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Christmas in the Bulge **By Karolyn Bredberg**

Fort Lewis in 1943 was one of many mobilization bases across the country. Superb field training areas combined with small-arms ranges, obstacle courses, rail sidings and acres of temporary frame barracks provided an ideal place for training armored battalions as part of the U. S. Army's new Armored Force, created in 1940. Activated on January 10, 1943, the 735th Tank Battalion (Medium) took its basic training at Fort Lewis.

Basic Recruit Training consisted of sixteen weeks of classes in military courtesy and discipline, close order drill, wear of the uniform, sanitation, chemical warfare, the dangers of venereal disease and other relevant topics. Officers and NCOs attended night classes in armor skills, covering gunnery theory, direct and indirect fire procedures and artillery adjustment.

While basic training was still in progress, a battalion detail was requested at the railhead to accept the battalion's first issue of almost three dozen medium M4 "Sherman" tanks.

Built by Chrysler Motors, the M4 used five proven six-cylinder automobile engines banked around a common drive unit to create a 30-cylinder tank engine, referred to by admirers as the "egg-beater" or the "Dionne Quints." The spectacle of these powerful monster tanks wheeling off the flat cars and making their way through Fort Lewis instilled a sense of pride in both recipients of the new tanks and post spectators. The M4, with its variations, became the war horse of World War II Allied forces.

Within weeks, the 735th's tank park filled with over 220 vehicles: medium tanks, assault guns, mortar carriers, half-tracks, tank recovery vehicles, jeeps, trailers, and motorcycles.



After tactical exercises and small unit training during the summer, the 735th rail-loaded to La Pine, Oregon for large-scale maneuvers combined with infantry-armor training. Once those maneuvers were completed, the battalion rail-loaded again, this time for training at the Yakima Firing Center in eastern Washington. In Yakima, a company of light tanks, designated as "D" company, was added to three medium tank companies - Companies A, B, and C - a Headquarters Company, and a Service Company to fulfill the standard organizational plan of a U. S. medium tank battalion.

The 735th returned to Fort Lewis in December to begin packing and preparations to move overseas. On 23 January 1944, the 735th entrained for Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts, en route to the European Theater of Operations. From there, they traveled to England for small unit training and then landed at Utah Beach in mid-July 1944.

Once in France, they encountered hedgerows – closely planted shrubs and trees bordering roads and agricultural fields. American military planners had not envisioned these obstacles which provided excellent defensive positions for the Germans while exposing the tanks’ thinly-armored underbelly to enemy fire when they attempted to drive over the bocage. As described by war correspondent Ernie Pyle: “The fields are usually not more than 50 yards across and a couple of hundred yards long. ...The fields are surrounded on all sides by immense hedgerows which consist of an ancient earthen bank, waist-high, all matted with roots, and out of which grow weeds, bushes, and trees up to 20 feet high. The Germans have used these barriers well. They put snipers in the trees. They dig deep trenches behind the hedgerows and cover them with timber, so that it is almost impossible for artillery to get at them. Sometimes they will prop up machine guns with strings attached, so they can fire over the hedge without getting out of their holes.”

During a discussion about how to surmount the problem, Sgt Curtis G. Culin III of the 2nd Armored Division was inspired by a Tennessee hillbilly who said, “Why don’t we get some saw teeth and put them on the front of the tank and cut through these hedges?” Culin improvised a set of pointed steel blades fabricated from German equipment abandoned on the beaches. The blades were welded to the front of the tanks, enabling them to hack out a broad avenue for infantry and other tanks to advance.



Culin device for cutting hedgerows mounted on M4 Tank. Courtesy flamesofwar.com.

With Culin devices mounted on their tanks, the 735th participated in Operation Cobra, the U. S. First Army’s successful offensive to break through the German encirclement of the Normandy beaches. An independent tank battalion, the 735th was then used to support the 10th and 11th Infantry Regiments, part of the 5th Infantry Division, in the battle of Chartres when Angers was taken and Paris liberated. By the end of August the battalion had crossed the Marne River as the 11th Infantry Regiment took Reims.

With the Allies gaining ground, the Germans strengthened their defensive positions around Metz. Fort Driant, heavily fortified by steel reinforced concrete, a deep dry moat, barbed wire, five main gun batteries of 150mm guns, infantry trenches, and armored machine gun and observation posts, gave the Germans command of the Moselle valley. General Patton, commanding the U. S. Third Army, decided attacking the fort was the key to defeating the Germans and taking Metz. The tanks received concrete piercing ammunition and towed long tubes of explosive, known as “snakes”, to clear obstacles in the attack, ultimately a fiasco. Both contraptions failed to produce the desired results as the tankers suffered heavy losses. One tank and its five-member crew were taken prisoner. Two of the men, tank commander Paul G. Otto and Cpl Russell Sherrill, tank gunner, spent approximately three months in a series of German POW camps, moving deeper into Germany as the Allies pushed eastward. They escaped during a foot march when their column was ambushed by a Russian unit. As the German guards and other prisoners sought cover, Otto and Sherrill hid among trees and brush by a stream. They travelled overland more than 1200 miles through eastern Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, and Russia. Sherrill later recalled, “We were scared and awfully hungry at times.” During their long journey, they never knew whether they would encounter friend or foe. At Odessa, they boarded a British freighter to Port Said, Egypt; another freighter took them to Naples, where they reported to U. S. military authorities, who shipped them home.

Preparatory to the capture of Metz, the battalion was pulled off the line for several days to recuperate with showers, dry clothing and regular hot meals. Under the auspices of Army Special Services, actress and songbird Marlene Dietrich performed for them in the town theater at Pont-a-Mousson. Of her appearance, Col Moore later wrote: “The night of her performance she made an entrance onto a darkened stage illuminated by only a single spotlight that highlighted her smashingly attractive looks and the tight-fitting evening gown that encased her slender body.

“After the thunderous ovation that greeted her entrance had died down, she sang several songs in that deep, throaty voice that was her show biz trademark, each one concluding with more applause by the enthusiastic audience than the one before. For her finale she produced a garden variety carpenter's hand saw, lifted her gown exposing two of the most beautiful limbs imaginable, covered by red knit underwear, and eased into a straight-backed chair from which she sawed out seven tunes on the implement. The troops went wild, bringing down the house in appreciation for the welcomed relief that performer had provided from the seemingly endless days.”



Miss Dietrich playing her saw for Allied troops in France.

The offensive at Metz ended for the 735th in early December as the tankers advanced into Germany.

On December 16, 1944, three German Armies launched the Nazis' last major offensive on the Western Front: the Ardennes Offensive, also known as The Battle of the Bulge. Primary objectives were to block Allied use of the Belgian port of Antwerp and split the Allied lines. The attack caught Allied forces by surprise. Attached to the 26th Infantry Division, part of General Patton's Third Army, on December 21, the 735th became part of Task Force (TF) Hamilton, assigned to secure a huge gap existing between the 4th Armored Division and the 328th RCT of the 26th Division.

Following is a first-hand account by Col (Ret) Roy Moore, Jr. from his memoirs and battalion history, “Chariots of Iron”:

On 24 December, the day before Christmas, TF Hamilton pushed northward out of Wierhof, seizing the high ground 1000 yards south of Eschdorf. Fierce enemy resistance again halted the advance as the TF ran into the Fuehrer Grenadier Brigade as it was collecting itself for a counterattack toward the 4th Armored Division at Martelange. During this action, A/735 commander Capt West narrowly escaped death.

Lt H. B. Smith, the company XO, reported the incident tersely: " ... he was on foot in a roadway somewhere around Eschdorf, standing close by one of the "A" Company tanks when the tank was hit by an AP (armor piercing) shell. A splinter from the shell cut a gash in his throat under his chin ... he was evacuated." The officer commanding the tank, Lt A. P. Smith, was disabled by the concussion and was also evacuated. Lt H. B. Smith assumed command of "A" Company, while Lt A. P. Smith took overall command of the 735th elements of the task force.

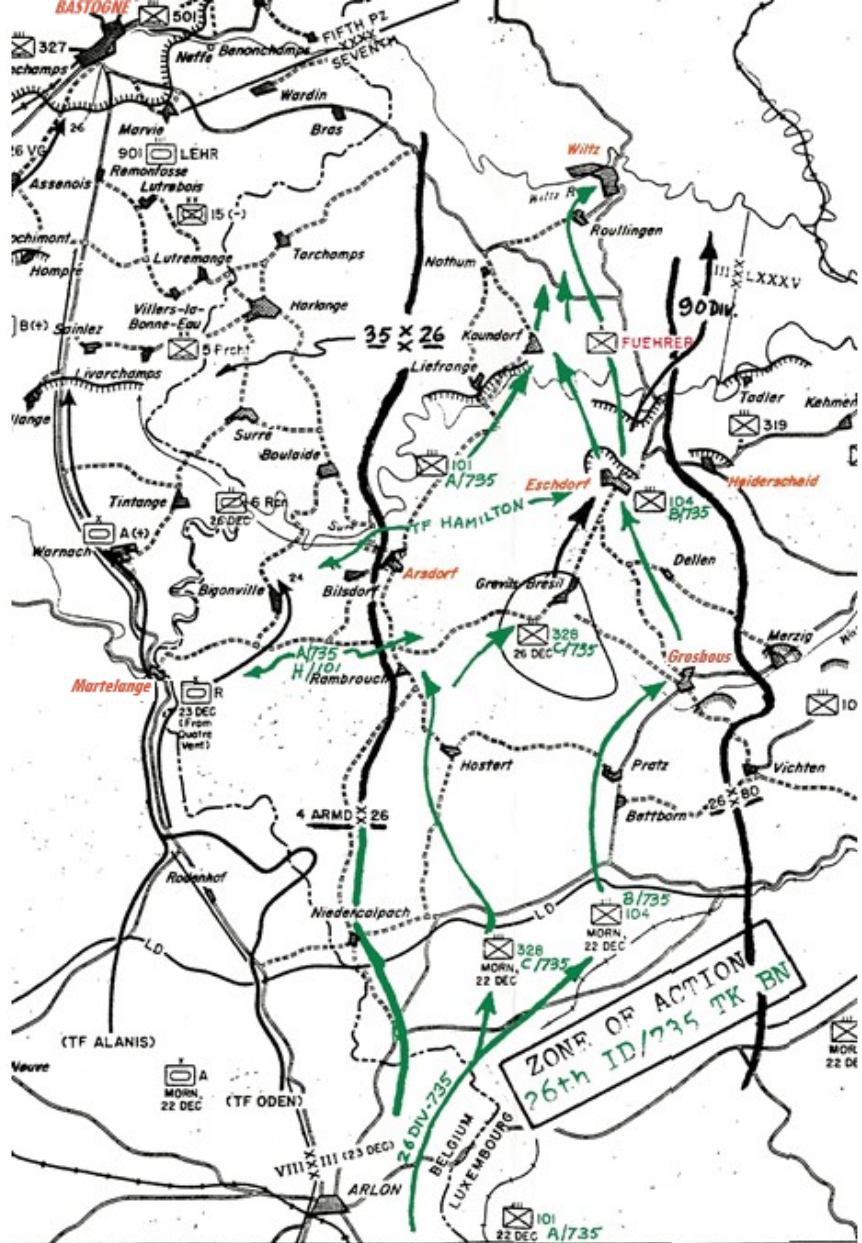
In the B/735 area, the advance of the 104th RCT progressed well, capturing Merschied against little resistance. This village was located on a ridge providing excellent observation over an area where an enemy force of a dozen or more tracked personnel carriers were moving across the front. The tank commanded by Sgt Ernest H. Karsch was first to go into a firing position here and had a field day picking off several of the vehicles before the others could seek cover. Lt Moore was standing on the back deck of Karsch's tank assisting the Sergeant in target selection, when he leaped off the tank to direct additional tank support into the action. At that moment an enemy tank fired a round from another village at least 2000 yards away, striking Karsch's tank. The enemy tank continued raining high explosive shells into the area preventing Moore and an infantry aid man from returning to the stricken tank to rescue survivors. Other Shermans joining the line took the enemy tank under fire but their hits just ricocheted off it and eventually the enemy tank backed out of view and disappeared; this had to have been a Tiger. Karsch's driver and assistant driver were killed instantly when hit, the gunner and loader wounded.

Karsch himself was pulled out of the turret, one foot dangling grotesquely by a single tendon which was snipped after a shot of morphine and the stump tightly bandaged before a litter jeep took him off to the rear with the other two injured crewmen. The tank then began to burn --and did so all night long--before the dead driver and assistant could be spared the cremation that ensued.

Sgt Karsch had been a tank commander since the early days of "B" Company at Fort Lewis, a seasoned veteran who eventually recovered from his wound, but was sorely missed because of the unit's reliance upon him. One of those killed was Robert F. Riley, another original member of the unit who was a boyish seventeen-year-old in appearance, but a dead serious soldier; he was another real loss to the team.

Eschdorf was a key location for both the Americans and the Germans during the fighting taking place on 24 December. TF Hamilton was able to approach very near the village but ran into a thicket of small arms and antitank fire which impeded further progress each time an attempt to take it was made. Col Hamilton finally decided the TF should dig in for the night, and with that the situation became confused. Maj Gen Paul overruled Hamilton's decision, ordering the TF to take Eschdorf. Then the 104th RCT was charged with command of the TF and directed to take Eschdorf, but later that order too was countermanded when the 104th was told to go for crossings over the Sure River while Hamilton and his TF undertook the capture of Eschdorf. When this finally settled down, commanders on the ground worked together to come up with a coordinated night attack to capture Eschdorf. The TF jumped off about midnight but the accompanying tanks soon bogged down in a hidden ravine made wider by an antitank ditch. German infantrymen, whose white capes blended them into the snow-covered ground, caught the TF in the open.

The Americans' dark uniforms highlighted against the snowy backdrop made them easy targets. A fusillade of German fire broke up the attack for yet another time.



A second assault was attempted at 0400 hours on Christmas day, but again the tanks were unable to traverse the sloppy ground and the infantrymen were repulsed by enemy fire.

It would not be until 26 December, after the Fuehrer Grenadier Brigade had slipped out and headed northwest toward Bastogne, that the combined efforts of TF Hamilton and the 104th RCT would seize Eschdorf.

In the afternoon on the 24th a battalion of the 104th RCT had reached Heiderscheid via a cross country route over terrain that was impassable to the tanks of B/735. B/735 sought to rendezvous with them taking whatever trail or farm road seemed to lead in the general direction of the place.

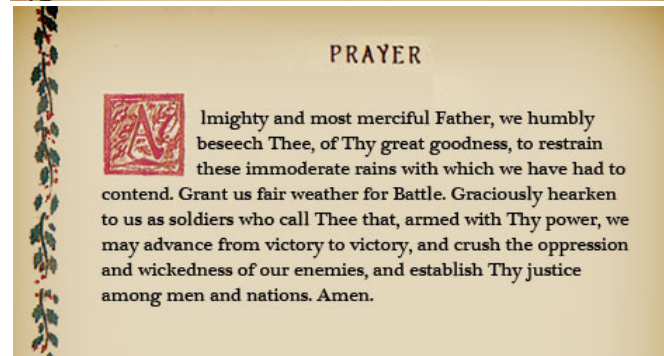
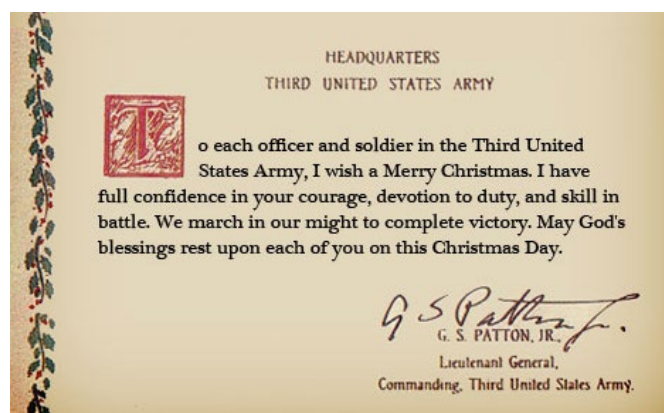
Lieutenants Moore and Charles Hummer guided the company column in a jeep as darkness gathered, and after detouring and bypassing various natural obstacles they ran into a strongpoint from which a challenge to halt came in English. Not knowing the password or any suitable reply the two American Lieutenants held a low-voiced parley generally along the lines of "what do we do now?" - both of them being well aware of the enemy employment of German troops fluent in English, wearing American uniforms and perpetrating actual murder of Americans while in this guise. After a very quickly formulated plan was decided upon, Moore dismounted and approached the strongpoint. Hummer remained in the jeep, engine running. If the position was indeed German, Moore would open fire with his tommy gun and dive for the roadside ditch, covering Hummer while he high-tailed back to the lead tank to overrun the enemy and rescue his company commander. There was no emergency as it developed, at least not of a major character. The outpost was American, part of the 80th Infantry Division, and a participant in the III Corps counterattack. The Major commanding the strongpoint had in his command the equivalent strength of a battalion; however, he had no tanks and was determined that B/735 be incorporated into his task force whether a willing adoptee or not. Only after considerable haggling was B/735 permitted to pass through the 80th position and join its rightful parents, the 104th at Heiderscheid.

However well the planning of the Third Army had been up to this point, two aspects of it were not well done. General Patton had thoughtfully ordered the delivery of a Christmas card to each member of his command.

This Christmas message was to have been preceded by the delivery of a prayer drawn up by the Third Army Chaplain at Patton's direction.

As far as anyone in the 735th Tank Battalion knows neither the greeting nor the prayer filtered down to the hard-bitten tankers in anything resembling a timely manner.

As of daylight Christmas morning the 26th Division was engaged in a fierce combat engagement at both Eschdorf and Arsdorf. Although the river Sure was in sight, there was just not enough firepower to carry the outfit into the town much less across the river. III Corps now released the 101st RCT from its reserve and ordered the 26th to "keep going" and capture Wiltz, only four miles beyond the Sure, and then head toward Bastogne ten miles due west.



Back at TF Hamilton the two medium tank platoons of A/735 had been reduced to three tanks during the Eschdorf fighting. One platoon of D/735 light tanks commanded by Lt Harris was now attached to the TF to provide additional armor punch. During a day of bitter fighting on Christmas a light tank commanded by Sgt Maloney of D/735 was hit by a high velocity 75mm Mark V "Panther" tank causing it to explode, killing the entire crew. Another tank commanded by Sgt Leet had approached to within yards of the town the night before, and because of engine failure was unable to pull back out of position when the attack he was part of was repulsed. The crew chose to remain with their immobile tank rather than bailout and continued to fire on the enemy until a German 88 put an end to their gallant stand, killing two crew members and wounding three. Later, Lt Harris succeeded in boxing in a German Mark V, possibly the one that had drilled the Maloney tank. Harris converged all available tank fire on the Mark V, and when it attempted to change positions, his men finished it off with a deadly, concentrated barrage.

On the subject of M5 light tank capabilities to kill German Mark IV and V tanks, D/735 platoon sergeant H. D. Burns had this to say, " ... our fight with the 37mm was about like going after a grizzly bear with a fly swatter."

The next day A/735 maintenance personnel examined the German tank and discovered that one of the dead crew members was a young woman, the first and only time such an instance was reported.

B/735 had relatively easy going on Christmas day, assisting the 104th RCT in an attack against light resistance which succeeded in seizing Heiderscheidergrund, a small village beyond Heiderscheid, on the Sure River.

In the area of C/735, the 328th RCT succeeded in clearing enemy out of Arsdorf.

D/735, minus the platoon with TF Hamilton, continued to outpost the 26th Division HQ, as well as escort convoys of vehicles along the route between Grosbous and Hierhech to the north. No cohesive lines existed in this area and considerable numbers of bypassed enemy and infiltrators were known to be present there. One such pocket of resistance was located near Eschdorf in a wooded area overlooking a route being traveled by American supply and tactical vehicles. As the light tank platoon of D/735 traveled to join the TF on Christmas Day this was the route along which they marched. The platoon column was being led by Lt Bill Clark and Capt Greener riding in a jeep. As the column neared the enemy-occupied woods they suddenly found themselves the target of automatic weapons fire. Dirt, grass, and clipped tree branches were flying all around them as Clark and Greener took to a nearby ditch. The light tanks moved up engaging the enemy pocket, diverting the fire away from the two officers who remounted their jeep and sought more protective ground. Such is a practical and undesirable implication of what is termed a "fluid situation," and it illustrates what had become almost a routine for the past several days.

In his memoirs, General Patton proudly asserted that the entire Third Army had turkey for Christmas dinner. His Quartermaster deceived him. Most of the 735th tank crewmen ate whatever cold rations were at hand that day.

The day after Christmas was made noteworthy by two events that occurred on the 26th. First, was the action by TF Hamilton around Eschdorf. To General "de Panzertruppen" Brandenberger, commanding the German Seventh Army, Eschdorf provided a high-speed approach westward where he could strike a blow against the flank of Patton's 4th Armored Division just 16 miles away at Martelange and making its way toward Bastogne.

Eschdorf was therefore a concentration point for the German counterattack and had to be held if there was to be any hope of stopping the 4th Armored's drive to Bastogne.

Maj Gen Paul was just as determined that the 26th Division capture Eschdorf as a stepping-stone to a Sure River crossing and an advance toward Wiltz. As the saying goes, this placed the A/735 tankers and TF Hamilton "between a rock and a hard place." The TF slugged it out with the Germans, toe-to-toe, throughout the night of 25-26 December, and as the new day dawned with a clear sky overhead American fighter bombers took to the air plastering enemy all along the III Corps front, including the Eschdorf area and the area to the west where the 4th Armored was battling toward Bastogne. TF Hamilton fought its way into Eschdorf about midmorning, assisted by the 104th RCT and B/735. Late that same afternoon the 37th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armored punched its way into the Bastogne perimeter of the besieged 101st Airborne Division. The relief of Bastogne was the big news of the day along with its hero, Brig Gen Anthony "Nuts" McAuliffe. But it was the tanks of A/735 and D/735 along with TF Hamilton that had kept the Fuehrer Brigade from accomplishing the counterstroke that could have spoiled or delayed that relief. Perhaps some credit is also due to General Patton's Christmas prayer for good flying weather that enabled the "crush" of our "wicked enemies." When asked later about the effect of that prayer, the General reportedly alluded to a direct line existing between himself and THE BOSS upstairs.

The campaign on the south shoulder of the bulge was now entering its seventh miserable day of bitter cold, knee-deep snow, ice-encrusted roads where any roads existed, and a determined, skillful enemy making an all-out offensive he hoped would shatter the Allied forces on the western front. The entire region was gripped in the worst winter experienced there in a quarter century.

Tank crewmen huddled in cramped turrets and drivers' compartments, encased in vaults of steel so cold that if exposed skin came into contact with it bits of tissue would be permanently attached to the metal. Army issue woolen blankets became precious items, either for bundling up, or for cutting into strips to be wrapped around one's belly or feet for additional warmth.

There were entire days and nights when the relief of bodily wastes was accomplished using an empty ammunition box or shell casing, which when done inside the confines of a tank gave new meaning to the term "crew cooperation." It was the infantryman, however, who bore the greatest discomfort, hardship, and pain. Respiratory ailments were common. Frostbite took its toll in fingers, ears, toes, and feet. Under such conditions of cold even a modest wound, if untended, could immediately bring on early shock, loss of body heat, and death. The frozen ground defied the soldier's entrenching tool making foxhole digging a near impossibility. To kill a German meant taking his hole; to capture a village meant using its shelter. In fact, shelter afforded by villages created command problems among both the American and German sides, because to a frostbitten squad or platoon, the seizure of a village outweighed the tactical considerations of taking the high ground.

While the 4th Armored had succeeded in breaking into the 101st Airborne perimeter at Bastogne, the road there was passable only with the assistance of armed convoys, and once the enemy had recovered from shock and became aggressive again, these were vulnerable to German counter action. The main east and west routes intersecting the narrow corridor created by the 4th Armored were still very much in the hands of the enemy. Moreover, a considerable gap still existed between the corridor and the 26th Division, and the fact that it was being screened by the 6th Cavalry Squadron offered only tenuous physical security and something less of the emotional variety. However, the German counteroffensive that began on 16 December had lost most of its steam by 26 December. The enemy had overextended his logistics, had suffered severely from the Allied aerial bombings, and had clearly underestimated the speed with which the Americans had been able to strengthen the shoulder of the German penetration. The stage was now set to widen the Bastogne corridor and eliminate the bulge.

SOURCES

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