

Lt. Eric F. Wood, Jr.

589th Bn

From: Henri Rogister To: jschaffner

Date: Fri, 19 Dec 1997 19:18:49 +0100 Subject: Certificate Elliott Goldstein

Copies to: J. Gatens, J. Roberts, J. Kline, E. Goldstein

I, Major Elliott Goldstein, FA, O 408 175, on the evening of 2 August 1945, near Hochst, Germany, certify to the following:

From January 1944 until 22 December 1944 I served as Executive Officer of the 589th FA Bn; after which date I commanded the Bn. I was present with the Bn in all of its positions during December. The following events (with particular reference to 16th and 17th December 1944) with reference to Battery "A" and 1st Lt Eric F. Wood Jr. were observed by me; or are known by me to be true:

1. On the morning of 16 December 1944, 589th FA Bn was in position SW of AUW in Germany. The AUW-BLEIALF Road ran from front to rear through the center of the Bn. Bn CP and FDC and HQ Battery were located on this road. "B" Battery was to the left flank of the CP at a distance of some 600 yds. "C" Battery was to the right (actually left, JRS) front at a distance of over 1000 yds. "A" Battery's position was in a pine wood on a knoll, on the right flank of the Bn CP where I was stationed, and in plain view from it across a shallow valley of bare ground at a distance of about 600 yds. Accurate enemy FA fires started hitting in it at about 0630 or a bit later. It received at least 15 or 25 bursts, - many of them air bursts in the trees. Immediately afterward Eric checked for casualties, but nobody hurt. Because Eric, in the 2 or 3 days the Battery had been in position, had industriously organized shelters with over-head cover.
2. There was a house on the skyline in plain sight to right front of Battery "A". It could have been an enemy CP, which would have explained the accuracy of the enemy fires. Eric asked for volunteers to raid that house. Five men went with him. He led them. They had small arms. 1st Sgt Coffey, Pvt (now Sgt) Casky, Pvt Cody and 2 others. They covered the house from the outside, and Eric went into it alone and thoroughly searched it. Empty.
3. Then the fire missions really came in for "A" Battery to fire. These fires, observed by Lt Fomenko, were very effective. Eric had cooks, drivers, everybody handling ammunition. They were down to "Iron Rations" (25 rds per gun), and were about to report small arms fire to me at about 1100 hours when Bn Ammo Train rolled in with more ammunition.
4. "A" Battery began to hear and receive small arms fires at about 1530 Then a column of 3 enemy "Tanks", supported by infantry and by lots of automatic fire, appeared to the left front of the Battery. They were coming down the AUW-BLEIALF Road (from right to left across the left flank of "A" Battery) and were heading directly for the Bn Hq installations on that road. They were defiladed from "B" and "C" Btries. Casky, cannoneer of #4 piece (the left flank piece) of "A" Battery gave the alarm and the crew shot at the leading "tank" but missed. Eric with his field glasses, took post in the open under small arms fire. He called data to #4, and adjusted direct fire. His first shot was a very close "line over". His second shot was a direct hit, setting the "tank" on fire. This "put their tails up" for his whole Battery. The men cheered. This leading "tank" was already within about 200 yds of the Bn CP and FDC. Had it not been stopped all 3 "tanks" with their supporting troops would certainly have continued into the Bn Hq and Hq Battery with disastrous results. Lt Wood followed up with 4 or 5 more rounds, all hits directly into the "tank"; and then switched fire to the other two. These withdrew, with their accompanying troops. One of them appeared to be

damaged. However, they both completed their withdrawal to hull-down position. Actually the enemy vehicles were Mark IV, tracked, armored, assault guns, mounting 75mm cannon, with enemy infantry riding on them.

"A" Battery fired at them there and neutralized them. small arms fire, tearing through "A" Battery position all the while, might easily have made the men panicky. But they were reassured by Eric's calmness, by seeing him out in front, in the open, with his glasses successfully commanding the direct fire against the enemy. Later, with fwd observation, "A" Battery adjusted on one of the two hull-down "tanks", hit it, and destroyed it. 2d Lt O'Toole was a hell of a fine boy, team mate to Eric, his Asst Battery Exec. Battery "A" continued fire missions against enemy infantry, etc., until dark.

5. Before dark, and thereafter, the Germans kept fire whistling through "A" Battery's positions, -small arms, heavy Mgs, burp guns, with plenty of tracers. It would have badly rattled a unit that did not have superior leadership. At dark Lt Col Kelly said "no more firing"; because no observation and because flashes would give away our exact locations for enemy counter-fires.

6. The men in the Battery knew that they were supposed to displace that night. 2nd Bn, 423d Inf, Lt Col Puett CO. recommended to Div CG that he be allowed to organize Schonberg, and there by cover a Div withdrawal. He was refused and accordingly came up forward to where we were.

7. When 106 Div went originally, it had had no Inf mortar ammunition. The Div Arty had to take over mortar missions. This required deep How pits; and necessitated taking up the gun-pit flooring that 2d Div had previously laid, in order to sufficiently depress the trails. Now, when a withdrawal under fire became necessary, it was a Herculean task to get the 105mms out in a hurry. Moreover, the German FA had blown two craters in the corduroy road leading out of "A" Battery's position across the fields to the hard road - necessitating detour through hub-deep mud to get the prime movers and pieces out of initial positions and on the way back to the 2d positions. Eric (now commanding "A" Battery since Capt Menke had become a casualty the previous evening) and O'Toole were everywhere.

Wherever it was necessary to winch out a How, they were there. O'Toole, about 2130, (plus 6 EM) left Eric and went back with me to the next (2d) position. Eric got his pieces out, by coupling 2 and 3 trucks tandem with two ropes; all under fire and in the dark with only shell bursts and distant gun flashes to light the work. Eventually, by such means, all 4 Hows got out on the hard road. Then Eric took a detail of 6 or 7 men back into the Battery position, through which bullets were still whistling, on foot, to make sure all serviceable equipment and ammunition had been taken, and that all serviceable equipment and material had been evacuated.

8. The new Bn position was a very small goose-egg - the ex-position of "C" Battery of 74 1st FA (8" Howitzer) - which Kelly had received from Div Arty. It was an extremely difficult position to defend. If occupied, we could not cover the road leading into it from the direction of the enemy.

9. A position was designated by me in this location to Lt O'Toole (who was accompanied by several EM, including Casky) - the best on available, but hard to get into and out of. He and Casky rcn'd it and found a track (rutted farm road) into and through and out of the position. While this Rcn was going on, German machine pistols were already being fired in and through the neighboring woods. Some time around 0500 Eric arrived with "A" Battery guns and put them into position (3 of them). #2 piece was lame and plugging along near "5" Battery's position with Sgt Alford, its prime mover having been injured while the Battery was making a cut-off through a rough corduroy road to avoid using the highway at the place we called "Dead Men's Corner", which was under fire and observation.

When "A" Battery's 3 guns were in position, and ammo unloaded, (but guns not laid, on account of darkness and wire still being laid) Eric told the Section Chiefs to have their men sleep at the pieces, 1 man per section awake as a security guard. Eric placed these security guards himself and instructed them. Then he went to Maintenance position to see if his kitchen was in position. Then he came back to the road to see if he could locate his lame #2 piece. There he found Sgt Alford with that piece, which he halted and unlimbered enfilading the road back toward "5" Battery about

1000 yds S of us, as he could hear heavy firing in that direction. Then he (with Alford) came to Bn CP to report and get orders, around daylight.

10. About daylight the phone rang. There was an increased amount of small arms fire going on in the vicinity. But I had been hearing them all day and all night, and didn't pay any particular attention to them. The phone call was Capt Cagle, "S" Battery, who said he was surrounded by enemy inf and tanks at his position. }1e was told to keep shooting at them, and that we would move Hows up to support him. (From prescribed position we could not shoot to the 5, as I have already indicated). However, Cagle called again about 2 minutes later and said he was done for and it appeared to him he had no choice, but ultimately be overrun, but that he was still fighting.

11. I talked to Maj Parker (Actg Bn CO since Lt Col Kelley had become a casualty the night before) and recommended that we displace immediately across the OUR River, and reassemble in front of St Vith. I knew our ground and how unfavorable it was, and Parker didn't. Parker accepted my recommendation and ordered that Btries be notified accordingly. At that moment all phone lines went out. I think the switchboard operator, listening in, had got panicky and beat it. I then went out of the Bn CP to notify the Btries personally. Immediately outside the CP I met Eric with Sgt Alford. We could heard loud small arms fire all around us. Eric asked, "What's the score?" I said, "We are displacing, via Schonberg, to reassemble in front of St Vith. March order your Battery and get going". Eric said, "I have my lame How in position on the road, enfilading the road back toward "5" Battery. Shall I continue it in position?" But its brakes were out and the road slippery. Moreover, with its prime mover injured, I was afraid we would lose it if it had to pull out under pressure. And "S" Battery was still covering us. So I told Eric to move his lame piece out also. Eric turned to Alford, and ordered him to continue the march, as best he could by himself on St Vith, starting immediately.

Eric then went for the rest of his Battery on the double. I, personally, never saw him again. Then I visited "B" Battery and finally Lt Wright of "C" Battery's vacant position. Meanwhile Eric had ordered Lt Crowley to go to the Maintenance position and get the kitchens, mechanics, maintenance trucks, etc., out of position and get them rolling through Schonberg on St Vith, by vehicle.

12. Meanwhile the small arms fires were getting nosier in all directions, and bullets were spattering around from many directions. In particular, the firing from the direction of "5" Battery, about 1000 yds away air-line to our rear, was getting louder and nearer. To cap the climax, casual vehicles with panic-stricken drivers came tearing through our positions yelling alarms and warnings. For instance, a QM truck - one of those that had moved 2d Bn of 423d Inf up front during the night - came by and its driver and asst driver shouted to everybody to the effect that German Inf and tanks were "right on their tail", that everybody had better "beat it" instantly, etc. As a result panic conditions were beginning. But Eric kept his head, and completely allayed any panic in "A" Battery. Moreover, his men had come to have absolute confidence in him.

13. Eric sent Pvt Caskey to get the howitzers out and, fortunately, Caskey had reconnoitered a road which led out of the position to the North. He got the pieces coupled and led two of them through "B" Battery's position onto the road. The third piece didn't follow him but turned to go out the way it had come in, along the farm road. The driver took a wrong fork into a farm-yard or something, and mired down. During all this time Eric remained on the highway at the southernmost end of the position, where he could assure himself that everything in the Battery had been evacuated. Now he stuck with this last howitzer, with small arms fires and Germans behind him and on both sides of him - and ahead of him as it later turned out. Eventually he got it loose and with it started after the Bn. But at a long distance; a distance much of which must by that time have been under close-range small arms fire. At St Vith some time later, I found that none "B" Battery's howitzers had come in; and that one of "A" Battery's and Eric were missing.

13. I can add only 3 things about what happened to him later.

a. Sgt Aspinwall of HQ Battery (who eventually escaped to St Vith by himself) told me that after Eric's gun and vehicle had been destroyed by tank cannon fire, and completely surrounded, at the western end of Schonberg, he (Sgt Aspinwall) saw Eric, alone and by himself, under heavy small arms fire running up hill towards the woods north of Schonberg.

14. This statement is based in part on my own knowledge, and in part on statements made to me by 1st Sgt George Blaizin, HQ Battery; Sgt Forrest Casky, "A" Battery; 2d Lt Barney Alford, "B" Battery; S Sgt Francis Aspinwall, HQ Battery; and S Sgt Johnny B. Jordan, "A" Battery. I checked their stories very carefully against each other and against the known physical facts and believe them to be true.

Is! ELLIOTT GOLSTEIN,

ELLIOTT GOLDSTEIN, Maj, FA

General Wood had added this note:

It is to be presumed Lt O'Toole was ordered by Eric to follow on the tail of these pieces (on the tail of the Battery, less the one piece that Eric was struggling with).

From: Henri Rogister To: jschaffner Date: Fri, 19 Dec 1997 19:24:44 +0100 Subject: Abstracts from an affidavit copies to J. Kline E. Goldstein J. Roberts E. Goldstein

Abstracts from an affidavit (of which there are no copies available) by Philippe L. Berube, a Private in the 1st Gun Section of Battery "A", 5 89th FA Bn, made after his return from being a POW in Germany:

"About dawn on the 17th enemy attacks were renewed upon us in our new position. Our Bn was ordered to displace again immediately. Lt Wood gave Battery "A" march order, and directed that we move, by vehicle, through Schonberg to St Vith (over a road with which our drivers were familiar). "The 3rd and 4th Sections and the other vehicles of our Battery were able to move out with reasonable promptness. I presume that Lt O'Toole followed their tail. But our section was much delayed.

"Lt Wood was a swell guy to the Battery he partly commanded and no one of us thought of him and Lt O'Toole the same as we commonly felt of average officers. We regarded them as men who were concerned with our welfare in preference to their own.

From: Henri Rogister To: jschaffner Date: Fri, 19 Dec 1997 19:35:59 +0100 Subject: Interview

Copies to: E. Goldstein J. Kline J. Roberts J. Gatens

Interview 17 June 1945 near Nachtsheim, Germany, with the following officers, all of them participants of the actions of 16-17 December 1944, and all of them members of 5 89th FA Bn, except Lt Col Hagman (of Div Arty Staff). Alford, Barney M Jr 2d Lt, Kiendi, Theodore Jr. 1st Lt, Brimer Jas. 2d Lt, Leach, Ambrose R. 1st Lt, Cassibry, Graham H. 1st Lt, Miller, Delbert L. 2d Lt, Cocke, Joseph W. Capt, Parker, Arthur C HI Major, Huxel, George F. Major, Scott, Earl A. 1st Lt, Hagman Ben J. Lt Col

1. The above officers read and confirmed all statements in the interrogation of 2 May 1945 at Moosburg, except as to the following relatively minor points:

a. par 4, line 3: Enemy FA Fires began at 0605 on 16 Dec, instead of "about 0630". b. par 4, line 6: A & C Btries received enemy automatic small arms fires during the daytime also. C Battery from about 1100, A Battery from about noon or 1300. These fires were at times heavy.

c. par 5, line 9: B Battery extricated the piece referred to. It was, however, later abandoned with the other 3 B Battery pieces at the second position. It was not a piece, but B Battery's kitchen truck, that was abandoned on the "cut-off" road.

d. par 5, line 13: B Battery's second position was only about 400 yds beyond (N) of A Battery's second position, instead of "about 1 mi road distance".

e. par5, line 15: B Battery occupied new (second) position with 4 pieces, instead of with "only 3 pieces".

See sub-par c, above.

f par 5, line 17: The first warning was delivered by a QM truck, probably a Div truck, coming back from the rear guard position, not by "an A Battery prime mover". Several subsequent warnings were received, including one from MP's in a jeep. So that A and B Btries were currently and continuously aware of the critical nature of their situation. g. par 7, line 3: "Ninth Army" should read 9th Armd Div.2.

2. Additional information:

a. Lt Alford stated that, at the second position, he was present with Lt Wood when the latter received orders from Bn at Bn CP (which was located about midway between positions of A and B Btries, or about 200 yds from either) to the effect that A Battery was to withdraw immediately by vehicle via Schonberg to St Vith.

3.a. No information was available as to what happened after Lt Wood's prime mover was hit by cannon fire at the west exit to Schonberg. This truck was A Battery's No.8, pulling No.1 piece. Of the ten members of the gun crew (driver included) none have been heard from since. Except the Section Chief, Sgt Scannapico, and the driver, T15 Knoll, whose bodies were among the six later (in February) found "Killed in Action.

b. It appears that no other officer was on this truck with Lt Wood. Of the officers who might have been with him, all are otherwise accounted for. Lts Crowley and O'Toole were elsewhere in a jeep. Lt Euler was last seen on foot, S of Schonberg, by the last of B Battery's withdrawing vehicles.

c. The 3 pieces that were extricated from the second position by Lt Wood on 17 December constituted the supporting FA at the "Road Block Fight" of 23 December. It is doubtful if that fight could have been the success it was without the presence of these pieces - the only surviving ones of 5 89th FA Bn.

4. We certify that the above statements are true and correct to the best of our knowledge and belief

(signed by all officers listed)



Photo courtesy of
Eddy Riedijk, Kapelle, The Netherlands
07-2007



ERIC FISHER WOOD, JR. Born in Los Angeles on January 25, 1919, he graduated first in the class of 1937 at Valley Forge Military Academy. At Princeton, where he won five letters in varsity football and track, he graduated with honors in 1942.

An ROTC student, Wood, who served five years in Battery C, 107th Field Artillery, Pennsylvania National Guard, was appointed second lieutenant, Field Artillery Reserve, and was called to active duty on April 19, 1943. From the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, he was assigned to the 589th Field Artillery Battalion in October, and seven months later was promoted to first lieutenant.

Married to Miss Margaret Wadsworth, of Wayne, Pennsylvania, on July 26, 1941, Eric Wood left two children, Pamela and Eric III, the latter born December 8, 1944, one week before the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes was launched.

Posthumous award of its highest decoration for valor—the Knight's Cross, Order of Leopold I, with gold palm—has been made by the Belgian Government, in recognition of Wood's heroic exploit. Our own War Department awarded him posthumously the DSC last January. His body rests with 17,000 other American soldiers dead in the United States military cemetery at Henri Capelle, Belgium. —The Editors.

The Incredible Valor of Eric Wood

By **R. ERNEST DUPUY**

Colonel U. S. A., Ret.

Told for the first time, the story of a young lieutenant who almost singlehandedly saved the right flank of an American army in the Battle of the Bulge, "the most amazing example of heroism in World War II."

DARING indeed would be he who named one individual as the epitome of human heroism. Through the ages, men of all nations and all races have fought well and died well. Once in a great while, however, a man emerges who, under extraordinary circumstances, flings down the gauntlet to death, defies fate, says farewell to the conflict only when breath leaves his body. Since chance—and chance alone—decides whether or not there be witnesses to such an exploit, let us say of what follows only that it is the most amazing example of heroism as yet to come out of World War II.

The man was a first lieutenant, Field Artillery, AUS, one of thousands bearing identical labels. The cannons were squatly, humped-up, wicked-looking pieces towed by great six-by-six trucks—three of thousands of the same type carried on

Ordnance records as "Howitzer, 105 mm., M1." There the resemblance of this man and these cannons to others of their respective kinds ceases. For the cannons saved the right flank of an American army in the Ardennes. And had it not been for the man, they wouldn't have been available to do it.

After the cannons had been lost with honor when howling waves of the Nazi 2nd SS Panzer Division washed over both them and the remnants of the field artillery battalion serving them, the man continued to wage singlehanded warfare against the 6th SS Panzer Army. So the man, as always, is the important element. And his tale is worth the telling.

It begins on December 16, 1944, when the Battle of the Bulge broke furiously on the Ardennes front. The howitzers—there were four of them to start with—of Battery A, 589th Field Artillery Battalion, 106th Infantry (Continued on Page 101)

ILLUSTRATION BY FRED LUDEKENS



"So the American had died as he had lived—a free man."

THE INCREDIBLE VALOR OF ERIC WOOD

(Continued from Page 26)

Division, emplaced in rear of the little village of Schlausenbach on the northwestern slopes of the Schnee Eifel, were, with the rest of the battalion, supporting the 422nd Infantry Regiment of the same division.

1st Lt. Eric F. Wood, Jr., from Bedford, Pennsylvania, twenty-five-year-old Princeton fullback, five feet eleven, 195 pounds in weight and catlike in reflexes, was executive officer of the battery. His skipper, Capt. Aloysius J. Menke, up at a forward OP, was silent. He would continue to be silent, for the first kraut wave had overrun the OP, and Menke, a prisoner, will not enter this story again. Wood was then acting battery commander.

Up the forest, through a gaping hole torn in the northern sector of the 106th Division's recently inherited cordon-defense positions, the Germans were swarming around the left flank and rear of the infantry, and into the artillery positions. One by one, in trace, three Nazi tanks pushed along a road over a rise a few hundred feet from the battery. Wood, racing to the left flank and standing on a knoll amidst enemy small-arms fire, coolly shouted commands to his No. 4 piece, and as coolly destroyed the lead tank in two shots by direct fire. No. 4, incidentally, was the only piece in the entire battalion which could reach the defiladed tanks. That was because Wood, the previous day, had rearranged it so that it could sweep the road. This was not in the plan—it had not been considered necessary. But Wood had done it, just in case.

The lead tank destroyed, Wood hit the next, damaging it and sending it scuttling with its remaining companion for cover, hull down. He then swept the woods around him with short-cut fuse, breaking up the enemy's infantry support. All this was but a temporary respite. By nightfall the battalion was ordered to fall back; the krauts were crowding in from all sides. But getting out was easier said than done. In the Battery A positions the big tow trucks

churned the icy muck to a paste in which the howitzers sank almost hub-deep. Hostile fire—small arms and artillery—was sweeping the area. Snow blew patchily into sweating faces in the night. The wind howled through trees each of which might be hiding an infiltrating enemy soldier. Hostile flares flickered over the snow-drooped pines.

It was not nice. But Eric Wood tore around, and the men of Battery A tore and tugged with him. He was that kind of guy. At last they got the howitzers on the road one by one, with two trucks grinding at each piece and with little clumps of men pushing, like ants tussling with twigs. The howitzers could shoot again, once they dropped trails, for Eric Wood had packed eighty-three rounds of ammunition for each piece in the trucks.

In the rest of the battalion Battery C never got out. The pieces, too deeply mired, had to be blown up. That left eight howitzers out of twelve. Battery B got out ahead of A, and the outfit went swaying and fumbling in the dark over a narrow corduroy trail, while the enemy, with white phosphorus shells, hunted for them.

They got to their new positions by dawn—a field on the right of the road that runs north from Bleialf into Schönberg on the Our. They were about a mile and a quarter from Schönberg itself. Battery B got in first. Wood got three of his howitzers in. The last one, lagging, its tow truck partly crippled, he held on the road as antitank defense.

The Germans were really bursting through in force that second morning. From the north they were coming down the Our valley into Schönberg; from the south they were coming up this road from Bleialf. But all that Eric Wood knew was that the world seemed full of krauts. The enemy from the south washed nearer, overrunning their neighbors. The acting battalion commander—the original was cut off behind them with Battery C—ordered the outfit out, to push through Schönberg and west toward St. Vith. Wood got two pieces rolling and sent the crippled third howitzer back with them.

"I'll meet you west of Schönberg," he told the section chief, Sgt. Barney M. Alford, "if I get there."

For Wood's last howitzer was stuck. Once again the perversity of inanimate objects was working against him. So he stayed to get it out, with its crew. They worked at it while more krauts began to overrun Battery B, and its howitzers were abandoned. That, of course, left four howitzers in the battalion, out of twelve. When Wood at long last got his last piece on the road and swung over the tail gate of the truck, the last man out, the main body of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion, consisting now of Wood's three other howitzers and some truckloads of men of both batteries, was way ahead of him.

This bedraggled outfit hit Schönberg to find the krauts coming in from the north. The three-piece "battalion" beat them to the Our River bridge by seconds, and got away. It got away to fight again, beginning on December nineteenth, at a dreary crossroads far to the west on the hastily forming and still somewhat nebulous right flank of the United States 1st Army. How these three howitzers for four days saved the right flank of the 82nd Airborne Division and of the Army at "Parker's Crossroads" is another story.

When Eric Wood and the twelve men with him in the truck now came rolling down the steep hill into Schönberg, the howitzer bounding behind, a kraut tank poked its nose out of the southern entrance of the village. Brake bands screamed as the truck pulled up in front of it. Wood and his men piled out to attack it. Pfc. Campagna had a bazooka, the others their carbines.

But the tank wasn't having any—God knows why! It scuttled crablike back across the bridge and disappeared into the town with Wood and his gang in pursuit. They crossed the bridge and pointed west in Schönberg's one street, with snipers pecking at them. And they slowed down while Sergeant Scannapico and Pfc. Campagna, still hugging his bazooka, ran ahead to see where that tank had holed up. They found it tucked in an alley. Scannapico fired his carbine at it. Campagna, climbing into the truck, let fly with his bazooka as they rolled past. Again the tank wasn't having any. The truck slowed to let Scannapico catch up, but a sniper got him cold. So the section rolled on.

They gathered speed as they left the village and met, over a rise in the road, another kraut tank. A medium, this, with its cannon and machine guns trained directly on them. Wood's reflexes worked instantaneously. He pitched his men and himself out into the ditch an instant before the tank's artillery blasted the truck to scrap iron. That was that, so far as getting the howitzer back safely was concerned. It left the battalion's score at three out of twelve.

But what about Wood and his men? The enemy was firing at them now from across the river on the right. Kraut infantry were firing from the trees beyond the meadow across the road to the right rear. More kraut infantry was pouring out of Schönberg behind them. And that tank squatted in front of them a stone's throw away. To the ordinary man, the situation seemed hopeless. And all but one of the group were ordinary men. They raised their hands in surrender. They were through. But Eric Wood wasn't through. Leaping the ditch, he ran, dodging northward toward the trees.



* See U. S. P. O.

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THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

represented from sight in the shelter of the forest.

Late in the afternoon of the next day, December eighteenth, Peter Maraitte, woodsman, left his home in the mountain village of Meyerode, Belgium, about four miles north of where that tank had smashed Eric Wood's truck. There were Germans all around. There had been fighting, doubtless there would be more. But Maraitte had something else to think about. He was going to cut a Christmas tree—there had always been a tree in the Maraitte house for Christmas; there always would, as long as Peter could provide one. They are like that, in the Ardennes, war-washed for generations.

So Peter plodded for a mile through the woods, moving southeast in the general direction of Schönberg. It was cold; clammy mist cloaked the woods. The snow powdered his head as he brushed low branches. Then two armed men loomed in front of him at a six-way trail crossing—Americans. Peter knew Americans when he saw them; they had held this sector for more than two months now. One was a big man with single silver bars on the shoulders of his short overcoat. He had a pistol. The other was smaller and wore no insignia of rank. He was armed with an infantryman's rifle, not an artilleryman's carbine. Peter Maraitte is insistent on this point.

Now, like most of the Belgians of this border country, Peter Maraitte spoke only German. The Americans could not speak German. But Peter managed to convey the idea that he was a friend; he invited them home. Cold, wet and tired, they accepted.

Because of the Germans, they came home cautiously, slipped into the warm stone house where astonished Anna Maria, Peter Maraitte's wife, and wide-eyed Eva, their daughter, rushed to pour hot coffee. The Americans gulped it down while Eva slipped out to bring back Peter's trusted friend and neighbor, Jean Schroder, who spoke English. The watchdog was put outside to guard the door.

The Americans relaxed, steaming their soggy clothes before the fire. The big young officer, with a confident, smiling face, told how he had escaped from a detachment surrounded near Schönberg. He and his companion were going to St. Vith. He was concerned about the fate of his men, "all very good and loyal men," as Peter Maraitte remembers the conversation. The villagers warned that the country between Meyerode and St. Vith was full of Germans. The young officer wasn't a bit disturbed by their shaking heads.

"I'll either fight my way back to my outfit," he told them, "or I'll collect American stragglers—I've seen some in the woods around here—and I'll start a small war of my own."

What he wanted now was information about the Germans. He pulled out a map. So, while the woman and the girl bustled to get supper, the young American officer and the two droopy-mustached woodsmen pored over the map. The Americans couldn't go that night, the villagers said; they would get lost. They must stay, and start at dawn next day. The woodsmen explained landmarks; they showed the lieutenant where, so far as they knew, the Germans had bivouacs. They would have to go next day in any case, for doubtless the krauts would begin quartering men in the village. But for tonight—well, the Maraittes had a big

So the two Americans ate and drank with their hosts. The officer cracked jokes—"said funny things which made us laugh," is the way Peter and Anna Maria Maraitte put it. He seemed to have no fears.

After they cleaned their weapons, the Americans repaired to the big soft feather bed while their clothes dried. They slept the sleep of tired but confident men, not waking even when a V bomb crashed in the outskirts of Meyerode with its hideous thunder. Peter Maraitte had to shake them awake in the morning.

Dawn was breaking when Peter put the pair on their way into the forest. They had hot breakfasts under their belts. They carried sandwiches with them, "well buttered, with plenty of meat therein," and, says Anna Maria Maraitte, "they were accompanied by our prayers."

The fighting, it now appeared to the villagers as the days passed, was drifting far from Meyerode's huddle of

from the hills, and sometimes the "wham" of a mortar.

These sounds were in addition to the crashes of bombs and pom-pomming of flak guns along the highways to the west. The weather had cleared and the Allied air forces were taking toll of German columns. Fighter bombers continually strafed the roads. The Germans had had to reroute their daylight movements through the secondary roads in the eastern woods leading to the Our Valley and thence through the Loosheim Gap. It was from this area that those unexplained small-arms bursts were coming over the cold air to the peasants huddled in their homes.

Meyerode people began to notice that while large forces came and went at will through the hills, never did a small body of Germans or a supply column pass into the pine woods but that one of those mysterious bursts of fire followed. And the krauts issued orders strictly forbidding civilian movement in the forests.



fifty-two homes and 280 inhabitants. St. Vith was captured by the Germans. True, up to the northwest on the Ades Berg, a hill commanding the highway to St. Vith, some stragglers were fighting. But on Christmas Day, when the Maraittes gathered about their tree, the krauts bagged all these men—120 of them, according to some of the German soldiers now quartered in the house.

The Germans had taken over the village for a headquarters area. To it on December twenty-second came Field Marshal von Model, over-all director of the great counteroffensive which the Germans boasted would sweep the Anglo-Americans out of Western Europe. There, too, had come Gen. Sepp Dietrich, commanding the 6th SS Panzer Army. In Meyerode also was shift-eyed Rex Degrelle, leader of the Belgian Nazis of the Walloonian SS Division—a traitor whom the burghers of Meyerode feared and hated.

The Maraittes at first wondered if their American visitors had been among those captured on the Ades Berg. Perhaps—but odd things were happening in those woods southeast and east of the village, deep behind the German lines in the deep Omer-

Chance words dropped by the Germans, unguarded bursts of wrath from officers of the staff billeted in the village, plus the evidence of their own eyes and ears, gradually were pieced together by the Maraittes and their neighbors. In a community like Meyerode the grapevine travels fast. Most of the burghers knew of the Americans who had stayed at the Maraitte dwelling.

Sepp Dietrich himself, quartered in the home of Jean Pauels, the burgomaster—a relative of Anna Maria Maraitte—began to thunder about American "criminal scoundrels and bandits." The krauts were getting nervous, itchy. Daily, wounded men came in from the easterly woods, some hobbling, some carried. Kraut orderlies gossiped. "Damned bandits," it seemed, flitted like ghosts through the trees out there, hid in snowbanks. A German traveling those woods never knew when a bullet might come singing his way.

Larger and larger detachments were assigned to guard working parties, who from time to time took a six-horse snowplow out to clear those woodroads. Searching patrols went daily into the forest, but no American prisoners ever were brought back.

winter air, and the burghers of Meyerode built up their theory. They conjectured that out in the forest a small but organized group of Americans roamed. They had plenty of arms, they had at least one medium mortar, and they were taking a steady toll of Germans.

And all the stories added up one way: that these American guerrillas were led by the young officer who he visited the Maraittes, a man "very brave and powerful of body and brave of spirit." He kept his wolf pack going, it was said, by sheer will power. There could not have been many of them—the Meyerode woodsmen later found no evidences of large bivouacs other than those known to be German.

How they existed through those bone-chilling winter weeks no one knows. Probably horse meat was their diet—there were several horse-drawn kraut artillery units in the neighborhood, and horse-drawn transport was daily passing through. Perhaps the Americans found rations in abandoned dumps. There was an ammunition dump at a trail crossing just a mile south of Meyerode where, after the Germans had gone, villagers found quantities of mortar ammunition still remaining.

Anyway, the daily firing in the woods continued until the middle of January. It was stilled just a few days before the counterattack ebbed and the Americans began slashing back into the neighborhood—perhaps about January twenty-second.

When the Germans left, the people of Meyerode combed those woods. The burgomaster first sent two competent woodsmen—his cousin August Pauels and Servatius Maraitte—to search. They found German graves and some unburied German dead. And they found a few American dead, also unburied.

In a dense thicket southeast of Meyerode, not far from the six-way trail crossing, Servatius Maraitte found the body of an American officer, a big young man, "with single silver bars on his shoulders." Near him lay the bodies of seven German soldiers. All had been dead about the same length of time—as well as could be judged, perhaps ten days before the Germans were driven out. American Graves Registration people later would fix the date as probably January twenty-second.

That no living Germans had later visited this spot, the villagers agree. This was evidenced by the fact that the American officer still had in his clothing his papers and 4000 Belgian francs, a sum no kraut looter would overlook. So the American had died as he had lived—a free man, taking with him when he went the last of his pursuers.

That American officer, Graves Registration attests, was 1st Lt. Eric F. Wood, Jr. And the people of Meyerode say that he was the man befriended by Peter Maraitte and his family—the leader of the American guerrillas, whose description by wounded Germans, according to Burgomaster Jean Pauels, fits "like a police description" with that of Eric Wood.

Records and statements of eyewitnesses prove that the only officer of the 106th Infantry Division accounted for from December sixteenth onward—that is, neither dead nor alive as free man or prisoner of

Courtesy of Hugh B. Roberts, Valley Forge Military Academy & College
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