

Leaves From A Correspondent's Notebook

By HAL BOYLE

WITH AMERICAN 30TH DIVISION IN BELGIUM, Jan. 9—(Delayed)—(AP)—What makes an infantry regiment good?

"Good battalion commanders," says Col. Walter M. Johnson of Missoula, Mont., who leads the 117th Regiment, currently regarded by many military men as the finest in the American battle line.

"And I have three of the best in the Army," adds Johnson.

No one who knows the regiment's combat record would doubt that. The battalion commanders—Lt. Col. Robert E. Frankland of Jackson, Tenn., Maj. Ben T. Ammons, also of Jackson, Tenn., and Lt. Col. Samuel T. McDowell of Rockhill, S. C.—have been with him in ten battles—and ten victories.

But every man in the 30th Division's famous "breakthrough" regiment names Johnson himself as the wellspring of their success.

"The Little Corporal," they call him behind his back. He is small—standing under five feet, five inches and weighs "about 140 pounds after eating all the fruit cakes I got for Christmas"—but he is as frisky and energetic as a fox terrier.

His wry grin, high forehead and neat black moustache are as familiar to his advanced platoons as his headquarters staff.

If the "Little Corporal" has any failings, it's his desire to beat his own mortars to the objective.

"That gallop across France was the most fun," he sighs. "You could go out and take towns ahead of the regiment."

Once "The Little Corporal," who has had command posts in 71 places since his far-traveling outfit landed last June, set up headquarters in front of his regiment. When his troops took half of Maastricht in Holland, Johnson got in a boat with a staff officer, Maj. Warren Giles of Athens, Tenn., rowed across the Maas and took the other half of the town himself.

Back at Fort Benning, Ga., the 117th was a demonstration regiment used to show infantry school scholars how to cross rivers and maneuver in battles. It is still showing them.

Its crossing of the Vire River paved the way for the successful attack on St. Lo and its fording of the Wurm led to the cracking of the Siegfried line north of Aachen.

But the "breakthrough" boys are proudest of the fact that they never failed to take an assigned objective and never lost it after taking.


Twice they knocked the Elite First SS Adolph Hitler Division back on its haunches: Last August when the Germans tried to cut the American armies in half at Mortain, France, and last month at Stavelot when they trapped and destroyed a large portion of this rebuilt Panzer Division.

Johnson's regiment has taken about 3,500 prisoners—more than its own strength—and killed or wounded as many more. His men have won almost 700 decorations for valor. But ten victories have not been cheaply bought.

Johnson has been awarded the Silver Star, one Oak Cluster and a Bronze Star. He got his first Silver Star in the fight to hold Mortain.

"We called our command post Chateau Nebelwerfer," he laughed. "They were dropping Nebelwerfers all over the place—the manure piles, the barns, the front yards, killing cows and chickens. But they didn't hit the house."

"I guess that was the first time they ever gave the Silver Star to anybody for staying in a house for two weeks, but it was too hot to leave."



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