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*Normandy to Czechoslovakia:*

## **2800-MILE DASH ACROSS FRANCE AND GERMANY FEATURES 79TH'S CRACK COMBAT RECORD IN ETO**

Three years ago this month the 79th Infantry Division was reactivated, at Camp Pickett, Va. One year ago today it was committed to its first combat in World War II, in the Normandy hedgerow country southwest of Valognes. In ten months of hard fighting it has compiled one of the finest combat records in the ETO. In this record are three outstanding "firsts": First into Cherbourg, first across the Seine, First American division to stand on the Rhine. Few divisions have served under as many Higher Headquarters: All three Army Groups, four of the five U.S. armies, nine of the sixteen U.S. Corps.

The Division's combat itinerary – approximately 2800 miles – is one of the longest. Predominantly a spearhead and "river crossing" unit, it featured in nearly all the important Allied campaigns in the West: The seizure of Cherbourg, the great breakthrough and the closing of the Argentan-Falaise Pocket, the dash to the Seine and then on to Belgium, the drive into Lorraine, the piercing of the Vosges and the clearing of Alsace, the containing of the enemy's desperate Alsatian counteroffensive, the clearing of the Rhineland, crossing of the Ruhr and reduction of the Ruhr Pocket. In prisoners alone the Division has accounted for the equivalent of three enemy divisions. Enemy casualties in killed and wounded are reckoned as many times greater.

This was the record that prompted Ninth U.S. Army to select the 79th as one of its two assault units in the Rhine River crossing. Here, in intentionally cold fact and a minimum of color, is that record in detail:

On June 12, 1944, the 79th's first elements reached Utah Beach and during the following week the remainder of the Division assembled near Ste. Mere Eglise in VII Corps reserve. It was this week that saw the cutting of the Cherbourg Peninsula and the unleashing of First Army's drive to capture the great port at its tip. The importance of taking Cherbourg at once was underlined by a spell of rough weather at the beaches which made imperative Allied possession of good harbor. Plans for this drive called for the 79th to make the main effort northwards, with the tested 4th and 9th Divisions covering its flanks. The Division's first D-Day and H-Hour came at 0500, June 19th.

### **FALL OF CHERBOURG**

Good progress was made for two days while the Division accustomed itself to the unforeseen difficulties of hedgerow warfare. The advance was slowed momentarily at the outer defenses of "Fortress Cherbourg", but air bombardment and artillery and naval fire aided in their reduction. At length, however, it was the foot troops who had to carry the ball when Fort du Roule was reached. This fort, a bastion of the Atlantic Wall and

termed “impregnable” by Berlin, was the key of the inner defenses of the city. Situated on a rocky height overlooking Cherbourg, honeycombed with corridors and covered with firing ports, it had enough troops and supplies to withstand a long siege. The fury of the 79th’s attack, however, was such that the garrison capitulated after only one day of resistance, during which the doughboys blasted their way into tunnels, silenced guns with demolitions, and kept a tremendous stream of fire directed at the ports. On the evening of June 25 came the Fort’s formal surrender, followed the next day by that of the city.

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## KRAUTS CAUGHT NAPPING WHEN 79TH FORGED SEINE BRIDGEHEAD

On June 27 the division moved south from Cherbourg to relieve elements of the 90th Infantry Division on the extreme right of the Allied line and preparations were begun for a drive south under VIII Corps. The jump-off came on July 3 when the units crossed the Ollonde River and attacked south. The Division’s axis of advance led through some of the most difficult terrain it ever traversed – the Norman hedgerow country. German delaying tactics made the greatest possible use of the hedgerows, and, consequently, each pasture frequently developed into a miniature battlefield. North of the Ay River, enemy defenses centered around two important points – La Haye du Puits and Hill 84 – and at both of these points the infantry encountered opposition of the toughest nature. Enemy fire was extremely heavy and accurate, enemy tanks were active, and the foot troops had to advance with a minimum of fire support. As La Haye du Puits was cleared house by house, the bulk of its defenders withdrew to a strongpoint in the railroad yards where a last-ditch stand took place before the town was finally cleared on July 9. Simultaneously, at Hill 84 – “Bloody Hill” – the Division met stubborn resistance as it strove to gain possession of this last high ground north of the Ay River. A stiff, see-saw engagement had to be fought through the village of Montgardon before the enemy conceded the Hill to the 79th. On July 13 the enemy withdrew south of the Ay River and the Division halted its advance at the north bank. During the next two weeks it marked time while the plans were made that resulted in the great breakthrough of July 24. In this “Operation Cobra”, VIII Corps’ role was a limited one at first. It was only after the enemy had been crushed at St. Lo that the Division finally got the green light.

## THE BREAKTHROUGH

On July 27 it attacked south in a move to envelop the town of Lessay, a strong enemy position. Little opposition was met, however, although the Division’s progress was slowed by extensive minefields. The Division drove on south against little resistance until July 29, when it was ordered to make way for the armored divisions exploiting the breakthrough. On August 2, as it prepared to follow the 6th Armored Division into Brittany, orders from General Bradley completely changed the Division’s mission. It was transferred to the XV Corps in the new Third Army, motorized and ordered to move rapidly on Fougères. By noon of the following day the town had been captured and preparations were made to defend it against any enemy counterattacks at this critical point in the Allied line. On August 5 the Division resumed its advance, with the mission of seizing the Mayenne River crossings at Laval. The city was occupied the next day

and, following the establishment of bridgeheads on the east bank of the Mayenne, Division engineers quickly installed bridges. The next day the 79th continued its eastward drive, the new objective being the important communications center of Le Mans. Increased opposition was encountered between Laval and Le Mans but on the afternoon of August 8 Division troops entered the main square of the latter city.

The Corps' advance had brought it around to the rear of the enemy facing the British and Americans to the north. On August 9 the Division was ordered to prepare to move northwards behind the 5th Armored Division in a move to make contact with the British, thereby surrounding the German Seventh Army. Following the armor north through Mamers, the 79th reached the vicinity of Le Mele-Sur-Sarthe where it was ordered into Corps reserve. Here on August 14 the Division teamed up with the Air Forces to destroy more than 50 enemy vehicles in which the Germans were attempting to break out of the pocket. On the same day came orders to advance on Versailles.

## ON TO BELGIUM

Motorized again, and moving with the same speed as the armored divisions on its flanks, the Division reached the Eure River on August 15. As it made plans to push on to Versailles and beyond to Paris, the 79th's mission was changed again by higher headquarters. Its next objective – the Seine at Mantes-Gassicourt – was designed to block the last important escape route to the east for the enemy caught in Normandy. Enemy resistance to these advances had been spasmodic, and intelligence reports indicated that only light enemy forces were holding the Seine opposite the Division's positions at Mantes-Gassicourt. At 2130 on August 19 came the order to cross and by 0130 elements of the 79th were on the east bank and had secured the first Allied bridgehead beyond the Seine. The bridgehead was expanded to include the river's loop above Mantes-Gassicourt, after which the Division dug in to wait for the inevitable counter-attacks. From August 22 to August 26 the enemy strove in vain to close this hole in his defenses around Paris. The 18th GAF Division, with powerful tank support, was decimated by anti-tank fire and the massed fire of Division and Corps Artillery.

On August 30 came the break-out, and, under First Army and XIX Corps, the motorized 79th headed for the Belgian frontier. In seventy-two hours the Division flashed 180 miles across World War I's battlefields to chalk up a new record. In the words of the Corps Commander, it was "one of the fastest opposed advances by an Infantry Division in the history of warfare." From September 2 to 5 the Division waited for new orders at its assembly areas near Sameon on the Franco-Belgian frontier and a day later it started south to rejoin Third Army and XV Corps.

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## VE DAY FINDS DIVISION OCCUPYING RUHR VALLEY

## ANOTHER BREAKTHROUGH

By September 9 the Division had assembled in its new locations near Joinville, with bridgeheads established over the Marne River. Here it was in position to block any move against Third Army's south flank by the enemy retreating up the Rhone Valley

before the Seventh U.S. Army. However, on September 11 the Division's eastward advance was resumed. Moving across the entire front of the German 16th Infantry Division, one of the combat teams drove sixty miles to cross the Meuse and reach the outskirts of Charmes. The other combat teams peeled off the Division's column to wipe out enemy garrisons parallel to this route, at Poussay and Mirecourt and at Neufchateau. After short but stubborn battles these towns were captured and on September 15 the whole Division assembled at Charmes to support the bridgehead secured on the east bank of the Moselle. On September 18 the advance was resumed and next day the Division crossed the Mortagne against slight opposition. Two days later, however, heavy resistance was met when patrols came up against strong enemy positions along the Meurthe. After eight weeks of flight, the Germans had succeeded in stopping their rout and, until the next breakthrough, two months later, they gave ground only after bitter resistance.

From September 19 to 23 the enemy strongly contested all attempts of the Division to break the Meurthe River line. On the left flank, one combat team cleared the enemy from Luneville, thereby jeopardizing the Nazi right flank, and the next day the Germans withdrew to new defensive positions along the Vezouse River and through the Forêt de Parroy. Reconnaissance indicated that the enemy was holding the forest in strength and Sound and Flash units reported a considerable concentration of enemy artillery to the east. The Division planned to attack following a heavy bombardment of the forest by XIX T.A.C. but poor weather forced this to be postponed until September 28. When it did come off, it was hardly a success, and the first foot troops into the forest encountered tough resistance. The thickness of the forest, the well dug-in and experienced enemy troops of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, and their heavy supporting fire, all combined to make the Division's progress slow and costly. But the forest had to be taken and it was. On October 9 a carefully planned attack was launched and after heavy fighting the enemy was driven from his commanding positions in the middle of the forest. Next day the enemy evacuated to new positions on high ground to the east of the forest with the Division closely following up the withdrawal. Two weeks later the 79th was relieved by the 44th Infantry Division for its first break in 128 days of combat. The Division assembled in rest areas around Luneville and made plans for the next campaign.

## CLEARING OF ALSACE

Seventh Army and XV Corps plans called for a breaking of the German lines in Lorraine, the forcing of a passage through the Vosges and the clearing of the enemy from Alsace. The enemy was established in strong positions along the Vezouse and was preparing an even stronger defense line along the heights of the Vosges where he hoped to hold through the winter. To the 79th was assigned the task of forcing a breakthrough which would be exploited by the 2nd French Armored Division. On November 13 the Division returned to the line, and attacked northeast from the vicinity of Harbouey. In a week of heavy fighting it drove a deep wedge into the enemy's lines, and "fighting like devils", in the words of a French report, succeeded in forcing a passage of the Vezouse. The French armored poured through the hole in the enemy's lines and uncovered the brilliant maneuver that pierced the Vosges and freed Strasbourg. The 79th followed up, clearing Phalsbourg, and moving into Alsace to

cover the French at Strasbourg from the north. The Division then dug in near Brumath and awaited the opening of the next offensive.

This began on December 9 when the 79th, now under VI Corps, attacked to the northeast along the Rhine with the objective of breaching the Siegfried Line. Haguenau and Bischwiller were seized and after overcoming stubborn enemy delaying action the 79th reached the frontier along the Lauter River on December 15. The attack was pressed and the Division drove on into Germany to reach the formidable defenses of the enemy's West Wall. Advance reports of its strength proved accurate, for the Division met a hail of fierce fire. But after brisk fighting a foothold was gained inside the Line itself. Suddenly came the order to withdraw to the Lauter River as Higher Headquarters reshuffled the Western Front to meet the enemy's Ardennes threat. On December 22 and 23 this was accomplished and Christmas was observed by the troops as they outposted defensive positions along the river. Then the enemy unveiled another threat in the West – this time just to the west of the 79th's positions – and on January 2nd another withdrawal had to be made by the Division to new positions based on the Maginot Line. Four battalions were loaned temporarily to the adjacent 45th Division on the right, as it strove to contain the enemy's thrust, and in return, Corps attached to the 79th Task Force Linden (the three regiments of the 42nd Infantry Division). The Division prepared for the inevitable enemy follow-up, improving its Maginot positions and keeping a close watch on the right flank along the Rhine. On January 6 came the first of the enemy's attacks.

## DEFENSE OF ALSACE

The importance the enemy attached to this offensive was graphically disclosed as identifications of his units rolled in: 21st Panzer Division, 25th Panzer Grenadier Division and 7th Parachute Division. The first of these crack veteran units effected a penetration of the Maginot positions near Hatten on January 9 and through this slot the enemy poured men and armor to surround this village and the next one to the west, Rittershoffen. A battalion of the 79th clung on in each of these villages in the face of overwhelming German strength and fire. The enemy hurled attack after attack at these two battalions, and his two other divisions appeared to relieve the 21st Panzer. Meanwhile, on the Division's right flank along the Rhine, the enemy had secured a bridgehead and had been able to build it up with considerable strength, including his excellent 10th SS Panzer Division. Untested American units were forced to withdraw in the face of their assault, and, as the situation deteriorated, it became apparent that a withdrawal would have to be made to a new MLR along the Moder River. Accordingly, Hatten and Rittershoffen were evacuated successfully on the night of January 20 and the Division established its new positions on the Moder. The enemy was slow to follow up this move, and it was not until the night of January 24 that he attempted to assault the new line. The parachute, panzer grenadier and SS panzer divisions all secured bridgeheads on the south bank of the river, but at an extremely costly price. The numbers of enemy dead and wounded ran high and the Division's PW cage was filled many times over. The next day the Germans called it quits and pulled back to the north of the river. On February 7 the Division was relieved in its positions by the 36th and 101st Divisions and assembled at Pont-a-Mousson for a rest.

On February 14 the Division was alerted for a rail and motor drive northwards to join Ninth Army and XVI Corps and five days later the units closed into new areas in the vicinity of Tongres, Belgium. Much later it was revealed that this move had been made so that the 79th would be set and on the spot when the time came for an assault crossing of the Rhine. In the meanwhile, the Division played a limited role as the final operations to clear the Rhineland took place. In the American offensive which began on February 23, only one of the combat teams participated, clearing a sector east of Heinsberg to the Roer River. After the breakthrough had been effected, the Division passed to XIII Corps and on March 1 was given the mission of safeguarding the Corps rear areas as it sped across the Rhine plain. On March 7, however, came the order to return to Holland (and XVI Corps) to make ready for the great task ahead – “Operation Flashpoint”, the crossing of the Rhine. Sites along the Maas were selected as best matching conditions at the Rhine, and for two weeks the Division carried out a training program in river-crossing operations. Meticulous planning took into consideration all possible developments and angles, and plans were made to fire the greatest artillery preparation of the war. In perfect weather the Air Forces saturated the east bank of the Rhine and on the evening of March 23 the last moves forward were made.

At 0300, March 24, following the hour-long artillery preparation laid down by sixteen battalions of field artillery the Divisions two assault battalions jumped off. Against little resistance, the east bank was reached and bridgeheads secured. At once the build-up commenced, with men and equipment being ferried across the river by all manner of army and navy craft. By evening the city of Dinslaken had been captured after a stiff fight and the 79th had gained a large foothold on the east bank. Following the build-up, the Division swung south and drove for the Rhine-Herne Canal. Spasmodic resistance was met and on March 30 the Canal was reached after the 79th had overrun countless town, including the important city of Duisburg-Hamborn.

The Ninth Army objective, however, had not yet been seized and the 79th was again earmarked for a spearhead role. Ninth Army was to close up to the Ruhr River, there to await the arrival of First Army units pushing up from the south. The 79th would break across the canal and drive into the Ruhr valley. On April 7 it attacked across the Canal near Gelsenkirchen in the face of scattered German opposition. Two days later it was on its objective, the north bank of the Ruhr River, after which followed the clearing of the industrial cities of Bochum, Muhlheim and part of Essen. On April 16 First Army units uncovered the Division in its positions along the Ruhr and the 79th lost contact with the enemy in the ETO.

Thereafter followed military government assignments, first in the Bochum area, and later in an area expanded to the east to include Arnsberg and Lippstadt. Late in May, elements of the British Second Army arrived to establish their permanent military occupation and the 79th was ordered to relieve Third Army units occupying Cheb, Czechoslovakia and part of the surrounding Sudetenland.