

The following article was published in the June 26, 1945 edition of the “Lorraine Cross” the 79th Division’s bi-weekly newspaper. The author, Harry Farrell, later wrote *Recon Diary: Combat History of the 79th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop*. It’s worth reading if you can find a copy.

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RECON TROOP SPARKED DIV’S DRIVE

FIGHTING FLARED WHITE HOT AS SCOUTS BLASTED OPEN PATHWAYS FOR 79TH’S SUSTAINED DRIVES

(During the Division’s ten months in combat there was little time or opportunity to print the story of the 79th Reconnaissance Troop. The factual story during that time was unchanging: Where the Division moved, there moved Recon – probing, prodding, protecting. The following article, written by a troop member reveals for the first time some of the highlights of the 79th Recon Troop’s mission.)

by PFC Harry Farrell

Last January 6 was about as cold a day as Alsace ever shaped up to torture American soldiers who were fighting in that snow-whipped corner of France. And if ever the men of the 79th Recon’s third platoon, who huddled about a wood stove in a dingy little room in Bischwiller, wanted a day’s rest it was then.

The day before, the enemy had rebuilt his Gambsheim bridgehead across the Rhine, and the troopers had spent a wearing day feeling out this new thrust against Seventh U.S. Army positions. The troop had attempted to penetrate Gambsheim twice. On the west, they found the krauts dug in like bashful groundhogs. A brisk reception of machine gun fire wounded their platoon leader, 1/Lt Robert Dove, and two of their M-8 armored cars had barely slipped away between the black bursts of anti-tank shells. South of the town, they bucked a kingsized dose of incoming artillery when the Germans tossed in two scorching .88 barrages.

So, on the morning of January 6, the troopers were in the mood for a rest. Their 10-in-1 breakfast was about half prepared when in walked S/Sgt (now 2/Lt) Silas L. Lockhart, of Clifton Forge, Va., who had taken over when Dove was evacuated. He had been down the street at the troop CP. Quietly Lockhart glanced around the room.

“McCarthy,” he said, “how do you like dismounted work?”

“I don’t like it worth a damn!” answered T/S John McCarthy, 20 year old Boston Irishman.

“Well, get ready to move out in ten minutes.”

Then Lockhart picked the others. For this job he needed just a dozen – exactly half the number remaining in his depleted platoon. He singled out the old timers, men who had seen Normandy and everything since: Sgt James McGinty, T/5 James Conley, T/5 Bruce Marston, Pvt Albert (“Old Sam”) Remar, and Cpl Kermit Atkins. Then there were a few of the newer men: Irrepressible Pvt Chick Tarter of Kentucky, who at 20 was a veteran family man with four years

of married life behind him; there was “Gus”, who had been sweating out two years in Iceland when a transfer brought him to UK in time for D-Day; there was PFC Ted Mikolajczyk, whose name no one ever tried to pronounce. Lockhart himself completed the “Dismounted Dozen.”

“Go in Shooting!”

The dope was this: Over night, the enemy’s modest Gombsheim pocket had swollen to envelope Stattmatten, a little burg where two platoons of American doughs were cut off. Recon had orders to get them out and retake the town. Intelligence estimates of German strength and disposition in the town varied from “fairly strong” to “substantially so.”

For this assignment, Captain James F. (“Big Jim”) Beaver, Claremont, Okla., troop commander, had accumulated a small but formidable task force. Five light tanks attached to the troop bolstered the firepower of three M-8’s from Recon’s first platoon. The “Dismounted Dozen”, as well as 15 doughs loaned by an infantry company, were to ride the tanks, hop off when they reached the objective, and fight into Stattmatten on foot. First platoon jeeps were to stay outside the town and cover the flanks with their mounted .50 and .30 caliber machine guns.

The force reached a spot only a few hundred yards from Stattmatten’s outskirts without incident, and there the tanks and M-8’s fanned out into an armored skirmish line. Then, with the foot soldiers jogging along behind, the line moved forward in frontal assault.

There was only one order: “Go in shooting!”

[Headline on p.2: UNIT OPERATED UNDER ALL CONDITIONS, FREQUENTLY FAR BEHIND ENEMY LINES; HAS IMPORTANT ROLE IN OCCUPATION]

Tanks vs. Panzerfausts

“When all the .37’s on the tanks and M-8’s opened up together, it sounded like we were jumping off across the Rhine,” McCarthy recalls. “Every house on the border of the town had a shell hole and was burning by the time we got there. Outside of a few snipers’ bullets, there didn’t seem to be much for us on foot to worry about. But we hugged those tanks just the same.”

And it was just as well. Because the action got hotter – fast. There was neither cover nor concealment for the dismounted men in the town proper. They couldn’t chance ducking into a doorway to load a new clip or magazine. No one knew exactly where the krauts were holed, or from what source the next burst of fire would come.

“I kept thinking of only one thing,” Bruce Marston, who comes from Brunswick, Me., says. “‘Keep moving and keep shooting’. We shot at everything – windows, doorways, haylofts and krauts.”

Simultaneously the tanks and armored cars were prodding on through the streets. Their progress can best be described as a relentless, desperate series of duels between their .37’s and German bazookas and Panzerfausts. Target range was seldom greater than 50 yards. Often it was less than 50 feet.

Because the kraut rocketmen could snatch only hasty aim between the bursts of machine and tommygun fire that recon poured at them, they bagged only one of the eight American armored vehicles that were in Stattmatten. That was when one of the tanks rounded a corner by the church in which the Germans held a strong point. A bazookaman, firing at a range of ten yards, couldn't miss. His point-blank hit killed one tanker outright and wounded two.

“One guy was only scratched,” says McCarthy. “He tried to scramble out of the turret, but a burp-gunner in the church sawed him in half.”

Out Of The Cellars

Two of the men on foot received wounds which later caused their deaths in hospitals behind the lines. “Gus” was about to flush out some snipers hiding in a barn when one of them got him. The bullet left a clean wound in the back of his neck – just a small purplish hole. They thought for a few days he'd pull through, but he couldn't make it. A corporal who came to Recon after a hitch in 6th Cavalry copped it when some .37 mm canister ricocheted off a building and cut him down.

But there was an instant during the battle when the troopers had a little more cheerful outlook: That was when the cut-off American doughs burst joyfully from the cellars in which they had been holed up, sweating out the relief mission.

“I never saw anything like it,” says McCarthy, “It was like a cheering section at a football game. Those joes jumped up and down and shouted their lungs out. I guess they'd had a pretty rough night of fighting, at that.”

Within half an hour, the task force had pretty well sifted through the village. They were running the place, but it was far from clear. There were plenty of krauts left, not counting 21 dead ones who dotted the streets and alleys. However, those remaining began to think it was useless to continue the fight. The next three hours found them emerging from the buildings and cellars to surrender by twos and threes. Total prisoner bag was 52 enlisted men, four officers, and a substantial group of wounded. Late that afternoon infantry relieved the troopers and took over Stattmatten to end the show.

Recon's Repertoire

The fact that the Stattmatten assignment was not exactly concerned with reconnaissance might not surprise someone unfamiliar with the troop's mode of operation. But it never caused a flickered eyelash among the troopers themselves. You never know what to expect in recon, and that's what gives the outfit its color. One day you're five miles out in front of everyone else; the next, you're chaperoning displaced persons in a rear area clink.

Ask any man in the troop which aspect of its combat record gives him the most pride and personal satisfaction. He won't point to an impressive series of rough, costly engagements. Recon's had plenty of those, but that sort of stuff is first of all the infantry's meat. The trooper will more likely point to his outfit's reputation as a versatile gang that can, and does, tackle any assignment, good, bad, or indifferent.

Between Utah Beach and the Ruhr Pocket, Recon saw plenty of action. But it wasn't action in the protracted, bitter sense that characterizes infantry warfare. Recon's fighting came in quick, intense, white-hot spurts. As T/5 Melvin Baldinger, of Pittsburgh, puts it, "The troop's battles are concentrated, like K-Rations and dehydrated eggs, and just about as appetizing."

Several swift encounters came last summer when Recon spearheaded the Cross of Lorraine's lightning thrusts across France – to Fougères, Laval, Le Mans, Nogent le Roi, Mantes-Gassicourt and the Belgian border. Troopers don't like to recall the times that their lead jeeps and M-8's have rounded curves or nosed over the crests of hills to come face to face with zeroed-in kraut anti-tank guns. For example, there was the time outside Fougères one black night when an SP gun opened up.

"It was just like a ball of fire coming straight at us," remembers T/4 John Adank, Newport, Ky., who was on the radio in the lead armored car. The shell didn't hit the M-8, but the .50 cal. machine gunner on the point jeep was literally torn in half.

[Photo of a tank and some infantry in a village; Caption: "Liberating" A Specialty]

Sometimes, however, when Recon happened to catch the krauts napping, it was the troopers who enjoyed the field day. Lt Malcomb B. Vilas, of Cleveland, who used to lead the second platoon, remembers such a time the first day out on the Division's 72-hour drive to Belgium.

"We spotted a horse-drawn column of artillery guns and caissons on a side road. They thought we were miles away, and it was a complete surprise. Echols (T/5 Luther Echols, Danville, Va.) went hog-wild on the .37. I pointed out targets to him with tracers from my .30, and he went right down the line, putting a round of HE into every horse."

"Liberating" towns used to be the Recon Troop's specialty in France. It was not unusual to ride through six or seven new villages on a single mission. Invariably the elated civilians of such places flocked to the streets and swarmed over the armored cars and jeeps. The reception always included numerous handouts of cognac, calvados, mirabelle, or schnapps, as well as the welcoming embraces of local mademoiselles. First platoon men remember particularly a slick blonde who bestowed upon each of them an emphatic kiss as the column entered Nogent le Roi. Next day she appeared minus her golden tresses. The newly-freed French had shaved her pate to cue ball luster for having ardently "collaborated" with German soldiers during the occupation.

Occasionally the celebrations of the French proved premature. There was the day in the town of Pfaffenoffen when the third platoon rolled in and found it clear as a bell. Jubilant citizens triumphantly unfurled French tricolors in their windows, and everything was rosy. But when the troop's vehicles pulled out of town, the Germans pulled back in. The infantry subsequently had a rough fight on its hands before it got back into American hands. Kraut reaction to the sudden blossoming of the French national colors was never known.

Across the Seine

The Seine Loop remains a poignant memory in the minds of recon troopers. It was there they suffered their highest toll of casualties. It was there they performed some of their most brilliant reconnaissance, at one time penetrating ten miles beyond the tightly held German front.

Also, the Seine River recalls one of the most farcical missions the troop ever pulled. One night a Frenchman burst into the troop CP on the bridgehead and told a tale. He said he had filtered through the German lines via the underground. Twenty miles out on the left flank, he said, 40 FFI men were holding 40 Germans as prisoners in an old chateau. An assault force of approximately 40 more krauts were attacking in an effort to free their comrades. Help was needed.

Recon's second and third platoons took off. Out through enemy territory they raced – incidentally liberating three towns en route. Finally they reached their destination.

The rumor was false. There were no 40 German prisoners in a chateau. There were no 40 Frenchmen holding 40 German prisoners in a chateau. There were no 40 Germans attacking 40 Frenchmen holding 40 German prisoners in a chateau. There was no chateau.

Special Missions

To the layman, the very word “reconnaissance” brings to mind all manner of furtive missions and hairbreadth escapes from supermaniacal situations in the shadow of enemy positions. Any seasoned trooper will tell you that there is danger aplenty, but it's more a matter of getting out in front, moving forward until someone shoots at you, and then fighting like hell to get out alive with the info. And once or twice the 79th Recon Troop has been involved in deals that make Fearless Fosdick's predicaments look like Riviera furloughs. Probably the best example was the time S/Sgt Al Forbis, Kansas City, Mo., and PFC Frank Varela, of New Mexico, felt out the kraut defenses of Neufchateau.

They reached the edge of town on a foot patrol, stopped at a French house, and borrowed two overcoats which came to their ankles. These they donned over rolled up OD trousers. Then they strolled into town.

“One phony thing about our costumes was the fact that the coats were draped over our shoulders, rather than worn in the regular manner,” Forbis says. “We had carbines tucked up under our arms beneath them. But we didn't seem to be attracting any notice, so we decided to play it all the way through. The first German we saw was on guard at the outskirts of town. He was smoking a cigarette and didn't pay much attention to us, so we kept going.

“In the center of town we could have looked down the barrel of a .40 mm anti-tank gun covering the main intersection. There were four crew members there, one in the gunner's position and three just standing around. Then we turned a corner and were practically on top of a sentry with a burp gun. He was left flank security for the AT gun. He was standing in a fox hole in the front yard of a house bordering the street. We could have spit in his face.

“We were curious to see how far we'd come, so we looked back. It wasn't until then we discovered that we'd walked within 30 yards of a jerry machine gun, right through its field of fire. If the guy on the gun had been on the ball, we'd be there yet.”

[Photo of a snow covered tank in a French town; Caption: Typical of some of the scenes described in the Recon story is the above picture, taken in the middle of an Alsatian winter. This tank is probing the town's defenses.]

Out of Combat

Captain Beaver, who commanded the troop through all of its action, has been described by some men in the outfit as “the only joe who can wear an issue uniform and still look like the hero of a Hollywood western.” Whenever possible, even in combat, the captain’s shirt and trousers were creased sharper than Gillette blades. His combat boots carry a high polish, and his pistol belt sports a pearl-handled .45 and matching dagger. Once in a while the crimson corner of a bandana handkerchief trails from his hip pocket. An old army man with the permanent rank of staff sergeant, the Captain got his commission at Fort Riley. He wears the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart.

Other Recon officers come from a variety of backgrounds. 1/Lt William C. Miller was an agriculturist in Masontown, W. Va. 1/Lt Norris McGowan, Shreveport, La., is a southern gentleman and a Texas Aggie. Lt Vilas is a Yale man and nephew of the owner of the Cleveland Indians. Lt Dove was engaged in wholesale grocery transportation in California before entering the army. Newest troop officer, Lt Lockhart, received his field commission in January. He attended Virginia Military Institute.

V-E Day found Recon in Ludinghausen, just a little north of the Ruhr, straw-bossing the town jail and rounding up prisoners and displaced persons on daily patrols over a 500-square-mile area. Then the troop moved to Lippstadt, farther east, and the same sort of work continued. On the move to Czechoslovakia, it ran the bivouac area and drivers’ mess at the half-way point, Waltershausen. About that last job, Captain Beaver told his men: “We’ve done everything except run a filling station and hot dog stand, and now we’re doing that!”

Now Recon is sweating out the CBI, of course, but already there are a few bored joes in the outfit who turn gloomy at the mention of long-time occupational duties. A couple of weeks ago the troopers were speculatively discussing what the next war, if any, would bring. There were a couple of remarks about transoceanic rockets and such, and one dreamy individual pondered a trans-Atlantic autobahn, built by the Corps of Engineers.

“How would Recon fit in on a deal like that?” someone asked.

“Recon will be on an island in the middle of the autobahn, running a filling station and hot dog stand,” was the prompt reply.