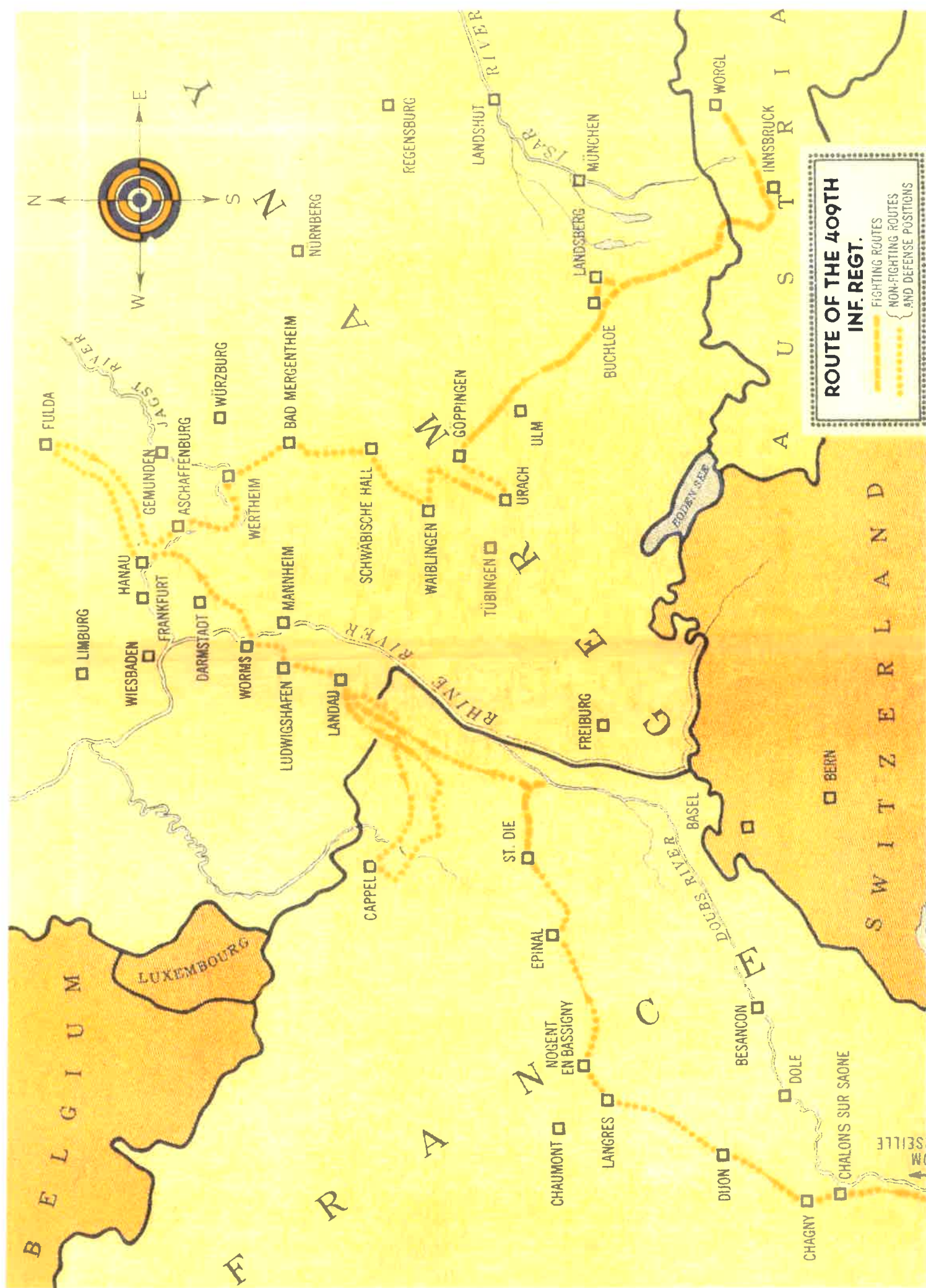


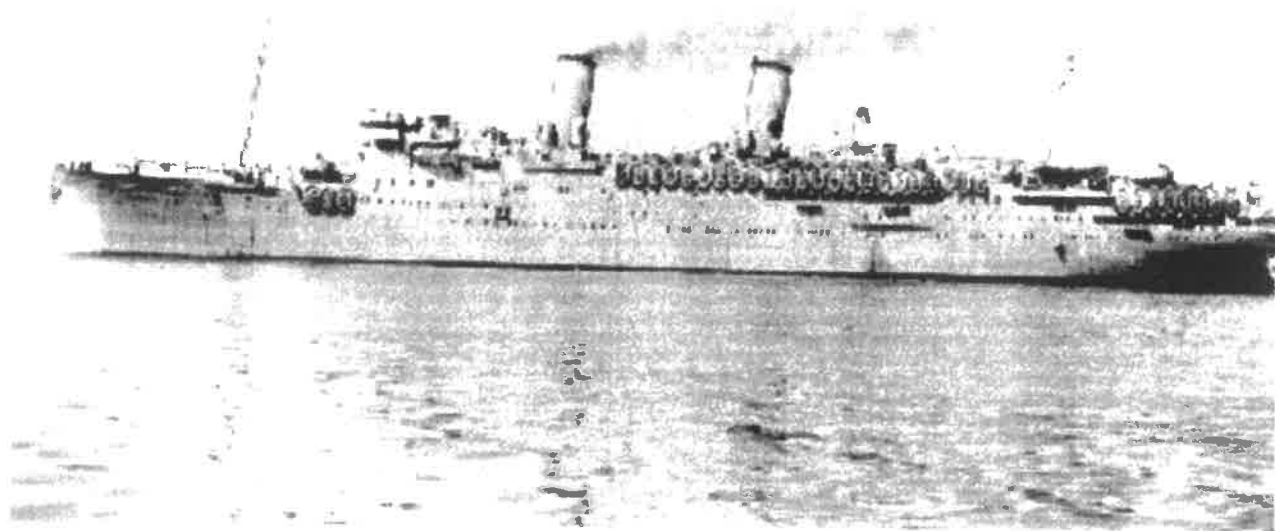
# **A SOLDIER'S STORY**

## **BILL TOLLESON IN WORLD WAR II**

**BY TOM TOLLESON**







# USS MONTICELLO AP-61



Col. Claudius L. Lloyd, commander of the 599th Infantry Regiment from February 1944 until its inactivation. Colonel Lloyd had been Regimental Executive Officer from activation on November 15, 1942, until he assumed command of the Regiment.

Bill Tolleson saw his first dead man as a young child living in the rough and tumble lumber camps of the Ouachita Mountains outside of Hot Springs Arkansas. It would not be his last.

Bill was born in Wright City Oklahoma on February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1925, son of Claude Paul Tolleson of Kirby Arkansas and Maxine Ellis of Sulfur Springs Texas. Within four years of his birth the Stock Market crashed and most of the world plunged into the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Work was to be found, however, tending the company store in the remote wooded areas of a state that was barely beyond its frontier days. The Tolleson family lived in a shotgun shack, hastily erected to provide shelter for the attendants of the burgeoning lumber business. Claude Paul tended the company store and issued payroll to the lumberjacks. Maxine educated the children of the camp in a rudimentary schoolhouse. Bill and his older sister Pauline occupied themselves with all the diversions of childhood that life has to offer wherever one might find themselves growing up. With no movies, TV or even CD players those diversions were whatever came along.

Felling trees in what was essentially a remote mountain wilderness was a tough and dangerous business. Crosscut saws and double bladed axes were the tools of choice. Chainsaws did not exist. Trees, once felled, were rolled onto wagons with chains, muscles and a lot of sweat. Mule teams pulled the wagons down to a makeshift railroad where logs were once again rolled onto flat cars and hauled away to the sawmills. Tons of logs lashed to open wheel wagons rolling over rough terrain were a disaster waiting to happen.

One such disaster took place when the brakes failed on a wagon and the logs went rolling. The driver fell from his seat and was consequently rolled over by a log laden wagon wheel. His remains were carried into the main building of the camp and laid out on a table in the front room for assessment. Word flashed through the camp like wildfire and quickly reached the Tolleson household that there was a dead man on the table at the main building. Terse orders were issued by the parents that the children were not to bear witness to this event.

Young Bill Tolleson and another young agitator named Billy Gene became preoccupied with the concept. They had to see for themselves. Fortified by their resolve, they sneaked to the building and stared wide-eyed through the front door and beheld the dead man sprawled on the table with a wagon wheel rut across his chest. Bill Tolleson saw his first dead man. The penalty for such behavior was severe for 1930's lumber camp parents disciplined their children with fear and pain. Fear and torment was what was meted out. Billy Gene was beaten severely and Tolleson was tied to a table. He thought that things could not possibly be worse. He thought wrong.



The Tolleson family eventually settled in Hope Arkansas where Claude founded a Gas and Oil delivery company named the Tol-E-Tex Oil Company. Essentially Claude would drive a tanker truck to the refineries outside of Longview in East Texas, fill up and then deliver the goods to the local outlets in and around Hope. From there came the name, Tolleson East Texas Oil Company. The business prospered and all was well.

Events that would change his life forever began to transpire in the world in 1937 when Bill Tolleson was 12 years old. As an indirect result of the great depression, instability among divided leaders in China created a power vacuum. Even though Japan had been meddling militarily in Chinese affairs since 1931, they launched a full-scale invasion of Northern and Central China in 1937 officially kicking off the hostilities that led the world into World War II.

A failed graphic artist in Germany and a self-absorbed dictator in Italy had their own plans for Europe. Adolph Hitler's most remembered artistic endeavor was certainly the swastika. It was the symbol of his Nazi party and emblazoned everywhere, sometimes with the words "Gott Mit Uns," (God is with us).

Claiming the unification of all German speaking people, the much more powerful Germany annexed the nation of Austria in 1938.

A civil war in Spain allowed Germany to try out some of its new weapons while Italy did the same in Ethiopia against troops armed primarily with spears. Big time action was launched in 1939 with a full scale German Blitzkrieg invasion of Poland. Blitzkrieg means "Lightning Warfare," in German and most people wrongly assume it refers to the speed of assault of a modern motorized military force. Even though Hitler's armies moved faster than any before, the lightning aspect of the description refers to the alternating zigzagging and slanted movements of the invading force against the defending army, which on a map looks like a jagged bolt of lightning. This is the gist of the maneuver. Rather than a straight on frontal assault, which is the only thing any defending army knew up until that time, alternating slanted attacks threw them off guard. It was hugely successful.

Poland then Scandinavia and then Belgium and Holland were overrun by Germany in 1939. 1940 brought the invasion and conquest of France in less than a month. 1941 saw the invasion of North Africa by Germany and the Balkans and Greece by Italy. Then in June of 1941 Hitler launched Operation Barbarosa, the invasion of the Soviet Union that pitted 3 million troops against each other in the most epic struggle this planet has yet to see. 27 million Russians would die as a result of this operation alone.

December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 brought the Japanese Navy to Pearl Harbor to eliminate the only real threat to their plans for expansion in Asia and the South Pacific. Shortly after making quick work of the American Pacific Fleet, Japan invaded and occupied Malaysia, the Philippines, Indochina, Burma and most of the East Indies. The bombing of Pearl Harbor did though, have the definitive effect of bringing America into the War.

In 1942 the Allied forces, which were mostly America and England and a few stragglers out of defeated France, began the long slow process of beating back the aggressors. The battle of Midway turned back a planned invasion by Japan of the Alaskan Aleutian islands and the Allies, led by General George Patton, began confronting the Germans on the sands of the Sahara Dessert in North Africa while the Russians were beating them back from the doorstep of Moscow. The American armed forces began planning for a combined invasion of continental Europe with England, and an Island-by-Island campaign in the South Pacific that would eventually wind up in Tokyo Harbor. They were going to need a lot of soldiers.

Meanwhile Bill Tolleson completed his studies at Hope High School and moved on to pursue a mathematics degree at Southern State A & M College in Magnolia Arkansas. He was hoping to become a teacher. The year was 1943 and America had been at war with both Germany and Japan since the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. To help out with his financial situation, Bill took a job mowing the grass on the campus and working on the campus farm doing odd jobs. It paid 15 cents an hour. A 10-hour day would net \$1.50, enough to buy plenty of RC Colas and Hamburgers to keep a young college freshman happy. He didn't know it at the time but he would soon be getting a slightly higher paying job.

Knowing a lot of souls would be needed for the desperate days ahead, recruiters swarmed to colleges looking for military aged prospects. They focused on the colleges because in the predominantly agriculturally based economy of rural Arkansas, anyone employed in farm production was deemed a strategic resource. In other words, the farms were essential to the production of food and other resources essential to the war effort. To rob the farms of its sons would be to rob our own country of its own basis of sustenance. The boys drafted to fight the great American war were coming from the cities and colleges of America and not from the countryside. Recruiting was easy because draft was inevitable.

Being a college boy, Bill Tolleson was offered what seemed to be a promising alternative by the recruiting vultures. Join the U.S. army this summer and they would guarantee another semester of college studying engineering. They also dangled the intriguing prospect of him completing his studies and becoming an Army engineer. The result would be directing either the demolition or erection of bridges and other various fortifications and not dodging bullets in the trenches. He could then be qualified to be a Civil Engineer after the War with a comfortable career overseeing the construction of dams and cloverleaves. No one told him that Army engineers often worked under direct enemy fire.

Bill Tolleson was sworn into the U.S. army in June of 1943 at Little Rock Arkansas. He was 18 years old. He did so with a good friend by the name of David Reed from Little Rock. They took the train down the Missouri Pacific line to complete basic training at Camp Maxey near Paris Texas. Bill and David phoned their families and when the train stopped in Hope en route, all of Bill's family was on hand at the train station to see them off.

Reporting for duty at Camp Maxey the officers asked the new recruit if he "had any brass?" Bill pointed proudly to the brass buttons on his new uniform and answered, "Yes Sir!" The officers doubled over laughing. What they were concerned with were live shell casings that training soldiers often carried in their pockets and were subject to accidental discharges, not buttons. Then in another great miscommunication they asked him where he had been going to school. Bill again proudly reported that he was a student at A&M, failing to specify the state. To anyone in Texas, A&M only means one thing, Texas A&M University at College Station Texas. Duly noted the officers decided that upon completion of basic training Bill Tolleson would attend the next semester at what they mistakenly thought was his home school, Texas A&M.

There was one problem however, basic training at Camp Maxey was a thirteen-week course and it was already into its tenth week. The officers determined that good young men of such a fine College as Texas A&M were probably well beyond the usual mark and could be thrown into the mix at such a late hour. Thus Bill & David joined US Army basic training at ten weeks into the program. On their first day they found themselves crawling across an obstacle course UNDER LIVE MACHINE GUN FIRE. They went on to complete the course in the remaining three weeks. Bill even earned a marksmanship medal for rifle accuracy even though his father never let him around guns for fear that he would hurt himself. Soon he would be depending on guns for his very survival. At the completion of their training, Bill and David were then enrolled for the fall semester at Texas A&M University, home of the Texas Aggies.

Things were going well for Private Tolleson. He was enrolled in a first rate college studying engineering. College Station was not too terribly far from his hometown of Hope. Once on Thanksgiving furlough he and David Miller hitchhiked home for a turkey dinner. He could also attend football games only to be amazed by the ridiculous antics of the fanatical Texas Aggie Football Fans. The soldiers that were assigned there were perplexed by the Fans insistence that they stand during the entire game. Further inquiry revealed the source of this absurd and tiring practice.

In the early years of the A&M football program there were barely enough players to field a complete team. Once during a game a critical player became injured and had to quit the field. This left the Aggies with an insufficient number of players and they were put in the awkward position of having to forfeit the game. However, this was not to be because a spectator standing on the sideline volunteered to fill the position and the Aggies went on to win the game. The spectator became known as the twelfth man and from then on every Aggie fan would stand, ready to join the team should the situation require.

Bill and his army colleges found this situation a bit annoying. Especially when the Aggie fans were standing in front of them blocking their view of the game. The solution was simple, cleverly tossed coke bottles got the message across, the Aggies sat down.

But the War raged on. At that time the American Armed Forces had invaded New Guinea in the Pacific in a series of Island hopping maneuvers that would eventually

defeat the Japanese Army. American and English forces were moving up the length of Italy and the Soviet Red Army was driving the Germans back across the Ukraine after turning the tide in Stalingrad the year before. Stalingrad was a horrendous affair. The Russians held the city at all costs because the German's target was the oil fields beyond. The Germans desperately needed the oil to fuel their war machine. The Russians were willing to trade the Germans a life for a life because they had the matching funds. The Germans were turned back at a cost of one million men dead on each side. The world had just witnessed the largest military battle in history.

Bill Tolleson completed the promised semester and started a second. That semester however, he would never finish. In March of 1944 he was transferred to Camp Howze in Gainesville Texas to begin training with the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division was part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Field Army, which consisted of some 300,000 soldiers commanded by General Patch.

Camp Howze was occupied solely by the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division known as the "Cactus Division." Major General Charles Haffner commanded the division. An American World War II infantry division consisted of roughly 15,000 men and was organized around three infantry regiments of about 3200 men each. These regiments were the 409<sup>th</sup>, 410<sup>th</sup> and the 411<sup>th</sup>. Private Tolleson was assigned to the 409<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment commanded by Colonel Claudius Lloyd. The regiment's motto was "Steadfast." The remainder of the men in the division fulfilled duties in artillery, medical, supply, communication, maintenance and administrative functions.

Colonel Lloyd was a tough old soldier in his sixties with graying temples and wire rim GI glasses. He wore a vintage World War One uniform with dress shoes and leggings, even in combat. His raspy voice held no shortage of harsh language and tough commands for his soldiers.

The Infantry Regiment was the core unit of the US Army in 1944. Despite all the advances in airpower and armored vehicles it was the soldier standing on the ground with a long rifle that the Army relied on to take the ground needed to win a war. Even though the Infantry soldier comprised only 15% of the total military personnel, they took 70% of the casualties. This was a far more dangerous business than logging the forests of the Ouachita Mountains.

An Infantry Regiment is divided into three combat battalions of 900 men each known respectively as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> battalions, each commanded by a Major. A battalion is then divided into companies of men each around 200 strong each commanded by a Captain. Private Tolleson was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion, commanded by Major Haynes. F (Fox) Company was then subdivided into four platoons of 50 men each. Lieutenant Tony White would command Tolleson's platoon.

Three of the platoons were the ubiquitous men with the 30 caliber M1 long rifles. The fourth platoon would carry the heavier weapons for support of the Infantry in ground warfare. Even though Tolleson had a medal for rifle marksmanship, Platoon Sergeant



Willy Williams was concerned that a "Four Eyes" would be carrying a rifle in his outfit. The concern was that should the eyeglasses become lost or broken during the heat of battle he wouldn't be much good, or perhaps downright dangerous with a long rifle.

Therefore Private Tolleson reported for duty to the 4<sup>th</sup> heavy weapons platoon, Fox company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 409<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 103 Infantry Division, VI Corp, 7<sup>th</sup> Field Army under the command of General Patch. Tolleson was paid \$54.80 + \$10.00 Infantry pay each month for his service to the U.S. Government. \$6.80 was deducted for life insurance and \$18.75 was invested into War Bonds leaving a take home pay of \$56.75 each month. Once overseas Tolleson was rewarded an additional \$10.00 per month. When the war was over Tolleson used the War Bond investment to buy his first truck for \$900.00.

Instead of M1 Long Rifles the heavy weapons platoon that Tolleson found himself in carried 60mm Mortars and 30 Caliber belt fed machine guns. Each heavy weapon required a team of three men to operate and carry. A 60 mm Mortar broke down into three parts: barrel, tripod and base plate. Once assembled, one man served as gunner, another as assistant gunner and the third as ammo bearer.

Advancing Infantry constantly needed fresh ammo to keep pressure on the enemy. Therefore the ammo bearers were constantly running from the last point of supply to the gun position carrying dozens of pounds of high explosives. During combat this chore was usually performed under direct enemy fire. The mortar ammo bearers were distinguished by their strong backs and poncho like slings that were packed with mortar shells. Machine gun ammo bearers were noted for their beefy arms from ferrying strong boxes of 30 caliber shells. Tolleson had just turned 19 and would see a lot of duty as a mortar ammo bearer. The bearers duly noted that wearing a poncho filled with high explosives was not too different from being a modern day Palestinian suicide bomber. Therefore they learned to wear the poncho over their shoulders and throw the thing as far away as possible if they came under fire.

Carrying the 40 lb poncho loaded with explosive lead meant that shouldering a large M1 rifle was a little out of the question. Therefore in the first month of combat operations Bill was to carry as a supplement armament a 30-caliber semi-automatic carbine. Even though the caliber of the weapon was the same as an M1 or a 30-caliber machine gun, the weapon utilized a shorter shell casing with less powder. It was more of a short-range weapon.

Tolleson and the soldiers of the 103 Cactus Division sweated through the hot and humid Texas Summer practicing military maneuvers wondering when and where their actual combat assignment would take them. With June came the Allied Invasion of Northern France in the D-Day operation. August saw the Invasion of Southern France with the last German Garrison surrendering in Marseilles at the end of the Month. Then in September the Allies attempted the Daring "Market Garden" operation that dropped a massive number of paratroops into Holland hoping to win the war and bring the boys

home by Christmas. The whole thing was almost a disaster because the paratroops jumped unsuspecting on top of two crack panzer divisions they did not know were there.

On September 15<sup>th</sup> 1944, Bill Tolleson and the 103<sup>rd</sup> Cactus Division received orders to move out. Equipment was crated and Camp Howze was boarded up. No one except high-ranking officers had any idea where they were going when they boarded the trains. They were somewhat relieved when the trains charted an Eastward course. They were most likely going to the civilized chateaus of Europe and not the steaming jungles of the South Pacific to face the fanatical Japanese.

The trains ride ended at Camp Shanks New York, 20 miles from the docks of the Hudson River. Camp Shanks was the main staging area for sending troops overseas to Europe. Day passes were issued and Bill Tolleson rode a bus into Manhattan. The highlight of this leg of the trip was standing atop the Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world! An impressive symbol of invincible American might.

October 5<sup>th</sup> the men of the Cactus division were herded like cattle lugging 100-pound duffel bags onto ferries which then carried them to the troop ships docked at the New York port of embarkation. Tolleson boarded the USS Monticello, a converted Italian Luxury Cruise Liner. Whatever luxury the ship may have once sported was long gone. The interior of the ship, which was a maze of pipes hatches and bulkheads, had been stripped and packed with plywood bunks and hammocks. Most of the bunks were below the water line and had no portholes and very poor ventilation. The showers were salt water, meals were eaten standing up, and the whole thing constantly stank.

Tolleson, however, got lucky. He was assigned to guard duty. That meant he spent his waking hours patrolling the decks of the ship and not confined to below decks like most of the 7000 soldiers aboard. The biggest issue he policed was men smoking when and where they shouldn't be. In the 1940's everybody smoked but Tolleson.

The big ship eased out of port and joined a long convoy of troop and supply ships. The convoy was ringed with destroyer escorts and was accompanied by a blimp overhead for spotting German U-boat submarines. There was also a small escort "baby flattop," aircraft carrier with mosquito bombers lashed to the deck. The German Navy in the Atlantic had sunk over 3000 Allied ships over the course of the war with their U-boat submarines.

Standing watch on deck at night, Private Tolleson saw what he was convinced were numerous periscopes poking above the waves. During the course of the transit two ships in the convoy were sunk. Tolleson remembers seeing a tanker ship on fire with a huge hole in its side.

At first the sailing was smooth then after a few days the wind picked up and the waves began rolling. A full-blown Atlantic storm reached its peak on the 7<sup>th</sup> day out of New York. With 7000 soldiers locked in the windowless holds below, seasickness became rampant.

No one knew where they were going; however speculation was endless. Ten days out to sea, land was spotted. Every one strained to make out the features to figure out where they were. It was the Rock of Gibraltar, they were headed for Southern France. Passing the famous rock the soldiers duly noted the absence of the Prudential Life Insurance Sign. The ships pushed East along the coast of Northern Africa and docked briefly in Algiers. No one was allowed to leave the ship.

On October 20<sup>th</sup> the Monticello sailed into the harbor of Marseille France and Tolleson saw the destruction of the war for the first time. Ships were capsized and docks were blown up all over the harbor. The Monticello could not even make it to a pier because of the wreckage. The port area was ringed by silvery barrage balloons to stave off enemy bombers. Even though the Germans had surrendered in Marseille almost two months ago, air attacks were still a possibility. The men crawled down nets thrown over the sides of the ship and jumped into landing craft bobbing in the waves. Timing your jump from one boat to another in rolling seas with a 100 pounds of equipment is not easy. The landing crafts then picked their way through the wreckage and the men of the 103<sup>rd</sup> stepped on dry land for the first time in 15 days.

Confusion reigned on the wharves during the unloading of the ships. Soldiers from every allied army in the world milled about. Tolleson and his company found themselves thrown in with some Algerians complete with turbans, beards, robes, daggers and long curved swords. A group of more sinister characters he had never seen before. It was little relief to know that at least they were on our side, for now. How they expected to employ those swords against the Panzer Corps of the German Army was an interesting prospect indeed.

A German plane appeared as a spec in the sky and the antiaircraft guns went into action. An air raid alarm was sounded and a heavy smoke screen blanketed the harbor. One gun accidentally crossed fire with a barrage balloon that exploded into flames and dropped into the bay. The plane dropped a photograph flare and left. The enemy had shown himself for the first time. It was unnerving.

The division was ordered to march up to a bivouac area that was supposedly two and a half miles out of town. They packed up and began walking through a Marseille that was a mélange of bombed buildings, children running about everywhere, girls on bicycles and German prisoners being marched about. The march went on for eight hours and the bivouac area wasn't reached until nightfall in the rain. The soldiers tried vainly to erect pup tents on solid limestone bedrock. Most gave up and slept in sleeping bags in the rain.

Tolleson's Platoon Sergeant was a Mexican named Galvin. He had been in the army for 23 years. He first joined on the Texas/Mexican border working in the kitchen at the age of 13. He had hoped to get out of combat duty due to the large family he had sired and was obligated to support. But in 1944 you had to be at least 40 years old to qualify out of combat duty and Galvin was only 36.

With Spanish as his first language, Galvin struggled with long English or Jewish names during role call. He could never get Tolleson straight. Jewish names like Bromstein, he simply gave up and shortened the name to "Jew." This was 1944.

Tolleson made friends with a soldier in his unit named Gordon Philips. Unlike the Jews from New York, Philips was from Tolleson's home state of Arkansas. His parents were teachers at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville where Tolleson hoped maybe one day to attend if he could live through the trying days ahead.

The next few days were spent gathering gear and unloading supply ships. Big guns and jeeps were craned onto the wharves where they had to be assembled. Passes were issued and the soldiers could wander about the sidewalk cafes and winding streets of France's second largest city. The soldiers joked that "Hey, even the little kids can speak French!"

The 1<sup>st</sup> of November brought the division orders to move north to join the fight. The division mounted trucks for the 400-mile long haul to the battlefield. Tolleson rode with his 409th regiment first to Lyon and then to Dijon, the famous mustard town. They bivouacked in Dijon during a torrential downpour then boarded the trucks again for Epinal France, about 50 miles North of the Northern border of neutral Switzerland. Leaving Dijon the unit made another unnerving change in their organization. Knowing full well that they were entering an area subject to aerial bombardment by the Luftwaffe (The German Air Force), the 328th Medical Battalion distributed medical officers and ambulances at strategic points along the column of vehicles. There was no bombing but one jeep missed a slippery turn and caused a casualty requiring the service of the forward posted ambulance.

On November 9<sup>th</sup> the men of the 409th arrived at a staging bivouac near the towns of Epinal and Charmois in Eastern France. For the first time Tolleson could hear the distant booms of artillery and the occasional chatter of machine gun fire. The issue at hand was closing in. The next morning live ammunition was issued. The men joked to relieve the tension, "Hey this is live ammo! If we start fooling around with this stuff somebody's gonna get hurt!" No kidding.

Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and the regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion were issued orders to relieve elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry division posted on the front line. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion would stay behind to provide relief to any unit that got in over their heads. Holding a unit in reserve was common practice in the infantry. The field hospital started setting up shop with plasma bottles, scalpels, saws and lots of morphine. It was a good thing that Bill never visited the hospital because unknowing to him he had the wrong blood type on his dog tags. Any transfusion from incompatible blood would cause kidney failure, leading most probably to death.

First they rode trucks and then they started walking, long columns of men on either side of the road. It rained, then it snowed and occasionally the sun would peek out. An ominous sight confronted the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on their march to the front. A frozen hand

poked frantically from a blood soaked German uniform partially hidden underneath a pile of brush. Bill Tolleson saw yet another dead man.

Some tanks pulling out of position to be relieved drew artillery fire wounding several men and killing another. They were the first men of the Division to be killed in combat. When soldiers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division that were retiring with the tanks were asked, "Where is the front Line?" they responded, "Your on it!"

Tolleson's F Company occupied a hill Southwest of the town of St. Die looking across the Taintrux Valley. On the other side of the valley were three large hills or mountains of the Vosge Range. F Company occupied foxholes that night and waited alone. There was nothing in front of them now but cold, rain, snow, mountains, and the German Army. How many there were, how well equipped and supplied, and who they were commanded by were facts opposing armies go to great lengths to conceal.

Unknowingly they had occupied the same line held by the Americans in World War I in 1918. Maybe even by Colonel Lloyd himself. Only the treaty of Versailles had dislodged the Germans then. The Germans were convinced they could hold it again. The plan was to stall the American advance until the snows of winter would make military operations impractical. This would buy time for them to resupply and mount a counter attack in the spring. Tolleson's unit had no idea that what they were about to attempt had been contemplated by military strategist from Caesar to Napoleon and had always been summarily dismissed as impossible.

Six more days passed as Tolleson's unit bided it's time on the front line, improved their foxholes, dodged an occasional artillery shell and waited for the inevitable orders to attack. They stacked logs and rocks over the top of the trenches to protect them from tree burst artillery. The German Army, which was known at the time as the "Wehrmacht," utilized an extremely versatile artillery piece called the "88." It could be used as a field gun, an antitank gun and an antiaircraft gun. They also used a wide variety of ammo including the dreaded tree burst fragmentation shells, which rained hot shrapnel down on soldiers huddled in foxholes protected from horizontal fire. The 88 could also deliver shells loaded with Sarin nerve gas, which would extinguish the life of an unprotected individual in seconds. Therefore all the American soldiers carried gas masks, whether they needed them or not.

The Germans adopted another unique strategy of commandeering the local dog population. They would tie them up and starve them. Then under close observation they would release them one at a time and kick them in the direction of the American lines. The dogs would run gleefully to the foxholes occupied by American GI's. Once the Germans identified that a dog had stopped to sniff out an American position they would unleash an artillery or mortar barrage on that position. Needless to say the dogs quickly became unwelcome visitors to the foxholes.

November 15<sup>th</sup> brought the inevitable orders to mount an attack. Company commanders were summoned to the command post and maps were studied. Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to cross the Taintrux Valley and seize 3 hills Southwest of the town of St. Die, a town with an ominous name for the inauguration into combat. The companies moved at 4:00 in the morning to the edge of the woods bordering the valley, the line of departure. The night was inky black and men stumbled and cursed. Tolleson's mortar platoon set up a position to cover the advance. Everybody was nervous as hell. Captain Teitelbaum gathered the men of Fox Company around and made a grim announcement, "Look around you, someone you see here among us now will not live this day out." He was right.

At 8:45 in the morning, just after daybreak the supporting artillery opened up a walking barrage. A line of explosions appeared in the open area on the other side of the valley which was about 500 yards across. Over the next 15 minutes the line of explosions moved forward into the woods and across the forward German positions. You couldn't imagine how anyone could survive such a thing. But they did. At 9:00 the last of 3168 rounds of artillery had been fired and scouts ran out of the woods into the clearing. Tolleson went to work with his mortar team firing smoke grenades into the clearing to cover the advance. Under more favorable conditions the infantry would advance following behind tanks which would provide some amount of cover for the exposed troops. But these were not favorable conditions and the mud and rugged terrain prevented any sort of vehicles from participating. So everybody had to move out, run across the open valley and some had to swim the Taintrux River that was four feet deep in places.

German machine guns, mortars and 88 artillery opened up on the advancing troops and cries for "Medic" went up everywhere. Men were getting hit all around Tolleson. This was it, the real thing. Moving against well armed and dug in troops. Bullets were flying, artillery shells were exploding and men were screaming in pain.

With the big red crosses on their helmets, and aiding the wounded troops in the open valley, the medics were the first ones to be targeted by the German snipers. They would soon learn to paint over the red targets on their helmets and uniforms.

With an unknown and obviously well equipped number of men desperately trying to kill them, Tolleson's unit ran through the melee and occupied a farmhouse in the clearing and then set up their mortars to cover the advance. The idea was to fire on any enemy positions creating problems for the advancing company that they could identify. A rifleman was trying to cover the occupation of the house when a slug from a German gun pierced his gut and then hit Tolleson's friend from Arkansas, Philips. The rifleman was dead and Philips was wounded. Now men were falling dead right before Tolleson's eyes. When cries for medic went up Tolleson knew he wasn't qualified for the job. Tolleson was ordered by the Sergeant to pick up the dead man's rifle and cover the advancing troops with rifle fire while the medics tended to his friend. Nervous that he might shoot one of his own troops in the back, he shot well above them onto the hill. The medics evacuated Philips.



Once it was clear that the Germans were retreating Tolleson's Battalion continued the advance up the steep wooded hill. The summit was attained late in the morning with what military officials considered relatively light casualties. That night the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion dug in.

The morning of November 17<sup>th</sup> brought a repeat of the previous days activities. An early morning artillery barrage and a quick run across the next valley to the base of hill 2. However this hill was more difficult due to steepness and thick underbrush. Sergeant Willy Williams, the one that ordered Bill to join the weapons platoon due to poor eyesight, after earning the first silver star of the entire cactus division was shot and killed during this operation

That night the platoon occupied a French farmhouse. With nothing but K rations for food and a lot of exertion over the last couple of days, the men were feeling hungry. A patrol reported that there was a monastery nearby that was raising a lot of rabbits. Rabbits sounded better than K rations to Sergeant Galvin. So he inquired as to who might have the resources to buy a few rabbits. Tolleson had lots of cigarettes because he was not a smoker. Smoking was as ubiquitous as ice tea in the 1940's; therefore every soldier received a ration of cigarettes. Not needing the cigarettes he realized that they were as good as currency in the recently liberated areas of France. He offered up his cigarettes to be used as a bargaining chip.

As soon as Tolleson was ready to leave the house to go haggling for rabbits with his cigarettes, Sergeant Galvin shouted "No! Tolleson, give those to Bromstein and let him use his Jewish wiles to do the bargaining." In time of war, all resources are treasured. Bromstein returned with a couple of Easter Bunnies but no one was willing to kill them for food. Galvin had no problem killing and cooking the rabbits.

The next morning the Battalion began moving up hill number two. Captain Teitelbaum ordered the men to drop packs to facilitate the movement through the thick brush and steep hill. Tolleson never thought much of the captain. To him he was a slobbish man and best avoided.

The summit of the hill was reached early in the afternoon. With some difficulty due to weak batteries the Captain reached the Battalion Headquarters by radio. They were ordered to secure the last hill. Later in the afternoon Tolleson's F Company began moving up the hill on the road to St. Die. At about 5:00 P.M the company reached a point just below the crest of the hill without meeting any opposition and decided to hold for the night. They had left their packs on the last hill and had no food or bedrolls. No one had eaten anything all day. Some men dug all night just to keep warm.

Communications with headquarters was reduced to garbled squawks due to worn out radio batteries. The next day Fox Company sent a guide and 30 men to make contact with the 411<sup>th</sup> regiment and to pick up their packs left behind on the last hill. Early morning, November 19<sup>th</sup> the 409<sup>th</sup> regiment was relieved by the 411<sup>th</sup> and they then

moved to the bivouac areas of Les-Rouges-Eaux. Tolleson had seen his first taste of combat. He also learned that his good friend Philips was dead.

The respite at the bivouac was brief after only twenty four hours of rest the battalions moved out by truck to vicinity of Hurbache France. After crossing the Muerthe river by footbridge under cover of a smoke screen the 409<sup>th</sup> regiment worked its way up to the besieged city of St. Die. During the night of November 21<sup>st</sup> F company was ordered to hook up with 7<sup>th</sup> Army Tanks and ride into town as a temporary unit designated as Task Force Hanes. On November 22<sup>nd</sup> Fox Company entered the city crowded atop Sherman Tanks, a procedure they would repeat many times during the course of the war. They spent the day clearing the city, house to house. St. Die had basically been reduced to rubble and was a surreal landscape of charred and blown up buildings. The Germans had adopted a vengeful scorched earth policy in their withdrawal.

The unique distinction, though of St. Die was that it was the home of the map-publishing house that published the first map with the continent of America on it shortly after the discovery of Florida by Perico Americo. This was the place that put America on the map. The building where this happened was the first to be set afire by the retreating Germans.

The 23,000 residents of St. Die were nevertheless overjoyed at their liberation. The Mayor made a speech and named a square in the town after the 103<sup>rd</sup> Division and wine was offered to the troops. There was little time to celebrate and at days end the 409<sup>th</sup> regiment was trucked back to the town of La Holland for the night.

The next day was Thanksgiving Day, 1944 and there was no time for a Turkey Dinner. Swollen streams and enemy demolitions stalled Task Force Hanes. Moving on foot the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion swung around a hairpin curve outside of Lubine and approached what appeared to be an abandoned roadblock designed to slow their advance. As the first men moved up to the block to examine it, Germans opened up with machine guns from both sides in a deadly ambush. The Battalion was forced to withdraw back to LaHolland for the night.

The next morning a new platoon showed up with a new type of 4.2 Chemical Mortar. They decided to try them out on the defenders above the roadblock. The platoon launched 300 rounds into the positions and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion approached the roadblock again. Enemy fire was as heavy as before and the Battalion was pinned down once more. Patrols and scouts were sent out to find a way around the block or to approach the enemy positions from above.

While lying in the ditch beside the road, Bromstein took a freak hit of shrapnel that landed through his lower jaw and into his mouth up through his tongue. He was right next to Tolleson. Sergeant Cohen ordered Tolleson to secure Bromstein's feet as the injured soldier thrashed about and complained vehemently about the burning of the hot metal lodged in his jaw. He insisted that they pull it out. The Sergeant told Bromstein to shut up and be happy that he was getting out of this war alive.

By mid afternoon Regimental Commander Colonel Claudius Lloyd showed up in a jeep wondering what the hell the holdup was. Not taking anyone's word for it, he and his aid walked directly up to the roadblock to inspect the situation. Machine gun fire opened up as before and the Colonel and his aid immediately dropped to the ground. Once it was clear that the guns were reloading the Colonel scrambled to his feet and walked back to the crouching ranks. "You see, there's nothing up there but a God Damn machine gun!" he yelled back at the troops. Most of the men reasonably assumed if that was the kind of behavior it took to merit the rank of Colonel they weren't up for the job. God only knew what it took to become a General.

The Patrols returned from their scouting mission above the enemy emplacements with the estimation that there was a reasonable way to attack the positions from above. The next morning the troops fanned out to the reconnoitered areas and swept down on the positions. Nothing but the still of the early morning greeted them. Apparently the audacious display of Colonel Lloyd was enough to convince the defenders that they were beyond their match and they quietly retreated in the middle of the night.

With the roadblock out of the way the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion trucked through the towns of Urbeis then Fouchy and on to La Laye. Further up the road, Tolleson's unit came under machine gun fire again and the platoon deployed from their trucks and into the ditches surrounding the road. Tolleson found himself lying next to Colonel Lloyd. The Colonel ordered Tolleson to lay down a suppressing fire on the enemy positions, which had them pinned down. Thinking he was on his way to a sure bronze star medal, and not really seeing any substantial target, Tolleson opened up with his carbine on whatever he thought was the right place. Immediately Lloyd recognized the inadequacy of Tolleson's carbine's firepower and he chewed him out. "Cut it out with the God Damn pop gun son, let's get some real rifles in here!" Tolleson's dreams of medal glory were forever dashed.

That night a barn was occupied by the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon as quarters for the night. In the morning Sergeant Cohen could hear rustling in the loft above. He suspected that there were chickens roosting and that there might be eggs for breakfast. He sent Private Tolleson to investigate and he surprised a hiding German Soldier armed with a variety of weapons from a Mauser rifle with a bayonet and a grenade launcher to several grenades and pistols. By right the soldier that does the capturing can keep the weapons taken from the prisoner. Private Tolleson commandeered a small personal arsenal that morning after taking the German prisoner.

The Battalion rested at La Laye for three nights and two days. In La Laye the men of the regiment noticed a definitive change in the scenery. They were obviously out of the mountains and onto a plain. The road signs changed in color from a familiar blue to Orange with black letters. Everything was written in German. A few wondered if they were in fact in Germany and not France. Where they were was in the long disputed province of Alsace. Alsace was a German speaking but French allied province that was awarded to France by the treaty of Versailles. The provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were hot points of contingency between the Germans and the French for two World Wars. Tolleson and the soldiers of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Division had broken through the winter

defenses of the Vosges Mountains, as said before, something considered impossible by the most brilliant Military Strategist that ever put serious thought to the question. But the men of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Division never knew any of that. They simply went and did what they were ordered to do.

On November 27<sup>th</sup> 1944 the 409<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment received orders to lay siege to the city of Selestat. There were numerous small towns occupied by German troops between the regiment and the city. Therefore the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion went to work clearing these towns while Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion took up a defensive position on the high ground of the small town of Triemmbach to counter the possibility of an armored counterattack, which never came. While in that position the month of November 1944 had come to an end and the 409<sup>th</sup> had lost 36 men killed, 156 slightly wounded and 20 men seriously wounded.

On December 1<sup>st</sup> the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 409<sup>th</sup> regiment entered the city of Selestat. Among those involved was another man from Hope Arkansas named James Gaines. Unknowingly he would later in life become the sales manager for the Tol-E-Tex International Harvester Tractor Distributorship under the direction of Private Tolleson. But this particular day, James Gaines's company occupied six houses in the lead area of Selestat. That night at 3:00 in the morning German Panzer tanks came rumbling down the streets of the city and opened up at point blank. The Americans, including James Gaines had no choice but to surrender. Around 100 American soldiers were taken prisoner that night.

Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion reached the outskirts of Selestat on December 2<sup>nd</sup>. They met everything from machine guns, mortars, and artillery fire, roadblocks protected by ambushing snipers, mines and tanks. Their tanks could not ford the stream bordering Selestat from the approach side of the American Troops. Once again the Infantry had to do it alone. After trying all night to get into the town, the Infantry entered the town on the morning of December 3<sup>rd</sup>. It took four days to take the town in bitter house-to-house urban combat. Casualties were high and this all took place during the peak of a dysentery epidemic among the Americans. If it wasn't bad enough to be fighting and dodging tank rounds from one building to the next you had to find somewhere to relieve yourself of an agonizing diarrhea every hour or so. Due to the delay in the occupation of Selestat and the loss of prisoners, Major Haynes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was relieved of duty and replaced by Major Henenhouser.

Selestat was considered a prime supply and evacuation center with a large railway-switching yard. The Germans were more determined than usual to hold this strategic point. But they could not. Once again the citizens of the city were ecstatic at the arrival of the Americans. They brought whatever they could to the soldiers and thanked them endlessly for their liberation. Even though they spoke German, they had no affection for their Nazi occupiers and the fact that they had been robbed of all their resources for the German war effort including their older male children.

The liberation of Selestat was quickly followed by a motorized movement on December 7<sup>th</sup> of the regiment by truck to the Northern staging area around the city of Gougenheim

where the Command Post had been set up. The movement was not easy, German planes were routinely strafing the roads where the troops were being moved. Truck mounted anti aircraft guns shot down a few attacking aircraft. On one occasion Tolleson entered a mountain valley with a large column of troops. A German single engine reconnaissance plane entered the valley flying low and flew the length of the column. Every available weapon in the entire length of the column from tank cannons and anti aircraft guns to individual pistols and perhaps thrown bayonets were employed against the plane that threatened to disclose their location. The plane flew the gauntlet of fire unscathed. Unbelieving the soldiers gazed in silent amazement as the plane cleared their field of fire and flew on down the valley. Yet the plane never turned to clear the next mountainside. The pilot had obviously been fatally wounded in the sortie and the plane crashed into the side of the mountain bursting into a fireball. The entire column cheered like the home team just scored a touchdown.

Upon arrival in Gougenheim the troops were introduced to a new weapon, the Bazooka. The Bazooka was a heavy-handed version of the modern day RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) currently being used to great effect by the Iraqi insurgents. The soldiers practiced firing the Bazooka throughout the day. To Tolleson though, with its straight trail of smoking rocket exhaust, the thing looked like a great way to announce your position to the enemy. He wanted nothing to do with Bazooka duty. He preferred to lob shells from unseen positions with the mortars.

A big push was being organized to make a move across the German border. This time the 1<sup>st</sup> and Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were to spearhead the attack with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in reserve. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion captured Kutzenhausen and dug in for the night. Then they pushed on through Soultz and Reschwiller. Then they encountered the famed Maginot Line, completely abandoned.

The Maginot Line was another one of the great boondoggles of human history, comparable with the Great Wall of China. Justifiably concerned with their bothersome neighbors to the East the French built a vast network of gun emplacements along the border all the way from Switzerland to Belgium. Tunnels, barracks, kitchens and armories were interconnected together with underground tunnels and trains. The trains allowed the French to move troops at will to wherever they were needed the most to thwart an attack from the Germans. The attack never came; the Germans simply went around the thing and attacked France through Belgium.

When Tolleson approached the famed line everyone was concerned that the Germans would use the fortress to mount their defense. They were surprised to find the facility undefended. Tolleson looked around and found a vast maze of concrete tunnels as cold and dark as a tomb. He lit a matchbook and dropped it into a shaft and counted six stories before it went out.

On December 14<sup>th</sup> the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion pressed on to seize the town of Steinseltz. The church bell was ringing when they entered the town and a runner was dispatched to put a

stop to that. It was signal to the Germans that the Americans had entered the town and for them to open up with their artillery.

Two days later they overran the town of Weiler and moved beyond the town to the German border. They were about to enter the enemy nation and no passports would be needed. On December 17<sup>th</sup> patrols from the regiment scouted the outskirts of the Siegfried Line.

The Siegfried line was Germany's answer to the Maginot Line but built along an entirely different theory. The Maginot line was built of prominent emplacements overlooking well-conceived lines of fire. It was planned to throw an enormous amount of firepower on a limited area and hold up the attackers until more troops could be mobilized to the zone of trouble. The Siegfried Line, however, was designed in depth with strongpoint backing up strongpoint several miles deep. Everything was camouflaged. Pillboxes looked like mounds of dirt overgrown by weeds. Big guns were disguised as barns and farmhouses. Some emplacements had concrete roofs that were 12 feet thick. On top of all that, the Germans placed snipers and machine guns to cover the approaches to the pillboxes.

The next few days were absorbed in vicious fighting against the determined defenders manning the Siegfried Line. They had lost France but now their backs were to the Fatherland. Assaults on the fortifications involved artillery to get the pillboxes to "button up." Then there would be the careful approach by the infantry with men armed with flamethrowers to immolate the defenders holed up in the fortifications. It was nasty work. The Germans were continuously throwing in counterattacks with tanks and infantry of their own to slow the advance. At one point Tolleson's unit was so close to a counterattacking tank they could hear its starter motor when it decided to move. They tried to throw a mortar round on it, but because it was so close and because the wind was blowing against them, the round exploded beside them. Normally the mortars had a range of about 550 yards, during this incident their range was zero yards.

As they were working their way through the most stalwart defensive line in the world the Germans had come up with a big plan to turn the tide. Far to the North in the Belgium Ardennes the Germans trusted one of their best field commanders, General Von Rundstedt to lead the two best Panzer Armies left in the German reserves on a last ditch major effort to stymie the allied advanced.

The Germans launched their major counter offensive on December 16, 1944. This operation would become known as "The Battle of the Bulge." The goal was to push through the Allied lines, which were mostly stalled due to weather, and reach the Dutch seaports thereby separating the Allied forces and leaving them vulnerable to further counter attacks. It almost worked. The spoiler was a division of American Paratroopers holed up in the Belgian town of Bastogne that never surrendered despite overwhelming odds. Completely surrounded, General Anthony McAuliffe's response to the request for surrender by the German Army was a famous one word reply, "NUTS." This



impediment of stubborn soldiers prevented the Germans from capturing an Allied fuel dump, which was critical to their plans and thus stalled their efforts.

To relieve the besieged troops, General Patton turned his entire 3<sup>rd</sup> Army of 300,000 men to the North and raced to the rescue. This left an enormous hole in the Allied front, which was to be filled by Tolleson's 7<sup>th</sup> Army.

The invasion of Germany by the 7<sup>th</sup> Army would have to be abandoned. On Christmas day Tolleson's Regiment boarded trucks and made a night motor march out of Germany and into the French Province of Lorraine, another long disputed area between the battling nations. Christmas night was not too bad as the unit was out of combat and somebody actually managed to capture a turkey for the traditional Christmas Dinner. The soldiers were surprised to see Christmas Trees in the French homes and images of Santa Claus around. They were even more surprised to learn that this was the very region that originated the Christmas tree and Kris Kringle traditions.

The 103<sup>rd</sup> division was now assigned to a holding operation. Defensive positions were dug and gas masks were reissued due to the possibility of a chemical attack. Guards were assigned to bridges and roads in the vicinity. As a part of their strategy during the Battle of the Bulge, the German's parachuted their ace saboteur named Skorzeny with a band of skilled agents behind enemy lines. These men wore American uniforms, spoke perfect American English, and even drove captured American Jeeps. Their job was to wreak havoc by cutting communication lines, reversing road signs and spying on Allied positions.

It became very dangerous to not know the password when moving through checkpoints. All kinds of questions were asked by the sentries like, what are the St. Louis Cardinals? What is a Baby Ruth? What State is San Antonio in? Any one not knowing the answers were stripped and searched. It turned out that the spies could easily be identified because they were wearing German underwear. It was a coup for the Hanes and Jockey companies.

During the Battle of the Bulge the German Army suffered 100,000 casualties and the Allies lost 76,000 men. But for the Cactus Division artillery duels, night raids and patrols characterized the next few weeks. There were no major combat operations. Shortly after the defeat of the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, the commander of the division, Major General Charles Haffner was replaced by newly promoted Major General Anthony McAuliffe of the "Nuts," fame during the siege of Bastogne.

During this respite from combat, Tolleson's unit occupied the home of a French Pornographer. The volume of photographs on hand was enormous. Tolleson insisted on sending trophies such as guns and German helmets, from the battlefield back home to Arkansas. Most of his comrades insisted that the packages would be thrown off the ships never to arrive. However this did not dissuade his fellow combatants from stuffing his packages full of the photographs from the pornography studio when Tolleson wasn't looking. He tried to make sure that all were removed so that there would be no surprises

for his Mother. All of the packages arrived home and nothing was ever said by his Mother of any unusual packing material.

On January 14<sup>th</sup> the 409<sup>th</sup> regiment boarded trucks and rode back to Alsace near Lamperstock France. The Germans had been mounting attacks similar to the ones to the North in Belgium. The regiment dug in and held the line without incident for six days. It was very cold. In fact, it was the coldest winter in Europe on record for 100 years. The weather was so cold that Tolleson's boots would freeze solid in the mud of the trenches at night, only to be cut out at daybreak by bayonet. To stave off frostbite he garnered the largest size boots he could get from the supply truck and made up the difference with layer upon layer of wool socks.

Tolleson encountered General McAuliffe riding in a jeep with a sign on the grill announcing "The Battling Bastard of Bastogne."

The General asked Tolleson, "Soldier are you staying warm?"

Tolleson answered the General, "Sir, I'm freezing my ass off."

Then McAuliffe queried, "What about those Arctic Sleeping bags?"

"I haven't seen any arctic sleeping bags," Tolleson shot back.

"Were still working on the distribution sir," mumbled one of McAuliffe's aids in the jeep with him..

The General drove away shaking his head in disgust.

Then disaster struck. Suffering from the defeat in the Ardennes the German army was a wounded animal lashing back at anything it could. The Germans launched a major offensive at the American positions named Operation Nordwind. The soldiers didn't know it but they were be threatened by a massive attack on their flank from the South. They had to move back and fast, or else they could be cut off and captured. There were no trucks available so the retreat was made by foot on narrow icy roads. Men were slipping and falling and breaking bones. Tolleson ran for 16 hours covering about 26 miles through the night. The roads were packed with refugees. It was cold as hell.

The regiment retrenched near Ringleldorf. To assess the enemy's strength and intentions patrols were sent out to capture prisoners for questioning. Tolleson's F company captured two scouts reconnoitering for a major attack by the Germans. But the attack never came. One platoon from F company had entered the town of La Walck on patrol and was almost trapped there when engineers set about to blow up the bridge into town. The plan was called off at the last minute. Skirmishes and small attacks continued through the rest of January, however no large movement of troops either way occurred.

The regimental headquarters was set up in the town of Buxwiller and the town's movie theater was opened to the troops showing silver screen delights such as "Song of Bernadette," and "Home in Indiana." Tolleson's second battalion set up shop in the town of Obersoultzbach.

Training and reinforcements continued through the entire month of February and into March. Supplies were stockpiled and new weapons were issued. A lot of the officers

carried Thompson machine guns, "Tommy Guns," which were vintage World War I weapons popularized by the prohibition era gangsters of Chicago and New York. This was replaced by a new submachine gun that resembled a gas station grease gun and was thus dubbed "The Grease Gun." The soldiers joked that the thing looked so improbable as a weapon that if they tried to rob a bank in their hometown with such a thing that the bank staff would laugh them out of the lobby.

Tolleson was upgraded from ammo bearer to assistant mortar gunner, which meant that he didn't have to carry the Mid East Suicide Bomb Ammo Sling anymore but instead the mortar base plate which would later save his life. He also was required to turn in his Carbine "Pop Gun" for a .45 automatic pistol. That is the weapon pictured on the cover.

According to legend, the brilliant Utah inventor and gunsmith John Moses Browning developed the Colt .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol. He was the same man responsible for the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) used by American troops during the war.

The Army found that during the Philippine Insurrection (1900-1903), charging tribesmen struck by .30 caliber rifle fire would just keep on coming, oblivious to mortal wounds. The Army needed a weapon that would stop a berserk fanatic in his tracks. The .45 was the answer even though it was heavy, mechanically complex and had massive recoil that was difficult to control. The Modern Day Army has replaced the .45 with the M9 9mm Beretta known by current day soldiers as the "9mm Mafia."

A big offensive was inevitable to regain the territory that was lost in January and to push back across the Siegfried line again and back into Germany. McAuliffe gathered the troops together and apologized for the loss of ground in January. But he said they were going to take it back. Not even General McAuliffe knew the level of desperation of the race that the Allies and the Germans were in. Both sides were working on the development of nuclear weapons. Germany had also developed ballistic missiles, which it had already launched almost 3000 into England. The idea of Adolf Hitler with nuclear missiles was most unsettling to those privy at the time to such information.

The big day came on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1945. Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was formed into a unit designated as Task Force Cactus. At 7:00 PM the Battalion took the lead in a major assault through the town of Schillersdorf and onto the town of Gundershoffen. Approaching Gundershoffen the men of F Company spotted an airfield where the Germans were operating jet aircraft. At that time jets were only experimental in America and the Germans were the only country in the world that had them operational. It would be similar to a modern day version of coming across an Area 51 where aviators were flying some sort of flying saucer.

Tolleson's Company approached a bridge, which led the only way into town. There were obviously large numbers of German Troops in the town defending the airfield and their advanced weapons. The company spotted a German Officer in a car on the other side of the river and one of the company's snipers took aim and wounded him in the car. This announced the arrival of American troops. Young boys from the town ran across the

bridge to greet the Americans that were huddled defensively on the other side. More German officers gathered on the town side to assess the situation.

Captain Teitelbaum of F Company told the boys to tell the Germans to surrender. The boys ran back across the bridge and relayed the request to the conferring German Officers. They declined the offer. The boys ran back across the bridge with the news. Captain Teitelbaum then asked the boys to bring the Officer to him for negotiations. The boys ran back to town and began tugging on the Officers sleeve to coerce him into meeting the Americans for talks. The Officer swatted the boys away so they focused their attention on the wounded officer slumped over the wheel of the car. Figuring he would offer less resistance the boys pulled him out of the car and began dragging his limp body across the bridge so that he could negotiate the surrender to the Americans. Gunfire erupted and the boys scattered leaving the unfortunate man on the bridge.

After a tense standoff the Germans blew up the bridge to stave off the inevitable attack. Army Engineers hastily erected a temporary bridge and Tolleson's F company took the lead in entering the town. They fought house to house under terrible fire. It was some of the scariest fighting of the war for Tolleson.

At one point while standing in a house, Tolleson spotted a fellow soldier stumbling in the street with a bullet hole in his helmet. Tolleson drug the wounded man out of the street and into the house and gingerly removed the helmet expecting to see an oozing mass of brains. Amazingly the bullet never pierced the skull and was stopped inside the helmet liner by perhaps the wool cap underneath. The stunned soldier's name was Thomas Miller. It would not be until about thirty years later that Tolleson realized that unknowingly, Miller had been working as his regional manager for the International Harvester Company out of Memphis for almost twenty years.

The Germans retreated from Gundershoffer later that day and they turned on the jet's engines and let them loose to run full throttle off the runway and into the woods to blow up, rendering them and their technology useless to the Allies.

Fox Company moved out to the town of Froshweiler where there were about 500 yards of open ground between them and the town. Crossing the open ground they drew a terrific bombardment of artillery fire and then were met by heavy fire from a well-camouflaged pillbox on the outskirts of town. A sniper contributed to the fire as Tolleson crossed the open field. To avoid being continuous targets the men would randomly run short distances then drop to the ground. Now an assistant gunner, Tolleson was carrying the base plate of the mortar and several times when he hit the ground holding the plate over his head a bullet would ping off of it. Seeing how World War Two Helmets were hardly bulletproof the plate probably saved his life. Fighting their way into town, Fox Company took twenty-one prisoners and suffered fifteen casualties.

That night Tolleson's platoon occupied a farmhouse out side of town. Shortly before they crossed the corpse of a German soldier in the field outside of the house. He had taken a terrific head wound. It wasn't too long after that the sentries noticed the dead

soldier getting up and walking toward the house. He obviously wasn't much threat because he was using his hands to hold his jaw together. Tolleson's unit took him in and patched him up the best they could. The war was over for this soldier and he would probably live through it, even though he might have a little trouble chewing his food for a while.

The night was inky black. At midnight the Sergeant informed Tolleson that it was his turn to take watch until dawn. In the pitch black they followed a wire strung from the sleeping area to a window where the watch would take place. Then he was left alone. Bill couldn't see anything. Then slowly his eyes began to adjust to the dark. He began to make out the valley, the river and the mountains beyond. There was movement just beyond the river. It was probably horses or cattle. He strained his eyes to see. Yes, more movement, but not large animals, smaller shapes. Tolleson didn't want to alert the platoon just yet, he had to be sure. More movement across the river, it was German troops, perhaps preparing an attack, he couldn't be sure. They were moving back and forth, probably bringing up weapons and ammo for the attack. Some seemed to be digging foxholes. There was no indication that they were crossing the river just yet. Tolleson kept quiet and watched until dawn, the Germans across the river setting up for an inevitable attack.

Then dawn began to break. First light brought an abrupt change in the scenery, at first Tolleson just couldn't make it out. What was going on? As the sun raised further it soon became obvious. All night long Tolleson had been staring directly into an earthen embankment ten feet away. There was no valley, or river, or mountains or German soldiers preparing for an attack, just a mound of dirt. He had hallucinated the whole thing.

The next day the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion moved on to retake Climbach. Just outside of Lembach an American P-47 fighter aircraft dropped bombs perilously close to the column of troops. To signal the planes that they were bombing their own troops, several soldiers pulled out yellow signal panels, which spared the formation from further bombing. In 1945 there was no radio communication between ground troops and friendly combat aircraft.

The Germans were retreating back to their vaunted Siegfried Line. The Regiment occupied Climbach just across the border of Germany. That night five 105 mm artillery shells landed within 70 yards of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Command Post wounding six men.

Conditions on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March were warm and clear. At 7:30 PM 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions led the attack with Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> in reserve. Crossing back again into Germany they met stiff resistance and took many casualties. Difficult terrain made the evacuation of casualties almost impossible. This was the second time the unit was breaching the Siegfried line and mistakes made the first time were not repeated.

Outside of Reisdorf the force encountered a 200-yard long roadblock and Fox Company set up as a covering force. Tanks operated by Black Soldiers from Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> army were trying to move through the roadblock. This was 1944 and the army was still segregated.

In fact, blood was kept in separate boxes labeled black and white. No one bothered to notice that it was all red.

Tolleson's platoon huddled behind one of their tanks for cover. A German machine gun would fire on one side and they would run to the other. Then a machine gun would fire from that side and they would repeat the process in the other direction. Despite the direness of the situation the soldiers actually found some humor in their predicament. They felt like they were the Keystone Cops. More humor was yet to come.

As the last tree was cleared, the black tankers advanced on the position and the Germans opened up with an 88 gun knocking the treads off of the lead tank. The black soldiers abandoned the tank and ran like the Olympian Athletes they are known for, yelling to the infantry soldiers, "We goin back to ordnance!" More fire came pouring in as Colonel Claudius Lloyd showed up in a jeep to see once again what the hold up was. Under direct enemy fire the old man fearlessly directed the troops mitigating what may have otherwise become a panic situation.

Unknown to the men in the regiment, the Generals back at headquarters were drawing up, a massive push on the maps. The entire seventh army was to make a coordinated attack into Germany along with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army to the North. It was code-named operation Undertone and it involved around 600,000 American troops. The scale of such an operation is mind-boggling. It would be similar to mobilizing the entire population of modern day Memphis.

The plan was to make a rushed offensive to capture a region of Western Germany known as the Saar Palatinate in the shortest amount of time. The 409<sup>th</sup> regiment was combined with the black tankers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> army in a temporary unit called task force Rhine.

The entire regiment moved through the black of the night along the road through Silz to Klingenstein. Tolleson and his infantrymen piled on top of tanks, which then rolled along firing continuously at every stretch of landscape on either side of the road. They called it reconnaissance by fire and they claimed it was a technique they learned from General Patton. The idea being if anyone was there they would probably shoot back and then would be located and annihilated.

Not to be outdone the infantrymen fired their weapons into the brush and ditches as well. They shot at any flash of light or any thing that moved or looked like it might move. They weren't stopping for anything. The whole column sped through Silz and on toward Klingenstein. Silz had an aura of hellish doom about it. Fires cast weird shadows amid groans and screams of terrified civilians and wounded enemy soldiers. There was no stopping and helping, they just kept going through the night, all night long shooting at everything.



It was this night that Bill Tolleson made his lifetime covenant with God. The deal was simple, if God would let him survive this night, this horrendous ordeal, Bill promised he would never drink or smoke and he would go to church regularly and become a Deacon and an Elder. He would go back to Arkansas and marry a fine woman that he would respect, be faithful to, and never raise his voice to, much less lay an ill tempered hand on. He promised to have as many children as possible and raise them well. All this, if God would allow him to live this night through. Both parties would uphold their end of the agreement.

Meanwhile the rolling nighttime convoy of death went on, surprising a retreating German column of artillery and supplies that couldn't get out of the way fast enough. The American tanks blasted the column into a twisted mass of flaming wreckage, rolling over men and horses as they went. The parade of destruction pulled into Klingenmunster at dawn of the 24<sup>th</sup>. Behind them lay 15 miles of flaming debris including: 25 trucks, 5 tracked vehicles, 10 cars, 12 kitchen vehicles, 25 artillery pieces and 128 horse drawn vehicles. Human casualties were never fully tabulated. It was the American version of blitzkrieg warfare and Tolleson rode through the whole thing without a scratch. God considered the terms of the contract acceptable. Task Force Rhine had cleared the way and later that morning two armored divisions came rolling past to take the fight deeper into Germany.

Still jittery from the previous night Tolleson was posted on guard duty. Once again he found himself alone making sure no residual enemy crossed his checkpoint. Some one approached unannounced in the dark of the night.

"Halt! Who goes there?" Tolleson raised his weapon. There was no answer but there was movement in the shadows.

Tolleson repeated with a little more serious tone. Still there was movement but no acknowledgment. Tolleson threw the bolt and prepared to fire. A large shape lumbered into view. Then Tolleson saw his foe, a draft horse possibly escaped from the doomed convoy, ambled up and nudged his shoulder hoping for a sugar cube or something.

Thousands of prisoners began swelling the prisoner of war pens near Klingenmuenster. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had overrun a large section of Western Germany and was now faced with the task of occupation of portions of the enemy nation.

Tolleson's unit occupied the city of Ludwigshafen on the West banks of the Rhine River. The town had pretty much been reduced to rubble by allied air raids. Perhaps Bill saw a young Helmut Kohl, the first chancellor of reunified Germany in the 1990's running about as a child, because this was his childhood home. The Irony was that Germany, by virtue of its conquest, was about to be divided for almost fifty years, until Kohl and the fall of the Soviet Union could put the country back together again.

For the next month they policed the civilians, who tried their best to ignore them through pride. They fought isolated skirmishes with SS fanatics that although cut off, were trying to rejoin their units which had retreated to the Southeast. There were rumors of all the defeated troops of Nazi Germany rejoining in one last redoubt in the Bavarian Alps for a

showdown to the last man. There were also rumors of the Werewolf Corps, a civilian/remnant military insurgence that would strike back at the occupying American Army at any opportunity, much like what is happening in current day Iraq. The once proud nation of Germany, which set out to conquer the world six years earlier, was coming apart at the seams. No one observing this fact felt any sympathy for the Germans or their insane leader.

Because the retreating Germans had blown up the bridge across the Rhine to Mannheim, Tolleson's regiment crossed the Rhine river at Worms over an engineered pontoon bridge. They took up policing duties in Mannheim when an unexpected development took place. Tolleson's friend Philips came walking in to rejoin the unit. Somehow the names of Philips and the dead rifleman got reversed and it was assumed that Philips was dead. They would both live to later have dinner together at Philips parent's home in Prairie Grove Arkansas. Less happier, Tolleson also found out that his good friend David Reed, with whom he had joined the army with and went through boot camp together, had stepped on a mine during operation Undertone. When the medic came to assist he rolled David over onto another mine killing them both

The war was not over but occupational duties had commenced. Company Commanders now found themselves in the delicate situations of resolving internal domestic problems such as a Polish national who had joined the French Army then was captured by the Germans and then liberated by the Americans and now wanted to marry a German Fraulein and move to France to live. The men of the Cactus division wondered if they would see any more combat duty.

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> April 1945 was an unlucky day for the American President, Franklin Roosevelt died. Seven days later brought an end to the occupation duty with a long trucked march to the South to squash the infamous redoubt mentioned before. Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion entered combat again outside of Houbersbronn where the enemy was attempting to mount counterattacks against the allies. The enemy had encircled the 410th regiment and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was called to the rescue and not only relieved the regiment but took their primary objective, which was the town of Urach.

April 25<sup>th</sup> the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 409 regiment reached the banks of the Danube River and were ordered to cross at night by boat, which they did. That afternoon Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion crossed the Danube over a reconstructed bridge. At this point the infantry division attached itself to several Tank Battalions and they climbed aboard the tanks in the same haphazard fashion they had learned before during the assault on Klingenmunster.

The next day Tolleson's regiment entered the town of Landsburg on the banks of the Lech River. They were astonished to see withered and half naked walking zombies stumbling from the gate of what appeared to be a prison camp. The Americans were obligated to investigate.

Tolleson was stopped outside the gate of the camp by a smell so hideous he could go no further. Few people get to peek past the gates of Hell, but that day Tolleson was one of them. Hundreds of withered and rotting human bodies were stacked in heaps like cordwood. It was a Nazi death camp, and they weren't all dead. That moment Bill Tolleson saw enough dead men to last a hundred lifetimes. He spoke with a Polish Doctor who wandered out from the now abandoned concentration camp. The man spoke good English and said some inmates had been starving there for five years. He also mentioned that cannibalism had become commonplace. This sort of thing makes the rest of us cherish our deep appreciation for our sheltered lives.

In another two days the regiment had reached Schongau and crossed a dangerous hastily constructed bridge over the Lech River. Large numbers of prisoners were being taken. Germany was still falling apart. On April 30<sup>th</sup> Adolph Hitler committed suicide. Most of the resistance being encountered was by fanatical SS troops brainwashed into believing they still had a chance. They didn't. Tolleson and his men started seeing snow again as they were now approaching the high Alps of Austria. They crossed the Austrian border at Scharnitz the next day.

Tolleson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion captured a bridge intact at Telfs during a snowstorm. Piled onto tanks again, the battalion rolled down the Inn River Valley and into the capital city of the Austrian Tyrol, Innsbruck Austria. The civilians swarmed into the streets to greet the arriving soldiers, offering flowers, cognac and kisses. They had no love for the occupying German troops, which were still patrolling the streets with loaded weapons. Only two days later with one stroke of a pen, General Brandenburg surrendered the German 19<sup>th</sup> Army to the Americans at Innsbruck in a red-carpeted hotel lobby.

There were mass surrenders yet other elements continued to fight on, more from confusion than anything. The next day, elements of the 411<sup>th</sup> regiment made contact with the American 5<sup>th</sup> army at the Italian border. The 5<sup>th</sup> Army had fought its way up through the length of Italy. On May 6<sup>th</sup> the 2nd Battalion moved to Wattens Austria. The Third Reich had surrendered in Berlin yet certain factions continued to fight. By May 9<sup>th</sup> all major elements of the German Army had surrendered and the War in Europe was over. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Division held a huge parade through the streets of Innsbruck. Tolleson was moved to Lyndes Austria where his duty was guarding SS troops as prisoners of war.

Shortly thereafter the Cactus Division was disbanded. There was a point system to determine who would go home and who would stay for the occupation of Germany. The points were based on years of service, age and children to support. Tolleson didn't have very many points. He was to stay on for occupation duty and be transferred to George Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, the Rainbow division.

Tolleson was given a choice of several units to join and he chose the 2<sup>nd</sup> 4.2 chemical mortar battalion, the reason being was that due to the size of the weapons, they got to ride in jeeps. He hoped his foot soldiering days were over. Yet things took an ominous turn when his unit began training with their mortars for the invasion and conquest Mainland Japan.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were attacked with nuclear weapons by the Americans on August 6<sup>th</sup> & August 9<sup>th</sup> 1945 thus ending the war and any chance of more combat for Tolleson. Official estimates indicated that the total war dead as a direct result of World War II was about fifty million souls. The English high authorities knew full well about the race between the Americans and the Germans to develop nuclear weapons. They also knew all too well about the German's capacity for ballistic missiles. The Germans had launched over 500 V-2 missile attacks on London alone. Should the Germans acquire nuclear weapons and use them against England with their missiles, the English government had a prepared response. They had cultivated massive amounts of Anthrax and were preparing, with their air superiority to release a Hell of biological warfare against the German population. Fortunately it never came to that.

Tolleson stayed on in Europe and was transferred to help guard the cleanup of a Sarin Nerve Gas Facility in Munich Germany. Neither the Germans nor the Allies used any chemical weapons during World War Two. The Germans were the first country to experiment with chemical weapons during World War I, often with mixed results. In those days it was difficult to assess the effectiveness against enemy troops once the weapons were deployed thereby making it tricky to decide whether to follow up with a conventional attack, which was generally the plan. The other problem was that a chemical attack is as fickle as the wind, which could change and blow the whole thing back over your own soldiers. This is exactly what happened to Hitler himself as an infantry soldier during World War I, which landed him blinded in a hospital for some length of time. Whether that experience implored him to restrict the use of these weapons is a speculation that will never be resolved.

Regardless of the decision whether to implement chemical weapons in the war, the Germans had over a million rounds stockpiled at the facility Tolleson was guarding in Munich. The guards would oversee the German technicians dismantling the explosives from the gas canisters. Then they would detonate the explosives and load the gas canisters onto rail cars. They were told that the rail cars were then loaded onto dilapidated ships, which were then sunk in the deep Ocean.

With today's deep salvage techniques (the sunk German Battleship Bismarck has been photographed at 15,420 feet below the surface of the Ocean) and folks like al Qaeda lurking about, at least a Hollywood screenplay should be written about a million rounds of nerve gas currently sitting somewhere at the bottom of the Ocean.

Occupation had its upside though. Travel permits, complete with transportation, food and lodging were issued to the soldiers and Tolleson took every one that came along. Paris, the Riviera, Nice, and the Matterhorn in Zermatt Switzerland were all visited during the months of occupation.

In February of 1946, just less than a year after the cessation of hostilities in Europe, Tolleson's points added up. He boarded a Liberty Ship for the transatlantic voyage home. A Liberty Ship was primarily a cargo ship mass-produced for the War effort. Though they were nervous about the viability of a liberty ship, because they were built on an assembly line in an average of 42 days, they were at least going home.

In a little over a week, standing on the deck of a Liberty Ship, Tolleson was greeted home by the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York Harbor. Shortly thereafter he rode the train to Jefferson Barracks outside of Saint Louis Missouri where he received an honorary discharge from the United States Army. His Father, Mother and Sister were waiting for him outside. They had driven up from Hope and they all drove back home together. He was now obligated to fulfill his side of the bargain that he made that night on the road to Klingenstein.