



WITH THE CANADIANS IN FRANCE

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By Pvt. BEN FRAZIER

YANK Staff Correspondent

WITH THE CANADIAN FORCES IN FRANCE—It was the week of the big squeeze play to crush and annihilate the German Seventh Army. The Canadian forces had already outflanked the Germans in the north and were turning toward a juncture with the Americans pushing up from the south. Jerry had only one escape route left—a narrow gap still open between the advancing American and Canadian troops near Falaise and Trun. Behind the Germans, acting as a piston to shove them through the gap, was a British outfit prodding them on and mopping up the stragglers.

After Trun was captured by the Canadian 3d Division, one company of Highlanders pushed ahead to the next town, St. Lambert. There it was cut off during the night, and now only 50 men were left. The position was very uncertain. Contact had been reestablished from time to time but it never lasted. The CO knew that reinforcements might not be able to reach his men until the next day, and he prepared them for a long and hard night.

It was. There were a few tanks attached to the company and some 17-pounders. All night long they shelled a group of German-held farm buildings at the foot of the lane just one field away. In one of the barns the Jerries had stored ammunition. It caught on fire and after dark blazed away, making a spectacular show with the ammo exploding and sending up bursts of flame into the night sky.

In between the incessant firing, there were brief moments of quiet, and then you could hear the Jerries in the farm buildings down the lane yelling like a bunch of madmen. It was not a chorus of surrender. Individuals were yelling excitedly, at the top of their lungs. You felt that the Jerries must have been reduced to insanity by the bombing and the shelling they had been through. There was one German, somewhere in the field next to us, who kept calling out in a high nervous voice something that sounded like "potatoes." He kept it up for hours. I fell asleep that night with the sound of "potatoes, potatoes" running through my head.

EARLY the next morning I was awakened by a considerable burst of gunfire. A German tank and half-track had tried to make a run for it but were blocked by two burned-out tanks side by side in the main road. A 17-pounder lit into them and the tank burned furiously.

German patrols, too, had crept into town during the night and had tossed some grenades into a few buildings. But the Nazis never got out

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again; the road was full of dead Germans sprawled at horrible angles as far as you could see. It was still raining, which was unpleasant, but at least it washed the blood away.

From the direction of the farm buildings at the bottom of the lane, where there had been all the yelling the night before, there was not a sound. There was nothing but a faint curl of smoke coming from the barn.

In a short time a small group of Germans began to form at the end of the lane under a white flag and slowly advanced toward us. They were covered by the Canadians from the hedges on both sides of the lane and the 17-pounder at the crossroads. The tanks covered them, too. No one was taking any chances.

Just then somebody shouted excitedly. We all looked down the lane toward the burning farm. It was full of Germans. Three and four abreast, they were trudging up the lanes with white flags. Some of them had white handkerchiefs tied over their helmets. The first ones came slowly up the path, sloshing about in the mud puddles. There was no end to the procession.

The captured Jerries were a sad-looking lot, too confused to do anything more than just plod along. All the spirit was out of them. Just once in a while you would see a thoroughly Nazi-type officer sitting bolt upright in a Volkswagen or a truck, looking disdainfully at the low trash whose prisoner he was. These Nazis invariably had immaculately clean uniforms, so that it seemed as if they had not even come from the same place as their dust-covered men.

All over the field small detachments rose up out of nowhere and streamed in under white flags. And then up the main road, cautiously coming past the burning tank wrecked just that morning, was another group as large as the one down the lane. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Germans, picking their way over the bodies of their dead in the road.

They were all surrendering to a little company of 50 men at a country crossroads.

The company was snowed under by the sudden deluge of prisoners. There were hardly enough men to frisk them all. In the midst of all this confusion, a helmetless English officer came walking up the road, making his way through the crowd of Germans. Pointing to a map, he asked the CO if we were mortaring a certain position. It was well down in territory which everybody assumed was teeming with Germans, and our mortars were giving it everything they had. The English officer asked quietly if we would stop—"Because we're there."

The British unit had been pushing the Jerries toward this trap. Now they had arrived at the gap—only a couple of miles from the Americans on the south and the Canadians on the north. We knew now that the Germans were finished. The Seventh Army had been destroyed, and the battle of the gap at St. Lambert had turned into a race for Berlin.