

# AACHEN was like STALINGRAD



There were the same house-to-house and room-to-room fighting, the same combat techniques. One observer who had been in both places said that the two battles were very similar, even to the German fanatics defending. It was even more similar to one Nazi who had escaped from Stalingrad, fought at Aachen, and whose days of "fanaticism" were now finished.

By Sgt. **BILL DAVIDSON**

YANK Staff Correspondent

**A**ACHEN (delayed)—With rifles at a casual port, the squad moved up both sidewalks of the tree-lined boulevard to the main line of resistance which, at this stage of the Aachen battle, ran roughly along the smashed jewelry stores and dress shops and hairdressing establishments of a street strangely named Jakob Strasse. As they hit our intersection, our machineguns opened fire on the near and far corners of the block of apartment houses that the squad was attacking. The squad scurried across the street and into the lobby of the first house. As the eleventh and twelfth men ducked into the lobby, sporadic German rifle fire broke out from the windows of another apartment house down the street. "Son of a bitch," said the lieutenant platoon leader watching the advance from a corner hotel room window. And he reached for a field telephone.

Ten minutes later a monstrous-looking vehicle came lumbering down fashionable Hindenburg Strasse toward Jakob Strasse, covered by our mortar fire from the rooftops. The vehicle was an old French 155mm. gun from the last war mounted on an M-4 tank chassis. The 155 GPF, as it is called, rolled up to the intersection. It took cover behind a pile of rubble on top of which was an undamaged sign indicating that the rubble had been a furniture store presided over by one H. Richtenberg. The 155 drew a bead on the apartment house from which the shots had come. Then it let go.

The first heavy projectile, weighing more than one hundred pounds, tore a huge hole between the fifth and sixth floors, spilling a desk and chairs and great quantities of paper into the street. The second shell went in through a window and exploded inside. The top three floors seemed to collapse onto the bottom three floors. The infantry squad in the first apartment house waited patiently for the debris to stop falling. Then they methodically moved forward to the ground floor and basement of the shelled house to mop up any one-piece Nazis still inside. They flushed the remainder of the Germans from room to room and from house to house in that same neighborhood for the rest of the afternoon.

That's the way the fighting has been inside Aachen for four bloody days now. And that's the way it promises to be in every German city the Nazis choose to defend.

**A**CCORDING to Battalion CO, Lt. Col. John Daniels, of Geneva, N.Y., this house-to-house warfare is similar to the hedgerow warfare of Normandy. And to anyone who witnessed at first hand those bitter days around St. Lo, the analogy becomes strikingly apparent.

The Germans elect to fight for every city block, just as they used to defend every field. In exactly the same way that they set up machinegun and mortar strongpoints at the corners of a field or behind the hedgerows, they now pick two or three houses in a block giving them a good field of fire, and they have to be rooted out by the encirclement tactics of small units of riflemen. Sometimes you hold one block or one building or one room, and you don't know whether the next block or building or room is held by the enemy. Snipers from rooftops or upper stories are a constant menace. And, as in the hedgerow days, the German mortar fire has been a little more than annoying. They place their mortars on the top floor of a building and fire out of windows. Neither the Nazis nor the guns can be seen because they are below windowsill level. They don't bother to fire at visible targets. They have the mortars zeroed in on main thoroughfares they know we have to use. Then once in a while they let loose, and the projectiles go screaming up over rooftops and come swooshing down into the traffic on the street. They usually catch something.

One pfc. from New York City, later wounded, worked out a pretty good method of dealing with the troublesome mortars after he had almost been nipped three times by them at apparently safe intersections. He took to hanging around on rooftops. When he thought he had a top floor mortar position spotted, he would lob a few rifle grenades onto the roof over the mortar men's heads. The shell and bomb-weakened roof would usually collapse and forthwith terminate the activities of the Nazis beneath.



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**RIGHT, U.S. ARMOR AND G.I. MOVING THROUGH AACHEN; ABOVE, THE RUSSIANS DID IT IN STALINGRAD.**

We have developed other techniques to deal with situations in this fantastic house-to-house warfare. When the Jerries control houses at the far end of a street, it is suicide for our infantry squads to venture outside after mopping up each house. The sniper fire is that rough. So the doughfoots merely take the one-and-a-half-pound dynamite charges used to clear away obstructing trolley and telephone wires, and blast their way through the connecting walls of houses all the way down the street. This interesting little method is called "Mouseholing." "It is," says Pvt. Irving Weiss, of Philadelphia, "a good way to keep from getting wet on rainy days." It's also a good way of cutting off the escaping Germans who try to use the deep connecting air raid shelters and the old Roman catacombs beneath the apartment houses.

**F**OR a time we had trouble with German combat patrols filtering back through our lines. Three war correspondents were cut off for two hours in a house when they looked up and saw "about a dozen men in green suits passing the window, crouched down low and carrying rifles." But one day, a Jerry patrol was spotted from the rear of an M-4 tank. The tank scooted all the way around the block and caught up with the patrol face to face before it reached the next corner. One 75mm. round at a ten-yard range, plus a burst of .50 calibre machine-gun fire, and there were no German survivors.

The unusual thing about Aachen is that while it has been heavily shelled and bombed, it is nowhere near as badly destroyed as cities like St. Lo and Coutances. Practically every house is damaged and has huge gaping holes in it, but ordinarily the four walls are standing and at least part of the house is habitable. You go down one deserted street after another that remind you of the fashionable parts of New York or London. Most of the houses are tall and modern, and they make excellent fortresses.

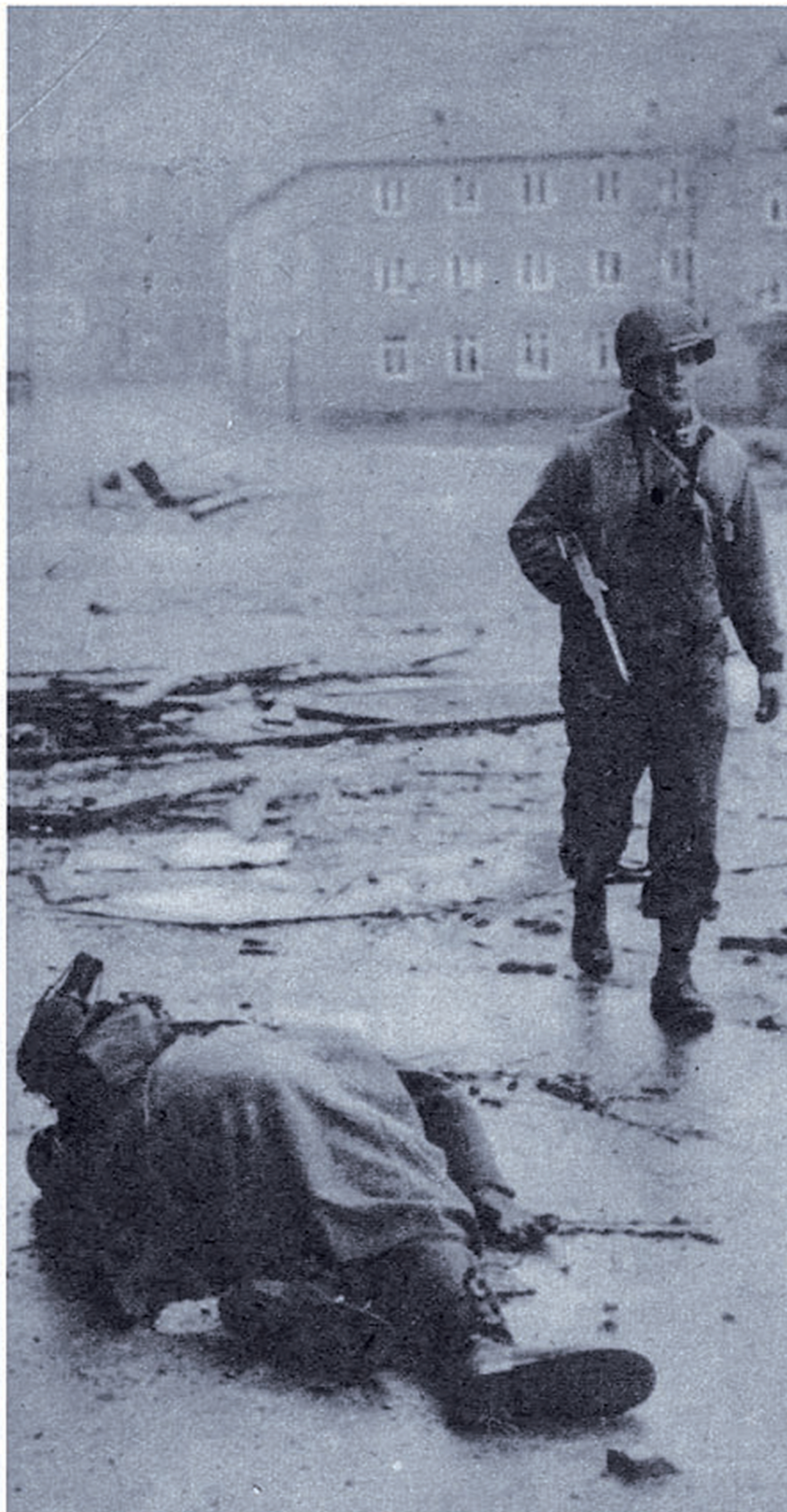
As we advance we clean out one city block at a time. We do not go on to the next block until every German soldier and civilian is cleared out of every room and cellar. We can't afford to have a single enemy of any classification behind our lines. First, the machineguns cover the four corners of the block, to enable the infantry to reach the first house. Then, the supporting weapons are brought up to knock out strongpoints. We don't fool around with strongpoints any more. If a single rifle shot comes from a rooftop, we will bring up an M-4 tank or an M-10 tank destroyer or a 155 GPF to engage it. We slam a few shells into the source of the trouble. That usually chases the Nazis into the cellar. The next step is for the infantry to move into the cellar to mop up. The doughs "flush them out" with a few hand grenades. Then they close with rifles and tommy guns. It is not what you would call pleasant work.

**S**OMETIMES the German strongpoint is located in an entire building, as in the case of the State Theater, where Adolf Hitler once made a speech stating that the Rhineland symbolized the great conquering spirit of the Reich and would never feel the foot of the foreign invader. When the State Theater proved troublesome, we brought a battery of the 155 GPFs up the Hindenburg Strasse and let them blast away with direct fire at a range of less than three hundred yards. The State Theater was knocked flat.

This 155 GPF is an interesting weapon. It was the high-powered fortress gun that stopped the Germans at Verdun for four years in the last war. We were so full of admiration for it in 1918 that we bought dozens of them from the French after the Armistice. Then we let them lie around Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland for 22 years without even bothering to wipe off the rust. In 1940, we were about to convert the old 155s into scrap, when General Huebner, who now commands the First Division, decided to experiment with them on an M-4 tank chassis. With this mobility and modern ammunition, they have turned out to be



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one of the finest self-propelled siege guns we possess. But the basic infantryman is still the key guy around here.

Once the doughfoot gets into a building with trapped Germans, bizarre fights develop. The hand grenade is the principal weapon, and the fighting is from room to room and floor to floor. Stairways are barricaded and both sides cut holes in the walls and floors to try to cut off the opposing forces. You don't dare to fire until you're sure you've got the enemy trapped, because once you give away your position, you can expect a burst of Schmeisser fire through a wall or ceiling. One corporal, an assistant



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squad leader, developed a fairly ingenious technique for handling such problems. When he was sure he had the enemy pinned down in a room, he would crawl along the ledges outside the building, stick his tommy gun in the windows, and give the room an over-all spraying job. This worked very well until he was picked off by a sniper who had been watching him from across the street.

Often the opposing forces are only a wall apart. Company aid man Pfc. Arthur Wetheimer, of New York City, reports an incident in an apartment house on Adalbert Strasse. He went in to pick up a casualty during a truce, and heard the GIs and the Germans talking to each other through the wall. A buck sergeant was saying: "You started the war by going into Poland, you son of a bitch." From the other side of the wall a voice said in perfectly good English: "The British started the war by bombing Germany."

## YANK

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By the men . .

for the men

in the service

**A**BOUT the only thing that makes house-to-house warfare more bearable for the doughfoot than hedgerow fighting is that living conditions are better. For the first time since England, the men of this division are now out of the mud. Also for the first time in months, many of them are sleeping in beds. There are plenty of beds around, and other household comforts—phonographs, stoves, toilets, sewing baskets, table cloths, dishes, live fowl, razor blades, alarm clocks, easy chairs, literature, cats, dogs, and sound-proofed air raid shelters. When it is actually fighting, a platoon will simply move into one of the less damaged houses in the main line of resistance, post guards in strategic corner rooms covering the street, cook up some German canned foods on a German stove, listen to some German phonograph records, and go to sleep in a German bed with good German linen.

For a while, the aid men had a beautiful setup. When not engaged in picking up casualties and carrying them through back alleys and over fences, the medics enjoyed the luxury of the swank Palace Hotel. Each man had a single room and bath, even though the bath didn't work. "It is just like the Jeff Davis back home," said S/Sgt. Howard Ochols, of Montgomery, Ala. The only difference was that the medics had already suffered fifteen casualties.

Godfrey Blunden, the Australian war correspondent, was here in Aachen and was probably the only man in the theater to witness both the Aachen and Stalingrad house-to-house battles. Blunden, one of the few foreign newspapermen on Russian soil at the time, covered the great German defeat at Stalingrad for the Associated Press as well as his own paper. He was immediately struck by the similarity between the two battles. "There is the same house-to-house and room-to-room fighting, the same combat techniques, the same type of German defense. At Aachen, the Germans held Lousberg Hill, dominating all our approaches to the city. In Stalingrad, the Germans held Murmia Kurgan Hill, and planted it thick with 88s and six-barreled mortars.

"There was one ultimatum here, and when the Germans refused to accept surrender, the Americans dive-bombed the hell out of the place. In Stalingrad, there was one ultimatum, and when the Germans refused to accept surrender, the Russians opened up with artillery placed hub to hub in a ring around the city. Even the German attempts to relieve the besieged garrisons were the same.

"The only difference between the two battles," says Blunden, "was the intensity of the fight at Stalingrad. The Germans used incendiaries there, and the city was burned to the ground. In Aachen, the Germans just defended an occasional house. In Stalingrad, it was every house. The streets lay thick with the dead. And the dead were the finest Germany had—twenty-two and twenty-three-year-old Hitler Jugend kids. That was the crack undefeated Sixth Army, 300,000 strong, that had swept through France and Poland and a thousand miles of Russia unchecked.

"One group of fanatic young Germans retreated into the Red October factory, locked themselves in one of the huge furnaces, and set up machineguns at the openings. The Russians waited until the Nazis had used up all their ammunition. Then they went in with hand grenades and wiped out the Germans to the last man."

I saw one of these same young Nazi fanatics in the division prisoner of war cage yesterday. He was one of the few who had escaped Stalingrad to fight later at Aachen. He was bald and ashen-faced and skinny, and looked as if he were at least fifty years old. All the fingers were missing from his left hand. He got into a feeble argument with a middle-aged German deserter in civilian clothes about who started the war. The deserter ended up by slugging the prisoner and knocking him down into a corner, where he turned onto his side and lay huddled and crying.