

DEATH of an ARMY



The once-mighty German Seventh Army crumbled and died—its funeral dirge the roar of Allied big guns. As it did so, a little valley in France became the *sterbenraum* of men who sought *lebensraum* by grabbing it from smaller neighbors.

By Sgt. SAUL LEVITT

LE BOURG ST. LEONARD, FRANCE—The destruction of an army can be a fact, but it is rarely a fact that you can see. All you usually get is a piece of it. You can see the dead cows with their legs in the air and the dead Germans lying in the ditches along the way with their faces turned upward toward the sun. You can see the dead Tiger tanks, burned-out and rusty-red, and the dead houses—houses that were lived in yesterday and that today are piles of rubble or mere mortar dust between shattered walls with empty window-spaces like men without eyes. These things are the spoor of an army breaking up.

The curtains wave through the empty window-spaces of the shattered houses in Le Bourg St. Leonard. Here it is much the same as it has been elsewhere in this part of France—at St. Lo and Valognes and Montebourg—and again the road is filled with the broken pieces of men and machines. The difference is that somewhere in this area the German 7th Army is dying.

We have been told that the German Army, which fought so craftily and gave out to our men a share of death in Normandy, is now almost encircled by the great armored columns which broke through and swept around the enemy. But this army does not die easily. Its roads out are few and all of them are covered by our big guns, but still the Germans try. With each thrust they lose some strength, but still they try again. Last night they sent some Tiger tanks into Le Bourg St. Leonard. Bazookas and TD guns stopped them. Using bazookas, Pfc. William Boles, of Pittsburgh, Pvt. Harry Rainier, of Philadelphia, and Pvt. Harold Kernu, of Lead, S.D., crippled one tank. Other tanks retreated. Some Americans were casualties, but another door was closed to the desperate 7th Army. And this morning three American soldiers sit around a 57-mm. gun, pointing it up a road because the Germans may make another stab through, seeking an opening. The Germans are dying, but they are dying hard.

Here, in and around Le Bourg St. Leonard, there was fighting only a few hours ago and there is no death-smell yet. Here once more are the dead Germans in the ditches, the dead cows, and the burned-out tanks—all newly dead and all perhaps still warm to the touch, if you cared to touch them.

Now, though all this is what you usually see in places throughout France where there has been severe fighting, according to the men who know and according to the map, here at Le Bourg St. Leonard it means more than just another town taken. It

The Death of the German 7th

means much more than that. This time it means the breaking up of an Army. Where do you find that breaking up and where do you see it?

We move down silent and empty roads where the wrecked machines lie, looking for a glimpse of the big smashing up as it takes place. And suddenly we find it. We see the smashing up of this once powerful 7th Army taking place over an area of several square miles. Everywhere on the horizon we see smoke clouds, and all at once the map becomes alive with big movements of men. Through a telescope, we look down across a gently sloping plane and see vehicles moving along a single road. Behind us is the roar of big guns—ranging from weapons firing puny shells no more than four inches across all the way up to 240 mms., the top artillery gun of them all.

We can see all the way down to a gully where the Germans are. We can see them moving—the men, the trucks, the tanks, all trying to go out through a gap that is still left for them but which is steadily narrowing. We are watching them from the south side of the gap. On the north side are the Canadians. First we hear the roar of one of our guns, and then a little time goes by and then comes the explosion of the shell on the road down there amid the vehicles. At one point we see flames climb up. They form thin sheets of fire and a young artillery officer—Lt. John J. Cotter, of New York City—explains that this is probably an ammunition truck. Our guns keep at it unendingly. All along the road flames from our shells burst out and then black and gray smoke drifts upward. Now, nearer to us, this side of the bursting shells, we can see our own infantry deploying across a wheatfield. They are down there to mop up in a small wood. They move singly and far apart across the field. They move past a farmer who goes right on working in the same wheatfield.

Lt. Cotter explains what has taken place down there. "First," he says, "the Germans tried to break to the west and cut the line of our armored movement southward. Then they moved northward against the Canadians and British. That got them nowhere, and since they knew we were on the south, the only way out was to the east. That's where they're trying to go now, but they have little left in the way of roads, and we keep shelling those."

THAT is what is taking place down there below. It is an effort to get out which cannot really succeed. Some of the men will make it, but few of the machines will and few of the guns. No one knows how many Germans have died and are dying down there. No real check-up is possible now in that scourged land, but two British soldiers in fast recon cars—Sgt. William Greenaway, of Reading, and Trooper Basil Porter, of Newcastle—who managed to cut through a corner of the region yesterday, say that they counted hundreds of burned-out German vehicles. The total score waits.

Elsewhere on this burning plain stands the town of Argentan, shrouded in smoke, almost like a mirage, except for its church spires which rise above. And somewhere below, the German General, Hausser, who commands this dying army, is fleeing—or so one captured German soldier says. Like other men, the general is dodging the shriek of tons of flying steel—a deadly canopy spreading out over a whole army. No one knows if he is doing it with dignity, but he is doing it. Possibly the soldiers, the plain soldiers of his army, have not known until now how completely they were trapped there. But now the soldiers and the general alike know, and together they are trying to escape. Another shell explodes, another fire flares on the road. The prisoner totals mount up—prisoners are brought in from many divisions, testifying to the disorganization of an army. Other Germans are escaping now

The Death of the German 7th

as they can, trying to run a gauntlet of fire.

WE ask the prisoner who has told us about the flight of the German general what he thinks about Germany's chances of winning the war now. The soldier, a non-com, is an unswerving Nazi. He says the Germans can win because they have secret weapons. We ask him why the Germans went to war, and he says they wanted *lebensraum*—living space. Did this mean, then, taking the lands of the Czechs, the Poles, the Russians, and other peoples? He answers with great frankness and looking his questioner squarely in the eye—yes, exactly. Taking land from other peoples in Europe, and he puts it just as simply as that—is what is meant by *lebensraum*.

While he is talking, the guns roar with the loud, sharp note of thousands of fragments of steel breaking around and among and over the men of the German 7th Army. Those men who manage to come out of this dying army will carry the blast of shells within them for a long time. They will perhaps never be able to fight or to do much of anything else again.

In the final lunges of this dying army our soldiers die, too. Some of our infantrymen here, men who fought hard in Normandy, say that this fighting is harder still. The Germans in this area are more desperate.

Another 240-mm. goes off at pointblank range. It falls, and another fire burns down in the gully.

The German word for what is taking place below us today is *sterbenraum*. It means dying space.

YANK

SEPTEMBER 17, 1944