



By Ed Wilcox

Warweek Combat Correspondent

WE climbed the flight of narrow steps and emerged in a musty, low-ceilinged attic. We walked, half stooping, to the end of the room and shouldered our way in among a group of GI's. "From here," the sergeant said, "you can get a pretty fair view of it." I stepped closer to the open window and had a look.

In front of me lay Aachen, sprawling and tumbling down over the hillside. It looked just like any city of comparable size back home. I might have been looking at Peoria, Ill. Yet there was something distinctive about Aachen. At first I thought that it was the churches, spires standing out against the somber October sky. But it wasn't the churches. It was the atmosphere of inactivity. There wasn't a flicker of movement anywhere. It was strangely peaceful and almost foreboding. Aachen was a city condemned to death, waiting mutely for the hour.

"Watch it!" the sergeant warned as I leaned too far toward the windowsill, "this place is alive with German snipers." We turned to leave just as a young Signal Corps lieutenant, camera slung across his chest, entered the O.P. "Came up to get a few close shots of the boys in their foxholes," he said grinning confidently. "Where are they from here?" The two non-coms with the officer looked at each other and one said, "They are just over the hill but it's dangerous out there, sir." The lieutenant said, "C'mon, let's get down there." As we left the building we could see the three making their way along a hedgerow over the hillside.

Sniper Got Him

Back at regimental headquarters that night, one of the officers remarked that the Signal Corps photographer had been hit by a sniper's bullet. I asked how it happened and the officer said, "Just another guy who hasn't learned that it is not smart to walk across breaks in hedges when Jerry is around. Nothing serious, luckily, just a nasty neck wound that will get him the Purple Heart."

Later that evening I had a talk with a Colonel commanding an Infantry Regiment. He had the sure certain air of a professional soldier, a product of West Point. The Colonel was commanding the outfit charged with the taking of Aachen.

"How long has it been stalemated like this?" I asked.

"Three weeks," he answered.

"When can you take the city?"

"Whenever I want it," he answered.

"Why don't you take it?" I asked.

His Own Terms Only

"I never fight on the enemy's terms," he said. "I force the enemy to do battle on mine." I didn't understand fully that night just exactly what the Colonel had in mind when he said that. I came to understand during the next few days.

Headquarters buzzed Monday with talk of an ultimatum to be delivered. Opinions were bandied about and it was clear that some-

thing was in the wind. During the day companies changed positions and the officers in the situation room drew new circles on the maps, indicating new locations. The Regiment jockeyed for position, closing the steel ring around the city. The suburb of Aachen-Forst fell to our troops and the infantry dug in along a railroad embankment, awaiting the final push.

Monday night weather reports were studied and the situation was hashed over and rehearsed. The men in the companies cursed the light rain that began to fall and tried to get a little sleep. There was no small-arms fire—just the rumble of our artillery and the sound of the shells exploding within the city. The lights at the regimental C.P. burned late that night as final plans were drawn and Aachen's doom drew nearer.

Three Men Alone

At nine o'clock Tuesday morning two lieutenants and a Pfc left regiment in a jeep, turned at the crossroad where the sign reads, "Nach Aachen 4 Km.," and drove toward a Company outpost near the railroad tracks.

A fine rain was falling and unshaven infantrymen slogged through the muddy streets of Aachen-Forst, walking gingerly in the debris and rubble, trying to keep the

The interrogator, S/Sgt. Eric Kirchheimer, New York City, ordered the Wehrmacht soldier to advance for questioning.

"Where do you live?" the sergeant asked.

"Stuttgart," the prisoner answered.

"Hmm—so did I," the sergeant said to me in English.

"How old are you?" he asked the prisoner.

"Twenty-five," the Nazi replied.

"I'll be damned," the sergeant said to me. "So am I."

"Where did you go to primary school?" the sergeant asked.

The Nazi replied with the name of a school and the sergeant turned and said, "How do you like that—this guy and I are from the same town, same age, and went to the same public school—might have played together as kids. And now look at us; we are enemies and as different as day and night. This is a screwy war."



FIRST TANKS enter Aachen after artillery and bombers of the Ninth Air Force blasted enemy positions. Death of the city was best example of air-ground co-operation.

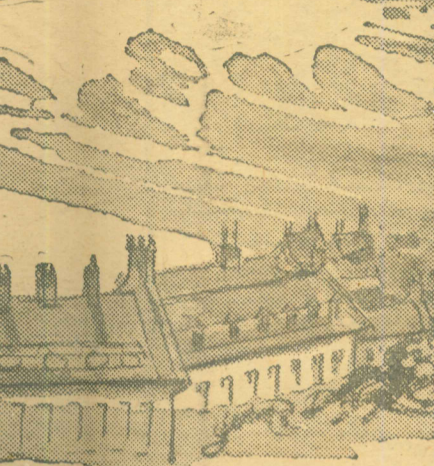


DEMOLITION, the old standby German defense, was a feature of the battle to hold Aachen. Germans blew up viaduct leading to city. Yank tankers called on tank-dozer, cut through rail embankment.

9th Air Force Photos.

WHEN

er's



stub of a cigarette alive as the water dripped from their helmets and made smoking almost impossible. All firing had ceased and one GI would say to another, "What the hell goes?"

A few minutes before ten o'clock the two officers and the flag bearer, holding a large white table cloth aloft on a pole, walked silently through our lines, into an underpass, and emerged on the German side of the railroad embankment where they were halted in one guttural command by four German enlisted men. The Germans asked why they had come.

Message for CO

"We have a message for your battalion commander," Lt. William Boehme, New York City, the interpreter, said in German. The four Germans held a hasty confab and then blindfolded the three Americans.

A half hour later they reached a company headquarters where the blindfolds were removed and they were questioned as to the reason for their mission by a young Nazi lieutenant. They were again blind-



folded and taken to a second German headquarters, this one a battalion C.P. located in the basement of a brick apartment building.

Here they were confronted by a second Nazi lieutenant who volunteered the information that he was the battalion adjutant. Lt. Boehme explained their mission and Lt. Cedric Lafley, Enosburg Falls, Vt., produced two envelopes, one addressed to the garrison commander and the other to the Mayor of Aachen. The Nazi lieutenant receipted for both.

Exchange Cigarettes

As Lt. Boehme discussed the means of effecting the surrender of the city if the Germans accepted the ultimatum, Lt. Lafley offered the Germans a cigarette. Both enemy officers accepted an American cigarette, and, in turn offered one of their own to the Americans. The German enlisted men made no move to decline or accept the offer to smoke in the presence of their officers. Pfc. Kenneth Kading, La Grange, Ill., the flag bearer, lit a cigarette and smoked democratically with the officers.

As the party rose to leave, the Nazi adjutant said, "I believe I speak for the commanding officer

when I say we shall fight on anyhow." The Americans left with their four guards and walked back toward the railroad tracks.

"I hope the terms are reasonable," one of the German non-coms remarked soberly. The remainder of the stumbling walk

You look twice when you see a young girl strolling nonchalantly around less than 200 yards behind the front lines. I looked twice and walked over to the young German girl to ask what her business was. She smiled and said, "I have come because I lived in Aachen-Forst and I formerly had a shop in Aachen—I am trying to get information about my shop."

"What sort of a shop did you have?" I asked as a shell hissed overhead and smashed somewhere in Aachen.

"China and glassware," she answered brightly.

"That's all, sister!" I said, walking quickly away.

back through Aachen's twisting streets was made in silence.

At the company C.P., a scant hundred yards up the hill from the underpass, the muddy infantrymen milled around inside the bombed-out building discussing the possibilities of the Germans surrendering the city, cursed the rain and the mud, joked among themselves, wondered and waited.

GIs Were Waiting

Now and then one of the men would step into the street and peer down toward the tracks. The rain continued to fall, the mud in the streets got souper, and the GIs rubbed their chins, sweated, and waited.

"Them b...s ain't gonna give up," a sergeant drawled. "We'll have to root 'em out house-to-house style. Them b...s!"

A few minutes later the party of three came into sight, walking slowly up the hill toward the company C.P., white flag no longer unfurled. In the distance there was a boom, the hiss of a shell overhead, and a crash as the shell exploded within the city. Another boom, hiss, smash. And then a steady din as the battle exploded angrily all around. The armistice was over.

No questions were asked. The GIs who had stood in the halls, turned, flipped their cigarette butts into the mud, and plodded slowly down toward the stairs to the basement. Just like downtown," one of the doggies muttered.

"City Is Surrounded"

The message that had been delivered to the commander of the troops within the city had said, in part, "The city of Aachen now is completely surrounded by American forces who are sufficiently equipped with both air power and artillery to destroy the city, if necessary. We shall take the city either by its unconditional surrender or by attacking and destroying it."

Leaflets dropped by our planes during the day told the Germans, "On our airfields our bombers are awaiting final order to take off. Our artillery surrounding the city

is ready. Our troops are alerted for the final advance." The cards were on the table.

Music vs Shellfire

Tuesday night as our artillery stepped up its barrage, a German loud-speaker system in the front line was heard. If you will stop the shelling we will play some music for you. We regret that we have none of your American swing records." A record was put on the turntable and the strains of a German waltz floated out across the tracks, the report of our big guns in the rear furnishing a strange midnight symphony.

When our artillery continued to fire, the German at the loud-speaker said, "All right—if that is the kind of music you like, that is the kind of music you shall have." Then the enemy mortars fired a few rounds to the left of our positions. Our guns shelled their positions for the rest of the night.

Wednesday was the first really clear day of the weeks. There were a few wisps of cloud, but the sun shone brightly and everybody from the colonel to the private in the line looked much more cheerful.

The Planes Appear

At 10:00 o'clock with slightly less than an hour left for the Nazis to make their decision to stand and fight or surrender, there was a drone in the distance and soon you could make out the specks in the sky—twelve P47 dive bombers, buzzing angrily above Aachen, a reminder that the time was growing short. They hovered above the city and were joined by P38s, gliding in graceful turns, awaiting the order to release their bombs.

Rumor, the ever-present hazard to logical thinking in combat, swept the area. One story had it that Aachen was surrendering and that white flags flew from almost every building in town. One or two could be seen, but there was no general display of flags of truce. Another infantryman who claimed to have been down to the underpass a few minutes before, stated that the Germans were beginning to file down to the railroad track and they had agreed to give themselves up in groups of 50. No one knew what to believe and the boys who thought that it would be a soft touch because of what they had "heard," were disappointed.

Dump Blows Up

At 10:50, the time the ultimatum expired, all doubts were dispelled as the P47s peeled off and dived on the target city. They came in at about a 70-degree angle, you could see them strafing and then the two specks which were 500-pound bombs would cut loose and then a minute later there would be the explosion. One by one they dropped their cargos, zoomed away, regrouped and flew off for home and more bombs to drop. One hit had destroyed a hotel which was plainly visible on a hill the other side of Aachen. "Damn it," one officer said, "I had hopes of having a drink there."

Fires were started all over Aachen—there must have been a dozen large ones. Then an ammunition

Backwash of a Battle

There was a short driveway running around the side of the two-story farmhouse and around in back there was a large lot. The prisoners and evacuees who had come from Aachen just a few minutes before, stood around in small groups, some talking and smiling, others sitting moodily on the grass. And the civilians did not talk to the soldiers.

Every time one of the big American trucks would arrive with a new load of civilians, there would be a demonstration that reminded me of a neighborhood picnic with everyone greeting everyone else and laughing and joking. But this was no picnic.

The men were mostly oldsters, wearing stiff white celluloid collars and suits that looked like they came out of the 1928 Sears-Roebuck catalogue. The women were not well dressed—most of them wore no hats but instead had a shawl tied around their hair. Their stockings were cotton and their shoes were square-toed and heavy. They seemed to be working people and they looked far from prosperous. They were all very friendly and co-operative when questioned by the interrogators.

The men of the Wehrmacht—about 100 enlisted men and six officers—were something else again. They stayed to one side of the lot, watching the civilians arrive and leave disinterestedly.

The six officers stood in a tight circle and talked among themselves, paying little attention to either the soldiers or the civilians. They seldom smiled and they had an air of insolence about them. Only one looked more than 21 years of age.

Individually the prisoners and civilians were questioned by the interrogators, who made penciled notes during the interviews and then told the people where to wait to be taken elsewhere. In the case of the soldiers it was a problem of finding out their grades, units, and any other information they might have that would be of value to our commanders in the area.

The civilians, almost all of whom were Catholics, professed to have no use for Nazism or Hitler and said they were happy to be safe and free of the Gestapo terrorists who threatened them with death if they attempted to surrender.

But it was a different story with the soldiers. They were an unkempt, slovenly group of men and certainly a far cry from the superman myth of yesteryear. They all claimed that they wanted to surrender earlier but that they had been forced to continue the fight. They tried hard to be friendly, but the Yanks weren't interested.

Finally the six officers of the Wehrmacht were questioned. The ranking officer, a first lieutenant, was the battalion commander who had refused the ultimatum.

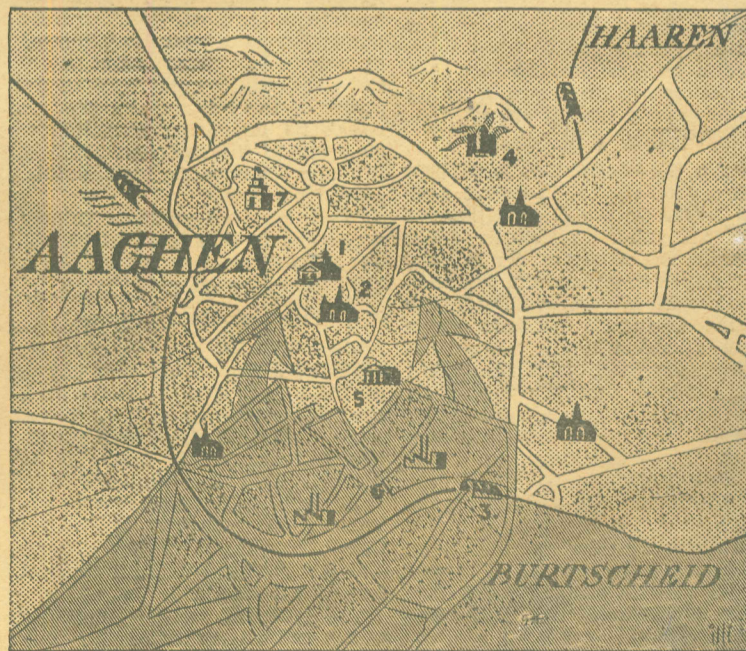
"Did you give yourself up or were you captured?" the interrogator asked.

"A German officer would never give himself up," the Nazi answered.

"You left your garrison to face the music, but you conveniently became a prisoner yourself, knowing the situation is hopeless for you, didn't you?"

"I—I can't answer that question. You may judge for yourself," the lieutenant said.

"That is the pay-off," the interrogator said disgustedly, "and they call themselves officers." It is impossible to feel sorry for men like these. Just talking to them makes you want to wash your mouth with strong soap. You can't feel sorry for them.



RIGOR MORTIS at Aachen. 1, City Hall; 2, Cathedral; 3, Prisoner of War camp; 4, Principal hotel; 5, State Theater; 6, Factory district, and 7, College.

(Continued on Back Page)