

Capturing a German Spy

John M. Gunn

On the 16th of December 1944 the Wehrmacht, acting on direct orders from Hitler and against the advice of most of his generals, launched their last major offensive of the War on the Western front, attacking a thinly defended line along the Belgian/German border. Supreme Headquarters had assigned troops there thinly, believing the combination of forested mountains, few and poor roads, and extreme weather made it an unlikely place for a rapidly failing German Army to attack.

Two days later, on the morning of the 18th, the 84th Infantry Division, the northern-most of the 61 divisions of the Army of the United States that was stretched from the Swiss border to a point Northwest of Aachen, Germany, attacked in full division strength into the “elbow” of the Siegfried Line. An attack in full division strength against a defended position is a very large and complex operation. 72 hours later we had been withdrawn from the attack, moved about 75 miles over crowded, narrow roads, most of them not paved and frozen to a depth of several inches, and were dug into defensive positions in front of the key Belgian town of Marche. Marche was a small town but located at the intersection of several highways, small by most standards but significant there in the Ardennes Forest. It was the first, interim objective of an attack aimed at Liege and ultimately to the coast, cutting off all the British and Canadian troops from a functioning port. We took the point of the German attack and turned it back.

There was no air support. It was the beginning of a severely cold winter in Europe (the following winter was worse), and the fog was so dense that visibility was limited extremely. Then on Christmas Eve the morning broke in one of those splendid winter morns, crystal clear. By mid-morning the sky was packed with aircraft, British and American bombers, supported by fighter planes and attacked by the Luftwaffe. Around 11 AM in half an hour I counted more than 3000 aircraft, observed dozens of dog fights, and saw at least a couple dozen of aircraft come down, both bombers and fighters.

In the aid station where I worked as a medical technician we had 20 or more airmen come through, some wounded, some injured when their parachute jumps didn't go quite right. Soon I was assisting my platoon commander, a young surgeon just out of medical school and in effect doing his residency in the Army, in combat, but a very fine physician. We were treating an American fighter pilot, a first lieutenant whose ankle had been injured in his parachute landing when he was shot down.

We determined quickly that his only injury was a damaged ankle and went to work. After a time I realized that Lieutenant Biasini was stalling. I didn't understand. I knew him well. We worked together every day, and that was so unlike him. After a time he caught my eye and signaled for me to step away from the make-shift examining table on which the lieutenant lay—he wanted to speak to me.

“Corporal Gunn,” he said quietly, “Without telling anyone what you are doing, go back to company headquarters. Tell the first sergeant you need to call Division headquarters. Ask them to send a counter-intelligence team down here. Tell the first sergeant then that they are coming and that when they arrive he should send them to you. Then get a carbine, put a cartridge in the chamber, and without letting this man see you take a seat behind him and don't let him move.”

(over)

I have no idea what made him suspicious. We had heard rumors of German spies, masquerading as American servicemen, parachuting down during air battles in order to get behind the American lines, but beyond that fact I had no clue.

In about twenty minutes a jeep pulled up near the tent where we were working and two men got out. I think one of them was Fritz Kraemer, an erudite Nazi refugee held both a doctorate in political science and a law degree, who had been a legal adviser to the League of Nations, and who became a famous adviser to generals and cabinet members for the next 30 years, with an office in the Pentagon, but who at this time was a private first class whom the Commanding General had found in the ranks and pulled into division headquarters. He travelled around the division giving lectures on why were fighting, the progress of the war, etc. He served also as one of the 5 members of the division's CIC team. It wasn't until years later that I realized the identity of the other one, also a private first class.

We spoke no words. I simply pointed to the man on the litter. They took up positions, one on each side, the second man taking over the interrogation. The "fighter pilot" was good. His story was plausible. He was from Chicago. He had graduated from New Trier High School. Soon thereafter he joined the Air Force, applied for flight training, and was accepted. His English was flawless. His uniform, his papers, everything about him was perfect, almost too perfect.

The interrogator was also good. Some of the first questions were simple—I think the CIC must have used a set of these routinely. Things like "Who is the left fielder for the Cubs?" Sing us your high school fight song. Who is Benny Goodman's girl singer? I could see the airman growing more and more anxious.

After a time, in a voice that changed in no way, a voice in the same pitch, same tone, same volume, same quality altogether (and in a voice that once you have heard you can never again forget), Pfc Henry Kissinger asked a question in German.

The perfect American began to answer. He caught himself quickly, but it was too late. The game was up. He jumped up and tried to run, but he could not.

That injured ankle in fact was broken. He could neither stand nor walk on it. Moreover, I was sitting about 15 feet away from him with a carbine pointed at his heart.

Kraemer and Kissinger broke out handcuffs, cuffed him, brought their jeep up and took him away.

Technically he could have been shot, legally under the rules of war, but to my knowledge the United States Armed forces shot no spies during World War II, at least not in the European theater. I am confident that Army Intelligence in rear echelon questioned him until they had all the information they thought they could get from him, then that his ankle received first class medical attention, he was fed better than he had been being fed for months, and shipped to the United States to be interned in rather comfortable conditions until the end of hostilities.

It has struck me as ironic that I think there is a real possibility this handsome and clearly intelligent young man became a prominent citizen of Chicago—"his hometown."

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Crossing the Rhine River and the End of World War II on the Western Front

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During the Second World War after the Wehrmacht's final, desperate offensive attack against the Western Allies in the Battle of the Bulge had been defeated and turned back, preparations began for a coordinated crossing of the Rhine River, the last significant line of defense for the Germans on the Western front.

These preparations were massive, the next-largest coordinated attack of the war on the Western front, next after D-Day itself--supplies and arrangements for the continuing supply of 61 US divisions, lined up from the Swiss border to the "elbow" of the Siegfried line, a little North of Cologne--If the divisions had been at full strength that would have been about one million US soldiers. My division, the 84th Infantry Division, was at the extreme left flank of US forces, with Field Marshall Montgomery's Army of British and Canadian troops on our left.

There had been 28 vehicular bridges and 22 railroad bridges across the Rhine River, but as the Allied forces approached the river the desperate Wehrmacht had systematically destroyed all but 2 of them. One of these, located at Remagen, was one of 3 railroad bridges built during World War I to facilitate movement of troops and supplies to the German army fighting near the French border. It was a "big" bridge, double decked, with defensive towers at each end, large enough to store large amounts of arms and ammunition and to house as much as an infantry battalion. The bridge had been built with the capacity to destroy it built into it, cavities in the piers into which explosives could be placed, with electrical wiring back to the control rooms.

In the spring of 1945 the bridge had been armed fully with explosives, but somehow on the morning of the 7th of March when an attempt was made to destroy it only part of the charges exploded and the bridge remained standing. Soldiers of the 9th Division, then attached to General Patton's Third Army, reached the bridge and found it intact. I have no good evidence that the following story is true, but it went up and down the front.

There was an order from Supreme Headquarters that no one was to cross the river until the coordinated crossing, scheduled for the end of the month. When the platoon commander of the first unit to reach the bridge saw it intact, however, he took his platoon across and radioed back to his company commander something like, "I am on the East bank of the Rhine River with a platoon in secure positions. What should I do?" According to legend, at least, a couple more levels of command took the troops across and sent similar messages. By the time they reached a level where anyone was willing to raise holy Hell about it an entire regiment was safely dug into defensive positions on the East bank of the Rhine River. The Germans immediately began trying to destroy the bridge with artillery shelling and aerial bombs, but it took ten days before the bridge collapsed from its successive damages, and by that time (and this is firm data now) 25,000 American troops, 800 tanks, and hundreds of artillery pieces had crossed the river.

It is well known that there was a strong rivalry between General George Patton, commanding general of the US Third Army, and General Omar Bradley, commanding general of the US First Army Group. Bradley was a quiet man, highly respected by his men (of whom I was one). Patton, of course, was at least publicly, flamboyant and feisty, often reckless in public statements. He sent a telegram to General Bradley that said something like, "On this date the US Third Army, without benefit of aerial bombardment, massive artillery barrages, . . . , crossed the Rhine River." (He also claimed to have urinated in the river as he crossed it.)

On the first of April the 84th Infantry Division crossed the Rhine as part of the coordinated crossing on the entire Western front. Beginning about midnight the sky was lit like I have never seen it before or since, with aerial bombardment and shelling by 16 battalions of artillery in our direct support, our own 4 battalions plus 12 others detached from other units—I think that was more than 1000 artillery pieces. We were subjected also to heavy incoming artillery fire. I literally read a newspaper by that light just after midnight, until I became too busy to do any reading. At dawn the first boats were launched, driven by combat engineers. The next 12 hours involved some of the most intense and bloodiest fighting by our division in the entire war, with some of the heaviest casualties, but then it became very quiet. We had a secure position on the East bank. I don't think I crossed the river until the next day; my memory is not clear, but what I do remember is that I crossed the river on a pontoon bridge the engineers had in place in a remarkably short time.

After the massive crossing of the Rhine River by the entire American and British fronts the Wehrmacht just collapsed. The Germans were beaten thoroughly, and they knew it. We (the 84th Infantry Division) went from the banks of the Rhine to the banks of the Elbe River in just 13 days, riding on various vehicles, on good roads, almost all the near-300 miles. We encountered only occasional pockets of resistance. Stop the convoy. Unload a company or a battalion, whatever it took. Knock out the pocket. Get back on our trucks, "liberated" school busses, motorcycles, almost anything with wheels and a motor, and keep moving. Whereas in the previous Fall attacking the Siegfried Line at its "elbow" a day's progress was measured in yards, or more significantly in number of pill boxes knocked out, now we advanced by more than 20 miles a day. We liberated several prisoner-of-war camps and some small concentration camps. One of the POW camps contained members of our division who had been captured during the Battle of the Bulge. I was not at that point but I was told that when the prisoners saw trucks approaching with the Railsplitter insignia on the front bumpers a shout went up that was heard all the way back to Manhattan.

My division was credited with capturing 61,000 German prisoners in those 13 days, but "capture" was hardly the word. Entire regiments were surrendering without a fight. We didn't even attempt to guard them. "Stack your arms and keep marching—that way."

[To the West] They wanted to surrender to Americans rather than be captured by Russians, and they were hungry. They expected to be fed by the American Army, and they were, as soon as they reached secure areas where their care could be organized. After we reached the Elbe at least a dozen German soldiers drowned, trying to swim across the river, just in our sector, to give themselves up to Americans.

We were on the West bank of the Elbe River, at a point Northwest of Berlin, essentially bivouacked and just waiting for the surrender, three weeks later. There was hardly any opposition remaining, only an occasional few shots from an isolated German soldier somewhere. We, the Americans, could have captured Berlin, but it had been agreed by Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, that the Elbe River would be a dividing line between Russian troops advancing from the East and Allied troops advancing from the West. The Russians wanted “the honor,” or the strategic advantage and public relations, of capturing the German capital—that “honor” cost them several thousand troops killed in action. The Elbe River then became the dividing line between East Germany and West Germany for the Cold War.

But it was not just the Wehrmacht that was collapsing.

The entire German nation was collapsing. Everyone was hungry. Everyone was cold. Everyone was dispirited, hopeless. Confused. It was a pitiful sight, a mass of pitiful sights. One felt sympathy for the people, even though they were a people who had been seeking our own violent destruction for many months preceding.

On the Western front the War in Europe ended like the world in T. S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*, “not with a bang but with a whimper.”

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