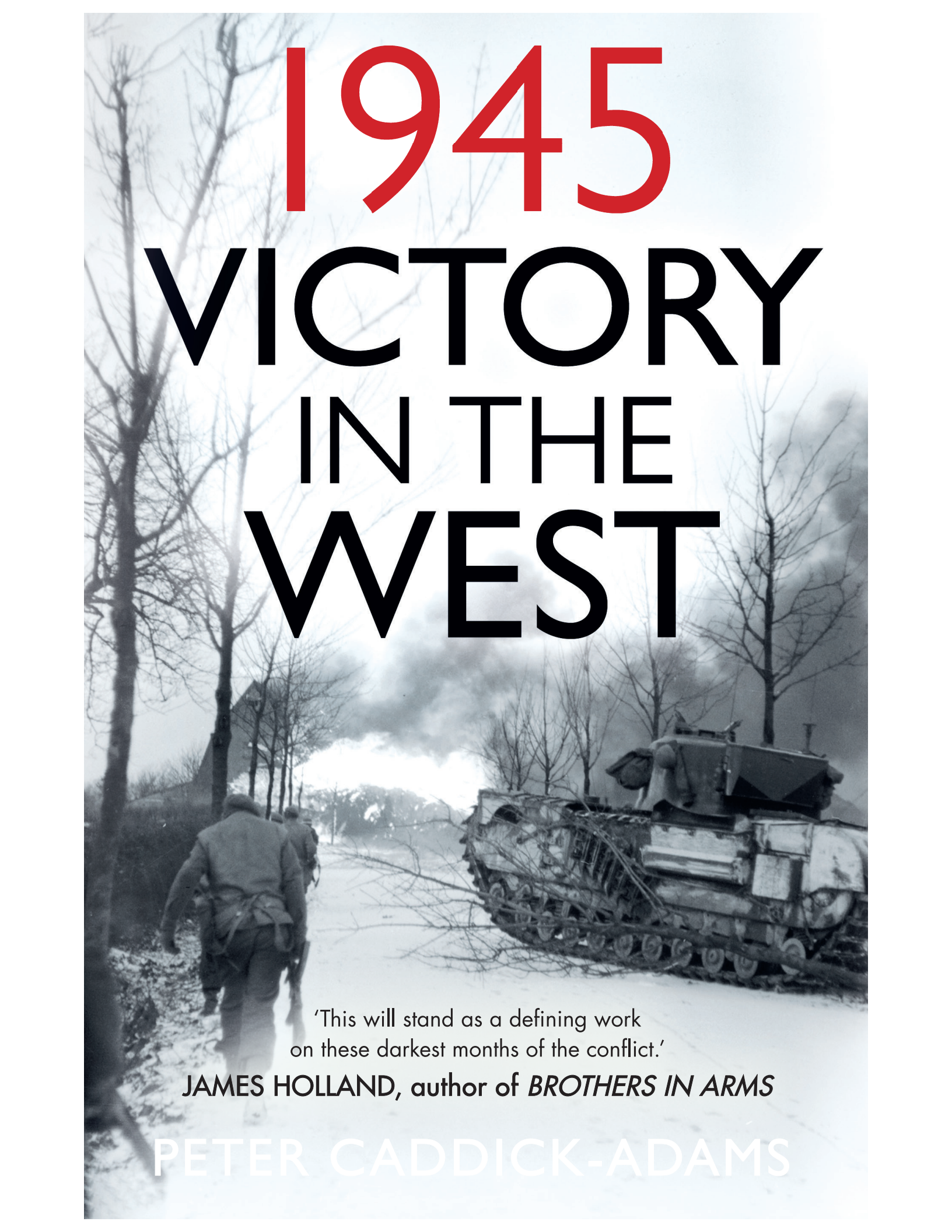




1945 VICTORY IN THE WEST

'This will stand as a defining work
on these darkest months of the conflict.'

JAMES HOLLAND, author of *BROTHERS IN ARMS*

PETER CADDICK-ADAMS

1945 VICTORY IN THE WEST

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1945 VICTORY IN THE WEST

PETER CADDICK-ADAMS

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To A.L. LeQuesne
who taught me history
at Shrewsbury School (1974–1978)
&
Paul Beaver and Cate Pye
who have kindly accommodated, wined and dined
the wandering historian
during his many travels

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Military Tool Kit And Glossary

Military folk worldwide, like many other communities, tend to adopt their own abbreviations, which they forget puzzle those outside. Military algebra, by which I mean the designation of divisions, brigades, regiments, battalions and so on, is particularly vexing to the uninitiated, hence this briefest of tool kits for your enlightenment.

Units of all the nations covered here followed much the same approach, in that their basic formation was the division. By 1945 German divisions had often shrunk to perhaps 10,000 and sometimes much less. Allied ones tended to vary between 12,000 and 15,000 men, depending on purpose (airborne, armoured or infantry). Divisions (usually commanded by a Major General, Generalmajor or Generalleutnant) were self-supporting, with their own reconnaissance, artillery, anti-aircraft and anti-tank, engineers, signals, machine-gun, supply, transport, ordnance (for repair), workshop (for vehicles), medical and military police elements.

All divisions were numbered, and often had a secondary title, which indicated where they recruited, for example 15th Scottish, 43rd Wessex and 53rd Welsh under Montgomery; or the 36th Texas and 42nd Rainbow (the latter drawing recruits from across the United States). Two divisions or more – often many more – made an army corps. Allied corps possessed their own heavy artillery (an AGRA, Army Group Royal Artillery in the Anglo-Canadian forces), anti-aircraft, armoured and reconnaissance units, a Mechanized Cavalry Group (in US corps), plus other assets.

Allied infantry divisions were broken down into three infantry brigades (regiments in US terminology), each of around 3,000 personnel, commanded by a Colonel or Brigadier (Brigadier General, or Général de Brigade). The Cottonbalers was the unofficial title of a US Army regiment, more formally titled the 7th Infantry. A brigade, in turn, comprised three battalions, led by lieutenant colonels, which remain the basic building blocks of military formations. Tank battalions (sometimes called armoured regiments) fielded around sixty tanks, infantry battalions contained 600–1,000 riflemen, whilst artillery battalions (or regiments) comprised anything from nine to forty-eight guns, depending on type and calibre. Each generally included three infantry companies, armoured squadrons or artillery batteries, plus headquarters elements.

American and British airborne forces, with minimal transport, who deployed into battle by glider and parachute, fielded fewer numbers, as did British Commandos. The

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latter, all numbered, were split between the Navy (Royal Marine Commandos) and Army, each unit being the equivalent of a highly-trained, well-armed, but small battalion. Their US equivalents are Ranger battalions.

American battalions and regiments were numbered, while the Anglo-Canadians retained a variety of exotic and confusing titles for their battalions, evoking nineteenth-century antecedents. These included the 13th/18th Hussars, 22nd Dragoons and Staffordshire Yeomanry (all British tank battalions); 3rd Scots Guards (also a tank battalion); 13th Royal Horse Artillery (an artillery battalion); the Algonquin Regiment and the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (both Canadian infantry battalions, the latter fielding machine-guns); and 4th/5th Royal Scots Fusiliers, 5th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and (bizarrely) the 12th King's Royal Rifle Corps (all British battalions).

Now, for some TLAs (Three Letter Abbreviations) and others, which have crept past the censors and into this volume.

30 Assault Unit	British commando unit, raised by Ian Fleming, tasked to capture German codes, technical documents, equipment and personnel
AEF	American Expeditionary Force, which fought in World War One
AFS	American Field Service; an all-volunteer US force of ambulance drivers
AGRA	Army Group Royal Artillery; corps-level medium and heavy artillery units
AGRE	Army Group Royal Engineers; fielded troops for corps and army activities
AVRE	Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers, based on the 40-ton Churchill tank
Army Group 'B'	FM Model's central German force; 5th Panzer, 7th and 15th Armies
Army Group 'G'	SS Gen. Hausser's force defending southern Germany; 1st and 19th Armies
Army Group 'H'	Defended Holland with 1st Parachute and 25th Armies under Blaskowitz
BAR	Browning Automatic Rifle; US Army squad light machine-gun, 20-round magazine, 0.30-06-inch calibre
<i>Bagrati</i>	Soviet operation, 23 June 1944, to compliment D-Day in Normandy
BLA	British Liberation Army
<i>Blackcock</i>	British XII Corps operation to clear Roermond Triangle, 13-27 January 1945
<i>Blockbuster</i>	Canadian operation to clear Rhineland, 26 February to 3 March 1945
Blue and White Devils	Nickname for 3rd US Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. John W. O'Daniel)

MILITARY TOOL KIT AND GLOSSARY

Bren Carrier	British-Canadian 3-ton armed and armoured, tracked carrier for moving combat supplies and towing equipment
Bren gun	British-Czech .303-inch calibre, 30-round, magazine-fed, light machine-gun
Bronze Star	US decoration for achievement or bravery in a combat zone
C-rations	(US) canned combat rations, also gum, matches, cigarettes, toilet paper
CEF	(French) Corps Expéditionnaire Français, under Général Alphonse Juin
CIC	US Counter Intelligence Corps; provided tactical intelligence from captured documents, interrogations, or civilian sources
CIGS	British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, FM Sir Alan Brooke
Combat Command	US all-arms combat grouping in armoured divisions, designated 'A', 'B' and 'R'
Cottonbalers	(US) nickname for 7th US Infantry Regiment (Col. John A. Heintges)
Crocodile	Churchill flame-throwing tank, towed armoured trailer of fuel; range 100yds
Curtiss C-46	(US) twin-engined transport, forty troops, aka 'Commando'
DD tank	Duplex Drive Sherman tank, able to float using canvas side screens
DESt	Deutsche Erd und Steinwerke, SS-run German Earth & Stone Works
Deutsche Reichsbahn	German railways
Division-Leclerc	(French) 2nd Armoured Division, led by Général Philippe Leclerc
Douglas C-47	(US) twin-engined transport, twenty-eight troops, aka 'Dakota' or 'Skytrain'
Douglas C-54	(US) four-engined, long-range transport, fifty troops, aka 'Skymaster'
<i>Dragoon</i>	Anglo-US amphibious assault of southern France, 15 August 1944
ETO	(US) European Theater of Operations
Fallschirmjäger	(German) parachute troops, forces
<i>Festung</i>	(German) fortress; if so designated, area obliged to fight to the last bullet
Flakhelfer	German teenaged anti-aircraft assistant personnel; females designated as Flakhelferinnen
<i>Flashpoint</i>	Ninth US Army operation to cross the Rhine, 24 March 1945
FOO	Forward Observation Officer (for artillery)
Franconia	Old Germanic region centred on northern Bavaria and eastern Württemberg

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G-1	(SHAEF/US, later NATO) designation for administration and personnel issues
G-2	(SHAEF/US) personnel and departments responsible for intelligence matters
G-3	(SHAEF/US) personnel responsible for operations, plans and training
G-4	(SHAEF/US) personnel and departments devoted to supply issues
G-5	(SHAEF/US) personnel and departments responsible for civil-military matters
Gauleiter	Powerful regional political leader, senior to Kreisleiter and Ortsgruppenleiter
Gebirgsjäger	German mountain troops or formations
<i>Goldflake/Penknife</i>	Anglo-Canadian operation to bring troops from Italy to North West Europe
<i>Grenade</i>	US Ninth Army operation to clear Rhineland, 23 February to 10 March 1945
Hauptbahnhof	Main railway station
<i>Herbstnebel</i>	German 'Autumn Mist' Ardennes attack, beginning on 16 December 1944
Hitlerjugend	Hitler Youth movement for males aged 14–18; heavily militarised
Jagdpanther	German turretless, tracked vehicle, mounting 88mm gun on Panther chassis
Jagdpanzer IV	German turretless, tracked vehicle with 75mm gun on Panzer IV chassis
<i>Kaiserreich</i>	German Empire of 1871–1918 (Second Reich); preceded by the Holy Roman Empire of 800–1806, first established by Charlemagne (First Reich)
Kampfgruppe	German temporary all-arms combat grouping
Kangaroo	Armoured personnel carrier, based on M7 Priest or Canadian Ram tank
King Tiger	German 70-ton heavy tank, mounting 88mm gun, armour up to 7.5 inches
K-rations	US emergency rations, included chocolate, crackers, powdered drinks
LCM	Landing Craft Mechanised, capable of carrying a tank, 50-foot long
LCVP	(US) Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel; the 36-foot-long Higgins Boat
<i>Lumberjack</i>	US First Army operation to clear west of Rhine, 1 to 25 March 1945
LVT	Armoured tracked amphibious carrier, nicknamed 'Buffalo' or 'Alligator'
M4	Sherman: US-designed 32- to 42-ton medium tank in general Allied service
M5	Stuart: US light tank, with 37mm gun in revolving turret

MILITARY TOOL KIT AND GLOSSARY

M7	Priest: US tracked, armoured motor gun carriage with 105mm howitzer
M8	US 6-wheeled armoured car with 37mm gun in revolving turret
M10	US tank destroyer on Sherman chassis, 3-inch gun in revolving turret
M26	Pershing: 46-ton heavy US tank with 90mm gun, introduced early 1945
M29	Weasel: US rubber-tracked, amphibious load carrier, with a crew of four
M36	US tank destroyer; development of M10, with 90mm gun
Manhattan Project	US operation to develop atomic weapons
<i>Market Garden</i>	Anglo-American airborne and ground operation, Holland, 17 to 25 September 1944
Marne Division	US 3rd Infantry Division, named 'Rock of the Marne' from service in 1918
Monty's Moonlight	Reflecting searchlights on low clouds, creating night-time illumination
Nashorn	German self-propelled 88mm anti-tank gun on Panzer IV chassis
Nebelwerfer	German multi-barrelled mortar tubes, wheeled or towed into position
<i>Nordwind</i>	'North Wind' German attack against US Seventh Army, 1 to 25 January 1945
Oberbürgermeister	(German) lord mayor, senior to Bürgermeister (mayor)
Oberrhein	Himmler's Upper Rhine army group, November 1944–January 1945
Oflag	Abbr. of 'Offizierslager', (German) prison camp for officers
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, the German Armed Forces High Command headquarters near Berlin
<i>Overlord</i>	Anglo-American-Canadian invasion of France, from D-Day, 6 June 1944
P-47	US single-seat ground attack fighter, aka 'Thunderbolt'
P-51	US long-range, single-seat fighter, aka 'Mustang'
Panzerfaust	German shoulder-launched, single-shot anti-tank weapon
Panzergrenadier	German armoured infantry personnel or units
Panzerjäger	German anti-tank units, weapons or personnel
Panzerschreck	German stove-pipe-like two-man anti-tank weapon, modelled on bazooka
<i>Paperclip</i>	US operation to remove to America German scientists, engineers and technicians from post-war Soviet influence, 1945
PFC	(US) Private First Class, rank above private, for military service of one year
Phantom	British liaison unit of teams with special communications; equivalent of US Signal Information and Monitoring (SIAM) Companies

1945: VICTORY IN THE WEST

PIAT	Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank (Anglo-Canadian bazooka)
<i>Plunder</i>	British-Canadian Rhine crossing operation, 23 to 24 March 1945
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, modern term for shell shock (WW1), or battle exhaustion (WW2)
PX	(US) Post Exchange, front-line store, where troops could buy non-issue items
RAD	Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service), 6-months' compulsory service for those aged 18–25, before joining the Wehrmacht or SS
Ram	Canadian training tank; turretless, converted into Kangaroo armoured personnel carrier for 10-man infantry section or squad
Rathaus	(German) city or town hall
Repple Depple	(US slang) Replacement Depot, where troops are processed before combat
SAS	(British) Special Air Service; air-dropped or Jeep-equipped special forces operating forward of Allied troops
SCAEF	Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight David Eisenhower
Schmeisser	German MP-40 machine-pistol, 9mm calibre, 32-round magazine
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, forward base in Reims
Silver Star	US award for bravery in battle from 1942, above Bronze Star
Sten	British-Canadian submachine-gun, 9mm calibre, 32-round magazine
Sturmgeschütze	German tracked, turretless vehicle with 75mm gun, abbreviated to StuG
T-4	German programme to murder individuals designated 'of no use to the Reich', disguised as euthanasia
TAC	Tactical Command Post/HQ
Task Force	US all-arms grouping, usually two per armoured combat command
T-Force	Anglo-US military mission in 1945 to secure German scientific and industrial technology before it could be destroyed or fall into Russian hands
<i>Torchlight</i>	British XII Corps attack on Xanten, 24 March 1945
<i>Turnscrew</i>	Anglo-Canadian XXX Corps assault on Rees, 23 March 1945
Typhoon	RAF ground attack fighter, 4x 20mm cannon, 8x rockets plus 2x bombs
Ultra	Strategic intelligence gleaned from cryptoanalysis of German radio signals
V-1	<i>Vergeltungswaffe</i> (vengeance weapon) flying bomb
V-2	German rocket, assembled by slave labour in underground facilities

MILITARY TOOL KIT AND GLOSSARY

<i>Varsity</i>	Anglo-American airborne operation beyond Rhine, 24 March 1945
<i>Veritable</i>	Anglo-Canadian operation to clear Rhineland, 8 February to 11 March 1945
Volksgrenadier	German infantry soldier or formation, designated from autumn 1944
Volkssturm	German armed civilian militia, established in battalions from 25 September 1944
wald	German for 'wood' or 'forest', hence Hochwald, Pfälzerwald, Reichswald, Schwarzwald
<i>Westwall</i>	German western frontier defences, aka the Siegfried Line
<i>Widgeon</i>	British Commando attack on Wesel, 23 March 1945

Order of Battle, Allied Forces Western Europe, at the Time of the *Plunder*/ *Varsity* Rhine Crossings, 24 March 1945

Note: this is a snapshot of Eisenhower's ninety-one full-strength divisions and other forces on a significant day. No more divisions arrived after this date. Allied divisions changed between corps frequently, and several senior commanders changed. John Millikin had just been replaced at III US Corps on 17 March by James A. Van Fleet. On 23 March, Dan Spry had been replaced by Ralph Keefler as commander of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division. On 24 March, Tom Rennie (51st Highland Division, Second British Army) was killed in action and replaced by Gordon MacMillan. Maurice Rose (3rd US Armored Division) was killed on 30 March and replaced by his deputy, Doyle Hickey; on 4 April, Simpson's Ninth US Army would revert from Montgomery's control to Bradley's Twelfth US Army Group. On 22 April, Van Fleet's III US Corps would be switched from First to Third US Army in exchange for VIII US Corps joining First Army. On 17 April, John Wogan (13th US Armored Division) was wounded and replaced by John Millikin, recently sacked from III Corps. On 20 April, Manton Eddy at XII US Corps was replaced for medical reasons by Leroy Irwin. Matthew Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps was moved frequently between armies in the last month. US V Corps joined Patton's Third Army from Hodge's First at the beginning of May 1945.

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower

FIRST ALLIED AIRBORNE ARMY (Lt Gen. Lewis H. Brereton)

XVIII US Airborne Corps (Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway)
13th US Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. Elbridge G. Chapman Jr)

1945: VICTORY IN THE WEST

515th and 517th Parachute Infantry and 326th Glider Infantry Regiments
17th US Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. William M. Miley)
507th and 513rd Parachute Infantry and 193rd Glider Infantry Regiments
82nd 'All American' Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. James M. Gavin)
504th and 505th Parachute Infantry, 325th Glider Infantry Regiments
101st 'Screaming Eagles' US Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor)
502nd and 506th Parachute Infantry, 327th Glider Infantry

I British Airborne Corps (Lt Gen. Sir Richard Gale)

1st British Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. Robert E. 'Roy' Urquhart)
1st Parachute Brigade, 1st Airlanding Brigade
6th British Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. Eric Bols)
3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades, 6th Airlanding Brigade
1st and 2nd (UK), 3rd and 4th (French) and 5th (Belgian)
Special Air Service (SAS) units
1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade (Lt. Col. Stanislaw Jachnik)
(3 parachute battalions; brigade later joined
1st Polish Armoured Division)

TWENTY FIRST ARMY GROUP

Field Marshal Sir L. Bernard Montgomery

2nd Tactical Air Force, RAF (Air Marshal Sir Arthur 'Maori' Coningham)
No. 2 Group (medium bombers), No. 83 Group (supported British),
No. 84 Group (supported Canadians),
No. 85 Group (night fighters/light bombers)

FIRST CANADIAN ARMY (Gen. H.D.G. 'Harry' Crerar)

2nd Canadian Independent Armoured Brigade (Brig. G.W. Robinson)
(1st Canadian Hussars, Fort Garry Horse, Sherbrook Fusiliers)
4th Commando Brigade (Brig. Bernard W. 'Jumbo' Leicester)
(41, 46, 47 and 48 RM Commandos)
1st and 2nd Canadian Army Groups Royal Artillery

I British Corps (Sir John T. Crocker)

(lines of communication and military government duties)
49th West Riding Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Stuart B. Rawlins,
later to I Canadian Corps), 56th, 146th and 147th Infantry Brigades
1st Polish Armoured Division (Maj. Gen. Stanisław Maczek,
later to II Canadian Corps): 10th Polish Armoured Brigade,
3rd Infantry Brigades

ORDER OF BATTLE

I Canadian Corps (Lt Gen. Charles Foulkes)

Arriving from Italy, 1st Canadian Infantry Division
(Maj. Gen. Harry W. Foster) 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades
Arriving from Italy, 5th Canadian Armoured Division
(Maj. Gen. Bert H. Hoffmeister)
5th Canadian Armoured Brigade, 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade
Arriving from Italy, 1st Canadian independent Armoured Brigade
(Brig. William C. Murphy: Ontario, Three Rivers and Calgary Regiments)

SECOND BRITISH ARMY (Gen. Sir Miles C. ‘Bimbo’ Dempsey)

30th Armoured Brigade (Brig. Nigel W. Duncan: Flail Tanks)
31st Armoured Brigade (Brig. Gordon S. Knight:
Crocodiles, LVTs and Kangaroos)
33rd Armoured Brigade (Brig. Henry B. Scott: DD tanks and LVTs)
1st Assault Brigade, Royal Engineers (Brig. Philip St. B Sydenham:
AVREs and LVTs)

II Canadian Corps (Lt Gen. Guy G. Simonds, under command)

4th Canadian Armoured Division (Maj. Gen. Chris Vokes)
4th Canadian Armoured Brigade, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade
2nd Canadian Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. A. Bruce Matthews)
4th, 5th and 6th Canadian Infantry Brigades

VIII British Corps (Lt Gen. Evelyn H. ‘Bubbles’ Barker)

11th Armoured Division (Maj. Gen. G.P.B. ‘Pip’ Roberts)
29th Armoured Brigade, 159th Infantry Brigade
6th Guards Independent Tank Brigade (Brig. Walter D.C. Greenacre)
(4th Coldstream Guards, 4th Grenadier Guards, 3rd Scots Guards)
Arriving from Italy, 5th British Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Richard A. Hull)
13th, 15th and 17th Infantry Brigades

XII British Corps (Lt Gen. Sir Neil Ritchie)

7th Armoured Division (Maj. Gen. Lewis O. Lyne)
22nd Armoured Brigade, 131st Infantry Brigade
15th Scottish Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Colin M. ‘Tiny’ Barber)
44th and 46th Lowland Brigades, 227th Highland Brigade
52nd Lowland Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. E Hakewill-Smith)
156th, 157th, 158th Infantry Brigades
53rd Welsh Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Robert K. ‘Bobbie’ Ross)
71st, 158th and 160th Infantry Brigades

1945: VICTORY IN THE WEST

1st Commando Brigade (Brig. Derek Mills-Roberts)
(3 and 6 Army Commandos, 46 and 45 RM Commandos)
4th Independent Armoured Brigade (Brig. R. Michael P. Carver)
(Sharpshooters Yeomanry, Royal Scots Greys, 44th Royal Tank Regiment plus
2nd Kings Royal Rifle Corps, infantry battalion)
34th Independent Tank Brigade (Brig. William S. Clarke)
(107th and 147th Royal Armoured Corps, 7th and 9th Royal Tank Regiment)
3rd, 8th and 9th Army Groups Royal Artillery

XXX British Corps (Lt Gen. Sir Brian G. 'Jorrocks' Horrocks)

Guard Armoured Division (Maj. Gen. Alan H.S. Adair)
5th Guards Armoured Brigade, 32nd Guards Brigade
3rd Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Lashmer G. 'Bolo' Whistler)
8th, 9th, 185th Infantry Brigades
3rd Canadian Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Ralph H. Keefer,
later to II Canadian Corps)
7th, 8th and 9th Canadian Infantry Brigades
43rd Wessex Division (Maj. Gen. G. Ivor Thomas)
129th, 130th, 214th Infantry Brigades
51st Highland Division (Maj. Gen. T.G. Rennie,
killed in action 24 March, then Maj. Gen. G.H.A. MacMillan)
152nd, 153rd and 154th Infantry Brigades
4th and 5th Army Groups Royal Artillery
8th Independent Armoured Brigade (Brig. Gen. Erroll Prior Palmer)
(Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards,
13th/18th Hussars
12th King's Royal Rifle Corps, infantry battalion)

NINTH US ARMY (Lt Gen. William H. Simpson)

XXIX Tactical Air Command (Brig. Gen. Richard E. Nugent)

XIII US Corps (Maj. Gen. Alvan C. Gillem)

11th Mechanized Cavalry Group
5th 'Victory' Armored Division (Maj. Gen. Lunsford E. Oliver)
10th, 34th and 81st Tank, and 15th, 46th and 47th Armored Infantry Battalions
84th 'Lincoln' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Alexander R. Bolling)
333rd, 334th and 335th Infantry Regiments, 771st Tank Battalion
95th 'Victory' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Harry L. Twaddle)
377th, 378th and 379th Infantry Regiments, 709th Tank Battalion
102nd 'Ozark' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Frank A. Keating)

ORDER OF BATTLE

405th, 406th and 407th Infantry Regiments, 709th Tank Battalion

XVI US Corps (Maj. Gen. John B. Anderson)

15th Mechanized Cavalry Group

8th 'Thundering Herd' Armored Division (Brig. Gen. John M. Devine)

18th, 36th and 80th Tank, and 7th, 49th and 58th Armored Infantry Battalions

30th Infantry 'Old Hickory' Division (Maj. Gen. Leland S. Hobbs)

117th, 119th and 120th Infantry Regiments, 743rd Tank Battalion

35th Infantry 'Santa Fe' Division (Maj. Gen. Paul W. Baade)

134th, 137th and 320th Infantry Regiments, 784th Tank Battalion

75th Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Ray E. Porter)

289th, 290th and 291st Infantry Regiments, 701st Tank Battalion

79th 'Cross of Lorraine' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Ira T. Wyche)

313th, 314th and 315th Infantry Regiments, 717th Tank Battalion

XIX US Corps (Raymond S. McLain)

113th Mechanized Cavalry Group

2nd 'Hell on Wheels' Armored Division (Brig. Gen. Isaac D. White)

66th and 67th Armored Regiments, 41st Armored Infantry Regiment

29th 'Blue and Gray' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Charles H. Gerhardt)

115th, 116th and 175th Infantry Regiments, 747th Tank Battalion

83rd 'Thunderbolt' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Robert C. Macon)

329th, 330th and 331st Infantry Regiments, 736th Tank Battalion

TWELFTH US ARMY GROUP

Gen. Omar N. Bradley

FIRST US ARMY (Lt Gen. Courtney H. Hodges)

IX Tactical Air Command (Maj. Gen. Elwood R. 'Pete' Quesada)

III US Corps (Maj. Gen. James A. Van Fleet)

14th Mechanized Cavalry Group

7th 'Lucky Seventh' Armored Division (Maj. Gen. Robert W Hasbrouck)

17th, 31st and 40th Tank and 23rd, 38th and 48th

Armored Infantry Battalions

9th 'Old Reliables' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Louis A. Craig)

39th, 47th and 60th Infantry Regiments, 746th Tank Battalion

99th 'Checkerboard' Infantry (Maj. Gen. Walter E. Lauer)

393rd, 394th and 395th Infantry Regiments, 786th Tank Battalion

V US Corps (Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Huebner)

102nd Mechanized Cavalry Group

1945: VICTORY IN THE WEST

9th Armored Division (Maj. Gen. John W. Leonard)
2nd, 14th and 19th Tank Battalions; 27th, 52nd and 60th
Armored Infantry Battalions

2nd 'Indianhead' Infantry Division (Walter M. Robertson)
9th, 23rd and 38th Infantry Regiments, 741st Tank Battalion
28th 'Keystone' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Norman D. Cota)
109th, 110th and 112th Infantry Regiments, 777th Tank Battalion
69th Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Emil F. Reinhardt)
271st, 272nd and 273rd Infantry Regiments, 777th Tank Battalion

VII US Corps (Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins)

4th Mechanized Cavalry Group
3rd Armored 'Spearhead' Division (Maj. Gen. Maurice Rose)
32nd and 33rd Armored Regiments, 36th Armored Infantry Regiment
1st 'Red One' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Clift Andrus)
16th, 18th and 26th Infantry Regiments, 745th Tank Battalion
8th 'Arrow/Pathfinder' Infantry Division (Brig. Gen. Bryant E. Moore)
13th, 28th and 121st Infantry Regiments
78th 'Lightning' Infantry (Edwin P. Parker Jr)
309th, 310th and 311th Infantry Regiments, 774th Tank Battalion
86th 'Blackhawk' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Harris M. Melasky)
341st, 342nd and 343rd Infantry Regiments
104th 'Timberwolf' Infantry Division (Terry de la Mesa Allen)
413th, 414th and 415th Infantry Regiments, 750th Tank Battalion

THIRD US ARMY (Lt Gen. George S. Patton Jr)

XIX Tactical Air Command (Maj. Gen. O.P. Weyland)
6th Mechanized Cavalry Group (Army reporting and liaison)

VIII US Corps (Maj. Gen. Troy H. Middleton)

11th Mechanized Cavalry Group
87th 'Golden Acorn' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Frank L. Cullin, Jr)
345th, 346th and 347th Infantry Regiments, 735th Tank Battalion
89th 'Rolling W' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Thomas D. Finley)
353rd, 354th and 355th Infantry Regiments, 748th Tank Battalion

XII US Corps (Maj. Gen. Manton S. Eddy)

2nd 'Dragoons' Mechanized Cavalry Group
4th Armored Division (Brig. Gen. William M. Hoge)
8th, 35th and 37th Tank, 10th, 51st and 53rd Armored Infantry Battalions
6th 'Super Sixth' Armored (Maj. Gen. Robert Grow)

ORDER OF BATTLE

15th, 68th and 69th Tank, and 9th, 44th and 50th Armored Infantry Battalions
5th 'Red Diamond' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. S. Leroy Irwin)
2nd, 10th and 11th Infantry Regiments
26th 'Yankee' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Willard S. Paul)
101st, 104th and 328th Infantry Regiments, 778th Tank Battalion
76th 'Onaway' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. William R. Schmidt)
304th, 385th and 417th Infantry Regiments
90th 'Tough Ombres' Infantry Division (Brig. Gen. Herbert L. Earnest)
357th, 358th and 359th Infantry Regiments

XX US Corps (Maj. Gen. Walton H. Walker)
16th Mechanized Cavalry Group
3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group (later SHAEF reserve)
11th 'Thunderbolt' Armored Division (Brig. Gen. Holmes E. Dager)
22nd, 41st and 42nd Tank, and 21st, 55th and 63rd Armored Infantry Battalions
65th Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Stanley E. Reinhart)
259th, 260th and 261st Infantry Regiments, 748th Tank Battalion
80th 'Blue Ridge' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Horace L. McBride)
317th, 318th and 319th Infantry Regiments, 702nd Tank Battalion
94th Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Harry J. Malony)
301st, 302nd and 376th Infantry Regiments, 778th Tank Battalion

SIXTH US ARMY GROUP

Gen. Jacob L. Devers

SEVENTH US ARMY (Lt Gen. Alexander 'Sandy' M. Patch)
XII Tactical Air Command (Brig. Gen. Glenn O. Barcus)
Reserve: 13th US Armored Division (Maj. Gen. John B. Wogan)
24th, 45th and 46th Tank, and 16th, 59th and 67th
Armored Infantry Battalions

VI US Corps (Maj. Gen. Edward H. Brooks)
117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron
14th Armored Division (Maj. Gen. Albert C. Smith)
25th, 47th and 48th Tank, and 19th, 62nd and 68th
Armored Infantry Battalions
4th 'Ivy' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Harold W. Blakeley)
8th, 12th and 22nd Infantry Regiments, 70th Tank Battalion
42nd 'Rainbow' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Harry J. Collins)
222nd, 232nd and 242nd Infantry Regiments, 48th Tank Battalion
36th Texas Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. John E. Dahlquist)

1945: VICTORY IN THE WEST

141st, 142nd and 143rd Infantry Regiments, 753rd Tank Battalion
103rd 'Cactus' Division (Maj. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe)
409th, 410th and 411th Infantry Regiments, 761st Tank Battalion

XV US Corps (Maj. Gen. Wade H. Haislip)

106th Mechanized Cavalry Group
2nd French Armoured Division (Général de Division Philippe Leclerc)
12th Chasseurs d'Afrique, 12th Cuirassiers, 501st Régiment de Chars
(tank battalions)
Régiment de Marche du Tchad (3 battalions mechanised infantry)
3rd 'Marne' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. John W. O'Daniel)
7th ('Cottonbalers'), 15th and 30th Infantry Regiments
44th Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. William F. Dean)
71st, 114th and 324th Infantry Regiments
45th 'Thunderbird' Division (Maj. Gen. Robert T. Frederick)
157th, 179th and 180th Infantry Regiments, 191st Tank Battalion
63rd 'Blood and Fire' Division (Maj. Gen. Louis E. Hibbs)
253rd, 254th and 255th Infantry Regiments, 740th Tank Battalion

XXI US Corps (Maj. Gen. Frank W. Milburn)

101st Mechanized Cavalry Group
10th 'Tigers' Armored Division (Maj. Gen. William H. H. Morris, Jr)
3rd, 11th and 21st Tank, 20th, 54th and 61st Armored Infantry Battalions
12th 'Hellcats' Armored Division (Maj. Gen. Roderick R. Allen)
3rd, 11th and 21st Tank, and 20th, 54th and 61st Armored Infantry Battalions
70th 'Trailblazers' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Allison J. Barnett)
274th, 275th and 276th Infantry Regiments, 772nd Tank Battalion
71st Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Willard G. Wyman)
5th, 14th and 66th Infantry Regiments, 761st Tank Battalion
100th 'Century' Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Withers A. Burrese)
397th, 398th and 399th Infantry Regiments, 781st Tank Battalion

FIRST FRENCH ARMY (Général Jean De Lattre De Tassigny)

I French Corps (Général de corps d'armée Émile A. Béthouart)

1st French Armored Division (Général de Brigade Aime Sudre)
2nd Moroccan Division (Général de Division Maurice Carpentier)
4th Moroccan Mountain Division (Général de Division René de Hasdin)
9th Colonial Infantry Division (Général de Brigade Jean-Étienne Valluy)
10th French Infantry Division (Général de Brigade Pierre Billotte)

II French Corps (Général de corps d'armée Joseph de Goislard de Monsabert)

5th Armored Division (Général de Brigade Guy Schlessler)

ORDER OF BATTLE

French 1st Motorised Infantry Division (Général de Division Pierre Garbay)

French 1st Infantry Division (Général de Brigade Jean Callies)

French 3rd Algerian Infantry Division

(Général de Division Augustin Guillaume)

French 14th Infantry Division (Général de Brigade Raoul)

Detachment Army of the Alps (Général de corps d'armée Paul Doyen)

French 27th Infantry Division (Col. Jean Valette d'Osia)

SHAEF RESERVE

FIFTEENTH US ARMY (Lt Gen. Leonard T. Gerow)

(Inward processing, training of troops)

XXII US Corps (Maj. Gen. Ernest N. Harmon)

16th US Armored Division (Brig. Gen. John L. Pierce)

Arrived ETO 11 February 1945

5th, 16th and 26th Tank, and 18th, 64th and 69th Armored Infantry Battalions

20th US Armored Division (Maj. Gen. Orlando Ward)

Arrived ETO 21 February 1945

9th, 20th and 27th Tank, and 8th, 65th and 70th Armored Infantry Battalions

66th Infantry Division (Maj. Gen. Herman F. Kramer)

262nd, 263rd and 264th Infantry Regiments (training French Army)

97th Infantry Division (Brig. Gen. Milton B. Halsey)

Arrived ETO 3 March 1945

303rd, 386th and 387th Infantry Regiments

106th 'Golden Lions' Division (Maj. Gen. Donald A. Stroh)

422nd, 423rd and 424th Infantry Regiments

Prologue

‘You are in enemy country! These people are not our allies or our friends. You must remain an alert soldier. Protect yourself at all times.’

*US Army Pocket Guide to Germany, 1944*¹

‘We were over Germany,’ wrote Martha Gellhorn, ‘and a blacker, less inviting piece of land I never saw.’² In early 1945 General Dwight D. Eisenhower had assembled seven Allied armies, totalling 4 million men and women, to invade the Western Reich. This is the story of the last hundred days of their war.

Let us begin on one of them, 14 March 1945. The weather still hovered between the seasons. The raw edge of winter had gone, but the penetrating damp had not. ‘Warm days and cold nights,’ noted one GI. Captain Earl E. Swanson’s diary told him it was a Wednesday – not that days mattered in combat. He lifted his binoculars and surveyed the terrain ahead. Standing in France, he looked over to the village in Germany. Across the morass of rain-soaked soil, his eyes focused first on Utweiler. Then five miles beyond, where he knew lay the true ramparts of the Reich. Called the *Westwall* by the natives, it was marked ‘Siegfried Line’ on Swanson’s map. Built before the war, its five belts of anti-tank obstacles, barbed wire, ditches, minefields, machine-gun nests and bunkers, thousands of yards deep, hugged the contours and awaited his men.

In these lonely southern borderlands of France and Germany there was no frontier fence or wall. Just marker stones in the corners of fields, observed only by generations of farmers, for few travelled this

way. In 1769, Marshal Ney, Napoleon's finest warrior, was born in the nearby fortress town of Saarlouis and grew up speaking both German and French, which reflected the frequent changes of nationality in the region. In Hitler's day, Ney's hometown had been renamed Saarlautern. Even here, in this tiny place, the shadow of past conflicts loomed large. Always an area of Franco-German tension, it had lost eight of its men-folk in the Great War, including three pairs of brothers.³ History mattered not to Swanson, but he had read the Seventh Army assessment that 'the people and their cows live together in thick-walled buildings and manure is piled neatly in the streets.'⁴ He knew the French Army had occupied the area for a few weeks in September 1939, when the German population had been evacuated. Swanson expected the locals to have again been removed, including prisoners forced to work on the surrounding farms. His job was to clear these outposts.

Aerial photos picked out the low rolling ridgelines topped with trees that ringed the village. His map indicated Utweiler lay just three hundred yards inside the Reich. A 700-year-old hamlet, one of the smallest settlements in the region, he could see it comprised no more than a couple of farms, a few dozen houses and a tiny church grouped around a crossroads.⁵ Instinct had told his superiors this collection of stone and wood structures, a symbolic gateway into Germany, would be symbolically defended. Swanson viewed the glossy black-and-white air imagery, taken days earlier. They highlighted machine-gun posts, mortars, mine-fields, and trenches.⁶

Swanson's men were known as the 'Cottonbalers'. In January 1815 at New Orleans, their predecessors had repelled English redcoats from behind walls of cotton bales, and the moniker had stuck. As the US 7th Infantry Regiment, they had campaigned throughout the Civil War, notably at Gettysburg, where they had taken over 50 per cent casualties in the Wheatfield. Alongside their Anglo compatriots 128 years later, they had waded onto the sands of Morocco in November 1942, splashed ashore in Sicily the following July, and in September 1943 passed through the newly won Salerno beachhead in Italy towards Monte Cassino. January 1944 saw the three battalions of the 7th Infantry – more than 3,000 GIs – assault the port of Anzio.

It was at Anzio that their German opponents first labelled everyone

in the US 3rd Infantry Division, Cottonbalers included, the 'Blue and White Devils', after the distinct, diagonal stripes all wore on their helmets and uniform sleeves. This was their second nickname, for the 3rd Division were also known as the 'Rock of the Marne' after their combat service in France during 1918. The 3rd prided themselves on being 'Eisenhower's favourite division', not least because Ike had commanded one of their battalions before serving as their chief of staff in late 1940.

The Cottonbalers' next amphibious landing had seen them arrive on the French Riviera in August 1944 and fight their way to the German frontier. Following 188 days of continuous operations, latterly in the Colmar Pocket of France, on 18 February 1945 exhausted Cottonbalers, commanded by German-born Colonel John A. Heintges, were pulled out of the line to rest and absorb replacements. Now they were returning to the fray, attacking fifteen miles east of Saarbrücken, in the middle of German-held terrain known as the Saar-Palatinate Triangle. They spent a couple of weeks in March training for village and street fighting, including night operations, then teamed up with other divisions as the Seventh Army's spearhead to punch their way through the Siegfried Line.

Before Swanson and the rest started out, their divisional commander, Major General John 'Iron Mike' O'Daniel, gave them all a pep talk about the opposition ahead. Their mission, he told the Cottonbalers, was part of a larger divisional operation called *Earthquake*. Friendly troops would be to their right and left. However, he warned them, the Germans were waiting, determined to defend their homeland at all costs. O'Daniel ordered that 'gas masks with protective eye ointment must be carried'.⁷ Staff Sergeant Eldon Berthiaume, a former military policeman assigned to Company 'G', recalled the anxiety that caused many to skip their meals that afternoon. At six in the evening the men of the 7th Infantry started out in the dark towards their objective. The ground was unforgiving caramel: 'every step was agony', remembered one, as GIs wrestled their boots out of the mud. 'We was sweating like pigs, and when we stopped, the sweat froze on us.'

In many ways Utweiler resembled the French village of Pournoy-la-Chétive, a southern suburb of Metz, which the Cottonbalers had just left, where the 7th Infantry had trained with demolitions, grenades, rocket

launchers and flame-throwers, and worked with tanks and tracked tank destroyers.⁸ As a result, the Americans considered themselves expert at night-fighting. At one in the morning on the 15th, Captain Swanson's Fox Company led the way, followed by Easy and George, advancing downhill in the half-light. Searchlights bounced their beams off clouds to create 'artificial moonlight', a tactic borrowed from the British.

All was quiet, with the Germans either absent or asleep.⁹ Ben Loup, carrying a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) with First Platoon, recalled their orders were to follow the white tape placed by another unit through a minefield. A mile short of Utweiler, Loup observed, 'the officer who was supposed to lead us through the mines pointed out the engineer's tape to Captain Swanson and took off for the rear. Swanson led, followed by his radio operator, my squad's scout, then myself and my assistant BAR-man.' After twenty yards or so, the tape ended. The captain looked around for more, found none and assumed no more tape equalled no more mines.¹⁰

Ten yards later, Loup recalled, 'Swanson's radio operator set off a bouncing mine that killed him and destroyed the radio on his back. Almost simultaneously, there were two other explosions farther back in my squad. Swanson immediately gave us the order to stop in our tracks, to not move our feet, and gently feel around where we were standing. If we felt nothing, lie prone.' As his men groped blindly in the freezing mud and clotted leaves, the captain sent a runner back to battalion HQ alerting them to his predicament, but now had no wireless communications. Flares soared into the sky and tracer stabbed the dark: the noise had alerted their opponents, who deluged the GIs with anti-aircraft fire in flat trajectory, machine-guns, and mortars.

At this juncture Loup was wounded in the cheek by a shell fragment and told to make his way back to the battalion aid station for treatment. Rifleman George Corpis, in action for the first time, saw what happened next. A shell landed next to his captain. Earl Swanson – the veteran of every campaign since 1942 and already wounded in the arm – was killed instantly by the blast. Corpis then witnessed his own platoon commander, Lieutenant Robert W. Rankin, step on a mine blowing him into the air. He came down on another mine, which eviscerated him.

Fox Company was soon badly disorganised, with dead and wounded

lying everywhere. The commander of Easy, Captain James Powell, stepped forward to lead the rest around the minefield while Fox sorted itself out. Under fire, the companies extracted themselves with difficulty, skirted right and found a new route into what they now knew was a heavily defended position. Corpis remembered Fox Company retracing their steps away from the mines and following Easy into Utweiler, 'where we charged the German defenders, firing from the hip, just like in the movies'. The rest stormed downhill into the village, finding it ringed by zigzag trenches and felled trees, and took sixty prisoners.

It was 06:00 by the time they had mopped up, but the Cottonbalers' first visit to Germany had been unexpectedly costly. As he moved his command post into the village, the CO, Lieutenant Colonel Jack M. Duncan, mused that his Second Battalion had grown careless. The minefield delayed the laying of telephone lines from Duncan to other units, but he was more concerned that almost half his battalion, which in the preceding month had been brought up to strength by 'repple-depples' – replacements from training depots and rear areas, many of them without combat experience – had failed to arrive at all. Presumably the 'greenhorns' had been disorientated by the minefield, the shelling, the darkness, and their own fear.

Pondering how to better grip his battalion, Duncan waited for communications to be restored and the arrival of his supporting armour, which had no night-fighting capability and tended to operate only in daylight. However, all was not well back at the line of departure, where four tanks lay disabled by mines and shellfire. Other armoured vehicles refused to move forward until engineers had 'deloused' the road ahead of munitions, objecting that the ground was too soft to go cross-country. While the Cottonbalers' CO, Colonel Heintges, persuaded some vehicles to move, the GIs in Utweiler were unaware that their friendly armour would be delayed.

However, none of this was an issue to Duncan, whose men consolidated their positions and grabbed a hasty breakfast. George Corpis recollected that Company 'F', now officerless, was told to occupy the small Catholic church and adjacent graveyard and wait for their armour to catch up before resuming the advance. Once in the church they relaxed, reflecting on their nightmare in the minefield, just glad to be alive.

Another GI, Joseph Corrigan, recalled that his squad leader, Sergeant Jacob Cohen, was soon 'off with a German woman'.

At 08:00, Corpis had put down his rifle and unbuckled his trousers to answer a call of nature in the churchyard when he happened to glance uphill. On the slope above lurked a German tank, surrounded by small specks – infantrymen.¹¹ It was one of several that suddenly surrounded the village and began firing at the surprised GIs who had been off their guard and inattentive. Corpis dashed back towards the church to raise the alarm but was wounded in the shoulder by shrapnel that hit the church wall. PFC Hubert 'Kly' Kleiboeker was killed instantly when a tank shell burst near him. A devout Lutheran, Kleiboeker had just written home, 'I hope if you ever hear I am wounded, don't get all excited and worried, because nine out of ten that go to hospital make it OK.'¹²

Although each rifle company carried bazookas, their inexperienced handlers had yet to learn to let enemy armour crawl to within sniffing distance, to be sure of a kill. They soon used all their ammunition firing at extreme range. Once the bazookas fell silent, German tracked assault guns nosed their way into Utweiler, demolishing each house, while their supporting infantry overran Duncan's men. Eldon Berthiaume, the former military policeman of Company 'G', and five of his buddies took shelter in the cellar of a nearby barn, where they were captured by a young German soldier. 'He was a kid no older than fifteen or sixteen,' remembered Berthiaume, who was marched away with his hands up. He regretted not having eaten the previous day and had no idea when he would next be fed. They happened to pass a wounded German officer and put a tourniquet on his leg to stop the bleeding, which resulted in better treatment during their captivity.¹³

Machine-gunner Ross West was a 'repple-depple' newcomer, in Europe for only two months when he was taken prisoner. Utweiler was his first and last day of combat. He recalled German cameramen snapping pictures, muttering 'infanterie, gut, gut', sharing a big vat of beer, before trucking their captives away from the front.¹⁴ Sergeant Robert Cook and ten others from Company 'F' were in the church with the injured Corpis and Sergeant Cohen, who had rushed back from his fraternisation. A tank shell crashed through the door and skidded along the floor. They all watched and held their breaths. It did not explode: a

dud. At about 11:00 Cook recollected he was at a window firing when ‘Sergeant Cohen yelled at me to stop shooting because we were going to have to surrender. One of our German prisoners, taken in the first firefight, signed that he would go and negotiate the capitulation. As he stepped outside, he was felled by a German machine-gun.’

Cook observed, ‘an SS officer came in with several infantrymen; he was waving a potato-masher grenade over his head and yelling, “Amerika ist kaput”. He began arguing with one of our German prisoners in a loud and threatening voice. Later, one of our guys who could understand German said that the SS officer wanted to kill all of us but was talked out of it by one of our prisoners who told him we had taken good care of their wounded. We were then marched out of town, picking up other groups from Fox Company along the way.’¹⁵ The 7th Infantry’s official history noted the Germans ‘closed in on the town with a combination of four flak wagons and nine tanks and tank destroyers, which included two Tigers. It was a tough situation to be in without support of any kind. Attached armor had not gotten through to the battalion and without communication, artillery could not be called into play.’¹⁶

In a short morning, the Second Battalion of the 7th Infantry Regiment had ceased to exist. Colonel Duncan and three others survived by immersing themselves to their necks in a water-filled bomb crater for almost eight hours. Dale Schumacher of Company ‘F’, his pelvis and femur damaged by shrapnel, played dead for almost twenty-four hours before rescue by friendly medics. For the rest, with small arms useless against armour, without radio or telephone communication to friendly aircraft or artillery, and without supporting tanks, there was no alternative but for the Blue and White Devils to surrender.

When they saw the signature SS runes on the collars of their opponents – panzermen of the ‘Götz von Berlichingen’ Division, and infantry of the First Battalion, 37th SS Panzergrenadiers – the surviving Cottonbalers understood why they had been outfought. These units, who had an appalling reputation for brutality in Normandy, had orders to ‘keep the enemy out of the Reich at any cost’. They were not merely fighting for their Homeland, but everything they believed in. Mostly in their late teens, these were fanatics who had no fear of death.

Back home and safe on the other side of the Atlantic, in their diners,

apartments and farmhouses over morning coffee, Americans read the Associated Press communiqué in their newspapers. 'Lieutenant General Alexander M. Patch sent his Seventh Army into its first major action since the Colmar Pocket fight, at one o'clock yesterday morning, striking silently without the usual artillery preparation. Only light resistance met the first assault forces, and the enemy began at once to fall back into the Siegfried Line, behind thick minefields. Then massed American guns opened up with a thunderous barrage and only scattered fire met the attackers.'

More intent on eggs or toast, they might have missed the last paragraph, where Colonel Duncan's Second Battalion of the 7th Infantry were rewarded forty-five words: 'Fifteen miles east of Saarbrücken, other forces broke into the Saar on a two-mile front, penetrated the basin as far as a mile and were locked in a swirling battle near the border town of Utweiler where the Germans threw in their first tanks.'

That 'swirling battle', a footnote on the Seventh US Army's front, cost the Second Battalion 456 missing personnel. More than at Gettysburg. Ten GIs per word of the press notice. By the war's end, military accountants would assess the bill as twenty-one killed, seventy-two wounded; 222 had been captured, while seventeen men remain missing to this day.¹⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Duncan's 640 men had been reduced to a cadre of 'scattered and ineffective personnel' in a mere forty-five words.

Although the 'Marne' Division and its 7th Infantry were experienced outfits, the darkness, confusion, shelling, mines and panzers terrified the many newcomers that made up all US Army formations in 1945. In this case there were clearly tensions between the engineers, infantry and armour. All were cautious; many were tired; no one wanted to be the last to die. Even before 1945, the Marne Division's turnover had exceeded 100 per cent, which included the killed, wounded, captured and the missing, but also those claimed by illness, injury and battle fatigue. The Blue and White Devils would sustain the most casualties of any division in the European Theatre.¹⁸ These losses fell disproportionately on its nine infantry battalions and their junior leadership. Captain Earl Swanson, Fox Company's commander, was one of these: an experienced GI who had worked his way up through the ranks; in Sicily he had been a staff sergeant.¹⁹

PROLOGUE

By March 1945, many US platoons and companies were being led by outstanding GIs who had bubbled to the surface as natural leaders. The same was true in the British, Canadian, French and Polish forces. Elsewhere in the US 3rd Division, First Lieutenant Audie Murphy (who would emerge as the US Army's most decorated soldier of the war) and Second Lieutenant Michael Daly (a month away from earning himself a Medal of Honor in the ruins of Nuremberg), both recipients of battlefield commissions, were serving in the neighbouring 15th Infantry Regiment. Yet, success or failure in combat can be random. When Murphy and Daly attacked Epping and Ormersviller on the 7th Infantry's right at the same time, they compelled a German withdrawal. It was Swanson's misfortune to alert his opponents by triggering landmines in the middle of the night.

To be fair, their 17th SS opponents were in much the same condition. Comprising conscripts and volunteers, they made up with fanaticism what they lacked in experience. They had recently disengaged from heavy combat in Operation *Nordwind*, a smaller version of the Ardennes assault but further south, and in January, much of the divisional staff had been sacked and replaced with veteran army officers. A week later the divisional General was captured and was replaced temporarily by a Wehrmacht colonel. This was the *tenth* change of command in a year, surely an indication that by March 1945, the 17th SS lacked professionalism, never mind personnel and equipment.²⁰

However, it was 283 days since the Allies had first set foot in northern France. Both sides had fought without respite since those first landings on German-occupied soil and were very tired. Across the armies, morale during the shockingly awful weather of the Bulge had been tested. Now it would be equally tested in victory. The 15 March setback at Utweiler indicated that any invasion of the Reich, even in 1945 with the Germans seemingly on the run, was going to be a slow and costly affair.

No one would have believed there were just fifty-four days of conflict left before the permanent demise of Nazi Germany. World War Two in Europe would officially finish on Tuesday 8 May – or some 336 days after the Normandy invasion. The Western Allies would call it VE (Victory in Europe) Day. For Germany, it was *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour), marking the beginning of a new era.²¹