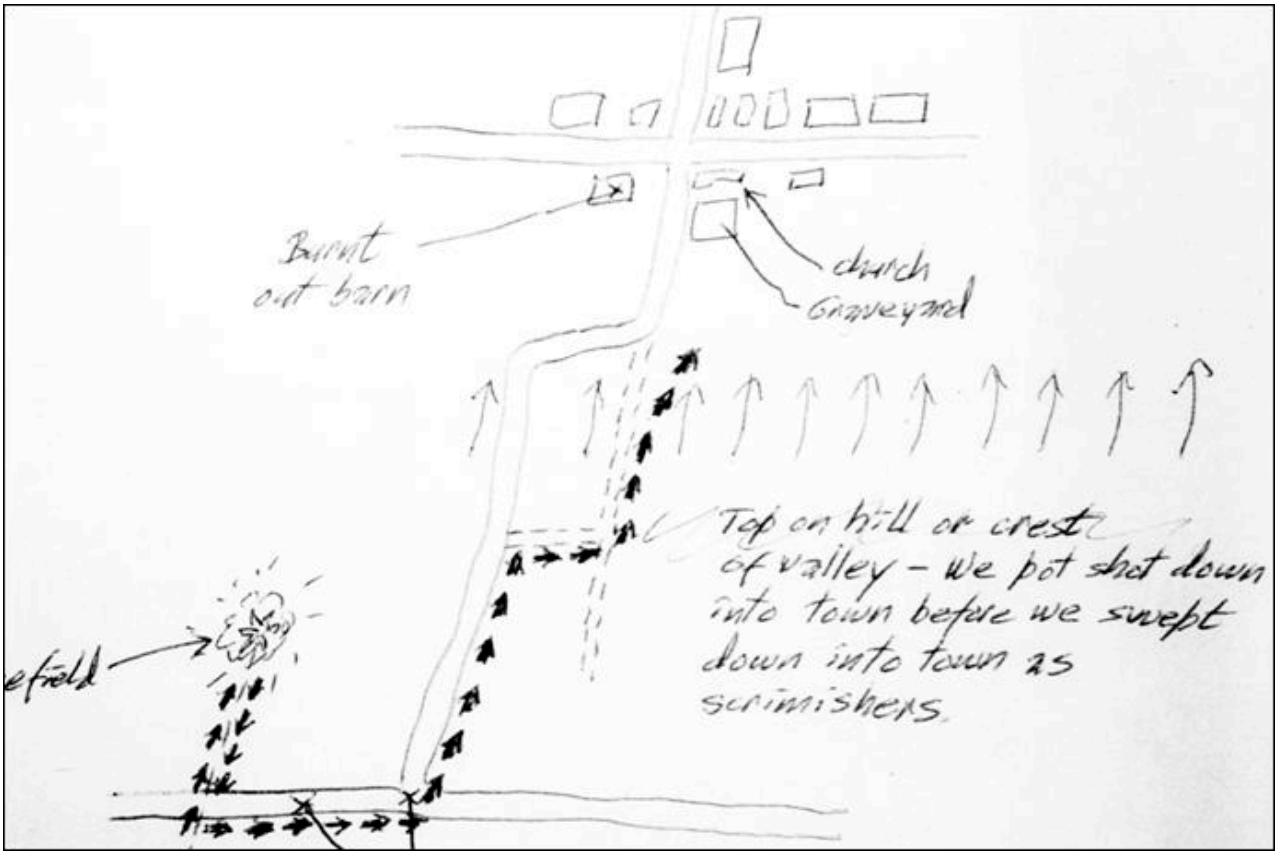
Disaster at Utweiler:

On March 15, 1945, the 7th Infantry suffered its worst day in its long service during World War II. The war was coming to an end, and a unit accustomed to success had become careless. In the fog of war, things sometimes go wrong, and when they do, the riflemen find themselves on the cutting edge of defeat. Safe in my mail tent in the repple depple, I had no idea what had happened, and many years passed before I learned the full story.

In early March the U.S. Seventh Army launched a powerful attack into Germany. The assignment of the Third Division was to enter Germany from eastern France and penetrate the Siegfried Line, about twelve miles north of the border, where the German Army was

expected to make a stand. As the Third Division approached the line of departure it passed through lines that had been held by the 44th Infantry Division. The 7th Infantry, commanded by Colonel John A. Heintges, was on the left of the attack. The first objective of the Second Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jack M. Duncan, was to take the tiny village of Utweiler, where only token resistance was expected (7th Infantry, 235-240)

The Second Battalion, which had suffered heavy losses in the Colmar Pocket, had been brought up to strength by replacements from basic training camps and the rear areas, many of them without combat experience. F Company was still commanded by Earl E. Swanson, now promoted to Captain. The First Platoon was led by 1st Lt. Robert W. Rankin. Ben Loup, who



Utweiler attack.

[Sketch map drawn by George Corpis]

had been in the hospital during the crossing of the Meurthe and the Colmar Pocket, was back with the First Platoon as BAR man. Ernie Boyd was a prisoner of war, but Dale Schumacher was still with E Company.

The Third Division had become expert at night attacks, and the battle plan resembled the crossing of the Meurthe. The attack was scheduled for 1:00 a.m., with an artillery barrage beginning 30 minutes before. A new wrinkle was the use of a searchlight battalion to create "artificial moonlight" by bouncing light off the clouds. Although surprise was intended, it certainly was not achieved. After the battle, German prisoners stated that they had been alerted to expect something about 4:00 a.m.

As at Wihr-en-Plaine, the Second Battalion walked into a buzz saw. Lying in wait were elements of the tough 17th SS Panzer Division, supported by the 37th and 38th SS Panzer Grenadiers. The determination of the German defenders and the amount of German armor committed to defense of Utweiler was totally

unexpected. Charles B. MacDonald (The Last Offensive, 253) states that the 17th SS Panzers were a worn-down unit, but "possessing considerably more tanks and other armored vehicles than were to be found in the entire adjacent corps."

Shortly after 1:00 a.m. on March 15 the Second Battalion crossed into Germany at Utweiler. Company F led the way, followed by E and G Companies. Company H, the weapons company, was divided among the rifle companies. As usual, Capt. Swanson led from the front, using the First Platoon, led by Lt. Rankin, as his attack platoon. The artillery barrage and searchlights gave the signal for the attack but they also alerted the Germans. About a mile south of Utweiler, F Company entered a mine field where exploding mines wreaked havoc. Trapped in the minefield, the "artificial

moonlight" exposed the riflemen to raking direct and indirect fire from enemy flak wagons, machine guns, and mortars. Swanson sent a messenger back to battalion headquarters to inform them that the company was in a minefield and could not proceed. Shortly thereafter Swanson and his radio man were killed.

The Second Battalion became badly disorganized as officers and men under heavy fire attempted to extricate themselves from the minefield and find a new route to their objective. Dead and wounded were everywhere. Dale Schumacher was hit by a German shell that blasted his pelvis and femur, leaving him helpless but not unconscious. He could hear the sounds of the battle taking place in the village. He lay there for almost twenty-four hours before a medic came with

some German prisoners to help carry the dead off the battlefield. They carried him back to the battalion aid station, and that was the end of his military career.

While the remnants of F Co. were getting reorganized, Capt. James Powell, commander of E Co., led the battalion around the mine field to gain entrance to the village, which was defended with trenches and cut trees. They attacked with a rush, took approximately 60 prisoners, and by 6:00 a.m. the situation seemed to be well in hand. Almost half the members of the battalion were disoriented by the minefield, the shelling, and the darkness, and did not make it into Utweiler at all. Radio contact was lost when Col. Duncan moved his command post into the village, and the minefield delayed the laying of telephone lines. Duncan expected that

communications would soon be restored and waited for the arrival of the armor, which was the signal to move forward (7th Infantry, 236).

Back at the line of departure the American armor was held up. Four tanks were disabled by mines and German artillery. The remaining tanks and tank destroyers refused to move forward until the road had been swept. They claimed that the ground was too soft to go overland. Colonel Heintges intervened personally to persuade some of them to move forward (7th Infantry, 238). For the moment the troops in Utweiler were without armor, but that did not seem important. Having attained their objective, those members of the Second Battalion who had reached Utweiler relaxed, waiting for the next move. Apparently the usual

procedures for establishing a defensive perimeter were not followed.

About 8:00 a.m. the Germans counterattacked with armor supported by infantry. They surrounded the village and began firing on the surprised GIs who were resting or lounging about. The rifle companies had bazookas, but their bazooka ammunition was quickly expended in firing vainly at tanks at long range. When they discovered that the Americans had no bazooka ammunition left, four German tanks, supported by riflemen, came rolling down the street, firing into the houses, collapsing the roofs, and setting the houses on fire. Unlike the battle at Wihr-en-Plaine, the bazookas were ineffective. Without radio or telephone communication, artillery could not be called in, and the armor did not appear. Rifles were useless against tanks;

there was no alternative to surrender. In less than an hour the Second Battalion of the 7th Infantry Regiment was destroyed as a fighting unit. Colonel Duncan and three others survived by immersing themselves to their necks in a water-filled bomb crater for almost eight hours (7th Infantry, 238-239).

General O'Daniel, right, and Col. Heintges.

[From Fedala to Berchtesgaden: A History of the Seventh United States Infantry in World War II]

The message logs of the Third Division and 7th Infantry Regiment (indicated by *) are remarkably detailed and present a dramatic record of the unfolding disaster as it appeared at divisional and regimental headquarters. At first the attack seemed to be going well. As the day dawned 7th Infantry HQ received its first intimations of serious trouble. At 7:25 a.m. it was reported that the Second Battalion had been hit hard by German mines and machine guns. Shortly thereafter word was received that four tanks had been knocked out by mines and that it would be necessary to sweep the road again. Colonel Heintges was still minimizing any problems when he called division HQ at 9:45 a.m. "Second and Third Battalions got scattered just after

daylight by an artillery concentration," he stated, "and it's taking time to get them together."*

General O'Daniel's practice was to "fight" his regiments from the forward division command post, keeping in close touch with his regimental commanders. He instinctively became concerned when contact with a battalion was lost, a not infrequent occurrence. O'Daniel sensed problems when he phoned regimental headquarters ten minutes later. Although the Second Battalion had launched its attack almost nine hours earlier, Col. Heintges was unperturbed: "It looks okay," Heintges reported. "I have no communication with the Second and Third Battalions right now. I don't know what the trouble is, but I'm leaving no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of the trouble. The First Battalion is okay. The Second Battalion lost four tanks

by mines. I have my Mine Platoon up there now checking the roads. We have some seventy PWs so far. The two roads coming out of Utweiler are very heavily mined and Utweiler itself is booby trapped."*

About the same time a sergeant who had escaped from Utweiler phoned from another regiment. Excitedly he informed 7th Inf. HQ that the Second Battalion was "surrounded by six enemy tanks and the tanks are closing in on the town. … Most of the Battalion is still in the town. Enemy tanks blowing down all the buildings. Battalion CO is still in the town."

Heintges now knew that his Second Battalion was in deep trouble. He phoned Third Division HQ and asked that help be sent. Frantic preparations began to rescue the Second Battalion. Mine-sweeping activities

were accelerated. Regimental Anti-Tank Company was hurriedly armed with bazookas and ordered to join with a platoon of tank destroyers in the woods south of Utweiler.

At 11:15 a.m. Heintges called Third Division HQ again.*

Heintges: "The situation up there doesn't look too good. I am on my way up to see what I can find out. The story I've got now from people who have come back is that six enemy tanks passed thru the middle of town and started to knock the buildings down."

O'Daniel: "What are you doing about it?"

Heintges: "We fired all our bazooka ammo and that is as much as I know now. The armor is moving up slowly behind the mine sweepers."

O'Daniel: "How about artillery?"

Heintges: "We have used just as much artillery as we can. We have a plane that is observing it and I have a ground observer observing it."

O'Daniel: "How about the men up there?"

Heintges: "We have no communication with them. I did talk to Major Flynn who was on the end of the wire [at the Observation Post south of the village] and he gave me a pretty good picture, but I haven't heard from the CO."

O'Daniel: "How far up are those TDs?"

Heintges replied that they were at a map coordinate south of Utweiler. O'Daniel's impatience with Heintges' tardy reactions to the situation was clearly evident.

O'Daniel: "What is keeping them?"

Heintges: "Mines."

O'Daniel: "They have been sweeping them all morning!"

Heintges: "Yes sir."

O'Daniel: "A whole Company?"

Heintges: "I have had my AP Platoon and some Engineers working on it."

O'Daniel: "What are you going to do now?"

Heintges: "I recommend that a battalion of the Fifteenth Infantry go up toward Objective Five and come in on the town from the west. I've got my AT [Anti-Tank] Company assembled in the woods and I am going to assemble a TF [Task Force] to go up there with bazookas."

O'Daniel: "You've got to get armor to that Second Battalion. Keep me posted."

O'Daniel agreed to send help from the 15th Infantry, which was in reserve. At 11:50 he phoned to state that he was sending armor as well.

"Get those roads swept," O'Daniel said, "so we can get some armor and infantry up to help Second Battalion. Get your TDs in position to keep the enemy armor from counterattacking."*

By 2:00 p.m. all was ready and the counterattack on Utweiler began. Supported by fifteen tanks and tank destroyers plus the Anti-Tank Co. armed with bazookas, the Third Battalion of the 7th Infantry attacked Utweiler from the southeast. Artillery concentrations and air strikes were placed on the area

north of Utweiler to prevent German reinforcement. At 3:05 p.m. 7th Infantry HQ reported to O'Daniel that the Third Battalion was in the town.

"The Jerries are streaming out the other side. One of our tanks knocked out a tank of theirs that we are sure of so far. Artillery has been shooting at the retreating Germans."

"You have to keep after them or they will be back tonight," O'Daniel replied.*

By 3:30 in the afternoon Heintges could report to Third Division HQ that Utweiler had been retaken and that the Germans had suffered heavy losses. "The Germans had a lot of men back in that town of Utweiler," he stated. "Our observers estimated at least a reinforced company of over one hundred men. We got

back about two hundred fifty men out of the Second Battalion. On this last deal up there we lost a very good Company Commander [Capt. Earl Swanson] and also two or three more pieces of armor. Heavy weapons Company of Second Battalion seems to be in fairly good shape."*

During that disastrous day the Second Battalion counted 21 dead, 17 missing in action (most of whom were dead), 72 wounded and evacuated, and 222 men taken prisoner by the enemy. Heintges' reference to H Co. (heavy weapons) indicates that most of the losses were riflemen. Most striking is the fact that by nightfall 184 stragglers of the Second Battalion had been rounded up and another 124 men were collected in the next two days. The Germans also took heavy losses. By 10:00 p.m. the Third Division had taken 216 prisoners,

with an estimated 100 more on the way. Although no count of German dead and wounded was possible, when Sgt. Greig Forrest was taken prisoner he saw heaps of bodies outside the German field hospital, which was filled with the wounded.

Evidence collected from survivors of Utweiler adds another dimension to the story. Ben Loup, BAR man in the First Platoon, tells the story from the perspective of an experienced combat rifleman. The first problem, as Loup saw it, was failure to coordinate intelligence and mine-sweeping between the 3rd Division and the 44th Division, which had been in position at that part of the line. Loup writes:

We were told that the field between Utweiler and the road which was our line of departure was heavily mined. The engineers of the 44th Division which had established defensive positions along our line of departure were to clear a path through the minefield and mark the path with engineer's tape. An officer of the unit through which we were to pass was to lead us through the mine field.

F Company reached the line of departure at 1:00 a.m. and Capt. Swanson gave his usual order: "Let's go." Swanson was in the lead with the First Platoon. Loup saw clearly what happened next:

Everyone got up and followed Capt. Swanson down the road about 40 or 50 yards. At this point the officer who was supposed to lead us through the mine field into Utweiler pointed out the engineer's tape to Capt. Swanson and took off for the rear. … Captain Swanson entered the field by the engineer's tape followed by his radio operator, my squad's scout, then myself and my assistant BAR man. After traversing a short distance in the mine field, about 20 yards or so, the engineer's tape ended. Capt. Swanson stopped and looked around for the engineer's tape, but found none. He then assumed, and so passed back the word, that since there was no more engineer's tape, there were probably no more mines. We started our approach to Utweiler. About 10 yards or so past the engineer's tape, Capt. Swanson's radio operator set off a mine and the explosion ripped

the radio off his back. Almost simultaneously with that explosion, there were two other explosions farther back in my squad. Capt. Swanson immediately gave us the order to stop in our tracks, do not move our feet, and gently feel around where we were standing. If we felt nothing, lay prone. The attack was now stalled.

Then enemy machine guns and mortars began firing at the stranded troops. Loup, who knew a snafu when he saw one, was wounded in the cheek by a shell fragment, returned safely to the battalion aid station for treatment, and lived to fight another day.

A major problem at Utweiler was the lack of armor due to the refusal of the tanks to accompany the infantry. Joseph Corrigan of F Co. recalls: "When we got up to the front and just before we went into the

minefield I remember Capt. Swanson jumping up on the tank with a gun in his hand, telling the tank commander to go forward. But as soon as he got off the tank, the tank turned around and took off for the rear."

George Corpis was a replacement rifleman in F Co. for whom Utweiler was his first (and last) experience of combat. He describes the deaths of Capt. Swanson and his platoon leader, Lt. Rankin. "Captain Swanson," Corpis writes, "was wounded in the arm and heading to the rear to an aid station when a German shell landed near him and killed him." Lieutenant Rankin was next to Corpis as they tried to extract themselves from the minefield. Rankin stepped on a mine, and when he hit the ground he landed on another mine and was killed instantly.

Corpis recalled that F Co. got out of the minefield and followed E Co. around to the right, where they charged the German defenders, firing from the hip, "Just like in the movies," he said. F Company was told to take the church and walled graveyard and then wait for the armor before heading out again. When Corpis' squad was ensconced in the church they relaxed, glad to be alive after the harrowing experience in the minefield. Swanson and Rankin had both been killed, and it appears that no one stepped forward to take charge. Corrigan told me that his squad leader, Sgt. Jacob Cohen, was off with a woman when the Germans attacked.

Utweiler church from the direction of the attack (postwar photo).

[Author's collection]

Other calls of nature asserted themselves. While he was standing watch in the churchyard, Corpis felt a powerful urge to move his bowels. Since nothing was happening, he put down his rifle, unbuckled his pants,

lowered his shorts, and proceeded to take care of his business. When he finished he glanced upward. On the slope above the church was a German tank looking down on him. As he dashed back into the church, Corpis saw German infantry running along the high ground to surround the Americans and protect the tank. When the tank fired, he was wounded in the shoulder by shrapnel from a shell that exploded on the church wall. The tank continued to fire shells into the wall and roof of the church, which contained German prisoners as well as American soldiers.

Robert Cook of F Co. was in the church with Corpis and Sgt. Cohen, who had rushed back from his tryst. They had four or five German prisoners with them, several of whom had been wounded and attended

to by their American captors. One tank shell came through the door of the church and skidded along the floor—a dud! Cook recalls what happened next:

About 11 a.m., when I was at a window firing at a German near another building, Sgt. Cohen yelled at me to stop firing because we were going to have to surrender. One of the Germans indicated that he would go to the entrance and tell the German infantry that we were giving up. As he stepped outside a German opened up with a burp gun and killed him on the spot.

Shortly after, an SS officer came rushing into the church threatening to kill all the Americans. He was dissuaded by the German prisoners, who told him that

the Americans had taken care of their wounded. Then a Wehrmacht officer stepped forward and said he would take the Americans, and the SS allowed him to do so. Sergeant Cohen carried a set of Protestant dog-tags for such an eventuality, but they may not have served their purpose.

Sergeant Greig Forrest was a squad leader in G Co., which had been in reserve during the initial attack. He was experienced in combat, having joined the 3rd Division in September 1944. Forrest and his squad got into Utweiler about 6:00 a.m. and went into a house to relax. Forrest posted one of his riflemen (a green replacement) to watch for the arrival of the American tanks, which was their signal to move out. After a while the rifleman reported that the tanks had arrived and one of them was coming down the street. When Forrest

took a look he saw that the tank was German. He seized his BAR and fired and then ducked back into the house. He and his riflemen continued firing until the muzzle of the tank's 88 came in the door and they had no choice but to surrender.

E Company led the way around the minefield, and Joe Englert made it into the village, where he dozed off in the basement of a house. He heard someone shout, "It's coming down the street." When he looked out the door, he wrote, "There were tanks, halftracks, and infantry coming at us. I stuck my BAR through the opening and fired a magazine at them." Immediately a German potato-masher grenade came back through the door and hit him in the eye. Another struck him in the back. Then a German burp gun appeared in the

doorway and began spraying the room. "My ears were ringing," he continued, "and I started saying an Act of Contrition thinking that this was it. I was going to die."

Joe filed out of the house with his comrades, to face German soldiers about fifteen years of age: "It looked like they wanted to shoot us, but thank goodness an officer stopped them and told them to take us prisoner." Joe was put into a German ambulance, and received medical care in a German military hospital that enabled him to survive and tell his tale.

Ernie Boyd of F Co. had been taken prisoner earlier in the Colmar Pocket. He was trying to keep warm in his prison bunk when he was told that a new group of prisoners from the 3rd Division had been brought in. When he met them he saw familiar faces

from F Co.—they had been taken prisoner at Utweiler. One of them told of the circumstances of his surrender:

Evans said he and several others were trapped in a house and the only bazooka gunner had been killed by a direct hit from an 88 on the door. Without any defense, Evans hid in the coal bin. As he sought to cover himself with coal the muzzle of an 88 was rammed down the chute, almost pinning him to the bottom. At that moment a voice from the tank called out: "I wonder if you would like to surrender." Evans said he never had an easier time answering a question.

What Happened?

The disaster at Utweiler began as a failure of intelligence. The division had recently moved to a new and unfamiliar sector of the front. German resistance was not anticipated prior to reaching the Siegfried Line, and for that reason the strong German concentration of infantry and armor at Utweiler was completely unexpected. Mine sweeping efforts prior to the attack were rather casual. Too much reliance was placed on the mine-sweeping activities of the 44th Division, which was probably not much interested in clearing a path for another outfit. Over-confidence was a factor: although Gen. O'Daniel sensed early that the Second Battalion was in trouble, the regimental commander was slow to respond. When the village was occupied, the lack of adequate preparation for a possible German counterattack reflected a failure of leadership.

Although the Third Division and 7th Infantry were experienced outfits with a superb cadre, the 300 or more stragglers who were rounded up in the next two days shows that morale was low. In the darkness, confusion, shelling, and mines, the many stragglers suggest that they did not make much effort to get into Utweiler. Those soldiers who got there relaxed while waiting for the tanks. The tankers were quick to make excuses, leaving the infantry without armored support. The 7th Infantry's own mine-sweeping units seem to have taken their time about clearing the roads. Morale can break down in victory, as well as defeat.

Professor Weigley's concept of "the worn-out division" probably applies in this instance. A division that has been in combat for a long time will have battle-tired veterans reluctant to face another throw of the

dice, and inexperienced replacements brought in to fill the gaps left by the casualties of the previous campaign. A period of rest and relaxation is likely to lead to a letdown as officers and men face the disagreeable prospect of a return to combat. No soldier wanted to face the nightmare of being killed at the end of a war. In an interview, Gen. William Rosson remarked to me that in the later stages of the war the troops became increasingly reluctant to attack enemy positions. "In some battles," he said, "no more than twenty percent of the assault troops reached the objective."

In a letter to me (March 25, 1989), Gen. Rosson noted that the 7th Infantry was one of the most experienced units in the European theater, but that units have good and bad days. Rosson pointed out that

the Second Battalion showed its coolness under fire by reorganizing in the darkness and taking its objective. On the other hand, Rosson remarked, "one must ask why the elements in Utweiler did not organize for defense, to include the establishment of outposts? This is standard procedure instead of holing up in buildings to get out of the rain."

Rosson added: "Lastly, it is difficult to fathom why, in a regiment that had seen as much combat as the Cottonbalers had, it took so long to sweep the road for mines and to reestablish wire communications. Clearly something went wrong in both departments. I would be certain that corrective action was warranted and was taken."

Clayton Thobro was angry at the death of Earl Swanson, who had landed with the Third Division in North Africa and had risen through the ranks to company commander. Swanson had applied for rotation several times, Thobro told me, and had always been denied, on the grounds that he could not be spared. "Swanson had to keep going, battle after battle, until he was killed or wounded," Thobro said. "Eventually the odds caught up with him. You've got to give a man a decent chance to get out of it alive."

In the larger picture, the setback at Utweiler was a minor one. The Third Battalion of the 7th Infantry quickly avenged the losses inflicted on the Second Battalion. The Second Battalion was reconstituted with survivors and replacements, and continued to do its

part to the end of the war. The Third Division broke through the Siegfried Line and drove all the way to Nuernberg, Munich, and Berchtesgaden, the heart of Adolph Hitler's evil Reich. And, as always, the riflemen were on the cutting edge.

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