

MAJ Robert Thomas Hazlett

1907 – 1982

CIVILIAN BACKGROUND AND MILITARY TRAINING

Robert Thomas Hazlett was born in 1907 in Canton, Ohio, to parents Harry Fouts and Ona Estelle Hazlett. His initial training took place in the Reserve Officers Training Corps at St John's Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin; he also held a Bachelor of Science Degree in Civil Engineering from Purdue University in 1936.



Military duty ran deep in this family for his father had served in WWI and later rose through the ranks to become a Major General in the U.S. Army.

MILITARY ACTIONS

Hazlett reported to active duty in March 1942 with the rank of Captain, advancing to Major in July 1943. Assigned to the 112 Infantry Division, 28th Division, he participated in conflicts in Normandy, Northern France, the Rhineland and Central Europe.

His uniform bore the red keystone, official emblem of the State of Pennsylvania, the official shoulder sleeve insignia of the 28th Division, originally a Pennsylvania National Guard organization. The Germans called it "Bloody Bucket" because of the blood-red keystone insignia and vicious fighting tactics during the Normandy Campaign.

Its motto: "Fire and Movement"

http://history.army.mil/various_div.histories

"Into The Valley of Death"

Cecil B. Currey's account:

"In November 1944, the 28th Division, under inept commanders, was ordered to attack the Germans in the Hurtgen Forest near the Siegfried Line. Resistance was fierce. The American infantrymen, though courageous, were demolished by cold, hunger, exhaustion, and fear. They broke and ran. Ten percent losses would have been considered unacceptably high, but American casualties climbed to seventy-five percent." (Currey, inside book cover notation)

Other sources reported that a percentage regained their courage and returned to the battle. Without the determination of those who "held the line" under

impossible conditions, the loss of life and acute suffering would have been complete dismantlement of the division.

SPECIFICS OF THE BATTLE

Just south of Aachen lay the Hurtgen Forest. Roughly fifty square miles, it sat along the German border. It was densely wooded with fir trees twenty to thirty meters tall. They blocked the sun, so the forest was dark, damp, devoid of underbrush. The firs interlocked their lower limbs at less than two meters, so everyone had to stoop, all the time. It was like a green cave, always dripping water, low-roofed and forbidding. The terrain is rugged, a series of ridges and deep gorges formed by numerous streams and rivers. (Ambrose, p. 167)

The Roer River ran along the eastern edge of the Hurtgen. Beyond it was the Rhine. First Army wanted to be close to the Rhine, which General Hodges [First Army Commander] required driving the Germans out of the forest. Neither he nor his staff noted the obvious point that the Germans controlled the dams upstream on the Roer. If the Americans ever got down into the river valley, the Germans could release the dammed-up water and flood the valley. The forest could have been bypassed to the south, with the dams as the objective. The forest without the dams was worthless; the dams without the forest were priceless. But the generals got it backward, and went for the forest. The Battle of Hurtgen got started on the basis of a plan that was grossly, even criminally stupid. (Ambrose, p. 167)

It was fought under conditions as bad as American soldiers ever had to face, including the Wilderness and the Meuse-Argonne. Sgt. George Morgan of the 4th Division described it: "The Forest was a helluva place to fight. You can't get protection. You can't see. You can't get fields of fire. Artillery slashes the trees like a scythe. Everything is tangled. You can scarcely walk. Everybody is cold and wet and the mixture of cold rain and sleet keeps falling. (Ambrose, p. 167)

When Germans secured in their bunkers saw GIs coming forward, they called down presighted artillery fire, using shells with fuses designed to explode on contact with the treetops. When men dove to the ground for cover, as they had been trained to do and as instinct dictated, they exposed themselves to a rain of hot metal and wood splinters. They learned that to survive a shelling in the Hurtgen, hug a tree. That way they exposed only their steel helmets. (Ambrose, p. 168)

American tanks experienced the same levels of frustration and danger as the topography of the area encouraged slippery mud and thick forest-like

hedgerows which had to be maneuvered out of the way—often by hand—in order for tanks, replacements, and supplies to proceed. On some trails, tanks could not pass one another, making these lines long and vulnerable, tank treads often falling off in the mud ponds, further delaying the movement of troops and supplies to badly needed American troops. Many of the German commanders and troops were of the same opinions. What affected one, affected all. (Ambrose, p. 168+)

Photos and writings concerning information about tank issues appeared in multiple books, some listed above. In addition, many oral and written accounts have stated that Hazlett and Christensen, both Battalion Commanders of the 1st and 3rd Brigade, fought bravely while protecting and guiding those under their watch, especially during times of shortage of both men, tanks and aerial support. It is clear through reported communiques between commanders that servicing officers like Hazlett and Christensen felt the sense of hopelessness at times, but continued to do their duties and follow their training.

The 112th Inf had seized and then lost Schmidt falling to Kommerscheidt to hold at all costs. Majors Robert Hazlett and Robert C. Christensen now commanded 1st and 3rd Battalions. They were understrength and combined their units, staffs and operated as one. By 7 November they were nearly encircled and at noon were attacked in strength including a German Panzer (Mark V) tank. The Majors were captured with some of the men [260] while others fled off into the trees. They were evacuated by way of Bonn and Limburg to Oflag 64. (Meltesen, p. 102)

GENERAL HAZLETT'S SON MISSING IN GERMANY

Major General Harry F. Hazlett, Commander of Army Ground Forces Replacement and School Command said today he had been notified that his son, Infantry Major Robert T. Hazlett, is missing in action in Germany. His father and mother reside in Birmingham, where General Hazlett's command headquarters is located. He has a brother, Paul Hazlett, who resides in Huntingdon, California.

Source: *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, VA) –Dec. 8, 1944 – P. 4

<http://www.newspapers.com/images616053816>

OFLAG 64

The in-processing routine began as new arrivals entered the gate. They were vetted, sometimes offered a tour around the camp, and assigned a place to sleep. Hazlett was fortunate; his bunk was in a cubicle reserved for field-grade officers which afforded him an atmosphere of semi-privacy. Hopefully this offered him a sense of peace and reflection—away from the sounds of

battle and wounded, dying men. Some faces looked familiar and he looked forward to news about others with whom he had served. Daily “bird” (secreted radio) reports kept them in touch with the outside world and preparations had begun for a very important holiday: Christmas.

Col. Doyle’s Yardley’s book, *Home Was Never Like This*, expressed the thoughts of many Kriegies:

With the thermometer sinking to 7.5 degrees F, but with Kriegies cooking, basting, boiling, baking and bashing the Red Cross parcels [which arrived on December 13], it was a Merry Christmas—even under these circumstances. We are alive and that is a lot to be thankful for. Perhaps us Americans are the most spoiled people under God’s sun—America, the land of plenty. God’s Country! Ask any POW! (p. 221)

Established in June 1943, as a camp for American ground force officers, neither new arrivals such as Hazlett, who arrived on December 3, 1944, nor old timers could know that 1½ months later, the camp would be evacuated on January 21, 1945.

NEXT STOPS, HAMMELBURG, MOOSBURG AND HOME

Journal entries concerning the trek to Hammelburg by the Kriegies, though varied in style and content, all shared one central theme: survival! Food rations varied from watery soup, ersatz coffee with German bread to Red Cross Boxes.

Modes of travel ran the gambit from paths and dangerous encounters on highways to crowded, often locked-in train cars with little sleep or food.

Colonel Goode was in charge of 1500 marchers leaving Oflag 64 on 21 January 1945 to OFLAG XIII-B, Hammelburg, Bavaria, arriving there on 9 March 1945. Four hundred and ninety men completed the march. (Meltesen, p. 188)

After Hammelburg was abandoned in late March, the POWs were railed to Stalag VII-A, Moosburg where they were eventually liberated.

Major Hazlett returned to the United States in June 1945. According to official military records, Hazlett was promoted to the rank of Lt. Col. on 7 November 1945.

Family members reported that although his return was warmly received, he gave no interviews concerning his war experiences.

CONTINUED ASSIGNMENTS AND DUTIES

“Hazlett To Command Infantry At Fort Sill”

Lt. Col. Robert T. Hazlett, Birmingham has been assigned as commanding officer of the Infantry Training Detachment, Field Artillery School Troops at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma.

As operations officer of the 112th Infantry Regiment of the 28th Division (Keystone) and later as commanding officer of the Third and Fourth Battalions of the Regiment, Col. Hazlett wears the Bronze Star Medal with oak leaf cluster for meritorious achievement and the Purple Heart for wounds suffered in combat.

Source: *The Birmingham News* (Birmingham, Alabama) – Thur. Jan 24, 1946 – P. 17

<http://newspapers.com/images/573534029/>

“Inspects City Armory”

Lieut. Col. Robert T. Hazlett from the Eau Claire Infantry instructor’s office is spending Monday in La Crosse inspecting the armory, training facilities and records of the 426th infantry service company under the command of Capt. Herbert J. Zerneck, 1902 Wood Street.

Lt. Col. Hazlett is instructor of all batteries in the 426th regiment.

Source: *The La Crosse Tribune* (La Crosse, Wisconsin) – Monday. Oct. 20, 1947 – Page 21

<http://newspapers.com/images/511248113/>

The following article concerns Korean War actions:

Hundreds of Reds were captured by the South Koreans. Others fled into the hills before a ROK drive that would not be stopped. American tanks led the ROKs at least part of the way.

The South Korean First Division’s drive into Pyongyang climaxed a spectacular smash north out of the old Pusan defense perimeter.

When other South Korean divisions recoiled there before the fury of the Communist blows, the ROK First stood fast north and north-east of Taegu, the old South Korean anchor. It gained a reputation for toughness.

Lt. Col Robert T. Hazlett, Crestline, California, senior American advisor with the ROK First Division, gave his opinion of them as fighters:

“These are damned fine men. It is a pleasure to serve with them.”

Source: *The Bennington Evening Banner* (Bennington, Vermont) – Wed. Oct. 18, 1950, P. 3

<http://newspapers.com/images/546025563/>

“Silver Star Awarded to Army Physician”



Capt. Leslie E. Hedgepath is being congratulated by Col. Robert T. Hazlett after receiving the Silver Star Medal for gallantry in action in Korea. A physician with the 24th Regiment of the Tropical Lightning Division, Capt. Hedgepath was awarded the citation for his 72-hour performance on duty from Aug. 31 to Sept. 3, 1950, while “rendering expert care to numerous casualties who could not be evacuated from a battalion aid station cut off from frontline companies and rear installations by intense hostile fire.” Capt. Hedgepath has been overseas for more than a year.

Source: <http://newspapers.com/images>

TAPS



Colonel Robert Hazlett remained in the U.S. Army and retired in 1970. He lived in Crestline, California until his death on 1 July 1982 and was buried with military honors in Riverside National Cemetery Riverside, California.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Americans took the forest but lost the Battle of Hurtgen and too many good men. The battle did not shorten the war by one minute. For those reasons, it is remembered today by those who were there. The Americans had taken Aachen and Metz and the Hurtgen, but at such a cost in time and lives, that for those who were not there these great battles were hard to recall. (Ambrose, p. 178)

Lieutenant Leonard Lomell is a legend among the Rangers for what he did on D-D. In 1995 he commented, “June 6, 1944, was not my longest day. December 7th, 1944 was my longest and most miserable day on earth during my past 75 years.” (Ambrose, p. 177)

SOURCES

CITIZEN SOLDIER by Stephen Ambrose

FOLLOW ME AND DIE – The Destruction of an American Division in World War II by Cecil B. Currey

U.S. ARMY IN WORLD WAR II – Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt by Charles B. MacDonald and Sidney T. Mathews, CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY - UNITED STATES ARMY - WASHINGTON, D.C., 1985

ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64 by Clarence R. Meltesen.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers