

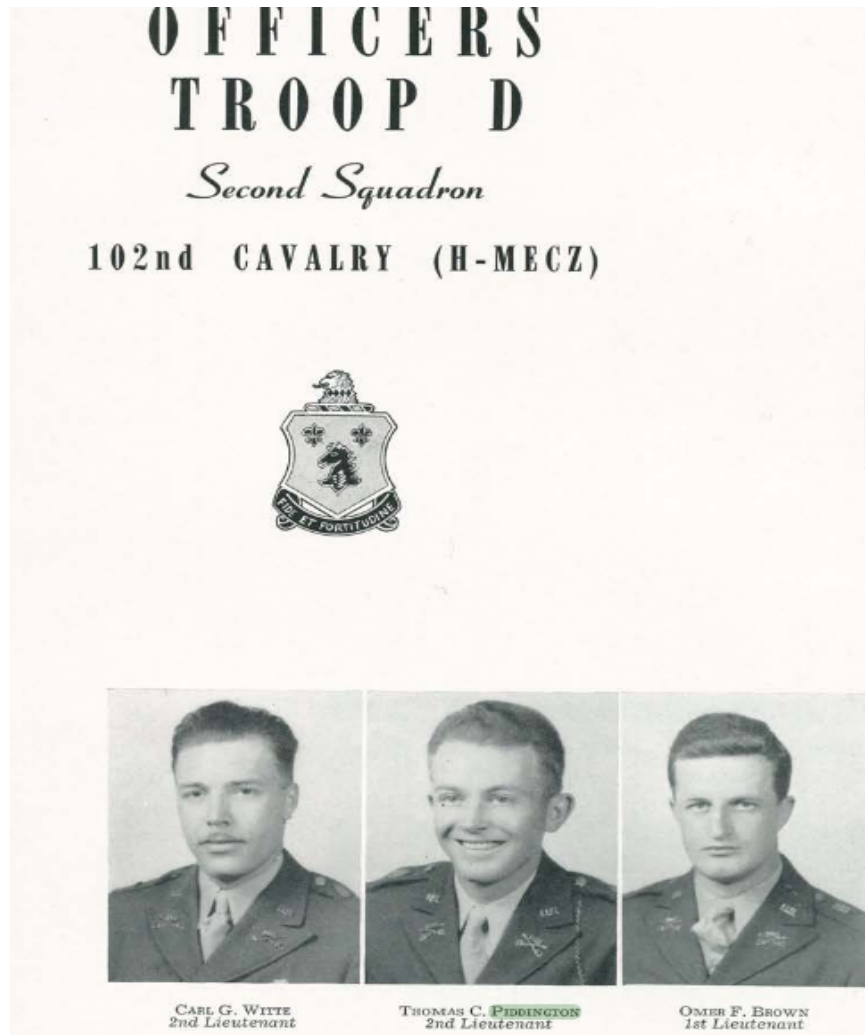
# CPT Thomas C. Piddington

1915 - 2001

Colonel Thomas C. Piddington was born October 3, 1915 in Dunellen, New Jersey. He graduated from Kentucky Military Institute in Lexington, Kentucky. He joined the 102<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment (known as the Essex Troop) from Westfield, New Jersey. He married Miss Nancy Dickinson Johnson on 27 December 1941 in New Jersey.



Below is a picture of 2LT Piddington as a member of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment. The unit was later reorganized and renamed the 117<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized) in 1943.



## **WAR PREPARATION**

In January 1941, the unit was ordered to Federal service for one year and trained at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the unit remained on active duty. In January 1942, the unit was assigned to a French luxury liner (the "Normandy") for overseas duty with an embarkation date of February 26. The liner was burned and sank in the New York harbor on February 18, and sabotage was suspected. The unit returned for further training at Ft. Dix, New Jersey and left the horse cavalry for mechanized cavalry. Up until this point, horses were still in use.

On September 25, 1942, the unit boarded the H.M.S. Dempo, a Dutch passenger liner under British Army control and sailed on October 1 for England in a 96-ship convoy. Two hours out at sea, the H.M.S. Dempo developed engine problems. The convoy left the lone ship. Sailing without an escort, the unit arrived in Liverpool, England on October 7 after an uneventful crossing.

Billeted in Fairford, a little village in the Cotswald area of England, the unit was quartered on the Palmer Estate adjacent to the Village Square. LT Piddington was billeted in the Manor House.

LT Piddington was trained along with all the officers at the Royal Armored Tactical School at Brasenow College, Oxford University.

## **NORTH AFRICA**

On December 24, 1942, the unit sailed from Glasgow, Scotland for Algiers aboard the H.M.S. Straithaird and landed at Algiers the morning of January 3, 1943.

After several days in the El Biar section of Algiers observing the nightly Luftwaffe bombing, the unit moved 18 miles south to Douera on January 10. The unit was assigned as security for the Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ). While the AFHQ was located in the St. George Hotel in Algiers, the unit was responsible for 24-hour patrols, seven days a week, for a radius of 120 miles around Algiers.

The unit also provided escort service and security to King George V, Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt, Generals Marshall, Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, Truscott, and British Generals Alexander and Anderson.

On January 17, the unit responded to German paratroopers landing near Palestro (25 miles southeast of Algiers) successfully.

LT Piddington was involved in training units of the Free French Army in North Africa. He was promoted to Captain on February 3, 1943.

November 30 finally saw the unit renamed to the 117<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Squadron Reconnaissance (Mechanized). December 30, the unit received orders requiring a forced march of 1000 miles to Marrakech, French Morocco to provide security for Winston Churchill's meeting with General DeGaulle. Leaving Douera at 19:30 hours, the convoy reached the objective in only 51 hours.

Returning to Morocco, the unit was attached to the 85<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and on February 6 arrived at Foret De La Malta, east of Oran, for Invasion Training. In late April 1944, the unit was attached to the 5<sup>th</sup> Army and ordered to embark for Naples, Italy.

## **ITALY**

At this time, CPT Piddington boarded the troop ship, H.M.S. Strath-Naver and May 10 set sail for Naples harbor. Arriving on May 16, the 90-ship convoy had survived four JU88 bombers that had attacked the convoy on May 12.

The unit was assigned to the frontline near the mouth of the Garigliano River. Two days later, the unit was moved in the area at Itri and Sperlonga to secure the crossings of the Amaseno River and maintain contact with the enemy forces.

On May 25, 1944, CPT Piddington, in command of "A" Troop, took Terracina and ran into strong German resistance at Sezze. The Troop took Sezze after two hard days of combat.

The following is from CPT Piddington's own writing. He earned his first Purple Heart during the action described below.

*"Prior to crossing the IP at 0300 hours, the troops were fed, eggs any way you like them, (If you can believe that), and I gathered my officers under a tree, away from the troops to talk over the forthcoming mission and relax a bit before we kicked off. In the still dark early hours, "A" Troop, with its 2nd Platoon in the lead took Terracina and advanced aggressively north against sporadic small arms fire. Just south of the mountainous village of Sezza, near the Pontine Marshes, the 3rd Platoon was bogged at a bridge over a dry creek; a bridge they believed to be mined. I took a patrol forward to determine what was holding things up and to get them moving. While walking point with Maj. Bob McGarry we were hit with a heavy concentration of machine gun fire from the ridge beyond. Both McGarry and I were hit. We managed to work our way to cover from where we were able to bring assault gun fire to bear on the ridge. In addition, we called up a Platoon of "F" Company tanks which then overran the enemy positions." (It is of interest that while this was going on, General Keyes had visited the "A" Troop CP and inquired as to the whereabouts of*

*the Troop Commander. Sgt. Bryant Casterline answered that he was up front with the lead Platoon to which the General replied "Good" and left.)*

*Col. Hodge relieved Captain Piddington because of his wounds and replaced him with Captain Mario Zecca. Piddington was then driven to the Squadron First Aid Station in his Command Jeep by his radio operator, T/4 Bill Coddington. On the way, the jeep capsized and rolled over twice killing Coddington instantly. The Captain received lacerations to his head and face and numerous other bruises to his already wounded body. (Relative to the above mission, the Squadron Daily Report for the day indicates that two were killed in the above action. Captain Piddington says it was instead two wounded as just related. He also adds for the record that: " Major Robert F. McGarry was one of the most courageous, outstanding officers he has known in and outside of the U.S. Army".)*

By July 24, CPT Piddington was returned to duty and assigned to the headquarters of the unit. The main task was planning for the Southern France invasion.

## **SOUTHERN FRANCE**

CPT Piddington was reassigned as "A" Troop commander 24 hours before the invasion. The relieved commander had become hospitalized with malaria. CPT Piddington and his "A" Troop loaded the USS Achernar and put to sea at 12:30 hours on August 13.

The unit landed on August 15, 1944 on D-Day for the southern France invasion. CPT Piddington's "A" Troop landed at Green Beach at 10:00 hours near Frags (in the vicinity of St. Raphael). Working on the right flank of the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the Troop pushed ahead against stiffening resistance.

On 17 August, near Le Muy, France, CPT Piddington's Troopers made contact with the paratroopers who had landed before dawn on D-Day.

On 19 August, CPT Piddington's Troopers engaged in a firefight for an enemy held bridge near les Mees. The bridge was taken and then the Troop pushed on to Chateau-Amoux. Following another firefight, the entire garrison of 180 Germans were taken prisoner.

During this time, the French resistance fighters (the "Maquis") were cooperating more with the 117<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.

As part of Task Force Butler, CPT Piddington was ordered to proceed to the town of Gap and beyond. However, his Troop ran into heavy resistance in the town. The German garrison decided to surrender after being assured that the Maquis would not take the 1,500 German soldiers into captivity.

From the 117<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized) in World War II, on August 22:

*At 1030 hours an enemy column moving north along the Rhone, swung east at Montelimar and tried to penetrate "A" Troop's position but was routed and partially destroyed by Troop "A" which at this time was reinforced with six Sherman tanks and a section of Tank Destroyers. This situation was finally closed late in the afternoon. At 1500 hours, the 3rd Platoon of Troop "A" was surrounded one half mile west of Cleon. The platoon was able to extricate itself, and after disabling its weapons, radios and vehicles, took to the hills on foot. Heavy artillery fire directed by air liaison was responsible for breaking up and routing the column after it had been turned from the Squadron position by fire-fights. At nightfall the Platoon, which had gone into the hills, was still out of contact. There were no casualties on this date. It was during this period that we first encountered the 11th Panzer Division which was protecting the east flank of the retreating German 19th army as it made its way north in valley along the Rhone River. (Riviera to the Rhine tells of the above German action and adds that the main force of the enemy then regrouped south of the Rubion River, advanced nine miles east and swung north, advancing on Puy St. Martin and Marsanne, behind Butlers defenses. They took Puy, cutting the American supply line to Crest and Sisteron and endangering Butler's CP which was in Marsanne. By chance, the "A" Troop column returning from Gap ran into this developing situation. The Troop had just turned south from Crest when they came in behind the German column. The Troop Commander, (Captain Piddington), realizing the implications of the German advance, organized a tank infantry attack into Puy. (The infantry were Stack's 36th Division forces, who, as luck would have it, were just returning from Croix Haute Pass.) While Sherman tank fire blocked roads leading from Puy to Marsanne, the unit from Gap cleared Puy that evening destroying ten German vehicles, but suffering no casualties.)*

The action of CPT Piddington here on August 22, 1944, likely averted a disaster for the American army.

On August 23, "A" with a Company of medium tanks and two tank destroyers supported by several hundred Maquis, covered the left or southern flank and the southeastern front. At approximately 0900 hours, a hostile column following the

same route as on the day before, penetrated "A" Troop's position but was turned and practically destroyed by 1400 hours.

CPT Piddington took "A" Troop to Apres and report to the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The rest of August, his Troop operated near the Italian border with Task Force Bilbo.

By September 1, CPT Piddington was returning back to the 117<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.

## ALL OUT BATTLE AND CAPTURE

On 2 September, CPT Piddington's troopers were at Marboz and preparing to assault Montrevel. General Truscott, commander of VI Corps, ordered Montrevel to be "seized and held". On 3 September at 07:00 hours, the troopers were in Montrevel and in a serious firefight with tanks and infantry. By 10:00 hours, the Troopers were surrounded by a large German force. Reinforcements could not break thru to the surrounded "A" and "B" Troops.

The letter at right from *Armor September-October 1994* best describes the desperate situation that resulted in CPT Piddington's capture.

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**Captain Thomas Piddington** photographed in front of his jeep "Ah Viola" toward the city of Digne, August 1944.

Troop B, commanded by CPT John Wood, was ordered to "seize and hold" Montrevel by LTG Lucian Truscott, commanding general of the VI Corps, as part of Task Force Butler. At the time the order was given, Troop B consisted of 124 men, 10 armored cars, and 18 jeeps armed with machine guns or mortars. Troop A, under the command of CPT Thomas Piddington, was 200 miles to the east, patrolling the Italian Border, while Troop C was attached to the 179th Regiment and was stationed 30 miles away in the Meximieux area. LTC Charles Hodge, commander of the 117<sup>th</sup>, protested, but corps headquarters refused to change the order. Troop A was released from border patrol to join in the mission, and drove all night in the rain to reach the squadron headquarters. Unfortunately, the entire troop did not arrive intact, as many vehicles were disabled along the way due to mechanical problems.

Troop B entered Montrevel and captured about 75 German soldiers still in the town. The troop established a defense of the town and waited. The 11th PD responded by sending Bode's Battalion 11, equipped with Mark V Panther Tanks, to counterattack and retake the town. The battle lasted all day, with many heroic acts performed by the members of the squadron in attempting to defend the town. A number of decorations were awarded for these actions, including a number of DSCs and the Medal of Honor. Requests for reinforcements were denied, and the squadron was left to its own by the corps. In the end, the Germans captured 102 Americans, including 31 wounded. LTC Hodge, in his memoirs, writes, "It is noteworthy to note here that the commanding general of the 11th Panzer Division sent me a message through the doctor we had left in Montrevel. The CG said, 'We just don't believe that there is a small armored force here. We believe it is a big operation, and when we found out that it is only a squadron, we were utterly amazed, and would you please convey my congratulations to your commanding officer, who is putting up the strongest fight we have had in the war'."



The following is from CPT Piddington in his own words describing the events surrounding his capture and the intense battle on September 3, 1944.

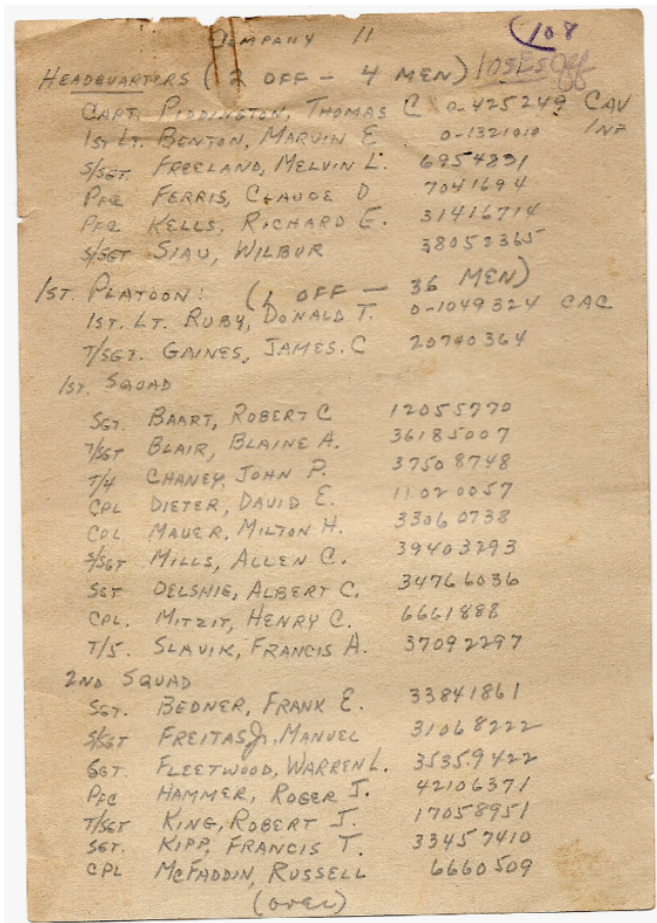
CPT (then) Tom Piddington, CO A Troop "The next day, Troop A received a new mission-screen and protect the right flank of the 45th Infantry Division. This was in the vicinity of Briancon near the Italian border. We became part of a task force under a LTC Bilbo. We spent about 12 days in this location. We were placed in a very poor position and almost lost the whole task force when the Germans attacked, swarming down from the high mountains. Troop A persevered as usual. That action split Troop A because we were spread over a twenty mile front. Eventually, we came together safe and sound. After this action, we were required to report to Squadron somewhere near St. Arnaud east of Montrevel. We arrived late at night on the 2nd of September after a forced march of 250 miles in one day. The column was spread out for miles -mainly maintenance problems. We needed every conceivable supply. A small task force under the command of Major Bob McGarry consisted of Capt. Wood's Troop B and Troop A in support. The mission was to attack Montrevel at dawn on the 3rd of September 1944. All reports from Troop B's scouts indicated that the 11th Panzer Division was on the east side of the Rhone River in force. 6th Corps Headquarters denied these reports. Col. Hodge pleaded With 6th Corps to call off this ridiculous mission. This request was to no avail. I was with Hodge when he raised hell with the Corps Chief of Staff about this to-be sure of fatal attack. In a talk with Bill Luty, who scouted the 11th Panzer force, he indicated we wouldn't survive this one. I had to agree, but also Wood and I knew we had to get on with our mission -regardless of the results. We had to do our best. Troop B took Montrevel on schedule. Troop A outposted about 20 miles of roadway to Montrevel in order to keep a line of communication open. Troop B's wounded were evacuated immediately. Capt. Wood called me for assistance. I told McGarry that I would go in with LTCronin's platoon (about one section is all we could muster). Just as we entered the edge of town, our rear was closed by 88 tank shelling. We never did get it open again. Unfortunately we were trapped in town. It was a cardinal rule of mine -never stay in a town. It was too easy to be trapped. We tried all kinds of things such as two armored cars abreast firing 37MM salvos, laying mines (with no caps available) to delay the enemy in their approaches to our position and use of German weapons. However, the casualties were piling up. With Wood's agreement, I asked, on a voluntary basis, LT Cronin to make and escape in his armored car to our lines and tell Hodge the real story of Montrevel. Cronin, a very brave officer, dashed through the enemy lines in a hair-raising, wild ride. He made it. We ended up in the school house, a sturdy thick walled building capable of withstanding heavy gun fire. It ended up that all personnel were on the business end of some kind of weapon. CPT Wood and I manned a LMG. I fed the last rounds into his gun. We were firing at the slits of a Panther tank, about 40 to 50 yards from our position in the school building. The Germany infantry was in the ditches along side of the tanks -ready for the final assault on the schoolbuilding. We were down to our last bullets. An 88 MM shell missed Wood and me by inches as it caused four more casualties in the building. CPT Wood, a very fine officer decided this was it. No more bloodshed. Thereafter, we were captured by the 11th Panzer Division. The great Patton never did defeat this division. However, the German Regimental Commander, responsible for destroying Montrevel, Pointed out that our outfit was the toughest unit he had ever encountered. This German unit spent 3 years on the Russian Front. We had

been fighting crack troops for many days. As prisoners, we marched out as proud Americans. The Germans looked out for the dead and wounded. In days to come, several of our people escaped when Corps artillery caused them to take cover. LT Padraig O'Dea was like a nurse to me when I was so very ill, prior to an operation by a German surgeon. In addition, some wonderful Catholic Nuns at the local hospital of Limburg, Germany, helped me to survive. I eventually ended up in Poland after an operation due to a lack of water and food. I was lucky, I finally returned home in June 1945." Colonel Tom Piddington served post war, becoming CO of the 50th Recon BN and later in the Army Guard Bureau, Washington DC as a Colonel. LT(then) Padraig O'Dea, XO, Troop

CPT Piddington noted in the above his operation at Stalag XII-A in Limburg, Germany. (The hospital still operates today on the Limburg Lahnufer as The St. Vincenz Hospital. During WWII, the Sisters of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul provided nursing and pastoral care in the hospital.) He arrived at OFLAG 64 on December 31, 1944.

It is not clear when CPT Piddington arrived from the Long March to Stalag III-A at Luckenwalde. The senior United States Army commander at the camp had organized the enlisted men and officers into a functional unit prior to the Germans abandoning the camp and the Russians arriving. CPT Piddington was selected to be the company commander for company #11 in the 2nd Battalion of the United States Prisoner of War. See below the duty roster as compiled by LT Thomas Wingate, Battalion Adjutant.

On April 1, 1945, CPT Piddington, LT Albert F. Miller Jr., and LT Bill Frodsham presented LT Thomas H. Wingate a birthday gift. These men had all been at OFLAG 64 together. See the following picture of the gift and accompanying note signed by CPT Piddington.







It is also not clear how CPT Piddington was liberated back to Allied lines. He may have left thru the wire and found his way back across the Elbe River as many had. Or he may have had to wait longer until the Allies worked a deal with the Russians a few weeks later to be free from the camp. (The National Archives lists his return to Allied control as June 12, 1945 which would likely indicate he had to wait for the Allies to negotiate with the Russians.)

His military awards include two Purple Hearts.

### **RETURN TO THE STATES**

Returning to the United States, he worked at E.B. Latham Company in Newark, New Jersey.

CPT Piddington returned to serve in the 50<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Squadron of the New Jersey National Guard in 1950 as the Battalion Commander. Incidentally, this location was the same Westfield Armory where CPT Piddington started his military career in 1937 as a Private. He later was recalled to active duty in 1957 in the National Guard Bureau in Washington, D.C. as National Guard Advisor for the Army. Later, he graduated from Command and General Staff College in 1961.

Retiring as COL Piddington in 1965, he eventually made his home in Spring Hill, Florida and later in coastal North Carolina. He was an active and past commander with the Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 16-07. Thomas Piddington served as a member and on the Board of Directors of the Colington Volunteer Fire Department also.

## **REMEMBERING COMRADES**

COL Piddington visited Châfâteau-Arnoux, France, in June 1984, where he met the gendarme, Max Bossert, who had guided him 40 years earlier.

In October 1996, COL Piddington returned to southern France to visit battle locations. (In 1946, the 117<sup>th</sup> Cavalry was awarded the Croix Guerre avec Palme for their actions there.)

It is clear that COL Piddington was fearless, an excellent leader, and valued service to others and country.

He never forgot those whom he served with. An example is Sgt Michael Aun. This is from Sgt Aun's son:

*It was not until after his death that I heard the story of the Silver Star from his commanding officer, the late Ret. Col. Thomas C. Piddington. On July 9, 1998, Col. Piddington wrote to the Aun family after learning of my dad's death. "I was a Captain of Troop A on the 22nd day of August 1944," he wrote. "We ran into a heavy German force at Mantelimar, France. That was the day Mike won the Silver Star for bravery."*

COL Piddington died at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina on January 10, 2001 at the age of 86.



Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer David Little