

Exploits Of The Golden Arrow

By Gary Knehans

Though officially designated the 8th, this renowned army division was commonly called the Golden Arrow Division, owing to its insignia design. Reactivated in July, 1940, the division came to Fort Leonard Wood in the autumn of 1942 as part of an intensive training effort to prepare its troops for fighting the rugged German army in World War II. Although motorized for a short period of time, the 8th once again became a standard infantry division in May, 1943, a few months after it left Fort Leonard Wood.

The division was transported to near Belfast, Northern Ireland, in December of that year. There, the infantrymen received special training in small unit tactics. German tactics were studied extensively. Additionally, all troops underwent elementary amphibious training. General Dwight D. Eisenhower inspected 8th Division forces the following spring, as did General George S. Patton. Both commanders found the division to be ready for the long awaited invasion of France sometime that summer.

Despite this, invasion plans subsequently developed did not place the 8th Division among the initial landing forces. Instead, troops of this division came into play about a month later, when the Allies needed to expand their tenuous toehold in France against fierce German resistance.

On the evening of July 3rd, 1944, soldiers of the 8th were placed aboard transports for the dangerous trip over the English Channel. Around midnight, the nervous troops came within view of thousands of red anti-aircraft tracers and saw distant flashes of artillery. In the early minutes and hours of the Fourth of July, these military fireworks gave special meaning to the soldiers' pending mission.

When morning came, the infantrymen scrambled into landing barges and went ashore. They stacked the full packs and heavy duffel bags they were lugging and marched up from the beach to their assembly area near rubble-strewn Monteburg. What the soldiers viewed along the way made them even more nervous and anxious. Acres of poppy fields were loaded with mines and the wreckage of Allied gliders.

Less than 48 hours later, the division was engaged in its first action. On the night of July 7th, soldiers of the Golden Arrow relieved Allied forces near La Haye du Puits. Under the leadership of Field Marshal Rommel, the German army was tenaciously fighting to

keep invasion forces bottled up in Normandy.

As part of the attacking force, the 8th Division punched a hole in the German defense at the Ay River line. Allied armor poured through the opening, leaving the 8th with mopping up duties through Coutances to Avranches. Division forces encountered stiff resistance at Rennes, the original capital of Brittany, but eventually prevailed. For the most part, this victory virtually sealed off the Brittany Peninsula.

After the 121st Infantry captured Dinard near St. Malo, fighters of the 8th Division closed in on the fortress of Brest. The attackers encountered every possible defensive tactic the fertile German mind could conceive, but eventually shattered this strategic port city's outer fortress, leaving other units the task of solidifying control over Brest.

But the Germans still controlled the Crozon Peninsula, south of Brest Harbor. Soldiers of the 8th were transported there in an attempt to wrest control from the tenacious defenders. Here again, the Germans fought bitterly for every inch of territory; but the Golden Arrow Division completed the mission in three days, capturing General Herman Bernhard Ramcke in the process. Ramcke was the commanding general of all the German paratroops, and had achieved fame as the Nazi general who led forces of the Reich to victory on Crete earlier in the war.

The victorious 8th was sent to Luxembourg for a short period of time. There, participating in a holding action, the soldiers had some time to rest and recuperate. As it turned out, they needed every minute of this respite. Their next mission was to attack entrenched German forces in the Hurtgen Forest.

Many historians say this theater of action presented some of the harshest conditions encountered by any American unit in World War II. The Germans had carpeted the forest with thousands of land mines. Immense numbers of artillery and mortars were zeroed in on every parcel of the terrain. And the Germans held all the high ground to thwart any attempt by the Allies to outflank them.

Despite this and bitterly cold conditions that further favored the Wehrmacht, soldiers of the 8th Division managed to break through the forest. The 121st Regiment captured the town of Hurtgen. The next towns to fall were Grosschau, Brandenburg, and Bergstein. The Germans viciously counterattacked at Bergstein, but could not retake



VICTORIOUS SOLDIERS OF THE 8TH DIVISION COMING HOME. Courtesy of the Fort Leonard Wood History Office.

it.

After an heroic crossing of the swollen Roer River, the 8th Division attacked a strong German force at Duren. For perhaps the last time in the war, the Luftwaffe was sent out in force in an effort to stop the Allied advance. It was a futile act, as the city could not withstand the determined Golden Arrow attack.

But the victors had little time to celebrate. Advancing at a break-neck pace across the Cologne plain, soldiers of the 8th raced to the Rhine, sweeping through some twenty towns and villages, including Stockheim, Blatzheim, Modrath, Frechen, and Marienberg. Riding with armor, the 13th took part in the clearance of Cologne.

The banks of the Rhine offered an inviting place for the 8th Division to briefly rest before its next campaign. The soldiers then crossed over the Rhine and joined up with the First Army's steel loop around the Ruhr. Then, going on attack, the 8th became the first division to cross the Sieg River, encountering extremely stiff resistance from the Germans, who mounted 19 savage counterattacks. After ten days of brutal fighting, the Golden Arrow Division finally punched through the Sieg defense line. Racing 45 miles in eight days to the Ruhr River, members of the 8th cut the German forces in two and captured more than 50,000 prisoners.

For the remainder of the war, the 8th Division was allied with the 2nd

British Army. This combined force drove east beyond the Elbe River into northern Germany, capturing 244,000 prisoners and eventually linking up with the Russians.

Hundreds of German prisoners told interrogators that 8th Division artillery fire was the most terrible they had ever encountered, even in Africa and on the eastern front. This came as the result of the division's tactic of concentrating four to eleven battalions on a single target and of displacing forward rapidly to support swiftly advancing infantrymen.

Division artillery fire in the Roer River assault included a thunderous 45-minute barrage that destroyed most of the city of Duren and areas to its south. During the battle for Brest, the 8th Division massed 96 guns on a single target at Lambazellec Ridge.

In ten months of fighting, the Golden Arrow Division captured 316,187 prisoners, one of the best records compiled by any division in the American army. Soldiers of the division proved very adaptable, learning tough hedgerow fighting very quickly, battering the nearly impenetrable fortifications of Brest, adjusting to the harsh wintry realities of Hurtgen Forest, and outracing the German defenders in the concluding days of the war.

The 8th Division was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood following the war.