

Cutler, Elliott C. Jr. Interview (with Woolfey) 6-24-78

[Speaker 1]

Hello everyone, this is Frank Musidola, State Street Road, Auburn, New York. I was a former Tech Sergeant in the 76th Infantry Division, United States Army, having served with Company I of the 304th Infantry Regiment from June 1942 at Fort Meade, Maryland to August 1945 in Germany, when the 76th was deactivated and its men assigned to other units. I am at present the historian of the 304th Infantry Regiment Association.

The date is June 24, 1978. I am speaking to you from the Thayer Hotel at West Point Military Academy, West Point, New York, where the 76th Infantry Division is holding its 31st annual reunion. In a few moments, I will be talking with our former Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Francis A.

Wolfley, now retired from the Army. I will also be speaking with Elliot C. Cutler, Jr., former Captain and S3 in the 1st Battalion of the 385th Infantry Regiment, who later served as head of the Electrical Engineering Department at West Point Military Academy with a rank of Colonel, having only recently retired as Brigadier General. General Cutler has been the Secretary-Treasurer of the 76th Infantry Division Association for the past eight years. We're going to be talking about the World War II accomplishments of the 76th Division and some of its post-war activities. Gentlemen, it is good to see you again.

General Wolfley, as the former Assistant Division Commander of the 76th, you undoubtedly know more about our division than anyone. In view of the role played by the 76th Infantry Division in shape and history in Europe during World War II, this conversation should serve not only as a perpetual oral history of this great division to future generations, but also as a memorial to all of the men that ever served with the 76th Division. General Wolfley, how old are you now?

On April 30th of this year, I reached the age of 85. God bless you. You look great.

You came to the 76th Division from Camp Swift, Texas, where you were Regimental Commander of the 377th Infantry Regiment of the 95th Division. You initiated a tough physical fitness training program while with this regiment. However, before it was able to be completely implemented, you were assigned to the 76th Division at Fort Meade, Maryland, as its Assistant Division Commander.

Your same ideas on physical fitness were introduced in the 76th Division. Physical fitness training for the military has been, at times, a controversial subject. General Wolfley, what are your thoughts on physical fitness in relation to combat readiness of the soldier?

[Speaker 2]

Physical fitness is absolutely essential to the combat readiness of a soldier. This statement applies to all branches of the Armed Forces, but applies with greatest force to the infantry soldier who does most of the grueling tasks in combat.

[Speaker 1]

The 76th Infantry Division was officially activated at Fort Meade, Maryland, in June of 1942, under the command of Major General Emil F. Reinhardt, who achieved world fame in 1945

as leader of the 69th Division, first West Front unit to make contact with the Russians at the Elbe River. In December of 1942, the command of the 76th Division was assumed by Major General William R.

Schmidt, who also led it through combat. General Wolfley, what was the very first training mission assigned the 76th?

[Speaker 2]

On June 15, 1942, the 76th Infantry Division was reactivated as a replacement division by a cadre furnished by the 1st Infantry Division. Its initial mission was a training of replacements. It served as a replacement division until March of 1943, when it was given the status of a combat division.

[Speaker 1]

In July of 1943, the division went from Fort Meade, Maryland, to A.P. Hill Military Reservation in Virginia. What was the 76th Division mission here?

[Speaker 2]

Training facilities at Fort Meade were limited. They were adequate only for basic training. A.P. Hill Military Reservation offered the nearest area available for field training. Unit tactical training was a mission assigned to 76th Infantry Division during its stay at A.P. Hill Military Reservation.

[Speaker 1]

From A.P. Hill in September of 1943, the division was moved back to Fort Meade in Maryland, and then from there to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin in October of 1943. General Wolfley, what was the new mission of the 76th while at Camp McCoy?

[Speaker 2]

The training mission of the 76th at Camp McCoy was the completion of its field training, with special emphasis upon tactical training of the combined arms. In addition, the division took over from the 2nd Division its winter training mission, which required that all training be accomplished outdoors during the severe winter weather of northern Wisconsin and Michigan. Operations under these conditions required the clothing and equipment of a special nature.

The rucksack replaced the infantry pack, and with all the survival gear needed to keep alive, a much heavier load was imposed upon the foot soldier. Archless clumsy shoe packs replaced the marching shoes to protect their feet from the cold, and skis and snowshoes were necessary in moving over deep snow.

[Speaker 1]

In February of 1944, the division went from Camp McCoy to Watersmeet, Michigan, where it engaged in extensive winter warfare maneuvers in subzero weather conditions. This was a complete departure from all previous training. General Wolfley, what was happening to the division now?

[Speaker 2]

In the Watersmeet area, the division conducted a series of winter maneuvers consisting of four two-sided exercises. During these maneuvers, all participation personnel lived outdoors in the snow without tinnage or overhead cover. This, in spite of subzero temperatures, which during the exercises dropped as low as 28 below zero Fahrenheit.

Men slept on the snow in their arctic sleeping bags, behind windbreaks constructed of hemlock bars. Feeding during these winter maneuvers presented problems. Heated shelters were necessary in which to serve hot food, since boiling coffee or hot food placed in a soldier's metal mesquite was frozen before he could eat it or drink it.

In spite of the severe weather, our health record during the winter maneuvers was exceedingly good.

[Speaker 1]

The 76 returned to Camp McCoy in March 1944, continuing advanced combat training. It left McCoy in November 1944 for Camp Milestandish, Massachusetts, and sailed from the Boston port of embarkation for its overseas assignment on Thanksgiving Day. Did you have any doubts about the combat readiness of the 76 at this time?

[Speaker 2]

In answering this question, let me first say that most of my Army service has been devoted to the command and training of infantry. I had served as director of training at the infantry school and had participated in the development of training requirements for combat. I felt that I knew the requirements for combat readiness, and I had no doubts whatever concerning the combat readiness of the 76th Infantry Division.

[Speaker 1]

The 76th Division landed in England on December 4, 1944 and billeted in the Bournemouth area on the English Channel. While waiting to cross the channel, the division maintained its combat readiness by engaging in physical conditioning and never-ending maintenance of arms and equipment. What was the morale of the troops at this time?

[Speaker 2]

Some division troops were hardened by long physical training. They were experts in the use of their weapons. They had confidence in themselves and in their leaders.

They had been well cared for and thoroughly trained. All of these things contributed to a very high state of morale as they waited to call for actual combat.

[Speaker 1]

On January 10, 1945, the 76 crossed the channel and landed in Le Havre, France. From this point, the division was moved to the vicinity of Limsey, north of Rouen. The weather in northern France, as I recall it, was miserably cold.

Keeping warm, especially your feet, was foremost in the minds of the troops. General Wolfley, did the division lose many men to weather conditions during this period?

[Speaker 2]

Our troops had been conditioned to withstand adverse weather conditions during our winter training at Camp McCoy. We did have some losses from frozen feet during truck movements, but our losses to disease and adverse weather condition were relatively small.

[Speaker 1]

From the Limsey area, the 76 division headed for Belgium, where the reduction of the bulge was still in progress. Arriving in Belgium, the troops were concentrated around the Bastogne and Champlonne area of the Ardines Forest. A day or so later, we headed for Luxembourg, where the 76 dug in and was committed to the defense of this country.

Whereas all previous missions were of a training nature, we probably now received our first combat mission. What was this mission while in Luxembourg?

[Speaker 2]

Upon arrival in Luxembourg, the 76th Infantry Division relieved the 87th Infantry Division and took over their defensive missions west and south of the Sauer River. The missions assigned to 76 were twofold. First, the improvement of the defensive organization and defensive positions held, and second, preparation for a forced crossing of the Sauer River and an attack on the Siegfried Line.

[Speaker 1]

After arriving in Luxembourg, the 76th Division, relieving the 87th, deployed along the Sauer River facing Germany and the Siegfried Line with the 417th on the left flank in the vicinity of Echternach, the 304th in the center in the vicinity of Dickweiler, and the 385th on the right in the vicinity of Wasserbillig. As I remember it, Echternach was the extreme left flank of General von Rundstedt's German drive west through the Ardines. General Wolfley, do you remember in miles how long of a front was the domain of the 76th Division in this deployment?

[Speaker 2]

The frontage of the 76th Division in this instance was approximately 15 miles, a very wide frontage which made it necessary to put all three infantry regiments in line.

[Speaker 1]

In order to gain knowledge of the enemy facing the 76th Division in the Siegfried Line, extensive patrolling activities, both day and night, were undertaken. Did division headquarters learn much about the enemy with these patrols?

[Speaker 2]

We gained some valuable information through the use of the patrols you mentioned, but their usefulness was somewhat limited by their rapidly flowing Sauer River, which was at flood stage during the entire period of our operation. In addition, the areas along both sides of the river were heavily mined, which greatly restricted the operations of patrols.

[Speaker 1]

The 304th Infantry Regiment of the 76th had organized a volunteer combat patrol named the Tiger Patrol, trained and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Guy Emery, 304th Regimental Executive Officer. After several missions in and around Steinheim, Luxembourg,

this patrol, as I recall it, suffered casualties to the point of making its future use ineffective. Did the Tiger Patrol, while it lasted, prove useful to the 76th?

[Speaker 2]

There was considerable hostile patrol activities in the 304th Infantry Sector, and the patrolling by the 304th, such as the Tiger Patrol you mentioned, did much to offset the hostile patrol activity. However, due to numerous unmarked minefields in the area, we had many casualties as a result of our patrol activity. Lieutenant Colonel Guy Emery himself was among the large number of casualties that we suffered because of these unmarked minefields.

[Speaker 1]

In the foxhole areas of Luxembourg, I personally never encountered any civilian population, and the reasons are obvious. However, in the rear areas, it may have been different. What help, if any, did the local population in Luxembourg give the 76th Division?

[Speaker 2]

The local population in Luxembourg was most helpful in supplying information to the German positions. In particular, we learned from this source some detailed information concerning the reinforced concrete fortress at the junction of the Pomme and Nimes River near Erre. In planning our attack, we avoided this strongly held area and were able to take it by attacks from the flank and rear.

[Speaker 1]

Artillery duels with the enemy were a daily occurrence while in Luxembourg. The record states that the 76th Division artillery commanded by Brigadier General Henry C. Evans fired over 100,000 rounds by the end of the war.

General Wolfley, whenever any of the regiments of the 76th called for artillery support, was it always available to them.

[Speaker 2]

One of the most gratifying things about our 400-mile drive into central Germany was the close support our infantry received from our division artillery. General Henry Evans and I saw the light. We believed in keeping well forward and doing operations while we were in close touch with the fighting units.

We also kept in close touch with each other, which permitted us to coordinate infantry and artillery operations. Let me repeat, the supporting fires of our division artillery under General Evans left nothing to be desired. It was superb.

[Speaker 1]

Most of the guys that I remember were thankful for that. The Allied drive into Germany and the Siegfried Line took place at 0100 on February 7, 1945. The mission of establishing a bridgehead over the Sauer River was given to the 5th Division and the 417th Regiment of the 76th Division, which now had become part of the celebrated 3rd Army commanded by General George S.

Patton. General Wolfley, since the 76th Division had not yet been tested in the attack, how did it come about that this relatively green division had been assigned such an important mission?

[Speaker 2]

At a conference with Major General Stafford Roy Irwin, known to his compatriots as Red Irwin, who commanded the 5th Division, General Irwin reminded us that the 5th Division suffered heavy casualties and that its ranks had been filled with raw replacements. He insisted that the 76th Division was perhaps better able to make the crossing than was the 5th Division. Subsequent events proved that General Irwin was right.

[Speaker 1]

The Sauer River bridgehead was successfully established and the remainder of the 76th crossed over. The 385th Regiment of the 76th Division, commanded by Colonel O. P.

Bragan, was credited with capturing the largest pillbox in the Siegfried Line. Called a Katzenkopf by the Germans or the cat's head, it was a three-story bunker. General Cutler, you were with the 385th Regiment at that time.

Can you tell us a little about this fortification?

[Speaker 3]

It was located on the nose of a ridge overlooking the German town of Burel. It had one or more entrances at the base of the ridge and also connected with the interior of a railroad tunnel that ran through the ridge. I've heard that it had three levels of compartments and rooms in there.

I was told that there was a fully equipped aid station and many rooms and that at the top there was a turret that contained a rapid fire mortar that could spread mortar shells around in a defensive ring around the fort. It was a key fortification, certainly.

[Speaker 1]

Was it true? I don't remember now, but was this the command post of the entire Siegfried Line? Do you recall?

[Speaker 3]

I don't know that it was a command post.

[Speaker 1]

Do you recall that, General?

[Speaker 2]

It was not, no.

[Speaker 1]

It was not.

[Speaker 2]

It was an important part of the defenses, I'll predict or not.

[Speaker 1]

I thought that the Siegfried Line at least was commanded from that pillbox. I don't think the whole line was. All right, okay.

The next major objective of the 76th Division, as I recall it, was the crossing of the Keel River. The 304th Regiment of the 76th, commanded by Colonel Wallace A. Choquet, was assigned the task of getting across the river and establishing a bridgehead.

This crossing took place at midnight of March 3, 1945. In General Patton's memoirs, War As I Knew It, the crossing of the Keel River by the 76th Division was mentioned as a Third Army objective. General Wolfley, up to this point, we had crossed several rivers.

What was so important about the Keel River crossing?

[Speaker 2]

That calls for a rather long story. The Keel River was not the tremendous obstacle that the Sower River had been, but it was a deep stream with precipitous banks, and its bridges had all been destroyed, and it was defended. The crossing of this river was important, for here was a chance for the Germans to slow down or advance to the Rhine.

Just before we reached the Keel, our infantry had been motorized and combined with the 702nd Tank Battalion and other special units to form Task Force Onouye. Task Force Onouye was stopped by this obstacle, with its bridges destroyed. East of Eidenheim, our Divisional Combat Engineers were struggling to put in a bailey bridge in the face of fire from the heights opposite the bridge site.

There, I met Major General Manton Eddy, the 12th Corps commander, who was hot and bothered because we hadn't gotten anyone across the Keel River. Tell me, Wolfley, he said, what the hell is the matter? I replied just as frankly as he had stated his question.

Your headquarters stopped us when they took our organic transportation to motorize the infantry, and when they hung all those tanks around our neck. This is a river crossing situation, an infantry job. General Eddy was an old doughboy.

He thought for a moment, then he said, you were dead right, Wolfley. This river didn't look so big on the map. But I want to get going.

What can we do? Then I told him that the 304th Infantry had just been pinched out, and are moving for arrest to positions in reserve, that he could hold Task Force Onouye in reserve, make a crossing with the 304th, and seize a bridgehead, put in bridges, and push Onouye across. General Eddy asked when this 304th could cross.

I told him that we could cross that night, that I would alert Colonel Shulkett at once, if he would call General Smith and tell him what was wanted. General Eddy approved the plan. I contacted Colonel Shulkett.

He crossed that night, a surprising crossing, a surprise crossing at the most difficult point when attack was not expected. Pushed forward rapidly to Odenhofer, and just as dawn was breaking, catching Germans still asleep, completely surprising them and capturing 250 Germans. Bridges were put in, with little or no opposition, and Onouye rolled on its way.

How well I remember.