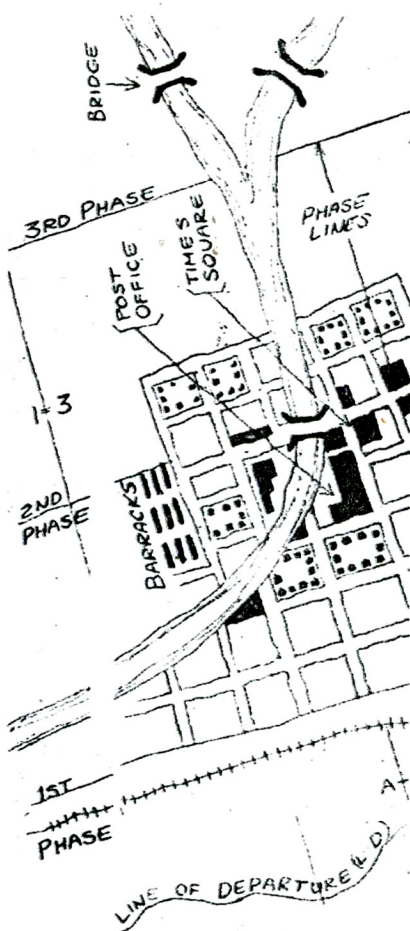


CORONET

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BLUEPRINT *for an Attack*



by HOWARD WHITMAN

Most reporters pass over the importance and drama of pre-battle meetings for the more spectacular copy of the fight itself. But the nature of war being what it is, they are doing a disservice by not mentioning what goes into an advance besides the tanks and planes and men. Here Howard Whitman tells this story. The characters in the piece and the town of Guersten are not real—except in so far as they are typical of millions of Yanks and a thousand objectives where we are fighting and have fought. The map above, incidentally, will help give a graphic idea of Col. Ainsley's instructions.

—THE EDITORS

AS YOU gentlemen know, we've got another shootin' match on for tomorrow morning," said Lieut. Col. Bob Ainsley.

There was a shuffling on the concrete floor of this captured German pillbox, and eight young American infantry officers moved closer around the map table. Four of them were the colonel's staff—his administrative officer, intelligence officer, operations officer and supply officer.

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The other four were Captains George Eggert, Ronnie Wellbaum, Sidney Platkin and Art Walters, captains, respectively, of A, B, C and D companies.

Colonel Ainsley adjusted three of the gasoline lamps so they would throw maximum light on the big map. "It's going to be tough," he said. "But Colonel Willy has arranged with the old man for plenty of support. We're going to have air and artillery, both."

Wellbaum said, "Good show."

"Now, gentlemen," the colonel began, "you got the rough outline of this thing this morning. But there've been a few changes."

Wellbaum fished a notebook out of the chest pocket of his field jacket as the colonel began to run his index finger over the map.

"The Krauts are stretched out pretty thinly along this line, but their reserves are pretty powerful back here. Our own position is solid all along, as you can see."

"The orders call for a general advance in this sector. Now all we've got to worry about is our own battalion."

Colonel Ainsley reviewed what had been decided at the regimental command post. The regiment was holding a line in a woods just before the town of Guersten. That town was to be its objective.

GUERSTEN, according to regimental G-2, was held by about 1,000 German troops, the equivalent of a battalion. So it was decided to hurl the whole regiment (three battalions) against the town, observing the time-proved attack ratio of three to one.

The first battalion was to make a sweep along the left flank of the town, the second battalion would take the right. Together they would establish a perimeter defense, or seal off the town so that the third battalion, Ainsley's, could make a frontal attack on the town itself and mop up all opposition in it.

"What about reserves? Colonel Willy's not committing the whole regiment, is he?"

"In this case, yes. But don't worry. The old man's detached a battalion from Joe Picker's regiment. They'll be our reserves."

"Then as I get it, this town is our own baby," Eggert remarked.

"That's about the size of it,"

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the colonel replied.

The town of Guersten was a small place in a valley, population around 5,000. Its built-up area was 500 yards wide and 800 yards long, stringing along the valley with gradual slopes rising on either side. The woods which marked the American front line thinned out and ended about 600 yards before the town.

"This is our first phase line," Colonel Ainsley said, pointing to the edge of the town, the beginning of the built-up area. "Now what bright ideas have you got for this situation?"

He pointed to a railway roadbed that passed, at an angle, right in front of the town—like a cordon.

Wellbaum spoke up, "Sir, we've got a very bright idea, if you don't mind my saying so. Eggert and Platkin and I have conferred on it, and our three rifle companies are prepared to handle it—provided Walters gives us some cover."

"You're aware that the roadbed has more bouncing babies in it than you'd find at the Folies Bergère?"

"Yes, sir."

Patrols had found the roadbed (the rail line had been knocked out ten days before by Thunderbolts) sown with anti-personnel mines—German "bouncing babies," the kind that fly up waist-high before they explode.

"Fritz has four machine gun positions guarding those mines right in front of the town," Wellbaum continued. "Now here's the pitch. Walters is going to put a lot of mortar fire over the roadbed while we move up. Our own weapons platoons are going to toss what they can with the mortars and we'll put some machine guns in action if we get a chance. We're depending on all this, and a lot of rifle fire, to keep the Krauts down while we work on those mines."

"You're not planning to fish 'em out, are you?" the colonel inquired.

"The fact is," Wellbaum continued, "we're planning to blast those mines out. We're going to give about seventy-five feet of primer cord to a couple of men in each squad. Actually, it will be three strands of primer cord braided together, with a pound charge of TNT at the end. When we reach the roadbed, they throw the cords across, lariat style, and then set the

things off. The concussion detonates Fritz's mines, and each squad goes single file across the roadbed in one of the aisles cleared by the primer cords. Okay?"

"Yeah, that'll work," said the colonel, matter-of-factly. "Now let's review the jump-off." He pulled some mimeographed orders out of a map case.

"Starting at four a.m. we move up to the jump-off area at the edge of the woods. You'll probably hear a lot of artillery, but there won't be any barrage on the town. The old man wants to use this burg as a supply town. H-hour is 6:45. You'll see some white star clusters going up along the line—that's the jump-off signal.

"Now you've got until 7:15 to get over that roadbed and reach the first phase line. Let me know if you get there sooner."

Then everyone reviewed the names they would use on the walkie-talkie, code names because the enemy often knew the names of officers in a particular sector.

Colonel Ainsley was Popeye. Eggert was Frank Sinatra. Wellbaum was Barney Google. Walters was Smokey Joe. And Platkin was Snowwhite. It wouldn't be long before Eggert's walkie-talkie would be crackling, "Frank Sinatra to Popeye. Frank Sinatra to Popeye. Okay, we're on the first phase line. Safe as a bug in a rug. That stunt with the primer cord worked perfectly. Over." At least he hoped he'd be able to say that stunt with the primer cord worked perfectly.

Colonel Ainsley directed attention to the second phase line on the detailed map of Guersten.

"After you reach phase one and report to me, sit tight—remember that. I don't want one company charging into town alone."

"Check," Eggert said.

"Sir, for the second phase I'm planning to work my way straight across 42nd Street to Times Square. Does that jibe with you?" Wellbaum put in.

"Never mind me. How you get there is your own business. That's what you went to OCS for," the colonel said jocularly. "What are your tactics?"

Eggert spoke up. "Well, sir," he said. "I'm going to take A company up the left side of town, keeping visual liaison with the first

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battalion on our left flank. Platkin is to take C company up the right side of town, keeping liaison with the second battalion on the right flank.

"That leaves me making a center rush up 42nd Street," Wellbaum broke in.

"Okay, if that's how you want it. Let's see," said the colonel, running both index fingers across the map, "Wellbaum, you're going to end up in Times Square. Eggert, you'll come out right about here—at the Metropolitan Opera House. And Platkin—let's see, you hit Columbus Circle, don't you?"

"Right, sir."

Already the company commanders had briefed their men on the layout of Guersten, with all the main streets and squares named after places in New York. If a .30 caliber machine gun was to be set up at 57th St. and Fifth Avenue, its crew could have walked into Guersten blindfolded and found that corner.

"Phase two takes you nearly through the town," the colonel explained. "It's an advance of 600 yards to the main thoroughfare—Broadway. After that you've only got 200 yards to go."

"What about that garrison in the barracks? Do we just let them chop us up?" inquired Eggert. He pointed on the map to a military barracks on the left side of town.

"No. Here's the dope," Ainsley went on. "Colonel Willy says the old man is giving us a light artillery battalion for support. That means we've got three batteries of 105 howitzers behind us—twelve guns."

"I thought they were going to save the town," Platkin interjected.

"Here's the ticket. While we're on phase one, they're going to drop a hell of a lot of high-angle fire into that barracks enclosure. They'll lift the fire as soon as we start on phase two. By the time you get there, there shouldn't be much stirring inside those barracks walls."

"But what if there is?"

"Then leave a few mortars to throw stuff in, and by-pass the place. We'll worry about it later."

"After the 105's lift fire, what are they going to do, take a siesta?" asked Platkin.

"Interdiction fire, lad. When they lift off the barracks, they're going to pound the two forks of the

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main road leading out of the rear end of town. We don't want any Kraut reinforcements busting in on our show."

"Good," Wellbaum said softly.

"Have you studied the plans of that post office, Sid?" asked the colonel.

"It's in the bag," Platkin answered. "The floor plan that S-2 got ahold of makes it duck soup."

"How are you planning to work it?"

"Well, sir, since it's cracked up to be the strongest point in town, I've planned to put the entire company on it. One platoon stays in reserve behind these buildings here," he explained, running his finger across the map. "We're going to surround the place, one platoon working up from behind, one in front. That leaves my last platoon for second-story work."

"Good," said the colonel.

"We get up on top of this dairy building next door. Our air photos show it's not more than three feet from the post office roof. Then we play Santa Claus."

PLATKIN WENT on to explain the Santa Claus game. From the floor plans of the post office, which had been captured in a district postal headquarters three days before, he had traced the location of seven fireplaces on the three floors of the building to corresponding chimneys on the roof. His men would simply drop TNT charges and fragmentation grenades down the chimneys into rooms where machine gunners and snipers were holding forth. He had also located two skylights, so that the roof platoon could work its way right down into the building.

"Ready for phase three," said the colonel. "You all know the ultimate objective—this high ground beyond the town. We want to get clear through the town and 500 yards beyond it—to the edge of this slope. That becomes your MLR. Your OPL will be here."

The captains made notes. The MLR, or Main Line of Resistance, was where they would take up positions similar to the positions they now held in the woods this side of the town. The OPL, or Outpost Line, was the line of their fingertips. Every position has fingertips thrust out beyond the main line

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that feel out the strength and location of the enemy.

"Until our positions are stabilized, you'd better have your forward squad leaders set off some yellow smoke grenades. The old man has arranged with the division air officer to give us a squadron of Thunderbolts. They're going to concentrate on two bridges on those forks leading out of town, mainly because we don't want any Kraut armor rushing up to spoil our show. I said we'd give the planes some yellow smoke to mark our front lines, so they don't drop anything on us."

"Check," said Eggert.

"Now I'm scrambling out of here," the colonel went on. "There's some more stuff to iron out with the regiment. You men get together with my staff and work out the details about the rations and equipment you're going to take, and the location of your ammo dumps, water points, gasoline supply, battalion aid stations, communications and the rest of it. Remember, I want plenty of bangalores on this show—that town's full of barbed wire that you can't blast out any other way. Everything jake?"

"If it isn't, it will be by tomorrow morning," Platkin replied.

Walters took the chewing gum out of his mouth and pasted it on the concrete roof of the pillbox. He said, "Yep, I can see it all right in the headlines!" He drew his hands apart in front of him as if making a streamer. "'Yanks Plunge Deeper Into Enemy Territory,' and all our dear countrymen are going to think you just press a button and boom, another town is bagged."

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