

Cook, Marvin G.

Flak Wagon Manned By Northampton County Boys 'Screws Up' Plans Says Nazi Prisoner

FEB 3 1945 ★ ★ ★

★ ★ ★

Eight Area Lads Tell Spine-Chilling Story of Their Part In Halting Breakthrough

By CPL. BILL CASE
(Combat Correspondent)

SOMEWHERE ALONG THE BELGIAN FRONT—(Delayed)—“Goebbels promised us the rebuilt Luftwaffe, the Belgian breakthrough, Aachen by Christmas and Paris by New Year. We got the first two and we should have taken the others too—but those guys on your flak wagons kind of screwed us up.”

That is the somewhat dubious compliment paid to American ack-ack gunners by a recently captured Luftwaffe pilot, a former resident of New York City, shot down in action on the Belgian front.

U. S. First Army ack-ack gunners did play an unusual and unprecedented part in turning back the German breakthrough for they not only slugged it out with Nazi planes but also fought off paratroopers, ground troops and enemy armored columns as well.

One of the AA outfits in on the

ground floor of this show was the 474th Anti-aircraft Battalion, leading automatic weapons ack-ack outfit in the ETO which had hit the Normandy beaches early on D-Day under the command of Lieut. Col. William A. Stricklen, Jr., of Reform, Ala.

Since then the outfit has used its highly mobile, self-propelled, guns to fight off dive bombing and strafing attacks, capture prisoners, and guard convoys, bridges, air fields, artillery and military installations from the docks of Cherbourg to the mine fields of the Hurtgen Forest, in Germany. During that time it has destroyed 68 enemy planes in action.

When the Germans preluded their breakthrough last December 17, with heavy raids, designed to soften up American positions, the 474th was in position well inside the outer ring of Siegfried Line defenses giving air raid protection to vital

ground units.

“I’ve never seen the Krauts come out like they did up there,” Sergt. Marvin G. Cook, operations crewman, of 144 Madison Avenue, Freemansburg, Pa., told us. “Within just a few days they hit us eleven times with fast sneak raids by from twenty-five to thirty fighter planes on small targets. The worst day was December 18 when they threw three heavy raids into us.”

“We burned out barrel after barrel on our guns firing that day,” Cpl. Paul K. Hay, a gunner from R. D. 2, Bethlehem, Pa., said, “But I guess we came out on top because they did only a little damage to the outfits we were protecting. Besides that we got eight fighters and probably two others that we were told crashed in enemy lines.”

As German ground troops pushed further into Belgium the need for

reinforcements became critical and the 474th was pulled from German back into Belgium at the tip of the enemy salient.

“I’ve never seen such a damned wild place as that,” Cpl. William P. Kugler, C Battery crew chief, of 1249 Second Avenue, Hellertown, Pa. told us. “There was no actual front. The Germans were everywhere. It seemed so we set up local defenses and waited for them to come.”

They didn’t wait long according to Cpl. William J. Paukovits, of 32 Lincoln Avenue, Nazareth, Pa. Night after night paratroopers was dropped and 474th crews aided in rounding them up and continued to knock a few available Luftwaffe planes from the sky.

“One ME-109 made the fatal mistake of chasing a bomb loaded P-47 right across the sights of one of our multiple banked machine gun positions,” Pvt. Stephen P. Bakos, Jr., of 306 Fifth Street, Miller Heights, Pa., said, “Another was a JU-88 that came too low on a midnight bombing run. He crossed right across the full moon and the guys on the gun blew his tail off.”

As German resistance in the bulge began to crumble the 474th went into a series of fast moves that was strongly reminiscent of their fast moves across France behind American armored columns, Sergt. John J. Groller, of Bath, Pa., told us.

“The weather was really a stinker,” Pfc. Maxwell H. Pennock, of 314 Broad Street, Nazareth, declared. “It was so bitter cold we shacked up in old barns, haystacks, boml wrecked houses and anything that would keep some of the snow and cold off. Trying to keep up communications with headquarters was really rough. We had to jump all over the place like fleas. But somehow we did it.”

Because of the intense cold all of the Battalion’s half tracks had to be moved almost hourly to avoid being frozen in. It was one of those times in the field when temperatures grow short, equipment gets balky and the going generally tough.

“When you hear about it you wouldn’t think it could be done,” Sergt. Stephen J. Petrino, of 61 Bachman Street, Hellertown, said. “It was the toughest beating the men and equipment in this outfit have ever taken. But we kept it up—and they tell us we fulfilled our mission.”

His battery moved 19 times in ten days—That’s all brother, that’s all

Feb. 3, 1945