

U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

contact: paoci@eur.army.mil
phone: 49-6221-57-5815 / DSN 370-5815
fax: 49-6221-57-6376 / DSN 370-6376



RELEASE #2009-02-24-03 *2009: THE YEAR OF THE NCO* February 24, 2009

‘Cobra King’ led 4th Armored Division column that relieved Bastogne during Battle of the Bulge

By Dave Melancon

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

VILSECK, Germany -- A World War II-era warrior with a storied past still stands guard over the back gate of Rose Barracks here.

That sentinel is a Sherman tank, nicknamed “Cobra King” by her first crew, that helped liberate occupied France, helped to relieve the embattled 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, breached the Siegfried Line and battled its way through Germany into Czechoslovakia.

The 37th Tank Battalion, 4th Armored Division fought many hard-won battles in France, but

Cobra King and its crew earned their place in U.S. Army history during the Battle of the Bulge.

One day after Christmas 1944, Cobra King – its nickname symbolic of the tank corps tradition of naming vehicles with the first letter of their companies’ designations -- and its five-man crew from the 37th’s Company C led a column of infantry and armor that relieved the encircled Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium.



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

The 'Cobra King' crew -- 1st Lt. Charles Boggess, Cpl. Milton Dickerman and Pvts. James G. Murphy, Hubert S. Smith and Harold Hafner -- pose for a celebratory photo in the vicinity of Bastogne, Belgium shortly after the tankers led the armor and infantry column that liberated the city in December 1944.

On Dec. 24, 2008 – just two days shy of the 64th anniversary of its entry into Bastogne -- U.S. Army Europe historians announced that the tank's identity and lineage had been confirmed.

A German offensive, called "Watch on the Rhine," began Dec. 15, 1944 when the German 5th and 6th Panzer Armies pushed through U.S. lines along the German-Belgian border, headed for Antwerp. U.S. forces were pushed westward, but the 101st, held fast in Bastogne surrounded by the enemy.

The 4th, part of Gen. George S. Patton's 3rd Army, began its 19-hour, 150-mile race to rescue the 101st in Bastogne Dec. 18. The Germans continued their attack on the western side of the Bastogne perimeter Dec. 26 but the U.S. lines held firm.

Cobra King and its crew began their 5-mile final push into Bastogne through stiff German resistance, according to a January 1945 interview with Capt. Stedman Seny, the division assistant operations officer, on the division association's Web site.

The commanders of the 37th and the 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, Lt. Cols. Creighton W. Abrams Jr. and George L. Jaques, were ordered to make a break for Bastogne, he said.

Race to Bastogne

Starting from assembly areas north of Arlon Dec. 22, the 4th's three combat commands, similar in size and organization to today's modular brigade combat teams, battled their way to Bastogne. The division sustained heavy losses along the way.

While preparing for their next push, Abrams and Jaques saw the sky filled with cargo planes dropping ammunition and supplies to the surrounded paratroopers. Abrams suggested they try a dash through the village of Assenois straight into Bastogne.

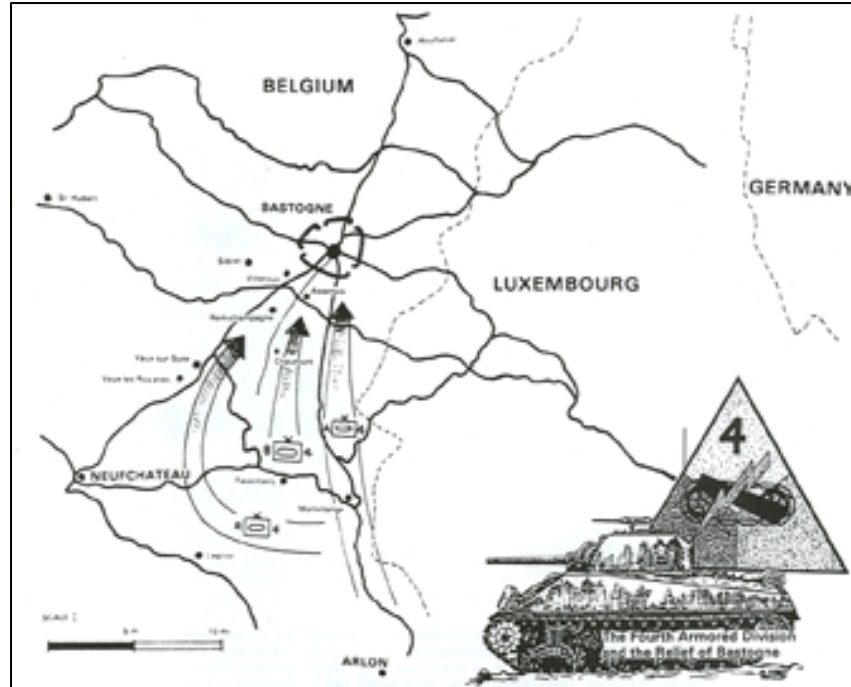
That afternoon division tankers took the high ground near the village of Clochimont, about five miles southwest of Bastogne, Seny said. According to his report, the 37th was down to 20 medium tanks and the 53rd was short about 230 men as the two units' C Companies set out. Cobra King, bumper number C-6, led the column of tanks and halftracks with 1st Lt. Charles P. Boggess of the 37th's Company C in its commander's seat.

According to reports, U.S. artillery rained 2,340 shells on enemy positions, tankers and infantrymen and showered the defending Germans with heavy machine gun fire as the column, in Seny's words, "highballed through Clochimont" toward Assenois, the last stop before Bastogne.

Thick woods concealed blockhouses defending the road beyond Assenois. Boggess's company had the job of plowing through those defenses without stopping. The companies that followed, supported by the 53rd, would mop up behind them.

After the first four U.S. tanks continued north through Assenois, the Germans detonated Teller mines behind them, knocking out a halftrack and wounding several infantrymen, Seny said.

“The Germans had these two little towns of Clochimont and Assenois on the secondary road we were using to get to Bastogne. Beyond Assenois, the road ran up a ridge through heavy woods. There were a lot of Germans there, too,” Boggess said in a December 1949 article in *European Stars and Stripes*. “We were going through fast, all guns firing, straight up that road to bust through before they had time to get set.”



COURTESY PATTON MUSEUM

This map from a 4th Armored Division pamphlet shows the route the division followed during the relief of Bastogne, Belgium. 'Cobra King' and its crew were assigned to the division's Company C, 37th Tank Battalion.

“I used the 75 (mm main gun) like it was a machine gun,” said gunner Cpl. Milton Dickerman. “(Loader Pvt. James G.) Murphy was plenty busy throwing in shells. We shot 21 rounds in a few minutes and I don’t know how much machine gun stuff.”

“We moved full speed, firing straight ahead, with the other tanks firing left and right. We weren’t supposed to stop on the way, either,” Boggess said in an interview with *strictly-gi.com* during the 40th anniversary commemoration of the battle in 1984.

North of Assenois, Boggess and crewmen Pvts. Hubert S. Smith, driver, bow machine gunner Harold Hafner, Murphy and Dickerman approached a team of combat engineers in U.S. uniforms assaulting a pillbox. Boggess, aware of reports of German soldiers masquerading as Americans, called out to the engineers’ platoon leader, who identified the team as U.S. Soldiers.

“We then came across a large pillbox, which we at once destroyed,” Boggess said. “There certainly was a lot of confusion, since the Germans hadn’t expected us to break (through) via this secondary road. Nevertheless, enemy fire was considerable, and we lost four Shermans on the way.”

The siege of Bastogne was broken when the Cobra King crew linked up with the 101st’s Able Company, 326th Airborne Engineer Battalion, at the pillbox about two miles from the town center.

At 5:10 p.m., Abrams shook hands with Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of the 101st in Bastogne.

The road cleared by the column was the only route in or out of Bastogne. That night, dismounted infantrymen continued to clear enemy stragglers in the woods along the road. Assenois was cleared by 8 p.m. Dec. 26, and by morning the woods on both sides of the road running north from Assenois were secure enough to assure relatively free use.

The relief of Bastogne cost the 4th Armored Division about 1,000 men killed and wounded. The 37th lost five men, with another 22 wounded and five missing. Thirty Soldiers of the 53rd died and 180 were wounded. Company C was down to four tanks.

But the fight was not over.

“The corridor to Bastogne had to be held. By now the 37th and elements of the 26th Infantry Division were joined in fighting to hold the road open,” according to reports on globalsecurity.org. It took two weeks to push the Germans east of Bastogne, and the battle officially ended just more than a week later, on Jan. 17, 1945. The 37th earned a Presidential Unit Citation for its relief of the city.

On to Germany

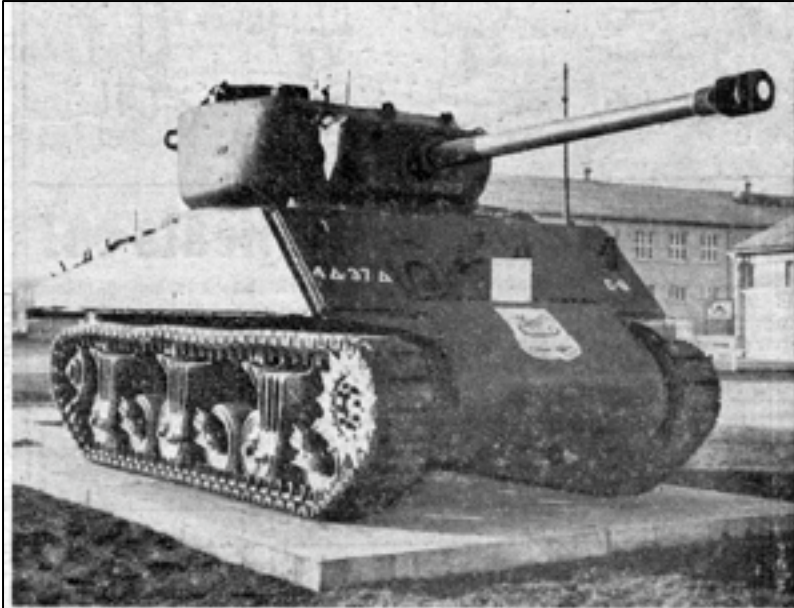
The 4th remained in the Bastogne area for about six weeks, in anticipation of another German offensive.

In February and March, the 4th followed the 90th Infantry Division through the Siegfried Line to the Kyll River in Germany and battled its way to the Rhine through Simmern, Bad Kreuznach and Worms. The 4th crossed the Rhine in late March and pushed on to Hanau, Giessen and (Bad) Herzfeld.

Elements of Company C, 37th Tank Battalion were detached from the 4th to support Task Force Baum, an ill-fated attempt to rescue an estimated 1,500 U.S. prisoners of war in a camp near Hammelburg, far behind enemy lines about 60 miles away.

Capt. Abraham J. Baum’s task force wreaked havoc on German forces along its route. Some enemy radio transmissions said the entire 4th was on the attack. Although greatly weakened, the task force reached Hammelburg and freed the prisoners.

With the aid of the strongest of the liberated POWs, the task force fought its way through a German army corps in a desperate dash toward U.S. lines, losing all its vehicles in the attempt.



This M4A3 WWII tank is a familiar sight to visitors of McKee Barracks. During the battle of Bastogne this 37th Armor tank was the point of the spearhead in the 4th Armored Division attack.

COURTESY 1ST ARMORED DIVISION MUSEUM

This photo from 4th Armored Division's 1958 yearbook shows 'Cobra King' guarding a headquarters building at McKee Barracks in Crailsheim, Germany in 1958. The tank was also displayed on Ferris Barracks in Erlangen, and was later moved to Rose Barracks in Vilseck.

Peter Domes, webmaster for taskforcebaum.de, the Web site of a German World War II re-enactment group based in Hammelburg, said Cobra King was not among the destroyed or abandoned tanks. "According to our information, there was no 'Jumbo' on the Hammelburg Raid," he said. "This type of vehicle would have slowed down the speed of a task force."

Only 35 U.S. Soldiers made it through the German defenders. The 37th's tanks were "written off the books" April 6, according to one report.

Meanwhile, the rest of the 4th raced eastward through Germany. By April 1 the division crossed the Werra River, rolled into Gotha a few days later, and crossed the Saale River April 12.

Chasing the enemy through eastern Germany, the 4th crossed into Pisek, Czechoslovakia in early May.

After V-E Day -- May 7, 1945 -- the 4th assumed occupation duties in Landshut, Germany, where it remained until its inactivation the following year.

The 37th had been detached from the division a week earlier and redesignated as the 37th Constabulary Squadron, 3rd Constabulary Regiment. Swapping their Shermans for armored cars, the tankers took on law enforcement and security duties until the squadron was inactivated the following year.

After the War

Cobra King remained in Germany while the 37th Tank Battalion was re-activated in 1951 and assigned to the 4th in 1953 at Fort Hood, Texas. The battalion would later return to Europe, and a photograph from the division's 1958 yearbook shows the famed tank on display on McKee Barracks in Crailsheim, Germany.

When Crailsheim was closed in 1994, the 1st Armored Division units there relocated to Vilseck and brought the tank along, said Steven Ruhnke, 1st Armored Division museum curator. The division later relocated to Bad Kreuznach, Germany, but this time Cobra King stayed behind.

Cobra King maintained its vigil in obscurity for several years until Sgt. Brian Stigall of the 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery, recognized it after attending a Battle of the Bulge commemoration in 2004.

Research by Army historians in Germany and the U.S. confirmed its identity. Cobra King is now expected to go on display at the National Museum of the U.S. Army, scheduled to open in 2013 near Washington, D.C.



www.hqusareur.army.mil