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Jepsheim - A Town turned into a Slaughterhouse

It had become apparent as the month of January drew to a close that the hub of resistance, the key, to the entire Colmar Pocket was the well fortified town of Jepsheim. The capture of Jepsheim was necessary to protect the north flank of the 3rd Division's advance. The village itself is laid out in a way highly advantageous to the defender. The Battle of Jepsheim was fought from 24 January to 2 February 1945.



Jepsheim was one of a string of fortified towns in the north to south communication grid east of Colmar an important German communication center (photo courtesy www.dogfacesoldiers.org)

General O'Daniel committed the U.S. 254th Infantry Regiment (part of the U.S. 63rd Infantry Division but attached to the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division for the duration of operations in the Colmar Pocket) as the primary US force to capture Jepsheim.

The Allied units who fought in and around Jepsheim were not only US troops but French as well. Among them a battalion of French paratroopers of the French 1st Parachute Regiment, French tanks of Combat Command 6 (French 5th Armored Division), French Foreign Legion, a group of Moroccan cavalry and some Resistance forces.

Among the German units were outfits of the schwere Panzerjaeger-Abteilung 654 (heavy Tankhunter Battalion 654) with mighty Jagdpanther tanks. Jepsheim at this time is held by troops of the German 136th Gebirgsjaeger-Regiment (Mountain Infantry) of the 2nd Gebirgsjaeger-Division.

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Although the town of Jepsheim did not suffer as much destruction as other villages in the Colmar Pocket, it was on its soil that the most violent and deadly fighting took place at the end of January 1945. Certain liberators still refer to it today as the "Alsatian Verdun". During the Battle, Jepsheim will change hands for 3 times.



Photos above show the former sites of the German communication posts in Jepsheim: right house no 22 in the Rue des Roseaux and left at the beginning of la Rue de L'Est.

The Battle begins



Croix du Moulin (Mill Cross). On the cross is a text in three languages: You are united in Death, we unite in Peace.

On January 25, 1945. After all day fighting with German tanks and infantry, French forces can take the Mill of Jepsheim, at the same time as an element of the 254th US Infantry Regiment and several American tank-destroyers of the 3rd US Infantry Division arrive.

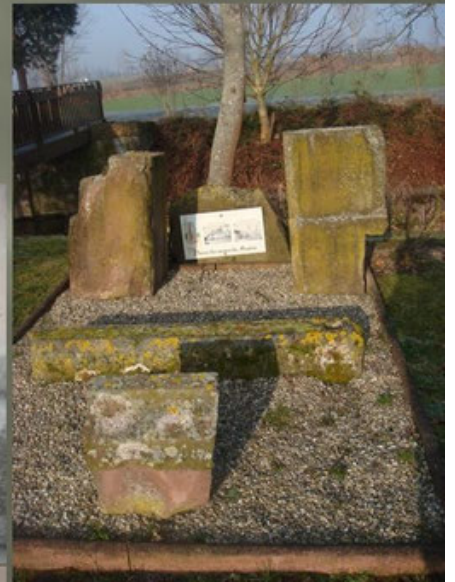
But, apart from the taking of the Mill of Jepsheim, no progress has been made during the day by the other units. It is already the evening of 25th January and the 2nd Army Corps is still far from Neuf-Brisach.

At 0300 (3:00 AM) 26th January 1945, the 254th US Infantry Regiment, which has been reinforced, announces that it is going to attack Jepsheim.

However, reports began reaching regimental headquarters that the men wer unable to fire their weapons due to frozen weapons and hands and that the attack was stalling.

The Croix du Moulin Memorial today on the site of the former Mill

Jebbsheim Mill - Then and Now



The Mill in 1940 and the remains of the Mill today. At the end of January 1945, the Germans install two 105 mm guns in front of the mill, in trenches dug by requisitioned civilians.

The Croix du Moulin Memorial is a cross represented by emptiness outlined by three stone panels in sandstone from the Vosges, one for each nationality involved in the fighting (France, USA and Germany), arranged in a star shape on a circular base bearing the names of the units that fought in Jebbsheim in January 1945.



Jebsheim Mill - Then and Now



The Battle of Jebsheim is going to be very, very hard. In fact it will become a bloodbath. The village is in the midst of the gigantic fight, and, because of the snow and severe cold, the soldier who has a house at his disposal (and this is not the case of the Allied attackers) has an important advantage in the fight.



German Bunker



Jebsheim - German Bunker

Close-up of damage done by the brave tank destroyer crew with 90 mm shells. This was the bunker that was used to pin down D/254th during the attack on Jepsheim.



Dead German soldiers in Jepsheim (photo courtesy www.dogfacesoldiers.org)

At around 0700 (7:00 AM) on 26th January the Americans announce that they have entered Jepsheim and hold half of it, which is denied shortly afterwards. Towards 1730 hours (5:30 PM), the Germans launch a powerful counterattack against Maison Rouge. The attack, coming from the south, between Houssen and Holtzwihr, is a danger to the rear and to all the

units in front of Jepsheim. But the Americans can repulse the German attack. After all day of heavy fighting, it is clear that no progress, or nearly none, has been made. The situation is practically unchanged.



St. Martins Church in Jepsheim - Then and Now

St. Martins Church of Jepsheim

During the hard fighting of January 1945 the gable of the Romanesque facade was damaged again. It was not possible to complete the restoration of the facade until 1956. The tricolor flag (The French flag) that floats proudly in the breeze over the church today was raised immediately after the liberation by Mr. Albert Hild (Future Mayor of Jepsheim) and Mr. Emile Scherer (Londoner). This is proof of the patriotism and also the courage of these two inhabitants of Jepsheim.

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A US gun crew of the 254th Infantry Regiment manning a 57mm Anti Tank gun during the battle of Jepsheim.

Photos above from left to right:

An ambulance is pressed into body detail in the streets of Jepsheim during Third Division action in the Colmar Pocket. Initial action in Jepsheim was against a seven-foot pillbox defended by 12 German soldiers as the armor and infantry battle for the town began Jan. 26 with a 15-minute artillery barrage.

Ammunition and equipment litters an abandoned German defensive position in Jepsheim overrun by the 254th Regiment with French Armor. As January came to an end, the Third Division was pressing towards the Colmar Canal and was officially transferred on Jan. 28 from French II Corps to Maj. Gen. F. W. Milburn's XXI Corps, ordered to the fight by Eisenhower bringing Allied commitment to 400,000 troops.

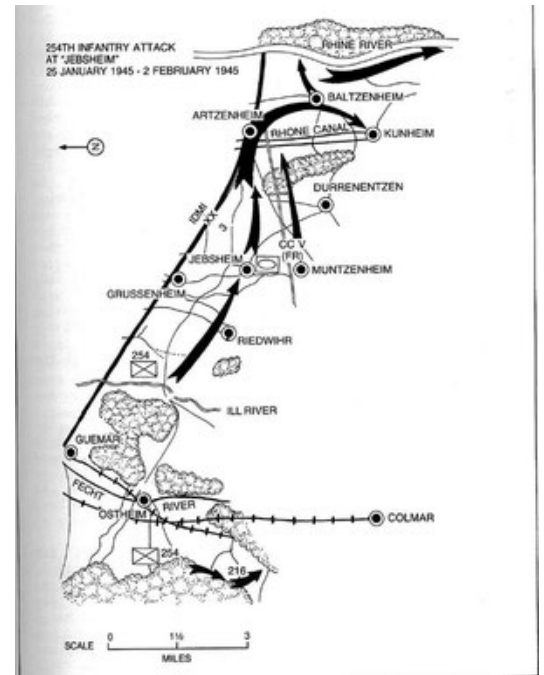


Jepsheim after ther Battle (Photo courtesy Philippe Aubert)

During the night to January 27, the 254th Infantry Regiment take advantage of the darkness to penetrate and advance in the northwest part of the village. At 0700 hours (7:00 AM) they signal that they hold half the village (in reality half of the north section).

At noon of the 27th, the taking of Jepsheim is announced by the Americans. This is a severe error!, The Americans - advancing as far as the church - have seen in the distance, farther to the south, "the other village". What they saw in the distance was in reality, cut in two by a large no-man's land, the center of the village, which had been completely destroyed by German artillery in 1940 and was now covered with fresh snow!

In the afternoon of January 27, the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment of Paratroopers, the Legionnaires of the 3rd RMLE, the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Regiment of Paratroopers arrive one after the other to join in the battle inside the village. Taken and retaken, lost and lost again, taken back again, Jepsheim will be the stake in a fight with no mercy, with furious hand-to-hand combat.



Map courtesy Fred Clinton of www.63rdinfdiv.com



The Pak 40 is gone but the street is almost the same, leading from Jepsheim to the canal south of the village

But this day of 27 January will bring nothing more than the mopping-up of several blocks of houses. When night comes it can no longer be a question of exploiting a breach in the enemy lines, nor of going to spend the night at Neuf-Brisach, as everyone had hoped for a time. The enemy is not yet broken. The 1st DMI with the support of the 2nd



This is house no 7 in the Grand Rue. During the battle this was a German Field Hospital

Armored Division has not yet taken Grussenheim, and Jebnheim is still partly held by the Germans. The 6th CC cannot therefore move out. In fact, events evolved rapidly. The enemy does not wish to die. Holding in front of Neuf-Brisach is a question of life and death for him. He counterattacks everywhere, refusing to yield the least bit of terrain. What might have been true at noon is no longer true at 1300 hours (1:00 PM).

On the German side the 2nd Gebirgsjaeger-Division took command of the sector located between Jebnheim and the Ill River and gets the following order:

"The breach in the Hauptkampflinie (Main line resistance) between Grussenheim, Jebnheim and the canal to the north of Muntzenheim must be closed with all the forces of which the corps disposes, reinforced and defended. The enemy must not be able to overrun this HKL and push in the direction of the East, under pain of causing serious consequences in the conduct of the entire fighting of the Corps. New reserves must be constituted in the region to the east of Jebnheim and to the south of Muntzenheim."

The Battle of Jebnheim reaches its climax on the 28th and 29th of January. The fighting in the village itself, with troops being constantly reinforced on both sides, slowly took on proportions that, in the beginning, were entirely unforeseen. The battle became one of the bloodiest and most glorious episodes of the war. The Germans still held two-thirds of Jebnheim. They are supported by German artillery and tanks located in Bois de la Hardt (Hardt Woods). The battle continues all during the night of the 27th to the 28th. At sunrise on the 28th, the streets are strewn with bodies that had been crushed by the tanks, and the fighting continues.



Dead German soldier next to a roadblock (Photo courtesy Philippe Aubert)



Allied Sherman Tank with camo painting in Jébsheim 1945

By the evening of the 28th, no one is talking any longer about Neuf-Brisach, but the disappointment of the first days has given way to a glimmer of hope.

As things have turned out, each day has seen progress of the Allied troops and the nightmare can be expected to end the next day. Only the southern part of the upper

village and Vosges Street remain to be liberated. This will be the most difficult part causing the most casualties and destruction. During the night, the Germans moved in reinforcements from Muntenheim and advance everywhere. French troops advance slowly along Grand Rue, taking farms in reverse by the east. One after the other the farms fall prey to flames, just as in Vosges Street.

After the strong German counterattack on January 29, at 0900 hours (9:00 AM) supported by 7 Jagdpanthers of Kampfgruppe Plenge of the 654th Heavy Tank Hunter Battalion, the enemy gains a foothold and then is thrown back towards the south. The Germans will return at 1800 hours (6:00 PM) again supported by tanks. This counterattack is also stopped outright. But Germans still remain dug in at the last farms. Although the outcome of the fight is no longer in doubt, these Germans rather die instead of surrender. Some German diehards are determined to continue the fight until it becomes hand-to-hand! A few scores will be settled with knives with the horrified population looking on.



This is the intersection of Rue des Vosges and Grand Rue where the Germans had a roadblock against Allied tanks after the Battle (photo courtesy Philippe Aubert)

At last, the final three houses are taken. Among them is the farm house No 12 in the upper village. It is the farm that saw the bloodiest fighting of the entire sector. The taking of this farm at approximately 3 p.m. in the afternoon, marked the end of the Battle of Jebnheim. Prisoners come out, throw down their weapons, and raise their arms. Many with frayed nerves and exhausted and many are wounded.



The same intersection of Rue des Vosges and Grand Rue in 2011 where the Germans had a roadblock against Allied tanks

At 1900 hours (7:00 PM) the radio of Boulanger's Sub-Group announces, laconically: Jebnheim mopped up, 600 prisoners, 500 dead.

Never was street-fighting, even at Kayserberg, even at Orbey, so fierce, longer and more murderous. **The Battle of Jebnheim was a bloodbath and the village was turned into a slaughterhouse!**

People walk on bodies. They are everywhere, in the streets and in the orchards. All the houses are gutted, charred remains of vehicles lie here and there, and the dead, some of whom have been crushed by tanks, litter the streets and gardens.



Jebsheim after the Battle (Photo courtesy Philippe Aubert)



View of the Cemetery of Jebsheim from the Rue Artzenheim

Although Jebsheim was liberated from the Germans they were still around the town. So on January 30, 1945, Feldwebel Carl Bath of 2. Comp., 654. Heavy Tank Destroyer Battalion secured the east sector of Jebsheim with 3 Jagdpanthers. On this day in the afternoon, an Allied assault was launched by

the combat command of the French 5th Armored Division. The 1st Battalion of the 254th US Infantry Regiment was to attack to the east of Jebsheim with the Jebsheim-Artzenheim road as its left boundary, while French paratroops supported by the armored combat command, were to attack on the left of the 1st Battalion / 254th US Infantry Regiment. Two of Feldwebel Bath's Jagdpanthers were quickly knocked out. When Sherman tanks as well as infantry advanced to his position, Bath's Jagdpanther held the position and destroyed five Sherman tanks. However, his gun fire attract the Allied artillery and he was soon in the middle of a concentrated shellfire. Bath's Jagdpanther was hit and disabled. Nevertheless, Bath took his machinegun from the hull inside, fixed it on top of his tank and begun to spray the attackers. In addition, the Germans shelled the attackers with everything they had on hands and the intense German defense fire took a heavy toll on French armor as the attack progressed. In order not to be wiped out, the French troops fell back to the Jebsheim-Grussenheim line. The French commander sent a request to the 254th Infantry asking that the 1st Battalion withdraw its lines to

conform. The 1st Battalion, 254th Infantry meanwhile, in the face of determined enemy fire of all arms, had advanced to the vicinity of the woods south of the road to the Bois de la Hardt.



Knocked out Jagdpanther No 101 which belonged to 1st Comp. schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654, Jan.30 1945. It's the early version of the Jagdpanther since it has retained its application of Zimmerit, which was only applied by factory until Sep. 1944

The French withdrawal left the 1st Battalion (now no more than the size of a company) dangerously exposed. It held on however until dark when it was ordered to withdraw its lines several hundred yards east of Jebsheim, where it could take advantage of the excellent fields of fire east of the vineyards. Another attack was launched just after dark on February 1 and it met heavy resistance from large dug in German troops. After all, by 07.30 a.m. on February 2, the 1st Battalion had cleared the woods. On March 9, 1945, Feldwebel Carl Bath was awarded the German Cross in Gold for this and other actions.

The role of the schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654

As this elite unit has also seen action around Jebsheim while supporting German infantry units, it's worth to add some facts of the German point of view as well. The information has been kindly provided by Karl-Heinz Muench, author of the unit history of the schwere Panzerjäger Abteilung 654.



Jagdpanther of the 1st Comp. schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654, knocked out in Grussenheim near Jebsheim

January 25, 1945:

The sector of the Jebsheim Mill as well as Jebsheim was in the fighting sector of Grenadier-Regiment 748. Stossgruppe Hueckstädt

from Kampfgruppe Winter, containing 3 Jagdpanthers, was committed against enemy forces who advanced at the Jebnheim Mill. In support of the infantry, the enemy penetration, which was obviously aimed at Jebnheim, was stopped.



Unteroffizier Karl-Heinz Danisch in Orel / Russia in 1943
(Photo courtesy J.J. Sturm)

January 26, 1945:

The order for the schwere Panzerjaeger-Abteilung 654, was to support a German infantry assault against the Bois de Riedwihr, which was launched around 14.00 on January 26, 1945. Jagdpanther No 131, commanded by Unteroffizier Karl-Heinz Danisch had some technical problems. Due to this the German platoon leader told Danisch, it would be his decision to join the assault or to drive back to the mechanic unit for repair.

Danisch decided to join the assault as the infantry tank support would have been down to one Jagdpanther only without Jagdpanther No 131. The German assault was repulsed in front of the forest due to heavy enemy artillery fire. On the way back, between Riedwihr and



Unteroffizier Karl-Heinz Danisch Jagdpanther No 131 of Schwere Panzerjäger-Abt. 654 in March 1945 (Photo Schmitt/Ohnenheim)

Wickerschwihr, Danisch's Jagdpanther, fell out because the engine overheated. This was around 4 p.m. Danisch bailed out to check the engine together, with his driver Stabsgefreiter Rensen. While standing on the tank and lifting the engine cover, suddenly Rensen's head was shot off by an enemy tank shell and he died instantly.

Danisch saw a enemy tank on the left just at the edge of the forest and a second one behind. He went into his Jagdpanther and tried to bring his tank in enemy direction, but he could not start the engine again. Instead Danisch started to shell the enemy infantry which came into the open near Riedwihr. However, the enemy tank fire was now very well aimed and after 16 hits of several antitank rounds from the 800 meter distant Moench Woods, the Jagdpanther was starting to burn out. Unteroffizier Danisch gave the order to his remaining crew to bail out and all made it back to Elsenheim. After



Allied soldiers examine the burnt-out Jagdpanther No 131 of Unteroffizier Karl-Heinz Danisch outside Wickerschweiler

corresponding after action reports from both sides, it was most likely an US outfit of B Company, 15th Infantry, facing the German Jagdpanther, commanded by the most decorated US soldier – Audie L. Murphy who was awarded the Medal of Honor for defense action in the Holzwihr

woods!



Night 26/27 January 1945:

Kampfgruppe Wittmoser was now attached to HQ LXIV Armee Korps. Following its arrival with 3 operational Jagdpanthers, the Kampfgruppe was initially positioned in the Duerrenenzen area. Toward evening it was deployed to screen against enemy tanks that were threatening to advance along the Jepsheim – Artzenheim road.

January 28, 1945:

During the course of enemy attacks from Jepsheim toward Grussenheim on January 28, Kampfgruppe Wittmoser destroyed three enemy tanks on the Jepsheim – Artzenheim road from positions north of point 182 while supporting Regiment Vesper of the 2nd Gebirgsdivision. During the night of 28/29 January, Kampfgruppe Wittmoser was withdrawn to Artzenheim to realign its guns while Stossgruppe Leutnant Knopp with 3 Jagdpanthers was committed to attack Jepsheim but was stopped by enemy resistance.

January 29, 1945:

At dawn on the 29 January the Kampfgruppe with 4 Jagdpanthers occupied its former positions at point 182, approximately 2.5 Kilometers east of Jepsheim. In the late afternoon a enemy counterattacked south from Jepsheim and drove out the last of the German infantry still holding out in Jepsheim.

January 30, 1945:

The Allies attacked Kampfgruppe Wittmoser (assigned to support Regiment Vesper of the 2nd Gebirgsdivision) in the morning from Jebbsheim in the direction of Artzenheim. The enemy attack was repulsed after the Kampfgruppe knocked out one enemy tank. The assault was repeated some time later and 6 more enemy tanks were destroyed. As a result of the temporary loss of 4 Jagdpanthers, the enemy was able to infiltrate the woods south of point 182, during which 3 enemy trucks were destroyed. Because of this heavy losses, the Allies later withdrew to east of Jebbsheim.

As mentioned earlier, Feldwebel Carl Bath of 2nd Comp., 654. Heavy Tank Destroyer Battalion secured the east sector of Jebbsheim with 3 Jagdpanthers and distinguished himself bravely on this 30th of January 1945.

Aftermath

Casualties in the fighting units were huge on both sides. The exact number will never be known and can only be estimated.

Around 500 German dead, mentioned in the first official communiqué, nearly 200 French soldiers killed and at least as many Americans K.I.A's makes it up to 900 soldiers killed. In

addition they were approximately 2'000 wounded. The US 254th Infantry Regiment alone had 66 men Killed in action. Considering the large number of soldiers killed or wounded in this ruthless bloodbath and the severe damage done to buildings in the village, it is a miracle that the casualty rate among the civilian was not higher as 5 K.I.A's of the 600 to 700 civilians hiding in makeshift shelters during those tragic days!

However, concerning the civilian population of Jebbsheim, there has been no report at all of any atrocities committed by German or Allied soldiers. Although the fighting was ruthless and the village a slaughterhouse, the soldiers "played a fair game" on the residents of Jebbsheim including women and children.

Overlooked and ignored facts

The first American unit to enter Jebbsheim, was 1st Platoon, G Company, 254th Infantry Regiment during the early morning hours of 26 January 1945. Platoon leader was Lt. Michael J. Myers. He and his men held this position for almost 24 hours before elements of the 1st and 2nd Battalions arrived.

Presidential Citations



German PoW's of the 137. Geb. Jg Rgt leave Jebbsheim after the battle



By direction of the President of the United States of America, the Presidential Unit Citation is awarded to; **Second Battalion, 254th Infantry Regiment, 63rd Infantry Division** for outstanding performance of duty during the period 25- 29 January 1945, in capturing the heavily fortified and defended

stronghold of Jepsheim, France, in the Colmar Pocket. Attacking in subzero weather through fierce winds and deep, numbing snow, the 2d Battalion met stalwart, determined resistance from machine guns in pillboxes, small arms fire, and heavy artillery fire. It was apparent that the Germans were stubbornly determined to hold this last stronghold in the Colmar Pocket, the key city of their well planned defense arc. The men of the 2d Battalion fought their way to the Blind River and waded the icy, swift-flowing stream under a devastating barrage. Slowly and grimly the men advanced, though suffering heavy casualties in the intense fire coming from three directions, took the concrete bunkers with the aid of tank destroyers and eliminated the resistance before the town which had previously turned back entire regiments. Penetrating the flaming town, the men fought bitterly against the desperate and determined defender, neither giving nor asking quarter. In 2 days of house-to-house, floor-to-floor, and room-to-room fighting, the town was lost and regained three times. While enemy 88-mm guns from the woods to the east poured fire on the unit, the exhausted and frozen men fought violently to gain the last portion of the city still held by the enemy. So fierce and determined was their attack that the enemy marched out of their strongpoints and surrendered. The fierceness of their resistance lends credence to their statements that Jepsheim was being used as a corps headquarters. With the fall of Jepsheim to the 2d Battalion, 254th Infantry Regiment, the hub of German resistance in the strong Colmar Pocket was broken and another vital portion of France was liberated. The indomitable courage, fortitude, determination and zeal of the men of the 2d Battalion, 254th Infantry Regiment, 63rd Infantry Division are a shining example to their fellow countrymen and reflect the highest credit on them and the armed forces of the United States. (WD GO 42, 7 May 1946). (Text courtesy www.blountweb.com)

Acknowledgements

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- Jean-Jacques Sturm, Ostheim (photo Danisch)
- Philippe Aubert

Source of the Photos of 1944/1945:

Some of the 1944 images used for the "Then and Now" comparison photos on this site are part of a collection archived by William J. Toomey of Everett, Massachusetts while serving with the Third Signal Company of the U.S. Third Division during WWII. Bill was a member of a five-man crew of photographers along with William Heller, John Cole, Robert Seesock and Howard Nickelson. The photographs from this unit form a major part of the visual history of the Third Division in WWII.

Other photos of 1944/1945 taken from www.ecpad.fr the French Department of Defense.

Some text taken from:

www.63rdinfdiv.com / Wikipedia / www.dogfacesoldiers.org

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