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For Lieutenant Wierzbowski and his little group down by the bridge, D plus 1 was a day of disappointment. In the clear light the bridge turned out to be a single-span concrete structure, over a hundred feet long. The sentry had been withdrawn from the north approach before daybreak and it seemed unguarded. But there was a barracks south of the canal just twenty yards from the bridge with dug-in positions around it. These positions were well filled with soldiers. Another group of Germans was on the far side of the road, only eighty yards away. "Every time we raised up to start toward the bridge, we drew heavy fire from both sides."

As the morning wore on they saw German infantrymen straying toward them through the trees along the northern bank of the canal—stragglers from the 2d Battalion attack. They held their fire and their

ground and when the Germans got to within fifty yards mowed them down, killing about thirty-five.

Around 1000, the watching men saw a German soldier and a civilian—they thought he was Dutch—come up to the far side of the bridge and stand around for twenty minutes or so, apparently talking. They thought little of the incident. In any case, they could not get a clear shot at the soldier.

At exactly 1100, there was a terrific explosion. The span shook and lifted and then they had to bend low in their foxholes as the concrete and steel debris from the ruin fell all around them. The German and the civilian had evidently set a time fuze to an already prepared demolition. But of this Lieutenant Wierzbowski could get no word back to the regiment. It continued to think the prize was still within its grasp.

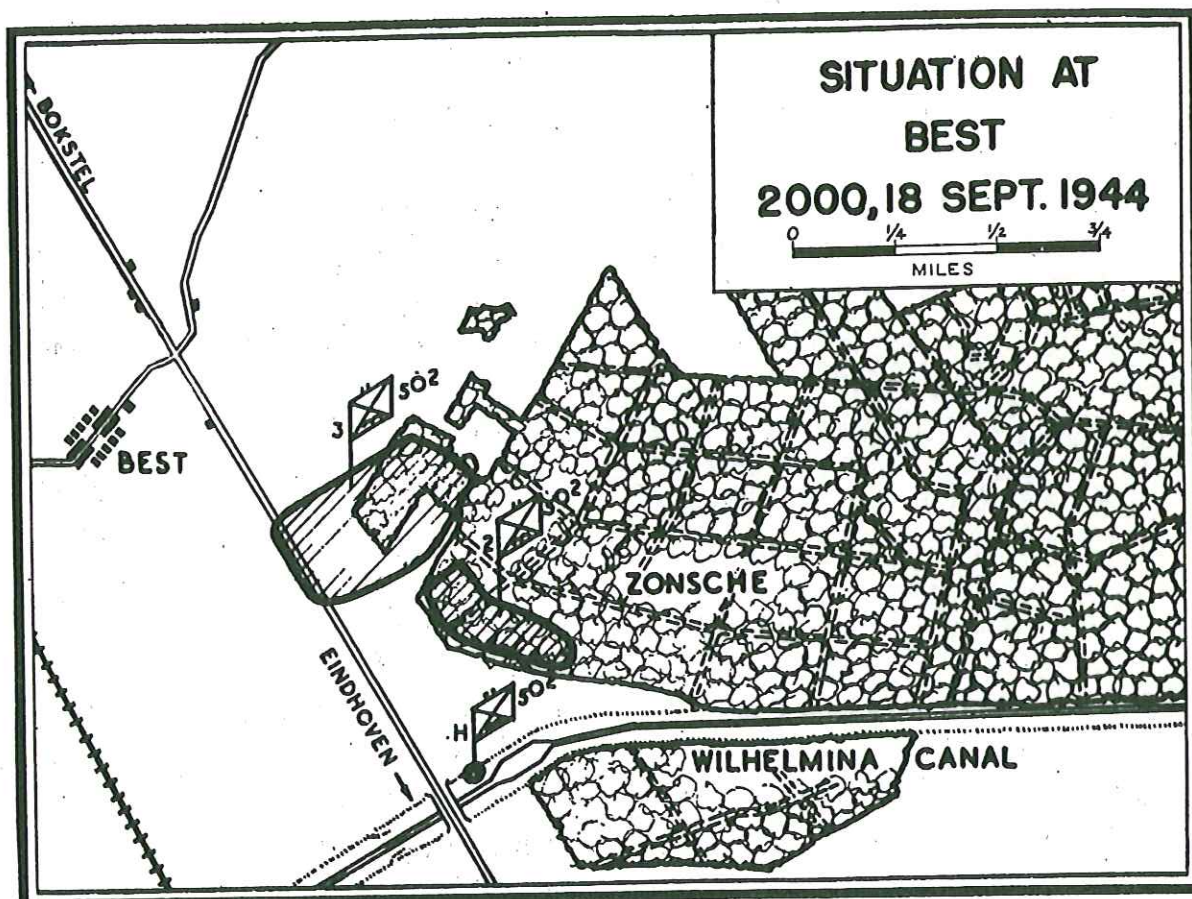
Mann and Hoyle made one sortie. They saw a German 88mm dump, with ammunition and spare parts, lying about a hundred yards from them; they sneaked out and Mann destroyed it with a few rounds from the bazooka. Staying in their new position they shot six Germans coming toward them from the north. Then Mann was hit twice by rifle bullets. Hoyle took the bazooka and with his first round destroyed an 88 about 150 yards up the canal.

The P-47s, which came over that morning in response to the call of Colonel Cole, strafed the group, but no one was hurt. Both before and after this escape the men could hear the fire of the two battalions in the woods. This encouraged them to go on believing that they would shortly be relieved.

In mid-afternoon they got an attack along the canal bank from the north and drove it off. To get a better view of the retreating enemy, Lieutenant Watson of the engineers sneaked out in front of the position. He was hit in the mid-section and went down. Pfc. James Orvac, first-aid man, crawled out and treated him. Then Lieutenant Wierzbowski went out to look him over.

Watson thought his testicles had been shot off and he begged Wierzbowski to take his .45 and kill him. Wierzbowski dragged him 150 yards back to the lines. His testicles were all right.

Now the German fire increased. Private Onroe H. Luther was hit and killed by a shell fragment in the head. Private Northrup was hit in the base of the spine. Little could be done for him. Two more bullets bored into Mann. They bandaged him and put both his arms in slings. He begged Wierzbowski to let him stay with the defenders instead of sending him off to a safer foxhole with the other wounded; the request was granted.



Map 41.

By this time medical supplies were exhausted. Lieutenant Otto J. Laier and Sergeant Betras of the engineers volunteered to try to break through for aid. They crawled away. A few minutes later Betras came back wounded. They had been ambushed and Lieutenant Laier had been knocked down by a bullet and captured.

But they thought their troubles were over when a British armored car, accompanied by a British reconnaissance car, appeared on the other side of the canal. When the Germans immediately opened fire on them, they pulled part way around the corner of a building, blazing away at the Germans with all of their machine guns. The German fire quieted and soon the German garrison on the other side of the canal got out.

Cpl. Daniel L. Corman found a small boat at the bank, rowed across to the armored car and came back with a medical kit. Lieutenant Wierzbowski yelled across asking them to call Division on the radio and explain the need for relief. The car couldn't get Division. So Wierzbowski started to move his men to the bank, planning to row them across to its shelter. But the British commander shouted to him: "Stay where you are! I am sure that help will be here soon."

Privates Koller, Waldt and Laino prowled down toward the derricks and came back with three German medics and one wounded German



*Bridge at Best, looking west from the derricks. In the right foreground Lt. Edward L. Wierzbowski's squad was dug in, and here Pfc. Joe E. Mann won the Medal of Honor.
(Water color by H. Standley)*

officer. Lieutenant Wierzbowski told them to get to work on his wounded, which they did. What he really needed was plasma. Lieutenant Watson was in bad shape; Northrup was slowly dying from loss of blood.

Again things seemed to take a turn for the better when a patrol from Company E stumbled into their position in the early evening. Departing, it promised to take back word of the destruction of the bridge and the plight of the group. But the report was distorted so that when it reached Colonel Chappuis it told only of the destruction of the bridge.

Later an entire platoon from Company D which had become separated from its battalion during the afternoon attack appeared. Lt. Nicholas D. Mottola, its leader, decided to have it spend the remainder of the night with Wierzbowski.

Lieutenant Wierzbowski accordingly reorganized his lines with the Mottola group holding one flank. His men, utterly fatigued, dozed off. In the middle of the night the Mottola flank was beset by a larger German group attacking from the direction of Best and fell back across the canal, some men swimming and others rowing. They ultimately recrossed the canal well to the east and the survivors rejoined the battalion two days later.

Strangely enough, Wierzbowski's men were scarcely aware of this attack being pressed against the Mottola group. To complete their misfortune, the British cars, hearing Americans come into the position, had concluded that the relief was accomplished and had pulled away from the far bank. The survivors stayed in their foxholes awaiting the morning.

With first light on D plus 2, Lieutenant Wierzbowski and his men found themselves enveloped in heavy mist. They had not moved to



Pfc. Joe E. Mann, Company H, 502d, who won the Medal of Honor at Best on 19 September. The picture was taken in the U. S. before Mann left for England. A Victory ship has been named for him.

redistribute themselves so as to cover the open flank left by Mottola's abrupt departure which they still did not comprehend. As the light grew, Wierzbowski looked around. Twenty feet away he saw a group of Germans coming toward him. He yelled. Sergeant Betras threw a grenade, and then several of the others threw. But the Germans had beaten them to the throw and grenades were already on their way to the foxholes. Two hit the top of one embankment and rolled down among the wounded. Betras threw the first one out. Someone else got rid of the other. The third went wild. The fourth hit the machine gun and exploded directly into Laino's face. It blew his left eye out, blinded the other eye and made a bloody pulp of his face.

A bullet hit Koller in the temple. Another grenade came over Wierzbowski's head, hit Laino on the knee and bounced off into his foxhole. Laino, still blinded, reached down groping for it, found it and tossed it from his foxhole just a split second before it exploded.

The next grenade came toward Mann. He was sitting against the back of the trench—a large trench containing six other men—and he saw it come over and felt it land behind him. But his arms were bound

and useless because of his four wounds from the day before. Yelling "Grenade!" to the other men and fully conscious of what he was doing he lay back and took the explosion with his own body.

It blew his back apart. He had saved the other men, though Pvt. Anthony Atayde, at his side, was wounded in the body and Privates Paxton and Wienz were both hit in the hip by fragments. He said quietly to Wierzbowski: "My back's gone," and a minute or two later died, without a groan or a whimper—the bravest man, his comrades said, that they had ever known.

Mann, from the state of Washington, had been a popular soldier in his company; and his citation for the Medal of Honor reads, "His outstanding gallantry and his magnificent conduct were an everlasting inspiration to his comrades for whom he gave his life." He and his battalion commander were to be the only members of the Division to receive this highest award granted an American soldier; both awards were to be posthumous, and both men died within a day of each other.

The Germans kept coming in. By this time his men had exhausted their supply of grenades and all other ammunition. Only three were unwounded. Further struggle seemed pointless, so Wierzbowski and his group surrendered.

Later, after 2d Battalion's successful attack that afternoon, the survivors of Wierzbowski's group managed to free themselves and in turn make prisoners out of the Germans who had been guarding them.



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