

“Knock ’em All Down”: The Reduction of Aachen, October 1944

Christopher R. Gabel

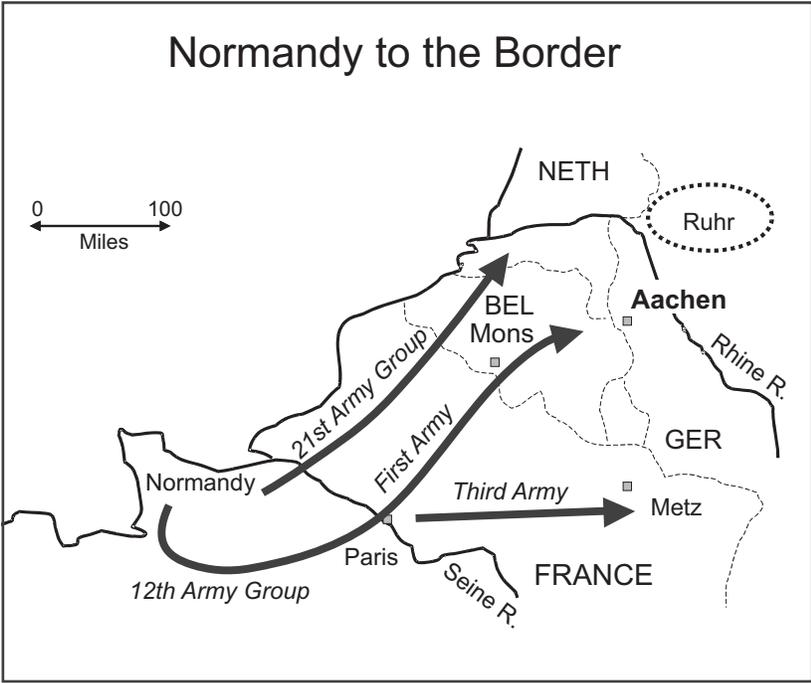
The city of Aachen is located in western Germany, just a few miles from the borders of Belgium and the Netherlands. It lies astride one of the two historic axes of advance between France and Germany. In World War II, it was the first major German city to come under direct attack by Allied ground forces. Aachen was not, however, a significant factor in Allied plans for the defeat of Nazi Germany. It was only by chance that American ground troops found themselves involved in urban operations in this ancient city.

The campaign that led to the assault on Aachen began on 6 June 1944 with Operation OVERLORD, the Allied invasion of Normandy. The mission of the multinational force under General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s command was to “undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.”¹

Initial progress toward this goal was slow, owing to frantic German efforts to contain, if not eliminate, the Allied foothold in France. After a prolonged battle of attrition in Normandy, on 25 July the Allies launched Operation COBRA, a deliberate assault designed to break out of the lodgment area. The Germans, who committed everything to a cordon defense, lacked the means of preventing the breakout from becoming a pursuit. During the month of August, the forces under Eisenhower’s command liberated most of northwestern France, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Eisenhower’s plan for this phase of the campaign envisaged a twin thrust, with the British 21st Army Group on the left, and the American 12th Army Group on the right. The American army group, commanded by Lieutenant General Omar Bradley, planned to cross from France into Germany by way of the “Metz Corridor,” in the province of Lorraine. The British army group, under Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, constituted the main effort. Plans drawn up before the invasion called for this force to advance from Liege to Cologne by way of the “Aachen Corridor.” It would then cross the Rhine River and assault the vital Ruhr industrial region, the capture of which would effectively destroy Germany’s ability to continue the war. The Aachen axis not only constituted the most direct route between Normandy and the Ruhr, but also carried the benefits of proximity to air bases in England and to ports along the English

Channel. Had the Allies adhered to this plan, Aachen would have lain in the path of British, not American, troops.

The circumstances of war often play havoc with plans, and the Allied campaign against Germany was no exception. The rapidity of the Allied pursuit across France prevented the creation of a systematic logistics support base, thus making it essential that the Allies capture quickly the channel ports along the coast of France and Belgium. Another unforeseen demand was the urgent requirement to capture bases along the same coast from which the Germans were launching unmanned flying bombs, known to the Allies as the V-1, against England. Accordingly, once Allied forces crossed the Seine River, Eisenhower shifted 12th Army Group's zone of advance northward, along the channel coast. To maintain contact between the British and American forces, Eisenhower split the 12th Army Group so that the First U.S. Army passed north of the Ardennes, where it covered the right flank of the British. Third Army proceeded alone into Lorraine. This decision placed Aachen in the zone of Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges' First Army (see Map 1).



Map 1

One further development during the pursuit dictated which American elements would find themselves fighting in Aachen. First Army advanced northeastward from the Seine with three corps—XIX Corps on the left, V Corps in the center, and VII Corps on the right. The VII Corps, commanded by Major General J. Lawton Collins, was in advance of the two corps to its left. As the pursuit unfolded, a large body of German troops accumulated in front of XIX and V Corps. These troops were remnants of the German Seventh and Fifteenth Armies that were streaming toward Germany in disarray. On 1 September, Hodges ordered Collins to wheel his corps ninety degrees to the left in an attempt to trap the German elements being bulldozed along by his other corps. Accordingly, VII Corps drove north to the vicinity of Mons, Belgium, and on 3 September set up blocking positions to intercept the fleeing enemy. Over the course of the next several days, elements of twenty German divisions ran unaware into the trap. The “Mons Pocket” netted a total of approximately 25,000 German prisoners.² In executing its pivot to the north, VII Corps pinched out V Corps to its left, and thus became the center corps in First Army’s line. When the eastward advance resumed, VII Corps found itself on the road to Aachen.

Collins’ VII Corps crossed the border into Germany on 12 September. Aachen, which lay just ten miles away, was virtually undefended. However, the city was not even an objective at this time. Assuming that the German army was beaten and that the pursuit across France and Belgium would continue into Germany, First Army expected to drive past Aachen and proceed to the Rhine, forty miles beyond. Indeed, pursuit was about all that First Army was capable of at this juncture. It entered Germany 233 days ahead of the planned schedule for logistics support.³ Equipment and supplies were nearing exhaustion. In VII Corps, the 3d Armored Division was down to one-third of its normal allotment of approximately 230 medium tanks.⁴ Supplies for the Army had to be hauled by truck from Normandy, a procedure that had largely ceased to be cost effective. (The trucks hauling supplies for 12th Army Group consumed as much gasoline as either one of the two field armies.) Within First Army, XIX Corps ran out of gas on 9 September and fell behind in the advance to the border. On the day that VII Corps crossed into Germany, First Army had to rely upon captured rations to feed the troops. With priority placed upon the delivery of gasoline needed to continue the pursuit, First Army would find it necessary to ration ammunition until mid-October. The logistics crisis moderated somewhat on 18 September when rail service was advanced to Liege, Belgium, but it would be months before the supply situation was fully resolved.⁵

Moreover, First Army was badly overextended. It reached the German border on a front of eighty miles, of which the VII Corps front was twenty miles. Doctrine for that era prescribed a front of five to ten miles for a force the size of VII Corps.⁶ First Army had no reserves. Such extended frontages had been advantageous during the pursuit, but the Allies were about to learn that the pursuit was over. The ever-dangerous German army was in the process of reconstituting after its defeat in France. Determined to defend their homeland, the Germans would enjoy the advantage of a fortified line, the *Westwall*, known to the Allies as the Siegfried Line.

The *Westwall* was a band of some 3,000 mutually supporting pillboxes, bunkers, and observation posts covering the entire western border of Germany.⁷ Construction had begun on the *Westwall* in 1936, when German forces occupied the Rhineland in defiance of the Versailles Treaty that had ended World War I. The building effort commenced in earnest in 1938 during the “Munich Crisis.” Since the German conquest of France in 1940, the wall had lain unoccupied and was in rather dilapidated condition. Still, the *Westwall* would prove to be a significant combat multiplier for the defenders.

The Germans never supposed that the *Westwall* could stop an invader cold. Its purpose was to slow down an attacker until mobile counterattack forces could arrive. In a sense, this is what Adolf Hitler intended in 1944. He ordered that the Allies be held at the *Westwall* until forces could be amassed for a major counteroffensive through the Ardennes. This counteroffensive, known to Americans as the Battle of the Bulge, eventually took place in December.

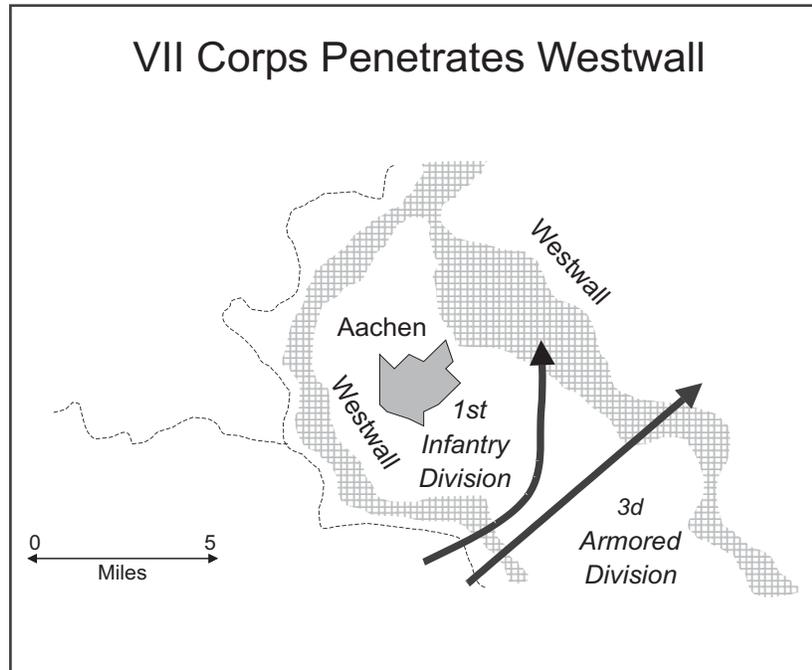
Aachen was, for all practical purposes, a part of the *Westwall*. The city nestled within two belts of bunkers and obstacles, one to the west of the city and the other to the east. The Aachen sector was, in fact, one of the most heavily fortified portions of the *Westwall*. Aachen itself, however, was unfortified. It had little to commend it as a battleground from either the German or the American perspective. As a defensive position, Aachen was flawed by the fact that it lay in a depression with higher ground on all sides. From the American point of view, Aachen offered little as an objective. The existing road net made it perfectly feasible to bypass the urban area altogether. Although Aachen was home to some industry and coal mining, it was not vital to the German war effort. Moreover, heavy Allied air raids had already damaged or destroyed half of its buildings. Its prewar population of 165,000 had dropped to fewer than 20,000 by September 1944. A mandatory evacuation of civilians, ordered by Hitler himself, removed most of the

remainder. In light of what eventually occurred, it seems ironic that on the day VII Corps entered Germany, the Americans intended to bypass Aachen, and the German commander within Aachen intended, apparently, to yield the city without a fight.⁸

Adolf Hitler had other ideas. He had no intention of yielding a German city to the enemy, particularly a city with Aachen's symbolic significance. Aachen's history extended back to Roman times, when it was known as "Aquisgranum." The Roman name derived from the hot mineral springs located there, which the Romans converted into baths. The supposed medicinal qualities of Aachen's baths continued to attract visitors into the twentieth century. More to the point, Aachen was the capital city of Charlemagne's European empire in the early Middle Ages and was the coronation site for the Holy Roman Empire from 813 to 1531. Hitler, who styled his regime the Third Reich (or empire), considered the Holy Roman Empire founded by Charlemagne to be the First Reich. It would not do to lose Charlemagne's city to an invader.

As a battleground, the city of Aachen in 1944 contained three different types of urban terrain (see Map 2). The core of the city was a relic of the Middle Ages, with crooked streets and close-packed buildings. Masonry construction predominated here. To the north, on higher ground, were the mineral springs and the resort hotels built around them. Here the streets were wider and straighter, and much of the area consisted of wooded parks around the resorts. Surrounding both the downtown and resort areas was an industrial belt consisting of factories, coal mines, and residential areas. The American soldiers who eventually found themselves fighting in Aachen would at least have the benefit of excellent maps (obtained in France) and, thanks to Allied air superiority, access to aerial photographs.⁹ Although a complex battlefield, Aachen would not be a mysterious one.

The battle of Aachen began on 12 September with neither side intending to fight for the city itself. On that date, VII Corps began a penetration of the *Westwall* south of the city in hopes that it would quickly break through into the Cologne plain beyond. By 15 September elements of the 1st Infantry Division and 3d Armored Division had achieved penetrations, but progress was slow and casualties heavy (see Map 3). Even when manned by second-rate troops, the fortifications of the *Westwall* represented a formidable obstacle. Bad weather further hampered the American drive. Rain-soaked ground limited off-road mobility, and cloudy skies afforded the Germans an opportunity to reinforce the Aachen sector without interference from Allied air power.

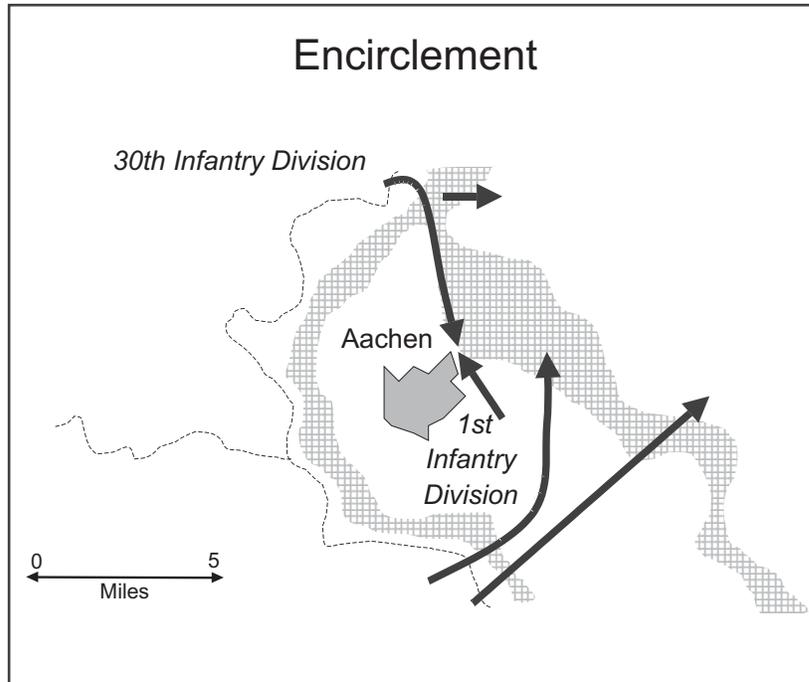


Map 2

American intelligence officers noted the arrival of the first German reinforcements on 14 September.¹⁰ By 17 September, the Germans had strength enough to begin mounting counterattacks.

With progress effectively stalled by German resistance, bad weather, and logistics scarcity, the American high command recognized that the pursuit was over. On 22 September, First Army went on the defensive. By 24 September, the Rhine had ceased to be an immediate objective. Instead, First Army decided it would be necessary to reduce Aachen, which by now constituted a dangerous salient on the left flank of VII Corps' penetration of the *Westwall*.

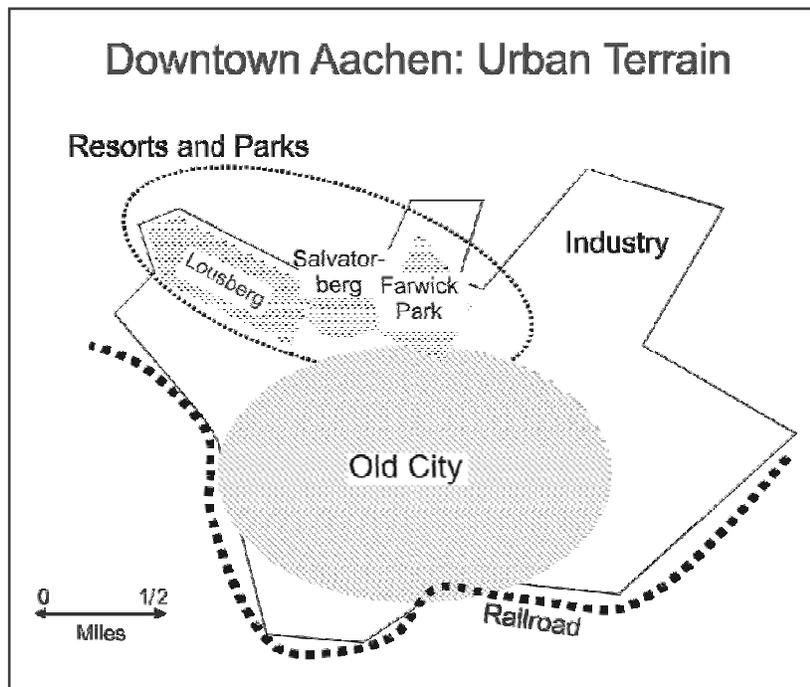
When First Army resumed offensive operations a week later, the first order of business was to encircle Aachen. On 2 October, XIX Corps launched a deliberate assault against the *Westwall* north of the city. Twenty-six artillery battalions and 432 tactical aircraft bombarded German positions, following which the 30th Infantry Division attacked eastward, forcing a crossing of the Wurm River and entering the *Westwall*. Neither the air nor the artillery preparations had much impact upon the *Westwall* fortifications, so the infantry, organized into small



Map 3

teams, proceeded to reduce the pillboxes one by one with grenades, pole charges, and flamethrowers. The 2d Armored Division began crossing into the slowly expanding bridgehead on 3 October. By 6 October, the 30th Infantry Division had penetrated the *Westwall* and turned south, with the 2d Armored Division facing east to protect the infantry's left flank. The German reaction to this incursion was vigorous but uncoordinated. Violent, piecemeal counterattacks began on 4 October. Among the German troops committed to stopping the 30th Infantry Division was a depleted grenadier regiment withdrawn from the garrison in Aachen (see Map 4).¹¹

On 7 October, First Army ordered the 1st Infantry Division to attack north toward the 30th, forming the southern jaw of the encirclement. The 18th Infantry Regiment, which drew the assignment, attacked laterally along the *Westwall* through suburban and industrial terrain. The regiment formed special pillbox assault teams built around flamethrowers, Bangalore torpedoes, and demolition charges. Reinforcing the regiment were a battery of self-propelled 155mm guns, a company of self-propelled tank destroyers, and a company of M4



Map 4

“Sherman” tanks. An air liaison officer accompanied each battalion. Eleven artillery battalions and a company of 4.2-inch mortars provided supporting fires. The 18th Infantry’s mission was to advance 2.5 miles, capturing three hills that lay consecutively along its route. The first of these, Verlautenheide, fell to the Americans in a predawn attack on 8 October that followed closely upon a heavy artillery bombardment. On the afternoon of the same day, the 18th Infantry took the second elevation, called Crucifix Hill, once again by hitting the German defenders just as the artillery prep lifted. For its attack on the third and final hill, the 18th Infantry changed its tactics. On the night of 9 October, two companies infiltrated among the German pillboxes and occupied the crest of Ravel’s Hill without firing a shot. After clearing the bypassed enemy positions, the 18th dug in and awaited the advance of the 30th Infantry Division from the north.¹²

With the Americans perched precariously on Ravel’s Hill, the gap between 1st Infantry Division in the south and 30th Infantry Division in the north was just over a mile wide. However, German reinforcements continued to arrive. General Friedrich J. Koechling’s LXXXI Corps,

defending the Aachen sector, began to receive elements of the I SS Panzer Corps consisting of the depleted 3d Panzer Grenadier and 116th Panzer Divisions. Koechling's mission was to eliminate the American penetrations of the *Westwall*. However, the pressure of events forced him to commit the arriving elements piecemeal rather than massing them for a general counteroffensive. Consequently, both the 30th and 1st Infantry Divisions were able to hold their ground in the face of repeated counterattacks and artillery bombardments, but only with massive artillery and air support. It would take the 30th Infantry Division another week to close the gap.

At this juncture, First Army decided to proceed with the reduction of Aachen itself, even though the encirclement was incomplete. First Army arrived at this decision not so much from a desire to own Aachen, but from a need to shorten the American lines and free up the forces containing Aachen so they could be used to counter the German forces arriving from the east. In essence, the reduction of Aachen was a secondary effort. First Army's main effort was the encirclement battle east of the city. This being the case, the only forces immediately available for the capture of Aachen were two battalions of the 1st Infantry Division.

Fortunately for the Americans, the defense of downtown Aachen was also a secondary priority for the Germans, who were more concerned with eliminating the penetrations of the *Westwall* north and south of town. The garrison of Aachen proper consisted primarily of the 246th Volksgrenadier Division, minus four of its seven infantry battalions. Volksgrenadier divisions, which first appeared in the German order of battle in the autumn of 1944, were hastily constituted formations composed largely of survivors from other divisions wrecked in battle. These divisions lacked a full complement of artillery, but were abundantly provided with automatic weapons as compensation. The commander of the 246th Volksgrenadier was Colonel Gerhard Wilck. Also under Wilck's command were elements of two "fortress battalions" (static-defense forces composed of second-rate troops), some *Luftwaffe* (air force) ground troops, and 125 city policemen. To support his infantry, Wilck had five Panzer IV medium tanks armed with high-velocity 75mm guns, and 32 artillery pieces ranging in caliber from 75mm to 150mm.¹³ Perhaps the most dangerous weapons in Wilck's arsenal were *panzerfausts*, hand-held recoilless antitank weapons that delivered a hollow-charge warhead capable of penetrating eight inches of armor. The main drawback of the *panzerfaust* was its short range—30 to

80 meters—but in the close confines of urban fighting it could be deadly.¹⁴

Wilck assumed command in Aachen on 12 October, one day before the American assault on the city began. He established his headquarters in the luxurious Hotel Quellenhof, located in the resort district on the north side of town. Wilck's position was not an enviable one. Hitler himself had ordered a "last stand" in Aachen, and Wilck was aware that soldiers who failed to do their duty could expect their families to face retribution from the German secret police. Yet, his force numbered only some 5,000 troops of uneven quality, exclusive of reinforcements that would become available during the fight.¹⁵

Although he did not know it, Wilck's force outnumbered by a ratio of three or four to one the Americans who would launch the attack on Aachen. Moreover, the two battalions of the 1st Infantry Division given the task of reducing Aachen had no experience in urban operations. At best, they had received word-of-mouth accounts of urban fighting conducted by other units, and that news was far from reassuring.

Published doctrine would have been little help to the Americans.¹⁶ The closest that the relevant field manuals came to urban operations doctrine was a few pages on fighting in towns and villages. There were no references to major cities. Moreover, those manuals made it clear that reducing a town by "frontal attack" was the least preferable means of coping with such objectives. They recommended enveloping the town or avoiding it altogether.

On the other hand, published doctrine presented a fairly accurate picture of the type of defense one could expect to encounter in a builtup area. The manuals predicted that the enemy would defend in depth throughout the town, and that buildings and especially cellars would be fortified into strongpoints capable of all-round defense. Perhaps the most helpful piece of advice found in the manuals was to warn that streets would be swept by fire, and that the best way for infantry to advance would be to pass from building to building by piercing holes in the walls.

As for the actual tactics to be employed, the manuals advocated methodical, firepower-intensive procedures. Operations would of necessity be decentralized, due to the lack of observation. Units should advance in a series of bounds, reducing strongpoints one by one with artillery bombardments followed closely by infantry assaults. Frequent halts along phase lines (main streets) would be necessary to restore contact among adjacent units. As for tanks, doctrine suggested rather

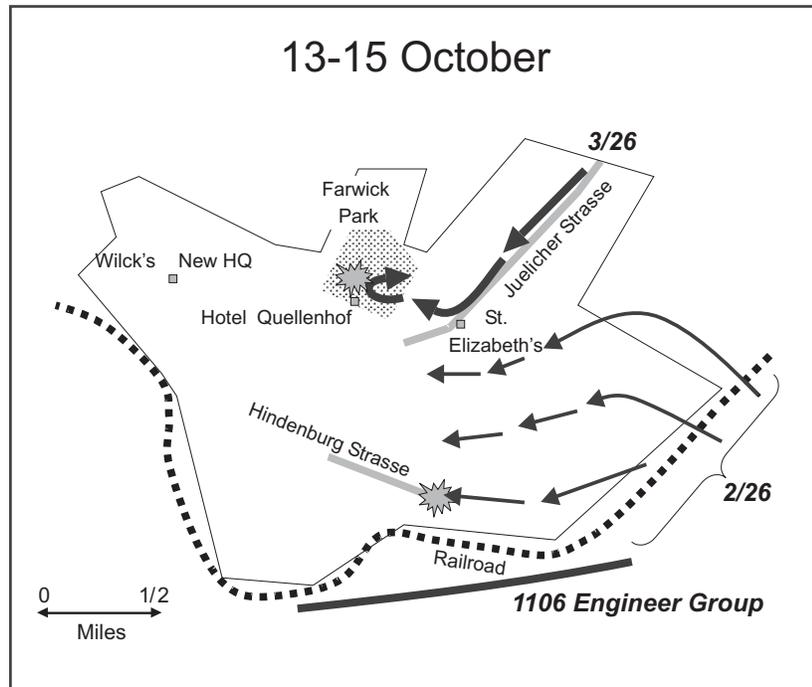
unhelpfully that “opportunities will present themselves frequently where the support of tanks in such situations becomes desirable.”¹⁷

One might argue that the Army’s published doctrine was sound in general principle, but clearly the American troops assaulting Aachen would have to work out the details for themselves. One factor working in the Americans’ favor was that the force given the mission was among the most experienced units in the U.S. Army. The 1st Infantry Division’s 26th Infantry Regiment, commanded by Colonel John F.R. Seitz, had been in action since the invasion of North Africa in November 1942. Two of the regiment’s three battalions were available for the reduction of Aachen—the 2d, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Derrill M. Daniel, and the 3d, under Lieutenant Colonel John T. Corley. Expecting that the German defenses in Aachen would be oriented to the south, where American forces had been in position for a month, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division, Major General Clarence R. Huebner, directed the two assault battalions to swing around to the east and attack the city along an east-west axis. The 1106th Engineer Combat Group, consisting of two battalions, received the mission of holding the perimeter on the southern side of Aachen while the attack crossed its front.

Colonel Seitz assigned to the 2/26 the mission of clearing the heart of downtown Aachen. On its right, the 3/26 was designated the main effort, its objectives being the hills on the north side of the city, Salvatorberg and Lousberg. Both battalions received orders to remove all civilians encountered. The Americans intended that no Germans, civilian or military, would remain unaccounted for behind U.S. forces as they advanced through the city.

From 8 to 12 October, the two assault battalions worked their way up to jump-off positions east and southeast of Aachen, taking the opportunity to practice tactics and techniques of urban fighting as they advanced. By nightfall of 12 October, the 2/26 on the left had drawn up to the foot of the railroad embankment of the Aachen-Cologne railway. To its right, the 3/26 occupied its line of departure in the industrial area just east of Aachen proper (see Map 5).

Meanwhile, on 10 October Major General Huebner delivered an ultimatum to the garrison of Aachen giving the Germans twenty-four hours to surrender. When the ultimatum expired unanswered on 11 October, the Americans began a two-day preparatory bombardment of the city. Twelve battalions of VII Corps and 1st Infantry Division artillery poured 4,800 rounds into the city on 11 October, to which four air groups of the IX Tactical Air Command, totaling some 300



Map 5

fighter-bombers, added 62 tons of bombs. Another 5,000 shells and 99 tons of bombs hammered the city on 12 October.¹⁸ It is not likely that this display of firepower had much impact on the German defenders, who had long since established themselves in basements, bunkers, air raid shelters, and other protected positions.

The 1106th Engineer Group, overlooking Aachen from its positions on the high ground south of the city, made its own unique contribution to the preparatory fires. The engineers loaded streetcars with captured explosives, to which they attached time fuses, and then set them rolling downhill into the city center. The 1106 dispatched three of these weapons, which the engineers dubbed "V-13s." The first V-13 exploded prematurely, and the second derailed on the wreckage of the first. After a patrol succeeded in clearing the tracks, the third V-13 rolled into the heart of Aachen and exploded, without discernible impact on the German defenses.¹⁹

In analyzing the reduction of Aachen itself, it is important to recognize that the two American battalions involved faced different

challenges and fought different battles. For analytical purposes, it is best to treat the two battalions separately.

The 2/26, given the mission of clearing the densest part of the old city, conducted a methodical, specialized urban operation. Fortunately, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel, the battalion commander, wrote a detailed account after the war of the methods employed.²⁰ His preparations began with a reconfiguration of his battalion that integrated the combat arms at the small-unit level. Each rifle company became a task force. In addition to the company's three organic rifle platoons and weapons platoon (light machine guns and 60mm mortars), Daniel added three tanks or tank destroyers, which the company then assigned down to the rifle platoons. The tanks, M4 Shermans, weighed approximately 35 tons and mounted general purpose 75mm main guns capable of firing armor-piercing, high-explosive, and white phosphorus rounds. The tank destroyers were M10s, based upon the M4 tank, that mounted high-velocity 75mm guns highly valued for their ability to penetrate walls and fortifications. It should be noted that the M4 and M10, both of which were about twenty feet long and nine feet wide, were small enough to maneuver even in the close confines of an urban environment.²¹ Daniel further augmented each of the rifle companies with two 57mm antitank guns, drawn from the regimental antitank company, two bazooka teams, one flamethrower, and two heavy machine guns (water-cooled .30 caliber weapons capable of sustained fire).²²

Each of the 2/26's companies was assigned a zone of advance, within which each platoon, with its accompanying tank or tank destroyer, was assigned a specific street to clear. Using the detailed maps at his disposal, Daniel set up a "measles system" in which all intersections and prominent buildings were numbered to speed up communication and ensure coordination among the battalion's elements. Daniel further ordered that constant, positive liaison be maintained between adjacent units at all times. As units advanced, Daniel mandated stops at designated checkpoints for the reestablishment of contact along the line. Offensive operations halted at nightfall along designated phase lines (major streets) to avoid the confusion and loss of observation inherent in night combat.²³

Logistics posed a special set of problems for the 2/26. Anticipating high expenditures of ammunition, Daniel improvised a mobile battalion ammunition dump that could keep pace with the advancing companies.²⁴ To facilitate medical evacuation in the rubble-filled streets, Daniel obtained some M29 cargo carriers, known as "Weasels."²⁵

These versatile little vehicles were fully tracked and measured only 10.5 feet long and 5.5 feet wide but could carry a payload of 1,200 pounds.²⁶

On 13 October the reduction of Aachen began, with the two battalions moving out in simultaneous but separate attacks. The first obstacle that confronted the 2/26 was a railroad embankment, fifteen to thirty feet high, that ran from southwest to northeast along the battalion front. Three artillery battalions delivered a 23-minute preparatory fire on the far side of the embankment, followed by a “grenade barrage,” in which every man of the two lead companies tossed grenades over the obstacle.²⁷ At 0930 the troops clambered over the embankment, only to find that the area behind was undefended. The embankment remained, however, a formidable obstacle to the tanks and other vehicles. Two tanks, though, succeeded in traversing the embankment when it was discovered that vehicles could drive straight through a railroad station built into the embankment, once a few walls had been knocked down.²⁸ After clearing the embankment, the two assault companies pivoted left so that they faced west. The 2/26’s third company filled in behind, ready to take its place in the line.

On 14 October, the 2/26 began its methodical advance through Aachen, though with one eye over its shoulder. Due to the intensity of German counterattacks against the forces still attempting to complete the encirclement, the 26th was warned to be ready to suspend its advance and go over to the defense. Despite this distraction, Daniel put all three of his companies on line and moved into the city.

With a front of some 2,000 yards (two to four times the frontage prescribed by doctrine) and no reserve, the 2/26 relied upon patience, thoroughness, and firepower to maintain its advance. The battalion’s catchphrase for this operation was “Knock ’em all down.” There was no attempt to avoid collateral damage; in fact, the troops displayed a degree of enthusiasm in wrecking a German city. More pragmatically, Daniel reasoned that German soldiers could not be expected to fight effectively with buildings falling down around their ears.²⁹ Stated generally, Daniel’s procedure was to use all available firepower to pin down the defenders and chase them into cellars, where the infantry closed with and eliminated them with bayonet and grenade.

“Knock ’em all down” started with artillery fire. Heavy artillery struck German lines of communication to isolate the battle area. Medium artillery and mortars fired across the front itself. Artillerymen used delayed fuses to ensure that rounds penetrated buildings before exploding. Division and corps artillery was arrayed south of the city,

which allowed artillery to fire parallel to the front of troops fighting in the city. With the danger of short rounds falling on American troops thus minimized, artillerymen were able to adjust fires within yards of the infantry lines. However, since the encirclement battle still raged, the forces fighting in Aachen could not count upon artillery support all the time.³⁰

Tanks and tank destroyers assigned to the platoons were, on the other hand, an ever-present source of mobile firepower. The American troops, acutely aware of the dangers posed by German *panzerfausts* in close-quarters fighting, developed combined arms tactics in which infantry protected the armor from *panzerfausts* while the armor engaged strongpoints that impeded the infantry. Platoons generally kept their armor one street back from the street being cleared. The tank or tank destroyer would nose cautiously around the corner and pour fire into a specific building. Then, the infantry would assault the building, whereupon the armor would shift fire to the next in line. Once the block had been systematically cleared, all available weapons would fire into every possible *panzerfaust* firing position while the armor dashed forward into the street just cleared.³¹

As for the infantry, the rifle platoons stayed out of the streets as much as possible. Heavy machine guns maintained steady fire up the streets along the axis of advance, thus impeding German lateral movements, while the American infantry moved from building to building by blowing holes through adjoining walls with bazookas and demolition charges. The preferred mode of clearing a building was to fight from the top down, with grenades being the weapon of choice.³²

The 2/26 eliminated every German position as it was encountered, intentionally bypassing none. Every sewer manhole was blocked off to prevent the reoccupation of positions behind American lines. In accordance with orders from higher headquarters, all civilians encountered were evacuated from the city.

As fighting progressed on 14 October, the 2/26 received augmentation from VII Corps in the form of a self-propelled 155mm gun. (The 3/26 was likewise reinforced on this date.) This weapon fired a 95-pound armor-piercing projectile at a muzzle velocity of 2,800 feet per second—sufficient kinetic energy to penetrate an entire block of buildings. Daniel was strictly enjoined to take good care of this asset.³³

At day's end, the 2/26 reached its designated phase line, but a gap remained between its right flank and the left of the 3/26 to the north. Daniel blamed the 3/26 for anchoring its left on the wrong landmark.

Fortunately, the Germans did not exploit this gap, though the 2/26 did lose one of its 57mm antitank guns to fire from this open flank.

The 2/26 continued its methodical advance on 15 October. It achieved a linkup with the 3/26, thus securing its right flank. Company G, on the left wing, encountered a massive three-story fortified structure that proved to be a gigantic above-ground air raid shelter. One burst of fire from the company's flamethrower induced the surrender of 200 soldiers and 1,000 civilians sheltering behind the structure's fifteen-foot walls.³⁴

At dusk, the Germans launched a counterattack in company strength, with tank support, along Hindenburg Strasse. It took the 2/26 two hours to contain the attack and restore the line. This action cost the Americans one tank destroyer, one antitank gun, and a heavy machine gun. The Germans lost one tank and about a platoon's worth of infantry.³⁵ This would prove to be the largest single action that the 2/26 would fight during the reduction of the city.

On the next morning, 16 October, the 1st and 30th Infantry Divisions finally linked up east of Aachen, thus completing the encirclement of the city. The Germans responded with heavy counterattacks, prompting the 1st Infantry Division to suspend offensive operations within the city as a precautionary measure. The 2/26 took advantage of the pause to secure its position. On the battalion's left flank, the 1106th Engineer Group pivoted its right wing forward from its position south of the city to conform to the 2/26. The battalion also decided to take measures against a supposed pillbox spotted at the far end of Hindenburg Strasse. Daniel brought up his attached 155mm self-propelled gun for the purpose. To protect it, he ordered tank destroyers to fire into the intervening cross streets. To protect the tank destroyers, infantry secured the buildings within *panzerfaust* range of the armor. Once in place, the 155 utterly demolished the "pillbox," which later proved to be a camouflaged tank.³⁶

The 2/26 continued its methodical advance on 17 and 18 October (see Map 6). The 1106th Engineer Group continued to displace forward to cover the battalion's flank. As it advanced, the 2/26's front widened. The 1st Infantry Division attached Company C (1/26 Infantry) to Daniel's command, where it assumed responsibility for a zone on the right flank.³⁷

During this period, the 2/26 found itself taking fire from the rear, despite all its precautions to assure that no Germans were bypassed. After a careful search, the Americans discovered that the fire was

coming from a church steeple that had been reinforced with concrete, making it a fortified observation post. This position proved to be impervious to both small arms and 75mm tank destroyer fire, whereupon Daniel again called upon his 155mm artillery piece. One shot from the 155 brought the entire structure crashing to the ground.³⁸ This use of a 155mm gun as an anti-sniper weapon is perhaps the epitome of “Knock ’em all down.”

The 2/26’s front continued to widen as it entered the western portion of the city on 19 October. Another battalion, the 2/110 (28th Infantry Division), was made available “for defensive missions only.”³⁹ This force, which had been battered in earlier fighting, occupied a gap that emerged between the 2/26 and the 1106th Engineers. That same day, operating in conjunction with the 3/26 to its right, elements of the 2/26 occupied the lower slopes of Salvatorberg.

On 20 October, the battalion’s right wing became embroiled in a difficult battle for the Technical School. (Unknown to the Americans, the German headquarters in Aachen was just a few blocks away in the 3/26 zone.) Conversely, resistance faded on the left as the battalion neared the western edge of the city. The Technical School fell on 21 October, yielding several hundred prisoners. This was the last organized resistance encountered by the 2/26. The battalion crossed a railway embankment at the western edge of the city with a repeat of the grenade barrage with which it had entered Aachen. It was securing the ground beyond when word arrived that the German commander, Colonel Wilck, had surrendered to the 3/26.⁴⁰

Whereas the actions of the 2/26 in Aachen were largely in the nature of a clearing operation against poorly organized defenders, the 3/26 experienced something more like a pitched battle. Its battlefield environment was also different. Unlike the dense urban terrain that confronted the 2/26, the 3/26 first encountered an industrial area, and then advanced through the parks and resorts that covered the hills on the north side of town. Control of those hills, which overlooked the city center, was key to the possession of Aachen, a fact that both sides recognized. Colonel Wilck placed the best of his defenders in the path of the 3/26.

The 3/26 launched its attack on 13 October through factories and apartment houses on the northeast side of Aachen (see Map 5). Although its front was considerably narrower than that of the 2/26, the 3/26 advanced with both flanks open. After progressing steadily along Juelicher Strasse for several hours, the battalion was halted by 20mm cannon fire that drove the infantry out of the street, exposing two tanks

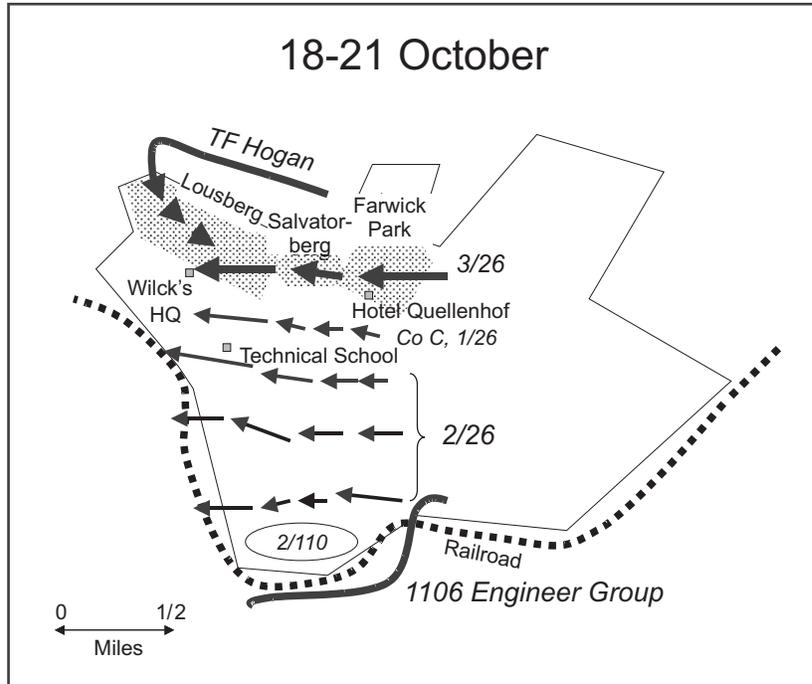
to *panzerfaust* fire. One tank was destroyed, and the other damaged and abandoned by its crew. Some infantrymen later succeeded in retrieving the damaged tank.⁴¹

On 14 October, the 3/26 concentrated two of its three companies in the reduction of a German strongpoint in St. Elizabeth's Church. By the end of the day, elements of the battalion advanced to the edge of Farwick Park, only a few blocks from Wilck's headquarters in the Hotel Quellenhof. In response, Wilck moved his headquarters to an air raid bunker 1,200 yards west of the hotel. That evening, Wilck received the only reinforcements that would come his way during the battle. SS Battalion Rink, a task force of infantry and eight assault guns, reached Wilck's position after fighting its way past the U.S. 30th Infantry Division. Although this force was rather badly depleted, as an SS unit it was manned with the best, most fanatical personnel that Germany had to offer. Wilck assigned this battalion the task of stopping the 3/26.⁴²

The next day started out well for the 3/26. The battalion achieved a linkup with the 2/26 on its left, securing one flank. The attack against Farwick Park made steady progress, with the help of some 4.2-inch mortars provided by division headquarters. Advancing across once-luxurious lawns and gardens, the 3/26 reached the vicinity of the Hotel Quellenhof, Wilck's old headquarters, when SS Battalion Rink counterattacked in force. The counterattack drove the Americans back out of Farwick Park in disarray. Not until 1700 did the 3/26 stop the German attack and stabilize its lines.⁴³

Following this setback, the 3/26 went on the defensive for two days. The American forces outside the city completed their encirclement on 16 October, in the face of heavy German counterattacks. The 3/26 used the pause to lick its wounds and await reinforcements from VII Corps. On the German side, Wilck knew that the 4,392 effectives at his disposal on 16 October were not likely to be reinforced.⁴⁴

The 3/26 resumed offensive operations on 18 October (see Map 6). A patrol sent out beyond the right flank made contact with the 30th Infantry Division, thus affording a degree of security in that direction.⁴⁵ The battalion renewed its attack on Farwick Park, regained the ground lost on 15 October, and assaulted the Hotel Quellenhof. After bitter fighting through the once-luxurious rooms of the hotel, the Americans forced their opponents into the basement and subdued them with grenades and machine gun fire poured point-blank through the windows. The 3/26 controlled Farwick Park by day's end.⁴⁶ The ground gained on 18 October placed the 3/26 in position to attack Salvatorberg and Lousberg, the key terrain in the battle for Aachen. What is more, the



Map 6

battle for Hotel Quellenhof seems to have broken the back of SS Battalion Rink and, thus, of the German defense in general.

For the final assault, VII Corps reinforced the 3/26 with Task Force Hogan, consisting of one armored infantry battalion and one tank battalion (minus a medium tank company) from the 3d Armored Division.⁴⁷ The attack, coordinated by 1st Infantry Division headquarters, jumped off at 0730 on 19 October. Task Force Hogan, advancing on the right, passed behind Lousberg and attacked from the northwest while the 3/26 attacked from the east. Both advances progressed steadily against weakening resistance. The 3/26 seized Salvatorberg and moved onto the slopes of Lousberg proper. Task Force Hogan's advance cut the last possible escape routes for the Germans in Aachen and, at 1202, established contact with the 3/26 on Lousberg.⁴⁸

With defeat staring him in the face, Wilck sent out an order to his command calling for a fight to the last man and bullet. How many German troops received this directive is not known, but resistance clearly was crumbling. On 20 October, as Task Force Hogan and the

3/26 cleared the last German troops from Lousberg, the issue was no longer in doubt.

The end came on 21 October, when elements of the 3/26 closed in on an air raid bunker south of Lousberg, unaware that it was Wilck's headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Corley, the battalion commander, dispatched his attached 155mm self-propelled gun to reduce the position. Before the gun could open fire, Wilck sent out a white flag in the hands of some American prisoners who were being held in the bunker. He broadcast a last radio message proclaiming his loyalty to Hitler and to Germany and then turned himself over to the 3/26. The surrender of the Aachen garrison took effect at 1205.⁴⁹

With the German communications system broken down, Wilck had no means of communicating the surrender to most of his troops. The Americans found it necessary to drive one of Wilck's staff officers around town in an armored car to collect the German troops still holding out.⁵⁰ The two battalions of the 26th Infantry, the 1106th Engineers, and Task Force Hogan accounted for 1,600 German prisoners after Wilck's surrender, bringing the total haul of prisoners collected during the reduction to 3,473.⁵¹

At 1615, the 26th Infantry reported, "Mission out here complete as of now and are through with TF 'Hogan.'" ⁵² The regiment patrolled Aachen for two more days, then was relieved by a field artillery battalion. Aachen was secured but, for the 26th Infantry, the war was far from over. The next day it took up a position in the front lines facing east into Germany.

The military garrison of Aachen was not the only group of Germans with whom the victors had to contend. Some 7,000 civilians still inhabited the city when the reduction began, and all of these had to be evacuated and processed. Two agencies were responsible for handling the civilians. The Counter Intelligence Corps screened the evacuees, looking for any spies, would-be saboteurs, and high-ranking officials. Suspected spies were to be turned over to the First Army Military Commission for trial. German military deserters were sent to the Provost Marshal for processing as prisoners of war. The task of the Counter Intelligence Corps was greatly simplified by the Nazi regime's obsession with documentation—every German carried identity papers. After the screening process, military government personnel registered the evacuees and provided them with food and shelter.⁵³

Of the 7,000 civilians in Aachen, approximately 6,000 were removed in the course of the fighting. At first, the evacuees were simply

taken to an open field for screening by the Counter Intelligence Corps before being removed to displaced persons camps behind Allied lines. As the reduction of Aachen picked up pace and the number of evacuees swelled, military government took over some German army barracks at Brand, four miles from Aachen. Here the evacuees could be kept under shelter (and behind fences) while the screening and registration took place.⁵⁴

Overall, the Americans responsible for handling the civilian evacuees from Aachen found them to be passive, and even cooperative. The hard-core Nazis had left town during the evacuation that preceded the battle. Those who remained seemed to be quite content to let the U.S. Army take care of them. After a decade of increasingly brutal Nazi rule, not to mention the horrors that war had brought upon them, the evacuees from Aachen found American military rule to be relatively benign. The happiest group of evacuees was undoubtedly the Polish and Russian forced laborers liberated by the Americans.⁵⁵

Within captured Aachen itself, teams from the Counter Intelligence Corps searched specific buildings for military information, but found little. Other teams secured communications centers and collected all radio transmitters to prevent any stay-behind spies from communicating with the outside. One report stated specifically that “no pigeons were found.” This was in response to rumors that German spies behind Allied lines were using homing pigeons to communicate with their homeland. Counter Intelligence personnel in Aachen also screened some 1,000 civilians who had avoided evacuation during the battle.⁵⁶

It would appear that the Germans made no preparations for subversion against occupying forces in anticipation of the American capture of Aachen. The Counter Intelligence Corps reported that there were no confirmed cases of sabotage, no booby traps, and no resistance cells to be found within the city.⁵⁷ For all its prowess at the tactical and operational levels of war, Nazi Germany proved to be singularly inept at covert operations such as espionage, counterespionage, and subversion. At no point in the Allied conquest of Germany did a coherent popular resistance movement menace the occupying forces, Adolf Hitler’s rhetoric notwithstanding.

Urban operations may well represent the coming face of battle in an increasingly urbanized world. Today there is a tendency to regard urban operations as a distinct, rather esoteric form of warfare demanding specialized military capabilities. As the foregoing account should make clear, the reduction of Aachen posed challenges that invoked a certain degree of innovation and adaptation. Most notable were the creation of

small, combined arms teams and the measures undertaken to cope with civilians. What should not be overlooked, however, is the degree to which the battle of Aachen resembled conventional combat, even though it was fought in urban terrain.

First, it should be noted that Aachen was a linear battle, most particularly in the sector of the 2/26. The battalion took great pains to assure that all Germans were either in front of its line or on their way to detention centers. It was remarkably successful in keeping the battle linear. Even in the zone of the 3/26, where the situation was more fluid, linearity prevailed.

Second, the tactics employed within Aachen embodied the standard fire-and-maneuver concepts that were common to open-field battle of the day. The tactical intent, which the Americans routinely accomplished, was to pound the enemy into helplessness with firepower, so that when the infantry attacked, it encountered an enemy who was ready to surrender. Much the same could be said for Army combined arms doctrine in general, as practiced in World War II.

Third, it should be noted that both the attackers and defenders in Aachen were conventional, “heavy” forces. The American forces were able to shift from conventional to urban operations in a matter of days. They possessed no equipment specially designed for urban operations, nor did they have much in the way of formal doctrine to guide their efforts. Although none of the American units involved had ever reduced a city before, they did possess experience in fighting among the close confines of the Normandy hedgerows. Not surprisingly, the task organization and tactics employed in Aachen somewhat resemble those used with success in Normandy.

The battle for Aachen challenges conventional wisdom in another respect. Urban operations are commonly regarded as bloody, time-consuming operations in which the defender can exact many times his own number in enemy casualties. In Aachen, however, the defenders outnumbered the attackers, and yet managed to hold out for only nine days because of the American offensive methods and the incoherent nature of the German defense. The two battalions of the 26th Infantry (plus attachments) that bore the brunt of the fighting in Aachen lost 75 killed, 414 wounded, and 9 missing in securing a city defended by over 5,000 enemy troops.⁵⁸ For the U.S. Army, the true bloodbath of the 1944 campaign was not an urban operation, but rather the battle of the Huertgen Forest.

The Germans, on the other hand, lost virtually all of the troops committed to Aachen. Over half of the total surrendered, despite Hitler's admonition that they were to fight to the last man. A small number probably succeeded in exfiltrating, but the rest were killed or wounded. The German cause did not gain much from the sacrifice of these troops.

In two respects, however, the battle for Aachen bears out conventional wisdom. First, although Aachen itself was unfortified, war made it a fortress. Stone walls erected for any purpose can be a significant combat multiplier for a defender. Moreover, when the Americans reduced the city to rubble with artillery and air bombardment, they rendered buildings unfit for civilian use but did not destroy them as fighting positions. Urban rubble is as much of a problem for an attacker as intact buildings would be.

Second, Aachen showed that civilians add an inescapable dimension to urban operations. Despite two mandatory evacuations (one by the German government before the battle, and one by the Americans during it), an estimated 1,000 civilians were still in the city when Wilck surrendered the German garrison. Although this number represents only a small fraction of the city's prewar population, it was large enough to require the attention of the victors. Future planners can never assume away the presence of civilians during urban operations.

In the context of the U.S. Army's 1944 campaign in Europe, urban operations were not a major problem. Partly by chance and partly by planning, Americans avoided combat in truly large cities such as Paris and Berlin. When they did have to fight in builtup areas, U.S. troops adapted and pushed on. Given the intensity of the war, "Knock 'em all down" served admirably as a technique. The reduction of Aachen, a sideshow for the U.S. First Army as it drove into Germany, was just another day's work for an experienced, competent military force.

Notes

1. Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack*, U.S. Army in World War II (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1950), 457.
2. Elbridge Colby, *The First Army in Europe*, 91st Congress, 1st Session, Senate Document No. 91-25 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1969), 92-95.
3. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, U.S. Army in World War II (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1963), 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 68.
5. Colby, 97-108.
6. Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Field Service Regulations, Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1944), 11. This manual calls for a battalion in a “main attack” to occupy a frontage of 500 to 1,000 yards. Extrapolating this figure yields a frontage of approximately 5 to 10 miles for a corps.
7. See MacDonald, 30-35 for information on the *Westwall* and its component fortifications.
8. *Ibid.*, 71.
9. *Ibid.*, 26-27.
10. H.R. Knickerbocker et al., *Danger Forward: The Story of the First Division in World War II* (Washington, DC: Society of the First Division, 1947), 256.
11. MacDonald, 261-73.
12. *Ibid.*, 285-88.
13. MacDonald, 81. See also 1st U.S. Infantry Division, “Report of Breaching the Siegfried Line and the Capture of Aachen, 7 November 1944,” Combined Arms Research Library (CARL) manuscript collection, Fort Leavenworth, KS (hereafter referred to as CARL).
14. Alex Buchner, *The German Infantry Handbook, 1939-1945* (West Chester, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1991), 149-51. The *panzerfaust* was comparable in performance and employment to the rocket-propelled grenade of modern times.
15. MacDonald, 307-308.
16. In addition to FM 100-5 (1944), the following FMs were consulted: FM 100-5, *Tentative Field Service Regulations, Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1939) 218-22; FM 7-5, *Infantry Field Manual: Organization and Tactics of Infantry, The Rifle Battalion* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1940), 99.
17. FM 100-5 (1944), 248.
18. Colby, 107, and MacDonald, 309-310.
19. *Ibid.*, 310n.

20. Derrill M. Daniel, "The Capture of Aachen," CARL manuscript collection.
21. *The American Arsenal* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1996), 29, 51.
22. Daniel, 7-9, and MacDonald, 310.
23. Daniel, 6, and MacDonald, 310-11.
24. Daniel, 5-6.
25. MacDonald, 311.
26. *The American Arsenal*, 72-73.
27. 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report of Operations, 1 October to 31 October 1944," 5 November 1944, CARL manuscript collection.
28. Daniel, 8-10.
29. *Ibid.*, 5.
30. Daniel, 11, and MacDonald, 310.
31. Daniel, 6-7, and MacDonald, 310.
32. Daniel, 11, and MacDonald, 310-11.
33. *The American Arsenal*, 159.
34. Daniel, 12-13.
35. *Ibid.*, 13.
36. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
37. *Ibid.*, 15.
38. *Ibid.*, 15-16.
39. 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report," 114 and 118-19, and 1st Infantry Division, "Report of Breaching the Siegfried Line," 11.
40. Daniel, 16.
41. MacDonald, 311-12.
42. *Ibid.*, 312.
43. *Ibid.*, 312-13.
44. *Ibid.*, 313-14.
45. 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report," 117.
46. MacDonald, 315.
47. 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report," 118-19.
48. *Ibid.*, and 1st Infantry Division, "Report of Breaching the Siegfried Line," 11.
49. MacDonald, 316.
50. 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report," 124.
51. MacDonald, 316-17, and 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report," 124.
52. 1st Infantry Division, "G-3 Report," 124.
53. 1st CIC Detachment, "CIC Operations in Aachen and Vicinity September, October, and November," 1.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

56. Ibid., 2-3.
57. Ibid., 2.
58. MacDonald, 318.

Annotated Bibliography

The basic source for study of the Aachen battle is *The Siegfried Line Campaign* by Charles B. MacDonald (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1963). This work is a volume in the Army's official history series, *United States Army in World War II*. MacDonald, a combat veteran of the war, encompasses Aachen, the Huertgen Forest, and Operation MARKET GARDEN in this thoroughly researched, well-written book. He devotes ten pages to the urban operation within the city of Aachen itself.

Of particular value is an unpublished manuscript titled "The Capture of Aachen, A Lecture Presented by Lieutenant Colonel Derrill M. Daniel." This 19-page typescript document contains details on task organization, control measures, and tactics employed by the 2/26 Infantry in Aachen. A copy is available in the Combined Arms Research Library (CARL), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Other documents available from this library include reports of the 1st Infantry Division G3 section, a 1st Infantry Division after-action report, and a compilation of documents from the Counter Intelligence Corps. CARL also possesses a valuable collection of field manuals from the World War II period.

Three readily available secondary works are of interest to the student of the Aachen operation. *Danger Forward: The Story of the First Division in World War II* (Washington, DC: Society of the First Division, 1947) includes ten pages on the operations in and around Aachen. Charles Whiting has produced a mass-market account titled *Bloody Aachen* (NY: Military Heritage Press, 1988 [1976]). This book relies in part on MacDonald's official volume, cited above. Irving Werstein's *The Battle of Aachen* (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962) is an anecdotal account upon which serious researchers will not wish to rely.

Among the most useful reference works is George Forty's *U.S. Army Handbook 1939-1945* (NY: Scribner, 1980). This handy volume contains a wealth of information on Army organization, weapons, and equipment. The *German Infantry Handbook, 1939-1945* (West Chester, PA: Schiffer, 1991) by Alex Buchner, provides comparable information on German forces. *The American Arsenal* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1996), a reprint of an official Ordnance Department publication, provides authoritative information on American weapons and equipment.

Two government publications offer information on Army doctrine in World War II. *Seek, Strike, and Destroy: U.S. Army Tank Destroyer Doctrine in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College [USACGSC], 1985) by Christopher R. Gabel discusses the integration of tank destroyers into small-unit combined arms teams. Michael D. Doubler's monograph, *Busting the Bocage: American Combined Arms Operations in France, 6 June-31 July 1944* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC), explores the organizational and tactical innovations used in

Normandy, which bore some resemblance to those employed in later urban operations.