

A BRIEF, UNAUTHORIZED HISTORY OF THE 26TH “YANKEE” DIVISION

26 YD Historical Reenactment Group
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FORMATION AND EARLY HISTORY



With World War I underway, the War Department authorized the 26th Infantry Division and notified Major General Clarence Edwards on 14 Aug, 1917 to begin its organization. He was to use available National Guard units under him as Commanding Officer of the Department of the Northeast. The new division was thus nicknamed the “Yankee” division because the units selected were from all six New England states. It was officially organized by his order on 22 Aug, 1917.


General Edwards was an interesting character. He was a hard driving, no nonsense man with a disregard for the red tape for which the Army was famous.



General Edwards and the YD Patch



The War Department was short on details on how the organization was to be carried out and General Edwards took advantage of this. He quickly transferred artillery from Coast Artillery units under his command to fill out Field Artillery units for the YD. He was later reprimanded by the War Department but much too late for them to do anything about it. The General further ruffled feathers by cutting ahead of the 42nd "Rainbow" Infantry Division to get overseas first by getting his units to New York faster. When only two boats were available, not enough for the 30,000 strong division, General Edwards secured passage for the rest from Canadian ships. In this manner, the "Yankee" Division was the first full American division to land in France directly from the U.S. during World War One.



The 26th went on to fight with distinction in six campaigns. It also became the first American division to have one of its units honored with a foreign countries award for military action when the 104th Infantry Regiment received the French Croix de Guerre.

The 26th was deactivated at Camp Devens, Massachusetts on 3 May, 1919.

PRE-WORLD WAR TWO


By the middle of 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt could see that it was just a matter of time before the United States would be dragged into the war that had been raging in Europe since 1939. He had already started to expand the Regular Army and the next step was to activate National Guard units.



The “Yankee” Division was activated on 16 Jan, 1941 at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts for what was supposed to be one year of war service training.

In August and September of 1941, the 26th joined the 1st Infantry Division (the Big Red One) for maneuvers at Camp Devens, Massachusetts.





This was followed by participation in the Carolina Maneuvers later in the fall of that year. These maneuvers involved 350,000 men and was the next part of the progressively larger unit training and integration of the Regular, National Guard, and Reserve forces. The Division returned to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts on 6 December, 1941 to await the end of its one-year activation. We all know what happened on 7 December...Imperial Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II. Germany declared war on the U.S. three days later.

WORLD WAR TWO

Training

The US Army began reorganizing its nine Regular Army infantry divisions in 1939 under the leadership of Chief of Staff General George Marshall and his Chief at General Headquarters, Lieutenant General Lesley McNair. They changed from the large “square” divisions of four regiments used for the static warfare of World War I to the streamlined “triangular” divisions of three regiments for the highly mobile warfare they foresaw for World War II.

General George Marshall



Lt. General Lesley McNair



The size of an infantry division had already been reduced from its World War I strength of 30,000 to 22,000 by 1929. It was now to be 14,500 with many of its former resources assigned to Corps and Army levels. This change was accomplished by the end of 1940. The process was started for the National Guard divisions in 1942.

At that time, the 26th ID was comprised of the 101st, 104th, 181st, and 182nd Infantry regiments. In January of 1942, the 181st was reassigned to Eastern Defense Command for shore patrol duties and the 182nd was sent to service in the Pacific Theater where it became part of the Americal Division.

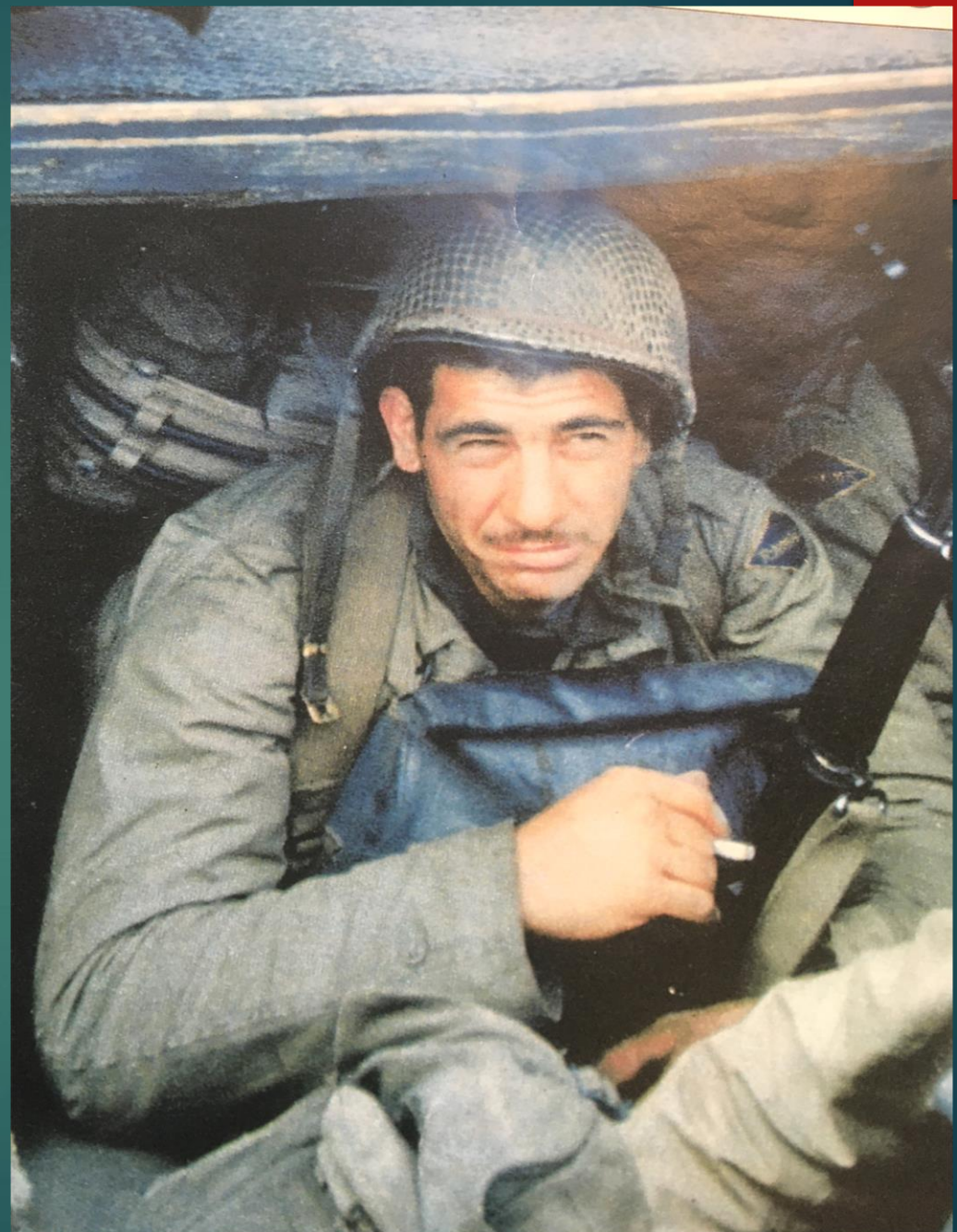
The remainder of the “Yankee” Division was assigned to the 1st Coast Artillery District of the US Coast Artillery Corps for shore patrol duties. From Jan - Mar, 1942 they patrolled the New England coast as far as Long Island, New York. From Apr – Dec, 1942 they patrolled the coast from North Carolina to Key West, Florida.

In Jan, 1943 the 328th Infantry Regiment was assigned to the 26th ID to bring it to full strength. The 328th had been part of the 82nd Infantry Division during World War I. Its most famous member was WWI Medal of Honor recipient Sergeant Alvin York. The 82nd ID became the 82nd Parachute Infantry Division during World War II.

The Division was assigned to Camp Blanding, Florida for conditioning and amphibious training between Jan and Apr of 1943.

On 17 Apr, 1943 they arrived at Camp Gordon, Georgia where they stayed until moving to Camp Campbell, Kentucky in September for combat training. On 1 Sep, the 5th Ranger Battalion was activated at Camp Forrest, Tennessee. Members of the YD were training at Camp Forrest at that time and so many members volunteered for the 5th Rangers that it was often referred to as the "Little YD". The 5th went on to land at Omaha Beach during the Normandy Invasion in June, 1944.

Member of the 5th
Rangers Aboard a
Landing Craft on 6
June, 1944



The Division then took part in the Tennessee Maneuvers of Jan – Mar, 1944. Along with the Louisiana Maneuvers, it was the final test of how the Army would handle combat and logistics of armies in the field. The exercise involved 850,000 soldiers and would be a sad one for the 26th ID.


Members of the 26th had been ordered to cross the Cumberland River. The river was swollen by heavy rains and had reached the flood stage. The rapid flow of the river had made it impossible for engineers to construct a pontoon bridge across. At midnight, four hours before the end of the maneuvers, a colonel made a fateful decision.

Against the advice of his subordinates, the colonel ordered a crossing using pontoon boats. The boats were not designed to transport men and equipment but to support bridges. The first boat of twenty-two heavily laden infantrymen made it across. The second boat did not. Burdened with heavy overcoats, weapons, and full packs, the men sank so quickly that not one scream or cry for help was ever heard.

Soldiering is a dangerous business, even in peace time. A total of 250 soldiers perished from all units along with ten civilians during the Tennessee Maneuvers.

The 26th stayed at Fort Jackson, South Carolina from Apr, 1944 until they were transported to their port of embarkation at Fort Shanks, New York in Aug, 1944. Major General Willard Paul assumed command of the division from Major General Roger Eckfeldt at this time and would lead it through the end of the war in Europe.





The “Yankee” Division boarded the SS Argentina and the SS Saturnia on 27 Aug, 1944 and headed for Europe. Both ships landed on 7 Sep, the SS Argentina at Valognes (Utah Beach) and the SS Saturnia at Cherbourg. In doing so, the YD became the first full American division to travel directly from the U.S. to France during World War II, just as it had during World War I.

The SS Argentina also had the honor of Carrying the first war brides from England to the United States.

The SS Argentina



Valognes, France



European Theater of Operations

The 26th was assigned to III Corps, Ninth Army upon their arrival in France. They did not see combat as a division until a month later. Elements performed patrol duty until the end of September and the 328 IR saw action with the 80th ID from 5 to 15 Oct, 1944. The Division was reassigned to XII Corps of General Patton's Third Army and relieved the 4th Armored Division. They assumed defensive positions with a limited objective attack in the Moncourt Woods on 22 Oct.

Maj. Gen. George Patton

On 8 Nov, the Division went on the offensive and took Dieuze on 20 Nov. The advance continued across the Saar River to Saar Union which they captured on 2 Dec after heavy house-to-house fighting.



The Division regrouped after reaching the Maginot fortifications and entered Saarguemines on 8 Dec.

The fighting, especially at Saar Union, had depleted the 26th and it was sent to Metz on 12 Dec for a planned thirty-day rest and refit. General Patton was already envisioning a thrust to the north to capture Rhine River crossings and created III Corps for this purpose. It was to consist of the 4th Armored, 26th Infantry, and 80th Infantry divisions. Rest at Metz was interrupted when German forces launched the Ardennes counter-offensive, more popularly called the Battle of the Bulge, on 16 Dec.

Having already been prepared to move north, Patton quickly moved III Corps to Luxembourg from 19 to 21 Dec to aid in the relief of the forces under siege at Bastogne. The advance had the 4th AD aimed at Bastogne on the left, the 26th ID in the center, and the 80th ID on the right.




The 26th attacked at Rambrouch and Grosbous on 22 Dec, beat off strong German counterattack, and captured Arsdorf on Christmas Day after heavy fighting. Relief of Bastogne was accomplished on the 26 Dec but the fighting continued. They then attacked towards the Wiltz River but were forced to withdraw in the face of heavy resistance. It attacked again after regrouping on 5 – 8 Jan and crossed the Wiltz River on 20 Jan. The advance continued with Grumelscheld being captured on 21 Jan and the Clerf River being crossed on 24 Jan. General Paul sent out the following to all units of his division on 1 Feb in response to their performance:

“When you initially attacked for seven days and nights without halting for rest, you met and defeated twice your number. Your advance required the enemy to turn fresh divisions against you, and you in turn hacked them to pieces as you ruthlessly cut your way deep into the “bulge”. Your feats of daring and endurance in the sub-freezing weather and snow-clad mountains and gorges of Luxembourg are legion; your contribution to the relief of Bastogne was immeasurable. It was particularly fitting that the elimination of the “bulge” should find the Yankee Division seizing and holding firmly on the same line held by our own forces prior to the breakthrough.

“I am proud of this feat by you as well as those performed earlier. We shall advance on Berlin together.”

The Division was reassigned to XX Corps after crossing the Clerf River and was immediately shifted to the east bank of the Saar River to maintain defensive positions in the Saarlautern area. They remained there from 29 Jan until 6 Mar, 1945.

The Division's drive to the Rhine River started on 13 Mar. They reached the Rhine on 21 Mar and crossed at Oppenheim 25 – 26 Mar.



After being reassigned to XII Corps, it took part in the house-to-house reduction of Hanau on 28 Mar, broke out of the Main River bridgehead, moved through Fulda on 1 Apr, and helped capture Meiningen on 5 Apr. Moving southeast into Austria, it helped with the capture of Linz on 4 May. It had changed direction again and was moving northeast across the Vlatava river into Czechoslovakia when the cease fire order was received on 8 May.

VE Day, the war against Germany was over.

On 9 May, the 26th and the 11th Armored overran the Gusen concentration camp. Gusen was part of the Mathausen Complex and had been set up to use slave labor to create tunnels for aircraft production. They liberated it before the SS at the camp could carry out plans to demolish the tunnels with the prisoners inside.

Gusen Concentration Camp



ROUTE OF ADVANCE 1944 - 1945



1 7 Sep, 44
Debarcation: Cherbourg and Valognes, France

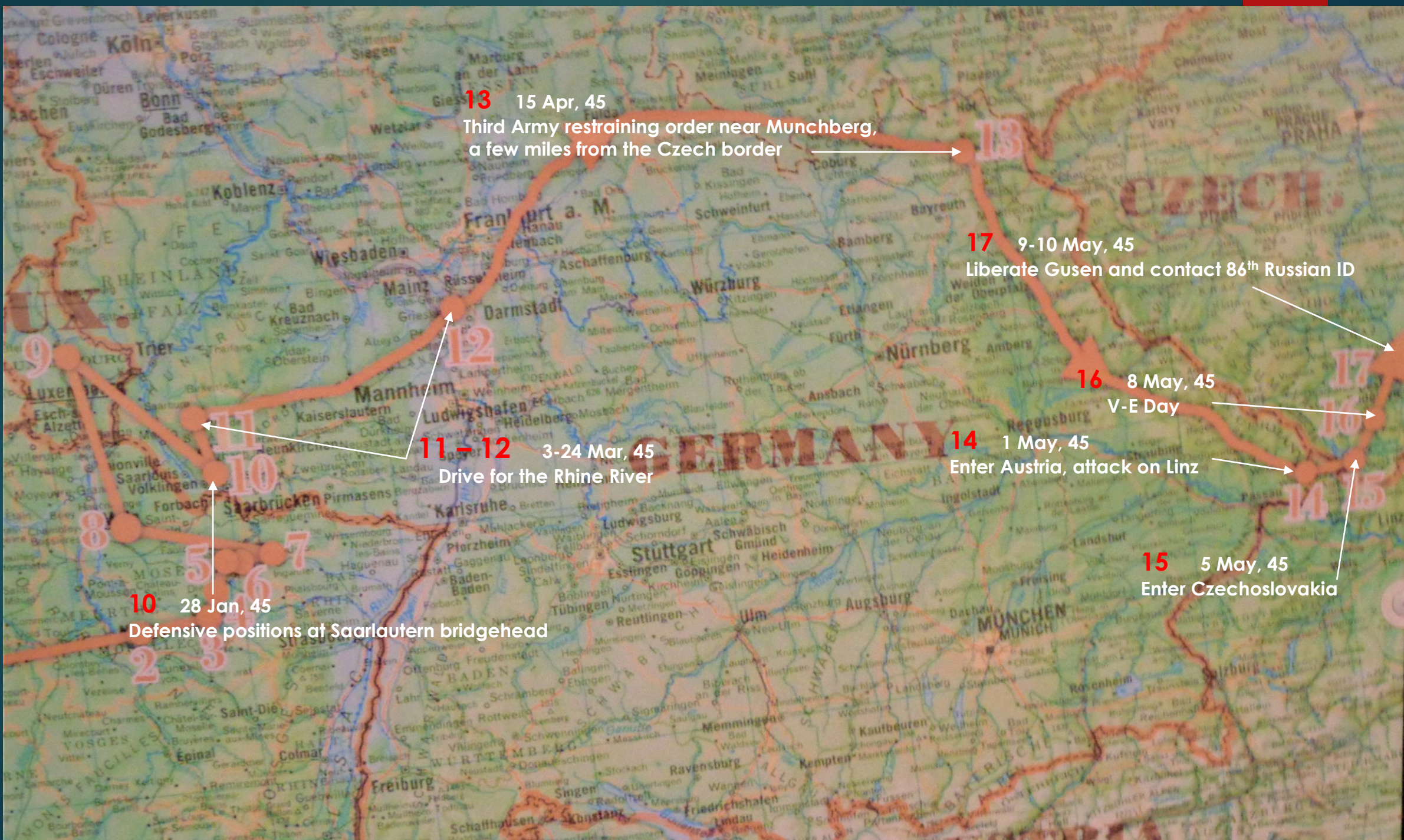
8 12 Dec 45
Trucked to Metz for planned 30 day rest and refit

9 22 Dec-24 Jan, 45
Battle of the Bulge

2 6 Oct, 44
Relieves 4th Armored Division

3 22 Oct, 44
Attack on Moncourt Woods

4-7 8 Nov, 44 – 4 Dec, 45
Lorraine Offensive



13 15 Apr, 45
Third Army restraining order near Munchberg,
a few miles from the Czech border

17 9-10 May, 45
Liberate Gusen and contact 86th Russian ID

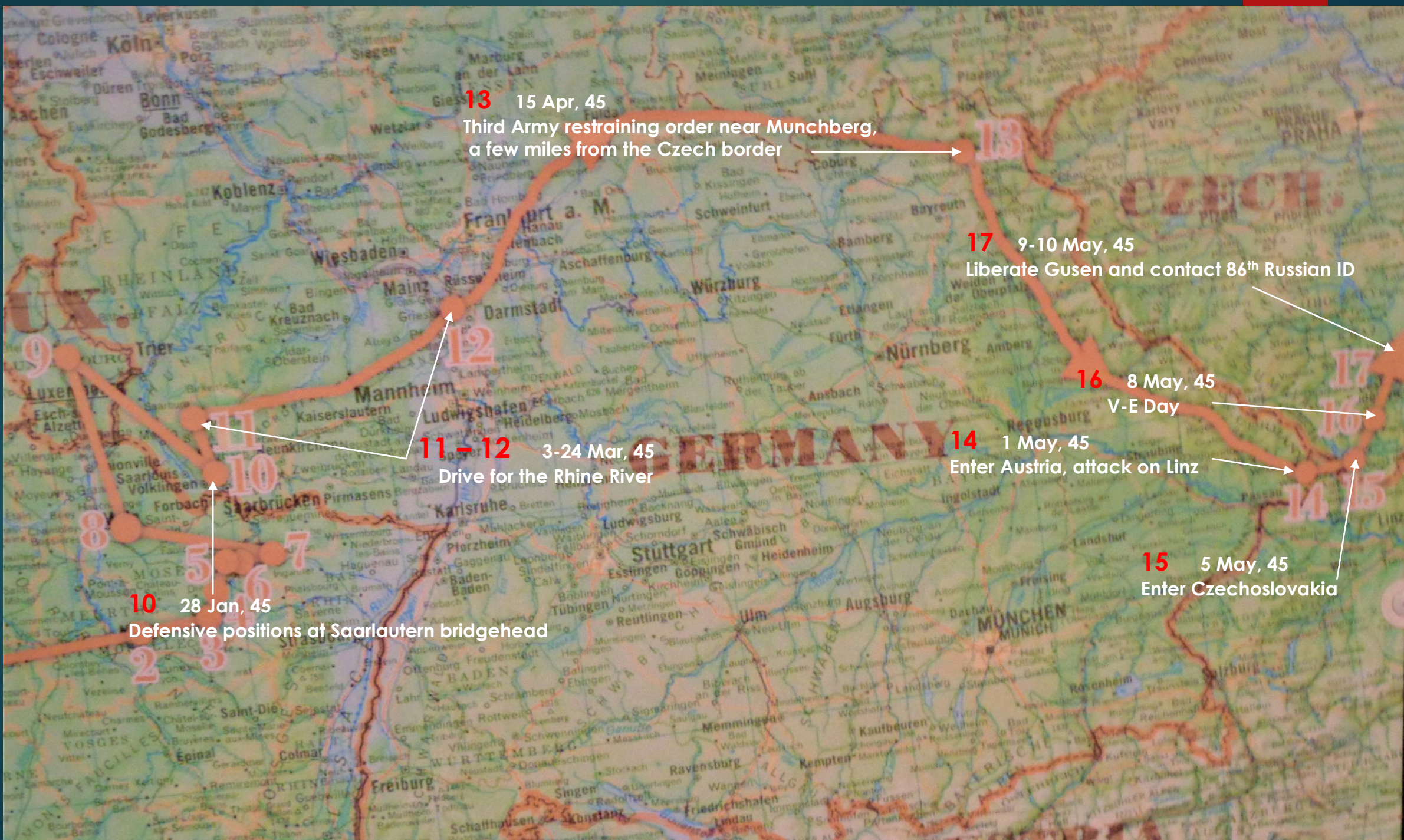
16 8 May, 45
V-E Day

14 1 May, 45
Enter Austria, attack on Linz


15 5 May, 45
Enter Czechoslovakia

11-12 3-24 Mar, 45
Drive for the Rhine River

10 28 Jan, 45
Defensive positions at Saarlautern bridgehead



1. 7 Sep, 44 – Debarkation: Cherbourg and Valognes, France
2. 6 Oct, 44 - Relieves 4th Armored Division
3. 22 Oct, 44 – Attack on Moncourt Woods
- 4., 5., 6., and 7. 8 Nov, 44 – 4 Dec, 45 - Lorraine Offensive
8. 12 Dec, 45 – Trucked to Metz for planned 30 day rest and refit.
9. 22 Dec-24 Jan, 45 – Battle of the Bulge
10. 28 Jan, 45 – Defensive positions at Saarlautern bridgehead
- 11., 12. 13-24 Mar, 45 – Drive for the Rhine River
13. 15 Apr, 45 – Third Army restraining order near Munchberg, a few miles from the Czech border
14. 1 May, 45 – Enter Austria, attack on Linz
15. 5 May, 45 – Enter Czechoslovakia
16. 8 May, 45 – V-E Day
17. 9-10 May, 45 – Liberate Gusen and contact 86th Russian ID



Units of the 26th were in combat for 210 days, just as they had been during World War I. The Division returned to the United States and inactivated at Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts on 21 Dec, 1945.

The “Yankee” Division, as well as numerous other American units, have been honored by memorials scattered across Europe. It is our hope that their sacrifices will always be remembered.

Moyenvic, France
(Lorraine Campaign)



Near Pratz, Luxembourg Between Rambrouch and Grosbous (Battle of the Bulge)



POST WORLD WAR TWO

The 26th Infantry Division was reactivated in 1947 and reorganized several times before it was inactivated on 1 Sep, 1993 during the post cold war manpower reductions.

1993: Reorganized as 26th Inf. Brig., 29th Inf. Div.

2005: Reorganized into the 26th Brig. Com. Tm., 42nd Inf. Div.

2008: Reorganized as 26th Maneuver Enhancement Brig.

Camp Curtis Guild, MA

2016: Relocated to Natick Readiness Center, Natick, MA

WORLD WAR TWO CASUALTIES



Killed In Action: 1,678

Wounded In Action: 7,379

Missing In Action: 740

Prisoners Of War: 159

Non-Battle: 6,895

TOTAL: 16,851

WORLD WAR TWO MEDALS

Medal of Honor: 2

Distinguished Service Cross: 38

Legion of Merit: 7

Silver Star: 927

Soldiers' Medal: 42

Bronze Star: 5,331

Air Medal: 98

“YANKEE” DIVISION HONORS

Unit Decorations

French Croix de Guerre, World War I, 104th IR, 1918

French Croix de Guerre, World War II, 104th IR, 1945

Distinguished Unit Citation, 1945

Campaign Streamers

World War I: Six

World War II: Four