

LIEUT. COLONEL CREIGHTON ABRAMS (LEFT) AND A RUNNING MATE LOOK OVER TERRAIN BEFORE ABRAMS LAUNCHED HIS FAMOUS DRIVE TO RESCUE BASTOGNE

"COLONEL ABE"

TANKMAN CREIGHTON ABRAMS OF THE 4TH ARMORED DIVISION, SPEARHEAD OF PATTON'S ADVANCES, MAKES HIMSELF A TERROR TO GERMANS BY BASING HIS OPERATIONS ON OVERPOWERING VIOLENCE

by WILL LANG

BY WIRELESS

Just before the U. S. armies plunged across the Rhine a captured American soldier, one of thousands subsequently freed, was brought up for questioning before a scowling German officer.

"So, you are from the 4th Armored Division?" the German asked.

The American looked the German straight in the eye and with the aggressiveness of a good tankman said, "You bet I am."

The German leaned back in his chair, smiled broadly and in the tone of one anxious to hear all about an old friend, asked, "Well, and how is Colonel Abrams?"

Lieut. Colonel Creighton William Abrams Jr., the object of this intimate interest on the part of the German officer, is largely unknown among U. S. civilians. It is one of the ironies of this sprawling global war that outstanding young combat officers are better known to the enemy than in their own country. Yet it is they who execute the battle plans of the well-publicized higher officers.

As the rampaging commander of the 37th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armored Division of the Third Army, Abrams is the cutting edge of the U. S. spearhead. An even more pertinent ques-

tion about him might have been, "Where is Colonel Abrams?" For where Colonel Abrams is, that spot is likely to be the farthest point of U. S. armored penetration into Germany. Last week, as advance man for the equally aggressive George Patton, commander of the Third Army, he was reported to be cutting clear across prewar Germany into Czechoslovakia. His present whereabouts is cloaked in a security news blackout and at any given time may not even be known to his commander. In his own words, Abrams likes to be "way out on the goddam point of the attack, where there's nothing but me and the goddam Germans and we can fight by ourselves without stopping to report back to headquarters."

SHAEF headquarters by now is accustomed to having him and his running mate, Lieut. Colonel Delk Oden of the 35th Tank Battalion, turn up unexpectedly in places far in advance of the theoretical battlelines. This habit inspired a wisecrack by one of Abrams' officers that has since been borrowed by half the other units on the Western Front. While looking over a field map showing concentrated German positions all around them in the forward areas, the officer

shook his head in feigned dismay. "They've got us surrounded again," he said, "the poor bastards!"

The surroundings of Abrams' and other units of the 4th Armored by the Germans has almost invariably resulted in the 4th Armored's soon surrounding the Germans. This pattern, repeated elsewhere along the front, has made the great campaign in the west a series of encircling movements which have broken the back of the German defenders and captured them in massive blocks of tens of thousands. The 4th's special skill in this technique recently won it a Presidential citation which followed a peculiar accolade from the Germans that was almost as flattering in its own way. According to captured documents the Wehrmacht rank and file, among whom the 4th is regarded with both respect and terror, were told that each individual soldier in the division was chosen because he was a professional murderer in civilian life. Moreover, the documents charged, an American was entitled to membership in the division only after he had first proved: 1) he had killed his mother; 2) he had been born out of wedlock.

These documents are cherished at divisional headquarters along with the records of the 4th's



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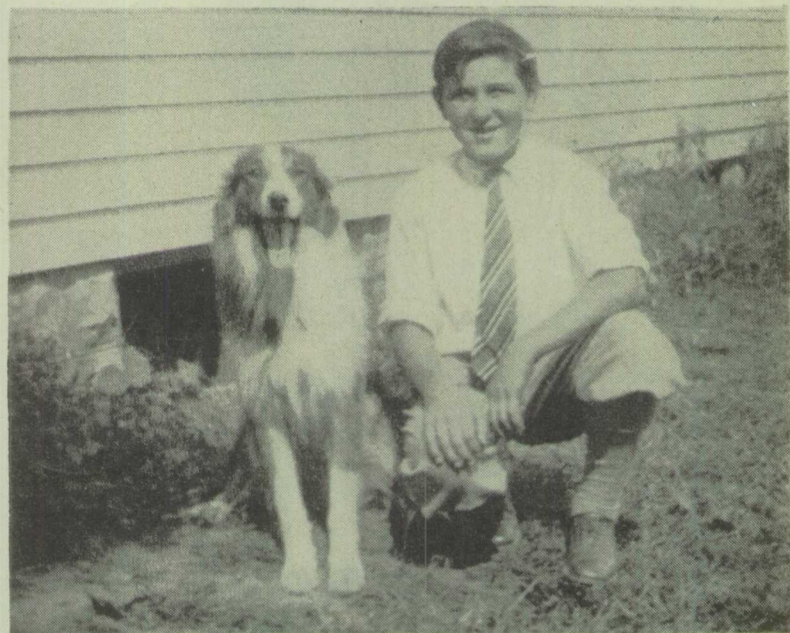
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"Toots" and Pal, the family collie, were photographed together outside Abrams home in Feeding Hills, Mass. when young Abrams, then 15, was active in 4-H Club work.

"COLONEL ABE" CONTINUED

career through a series of bold and critically important field operations. It was the 4th, with Abrams always out on the point of contact, that broke loose from the Normandy beachhead and led the entire Third Army in sealing off the Normandy peninsula in only 11 days' fighting, a feat that has been described as "astounding the Allies as well as the Huns."

After that it was the 4th that led the Third Army in the breakthrough at St. Lô, which drove the Germans back to their Siegfried fortifications. In that epic drive the division destroyed 317 German tanks and captured 20,000 prisoners, even though on several occasions Abrams radioed back that "we are moving ahead without opposition." Division Headquarters, following up, would find the "unopposed" route strewn with German tanks and gun batteries and littered with hundreds of German bodies.

When the Germans mounted their Ardennes counteroffensive, it was the 4th Armored, under command of Patton's former chief of staff, Major General Hugh Gaffey, that buttressed the southern flank. Later, with Abrams in the lead, it broke through in a spectacular and devastating dash to relieve the besieged 101st Division paratroopers in Bastogne. More recently, in the drive from the Kyll River to the Rhine, it plunged ahead more than 50 miles in 58 hours of concentrated mayhem. Abrams and his outfit destroyed more than 300 German motor vehicles, 75 artillery pieces, 75 antitank guns, 15 Tiger and Panther tanks, 20 "screaming meemies" and overran a rear-area German hospital with 80 patients, three enemy ammunition dumps, one ordnance depot, one fuel dump and a German army corps headquarters where an annoyed German lieutenant general and most of his staff were captured while still at their desks.

Such accomplishments, in which Abrams has always been a leading performer, have draped the cape of a legendary hero around Abrams' shoulders. At 30, he is mature enough to be truly modest, and he does not cultivate the hero worship that surrounds him. But there is a dynamic quality about him and a great flair for leadership that cause his men to idolize him. "We can always spot his tank," says Lieut. John Whitehill, a company commander, "because it doesn't roll ahead like others. It gallops." "Abe's tank," says Lieut. Colonel George "Jiggers" Jaques of the 53rd Armored Infantry, whom Abrams addresses over the tank radio as "Sad Sack," "looks bigger than anyone else's in the field just because Abe's in it."

As he rides along, Abrams gnaws on a long, black, unlighted cigar. "It looks just like another gun," his men say. His present tank, successor to six he has worn out, is named *Thunderbolt VII*. One of the latest improved models of the M4 medium tank, it arrived just after Christmas, when the battalion was resting after the breakthrough to Bastogne. It has a 76-mm. gun, a 17-inch tread, a cast turret and a welded hull. Abrams spent a happy holiday wheeling it through its vocabulary of paces within artillery range of the Germans. The tank it replaced, *Thunderbolt VI*, had its name in letters eight inches high on a background of billowing white clouds punctured by jagged red streaks of lightning. In the interests of winter camouflage *Thunderbolt VII* was painted a drab white, but with spring well along Abrams' driver, Sgt. Robert Stillwell, is giving thought to another appropriate motif for *VII*.

One reason why the Germans are particularly fascinated and terrified by Abrams is that they assume because of his name that he is Jewish, and they imagine that race vengeance plays some part in his destructiveness. Actually Abrams is a New England Methodist but he lets people think what they like. However, Major Harold Cohen of the division's 10th Armored Infantry Battalion is Jewish and is not only a close friend but an operational business partner of Abrams. Cohen's infantry usually either accompanies or follows Abrams' tanks, so that the two units are often indistinguishable. To the Germans the team of Abrams and Cohen seems like the instruments of a wrathful Jehovah.

Perhaps, if the Germans could ever understand it, it would be instructive to them to know more about Abrams and the background that molded him. He was born in Springfield, Mass. on Sept. 16, 1914 and grew up like any normal American boy whose parents see that he goes to Sunday school, eats his vegetables and has plenty of milk to drink. World War I was finished by the time he went to grade school, and the only military background in the family was the story of his great-grandfather, who served with distinction as a drummer boy in the Civil War until his left arm was blown off by a nervous comrade behind him. Out of the fuzziness of most childhood memories Abrams retains a sharp picture of how the old man carried a pail hanging from a hook on the stump of his arm during long walks through the woods in search of blueberries.

"Tootsie," the Hi-Y president

In Agawam High School, across the Connecticut River from Springfield, young Abrams was known as "Toots." His friends picked up the nickname from the Abrams family, who started calling him "Tootsie" because he was such a cute baby. He was able to live this down in high school, however, where he was captain of a football team that went through its season undefeated, untied and unscored upon. He was class president in his senior year, editor in chief of the school paper, president of Hi-Y, a member of the senior-class play and class orator at graduation. In summers he worked on the Jenks farm near by and in his spare time took part in 4-H Club garden activities. He also raised chickens and later raised and exhibited steers for the 4-H Baby Beef Club.

After high school Abrams considered a scholarship to Brown University but a friend persuaded him to try the competitive examinations for West Point. He was third in a field of 57 and entered when the two candidates ahead of him failed in their physical examinations. At West Point he was too busy to spend much time on his studies and graduated 216th in a class of more than 480. He had his nose broken playing hockey and was considered one of the most efficient hazers on the academy's "beast detail." It took him four years to make his letter in football because he was never able to get his weight up much above 165 pounds, which is light for a guard. The 1936 *Howitzer*, the academy yearbook, said he held the football "warm-up record" as well as "the undisputed title of the loudest, happiest, 'fightin'est' man on the squad." "Indeed," said the *Howitzer*, "a team of Abrams might conceivably prove a champion."

From West Point, Abrams went to the Cavalry School at Fort Bliss, where his restlessness soon gave him a reputation as a prankster. During one period he had a room directly across a court from

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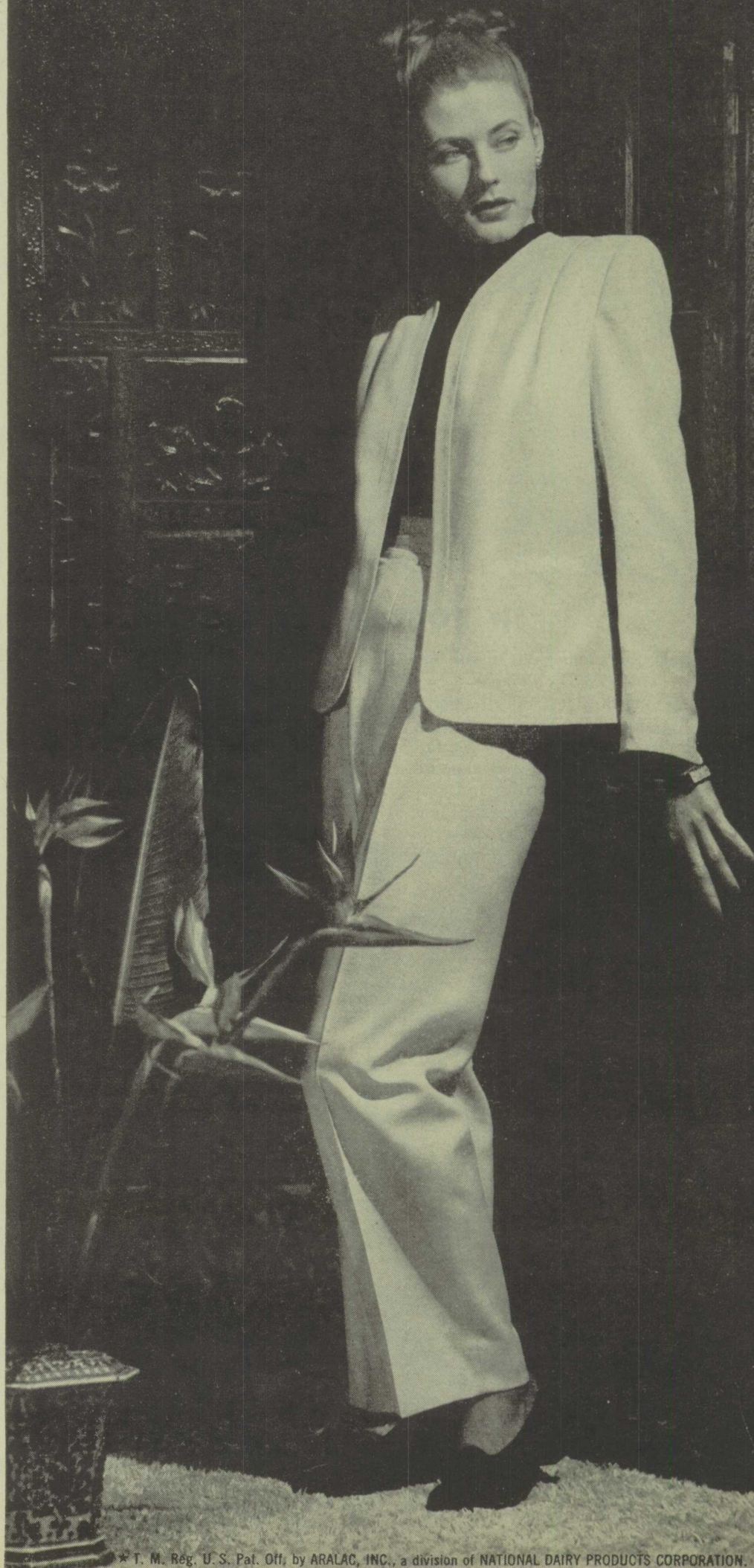


The Colonel's lady met her husband on a blind date during his second year at West Point. They married after he graduated. She is now the mother of two small children.

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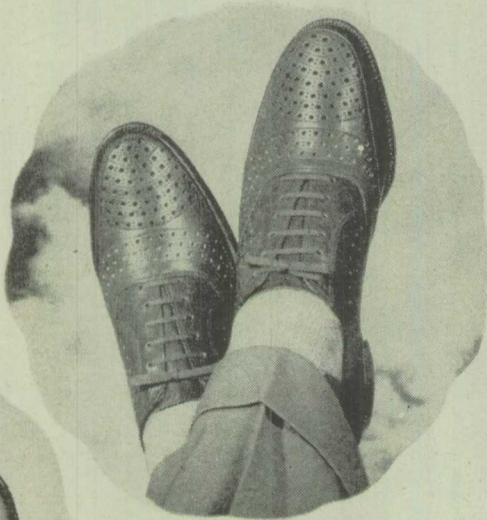
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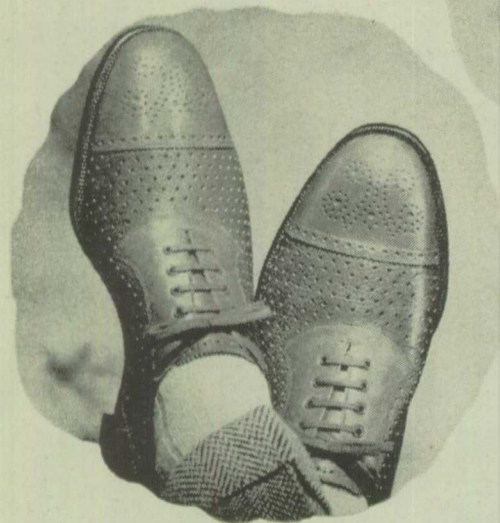
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“Thunderbolt VI,” shown with its crew resting and with cigar-chewing Abrams in the turret, was Abrams’ sixth tank of the war. It was recently replaced by *Thunderbolt VII*.

“COLONEL ABE” CONTINUED

the officers’ club of the post. On Saturday nights, after other officers and their friends had parked their automobiles in the court and entered the club for an evening of fun, Abrams would sneak out and attach smoke-producing firecrackers to the spark plugs of the cars. Then he retired to the window of his room to watch and wait. When the officers’ club eventually closed, gay, teetering officers climbed into their cars and pressed the starters. The loud explosion and ensuing clouds of black smoke, curses and frightened cries gave Abrams much saturnine merriment. Intoxicated by a series of successes, one night he wired a firecracker in the automobile of the general commanding the post. Abrams never was identified as the culprit in the inquiry which followed, but having achieved the ultimate he felt justified in giving up his pastime.

In his second year at West Point Abrams had met Miss Julia Harvey of West Newton, Mass., an attractive Vassar student who came down for a hop as the guest of one of Abe’s friends. The friend got sick, Abe got the date, fell in love and he and Miss Harvey were married two months after he was graduated. Now the mother of 6-year-old Noël Abrams and 4-year-old Creighton William Abrams III, she lives in St. Petersburg, Fla. with her mother, waiting and hoping like millions of other Army wives for the war to end quickly.

Abrams, too, wants the war to end quickly and as a cavalryman who turned to tank warfare in 1940 his theories about how it can be done quickly are illuminating. To a cavalryman’s belief in mobility he has added a belief in the efficiency of violence properly and unsparingly applied. “We don’t want the Germans to fall back,” Abrams insists. “We want them to try to defend their positions so we can destroy them and their equipment. There’s entirely too much emphasis on getting prisoners and not enough on destruction. Whenever the Germans get us in the wringer they show no quarter, so why should we? We’ve got to set our minds to destroying them—that’s the only way to get this job done, and done fast.”

“When we go into those pretty little towns in Germany,” Abrams explains, “we don’t aspire to damage anything. But if there are Germans there we use our violence, everything that can be burned is burned and every building is destroyed.”

Abrams’ theory is that overpowering violence not only destroys the enemy’s soldiers and does it quickly but it also keeps down American casualties. In one town in Belgium, for instance, German resistance was mean and stubborn. In house-to-house fighting Abrams’ tankmen, working with Lieut. Colonel Jaques’ armored infantry, systematically chucked grenades into every window and directed flame throwers through every door. Before the village was completely cleared of Germans it was necessary to burn every building in the area. The score was 427 prisoners of war, 50 Germans killed and 42 wounded. American casualties were negligible.

“Our operations are all based on violence,” Abrams says. “An infantry division doesn’t have the type of violence we have. We have more firepower than any infantry division in the world—

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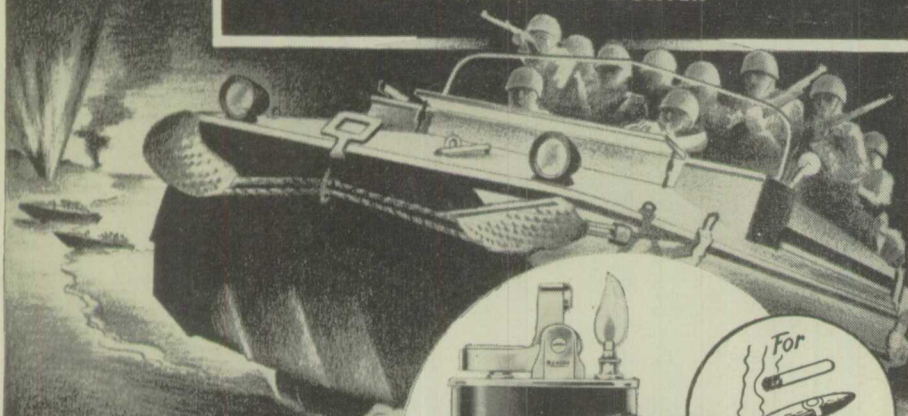
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"COLONEL ABE" CONTINUED

German, British or Russian. We have mobility, better communications and support artillery which is right behind us. Why, I'd no sooner tackle an American tank battalion having all that violence than I'd try to trap a wildcat in my sleeping bag."

How Abrams relieved Bastogne

When Abrams' tank battalion starts rolling, it goes fast, with every gun in its tremendous arsenal firing throughout the charge. "Even the best German troops, like the 11th Panzer," says Abrams, who occasionally speaks in MacArthur-like formalisms, "cannot collect themselves fast enough. Our firepower spreads confusion and chaos in the German command and fear in the German soldier. Perhaps the more stouthearted fellow will hang on. But the vast majority take counsel with but one thing—fear."

The best illustration of the effectiveness of this blasting program occurred during the 4th Armored Division's dash to relieve the Bastogne garrison. Just before dusk on the day after Christmas, Abrams' tank battalion and the 53rd Armored Infantry under Jaques had fought their way to the crest of the last hill before Bastogne. Ahead a secondary road rolled over the countryside for more than three miles before it finally reached the outskirts of the town. Two villages, Clochimont and Assinois, straddled the road, both defended by fanatical German paratroopers.

While supporting artillery laid down a heavy concentration on the two villages, Abrams' armor stood poised on the hillside, ready for the swift downward swoop. Finally Abrams stood up in his turret and over the interphone came his terse signal, "Let 'er roll!" Like one great snake, the chain of armored vehicles jerked into motion and, gathering momentum, raced down the road towards Clochimont with guns blazing. The column whipped through the village and then rolled on to Assinois where our artillery shells were still pounding German hideouts. Four lead tanks sped through the inferno safely, but a half-track next in line caught a direct hit which disabled the vehicle, killing two infantrymen and wounding four others. The next tank was pinned by a falling telephone pole and still another Sherman floundered under half a ton of debris. In the street the remainder of the column ground to a halt behind the immobilized vehicles. Abrams and his crew scrambled out of their tank and wrested the telephone pole from the trapped tank as infantry engaged German paratroopers in a hot sniping duel. Once back in his tank, Abrams waved the column forward and it roared ahead, leaving doughboys behind to clear the burning village.

Thus Bastogne was relieved in a daring plunge which sent the Germans reeling. As against their high casualties and equipment losses, ours were few: 30 men killed, 180 wounded, and several tanks destroyed.

While Abrams has never had a tank shot out from under him nor sustained an injury in combat, his long periods spent in the vanguard of the fighting have brought him close to death many times. One of his narrowest escapes occurred north of Bastogne when a sudden heavy German artillery barrage caught him standing in the open with two of his officers. The trio instantly dove under the stern of a light tank near by. While shells, mortars and rockets sliced the area to ribbons, one officer had his helmet rapped by shrapnel and "Colonel Abe's" pants were torn by fragments. "I was considerably concerned at the time," Abrams commented later, "but our division headquarters later reported only 'sporadic' enemy fire, so I guess I shouldn't have been."



White flags fluttered from houses in Gross Gerau when tanks of the 4th Armored Division rolled into the village en route to Frankfurt after having crossed the Rhine.

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