As World War Two in Europe came to a close in the first days of May 1945, more than just the end of the war was at hand. For over six long years, the people of western Czechoslovakia had lived under Nazi tyranny - longer than any other people subjugated by Nazi Germany. Now, two corps of General George S. Patton, Jr.'s Third U.S. Army were in the Sudetenland region along the old 1937 German-Czechoslovak border. The German Army opposing them was literally melting away, as tens of thousands of its soldiers surrendered or deserted daily. Third Army was about to bring an end to western Czechoslovakia's long years of Nazi occupation and oppression.

Long Years of Nazi Occupation

The fate of the Czech and Slovak peoples was sealed at the infamous Munich Conference in September 1938, when Britain and France permitted Adolf Hitler to seize the Sudetenland. This region of western Czechoslovakia bordered on Germany and contained some 3 million ethnic Germans who had never historically been a part of Germany. By the spring of 1939, Czechoslovakia no longer existed; the Germans had seized the rest of the Czech lands and form the Slovaks to form their own Nazi puppet state. The nation was forcibly incorporated into the Nazi war machine and renamed "the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia."

For the next six years, the Czechs lived under the oppression of their Nazi occupiers. Hundreds of thousands of Czechs were deported to work in German industries. Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps, where most ultimately were killed. The Catholic Church and other churches and faiths were vigorously persecuted. Schools and universities were closed.[1]

After six long years of occupation, the liberation of the Czech people was finally at hand in April 1945. Soviet armies were steadily advancing through the Slovak lands and eastern Moravia against fierce German resistance. In the west, Allied armies were streaming across central Germany against melting German resistance. On 18 April, the 90th Infantry Division of XII Corps reached the old 1937 Czechoslovak border and sent elements on a raid into the country. With this action, Germany was cut in two laterally. Within a few days, the 90th Infantry Division was joined by two more Third Army units: the 2nd Cavalry Group and the 97th Infantry Division.[2]

Third Army Operations Along the Border[3]

Rather than continue east into Czechoslovakia, the Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower shifted Third Army's advance to the south-east to prevent the formation of a rumored Nazi "last stand" in a region of the Alps known as the "National Redoubt." Under its commander Major General S. LeRoy Irwin, XII Corps advanced parallel to the Czechoslovak border to protect and screen the ever-lengthening left flank of Third Army.[4]

While Third Army's main effort was directed to the south-east, 2nd Cavalry Group, and the 90th and 97th Infantry Divisions each conducted some limited operations to the east along the border. The 2nd Cavalry Group, for instance, overcame stiff German resistance while capturing the town of Asch. On 23 April, the 90th Infantry Division liberated Floesensburg Concentration Camp just west of the border. There they discovered horrid Nazi atrocities, and emaciated inmates who had been left to die. Two days later, the city of Cheb was liberated by the 97th Infantry Division after intense fighting. Then, the division seized an airfield just outside the city. First Sergeant Thomas Banks's platoon of the 387th Infantry Regiment of the 97th Infantry Regiment led his company's attack on the airfield and was supported by some medium tanks. "The action was fast and furious," he later recalled. "We would have been in big trouble without the tanks."[5]

Several days later, the 42nd Squadron of 2nd Cavalry Group launched two successful rescue operations. The first one, spearheaded by Staff Sergeant (S/Sgt.) Joseph Carpenter's platoon of C Troop, rescued several hundred Allied prisoners of war from a camp several miles behind German lines. The other involved the famed Lipizzaner horses of Vienna's Spanish Riding School. Accompanied by a German Army veterinarian, Captain Thomas Stewart snuck through German lines to the stables in which the horses were kept and successfully negotiated for their surrender. Then a force of the 42nd Squadron fought through German lines, occupied the stables, and rescued the horses.[6]

As April came to a close, the end of the German Army appeared to be only days away. Units of the First U.S. Army began shifting south to help protect Third Army's left flank, which was becoming longer and longer every day. The 97th Infantry Division was transferred to First Army, and the 1st Infantry Division assumed responsibility for covering their left flank. V Corps Headquarters moved south from Leipzig to assume command of First Army units on the Czechoslovak border. Additional Third Army units were moving into position along the border as well. The Nazi last stand never materialized. Third and Seventh Armies occupied the National Redoubt and definitively
Because many of the German vehicles were out of fuel, Halsey provided the battalions tasked with processing the Germans. As the German columns came in, proved that it was a myth created by German propaganda.[7]

Pathon was anxious to continue advancing eastward. Repeatedly, he sought permission from Twelfth U.S. Army Group commander General Omar N. Bradley and from Eisenhower to advance into Czechoslovakia. He was denied by both. They were not unsympathetic to his requests, but the liberation of Czechoslovakia was a lower priority. In his memoirs, Bradley wrote about Patton's enthusiasm for Czechoslovakia:

"Why---," I asked Patton, "why does everyone in Third Army want to liberate the Czechs?" George grinned. "On to Czechoslovakia!," he whooped. "--- and fraternization! How in hell can you stop an army with a battle cry like that?"[8]

Unfortunately for Patton, Eisenhower was wrestling with several major issues of greater importance. Eisenhower wanted the war over as quickly as possible so that he could implement plans to re-deploy his American units to the Pacific Theater to invade Japan. He had also successfully resisted intense pressure, not only from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and British senior military leaders but from some of his own officers, who all wanted to capture Berlin ahead of the Soviets. Eisenhower was engaged in prodding British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery to seize Lübeck, on the Baltic Sea coast, instead of Berlin, in order to prevent the Soviets from getting into Denmark. Finally, Eisenhower had to make arrangements with the Soviets to affect a link-up of their respective armies that would not cause recognition problems and casualties. In the center, the Elbe River was chosen as the demarcation line, but the matter was largely unresolved in the north and south, including in Czechoslovakia.[9]

The Collapse of the German Army in Western Czechoslovakia

Daily intelligence reports detailed the rapid disintegration of the German 7th Army, which was opposing Third Army along the Czechoslovak border. Unable to maintain a cohesive defensive line, the 7th Army had resorted to delaying tactics that utilized road blocks and strong points. The Third Army G-2 (Intelligence) Periodic Report for 2 May stated that there was "no organized enemy front line" opposite XII Corps. Intelligence officers for Third Army and XII Corps estimated that only 6,500 to 7,000 German soldiers and 35 tanks and assault guns were actively opposing the corps. Of the several divisions identified in 7th Army, most were ad hoc units or remnants of units. Only the 11th Panzer Division was believed to be anywhere near its authorized strength.[10].

With Third Army in force along the border and Soviet forces advancing from the east and from Austria, the German Army was being forced into a pocket in Bohemia. Third Army G-2 estimated that there were a total of 141,250 German soldiers and 325 tanks in the Czechoslovak pocket, the vast majority of whom were vigorously opposing the Soviets. Other estimates put German forces at two and three times the Third Army estimate. In late April, Twelfth Army Group intelligence estimated that there were over 30 German divisions, including four panzer divisions, in Czechoslovakia, with another six panzer divisions nearby in Austria west of Vienna. However, most of these divisions were greatly under strength as a result of heavy fighting.[11]

Conditions within the German 7th Army were worse than American intelligence officers estimated. The 2nd Panzer Division was down to less than 20 tanks and 2,000 men. Seventh Army Chief of Staff Generalmajor Freiherr von Gersdorff wrote that the army was practically immobilized for lack of fuel. What little stocks they had were confiscated for use against the Soviets. A counter-attack by the 2nd and 11th Panzer Divisions against Third Army's left flank had been ordered, but could not be carried out because of lack of fuel. The infantry divisions each numbered less than 2,500 men and had few artillery pieces and heavy weapons for support. Generalmajor Karl Weissenerberger, commander of Military Area XIII or 13th Corps, later wrote "the front consisted only of strongpoints and roadblocks and we had not been able to fill the gaps." With the Western and Eastern Fronts converging, Field Marshall Ferdinand Schoerner assumed command of all German forces in the Czechoslovak Pocket. He soon ordered the 11th Panzer Division, 7th Army's largest and most effective remaining combat unit, to immediately proceed east to fight the Soviets.[12]

For the German soldiers, fighting against the Soviets meant certain death, either on the battlefield or in prisoner of war camps should they be captured. Needless to say, Schoerner's orders were not well received by the officers and men of the 11th Panzer Division. With the assistance of the 2nd Cavalry Group's commander Colonel (Col.) Charles H. Reed, the 11th Panzer's commander General Wendt von Weitersheim met on 4 May with officers of the 90th Infantry Division in the Czech village of Vseruby to discuss the surrender of his division. These officers included his division's commander Brigadier General Herbert Earnest, the 359th Infantry Regiment commander Col. Raymond E. Bell, and several division staff officers. The arrangements were agreed upon, and von Weitersheim unconditionally surrendered his division to Earnest.[13]

Accepting the surrender of the 11th Panzer Division was no easy task. The 11th Panzer surrendered over 9,000 soldiers, seven tanks, over a hundred half-tracks, fifteen self-propelled guns and over a thousand assorted vehicles. Because many of the German vehicles were out of fuel, Halsey provided the Germans with fuel so that they could drive into the American lines. Lt.Col. Orwin C. Talbott's 3rd Battalion / 359th Infantry Regiment was one of two battalions tasked with processing the Germans. As the German columns came in, Talbott's men disarmed them and sent them westward into prisoner of war enclosures in the rear. Howitzers of Col. D. K. Reimers's 343rd Field Artillery Battalion were trained on the columns of German vehicles just in case the Germans had a change of heart and decided to resist. Soldiers of the 2nd Panzer Division were later called in to assist the 90th Division's soldiers in handling the German prisoners. A couple of days later, the remaining portion of the 11th Panzer Division surrendered to the 26th Infantry Division in south-western Czechoslovakia.[14]
Corps's right flank and rear as it attacked to the east bank of the Vltava River. Such a move naturally would include liberating at least part of Prague, because the river ran through the middle of the city.[16]

Thus, on 4 May, Patton got his wish. At 9:30, Bradley telephoned him with the news of Eisenhower's decision. Patton was to attack into western Czechoslovakia to the Karlovy Vary-Pizen-Ceske Budejovice line. He was also to be prepared to advance beyond that line upon further orders. To bolster his forces, Major General Clarence Huebner's V Corps was being transferred from First Army to Third Army. Bradley asked Patton when he could commence his attack. Patton replied that he could attack the following morning. "He [Bradley] was somewhat incredulous, but as we were pretty well used to each other, he believed me," Patton later wrote in his memoirs.[17]

For the past several days, V Corps had been moving down from the north as part of First Army's effort to cover Third Army's lengthening left flank. As Carl Sosna of the 23rd Infantry Regiment recalled, much of the 2nd Infantry Division's move south from Leipzig was conducted in a snowstorm that caused some vehicular accidents. With the addition of V Corps, Third Army now had 18 divisions and over 540,000 men. This was the largest field army ever fielded by the U.S. Army. As Patton's Chief of Staff Major General Hobart Gay, recorded in his diary, "this is probably one of the most powerful armies ever assembled in the history of war..."[18]

Around the same time that Bradley was informing Patton of V Corps's transfer to Third Army, Major Gen. Huebner received the same news just as he sat down for dinner with some of his staff officers. "Well, I'll give us just about twelve hours before General Patton calls up and tells us to attack something," Huebner remarked. Minutes later, Huebner received a phone call from Patton. "Well, I missed that one," he informed his staff after finishing his telephone conversation with his new commander. "Instead of twelve hours, it was twelve minutes. We attack Pilsen at daybreak."[19]

Patton also had Gay call XII Corps about the next morning's attack. Gay informed the corps commander Irwin that his mission was to "destroy enemy zone in advance and advance on Prague." He instructed Irwin to use the 5th and 90th Infantry and 4th Armored Divisions for the attack on Prague; his 26th Infantry and 11th Armored Divisions were to cover the right flank and rear of his corps with supporting operations. After outlining the orders, Gay asked when Irwin could commence. Irwin replied: "Before 0700 tomorrow morning."[20]

The addition of Huebner's V Corps required some shuffling of forces in Third Army. When it was completed, V Corps consisted of the 1st, 2nd, and 97th Infantry Divisions, the 102nd Cavalry Group and the 9th and 16th Armored Divisions. Irwin's XII Corps now had the 5th, 26th and 90th Infantry Divisions, 2nd Cavalry Group, and 4th and 11th Armored Divisions. Both corps had numerous separate artillery battalions for additional fire support.[21]

For many days now, Patton had been planning this attack. Reconnaissance had been conducted. His staff had made terrain analyses and attack plans. The 5th Infantry Division and 2nd Cavalry Group had secured some of the passes through the Bohemian mountains for the armored divisions to exploit. After receiving a change of orders on 2 May, Gen. Irwin wrote in his diary, "Apparently we invade Czechoslovakia..." So when Bradley gave him the go-ahead to attack, Third Army was ready and able to do so within a matter of hours.[22]

The plan called for both V and XII Corps to attack side-by-side on a broad front that stretched the width of Czechoslovakia. In the north, the 1st Infantry Division supported by Combat Command A of the 9th Armored Division would attack towards Karlovy Vary. In the center, the 97th and 2nd Infantry Divisions would advance to clear a path. The 16th Armored Division would exploit that path and liberate the city of Pilsen. This was to be 16th Armored's first battle, and Patton was eager to get them into combat before the war ended. The remainder of the 9th Armored Division and the 102nd Cavalry Group were held in reserve.[23]

South of V Corps, the 4th Armored Division would pass through the mountain passes held by the 90th and 5th Infantry Divisions and head for Prague. These divisions and the 2nd Cavalry Group would follow in support. Farther south, the 26th Infantry Division would conduct attacks in both south-western Czechoslovakia and in nearby Austria. The 11th Armored Division would not participate in the Czechoslovak attack; instead, it would push east through Austria to link up with Soviet forces coming west. These two divisions would serve to cover XII Corps' right flank and rear as it attacked to the north-east. The plan was typical Patton: infantry divisions opening holes for armored divisions to pour through and rush headlong into the German Army's rear areas to wreak havoc.[24]
The infantry had made significant gains. Now, on the morning of 6 May, it was requested.[34] Also reminded him that the Soviets had halted their drive on the turn of the armored divisions. The 1st Infantry Division advanced up to 11,000 yards through rugged terrain and secured several bridges across the Vltava River. For this attack, the 90th Infantry Division used only one of its three regiments. Col. Bell's 359th Infantry was still processing the surrender of the 11th Panzer Division. The 357th Infantry cleared routes for the 4th Armored Division, while the 358th Infantry remained in reserve. In doing so, the 357th Infantry overcame stiff German resistance in a few places. With the imminent approach of American soldiers, the citizens of Klatovy rose up against the Germans in their town. Late in the afternoon, the first elements of the 2nd Cavalry Group arrived, and the German garrison of nearly 1,000 soldiers surrendered to them.[27]

In Prague too, partisans rose up against the Germans and were initially successful. A division of Russian prisoners of war who had joined the German Army to fight the Communists was passing through the area. These troops and their commander, former Soviet Army Lt. Gen. Andrei Vlasov, decided now was a good time to switch sides again, so they stopped their journey to help the Prague patriots. The German commander of the city, Gen. Rudolf Toussaint, was not all that interested in continuing the war but his superior, Field Marshall Schoerner, was. Schoerner immediately dispatched two divisions of SS troops and tanks to crush the rebellion.[29]

American soldiers quickly began receiving reports of the uprising in Prague. These reports were confirmed by a three-man Office of Strategic Services team that infiltrated into Prague and returned to inform Patton of the situation. After learning of the Czechs' plight, Patton called Bradley to get permission to liberate Prague. "For God's sake, Brad, those patriots in the city need our help!" Patton pleaded with his superior. Patton even went so far as to suggest that he "get lost" until his troops had liberated the city. Not unsympathetic to the Czechs, Bradley called Eisenhowser but the Supreme Commander refused to budge on his decision. Furthermore, he ordered Bradley to order Patton not to cross the Karlovy Vary - Plzen - Ceske Budejovice line.[30]

The first American operations in Czechoslovakia had been conducted in the Sudetenland, which was almost entirely populated by Germans. "When we crossed into Czechoslovakia, we were not in friendly territory," recalled Private Harold Yeglin of the 97th Infantry Division. "Here surly looks and sullen faces met them as the Germans walked with eyes looking to the ground, refusing to take cognizance of the victors," recorded the 2nd Infantry Division's history.[31]

Once the American soldiers crossed into the Czech-populated areas of Bohemia, the atmosphere radically changed. "The scattering of Czech flags should have warned us, but we were totally unprepared for the mad celebration which greeted us in the next town," Capt. Charles MacDonald of the 23rd Infantry Regiment later wrote. In a letter written home afterwards, Capt. Burton Smead, Jr. of the 12th Field Artillery Battalion described the reception that his unit received. "If you stop your vehicle, it is only with difficulty you can get away because the people swarm over it, laughing, shaking hands, talking a blue streak, pressing food and wine and flowers and flags on you," he wrote. In a letter to his parents, Sgt. Lee Walenta of the 15th Field Artillery Battalion described the experience as "like a hero in a great football game carried off the field on the shoulders of the spectators." When the 2nd Cavalry Squadron entered Klatovy, they were greeted by "great crowds of wildly cheering Czech people." As the Americans advanced deeper into the Czech lands, they were greeted by joyous Czech civilians dressed in their native costumes, and whole towns and villages decorated with Czech and American flags. This was only the beginning. Soon, thousands of other American soldiers in other units would be experiencing similar receptions.[32]

Significant gains had been made by units of both V Corps and XII Corps. Greater advances were expected for the next day. Concerned about Patton's intentions, Bradley phoned him at 1930 that evening and reminded him to halt at the Karlovy Vary - Plzen - Ceske Budejovice stop line.[33]

The Soviet High Command was greatly alarmed that Eisenhower was considering an advance to the east bank of the Vltava River. Antonov replied to Eisenhower's cable of 4 May the very next day after it was received. In his reply, Antonov requested that Eisenhower not advance beyond the Karlovy Vary - Plzen - Ceske Budejovice. He also reminded him that the Soviets had halted their drive on LÁ½beck a couple days prior at Eisenhower's request.[34]

**Liberation Day - 6th of May**

The infantry had made significant gains. Now, on the morning of 6 May, it was the turn of the armored divisions.
Nathan Bedford Forrest  
G. Washington and J. Monroe  
Mao and Giap On Guerrilla Warfare  
Interview of a WWII Veteran  
Stephen Douglas and Popular Sovereignty  
The “Green Beret Affair”  
The Start: Ft. Necessity  
Napoleon’s Campaign of 1809  
Clark Field, Philippines  
Winter Warfare  
The Great Retreat  
The Raid on Thursro, 1649  
The City Point Explosion  
Capture of USS President  
Operation Rusty: The Gehlen-U.S. Army Connection  
The Hundred Years War: An Analysis  
Why France Lost the Seven Years’ War  
A Cold War Retrospective  
Dalton to Atlanta-Sherman vs. Johnston  
The Fenian Raids  
Military History of War of 1812  
Blowback  
Hitler, Germany’s Worst General  
A Path Across the Rhine: Remagen  
Failures during the Spanish Civil War  
Surface Actions of World War II  
Austerlitz: Napoleon Makes His Own Luck  
MacArthur’s Failures in the Philippines  
The Battle of Cowpens  
The Failures at Spion Kop  
Combatants in Black Hawk War  
Japan’s Monster Sub  
Britain’s Participation Justified?  
Popik’s Private Army  
The Maple Leaf Adventure  
An Odd Way to View WWII  
America’s Paradoxical Trinity  
The Soviet Formula for Success  
Basic Counter-Insurgency  
The Onin War  
The Battle of Pea Ridge  
Tunisian Army in Crimean War  
Japan’s TA-Operation  
The Cambodian Incursion  
Hitler Youth: An Effective Organization  
Dien Bien Phu: A Battle Assessment  
After Midway: The Fates of the Warships  
Lafayette Escadrille Pilots  
Governor Kieff’s Personal War  
Barbarossa: Strategic Miscalculation  
History of 138th PA  
Giuseppe Garibaldi  
The Story of a “Go Devil”  
Long Range Desert Group  
Island of Death  
The Caterpillar Club  
Foundation of Modern Army Regiments  
One of Ten Thousand  
The Design Was Not Passed On  
Subverting the Sultan  
John Paul Jones and Asymmetric  
Brig. Gen. Thomas Harrold’s Combat Command A of the 9th Armored Division staged through the front lines of 1st Infantry Division, which were located about five kilometers east of Cheb. The combat command consisted of Lt. Col. Kenneth Collins' 60th Armored Infantry Battalion, Lt. Col. George Ruhlen's 3rd Armored Field Artillery Battalion, Lt. Col. Leonard Engeman's 14th Tank Battalion, and attached units such as engineers, medical and anti-aircraft artillery. The battalions were broken into Task Force Collins and Task Force Engeman, with Ruhlen's battalion providing mobile artillery support. Task Force Engeman headed east from the 1st Infantry Division's lines with lightly armored reconnaissance vehicles in the lead, while Task Force Collins awaited further orders.[35]

Task Force Engeman soon ran into German resistance from roadblocks, machine guns, anti-tank guns and infantry armed with Panzerfaust hand-held anti-tank rockets. After the first resistance was overcome, the M24 light tanks of D Company were placed in the lead. They immediately ran into more anti-tank guns, which knocked out one of 1st Lieutenant Demetri Paris's Paris's light tanks. Supported by the howitzers of Ruhlen's battalion, the task force knocked out these guns and continued east. Before the day's advance was over, several more German anti-tank guns were knocked out at a cost of another American tank and several more American casualties.[36]

Though its cavalry squadron had seen some action with another division, the 16th Armored Division had yet to see combat as a division. With the days of the war winding down, Patton was anxious to get them into action. On the morning of 6 May, they entered combat for the first time. Their mission was to liberate Pízen, western Bohemia's largest and most important city. The main effort was made by Col. Charles Noble’s Combat Command B down the Bor-Pízen road. They were to seize high ground west of the city. On a parallel road to their south, Combat Command R was to cover their flank and seize high ground east of Pízen. Combat Command A was to follow Noble’s forces in support and reserve. Completion of these movements would put the division in position to liberate the city.[37]

Noble split his command into three task forces. Task Force A, under the command of Lt. Col. George B. Pickett, consisted of most of the 69th Armored Infantry Battalion, several platoons of the 16th Tank Battalion, Troop B of 23rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and a platoon of the 216th Armored Engineers Battalion. Some German resistance was met by Task Force B and overcame. Less than two hours into the attack, Troop B arrived in the outskirts of the city. Noble decided to press on into Pízen without waiting for the rest of the division. It was an audacious decision, for Noble had only 2,500 men and the German garrison was estimated at over 10,000.[38]

In Republic Square, thousands of people turned out to greet their liberators from the Germans. The Czechs showered their American liberators with flowers, food, and their world-famed Pilsner beer. Vera Fiedlerova was nineteen years old at the time. “I was among those happy people with tears in my eyes,” she later recalled. “It was one of the happiest days of my life.” Of liberation, Jaroslav Peklo, who was eight years old at the time, later wrote “the best days of my life began, for a while.” Another teenager living in Pízen, Malvina Zajícová, wrote afterwards that “every inhabitant [of Pízen] tried to express his joy and gratitude.” Col. Noble was soon joined by division commander Brigadier General John L. Pierce. Both received hero’s welcomes from the huge crowd.[40]

The celebration in Republic Square was short-lived. At around 1000, German snipers perched high up in the steeple of St. Bartholomew's Cathedral in the center of the square opened fire on the crowd below. Other German snipers opened fire from nearby houses. The crowds dispersed to find cover. American machine gun crews returned fire on the snipers. Vera Fiedlerova later recalled how calmly the American soldiers went about taking out the snipers. “From our shelters we observed with great amazement and admiration the battle experience and courage of G. I. Joes,” recalled Malvina Zajícová. The Germans were no match for the 16th Armored soldiers and their machine guns mounted on armored vehicles. A squad of soldiers ascended St. Bartholomew’s steeple and captured the Germans holed up there. Other Americans fanned out and subdued other pockets of snipers.[41]

In the afternoon, Lt. Charles Schaefer of the 216th Armored Engineers came across the commander of the German garrison in Pízen, Lt. Gen. George von Majewski, and his staff in their headquarters. Schaefer immediately sent word of his find. Not long after, Combat Command B’s executive officer Lt. Col. Percy Perkins showed up and demanded that von Majewski surrender unconditionally. After signing the surrender document, the German commander shot himself fatally in the head with a pistol that he had managed to hide from the Americans.[42]

Though most of the German garrison simply surrendered, scattered pockets of diehard German soldiers continued to fire on the Americans from numerous places around the city. For the remainder of the day, the 16th Armored soldiers fought to subdue these pockets. They also set up defensive positions around the city. Throughout the day, soldiers from the other two combat commands and the 97th Infantry Division poured into Pízen. They cleared out pockets of German snipers and soldiers holed up in several churches, the synagogue, the Opera House and the Gestapo headquarters. They also processed over 8,000 German soldiers, most of whom had surrendered peacefully. In its first and only combat action of the war, the 16th Armored Division had liberated Pízen at a cost of one killed and six wounded.[43]

While much of the 16th Armored was consolidating in and around Pízen, some of its elements were pushing east towards Prague. S/Sgt. Gene Elke of the 18th Armored Infantry Battalion took a half-track and six men to find a certain highway that ran east. In the process, he and his men liberated three small villages outside of Pízen. Lt.
orders was slow in reaching many units. As a result, advances were begun by Combat Command A - 9th Armored Division's 51st Armored Infantry Battalion made it to the outskirts of Prague. "I hand delivered the message to General Eisenhower," recalled 1st Lt. Pierce, our combat engineer officer. "I was amazed to learn that General Patton would hold a complete armored division in limbo while Prague was still in German hands," he later recalled. "I hand delivered the message to General Pierce, our Commanding General and this caused us to recall Combat Command B from their advance to Prague." Some time later, Polish learned that the halt order originated with Eisenhower.[49]

In the headquarters of 16th Armored Division, Sol Polish was serving as the Division Message Center Officer, which made him responsible for deciphering encoded communications. At around 1600, he received a message from V Corps directing the division to halt its forward advance and maintain a defensive perimeter five miles north of Plzen. "I was amazed to learn that General Patton would hold a complete armored division in limbo while Prague was still in German hands," he later recalled. "I hand delivered the message to General Pierce, our Commanding General and this caused us to recall Combat Command B from their advance to Prague." Some time later, Polish learned that the halt order originated with Eisenhower.[49]

Slowly but surely, word was passed down the chain of command to halt the armored forces. According to Gaston Gee, his reconnaissance unit of the 4th Armored Division's 51st Armored Infantry Battalion made it to the outskirts of Prague. Units of the 16th Armored Division were also halted short of Prague. "We were 17 miles from Prague on the 6th [of May] and they turned us around and brought us back," Sgt. Jack Gallagher of the 5th Tank Battalion later recalled. Pvt. Ed Krusheski recalled that his unit of the 69th Armored Infantry Battalion was within eleven miles of the city before being recalled. The 69th Armored Infantry's commander, Lt. Col. George B. Pickett, later wrote that his reconnaissance platoon got half way to Prague before being recalled.[50]

Since the previous day, reports of the uprising in Prague and calls for American assistance against the Germans were being received by American forces. Many of the American soldiers could hear the radio broadcasts from Prague. Czech partisans from Prague made their way to forward units of both the 4th and 16th Armored Divisions to request immediate help against the Germans. These requests were passed on went all the way up the chain of command through Third Army and Twelfth Army Group to Eisenhower's own Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) itself. "At 0415 hours 6 May 1945, Prague asked again for American support by planes and tanks during this day," read one of several messages from the Czech Military Mission to Eisenhower. "The population holds down firmly, but support necessary, we appeal for it." Hearing the radio broadcasts coming from Prague, the Czechoslovak government in London sent urgent appeals to Eisenhower through its Military Mission.[51]

Despite the repeated calls for help from Prague and the lack of German resistance to American forces, Eisenhower did not permit Third Army to continue its drive on Prague and the rescue of the embattled citizens of the city. Instead he informed the Soviet High Command of their requests and of his intentions to abide by the Karlovy Vary - Plzen - Ceska Budejovice halt line.[52]

The War in Europe is Over!!

Eisenhower ordered American forces to halt at the Karlovy Vary - Plzen - Ceska Budejovice line, but word of his orders was slow in reaching many units. As a result, advances were begun by Combat Command A - 9th
Nazi Germany officially surrendered to the Allied Powers at Reims, France on 7 May, with the official cessation of hostilities to occur at 12:01 am on 9 May. The news was greeted with mixed emotions by American soldiers. Some American soldiers were joyous and exuberant at the news. Others quietly reflected on the costs of that victory and of friends who had been killed. For some other soldiers, the German surrender was anti-climactic. "Our joy was somewhat tempered by the fact that the war in the Pacific still went on and that we might be shipped there," recalled 1st Lt. Bob Carlson of the 38th Infantry Regiment. His division was not the only one that had been selected to be sent to the Pacific Theater to fight the Japanese. While their reactions to the German surrender varied, numerous Americans eagerly participated in the victory celebrations that were held by the Czechs across western Czechoslovakia.

Though halted at the demarcation line, the 16th Armored Division had one more vital mission to perform. A platoon of the division's 23rd Cavalry Squadron escorted the V Corps Assistant G-3 (Operations) Officer Lt. Col. Robert Pratt, a Czechoslovak liaison officer, and Colonel Meyer-Detring of the Wehrmacht High Command, to locate Field Marshal Schoerner and deliver messages ordering him to surrender in accord with the German surrender signed at Reims. The Pratt Mission set out from Plzen and made its way without incident to Prague. There it was learned that Schoerner had moved his headquarters east to the town of Welchow near the Polish border. So the Pratt Mission headed off to Welchow, arriving there late in the morning of 8 May. The messages were delivered and the Pratt Mission returned to Plzen later that day.

After VE-Day

The war in Europe was over, but there was still some killing left to be done. While loading captured German munitions onto trucks in the town of Pernek on 8 May, an explosion claimed the lives of Corporal Joseph Evancho and seven other soldiers of the 26th Infantry Division. "War, the cruelest of all predators, had consumed its last prey from the 101st Infantry Regiment," Sgt. Carl DeVasto, a witness to the tragedy, later wrote. In two separate incidents in the week after VE Day, soldiers of the 4th Armored Division's 94th Armored Field Artillery Battalion were fired upon by small groups of diehard German soldiers. The members of both groups were either killed or captured but one American soldier - PFC Oscar Oakman - was killed during the second incident.

The Germans in Prague refused to surrender and kept on fighting. Though Soviet tanks arrived in the city on the afternoon of 9 May, pockets of Germans held out until 13 May. When the guns finally fell silent in Prague, tens of thousands of Czech civilians and Soviet soldiers had been killed or wounded.

The war in Europe came to an end, but with it came the massive task of handling the hundreds of thousands of surrendering German soldiers and civilians. Prior to VE Day, there had been a flood of Germans surrendering to the Americans to escape the Soviets. Now that flood became a tidal wave. An agreement had been made with the Soviets stipulating that all Germans found west of the American stop line by one minute after midnight on 9 May would be prisoners of the Americans and all Germans found east of that line would be Soviet prisoners after that time. Any Germans caught infiltrating into American lines after that deadline would be turned over to the Soviets. Not surprisingly, there was a mad, panicked race amongst German soldiers and civilians alike to cross into American hands as quickly as possible. Eventually those who lost the race ended up in Soviet hands.

The sheer numbers of German soldiers and civilians surrendering to the Americans to avoid capture by the Soviets were staggering. Before VE Day, the 2nd Infantry Division captured over 23,000 German soldiers; after VE-Day, they accepted the surrender of some 52,000 soldiers. By nightfall on 9 May, Combat Command A of the 4th Armored had over 54,000 German soldiers and civilians within its lines, and estimated that another 275,000 had been halted outside their lines. In fact, the number of Germans awaiting capture was so enormous that the combat command had to use captured German staff officers to co-ordinate the movements of Germans to the American lines. On 10 May alone, V Corps units took over 55,000 German prisoners. Between 9 and 13 May, Third Army took over half a million prisoners throughout its zone of operations.

Dealing with the huge numbers of surrendering Germans was a major undertaking. Roadblocks were set up to stem the tide of Germans and prevent them from sneaking through American lines. Huge prisoner enclosures were set up while the Germans were screened to detect possible war criminals. American commandants scoured their units to find trucks to transport the German prisoners back to Germany and discharge them to their homes. American interrogators were overwhelmed by the numbers. George Lamm was one of six men in XII Corps's Interrogation of Prisoners of War Team No. 79, tasked with screening some 20,000 Germans at a prison camp near the German-Czechoslovak border. Hidden amongst these Germans were high-ranking SS and Gestapo officers and Nazi officials trying to escape justice. American interrogators did their best to identify and incarcerate those officials and officers, but some managed to sneak through undetected. Meanwhile, other American soldiers such as S/Sgt. Ib Melchior of XII Corps's Counter-Intelligence Detachment 212 tracked down fugitive senior Nazis and arrested several high-ranking German officers who were attempting to set up guerrilla operations to continue the war.

In addition to the Germans, American soldiers had to take care of hundreds of thousands of other persons. They...
came from nearly every nation in Europe: Poles, French, Belgians, Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks, Danes, Dutch, and Jews from many countries, etc. Most had been freed from imprisonment in forced labor and concentration camps. Others had been displaced by war from their homes. Many others were freed prisoners of war, including Americans. Often the people were in failing health and suffering from disease and poor nutrition. American soldiers did their best to help.\[61\]

Within a few days of the German surrender, American and Soviet forces began linking up. Though some meetings were celebratory - the famed 25 April U.S. - Soviet link-up on the Elbe River is the best-known - many others were occasions of tense armed confrontations between American and Soviet soldiers. American soldiers from many units, including the 9th and 16th Armored Divisions, the 1st and 2nd Cavalry Groups, and the 2nd Cavalry Group, experienced problems with overly aggressive Soviet troops. In the town of Rokycany, Carmine Caiazzo and other soldiers of the 9th Infantry Regiment had several hostile incidents with nearby Soviet troops. Even 2nd Infantry Division commander Major General Walter Robertson and Col. Noble of the 16th Armored Division had problems with Soviet officers and their men.\[62\]

Within days of the end of the war, American forces began pulling out of western Bohemia. Leaving the 26th Infantry Division behind to become a part of V Corps, the rest of XII Corps returned to Germany around the end of May. The 97th Infantry Division pulled out immediately, and was sent to the Pacific Theater. Combat Command A of 9th Armored Division left Czechoslovakia around this time and re-joined its parent division in Germany. The rest of V Corps remained in Czechoslovakia until mid-June, when it was relieved by Major General Ernest Harmon's XXII Corps. The 79th, 80th, and 94th Infantry and 8th Armored Divisions all served on occupational duties in Czechoslovakia at one time or another. Though originally with V Corps, the 102nd Cavalry Group and the 17th Field Artillery Observation Battalion both remained in Czechoslovakia until late in the occupation period. By 1 December, all American forces had left western Czechoslovakia under a mutual withdrawal agreement with the Soviet Union.\[63\]

While occupying Czechoslovakia, American soldiers assisted the Czechs in re-building their country and the economy ruined by the war. For example, Sgt. George Thompson and other soldiers of the 137th Armored Ordinance Battalion repaired captured German vehicles and turned them over to the Czechoslovak government for their use. To help bring in the harvest, the 94th Infantry Division provided fuel for the farm equipment and a few hundred of its trucks.\[64\]

As the first country forcibly seized by Nazi Germany, Czechoslovakia suffered the longest occupation of any country in Europe. As World War Two in Europe came to an end, Patton's Third U.S. Army liberated western Czechoslovakia and freed the last people held captive by Nazi Germany. The six long years of Nazi oppression and brutality were finally over.

* * *

Endnotes


[3]. Due to its proximity with Germany, the geographical places in the Sudetenland and western Bohemia often have two and sometimes three names and/or spellings: German, Czech and English. For instance, the city of Cheb (Czech) is known as Eger in German. The Czech capital of Praha (Czech) is Prag in German and Prague in English. For this article, the Czech names/spellings will most often be used.


[8]. Bradley, p.549. While conducting operations in Germany, Allied soldiers were forbidden to fraternize with German civilians, especially women. Since the Czechs were Allies like the French and Belgians, fraternization rules were relaxed. See also Ladislas Farago, The Last Days of Patton, (NY: Berkley Books, 1981), p.57. Farago gives a differently worded version of Patton's reply that contains essentially the same meaning.


[10]. Third Army G-2 Periodic Reports are found in Annex No. 49 of TUSA AAR.; XII Corps Ops, p.43.


[12]. Freiherr von Gersdorff, "The Final Phase of the War: From the Rhine to the Czech Border," draft trans. from the German. (Oberursel, Germany: U.S. Army - Historical Division [Foreign Military Studies Branch], March 1946); Karl Weissenberger, "Battle Sector XIII (Wehrkreis XIII) (May 1945)." (Karlsruhe, Germany: U.S. Army, Europe - Historical Division [Foreign Military Studies Branch], 1946). After the war, US Army historians interviewed hundreds of captured German officers. These historical reports are now kept at the U.S. Army Military History Institute and the National Archives.

[13]. For the surrender of the 11th Panzer Division, see Dyer, pp. 424-6, and U.S. Army. 90th Infantry Division. After Action Report - Month of May 1945. RG 407. NARA. [Hereafter cited as 90ID AAR May-45].; John Colby, War From the Ground Up. (Austin, TX: Nortex P, 1991), pp.466-9.; Additional information was provided by Brig. Gen. Raymond E. Bell, Jr., son of the 359th Regiment's commander.; The 11th Panzer actually had two commanders at this time. Gen. von Weitersheim had been ordered east to assume command of a corps fighting the Soviets but "illness" had delayed his departure. He remained in command of most of the division with the remainder farther south under the command of his replacement.


[15]. Weissenberger, p.8.; Under orders from the 7th Army's commanding general, Weissenberger attempted unsuccessfully to stop the surrender. By the time he received his orders, the surrender had been nearly completed.

[16]. These cables may be found in Chandler, pp.2664-5 and 2679-80.; See also U.S. Department of State. "Correspondence Between SHAEF and Soviet High Command Concerning Decisions To Halt Allied Forces in Czechoslovakia." Department of State Bulletin. May 22, 1949, pp.665-7. Under intense criticism following the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the State Dept. published Eisenhower's and Antonov's cables in an attempt to set the record straight.


[19]. This episode is related as a footnote on page 307 of War As I Knew It.

[20]. This episode is related in Hobart Gay's diary, p.924.
Forces Journal


Noble, pp.33-6.)


Ibid.; V Corps in ETO, pp.450.

Ibid.; TUSA AAR, pp. 392.

V Corps in ETO, pp.450.; Combat History of the Second Infantry Division in World War II, pp.150-1.; The First - A Brief History of the 1st Infantry Division, World War II. (Cantigny, IL: privately published the Cantigny First Division Foundation, 1996), p.49. This is a re-print of a history printed by the division following WWII.


[25]. V Corps in ETO, pp.450.; Combat History of the Second Infantry Division in World War II, pp.150-1.; The First - A Brief History of the 1st Infantry Division, World War II. (Cantigny, IL: privately published the Cantigny First Division Foundation, 1996), p.49. This is a re-print of a history printed by the division following WWII.


[30]. Farago, pp.49-50.


[34]. Department of State Dispatch, p.667.; Antonov's assertion was false. Montgomery's forces were in Luebeck and the vicinity because they arrived their first, not because of any benevolence on the part of the Soviets.

[35]. This account of Combat Command A's operations is compiled from several sources: Major General George Ruhlen, USA (dec.). Lt. Col. Battalion Commander / 3rd Armored Field Artillery Battalion. Letters to the Author of 19 May, 31 May and 4 August 1998, and his History of the 3rd Armored Field Artillery Battalion. 2nd ed. (San Antonio, TX: privately published in 1986); Col. Cecil Roberts, USA, (dec.). Captain. Operations Officer. 14th Tank Battalion. A Soldier From Texas (Ft. Worth, TX: Branch-Smith, Inc., 1978). My thanks to both officers for copies of their books.


[41]. Fiedlerova, "My Memories on the end of WW2.", Zajicova Letter.; Pickett, p.34.


[43]. Pickett, pp.34-6.; 16AD AAR.


[50]. Gaston Gee. A Company / 51st Armored Infantry Battalion / Combat Command A / 4th Armored Division. Letter to the Author. 3 April 1998. In his letter, Gee noted with puzzlement that there is no mention of this in his battalion's records. I myself have checked some of those records without success.; Gallagher Interview.; Krusheski Interview.; Pickett, p.36.


[54]. This paragraph is based on correspondences and conversations with many American veterans.; Major Robert Carlson, USA (Ret.). 1st Lt. Executive Officer. Cannon Company / 38th Infantry Regiment / 2nd Infantry Division. Unpublished Memoirs. My thanks to him for sending me a copy.


On April 30, 1945 Winston Churchill wrote to Franklin Delano Roosevelt that the liberation of Western Czechoslovakia could change the post-war status of the country and influence the situation in the neighboring states. Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, sent a letter on May 4 to Army General Aleksei Antonov, the Chief of General Staff, to inform him that he intended to move forces to the shores of Vltava and Elbe rivers (the left bank of Prague). The last Soviet offensive in Europe was over. Unlike many other European capitals Prague cherishes the memory of its liberators. Milos Zeman, the President of Czech Republic, happened to be the only EU leader to ignore the peremptory shout from Washington and visit Moscow to mark the 70th anniversary of Great Victory, battle for the liberation of Czechoslovakia began in September 1944. At that time, the Soviet army entered the territory of the country. Consider further how the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945. Photos battles will also be shown in the article. Historical information began to surrender. It was spring of 1945. The liberation of Czechoslovakia was the next step to the overall goal - to destroy fascism. The German troops were still on its territory and continue to a stubborn defense. Liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945: The German positions. In early May, on line 1, 3, 4, and 2nd Ukrainian fronts at the turn of 1945.
Liberation of Czechoslovakia by Red Army, photo: Czech Television

But Prague was calling for help over the airwaves and that made the Americans change their plans, says Mr. Lukeš. "They changed their plans because Prague was calling for help over the airwaves."

So these three US soldiers decided that instead of going back to Plzeň, they would try to get to Prague. The trip was a little rough: some of the Czech guerrillas decided at the very end of the war to shoot at anything that moved on the roads. That, in time, would destroy democracy in Czechoslovakia for more than four decades and become a major factor in establishing the totalitarian government in the country. Of course, history knows no "ifs." During the liberation of western Czechoslovakia, the Group performed rear area security missions and mop up bypassed pockets of German resistance. The 102nd Cavalry Group relocated to Plzen on 7-8 May and remained in Czechoslovakia until October 1945 performing occupation and security duties. Few other U.S. Army units served in Czechoslovakia as long as the 102nd Cavalry Group did.