

The Holzheim Incident

As readers will know, my endnotes for Fatal Crossroads are already very long in many cases. In interest in readability, some of the longer of these were cut from the final draft. The one below was whittled off from the epilogue of the book on page 230. However, the cut was not only done in interest of length, but also of skirting controversy. The confusing battlefield incident described below involves one of the highest U.S. Army Medal of Honor recipients of the entire war in Europe. The editor rightfully believed that surfacing this issue could be controversial. Still, in interest of fairness and disclosure, I provide the removed excerpt— a keen illustration of a quote from Jochen Peiper himself: “There are combat situations of which one cannot discuss at the green table...”¹

While Malmedy was a war crime, there were certainly indiscretions on the American side. Joseph Peters, a Sgt. with the German 3rd Parachute Division, described a confusing battlefield incident which took place on 29 January 1945. On that date, Peters and a large number of German paratroopers wearing white camouflage snow capes were captured at a farmhouse in the Ardennes border town of Holzheim not far from Losheim along the Belgium-German border. Unfortunately, after surrender a couple of German members suddenly produced weapons and demanded that the half dozen Americans guarding them surrender instead, "All Americans hands up!" Looking at his comrades, Peters was aghast. “You must be mad!” Shots rang out and Peters dived into a snow drift. Moments later, while he hid, he heard sustained machine gun fire and over two dozen German soldiers were cut down.²

Indeed, Holzheim was captured on the afternoon of 28 January 1945 by the 1st Battalion of the 508th Parachute Infantry Battalion which was part of the 82nd Airborne Division. The incident becomes even more controversial since the chronicle of the 508th records that some eighty German troops were captured in Holzheim, but that “half of these were killed in a failed escape attempt.”

1st Sgt. Leonard A. Funk, Jr. of C Company received the Congressional Medal of Honor for this action (see his Medal of Honor citation in which 21 Germans were killed in the action and another 24 wounded). While there is no question that Funk bravely foiled an enemy escape attempt with his submachine gun, local villagers in Holzheim contend that a number of German soldiers were executed *after* the failed escape was over.³

That something strange happened at Holzheim is underscored by the ratio of killed (21) to wounded (24). This is a statistical smoking gun: in any normal combat engagement, the ratio of

¹ Jochen Peiper interview from Hans Kettgen referring to the masterpiece of choreographer Kurt Jooss, *The Green Table* (1932) pointing the futility of negotiations in war.

² Kurt Fagnoul and Hubert Jenniges, ed. *End un Wende im Lande zwischen Venn Schneifel: Augenzeugen berichten von ihren Kriegserlebnissen 1944/45*, ZVS, St. Vith, 1995.

³ Author’s interview with Peter Lentz: 22 March 1996: “I heard about this [shooting] from the witness in Holzheim who saw it— Morges Christian. They were murdered by the side of his house. It was common knowledge to the locals there....”

wounded to KIA is typically four to one or more. As the number killed nears or exceeds the number of wounded in an engagement, the likelihood that no quarter was granted becomes much more probable.

Emotions may have played a role. After the action, Funk's buddies with Company C recall him grieving over the death of Company Clerk, Edward C. Wild who was killed in the initial escape attempt. With the medal of honor bestowed by President Harry Truman at the White House in August 1945, Funk became the most decorated U.S. paratrooper of WW II.

Had the Germans been shot down as Joseph Peters claimed? While it seems likely, we cannot know for sure. When interviewed, one of the last living witnesses, M/Sgt. Thomas Angress, who served as an interpreter for the 1st Battalion of 508th, was evasive and unwilling to speak about the Holzheim incident.⁴

⁴Interview with Werner Thomas Angress by Ann Hamilton Shields, Berlin, 14 January 2010.