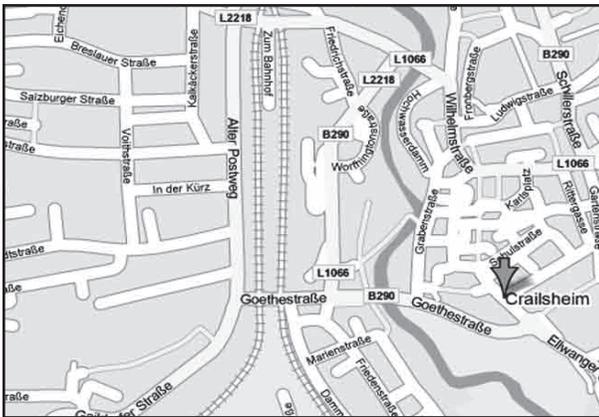


CRAILSHEIM, GERMANY

day 44

Crailsheim was an important city to the Allies. Along with Bad Mergentheim (6 miles north of Assamstadt) and Heilbronn, it created a strong point

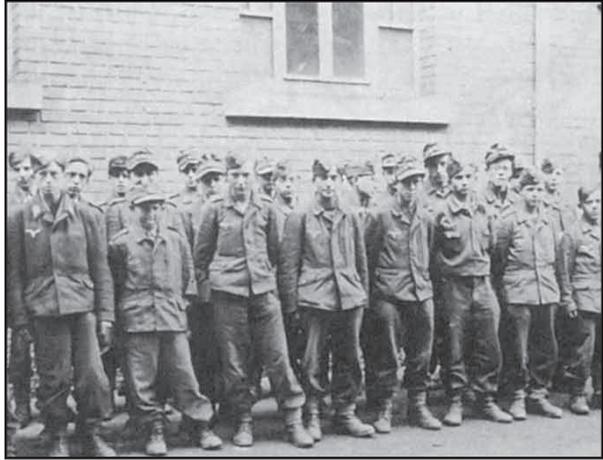


Present day Crailsheim

and gateway into Bavaria. Crailsheim lay just forty miles southwest of Nurnberg and only 100 miles from Munich.

CC B moved about forty miles from Assamstadt overnight to Crailsheim on muddy, pot-holed roads in order to arrive at Crailsheim on the early

evening of Sunday, April 8. They were now thirty-five miles behind actual German lines, which theoretically began at the Rhine River. On the move from Assamstadt CC B had managed to capture over 300 German soldiers, including some Hitler Youth. They killed at least that many more



Hitler Youth after capture

enemy and destroyed as much of the enemy artillery and equipment as time would allow.

In Crailsheim, the German army mounted the largest display of strength since the Battle of the Bulge the previous December. The 10th Armored cut a major German supply route known as the “Bowling Alley” to both the Germans and Allies. The supply route extended from Crailsheim to Hollenbach, about twenty miles north. Once cut, the supply route began being used exclusively by the Allies and 10th Armored Division to supply troops already at Crailsheim. Still heavily and aggressively defended by the 17th German Panzer Division, this route was guarded by many U.S. roadblocks along its entirety.

The Battle for Crailsheim had actually begun a

couple of days before when advanced divisions of the 10th Armored, including CC A, were ordered to advance on Crailsheim while CC B fought its way to Assamstadt. But recognizing its value, the Germans were desperately attempting to hold onto this city. At that point, Crailsheim was a last stand, and the German command realized that fact. Adolph Hitler by this time had ordered that the Geneva Convention be laid aside and that every Allied prisoner of war be executed in an attempt to set an example for the German army that German soldiers would be dealt with accordingly, should they fail to turn back the advancing armies. To their credit, his orders were largely, if not wholly, ignored by the German High Command. However, Crailsheim would be defended from the 10th Armored Tigers at all costs. General Piburn would comment later that at no other time during the war in Europe had he seen so many German Messerschmitts in the air as there were over Crailsheim.

Supplies were desperately needed by the advanced troops. CC B orders were to set up roadblock strongpoints along the route from Crailsheim north to Blaufelden. Units were to be assigned to patrol between each strongpoint. At major road intersections, one or more Sherman medium tanks would be positioned to guard the route. Civilian traffic, what little there was, would be stopped, and tank crew members were ordered to inspect drivers, passengers, and vehicles.

The .50 cal anti-aircraft guns on a pedestal mount on top of the turret would be trained on a vehicle undergoing an inspection, while another tank crew member, carrying an M3 “Grease Gun” standard to tank crews, would carry out the inspection.



Present day Blaufelden

M3 “Grease Guns” were officially .45 cal M3/M3A1 submachine guns. The M3 was much less expensive to produce than the standard Thompson submachine gun. Designed in 1942, the M3 was produced by using



M3 Grease Gun issued to tank crew

pressed and stamped metal parts which were then welded together to form the shell of the weapon. While de-

signed to be only fully automatic, the slow rate of fire (400 rounds per minute vs twice that speed for the Thompson) could allow an experienced tank crewman to fire single shots when necessary.

The M3 Grease Gun had an effective range of only 50 yards and so was considered a close proximity weapon. One of the weak points of the M3 was its magazine design. The Grease Gun magazine held 30 cartridges and fed the cartridges to the chamber in a double column in order to shorten the magazine length. The cartridges narrowed to a single column in order to enter the chamber port. The friction created by the narrowing created frequent jams. Consequently any dirt or debris would also affect the cartridge feeding system by creating additional friction.

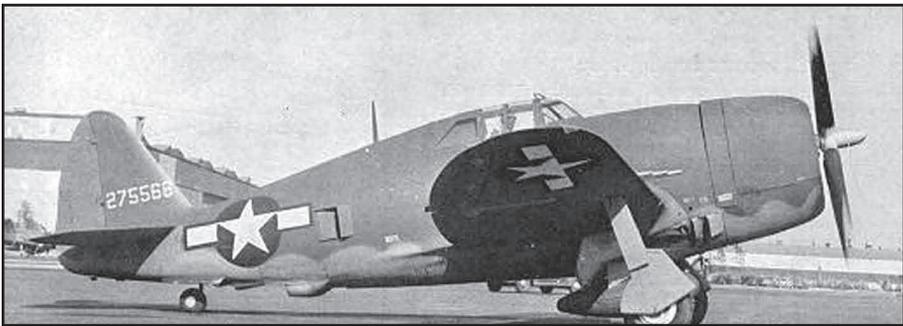
In order to fire the weapon, the cartridge ejection port, which also functioned as its safety mechanism, had to be opened manually, a time-consuming process.

The firing rate was also affected by the weakness of the bolt spring. It was not strong enough to shove the heavy bolt. As the gun was fired, the spring labored to force the bolt back into position to fire another round.

As a vehicle would come to a guarded intersection a tank crew member would approach the vehicle with the M3 in hand, check the vehicle occupants and do a cursory check for weapons. If none were found, the vehicle was allowed to pass.

Melvin's tank was sitting guard at one such intersection on April 9, a clear, sunny day. The Germans had succeeded the day before in using artillery and air strikes to sever the supply road and cause several Tiger casualties. It was common to hear and see both German fighter planes and Allied planes over Crailsheim. The 10th Armored had captured an airstrip north of Crailsheim so that supplemental supplies could be delivered by airdrop. U.S. Army Air Corps P-47's were being used as escorts to protect the C-47 air freighters from Messerschmitt attacks.

Hearing the drone of an airplane engine barely caught anyone's attention any longer. Planes were so common, in fact,



U.S. Army Air Corps P-47

that orders were issued not to shoot at any low flying German aircraft unless they became hostile. This was issued in an attempt to protect all U.S. planes from friendly fire damage as they made low level approaches to land or drop supplies.

However, one plane sounded different. This engine had a higher pitch. Out of the north appeared a German ME-109 Messerschmitt. It was low and coming in for a strafing run. The 1475 hp Daimler-Benz DB-605 engine could pull the Messerschmitt at over 400 mph with a climb rate of 4,820 feet per minute.

Inside the Sherman, the crew was relatively safe. If they were caught outside of the armor, Messerschmitts were deadly. The vulnerable spot on the Sherman to an attacking Messerschmitt was the relatively thin ar-

mor which covered the engine compartment of the tanks. A direct hit on the compartment cover



German Luftwaffe ME-109 Messerschmitt

would mean a damaged or blown engine and, consequently a lame tank.

The Messerschmitt 109 banked sharply right and

dropped lower, lining itself up for the strafing run using the road as a line of site. The gunner in Melvin's tank stood up in the turret, through the commander's cupola and taking the .50 cal anti-aircraft gun in hand, readied for return fire.

The Messerschmitt swung low, skimming the ground at barely 80 feet heading straight for the medium tank. The German fighter plane fired a steady burst of 7.9 mm lead from its two fuselage guns. The lead was stitching two streams of sod and gravel advancing on the Sherman at unbelievable speed. The gunner in the cupola jerked the bolt back on the .50 cal anti-aircraft gun and pulled the trigger releasing his own barrage of lead. Taking accurate aim on a diving fighter was generally difficult. Experienced gunners knew that one of the best ways to hit a strafing fighter plane was to fire ahead of the plane and allow the plane to fly into the stream of lead. Tracer bullets made it possible to see where lead was flying without the use of the fixed sight on the gun.

Both German fighter plane and gunner missed each other on the fighter's first pass. The Messerschmitt climbed steeply and banked for a second pass approaching from the south. This time the pilot of the Messerschmitt would attempt to fire its 20mm wing cannon at the Sherman. At nearly 13/16" in diameter, if a 20mm shell were to strike the engine covers, damage would be inevitable with possible total destruction of the tank and crew.

As the Messerschmitt positioned itself for its second strafing run, a low growl was heard from somewhere above the German fighter. Out of the east-south-east mid-morning sun appeared not one, but two P-47 Thunderbolts. Powered by a large 2535 hp Pratt & Whitney radial piston engine, the sound of these U.S. Army Air Corp planes was unmistakable.

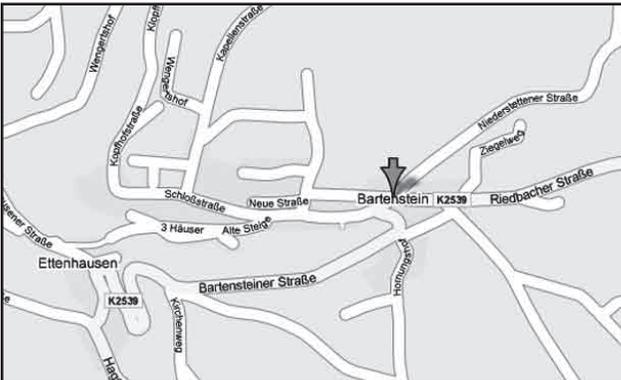
Weighing over twice as much empty as the Messerschmitt (4431 pounds vs 9950 pounds), the additional weight of the P-47 was due not only to the overall size difference but also to the larger more powerful engine. The Pratt & Whitney engine powered the P-47 to a 41,000-foot altitude while the Messerschmitt topped out at only 30,000 feet. The difference proved very advantageous to the Thunderbolt in aerial fights.

The Messerschmitt pilot was too focused on the Sherman at first to notice the Thunderbolts. The pilots of the P-47's knew that approaching with the sun rising behind them would conceal their presence and give them a momentary advantage and possibly the first strike. Just as the ME-109 pilot was about to trigger the 20mm cannon at the Sherman, a quick flash of reflected sunlight off one of the Thunderbolt canopies caught his eye. Instinctively he knew he was at a severe disadvantage. In a one on one dog-fight, the nimble ME-109 had an equal chance against the stronger P-47. Against two P-47's mounting four 12.7mm (1/2" diameter shells) machine guns in each wing, he knew he was at a severe disadvantage. He

retreated as fast as possible.

Banking a hard left to the west, then accelerating into a steep climb the P-47's gave chase climbing high and fast on the Messerschmitt's tail until all three planes were out of sight.

CC B continued to patrol the "Bowling Alley" between Blaufelden and Bartenstein until Tuesday, April 10. They would later realize that the German army had been concealed by the forest and was never more than one mile on either side of the road that they had been patrolling for the past several days. On

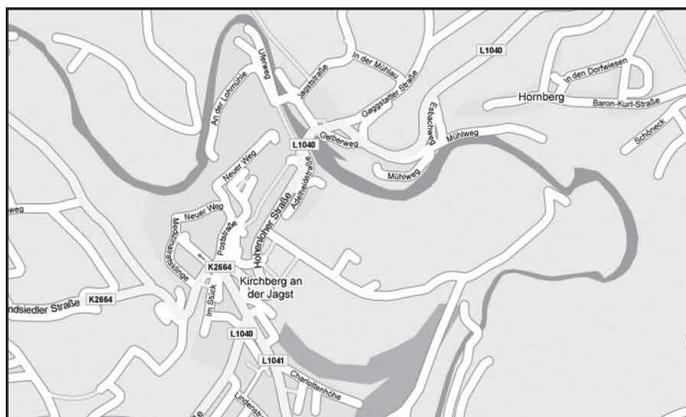


Present day Bartenstein

Wednesday, April 11, at 7:30 a.m., CC B was ordered to assemble at Blaufelden and move directly to Kirchberg located about eight miles south. On their approach to Kirchberg, the tank column was again menaced by the German Luftwaffe with

limited success in bombing and strafing runs. At 3:00 p.m. in Kirchberg, CC B was told that it would lend support to the withdrawal of CC A from Crailsheim. Additional reinforcements for CC A were not available, and the current divisions were not strong enough to hold their position and counter the German offensive.

An all night movement from Kirchberg to Bartenstein positioned CC B to carry out its order of covering CC A for the withdrawal. German infantry and artillery



Present day Kirchberg

nagged at the column during the entire night's travel.

When CC A had retreated from Crailsheim by early morning of April 11, the Battle of Crailsheim officially

ended. At dusk that day, the remaining squadrons moved safely from Crailsheim to Blaufelden. For the 10th Armored Division this had been a frustrating and disappointing battle ending in a stalemate, with the Germans ultimately claiming the city of Crailsheim. The frustration was due to the feeling that, with the help of additional infantry, the U.S. Seventh Army and the 10th Armored Division could almost certainly have captured and held Crailsheim.

Even though the city had been relinquished to the Germans and the 10th Armored losses were heavy, the 10th Armored had managed to capture 2000 German soldiers, kill more than 1000 others, shoot down 50 valuable German aircraft, and divert large numbers of German troops, which were needed and engaged elsewhere, to defend Crailsheim.

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Note:

On June 30, 1944, the Messerschmitt ME-262 jet-powered fighter plane was introduced into the war by the German Luftwaffe. While the Allies called it the “Stormbird,” the Germans officially named it the “Schwalbe” (Swallow) because it is one of the fastest birds in a dive. German pilots referred to it as the “Turbo.”

With speeds of 540 mph, the ME-262 seemed to have the advantage over the U.S. P-47’s and P-51’s.

However, not only were the German jet fighters introduced into the war too late to be of any consequence, they also were much less maneuverable than the U.S. planes, especially at lower speeds.

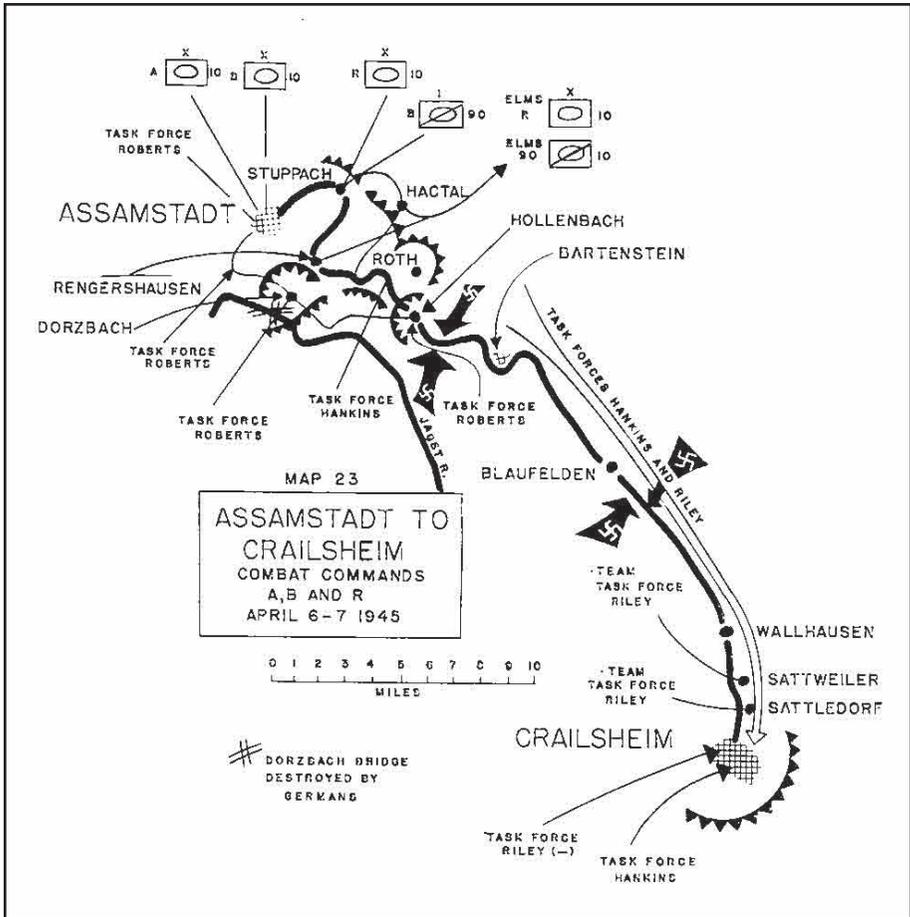


German Luftwaffe ME-262 jet Messerschmitt

The Luftwaffe found the jet fighters less useful in a dog fight but most beneficial in groups of three or more unleashed on Allied bombers. They would approach the bomber from the side, fire their 30mm (1 1/4" diameter) cannon or 55mm (1 7/8" diameter) rockets, and then break off the attack before U.S. fighters could give chase.

It was at Crailsheim that the ME-262 was used in numbers against the Allied air freighters bring-

ing supplies to the 10th Armored Division during the battle. Even so, they were basically ineffective in part due to the U.S. Army Air Corps P-51 air freighter escorts.



Crailsheim Battle Map