

## The Colmar Pocket

General Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied Forces in Europe, called it “a sore” on the 6<sup>th</sup> Army Group’s front. It was a concentration of German forces clinging to the last enemy-occupied territory in France, an area labeled the Colmar Pocket. Reducing the pocket and shoving the Germans back across their own border fell to the First French Army and the American 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. William Franklin Campbell was an officer in the division’s 109<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

Bill Campbell was an industrial education major from Anderson, where he graduated from Boys High School. A member of Clemson’s Class of 1940, he was inducted into Iota Lambda Sigma, the national honor society for industrial education and served as the organization’s secretary-treasurer. He participated in ROTC summer camp at Fort McClellan, Alabama and as a senior was appointed a second lieutenant in Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment.



Following graduation, Campbell accepted a position teaching school in Virginia. Campbell was called to active duty in 1941 as the United States prepared for a war its leaders hoped could still be avoided.

Campbell was assigned to the 109<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, a National Guard outfit from Pennsylvania federalized in February of that year. The 28<sup>th</sup> trained in the Carolinas, Virginia, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida before departing overseas in October 1943. It resumed its training upon arrival in South Wales. On July 22, 1944, the division landed in Normandy and was quickly committed to Operation Cobra, the American breakout from the invasion lodgment area. The 28<sup>th</sup> battled its way to Paris and was given the honor of parading down the Champs-Élysées during the city’s liberation celebration on August 29.

The 28<sup>th</sup> then moved northeast toward the German border and its Siegfried Line of fixed fortifications. In September, a night patrol from Campbell’s 109<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment became the first Allied troops to reach German soil.

The division was committed to the Battle of Hürtgen Forest in mid-September. Fighting in difficult, heavily wooded terrain, in cold, wet weather, the division suffered heavy casualties, including Lieutenant Campbell. Campbell was evacuated to a hospital in England and awarded the Purple Heart. After three months of healing and recuperation, Campbell returned to the division in mid-December. After its mauling in the Hürtgen campaign, the 28<sup>th</sup> was placed on a quiet stretch of the Allied lines opposite the Ardennes Forest. On December 15, the main effort of the Germans’ great winter offensive fell on the depleted 28<sup>th</sup>. The division fought doggedly but was vastly outnumbered and stretched too thinly to hold its lines. Although it had to withdraw from the battle, the 28<sup>th</sup>’s resistance wrecked the Germans’ ambitious timetable for

their attack. The division relocated to Neufchâteau, France to rest, reorganize, and receive replacements.

The winter offensive was ultimately turned back at great cost to the Germans and the front lines were gradually restored to their positions at the outset of the attack. But to the south, in the Alsace region of France, the Germans continued to stubbornly cling to an area around the city of Colmar. This pocket of enemy forces on French soil prompted Eisenhower's descriptive remark—which motivated Sixth Army Group commander General Jacob Devers to resolve the issue. Devers and the commander of the First French Army, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, met with Eisenhower's chief of staff, General Walter Bedell Smith, to ask for additional forces with which to attack the Colmar Pocket. Smith offered the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and Campbell's 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division for Devers's command, but he warned that the 28<sup>th</sup>, after its brutal experiences first in the Hürtgen and then in the Ardennes, was “capable of only limited offensive action.”

Nonetheless, on January 19, the 28<sup>th</sup> was again committed to battle, attacking the northwestern section of the pocket in the Kayersberg Valley. The 28<sup>th</sup> pushed steadily toward Colmar and in less than ten days reduced the German pocket by half. By February 2, with the Germans in retreat, the 28<sup>th</sup> had opened the way into Colmar for the French 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. The following day, First Lieutenant Campbell was killed by enemy machine gun fire. Six days later, the last organized German troops were pushed back across the Rhine River and into Germany.

William Franklin Campbell was survived by his parents. After the war, his body was returned to Anderson and buried in the Silver Brook Cemetery.

