

Several years ago, I received an email from Ronan Urvoaz, who was looking for the whereabouts of the family of Pvt. Frank Truesdale, killed in a bayonet charge on Sept. 1, 1944. In 2006, Ronan Urvoaz, a historian at The Hague, the seat of parliament, court, and the Council of State of the Netherlands contacted me seeking information to locate the family members of a Fairfield County WWII soldier killed there in 1944. A new monument was being dedicated to the soldiers who were killed in the Battle of Brest. Mr. Urvoaz's letter outlined Pvt. Frank Truesdale's story below:

-Pelham Lyles

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Dear Gerri,

Pvt Frank L. Truesdale belonged to 3rd Platoon, I Company, 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment of the famed 2nd Infantry Division known as the "Indian Head" or as the "Second to None" Division. Frank's unit was called upon, along with K and L Company, to reduce the heavily fortified German positions at Bourg-neuf/Fourneuf, twin little villages located north-east of Brest near the town of Gouesnou.

The Bourg-neuf/Fourneuf Strongpoints (Stützpunkte) were positioned on either side of the Guipavas-Gouesnou Road, now route D 67, guarding a crossroad. Both strongholds were on high ground, overlooking the entire area, with good fields of fire, they covered the approaches North, East, and West of the main line of defense (Hauptkampflinie). The gentle countryside around the farm buildings at Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf concealed one of the deadliest strongpoints outside Fortress Brest. The Germans had built a large complex of underground positions linked by an intricate network of trenches providing the defenders with good observation outposts and firing positions remaining themselves undetected. Unlike most German fortified positions in rural areas, Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf strongpoints were composed of a few surrounding fields around fortified farm buildings; each field was in itself a small strongpoint. Foxholes (Fuchslöcher), for one or two men, were dug in the sides of hedgerows. They provided the German soldiers with an effective protection against enemy fire. American infantrymen had to reduce these hedgerows one by one by blasting holes and by bayonet charges. It was a slow process that explains why American troops gained little ground during the opening stage of the battle. To make matters worse, Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf's defenders were members of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Paratroop Regiment under the command of

Major Fritz Becker and initial U.S. Intelligence reports had underestimated the strength of the strongpoints.

On 25 August 1944, after a deafening U.S. artillery barrage, the main assault against the Brest Fortress was launched. Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf strongpoint was one of the main objectives of the 2nd Infantry Division. Pvt Frank L. Truesdale's unit stayed in reserve with 3rd Battalion in L'Ormeau while the 2nd Battalion moved toward Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf attacking German positions south of Keralénoc. German resistance was fierce with their well camouflaged gun emplacements. They had clear fields of fire, Machine Gun crews and riflemen were opening up from hiding positions. The sunken lanes were perfectly suited to conceal their troop movements. Battle hardened German paratroopers had no fear of American Troops but dreaded their formidable weaponry especially the fighter bombers.

On 26-27 August 1944, Pvt Frank L. Truesdale along with the 3rd Battalion was sent to the front line to assist 2nd Battalion in reducing the Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf strongpoint. Company K progressed right of the Kéralénoc-Fourneuf road to cut off the dirt road linking Fourneuf to Penguérec on the West. Company I, Frank Truesdale's unit, moved in the center toward Bourg-Neuf. Company L occupied the dirt road linking Fourneuf-Le Cosquer to the East. The right flank was strengthened by Company E, 5th Rangers Battalion between K Company and 3rd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment on the border separating the 2nd and 8th Infantry Division. Mortars of the 86th Chemical Battalion were brought in support.

On 28-29 August 1944, the Bourg-Neuf/Fourneuf Strongpoints nicknamed "Far-enough" by U.S. troops, was encircled but remained impenetrable. On the right, in the 8th Infantry Division zone, 3rd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment was relieved by 1st Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment. Company K remained on the right flanked by E Company, 5th Rangers. Frank Truesdale's unit, Company I, was still outside the village of Bourg-Neuf; Company L was holding the line near Le Cosquer on the east.

On 30 August, U.S. artillery and men of the 86th Chemical Battalion pounded the German positions. Assault squads launched relentless attacks on both strongholds. The battle soon developed into guerilla warfare, small squads on both sides were involved in vicious hand-to-hand combat. Acts of bravery during these terrible 4 days of fighting were common and are well documented but the German paratroopers refused to give in and fought bitterly for every inch of ground.

On 1 September 1944, at 1020 Hrs, Company I and L attacked simultaneously under the cover of a smoke screen. The battle was particularly violent; U.S. troops had to charge up-hill climbing over fortified hedgerows and crossing open fields under heavy machine gun fire. The German defense was so well organized that a small unit could engage and oppose far larger American forces. Fields were filled with all kinds of mines, antitank mines (Tellerminen) converted to anti-personnel and shoe mines (schuminen) made of wood or glass. Machine guns, mortars and artillery from the Mesmerien Flak nearby devastated the ranks of 3rd Battalion. U.S. infantrymen finally reached Bourg-Neuf at 1430 Hrs, but were repulsed by a strong German counterattack coming from the west of Fourneuf, forcing Company I to retreat back outside Bourneuf. This paratrooper unit fought against Company K and the Rangers for another day before being finally neutralized. The intensity of the fighting was such that 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment had to fall back and to re-group. On the right in the 8th Infantry Division zone, 1st

Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment suffered greatly and was encircled by the German paratroopers only to be freed by the Rangers at 1800 Hrs.

Pvt Frank L. Truesdale was killed along with 11 others comrades in a single bayonet charge. On that day 3rd Platoon, I Company, 9th Infantry Regiment ceased to exist as a fighting unit:

Pvt. William J. Ambrose (Massachusetts)
T/Sgt. Archie F. Averitte (Texas)
Pfc. Herbert Bernardt (New York)
Pvt. Robert O. Brown (Minnesota)
S/Sgt. Justus S. Flint (Ohio)
Pfc. James A. Futch, Jr. (Georgia)
Sgt. George Washington Lee (Alabama)
Pfc. Warren H. Lewallen (Tennessee)
Sgt. Lester F. Marvin (Iowa)
Pfc. Louis E. Myers (Michigan)
Sgt. Paul E. Renfrow (Missouri)
Pvt. Frank L. Truesdale (South Carolina)

On 2 September 1944, German resistance collapsed in the sector and 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment was pulled off the line having suffered 45 killed and 110 wounded. They would not meet such a strong opposition until reaching "Old City Wall" the 17th century fortifications protecting Brest City Center.

Source:

After Action/Action Against Enemy/Combat/Morning Reports and Unit Journals.

"Keep up the Fire" The Ninth Infantry Regiment in WWII by Alvaro L. Castillo (Southern Heritage Press.)

Combat History of the Second Infantry Division in World War II (The Battery Press, Inc.)

1944 American in Brittany, the Battle for Brest by Jonathan Gawne (Histoire & Collection.)

"L'Enfer de Brest" Août Septembre 1944 by Henri Floch & Alain Le Berre (Editions Heimdal)

Thank you for your time, and don't hesitate to contact me to learn more about the battle of Brest.

Best regards,

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3RD BATTALION

9TH INFANTRY

UNIT CITATION

General Order Number 15, 1945

"The 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment is cited for distinguished and extraordinary heroism against strong German forces in forcing the enemy defenses north of Brest, France, in a four day engagement beginning on 30 August 1944. The entire battalion was fought at close range, sometimes from house to house and hand to hand, in rolling hedgerow country which the Germans had fortified with pillboxes, communications trenches, tunnels and cleverly camouflaged gun emplacements. The core of the enemy resistance defending these positions was a reinforced, full strength weapons company of a parachute regiment. With their arrogance, self assurance and high morale, these troops differed greatly from the demoralized German troops captured in great numbers in adjoining sectors. At a cost of 45 killed and 110 wounded, the 3rd Battalion captured two principal strongholds of the German main line of resistance at Bourg Neuf and Fourneuf, thereby denying the enemy positions of great tactical value; positions that formed the pivot of all the German ground and fire organizations in this sector. The enemy's line could no longer be held. The 3rd Battalion as well as the regiment on its right were able to advance 1,000 yards without major difficulty. The victory was a product of skillful leadership and relentless fighting. The highest personal

bravery and self sacrifice were extracted of the troops, and the price was paid, in the case of one platoon to the extent of almost 100 percent casualties in a single bayonet assault. When the fighting ended on 1 September 1944, the bulk of enemy resistance had been crushed. That night the Germans made no attempt to reoccupy the positions from which they had been driven or to evacuate their dead. Dawn patrols revealed that all survivors had withdrawn. The ferocity and determination of the 3rd Battalion's repeated and relentless assaults dealt a lasting blow to the morale of the enemy who failed to make another comparable stand until they were within the heavily fortified lines at the old wall of the city of Brest. The loyalty, heroic effort and devotion to duty exemplified by the 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment reflects highest credit on the armed forces of the United States".

Whole Platoon Lost

In Bayonet Charge

WITH SECOND INF. DIV., Belgium, Jan. 22-One platoon suffered almost 100 percent casualties in a single bayonet charge, it was disclosed today when a Presidential Citation was awarded the Third Bn. of this division's Ninth Inf. Regt.

The Third platoon of I Company was wiped out as a fighting force when, in four days of hand-to-hand combat, the Third Bn. sent the German Seventh Parachute Regt., reeling out of the twin towns of Bourg-Neuf and Fourneuf.

The battalion's Company L also experienced high casualties when an enemy shell landed in the middle of an assault force for a charge over a hedgerow.

The citation said, "The victory was the product of skillful leadership, relentless fighting and the highest personal bravery." Commanding the battalion was Lt. Col. (then major) William F. Kernan of San Antonio, Tex.

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

BATTLE OF BOUR-NEUF AND FOURNEUF

(Remember, the invasion of Normandy began in June ---Pelham's notes)

The following is an account of a four-day engagement. 30 August to

2 September 1944, in which the 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry, driving toward Brest, France, smashed a crucial strong point in the enemy's first main line of resistance at Fourneuf and Bourg-Neuf:

At the end of August the Ninth Infantry was battling southward in Brittany toward Brest and had broken through one strong German line of Resistance near the Brest airfield. Another line blocking the next stage of advance lay several hundred yards farther south. It was anchored in the twin villages of Bourg-Neuf and Fourneuf, with the main defenses on a ridge guarding Fourneuf and dominating the entire area. (See Sketch Map No. 1, attached hereto.)

These defenses, including pillboxes, tunnels, foxholes, communicating trenches and cleverly camouflaged gun emplacements reinforced by timber and stone, were organized in depth. They faced in three directions, north, east and west; commanded excellent fields of fire and were so arranged as to take advantage of the difficult terrain. For apart from these carefully prepared fortifications which the Germans had so much time to construct, the terrain presented many natural tactical obstacles. The line of departure, an east-west road near Keralleunoc, was on one ridge. The main Fourneuf defenses were on the opposite ridge 1,000 yards to the south. Hence our troops had to advance down on the slope of one ridge and up the slope of the other. From the outset every movement could be observed. Enemy outposts could

and did fight from hedgerow to hedgerow unobserved by our troops. Sunken lanes offered covered routes of withdrawal and supply for the defending forces, and yet served as bloody traps for our soldiers.

The enemy line was well manned. Among the German troops were the 4th Company, 7th Parachute Regiment, which was a weapons company then at full strength, and a platoon of the 8th Company, 7th Parachute Regiment. These troops differed greatly from the demoralized, disorganized German troops being captured in large numbers by the other two battalions. They were arrogant and self-assured; their morale was good. (See Statement of Captain Vsevolvod N. Podlesski, Commanding Officer, I. P. W. Team #28. attached hereto.)

Before 30 August the Ninth Infantry Regiment had been attacking with two battalions abreast; the 2d Battalion on the right and the 1st Battalion on the left. The 3d Battalion, less "K" Company, was in reserve. "K" Company was dug in protecting the Regimental right flank, just east of Gouesnou.

As the 2d Battalion approached the enemy strongholds at Bour-Neuf and Fourneuf, its progress southward stopped. The only possible advance was to the southeast, flanking Bourg-Neuf and Fourneuf on the east. On 29 August, therefore, it was decided to press the attack with three battalions abreast, committing the 3d Battalion on the right. This alignment brought the 3d Battalion, commanded by Major William F. Kernan, squarely up against the carefully prepared German positions at Bourg-Neuf and Fourneuf. The ensuing

- 1 -

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

Battle in this area raged through three days of bitter fighting to hand-to-hand climax in hedgerows and pillboxes on 1 September. On 2 September, final day of the engagement, the battalion occupied all its objectives without further oppositions.

The conduct of the entire battle was notable for skillful and determined leadership and many instances of great personal bravery and self-sacrifice, one of the most outstanding of which was a bayonet-and-grenade charge that cost the 3d platoon of "I" Company almost 100 percent casualties.

The chronology of the four day engagement follows:

First Day, 30 August 1944

The Battalion launched the attack in column of Companies, in the order "L", "I", "K".

With artillery support, "L" Company drove south to the first enemy positions, (See Sketch Map No. 1), where the heavy machine gun, small arms and mortar fire encountered was augmented by the direct support of self propelled guns firing at point blank range from the road running through Bour-Neuf. A decision was made, therefore, to move the company around to the left. Gain contact with the 2d Battalion, whose boundaries ran along the road bordering Fields #6, #7, and #21, and flank the enemy from the east, while "I" Company took up the fire north of the village. Several times as "K" Company was bypassing Bour-Neuf it tried to close in on the village from the flank, but each attempt was repulsed by artillery, Mortar and rifle and grenades. Twenty casualties were suffered by the company on this first day of fighting. By nightfall it had taken up positions along the Fourneuf road, almost 1000 yards from the line of departure, in Fields #16, #20, and #21.

"K" Company, initially, remained on the right flank keeping contact with units of the 121st Infantry on the right of the Ninth Infantry. Later in the day, however, "K" Company was relieved by "E" Company of the 5th Rangers Battalion, and moved southeastward to the outskirts of Bourg-Neuf to occupy the same ground "L" Company and "I" Company had held and then vacated in their flanking operation. Thus, with "K" Company on the north and "L" Company and "I" Company on the east, Bourg-Neuf was threatened from two directions at the end of the first day. (See Sketch Map Nos. 2, 3, 4.)

Second Day, 31 August 1944

"I" Company's mission for the day was to cross the Fourneuf road, swing due west astride the road and seize Fourneuf. The enemy defense was dug in along the hedgerows paralleling the road and were defended with bitter determination despite our superiority of supporting fires. Every field was criss-crossed with cleared fields of machine gun fire through the hedgerows.

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C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

To reach these fields from the Fourneuf road our men had to surmount a nine-foot hedgerow. Time and again the two assault platoons flung themselves over the hedgerow under artillery and mortar fire only to be pinned down short of their objective by the enemy's machine guns. On one of these attacks Sgt. Anthony Raimondo, leading his squad,

succeeded in reaching the protection of the very hedgerow behind the enemy was situated. The German weapons could not be depressed sufficiently to cover the ground immediately in front of them. Sgt. Raimondo and his two scouts engaged in a furious hand grenade battle. The rest of the squad was pinned down half way back in the field. The men could not advance because of machine guns firing from the flank.

Apparently, however, some of Sgt. Raimondo's grenades had been effective. He was able, finally, to get the remnants of his squad out of the field. Sixteen men were killed or wounded throughout the day's fight for that ground.

Stopped in its attacks south, "L" Company turned west toward Fourneuf. By nightfall, in conjunction with "I" Company's push to Bourg-Neuf on its right, it had driven the enemy back three hedgerows. In fighting of this character, this was a substantial gain for this period of time. (See sketch Map. No. 4)

"K" Company and "I" Company collaborated in an attack on Bourg-Neuf with the mission of forcing the enemy from his well organized and strongly held positions in and around the buildings in the northern and southern sections of the village. "K" Company was to sweep south through the fortified area that had stopped "L" Company on the previous day with the limited mission of driving the "I" Company was to launch its attack, driving due west across the front of "K" Company to clear the houses in the southern part of the village.

Both companies crossed their lines of departure at the appointed hour. Smashing forward under withering enemy artillery, mortar and automatic small arms fire. The enemy strongly contested every inch of the way, but by the close of the day companies had gained their objectives, outposting their areas and continuation of the attack the next day.

During this day's operation "K" Company found its path strewn with a pattern of mines laid in great profusion, including Teller mines with anti-personnel pressure-type igniters, cunningly concealed S-mines, "shoe" mines and "mustard pots".

Third Day, 1 September 1944

At 1000 hours on 1 September 1944, under a skillfully layed smoke barrage Company "I" attacked Fourneuf. (See sketch Map No. 5)

The assault on the main pillbox and trench defenses described above and shown in the accompanying sketch was assigned to the 3d Platoon, under T/Sgt. Archie F. Averette. The company's casualties in the previous days had been heavy and on the morning of 1 September 1944 the 3rd platoon had only twenty-four men, the platoon leader and twenty-three others, of whom only eight had been with the platoon when it arrived in France, on 7 June 1944. The 1st and 2nd Platoons also were reduced to less than thirty men each.

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C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

The 3d Platoon organized into two squads. Each squad advanced on its objective, in wedge formation, with fixed bayonets. The approach was open to enemy fire, but the German gunners fired blindly in the smoke. Reaching the pillbox without casualties, the platoon charged with grenades and bayonets. Close-quarter fighting flared all along the line. Some of the enemy were shot, some bayoneted and some, prodded from their holes, surrendered. Three prisoners were sent back to our lines unescorted; no one could be spared to guard them.

S/Sgt. Lester F. Marvin, leader of the right assault squad, and his BAR man pushed across the full length of the fortified positions, paving the way for a possible break-through by our forces, when enemy reinforcements, observed from the battalion CP, came along the sunken roads from the west and opened fire with machine guns. Men in both squads, including Sgt. Marvin and his BAR man, were killed. Many wounded.

Meanwhile Sgt. Averette and several men made for a tunnel that led under a hedgerow to the Fourneuf road. A struggle for the tunnel

ensued. The Germans guarding it were wiped out. Three of our soldiers were killed. Sgt. Averette and two of his men crawled through the tunnel, but while seeking to establish contact with the 2d Platoon on the left, they were caught by the machine gun fire of the newly arrived German reinforcement and were killed.

These casualties wiped out the 3d Platoon as a fighting unit.

The 2d Platoon engaged the enemy at point-blank range in the Fourneuf road and among the buildings of the village. Its casualties were so heavy it had to pull back without taking its objective immediately.

In the fierce fighting, however, the two platoons, through hard hit, inflicted serious casualties on the enemy and the toll rose when our artillery blanketed the area later in the day. Twenty-five enemy dead were counted on the battle ground. Fifty-seven Germans, almost entirely from among the reinforcements who had been brought up and then mauled by our artillery, surrendered to units of the 121st Infantry. Nine more straggled back over the field that night and surrendered to Company "K" at Bourg-Neuf.

The Germans were too much weakened to hold the Fourneuf positions. During the night of 1 September they retire leaving the way open for Company "I" to advance to its objective the next day.

Company "L" thwarted the previous day in its attempts to seize the fields south of the Fourneuf road, struck south renewed vigor on the third day. The enemy was still strong and several times the company was hurled back from hedgerows before it finally shattered German resistance.

On the first attack, at 1000 hours, under cover of all the Battalion's heavy weapons, one squad of the 2d Platoon swept across field No. 24 while a second squad cleared out the houses in the Northwest corner of the field. Five men reached the low hedge

bisecting the field half way to the German positions. There two accurate enemy mortar shells killed four of the men and wounded the squad leader. With his leg broken, he attempted to stumble back along the low hedgerow bordering the field on the West. He was caught in the path of the machine gun firing across the hedge and shot to pieces.

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C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

A second attack was stopped dead by mortar and machine gun fire. Losses were serious and the men were disheartened. At 1400, Major Kernan climbed up the hedgerow bordering Field No. 24 to observe the positions which had held for so long. He directed his artillery forward observer to shell the field just 75 yards away. He told Lt. Cagle, the company commander, that the positions could and would be taken. He turned to Lt. Van Dorpe, the only rifle platoon leader left, and told him to get his remaining 14 men over the hedgerow in a line of skirmishers as soon as the last round of 105mm was on its way. At 1430 the barrage fell. The men scrambled up the hedgerow. At that critical moment the enemy's mortars replied. One heavy shell landed on the hedgerow, killing 2d Lt Jack Parker, the mortar observer; his radio operator and two of the five-man Light Machine Gun Section attached to the platoon. It seriously wounded the remaining three members of the Section and also four men of Lt. Van Dorpe's platoon who were caught on top of the hedgerow. Lt. van Dorpe himself dashed across the field. Only two others reached the far hedgerow, but with this nucleus. Lt. Van Dorpe gradually build up a line of fire. By nightfall four machine guns were in position. The field was taken. The pocket of resistance in the Southwest corner of the Fourneuf-Bourg-Neuf road junction was outflanked. "L" Company rifleman poured fire into it from the North along the road from the newly won positions to the East. Five German bodies were evacuated the next day. Three prisoners were taken.

When the fighting ended on 1 September 1944 the Battalion had lost 45 men killed and 110 wounded. The core of enemy resistance had been crushed. That night they made no effort to reoccupy the positions from which they had been driven or to evacuate their dead. Dawn patrols revealed that the survivors had withdrawn. The 121st Infantry and 3d Battalion together pushed South 1000 yards without incident. (See overlay - "Disposition of front line Troops" - attached hereto.)

The heroism and self-sacrifice of these Infantry Troops irrevocably deprived the Germans of a position of considerable tactical value, which subsequently proved to be the pivot of all their ground and fire organization in the entire sector. The ferocity and determination of the 3d Battalion's repeated and relentless assaults dealt a lasting blow to the morale of the enemy. To the last enemy fortified lines at the Old Wall before Brest, no comparable resistance was met.