

## War Era Story Project 2012

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### **FIFTH ARMORED DIVISION (THE VICTORY DIVISION)**

**Address Presented by Victor F. Musial  
at the Fifth Armored Division Reunion Memorial Service  
June 16, 2012 – Bangor, Maine**

Ladies and Gentlemen - may I have your attention please!

You see before you 25 persons, veterans and family members, who are representing an actual unit of the Fifth Armored Division. In this memorial, we are honoring not only those Fifth Armored men who paid the extreme sacrifice during World War II, but also those who survived that war, but, have since passed away. As this is our last and final reunion of the Fifth Armored Division, I think it would be imperative that we again recall the exploits of this armored division in World War II, which, were brought about by the very veterans seated with us tonight.

The Division was activated on October 10, 1941 and assigned to Fort Knox, Kentucky for training under the Armored Force. In March, 1942, it transferred to Camp Cooke, California. From August 24 to October 18, the Division took part in maneuvers in the Desert Training Center area. In March of 1943, and again, from April 26 to June 20, the Division maneuvered in Tennessee, under the Second Army. The transfer to Pine Camp, New York, took place in July of 1943.

On February 11, 1944, the Division left for foreign duty through the New York Port of Embarkation. They went into training at Camps Obisedon, Ogbourne - St. George and Tideworth Perham Downes in Wiltshire, England. The Fifth serviced the First Army troops as they embarked for the invasion of France. With the beachhead secured, the Division entered combat on August 2, 1944.

General Oliver had studied the Germans in North Africa and their earlier blitzkrieg through Belgium, Holland and France. He noted that their tanks would have to pause to let their infantry to catch up with them. When assigned to head the Fifth Armored Division in England he "married" tankers and infantry by placing the infantry in armored half-tracks and had them travel right with the tanks, forming mobile combat teams.

Plunging into combat on August 2, 1944 in a gap between Countances and St. Lo and across the Selume River, the Division started a 300-mile exploitation behind the German Seventh Army. This maneuver was a first for an armored division to undertake. Never before in the history of warfare had an armored division plunged through the lines of the enemy and then operated independently behind those lines! The Fifth was able to introduce this action because the entire division was entirely on treads and wheels

and, most importantly, it contained its own infantry. No armored division had operated behind enemy lines before in the history of warfare. The Fifth Armored initiated that concept!

Swinging south, the Fifth fought its way to Vitre, traveling one hundred and fifty miles in three days! Turning east from Vitre to LeMans, it liberated that city on August 8, covering one hundred miles. Wheeling north, the Division was starting the third stage of a gigantic hook, with the intention of trapping the German's Seventh Army. The German Seventh was holding the Americans, British and Canadians in the north, on a line extending from St. Lo to the city of Caen. Fighting north, the Fifth Armored reached Argentan on August 12, covering a distance of fifty miles. This encircling movement enabled the Fifth Armored Division to snap the trap shut at the Falaise Gap on August 13.

Turning east, the Fifth pursued the enemy, wrecking their armor and inflicting heavy casualties all the way to the Seine River, arriving there on August 21. The Euro- Seine Campaign was the elimination of the successful plunge to the South and the Fifth won the Corps commendation for that action which reads as follows:

*Subject: Commendation*

*To: Officers and Enlisted Men of the XV Corps.*

*1. It is with extreme pride that I publish to you the following commendation of the Army Commander on the historic movement of the XV Corps around the German Armies in Northern France during which the Corps advanced against resistance a distance of approximately 180 miles in nine days, and stopped only because of order from higher authority:*

*"Please accept for yourself and transmit to the officers and men of your command my sincere appreciation and commendation for the masterly manner in which the Corps has pressed relentlessly forward, executed difficult changes of direction, and had taken calculated risks with the utmost daring. The whole performance on the part of yourself, your officers and men, has been very superior."*

*2. You have done a fine job. You have whipped the German wherever you have met him. You have strewn the country-side with the wreckage of his equipment. You have captured thousands of prisoners. With the experience gained in this campaign you will handle whatever lies ahead of you with confidence and ease. My heart-felt thanks and best wishes to you all.*

*Signed: Wade H. Haislip*

*Major General, U.S. Army Commanding*

Arriving at the outskirts of Paris, units of the Fifth Armored waited for the Second French Armored Division with French General DeGaulle in its midst to enter Paris, with the Fifth following on August 26. From Paris the Fifth began a 130-mile push to Belgium. They cut through the Compiègne Forest and crossed the Oise, Aisne and Somme Rivers. The Fifth Armored was one of the first divisions to enter Belgium on September 2.

Preparing to take Brussels, they were given new orders that took them out of Belgium, racing another one hundred miles to the Meuse River. The Fifth had the first American bridgehead over the Meuse River on September 4. Arriving at the border of Luxembourg, the column was halted to await a Jeep that arrived with a British Colonel as a passenger. He was the Prince of Luxembourg, who had fled to England when the Germans had overrun Luxembourg. The Fifth, with the Prince in its column, liberated Luxembourg on September 4 and placed the Prince back on his throne.

On September 11, the Fifth became the first division to reach the Our River. The Our River separated the countries of Luxembourg and Germany. On that date, the Fifth Armored Division plunged through the vaunted German Siegfried Line and became the first American Troops on German soil! Until that time, the Fifth Armored's identity had been kept a secret from the German Army and, during the drive, it had only been referred to as either Patton's Third Army "Ghosts," the First Army's "Armored Wedge" or the Ninth Army's "Spearhead." Shortly after the thrust into Germany, the veil of censorship was removed and the fact that the Fifth Armored Division was fighting on the Western Front was announced to the world!

In 41 days of combat, the Fifth Armored had come a long way. It was more than 700 miles away from the hedgerows and apple orchards of Normandy and, it had fought through three countries and now was ready to lead the allied armies onto the soil of the nation that had unleashed this war on the world.

The Allies' main thrust into Germany was planned for an attack at Caen, Germany. The feint by the Fifth into Germany was to draw the enemy forces to that action and away from Caen. The Fifth was successful in that action. From November 24 to December 24, the Fifth was subjected to the worst fighting of the war on the drive through the Hurtgen Forest to the Roer River. This was a battle that historians agreed should never have been fought.

The troops of the Fifth Armored rate the battles in the Hurtgen Forest and on the approach to the Roer River as the most bitter they experienced. Restrained by the terrain, bad weather and thousands of mines, the tankers and infantrymen made a slow advance, fighting in a foot-by-foot engagement. They lived in mud, rain, snow and ice and were constantly exposed to tremendous artillery concentration. To dig a foxhole was impossible, because the hole would immediately fill with water. Tanks and vehicles dared not stray off the road because they would be mired in mud and water and rendered useless. At each crossing, a firefight was necessary to maintain the advance. This was the month of savage warfare that broke the German spirit. Never again did the Nazi fight with the ferocity shown at the Hurtgen Forest.

After the completion of its mission in the Hurtgen Forest, the Fifth Armored was pulled back into Belgium to help block the German's drive toward Liege during the Battle of the Bulge in December, 1944 and January, 1945. These engagements were conducted as standard infantry, and not armored operations, and cost the Division dearly in casualties.

Once again, unleashed for armored combat operations, the Division took the lead of General Simpson's Ninth Army, crossing the Roer River on February 25, and the Rhine River on March 31. The Weser River was traversed on April 2. The Fifth Armored's fight from the Rhine River to the Elbe River was described

by tacticians as “exploiting the enemy’s rear zones after breaking his frontal position.” The men in the division had a simpler name for it: “rat race.”

In the Rhine River to the Elbe River rat race, the division fought the kind of war it knew best. It was like France all over again. No one slept, no one ate, no one did anything but attack and push on. The tanks and half-tracks kept running off their maps as the division spearheaded 260 miles into enemy territory in 13 days. In its drive of 125 miles, a four day dash from the Weser River to the Elbe River, the division captured seven German generals. The capture of this amount of brass, to say nothing of 17,000 lesser prisoners and untold millions of dollars’ worth of German war factories and equipment, is not accomplished without opposition even in this stage of the war. Numerous German battle groups, training school commands, armored detachments in the process of refitting, and artillery and anti-aircraft units had been organized to defend the area.

They were supposed to hold Hanover as a strongpoint, and also the line on this side of the Elbe from Magdeberg to Wittenberge. They had prepared dug-in positions, including roadblocks at the entrances to most of the principal villages on the Fifth’s line of advance. But the Fifth sliced through these obstacles like the proverbial “knife through butter.”

Part of the answer is, of course, the sheer weight of power in a modern American armored division. The Fifth’s firepower, for instance, including tanks, self-propelled guns and mobile artillery running up to 155 millimeters, is equivalent to 50 artillery battalions of the last war. The Fifth’s armored infantry, riding tanks and half-tracks in what Fifth calls “married teams” of infantry and armor, hit the ground only when the situation required infantry methods. A third and important member of the team was the fighter-bomber support from the tactical air force.

Before the Division stopped rolling, it reached the Elbe River at three points on April 19, 1945, and it was only 45 miles from Berlin. No other American unit fought that close to the German capitol. Per General Oliver’s address on November 5, 1948:

*“On April 12, 1945 we arrived at the Elbe River just opposite Berlin, at which time we were a hundred miles out in front of the infantry of our Corps, the farthest ahead of the infantry division, I believe, that an armored division ever got. We were just starting to force a crossing of the Elbe River and go into Berlin when we received orders not to do so. But for this order, we would have been in Berlin well ahead of the Russians.”*

The Fifth Armored Division’s war ended on the banks of the Elbe River.

Starting in Normandy, France, the Fifth Armored had spearheaded General Patton’s Third Army from August 2, 1944 to August 16, 1944; General Hodges First Army from August 26 to January 1, 1945; and General Simpson’s Ninth Army to the end of the war. War correspondent B. J. McQuaid, in a press wireless dated April 24, 1945 to the Chicago Daily News and associated papers throughout the United States, gave the Fifth Armored Division an excellent rating. That article read as follows:

*“With the Fifth U.S. Armored Division at the Elbe River, Germany, April 24, 1945. This comparatively unpublicized armored division, regarded by insiders as second to none on the Western Front, has perfected its technique to a point that it astonished German tank experts who cherished the notion that the blitzkrieg is a thing of their own.”*

So well did this close tank-infantry combination work as the division swiftly penetrated and exploited German rear areas, that its “married companies” organization for armored combat was soon adopted by other armored divisions, became and remains the standard arrangement of armored formations today!

After V-E Day, the Division sailed for home on October 2, and was inactivated shortly after arriving in the United States.

Ladies, Gentlemen and families, you have just heard the history of the best fighting Armored Division of Word War II- the Fifth Armored Division!!

### **Units of The Fifth Armored Division**

127<sup>th</sup> Ordinance Maintenance Battalion  
47<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion  
75<sup>th</sup> Armored Medical Battalion  
628<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion  
22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Engineer Battalion  
5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division Artillery  
145<sup>th</sup> Armored Signal Company  
10<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion  
85<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron  
5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division Trains  
5<sup>th</sup> Armored Military Police Platoon  
46<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion  
34<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion  
772<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion  
71<sup>st</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion  
387<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion  
81<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion  
707<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion  
47<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion  
15<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion  
95<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion  
Combat Command A  
Combat Command B  
Combat Command R  
5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division Headquarters