

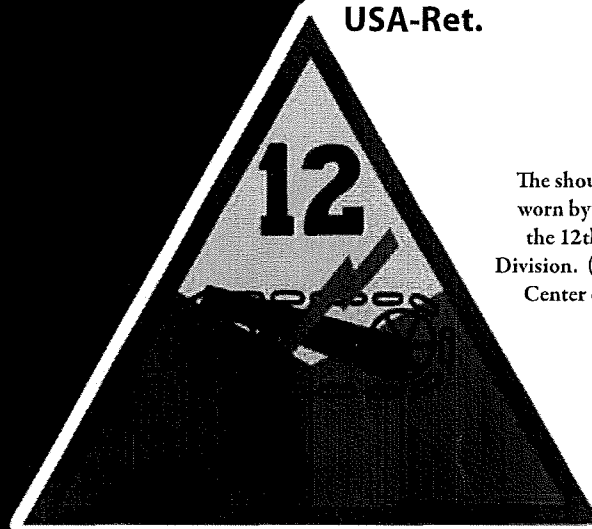
# "...a good day's work..."

## The 12th Armored Division in World War II

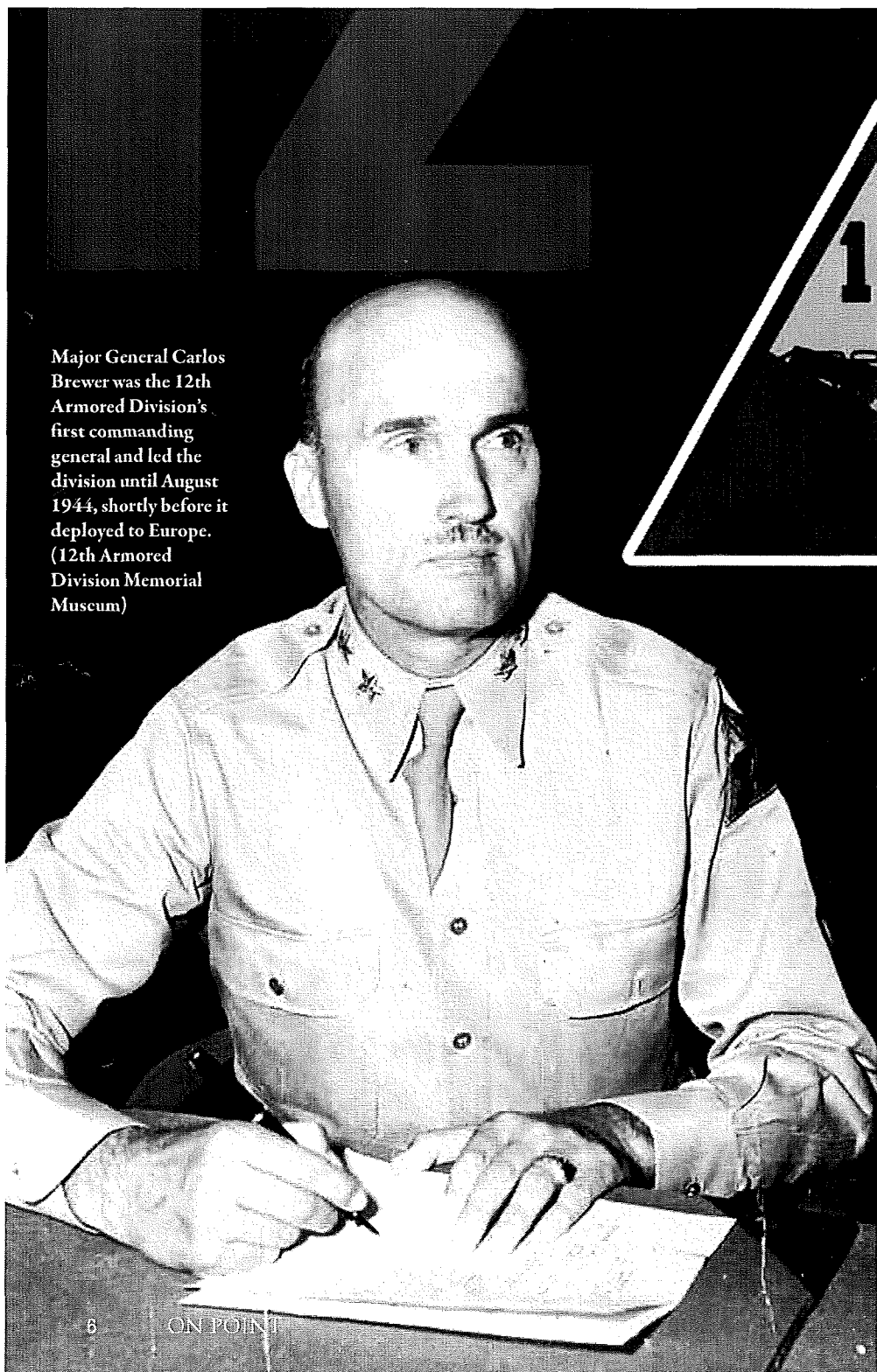
by Command Sergeant  
Major James H. Clifford,  
USA-Ret.

Major General Carlos  
Brewer was the 12th  
Armored Division's  
first commanding  
general and led the  
division until August  
1944, shortly before it  
deployed to Europe.  
(12th Armored  
Division Memorial  
Museum)

The shoulder patch  
worn by soldiers of  
the 12th Armored  
Division. (U.S. Army  
Center of Military  
History)



**A**s 1939 erupted into war, the U. S. Army was an under-strength, under-equipped, and under-funded force of six weak divisions. In 1940, it expanded to eight infantry, one cavalry, and one armored division. The expansion continued to a total of thirty-six divisions by December 1941. By the end of World War II, the Army had grown to eighty-nine divisions, sixteen of them armored formations.





Soldiers from Machine Gun Squad, 1st Platoon, Company A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion, pose for a photograph during training at Camp Barkley, Texas. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

Tanks, artillery, and 12,697 men provided an armored divisions' formidable strength. The 12th Armored Division was one of nine such divisions activated in 1942. Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, Commanding General, Army Ground Forces, personally selected Brigadier General Carlos Brewer as the 12th's first commanding general.

Brewer was joined by a cadre of experienced officers and noncommissioned officers, most from the 8th Armored Division, who were responsible for receiving and training new recruits. The 12th was formed at Camp Campbell, Kentucky, and by August 1942, the division's cadre had grown to 216 officers and 1,460 NCOs. An additional 450 officers, recent graduates from service schools or officer candidate schools, soon rounded out the cadre.

The 12th Armored held its first formal guard mount on 17 August 1942 and was activated on 15 September. As the division chief of staff read the activation orders, the newly promoted Major General Brewer received the colors of the division headquarters and assigned units. After a blessing of the colors by division chaplain Lieutenant Colonel Silas E. Decker, Brewer said in his opening remarks, "We have everything to develop a top combat division here at Camp Campbell...I am sure that you will not be satisfied any more than I will until the 12th Armored Division has proved its worth and is recognized as one of the best in the Army. To our country we pledge our lives and our honor, and we promise victory." With that challenge the 12th Armored Division was born.

Most of the personnel assigned to the division were new to the



The 12th Armored Division's activation ceremony took place 15 September 1942 at Camp Campbell, Kentucky. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

Army. The cadre had to clothe, feed, and house the recruits as they interviewed them to determine what their job qualifications might be. Next came training that began with a thirty-five-week schedule consisting of thirteen weeks of basic training, eleven weeks of unit training, and eleven weeks of combined training.

The 12th had no nickname, so a contest was held. Private Francis Beckman's submission, "Hellcats," was formally adopted on 1 February 1943. As his reward, Private Beckman, of the 493d Armored Field Artillery Battalion, enjoyed a three-day pass.

Training of the 56th Armored Infantry Regiment was interrupted on 1 April 1943 because it was detailed to protect President Franklin D. Roosevelt as he traveled by rail through Tennessee. After that brief respite, it was back to a regimen of tough road and motor marches, tactical training, field exercises, and physical conditioning in preparation for the upcoming multiple-division exercise called the Tennessee Maneuvers. In his book *Hellcats: The 12th Armored Division in World War II*, author John C. Ferguson wrote, "Many men grumbled that combat couldn't be as tough as these extended field exercises."

From 6 September to early November, the 12th operated as the Blue Armored Division during the Tennessee Maneuvers, working in conjunction with aircraft to show how soldiers on the ground could work with fighters in the air. After the maneuvers, the 12th was reorganized. Gone was the regimental structure in favor of a more streamlined one based on a division structure of three combat commands that stripped 1,760 soldiers from the division. Much of the men and equipment removed from the 12th became the nucleus of the 14th Armored Division. On 15 November 1943, the Hellcats headed to Camp Barkeley near Abilene, Texas.

At Camp Barkeley, the 12th continued to prepare for combat through the winter and spring. On 11 June 1944, the division began an evaluated field exercise that would prove it was ready to face a real enemy. During the exercise, one of those inexplicable events that seem to happen only in the Army occurred. While the soldiers were in the field a team of inspectors from the XXIII Corps headquarters descended on Camp Barkeley for a surprise inspection. Finding the division area and barracks to be substandard, they pulled the division from the field exercise to conduct GI parties back in the



Soldiers from the 56th Armored Infantry Battalion ride in half-tracks during training at Camp Barkeley, Texas. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

barracks. Only when the area was suitably cleaned did the division return to the exercise.

Not surprisingly, the agitated and distracted soldiers of the division failed the test. However, after a few weeks of accelerated retraining, the 12th performed well during a five-day exercise at Camp Bowie, near Brownwood, Texas, and was declared ready for deployment into the combat theater. On 8 August, orders were published for movement overseas. A week later, the 12th held a division review in honor of Major General Brewer as he relinquished command to Major General Douglas T. Green.

In a few days, the soldiers of the 12th Armored removed their shoulder patches to conceal their identity before boarding trains of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe on the first leg of their trip overseas. After a week at Camp Shanks, New York, they boarded three ships: the USS *General T. H. Bliss*, SS *Marine Raven*, and SS *Empress of Australia*. On that same day, 19 September, Major General Roderick R. Allen took command of the division from Major General Green after just one month in command of the 12th.

Tents housing soldiers of the 12th Armored Division line Salisbury Plain during the division's training period in England in 1944. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)





Greene later went on to lead the 16th Armored Division.

After an uneventful cruise, highlighted by cramped quarters, bad food, and stale air, the 12th landed in Liverpool, England. From there it was on to Tidworth near Andover. Their camp was nicknamed "Windmill Hill" due to the high winds that generally blew there. Training was the order of the day, and before long, the 12th suffered its first casualty. Private First Class Robert I. Ervin of Company A, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion, was killed by an errant mortar round on 29 October 1944. He is buried at the Cambridge American Cemetery near Cambridge, England.

While at Tidworth new equipment was delivered to the division including M7 self-propelled 105mm artillery pieces and tanks. In early November, the Hellcats moved to the ports at Dorchester, Weymouth, and Southampton for the short trip across the English Channel. They landed near the war-torn city of Le Havre, France, and quickly moved on to Auffay. In Auffay, the 12th became part of Lieutenant General Alexander Patch's Seventh Army.

In late November, the division began moving towards the front hundreds of miles to the east. The division headquarters was in Luneville, France, on 1 December. Four days later, the 12th moved out towards Kirschberg as part of XV Corps and detached the 493d Armored Field Artillery Battalion to support the 44th Infantry Division near Weisslingen, France. Late on the afternoon of 5 December, the Number 2 gun section, Battery A, 493d Armored Field Artillery, let loose with the first shot fired in anger by the 12th Armored Division, almost twenty-seven months after its activation ceremony.

The Hellcats began relieving the 4th Armored Division on 6 December in the vicinity of Domfessel. Even before the relief was effective, the Hellcats were actively supporting the 26th Infantry Division and XV Corps' breach of the Maginot Line on the French frontier. In an offensive that began on 7 December, soldiers of the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion occupied the southern part of Bining while Germans held the northern side. The next morning the Americans seized the entire town as the Germans retreated. The only resistance came at a military installation known as Bining Barracks. There the 17th and 43d Tank Battalion received their baptism of fire.

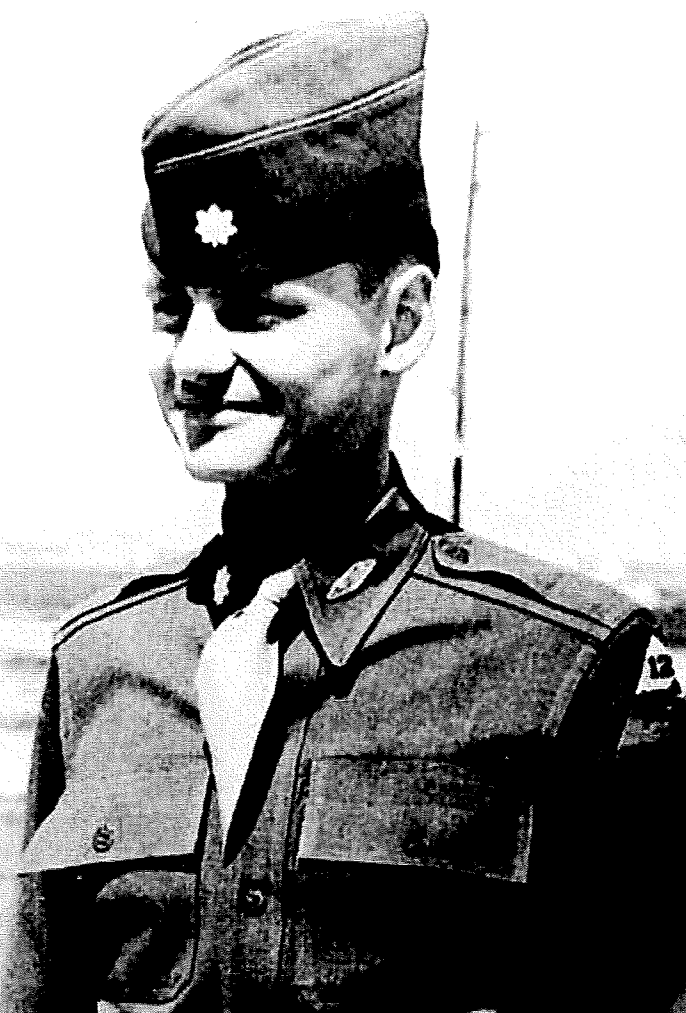
On the evening of 8 December, Combat Command A attacked into the village of Singling and completed the capture of the area the next morning. On 10 December, it advanced with no resistance into the town of Rohrbach, but, when German artillery began to rain down, it moved back a short distance to dig in. On the morning of the following day, the Hellcats suffered their first combat deaths when Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery Meigs's tank was hit by 88mm cannon fire as he led his 23d Tank Battalion at the town of Bettviller. Overall, the division captured all its objectives by 12 December with the loss of six officers and thirty-seven enlisted men killed, and 157 wounded. Meigs and Captain Carl J. Adams were later awarded posthumous Silver Stars, along with Sergeant Edward M. Madrack and Private First Class Dave Hake. Additionally, First Sergeant Billy D. Hanover of the 43d Tank Battalion was given the division's first battlefield commission.

When Lieutenant General George S. Patton's Third Army moved north to counter the German offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge, the Seventh Army had to stretch its lines to cover a 126-mile front, twice its previous frontage. The German response to this lengthening of lines was Operation Nordwind (North Wind),



ABOVE: Two soldiers from the 12th Armored Division stand of ruins of the Maginot Line in December 1944. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

BELOW: Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery C. Meigs, a descendent of the Union Army's Quartermaster General and father of a future Army general, was among the 12th Armored's first combat deaths. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)



an offensive in the flatlands between the Vosges Mountains and the Rhine River in the Alsace region of France. There were four distinct attacks in Nordwind, the fourth being against the towns of Herrlisheim and Gamsbheim.

A German attack on 5 January 1945 scattered the 42d Infantry Division. By nightfall, the Germans secured a bridgehead five miles wide by two miles deep on the western bank of the Rhine. To oppose this, VI Corps commander Major General Edward H. Brooks ordered the Hellcats into the fray. Early on 7 January, Colonel Charles V. Bromley, Jr.'s Combat Command B was attached to the 79th Infantry Division to face what was believed to be a limited German incursion. Combat Command B got chewed up badly in Herrlisheim. At one point, it was down to 150 men fit for battle. When Bromley questioned an order to resume the attack, he was relieved of his command. When it was learned that two enemy divisions were in Herrlisheim, the 10th SS Panzer and the 553d Volksgrenadier, the entire 12th Armored was committed.

On 17 January, American forces entered Herrlisheim from several directions in piecemeal and poorly supported advances indicative of having only a few hours to prepare. The American intent was to meet in the middle of town, but they never got there. The Germans hit hard and inflicted significant losses in killed, wounded, and captured among the Hellcats. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Novosel, commander of the 43d Tank Battalion knew that things were bad. He was heard remarking to a fellow officer who apparently was not going in on the attack, "Meyer, you're a lucky SOB. I think we're not coming back from this one." The 43d initially made good progress but were stopped at the Herrlisheim-Gamsbheim railroad tracks.

On the morning of 18 January, Novosel radioed, "Yesterday was a circus compared to what it is today." Later he reported that, "Things are plenty hot." That was his last transmission. Later,

an unidentified soldier was heard on the radio describing how the battalion commander's tank was knocked out and they were heavily engaged. The 43d Tank Battalion ceased to exist as a fighting unit as most of its soldiers had been killed or captured. A rescue attempt was aborted when aerial reconnaissance discovered German forces swarming over the 43d's tanks.

The 12th prepared defensive positions outside Herrlisheim in anticipation of the German breakout. Fear gripped the headquarters, bordering on panic. Colonel Bromley, who had been restored to command, forcefully stopped any thought of retreat by declaring, "Stop this goddamn panic. We're not retreating anywhere. We're defending this command post; we're holding this line. We're soldiers; we have weapons; we're expendable." Although hurt, the Hellcats repulsed several waves of infantry and armor attacks that prevented the Germans from widening the bridgehead.

Herrlisheim was the bloodiest episode in the short history of the 12th Armored Division. The 43d Tank Battalion and 17th Armored Infantry Battalion were devastated with the loss of both commanders and most of the troops. When the battle ended the division needed 1,700 men and seventy combat vehicles to replenish losses.

After a few days rest, the 12th was placed under the temporary control of General Jean-Marie de Latre de Tassigny's French II Corps with the mission to clear the Colmar Pocket, a strategically important 850-square-mile salient on the French side of the Rhine. The reduction of the pocket began on 20 January, with the French I Corps attacking from the south during a severe snow storm.

The French II Corps kicked off its attack in the north on 22 January. The pocket was cleared on 2 February with the Hellcats acting mainly as a reserve force. It returned to the American XXI Corps and began moving through Colmar. Even though it was in reserve, the citizens of Colmar bestowed all the traditional rewards of liberators to the surprised and pleased Hellcats. The 66th Armored



A group of German prisoners taken at Herrlisheim are escorted through the streets of Bischwiller, 9 January 1945. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)



TOP: A column of M4 Sherman tanks pauses along a street in Hieslshausen during the fierce fighting to take the town in January 1945. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

ABOVE: Armored infantryman ride on an M4 Sherman during the fighting to retake the Colmar Pocket in February 1945. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)



Infantry Battalion represented the 12th Armored in a victory parade. France awarded Major General Allen the Legion of Honor and Croix de Guerre with Palm, and the division was authorized to wear the Colmar Coat of Arms for their efforts to free the area from Nazi occupation.

The job now was to clear the enemy from the Vosages Mountains. Working along-side the soldiers of the 28th Infantry Division, the 12th raced forward in a relentless three-day drive. At the end of the movement, the division had killed 300 Germans and wounded or captured hundreds more from the German Nineteenth Army's LXIII and LXIV Corps. The cost to the Hellcats was twenty-three killed in action.

The Germans were so respectful of the 12th that they dubbed the Hellcats the "Suicide Division." German prisoners of war proclaimed the 12th Armored Division the one of the two most fearsome American divisions—the other being the 4th Armored Division—on the Western Front.

Many more honors would be bestowed upon 12th Armored Division's soldiers. During a period of relative calm, a tank supporting the 56th Armored Infantry Battalion came under fire on 23 March 1945. Staff Sergeant Edward A. Carter, Jr., an African American soldier, jumped off the tank with three companions. The other three were cut down as they advanced in the direction of the fire. Carter went on alone until he was wounded several times.

After taking cover, he opened fire on an approaching German patrol, killing six enemy soldiers and capturing the remaining two. His commanding officer recommended him for the Medal of Honor, but it was downgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross. Year later, the Army Review Board determined that Carter's actions did merit the medal. In 1997, his family received the Medal of Honor for Carter, who died in 1963, in a White House ceremony.

About this same time, the 12th was reassigned to Patton's Third Army under a veil of secrecy, to be used as a spearhead across the Rhine. The cooperative press referred to the Hellcats as "another unnamed armored division." A March 1945 *New York Herald Tribune* story said, "The 'Mystery Division' of Gen. Patton's Third Army took the spotlight today by reaching the Upper Rhine, entering the important chemical city of Ludwigshafen and penetrating to within seven miles of the ancient cathedral city of Speyer, the chief community of the Bavarian Palatinate. It was a good day's work..."

The 12th's time with Patton was a stunning success. In six days, the Hellcats raced across the Rhine, killing and capturing thousands of German soldiers from twenty-three different divisions. When the 12th returned to the Seventh Army, Patton issued an order in which he told the Hellcats, "The highest honor I have ever attained is that of having my name coupled with yours in these great events."

The element of surprise was total. On one occasion, Troop D, 92d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized), found a town's streets completely blocked by German vehicles while the drivers drank in the local establishments. First Lieutenant Roane C.

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Figg ordered his men not to fire a shot unless fired upon. He entered several restaurants and cafés and boldly ordered the German drivers to move their vehicles out of his way. The Germans assumed that they had been captured so they immediately obeyed. With the way cleared, Troop D moved through the town, leaving the bewildered Germans to be swept up by follow-on units.

After crossing the Rhine on 28 March, the 12th moved quickly towards Würzburg, Germany. Clearing the way for the 42d Infantry Division, the 12th took Würzburg and moved on to Schweinfurt and Kitzingen before turning towards Nuremberg. It then moved deeper into Bavaria. On 17 April, the Hellcats were ordered to advance on Munich, the birthplace of Nazism.

Five days later, the division hoped to capture some bridges intact over the Danube River. A task force consisting of the 66th Armored Infantry Battalion and companies from the 43d Tank Battalion closed on the town of Dillingen just before 1200. Quick thinking infantrymen rushed across a two-lane concrete bridge just as a German demolition team was preparing to bring it down with six 500-pound bombs. The capture of the demo team and bridge allowed Combat Command A to advance further. Units crossing the bridge later were greeted by a sign at the northern approach announcing, "You are crossing the beautiful blue Danube thru courtesy of the 12th Armored Division." The Germans would not give up the bridge lightly. Over the next two days, the *Luftwaffe* failed to destroy the bridge, losing six planes on 23 April, and three more the following day to the guns of the 572d Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion.

The Hellcats continued to advance and soon crossed the Lech River. Elements of Combat Command R found forty ME-262 jet fighters, twenty in working order, on an airfield near Hiltengen on 26 April. Meanwhile, Combat Command A liberated 2,800 Allied prisoners, including 1,400 Americans. On 27 April, the division captured two hospitals with 1,300 patients and discovered sixty more planes.

In the area of Landsberg, where Hitler wrote his famous autobiography *Mein Kampf* while in prison, the Hellcats found eleven separate concentration camps housing up to

50,000 Jews and other prisoners. Hundreds of the starved and tortured victims were already dead. But due to the speed of the 12th, tens of thousands were liberated. During April, the 12th captured more than 30,000 Germans at the cost of 234 American dead. Resistance was crumbling, and it was just a matter of time before victory would be assured.

Near Murnau, the Hellcats liberated a large prison camp, freeing 5,000 Polish officers, including twenty-three generals. As the Hellcats moved deeper into Bavaria en route to Austria, they took prisoners in record numbers. On 3 May, they hauled in 12,060. The next day, the division became the Seventh Army reserve. Some 12th Armored Division units had already crossed into Austria. As soldiers were pulled out of line, they hoped that their fighting would be over. On 6 May, the Germans in the area surrendered, effectively ending the war in that sector. The rest of the German armed forces would lay down their arms the following day, and V-E Day was declared on 8 May. The 12th quickly settled into the comforts of garrison duty.

During five months of combat, the 12th Armored Division was mauled at Herrlisheim but recovered to help close the Colmar Pocket and rush from the Rhine to Austria in just thirty-seven days. In that time, they captured more than 70,000 German troops and liberated



ABOVE: Armored infantrymen escort an M5 Stuart light tank into Weilheim, Germany, in April 1945. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)



LEFT: The 12th Armored Division takes part in the victory ceremonies in Colmar after the Colmar Pocket had been eliminated in early February 1945. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)



LEFT: Tanks and armored infantrymen from the 12th Armored roll into Innsbruck, Austria, in early May 1945. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

BELOW: A German general and his staff surrender to soldiers of the 12th Armored Division. (12th Armored Division Memorial Museum)

8,500 Allied prisoners of war and 50,000 non-military personnel in the hands of the Germans. Among the civilians freed were former French premiers Edouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud, two former French Army commanders, the son of Georges Clemenceau, and the sister of General Charles De Gaulle.

Over the course of the war, 870 Hellcats were killed in action, beginning with Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery C. Meigs, descendant of the Union Quartermaster General, and father of a future Army general. More than 2,600 were wounded and another 351 were captured.

As spring turned to summer, those with the highest combat points, calculated from a system designed to identify those with the most service under fire, began to return home. New replacements arrived to perform occupation duty. At the same time, the 12th prepared to return to the United States. In July, Major General Allen turned over divisional command to Brigadier General Willard A. Holbrook, Jr. In November, the Hellcats boarded transports in Marseilles, France, for their trip home. Once back in the United States, 12th Armored Division soldiers were discharged and the division was officially inactivated at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey on 3 December 1945.

The 12th Armored Division was not the longest serving or most celebrated division in U.S. Army history, but the Hellcats had reason to be proud. The words of Norman P. Bruneau, a veteran of the 12th, sum up this pride. In an unpublished essay written for his family, Bruneau stated, "During my stint with the 12th Armored Division I met many terrific guys. It was a wild and exciting and also rough and sad time and I am glad I was part of it. I am very proud to be a Hellcat!" ☛



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Command Sergeant Major James Clifford, USA-Ret., is a regular contributor to On Point. He retired in 2006 after thirty years of service and is now a Department of the Army civilian at U.S. Army Forces Command at Fort McPherson, Georgia. He holds a masters degree in Civil War Studies and writes on a wide variety of Army topics.*

*The author thanks Major Norman P. Bruneau, Jr., USA-Ret., for sharing his father's papers and other documents relating to the 12th Armored Division. For additional information on the 12th Armored, see Hellcats: The 12th Armored Division in World War II by John C. Ferguson, and the pamphlet Speed is the Password: The Story of the 12th Armored Division, available at [http://www.lonesentry.com/gi\\_stories\\_booklets/12tharmored/index.html](http://www.lonesentry.com/gi_stories_booklets/12tharmored/index.html). The website for the 12th Armored Division Association, which includes historical and museum information, is <http://www.12tharmoreddivision.com>.*