

Paris

UNIT: 80th Inf Division

PERIOD: 27 Nov to 4 Dec 1944

ACTION: St. Avold Time-Bomb incident

SOURCE: 1st Lt Pierre R. Schlund, Paris, France, French Liaison Officer
Attached to 80th Division

PLACE AND DATE OF INTERVIEW: Kaufbuechen, Germany, 23 June 1945

INTERVIEWER: Capt James J. Cowen

MAP: 1/50,000 scale; Title-St. Avold; Sheet No. 35-13, GSGS No. 4471

NOTE: No records were used during the interview.

Emphasis was placed on the St. Avold Time-Bomb Incident not because of the number of casualties suffered, but because psychologically it affected every unit in the Third Army during these days of bitter fighting. It also influenced Third Army Headquarters, then stationed at Nancy, France, to the extent that St. Avold, originally considered as one of the most logical locations to move, was dropped altogether from the future CP location list. The interview also brought out the nervous effect it had on the 80th itself.

The city of St. Avold (2557) was captured on Sunday 27 Nov 1944, Lt Schlund recalled. He arrived about 1000 hours with the first-wave of dough-boys who entered the town. Carrying the name of a reliable informer who lived at St. Avold, Schlund found him and consequently he learned considerably.

It seems the last of the Germans had fled close to midnight the night of 26-27 Nov but not without doing considerable damage with demolitions. About six enemy engineers had placed heavy charges under the town post office, the main crossroad, and a culvert in the town square in addition to several other relatively important crossroads and culverts within the city.

24

limits. One FFI member had saved one bridge in the town by cutting the wires leading to the charges, the act probably being prompted by (1) patriotism in saving the bridge, and (2) self interest in saving his home that stood nearby. The cutting of the wires was of great aid to the 80th and other units that settled there, for it turned out that the road running over the saved bridge was the only remaining link between the center and north side of town.

That evening, while Schlund was with one of the battalions of the 319th Inf, a Lorraine native was brought into the regimental area by out-post guards with a very interesting story to tell.

He claimed that he had lived in Lorraine all his life but had had some trouble with the Nazis. The latter gave him his choice of going to a concentration camp or playing ball with them and he chose the latter. He then was sent to a school for sabotage at Saarbrücken where he learned radio technique in particular and a general knowledge of demolition.

His mission was to return to St. Avoird, he said, and observe the destructive results of time bombs planted by the Nazis. Then he was to report those results by radio. He brought no radio equipment with him, but had the address of a house that he was not familiar with personally but to which he was supposed to proceed once arriving in St. Avoird and find a radio underneath a pile of potatoes in the basement. The radio was of British make dropped to FFI members but which fell into German hands. If he was caught by the Americans, he was to use as an alibi, the story that it simply was FFI equipment. The most disconcerting thing about his entire story was that the Germans did not tell him where the bombs were placed, so he said, and although Schlund pumped him for considerable time, he could get nothing out of him on that subject. He did say that he was told there were something like 30 bombs in the town. He also added that now that he

was out of German control he was giving himself up and offering the information in an effort to aid the Allies.

Schlund said he personally was convinced that the Lorraine man, about 35 years old, was telling a truthful story although he still had to be handled with great suspicion. It never was determined just what the man's attitude was when he confronted the outpost, whether or not he attempted to elude the guard and was caught or just what the circumstances were. First he was placed in the PWE, but shortly thereafter in order to attempt to substantiate the story, they took him to the address where he said he was to find the radio. The house was owned and occupied by an old lady of some 70-odd years. The radio, in a disassembled condition, was found just as he said the instructions read, under about 100 kilos of potatoes in the basement. Schlund also stated that the woman obviously, in his mind, had nothing to do with the plot, that she was too old and feeble, didn't have the slightest idea what the object in her house was, and that she said she had never seen this man before. The saboteur also stated that the plan called for him to play on the woman's sympathies as a refugee and stay at her house, a fact that led Schlund to believe that at least that house was one that did not have time bombs planted around or in it.

The Frenchman also stated that he had been told that the explosives were expected to destroy an entire American military staff. Schlund took the story that he had so far and told it to the Headquarters Commandant, of the 80th, who became quite concerned over the matter, because Division Headquarters was due in the next day and had the Division CG known this information right then he might have changed the entire billeting plan.

The next morning, 28 Nov, When Division Headquarters moved into the same buildings the Germans had just evacuated, Schlund became greatly preturbed, for he figured the 80th was follow^{ing} the exact steps that the Germans had in mind to lead to their destruction. He took his information to the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, as soon as he arrived and was told to conduct a thorough investigation on the matter and report back as soon as he found out something.

His first step was to take a map of all the streets, houses and buildings of the town and mark with red circles those structures which had been used by the German army and Nazi officials. He also questioned as many civilians as he could find. In the afternoon he went to the town gas plant, where artificial gas was manufactured, on the west side of town on a routine inspection and he arrived shortly after 80th Division engineers, seeking billets there, had discovered a badly-concealed time-bomb device attached to TNT. The explosives wieghed about 200 pounds, were covered lightly with straw and placed under the stone steps leading up to the director's office. The time-clock device created great interest, for it was the first one they had seen. It was set to detonate the explosives on the following Saturday, 3 December, at about midnight. Schlund estimated that the Germans had left about midnight the Saturday previous, so figured that it was estimated to blow in one week's time. Schlund explained that the clock itself looked like an ordinary pressure ga^{au}ge with graduations running from 0 to 21 days. It also had graduations in hours, indicating that it was a plenty delicate instrument.

News of the discovery of the bomb and time clock spread swiftly among

80th Division troops in town and Major General Horace L. McBride, Div CG, ordered all the engineers to institute a thorough search in the city for other bombs in all billets being used by his troops. Schlund said that by that time no search order was necessary because every available hand was conducting his own personal search, using picks and shovels, tapping all the walls of the houses, looking under the beds, etc.. This went on for about two days.

On Wednesday, 30 Nov, Schlund found a St. Avold citizen who revealed that the Gestapo had borrowed from him shortly before they left a crow-bar-like instrument used by miners in that area to dig into rock and make holes for charges. It was about that time that the G-2 sent Schlund to the Chief of Staff to report all the information he had. When asked for his opinion of what the division should do, Schlund said he advised evacuation of all American troops in the town and that an Off-Limits sign be hung out until at least 21 days had passed. Nothing happened along the suggested lines, however,

Later in the day, a second time bomb was discovered (he didn't know just where or by whom). It was just as badly concealed as the first, he said it was reported to him. But the real significance of the second bomb was that it also had been set to blow the coming Saturday about midnight. By this time Schlund recalled that all troops and officers were in a high state of nervousness, still feverishly searching for bombs.

Because the Cg, the C/S, and the general staff of the division were located in a large building that formerly was the German Army Soldatenheim, enlisted men's club, Schlund concentrated his investigations on that edifice. He located three civilians who worked with the German Army in that building right up to the time of the Nazis' departure. There were two cooks, a man and a woman, and a house man who did odd jobs for the occupants. He questioned

them for four hours concerning whether or not they had noticed any extraordinary activity in the building near the end of their stay, but he could not obtain one single scrap of information indicating that the building had been prepared for demolition.

Wednesday evening or Thursday, he doesn't recall exactly which, Schlund was called before the Division Commander to report the whole story. He told him everything he had learned so far, the saboteur, the two time-bombs set to go off simultaneously, the information on the man from whom the Germans had borrowed the crow-bar-like instrument, and the questioning of the former employees of the soldatenheim. He also showed the CG the map with the building formerly occupied by the Germans outlined in red. No action was taken towards evacuating any of those buildings as a result of the conversation, Schlund emphasized.

On Saturday evening, 3 December, at about 1730, Lt Schlund was walking out of his quarters when he heard a terrific explosion on the other side of the town. A great flame leaped into the sky and he could see that it was coming from the direction of the former Gestapo headquarters. The first thought that flashed through his mind, he said, was that it was incoming artillery fire, probably 280-mm, which had been directed on the town earlier in the week. Ten minutes later he heard an identical explosion and within an hour, a total of five such detonations occurred. All were time bombs, it developed, and their explosions coincided with the settings of the two time devices discovered earlier in the week.

Schlund said 22 were killed by the bombs and 9 missing, these being unofficial figures that had been given to him by the division chaplain. Schlund also stated that four of the bombs exploded in houses on the same street on

which the former Gestapo Headquarters was located and the fifth blew in a caserne occupied by QM troops on the northeast edge of town. (These locations and total casualties apparently are incorrect. See later paragraph.)

The next morning all 80th Division units in St. Avold moved to other buildings still in the town, but buildings known not to have been occupied by Germans. No further explosions occurred.

Identical results were obtained by all the bombs. The engineers later determined that they must have been planted deeply under ground in the center of the houses. When they exploded the effect was to lift the houses straight up and then have them settle on the exact same spot from which they came. In a couple of cases, the entire house settled below the level of the ground with the roof, still intact, being practically at ground level covering the debris. The amazing part of the explosions were that they caused no damage to the surrounding buildings or objects. Not even the trees standing a few feet away were affected. German Army documents and correspondence practically covered the area, however.

To emphasize the importance of this effect of not damaging any objects removed from the houses, Schlund stated that after the initial explosion occurred, a group of men occupying a nearby house went into the street to see what the commotion was all about, and while all were out investigating their own billet blew up, causing no bodily injury.

Schlund mentioned another peculiar incident relative to the bombing. He met a family moving back into their house which was just two or three removed from the Gestapo headquarters. They had evacuated the house several weeks before because of Allied bombing and also the threat of artillery.

Schlund told them about the danger of the time bombs and they remained in their cave dwelling. Later in the week the house owner went to his residence to see the condition of the place and discovered American soldiers had moved in. He also told them what Schlund had told him (in effect that it had been triply-ringed on his map in red as a danger point) and the soldiers moved out. That house also was one of the four to blow.

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In order to check on the official casualty figures, the interviewer was referred to ^{FRANK J.} Capt. Dowd, now assistant G-2, 80th Div, but at that time, a member of the staff of the 633d AA Bn, in which unit all the casualties were suffered. Dowd confirmed that fact that 23 were killed, four officers and 18 enlisted men. A total of 97 were in the building at the time and about 30 others were injured to a degree necessitating evacuation. Officers killed were the S-1, the Motor Officer, the CO of Hq Battery, and the Ex O of Battery A, a visitor. The Bn CO, Lt Col John C. Mazzer, was slightly injured and was evacuated, but returned two days later.

Dowd's explanation of the exact locations of the buildings that blew differed from Schlund's considerably. He did concur on the number of buildings that actually exploded, however, and stated that all the injuries were sustained by the one unit, the 633d AA Bn. He also said that there was not as much of a coincidence to the story about the group that evacuated their billet to see what the explosion was and then saw their own house go up as Schlund indicated because when the first explosion occurred there was a general evacuation order given that emptied all houses in which American troops were billeted.

Lt Schlund also recalled that the 80th's stay at St. Avoird was supposed to be a rest period, but because of the presence of the time bombs it was anything but that. He also recalls that if he heard the fact stated once that, "I'll be so damned glad when 21 days have passed, so we can get a little rest and peace of mind!", he heard it a thousand times.

The 80th was ordered to move out of St. Avoird on 17 Dec,⁴⁴ exactly 21 days after arriving.