

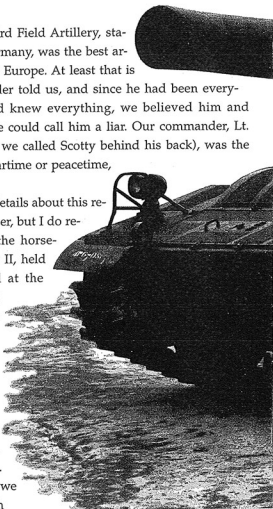
By Brig. Gen. Richard F. Allen  
U.S. Army Reserve retired

# The Big Eyes

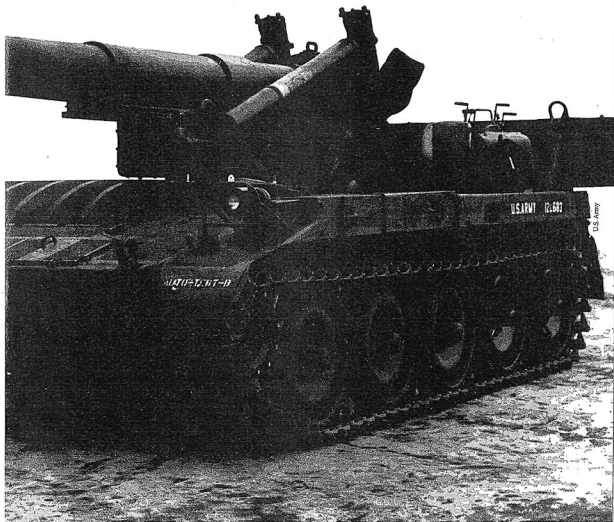
**I**n 1964, the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery, stationed at Büdingen, West Germany, was the best artillery battalion in U.S. Army Europe. At least that is what our battalion commander told us, and since he had been everywhere, done everything and knew everything, we believed him and worked hard to make sure no one could call him a liar. Our commander, Lt. Col. Norman S. McTague (whom we called Scotty behind his back), was the finest commander I ever knew, wartime or peacetime, active or reserve.

Years have erased many of the details about this remarkable officer and his early career, but I do remember that he had served in the horse-drawn artillery before World War II, held every enlisted rank that existed at the time, obtained a warrant, and held every warrant officer rank that then existed, had then obtained his commission and held every officer rank up to colonel, to which he was promoted shortly after leaving the battalion.

As technically and tactically competent as Col. McTague was, his real strength was leadership. He employed the same techniques we all learned in class—announce high



# Don't Lie



standards, set the example and check, check, check—he just did them better. Col. McTague took literally Gen. Mark W. Clark's observation that, "Any organization does well only those things the boss checks." Accordingly, he checked just about everything we did on a regular basis, made on-the-spot corrections that were instructive rather than critical and molded his battalion in his own image; we were, in fact, pretty darn good. Years later, in Vietnam, one of my close friends, Cary King, who had just relinquished command of a firing battery in the 1st Infantry Division Artillery, confided in me that whenever he was in a tight spot, he would ask himself, "What would Scotty do?" and act accordingly. What was amazing, I told him, was that I did the same thing.

I arrived in Büdingen in mid-December 1963 to begin a three-year tour in Europe. I was met at the train station by 2nd Lt. Jack Nelson. He took me straight to battalion headquarters so I could meet the boss before in-processing with Battery B, where he was the fire direction officer. The battalion executive officer, Maj. Fletcher Gretzenberg, greeted me and led me to a chart listing other lieutenants who were due in any day—Al Swan, Cary King and Greg Hendrickson. As it turned out, they were all outstanding officers. We became close friends and remain so today.

Maj. Gretzenberg told me Col. McTague—the "old man"—was at something called motor stables but would return soon. By this time in my career, I had completed four years of ROTC; served as the executive officer of a basic training company at Fort Jackson, S.C., for a six-week cycle; and attended the field artillery basic course at Fort Sill, Okla. I thought I would not be too impressed with a mere lieutenant colonel—after all, I had been a cadet full colonel myself. I was wrong.

When I entered the cold, unheated office (since he was out and about so much, Scotty wore long johns and kept the heat off so he would not get too hot when inside), I was warmly greeted, and after some perfunctory small talk, Col. McTague explained the battalion's wartime mission. Since we were an eight-inch, nuclear-capable outfit, our mission, as part of V Corps Artillery, was to participate in the defense of the Fulda Gap, the traditional invasion route from the east to Frankfurt and other points west. We were to hold our position for about three days to delay what was projected to be an overwhelming tank-led, possibly nuclear, attack, then either redeploy to the west or hide in the forest for as long as we could if rearward redeployment was not possible. Our nuclear targets were prepicked and well rehearsed (on paper). The unit was ready to go on two hours' notice. Did I have any questions?

It was at that moment that I realized I was truly in the Army, which was a serious business that I, too, would take seriously forever after.

I was soon given notice that in mid-January I would go to the field with the 8th Infantry Division as an artillery

"fire marker" on a three-week exercise called Winter Track. It would be my first opportunity to test my artillery roll (a sleeping bag, air mattress and wool blanket encased in a shelter half) on snow in an unheated tent.

Sometime late in 1964, the Army changed the name of our battalion from the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery, to simply the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Artillery. Thereafter, many times, wet and miserable on a cold observation post, choking on dust on tank trails or sloshing through a half-frozen mixture of snow and mud, I mused to myself that the Army took the "field" out of the field artillery, but never seemed to take the artillery out of the field.

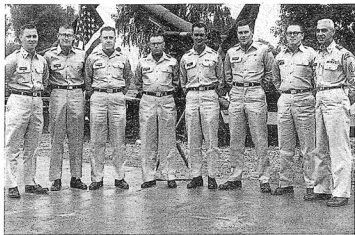
I had arrived in Germany several weeks before my comrades because I did not attend either Ranger or Airborne School even though I was Regular Army. I was not allowed to do either (whew!) because my uncorrected vision was 20/200 in my good eye and worse in my bad one; so naturally, I became the battalion forward observer. Since the mission of an eight-inch howitzer battalion is to provide general support and reinforce fires in support of direct support units, it does not need a forward observer in real combat. In peacetime training situations, however, someone must be given the additional duty as the battalion forward observer. How a nearsighted, ordnance-detailed artillery officer became a forward observer is one of my favorite war stories.

**N**ormally, the battalion had two rotations at Grafenwöhr each year—the battalion Army training test was in May, and the battery training test was in August. In May 1964, however, we were issued the new M-110 howitzers and spent the month conducting new equipment training. After firing the first round from each cannon using the traditional 100-foot lanyard, determining the long shooters by measuring muzzle velocity and overcoming the usual new equipment glitches (that is, deck plates that flew off after each round), we settled down to learn how to move, shoot and communicate. The remainder of the month was uneventful except for a few trips to Mickey's, a noted Grafenwöhr watering hole, a few near brawls in the infamous Grafenwöhr Officers' Club and the unexplained fact that our registrations seemed to take forever.

Registration missions are of utmost importance to artillery units because they develop "corrections" that are applied to all missions fired from a particular position, resulting in much more accurate and deadly fire. Invariably, registrations that should have required no more than 16 or 17 rounds were taking 32, 34 or sometimes more. I spent much of my time on the guns as a safety officer for the firing batteries (having been moved to the battalion staff) while other lieutenants, mainly Swan, Hendrickson and King, manned the observation posts. I saw frustration grip everyone from the section chiefs, who personally set elevations using the marvelously accurate gunner's quadrant, to the battery fire direction officers to the battalion S-3 who was responsible for fire control for the battalion. Not only

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Left to right, Lt. Fred Ralph, Lt. Don Fisher, Maj. Fletcher Gretzenberg, Lt. Col. Norman S. McTague, Maj. Don Fox, Lt. Dave Wahlbom, Lt. Richard Allen and CSM Gary.

was ammunition being wasted, but the time consumed in firing the missions was unacceptable. Even Col. McTague was stumped.

As most everyone else did, he thought the problem must be at the guns; so he would crawl up and observe the section chief carefully, but quickly, level the bubble on the gunner's quadrant, setting the correct elevation time after time, only to have the mission go on and on. He would then go to the fire direction center and observe the procedures there and find no fault. Finally, he would drive to the observation post and check the forward observer's techniques, to no avail. The month ended, and we convoyed back to Büdingen with the mystery unsolved—but with some suspicion that our new guns were not what they were supposed to be.

Back at Grafenwöhr in August, we had an initial battalion three-day live-fire exercise. While the fire missions went well, the registration problem had not been solved. I was serving as the safety officer for Battery A when a registration took 38 rounds. Needless to say, patience was wearing thin, and tempers began to flare as everybody looked for someone to blame.

I was in the latrine shaving when Col. McTague came in. No one else was there, and we made the usual small talk. Suddenly, he asked me how I did in gunnery (fire adjusting) at Fort Sill. I told him I did well, which was only a slight exaggeration. He then asked if I would like to try my hand as the battalion forward observer, and I said I would like that very much. Col. McTague grinned and said, "You know, I'm damned critical." I surprised myself by responding, "Well, I'm damned good!" He laughed and said, "We'll see."

Two days later Battery C was in the field for live-fire training, and I found myself on an observation post called Pappenburg South with Maj. Gretzenberg. The drill would proceed as follows: When the battery was in a firing position, someone at the fire direction center would call me, and I would request, "Mark center of sector." A two-round

volley would be fired, and I would observe the impact, pick a clearly identifiable landmark for a registration point and shift the fire to that point. When the rounds were within 50 meters, the registration would continue with only one gun. The target bracketing process should take three or four two-round volleys; the registration itself, six single rounds to establish range corrections; then six more rounds to achieve height-of-burst data. Sometimes an additional round might be needed to confirm the data, but ideally, it was a 16- to 17-round mission. As the rounds detonated near the registration point, I "sensed" their point of impact—right or left, over, short or "doubtful"—and reported the sensings to the fire direction center. A doubtful sensing occurs when the round detonates either right or left of the registration point, but the observer cannot tell with certainty whether the round landed short of the target or beyond it.

Forward observers have an assortment of vision-enhancing equipment such as handheld 50-power binoculars and the more steady, tripod-mounted scope which, like a periscope, lets the forward observer look out of his foxhole without exposing himself to hostile fire. Both had horizontal and vertical lines called reticles etched on the lenses to aid judging distances when adjusting fire. Because of my vision problem, I needed these tools much more than average forward observers, many of whom could adjust just fine with their unaided eyes, which was a normal procedure.

With Maj. Gretzenberg watching my every move, I identified an easily recognized and well-known Grafenwöhr landmark as my first registration point—the cut in the dike near the center of the impact area. It was a minor miracle that this feature, which appeared to be a break in a low earthen dam, still existed after being shot at by so many for so long. I quickly moved the adjusting volleys to within 50 meters of the cut, and 12 rounds later the mission was complete—a near perfect registration. The collective sigh of relief throughout the battalion was almost audible. No one knew exactly what had happened or why, but we had a valid registration within time standards, and that was all that mattered.

The next day Maj. Gretzenberg and I were at an observation post known as Bleidorn Tower, but this time we had a visitor—Col. McTague. As usual, he came armed with a



by the 212th Group in conjunction with V Corps Artillery in May.

In January 1965, V Corps Artillery conducted an aerial observers school to train all forward observers to adjust fire from airplanes and helicopters. I, of course, was not allowed to attend the school because of my poor vision. King, Hendrickson and our pilot, Dick Thompson, represented the battalion. Since an aerial mission was a part of the training test, the plan was that Dick would fly the battalion's L-19 while King or Hendrickson adjusted the mission.

By the May training test, we were primed and ready. When the alarm sounded, it was still dark, and we were greeted with fog so dense you

could almost lean on it. I had seen fog like that bring training to a halt at Wildflicker in February; nobody wants to shoot 200-pound high-explosive-filled projectiles when it is impossible to see where they are landing. I knew, however, that the sun would burn the fog off, and it would be so clear we could see all the way to Czechoslovakia. It did indeed turn into a sparkling day, and I never shot better. Midway through the afternoon I learned that since neither King nor Hendrickson could get away to do the air mission, Thompson had to fly the airplane and fire the mission himself.

At the critique the next afternoon, attended by all officers and senior NCOs, the group commander and the corps artillery commanding general, the battalion was rated combat-ready and given high marks in almost every area. The assessment by the forward observer umpire caused me to flush with pride and embarrassment. Every mission fired was "in the box," and all initial fire requests were within 200 meters of the target. "Lt. Allen was," he said, "one of the best forward observers" he had ever graded.

No matter—I never fired another mission. Within a week my assignment to the Artillery branch expired, and I reverted to the Ordnance Corps and was soon in the business of storing and shipping eight-inch projectiles, not shooting them. My two years in field artillery, especially in the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Artillery, offered many lessons, some of which provided a firm foundation for the remainder of my military career, and indeed, my endeavors in civilian life. Occasionally I still ask myself, "What would Scotty do?" and conduct myself accordingly.

Several years ago, when I was selected for promotion to brigadier general in the Army Reserve, I tracked down Col. McTague and called to tell him one of his boys had done all right after all. Long since retired from the Army, he still recalled the glory days of 2nd Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery, in Büdingen, and Al Swan, Cary King and Greg Hendrickson. Try as he might, however, he just could not remember Lt. Allen.

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