

“Burn ‘em!”

The Verbal Order Philosophy of MajGen John ‘P’ Wood

The Fourth Armored Division was coiled in defensive positions in a pie-shaped sector we had taken over from the 4th Infantry Division. It was July 26, 1944. All the division needed to break out of the Normandy Peninsula was the long-anticipated order to put *Operation Cobra* into action. LtCol John Sullivan, the G-3 of the division, and his G-3 section cohorts had labored intensely to put together a five-paragraph field order to start the ball rolling. Each of us had written many five-paragraph orders in schools and on maneuvers, but this one was going to be “for real.” And so we insured that every detail was covered precisely, succinctly, and with no chance of misinterpretation. We were proud of the end result.

As I emerged from the G-3 tent with a sheaf of the orders, hot off the press, in my hand, I heard “P” Wood’s booming voice from across the field where he sat in his captain’s chair in front of his van.

“Gillis, whatcha got there?”

Handing the general a copy, I told him with pride and confidence – not to mention great anticipation – “Sir, this our Field Order Number 1!”

With pursed lips, “P” Wood read every memorable sentence. I thought I could feel his satisfaction with the job we had done and his pride in his staff officers.

Handing the order back to me, the general barked, **“Burn ‘em! That’s the last written field order this division puts out!”** Seeing my crest fallen expression and amazement, he tempered his remark with the explanation, **“Every order I give will be verbal...either eye to eye or by radio.”**

With those two words, “Burn ‘em,” General Wood had negated all the training we had received at our branch schools and Leavenworth about field orders. He had thrown out the window the tried and true procedures that had insured victory in past wars. **In fact, he was about to re-write history and sweep with his division through all of Europe spreading terror in the hearts of the enemy and destroying countless units, killing 13,640, capturing 90,354, and destroying or capturing over 6,253 guns, vehicles and pieces of equipment...all on verbal orders alone!**

Small wonder that the division won the supreme accolade from the German radio as the “American Elite 4th Armored Division.”