

# THE DEATH OF COLONEL FORD

By Jean-Loup Gassend

Story based on the book

*Autopsy of a battle, the Liberation of the French Riviera*, Schiffer, 2014

In mid-November 1944, the First Airborne Task Force was removed from the Maritime Alps front, where it was replaced by several American units, one of which was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, which took up positions around Peira Cava December 12<sup>th</sup>. The interesting characteristic about the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was that it consisted of Puerto Rican soldiers, and being at Peira Cava was their very first experience of front line duty. December 14<sup>th</sup>, the newly-appointed regimental commander, 41-year-old West Pointer Colonel George A. Ford, reached Peira Cava. The next day he wrote home to his wife and three children:



The Maritime Alps valley that was the front line for several months. The Germans were on the left side and the Americans on the right. Photo: Jean-Loup Gassend

*I arrived at my CP yesterday afternoon. I found it in a tiny hamlet 5,000 feet up in the Maritime Alps. It is a jewel of a setting, the most gorgeously magnificent scenery I have ever encountered. It is futile to attempt to describe it, a tumbled sea of mountains all around, rugged grey masses dusted with snow and snow-covered ranges interspersed. A belt of spruce trees here, all feathered with snow, and at this elevation the ground snow covered. The morning and evening light on the mountains is lovely beyond description, and each turn of the road reveals a new and fascinating vista. (...) Altogether I am so darned happy over the situation that I am likely to burst into a song at any moment. My surroundings are such that it is a shame to take the taxpayer's money for being here. To have my own command again, and in the combat zone, doing work that I love and can be enthusiastic over again, and with a unit which appears basically excellent but in need of lots of work – it is just perfect. Or would be if you were here, too. Short of that, I have been so very lucky and after the last miserable six months, too, that I can hardly keep down to earth. Nor need you have the least concern for my safety – it is a nice quiet little war we have here, and my only risk is of bumping my head against a cloud. A merry, merry Christmas to the best and sweetest wife and family ever.*



Maritime Alps - the Authion area that were the German positions. Photo: Jean-Loup Gassend

Although the snow may have looked beautiful, according to witnesses from neighboring units, it wreaked heavy havoc on the morale of the Puerto Rican soldiers, who were used to living in a tropical climate and not in freezing cold dugouts. The approach of Christmas in this bleak environment may also have affected the spirits of some soldiers. On December 19, a soldier from I Company shot himself in the foot in his foxhole. This marked the beginning of an incredible series of “mishaps”. On the same day, a second soldier shot himself in the arm when he slipped in the snow. In total, between December 19 and 24, no less than eight soldiers were wounded with their own weapons, the last three all

having their left hands injured by grenades. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, Lieutenant-Colonel Juan César Cordero Dávila, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion commander, finally ordered an investigation into this highly suspicious string of events, the results of which are not known.



Lt. Col. Juan C. Cordero Dávila (standing, 9th from the left) and the Third Battalion in Naples, Italy, 1945.  
Photo: Puerto Rico National Guard

Relations between Lieutenant-Colonel Cordero and Colonel Ford were highly strained. Soldier Benjamin Vega<sup>1</sup> even remembered that on one occasion, when Cordero was taking a nap on a cot, Ford spanked him and gave him an order. Cordero passed the buck down the chain of command (the order ended up with a corporal) and went back to sleep. When Ford saw this, he overturned the cot, shouting at Cordero, who he dismissed shortly afterwards. An obviously very irate Ford, whose enthusiasm had been seriously tempered by his first two weeks in command of the 65<sup>th</sup>, wrote home on December 30:

*I have a major operation in personnel shake-up to be performed. I called in all my officers today, that is all I could safely take out of positions, and laid down the law. Last night, I relieved my second in command and sent him to the brigade commander with a letter to the effect that I never again wanted to see him. It will cause some surprises in view of the fact that my predecessor recommended him to take command. I gather that (as usual) I am regarded as a very mean old ----. I do not mind that in the slightest, but I hate to think of the long hard job I have to do. It is difficult to change people's way of thought and to lift them bodily out of a really deep rut.*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Noemi Figueroa-Soulet, March 24, 2003.



**Col. George A. Ford**

**Photo: Ann Ford Collection**

Only five days after writing these lines, Colonel Ford decided to personally lead a 12-man patrol out to the German lines that were held by the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. This bold display of leadership and aggressiveness was presumably meant to serve as an inspiration to his men and as a boost to their morale. Another explanation may be that, as remembered by Benjamin Vega, Ford did not believe patrol reports brought back to him by his Puerto Rican officers, and decided to see things for himself. In any case, the patrol departed on January 4, advancing east up a steep mountain towards a cable house held by the Germans, halting shortly before their objective. SSgt Jose Robles, Jr. picks up the story from here:

*When we got to the rifle pit, Colonel Ford gave a signal to stop, which I did. He walked up to me and told me that we were close to the enemy positions. I continued with my patrol to the left of the ridge. He also told me that he would continue to the right, with Capt Logan behind. I warned the Colonel twice that he was exposed. I told that to the Colonel because I had been there before and he grinned. Then I continued with my patrol to the position that he told me to take. He kept going with Capt Logan until he reached a place about 25 yards from the cable house. I could see the Colonel standing up, observing through field glasses.*

Captain Daniel B. Logan, who was accompanying Colonel Ford, continues:

*There was a double tree. I put my rifle between the tree and put it to my shoulder, aiming at the house. The Colonel stepped out from behind the tree to the left and advanced in the direction of the house. He took about three or four steps, slightly crouching, when there was one single shot fired from the direction of the cable house. After the shot I heard the Colonel's carbine hit the ground. I looked in his direction and saw him lying down on the ground on his back, in the axis of his movement, his head towards the cable house. I asked the Colonel: "Where were you hit, Colonel?" He replied: "Logan, I am hit in the back." Right after he said that, he drew his knees up and stretched out and quivered. I could see blood was flowing from his mouth. After that I called at the Colonel: "Colonel, come to me," and there was no answer. I remained in my position about a minute, and before I left I took another look at him, and he looked to me like he was dead.*

*Immediately after the first shot was fired, the one that hit the Colonel, a machine gun opened up from the direction of the right side of the house. I withdrew to the rear about five yards and then to the left, where I knew the patrol was. As I was withdrawing to the left, I withdrew into the right flank of the patrol, and it began to give way when I came in sight. When I reached the cover of a large tree and counted the men there were five. By this time mortar fire was falling in our immediate vicinity. I called for the sergeant and he answered. I went to him and told him that the Colonel was hit, that we had to get him. I asked him what the best way to do it was. We arrived at no conclusion, and I told the sergeant to go ahead towards the house, which he did. I then discovered that one man in front of me was badly wounded, which left only three riflemen, not counting the sergeant. I dispatched the one on the right to go to higher ground to our right to protect the flank. I told the man in the center to cover straight ahead and the man on the left to cover our left. At that time, I started to move up along the sergeant's right, towards the higher ground from which I had come. I moved up about one bound of about 15 yards and motioned for the center and the left riflemen to also move forward. I seemed to be unable to convey my intentions to them. I then went back to them and pointed out the bound which I wanted them to take. At that time they took their designated bound.*

In the meantime, SSgt Jose Robles was trying to retrieve Colonel Ford's body:

*[Capt Logan] told me to go up there and get the Colonel and I started on my mission. Before leaving, I noticed Capt Logan posting some men to guard my flanks. When I reached near the top of the ridge, I saw one German behind the small house and he fired at me, so I returned the fire. I saw four enemies run out from behind the little house, and before I had a chance to fire at them, they hit the ground close to the position where the Captain told me the Colonel was. They were about 25 yards from me, but after they hit the ground I could not see them. I never saw the Colonel while I was up there. The four enemies were Germans, I could tell this by their uniforms; they were not wearing helmets. I looked back towards Capt Logan and he signaled me to come back, which I did. He asked me what was going on up the hill and I told him what I had observed.*

The experienced soldiers of 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were preparing to surround the small patrol, as Captain Logan explains:

*The rifleman who had been sent to the top of the ridge to cover our right came back at about this time and motioned to me to come to him, which I did. He reported that an enemy patrol was moving so as to envelope our right flank. At this time, I decided that we would withdraw. Before we withdrew, I checked the wounded man's pulse and found him dead. I said to the men "let's go." We withdrew down the hill about 50 yards, at which place I checked with the sergeant to see if everyone was accounted for. He counted them and said they were.*

The patrol was forced to withdraw, leaving the bodies of their regimental commander and of Corporal Aristides Cales behind. The patrol had not gone at all as planned. Instead, the 65<sup>th</sup> IR had suffered a huge setback and the Germans had proven once again that the war was far from over by killing and capturing the body of the highest ranking American officer to be killed on the Maritime Alps front. Since his death could at first not be confirmed with certainty, Colonel Ford was listed as missing in action, and it was not until after the war that his body was found buried in a shallow grave near the scene of his death. Because no identification tags were found on his body, it needed to be identified with a dental chart. It was a tragic fate for Colonel George Ford; only one day before his death, on January 3, 1945, his wife and children had received his letter, wishing them a merry Christmas and assuring them: "it is a nice quiet little war we have here and my only risk is of bumping my head against a cloud."



**Helmet with the 65th insignia found in a hillside of loose rocks near Peira Cava in 2000.  
Photo: Jean-Loup Gassend**

**Sources:**

All quoted text originates from the Ann Ford Collection  
National Archives Document about the 65th IR from December 1944 to February 1945