

## Introduction to “The Boy in the Snow” By Richard Rodgers

**Comments?** *Comments are welcome. Just use the link below to our message board.*  
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=4753>

*On that day*, January 26, 1945 only five months remained until the surrender of German forces in World War II and the end of the war in Europe. There were many lives still to be lost.

*On that day*, 18 weary, cold, ill-equipped Americans with a teenaged commander spread themselves in hastily prepared defensive positions across a bitterly cold, snow and ice-covered woodline overlooking the town of Holtzwihr, France.

*On that day*, B Company 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment should have had 6 officers and 250 soldiers. The battalion should have had 4 rifle companies, a headquarters' company, and a total of about 780 soldiers. As it were, the combined strength of entire battalion was not even enough to field a single full-sized company.

*On that day*, with only two thinly armored, out-gunned M10 tank destroyers temporarily attached from a nearby unit and with a promise from the battalion commander that B Company would have priority of artillery fire support, the company commander led his men under the cover of morning darkness to the woodline hours before the Germans advanced.

*On that day*, Lieutenant Audie Murphy, who a few years earlier, had enlisted as a private at the age of 17, was now just 19,

and was the company commander. He and his men were to protect the woodline at all costs from German infantry and armored forces that occupied Holtzwihr. The strength of the enemy was estimated to be slightly less than a regiment in size. Failure to hold the woods would be catastrophic to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

*On that day*, the entire German advance was miraculously stopped dead in its tracks with the lion share of the credit given to Lieutenant Murphy for a heroic one-man stand which later earned him the Medal of Honor. Afterwards, Audie expressed guilt about the award and continued doing so until his death in 1971. It was his view that the award had been earned by everyone – especially those that died on that day in the lonely frozen woods of Holtzwihr.

*On this day*, 76 years later, to those who would honor Audie Murphy, the Audie Murphy Research Foundation suggests that the best possible way to do so is to remember and credit the other soldiers who fought and perished on that now silent battlefield in Holtzwihr.

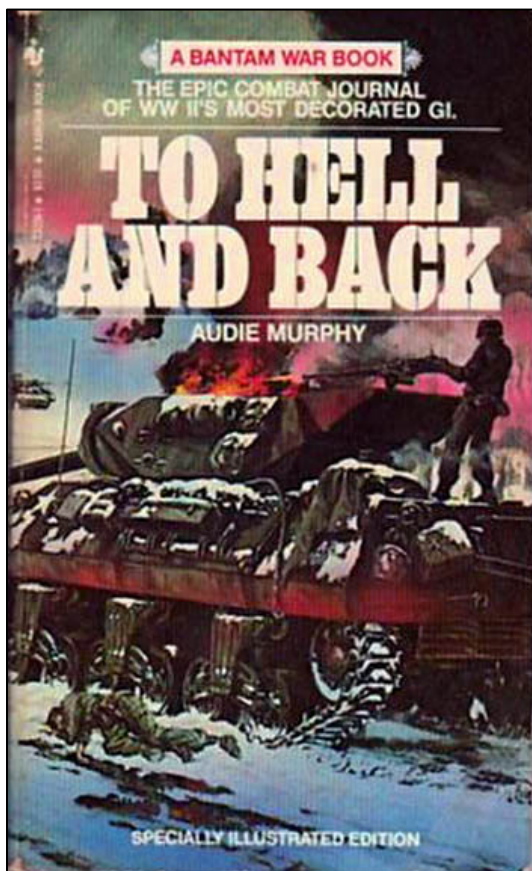
For this reason, the true story on the following pages is about one of those soldiers who – *until today* – has been all but forgotten. Read on faithful fans, read on ...

... Richard Rodgers

# The Boy In The Snow

By Mike West

**Comments?** Comments are welcome. Just use the link below to our message board.  
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=4753>



**The Boy in the Snow** is depicted in this 1983 illustration of Bantam War's published version of TO HELL AND BACK.

**W**E have all probably seen him. Likely, we paid him little attention. Book covers



**After The Battle painting.** A photo of a George Campbell painting depicting Audie Murphy and The Boy In The Snow. Created from all available information for accuracy the painting published by "After The Battle", issue 3, page 32.

See <https://www.afterthebattle.com> for more information.

for volumes of TO HELL AND BACK and illustrations in military magazines depicting Audie Murphy's famous stand on a burning M-10 tank destroyer defying a German counterattack are very familiar but lying near is the boy in the snow.

Our attention is understandably fixed on a solitary soldier standing on the

burning hulk of a tank destroyer – but what of the lifeless boy in the snow? Through an act of military necessity, certainly not one of callous indifference, he becomes simply an object who has been pushed aside “like a bag of wheat”<sup>1</sup> not even a footnote in the historical event taking place before us.

In terms of time, 76 years remove us from the boy’s death. In terms of distance, some 43 miles separate him from where he died to where he now rests. He was the only soldier of Company B, 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion to be killed in action during the month of January 1945 – perhaps the only one during the entire Rhineland Campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Today tourists visiting the site of Audie Murphy’s Medal of Honor action may very well stand where the boy in the snow once laid. Oblivious to the savagery of that day, visitors may in fact simply gaze at the monument depicting Murphy’s heroic stand and forget the carnage that lay about them. Men died here in this seemingly insignificant patch of timber. What on earth made it so important?

This “H-shaped” patch of woods located about a half mile north of



**The “H-patch Woods North of Holtzwihr.** This photo is believed to be a US Army Air Corps military surveillance photo. The M10 tank destroyer occupied a position just on the edge of the wood line where an inside roadway enters the crossbar of the “H” on its left side.

*Photo contributed by Patrick Baumann.*

Holtzwihr, France was to become the jumping-off place for Allied elements in their effort to liberate the towns of Holtzwihr and its neighbor Wickerschwih. With the capture of

<sup>1</sup> David "Spec" McClure, Edited version of Audie Murphy's Handwritten account of the MOH action. Author's collection.

<sup>2</sup> Private emails between Mike West and Victor Failmezger, author of "American Knights, the untold story of the men of the Legendary 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion; Operations Report For the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion 1 Jan-31 Jan 1945: Casualties Incurred. Author's collection.

these two towns, American and French forces would go on to take Colmar, France. For you see, this small patch of woods, known as the "Woods of Riedwihr"<sup>3</sup>, had become essential in determining who would control access to Holtzwihr and ultimately the Colmar Pocket. In the words of Lt. Col. Keith Ware,

"During the offensive which smashed the COLMAR Bridgehead and drove the German forces from their last foothold on French soil, Company "B", Fifteenth Infantry, moved into the BOIS DE RIEDWIHR. Control of this forest had been wrested from the enemy at a heavy cost in blood. Its possession was of cardinal importance as the woods dominated the German stronghold of Holtzwihr... Accordingly, on the afternoon of 26 January 1945, the enemy launched a determined counterattack, hurling two companies and six heavy tanks at Company "B"'s position in an effort to retake the woods at any cost."<sup>4</sup>

The Colmar Pocket, covering an area approximately 45 miles long and 25 miles wide, was in fact a German salient or bulge extending west from the Rhine River and its presence was a great threat to Allied efforts to cross the Rhine and take the ground-war to Germany from the west.<sup>5</sup>

The Third Infantry Division, at that time located 38 miles northeast of Colmar in Strasbourg, France, moved south to attack the northwest shoulder of the Colmar Pocket in an effort to eliminate it. This effort would be called Operation Grandslam.<sup>6</sup>

The operation began the night of January 22-23, 1945 with elements of the 7th and 30th Regiments, 3rd Infantry Division crossing the Fecht and Ill Rivers supported by the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion. Units of the 30th Regiment assaulted the German held towns of Riedwihr and Holtzwihr located respectfully east and south of the Bois de Riedwihr. Unfortunately, the tank destroyers of the 601st had to support the attack while remaining on the west side of the Ill River. Located 5.5 miles northeast of Colmar the La Maison Rouge bridge over the Ill River collapsed under the weight of a

---

<sup>3</sup> Untranslated, the name of the woods is "Bois de Riedwihr".

<sup>4</sup> Keith Ware, "Statement Regarding Audie Murphy's MOH Action of 1/26/45, National Archives; Author's collection.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Failmezger, "American Knights, the untold story of the men of the Legendary 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion, Paperback; (Osprey Publishing, Oxford, UK, 2018) 288-289.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Operation Grandslam visit <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/2016/10/19/saving-operation-grandslam/>





**M10 "Wolverine" Tank Destroyer.** U.S. Army photo of Soldiers of the 629<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion huddle to the side of an M10 on January 20, 1945 at Courtil, Belgium just 235 miles northwest from where the "Boy In The Snow" would lie six days later. Conditions in both locations were similar.

Source: <https://www.worldwarphotos.info>

Sherman tank thereby stranding men of the 30th on the east side of the river without direct armor support.<sup>7</sup>

Initial successes by elements of the 30th Infantry Regiment had GIs in the towns of Riedwihr and Holtzwihr,

France who held the Bois de Riedwihr. These early successes were soon blunted by strong German counterattacks composed of infantry and armor. Without direct US armor support, the 30th was hard hit suffering hundreds of casualties – it

<sup>7</sup> Daniel R. Champagne, *Dogface Soldiers, The Story of B Company, 15th Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, From Fedala To Salzburg: Audie Murphy and His Brothers in Arms*, (Merriam Press, Bennington, Vermont; 2005) 118-119; Don Taggart, "The History of the Third Division in World War II (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947) 307-310.

was a near rout. Over the next two days the fighting around La Maison Rouge, which means "the Red House", would prove to be more savage than that of Anzio in the words of some the veterans of that long battle.<sup>8</sup>

The 15th Infantry Regiment, held in reserve at Guemar, France just northwest of the fighting, was called in to help stabilize the situation and continue the attacks of the 30th Infantry in an effort to retake the Bois de Riedwihr and the towns of Riedwihr and Holtzwihr. Savage fighting raged in the woods and surrounding ice and snow-covered fields. The 1st and 2nd Battalions, 15th Infantry by the early morning hours of January 26, 1945 had driven the Germans out and back into Holtzwihr. The morning of the 26th found the 1st Battalion holding the west leg of the "H-shaped" woods while the 2nd Battalion held the east.<sup>9</sup>

A radically depleted 1st Battalion held the west leg and much of the "crossbar" of the H-shaped woods with three companies none of which had more than 22 men. Later, in the early morning hours, two of those companies, A and C, would be removed to the rear initially leaving only Company B composed of 18 men to

cover the line. The Ammunition and Pioneer platoon would be sent to support Company B on the left but it had few men.<sup>10</sup>

During the night of January 25-26, a section consisting of two M-10 tank destroyers (TDs), 2nd Platoon, Company B, 601st moved up to support Company B, 15th Infantry. The TDs parked on the road which passed through the west woods leading north from Holtzwihr to La Maison Rouge. One TD, commanded by S/Sgt. Joseph Tardif, was positioned just to the south of the woods while the other, commanded by Lt. Thomas P. Welch was located just inside the timberline. The crewmen of both units were probably asleep until later in the morning. Among the sleeping crewmen of the Welch TD, was the soldier who would become the boy in the snow.<sup>11</sup>

How did he get here?

Like many of the American soldiers of World War II, this New York City boy – whose first name was Gil – was born in the early to mid-1920s. He was the oldest child with three siblings: two sisters and a brother. His mother worked as the superintendent of an

---

<sup>8</sup> Allyn Vannoy, "Saving Operation Grandslam, Internet, Warfare History Network; Taggart, 307.

<sup>9</sup> Taggart, 307-310.

<sup>10</sup> Harold B. Simpson, "Audie Murphy: American Soldier", (Dallas: Alcor Publishing, 1982) 153-154. 15th Infantry Battle Report for 1/26/45. Author's collection.

<sup>11</sup> David "Spec" McClure, Letter to Albert L. Pyle, dated 10/21/1986. Author's collection. Private emails between Failmezger and West.



**M10 in North Africa.** An M10 Tank Destroyer moves toward the battle lines At Bir Marbott Pass East Of El Guettar in Tunisia, 1943.

Source: <https://www.worldwarphotos.info>

apartment house while his father was a doorman. Later, the father would become absent from the household and the mother would take on employment as a seamstress. In 1942 the boy in the snow became employed to help support the family. He and his high school buddy, Bill, both being 18 filled out their Selective Service forms on June 30, 1942. Since both volunteered in September 1942, they could choose their specialty in the service. They went armor.<sup>12</sup>

This decision sent the boys to Fort Knox, Kentucky - the school of armor. Both wanted to drive tanks. After

weeks of training and along the way having endured such things as inoculations, kitchen patrol (KP) duty, calisthenics, and barracks life, they were ready. In January 1943, Gil shipped out to North Africa while Bill remained behind. They would see one another again only once. Bill would become part of the 1st Armored Division and Gil, a crewman in a tank destroyer of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion. Bill did succeed in driving tanks, but Gil initially became a loader in the 5-man crew of the M-10 Tank Destroyer. Along the way, he would learn the skills of the gunner.<sup>13</sup>

Gil would fight with the 601st in North Africa, Sicily, and Salerno where in December 1943 with 70 days of combat under his belt, Gil and his buddy, Bill met again for the last time. Bill would survive the war and become an attorney.<sup>14</sup>

The 601st was attached to the 3rd Infantry Division in Italy. It would for the most part remain in support of that division until the end of the war. The hard fighting at Anzio and the invasion of southern France would test the mettle of the 601st. It was at Anzio that Gil was first hospitalized but not from wounds. It appears he was never

<sup>12</sup> Federal Censuses: 1930: Manhattan, New York City, New York, Sheet No. 4A, 1940: Bronx, New York City, New York, Sheet No. 12B. Various Selective Service Cards: Bronx, New York City, New York, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, "The GI's War: American Soldiers in Europe During World War II, (Da Capo Press, New York, 1988). 81. William Gordon "Bill" Haemmel's obituary; Ashville Citizen Times, Sun. Oct. 7, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Hoyt, 271-272.

wounded; instead, he had malaria from March 1944 until May 1944. In June after the breakout from Anzio in May 1944, Gil would have a relapse and be back in the hospital until the end of June.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that from June 1944 until January 1945, Gil served with honor and became the gunner of his tank destroyer. Along the way he received the Good Conduct Medal. There would be no time for the 3<sup>rd</sup> ID nor the 601<sup>st</sup> to rest. The 3<sup>rd</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, and 45<sup>th</sup> IDs would be training for the invasion of Southern France on August 15, 1944.<sup>16</sup>

The heavy fighting in France would eventually bring the 601<sup>st</sup> to Strasbourg, France just to the north of the Colmar Pocket. In late December 1944 the 601<sup>st</sup> would move to Ribeauville, France located northwest of Colmar to aid in the first phase of reducing the Colmar Pocket. Over the next few weeks the men of the 601<sup>st</sup> would be engaged in the fighting to reduce German control of the towns of Sigolsheim and Bennwihr, northwest of Colmar. With the capture of these towns, the 601<sup>st</sup> prepared for the final elimination of the "Pocket" by painting all tank destroyers white and issuing

"white jumpsuits known as spooksuits".<sup>17</sup>

The effort to eliminate the Colmar Pocket would place the 601<sup>st</sup> in the thick of battle and on the afternoon of January 26, 1945, Gil as the gunner of the soon-to-become famous TD would face an onslaught of German infantry and six tanks. Earlier in the morning, Audie Murphy fearing an attack, had awakened the sleeping lieutenant in command of the tank destroyer. Murphy suggested he move his TD off the road and into the woods for better cover. Fearing the TD would get stuck, the lieutenant declined to do so.<sup>18</sup>

Shortly after 2:30 in the afternoon, six German tanks and hundreds of white-clad infantry swarmed out of Holtzwihr moving north toward the Bois de Riedwihr in an effort to recapture the woods while driving into the rear of two American battalions with the intent to destroy them as combat units and place the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> ID in great peril. Nothing stood between them and total success but a depleted infantry company, 3 Forward Artillery observers and two tank destroyers.<sup>19</sup>

German artillery opened fire on the American line in the forward edge of

---

<sup>15</sup> Taggart, 566; Ancestry.com, "U.S., World War II Hospital Admission Card Files, 1942-1954.

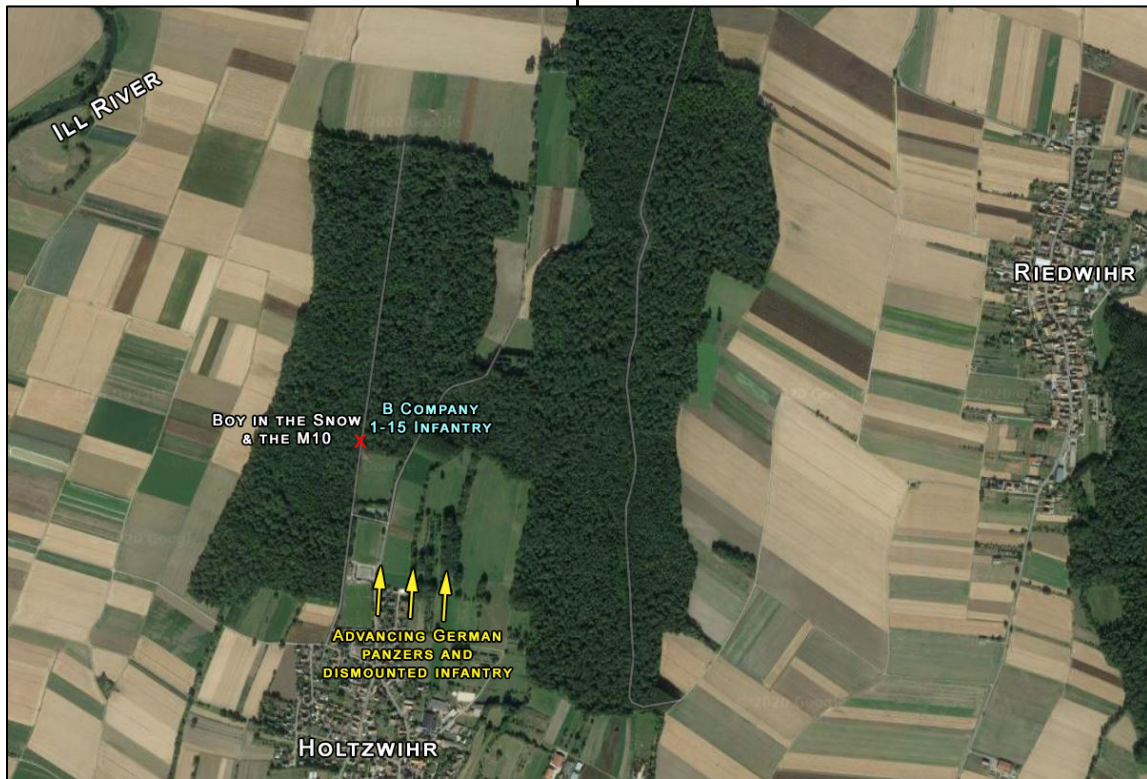
<sup>16</sup> Private emails between Failmezger and West.

<sup>17</sup> Failmezger, 295-296; 304.

<sup>18</sup> Failmezger, 316-317; Audie Murphy, "To Hell and Back" (USA, Owl Books, 2002) 237-238.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, 238-239.





**X marks the spot.** A map showing the approximate tactical positions of Company B, 1-15 Infantry, and one of two attached tank destroyers on January 26, 1945 as German forces advanced in attack formation. The red "x" is the approximate location of the M10 with the "Boy In The Snow".

Google Map source: <https://goo.gl/maps/pvbSGnykse9ivy4F7>

the woods. For 10 minutes, the artillery pounded the area killing soldiers, knocking out machine-guns, and creating havoc, while the German tanks began to creep forward.<sup>20</sup>

As the German armor moved closer, the commander of the TD in the woods ordered the gunner to fire on the approaching tanks. Gil fired making a

direct hit and knocking out one of the German tanks.<sup>21</sup>

At almost the same moment, the German tanks armed with 88mm guns fired and knocked out Gil's TD setting it on fire. All other crewmen escaped to safety. Gil, though fatally wounded, attempted to lift himself out but

<sup>20</sup> Eyewitness Accounts to MOH Action of 1/26/45. Author's collection.

<sup>21</sup> David "Spec" McClure, Letter to Irving Kelley dated 10/13/1982; 15th Infantry Battle Report, 1/26/45. Author's collection.



**Location of M10 and “The Boy In The Snow”.** Taken in the early 1970’s this image shows where the M10 stood in 1945. In the background stands the village of Holtzwihr. To the left is the tree where the machinegun crew was killed by a German artillery tree burst. To the right is the ditch where the Germans were shot as they crept toward Audie Murphy.

*Source: This photo given by [After The Battle](#) magazine to Audie Murphy’s publicist, David “Spec” McClure, who later forwarded it to Lillian Bailey who included it in her collection.*

collapsed on the edge of the turret where he died.<sup>22</sup>

The remaining tank destroyer, closer to the German attack, attempted to maneuver for a better firing position but with the road covered in ice and snow, the driver lost control and slid

into a drainage ditch next to the road. In this position, the guns were at a useless angle. The crew was forced to abandon the tank destroyer.<sup>23</sup>

Murphy, realizing the hopelessness of the situation, ordered all the remaining soldiers to retreat. Continuing to call down artillery fire on the attacking Germans, Audie turned to leave when he saw the .50-cal. machine-gun on top of the burning tank destroyer. Climbing on top, he attempted to traverse the machinegun so as to bring it to bear on the enemy, but the body of the dead gunner prevented the weapon’s proper use. Realizing the danger, Murphy pulled Gil’s body out and let the lifeless soldier fall to the ground. He would not remain there long.<sup>24</sup>

As Murphy raked the oncoming infantry, two of Gil’s fellow crewmen rushed back under fire to drag him to safety thinking he was still alive. Upon discovering he was dead they dropped him yet again in the snow.<sup>25</sup>

A second effort would be made this time by one of forward artillery observers who - while under intense fire - grabbed the boy in the snow and attempted to drag him to safety. He too,

<sup>22</sup> McClure, Letter to Kelley dated 10/13/1982; Letter to Albert L. Pyle dated 10/21/1985. Author’s collection.

<sup>23</sup> Simpson, 157; Murphy, 239.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, 239-241.

<sup>25</sup> McClure, Letter to Pyle dated 10/21/1985.

upon learning that the boy was dead, left him once again in the snow.<sup>26</sup>

After an hour of intense fighting, the Germans were forced back into Holtzwihr and the original American lines were reestablished and held through the night. The next afternoon, US forces attacked through the Bois de Riedwihr and captured Holtzwihr. In early February, with the capture of the city of Neuf-Brisach, the Colmar Pocket would finally be eliminated.<sup>27</sup>

Audie Murphy on top of a burning tank destroyer calling down artillery fire and using a .50-cal. machinegun broke the back of a fierce and determined German assault. While all true have we forgotten the boy in the snow?

It may have slipped by unnoticed by the reader with all the mayhem going on at the time. Did we forget the sequence of events? We may want to read the account again. If we follow what Murphy said in "To Hell and Back", the boy in the snow may very well have fired the first shot in defiance of the German counterattack – and not Murphy.

The boy in the snow – just who was he?" Let us journey some 43 miles to a place west of that patch of woods. The place is called the Epinal American Cemetery

and Memorial, Epinal, Departement des Vosges, Lorraine, France. In Plot B Row 14 Grave 41, you will find the final resting place of Tec5 Gilbert J. Van Elk, the boy in the snow.<sup>28</sup>



**The Boy In The Snow.** The final resting place of Tec5 Gilbert J. Van Elk. Killed in action on January 26, 1945 in Holtzwihr, France while serving honorably as a gunner on an M10 Tank destroyer while in support of Company B, 1-15 Infantry and Audie Murphy.

*Photo by: Command Sergeant Major Dwight "Andy" Anderson.*

<sup>26</sup> McClure, Letter to Pyle dated 10/21/1985.

<sup>27</sup> Champagne, 127-131.

<sup>28</sup> Technician 5<sup>th</sup> Grade (Tec5) Gilbert's final resting place is at Epinal American Cemetery and Memorial, Plot B, Row 14, Grave 41. Source: [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56376073/gilbert-j-van\\_elk](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56376073/gilbert-j-van_elk)