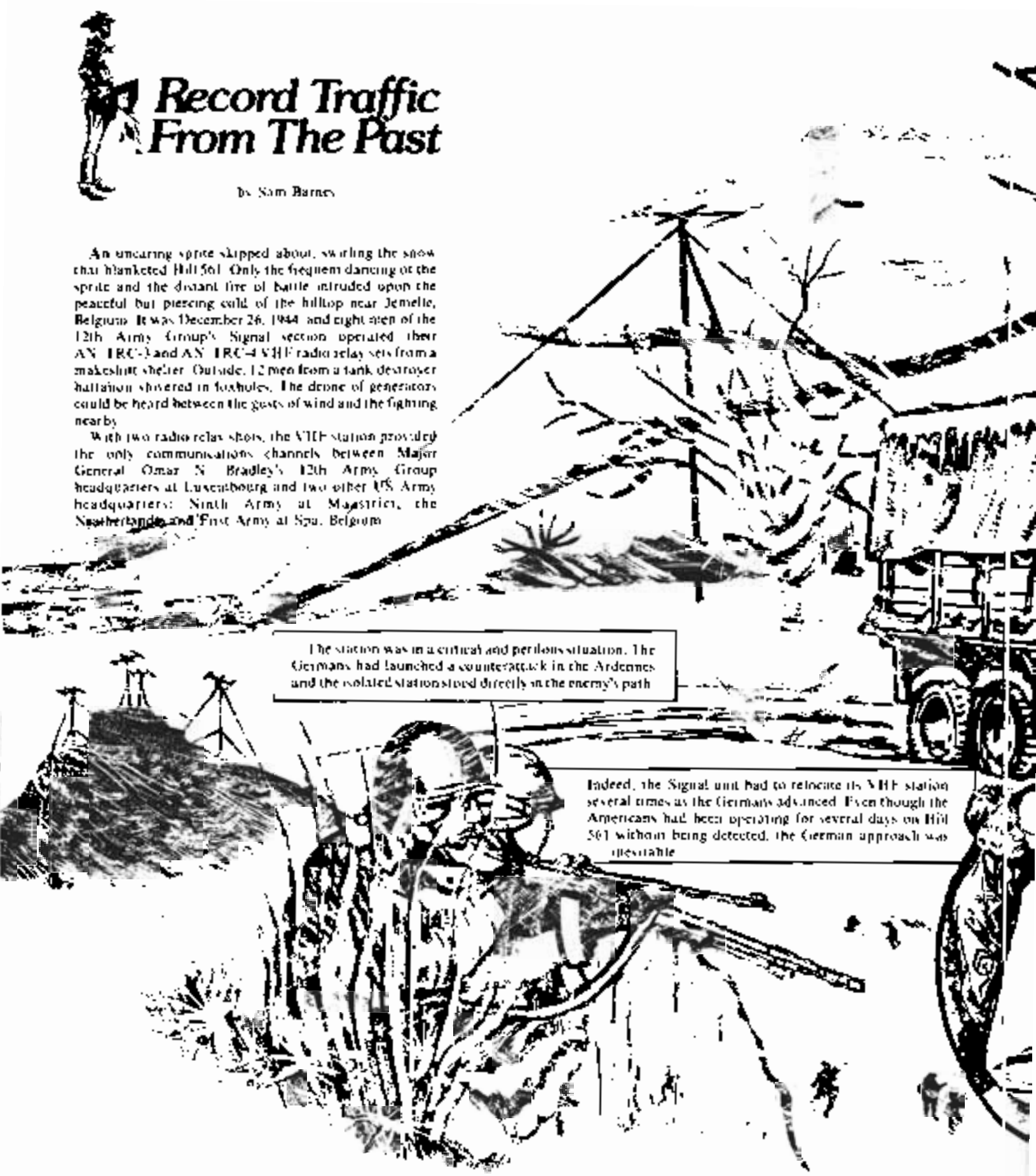
Record Traffic From The Past

by Sam Barnes

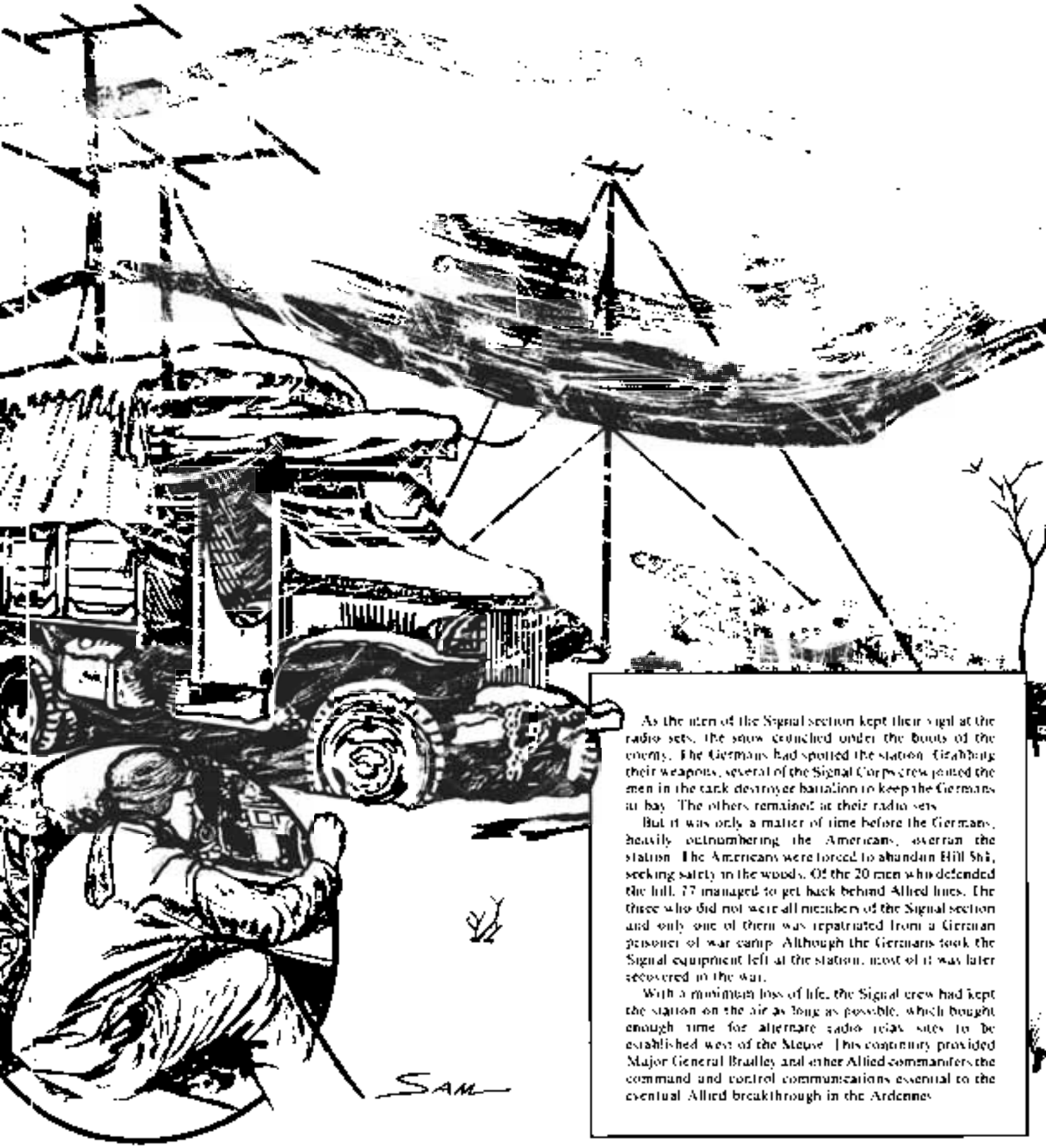
An uncaring sprite skipped about, swirling the snow that blanketed Hill 561. Only the frequent dancing of the sprite and the distant fire of battle intruded upon the peaceful but piercing cold of the hilltop near Jemelle, Belgium. It was December 26, 1944 and eighteen of the 12th Army Group's Signal section operated their AN/TRC-3 and AN/TRC-4 VHF radio relay sets from a makeshift shelter. Outside, 12 men from a tank destroyer battalion shivered in foxholes. The drone of generators could be heard between the gusts of wind and the fighting nearby.

With two radio relay sets, the VHF station provided the only communications channels between Major General Omar N. Bradley's 12th Army Group headquarters at Luxembourg and two other US Army headquarters: Ninth Army at Maastricht, the Netherlands and First Army at Spa, Belgium.



The station was in a critical and perilous situation. The Germans had launched a counterattack in the Ardennes and the isolated station stood directly in the enemy's path.

Indeed, the Signal unit had to relocate its VHF station several times as the Germans advanced. Even though the Americans had been operating for several days on Hill 561 without being detected, the German approach was inevitable.



As the men of the Signal section kept their vigil at the radio sets, the snow crunched under the boots of the enemy. The Germans had spotted the station. Grabbing their weapons, several of the Signal Corps crew joined the men in the tank destroyer battalion to keep the Germans at bay. The others remained at their radio sets.

But it was only a matter of time before the Germans, heavily outnumbering the Americans, overran the station. The Americans were forced to abandon Hill 584, seeking safety in the woods. Of the 20 men who defended the hill, 17 managed to get back behind Allied lines. The three who did not were all members of the Signal section and only one of them was repatriated from a German prisoner of war camp. Although the Germans took the Signal equipment left at the station, most of it was later recovered in the war.

With a minimum loss of life, the Signal crew had kept the station on the air as long as possible, which bought enough time for alternate radio relay sites to be established west of the Meuse. This continuity provided Major General Bradley and other Allied commanders the command and control communications essential to the eventual Allied breakthrough in the Ardennes.