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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: THE ARMORED COMBAT COMMAND IN "OPERATION RIVER CROSSING".

SCOPE A historic example of CCR of the 5th Armored Division crossing the Meuse River in France during the month of September, 1944 is used to demonstrate the ability of an armored combat command to effect a river crossing with troops organic to the armored division. This example shows the troops required and the technique of operation in effecting the river crossing after dark, following a prolonged march to the crossing area. The necessity for aggressiveness and initiative on the part of the small unit commanders is clearly demonstrated.

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THE ARMORED COMBAT COMMAND IN

"OPERATION RIVER CROSSING"

A narrative description of the  
operation of CCR of the 5th Armored  
Division in crossing the Meuse River  
in France during the month of Septem-  
ber, 1944.

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The Armored Combat Command in "Operation River Crossing".

The armored division can perform any ground task to some extent. This was evidenced during the past war by the operations in the European Theatre. A study of the after-action reports of the armored divisions in that theatre will reveal a large variety of missions assigned to the units of armored divisions. Oftentimes these missions were assigned due to the necessity of the immediate situation. This, however, does not imply that the armored division is adapted to perform all ground tasks equally well. There are some tasks which are best suited to armor and others which the division can perform with a lesser degree of efficiency. Among the more difficult missions can be listed the task of performing a river crossing operation.<sup>1</sup>

The forcing of a river crossing can be performed very successfully by an armored unit provided the units are commanded by capable and aggressive leaders and the mission is pursued with a spirit of aggression. Such an operation was performed by Combat Command R of the 5th Armored Division in the vicinity of Charleville, France during the month of September, 1944. In this operation Combat Command R forced a crossing of the Meuse River, constructed a bridge, and continued the exploitation across France,

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<sup>1</sup> "Organization and Employment of the Armored Division", Precis T-508, Sec 1, Par 11, TAS, Fort Knox, Ky.

Belgium, and Luxemburg.

At this time, all units of the United States First Army, were rapidly moving across France in exploitation. In most cases armor was preceding with orders to continue to move eastward toward the German border as rapidly as possible. Supply lines were becoming greatly extended and fuel and lubricants prized possessions.

The 5th Armored Division having passed through Paris, moved northeast, with orders to procede to the Belgian border as rapidly as possible. On the 3d of September, 1944, the 5th Armored reached the France-Belgium Border and all elements were in the vicinity of Valenciennes, France.

At this time the command post of CCR was located at Villers en Gauche, France. The unit was commanded by Colonel Glenn H. Anderson, who had led the unit since its committment to battle in July. The attachments to Combat Command R which had been with the command since committment were the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Howard Boyer, the 10th Tank Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William Hamberg, and the 95th Armored Field Artillery Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles McNeer. Other normal attachments were Company C of the 22nd Engineer Battalion, Company C of the 85th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mcze), Company C of the 127th Armored Ordnance Battalion, Company C of the 75th Armored Medical Battalion, and Company C of the 628th Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP).

At 2040 Hours on the 3d of September, the following warning order was received at CCR: "Division moves at 040700B to the south-east. Orders will be issued tonight".<sup>1</sup> All units in CCR were immediately alerted to be prepared to move the following morning at 0700.

At 0020 hours on the 4th of September, CCR received orders that it would lead the movement of the division to the southeast to an assembly area in the vicinity of Logny-Bogny, France.

The following task organization for the movement was decided upon by Colonel Anderson:

TASK TEAM BOYER

47th Armd Inf Bn (-)  
Co B, 10th Tk Bn  
1st Plt Co C, 85th Cav Sqdrn

CCR COMMAND GROUP

Hq CCR  
Co C, 22d Engr Bn  
Co C, 85th Cav Sqdrn (-)  
Co C, 628th TD Bn  
196th FA Bn (105 mm towed)

TASK TEAM HAMBURG

10th Tk Bn (-)  
Co A, 47th Armd Inf Bn  
Co C, 47th Armd Inf Bn  
2d Plt Co C, 85th Cav Sqdrn

CCR TRAINS

Sv Co, 10th Tk Bn  
Sv Co, 47th Armd Inf Bn  
Co C, 127th Armd Ord Bn  
Co C, 75th Armd Med Bn.

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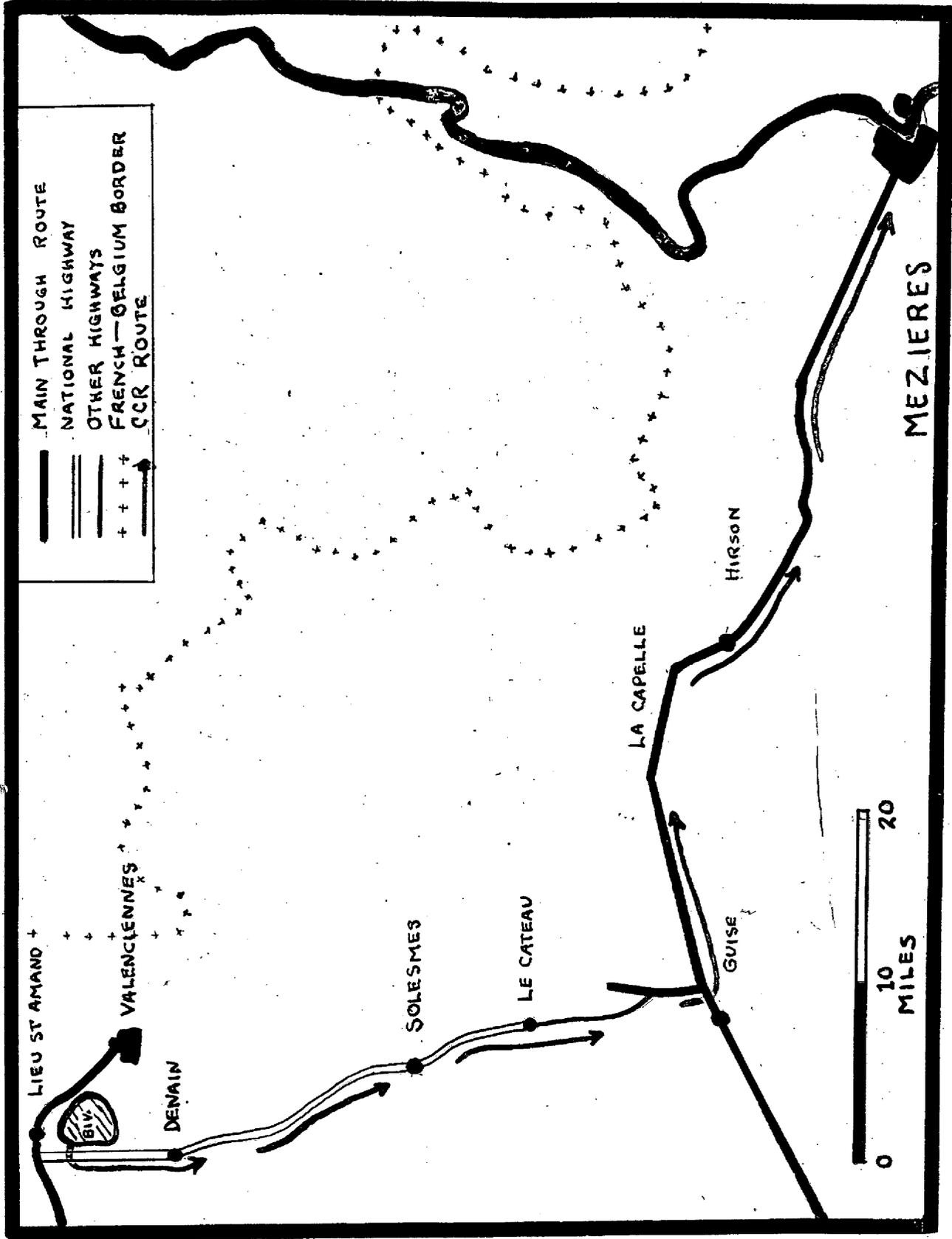
<sup>1</sup> After Action Report, CCR, 5th Armored Division, 3d - 5th Sept., 1944.

Due to a shortage of fuel it was decided to leave the 95th Armored Field Artillery Battalion behind. It was to rejoin the combat command in the new assembly area when sufficient fuel was received.

The combat command moved out at 0700 hours on the 4th of September. Shortly after the movement started, Major General Lunsford Oliver, Commanding General of the 5th Armored Division, contacted Colonel Anderson and informed him that the plans were changed and the division had been assigned the mission of seizing or forcing crossings of the Meuse river. CCR was ordered to move directly into Charleville-Mezieres and seize or build a bridge across the Meuse. Sufficient bridging equipment was to be sent forward and attached to CCR enroute to Charleville. CCA was given a similar mission in the vicinity of Sedan, France.

Having received these new orders, Colonel Anderson called his unit commanders to his command vehicle while the unit continued to move south. He informed them of the new plan and the following route was selected to the new area: Lieu St. Amand--Denain--Solesme--Le Cateau--Guise--Hirson--Charleville. This was a total distance of approximately ninety-six miles. Upon reaching Charleville, Task Team Boyer was to initiate reconnaissance immediately for possible locations for crossing the river.

During the march, Task Team Boyer was given priority on existing fuel and lubricant loads within the combat command. Because of this, Task Team Hamberg had to ration its quantity of gasoline, and



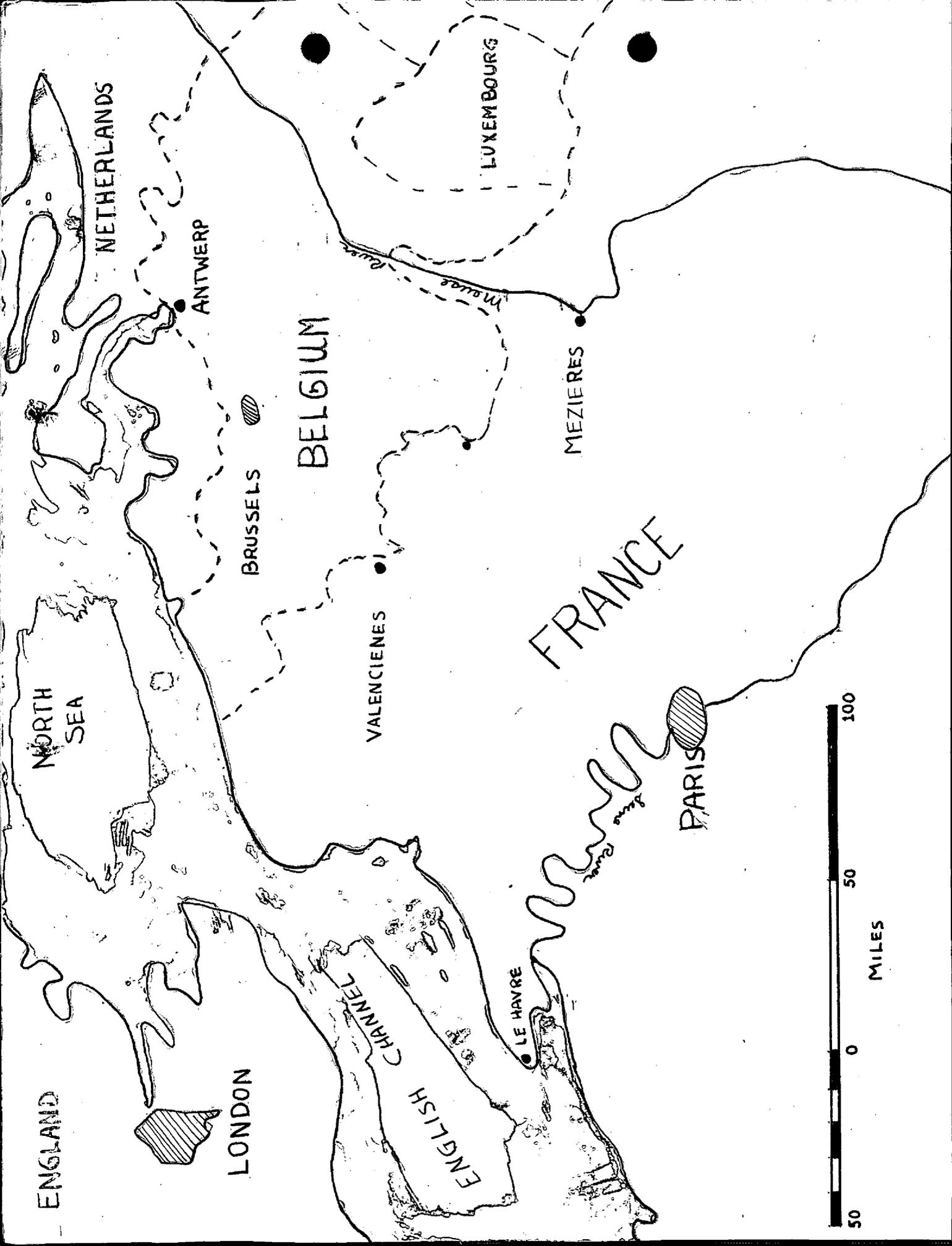
ROUTE OF COMBAT COMMAND R

it was decided to continue the march until each vehicle's fuel supply was exhausted. When a vehicle ran out of gasoline it was left at the roadside to await replenishment from the fuel and lubricant trains when they arrived from the army supply points, approximately one hundred and fifty miles to the rear. As the vehicles were refueled they were to rejoin their command individually in the vicinity of Charleville.

Task Team Boyer reached the outskirts of Charleville at 1600 hours on the 4th September. The leading elements contacted a task force of C Troop, 24th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron which had reached Charleville on the previous day. This task force stated that all bridges in the vicinity were blown and the Germans were defending the east bank of the river. The civilians of Charleville had improvised a span across the blown bridge connecting Charleville and Mezieres and it was possible to cross this span on foot.

The combat command was ordered to coil up and move off the road into assembly areas on the northwest edge of Charleville. Task Team Boyer immediately started reconnaissance parties out in search of possible crossing sites, and the company commander of C Company 22d Engineers was ordered to reconnoiter for a bridge site.

It would be worth while to pause at this time and briefly look at the geography of this area as well as the political and military background.



Charleville, a city of twenty-one thousand inhabitants, was founded by the Duke of Nevers in 1606. The major portion of the city is located on a salient formed by the Meuse river. On the north side of the town and on the opposite bank of the river rises Mount Olympe. This mountain and high-ground extends to the south, with steep slopes following along the river line east of the city<sup>1</sup> of Mezieres.

Mezieres is the chief town of the department of the Ardennes with approximately one thousand inhabitants. It is situated on a peninsula formed by the Meuse river and is connected to the city of Charleville by bridge. It is bounded on the south by the cities of Pierre and Mohon, to which it is also connected by bridges. Walls were built around the city in the 13th century as well as other fortifications including a citadel on the east edge of the city. The citadel is located between two canals which cut across the peninsula and provide river traffic with a short-cut across the isthmus. Immediately to the east of the second canal rises the extension of Mount Olympe. Farther south and east of the city of Mohon the slopes of the mountain are more gradual and more easily<sup>2</sup> negotiated.

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1 Baedeker, Karl--Baedeker's Northern France, Leipzig, published by Karl Baedeker, 1909.

2 Ibid.

In 1521, the Chevalier Bayard, with a garrison of two thousand men, successfully defended Mezieres for twenty-eight days against an Imperial Army of thirty-five thousand troops. In 1815, after a siege of six weeks, the town was compelled to capitulate to the Germans, though not before the general pacification. Again in 1871, Mezieres surrendered after a severe bombardment. Both Charleville and Mezieres were taken by the Germans in 1914. The Germans made Charleville the seat of their high command in the west, and later the headquarters of the German Crown Prince.<sup>1</sup>

The fortifications of the city of Mezieres with the exception of the citadel were dismantled in 1886. The German army was using the citadel as a garrison at the time of the recapture by our forces on the 4th of September, 1944. This was evidenced by the large quantities of food supplies left upon their hasty evacuation across the river.

Thus we see the area possessed a long history of military conflict, and had figured in nearly every war in which France participated since the fifteenth century.

The peninsula on which Mezieres was located offered an ideal salient for a river crossing. Through some error, only one canal was shown cutting the isthmus on the maps in the possession of all units of CCR. Upon discovering the bridge crossing the canal

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Volume 15, Page 402, Article: "Mezieres"

shown on the maps was intact, and that the city of Mezieres had been evacuated by the Germans, the engineer company commander immediately began looking for a crossing site in order to build a bridge leading into Mezieres. The small village of Warcq on the tip of the peninsula was determined to be the best spot. It was about 1900 hours at this time and very few hours of daylight remained. As the leading reconnaissance parties of Task Team Boyer moved forward through the citadel they were fired upon by enemy on the high ground east of the city. It was then (2000 hours) that they discovered the second canal east of the citadel. This canal was not shown on the maps. As they reconnoitered farther, they discovered that the bridge across this second canal had been blown and also a large gap had been blown in a dam located in the canal.

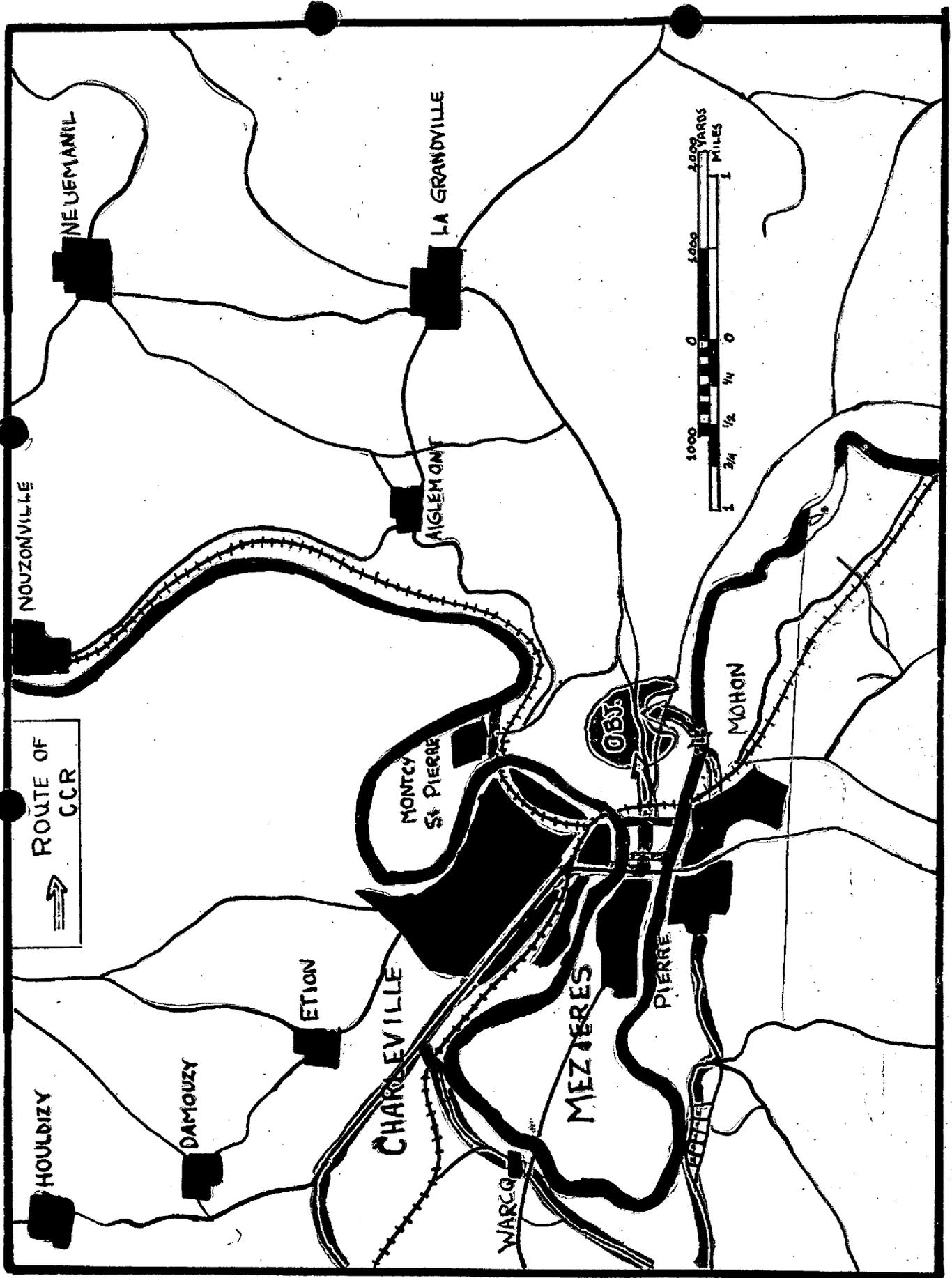
When Colonel Anderson received this information at CCR command post he decided that a crossing would have to be forced by infantry, a bridgehead secured, and a new crossing site selected south of the peninsula on which Mezieres was located. He ordered the company commander of the engineer company to locate a crossing site in the vicinity of Mohon.

The reconnaissance elements of Task Team Boyer reported that they could lay a couple of planks across the gap blown in the dam after dark. The infantry troops would then be able to cross the river on this dam.

Based on this report it was decided to force a crossing after

dark that night and attack to secure the high ground east and south of the city of Mezieres. Company C of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion was attached to Task Team Boyer for the operation. This gave the team two armored infantry companies and one tank company.

A hasty plan was drawn up by the staff of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion as follows. Company B of the 47th Armored Infantry was to cross the dam immediately after dark and attack directly east and secure the high ground east of Mezieres. The machine gun platoon of Headquarters Company of the 47th Armored Infantry was attached to Company B for the operation. Company C of the 47th Armored Infantry was to follow Company B across the dam and attack to the east and southeast on the right of Company B, through the suburb of Le Theux. Company B of the 10th Tank Battalion was to move as many tanks as possible into firing positions along the river's edge in the city of Charleville and provide direct fire support by taking under fire all suspected targets on the high ground east of Mezieres. It was requested of CCR that one tank company of Task Team Hamberg be placed in position in the vicinity of the new bridge site where they would be capable of providing fire support for Company C of the infantry. The 196th Field Artillery Battalion was to be in direct support of Task Team Boyer for the operation. The mortar platoon of headquarters company 47th Armored Infantry Battalion from positions in the vicinity of the citadel, was to furnish close fire support for the operation. The assault



CCR CROSSING OF THE MEUSE RIVER IN THE VICINITY OF CHARLEVILLE FRANCE

gun platoons of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion and 10th Tank Battalion were also combined to furnish indirect fire support.

Little information was available about the enemy in the area. The primary source of information was the native population. The military interrogation team with CCR started immediately to question the natives and secured the following information. Fifty German tanks were reported between St. Laurent and Gernelle, moving north at 1700 that afternoon. They also reported a battalion of German troops at Nouzonville and another battalion between Nouzonville and Neufmanil. Also there was reported a company of Germans in Gepunsart and at least three antitank guns at Nouzonville.<sup>1</sup>

The information concerning the fifty German tanks was treated with some doubt due to previous experiences with civilian reports. Thus, granting that the Germans were in some strength at the places listed, it was felt that no German force in the area was sufficiently mobile to move southward and attack our unit before we occupied the high ground and crossed the river with our armor. It was also felt that the actions of CCA in attempting to force a crossing to the south in the vicinity of Sedan would contain any enemy in that area and prevent the reenforcing of the enemy opposing our troops.

Leading elements of Company B of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion crossed the dam at 2120 and started to move up the high ground.

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1 After Action Report, CCR, 5th Armored Division, dates covered 3-5 September, 1944.

Having moved part way up the slope they came to a steep cliff approximately forty feet high, caused by a railroad cut in the hillside. The enemy located on top of this cliff, becoming aware of the presence of the B Company troops, started to hurl hand grenades down the cliff. The company halted due to this obstacle and enemy action. They immediately began to search for a possible ascent to the top of the cliff. This proved quite difficult and time consuming in the darkness. They were also receiving small arms fire from the enemy, but it was quite ineffective in the darkness.

Meanwhile Company C of the 47th had crossed the dam behind Company B and moved out in the direction of Le Theux, and was also temporarily stopped. They immediately called for artillery fire and the company commander of Company C adjusted it on the enemy strong point. The artillery fire proved very effective and this method was used in movement through the remainder of the town. It was a slow process of reducing each strong-point and the company became quite disorganized in the darkness. The company commander decided that he would have to get better oriented with the ground prior to renewing the attack, so he ordered the company reorganized along a railroad embankment. He moved out along the river on a reconnaissance to determine how to best employ his company and secure his objective. His troops were receiving some indirect fire from the enemy, but it was sporadic and quite ineffective.

Inasmuch as both companies had been held up and it was about.

0300 hours on the morning of the 5th, the staff of Task Team Boyer began to initiate new plans for a coordinated attack of B and C companies after daylight. Information received through interrogation of a captured enemy soldier revealed that the hill was being defended by the 1st Battalion of Combat Team Holgen. This unit consisted of approximately two hundred men armed with machine guns and rifles and equipped with six or seven armored cars. It had been organized from remnants of the 2d Panzer Division. It was supported by one battery of light artillery. The mission assigned to the unit was to defend east of the Meuse and prevent the crossing of our troops. It was determined that the morale of the unit was quite low and it had not been resupplied recently.<sup>1</sup>

With daylight approaching, the Combat Command commander decided to employ his remaining infantry company which was attached to Task Team Hamberg. He planned to ferry it across the river at the bridge site and have it attack to the top of the high ground directly opposite the bridge site. However, this plan was not put into effect before the capture of the hill.

During the night engineer equipment was moved to the selected bridge site. This was quite difficult because the large and heavy bridge vehicles sank in the soft ground and several became mired. The activity in the area soon alerted the enemy as to the location

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1 After Action Report, CCR, 5th Armored Division. Dates covered 3-5 Sept. 1944.

of the bridge site. Work was started on the approach to the bridge in the darkness but the engineers experienced considerable difficulty in proceeding very rapidly because of the enemy fire that was falling in the area. The D-7 bulldozer which was working on the approach and the company commander's one-quarter ton truck were destroyed by direct hits of enemy fire.

Back with Task Team Boyer, things began to break loose again. The company commanders of B and C companies had reorganized their units and renewed their attack at dawn with increased vigor. They proceeded up the high ground as planned. The enemy located on the high ground began to withdraw in the face of this renewed attack and by 1200 hours on the 5th of September the objective had been taken, cleared, and organized.

Company A of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion was ferried across the river at 0900 that morning, but too late to participate in the attack. They were moved into a portion of the perimeter of the defense on the objective.

After daylight work progressed rapidly on the treadway bridge and by 1350 that afternoon a one hundred and ninety-two foot tread-<sup>1</sup> way bridge was completed across the Meuse. The armor of Task Team Hamberg was given first priority in crossing the bridge to provide

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1 After Action Report, 22d Armored Engineer Bn., 5th Armored Division, September, 1944.

the defense of the objective with tanks in the event of an enemy counterattack. Following the armor, the personnel carriers and remaining units of the combat command were crossed. By 1830 that evening the entire command was assembled on the high ground east of the Meuse River.

In looking over the area it was discovered how the enemy had effectively held off our troops with a much smaller force during the night. On the top of the high ground was situated a German Military School. The buildings were all constructed of concrete. Surrounding the buildings was a model defensive set-up. Each fox-hole in the defense had a numbered stake in it and a range card constructed for the entire visible terrain from that particular hole. These foxholes were connected by communication trenches and buildings had underground tunnels running out to openings in the hillside. The area was a portion of the rear of the Maginot line. The high ground dominated the entire surrounding country. From these positions it was possible for a person to observe to the northwest, west and southwest for approximately ten miles. The enemy had been able to watch the entire column of CCR approaching from Tournes on the previous day.

During this operation, because of the distance the attack took place from where the vehicles of the command were located, a problem of logistical support was encountered. At the start of the attack, no vehicles were located on the peninsula on which the

city of Mezieres was situated. Thus, all casualties had to be hand carried across the dam, through the city of Mezieres, and across the improvised foot bridge to ambulances in the city of Charleville. Two one-quarter ton trucks were ferried across to the peninsula and used to evacuate the casualties from the citadel to the bridge at Charleville. Fortunately casualties were very light throughout the operation, amounting to approximately three killed and twenty-five<sup>1</sup> to thirty wounded.

The one-quarter ton trucks ferried across to the peninsula were also used to carry ammunition and supplies to the forward elements. Small Stock piles of ammunition were built up in the vicinity of the citadel.

This operation demonstrated the ability of elements of an armored division to force a river crossing and construct their own bridge across a water obstacle of considerable size. The success of the operation was due primarily to the aggressiveness of the small unit commanders. They moved into the attack at night with very limited reconnaissance after completing a motor march of ninety-six miles the same day.

The operation permitted the division to continue eastward in the exploitation to the homeland of the German soldier. It was characterized throughout by the spirit of aggressiveness which,

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1 After Action Report, CCR, 5th Armored Division. Dates Covered 3rd-5th September, 1944.

through training, we attempt to instill in the soldiers of an armored unit. For their actions in the operation, both Companies B and C of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion were awarded a Presidential Unit Citation.

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