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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3D INFANTRY DIVISION, VI CORPS,  
(SEVENTH UNITED STATES ARMY), IN THE CROSSING OF THE  
MEURTHE RIVER AND THE BREAKOUT FROM THE VOSGES  
MOUNTAINS, 20-27 NOVEMBER 1944  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY DIVISION IN A  
RIVER CROSSING AND PURSUIT THROUGH MOUNTAINOUS  
TERRAIN

Major Irvin F. Carpenter, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INDEX.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPH.....	2
ORIENTATION.....	3
Introduction.....	3
The General Situation.....	4
Dispositions and Plans of VI Corps.....	7
The Division Situation.....	9
The Division Plan.....	11
Movement Prior to the Attack.....	14
NARRATION.....	15
Crossing the Meurthe River.....	15
Pursuit into the Winter Line.....	18
Breaking the Winter Line.....	21
Pursuit towards Strasbourg.....	24
Mission Accomplished.....	27
ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM.....	28
LESSONS.....	36
MAP A    Seventh Army's Drive North	
MAP B    Plan for Capture of Strasbourg	
MAP C    Crossing the Meurthe River	
MAP D    VI Corps in the Vosges	
MAP E    Advance from the Meurthe River to Strasbourg	

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the 3d Infantry Division, VI Corps, Seventh United States Army, in the crossing of the MEURTHE RIVER and breakout from the VOSGES MOUNTAINS, 20-27 November 1944 (Rhineland Campaign).

To adequately acquaint the reader with the necessary background for this operation, certain major events, which preceded this action, must be discussed at this time. (Map A)

On 15 August 1944, DRAGOON Force, composed of the French Army "B" (later designated "First French Army") and the Seventh U.S. Army, established a beachhead on the coast of Southern FRANCE at ST. TROPEZ, ST. MAXIME, and ST. RAPHAEL.

(1) Seventh Army was composed of VI Corps, commanded by Major General Lucian Truscott and included the veteran 3d, 36th, and 45th Divisions, plus attached troops. Following relatively light resistance on the beaches, Lt. General Alexander Patch's Force pushed the enemy westward to MARSEILLES and then northward up the RHONE RIVER VALLEY through MONTE LIMAR, GRENOBLE, BOURG, BESANCON; and, by 11 September, had linked forces with General George Patton's Third U.S. Army near DIJON at SOMBERNON, FRANCE. (2) On 15 September, both the First French Army and the Seventh Army were relieved from assignment to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations and passed

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(1) A-3, p52  
(2) A-4, p310

to control of General Jacob Dever's 6th Army Group. On 12 October, the XII TAG and the First French Air Force (Provisional) were placed under the control of SHEAF. (3)

Following the link-up and the crossing of the MOSELLE RIVER, VI Corps moved eastward toward the VOSGES MOUNTAINS. On 29 September, XV Corps, under the command of Major General Wade H. Haislip, composed of the 2d French Armored Division, 79th Infantry Division, 106th Cavalry Group, and attached troops, passed to the control of Seventh Army and took their place on the Army front in the LUNEVILLE sector near the FOREST OF PARROY. (4)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

The mission of the Seventh Army during October and early November was to "clear approaches to passes of the VOSGES in zone, to seize terrain from which to launch an offensive designed to carry the Seventh Army through the VOSGES defenses to STRASBOURG and over the RHINE". (5) (See Map B)

Seventh Army on 1 October was disposed as follows: XV Corps on the left had anchored on the North to the Third Army along the RHINE-MARNE CANAL and extended South to RAMBERVILLERS; VI Corps on the right flank was along a line running generally from RAMBERVILLERS, GRANDVILLERS, ST JEAN duMARCHE, ST AME, FERDRUPT; the First French Army, the remaining element of 6th Army Group, extended from FERDRUPT South to the SWISS border. (See Map D)

The arrival of the 44th, 100th, and 103d Divisions, and the 14th Armored Division in October and November was heartily welcomed. This would now allow at least one division from each Corps to be rotated to Reserve. (6)

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(3) A-3, p52  
(4) A-1, p336  
(5) A-5  
(6) A-1, p377

By 19 November, following some of the bitterest fighting yet encountered and against stiffening resistance by a stubborn and at times fanatical enemy, the Seventh Army had reached a line extending from the RHINE-MARNE CANAL, AVRI-COURT, BLAMONT, BADONVILLER in the XV Corps sector; and, from the Corps boundary to RAON L'ETAPE, CLAIREFONTAINE, along the West bank of the MEURTHE RIVER to ANOULD, and Southwest to GERARDMER in the VI Corps sector. (See Map D)

The going had been slow and tortuous and the advance at times had slowed to such a pace that in some zones a single day's fighting could be measured in yards. The enemy during this period adopted a scorched earth policy, which he undoubtedly learned from his Russian enemy on the Eastern front; and, the towns of GERARDMER, BARBEY-SEROUX, CORCIEUX, AND ST LEONARD fell before his torch and the towns of ST DIE, ST MARGUERITE, ST JEAN D'ORMONT, and MOYENMOUTHIER were soon slated to befall a similar fate. (See Map D)

The VOSGES MOUNTAINS begin in the forested hills around KAISERSLAUTERN and extend generally southward, dividing the plains of ALSACE and LORRAINE with SAVERNE GAP, being that point, which divides the mountains into the LOWER AND HIGHER VOSGES. South of SAVERNE, the HIGHER VOSGES rise steeply to heights of over 4,000 feet and continue southward to the 4,600 foot heights overlooking BELFORT GAP. From a military viewpoint, the LOWER VOSGES present a greater problem or obstacle than do their counterpart. To the North, the mountains have very steep western approaches and are densely forested, whereas, to the South, the western approaches rise more gradual and are less densely forested except for a sharp

decline to the East onto the plains of ALSACE. There are four (4) major passes through this mountain range. In order from North to South, they are as follows: SAVERNE GAP (#1), which provides entrance to STRASBOURG; SAALES PASS (#2), which provides entrance to SELESTAT and STRASBOURG; SCHLUCHT PASS (#3), which provides entrance to COLMAR; and, BELFORT GAP (#4), which provides entrance to MULHOUSE. (See Map B) These mountains, in their entirety, presented quite a formidable barrier to any proposed breakthrough and favored the enemy along the entire front. (7)

One of the major reasons for the enemy's dogged resistance was to use this static situation to regroup and reorganize his defenses along the WINTER LINE in preparation for the attack he knew was sure to come. Although the enemy had suffered one set back after another and his strength had been greatly reduced, he had been lulled into a false security by the "impregnability" of the VOSGES, which prior to this operation had never been crossed against organized resistance. His supply lines were now much shorter and he was looking forward to a rather quiet winter behind the protection of his prepared positions. Elements of the First and Nineteenth German Armies opposed the Seventh Army in their zone. In the sector occupied by VI Corps were found the 16th, 716th, and 708th German Divisions. The 716th German Division opposed the 3d U.S. Infantry Division in their zone. (8)

Continuous reversals and set backs and poor food and medical attention were the chief causes for the enemy's low morale but the fighting ability of the individual German soldier had not decreased one bit. (9)

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(7) A-1, p400  
(8) A-5  
(9) A-1, p396

Troops of the Seventh Army were faced with continuing bad weather -- rain, snow, sleet and low temperatures added to the problems of commanders and to the seemingly never ending misery of the combat soldier. Lack of supplies, which had brought the lightning like 400-mile drive North to almost a virtual standstill, had now improved with the exception of artillery ammunition, which was still critical and had to be controlled. Despite the problems of weather and supply, the combat efficiency of the troops was excellent and morale was generally high. (10)

#### DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF VI CORPS

On 19 November, the VI Corps was disposed along the MEURTHE RIVER (See Map D) with the 100th Division on the North; the 3d Division in the center; and, the 36th Division on the South. Combat Command "A" of the 14th Armored Division was attached to Corps and moved into its assembly area on the 20th of November.

On 5 November, a directive was issued by Seventh Army which stated its mission as follows: "The Seventh Army attacks on D-Day; destroys enemy in zone West of RHINE; captures STRASBOURG and maintains contact with right flank of Twelfth Army Group". (11) As applied to VI Corps, it outlined a mission of continuing operations: Force the passes to the VOSGES in their sector, and capture STRASBOURG. (12)

The plan of VI Corps was for the 100th Division to maintain contact with XV Corps on the North, protect the left flank, capture MOYENMOUTIER, and continue the attack East. The 3d Division in the left center would spearhead the Corps

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(10) Personal knowledge of writer

(11) A-1, p397

(12) A-1, p424

attack Northeast through SAALES PASS to STRASBOURG. The 103d Division in the Corps right center would seize the high ground Northeast of ST DIE, take the town, then attack Southeast to the line ANOULD-FRAIZE-BAN de LAVELINE. On the Corps right flank, the 36th Division would initially block on the line ANOULD-GERARDMER, maintain contact with the First French Army, protect the Corps right flank, and be prepared to relieve the 103d Division on order. The 45th Division in conjunction with the 36th Division was to simulate preparations of an all-out attack toward FRAIZE in order to cover movement of the 3d Division and conceal the true direction of the main effort. After the attack had jumped-off, the 45th Division would revert to Army control. CC"A" of the 14th Armored Division was to pass through the 100th and 3d Divisions by way of RAMBERVILLERS, BACCARAT, BLAMONT, CIREY, and attack towards STRASBOURG on order. (13)

Plan "A" (three (3) plans were originally formulated, A,B,C,) called for the 3d Division to make a river crossing in the vicinity of LA VOIVRE and attack East and Northeast along an axis SAALES-SCHIRMECK-STRASBOURG. The 100th Division was to continue the attack through RAON L'ETAPE and the 103d Division was to secure the heights West of the MEURTHE RIVER overlooking ST. DIE. The attacks by the 100d and 103d Divisions would tend to weaken the enemy in the 3d Division zone. Upon the completion of the bridging and crossing by the 3d Division, the 103d Division would make an administrative crossing in the 3d Division zone. (14)

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(13) A-1, p425  
(14) A-7, p137

## THE DIVISION SITUATION

The 3d Division was now located along the MEURTHE RIVER. The 103d Division had relieved the 7th and 30th Infantry Regiments of their portion of the line as these two Regiments were to be in the initial assault. The 15th Infantry Regiment had moved to the Northeast along the West bank of the river and had secured the entire Division front from CLAIREFONTAINE to just South of HERBAVILLE. The 7th and 30th Infantry upon relief had moved to the AUTREY-FREMIFONTAINE-ST. HELENE area where they received additional training and practice in river crossing techniques on the MORTAGNE RIVER, and small unit tactics in woods and against fortified positions. This training was based on a Division staff study of lessons learned in the operations from the MOSELLE to the MEURTHE. (15) Due to bad weather and the muddy terrain, the use of armor was restricted. However, tanks and tank destroyers were eased into positions where they would be able to support the attack.

The enemy had demolished all bridges across the MEURTHE in the Division sector and the river whose normal 50-60 foot width and 3-4 foot depth was rain swollen to the point where its banks were overflowing and its 5-7 foot depth made fording impossible. (16)

The enemy's WINTER LINE on the East bank of the MEURTHE consisted of anti-tank ditches, gun positions, light AAA and SP positions, fire and communication trenches. In effect, these fortifications extended all the way from

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(15) A-15

(16) A-1, p426

RAON L'ETAPE to FRAIZE. He gave depth to these defenses by strongly fortified positions in the mountain passes between the MEURTHE and FAVE RIVERS, where he intended to make his last ditch stand. The lowlands between the river and LA VOIVRE were heavily sown with anti-personnel mines. The buildings of the towns had been turned into strong defensive positions by sand bagging and blowing holes in the walls between buildings, thus, allowing him to have covered routes of communication. Here we see the enemy enjoying the advantages of terrain, weather, and a strongly fortified position. (17) (See Map C)

The 15th Infantry sent a Platoon across the river on 18 November. This Platoon patrol was undetected and remained in a house just in front of the enemy's main position. Valuable information was radioed back across the river. Their undisclosed presence alone indicated the enemy's weakness in strength. Other elements of the 15th Infantry pecked away at enemy positions across the river with desultory rifle fire but the enemy failed to engage in a firefight and replied only with artillery and mortar fire in areas where he could observe movement. Patrolling was continuous and reconnaissance by the Engineers was maintained in an effort to locate the best possible bridge sites. For this operation, elements of the 36th Engineer Combat Regiment worked with the 10th Engineer Combat Battalion. The Division Artillery on the 17, 18, 19 November fired a fifteen minute shoot just before dawn and just after dusk on known enemy positions. This was part of the Division plan to deceive the enemy as to the time of attack.

During this same time, 50 caliber machine guns, Flakwagons, anti-tank and cannon companies were moving into positions West of the river in order to support the attack by both direct and indirect fires. Also, during this same three day period, fighter bombers of the XII TAC fire bombed and strafed enemy positions East of the river in an endeavor to neutralize his positions and weaken his already low and declining morale. Units on the Division flanks were still pushing against the enemy. (18)

#### THE DIVISION PLAN

Upon receiving the Corps order, General O'Daniel and his staff went to work and, after a great deal of study and planning, came up with a plan of operation which was termed "POWERHOUSE I". The plan was a bold one, and called for the crossing to be made a little over a mile North of ST. MICHEL. The reasons for the selection of this site was because of the good road net leading to the crossing area; a railroad embankment which paralleled the river could be used as an easily distinguishable reference line; it afforded some protection for assembly areas; and, furnished good positions for certain supporting weapons.

The enemy had abandoned his positions along the bank of the river due to overflow of the river and had taken up positions in buildings along the RAON L'ETAPE HIGHWAY. It was therefore decided that the two assault regiments would cross with the 7th Infantry on the right and the 30th Infantry on the left. The crossing would be made over four footbridges, two in each regimental sector, and "the attack

would "jump off" from a line of departure 300-500 yards West of the enemy's main line of resistance east of the river". (19) As assault platoon from each of the regiments would cross the river in assault boats under cover of darkness, secure the line of departure, and the Engineers in the erection of the four footbridges. The 7th and 30th Infantry would cross the river as soon as the bridges were completed. Rain was the greatest single factor affecting the operation. Flood waters were receding at that time, but a sudden rain would have increased the current to such a degree that the footbridges would have been rendered unusable. In addition to the footbridges, one Infantry support bridge would be constructed in each Regimental zone and four Class 35 bridges would be constructed as soon as the eastern approaches to the bridge sites were secured. The wet and muddy terrain dictated that the Class 35 bridges be constructed at the site of the present blown bridges inasmuch as they afforded the only logical hard standing approaches. Two bridges were to be built at CLAIREFONTAINE and two at ST. MICHEL. (See Map C)

The two assault Regiments were to finish their five-day rehearsal of the operation and move to forward assembly areas some three miles West of the river on the night of 19 November. From this point, they would move to the river, cross, take up positions along the line of departure, and attack at H-Hour when the artillery preparation (30 minutes) lifted. (20) D-Day was 20 November with H-Hour being 0645.

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(19) A-7, p137  
(20) A-7, p142

Missions assigned to subordinate elements for POWERHOUSE I were as follows: (1) 7th Infantry Regiment--Cross the MEURTHE and attack in a sector extending from the HOLLANDE-HURBACHE ROAD to a point 500 yards North of PECHERIE; protect the Division right flank and hold the ST. MICHEL bridge site until relieved by Division order. To accomplish this, the town site of LA VOIVRE must be captured; (2) 30th Infantry Regiment--Cross the MEURTHE and attack in a sector from just North of CLAIREFONTAINE, South to include the HOLLANDE-HURBACHE ROAD; protect the Division left flank, secure and hold the CLAIREFONTAINE bridge site until relieved by Division order. To accomplish this, the towns of HOLLANDE, HIMBAUMONT, and CLAIREFONTAINE must be captured; (3) 15th Infantry Regiment--Cover the assault of both the 7th and 30th Infantry by fire, secure the line of departure, cross the MEURTHE on Division order and be prepared to pass through either the 7th or 30th Infantry; (4) 3d Division Battle Patrol (Composed of elements of Division Reconnaissance Company and FO party from Division Artillery)--Cross the MEURTHE in conjunction with the 7th Infantry, hold the ST. MICHEL bridge site and revert to 7th Infantry control on contact; (5) 3d Division Artillery--Fire preparation from H-30 to H-Hour afterwards, fire on call, screen by smoke on call, mark targets with smoke for fighters of XII TAC on call, fire on targets of opportunity with priority given to the area of HURBACHE VALLEY; (6) 10th Engineer Combat Battalion--(To be aided by 1st Battalion, 36th Engineer Combat Regiment) Construct one foot bridge for each assault Battalion, one

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light support bridge for each assault Regiment, and four class 35 bridges after the attack upon siezure of sites, also mine and booby trap removal and road maintenance in the Division area; (7) 756th Tank Battalion and 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion--Make reconnaissance for crossing sites and forward routes in zone of advance, support by fire the crossing from hull defilade positions; (8) 3d Chemical Battalion--Place smoke generator unit in zone of 7th and 30th Infantry, smoke crossing and bridge areas on call, mortars to fire maximum support. (21)

#### MOVEMENT PRIOR TO THE ATTACK

On the 18th of November, VI Corps decided on a change of plans, inasmuch as General Buress' Century Division was making such good progress. The 3d Division would pass through the 100th Division in an exploitation role. This caused some confusion as last minute coordination had to be made with the 100th Division relative to crossing, road priorities, and passage of lines, all in a limited amount of time. On 19 November, the enemy stiffened his resistance in front of the 100th Division to such a degree that General Brooks, Corps Commander, again changed his plans and the 3d Division, with only a few hours of time left, placed their original plan into effect.

On the night of 19 November, according to the original plan, the four assault platoons crossed the river under the cover of darkness and were met by the patrol of the 15th Infantry. By midnight the footbridges had been completed by

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(21) A-8, p178-179

the Engineers and the assault platoons had secured the line of departure East of the river. The remainder of the two assault Regiments had detrucked in their forward assembly areas. A tank battalion of the 14th Armored Division, having become separated from its parent unit, was endeavoring to find its own assembly areas in the area now occupied by the 7th Infantry. Foot troops and tanks were intermingled in the area and order was not restored until some time later. The result of this confusion was that the greater portion of the wire lines in the area were destroyed and were not re-established completely until noon of the following day. None-the-less, by 0600 hours on 20 November, three battalions of the 30th Infantry and two battalions of the 7th Infantry were across the river and in position without having been detected. About 15 minutes later Division Artillery started their preparation. Corps Artillery, AAA, tanks, tank destroyers, and all supporting weapons joined in on the chorus. The preparation ended at H-Hour, some 30 minutes later. (22)

#### NARRATION

##### CROSSING THE MEURTHE RIVER

With the lifting of the artillery preparation at 0645 on the 20th of November, the 7th and 30th Infantry Regiments crossed the line of departure on schedule, and the battle was under way. The 7th Infantry on the right moved into the town of LA VOIVRE and by 0745 the troops were in possession

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(22) A-7, p143

of the town. Despite the small amount of time required to capture the town, it was not without incident. The area surrounding the town was heavily mined with anti-personnel mines which contributed to the major portion of the casualties; and, stubborn enemy rifle and machine gun fire had to be overcome before possession of the town could be claimed. Enemy artillery was falling in the area but some 64 sorties, flown by elements of XII TAC, dive bombed and strafed enemy installations which were marked with smoke by the Division Artillery. The air support rendered at this time kept the enemy artillery and mortar fire to a minimum and reduced its effectiveness. Their presence in the sky alone was sometimes sufficient to silence the enemy guns. By 1100 hours the 7th Infantry had overrun entrenchments just South of the town of HOLLANDE and established a roadblock to the East, and established another roadblock in the vicinity of the ST. MICHEL bridge site and still another just North of the town of PECHERIE. (23)

Meanwhile, the 30th Infantry on the left flank jumped off at H-Hour with the 2d and 3d Battalions abreast and by 0745 had taken the villages of HOLLANDE and HIMBAUMONT. By 1145 the Regiment had taken Hills 354 and 357 and had dispatched patrols to the town of HURBACHE. The 1st Battalion (Reserve), after the initial attack, was dispatched along the RAON L'ETAPE-ST. DIE HIGHWAY to the North with the mission of reducing the enemy and securing the bridge sites in the vicinity of CLAIREFONTAINE. They were further

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(23) A-6

assigned the mission of maintaining contact with the 7th Infantry. The latter part of the mission was easily accomplished but the clearing of CLAIREFONTAINE was not effected until late in the evening of 20 November. (24)

Both Regiments now started to move eastward toward the mountains. The 2d Battalion of the 30th Infantry entered the town of HURBACHE at about 1700 hours in the late evening of 20 November. The 3d Battalion of the 30th Infantry was moving North and Northeast towards LA PAIRE and LA CHAPELLE.

The 7th Infantry, with the 3d Battalion in the lead, bypassed the town of HURBACHE and moved Southeast towards DENIPARE and took the town by 2100 hours on 20 November. The greatest resistance met during this movement was small arms fire from the fleeing enemy. (25)

Upon Corps order, two of the assault regiments of General Haffners' Cactus Division were to cross on the four 3d Division footbridges and drive South to the town of ST. DIE. Meanwhile, the Division Engineers were having a "rough go" at the ST. MICHEL bridge site. The enemy was pouring harassing fire into the area and at one period the fire was so intense that work had to be stopped for several hours. However, the appearance of fighters from XII TAG in the area reduced this fire and permitted the Engineers to continue their work. A Bailey bridge was being constructed at the old bridge site and a Treadway bridge was in the process of being constructed some 100 yards to the North.

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(24) A-9, p277

(25) A-2, p270

Interrogation of prisoners on the evening of 20 November disclosed that the harassing fires of the Artillery for the three days prior to the attack had caused him to reduce his observation and deceived him as to the time of the attack. They further stated that the well developed defenses East of the river were undermanned and that morale was low. Also, that the defenses were so well constructed that the preparatory artillery fire had failed to destroy them and that they were able to man them as soon as the fires lifted.

By night on 20 November, the Division had completed a successful river crossing and leading elements had pushed some 4 miles east of the MEURTHE RIVER. The 7th Infantry had sustained 167 casualties and captured some 40 prisoners while the 30th Infantry had suffered fewer casualties and captured approximately the same number of prisoners. (26) The days' operation was "the quickest and most successful large-scale river crossing ever made by the 3d Division. (27)

#### PURSUIT INTO THE WINTER LINE

The 3d Battalion of the 7th Infantry from an assembly area in the vicinity of DENIPARE moved out toward the town of ST. JEAN D'ORMONT on the morning of 21 November and took the town after engaging in a brief fire fight with several enemy SP guns and scattered riflemen. Upon occupying the town, they reorganized and continued their attack and by night fall had arrived at the town of BATTANT de BOURRAS, which they took during the hours of darkness. (28)

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(26) A-6, p23  
(27) A-2, p269  
(28) A-8, p182

The 1st Battalion, moving cross country, took the town of FONTENELLE without any enemy resistance and continued the attack toward LAUNOIS where they encountered the enemy of about reinforced company-size who offered stiff resistance. The 2d Battalion as Regimental Reserve moved from LA VOIVRE to an assembly area at DENIPARE.

Simultaneously, the 2d Battalion of the 30th Infantry moved from an assembly area in the vicinity of DENIPARE and attacked in an easterly direction and occupied the town of LAITRE by late afternoon with the leading elements moving through the town and taking up positions just beyond. The 3d Battalion of the 30th Infantry moved out in the early morning and by 0630 hours had forced the enemy from the high ground East of the river and seized the town of PAIRE. They continued their advance toward CHAPELLE against a stubborn and delaying enemy but took the town itself without any resistance. The 1st Battalion, as the 30th Infantry Regiment's Reserve, moved on order from the vicinity of CLAIREFONTAINE; and, following the route of the 3d Battalion, moved into the town of LA CHAPELLE in the late afternoon of 21 November. (29)

During the night 20-21 November, the two assault regiments of the 103d Division crossed the foot bridges in the 3d Division sector. By noon on 21 November, the 15th Infantry had moved all elements across the river and moved into an assembly area in the HOLLANDE-LA VOIVRE area. By this time, the Engineers had completed their magnanimous task of spanning the river with four Class 35 bridges. The Corps Commander at this time telephoned all Divisions that "in

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(29) A-9, p277

view of enemy withdrawals that there be formed a fast moving and hard hitting mobile Task Force of tanks, tank destroyers, artillery, engineers, motorized infantry, and reconnaissance elements in each Division to strike for Corps objectives. All scattered resistance was to be bypassed and disposed of by follow-up infantry". (30) In compliance with this order, General O'Daniel formed Task Force WHIRLWIND, which was composed of the 1st Battalion 15th Infantry, reinforced. The reinforcements were to be as follows: Company C (-) 756th Tank Battalion, one platoon of Company C 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion, 3d Reconnaissance Troop (-), B Battery of the 93d Armored Field Artillery Battalion, one platoon of Company B, 10th Engineers with armored bulldozer, and the 2d Platoon Company C 756th Tank Battalion. Division furnished the additional transportation needed to motorize the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry. (31)

On the morning of 22 November, the 2d Battalion, 7th Infantry passed through 3d Battalion in BATTANT de BOURRAS and, after overcoming a roadblock West of FRAITEUX, seized the town and continued the attack to the East. The 1st Battalion, 7th Inf. moved out at dawn toward the town of NAYEMONT where the enemy put up the stiffest resistance encountered East of the MEURTHE to date. The fighting was characterized by rifle and automatic fire, anti-tank guns, flak wagons and a large number of enemy mines. The leading elements had to make their way across some 400 yards of flat and open ground by alternate creeping and crawling and short rushes which were covered by supporting tanks and 60 mm mortars. So delicate

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(30) A-1, p431, 432  
(31) A-2, p270

was the balance of the battle that at one time the edge of the town was held by a sadly depleted assault squad of the 1st Battalion, which managed to hold their gains until an enveloping force was able to move in and start clearing of the town in earnest. Here the 1st Battalion dug in for the night. The 3d Battalion during this period, acting as the 7th Infantry Reserve, was now moved forward and by-passed the Regimental Battle Patrol, which had been held up by a road-block covered by anti-tank guns and riflemen on the SAALES road, and by midnight had captured the town of GRANDE FOSSE. (32)

The 2d Battalion 30th Infantry moved out on the morning of 22 November and took the town of ROUAX and continued the attack to the North where they over ran the town of CHATAS and continued eastward. By night fall, they had reached the high ground overlooking SAALES and dispatched patrols at once. The 3d Battalion, 30th Infantry, attacked to the East of CHATAS and took the town of GRANDRUPT. The 1st Battalion was the 30th Infantry Reserve. (33) Task Force WHIRLWIND passed through the 3d Battalion at GRANDRUPT on their way towards ST. BLAISE but held up for the night just West of SAULXURES.

#### BREAKING THE WINTER LINE

The fighting in the early morning hours of 23 November was a continuation of the night before and all elements of the Division were anxious to press their advantage. The Division was now deep into the WINTER LINE defenses as had been clearly shown by the intrenchments, minefields, barbed wire, uncompleted pill boxes, and other types of fortifications found throughout the area. Prisoners reported that these fortifications had been constructed by

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(32) A-8, p183

(33) A-9, p277

Alsatian and Russian forced labor but that the rapid advance of the Americans had forestalled their completion.

At 0430 hours, 23 November, the leading elements of the 3d Battalion of the 7th Infantry moved out of GRANDE FOSSE and moved into the outskirts of SAALES where they became engaged in a fire fight with the enemy and remained there until late in the afternoon when the 1st Battalion, which had been motorized, moved to the vicinity of SAALES, detrucked, enveloped the town and attacked it from the East in conjunction with the 3d Battalion. The 2d Battalion of the 7th Infantry, following the route of the 3d Battalion, eliminated the road block and reverted to 7th Infantry Reserve. Upon the capture of SAALES, the 1st Battalion reorganized and at dusk moved out along road toward the town of BOURG-BRUCHE. No sooner had they left SAALES than they encountered enemy resistance and a mile further down the road ran into an enemy strong point at a railroad embankment. After stubborn resistance and close-in fighting by the enemy, the 1st Battalion resumed its march to BOURG-BRUCHE and arrived there shortly before midnight. In an effort to take the town in the early morning hours of 24 November, the troops became involved in some bitter house-to-house fighting in the dark. Small units of the Battalion established a foothold in the town and held their positions against repeated enemy counter-attacks until morning at which time fighting raged on with increased fury. The enemy was trying desperately to hold what remained of his vaunted WINTER LINE. He fired on the attackers from pill boxes, direct fire with 88's, dug-in Flak guns, and well placed

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mortar fire. It was not until mid-afternoon, and with the combined efforts of tanks-infantry-artillery, that the enemy ceased to resist and fled the town to the East where he again came under the murderous flanking fire of the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, which had moved into positions Northeast of the town under cover of the fighting. Most of the enemy were either killed or captured; few escaped. (34) The 2d Battalion, during this action was engaged in mopping-up operations North and South of the SAALES ROAD.

The 2d Battalion of the 30th Infantry on the morning of 23 November was on the northern heights overlooking SAALES. They cleared the northern portion of the town and then reduced a roadblock North of the town and continued the attack to the North. They moved into an assembly area for the night and the following day, 24 November, continued northward, clearing the woods South of SAULXURES, entering the town around noon of that day. Upon reorganizing in SAULXURES, the Battalion was given a blocking mission to the SOUTH and Southeast, relieving the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry, along the Regiment's route of advance. The 1st Battalion moved toward the town of COLROY. (35) (See Map E)

Meanwhile, the 3d Battalion of the 30th Infantry and Task Force WHIRLWIND, had met with stubborn enemy resistance in the town of SAULXURES on the morning of 23 November. They were able to seize the town by 1630 hours, thus, breaking completely and finally clearing the enemy's WINTER LINE defenses. The 3d Battalion moved forward on the morning of 24 November toward ST. BLAISE where they contacted elements of the 100th Division. They then continued on to SOLBACH,

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(34) A-2, p275  
(35) A-9, p279

captured the town by noon, and advanced toward BAREMBACH, arriving at the edge of town just after dark. (36)

On 24 November, following the seizure of SAULXURES by Task Force WHIRLWIND and the 3d Battalion, 30th Infantry, the Task Force pushed on to the Northeast and captured the town of ROTHAU.

The 2d Battalion of the 15th Infantry had moved to the vicinity of CHATEAU ST. LOUIS where their patrols contacted the 100th Division. The 3d Battalion of the 15th Infantry moved into an assembly area near the town of FONTENELLE. (37)

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(36) A-2, p276  
(37) A-9, p279

### PURSUIT TOWARDS STRASBOURG

The enemy was now in general retreat. He was utterly confused by the breakthrough of forces all along his front and overwhelmed by the infantry and armor. Interrogation of prisoners indicated that the enemy was withdrawing to his defensive positions along the RHINE RIVER. Any hopes that he might have had relative to an easy winter in his VOSGES WINTER LINE were dissolved. Prisoners reported that the rapid advance had caught them understrength and in many cases highly disorganized. Orders from the German High Command to "hold at all costs, and to the last man" held little, if any meaning for the many isolated and completely astonished groups of enemy encountered and captured.

The 7th Infantry on 25 November moved from BOURG-BRUCHE along HIGHWAY 420 in the wake of the advance of the 30th Infantry. The Regiment's 3d Battalion passed through its 1st Battalion and moved into an assembly area about one-half mile East of FOU DAY. The 2d Battalion was moved along HIGHWAY 420 and assembled near LA GOUTELLE. The 1st Battalion was reinforced, motorized, and held in the vicinity of BOURG-BRUCHE. The entire 7th Infantry at this time reverted to Division Reserve and was given the mission of protecting the Division's rear and exposed right flank. (38) The Regimental CP was moved to ROTHAU, captured the day before by Task Force WHIRLWIND.

Early in the morning of 25 November, Task Force WHIRLWIND pushed East and cleared many isolated groups of enemy in the

area. With its mission completed, the Task Force was dissolved, and Division ordered all elements to revert to the control of their parent units. This order was in conjunction with the one which ordered the 7th Infantry into Division Reserve.

The 3d Battalion, 30th Infantry, having reached the outskirts of BAREMBACH the night of 24 November, continued the attack at daylight on 25 November and by noon had captured the town. Upon their reorganization, the Battalion reverted to Regimental Reserve.

At daylight on the morning of 25 November the 2d Battalion, 30th Infantry moved out of SAULXURES by motor with the high ground Northeast of SCHIRMECK as their objective. Enemy resistance to this advance was very slight and it was not until the Battalion neared GRENDELBRUCH that the advance was halted. Supported by armor the Battalion moved in and once more fought from house-to-house in the dark. This type of fighting was now a common and familiar operation to the members of the 3d Division. By midnight the 2d Battalion was in possession of the town and completely cleared the town and reorganized on the morning of 26 November.

The 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry, having been relieved of its blocking mission by the 7th Infantry, assembled in the vicinity of SCHIRMECK on the morning of 26 November and advanced just North of HIGHWAY 392 and established road blocks in the vicinity of MOLLKIRCH. The advance continued towards ROSHEIM and the town was captured in midafternoon by the Battalion. Here they reorganized immediately and pressed on to BISCHOFFSHEIM and entered the town after dark

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and set up roadblocks on all roads leading into the town.

The 2d Battalion, 30th Infantry, moved into the town of MOLLKIRCH, which had been bypassed by the 1st Battalion. (39)

The 3d Battalion, 15th Infantry, moved from LA BROQUE along HIGHWAY 420 to SCHIRMECK, turned East onto HIGHWAY 392 and advanced towards MUTZIG. The town was overcome late in the afternoon of 26 November. (40)

The 7th Infantry in the afternoon of 26 November was ordered to leave one Battalion in the ST. BLAISE-ROTHAW area to establish road blocks and engage in mopping-up operations. The remainder of the Regiment was to be motorized and move to the town of CRONENBURG, just West of STRASBOURG, on the night of 26-27 November and relieve the 2d French Armored Division in the town and set up defenses West of the RHINE.

The 30th Infantry was to revert to Division Reserve and engage in mopping-up operations. Thus, we see drawing to a final close, the advance from the MEURTHE to the RHINE. All that remained was the clearing of small pockets of enemy resistance, and bypassed and isolated groups of enemy which would result in disconnected, small unit engagements.

It is interesting to note that during 25-26 November, the 3d Division over ran the town of NATZWILLER just East of SCHIRMECK. This town contained some real, first hand evidence of the brutality and torture of the Nazi concentration camps. It was under the control of SS personnel who left the town in such haste that they were prevented

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(39) A-9, p280  
(40) A-2, p276

In summation, the words of General Brooks, VI Corps Commander, in a message to his troops, upon completion of this operation, best describe the results accomplished. "Since the beginning of the military history of EUROPE, to force a successful passage of the VOSGES MOUNTAINS has been considered by military experts as an operation offering such small opportunity for success as to forestall consideration of such effort."

"To march, supply, and maintain a large body of troops through these natural obstacles without hostile opposition is a major problem in itself."

"To fight cross country in the face of unreasoning, stubborn Nazi resistance at times supplying over snow covered mountain roads and trails through this region and at this season of the year is a military achievement of which all who participated can be justly proud." (42)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. PLANS

The 3d Division initially drafted three plans and adopted and started to place into effect Plan "A" for the river crossing. All arrangements had been made and the efforts of the entire Division had been guided in this direction. VI Corps commander decided to change these plans the day before the scheduled river crossing. A crossing of the MEURTHE behind the 100th Division under normal conditions would have been a good plan. It would have increased the ease of the crossing and undoubtedly reduced the number of casualties and allowed the 3d Division to strike the enemy

from the North along the RAON L'ETAPE - ST DIE HIGHWAY in a flanking movement. However, the Division had not been notified of this plan until the 19th of November, the day before the attack was to commence. This necessitated cessation of the present plans for crossing and the initiation of reconnaissance and new plans in a limited amount of time. Had this plan been effected, the enemy would have had a decided advantage, as later events proved, inasmuch as the defenses in front of the 3d Division had been weakened considerably in order to meet the thrusts of the 100th Division and the 103d Division, thus strengthening the enemy defenses in those sectors.

Due to increased resistance by the enemy in these two sectors, the Corps commander once again changed his plans and the original Plan "A" was once again placed into operation within only a few hours of the time the movement to the line of departure was to start. This twice changing of plans added greatly to the confusion of staffs and leaders and consumed valuable time which could have been better utilized in perfecting the original plan. These unnecessary changes did not keep the Division from successfully crossing the river and taking their initial objective; however, the writer feels that the success realized can be attributed to the experience and training of the Division and could have easily resulted in failure for a less experienced unit.

## 2. TRAINING

The training conducted in the AUTREY-FREMIFONTAINE-ST HELENE area on the MORTAIGNE RIVER repaid the Division many

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times the effort they had expended in preparation for the MEURTHE RIVER crossing. The training was conducted not only in river-crossing technique but also in small unit tactics, fighting in woods, fighting under various conditions of weather, attack of fortified positions, and the stressing of teamwork and coordination at all echelons. This was culminated in rehearsals of the River crossing to be made on the night 19-20 November. So well did the units and individuals learn their jobs that the actual crossing was made quickly and undetected without the loss of a single man. Further, the previous training reduced the casualties in the fight for LA VOIVRE, HURBACHE, and CLAIREFONTAINE and in the fighting that ensued at SAALES, BOURG-BRUCHE, and SAULXURES where the bitter night fighting against fortified positions proved the value of teamwork and coordination of Infantry-Tank-Artillery. The taste of success by the Division added to the already aggressive spirit with which they had been imbued in their training.

After the initial phase, the action became somewhat disconnected and Battalions were more or less operating independently. Battalion commanders upon seizing one objective would immediately move on to the next town upon reorganization and report their progress periodically. Such is an example of the initiative and aggressiveness.

### 3. DECEPTIVE FIRES

The Division commander's plan to fire scheduled harrassing fires of fifteen minutes duration accomplished its mission of deceiving the enemy as to the true time of the attack. For

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three days prior to the attack the Division Artillery fired on known enemy installations at dusk and at dawn. This was to cause the enemy to believe that an attack would follow immediately. Prisoner of war reports substantiated this effectively. Although the enemy knew that an attack was imminent, he could not ascertain definitely just when it would start. Furthermore, he felt relatively secure in the invulnerability of his positions. Not only did these scheduled artillery fires deceive the enemy as to the time of the attack but it also assisted in the movement of tanks, tank destroyers and other support in weapons into position so that they might efficiently fire in support of the attack. Time is the element necessary for this type of deception. It could not have been used in a fluid or fast moving situation.

#### 4. MOVEMENT IN REAR AREAS

Greater care should have been taken by the Division of movement in rear areas, especially in the assembly areas just West of the MEURTHE RIVER. The movement in the dark of the 1st Tank Battalion of the 14th Armored Division caused great confusion and irreparable damage to wire lines of the Division Battle Patrol and the 7th Infantry. So great was the damage that contact was not completely established until noon, 20 November. Furthermore, one entire Infantry Battalion was prevented from crossing the river at night and was detained until the following day. Despite the fact that they did cross without incident, it could have caused

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untold damage. The greatest factor involved was the possible disclosure of the 3d Divisions' plan of attack. An alert enemy would have immediately detected the noise caused by the tanks just West of the river and strengthened his defenses and could have prevented or deterred the river crossing. The use of guides, restrictions of routes, and proper traffic control would have eliminated this confusion. The Division erred in overlooking these possibilities. The lack of surprise could have severely hampered the Divisions crossing of the MEURTHE.

#### 5. SECURING CROSSING SITES PRIOR TO ATTACK

The undetected crossing of the river the night prior to the attack was undoubtedly the greatest contributing factor to the ease of the crossing and the small number of casualties sustained as a result of the operation. It is interesting to note that no casualties resulted as a result of the crossing itself and the greatest number of casualties was due to anti-personnel mines which were liberally sown in the low ground between the river and the Division objectives. Also worthy of note is the action of the patrol of the 15th Infantry from 18 November until H-Hour on D-Day. They rendered invaluable service to the Division. They acted as an accurate source of information regarding the enemy; secured temporarily the crossing sites until relieved by the assault platoons of the 7th and 30th Infantry; and, acted as guides for the first elements to cross the river. It is recognized by the writer that situations permitting crossing

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of rivers prior to the attack are infrequent but an aggressive commander will use all means at his disposal to effect surprise on his enemy as did the CG of the 3d Division. When the artillery and the fire of the supporting weapons shifted their preparation, the enemy was completely bewildered by the presence of American troops on the East side of the MEURTHE RIVER. Had it not been for the mine fields, the Division troops would have enjoyed an even greater degree of surprise. The undetected crossing coupled with the above mentioned surprise was so advantageous to the attackers that in some cases he was able to move in on the intrenched enemy before he could adequately man his weapons.

#### 6. VALUE OF AIR SUPPORT

Credit must be given to the fighter-bombers of XII TAC for the part they played in the initial success of the river crossing. Counter battery had not located the enemy's artillery and mortar positions well enough to reduce his effectiveness. As soon as the attack was known to the enemy, he placed planned artillery and mortar fire on the attackers. Our fighter-bombers were ranging back and forth East of the MEURTHE, strafing and bombing the enemy's gun positions whenever they could be located. So effective was the support that they offered that their presence alone deterred the enemy from firing for fear of disclosing his position. As soon as the air was clear the enemy resumed his fires. Here we see the use of the air arm to prevent the shelling

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of the attackers by the enemy until he was forced to displaced in order to prevent destruction or capture. This reduction in enemy artillery and mortar fire was also greatly welcomed by the Engineers who were attempting to bridge the river. It is recalled that so intense was the enemy fire on the bridge sites that the Engineers had to cease work for quite some time. The presence of the Air Force in the area later on permitted the resumption of work. Thus, we see the effectiveness of teamwork and cooperation between air and ground forces.

#### 7. REDUCTION OF SURPRISE

Here we have a good example of a commander allowing himself to be surprised unnecessarily. The German commander of the WINTER LINE defenses along the MEURTHE either through false security in the "impregnability" of his defenses, too much faith in the enemy's intentions rather than his capabilities, plain negligence, or a combination of all permitted himself to be surprised. Admittedly, his positions were undermanned; but none-the-less aggressive patrolling action initiated by him would have prevented the 15th Infantry patrol from remaining across the river for three entire days without detection. Disclosure of such a patrol would or should have immediately indicated to him the enemy's capability to cross the river and permit him to prevent or make the crossing costly. Furthermore, the establishment of listening posts would have provided him with a timely warning system and allowed him to move

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his reserves in time to meet any crossing in his area. From this commander, it can be learned that one must constantly be alert and aggressive, even in a defensive situation; and, that contact with the enemy is imperative at all times in order to prevent surprise.

#### 8. EXPLOITATION OF SUCCESS

The Division Commander was quick to realize that he had caught his opponent asleep when the patrol of the 15th Infantry remained across the river for a day without being discovered. He capitalized on his bold plan of crossing the river during hours of darkness and thereby reduced his casualties and effected surprise on the enemy. The enemy caught unawares although well dug in was not prepared for the speed with which the attack was launched and fell back, thereby, giving the 3d Division their initial success.

On the other hand, the Division Commander should have realized on the second day that his troops were engaged in a pursuit and immediately made plans for a motorized force to push the enemy relentlessly. This force could have crossed the river as soon as the bridges were completed and have moved against the enemy at once and denied him the use of his successive positions. There was some delay in the assembling of the elements of Task Force WHIRLWIND. This resulted indirectly in the assault Battalions having to fight extremely long hours and often be involved in night fighting without the benefit of time for planning or reconnaissance. It is the belief of the writer that at

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least one and possibly two days could have been saved in actual operation time had the Division commander and his staff anticipated the order of the Corps commander and had such a Task Force and ready to move upon order.

#### LESSONS

1. Although plans of subordinate units should possess flexibility; higher commanders should avoid the unnecessary changing of plans except in the event of an emergency.
2. Training and rehearsal for special operations will reduce the number of casualties and enhance success.
3. When time permits, scheduled harassing fires should be placed on the enemy daily for as many days possible, prior to the attack in order to deceive the enemy.
4. All movement in rear areas just prior to an attack should be closely controlled.
5. River crossings made under the cover of darkness reduces the possibility of detection, assists in achieving surprise; and, gives a marked advantage to the attacker.
6. Air support is of great value in reducing the effectiveness of enemy mortar and artillery fire during an attack.
7. When defensive positions are undermanned, a commander must maintain sufficient contact with the enemy in order to avoid being surprised.
8. Commanders must be ever alert to take advantage of any known enemy weakness and be prepared to exploit their success immediately.