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OPERATIONS OF THE 5TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN THE
CROSSING OF THE SAUER RIVER, 6-13 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY DIVISION OFFENSIVE
ACTION DURING A RIVER CROSSING

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 5TH INFANTRY
DIVISION IN THE CROSSING OF THE SAUER RIVER,
6-13 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 5th Infantry Division in the crossing of the SAUER RIVER, 6-13 February 1945, during the Rhineland Campaign.

In order to orient the reader properly, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the major events which led up to this action.

It was 9 July 1944 when the 5th Division landed on UTAH BEACH on the coast of FRANCE, 33 days after the initial invasion of the NORMANDY BEACHHEADS. (See Map A) (1)

At this time the 5th Division was under the 1st US Army which was holding the general line, CAEN-St. LO. Elements of the Division were in combat early, actually just 4 days after their landing. (2)

By 3 August 1944 the 5th Division had moved to the vicinity of CERISY LA SALLE and passed to the control of the newly formed Third US Army. (3) This was the beginning of the long and fast moving Third Army. The Third Army in its drive south and east was ready for hard fighting and by 14 August 1944 it had proven its ability by reaching the general line CAEN-TOUR-NANTES.

(See Map A)

The German Army was now generally withdrawing and the Third US Army having gained considerable momentum was in no mood to be stopped. The advance was so great that it was out running its

- (1) A-2, p. 41
- (2) A-5, p. 5
- (3) A-2, p. 59

own supply lines. It was not until 31 August 1944 that the advance was slowing down. The front lines at this time took on a new look. (See Map B)

The shortage of supplies was beginning to be felt and by 29 August 1944 a serious gasoline shortage existed. (Some 140,000 gallons were needed for one operation.) (4) As it happened this shortage was temporary, thanks to the retreating German Army, because, in their hasty retreat they left 100,000 gallons of Aviation gasoline which was used to continue the push forward. However, the supply shortage was definitely slowing the advance. The daily telegram from the Third Army requested 250,000 gallons of gasoline of which only 25,000 were received. The stiff resistance afforded by the METZ area with its many Fortresses further impeded progress. Fighting for the Fortress City METZ continued and it was not until 7 December 1944 that the last of the Forts were cleared of the enemy. All in all there were a total of 23 Forts in the METZ area. (5)

It is now 15 December 1944 and the front line widening out somewhat ran generally from TRIER-SAARBUCKEN-STRASBOURG. (See Map B)

The Third Army with the XII, XX and III Corps continued the attack east with its sights set on the RHINE RIVER.

Just three days later orders were received at Headquarters Third Army to attack north, cut off and destroy the enemy that had penetrated our lines. The Battle of the Bulge was on.

(See Map C)

(4) A-9, p. 124

(5) A-2, Metz

This was a fabulous feat, without parallel in Military history, of an Army massed in jump-off position for a coordinated drive east, to disengage its main forces and race through a blizzard to a meeting engagement 125 miles to the north. (6)

The accomplishments of the Third Army during the Battle of the Bulge is now history, however, the 5th Division in addition to other accomplishments during this operation, produced 15,000 aching feet and GI backs. By 7 February 1945 the front lines indicated a more favorable situation. (See Map C)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Upon the conclusion of the ARDENNES CAMPAIGN plans were being made in Third Army Headquarters for a new offensive. Third Army had received a directive to continue the attack and seize PRUM, attack northeast from the vicinity of ECHTERNACH and seize BITBURG and be prepared to continue the attack to the RHINE RIVER. (7)

This meant the zone of advance was the EIFEL, bounded by the RHINE RIVER on the east, the MOSELLE on the south and the RUHR on the north. The EIFEL is hilly, forested very heavily, and compartmented forbiddingly by numerous deeply seated streams. It is difficult terrain to attack at any time and during this period of severe winter it was particularly rigorous.

The rugged terrain was slippery and treacherous and the road net in a desperate state. The German Army had pounded it to pieces in their advance and now again in their withdrawal. Then the succession of early thaws and heavy rains transformed what was left into almost impassable quagmires, and the normally placid 100 to 150 foot streams were now flooded to raging torrents.

(6) A-8, p. 230
(7) A-1, p. 255

On top of all these arduous natural obstacles was the strong SIEGFRIED LINE guarded by a river barrier and with countless pill-boxes, bunkers, fire trenches and gun positions. Behind these fortified positions stood nine German Divisions and elements of eight more Divisions as against twelve US Divisions. (8)

For the first time in months all units were practically at full strength. This was not actually as good as it appeared on the surface, for the severe weather, cold and dampness was particularly difficult for the troops. Upper respiratory infections were heavy, often sixty percent of hospital admissions were due to colds.

To offset these conditions, to some extent, were several favorable factors.

The supply situation had improved tremendously and could now be considered as good generally.

Efforts were being made to strengthen the armor of our M4A3 medium tanks. They had proved inadequate against the new type Panzers. The low silhouette Tiger Royal modeled after the powerful Russian tank and armed with a long barreled murderous 88mm, heavily outweighed the US mediums in both armor and fire power. The additional armor protection was accomplished by welding two and one-half of inches of extra armor plate on the forward hull. The plates were obtained from wrecked tanks. This improvisation later proved its worth.

The plans of the Third Army was to impose a double hazard on the enemy. This was to be accomplished by a coordinated attack by all four corps along the front with the main effort being made by the VIII and XII Corps.

(8) A-1, p. 271

The VIII Corps with four divisions was to attack east in the north (left) sector, seize PRUM and be prepared to continue the attack east or northeast and maintain contact with First US Army on the left.

The III Corps with two divisions was to continue an aggressive defense and be prepared to advance to the KYLL RIVER and maintain contact with the VIII Corps on the left and the XII Corps on the right. (The III Corps was to pass to the control of First US Army on 10 February 1945.) (9)

The XII Corps with four divisions was ordered to seize and secure a bridgehead over the SAUER RIVER, attack and seize BITBURG and be prepared to continue the attack east and northeast.

The XX Corps with two divisions was to continue an aggressive defense in its zone with the objective of containing the maximum number of enemy troops and to maintain contact with XII Corps on the left.

THE XII CORPS PLAN

With the mission in mind the Corps planned to make three separate crossings by placing the 80th Division on the left, the 5th Division in the center and the 76th Division on the right of the Corps zone. The 4th Armored Division was to remain in Corps Reserve until the river crossings were established. The Corps offensive at this time covered a 25 mile front.

(See Map C)

The terrain on the Corps front was rugged. The rolling plateau of the high EIFEL rose gradually to the northeast, deeply cut with heavily wooded stream gorges bordered at their

upper levels with almost vertical rock cliffs. The few roads ran generally along the ridges, occasionally winding down the lateral valleys to cross the streams.

Starting at the water's edge and along the border streams, the SEIGFRIED LINE fortifications with its many obstacles covered every approach, these were in the form of small pill-boxes to extensive four level concrete structures.

The river had risen 12 feet and was flowing at 12 miles per hour. (10)

The Corps operation was considered so important and the river barrier so great that two additional Engineer Combat Battalions with Bridge Companies were supporting each Division in addition to the organic Division Engineer Battalion. It appeared that this phase of the operation was going to be an Engineer's fight.

This plan of operation was possible for the German Army no longer had the reserves to meet such a threat. They were already straining every resource to reinforce against the Russians.

PLANS FOR THE DIVISION OFFENSIVE

The Division plan called for forming three Regimental Combat Teams. The assault crossing of the SAUER RIVER to be made by the 10th Infantry on the left to cross the river south of BOLLENDORF, seize and secure a bridgehead, pierce the SIEGFRIED LINE, capture the German strongpoint of FERSCHWEILER and be prepared to continue the attack on BITEBURG.

(10) A-10, p. 316

The 11th Regimental Combat Team was to make an assault crossing northwest of ECHTERNACH, pierce the SIEGFRIED LINE, capture the stronghold of ERNZEN and be prepared to continue the drive to BITBURG.

The 417th Regiment, 76th Infantry Division which had been attached to the 5th Division was to make an assault crossing in in the right of the Division zone. This was the first time this unit had been committed to combat. (11)

The 2nd Regimental Combat Team was in Division Reserve near BERDORF.

The assault crossing of the SAUER RIVER was to be made on the night of 6-7 February 1945.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ASSAULT

To the river crossing veterans of the 5th Division, the SAUER loomed as just one more river. This was the sixteenth river since the Normandy landing, they were truly veterans in river crossings. (12) For two days prior to the jump off, patrols were busy searching the river bank for the most suitable crossing sites.

In the 10th Infantry sector a heavy artillery preparation was to cover the assault. The 11th Infantry was to attempt a surprise crossing under concealment of darkness, but powerful artillery units were standing by. Actually the supporting artillery preparation lasted for five hours and included all of Corps and Division Artillery plus three Artillery Battalions from the III Corps. In all 29,000 rounds were dropped during this bombardment. (13)

- (11) A-2, across the Sauer River
- (12) A-2, logistical record
- (13) A-1, p. 257

NARRATION

THE CROSSING OF THE SAUER RIVER

At 0130 7 February 1945 during the heavy artillery fire that shook the earth for miles around, the 2d Battalion, 10th Infantry moved down to the river to attempt a crossing opposite WEILERBACH in rubber boats captured from the enemy. The Engineers were already there working furiously in assisting the crossing. The initial attempt to cross the swollen river drew heavy fire from enemy fortifications on the far bank which knocked out the boats almost as fast as they were loaded. A second and desperate try was made shortly after 0800 and in the midst of artillery, mortar and machine gun fire the boats started across the fast waters. Eight men succeeded in crossing to the far side, and this time 10 of the 12 remaining boats were sunk or lost to the rough water. (See Map D)

For twenty-two hours the Division bridgehead consisted of those eight men dug in on the far shore and subjected to small arms and mortar fire. (14)

In the meantime the Battalion Commander reported to the Regiment the difficulties encountered in the crossing operation. The Regimental Commander made a personal visit to the crossing site to inspect the proceedings. Subsequently, new plans were formed for the 2d Battalion to continue the crossing and the 3d Battalion to move down the river just below WEILERBACK and prepare to cross.

The 2d Battalion's sector was inactive during the night as final plans were being perfected to continue the crossing at 1000 hours on 8 February. When the designated hour arrived the Heavy

(14) A-4, p. 120

Mortars dropped smoke along the far bank, but this was soon discontinued in favor of better observation for the assault boats which had been brought up during the night. Opposition to the crossing renewed with incessant shelling and machine gun fire, and the extremely difficult terrain consisting of high cliffs along the river bank, plus the swift current, aided the enemy and impeded our progress. In addition to all this, visibility was very poor, but enemy shelling was extremely accurate as they had zeroed in on these crossing sites. During this rain of shelling the crossing got under way and within a few minutes elements of the Battalion had reached the far side and were busy clearing the buildings and bunkers near the river edge. Smoke was again laid on both flanks of the crossing site to obstruct the enemy's observation. By 1200 hours the first wave was well established on the shore and the next wave was on the way across.

Casualties were rather heavy, but all losses in the crossing were not due to enemy fire. Owing to the extremely swift and treacherous current several of the boats capsized and some of the heavily weighted infantrymen were unable to shed their equipment and swim clear of the undertow. Barbed wire and other obstacles planted on the shore, and now just beneath water due to the flooded state of the river, caused the capsizing and destruction of a good number of boats.

The initial objective in the establishing of the bridgehead was the clearing of the sector of WEILERBACH adjacent to the river and the securing of the surrounding high ground to the north. By 1100 hours troops had pushed forward against heavy opposition and had crossed the road running parallel to the river and were entering the town in strength. Heavy enemy artillery and mortar

fire continued especially at the crossing sites while the advancing troops edged in to reduce withering machine gun fire from pillboxes. Artillery was called in to prevent the hard pressed enemy from escaping when assault troops armed with pole charges, satchel charges, bangalore torpedoes and flame throwers attacked the strongpoints. One such charge on a pillbox ended abruptly the military career of anyone inside. On other occasions, the troops would draw fire from the pillbox by decoy, permitting direct fire from 155mm guns, which proved very effective as the gun positions had been moved up to within 400 to 600 yards. (15)

As the advance continued the supply problem became increasingly acute and efforts to remedy the situation during the night proved only partially successful, because of the highly effective artillery and mortar concentrations at the crossing site. The Engineers were by no means idle during the operation. A continuous effort to construct a foot bridge was made which was either destroyed by fire or torn away by the raging water. Several attempts to build a foot bridge at the old bridge site proved futile.

Crossing operations were carried on despite difficulties during the night of 8-9 February, and the 2d Battalion was successful in crossing the major portion of the unit.

Meanwhile the 3d Battalion, finding it impossible to cross at the selected point and after losing more boats to enemy fire, reassembled in rear of 2nd Battalion and prepared to follow that unit across as promptly as development of the bridgehead permitted.

(15) A-9, p. 243

During the following morning one company managed to cross in four boats in the midst of heavy artillery and mortar fire. After this crossing the remainder of the Battalion was moved down the river and crossed in the 11th Infantry zone.

THE SECOND CROSSING

Fully coordinated and simultaneous with the crossing of the 10th Infantry were the movements of the 11th Infantry Regiment in preparation for the assault crossing of the SAUER RIVER during the same period. (6-7 February 1945)

Within the Regimental zone of action plans were formed to attempt a surprise crossing with the 2d and 3d Battalions under concealment of darkness by way of foot bridges which were to be constructed by the engineers. Reliance was placed on the surprise element by assault troops who were to attempt crossing without a preparatory artillery concentration. Supporting units which consisted of three Battalions of Artillery, one Tank Battalion, one Company of Tank Destroyers and one Company of Chemical Mortars, were held in readiness. (See Map D)

The opening phase of the river crossing began during darkness by the engineers working on two foot bridges while the 2d and 3d Battalions moved to positions at the river. The Engineers, as yet undetected by the enemy, were experiencing unforeseen difficulty in their attempt to bridge the river at two points. The swift current frustrated engineer attempts in effecting construction. At 0300 hours on 7 February a reconnaissance patrol of the 2d Battalion crossed the river in assault boats. Due to the swift current only eight men succeeded in reaching the far shore, the accompanying boat lost control in midstream, was carried

downstream a considerable distance and forced to return to the friendly bank. The eight men who reached the enemy shore were undetected, fortunately, and dug in immediately, thus forming the initial bridgehead on German soil.

Almost at the same time the 3d Battalion attempted a similar crossing approximately 500 yards south of the 2d Battalion's crossing site, but the enemy, apparently more alert in this area, not only perceived the attempted crossing but the Engineer activities as well and opened with raking machine gun fire from pillboxes. The Artillery and Mortar concentrations that followed immediately, disorganized completely the engineers and the assault party. Gone was the element of surprise, the enemy now clearly discerned the plan of attack.

By the time our own Artillery had opened with furious counterbattery fire and the enemy guns pounding the crossing site, the entire Regimental front seethed with fire, with the eight man bridgehead in between. The enemy also received violent pounding from Tanks and Tank Destroyers who had moved up to within direct fire range.

The small group remained stranded on the enemy shore for 24 hours without food or rest and without visible means of relief and subjected to concentrations of enemy fire.

At about 0700 that morning the 3d Battalion attempted another assault boat crossing in the early morning darkness with the aid of a smoke screen, but enemy fire proved overpowering and once again attempts were abandoned as partial disorganization existed. In daylight, engineers labored continuously in an effort to construct footbridges for the two assault Battalions, but in each instance the swift river washed away section after

section while the enemy further harried the effort by numerous shellings which took out any sections left by the river.

Artillery duels continued throughout the day while the 11th Infantry regrouped and reorganized for another attempted crossing during the hours of darkness. This was the type of artillery duel, apparently, (as discussed by Lieutenant Colonel K. L. Davis,) where enemy artillery fire on our Infantry and our Artillery fire on enemy infantry, this seemed to be true because later, enemy artillery was as active as ever.

When it became apparent that supply and evacuation by means of assault boats was practically impossible and so costly as to make further effort in that direction useless, efforts were made to supply the isolated troops by air. After a considerable length of time, four P-40's, their belly tanks loaded with K rations, medical supplies and other equipment answered the call. Unfortunately, due to the small target area afforded by the bridgehead the attempt was unsuccessful. The first tank fell on friendly shore, the second fell in the river, the third fell on open ground which was covered by enemy fire immediately, the other tank fell in the German lines and a German prisoner later stated that it was welcome to the German front line troops. (16)

The supply situation on the far shore had become critical and the only means of communication, radio, was endangered due to weakening of the batteries. At this time the Division staff decided to try resupply by air by using Division Liaison Planes.

(16) A-2, ch. across the Sauer River

Although no information on packing and dropping of supplies was available, the supply echelons began to experiment and pack the necessary supplies. A water can was weighted to approximate the weight of a 300 radio was dropped, using a sheet as a parachute. After several tries a satisfactory method was worked out and flights over the bridgehead began. Enemy antiaircraft fire was heavy and consisted mainly of quadruple 20mm antiaircraft and 88mm tank gun fire. The flights continued despite the fire and succeeded in dropping the majority of their loads in the hands of the beleaguered troops. The following day, the planes of the 76th Division joined those of the 5th Division and in the two days of air operations over 80 flights were made, dropping food, ammunition, medical supplies, batteries and other equipment. One plane sustained a hit by enemy antiaircraft fire, which seriously wounded the pilot, but the observer succeeded in crash landing the plane on the near shore.

At 1830 hours simultaneous river crossing thrusts were launched by the 2d and 3d Battalions. Forward elements of the 3d Battalion stealthily embarked in assault boats and encountered no fire as they began moving across the river. Only three boat loads managed to reach the far shore, four others caught in the swift current, were swirled and churned causing loss of control and sweeping them almost 1000 yards downstream. Twenty-eight men including two machine gun sections made the far shore and quietly dug in to await for reinforcements, which however were not to come. Two more attempts failed and resulted in several overturned craft, causing casualties. Up until this time the enemy remained ignorant of what was taking place, but cries of distress from those who had been thrown in the cold water brought raking

machine gun fire from enemy pillboxes and forced the troops to withdraw from the river bank. Enemy artillery and mortars renewed intense shelling and concentrated small arms fire on the 28 man bridgehead. This small force moved up to a position which afforded more cover and proceeded to dig in.

Another crossing was attempted at 0200 hours that morning, but the river again proved impossible and more boats were carried downstream. There was no communication with the troops pinned down on the far shore and further crossing attempts were abandoned.

While this action was taking place, the 2d Battalion, too, was experiencing river crossing difficulties at a point 800 yards northwest of the 3d Battalion site. Ten boat loads of Infantrymen embarked on the short but hazardous journey. Bristling with fire power, the enemy did not observe this effort and the assault boats had a clear route. But again the river current took a heavy toll as only four boats made it to the far shore, the others were swept downstream. The enemy was now alerted, by sounds of firing from the 3d Battalion area, and opened with machine gun fire to pin down elements that had made the crossing. Thus some relief was effected for the eight men who held their position during those long 24 hours.

With the resumption of enemy artillery fire, friendly artillery and armor reopened with steady firing, some of which was direct fire against pillbox positions. Some of the tanks were equipped with the new tank-launched rockets which streaked into enemy territory, the impact of which is credited with having liquidated a number of pillboxes.

In view of the circumstances the Regimental Commander ordered the 1st Battalion to cross at the 2d Battalion bridgehead and turning south to take the objectives which were originally assigned to the 3d Battalion. The 3d Battalion was to be placed in Regimental Reserve to reorganize and later exploit any breaches effected by either of the other Battalions. Actually the plan hinged on the success of the 2d Battalion, which had not, as yet, established a secure bridgehead. Both the 2d and 3d Battalion's miniature bridgeheads were supported by artillery throughout the remainder of the night.

Under concealment of a smoke screen, engineers renewed bridge attempts at daybreak of 8 February while plans were being formulated to cross the 2d Battalion during darkness that night.

Artillery duels of the previous day were reenacted, and when the enemy brought up self-propelled guns the tanks and tank destroyers drew direct fire.

2d Battalion operations were resumed at 1730 hours, and once again it became necessary to use assault boats when engineer bridges were carried off by the river. "Artificial Moonlight" in the form of powerful searchlight batteries illuminated the zone of operation, with beams directed at low hanging clouds deflecting a fair amount of light. The bridgehead increased and expanded slowly. One assault boat was caught in midstream under cross fire from enemy machine guns causing a number of casualties. With elements of the Battalion on the enemy shore, small assault teams were organized in preparation for storming of the first belt of the SIEGFRIED defenses. At 0215 on the morning of 9 February additional crossings were made to bring supplies and ammunition and evacuate the wounded.

The remaining elements of the 2d Battalion commenced crossing at 0800, bringing pole charges, satchel charges and bongalore torpedoes with which to reduce pillboxes. The Battalion Commander directed that the boat crossings be affected with one craft at a time, thus cutting the possibility of presenting a concentrated target to enemy machine guns. During this period the entire river draw was enshrouded with thick smoke.

Three days of rainfall together with recent thaws had turned secondary roads and fields into quagmires, it was under these conditions that the 2d Battalion began moving up the mine studded slopes toward enemy pillboxes. By 1600 the bridgehead was sufficiently broadened to allow the 1st Battalion to begin crossing as planned. The enemy being pretty much preoccupied with the 2d Battalion assault teams, the 1st Battalion effected crossings without much trouble from enemy guns.

BEGINNING THE FOURTH DAY AT THE RIVER

To come back to the operations of the 10th Infantry, the last of the 3d Battalion was making its way across the river in the 11th Infantry zone. So too, on 10 February the 1st Battalion crossed the river at the same location and when the crossing was completed, the Battalion moved northwest passing through the 2d Battalion towards BOLLENDORF. Throughout the operation thus far, communications were a difficult problem. Wires were shot out almost as soon as laid across the river. When restringing and repair operations proved too hazardous by boat, the expedient was resorted to, of shooting the wire across attached to rifle grenades. Radio, nevertheless, remained the principal means of maintaining contact with the advancing units during the early phases of the attack.

On the 11th three Battalions pushed inland and outward to enlarge the bridgehead. The troops moved out under heavy support of mortars and artillery, including tank and tank destroyers, fanning out and neutralizing resistance in the pillbox defenses along the high ground north of the river road. In many instances, the artillery had driven the enemy from the fortifications to connecting trenches, and when the Infantry bore down on these positions, the enemy fled, abandoning their stronghold which many considered death traps, as prisoners later reported.

During the night of 11-12 February leading elements of the 1st Battalion reached BOLLENDORF after taking a number of pillboxes on the way. BOLLENDORF, an integral part of the SIEGFRIED LINE, was protected well and badly needed by our forces for a permanent bridge site. Camouflage of some of the pillboxes was excellent. On the river road in the center of town was located a pillbox camouflaged as a house. It was built inside an old house, the outer walls of which were knocked down when it became necessary to go into action. The pillbox was difficult to reduce, the men, under cover of their own machine gun fire, dropped grenades through the ventilators at the top and the embrasures on the sides. Another was camouflaged like a barn, and a wooden barn at that. When you opened the door through which the hay was supposed to be put, it displayed a concrete wall nine feet thick with an 88mm gun sticking out. (17) (18)

Troops entered the town from three sides and its fall was imminent, all that remained was clearing out the remnants of the enemy left stranded in the vicinity. By 0900 12 February the

(17) A-9, p. 242

(18) A-4, p. 123

1st Battalion checked the pillboxes along the river, found them empty and reported the town clear. 104 prisoners were taken.

In the meantime, the drive of the 2d Battalion continued on to DIESBURGERHOF and the high ground covering the roads. During this operation, troops came upon a house still holding out, they (the enemy) had detected the advance and opened fire. To emphasize a striking display of courage, a private turned to his platoon leader and asked for permission to go in alone after them. Before the officer could reply the Infantryman made a rush for the house firing as he ran through a door. Soon after, while the rest waited tensely, the soldier came out of the house with 15 German prisoners. The town was taken without a single casualty. The first belt of the SIEGFRIED LINE defenses had been successfully breached.

By the morning of 13 February the 10th Infantry had reached a position near DIESBURGERHOF still receiving small arms and self-propelled fire. The town of FERSCHWEILER from which the enemy artillery had covered the river crossing was open to attack. Patrols were sent into the town, investigated several houses and installations and found them empty. Units moved in and within two hours the town was cleared and they billeted there for the night.

ACTIONS ON THE SOUTH CROSSING

Little has been said about the operations of 417 Regimental Combat Team, 76th Infantry Division, which was attached to the 5th Infantry Division for this operation. The reason being that the Regiment returned to the control of its parent organization before the operations were completed. (19) However, the Regiment performed well, it had established a bridgehead on the second day of the operation and did a better job than the 5th

(19) A-1, p. 263

Division in getting across the river because they did not realize how dangerous it was. After they got across, they did very little for about three days, probably recovering from the shock of their own heroism. (20)

The 11th Infantry was busying its self in expanding the bridgehead. The 1st and 2d Battalions were across the river and the 3d Battalion, having reorganized, was committed to cross the river and pass through 2d Battalion positions in continuation of the attack. The crossing began at 0730 on 10 February, turbulent waters capsized two assault boats, causing some casualties. By noon that day the entire 3d Battalion was across the river and in position to pass through the 2d Battalion. Although hindered by minefields, the 1st Battalion forged slowly ahead by blasting pillboxes, by-passing others and taking several intact by surprise attack. The system used generally in reducing pillboxes was to place a heavy charge at the back door or to drop grenades down ventilators or through the embrasures on the sides. Riflemen would simultaneously attack and blast these strongpoints.

During this time 2d Battalion held defensive positions along the river through which the 3d Battalion was scheduled to pass in resumption of the attack.

The 3d Battalion struck at the enemy with a daring attack which carried them 800 yards further inland. This drew intense artillery and mortar fire and all elements were pinned down and later had to withdraw 300 yards. However, a vitally important ridge had been attained. Enemy artillery and self-propelled guns reported to have been moved into ERNZEN and the surrounding area, pounded the ridgeline with incessant concentrations causing the

(20) A-9, p. 238

3d Battalion to dig in and consolidate positions until renewing the attack, the following day.

By this time Engineers had succeeded in constructing a footbridge and work was begun on a treadway. Food and ammunition was carried across the bridge by Kitchen and Headquarters personnel under concealment of darkness.

At 0600 11 February the 3d Battalion launched a second strong attack and succeeded in securing the high ground overlooking the ERNZEN-FERSCHWEILLER road.

At 0900 the 1st Battalion jumped off in an attack on the Regimental left flank only to encounter stiff resistance and strong artillery fire. The attack failed and the Battalion was forced to remain in position until late afternoon at which time shelling ceased. It ceased here, but opened up at the crossing site. German artillery found the range and knocked out the newly constructed footbridge with a direct hit. Work began immediately on a new footbridge, even as a class 40 Bailey Bridge was being assembled.

The 1st Battalion launched another attack the next afternoon (12 February) in an attempt to pull the 1st Battalion line abreast of the 3d Battalion. Once again the attack was checked by strong enemy fire and heavy concentrations. With the attack halted, friendly artillery pounded the enemy positions for several hours.

The Regiment formulated new plans for a coordinated attack by the 1st and 3d Battalions. It was to be a converging two-pronged assault on ERNZEN with contact to be made on the left with the 10th Infantry who was driving on FERSCHWEILLER. The 2d Battalion was to remain in Reserve.

The attack opened at 0500 13 February with the 3d Battalion on the right. The Battalion advanced slowly but when daylight came the enemy employed violent mortar, artillery and direct fire which caught the Battalion in exposed positions. The intense shelling continued without let up until 1230 hours. The day's attack developed into probing attacks by patrols.

Even though resistance was strong in some sectors, it became evident that enemy morale was dropping, for a patrol, probing a menacing bunker easily took two Captains, one Lieutenant, 12 NCO's, and 35 enlisted men, all of whom were cleaned up and freshly shaven in eager anticipation of being taken prisoner. (21)

Meanwhile the attack by the 1st Battalion made very little headway and was halted again by stiffening enemy resistance and shelling.

The attack which was aimed at ERNZEN fell far short of its mark and the units dug in for the night.

Although these attacks were unsuccessful, time now was no serious consequence, for the bridgehead was well established and a class 40 Bailey Bridge was in and troops, supplies and armored units were moving across to render close support.

The 5th Division accomplished its mission of crossing the SAUER RIVER, securing a bridgehead and continuing the attack. The crossing of this river was a magnificent feat of arms. The river, flooded and wild was a barrier by itself, but this was not enough, immediately behind this vicious river was the strongest sector of the SIEGFRIED defenses with its barbed wire in the water, the murderous water-level machine gun fire, the

(21) A-5, p. 61

high banks, studded with pillboxes, bunkers, and mines, supported by more elaborate concrete strongholds plus the accurate artillery and mortar fire. A magnificent feat of arms. (22)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. FULL AGGRESSIVENESS

The entire operation hinged on the aggressiveness of the action. All well knew that the SAUER RIVER was flooded, swift and treacherous. All only knew too well that the formidable SIEGFRIED LINE lay on the far side. They knew too that between the swollen river and the elaborate fortifications was the steep river bank, studded with pillboxes, bunkers, mines and wire. They knew also that raking machine gun fire and artillery would surely meet them midstream.

All this they knew, but it in no way weakened their aggressiveness, nor did they weaken their efforts when boat after boat was torn loose or capsized in midstream carrying men and supplies with it. No - rather they redoubled their efforts and with determined, indomitable aggressiveness breached the river and pushed forward.

2. PLANS MUST FIT THE SITUATION

Tactical doctrine teaches that planning must be continuous. New estimates of the situation are made and new plans are formed to meet the new situation. So it was on numerous occasions during this operation. Take for example the 10th Infantry during the period 8-9 February when the Regimental Commander after a

personal visit to the River crossing, changed the plans for the 3d Battalion on two occasions due to unfavorable changes in the situation. Plans must be flexible to meet changing situations, not fit the situation or create a situation to fit your plans.

3. NIGHT ATTACKS

During the operations of the river crossing fully 50% of the assault crossings were made under concealment of darkness. It must be remembered that the river at this period of the year was a flood-swollen torrent with a deadly current. Even under such most unfavorable conditions, night crossings were successful. It is conceivable that the average river crossing will be made during darkness which offers concealment in favor of daylight crossing with better visibility. Due to the swift current the daytime visibility offered a distinct advantage as the assault boats were partially successful in selecting their course, however they also offered a visible target for the enemy. The night crossings, while more hazardous due to the treacherous water were much safer from raking machine gun fire.

4. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

Supply problems during a river crossing assume added importance. Until a bridgehead is established and a suitable bridge erected, supplies must be carried in assault boats or hand carried across footbridges. This procedure is slow and often inadequate. The great difficulty arises as in the case of the stranded troops on the enemy shore. Air supply is very effective under certain conditions. In the case of the P-40's used to supply the small bridgehead, the area was entirely too small to be successful for drops for fighter aircraft. Due

credit should be given to those responsible for the supply expedients used in the drops from Artillery Liaison Planes. This is an example of the ingenuity of a determined unit.

5. ATTACK THE ENEMY WEAKNESS

Any position strong as it might be has its weak point, slight as it might be. The fortified positions of the SIEGFRIED LINE is an excellent example of strong and weak points of a position. In this operation the pillboxes were neutralized by placing strong charges against the rear door or by dropping charges through the embrasures or ventilators - their weakest points.

6. SURPRISE

Surprise is one of the principals of war. It must be sought throughout the operations and used whenever the opportunity arises. Surprise was effected initially when the 11th Infantry attempted the river crossing without the usual artillery preparation. It only succeeded partially. Surprise was gained in the crossing in the 10th Infantry sector until the screams from the men in the icy water attracted the attention of the enemy. In the latter incident, if surprise had been maintained the crossings could well have continued.

7. COMMUNICATIONS

Due to the difficulties of maintaining wire during a river crossing operation, the principal means of communication is the radio. However, radio, with its present batteries is very undependable. The life of batteries should be increased to eliminate the necessity of practically daily battery replacements.

During this operation it was impossible to maintain telephone wires due to the constant shelling and the treacherous river.

8. CAMOUFLAGE

Camouflage of some of the enemy strong points was excellent. For example the wooden barn and the pillbox built inside of an old house. It is evident that good camouflage is effective but with alert and aggressive troops the location of camouflaged positions can be detected. The amazing thing about all these defenses is that they produced little results.

9. ARTILLERY

The ever ready artillery, whether day or night, will normally satisfy the demands of the assault troops. Without the support of the artillery, mortars and not forgetting the big self-propelled guns that had moved up to within 400 to 600 yards of the target, the operation would certainly have taken a lot longer and cost many more lives.

LESSONS

1. Aggressiveness in river crossings must be full, determined and indomitable or failure is sure to result.
2. Plans must be made to fit the situation, not try to fit the situation to the plan.
3. River crossings during darkness are as effective as crossing during daylight.
4. Logistic support takes on added importance during a river crossing. Various expedients are necessary.
5. In the attack striking the enemy at his weakest point is assurance of success.
6. Surprise must be sought throughout the operation. Surprise will give added advantages not otherwise obtainable.

7. Radio communication should be improved to eliminate the need for frequent battery replacements.

8. The use of camouflage is effective, however the extent and elaborateness must be weighted carefully. Aggressive action will locate the best of camouflaged positions.

9. Artillery is the friend of Infantry. In large operations little can be done offensively or defensively without it.