

General Subjects Section  
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT  
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1947-1948

THE OPERATIONS  
OF THE  
48th ARMORED INFANTRY BATTALION  
(7th ARMORED DIVISION)  
IN  
THE CROSSING OF THE SEINE RIVER  
24 AUGUST, 1944  
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a  
Battalion Operations Officer)

Type of Operation Described:  
BATTALION IN A RIVER CROSSING

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 48th ARMORED INFANTRY BATTALION  
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, 7th U.S. Armored Division, in the crossing of the Seine River, France, 24 August 1944 during the Allied drive across France.

In order to orient the reader as to how the initial breakthrough was accomplished, it will be necessary to go back to the Normandy Campaign. The Normandy Campaign was in three phases: (1) "the assault on the beaches" (Utah and Omaha); (2) "the establishment of a beachhead"; (3) "the breakthrough". (1)

The first two phases of the Normandy Campaign had been completed on 23 July 1944 when XX Corps Headquarters was established on the Cotentin Peninsula in the vicinity of St. Jacques De Nehou. (See Map A) (2)

The XX U.S. Army Corps was commanded by Lieutenant General (then Major General) Walton H. Walker and was to be a part of the Third U.S. Army commanded by General George S. (H.) Patton, then Lieutenant General, deceased. It was as a part of the XX Corps under the Third Army that the 7th Armored Division was to operate. The 7th Armored Division was commanded by Major General Lindsey McD. Sylvester.

From 23 July to 1 August the First U.S. Army continued its efforts to drive the Germans out of the Cotentin Peninsula. By 31 July the First Army had succeeded in capturing Avranches which is located at the hinge of the Normandy and Brittany Coasts. This successful seizure was possible because of the very effective use of the air force on the German positions. The VIII U.S. Army Corps had

(1,2) A-1, p.-1

captured Avranches, thereby accomplishing a definite breakthrough. (See Map A) (3)

The First U.S. Army was operating under the Twelfth Army Group commanded by General Omar N. Bradley. The Twelfth Army Group had previously selected the Third U.S. Army to exploit the breakthrough once it had been accomplished. Due to the fact that the armor of the VIII Corps of the First Army had achieved a breakthrough, the Third Army immediately became operational on 1 August 1944 with the following two fully manned corps under its control: VIII Corps, with two armored divisions and two infantry divisions, and XV Corps. XX Corps was in reserve and had only corps troops and the French 2nd Armored Division under its control. XX Corps was awaiting assignment of further armored and infantry divisions from the Third Army to bring it up to operational strength. (4)

The Third Army had the mission of driving south and southwest. This would enable the Third Army to clear out the area between Rennes and Fougères. As soon as this had been accomplished one corps was to turn west with the mission of securing the Brittany Peninsula and take the vital seaport town of Brest. The port of Brest would be needed, as soon as possible, to supply Allied Forces on the Continent as our supply installations on the beaches were already feeling the strain of providing for such a large number of troops. As VIII Corps while part of the First Army had taken Avranches and was in that area it was given the mission of capturing the Brittany Peninsula. The XV Corps, to the north, was given the mission of moving south to capture Mayenne. As soon as additional divisions were assigned to the XX Corps which was in reserve, it was to be prepared to move to the east.

By 5 August the 5th and 35th Infantry Divisions had come under the operational control of the XX Corps. On 7 August General Patton verbally ordered General Walker to send one regimental combat team of the 5th Infantry Division

(3,4) A-1, p.-1

to capture Angers and one battalion of the 5th Infantry Division to capture Nantes. He also told General Walker that it was thought that the enemy might make a large scale counter attack from the west on Avranches to try to split our forces in half. Therefore, it was necessary for the XX Corps to be prepared to send forces to the northeast to meet this threat. (5)

The French 2nd Armored Division and the 35th Infantry Division were, at the time, moving south to the vicinity of Vitre. General Walker ordered the 35th Infantry Division to halt its move south and to remain in the vicinity of St. Hilaire where it could rapidly strike any German Counter attack in that area. The French 2nd Armored Division was ordered to be held in the vicinity of St. James thus backing up the 35th Infantry Division. Subsequently the 80th Infantry Division was also sent by the Third Army to go into this area around St. James and St. Hilaire as the Germans were expected to counter attack in great strength. (See Map A) (6)

Thus we see that the mission of the XX Corps was twofold: "To hold open the corridor which First US Army had forced through the German line, and to commence the exploitation of that army's breakthrough by driving south to the Loire River, and securing Third US Army's right flank at Angers." (7)

Angers, located on the Loire River, was a city with a population of 80,000. It was the main communication and transportation center for the Seventh German Army operating in northwestern France. It was also the most likely route for the Seventh German Army to take to retreat south to join elements of the Fifteenth German Army which was operating in southern France. It was felt also that the Fifteenth German Army which at this time was not engaged by any Allied Forces would have to pass through Angers in moving north to help the Seventh German Army.

On 7 August, the 5th Infantry Division sent the 11th  
(5,6,7) A-1, p.-2

Regimental Combat Team which had been motorized by corps, 65 miles southeast to capture Angers. After hard fighting Angers was taken on the morning of 10 August. (8)

The 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Infantry Regiment had also been motorized and had been sent south to capture Nantes. The reason for this was the fact that the main highway running along the southern coast of the Brittany Peninsula passes through Nantes. To prevent any Germans escaping from the VIII Corps operating in the Brittany Peninsula capture of Nantes or blocking of the roads was desired. The 3rd Battalion did not take Nantes as it was too strongly defended by the enemy but it did succeed in establishing road blocks, thereby accomplishing its mission until eventually relieved by the 4th Armored Division.

On 7 August the XX Corps received reports that the expected German counter attack to cut the corridor was under way and that the enemy was at that time in the vicinity of Mortain. The 35th Infantry Division which had been held in the vicinity of St. Hilaire in anticipation of this attack, was immediately alerted and two regimental combat teams were rushed to meet the attack. The 35th Infantry Division hit the Germans on their left flank. The Germans counter attacked twice against these two regimental combat teams but their forward thrust was contained and they took up defensive positions east of Mortain. The 35th Infantry Division was then able to hold the line Mortain-Barenton. (9)

The 3rd Cavalry Group came under the operational control of the XX Corps on 10 August. Elements were given the mission of patrolling north and contacting the First Army around Mayenne. The cavalry made contact with the First Army and was given the mission of making a reconnaissance east. This they did in a three day action and ran into very little enemy resistance. This reconnaissance proved that the left flank of the Seventh German Army was lightly

(8) A-1, p.-4; (9) A-1, p.-5

held and that the time was favorable to send forces to encircle the Germans. (10)

On 13 August the XX Corps was ordered to drive northeast across France and seize Dreux which was on the main escape route for the German forces in the Falais-Argenton Gap. (See Map A) The Third Army plan after taking Dreux was to continue northeast and cut off any additional Germans along the Seine River west of Paris.

The 7th Armored Division, in the meantime, had landed on Omaha and Utah beaches and had immediately come under the operational control of the XX Corps on 10 August. The combat elements of the division were immediately assembled from their various landing crafts and moved approximately 180 miles to the vicinity of La-Ferte-Bernard by 13 August making only one stop at Fougères on the way. The XX Corps plan was for the 7th Armored Division to attack with three combat commands abreast: CCA on the north, CCR in the center, and CCB on the south. The 5th Infantry Division completely motorized with corps transportation was to follow behind on the south. Thus we see that the breakthrough, as originally made by the First Army, had been completely developed in 13 days and the exploitation of this breakthrough had begun. (11)

#### GENERAL SITUATION

On 14 August the 7th Armored Division received its first attack order which was to move northeast from the vicinity of La-Ferte-Bernard and capture Dreux. The division attacked with three combat commands abreast and was making good headway contacting only light enemy resistance when word was received from XX Corps to swing due east with Chartres as the objective. It was learned later that the reason for this change was due to the fact that the XV Corps on the north of XX Corps had broken loose and its leading elements were as far forward as those of the XX

(10,11) A-1, p.-5

Corps. The route of the XX Corps was changed to prevent elements of that corps and the XV Corps from running into each other. On 18 and 19 August, after very hard fighting, Chartres was partly captured by elements of the 7th Armored Division. The 5th Infantry Division, in the meantime, had moved up to Chartres and relieved the armor with its limited infantry of the task of cleaning up Chartres. Chartres was a main communication route for the Germans and also the headquarters of a German artillery school. Approximately 800 Germans were captured by the 5th Infantry Division. The 7th Armored Division was then moved further to the east to hold the Dreux-Chartres bridgehead. (12)

On 20 August the 7th Armored Division received orders to continue the attack to the east and cross the Seine River at Melun. Paragraph 3A, Field Order Number Six, Headquarters XX Corps, 202115B August 1944 gives the 7th Armored Division a mission of "(1) advancing east on axis Dreux-Rambouillet-Arpajon-Melun with main bodies crossing the initial line 210700 August; (2) seize bridgehead vicinity of Melun". (13)

On 23 August with two combat commands marching abreast on single routes, CCR on right and CCA on left, CCA reached the Seine river at Ponthierry about three miles north of Melun and CCR reached the Seine at Melun. The distance covered was approximately 55 miles over exceedingly rough and mountainous terrain defended by numerous road blocks. (See Map B)

#### BATTLE SITUATION

Combat Command R, which was opposite Melun, was stopped in its attack due to the fact that all of the advantages existed in favor of the enemy. There was an island in the center of the river opposite the town. This island was well covered by fire and was very difficult to capture. One company of infantry did succeed in getting on the island after very heavy casualties but no tactical success was gained by the effort. The enemy expected the crossing

(12) A-1, p.-5; (13) A-1, Appendix 4

to be made here and had massed a large amount of artillery in position to fire against CCR. These advantages held by the enemy forced the attack at Melun to become stymied.

CCA to the north at Ponthierry commanded by Colonel Dwight A. Rosebaum was also under heavy artillery fire from the east side of the Seine River. The town with its many buildings and houses and the fields behind afforded good protection. Seeing the inability for an immediate development of a crossing at Melun, and knowing that the bridge opposite Ponthierry had been blown by the Germans, Colonel Rosebaum issued orders for an immediate reconnaissance to be made to the north for possible crossing sites. To clarify the reader, the composition of Combat Command A at that time was as follows:

- "Headquarters and Headquarters Company, CCA
- 40th Tank Battalion
- 48th Armored Infantry Battalion
- 489th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
- A Company, 33rd Armored Engineer Battalion
- A Company, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion
- 1 Battery, 203 AAA Battalion
- 1 Company Combat Engineers and 1 Light Pontoon Platoon (72 boats)
- 1 Company Treadway Bridge" (14)

As ordered by the combat commander, staff officers of the combat command, all battalion and separate company commanders immediately instituted a reconnaissance.

#### COMBAT COMMAND PLAN OF ATTACK

A French civilian who knew the locality and was willing to help was found in Ponthierry. In many instances prior to this time members of the FFI and other French people who were in sympathy with the Allies had freely volunteered their help. This civilian was told that the reconnaissance party was looking for a place to cross the river, and indicated that

(14) A-3

there was such a place to the north. The party moved about two miles to the north from Ponthierry to a town by the name of Tilly. Unit commanders were given instructions to make a reconnaissance in certain areas, and engineers were given instructions to reconnoiter for possible crossing sites and for a bridge site. After the reconnaissance was made, all commanders were assembled before moving from the site. Each commander presented his organizational plan. A detailed discussion followed, then the combat command plan was issued. It was found that all the terrain features that should be considered by an armored unit before crossing a river were at this point. There was an inverted salient and the observation and terrain around the crossing site was commanding on our side of the river. On the enemy side, the bank was low and treeless in the immediate vicinity of the river bank then thickly wooded. The combat commander gave the order of march for units to move from Ponthierry to Tilly in the following order: "First, units to support the crossing; second, units to actually make the crossing including engineer assault boats; third, units to build the bridge." (15)

From Ponthierry to Tilly, two excellent approach routes were available. The combat command set up control posts at critical junctions to regulate and control traffic. Unit commanders were ordered to report to the combat command as soon as their units were in position. The combat command CP was established in a house overlooking the river site, a very excellent position which would facilitate control. The combat command time schedule was:

1. Movement of troops into position, 1330 to 1600.
2. Coordination after troops were in position, 1600 to 1610.
3. Preparatory fires, 1610.
4. Crossing, 1640. " (16)

(15,16) A-3

## BATTALION PLAN OF CROSSING

The 48th Armored Infantry Battalion was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Richard D. Chappius. Immediately upon receipt of the combat command order, Colonel Chappius sent his S-3 on the road back to Ponthierry to guide the infantry company commanders to the crossing sites. He had previously radioed the executive officer at Battalion CP in Ponthierry to have the company commanders meet the S-3 on the main road going north from Ponthierry. Colonel Chappius had also directed the executive officer to have all the companies alerted for immediate movement. This was accomplished and the S-3 met the company commanders, took them to the crossing site where Colonel Chappius was waiting and further reconnaissance was made by the infantry officers. There were two excellent crossing sites approximately 400 yards apart in the bend of the river. Since the current of the river was not very swift at this point, <sup>CONFIDENTIAL</sup> no anxiety was given to the fact that the boats might be swept down stream, thereby losing a certain amount of control. During this reconnaissance, the party was extremely careful not to expose themselves to the enemy's riflemen and machine gunners who were dug in approximately 20 yards apart on the far bank and could be plainly seen from the west side of the river. (17)

The bank on the east side of the river was approximately ten feet high, then there was open space for about 150 yards to a woods. It was apparent that this at one time had been an old river bed. Where the wooded section began, the ground rose gently for several hundred yards, then leveled off. The terrain on our side, the west side of the river, was steeply rising to a height of about 50 feet. From this height, and down to the river's edge was built the town of Tilly. Leading up to the south crossing site, there was a railroad bed that afforded excellent protection from observation and small arms fire. Leading down to the north crossing site, there was a street between two rows of houses that afforded

(17) Personal Knowledge

excellent protection against small arms fire and observation.

On the high ground above the crossing site in the town of Tilly itself, there were excellent positions for supporting weapons on both flanks and between the houses. The river was approximately 250 to 300 feet wide at the crossing site.

After this reconnaissance, Colonel Chappius called his staff and company commanders together and gave them the combat command plan, then the battalion plan of crossing. The battalion plan of crossing was for C Company to cross at the southern site and A Company to cross at the northern site simultaneously, the battalion command group and B Company following at the southern site. The battalion rear post was to be established by the executive officer on the west side of the river in the vicinity of Tilly. The battalion's heavy weapons would support the attack from the high ground around Tilly. Once across, the formation was to be A Company on the left, C Company on the right, and B Company in reserve. After reaching the objective, a clearly defined road on the map approximately 2000 yards inland due east, the battalion was to reorganize, consolidate and dig in. (See Map C) (18)

After the combat command concentrations, any additional fires from the 81's and artillery ~~was~~<sup>will</sup> be on call. One artillery forward observer as well as one 81 millimeter mortar forward observer was attached to all three rifle companies. Communication was to be by SCR 509 radios which took two men to carry. They were SCR 510 sets taken out of vehicles and connected to battery packs making them 509's, to be used dismounted. This was the only original means of communication available, with the exception of the artillery and mortar channels.

Extra ammunition and rations were issued to all personnel making the crossing. One K ration and two D rations were to be carried by each man. Orders were given that the crossing would be made with only light packs even though it was realized that it would soon be dark and the men would need

(18) Personal Knowledge

blankets and bed rolls. It was felt that if the crossing ~~was~~<sup>was</sup> not a success the men would not need this equipment, and if it ~~was~~<sup>was</sup> a success the equipment could be ferried over and issued that night.

Once across the river, evacuation of the wounded to the crossing site was to be by battalion medical personnel who were attached to each company from the battalion medical platoon. From the crossing site the engineer medical personnel were to take the casualties across the river to the combat command collecting station. The battalion surgeon was alerted to be ready to cross the river on order.

### THE CROSSING OF THE SEINE RIVER

The battalion dismounted from their vehicles in the infantry assembly area behind Tilly. Headquarters Company had already moved into positions behind the hill mask to support the crossing. A and C Companies marched the short distance to the engineer assembly area and picked up their M-2 assault boats, one boat per squad, then moved off to their specific crossing sites. B Company was held in assembly area near the southern crossing site to follow behind C Company and use their boats as soon as C Company had crossed. H Hour was 1640. While moving down to the crossing sites, three P-47's were overhead making their dives dropping 100 pound bombs. The target for the P-47's had previously been marked by our artillery. As soon as the planes had left, our artillery and supporting weapons began firing. During this artillery concentration the troops moved up and started their crossings. A and C Companies moved rapidly across the river followed by the battalion command section and B Company. The enemy was dug in on the opposite side as the leading riflemen climbed up the ten foot bank. They were quickly disposed of by hand grenades and those that surrendered were left standing alone. (19)

(19) Personal Knowledge

The companies were very well organized by the time the leading element had hit the woods approximately 150 yards inland. Only sporadic sniper fire was received from the enemy. The companies had been so well briefed on the objective and received such light resistance that once across, they pushed rapidly to the objective. It was only after the objective was reached that the battalion commander ordered the S-3 to have the radios set up and to contact the companies. This was done and the reports from the companies were very favorable. The morale and esprit de corps of the men were excellent. The companies were already consolidating and digging in.

Since it was rapidly getting dark and had begun to rain, all effort was concentrated toward consolidating the defensive position, as it was thought that there would be a counter attack that evening or early the next morning. The officers thought the rain might prevent the enemy from counter attacking that night. The only anti-tank protection at the time consisted of bazookas of which there was one per rifle squad.

The ~~Combat~~<sup>Company</sup> commander, in the meantime, was urging the engineers to ferry across the river our organic anti-tank weapons, namely 57mm.'s. There was one platoon of four guns each per rifle company. These were towed by half-tracks and were given first priority across the river as the ferries were not sufficiently strong to stand the weight of tanks. The command tracks were given second priority to be ferried across and about 2000 that night the battalion command track was ferried across and was led through the woods to the battalion forward command post. Because the half-track had both FM and CW sets the communication channels were greatly improved. The battalion commander was thus able to talk direct to the ~~Combat~~<sup>Company</sup> commander as well as to the battalion rear command post.

About 1900 the companies were in their defensive positions and a heavy rain was falling. A considerable amount

of artillery was being fired from both sides, but none of the enemy artillery was falling on the battalion position. It was directed against the bridge site and the town of Tilly itself. Radio France which was the largest German radio installation in France was located about 700 yards due east from where the battalion was dug in. Even though the battalion commander had directed as soon as the position was consolidated that patrols be sent out to the flanks as far forward as Radio France, throughout the remainder of the night there was no action.

It was a standard operating procedure in the battalion that all personnel would be alerted an hour before daybreak. This was because daybreak was the time when the Germans usually counter attacked. However, no counter attack was forthcoming. The only sign of activity was an enemy staff car which came down the road in front of our positions evidently on a reconnaissance. It was quickly knocked out by rifle fire from C Company. There were three officers and two enlisted men in this car and they were all killed. Maps, orders and other papers were taken from the car and sent to the combat command S-2.

The bridge construction had been started at 1800 and was completed by 0800 the next morning. Around 0830 we could hear the tanks coming up into position to support the bridge-head, and the entire combat command moved across the river.

CCR at Melun had been informed of our successful bridge-head at Tilly and was ordered to move north, cross our bridge and attack Melun from the northeast. This was accomplished and that afternoon CCA received orders to move east to attack towards Provins.

Thus the successful crossing of the Seine River was completed.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In a study of an operation of this type, it might be well to bring out the fact that since the original breakthrough by the First U.S. Army, about 31 July, a tremendous pressure by

the Allies had been exerted on the Germans. Those elements that had escaped and retreated across France had not had sufficient time to properly organize and defend this natural barrier, the Seine River. In the XX Corps Zone at the time that the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion crossed the river, CCR at Melun was also attempting a crossing and farther south, around Montereau, the 5th Infantry Division was crossing the Seine in force. Thus we see that the Germans had to dissipate their forces, not knowing exactly where the Allies would cross. Nor did they have sufficient strength to hold enough mobile reserve to strongly counter attack all attempted crossings.

Combat Command A had the proper engineer troops and equipment when they reached the Seine River to enable them to immediately undertake their plans for a river crossing. They could also accomplish the crossing without being delayed by having to wait on division or corps engineer equipment and troops. This showed prior planning on the part of high commanders because the specific mission of the combat command was to establish a bridgehead and the time factor, once the river was reached, was of great importance. Once the initial crossing sites had been selected and had then been approved by the combat commander, sufficient time was given to all elements to enable them to make a complete and thorough reconnaissance. There was also sufficient time allocated for the briefing of the troops and for the actual part each organization was to play in the crossing. This is of extreme importance due to the fact that the crossing of a river 250 to 300 feet wide is a major operation and needs a great deal of coordination by all elements of the command.

Definite surprise was achieved in this operation. One factor which enabled this surprise to be achieved was the extreme care which was taken by all personnel in not exposing themselves while making their reconnaissance. Another factor was that a high ridge line followed the river on our side enabling the combat command to move large numbers of troops, vehicles and equipment to a specific point without this lateral communication being observed by the enemy. Lastly, the factor achieving surprise was that all self-propelled guns and supporting weapons were kept out of enemy observation until

it was time for them to actually open fire in support of the assault elements.

The 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, in my opinion, showed a great deal of initiative in this crossing because it was not known that there would be such light enemy resistance to their successful establishment of a bridgehead. However, it is my firm opinion that even though the bridgehead had been much more strongly defended, the operation would have been successful.

In the summary of the crossing of the Seine River, the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion did succeed with the help of the supporting arms of the combat command in establishing a successful bridgehead. The organization of a combat command, that is the artillery-infantry-tank team, is so dependent upon coordinated efforts that it is difficult for the writer to give credit to any one arm. The crossing was accomplished by the combined efforts of all arms.

One round of artillery landed in B Company's area as they were moving to their crossing site causing several casualties. It is believed that this was caused by the fact that the artillery had not previously registered on the far side of the river. Previous registration is desirable before having close artillery support if it will not give away the surprise element. Some difficulty was encountered in stopping the fires of the machine guns which were supporting the assault infantry and it was thought that some signal, possibly pyrotechnic, should have been planned to stop these fires.

The enemy on the bank opposite Tilly and in the vicinity of Tilly was estimated to be "one battalion of approximately 700 infantry, one battery of marine artillery, and two batteries of unknown type of artillery, supposedly 88's." (20)

"Losses suffered on the crossing were seven casualties determined to be from our own supporting weapons. Casualties suffered subsequent thereto, three killed and one wounded." (21)

#### LESSONS LEARNED

1. Once an enemy is in retreat pursue him relentlessly and do not give him time to properly organize behind the next natural barrier.

2. Prior to a river crossing, reconnaissance is vital because maximum use has to be made of the terrain.

3. Sufficient time must be given to allow the commanders

(20,21) A-3

of the assault support and engineer elements to coordinate their plans.

4. In an armored unit, traffic control to the assembly positions in the vicinity of the crossing site is essential.

5. The M-2 assault boats that were used in this operation weigh approximately 410 pounds. It is desirable to get them as close as possible to the crossing site to prevent exhaustion of the infantry troops in carrying them long distances.

6. Previous training and rehearsals by all elements taking part in a river crossing is mandatory.

7. The assault elements must be well briefed as to their initial objective because there is much confusion and control is difficult to retain once the crossing has been launched.

8. In crossing a river which is defended, surprise is desired.

9. The massing of supporting fires upon a small area will make it untenable by the enemy.

10. Good communications are mandatory and alternate means should be available whenever possible.