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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 379TH INFANTRY (95TH INF. DIV.)
SAARLAUTERN, GERMANY, 2--6 DECEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal experience of a Battalion Reconnaissance Officer)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN A RIVER CROSSING;
CAPTURE AND DEFENSE OF A BRIDGE

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the 1st Battalion, 379th Infantry, 95th U. S. Division, in the Rhineland Campaign, in the crossing of the Saar River and capture and defense of the bridge at Saarlautern.

A short history of the 1st Battalion and a brief summary of preceding events leading up to the crossing of the Saar River and capture of the bridge will aid the reader in a clearer perception of the situation. This operation won acknowledgment from the War Department when Robert P. Patterson, then Undersecretary of War, made the following statement to a press conference: "The 95th Division performed with great distinction in taking intact the Saarlautern bridge." (1)

The Battalion saw its first combat 18 October 1944 when the 379th Infantry relieved the 11th Infantry of the 5th Infantry Division on the Moselle River bridgehead in the vicinity of Arry, France. The extent of its combat there was principally defensive; there was no offensive action except for a few patrols. The 379th Infantry was relieved two weeks later by the same elements of the 5th Division. The 95th Division then moved north and relieved elements of the 90th Infantry Division and of the 10th Armored Division. From this position the 1st Battalion was soon engaged in one of the most bitter battles of World War II -- the fight for Metz, the

(1) A-14, p. 4.

world's most fortified city. It was in Metz that the officers and men gained the experience and confidence to make them combat veterans. Casualties were heavy, not so much in number but in the loss of key men -- mostly high ranking noncommissioned officers. (2)

On 31 August 1944 the XX Corps of the Third U. S. Army reached Verdun, France. Though the Third Army was practically immobilized by the shortage of gasoline, General Patton issued an order to Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, Commander of XX Corps. In brief, it assigned the Corps the mission to shove across the Moselle River; capture or encircle Metz; cross the Saar River in the vicinity of Saarburg; continue the attack, crossing the Rhine River at or near Mainz; and attack the final objective of Frankfurt, 160 miles away. This was to prevent the now badly disorganized and fleeing Germans from organizing a capable defense at any of the natural barriers or to use successfully the Maginot or Siegfried defenses. This plan was not carried out as scheduled for reasons on which military leaders do not agree, and the final attack on Metz did not begin until 8 November 1944. During the period 31 August to 8 November 1944 the Germans occupied the fortifications of Metz and the Siegfried defenses. (3)

Metz was officially captured 22 November, and at this time XX Corps changed its original plan to drive towards Saarburg and Merzig and decided to take the most direct route to the Saar River. The change in the original plan was due to the collapse of the enemy after the capture of Metz. The new plan was given in Field Order #13, Headquarters XX Corps,

(2) A-6, Nov., pp. 3,4. Eye-witness, self. (3) A-12, p. 15. A-1, p. 16.

dated 22 November 1944. (4)

Parts of the plan pertinent to the 95th Division were as follows: the 95th Division was to attack northeast to destroy the enemy within its zone, seize crossings of the Saar River between Saarlautern and Pachten, establish a bridgehead in the crossing area, and expand to the north to uncover Rehlingen to facilitate bridging operations of the 90th Division. (5)

Supporting units included III Corps Artillery, (the III Corps not being operational at this time), elements of the 5th Division Artillery, the 1103rd Engineer Group, the 4th Tank Destroyer Group, and elements of the 119th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion. (6)

On 24 November the Division was poised on the west bank of the French Nied River, with the 377th Infantry on the left and the 378th Infantry on the right. On this date, Colonel Robert L. Bacon assumed command of the 379th Infantry, which was containing the five remaining forts held by the Germans in the Metz area. The 379th Infantry was to become Division reserve, upon being relieved by the 2nd Infantry of the 5th Infantry Division. (7)

On the morning of 25 November the Division's attack jumped off at 0730. Resistance was comparatively light, and by night the Division's front line extended along the Maginot defenses. The 2nd Battalion, 379th Infantry, was attached to 377th Infantry to protect the left flank of the Regiment and Division.

The Maginot defenses were built for protection from the east, so were of little value to the Germans. During the days

(4) A-1, p. 43. (5) A-1, p. 68. (6) A-1, pp. 68, 69.
(7) A-7, Nov., p. 31.

of 26 and 27 November the Division's attack progressed rapidly with light resistance on the left, but with somewhat stronger resistance on the right of the Division Zone.

At this time the XII Corps, on the Division's right, changed the direction of its attack from northeast to east, causing a gap to develop on the right flank of the 378th Infantry. This caused considerable trouble, and various means were used to relieve the situation. First, the Division Reconnaissance Troop was committed on the open flank; then the 3rd Battalion, 379th Infantry, was attached to the 378th Infantry; and later the 10th Infantry, 5th Division, was attached to the 95th Division to fill the gap. (See Map 1). On 30 November the 10th Infantry of the 5th Division was returned to 5th Division control, and they assumed responsibility of the Corps right flank. (8)

The 95th Division crossed the German border 28 November. On 29 and 30 November German resistance stiffened and was almost fanatical at times. Report from air reconnaissance showed that the Germans were fighting to delay until the bulk of their troops could cross the Saar River. (9)

By 1 December the 95th Division was ready to attack and cross the Saar River. Supporting troops were being massed for the crossing. The Division maintained the normal attachments of tank destroyer, tank, and antiaircraft elements, and added at this time two light equipage platoons, one engineer battalion, one medium artillery battalion (with one extra battery), and three companies of chemical mortars. (10)

(8) A-7, Nov., pp. 33, 34, 35. A-1, p. 46. (9) A-1, p. 46.
(10) A-7, Dec., p. 1.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

The terrain the Division had covered since moving from Metz had been mostly gentle slopes, with a network of roads joining many small villages. Beginning at Oberfelsberg, the terrain assumed different features. Oberfelsberg itself is on a high plateau that drops off sharply to develop the Saar Basin. The Basin extends for about five miles on both sides of the River and is comprised mainly of lowlands that are marshy during the rainy season.

In this vicinity, the Saar River flows northwest and averages about 150 feet in width. Situated along the south bank of the River are Wallerfangen, Lisdorf, and Saarlautern -- a small part of Saarlautern being on the north bank of the River. Along the north bank of the River, also, are Saarlautern Roden, Fraulautern, and Ensdorf. About 10 miles northwest of Saarlautern is Rehlingen; 6 miles north of Saarlautern is Saarwellingen, a railroad center. (Refer to Map 2).

The entire Basin is very thickly populated, and all the buildings are of modern stone structure. From Oberfelsberg, with the aid of field glasses, many pillboxes and bunkers could be located north of the River. The River is a natural barrier, reinforced by fortifications to complete a very strong defense. The Division held the commanding terrain, but it is doubtful if it could be said, logically, that the terrain favored the attacker at this point. (11)

ATTACK TO THE SAAR RIVER

Field Order #4, 95th Division, issued 30 November, gave the following instructions to the 379th Infantry: the 379th

(11) A-2, p. 4. Eye-witness, self.

Infantry was to make the Division's main effort and was assigned the following missions. First, it was to advance rapidly to the Saar River and seize Saarlautern. Second, it was to force a crossing of the River in its zone and secure a bridgehead. And finally, it was to be prepared to attack, seize, and hold Rehlingen, the Division objective. The intelligence annex named the following enemy divisions as opposing the 95th Division at this time: the German 347th Infantry Division, the 559th Volksgrenadier Division, elements of the 21st Panzer Division, and remnants of the 36th Infantry Division. All of these divisions had been partially destroyed or captured. It was estimated that at least 10, 000 German troops were opposing the 95th Division. (12)

On 1 December eight groups of medium bombers attacked Saarlautern and the south bank of the Saar River. Throughout the day the 513th Fighter Squadron of XIX Tactical Air Command supported the Division's attack. The enemy resistance could be classified as extremely stubborn along the entire Division front, especially along the main road from Oberfelsberg to Saarlautern. (13)

The attack of the 379th Infantry was delayed on the morning of 2 December while another direct support air mission attacked Saarlautern. This time the medium bombers were followed by a dive bombing attack on the German barracks southwest of Saarlautern. The attack against Saarlautern progressed favorably, and by 1600 the 2nd Battalion had cleared the German barracks and was engaged in severe house to house fighting in

(12) A-7, p. 1. A-2, p. 8. (13) A-7, Dec., p. 2. Eyewitness, self.

the outskirts of the city. (14)

The 1st Battalion followed the 2nd Battalion throughout the day of 2 December, expecting to be committed at any time; but as night fell, it still was not in contact with the enemy. Shortly after dark the 1st Battalion moved into the German barracks, and the Battalion Commander, with the Artillery Liaison Officer, S-3, and Operations Sergeant reported to the Regimental Command Post at Oberfelsberg. The morale of the Battalion at this time was extremely high. It was the only battalion in the Division that had not been committed in the march from Metz to the Saar. There was a difficult task to be performed in making the initial crossing of the River, and this Battalion expected the assignment. (15)

The Battalion commanders of the 379th Infantry arrived at the Command Post about 2000. The Regimental Commander (Colonel Robert L. Bacon) had just received an air photo from Division Headquarters. This photo, taken at about 1600 that afternoon, showed the bridge at Saarlautern to be the only bridge remaining intact in this area. After a short discussion with the Battalion commanders, Colonel Bacon suddenly picked up the photo and made the statement: "It certainly would disconcert Jerry if we were to slip across the River and capture that bridge intact." (16)

The Regimental Commander contacted Division Headquarters and presented his plan, which was heartily endorsed by the Commanding General. The Division G-3 rushed to the Regimental Command Post with authority of the General to make the necessary

(14) A-7, Dec., p. 3. A-6, Dec., p. 15. Eye-witness, self.
(15) A-6, Dec., p. 15. Eye-witness, self. (16) Statement of Lt. Col. Tobias R. Philbin, C. O., 1st Bn., to self.

supporting troops to accomplish the mission. The Division already had been given attachments by Corps, but it was going to be a difficult undertaking to prepare for a crossing by dawn. (17)

The Regimental Commander had many things to consider in planning this move. Surprise essentially was going to be the best weapon. Failure to capture the bridge intact would probably have disastrous results. The proper reconnaissance had not been made and could not be made at this time. It was a command decision; Colonel Bacon had decided that it was a calculated risk and that the advantages gained would outweigh the danger of failure, if the move proved successful. The Germans would lose not only the bridge but also the troops in Saarlautern.

The Regimental order was issued at 2130. The 1st Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Tobias R. Philbin, was to force a crossing of the River at 0545, capture the north approaches of the bridge and prevent the enemy's destroying it. Company L was to attack at 0745, with its line of departure being the barracks now occupied by the 1st Battalion. Its mission would be to capture the south approaches of the bridge. (18)

PREPARATION FOR CROSSING THE RIVER

The Artillery Liaison Officer was present when the Regimental order was issued. He immediately contacted the commanding officer of the 359th Field Artillery, which was the direct support battalion for the 379th Infantry. He was assured that plenty of artillery support was available. The

(17) A-7, Dec., p. 1. (18) A-6, Dec., p. 16.

amount of artillery supporting the 95th Division previously has been mentioned. However, it will not be over-emphasizing the artillery to state that the XX Corps, and especially the 95th Division, had far more than the normal amount of artillery support.

The Division G-3 was present and assured the Battalion Commander that the 1st Battalion would have priority of fires from all Division and attached artillery. The Commanding General of the Division Artillery was contacted, and he promised priority of fire to the 1st Battalion from battalions reinforcing the 95th Division Artillery. There would be an abundance of artillery support. Time was very short for appropriate planning of these fires, but properly planned and executed they would do a great deal toward deceiving the enemy and covering the noise of moving vehicles.

Before all the plans were completed, part of the artillery plan was being put into effect by Corps medium artillery firing heavy barrages into Saarlautern and deep into enemy-held territory. By the time the Liaison Officer and the Battalion Commander had finished their plan, it seemed like all of the many artillery battalions in support were trying to demolish everything across the River. It was certain that the noise made in preparation for the crossing would not be heard by the enemy. (19)

The Division Engineer and the Commander of Company C, 320th Engineer Battalion, who also were present when the Regimental order was given, immediately began preparations to move assault boats and bridging equipment to the barracks now

(19) Statement by Capt. Lawrence W. Slorah, Artillery Liaison Officer, to self.

occupied by the 1st Battalion. An engineer officer was to accompany the 1st Battalion Commander and aid in selecting a crossing site. Two light equipage platoons previously had been attached to the 95th Division by XX Corps; and, due to the foresight of the Commanding General, were well forward and accessible. An engineer platoon already had cleared anti-tank mines from the road, extending from the outskirts of Saarlautern to the German barracks. (20)

The Battalion had not been idle during the absence of the commander. The barracks provided excellent cover and a warm place for the men to get some much needed sleep. A hot meal was brought forward by use of quarter-ton trucks and trailers, and weapons carriers had been brought forward by infiltration. All vehicles were put under the spacious sheds, which were so large that the vehicles could be dispersed almost as well as would be required for an outside bivouac. (21)

The Battalion Commander, the S-3, and Artillery Liaison Officer completed their coordinations and left the Regimental Command Post at about 2230. Before reaching the Battalion, the S-3 shot himself in the left arm, becoming a casualty. The company commanders had assembled at the Command Post when the Battalion Commander arrived. The S-2 immediately was assigned the S-3 duties. (22)

Before the Battalion Commander issued his order, he asked for one officer to volunteer to attempt to slip through the German defenses and cut the wires to the explosives. No one volunteered, so the idea was discarded. (23)

(20) A-6, Dec., p. 16. Statement by Lt. Col. T. R. Philbin to self. (21) Eye-witness, self. (22) Statement by Lt. Col. Philbin to self. (23) Eye-witness, self.

The Battalion Commander's attack order was as follows:
"The enemy holds the Saarlautern Area and the area across the River, strength unknown. Strength of enemy fortifications also unknown. Company L attacks at 0745 with mission of securing intact the south end of the bridge across the Saar River in Saarlautern. This Battalion with one platoon Antitank Company attached; one platoon, Company B, 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion; and one platoon, Company C, 320th Engineer Battalion in direct support, will force a crossing of the Saar River and capture the north approaches to the bridge and prevent the enemy from destroying it. Engineers will deliver assault boats by 0300, and crossing will begin at 0545. Secrecy is vital; noise must be kept to a minimum, and no shots will be fired until necessary. Crossings will be in two waves: 1st Wave -- Company B on right, Company C on left. 2nd Wave -- Company A on right, Company D on left. Battalion will move in columns of companies on north bank of River in order: B, C, D, and A Companies. Machine gun platoons of Company D to join Companies B and C on the north bank. I will be in center boat of second wave and at the rear of Company B in the advance on the north side." (24)

The Battalion Commander was perturbed over the fact that there had been no reconnaissance of the River. He gave orders for the company commanders to take all but one officer from each company and make a reconnaissance and select a crossing site. Three rifle squads were attached to furnish security for this group.

The reconnaissance party moved onto the hard surfaced

(24) A-6, Dec., p. 16. Eye-witness, self.

road north of the barracks. At this time the group had only one map and one aerial photo. They were not very well organized and moved up and down the road, learning nothing. The moon shone so brightly that one could almost read the maps in the moonlight. However, the group could not agree on just how to get to the River. After having been out about an hour, the company commanders were very anxious to return to their planning.

Company D Commander, the senior officer in the group, gave his executive officer the mission of finding the River and picking a crossing site. An engineer officer and one rifle squad accompanied him. Eight minutes later they were on the banks of the River, lying close to the ground, as friendly artillery was pounding the north banks of the River. The River was approximately 125 feet wide, and the banks were about two feet high. The reconnaissance party made a quick inspection of the River and immediately agreed on a crossing site. After choosing terrain features as guiding marks to be used should the moon be covered by clouds later, they returned to the barracks, and the Battalion Reconnaissance Officer reported to the Command Post. (25)

The Reconnaissance Officer reported to the Battalion Commander and gave a detailed description of the River and recommended a location for the crossing. The crossing site recommended was ideal if surprise was accomplished; but, if discovered, it would leave the Battalion in an open field at the mercy of the enemy. However, this crossing site had many desirable features, and it was approved by the Battalion Commander.

(25) Eye-witness, self.

The night was spent in preparation for the crossing. Each man was properly oriented and assigned to a boat. The S-4 supplied enormous amounts of bazooka ammunition and anti-tank grenades, and extra ammunition was issued. Two K rations which were to be carried by each man were not available in the kitchens, but the S-4 supplied them also. Everything needed by the men -- even extra socks -- was issued in the short time available.

The engineer boats were in place by 0300, and each boat commander had made a personal reconnaissance of the River. Turcks loaded with bridging equipment were in the courtyard between the barracks. The noise of this movement was covered by the terrific artillery barrages. (26)

CROSSING OF THE RIVER AND CAPTURE OF THE BRIDGE

The Battalion was fed a hot meal at 0330, and at 0515 began its movement toward the River. The moon was shining brightly, and movement was very easy. There was no noise -- not even a boat scraped the ground. At 0545 the boats were placed in the water, and at 0556 every man in the Battalion was across the River. The companies rapidly formed into a column and moved forward. (Refer to Map 3).

There was no artillery preparation in the bridge area, but both Corps and Division medium artillery were giving the German rear area sufficient quantities of fire to keep them quiet, and the Battalion was not receiving any enemy fire.

It was about two thousand yards to the bridge, and half of that distance was on the flat open terrain in the triangle between Saarlautern, Saarlautern Roden, and the River. The

(26) Eye-witness, self.

ground was very wet and soft from recent rains, and the men, heavily loaded with weapons and ammunition, experienced great difficulty in moving. (27)

Company B reached the Saarlautern, Saarlautern Roden road at 0625 and captured a German soldier who was on his way to the bridge. When questioned, this German said other soldiers were on the way, and Company B made plans to capture them also. (28)

The Battalion Commander, dissatisfied with the delay, moved forward from his position at the rear of the lead company and took a position behind the lead scouts. The Battalion, still in column, made a right angle turn at the road; and moving on both sides of the road, advanced more rapidly toward the bridge. (29)

As the head of the column neared the bridge, an armored car was discovered on the road, close to the bridge. The scouts moved by on the flanks, and the Battalion Commander and Company D Commander approached the car. One man was inside the car sending a message; and when he failed to respond to a challenge, he was knifed by the Company D Commander. One German outside the car dashed for a detonator switch, and the Battalion Commander fired the first shot of the operation -- killing the German soldier. (30)

The detonator switch was removed, and all wires that could lead to demolitions were cut. The engineers who had marched near the front of the column moved onto the bridge to check for demolitions. Four American 500 pound bombs were located,

(27) Eye-witness, self. (28) Statement by Capt. Angelo A. Paciotti to self. (29) Eye-witness, self. (30) A-1, p. 47. A-7, Dec., p. 4.

disarmed, and rolled into the River. Continuing the inspection, the engineers moved across the bridge and found antitank mines across the approaches. As they were attempting to remove them, four German soldiers approached, apparently unaware that they had lost the bridge. They were taken prisoners. The engineers were unable to remove the mines, for by this time the Germans realized something was amiss, and had begun pouring small arms fire onto the bridge. (31)

At 0721 the Battalion Commander reported to Regiment that the bridge was captured. Incredible as it may seem, it was later learned from captured prisoners that the Germans planned to blow the bridge at 0730. It was learned also from German engineer prisoners that artillery fire had knocked out generators with which the bridge was to have been blown; and when captured, these engineers had been on their way to hand-blow the bridge. (32)

Company L, reinforced, crossed the line of departure at 0730 and attacked aggressively. They encountered heavy small arms fire; but, taking advantage of buildings, by-passed some of the strong points and proceeded as quickly as possible. By 0830 they had captured the south approaches to the bridge and contacted the 1st Battalion. The attack of Company L forced several Germans to retreat across the bridge, and they were taken prisoners by the 1st Battalion. One group tried to fight its way across the bridge and was killed by heavy machine gun fire. (33)

By 0700 elements of the 320th Engineer Battalion had completed construction of a foot bridge, and work was

(31) Eye-witness, self. (32) A-7, Dec., p. 5. (33) A-9, p. 4. Eye-witness, self.

progressing on an infantry support bridge. These bridges were being built at the exact location where the infantry had crossed. This location had been chosen for the purpose of aiding the infantry in its surprise attack but did not have any of the qualities necessary for bridging operations. Shortly after daylight the enemy artillery destroyed the foot bridge and damaged the infantry support bridge. Continuous artillery and mortar fire forced the engineers to abandon their efforts in this location. (34)

As soon as the bridge was captured, the 1st Battalion began clearing that part of Saarlautern north of the River. One platoon of Company B surprised Germans in a two-story bunker almost at the same time the first shot was fired. This bunker had no outside security, and the effects of a hand grenade dropped into it persuaded the Germans to surrender. (35)

Company C, following close behind Company B, began occupying buildings east of the road and found an aid station and a small group of German soldiers, all seemingly unaware of what was happening.

Company A moved into buildings in the north section of the town and thus completed cleaning out that part of Saarlautern north of the River. At this time the Battalion had not suffered a single casualty. (36)

DEFENSE OF THE BRIDGE

The Battalion Commander ordered that a strong defense be organized. This was to be an all-around defense with companies dispersed as follows: Company B on one side of the road and

(34) A-7, Dec., p. 5. Statement of Capt. Elias L. Tolbert, Company Commander, Co. C, 320th Engineers. (35) Statement by Lt. Lewis C. Archambeault, platoon leader, Co. B, to self. (36) Eye-witness, self.

along the River; Company C on the other side of the road and along the River; Company A with its back to the rest of the Battalion and facing generally northwest -- thus forming a triangular defense area. Company D already had both machine gun platoons in position. One was emplaced along the banks of the River, covering both sides of the bridge. The other platoon was in a building about 75 yards north of the bridge, with fields of fire covering all enemy approaches. The 81 millimeter mortar platoon was located near the center of the area. It was to conserve its ammunition and to fire only in case of a counterattack. (37)

Just after daybreak the Germans apparently realized that they had lost the bridge. Small arms fire seemed to come from all directions. It was impossible to tell from which directions the Germans were firing. By 0900 the Battalion had repulsed two counterattacks. The strength of one was estimated to be about two squads; the other approximately two rifle platoons. These came from the woods along the River bank, so the Battalion Commander ordered Company A to clean out these woods. This was completed by 1130, and several prisoners were taken. The woods were found to have a tremendous amount of antipersonnel mines.

Enemy artillery and mortar fire began pounding the bridge-head about 0900 and increased throughout the day. The artillery fire was the heaviest ever received by the 1st Battalion. Trees and buildings were gradually destroyed. Movement was reduced to a minimum, but casualties began to reach a high figure. Only the strongly constructed stone buildings prevented

(37) Eye-witness, self.

the number of casualties being much higher. (38)

Fighting in Saarlautern south of the River continued until 1600, at which time the 2nd and 3rd Battalions made contact, and the main portion of the town was cleared. (39)

The capture of Saarlautern stopped the small arms fire on the bridge, and soon afterwards the engineers removed the mines from the approaches. One platoon of the 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion crossed to the north side to aid in defending the bridgehead. (40)

At 1700 the first infantry vehicles crossed the bridge with supplies -- ammunition having first priority. Several weapons carriers crossed the bridge and were placed under cover in a large warehouse. A ration and ammunition dump was established. Due to mounting numbers of casualties, the Battalion Aid Station was established north of the River, but the first attempts to evacuate the wounded failed because of the heavy artillery fire. Vehicles not under cover would last only a few minutes. A few vehicles were destroyed by direct hits by artillery, and traffic across the bridge was stopped and later limited to a small number of vehicles per hour.

Just before dark the Germans launched a counterattack from the vicinity of Saarlautern-Roden with five tanks and a force estimated at two companies of infantry. Tank destroyers knocked out two enemy tanks, and the infantry companies never were able to cross the open field, being halted by heavy machine gun fire. (41)

The Battalion Commander ordered that a minimum of half of all personnel remain on guard duty during the hours of

(38) Eye-witness, self. (39) A-7, Dec., p. 5. (40), (41) Eye-witness, self.

darkness. Artillery fire increased, and guards on duty outside the buildings had a very dangerous task. Several enemy patrols tried to reach the bridge, but failed. About 0130 two German soldiers walked past several sentries and were not halted. They misled the sentries by laughing, and conversing in the English language. They were within 75 yards of the bridge when they were forced to pass a rock wall, behind which was the 81 millimeter mortar platoon. A staff sergeant who could speak the German language fluently was on guard. For some reason which he never explained, the sergeant spoke to them in German. They answered him, then immediately turned and ran. The sergeant killed one, and a machine gun across the street shot the other. This attempt to reach the bridge was characteristic of several made. (42)

During the night some of the more seriously wounded were evacuated. The supply of ammunition was increased, and two heavy machine guns damaged by artillery fire were replaced.

The heavy artillery and mortar fire continued throughout the night, and at dawn of 4 December something new was added. An artillery shell of very large caliber began landing in the area. These shells did not come in barrages but one at a time. One of these shells struck a building occupied by a heavy machine gun platoon and went through a hole, previously made by a smaller shell, exploding in the basement, killing 13 men and seriously wounding 5 others. Among those killed were the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and two squad leaders. (43)

On the morning of 4 December the 3rd Battalion attacked Fraulautern, making small gains, but taking four pillboxes.

(42) Statement of Staff Sgt. Oscar Patzer to self. (43) Eyewitness, self.

They, too, came under extremely heavy artillery and mortar fire. (44)

The weather was cloudy, with a low fog early in the morning. The artillery liaison plane attempted to locate the enemy guns but was unable to see through the low clouds. About 1200 an officer stepped outside the Battalion Command Post and actually saw one of the large shells as it approached the area, and he immediately checked the direction. The Artillery Liaison Officer, adding this information to that already gathered, turned in a shell report and requested a counterbattery fire mission. The Battalion Commander at the same time asked Regiment for everything possible to try and relieve the terrific barrage that the bridge area was receiving. (45)

Around 1600 the weather improved. Not long after the clouds lifted, a squadron of fighter planes passed over the bridge area, flying into German territory. Almost every man in the Battalion watched them, wondering what they would do. By using their field glasses, the men could see the planes begin their dives, and later a deep thud could be heard as the bombs exploded. They had dive bombed Saarwellingen. (46)

A report from the Regimental S-2 stated the planes had destroyed two railroad guns and damaged a third one. The important thing was that the big shells ceased their methodical destruction. (47)

During the night Germans had infiltrated into the woods along the River and about 0900 counterattacked, with two tanks firing from the vicinity of Saarlautern Roden. Tank destroyers damaged one of the tanks, and the attack was repulsed. Company A

(44) A-6, Dec., p. 4. (45), (46) Eye-witness, self. (47) Statement by Maj. Robert E. Burke, 5 Dec 1944 to self.

was ordered to clear the woods again. This was accomplished without much trouble, and more prisoners were taken. (48)

An enemy counterattack with two tanks and an estimated force of two platoons of infantry was launched at about 2200. The tanks never fired a shot but raced down the road at a high rate of speed. The Company A Commander was with his bazooka team located in a building near the road where it forks -- one road leading to Saarlautern Roden, and one to Fraulautern. The first tank was allowed to pass as a tank destroyer was about 100 yards farther down the road. Just as the first tank passed in front of the tank destroyer, the second tank passed in front of the bazooka, and both tanks were destroyed. The peculiar thing was that the tank destroyer had a frozen turret; and as its gun could not be traversed, it must necessarily wait until the tank passed in front of its gun. The lead tank was loaded with explosives, so evidently was on a suicide mission. This attack, also, was repelled. (49)

Enemy artillery fire continued heavy. The Artillery Liaison Officer and an officer from Corps Artillery estimated that 6000 rounds of artillery and mortar fire landed on the small bridgehead each 24 hours. For a 24 hour period XX Corps Artillery fired 19, 404 rounds of counterbattery. (50)

Some of the buildings began crumbling from the consistent shell fire. The Battalion Command Post was moved from the large brick buildings south of the road to a German air-raid shelter north of the road. A short time later an enemy artillery shell scored a direct hit in the room previously occupied

(48) Eye-witness, self. (49) Statement by Capt. Joseph Lydon, Co. A, to self. (50) A-4, p. 30. Statement by Capt. Lawrence W. Slorah, Artillery Liaison Officer, to self.

by the command group. This shell killed several of the Message Center Group who had just occupied the room. (51)

The night of 4 December was a repetition of the previous night. The Germans made several attempts to penetrate the left flank of the Battalion but were repulsed each time. On one occasion artillery fire was called for in the woods in front of Company B. A few minutes later a terrific barrage was dropped in the woods and Germans could be heard screaming. The forward observer reported the mission accomplished and was told that the mission had not been fired. The Germans had shelled their own troops. (52)

The Communications Platoon worked day and night, and many miles of wire were laid in the small defense area. Attempts to repair wire knocked out by artillery usually resulted in casualties, so new wire was laid. Radio was the chief means of communication and proved successful.

Before daylight of 5 December the 2nd Battalion passed through the 1st Battalion area and attacked Saarlautern Roden. The attack was successful as they captured seven forts and several blocks of the city, but it cost many casualties. Medics and men of the 1st Battalion gave a great deal of assistance in evacuating these casualties.

As the 2nd Battalion continued the attack in Saarlautern Roden, enemy artillery and mortar fire became lighter in the bridge area. This was the first time the artillery fire had shown any signs of weakening since the bridgehead had been occupied. (53)

The Engineer Platoon, taking advantage of the lull in

(51), (52), (53) Eye-witness, self.

the enemy artillery fire, and acting on information from a German prisoner, made a thorough inspection of the bridge. They found and removed from the piers of the bridge 6400 pounds of explosives. (54)

The night of 5 December orders were received that the 1st Battalion would be relieved by the 3rd Battalion, 377th Infantry. The 1st Battalion was to attack in Saarlautern Roden on the right of the 2nd Battalion. (55)

The night was quieter than the two preceding nights, but artillery fire was constant enough throughout the night as to be classified as heavy. (56)

The morning of 6 December the Battalion moved out in column along the same road on which they had entered the bridgehead area. The mission had been accomplished.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A study of this operation brings out the fact that the mission assigned the 1st Battalion had two outstanding possibilities. One possibility was that it could cross the Saar River and capture the bridge intact before the Germans realized what was happening. The second possibility was that the Germans would destroy the bridge and annihilate the troops which crossed the River, by attacking them from two or more directions.

Outstanding points for criticism are as follows:

1. On 30 November the 379th Infantry was assigned the mission of making the Division's main effort. This included the crossing of the Saar River and establishing a bridgehead in the Saarlautern Area. The Regimental Commander failed to

(54) A-7, Dec., p. 8. Eye-witness, self. (55) A-6, Dec., p. 4. (56) Eye-witness, self.

utilize liaison planes or any other method to make a daylight reconnaissance of the River. The German barracks south of the River were captured by 1600 on 2 December, and the Commander of 1st Battalion did not take advantage of this to make any type of reconnaissance of the River. These failures made it necessary for the River crossing to be made without a daylight reconnaissance. This definitely is against one of the main principles required for successful river crossings and could have resulted in disaster.

2. The failure of the Battalion Reconnaissance Officer to consider a possible bridging location probably would have been a major error if the permanent bridge across the River had not been captured intact. The site where the troops crossed the River was an impossible location for bridging operations, and a bridge was essential for the survival of the attacking troops.

3. The Company B Commander made a serious mistake when he allowed one prisoner and a chance to capture others delay the entire Battalion. The mission was to prevent the enemy's destroying the bridge and not to take prisoners. There is some doubt that the bridge would have been destroyed at 0730 as the German engineers claimed, but certainly any delay would add to their chances. Another thing that should have been considered was that an entire Battalion was being delayed in an open field within range of small arms fire of known enemy positions.

4. The 1st Battalion crossed the River and attacked with only one plan. They could have crossed the bridge and captured both approaches. This would have increased the

strength of their position. A flexible or alternate plan to be put into effect if the bridge was taken without any difficulty would have added to the strength of the position and very likely aided the attack in Saarlautern.

5. To send practically all the officers on a reconnaissance to pick a location to cross the River was an error. The mission could be performed by one or two officers just as well. The reconnaissance was not properly organized and accomplished nothing.

Outstanding in the accomplishment of this mission was the foresight and prior planning of Higher Headquarters. XX Corps and the 95th Division were very instrumental in the successful accomplishment of this operation by furnishing the correct supporting elements which made it possible for the Commander of the 379th Infantry to make a quick, sound decision concerning the crossing of the River.

There can be no doubt that the Battalion Commander greatly influenced the outcome of the operation when he took a position behind the lead scouts to prevent further delay of the Battalion.

While no credible record can be found to support the statement of the Regimental S-2, with reference to the destruction of the railroad guns by the plane attack of 4 December, the fact that not a single large caliber shell landed in the bridge area after the air attack is evidence of success of the attack.

Artillery support left nothing to be desired from the time the plan to cross the River was proposed until the 1st Battalion's attack from the bridgehead. Accepting statements

of German prisoners as true, the artillery fire unquestionably delayed the destruction of the bridge.

Engineer support from the delivery of the assault boats until the last explosives were removed from the bridge, showed utmost cooperation and skill.

In summing up the achievement of this mission, a few things to consider are these: The Saar River was the first natural barrier within Germany. The Siegfried defense extended along the banks of the River. The results were over two hundred prisoners and an undetermined number of Germans killed. The Battalion had captured a bridge that would carry the heaviest traffic necessary for a main supply route.

LESSONS

Lessons learned from this operation are as follows:

1. Surprise is essential if enemy-held bridges are to be captured intact.
2. Knowledge of the enemy's language is very valuable in military operations.
3. When other means are not available, commanders must exercise leadership to the utmost to influence the attack.
4. Any commander must at all times keep in mind his mission and its importance.
5. Shell reports are valuable aids to counterbattery fire.
6. Artillery properly planned and fired is one of the very best methods of deceiving the enemy as to the attackers' intentions.
7. Calculated risk must be taken when the advantages of success outweigh the possibilities and dangers of failure.

8. A properly trained unit can make a successful river crossing with very little time for preparation and without a rehearsal.

9. Close cooperation between artillery, infantry, and engineers is essential for successful river crossings.

10. Throughout this operation the doctrines and principles of The Infantry School proved sound.