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THE OPERATIONS OF 1ST BATTALION, 417TH INFANTRY
(76TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE CROSSING OF THE SAUR RIVER
AND ATTACK AGAINST THE SIEGERIED LINE, FORTERNACH
LUXEMBOURG, 1-15 FEBRUARY 1945
(Personal experiences of The Division Commander's Aide-de-Camp)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION IN A NIGHT
ATTACK, RIVER CROSSING AND ASSAULT OF A FORTIFIED AREA

Captain Dan A. Mobley, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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THE OPERATIONS OF 1ST BATTALION, 417TH INFANTRY
(76TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE CROSSING OF THE SAUR RIVER
AND ATTACK AGAINST THE SIGFRIED LINE, BOHLERNACH,
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(REINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experiences of The Division Commander's Aide-de-Camp)

INTRODUCTION

The hastily dug and later comfortably improved foxholes were a luxury to the men of the 76th Infantry Division after the long ride in slow trains and open trucks through snow covered hills and the ice glazed roads of France, Belgium and Luxembourg. The blanket of snow, marred in spots by small markers denoting the presence of mine fields, trees notched and prepared for demolition, and lines of barbed wire strung with booby traps all helped impress a new division with the importance of its sector. It was here in the eastern section of Luxembourg that the left wing of von Rundstedt's drive hit and bounced. Now the once invincible German armies were fast being destroyed to the north and west where they had ballooned in the drive toward our vital supplies in Liege and Antwerp.

On 26 January 1945 the 76th Infantry Division began to relieve the 87th Infantry Division along its sector of the Third Army front. This relief was completed when the last 155 mm howitzer of the 364th BA Battalion was replaced at about 1000 hours on 27 January. (1) (The rapid changes in the situation on the Allied front had caused the 76th Division to be moved from southern England to France where it was assigned to Fifteenth Army. From Fifteenth Army it was assigned to Third Army and VIII Corps reserve and moved to the vicinity of Champlon, Belgium.) Other changes in the Army front caused the 76th Division to be assigned to XII Corps, Third Army and moved to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg to relieve the 87th Division, all in a period of eleven days. (2) (See Map A)

(1) A-1, p. 59; (2) A-1, p. 200.

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The left flank of the 76th Division's new sector was held secure by the 4th Infantry Division. This tried and proved division still occupied part of the area they had hastily fortified to successfully hold off Armored and ground troops of Rundstedt's forces. Just as competently the 2d Cavalry Group anchored the right flank to the XII Corps. (3)

Elements of the 76th Division were disposed from left to right; the 417th Infantry, 304th Infantry and 385th Infantry Regiments. Backing them up were the 901st PA Bn., 302nd PA Bn., and 355th PA Bn., with their 105 mm howitzers. Other division troops were tactically disposed throughout the area. (See Map A)

Across the Sauer river, which ran along the entire division front, was the answer for anyone who would ask why the relief of front line elements of the 87th Division had been done at night. The ground rose abruptly almost from the edge of the river. Parts of it formed escarpments of one to 450 feet in height and a thousand or more yards in length. (See Map A) Nestled scientifically into these hills and cliffs and extending several miles back were the four to eight foot thick concrete fortholes of the enemy; the pill boxes, communications centers, and store houses of the German Siegfried line. Army G-2 reports told us that within these fortifications were the 9th, 352nd, and 212th Volks Grenadier Divisions, elements of the 44th Fortress Machine Gun Battalion and the 23rd Penal Battalion. The 212th Division, after having been badly depleted at the hands of the Russians, had been reformed in October 1944 and commanded by Lt. General Gensfuss had participated in the December Ardennes counteroffensive to the extent of establishing a bridgehead across the Sauer River. The 23rd Penal Battalion was composed entirely of political, criminal, and army offenders who were being given the opportunity to save themselves by fighting for their country. (4) (See Map A)

(3) A-3, p. 302; (4) A-1, p. 72.

With the possible exception of night patrols by the enemy who sometimes exchanged fire with the division's outposts the new, untried division was in a quiet sector. The new men, not yet baptized by fire, set about their job of improving positions, cleaning out buildings, sighting machine guns and the multitudinous other duties of a soldier. These men though new to combat were not new to soldiering. For the most part they had learned to make themselves comfortable in the snow and cold while on maneuvers in northern Michigan during the winter of 1944. This weather which had made the Ardennes winter offensive so costly to our armies in casualties from cold, trench foot, and frost bite, was mild compared with the sub-zero weather they had maneuvered through a year before. After the first day in the new area some of the men of the 1st Battalion, 417th Infantry found a supply of German blankets. With little regard to regulations covering captured enemy material these blankets were cut into strips four or five inches in width and three feet long. During periods of relative inactivity, such as sitting in forward foxholes that were cold and damp at the best, and standing guard in the rear across these simple pieces of cloth stood their owners in good stead. Wet combat boots and damp sox were removed, the pieces of blanket wrapped loosely around the feet and ankles and the overshoes pulled on over the top. This improvised foot gear kept the feet warm, dry and well-ventilated and virtually eliminated cases of frost bite and trench foot. (5)

Patrols were organized and the old lessons, well learned in training, soon began to pay dividends. Snow camouflage suits were improvised from sheets and other materials available and the squad leaders and platoon leaders began for the first time to lead their men in action.

While the men of the battalion were getting settled others in the division were also busily engaged. Baggage and T/E equipment began to catch up. The necessities of campaign were being brought into position. Division QM, (5) Personal experience.

Ord. Officer, and Engr. were rapidly getting their part of the "big show" ready. (6)

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The Third United States Army was facing the Eifel, a rugged country, bordered by the Siegfried line and made up of generally rugged terrain. For an attacker there was the disadvantage of cross corridors formed by rivers flowing generally to the south into the Moselle. Road nets were poor or non-existent and the terrain in between was made up of broken hills and ravines. The damp, cold February dawn^{ing} made it even more miserable. (7)

Even in the absence of orders every man from the General on down knew that those massive fortifications were going to have to be smashed and pushed behind when the Americans drove into the German homeland. It was not going to be easy but it could be done.

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Each man had out-smarted, out-flanked, and out-maneuvered similar pill-boxes in the fortified area of Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. This time there would be enemy inside them but there would be supporting fires to close the embrasures, blind spots, shell craters, satchel charges, pole charges, Bangalore torpedos to remove wire and anti personnel mines and the small arms fire of their buddies. These supports in the hands of a determined American soldier could lick any pill box. The men of the 1st Battalion, 417th Infantry were those determined men. Once mechanics, clerks, lawyers, business men, farmers, now all soldiers of the 76th Infantry Division and here to do a job. (8)

PREPARATION FOR THE ATTACK

The 4th Infantry Division on the left of the 76th was relieved by elements of the 80th Infantry Division ^{which} side-slipped south. (9) Rumors as to what General Patton was going to do next buzzed like summer insects from patrols on the river line back to division CP. Every man knew that the

(6) Personal experience; (7) A-2, p. 9; (8) Personal experience; (9) A-3, p. 304.

Third army never had rest still for long and now with new units being put into the line it looked like something was surely up. Every time a member of the division staff would visit the battalion the same question would be raised from all quarters, "When do we jump off?" The morale, physical condition, training and confidence in themselves, their comrades and their leaders was at an all time high. (10)

Night patrolling continued to increase both by the enemy and our forces. Attempts were made by enemy elements to secure identifications. (An operations map later unearthed in one of the pill boxes showed the division had been successful in deceiving the enemy as to our unit identifications although boundaries and sizes of units were exceptionally accurate.) Our patrols reconnoitered the banks of the Saar for likely crossing places and attempted to locate enemy positions on the far bank even to the extent of exposing themselves to snar fire. These little excursions into the unknown were sometimes humorous but always dangerous. The area along the river was a maze of mine fields and booby traps. German anti personnel mines and booby traps had been left when they were driven back across the river the month before. Others were emplaced by the 4th Division and the 27th Division when they occupied the sector. Many fields were unmarked either on the ground or on the charts turned over to the division. In the hurried, critical days of the "Eulge" such defenses were hastily laid and left as one unit replaced another. Over this entire area a heavy blanket of snow had fallen. It covered trip wires and mines laid on the ground but did not lessen their effect when activated by an unfortunate soldier. These silent, cruel weapons of war caused anxiety among even the bravest men. Here was an enemy capable of taking a leg, an eye, or even your life. An enemy you could not see and could not fight. Feet and legs were partially protected from mine fragments by extra wrappings of blanket and leggings and overshoes over the combat boots. It

(10) Personal experience.

was these patrol missions that took the first battle casualties. (11)

Units were rotated frequently along the forward slopes of the battalion front. Men were brought back from the foxholes where they could not have fires nor move around much and rested in the comparative comfort of buildings where they could be fed hot food and allowed to exercise their cramped legs. The platoons were successful for the most part in moving their men back after dark each night. There were a few forward positions that doubled as observation posts and during the day furnished excellent observation of the German-held east bank of the river. Several of these were frequented by visitors from Regiment and Division. The men who occupied these positions were not happy to see these visitors as they often exposed themselves coming up and usually drew fire on the position. (12)

In the company and battalion rear areas, Sgt. Cecil Travis, beloved third baseman of the old 76th baseball team, and his associates from the Special Service office was around delivering copies of the soldiers newspaper Stars and Stripes, Yank magazines, candy, cigarettes, soap, razor blades and so forth. The special service men delivered the news of the world and little necessities and meager luxuries that were available to the American soldier. Better still they brought news from buddies in other units and carried bits of gossip like an old maid at a tea party. (13)

On 2-3 February 1945 the 1st Battalion, 417th Infantry squeezed to the right into the immediate vicinity of Echternach and the veteran 5th Infantry Division moved in between the 417th and the 80th Division. (14) The men could hardly be contained. This was really what they had been waiting for. In the words of one squad leader it looked like the 76th was going to have to show everybody how to get across that river.

Back in Luxembourg City at Third Army Headquarters plans were being made. The Commanding General XII Corps had talked over his plan with General Patton.

(11)(12) Personal experience; (13) A-1, p. 66; (14) A-3, p. 324.

the town, prepared to place fire on the village of Echternecherbruck on the river's north bank. The second machine gun platoon was on the opposite side of the town, covering the river to the west. (19) (See Map B)

That portion of the Siegfried line directly in front of the 1st Battalion looked to be a good crossing site if such a thing were possible. It was one of the few areas where assault boats could be launched and across the swollen river, at this point approximately 150 feet wide, was a flat area of approximately 200 yards. This area was known to have been plowed and leveled and thickly sown with anti-personnel mines. Visual reconnaissance indicated that these mine fields were covered by grazing fire from pill boxes in the area and from direct fire from pill boxes in the vicinity of Echternecherbruck which, due to a sharp bend in the river, afforded the enemy perfect enfilade fire of the entire river bank. This small flat plain extended back to the hills that rose as a virtual escarpment to the height of about 450 feet in this particular area. However to the right could be seen small trails and a draw which the maps and aerial photos showed ran north and east into the line. These trails had shown signs of use from time to time and it was believed that a path existed through the mines. (20)

On the night of 5 February a Corps Artillery 155 mm Long Tom and two tank destroyers of the 808th TD Battalion were secretly hidden in the town of Echternech. The 160th Engineers also hid forty assault boats in the forward edge of the town. Everyone was on his toes. Strictest light and noise discipline were enforced and the enemy, always quick to fire in a round or two, was apparently unaware of what was taking place along his front. (21)

In a blacked out crowded room of the 1st Battalion CP at Lauterborn, hardly two miles from the edge of Echternech the Staff officers of the 1st Battalion, 2d, 3d, Regimental staff, 901st WA Battalion Commander, Engineer Company Commander, TD Commander, the Division Commander and Aide and others gathered after dark to hear the Regimental field order. The 1st Battalion-

(19) A-1, p. 74; (20) Eye witness; (21) A-1, p. 75.

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was directed to lead the attack, cross the Sauer, neutralize only those pill boxes in its zone, and secure the high ground overlooking the crossing site.

The 2nd Battalion was to clear the pill boxes on the right, flanking the crossing site and occupy the high ground to the east. The 3rd Battalion, following the 2nd was to pass between the 1st and 2nd on Regimental order and sieze the high ground west of Menningen. (22) (See Map B) (not clear)

There were very few questions asked. These leaders, few of whom had been in combat before, knew they were on the spot and had a big job to do. Every man knew that he was being watched by everyone from the Supreme Commander down to his friend on the right and left. Making the crossing to the west were two veteran divisions, the 5th and 80th. Both these divisions had crossed rivers before, maybe not like this one but they had successfully made assault crossings against the German defender. Here was a psychological factor. A new unit was being given a chance to prove they had the courage, stamina, and know-how by pulling their part of the load in a Corps and an Army that the whole world knew for aggressive and brilliant attacks. It was with this in mind that the officers returned to their units and set the wheels in motion to carry out the plan.

Few if any of the men slept much the night of 5-6 February. Each talked over the coming operation with his buddies. The old teams that had trained together were being given a little skull practice by their leaders. The 76th Division was indeed fortunate at this time to have so many men who had trained together. Most of the non-commissioned officers had been with the division and although the many cadres and replacements had decimated the ranks of infantrymen the new men who came to take their place had been with the unit long enough to become familiar with the tactics taught from the basic field manuals in the hands of experienced non coms.

The operation beginning on the following night would embrace three sep-
(22) Personal experience.

erate and difficult operations. First a night attack. The ability of squad and platoon leaders would be put to the acid test to move their men in the dark of the night and maintain control, muffle all noise and prevent the enemy from knowing that any unusual movement was taking place. Each leader wondered how he would react under fire and whether or not his men would follow his commands and stand their ground when they encountered for the first time the terrific fire of all types of weapons that they knew would greet them as soon as their presence was detected by the defenders in the Siegfried line. Any movement at best is difficult at night over unfamiliar ground. This advance would lead down narrow, rubble-strewn streets of the town of Echternach, canalizing all action and allowing little or no freedom of maneuver, if their presence was detected and the famous SS's, mortars, and artillery began to descend.

If everything went well and the troops were able to reach the banks of the river without detection there was a barricade of railroad ties along the railroad almost to the waters edge. The next big problem would be the crossing of a flood crazed river filled to overflowing with the icy water of the melting snow. Of the forty assault boats the 160th Engineers would have in Echternach Company A was assigned sixteen and Company B sixteen, Company C would use the remaining eight for the first wave and the remainder of Company C, Battalion Headquarters group and Company D would use the boats that returned to get across. (23) Each company organized boat teams of twelve to sixteen men. Each man was briefed as to the terrain on the opposite side of the river, possible location of mine fields and known pill boxes.

The men were stripped of extra equipment, examined for rattling equipment and generally stripped for action. No mother was ever more careful in preparing her child for his first day at school than the squad leaders and platoon leaders were in getting their men ready for the operation. Normal

(23) A-1, p. 76.

activity was carried out along the division front on the sixth to prevent the alert enemy of suspecting anything unusual was taking place. (24)

Toward dark a cold wind began driving a heavy rain into the fox holes, through cracks of shattered buildings and almost into the bones of every man in the area. Overcoats and raincoats had been given up for field jackets and sweaters. Everyone shivered and teeth chattered, more from the pent-up excitement than from the wet and cold. As the rain continued the ground became a virtual quagmire. Old shell holes filled up with water. Ditches and gutters in Eoaternsch ran brim full of cold dirty slush. Muffled curses could be heard from men who inadvertently got in an exceptionally large puddle or slipped and fell on the mud as they moved around to keep up the circulation in their legs. (25)

As the hands ^{crept} slowly toward midnight the tension mounted. Boat crews were quietly gathered and again briefed on the technique of rowing quietly and carrying the assault boats so that they would not bang against a rifle or some other piece of equipment. After a hurried check of his companies, the Battalion Commander, Lt. Colonel Clarence A. Motte, Jr. moved to his observation post on the extreme northwest fringe of the town so that he would be near the crossing point and ready with his Battalion Headquarters group when Company C had got across the river. The crossing was to begin at 070100 February without any artillery support with the hopes of getting most of the battalion across the river and up to the comparative safety of the high escarpment before the defenders could be alerted. If this was possible, chances of crossing with few casualties would be much greater because once the Germans detected the operation they could bring their grazing fire to bear almost on the surface of the flooded river and the flat plain on the east bank.

At 070130 the artillery would cut loose in hopes of keeping the defenders in their pill boxes and allowing the 1st Battalion to reach the top of the ridge before being counterattacked. In addition to the 901st FA Battalion ^{which} normally supported the Regiment and other two light battalions and the
(24) Personal experience; (25) Personal experience.

medium battalion of the Division artillery would reinforce with their fires in an attempt to isolate the crossing site and attempt to prevent the defenders from moving to occupy positions within the immediate area. Corps artillery supplemented this fire with the 273rd FA Battalion's 155's and the 243rd FA Battalion's eight-inch guns. (26) Along the Saumur the Cannon Company's 105's, Anti Tank Company's 57 mm and the guns of the 808 TD Battalion, that could fire, would back up the automatic weapons and mortars of the 1st and 3rd Battalions and the 304th Infantry would lay heavy fire along its front. It was hoped that this action by the 304th would appear to be another crossing to the enemy, and therefore draw some of his troops away from the actual crossing area. (27)

About 070015 February guides from the 160th Engineers appeared and led the boat groups to the boats. Moving quietly and slowly Companies A and B were able to reach the river undetected. Opposite a hole in the cross tie barricade that had been erected along the railroad the troops reached the river bank. The rising flood had cut away the bank and there was a drop of almost four feet down to the water. Exercising all care possible the men lowered the boats and shoved off for the opposite shore. The current grabbed the square unwieldy boats and tore them from the hands of those men who were helping steady them for the launching. Until this time the enemy had been quiet but almost as on a prearranged signal he opened up along the entire river front. Mortars, artillery, machine guns, 20 mm anti aircraft guns and small arms began to cover the area with murderous fire. The calm words of the leaders helped steady the men and the first wave was under way. Immediately after Company B was launched Company A started out with its boats. At this time the enemy fire was not directed at the launching site. About half way across, battling the twelve mile current in a herculean effort to keep straight, the little flotilla was caught under the enemy's flares. In (26) A-1, p. 78; (27) Personal knowledge.

a matter of seconds the boats became a mass of flying splinters and writhing bodies as the machine guns found their mark and the mortars began to detonate on the water and in at least one case within one of the boats. Boats were literally blasted out from under the men, others sprang leaks, shipped water and sank. Some of the soldiers lost their paddles and their boats swung broad-side to the current and were swept down stream or sunk under the shifting load. Men spilled into the icy waters. The good swimmers struck out for the enemy shore determined to reach their goal. Others paused to help their buddies who were less expert swimmers or had been wounded by fire or stunned by the swirling boats and floating debris. To an observer watching the action it seemed impossible that anyone could be alive out there. A few of the boats made the far shore and others were swept into the far shore where they were lost from view by a bend in the river. (28)

As the few remaining boats reached the far shore the infantrymen hastily unloaded and left the unfortunate engineers to attempt to paddle back. Enough cannot be said for the grim determination and gallantry of these engineers who attempted to regain the friendly shore with their boats in order to take more troops across. Some of these boats did get back and due to the superior discipline of the men and excellent leadership of the officers and non-commissioned officers more troops jumped off into the fire in an effort to reach their units and friends whom they knew would be needing them on the far side.

On the enemy shore, men who had been swept down stream but had regained the shore began to work their way up to the pre-arranged assembly area. Almost as a magnet draws metal filings they came by twos and threes and an occasional single man appeared from out of the night. It was not so dark now. Across the river in Echternach the German artillery had set some fires, lighting the launching site, and the flashes of bursting shells seemed to light up the area. The reorganization began to take shape and a quick head count showed Company A with fifty-six enlisted men and three officers and Company B with (28) Personal experience.

fifty-two enlisted men and two officers. There were others who had been wounded and remained uncomplaining in the care of a medic at the base of the hill. Companies A and B fell into a ragged column and began their move toward their objective which seemed to rise at impossible heights above their heads. Luck was with these companies as they passed through a heavily mined area without a casualty. Company B moved to the left and reduced several pill boxes, along the escarpment, that were firing blindly and ineffectively into the night. Company A protected from the pill box fire but surrounded by high angle fire started straight up the escarpment dragging themselves up on their hands and knees. They concentrated on finding the trails used by the Germans in moving through the area and by the light of the burning buildings across the river and the bursting shells they clewed their way up through the thick mud, clutching rocks and shrubs as they went. (29)

By this time our own artillery and supporting weapons near Echternech had begun to pound the area. The ground shook and even the water in the river seemed to slosh and boil all the more. The 901st FA Battalion alone fired 2,214 rounds. (30) Due to the light from the burning fires and the flares the enemy sent up it was impossible for the remainder of Company C, Battalion Headquarters Group and Company D to cross. Somewhere to the northwest the 5th and 80th Divisions were also engaged in trying to cross in their sectors. As daylight began to turn the scene a dirty wet grey, Company C less its weapons platoon managed to get across in the remaining boats under direct observation and intense enemy fire. Also with the coming light Company D of the 91st Chemical Mortar Battalion from positions at Echternech tried unsuccessfully to smoke the shore but the switching winds made a smoke screen impossible to maintain. Up stream a few hundred yards the 81st Chemical Company (SG) had a platoon of smoke generators and were making a vain effort in face of the enemy to screen the operation from direct observation. In the face of the enemy, with very little protection from the smoke, elements of the (29) A-1, p. 78; (30) A-1, p. 78.

160th Engineers tried unsuccessfully to construct a foot bridge. The sweeping current snapped the first two cables that were wrestled across the river. On the third attempt the one remaining boat in the area was sunk while attempting to get another cable across. Undaunted the men began construction of the foot bridge parallel to the shore with the idea of swinging the upper end across the river on the current. This bridge was almost in place when the center sagged and the hopes went out of the men as their bridge which had already cost the lives of many of their comrades went down the river in a slashing, twisting maze. (31)

Advancing against heavy resistance from entrenched men, mortar fire and pill boxes Company B was still working its way up a small draw through the early morning mist and rain toward its objective. On their right Company A had succeeded in reaching the top of the escarpment and except from being dead tired from pulling and hauling themselves hand over hand up through the mud the men found themselves in a relative safe position on their objective. By 071000 both companies were well dug in on their objectives and the feeling of success was running high. To the right Staff Sergeant John Shepherd had gathered a few men of Company C and his own Company D and was protecting the battalion left flank. (32) Throughout the day the enemy continued to shell this tenacious group who held on like a bull dog with a grip on the house breaker's leg. During the day there were nine strong counterattacks all beaten off without loss of ground. (33)

At approximately 1555 hours the heaviest counterattack hit. This attack was made up of a strong enemy force and accompanied by three tanks. In the words of Sgt. Charles Smith, "PFC Lyle Corcoran was the only bazooka man with us at the time. When the lead tank turned sideways about twenty yards from us, he let it have two blasts. Fire broke out and the tank went back down the road. I think the men inside burned to death." The second tank (31) Eye witness; (32) A-1, p. 80; (33) Personal experience.

continued to come on firing its machine guns. Mounted on this one were about seven German soldiers. One of the men upon seeing it over run the fox hole of his buddy jumped out of his hole and charged the tank with his pistol. He was immediately killed. This tank however became stuck in the mud and the riding infantry scattered. Before the crew could get out Sgt. Smith and PFC Donald E. Hall dashed out and threw grenades inside the turret. The crew were killed. The third tank withdrew but only after fourteen of the accompanying enemy had been killed. No ground was lost. (34)

In the meantime in the town of Echternach many activities were under way. The engineers had brought up more boats. This time there were eight storm boats with fifty-five horse power motors and six assault boats with twenty-two horsepower motors. The regimental commander altered his plans and decided to commit the 2nd Battalion to support the 1st ^{which was} ~~who were~~ having such a tough time and fast running out of supplies. One of the storm boats and four of the assault boats were lost as the engineers tried to prepare them for the new crossing. At 2030 Company G started across under the enfilading fire from the vicinity of Echternacherbruck and the mortar and artillery fire directed from the remaining pill boxes overlooking the river. About midnight three platoons of Company G and a heavy machine gun platoon from Company H had succeeded in reaching the far shore. Again the boats were lost. Only one power boat remained operational. (35)

Nowhere on the Corps front had the Corps engineers been successful in bridging the swollen stream. Four times during the night cables had been successfully strung across the stream to anchor a bridge. Two of these were swept away by boats and debris floating down from above and the other two were snapped as men in the careening boats clutched at them in an effort to pull themselves across the river. Following the example of their comrades and determined to do just as well additional men of the 2nd Battalion attempted again to cross in eighteen new boats that had just arrived. Twelve of

(34) A-1, p. 80; (35) A-1, p. 81.

these craft, each carrying fifteen men reached the far shore, only one came back. (36) More boats arrived at 0630 and the remainder of Company D and the 1st Battalion command group pushed off. The boat containing the mortars of Company D was sunk and the mortars lost. An act of personal courage by the Battalion Commander at this time helped inspire his men and encourage them to do their best. The boat in which Lt. Colonel Mette was riding capsized a short distance from the ^Near shore. Colonel Mette did not return to the near shore but swam the one hundred or more feet of swift cold water to be on the enemy shore with his men. Many other men seeing his example followed suit. In the comparative safety of the escarpment the Battalion Commander organized the two battalions' scattered elements and began his struggle up the muddy, precipitous hill to reinforce his troops who were still holding out. (37)

The beleaguered troops were sorely in need of supplies. Captain Huston O. Deen, Munitions officer of the 417th Infantry requested permission to fly over the area and drop food, ammunition, and medical supplies to the men. The division commander approved this request and the division artillery pilots volunteered to fly him over. This supply by air was a new idea in the regiment and as the packages were made up, the excited supply officer decided to send over the river on a food run cases of grapefruit juice. Needless to say this was not approved and the packages were made up of more nourishing items. In addition blood plasma, bandages and a SCR 300 radio were successfully dropped from the Liaison planes. (38)

Colonel Albert C. Lieber, Jr., Deputy Chief of Staff of the XII Corps wrote: "The action of the 417th Infantry, 76th Division, was remarkable. The green division had joined the Corps in January and had gotten its ball cartridge maneuvers in holding the defensive front along the lower Sauer-Moselle. It was necessary to use a regiment of this division in the 7 Feb- (36) A-1, P. 82; (37) Personal experience; (38) Personal Experience.

ruary attack in order to obtain the desired density along the attack front, so the 417th Infantry was attached to the 5th Division for the crossing. We estimated that the best way to clear the line in front of the 76th Division was to penetrate and take it in reverse, sweeping from the west to east. Then came the attack and the 'green' 417th found a way through a draw up the precipitous canyon walls and penetrated over 1,000 yards - farther than any of the battalions of the experienced 5th and 80th Divisions..... Months later, when I was C/S XXIII Corps, we were still finding their bodies, ranged around the pill boxes they captured, and frequently with the officer or NCO leader nearest the embresure." (39)

The foregoing action as described by Colonel Lieber was possible because of the good leadership, thorough training, and rigid discipline by which a unit gains confidence in itself and each man knows that he is in a good organization that can do things properly. At one stage of the battle, the attack was lagging in a certain company, threatening the advance of the entire battelion. The Battalion S-3 who had been an instructor during training in attack on pill boxes was with the company endeavoring to induce it to advance. The Company Commander was new and had suffered heavy losses. The Battalion S-3 asked for volunteers among men he knew and, after buttoning up a nearby pill box with machine gun fire, he proceeded to stage before the entire company what he called a "Benning Demonstration" and captured the pill box with eight prisoners. This audacious bit of leadership resulted in a new spirit in the company which carried it to success.

So far the Sauer river had defeated all attempts by the Corps engineers to construct a bridge. The Company Commander of Company C, 301st Engineers, whose men had worked and trained with the 417th Infantry begged permission to allow his company to attempt to bridge the stream and reach their friends on the opposite side who badly needed Engineer support in fighting the pill
(39) A-3, p. 320. (40) Personal Experience.

boxes. Also across the river were many wounded who needed evacuation but were being guarded and protected by the medics of Company C, 301st Medical Battalion. Only the most seriously wounded had been returned to this side. This permission was granted and the company set about their job. Winch cables were removed from the 2½ ton trucks in the area. Anchors were improvised from scrap metal, two for each boat. Under the protection of the smoke, which was covering the area at this time due to the abating of the wind, the bridge began to take form. Before the far shore had been reached however parts of a similar structure being constructed up stream raced down and broke it. The heavy anchors and the improvised cable held however and the following night, 9-10 February after more than ten hours of hard labor, the first men of the 417th Infantry marched across the river. (41)

Supplies began to roll across the river in numbers. These were dumped, protected except from very accurate high angle fire, in the draw leading up to the 1st Battalion's position. It became SOP for every man coming forward, General and soldier alike to carry water, food, or ammunition up the slippery hill. Casualties could be evacuated to the aid station in Echternach and on to the rear. With the support of the rest of the regiment and the supplies coming in the 1st Battalion continued to advance swinging east and mopping up the pill boxes along the north shore of the Sauer and fighting this time through the Siegfried line from the back side. This area was appropriately nicknamed "Rat's nest". Figures showed an average of one pill box to every forty yards. Each pill box had its trenches, gun positions, wire and mines to delay and cause casualties. (42) Throughout this entire operation the attackers were always under direct observation and observed artillery and mortar fire from positions on the higher ground to the north of them. (See Map C) On 11 February control of the 417th passed back to the 76th Division. (43)

The teams were clicking by this time. Each man knew his job. He had confidence in his leaders, his companions and himself. Although the advances

(41) Eye witness; (42) A-1, p. 85; (43) A-1, p. 201;

of the battalion were measured in feet and yards, pill box after pill box, they were going places. The presence of the battalion commander, regimental commander, assistant division commander and the division commander, somewhere in the area every day from the very first night helped inspire the men as they knew that if the "Bress" was around things must be pretty safe. Needless to say battle is never safe but there is a great deal of protection even within a fortified area if you can pick your route and know where you are going. (44)

By 13 February the 301st Engineer battalion had completed a second trestle bridge at Echternach. This bridge was now out of direct observation of the Siegfried line although the Germans continued to interdict it with artillery. The river was receding and the extensive mine fields on the north bank were once again exposed. On 15 February the 1st Battalion, depleted in numbers, more sober, but with a confident cockiness was relieved and went into Division reserve to rest, eat and tell the tales of their own valor, highlighting tales of humor, and skipping the hard bitter fights that each man had at one time or another been engaged. (45) (See Map C)

ANALYSIS AND SPECIALLY

This operation involved a night attack, a river crossing (river in flood) and an attack on a fortified area. Any one of these operations would have been a major undertaking for an untried unit, yet this unit was outstandingly successful.

In analyzing the operation, there was a psychological factor involved. This unit was attacking along side two veteran divisions. The XII Corps and particularly the Third Army had a reputation for aggressive and brilliant attacks. It is a natural human reaction to want to be as good as the next fellow. I believe this factor explains some of the abandon with which this

(44) Personal knowledge; (45) A-1, p. 89

attack was carried through to a successful conclusion. In its eagerness to show up well in its first engagement, this organization outdid the veteran outfits.

There were only limited areas where the river could be crossed due to topography and approaches from our side. However, surprise in the attack was effected owing to the darkness of the night and by the enforcement of the strictest light and sound discipline. As a matter of fact, light and sound discipline was not difficult to enforce. The men needed only to be reminded of the necessity for it and it was apparent to all.

An incident of personal courage on the part of a leader occurred when the Battalion Commander's boat capsized about twenty-five feet from the near shore. The Battalion Commander did not return to the near shore but swam the hundred or more feet across in order to be on the side of the stream where his men were engaging the enemy. On the way, he saved two men from drowning. After this episode, which spread quickly through the ranks of the battalion, the Battalion Commander could do no wrong in the eyes of his men.

In the case of Liaison plane supply, a battle excited supply officer decided to send over the river on a food run cases of canned grapefruit juice. The men needed food, not refreshment. Besides, grapefruit juice would not have been appetizing in freezing February weather, and its great weight precluded any quantity being shipped. Appropriate loads must be planned carefully to get the maximum advantage from the limited space available.

The ten to twelve mile per hour current of the flooded stream defeated the Corps Engineer troops in getting a foot bridge over early in the operation. The cable snapped and debris from upstream carried the boats away. The Engineer Company of the Division Engineers that normally supported this organization pled for an opportunity to place a bridge across. They improvised a cable by removing the winch cables from 2½ ton trucks and improvised

good point
but supporting
anchors
needed.

suitable anchors, two per boat. They set about with grim determination under heavy machine gun and artillery fire and put a bridge across for their buddies with whom they had trained.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons learned in this operation were:

1. A well trained, well disciplined, and well led outfit has determination and confidence in itself. It can rise to great heights.
2. Even though an area for attack is limited, the element of surprise can be effected by selecting the proper time for attack and by enforcing proper discipline.
3. At crises in battle, officers must assume responsibility and risks and must inspire their men by acts of personal courage and daring.
4. Liaison planes were effective in delivering limited supplies to isolated units before the stream was bridged. However, an alert Commander must supervise and check all non SOP operations.
5. Whenever possible, units that normally train together and know each other and have confidence in each other should support each other in battle. It is an American characteristic to never let a buddy down.
6. The action of this battalion proved that man-made obstacles can be overcome by a well trained, well disciplined, well led attacker.
7. Outstanding success in the first engagement with the enemy proved our tactical doctrine to be sound and our training methods correct.