



crossing the Rhine

WILLIAM COLON

In early March 1945 almost any tactical situation map of the Western Front in Europe would have painted a rosy picture for the Allies. All along the Rhine River, German forces, weakened by their losses in the Battle of the Bulge and by the transfer of troops to meet the rising Russian threat on the Eastern Front, were withdrawing to the east bank of the Rhine, destroying bridges behind them.

On the Allied side, forces were strung out all along the west bank of the Rhine. The United States Ninth and Canadian First Armies had linked up near Wesel and Dusseldorf in the north, the First U.S. Army was approaching Remagen, the Third U.S. Army was heading for Frankfurt, and the Seventh U.S. and First French Armies were moving toward Stuttgart and Worms.

Through a German error the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen was still intact when elements of the U.S. 9th Armored Division arrived and seized it before it could be blown. Its seizure was one of the biggest coups of the war, because it gave the Allied forces a highway across the Rhine. Not since 1804, when Napoleon's forces crossed the river to defeat the Austrians at Ulm, had an invading army crossed it.

But this was by no means to be the only crossing of the Rhine. Preparations were under way up and down the river for the establishment of other bridgeheads. In the end, the job of conducting the first assault crossing fell to the 5th Infantry Division. The Red Devils of the 5th Division got the job because they had the best record for river crossings in the Third Army, having conducted a total of 30, with five of them being assault crossings.

Elements of the division reached the Rhine in the vicinity of Oppenheim on 21 March and began deploying on the west bank. By the morning of 22 March the bulk of the division had arrived. All the division staff needed at this point was two or three days in which to plan a crossing. What it got was only a few hours, because the Germans were already diverting troops from the American bridgehead at Remagen to meet the new threat posed by the Third Army. Every hour's delay, therefore, reduced the chances for a successful crossing. No one knew this better than the Third Army commander, General George S. Patton, Jr. Patton also knew that the British 21st Army Group in the north was about to try an assault crossing of the Rhine. In deciding to rush the 5th Division's crossing, Patton may have been partly motivated by a desire to be first. In any event, on the morning of 22 March, he ordered the crossing to take place that night.

There were endless details to be worked out. Assault teams had to be assembled, armed, and equipped; boats had to be obtained and brought forward to the crossing site; artillery support had to be organized; guns of all calibers had to be brought up and emplaced; and troops, equipment, and supplies had to be scheduled for movement.

This is where the division's experience in river crossings paid off, because a miracle of planning took place in the few hours that were available. The final plan called for the initial crossing to be made by the 1st and 3d Battalions of the 11th Infantry. The 10th and 2d Infantry

Regiments would follow in that order, and these would be followed by the 90th Infantry and 6th Armored Divisions. The 4th Armored Division was prepared to strike behind the 5th's bridgehead.

Tremendous quantities of bridging and ferrying equipment were brought up by engineer units and special port battalion personnel. Supporting artillery units were massed in firing positions. The firing plan called for nearly 200 concentrations to cover the far shore from the water's edge to several hundred yards inland, concentrations on all roads and trails leading to the bridgehead area, and heavy concentrations on several towns in the surrounding areas. But none of these were to be fired except on call.

CROSSING

At precisely 2145 hours, Companies I and K of the 3d Battalion, which were to spearhead the crossing, moved down to the river bank. Before them the engineers had laid out the assault boats, and the assault teams carried the boats to the river, launched them, and climbed aboard. The night was cloudy as the troops began paddling across the 800 yards of water, fighting the current. Not a shot was fired from the far side. (See accompanying map.)

Company K's boats reached the far bank first, and as the first infantrymen scrambled ashore, a group of seven surprised Germans rose before them and promptly surrendered, even agreeing to row themselves unescorted across the river to captivity.

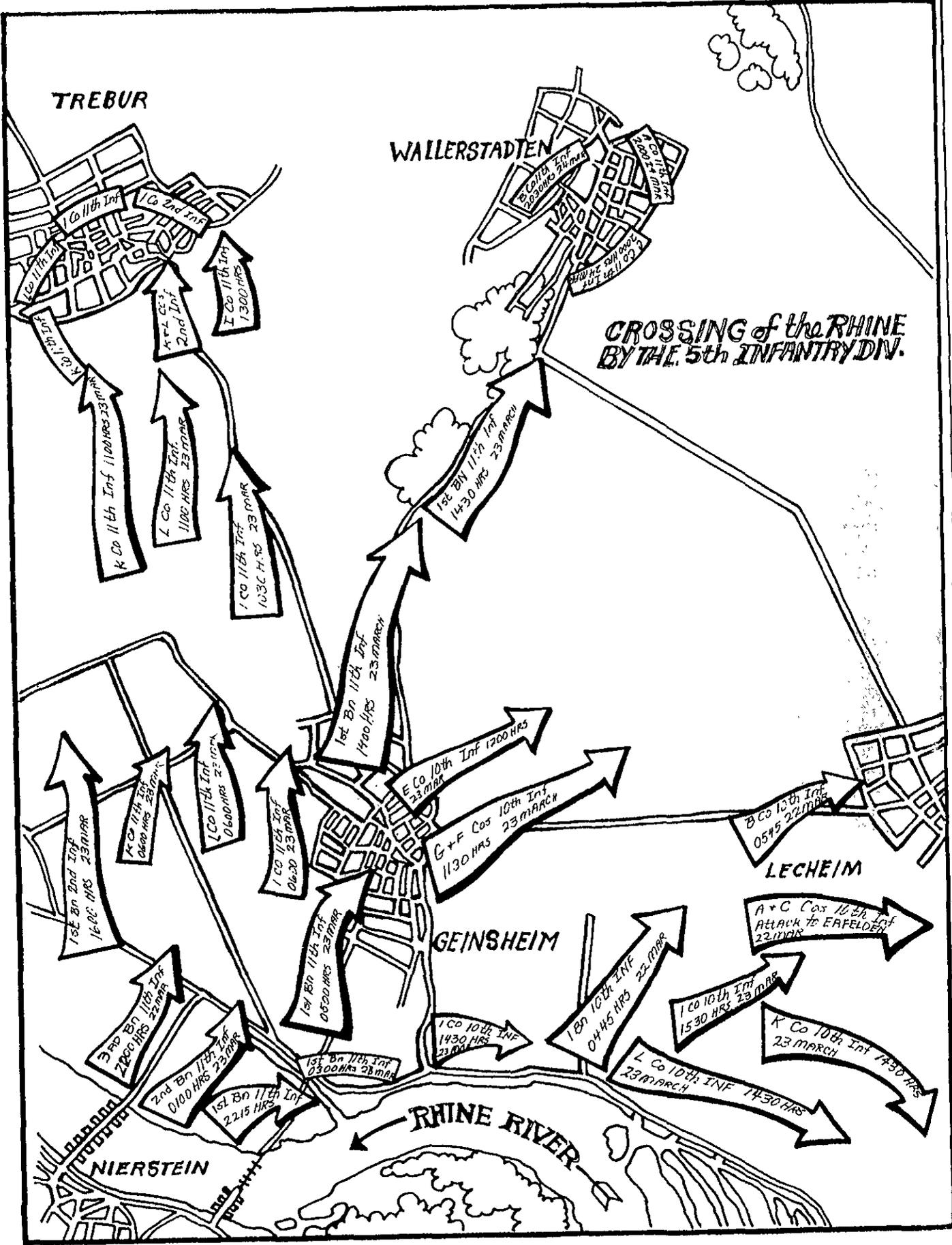
Company I was still crossing when heavy firing came from the right flank where the 1st Battalion's troops were crossing 700 yards downstream near Oppenheim. As the company's boats neared the east bank, its troops were also fired on, but the Germans were firing blindly, and the company suffered no casualties. But when Company L crossed minutes later, the German fire increased and several soldiers were hit.

Meanwhile, Companies A and B of the 1st Battalion were paddling into increasingly heavy machinegun and small arms fire in their sector. As their boats beached on the far shore and the troops scrambled ashore, German fire increased.

Company A met violent resistance in clearing out several buildings on its right flank. Twenty Germans were captured and 14 killed. By midnight, the entire 1st Battalion was across the Rhine, and the troops continued to clear pockets of resistance.

While the 1st Battalion was having trouble securing its sector of the bridgehead, the 3d Battalion tried to extend its sector about a thousand yards to the north. By midnight, too, the entire 3d Battalion had crossed over, with only Company L receiving heavy small arms fire during the crossing. Company K began clearing the left half of the 3d Battalion's river area while Company I moved south toward the 1st Battalion on its right flank. Company K sent two platoons north to secure the southern tip of a small airfield, which they did by 0400 hours.

Despite several small German counterattacks in the 3d



TREBUR

WALLERSTADEN

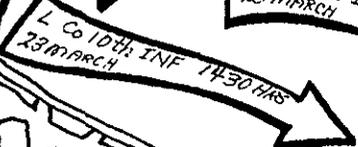
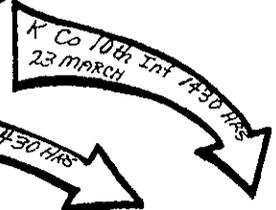
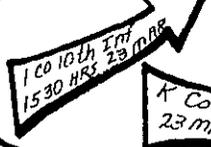
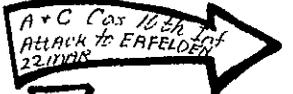
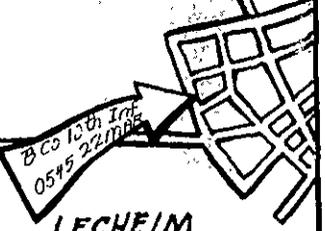
CROSSING of the RHINE BY THE 5th INFANTRY DIV.

LECHEIM

GEINSHEIM

RHINE RIVER

NIERSTEIN



Battalion's sector, the 11th Combat Team began to take over as artillery liaison and forward observers crossed over. Troops of the 2d Battalion, who had been held in regimental reserve, began crossing shortly after midnight.

EXPLOITATION

At 0155, 23 March, the bridgehead was considered sufficiently secure, and the three battalions of the 10th Infantry began crossing near Oppenheim. Once across, they moved out immediately toward Leeheim on the southern flank of the bridgehead. Companies A and C of the 1st Battalion made contact at 0245 and moved eastward toward Erfeldon. Although Company C was fired on, the troops advanced with deadly marching fire, and soon most of the opposing Germans had been captured.

By 0655, the last battalion of the 10th Infantry was across, and as the two regiments fanned out in the bridgehead, U.S. Navy units brought up landing craft and put them in the river. Combat engineer battalions constructed four ferries and began building a treadway bridge. By 0700 hours, one ferry was working and the landing craft were scuttling back and forth across the river carrying supplies.

Meanwhile, with all but sporadic resistance broken in its sector, the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry had continued moving inland toward Geinsheim, which was one of the division's primary objectives. It was still dark. The axis of advance was the main road leading to Geinsheim.

Heavy small arms fire flared as the assault companies advanced. Flares burst overhead, and these were followed almost immediately by heavy concentrations of German mortar fire. The shelling grew more intense as German artillery fire fell among the U.S. troops, forcing them off their course.

Caught in the open and unable to find cover or to advance in the face of the heavy German fire, the men in Companies A and B milled about and suffered a number of casualties. But they soon rallied behind their leaders and moved forward in a determined assault that scattered the resistance. Their advance proved timely, because moments later heavy concentrations of German shellfire fell in the area they had just left.

A little later, the German infantry counterattacked from Geinsheim. Company B caught most of the action, exchanging rifle fire, rifle grenades, hand grenades, and even bazooka fire with the Germans at close range. Supporting fires from the 19th Field Artillery Battalion helped the defense, and at 0400 the Germans broke off and withdrew.

Around 0530, the two companies resumed the attack on Geinsheim, following the retreating Germans who partially blew a canal bridge near the town while withdrawing. During this period, the German air force was active over the bridgehead. German planes dropped bombs along the river bank and attempted to strafe troops and installations, but were driven off by anti-aircraft fire.

Company B's troops met intense resistance as they

neared Geinsheim. Small arms fire slowed their advance. Once again using marching fire, the Americans routed the German defenders along the canal, firing directly into their positions and sending them scurrying. As the Americans neared Geinsheim, they heard a welcome rumble. Supporting armor had crossed the Rhine and was rolling toward them.

At the same time, the 10th Infantry was expanding the bridgehead to the south, clearing several miles of the eastern bank and taking 73 prisoners while driving toward Erfeldon. The 2d Battalion pushed on toward Dornheim, which it cleared by 2030, and the 1st Battalion began passing through to attack Berhach.

Elsewhere in the 10th Infantry's area the 3d Battalion jumped off at 1300 in a southeasterly direction, and by 1630 Company L had cleared a pocket of resistance in the bend of the river formed by the Rhine's former and present courses. By this time, too, the 1st Battalion of the 2d Infantry had crossed the Rhine in landing craft piloted by the Navy, had passed through the bridgehead established by the 11th Infantry, and had continued the attack to the north, capturing the town of Astheim. Two hours later, its 3d Battalion had crossed and had moved toward Trebur to relieve the 3rd Battalion of the 11th Infantry.

Thirty-six hours after the initial crossings, the division's bridgehead was five miles deep and seven miles wide and, in addition to the three regiments of the 5th Division, held two regiments of the 90th Infantry Division, a tank destroyer battalion, a tank battalion, and numerous artillery battalions. Elements of the 6th Armored Division were also across. The Rhine bridgehead was a success.

Casualties had been lighter than expected. Heroism had been commonplace. Crossing the Rhine without artillery preparation or area reconnaissance had been a calculated gamble that paid off, largely through the efforts of the infantrymen of the 5th Division.

The most prized accolade for the division came from General Patton when he wrote in November 1945:

Throughout the whole advance across France you spearheaded the attack of your corps. You crossed so many rivers that I am persuaded many of you have web feet, and I know all of you have dauntless spirit.

Despite its hasty preparations, the 5th Division's crossing of the Rhine River turned out to be one of the smoothest river crossings the division had ever conducted.



WILLIAM COLON has been interested in military history since World War II, when he served with the 5th Infantry Division. He participated in three of the 5th Division's six assault river crossings, was wounded twice and was awarded the Combat Infantryman's Badge. He retired from the Department of Defense in 1979 after 33 years of military and civil service.