

# Infantry In Action



## CROSSING THE MEURTHE

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*AUTHOR'S NOTE: On 15 August 1944 the United States Seventh Army landed in southern France, moved quickly westward to take Marseilles, and then swept north up the Rhone Valley, reaching the Vosges Mountains by mid-October. At this point the attack stalled; German resistance stiffened, supply problems became acute, and the rugged terrain proved hard going for battle weary troops.*

*I was briefly part of this story. I joined Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division as a replacement rifleman on the Anzio beachhead. I got my baptism of fire during the Anzio breakout, enjoyed our triumphant entry into Rome, stood guard at Mussolini's headquarters on the Piazza Venezia, participated in six weeks of strenuous train-*

*ing for the landing in southern France, and landed with the first wave at Cavalaire.*

*Although the landing did not compare in casualties with Salerno or Normandy, the 7th Infantry had 58 men killed including 11 from Company F. I got mine the next day when I was wounded in the knee and sent back to a hospital in Naples. Thus I missed out on the fabled "Champagne Campaign." In October the doctors decided, in view of the great shortage of riflemen, that I was sufficiently recovered to return to combat. I rejoined my unit in mid-November, just as the Seventh Army was preparing for its push toward Strasbourg and the Rhine.*

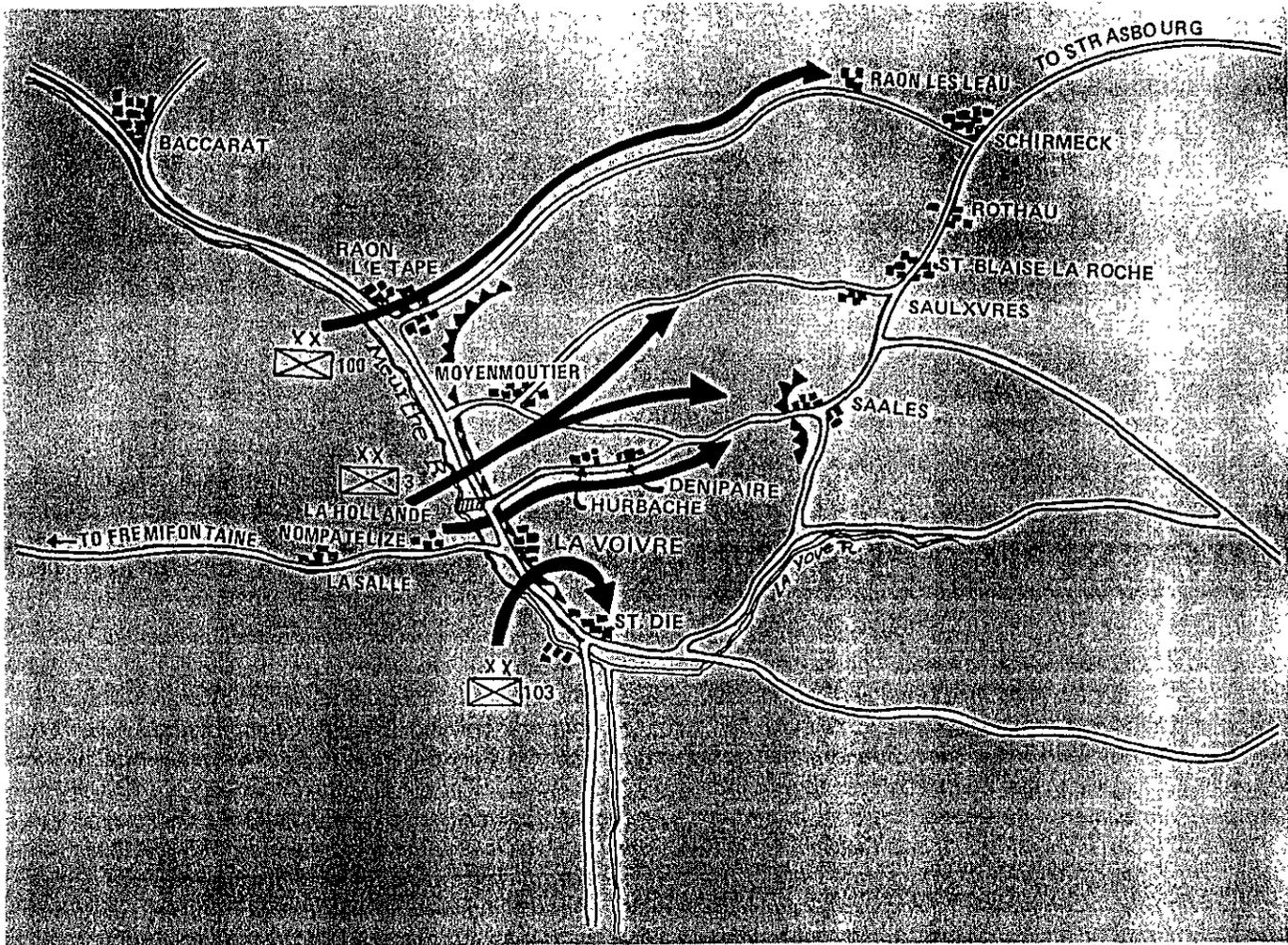
The Army's immediate objective was to break through the "Winter Line" that the Germans had spent several months preparing in the Vosges Mountains (see Map 1). The 3d Division's assignment was to cross the Meurthe River above St. Die and then cut through the mountains to Saales, where it would be on the main road to Strasbourg. To the north, the 100th Division would attack from Raon L'Etape, while to the south the 103d Division would take St. Die itself.

Nestled in the valley of the Meurthe, St. Die was a tough obstacle similar to St. Lo in Normandy. The most likely strategy was to outflank it, and for this reason the Germans had built extensive fortifications north of the city along the river. The Meurthe is not a large river but it flows rapidly down the valley, and in November it was swollen by autumn rains. The riverbanks were soft and muddy. Just north of St. Die at LaVoivre, however, there were two good sites for the Bailey bridges that would be needed to move the Division's armor and other heavy equipment across the river.

The Division decided that the most dangerous part of the coming operation would be the actual crossing of the swift-

flowing Meurthe. The German fortifications were weakly manned, and once our infantry got across the river they could be taken by assault. The land west of the river, though, was bowl-shaped: a flat plain surrounded by mountains, over which the Germans had excellent observation, and in the days before the attack, the Germans used this advantage to shell the Division's crossing area. A daylight attack would certainly come under heavy artillery fire, especially at the vulnerable time when the troops were crossing the river. For this reason the Division decided to cross the river at night, attacking at dawn after heavy artillery preparation. Company F had had a brief respite from combat, the time being used for training, repairing equipment, and practicing night maneuvers and river crossings. The date for the crossing of the Meurthe was set as 21 November.

LaVoivre and the bridge sites were assigned to the 2d Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Clayton Thobro, one of the most respected battlefield commanders in the division. LaVoivre was a village of about twenty houses, one and one-half miles north of St. Die, which had been converted by the



Map 1

Germans into a strongpoint. It was situated on rising ground about 1,000 yards from the river. The plain between the river and the town had been mined, and the rising ground in front of the village was blocked by felled trees, barbed wire, and trenches. The hills and woods behind the town provided ideal locations for the German artillery units, who were zeroed in on the riverbanks where we were likely to cross.

The houses of LaVoivre had been converted into fortifications, with buildings connected either by breaches in the walls or by underground tunnels. Because the buildings were sited on a slope, their basement walls were open on the side facing the river, from which connections were made with trenches. Isolated houses on each end of town had been reinforced by sand-bagged windows. If LaVoivre had been adequately manned, it would have been a tough nut to crack. Fortunately, Division intelligence had learned that LaVoivre was defended only by approximately 60 men. There was no German armor that might counterattack.

When the attack began, the 7th Infantry was bivouacked at Fremifontaine, about 15 miles from the crossing point. At 2300 on a chilly, damp evening, the 2d Battalion left Fremifontaine by truck but encountered a traffic jam when a battalion of tanks from the 14th Armored Division wandered into 3d Division

territory. The delay was short, but the tanks chewed up most of our telephone wire.

We left the trucks at LaSalle, about a mile from the river, going the rest of the distance by foot. We were under strict orders to maintain complete silence, an order we scrupulously obeyed, since no one wanted to draw enemy fire. Our 1st Battalion moved into position on our left about the same time. The 3d Battalion was in reserve, ready to move through the assault battalions when the initial objectives were achieved.

Earlier in the evening, Company F's third platoon had gone ahead, crossed the river in wooden boats, and established a perimeter on the east side of the river, and the combat engineers installed two footbridges downstream from the planned Bailey bridge sites. These were standard floating bridges with a three-foot gangway and attached cables for hand guides. One was 84 feet long and the other 96 feet. Fortunately, the Germans were unaware of the bridge building, and their random artillery fire during the night was apparently routine harassing fire.

At 0345, Company F, commanded by First Lieutenant Earl Swanson, led the battalion across the footbridges (see Map 2). (I still remember the blackened faces of the engineers as we crossed the bridge.) We spread out quietly on ground that

I recall as hard, damp, and cold. There was no thought of digging in, which would have made noise. Company E, under Lieutenant James Powell, followed and took its place to the right of Company F. Lieutenant Leonard Hanney's Company G remained in reserve back by the river in a line of trees. It was in a column of platoons parallel to the river with orders to make a large loop to the south end of the town. Sections of Company H, the battalion's heavy weapons company, were attached to the three rifle companies. The 1st Battalion crossed on footbridges to our left, and farther north two battalions of the 30th Infantry also crossed.

Once in place, we lay for two hours in the silent darkness. All was quiet until about 0600 when the German artillery routinely shelled the riverbanks and hit several men in Company G; I do not recall that any of the wounded cried out.

An important part of the plan was a massive artillery barrage to precede our infantry attack. The firepower devoted to this rather modest operation was indeed awesome. The official history of the Seventh Army summarizes it this way:

*H-Hour was preceded by 30 minutes of the most intense artillery preparation fired for the 3d Division since the breakout at Anzio. This was followed by 30 minutes of counter-battery and deepening fires on enemy positions. The initial preparation was fired on the enemy's main line of resistance, from which infantry elements were but 200 yards away . . . Over 6,500 rounds were fired by 3d Infantry Division Artillery alone, in addition to that fired by corps and group. In support of the VI Corps assault across the Meurthe 64 sorties were flown by the XII Tactical Air Corps prior to noon.*

Our Regimental Cannon Company also provided indirect fire while direct fire was provided by antitank guns, tanks and tank destroyers from hull-down positions, and antiaircraft guns. The Division's Reconnaissance Troop manned six .50 caliber machineguns and the 7th Infantry's Battle Patrol

manned 20, all of which were mounted along the riverbank to provide overhead direct fire support for the advancing infantry.

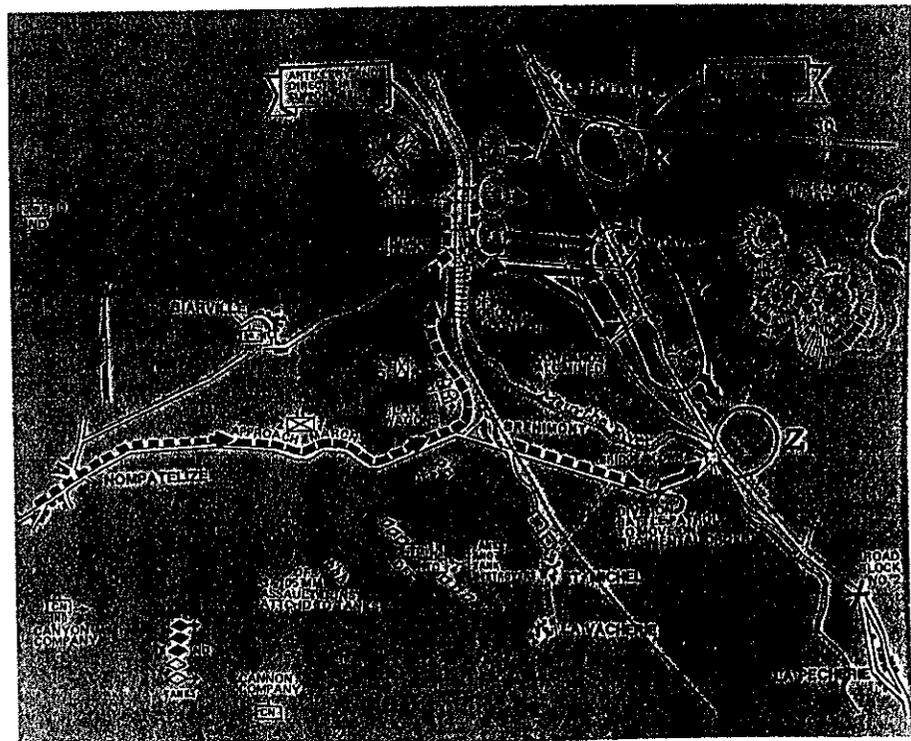
At 0617 the barrage began. It alerted the Germans, who assumed that the river was being crossed at that time. They placed mortar fire on the riverbanks and plain and we could do nothing but lie there and take it. Seven men in the company were hit. One mortar shell landed about three feet behind my right foot. It seemed like the ground dropped out from under me and I fell back on my stomach with a thud. I can still see that smoking black hole.

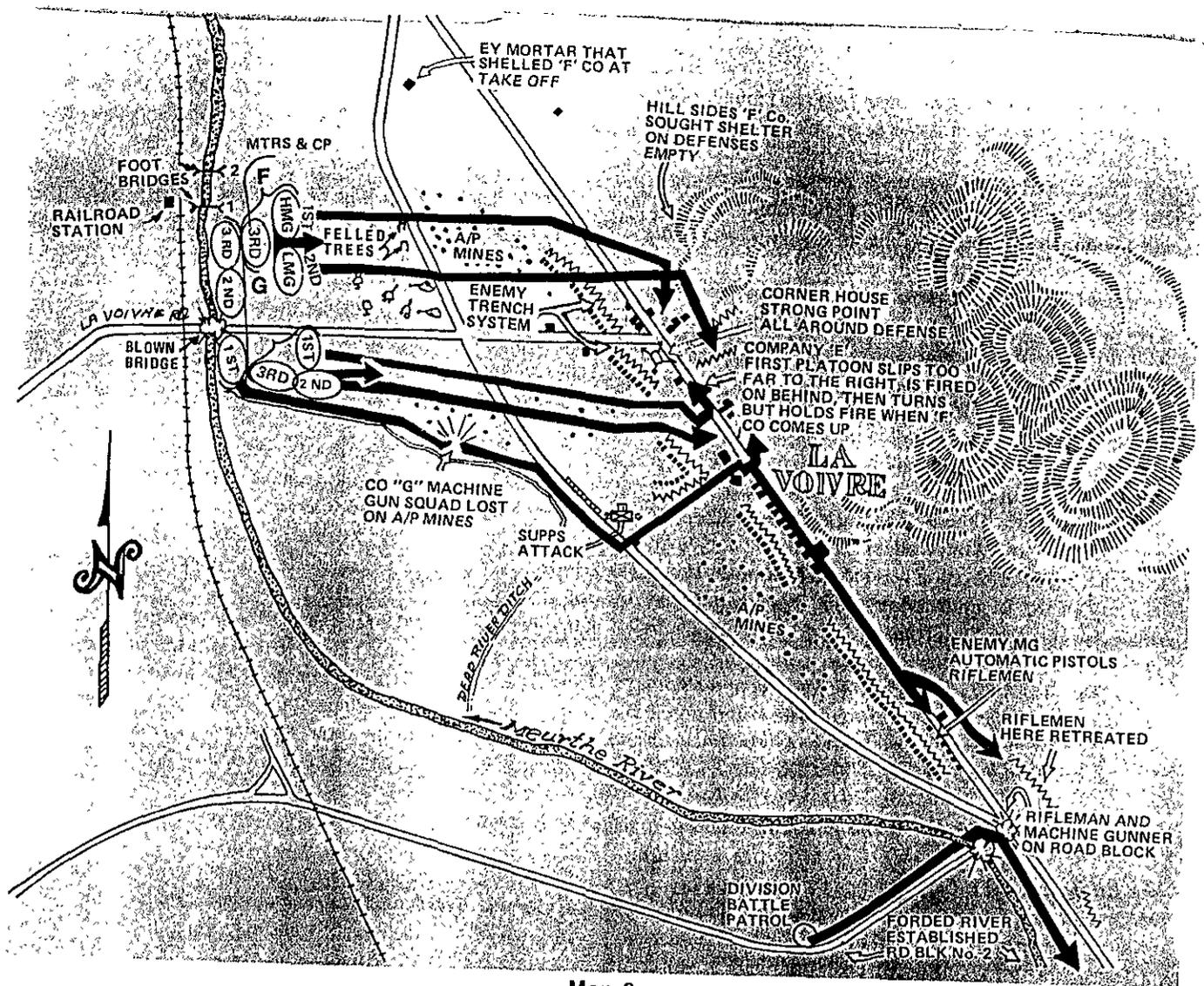
Despite the shelling, we held our places and maintained silence. Nobody panicked. Besides, there was no place to go.

The battalion jumped off at 0645 (see Map 3). By that time LaVoivre was burning and a cloud of smoke from it rose in the pale November dawn. Our artillery was still firing overhead and the direct fire weapons poured fire on the town. One report attributed the German's failure to occupy their trenches to the volume of direct fire support. In the meantime, dive bombers attacked the German artillery positions in the rear, thus preventing German counterfire while the advance was in progress. I still have a vivid memory of a dive bomber swooping down on the town and dropping its bomb, which at that distance looked to me about the size of a jelly bean.

Our advance was delayed about half an hour by felled trees, and this gave the Germans time to get out of their cellars and pour machinegun fire on us. Most of it came from a fortified house on the north end of town. We needed another half-hour to reach the wire and the trenches, which fortunately were unmanned. The company then took shelter on the hillside north of town while Lieutenant Swanson directed the First Platoon to attack the house; he later estimated it contained 10 men with a heavy machinegun and other automatic weapons. The Second Platoon (where I was) swung around in back of the town

Map 2





Map 3

and then began working its way down the street, clearing houses.

In the meantime, on our right, Company E did not encounter the obstacles that slowed our advance, and its soldiers attacked the town in quick rushes, reaching the wire and trenches in about 15 minutes. The leader of Company E's First Platoon was new to combat, and many of his men were new replacements. The platoon was supposed to link up with Company F, which was still working its way through the felled trees and receiving fire from the fortified house at the north end of town.

Company E did not receive any fire from this house until its First Platoon veered southward to the main part of town. Then the Germans in the house opened up on them. The platoon scattered for cover until Lieutenant Powell, the company commander, got it organized and firing back. The platoon stopped firing when they saw our First Platoon attack the house. The rest of Company E stayed busy clearing houses and taking prisoners.

Company G attacked by looping to the right, its purpose being to take the road that led southward to St. Die. It ran into a minefield and lost an entire machinegun squad from Company H, plus several of its own soldiers. But then it ad-

vanced rapidly and reached the south end of town about 0730 and probably took most of the prisoners the battalion claimed that morning.

A secondary objective of the battalion's attack was the site of a blown bridge south of town. Here the Germans had a roadblock composed of a squad of men with a machinegun and automatic pistols. The Division's Battle Patrol forded the river at this point about 0830 and attacked the roadblock with support from Company G. Eight or ten prisoners were taken, and other German defenders fled into the hills. German artillery and mortar fire fell on the road, however, and cost Company G an estimated 16 casualties. The bridge site was secured about 1045 and the engineers immediately began installing a Bailey bridge for the armor to cross and continue the Division's advance. By that time, too, other engineers were already building another bridge at the site near the footbridges.

By 1100 the battle was over. The 1st Battalion took the village of Hurbache and the 3d Battalion was committed, crossing on the footbridges and taking Denipaire (see Map 1). We were sent back to catch our breath and reorganize. The 7th Infantry Regiment had 167 casualties that day, including 31 killed and 136 wounded. The 2d Battalion had 11 killed (three from Company F) and 57 wounded. It captured 45 prisoners.

When we dug in for the night, I opened my pack to take out my blanket. I found it was full of holes. My first reaction was: "Somebody took my blanket and gave me this moth-eaten one." Then I looked again and saw that a piece of shrapnel had passed completely through the pack and blanket about two inches above my back. Obviously, this was from the mortar shell that had blown me off the ground in the early morning shelling.

What can we learn about infantry combat in World War II from this account of the crossing of the Meurthe? An official report prepared by the Seventh Army historical team, which I have used to flesh out my own recollections, shows the extensive planning and coordination that was necessary to launch an attack by one battalion on one small village, an attack completed in less than four hours. Most of the men who planned and led the operation were ordinary Americans with minimal training who had learned how to do it mainly through experience. Common soldiers like me had little knowledge of what was happening, but we did our duty anyway. The 7th Infantry relied on heavy supporting fire to destroy the enemy's willingness to resist and then sent in rifle companies to occupy the ground, mop up any remaining resistance, and take prisoners. The Germans in LaVoivre put up a respectable fight and then surrendered or fled. By the time the riflemen got into the town, most of the enemy were gone or were ready to surrender. As a rifleman, that's the way I liked it!

Crossing a river at night was unusual and required careful planning, good leadership, and well-disciplined troops. In this respect, the 7th Infantry performed well. The risk in the plan was premature discovery, for when the two battalions had crossed the river and taken up their jump-off positions, they were vulnerable to German artillery and mortar fire. In the darkness, they could neither attack the town nor retreat across the river. The gamble paid off, but the 2d Battalion paid a price, the least of which was my ruined blanket. We were fortunate the price was not higher.

The crossing of the Meurthe established a method of crossing rivers at night that was used successfully by the 3d Division on several occasions during the Colmar Pocket operation. Clearly, the Division was capable of organizing and carrying out a sophisticated and risky operation.

At LaVoivre, as is inevitable in a citizen army, leadership determined what happened. The rifle companies were greatly understrength, and the constant turnover of riflemen meant lack of battle experience and inevitable confusion. The company commanders were proven leaders, and with companies

at half strength or less they exercised considerable personal control over the action. Sometimes the lack of experience may have been an asset.

What about the riflemen? In 1947, S.L.A. Marshall's *Men Against Fire* astonished a nation whose view of World War II had been shaped by wartime newsreels, movies, and morale building articles, plus the tales of personal daring and danger told by returning veterans. The theme of Marshall's book was the lack of aggressiveness on the part of U.S. ground troops which he demonstrated by showing the unwillingness of riflemen to fire their rifles.

After surveying numerous battles in the European Theatre and in the Pacific, Marshall found that in any battle no more than 25 percent of the riflemen fired their rifles, and much of the time the figure was closer to 15 percent. I know I did not fire my rifle at LaVoivre, and I am confident that most members of the Second Platoon did not, although other platoons did. Coming around the back of the town, firing by the Second Platoon was more likely to injure friend than foe.

The crossing of the Meurthe showed that the riflemen would fire their rifles where there was a target and when their officers or NCOs showed the way. There are enough deadly missiles flying around a battlefield anyway without adding unnecessarily to the congestion. The purpose of infantry is to advance on the enemy and occupy ground. When this purpose is carried out, the riflemen are fighting the war, whether they fire their rifles or not.

In retrospect, the crossing of the Meurthe River, although it had some special features, was the kind of small unit action that took place constantly in combat and would be repeated over and over until Hitler's *Reich* was no more. All along the great front that stretched from the North Sea to the Alps, other battalions were doing approximately the same thing. Although it is important to understand war in its broadest context, if there is any lesson for the modern U.S. Army in this account of the crossing of the Meurthe, it is that war eventually comes down to small unit actions. It is at that level that doctrine, training, leadership, weapons, and morale prove their worth.



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