

Armor in River Crossings

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A RESEARCH REPORT

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1949 - 1950

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ARMOR IN RIVER CROSSINGS

A RESEARCH REPORT PREPARED

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1949 - 1950

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MARCH 1950

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CHAPTER 1

ARMOR IN RIVER CROSSINGS

Introduction

Military history is replete with detailed accounts of military operations against both natural and man-made obstacles. In every incident the objective lay beyond the obstacle and did not constitute the obstacle itself.

Wide and unfordable rivers exercise considerable influence on military operations, due to the restrictions which they impose upon movement and maneuver. Rivers constitute obstacles to an attack and natural lines of resistance for defense. They assist in screening against hostile attack. The attack across wide and unfordable rivers requires, in most cases, special preparation, both technical and tactical. These preparations are in proportion to the size of the river and the relative strength of the opposing forces.

The detailed study of armor in river crossings during World War II is far beyond the scope and purpose of this paper. Such a study would require time, facilities and personnel far beyond the reach of this research committee.

The study of armor in river crossings as it is treated in this paper approaches the problem in three phases.

A hasty crossing or probably more appropriate in this case, a crossing of opportunity is defined as a crossing made with the technical and tactical means immediately available to the unit making the crossing. It is characterized by the rapid seizure of

a bridge-head with no delay for special training or detailed planning.

A deliberate crossing is defined as one in which additional personnel and equipment are required by the unit making the crossing. The planning for a deliberate crossing and the necessary coordination is performed by higher headquarters.

A supported crossing is defined as a deliberate crossing in which armor is utilized in a supporting role, both on the near and far shore. The employment of armor in the role of supporting infantry in river crossing operations was frequently and successfully accomplished during World War II.

The appreciation of the problems involved in the employment of armor in these three phases and the practical application of solutions by tactical commanders is illustrated by combat examples from World War II.

The rapid and bold seizure of the LUDENDORF railroad bridge at REMAGEN, Germany, 7 March 1945, by the 9th Armored Division is used to illustrate the hasty river crossing, or crossing of opportunity by armor.

The river crossing operations on the OUR River in the vicinity of CLERVAUX, Luxemburg, the night of 6-7 February 1945, by the 6th Armored Division under most adverse conditions is used to illustrate the deliberate river crossing by armor.

The heavy, slugging, fiercely opposed crossing of the ROER River at JULICH, Germany, the night of 22-23 February 1945 by the

29th Infantry Division, supported by the 747th Tank Battalion,
is used to illustrate the supported river crossing by armor.

CHAPTER 2

THE HASTY CROSSING

Introduction

It is not unusual for an armored unit to be faced with a river crossing of opportunity -- a crossing which materializes with little or no prior notice and without opportunity for planning or rehearsal. Such an operation is formally termed a "hasty river crossing" and is defined as one made with the tactical and technical means immediately available to the unit making the crossing. It is characterized by the rapid seizure of a bridgehead with no delay for rehearsal or detailed planning and no further reinforcement by higher headquarters.¹ Rapid seizure implies initiative at all levels of command from platoon leaders to division commanders. It means exploiting to the utmost a fundamental characteristic of armored action -- boldness.

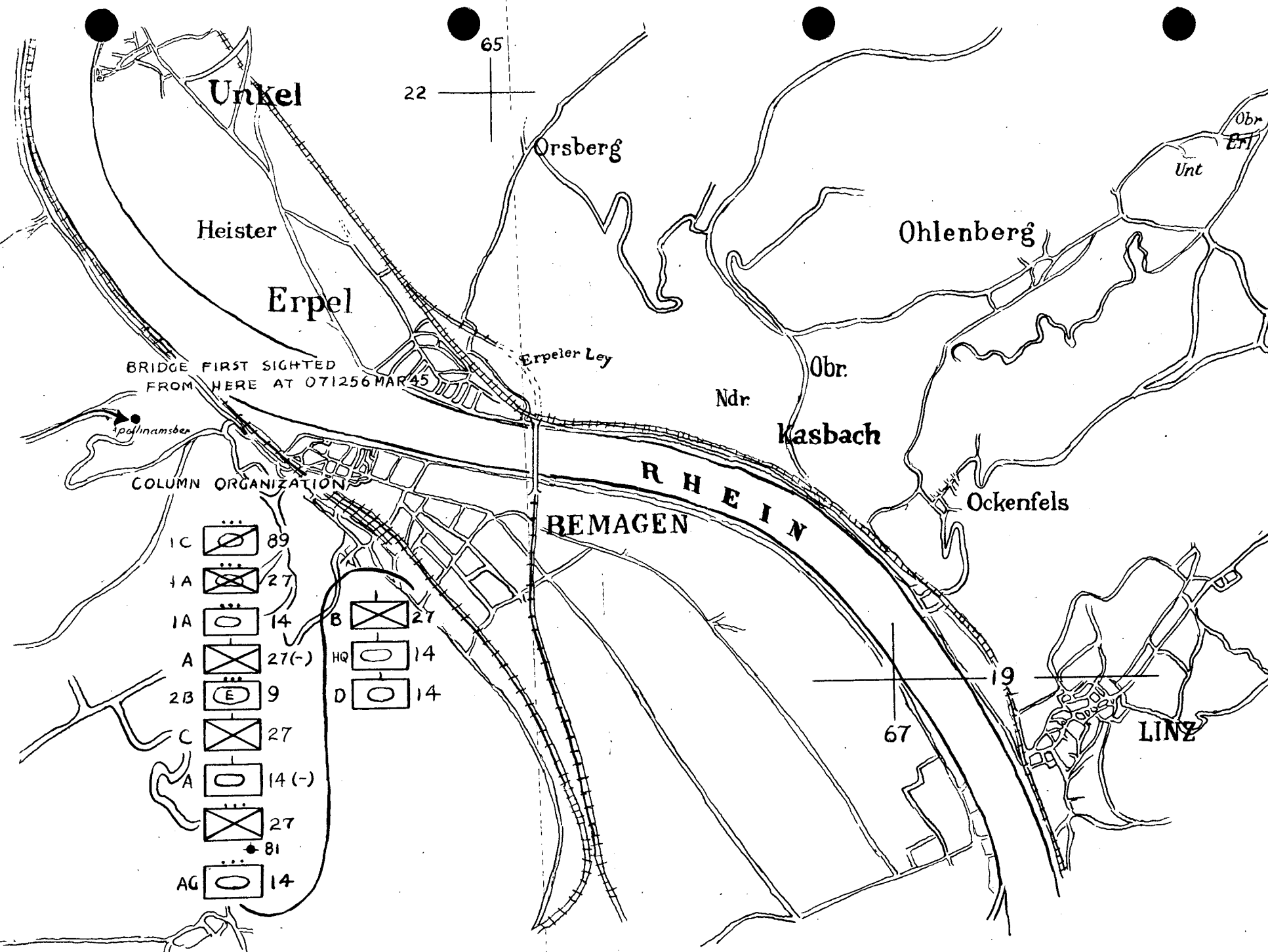
In studying armored river crossing actions during the past war, it became apparent that the bold seizure of the LUDENDORF BRIDGE at REMAGEN, Germany, by the 9th Armored Division in March 1945 was typical of armor in hasty river crossings. The wealth of available detail from after action reports and personal interviews permits an almost minute-by-minute account of the first two days of that historic action. Because this study is concerned only with the armored aspects of the REMAGEN bridgehead, no attempt has been made to follow the expansion of the bridgehead after its command passed from the control of the 9th Armored Division on 9 March.

The General Situation

By late February 1945 Allied armies had breached the German West Wall and were surging into the Reich, well on their way to the RHINE. With the collapse of defenses along the ROER River the last of February, the German forces opposing the First U. S. Army began their withdrawal to the east bank of the RHINE. By the first of March it became apparent that resistance was diminishing and First Army directed its corps to push for the RHINE, clear the west bank of enemy and prepare for what was expected to be a troublesome and expensive task, the crossing of that major river. First Army had, however, optimistically directed that any existing crossings be seized.²











The north corps of First Army, III Corps, assigned each of its three divisions a zone of advance with the 9th Infantry Division on the north, the 9th Armored Division in the center, and the 78th Infantry Division on the south. The 9th Armored Division was directed to advance rapidly within its zone to the RHINE, clear the zone of enemy, and seize the AHR River bridges at SINZIG, BODENDORF and BAD NEUENAHHR.


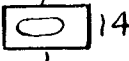

When Major General Leonard, commander of the 9th Armored Division, received his mission, he divided his zone between Combat Command A and Combat Command B, with Combat Command B on the north. The northern sector included the AHR River towns of SINSIG, BODENDORF and BAD NEUENAHHR and the RHINE River towns of KRIPP and REMAGEN. The last-named town, REMAGEN, was unique in that available maps depicted a railroad bridge, known locally as the LUDENDORF BRIDGE,



BRIDGE FIRST SIGHTED FROM HERE AT 071256 MAR 45

COLUMN ORGANIZATION

- 1C  89
- 1A  27
- 1A  14
- A  27(-)
- 2B  9
- C  27
- A  14(-)
-  27
-  81
- AG  14

- B  27
- HQ  14
- D  14

RHEIN
BARMAGEN

LINZ

joining REMAGEN with the town of ERPEL on the east bank of the RHINE; the only bridge of any kind spanning the RHINE in the III Corps zone. This bridge was the subject of a telephone conversation between the Corps Commander, Major General Milliken, and General Leonard during the night of 6 March. At that time, General Milliken remarked, "Do you see that black line on the map? If you can seize that, your name will go down in history," or words to that effect.³

The Special Situation

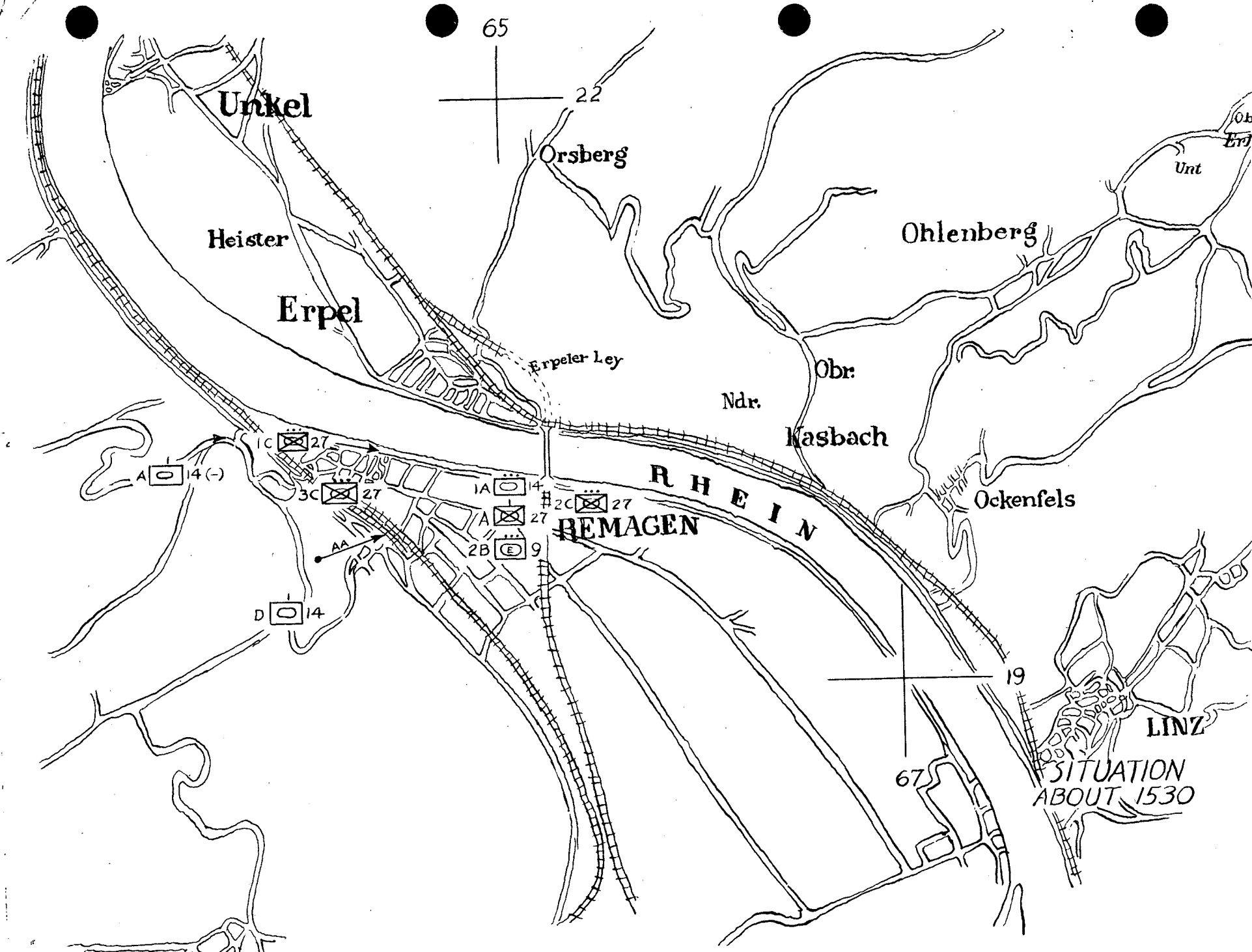
The northern sector of 9th Armored Division's zone had been assigned to Combat Command B. General Hoge, its commander, had just arrived in the bomb-battered town of STADT-MECKENHEIM, about nine miles from the RHINE when he received his orders to accelerate the advance to the RHINE and secure the AHR RIVER bridges. He had arrived in this town before 1530 on the 6th of March and upon receipt of the new orders, began his preparations for a continuation of the advance on the next morning, the 7th. Three forces were organized: Task Force Engeman, composed of the 14th Tank Battalion (less Company B) with the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion attached; Task Force Prince, composed of the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion with Company B of the 14th Tank Battalion attached; and Task Force Robinson, composed of the 1st Battalion, 310th Infantry, with a company of armored engineers and a company of tank destroyers attached. (See Fig. 1)⁴ Task Force Engeman was to move by the northern route (See Sketch) to seize REMAGEN and KRIPP and link up with Task Force Prince on the south. Task Force Prince was to move

on the southern route to seize crossings over the AHR at BODENDORF and SINZIG. Task Force Robinson was placed in reserve initially.

On the morning of 7 March the task forces were delayed several hours by rubble which clogged the streets of STADT-MECKENHEIM. Our Air Force had been almost too thorough. Rain for the past month had so softened the ground that movement off roads was impossible so that it was 1000 before the columns had moved out. General Leonard had come up to confer with General Hoge that morning and, based upon information received from an artillery liaison pilot, Lt. Harold E. Larsen, who had observed the LUDENDORF BRIDGE intact at 1030, General Leonard directed General Hoge to grab it.⁵ General Hoge's S-3, Major Ben Cothran, was dispatched by jeep to overtake Lt. Colonel Engeman's column, making contact with them about one and one-half miles from REMAGEN.

Before Major Cothran overtook the column with the new instructions, Task Force Engeman had been moving forward against only scattered resistance and shortly after Cothran's arrival the advance guard, commanded by Lt. Timmerman, CO of Company A, 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, had stopped on the top of a bluff overlooking the RHINE and the town of REMAGEN.

This general area is called APOLLINARISBURG and from this point, at 071256 March, the LUDENDORF BRIDGE was first sighted by American ground troops. Timmerman, upon spotting the bridge, noted enemy vehicles moving east across it and, turning to his artillery forward observer, requested that fire be placed on the bridge. The forward observer eagerly relayed this request to the 400th Armored



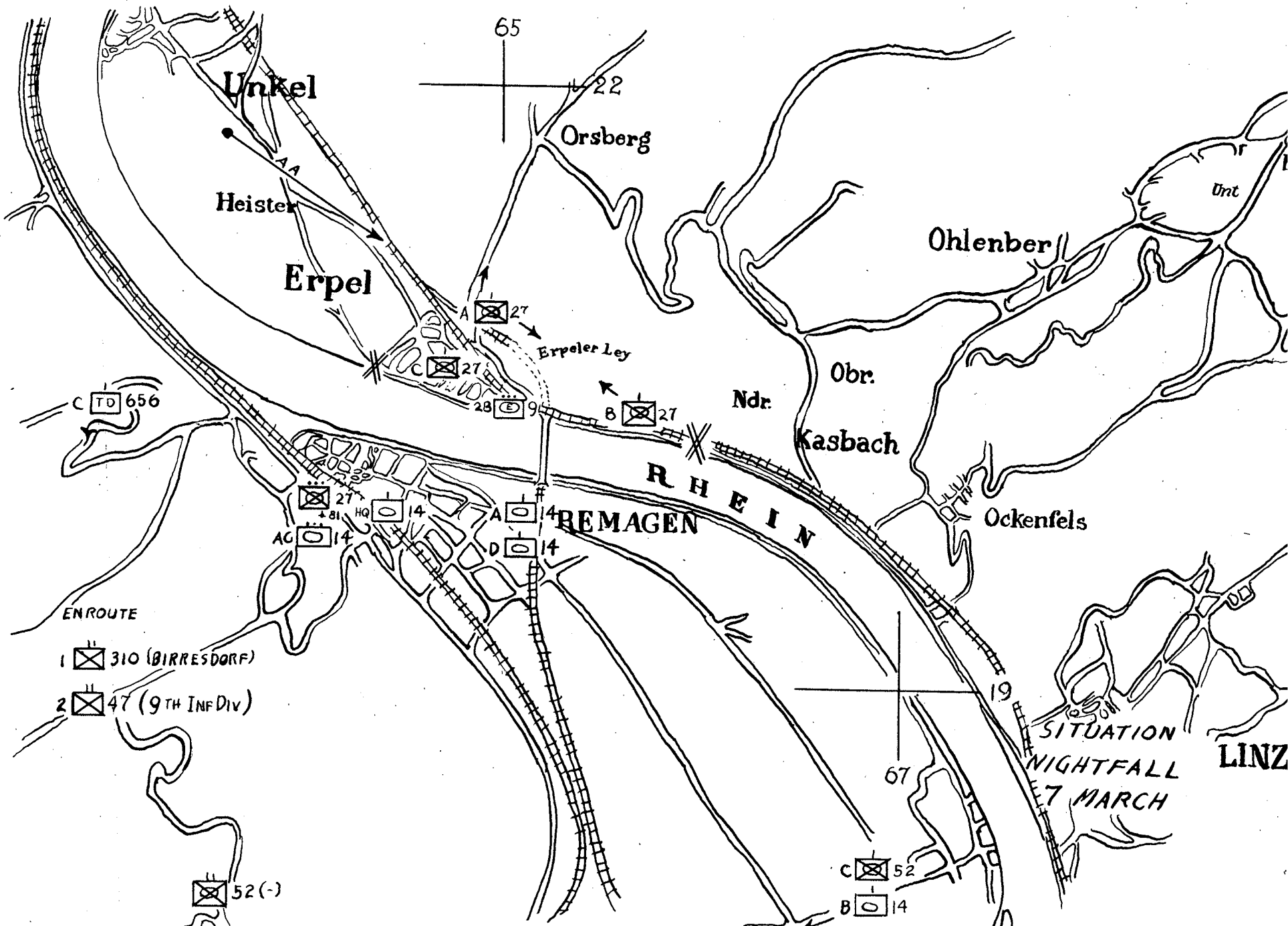
Field Artillery Battalion but, as Lt. Timmerman later put it, "Higher authorities refused permission, stating that friendly troops were on or in the vicinity of the bridge."

About this time, Lt. Colonel Engeman, Major Deevers of the 27th Armored Infantry, Major Cothran and Lt. McMaster of C Company of the 27th had arrived on the scene. After a hasty conference Engeman decided that after Timmerman and McMaster had reconnoitered the approaches to REMAGEN, A Company of the 27th would dismount and clear the town and that C Company, mounted in its half-tracks, would drive for the RHINE and for the LUDENDORF BRIDGE. Company A moved out at 1350, down the narrow winding trail from APOLLINARISBURG to REMAGEN, over-watched by a platoon of tanks from Company A of the 14th Tank Battalion. Company C waited until A Company had reached the bottom of the hill before they started down. Resistance was light, consisting of small arms fire and scattered 20mm antiaircraft fire from positions along the east bank of the river. While this action was in progress, the assault gun platoon with six 105 howitzers from the 14th Tank Battalion and the infantry's mortar platoon, went into position on the heights (632204) and began firing smoke shells at ERPELER LEY, a hill at the far end of the bridge. Unfortunately, the wind was blowing to the east and the smoke, at least initially, was not too effective. The artillery too attempted to place smoke on this same hill. At 1420, the tank platoon of the advance guard started down the hill into REMAGEN and arrived at the edge of town ahead of the infantry. The infantry and tanks joined and moved along the main road through REMAGEN toward the bridge.

At 1500 the tanks reached the west end of the bridge, followed closely by the 2nd Platoon of C Company. While the tanks were going into firing positions in the vicinity of the west end of the bridge, Major Deevers arrived with Timmerman's infantry.

Concurrent with this action along the river bank, General Hoge arrived at APOLLINARISBURG and urged that Engeman speed up his seizure of the bridge. General Hoge's appearance at this juncture was probably occasioned by a report from Task Force Prince to the effect that at 1300 on the afternoon of the 7th, Troop A, 89th reconnaissance Squadron, had learned from civilians in SINZIG that the bridge at REMAGEN would be destroyed at 1600 that day.⁷ This information had been speedily relayed by radio and courier to Combat Command B and Task Force Engeman on the road.

Lt. Colonel Engeman then radioed Lt. McMaster, saying, "Go for the bridge." McMaster replied, "I'm at the bridge!" McMaster was at that moment receiving orders from Major Deevers to take his company across the bridge. McMaster explained to Deevers that he had only one platoon immediately available and that the other two platoons were still in REMAGEN. Deevers then ordered Timmerman's company to cross the bridge and directed that the tank platoon and McMaster's one infantry platoon support Timmerman's crossing. Timmerman was in the process of issuing his attack order at 1550 when the German defenders set off an explosive charge which blew a huge crater in the earth approach to the bridge.⁸ Almost immediately a second charge went off and in the smoke and confusion which accompanied these blasts, Lt. Timmerman cancelled his attack order with



Unkel

65

Orsberg

Heister

22

Erpel

Ohlenber

A 27

Erpeler Ley

Obr.

C TD 656

B 27

Ndr.

Kasbach

R H E I N

Ockenfels

27

AG 14

HQ 14

A 14

D 14

RE MAGEN

ENROUTE

1 310 (BIRRESDORF)

2 47 (9TH INF DIV)

67

SITUATION
NIGHTFALL
7 MARCH

LINZ

52 (-)

C 52

B 14

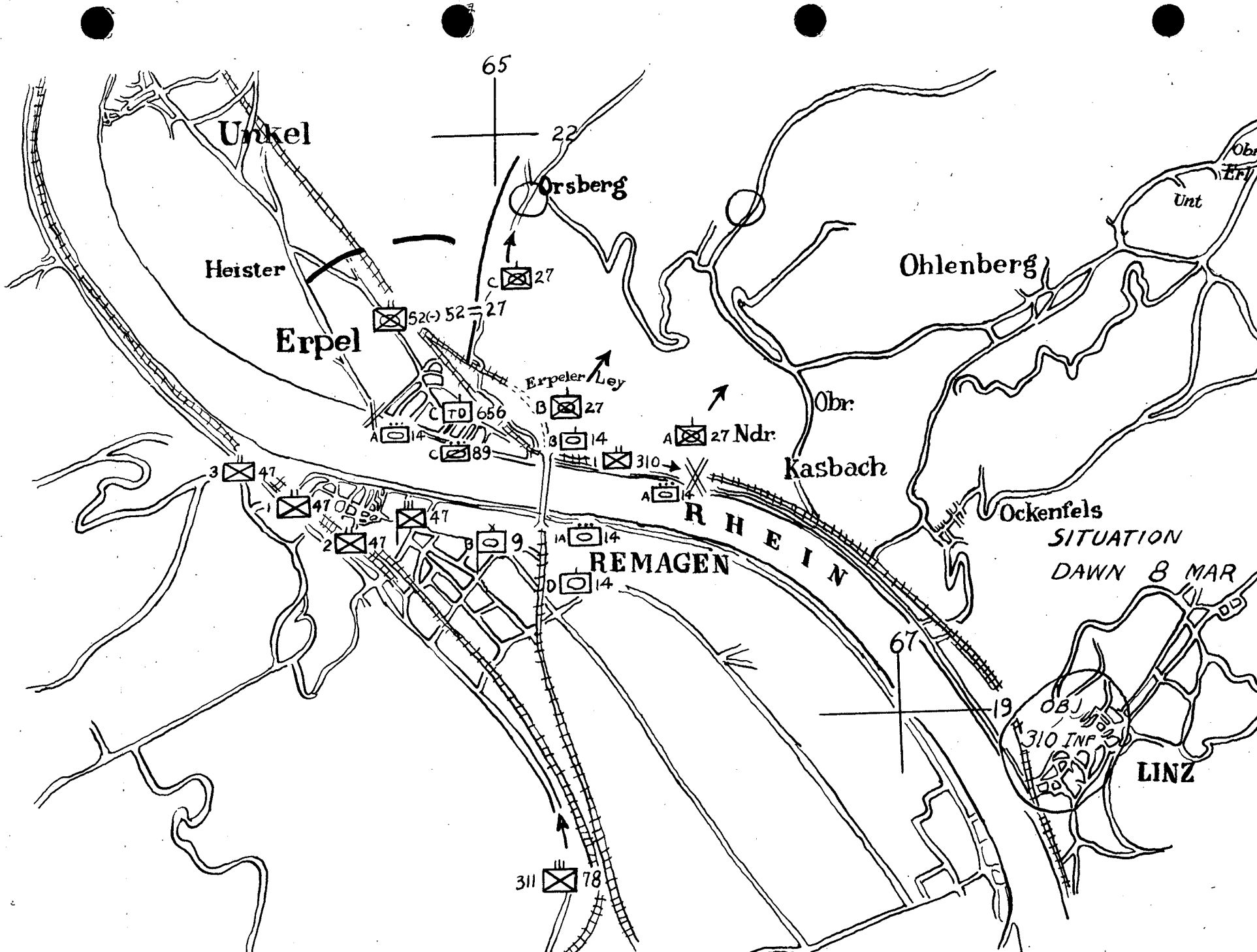
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a wild yell of, "As you were," but as the smoke cleared away, he shouted, "We'll cross anyway! Order of march: 1st Platoon, 3rd Platoon, 2nd Platoon." As they started across the bridge they were joined by a Lt. Mott and two non-commissioned officers from Company B of the 9th Armored Engineers. These engineers kept abreast of the leading elements and cut wires and removed demolition charges wherever they found them. The men moved steadily across the bridge, some running, some moving at a fast walk. They received some sniper fire from the stone towers of the bridge but most of the fire was light and inaccurate for the short time it lasted.

When A Company reached the east end of the bridge, they moved off to the left toward ERPEL and sent a small patrol from the 1st Platoon through the railroad tunnel. This patrol captured a few very startled German engineers without a fight.

McMaster's men followed closely on the heels of A Company and moved toward ERPEL, keeping to the left of A Company and before dark had established a road block at a small bridge over the railroad on the north edge of ERPEL.

Company B, the last infantry company across, turned to the right and started up the bluff, ERPELER LEY, which overlooks the bridge. One-half of the 2nd Platoon of this company established a road block a few hundred yards to the east of the bridge. The remainder of the 2nd Platoon plus the 3rd Platoon constituted the assaulting force on the bluff from the southeast while the 1st Platoon moved around to the northwest of ERPELER LEY to join A Company in its assault on the hill from that direction. This attack, which con-



tinued until after dark, was opposed by deadly 20mm antiaircraft fire from a gun in the vicinity of ERPEL and by sniper fire from a house on top of the hill. B Company reached the top of ERPERLER LEY and remained there despite sporadic artillery fire throughout the night of 7-8 March.

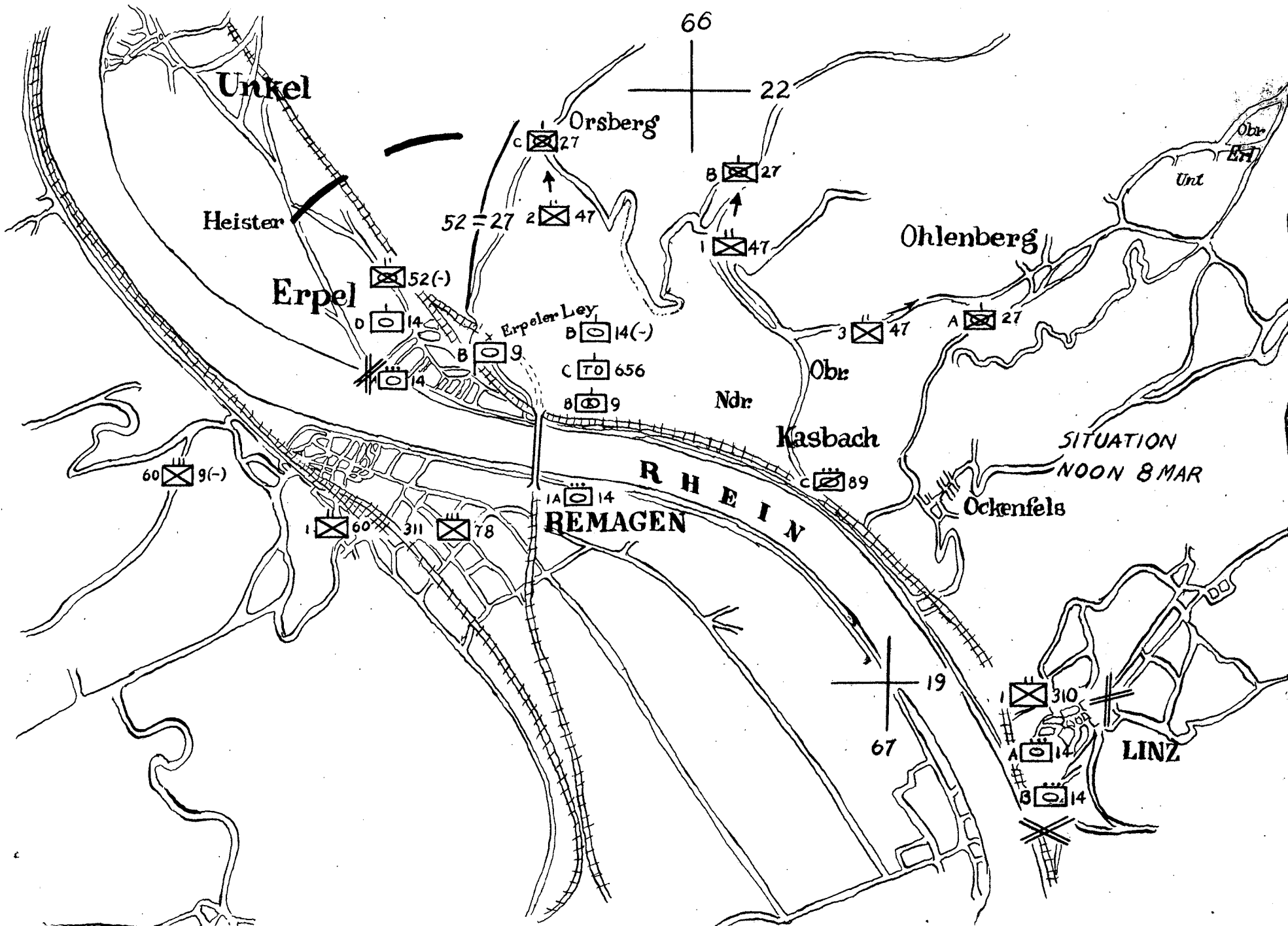
McMaster's road block on the north side of ERPEL received two platoon-sized counterattacks during the night which drove the company back to within 100 yards of the bridge by the morning of 8 March.⁹ Shortly after dark, upon the capture of ERPELER LEY, A Company was assembled and sent to the right of B Company and headed in the direction of ORSBURG with the mission of capturing that town and the high ground in the vicinity.

To return to activities on the west bank, General Hoge, after seeing the infantry reach the far shore, decided to exploit his success and summarily ordered Colonel Engeman to commit the remainder of his command. General Hoge then contacted General Leonard for further instructions. General Leonard immediately went into action ordering Combat Command A and the 89th Reconnaissance Squadron to take over the missions of Task Force Prince, thus making available all elements of Combat Command B for the exploitation of the bridgehead. Steps were also taken to retrieve Task Force Robinson which had been detached from Combat Command B early that morning to join the 89th Reconnaissance Squadron in patrolling the left flank of Combat Command B and the right flank of the 9th Infantry Division. General Hoge was able to alert Task Force Robinson about dark on the 7th of March in the vicinity of BERKUM and a motley assemblage

of trucks were dispatched to motorize Robinson's force.

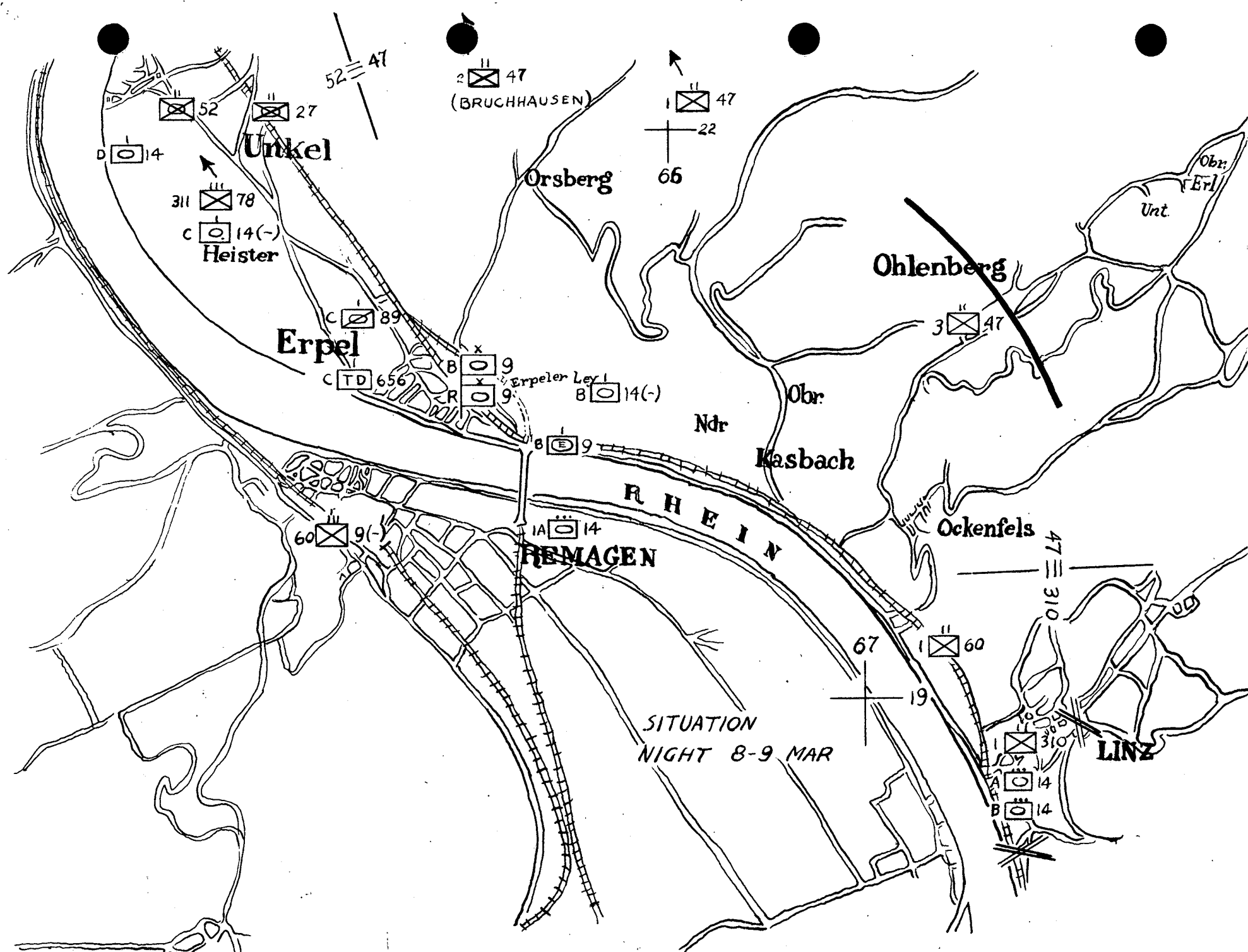
When the Corps Commander, General Milliken, was informed of the situation, he immediately confirmed all previous orders and actions of Generals Hoge and Leonard and alerted elements of the 78th Infantry Division (the rest of the 310th Infantry) and the 9th Infantry Division (the 47th Infantry) to move into and expand the bridgehead.

While higher and higher headquarters were being informed of developments at this soon-to-become historic site, those individuals in and around the bridge were engrossed in the problems of the moment. The three companies of infantry had crossed the bridge on foot as a result of the damage done to the approach and dock of the bridge, when the Germans had blasted it that afternoon. A tank dozer from A Company of the Tank Battalion was brought up to fill the crater in the earth approach and the 2nd Platoon of B Company of the 9th Armored Engineers (joined later by the remainder of their company) busied themselves with repair of the damaged deck and removal of unexploded charges. Men from Company D of the Tank Battalion dismounted and neutralized a 20mm antiaircraft gun on the west bank which was holding up the work of the tank dozer and the engineers. It was midnight before they had completed their repairs. At 080015, A Company of the Tank Battalion, less its 1st Platoon, started across the bridge and by 080100 Captain Soumas, the CO, had one of his platoons with the B Company's road block east of the bridge and had established a road block of his own on the road parallel to the river west of ERPEL.



Company C of the 656th Tank Destroyer Battalion started across the bridge behind Soumas' tanks, but in the rainy blackness, the leading vehicle slipped off the narrow flooring and fell through a hole in the deck of the bridge, thus blocking all vehicular traffic until about 0530. This five-hour delay created a tremendous snarl of traffic on the west bank which grew more and more unmanageable as additional division and corps units arrived.

All had gone well with Task Force Prince that momentous afternoon. Colonel Prince had reached his objectives and had elements in SINZIG and WESTUM. Although Prince had received orders to move to the REMAGEN area at 1945, traffic congestion on the road between SINZIG and REMAGEN delayed his arrival until 0330 on the 8th. Immediately upon arrival in REMAGEN, his infantry was dismounted and dispatched across the bridge, completing their crossing by 0400. On the far shore, they took up positions north and east of Deever's 27th Armored Infantry on the high ground in the vicinity of ORSBURG, making contact with C Company of the 27th at this point. The 1st Battalion of the 310th Infantry (Task Force Robinson) which had rolled into REMAGEN at 0200, dismounted, and started across the bridge on the heels of Prince's 52d Armored Infantry Battalion. Robinson was to by-pass KASBACH and secure OCKENFELS.¹⁰ As they passed through KASBACH, they were joined by one platoon of tanks from A Company and one platoon from B Company of the 14th Tank Battalion and shortly after daylight were in position on the high ground in and around OCKENFELS.



SITUATION
NIGHT 8-9 MAR

After considerable confusion in the procurement of motor transportation, the reserve battalion (the 2d) of the 47th Infantry of the 9th Infantry Division was motorized in the vicinity of HEIMERZHEIM about 1930 and by 0500 had dismounted on the near bank and started across the bridge following Robinson's infantry. This battalion of the 47th Infantry was to pass through the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion and secure BRUCHHAUSEN. The remainder of the 47th Infantry followed the 2d Battalion and was committed northwest of BRUCHHAUSEN and OHLENBURG during the 8th of March.

Fear of possible destruction of the bridge by enemy air action during the critical first few days prompted the hasty dispatch to the bridgehead of the 482nd AAA (AW) Battalion SP. The battalion moved into the area during the early hours of 8 March and deployed with a battery plus one platoon on either bank. These guns constituted the antiaircraft defense of the bridge until that afternoon when four batteries of 90mm guns of the 413th AAA Battalion arrived on the scene. The 482nd had scarcely gone into position before the first air threat materialized. Four Stukas (JU-87s) came in for a dawn dive on the bridge. These craft appeared to be only a diversionary effort because at almost the same time two of the faster ME-109s sneaked in for a low-level attack. No damage was done by this attack or the other raids that followed during 8 March.

General Hoge moved his Command Post across the LUDENDORF BRIDGE at 080835 March and General Milliken then placed all forces east of the RHINE under Hoge's command. During the early morning hours of the 8th, General Milliken alerted and started moving the

remaining uncommitted units of the Corps into the bridgehead area. By 081200 March, the bridgehead had been expanded by the continuous attack of the 1st Battalion, 310th Infantry, the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, and the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion. The 47th Infantry Regiment was in the bridgehead and in the process of relieving the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion.

About noon Colonel Burnside reported into the area with the Reserve Command. General Hoge gave him the maddening task of traffic control on the near shore and of screening the almost constant flow of III Corps troops as they arrived in the bridgehead area.

During the afternoon of 8 March, the 47th Infantry completed the relief of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion and the 27th was recommitted to assist the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion in its attack on UNKEL. The 1st Battalion, 310th Infantry, continued pressure to the south in the vicinity of LINZ. The 47th Infantry Regiment aggressively pushed its attack and completely cleared BRUCHHAUSEN. The 60th Infantry had one battalion on the east of the RHINE moving south and completed their crossing shortly after dark. The 311th Infantry was also across the RHINE and moving to join the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion in the vicinity of UNKEL.

The Commanding General, III Corps, had realized early that the nature of the terrain and the road net on the east bank of the RHINE within the bridgehead dictated infantry rather than armored action and had made plans for the early relief of the 9th Armored. During the afternoon of the 8th it became apparent that sufficient infantry had arrived to take over. At 090235 March, control of the

REMAGEN bridgehead passed to the Commanding General, 9th Infantry Division, Major General Lewis H. Craig.¹¹ During the days that followed elements of the 9th Armored Division were gradually withdrawn from action and placed in Corps reserve.

Conclusions

The value of the foregoing detailed narrative of an armored command successfully negotiating a hasty river crossing lies in the opportunity it presents for the drawing of conclusions; conclusions as to the fitness of armored divisions for the mission of a hasty crossing; conclusions as to whether the methods employed in this particular crossing conform with our present tactical doctrine or whether the action reflects a need for changes in or additions to that doctrine. It permits an opportunity to profit from history. But, before attempting to evaluate or interpret this crossing, certain aspects of the operation must be underlined. Special consideration must be given to (a) the character of German resistance at that time and (b) the terrain in the immediate vicinity of the bridgehead.

On the ROER RIVER line in February 1945 the Germans had shown a considerable will to make a last ditch stand on the west bank of the RHINE, but with the rupture of this line resistance rapidly dwindled as disorganized and broken Nazi units fled across the RHINE. According to Liddell Hart, the Germans had little more than that wide river to put between themselves and the Allied armies because Hitler had refused to permit competent commanders to organize even rudimentary defenses on the east bank prior to March 1945.¹²

At the time of the German evacuation of the west bank, bridges were guarded by small antiaircraft and Volksturm units, supported by a handful of engineer troops. Morale in the German Army, now that defeat was in the air, ranged from suspicion to utter resignation.¹³ This morale problem was aggravated by an acute shortage of such vital supplies as gasoline and ammunition.

Although efficiency in the German Army was low, this deficiency was somewhat compensated for by the character of the terrain along the RHINE RIVER -- easy to defend and difficult to attack. The terrain and road net in the vicinity of REMAGEN was an armored commander's nightmare. Constant rain prohibited cross-country movement of vehicles of any type and the road net leading into REMAGEN, as well as the net on the east bank of the RHINE, was totally inadequate for armored action. One infantry division commander aptly and graphically described the area as "goat country".

Now, taking into account the terrain and the enemy which faced the 9th Armored Division at REMAGEN, it is believed that this armored division conclusively demonstrated the flexibility of armor and its capacity for rapid and effective action under the most adverse circumstances. This operation proved, too, the soundness of the doctrine of armored infantry action: That armored infantry will utilize the mobility and striking power of its vehicles to the utmost but will not hesitate to dismount and operate on foot when the situation of the moment requires it.

The surprise crossing of the RHINE RIVER on the afternoon of 7 March 1945 secured the first foothold on the eastern bank of the

RHINE. This crossing not only drew enemy forces from other Allied fronts but also served as a springboard for the final attack on the heartland of Germany. Immediately after the seizure of the LUDENDORF RAILROAD BRIDGE intact, the main problem was the establishment and expansion of the bridgehead. The nature of the terrain and weather made it most desirable to commit a complete infantry division in the bridgehead, but as the situation had developed no such division was immediately available and the Corps Commander, of necessity, made the most of the troops on hand. Units were ordered across as rapidly as they could be disengaged; and by 9 March 1945, a total of 17 battalions of infantry with supporting tanks, weapons and transport had been moved into the bridgehead.

During the past war, hasty river crossings and the seizure of bridges intact by alert units far exceeded the number of deliberate river crossings and generally produced results with few casualties in men and equipment.

This particular operation gives outstanding proof that the American principles of warfare, with emphasis on initiative, resourcefulness, aggressiveness, and willingness to assume great risks for great results are sound. Military history is replete with incidents where wonderful opportunities were not grasped with resultant failure.

The fact stands out that positive, energetic actions were pursued to get across the RHINE. The traffic jams, the weather, the terrain, the road nets, the change in plans did not deter anyone from the primary job of crossing the river and exploiting to the fullest this wonderful opportunity.

Recommendations

In view of the facts presented in this study and the success of the operation described therein, no change is recommended in either the current hasty river crossing doctrine as enunciated in Department of the Army publications or in the present Tables of Organization and Equipment of the armored division. However, to facilitate operations of this nature, it is recommended that in the conduct of field training added emphasis be placed upon hasty river crossing techniques to include (a) the organization and training of traffic control and communications teams within each battalion and (b) combat command level training of teams of combined arms to insure rapid and coordinated action in crossings of opportunity.

It is believed that special training within the limits of present Tables of Organization and Equipment and enunciated training doctrine will greatly enhance the unit's ability to seize and exploit opportunities of this nature. This will not only enhance a unit's ability but also will give both officers and men that confidence and mutual respect of each other and confidence in the Team that is so necessary to the assumption of great risks and the successful accomplishment of the mission.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 2

¹D/A Training Circular No. 5, River-Crossing Operation (4 March 1949).

- ²After Action Report, First U. S. Army, March 1945, p.61.
- ³Statement of Major General John W. Leonard, 16 March 1945.
- ⁴Statement of Major Ben Cothran, S-3, CCB, 14 March 1945.
- ⁵Statement of Lt. Harold E. Larsen, Ln. Pilot, 16th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 16 March 1945.
- ⁶1st Platoon, Company A, 14th Tank Battalion; After Action Report, 14th Tank Battalion, March 1945.
- ⁷Statement of Lt. Colonel A. R. Prince, 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion, 21 March 1945.
- ⁸Sources are at some variance as to exact time of the first blast. Lt. Mott of the Engineers, believes that it was about 1535 but Lt. Colonel Engeman believes that it was nearer 1550.
- ⁹Statement of Lt. William E. McMaster, CO, Company C, 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, 30 April 1945.
- ¹⁰Statement of Captain John Hertzig, Executive Officer, 1st Battalion, 310th Infantry, 23 March 1945.
- ¹¹After Action Report, Combat Command B, 9th Armored Division, March 1945.
- ¹²Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk.
- ¹³Report of Chief of Staff, Army Group "B", 25 January - 21 March 1945.

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CHAPTER 3

THE DELIBERATE CROSSING

Introduction

When it is impossible for the leading elements of an Armored Division to seize a bridge intact, it will be necessary for the division to make a deliberate crossing of rivers along its axis of advance. This is especially true during the exploitation phase when the Armored Division has penetrated deep into enemy territory thus relying entirely upon its own organic facilities to accomplish its mission. Such a crossing of a major river requires the maximum in coordination and teamwork among the combined-arms teams of the division.¹

During the past school year all available records of deliberate crossings made by armored divisions during World War II have been carefully studied and reviewed. The crossing of the OUR River by the 6th Armored Division in February 1945 has been selected as an historical example that will contribute immeasurably to the training of officers attending The Armored School in future classes.

In addition to having available the after action reports and histories of each organization with the 6th Armored Division, General Grow, the Commanding General of the 6th Armored Division during this operation, and many of his officers have contributed detailed information that presents a complete picture of this difficult crossing of the OUR River.

The General Situation

As a member of the fighting team of the United States III Army Corps in January 1945, the 6th Armored Division had knifed its way steadily east from BASTOGNE in spite of heavy to moderate resistance, deep snow, and very difficult terrain. Even though the German forces were fighting a planned withdrawal, they offered exceedingly stubborn opposition at all advantageous defensive positions. Elaborately placed mines were encountered at critical points. These mines were effectively covered by small arms, automatic weapons, tanks, mortar, and in some cases artillery fire. Strong fire fights usually preceded each enemy withdrawal but by the 25th of January, the Division gained its objective on the high ridge between the CLERF and the OUR Rivers. This ridge was called the "skyline drive" because of its prominence in the area.

Even as the 6th Armored Division was consolidating its objective, aggressive patrols were sent to the west bank of the OUR River to reconnoiter possible crossing sites and to clear the enemy from the west bank. The terrain occupied by the 6th Armored Division and adjacent forces by 042400 February 1945 is shown on the attached map.²

The Special Situation

The OUR River was a serious obstacle to the contemplated operations of an advance to the east. The thaw that started on the first of February had caused most of the snow to melt. The river swollen by the melting snow, was flowing at the rate of 10-15 miles per hour. It was approximately ten feet deep and several times its

LEGEND

1st Lt. 6th \triangle Div 4 Feb 1945 and
Cons. 1st Lt. Bridgehead Line
3 Feb 1945.

- 1st Lt. Bn Eridgenau
8 Feb 1945.

- 1 Crossing Site No. 1
- 2 Crossing site No. 2
- 3 Crossing Site No.
- 4 Crossing Site No.
- 5 Bailey Bridge Site
- 6 Assault Boat Dump Site



normal width. The approaches to the river were steep and the terrain generally rough, permitting vehicular movement only on primary and secondary roads.

Regardless of the existing weather conditions and the difficult terrain, the III Corps Commander, Major General Milliken, issued orders on the 5th February at 1200 for the Division to make a reconnaissance in force across the OUR River on the night of 6-7 February. General Grow, the 6th Armored Division Commander, immediately prepared the following plan, and it was approved by the Corps Commander.

First Objective: Seizure and securing of two bridge sites on the east bank of the OUR River by two reinforced infantry battalions under the Reserve Command.

Intermediate Objective: Establishing a bridgehead on the east bank of the OUR River by the Reserve Command from which the remainder of the Division could assault the SIEGFRIED LINE.

Final Objective: Penetration of the SIEGFRIED LINE.

Tactical Plan: A night crossing by infantry using assault boats and the rapid expansion of the bridgeheads covering each bridge site to form a consolidated Division bridgehead. The entire Division reinforced to achieve the final objective with CCB passing through the Reserve Command and leading the effort to penetrate the SIEGFRIED LINE.³

The Reserve Command of the 6th Armored Division was holding the Division front and because it was thoroughly familiar with the terrain, the Division Commander decided to use this command to establish the bridgehead. At 1500 General Grow, the Division Commander, and Colonel Albert E. Harris, the Reserve Command Commander, were in conference in BOXHORN at the Reserve Commander's Command Post.

A detailed study was made of air photos and patrol information with particular reference to suitable crossing sites, and General Grow issued the following orders:

The Reserve Command would cross the OUR River beginning the night 6-7 February with two infantry battalions and establish a bridgehead on the high ground north of DAHNEN. A vigorous reconnaissance would be conducted along the west bank of the OUR River to determine suitable crossing sites for the assault troop; three sites would be selected. The operation would be initiated during the early hours of darkness with emphasis on stealth and secrecy. No artillery preparations would be fired. CCB would be prepared to assume command of the troops in the bridgehead east of the OUR River on Division order and CCA would be prepared to assume command of all troops on the west bank of the river on order.

The Reserve Command was allotted the following units to accomplish its mission:⁴

- 44th Armored Infantry Battalion
- 9th Armored Infantry Battalion
- 50th Armored Infantry Battalion
- 68th Tank Battalion
- 69th Tank Battalion
- 86th Cavalry Recon Squadron Mechanized
- 25th Armored Engineer Battalion
- 777th AAA Battalion (-)
- Company A 603d Tank Destroyer Battalion
- Company C 76th Armored Medical Battalion
- 212 Armored Field Artillery Battalion, Direct Support
- 128th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, Direct Support
- 231st Armored Field Artillery, Direct Support
- 1123 Engineer Construction Group, General Support

The Reserve Command Commander utilizing infantry and mixed infantry and engineer patrols, extended the reconnaissance throughout the zone. The primary mission of these patrols was to locate routes of approach, attack positions and suitable crossing sites.

Reconnaissance in the area was hampered by close hostile

surveillance of the area. Movement by friendly forces in forward areas during daylight received prompt attention from hostile mortar and artillery fire. It was soon evident that reconnaissance would be limited to the hours of darkness.

During the night of 5 February 1945 three crossing sites were selected, two in the north numbered one and two and another in the south numbered three. Routes of approach and attack positions were determined and located on the ground.

At dark 6 February 1945 the situation relative to weather and terrain was characterized by a temperature that had dropped below freezing. The ground was partially covered with snow and the OUR River was swollen to ten feet deep, 100 feet in width and flowing at 15 miles per hour. The trafficability on level ground was good but on the icy slopes only foot troops could move and then with difficulty.

The assault plan indicated the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Brown, commencing at H-hour would cross the OUR River at crossing site one (P855686) and crossing site two (P853683), seize and secure the high ground at LANGFUKR (P870673).

The 9th Armored Infantry Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frank K. Britton, commencing at H-hour would cross the OUR River with one reinforced company in the vicinity of (P851651) and advance generally east and seize the town of DAHNEN (P863650).

The 50th Armored Infantry Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Albert Ward initially constituted the reserve that was alerted to

move within two hours across the OUR River to occupy the ground seized by the assault battalions.

Due to adverse weather and terrain conditions, which rendered approaches impossible to wheeled vehicles, the assault boats were located at the junction of the DAHNEN-KALBORN road. This necessitated the hand carrying of assault boats over one and a half miles of steep, icy mountain trails to selected attack positions.

The Engineer Plan stipulated that the 25th Armored Engineer Battalion supported by the 1123d Engineer Construction Group would provide engineer support for the crossing operation.

Company A, 25th Armored Engineer Battalion would support the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion by providing and operating assault boats, and the construction of foot bridges at the battalion's crossing site.

Company C, 25th Armored Engineer Battalion, would support the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion by providing and operating assault boats, and constructing foot bridges at the battalion's crossing site.

The 25th Armored Engineer Battalion less companies A and C reinforced by the supporting corps engineer unit would prepare and maintain avenues of approach, construct a Bailey bridge at the old bridge site on the DAHNEN-KALBORN road, and provide any additional support required by the assault battalions.

The allocation of crossing means provided assault boats (the exact number cannot be determined) for the assault elements, foot

bridges not to exceed two per assault battalion for the supporting foot elements, and a Bailey bridge for the crossing of vehicles.

A carefully prepared fire support plan indicated the 69th Tank Battalion would provide direct fire support to the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion and be prepared to cross the OUR River on order.

68th Tank Battalion would provide direct fire support to the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion and be prepared to cross one medium tank company over the OUR River on orders. The tank company would be attached to the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion upon reaching the east bank.

86th Cavalry Recon Squadron Mechanized would support the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion by fire from positions on the west bank of the OUR River.

Battery A, 777th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion, (-) would be prepared to move one platoon on order to the vicinity of the bridge site and provide protection for the construction of the bridge.

The 212th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (P803706) would be in direct support of the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion.

The 231st Armored Field Artillery Battalion would be in direct support of the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion.

The 128th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (P901678) was placed in general support of the crossing operations.

At 061630 February 1945 the Reserve Commands new command post was opened at HEINERSCHIED (P820675), the assault battalions were closed in their assembly areas, and supporting units and weapons

were in position. The operation had progressed to the end of the preparation and planning phase and the conduct of the crossing was at hand.

Crossing of 44th Armored Infantry Bn.⁵

Immediately after dark on 6 February, the engineers moved the assault boats by truck to the selected unloading point. The 44th crossed the line of departure and on arriving at the unloading point, found the engineers had encountered their first unexpected difficulty.

The boats had been obtained from Corps, and upon removal of the covering tarpaulin, the engineers found that they were heavier than the ones requested and that they were nested, top side up with the top boat three-fourths full of water, the upper three or four inches of which was solid ice.

Orders were issued to break out the pioneer tools, smash the ice in the top boat, and bail out the water. As it struck the ground around the truck, the water promptly froze, and the unloading detail slipped on the icy footing.

After a desperate struggle the boats were unloaded. Carrying their burdens, the infantry-engineer teams started the long, slow trek to the launching site, trying to make up the time already lost.

The last of the 500-pound assault boats was finally in place at 0200 7 February. To the amazement of all, what had seemed to the participants a noisy debacle still seemed to have left the German unaware of the activity on his front.

Company A was at the head of the column to make the initial crossing. The leading platoon was brought forward, and the first wave of assault boats was placed in the water.

Standing at the bank of the river the water could not be seen but the ominous rushing sound indicated plainly that the river was swollen out of all proportion of its normal size. The platoon leader quickly changed his original plan, deciding to cross with one boat towing a line. This line was to be secured to the opposite bank and serve as a guideline for the rest of the boats. This decision undoubtedly saved a number of lives and the loss of irreplaceable equipment.

The first boat was manned by a crew of two engineers and a rifle squad. Launched into the darkness and swirling water, it had moved only about its own length when it was seized by the current and dashed downstream and back into the near shore.

The same crew tried several times but the swift current of the river threw them back. Eventually it became clear that at this point the current was almost head-on because of a sharp bend in the river a few yards upstream. Darkness and the need for haste made it unwise to search for a new site. The men would make another try where they were.

This time the infantry crew of the first boat was replaced by carefully selected engineers who had been thoroughly trained in handling boats and were expert oarsmen. But the efforts of this new crew failed.

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Feeling that stealth had been compromised anyway, the battalion commander decided to dispense with it. He ordered the engineers to bring up two 35 hp outboard motors which were part of the boat equipment.

The first of these was mounted on a boat, and infantry-engineers crew loaded into it, and a line was attached. The motor was started and the boat moved off. Almost immediately a wave washed over the stern of the boat and caused a motor failure. The boat was swept back to the near shore.

The motor was removed and replaced. The boat was reloaded, and launched once more. It shot away, roaring at top speed.

As the boat disappeared toward midstream, it was literally lifted by the torrent and turned upside down. Crew members were thrown clear and found themselves in a desperate life-or-death struggle with the cold and violent waters of the river.

Heavily clothed and numbed by the shock of the icy waters, they were further handicapped by the impenetrable darkness. Seven of them were lost.

Of the remainder, four succeeded in returning to the near bank. A fifth crew member, swept some distance downstream, became approximately at 0400 7 February--the first man of the 44th to set foot on German soil on a combat mission. Ironically, he was unarmed.

This man made his way back upstream on the far shore--largely by instinct and good guessing--to a point directly opposite the crossing site.

He could hardly be expected to appreciate at once that through his unhappy circumstance, the success of the entire operation was now possible. He promptly reported his situation and whereabouts.

An engineer sergeant came forward with the suggestion of shooting a rifle grenade across with a tape tied to it.

A few minutes later, as the first grey light filtered down into the canyon, a grenade was fired across, trailing a slender white line, so light a strong man could have broken it with his hand. The man on the far side grasped the tape and eventually a length of cable which was fastened to a tree on his side, and secured by the engineers on the opposite side.

The engineer company quickly arranged what they called a "flying ferry," consisting of pulleys that ran along the cable, to which ropes were attached and in turn secured to each end of a boat. By shortening the forward rope, it was possible to pull the boat assisted by pressure of the current, across the river at a surprising speed.

Through this quick turn of events, the rushing torrent which had defeated all the normal measures to bridge it during the night, was now harnessed and its powerful force was actually helping pull the boats back and forth in a round trip that took less than five minutes.

At 0715 the first boat load of infantry landed on the far shore. The process was quickly repeated and shortly all of Company A was across. As rapidly as squads were landed, they were moved directly out to covering positions to secure the crossing site.

With the coming of light, examination of the immediate terrain rising from the far side of the boat crossing made it easier to understand why there had been no enemy reaction, and why even now the bridgehead was rapidly expanding without any apparent sign of detection.

Besides the roar of the river, which had drowned out the noise of the crossing effort for the most part, the attackers found the slopes on the far side so steep as to defilade them from the main line of SIEGFRIED defenses. During the early morning of 7 February, it also became apparent that the Germans maintained no observation posts and operated no patrols in the vicinity of this crossing.

This area was littered with booby traps and anti-personnel mines, and prisoner information later revealed that the Germans in the sector had taken it over only a few days previously. They knew this ground was mined, but did not themselves know the exact locations of the fields. Fear of entering this uncharted danger area had caused them to rely upon the river and the difficult terrain for close-in protection.

As a result, the initial lodgement was expanded until the whole of Company A had worked up into positions some distance from the crossing and extending in a wide semicircle around it.

The "flying ferry" was excellent for moving the first waves across the river, but was inadequate to support an entire battalion. Since the enemy appeared to be unaware of the crossing, it was decided that prior to moving more troops over and expanding the bridgehead to battalion size, two footbridges would be constructed--one

to be a suspension type bridge, the other a floating type.

During the remainder of this day and the following night the engineers continued the battle with the elements to provide the bridges. In one instance, as a floating bridge neared completion, the rushing waters surged upward to catch it and tear it out. More equipment was obtained as rapidly as possible, and renewed efforts during the night proved successful.

While Company A protected the engineer work at the crossings the remainder of the 44th had been withdrawn to KALBORN to wait under cover until the engineers completed the foot spans. As these were finished, more infantry was on the way, and before the darkness had completely lifted on the morning of 8 February, the rest of the 44th was moving rapidly across and into positions on the far side.

One platoon of Company C was ordered to move directly down the river and reduce a pillbox immediately overlooking the Bailey bridge site, securing a small bridgehead at this point. The remainder of the battalion was to pass through Company A and push vigorous reconnaissance against the SIEGFRIED LINE in the battalion zone. Company A was to extend to the right portion of the bridgehead, anchored on the Bailey site. Company C less one platoon was to operate in the center, while Company B took the area left (north) of the bridgehead.

This attack began soon after dawn.

The battalion encountered small arms and mortar fire and heavily booby-trapped areas. Once he discovered the crossings, the enemy placed heavy fire upon them. The suspension bridge went out

when a mortar round snapped a supporting cable but it was immediately repaired. The floating bridge was undamaged throughout the operation.

Because there was no enemy resistance opposing the initial crossing of this battalion, the 44th enjoyed definite tactical surprise and by 1030 on 8 February had expanded its bridgehead to a mile and half deep and two miles wide.

Crossing of the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion⁶

The 9th Armored Infantry Battalion, under command of Lieutenant Colonel Frank K. Britton, began movements to cross the OUR River simultaneously with the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion. Company C, the assault company, commanded by Captain Paul Storck, moved into a forward assembly area along the OUR River at 061530 February. At 1610 the plans and preparations for the crossing of the battalion were completed when the engineers dumped the assault boats at the attack position.

In a driving, freezing rain the assault troops moved out of the assembly area in boat crews so as to arrive at the attack position at 1845 and pick up the boats. It took the assault troops until 070100 February to carry the boats to the crossing site, due to the length of the move, weather conditions, and the difficult terrain. During this time five men were wounded by enemy mortar and small-arms fire.

Company C worked from the time they arrived at the river until 070345 February before they were successful in placing the first

boat load of men on the far bank. The remainder of Company C reinforced was ferried across using assault boats by 0645, thus arriving on the east bank approximately 30 minutes before the first boat load of the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion. Captain Storck, the company commander, was seriously wounded by enemy small-arms fire soon after his arrival in the small bridgehead. Lt. Colonel Britton immediately placed Lieutenant Everett C. Martin, Jr. in command of Company C and directed the company to continue its important task of expanding the battalion's bridgehead.

Company B, under command of Lieutenant Percy R. Blundell, arrived at the crossing site at 0645. Leading elements attempted to cross the river in assault boats; however it was getting light, thus resulting in the crossing site being covered by accurate and effective enemy small arms, observed mortar, and artillery fire. Only one boat load was placed on the east bank before it became evident that the crossing could not be effected without concealment from the enemy position. This resulted in Colonel Britton issuing instructions that the crossing would be completed that night on a footbridge to be constructed by the engineers.

Company A 25th Armored Engineer Battalion was given the mission of constructing the bridge. They found the work slow due to the flooded stream and the enemy harassing action. Another difficulty was the replacement of equipment that was washed downstream by the surging waters. The bridge was successfully completed just before noon the following day, February 8th.

After completion of the bridge the battalion continued the

crossing of the river, with Company A commanded by Captain John L. Rice leading. By 1345 Company A had cleared the bridge and Company B had started crossing. At this time the Germans threw a heavy concentration of mortar fire at the bridge and the approaches to it, but no direct hits were scored. Company B pushed ahead and by 1500 had cleared the bridge and established contact with Companies A and C on the far shore.

The companies at this time were ordered to consolidate their gains and establish physical contact for the night. This was difficult due to the mountainous terrain, but by 1830 this task was accomplished and the bridgehead was firmly established. A small counterattack along the entire battalion front was repulsed at 1740 with no loss to the battalion.

In order to support the battalion on the east bank of the river, Company A of the 25th Engineers were ordered to establish a ferry at the crossing site the morning of 9 February. This mission was completed by noon.

The 9th Armored Infantry Battalion had accomplished a most difficult crossing in the minimum time expected. Unlike the 44th Battalion's unopposed crossing to the north, the 9th had received effective enemy small arms, observed mortar and artillery fire from the time the first troops arrived at the crossing site until the battalion repulsed the coordinated counterattack on the east bank of the OUR River 1740 on February 8th. Even though the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion crossing was opposed by the enemy and in spite of the difficult terrain and extreme weather conditions, this battalion was

successful in capturing the first objective on German soil for the 6th Armored Division.

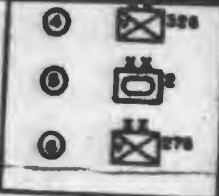
With the build-up of troops across the river it was now possible to join the two bridgeheads, so Reserve Command ordered the battalion to send one company to the North to make and maintain contact with the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion. Contact was established and a continuous defensive line was tied in by 091830 February.

Summary

The crossing of the OUR River by the 6th Armored Division was a well executed operation in view of the particularly difficult terrain, adverse weather conditions and the strong hostile positions of the SIEGFRIED LINE. Fortunately the enemy did not exploit his advantage and success was attained against light resistance with the exception of the crossing made by the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion where effective enemy fire was received. But, before reaching any conclusions it is felt that the enemy situation opposing the overall operation should be reviewed.

The German forces had been revealing definite signs of strain as they were gradually driven into the SIEGFRIED LINE from where their ARDENNES offensive had been launched six weeks earlier.⁷ Official reports reveal that the defensive potential of the forces opposing the crossing were the following averages per kilometer of assigned frontages.

26 Infantrymen
1.62 artillery pieces
0.4 Anti-tank guns



US A-255 APP 5

**A GP B
SITUATION
10 FEB 45**



6888 4048 IN 50, K 51, K 52
6889 4048 IN 50

PREPARED BY ENGINEERING CORPS
FROM AN OVERLAY BY SIGNAL BATTALION
APPROVED BY THE COMMANDING GENERAL

The WEST WALL fortifications were considered by General Field Marshal Model, Commanding the German Army Group B opposing the III Corps, to be obsolete. Its works and installations proved the US Forces with much better targets in that they were vulnerable to the material and tactics of the Allies. The latter by reason that sufficient German troops were not available to occupy all positions.⁸

The planning for, and the performance of the troops during the crossing was exemplary. The fact that the hostile resistance was light was more than compensated for by the extreme conditions imposed by the weather and terrain.

In the opinion of the committee this river crossing operation illustrates the typical in deliberate river crossings. It chronologically outlines the operation from its consumation to its termination as it blended into another variation of offensive operations, the attack of fortified positions.

Conclusions

1. Armor can operate effectively in difficult terrain and cross rivers under adverse weather conditions.
2. Armored divisions can successfully execute deliberate river crossing but, due to certain equipment limitations, are less adapted to this operation than infantry divisions.
3. The reserve command can be used to accomplish tactical missions with effectiveness equaling the combat commands. The commander who does not consider such employment of the reserve command is not availing himself to the full organizational potential of his division.

4. Any river, regardless of its topographical characteristics, the meteorological and climatic conditions of the period, is an obstacle that can be successfully crossed with little reinforcement of organic equipment.

5. River crossings are operations that are normal occurrences in the combat operation of armored units.

6. The difficulties encountered during the crossing of the OUR River by the 6th Armored Division could have been tempered by more effective reconnaissance for a selection of crossing sites. This was especially illustrated in the crossing of the 44th Armored Infantry Battalion.

Recommendations

1. That all armored units receive thorough training in the technique of river crossings.

2. That the training of reconnaissance personnel and unit commanders emphasize the importance of selecting suitable crossing sites.

3. That training include familiarization of all personnel with organic stream crossing equipment and expedients.

4. That river-crossing plans must be prepared to provide for change as it may affect any portion of the plan. Flexibility of plan and organization is essential.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 3

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³Personal letter from Major General Grow, CG 6th Armored Division.

⁴After Action Report, Res Comd 6th Armored Division, February 1945, p. 2.

⁵Infantry Journal Article, a magazine for the ground combat forces, June 1949, issue, p. 22.

⁶After Action Report, 9th Armored Inf Bn, February 1945, p. 4.

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⁸WD Historical Division Interviews with C of S German Army Group B, MSA 964.

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CHAPTER 4

SUPPORT OF INFANTRY IN RIVER CROSSINGS

Introduction

This chapter concerns armor supporting infantry in a river crossing. Normally we find a tank battalion as part of the combined arms team supporting an infantry division. As in the armored division tank firepower is employed to give maximum support during the initial crossings of infantry assault elements. Following the establishment of a limited farshore bridgehead, armor crosses as rapidly as possible to assist the infantry elements in the reduction and securing of designated objectives. This is accomplished by the employment of small and closely coordinated tank-infantry teams. Once the bridgehead has attained sufficient depth to preclude aimed small arms fire upon the crossing sites, the tank-infantry teams advance rapidly to capture objectives in depth, thus facilitating a safe crossing for major elements following in their path.

Such was the employment of the 747th Tank Battalion when the 29th Infantry Division dashed across the ROER River at JULICH, Germany on the 23rd of February 1945. The 747th Tank Battalion had been attached to the 29th Infantry Division since 17 May 1944, and had gallantly fought with its regiments in driving the tenacious and wily enemy from the soil of France.

The Situation

During the month of November 1944 the 29th Infantry Division as a part of the US XIX Corps, Ninth Army, had steadily advanced

against determined resistance east of AACHEN, Germany, through the SETTERICH-BETTENDORF area to the ROER River. (See Sketch page ,). Upon arriving at the riverline it was discovered that the enemy in his withdrawal east had destroyed all of the bridges in the divisions zone of advance. Upstream from JULICH, near the headwaters of the ROER, two massive dams within the HURGTEN FOREST controlled the flow of the river. These critical installations which were of tactical significance had yet to be wrested from the German. At his will great quantities of water could be unleashed thus inundating the banks of the ROER and creating conditions unfavorable to a successful crossing. It was considered tactically imprudent to attempt a crossing along the Ninth Army front until such time as the HURGTEN FOREST dams were either destroyed by the enemy or in friendly hands.

Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley commanding the Twelfth Army Group decided to hold the Ninth Army west of the ROER RIVER line and attack with elements of his First Army through the HURGTEN FOREST.¹ This decision on General Bradley's part, coupled with the ARDENNES offensive of the enemy, dispelled any optimism concerning an early crossing. The 29th Infantry Division halted their advance along the KOSLAR-KIRSCHBERG line overlooking the obstinate ROER. Enemy ~~positions on the east bank of the ROER were in the vicinity of JULICH~~ and estimated to be approximately two reinforced infantry companies in strength. In view of the static situation along their front the 29th Infantry Division utilized this time for rehabilitation, training and deliberate planning for the eventual crossing.

Subsequent to the collapse of German efforts in the ARDENNES the 29th Division received warning orders to be prepared to cross the ROER on 10 February, concurrent with the capture of the HURTCEN FOREST dams by the First Army.

On 8 February the German forces in their withdrawal from the HURTCEN FOREST were able to partially destroy one of the floodgates of the dams. As a result of this enemy action a flood crest of the ROER was created which necessitated a postponement of the intended crossing.²

Anticipating the gradual return of the river to its banks, the date of the crossing was advanced to 23 February 1945. On 18 February Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, CG, 12th Army Group, Lieutenant General William H. Simpson, CG, Ninth Army, Major General Raymond S. McLain, CG XIX Corps, and Major General Charles H. Gerhardt, CG, 29th Infantry Division, resolved the final crossing plans in detail at General Gerhardt's headquarters.

The general plan of attack required the 29th Infantry Division to cross the ROER on the left flank of XIX Corps, to seize JULICH as an immediate objective and to be prepared to continue the attack on order. The 30th Infantry Division on the south and the 102nd and 84th Infantry Divisions of the XIII Corps on the north would make simultaneous crossings.

Enemy resistance in JULICH was not expected to be strong but could be determined. Intelligence estimates indicated two infantry companies reinforced with machine guns as being locally available. However, active patrolling by our forces revealed exten-

P-253

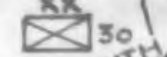
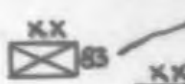
SITUATION ON THE ROER

25 FEB

DUSSELDORF



RHINE RIVER



NINTH XXXX FIRST

HURTGEN FOREST & DAMS



AACHEN



sive minefields and deliberate fortifications on the east bank of the ROER. The river contained partially submerged barbedwire obstacles along the length of the east bank fronting on JULICH which would prevent the use of assault boats unless removed. The famous fortress CITADEL presented the major obstacles to the rapid capture of the city. The CITADEL was an elaborate and historic edifice spanning two city blocks whose towering walls rose forty feet above the ground and dominated the critical terrain in the area. A wide moat filled with stagnant water eighty feet in depth canalized the approaches to two narrow entrants which were causeways on the north and south sides of the fortress. In an effort to eliminate or minimize this obstacle aerial bombardment missions were arranged. Eight direct hits with 1000 pound bombs were made on 20 February but damage could not be assessed by ground observers on the west side of the river.³

Major enemy combat elements in the area were the 59th and 363rd German Infantry Divisions extending north and south of JULICH with the divisional boundary extending east along the JULICH-COLOGNE road. These divisions were elements of the German LXXXI Corps operating under the German Fifteenth Army. Armored elements comprising the 9th and 11th Panzer Divisions were located to the east within reinforcing distance of the JULICH area. Enemy infantry and armored elements immediately available were suspected to be located in HALBACH FOREST east of JULICH. Other infantry elements were thought to be in the general vicinity of MERSCH.⁴

The task organization (See Figure 1) of the 29th Infantry Division contained all those combat elements organic and non-organic to the division which were considered essential to the success of a river crossing. The massed fires of the divisional artillery of the 83rd Infantry Division were available to support the initial crossings and in addition the 323rd Field Artillery Battalion of the 83rd was attached to the 29th Division. In addition to the 747th Tank Battalion, the flame throwing platoon of the 739th Medium Tank Battalion (Special) was attached to assist in the reduction of the CITADEL. Organic bridging and small boat equipment of the 121st Engineer Battalion was considered capable of supporting the operation until the bridgehead was secured.

The 83rd Chemical Smoke Generator Company was made available to screen the construction of engineer bridges and the initial infantry crossings.

The plan of supporting fires provided for short concentrated preparatory fires by all available artillery, tanks and heavy mortars commencing at 0245 on 23 February. These fires were to cover the entire division initial objective, namely JULICH and the high ground to the north of the city in the division zone.⁵

Covering forces consisting of two platoons from the 175th Infantry Regiment were to cross by assault boat at 0300 hours to secure designated areas on the east bank previously selected as the construction sites for two infantry support bridges.

The 115th Infantry Regiment to cross by assault boats and alligators at 0330 using sites No. 4 and No. 5 and to capture the high ground north of JULICH.

The 175th Infantry Regiment to cross the ROER upon completion of engineer assault bridges at sites No. 2 and No. 3 and attack east through JULICH.

TASK ORGANIZATION

Organic

29th Infantry Division
115th Infantry Regiment
116th Infantry Regiment
175th Infantry Regiment

29th Division Artillery
110th Field Artillery Battalion
111th Field Artillery Battalion
224th Field Artillery Battalion
227th Field Artillery Battalion

121st Engineer Combat Battalion
104th Medical Battalion

Attached

83rd Infantry Division Artillery
323rd Field Artillery Battalion
554th AAA AW Battalion (Mbl)
Detachment 234th Engineer
Combat Battalion
747th Tank Battalion
1st Flamethrowing Platoon,
739th Medium Tank Battalion (S)
821st Tank Destroyer Battalion
92nd Chemical Mortar Battalion
83rd Chemical Smoke Generator Company

Figure 1. Task organization of 29th Infantry Division, 23 February 1945

The 116th Infantry Regiment to be in division reserve until such time as the bridgehead had developed and at that time to cross by the infantry foot bridge and relieve the 175th Infantry Regiment.

The 330th Infantry Regiment to cross the ROER by assault boat behind the 115th Infantry Regiment; to pass through and continue the attack after the 115th has taken its initial objective; to revert to its parent 83rd Infantry Division when that unit crossed the ROER.

The 747th Tank Battalion to support the initial infantry crossings from overlooking positions on the west bank of the ROER and to cross by heavy ponton bridge at site-No. 1 after daybreak.

The 1st Flamethrowing platoon of the 739th Medium Tank Battalion (Special) attached to the 175th Infantry Regiment in order to provide close support in the reduction of the CITADEL.

Planning and Preparation

The planning and preparation for the bridging of the ROER River had been a continuous process since the 29th Infantry Division arrived at the ROER in December 1944.

Upon arrival in the area west of JULICH it was necessary for the 121st Engineer Combat Battalion to clear avenues through the numerous minefields the shrewd German had constructed. Initially all east-west roads were cleared and marked so that vehicular traffic and troops could move without undue hazard. The task was tedious and slow as the Germans had employed the efficient and evasive plastic mine. Concurrently, engineer troops surveyed the river banks and selected tentative crossing sites.

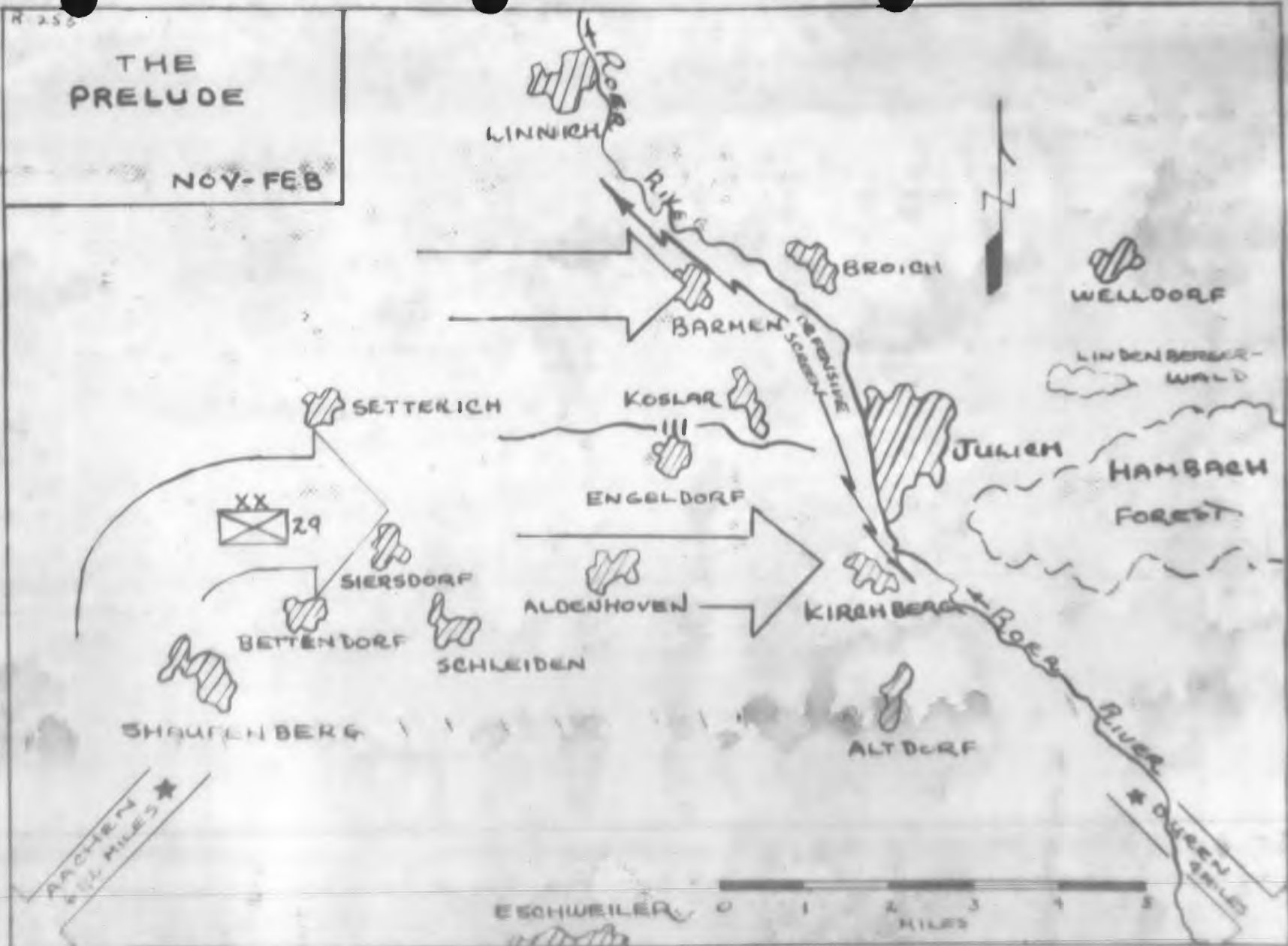
Patrolling was active and aggressive during the period 9 December - 23 February. Approximately 60 reconnaissance and combat patrols crossed the ROER in six man rubber boats along the division front and probed the enemy's defensive positions. Artillery fires were meticulously coordinated with patrol activities so that normal harrassing and interdictory fires could be accomplished without interference, one to the other.

Due to the fact that most of these patrols operated after nightfall the use of armor evidently was not contemplated. Information on this matter indicates that in one instance armor support was planned. On 13 January the 2nd Platoon of Company A, 747th Tank Battalion was attached to the 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry Regiment for the purpose of providing covering fire during an infantry raid into the city of JULICH.⁶ Tanks of the 747th Tank Battalion were disposed in firing positions along the west bank of the river as the infantry raiding party cautiously moved to their crossing sites. The large raiding party of five officers and 85 enlisted men quickly began loading into their assigned boats. Ice had formed along the river's shore during the night and the noise of its crackling under the weight of infantrymen soon alerted the vigilant enemy. Enemy parachute flares floated over the river rapidly followed by intense mortar fire. The enemy's accurate mortar fire fell among the boats of the raiding party causing six casualties and the abandonment of the mission. The tanks being unsuitable, counter weapons likewise retired.

The harrassing and deception maneuvers of the 29th Infantry Division during this period assumed many forms. Artillery demon-

THE PRELUDE

NOV-FEB



XX 29

ESCHWEILER

0 1 2 3 4 5
MILES

* DUREN 4000

strations, feint crossings and periods of relative quiet preceded the actual crossing. A major tactical demonstration was conducted by the 2nd Battalion of the 175th Infantry Regiment near KIRSCHBERG in early February. Divisional artillery fired their preparation fires as the infantrymen unloosed the fires of all organic weapons against the south flank of JULICH.

Even in the rigors of war can be found interludes of mutual humor. The Germans late in January constructed an impressive concrete pillbox between BROICH and JULICH within which they took refuge with relative calm. The direct fires of tank guns and multiple concentrations of artillery had proven embarrassingly inadequate. To further insult into injury, after each futile effort a German soldier would scramble from his concrete lair, gleefully wave a red "Maggies" drawers, then quickly withdraw. General Gerhardt's retort to this implied affront resulted in the procurement of a 155mm self propelled gun from corps artillery. Needless to say the aplomb of the infantrymen was soon restored.

The 747th Tank Battalion which had moved into positions east of SCHLEIDEN during early December found ample time for rehabilitation and training. Efforts were made to improve tank-infantry-tank destroyer cooperation and coordination. The tank companies were farmed out for tank-infantry training to those regiments with whom they were habitually employed. River crossing techniques were reemphasized and familiarization training with the new 76mm tank gun intensified. Individual infantrymen and tankers were acquainted with each others tactical responsibilities.⁶

On 6 February the 747th Tank Battalion, less Companies C and D, withdrew west to SCHAUFENBERG while the aforementioned companies withdrew to BETTENDORF. This deceptive move was accomplished by a well coordinated infiltration to assembly areas in the rear of the division area. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart G. Fries, his staff and subordinate unit commanders moved forward to the river line and conducted a detailed reconnaissance. The zone of attack, firing positions for each tank in support of the pending operation and routes forward thereto were tentatively selected.

On 8 February a systematic infiltration forward by all elements of the 747th Tank Battalion commenced. ALDENHOVEN was designated as the forward echelon of the battalion command post. Company A, Company D(G), Company B(-) and the Assault Gun Platoon moved into the same general vicinity.

Company A, in addition to four assault guns of the Assault Gun Platoon had been attached to the 175th Infantry Regiment but were to remain with their parent unit until such time as they were able to cross the ROER.

Company C, plus one platoon of Company D in addition to two assault guns of the Assault Gun Platoon, were attached to the 115th Infantry Regiment and infiltrated into previously reconnoitered firing positions near KOSLAR.

The 1st Platoon, Company B, was attached to the 175th and moved into positions near KOSLAR.

In these forward areas tank crews occupied themselves with improving the individual tank positions. Tanks were sand bagged,

dug in, and camouflaged within the means available. Ammunition was stockpiled well forward for easy access during the critical phases of the crossing.

The 1st flamethrowing platoon of the 739th Tank Battalion (Special) under command of 1st Lieutenant Elmer G. Haltom was attached to the 29th Infantry Division on 9 February 1945. This unit alternately trained with both the 175th Infantry Regiment and the 747th Tank Battalion.⁷ As was explained before this special unit was being groomed for operation against the CITADEL.

During early February the assault battalions of the 175th and 115th Infantry Regiments were withdrawn to the vicinity of VISE', Belgium. Here, along the MEUSE river, were staged the rehearsals that preceded the crossing of the ROER. The MEUSE at this particular period was reaching floodstage. The river banks, speed of the current and general topographical characteristics were consistent with known and anticipated conditions on the ROER. Such an opportunity rarely presents itself during the course of a war.

The original concept for the crossing of the ROER envisaged a conventional crossing over infantry assault bridges by two infantry regiments in the assault echelon, each disposed over a two battalion front. This plan devised in November 1944 was subsequently altered so that one regiment, the 115th would cross by assault boats and alligators, the other regiment, the 175th crossing as originally planned.

This alteration to the original plan eliminated a serious engineering problem concerning construction of a bridge on the division's north flank where the terrain greatly favored the enemy.

The traffic control plan for the pending operation was rigidly established. Each vehicle of the division was allotted priority and would cross only on schedule.

In order to engage any armor threat on the far shore armored elements and anti-tank weapons were given precedence in the crossing schedule. Tank dozers would necessarily precede the crossing of armor and vehicles so as to clear avenues through the debris created by artillery and other fires.

The Crossing

On 22 February 1945 the long weeks of waiting came to an abrupt end. As the evening shadows lengthened and blanketed the swift running ROER, impatient doughboys, in long open files, moved quietly forward to their attack positions and the river beyond. Large stacks of ammunition formed grim borders along the muddy roads leading to the ROER. Engineer vehicles piled with heavy bridging gear slowly made their way between moving columns of soldiers. Along the ridges from KOSLAR to KIRSCHBERG, overlooking the river, the men of the 83rd Chemical Smoke Generating Company stood ready beside their equipment.

All through the night increasing numbers of men and equipment continued to mass along the west bank of the ROER.

At 0230 23 February the tanks of the 1st Platoon, Company B, 747th Tank Battalion were moving into previously prepared firing positions near KIRSCHBERG to support the crossing of the 175th Infantry Regiment. The 1st Platoon, Company C moving east along the KOSLAR - ENGELSDORF road suddenly stopped. The lead tank had struck a plastic

mine and been disabled. The remainder of the platoon unable to bypass doubled back to KOSLAR as a tank dozer moved forward to push the crippled tank from the road. It too became a casualty to enemy mine action. At this time elements of the 115th Infantry Regiment in amphibious alligator vehicles were preparing to move down the KOSLAR - ENGELSDORF road, now blocked by friendly tanks. Realizing that further delay might have an adverse effect on the operation the troops quickly dismounted from their vehicles and continued east on foot.

At 0245 the comparative silence of the night was broken by the thundering of guns, mortars and cannons as the supporting weapons commenced their preparatory fires. Simultaneously great billows of smoke rose from the smoke generators along the front.

At 0300 hours two platoon size covering forces of Companies A and F, 175th Infantry Regiment slid their assault boats into the river. Their mission was to take positions along the east bank of the river and secure the crossing sites for the engineer support bridges. As the infantrymen challenged the angry river one boat of Company F capsized and another was swept downstream and back against the western bank. As the men clamored from their beached craft and moved south along the shore they found themselves within a minefield. The casualties which resulted so depleted and disorganized this unit that its further employment was not practicable. Covering forces of Company A reached the far shore without mishap and proceeded with their mission.

At 0330 the preparatory fires lifted as the 115th Infantry Regiment in assault boats moved across the river under the covering fires of the 747th Tank Battalion.

The KOSLAR-ENGELSDORF road, previously blocked by disabled tanks, reopened to vehicular traffic at 0350 hours. Thus, the amphibious vehicles abandoned earlier at KOSLAR were able to participate in the concluding phases of the 115th Infantry Regiment's crossing.

At 0330 hours dense clouds of friendly smoke hovered over crossing site No. 2. At this time and place the 121st Engineer Combat Battalion was engaged in the construction of the first infantry foot bridge over the ROER, coincident with the crossing of the 115th Infantry Regiment. Although this tactical smoke screen denied the enemy observation of construction activities it also operated to severely impede engineer progress. After completion of the bridge an unmanned assault boat drifting rapidly downstream rammed the bridge collapsing it into sections. It was not until 0600 hours 23 February that the bridge was reestablished and ready for use by the 175th Infantry Regiment. In addition another infantry foot bridge was constructed at site No. 3 without unforeseen difficulties.

After completion of the two infantry foot bridges engineer support was directed to the construction of a heavy pontoon bridge at site No. 1. This was completed in the early afternoon of 23 February. In addition a steel treadway bridge and infantry support bridge were established at sites No. 2 and No. 3 respectively. The tank dozers of the 1st Flamethrowing Platoon, 739th Medium Tank Battalion (Special) assisted in the construction of the treadway bridge until destroyed by enemy artillery. Enemy artillery, mortar and rocket fires although not extremely heavy repeatedly interfered with the engineer mission. Two direct hits were obtained on the partially



constructed treadway bridge, and infantry support bridges were severed a number of times.

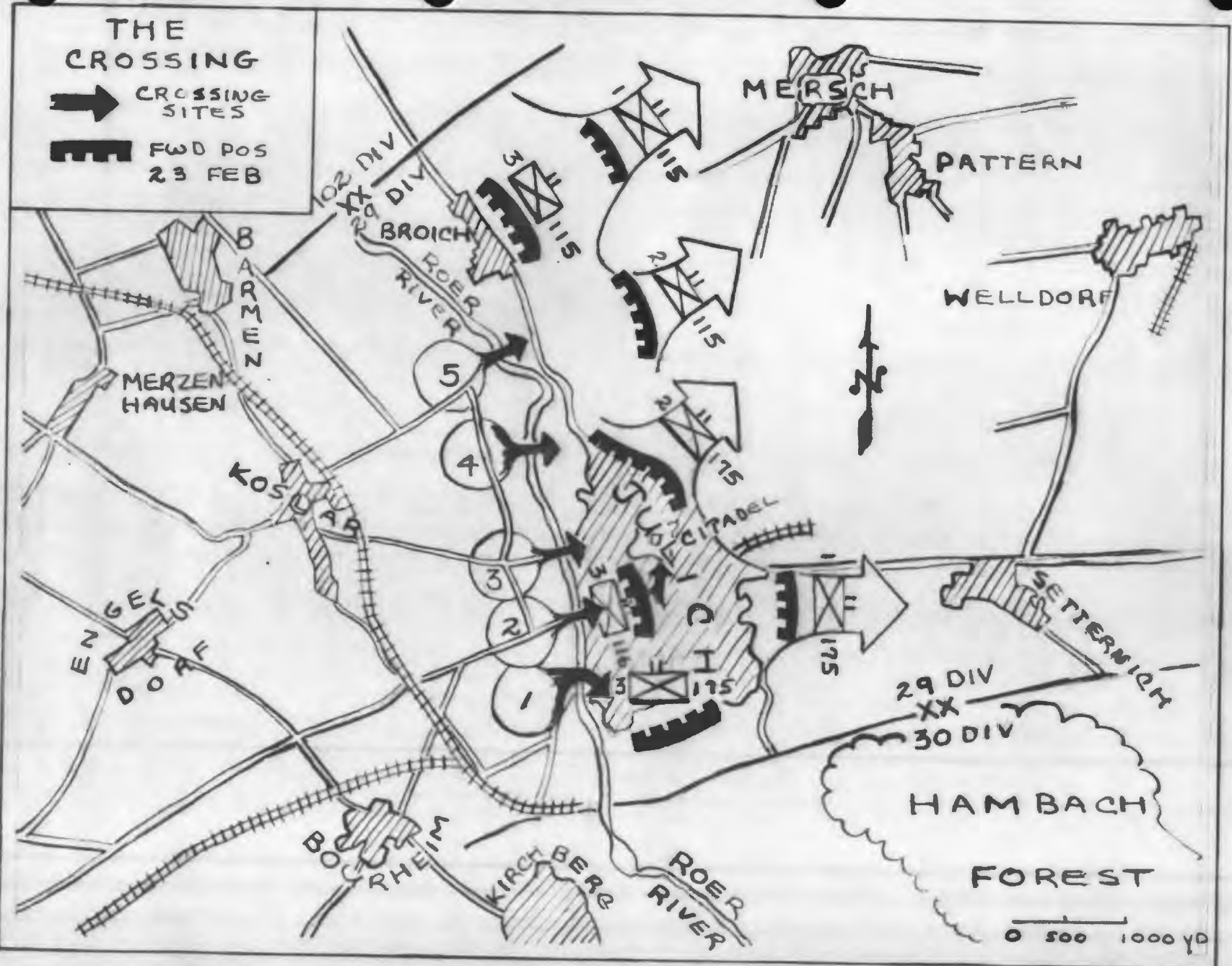
At the first trace of dawn, a few minutes after 0600 hours, the 175th Infantry Regiment commenced crossing the ROER over the bridges at sites Nos. 1, 2 and 3. High banks on the east side of the river defiladed the area from small arms fire delivered from JULICH. Tactical smoke again acted contrary to intention as vehicles and men grouped their way to the crossing site. The slow rate of diffusion caused the smoke to cling over the crossing areas and had a sickening effect on the troops. At this juncture the employment of the 83rd Smoke Generator Company was discontinued. Under the covering fires of Company B, 747th Tank Battalion, the men of the 175th Infantry Regiment streamed across the footbridges into the outskirts of JULICH.

Throughout the morning of the 23rd the 115th Infantry Regiment relentlessly pressed its attack through and beyond BROICH while the 175th Infantry Regiment pushed on through JULICH and into the factory area south around KOENIGDKAMP. Enemy resistance was moderate, however his artillery continued to concentrate its fires on the crossing sites in an effort to seal off the established bridgehead. In view of the rapid advances made by the committed elements General Gerhardt decided to bypass the CITADEL in order to fully exploit his present successes.

At 1630, Company A, 747th Tank Battalion, plus four assault guns crossed the ROER and joined the 175th Infantry Regiment in the southern part of JULICH. Until this time infantry elements in the

THE CROSSING

-  CROSSING SITES
-  FWD POS 23 FEB



bridgehead were without armor support. Tank dozers moved about JULICH clearing streets of debris so that the armor could establish a perimeter anti-tank defense of the bridgehead before nightfall. During the passage of tanks through the restricted buildup area one tank was lost to enemy bazooka fire.⁹

Late in the afternoon of the first day the 3rd Battalion of the 116th Infantry Regiment crossed into the bridgehead and became the reserve of the 175th Infantry Regiment. At the end of this first day dispositions were as shown.

The Second Day

During the morning of the second day the 115th Infantry Regiment remained in their present positions while combat patrols operated well forward in the vicinity of MERSCH and PATTERN. During the afternoon the 330th Infantry Regiment of the 83rd Infantry Division moved across the ROER, according to plan, and relieved the 115th Infantry Regiment. The 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry Regiment with Company A, 747th Tank Battalion moved east, captured SETTERNICK and closed the south flank on the 30th Infantry Division. An enemy self propelled 88 accounted for one tank from Company A. Another was lost to bazooka fire.

The 175th Infantry Regiment (-) attacked northeast toward PATTERN after mopping up operations around KONIGSKAMP.

Although the CITADEL had originally been bypassed it was now necessary to eliminate this stronghold before extending further east and north. During the morning the 1st Flamethrowing Platoon, 739th Medium Tank Battalion (Special) moved across the pontoon bridge and

assembled in JULICH where it was attached to Company K, 116th Infantry Regiment. Company K then proceeded to positions around the fortress while one tank section moved to within seventy five yards of the main gate on the south causeway. The second tank section remained to the rear in an overwatching role. The forward tanks supported by fires from the overwatching tanks and infantry applied their flamethrowers to the embrasures and fired 75mm shells against the staunch steel doors of the south gate. After the gates had collapsed the tanks lifted their fires permitting the infantrymen to dash across the causeway into the CITADEL. Few prisoners were taken as the bulk of the enemy force had escaped through one of the numerous underground tunnels leading northeast out of the CITADEL.¹⁰ With the fall of this fortress at 1500 24 February, the city of JULICH had been cleared of all enemy combat forces.

At 1430 hours, Company B, 747th Tank Battalion, moved across the ROER to JULICH and joined the 116th Infantry Regiment.

At 1500 hours Company C, plus one platoon of Company D, with the two remaining assault guns crossed the river and took up positions in JULICH awaiting future employment with the 115th Infantry Regiment, now in division reserve.

At 1700 hours the 116th Infantry Regiment relieved the 175th Infantry Regiment along the general line, MERSCHERHOE-SETTERNICK-KONIGSKAMP, while the 330th Infantry Regiment remained in the same position as when committed. The closing of the second day found the bridgehead free of hostile forces and all armor of the 747th Tank Battalion available east of the river for the anticipated drive to the east and the RHINE.

The Third Day

On 25 February, the third day of this operation, XIX Corps swung the attack to the northeast in the direction of DUSSELLDORF rather than COLOGNE, as originally planned. The change in direction was part of a gigantic flanking movement in order to slice across the enemy's lines of communication.

The 330th Infantry Regiment captured MERSCH and PATTERN against scattered enemy resistance and in late afternoon moved on MUNTZ. The 116th Infantry Regiment supported by Company B, 747th Tank Battalion, moved rapidly on WELLDORF, GUSTEN and SERREST, capturing all three towns before midnight. Strong resistance was encountered at WELLDORF during this advance. At 1500 hours the 1st and 2nd Battalions with Company B, 747th Tank Battalion enveloped the city after previous attempts proved inadequate. Company B lost one of its tanks to 88mm SP fire. Concurrent with the fall of WELLDORF one infantry company struck north and captured SERREST against light enemy resistance. As the regiment moved on GUSTEN enemy fires increased so that it was necessary to withdraw to WELLDORF for reorganization. A coordinated attack was launched at dark and infantry and tank elements controlled the town by 2200 hours. Company B, 747th Tank Battalion remained in GUSTEN due to the need for maintenance and ammunition resupply.

The 175th Infantry Regiment with Company A, 747th Tank Battalion attached remained in the vicinity of SETTERNICH and LINDENBERGER WALD conducting mopping up operations and securing the east flanks during the division's turning movement.

During the day the light artillery of the 29th Infantry Division crossed the ROER and occupied positions northeast of JULICH in the area previously held by the 330th Infantry Regiment. Five extra 2½-ton truckloads of ammunition per battery were crossed by the 3695th Quartermaster Truck Battalion in the event that the enemy succeeded in destroying the ROER bridges. Thus, an additional 3000 rounds of ammunition were made available to each light artillery battery.

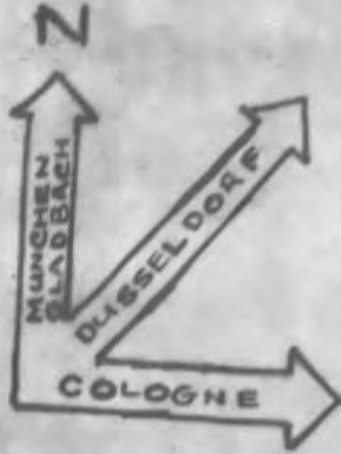
The Fourth Day

The fourth day, 26 February, found the 29th Infantry Division breaking out of the bridgehead against a rapidly fleeing enemy. The 330th Infantry Regiment completed the reduction of MUNTZ and advanced to take HASSELWEILER and GEVELSDORF.

The 115th Infantry Regiment was committed at SEVENNICH in the early morning and continued the attack north taking SPIEL by 0730 hours. Company C, 747th Tank Battalion, plus one platoon of Company D left JULICH at 0820 hours to join the 115th Infantry Regiment in its attack against AMELN. Attached to the 1st Battalion of this Regiment Company C reinforced approached AMELN on the right with the infantry on the left. Two hundred yards south of the city the tanks were fired upon from both flanks by five Mark V and one Mark IV German tanks. Three American tanks were destroyed before the enemy tanks were forced to withdraw. The infantry advanced into the city and thereupon set up hasty defenses against an expected counterattack. Company C reinforced moved to their immediate objective which was a sugar factory in the north part of AMELN.

R-12
**BRIDGE HEAD
SECURE**
26 FEB

*Rohr
River*



KOSLAR

BOURHEIM

JULICH

HAMBACH
FOREST

MERSCHERHOE

LINDENBERGER
WALD

MERSEH
350

PATTER
350

SERAPT GUSTEN

2-116

1-116
WELLDORF

SPIEL

1-115

HASSELWEILER
350

2-115

GEVELSDORF
350

After consolidation of the objective Company C reinforced prepared to withdraw to SPIEL where they were to support the 2nd Battalion, 115th Infantry Regiment, in accordance with prior plans. As the tanks were withdrawing the enemy launched a strong and well coordinated counterattack against AMELN. Enemy forces consisted of tanks, infantry and self propelled 88s. This sudden counterattack carried the enemy into the vicinity of the sugar factory previously taken by Company C, 747th Tank Battalion. Company C was hastily recalled and a heavy firefight ensued during which one American and two German tanks were destroyed and the position restored.¹¹

The capture of the general line GEVELSDORF-HASSELWEILER-SPEIL-AMELN-GUSTEN secured the bridgehead to a depth of six miles. It eliminated the ability of the enemy to place artillery fire on the ROER crossings and permitted the 29th Infantry Regiment to mass its strength east of the ROER for the onslaught against DUSSELDORF.

SUMMARY

The rapid progress in securing the bridgehead at JULICH once the river had been crossed is partially explained in a report by Major General Wagener, Chief of Staff, German Army Group B.¹² Ex-tracts of his report follow:

In the German regrouping after the termination of the ARDENNES offensive the following factors were of decisive importance...Very strong forces were transferred to the EASTERN FRONT...Because of the destruction of the rail net west of the RHINE and the acute gasoline shortage, troops moved on foot with considerable risk...Most of the divisions were in a very battered state...

The morale of the German population too, was very poor. The long Allied air offensives had had the remarkable effect of making them eager for the arrival of the enemy. They regarded the advancing Allies not as foes who would bring the terrors of

war to Germany but as liberators from the unbearable nights of bombing. From this point of view, the German people were often more hostile to their own troops than to those of the enemy...Everything was lacking for a successful defense; forces at the front, reserves, fuel and ammunition.

The combined effect of air bombing and artillery fire in JULICH proper caused Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of England, to make the subsequent statement during his visit to the front 2 - 8 February 1945: "There will be no unemployment problem in this city after the war."¹³

A total of 600 German prisoners were captured by the 29th Infantry Division during the four day operation. Interrogation of prisoners disclosed that, in addition to those enemy elements already mentioned, troops had been employed from both the 9th and 11th Panzer Divisions and the 939th Volksgrenadier Regiment which was part of the 363rd Infantry Division.¹⁴

Of the seven American tanks lost during the operation, two were lost to plastic mines, one to bazooka fire, three to German tanks, and one to a self-propelled 88 gun.

Lieutenant Colonel Fries, commanding officer, 747th Tank Battalion, concluded in his After Action Report for February that

The attachment of a company of medium tanks to each infantry regiment in a prolonged offensive has proved sound, inasmuch as the companies thereby are allowed as much rest and maintenance as possible and the close integration of tank and infantry are more completely achieved.¹⁵

Conclusions

1. That the employment of the 747th Tank Battalion in the support of the 29th Infantry Division during the crossing of the ROER

River primarily supplemented the fires of the artillery and provided limited anti-tank defense by direct fire from the far shore.

2. That the planning preceeding the crossing did not envisage early employment of armor on the far bank, and, had an enemy tank threat developed, particularly in the north, the crossing might have been less successful.

3. That although the 29th Infantry Division had been present in this area for some three months, tanks were lost to enemy mine action enroute to their support firing positions.

Recommendations

1. That in the planning phase of river crossings necessitating entrance into limited built up areas, consideration be given to the employment of the main tank strength with infantry units on the flanks. Such tactical employment could have been used in this operation serving to eliminate delay in passing tanks through JULICH, while still allowing the hasty organization of a perimeter anti-tank defense around the outer fringes of JULICH. When the tactical situation and local terrain permits armor should be crossed in vicinities offering areas of unrestricted tank maneuver once the far bank has been reached.

2. That enemy mine fields must be meticulously and systematically searched especially in those areas through which armor must pass. Where armored strength is present in limited or insufficient numbers, the search and removal of enemy mines assumes high tactical significance and undue losses may adversely effect the outcome of local engagements.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 4

- 1 Report of Operations 12th Army Group, Vol. V, G-3 Section,
p 42.
- 2 Ibid, Letter of Instructions Number 15, paragraph 3.a.,
p 121.
- 3 Joseph H. Ewing, 29 Lets Go, (Washington: Infantry Journal
Press, 1948) pp 224-225.
- 4 Report of C/S German Army Group "B", 25 January to 21 March
1945, Appendix 6.
- 5 Ibid, pp 225-226.
- 6 After-Action Report, 747th Tank Battalion, December 1944 -
January 1945.
- 7 After-Action Report, 739th Medium Tank Battalion (Special),
February 1945.
- 8 Op cit, 29 Lets Go, p 229.
- 9 After-Action Report, 747th Tank Battalion, February 1945.
- 10 Op cit, 29 Lets Go, p 233.
- 11 Ibid, p. 235.
- 12 Op cit, German Army Group "B".
- 13 "Churchill Visits Julich", New York Times, 13 March 1945,
p. 1.
- 14 Staff Film Report Number 46, War Department, Washington,
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- 15 After-Action Report, 747th Tank Battalion, February 1945.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

1. The armored division, as organized, is highly flexible capable of making either a hasty or a deliberate river crossing or to be used in a supporting role with infantry. However, it is much better suited to the hasty crossing where its inherent speed, mobility, fire power and armor protection, which are so necessary to the success of the operation, can be more fully exploited. Every effort should be made by armor to seize bridges intact, and to rush armored vehicles across to alleviate the necessity of having to make a deliberate crossing.

2. In armored assaults across a river line, executed either deliberately or in support of large infantry units, the most desirable characteristics of armor cannot be fully utilized. Generally, armor occupies defiladed firing positions on the near bank and renders both direct and indirect fire support to foot elements.

3. Weather, the most variable of the commander's problems, can greatly influence the successful execution of this type of operation. Torrential rains, and spring thaws transform otherwise placid waters into swift moving rivers capable of upsetting the timetable of strategic operations and further complicates a complex operation.

4. The intense aerial bombardment and artillery fire, to which the city of JULICH was subjected prior to the crossing of the ROER, created vast amounts of debris which served to block and delay

the passage of armor through that city. Enemy strength, dispositions and activities in the JULICH area did not warrant its complete reduction and served to hinder, rather than assist, the subsequent employment of armor.

5. In making a deliberate river crossing the most critical time for any unit is during the first few hours. Before tanks are ferried across the only antitank weapons available are the hand carried ones. Due to this fact the infantry of the infantry division, with their greater proportion of 57mm and 75mm recoilless weapons, are more able to defend themselves against an armored counterattack during this stage of the crossing than are the infantry troops of the armored division.

6. In the attack of a heavily defended position across a river line it is more economical of forces to use an infantry unit supported by tanks; because of the proportionately higher number of infantry troops. In the planning preceding the crossing of a river, however, the early requirement for tanks on the far shore must not be overlooked.

Recommendations

1. That in the conduct of field training added emphasis be placed upon the hasty river crossing techniques to include:

a. The organization and training of traffic control teams and communication teams within each battalion.

b. Training of combined arms teams at combat command level to insure rapid and coordinated action in crossings of opportunity.

2. That in the planning phase of a river crossing opposite a built up area, consideration be given to the employment of tank-infantry teams on the flanks of the main effort. Tanks should be crossed in a vicinity that offers unrestricted maneuver area on the far bank.

3. That the training of reconnaissance personnel and unit commanders emphasize the importance of selecting suitable crossing sites.

4. That the training of armored units include familiarization of all personnel with organic stream crossing equipment and field expedients.