

INSTRUCTOR TRAINING DIVISION
GENERAL INSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT
THE ARMORED SCHOOL
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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

41-115

TITLE: The Capture of Trier.

SCOPE: The importance of the capture of Trier.

The Saar-Moselle triangle; its terrain and tactical importance.

The closing up on the west bank of the Saar River by the 10th Armored Division and the 94th Infantry Division.

The assault crossing of the Saar River by the 376th RCT and its failure to establish a secure bridgehead on the vicinity of Ockfen, Germany.

The assault crossing of the Saar River by the three dismounted armored infantry battalions of the 10th Armored Division.

The crossing of the armor and its passage through the bridgehead of the 94th Infantry Division, and the joining up of the tanks and armored infantry at Irsch.

The drive on Trier, the nature of the opposition, the entry into the city, the seizure of the bridge, and the results of the action.

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THE CAPTURE OF TRIER

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the operation against Trier is perhaps best attested by the fact that Goering and Keitel, in signed statements, said that the three decisive actions of the war on the western front were: the break-through at Avranches, the crossing of the Rhine, and the capture of Trier with the subsequent uncovering of the Seigfried Line south of Trier.

BACKGROUND

Mid-February, 1945, found men and materiel being massed along Germany's frontier for the final blow to destroy the Wehrmacht west of the Rhine. The 21st Army Group, under General Montgomery, was to make the main effort. First Army, under 12th Army Group, had the mission of seizing the Roer dams. Third Army had been ordered to assume the defensive in order that the bulk of available supplies could be used to support the main effort. However, Third Army had instructions from General Bradley to make probing attacks to prevent the Germans from withdrawing units from the Third Army front to reinforce against the attack in the north. Actually it is a matter of historical record that the attacks in which Third Army was currently engaged continued unabated.

Third Army had already cracked the Seigfried Line east of the Luxembourg border, but the Saar-Moselle triangle to the south,

which had served as a protective screen while Von Rundstedt funneled supplies through Trier for his December offensive, remained a threat to the exposed left flank of XX Corps.

TERRAIN IN THE SAAR-MOSELLE TRIANGLE

The Saar-Moselle triangle is the name which, for the purpose of military expediency, has been given to the strip of Germany lying between the Saar and Moselle Rivers. Its apex is the confluence of the two rivers, its western and eastern legs are, respectively, the Moselle and the Saar, and its base is formed by the southern flank of a mountainous ridge running east and west from Sierck to Merzig. The triangle, approximately 19 miles long from base to apex and 10 miles wide at its base, is approximately bisected by a long north-south ridge. In general, the road network within the triangle, restricted as it is by difficult terrain, is not suited to military, and particularly to armored, operations. Across the base of the triangle the Germans had constructed a switch line to the main Saar River fortifications, hoping thereby to bar access to the high ground overlooking Trier.

TACTICAL IMPORTANCE

The tactical importance of the Saar-Moselle triangle was considerable, both to the attacker and to the defender. During the latter part of November, XX Corps, driving east beyond captured Metz,

had moved up to the west bank of the Saar River from Saarlautern to Nohn. Simultaneously with this drive to the east, an attempt had been made, initially by the 3d Cavalry Group, and then by CCA of the 10th Armored Division, to advance north into the Saar-Moselle triangle with the purpose of seizing crossings over the Saar at Saarburg. The enemy, employing the 416th Infantry Division, remnants of the 25th Panzer Grenadier Division, and the antitank battalion of the 19th Volksgrenadier Division, and defending from the concrete fortifications of the Siegfried Line switch positions between Orscholz and Nennig, was able between 21 and 26 November to stop the attacks and stabilize his front along the base of the triangle. As a consequence of this stabilization, the left flank of XX Corps lay exposed to an attack which the enemy might prepare at his leisure behind the protective wall of his switch position. Moreover, the requirements of sound tactics dictated that this flank be somewhat less awkwardly disposed before the corps resumed its advance to the east.

For the Germans, the importance of the triangle lay in the fact that any hostile force which held the high ground at its apex would be in a position to dominate the city of Trier. This city, one of the chief communications centers of Western Germany, guarded the entrance to the Moselle Corridor, through which the attacker might drive to Koblenz and the Rhine. Furthermore, it was a vital hinge in the Siegfried Line, and the force which held it held the key to the defenses of both the Saar Basin and the Eifel. The determination of

the enemy to hold the triangle was in no way lessened by his knowledge of the fact that, so long as he held it, his mere presence there constituted a very real threat to the left flank of XX Corps; he had, what is more, an ideal position from which to launch a dangerous counterattack, should his strength ever be equal to it.

ATTACK OF THE 10TH ARMORED DIVISION

On the 20th of February the 10th Armored Division attacked through the 94th Infantry Division with combat commands abreast. After overcoming heavy initial resistance consisting of mine fields, defended road blocks, and artillery and antitank fire, the division was able to break out and by early afternoon of the 21st had reduced the Saar-Moselle triangle. In two days, the 10th Armored Division had taken 85 square miles of German territory, had seized 23 towns, and had reached a position from which it could command the approaches to Trier. All was not glory, however. Part of the mission of the 10th Armored Division had been to seize the Wiltingen and Kanzem bridges, but the bridges, protected by extensive mine fields, had been blown by the retreating Germans before the armor could reach them.

Late afternoon on the 21st of February found the 10th Armored Division drawn up on the west bank of the Saar River from Saarburg north to the confluence of the two rivers. The 94th Infantry Division was drawn up to the Saar River in its zone south of Saarburg.

During the afternoon of the 21st, Major General Walton H.

Walker, XX Corps Commander, issued the 10th Armored Division an order:
"Bridge the Saar and take Trier."

PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

When the original Saar-Moselle triangle operation was planned, an assault crossing of the Saar River had not been contemplated, and no engineer preparations had been made. By night, however, XX Corps made available to both the 10th Armored Division and the 94th Infantry Division assault boats and bridging equipment in sufficient quantities for the crossing. The plan was for the 10th Armored Division, with the 376th RCT attached, to attack east across the Saar River in the vicinity of Ockfen. The 376th RCT would establish the bridgehead at Ockfen for the armor and follow behind the tanks after they had crossed en route to Trier. The 94th Infantry Division, less the 376th RCT, would make a simultaneous and diversionary assault crossing of the river south of Saarburg, in the vicinity of Serrig and Taben. It was further planned for the 5th Ranger Battalion, which was at that time attached to the 94th Infantry Division, to cross with the infantry, pass through, infiltrate through the enemy lines, and seize the high ground around Zerf.

SAAR RIVER SITES AND SEIGFRIED LINE

The western approaches to the Saar River in this part of its course were nearly everywhere dominated by the high ridges on the east

bank. The difficulties involved in the proposed crossings were considerable. On the formidable obstacles of terrain on the east bank of the river, the enemy had superimposed the even more formidable obstacles of the Seigfried Line to supplement the natural barriers. Where the defensive combination of the river and the ridge was not considered sufficiently formidable by itself, as at Ockfen, there the defenses were built in more than normal density. This part of the line was approximately three kilometers in depth and formed a continuous obstacle to the crossing. It thinned out appreciably at only one point, in the vicinity of Taben and Serrig, where the eastern bank rose in a sheer precipice from the water's edge. The river itself was from 120 to 150 feet wide in the general vicinity of the crossing sites; all bridges were blown, and the steep eastern banks made fording impossible. Both the river and the crossing sites on each bank were covered by prepared fires; bridging operations would have to take place under both direct and observed fire. The terrain along the western bank was mostly open, with scattered and thinly-wooded areas which exposed movement to enemy observation, and marshy ground which confined movement to places where roads led down to the river. To these considerations must be added the additional factor that the two divisions had been given no opportunity for prior planning and were able to make only the hastiest sort of reconnaissance of the proposed crossing sites.

It had originally been planned that the crossing of the 10th

Armored Division, initiated by the 376th RCT, would be made on the night of 21-22 February. Unfortunately, because of the confused and restricted nature of the road net within the triangle—a factor rendered more trying by the unusual blackness of the night—the assault boats failed to arrive on schedule at the Ockfen crossing site, and the crossing had to be delayed until 0900 the following morning. The delay was costly; it gave the enemy valuable time in which to collect his stragglers and organize his defenses. Furthermore, the daylight crossing had to be made under a smoke screen and after an artillery preparation, and consequently the element of surprise was lost.

ASSAULT AT OCKFEN

The enemy's defenses at Ockfen were manned by three fortress battalions, by such remnants of the two divisions destroyed in the triangle as were able to make their way back across the Saar, by hastily improvised formations of rear echelon and service troops, and by the Saarburg Volksturm. Their quality was low, but their mission, to sit behind concrete emplacements and keep machine guns trained on the river, was simple. The 1st and 3d Battalions of the 376th RCT, making the initial assault crossings for the 10th Armored Division at 220930 February, immediately came under heavy artillery fire and withering cross fire from the machine guns mounted in the nearly continuous row of pillboxes which commanded the crossing site.

Friendly artillery was called for, and under its protection the infantry cut its way through the maze of barbed wire entanglements which lay in its path and fought its way up the banks which rose abruptly from the river's eastern edge. In the wake of the initial assault the 2d Battalion crossed and, with the other two battalions, was soon engaged in hard fighting. The 376th RCT fought on throughout the day and the following night, but could not make satisfactory progress.

The situation on 23 February remained unimproved. Enemy artillery and small-arms fire on the very small bridgehead made bridging operations impossible, and the infantry was unable to enlarge the bridgehead further in the face of the fanatical resistance it was meeting from the Seigfried Line fortifications.

On the evening of 24 February, the three armored infantry battalions of the 10th Armored Division were placed under CG, CCA, and, under withering fire, crossed the river north of the Ockfen bridgehead to assist the 376th RCT, which by now was completely stalemated. Early on the morning of 25 February, these units succeeded in occupying Ockfen. They spent the rest of the day in reducing the pillboxes which had been blocking expansion of the bridgehead, and in driving south to the road center of Irsch, which was occupied by midnight of the same day.

SAAR CROSSINGS

In the meantime the 94th Infantry Division, having on 21 February closed up to the Saar River in its zone, forced a surprise crossing in the vicinity of Taben and Stadt. By 24 February a floating treadway bridge had been built in the vicinity of Taben, on 25 February a second treadway bridge was completed at Serrig, and on 26 February a heavy ponton bridge was constructed at Saarburg.

CROSSING THE ARMOR

On 25 February it was found impossible to construct a bridge at Ockfen, in the zone of the 10th Armored Division bridgehead, due to both artillery and small-arms fire from the fanatical garrison that manned the row of pillboxes dominating the bridge site. XX Corps therefore decided to pass the vehicles of the 10th Armored Division through the 94th Infantry Division bridgehead. On the morning of 26 February, CCB, with the vehicles of its armored infantry battalion in column, passed through the 94th Infantry Division bridgehead at Taben, moved into Irsch, and rejoined the armored infantry moving south from the Ockfen bridgehead area. Mounting its infantry, CCB attacked east toward Zerf. By 1600 on 26 February, CCB had entered Zerf, and CCA had passed through the 94th Infantry Division bridgehead in the vicinity of Serrig and had reached Irsch. Here CCA mounted its infantry and re-formed its teams. Division then ordered

CCA to move without interruption to Zerf, pass through CCB, and attack north toward Trier; CCB to block south and east at Zerf and prepare to follow CCA; Reserve Command to cross the Saar at Saarburg and follow CCB.

ENEMY AND TERRAIN

To oppose this plan, the enemy had available—in addition to the motley array of divisional remnants, fortress battalions, and Volksturm with which he had resisted the original crossings—the newly arrived 2d Mountain Division, which had been badly mauled in the fighting in Alsace. The 2d Mountain Division was no longer a first-class fighting unit, but it still functioned as a division. Its sudden appearance on the scene emphasized the necessity for speed if the initial successes in the triangle were to be profitably exploited.

The enemy was further assisted in his defense of Trier by the terrain, which was most unfavorable for armored operations. Between Zerf and Trier there lay a succession of hills and deep valleys which afforded the defender excellent positions for gun emplacements. The one road capable of sustaining a rapid armored advance in this direction ran along the crest of a ridge stretching from Zerf 11 miles north through Pellingen to Trier. The armor, unable to leave this road, would be forced to advance under constant enemy observation from both east and west and would be subjected to the fire which the enemy, now fighting with small rear guards who had set up their

mortars and antitank weapons on commanding ground, would inevitably bring to bear on it.

At approximately midnight on 26 February, CCA struck east in march column and under artillery and mortar fire rounded the corner at Zerf. This German rail center became the elbow of a brilliant turning movement which General Patton described as "a daring operation, well executed!"¹

ADVANCE BY THE ARMOR

At midnight on 26 February, with Task Force Chamberlain leading, CCA struck east in march column, and under intense artillery and mortar fire rounded the corner at Zerf and turned north toward Trier. Task Force Chamberlain, followed by Task Force Norris, found progress initially slow through the heavy woods which lie immediately north of Zerf. Neither force had sufficient time or sufficient infantry to push out beyond the road or to secure commanding hill positions, although small flank guards were sent along secondary roads to block to the east. Between Zerf and Pellingen the infantry dismounted from their half-tracks and were employed to screen a distance of 100 yards on each side of the road. In this way four pillboxes and two tanks guarding the wooded stretch of the Trier road were destroyed.

1. Terrify and Destroy, The Story of the 10th Armored Division, p. 17.

When, on 27 February, the leading elements of Task Force Chamberlain succeeded in breaking clear of the forest, the infantry was remounted. A tank-heavy team was moved forward and passed through the infantry in order to deploy and move cross-country when possible.

Four kilometers south of Pellingen, the tanks ran into a deliberate mine field, and two tanks were disabled. Simultaneously, heavy artillery and mortar fire was brought down on the task force from a bare ridge 500 yards to the front. The infantry dismounted and, using the ditches and road foliage for cover and concealment, hit the enemy from the left flank and routed him. Any attempt to advance beyond the ridge, however, brought heavy shelling from direct fire weapons. Engineers were sent in to clear the mines so that the tanks could be employed on the flanks of the enemy positions. By 280115 February passage had been cleared through the 300-yard deep belt of mines, and the tanks moved out to take up positions dominating Pellingen. The infantry, aided by battery shelling from the tanks, reduced the positions defending Pellingen, and by 281130 February Pellingen had been cleared.

ENVELOPMENT OF TRIER

At this point (28 February) an effort was made to speed up the attack by throwing into action the full resources of the 10th Armored Division. Task Force Chamberlain was directed to discontinue

its advance north and, turning west, to seize Konz-Karthaus, thereby blocking any attempt by the forces pocketed between that town and Ockfen to intervene in the Trier action. Task Force Norris, which had been following Chamberlain, was to continue directly to Trier. Those elements of the 10th Armored Division which had been left back to hold the corner at Zerf were relieved by the 1st Battalion of the 301st Infantry and organized into Task Force Richardson, with orders to go into Trier. Meanwhile, CCB had moved north, on 27 February, along the Zerf--Lampaden--Ollmuth road. Mine fields, artillery, and direct fire weapons offered the same type of resistance that CCA had met, and on 28 February CCB had reached a point approximately six kilometers southeast of Ollmuth.

On 1 March Task Force Chamberlain drove into Konz-Karthaus and, having cleared the town by noon, set up blocking positions to the south of it and thereafter protected the division left flank without incident. Task Force Norris drove straight to Trier, but was prevented from making an immediate entry into the city by reason of a fight which developed at prepared positions on the southern outskirts. Task Force Richardson, moving out at midnight of 1 March under a full moon and with excellent visibility, began advancing on Trier by way of the Lampaden--Ollmuth--Ollmuth road, with the mission of seizing intact, if possible, the two bridges over the Moselle in the city.

ENTRY INTO THE CITY

CCB was still being held up at the outskirts of Trier, but Task Force Richardson, moving over the most eastern route, was able to pass through Oewig and continued into the city limits early on morning of 2 March. A 15-minute halt occurred at the railroad crossing within the city limits while a company of surprised German infantry and four antitank guns were captured without a round being fired. Evidently the Americans had not been expected in that part of the city so soon. One of the prisoners taken at the railroad crossing had been detailed to notify an enemy demolition party on the far side of the south bridge over the Moselle about the arrival of the Americans as soon as they arrived at the railroad crossing. And the demolition party, in turn, was to blow the bridge upon sighting the American tanks.

Feeling that if he attacked the nearer bridge directly, it would in all likelihood be immediately blown, Colonel Richardson decided to attack the northern bridge first. One team was sent to take that bridge, and another team was to follow, ready to cut through the city from the north and get the remaining bridge. At 0200 the first team reported that the north bridge had been previously blown. Colonel Richardson immediately ordered his other team to move at once to seize and secure the south bridge. The team moved out on the avenue along the Moselle River, and shortly afterward reported by radio

to Colonel Richardson: "Have reached bridge. Bridge intact. Am receiving small-arms fire." Colonel Richardson hurriedly got to the bridge in his tank, and directed its seizure from that point. Fifty-caliber machine-gun fire was directed on the western approaches of the span, while a platoon of tanks and a platoon of dismounted infantry crossed the bridge, expecting to have it disappear at any moment. They crossed the bridge just in time to seize a German major and five enlisted men rushing toward it with detonating caps and an exploder. The German major was drunk. A detail of men cut all wires leading to the bridge, and the remaining men and tanks which had crossed formed a small bridgehead at its approaches. The major, worried about the fact that he had failed in his duty, and wishing to conceal the fact from higher German Army commanders, told his captors about 17 other German officers having a party down the street. The 17 were there in the house reported, about 200 yards from the western entrance to the bridge, and were captured without a fight.

Shortly thereafter, CCB and Task Force Norris entered the city; and by the end of the day, Trier had been cleared in a house-to-house search and was being outposted as far east as the line of the Ruwer River by elements of the 10th Armored Division.

At the conclusion of the action, the last installations of the Siegfried Line in the pocket between Ockfen and Konz-Karthaus were being reduced by the 376th RCT. The 94th Infantry Division was successfully defending and expanding its sector of the bridgehead

against furious enemy attacks. XX Corps now had available for future operations a firm and extensive bridgehead extending from the town of Ruwer in the north along the line of the Ruwer River to Taben in the south.

RESULTS OF THE ACTION

With the capture of the ancient city of Trier, complete with an excellent advanced fighter base for the supporting planes of the 19th Tactical Air Command, XX Corps had secured one of the chief communications centers of Western Germany. It had unhinged the Siegfried Line at one of its critical points, depriving the enemy of the full effectiveness of his defense in the Eifel and in the Saar Basin.

The defenses of the Saar were completely outflanked by the success of the Trier operation; while to the north, XII Corps was shortly able to exploit the unhinging of the Eifel Line by a spectacular dash to the Rhine. Possession of Trier was essential to the success of further advances to the east, and with its fall, XX Corps was in a position to launch its last great drive to the Rhine and beyond.

END

APPENDIX NO. 1

COMPOSITION OF 10TH ARMORED DIVISION COMBAT COMMANDS AND
TASK FORCES DURING PERIOD 20 FEBRUARY TO 3 MARCH 1945

CCA:

Task Force Chamberlain:

11th Tank Battalion (less Companies C and D)
Company A, 20th Armored Infantry Battalion
1st Platoon, Company A, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion
1st Platoon, Company B, 609th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Task Force Richardson:

20th Armored Infantry Battalion (less Company A and 2d
Platoon, Company C)
Company C, 11th Tank Battalion
3d Platoon, Company A, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion
2d Platoon, Company C, 609th Tank Destroyer Battalion
Company B, 796th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons
(Self-propelled) Battalion (less one platoon)

Task Force Norris: (CCA Reserve)

Company B, 3d Tank Battalion
Company D, 11th Tank Battalion
Company B, 609th Tank Destroyer Battalion (less one platoon)
2d Platoon, Company C, 20th Armored Infantry Battalion
1st Platoon, Company B, 796th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic
Weapons (Self-propelled) Battalion

APPENDIX NO. 1 (Continued)

CCB:

Task Force Riley:

21st Tank Battalion (less Companies B and C and the 1st
Platoon, Company D)
1st Platoon, Company B, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion
Company A, 54th Armored Infantry Battalion

Task Force Brown: (Dissolved 24 February 1945; Company C, 21st
Tank Battalion, was attached to Task Force
Riley and Company B, 54th Armored Infantry
Battalion, to Task Force O'Hara.)

Company C, 21st Tank Battalion
Company B, 54th Armored Infantry Battalion
1st Platoon (less one section), Company D, 21st Tank Battalion
2d Platoon, Company B, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion

Task Force O'Hara: (Later Task Force Roberts after O'Hara was
wounded at Zerf.)

54th Armored Infantry Battalion (less Companies A and B)
3d Platoon, Company B, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion*
Company B, 21st Tank Battalion
One section of Company D, 21st Tank Battalion
*Company B, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion, released from
control of CCB at 211900 February 1945

CCR:

Task Force Cherry*:

Headquarters Company, 3d Tank Battalion
Company A, 61st Armored Infantry Battalion
Companies B and C, 3d Tank Battalion
1st Platoon, Company D, 3d Tank Battalion
3d Platoon, Company C, 55th Armored Engineer Battalion
*Reconstituted 24 February 1945

Task Force Standish:

Headquarters Company, 61st Armored Infantry Battalion
Company C, 61st Armored Infantry Battalion
Company A, 3d Tank Battalion
Company D (less 1st Platoon), 3d Tank Battalion
Company B (-), 61st Armored Infantry Battalion

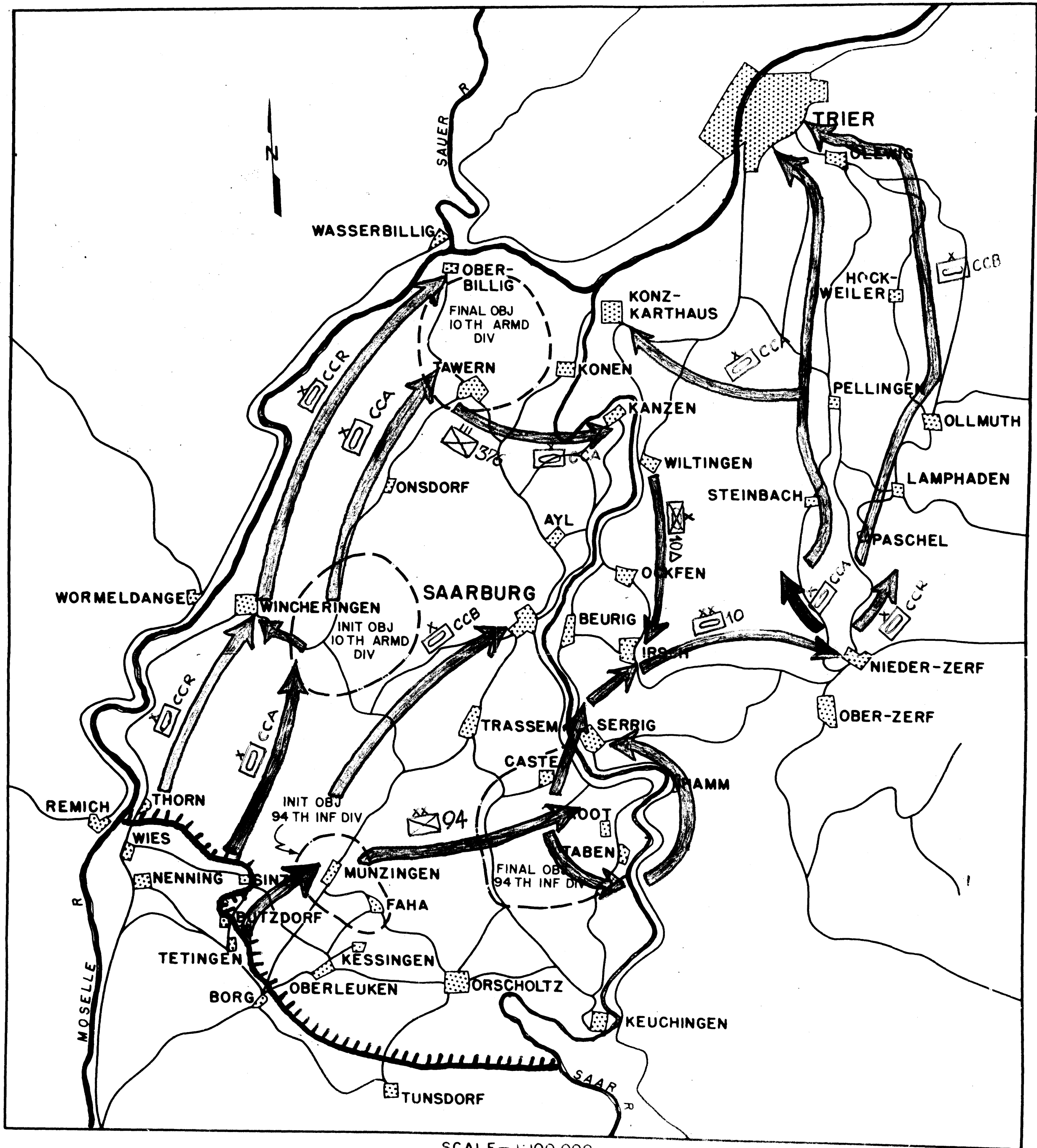
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THE CAPTURE OF TRIER



SCALE - 1:100,000

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KILOMETER 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

FRONT LINES 19 FEBRUARY, 1945