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Military Monograph

TITLE: THE FIGHT AT SAAR-LAUTERN AND THE SUBSEQUENT BREACHING
OF THE SIEGFRIED LINE.

SCOPE: This monograph deals with the defense of a bridgehead and house to house fighting in Saar-lautern, Germany. It tells of difficulties encountered in keeping communications open and how a clever method was devised to use each soldier in the battalion as a forward observer for artillery and mortar fire by the use of block diagrams. It tells of the reduction of pill boxes encountered and how artificial moonlight and illuminating flares came to play an important part in the bridgehead defense. A short description of the Siegfried Line is given as well as a brief history of its construction. In conclusion, it relates how various divisions were employed to flank the Siegfried Line resulting in the fall of Saar-lautern and the subsequent drive to the Rhine River.

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THE FIGHT AT SARR-LAUTERN AND THE SUBSEQUENT BREACHING OF THE
SIEGFRIED LINE.

This story is one that has probably been told thousands of times over beers in various sections of the United States. Those who were there or those who were in a similar situation will understand what it was like; fighting in the ruins of what once had been a thriving, large city; the most nerve racking type of fighting. You crouched all day in the rubble or in the cellars, watching and straining your eyes. Nerves were on edge and your muscles were tensed, for the enemy was in the same block as you or in the house next door. It was normal to fight all day with neither side advancing more than a house or two. The nights were full of quietness until a cat or rat would disturb the rubble and then all hell would break loose from both sides. We are going along with an ordinary infantry division, the 26th Infantry Division, into a situation such as this and observe some of its difficulties within the city and finally during an operation in which it breached the Siegfried Line and aided in opening the way for the race to the Rhine River.

Our initial action jumps off at Saar-lautern, Germany with the attack of the 95th Infantry Division upon Saar-lautern. Across the Saar River and overlooking the town were the massive defenses of one of the thickest portions of the Siegfried Line.

The 95th Division after hard, bloody fighting had managed to penetrate the enemy defensive positions in the eastern sector of

of Saar-lautern and seized a bridge intact before the enemy was able to blow it.¹ This bridge proved to be quite a bone of contention between the 95th and the enemy, but the 95th defended it successfully against numerous attacks until relieved by the 5th Infantry Division on the 18th of December 1944. The 5th held the bridgehead until the 21st of December when the 95th again took over the mission. On the 28th of January 1945, the 26th Infantry Division relieved the 95th of its mission and now we go into our story.

The type of fighting that the men of the 26th now found themselves in was quite new to most of them.² They had received extensive training in house to house fighting back in the States and since hitting combat they had fought in their share of villages and small towns, but this was a different type of warfare. It wasn't just a question of calling for artillery and leveling the buildings. This had been tried as the heaps of rubble and demolished buildings mutely testified. This was a different situation entirely. Close inspection showed that most houses were merely a front for defehsive positions consisting of heavily reinforced concrete cellars. Other houses were merely frame works, cleverly camouflaging pill boxes with walls seven and eight feet thick.

1. After Action Report 3rd U. S. Army 1 August 1944- 9 may 1945

2. History of 26th Infantry Division in WWII Chap. 5, page 35

The concrete cellars all had firing openings looking out at all approaches and with automatic weapons set up they were able to secure very deadly grazing fire.¹ Our progress was not measured in blocks or even half blocks, but in the number of houses taken. Some of the houses located at key points were bitterly contested, changing hands several times within a week. All normal methods of town fighting and sometimes some very unorthodox were used. Special teams were organized and briefed before use. One team would usually lay down a heavy volume of fire with machine guns, automatic rifles and fire from individual weapons. Under cover of fire from this team, the assault team, would endeavor to take the enemy strong point with bazookas, grenades, white phosphorus and automatic fire. Quite often, because the innocent appearing house would turn out to be a heavily defended pill box, additional equipment would have to be employed. Pole charges, satchel charges, direct fire from attached tanks, and flame throwers were all used with good effect.

The fighting would become a bit easier after a foot hold had been secured in a block. The house or houses taken would become a spring board from which we were able to launch limited objective attacks. Mouseholing was the most effective means of moving from one house to the next. The term mouseholing in this case means to knock out or blow in a portion of the wall in order to

1. General George S. Patton Jr's, War As I Knew It. page 187

get into an adjacent house without unduly exposing yourself by entering through the front or back doors. Bazookas were very effective and would usually make a hole large enough for a squad to crawl through. Once inside they would then proceed to clean the house out from attic to cellar.

After a period of this costly bit of fighting, we received orders to limit our attacks to short raids and not to start any large scale attacks. This order came as a welcome bit of news to us. We had been on the verge of a large all-out attack and with the giant pill boxes looking down our throats from the hills above us we were not looking forward to the attack with anticipation.

We had identified enemy troops in our area as being from the 347th and 719th Infantry Divisions. Portions of these troops occupied houses and buildings directly across the street from my own positions and at times were as close as the house next door. Any movement during the day drew instant fire from these troops and direct fire from the pill boxes on the hills overlooking us. It was almost equally as dangerous at night. A pitched battle was frequently started as the result of a slight noise.

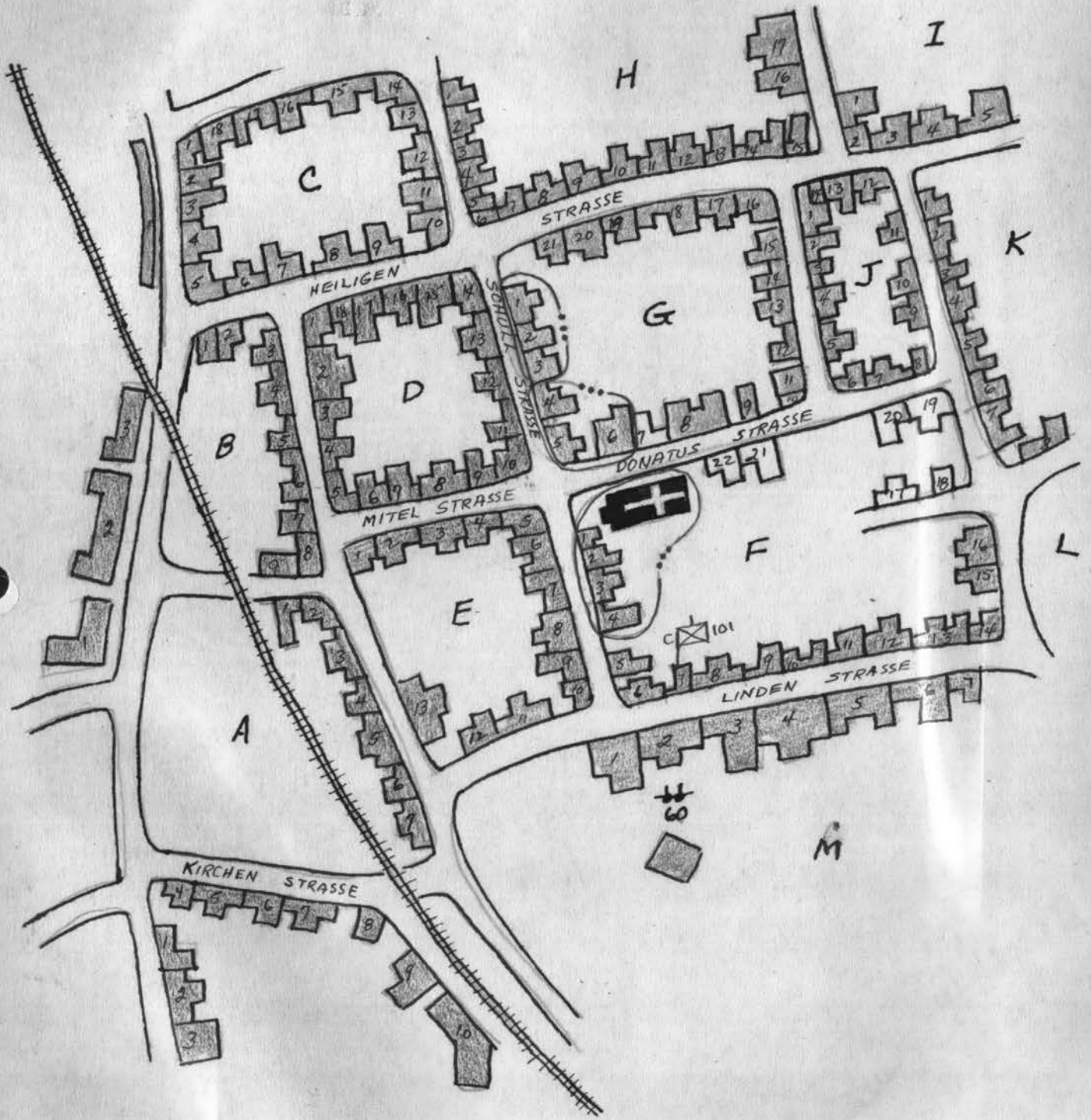
Communications in this position were extremely difficult to maintain. The company command post was connected to each platoon by wire as well as to each company within the battalion. Each

company was able to monitor all calls from adjacent companies and get all important information first hand without undue delay. Our greatest problem was in keeping our wire communications functioning. Enemy artillery and mortar fire constantly interfered with our communications set up. Due to the proximity of enemy troops, it was virtually impossible to repair breaks in the wire during the hours of daylight. Battalion communication officer sent down an extra SCR 300 and this I placed with my most forward platoon with instructions to open only in case their wire communications went out. My own SCR 300 at the company command post was kept open constantly. I was quite concerned with the maintaining of communication within the company, particularly as the enemy positions were so close to my own. If they had pulled an attack while communications were out, it would have been very difficult to control my defense as well as assist my platoons with artillery and mortar fire. We experimented a bit in a rear area and came up with a workable solution. We fastened a length of light combat wire to a rifle grenade and with the pin still intact, fired it from one of my platoons across the street to an adjacent company who tapped in to their wire. Thus we were able to maintain constant communication.

Prior to moving into our positions, a number of mimeographed diagrams of the city blocks that were to be our sector were issued to each man in the company. Each block, which was then

reproduced, was lettered and each house in each block was given a number. (See drawing No. 1) Prior to the men moving into position, they were all instructed in the purpose to which the diagrams were to be put. Each man, no matter what his position or rank, was to act as a forward observer and direct artillery and mortar fire. Heavy weapons company was also provided with these diagrams and adjusted their fire on key points in order to be able to adjust on any particular point within the sector in a matter of seconds. Copies were also given to the artillery that was in direct support of our battalion and they also adjusted their fire in a similar manner. So fine was the adjustment on both of these supporting weapons, that fire could be brought down on houses directly across the street from those occupied by my company. The procedure would go something like this: a man in the platoon would spot an enemy position or troop location, locate it on his diagram, then report it by house and block number to his platoon leader who would then relay it to me. If we were not able to take care of the situation with our own weapons, the battalion 81's or artillery were available to us within a matter of seconds. It was fast, efficient support. Several attacks were broken up before they could gain momentum in this manner.

White phosphorus was used with very good effect upon some of the older buildings within the block. Several fires were started by phosphorus shells fired from our bazookas or the 81 MM mortar



DRAWING # 1

platoons of battalion heavy weapon company. The fires sometimes drove the enemy out into the open where they were eliminated.

Automatic weapons proved to be of very great value to us in this position. As a matter of fact, I couldn't seem to get enough. The battalion S-4, a very resourceful and talented young man, won my undying gratitude by securing either by hook or crook two additional light machine guns and six more automatic rifles.

These were placed in strategic positions supplementing those we all ready had set up. I felt sure that with the curtain of fire that we were now capable of placing to our front that if the enemy started throwing his weight around that we could certainly discourage him. Even the fifty caliber air cooled machine gun was taken off the headquarters jeep and placed in a position where it could fire up the street into positions that the enemy were fond of occupying upon occasion. This street we called "Burr Gun Alley" as it seemed to have a constant stream of lead going either one direction or the other. We were located about a block and a half from the battalion command post, but for some strange reason we were not honored by staff visits.

During this time we were given one of the then new 60MM mortars with the neat trigger attachment in the base. This weapon was capable of being fired at an almost horizontal position. These were tried out with considerable success and were especially effective when fired at short range against

enemy personnel. We also tried out several other unorthodox ways of firing our weapons. Some of the men tried firing a 60MM mortar shell from an M1 rifle with the aid of a grenade launcher and the fragmentation grenade adapter M1. It worked very well and was used on numerous occasions. Recently I noticed an article which mentioned a similar experiment.¹ It was stated that all increments were removed prior to firing. Normally the rifle is fired by resting the butt on the ground and inclining the rifle at an angle of 45 degrees, which gives a range of about 100 yards, 60 degrees gives a range of about 85 yards and 70 degrees gives a range of about 60 yards. The safety pin must be pulled. Twenty five percent of the shells fired in this manner prove to be duds. This is attributed to the relatively low force exerted by the grenade cartridge. Possibly a greater charge in the cartridge would prove more effective and eliminate the majority of the dud rounds.

In many places, the houses were connected by tunnels which were usually blown by the Germans if they lost the house. Tunnels were also dug beneath the streets connecting a house in one block with a house in another block. Mines and booby traps were placed among the debris and rubble that littered the streets and blocks. Anti-tank and anti-personnel mines were also placed quite freely by both sides.

1. Battle Experience July 1944-April 1945 Chapter 3, part 7

Saar-lautern, as I have mentioned previously, was one of the strongest portions of the entire Siegfried Line. In addition to the rows of dragons teeth and concrete obstacles along the Saar River, pill boxes and gun emplacements looked down upon us from the hills. These did nothing to raise the morale of the troops, particularly as we were able to observe one or two air strikes which apparently did nothing more than jar the occupants.

Our supply routes were under constant artillery fire. After a vehicle crossed the bridge, it was full speed ahead until you slid into the shelter of the few buildings left standing in Saar-lautern itself. Control of the area and traffic between units and their installations was limited strictly to night movement. All activity took place at night and I cannot recall getting one nights sleep in all the time that we were in this position. Action during daylight was limited and this was the time that I was able to get a little rest, that is, if one could rest while trying to sleep in a poorly ventilated cellar on a pile of stinking sugar beets.

During the period that we retained the bridgehead, the nights were usually very dark and the moon shone rarely. This was not conducive to steady nerves. The troops became very jittery and in some cases extremely trigger happy. It seemed that about the only inhabitants left in the city were hundreds of cats and one lonely goat who had strayed too near to the

Battalion Aid Station and had received a liberal painting with several bottles of mercurochrome. He was a beautiful, lurid pink. As for the cats, the city was overrun with these animals who were looking for former homes and food among the ruins of what had once been a thriving city. Each and every feline needed its full quota of nine lives to survive during the hours of darkness. During the night, a lonely cat would disturb some rubble or tin cans and the grenades and shots would fly. The death toll among the cats mounted nightly. Nerves were on edge and no man dared sleep at night. It was at this time that artificial moonlight and illuminating shells began to play an important part in our defense of the bridgehead.

On the fourth of February 1945 and for the first time in the Third Army area, troops of the 26th Division had their first experience working with searchlights under combat conditions. The searchlights were used at this time in an experimental as well as a familiarization capacity. At first the men didn't like the lights, however, after becoming accustomed to them, they asked for more. These lights proved to be of value to us in more ways than one. Their chief value lay in their morale building factor. During the dark nights, the troops would imagine all sorts of noises and forms approaching their positions. The glow of these searchlights reflected off of low hanging clouds above the city gave off just enough light to make jittery nerves quiet and relax

a bit. The lights were ordinarily placed in defilade from 600 to 2000 yards from the enemy front lines and were usually reflected from low hanging cloud formations. The light beams were usually laid on an azimuth given by the Division G-3.¹ The illumination was at times as bright as that of a full moon. Naturally, it depended a great deal upon the cloud formations and their proximity to the ground.

British reports indicate considerable success in the use of the searchlights to illuminate the battlefield in the Italian campaign. Indirect lighting aided in the movement of tanks, infantry, and of motor transport. German and Italian PW reports were varied. Some stated that the lights did not bother them while others stated that they were a definite nuisance. The majority of German troops felt decidedly uneasy during the periods that the lights were operating, not only because of the uncanny atmosphere, but because they felt that they were now handicapped even during what used to be their one period of free movement.²

Illuminating flares from both the 60MM and 81 MM mortars of the company and of battalion were also used to provide valuable illumination at night. They provided approximately 25 seconds of 100,000 candle power light and materially aided in disclosing any enemy movements. These flares were set off at varying inter-

1. Operations Division Information Bulletin. Vol. 5 No. 1 July 1945

2. Tactical and Technical Trends. No. 57, April 1945

vals throughout the night in order that the enemy would not know just when to expect them. Frequently, we surprised groups gathering for raids on our positions and with the aid of the flares, we succeeded in discouraging them. These two methods of illumination, searchlights and flares, helped out immeasurably in these particular positions and were so reported by us.

There were moments of humor to be found even in such a situation as we found ourselves in at the bridgehead. Nightly, we received orders to send patrols out to gather whatever information of the enemy was available. Division was anxious to find out if there had been any change in enemy troops within our sector. These patrols were of particular danger, not only from enemy fire but from the numerous mines and booby traps scattered about the area. The patrols were usually unsuccessful in capturing a prisoner and usually became involved in heavy fire fights with enemy strong points in the houses adjacent to our positions. Normally, dawn was about to break before the patrols returned and I would be sweating out their return. One particular raiding party pulled a very courageous raid upon an enemy occupied house. We all knew that the enemy habitually occupied the cellar each night with a strong force. A strong bee-hive charge was prepared for us and three of the men from my company volunteered to place it against the wall of the cellar that night. Upon my questioning later, they reported that they crawled to the house

and could hear the murmur of German voices within. In spite of the fact that a soldier was at the entrance to the cellar, presumably on guard, they placed the charge against the wall, ignited it and crawled a safe distance away. A short time later when they heard the explosion, they got up and ran to the safety of our company area. Later patrols revealed that the house had been practically blown down and anyone in it at the time certainly killed or injured. After such nights as these, the days seemed almost quiet, although we were subjected to artillery and mortar fire throughout the day. They seemed to be trying to pick off the company CP, as they fired in its vicinity almost constantly. This was not particularly dangerous, more of a harassing effect was obtained. The rounds invariably fell just across the street and behind my mortar positions. Possibly, due to the close proximity of their own troops, they could not bring their rounds closer. It was quite evident to me that the enemy knew my location, however, due to the fact that my cellar was well protected, I did not worry. Most of the house above was demolished, but somehow the frame work and part of the rafters remained. Hanging from the second floor rafters was a block and tackle arrangement with a rope hanging to the ground that had probably been used to draw hay up into the upper story. After several days of being harassed by enemy fire, I became a bit irked and rummaged around in the ruins until I found what I had

been looking for. Every GI knows what a "Maggie's Drawers" signifies and I was hoping that the Krauts did too. I found a bright red pair and tied them to the ropes hanging from the rafters of my C P and after the next barrage ran them up until they fluttered in the breeze above the house. Evidently, the Germans knew that I was giving them the bird because as I made a bee-line for the cellar, I could hear German curses and shortly thereafter more artillery. No harm done and my tension was for the moment relieved.

The Siegfried Line at this point boasted the thickest portion along the entire line of fortifications, being some twenty miles thick. This belt of fortifications, called "the West Wall" by the Germans, was a fortified zone some 400 miles long, extending along the western boundary of Germany from Basle on the Dutch border to Kleve on the Swiss border. Construction began in 1939 and was completed in 1940. Approximately one half million men were used in its construction, composed of slave labor from those countries that had been over-run by the German war machine.

The Line was a modern version of the Great Wall of China built in the Third Century B. C. by the Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti to keep out the Mongol hordes. It was 1600 miles longer than the Siegfried Line, twenty feet high and fifteen to twenty five feet thick. In 1939, the Germans boasted that the

Siegfried Line was ready to crush every attack before it could get started and to demolish with its huge shells every hostile line up of troops, not only close to the Rhine, but also far behind the enemy deployment zone. It was shortly thereafter that the Germans learned that they had over-rated their defenses. They learned on the Russian front, the principle of an all around defense of strong points and of key positions. This defect in their Siegfried Line defenses they remedied in the construction of their defensive positions along the Atlantic and English Channel coasts. The Siegfried Line was constructed along the line of natural barriers extending north and south of the German eastern frontier. Naturally, where the barrier was the weakest, the pill box concentration was the strongest and where the terrain was virtually impassable to tanks and infantry, the defenses were few and widely scattered.

The concrete installations themselves were generally twenty to twenty five feet high and from forty to fifty feet long. The walls and roof were from four to eight feet thick. Each pill box was furnished fairly comfortably as far as sleeping accommodations went and some of the occupants had gone to some extremes in furnishing theirs with overstuffed furniture and rugs from the homes of nearby unfortunate civilians. In one instance, we discovered a beautiful piano taken there by some music loving Kraut.

Methods of attack in these positions were as many and as varied as there were units in the field. The infantry, with the help of their close support weapons, were able to reduce these obstacles with a minimum of casualties. All weapons at the infantry's disposal were used. Direct fire from 105 MM self propelled guns, satchel charges, pole charges, flame throwers, grenades and white phosphorus were all very successful.

The rear of the positions were found to be the weakest point and subsequent attacks were launched against these weak points. After taking a pill box, the job was not complete until provisions had been made to prevent the enemy from re-occupying it at a later date. Many methods were devised, the most effective of which were the procedure of arc welding the steel doors shut, the use of tank dozers to push earth over the entrances, and most effective of all, the use of TNT. Approximately 300 to 400 pounds of TNT was sufficient to completely demolish even the most sturdy of pill boxes.

During the time that we had spent at the bridgehead, the powers that be had spent much time analyzing the courses of action that were open to the Third Army in order to accomplish its mission and they had decided that it would be extremely costly to try a frontal attack through this thickest portion of the Siegfried Line. In view of this, the following plan was to be immediately put into effect.

The 65th Infantry Division, a Division which was now to have its initial contact with the enemy was to relieve us of our present mission. For a week, all key personnel of the Regiment that was to relieve us spent that time actually with the various companies that they were to relieve. They were oriented day and night as to the positions and habits of the enemy and the mission at hand. We used all possible precautions that the enemy might not discover that a change was about to take place. All the men were instructed to remove their division insignia before the relief was completed. On the fourth of March, the 65th moved its troops into the bridgehead area. The relief went off rather smoothly except for the usual confusion that occurred when green troops moved into combat positions. Most of the troops moving in had full field packs, at least three blankets apiece and some were even lugging their duffle bags. It was impossible for them to have effected a relief crawling through the holes we had made and over the rubble without tipping the enemy off and getting both companies shot up. This was soon straightened out and managed to complete the relief without getting shot up. As we moved across the bridge, a shell struck a building near by and started a blaze. The bridge was lit as if by day light and we moved out into an assembly area as rapidly as possible. Soon thereafter we entrucked and moved out to the northeast to the vicinity of

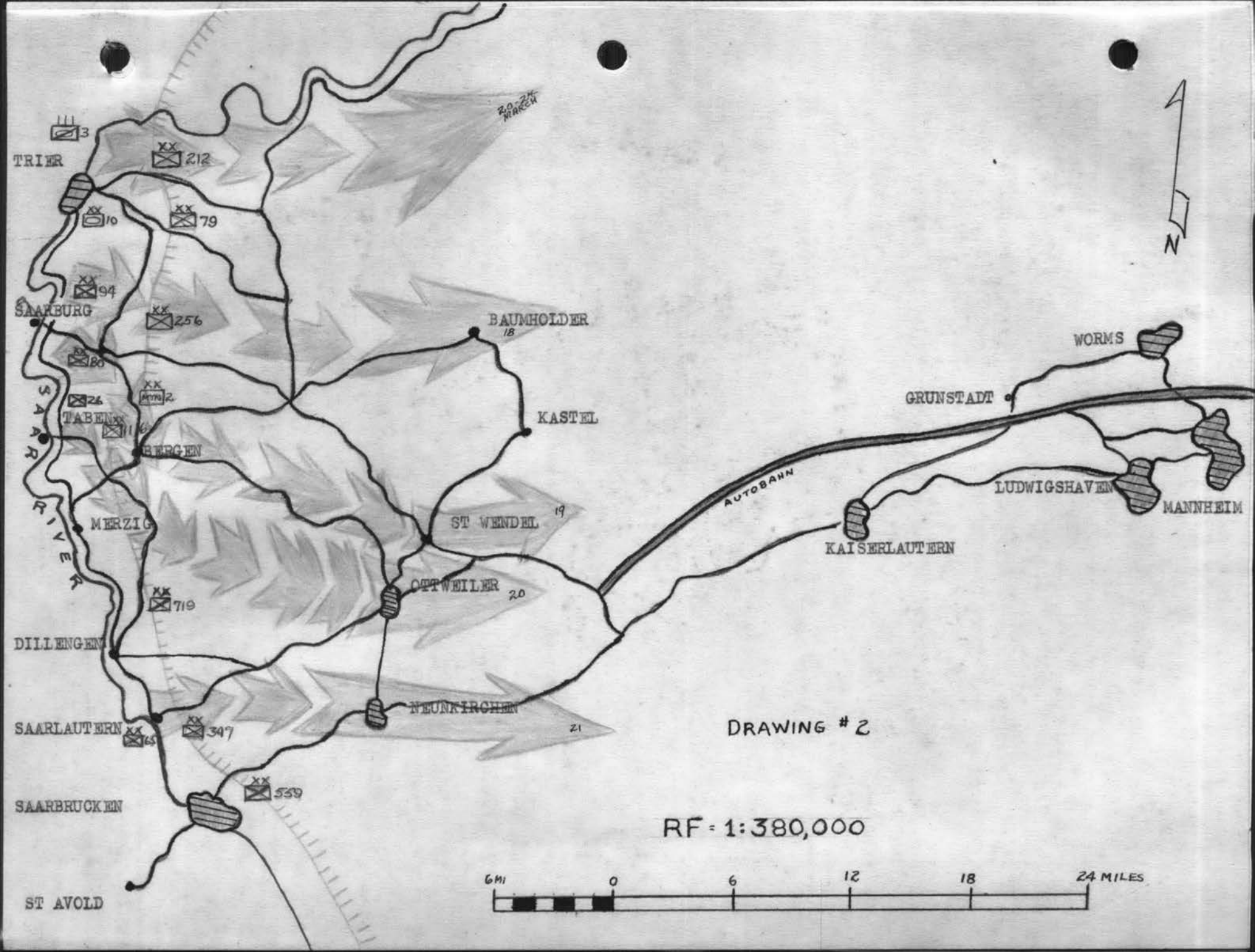
Serrig, Germany on the west bank of the Saar River. The overall plan was for the 65th to stage a diversionary attack at the Saar-lautern area, thus forcing the enemy to retain his forces in that area while the main attack of Corps would move southeast from a bridgehead held further up the river by the 94th Infantry Division. This attack, if successful, was to uncover that portion of the Siegfried Line overlooking the Saar-lautern bridgehead. As soon as this was accomplished, the 10th Armored Division was to be committed to exploit the breakthrough. After the armor was committed, the 65th was to push east to link up with the infantry attack pushing down from the north behind the Siegfried Line. The 94th attacked on the left, the 80th in the middle and the 26th on the right. The attack jumped off at 130300 March 1945 supported by a fifteen minute preparation of Corps and Division artillery, thirty one battalions in all.¹

The 26th found the going tough. In addition to facing the numerous unreduced positions of the Siegfried Line proper, the Division was confronted with some of the toughest terrain along the entire line. Before it could advance, the Division was forced to dig entrenched enemy out of gullies, caves and pill boxes located on the sides of steep mountains and cliffs in the

1. Uncovering the Siegfried Line and the Drive through the Palatinate. 20th Corps Operational Report. 13-25 March page 3

zone of the advance. On the 17th of March, the 26th Division climbed through the woods and over the mountains and captured the city of Merzig. During this climb, the men of the Division utilized horses that the Germans had abandoned and made pack animals of them to aid in transporting the heavy loads. After the capture of Merzig, the Division was then ordered to swing east towards the city of Ottweiler with the object of cutting enemy escape to the east and of making contact with the 65th Infantry Division who would be free to move when the enemy withdrew. On the 18th, the enemy holding the Siegfried Line overlooking the Saar-lautern area began to feel the pressure and began to withdraw. They hesitated too long, however, for the 26th was now in position to intercept them as they fled along the road nets toward the city of Ottweiler. On the 20th of March, the encirclement of the Saar-lautern bridgehead area was complete and the Siegfried Line was breached at this point. (See Drawing No. 2) It was a comparatively costly maneuver, but the loss of life was much lower than if a direct frontal assault had been attempted upon the enemy positions in the vicinity of Saar-lautern.

During the few days of action that the 26th, 94th, 80th and 65th Infantry Divisions in conjunction with the 10th Armored Division had participated and shattered the strongest defensive positions of the Siegfried Line, more than 6,719 prisoner



of war had been captured (65% in the last two days) and approximately 2300 killed plus 3700 wounded at a cost of 273 Americans killed or missing in action and 1587 wounded. The enemy plan of holding the American forces west of the Rhine had been defeated. Too much had been dependent upon his stopping us at the Siegfried Line and his defeat at this point had brought him disaster. He had been defeated and driven from positions he had considered impregnable and forced into a retreat that rapidly became a rout. His entire defensive line in this sector had been outflanked and the entire salient laid wide open for the swift advance to the Rhine that followed.

Many valuable lessons had been learned in this operation and the men of the 26th Infantry Division never forgot them. They were taught the hard way which is sometimes the best way to drive home a point.

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