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Title: Elimination of the Ruhr Pocket, 387th Infantry, 97th Division, 8-19 April 1945

Author: U.S. Army XVIII Airborne Corps

Abstract: Elimination of the Ruhr Pocket, 387th Infantry, 97th Division, interview of CPT M. Ponitz and LT R.W. McCaffrey of 387th Infantry by LT F.P. Halas of XVIII Airborne Corps. Include maps.

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ELIMINATION OF THE RUHR POCKET

XVIII AIRBORNE CORPS
(FIRST U. S. ARMY)

Unit: 387th Infantry, 97th Infantry Division

Interview with: Capt Milton Ponitz, Asst S-3, 387th Inf, 97th Inf Div
1st Lt Robert W. McCaffrey, Ln O, 387th Inf, 97th Div.

Place: Opladen, Germany.

Date: 19 April 1945.

Maps: Germany, 1/50000, Sheets 38, 58, 59, 60, 78, 80.

Interviewer: 1st Lt Francis P. Halas (5th Info & Hist Sq, XVIII Airborne Corps, Temporary)

Period covered: 8 - 19 Apr 45

1. On 4 Apr 45 the 387th Inf as a component of the 97th Inf Div was holding a defensive position on the W bank of the Rhine from DORMAGEN (370730) N to NEUSS (270890). On this day the Division received orders from the VII Corps, First U. S. Army, to move to the E side of the Rhine River in the vicinity of SIEGBURG, Germany (630440) to take up a position on the left flank of the First U. S. Army breakout from the REMAGEN bridgehead. The Regiment moved at 040800 Apr 45 by truck and closed at ROTT, Germany (667387) at 1730 on the 4th. This was a rear assembly area, and the battalions then crossed into the terrain just N of ROTT.

2. The Regiment was given the mission of relieving the 309th Infantry of the 78th Division on the S bank of the SIEG River. The area to be taken over by the 387th Infantry extended from the left flank on the Reichautobahn (FRANKFURT - COLOGNE) Highway at (650430) E along the southern bank of the SIEG River to the right flank at (773409), a frontage of 9000 meters, including HENNEF. The Regiment completed relief of the 309th Infantry at 050545B Apr 45. The Regimental Commander placed two battalions on line, the 3d Battalion on the left and the 1st Battalion on the right. The 2d Battalion was given the mission of taking up break-through positions to the rear of the 3d Battalion, on the high ground commanding the plain SE of SIEGBURG.

The SIEG River flows EW into the RHINE River, just above BONN, Germany (550360), and it was on the S bank facing N that the Regiment went into position. From HENNEF to the E, the S bank of the river is a shallow open plain, three to four hundred yards wide, cut by an NW road. However, near the right boundary, in the vicinity of BLANKENBURG the high ground approaches the river closely from the S. To the W of HENNEF the S bank of the river is a flat, open plain, about 2000 meters in depth, which rises to the high ground to the SW of HENNEF. The flat ground on the S bank of the river, the valleys approaching this ground from the S, and the N side of the high ground overlooking the river from the south were commanded by high ground on the N bank

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Rpt "Elimination of the Ruhr Pocket, 387th Inf. (Cont'd).

of the river from HOLBERG W to SELIGENTHAL, all of which was in German possession. Movement on the flat open ground by day was necessarily limited to infiltration, except in the larger towns where cover and concealment were available. HENNEF, in the center, served as a strong anchor for our line. The 1st Battalion on the right in general extended from HENNEF along a road about 300 yards S of the river, to BLANKENBERG, exclusive. The 3d Battalion, which included the main W portions of HENNEF, extended from the N Portions of HENNEF through WEINGARTSGASSE - ZISSENDORF - STOSSDORF to the Autobahn.

4. The wide flat plain between the Autobahn and HENNEF was suitable for use by German Armor, and was one of the most vulnerable locations on the Corps front. This plain was commanded by the high ground lying between HENNEF and the highway and S of the plain. For this reason the 2d Battalion in Regimental reserve dug in on this high ground at (650405) to (860405). Companies E and G were charged with the defense of these positions. Company F was further held in reserve at SOVEN (680390). To further strengthen the regimental reserve position, Company I, the reserve of the 3d Battalion, dug in on the high ground S of HENNEF (683405). The 1st Battalion's left flank was at (685417), with right flank at (733409). The 3d Battalion's left was just E of the Autobahn Highway at (650430) extending right (E) to tie in with the 1st Battalion's left flank at (685417). Both the 1st and 3d Battalions had their CP's in HENNEF, the 3d Battalion CP being in the W end at (695417). The Regimental CP was at ROTT. Cannon Company occupied positions at DOMBROICH (650390). TD and AT guns were included in each battalion's fire plan.

5. The Regimental CO, Col William D. Long, immediately sent night patrols to feel out the N bank of the river which was enemy held territory. Intense lateral patrolling along the river bank was also maintained at night. Reconnaissance groups were sent at night along the river to find points for possible crossings; the mission including investigation of the fordability, of the banks on both sides for easy approaches, consistencies of the river bed and current and the routes of penetration away from the river to the N.

6. On 6 Apr 45 the Regiment received an order from Division to force a crossing of the SIEG River on the 8th of April. Orders included the further mission of continuing the attack to the NW after crossings were secured. At this time the whole Corps mission was to attack to the N to crush the RUHR Pocket formed by the link-up of the Ninth U. S. Army and the First U. S. Army at PATTENBORN, Germany, further to the E. The overall Corps plan was to use the left flank of the Corps anchored on the Rhine as a pivot and to swing the right and center of the Corps to the NW, slamming the door on the pocket formed between the RUHR River, which flows EW into the Rhine far to the N, and NS course of the RHINE itself.

7. The 386th Infantry on the right of the 387th Infantry was to cross on the 7th with the 387th Infantry crossing on the 8th. This would necessitate an attack across the river by the 387th Infantry to the N until it caught up with the left flank of the 386th Infantry. Upon contact the 387th Infantry would then have to wheel itself into line facing to the NW and thus take its proper place in the Corps picture.

8. The plan formulated with this in view was as follows: The 1st Battalion was to make a crossing of the SIEG in the vicinity of WELDERGOVEN (704425) and drive to the NE, take as its initial objective the high ground at ALTENBODINGEN (717438) and BODINGEN (725425), (facing N). When this position was consolidated and the pressure thus taken off the crossing, the 1st Battalion was to continue

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Rpt, "Elimination of the Ruhr Pocket, 387th Inf, (Cont'd).

to the N and E and take the high ground (730440) (737438), (still facing NW). Then the 1st Battalion was to pivot on its own left flank (730440) and swing its right flank to the N and then to the NW to anchor at (747454), facing NW, and thus becoming an extension of the 386th Infantry's left flank which was already in position at (747454).

9. The 3d Battalion and the 2d Battalion's left flank companies were to maintain their defensive positions and guarantee the security of the tank approaches along the Autobahn while Company F, which was Regimental reserve, was to occupy the front line positions of both 1st Battalion front line companies in the right flank sector. On Corps order the 2d Battalion was to cross during the day of 9 Apr at the same place and to anchor its left flank on the SIEG River at (700428) and swing its right flank to the N and NW to (716431). Then the 3d Battalion was to cross and fill in between the 2d Battalion and the 1st Battalion, with its left flank on the right flank of the 2d Battalion at (716431) and its right flank on the left flank of the 1st Battalion at (730440). Thus all three battalions would be on line facing NW in extension of the 386th Infantry line and the attack could jump off to the NW to the RUHR River. As the 386th Infantry drove NNW the sector of the 387th Infantry would widen naturally as the 1st Battalion maintained contact with the 386th Infantry.

10. The 922 FA Battalion was in support of the Regiment and Cannon Co of the Regiment was attached for the initial fire mission to the 922 FA Bn. Company A of the 820TD Bn was attached to the FA Bn also for the preliminary artillery fires. The TD's were to move into position for direct fire missions during the actual crossing and attack.

11. The 3d Battalion's heavy weapons company was to support the crossing of the 1st Battalion by fire from HENNEF on ALLNER and vicinity. H Company was to support the 1st Battalion crossing from positions in the vicinity of WELDERGOVEN, but was not to cross with the 1st Battalion.

12. The SIEG River E of HENNEF is about 50 feet wide and varies from four to eight feet deep. The current was very swift from recent rains, and no suitable ford for a crossing in strength could be found. The crossing point selected was at WELDERGOVEN (705424). On the S side this small village is approached over open plains by several roads across bare ground commanded by the high ground held by the Germans to the N. On the N. bank of the river, across from WELDERGOVEN, lies an open meadow which is bounded by the village of LAUTHAUSEN on the E and which is commanded by a spur which extends from ALTENBODINGEN nearly to ALLNER. The bridge at ALLNER had been blown, as had also the bridge over the tributary of the SIEG some 200 yards to the NE of ALLNER.

13. In planning for this operation, it was intended to ferry one company over in assault boats, while another company forded the river. However, nothing approximating an adequate ford could be found, and the plan was altered to include the ferrying of two companies over at two different points. Company C, 322 Engr (C) Bn, assembled the crossing material in the village of WELDERGOVEN and planned assault boat crossings at (707422) and (703426).

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14. At 081300B Apr 45 an artillery barrage opened which was to last for one hour. The 1st Battalion had pulled out of its defensive positions on the right flank and now moved behind the mask of the high ground 200 yards S of the river crossing into an assembly area, at (691419). At 1400 the 1st Battalion launched its attack across the river. The troops went over in waves with Company A using the assault boats at (707422) and Company B, crossing at (703426). Company C followed, using both crossings. Heavy mortar fire was falling on the crossing area immediately after the initial assault. MG fire was strafing the crossing area from a castle at (696435) near ALLNER where it had a clear field of fire and from a wooded spur at a bend in the river W of the crossing, firing upriver toward the boats. Artillery fire, TD's heavy MG fire, and mortars were all brought to bear on this castle but although it crumbled, the MG fire continued. Fire was also coming from the high ground N of the river at (700430). The assault units crossed the meadows at a run and in two hours had gained the high ground at (717438). This gave the Regiment a mask just N of the river which permitted them to put in a pontoon ferry for vehicles. Two wire jeeps, the first across the river on the pontoon ferry, hit mines on the road at (705427). The pontoon ferry was placed in operation on the river at (703424). By 1625 the 1st Battalion had consolidated its position and reorganized on the high ground. At 1750 Companies A and B launched their coordinated attack to reach the 2d phase line of which was the high ground at (773440). By 2130 the 1st Battalion had successfully cleared its objective and had reached a final phase line at (747454) and gained contact with elements of the 386th Infantry on their right flank. The communications were a terrific problem because the radio did not work and the wire jeeps had been damaged when they crossed the river. Regiment was not fully informed of the situation of the 1st Battalion until the next morning.

15. On the night of 8 - 9 Apr 45, Co C, 322 Engr (C) Bn, put in a foot bridge just E of the pontoon ferry at WELDERGOVEN (703424). At 090555B Apr 45 the 2d Battalion moved down from its position on the high ground in the left sector of the Regimental area and crossed the foot bridge. It encountered little difficulty and anchored its left flank on the SIEG River at (700426). Artillery and SA fire harassed but did not stop the river crossing. Company G led out and anchored their left flank on the river. E and F Companies followed and went into position in extension of G Company with E on the right. F Company's right flank was at (716431). At 090600B Apr 45 the 3d Battalion crossed without incident other than harassing artillery fire, and took up a position in the center of the Regimental line with its left flank contacting the 2d Battalion's flank at (716431) and its right flank in contact with the 1st Battalion's flank at (730440). The three battalions were now on line, 2, 3, and 1 from left to right facing NW.

16. The battalions pushed to the NW as soon as the 3d Battalion was in position with the mission of clearing the high ground to the NW overlooking the river. The 2d Battalion hit very stiff resistance at the ALLNER Castle (696426) and on the ridge in the loop of the river at (695430). Anti-tank company and the TD's blasted the castle from the S bank of the SIEG River and G Company was able to clear it out. The hill beyond the castle was very steep and heavily wooded and gave the 2d Battalion the toughest fight of the entire Regiment during the campaign. All three Companies of the Battalion were engaged in the step by step drive up the steep hillside to clear the top of the cliff.

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Until this high ground could be cleared, a treadway bridge for the 13th Armored Division tanks which were to follow the regiment could not be built at ALLNER because the only suitable site for such a bridge was commanded by this high ground.

17. Orders were received from Division to expedite the attack to the high ground N of SIEGBURG. The situation at this time was roughly as follows: The 1st Battalion was making good progress and keeping abreast of the left flank of the 386th Infantry on the right. Company F had become heavily involved with opposition along the SIEG River in the ALLNER - SELIGENTHAL area. Company H, in covering the crossing of other troops over the river, had been delayed and had not caught up with the remainder of the battalion. In the 3d Battalion, Company L had been required to remain in place to cover the open plain SE of SIEGBURG until our advance had moved further W along the N bank of the SIEG.

18. At this time the Regimental Commander took personal charge of the situation, moving to HOPPERSCHLOSS, where he made contact with the 3d Battalion (- Company L), following which contact was also made with the 2d Battalion (- Companies F and H). From this point the attack was by the 2d and 3d Battalions abreast, each in column of companies. Movement was cross country by covered routes, as rapidly as the heavier weapons could be hand-carried. At dark, the two battalions halted for the night, with the 2d Battalion S of the SIEGBURG - SCHRECK road, and parallel to it, with its head pointed toward SIEGBURG near (663465).

19. In the morning, the 3d Battalion was to move N across the highway and turn left (SW) along the highway, coming up abreast of the 2d Battalion. The two battalions were then to attack SW to SIEGBURG, astride the SIEGBURG - SCHRECK highway. This was done against no opposition. Both battalions moved obliquely to the right later, the 2d Battalion crossing the highway then continuing to parallel it. Ultimately both battalions struck the Autobahn Highway near the over-pass at AUL-GASSE in NE SIEGBURG where the Regimental Commander made contact with right elements of the 303d Infantry, already in the city.

20. Meanwhile the engineers started a treadway bridge after the battalions had cleared the high ground N of ALLNER. This bridge was placed at (695425) which was quite close to the castle that had given the 2d Battalion so much trouble. It was completed for light vehicle traffic by 2200 on the 9th and at 100600B Apr 45 medium tanks could cross it. Corps had instituted a plan at this time in which the regiment was to hold its positions now occupied and Combat Command A of the 13th Armored Division was to pass through the regiment and spear-head a drive to the N. The Regiment was to follow in the wake of the 13th Armored Division and mop up pockets of resistance. On the morning of 10 Apr the 13th Armored Division passed through on the left flank of the regiment and the battalions resumed the attack to the NW against moderate resistance, with left flank resting on the Autobahn Highway. Since the 13th Armored was passing through the left flank sector of the regiment and this was held by the 2d Battalion, which had taken the toughest fighting so far, the Regimental Commander held the 2d Battalion in reserve and sent the 3d (left) and 1st Battalions forward in this resumption of the attack on 10 Apr 45.

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By nightfall the 3d Battalion had taken HALBERG (652500) and LOHMAR, while the 1st Battalion took BREIDT (675508). The 2d Battalion was in reserve at KALDAUEN (665540).

21. On the morning of the 11th of April at 0700, the 2d Battalion was committed on the left and with the 1st Battalion continued the attack to the N. Moving across the rolling country the 1st Battalion took WAHLSCHIED (658545) and WICKUHL (645562) by nightfall. The 1st Battalion was supposed to take HOFFNUNGSTHAL (635576) and Company A moved up after darkness in an attempt to complete their mission of taking that town even though they had been on the move since 0700 that morning. Company A was stopped by 88's and MG fire from the vicinity of (645585) and WIELPUTZ (643520). The 2d Battalion was just short of MENZLINGEN (618550) at nightfall by resistance. The 3d Bn was in reserve at LOHMAR (627492) but continued to hold the high ground at HALBERG and the high ground E of LOHMAR.

22. Elements of the 13th Armored Division had crossed the AGGER River S of LOHMAR and had moved N along the W bank of this river to ALTENRATH. On orders from Division the 3d Battalion was directed to reconnoiter a crossing of the AGGER at LOHMAR and secure the high ground near ALTENRATH in support of the armored operation. Shortly after this the left boundary of the Regiment was extended across the highway to include a strip of land parallel to and S of the Autobahn Highway about 1000 meters wide, in the direction LOHMAR - SCHARREN - BROICH. Beyond this latter town the left boundary of the Regiment was the Autobahn Highway exclusive. The 3d Battalion was committed in the left sector, attacking initially from ALTENRATH to the NW.

23. At 0800 on 12 Apr 45 the 1st and 2d Battalions resumed the attack to the NW. The 2d Battalion took MENZLINGEN by noon and ROSRATH (610557) by 1300. The 1st Battalion took HOFFNUNGSTHAL and thus by early afternoon the Regiment was holding the line along the SW to NE road, ROSRATH - SULZE (622587). Prior to this time the Regimental Commander was ordered by Corps to increase the speed of his attack. Emphasis was to be placed on speed, and not on screening population in towns. The Regimental Commander, had directed utilization of all three battalions in the assault, employing organic motors.

24. The net result for the day's operation was to narrow the front of all 3 Battalions; and they were ordered to move out with all speed. Each Battalion utilized all means at hand and attacked along road nets and took all resistance as it moved. (By nightfall the left flank of the Regiment was just S of DELBRUCK (540645) and the right flank was just W of BERG GLADBACH (575655). The front line positions were on the road running WE between these towns, with the 3d Battalion on the left, the 1st on the right, and 2d in the center. The Regimental CP was at GIERATH).

25. At 130800B Apr 45 the Regiment motorized the 3d and the 1st Battalions for shuttling by utilizing the kitchen and baggage trucks and the Cannon Company vehicles and moved the 1st and 3d Battalions up parallel road nets to the NW. The 2d Battalion followed the 1st Battalion as soon as possible to

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reserve positions near PATFRATH. By nightfall the Regiment was on the line just S of the EW road from NITTUM (535962) to UPPERSBURG (550703) to ODENTHAL (566707). On 14 Apr 45 the battalions jumped off from this NITTUM - ODENTHAL line to reach a point just S of the LEVERKUSEN - WUPPERTAL River line. The 3d Battalion met heavy resistance in the vicinity of SCHILDGREN and NITTUM. Numerous casualties were incurred. The resistance in the vicinity of NITTUM was not broken until late in the afternoon.

26. The Regimental Commander now shuffled his battalions around so that he had all three on the line for the next morning attack. The 2d Battalion was on the left, the 3d in the center, and the 1st on the right. In this formation they jumped off at 0800 on the morning of the 15th. 1st and 3d Battalions met little resistance in the movement to the line PATTSCHIED (520770) - ROMBERG (530770), nor did the 2d Battalion in moving by SCHLEBUSCH toward HUSCHIED.

27. The attack had now become a pursuit, and every effort was made to keep the enemy on the run. The order given to the battalions was to drive to the N with all possible speed, using whatever battalion and company transport which could be utilized. No communication was kept between battalions. Regiment kept battalions informed of progress on the flanks. The TD's were kept in very close support, with one platoon attached to each battalion. There were no tanks with the Regiment.

28. With the battalions sitting on the PATTSCHIED - ROMBERG line on the night of the 15th, the Regimental Commander ordered all three battalions to make a night attack starting at 160200B, with the mission of crossing the WUPPER River and securing the high ground to the N with all possible speed. This was in compliance with the directive of higher headquarters to cross the WUPPER by noon of 16 Apr 45.

29. The WUPPER River runs EW into the Rhine and is just S of a heavily industrialized area between the WUPPER and the RUHR River further to the N. The populated environs of DUSSELDORF include the centers of SOLINGEN, HILDEN, HAAN and WALD.

30. The battalions jumped off at 0200. The 2d Battalion (left) was held up by enemy resistance in the area around HUSCHIED and WEITSCHIE (507775), where apparently the enemy did not know that the "No Resistance" order had been given to the rest of the units in the pocket. In the right sector, however, the 1st Battalion reached the WUPPER at 0740 and had captured two bridges intact. The 2d Battalion (left) was delayed at HUSCHIED and did not cross the WUPPER until the early hours of the afternoon. The 3d Battalion met little resistance and was able to have Company I across the WUPPER River at approximately 1000, followed by the bulk of the Battalion in the late hours of the morning. Company I secured intact a bridge over the WUPPER which later proved extremely valuable as a focal point on the combat team MSR. The battalions continued the advance and by nightfall the industrialized towns of OHLIGS (480850) and HAAN (490885) were taken.

31. The Regiment was ordered to jump from OHLIGS and HAAN on the morning of the 17th and to reach the Corps stop line which was several miles to the N along the line (450930) (510930). The 1st and 3d Battalions jumped off on the morning of the 17th of April and by noon were sitting on the Corps stop line, thus completing the mission of the 387th Infantry in the closing of the Ruhr pocket.