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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 376TH REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM
(94TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE CROSSING OF THE
SAAR RIVER AT OCKFEN, 21-26 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of an Officer of the Combat
Team Artillery Battalion)

Type of operation described: A REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM IN AN
ASSAULT RIVER CROSSING AND DEVELOPMENT OF A BRIDGEHEAD.

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 376TH REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

The description of combat action which follows deals with the operations of the 376th Regimental Combat Team of the 94th Infantry Division in crossing the SAAR RIVER at OCKFEN, GERMANY, 21-26 February 1945.

These dates are significant in associating the subject action with the major preceding event, the famed penetration by Von Rundstedt in the ARDENNES. Launched on 16 December 1944, the German drive tore a 45 mile gap in our lines and extended 60 miles westward before it was halted. (See Map A)
(1)

Over five weeks were required to eject the enemy and restore our lines. There followed a period of regrouping of Allied Forces which, when completed, saw the United States Third Army disposed from a point opposite ST. VITH on the north, to SAARLAUTERN on the south. (See Map B) (2)

General Patton's troops were now poised for a high-powered offensive to emasculate the Third Reich.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In the XX Corps sector, offensive activity was concentrated in the SAAR-MOSELLE TRIANGLE, a piece of restricted terrain upon which the defense of the city of TRIER depended.

- (1) A-1, p. 78
(2) A-2, p. 79, 81

(See Map B)

The SIEGFRIED SWITCH LINE (3), at the base of the triangle, had been assaulted by the 94th Infantry Division in a series of limited objective attacks from early in January until 19 February when an all-out Division attack ruptured the German defenses. The attack was followed by a two day clean-up of the Triangle in conjunction with the 10th Armored Division which the Army Commander had obtained from SHAEF Reserve for this specific purpose. (See Map C) (4)

The reduction of the SAAR-MOSELLE TRIANGLE was itself a major victory, having routed two German divisions, the 256th and the 416th. In the best tradition of the United States Third Army, however, the attack did not slow here even though our forces were now confronted by the SAAR RIVER and the overlocking main fortifications of the SIEGFRIED LINE.

→ On 21 February, ^{— GEN SITUATION —} General Patton verbally instructed the Corps Commander to cross the SAAR RIVER and capture TRIER, the intention being to effect a crossing before the enemy could reorganize his forces and man the pillboxes on the east bank of the SAAR. (5)

XX Corps Field Order No. 17 implemented the Army Commander's instructions. Two crossings were to be made, the 94th Division to cross in the vicinity of SAARBURG, and the 10th Armored Division plus one combat team of the 94th to cross north of SAARBURG and proceed to TRIER. The 376th Regimental Combat Team of the 94th Division was attached to the 10th Armored Division for the operation. (See Map C) (6)

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- (3) A-4, p. 82
 - (4) A-2, p. 246
 - (5) A-10, p. 272
 - (6) A-5, Document

The two chief capabilities of the enemy at this time were: first, that he could occupy the SIEGFRIED LINE and defend the east bank of the SAAR RIVER with a force of unknown strength and composition; second, that he could reinforce with the 11th Panzer Division, the 2d SS Mountain Division or the 6th SS Mountain Division, the 11th having last been contacted in the triangle fighting a month previous, and the latter two reported enroute to the sector.

(7) (8)

The weather forecast was "generally fair, minimum 32 degrees, maximum 44 degrees", an improvement over the bitter cold of the preceding weeks. (9)

SITUATION AND PLANS OF THE 10TH ARMORED DIVISION

Throughout the day 21 February, the tanks of the 10th Armored Division had advanced to the north extremity of the Triangle. The battalions of the 376th Infantry had followed, mopping up small pockets of resistance.

At 1800 hours the commander of the 376th Infantry with his S-3 and artillery battalion commander reported to the command post of the 10th Armored Division at APACH, and there received the order of the Division Commander, Major General Morris. The mission assigned Combat Team 376 was to cross the SAAR RIVER and establish a bridgehead centering on the town of OCKFEN and extending to the dominating ridge 2000 yards east. Assault craft would be supplied and manned by XX Corps Engineers who were to be ready at the crossing site by H hour, 0400 the next morning. As soon as a treadway

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- (7) A-6, Document
(8) A-9, p. 305
(9) A-6, Document

bridge could be installed, General Morris' tanks were to cross and push through to TRIER. (See Map C)

SITUATION AND PLANS OF THE 376TH REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM

The combat team was composed of the 376th Infantry, the 919th Field Artillery Battalion, C Company, 319th Medical Battalion, the 1st Platoon of C Company, 319th Engineer Battalion and a platoon of 4.2 mortars from the 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion. (10)

At this stage of the campaign the personnel of the combat team were physically tired, having been in continuous aggressive contact with the enemy for seven weeks. The infantry regiment was 340 men understrength and numbered 40% replacements who had been with the unit less than 30 days. On the other hand, the combat team did possess one definite advantage; it was professionally led. The regimental commander, the three battalion commanders and the artillery battalion commander had held their respective commands through five months of combat. They knew their business. (11)

After receiving the 10th Armored Division order, the regimental commander started the 20 mile blackout ride by jeep to the small village of MANNEBACH where his troops, *(entire CT?)* with the exception of the 919th Field Artillery Battalion, were now assembled. The artillery had executed march order from its location near BEUREN, and was moving to make a *NS* night occupation of unreconnoitered positions west of the crossing site. (See Map C)

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- (10) A-5, Document
(11) Personal knowledge

Upon arrival at his headquarters, the regimental commander assembled his staff and the battalion commanders, outlined the mission, and described his plan of attack. The 1st and 3d Battalions were to ^{where?} cross simultaneously at H hour, the 1st Battalion to seize the high ground south of OCKFEN, and the 3d Battalion to take the high ground immediately north of the town. The 2d Battalion was then to cross and occupy OCKFEN, after which the 1st and 3d Battalions would attack east to the dominating ridge which was the regimental objective. There would be no artillery preparation. Radio silence was in effect until H hour. (See Map C)

The battalion commanders now formed their troops and began the three mile march to the river bank. Four hours remained until H hour.

As the lead personnel entered the town of AYL, jump-off point for the crossing, some confusion resulted from the presence of a handful of Wehrmacht who had missed the boat in the withdrawal of their forces to the east bank. The confusion was of brief duration and did not delay the preparations of the regiment.

NARRATION

CROSSING OPERATIONS, 0400 to 1630, 21 FEBRUARY

Shortly before 0400 hours the regimental commander ordered the 1st and 3d Battalions to the bank of the river, ready for the surprise crossing which it was hoped would pay off with a quick bridgehead and little loss of life.

As H hour came and passed, all such hopes were deflated.

There were no engineers; and there were no boats. (12)

Staff officers checked the road net to the rear for the missing boat train with no success. With the coming of daylight it was evident that an immediate crossing of the SAAR, swollen to a width of 250 feet and moving at a 7 mile-per-hour current, was out of the question. The infantrymen were assembled in the stone houses of AYL to await the arrival of the corps engineers with the assault boats.

A short time later, enemy artillery searched the area of the 919th Field Artillery with 20 rounds of 150 mm, the first evidence of hostile activity. Gone now was the opportunity for surprise. What had been planned as a swift crossing against probable light opposition would become a prolonged effort against the maximum force the enemy could move to our known point of attack.

Throughout the morning the small town of AYL, 1200 yards from the river and in plain view of the enemy fortifications, assumed the appearance of a combat boom town. Corps engineers with boats and bridging infiltrated through the town to the river bank; a smoke generator company arrived and prepared for action; the regimental command post and the 10th Armored Division Command Post were installed in adjoining buildings. (See Map D)

During this period enemy fire was harassing in nature and generally ineffective.

Early in the afternoon, the 1st and 3d Battalions were alerted and awaited orders to move to the boats. The number of boats at the river was still insufficient for the crossing and it was not until 1630 hours that the regimental commander

(12) A-2, p. 246

ordered his battalions forward. This order originated with the Army Commander who, having observed the lack of progress, conveyed his dissatisfaction to the Corps Commander and the 10th Armored Division Commander who in turn ordered the regimental commander to attack. (13) (14)

As the lead companies, L and C, advanced across the open fields to the river, any doubt concerning the amount of resistance on the far bank was quickly dispelled. A volume of coordinated machine gun fire and mortar concentrations poured upon the exposed companies. Many assault boats stacked in the area were damaged by fire. Crews of the smoke generators were scattered and a number of generators put out of action. The commander of L Company was killed. C Company's commander was wounded and evacuated. (15)

Our artillery fired on pillboxes spotted by forward observers, but high trajectory fire had little lasting effect on the 36 inches of reinforced SIEGFRIED concrete. After an hour of futile effort and mounting casualties, the regimental commander ordered his troops to take cover in AYL and prepare for a night crossing. The next attempt was scheduled for 2300 hours.

THE NIGHT CROSSING

Based on the location of known enemy installations which had been sited during the afternoon, the combat team artillery commander and the 10th Armored Division Artillery Officer devised an effective fire plan to support the crossing. The plan included direct fires of the 10th Armored's tank destroyers.

- (13) A-2, p. 246
- (14) A-4, p. 341
- (15) A-4, p. 342

A heavy smoke screen was employed along the river bank to counter the light of a bright moon. The battalions began crossing as scheduled at 2300 hours. Our planned artillery fires greatly reduced the volume of opposing small arms fire, but mortar concentrations continued to land along the near bank with prearranged accuracy, and within a few minutes after the first boats had shoved off, the Regimental Commander, Colonel McClune, was seriously wounded while coordinating the movement of his battalions. Command passed to the executive officer of the regiment.

Meanwhile the battalions met with varying success. Enemy fire was light in the zone of the 3d Battalion and the companies crossed in good order despite the swift current of the river and the presence of wire entanglements on the far bank. Unopposed but for erratic machine gun fire from the north, I, K and L Companies made their way up the cliffs to the hill which was the battalion objective.

The 2d Battalion was subjected to an artillery concentration as it proceeded in the wake of the 3d Battalion, but had completed the crossing by 0400 hours and was moving through the mist and smoke to its objective, the town of OCKFEN. (16)

Upstream the 1st Battalion found conditions less favorable as the boats were caught in severe mortar and artillery fire. Company C, the first to cross, was immediately engaged by machine gun fire from mutually supporting pillboxes to its front. The platoon of engineers attached to the combat team was equipped with pole charges and crossed to join C Company in attacking the pillboxes. (17)

(16) A-4, p. 344

(17) A-8, p. 215

By the time Company B had crossed to engage in the fight there were no servicable boats remaining to transport Company A. The men of this company were led by their company commander from the water-filled ditches in which they had taken cover during the past four hours, to the site where the 2d Battalion had just crossed. Company A crossed here at 0500 hours. (18)

Thus, at dawn of the 23d the rifle companies of the regiment were ashore amid the SIEGFRIED defenses.

All three battalions operated similarly in maintaining a rear command post on the near side of the river under control of the battalion executive. The battalion commanders, each with a small command group, accompanied the rifle elements in the crossing. Battalion aid stations were maintained in AYL, and stretcher teams made special crossings by assault boat to evacuate the wounded from the far bank.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRIDGEHEAD

The assault crossing completed, the battalions were now occupied in the development of the bridgehead.

After surprising and capturing a battery of 76.2 mm guns on the reverse slope, the 3d Battalion set up a perimeter defense on its hill. The 2d Battalion was clearing the houses on the near edge of OCKFEN. The 1st Battalion, its back to the river, was fighting, pillbox by pillbox, in attempting to reach its objective.

At the same time, under the continuing blanket of smoke, XX Corps Engineers moved heavy equipment to the river bank and initiated construction of the bridge.

(18) A-4, p. 345

Progress in occupying OCKFEN came to a halt in mid-morning when an estimated company of Germans with armored personnel carriers and four tanks entered town from the south and east, firing into each building as they passed. In consideration of the enemy's armored strength, the commander of the 2d Battalion moved his troops from the town to the protection of communication trenches which traversed the slope of the steep hill bordering OCKFEN on the north. (See Map D)

The situation now developed into a fire fight between the entrenched 2d Battalion and the Germans in OCKFEN. Immediate action was necessary to blast the enemy from his position; otherwise there would be no bridgehead. The battalion commander consulted with a forward observer from the 919th Field Artillery and requested that all possible artillery be concentrated on the German positions. The observer radioed this request to his battalion. The artillery battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James M. Caviness, coordinating with 10th Armored Division and XX Corps Artillery, arranged for a ten minute "Time on Target" shoot on the German-held town. Because of the proximity of our own troops to the target area, the observer conducted a preliminary registration, adjusting with a 240 mm howitzer from the supporting corps artillery. This accomplished, the rounds of eight battalions of artillery from 105 mm to 240 mm were delivered simultaneously on the target. (19)

After five minutes of this treatment, fire was lifted at the request of the 2d Battalion Commander as his own men were beginning to suffer from concussion. The results were (19) Personal knowledge

spectacular. Three tanks remaining in operating condition withdrew to the east. The enemy infantry who had escaped death were shell-shocked. Seventy one prisoners were rounded up with no difficulty by the first squad to reenter the town. By late afternoon the battalion had mined the road from the east and defenses were established. (20)

On the right, the 1st Battalion had now succeeded in reaching the crest of the hill which formed its objective. At this point, as per the attack plan, the two flank battalions were to take the regimental objective. (See Map C)

Accordingly, the 3d Battalion advanced in single file over the rocky 2000 yards without incident until reaching the objective where one pillbox was encountered and captured. The 1st Battalion met continuing resistance from the fortifications in its zone and was unable to advance. Extended now to include the hill vacated by the 3d Battalion, the 2d Battalion sent out patrols which reported enemy activity to the north.

Consequently, the 3d Battalion was precariously located with no flank protection and was additionally burdened with the task of keeping open its supply line to the rear. Throughout the night 23-24 February, enemy artillery fell on the battalion, and enemy patrols were active to the rear. In the morning the battalion commander assigned L Company the mission of establishing and protecting a line of communication to the rear. This permitted the evacuation of casualties, but the problem of supply became acute as there was still no bridge. The amount of supplies which could be safely transported by assault boat across the fire-swept river and then

(20) A-4, p. 347

hand-carried over the treacherous route to the battalion, was insufficient. Nevertheless, the troops held their ground and conserved ammunition while enemy activity was countered with well directed artillery fire.

The enemy in contact to date had been identified as the 256th Division, supported by GHQ Artillery. Reduced to a strength of 2000 during its recent defeat in the SAAR-MOSELLE TRIANGLE, the division was now reinforced by three fortress battalions. In the zone of the 94th Division to the south, the enemy had committed the 2d SS Mountain Division. The possibility of employment of this unit for reinforcement or counterattack against Combat Team 376 was therefore reduced.

EXPANSION TO THE NORTH AND SOUTH

While the regiment fought to maintain the sketchy bridgehead perimeter, work on the vital bridge came to a standstill. The smoke screen was inconsistent and the engineers lost heavily in men and equipment. pontoons were punctured by fire as fast as they could be floated from the river bank. Effective machine gun fire from the north, plus continuing observed artillery fire, frustrated the persistent efforts of the engineers. (21)

The action taken to improve the situation consisted of ordering the 1st and 2d Battalions to attack to the south and to the north respectively; arranging for a supply drop by artillery liaison planes to assist the 3d Battalion in holding its position; and obtaining a company of armored infantry which was to cross the river and attack SCHODEN.

(See Map D)

(21) Personal knowledge

B Company, 61st Armored Infantry Battalion, was attached to the 2d Battalion, 376th Infantry for the attack on SCHODEN. The tactics of this unit in shuttling by fast moving half-tracks from AYL to the assault boats, provided a striking contrast to the costly foot movement of the 376th Infantry over the open fields on the first day of the operation. After crossing the river, the company fought its way into SCHODEN and undertook the tedious reduction of the numerous active pillboxes in that locality. (22)

Lateral expansion of the bridgehead was begun by the 1st and 2d Battalions, and at the same time a convoy of twenty L-5 aircraft which had been assembled by XX Corps Artillery, dropped ammunition, rations, medical supplies, radio batteries and dry socks to the hard pressed 3d Battalion. On each sortie the planes were led by a pilot of the 919th Field Artillery who was guided to the drop zone by radio instructions from a forward observer on the position. Although about 20% of the supplies fell into German hands, the effort was successful in enabling the battalion to continue to hold its isolated position. (23)

On the high ground paralleling the road to SCHODEN, the 2d Battalion had made some progress during the 24th. As darkness fell, the platoon at the northernmost point of advance took cover in a large pillbox which it had just captured. German retaliation occurred quickly in the form of combat patrol which assaulted the box and placed four machine guns in position to stop any relief attempt. Early in the fight the artillery observer with the platoon was wounded and

(22) A-4, p. 351

(23) A-4, p. 350

his radio damaged. The trapped platoon held out for four hours until finally overcome when the enemy exploded a demolition charge next to an embrasure. The Germans assembled the prisoners and withdrew. The battalion commander was wounded while directing relief personnel to the scene. (24)

No further ground was gained until the afternoon of the 25th when A Company advanced south to within 500 yards of BEURIG. This gain was supported by tank destroyer fire from the friendly side of the SAAR. At 0500 hours the next morning the commander of A Company mustered his fatigued riflemen and charged into the streets of BEURIG to begin a house to house cleanup. (See Map D)

At noon, elements of the 94th Division's 302d Infantry were contacted in BEURIG and the two bridgeheads joined. It was learned that in the 94th Division zone there were two completed treadway bridges over which the tanks of the 10th Armored Division were now crossing and attacking toward TRIER. The OCKFEN bridging efforts were abandoned and the combat team now concentrated on eliminating the forces still holding out on the route to TRIER.

RESULTS

Under the heading of results, first and foremost is the fact that an important bridgehead was established. (25)

Next, the specific accomplishments can be measured in terms of 49 pillboxes, 452 prisoners, 5 artillery pieces and an estimated 500 enemy dead. (26)

Further, the ground taken facilitated the capture of

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- (24) A-4, p. 350
(25) A-1, p. 92
(26) A-4, p. 354

TRIER by the 10th Armored Division on 2 March 1945. In a fitting culmination of the combat team attachment, the 1st Battalion of the 376th Infantry fought its way into TRIER with the lead combat command of the division.

During the period 21-26 February, Combat Team 376 suffered 200 casualties, including the regimental commander, one battalion commander, four company commanders and five artillery forward observers. (27)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. COORDINATION WITH SUPPORTING ENGINEERS

To have attained the degree of success expected by the Army Commander, an unopposed crossing and subsequent rapid advance to TRIER, the element of surprise was absolutely essential. Surprise was lost due to the non-arrival of the supporting engineers at the crossing site on the early morning of 22 February. General Patton's writings accurately describe the incident as resulting from the boat train having become lost in its movement to the river. The situation could have been corrected had there been direct liaison from the engineer group to the 376th Infantry. It will be recalled that the regimental commander dispatched members of his own staff on a fruitless search for the boats. If there had been present an engineer liaison officer in communication with his unit, or at least with a knowledge of its route of march, the mix-up might have been averted. It follows then, at combat team level, that if engineer to infantry liaison is not established by order of the superior headquarters, it should be

(27) A-4, p. 356, Supplemented by Personal knowledge.

requested by the infantry commander at the outset of a river operation.

2. MOVEMENT OF INFANTRY TO THE CROSSING SITE

The efforts of the lead companies of the 1st and 3d Battalions to advance over open fields to the river line on the afternoon of the 22d, constituted an attempt to force a crossing under the direct fire of the enemy. The attempt was futile and costly. Later, the mounted movement of the armored infantry over the same route under identical handicaps of enemy fire and observation, illustrated the fact that infantry can be delivered to the assault boats without having to make an exposed foot approach. The possibility of employing armored vehicles in this manner should be considered by infantry units engaged in an assault crossing, and appropriate staff action taken to obtain the temporary use of the vehicles required.

3. CLOSE ARTILLERY SUPPORT

The value of close artillery support for the assault infantry was demonstrated in the successful elimination of the enemy force in OCKFEN, and again in the employment of defensive concentrations during the period of isolation of the 3d Battalion on the regimental objective. Three factors account for the effectiveness of the artillery in this operation: the aggressive action of the forward observers in keeping abreast with the assault infantry; the fact that the commander of the combat team artillery battalion was kept constantly informed from the time the mission was received; and the close coor-

dination of the artillery battalion with the artillery of the 10th Armored Division.

4. DIRECT FIRE SUPPORT

The successful night crossing of the 376th Infantry was aided by the planned fires of tank destroyers. The fires were included in the artillery fire plan and were directed against known enemy fortifications which had been sited earlier in the day. Later on, the tank destroyers, still on the near bank, provided direct fire for the infantry in the assault of individual pillboxes. Currently the infantry regiment could well use its organic tank company in the same role.

5. ENGINEER COMPONENT OF THE COMBAT TEAM

One platoon of engineers was attached to the combat team. This is normal for a regiment on the far bank of an opposed crossing. In this case, however, with the bridgehead area so heavily fortified, there proved to be insufficient attached engineer personnel. The employment of an engineer company with the mission of demolition of troublesome pillboxes, would have allowed the infantry battalions to concentrate their efforts on a more rapid expansion of the perimeter. As it was, much time was consumed inside the perimeter in assaulting pillboxes which were firing on the bridge site. An engineer unit of company size would further have been capable of carrying the amounts of explosive necessary for demolition of the concrete installations.

6. SUPPLY

The supply problems encountered during the period were of the type which should be expected in an opposed river crossing. Air supply as was effected here is contingent entirely upon the superiority of friendly air. When bridging operations were impeded, immediate steps should have been taken to deliver jeeps to the far bank by improvised means for use in supply and evacuation. Excessive numbers of personnel on the far bank were occupied in carrying supplies by hand because of the fact that no transportation was made available.

7. COMMUNICATION

Communication was good. At no time were the battalions out of contact with regiment. Radio was used 90% of the time for contact with the troops on the far bank due to the frequent disruption of wire traffic by shell fire and by the movement of engineer equipment to and from the bridge site. The 600 series radios of the artillery observers and liaison officers supplemented the SCR 300 sets of the infantry to good effect. The availability of signal supplies through direct contact of unit communication officers with the Signal Officer, 10th Armored Division, was an improvement over the customary muddling with S-4 to G-4 procedure, and contributed greatly to the effectiveness of communication.

LESSONS

1. In a river crossing, direct liaison from the supporting engineers to the headquarters of the assault infantry

is essential.

2. During an opposed crossing, armored personnel carriers can be used to good advantage for shuttling the assault infantry to the crossing site.

3. The assault infantry will profit in bridgehead operations by employing artillery concentrations to protect the bridgehead perimeter, and by utilizing maximum supporting artillery as an immediate reserve to nullify enemy counterattacks.

4. The employment of coordinated tank fire against known strong points on the far bank will greatly assist the crossing.

5. A regimental combat team to be committed in bridgehead operations against a heavily fortified far bank should include a complete engineer company.

6. Difficulty in supplying forward units should be anticipated in river crossing plans, and provision made for the use of all possible expedients.

7. A force engaged in a river crossing should attempt to install and maintain wire communication, but should be fully prepared for the eventuality of 100% radio communication.