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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 353D INFANTRY
(89TH DIVISION) IN THE ASSAULT CROSSING OF THE MOSELLE
RIVER IN THE VICINITY OF BULLAY, GERMANY, AND
SUBSEQUENT PURSUIT ACTION, 16 - 20 MARCH 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion S-3)

Type of operation described: ASSAULT OF A RIVER
LINE AND PURSUIT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index	1
Bibliography	2
Introduction	3
The General Situation	3
The Division Situation (Map C)	6
The Battalion Situation (Map C)	6
The Battalion Plan	10
The Assault of the River Line - 16 March (Map C)	11
Operations, 17 - 19 March (Map D)	15
Operations, 20 March	17
Added Information	21
Analysis and Criticism	22
Lessons	25
Map A - Line 12 March 1945	
Map B - Saar - Palatinate Triangle	
Map C - Moselle Crossing	
Map D - Operations, 17 - 20 March 1945	
Map E - Attack of Fortified Position	
Map F - Saar - Palatinate Triangle, Situation 22 March 1945	

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INTRODUCTION

Early in January 1945, the military position of the German Armies on the main continent of Europe started a decline which lead to certain doom. Before the end of March, the German was beaten back behind the Rhine River and his armies west of the Rhine were largely destroyed or captured. This monograph deals with the operations of the 2d Battalion, 353d Infantry, 89th Division, in the final phase of the destruction of the German Armies west of the Rhine, better known perhaps as the reduction of the "Saar-Palatinate Triangle". This action, covering the period 16 - 20 March, consisted of an assault crossing of the Moselle River at Bullay, Germany, and the rapid pursuit of a defeated German enemy.

In order to orient the reader, it is necessary to review briefly the salient military events leading up to this action.

On 8 February, the Allied Armies, under the command of General Eisenhower, began a series of coordinated attacks designed to close to the Rhine all along the front and at the same time destroy the defenders. (1) The attacks were carried out according to plan, and by 12 March, the Allied Armies stood on the west bank of the Rhine from Coblenz north to Nijmegen. The bridgehead across the Rhine at Remagen was 5 days old at this time. South from Coblenz, the left bank of the Moselle River was almost entirely under the control of the US Third Army. (2) Map A indicates the general line held by the Allied Armies on 12 March. (3)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

General Eisenhower's plan for the destruction of the German Armies west of the Rhine was in its final phase. "There remained only the great
(1) A-6, p. 365; (2) A-7, p. 27, 28; (3) A-7, Maps 7 & 8.

hostile garrison in the Saar Basin. These troops were situated in a huge triangle that had for its base the Rhine, with the two sides meeting at a point seventy-five miles to the west. The northern leg of the triangle was protected by the Moselle River and the southern by some of the strongest sections of the Siegfried Line." (4) Along the Moselle, the US Third Army regrouped to strike the nose and northern base of the triangle. To the south, the US Seventh Army was poised to strike the southern leg through the Siegfried Line. (5)

Two German provinces in the triangle - the Saarland and the Palatinate - comprised some 4,000 square miles. "The terrain in this area is varied and not, on the whole, favorable to military operations. South of the Moselle, as it flows northeast from Trier to Coblenz, lie the Hunsruck Mountains. Here the desolate and rugged topography is characterized by steep and heavily wooded ridges, cut by deep valleys. Along the southern base of this mountainous mass flows the Nahe River, forming a narrow valley which separates the Hunsruck Mountains from the comparatively level region of the Palatinate. This area, which extends northeast from Murzig and Saarbautern to the Rhine at Mainz, is in reality a huge drainage saddle lying between the higher and more rugged barriers of the Hunsruck to the north and the Hardt Mountains to the south." (6)

An estimated total of 80,000 soldiers of the German Army Group G garrisoned the triangle. (7) The Seventh German Army, which had lost approximately 50% of its strength in the retreat across the Moselle, defended the northern leg, and the First German Army on the south manned the Siegfried Line. (8) Morale was low. The failure of the Ardennes offensive, coupled with recent reverses, had done much to shatter the German soldier's belief in the invincibility of his army. Further, the enemy's ability to move troops and equipment on the battlefield was severely limited

(4) A-6, p. 382; (5) A-6, p. 382; (6) A-11, p. 1; (7) A-1, p. 338; (8) A-11, p. 3.

the Eiffel Hills, closed on the Moselle in the vicinity of Alf.

THE DIVISION SITUATION (MAP C)

The division's mission was to establish a bridgehead across the Moselle and continue the attack to the southeast parallel to the 5th Division, protect the corps right flank, and maintain contact with the XX Corps. The division plan called for crossings at three points: the 1st and 2d Battalions, 353d Infantry, were to cross between Neef and Alf; the 354th Infantry near Reil. The 355th Infantry was to pass through the bridgehead after making a demonstration toward Ernst. (14)

THE BATTALION SITUATION (MAP C)

At noon on the 14th of March, the 2d Battalion, 353d Infantry, was alerted to prepare to make an assault crossing of the Moselle at Alf during the night of 15 - 16 March. The battalion commander and appropriate staff members were to report to the Regimental CP at Bad Bertrich at 1000 the following morning to receive the attack order. Patrols could be sent across the river that night, but in order to preserve surprise, they would be held to a minimum. At this time the 2d Battalion was in regimental reserve at Hontheim, some six miles from the Moselle. The battalion commander and his staff studied the situation map and made tentative plans. It was decided to send three officer led patrols, one from each rifle company, on reconnaissance missions across the river during the night. All companies were alerted to the situation, and the company commanders and the selected patrol leaders were directed to report to the CP at once to go on reconnaissance with the battalion commander. In addition, the battalion S-3, S-2, and the artillery liaison officer would accompany the battalion commander's party. (15)

From the wooded high ground northeast of Alf, the battalion commander and his party studied the terrain across the Moselle. At the same time, (14) A-2, p. 88; (15) Personal knowledge.

the patrol leaders were oriented on the ground and assigned missions. Here the river flowed slowly through a deep winding gorge. Either bank rose abruptly to a height of 300 feet above the river line and was terraced with vineyards. Thick woods and bushes covered the hill tops. Just south of Alf the river turned to the southeast for approximately three miles and then doubled back to almost meet itself again before resuming its course to the south. Across the narrow neck of the "tear drop" thus formed, elements of the 3d Battalion were engaged in a fire fight. Sporadic firing could be heard and puffs of smoke could be seen as this drama unfurled itself far below. Directly across from Alf was the village of Bullay, set in the curve formed by the turn in the river. The town of Merl lay two miles down the river below Bullay. Below Merl, one and a half miles, was the town of Zell. A single road and a railway embankment paralleled the river line and connected the three towns. Beyond Bullay the vineyard-covered hillsides rose abruptly. The river itself averaged about 200 yards in width. (16)

After viewing the terrain from the heights, the battalion commander's party proceeded to the town of Alf for a closer look. The winding road leading into Alf from the west, shielded by high hills on either side, afforded a covered approach into the town itself. Within the town, which was held by a company of the 3d Battalion, a continuous line of connected buildings located on the near bank of the river afforded excellent vantage points for the battalion commander's group. At 1600 the company commanders and patrol leaders were released to return to the battalion. The battalion commander and staff members proceeded to the 3d Battalion CP in Alf to get a first-hand account of the enemy situation and to coordinate with the 3d Battalion. (17)

The 3d Battalion had taken Alf that morning after a brief skirmish with snipers. However, an estimated company of Germans were still stubbornly defending the neck of the "tear drop" south of Alf. Casualties had been (16, 17) Personal knowledge.

heavy in the attacking company, but the attack was to continue the following day. The company in Alf had received intermittent artillery fire throughout the day. The 3d Battalion could support the 2d Battalion's crossing with fires of one rifle company and a platoon of heavy machine guns. The artillery and 81 mm mortars were already registered and prepared to fire on any known targets. The passing of the reconnaissance patrols through the 3d Battalion's lines in Alf was coordinated. The battalion commander and party then returned to the Battalion CP at Hontheim, arriving just prior to darkness. There was still much work to be done. (18)

A check with regiment by phone brought further needed information. Engineer guides would meet the patrols at the Regimental CP at 2300. The patrol leaders were called to the Battalion CP for their final briefing. The Company G patrol would reconnoiter all approaches leading into and out of Bullay. The Company F patrol would circle Bullay to the left and reconnoiter the hill mass immediately beyond Bullay. The Company E patrol would reconnoiter the high ground to the left of Bullay. The general mission for all patrols was to observe any enemy movement in the area, to locate any enemy defensive positions, and to search the opposite river bank and roads for mines. If at all possible, the patrols were not to let themselves be discovered. Firing would be resorted to only as a last resort. (19)

At approximately 2330 the three patrols slipped noiselessly across the river. No mines were located on the river banks or on the roads. The Company G patrol located a machine gun position on the left side of Bullay covering the road to Neef. The Company F patrol observed approximately thirty German soldiers leaving Bullay and marching toward Neef. The high ground beyond and to the left of Bullay was not occupied. At approximately 0300 hours the three patrols, undiscovered by the enemy, returned quietly (18, 19) Personal knowledge.

across the river in the boats that had been previously concealed along the river banks. (20)

The mission had been accomplished and vital information gained, but not without difficulty. The boat furnished the Company F patrol had a leaky bottom and continually shipped water. The men had to bail with their helmets and were almost forced to turn back before getting across. On arrival on the far bank the patrol was wet, cold, and miserable. Their water-filled shoes made considerable noise, and the patrol had to spread out, remove shoes, and wring out socks before proceeding on their mission. This was time-consuming and added to the chance of the patrol being discovered, to say nothing of the vulnerable position of the patrol while executing this procedure. On return to the river bank, the boat was found to be full of water and had to be tipped on its side and emptied. This again caused a great deal of noise. On the return trip, the boat again rapidly filled with water and had to be abandoned far downstream. (21)

At 1000 on the following morning, 15 March, the battalion commander arrived at the Regimental CP to receive the order for the assault of the river line. Accompanying him were the battalion S-2, S-3, artillery liaison officer, and the communication officer to coordinate with appropriate regimental staff sections. The regimental order yielded the following pertinent bits of information not already known by the battalion. Division G-2 had identified three companies of the German 116th Grenadier Regiment between Bullay and Neef. However, prisoners of war reported they were short of ammunition for all weapons. (22) The assault crossing of the Moselle would begin at 0330, 16 March, the 1st Battalion crossing at Neef and the 2d Battalion at Alf. The 3d Battalion would be prepared to support the 2d Battalion by fire from positions in Alf, on call, and would continue the attack on the "tear drop". In order to gain surprise, no artillery

(20) Personal knowledge of patrol leader's reports; (21) Personal knowledge, Statement of Lt Earl H. Oot, Co F patrol leader, dtd 30 Nov 48; (22) A-2, p. 88.

preparation on the immediate bridgehead area would be fired. Companies A and C, 314th Engineer Combat Battalion, would support the 1st and 2d Battalions, respectively, in the crossings. After seizing the initial objective, the battalions were to continue the advance to the southeast, in the regimental zone. (23)

Coordination with the supporting engineer representatives was made on the spot immediately after receipt of the regimental order. Sufficient boats would be made available to cross the assault elements of two rifle companies at one time. The engineer representative pointed out the exact spot of the crossing site on the map, just to the left of the last houses in Alf. It was further agreed that the engineer guides would meet the battalion at the crossing site, and that the boats were to be placed along the beach in rear of the crossing site by the engineers prior to the time of crossing. No further coordination was considered necessary as both parties were familiar with crossing the site. (24)

At approximately 1530 the battalion closed in a forward assembly area one and one half miles east of Alf. The men got what rest they could and readied themselves and their equipment for the crossing. The battalion commander assembled his staff and company commanders and issued the attack order. (25)

THE BATTALION PLAN

Companies F and G were to cross in the first wave, Company F on the left and Company G on the right. Company G's mission was to seize the town of Bullay and to continue the attack down the road parallel to the river toward the towns of Merl and Zell. Company F on the left was to seize the high ground to the left and beyond Bullay, protect the crossing of the remainder of the battalion, and continue the attack along the high ground to the left of Company G. Company H and the battalion command group were to cross in the second wave. One platoon of heavy machine guns (23, 24, 25) Personal knowledge.

was to be in support of each of the assault rifle companies. The 81 mm mortar platoon would be in general support in the vicinity of Bullay. Company E and Headquarters Company were to cross in the third wave. Company E was to be the battalion reserve and follow the advance of Company F, prepared for employment in either company zone. All crew served weapons and all ammunition possible were to be hand carried. In addition, each man was to carry a one blanket pack and three full "C" rations. The battalion S-4 was charged with getting the battalion vehicles across the river as soon as possible. The boats were numbered and assigned to companies. The battalion command group would follow Company G's route of advance along the river line. Radio silence was to be maintained until H hour. Wire communication lines were to be strung across the river with the crossing of the second wave and go forward with the battalion command group. Communication with the assaulting rifle companies would be by 300 radio. (26)

THE ASSAULT OF THE RIVER LINE - 16 MARCH (MAP C)

At approximately 0300, 16 March, the battalion arrived in Alf. While the men crouched in the darkness of the streets and doorways of Alf, commanders and staff officers made coordination with the engineers at the crossing site. As usual, the unexpected happened, necessitating a last-minute change in plan. The assault boats were still on carriers behind cover of the last buildings next to the crossing site, instead of along the river bank as had been previously agreed. The only immediate solution was to have the men file by, lift the boats off the carriers, and carry them to the river. Most of the boats would have to be carried laterally across the front in order to get in position for launching. The other alternative was to request that regiment delay the jump-off time so that a reconnaissance could be made for a better approach to the river line. The battalion commander decided on the first course of action. Luckily, the night was very dark. The first assault boats of Company G slid into the Moselle at 0330. (26) Personal knowledge.

The remaining boats shoved off as the boat groups reached the water's edge. Despite the confusion caused by the change of plan, surprise was obtained. The first wave crossed without drawing a shot. The enemy machine gun position to the left of Bullay, located the night previously by the patrols, was taken in reverse with complete surprise. Four very confused German soldiers manning the gun surrendered to Company G riflemen. Company G then began a house to house advance through town. Upon clearing about one-half of the town, firing was heard on the far side of town ahead of Company G's front-line troops. This turned out to be elements of the battalion A & P Platoon that had driven off an enemy patrol entering Bullay along the road from Merl. The A & P Platoon leader had given his platoon a street junction on the far side of town for an assembly point! The platoon leader and a group of his men had arrived there ahead of Company G. (27)

On the left Company F climbed up the steep vineyard-covered hillsides to seize its objective without encountering resistance. Meanwhile, the remainder of the battalion shuttled across the river, loading the boats as soon as they reached the near shore.

After clearing Bullay, Company G moved down the river road toward Merl. Although the "tear drop" was still under the control of the enemy, the battalion commander had counted on the darkness to cover the exposed movement of Company G down this road. However, as the light grew better, enemy automatic fire from the wooded hill in the center of the "tear drop" caught the main body of Company G and the battalion command group on the exposed road, forcing them to take cover along the railroad embankment. The supporting heavy machine gun platoon quickly went into position and sprayed the general wooded area, while Company G and the battalion command group went forward by rushes into the cover of the houses in Merl. (28)

(27, 28) Personal knowledge.

No resistance was encountered in Merl and the town was quickly cleared, Company G being held up temporarily by a concentration of very heavy artillery or mortar fire that fell in and to the rear of the town. Several Company H machine gunners were wounded. (29)

Immediately beyond the town of Merl the river road forks, one branch continues to parallel the river as it turns to the south toward Zell, while the other goes almost due east through a deep ravine leading up to high ground. (30)

As Company G's leading elements emerged from Merl, they were taken under fire by a defended road block approximately 800 yards up the left fork of the road. Company G deployed to take the road block under fire. Company F, in the meantime, was echeloned to the left rear. Progress along the thickly wooded ridge line was much slower, although no resistance was encountered.

It became apparent that Company G could not be easily withdrawn from the fire fight against the defended road block. Much valuable time would be lost if the advance were not continued toward Zell with all possible speed. The Germans would have time to move troops into Zell and, thereby, block the battalion's advance along the river road. With this in mind, Company G was ordered to continue the attack up the ravine toward the road block and then seize the high ground to the left of Zell, which had originally been Company F's objective. Company E, in reserve on the high ground behind Company F, was ordered to move down through the vineyards into Merl and seize Zell without delay. Company F was to continue clearing the woods in its zone of advance, assist Company G forward by fire, and then revert to battalion reserve. (31)

Company G pushed the attack of the road block vigorously. Advancing under the cover of its own and supporting fires the road block was captured, (29, 30, 31) Personal knowledge.

along with four prisoners and a machine gun. An estimated squad of Germans beat a hasty withdrawal up the ravine. By noon, Company G had hastily re-organized and started moving toward its new objective. In the meantime, Company E had moved down from the high ground into Merl and was advancing down the river road toward Zell. Fortunately, no fire was received from the "tear drop". (32)

In order to give the reader a more vivid account of Company E's action in Zell, excerpts from a letter from the Company E commander are quoted: "On entering Zell the advance guard ran into sniper fire, pushed on in, and disappeared. The company kept on going, but I lost radio contact with the platoons. I saw a company of Germans across the river on the "tear drop". The new artillery observer was excited and stayed in a building where he couldn't see to adjust fire. The rounds were lost. The company was not progressing, civilians were wild, and snipers were getting worse. The men were tired and beginning to lag - still no contact. Finally I gathered up a handful of men and led them down the center street, clearing houses toward the prearranged roundezvous at the church. The messenger beside me was shot squarely between the eyes - snipers were getting worse. I then realized that the Germans were retreating from across the river and assembling in Zell. Also there were indications that German soldiers were changing to civilian clothes as we surrounded or raided houses. We found uniforms dropped in a heap a few feet back from the street windows of many houses. I got a platoon leader to gather up some men and machine guns to go to the river and head off the Germans coming across by boat." (33)

The battalion commander, S-3, and radio operator moved forward to Zell to check on Company E's difficulties. Although an attempt was being made to evacuate civilians from the area, many remained in the houses and others walked about on the side streets. The situation was highly confused. Control had been lost. (34)

(32) Personal knowledge; (33) Personal knowledge; Statement of Maj W. E. Riggle, then CO of Co E, dtd 24 Jan 49; (34) Personal knowledge.

After sizing up the situation, the battalion commander and S-3 returned to Merl where the Battalion CP had been set up. Company F, still in reserve on the high ground above Merl, was ordered to pass through Company E and clear the remainder of Zell prior to darkness. It was now late in the afternoon. (35)

Company F planned its operations thoroughly. Definite zones of advance and definite objectives were assigned to the assault platoons. The company objective was the town itself. The advance was from house to house, driving all civilians to the rear and keeping them there. This eliminated the sniper fire. Machine guns and automatic rifles were placed in upper story windows and told to fire on all possible targets. Thus, the attack leap-frogged forward under the supporting fires and within an hour the last houses in Zell were cleared. Company F received no casualties. (36)

As the battalion dug in for the night, Company G held the high ground to the left of Zell, Company F the outskirts of Zell, and Company E, now the battalion reserve, was located in Zell. The advance had carried well beyond the initial division objective. (37)

All during the day, supporting engineers ferried vehicles across the river at Alf and worked feverishly to complete the bridge between Alf and Bullay. By nightfall, the bridge was completed and organic vehicles joined the assault units. (38)

OPERATIONS, 17 - 19 MARCH (MAP D)

Early on the morning of 17 March, one company of the 3d Battalion recrossed the Moselle at Merl and assaulted the German defensive line across the neck of the "tear drop" from the rear. By daybreak, the 3d Battalion smashed the last German resistance on the "tear drop". (39)

(35) Personal knowledge; (36) Personal knowledge; Statement by Capt B. F. Hardin, CO, Co F, dtd 24 Feb 49, and of Lt Earl H. Oot, plat ldr, Co F, dtd 30 Nov 48; (37, 38, 39) Personal knowledge.

The 2d Battalion was ordered to continue the advance toward Tellig on 17 March. The 89th Reconnaissance Troop crossed the bridge at Alf and raced eastward to reconnoiter toward Tellig. (40) The 11th Armored Division, having assembled in rear of the bridgehead, started crossing the bridge at noon. The 355th Infantry was motorized and attached to the 11th Armored Division for operational control. The armored spearheads quickly passed through the advance elements of the 89th Division and by nightfall captured Kirchberg. (41) The 2d Battalion, mopping up scattered enemy resistance, reached Peterswald, an advance of five miles. (42)

On 18 and 19 March the 2d Battalion continued mopping up behind the armored columns. All organized resistance along the whole front collapsed. Deserters, stragglers, and isolated units streamed from the woods and towns to surrender to the 2d Battalion doughboys. (43)

Orders for the next day's operation consisted of an overlay showing the zone of advance, the objective which was usually ten to fifteen miles away, and various code numbers for key terrain features. (44)

In the meantime, the 11th Armored Division crossed the Nahe River in the vicinity of Kirn on 19 March, smashed through the German's hasty defense line south of the Nahe, and fanned out into the open country beyond, with Mainz as its objective. (45)

Orders were received during the night of 19 March to continue mopping up in the division zone behind the 11th Armored Division. The battalion was resting for the night in the vicinity of Hennweiler after a day's advance of 10 miles from Lindensheid. The objective lay some 15 miles to the southeast across the Nahe River. The 3d Battalion would advance on the 2d Battalion's left and the 354th Infantry on the right. (46)

Elements of the 355th Infantry were still in Kirn with security elements on the high ground across the river. Division and regimental

(40) A-2, p. 92; (41) A-5, p. 85; (42, 43, 44) Personal knowledge; (45) A-5, p. 85; (46) Personal knowledge.

reconnaissance elements would be operating in advance of the battalions. (47)

Administrative details called for the foot elements of the 2d Battalion to cross the footbridge across the Nahe at Kirn at 0800. The battalion vehicles would cross at 0900 or possibly earlier if the bridge at Kirn was repaired before that time. (48)

The terrain across the Nahe in the battalion's zone of advance consisted of low rolling hills, generally open, but dotted liberally with large and small patches of woods. A good network of roads criss-crossed the area with one well-defined dirt road running generally along the center of the battalion's zone of advance. (49)

The battalion plan was to advance generally along the dirt road in the center of the zone. The battalion vehicles were to join the main column along this route of advance. Crew served weapons were to be left on the vehicles, since it was believed that the vehicles would be able to join the foot column before it passed through the security elements of the 355th Infantry. Also, it was believed that advance reconnaissance elements would furnish the battalion with early information of any enemy activity in the area. As an added precaution, however, all artillery forward observers were directed to hand-carry their radios while moving with the foot column. The battalion artillery liaison officer with his own and the battalion commander's vehicle was to cross the river ahead of the main motor column and join the battalion at the earliest possible time. (50)

OPERATIONS, 20 MARCH

By 1000, 20 March, the battalion foot column had crossed the foot bridge at Kirn, climbed the wooded hills beyond, and passed through the last security elements of the 355th Infantry as it debouched from the woods into open country. Considerable time was lost due to the difficulty of maintaining direction in the thick woods. The center road through the (47, 48, 49, 50) Personal knowledge.

woods shown on the map did not exist. (51) At this time, the battalion artillery liaison officer joined the column and reported that the motor column was across the river and should join the battalion shortly. The Heavy Weapons Company commander was immediately dispatched in the battalion commander's vehicle to guide the motor column forward. (52)

The advance continued in a column of companies, security well out to the front and flanks. Company F formed the advance guard. The battalion command group was well forward with the Company F commander in rear of the leading platoon. (53)

At approximately 1200, the platoon leader of the leading platoon radioed back that several groups of enemy and several gun positions had been spotted to the front. (See Map E) (54)

The battalion command group and the Company F commander immediately went forward to observe. The leading platoon was deployed along the crest of a wooded hill. To the front at approximately 1500 yards distance, two bunkers, apparently gun positions, could be seen near the crest of a bald round hill. Occasionally groups of two or three Germans would walk from one bunker to the other and disappear. Apparently, up to this point the battalion had been unobserved. The motor column had not yet joined the battalion, and their whereabouts was uncertain. (55)

The terrain leading up to the enemy position was deceptive. The German position was at the far end of a long ridge line. The leading elements of Company F were on the near end. To the front at about 300 yards distance the ground rose forming a small hill, partially covered with bushes on the right and woods on the left. For purposes of clarity, this piece of terrain will be called Hill #1. Between Hill #1 and the German position was another small hill that could not be seen from the position of the leading elements of the battalion. Again for purposes of clarity, this terrain feature will be called Hill #2. To the right, the
(51, 52, 53, 54, 55) Personal knowledge.

ridge line fell off gradually toward a large open valley. To the left, the ground fell off sharply and was thickly wooded, except for an expanse of about 100 square yards just in rear of Hill #1. The town of Limbach could be seen at the base of the ridge line to the right of the German position. (56)

As the commanders studied the terrain to the front, artillery fire began falling on the battalion's forward elements. Two field pieces could be observed firing from the bunkers. The battalion commander ordered Company F to continue the advance forward. (57)

The leading platoon moved down the road approximately 100 yards when it was hit from all sides by sniper fire. The Germans had held fire until the platoon was very close in order to inflict maximum casualties. The platoon reacted quickly. Working into a skirmish line, it advanced across the clearing, captured Hill #1, and quickly reduced the small arms fire in that locality. Several Germans were killed and one other taken prisoner. (58) Company F deployed along Hill #1 and fired on Hill #2 to the front.

Rifle grenades with booster caps could reach the target nicely. Artillery fire was placed on Hill #2 and Company F assaulted on signal of a smoke shell marking the last round of the barrage fired. Marching fire was delivered as Company F advanced to the crest of the hill. Then all "hell" broke loose. Machine guns, 20 mm flack, and 88 mm fire swept the hill from the main German position. The squad on the right flank was caught entirely in the open. The platoon leader passed word along the line for the squad to crawl to the rear and to the left to a more covered position. In doing so, the men pulled a good trick that seemed to work. Seemingly dead as far as the enemy was concerned, the men inched back gradually and crawled into new positions. Company F dug in and returned the fire. (59) The true nature of the terrain was only too apparent. A (56, 57) Personal knowledge; (58, 59) Personal knowledge; Statement by Lt Earl H. Oot, plat ldr of leading plat, Co F, dtd 30 Nov 48.

deep saddle, entirely open, separated the two positions which were approximately 600 yards apart. The Germans could cover all approaches to their position with grazing fire. (60)

The platoon leaders radioed for artillery fire frantically. However, the Company F commander was moving forward to Hill #1 at the time, and his artillery forward observer, who had somehow been left behind in the rush, could not be contacted. (61)

The battalion commander, S-3, and artillery liaison officer quickly followed Company F forward. The artillery liaison officer had thought to have his radio hand-carried forward. The radio was set up in rear of the hill and the needed artillery placed on the main German position. This drove the crews of the 88's to cover and considerably lessened the fire being delivered on Company F. (62)

On the right, considerable firing could be heard and the town of Limbach appeared to be burning. It was later learned that the battalion's lost motor column had been fired on while approaching this town. The vehicular mounted 50 caliber machine guns and the 57 mm antitank guns in the motor column had gone into action to cover the column's hasty withdrawal. (63)

At this time, the company commander of Company K arrived at the battalion commander's CP to check on the situation before continuing the advance in the 3d Battalion zone to the left of the hostile position. It was agreed that Company K would advance in its zone and assist the 2d Battalion forward by taking the German position under fire from the flank and rear. Company F continued to improve its positions and fire on the German position. (64)

Meanwhile the platoon leader, who led the first assault elements of Company F forward, was not idle. Through a German-speaking soldier of his (60) Personal knowledge; Statement by Lt Earl F. Oot, plat ldr of leading plat of Co F, dtd 30 Nov 48; (61, 62, 63) Personal knowledge; (64) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lt Earl H. Oot, plat ldr of leading plat, Co F, dtd 30 Nov 48.

platoon, he briefed the German soldier previously captured, and sent him forward to the position with an ultimatum, "Surrender or all be shot. Your position is surrounded." (65)

At the same time, Company K resumed the attack on the left. The German outpost line in that sector was quickly driven back, and fire placed on the position from the flank. The Germans broke out the familiar white flags, and Company F moved quickly across the exposed saddle to capture the position. Forty German soldiers filed out of the bunkers, their hands behind their heads. (66)

The action had cost Company F four killed and eight wounded. The German pocket had held up the battalion's advance for approximately five hours. (67)

By 1800, Company F had reorganized and was ready to continue the advance. Also, the long lost motor column joined the battalion. Weapon carriers were promptly released to the companies, and the battalion moved out in approach march formation, two companies abreast. The advance to the objective was made without further incident. (68)

Thus ended the 2d Battalion's participation in the destruction of the last German garrisons west of the Rhine. The "Eighty-Niners" were to get three days rest prior to moving out to make another river crossing. This time it was to be the Rhine, behind which lay the heart of the German Reich. (69)

ADDED INFORMATION

As an added bit of interest and to give the reader a clearer incite to the nature of the entire operation in the Saar - Palatinate triangle, Map F is included to show the situation as it existed on 22 March and the general operations since 12 March. Some few battered German units did manage to escape across the Rhine, but on 23 March the back door was slammed

(65) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lt Earl H. Oot, plat ldr of leading plat, Co F, dtd 30 Nov 48; (66) Personal knowledge; (67) Personal knowledge; Extract summary of Co F's morning report, property of Capt W. F. Harden; (68, 69) Personal knowledge.

for good, as American troops entirely cleared the west bank of the Rhine.
(70)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The operation of the 2d Battalion, 353d Infantry, heretofore described, was a part of an encircling maneuver executed by the US Third Army. Well-conceived and brilliantly conducted, it stands as a prime example of this type of offensive action. The XII Corps attack slashed deep into the rear of the German Army Group G, blocked its retreat, and with the application of direct pressure by the XX Corps and the US Seventh Army, completely destroyed its ability to fight.

From the enemy's point of view, the decision to fight for every inch of ground, rather than withdraw to the natural defensive barrier of the Rhine, was utter stupidity. His position was exposed, and he lacked the ability to concentrate his forces at the decisive point on the battlefield. General Eisenhower in his book, CRUSADE IN EUROPE, has this to say: "In retrospect it is difficult to understand why the German, as he saw his armies north of the Moselle undergo complete collapse and destruction, failed to initiate a rapid withdrawal of his forces in the Saar Basin, in order to remove them from their exposed position and employ them for defense of the Rhine." General "Ike" goes on to say that he believes the German's failure to pull back his exposed troops was due more to "Hitler's intuition in action" than to a military decision. (71) Statements made by General Paul Hausser, commander of German Army Group G, to Allied interrogators support this conclusion. He blamed his disaster on the order from higher headquarters to hold and fight to the last man. (72)

The assault of a river line is a difficult military operation and requires thorough preparation. In the action thus described, the 2d Battalion had less than two days to prepare for its crossing of the Moselle.
(70) A-7, p. 31 and Map 8; (71) A-6, p. 382; (72) A-9, p. 738.

Joint infantry-engineer training would have been of great value, but it was not attempted due to the shortage of time. The time element was sacrificed in order to keep the enemy, already highly disorganized, on the run. Speed and aggressive action were of paramount importance. Indeed, there is seldom enough time for all the preparation required in combat. Commanders and staffs must be trained to react accordingly. (73)

✓ The lateral movement of the assault boats across the front to the river line was a clear violation of principle. (74) It came about as the result of another serious error: the failure to conduct an infantry-engineer reconnaissance on the ground. ✓ The coordination was far from complete. This violation of principle could have produced disastrous results against a more alert enemy.

Much credit for the success of the operation must go to the three rifle company patrols. The information they brought back was both complete and accurate, and it served as a firm foundation on which to base the battalion plan. In addition, their personal knowledge of the terrain across the river helped to orient leaders and other troops of their own units during the actual operation.

Surprise was sought throughout the planning phase of the operation at both high and low levels. Its achievement compensated for the shortage of time and other mistakes that were made.

One of the principles of fighting in towns and villages is that "in an attack of a village, the objective of the attacker is the village itself." (75) In Company E's attack of Zell, speed of advance alone did not compensate for the failure to adhere to this principle. A village must be attacked in the same manner as any other piece of terrain designated as a military objective. Loss of contact and lack of control over hostile civilians added to Company E's difficulties. Restricted observation and limitations of (73) A-14, pars 12-13; (74) A-14, pars 12, 46; (75) A-15, par 68.

radio made control very difficult. A prearranged plan covering the seizure of the whole objective is a necessity. Hostile civilians must be evacuated from the immediate battle area to prevent interference with military operations.

In the attack of the fortified position near Limbach, an improper estimate of the situation caused the battalion to be without the use of its organic supporting weapons. In fast moving actions such as this, enemy and friendly situations are apt to be vague. Road nets shown on maps are frequently inaccurate. When there is any chance of a slip-up in plans, as certainly there was in this case, the safer course of action should govern.

In addition to factors already mentioned, the success of the operation may be contributed to:

1. Complete air superiority.
2. The use of armor and motorized infantry to exploit and disrupt the enemy, closely followed by slower infantry units to mop up and clinch the gains made.
3. High state of training of all units - the Eighty-Niners, though short in combat experience, had been thoroughly trained - especially so in small unit tactics.
4. Aggressiveness and high morale of all troops.
5. Flexibility of plans and the ability of commanders and staffs of all echelons to meet the demands of the fast moving situation.
6. The enemy's complete inability to concentrate his forces at the decisive point on the battlefield.

The following message to the Commanding General, 89th Division, from the XX Corps Commander is quoted in part: "Your advance to the Moselle, followed by your notable assault river crossing at Bullay, established a new route essential to the successful operation of this corps. The courage of your troops in their baptism of fire, and the promptness with which your staff and combat leaders grasped their new responsibilities, surely mark the beginning of a gallant record for your division." (76)

LESSONS

1. An encirclement is an extremely effective military maneuver when boldly and aggressively executed.
2. Surprise and aggressive action will often compensate for the shortage of time required to complete preparation.
3. Preparations for a river crossing operation must include an infantry-engineer reconnaissance on the ground.
4. Air superiority is a great asset in any military operation.
5. Tactical military decisions should be made by commanders in the field and not by political leaders.
6. Thorough and sound training pays dividends in combat.
7. In the attack of a village, a prearranged plan covering the seizure of the objective, the village itself, is of utmost importance.
8. A sound estimate of the situation is essential for success in combat.
9. When fighting in towns or villages, hostile civilians must be evacuated from the immediate combat area in order to prevent their interference with military operations.
10. All subordinate leaders must thoroughly understand the plan of operation.
11. In the attack of a town or village, control is extremely difficult.
12. The pursuit must be pushed with all means available until the enemy is destroyed. Armor reinforced by motorized infantry units and regular infantry, following closely, form a combination particularly suited for this purpose.
13. In training for combat, the necessity for speed in preparing plans must be emphasized.
14. Enemy information gained by reconnaissance units is worthless unless disseminated to the proper unit in time to be used.