

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 100TH INFANTRY
DIVISION (UNITED STATES SEVENTH ARMY)
AT BITCHE, ALSACE-LORRAINE, FRANCE,
15-17 MARCH 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY DIVISION
ATTACKING A FORTIFIED POSITION

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 100th Infantry Division, Seventh United States Army, in the attack and capture of BITCHE and CAMP DE BITCHE, in the Maginot Line, Alsace-Lorraine, France, 15-17 March 1945, during the RHINELAND CAMPAIGN.

In order to orient the reader it will be necessary to discuss briefly the major events which led up to this action.

By March 1945 the allied armies under General Eisenhower in the European front, had crushed the German winter offensive on the Ardennes and were chasing the fleeing enemy toward the RHINE River. // The Third and Seventh Armies now confronted a triangular island, the Saar-Palatinate, bounded by the Rhine River on the east, the Moselle on the northwest, and the Lauter-Sarre River line on the south and west. This area had four major terrain features: the Rhine Valley, the Hardt Mountains, the Saarbruecken-Kaiserlautern-Worms Corridor, and the Hunsruck Mountains. It was also the second richest industrial region in front of the western Allied armies. //

(See Map A) (1)

By 13 March 1945 the Seventh Army was disposed with three Corps abreast from west of SAARBRUCKEN to HAGUENAU, ready for the impending operation; the reduc-

(1) A-4, P. 693

tion of the Saar-Palatinate Triangle on its zone. (See Map B). Army Field Order No. 10 stated the mission of the Seventh Army: attack from its present positions, breack the Siegfried Line, destroy the enemy in zone, and seize the west side of the Rhine River. The assault was to be made with three Corps abreast, the main effort assigned to the XV Corps along the RIMILIN-ZWERBRUCKEN axis in the center. The VI Corps on the right and the XXI Corps on the left were to assist the main effort beyond ZWEIBRUCKEN to KAISERLAUERN and the WORMS area, where a river crossing was to be effected. (2) The XV Corps had an subsidiary and preliminary mission of capturing the Maginot Fortress of Bitche. (3) (See Map B).

The Maginot defenses in the vicinity of Bitche consisted of several forts and lesser fortifications reaching out and clinging to the earth for miles around. The Germans in their sweep through Europe did not overcome these defenses and after the capitulation of France the forts were greatly strengthened. This was the southern axis of the Maginot Line upon which the entire system swung and hinged. Once these fortifications were smashed, the line could be circumvented, neutralized and rendered useless, and the gates to Germany would swing open. (4)

The XV Corps consisted of the 6th Armored Division and the 3rd, 44th, 45th, 71st and 100th Infantry Divisions. The XV Corps planned for the 71st Infantry Division to remain static, the 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions to attack due north and breach the Siegfried

(2) A-2, p. 699
(3) A-2, pp. 703-704
(4) A-3, pp. 47-48

Line, and the 100th Infantry Division to seize and hold BITCHE and CAMP de BITCHE, reduce the surrounding forts and protect the right flank of the Corps up to the outer defenses of the Siegfried Line, where it was to hold untill the 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions on its left had made the breackthrough, at which time the 100th Infantry Division was to follow the 6th Armored Division through the gap and advance rapidly to the Rhine River, via SWIBRUCKEN, NEUSTADT, and LUDWISSHAFFEN. (5)

(See Map B)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

This was the second time that the 100th Infantry Division had received the order of capturing BITCHE and surrounding forts. After clearing the Vosges Mountains in which this Division took active part, the Seventh Army was attacking the Maginot Line on 17 December 1944 and ordered the 100th Infantry Division to take Bitche. By 21 December the Division had cleared the entire area west of the town and was making steady progress toward the CITADEL itself, but the advance had to be stopped and a defensive position asumed due to the progress of the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes region. The Seventh Army had to take over part of the Third Army front and the 100th Infantry Division was given a defensive mission with an extended front. It was well known at this time that in order to capture Bitche; the highground west and northwest of the city as well as the surrounding forts, had to be reduced first. (6)

(5) A-1, p. 37

(6) A-1, p. 36

On 13 March 1945 the 100th Infantry Division was relieved from its extended defensive front by elements of the 44th and 71st Infantry Divisions and moved to an area from HOTTVILLER on the north, to HOLBACH, LAMBACH and SIGNALBERG to the south and southeast. (See Map C)

Confronting the 100th Infantry Division were elements of the 935 Volks Grenadier Regiment and 937 Volks Grenadier Regiment, of the 245 VGD; and elements of the 225 VGR of the 16 Volks Grenadier Division. Supporting these enemy troops were the 22 Rocket Launcher (Nebelwerfer) Regiment and the 410 Volks Artillery Corps. (7)

The morale of the 100th Infantry Division at this time was considered excellent. The Division had been cited by Gen Devers, CG 6th Army Gp, because of their valuable part during the enemy counteroffensive and especially because of the brave stand and repulse of three German divisions during the enemy offensive against the Seventh Army front on 1 January 1945. (8) They had been fighting continuously during the last 5 months from the Vosges Mountains to the Maginot Line and had experienced the bitter cold of winter. They knew the enemy and became familiar with his characteristics and forte. This understanding instilled confidence. (9)

The 100th Infantry Division had a rest center at Sarrebourg where men would go for a few days of relaxation from the cold monotony of the foxholes. Also, advantage was taken of the Seventh Army quotas to Paris, Brussels and other Army rest centers.

(7) A-5, p. 7

(8) A-4, p. 120

(9) A-3, p. 82

The morale of the forces opposing the 100th Infantry Division was considered to be low due to the failure of their last offensive; and their combat efficiency was considered inferior to the units previously encountered.

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 100TH INFANTRY DIVISION,
PRIOR TO THE ENGAGEMENT.

During the entire defensive period, from 21 December 1944 to 13 March 1945 when the 100th Infantry Division was assembled for this mission, the G-2 section of the Division undertook a program of combat research which laid the foundation for the subsequent assault. The approach to the problem of attacking a fortified point was immediately discerned after the completion of the VOSGES campaign, as the next barrier for all practical purposes appeared to be the Maginot Line. Anticipating this obstacle a G-2 staff officer was detailed to prepare a study of enemy fortifications including methods of neutralization and destruction of stationary forts. Special consideration was to be given to that part of the Maginot Line pertaining to the Bitche area. The object of this research was not primarily, data on the capture of the town, but of the surrounding forts which were a powerful link in the Maginot Line. The area can be described as a large semi-circular bowl. On the outer rim of the bowl, were the forts, extending from west to east. Reading west to east were Fort LEGERET, OP FREUDENBERG, Fort FREUDENBERG, Fort SCHIESSECK, Fort RAMSTEIN, Fort OTTERBIEL, Fort WEST AVIATION, Fort EAST AVIATION, and Fort HOEKIRKEL. (10) (See Mapt C)

(10) A-5, p. 7

Requests were made to the French Army for available studies of the Maginot Line, its technical plans, lines of communication, fields of fire and other details. To bring this information up to date, an officer personally visited areas of the Third Army front which included parts of the Maginot Line. This trip proved extremely fruitful. Previous ideas concerning the assault of fortified areas were revised. The applied experience of other units proved invaluable both in calculating the enemy's effective defense, strength, and in neutralizing fortifications. The contributions of the French Army technical facts, plus the personal reconnaissance of an officer, offered a point of departure towards a directed program of study of Fortress Bitché.

Results of this study were pictured in a special map where fields of fire, routes of approach and departure, caliber of weapons, entrances, and other pertinent facts were accurately plotted and kept up to date.

Unit S-2's were directed to send combat and reconnaissance patrols into front-line areas to determine nature of terrain, enemy installations, OPLR's and the general nature of the enemy morale. As this method of patrolling went into full swing, experienced units were able to determine regular enemy supply and messenger routes. These bits of information proved extremely valuable in playing havoc with enemy morale. Through PW interrogation it was learned that enemy outposts had a low morale due to harrassing activities, especially against ration wagons-even formal inspections were interrupted by well

placed artillery fire. Changing enemy order of battle, enemy defenses and tactical movements were quickly observed by intelligently planned patrols. (11)

All the intelligence agencies furnished the answers to the essential elements of information (EEI). Photos were taken, studied and interpreted to determine location of roadblocks, minefields, dummy minefields, artillery and nebelwerfer positions. It was estimated that from December 1944 to 8 March 1945, Fortress Bitche was protected by approximately 30 to 40 batteries of AA ranging from light to the heaviest calibers. Photo cover missions were flown in search of enemy rear installations, supply routes, reserves and concentration areas. Results obtained were published in periodic reports and plotted on the defensive map. Approximately 200 different photos were received daily by the 100th Infantry Division G-2 section. (12)

The fact that the local population had labored on the fortifications for both the Germans and the French, moved the planners to seek their cooperation, concerning the fortifications, movements and intentions. Many of them had close contact with the Bitche residents and could aid in clandestine operations. The 100th Division MII Team, closely operating with the CIC, OSS and Civil Affairs, approached the problem methodically. The information needed was classified and each prospective civilian would be interviewed under the classification that suited his background. Basically two main cate-

(11) A-5, p. 1

(12) A-5, p. 3

gories of information were established: (1) verifying and supplementing the known facts of Fortress Bitche. The armament, nature of turrets, fixed pillbox type or disappearing, angles of fire and the construction details provided the subheadings of this category.

(2) Category 2 was information dealing with the present condition of the weapons, the state of use and repair of the Diesel engines within the forts, the amount of Diesel oil being used, the amount of Diesel oil storage, supply routes, amount of food supply and ammunition, the number of troops, the systems of communication between the forts, the storage of bombs and demolitions; and other recent changes since French occupation. Periodically the above unearthed facts were reported to interested agencies within the Division. Division Engineers were supplied with specific construction details from former French engineers and laborers, which proved invaluable in destroying some installations. For example, it was learned that it was not necessary to destroy a whole system of underground tunnels and that a well placed charge in a ventilator or a single connecting tunnel, was sufficient to render machinery useless or an underground installation impotent. (13)

THE 100TH INFANTRY DIVISION PLAN OF ATTACK

In accordance with XV Corps plan, the 100th Infantry Division planned to attack at 0500, 15 March 1945, and seize the highground to the west and northwest of Bitche, from the present front-line positions with the three infantry regiments abreast-the 399th Infantry on the

(13) A-5, p. 3

right (south) flank, the 398th Infantry in the center, and the 397th Infantry on the left (northwest) flank. One company of tanks of the 781st Tank Battalion, one company of the 191st Tank Destroyers and one company of the 83rd 4.2 Chemical Mortar Bn; were attached to each regiment. The 399th Infantry was to protect the right (south) flank and the 397th Infantry was to protect the left (northwest) flank of the Division. (See Map C)

The Division Artillery was assigned normal support, except that the 250th FA Bn was grouped with the 374th FA Bn in direct support of the 398th Infantry. Priority of fires was given to the 398th Infantry. The 781st Tk Bn (less the three medium companies attached to the assaulting regiments) and the 100th Reconnaissance Troop were in Division Reserve.

The main effort was to be made by the 398th Infantry in the center. The attack was to be launched without artillery support in order to secure surprise, but an elaborate plan of prearranged fires was to be carried by each forward observer so that he could call immediately for concentrations on any defenses that should hamper the progress of the infantry. The air OP's were to be sent aloft at 0500 to locate gun flashes of either enemy battery positions or forts that opened up on the assaulting troops; and an antiaircraft searchlight was used as an orienting point for these plains during the remaining hour of darkness. (14)

(14) A-1, p. 38

MOVEMENT TO THE LD AND FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

Prior to H-hour on the 15th of March 1945, the three Infantry Regiments were moved to their respective lines of departure: the 397th from HOTTVILLER, the 398th from HOLBACH and the 399th from SIGNALBERG Hill. (See Map C)

The Divisions making the main effort in the XV Corps sector were to jump off at 0100 and at the prescribed time an intense counterbattery program was fired by the Corps Artillery, fired chiefly at known battery locations in front of the main effort, or at batteries that could interfere in the main attack. But the 100th Division's artillery fired only normal night missions, mainly road-runners, prior to H-hour which had been set for 0500. (15)

NARRATION

THE FIRST DAY OF THE ATTACK

All regiments jumped off as scheduled. The artillery air OP's did not locate any flashes from either batteries or the guns in the forts until some time after the attack was launched.

The 399th Infantry with its attached tanks, quickly cleared the REYERSVILLER Ridge. This action sealed off a considerable body of the enemy that was south of REYERSVILLER Ridge, but they successfully withdrew through the woods to the east in the direction of Camp de Bitche. The Regiment was on its assigned objective-REYERSVILLER Ridge-early in the attack and reorganized between REYERSVILLER and SCHOENBERG, where it remained for the night.

(15) A-1, p. 38

The 398th Infantry, in the Division center, attacked in column of battalions, 2d, 1st, 3rd. The 2d Bn attacked FREUDENBERG FARM from near LEGERET, but ran into enemy small arms fire and minefields and was slowed down. The 1st Bn was ordered to bypass this resistance, which was successfully accomplished, then captured the hill north of SCHLESSECK and continued east and took the highground southeast of SCHORBACH. The 2d Bn, having resumed the attack, was able to capture FREUDENBERG FARM and by the end of the day had taken Fort FREUDENBERG and Fort SCHLESSECK. Thus before the end of the first day the 398th Infantry was in position of the highground overlooking Bitche from the northwest and had cleared 3 of the surrounding forts. (See Map C)

The 397th Infantry on the left (north) flank attacked as scheduled, with the 1st Bn in the assault, 2d and 3rd Bns in reserve. The 1st Bn attacked directly east toward SCHORBACH and without encountering too much resistance promptly got loose, cleared the highground north and west of SCHORBACH and then occupied the village itself, after overrunning the enemy's mortar and rocket firing positions in the area, thereby taking a pressure of the 398th Infantry. The 397th Infantry made a penetration of 6,000 to 7,000 meters in direction north and east, and got to its final objective by mid-afternoon. It is believed that the rapid envelopment caused the entire fortified area to fall like a ripe fruit because its action eliminated all of the fires of the supporting weapons. During this rapid advance, this regiment captured

the remnants of a regiment of Nebelwerfers (rocket launchers) and many mortars.

By the end of the day all three regiments were on their assigned objective and the 100th Infantry Division was in possession of the dominating ground overlooking the final objective; from SCHORBACH on the northwest to REYERSVILLER Ridge in the south and southwest. The supporting artillery was displaced and registered for the next day's operation, namely, the reduction of BITCHE and CAMP de BITCHE. (16) (See Map C)

THE SECOND DAY OF THE ATTACK

The night of the 15th passed without any incident and the attack was resumed at 0600, 16 March.

To the south, the 399th Infantry left the 3d Bn east of REYERSVILLER Ridge (at SCHOENBERG) so as to protect the Division's right (south) flank, and attacked with the 1st Bn astride the LEMBERG-BITCHE Highway towards Bitche. The 2d Bn remained in reserve. The attack of the 1st Bn was almost unopposed and promptly entered Bitche from the south and after clearing its part of the town continued its advance to the east towards CAMP de BITCHE.

The 398th Infantry in the Division center, attacked from Fort SCHIESSECK, entered BITCHE from the northwest, quickly cleared its portion of the town and the few remaining snipers in the vicinity of the CITADEL, reduced Fort RAMSTEIN and Fort GRAND OTTERBIEL (which surrendered after a couple of direct hits from a 155 mm selfpropelled) and proceeded to the east to the left of the 399th

(16) A-1 , pp. 38-39

Infantry, which was advancing along the BITCHE-STRASBOURG Highway. (See Map C)

The 397th Infantry, because of its spectacular advance the first day, took the main effort. Advancing from SCHORBACH in column of battalions, seized the ~~x~~ crossroads where the road east from SCHORBACH joins the road from Bitche to BREIDENBACH and HANVILLER, thus sealing the enemy escape routes to the north. Then occupied all the highground immediately to the north of this crossroads and according to its mission, took the necessary positions to protect the Division left (north) flank. (See Map C)

CAMP DE BITCHE was an old pre-war French garrison with facilities for a Division of troops. "The construction was mostly of stone and brick, with basements in almost all of the buildings. The post itself had been occupied all winter by the Germans and had been pretty well demolished by Allies air bombardment". (17)

"Upon approaching Camp de Bitche the 398th and the 399th Infantry Regiments had a sharp fire-fight and the task of cleaning the post of Germans was a little show. The enemy had augmented its natural defensive strength with earth bunkers and pillboxes, which were reduced by direct fire weapons from the accompanying tanks."

"Several enemy tanks and self-propelled guns were either captured or destroyed in this action." Numerous prisoners, including the Bn Commander of the 225th VG Regiment, 4 officers of his staff and more than 70 NCO's and

(17) A-1, p. 40

enlisted men, were captured in Camp de Bitche.

After taking Camp de Bitche, Fort HOEKIRKEL, approximately 1500 meters from the Camp, was secured in order to hold Camp de Bitche. OK

By 1700, 16 March 1945, all assigned objectives had been taken by the 100th Infantry Division. The 398th Infantry was left to garrison Bitche and Camp de Bitche. The 397th and the 399th Infantry abreast, were ordered to continue moving rapidly to the north. OK

The next day, 17 March 1945, the 397th and 399th Infantry continued their advance to the north while the 398th Infantry remained in Bitche and Camp de Bitche protecting the rear and right flank. The 397th and 399th Infantry reached the main Siegfried Line and halted and held their positions according to XV Corps plan, which called for the 100th Infantry Division to follow the 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions who were to breach the Siegfried Line.

// This brought the Bitche operation to a successful close. The 71st Infantry Division took over the Bitche area and the 100th Infantry Division assembled and on 22 March 1945 began its advance to the RHINE. D. 21

// The attack was a march through long prepared-and well known-minefields, the overrunning of weakly defended forts, many out of commission, and the beating down of small local counterattacks. The enemy was surprised by all the actions (of the 100th Infantry Division.) All captured officers indicated

ignorance of (the ^{our} attacker's) intentions and amazement at the thoroughness of (the ^{our}) knowledge of their situation. From 0500 on 15 March to 2400 on 16 March, a total of 293 PW's were taken. The 100th Division casualties during this operation are considered as very low according to the type of mission. (18)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. PRIOR PLANNING

Anal

The plans for the reduction of Fortress Bitche were made by the staff of the 100th Infantry Division several months before the mission was actually assigned by higher headquarters. While still fighting in the VOSGES Mountains the staff was thinking and planning ahead and they understood that the Division was to be employed somewhere along the Maginot Line. On 17 December 1944 when the first order to capture Bitche was received, the Division was prepared for the job and they were doing pretty well when ordered to assume a defensive mission on the 21st of December 1944 due to the Ardennes offensive. During the whole defensive period from 21 December to 13 March, the plans were kept to date and when again the mission was given to assault the fortress, the Division was prepared for the job and no hasty plans were to be undertaken.

2. INTELLIGENCE

Anal

It can be concluded that the success of this operation was greatly due to the thorough knowledge of the enemy situation. The 100th Infantry Division

(18) A-1, p. 6

Intelligence Officer made the best use not only of the organic intelligence agencies, but also of those of higher and adjacent units and of Allied Armies. The data supplied by the French Army regarding the fortifications of the Maginot Line, technical plans, lines of communications, fields of fire and other details, used in conjunction with those supplied by the Third Army, plus the information furnished by the subversive agents and the reconnaissance patrols; gave the Intelligence Officer the real picture of the enemy situation in the Bitche area. The information was disseminated timely to subordinate units. The technical services received the necessary information regarding the different obstacles to be overcome and they designed the way to overcome the same, prior to the attack. The best example is that of the Division Engineers: they learned that it was not necessary to destroy a whole system of underground tunnels (an impossible task in many ways) but that a well placed charge in a ventilator or a single connecting tunnel was sufficient to render machinery useless or an underground installation impotent.

3. COORDINATION

Throughout the entire operation, the attack was coordinated by all elements of the Division. In the first place the attack was to be made without artillery preparation, but to each forward observer was given an elaborate plan of prearranged fires, so that he could call immediately for concentrations on any defenses

that should hamper the progress of the infantry. The attack by the three Infantry Regiments was coordinated through the entire operation. The first day they secured the highground dominating the fortress from the north, west and southwest, and they halted and regrouped, displaced the supporting artillery forward. The second day, from their vantage points, they moved for the kill; first the escape routes were sealed and then one after another the forts were reduced as well as Bitche and Camp de Bitche. And through this rapid advance, the Division secured its exposed flanks.

4. SURPRISE

In some cases a Commander is given a free hand to make his attack with or without artillery preparation as well as the time of the attack. In this operation General Burress had that choice. The Divisions making the main effort in the XV Corps sector, the 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions, were to jump off at 0100, 15 March, and an intense counterbattery program was fired by Corps Artillery commencing at 0100. By 0500 the enemy was highly occupied when the 100th Infantry Division was ordered to attack. The Germans were taken completely by surprise and out of balance, thus enabling the attackers to gain the momentum that was to take them into the heart of Germany.

5. SIMPLICITY

The Division plan of attack was simple and without unnecessary details. To each of the three assaulting

regiments was given a clear mission since the start of the attack until it was successfully completed.

6. THE DIRECTION OF THE ATTACK

Paul

By prior experience the Division Commander knew that in order to capture Bitche and the Camp, it was necessary first to secure the highgrounds to the north, northwest and southwest. With that in mind, he moved the Division to an area west of those dominating terrain features, from where they could be attacked simultaneously. The 397 was to secure SCHORBACH, the 398th the ridge around SCHIESSECK and the 399th, REYERSVILLER Ridge. Attacking simultaneously these dominating features which were mutually supporting, the enemy was unable to concentrate his fires in a single point of attack. The capture of any of these objective would enable the Division to mass its supporting fires in any point of the final objective and cut its routes of escape or reinforcement. The three regiments accomplished their assigned missions the first day of the attack and before dark the fate of the fortress was sealed and thereafter the enemy was unable to present a coordinated stand.

7. FLEXIBILITY OF PLANS

It was demonstrated in this operation that plans should be flexible enough to allow the commanders to change their courses of action according to the situation encountered. Although the 398th Infantry was to make the main effort, when this Regiment was slowed down

on account of the numerous obstacles encountered and it became evident that the 397th to the left (north) was making unexpected progress, the latter was pushed forward and in an advance of from 6,000 to 7,000 meters eliminated the pressure that had slowed the center regiment-the 398th-allowing it to resume the initiative.

LESSONS

1. Planning is a continuous process and the Commander and his staff must always be planning for subsequent operations during the conduct of current operations.
 2. A well planned intelligence estimate can positively ease the tactical situation.
 3. A coordinated attack avoids confusion and facilitates the job of supporting services.
 4. An attack with artillery preparation will certainly smooth the objective and serves its intention of demoralizing the enemy, but at the same time warns the enemy of the impending attack; and commanders should analyze both alternatives before launching an attack.
 5. Plans should be as simple and direct as the attainment of the objective will permit.
 6. Mutually supporting positions should be attacked simultaneously so as to prevent the enemy from massing his fires against a single point of the attack.
 7. Plans should be flexible enough to allow the commanders to change their courses of action according to the situation encountered.
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