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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 117TH INFANTRY REGIMENT
(30TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE BREACHING OF
THE SIEGFRIED LINE IN THE VICINITY OF ALSDORF,
GERMANY, 2-8 OCTOBER 1944
(Personal Experience of a Regimental Adjutant)

Type of operation described, INFANTRY ATTACK OF A
FORTIFIED POSITION

Captain Lester D. Royalty, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 1

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**OPERATIONS OF THE 117TH INFANTRY REGIMENT
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INTRODUCTION

After World War I many military men were thinking mainly in terms of the defense. Certain European countries constructed defensive works along their frontiers heretofore unparalleled in military history. One such defensive system was the Siegfried Line, constructed in 1939 and 1940, extending from Kleve on the Dutch frontier to Lorrach on the Swiss border. (1) This German West Wall was approximately 350 miles in length, extending from 8 to 20 miles in depth, and contained more than 22,000 separate works. (2) It was built on the principal of increasing the defensive strength of the terrain, and consisted mainly of elaborate concrete pillboxes and anti-tank barriers. The Germans had not yet learned the "hedgehog" defense, later taught them by the Russians, and intended that their fortifications soften the attacker for the launching of strong counterattacks by reserves held behind the line. (3)

It was a portion of this fortified line that the 117th Infantry Regiment faced on the morning of 2 October 1944 with the mission of breaching a gap for the furtherance of the Allied offensive in Europe. Now let us go back to 1942 and summarize the events of World War II that placed the 117th Infantry in this position.

Early in 1942 the Allied strategic planners reached a general agreement to the effect that the final blow against Germany must be delivered across the English Channel and eastward across the plains of Western Europe. Originally the cross-channel operation was set for the summer of 1943, but after prolonged discussion and study it was deter-

(1) A-6, p. 4; (2) A-6, p. 10; (3) A-6, p. 4.

mined that the build-up for this operation could not be completed by that time. Still it was evident that something must be done to lessen the pressure on the Soviet Army, so the decision was made to assault North Africa. This operation would divert some German pressure from the eastern front, would improve the critical situation in the Middle East, and furthermore, was the only operation that could be undertaken by the Allies in 1942 that had a fair prospect of success. (4)

In November of 1942 the United States and Great Britain had launched the operation which drove the Axis Armies out of all North Africa. At the Casablanca conference in January of 1943 the Combined Chiefs of Staff directed that detailed plans be made for the Allied invasion of West Europe. (5) However, since Axis control of the Mediterranean Sea denied the Allies this source of communications and forced their shipping into a 12,000 mile detour around the Cape of Good Hope, the Allies launched the attack against Sicily in July 1943. This was followed by a landing in Italy in September of 1943. (6) By the end of September Sicily had fallen, the Italians had surrendered, and the Allies were fighting the Germans on the Italian mainland. (7)

The stage was now set for the cross-channel operation into Western Europe to strike at the heart of the German homeland. The build-up for this operation was one of the most tremendous logistical undertakings in military history. (8)

The campaign in Western Europe was launched 6 June 1944 against the Cotentin Peninsula. (9) After approximately two months of bitter "hedgerow" fighting the Allies broke out of Normandy and began a rapid pursuit of the disorganized German Army across France, Luxemburg, Belgium and Holland. On 15 August 1944 another Allied Army had landed on the southern coast of France and advanced rapidly northward. (10) By the latter part of September the Allied drive had reached the Siegfried Line

(4) A-9, p. 153, 154, 155; (5) A-10, p. 1; (6) A-9, pp. 156, 159, 164; (7) A-9, p. 163, 164; (8) A-9, p. 156; (9) A-10, p. 35; (10) A-10, p. 35.

in the north and the Moselle River in the south. (See Map A) Here it lost its impetus, mainly for lack of logistical support. (11) Administrative plans had been predicated on a slow offensive rather than a pursuit, and the speed of the advance consumed operational reserves and strained transportation facilities to the breaking point. (12)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces had selected the Aachen plain for the main thrust into Germany. This sector afforded favorable terrain for the attack, and was a short route into the vital industrial Ruhr area. (13) First United States Army gave XIX Corps, of which the 30th Infantry Division was a part, the mission of breaching the Siegfried Line and advancing to secure a bridgehead across the Rhine River in the Cologne-Dusseldorf area. The area selected for the initial assault was the Palenburg section in the 30th Division zone. (14) (See Map B). This selection had been made before the leading troops had reached the German border. (15)

The mission assigned the 30th Infantry Division was twofold. First, it was to make a breakthrough of the Siegfried Line; and second, it was to then swing south toward Aachen to relieve pressure on VII Corps troops that were engaged in a bitter fight for that city. (16) The Germans were determined to hold the city of Aachen. A communications and industrial center, it was the first large German city threatened with capture by the Allies. (17)

The 30th Infantry Division's plan was to attack on a narrow front with two regiments abreast; the 117th Infantry on the left and the 119th on the right. After getting through the pillbox area both regiments were to swing south to take in flank the more difficult positions of the Siegfried line, and to link with the 1st Infantry Division of VII Corps to

(11) A-10, p. 53; (12) A-10, pp. 35, 51; (13) A-10, pp. 42-44; (14) A-4, p. 9; (15) A-7, p. 107; (16) A-7, p. 107; (17) A-7, p. 105.

encircle Aachen. The 120th Infantry was to initially hold on the division south flank, and be prepared to attack eastward or to come through the gap to join in the assault to the south. The 2d Armored Division was to follow through the gap as soon as possible, and drive to the north and east. (18)

Attached to the 30th Infantry Division for this operation were:

- One medium field artillery battalion
- Two light field artillery battalions
- One 4.2" Chemical mortar battalion
- One tank destroyer battalion
- One medium tank battalion.

In direct support of the division were:

- Three medium artillery battalions
- One engineer group.

In addition, VII Corps artillery was to participate in the preparatory fires and IX Tactical Air Command was to deliver an air strike. The air strike was to be made by nine groups (324 planes) of medium bombers, and two groups (72 planes) of fighter-bombers, to: (a) effect a saturation bombing of the breakthrough area; (b) knock out pillboxes immediately facing the assault regiments; and (c) knock out all reserves which could be used for immediate counterattack. (19)

REGIMENTAL SITUATION

The 117th Infantry Regiment had crossed the German border on 19 September 1944, and contacted the Siegfried Line near the village of Palenberg. The Regiment had traveled more than 500 road miles since landing in Normandy, fighting, marching, and riding when vehicles and gasoline were available. The men were weary and supplies were short. Nevertheless orders were received on the night of 19 September that called for an attack on the Siegfried Line the next morning. The attack was later postponed by higher headquarters because air was not available to support the attack, a critical shortage of artillery ammunition existed, and there was a fear of overextension. (20)

The postponement of the attack gave the 117th Infantry an opportunity

(18) A-7, pp. 102, 103; (19) A-6, p. 102; A-5, p. 120; A-9, p. 121
(20) A-2, p. 39; A-7, pp. 78, 108.

for detailed planning and special training of assault teams. For the next two weeks there was little activity along the Regimental front other than patrolling and the occasional exchange of fire. It is interesting to note that initially friendly patrols found many of the pillboxes in the Regimental sector unoccupied. Thus, this necessary delay not only gave the 117th Infantry time to prepare a well planned, coordinated attack, but it also gave the enemy sufficient time to bring in troops to man all pillboxes and to further strengthen his defensive position.

(21)

The Siegfried Line in the 117th Infantry's sector made full use of the existing terrain. (See Map C). The enemy had excellent observation over the open ground an attacker would have to cross, and had situated his main defensive position behind a series of natural and artificial obstacles. The attacker would first have to cross approximately 1200 yards of open farmland before the ground dropped rather abruptly and offered about 300 yards of fairly good cover. Beyond this cover was a flat open field extending 250 yards to the Wurm River. The Wurm River, although only 20 to 30 feet wide was a formidable obstacle. The water was 4 to 5 feet deep and the bottom very muddy. Vertical banks extended 2 to 4 feet above the water, and the soil along the banks was soft. The town of Marienberg was situated on the west side of the river, and could be made into a strong point should the enemy so choose. The only bridge in the 117th Infantry's sector had been blown. Once across the river the attacker would have to cross 250 yards of gently rising ground before coming to a high hedge and railroad embankment which would offer some protection from enemy fire from the pillbox area. Beyond the railroad and across a flat open field were the pillboxes, well camouflaged and mutually supporting.

(22) These individual forts were constructed of concrete and steel with walls from 5 to 8 feet thick. Each pillbox contained a number of rooms,

(81) Personal knowledge; (22) A-3, p. 47.

including sleeping quarters, ammunition lockers, and gasproof chambers. They had excellent prepared paths of fire although their fire was limited to 40 or 50 degrees. None of the pillboxes in the 117th Infantry's sector were capable of mounting weapons larger than machine guns. The pillboxes were connected by field-type communication trenches, and numerous firing trenches were positioned throughout the area. (23) Beyond the pillbox area were the towns of Palenberg and Ubach. Other pillboxes were located to the north and south of these towns. A critical terrain feature was a high bluff, containing a cluster of pillboxes, on the north edge of Palenberg. Two slag piles on the east edge of Palenberg gave the enemy excellent observation over the entire area. Other defensive measures included minefields, barbed wire, an anti-tank ditch that extended across part of the sector, and underground communication lines. (24)

Enemy troops in the 117th Infantry's sector were estimated to be two reinforced rifle companies of the 183d German Division. The quality of the troops was relatively poor, consisting of a mixture of old, young and previously wounded soldiers who had been thrown back into the line. A few fanatics were sprinkled through the lot, but for the most part they were willing to surrender after a brief show of resistance. (25)

REGIMENTAL PLAN OF ATTACK

To accomplish the task of penetrating the Siegfried Line, the Regimental Commander's plan called for an attack in column of battalions, from positions in the vicinity of Scherpenseel, eastward to include the capture of Ubach. The 1st battalion, leading the assault, would attack south of the village of Marienberg, force a crossing of the Wurm River and capture the pillboxes in its zone between the railroad and the western edge of Ubach. After gaining this objective, the 1st battalion would take up a defensive position facing south. (26)

Company "E", under regimental control, would attack on the left of the 1st battalion, clear the village of Marienberg, and seize the bridge

(23) A-6, p. 51; (24) A-6, Accompanying Map; A-8, p. 23; (25) A-8, p. 52;
(26) Interview with Col. W. M. JARRETT, G-3, 127th Inf., 17 November, 1948.

site across the Wurm River between Palenberg and Marienberg. (27)

Second Battalion (-) would move through the gap made in the pillbox belt by the 1st Battalion, swing northward, clear the town of Palenberg, seize the high ground on the north edge of the town, and the slag pile area on the northeast edge. (28)

Third Battalion would render all possible fire support to the leading Battalions, follow the 2d Battalion through the gap created by the 1st Battalion, and attack eastward and capture the town of Ubach. After the bridgehead was secured the 3d Battalion, along with the 1st Battalion, ~~would be prepared to attack southward toward the city of Alesdorf.~~ (29)

Company "A", 743 Tank Battalion was attached to the 117th Infantry for this operation. It would follow closely behind the 1st Battalion to the Wurm River, cross the river using an improvised bridge, and assist the infantry in assaulting the pillboxes. The bridge to be used in crossing the river was constructed of culverts reinforced with logs. It would be pulled on a sled to the river bank by a tank. A tank dozer would push the bridge into the river, and prepare approaches to permit the passage of the tanks. (30)

Company "C", 803d Tank Destroyer Battalion, in direct support, would initially support the attack from the west side of the river, cross the river as soon as a bridge was completed, and join the assaulting infantry units. (31)

Company "A", 105 Engineer Combat Battalion, in direct support, would provide demolition crews to the assaulting infantry units, portable bridges which the infantry units could carry to the river, place in position and walk across; and provide assault materials such as flamethrowers, pole-charges, and satchel charges. They would also clear mines and obstacles, and destroy captured enemy pillboxes. Another engineer unit would construct the necessary bridges across the river. (32)

(27)(28)(29) Statement by Col. W. M. Johnson, then Commander 117th Infantry, 17 November 1948; (30) A-5, p. 17; (31) Statement by Col. W. M. Johnson, then Commander 117th Infantry, 17 November, 1948; (32) A-5, pp. 176, 178.

A detailed coordinated fireplan was prepared to support the attack. An air strike was scheduled for H-120. A preponderance of prearranged artillery fires were planned, and made known to all commanders. 4.2" mortars were given the mission of destroying the known barbed wire in the zone of attack, and a further mission of providing a rolling barrage in front of the assault units. All organic mortars were included in the overall fireplan. The supporting fires would not only neutralize the area under attack, but would also place a wall of fire around the area to prevent the movement of enemy reserves. For several days prior to the attack, tank destroyers and 155 mm guns would deliver direct fire, from short ranges, on the known pillboxes in an effort to knock them out and remove camouflage.

(33) In addition, 57 mm anti-tank guns, 50 caliber machine guns, and heavy machine guns would deliver direct fire at pillbox embrasures to permit the assaulting infantry to move forward in the attack. (34)

The line of departure was a north-south trail between Marienberg and Scherpenseel. It was 2400 yards from the line of departure to the pillbox area. Plans called for the leading elements to cross this area at a rapid pace, "between a fast walk and a dog trot". (35) Success to a great extent would depend upon the assault detachments, closing with the pillboxes, before the full weight of the enemy defensive strength could be brought to bear. (36)

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

After the attack, initially scheduled for 20 September 1944, was postponed the 117th Infantry had ample time for detailed preparations for the thrust that was launched on 2 October 1944. During the interim period, the Regiment was holding a defensive position around the village of Scherpenseel. Preparations made for the attack may be divided into three phases:

(33) A-6, p. 18; (34) Statement by Col. W. M. Johnson, then Commander 117th Infantry, 17 November 1944; (35) A-6, p. 27, 40; (36) statement by Col. W. M. Johnson, then Commander 117th Infantry, 17 November, 1944.

1. Obtaining all possible information on the enemy defensive position.
2. Training of assault units.
3. Detailed orientation of all personnel on the plan of attack.

The first phase, that of obtaining enemy information, began when the Regiment first came into contact with the Siegfried Line, and continued until the attack was launched. Maps and photographs were furnished by higher headquarters that showed the location of approximately 90% of the pillboxes in the area. (37) Division Liaison planes were used by commanders and staff officers for aerial reconnaissance. Most of the information of immediate concern to the Regiment was obtained by patrols that were dispatched almost nightly to probe the enemy positions. Patrols explored the Wurm River and determined the best crossing site. They located a gap through what was believed to be an impassable hedge. They also located barbed wire, minefields, enemy weapons emplacements, and other bits of information that when pieced together gave a clearer picture of the enemy defensive position. (38)

The second phase, the training of assault troops, was carried on throughout the waiting period, even though the Battalions were in line most of the time. Using a rotation system, each Battalion was given a two day training period in a rear area. Assisted by divisional engineers, this training included the use of demolitions, flamethrowers, and rocket launchers as well as practice firing of individual and crew served weapons. Training was provided in the attacking of pillboxes, and in the crossing of a stream similar to the Wurm River. Improvised footbridges, called "duckboards", were devised that could be carried by one man and placed across a narrow stream. (39) Each attacking platoon was divided into an assault detachment and a support element. The assault detachment, consisted of

(37) A-6, p. 9; (38) A-2, p. 44; (39) A-6, p. 9.

16 men equipped with flamethrowers, pole charges, rocket launchers and grenades. They would also carry the "duckboards" for crossing the river. The support element was equipped with extra automatic rifles for added firepower. (40) Company "A", 105th Engineer Combat Battalion furnished a three man demolition crew that would accompany each assaulting platoon. (41) Training was conducted so as to familiarize all personnel with the special tools for use against fortifications, so that if the person carrying the special weapon became a casualty any of the other men in the team could pick it up and continue its operation. (42) Tanks and tank destroyers also participated in the special training exercises. (43)

The third phase, the orientation of personnel, was conducted in detail for all units taking part in the attack. By means of elaborately constructed sandtables, aerial photographs, maps, and direct observation over the terrain, each individual was told and shown exactly where he was to go and what he was to accomplish. (44)

THE ATTACK ON THE SIEGFRIED LINE

2 October 1944

The air strike scheduled to precede the infantry attack and intended to saturate the breakthrough area, knock out pillboxes, and neutralize enemy reserves began at 0900 on 2 October 1944. The sky was partly overcast at the target area, and the nine groups of medium bombers approached the target from the west, whereas the plans called for their bomb run to be made from the southwest. Few of the bombs landed in the target area. Two groups that came in late did hit the town of Palenberg after it had been marked by red smoke by the supporting artillery. The two groups of fighter-bombers dropped gasoline "jelly" bombs in the vicinity of the pillbox area after it was marked by red smoke by the artillery.

(40) A-3, p. 46; (41) A-5, p. 176; (42) A-4, p. 112; (43) A-4, p. 111;
(44) Personal knowledge; Statement by Col. W. M. Johnson, then Commander 117th Infantry, 17 November, 1948.

None of the fortifications in the 117th Infantry zone were hit by the bombing, and almost all ground observers agreed that the air strike had little effect. (45)

Following the air bombardment, the artillery and other supporting weapons began delivering pre-planned fires. A large volume of fire was initially placed on the river bank and pillbox area to soften the enemy position, and to keep him down while the infantry advanced to assault positions. Concentrations were placed on crossroads and other likely avenues the enemy might use to reinforce the area to be attacked. The 4.2" mortars quickly blew gaps in the barbed wire in the zone of attack, and began an effective rolling barrage 150 yards ahead of the assault companies. (46)

The 1st Battalion, spearheading the attack as planned, crossed the line of departure at 1100 with Companies "B" and "C" abreast. Company "A", in support, was initially held in the shelter of Scherpenseel to escape the enemy artillery and mortar fire that was usually prevalent behind the leading companies. (47) A platoon of heavy machine guns was attached to Company "B" and one to Company "C". The 81 mm Mortar Platoon fired in battery to support the two assaulting rifle companies. (48)

Both Companies "B" and "C" moved rapidly forward over the 1500 yards of flat, open beet fields southwest of Marienberg under the protection of the supporting fires. In some instances they moved so rapidly that their own supporting fires fell dangerously close, but no casualties resulted. These infantrymen had previously learned that a speedy advance, close behind supporting fires would, in the long run, result in fewer casualties. A pillbox, located on the west edge of Marienberg, was occupied

(45) A-6, pp. 12, 25; (46) A-6, pp. 12, 39, 64; (47) A-6, pp. 38, 39;
(48) A-3, p. 191.

by a lone German rifleman who was killed after firing a few rounds at Company "B". The assaulting Companies began receiving enemy mortar and artillery fire after advancing to a position south of Marienberg, 300 yards west of the Wurm River, where the ground began dropping off to the narrow river valley. (49)

The receipt of enemy artillery and mortar fire only resulted in additional speed in the advance of Company "B", attacking on the left in the Battalion zone. The leading elements of the company left the wooded draw south of Marienberg and moved rapidly forward to cover the remaining 250 yards of flat, open ground west of the Wurm River. Some barbed wire was encountered, but it was quickly cut and the advance continued. Upon nearing the river bank, the friendly mortar fire that had been pounding that area shifted to the pillboxes. The support platoon, weapons platoon, and heavy machine gun platoon went into positions in the vicinity of the woods west of the river to support the crossing. Upon reaching the river, the "duckboards", were placed in position by the leading platoons. Due to increasing enemy fire many of the men did not bother to cross the bridges, but preferred to jump into the river and wade across. (50)

After crossing the river the two attacking platoons captured eleven enemy prisoners that had been positioned in open emplacements near the river bank. Both platoons then rushed across the 250 yards of gently rising ground to the relative safety of the railroad embankment. They reached this position only 45 minutes after crossing the line of departure, and after having covered over 2000 yards at a rapid pace, carrying extra loads. Just beyond the railroad embankment were the pillboxes. While the supporting machine guns were displacing forward, final preparations for the assault on the pillboxes were made. The support element of each platoon was placed in position to cover the movement of the assault detachment by firing on embrasures of pillboxes (49) A-5, p. 39; (50) A-6, p. 39; A-2, pp. 51-53.

and other likely targets. The assault detachments then moved forward under cover of these supporting fires, and neutralized the pillboxes one at a time by the use of flamethrowers, pole charges, satchel charges, rocket launchers, and grenades. Little enemy fire was delivered at the assault detachments from the pillboxes, so well were the embrasures covered by the support elements. The two leading platoons captured a total of seven pillboxes in less than two hours, three of which had been assigned to the Company attacking on the right. In the meantime the support platoon had moved to the left of the Company sector and captured one pillbox. This gave the company a total of eight pillboxes for the day's fighting. The Company suffered only three men killed and twenty-six wounded. (51) The 1st Battalion Commander later stated that he believed the successful attack by Company "B" was largely due to the element of surprise which was obtained by the sheer aggressiveness of the attack and the speedy crossing of the Wurm River. (52)

Company "C", attacking on the right, was not as successful as Company "B". It had a more exposed route of approach and received severe enemy artillery and mortar fire. Before reaching the river a heavy toll in casualties had been taken, and the Company had become disorganized. Only a few men succeeded in reaching the river. The "duckboards" that were placed across the river were promptly knocked out by enemy fire. Upon reaching the railroad embankment one of the leading platoons had only twelve men, and the other leading platoon had fifteen men. The assault detachments of both platoons had been lost. When the Battalion Commander learned of this situation he instructed Company "C" to hold in place, and ordered Company "A" to take over the mission of Company "C". (53) In the short period of one hour, Company "C" had suffered a total of 87 casualties. (54)

(51) A-6, p. 39; A-2, pp. 56-63; (52) A-6, p. 38; (53) A-2, p. 64;
(54) A-6, p. 39.

Company "A", initially following the route used by Company "B", moved forward rapidly to take over the mission of Company "C". By 1225 it was on line and continuing the attack. Little difficulty was experienced in capturing the objective since Company "B" had already moved into this area and reduced three of the pillboxes. This left only one to be captured by Company "A". (55)

The 81 mm Mortar Platoon of Company "D" fired in continuous support throughout the attack. This platoon fired 1425 rounds during the day, initially from positions in the vicinity of Scherpenseel and later from Marienberg. (56)

By nightfall the 1st Battalion had a firm hold on its objective, and had prepared defensive positions facing southward in anticipation of the enemy counterattack. A minor counterattack, by an estimated enemy force of two tanks and twenty infantrymen, was launched against Company "A" during the night and successfully repulsed. (57) Later information gained from German prisoners revealed that this was intended to be a battalion-strength counterattack, but the German Commander had refused to continue it through the great volume of American artillery fire directed at his troops. (58)

To give a clearer picture of the actual method used in reducing the pillboxes, the following is the technique employed by the First Platoon of Company "B" in capturing one of the pillboxes in the 1st Battalion sector:

The support elements were placed in position to deliver rifle and automatic weapons fire on the embrasures of the pillbox to be attacked, and those pillboxes in position to support it. The support elements were also alert for enemy outside the pillboxes. Under cover of the supporting fires three men, Sgt.

(55) A-3, pp. 40-51; (56) A-3, p. 61; (57) A-6, p. 40; A-2, p. 51;
(58) A-7, p. 117;

Radzio, Pvt. Polansky, and Pvt. Jandreau, of the assault detachment crawled forward to the pillbox from the blind side. Polansky and Radzio threw grenades through an embrasure while Jandreau started for the rear door with a satchel charge. Two additional men, Cpl. Curtis and Sgt. Burke, armed with smoke and hand grenades rushed forward to the pillbox. Polansky climbed on top of the pillbox and threw a grenade down the ventilator. Meanwhile Pvt. Youenes and Pvt. Smith arrived with the flamethrower, and gave the front embrasure a long burst of flame. Jandreau then threw the satchel charge through the partly open rear door of the pillbox. The flamethrower crew moved around the pillbox to give another embrasure a burst just as a German officer lunged from the rear door of the pillbox. The German officer killed Smith with three shots from his pistol and started running for another pillbox, but the supporting elements brought him down before he had gone far. With little additional persuasion the six remaining Germans in the pillbox surrendered. (59)

Company "E", under regimental control, advanced on the left of the 1st Battalion with the mission of clearing Marienberg, and securing the bridge site on the Wurm River leading to Palenberg. The bridge site was approximately 400 yards north of the 1st Battalion crossing. Company "E" began receiving heavy mortar and artillery fire after advancing to within 400 yards of Marienberg. Continuing to push forward, they came under small-arms fire from houses on the west edge of the town. Only after considerable fighting, was the enemy cleared from the town. The first platoon then took positions along the eastern edge of Marienberg, north of the Palenberg-Marienberg road, to cover the two pillboxes on the western edge of Palenberg which overlooked the bridge site. The second and third platoons crossed the Wurm River south of the bridge

(59) A-3, pp. 60, 61.

site, and attacked the two pillboxes from the flank. The assault platoons received considerable small arms fire from the houses of Palenberg, but succeeded in capturing the pillboxes. The technique used here was to cover the apertures by small arms fire while the assault detachments moved forward and reduced the pillbox by throwing grenades and firing rocket launchers through embrasures. Neither flamethrowers or other special equipment were used by Company "E". The work was accomplished by the use of organic infantry weapons. By 1600 the bridge site was secured, and by 2400 the engineers had completed a vehicular bridge across the river. (60)

Second Battalion (minus) moved forward in the attack at 1430 with Company "F" following the route of Company "B" across the river. Beyond the pillbox area Company "F" turned northward to clear the western portion of Palenberg. The advance through the town was a slow process requiring house to house fighting. This advance materially aided Company "E" in capturing the pillboxes on the west edge of the town. By nightfall, Company "F" had reached the north edge of Palenberg where it took up defensive positions, facing north, at the bottom of the high cliff held by the enemy.

At 1630 Company "G" passed through the 1st Battalion area, cleared the eastern portion of Palenberg, and took up defensive positions for the night on the northeast edge of town. (61)

The 3d Battalion was mainly represented in the first days attack by its 81 mm mortar platoon which fired over 1100 rounds during the day in support of the 1st and 2d Battalions. Just prior to dark, Company "I" was sent across the river and took a defensive position on the right flank of the 1st Battalion. This was necessary because the regiment attacking on the right had been unable to advance, leaving the

(60) 1-2, pp. 68, 69, 70; 1-1, p. 10; (61) 1-2, p. 70.

right flank of the 117th Infantry exposed. (62)

Company "A", 743d Tank Battalion followed the 1st Battalion to the Wurm River. Here the carefully prepared plans for crossing the river failed. The soil along the river bank was so soft the tanks became bogged down, and spent the remainder of the day trying to free themselves while under enemy fire. They crossed the river after dark on a 30-foot treadway bridge that had been constructed by the engineers. (63)

Company "C", 803d Tank Destroyer Battalion rendered effective direct fire support during the attack from positions west of the river. It crossed the river after dark and went into position to protect the penetration from armor attack. (64)

Supporting engineers constructed two treadway bridges in the 117th Infantry sector on the first day of the attack. The first, over which the tanks and tank destroyers crossed, was constructed 300 yards south of the Marienberg-Palenberg road. It was constructed under heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire and received direct hits. Nevertheless, it was ready for traffic by 2000. The second bridge, a 45-foot treadway, was constructed adjacent to the blown bridge on the Marienberg-Palenberg road. This site was constantly subjected to small arms fire from the cliff on the north edge of Palenberg, and the bridge was not completed until 2400. An additional bridge, a 50-foot Bailey, was completed at 1000 the following morning, at the latter site. (65)

At the close of the first day's fighting, the 117th Infantry had penetrated the pillbox area, capturing a total of 11 pillboxes; captured the towns of Marienberg and Palenberg; and had reorganized and consolidated positions to hold the gain against enemy counterattack. During

(62) A-1, p. 11; (63) A-6, p. 40; A-7, p. 117; (64) A-6, p. 17; A-2, p. 70; (65) A-5, p. 179.

the night plans were prepared and orders issued to continue the attack the next morning.

3 October 1944

At 0700, 3 October 1944, the 3d Battalion launched an attack to capture the town of Ubach. (See Map D). The Battalion started receiving extremely heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire at the eastern edge of Palenberg, that continued to pour in throughout the day. Enemy machine gun and rifle fire were also intense, and the enemy yielded the ground only after desperate fighting. At one point in the attack the leading Companies became mixed up, and undue confusion resulted. It was some time before boundaries could be adjusted and the attack continued. By nightfall the Battalion had cleared Ubach and prepared defensive positions for the night around the eastern edge of the town. (66)

Second Battalion, less Company "E", which continued to secure the bridge site, launched an attack at 0700 to gain the high ground north of Palenberg. Company "F" had as its objective the high bluff containing a cluster of pillboxes. The only approach leading to the enemy position was a large draw which the enemy covered with intense fire. After several attempts at gaining the high ground, Company "F" withdrew to its starting position. Company "G" also participated in the 2d Battalion attack, and captured the factory area on the northeast edge of Palenberg after a bitter engagement. (67)

First Battalion continued to occupy the defensive positions south of Palenberg to protect the regiment's right flank. The 119th Infantry, attacking on the right of the 117th Infantry, was making little progress. During the day the adjacent regiment swung a task force through the 117th Infantry's gap, passed through the 1st Battalion's position, and attacked

(66) A-1, p. 11; A-2, pp. 73, 74; (67) A-1, p. 10; A-2, p. 70.

the fortifications in their zone from the north. (68)

At 1330 the Second Armored Division began moving through the 117th Infantry's gap. It was to swing north and northeast after passing through Ubach, and would thus cover the 117th Infantry's left flank. The armored column only added to the confusion that already existed in the 3d Battalion's fight for Ubach. Units became entangled amid the heavy volume of artillery fire delivered on the town by the enemy. Roads and streets were congested with vehicles, and the tempers of commanders ran high. Only after careful coordination between the 3d Battalion Commander and the Armored Task Force Commander was the situation disentangled. (69)

By the end of the second day's fighting, the 117th Infantry had made a deep penetration in the German line, and instructions were issued to all Battalions to strengthen their defensive positions in preparation for an enemy counterattack that was sure to come. First Battalion was in position south of Palenberg to meet an enemy attack from that direction. Companies "F" and "G" of the 2d Battalion were in position around the northern edge of Palenberg to protect the penetration against counterattack from the north. Company "E" remained in position to guard the Palenberg-Marienberg bridge. Third Battalion was deployed around the east and south edge of Ubach. The Armored Task Force was on the north and northeast of Ubach.

4 October 1944

4 October, 1944, was characterized by enemy counterattacks aimed at reducing the penetration. As soon as one counterattack was repulsed another one would develop. Elements of a new German Division were identified during the day. (70) The enemy artillery and mortar fire was even heavier than on the previous day. Not since Normandy had the 117th Infantry experienced such devastating enemy fire.

(68) A-7, p. 118; (69) A-7, pp. 118, 119; (70) A-7, p. 120;

Second Battalion received two strong enemy counterattacks during the day from the direction of the high ground north of Palenberg. During the night of 3-4 October, they had received two minor thrusts that had been repulsed without much difficulty. The first daylight attack came at 0700, following a powerful artillery preparation. It was made by an estimated enemy battalion, and came down the draw that Company "F" had tried to use the previous day. Engineers accompanied this attack, and had the mission of blowing the bridges over the Wurm River. By 1000 the enemy thrust had been repulsed, but only after determined fighting on the part of the 2d Battalion, and effective artillery support. The next counterattack struck the 2d Battalion at 1500, but was soon driven off with the aid of the supporting artillery. (71)

Ubach was the scene of the Germans most determined effort. Starting before daylight the enemy began hitting the 3d Battalion with strong counterattacks that continued throughout the day. The enemy force was estimated at two infantry battalions, and was supported by tanks. The first enemy thrust came from the east and hit Company "L" at 0400. The enemy attack gained the edge of the town before it was finally contained at approximately 0800. The second counterattack came at 1000 straight from the barracks area east of Ubach, and succeeded in entering the edge of the town, and overrunning a platoon of Company "E" before it was stopped. The third and most serious of the counterattacks came at 1500 from the south. This attack succeeded in getting through Company "K's" position, but was finally repulsed with the aid of supporting artillery, and elements of the 2d Armored Division that were in the town.

By nightfall it was evident that the enemy effort to reduce the penetration had failed. The 117th Infantry had regained all positions

(71) A-8, p. 65; A-7, pp. 119, 120.

lost during the day, and began preparations to continue the attack to the south the next morning.

5 October 1944

On the morning of 5 October 1944, the Second Armored Division continued to pass through Ubach, and drive to the north. The 119th Infantry on the right was beginning to advance more rapidly. The 117th Infantry received orders to continue the attack to the south to accomplish the second phase of the 30th Infantry Division's mission, which was to link with the 1st Infantry Division to encircle the city of Aachen. (72)

At 0700 3d Battalion, 117th Infantry, attacked southeast astride the Ubach-Alsiorf road, in coordination with a Battalion of the 119th Infantry, attacking on the right. Company "I" and Company "L" led the attack, and were supported by Company "A", 743d Tank Battalion. Upon leaving the edge of Ubach, the leading elements of the Battalion were again subjected to the powerful enemy artillery and mortar concentrations they had experienced almost constantly since their arrival in the town on 3 October. In addition they were brought under intense enemy small arms fire, delivered over the open fields from well prepared positions in the vicinity of the barracks area and the Ubach. Five tanks of the 743d Tank Battalion were knocked out by enemy anti-tank guns as they moved forward to assist the infantry. One tank destroyer was also knocked out by the enemy anti-tank guns while moving into a position in the edge of Ubach. The infantrymen in the open fields south of the town were in a tight position, and the advance was halted. One platoon of Company "I" was pinned down in an open field practically all day. After considerable artillery fires were put on the enemy strong points, the 3d Battalion fought its way slowly for-

(73) A-7, pp. 120, 121.

ward, and by dark had reached a point several hundred yards short of the hamlet of Zu Ubach. (73)

During the morning the 1st Battalion left its positions south of Palenberg, and moved to positions on the southern edge of Ubach. The battalion experienced great difficulty in moving to their new positions because of the heavy volume of enemy artillery and mortar fire being delivered at the town. (74)

The 3d Battalion remained in Palenberg because of the congested conditions in Ubach, and the quantity of enemy fires being delivered at the town. Company "E" had been returned to battalion control the previous day.

At the end of the day, the 117th Infantry had made little progress against the determined enemy resistance, and had suffered heavy casualties. During the night, a new plan was devised to continue the attack the next morning.

6 October 1944

The 117th Infantry continued the attack southward at 0800 on the morning of 6 October, with the 3d and 1st Battalions attacking abreast. Air strikes and artillery concentrations were placed on the enemy positions that had proven so troublesome on the previous day.

The 3d Battalion continued its attack toward Zu Ubach, supported by tanks, and made rapid progress. The enemy fire was less severe than on the previous day, and excellent tank-infantry teamwork soon led to the neutralization of the barracks area and the capture of Zu Ubach. Approximately fifty prisoners were captured in the town of Zu Ubach, including a battalion command group, complete with maps showing the enemy defensive positions in the area. (75)

(73) A-2, pp. 71, 74. (74) A-3, pp. 52, 53; (75) A-2, p. 75.

The 1st Battalion moved forward at 0800 on the right of the 3d Battalion, but was stopped by enemy artillery concentrations and small arms fire after advancing 1000 yards. The attack was resumed late in the afternoon, and after heavy fighting the 1st Battalion advanced to the road leading southwest from Zu Ubach, and tied in with the 3d Battalion on their left. The day's fighting netted the 1st Battalion 100 enemy prisoners and four pillboxes, which had previously been captured by the 119th Infantry, but later reoccupied by the enemy. (76)

By evening it became apparent that the German positions confronting the 117th Infantry were intractable. (77) Therefore, the 2d Battalion was moved from Palenberg to Ubach, and a power drive attack was planned for the following morning.

7 October 1944

At 0700 on 7 October 1944, the 117th Infantry continued its attack against the somewhat disorganized enemy, with the town of Alsdorf 5000 yards to the southeast, as the objective. (78)

The attack was made with the 3d and 1st Battalions abreast. The 3d Battalion was on the left, astride the main highway leading from Zu Ubach to Alsdorf. Preceded by tanks of the 743d Tank Battalion, both infantry battalions advanced rapidly across the open farmlands, encountering only scattered enemy small arms and artillery fire. There were a large number of German soldiers in prepared positions between Zu Ubach and Alsdorf, but the speed and aggressiveness of the attack overran their positions before they could offer much resistance. The tanks leading the assault placed heavy machine gun and cannon fire on the enemy positions, thus keeping him down. The infantry, following closely behind the tanks, nabbed the Germans in their holes before they could offer effective resistance. The 1st Battalion alone captured over 100 (76) A-3, p. 51; A-3, p. 53; (77) A-7, p. 124; (78) A-7, p. 124.

prisoners using this technique. Third Battalion found 12 artillery observers, with 15 radios, included, in their bag of prisoners for the day. These men had undoubtedly played an important part in the effective enemy artillery fire that had been delivered on the town of Ubach the past few days. (79)

The attack continued to speed forward and by 1000 the 3d Battalion had captured Alsdorf with little difficulty, and taken positions on the southern edge of the town. The 1st Battalion captured the town of Wilhelmschacht, west of Alsdorf, and linked with the 1st Battalion.

(80)

The 2d Battalion, in reserve, had followed the 3d Battalion during the attack with the mission of protecting the regiment's exposed left flank, and mopping up behind the fast moving assault battalions. (81)

By nightfall of the 7th, the 117th Infantry was well established in positions around Alsdorf, but the situation did not look too good. The left flank was wide open to counterattack from the east, and the regiment attacking on the right had lagged far behind. The 117th Infantry's positions stuck out like a "bump on a log". (82)

However, one important contribution had been made to the "big picture". The regiment, in capturing Alsdorf, had cut one of the two main highways running northeast out of Aachen, and thus reduced the Germans ability to reinforce his troops defending that city.

Although in an extremely vulnerable position, the 117th Infantry was ordered to continue the attack the next morning to capture the town of Mariadorf, through which the enemy's one remaining highway to Aachen passed. (83)

8 October 1944

At 0700 on 8 October 1944, the 117th Infantry launched its attack

(79) A-3, p. 51; A-11, p. 52; SYN-000; (80) A-3, p. 53; A-11, pp. 578-585;
(81) Personal knowledge; (82) Statement by Col. W. M. Johnson, then Commander of 117th Infantry, 17 November, 1948; (83) A-7, p. 187.

to capture Mariadorf. The 3d and 1st Battalions again attacking abreast, with the 1st Battalion on the right, advanced through Kol Kellersberg and approached Mariadorf from the west. Enemy fire grew in intensity as the leading companies, supported by tanks, advanced across the open fields toward the town. Well prepared enemy positions along the railroad running between Kol Kellersberg and Mariadorf, and around Mariadorf itself, finally stopped the advance. Enemy fire increased in fury and inflicted heavy casualties on the troops pinned down in the open fields. (84)

While the 1st and 3d Battalions were heavily engaged south of Alsdorf, the enemy launched a strong counterattack at the regiment's left flank, with two battalions of infantry supported by seven tanks and twenty assault guns. This force had arrived in the area from Luxemburg the previous night, and had the mission of recapturing Alsdorf at all costs, and thus reopening that vital supply route to Aachen. (85)

The enemy attack came from the east between Schaufenberg and Mariadorf, and cut in behind the 3d Battalion. The enemy thrust came straight at Alsdorf, which was occupied only by the Regimental Command Post and the Command Posts of the 3d and 1st Battalions. Every available weapon was turned on the enemy attack as it crossed the open fields toward the town. The full weight of the attack was finally broken by supporting artillery, and by anti-tank guns that knocked out three enemy assault guns. However, small groups of enemy infantry and tanks, succeeded in getting into Alsdorf. (86)

In the afternoon the 2d Battalion moved from its position to the north, cleared Alsdorf of the enemy, and drove eastward to capture Schaufenberg. The regiment was given permission to pull the 1st and 3d Battalions back to positions around Kol Kellersberg and Alsdorf. (87)

(84) A-7, p. 187; A-3, p. 54; A-11, pp. 391-392; (85) A-7, p. 148;
(86) A-2, p. 73; (87) A-7, p. 188.

8 October was the end of the 117th Infantry's offensive action in the 30th Division's operation to breach the Siegfried Line and close the Aachen gap. Being in an exposed position on the division's left flank, the regiment was ordered to prepare defensive positions around Schaufenberg, Alsdorf, and Kol Kellersberg.

The other regiments of the Division would continue the attack on the right to join with the 1st Infantry Division to the South. (88)

SUMMARY OF OPERATIONS 2-8 OCTOBER 1944

In the seven days of fighting, the 117th Infantry had performed outstandingly. It had made a clean break in the Siegfried Line through which other units could move to continue the offensive into Germany. The Regiment had captured a total of 15 pillboxes, 7 German towns, over 1000 prisoners, and an untold amount of enemy equipment. (89) Still another interesting note is the fact that the 81 mm mortars of the 117th Infantry fired over 6000 rounds during this period, with 3000 of the rounds fired in one day, the 2d of October. (90)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The 117th Infantry Regiment accomplished the missions assigned during the period covered by this monograph in a timely and highly efficient manner. A gap was breached through the Siegfried Line through which other units gained easy passage into Germany, and the drive southward materially aided in the capture of Aachen.

During the period the regiment suffered over 700 casualties, approximately 500 of which occurred in the first three days of fighting. It is believed that many of these casualties could have been avoided had the attack been made on 20 September as originally planned. Even though supplies were short and air was not available to support the attack, the regiment could have advanced the few thousand yards through the pillbox

(88) A-7, p. 128; (89) A-1, p. 13; (90) A-6, p. 12.

belt with little difficulty, since few of the enemy defenses were manned at that time. Once beyond the pillbox area they should have established defensive positions until sufficient supplies were built up to continue the attack. Fewer casualties would have been suffered, in such a defensive position, than were actually inflicted by the enemy when the attack was made on 2 October.

The attack that was launched on 2 October was exceptionally well planned. Coordination was affected with all units concerned. The plan was simple and complete. Every individual participating in the attack was informed of his part in the overall plan.

The careful and detailed preparations that preceded the attack left little to be desired. By the time the attack was made the assaulting units had been given thorough training in the use of special weapons, and had conducted "dry runs" on the parts they were to play. They launched the attack with full confidence in themselves and their units. They were imbued with the necessity for speed of advance in the initial stage of the attack, which resulted in the gaining of surprise.

The air strike had little or no effect on the operation. Most of the planes missed the target completely, and those that did drop their bombs in the target area did so after it had been marked by the supporting artillery. This situation could possibly have been avoided had communications been available with which to talk directly with the planes.

The supporting fires rendered by the artillery and mortars were very effective. A large number of concentrations were planned and made known to all commanders. The fires delivered by the 4.2 chemical mortars were especially effective. It is felt that the only ineffectiveness in the artillery support plan was in counter-battery work. This belief is substantiated by the large volume of enemy artillery fire that continued to pound the attacking troops. However, it must be remembered that artillery

ammunition was in short supply, and the artillery was limited in the number of rounds it could use for counter-battery work.

In the 1st Battalion attack on 2 October, Company B did not halt when it began receiving enemy fire. If anything, the advance was further speeded, and continued to follow the rolling barrage of the 4.2 mortars closely. This company accomplished its mission with relatively few casualties. The advance of Company C, on the other hand, was slowed by the initial enemy fire. This permitted the enemy to adjust and concentrate his fires on Company C more easily, and resulted in heavy casualties, disorganization, and failure in accomplishing the assigned mission.

The 1st Battalion commander's decision to have Company "A" take over the mission of Company "C" was made promptly, and led to early accomplishment of the battalion mission. Company "A" was able to enter the action without delay because it had previously prepared plans to take over the mission of either of the leading companies.

The successful attack by the 1st Battalion can be attributed to teamwork and coordination, which was perfected in the training area prior to the attack. The technique used in reducing the pillboxes closely followed that prescribed by Field Manual 31-50. The special weapons, such as flamethrowers, pole charges, and satchel charges were used by the 1st Battalion to great advantage.

Company "E" captured the two pillboxes in its area without the aid of special weapons. It used only weapons organic to the company, with the rocket launchers proving most valuable when fired through pillbox embrasures.

The 2d Battalion's failure to capture the high bluff on the north edge of Palenberg resulted in the bridge sites across the Wurm River being subjected to enemy small arms fire for several days. The bluff was strongly defended, and the approaches into the position were well

covered, however it is believed that the positions might have been taken by swinging further to the east and approaching the pillboxes from the rear.

The enemy troops that manned the pillboxes were not of the highest quality, and would surrender after little persuasion. The small arms fire from the pillboxes was rendered ineffective by the fire placed on the embrasures by the support elements of the attacking platoons. The enemy did not keep sufficient troops in open emplacements outside the pillboxes, but kept them inside the pillbox itself where they were helpless in the hands of the assault detachments. The enemy troops encountered beyond the pillboxes were of much better quality, and the enemy artillery and mortar fires were highly effective and of great quantity.

The confusion that existed in the attack on Utach on 3 October can mainly be attributed to the large volume of enemy artillery being placed on the town, and the movement of the 2d Armored Division units into this small area. In my opinion the armored units tried to move through the gap too soon, and it is doubtful whether a reconnaissance was made to determine the exact situation before the units were brought forward.

The failure of the 119th Infantry to keep abreast placed the 117th Infantry in a very vulnerable position. The enemy was thus able to concentrate the bulk of his fires and counter blows against the 117th Infantry.

The attack on 7 October that led to the capture of Alsdorf was an example of perfect tank-infantry teamwork. Although many enemy troops were in position to contest this advance, the technique and timing of the tank-infantry attack prevented effective resistance.

In my opinion the attack on Mariadorf on 8 October should not have been ordered. The 117th Infantry was in an exposed position with both

flanks wide open to enemy counterattacks, but the enemy pushed his attack that was launched on that day it would probably have been highly successful.

LESSONS

✓ 1. Simple plans and thorough preparations, to include special training of assault teams, are necessary in the attack of a fortified position.

✓ 2. Air support, to be effective, must be carefully planned and coordinated. Furthermore, direct communication between ground observers and the planes is highly desirable.

✓ 3. Following supporting fire closely will, in the long run, result in fewer casualties to the attacker.

✓ 4. Artillery fire can be concentrated more easily on the attacker or when his advance has been slowed or halted.

✓ 5. Infantry troops, using only organic weapons, can reduce pillboxes.

✓ 6. Special equipment, such as flamethrowers, pole charges, and satchel charges are desirable in the attack of a fortified position.

✓ 7. All personnel in the attacking units must be trained in the use of the special equipment. *included*

✓ 8. The rocket launcher is an effective weapon against permanent type fortifications.

✓ 9. When pillboxes or similar fortifications are used in the defense, troops must be positioned outside the structure to meet the attack of the assault detachment.

✓ 10. Surprise may be gained by clear aggressiveness of the attack.

✓ 11. The reserve unit must have plans prepared in advance to take over the attack of either of the leading units.

✓ 12. The importance of rifle marksmanship for the infantry soldier cannot be overstressed.

✓ 13. The current teachings in the attack of a fortified position are sound.

ENGLAND

ENGLISH CHANNEL

HOLLAND

BELGIUM

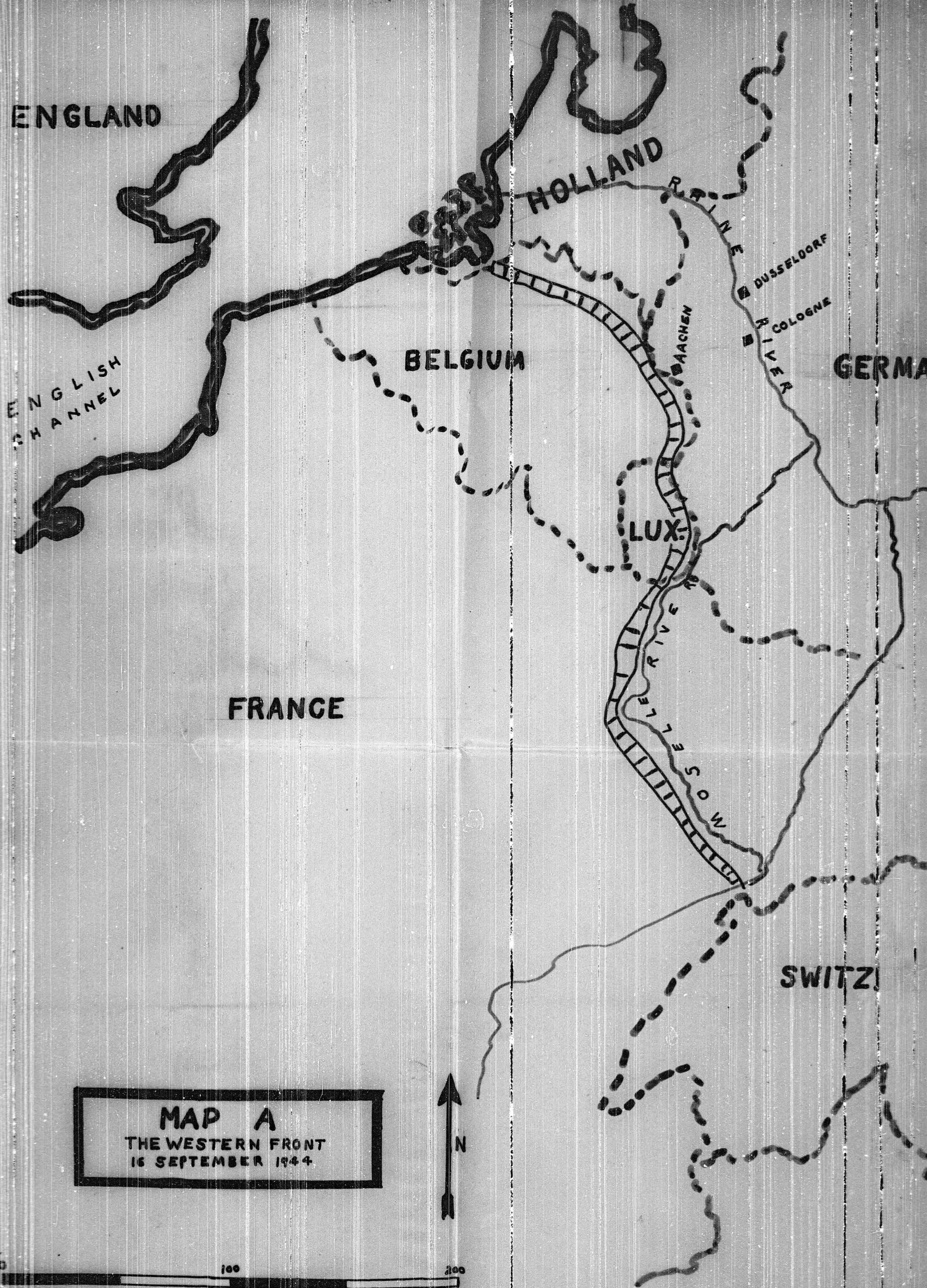
FRANCE

LUX.

GERMA

SWITZ

MAP A
THE WESTERN FRONT
16 SEPTEMBER 1944



XIX CORPS SECTOR

DUSSELDORF

PALENBERG

2

30

AACHEN

RIVER

RHINE RIVER

XXX
XIX

XIX
XXX
VII

COLOGNE



MILES



MAP C

MAP D
PALENBERG TO ALSDORF

