

Northern France

28 July 1944

5 January 1945

First there were great numbers of craters, burned out tanks, mines and demolished culverts and during 27- 28 July the battalion suffered seven casualties - mostly from mustard pot mines. But as the way was cleared through Periers, St Sauveur Lendelin and Countances the going became easier until the Selune River was reached at St Hilaire du Harcouet. Here on the night of 3-4 August Company C built the battalion's first major bridge of the war.

The road was fine, a paved highway along which the division was to roll, but over the Selune River there was a 110 ft masonry arch bridge which had been demolished. Two-way traffic was required. With Company B assisting in the repair of the approaches, Company C began the simultaneous construction and launching of two double single bailey bridges. The structures were unusual in that cutaway abutment seats were made so that the decking was level with the roadway. Work was continuous throughout the night except for a period of 45 minutes when the area was attacked by the Luftwaffe. At 0130 the first parachute flares were dropped and as they floated downward their burning magnesium charges lit up the entire area like daylight. Anti-aircraft guns fired wildly first at the flares and then at the sound of the planes. But around and around the planes droned and then at 0215 made the bomb run and dropped their pay loads. With the long swoosh and the unmistakable earth shaking blast the bombs hit. Had they been on their mark the results would have been devastating but the anti-aircraft fire and perhaps other factors caused the bombers to miss their target. The sticks fell harmlessly in the nearby fields and the only casualty was one man hit by an ack-ack shell fragment. Work was quickly resumed and the bridges were completed well before the deadline.

The 90th rolled on! The citizens of St Hilaire stood in the streets and cheered and waved and yelled. Troop laden trucks and jeeps were pelted with bouquets of flowers and the men were presented, ceremoniously, with wine and cider and Calvados. On and on the 90th rolled. On through Landivy, Louvigne du Desert and Ernee – it was the same in every town and village. Here was Monsieur le Mayor in his cutaway stripped pants – waving frantically for quiet so he could make his speech. At times the welcoming committees seemed unhappy because the troops wouldn't stop long enough to receive the keys to the city formally.

To Task Force Weaver, Company A was attached on 5 August. This now famous team made a 37 mile dash to Mayenne where engineers of the 1st squad of the 2nd platoon of Company A removed the German explosives from a key bridge over the Mayenne River. Under direct fire these soldiers dashed over on the bridge, clipped the firing wires and defused the huge aerial bomb charges with which the krauts were trying to destroy the massive stone bridge. Later in a flanking movement Company A ferried the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 357th across the river and the entire city fell.

Again the division was rolling along – out of the hedgerows, out of the stench of the war torn bocage country and across the plains of Northern France. Rolling so fast that the water points leap-frogged each other – sometimes twice a day three or four small scale map sheets were crossed without stopping.

Each company moved with its CT regiment clearing vehicles and mines, repairing a few craters but mostly rolling along at top speed across France – chasing the kraut.

At Le Mans a bridge over the Sarthe was captured intact on the 10th. The battalion was already constructing a floating bridge just north of the city and both were used to speed the division in a drive northward.

Le Mans was the first large city to be liberated by the 90th and the French welcome surpassed all previous ones. Flowers, eggs, cognac, cider, tomatoes, wine and bread were offered and frequently tossed to (and sometimes tossed at) the troops by the hilarious frenchmen. Here the mademoiselles were even better than before, simply because there were more mademoiselles. There were the bearded frenchmen who insisted on bestowing wet whiskery kisses on the cheeks of each and every American who came within his range. But the mademoiselles were shy and coy yet not too shy and not too coy.

But Le Mans was soon left behind. The battalion with the division had rolled 140 miles since breaking out of the hedgerows, much by-passing of German columns had occurred and many head on collisions had resulted in sharp, road junction battles where the perfectly coordinated troops battered down the heavily armored German forces. Now the 90th was surging northward in a move to seal off the retreating Boche armies.

The lettered companies were moving with their respective CT's and the units swiftly liberated Alencon and Sees. Then moved on to Nonantpin and into an area to become famous as the Falaise Pocket.

German columns were desperately trying to escape. The engineers built and manned road blocks and especially at a road junction just east of Le Bourg St Leonard the 2nd platoon of Company C engaged in very heavy fighting on the 17th and 18th against repeated attacks by panzer columns. The frenzied attempts to break out were stopped on the 19th, Company C, with the 359th Infantry, moved into Chambois to make contact with the Poles and British of the north. In the other regimental sectors Companies A and B were engaged in the same type of operation and the trap was sealed.

Never before had such a mass of destruction been seen. The artillery had a "field day" as thousands and thousands of rounds were poured into the trapped armies. Desperately the Germans beat themselves against the sides of the wall that engulfed them but the 90th Infantry Division held fast. Prisoners poured into the cages. Guns, equipment and vehicles beyond number littered the valley floor.

It was with enthusiasm that the engineers moved in to clear paths through the wreckage. By 1800 on the 19th Company C, with assistance from the tankers and TD's, had cleared from the streets of Chambois: 26 burned out tanks (including 5 mark VI's), 203 vehicles and 63 dead horses.

For several days the clearing of roads continued but primarily it was a sort of ghoulish picnic for the men who spent much time scrounging among the vehicles for trinkets and for the prized P-38's and lugers. But the mission was accomplished and it was time to move on. The engineers had played another important role in the division's operations. In this one, in four days, the 90th had captured 13,000 prisoners. Killed another 8,000 of the enemy and had destroyed more than 300 enemy tanks, 250 self-propelled guns, 164 artillery pieces, 3270 vehicles and countless other items of enemy war material.

All American dead and most of the German bodies had been collected but by the 26th of August, a week after the trap had been sealed, the stench of a thousand dead horses and the general carnage of the battlefield in the warm summer heat was terrific.

Morale was high as the victorious 90th again loaded up and rolled to the east. On and on -- through Mortagne, Chartres, Etamps, Milly and Fontainebleau – more than 160 miles in one day. Tactical maps were out of the question and road maps (carte michelin) were generally used. Corps maps were so far behind that essential prints were flown up and dropped for distribution.

After an overnight bivouac in the great forest of Fontainebleau, where kings of France had hunted and played at their summer palaces, the battalion pushed on. Crossing the Siene at Montereau on 27 August the 315th less the CT platoon attachments assembled at Nangis then pushed on toward Montmirail and to Dormans on the Marne.

The French resistance forces were saving many bridges from destruction by the rapidly retreating German forces. However, in this area most large bridges were temporary structures and they were easy to destroy. In fact in many places the bridges had been destroyed by the retreating French in 1916-17 then rebuilt again. At the beginning of World War II they had been destroyed again by the French, rebuilt by the Germans and now they were destroyed by the Germans to be reconstructed by the American engineers. Everywhere Free French were eager to help. They had spotted mines and assisted in their location and removal. They helped procure bridge repair materials and helped in reconstruction work. But near Dormans the gap in the span across the Marne was too great for expedient repairs. Company A built the battalion's assault boat and rubber float bridge and the division rolled on to the cathedral city of Reims in the Champagne District in the heart of France.

Reims, which had been devastated during World War I, fared this one much better. The airdrome had been heavily bombed and some of the bridges in the center of the city had been destroyed. But the wide boulevards, the sidewalk cafes, the supplies of champagne and the famous cathedral were unscathed. In spite of the light enemy resistance the dash across France suddenly came to a halt. The famed Third Army had run out of gasoline. It was on 31 August 1944 that the battalion halted near Bourgoyne on the outskirts of Reims. They had stretched the supply lines beyond their elastic limit.

Company A engaged in bridge repair work in the city and elements of Company A and Company B repaired bridges along the Aisne River near Pontavert on the division's left flank. The main task, however, fell to Company Cc.

Before the 90th could roll again gasoline had to be supplied. So, Company C moved to the Reims airdrome and turned themselves into aviation engineers for a week. Runways were cleared of mines and repaired and soon C- 47's were roaring in with loads of petrol flown directly from bases in England. The stock of that rare and precious commodity was built up to such an extent that on 7 September the division and the battalion rolled again.

The route was to the east – on through the still pock marked World War I battlefields near Ste Menehould and at Verdun. But again the supply lines snapped as the division halted at Etain then slowly pushed on to the outskirts of the fortress city of Metz and to the Moselle.

At Briey, a huge cold storage warehouse filled with choice beef for the Wermacht was liberated. For the first time since in the hedgerows, where the fine Norman cattle had stepped on tellermines, the battalion had choice t-bone and sirloins.

Immediately plans were made for an assault crossing in the vicinity of Thionville but a continuing bad supply situation forced a long deferment of this operation.

By 14 September the mission had definitely become a defensive one. The heavily armed ancient fortresses of Metz were strongly manned. Two platoons of Company C and one platoon of Company A were attached to task force Randolph. The mission was to hold the center of an enemy salient in the Foret de Jaumont and during the ensuing action the battalion suffered eleven casualties from mortar and artillery fire. The engineer mortar platoon was again brought into action and, from a quarry near Malancourt la Montagne, round for round was traded with the kraut.

The major portion of the battalion moved into the Bois de Fleury near Beaumont on 15 September and the next day the rains came. For twelve days without stop the downpour continued. An early fall had come to the Moselle and with it had come a stalemate.

Strong patrols probed the fortress outposts. In slugging matches, while in support of the 359th, Company C suffered 10 casualties at Gravelotte on the 26-27 September. On 3 October a jeep and trailer load of mines exploded near Pierrevillers killing seven men of Company A.

Continuing rains and the heavy traffic turned roads and trails into ribbons of mud and turned the battalion bivouac, in Bois de Fleury, into a wooded bog. For almost two months the engineer battle was conducted from this – "Fort Quagmire".

Road work was of first importance but other projects quickly developed. A mock up of a portion of Fort Jeanne d'Arc was constructed for practice assault work. Then a tank transported moat bridge was fabricated. Experiments with the conger, the snake and large shaped charges were conducted in a captured Maginot Line section west of Thionville.

As the cool rains of autumn gave way to the cold rain and wind of winter the battalion dismantled a large number of prefabricated hutments in the Maginot area. After hauling them into the regimental zones they were erected behind the front lines near Doncourt and St Marcel for use by the infantry and in "Fort Quagmire", the prefabs rapidly replaced the rain soaked pup tents.

Camouflage of the huts built for the infantry was a difficult problem. In "Fort Quagmire" the falling leaves left bare the rooftops and the vehicle parks. The garnished nets had been the old standby against aerial observation but here the problem was much greater. Again materials from the Maginot Line were employed. Various types of wire netting with clay and metal garnishings were effectively used. Furnishings such as beds, tales and chairs and even items from Hitler's own suite in the vast underground Maginot city were brought up and moved to complete the barracks of "Quagmire".

One particular, much traveled, section of a road south of Gravelotte was subject to clear observation by the Germans in one of the casemates of the Metz fortress system. The krauts seemed to have enough ammunition to shoot at any vehicle which ventured down the racetrack during daylight but not enough to shoot indiscriminately without a clear target. So, to deny this perfect observation Company B turned itself into a forestry company and cut hundreds of evergreens from the Bois de Ognons. Then, under the cover of darkness, the engineers replanted the trees, with guy wire supports, forming a screen all along the road. It would be good to have known the surprise of those German gunners when they looked across their field of fire the next morning and saw a new forest that had "grown" overnight.

Except for a violent 27 day battle for Maizieres-les-Metz the division zone was a stalemate of mud punctuated by the exchange of fire by combat patrols and the occasional duel of artillery and mortars. But on 1 November a relief of the 90th began. By the 3rd all units of the battalion had moved

again to the vicinity of Fontoy and Angevillers just west of Thionville. The assault of the Moselle, which had been first planned in September, was on. Metz would be encircled and the 90th would drive across the German frontier into Naziland.

Days were filled with planning, preparation and rehabilitation. Nights were filled with movement of troops and equipment being juggled into position for the assault. Two battalions and other units of the 1132nd Engineer Group would support the operation. The 315th would ferry a portion of the assault troops, furnish engineer support on the far shore and construct a foot bridge and a light raft. The corps engineers would ferry the other assault troops and build the heavy bridges and rafts.

The Moselle was 350 feet wide at the selected crossing sites of Cattenom and Malling. Normally the bridging of such a stream would not have presented any insuperable problems, but as D-Day approached the steady downpour of rain continued. Assembly areas were turned into impossible bogs of mud where supply trucks sank to their axles. Foxholes were turned into deep pools of icy water and as the hour approached - still the rain poured down.

0330 on 9 November was H-Hour. The 359th Infantry crossed on the left at Malling and the 358th crossed at Cattenom – across the wild Moselle – angrily foaming, swirling and eddying as it reached then passed, flood-stage.

Surprise over the enemy had been gained but violent reaction soon came from the German artillery and mortars, already "zeroed in" on the crossing sites, directed from the ancient Prussian Fort Koenigsmacher, and in spite of the artificial fog created by generators and smoke pots the fire was murderously accurate. A single salvo hit and severely damaged five truck loads of bridging.

Still, the rain poured down and the Moselle swiftly spread to 400, then 600 and then 800 yards - out across the flood plain - eight times the normal span. pontoons were ripped from their moorings and were washed downstream. Boats carrying supplies were capsized and only those with large motors could stem the tide.

A bridge at Malling (although the approaches were under 4 ft of water) was under construction on the 11th but a well placed mortar burst deflated several floats. The bridge capsized and was swept downstream in the swirling current. Amphibious trucks were brought in but only a few were able to battle the raging torrent and these were mired up in the mud banks or disabled by submerged antitank mines on the far shore.

Power boats and liaison planes were the only means of transportation as the troops savagely fought on and captured fortress Koenigsmacher and repulsed counterattack after counterattack.

On the night of 11-12 November two tank destroyers crossed the reconstructed bridge at Malling but the raging torrent, in one mighty blast, swept the bridge away and scattered its remnants 800 yards downstream.

Then the river passed its crest and began to subside – first at a rate of $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch per hour, then as rapidly as it had risen, it receded. On the fifth day the Moselle was bridged. At Cattenom the tanks and artillery rolled in a steady stream – uninterrupted only when the receding water allowed some of the floats to come to rest on previously submerged mines. Mines had been numerous in the hedgerows of Normandy but never had the 315th encountered such deliberate minefields and antitank defenses as the enemy had prepared here east of the Moselle. Along a 12 mile band parallel to the river hundreds of

thousands of mines had been installed – mines of all types. There were Schuh mines designed to amputate a foot and there were wooden box Mines to blow off a jeep wheel. There were Hungarian mines, Italian mines and there were glass mines and asphalt mines, which the detectors could not detect. Of course there were huge numbers of the now very familiar tellermines and "S" mines.

But in spite of the "hell and high water" the old 90th slugged on and with the 5th Division closed the pincers around Metz, and on 19 November the fortress city fell. Of the operation, General Patton, Third Army Commander wrote to General Van Fleet, Division Commander:

"The capture and development of your bridgehead over the Moselle River in the vicinity of Koenigsmacker will ever rank as one of the epic river crossings of history. Please accept for yourself and pass on to the officers and men of your valorous division my high commendation for the superior manner in which you and they preformed this truly magnificent feat of arms."

There was no halting to gloat over the fall of the fortress – Metz. For the sacred soil of the "Vaterland" was now only a few kilometers ahead.

Using great numbers of slave laborers the enemy had dug miles of huge antitank ditches across the countryside in this frontier area between the Saar and the Moselle. The ditches were opened across the roads and trails as well as the highways. Then on the principal routes hasty timber bridges had been built over the ditches to carry the retreating traffic. In the face of our advancing infantry these structures were blown and the "Engineers War" ground on as the 90th crossed the boundary into Germany.

The international frontier was marked only by small monuments on some roads, but on the highways the remains of blasted port of entry stations saluted the invading Americans.

The country didn't look much different. The civilians looked about the same although the houses and the towns seemed cleaner and neater. But now, instead of the troops pitching pup tents in the mud, the German civilians "gladly" moved out of the best houses in town so the invaders could be sheltered.

Over the Nied River at Niedaltdorf an almost unopposed "assault" river crossing was staged. The infantry was ferried across, then the 315th built its floating support bridge and a corps battalion moved up and constructed a double-triple bailey. Company B then pushed a bailey across the Nied at Kerprich Hemmersdorf. The 90th pushed on and patrols reached the Saar on 19 November 1944.

After the successful completion of the Moselle crossing the Saar looked like it could be a cinch – a cinch if it weren't for the fact its opposite shore boasted one of the thickest sections of the famed Siegfried line.

Enemy observation of the few possible crossing sites was perfect and his prearranged artillery fires were precisions of accuracy. Furthermore, as on the Moselle, the Saar was approaching flood stage.

The 6th of December was the assault day and again, in the cold foggy pre-dawn hours, the 90th silently moved by assault boat and caught the enemy unaware. Portions of Companies A and B crossed with their respective regiments to fight and do engineer work amid the Siegfried fortifications – Company C built a footbridge near Wallerfangen, which stayed in just long enough to allow reinforcing troops to cross – then a well placed round of heavy mortar fire neatly clipped the bridge and the bridge and the wreckage went swirling down the stream.

Again, the supporting corps engineers moved in to construct heavy rafts and a bridge but, as at the Moselle, the flooded river, smoke dissipating winds and deadly accurate fire blocked every effort. Bridges were started and rafts constructed but the accurate fire knocked out each one. The infantry fought to capture then recapture the pill-boxes of Dilligen and Pachten and the 315th brought over welding equipment to seal embrasures of the captured forts.

All supplies were carried across in boats at night and the wounded were brought back on return trips. At a site between the two on which the enemy had been placing such accurate fire, a ferry was finally put in operation and a trickle of armor and tactical vehicles began to cross. The trickle continued and on the 15th armor supported infantry stormed and took Dilligen.

Then Suddenly the picture changed. To the north the Von Ronstadt offensive had broken through the American lines in Belgium and Luxembourg.

Engineers of the 315th began installing mines and booby traps in Dillingen as preparations were made for the evacuation of the 90th's Saar bridgehead. On the 19th Company A built a footbridge near Buren and the withdrawal began. For three days and nights the operation continued and under continuous shelling all troops and all except six destroyed vehicles were withdrawn by ferry, foot-bridge; and assault boat and so the "double-crossing" of the Saar was completed. The Siegfried Line had been cracked and another triumph was almost achieved but the fortunes of war demanded that the 90th move elsewhere.

Christmas of 1944 was spent in the Maginot Line area near Veckring. Here the 315th was deliberately preparing a defensive zone along the front of the Siegfried switch position from Sierck-les Bains through Manderen, Launstroff and Waldwisse to Mondorf. Bridges were prepared for demolition, craters were charged, trees were fixed for easy felling across roads and mines were emplaced. But the 90th could not long be spared for a defensive mission and on 5 January orders were received – "be prepared for movement".

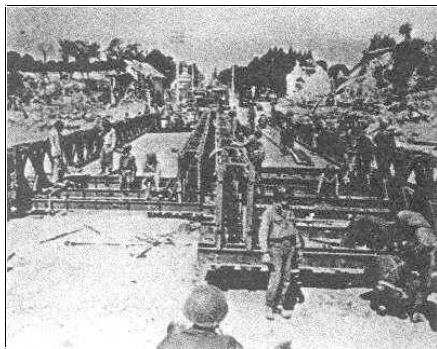


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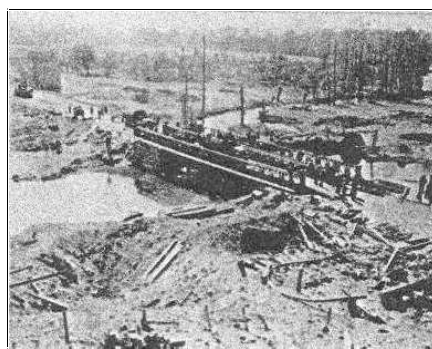


Figure 6-2

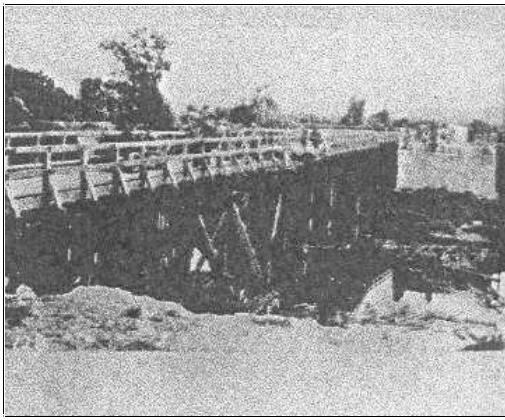


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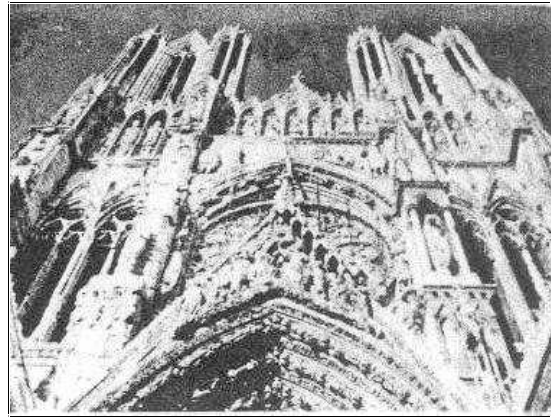


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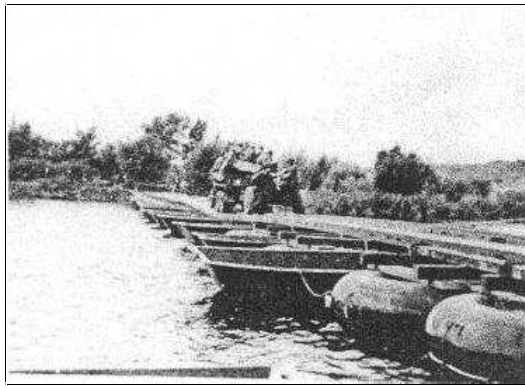


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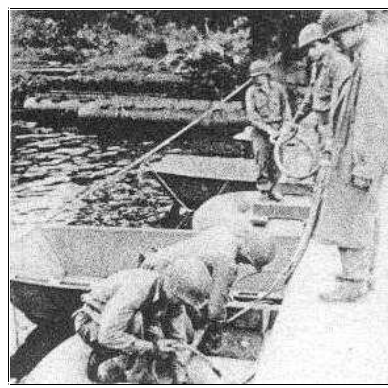


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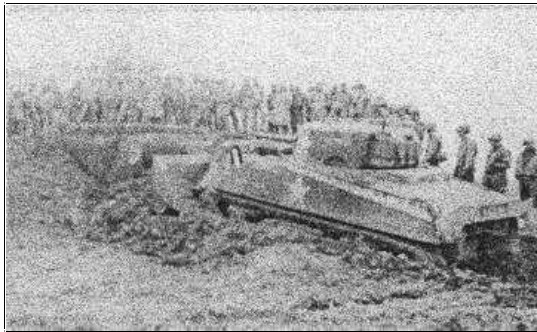


Figure 6-7



Figure 6-8

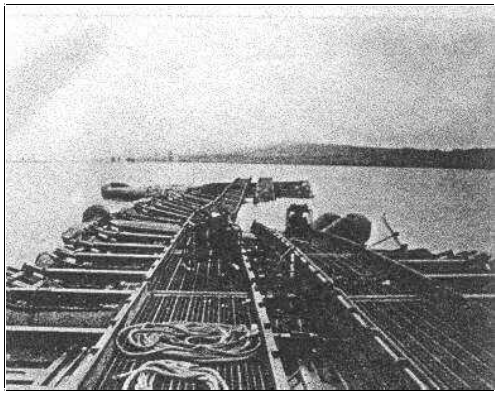


Figure 6-9



Figure 6-10



Figure 6-11



Figure 6-12



Figure 6-13



Figure 6-14

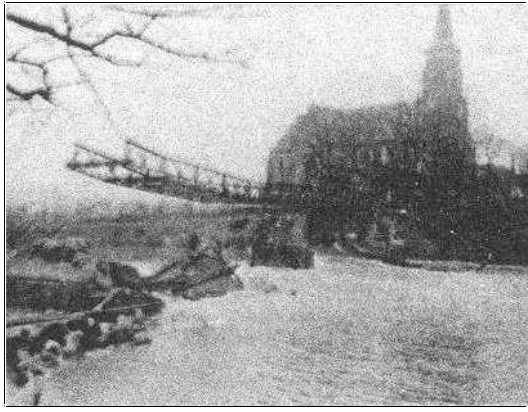


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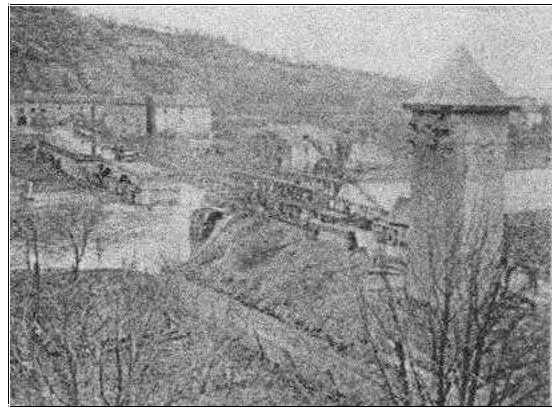


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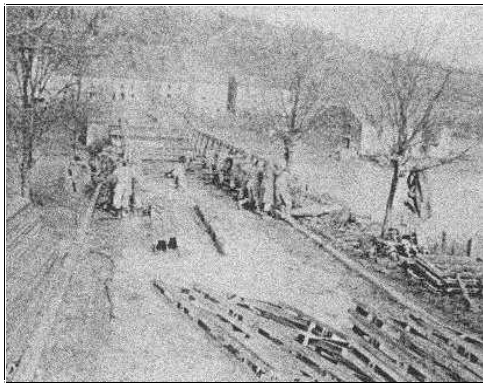


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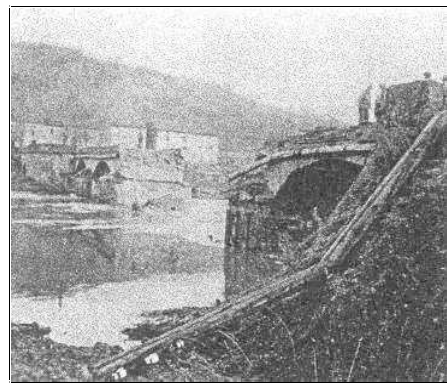


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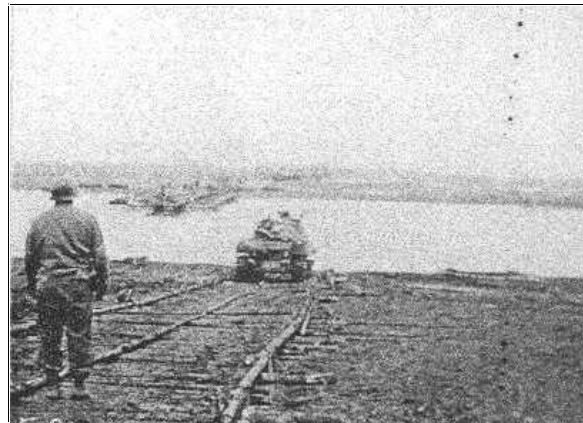


Figure 6-19