

CHAPTER IX

ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS: VE



At 0250 on 14 March the 343rd along with the rest of the XII Corps Artillery started firing the greatest preparation that had ever been furnished the 90th Division. There was artillery fire on every known enemy strong point and on the road net that the enemy would use to bring up reinforcements. Before dawn the infantry went across the Moselle river in assault boats and started pushing out against scattered resistance. This was the second time the 90th had forced the Moselle. We had to move up next to the river to give necessary artillery support. Shortly after noon the engineers had a bridge across the river on the 90th and 5th Division boundary and the necessary armor and supplies began to pour across.

Late in the evening of the same day we crossed the river and went into Alken, within 50 yards of the river. The high hills made it necessary for us to use the lowest possible charge with high elevations to clear the mask.

About the time of departure from our old position, Charlie Battery received a light shelling resulting in one casualty. The march to and across the river was quiet and well executed. Actually the night was as black as tar but artificial moonlight, manufactured by a search light unit, was a great help and did much to speed up the march. As the new position was approached good march discipline was stressed and the battalion was warned to be doubly alert as our positions were on the exposed left flank of the division. Many rounds of WP were exploding on the hill in front of our position, they were being fired by an attached 4. 2 Chemical Mortar outfit.

Early in the morning of March 15 the enemy counter-attacked the 357th using flak guns and 88s. Urban and its supporting units poured thousands of rounds into these enemy positions. SS Troops attacked with fanatical fury, practically all were either killed or captured. Few escaped the fast moving 90th. Coordination of infantry, artillery and tanks made possible the reduction of these strong points. Within 36 hours after the leading elements of Union Red crossed the Moselle. They were on the banks of the Rhine! Partial score for this CT was 300 SS Troops dead, seven 88s and 19 flak guns knocked out, in addition to countless Wehrmacht dead and vehicles kaputed, even boats and barges destroyed on the Rhine. The Union men sat on the banks of the Rhine at Boppard, seven miles below Koblenz, shooting at the Krauts on the other side and pouting because they were not permitted to cross. Army orders did not call for a crossing.

As the 90th and 5th broke through, the 4th Armored came thru to make a record dash in the direction of the U.S. 7th Army in an effort to trap Germans in this pocket. We moved along the Rhine as fast as additional troops could be brought up to hold our rear. The 90th moved on Mainz and captured it after a fierce battle. It was a slam-bang affair, slam on the brakes, pull off the road and bang, fire a few rounds and on the road again. We were harassed by enemy jet-propelled planes. It was interesting to watch the ack-ack boys, who to date had done a wonderful job, try to track these jet jobs. The jets were the fastest thing we had seen. When they came in low it was too late to start for cover because brother they were gone. The afternoon of 22 March we arrived at Marienborn, in position to support the attack on Mainz. Expecting to be there a few days, plans were made for showers and laundry and a chance to clean equipment, but a change of plans, they always came up, had us on the road about noon the next day. Shortly before dawn on the 23rd, the 5th Division had slipped across the Rhine in the vicinity of Oppenheim and their Division Commander had requested that the 357th CT be rushed up to help them expand their bridgehead.

At 1650 hours, Baker was reported ready to fire. We remained in position at Oppenheim until 1940 when we moved through town toward the bridge. The 5th Division Artillery was scheduled to cross before us but a short breach between convoys appeared and permission was asked to cross.

Permission was granted providing we cleared in 10 minutes, the battalion cleared in 12 minutes establishing record time for the crossing and thus making the 343rd F.A. Battalion the first artillery unit, in the 3rd Army to cross the Rhine.

Although not receiving a casualty the move that evening will long be remembered. Enemy aircraft and artillery were extremely active around the bridge, but it seemed that they both “took 10” when we went across. The town of Leeheim was receiving the same treatment but as we neared the city limits the firing ceased. On through town, no sooner had we cleared than the Krauts dumped everything they had there. Urban was in position, ready to fire, about 900 yards south of town at 2200.

Many missions were fired during the night and morning. The armor passed through about noon and drove straight east. The 5th headed for Frankfurt, the 90th to the Main River east of Frankfurt. Resistance was strong up to Darmstadt where the main line of resistance was broken and the 90th raced to the Main.

The first day over the Rhine Lt. A. J. Lease, Cpl. C. F. Groom and Pfc. A.F. Meisner, all members of a Baker FO crew, were captured by the Krauts. Lease and Groom managed to escape the next day when the armor overran the enemy. Meisner was recaptured sometime later but did not return to the 343rd.

On 27 March we were at Didesheim in position to support the assault crossing of the Main. Artillery preparations started at 0400 the next morning and the infantry crossed against strong resistance. Good progress was made as more troops poured across. Hundreds of rounds of artillery were fired during the day with a large percentage of them used in searching for a roving enemy gun. This gun or guns were hindering the work on the bridge our engineers were attempting to throw across the river. Double success was finally achieved and we crossed the Main to Wachembuchen at 0200 March 28, five days after crossing the Rhine.

In the last 23 days the 90th had crossed 4 large rivers, the Kyll, Moselle, Rhine and Main, slashed thru the Little Siegfried and had ran amuck over hundreds of miles of Germany. Thousands of prisoners had been captured and nearly as many more killed. There on the Fulda River it paused momentarily getting its breath and making ready to start on another record drive.

2 April we started moving from the vicinity of Hersfeld toward Zella Mehlis. The 90th straddled the hills of the famous Thuringen Forest while the armor took to the plains. Because the U.S. First, Ninth, Fifteenth and British Second Armies north of us had started to move out the Third Army was to swing southeast, thus the objective of the 90th was changed from Dresden to Prague.

4 April the 357th discovered the famous gold cache in the Merkers salt mines and stayed there to guard it until the gold had been inventoried and removed by higher headquarters.

The 357th Infantry stopped but we were assigned to supporting the fires of the other regiments and continued on our way across Germany. The back of the German Army had been broken and with the exception of a few units that were still intact, resistance was scattered. A few fanatical units fought savagely while the Volkssturm were only too glad to give up.

17 April at Heinersgrun after a 10 day absence the 357th was back in the war and we went back in their support. 18th April 90th patrols crossed into Czechoslovakia, and Germany had been split in

half by the Tough 'Ombres. The remainder of April the division continued its drive southeast patrolling the Czech border but not going into the country.

As the drive gained momentum the 357th pushed out in front and stayed there. One battalion had to keep contact with the regiment on the left thus holding the 357 CT left flank back. This created a problem for us because we had to stay up close enough to give the front elements support and far enough back to support the left flank elements. It wasn't unusual to see the 343rd in position with 2 batteries laid on compass 3200 and one battery on 6400. This occasionally confused the FO's who had been led to believe, at Fort Sill, that the artillery fired over the infantry and not back of them. All observers were at all times notified of our position, but some observers did not check this on their map before firing. This proved rather embarrassing at times when the target was on a line between the guns and the observer. After a near miss on his own position, the observer usually gave fire direction a piece of his mind and in turn was asked to check our position before we fired the next rounds.

A number of old German towns were set-a-fire by artillery when they offered resistance after displaying their white flags. This happened to one neat little city, directly on the axis of communication. It was a proposed CP for Div Arty and Division, the town offered resistance, a new town was chosen for their respective CP's!

Many allied prisoners were freed during this time. Some were being marched to the Southern-Redoubt by SS Guards. Thousands of slave laborers were freed, the Flossenburg concentration camp was captured and political prisoners freed.

3 May found the 343rd sitting right on the Czech border in the vicinity of Rittsteig, Germany. The CG of the 90th had received a surrender envoy of the German 11th Panzer Division. We had received orders to move with the 357th but were recalled to participate in the surrender of this Panzer unit. Urban CP was used as the contact point when the unit started coming in and was being disarmed. Our howitzers had the road covered and as the convoy approached there was some speculation as to what would be the outcome if the Krauts changed their minds. The surrender went as expected, except the division arrived with a few hundred more vehicles and a couple thousand more men than the German Commander knew he had, others had decided that it was the right thing to do, so fell in line as the column passed!

The following morning we marched 54 miles, to catch up with the 357th, over familiar roads. In fact it seemed that we had been thru a few of the towns, while maneuvering around, so many times that we expected the natives to start calling us by name. The first few miles of this move presented a strange sight. The captured 11th Panzer on one side of the road and us on the other. The Krauts were being disarmed and as we passed they would toss us Lugers and P-38s. It was all so strange. A few days ago we had been tossing the projectiles at each other.

After driving from Hof to Zwiesel parallel to the border, we suddenly swung to the left and started up the main highway toward Prague via Pilsen. Neither point mentioned was reached. On 7 May at a point a few miles beyond Susice we were given the order to cease firing and halt in place. After the order was received, Urban closed at Petrovice and marched 13 miles further northeast to Cejkovy in case we had to fire for the boys from Union who had gained such momentum in their drive that they couldn't be stopped until then.

The march into Czech was a change over the past few months: we were liberating again. Everyone lined the streets and the roads in the country cheering us as we passed. It was a fitting end for

the months of hardships we had been through. We moved into Cejkovy, Czechoslovakia, and set up our last combat position, a few hours later a message was received to cease firing for good, Germany had surrendered unconditionally.

The Czechs took us into their homes and gave us their best, dances were held and finally a ceremony with both the Czechs and our men taking part. The Czechs mustered the only group for whom they had uniforms, their firemen. A representative group of Officers and men from the 343rd met the formation. The national anthems of both countries were sang. The Mayor gave a speech of thanks and welcome to the “Glorious Americans”. Colonel Reimers put forth his best in acknowledging the welcome, and indicated that all of us were proud to have done our bit in liberating the enslaved peoples of Europe. Although the words were his, the feeling was that of every man in the 343rd.

We have come a long way together and now we can proudly say:

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

Over — Out









