

ACROSS FRANCE TO METZ

In September and October, the activities of the battalion, though varied, were not as spectacular as some of our previous fighting. Many moves were made with comparatively little firing being done.

At the outset of this period, our positions were in the vicinity of Cormicy, Boulton-sur-Suippe, Beine, Nauroy, Suippes, Ste. Mneuhould, Verdun, Etain, Spincourt, Bouvrois, Duzey, Nouillonpoint, Vandoncourt, and, Roudelaucourt.

On September 5th the battalion received its movement orders and began the long march from Boulton-sur-Suippe, to positions near Etain. The march itself was uneventful except for the crossing of the Meuse River at Verdun, Verdun was interesting to all of the battalion because of its previous fame in the First World War, in the last War 500,000 Frenchmen died between Verdun and Reims, and over 600,000 Germans were killed. The march took the battalion through hostile territory, and although there was no contact with the enemy, the area had not been completely cleared of Germans. The French had taken matters into their own hands and, armed with every conceivable type of weapon, they protected the route for our motorized division.

The 345th closed into positions beyond Etain and still the 90th Division had not made contact with the Krauts. The situation was fluid: little was known concerning either the enemy or friendly disposition of troops.

Captain Huckaby, Battalion S2 (with his usual shrewd foresight) sent Lt. Stanley and his forward observation party to the infantry near Spincourt. Lt. Stanley, the only observer present with the infantry, was aroused early on September 6 with the cry "counterattack". He wasted no time getting into action. Baker Battery was laid on the town and went to work. From then on, it was "Katie bar the Door" and "the Devil take the Krauts".

It was on this occasion that the "Desert Fox", Major Salisbury, made one of his most characteristic statements to Div Arty Hqrs. Said the Fox, "I have just leveled the town of Spincourt, and now I am burning it up." The krauts were as surprised as we and took a sound thumping, withdrawing before daylight. The enemy force consisted of tanks and infantry and was part of a German Panzer division. Apparently they were unaware of our locations, and contact had been accidental. From this time on, the division was in constant contact with the enemy again.

For the assault on Briey, Lt. Ritenbaugh's C Battery party of T/5 Ruiz and Cpl. Alonzo was sent to the 2nd Battalion 357th Infantry to accompany the attack. A German Infantry battalion was holding the town of Briey, which was situated between four hills. Any attempt to enter the town brought immediate crossfire from enemy machine guns. The enemy could not withdraw from the town during the daytime without being subject to heavy concentrations of artillery. The situation became stable with both sides taking shots at each other whenever possible.

With the aid of several Frenchmen, the observers from our battalion, the 343rd FA Battalion, and the 282nd FA Battalion were able to work over many of the buildings in which the enemy was located. One of the Frenchmen managed to slip into town and learned the whereabouts of the more important German installations. These included the location of the building in which the Germans stored their munitions and supplies. The locations of the Battalion CP, the officer's quarters, and the location of several of their machine gun emplacements, was also learned.

The battalion CP and supply dump were assigned to our observer since they were the largest buildings. The other observers were assigned the remaining targets, and all went to work on them with their respective battalions. Adjustments were made on both targets assigned to our battalion, The ammunition dump was hit several times. It began to burn and was still burning three days later. The German battalion CP took several direct hits from our 155 shells.

Following the concentrations on the CP, an enemy party requested permission to enter our lines to speak to the Commander. As they approached, a cease-fire order was given. The party, consisting of an Oberlieutenant and a Pvt., requested permission to negotiate a surrender between the two unit commanders. A meeting was arranged and the enemy battalion surrendered 435 officers and men. The only concession to the enemy was the fulfillment of his request of aid to their wounded. The town of Briey was occupied that evening by our Infantry.

From the Briey vicinity the battalion maneuvered through the general vicinity of Lommerange, Fontoy, Milvange, Velmerange, and Marspich. On the 11th of September C Battery of the 537th AAA Battalion, Undue Charlie, was relieved of their assignment as air defense for our battalion. On 12th September, we were attached to the 344th Battalion with the mission of direct support. On the 14th, all batteries except C Battery were relieved of this assignment and moved to a rendezvous area in the vicinity of Avril.

C Battery, assigned the mission of supporting the fires of the 344th FA Battalion, set up its own fire direction. With the aid of several of the members of the battalion fire direction team, T/4 Zink, T/5 Cioffi, and Cpl. Stephens, the battery FDC successfully accomplished its mission. Charlie Battery was located about 1000 yards behind several of the larger forts of the Maginot line. The battery was subjected to intermittent shelling, but no damage was incurred. The remainder of the battalion had moved to the Metz sector and was firing constantly on targets at Malmaison, Gravelotte, St. Hubert, Moscou Farm, Armanvillers, Champenois, and Forts Jeanne D'Arc, Lorraine and Driant.

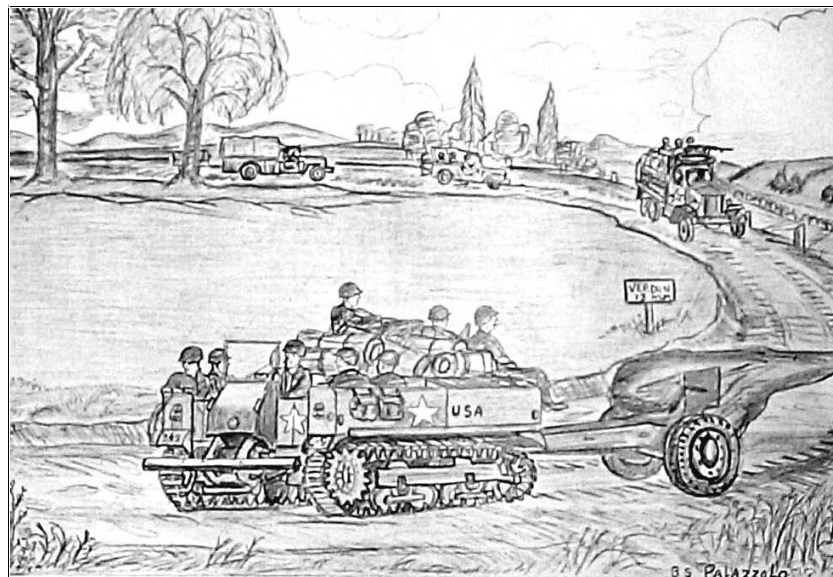
Beginning the 27th, the battalion, with two batteries, was in position near Montois. From this position, we had the mission of general support and reinforcing the fires of the 343rd FA Battalion. C Battery was relieved of its assignment at Marspich and returned to the battalion to occupy a position area at Malancourt. The first platoon D Battery, 537th AAA Battalion was attached as air defense for the 345th.

During October, the battalion remained in position in the Montois sector generally supporting the attack for the town of Mazierres les Metz. D Battery, a battery of 10.5cm German howitzers, was used extensively and many rounds of German ammunition were sent back to the original owners via their own weapons. The position areas were not too good. However, after a few days work on the part of everyone, the firing batteries had positions that were suitable for any type of action. Large gun pits were dug and afforded plenty of protection for the howitzers and crews. Behind the pits, the crews placed their dugouts. Electricity was available in some cases and C Battery had lights, radios, and heat in every section and was given a special commendation from General Bixby, CG 90th Div-Arty. The fight for Mazierres was long, tough and bitter. This industrial city had many factories and masonry buildings which provided excellent sites for defense; so it became a vital hinge in the defense of Metz. The enemy elected to defend Mazierres to the last man.

The fight progressed: the Infantrymen had to move from house-to-house, fighting every step of the way. Many times there were Americans in one room of a building and Germans in another. The Germans had also installed many fortifications throughout the town, so 8 inch howitzers and self-

propelled Long Toms were brought in to aid the infantry. Our battalion, with its attached batteries of 8 inch howitzers, 10.5 cm German howitzers, and a battery of 240 mm howitzers, fired daily into the defenses in and around the city of Mazieres. Observation points were manned by the battalion observers who were situated so that the town could be observed from three sides. Firing was continuous throughout the battle; the batteries were constantly busy.

Several enemy batteries which were in position near Mazierres were fired upon by air and ground observers. In one case, five of our batteries fired a time-on-target mission on one of them. Krauts themselves were firing. No more fire came from that battery. Four more battery positions were fired upon and hit heavily.



METZ – TO – SAAR

Mazierres finally fell after hard house-to-house fighting. Our Battalion remained in position near Montois until the 1st of November when the 90th Division was relieved by the newly arrived 95th Infantry Division, We retired to a rest and training area near Avillers. Just as it looked as though we were in for a real training period, schedule and all, we were alerted for movement. We were ready to go, for our motors and material had received a thorough going over, and our billets were French farm houses with the habitual manure pile in the front yard. We felt that the war had not been going on very fast while we rested.

Our observers were well acquainted with the Moselle River after having observed it for several days from observation posts in the Maginot line near Thionville. Now we found that the 90th was to cross that river and surround Metz by meeting the 5th Division 15 km east of the city. With the utmost secrecy the 345th made a night, blackout march of 30 miles on November 5th to the vicinity of Boust. Here the Battalion took up well camouflaged positions in the woods. Vehicles were kept in position and movement was kept to a minimum until the morning of the crossing. At 0330 on the morning of November 9th the assault boats started across the River. Canonners were standing by and at 0350, when the element of surprise was lost and the Heinie's new that we were coming, they started firing in support of the crossing. By six in the morning 249 rounds had been fired at Basse-Ham and the surrounding area. Our firing continued constantly in support of the hard pressed Infantrymen who were having to fight the flooded river as well as the enemy. The Moselle was having one all its worst floods in years and the bridges would not stay in; the combination of high water and continuous shelling prevented any successful bridging operation.

All ammunition and supplies had to go over in boats and the situation was critical. Some badly needed medical supplies and explosives were flown over and dropped by our liaison pilots who flew into small arms range to accomplish their mission. Finally a bridge was finished across the turbulent Moselle. The approaches to the bridge, however, were underwater; and ordinary vehicles could not make the crossing.

The 345th came to the rescue. Our tractors worked long hours night and day to tow loaded supply trailers across the flooded bridge. The badly needed supplies were delivered to the infantry. Major Guthrie supervised the work and was awarded the Silver Star. T/5 Veriegge received the Silver Star; also Captain Thomas, Sgt. Ernst, and T/5's Ruiter, Hiemstra, Dougherty, and Kikoski received the Bronze Star for their excellent work.

After super-human work by all of the members of the Division, the enemy cracked and was forced to pull back on the high ground overlooking the river.

On the afternoon of the 13th Colonel Norris led his reconnaissance party into a boat and crossed the Moselle through the artificial smokescreen to make a foot reconnaissance of the position which the battalion would occupy the next day. On the morning of November 14th the 345th crossed the river and prepared for action in the town of Koenigsmacker. Our battalion CP was in the railroad station. That night the town was shelled heavily and the CP building received a hit and several other near misses. One incoming shell set a Service Battery ammunition truck on fire in the rear of the building. Sgt. Batinovich, Cpl. McDarment, Cpl. Finegan, and Private Carlson, of Service Battery extinguished the fire and later were awarded the Bronze Star Medals for their act.

We occupied the Koenigsmacker position for four days while the Germans slowly retreated. 90th Doughboys fought their way forward across the heavily mined fields and the pillbox studded terrain, toward Metz for a juncture with 5th division, We fired heavily all the time on targets picked up by our observers. At night our interdiction fire crashed into road junctions, towns, and enemy battery positions.

November 17 found us on the road again. Passing around Fort Koenigsmacker we dropped trails rapidly – first near Valmestroff, then Metzeresche, Metzervisse, Vigy, and finally Laneauville as our infantry met the 5th Division and sealed off the escape routes for any Krauts left in Metz. There were some left. The first two nights in position we spent catching prisoners. Our alert guards picked up the bewildered Wehrmacht and SS troops whenever they entered our areas. Our haul for the two nights was around 50 prisoners, most of them collected by B and C Batteries.

During our fighting around the Moselle, rain fell continually. Without our M5 tractors, it would have been impossible to move out of the mud in which we often found ourselves. Time and again our competent drivers and their tractors saved the day for us. It was a common occurrence for our drivers to move us from one mud hole to the next mud hole and then take their tractors off to help one of our 105 battalions make a displacement.

With Metz in American hands, the 90th was off to the Saar River and the Siegfried Line. We followed the path of the 10th Armored Division which had crossed the Moselle on our bridgehead and turned east. The 345th moved to La Croix and then to Grindorff where we fired heavily at targets just short of the Saar. We were about to enter Germany: our observers were already there.

The 29th of November was the big day. The 345th entered Germany for the first time. That night the Heinies gave us such a hot reception that we almost wished we hadn't. In the afternoon incoming shells began to whistle. As usual, one of the first shells hit the Officers' latrine (how that thing did draw fire)! Baker, Able and Headquarters caught the bulk of the fire. That night, after everyone in the CP had gone to sleep except the night crew, the Krauts got the range and threw a round almost in the window of the room in which the fire direction crew was sleeping. The shell tore the wall out completely. Freakishly, no one was hurt, although until we dug the crew out from under the ruins, there were a few anxious moments. Corporal Spear provided the most amusing incident as he was being dragged feet first from the debris. Complained Corporal Spear, "Take it easy! Do you want to hurt somebody?"

Then came December. On the 3rd we moved across the anti-tank ditch to Gerlfangen. The division was planning to force a crossing of the Saar River and crack through the Siegfried Line in the vicinity of Dillingen. For the crossing the battalion moved to Guisingen. Very little firing was done from this position until 0415 on the 6th of December when our infantry stormed across the river in assault boats into the pillboxes on the opposite shore. Before daylight our doughboys had gained a foothold in Dillingen and our observers, Lt. McAtee and Capt. Crenshaw, who crossed with the leading wave, were firing. From the first the fight was hot and heavy. Enemy shell fire made bridge construction costly and almost impossible. Ferries provided the only means of getting tanks and TD's across the river. Flanking fire from bypassed pill boxes prevented reserves from reaching the assault troops during daylight. Lt. McAtee and Captain Crenshaw fired on pillboxes to their front, rear, and flanks. Capt. Crenshaw knocked out several of the little forts by adjusting direct 155mm gun fire on them. Communication was a difficult problem for the attackers as wire would not stay in; many times the radios of the observers were the only means of communication for the bridgehead. Fanatical

counterattacks were beaten off several times daily by our sharp shooting infantryman. By the 22nd Dillingen was ours. The 345th had poured five thousand 100 pound shells in and around the town.

During those last few days we heard disturbing rumors that swiftly become facts. Up north of us in the Ardennes the Germans were counterattacking in strength. Other divisions nearby were moving north. The 3rd Army was moving north. Soon perhaps we too would go, but for the time being and 90th Division received orders to evacuate Dillingen and hold along the west bank of the Saar. The Infantry made sure that Dillingen would be of no use to the enemy even if they did reoccupy the town. Then our Doughs slipped back over the river under artillery cover. The 345th then moved to Betting.

Christmas day passed, and New Years found us still in position in Betting. We listened anxiously but calmly to the radio to find out how our troops in the Ardennes were doing. Snow was on the ground and the weather was getting colder. We figured that the 90th would soon join the other American divisions of the 3rd Army who were so valiantly attacking the "Bulge". Every now and then low flying enemy planes would come in over our area and strafe or bomb. One dropped an egg in the C Battery area to cover up a tractor with dirt. Lt. Buntain brought down an ME 109 as it flew over his machine gun near Waldwisse.



