

CAMPAIGN OF THE RHINELAND (Part I)



The war of pursuit was at an end. The Germans had reached the fringe of their prepared positions and were now ready to extract a heavier price for advances. Enemy defenses in this area consisted of a concrete wall 20 by 30 feet forming the first fortification line. In front of this wall a strong outpost was maintained, manned by young, fanatical officer candidate school members. Initial attacks by the Regiment against this strong line resulted in heavy casualties and made it plain that a major effort would be required to break through. Weighing the cost of such an operation against the immediate strategic advantage that would be gained, brought the decision by Division that the Regiment would remain in its present general position and serve as a containing force.

The next 16 days saw savage artillery and mortar duels and aggressive patrolling by both sides, but no major offensive action. In addition to the almost constant artillery and mortar fire which the men were subjected to, the rainy, cool weather was a factor to be reckoned with, causing much discomfort and privation for the men who had to sit for days in rain-drenched foxholes.

By the 1st of October, plans were being made for an attack against the town of Maiziere-Les-Metz to the southeast. Capture of this strategic little town would allow a flanking of the enemy positions and place the Regiment in an excellent position to force the withdrawal from the fortified line. After the clearing and occupation of the large slag pile just northwest of the town by elements of the 1st and 2nd Battalions on the 3rd, the 2nd Battalion launched its attack against Maiziere-Les-Metz on the 7th. Almost half of the town was overrun before resistance stiffened and the fighting developed into a house to house affair. The Germans, fully realizing the strategic importance of this town, had orders to defend each house to the last man and this, precisely, is what they did during the next 22 days. Mines and booby traps were in every house, and artillery and mortar fire literally poured down day and night. Every weapon in the arsenal, including satchel charges and 105 and 155 self-propelled guns, were used against the stubborn defenders. It was not until the 29th, after the town had been reduced to rubble, that the 1st and 3rd Battalions by coordinated assault succeeded in overrunning the town and liquidating the defending German Garrison. During the morning of this day, Colonel Barth was seriously wounded while observing the progress of the attack from a front line position. Command of the entire operation was then assumed by Lt. Col. John H. Mason, 3rd Battalion Commander, until the following day when Colonel Julian H. George arrived to take command of the Regiment.

The loss of Colonel Barth was sorely felt by the entire Regiment. His keen judgment, tactical skill, and employment of the principles of common sense, had been directly responsible for the many successes of the Regiment carried out with an absolute minimum loss of life. The evacuation of Colonel Barth marked the loss by the Regiment of its finest soldier.

The close-in fighting for this town had been savage and not without its price in blood. During the 27 day battle a total of 552 casualties, including 51 dead, was suffered. Enemy losses of crack troops drawn from the Metz area were estimated to be much higher. At this time, the fortress city of Metz was under heavy siege by other Third Army Divisions, and enemy resistance west of the Moselle was undergoing the process of rapid elimination.

On the 1st of November, the Regiment was relieved by the 377th of the 95th Division and moved back to the Mercy le Bas, France for a short period of training and rehabilitation. This relief had been well earned by men who had continually occupied heavily contested front-line positions, for a period of over 60 days.

It was pouring rain and miserably cold the night of the 7th when the Regiment began its shuttle movement to the northeast. The 90th Division had been selected to establish a bridgehead over the Moselle River. This was considered a major task as it was known that the Germans maintained formidable defenses in this area and were prepared to defend them to the last. The French Maginot Line began on the eastern bank.

Following the assault crossing of the 358th and 359th before dawn on the 9th, the 357th crossed during daylight on the same day at Cattenom in the 358th sector and began its push inland. The men were fighting under terrific handicaps and against fanatical resistance. The heavy rains had swollen the river to many times its normal width, and constant enemy mortar and artillery fire had prevented the construction of a bridge across the raging stream. All supplies, therefore, had to be ferried across and hand carried to the front. Bedrolls and blankets

were not included in these supplies and the rain-soaked men spent the miserable nights in the open without even so much as an overcoat. The wooded hills up which the men had to attack were covered by some of the heaviest enemy mortar and artillery concentrations of the war. Mostly shells which fell were tree burst, making their effect more deadly. A shell which detonated in a treetop can make a whole squad casualties in one clean sweep. Moreover, the Regimental sector included all the Maginot Line fortifications in this area. Although these outmoded fortresses were for the most part facing the wrong direction, they served as an excellent protection for the enemy machine guns and for belt-fed, automatic 75mm guns being used by the Germans.

Day after day new heroism cropped out. Enemy entrenchments dug in on the slopes of the steep wooded hills were overrun and the defenders annihilated in hand to hand combat. The advance had carried the attackers out of range of the guns on the west bank of the river, so most of these attacks were made without benefit of artillery support. Rifles and hand grenades are the weapons used in this fight. This is one of the ways in which the infantry is obliged to carry its share of the burden of fighting and winning a war.

By the 17th, the Regiment had broken through the entire enemy defense line, turned south, and in two days it closed up to the Nied River in the vicinity of Brecklange. Here the advance was halted on order. The crossing of the Moselle River by the 90th Division brought the personal commendation of the Third Army Commander, General George S. Patton, Jr., and was described by him as a feat of military arms unsurpassed.

After enjoying a thanksgiving turkey dinner on the 24th, the Regiment moved by truck to an assembly area to the northeast near Colmen. It was in this assembly area near Neunkirchen that the first elements of the Regiment, Company "A", set foot on German soil.

On the 26th, the 3rd Battalion attacked the town of Furweiler and ran into stiff opposition and fire from all types of weapons. By dark, however, this Battalion succeeded in taking the town, along with 107 prisoners. Furweiler was thus the first German town to be occupied in force by the Regiment. It was here that the first artillery fire from Siegfried Line emplacements on the east bank of the Saar River was received.

The mission was now to clear the entire west bank of the Saar River. Accordingly, when other elements of the Division on the right flank came up online with the 357th on the 29th, the advance to the east and southeast was resumed. Resistance in the form of mine fields, heavy artillery fire, and rearguard infantry action was encountered, but by the 3rd the Regiment had closed up to the Saar River. During this operation, the most intense artillery shelling thus far experienced by the Regiment was undergone by elements of the 1st Battalion when over 200 rounds fell on front-line positions in less than 16 minutes.

The next mission was no secret or surprise – to make an assault crossing of the Saar. On the eastern bank of this swift running stream began the first Siegfried Line pillboxes, and the operation promised to be a trying affair.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions moved across in assault boats before dawn on the 6th of December and advanced rapidly inland against surprisingly little organized resistance. The coming of dawn, however, brought fire from the enemy-manned pillboxes in the rear which had been bypassed by the advance units during darkness. The enemy artillery and mortar barrage, directed against the crossing site and the entire bridgehead, which was to last for the next sixteen days, also increased in intensity. Although this operation was not the costliest in battle casualties, it was certainly the most trying from the standpoint of human suffering and mental anguish. As during the Moselle crossing, nature had not befriended the attacking infantrymen. Heavy rains turned the eastern bank of the river into a sea of mud for nearly a mile inland. The entire area was literally studded with the enemy pillboxes and advances were not measured in feet or yards but in the number of pillboxes taken. The supply problem was the most difficult ever experienced by the Regiment. The idea of building a bridge across the swift stream was abandoned after the third day because of continuous heavy enemy fire on the crossing site and continued flooded state of the river. For many days the men lived and fought on one-third "K" ration units daily and the only water for many came from many shell holes and ditches. The weather remained cold and wet and losses from "trench foot" were almost unbelievably high.

The enemy began to counterattack immediately in the Regimental sector, the left flank of the Division, in an effort to turn the flank of the bridgehead and liquidate the entire infantry elements of the Division. In spite of the fact that the 357th was outnumbered three to one and fighting without armor, the men held firm and took a huge toll of the fanatical Germans. Only a handful of reinforcements was being received, and each day saw the Regimental strength become smaller and smaller.

By the 20th, the great German counteroffensive through the Ardennes Forest, which had begun on the 16th, was still gaining ground. It was apparent that the Germans had massed their reserves for this, in their final offensive effort. If this thrust could be decisively crushed, the war in the west would assume new aspects. With the left flank of the German bulge only a few miles to the north, the Division bridgehead across the Saar had lost its strategic significance. Consequently, on the afternoon of the twentieth, orders came to prepare to withdraw to the west bank of the river.

During the early morning hours of the 22th, the Regiment completed its withdrawal. So well planned and executed was this operation, that the enemy did not suspect that a withdrawal was being effected. Counterattacks were made against a small covering shell during the night of the withdrawal, but such stiff resistance was put up by the small group that no hint was given that the positions were not fully occupied.

This operation was considered to be the most trying and gallant engagement ever completed by the 357th. During the fifteen hectic days, 35 pillboxes had been destroyed, over 600 prisoners taken, and an estimated total of 2000 casualties inflicted on the enemy. Every man in the Regiment had played his part, either in the line or by serving on the carrying parties which had been so methodically decimated by the constant enemy shelling. Particular commendation also goes to the men of the Anti-Tank Company and the battalion anti-tank platoons who filled the gaps in the line during the last trying days and provided the screen for the withdrawal.

There were, at this time, reports of a German buildup in the vicinity of Merzig, and a thrust south by the Germans would not be unlikely. Consequently, the Division went into a temporary defensive position along a general line running from Merzig northwest to the Moselle River at Beache. The 357th was in reserve, and on the 22nd moved 25 miles back into France to an area in the vicinity of the Monneren. Counter-attack plans were prepared to enable the Regiment to meet promptly any enemy penetration of the Division line.

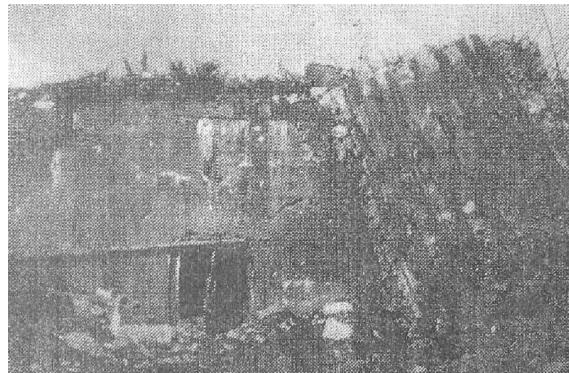
Although the situation was tactical, advantage was taken of the time to get some much needed rest. Hundreds of new reinforcements were received and were given valuable combat training at the 90th Division training center, set up several miles to the rear.

On Christmas day, every man enjoyed a fine turkey dinner, the 2nd within a month. This was a day for thanksgiving too, for other soldiers north were not so fortunate.

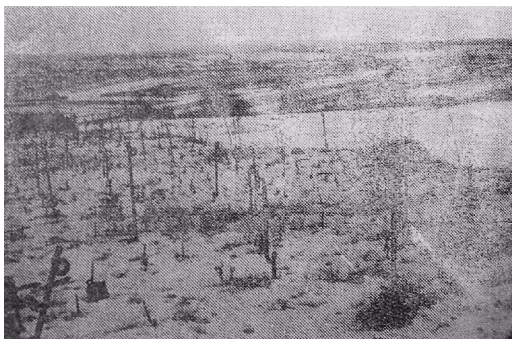
By the 5th of January, it was evident that the German threat from the north would not materialize. Defensive ideas were scrapped and thoughts turned to the offensive again. The Regiment was now up to full strength again and ready to go in every respect.



The swollen Moselle, the approach to the river



A demolished Maginot fort near Koenigsmacher

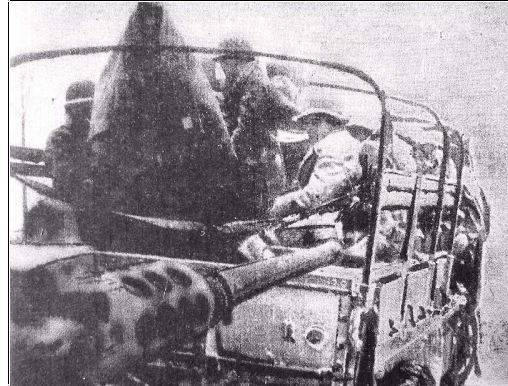


Mined barbed wire entanglements which covered approaches to Forts were frequent in the area



Smoke pots helped screen the Saar crossing site, Taken from hill west of river, above Siersdorf

CAMPAIGN OF THE ARDENNES



Bitter cold and heavy snow marked
the movement to the Ardennes

On the 6th, the Division moved northeast into Luxembourg to take its place in the Battle of the Bulge. The 357th moved into an assembly area near Bavigne and immediately began making preparations for an attack against the Germans who had just a few short days ago boasted that they'd be back in Paris soon.

The attack to the north was begun on the 9th and met with immediate success. The enemy had strong forces in this area, but evidence of their disorganization was apparent. The advance of the Regiment to the north threatened the supply and withdrawal routes to the northeast, and as a result, many of the shivering Germans gave up, while others fought on to the bitter hand. On the 11th, the Regiment took over 1200 prisoners. This was particularly gratifying as many of them came from the German 5th Paratroop Division, the same outfit encountered by the 357th at Beau Coudray many months before.

The weather was extremely cold and nearly a foot of snow covered the ground. If the soldier was careless with his feet, he stood an excellent chance of losing them from "trench foot" or frostbite. The men were still wearing the same type of leather shoe which they had worn during the warm summer months, and it simply was not adequate footgear for soldiers who had to remain exposed to zero weather. Evacuations from exposure were heavy.

By now the Germans were attempting to pull as much of their force as possible out of the "Bulge". To protect this withdrawal, the enemy maintained a shell of rear guard defenders around the diminishing perimeter of his salient. To break through this shell and get at the retreating columns was now the job.

On the 21st, the Regiment moved into the famous city of Bastogne, Belgium, and attacked to the northeast the following day, capturing the town of Asselborn. A crossing of the Clerf River was forced on the 23rd, and by the 26th, the Regiment had closed up to the Our

River, after smashing through tough opposition in the towns of Heinersheid, Lausdorn, and Binsfeld.



German prisoners from the 5th Paratroop Division at Doncols



357th Doughs moving into position for attack



An outpost near Doncols