

5. *Wind-up of the Palatinate Campaign*

Sweeping eastward from the Nahe, XII Corps' forward units burst out onto the plain of the Rhine and headed for two important German cities on the West Bank of the river, – Mainz and Worms. It also headed for a certain little village, Oppenheim, fated to be more important to the Muse of History than either of these.

"Although the enemy attempted to throw up a line of defense west of Mainz," says the Third Army After Action Report "to form a bridgehead for the withdrawal of his troops across the Rhine, he never succeeded. What was intended to be an organized withdrawal quickly became a rout, the enemy's fleeing columns being attacked constantly from the air and cut to ribbons by the Third U.S. Army's armor. Infantry mopping-up teams followed closely behind the tanks, taking thousands of prisoners in the wake of the charging armor. The German First and Seventh Armies were decimated, with a loss of 81,692 prisoners of war, and all territory to the Rhine River as far south as Speyer was cleared."

The two critical days which saw the end of this campaign were 20-21 March 45, and from the Corps After Action Report comes details of who captured what, when and with which:

"20 March 1945. a. The 362nd Group, XIX TAC, flew 16 missions with excellent results reported. The XII Corps continued the advance to the east with infantry clearing the enemy from the zone, following the advancing armor.

b. CCB, 4th Armored Division, attacked at 0600A. It cleared Offenheim, but ran into an enemy force of 4 SPs, one tank, and 100 infantry at Waldheim. The resistance collapsed quickly and at 1200A CCB had cleared Freimersheim and was passing through Alzey. At 1720A it entered Worms and spent the rest of the day mopping up. At 1730A contact was made with the 11th Armored Division. CCA also moved out at 0600A, cleared Flonheim, Albig, Monsheim, moving through Alzey. Resistance was light. The 10th Infantry, moving in rear of these two columns, opened its regimental CP at Alzey and assembled in that vicinity. CCR move to Wendelsheim. The 4th Armored Division CP opened in Frei-Laubersheim. The 90th Infantry Division jumped off towards Mainz at 0700A. No opposition was received until troops reached the high ground overlooking the city. The 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, at 1700A was in the Oberulmer woods and moved off from the high ground northeast of Mainz. The 2nd Battalion took Schwabenheim and Gros Winterheim. The 359th Infantry moved without opposition until the 3rd Battalion entered Nieder Oln where it was subjected to small arms fire and 88 mm fire. At 1215A an artillery concentration was placed on the town and at 1600A the town was secured. The 2nd Battalion met and overcame opposition in Zarnheim, and at 1700A was in Ebersheim. The 357th Infantry moved up and assembled the 1st Battalion in Vendersheim, the 2nd Battalion at Wolfsheim, 3rd Battalion at Parenheim. At 1300A the division CP opened at Spendlingen. Enemy in the 5th Infantry zone still consisted of small disorganized groups. The 3rd Battalion, 11th Infantry, marched from Bad Kreuznach to Worrstadt. The 1st Battalion was in Rommersheim. The 2nd Battalion occupied Spiesheim and Ensheim. The 2nd Battalion and three Battalions of the 2nd Infantry moved out north of the Nahe River from Sobernheim and cleared their zone from Rehborn south and east to Oberhausen. The 2nd Battalion was assembled near Hallgarten. At 0900A, CCB, 11th Armored Division moved out from the high ground east of Rockenhausen and by 1200A had entered Dreisen. The column there turned south, clearing Collheim and several small towns, reaching Offsteind by 1750A against light resistance. By dark the column was near Klein Nidesheim. CCA cleared Marienthal and Dennenfels where it received some AT fire and mortar fire. It reached Driesen at 1500A. Here CCA turned north and took Albisheim, Marxheim, and at 1730A advanced through Monsheim. There was considerable enemy air activity over the zone of the 11th Armored Division; three planes were knocked down by the AA units. The division CP opened at Winnweiler at 1545A. CCR assembled at Rockenhausen. At

0915A the 89th Infantry Division CP opened at Rhannen. The 353rd Infantry and the 354th Infantry continued following up the 11th Armored Division. The 2nd Battalion, 353rd Infantry, reached Barnweiler. The 3rd Battalion occupied Meddersheim, the 2nd Battalion reached Barmweiler. Little opposition was encountered. The 354th Infantry was in the vicinity of Becherbach at the close of the day. At 2000A the 417th RCT of the 76th Infantry Division had completed the relief of the 2nd Cavalry Squadron, at which time the division passed to VIII Corps control. By 1730A the 304th Infantry had cleared the road from Mulheim to Buchendeuren against no resistance. The 2nd Cavalry Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Group, after being relieved by the 417th Infantry, assemble that Warmsroth. The 42nd Cavalry Squadron crossed the Nahe River and screened the left flank of the 90th Infantry Division from Bingen to Gaulzesheim, where contact was made with a 354th Infantry, 89th Infantry Division, during the night.

"There was a slight increase in enemy artillery activity in the 4th Armored, 5th Infantry, and 90th Infantry Division zones, especially in the bridge site area at Bretzenheim. The rest of the Corps front was quiet. ..."

"21 March 1945. a. The Corps continued clearing the enemy in its zone to the Rhine River. Excellent weather prevailed with good air support by the 262nd Group, XIX TAC.

b. The 2nd Cavalry Group cleared its area along the west bank of the Rhine River from Bingen to Rudenheim. Bingen was cleared by 1100A. At 0100A CCA, 4th Armored Division, joined CCB in Worms. After being relieved by the 3rd Battalion, 10th Infantry, both commands pushed to the north to clear their respective zones. At 1700A CCA reported its zone clear. Little opposition was received in mopping up. At 1200A the 3rd Battalion, 10th Infantry, was in Worms, 1st Battalion in Bermesheim and a 2nd Battalion in Weinheim and Mauchenheim. The 90th Infantry Division received a counter attack during the night of 20-21 March in the vicinity of the woods near Hohnheim vicinity of (M3151). At 0400A the attacks were repulsed and the offensive was resumed. Both the 359th Infantry and 358th Infantry had heavy fighting throughout the day in a coordinated attack on Mainz. By dark they held the high ground immediately around the town and were fighting their way nearer. At 1100A the division CP opened at Nieder Saulheim. The 5th Infantry Division spent a quiet day. In the 11th Infantry the 1st Battalion moved to Offenheim and the 3rd Battalion to Nierstein. The division CP moved to Wendesheim. The 11th Armored Division continued to clear to the Rhine River in its zone, mopping up scattered strong points. Early in the day CCB attacked the airfield southwest of Worms and by 0910A had taken it against light opposition. Other elements of CCB worked towards the Rhine River between Worms and Petersau and at 1045A were 1 km from the river. After clearing the airfield, CCB moved into Worms and relieved the elements of the 4th Armored Division remaining there. CCA remained in its position. At 1555A CCR had cleared Reudolskirchen and Ratskirchen. During the day CCR cleared 22 towns west of the Glan River, taking 2,210 PWs. By night the division had cleared to the Rhine in its zone and had contact with a 4th Armored Division on its left and the 12th Armored Division of XX Corps on the right. Little activity took place in the 89th Infantry Division zone. The pocket southwest of Sobernheim was cleared. The dispositions at the close of the day were: 553rd Infantry, 1st Battalion at Kirschoth, 3rd Battalion at Meddersheim; the 354th Infantry at Jechenbach, Hoppstadten, and Schweinscheid. During the day the VIII-XII Corps boundary was changed to give Bingen to XII Corps and Simmern and Treis to VIII Corps.

c. Enemy artillery activity was light over the Corps front. Only five counterbattery missions were fired.

d. Operational Directive No 92 was issued. The 5th Infantry Division was directed to move all elements into new zone, relieve elements of the 90th Infantry Division and 4th Armored Division in zone without delay, and be prepared to cross the Rhine. The 90th Infantry Division, with the 2nd Cavalry Group attached, was directed to simulate a crossing northwest of Mainz on Corps order, protect the left flank, and maintain contact with VIII Corps. The 4th Armored Division, after clearing the area

assigned in Operation Directive No 91, was to hold the West Bank of the Rhine until relieved by the 5th Infantry Division and XX Corps, at which time it would assemble in Corps reserve. The 11th Armored Division was to clear its area, hold the West Bank of the Rhine, and, upon relief by XX Corps, assemble in Corps reserve. The 89th Infantry Division was directed to assemble, prepare either to relieve the 4th Armored Division West of Gernsheim to cross the Rhine River, or to follow the 5th Infantry Division across. The TDs, chemical units, and field artillery units were regrouped. ...

"The Corps now controlled the West Bank of the Rhine River from Bingen to Worms. ..."

Conditions along the roads of the Palatinate as the helter-skelter race for the Rhine went on are suggested by two press releases preserved in Lt Henry Murray's PRO file, and one interview with an artilleryman secured by the corps history team after the war. The first press release is the final word on a condition of "fluid" warfare:

"WITH THE XII CORPS IN GERMANY – during the dash to the Rhine XII Corps Artillery Wire Officer Capt Roland Jensen of Portland, Oregon, jeeped up to contact front-line units.

"After passing several spots still warm from enemy actions, Capt Jensen dismounted to proceed on foot. Turning off the road, he saw a bare headed, barefooted soldier in a pond, fishing nonchalantly.

"Hey!" Yelled the Captain, don't you know there's enemy around here?"

"No, it's safe enough; we're way behind the Kraut lines.' ...

The interview cited was with Sgt Nicholas Vergadamo, of the 731st Field Artillery Battalion:

On 20 March 45, Able Battery was with the forward elements of the combat command of the 4th Armored Division. We had a couple of men from fire direction center working with the battery to compute firing data. the remainder of the Battalion was waiting behind in Volxheim. We went into Heimersheim, preceded by a company of armored infantry. The armored elements stayed in the main road and went right through the town without stopping. We were the first American troops to stop in the town, a community of 1500 or 2000 inhabitants. We didn't see many people walking in the streets few white flags. The BC (Battery Commander), Capt Connor, went after the burgomeister, and told him he would give him half an hour to get all the firearms turned in. Within about 15 minutes they were all in. The Town Crier, some big guy, gave the call. The town bell was wrong to alert people. The people were told not to congregate in the streets and they didn't. They were told to tear down the road blocks at the entrances to town. ... in this position we picked up a 15-year-old Wehrmacht member, of the 15th Panzer Division. He was scared and crying, and stayed with us that night. This boy told us, as most enemy soldiers, that they didn't fear our infantry, but they will they were terribly afraid of our artillery and airplanes. We were told by the BC that we faced a long trip – we were going into Pffedersheim to shoot into Worms as direct support of the fourth Armored. We took off for Pffedersheim about 11 o'clock at night, and arrived there at Don. The move was about 90 miles. Hundreds of prisoners were clogging roads, waving white handkerchiefs, asking to be picked up. The 4th Armored, nobody, would take them – and they were told to keep on the main road, and keep walking back until somebody did take them. Later on we found out that someone came up behind the armored and established cages, huge fields for the Heinies. ..."

The "someone" Sgt Birgadamo referred to was, of course, XX Corps. How this worked, at least on one occasion in the Palatinate, is revealed in the other press release cited above, which appeared in the *Stars & Stripes*, 31 March 45:

"WITH THE XX CORPS IN GERMANY – Lt Col unique J. Scanlan, of Edwardsville, Illinois, is the XX Corps Provost Marshall. On 20 March Lt Col Scanlan received an urgent call to come and get

5000 Germans who had decided war was not for them. The PWs were 25 miles ahead. Only 12 men and two trucks were available for the job. It didn't add up, so Lt Col Scanlon gave an order:

"25 miles ahead we have 5000 PWs waiting. Go up and build a cage around them!"

Men in XII Corps, and the rest of the American Army so cruelly disappointed in the previous fall and winter, began to dare to take hope again that the end of the war was in sight. This certainly looked like the beginning of the end, anyway. It certainly looked like that "Destruction of the German Armies in Western Europe" which the High Brass had been saying all along was necessary before the war would be won and we could all go home. And once again, the voices of those who should know were raised in the optimistic statements, though perhaps somewhat more cautiously than had been the case during the previous September, when even the most famous statesmen had been predicting the eminent conclusion of the Battle of Europe.

Gen Patton in a special order to officers and men of Third Army and XIX TAC, dated 23 March 45, summed up the results of the recent operations:

"In the period from 29 January to 22 March 45, you have wrested 6,484 miles of territory from the enemy. You have taken 3,072 cities, towns and villages, including among the former: Trier, Koblenz, Bingen, Worms, Mainz, Kaiserslautern and Ludwigshafen.

"You have captured 140,112 enemy soldiers, and have killed or wounded an additional 99,000, thereby eliminating practically all of the German 7th and 1st Armies. History records no greater achievement in so limited time.

"This great campaign was only made possible by your disciplined valor, unswerving devotion to duty, coupled with the unparalleled audacity and speed of your advance on the ground; while from the air, the peerless fighter-bombers kept up a relentless round-the-clock attack upon the disorganized enemy.

"The world rings with your praises; better still, Gen Montgomery, Gen Eisenhower, Gen Bradley have all personally commended you. The highest honor I have ever attained is that of having my name coupled with yours in these great events.

"Please accept my heartfelt admiration and thanks for what you have done. ..."

And Gen Eisenhower, in the unshakable confidence of hindsight, was to put it with maximum brevity and impact in his postwar report in the Combined Chiefs of Staff, 13 July 45, when he classed this campaign as one of the three crucial operations of the war:

"The third decisive phase of the campaign (for Europe) consisted of the battles west of the Rhine during February and March. Once again the enemy played into our hands by his insistence upon fighting the battle where he stood. In the lowland country between the Rhine and the Meuse, in the Eifel, and in the Saar, the armies which had been intended to defend Germany were shattered beyond recovery. The potential barrier of the Rhine lay practically undefended before us, and from that time onward there was no German force in existence capable of halting our forward march. The war was won before the Rhine was crossed."

THE NINETIETH TOOK THE LARGEST CITY IN THE PALATINATE - MAINZ



(1) After stiff resistance on 21 March, the "Tough 'Ombres" of the 90th Infantry Division cleared Mainz, Germany, on the day that the pictures on this page were taken, 22 March 45. These are men of a 2nd Battalion, 358th Infantry Regiment reconnoitering the rubble-filled streets of the city for remaining snipers. (2) Infantry and armor, 1st Battalion 359th Infantry Regiment and 773rd Tank Battalion advance within the city. (3) More of the 359th at work, in another part of the town. (4) Company B of the 359th, is here represented by Pfc. William Parker who is firing from a window in Mainz while Captain John R. Angell calls the shots.