

2. *The Fifth Infantry Division's Great Day*

Spearpoint of XII Corps for the Rhine Crossing was the 5th Infantry Division. Just as the Third Army Summary makes it clear who was doing the actual running with the ball, so the Corps After Action Report leaves no doubt which division had the stellar role in the crossing.

"At 2200A on 22 March the 5th Infantry Division, crossing in assault boats with the support of the 1135th Engineer Combat Group at Oppenheim, made the historic assault crossing of the Rhine... the first assault crossing of the Rhine River in military history. Despite the swiftness of the move, the heavy forward traffic on all roads, and the brief time for ground reconnaissance, the careful planning and long experience in river crossings bore fruit. The crossing was made so swiftly and smoothly that only a scattering of small arms and machine-gun fire was brought on the crossing troops. As the infantry crossed, bridging and ferrying equipment was assembled, and landing craft operated by attached Naval personnel were launched and ferried personnel and vehicles. Shortly after midnight of 23-24 March the 5th Infantry Division had a secure bridgehead, two bridges had been completed by the 1135th Engineer Combat Group, and the 4th Armored Division was moving to the crossing points. ..."

The tale of those dark initial hours which established the XII Corps bridgehead could not be better told than by reproducing the detailed account given in the 5th Infantry Division's own unit history, which also can serve to outline a model for all such infantry operations:

"At precisely 2145 hours 22 March 45, the 3rd Battalion's spearheading companies, I and K, moved down to the riverbank where 204th Engineer Battalion personnel awaited in readiness. Preparations functioned quickly, smoothly, and above all, quietly, as the assault teams were formed and loaded into the boat. K Company shoved off at 2230 and paddled across the 800 feet (at that point) river without a shot being fired from the enemy shore. In the first boat to reach the far bank were: K Company CO, 1st LT Irven Jacobs, Lt John A Mallow, Pfc William Hewitt, Pfc Vergil Miller, Pvt Theodore Strategos, Pvt Richard J Huiller, Pfc Arthur Juengel, Pvt John Surace, T/5 Richard E Rose and Pvt John L Paquitt. They were the first of the Division to cross the Rhine, and when the balance of K Company arrived on the East Bank, *it marked the first time in history that a crossing of the Rhine River had been forced by troops in assault boats.* As K Company hit the shore, a group of seven surprised Germans promptly surrendered and paddled themselves across the river without escort.

"Meanwhile, just as I Company, commanded by Capt Link, prepared to follow up K in crossing, heavy firing opened from the right flank where the 1st Battalion troops were simultaneously crossing approximately 700 yards down-stream at Oppenheim. It developed that B Company's 1st Platoon had been spotted by enemy machine gunners, who commenced firing while assault boats were yet in midstream. Regiment then advised 3rd Battalion that 1st Battalion would delay its crossing for 10 minutes, but Lt Col Birdsong, 3rd Battalion CO, decided to get I Company across anyway while all of K Company organized on the far shore. Along with I Company's first wave were Maj Stiller aide to Gen Patton, and Lt Cocke of the Air Force who went as observer with the infantry. A flurry of shellfire managed to partially silence enemy automatic weapons in the 1st Battalion sector, but this heavy firing also alerted the enemy along the entire regimental front, and as I Company neared the far shore it also received some heavy machine-gun fire. No casualties were incurred, but when L Company crossed in 3rd Battalion reserve 10 minutes later, personnel paddled under increasingly heavy small arms fire. Some infantrymen were wounded.

"During this time, 1st Battalion assault troops of A and B Companies were meeting with very heavy resistance in crossing approximately 700 yards South of the 3rd Battalion at Oppenheim. The

Rhine Crossing itself was a tribute to the courage of riflemen, for whom it was necessary to paddle 800 feet into the very teeth of the enemy fire. B Company under 1st Lt Bryant pulled abreast. When assault boats were eagerly beached on the hostile shore, enemy fire increased and included that of Panzerfausts. An example of what was required in order to establish and extend the 1st Battalion bridgehead is the action of B Company's 2nd Platoon which was reorganized and led by S/Sgt Foster Ferguson, who took over platoon leadership when the platoon sergeant became a casualty. Concentric rifle and rifle grenade fire alone punched a hole in the enemy's perimeter defense system which consisted of a strong line of machine-gun nests, but no pillboxes. Fierce small arms skirmishes raged for a half an hour. Temporarily, at least, enemy resistance reached fanatical proportions, with infantrymen of Ferguson's platoon firing directly into large rectangular foxholes to eliminate strongpoints. Deadly marching fire extended the bridgehead, and shortly thereafter the 1st Battalion struck inland. Pfc Paul Conn, Jr., B Company rifleman, remained behind to hold down an enemy machine gun nest that was bypassed. It was an all-night affair for Conn who was forced to dig in with his bare hands, for less than 30 yards away the enemy machine gun intermittently opened at anything that moved. 'I was tempted to swim back across the Rhine,' said Conn afterwards. Conn remained in a cramped position through the entire night, and when daybreak came he saw 10 Germans who comprised the machine-gun nest. Conn then attempted to work his M1, but it jammed. Finally in desperation he flung all caution to the winds, pulled out a hand grenade and rose before the enemy. Transfixed at the sight of a lone American menacingly coming toward them, the 10 Germans threw up their arms and surrendered. Thus ended Conn's ordeal in the last vestige of enemy resistance on the river's edge.

"Lt Col Birdsong, 3rd Battalion CO and Headquarters crossed the river at 2330 hours in the midst of a small arms engagement near the far shore, but at this time the bulk of enemy resistance was being concentrated against the 1st Battalion. All assault troops were across the river by now clearing last bits of enemy resistance from beyond the East riverbank, and the 11th CT's attack was beginning to take form as artillery liaison officers and forward observers were also across. Armor of Company A, 737th Tank Battalion and the 803rd TD Battalion were preparing to cross on motor barges and render direct support, along with amphibious tanks of the 748th Tank Battalion. Despite the intense small arms fire encountered by the 1st Battalion and some by the 3rd, it was evident that surprise had been achieved in the operation for the German artillery reaction did not come until 0030 hours on the following day – or two hours after the crossing had begun. Assault companies prepared to strike inland at the time enemy artillery commenced falling into the river and hitting both banks ineffectually. Approximately 50 rounds of shellfire, including that of self-propelled weapons, fell in the Oppenheim area, but crossing of supplies and additional troops continued. In Regimental reserve, 2nd Battalion was alerted and prepared to cross near Nierstein, follow-up and consolidate ground taken by the 3rd Battalion. The 10th Infantry Regiment prepared to follow into the 1st Battalion's bridgehead opposite Oppenheim to take up the Division's right sector.

"A Company of the 11th met with violent small arms fire as it sought to clear a group of buildings along the bridgehead's right flank. Some 20 prisoners were taken and 14 of the enemy were killed. In seizing the area 1st Lt Harry Kaylor, Executive Officer of D Company, evacuated wounded back across the river under fire.

"At midnight troops of the 10th moved in columns down to the river and at 0155 hours, 23 March, the crossing of the Regiment began with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions following after the 1st Battalion of the 11th at Oppenheim. The 7th Engineer Battalion handled the assault boats.

Across the river the 10th Regiment moved immediately to this southern flank eastward toward Leeshseim. Companies A and C of the 1st Battalion made contact by 0245 hours and moved out to

breast toward Erfelden. (1 2/3 miles SE Leesheim) Company C encountered some resistance from small arms upon approaching the objective, but the enemy force was incapable of halting to the advance, and the majority was soon taken prisoner.

"The last Battalion of the 10th Infantry was completely across by 0655 hours, and as the two regiments fanned out along the eastern bank, the U.S. Navy brought up landing craft to the West Bank and put them into the water. Combat engineer battalions of the 1135th Engineer Group constructed ferries and began building the Treadway Bridge. By 0700 hrs, the two regiments at all six battalions across, one ferry was working in the Landing Crafts, Vehicle-Personnel were scuttling back and forth carrying supplies.

"With all but sniper and some bypassed resistance broken in its bridgehead sector, the 1st Battalion continued the attack inland and struck northeast toward Geinsheim, Division objective No. 1. The axis of advance was the main road leading to Geinsheim, and all assaulting platoons with B Company on the left and A on the right, moved forward abreast deployed as skirmishers. A Company left its reserve platoon and Company CP in position at the farmhouse which it had previously cleared while a similar contingent of B Company was yet engaged in rounding up outflanked resistance. Company C in Battalion reserve also crossed the river. The going became very rough as the assault troops neared the road junction at about 1000 yards inland. Heavy small arms engagements took place and as units attained the road junction they emerged into a broad expanse of open terrain which afforded no cover or concealment. The advance continued along the main road for several yards when suddenly large concentrations of mortar fire showered the area. The enemy enjoyed unobstructed observation and illuminating 1st Battalion positions with flares. Shelling grew in intensity, and artillery and self-propelled weapons joined mortar fire in forcing both units from their course. Forward elements of both companies were by now pinned down and reluctant to go forward in the face of severe fire. Eight casualties were incurred as platoons milled about and herded together until T/Sgt Troy B Key, an 11th Infantry veteran and acting platoon leader of B Company, together with T/Sgt Brown, a platoon sergeant of A Company, rallied the men forward and out of bursting radius. Sgts Key and Brown moved about in the fragment infested area to direct the positioning of flank-covering machine-gun fire, then went forward to lead their respective units with shouts of 'Let's get them – keep going.' This resulted in a marching fire attack against violently resisting German infantry that employed very heavy Panzerfaust fire. The Battalion Aid Station, under Capt Scott, by now also had crossed the river and set up in a farmhouse along the riverbank. Although outnumbered, B and A Companies continued to advance towards Geinsheim and suffered no casualties in gaining several hundred yards. It was the opinion of all, that had the units not moved forward as they did, annihilation by terrific and accurate concentrations of enemy shellfire which followed would have been likely. B Company on the left flank, bore the brunt of an infantry attack which enemy launched from Geinsheim shortly thereafter. Fierce small arms (rifle fire, rifle grenades, hand grenades, and bazookas) engagements ensued at close range, and the line was defended through close coordination of A and B Companies. Lt Bryant of A Company and Lt Randle agreed that Geinsheim could be taken without further help. Despite the fact that 81 mm mortars, under artillery fire in rear positions could not render full support, the 1st Battalion inflicted severe losses on the enemy, while suffering miraculously light casualties (two wounded) itself in so fierce an engagement. The 19th Field Artillery fired heavily too, in supporting the defense and by 0400 hrs the enemy withdrew – presumably to Geinsheim where a 25 foot wide canal provided a defense to its eastern approaches. It was believed that enemy artillery was emplaced in the vicinity of Leesheim and Erfelden and these areas now became the targets for heavy counter-battery fire as laid down by Corps Artillery. Actually a 10th Infantry attack was now developing in that direction.

"Meanwhile, during the time of the 1st Battalion's bridgehead fight, the 11th Infantry's 3rd Battalion was involved in extending its bridgehead some 1000 yards to the north. By midnight the entire 3rd Battalion, less the rear CP Group, had crossed over into the bridgehead, with L Company receiving very heavy small arms fire as it crossed in Battalion reserve during the latter period. K Company began clearing the left half of the 3rd Battalion River area while I Company moved south to come near 1st Battalion troops on the right flank. K and I Companies quickly moved inland to secure 500 yards of depth on the left, and 300 yards on the right. T/Sgt Heber Braley, K Company platoon sergeant, stumbled into a large foxhole where four Germans were mapped. The Germans immediately gave up, inquiring if these were American paratroopers. Meanwhile, L Company in reserve mopped up all remaining resistance between K and I Companies along and beyond the shoreline.

"K Company sent two platoons North to secure the Southern tip of a small airfield by 0400 hours. Resistance was at first moderate, consisting mainly of strong small arms fire including that of Panzerfausts. A short while later some very close action developed at the edge of the airstrip in darkness, and in local engagements which resulted in the capture of T/Sgt Heber Braley, 1st Platoon Sergeant, and Lt Alexander G Booras, platoon leader. Realizing that disorganization at this time threatened the bridgehead's entire left flank, Lt William B Belchee, platoon leader, regained control of the situation by personally contacting remnants of both platoons. He moved beyond the enemy lines under heavy fire and reorganized the leaderless platoon. Meanwhile, a good number of men of this platoon taken cover in an air raid bunker, and were now surrounded. This information came from Sgt Clarence A Ritchie who was captured but later escaped. Sgt Ritchie also informed Lt Belchee that the enemy was preparing to launch a counterattack. Lt Belchee called to the rear for artillery fire which soon commenced to fall – just in time; for the enemy had attacked his positions. I Company meanwhile was ordered from its phase line on the extreme right flank – some 1500 yards distant – to move up to K Company's flank while L in reserve occupied I's former position. The switch occurred at the right moment for I Company, as it neared the designated flank, ran flush into a German company seeking to encircle K Company. Back at the airstrip, Lt Belchee built up a defensive line and together with his depleted unit fought off an attack by 60 enemy infantrymen who filled the airstrip with wild shrieks as they attacked. In this fierce small arms fight, K Company killed 20 and took 40 of the enemy breaking the attack. It must be remembered that this engagement actually took place behind enemy lines, for Lt Jacobs, K Company CO, simultaneously directed a minor action from his CP in the small town, but I Company by now went to work on the main enemy force along the right flank. An outline of the bridgehead operation at this time showed continuous action along the entire regiment front. With the 1st Battalion attacking Geinsheim at daybreak, and a 3rd Battalion reducing enemy resistance on the left half. K Company losses were four EM killed and seven EM wounded – evacuated. Others who at first were listed missing returned.

"When I Company encountered the German force which aspired to cut and encircle K Company, CO Capt Link directed that his 60 mm mortars and machine guns immediately be set up at forward points. Although positions were unorthodox, these tactics later proved invaluable because the enemy force immediately became pinned down by the sudden and accurate shelling. Sgt Joseph A Hartke, weapons section leader, zeroed in on the enemy while gunners Pfc John B Knight and Sgt Stanley A Valancius maintained a continuous barrage. All came under direct small arms fire with which the enemy resisted. No less than three enemy machine guns and 10 automatic rifle positions were accounted for by this devastating fire. I Company's machine guns were strategically set up to give the maximum of overhead fire, and this too, kept the enemy pinned down. Not long afterwards Germans were giving up in large numbers and by 0730 hours the entire enemy force had either been killed or captured. Seventy-six Germans and two officers were rounded up while at least 15 dead were counted on the field of battle. I Company suffered two killed in this engagement. Three I Company runners, Pfc

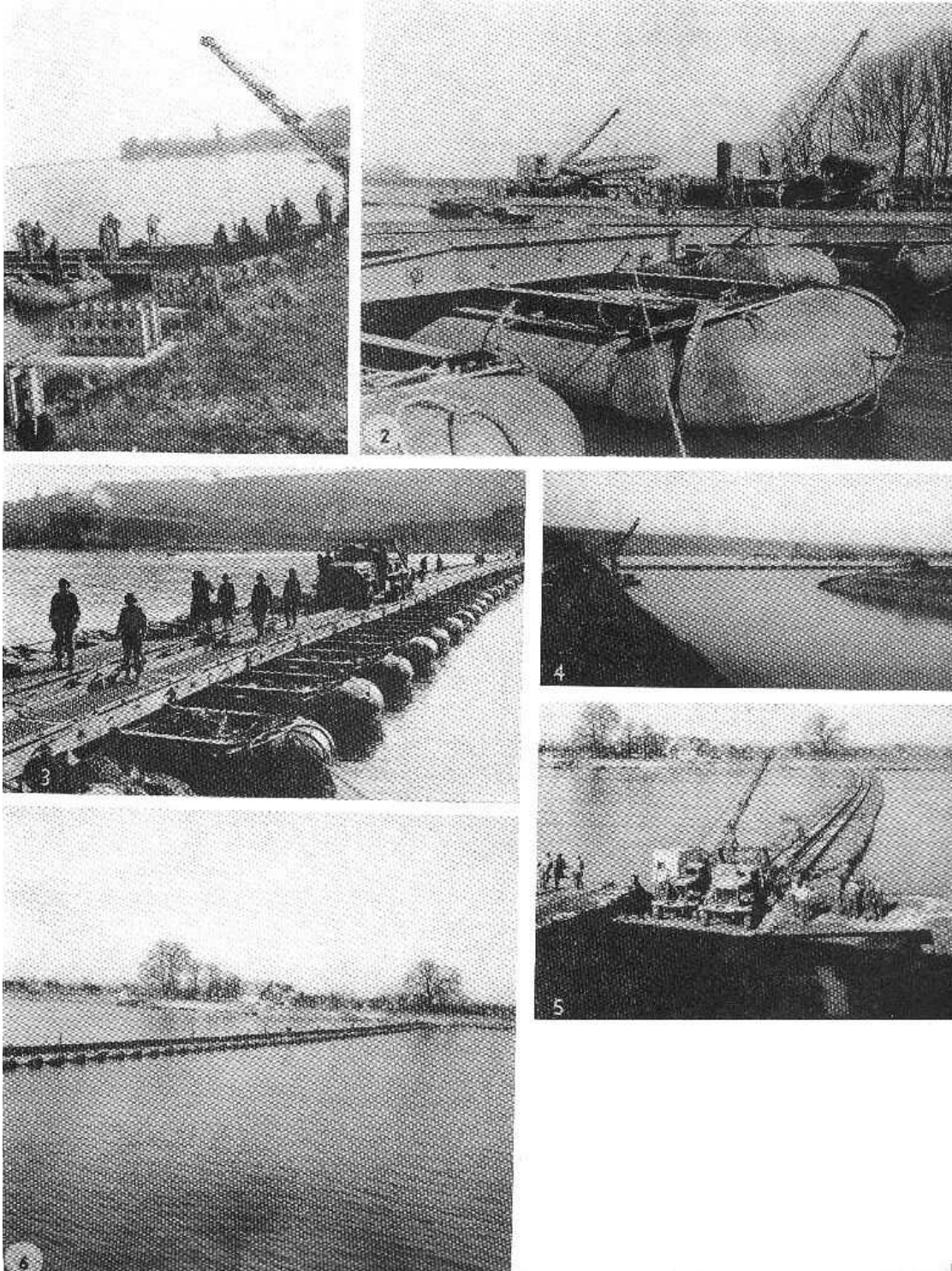
Conn Connewalt, T/4 Frank McArdle and Pvt Paul Bonwits, were in the midst of marching 41 prisoners back to the enclosure when they suddenly collided with a bypassed enemy platoon. The uncaptured Germans were apparently full of fight for they quickly deployed and set up a machine gun. The runners hurriedly informed the prisoners of war of their plight and tactfully added 'Alles Kaput.' The prisoners shouted emotional pleas to their erstwhile comrades upshot of which was the 30 fully armed Germans boarded the bandwagon to increase the particular prisoner tally to upwards of 70. By 0900 hours of 23 March 45, the 2nd Platoon of Company C, 803rd TD had been ferried across the Rhine, the first of the Third Army armor to cross, and were committed almost at once to help clear the 3rd Battalion front. I Company jumped off, attacking west of the canal between K and I Companies. Heavy support fire by artillery and tank destroyers enabled the company to move rapidly forward and dissect the main Trebur-Geinsheim route at phase line where 40 enemy shaken by violent shellings, neatly stacked arms and surrendered. Two K Company personnel who were missing as a result of the airstrip action earlier in the morning, T/Sgt Heber Braley and Medic William B Rea, were liberated when the contingent surrendered. I and L Company patrols probed into Trebur itself at 1053 hours that morning encountering but slight resistance in the form of rifle fire.

"It was dawn 0530 hours on 23 March when B and A Companies resumed the attack on Geinsheim, following up the enemy who had partially blown one of the canal bridges while effecting withdrawal. At this time 3rd Battalion troops had fought deeply on the left, but resistance was lighter there. The opening of this period also marked the beginning of 24 hours of the greatest Luftwaffe activity ever experienced by the Regiment in its sector, including the Caumont strafing and Verdun bombings in earlier French campaigns. For the most part of these attacks were directed at bridging sites in Oppenheim and Nierstein. The first of these attacks occurred at 0600 hours when 12 German fighters appeared to climax an hour-long enemy SP shelling of Oppenheim Crossing site, while troops on the 3rd Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment, were attempting to load into assault boats and paddle across the river. Enemy aircrafts dropped bombs along the river and attempted to machine gun troops and installations, while they themselves were under constant automatic weapons and anti-aircraft fire. One bomb struck the 3rd Battalion rear CP in Nierstein wounding Lt Bishop, Battalion Commanding Officer, and wireman Pfc Burrell, both of whom were laying wire."

"Across the river and inland B Company was meeting with intense small arms and bazooka fire as it drew to within 300 yards of Geinsheim. A Company, committed to take the right flank of the town, met with lighter resistance. The German arm-band Volksturm joined the Wehrmacht troops in defending the town, but these only afforded token resistance and either slipped away or gave up as prisoners or hid in cellars until captured. S/Sgt Charlie L Houston, acting 3rd Platoon sergeant of B Company together with Lt Laurel Venters, coordinated a successful attack on the enemy who was in position on the Geinsheim canal. Aptly termed "Walking Death," marching assault fire was vigorously employed by riflemen of the platoon and enemy troops along the canal were split into disorganization by the relentless advance. S/Sgt Thomas C McCrystal, D Company section leader, repaired a jammed machine gun while under heavy fire. He then moved up to where the riflemen of B Company were dug in, and personally opened with continuing and devastating fire, which eventually provided assault troops with an opening through which one entry into Geinsheim was affected. S/Sgt Dexter Cunningham, whose D Company heavy machine-gun section was attached to A Company, also performed nobly. He previously had suffered three separate wounds from an exploding Panzerfaust. He refused evacuation and insisted on participating in the Geinsheim attack, during which he personally positioned and directed invaluable covering machine-gun fire, immeasurably contributing to the attack. He was evacuated only when the town was completely clear. Lt Venters cut down a German with tommy-gun fire while dodging a potato-masher. Pfc Frank Benedict, a BAR man, killed an enemy machine gunner with a burst and took the balance of the crew prisoners with another burst. The entry

into town was gradual, but by 0900 hours all enemy resistance collapsed. A and B Companies outposted forward and ferreted prisoners from houses, basements and public buildings. By 0945 23rd March 45 the Battalion had taken Division Objective No 1, Geinsheim, together with more than 150 prisoners, B Company taking approximately 100, and A Company capturing 50. At this moment, supporting armor of Company A, 737th Tank Battalion, was being ferried across the river – on their way to Geinsheim to assist the 1st Battalion in an attack on Wallerstadten. ..."

FIRST RHINE BRIDGE



(1) Men of the 150th Combat Engineer Battalion placing final treadways on XII Corps' first bridge across the Rhine at Oppenheim. This bridge was completed on March 23d at 1730 hours. (2) Unloading the pontons. (3) The final inspection of the bridge before traffic is allowed to pass over to the east shore. (4) Looking upstream from the western shore. Note destroyed bridge in the background. (5) Placing the approach ramps. Note the quickway and brockway to the bridge. (6) Looking downstream to the West Bank of the river. Other engineer troops involved were the 995th, 996th and 997th Engineer Treadway Bridge Companies.