

4. All-out Support for the Bridgehead

Artillery played a minor role in the early hours of the XII Corps bridgehead across the Rhine, but made up for it later, as will have been noted in the quotation from the 5th Infantry Division unit history in section 2 of this chapter. The same source has the following to record for the Corps artillery which was designated to operate in direct support of the division, in addition to the 19th, 21st, and 46th Field Artillery Battalions ("divarty"):

"The Division Artillery had been assigned two groups of reinforcing artillery which were in turn assigned to the 19th (Field Artillery Battalion) with instructions that when the 11th (Infantry Regiment) crossed, the 182nd Field Artillery Group was then to reinforce the 46th Field Artillery Battalion. Thus the lineup of artillery for the 11th Infantry's crossing was the 19th, reinforced by the 21st Field Artillery Battalion, 177th and 182nd Groups. The composition of the groups is listed below:

182nd Field Artillery Group

- 512th Field Artillery Battalion (105 Howitzer)
- 771st Field Artillery Battalion (155 Howitzer)
- 945th Field Artillery Battalion (155 Howitzer)
- 740th Field Artillery Battalion (8 inch Howitzer)

177th Field Artillery Group

- 276th Field Artillery Battalion (Armored 18 105s)
- 758th Field Artillery Battalion (8 inch Howitzer)
- 179th Field Artillery Battalion (155 Howitzer)
- 191st Field Artillery Battalion (155 Howitzer)

AAA guns and automatic weapons were slow to find employment around the crossing, because of the Luftwaffe's "double-take" on XII Corps' attack. But beginning with daybreak of the first morning scattered nuisance raiders, including jet planes, bore down on the bridge sites. This, culminated in a determined night attack with flares on 26-27 March 45. Between dusk and dawn the enemy made 114 sorties against the crossing installations. Everything in XII Corps which could be pointed at the sky opened up, furnishing thousands of innocent bystanders with the most spectacular display of tracers and air bursts and exploding Jerry aircraft since the days of Utah Beach. The busy batteries of the battalions in the Corps' 27th AAA group were credited with 23 planes shot down during the night.

Equally calculated to thwart the Kraut pilots in their earnest efforts to smash the crossing were the activities of the smoke generator men, with their sizzling smokepots fuming away in Oppenheim and Nierstein and vicinity. They kept a persistent haze over the bridges, for which the corps headquarters, displacing forward across the Rhine from Bad Kreuznach to Gross Gerau in the early morning hours immediately after the big night raid, was duly grateful.

Perhaps the most continuously overworked personnel during those days and nights were the Corps MPs, and all others who had a share in the responsibility for seeing that the fantastic amounts of traffic funneling down into the bridges were kept in some semblance of order and regularity of flow.

Capt Maurice ("Smitty") Smith, Corps Assistant PM, furnishes a good example of a traffic regulator who had to be constantly on the move. Colonel Ragnar ("Smokey") Johnson, Corps CWS officer, represented the Corps commander in the vast operation, and was one of those XII Corps personnel constantly at the water's edge by the bridge sites. Day and night these officers and men

regulated the flow, hurrying up the lines of vehicles as the bridges looked capable of handling more, diverting threatened jams away from the "hotspots" along the river as Nazi planes came in to strafe and bomb, or artillery fire started to fall. A careful estimate indicated that between 24 March 45, when the first bridge opened, and 31 March 45, about 60,000 vehicles had crossed over XII Corps bridges. These included approximately 10,000 vehicles of XX Corps. The principal tactical units checked across the bridges included:

- 5th Infantry division (less assault troops)
- 90th Infantry Division (less assault troops)
- 4th Armored Division
- 6th Armored Division
- 26th Infantry Division
- Corps Artillery Troops
- 11th Armored Division
- 71st Infantry Division
- 2nd Cavalry Group
- 3rd Cavalry Group
- 80th Infantry Division (1 CT)
- 65th Infantry Division (1 CT)

"It was my most interesting assignment during the war," says Colonel Johnson, adding, in his official report, that an "efficient communication system and the work of the MP's assisted greatly in accomplishing the rapid crossing of the troops." The former DC/S of the Corps, paying high tribute to Colonel Johnson, comments: "The system of waiting assembly areas, information posts, control posts, guides, MPs, wire radio, airplane observation, etc., operated like a huge block system on a densely trafficked railroad. Additional dispersal and waiting areas were established on the east bank."

One of the six teaming assembly areas in the gentle hills bordering the Rhine on the west was in the vicinity of General Eddy's advance command post, set up at Udenheim from noon of 24 March until the Forward Echelon absorbed it again on its way through to Gross Gerau three days later.

Traffic control, crossing control, and control of the fighting on the far bank called as always for communications, and the 93rd Signal Battalion and other XII Corps communications agencies were also continuously in the thick of the activities. As an instance of this work, the Signal Battalion's special underwater telephone cable, described in the first section of this chapter, was started across the river at 1500 23 March 45. The line truck and cable trailer were run on an engineer ferry and the cable cautiously paid out and weighted as the ferry made its way, under German artillery fire, to the east bank, where the cable was secured and opened for traffic. This touchy operation was conducted by a wire team headed by S/Sgt Ross Gerber, under supervision of Lt Roy Riggs and Lt Col (then Major) Scanlan. A second cable was prepared during that night and laid in place on the following day by Sgt Gerber's crew. Just to make assurance doubly sure, more cables, to a total number of eight, were run across the engineer bridges as they were finished, until Col "Andy" Anderson and Maj John Myers, and the others in the Corps headquarters Signal Section, could feel that the system was absolute leak proof against any shelling or bombing that the enemy might be able to bring down upon it.

Thus XII Corps services and supporting troops poured into the swelling bridgehead by night and day, in all the multiplicity of types of units which compose a modern mechanized army. There even developed a certain truck-meet spirit as each outfit hastened to be the first of its kind across the once dreaded barrier, now proved so vulnerable. Unit histories for the period reveal no lack of such statements as: "... to Battery C (of the 457th AAA AW Battalion) went the distinction of being the first

AA Battery in the Third Army to cross to the east bank. ..."; "This hospital unit (the 16th Field Hospital) was the first Third Army Hospital across the Rhine River. ..."; and so forth. Whatever discussion might arise among rival units between XII Corps, there was little doubt that XII Corps itself was again first among Third Army units of its type to roll across the Rhine. VIII Corps, northernmost of Third Army's three Corps, launched its assault two days after that of XII Corps. And XX Corps' initial attack in the center of the Army line had not even started by the time XII Corps headquarters itself was rolling into the by-then secure and massive XII Corps bridgehead, – and aiming for Darmstadt, Frankfurt, and the very heart of Hitler's Reich.

"DRAG NACH OSTEN" -- BUT NOT AS THE GERMANS PLANNED IT



(1) Greatly assisted by Adolf Hitler's fine system of dual highways, men of the 5th Infantry Division give an American twist to the "drive towards the East" as they close in on Frankfurt-au-Main by way of an "autobahn," 27 March 45. "Well, the Krauts put these dual highways in for military use, didn't they? And that's how we're using them aren't we?..." (2) Yank tourists east of the Rhine: Sgt Robert Gore and Pvt Harry M. Curry both of Company A, 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division report their exact whereabouts east of Frankfurt with the help of the excellent system of road signs. 28 March. (3) Approaching Frankfurt over the well-paved streets of German towns (in this case Konigstadton) 5th Infantry Division foot and armor role eastward. 25 March.