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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 359TH INFANTRY REGIMENT
(90TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE CROSSING OF
THE MOSELLE RIVER, 9-14 November 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal experience of a Regimental S-3)

Type of Operation described: INFANTRY REGIMENT IN A
RIVER CROSSING AND OPERATIONS DURING SUBSEQUENT
COUNTERATTACKS AND A FLOOD

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the 359th Infantry Regiment of the 90th Infantry Division in the crossing of the Moselle River north of Metz, France in November 1944. This operation was a part of the XX Corps attack that encircled and captured that city, the hinge of the center of the German defensive line on the Western front.¹

The attack to capture Metz was a resumption of the offensive by the Third US Army after a six-week quiescent period that had its cause back in the first three months of the invasion of France.

For the first month and one half after the invasion of Normandy, France, by the Allies on 6 June 1944⁴, the progress of the troops was much slower than had been estimated by the planners of Operation Overlord. This condition continued until the end of July 1944 when the breakthrough at St. Lo began to gain momentum.² At the time of the breakthrough there were more than one million Allied troops ashore in France within a comparatively small beachhead that covered only the northwestern third of Normandy. This combination of a large number of troops in a small area severely limited the size of the logistical buildup on the continent.³

Third Army became operational at 011200 August 1944 and started its amazing dash across France. By D+90 elements of the Third Army had reached the Moselle in the vicinity of Metz and the Allied front had advanced approximately 150 miles farther than the logistical planning for Operation Overlord had anticipated.⁵ As the supply lines began to stretch to the breaking point, higher headquarters were forced to adopt a very strict rationing policy on supplies. Third Army began to slow down and then virtually halted in its tracks through the consequent lack of supplies, primarily gasoline. The impetus of the Third Army's drive had been lost.⁶ This pause in the meteoric dash gave the German High Command sufficient time to reestablish a defensive line in front of the Third Army located generally along the line of the Moselle River.⁷

The German strategy was for Metz to become the hinge in the reorganization of the center of the Western front between Alsace and Belgium.⁸ The equivalent of more than three divisions took over the defense of Metz and the area immediately adjacent to it.⁹

Metz was a very old city established by the Romans as one of their forts to defend Gaul against the Germanic tribes. The Huns captured the city and 461 AD, which was the only time the city had been captured by assault up until the arrival of the Third Army. The city is on the east bank of the Moselle and is surrounded by terrain that naturally lends itself to the defense. To improve these defenses of total of 43 forts had been built around the city. The forts formed two concentric rings around Metz with 15 forts on the inner ring and 28 forts on the outer, the

latter being about 6 miles from the city. The inner ring was begun by Vauban in the early 19th Century and finished by Napoleon III in 1866, and the outer ring was built by the Germans and was finished in 1912. In World War II, Organization Todt improved and reinforced the forts and added 11 batteries of artillery, the signal system and elaborate interconnecting field fortifications.

Hitler, against the advice of his Army staff, in the fall of 1944, personally ordered that these forts be manned as a part of the defensive system.¹⁰

The outer ring of forts was primarily underground with artillery pieces protruding only slightly from revolving domed steel tyrants. Nothing would knock these guns out but direct hits by bombs weighing 1000 pounds or more.¹¹ As an example of how impregnable this outer ring of forts was, 240mm and 8 inch howitzers were not able to neutralize them and six weeks of close range direct fire by three 155mm guns (SP) was only able to damage a few gun turrets and was not able to destroy any of them.¹²

XX Corps of Third Army received sufficient gas on 4-6 September to resume the attack and moved up to Metz in force.¹³

The troops had been moving so rapidly across France that they had little knowledge of the area to their front. The responsible headquarters had not been able to obtain, evaluate and disseminate detailed information of the German troops and fortifications facing them, and elements of two American divisions attempted to enter Metz from the northwest on 7 September without knowing of the existence of these forts. Their attack continued through 14 September but no penetration of the line of forts was effected.

On 14 September XX Corps ordered the 90th Infantry Division to relieve the attacking elements and contain the fortified area west of the Moselle. XX Corps changed its main effort ordered two divisions to cross the Moselle approximately 10 miles south of Metz. The Germans by this time had been given sufficient time to organize their defenses and the river crossing met strong resistance.

Because of the supply situation, Third Army was ordered on 25 September to assume the defensive.¹⁴ As a result the attack had to be stopped in a bridgehead. However, it outflanked some of the Metz forts and provided a good position from which to resume the offensive when ordered.

The 5th Infantry Division which was deployed in a bridgehead and astride the Moselle south of Metz, decided, with the approval of Corps and Army Headquarters, to attack Fort Driant, situated on the West Bank to the river south of Metz and one of the key forts in the outer ring. This attack lasted from 3 October to 14 October and after receiving heavy casualties it resulted in a withdrawal of the large task force formed for the attack. It was found in this attack that the supporting artillery was of little value against the fort, that the engineer explosives unavailable were inadequate for the task, that the coordination of fires between the various forts was excellent, and that when the Germans retreated into the depths of the fort it was nearly impossible the dig them out.¹⁵

For the remainder of the month Third Army continued on the defensive except for limited attacks along the front to gain better ground from which to resume the offensive.

THE PLAN ON THE ATTACK

When Third Army was ordered on the defensive, the senior commanders immediately began planning for the resumption of the offensive. The primary task facing Major General Walton H. Walker, Commanding General, XX Corps, was the capture of Metz.

After the costly and unsuccessful attacks against the northwestern face of the fortified area on 7-14 September and against Fort Driant on 3-14 October it became absolutely essential to devise a plan that would not involve a direct assault on these fortifications. Since he had a bridgehead over the Moselle south of Metz and controlled over 20 miles of the West Bank of the Moselle north of Metz, General Walker determined to use a double envelopment. The southern arm was to attack northeast from the 5th Infantry Division bridgehead and the northern arm would attack across the Moselle and turn south behind Metz, the arms meeting 25 miles east of Metz in the vicinity of Boulay.

The overall Corps plan was in two phases. The first phase was the envelopment of Metz which, it was hoped, would force the enemy to send reinforcements into the Metz area, thereby reducing his strength in the Siegfried Line along the Saar. The second phase of the attack, which was to be initiated simultaneously with the breakout of the Northern bridgehead to envelop Metz, was to send a strong force from the same bridgehead northeast through that part of Germany between the Saar and Moselle Rivers known as the Saar-Moselle triangle and force a crossing of the Saar in the vicinity of Saarburg.

This plan was initiated by XX Corps on 15 October and was submitted to Third Army for approval on 28 October 1944.¹⁶ The plan was approved by Twelfth Army group and Third Army on 3 November.¹⁷

Lt. General George S. Patton, Jr., CG of Third Army, made arrangements with Lt. General Omar N. Bradley CG of Twelfth Army Group, for the operational control of two regimental combat teams of the 83rd Infantry Division to be used in the attack northeast of the bridgehead to capture Saarburg. The 83rd Infantry Division, assigned to VIII Corps, 1st Army, was defending the eastern Luxembourg border along the general trace of the Moselle River directly opposite Saarburg. General Patton amplified the XX Corps plan by ordering that the Armored Combat Command be sent directly east from the northern bridgehead with the mission of capturing a bridge across the Saar in the vicinity of Merzig. This was to be in addition to the main crossing at Saarburg.¹⁸

General Walker was scheduled by the first of November to have for the operation, four infantry divisions, one armored division, and one cavalry group.¹⁹ His plan was to use the 5th Infantry Division as the southern arm of the pincers attacking in conjunction with XII Corps on the south on D-Day (to be established for the resumption of the general offensive); the 95th Infantry Division to contain the fortified area of the German bridgehead west of the Moselle, to

attack and seize the city of Metz on Corps Order, and to furnish one battalion to make a demonstration in force on D-Day at Uckange, a good crossing site 13 miles north of Metz; the 90th Infantry Division to make the main effort of the Corps by crossing the Moselle on the night of D/D+1 and established the Northern bridgehead in the Malling-Cattenom area approximately 23 miles north of Metz and 6 miles north of Thionville, and on Corps Order, to advance southeast to envelop Metz; after the capture of Fort Koenigsmacher in the 90th Infantry Division bridgehead area, the 10th Armored Division to cross the Moselle into the bridgehead with CCA on the left (East) flank of the 90th Infantry Division to envelop Metz from the north in order to block any reinforcements attempting to enter Metz and CCB to attack eastward with the mission of seizing a bridge across the Saar in the area of Merzig or south; initially, Task Force Polk (3rd Cavalry Group reinforced) to cover the assembly of troops prior to the Malling-Cattenom crossing and, subsequent to the river crossings, to be attached to the 83rd Infantry Division; 83rd Infantry Division to continue to protect Luxembourg and to cross the Moselle into the 90th Infantry Division bridgehead and attack northeast across the Saar River in the vicinity of Saarburg.

General Walker personally reconnoitered the Moselle north of Metz and chose the Malling-Cattenom site as the area for the 90th Division's crossing site.²⁰

The Moselle River at this point is about 350 feet wide and flows northeast through a flat plain approximately 1 mile wide. The near (west) bank is low and there is some marshy ground leading up to it. The far (east) bank is higher, averaging about 20 feet in height. The current averages from three to four mph. On the east bank in the right half of the crossing site is the Koenigsmacher Fortified Group. This fort is an old Metz-type fort that is one of a group of four forts built to protect the city of Thionville and is not a part of the Maginot line. It had a battery of four 105mm guns and was fully manned.²¹

That sector of the Maginot Line that faces north and east towards Luxembourg and the German portion of the Saar-Moselle triangle crossed the Moselle in the center of the division crossing site and bisected the bridgehead area. The first of these forts was the Metrich Group on the nose of a ridge about 1500 yards east of the river. The fires of this fort were tied in with those of the Koenigsmacher Fortified Group 2000 yards to the south. There were nineteen of these Maginot Forts east of the river in the division zone of action and they extended on a line running from the Metrich Group southeast towards Boulay. The Metrich Group and the Billig Forts, 4000 yards to the east, were within the perimeter of the bridgehead. These Maginot forts and the Koenigsmacher Fortified Group were on the principal terrain features within the bridgehead area, two ridge lines 50 to 100m higher than most of the surrounding terrain which provided the enemy with excellent observation of the crossing site. The Maginot forts consisted only of a line of forts facing north and east and they had no depth. The gun turrets could be swung in a complete circle and the flanks of the forts were protected by machine-gun emplacements. It was later discovered that they were only partially manned.

The principal terrain feature west of the river was a ridge running parallel to the river and approximately 1 mile west of it, opposite the southern half of the crossing site. This ridge was covered by the Bois de Cattenom, which was four one half miles long and over a mile wide. There were two pockets of Germans on the west bank of the river on hills at Berg and Basse

Kontz opposite the northern sector of the bridgehead area. "The tactical affect of the entire terrain favored the enemy. It would force the infantry and armor of XX Corps to canalize the attack between ridge lines of hilly and heavily wooded areas."²²

The XX Corps Engineer assigned the 1150 Engineer Combat Group in direct support of the Division. The Corps Engineer plan was to furnish and man the assault boats for the crossing. This would free the organic division engineers to cross with regiments with the mission of reducing obstacles and minefields in the regimental zones of action. The Corps Engineers also planed to build infantry support bridges, M-2 treadway bridges, and the floating bailey bridges at both regimental crossing sites.²³ The bridges at Malling were to be built at the location of a civilian bridge that had been completely blown. The bridges that Cattenom were to be built at an old ferry site.

The mass of Corps Artillery was to be employed in support of the 90th Infantry Division.²⁴ This involved the equivalent of approximately 22 firing battalions.²⁵

Because of the large number of units to move into the assembly area in the Bois de Cattenom area where the road net was greatly restricted, XX Corps established strict control of all the vehicular traffic.

The German 416th Infantry Division with an estimated strength of 8,300 men held the river line for approximately seven miles from the Corps' north boundary south to Koenigsmacher and the 19th Infantry Division with the strength of not more than 5,000 men held the line from Koenigsmacher southward.²⁶ Third Army G-2 estimate of the enemy situation on 8 November stated that the 11th Panzer Division with 6,500 man and 80 tanks was in reserve and could reinforce the frontline within 24 hours. It was also estimated that the Germans could reinforce the front against the Third Army with a type of Armored Corps within 48 hours.²⁷

The plan of the 90th Infantry Division, under command of Brigadier General James A. Van Fleet, was to have the 358th Infantry and the 359th Infantry Regiments in the assault with the 359th Infantry on the north crossing in the vicinity of Malling and the 358th Infantry crossing at Cattenom. It was planned that the 357th Infantry in reserve would cross at Cattenom and be employed in the center of the Division Zone down the ridge line of the Maginot forts. The perimeter of the bridgehead area was established approximately 5000 yards east of the crossing site, the capture of which would deny the Germans ground observation of the bridging sites.

The northern half of the bridgehead area comprised the 359th Infantry sector. The major portion of the terrain on the north of the regimental sector was generally level, rising gradually to the perimeter of the bridgehead area where it dropped off sharply into a deep ravine. The southern or right portion of the regimental sector was characterized by some heavy woods in the valley through which ran a small stream. Parallel with the river ran a double track railroad and a paved highway. In addition to this highway leading in from the extreme north flank there were several minor roads, a paved highway leading into the center of the sector at Kerling and a secondary road leading into Oudrenne from the southeast on the right of the regimental sector. The ridgeline of the Maginot forts was not in the regimental sector.

The plan of the 359th Infantry Regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Raymond R. Bell, was to have the 1st and 2nd Battalions in the assault, the 1st Battalion crossing north of the Malling ridge site and the 2nd Battalion crossing south of the Malling ridge site. The 3rd Battalion in regimental reserve was to cross at the 2nd Battalion crossing site as soon as the 2nd Battalion had cleared. Phase lines were established for control purposes, the railroad being designated as Phase Line 1 and the parallel highway Phase Line 2. The regimental plan of operations was to seize the perimeter of the bridgehead with all possible speed and then to mop up any bypassed areas. By so doing it was hoped that the enemy could more quickly be denied observation of the bridge site.

PREPARATION FOR THE ATTACK

The 90th Infantry Division had been in position containing the fortified area of Metz west of the Moselle since 14 September. It was relieved by the 95th Infantry Division during the period of 30 October - 2 November and went into Corps reserve 20 miles west of the crossing site and began training for the assault.

The Engineer combat Battalion that was to assist in the crossing joined the regiment in the area and trained with them from the 4th to the 7th of November. The Engineers taught the techniques of the river crossing and the troops were broken down into boat groups and made practice carries with full combat equipment. Units were guided through some of the Maginot forts in the area to familiarize them with that type fort. The general training status was better than normal for a division that had been in combat for five months. During the six weeks that the division was containing the Metz fortifications the battalions had been given training as they were relieved from the line. This training included general refresher courses and some specialized training in the attack of a fortified position. It was felt that combat efficiency of the unit was good but this was based on an estimate as the division had not participated in a large-scale attack at any time during the period. The supply situation was very good at this time in that all major shortages had been corrected during the static period in the Metz area. However, another check was made of the needs of the units and they were met while the division was in Corps reserve.

Meanwhile, reconnaissance was initiated by the regiment. A very elaborate cover plan had been established by Headquarters, XX Corps, in order to deny the enemy knowledge of the impending operation. Under this plan, reconnaissance was limited to not more than two trucks, 1/4ton, C&R, per regiment. All divisional insignia had to be removed and vehicle markings be changed to those of the 3rd Cavalry Group which was then guarding the river line north of Metz. The regimental commander of the 359th Infantry, the regimental S-3, and the three battalion commanders went on reconnaissance. After checking in at the Cavalry command Post, the reconnaissance party was conducted through the center of the Bois de Cattenom. As the party approached the northeast corner of the woods, they dismounted and entered the rear of a large Maginot fort concealed in the forest and were conducted along tunnels through the mountain to an armored observation post that overlooked the Malling area. Although there was a very low ceiling, the terrain in the vicinity of the river could be seen.

After returning to the regimental command post, the regimental commander had a meeting of those officers who went on reconnaissance and the exact crossing locations were decided upon.

The next day the regimental commander was relieved for reasons unknown to the author. The new regimental commander, Lt. Col. Raymond E. Bell, did not report in immediately thereafter. In the meantime, the S-3 felt some action should be taken and made a draft of the regimental order, giving copies to the battalions for planning purposes. Colonel Bell subsequently approved this draft.²⁸

Task Force Polk (3rd Cavalry Group reinforced) had the mission of guarding the line of the Moselle from the northern boundary of the Corps southward for approximately 20 miles. They were ordered to provide maximum security for the area in rear of the crossing site. In furtherance of this mission, they took several steps: intensive patrolling of the river line was conducted to deny access to the rear area; the inhabitants of the town of Cattenom were evacuated to the rear on the night of 2-3 November because they had been troublesome and it was feared that they would become a security threat; the German strong points at Berg, 1,000 Yards North of Malling and Basse Kontz three miles north of Malling, were attacked.²⁹ Berg and Basse Kontz provided excellent observation of the Malling crossing site and of the bridgehead area and it would have been impossible to obtain surprise in the crossing if they had not been eliminated.

The Germans had three companies entrenched in the Berg area. Elements of Task Force Polk attacked it at 040800 and by 050900 had cleared the Germans from the west bank and the river at this point.³⁰ At the same time other elements of Task Force Polk attacked the town of Basse Kontz and the hill immediately to the east. The hill was on the west side of the river directly opposite the extreme northern perimeter of the bridgehead area. That evening the cavalry was relieved by the 1st Battalion, 330th Infantry of 83rd Infantry Division and the latter unit captured the hill by the morning of 6 November.³¹

Under cover of darkness, on the night of 6-7 November the artillery and engineers moved into a rear assembly area about 10 miles in rear of the crossing site and then by bounds into their forward area. In accordance with the elaborate cover plan the artillery units left their air OP's and radios in place and continued normal traffic. The movement of the artillery away from the Metz area was covered by the 23rd Special Troops with dummy rubber artillery pieces and simulated flashes. Meanwhile the artillery left in place increased their rate of fire so that the total number of rounds fired at the enemy continued to be approximately the same. By the morning of 7 November the artillery was in place. Registration was limited to one gun per Battalion firing on the afternoon of 8 November, covered by the artillery that had been in support of Task Force Polk for several weeks.³²

On the night of 7-8 November the 90th Infantry Division moved from the reserve area by shuttling to the Bois de Cattenom. The 359th Infantry had been assigned to the northeastern end of the forest nearest to the Malling crossing site. By dawn the division had closed into the area and the regimental CP had moved into a small town directly in rear of the forest. It had been raining almost continuously for three days and it continued to rain on the 8th of November. All

movements off the main road through the forest were limited as the area was very wet and muddy. There were no buildings in the forest and practically no dry place for any of the soldiers to get out of the weather. Nevertheless, final preparations were made for the attack. The battalion and company commanders of all three battalions made their final visual reconnaissance of the crossing site from the Bois de Cattenom. The engineer trucks were in the forest with the regiment loaded with the assault boats broken down into boat groups. The engineer and infantry commanders coordinated the final details of planning; a final check was made of the breakdown of the infantry for boat assignments; and the order of march and exact route to the attack positions was established.

All of the officers and men were oriented on the operation and special emphasis was given to stressing the importance of this crossing to the Corps and Army plan. Only if the 90th Division accomplished its mission would the fighting of the previous two months of XX Corps be brought to a successful conclusion. Further, the operations planned in the future required that bridgeheads be established across the Saar promptly.

The regimental commander had his final conference with the battalion commanders in a small pillbox in the forest on the evening of the 8th of November.

During the day a German plane shot down an artillery observation plane directly over Gavisse and the German plane passed over the Bois de Cattenom several times. It was feared the he might discover the heavy concentration of troops in the area but it appeared later that he had not.

Meanwhile, the XII Corps and the 5th Infantry Division south of Metz and one battalion of the 95th Infantry Division north of Metz at Uckange jumped off in the attack. The Uckange crossing was to be a demonstration to draw troops away from the crossing area of the 90th Infantry Division. This feint was successful for the Germans promptly reacted by sending the 1218th Grenadier Regiment with supporting armor to occupy the high ground facing the crossing site to contain what appeared to be a major crossing.³³

9 NOVEMBER - THE RIVER CROSSING

H-hour had been established as 0300 and a forward regimental command post was established in the appropriately named town of Fixem by 0200. Shortly after midnight the troops in the forest began to stir. By 0200 the engineer trucks followed by the engineer boat crews on foot began to move out to the attack positions which were along the trails and farm roads varying from 300 to 700 yards from the river. Assault guns of Task Forest Polk located along the Gavisse-Cattenom Road fired for approximately an hour to cover the movement of the trucks and the unloading of the boats. It rained throughout the night and the engineers had difficulty in unloading the assault boats quietly due to the darkness and the slippery mud. However, the preparations were finished without any reaction from the enemy.

The engineers had marked the routes to the final assembly areas with engineer tape and provided guides for the assault troops. Despite the darkness and the mud and rain, the pre-

designated boat load groups soon found their boats and prepared for the carry to the riverbank. After days of rain the low marshy area west of the river proved to be nearly impassable for the heavily loaded infantry carrying the boats. In many places the men sank to their knees and progress was very slow. When the assault company commanders reached the bank of the river, their companies were disorganized and scattered in the dark. It was also found that the river had risen several feet due to the rains and the current had increased to about 5 miles an hour and was getting faster. By the time the companies were organized and had started across the river it was 0330.³⁴

A maximum effort had been made by all echelons to achieve complete tactical surprise. In order to help achieve this, the artillery did not fire a preparation but began firing their prearranged fires at H-hour and continued until H+120.³⁵ A good set of intelligence photos had been taken of the area on 29 October. From these photos and all other available enemy information, XX Corps Artillery S-2 had designated targets for the supporting artillery. These targets included all known and suspected enemy locations including CP's, artillery positions, defensive areas and troop concentrations. This very heavy fire was undoubtedly the principal reason why enemy artillery fire on the regiment was very light all morning. One of the missions of the artillery was to neutralize the area of the Bois de Koenigsmacher until the 357th Infantry could cross the river and take over this part of the sector.

When the assault troops landed on the east bank, they found that the German foxholes, which stretched all along the river's edge had been flooded by the river and were unoccupied. The German outposts along the top of the bank were quickly overrun by the first wave across the River, some of the Germans being found asleep in their holes.

Complete tactical surprise was gained by the assault. This was proven not only by the initial reaction of the defenders but by later PW interrogations.

The swift current capsized many boats and swept several downstream beyond the regimental crossing site. The remainder were forced farther downstream than had been originally anticipated. Consequently, the formation of the second and succeeding waves soon degenerated into single boatloads crossing the stream as boats could be found. An hour or more had passed before the assault companies and battalions had reorganized sufficiently to continue the attack more than one or two hundred yards beyond the river.

The 1st Battalion sector included the town of Malling. This Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. Leroy Pond, crossed the river northeast of Malling and reorganized there prior to continuing the attack. Colonel Pond dispatched the right assault unit, Company A, to capture and clear the town which had been fortified by the Germans. This objective was a particularly important one because the town directly overlooked the old bridge site, the best place for the engineers to build a new bridge, and as it later proved, the only possible place. The remainder of the battalion resumed the attack and by 0550 Company B, guiding on the Malling-Hunting road, had reached Phase Line 2, the main lateral highway running parallel to the river and 2000 yards beyond the battalion crossing site.

Meanwhile, the 2nd Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Col. Robert Booth, had reorganized sufficiently to push out from the river. Approximately half way to Phase Line 1 along the railroad, the leading elements ran into a group of entrenched Germans on a slight knoll. A firefight ensued which delayed the advance of the battalion for a short time. Soon, however, the Germans were forced to withdraw and by 0550 Company G had reached the railroad and Company E was close behind.

By dawn the elements of the two assault battalions that had not been able to cross the river or had been lost had regained contact. The 1st Battalion, less Company A fighting in Malling, had bypassed all minor resistance, had cut the main lateral highway in two places, and was approaching Hunting. The 2nd Battalion moving south was approaching Petite Hettange and Metrich and meeting only light resistance.

The assault battalions had taken full advantage of the initial surprise gained and had been able to overrun or bypass all enemy resistance in the area. The bypassed elements were left to reserve units to mop-up and the battalions were able to maintain their initial impetus, thereby ensuring success for the day's operations.

The 3rd Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. J. F. Smith, in regimental reserve, had begun to cross the river behind the 2nd Battalion on order of the regimental commander.

By midmorning Company G had taken Petite Hettange and Company E had taken Metrich, meeting only light resistance. At this early hour the bridgehead had not been consolidated and as no friendly troops had entered the Bois de Koenigsmacher, it was not known whether the Germans had occupied the Metrich Group of the Maginot forts. Consequently Colonel Boothe left Company E in Metrich to defend that flank and continued his attack to the east and southeast. Company F advanced toward Oudrenne along the Metrich-Oudrenne road until it was stopped by a very extensive minefield about 1500 yards north of Oudrenne. The flanks of this minefield could not be found and as it contained both antitank mines and anti-personnel mines, the company halted pending the arrival of engineers. Before noon Company G was moving on to Kerling and was in the vicinity of the cross roads between Hunting and Oudrenne.

By this time the 3rd Battalion had completed its crossing of the river and was following the 2nd Battalion by bounds. Company I relieved Company E in Metrich and Company E rejoined the 2nd Battalion. The regimental commander was concerned about his right flank and ordered the 2nd Battalion to stop advancing toward Kerling and to protect the right flank of the regiment. Meanwhile, he ordered the 3rd Battalion less Company I to continue the attack towards Kerling taking over the center sector of the regiment. The battalion advanced rapidly and entered Kerling about 1300.³⁶ The German artillery, reacting vigorously for the first time, promptly fired 60 rounds into the town.³⁷ However, the battalion soon captured Kerling and the high ground 400 yards to the north and patrol contact with the 1st Battalion was established. The battalion commander established platoon strong points around the town from the Kerling-Freching road to the northeast around to the south facing the woods. He placed his 81mm mortar platoon forward of the town and left about two rifle platoons and his CP group in the town.

Upon this change of mission the 2nd Battalion Commander moved Company G south astride the Hunting-Oudrenne road and had it take up positions facing toward Oudrenne and the un-cleared woods between Oudrenne and Kerling.

The 1st Battalion had continued its good progress and by midmorning captured Hunting.

In Malling, meanwhile, Company A was engaged in the heaviest fighting the regiment experienced that day. They were making progress, however, and the 1st Battalion commander ordered Company A to protect the extreme left flank of the regiment by taking up a position astride the road junction 1000 yards north of Hunting, leaving only one platoon to finish clearing Malling. The remainder of the battalion attacked towards their final objective, the long ridge 3000 yards north of Kerling. They were able to clear the woods between Hunting and the ridge but were finally stopped in the late afternoon by the Germans just short of the regimental objective. About noon Malling was cleared and the one platoon of Company A rejoined the remainder of the company north of Hunting .

The Germans had not been cleared from the area on the north flank around Rettel. This constituted a threat from the north so the regimental commander ordered a 57mm platoon of the regimental antitank company with some dismounted .50 caliber machine guns to take up positions on the commanding ground in the vicinity of Berg to support Company A immediately across the river.

By the end of the first day the regiment had reached its final objective in the center of the sector and had almost reached it on the right and left.

In the middle of the morning the remainder of the regimental headquarters had moved into Fixem and the forward command post moved into the easternmost building in Gavisse.

The river which had been dangerous at the time of the initial crossing before dawn was now threatening the success of the entire operation. The rain had continued without letup and the river had risen over its banks. By 091200 it was 800 yards wide midway between Cattenom and Malling and the current was approximately 7 mph and still getting faster. Fortunately, the road leading from Gavisse to the river was slightly higher than the surrounding ground and the western end of the Malling bridge site was built up approximately 12 feet above the banks. By the middle of the day, the river had overflowed its banks only about 200 yards around the bridge site. At the Cattenom bridge site the water was 3 feet deep on the road.

As soon as Malling was cleared, the engineers had constructed a double powered infantry support raft and by late afternoon had ferried about three 57 mm antitank squads and two or three communication and artillery liaison vehicles across the river. The engineers were just finishing the last section of an infantry support bridge and the western approach to it when the 1 1/2 ton truck and gun of the third antitank squad reached the eastern bank. This truck in climbing up the bank from the river ran across an upstream anchor cable of the bridge. Due to the fast current the cable was already under great tension and this extra load caused the cable to snap and the whole bridge came apart and floated in sections downstream a mile or more. The bulk of the sections

became stranded on a sand bar near Berg but the current was so strong that only a few of them could be towed back upstream to the bridgesite.³⁸

At Cattenom an attempt to put in an infantry support bridge at the 358th Infantry crossing site met a similar fate. Just as it was being finished the tension on the anchor cables became too great and the bridge was swept downstream, some of the sections almost reaching the Malling bridge, four miles downstream.³⁹

On the next trip across the river the infantry support raft carrying another antitank squad with its truck and gun sank in the middle of the river. All of the men on board were wearing long overcoats and web equipment and had a very difficult time staying afloat until they could be rescued. The 1st Battalion antitank platoon leader and several of his men were drowned.

The 358th Infantry on the right had gotten its battalion across the river satisfactorily but was having a great deal of difficulty with the Koenigsmacher Fortified Group. Units were on top of the fort but were unable to penetrate it and were receiving a great deal of artillery fire while other units on the flanks were pinned down by machine-gun fire from the fort. The 357th Infantry in division reserve had crossed one battalion at each crossing site and by dark the division had eight battalions across the river.

1476 heavy bombers of the Eight Air Force delivered a midday saturation attack in support of the Corps including 2305 tons of bombs on Metz alone.⁴⁰

10 NOVEMBER - THE FIRST COUNTERATTACK

At 0300 on the morning of the 10th of November the first counterattack was made against the regiment. A German battalion of infantry supported by seven tanks attacked Kerling. The 3rd Battalion commander had only two rifle companies at his disposal and in order to take advantage of the high ground had widely separated his platoons around town. Kerling is only 4 miles from the German border and among its inhabitants were some German sympathizers. These people slipped out of town after dark and guided the Germans into the town between the widely spaced platoon positions.⁴¹ Such a contingency had not been foreseen or expected within the borders of France. Due to the fact that the battalion did not have any effective patrolling or night security system and that the entire squad guarding the eastern entrance into town had gone inside a barn to sleep, the German infantry was able to penetrate the position undetected.

When the Germans opened fire, a heavy and very confused fight ensued. The Americans fought in small groups and squads. They could not see to contact other groups and in the confusion of the fighting in the dark, many men lost their sense of direction. All of the platoons had been cut off from the town and were fighting more to their rear than to their front. When the tanks came in, the only antitank weapons the platoons had were one bazooka per platoon and a few rifle grenades. As far as it is known every antitank projectile the platoons had was fired but the final result was that only one tank was knocked out.

When the tanks reached the mortar platoon, they ran directly over the platoon leader's and platoon sergeant's foxholes. After the tanks had passed, they fired a bazooka at one of the tanks but missed. The tank turned and repeatedly fired its main turret gun at their holes from a distance of 75 feet. After what seemed an eternity to the two men, the tank moved on into Kerling.

The Germans, knowing the exact positions of the Americans, were able to defeat the widely scattered platoons one at the time. In some cases the Americans held their positions until they were completely surrounded and then fought their way out of the encirclement. One machine gun platoon fired until they had completely exhausted their not very plentiful supply of ammunition and then retreated carrying their guns with them.

Meanwhile, the tanks and the remainder of the force had entered the town. The first the battalion commander knew of the attack was when he heard shooting in the town itself. He immediately attempted to contact his companies by radio and telephone to determine what had happened, but all units were already so heavily engaged that he could not get anybody to answer. He and his artillery liaison officer went downstairs in the house they were using as the CP and opened the door just in time to see a civilian point the house out to a German soldier sitting in a tank directly in front of the house. The house having no rear door, both officers dashed upstairs and jumped out of the second-story window in back. The liaison officer sprained both ankles in the jump but was able to reach his jeep. He found that the radio had been punctured by shell fragments or bullets and he was unable to obtain artillery fire.

The battalion commander attempted to contact his units but except for a few individuals the Germans seemed to be the only ones he could find. The German attack drove the Americans northward and individually and by small units they began to arrive in the 1st Battalion area. When the battalion commander had collected his battalion in the woods 1500 yards east of Hunting he found that they had suffered many casualties and that one entire machine gun platoon from Company M was missing. The platoon had apparently been cut off and captured by the Germans.

Except for some reports from the 1st and 2nd Battalions of firing in the Kerling area the regimental headquarters was unable to obtain any information of the situation there until 0430. The one 57 mm antitank squad of the 3rd Battalion that had crossed the river had been located in Kerling. When their gun position was about to be cut off they had hitched their gun to the truck and raced back to Petite Hettange. There they reported what little they know of the confused situation in Kerling to the 2nd Battalion who in turn informed regimental headquarters. No contact could be made within 3rd Battalion until shortly after dawn when contact was made through the 1st Battalion and it was confirmed the Kerling was lost. It having been established that the 3rd battalion was no longer in Kerling, the artillery fired many heavy concentrations into the town.

Company I was relieved by the 357th Infantry in Metrich and moved to the crossroads at the eastern edge of Petite Hettange in order to establish a block on the open road leading from Kerling.

The regimental commander, Colonel Bell, took his S-3 and crossed the river shortly afterwards and visited all three battalions. As Colonel Bell was walking through Malling he noticed some soldiers playing with two bicycles. He promptly commandeered the bicycles and he and his S-3 road in style to Petite Hettange and talked to the 2nd Battalion Commander. Company G was ordered to take up a position astride the Kerling-Petite Hettange road in the vicinity of the woods 800 yards west of Kerling. The enemy, apparently weakened by the furious night fight and artillery fire he was receiving, was making no effort to advance beyond the town and Company G was able to take up the new position without difficulty.

Colonel Bell then took the 3rd battalion anti-tank truck to Hunting and walked from their up to the 1st and 3rd Battalions. He found the 1st Battalion in excellent shape and the 3rd battalion dispirited from the night action and short the equipment lost in Kerling. After inspecting the battalion carefully and having a long talk with the battalion commander, he told the battalion that they would have to redeem themselves by recapturing Kerling as soon as they could be reorganized. He promised that Company I, now in Petite Hettange, would be returned as soon as possible.

Company C, 315th Medical Battalion, the collecting company in the regimental combat team, crossed the river and set up in Malling to provide medical care for the wounded waiting to be evacuated across the river. Their building was repeatedly hit by shells aimed at the bridge but these men performed outstandingly.

The 357th Infantry attacked in the center of the division zone and captured the Metrich Group of the Maginot forts. With Companies E and F facing Oudrenne the right flank of the regiment was now secure.

The regiment and the remainder of the division had sustained a large number of casualties. The men were without their roles and with the supply system barely getting the minimum essentials across the river, the continual rain and lack of dry socks was beginning to cause trench foot.⁴² The front-line units around the perimeter of the entire bridgehead were now beginning to receive a lot of flat trajectory fire from distant assault guns.⁴³

The river was now in full flood, the highest it had been since 1920.⁴⁴ Between Cattenom and Malling it was over 1 1/2 miles wide. The current was now up to 8 miles an hour and was so rough that the smaller engineer boats had difficulty remaining upright in midstream. The water covered the road leading from Gavisse and only large trucks could reach the bridge site.⁴⁵ General Walker, CG XX Corps, was very concerned about the lack of bridges and ordered that a bridge be completed at Malling as soon as possible.⁴⁶ The engineers, working under tremendous difficulties, were now attempting to construct an M-2 treadway bridge in order that armor could cross. The German artillery had the bridge site accurately zeroed in and fired almost continuously during the construction of this bridge, puncturing 11 floats.⁴⁷ In addition, General Walker ordered one battalion of the 95th Infantry Division to cross at Thionville in order that construction of a bridge might begin there also.⁴⁸

One of the greatest difficulties throughout this operation was to get supplies across the river. Ferrying operations were being carried on 24 hours a day. The engineers were using

paddled assault boats, single and double powered assault boats, 55 mph storm boats, power utility boats and later, DUKW's. The current was now too strong for the infantry support rafts or light ferries to be attempted. Most of the boats experienced getting caught in fences and the brush, the motorboats had their propellers repeatedly fouled, and many boats hit submerged fence posts and sank.

The amount of supplies actually delivered across the river materially decreased as the total round distance a boat had to travel in crossing the river increased, the boat loading areas became nothing but places in the middle of the field under 2 feet or more of water, and the boats were slowed down by their "obstacle course." The supply sections augmented by all available personnel from the battalion headquarters companies, the regimental trains and the engineers did all in their power to decrease this differential. The ferry service worked around-the-clock and many of the men worked from 24 to 48 hours at a stretch and some men even worked 72 hours without stopping for sleep or rest. Their almost superhuman efforts did ensure that at least the minimum supplies would get to the battalions. This included sufficient ammunition for the hand carried weapons that had crossed the river, wire and replacement radio batteries, inadequate rations. The river and the Germans were striving mightily to defeat the Americans but were not succeeding.⁴⁹

11 NOVEMBER - CONSOLIDATION

About 1000 on the 11th of November, the regiment jumped off in the attack to seize its final objective.

Company A on the extreme north flank attacked northeast astride the highway paralleling the river. They met heavy resistance but finally captured their objective, the main crossroad 1400 yards southeast of Rettel at 1600. The other two companies of the 1st Battalion attacked eastward to seize the ridge to their front. The enemy had maintained heavy pressure on the battalion from the ridge but the determined attack drove the Germans off the ridge and the 1st Battalion seized its sector of the final regimental objective by mid-afternoon. There they dug in and prepared a defensive position on the commanding ground north and south of Koengisberg Farm.

The I and R Platoon was ordered to relieve Company I at the eastern end of Petite Hettange. This continued to give depth to the defense of the dangerous sector in the center leading from Kerling and allowed Company I to return to the 3rd Battalion which then attacked directly toward Kerling, with Company I and Company K, Company I on the right. The Germans held all of the commanding ground along the ridge between Kerling and the 1st Battalion. This provided them with excellent observation and fields of fire and Company K was stopped approximately halfway to Kerling. Company I was able to advance farther and finally gained a position from which it could cover by fire the road intersection on the western edge of Kerling. Here the company was stopped by fire from Kerling and the Hill 400 yards to the north. Company L, the reserve company, was moved into the line on the left of Company K and gained secure contact with the 1st Battalion.

The 2nd Battalion positions did not materially change during the day. Company G was left in its position blocking the road 100 yards west of Kerling. Company E and Company F astride two roads leading south into Oudrenne were still faced with a minefield. This minefield was very deep and included S-mines, schu mines, teller mines and riegel mines. It ran east and west across the roads and neither flank of the minefield had been found, but it was known that it extended into the Bois de Koenigsmacher south of the regimental boundary and farther into the woods between Oudrenne and Kerling than any patrol had yet penetrated. The engineers were attempting to clear passageways through this minefield but were hampered by German small arms fire.

Wire communication with the battalions was proving very difficult to maintain and the forward regimental command post was moved across the river during the day into a building on the western edge of Petite Hettange. It was not possible to string the telephone wire above the river and consequently the lines were continually being broken by the fast current or were being shorted out by the water. Various combinations of wire were tried up to and including weighted quadruple strands of W-110 wire. This difficulty was subsequently solved by laying a heavy rubber covered cable weighted with scrap metal on the river bottom.

The M-2 treadway bridge at Malling was completed at 110200 November but it could not be used. The road between Gavisse and the bridge was under 54 inches of water and no wheeled or tracked vehicle available could ford that depth. The water had entered the streets of both Gavisse and Cattenom and all attempts at constructing a bridge at the latter site had ceased.⁵⁰ All bridges across the Moselle in the entire Third Army zone were destroyed by the flood except the one at Malling and a high level bridge at Pont-a-Mousson in XII Corps and these latter two were unusable because the approaches had been flooded. This meant that Third Army had seven divisions east of the Moselle and no usable bridges to support them.⁵¹

The engineer plan for the crossing had been based on the normal width of the river but it now was from 10 to 20 times that wide. The continual loss of all types of engineer boats at Cattenom and Malling had exhausted the Third Army supply. Assault boats were on the Theater critical supply list and Third Army was unable to requisition any more.⁵²

In order to be able to deliver the bare minimum of supplies across the river the reserve battalion of the 357th Infantry had not crossed on the 9th or 10th of November. However, they were able to cross on the 11th and joined their regiment. By this time the 357th Infantry had reached the southern edge of the Bois de Koenigsmacher. This covered the right flank of the regiment and eventually forced the withdrawal of the Germans from Oudrenne. At a great cost in casualties the 358th Infantry on the right of the division bridgehead had finally captured the Koenigsmacher Fortified Group. This fort had been manned by a 300-man German Battalion. The 358th Infantry had used element C-2, gasoline, and many other expedients in an attempt to capture the fort. However, the American casualties had been so great that the Division Commander, with General Patton's permission, had ordered the attack stopped there on the morning of the 11th. The battalion commander there had refused to withdraw, saying, "This fort is ours." By nightfall of the same day it was.

At 111800 November the flood reached its peak and shortly thereafter began to subside at the maddeningly slow rate of three-fourths of an inch an hour. When it was realized that by dawn tanks and tank destroyers would be able to ford the stream and cross the bridge, plans were made for Company A, 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion to be the first armored unit to cross the river. This company was the normal combat team attachment to the 357th Infantry. It had been chosen to go first in order to assist the 357th Infantry in the capture of the Billig Forts, a Maginot fort in the southeastern corner of the Bois de Koenigsmacher.⁵³

12 NOVEMBER - THE MAIN COUNTERATTACK

By midnight 11-12 November the river had subsided sufficiently for artillery M-4 tractors towing engineer trailers to ford the stream to the Malling bridge. Two hours later six-ton bridge construction trucks (Brockways) were able to ford the stream loaded with jeeps carrying critical supplies.

At 110640 the Germans launched their strongest counterattack against the bridgehead. The German High Command had been forced by the threat of a double envelopment of Metz to employ the newly reorganized 25th Panzer Grenadier Division of their strategic reserve. This unit had not been previously identified by the Americans as being in the German Order of Battle.⁵⁴ The counterattacking force was the 35th Grenadier Regiment reinforced with tanks and assault guns and by the German units already in the sector.

The German attack against the 1st Battalion in the vicinity of Koengisberg farm proved to be primarily a holding attack and their main effort was made astride the Kerling-Petite Hettange Road. The attack jumped off from the western edge of Kerling and the high ground 400 yards to the north and soon forced the right flank of Company I to withdraw northward away from the road. Some units emplaced on the high ground near Kerling contained Company I by fire while the bulk of the forces attacked Company G 800 yards west of Kerling. The company was forced off the road but went into the small woods on their immediate right flank and established a perimeter defense around the woods. The artillery forward observer with the company had adjusted artillery fire around the woods for the defense of the position.

Attached to Company G was one platoon of heavy machine guns of Company H commanded by Technical Sergeant Forrest E. Everhart. He had only one gun remaining in each section and had placed these guns on the eastern edge of the woods approximately 200 yards apart. When the Germans first assaulted the position Sergeant Everhart was with the last section. The machine gun here fired at maximum rate but despite its deadly fire the momentum of the German assault could not be stopped. Sergeant Everhart took all of the hand grenades on the position and stepping out in front hurled them all at the onrushing Germans. He was standing erect in the open but despite the hail of fire he was not hit and continued to throw hand grenades until the assault was stopped. The German attack switched to the south and Sergeant Everhart then crossed to his other one gun section. Despite the fire of this machine gun the Germans were not stopped and again Sergeant Everhart, standing upright and uncovered, hurled hand grenades until the assault force was broken up. Although there were some officers of Company G present on this flank, the leadership and example demonstrated by Sergeant Everhart was the principal

cause for Company G being able to hold its position. After the attack nearly 50 dead Germans were found in front of his machine guns. For this act, Sergeant Everhart was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Germans, realizing that they could only capture the woods with a time-consuming attack by a larger unit, ceased all attempts to do so and bypass the company position.⁵⁵

Only one telephone wire across the river was serviceable at this time. The 915th Field Artillery Battalion of the 359th Infantry Regimental Combat Team had sent one of their battery commanders over to act as a liaison officer with the regimental headquarters in Petite Hettange. In order to obtain artillery fire it was necessary to allow the artillery liaison officer to use the one line. All information on the situation that was received by the regimental headquarters in division headquarters was relayed by the 915th Artillery Fire Direction Center to them.

The artillery liaison officers sat with a telephone in each hand. When a forward observer would call in with a fire mission, the liaison officer would relay the information back to the FDC. In this manner the request for fire missions from all three battalions and all information from the forward regimental CP were handled by one wire-line.

The delay caused the Germans by Company G allowed the American troops closer to the river sufficient time to realize the seriousness of the threat and to initiate action to halt the attack. The 2nd Battalion less Company G was alerted to assemble and organize for a coordinated counterattack. The crossroads at the eastern edge of Petite Hettange were still defended by the I and R Platoon. This unit was alerted and reinforced by the Regimental Headquarters Guard Platoon, a few stragglers from Company G and Company I, and all possible excess men from the three headquarters in Petite Hettange including the forward headquarters of the regiment, and the headquarters of the 2nd Battalion and the 3rd Battalion. Two of the three 57 mm antitank guns that had crossed the river were brought to the crossroads, also. Colonel Boothe, Commander of the 2nd Battalion, having taken the necessary steps to start the organization of his battalion for a counterattack, had gone to the crossroads to organize the defense there in order to stop or at least delay the Germans until his Battalion was in position.

As the Germans pressed on in their attack, they next ran into the antitank squad of the 3rd Battalion that had been chased out of Kerling two days previously. This squad had their gun set up about 800 yards southwest of Hunting covering the crossroads midway between Kerling and Petite Hettange. They were able to disable one German tank before their position was overrun and their gun lost. In order to destroy the gun, the Germans placed an activated hand grenade in the barrel and then stuck a 57 mm round in the muzzle. The explosion of the grenade very effectively ruined a barrel.

The artillery was firing at maximum rate on the advancing German column, its fire being adjusted mainly by the forward observer with Company G.⁵⁶ All artillery battalions within range were firing but principal artillery credit for the eventual breakup of the attack was given by XX Corps Artillery to the 733rd Field Artillery Battalion (155 mm gun) and to the organic 155 mm Howitzer battalions of the 90th and 83rd Divisions. The bulk of the artillery fired directly on the attacking Germans while the heavy artillery including 8 inch howitzers, 8 inch guns and 240 mm

howitzers fired at the western edge of Kerling in order to stop the Germans from reinforcing his assault elements.

Despite the heavy casualties they were receiving from the artillery, the German attack was moving forward surprisingly fast. They were attacking on a fairly wide front astride the Kerling-Petite Hettange road with their armor in the center.

A row of trees extended eastward from Petite Hettange for three or four hundred yards along both sides of the road toward Kerling. These trees were planted fairly close together and except when shooting parallel to the road, they greatly restricted the fields of fire. In order to cover the road itself one 57 mm antitank gun had been placed in the road at the Petite Hettange crossroads.

As a German armor on the road approached the American position the leading assault gun and the 57 mm antitank gun began exchanging rounds. Colonel Boothe stood up in the middle of the road beside the antitank gun and observed and directed its fire. Each time the gun fired, it was slide back on the pavement and while the German rounds whistled by them Colonel Boothe and the squad members would then push it forward to fire again. The leading German assault gun had a low silhouette and its front armor was very heavy and slanted back at a sharp angle the rounds of the 57 mm gun could be seen to hit the assault gun but they would merely ricochet off. Finally this leading assault gun was damaged but the attackers came on.

By this time the air was full of small arms fire. Practically all of the buildings in Petite Hettange were being hit by rifle and machine gun fire. The Germans were within 200 yards of the crossroads and still advancing.

"This was the most critical period for the Corps in the whole of the Metz operation."⁵⁷

The Germans had been shelling the Malling bridge site consistently. By dawn they had damaged the bridge and punctured several pontons but by placing small portable air compressors out on the bridge the engineers had been able to keep the bridge in operation. At this time the leading tank destroyers of 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion arrived on schedule at the river. Because of the damaged condition of the bridge, it was decided to allow only one TD at a time to cross. The first two TD's crossed safely but as the third TD reached the middle of the bridge, fragments of another artillery shell hit the bridge and it broke in two sending the TD to the bottom of the river.

The two TD's that had crossed the river knew little of the big counterattack against the 359th Infantry. Their orders were to proceed to Metrich to join the 357th Infantry. When they passed the regimental CP in Petite Hettange, the regimental commander, realizing his opportunity, commandeered the TD's and personally led them up to the crossroads despite the furious firefight going on there.

As the TD's approached the crossroads, an American bazooka man, not realizing that any American armor had crossed the river and not being able to see the leading TD too clearly in the early morning haze started to fire on it. Only the quick action of a sergeant who recognized it as

one of our M-10 TD's and physically tackled the bazooka man just before he shot, saved the Tank destroyer.

The TD's crossed the road intersection, one around to the right of the first building, and before stopping, each had fired two rounds from its 3 inch guns. The two leading assault guns were completely destroyed and a third immobilized.

This stopped the German attack completely. All the men in the area, greatly enheartened by the presence of friendly armor, increased their rate of fire, the TD's fired into the Germans repeatedly and the artillery continued to literally rain shells on them. In a few minutes the Germans began to retreat. Just at that moment the 2nd Battalion counterattack hit them on their south flank. As the full force of the battalion's counterattack was felt by the Germans their retreat became a rout. As they fled back pursued by the 2nd Battalion and fired on by Company G and Company I from their positions on either flank the full force of the artillery lifted to Kerling.⁵⁹

Within thirty minutes from the time that the leading German assault gun had been 103 paces from the Petite-Hettange crossroads, there wasn't a living un-captured German left west of Kerling. Between five and nine German tanks and assault guns had been destroyed, 150 prisoners were taken, and over 200 dead Germans lay west of Kerling.⁵⁸ When General Patton and General Walker visited this Battlefield two days later, General Patton stated, "I have never seen so many dead Germans in one place in my life. They extended for a distance of about a mile practically shoulder to shoulder."

The mission of the 35th Grenadier Regiment had been to split the bridgehead in two. That they had nearly succeeded is evidenced by the facts that in the attacks of the 10th and 12th they had penetrated three-fourths of the way to the river and at that there was no opposition beyond Petite Hettange.

After the Germans were chased back into Kerling, the Regiment readjusted its forces. Company G was moved to the position along the mine fields facing Oudrenne, Company E remained in position along the Kerling-Petite Hettange road to strengthen a defense facing Kerling, Company F was placed in a position along the Hunting-Oudrenne Road facing the woods between Kerling and Oudrenne and the I and R Platoon was moved from Petite Hettange to Hunting to relieve Company A near Rettel. Company A joined the rest of the 1st Battalion and sent one platoon to capture and occupy the nose of the hill at the extreme north end of the perimeter of the bridgehead. This platoon fought by itself there for the remainder of the day. Several times they captured the nose of the hill only to be driven off again. Finally the platoon leader had his men fix bandits and they assaulted the German position so effectively that Germans did not again attempt to capture the position.

When the treadway bridge that Malling went out, part of it sank into the river and the bulk of it floated 800 yards downstream and stuck on a sand bar. After a great deal of work the salvageable parts were brought back to the position and a treadway ferry was constructed. This ferry was put into operation late in the day and by midnight two platoons of tanks and two

platoons of TD's had been crossed over the river as well as a number of command and litter jeeps.

Meanwhile bridging operations had started again at both Malling and Cattenom. The Battalion of the 95th Division that had crossed at Thionville had by now established a sufficiently large bridgehead for the engineers to also begin construction of a Bailey bridge there.⁶⁰

To facilitate the operations of the supply system some DUKW's were made available. They proved very successful but as the floodwaters receded, German mines were exposed and blew up one of the DUKW's. It took five hours to remove the mines from the bridge sites and boat landing sites.⁶¹

13 NOVEMBER - ENLARGING THE BRIDGEHEAD

The ferrying operations continued throughout the night and on into the day with armor, antitank units, command and reconnaissance vehicles, and medical jeeps receiving priority. No supply vehicles were crossed during this period and all administrative echelons including the rear regimental headquarters remained west of the river. The engineers were working at full speed to complete their bridges and for the first time, German artillery fire was not interfering with bridge building at Malling.

At 1200 the 3rd Battalion attacked Kerling and by 1400 the high ground 400 yards north of the town and Kerling itself had been recaptured. The battalions spent the rest of the day expanding the area they held around the town and preparing a defense of it that would avoid the mistakes of the 10th.

The 2nd Battalion was given the mission of clearing the woods between Oudrenne and Kerling and of capturing Oudrenne and establishing contact with the 357th Infantry on the right. The Battalion attacked at 1500 but was stopped by minefields on all fronts.

Company G was to attack south to Oudrenne but was immediately stopped by the mines. The combat team engineers that had been clearing gaps in the minefield in the area of the two roads leading south into Oudrenne found that it contained 12,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. Company G decided not to attempt to infiltrate through the mines that day and take the resultant casualties as the engineers estimated that they could complete the gaps along the roads the next day.

Company E and Company F attacked southeast into the woods but soon lost three tanks in an extension of the same minefield. The companies continued into the woods without the tanks but just at the dark became involved in an anti-personnel minefield containing 16,000 of the vicious little wooden schu mines. These mines were placed very close together and provided an extremely effective obstacle. The Battalion tried to pick its way through the minefield but soon had received too many casualties. Every time a man stepped on one of the mines, his foot was blown off above the ankle.

The Battalion medical section performed especially bravely during this period. Besides the fact that several company aid men were hurt, every litter man in the battalion squad became a casualty. In two separate instances, two-man litter teams carrying a wounded soldier stepped on a schu mine, seriously injuring both litter bearers and killing the wounded soldier on the litter.

It was very probable that the Germans would not attack through their minefields so it was finally decided to sideslip eastward paralleling the minefield and attempt to get around its flank in the vicinity of Kerling. The two companies halted about midnight in the woods near Kerling.⁶²

There was a marked increase in artillery fire including high velocity fire on the front lines of the entire division indicating that the Germans were employing additional artillery against the bridgehead.⁶³ The 357th Infantry in attempting to debouch from the south end of the Bois de Koenigsmacher was halted by the extension of the same minefield that had previously halted the 2nd Battalion of the 359th Infantry.⁶⁴

At 1915 the Cattenom bridge, an M-2 treadway 630 feet long, was finally completed and by 1940 the organic vehicles began to cross.⁶⁵ In some sectors the infantry was beyond the range of light artillery and it was essential that displacement forward be effected.

This completion of a usable bridge was the beginning of a new phase in the battle. "A turning point in the entire Metz operation had been reached."⁶⁶

14 NOVEMBER - THE BRIDGES ARE IN

By dawn all the transportation of the three regiments, the organic 105 mm howitzer battalions of the division, and the attached tanks and tank destroyers had crossed the river via the Cattenom bridge.

The addition of the two battalions of armor had a decided effect on the morale of the troops and soon all portions of the final objective were in our hands. At 0800 the 3rd Battalion attacked Freching and within an hour the town was captured. The 2nd Battalion jumped off at the same time, drove in a light enemy screen, and in conjunction with the 3rd Battalion out the Kerling-Lemestroff Road. The 3rd Battalion pushed on and mopped up the le Sillery woods. By midafternoon the engineers completed their gap in the minefield facing Oudrenne and Company G, moved quickly forward, occupied Oudrenne, and contacted the 357th Infantry on the right in the vicinity of the Billig Forts. Thus the regiment had gained its final objective in all sectors.

With the regimental transportation now across the river the troops finally received their overcoats and blankets and were given new socks, a particularly important item. Some units were even fed a hot meal that evening. Though all of the troops had been deprived of these things for six cold and wet days and nights by force of circumstances, they had never let in affect their tremendous will to win.

The enemy continued to resist with his greatest strength concentrated on the southern flank against the 358th Infantry. There he launched his last vicious counterattack against the bridgehead.⁶⁷ During the night of 14-15 November the Germans fired 200 rounds of 150 mm artillery into Hunting, his last parting blow against the regiment in the bridgehead except for a few rounds fired at the Malling bridge the next day, none of which did any harm.⁶⁸

At 1300 the engineers completed their bridge at the Thionville. This bridge was a double-triple Bailey and was believed to be the largest Bailey bridge to have been constructed operationally in the Theater up to that time.⁶⁹

Shortly afterwards CCB of the 10th Armored Division crossed the bridge at Thionville, turned north to Petite Hettange and then east to Kerling. Immediately after passing through the front lines of the regiment the armor was stopped by German antitank fire and mines. As darkness fell CCB stopped their attack and prepared to resume it the next morning. Meanwhile, the bridgehead at Malling was finished and CCA prepared to move across the river there as soon as CCB cleared the roads beyond.

The battle of the bridgehead was over!⁷⁰

SUMMARY

15-30 NOVEMBER - METZ FALLS

On the 15th of November all of the piled up forces began their breakout of the bridgehead.

The 90th Division turned south out of the bridgehead area toward the objective of Boulay. The division formed the center of the bulk of the northern arm of the double envelopment of Metz.

Task Force Bacon composed of those elements of the 95th Division that had crossed the Moselle at Thionville and Uckange and reinforced by other 95th Division units attacked from their bridgehead down the east bank of the river from Thionville toward Metz on the right of the 90th Division. On the left of the 90th Division CCA of the 10th Armored Division turned south with the mission of stopping any reinforcements that the Germans might try to send into Metz.

Within four days Metz was encircled. The 90th Reconnaissance Troop contacted the 735th Tank Battalion of the 5th Infantry Division at 191100 November. This had been a very rapid move with the 90th Division moving even faster than CCA of the 10th Armored Division.⁷¹

With the city completely encircled the 5th Division and the 95th Division attacked Metz. All resistance ceased in the city on the 22nd of November.⁷²

The 90th Division stayed in position behind Metz until approximately the 24th of November when it moved north and east into position on the southern flank of the 10th Armored unit attacking towards the Saar. The division reached the Saar on the 29th of November.⁷³

CCB of the 10th Armored attacked eastward with the mission of capturing a bridge across the Saar in the vicinity of Merzig. Unfortunately, the 10th Armored had not reached the Saar until 30 November and all bridges had been destroyed by that time.⁷⁴

On 12 November General Bradley had rescinded his order giving Operational control of the 83rd Division to Third Army.⁷⁵ Therefore, XX Corps ordered Task Force Polk (3rd Cavalry Group reinforced) to make the attack northward into the Saar-Moselle triangle to capture Saarburg. However, the intelligence agencies had not been aware of the strength of a switch position of the Siegfried Line behind the German border running east and west connecting the Moselle and Saar Rivers. Task Force Polk was unable to penetrate these fortifications and Saarburg was not captured until after the bulge.⁷⁶

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Basically, the mission of the regiment was, with the remainder of the division, to cross the river and establish a bridgehead that would permit the crossing of additional major units of XX Corps. In order to effect this, an area had to be seized and held east of the river that would permit the construction of bridges that would carry armor and would provide sufficient maneuver room within the bridgehead for its defense for the other major units of the Corps that were to break out of it.

Within the 359th Infantry sector the terrain was such that the enemy was not deprived of direct observation of the Malling bridge site until all of the ground within the specified perimeter had been captured. This was not accomplished until 14 November.

In analyzing this operation it becomes apparent that the principal factors affecting it were as follows:

1. The careful and deliberate planning.
2. The effect of the flood.
3. The conduct of the attack on 9 November 1944.
4. The conduct of the defense of Kerling on 10 November 1944.
5. The conduct of the defense on 12 November 1944.

The careful planning and preparation for the resumption of the offensive paid high dividends. However, it must not be construed that a similar amount of time for preparation should always be had. The advantages to be gained are in many ways outweighed by the fact

that the enemy is being allowed the same time to make his counter-preparations. The regiment did not have such a long period of relative inactivity at any other time during the war. The execution of the preparatory phase to include the security and deception phases was well handled by all echelons and was successful in that complete tactical surprise was gained and that despite great difficulties the battle was won. The success of the assault river crossing was in large part due to the careful rehearsals with the engineers prior to the crossing.

The flooded condition of the Moselle nearly prejudiced the entire operation. The flood was unexpected and no plans had been made for such a contingency. Determining the effect of weather on the operations such as a river crossing and the taking of this into consideration when establishing the D-day is properly the concern of the higher headquarters, not a regiment. However, the effects of the flood were so great that this factor should be examined briefly.

It would appear that Headquarters, Third U.S. Army was at fault in this instance. General Manton S. Eddy, CG of XII Corps, visited General Patton on the 7th of November and recommended that the attack be postponed due to the bad weather and the swollen rivers. However, General Patton flatly refused to consider such a suggestion.⁷⁷ Shortly after the operation General Patton was asked by a reporter if the flood had been expected and he stated that it had not.⁷⁸ Since an inordinate amount of rain had fallen immediately prior to D-day, General Patton and his staff should have thoroughly investigated the possibility of a serious flood. The initial advantage of tactical surprise that was gained by attacking under such conditions was soon heavily outweighed by the difficulties caused by the flood.

The flood directly affected by the operations of the regiment in many ways. The principal tactical effect was the complete lack of armor for the first three days of the operation and the small number of anti-tank guns available.

When soldiers do not have sufficient food and they do not have overcoats, blankets, and dry socks under conditions such as existed in this battle, their efficiency may be reduced. The soldiers are useless if they are without ammunition. The re-supply of the battalions became a problem of almost fantastic proportions and required the utmost in ingenuity and effort from all concerned.

The operation order of the regiment had stated that the assault battalions would make every effort to reach their final objectives on the first day of the attack. This order was based on the fact that small groups of German soldiers did not like to hold a position when they had been bypassed by larger elements. It was felt that if the battalions were to penetrate the German lines deeply, the small, bypassed elements would offer no problem. This belief was confirmed by the day's operations.

The performance of the 3rd Battalion in Kerling on the night of 9-10 November was very poor. When the counterattack struck, the Germans were able to defeat the 3rd Battalion piecemeal. The conduct of most of the platoons of the battalion was exemplary. However, the entire position was quickly lost. The fault lay chiefly with the battalion commander and the rifle company commanders. After capturing Kerling, the battalion commander located his defenses on the proper terrain and his general dispositions were certainly satisfactory. However, he failed

to consider that at night the platoon positions were too widely separated to be mutually supporting and penetrations could be easily effected between them. No night patrolling system was instituted and no readjustment of the front lines was made to fill in the gaps between platoons that would be covered by fire during the daylight. It was this failure of the battalion and company commanders to personally ensure that the small unit defensive positions were integrated into a united battalion defense that resulted in the loss of Kerling. Had the battalion held Kerling that night, it is extremely doubtful if the counterattack of 12 November would have proved anywhere near as serious as it did.

The use of artillery throughout the battle was outstanding. This was particularly true in the initial fires when the artillery was used to neutralize the area of the Bois de Koenigsmacher, in the fires on Kerling on the morning of 10 November which made it impossible for the Germans to continue their counterattack that day, and in the fires on the counter attacking force of the 12th, both in protecting Company G's position and in assisting in the breakup of the assault elements near Petite Hettange. Without the tremendous help of the artillery in the closely-knit infantry-artillery team, the Germans could not have been stopped from reaching the river on the 12th and it is conceivable that they might have been able to force the division back across the river.

The psychological effect of the arrival of the two tank destroyers at Petite Hettange on the morning of 12 November was tremendous. The soldiers had been fighting grimly and well up to their arrival, but when they saw that they finally had some armor of their own, their morale improved greatly and their aggressive spirit returned in full.

The counterattack by the 2nd Battalion on the 12th was timed almost perfectly. The Germans had been stopped, their armor had been almost eliminated, and they had just started to retreat when the 2nd Battalion struck them squarely in the flank. The Germans had already suffered heavy losses and a strong flank attack caught them by surprise. Almost instantly their slow retreat became a rout and they fled back to Kerling and were not able to mount another counterattack against the regiment.

Except for a few small unit actions the regiment had been on the defensive for seven weeks prior to the crossing of the Moselle. It was feared by some officers that the men might have lost their aggressiveness, that they had become defense-minded rather than attack-minded. This proved to be completely untrue. The combat efficiency of the regiment was as high or higher during this battle than it was any other time during the war.

Of the action of the division in this operation General Patton stated in a letter of commendation to the CG, 90th Infantry Division that "The capture development of your bridgehead over the Moselle River in the vicinity of Koenigsmacher will ever rank as one of the epic river crossings of history."

LESSONS

The major lessons emphasized by this operation are as follows:

1. An attack of a strongly defended river line requires careful and deliberate planning.
2. Weather and its affect on operations must always be considered. This is particularly true in river crossings.
3. Careful rehearsals with the supporting engineers must be made prior to a river crossing. This is particularly important when the infantry has not had a recent experience in such an operation and when the river line is strongly defended.
4. When the attack has jumped off in a night river Crossing, a regimental commander can do little to influence the action until daylight. Therefore, the initial missions given the leading battalions must carry them well into the day.
5. If the psychology of the enemy is conducive to the use of such tactics, the bypassing a small groups of the enemy will allow these small groups be eliminated more easily and will insure the arrival of the bulk of the combat elements on the objective at an earlier time.
6. The defenses of a command of any size must be integrated into a unified defense. No matter how good the positions of the component units may be, the defense of the larger unit is materially weakened if the smaller unit positions are not welded into one integrated defense plan.
7. Security guards must be frequently inspected to ensure that they are alert in performing their assigned mission.
8. There is an irreducible minimum in the amount of supplies required by units in combat. This minimum must be delivered to the combat units at all costs, even if other combat units have to be used to ensure delivery.
9. Supporting artillery must have communication from front to rear, even if this means that the infantry must share their means of communication.
10. The value of a counterattack can be increased immeasurably if it strikes the enemy at the correct moment.
11. A mine field containing adequate quantities of antitank and anti-personnel mines can be an extremely effective obstacle when it is covered by fire. This is true of a large minefield even when it is only lightly defended.
12. When there is any possible danger of enemy sympathizers in front-line areas, the civilians should be evacuated or closely controlled.

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