

Ardennes

6 January 1945

2 March 1945

The ground had frozen solidly. Five inches of snow had fallen. A glazing of ice had formed on the highways as the 315th loaded up to head north through a raging storm. All vehicular identifications were painted over and shoulder patches were removed. TO insignias on helmets were covered with tape and the 90th moved 50 miles, anonymously, through the storm.

Backtracking across the Moselle the troops again crossed at Cattenom. The scene was different this time for the snow and ice had covered the wreckage and cars of that November assault. The treadway bridge, protected by several anti-craft batteries, lay peacefully across the, now tame, Moselle.

Swinging to the north the battalion rolled through the muffled silence of the snowstorm. Into Luxembourg at Eurange, on through Luxembourg city then west through Arlon, Belgium, then north again the troops rolled in the near-zero weather.

On 9 January the 90th was in place, ready to assault the enemy east of Bastogne, and again it found the weather definitely pro-nazi. On the icy grades, trucks skidded and plunged into ditches. Tanks spun their tracks helplessly and high winds, sweeping down the valleys and across the ridges, drifted the snow into cuts along the roads.

Bulldozers were used for snow plows and captured German V plows were mounted on the bumpers of 4 ton trucks. [Figure 7-1] The engineers worked day and night spreading gravel on the ice covered grades and curves and plowing off the drifts in a mighty effort to keep the roads open. Near Herlange, hundreds of spruce and fir saplings were cut and piled to form snow fences at strategic points along the MSR.

As the infantry pushed on, snow covered mines became an ever increasing problem. Some were American mines emplaced by troops which had been overrun by the sudden thrust. Others had been hastily thrown in by both Americans and Germans during the see-saw battles which had ensued – now they were all well buried under the snow and ice of winter in the Ardennes. In the sub-zero blizzard the engineers searched and probed for mines as the 90th hurled the kraut back into "der Vaterland" and into the Siegfried Line.

For the first time the 315th was clearing, from the roads, large numbers of blasted and burned American tanks and vehicles. In the heart of the "bulge" the Sherman tanks and the tigers had slugged it out. Many jeeps and weapon carriers had been overrun and burned and everywhere there was a mixture of abandoned equipment – both American and German.

From a local factory the battalion procured a hundred pair of skis and set up a sled manufacturing business. Platforms were built and runners attached to form carriages for the infantry to use in hauling ammunition, rations and the wounded over the snow and ice covered hills.

Back into Luxembourg on 20 January, Company C and Company A built baileys over the Trione near Asselborn and Sassel. On the 25th the C.O. of Company B was seriously wounded when his jeep struck a snow covered box mine on a narrow trail between Sassel and Tois Verges near the Tois Verges Monastery.

The infantry was rapidly pushing forward in this area of wandering international boundaries where one had to carefully watch his map to tell whether he was in Luxembourg, Belgium or Germany.

On 31 January the 315th staged the assault crossing of the Our river between Burg Reuland and Steffeshausen – for the third time, a flooded stream plagued the engineers. [Figure 7-2] An early thaw was developing. Above freezing weather was now melting the ice and snow and the Our leaped out over its flood plain. Baileys were built at Burg Reuland and a Peterskirche and no sooner than they were completed – the floodwaters lashed at the footings. Rubble was hauled, sand bags were filled and the Burg Reuland bridge was saved. But the Peterskirche bailey was toppled into the torrent.

The 90th was across, however, and smashing its way again into the Siegfried Line – this time in the vicinity of Heckhuscheid, Habscheid, Brankscheid and Grosskampenberg. [Figure 7-3, Figure 7-4] Division headquarters moved to Winterspelt and the battalion CP was established at Elcherath on 9 February.

Mines, which had been frozen into insensitivity now thawed. On roads, which had been carrying heavy traffic, trucks were being blown up by the thawing mines and in the rear areas the corps engineers worked feverishly to remove these bypassed weapons.

The 315th Engineers joined the infantry teams in blasting the forts with satchel charges as the 90th steadily drove through the fortifications. But again the supply situation caused a temporary halt, the mission became a containing one, yet violent artillery and mortar duels were a daily occurrence. Cutting timber from the "orchard type" pine forest the 315th assisted the infantry in improving their positions by constructing log covered shelters and OP's.

During the entire month of February the 315th fought the mud battle. Supporting corps engineers worked hundreds of civilians and finally the MSR situation became so bad that rails and ties were removed from the ballast and the railroad grade was converted into a one-way road between Burg Reuland and Hemmeres.

On 24 February the 90th was relieved and pulled out for a brief rest and rehabilitation. The 315th H & S Company motor section had been working, at Elcherath, on a portable shower unit. A captured gravel-spreading trailer was converted into a firebox. Boiler tubing was cut and welded to form the heating coils. An atomizer was fabricated to blow diesel fuel into the chamber and captured fire pumps were used to force water through the heater. After several trial runs and modifications the unit was set up on the Winterpelter branch near Heckhalenfeld just south of Winterspelt. Three hospital ward tents and stoves were borrowed and through these shower and dressing tents poured a steady stream of battle weary troops. The QM provided clean clothes for all and soon the entire division had been refitted for the next battle, which was sure to come.

Preparations for a final thrust through the Siegfried were made for the 90th knew that the assault could not be much longer delayed. On 2 March it struck – smashing through the remaining forts, dragons teeth and pillboxes and during the night 2-3 March Company B bridged the Prum at Pronsfeld with a bailey. The west wall was cracked wide open and in the process the division had captured and destroyed over 500 pillboxes and log bunkers, had captured 3,195 prisoners and had knocked out 38 tanks and SP guns.

The 315th filled many of the larger forts with tons of captured explosives and ammunition. Then it detonated the charges, which in a mighty blast, destroyed the fruits of years of German planning and the work of thousands of slave laborers who had died in the construction of the impregnable Siegfried. But the major tasks of fort destruction and mine removal were left to the corps and army engineers as the 315th plunged on with the 90th on into the Rhineland.

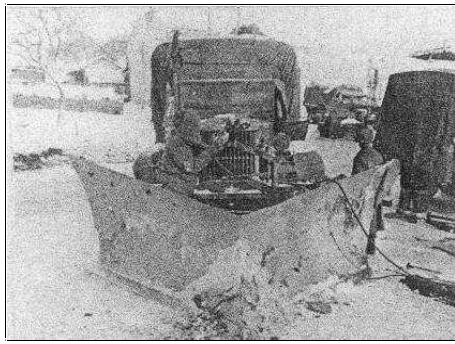


Figure 7-1



Figure 7-2



Figure 7-3



Figure 7-4



Figure 7-5

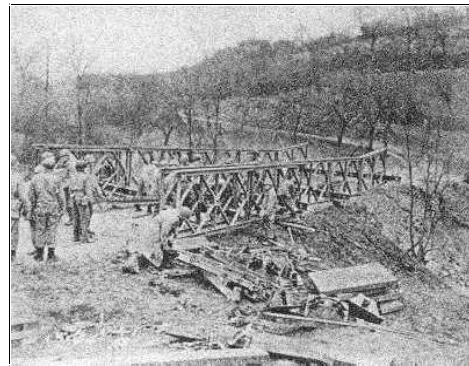


Figure 7-6

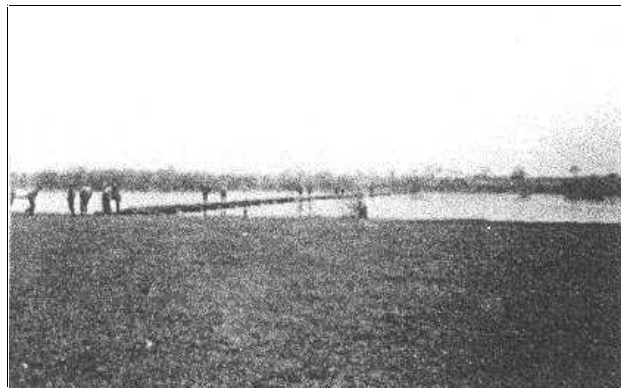


Figure 7-7

Rhineland

3 March 1945

27 March 1945

Through the Eiffel, the 90th smashed on to reach, on the 5th the Kyll River over which all bridges had been destroyed. Company A, under fire from a not too secure bridgehead, constructed a floating support bridge at Birresborn then built a plank road across the flood plain on the far shore. On the night of 6-7 March, Company B constructed a bailey across the Kyll at Lissingen.

While in the Brandschied – Habscheid – Winterspelt area experiments had been conducted in the production of artificial moonlight with anti-aircraft searchlights. Here on the Kyll the experiment paid off. Three of the giant arc lights placed several miles away were trained on the low hanging clouds then adjusted by radio and telephone so that the optimum amount of light was reflected from the clouds over the bridge site.

The laden bridge trucks were difficult to move through the mud and heavy traffic and it was almost midnight before they arrived. Company B was already in Lissingen and the men had hit their "sacks". But as soon as the first load of panels arrived the company was up and on the job. The artificial moonlight gave just enough illumination to make work with the bridge parts possible yet not enough to permit observation by the enemy who was only a few hundred yards away. At first work was slow then as the "moonlight" was better adjusted and the men became accustomed to the semidarkness the bridge rapidly took shape. It was finished by dawn – well before the deadline for an armored division to pass through. The last real defense line west of the Rhine was broken.

The 90th was rolling again as it had across Northern France. On the 9th the 315th cleared abandoned vehicles and equipment from 40 miles of roadway as the 90th roared into Mayen astride the principal route to Koblenz on the Rhine. On to the Rhine was the watchword, but the famed 90th, the masters of river crossings, were diverted to the southeast to again assault the Moselle.

After three days of reconnaissance and planning the boat crossing was made at 0230 on 14 March 1945 in the vicinity of Hatzenport, Brodenback and Burgen. Supporting corps engineers were to do the major bridging and ferrying on the site of the civilian ferry at Hatzenport. Initially the resistance was light but as the troops scaled the almost vertical vineyard-covered valley wall the enemy stiffened. After daybreak, as the infantry pushed out on to the plateau, the resistance became fanatical and the krauts threw in everything in a final effort to save the forces west of the Rhine.

Support rafts were operated to carry over light tactical vehicles and later a heavy ferry took armor across to support the hard pressed infantry. That evening a treadway bridge was completed by the 150th engineers and on the next day the 4th Armored Division roared across to spearhead the push to the Rhine at Boppard. When compared with the November crossing at Cattenom this second assault of the Moselle had been a cinch.

A large portion of the 315th was bivouacked in Hatzenport for three days during the bridging operations. Hatzenport was a beautiful little town nestled at the brink of the Moselle between the steep sides of the valley. These sharply terraced slopes were literally solid masses of vineyards. The entire population of Hatzenport was engaged in the wine industry. There were huge underground warehouses filled with thousands of bottles of the finest vintages of Moselle wines and champagnes. Naturally there was much sampling and comparing of these products and when the battalion loaded up on the 16th to move to Mermuth at least one platoon commander found that it was necessary to dump some of the samples in Order to get his ammunition and tools aboard.

It had been presumed that the 90th would force an immediate crossing of the Rhine but suddenly the direction was changed. The division stampeded 30 miles to the southeast and crossed the Nahe River between bad Kreuznach and Bingen on 19 March. Scattered mines, knocked out or abandoned vehicles littered the roads leading into the city of Mainz. The engineers were fighting to clear the routes of their respective combat teams and task forces.

The assault on the stronghold of Mainz began 22 March and with each of the six attacking infantry battalions and engineer team moved forward to clear mines and debris from the streets. Bitter house-to-house fighting was expected but the capture developed into a "snap". The disillusioned civilians were eager to hoist a white flag, to help clear the streets of debris and to help locate mines. All went well until, in the 359th sector, a booby trapped mine killed one and seriously injured two other engineers of Company C.

While the 90th was clearing the remaining resistance from Mainz, the 5th Division crossed the Rhine between Oppenheim and Nierstein. The 90th had missed assaulting the greatest of the European rivers but quickly, on the heels of the 5th Division crossed on the 22, 23 and 24th to expand the bridgehead, capture Darmstadt and drive 19 miles to the outskirts of Frankfurt.

On 27 March the battalion CP was set up in Bierber just outside of Offenbach. Here plans were rapidly made for still another assault crossing. This time the Main River at Muhlheim between Frankfurt and Hanau. A thrust would be made into central Europe.

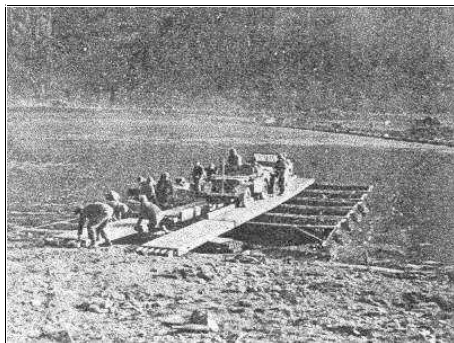


Figure 8-1

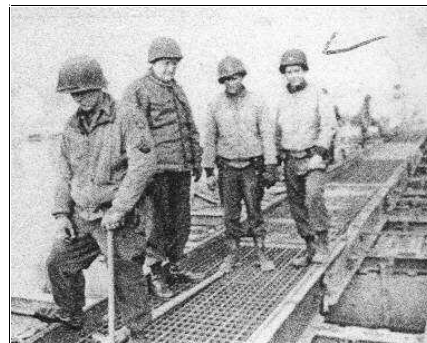


Figure 8-2

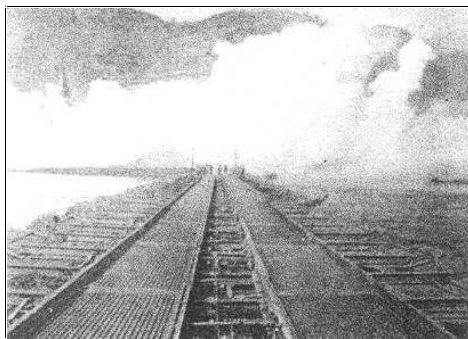


Figure 8-3

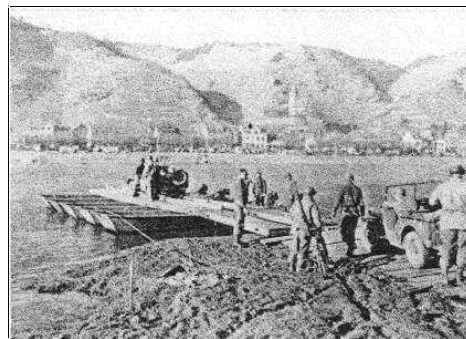


Figure 8-4

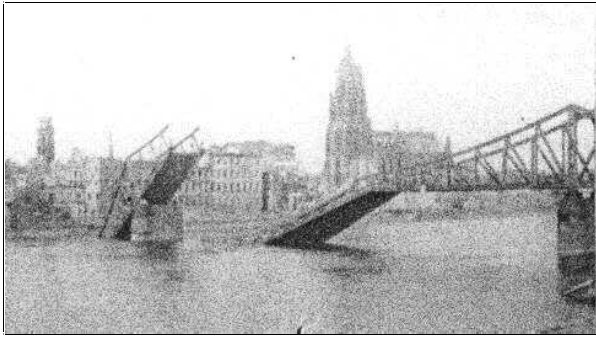


Figure 8-5



Figure 8-6

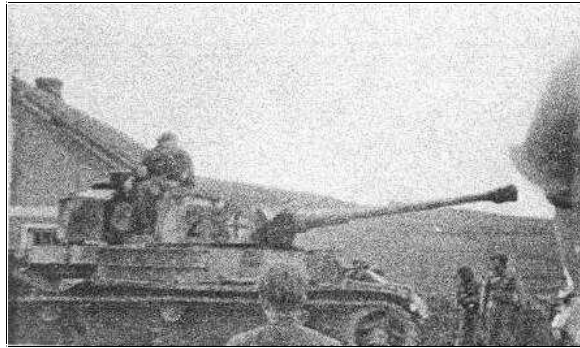


Figure 8-7