

## CHAPTER V

### ACROSS THE MOSELLE TO THE SAAR



1910 hours, November 6. The Battalion departed from Mercy le Haut, en route to a position near Seutzich. Moving over rugged terrain and mucky roads, blacked out the Battalion went into position at 0030. Every driver on that march deserves high praise for bringing his vehicle through. It was a helluva night! The Battalion set up their CP in Fort 688 of the Maginot Line. The scheduled assault of the Moselle River was postponed, because the steadily rising waters of the once peaceful and narrow stream. The dangers in crossing grew as time became more precious. Finally at 0330 November 9 the first wave crossed in assault boats.

The enemy was well protected in it's fortifications, while our own doughs with the rain and cold to combat along with plenty of enemy artillery and tanks were finding the going tough. This they could lick, but nature seemed against us for the rains continued, and the once placid Moselle became a raging torrent, nearly a mile and a half wide. Bridge after bridge was broken and washed away by the rampaging river. Rafts and boats were capsized. The infantry, separated from its artillery and supply, by the muddy tide, became desperate for supplies. Figuring a little was better than nothing, Lt. Watland loaded his cub with medical supplies and despite the weather and enemy landed the precious craft across the river. This initiated a series of mercy flights by the Div Arty "Air Corps", and earned the undying gratitude of the doughs, and a DSC for Lt. Watland.

Finally after losing bridge after bridge to nature or enemy artillery, the reluctant Moselle was finally spanned. The badly needed tanks, TD's, and all kinds of supplies began a steady flow across to the Koenigsmacher side of the river.

The artillery was kept busy day and night firing on enemy positions. Many targets were marked with smoke for the air force to bomb. Captain Clint W. Bracher and Lt. William D. Tatsch went up to replace Captain "Fearless Fosdick" Weinrich and Captain David E. "Molasses" Graf who had been wounded as Liaison 1 and 3. For "Pappy" it was his second time. Both had been up on liaison since the beginning and had been doing "crack up" jobs.

14 November the entire battalion was across the river and in position near Koenigsmacher. Shortly after the CP was set up, representatives of the Division informed us that Division forward Headquarters and Div Arty Headquarters were moving into the town and that "we might be a little crowded". We took the hint and moved forward to Elzange. We didn't like the idea of being kicked out of town, but that night we sat snug and smug in our new position while the Krauts shelled hell out of Koenigsmacher. There wasn't a round that landed in our position.

I guess life is like that.

The next morning the 343rd personnel were up bright and early. Some time later the Div Arty Executive Officer entered the CP and informed Colonel Reimers that the infantry was pushing out fast (the same into that we had sent Div Arty some time before) and that we would have to displace forward by leap-frogging the batteries. He explained that he would show how it was done. During the conversation he was looking directly at the Silver Star awarded to Colonel Reimers by General McLain for the Mayenne-Le Mans engagement for giving artillery support at all times during this fast moving engagement.

16 November the body of Lt. Henry R. Dutkiewicz, Able Battery's FO, was found. He had been missing since the 9th when he and his radio operator Cpl. Joe Sellitti crossed the river with the infantry.

The infantry was advancing steadily against stiff enemy opposition. The guns of the Maginot Line were emplaced so that it was necessary to use 155 SP's to fire direct on them. The 240's knocked out some, while the light artillery was used for targets in the open. Mud and rain still persisted and any degree of comfort was impossible.

On the 18th, a couple of enemy planes came over and thanks to the 537th AAA failed to return to Herman Goering. It's rumored the pilots went down singing the new luftwaffe battle song, "Don't get around much any more".

The enemy maintained its advance and the artillery kept firing. The terrain was rolling and the enemy had dug many tank traps. This had its disadvantages as well as its advantages. While it slowed our advance it also limited the number of roads the Jerries could run away on from the rapidly forming Metz trap.

With the contact of our Division and the 5th Division coming up from the south, the encirclement of the fortress Metz was complete. The city fell to elements of the 5th and 95th Divisions. The 90th made contact with the 5th Division at Bauzainville 19th November. After the enemy realized that the encirclement move was being made every effort was made to get as many forces as possible out of the area. As the pincers closed, many enemy columns were caught on the road and destroyed. It was a repeat of the Chambois trap on a smaller scale.

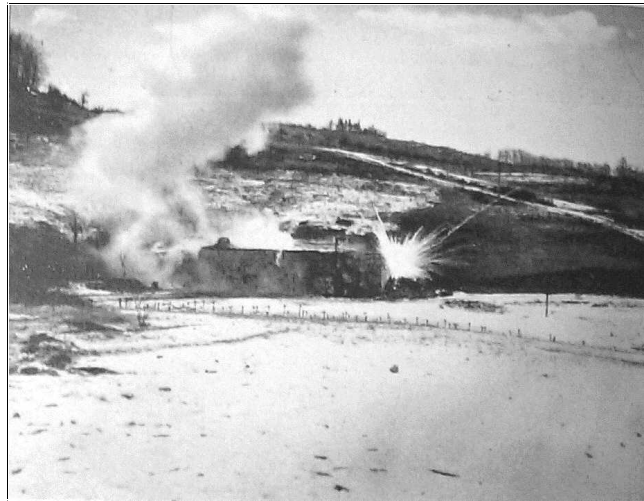
Thanksgiving day, just before the turkey dinner was to be served, a fire mission came over the radio. "Enemy machine gun dug in, 4 Krauts, will adjust". Cpl. Bill Pabst sent the data to the battery. Baker fired three center rights in adjustment and after the first rounds in the fire for effect, the command came back, "Cease Firing". One of those rounds landed in the dugout and blew both MG and Krauts all sky high. "Come and get it, turkey is served".

The 90th crossing of the Moselle was another epic feat of the Tough 'Ombres. The army command called it off and ordered the infantry back, but these men were not to be denied victory after so much was at stake. They stayed, and the angry river seemed to sense that such valiant men would never turn back and even she decided to return to her banks and permit the bridge so badly needed to be built.

With Metz out of the way, the 3rd Army turned its back on the city and headed toward the Saar Basin. The 90th now feeling at home when at the front, as usual led the army.

On 29th November, Able and Charlie Batteries went into the first positions of the Battalion, in Germany. Charlie Battery had, earlier on the 25th, fired the first rounds of the battalion in Germany at 0850, a check point registration. Now the 357th was on the high ground overlooking the Saar, southwest of Merzig.

As the 95th Division sector was moved up to our right, we occupied a sector along the Saar opposite Pachten Colony and Dillingen. We moved to the vicinity of Buren and Siresdorf with Service Battery in Hunnersdorf.



## CHAPTER VI

### DOUBLE-CROSSING THE SAAR



The XX Corps assault of the Saar was to be made with the 95th Division making the main effort and crossing at Saarlautern. The 90th was to attack through the 95th, enlarge the bridgehead, thrust through Dillingen and crack the Siegfried line. The 95th was unable to secure more than a toehold, so the 90th was ordered to make an assault crossing into Dillingen.

Our positions in and around Buren and Siresdorf were constantly subjected to Kraut artillery and even mortar fire. "The Bowling Alley" was the name given to the valley in which the towns were located. That is exactly what it sounded like, day and night. More enemy artillery was encountered during this period than ever before. The night that the roof of the Message Center house was blown off by an enemy shell, was typical of how everyone had grown accustomed to "The Bowling Alley". Sgt. "Casey" Rice, Cpl. "Curley" Knoff and "The fighting 4-F" Cpl. "Swede" Larson were playing a game of 500 Rummy, when the shell hit the roof. As if the command, "Helmets on head, place" were given, all calmly reached down to get their helmets and placed them on their heads in one action. The game continued, not a play was missed. "Stinky, the newly naturalized dog, who had been adopted by Knoff, had the '88' jitters and was just a brown streak, heading for the cellar".

On 5 December, Pfc. Charlie V. Ard, of Able battery wire section was killed in action, while laying wire to Able forward observation post.

In 16 days we fired over 16,000 rounds and attached units were practically as busy as we were. The 949th F.A. Bn. (Cocktail), a 155 Howitzer Battalion, was our mainstay for support. We first met up with them at Montois and since have had nothing but praise for them. They had been with us most of the time since then and had proven themselves a decided asset. Cocktail was the fastest, and the most accurate unit with whom we had the pleasure of working. Most of the time they were represented by the ever pleasant and able, Captain "Come out wherever you are" (Garcon) Seddon. Whenever a mission suitable for the mediums came in, it was not necessary to start looking for the liaison officer, Cocktail had already been alerted by Captain Seddon and was standing by, ready to take the mission.

Early in the morning of Dec 6th, the 357th Inf. started an assault boat crossing of the Saar without artillery preparation. They worked through the mud on the opposite shore and by-passed some pillboxes so as to gain the high ground beyond Pachten, before dawn. Thus began sixteen days of battle, among the worst in the history of the regiment. They fought on "K" rations and guts, and without a bridge for the whole period. On the 2nd night, one of the TD's from the 773rd TD battalion was ferried across, and from then on, more came nightly. Medical supplies were dropped, practically in the laps of the Medics by the 19th Tactical Fighter Group. One company, alone, repulsed 30 Nazi counterattacks during their stay in the heart of the Siegfried. When the Regiment crossed, it was approximately half strength. During the bitter fighting against severe weather, and fanatical enemy forces casualties mounted until companies were of platoon strength and battalions were of company strength. Still the regiment held, far out in front of the remainder of the Division's infantry, who were entangled in Dillingen.

There were many pillboxes that were by-passed, most of these were along the river and could be observed from our side. 240 mm Howitzers were used on these and at times an observer would fire a mission in front of him, turn around and fire the big guns on targets behind him. 155 SP's were again used to fire direct fire and were very effective in helping reduce these fortifications.

Our guns smashed many counterattacks and killed hundreds of Hitler's fanatics, who were defending in this part of the Siegfried. On one occasion a company of these fanatics came marching up a valley at right shoulder arms, marching up to the lines to attack. Not knowing they were close enough

to be under observation, they made a juicy target for our FO, after he had succeeded in convincing Fire Direction that he was sober and not seeing things. Having fired a concentration near this point a short time before, the first rounds were practically on the target, making minor changes, the command was "Fire for effect". Report from the FO: "It's a beautiful sight, arms and legs flying everywhere". Even though completely disorganized, the few that escaped the carnage, came up the hill, screaming, "Heil Hitler". The doughboys got the rest.

So fanatical and insistent were these Nazis in counter attacking, it was necessary for the boys from Union to roll the dead from in front of their MG Positions so that they would have an unobstructed field of fire. At one time a short truce was called to allow the Krauts to carry away their dead and injured.

Communications presented a problem. Many attempts were made to run wire across before success came. Cables would break from the strain and enemy artillery would tear them apart. Tirelessly the wire crews toiled, hour after hour, and night after night. In the meantime our radios were busy every minute of the day. Fire missions, messages for supply officers, messages for medical supplies, pleas for radio batteries, messages to Union 3, day and night this routine went on. Fire control channel and the alternate channel were in constant use. Here the FDC radio operators deserve a note of praise for the way they handled these messages. Two, four, six at a time, yet all were handled without a flaw. Finally on the fourth night, Headquarters Battery wire crew succeeded in getting a wire across and the strain on the radio was eased. This did not mean that the wire section was through, enemy shelling saw to it that they had little rest. Night and day they worked.

During all of this the HCO in FDC lost his voice. He reported to the Medics and after frantic efforts of whispering and waving of arms, and pointing at his throat, he received treatment: "A box of ever ready, all purpose aspirin! Eat two every hour and don't talk". 15 days later his voice came cracking back. In the meantime he used a little horn: one toot for "No", two for "Yes". A cow, not knowing the password, walked in the back door of the shed that Headquarters Battery kitchen was in and came out of the front door in 108 mess kits! Captain "Dave" Graf, Sgt. John F. "Knobby" Piel and T/5 Frank Pratt left for the U.S. on well earned furloughs. All three had been up front in liaison and FO since Normandy. An ARC Clubmobile came to the area but did not stay long enough for the coffee to be saucered and blown. Never-the-less they won the admiration of all for staying as long as they did, because there was quite a bit of "incoming mail".

10 December, Lt. Aram Zazian, Baker battery FO was killed by enemy mortar fire.

"Mason's Maulers" were still driving on, blowing pillboxes, killing Krauts and showing the Germans that when Adolph told them they were superior, he and not heard of the Tough 'Ombres, and evidently we hadn't heard that they were supposed to be superior, for we continued to chase and kill them. The enemy threw a number of tanks into the fight and many didn't return, with Urban getting its share.

About the 15th, enemy shelling lessened some, this was near the time that Von Rundstedt's Ardennes drive started. Some of the enemy artillery had moved up to help in this counter offensive.

Down on the river banks, the Saar was forever enveloped in the white fog of an opaque smoke generated by a record number of nearly 9000 smoke pots, set in operation by the 161st Smoke Generator Co. The negro troops, working 18 hours a day, consumed 146,410 gallons of fog oil, to screen an area of five kilometers along a vital section of the river.

Von Rundstedt's offensive in the north necessitated a revamping of American lines and the Tough 'Ombres, on their 16th night in the Siegfried, gently disengaged from the unsuspecting enemy and returned across the Saar, evacuating more than 100 armored vehicles and all combat troops without suffering a casualty during the withdrawal. To accomplish this, Urban and attached units were busy all night, firing at strong points and sometimes firing, just to make noise. Before the withdrawal, the engineers blew up everything that could later be used by the Krauts as a pillbox. With the exception of two hastily improvised foot bridges, constructed on the first and last nights, the Saar bridgehead was maintained without a span across Germany's number two river.

The Saar had been double crossed.







