

30th INFANTRY DIVISION
117th Infantry Regiment,
3d Battalion

BREACHING THE SIEGFRIED LINE

(Interview with Lt. Col. S.T. McDowell, Battalion Commander, 3d Battalion, 117th Infantry Regiment; Lt. Robert Peters, platoon leader of 3d battalion anti-tank platoon, 17 October 1944. ... Capt. Hechler)

In the initial day of the assault of the Siegfried Line, the 3d battalion of the 117th Infantry Regiment played a relatively minor role. M Company's mortar platoon fired 1100 rounds at the jump-off, and the rifle companies patrolled vigorously in the area north of Marienberg in order to deceive the enemy into thinking an attack was to be made north of where the main effort actually struck.

Late in the afternoon of 2 October, Company I was sent over the Marienberg bridge to close the gap between the right flank of the 1st battalion and the 119th Infantry Regiment on the right (south). Col. McDowell states that the inability of the 119th to advance on 2 October left the 1st battalion ~~and~~ of the 117th vulnerable to counter-attack from the right. I Company suffered 5 wounded during the first day's action, while M Company lost 1 killed and 4 wounded; a heavy machine gun section was wiped out during the operation.

At 0700 on 3 October, the 3d battalion jumped off for its objective, Ubach. Initially, the battalion crossed the Marienberg-Palenberg bridge. K and L Companies attacked abreast, discovering that enemy had infiltrated into the eastern part of Palenberg. As the leading companies reached the outskirts of Palenberg, artillery and mortar fire became more intense.

~~Small-arms fire was encountered from a~~ Small-arms fire was encountered from a pillbox firing north from the 119th sector at (858590). Lt. Peters, * platoon leader of the anti-tank platoon, states that his men fired at

the pillbox from a 900-1000 yard range, firing from the northeast of the pillbox over a small ridge which just barely gave them mask clearance. The first shot from their 57mm anti-tank gun was about a foot high, since they were trying to clear the ridge. The second shot scored on the aperture, and the top of the concrete was seen to fall down. One man quickly ran out of the pillbox and was squelched with a round of HE. No further moves were taken, inasmuch as fire had ceased coming from that sector and it was not in the 3d battalion area

K and L Companies proceeded on either side of the road to Ubach, sending out squads down the side roads to clean out resistance from the houses along the way. However, small arms was a minor problem in contrast to the artillery and mortar fire received.

The fight for Ubach itself was a slugfest of house-to-house fighting, with the enemy giving ground inch by inch. Elements of the 2d Armored Division assisted in cleaning out the town, but were held up by dug-in tanks and the weight of enemy artillery.

The 3d battalion continued to push forward, attempting to flank the resistance which they encountered. Due to the congestion of the route which they were taking through Ubach, because of the presence of tanks from the 2d Armored Division, the regimental commander ordered the 3d battalion at 1840 to button up for the night 500 yards short of "W." (884590). *The eastern 1/4 of Ubach was still in enemy hands.*

Early in the morning of 4 October, about 0530, the 3d battalion was counterattacked by enemy tanks and infantry attempting to ~~penetrate~~ ^{recapture} Ubach from the southeast. With the assistance of division artillery and the 2d Armored Division, this enemy thrust was repulsed by 0630 after one tank had penetrated the 3d battalion area. Although the 3d battalion was originally slated to continue attacking southeastward on 4 October, the counterattack and the continued congestion of

the 2d Armored Division in the area caused a holding up of the plan. During the remainder of the 4th, the Germans counterattacked the 3d battalion on two more occasions and continued to attack until 1600 on 4 October. 20 men from a platoon of Company K were overrun and cut off; in fighting back to its initial line, Company K recovered seven of these missing men.

The German counterattacks had early success because the enemy infantrymen were regularly picking off our bazookamen, thus allowing some Mark IV tanks to roam around at will. We finally stopped this by systematically eliminating the German infantrymen, forcing the tanks to withdraw because they lacked their own infantry support.

On 5 October, I and L companies of the 3d battalion jumped off abreast at 0700, attacking southeast toward objective "M" ⁽⁸⁸⁰⁵⁷³⁾ in the vicinity of zu Ubach. Determined fire was met from anti-tank guns which the Germans had placed in ~~the~~ buildings ^{immediately SE} on the outskirts of Ubach. Five tanks of A Company of the 743rd Tank Battalion were hit (see story of Col. Duncan on this incident). *The 3d Bn did not reduce or outflank this fire on 5 Oct.*

~~On~~ Late in the afternoon of the 5th, the 3d battalion began to receive determined opposition from a strongpoint which was to continue to harass them for the next few days-- the German barracks ~~at~~ ⁽⁸⁷⁸⁵⁸²⁾. The total advance for the 3d battalion on the 5th was approximately 800 yards, in the face of continued artillery and mortar opposition as well as the small-arms ^{fire} from the barracks area.

The 3d battalion resumed the attack at 0800 on 6 October, and continued to meet heavy artillery, mortar and automatic weapons fire in advancing across open ground toward Objective M. An air mission early in the day missed zu Ubach, but after a later mission hit the town the battalion pushed off again ^{at 1630} and by nightfall had reached Objective M.

At 0700 on 7 October, the 3d battalion continued the attack, with their objective "P" (890540)-- the town of Alsdorf. This was one of the best days for the speed of advance achieved. Lt. Temp^E of I Company and Lt. Dougherty of L Company had a bet on who could reach Alsdorf first, and they sped forward so fast that many of the enemy were caught and encircled while still digging their defenses. A German battalion commander's jeep with a complete set of maps and the radio still functioning ~~was~~^{was} captured by the battalion. The objective was reached at approximately 1200. The remainder of the day was spent in house-to-house fighting, cleaning up Alsdorf.

At 0700 on 8 October, the 3d battalion launched an attack to seize Objective "Green" (910525). The southern end of Alsdorf was cleaned out by the rifle companies, but the progress was very slow. The leading elements of the 3d battalion crossed an open field and started to move across railroad tracks beyond Alsdorf. This was apparently a final protective line for the enemy, and stubborn resistance was met at this point. Simultaneously, at 1020, the enemy launched a counterattack from the vicinity of Schaufenberg. Enemy artillery fell heavily, and enemy tanks and infantry moved up to cut off the 3d battalion by hitting it from the rear while it was trying to attack south.

A captured prisoner stated that the enemy force consisted of three mobile separate battalions, each with a strength of 450 men, supported by a company of engineers, 7 tanks, 20 assault guns and 100 pieces of artillery. The men had been told their whole line of defense in the Aachen sector depended on the taking of Alsdorf; the troops had been moved to Mariadorf from the Luxemburg-Welendorf border area, and had been ordered to take Alsdorf even if every man were killed in the effort.

It is evident that all of these units did not launch a coordinated attack, and probably no more than a battalion of enemy infantry was actually involved. The fighting in the open fields south of Alsdorf was at close grips and at bayonet point. The L Company mortars were captured, and were being set up for firing on our own troops when L Company attacked and recaptured them. An I Company sergeant was captured, and as he was being searched at rifle-point, another I Company man fired his M1 and caught the German guard squarely between the eyes.

Col. McDowell's O.P., in a three-story school building, was directly threatened and nearly overrun. Enemy infantry riding on tanks came in on both sides of the OP, and Col. McDowell describes the situation as "the toughest proposition this battalion had encountered since the beaches." It was misty that morning and ~~the~~ the enemy had sneaked in behind our lines unobserved. With Col. McDowell commanding the firing from the upper floor of the school building, a miscellaneous group of liaison officers, signal wire crew and engineers fired from the lower floors. Col. McDowell personally killed four "Category Ones", and accounted for three "Category Twos."

The attack was finally repulsed when tank destroyers knocked out three Mark IV tanks. One continued to roam up and down the streets in the southern part of Alsdorf, and escaped that night under cover of darkness. That night, the 3d battalion withdrew ~~back~~ north of the railroad tracks to better defensive positions, which they held for the next ten days.

Q. by Capt. Ferriss on 3d Battalion, 117th: How did the 2d Armored Division and the 3d battalion, 117th, arrange getting around the German barracks?

A. by Col. Johnson and Col. McDowell, COs, respectively of 117th Regt and 3d Bn. of 117th, as recorded by Capt. Hechler:

The original plan was to have the 2d Armored Division come down east of the barracks, while the 3d battalion was to envelop from the west. As it actually worked out, the 2d Armored Division cleaned out the north side and then cut north without making a complete encirclement.