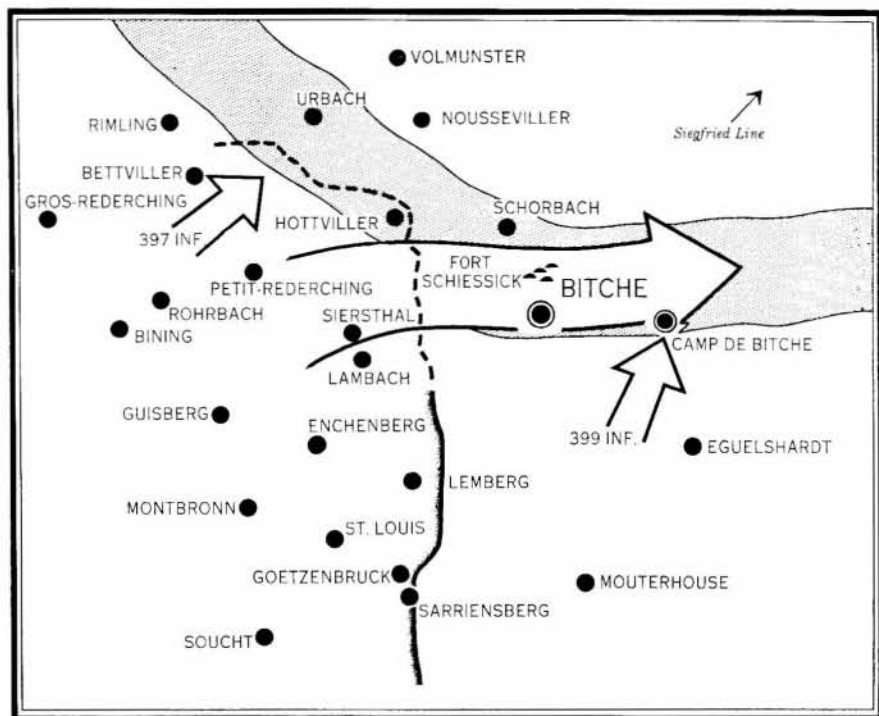


11: CAPTURE OF BITCHE

The excitement and rapid succession of events after a period of waiting and watching, brought renewed vigor and life to the men. The disappointment arising from the cancellation of the rest period was lost and forgotten amid the hurried preparations to meet with the changes in plans. The preponderance of the operations and news of outstanding successes from other sectors of the front filled the optimists with a wild speculation of the war ending with this drive. Even the less imaginative and more calculating minds were inclined to share the optimistic viewpoint.

Five months of constant and severe fighting in the mountains and bitter cold of winter had shown a marked change in the troops. The battle for the Vosges Mountains and the Maginot Line hardened the men to combat. They were wiser, more experienced and discerning than they had been when first going into action at Raon-l'Etape. The questions they had asked themselves and others as to what it was like, they answered for themselves. They knew the whine and crash of shells and what it was to be pinned down and sweating it out. They made a thorough study of the enemy and became familiar with his characteristics and habits. They knew his weakness and forte. This understanding instilled confidence. Toughened, experienced and confident, the 398th Regiment pushed off for the Rhine River and the mountainous strongholds of Southern Germany.

Supported by the 375th Field Artillery Battalion, Company B of the 325th Engineer Battalion, Company B of the 781st Tank Battalion, Companies A and B of the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion, and Company B of the 325th Medical Battalion, the 398th Infantry moved out of its defensive positions at Lemberg and Goetzenbruck in preparation for the attack on Bitche. Under cover of darkness, the combat team marched north to a position placing it on an east-west line with its objective. Regimental CP was set up at Fromuhl, a small town not far behind the rifle-company position. Jerry immediately started pounding the town with heavy artillery fire.



The Battle for Bitche

Plans for the impending attack differed from the first assault on Bitche. In the first attempt, the 398th struck from the southwest out of Reyersviller. From the present position, the objective lay to the east and somewhat south. An attack from the west and northwest was devised to cut the city off and effect an entrance from the rear and the flank.

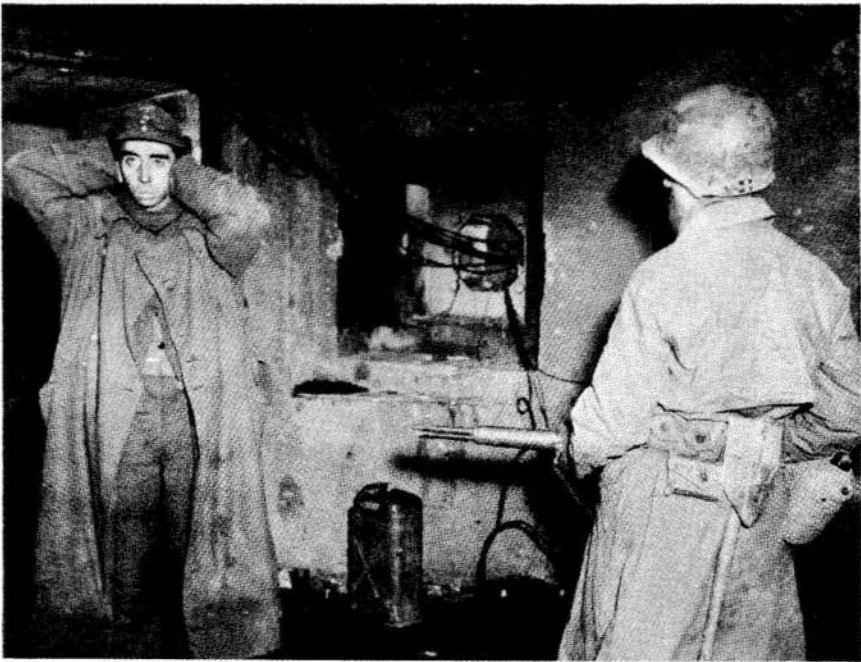
The morning of 15 March broke clear. Visibility was exceptionally good. With the 3d Battalion in reserve, the 1st and 2d Battalions jumped off towards Bitche. Although there was no artillery support the terrain to the front was mapped out and numbered. In the event artillery was needed all that had to be done was the calling back of a number from the front and the sector that number represented would immediately be plastered. Infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, led by Companies A and B, attacked the high ground southwest of Schorbach. The 2d Battalion drove on the Maginot forts northwest of Bitche and



Presentation

quickly captured Freudenberg Farms. Small-arms and automatic fire was light but antipersonnel, antitank and *Schu* mines were numerous and cleverly laid out in patterns covering every approach to the mighty bastion of the Maginot Line. Artillery fire was heavy. Enemy observers in Bitche and surrounding heights saw the determined lines of infantrymen moving slowly but deliberately forward and directed salvos of their prized 88s into the direction of the attack. Despite this fire, our riflemen continued forward. The engineers worked feverishly under the artillery fire, probing for mines and tenderly lifting them out of the ground

Systematically the attack progressed. The 2d Battalion drew intense mortar fire but Company G swarmed over the battered remains of Forts Freudenberg and Schiesseck to clean out the crust of resistance in comparison with that of what was encountered in the first attack. German efforts to rebuild the forts were evident but the demolition charges set off by the engineers, prior



Routing them out of the Maginot

to the withdrawal in December, discouraged any possibility. Instead, the Germans dug positions in and around the ruins but these hastily prepared defenses weren't anywhere near as effective as the original positions. The enemy was quickly spotted by the alert infantrymen. Mortar and automatic fire supplied by the heavy-weapons platoons supporting the rifle companies, was brought to bear on his positions, eliminating them. The perfect coordination between riflemen and supporting heavy weapons completely smashed the enemy by nightfall. With the high ground surrounding Bitche taken, the troops dug in and awaited morning and the order that would send them storming down from the hills into Bitche. During the night the Germans moved out.

Early on the morning of March 15 the 2d Battalion attacked. Fort Ramstein was quickly seized and E Company led the triumphant entry into Bitche and continued on to take Fort Aviation. Only sporadic sniper fire greeted the advance elements.



First Americans in Bitche

A hurried and thorough search of the houses and buildings uncovered groups of Kraut soldiers who had changed from army uniforms to civilian clothes. While the 2d Battalion was cleaning out Bitche of snipers and hidden enemy, the 3d Battalion meanwhile pushed through and captured Camp de Bitche, site of an old French training area, after a bitter fire fight. The 1st Battalion met considerable resistance in taking Forts Petite Otterbiel and Grand Otterbiel, the two remaining strongpoints atop the ground north of Bitche. After a pulverizing aerial bombardment the infantry swept in to complete the seizure of Bitche and surrounding forts.