

12: CROSSING THE RHINE

For two days the Regiment remained in the vicinity with the missions of cleaning out snipers, rounding up prisoners, neutralizing forts and protecting the Corps' east flank, left open by the rapid push north. During this time troops were impressed with the seriousness of association in any manner or form with the conquered enemy, forecasting an early movement into Germany. This was our first contact with the much discussed policy of fraternization. With Bitche cleared, the 398th Combat Team assembled north and west of the city in the towns of Schorbach, Hottviller, Nouswiller and Langelsheim. These towns, long used by the Germans as a training area for their artillery were completely smashed. No one had lived in them since the German occupation of France and gradually they became known as the "Ghost Towns." Here intensive training was carried on in preparation for the next mission, that of breaching the Siegfried Line, which lay directly to the west and just before the Rhine River. The 3d Infantry Division, at the time, was already engaged with the Germans in that sector. Upon completion of their breakthrough, the 398th was to become a mobile task force and dash

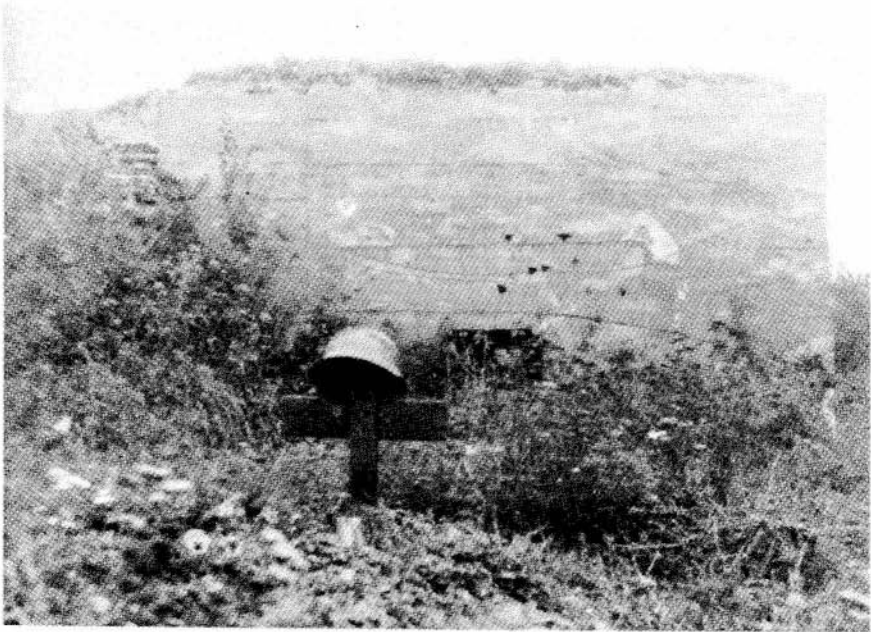


This was a machine



Dragon's teeth on the Siegfried

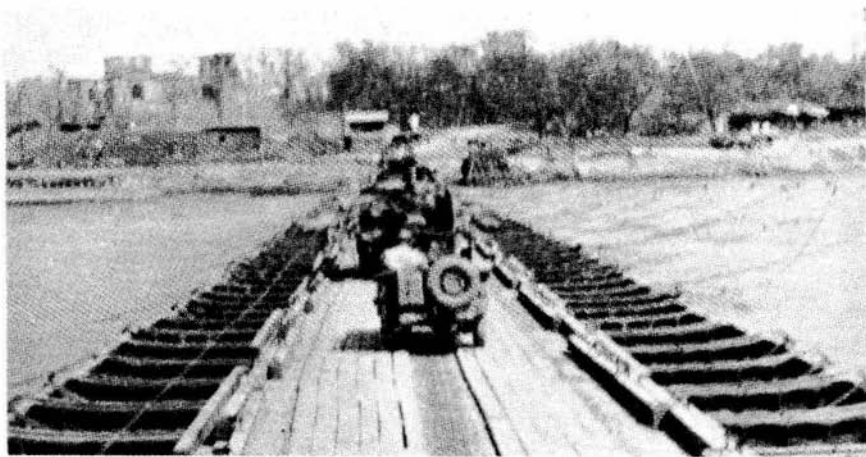
through the opening. The Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon of Headquarters Company had already made several patrols to the 3d Division front, mapping out roads and routes and taking note of obstacles which otherwise might delay movement. However, these plans did not materialize. To the north, Third Army armored columns had knifed through to the Rhine then swept south to come in from the rear of the Siegfried Line. The enemy, fearful of being trapped, fled from their defenses. On March 22 the 398th, motorized, sped west through the crumbled German defenses and over into the border. Into the German border cities of Reichweiler, Dellfeld, Stambach, and Contwig, the convoy rolled without meeting any resistance. White flags hung from a window of every house and every building. In less than two days the Regiment had covered more than one hundred miles. Through the Hardt Mountains to the banks of the Rhine the roadsides were cluttered with battered and smashed German mobile equipment caught as it withdrew by our airplanes. For miles German Labor Supervision Battalions of Russians, Poles and other conquered nationals who had been digging emplacements and fortifications in the mountains, were



Pillbox and former occupant

making their way back to the rear. The smashing through of the American armed might never gave the enemy a chance to man the positions. Thousands of dead horses littered the roads. The piles of mutilated carcasses necessitated the bringing up of bulldozers to sweep them from the path of the swiftly moving columns. The Division had moved so fast that when it finally did reach the Rhine River it was compelled to halt and wait until other units could come up to protect the flanks. Until 30 March the 100th Division remained on the west bank of the river with the mission of guarding vital enemy installations, suppressing sabotage, and cleaning out snipers in near-by towns. Hundreds of prisoners were taken in the four-day mop-up. German resistance was completely shattered. We waited for the construction of the ponton bridge that would send us across the Rhine River and into Southern Germany.

On 31 March the bridge was completed. At 1700 that day the 398th, still motorized, sped across at Ludwigshafen over into



Over the Rhine

Mannheim. It was ordered to overtake elements of the 63d Division and relieve them on position. This was not easy. The 63d was also motorized and pushing fast against relatively minor opposition, but movement over the *Autobahnen* (highways) soon lessened the distance between us and the 63d. The famed old university city of Heidelberg was passed through and by 3 April we were only twenty-four hours' riding from the unit we were to relieve.

