

13: HEILBRONN AND THE NECKAR

On down through Southern Germany our convoy of tanks, trucks, tank destroyers, jeeps and weapons-carriers roared. Infantrymen rode on anything that would carry them. They clung to the tops of tanks and piled on jeeps until no part of the vehicle could be seen and finally after a hectic drive overtook elements of the 63d Division on the banks of the Neckar River in the vicinity of Bad Wimpfen. Still there was no sign of opposition, let alone organized opposition. All over Germany Allied armies were riding roughshod over a land which the Nazis said would never be invaded. Central Germany was cut to pieces but the enemy was not yet beaten to the point of surrender. When the meeting between the Russians and the Americans seemed inevitable, the Nazis hurriedly pulled the remainder of their equipment and weapons out of that sector and reports had it they were moving into the mountainous confines of Southern Germany. If they could hold the American armies in the south for any period of time which would give them ample opportunity to set up their weapons in the mountains, it was possible that they could hold out indefinitely and extend the war into a long, tiresome and costly type of fighting. The Neckar River was the site chosen to hold off the surging tide of Americans until positions could be prepared in the mountains.

In the vicinity of Heilbronn, along the easy-moving Neckar, was to be fought the bitterest battle in all Germany. In the 398th Heilbronn will go down alongside Salerno, Anzio and Normandy. It was definitely the decisive battle that resulted in the collapse of whatever hopes the Germans held for the continuity of their abominable principles. They gathered their weapons, munitions and quietly lay in wait in prepared positions on the east bank of the Neckar River. For the fanatic SS troops and equally fanatic *Hitler-Jugend* who manned the positions and who were determined to hold at the cost of their lives, this was



Ruins of Heilbronn

a glorious gesture of fidelity when everything else seemed lost.

On 3 April the last battalion of the 398th to roll into Bad Wimpfen was the 3d. Before the men had a chance to dismount from the trucks a hurried call came in from the 10th Armored Division, which was also checked in its drive into Germany by the bridgeless Neckar, for infantry to establish a bridgehead on the opposite bank of the river. Since the start of the drive into Germany only roadblocks, a few snipers and mines momentarily held movement up and from all indications the Neckar River was another undefended obstacle. Aerial reports and ground patrols moving ahead of the main columns reported no enemy in sight. Nevertheless, precautionary measures were taken in the crossing of this new obstacle. The 3d Battalion proceeded to a crossing site in the vicinity of Heilbronn, key communications and rail city leading into Southern Germany.

