

14: BRIDGEHEAD ACROSS THE NECKAR

With only a short time to formulate plans, Company K with one heavy machine-gun platoon from Company M was ordered to cross in the first assault wave. They were to swing to the right after crossing and secure the factory buildings on the outskirts of Heilbronn. Company L with one heavy machine-gun platoon from Company M attached was to cross in the second wave, swing to the left and secure the lumberyard and buildings near Neckarsulm. Company I was to cross in the third wave, and as soon as Companies K and L had secured their initial objectives, was to pass through the two companies and take the final objective which was Castle Hill and the high ground overlooking the valley.

At 0300, 4 April 1945 Company K started the crossing. After getting across with practically no opposition the company quickly reorganized and continued the attack. One rifle platoon had been left in the factory buildings to secure the right flank of the battalion. The company commander was then ordered to send a strong combat patrol to Castle Hill to determine if it was occupied. One rifle platoon with a mortar observer and an SCR-300 radio was sent to accomplish this mission. At 0710 the platoon leader reported via radio that this platoon was on top of the hills and was given the order to hold the hill and control the observation. Company L sustained some casualties while crossing the river. However, they quickly reorganized and pushed aggressively forward until they had cleared the area around the canals and had searched the buildings in the lumberyard. Company I, after crossing, reorganized in the vicinity of the power plant and made preparations to move through Company K.

Things were comparatively quiet; then at 0900 with the bulk of the 3d Battalion across the river Jerry showed his hand by shelling the crossing site with a terrific barrage of artillery and mortar fire. Barrage after barrage landed with almost pinpoint



Neckar crossing

precision on the position used for crossing, making the use of assault boats impossible and isolating the battalion on the east bank of the river. Simultaneously hundreds of enemy troops launched a fierce attack on Companies K and L. The enemy plan was now clear. He had quietly lain in wait until the 3d Battalion had crossed the river and was now in the process of cutting it off and wiping it out. It was later determined that the Germans used one full regiment in this attack designed to cut the battalion off and wipe out the bridgehead. Wave after wave of fanatic SS troops and *Hitler-Jugend* hit the 3d Battalion positions. In spite of the fact that our troops fought doggedly and made the maximum use of every available weapon, the superiority of the enemy gradually forced the men back to the river's edge. The platoon from Company K holding Castle Hill was immediately cut off from the rest of the battalion. The Germans, thinking the hill unoccupied, sent several small artillery observation parties up to established observation posts, but the platoon captured several officers and twelve men before their presence was de-



Infantry sailors on the Neckar

tected. At 1200 the platoon was attacked in force but, despite the fact they were vastly outnumbered, beat off attack after attack, inflicting many casualties on the enemy. Several hours later the platoon leader radioed that his position was entirely surrounded and that his ammunition supply was nearly exhausted. Immediately after this message was completed the radio was smashed and the entire platoon was either killed or captured. It was later revealed through interrogation of PWs that it took a force of ninety men armed with automatic weapons to overcome the heroic group holding Castle Hill. In this same time two platoons of Company L were entirely isolated from the rest of the battalion, also.

In the meantime, the remainder of the battalion reorganized its forces, established a defensive line running parallel to the river in a small ravine, and here repulsed the rest of the savage enemy attacks. The Germans finally withdrew a short distance and dug in. But the 3d Battalion had no intention of giving the enemy any respite, and shortly after lashed out in a determined counterattack with the reserve company and the remnants of the other two companies and drove the enemy back. Approximately



Tourists beware!

three hundred Germans had taken positions in the factory buildings on the right and the battalion suddenly found itself subjected to a withering cross-fire from automatic weapons. The success of the mission depended on the holding of this ground so the battalion prepared a line of defense.

Shortly after the platoon on Castle Hill was captured the Germans established observation posts on the top, from which they were able to direct accurate artillery and mortar fire on the new defense line, the river crossing and all other installations. This fire continued without let-up for six days.

On 5 April the enemy attacked ferociously in force, first on the left of the defensive position then on the right. But due to the volume of fire laid down by every available man in the battalion the attacks failed. For five nights the Germans poured from positions never thought likely, trying desperately to regain the east bank, but each and every attack was thrown back.

On the night of 6 April a three-mile-long column of enemy troops and vehicles was seen moving into Neckarsulm. Air and artillery barrages were laid on this force but failed to keep it

from entering the town. The next morning all our 3d battalion positions were subjected to an unmerciful barrage of artillery, mortar and rocket fire and immediately following it came the inevitable attack. Advancing with fanatical zeal and disregarding the terrific toll our automatic weapons were taking, the attackers managed to make a slight penetration. Committing its reserve the 3d battalion stopped the attack and also bagged thirty PWs. Because of the increased enemy action, it was impossible to construct a bridge across the river but the battalion accomplished its mission of holding the ground on the east bank. For eight days and nights it held under constant and intense artillery. For eight days it drove back savage attacks of a numerically superior enemy. All supplies and rations had to be ferried across the river at night and hand-carried to the forward positions. The battalion A&P Platoon organized these parties and aided immeasurably in the defense of the ground by going well out to the front of the lines to plant antitank mines and set up trip flares. The medical Section of the Battalion worked untiringly and heroically, treating and evacuating the wounded amid the intensity of the enemy fire. With complete disregard for personal safety they darted about the fire-swept terrain to bring aid to the wounded and moved casualties from exposed positions preventing further injury.

The intrepid actions of the officers and men of the 3d Battalion enabled our Division to push other regiments across the river and intensify the attack on the enemy. Had the mission failed, a much more costly river crossing would have been necessary and the offensive in this sector would have been delayed indefinitely. On 12 April while another unit attacked Heilbronn, the 3d Battalion jumped off in the attack to the south and captured Neckarsulm and advanced unchecked until placed in reserve.²

²For its outstanding performance in establishing the Neckar bridgehead, the 3d Battalion was awarded its second Distinguished Unit Citation. The text of the citation is given in the Appendix. A more detailed account of the crossing is given in the Regimental commander's recommendation for this citation, also included in the Appendix.