

## 7: DRIVE TOWARD BITCHE

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The Maginot defenses in the vicinity of Bitche lay sprawled over the gently rolling country of Alsace-Lorraine like a huge octopus, with tentacles in the form of lesser fortifications reaching out and clinging to the earth for miles around. Never before in history had Bitche, nestled in the confines of its natural defenses, been taken by force and now, surrounded by and lying deep in the present-day man- and machine-made fortifications of the Maginot Line, the task was all the greater. The German Army, at the height of its power in the early phases of its sweep through Europe, could not overcome these defenses. Only through France's capitulation and after she had been almost completely overrun did the defenders of Bitche, alone and surrounded, yield to the Nazi hordes.

The Germans realized the significance of the Maginot defenses surrounding impregnable Bitche and strengthened them. This was the southern axis, extending from the North Sea, of the Maginot Line upon which the entire system swung and hinged. Once this hinge was smashed the line could be circumvented,



*Road to Wingen*



*Pillbox at entrance to Meisenthal*

neutralized and rendered useless. The gates to Germany would then swing wide open.

The guns in the turrets of the pillboxes, originally facing east and designed to repel imperialistic Germany, now pointed west. The huge octopus dug its tentacles deeper into the earth, watched and waited.

On 3 December the 398th Infantry Regiment started to hack away at the tentacles. With the 3d Battalion in reserve, the 2d Battalion jumped off in the attack with the mission of seizing Puberg. The 1st Battalion struck out for Wingen. The Germans were very sensitive to our probing the approaches to Bitche and showed it in the fury of their resistance as we methodically smashed defenses and forged ahead. They were determined to impress upon us the futility of this daring venture, but we were just as determined to reach our objective.

Heavy small-arms fire and artillery greeted the 1st Battalion driving in on Wingen. Companies A and C, attacking the flanks,

went through barrages of mortar and 88mm fire. Company C was stopped but A Company crashed through the defenses and entered the town. The Germans thrust back savagely and cut Company A off from the rest of the battalion. Out of contact, the men fought doggedly to break the ring encircling them but to no avail. Reconnaissance and combat patrols from the battalion attempted to break through from the outside, but withering machine-gun fire forced them to withdraw.

Fighting gallantly against a numerically superior enemy, Company A with the exception of one platoon, which managed to fight its way free of the trap, was compelled to surrender after exhausting its ammunition.

That night heavy concentrations of 81mm and 4.2 mortar fire blasted enemy strongpoints in the town chasing the Krauts out and into the hills. The following morning the battalion took Wingen and took up positions straddling the supply route leading to Bitche.

Meanwhile, the 2d Battalion drove on to Puberg and entered the town, now in flames from our artillery fire, and continued on to the outskirts of Soucht. The intensity of enemy artillery called a halt to the push and the men dug in. With the lifting of the



*Village of Meisenthal*

artillery came short rapid bursts of burp guns. The doughboys, peering down from their dug-in positions at the top of a hill, saw the field-green of German uniforms coming out of the woods at the base of the hill. Waiting until there wasn't a possibility of missing the attackers, the battalion's machine guns roared out simultaneously, cancelling whatever plans the enemy had. The riflemen then poured out of their holes and drove on into Soucht.

The 3d Battalion, not to be outdone, drove in from its reserve position, passed the 2d Battalion, and after a fierce fire fight amid artillery and mortar fire captured Rosteig and pushed on to Meisenthal.



*Siegfried Pillbox*