

3d Battalion, 319th Infantry Assault Crossing of the Moselle River

On the morning of 4 September 1944, the 319th Inf moved east from wooded assembly area about 8 miles east of Commercy, France, toward Toul on the Moselle River. The 3d Bn, of the 319th Inf was designated advance guard of the regiment and given the mission of entering Toul, establishing contact with elements of the 3d (?) Armored Cavalry Squadron in the vicinity of Toul, clearing Toul of any remaining enemy troops, crossing the Moselle River and establishing a bridgehead on the east bank of the Moselle River in the vicinity of Toul.

The leading elements of the 3d Battalion reached Toul about 1000 hours and made immediate contact with the elements of the Armored Cavalry in the town. The approaches to Toul from the west were screened from view to the enemy entrenched on the east bank of the Moselle. The battalion remained concealed while the commanding officer, Lt Col Elliott B. (Bud) Cheston, and his staff made a reconnaissance of the possible crossing sites. By 1100 hours, a plan for a hasty river crossing had been firmed up and orders had been issued to the companies. Companies "K" and "L" were designated as assault companies with "L" Company to cross in waves on two pneumatic rafts and three engineer assault boats while "K" company would cross on the rubble of the destroyed stone bridge between Toul and Domartin-les-Toul. Co "M" would support the crossing from positions in Toul with one machine-gun platoon in direct support of each assault company and the other machine-gun platoon and the 81mm mortar platoon in general support of the attack. Co "I" was to be in reserve and cross behind the assault companies, on order, using both the bridge and the assault craft. Battery "C", 905th FA Bn, the only artillery in range, would be in general support of the battalion attack. All elements of the Armored Cavalry Squadron in Toul would support the initial assault crossing by fire from their current positions using both main armament and machine-guns.

The pneumatic rafts were inflated and launched in a small tributary canal in the town of Toul, as were the assault boats. This area was screened from view of the enemy. Troops were loaded there and proceeded, down the canal toward the river so as to arrive at 1230 hours, the time set for the attack.

The assault, together with all supporting fires, started precisely at 1230 hours. The enemy was taken almost completely by surprise, and many positions were unmanned as the men were at lunch. Within thirty minutes, "K" and "L" Companies were across the river and had eliminated practically all direct small arms fire from the crossing sites. The direct support machine-gun platoons were crossed immediately, followed by Co "I" and the general support platoons of Co "M". By 1400 hours, the entire battalion, less vehicles, was across the river. Co "I" had been committed on the right flank, and the town of Domartin-les-Toul

45 Sep

was cleared of the enemy. The advance continued, and by dark, the battalion had a firm bridgehead of from 300 to 500 yards depth from north to south with both flanks anchored on the Moselle River. Our casualties were relatively light but one severe loss was sustained *when the "K" Co Commander, Capt Lovell, had his hand and wrist shattered by machine-gun fire in the assault crossing and was lost to the battalion for the rest of the war. 1st Lt Gottlieb Ruby, Co "I" was awarded a DSC for gallantry during this action.

Wounded prisoners of war captured during the attack turned out to be SS Officer Candidate School trainees and members of the 3d Parachute Replacement Regiment, and this accounted for the fanatical resistance they showed. No prisoners were captured who were not badly wounded, and over one hundred and fifty enemy dead were removed from the area. The enemy walking wounded and remaining fit personnel withdrew grudgingly throughout the afternoon toward Fort de Gondreville in the northern sector of the attack and toward Ft de Villey-le-Sec in the southern sector.

During the night, engineers put in a treadway bridge about 100 yards north of the destroyed stone bridge which made it possible to cross the required battalion vehicles, ambulances, and the attached tank platoon, 3d Platoon, Co "C", 702d Tank Battalion, into the bridgehead. Thus ended the first day of the establishment of the first permanent bridgehead east of the Moselle River.

At daylight on 5 September 1944, the attack was resumed to seize Ft de Gondreville and Ft de Villey-le-Sec. By noon, Ft de Gondreville had been captured and cleared of the enemy by Co "L", under the command * of Capt Harry Maertens. Co "L" was then ordered to take up a defensive position centered on the fort and extending to the Moselle River on their left flank. Meanwhile, Companies "K" and "I" were attacking toward Ft de Villey-le-Sec. Elements of both companies succeeded in clearing the area west of the Fort of all enemy but were unable to enter the fort which was heavily defended. It was impossible to bridge the dry moat because of its width and approaches down the ramp were heavily mined and under direct fire from embrasures. Anyone reaching the floor of the dry moat would be subjected to grenades dropped into it from the embrasures. Both companies were ordered to withdraw to the edge of the wooded area west of the fort and take up defensive positions for the night. Co "I", on the south flank, anchored their position on the Moselle River and tied-in with Co "K". Co "K" in the center, tied-in their defenses with Co "I" on the south and Co "L" on the north. One platoon from Co "I" was pulled out as battalion reserve and assembled in Domartin-les-Toul. The 81mm mortar platoon was moved into position practically abreast of the forward elements between Co "L" and Co "K" to enable them to cover the entire battalion front and also reach Ft de Villey-le-Sec. The battalion front was now approximately 6000 yards from north to south with both flanks anchored on the Moselle River.

1258
Lt Col Cheston, the battalion commander, repeatedly requested heavy, self-propelled artillery pieces from General Manton Eddy, the XII Corps Commander, on the occasions of the Corps Commander's almost daily visits into the bridgehead, but none were made available. During the ensuing five days, four attacks were launched by "I" and "K" Companies against Ft de Villey-le-Sec. Each attack succeeded in clearing the area up to the moat on the west side of the fort and killing or capturing all enemy troops in positions outside the fort. However, without heavy, direct-fire artillery to destroy the embrasures, entrance into the moat was impossible and the troops had to be withdrawn to their previous positions after each attack. Co "L" on the left, launched one reconnaissance in force into the edge of the Forêt-de-Haye, destroyed the enemy and enemy positions just inside the forest and withdrew, on order, to their previous positions around Ft de Gondréville. In this attack the battalion suffered another major loss, Capt Maertens was killed, the only casualty in the action.

On 10 September 1944, Cos "I" and "K", again launched an attack against Ft de Villey-le-Sec and this time found all of the previously occupied positions to the west of the fort unoccupied. Supporting fires were lifted and the advancing troops arrived at the fortress moat unchallenged. Mine detectors were brought forward and the moat ramp marked off, and the fort was entered. The Germans had withdrawn and the only enemy encountered were two soldiers who came up out of a room deep in the fort and surrendered without resistance. They had apparently slept through the withdrawal after a bit of over-indulgence in alcohol. Thus, Ft de Villey-le-Sec fell into our hands and the originally planned bridgehead was completely secured.

During the series of attacks against Ft de Villey-le-Sec, the fighting was more intense and the enemy resistance more fierce than in any previous engagement in which the 3d Battalion, 319th Infantry, had been involved. Three of the battalion's officers received DSC's for their actions during this period; Lt Col Cheston, the Battalion Commander, 2d Lt Hershel T. Hardin, Co "K", and 2d Lt William Moore, Co "K". The regimental Roman Catholic Chaplain, Captain Benedict A. Henderson, also received a DSC for his actions during one of the attacks.

* During the period 11 - 15 September, the 3d Bn, 319th Inf, held the positions taken on 10 September and sent nightly patrols into the western edges of the Forêt de Haye. The enemy was occupying prepared, field-type, defensive works in the forest in considerable strength, so plans were prepared for a coordinated attack against these positions to overrun them and continue through the forest and seize Nancy. Task Force Sebree, led by Brig Gen E.B. Sebree, Assistant Division Commander, 35th Inf Div, was created for this purpose. Task Force Sebree consisted of Combat Team 319, 80th Inf Div, (Less the 2d Bn), CT 134, 35th Inf Div, together with several GS artillery battalions from XII Corps Artillery. Date for the attack was set as 16 Sep.

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On the night of 15 Sep, patrols from the 3d Bn, 319th Inf, reported all the previously occupied positions in the western edges of the Forêt de Haye had been abandoned by the Germans. Last minute changes were made in the attack plans, and the 3d Bn, 319th Inf, advanced just prior to dawn in line of skirmishers across the open ground and into the Forêt de Haye without artillery preparation. After advancing into the forest some 300 yards without meeting any enemy resistance, the battalion closed on the Toul-Nancy road and proceeded east toward Nancy in an advance guard formation. Several vehicles were lost to enemy mines on the road shoulders, but otherwise, the advance was uneventful until the head of the column was near the outskirts of Nancy. Here, a large crater had been blown in a causeway which supported the road, and no vehicular traffic could proceed further. Crowds of civilians were assembled on the east side of the crater, cheering, waving flags and carrying wine and flowers.

Advised of these conditions, Gen Sebree ordered the 319th Inf to halt in place and brought the 134th Inf forward in trucks to the head of the column. The 134th Inf then dismounted and crossed over the crater and entered and took over Nancy without resistance. The 319th Inf was loaded into the trucks and went back across the Moselle River at Toul, turned north and rejoined the 80th Div in the Dieuland bridgehead about 1600 hours on 16 Sep.

* Upon arrival in the bridgehead, Col Cheston was ordered to relieve Lt Col Paul F. Roberts' battalion, 3d Bn, 317th Inf, which was occupying positions on Falaise Hill, after dark that night. Reconnaissance was completed and plans firmed up for the relief by dusk, but a change of orders cancelled this plan. The 3d Bn, 319th Inf, was now to move east on the road between Falaise Hill and Hill 382, make contact with Co "G", 318th Inf, which was in position as a roadblock between the two hills on the road, and close the gaps between Co "G", 318th Inf, and the 3d Bn, 317th on their right and between Co "G", 318th Inf and the (?) Bn, (?) Inf on Hill 382 to their left. 21315?

✓ These orders were carried out in complete darkness without ever having seen the area. At about 2100 hours that night, just after "I" Company had sealed the gap between Falaise Hill and the road block, a heavy fire fight erupted in their area. This skirmish lasted about 30 minutes and resulted in the capture or killing of a 40 to 50 man German patrol in its' entirety. This patrol had moved west through the area earlier and were returning to their lines by the same route when they moved right into the newly occupied positions of Co "I". Needless to say, both sides were completely surprised, but Co "I" recovered from their surprise more quickly and bagged the entire patrol. Thus ended the 3d Battalion, 319th Infantry, first day in the Dieuland - Pont-a-Mousson bridgehead.