

CROSSING OF MOSELLE RIVER
(ACTION of 2nd Bn 317 Inf)

The following story is told by Captain James J. Mullen executive officer of 2nd Bn 317 Inf. Capt Mullen was however, CO of E Co. of 2nd Bn during this action.

At 2100 on 4th of Sept the 2nd Bn had been directed to an assembly area in the vicinity of the Bois de Villers. This had come first as verbal order followed by a written field order by 2100 the 4th of Sept. ^{without Hq.} It was anticipated that the 2nd Bn. would cross the Moselle river on the 5th of Sept. Reconnaissance had, therefore, been initiated on the 4th of Sept when the Battalion had sent patrols to reconnoitre the line Pagni-sur Moselle to Pont-a-Mousson exclusive. Patrols had chosen a route for movement to the area indicated. The field order set forth the time of attack for 1000, 5th of Sept. However, because of the lack of communication by either wire, radio, or runner at this time, the Battalion had received word of the 1000 movement at 0300, 5th Sept. At 1000 5th Sept the Battalion proceeded in a column of companies in the order G, E, H, machine gun platoon with each leading Company, mortar platoon, the medical detachment, and F company. without enemy opposition to the edge of the Bois-de-Villers at (71.5-42.8, Sheet 14G, 1:100,000) and thence down the draw to the East, observing the rules of cover and defilade. At approximately 1015 the leading company, G, which was at the foot of the hill (73.5-43.0), received fire from enemy machine guns located in the building which was South of and on the outskirts of Pagni and due East of the draw. The Company was pinned down momentarily. The CO sent a platoon to the building in question with the mission of cleaning out the machine guns. This was accomplished in a short period of time. Meanwhile, 20 rounds of mortar fell between 2nd platoon of Company E and remainder of the column in a large open field.

The battalion was quickly deployed to the flanks in a protective and less vulnerable position. At approximately 1100 enemy artillery^{ry} fire fell on the battalion.⁽³⁾ This was probably a 150mm calibre and was identified as coming from batteries located across the river on hill 385, due West of the town of Marieulles. The objective of our battalion was hill 365 much farther to the South. The artillery fire was of such intensity that the units were well scattered and contact was difficult. "I was commanding Company E (Capt Mullens). I went to the Bn Commander and told him that I had control of two rifle platoons. The rest were scattered and out of contact because of the heavy mortar fire received between the second platoon and the rest of the column. By now all troops and any movement in our sector drew both artillery and mortar fire. The Bn Commander was with G Co. which had moved to within 150 yds. of the road shown on the map. At approximately 1230 from this point he directed me to cross the highway proceed along the railway to the canal and reconnoitre along the canal for a good point from whence we might make our crossing. I followed these directions and reconnoitred the area indicated ²⁰⁰ reporting back by 1300 that there were no points suitable for crossing without boats or a footbridge." During this period of time, Company E had been deployed generally on the right of Company G, which was on line facing the highway between Pagny and Vandieres. Company G was approximately 150 yds. west of the southernmost building on the outskirts of Pagny-sur-Moselle. Capt. Mullens: "When I returned to my company I found that I had no radio communication. My operator had been killed while I was away --- he had drawn ³⁰⁰ mortar fire while entering the town of Vandieres. The whip antenna had attracted the attention of the enemy across the river. This proved our theory that they had perfect observation of our side of the river. I was now unable to place my machine guns or my mortars in position to bring effective fire. This was due to the accuracy of the enemy mortar and artillery fire. (enlist-
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ed personnel testify to the fact that the slightest movement on the part of our men brought a barrage of mortar fire, to which we were of course most vulnerable, having been pinned down in very open terrain on the forward slope of a hill) We remained here till dark. "

Before the ~~early winter dusk set in~~ ^{dark} , Lt. Col. , the battalion commander, was able to assemble the company commanders for a conference. Here plans were made for an attempt at crossing the river during the night. Reconnaissance had proved to be unsatisfactory, ^{why?} but it was decided that the best place for the attempt would be at some point between Vandieres and the place where the winding Moselle came nearest the canal, about one kilometer south of the town. The battalion was to be reformed and moved under cover around the south slope of the hill to the west of Vandieres, using the draw at that point to approach the east-west road leading into the town. The unit commanders returned to their respective companies and the plans were put into effect for this move. At 1930 , the battalion in the order companies F, E, and G moved out. (Command was difficult, for it was found that two officers had been lost in the afternoon's action before the Bois de Villers and south of Pagny. Meeting scattered small arms fire , the unit advanced through Vandieres at approximately 2400 5 Sept . A

(5) At the point now selected for the attempted crossing the division engineers had constructed a footbridge across the canal. This had been rapidly accomplished by taking advantage of a barge in the canal, laying planks from each bank of the canal to this stationary object. The battalion was to cross the newly made bridge as soon as possible. In the pitch blackness of the night the men found their way along the west bank to the position indicated , forced to adopt a two-pace interval between each man to avoid losing the units completely. (It will be shown elsewhere , that the 1st Bn, faced with the same difficulty , did lose part of one unit. By 0200 6 Sept, the leading elements, F and E companies were across the canal bridge. Now it was necessary

How wide?
3
6
route

to initiate further reconnaissance of the river ahead, with the hope of finding a more suitable point for crossing. All this additional reconnaissance was needed at this time because the whole schedule of the attack had been upset when the battalion had been stopped at Pagny-sur Moselle, or on the hill to the south of the city, as has been shown. It must be remembered that the original plans set forth on 4 Sept called for the 2d Bn to proceed from the Bois de Villers down the draw to the East, through Pagny, across the main highway and the railroad, to the canal and the river where the two are very close together (75.3-44.4). When the unit had met resistance south of the city, it was evident that the crossing could not be made to the north. Then patrols had been sent to the south, below Vandieres, under Capt. Mullen, in search of an alternate fording place. It was almost impossible to find any exact spot now in the dark. The battalion completed its crossing of the canal in this darkness shortly after 0200. At 0300, companies F and E, maintaining a two pace interval between men, moved slowly from the canal bridge (opposite Vandieres 75.9-40.9) south along the canal bank, crossed the open space and turned north along the bank of the river near (76.3-40.0). All was quiet at 0400. By 0415 most of the troops had reached the west bank of the Moselle. There was an occasional mortar shell dropping north of Vandieres, but the silence in this sector was gripping.

(Capt. Mullen)" Then something happened which saved the lives of two-hundred men. Our column was stretched in a horse-shoe, bending to the south and back to the north. Suddenly out of the night, and sounding close enough to be on top of us, a loud voice sang out from the opposite bank in German:

'HALT', followed by a garble of German like ' MACHINENGEWHERS--'-"

At the first syllable of the command, all of the men tense in the excitement instinctively hit the ground. Not a moment too soon. Four machine guns opened up and swept the spot where we were standing. A peculiar thing about these guns, but not unusual, two fired tracer at a distance about five

feet above the ground. The other two covered their area at a distance of about eighteen inches off the ground."

The men fired back at the machine guns. A light machine gun was brought into play in one of the advance units. It was fired by one of the men from the hip. (Capt. Mullen)

(Capt. Mullen) "Then the enemy fired a red flare at us. This brought down 10 rounds of 80mm mortar, most of it falling between the column on the river and the column of the canal. Then a few rounds of 50 mm landed here. It was then 0500 (6 Sept.), and I crawled back to my company from my position up front and ordered them to pull back along the canal and hold positions there."

Under continuous machine-gun and mortar fire, the men crawled back to the edge of the canal; some, unnerved by the ordeal of shelling, attempted to swim the canal and reach the bank near Vandieres. The bulk of the battalion strength, however, began to dig in along the enemy side of the bank, the approaching daylight making more precarious their position. The companies started the process of reorganization and consolidation, but meanwhile German gunners readjusted their sights, and, at 0645, dumped 10 rounds of mortar on the canal itself.

(Capt Mullen) "I don't think that they knew that they had a whole battalion pinned down there. The men were there along the canal shoulder to shoulder. I was ordered to withdraw Company E across the canal and dig in with a reserve defensive position at (75.3-40.0) (E-1). The battalion left all of F company and two platoons of G dug in along the enemy side of the canal. Our 81mm mortars were emplaced at (74.3-39.8)"

The unit held their positions along the canal throughout the day of the 6th of September, shelled intermittently, all the while under enemy observation.

The Bn Commander wanted Company E (Capt. Mullen) to move around to the reverse slope of the hill on which they were now dug in , and take up where they had left off in their reorganization . They would wait in an assembly area here the orders to move to a new position. This order was to come by messenger from the S-3 . However, reconnaissance showed the reverse slope of the hill to be under observation. Three rounds of mortar fell there while our reconnaissance was being made. (7)

Capt. Mullen) "An officer from the battalion CP then arrived and told us that we were to move up to the Forêt des Vencheres (Company E) where we could be picked up by trucks and carried to a new assembly area. "

Capt. Mullen then took his company under cover down the slope to the Vandieres , east-west , road through Villers , across country and started up the draw to the west toward the Forêt.

" We moved up the draw , but it had been 'zeroed in', so we moved up to the woods , came under defilade and proceeded to meet the Bn Executive one mile south-east of the cross-roads. We were picked up by the trucks and taken around to the south to the Forêt de Puvenalle . (This move up to the woods had been made at approximately 1400 6 Sept.) Here the battalion less F company assembled. Company F had been left to hold Vandieres.. The whole battalion (-F) was assembled by about 0200, on the 7th of September . "

The following story concerns the activities of the 2d. Bn. in the second river crossing . This was the successful attempt from which the bridgehead was established. All the narrative is from interview with the men named in connection with each phase.