

Across the Rhine and on to Berlin - Almost

The Division jumped off at 0100 on Mar. 28 to force crossings of the Rhine and Main Rivers and seize bridgeheads for the passage of the XX Corps. The 317th crossed in assault boats from Mainz and reached the east bank in the vicinity of Kastel and Kustheim. On the far shore it met strong resistance from small arms and high velocity AA weapons but by nightfall had captured Kastel, Kustheim, Biebrich, Wiesbaden, Erbenheim and Bierstadt. Later in the morning the 318th crossed in LCVP's and LCVM's and attacking north seized Igstadt and Aubingen. The 319th crossed the Rhine on the XII Corps bridge in the vicinity of Bischofheim.

The next day the 317th mopped up in the bridgehead then moved into an assembly area. The 318th likewise mopped up then assembled near Naurud and prepared to be motorized and follow the northward advance of the 6th Armored Division. The 319th captured Kowicsten, Diedenberger, Marsheim, Hofheim and Bad Soden.

At 1300 on Mar. 29, the 314th displaced from Gonsenheim, crossed the Rhine River over the 80th's bridge, and after a 10 mile march, closed into positions at Kloppenheim. The route led through Mainz and Wiesbaden. The Bn. CP was in a tankstelle (gas station) along side the Autobahn from Frankfort.

"I remember well when we crossed the Rhine River," says Frank Lankford. "The Engineers had built a pontoon bridge. We had to wait on the west side for quite a while before we could cross. Along the roadside leading down to the river were a number of drums, the size of gasoline drums, that were spewing out clouds of fog so thick that you could not see the river bank a hundred yards away. As we drove over the pontoon bridge you could only see halfway across. I have a picture through the fog of the sign put up by the Engineers. It read: '160 Engr C. Bn 997 Trdwy Co. Length 1896 Ft.' The purpose of the man-made fog was to block German artillery observation of the bridge.

"When we finally got across we went into a large courtyard and had our evening chow. While we were eating, several German girls rode up on bicycles and stopped short. Capt. (William) Hassert talked to them for quite some time. Afterwards I asked him what seemed to surprise them so much, was it seeing us so soon. He said, 'No, it was seeing white bread so close to the front lines.' They had not even seen white bread for some time."

Clinton Hanson (A Btry), who drove the prime mover for the No. 1 Gun Section on that momentous crossing, likewise recalls the long pontoon bridge across the Rhine. 1900 feet long, he thinks it was. What a memory.

Col. Minahan adds: "The bridge was built under the supervision of the 80th's 305th Engr. Bn., commanded by Lt. Col. Albert E. McCollam -- my West Point roommate (the only classmate I encountered during the war). It was the longest pontoon bridge constructed during the war (1896 ft.). The engineers had to stretch nets upstream across the Rhine to catch the mines the Germans were floating downstream to knock out the bridge."

On Mar. 30, the 318th CT was attached to the 6th Armored Division, and the 314th moved northward under Combat Team control to join with the 6th. In

this advance the Battalion crossed on to the Berlin-Frankfort Autobahn or super highway just above Frankfort and rolled up this highway about 60 miles to Reiskirchen, where it turned off and proceeded to a bivouac area near Lindenstruth.

The march (race) resumed in early morning, Mar. 31. Back on the super highway, the Battalion rolled up to Alsfeld, turned off, and proceeded northward along back roads to a position at Utterhausen. Some 58 miles were covered. Late in the evening CT 318 was relieved from its attachment to the 6th Armored Division.

Not long after we had crossed the Rhine, Frank Sudjoso almost left the 314th the second time. According to Frank: "We had confiscated a number of German vehicles. We were using a halftrack to carry all the duffel bags. When we got to the new position, I climbed up on the back to get something for someone. Then I jumped off the side. Joseph Donovan was there and yelled 'Don't move! Don't move!' I froze. Then he calmly said 'Move to your right only.' I did. 'OK,' he said 'you can come on out here.' Joe then pointed to the spot where I had jumped. About a foot from where I had landed was a German land mine."

In retrospect, for the 314th, March was just that -- a series of long marches in support of the 318th Infantry whose main mission, aside from establishing a bridgehead across the Rhine at Mainz, was cleaning out pockets of resistance by-passed by the 10th and 6th Armored Divisions. So, ammunition expended was much less than in previous months. A total of 4,712 rounds were fired during March and a total of 495 miles were travelled in the advance through the Moselle triangle, across the Rhine, and into the heart of Germany.

During April, the 80th played a major role in the dividing and conquering of Germany. On Apr. 1, the Division followed the 6th Armored Division to the outskirts of Kassel, passed through the armor, and assaulted the city.

From its firing position in the vicinity of Utterhausen, the 314th supported the attack on Kassel. At mid morning it displaced some 10 miles to positions near Niedervorschutz. In the evening it moved another 4 miles to the vicinity of Disen.

In the early afternoon of Apr. 2, about 9 enemy tanks with supporting infantry slipped through the 318th's lines and threatened to disrupt the attack on the city. Through the immediate use of air and ground observers, the artillery knocked out all eight of the tanks and played a major role in repulsing the counterattack. The tanks were the newest model "Tiger Royal" and had been run right off the assembly line of the Heinkel Locomotive Factory in Kassel. After the situation stabilized the Battalion displaced from Disen to positions in the vicinity of Kirchbauna at 2140.

As the attack on Kassel continued on the 3rd, the Battalion remained in Kirchbauna until mid afternoon when it displaced 4 miles to Nordhausen -- a suburb of middle class homes on the south side of Kassel. The 314th took over a city block of houses in which was quartered the entire Battalion. The

howitzers were placed in various back yards. Within view, a few hundred yards away on a high hill was a monument to Kaiser Wilhelm who ruled Germany during WWI. The monument made a fine OP, dominating the entire city of Kassel. However, no missions were fired.

John Beard says: "I had an experience at Kassel that struck terror in my heart. At the time I was on detail to "Hq" serving as liaison with adjacent units. On the race towards Kassel, I was with the 6th Armored Division.

"Somewhere on the outskirts of Kassel, or in a nearby village, we had stopped and some of us were walking around the narrow streets where curious civilians were coming out of their houses to see what was going on. Suddenly, the tank machine gunners opened up as a German plane came over and began to strafe the street I was on. Everyone, GI's and civilians, quickly backed up against the sides of the houses which butted right up to the sidewalk; no front lawns there. As I stood there plastered against the wall, a woman came out of nowhere, thrust a baby in my arms and disappeared around the side of the house. In a few seconds, which seemed like hours, the front door opened and she reclaimed her crying child and took it in the house. She came back and beckoned for the few of us in the vicinity to come inside to safety as the plane made another pass. Most accepted her invitation, but, with a sigh of relief, I headed back up to the corner by my jeep. There all I would have to worry about would be the strafing."

On Apr. 4 an ultimatum was delivered to the German garrison commander, Gen. Major Erxleben, and at noon he surrendered with his troops. The 318th remained in the city to maintain law and order.

Francis Neighly remembers the underground warehouse at Kassel. "I got some champagne and sardines. On the way out I came up behind a man who was trying to carry a very heavy box. When I asked if I could help him it turned out to be Capt. Boston. He wanted to know what I was doing there and I replied 'The same thing you are.' So we loaded up all of the champagne we could carry and gave some to each of the batteries."

Bruce Dunsha says: "In that same warehouse we helped ourselves to cases of Cointreau, which had been hauled back from its place of origin -- Angers, France. Each bottle was stamped 'Reserviert: fur der Wehrmacht.' We also obtained some excellent soft cheese that had been packaged in tubes like toothpaste."

Francis Neighly also recalls: "That Sgt. Maj. Edward Sholly didn't allow drinking around the CP. Bob Dew, the "A" Btry agent, and I were in the Message Center and I opened one of the bottles of champagne I had 'liberated' from the underground warehouse and it made a loud 'pop'. Just then the outer door opened. It was Sgt. Maj. Sholly, so I quickly shoved the bottle into a cupboard. He said he thought he heard someone open a bottle of champagne but we assured him it wasn't us, so he left. When we retrieved the bottle from the cupboard it was almost empty having fizzed most of its contents onto the shelf. All that was left was a little taste, but it was pretty good."

Having been alerted on Apr. 5 for an attack to the east, the Division began to move from the Kassel area to Gotha. On the 6th, the 317th and 318th

moved to an assembly area northeast of Eisenach and the 319th concentrated in the vicinity of Oberkaufungen. The next day (Apr. 7) the 317th and 318th moved to Gotha and relieved elements of the 4th Armored Division.

On Apr. 8 the 80th began the attack to the east, which would eventually extend as far as Chemnitz. In the initial advance from Gotha, the 317th and 318th enveloped Erfurt from the north and south. The 4th Armored Division then passed through these two spearheads and dashed to the east, by-passing major cities and pockets of resistance. The Autobahn was the main axis of advance for both the 80th and the 4th Armored, and this four-lane highway contributed immensely to the speed of the operation.

On the morning of Apr. 7 the 314th left Nordhausen and travelled 78 miles to an assembly area at Ettenhausen. In the evening it advanced another 16 miles to positions in the vicinity of Siebleben and remained there until the 10th, in support of the 318th's attack on Erfurt.

"It was somewhere east of Kassel" Francis Neighly says "that a German soldier in a small building waived a white handkerchief and, in English, asked 'Can I be your prisoner?' I nodded my head and started speaking German. 'Don't speak German,' he said, 'I understand English.' He told me he had two friends who would also like to surrender and brought them out of the building. One was quite young and was really shaking in his boots. The other was a Marine and seemed to be on the rough and ready side. The Marine asked if I were hungry and would I like some eggs. Thinking they would be fresh and that Capt. Boston might like some, I said yes. So he disappeared into the building and came back with a half a bushel of hard boiled eggs.

"When I got the three prisoners to the Battery they saluted Capt. Boston. They thought they had joined our army and were not going to a PW enclosure. They wanted to stay with us in the worst way. We carried them for about two days. Then they had to go to a PW enclosure.

"Back home many years later I had a horse that needed to be shod. A neighbor said that he knew of a 'Pollock John' and he would get him to do the job. When 'Pollock John' arrived he spoke very broken English and when I asked if he were Polish, said he was German. As I looked at him closely he seemed vaguely familiar, so I asked if he had been in the Wehrmacht. He said no, that he had been in the Marines and had been taken prisoner. It came back to me in a flash. I asked if he had given the man who had taken him prisoner a half bushel of hard boiled eggs, if so I was the man. He shouted 'Yeh! Yeh!' and began jumping up and down, kissing me and hugging me and said the shoeing would cost me nothing."

On Apr. 10, the 314th displaced from Siebleben some 6 miles to Grossrettbach. As the attack on Erfurt progressed, the Bn moved the next day (Apr. 11) to positions at Ingersleben, and on the 12th advanced another 3 miles to the vicinity of Bishleben. In the fighting to take Erfurt on this day (Apr. 12), Lt. Eli Selikoff, "C" Btry FO, was severely wounded and died later from his wounds.

Robert Powell ("A" Btry) recalls that: "On the railroad tracks near Erfurt I captured a German Captain, two Lieutenants and a Private First Class." Like Bob, quite a few men in the Battalion took prisoners from time to time but Francis Neighly, through his ability to speak German, often seemed to have been successful in parlaying one or two prisoners into five or ten.

One such instance occurred in this area for as Francis tells us: "In the vicinity of Erfurt a German soldier came out of a house and I took him prisoner. After I talked to him in German for a while he said he had more men with him, and when he called them I believe I ended up with eight.



"Okay, it's a deal! For three candy bars, two packages gum, bar of soap and package cigarettes, one of them is your prisoner!"

Russell Litchfield remembers: "South of Gotha the 80th encountered its first concentration camp -- Ohrdruf. Several of the staff and I went down to see the place. It was a scene of walking skeletons with burnt out eyes. They even seemed unable to comprehend they had been rescued. In nearby shacks we viewed human bodies stacked like cord wood and covered with lime. We also inspected the incinerators where many had met their death. It was hard to believe man's inhumanity to man."

Earlier some of the psychological warfare tactics employed by both Americans and Germans were mentioned, so it should be noted that during this drive eastward the Division devised a technique for getting towns to surrender without resistance. As the Division approached a town, projectiles containing leaflets advising the town to surrender or suffer the consequences would be fired. If the town intended to surrender, the Burgermeister was to come out with a white flag and assure that there were no German troops in the town. Toward the end of the time period specified in the leaflets, fighter bombers of the 9th Tactical Air Command would fly over getting lower and lower with each pass. If the town did not surrender by the given time the planes would drop their bombs and at the same time an artillery concentration would hit. In the face of this threat many towns surrendered without a fight.

Weimar was one of the towns to take advantage of this offer, as were quite a few others later. But as the infantry pressed on, some stubborn resistance from small, fanatical groups was encountered, but quickly overcome, at Gena and Gera.

Just north of Weimar was the Buchenwald concentration camp, which the 80th liberated. Many in the Battalion remember visiting the place. The inmates had been kept in long sheds that had tiers of wooden bunks along the walls. They wore dirty, striped uniforms. Most were just skin and bones. Outside a number of bodies lay where they had fallen after being shot. The guards had not had time to remove them. While talking to some of the hapless inmates, Mike Heneghan discovered a man who was from Chicago. He was an American who had made the mistake of coming to Germany to visit Jewish relatives before the war started. His account of life in Buchenwald was nightmarish.

Many repulsive sights were seen during the war. Unfortunately, they are the ones that seem to remain fixed in our memories. Ed Scarberry says he has a vivid recollection of a very nauseating incident. Although he cannot remember when or where it occurred, he is still haunted by the sight of "a pig eating on a dead German soldier." He says that over the years he has often wondered whether he really had seen it, or whether he had just dreamed it. But, he added that, unfortunately, it did happen because about a year or so ago he talked to Bruce Dunsha, and the first thing Bruce said was: "Do you remember that old sow eating on that dead German?"

On Apr. 13, the 314th left Bishleben and travelled eastward 27 miles to an assembly area at Kötschau. From there it displaced another 4 miles to positions at Closewitz and assumed the mission of general support of the 80th.

Apr. 14 involved another long march of 59 miles from Closewitz to Gösdorf. The Battalion reverted to direct support of the 318th. On the 15th, the 314th moved another 18 miles to Herrenhaide to support the 318th's planned attack on Chemnitz.

In the Gösdorf area Russell Smalley of "C" Btry's FO Crew was seriously wounded by machine gun fire and died a month later. He was the 314th Bn.'s last combat casualty.

Elijah Hare (C Btry) doesn't recall the exact town but says he will never forget this incident. "A few of us, including Joseph Rudaski, were standing at a very busy intersection. There was a lot of activity going on there at the time. Anyway, Rudaski had picked up a 'stove pipe' hat about two feet high and was wearing it very proudly. A jeep with a little flag with a star on it came up the road. When it got to where we were, all of us, including Rudaski in his lovely hat, snapped to attention and saluted. The driver screeched his brakes and backed up. The General had a few words with Rudaski about the hat and the salute. Rudaski's face turned a crimson red. It was hard for the rest of us to keep a straight face."

The assault on Chemnitz was halted by SHAEF, because 3rd Army was operating in territory reserved for the Russians under the agreement made at Yalta.

Chemnitz now is in East Germany, and has been renamed Karl Marx Stadt. Marx was born in old Chemnitz. How different post-war history would have been, if the 80th and 4th Armored had been allowed to continue on to Leipzig and Berlin!



"AND FROM ALL INDICATIONS, BERLIN IS
FAIRLY HUMMING WITH ACTIVITY TONITE . . ."

