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UNIT: 1st Bn 317th Inf Regt, 80th Inf Div

PERIOD: 11 Nov 1944

ACTION: Seizure of the Bridge at HAN sur NIED

SOURCE: Major James A. Craig, CO, 1st Bn 317th Inf, then CO Co A 1st Bn
Capt Jerry Crowethers, Exec O, 1st Bn 317th Inf

PLACE AND DATE OF INTERVIEW: ST AVOLD, FRANCE, 1st Bn CP
12 Dec 1944. *Now Lt Col
reoperating in
the states from
wounds*

INTERVIEWER: Lt S. J. Tobin

MAP: 1/50,000 - METZ - Sheet No 34-13, GSGS No 4471

Note: The Morning Report and Unit Journal were used during the interview.

Prior to the attack on HAN sur NIED, the 1st Bn 317th Inf had a strength of approximately 550 men and 17 officers. Co A had 90 men, Co B had 60 men, and Co C had 75 men. B Co was commanded at the time by 1st Sgt Joe Werchluk. The percentage of old experienced men to replacements varied in each company; however, all men had at least four weeks intensive training during the stationary period prior to the SEILLE River crossing of 8 Nov 1944. Co A had three experienced platoon sergeants and nine experienced squad leaders. The Bn as a whole was very low on experienced non-coms.

Enemy information prior to the attack on HAN sur NIED (046443) was the following:

1. The enemy was withdrawing to the east after having been pushed back from the SEILLE River.
2. Enemy estimated strength on the 80th Div front - 3,000 men
3. *found* OB information - Enemy units on the 80th Div and 6th Armd Div on 11 Nov 1944 were the following:

80th Inf Div:

Elements of the 48th Inf Div, 126th & 127th Inf Regts

Elements of fortress units which had been employed in the Maginot Line Forts.

In addition to the organic artillery the 42d AA Regt of the 9th Flak Div was in support in the HAN sur NIED area.

6th Armd Div:

Elements of the 48th Inf Div, 126th Inf Regt.

Elements of the 17th SS Div, 38th SS Panzer Grenadier Regt.

The 1st Bn 317th Inf arrived in LUPFY (981433) at 1730 the night of 10 Nov. At 2100 that night orders were received for operations the next day. The Bn mission was to seize the bridge across the NIED River at HAN sur NIED⁴. Orders to the companies were issued verbally by the 1st Bn CO, Lt Col Sterling S. Burnett, at a company commander's meeting that night. There were no provisions in the regimental Field Order for armor-infantry cooperation or in the Bn meeting that night.

On the morning of 11 Nov the 1st Bn left LUPFY at 0800 and moved up to BECHY (008438) at 1030. The division formation at that time was column of regiments with the 317th in the lead. The regimental formation was column of Bns, 1st Bn along the main road, 2d Bn on the right of the main road, 3d Bn in reserve to follow the 1st Bn. The Bn CP moved into BECHY which had been taken against slight resistance. In the vicinity of BECHY the 1st Bn met the elements of the 6th Armd Div as both had the same mission to capture the bridge at Han sur NIED. Some arrangements were made to cooperate and coordinate their efforts. Information was received that the night before Capt Hammond, CO, Co A 9th AIB, 6th Armd Div, had come into the town of BECHY the night before to negotiate for its surrender but had failed to return. (This ties in with other information from 6th Armd sources).

At approximately 1100 the column pushed off in the direction of HAN sur NIED. The company objectives were as follows: Co A to clear the bridge and the high ground beyond the town. Other companies to follow A Co and reinforce as necessary. Co A was disposed--1st platoon on the right of the road, 2d platoon on the left, 3d platoon following the 1st. Disposition of the Bn heavy weapons--one machine gun platoon to each of the leading companies; 81mm mortars to follow and support the leading company. Artillery support--313th FA Bn in direct support on the 317th Inf. The 512th FA Bn (155mm Howitzer) 404th FA Group in a general support. The line of march was pointed by a platoon of light tanks, next some 400 yards behind the light tanks 5 half-tracks of the 9th AIB; behind the half-tracks dismounted elements of A Co moved along the sides of the road. Flank protection was provided by several medium tanks and TDs which were travelling cross country. The ground was wet and boggy due to recent

rains. Three medium tanks got stuck on the right side of the road in the vicinity of (027433). As the column moved eastward the tanks poured a continuous fire into the woods along the road. At approximately 1145 several enemy vehicles were flushed out of the woods at (042431). These proceeded southward over the ridge and headed toward HAN sur NIED. Flank protection for the advancing column was provided by a platoon of Shermans on each side of the road and 3 TDs which were also on the left. The gap between the point and the armored infantry closed to about 150 yards when the column stopped in the vicinity of the CORVEE le PRETRE woods (027439). Col John L. Hines, Jr, CO, CCA 6th Armd Div, and Lt Col Burnett proceeded to the edge of the woods (039432) at approximately 1150. There they heard an enemy tank come from the direction of AUBECOURT (044448), head SE and cross the bridge at HAN sur NIED. The bridge was made of wood and the sound of the tank crossing over could be distinctly heard. This indicated the bridge was in. A large number of enemy vehicles could be seen eastward from HAN sur NIED. Also, the enemy could be seen implacing 20mm AA guns and MGs in the vicinity of (059447) NE of the town. At about 1210 six Mark IV ^{Tanks} were seen moving out of HAN sur NIED toward VATIMONT (071431). The TDs were called up and one TD in position at the edge of the woods (035439) took the column under fire getting a direct hit on one tank. Little effect was observed except the speed up of the column of tanks. Several other shots were fired by this TD without effect. The TD moved position and was joined by two others at (035449). They fired a number of rounds from this position which offered no coverage. The fire was indiscriminate for the enemy vehicles had disappeared by this time. At about 1230 Lt Yetman, FO, from the 512th FA Bn with Co A 1st Bn 317th set up his radio and called for fire on VATIMONT. A concentration was fired at 1230, the effect on the tanks however was unobserved. At this time the 6th Armd FO, who was in a light tank, on the forward edge of the woods overlooking the town called for time fire on HAN sur NIED and the bridge. This was kept up until the assault was launched on the bridge itself.

It was evident at this time that the bridge was in and an effort to capture the bridge intact must be made. Col Hines ordered one company of armored infantrymen and 5 medium tanks to attack the

bridge. This attack was to be made in conjunction with the 1st Bn 317th Inf. It was imperative to seize the bridge as soon as possible and prevent the enemy from destroying it and strengthening his defensive positions. The attack was launched at approximately 1300. The armored infantrymen came forward behind the tanks with about 50 men deployed on each side of the road along a 300 yard front. The formation was a line of skirmishers. The armored infantry was followed by 1st Bn in column of companies, A Co in the lead. Co A had 1st platoon on the right of the road, 2d platoon on the left, 3d platoon in the rear of the woods. The frontage was approximately 200 yards. The infantrymen followed the armored infantry at a distance of about 200 yards. The 5 tanks spearheaded the column deployed in linear formation. It was Capt Craig's opinion that the column was insufficient in depth. The attacking column moved some 200 yards with the tanks firing at the enemy in the vicinity of the bridge. Main elements of the column, namely the armored infantry, had reached the open ground on the forward slope leading from the woods to the bridge at (042442) — about 300 yards from the bridge — when murderous fire opened up on the attackers from the enemy positions on the eastern side of the river. The main enemy positions were on the high ground NE of the town. Automatic weapons, mortars, some tanks and anti-tank guns and the heaviest fire of all 20mm AA guns. These 20mm AA shells fired a HE cartridge which caused numerous fragmentation wounds to the personnel in the vicinity. The enemy positions were echeloned in depth and possessed excellent observation. (16 quadrupled barreled 20mm AA guns were counted in the vicinity of HAN sur NIED by T/Sgt Angulo and Lt Tobin). The armored infantrymen were pinned down. Many of them froze in position in the ditches along the road. Many were calling for the medics having been wounded by the 20mm fire. An armored infantry lieutenant tried to urge them on but was unsuccessful. Capt Craig moved his men wide of the road by fire movement around to the railroad tracks and along the railroad embankment to the bridge. With the men he had left the Capt rushed across the bridge. Capt Craig said the bridge was the hottest spot he ^{had} ever seen. Tracers filled the air and fire seemed to be coming from all directions. Three tanks were at the bridge when they arrived. One tank just behind the log-block on the bridge, one about in the center of the

bridge and one some 15 or 20 yards on the other side of the bridge. The time was about 1345. At the bridge Capt Craig said a MG was firing from the rear from approximately (044444). Capt Craig said that he did not know at the time why the tanks were stopped on the bridge but later learned that the platoon commander whose tank was in the center of the bridge had been killed in the turret and the radio antenna of the tank was shot away by AA fire. As he crossed over the bridge Capt Craig saw a dead officer lying on the far side of the bridge with a pair of wire cutters in his hands. With about six of his men Capt Craig rushed to the first house across the bridge a distance of some 50 yards. A MG was firing at the house so the Capt assembled his men and pushed down the road to the next building on the left a distance of about 40 yards. Three men were wounded on the way. They arrived at the second building about 1415. One German was flushed out and a BAR man took care of him.

The three tanks had remained in the vicinity of the bridge. Capt Craig went back and personally brought two of them up to the building where they took cover on the left side of the house. Meanwhile a MG was brought in from the first house on the right and set up in Capt Craig's CP. The third tank meanwhile had come up to the building by about 1445 and a fourth tank which had been at the bridge had backed away from the bridge and was seen to catch fire. The tanks radioed back for orders and were told to await further commands. Two of the tanks were along the left edge of the building and the other a little to the right of the building. About 1500, 8 Germans ran from a trench about 30 yards to the NE of the building and were mowed down by MG fire from one of the tanks on the left side of the building. At about 1500 Capt Craig said that he had 18 men including three or four from the armored infantry under his command. He had posted the men at the windows and doorways of the building to cover all avenues of approach and to protect the tanks.

Meanwhile the troops that remained on the western side of the river sought cover behind the railroad bank and the road block and a cement shack at the west end of the bridge. From these positions and the positions in town they engaged the enemy in a fire fight during the afternoon.

At about 1715 Col Hines crossed the bridge bringing 15 men with

him. He contacted Capt Craig, told him to take full command of the forces coming across the bridge, and then returned to bring tanks and the remainder of the infantry. Shortly thereafter B and C Cos 1st Bn 317th Inf under 1st Sgt Werchluk and Lt Lacy Wheeler crossed over bringing about 30 or 40 men. Shortly thereafter about dusk 8 medium tanks under Capt Brown, B Co 68th Tk Bn, crossed the bridge followed by Capt Smith, D Co 69th Tk Bn, with 7 light tanks. Capt Craig organized the defense of the town and set up outposts. About 1830 Col Hines sent over about 200 armored infantrymen. B and C Cos 1st Bn 317th Inf proceeded to clear the remaining buildings in town. Defensive positions for the night were set up as follows: Capt Smith deployed his light tanks in the vicinity of the bridge. Capt Brown deployed his medium tanks on the eastern approaches to the town. Co A with 30 men under Lt Rexford Hawkins set up defensive positions on the left edge of town. Co B was on the right and C Co with the armored infantry outposted the eastern edge.

At approximately 1930 a German motorcycle with a sidecar came down along the road from the north on the east side of the river. A tanker from one of the tanks parked near the bridge killed one of the two men on the vehicle, the other evidently got away. Later that night the 2d and 3d Bns crossed the bridge to augment the forces in the town.