

864 - Day Rec

CROSSING THE OUR BY C CO, 319TH INF REGT
7 February 1945

At 0100 7 February C Co, 319th Inf, leading the 1st Bn, marched in a column of two's from its assembly area at KLEINREISDORF to the Bn's boat assembly area near the selected OUR River crossing site. Through the dark night the company, which contained 110 reinforcements new to combat, marched up the road to the crest of the ridge 400 yards from the river bank. The men kept good order, following the luminous tapes on the backs of the helmets of their squad and platoon leaders. They knew that across the flood-swollen river, not 1000 yards from them, was Germany, protected by a belt of SIEGFRIED line pillboxes, mines, barbed wire and booby traps; the squad leaders who had been briefed with aerial photos, had told them so. But no enemy fire was coming in to interfere with the approach to the boat area. On the crest the column swung to the right down a trail which sloped about 200 yards down the hillside to the boat assembly area in a clump of trees. There the battalion's 34 boats were lined up, with the platoon guides posted at 4-boat intervals. It had been uphill work almost all the way and it was about 0215 by the time the column started down toward the boats. The men knew that there was to be an artillery preparation, which started at 0230, and they could see the shells bursting on the far bank, then lifting farther up the bank for 10 minutes and then returning to pound the river edge. But they were not prepared for the intense noise and light which began a few minutes later when eight IMGs from H Co and a number of .50 cal. quad. mounts (633d AAA Bn) opened up with overhead fire from the ridge behind them. Battalion had been informed by regiment of this overhead fire just as the column started from KLEINREISDORF and the word had trickled down only to some of the platoon leaders and no lower. The company was then right at the boat assembly area and the waiting engineers (C Co, 150 Engr C Bn), who were also unprepared for the dazzling, ear-splitting overhead fire, broke in some confusion.

A short mortar or artillery round which wounded one engineer and two infantrymen added to the confusion and the men from C Co dispersed without orders and hit the dirt. The platoon guides helped the platoon leaders to round the men up and reorganize them by squads. Although the engineers' organization by boat was broken up when they scattered and many of them never reappeared on the scene (infantry's statement), little delay resulted. Three-man engineer crews were to be with each boat; as a result of the engineers' taking cover many of the boats were short part of their engineer crews or were manned entirely by infantrymen. In addition to their weapons and cartridge belts the riflemen carried four bandoliers of ammunition and a raincoat; blankets and shelter halves had been left behind as a result of experience in loading and unloading boats in the practice crossing.

It was a 20-minute carry from the assembly area to the crossing site. The site itself had been selected the day before by 1st Lt William P Sweaney, the Bn S-2, after the Bn commander, Maj Arthur H Clark, had rejected several sites picked by regiment. Capt Myron Gold, C Co commander, had seen the crossing site from an OP on the ridge, and the route down to it was marked with engineer tape earlier that night. It had been worked out at a practice crossing of the SAUER River just south of REISDORF on 5 Feb that 9 infantrymen and 3 engineers would go in each boat; no further breakdown was planned by weapons or men other than the squad.

2d Lt Franklin Retchless, the 1st platoon leader, led his men down the trail to a break in the woods down which the boats were to be carried to the river bank. Men from the 1st squad, assisted by T/Sgt Rosario Dennis, the platoon sergeant, and the 3 engineers shouldered the boat, moved down the trail and started down the steep 200-yard slope to the river's edge. The slope of the bank from the trail was about 45 degrees and even the first carrying party was unable to keep its footing. The men lost control of the boat and slid and sprawled down the bank knocking against trees and bushes on the way. The footing got progressively worse until the bank was slick as a toboggan slide and men and boats simply careened down to the river.

It had been planned to assemble the 5 boats needed to cross the 1st Plat and launch them simultaneously. The narrowness of the brush-free lane down to the bank prevented the bringing of more than one boat at a time down to the launching site. At 0300 the first boat was launched after an attempt to launch all the boats simultaneously had shown that the current, even close to the bank, was swift enough to threaten to capsize them by knocking them together. Lt Retchless, Sgt Dennis, the leader and assistant squad leader of the 1st squad, and four riflemen from the 1st squad, one of them carrying a pole charge, piled into the boat and pushed off. Rifles were slung across their backs to leave hands free to paddle. They found that there were only 3 paddles and these were manned by the infantrymen, rather than the one remaining engineer. Despite the 8-12 mile per hour strength of the current in mid-river and the lack of paddles, the boat landed only about 75 yards downstream from the launching site and the men jumped out, leaving the lone engineer to return the boat to the opposite shore.

The river's flood stage, which widened it from 50 to approximately 150 feet, carried the boat safely over the mines laid along the normal bank. Pvt Henry W Curtis took the two flashlights he had been given, each with an "X" cut in a black-out cover, and placed them on sticks facing the south bank, one at the landing site and the other 40 yards downstream. These were used as guides for the boats that followed. Two or three minutes after the first boat was launched the second one hit the water, with the remnants of the 1st squad and part of the 2d squad, including S/Sgt Walter B Brinkman, 2d squad leader. The boat carried 11 infantrymen, one of whom, Cpl Leonard Wolf, carried a BAR. Shortly after the second boatload landed and joined the first near the bank a couple of stray rounds, either from enemy artillery or, as the men in the 1st Plat believe, shorts from Co D's 81mm mortars hit just to the left of where the men were lying. Three men were wounded by fragments--Pvt Francis E Lawrence, Pvt Alonzo Minix and Sgt McGarvey, a new man in the company. Lt Retchless ordered the men to move a few yards farther to the right, and the platoon received no more casualties until the attack up the bluff. (D Co's 81mm mortars, from positions just behind the crest of the ridge, were firing close-in concentrations while the artillery kept up its fire on the main belt of pillboxes on the ridge. The green parachute flare which was the signal for lifting the fire on the ridge when the battalion moved out toward its objective was never used.)

The third boat also crossed without mishap, taking the normal two or three minutes for the trip. It carried the rest of the 2d squad and S/Sgt Joseph Besiljevack and some of his men from the 3d squad--a total of 9 men, one of whom

had a bazooka, one a BAR, and one a bangalore torpedo. Two more boats took the remaining 14 men from the 1st Plat across; 1st Lt Paul J Durand, Co Ex O, herded the rest of the 3d squad and stragglers from the platoon into the boats.

There had been some delay in rounding up the men from the fourth and fifth boat-loads and T/Sgt Zenas H. Bennett, leader of the 2d Plat, slid down the bank on his pants-seat to find out if he should bring his platoon and boats down. Lt Durand told him to bring two boats and the rest of the men down and wait for the return of the 1st Plat's boats. The men and two boats hurtled down the river's edge where they had a five-minute wait until the other boats returned. The engineers had little trouble finding the crossing site on the return trip even though one of the three that returned had to be dragged 100 yards upstream along the bank. The site stood out even in the dark night as a cut in the woods.

When five boats were assembled the platoon boarded them and took off, one following another at one- or two-minute intervals. Capt Gold and his SCR 300 radio operator, Sgt Ray Jones, went in the first load, along with Sgt Bennett and T/Sgt Stephen C Mace, his platoon sergeant. The boat had three engineers and seven or eight paddles. Among the eleven C Co men in the boat one carried a bazooka, one a pole charge and one a satchel charge. (The charges got wet and all failed to explode when C Co tried to use them later against the pillboxes beyond the bluff.) The 2d Plat crossed in the order, 3d, 2d and 1st squads. In the fourth boat, which also had a three-man engineer crew, two two-man regimental bazooka teams crossed. A guide had been left right on the bank by the 1st Plat, which, according to plan, moved forward a few yards to make room for the 2d Plat as it landed. When the platoon had all landed and assembled by squads, it closed in on the 1st Plat, taking cover in the muddy shell-holes. Rolling over in his hole, Pvt Marlen D Mahlum, who had crossed with the 1st load, accidentally knocked out the pin of a thermite grenade in his pocket and was badly burned. Engineers evacuated him and the three casualties from the 1st Plat. At about 0330 two German flares had gone up to the northwest in the area where the 2d Bn was crossing. In the 1st Bn's area there had been no flare activity or enemy fire on the crossing site.

The weapons platoon followed the 2d Plat, crossing in three boats which they brought down themselves. In the first boat, were 1st Lt Jean D Willis, platoon leader, and S/Sgt Albert Sicking, machine gun section leader, and one machine gun squad, with its weapon and six boxes of ammunition. Ten minutes later T/Sgt Harry Weston, the platoon sergeant, and the second machine gun squad crossed. Lt Durand went with them to check on conditions on the far bank; Capt Gold's 300 radio was not working and battalion had no radio communication with elements across the river until the B Co commander, Lt McGrath, got across. Durand returned quickly and reported to Capt Cyrus Adams, Bn C-3, who was at the launching site, that all was well.

The first two boats of the weapons platoon had not been fully loaded and, in the absence of Lt Durand, engineers loaded the rest of the platoon's men and equipment into the third boat. With a three-man engineer crew, 13 mortar men, three 60mm mortars each weighing 42 pounds, and 10 bags of ammunition totaling 300 pounds, the boat was heavily overloaded. (Lt Willis had planned to put one mortar squad

into the second boat.) There were only four paddles and when the boat got into the swift current in the middle it began to ship water and spin out of control. It was half full of water when it got close to the far bank and two of the engineers jumped out; instead of trying to pull the waterlogged craft the remaining 10 feet to the bank the engineers swam for shore. As each man jumped over the side the boat shipped more water and finally sank close to the bank. The men all made it to shore but lost helmets, packs and weapons. The mortar section was used for the next six days of action, until a bridge was put in, as ammunition carriers and extra riflemen. The two light machine guns were set up on the left of C Co's assembly area to cover in the direction of the pillboxes in that area.

The approach of C Co's 3d Plat was somewhat delayed by an order which was passed up from the bank to "pull back the 3d Plat." This order was intended for the 3d Plat of B Co, B's leading platoon, some of whose men had already reached the bank. C's 3d Plat crossed in four boats; the 1st squad brought one down but left it in the water and took another that already had an engineer crew. T/Sgt Claude E Smith, the platoon leader, went in the second boat, which also carried a BAR man, eight riflemen, and a satchel charge. Two platoon litter bearers crossed in the fourth boat.

The last strictly C Co boat crossed immediately afterwards with 1st Sgt Charles J Munson, three men from the Co Hq and four aid men, in a boat manned by three engineers. They carried wire, a field telephone, sound-power phone, and some extra SCR 536 batteries. The Co Hq group set up near the stone wall on the north bank of the road.

The company was now in positions along the road, having moved up about 150 yards from the river's edge. It was now about 0430 and B Co was starting across. Lt Durand and two men from C Co crossed in B's first boat. The company remained in whatever cover the men could find along the road and waited for the rest of the battalion to cross and assemble. The crossing was going slower. Some of the battalion's 34 boats had been lost on the return trips and the engineer crews were getting tired; paddles were becoming increasingly scarce.

By 0630, all of B Co and the two heavy MG platoons from D were across. B Co was along the wall to the left of C and the machine guns were in position on the wall. The one pillbox south of the road in the battalion's zone had been found empty and the battalion staff initially used it as a CP. Although no enemy fire was being received by the elements across the river, harassing artillery fire along the ridge where A Co was assembled was becoming increasingly heavy--A Co sustained 30-40 casualties from this fire. The boat crossing had gone slower than anticipated and the width and current of the river had prevented a platoon from A Co, 150 Mgr C Bn, from putting in a footbridge to the left of the crossing site. Before the Bn command group crossed (carrying two extra 500 radios), Maj Clark had radioed the B and C Co commanders of a change in the battalion plan. The original plan of by-passing the pillboxes, climbing the bluff, assembling 1000 yards beyond and then attacking from the rear had to be abandoned because it was almost dawn and A Co had not begun to cross.

Just at dawn mortar, artillery and nebelwerfer fire fell heavily for the first time around the road along which the two companies were deployed. Capt Gold stood up and shouted to Lt McGrath, "Come on, Mac, let's get the hell out of here."

At 0700 the two companies, each with two platoons in a line of skirmishers and one along the wall with the machine guns, moved out up the 400-yard slope toward the bluff. C Co was on the right. Two pillboxes in the path of the advance were found unoccupied but the riflemen kept any possible occupants buttoned up with their marching fire. The enemy's artillery and mortar fire did not follow the two companies but continued to pound the south bank and immediate crossing site, effectively blocking A Co's crossing until much later in the day.

During the 300-yard climb up the bluff, some small arms and machine gun fire came in from pillboxes above the hairpin turn in the road to the right. In spite of this fire the winded riflemen had to stop and rest two or three times. The pillboxes on the crest were unoccupied and in any case could not have covered the steep slope up the face of the bluff. Lt Willis, the weapons platoon leader, was the first man to reach the top. He did not have his weapon ready when he scrambled over the crest and a German in a foxhole knocked his helmet off and wounded him in the leg with two rounds from his rifle. Willis jumped back and was able to make it down the bluff alone. He was evacuated, along with a few other casualties, by the engineers.

C Co cleared a few Germans from holes and trenches around the pillboxes on the crest and dug in, using the boxes for shelters and CPs, facing the belt of bunkers and pillboxes on the high ground to the front. The 3d Platoon was on the right, the 1st on the left, part of the 2d Platoon contained the boxes near the hairpin bend in the road to the right and S/Cgt Alexander Franklin's 3d squad protected to the right rear near the company CP pillbox. The light and heavy machine guns were brought up and emplaced for defensive fire soon after the riflemen reached the crest.

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