

X CROSSING OF THE OUR RIVER BY F COMPANY, 2D BN,
319TH INF REGT, 7 FEBRUARY 1945

The wooded bluff that rises steeply west of HOESDORF and commands the OUR River valley from WALLENDORF to AMELDINGEN was a perfect OP from which to study the SIEGFRIED fortifications on the northeast bank, a fine place from which to check by observation the final plans to force a crossing of the river and establish a bridgehead in Germany. But to the officers of the 2nd Bn of the 319th Inf Regt who climbed up there in the afternoon of 6 February, it proved useless. A heavy mist blanketed the valley. Lt Col Paul Bandy, Bn CO, his staff and his company commanders, who had just been ordered to cross their troops under cover of darkness early the next morning, looked in vain for the location of enemy pillboxes which would oppose their crossing. They could make out the dim outlines of the houses of AMELDINGEN, and the massive ridge the assault companies would have to climb to secure a foothold on German soil; but they could see nothing of the scores of pillboxes, trenches, minefields and wire defenses which they knew from defense overprints maps and aerial photographs thickly studded the far bank, (See map #1). Visual reconnaissance was vital to insure the success of the operation. The SIEGFRIED fortifications which nature had had six years to camouflage, were extremely difficult to pick up, from aerial photos. Although a small regimental patrol had investigated the river's edge the night of Feb 5-6 and reported no field fortification or mine fields, the number and exact location of enemy positions on the commanding ground east of the river road were unknown. The fog that endured all day, 6 Feb, meant that they must remain unknown, that the crossing must be attempted virtually blind. It was not even possible to observe from the OP the crossing site which 1st Lt Gerald J. Foley, Bn S-2, and T/Sgt Thomas E. Harrell had selected by physical reconnaissance the night before. Though the risk of a night attack without thorough reconnaissance was great, there was no alternative but to go ahead with plans since the crossing was part of a coordinated XII Corps attack.

After dark 6 Feb the engineers (B Company, 150 Engr C Bn) brought twenty-five M2, 10-man assault boats into HOESDORF and stored them in buildings in the extreme south and north portions of town. (See map # 2) The plan was to use all boats to ferry F Company, the initial assault company, across, then have these boats return by the engineer paddlers to pick up E Company and take them across.

Each boat would carry nine infantrymen and would be manned by a crew of three engineers, two in the bow to stroke the paddling and set the course one in the stern with a paddle. A fourth engineer was assigned to each boat to remain on the near shore, to hold the boat in the landing and beach it on the return. He was also act as guide to the crossing site. Embarking and landing proved to be the most difficult and most critical stages of the operation. The river, normally about 60 feet wide at HOESDORF was flooded to nearly 90 feet by the February thaw and recent rain; the current averaged about 10 miles per hour. The battalion, in making their plans, figured the boats would be carried 200 yards downstream in crossing, but as this could only be a guess predicated on uneventful launchings and landings, Capt William H. Chamberlin, CO of F Company, did not try to pinpoint an assembly area on the far shore, but instructed his platoons to reorganize generally along the opposite the crossing.

At 2000, 6 Feb, F Company marched from MOESTROFF two miles in the dark to HOESDORF, where the men occupied houses and rested, waiting for the jumpoff scheduled for 0300. They had made a practice crossing of the SAUER River at MOESTROFF the day before at which time the men had been counted off by boat loadings. With the exception of certain key boats, this organization roughly followed division by squads. That, at least, was the plan. In practice organization largely disappeared. The first disconcerting circumstance was the arrival not more than two hours before the company was ready to attack of 25 reinforcements. These were apportioned to platoons as needed and as lined to boats as space was found. The assignment of the new reinforcements that nearly a third of F Company would be facing enemy fire for the first time, at 0300 when the first volley of preparatory artillery was fired, F Company was getting ready for the assault. 1st Lt John E. Cowgill, 3rd Platoon leader and company exec officer, led the first boatload of men which included a pathfinder from the 1st and 2nd Platoon to the building where the boats were stored. The men were armed with rifles, one half satchel charge, and most important of all white tapes with which two guides were to mark a path up the opposite bank to the road and so establish an assembly area. They hoisted a boat to their shoulders and followed an engineer guide 400 yards to the crossing site. Despite occasional enemy flare activity, our own artillery bursts and .50 caliber tracers fired from the hill on the west to mark the general direction of the battalion objective, the night was dark. The slope to the river was steep for the last 100 yards and the footing in the clayey mud perilous. The carry, in short, turned out to be more difficult than had been expected, and instead of getting the boat in the water at 0300 when the last artillery shell was fired, Cowgill's men were not ready to push off until 25 minutes later. The four engineers had the greatest difficulty holding the boat for loading. Two stood out waist-deep in the stream, holding the bow; two anchored the stern at the shore. At last all men were aboard; the two engineers climbed in at the bow, a third pushed off. The boat twisted in the current, then stuck. It was hung up on a partially submerged wire fence that had once marked the river bank. All the men had to climb out, but before they had all cleared, the boat freed itself and went drifting downstream, two men in the water clinging to the gunwales, one aboard. The men in the water finally managed to haul themselves over the side, and the three were carried down along the side of the river until their boat hit another which was enmeshed in some brush. One of the men caught hold and all three climbed into the other boat and thence to the shore. Their own boat and all the equipment it had carried were lost, but the men made their way back along the shore to the crossing where they tried again. In the meantime other craft had been launched and fared better.

The second boat with S/Sgt Donald B Hull in charge loaded without mishap. Using eight paddles, the squad headed straight across the river and landed farther upstream than any of the subsequent boats. Sgt Hull walked downstream along the bank, S/Sgt George E Barton walked upstream to look for the tape which they knew was to mark the path inland. Hull at last ran into men who had waded and swum ashore from the third boat.

S/Sgt Carl W Stine had loaded his men into the third boat without trouble. But, in landing, they miscalculated the depth and swiftness of the water. When they neared the far shore, one of the engineers told S/Sgt Joseph J Charles in the bow to jump out in what he thought was shallow water, and hold the boat for the others to disembark. Charles jumped, found himself in water up to his waist. In jumping, moreover, he kicked the boat out into the stream and it drifted away.

The men who had stood up preparatory to getting out were unbalanced by the sudden movement. The boat tipped, took on water and started to sink. The men leaped out, some in water over their heads. Pfc William Watkins threw his BAR onto the bank before he jumped, but he did not throw it far enough and it slid back into the water and was lost. Most of the rest of the men's equipment was also lost including a half stichel charge, mate to the one in the first boat. Sgt Charles abandoned this deliberately since the fuse had drifted away with the other half of the charge. They landed with two rifles in the sand. One man from the boat, listed as missing, is presumed to have drowned.

The last boat of the 3d Plat carried a nine-man squad under command of the Plat Sgt, T/Sgt LaVere R Foster. Unable to ram the bow of the boat into the far bank and make it hold against the current, they drifted down to a bend in the river where a clump of bushes pokes into the stream. The boat caught there long enough to allow the men to hold on to the bushes securing the boat so they could get out in shallow water. One man was found to have lost his gun and equipment and was sent back with the returning engineers. Eight men, all except Sgt Foster armed with M-1 rifles, thus landed and finally met the other men of the platoon. The platoon assembled on and near the road and waited about an hour for the arrival of Capt Chamberlin and the rest of the company.

Although the first boat of the 2d Plat (the next to cross), S/Sgt Robert P Johnson in charge, got across easily after cutting a section out of the submerged fence, the next craft (Sgt Harland E. Bortle) barely made it. Two of the men that were supposed to ride in it, S/Sgt Albert F Knorr and Pvt Toffy I Mater, missed the boat as it was swung offshore by the current before they could get in. None of the engineers were aboard and only three of the eight paddles could be found. It is supposed that a man in the back was sitting on the rest. Using the butts of their M-1s as paddles the eight men teacupped their way across while the current carried them about 500 yards downstream. At last in waist-deep water Sgt Loyd A Myers and Pvt Earl I Ferguson jumped out and held the boat for the others. In the landing, two rifles, the stichel charge and the bangalore torpedo which had been loaded in this boat were lost, but the men managed to salvage their bazooka. While the first two boats were crossing, the squad under S/Sgt Harold J Curtis had been dumped into the river when their boat overturned shortly after launching. Of the nine infantrymen, two were drowned; the rest waded back to the near shore.

The next boat, last of the 2d Plat's also capsized, and though no men were lost, none got across until later. This was fairly serious as the boat contained the platoon leader, 2d Lt Stanley C Bimson, his Plat Sgt, T/Sgt Walter Presback, the Plat guide, runner and medic. Capt Chamberlin with his CP group, including an artillery observer, an SLM mortar observer, his radio operator and runner, crossed next without incident. When Sgt Knorr was left on the near shore by the untimely departure of his boat, he walked back to town, picking up stragglers from other boats which had failed to cross and got another boat.

Up to this time there had been no enemy activity at the crossing site. It is possible that the surprise achieved was due to the selection of a comparatively unfavorable site. The enemy probably expected the crossing to be made north of HOESDORF where the river banks were less steep and where the Germans themselves had often crossed patrols. After the 2d Plat had landed, however, the enemy at last woke up to what was going on, and the 1st Plat, led out of town by 1st Lt Thomas Merrick, were immediately picked out by an enemy flare. The men froze, but the

big silhouette of the boat they were carrying was easily visible. Merrick's own boat crew following an engineer guide had made a wrong turning and were stopped by an angle-iron wire fence when the flare went off. An enemy shell well aimed by the light of the flare hit nearby, wounding the Plat Sgt, T/Sgt Orville Sword, and Pfc Albert B. Messaro. Another man rushed his knee between two fence posts. However, Merrick was able at last to get his boat down to the river and crossed it with six men, including one with a BAR.

The boat of Pfc Edward R. Burgence, caught by the same flare, was less fortunate. It was already in the water with three men aboard when a shell scored a direct hit. One man was killed, Burgence was slightly wounded and the boat was damaged so that it could not be used. Burgence split his squad to send some in the next boat and some in the one following.

The bad luck of the 1st Plat continued. Pvt William F. Endfinger, assistant squad leader, had waited ten minutes with his crew on the road out of town where he had been told an engineer guide would meet him to lead him to the crossing site. The engineer did not show up. Endfinger decided to take off. Misdirected by soldiers along the road, he found himself on a hilltop beyond the crossing when an enemy flare dropped, followed by shells which killed Pfc Kenneth E. Smith and wounded one other. Two of the squad then left to look for medics. The rest picked up the boat and stumbled on. A few steps, and they tangled with a wire fence. No one could find the wire cutters. They knocked part of the fence down, only to find another blocking their way. This time the cutters were found and they reached the crossing at last. Five men got over the river. There was a BAR in the boat but when they landed no one remembered to pick it up. The last of the 1st Plat boats with the squad under Sgt Stephen E. M. Lecoy took nine infantrymen and one engineer across without misadventure.

The plan called now for the weapons platoon to follow Lecoy's boat, but the enemy shelling which had been heavy on HOESDORF, had so disorganized the platoon, wounding at least six of the men, that they did not move out to the crossing at all. In fact they did not join the company until six days later. An attached platoon of heavy MGs from H Co was supposed to follow the weapons platoon, but, as the latter did not move, the heavies were delayed and reached the river after daylight to cross with elements of H Co. The last boat of F Co carried the second echelon of company headquarters under 1st Sgt Samuel C. Doss, Jr. With nine infantrymen and the crew of three engineers they landed safely on the opposite shore. The first person they met on the other side was Capt Chamberlin who took Sgt Doss and two other men on a detail to round up stragglers. The roundup squad headed downstream, passed within a few feet of a pillbox without seeing it, and walked through an extensive minefield between the road and the river. It was here that a few days later a jeep was blown to bits. Although about 70 men of the company had presumably made the crossing, when the company was at last lined up by platoons on the road (that is about 0500) Lt Merrick counted only 37. Many of these were without weapons. Of the rifles available, moreover, fully fifty percent, muddled by spills in the river and on the slippery banks, were soon unable to fire.

As predicted by the engineer patrol, the actual landing had been unopposed and

the men, assembled in the lee of the three to four foot embankment on the east side of the road, were getting no direct fire. But it could not be said that they had yet established a bridgehead. They had no idea what lay east of them. It was still dark when Capt Chamberlin ordered Lt Merrick, the only other officer across, to take his platoon of 17 men up the hill, find out what was there, and take a pillbox if he could find one to take. The rest of the company would remain in the vicinity of the road prepared to support him.

Merrick got his men together and sent two scouts out ahead, Pvt Joseph Aiello on the left, Pvt Dallas I Beall, Jr on the right. Aiello went up about 100 yards and found nothing but a grove of pine trees. Beall on the right crawled up to a deep, winding trench, which, in fact, was a communicating trench between two pillboxes neither visible to Beall. Two Germans were walking along the other side of the trench. Beall beckoned Lt Merrick. They fired at the backs of the Germans, but missed. The Germans ran and disappeared, presumably into the pillbox on the left (pillbox "B" - see map #2). Merrick's squad took over the trench. It was then beginning to get light and enemy on the top of the hill was firing down at them and also rolling grenades down the slope. Most of these did not reach the trench; some that did were tossed back. A two-man enemy MG team, driven out of Pillbox "A" by fire from the company on the road, came up the hill and, running into Merrick's men, surrendered. Sgt Lecoy took charge of them. But almost at that instant enemy on the left flank tossed a potato masher into the trench. The explosion killed the platoon runner, Pfc Robert B Walker, temporarily crazed Sgt Lecoy who rolled down the hill, shouting. Merrick then ordered Pvt Aiello to take the prisoners down to the company and at the same time get another bazooka, as the one they had would not fire.

It was clear that the squad's greatest danger lay from the left flank because if the enemy attacked from that direction, the men lined up in the trench would be unable to bring more than one weapon to bear. This danger seemed very real when a German suddenly appeared around the bend in the trench. Sgt Price J Nettles, the only NCO left in the platoon, shot and killed him. All the time Merrick's men occupied the trench they were unaware of the existence of a pillbox on their left. A MG was firing from that direction. Merrick's men tossed five grenades at it but none exploded. While the squad was sweating out counterattack from the left flank, ten Germans charged down the hill. As was later discovered, they had killed Merrick's two outposts. But they paid. Eight were hit and fell; the other two were taken prisoner. One of Merrick's men, who had been slightly wounded by enemy bazooka fire from Pillbox B, escorted the prisoners down the hill.

Merrick's SCR 536 was not working and he was out of contact with the rest of the company. Capt Chamberlin, however, had learned from Aiello something of the platoon's plight, although he did not know how desperate it was becoming. He did not know that enemy rifle and machine gun fire was becoming so intense that of three men who raised their heads above the level of the trench one was killed and two wounded. Nor did he know that in the whole platoon only one carbine and one BAR would still fire. Lt Merrick himself was wounded in the head when his carbine missed fire as he got up to shoot at a German NCO who was standing 15 feet away and shouting orders to surrender. What Chamberlin did know was that Merrick was pinned in place and that if he was to be freed, the enemy would have to be driven back from his flanks. Therefore, as soon as it had become light he sent one squad to Merrick's right to scout out the enemy positions. The squad returned

shertly to report a defended enemy pillbox (Pillbox A) which they did not think they could take alone. Chamberlin then detailed two squads of the 3d Plat (about 12 men) to assault the box. The satchel charges they had planned to have for this purpose had either been lost or were without fuzes. For special demolition equipment, the assaulting squads substituted boldness in attack. They marched on the box from the blind side, firing rifles and rifle grenades. If there were enemy around the box, they were kept from returning fire. Sgt Bortle on the left flank shot a bazooka round at the pillbox embrasure. Then S/Sgt Paul W Zahn climbed on top of the box and tossed a M1 grenade down the ventilator. The enemy were convinced of the wisdom of quick surrender and four men walked out to give themselves up. An officer, however, managed to escape. With the box cleared, Chamberlin occupied it and brought up the 3d Plat, now 21 men, to out-post it. They had scarcely got inside when heavy caliber enemy shells hit the top of the box, possibly 150mm.

In the meantime, Lt Merrick, with more than half his men killed or wounded, decided to abandon his position. Under the covering fire of the BAR he sent his men back down the hill one at a time. Two were hit in the middle of the back and seriously wounded. One fell heavily in the soft sand and stuck so that he could not be pulled out without risking further injury. He was left all day where he fell and was brought back after nightfall when he could be lifted on a litter. Of the 17 men who had gone up the hill with Lt Merrick, seven came down four hours later to rejoin the company at Pillbox A. Box B which had caused them so much trouble was assaulted and captured later in the day by E Co which crossed during the morning. Before it was taken, however, a sniper in it shot and killed one of Merrick's men, and others in the vicinity fired on boats evacuating the wounded.

Four boats in the morning took wounded back to HOMSDORF. S/Sgt George A Barton volunteered with three other men to pilot the last of these boats with found wounded of which two were litter cases. As the wounded were moved into the boat one of the paddlers was hit by artillery. When the boat headed out into the stream, snipers opened fire putting four or five holes in the hull and wounding the other two paddlers in the back. Only Barton was unwounded. With the help of one other man, who could still paddle, he continued through enemy fire and landed the seven casualties on the friendly shore. Barton got back to the company the next day.

F Co held for two days the slight foothold they had gained on German soil, and then, instead of pushing the attack to the high ground north as had originally been planned they were attached to the 1st Bn and sent east to support their attack (see Map #1).