

VI

Pont-a-Mousson and St Genevieve-FIRE FOR EFFECT!

The attack across the Moselle River began at 0200 on the morning of Sept. 12, when Division and Corps artillery fired a two-hour preparation. The 314th alone fired some 1,317 rounds. The 317th jumped off at 0400 and by 0920, in spite of heavy artillery, mortar and small arms fire, had crossed the river and reached its objectives on the high ground east of Dieulouard. The 318th (- 1st Bn) then crossed. The 3rd Bn headed north along the river and the 2nd set up roadblocks at Ville-au-Val and Bezeumont to protect the bridge site.

For Colonel Minahan the crossing of the Moselle was the most unforgettable and most controversial of all 80th Div operations. He says, "At dawn Sept. 12, after several unsuccessful attempts in the vicinity of Pont-a-Mousson, the 317th made an assault crossing of the Moselle near Dieulouard and, against determined enemy opposition, established a bridgehead on the east bank. The attack had been preceded by a two-hour preparation by all the Div Arty and attached Corps Arty battalions, augmented by an almost solid wall of direct aim fire laid down by all available machine guns and anti-aircraft 20mm guns, all of which had been moved up and positioned under cover of darkness along the high ground on the west bank of the river. Despite all this fire support the 317th had rough going.

"When the 317th had secured the Mt St Genevieve-Bezaumont ridge line other divisional units were phased over the pontoon bridges that the engineers managed to put in across the river and canals, despite continuous enemy artillery and sniper fire. The 314 FA was scheduled to displace over the river at 4:00 p.m.

"Several hours earlier I had taken over a reconnaissance party of BC's and communications personnel. Looking around I saw that the 313 FA and the 318 Cannon Co occupied all available gun positions and were even backed up against the river near the pontoon bridge. I ran into General Searby and explained the bridgehead was too small to accommodate the 314th. He agreed and told me he would arrange to hold up the one way bridge traffic so I could take the party back. I told him I did not want to disrupt the traffic, that we would bivouac in the bridgehead over night, and find gun positions the next morning after the expected attack of CCA 4th Armored Div and the motorized 1st Bn 318th had made more room.

"We bivouaced along a stream which flowed westward from Ville au Val into the Moselle on the right flank of the bridgehead, established local security, then experienced a night I'm sure the BC's and other members of the recon party well remember.

"After midnight the Germans launched a counterattack with infantry and tanks in an attempt to wipe out the bridgehead. The major attack came from near Loisy on the west flank and along the paved road which paralleled the river right down to the pontoon bridge. The Germans overran and shot up the 318 CP which was alongside that paved road. Col. McHugh was badly wounded. Lt. Col. Roy Herte, other regimental staff officers, and about 40 EM were

captured and taken away, not to be released until the war was over. The 313 FA could not support the 317 Inf because they were below minimum elevation. Instead they and the 318th Cannon Co played anti-tank roles and did knock out several tanks. Also many 313th personnel ended up as infantrymen in defense of the bridge. For this action the 313th FA later was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation.

"While this melee was going on behind us, I observed a 318 Inf lieutenant bringing his platoon from a road block they were supposed to man up ahead at Ville au Val, pointed out to him we could not afford to let any Germans come down that road, considering what's going on behind us, and directed him to go back up -- which he did.

"At daybreak the Germans launched a second counter attack from the St. Genevieve-Bezaumont ridge, and soon we observed two tanks and infantry coming down the slopes toward us. We were prepared to shoot it out with carbines and two machine guns, but I decided to try artillery fire before they discovered us. However, the requested artillery concentration was held up because of a big argument between Div Arty and Division G-3. Allegedly I was calling for fire behind our front lines. Col. (Joseph) Shaw (Div Arty Exec) came on the radio and asked if I was prepared to assume full responsibility. I said, 'Joe, we ARE the front lines, and if I don't get some fire in 30 seconds, I won't be around to worry about responsibility.' He replied, 'ON THE WAY!'

"The concentration landed right on the slope in front of us. I could see that one tank had been knocked out. The other one and the escorting infantry withdrew over the ridge toward St. Genevieve.

"By about 0700, the 317 Inf had retaken the St. Genevieve-Bezaumont ridge and at 0830 CCA, 4th Armored and the 1st Bn, 318 Inf, having crossed the river, passed by us on their way to Ville-au-Val, eastward to Nomeny, then southward, cutting off those German forces trying to escape from Nancy. However, there were several more days of critical events before the bridgehead was large enough for the 314 FA to cross the Moselle."

After the successful crossing, the 314th (- A Btry), which was assigned the mission of direct support of the 317 Inf for the defense of the bridgehead, displaced, via Viller-en-Haye and Griscourt, to a position one half mile west of Dieulouard. (The 313 FA, in the bridgehead would be unable to support its team mate, the 317 Inf, for several days, because it was too close (below minimum elevation)). From there the 314th supported later attacks on Mousson and Millery. The Bn remained there until the 21st. Initially, "A" Btry stayed at the Bois de Villers to support the 318th and 319th units patrolling the river from Dieulouard to Marbach.

During the day (Sept. 12) Pfc Sam Magill was killed and Sgt Joshua L. Dryden was seriously wounded by enemy 88mm fire, while running "The Gauntlet" -- the fully exposed road that led downhill from near the Bois de Villers position to Dieulouard. Both were members of the "Hq" Ln section supporting the units patrolling the river. Pfc Magill was the first enlisted man of the 314th to be killed in action.

Mike Heneghan recalls: "After the 317th had crossed the Moselle, the Colonel took the Battery Commanders across to find positions to which we could move as soon as all of the 318th had completed the crossing. The bridgehead was so crowded, the Colonel decided to wait until the next day for more space. We quickly pulled off into a field that, fortunately, had a big, tree-lined gully running through it and that's where we put the vehicles. That's where we stayed all night.

"In the gully we were unable to get radio communications, so we were practically lost. During the night everyone continued to try to get through to their batteries but without success. I think the Colonel may have gotten in brief contact with Div Arty from time to time during the night by moving his command car out into the open. At any rate, the next morning he was able to call for artillery fire on some tanks on the ridge just above us. There was enough fire to force them to move back. After CCA 4th Armored passed us we went back to the west side of the river.

"On the way back to the Battalion I was with the Colonel and he asked 'Mike, where is your Battery? It was there in that field when we left. Where is it now?' I said I didn't know because Sgt. Knott had moved it. He wanted to know how Sgt. Knott could have moved it, because I was with him and we had no communications with the Bn. So I explained that I had told Sgt Knott that if he hadn't heard from me by 1800, he should do whatever was necessary. He could move the Battery forward, backward, stay put, or do whatever was needed. So he probably moved it. (He had moved to an alternate position).

"After that overnight affair, I was called to Div Arty Hq where I was asked all about what had happened on the other side of the river, how we acted over there, and so forth. I didn't think too much about it but told everything I knew. Later on we were all called to Div Arty and they pinned medals on us. I got the Bronze Star, the Colonel got the Silver Star and Sergeant Knott got the Legion of Merit.

"I should also mention that an offshoot of Sgt. Knott's decoration occurred at the end of the war when we met the Russians and they wanted to meet with an enlisted man that had received a decoration. Sgt Knott was sent over and the Russians decorated him with a medal that, inter alia, entitled him to free transportation any where, any time in the Soviet Union. (According to a newspaper report these privileges were rescinded about ten years ago.)"

Hubert Kenyon says: "After the CCA 4th Armored tanks crossed the Moselle on Sept. 13, they drove far beyond our front lines. Art Lindberg and I were flying then and calling for fire on numerous targets of German troops and equipment that were well beyond the 80th's forward elements, but our Fire Direction Center would not give us any. About that time German anti-aircraft opened up on us and big black shell bursts were popping all around us. We dove down to treetop level and got the hell out of there. When we landed back at our field we were still so scared that when we got out of our plane we literally collapsed on the ground. After a moment or two we looked at each other and began to laugh. Then our laughter turned to 'Mad as Hell' because they wouldn't give us any artillery fire. We got in our jeep, drove to Div

Arty Hq and stomped into General Searby's office. He gently and quietly calmed us down, explaining that even though each unit had a full complement of ammunition, the Ammunition Supply Trains had not caught up with us, and if the battalions used up too much of the ammo on hand and the Germans counterattacked again, we would be in big trouble."

On the 14th, the 317th continued to strengthen its positions on the high ground east of Dieulouard. The 3rd Bn 318th attacked Mousson Hill and by early afternoon had reached the castle ruins on top. A strong armored counterattack against this position was repulsed later in the day with artillery fire being directed by Gen. Searby. The 314th FA was credited with stopping the counterattack. It was during this engagement Gen Searby was killed by a burst of machine gun fire from a German tank. His death cast a pall over the entire 80th Division. On this day the 314th fired 941 rounds.

Counterattacks on the 3rd Bn on Mousson Hill continued the next day (Sept. 15) but all were repulsed. However, hostile forces were successful in occupying the little village of Atton at the bottom of the hill thereby cutting the 3rd Bn's supply line. Isolated with the 3rd Bn were: the Liaison Section of Lt. John Ruyan, Sgt. Martin Burke, Pvt. Edward Schmidt and Pvt. Kenneth Elliott; the "B" Btry FO Team consisting of Lt. John Simonson, Cpl. William Martin and T/5 Kenneth Peterson; and the "C" Btry FO Team consisting of Lt. Richard Lee and Pvt. Fred Ellis. For the 317th, attacks and counterattacks were likewise the order of the day. The 314th fired a total of 1,134 rounds.

Francis Neighly remembers: "Several nights after the infantry had crossed the Moselle I got in my foxhole and went to sleep. The next thing I knew someone pulled my leg and yelled 'Come out, we need help!' A few minutes later they shook my leg again and said: 'If you don't come out now you may have to pull that damned hole in on top of you.' I came out and couldn't believe it. It was like the Fourth of July. The whole sky was lit up. There was artillery firing everywhere. We fired a long time. They said it was a counterattack.

"We were firing so much that "Sv" Btry had to keep bringing additional ammo. They brought it to the edge of the road, dropped it off, then hurried back for more. We had to lug it a long way to the guns. We had a mountain of empty shell cases that day.

"When the counterattack was over it was daylight and we saw our first bombing run by US P47's. At the time I thought they were trying to blow out a bridge or something, but learned later they had caught some German tanks in a woods and were bombing the hell out of them."

A positive development on this day of heavy fighting (Sept. 15) was the return of many units to Division control. The 1st Bn 318th was released from attachment to CCA of the 4th Armored and began moving west from Arracourt towards Nomeny. In the afternoon CT 319 also reverted to 80th control from Task Force Seebree and its mission of holding the bridgehead across the Moselle at Toul.

Art Lindberg remembers: "When the 3rd Bn, 318th was surrounded on Mousson Hill, the same hill where Gen. Searby was killed, the 314th's Air Section was asked if it would be willing to fly in supplies, plasma and rifle ammunition. This request came very late in the day. Flying would be hazardous. Lt. Kenyon said he would give it a try. He, with, I believe, Sgt. Marcus Robinson as observer, made the first try to drop the supplies while Sgt. Rebensdorf and I made the second. In all we made four trips.

"Sgt. Rebensdorf, being something of a daredevil pilot, would fly as low as possible on this mission, about 100 feet above the surrounded troops, so that our drop would be as accurate as possible and without too much damage to them. Fortunately, we drew little enemy fire. Flying this low we were able to see clearly the disposition of the enemy troops and their oncoming reinforcements, which we reported. Our last trip ended in nearly total darkness and it was only due to the flying skills of Sgt. Rebensdorf and the assistance of the other members of the Air Section that we were able to land safely. The crew of the Air Section stood alongside with flashlights to outline the strip. Even truck lights were turned on and off at intervals to give us a better reference as to the ground level. Suffice to say we made it safely."

That situation is also recalled by Mike Zizaro, who says: "In mid-September at Mousson Hill, a battalion of the 318th was cut off by the Germans for several days. Word was received that our troops were very much in need of ammunition, radio equipment, medical supplies, and food. The 314th's Air Section played an important part in establishing communications with and supplying the surrounded troops.

"Supplies were brought immediately to the Air Section field. I was responsible for loading the planes and guarding the supplies. Sgt. Rebensdorf and Lt. (Arthur) Lindberg took off with a load to be dropped to our troops. Gerry would fly his L-2 so low that once he brushed the tree tops before the observer could drop the supplies. On each trip a different observer went with Sgt. Rebensdorf or Lt. Kenyon. On the missions that day Sgt. Marcus Robinson, Cpl. Edward Alig and Pfc. George Zellner, as well as Lt. Lindberg, served as observer. On two of Sgt. Rebensdorf's trips the plane was hit by small arms fire. That evening we counted at least six holes in the fuselage and wings. While all of this was going on, Lt. Kenyon and an observer were also directing artillery fire on the enemy."

For the men that were isolated on Mousson Hill, most memories are of the bitter fighting and the heroic acts of General Searby and numerous others in staving off the enemy from retaking that strategic point. But there were also some incidents that were tinged with humor, for as John Ruyan tells us: "Before we went overseas I purchased an arctic parka at Fort Dix. I treasured that parka because I knew the winter snows were ahead and spending nights in a foxhole would be no fun.

"Along the Moselle I received a radio call from Col. Minahan to met him at Atton. We met there late in the afternoon and he told me to take Fred Maxted's place with the 3rd Bn., because 'Max' had been hit. At the time the 3rd occupied the cone shaped hill just north of the village.

"We parked our jeep in a ravine at the base of the hill and I told my crew to dismount our radio and bring it up with all of our batteries. On the way up the steep incline we met Maxted on the way down, and he informed us that the fighting on top was very heavy. We proceeded to the top and made contact with the battalion CP and adjusted some artillery fire on the enemy. During the night the Germans counterattacked, surrounded the base of the hill, and cut us off from our lines.

"The next afternoon, I was searching for enemy targets and spotted a German soldier in a field outside of Atton wearing my parka, which he must have removed from our jeep when it was captured. I immediately uttered a few words of choice profanity and yelled a fire mission to my radio operator. I was bound and determined that that Kraut was not going to enjoy my parka. When my radio operator called back and said that the Fire Direction Center (FDC) wanted to know what was the target, I replied: 'A German wearing my parka.' The response from the FDC was that it was not a suitable target for artillery. I was outraged. Before me was my mortal enemy and behind me my cohorts were laughing. I then told Fire Direction: 'That lone soldier has just been joined by a full company of Germans' and proceeded to bring a battalion of artillery down on that poor Kraut. To this day, if he survived, he must still wonder why in hell anyone would chase him with artillery concentrations. After the incident became known, Col. Minahan used to refer to me as the only sniper in the U.S. Army with a 105mm howitzer."

John went on to say that he was reminded of this incident by Paul Bassett, who was on duty at the FDC at the time and who refused the original fire mission request.

Col. Minahan recalls the burial of Gen. Searby. "Col. Shaw had arranged for a local carpenter to make a pine box coffin so we would not have to use the QM mattress cover. The Division cemetery was at Andilly. All the battalion commanders were there, plus Chaplain Hart, a firing squad and a bugler from Div Arty. It was a soggy, muddy day and a sad one for all of us. When repatriation of bodies began after the war, the Andilly cemetery was closed and the remaining bodies were reinterred in permanent cemeteries. Gen. Searby's body now lies in Epinal Cemetery, 4 miles south of Epinal, France."

On Sept. 16, the 319th, having moved from the Toul area, crossed the river, proceeded north and took its objective northeast of Mousson Hill. Enroute it seized Atton, thereby reopening the supply line for the 3rd Bn. Elsewhere in the Division's sector, the 317th held its position and repulsed a counterattack. The 2nd Bn, 318th maintained its roadblocks, while the 1st Bn, continuing its westward movement from Nomeny, seized St. Genevieve and attacked through the Foret de Facq, the base for most of the German counterattacks.

With these developments, the ridge line just east of the river running from Mt. St. Genevieve to Bezeumont had now been made reasonably secure, but efforts to expand the bridgehead in the hilly and forested terrain beyond continued to encounter strong enemy resistance. The weather, too, was becoming a major obstacle. Already more rain had fallen in September than was usual for that time of year and heavy rains would continue through October and

November, seriously impeding the advancing infantry and making artillery gun positions a veritable quagmire. Chet Rutkowski observed that: "Even in just damp weather, nine men in a small diameter (approximately 30 feet) can make a mud hole in short order."

In general, the 319th, after its release from Task Force Seebree held the northern or left flank of the Division's boundary; the 318th was in the center; and the 317th on the right. But almost from the time of the first river crossing until Oct. 8, it was not uncommon for a battalion of one regiment to attack an objective which, without a map showing regimental boundaries, would appear to be in another's sector.

The day-to-day limited engagements of the respective infantry units in the continued expansion of the bridgehead from Sept. 16 until Oct. 7, are recounted only when there was some direct 314th interest or involvement.

In the fighting on Sept. 17, the Bn After Action Report notes that Pfc. Elmer Simmons (B Btry FO Crew) was wounded.

"It was during the period we were at Dieulouard," says Andy Jordan (Hg Btry), "that my buddy in the Motor Section, Thornton Riffie, said he knew where there were some chickens and asked me if I wanted to go with him to get some. As you know, we had been living on "K" and "C" rations, so we decided to catch some of the chickens that night and fry them the next day.

"Riffie got a burlap bag and I had a blackout flashlight. After dark we made our way up a few blocks into town and down an alley between two houses. Around in the back was a woodpile and the chickens were roosting on it. I held the bag while Riffie tried to grab the chickens. They started fluttering around and were squawking and cackling. You never heard so much noise in all your life and the noise seemed so much louder because everything was so quiet at that hour of the night. Little did we know that a Frenchman was living in the house and heard all of the commotion, so while we were in the back yard chasing the chickens he came out screaming and yelling at the top of his lungs. Riffie and I took off in a hurry.

"The next morning Riffie and I were talking about the experience of the night before. I told him we would go again that night, only this time he would hold the bag and I would grab the chickens. So that night we went back again. We sneaked into the yard very quietly and didn't disturb the chickens of the Frenchman. I grabbed one chicken, wrung her neck right quick, and in the sack she went; no cackling or anything else. We got two or three chickens, took them back to the Motor Section, defeathered and cleaned them. The next day the Section had fried chicken for lunch, a real treat after "K's" and "C's" for so long. Thank you, Mr. Frenchman."

Andy goes on to relate: "Another experience I had while we were at Dieulouard, began one afternoon when Joe Donovan, the Motor Sergeant, said: 'Jordan, you and Joe from the Wire Section go up forward with the maintenance truck and pick up the advance switchboard and personnel and bring them back! We took off, crossed the bridge, went up thorough a couple of towns and as we approached the top of a hill, a bunch of infantrymen were

running back down. They stopped us and said: 'Don't go up there! The Germans are shelling the road and you can't get through! So we stopped and waited a while. Finally I decided that we had to follow orders and so we took off up over the top and down the hill as fast as we could on the winding road that led to the town where we were headed. All along the way there were many dead infantrymen. Gunning the truck the whole distance we continued through the town and around to the back of the building where the switchboard was. Lo and behold, they weren't going to pull the switchboard out; they had received orders to stay there. I guess someone realized it would be too dangerous to try to get out during the afternoon, so we stayed all night. The Germans shelled and fired on the town all night long. Sometime during the night the Signal Corps put up loudspeakers at various places, and an interpreter was yakking away in German for them to 'Come down with your hands up and surrender or else.' The 'or else' happened, because about ten o'clock that morning our artillery bombarded the hill the Germans were on with white phosphorus and regular shells. The whole mountain area was on fire.

"In the meantime, we loaded the switchboard, got everybody onto the truck and took off back to Dieulouard. On the way, in the first town we came to, I spotted down in a ditch a quarter-ton trailer that had been on fire. The fire had burned the tires off and most of the paint was burned but, being all metal, it wasn't in too bad a shape. The Maintenance Section needed a trailer for hauling gasoline and other supplies, so I hooked up the trailer on the back of the truck and took off for Dieulouard again. Riding through a couple of the towns, that trailer, not having any tires on it, sounded like a tank coming down the road. The people were running every which way, they thought the Germans were coming back. Anyway, back in our area we cleaned and pointed our newly acquired trailer and used it for the rest of the war."

VII

Displacing to the Bridgehead

On Sept. 19, the 314th reverted to direct support of the 318th guarding the bridgehead between Pont-a-Mousson and Millery, and on the 21st, displaced from its position west of Dieulouard and finally crossed the Moselle to Loisy. The next day it moved to the northern edge of Millery. The Battalion remained there in direct support of the 318th for the attack on Mt. St. Jean. A few days later, on the 27th, the CP and "Hq" Btry moved into Millery itself.