

CHAPTER III

The XX Corps Crossing of the Moselle¹ (6-24 September)

Preparations for the Moselle Crossing

On 28 August the exhausted and disorganized enemy forces were reeling back to the east, leaving only a few small groups of isolated infantry and stubborn antitank gunners from the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* and the *48th Division* to delay the American advance. But at the same time gasoline began to run low in the tanks, trucks, and armored cars of the XX Corps. By 29 August the shortage was acute. The 90th Infantry Division, on the north flank, came to a halt at Reims with hardly enough gasoline left to keep the field ranges on the kitchen trucks burning. By siphoning fuel from supply and transport vehicles, elements of the 7th Armored Division and 5th Infantry Division were able to make the last few miles to the Meuse River and establish a bridgehead there. Contact with the main rear guard of the fleeing Germans no longer existed, and shortly after noon on 31 August tanks from CCA, 7th Armored Division (Colonel Rosebaum), rumbled across the Meuse on a bridge which had been found intact in the ancient city of Verdun. The crossing at Verdun was close to the last step in the rapid 400-mile advance which the XX Corps had made since 6 August. Of the seventeen tanks in the task force dispatched to Verdun only three reached their objective; the rest had

[117]

run out of gasoline. The 5th Division followed as far as Verdun, outposted the east bank of the Meuse, and with this bridgehead in hand the XX Corps eastward drive stalled. For five days General Walker waited for gasoline, rationing the few hundred gallons left so as to send his armor and cavalry out on scouting missions to the north and east.

On the morning of 11 September, CCR (Lt. Col. J. W. Newberry) of the 7th Armored Division moved east along the main Verdun-Metz highway and reached Etain, some twelve miles from the Meuse, where on the previous night a raid by the 3d Cavalry Group (Col. F. W. Drury) had captured 4,000 gallons of gasoline-enough to send cavalry patrols on eastward to the Moselle River. For the next few days the 3d Cavalry Group acted with the elan of the old mounted cavalry tradition. But its accomplishments could lead to no substantial gain and did little more than indicate what might have been the story had not the iron grip of logistics intervened to thwart a Third Army dash across the Moselle. A platoon of B Troop, 3d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, commanded by 1st Lt. James D. Jackson and guided by a French Marine, made a seventy-mile foray deep into the enemy rear and on the afternoon of 2 September reached Thionville, the large bridgehead city north of Metz. For two hours Lieutenant Jackson's little force-three armored cars and six jeeps-shot up the town, and Jackson even succeeded in cutting the demolition wires on the main bridge spanning the Moselle River; but eventually the Americans were driven off, and returned to their command. Jackson, who had been wounded twice at the bridge, was awarded the DSC. On this same day a platoon from the 43d Cavalry

Reconnaissance Squadron made a reconnaissance toward Longuyon, twenty-eight miles northeast of Verdun, and penetrated the outskirts of that town before the surprised Germans mustered enough tanks and artillery to drive the American cavalry out. Another platoon of the 43d, led by 2d Lt. R. C. Downs, reached the Moselle River on 2 September and set up an observation post on the heights at Haute Kontz, north of Thionville, reporting by radio: "No enemy visible on other side of the Moselle. Many good places for bridges, all undefended. Rolling ground back of river." So disrupted were the German forces west of the Moselle that Lieutenant Downs was able to retain his point of vantage by dodging about until 5 September, when the lowering level in the gas tanks forced the platoon to cut back to the west and rejoin its squadron.

Elsewhere the 3d Cavalry Group was forced to curtail scouting operations between the Meuse and the Moselle as the limited gasoline supply began to

[118]

fail. By the morning of 3 September the 43d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which had pushed out on the left wing of the XX Corps zone of advance, had to report that it could operate neither its vehicles nor its motor-driven radios. The remaining squadron, the A was able to maintain contact with the retreating enemy all through 3 September and as night fell was approaching the Moselle River south of the city of Metz. But already there were signs of stiffening German resistance in front of the cavalry patrols and the FFI reported that its informants across the river had seen enemy troops entering Metz and strengthening positions south of the city near Arnaville. Contrary to rumors that later circulated through the Third Army, no American cavalry were able to enter Metz or its environs.

Meanwhile General Walker decided to make what use of the stalemate he could in hopes of adding to the enemy confusion. On 2 September, as an indication to the enemy that the XX Corps intended to turn to the north and northeast and move in the direction of Luxembourg alongside the VII Corps of the First Army, two armored task forces from the 7th Armored Division were sent north from Verdun, advancing on both sides of the Meuse with orders to make a feint at Sedan. The task forces ran out of gasoline before reaching Sedan, and on the afternoon of 3 September General Walker ordered them to return to Verdun. Some gasoline was available the following day and the armor then rejoined its division. It appears that the enemy initially reacted to this demonstration as General Walker had hoped. On 4 September German intelligence reports prepared in *Army Group B* headquarters noted: "The Third Army appears to be regrouping for a further drive to the *northeast*. A great attack on the line Mons-Charleville-Montmédy is to be expected soon." But the failure of American reconnaissance to follow up these first probing efforts on a northeasterly axis quickly convinced the German higher staffs that the Third Army attack would take some other course, and no troops were shifted to the Sedan sector.

During these days of enforced inactivity the XX Corps commander and his staff were busy with plans for a drive that would reach Mainz, on the Rhine, 140 air-line miles east of the XX Corps forward positions, before the German West Wall could be manned. This scheme of attack had

been discussed by General Patton and General Walker during March 1944, while the Third Army was in the United Kingdom. It had been promulgated as a written order from General Bradley's headquarters on 29 August and now remained on the planning maps for immediate use once the gasoline drought

[119]

was ended. In the first days of September, however, there was little the XX Corps, could do but commit ambitious future plans to paper, wait, make a sterile record of the optimistic and pleading messages radioed in by the cavalry, put out daily periodic reports with the dour phrase, "no change," engage in gunnery practice when German planes came over at night in fruitless attempts to destroy the Verdun bridges, and hope that gasoline would soon arrive. Even the foot soldiers of the two infantry divisions had to wait on the life blood of mechanized warfare, for without gasoline no artillery, bridging equipment, rations, or ammunition could be moved forward to support them in any extended advance.

In the meantime the 315th Engineer Combat Battalion of the 90th Infantry Division worked feverishly to repair a large airfield near Reims which had been badly damaged by German ground crews before its capture. By noon of 3 September the main runways were in shape to receive cargo planes; this, coupled with reports that there was a plentiful supply of gasoline on the beaches back in Normandy, promised an early end to the shortage.

By the afternoon of 4 September enough fuel was on hand to extend the radius of cavalry action and the 3d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron began to push its patrols toward the Moselle between Thionville and Pont-à-Mousson, the projected zone of a renewed advance by the XX Corps. General Walker ordered the squadron to seize any bridges over the Moselle still standing, but the German defensive positions west of the river were rapidly being manned and apparently were fairly well co-ordinated. The FFI told the American cavalry that some bridges south of Metz were still intact. When a cavalry patrol reached the bridge at Pont-à-Mousson, however, it found the structure demolished. Scouting north along the river the cavalry tried to pass through the defiles leading down to the west bank of the Moselle at Arnaville, which commanded another bridge site. Three separate attempts to get into the town were checked by the German infantry and artillery posted along the defiles, and when night came the XX Corps was still without a bridge, though scouts had heard of a fording site at Ars-sur-Moselle some five thousand yards south of the Metz suburbs. The following day brought no greater success and the five cavalry task forces probing toward Metz and the river met strong resistance at every point. In one brush with the Germans near Gravelotte, the commanding officer of the 3d Cavalry Group, Colonel Drury, was ambushed and captured. As reports came back from the cavalry indicating that a German line was beginning to form for the defense of the river and the Metz

[120]

Thionville position, the corps commander had to consider whether he should commit his one armored division at the river line in the hope of forcing a quick passage and making immediate

exploitation deep in the enemy rear, or whether a systematic infantry assault would be necessary before the armor could be put across the Moselle and started on a dash toward the Rhine. Alternate plans finally were formulated to allow either the 7th Armored Division or the 90th and 5th Infantry Divisions to initiate the attack and seize a bridgehead over the Moselle. General Walker favored the use of the armor, with the hope of securing a bridge in a quick stroke. General Silvester and his officers believed that the infantry divisions should be committed in advance of the 7th Armored Division.²

Late in the evening of 5 September, General Walker returned from the meeting at the Third Army headquarters with the long-awaited word to resume the offensive. He hurriedly phoned his divisions and relayed the news, adding that the orders from General Patton "will take us all the way to the Rhine." Early the next morning the XX Corps headquarters followed up his alert with instructions that Field Order No. 10, the most ambitious and far-reaching of the various plans considered during the waiting period, would be put into operation at 1400 that afternoon. This field order reflected the optimism so strongly felt in the Third Army. It defined the initial corps mission as the seizure of crossings on the Sarre River, some thirty miles east of the Moselle. Beyond this the field order provided that, on the receipt of additional orders from army headquarters, the XX Corps would continue its advance to Mainz on the Rhine River. The 7th Armored Division now was assigned the mission of making the Moselle crossing in advance of the infantry, apparently in the hope that the armor would find a bridge intact at the Moselle, as had been the case at both the Marne and Meuse. The corps commander specifically enjoined General Silvester to make the approach march to the Moselle on a wide front and in multiple columns, but no decision was made as to whether the division should fight for a crossing both north and south of Metz or confine its efforts to the establishment of a single bridgehead. Once the 7th was beyond the Moselle, the role envisaged for the armor was clearly defined, both by General Patton's customary use of armor in the exploitation of a breakthrough, and by General Walker's instructions that the 7th Armored Division must bypass Metz-"if it doesn't fall like a ripe plum"-striking straight for

[121]

the Sarre River and its bridges. The two cities that formed the anchor positions for the German main line of resistance in front of the XX Corps, Metz and Thionville, were labeled as "Intermediate Objectives" and assigned as targets for the 5th and 90th Infantry Divisions respectively. But here again, as in the case of the armor, details of any long-range scheme of maneuver would have to await the seizure of a bridgehead east of the Moselle and more exhaustive intelligence on the enemy and the terrain.

The XX Corps commander now faced much the same problem as that encountered by von Moltke during the westward German advance in August 1870. Von Moltke, famous for the detail and exactness of his planning, had waited for the situation to clarify before deciding whether to make his flanking movement north or south of Metz. The head of the German *First Army* was on the Moselle before von Moltke finally gave the order for the southern crossing. Later, at the turn of the century, von Schlieffen examined this problem in a series of staff exercises on the defense of Metz, then, as in 1944, in German hands. Three factors led von Schlieffen to conclude that an

advance along the western approaches to Metz offered considerable operational freedom and initiative to the attacker. First, defending field forces moving from east of the Moselle to counterattack would find it extremely difficult to defile in any strength through Metz and across its bridges. Second, the road net west of the Metz-Thionville position would permit the attacker to shift his weight quickly and with reasonable ease. Finally, the terrain to the north and the south would give almost equal facility for an advance from west to east.

The Enemy Situation

The XX Corps headquarters and higher intelligence echelons had relatively little information about the strength and the dispositions of the German forces along the Moselle. Earlier messages from the cavalry had indicated that the Germans were scattered and confused, and as late as 3 September the XX Corps G-2 reported: "There is every indication of enemy withdrawal." But on the following day additional information from the reconnaissance units to the front changed this optimistic appraisal with word of a considerable movement to reinforce Metz. By the night of 5 September the corps cavalry had encountered enough enemy resistance to give a general idea of the main German concentrations. A strong, close-in defense system was already evident west of Metz, and the Germans showed every indication of making a stand.

[122]

at the Thionville bridge site. Some withdrawal was still in progress between Conflans and Briey, opposite the north wing of the XX Corps, but even in this area there were signs that the Germans would fight a delaying action in the rugged terrain west and northwest of Thionville. Few prisoners were being taken and their attitude had changed considerably, as compared with the demoralized and submissive mien shown in preceding days. Most of the captured now displayed the old German arrogance.

On 6 September, D Day for the new offensive, the XX Corps G-2 drew up an estimate of the possible German strength in front of the corps. He cautioned that, since the Metz-Luxembourg area was probably the most important center for German troop concentration and regrouping on the Western Front, enemy units might be found temporarily in the sector en route from this way station to other parts of the line. The *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* was known to have troops opposite the XX Corps, and some clues pointed to the possibility that elements of the *Panzer Lehr Division* and *21st Panzer Division* also might be encountered. Two panzer grenadier divisions, the *3d* and *15th*, had been identified on the Western Front in August, and since scattered detachments of the *3d Panzer Grenadier Division* had been thrown against the XX Corps during the withdrawal toward the Moselle it was expected that one or both of these divisions might be committed when the Americans resumed the advance. In addition, numerous small units, such as training and fortress battalions, had been engaged in delaying actions at the end of August and might substantially increase the strength of the German forces ahead. Altogether the XX Corps expected to meet a maximum of 38,500 enemy troops and 160 tanks and assault guns.

Less was known about the type, strength, and precise locations of the fortifications around Metz and along the Moselle than about the enemy troops. Existing aerial photographs gave very little detail of tactical value.³ Camouflage was excellent throughout this fortified zone, as the Americans later learned to their cost, and on many of the works it had been enhanced by the natural growth of sod, bushes, and cultivation during the four years past. French intelligence officers from the 1940 *Deuxième Bureau* were consulted, but they, of course, knew little about the changes the Germans had made since the seizure of the Metz forts in the spring of 1940. American cavalry had fought for information, but were too weak to penetrate past the outlying

[123]

German positions. Furthermore, the American divisions had long since run out of detailed terrain maps and now were operating on road maps of the Michelin variety which gave little information on the configuration of the ground. As a result, all appraisals of the Metz-Moselle fortifications were little more than guesswork. In general, the XX Corps staff believed that this fortified system was of an outmoded, World War I vintage, in whose works the Germans might not be willing to risk a stand. Both the Third Army and XX Corps headquarters at this time tended to assume that the German forces at most would fight a delaying action at the line of the Moselle and that the main enemy stand would be made east of the Sarre River behind the works of the West Wall.⁴

Contrary to American intelligence estimates, Hitler and his military advisers in the headquarters of OKW had no intention of permitting the forces in the Metz-Thionville area to withdraw to the West Wall-or even so much as retreat behind the Moselle. Any organized resistance in the Metz area, as part of the defense of the Moselle "position" ordered by Hitler, entailed the disposition of German forces on the west bank of the Moselle, since the fortified system at Metz extended west as well as east of the river. And ultimately, when the Germans had been forced to withdraw behind the river line elsewhere along its length, they would continue the battle to hold the Metz "bridgehead" on the western bank.

On 5 September OB WEST estimated that the German troops available in the Metz-Thionville sector were equivalent in strength to four and a half divisions. Some order had been brought out of the chaos current in the last week of August, stragglers had been returned to their proper units, and an organized front could be presented to meet a continuation of the American advance. But the forces arrayed opposite the XX Corps represented a hodgepodge of miscellaneous battalions, detached regiments, and understrength divisions, which varied greatly in training, armament, and combat value from very good to poor.

Between Longuyon and Thionville, disposed at right angles to the Moselle, lay remnants of the *48th Division*, which had taken a severe beating in the retreat from the Chartres area during the last part of August and was due to be relieved as soon as fresh troops could be procured. Southwest of Thionville the *559th VG Division*, one of the new *volksgrenadier* divisions created by Hit-

[124]

ler to replace the units destroyed in the early summer, had just come up from Germany and by the night of 5 September had two of its infantry regiments in the line.⁵ On the left of the 559th, a miscellany of school and fortress troops, brigaded together under the staff of *Division Number 462*, was charged with the defense of Metz. Actually this "division" was an organizational makeshift, commanded by the faculty and administrative personnel of the German military schools located at Metz, and lacking both the service units and heavy weapons organic to a regular division. However, the rank and file of the student troops, picked for the most part for further training as officers and noncommissioned officers after having demonstrated superior abilities in the field, were among the elite of the German Army.⁶ West of Metz small units of the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* formed a covering force deployed along the Abbéville-Mars-la-Tour road, on the left of the 462d. Although the *17th SS* had been heavily engaged in the Normandy battles and had fought a running rear guard action against the Third Army during the August retreat, it was still one of the better German divisions on the Western Front. The gaps in its ranks had been partially filled by the absorption of two SS panzer grenadier brigades, the 49th and 51st, which had been hurried into France from Denmark during the latter part of August. Since *OB WEST* was anxious to reconstitute reserves, almost entirely lacking during the withdrawal across northern France, orders had been given that the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* be pulled back across the Moselle into a reserve position south of Metz and there refitted. This move began on 2 September, with the 462d taking over the major share of the security line west of the city, but a few of the SS troops still were west of the river when the XX Corps began its attack. Actually, the *17th SS* did not complete its reorganization until 12 Sep-

[125]

tember. Farther to the south the *3d Panzer Grenadier Division*, deployed around Pont-à-Mousson on the east bank, covered the flank of the Metz position. This division subsequently engaged the XII Corps and took part in the fighting around Metz only during the first few days of the battle.

The two German armored divisions (*Panzer Lehr* and *21st Panzer*), which American intelligence had predicted might be encountered by the XX Corps, were no longer in the Metz sector, having been moved to other endangered parts of the front during the lull in the first days of September. A few tanks and assault guns had been salvaged by the infantry divisions, particularly the *17th SS*, but the only armored reserve available to the commander of the *First Army* was the untried *106th Panzer Brigade*, assembling in Luxembourg behind the *48th Division*.

The total German strength facing the XX Corps made a fairly impressive showing when paraded on the map in order of battle. In reality, however, the enemy forces constituted one demoralized and burned-out division, one untried and incomplete *volks*grenadier division, one battle-weary SS division-lacking most of its tanks and assault guns but still possessed of good morale-one scratch "division" of heterogeneous units varying from very poor fortress troops to the trained and determined men from the Metz schools, and one panzer brigade whose potential strength was hardly that of an American armored combat command.

The Metz forts, when compared with the works of more modern construction in the Maginot Line and West Wall, were hardly formidable; but the attackers would assume that they were as the Lorraine Campaign progressed and the Germans proved their will to resist. Little had been done to modernize these fortifications during the years following 1919. The French had concentrated on the Maginot Line, farther to the east; and the Germans, after 1940, had given priority to arming the Channel coast. Some guns and steel plate had been taken from the Metz works and sent to the Atlantic Wall. Steel cupolas and bombproofs had been moved bodily to the industrial areas of the Ruhr and Rhineland as part of an air defense program. In July 1944, a few hundred civilian laborers had been drafted to work on the Metz fortifications, but they lacked equipment, concrete, wire and steel, and had accomplished little or nothing by the time the American attack finally came. Most of the forts lacked usable guns, ammunition, and fire control apparatus. Only Fort Driant had its fixed batteries functioning properly by 6 September, and even here some of the pieces were under repair as the Americans approached.

[126]

Communications between the various works were poor. Some of the lesser forts had no occupants at all; others were manned by skeleton garrisons. In short, the Metz garrison could not hope to rely upon a purely static defense behind an organized, modern, and well-armed wall of steel and concrete, for "Fortress Metz" possessed no such defensive capabilities at the moment of the XX Corps attack.

The military value of the Metz position lay not in the size of its garrison nor in the intrinsic strength of its numerous fortified works. Instead the long defense of Metz must be ascribed to a combination of factors favorable to the Germans: the presence of elite troops during the initial stages of the battle; the moral and physical strength derived from steel and concrete, even in outdated fortifications; and the possession of ground that favored the defender.

The eastern face of the Meuse plateau, whose heights average some 380 meters, falls sharply away to the plain of the Woëvre and a mean elevation of not more than 220 meters. In this plain the Imperial German armies had deployed for the bloody frontal attacks against the Verdun salient in 1916. Beyond the Woëvre the Moselle Plateau rises gradually to command the western approaches to Metz. The western edge of the plateau coincides roughly with the Conflans-Mars-la-Tour-Chambley road. The eastern heights, averaging 370 meters, drop abruptly to the Moselle River. East of the river some blocks of the Moselle Plateau reappear, but these are dominated by the higher ground on the west bank. The main plateau, if measured from Conflans to Metz, is about ten miles in depth. The western half is moderately rolling; on some roads the ascent to the east is barely perceptible. The eastern half of the plateau is high, rugged, and wooded, grooved by deeply incised ravines and innumerable shallow draws. It would be hard to imagine a terrain more compartmentalized and conducive to defense by small tactical bodies.

The Metz salient, as it confronted the XX Corps at the beginning of the September operation, extended for some eighteen miles in a perimeter west of Metz and the Moselle. On the left the German position rested on the Moselle near Arnaville, about nine and a half miles from the center of Metz. On the right a western affluent of the Moselle, the Orne, marked the limits of the

German line, which was anchored near the village of Mondelange, approximately ten miles due north of Metz.

At the southern end of this bridgehead position, three ravines cut obliquely through the wooded Moselle scarps and defile down to the river channel. The Rupt de Mad, farthest from Metz, is traversed by a road that angles from

[127]

Mars-la-Tour via Chambley and reaches the Moselle at Arnaville. The middle road riverward can be entered either at Mars-la-Tour or at Rezonville. It then passes through the village of Gorze, lying in the main throat of the gorge to which it gives name, and attains the Moselle bank at Novéant. The third and northernmost of these ravines, the Mance, forms an "L" whose upright runs from north to south through a small depression in the Bois des Génivaux. Near Gravelotte this shallow gully descends into a deep draw, finally turning toward the east as a sharp cut between the plateaus crowned by the Bois de Vaux and the Bois des Ognons. Just east of Gravelotte the main highroad between Verdun and Metz dips to cross the Mance, while a secondary road branches south at Gravelotte and follows along the bottom of the ravine to Ars-sur-Moselle and the river.

These three defiles would canalize any attempt to turn the Metz position on the south by a drive to and across the Moselle. But a close-in envelopment or a frontal attack in this section would be hampered chiefly by the ravine of the Mance. In effect, therefore, the natural anchor position on the German left was formed by the lower Mance ravine, the plateau of the Bois de Vaux north of the ravine, and the plateau of the Bois des Ognons to the south. On the eve of World War I the German governors of Metz had reinforced this natural abutment by the construction of a heavily gunned fort on the river side of the Bois de Vaux plateau about a mile southwest of Ars-sur-Moselle. This strong work, renamed by the French in 1919 as Fort Driant, was sited so that its batteries dominated not only the southwestern approaches to Metz but the Moselle valley as well.

North and west of the Bois de Vaux two villages, Rezonville and Mars-la-Tour, served as outpost positions for the southern sector of the German front. They blocked the main road to Metz and controlled passage from north to south through the Mance and Gorze ravines. Beyond Gravelotte the Bois des Génivaux and the wood-bordered Mance combined in a strong defensive line and masked the German forts farther to the east. These rearward positions lay on the open crest of a long ridge whose western slopes were outposted by a sprinkling of isolated but strongly built farms.

North of the Bois des Génivaux the forward German troops occupied a plateau marked by the villages of Vernéville and Habonville. The strongest position in the German center, however, was farther to the east. Here the Village of Amanvillers, located on a tableland, lay under the guns of forts hidden on wooded ridges to its rear. The Amanvillers plateau continued north

[128]

ward on the German right. In this area the forward defense line included the villages of St. Privat and Roncourt. To the rear rose a welter of rugged heights and heavy forests, running diagonally northeastward to the Orne. This northernmost portion was held only lightly. The main German line was a kind of switch position extending from the Bois de Jaumont along the Bois de Fêves ridge. This switch position was strengthened by a series of forts and walls. In this sector, however, the Moselle scarps do not come clear to the Moselle, as they do south of Metz. Here, in the area of Semécourt and Maizières-lès-Metz, a wide, level flood plain offered a gateway to the Metz position, once an attacker had cleared the western escarpment.

In sum, the ground west of Metz gave very considerable advantage to the defender. Long, open slopes provided a natural glacis in front of the main German positions. Wooded crests and ravines screened the movement of troops and supply from the eye of the attacker. Broken terrain permitted the most effective use of small defending groups. Ravines, draws, and thick wood lots offered ample opportunity for counterattack tactics, both in force and in patrol strength. Finally, the German soldier had used this terrain as a maneuver area and was prepared to exploit every accident of the ground.

The XX Corps Advance to the Moselle

On 5 September enough gasoline reached the XX Corps, by truck and plane, to permit General Walker to begin a concentration east of the Meuse bridgehead. The 5th Infantry Division moved forward from Verdun with no opposition and assembled along the line Jeandelize-St. Maurice, in what would be approximately the center and right when the corps began the attack toward the Moselle. (*Map XII*) In this position the infantry now screened the assembly areas around Verdun and Etain occupied by the 7th Armored. Since only enough gasoline remained to move one regimental combat team of the 90th Infantry Division, the 357th Infantry and the 90th Reconnaissance Troop advanced from Reims to cover the left wing of the corps northeast of Verdun. Bridging equipment, scattered in immobile trucks along the roads to the rear, and the corps artillery, mostly still west of the Meuse, were brought over the Verdun bridges as fast as quartermaster trucks laden with five-gallon gasoline cans arrived. By midmorning of 6 September, the day scheduled for the XX Corps attack, all battalions of the corps artillery were east of the Meuse and most of the bridging convoys were on the move to forward areas.

[129]

The remainder of the 90th Infantry Division assembled near Etain on 6 September, echeloned to the left and rear of the 5th Infantry Division and the 7th Armored. This movement completed the initial disposition of the corps for the eastward advance.

General Silvester, commanding the 7th Armored Division, had recommended that elements of his division be dispatched toward the Moselle, because of the obscure situation ahead, to undertake a reconnaissance in some force before the commitment of the main armored columns.⁷ General Walker also wished to reinforce the corps cavalry and screen the advance scheduled for the afternoon of 6 September. About 0300 on the morning of the 6th, a strong combat

reconnaissance force, commanded by Lt. Col. Vincent L. Boylan, set out toward the Moselle in four parallel columns, with orders to seize any intact bridges in the neighborhood of Metz.

The small cavalry detachments which had pushed out to the wings and already were engaged to the east had rough going as Boylan moved forward to their aid. South of Metz a small task force of the 3d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron succeeded in getting a few vehicles into Arnaville, but was driven out by artillery fire. Another task force that tried to cross on a ford at Ars-sur-Moselle was also beaten back. North of Metz the 43d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron had no better luck. But the cavalry actions had located possible fording sites south of Metz, near Pagny, Arnaville, and Ars-sur-Moselle, and had finally determined that all bridges in this sector were demolished.

Colonel Boylan's columns found the German resistance west of Metz stiffening as the morning wore on. When the four columns struck the *Fahnenjunkerschule* (Officer Candidate School) security line along the Fléville-Abbéville-Mars-la-Tour road, the enemy outposts, carefully dug in and supported by antitank guns, poured in a heavy fire. Colonel Boylan decided that his separate columns were too weak to advance alone, and about 1400 he shifted those on the left to reinforce the two columns on the right in an attempt to push through and join the cavalry south of Metz.

At this same hour the rest of the 7th Armored Division moved forward to mount the main attack. Since it was anticipated that the combat reconnaissance force under Boylan would either secure a crossing site or determine the most feasible location for bridging, no precise point seems to have been

[130]

fixed for the main division attempt to cross the Moselle.⁸ The armor moved on an axis along the main highway linking Verdun and Metz, with CCA (Colonel Rosebaum) in two parallel columns on the left, CCB (Brig. Gen. John B. Thompson) deployed in the same fashion on the right, and CCR (Col. George H. Molony) following CCB. Most of General Silvester's command was refueled in time to take to the road, though even now the gasoline shortage forced CCB to leave the bulk of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion, a company of light tanks, and a company of armored engineers back in bivouac. In the first hours of the advance only scattered German outposts were encountered. It therefore appeared that after Boylan's initial attack the enemy had begun to withdraw from the Fléville-Mars-la-Tour position. But about 1800 CCA found the Germans entrenched and waiting for a fight near Ste. Marie-aux-Chênes. Here the enemy fought stubbornly and the battle continued through the night. CCA did not reach the Moselle until the next morning.

Over to the right, CCB in the late afternoon met part of Colonel Boylan's force engaged in a fire fight west of Gravelotte, near which the Germans had emplaced a battalion of 88's. General Silvester ordered General Thompson to swing his combat command to the south of Boylan and continue toward the river. The north column assembled near Rezonville and in the twilight fought to dislodge a considerable body of German infantry and machine gunners located in the

ravine east of the town on the edge of the Bois des Ognons. Farther to the south General Thompson's right column, commanded by Lt. Col. R. C. Erlenbusch, met raking shellfire as it passed around elements of the combat reconnaissance force at Buxières and approached the village of Gorze, which blocked the entrance to one of the narrow defiles leading to the Moselle. (*Map XIII*) One medium tank company of the 31st Tank Battalion attempted to thread a path past the town but was stopped by mines and antitank fire. Colonel Erlenbusch withdrew the tanks and sent B Company of the 23d Armored Infantry forward in an attempt to reach and cross the river under cover of night. The riflemen reached the canal west of the river; but as daylight came on 7 September the enemy troops in Arnaville and Novéant, discovering the Americans between them, concentrated their fire on the exposed company, causing heavy casualties. The infantry finally were withdrawn under covering fire from the American tanks west of Novéant and mortars firing smoke shells.

[131]

Nevertheless CCB did succeed in reaching the Moselle. Just as General Thompson's north column was driving the German rear guard detachments out of the draw east of Rezonville on 6 September and night was coming on, Lt. Col. Leslie Allison arrived with a part of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion, which had finally obtained gasoline for its half-tracks. General Thompson at once ordered the 23d (-) to push on to the river. The main road from Gravelotte to the Moselle descended through a narrow gorge which was strongly held by the enemy and heavily mined. Allison's scouts discovered a parallel road running through the woods on the right, and under cover of darkness the battalion fought its way along this woods road. About 0400, on 7 September, the 23d reached a little cluster of houses, known as le Chêne, on the river just north of Dornot. Now the battalion found itself in a precarious position, for as daylight came the Germans opened up with mortar fire and bullets from both sides of the river, while Fort Driant rained in shells from the heights southwest of Ars-sur-Moselle.⁹ Colonel Allison turned the battalion to clear out Dornot, from which the fire was particularly deadly, and late in the afternoon the 23d attempted to put a patrol across the Moselle. This patrol was driven back by direct machine gun fire; two of the three assault boats were destroyed and a large number of the men in the patrol were killed.

The 23d Armored Infantry Battalion had been the first unit of the corps to reach and hold a position at the river. Later in the morning the left column of CCA broke through to Mondelange, ten miles north of Metz, and turned south of the riverside highway leading to Maizières-lès-Metz with the intention of finding a suitable site for a crossing attempt.¹⁰ Shortly after noon the right column of CCA, which had been held up by a fight at St. Privat,¹¹ met the left column south of Talange. All the bridges in the sector had been destroyed, but a crossing site was found near Hauconcourt. The command came to a halt and waited for bridging materials and further orders, all the while under artillery fire from across the river. Colonel Rosebaum still expected to fight for a crossing north of Metz, as did General Silvester, who advised the corps commander that CCA had found a possible crossing site.

[132]



MAJ. GEN. WALTON H. WALKER, XX Corps Commander (center), with Maj. Gen. S. Leroy Irwin, 5th Infantry Division, and Col. Paul O. Franson, General Irwin's chief of staff. Using a terrain model, General Irwin points out features of Verdun forts across the Moselle River at Dornot.

[133]

On the morning of 7 September a part of CCB shook itself free from the Gorze defile and joined Colonel Allison's force on the river bank near Dornot. The combat command had no assault boats save the three with Allison and, indeed, was hard pressed to hold on the near bank as the German fire intensified and counterattack followed counterattack. Ars-sur-Moselle, north of Dornot, served the enemy as an assembly point for the most severe of these attacks. General Thompson, anxious to ease the pressure on the left flank of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion and secure the crossing site, asked the division commander, who was at the combat command headquarters, to lend him CCR.¹² General Silvester agreed, and around 1120 CCR moved through Mars-la-Tour en route to launch an attack toward Ars-sur-Moselle. When the combat command was about halfway to the river the corps commander ordered the column to halt, in order to let the 5th Infantry Division through; CCR was then to return to corps reserve.

On the previous evening General Walker had told General Irwin to "pin onto" the tail of the 7th Armored Division and be prepared to fight for a bridgehead in the event that the armored attack failed. General Irwin was extremely concerned as to whether these orders called for the 5th to

establish its own bridgehead on the corps' right, or pass through the 7th Armored elements already engaged. In the confused situation, with the corps headquarters meagerly informed as to the progress of CCB, no answer was forthcoming.¹³ The 5th Infantry Division was somewhat dispersed on the morning of 7 September. General Irwin had expected to put its weight in an attack to the south of the 7th Armored elements and now found his division caught off balance. The 2d Infantry (Col. A. W. Roffe) had been brought forward behind the right wing of CCA with the mission of containing Metz by direct attack from the west. The 11th Infantry (Col. C. W. Yuill) was on the move east of Buxières, strung out along the roads behind and beside CCB. The 10th Infantry (Col. Robert P. Bell) remained in division reserve. Just before dawn twenty-two trucks rolled up with enough gasoline to fuel the vehicles of the 5th Division and mobilize it for the advance. At 0830 the 2d Infantry jumped off in a frontal attack with two battalions and moved past the Franco-Prussian War tombs and monuments. Three hours later, quite unaware of the enemy works ahead, the 2d slammed hard into a well-organized German defense line on the spur between Amanvillers and Vernéville held by the tough troops of

[134]

the *Fahnenjunkerschule* regiment. Losses were heavy, with fire from cleverly concealed machine guns and artillery sweeping across the front and flanks of the regiment. Here the 2d Infantry finally was checked in the first of a series of fruitless assaults on the western outworks of the Metz position.

At noon on 7 September, word reached General Irwin that he was to move through the 7th Armored Division and force a crossing at Dornot. He sent the 11th Infantry forward, CCR vehicles pulled over to the roadside to let the infantry through, and as night fell the regiment toiled slowly toward the high ground between Novéant and Dornot which was its objective. Mine fields and road blocks had to be cleared so as to bring up the trucks carrying assault boats, and the advance detachments were forced to break through the thin crust of German infantry that had re-formed in the wake of the American armor. Late in the evening General Walker told General Irwin to cross the Moselle on the following morning and use the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion to augment his own infantry. By midnight the 1st and 3d Battalions were about a thousand yards from the Moselle, and ready to cross the river to the south of CCB.

*The Dornot Bridgehead*¹⁴

Rain fell on the morning of 8 September and made the narrow and precipitous road through the Gorze defile slippery and treacherous. Troops and vehicles of CCB and the 11th Infantry were compressed on the narrow strip along the river between le Chêne and Dornot with enemy fire raking into the mass from the flanks, where the Germans still held on the west bank, and from across the river. Attempts were made to pull the armored vehicles out of the area, but this two-way movement resulted only in a traffic jam at Gorze. Orders were confused and, although General Walker verbally had given General Irwin command of all troops in the Dornot area, some time elapsed before a real co-ordination between CCB and the 5th Division troops could be introduced.

Around 0600 the 7th Engineer Combat Battalion reached the river's edge with some infantry assault boats, and the 2d Battalion of the 11th Infantry

[135]

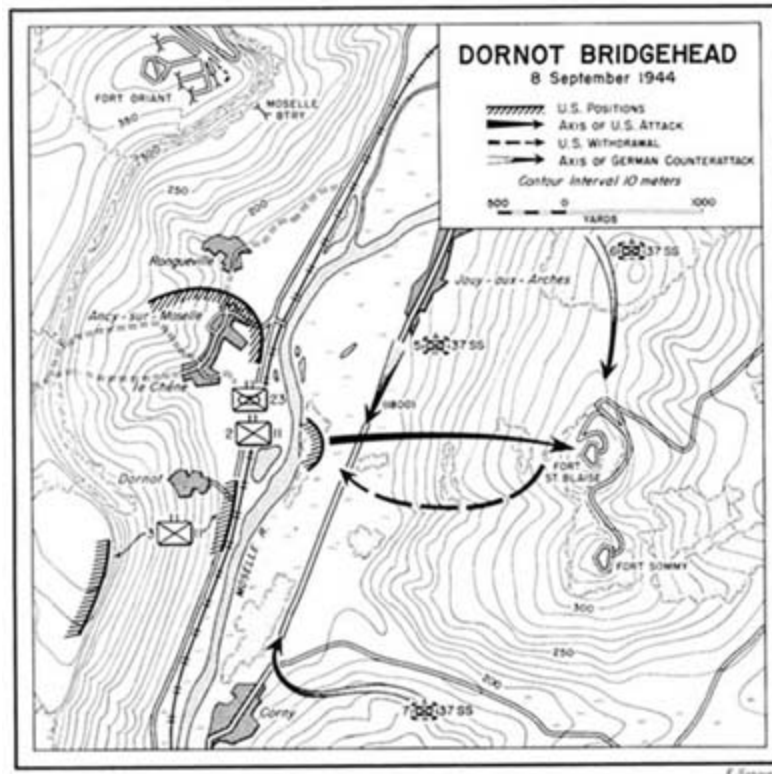


RIVER CROSSING AT DORNOT. Infantrymen (above) carry assault boat down to the Moselle, and (below) members of 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry, cross the river at Dornot.



RIVER CROSSING AT DORNOT. Infantrymen (above) carry assault boat down to the Moselle, and (below) members of 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry, cross the river at Dornot.

[136]



MAP NO. 3

(Lt. Col. Kelly B. Lemmon), chosen to make the first crossing, was in position to embark. During the previous night, General Thompson, the CCB commander, despairing of receiving the needed assault boats, had gone back in person and secured them. These boats, added to those brought down to the river by the infantry, seemed sufficient for the attempt. All chance of success by speed and surprise had long since vanished. This would be a frontal attack against what appeared to be a well-fortified position, with an enemy already engaging in continuous fire from *both* banks of the river. Under these circumstances General Irwin decided to postpone the attack until his artillery



DORNOT BRIDGEHEAD

[138-139]

could displace forward to firing positions on the bluffs and some degree of co-ordination could be achieved between the armored infantry battalion and his own. Eventually the two commanders concerned made their own arrangements and General Thompson organized the crossing attack.¹⁵ The 23d Armored Infantry Battalion by this time had incurred such losses as to reduce it to less than half its normal strength, and was further depleted when one company was committed to hold the left flank on the near side of the river. The 2d Battalion of the 11th Infantry, therefore, had to furnish the major share of the strength in the assault crossing.

Three battalions of 105-mm. howitzers finally were brought into position to support the assault, and about 1045 the crossing began just east of Dornot, where the river was only some hundred yards wide. The rest of the 11th Infantry and elements of CCB squared off to hold the position on the west bank. (*Map 3*) By 1320 Companies F and G, reinforced by a few armored infantrymen, were across the Moselle, together with heavy machine guns and 81-mm. mortars. Here the assault force re-formed in a patch of trees close to the river bank. German fire thus far was sporadic. But the American howitzers were strictly rationed in their use of ammunition, and whenever they ceased fire enemy mortars lobbed shells onto the crossing site, destroying several assault boats.¹⁶ Little was known about the structure of Forts Sommy and Blaise, but they were obviously impervious to light artillery, and urgent requests for air support filtered back through higher headquarters all through the morning. At 1330 General Irwin was told that he could expect no planes because, as was so often the case early in that September, all available aircraft

were being diverted far back to the west in an all-out attempt to smash the great fortifications at Brest.¹⁷

In the late afternoon the two assault companies, commanded by Capt. Ferris Church, S-3 of the 2d Battalion, moved out of the shelter of the trees and began a slow advance up the slope toward the forts, more than two thousand yards east of the river. The forts themselves were strangely quiet,¹⁸ and the

[140]

Americans suffered no loss until a sniper killed the commander of Company F near the top of the hill. Here the infantry came to the wire at the north fort (Fort Blaise), cut it, and then, faced by a moat and a causeway barred by an iron portcullis, drew back to radio for help from the artillery. While so disposed the two companies suddenly were hit by the 2d *Battalion* of the 37th SS *Panzer Grenadier Regiment* which swept in on both flanks and filtered through to their rear. Captain Church called for Companies E and K to come forward from the east bank, to which they had crossed during the afternoon; but they could not advance through the heavy enemy fire now traversing the slope, and the two forward companies began to withdraw, leaving dead and wounded marking the path. For nearly three hours the infantry crawled back through the gauntlet. The company aid men tried bravely to give help to the wounded left behind but were shot down at their tasks.¹⁹ Most of the survivors did not reach the clump of woods near the river until 2300, here joining the rear companies in the defense of the minuscule bridgehead.

The four infantry companies, reinforced by forty-eight men of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion whom Colonel Allison had brought across the river, dug a horseshoe line of foxholes just inside the edge of the woods and prepared to defend this narrow pocket, only 300 yards deep and 200 yards wide. East of the woods a highway paralleled the tree line and in the darkness enemy Flak tanks drove up and down, spraying the bridgehead with bullets and shell fragments. Fortunately, the German tanks, though protected by "bazooka pants," would not close with the Americans in the woods, and the attacks that followed through this night and succeeding days devolved on the enemy infantry.

The Arnaville Bridgehead

The precarious American foothold on the enemy bank east of Dornot was only nominally a bridgehead. There was no space for maneuver and no room through which additional troops could be passed to expand the line. In addition German 88's were sited for direct fire on the river segment west of the woods and made bridging impossible. General Irwin still had at hand the 10th Infantry, in the vicinity of Chambley, nearly two battalions of the 11th

[141]

Infantry, and the heterogeneous elements of CCB. On the night of 8 September he decided to bring up the 10th Infantry and commit it in a crossing about two and a half miles south of the

11th Infantry. Only vague reports filtered across from the 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry, during 9 September, and repeated requests for air support to ease the pressure on the bridgehead brought no help. General Irwin believed that the Dornot bridgehead was too rigidly contained to be of further value and wished to withdraw the troops there. But General Walker insisted that this foothold on the east bank would have to be maintained until another bridgehead was secured. Uncertain as to the exact situation across the river the division commander sent word for the 2d Battalion to push to the south and there link up with the 10th Infantry, whose crossing was set for the early hours of 10 September.

Preparations for the 10th Infantry assault crossing were carefully made. Artillery and tank destroyers were emplaced forward but found that the self-propelled guns across the river made difficult targets. The night before the attack the 84th Smoke Generating Company arrived on the scene. For some time past this company had been assigned to supply duties on the Red Ball Express route. The tactical employment of the 84th, now to be engaged in its first fight, would mark the initial attempt by the Third Army at large area smoke screening. Subsequently the use of smoke was to become standard procedure in Third Army river crossings. At this stage, however, the chemical troops were inexperienced and their use was not widely understood. But so long as the casemate artillery at Fort Driant had observation on the river from the west bank, and so long as the roving guns on the east bank could move freely within range of the river, all hope of throwing a bridge across, or of keeping it intact, rested with the smoke generators.

About 0200 that morning the 10th Infantry sent its first boatloads across the Moselle, choosing a site between Novéant and Arnaville. (*Map XIII*) The crossings were made quickly and easily, catching the enemy, whose attention was riveted on the 11th Infantry, completely by surprise. By 0720 the leading companies of the 1st and 2d Battalions were east of the river and astride the initial regimental objective. This objective had been chosen after a study of the only detailed maps available (the 1:50,000 sheets). These showed a partially wooded ridge line about a thousand yards from the river, running north from Hill 386, which rose in the midst of the Bois des Anneaux. Since no map sheets were at hand for the area east of this ridge line it was designated as an objective without knowledge of the fact that Hill 386, instead of

[142]

being the key feature in the area, was commanded by Hill 396, a thousand yards farther to the east.

The 1st Battalion (Maj. W. H. Haughey) had little difficulty and occupied Hill 386 after dispersing a small enemy detachment in a short, sharp attack with marching fire and the bayonet. On the left the 2d Battalion (Maj. W. E. Simpson) took Hill 370 and the Bois de Gaumont in much the same way. The 1st Battalion was just in the process of deploying along an outpost line when the first German counterattack, made by tanks and infantry of the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division*, came out of Arry and struck the two companies on the right flank. A wild melee ensued, but the Americans finally beat off the tanks with bazookas, dispersed the German infantry, and gained a breathing spell in which to reorganize and entrench. About noon the enemy in Arry gathered a battalion of infantry, plus what the American outposts estimated to be

a score of tanks or assault guns, and returned to the attack. This time the 1st Battalion was forced to give ground.²⁰ Eventually the German assault was smashed by the fire of American artillery and tank destroyers across the Moselle, reinforced by the machine guns and bombs of some P-47's which arrived on the scene late in the afternoon.

This intervention by the Third Army's old ally, the XIX Tactical Air Command, marked the beginning of nearly continuous air-ground co-operation in the fight to cross the Moselle and capture Metz. Early on 9 September the Ninth Air Force had turned down the Third Army request for support at the river, ruling that the XX Corps assault could be adequately supported by artillery. That evening the reports of a steadily worsening situation at the 5th Infantry Division crossing site convinced the G-3 air officer in 12th Army Group headquarters that help must be given or the shaky foothold east of the river lost. Thereupon, he authorized the Ninth Air Force to release as many of the XIX TAC fighter-bombers from the primary target at Brest as General Weyland, commanding the XIX TAC, should deem necessary for air support at the bridgehead.²¹ General Weyland's command still had many responsibilities-bombing at Brest, attacking at Nancy, protecting the exposed southern

[143]

flank of the Third Army, and flying cover for the heavy bombers over Germany.²² But on 10 September the P-47's arrived opportunely to aid the troops in the Arnaville bridgehead.

Through the afternoon the enemy in Arry threatened to roll up the south flank of the 10th Infantry, launching attack after attack but to no avail, for across the river thirteen artillery battalions now were in position to support the bridgehead force. The few German tanks that managed to get through the shellfire were driven off by the infantrymen's bazookas. Late in the evening Colonel Bell sent two fresh companies of the 3d Battalion, which had just arrived in the bridgehead, to make a sortie into Arry. They took the town, but the 10th was spread too thinly to permit such a diminution of its rifle strength and the two companies were pulled out of Arry, shortly before midnight, to form a bridgehead reserve.

Back at the river a series of mishaps had occurred. About 1000 the winds over the Moselle valley had shifted, blowing the American smoke screen away to the west. German fire promptly searched out the generators, some of the green crews left their apparatus, and conflicting orders delayed reorganization. Eventually the 84th was shifted to new positions and by nightfall had a fog oil screen floating for a distance of between six to eight miles over the valley.

During the night of 10-11 September the 1103d Engineer Combat Group (Lt. Col. George E. Walker) began to put in a bridge, a task that had proved impossible in daylight, under constant enemy artillery fire accurately directed by forward observers close to the bridging site. A ferry was started and worked steadily during the night. By this means a smoke generator platoon was crossed to cover the operations at the river in the event of a shift in wind. All of the battalion 57-mm. antitank guns were ferried over, as well as extra bazookas and ammunition.²³ Evacuation of casualties had continued all through the day despite the German fire, and by dark 142 dead and wounded had been removed from the bridgehead-representing only a part of the day's losses.

The plan to sideslip the meager forces in the 11th Infantry bridgehead, opposite Dornot, and join them with the 10th Infantry was abandoned when

[144]

the regimental commander reported that "the men are all shot." Since the 10th Infantry now had a foothold on the east bank of the Moselle, General Irwin ordered the evacuation of the Dornot bridgehead. The withdrawal by the 2d Battalion and the little contingent of armored infantry on the night of 10-11 September ended an episode colored by countless deeds of personal heroism and distinguished by devotion to duty. Thirty-six separate assault attempts had been hurled against the men in the horseshoe without breaking the thin American line. Indeed, on the morning of 10 September, the Americans had the superb effrontery to send a demand that the Germans surrender, The War Diary of the *37th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment* noting that the Americans promised such a concentration of fire as their enemies had never seen before if they did not capitulate forthwith. The determined infantry and their supporting artillery killed an estimated six hundred Germans in this bitter fight, and the toll of enemy wounded was probably very high. Detachments of at least four enemy battalions, reinforced by tanks and assault guns, were thrown against the bridgehead in the three-day battle, making their attacks with a ferocity and determination that astounded the Americans.²⁴ The American commander in the bridgehead, Capt. Jack Gerrie, passed word back to the 10th Infantry on the morning of 10 September: "Watch out for these birds, they are plenty tough. I've never run across guys like these before, they are new, something you read about Time after time the German grenadiers came forward in close order, shouting "Heil Hitler" and screaming wildly, only to be cut down by small arms fire from the woods and exploding shells from the field guns on the opposite side of the Moselle. But each attack took its toll of the defenders in the horseshoe. The wounded were forbidden to moan or call out for aid, so that the Germans would not know the extent of the losses they had inflicted. The mortar crews abandoned their weapons, whose muzzle blast betrayed the location of the foxhole line, and took up rifles from the dead. A lieutenant operated his radio with one hand and fired his carbine with the other. Nearly all the officers were killed or wounded when they left their foxholes to encourage the riflemen or inspect the position. Each night volunteers carried the wounded to the river, crossed them in bullet-

[145]

ridden and leaking assault boats, then returned immediately to the firing line.²⁵

The final evacuation of the bridgehead began at dark on 10 September, after two men swam the river to carry the order to Captain Gerrie, and was completed about midnight under cover of an intense protective barrage. Weapons and clothing were left behind as the able-bodied stripped to swim the river, leaving space in the assault craft for the wounded. Many drowned in the swift current. Others were killed by enemy fire sweeping the river. Company K of the 3d Battalion, which had reinforced the 2d Battalion in the horseshoe, came out of the three-day battle with fifty men and no officers. The three rifle companies of the 2d Battalion had only two officers among them and their total casualties numbered over three hundred.²⁶ The 23d Armored Infantry

Battalion, which had fought on both sides of the river, likewise suffered severely and sustained two hundred casualties in its four days of action.²⁷

The Fight to Expand the 5th Division Bridgehead

In the early hours of 11 September the 10th Infantry, in the Arnaville bridgehead, held the only footing the XX Corps possessed on the east bank of the Moselle River. East of Toul, in the XII Corps zone, the 3d Battalion of the 319th Infantry had a small bridgehead at the tip of the Moselle tongue. South of Nancy assault units of the 35th Infantry Division and the 4th Armored Division were forming up for a predawn crossing attempt between

[146]



ARNAVILLE CROSSING, *after bridgehead had become firmly established. On the left is fording site used during initial stage of the operation.*

[147]

Crévéchamps and Bayon, but success or failure on the army's right flank could not be expected to have any immediate repercussions on the enemy containing the 5th Division. Although the Germans had failed to engulf the Arnaville bridgehead, there was still no bridge to the east bank, nor adequate force across to expand the lodgment area.

On the night of 10 September General Irwin had given orders that "at all costs" a bridge must be put across the Moselle before morning. Much preparatory work was required, however, and no bridge was in position when daylight came. East of Arnaville the Moselle had a width of about eighty yards and a swift current. The bridging problem, moreover, was complicated by mud and swamps on both banks of the river, by a canal flowing parallel to the river on the west, and by an east-west tributary of the Moselle which bisected the 5th Division zone just opposite the 10th Infantry bridgehead. The engineers thus had to bridge the tributary, the canal, and a wide area of swampland before bridging equipment could be brought up to the main channel of the Moselle—all this under constant fire from the east bank. Furthermore, the river was too low in September to float a heavy ponton bridge. A partial solution was achieved by laying sections of a treadway bridge on the soft river bottom at a ford just north of the point where the canal briefly leaves the main river channel. This fording site was ready about 1100, but the depth of the stream, while permitting passage of dismounted troops, made it unusable for vehicular traffic.

On 11 September at dawn, a time favored by the enemy for local counterattacks, both flanks of the 10th Infantry were hit by infantry and tanks. The 1st Battalion suffered less than on the previous day and the Germans were driven back to Arry in short order, although the battalion antitank guns, posted to cover the approaches from Arry, were overrun by the enemy tanks. However, the 2d Battalion, deployed along the Côte de Faye, encountered a much stronger force and lost 102 men in a bitter fight during which the enemy managed to infiltrate into the American lines. But the attack faltered as rifle and machine gun fire continued to cut the Germans down, and they finally drew off, only to come under a shelling by the American batteries across the river.

Meanwhile reinforcements had crossed into the bridgehead and begun to expand the perimeter held by the 10th Infantry. Early in the morning General Irwin sent the 11th Infantry to make a crossing east of Novéant. His intention was to bring the 11th in on the left flank of the 10th Infantry and further

[148]

stabilize the bridgehead by the seizure of the village of Corny, which the Germans were using as a sally port into the bridgehead area. Two companies reached an island, formed by the river and canal, and then found the opposite bank too steep to bring in heavy weapons. The companies retraced their steps and crossed directly into the 10th Infantry sector. But an antitank platoon, which had been ferried across at a more favorable point near the original site, was not alerted to this change of plans and went straight into Corny where it was cut to pieces and lost its 57-mm. antitank guns. By 1000 the 11th Infantry had the 3d Battalion and two companies of the 1st Battalion east of the river and ready to execute the plan for the advance to the north. All through the afternoon the 3d Battalion inched its way toward Corny under the fire of the German

batteries at Fort Driant, some 4,500 yards distant. Casualties were heavy, but the battalion managed to reach the edge of the village and there reorganized as night came on.

The 10th Infantry sector remained rather quiet after the counterattacks in the early morning, probably because the 512th Squadron of the XIX TAC had descended on Arry and knocked out some ten German tanks and assault guns. Later in the day German artillery fire increased in tempo; artillery observers identified a total of forty German batteries firing on the Arnaville sector. Since the larger portion of the surrounding heights was still in enemy hands, American counterbattery fire was not very effective. Then, too, the shortage of artillery ammunition, chronic through all the Third Army in early September, was beginning to quiet the XX Corps artillery. On the two previous days the corps had fired about 20,000 artillery rounds per day, which had eaten heavily into its allotment and now forced a drastic curtailment in counterbattery and harassing fire. Again, as at the time of the gasoline shortage, the soldier fighting for his life found it hard to understand these logistical difficulties. One irate officer in the bridgehead, whose request for a fire support mission had been denied, asked sardonically, "Do they want us to come back, and duck, and throw stones?" Fortunately, air support was able to take over some of the artillery missions. Through the afternoon of 11 September more planes were diverted to support the 5th Division than in previous days,²⁸ bombing and strafing Arry and Corney, breaking up German formations as they moved up to attack positions, and by their very presence in the air periodically silencing the German batteries.

[149]

A few tanks and tank destroyers were moved across to stiffen the American bridgehead line. Bombers had made a direct hit on a dam impounding the water near the fording site and so reduced the river level as to make vehicular fording possible. However, the continuous German fire made this ford hazardous. The treadway on the river bottom was literally blown out from under the first tank destroyers to cross, constant repairs were imperative, and at the end of the day only six tank destroyers and ten tanks were on the east bank of the river.

The Germans resumed their assault on the bridgehead at 0330 on 12 September, using troops from the *17th SS*, *3d* and *15th Panzer Grenadier Divisions*. This time they came on in a coordinated attack striking at all sections of the American line, close behind a heavy barrage which rolled up the hills and ridge line and over onto the rearward slopes where lay the infantry reserves. On the right of the 10th Infantry, a battalion of German infantry and a company of tanks made the attack. American artillery mowed down the first waves, but two companies managed to break into the lines of the 1st Battalion; there most of the German grenadiers were killed in a hand-to-hand fight. Tanks led the enemy infantry against the extreme left flank of the bridgehead, where a composite battalion of the 11th Infantry had a slim hold on Corny. Four German tanks rolled through the darkness into the streets of the village: an American tank destroyer destroyed one, a 57-mm. antitank gun crew accounted for a second, and the others fled. Capt. Harry Anderson and eleven men of B Company killed twenty-two Germans and captured twenty-eight in a furious encounter at the company command post. But elsewhere in Corny the defenders suffered severely before artillery and tank destroyer fire repelled the German attack. When daylight came, the remaining enemy withdrew all along the line, leaving the Americans

still in possession of the bridgehead perimeter. That night the *15th Panzer Grenadier Division* began a move from Arnaville south to the Nancy sector, leaving the *17th SS* to continue the battle.

During the night of 11-12 September the engineers had labored to complete a bridge, all the while under fire from Fort Driant and from German assault guns that had been run down close to the east bank of the river. Sections of the bridge were blown to bits as soon as they were completed and nearly a fourth of the two bridging companies were casualties in this single night. At noon on 12 September, the bridge was completed under fog-smoke and the 31st Tank Battalion, reinforced by a company of tank destroyers, both

[150]

from CCB, 7th Armored Division, joined the troops in the bridgehead. The appearance of this reinforcement came opportunely, for the infantry were tired from constant alerts and shaky from the continuous pounding administered by the German guns. General Irwin, however, felt the need of more infantry before beginning a drive out of the bridgehead, and asked for additional reinforcements. The combat strength of the 5th Infantry Division was gravely reduced, short 35 officers and 1,300 riflemen. The 2d Infantry, attached to the 7th Armored Division, was closely engaged west of Metz; and CCB, which had been traded to General Irwin for the 2d Infantry, had lost much of its armored infantry in fighting at the river. The corps commander briefly considered a plan to aid General Irwin by stripping the central sector west of Metz, moving CCA south to the bridgehead, and gambling on the ability of the 2d Infantry to continue the holding attack in the central sector alone. But the 7th Armored Division commander advised that it would take more than one infantry regiment to contain the Germans west of Metz; therefore, General Walker turned to a plan for a wider reshuffling all along the XX Corps front which would free the forces needed to expand the bridgehead.²⁹

The Battle West of Metz

When the battle began for a crossing site at the Moselle on 7 September, the center and north wing of the XX Corps were moving forward as part of the general advance ordered for the Third Army. General Patton's forces were still somewhat ahead of the other Allied armies driving across northern France and his northern flank hung in the air. The V Corps, the closest First Army unit on the left, had just begun to cross the Semoy River east of Sedan.³⁰ Therefore, the 90th Infantry Division, forming the north wing of the XX Corps, was forced to start the drive toward Thionville and the Moselle with its regiments echeloned to the left rear along a front of some twenty miles.

In the corps center, CCA of the 7th Armored Division led off on the south flank of the 90th and early on 7 September had thrust its way on a narrow front to the Moselle north of Metz. (*Map XIV*) Next in the line of battle to the south the 2d Infantry under Colonel Roffe pushed straight east toward

[151]

Metz, cavalry task forces and miscellaneous patrols linking it tenuously with CCA on the north and the main body of the 5th Infantry Division on the south. On 8 September General Walker took cognizance of the diverse missions in the corps and in effect created one command in the corps center and another in the bridgehead area on the right wing, by attaching the 2d Infantry to General Silvester's 7th Armored Division and giving CCB to General Irwin. This change in command did not alter the mission of the 2d Infantry. The regiment had to continue the frontal attack toward Metz and by constant pressure contain the German forces west of the city, forces that might otherwise be shifted to meet the American threat at Dornot and Arnaville. Nor could the 2d Infantry expect much help from the armor to which it was now attached, for the western approaches to Metz were far too heavily fortified to permit tank maneuver and could be tackled, if a frontal attack was employed, only by the foot-slogging infantry.

The 2d Infantry attack, initiated by two rifle battalions along the Amanvillers-Vernéville-Gravelotte line on 7 September, met mines, concrete bunkers and pillboxes, extremely accurate and sustained artillery fire, and repeated counterattacks by the *Fahnenjunkerschule Regiment of Division Number 462* and detachments of the *17th SS*. But at this juncture the regiment was not yet up against the main Metz outworks and had been given only a foretaste of what was to come. Ahead lay what once had been one of the most heavily fortified areas on the European continent. Limited intelligence information and inadequate ground and air reconnaissance, during the hurried drive to the Moselle, forced the 2d Infantry to attack blindly, groping in the midst of battle to feel out the contours of the German defense line. All the advantage was on the side of the enemy, who was fighting from steel and concrete, knew -every yard of the ground, and held the main heights which gave observation over the area and facilitated counterattacks. Furthermore there was a hard core in the heterogeneous troops facing the 2d Infantry, tough products of the Metz military schools, now formed into special assault detachments and burning to distinguish themselves. These units were not content to fight a simple delaying action, but adhered rigidly to the German tactical doctrine of continuous local counterattacks designed to recover all lost ground and bar the approaches to the separate fortifications.

Early on the morning of 8 September a large German raiding party filtered into the lines of the 1st Battalion (Maj. W. H. Blakefield) and killed or captured two officers and sixty-six men before it could be driven off. Some time

[152]

elapsed before the regiment could reorganize to continue the attack, and when its advance began, now with all three battalions in the line, the going became progressively tougher. At the end of the day the 2d Battalion (Lt. Col. Leslie K. Ball), in the center of the line, held Vernéville. The 1st Battalion reached the edge of Amanvillers but suffered such heavy losses from hostile artillery fire that it could not drive into the village.

General Silvester detached Task Force McConnell from CCA to support the infantry in the attack set for the following day. A new plan called for Task Force McConnell to turn the north flank of the German forces facing the 2d Infantry along the Amanvillers-Gravelotte line with a

semicircular sweep out of St. Privat around to the east of Amanvillers and back toward Montigny. During the morning of 9 September American artillery, tanks, and tank destroyers blasted away at the known locations of German fortifications and batteries, and at 1330 the infantry and armor moved into the attack. Task Force McConnell proceeded only a short distance down the road east of St. Privat before coming under fire from the heights in the Bois de Jaumont and the guns in Fort Kellermann. The German batteries knocked out seven tanks and two self-propelled guns and forced the column to fall back through St. Privat. Here Colonel McConnell turned to execute a close-in thrust at Amanvillers from the north, with the intention of joining the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry. The 1st Battalion, still fighting to enter the town from the west, had lost some ground to counterattacks coming in on its right flank and was pinned down by artillery fire from the Lorraine Forts.³¹ When seven battalions of American field artillery opened up on these works, their fire subsided briefly; but field pieces had little effect on fortress batteries in steel emplacements, located on rear slopes and requiring high angle fire to reach them. The 3d Battalion (Maj. R. E. Conner), on the right flank of the regiment, attacked east of Malmaison toward Moscou Farm,³² ran into a nest of pillboxes and bunkers, and came under cross fire from the draw southeast of Gravelotte. The 2d Battalion, driving east of Vernéville, made several hundred yards' gain through a weakly held section of the German line, but at the close of day was checked by fire coming from a sunken road to the west of Fort de Guise.

[153]

On the night of 9 September Colonel Roffe reported to General Silvester, told him that the 2d Infantry had lost 14 officers and 332 men, and protested against sending the infantry "uselessly" against "20 odd forts." The 1st Battalion was in very bad shape, had suffered 228 casualties in the bloody fighting around Amanvillers, and in spite of its efforts had made hardly a dent in the German positions. Artillery, argued Roffe, was futile in dealing with these enemy fortifications. Planes and heavy bombs were needed and without them the infantry could make no further progress.

The planes that General Weyland's XIX TAC could divert to the Third Army were spread thinly along a very wide front. The XX Corps G-3, faced with the dilemma of allocating the meager air missions allotted the corps, protested that the other divisions were "cutting my throat" for diverting missions to the 5th Division bridgehead. Nevertheless, on 10 September he secured three squadrons of fighter-bombers for use against the enemy holding up the advance near Amanvillers. The planes hit their targets, but the 500-Pound bombs carried by the P-47's had little effect on reinforced concrete, and the ground attack begun at 1800 met as stubborn resistance as before. Despite mounting losses, the infantry pushed slowly forward, fighting to reduce each knot of pillboxes and every individual strong point in the way. Task Force McConnell meanwhile switched around to the south flank of the 1st Battalion, and at 2100 the tanks and infantry finally paused about a hundred yards from Amanvillers. In the center the 2d Battalion gained some ground and consolidated for the night on the high ground east of Vernéville.

The 3d Battalion continued a seesaw fight east of Gravelotte and Malmaison. Here the Germans could make ready use of their superior knowledge of the ground, gained by numerous exercises over this terrain when the Metz area had been a training center. East of Gravelotte³³ the Mance ravine runs north and south, fringed with thick woods that extend northward, as the draw tapers off, into the Bois des Génivaux opposite Malmaison. Since earlier combat patrols had been unable to push across the draw in the face of machine

[154]



GRAVELOTTE DRAW. *The area shown in the photograph is indicated on Map XIV.*

[Insert between 154 and 155]

gun positions on both banks and enfilading fire sweeping the bottom of the draw, the 3d Battalion tried to work its way around this trap by attacking through the Bois des Génivaux. But each attempt failed: whatever ground was taken was soon lost to small German detachments seeping back into the woods.

The 7th Armored Division commander could spare few additional troops to aid Colonel Roffe and the 2d Infantry. CCA was disposed so as to cover the flanks of both the 90th Division and the 2d Infantry, and was responsible besides for keeping a corridor open to the Moselle between Metz and Thionville. However, CCR, assembling at Ste. Marie behind the left flank of the 2d Infantry after extrication from the jammed road leading to Arnaville, could be used. A plan of maneuver was arranged with the 2d Infantry whereby CCR would make a hook from near

Roncourt and attempt to close in behind the enemy positions holding up the 1st and 2d Battalions, while at the same time the infantry executed a frontal attack.

At 0630 on 11 September the armor moved east, through sporadic artillery and antitank fire, along the road to Pierrevillers. Near Pierrevillers the head of the column ran into concrete road blocks, covered by antitank guns, and swerved south toward Semécourt; there intense fire from the right flank of the Canrobert Forts checked its advance. Further progress into this fortified zone was impossible. Artillery fire was causing heavy casualties, and the enemy guns, skillfully camouflaged, could not be located. Colonel Molony, commander of CCR, Lt. Col. Robert. B. Jones, commander of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and Lt. Col. Edmund L. Keeler, commanding the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, all were wounded. Lt. Col. Norman E. Hart, on whom the command now devolved, faced CCR to the west and shortly after 1100 sent his dismounted troops up the rugged, wooded slopes northwest of the village of Bronvaux. The armored infantry won a toehold on the higher ground. But the hook designed to pierce the German flank had been blunted and deflected by the enemy fortifications, and could only glance back to the west, short of its objective.

The 2d Infantry assault, timed to follow the armor at 0800, was delayed by a series of successful counterattacks that disrupted the American lines and forced the battalions on the left and center to give ground. About 0400 two green flares were fired in front of the 2d Battalion and German infantry poured in on its right flank. In the bitter struggle that followed, the Americans were driven out of their positions and forced back southwest of Mon-

[155]

tigny, where they dug in and held. Pvt. Carlton C. Bates, H Company, 2d Infantry, remained alone in a position from which he could cover the broken flank and continued firing until his machine gun jammed. Then he resumed fire with another machine gun whose crew was dead or wounded. He was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his part in breaking up the counterattack. Late in the day the 2d Battalion recovered much of the lost ground, under cover of artillery fire and exploding smoke shells laid on the German fortifications to the east; again the determined enemy counterattacked and drove back the battalion. About midnight one more German assault came in, but the 2a Battalion, which had lost half its men during this day of battle, stood fast.

The 1st Battalion, at the edge of Amanvillers, also was hard hit. Intense shelling and small arms fire made the American position untenable and the battalion pulled back about five hundred yards, making the withdrawal under a thick smoke screen laid down by its artillery support, but only with much difficulty and many casualties. Attempts to follow up an air strike on Amanvillers, made about 1400, were checked by a furious barrage.

Amanvillers had become the key to any further advance, just as it had been in 1870. It lay too snugly against the main German fortifications to permit a wide envelopment, and in any case the American forces were too weak to bypass and contain the town. General Silvester therefore altered the plan of attack on 12 September, bringing the 3d Battalion north from the Malmaison

area, where it still was hung up on the draw east of Gravelotte, and using it to relieve the tired and battered 1st Battalion outside of Amanvillers. The gap thus opened on the right flank of the 2d Infantry was covered by a screen thrown out by the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which General Walker had assigned to cover the left flank of the 5th Division while its main elements concentrated in the Arnaville bridgehead.

The first task was to straighten the 2d Infantry lines south of Amanvillers and retrieve the ground lost on 11 September; then the 1st Battalion could be recommitted at Amanvillers. Two days of bitter fighting redressed the 2d Infantry lines and brought the 2d and 3d Battalions up to the hedgerows around Montigny Farm, abreast of Amanvillers. Again the Americans had a long list of casualties, particularly in the 3d Battalion. The infantry were blind with fatigue after fighting for two days and nights without rest, their bodies so numbed that officers and men could no longer trust their sense of direction. Meanwhile, General Irwin sought to get the attack called off. Finally, on 14

[156]

September, orders to halt the attack reached Colonel Roffe from corps headquarters. The journal of the 3d Battalion noted thankfully: "Received warning order that we are to be relieved (which is good news, this is sure a hell hole)"-a feeling with which the entire regiment was in accord.

The Advance on the Left Wing of the XX Corps

After CCA, 7th Armored Division, had wedged its way to the Moselle River on 7 September, it had then fanned out along the west bank. (Map XV) General Silvester had been ordered to hold at this point, keep the Germans from recrossing the river, and protect the flanks of the 90th Infantry Division and the ad Infantry, which were coming up on the north and south respectively. The 7th Armored Division commander, still expecting that he would be called on to make an assault crossing somewhere north of Metz, selected a site near Argancy, just outside the exterior ring of the Metz forts.

In order to contain the enemy in the north sector of the Metz "bridgehead," for such it had become, most of CCA concentrated south of Talange as a task force (Lt. Col. Richard D. Chappuis) composed of the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, 40th Tank Battalion (-), 695th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, engineers, and tank destroyers. While the 2d Infantry battered away at the western line of the Metz forts, Task Force Chappuis engaged in an eight-day artillery duel with the guns of the German works on both sides of the river, the 695th Armored Field Artillery Battalion firing continuously around an arc of 270°. Here, as elsewhere, the German fortress batteries and roving guns returned the American fire with deadly precision, inflicting sixty-three casualties on the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion on 8 September and running up the tally daily until 15 September, when CCA was relieved.³⁴

Unlike the narrow, rapid thrust made to the Moselle by CCA, the 90th Division began a deliberate advance on 7 September, moving northeast on a wide front and methodically clearing out the enemy in its zone, while the 43d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron scouted to the north

and west. General McLain set the capture of the high ground west of Thionville as the division objective, preparatory to the capture of Thionville and the seizure of a crossing in its vicinity. Early intelligence reports indicated that the Germans were

[157]

prepared to fight only a delaying action, though it was expected that at least one division stood between the 90th and the Moselle.³⁵ Meanwhile, the 90th Infantry Division bore the responsibility of protecting the open north flank of the Third Army until such time as the V Corps of the First Army could draw abreast of the XX Corps. This would mean that General McLain could not concentrate his regiments initially in a power drive directly to the east.

On the morning of 7 September the 357th Infantry (Col. G. H. Barth) led off from Etain and moved toward Briey, a small mining town, but important as a main road center on the periphery of the rugged, wooded tableland rising west of the Moselle. Troops of the *559th VG Division* held Briey in some force and checked the 2d Battalion in a sharp fight. But the 1st and 3d Battalions, on the wings, executed a concentric attack which brought them together north of Briey. The following day the German commander, now completely surrounded, surrendered 442 men and the town.

The 358th Infantry (Col. C. H. Clarke), on the left of the 357th Infantry, met little resistance until the close of 7 September, when the two leading battalions became involved in a fight with a German rear guard detachment holding on some high ground west of Trieux. The advance by the 359th (Col. R. L. Bacon), echeloned to the left and rear of the 358th Infantry, was little more than a route march on this first day of the general attack and reached a point northeast of Landres. Just at twilight the division command post was set up west of the little town of Mairy, some four miles southwest of the 358th Infantry positions in front of Trieux. Here the division would meet its first large-scale counterattack.

On 7 September the new commander of the *First Army*,³⁶ General Knobelsdorff, decided to risk the *106th Panzer Brigade* against the left flank of the Third Army in a spoiling attack calculated to deflect the American advance toward the Briey mines. Hitler concurred in this decision, but tied a string to the *106th* with orders that it could be used for only forty-eight hours. In the late evening the panzer brigade moved south through Aumetz, slipped along side roads between the positions of the 358th and 359th, and about 0200 the following morning hit the 90th Division command post. Apparently the Germans did not realize what they had done, for some of the tanks continued on to the south, with the result that the *106th* soon was strung out in a disjointed

[158]

series of actions. The surprised Americans fought with whatever weapon was at hand: pistols, rifles, bazookas, and individual tank destroyers and antitank guns.³⁷ The artillery section of the division staff was encircled but fought its way out on foot. Tanks, tank destroyers, and three battalions of infantry rushed back to the scene at daylight and engaged the disorganized

Germans, now almost completely surrounded by the 90th, wherever they could be located. The enemy had found it easy to break into the American lines but lacked the weight to exploit his gains or extricate himself. Very little of the armor that had formed the spearhead of the penetration succeeded in fighting its way back to the north. By the end of the day the 90th Division had captured or destroyed thirty tanks, sixty half-tracks, and nearly a hundred miscellaneous German vehicles. Many of the armored infantry escaped, but the *106th Panzer Brigade* returned to its lines hardly more than a name and number.³⁸

This had been a day of good hunting in the 90th Division area. The German battalion pocketed in Briey capitulated in the late afternoon. The 1st Battalion of the 357th Infantry, occupying a wooded hill west of Neufchef, watched from cover as a German infantry battalion deployed and attacked straight toward an adjacent and unoccupied hill; then, in a matter of minutes, the 1st Battalion and supporting field guns cut down the enemy infantry. Earlier in the day, however, the 1st Battalion had run into its share of trouble during an enemy counterattack. The situation was precarious when a forward artillery observer, 1st Lt. Joseph R. McDonald, went alone to a hill from which he could direct the fire of the American artillery. The German counterattack was broken, but Lieutenant McDonald was killed. He received the DSC posthumously.

Because prisoners and enemy orders captured at Briey gave warning of another counterattack against the north flank of the 90th Division, General McLain held his troops in place until late morning of 9 September. Then, when this counterattack failed to materialize, the 90th resumed its advance to the northeast. The *559th VG Division* was in process of a general withdrawal. A few rear guard detachments holed up in towns and woods and

[159]

were wiped out. Others were trapped on the roads. The 3d Battalion of the 359th cut cross-country to get east of a German column of horse-drawn wagons and infantry, ambushed the column, and killed and captured some two hundred in the trap. That night the leading battalions of the division bivouacked in the neighborhood of Fontoy and Neufchef, only eight miles from Thionville, and from the heights of Neufchef American outposts looked down on the Moselle.

On 10 September the *559th VG Division*, still lacking one of its regiments, continued the fight to delay the 90th Division advance through the gorges and defiles interlacing the tableland west of Thionville. The 357th Infantry attack carried from Neufchef through Hayange and then was checked by a German riposte. The 358th Infantry pushed its 3d Battalion into Algrange, commanding the large gorge running north from Hayange. Here the battalion deployed and attacked up the steep scarp behind the town. The fight raged at close quarters along the forward slope, but when darkness closed in the Germans still held along the crest. On the north flank the 359th took Aumetz and passed unhindered through a section of the old Maginot fortifications. In this sector the enemy was disengaging as fast as he could and the cavalry attached to the 90th Division swung out north on a reconnaissance that carried them several miles beyond the infantry outpost line.

General McLain made plans to close along the river on 11 September and strike for Thionville. The 5th Armored Division of the First Army now was abreast of the 90th Infantry Division and the latter could be fully committed in an attack eastward. Therefore, General McLain held the 359th in place, so that it would be intact for use in forcing a crossing near Thionville, and the other regiments continued the attack. The Germans had withdrawn from the scarp east of Algrange during the night and the 3d Battalion, 358th Infantry, moved over the crest, across a valley, and on toward the next scarp, southwest of Volkrange. Here the enemy chose to defend, but he was shortly ejected and the battalion stopped east of Volkrange, ready to descend into the plain in front of Thionville. The 1st Battalion found the Germans making a stubborn stand in the hills, even after an air bombing mission had been laid on them, but toward the close of day was on the down grade leading to Entringe and the plain. The German hold on the heights was broken and the 358th Infantry cheerfully reported: "Have lots of observation and can see halfway to Berlin from here." In the early evening Colonel Clarke dispatched his 2d Battalion through the corridor held open by the 1st and 3d, with orders

[160]

to take Thionville; the going was slow and the enemy rear guard stubborn. On the division right flank the 357th Infantry succeeded in reaching the river at a few points south of Thionville and captured Florange, a railroad junction about five thousand yards outside of the larger city.

The next day German resistance west of the river ended, for General Knobelsdorff had ordered a general withdrawal behind the river line in the sector north of Metz. The 357th occupied Uckange and mopped up along the river bank. The 2d Battalion of the 358th climbed aboard tanks and rode into the western outskirts of Thionville, where it was reinforced by the 1st Battalion. The city streets were strewn with mines, and during the afternoon German sorties came in from across the river. But at dark the troops of the 358th held all of Thionville west of the river except a small sector barricaded by iron rails, concrete machine gun emplacements, and other obstacles at the western approach to the main bridge across the Moselle. The German demolition squads did not make the mistake, repeated in some instances later in the campaign, of waiting too long before blowing the bridge; it was destroyed during the night of 12 September.

General McLain was anxious to avoid a head-on attack across the Moselle straight into the enemy fortifications, clearly visible from west of the river. As an alternative he laid plans to swing wide, make a crossing north of Thionville, and close on the German river defenses from the rear. One battalion of the 359th Infantry already was en route to seize the heights at Basse Kontz, a key position on the north flank, when General Walker sent word that the 90th should prepare to seize a bridgehead at Thionville. General McLain alerted the 358th Infantry to lead the assault, gave orders to the 359th Infantry to put on a demonstration north of Malling, and set 15 September as a target date for the attack. These plans hardly were drafted when, about midnight on 13 September, the corps commander directed General McLain to hold up the scheduled assault and extend his south flank in order to relieve the elements of the 7th Armored Division and the 2d Infantry west and north of Metz.

Expanding the 5th Division Bridgehead

General Walker had not been insensible to the cost of the frontal attack west of Metz and to the fact that armor could not be usefully employed against the Metz fortifications. He was apprehensive, however, of exposing

[161]

the corps' left flank and weakening its center in the face of revived German aggressiveness. He believed that his forces were disposed on too extended a front for further dispersion in a double envelopment of Metz, a maneuver which would put both the 90th and 5th Divisions across the river, but miles apart and separated by a heavily fortified area and a stubborn enemy.³⁹

The 5th Infantry Division had a bridgehead. (*Map XVI*) But its troops were tired, holding on a wide front, and so closely engaged that it was exceedingly difficult to absorb the replacements coming into the bridgehead from the depots east of Paris. On 13 September the German batteries in Fort Driant destroyed a ferrying raft, partially demolished the treadway at the ford, and broke up the heavy ponton bridge then nearing completion. In addition, a critical shortage of artillery ammunition had developed in the XX Corps, burdening still further the infantry holding the bridgehead.

Early on 14 September the XX Corps headquarters issued a field order that called for the corps to regroup during the day in preparation for the execution of a new maneuver on the morning of 15 September.⁴⁰ This plan turned on reinforcing the corps' right flank. The 7th Armored Division would be assembled in the bridgehead and dispatched under orders to attack to the east, circle Metz from the rear by a left wheel, and "uncover" the Moselle line north of the city, thus permitting the 90th Division to cross unopposed in the Thionville sector. In the resulting shuffle the 43d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was reinforced and given a twenty-three-mile front on the left wing of the corps, relieving the 90th Division piecemeal north of Thionville. At the same time General Walker asked for a "deception team" to simulate a stronger force in the cavalry sector. This team finally arrived from 12th Army Group headquarters and operated for some weeks in the area as an "armored division." (The Germans seem to have been well deceived for the *OB WEST* maps show the "14th Armored Division" in this area.)

The 90th Infantry Division was ordered to contain Thionville with a small force and relieve the 7th Armored Division and 2d Infantry north and west of Metz. Then, on 15 September, the bulk of the 90th would begin an attack to clear out the enemy west of the Moselle with a main effort on the south flank in the old 2d Infantry sector. During the night of 14-15 September the 90th completed the relief and arrived on its new positions: the 358th Infantry

[162]

held a line from Uckange north to Garche; the 90th Reconnaissance Troop patrolled the river bank south to Talange; the 357th Infantry was deployed at right angles to the cavalry as far west as St. Privat (where a scratch task force covered the open ground northwest of Amanvillers); and

the 359th Infantry relieved the 2d Infantry along the Amanvillers-Habonville road south to Gravelotte.

In the meantime the 5th Infantry Division had attempted to enlarge the Arnaville bridgehead by pushing to the south, as a means of establishing a firm and deeper base for future operations northward toward Metz. In the late afternoon of 13 September CCB tanks, newly arrived in the bridgehead,⁴¹ began a drive to extend the bridgehead line south and east to Mardigny with the intention of seizing the enemy-held ridge on the 5th Division's right flank. Just as in earlier fighting, Arry proved to be the key position, and the armored column was stopped cold by the German antitank guns and artillery near the town. The new field order issued by the corps commander imposed what General Irwin considered to be an impossible mission on the 5th Infantry Division. But both General Walker and General Patton were now under pressure from the 12th Army Group commander, who in turn had taken responsibility for assuring the Supreme Commander that the Third Army would soon have a substantial footing east of the Moselle. By this order the division was to expand its existing bridgehead to the maximum on 14 September, and on the next day attack north toward Metz-thus permitting the 7th Armored Division to break out for the projected end run around the city. When 14 September dawned General Irwin decided to postpone the operations ordered for the day. A night-long rain had made the clay soil east of the river impassable for armor. Tank movement succeeded only in churning up the mire so badly that jeeps and supply trucks could not move. About three hundred replacements had just arrived to fill the depleted ranks of the 10th Infantry and some time would elapse before they could be absorbed in their proper units. In addition, the 2d Infantry was en route from the battle line west of Metz but had not yet joined the division.

At 0900 the next day, CCB and the 10th Infantry jumped off in the planned expansion to the southeast. Fog had closed in and much of the advance was by direction of the compass. In some of the low ground visibility was reduced to ten feet or less. Footing was slippery and the armored advance slow and

[163]

difficult. Targets could be seen only when they loomed out of the low-lying ground fog directly ahead, and the tank gunners were forced to use their weapons at point-blank range. Perhaps poor visibility hindered the enemy defense as well, for as the day progressed prisoners began to come through to the rear. Arry, so long a thorn in the flesh, was captured. The 3d Battalion of the 10th Infantry, supported by Company B, 735th Tank Battalion, took Hill 396 after a savage fight with the German troops manning the pillboxes that studded its slopes. Once on top of this key hill the infantry met a heavy concentration of artillery fire, for the summit was bare of trees and the German gunners were well ranged in. However, command of this nearly untenable point offered observation clear across the division front, weather permitting, and allowed the battalion to seize the crossroads town of Lorry, lying at its foot. Late in the afternoon CCB ended the day's operations by the capture of Mardigny and Vittonville, the latter marking the southernmost point of the advance. Then, receiving orders that it would be relieved by the 2d Infantry and revert to the 7th Armored Division, it halted.

Renewed American activity in the Arnaville bridgehead on 15 September and the presence of strong armored units east of the Moselle now forced Hitler to make a decision on the future tactical status of Metz and its garrison. On 8 September, while the American forces were beginning to probe vigorously at the Metz-Thionville position, the commanding general of *Army Group G*, General Blaskowitz, had put the question to his superiors as to whether Metz should be retained within the lines of the *First Army* or be abandoned to investment by the Americans when the *First Army* withdrew to the eastern side of the Moselle. Blaskowitz recommended on two counts that Metz be defended and that the field forces on either flank retain contact with the fortress: first, there were in the Metz garrison some fifteen hundred student-officers whom the German Army could ill afford to lose; second, Blaskowitz had no reserves to fill the gap that would result in the *First Army* line if Metz were encircled by the enemy.

Neither *OB WEST* nor OKW was prepared to take the responsibility for such a momentous decision, and when the situation in the Metz sector became more threatening on 15 September Blaskowitz's question was referred to the Fuehrer's headquarters.⁴² By now Hitler was completely committed to the

[164]

idea that every "strong place" should be garrisoned with second-rate troops (*Halb-Soldaten*) and left to wage a prolonged and lonely battle, with the object of containing as many American or Allied troops as possible.⁴³ In the case of Metz, therefore, Hitler's first reaction was to issue a mandate that the Metz garrison should submit to encirclement. But on 16 September the Fuehrer reversed himself, perhaps at the instigation of General Jodl and the operations staff of OKW, and sent a peremptory order that the *First Army* must reinforce the shoulders of the Metz salient with its field forces and thus prevent any encirclement by the Americans.

Early on 16 September the leading elements of the CCR column (Col. Pete T. Heffner) which had crossed on the previous day began an attack to break out to the east along the Lorry-Sillegny road. General Silvester intended to bring CCA in on the left of CCR, as it arrived in the bridgehead, and launch the two combat commands in attack along parallel routes. CCB was ordered to join the rest of the division, as soon as disengaged, and follow behind the artillery of the leading combat commands as a division rear guard. The line of departure for the 7th Armored Division attack was not marked too specifically on the ground, but generally followed the forward slope of the ridge line between Fey and Mardigny. In the plans prepared by the Third Army staff the 7th Armored Division would skirt the "known" forts south of Metz, cross the Seille River, then begin a wheel to the northeast in the neighborhood of Verny, cross the Nied River, and circle to the rear of Metz, with the inside column of CCA passing about three miles from the heart of the city. While this envelopment was in progress CCR, on the right, would be responsible for guarding the open flank, and would be covered in turn by a cavalry screen thrown out to the east. Such a scheme of maneuver was daring enough to suit even General Patton, but its successful execution hinged on numerous and unpredictable factors. Intelligence reports already carried information that the Germans were building a new line of defense across the Seille River, only six miles east of the Moselle. Once the Seille line was breached the 7th Armored Division columns would have to pass under the guns of the Metz exterior forts,

clustered around Verny and Orny. If the weather continued poor, little help could be expected from the air force, and the armored columns would be unable to deploy across country off the main hard-surface highways.

[165]

In any case the road net was limited, and it was known that the enemy had taken the precaution of emplacing much reserve artillery along the roads leading east.

CCR got a taste of the difficulties involved in this armored advance almost as soon as it began the attack. The Germans had dug in along the Lorry-Sillegny road and occupied a large woods astride the highway. One task force (Lt. Col. J. A. Wemple) of CCR, having fought its way through the woods and into the clear, was driven back to the shelter of the trees by accurate shelling from Sillegny. CCA, which had crossed the Moselle in the early morning, joined the attack at 1400 but was compelled to use the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion (Colonel Chappuis) instead of its tanks because of the fog and the slippery condition of the slopes on the line of departure. Some of the CCA tanks even had to be winched over the crest of the ridge in order to reach attack positions. As the armored infantry started down the slope toward the hamlet of Vezon, they were hit immediately by artillery fire plowing into the flank from the Verdun Forts in the north. Colonel Chappuis sideslipped his rifle companies behind a spur of the main ridge which jutted east between Lorry and Marieulles, and shifted the direction of the attack toward the latter town. Hill 396, taken by the 10th Infantry the day before, gave observation from which artillery officers directed a concentration of thirteen field artillery battalions on Marieulles preparatory to the assault. But, when the fire lifted, the Germans crawled out of cellars and foxholes, the guns behind the town opened up, and the 48th was beaten off.

Back in the bridgehead the 5th Division commander regrouped his battalions to join the battle with an attack alongside the armor. The 2d Infantry relieved CCB on the right flank of the bridgehead and the armor assembled in Vittonville. The 11th Infantry crossed an additional battalion and deployed along the north edge of the bridgehead, leaving the battered 2d Battalion (still minus helmets, automatic weapons, and even rifles, lost in the Dornot fight) to contain Fort Driant across the Moselle. In the center the 10th Infantry reformed its battalions, pushed patrols out toward Fey, and prepared to attack as soon as the 2d Infantry was in position and the situation in front of the armor cleared up. The Third Army commander was none too pleased with the day's operations and General Walker passed on his remarks to General Irwin: "General Patton is here and said if we don't get across [the Seille] he is going to leave us here and contain Metz while he goes across with the rest of the Army to the Rhine. Now that wouldn't do." General Irwin agreed

[166]

that it wouldn't do, but noted privately: "The enemy is making a desperate stand, aided by his artillery, bad weather and poor observation."

Meanwhile the enemy had drawn heavily on his troops in the Metz area to check a further expansion of the American bridgehead. These reinforcements moved south during the late afternoon of 16 September and occupied positions in front of the 5th Infantry Division. In the early morning of the next day the Germans took advantage of fog and rain to launch an assault between the 11th and 10th Infantry. An enemy battalion, heavily armed with bazookas, burp guns, and antitank rifles, crept up the draw west of Vezon, struck the flank of the 11th Infantry and drove into the positions held by Companies I and L, 10th Infantry. Confused fighting raged here for most of the morning,⁴⁴ the German infantry pressing the assault regardless of losses. Company I later counted ninety-six dead Germans lying in front of its position. A platoon of L Company was engulfed and surrendered, but nearly all the men escaped when their guards were swept into the fight and shot down. The German counterattack ended abruptly when a platoon of tanks from the 735th Tank Battalion arrived on the scene and sprayed the draw with machine gun fire.

South of the 10th Infantry CCA continued the battle for Marieulles, where some five hundred enemy infantry fought stubbornly all day long.⁴⁵ In the first assault the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion (-), supported by the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion from CCB, was stopped at the edge of the town by emplaced 88's firing high explosive at point-blank range into the ranks of the attackers. In the afternoon two battalions of 155-mm. guns fired for one minute into Marieulles-all that ammunition rationing could permit-and the armored infantry returned to the assault, only to be repelled by a fusilade [*sic*] from the German antitank guns. Light American artillery joined in the fray and a final attack, spearheaded by tanks, carried Marieulles. Some 135 prisoners and the ubiquitous antitank pieces were captured. Even in the last moments of the battle, however, the German rear guard fought furiously, standing erect in the open streets to engage the American tanks and infantry with blasts from machine pistols. On the right, CCR spent the day removing road blocks and establishing a line of departure on the east edge of the Bois

[167]

de Daumont before attacking to take Sillegny. German guns firing to cover the road blocks had good practice and inflicted several casualties. American counterbattery attempts proved futile in the fog and rain-an ominous introduction to the battle for Sillegny.

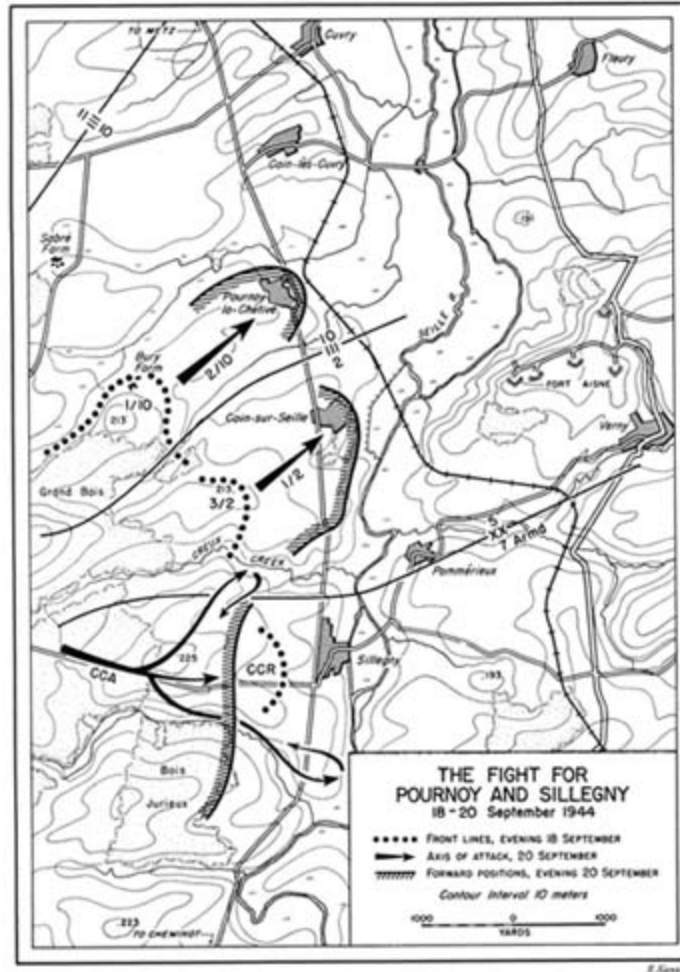
Troops and vehicles remained jammed together in the confined bridgehead area, and regrouping and assembly were a problem. General Walker, therefore, established a more precise boundary which gave the 7th Armored Division a definite zone on the right of the 5th Infantry Division. General Silvester ordered CCR, on the left, and CCB, now in position on the right, to continue the frontal attack until the Seille River was crossed and some freedom of maneuver was possible. CCA passed into reserve behind Marieulles, while the 10th Infantry took over its former section of the front. Elements of the 2d Infantry then drove ahead in the early evening and occupied Hill 245, a thousand yards to the east.

The plan of attack for 18 September turned on an advance along a somewhat wider front in which elements of both bridgehead divisions would participate. The immediate objectives were four towns strung along the lateral ,highway between Metz and Cheminot that followed the west

bank of the Seille River. Pournoy-la-Chétive, the northernmost, was assigned to the 2d Battalion, 10th Infantry. Next in line the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, had the mission of taking Coin-sur-Seille. CCR already was poised in front of Sillegny, third in the series, and CCB aimed its attack at Longueville-lès-Cheminot, enfolded in a loop of the Seille. If these objectives were taken, the way to the Seille would be opened, with the 5th Infantry Division and 7th Armored Division properly aligned to execute the maneuver on and around Metz. (*Map 4*)

Weather along the front continued to be poor on 18 September. Much artillery had been brought into the bridgehead, but observation remained limited and fire not too effective. Tank maneuver was hampered by the sticky clay, and armored vehicles seldom could be used effectively except as supporting artillery. The burden of the attack fell largely on the infantry.

On the extreme right wing, patrols from CCB began the day's operations by occupying the town of Bouxières-sous-Froidmont, which had been evacuated but left strewn with mines. The rest of the morning was spent clearing a route through to the east. When the armored infantry (two companies of the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion and the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion) started on toward the loop in the Seille, they came under fire from German guns in concrete emplacements on Hill 223, about three thousand



MAP NO. 4

[169]

yards ahead. Because the maps in use did not show the hill, the troops had trouble convincing the division staff that they had run into such opposition; but the incoming shells were real enough and the infantry halted.

On the opposite wing, the lead battalions of the 5th Infantry Division jumped off in the afternoon and, with little resistance to bar the way, advanced as far as the slight rise west of Pournoy-la-Chétive and Coin-sur-Seille. The 5th had begun to slow down. There was little drive left in the battalions. The troops had been fighting for eleven days and the ranks were filled with replacements still much in need of combat experience.⁴⁶ Since further progress would bring the advance under fire from the forts around Verny, planes were urgently needed to silence their guns-and any such help depended on the caprices of the weather. A few planes that managed to get through in the late afternoon dropped twelve napalm bombs on the forts, but their effort was only a gesture.

In the center CCR launched its first attack on Sillegny at 1515 with two companies of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion (Lt. Col. W. W. Rosebro) and the three medium tank companies of the 17th Tank Battalion (Colonel Wemple).⁴⁷ As the infantry advanced out of the woods the enemy barrage opened up, the heavy guns in the Verny forts thickening the fire of the field pieces around the town.⁴⁸ Four artillery battalions supported CCR, but their forward observers could not locate the German guns and counterbattery was ineffective. Although the tankers advanced far enough to blast the town at ranges, as close as five hundred yards, two companies of the mediums had to withdraw from the fight when their ammunition ran out and five tanks were lost. Nothing seemed to affect the German gunners; their shells poured into the American infantry line with such fury that the troops refused to move forward down the slope and fell back to the shelter of the woods. Colonel Heffner, commanding CCR, phoned the division headquarters and reported that he had thrown into the fight nearly all of his infantry⁴⁹ plus two platoons

[170]

of armored engineers, that he had only two platoons of infantry left in reserve, and that even if they were committed it was unlikely that the town could be taken with the weak force at hand. He was ordered to use the last two platoons and make another try for Sillegny. Again CCR formed up and went into the attack. This time the infantry broke under the steady fire, but were stopped by Colonel Rosebro, Colonel Heffner, and a few other officers, turned about, reorganized, and at dusk were sent in again. The tanks led off and the infantry "made a splendid come-back," as Colonel Heffner later reported, following the tanks right to the edge of the town, where small arms fire swept the line and brought the assault to a standstill. Colonel Wemple's tank battalion had performed valiantly through the day, but he was unwilling to risk his tanks in the town at night. The infantry dug in about fifty yards from the nearest buildings. In the early morning hours the 38th took a few houses in the town, but by daylight had lost even this slight hold. Meanwhile, prisoners reported that the German defenders had been reinforced during the night by two companies of infantry from Metz.

Through the morning of 19 September a confused and bloody battle continued at the edge of Sillegny. Colonel Rosebro was mortally wounded. The executive officer of the 38th, Maj. C. H. Rankin, was killed; and when Maj. T. H. Wells, the next senior officer, took command he too was lost.⁵⁰ Another battalion commander, Lt. Col. Theo T. King, was sent forward from the division headquarters and about 1100 withdrew the assault companies. Meanwhile, the third rifle company had been rushed up to the 38th from its post as division headquarters guard. The American artillery pounded the town while King reorganized the battalion, and at 1315 the infantry attacked once again. Although in the interim the German garrison had evacuated Sillegny, when the Americans entered the town they received a deadly shelling from enemy batteries on the high ground to the north and east looking down on the elliptical bowl in which Sillegny lay. The troops to the fore, unable either to move on through the town or to retire, took shelter in the nearest cellars. The enemy now moved to counterattack with infantry and tanks. Fortunately, American planes flying to attack the Verny forts were diverted by radio and struck at the German column. Though the bulk of the column was dispersed, a few German tanks

reached the town and supporting infantry filtered in behind them. Two American tanks, which had come in earlier, knocked out

[171]

the leading German tank; then, finding that their own infantry had taken refuge in cellars or left the town, they hurriedly pulled out to avoid the enemy bazookas. During this action Colonel King was wounded and evacuated. By 1830 the Germans once again held the town. An American captain and twenty-three men held on in a large stone house, though surrounded, but about 1900 radio contact with the encircled platoon was lost after a section of tanks had made a fruitless effort to come to its aid.

Lt. Col. R. L. Rhea, the new battalion commander, received permission to break off the engagement. The surviving infantry dug in on the slope east of the woods and Colonel Wemple deployed his tanks in an outpost line between the infantry and Sillegny, moving the tanks back and forth to diminish the target they presented. Colonel Heffner had been wounded and a number of the CCR, staff killed or wounded. The 38th Armored Infantry Battalion was reduced to about one-fourth its normal strength and most of its officers were dead. General Silvester ordered CCA to relieve CCR, and on the following morning the badly shattered reserve command disengaged and withdrew into the woods. CCA took its place in front of Sillegny and prepared to resume the drive toward the Seille.

While CCR had been fighting desperately at Sillegny, CCB was moving slowly toward the river. On the morning of 19 September infantry from the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion drove the German gunners off Hill 223. With this threat removed, the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion and a company of the 31st Tank Battalion drove on into the Seille loop toward Longueville. The enemy fought stubbornly in the shelter of the town and his antitank guns stopped the American tanks, but at dusk the Americans held Longueville. A subsequent attempt to capture Cheminot, on the southern bank of the Seille opposite Longueville, failed, and five tanks were destroyed by German antitank fire from across the river when they deployed to support the infantry. Cheminot remained as a potential threat to the whole right flank of the 7th Armored Division until 22 September, when the small garrison force from the *553d VG Division*, pinched between the 7th Armored Division and the XII Corps advance on the south, withdrew from this pocket.

By midafternoon of 20 September CCA was organized on its new position west of Sillegny, with the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion attached to give added infantry strength. CCA and CCB immediately jumped off in a coordinated attack to reach and cross the Seille River. CCA tried to maneuver around Sillegny to the north, but its tanks were stopped by Creux Creek, a

[172]



SILLEGNY

[Insert between 172 and 173]

small stream at right angles to the Seille. A second envelopment, swinging to the south and wide of the town, was abortive. The attack reached the river and then was stopped by antitank guns in reinforced concrete casemates on the opposite bank which proved impervious to direct hits by artillery and tank fire. CCB, advancing east under a continuous fire from Cheminot on the flank and enemy guns to the front, was no more successful. It, too, reached the river, but was forced to relinquish its gains and fall back.

Apparently the Germans reinforced the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* at the Seille line during the night of 20-21 September,⁵¹ for all American movement during the daylight hours of 21 September brought down intense and accurate artillery and mortar fire. After dark CCB forded two companies of armored infantry across the Seille south and east of Longueville. Since the enemy interdicted the river in daylight, engineer reconnaissance had been confined to hours of darkness and the first bridge site chosen proved unsuitable when actual work began. A second crossing site had to be abandoned when it was discovered that the equipment in the CCB bridge trains was insufficient to span the river, as a result of the loss of two truckloads of bridging materials, which had received direct hits earlier in the day. At daylight the infantry companies withdrew, and the 7th Armored Division began to ready plans and bridging equipment for a coordinated crossing attack by both combat commands on the night of 23 September. This attempt was never made: on the afternoon of 23 September General Silvester received orders that his division was to leave the Third Army and go north to join the XIX Corps in the First Army zone.

The XX Corps had failed to make the dash to encircle Metz for which General Patton had hoped. The gasoline shortage at the end of August and the beginning of September-had worked to the advantage of the enemy and allowed the German *First Army* to man not only the Metz fortifications but the line of the Moselle as well. The German plans for demolitions at bridges along the river were well co-ordinated and efficiently executed. The 7th Armored and 5th Infantry Divisions were thereby forced to fight for a bridgehead under conditions most unfavorable to an armored thrust, conditions that were less easy to meet because of the lack of an early co-ordination between elements of the two divisions at the initial crossing site. The amount of in-

[173]

fantry available to expand the bridgehead and support the armor in a breakout proved too small for such an undertaking. Bad weather, together with the clay soil prevalent on the east bank of the Moselle, also contributed to the difficulties faced by the armor. Finally, the German works on the periphery of the Metz fortifications extended well out from the heart of the city, interlaced and supported by entrenched field forces and a large complement of medium, and heavy reserve artillery, the whole calculated to deflect any attempt at a rapid, close-in envelopment by armor. The losses of the 7th Armored Division during the September battles give some clue to the price paid for the use of the armor in frontal assaults against stubbornly defended and well-fortified positions: 47 medium and 8 light tanks destroyed, Plus 469 men dead or missing and 737 wounded in the period of a fortnight.⁵²

While the 7th Armored Division had been trying to bludgeon a path to the Seille, the 5th Infantry Division, on its left flank, also found the going slow. On 18 September, 10th Infantry patrols worked forward along the gentle slopes leading east to Pournoy-la-Chétive and troops of the 2d Infantry occupied Hill 213 in sight of Coin-sur-Seille. General Irwin called off the assault on the two towns scheduled for the following day in order to let the armor take Sillegny, from which fire was harassing his right flank, and to give time for the weather to clear. He hoped that the American air force could be used to silence the guns in the Verny forts behind Pournoy-la-Chétive and Coin-sur-Seille. The Germans took advantage of this pause on 19 September to gather a large counterattack force in Coin-sur-Seille. In the late afternoon, this force was caught en route to Sillegny by the P-47's and the 5th Division artillery. Late in the evening the 2d Infantry was hit by a similar counterattack from Coin-sur-Seille, but this was broken up by the American gunners before it could do any damage.

General Irwin ordered a co-ordinated attack by the 2d and 10th Infantry on 20 September and sent the assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. A. D. Warnock, to command on the spot. Since CCA, 7th Armored Division, had planned to take over the assault on Sillegny at 1100, the two regiments of the 5th Infantry Division were sent into the attack at this hour. As it turned out, the difficulties attendant on the relief of CCR so delayed the armored attack at Sillegny that the 5th plunged ahead alone. There had been some hope of air support, but during the morning a low overcast kept out the American

[174]

planes. Furthermore, there was another cut in the ammunition allowed the supporting artillery, still further limiting the support on which the infantry could rely. Nevertheless the assault battalions fought their way forward through tank, mortar, and artillery fire. By early evening the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, held Coin-sur-Seille, though its flank had been under fire from the German batteries near Sillegny all during the advance.

In the north the 2d Battalion, 10th Infantry (Lt. Col. Paul T. Carroll), was roughly handled by the Germans in and around Pournoy-la-Chétive.⁵³ Having been filled out with replacements during a brief period in reserve, the battalion began its attack to take Pournoy-la-Chétive on the morning of 20 September with nearly its full complement. In addition the infantry was reinforced by Company B of the 7th Engineer Combat Battalion, Company B of the 735th Tank Battalion, and Company B of the 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Followed by tanks and tank destroyers, F and E Companies led off from Bury Farm, just outside of le Grand Bois, a sparse wood lot about two thousand yards southwest of Pournoy-la-Chétive. Company F, on the left, was hard hit by enfilading fire coming in from an enemy outpost position near Sabré Farm. But when the battalion wheeled east to strike Pournoy, the exposed company and Company G following in reserve found some shelter from the searching fire in a slight draw. As the infantry approached Pournoy, marching deliberately and firing as they moved, the enemy guns and mortars took heavy toll. Two of the rifle company commanders were killed (the third had been evacuated at the beginning of the assault). Companies E and F fought their way in and briefly held about a third of the town; in the early evening they were hit by tanks and driven back about three hundred yards from Pournoy, where they halted and dug in. Disorganized by the loss of its officers and shocked by continuous shelling from what seemed to be all points of the compass, one company began to straggle back toward the shelter of le Grand Bois. A few of the veterans sought to hold the new replacements, many of whom were under fire for the first time. Pfc. William A. Catri, from the reserve company, ran forward alone and drove off two of the German tanks with his bazooka.⁵⁴ Colonel Carroll, the battalion staff, and the few remaining company officers worked frantically to restore order and reorganize

[175]

the attack. Finally, in the early evening, the battalion returned to the assault, while the tanks swung to the east of the town and the tank destroyers swung around the west edge. This time the assault was successful. The German troops were driven from the streets and buildings, and Colonel Carroll deployed the battalion, still much disorganized, in an outpost line rimming Pournoy on the north, east, and south.

During the evening General Irwin visited his regimental commanders and concluded from their reports that a further advance would be impossible unless additional artillery ammunition could be provided. When the corps commander received this word from the 5th Infantry Division, he ordered General Irwin to hold his troops where they were. The 5th was deployed with the 2d and 10th Infantry on a north-south line in front of the Seille. At Pournoy-la-Chétive the front bent back abruptly at a right angle, with elements of the 11th Infantry stretched back to and across the Moselle so as to contain the outer Metz fortifications. This angle was now the key to the 5th

Infantry Division position, whether the division held in place or resumed the advance. Against it the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* directed all its available troops and guns, plus the remnants of the *106th Panzer Brigade*.

Through the late evening shells poured into the town from the heavy guns at Verny and Fleury, while at closer ranges the German 88's and 20-MM, cannon blazed away continuously. About 0100 on the morning of 21 September a sizable enemy force slipped into the American positions from the northeast. Incessant shellfire had disorganized communications, and before the 2d Battalion could get word back to the American artillery the enemy was in the streets and had sliced across the rear of F Company, deployed along the road and hedgerows east of the town. Most of the company were killed or captured, and only thirty-five men escaped to rejoin the battalion. Company E, on the south, was preparing to send patrols to cut the Metz-Château-Salins railroad line, a few hundred yards away, when the Germans struck. In beating off this attack, the company was badly cut up and reduced to two officers and sixty-four men. By daylight the Americans had redressed their lines close into the town. But the cost of the battle in its first phase had been very high; only some 450 men were left out of the 800 who had entered the engagement the previous day.

All during 21 September the Germans struck blow after blow at the 2d Battalion, forming their assault forces in Coin-lès-Cuvry, about 1,800 yards to the north, and striking in rapid succession around the peripheral defenses

[176]

with tanks, armored cars, and motor-borne infantry. These attacks were made in considerable strength, one assault force being estimated by the defenders as approximating a regiment. Shells exploded continuously in the American positions. The sound of the German artillery, mortars, and "screaming-meemies" was "a constant roar." A tanker ruefully reported, "We were shelled just once at Pournoy, that was all the time." Men could not leave their cellars or foxholes even to get food and water, for any living thing in the open was cut down. As each attack came in, the tankers and tank destroyer crews served their guns and the infantry doggedly laid on fire with their rifles and machine guns. But the American artillery saved the beleaguered battalion,⁵⁵ sweeping across the German counterattack columns and blasting Coin-lès-Cuvry with heavy gun battalions and batteries of 240-mm. howitzers. Even this demonstration of American fire power failed to discourage the attackers and they stubbornly persisted in their efforts to recapture Pournoy. On 22 September the enemy counterattacks shifted in direction, perhaps because Coin-lès-Cuvry had been made untenable, and came out of an assembly area in a little wood southeast of Pournoy. These new assaults likewise were beaten off. The 2d Battalion was nearing the end of its strength, however, and on 23 September Colonel Carroll asked for relief. The corps and army commanders had new plans for the 5th Infantry Division, in which the project of a further eastward advance by the corps would be temporarily abandoned, thus robbing Pournoy of its tactical significance. On the night of 23-24 September the 1st Battalion, 10th Infantry, relieved its sister battalion, and subsequently Pournoy was abandoned as the division withdrew to a new main line of resistance back to the west. The battle for Pournoy had had no decisive result or far-

reaching effect, but it ranks with Sillegny and the Dornot bridgehead among the most bitterly fought actions in the Lorraine Campaign.

The 90th Infantry Division Attack West of Metz

While the bulk of the XX Corps was trying without success to breach the German line at the Seille River, the 90th Infantry Division took over the holding attack west of Metz which had cost the 2d Infantry so heavily. The general regrouping in the corps zone on 14 September brought two regiments of the 90th south to occupy the 2d Infantry positions. (*Map XII*) The

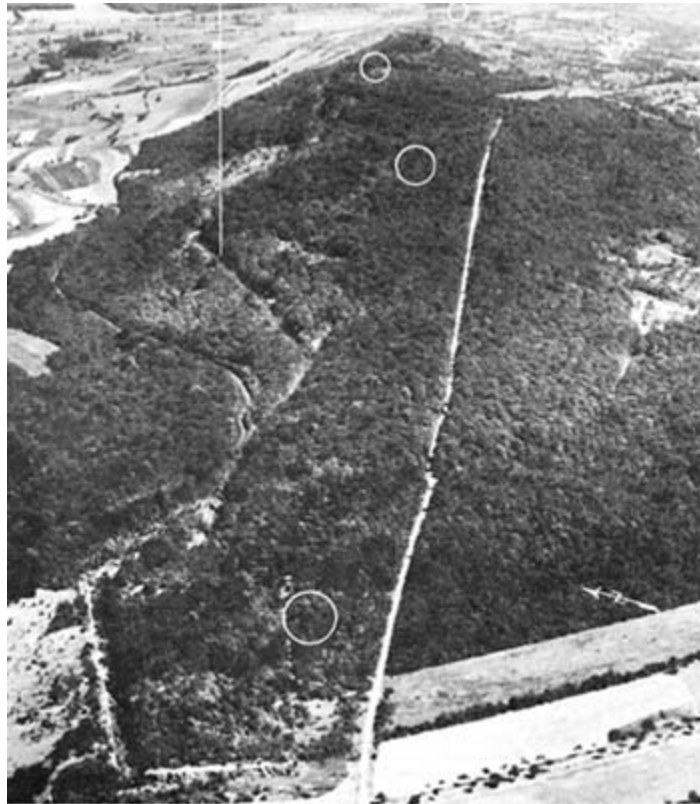
[177]

357th Infantry, on the left, deployed so that its exterior flank lay along the Bois de Jaumont, east of St. Privat. The 359th Infantry, on the right, extended the opposite flank as far as the draw south and east of Gravelotte. By midnight of 14 September the last troops of the 2d Infantry were out of the line and the 90th Infantry Division was ready to join in the corps attack set for the following morning.

The earlier attacks by the 2d Infantry and probing by armored patrols provided the 90th with some intelligence as to the kind of enemy opposition to be expected. But the contours of the main German positions west of Metz were little disclosed. Again, as in the experience of the 2d Infantry, each new gain made toward the east would uncover camouflaged bunkers, pillboxes, and extensions of fortified lines previously unknown to the Americans. And again, as the artillery supporting the 2d Infantry had learned, American counterbattery fire would prove relatively ineffective so long as the enemy could move his self-propelled guns at will and so long as the Americans were denied observation covering the rear slopes where most of the German fortress guns were emplaced.

In front of the 357th Infantry lay two main lines of fortifications extending from either side of the St. Privat-Marengo-Metz road. North of the road the Canrobert works followed the ridge line of the Bois de Fêves obliquely northeast toward Semécourt. This line consisted of a continuous concrete wall, twenty feet high and thirty feet broad, reinforced by four forts, the whole covered on the west by an outpost line of foxholes, barbed wire, and machine gun positions. South of the St. Privat-Metz highway two detached groups of fortifications, connected by field works, flanked the Canrobert line. The northernmost, the Kellermann works, commanded the highway.⁵⁶ The Lorraine group of forts, echeloned to the southeast, lay astride a wooded hill looking down on Amanvillers. Across and beyond the front of the 359th Infantry the German line continued south until it reached its linchpin at Fort Driant, in the-zone of the 5th Infantry Division. The portion of the line immediately south of Kellermann and Lorraine was composed of temporary field works, covered by permanent batteries to the rear and on the flanks. Beyond came the de Guise forts (east of Vernéville), more field works, the Jeanne d'Arc group of forts, and a line of small detached works known to the American troops as the "Seven Dwarfs." The last of the Seven Dwarfs,

[178]



BOIS DE FEVES RIDGE. *Circles indicate positions of Canrobert forts.*

[179]

Fort Marival, covered the flank and rear of Fort Driant, just across the defile leading down to Ars-sur-Moselle. The western approaches to the Jeanne d'Arc group and the Seven Dwarfs were screened by the German hold on the ravine of the Mance, east of Gravelotte, which had proved so difficult to break during the early attacks by the 2d Infantry.⁵⁷

On the morning of 15 September the 357th (Colonel Barth) and 359th (Colonel Bacon) opened the attack against the German line west of Metz. Both regiments were fresh, their losses during the advance to the Moselle had been slight, and their ranks were full. A series of relatively easy victories in recent fighting had done much to restore the self-confidence lost during the reverses suffered by the 90th in Normandy.⁵⁸ General McLain, the new commander, had had six weeks in which to acquaint himself with the division staff and influence somewhat the division *esprit*. Finally, the 90th Division was prepared to use the bulk of two regiments in this operation, whereas the 2d Infantry in its last assaults had been forced to work alone, and then much understrength.

In the initial attack on 15 September each of the two regiments committed its right-wing battalion. The 1st Battalion, 357th Infantry (Maj. B. O. Rossow), reinforced by an engineer

platoon armed with flame throwers,⁵⁹ was given the mission of driving into the narrow gap along the St. Privat-Metz road where the highway cut between the Canrobert wall and the Kellermann works. The line of approach was somewhat protected by extensive undergrowth, but this also made control difficult and the advance was slowed down by the need for constant reorganization. The infantry drove in the German outposts south of the Bois de Jaumont, crossed a railroad track and seized a stone quarry west of Kellermann. At the close of day, with its right flank secured at the quarry, the battalion wheeled into position for a close-in assault on Kellermann from the north. Meanwhile, the 2d Battalion had sent patrols to test the northern end of the Canrobert line only to find that any advance

[180]

there would have to be made across absolutely barren ground under direct fire from Fort Fêves. The idea of a flanking movement was therefore rejected.

Three-quarters of an hour after the 357th started its advance the 2d Battalion, 359th (Capt. O. C. Talbott), moved out from a line of departure southeast of Malmaison in an attack toward the Jeanne d'Arc forts, while a platoon of tank destroyers, dug in near Malmaison, supported the attack by firing over the heads of the infantry. Colonel Bacon apparently intended to bypass the most dangerous part of the ravine east of Gravelotte by pushing the right flank of the 359th around to the north through the Bois de Génivaux and across the head of the draw. At first the Germans offered little opposition, but about 1340 fire from a large pillbox in the woods directly east of Malmaison pinned the forward infantry to the ground and halted the advance. Since rounds from the American bazookas had not the slightest effect on the heavy reinforced concrete, a platoon of tanks and a platoon of engineers equipped with flame throwers were brought up to engage the pillbox. The German strong point was neutralized, but not taken, and the advance continued, making only a couple of hundred yards in "vicious fighting" (as reported that evening) at the edge of the draw.⁶⁰

The story of this first day had been dishearteningly like that of earlier attacks by the 2d Infantry in the same area. That evening, after studying the reports from his two regimental commanders, General McLain concluded that a full-dress assault on the western defenses of Metz "was out of the question" unless additional troops could be secured. He therefore instructed Colonel Barth and Colonel Bacon to "nibble" at the German positions in limited-objective attacks, while maintaining harassing fire and heavy patrolling all along the front in order to keep the enemy constantly off balance.

The morning of 16 September opened with a heavy fog which clung to the ground through the forenoon and provided some cover for the American attacks. The 1st Battalion, 357th, formed up its three rifle companies and moved slowly toward the gap between Kellermann and the Canrobert line, under sporadic and aimless shelling by the German guns. However, the fog screen was not an unmixed blessing and the battalion lost its bearings. At 1000 the advance patrols found themselves about 150 yards away from the

[181]

concrete wall that identified the Canrobert position. The battalion commander thereupon decided to send two companies through the gap at the end of the masonry where wire barricades and machine gun posts covered the St. Privat-Metz road. Colonel Barth then ordered the 3d Battalion to move in on the right of the 1st and block toward the south while the assault was made into the gap along the road. The two battalions were organizing for this maneuver when, a little after noon, the Germans struck hard at the two companies deployed for the assault. This counterattack, made by troops of the *Fahnenjunkerschule* regiment, was pressed with all of the determination and savagery that characterized these elite German infantry. But the Americans stood their ground and drove off the enemy, after losing seventy-two men in a bitter hand-to-hand fight. At 1700 the 1st Battalion again attempted to move forward but was stopped in its tracks by artillery and small arms fire that forced it to dig in.

In the 359th area the 2d Battalion resumed the effort to shake the Germans loose from the Mance ravine east of Gravelotte. This time the battalion turned its attack south, down into the draw. The enemy reacted at once with furious fire from mortars and automatic weapons concealed on the wooded banks and scattered the length of the ravine. By nightfall the battalion had advanced about two hundred yards and reached the Gravelotte-Metz highway, which here crossed the draw. This slight gain was made at the cost of severe casualties: 117 men and 15 officers (nearly half the officer complement of the battalion).⁶¹

The volume of German artillery fire brought to bear on the 357th and 359th increased abruptly on 17 September. General McLain and his staff were already perturbed by the width of the 90th Division front (some sixteen miles) and the numerous weak spots in the forward line. This new development, the division commander feared, might presage a major German counterattack against some thinly held part of his position.⁶² Nonetheless, the two regiments west of Metz continued the attack, each using the single battalion which was all that could be committed to the assault without drastically denuding the extended American line. In the zone of the 359th Infantry the 3d Battalion relieved the 2d in the fight to clear the ravine, but the fresh troops had made

[182]

little progress by the end of the day. The 357th Infantry also relieved its assault battalion, after an unsuccessful attempt during the morning to push a company through the wire and mortar fire at the south end of the Canrobert wall.

Gains made on 17 September could be reported only in terms of yards. The execution of even limited-objective attacks had proved too costly, and General Walker agreed with General McLain that the assault should be discontinued. New plans were already being made for the Metz operation, and the 90th Infantry Division would have ten days' respite before returning to the grueling task of battering a hole through the western German defenses.

[183]