

Planning the Roer Crossing

27 January—22 February 1945

HAVING wiped out the enemy salient west of the Roer, except for the town of Hilfarth which was of limited value to the Germans, the Division began on 27 January to consolidate its newly gained positions and organize a line for defense (*Map 10*). The plan directed the establishment of a system of interlocking and mutually supporting strong points, each organized for all-around defense. Antipersonnel and antitank minefields, roadblocks, and barbed-wire entanglements were to be set up along the MLR. Overrun enemy concrete emplacements which did not fit into the defensive network were to be blown up. Those to be utilized by our troops as shelters or pillboxes were to be prepared for demolition if and when they were evacuated. The defense of the new area was to be organized in depth with particular regard to the possibilities of enemy penetrations along the Himmerich–Wurm or Brachelen–Lindern axes. On the old front, an attack through Linnich, or slightly south of our sector from Jülich towards Aldenhoven, constituted the main threats. At the same time harassing fire and patrolling measures were renewed.

By this time the weather had perceptibly changed. The ground had frozen hard and was deeply covered by snow. Occasional squalls masked pick-and-shovel work parties in a swirl of white. Nitro-starch or TNT had to be used to break the tough crust of earth in order to insert a pick, or dig a foxhole.

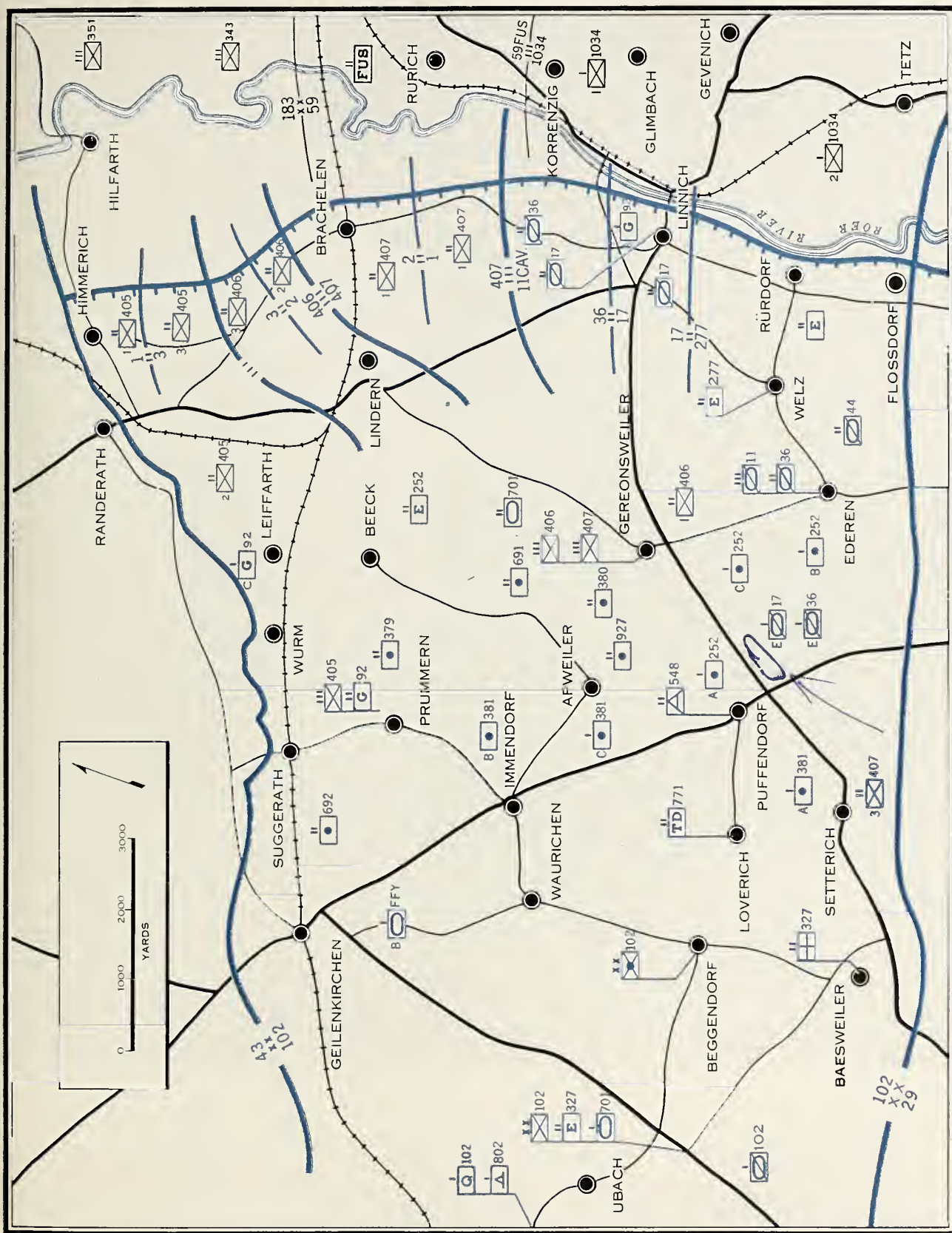
Considerable regrouping took place following the attack, which resulted in the movement of a number of organizations to other areas. On 27 January, the 336th and 1276th Engineer Combat Battalions and several British tank units were relieved from attachment. On the following day the 277th Engineer Combat Battalion and the remainder of the British elements left for undisclosed places. On 29 January, the 17th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron departed, followed the next day by the 691st Field Artillery Battalion. Again we were being stripped of combat strength.

On the night of 28-29 January, the 406th Infantry

assumed responsibility for the sector of the 405th Infantry north of Himmerich. The front then was defended from right to left by the 11th Cavalry Group, the 407th Infantry, and the 406th Infantry. The 405th Infantry was delegated to Division reserve. A few days later, however, on 3 February, the 11th Cavalry Group was relieved from its long and outstanding service with the division, its sector being taken over by the 405th Infantry. On 7 February, the 84th Infantry Division, having returned to XIII Corps after participation in the Battle of the Bulge, moved into the left sector of the Division area where it relieved the 406th Infantry which then passed to Division reserve. Elements of the 407th Infantry northwest of Linnich, were also relieved by the Railsplitters at the same time.

The general easing up of the situation following the Brachelen–Randerath operation was in marked contrast to that which had existed one month earlier. The collapse of the enemy's Ardennes offensive and the crushing assault of the Russians in the east had reduced him to a position which threatened soon to become desperate. As elsewhere along the entire Western Front, the German lines opposite the Division sector were becoming dangerously thin. The German Army had lost the initiative. The return to this section of the Western Front of American units released from the Ardennes boded ill for the enemy. All he could do, in fact, was to continue to work upon his defenses on the east bank, while awaiting the inevitable American effort to cross the Roer and strike towards the Rhine.

In this unhappy predicament the enemy had two allies—the weather and the dams at the headwaters of the Roer River which were still under his control. Weather conditions at the beginning of February fluctuated between snow and rain. As the thaw set in, soil conditions became more and more unfavorable for the employment of our armor. At the same time the Roer River increased in depth and speed as a result of the rain and thaw and release



Map 10: Organization in the Ozark sector on 27 January 1945. Enemy units and boundaries are shown in black.



Linnich and the Roer Valley. The dark wooded band along the left side of the picture, leading into Linnich in the upper left, is a steep, 40-foot bluff. At the bottom of this bluff is a creek flowing south from the church. Between the creek and the river in the center of the picture are the village meadows. The two straight lines south of the bridge on each side of the river are dikes surmounted by roads. The bridge east of Linnich is demolished and the river has been forced around the west pier by accumulated debris. East of the river is the smooth curve of the railroad along which were dense minefields. The large building (extreme right) is Schloss Breitenbend. Legend told of a tunnel leading under the river from the church to the castle, but it could not be found.

of water from the dams. It soon began to overflow its channel.

Ninth Army was now looking ahead to the time, no longer believed far off, when the offensive could be resumed. The XIII Corps likewise was planning to revert from a defensive to an offensive role. In turn, the 102d Infantry Division began preparing for this climactic phase of the Battle of the Roer. Its patrols, exploring deep into the enemy's defense and reconnoitering both banks of the river, encountered greater difficulties than ever before. The ice-cold river, in its swollen condition, was almost impassable. The enemy, in desperate straits, was more than usually sensitive to any approach toward his lines.

HILFARTH PATROLS

The area of greatest activity in the closing days of January lay in the sector of the 406th Infantry at Hilfarth, where the Germans still retained access to their former bridgehead. Here it had been decided by the Division Commander not to extend the defensive line to the river's edge. Thus the undesirable low-lying terrain in this area became something of a no man's land. However, the Germans maintained several positions in the area, the most troublesome of which was a troop shelter cleverly camouflaged as a barn, which stood near the river's edge between Hilfarth and Brachelen.

On the night of 31 January–1 February, a strong raiding party composed of Company I, 406th Infantry, and a platoon from Company B, 327th Engineer Combat Battalion, supported by artillery, set out to investigate and destroy this shelter. Leaving Brachelen at 2109, the group proceeded uneventfully to within four hundred yards of the objective. Here the two leading platoons fanned out according to plan, and took cover in the empty trenches on either side of the troop shelter, while the assault platoon moved up to within fifteen feet of its objective. At this point, it received a volley of machine-pistol fire from a window and suffered four casualties. The patrol replied with a heavy and effective concentration of bazooka, rifle and rifle-grenade fire which covered the engineer platoon as it advanced to place the demolition charges.

As each of twenty men carried fifty pounds of TNT, the advance of the engineers was hazardous, but the supporting artillery silenced enemy fire



Division Staff studies a terrain model of the bridgehead area.

which began falling from the farther bank of the river. The platoon soon reached its objective without a casualty. The shelter, upon investigation, appeared to be occupied only by dead men—nine upstairs and eleven downstairs. When the engineers had just about completed their preparations for demolition, however, they were interrupted by cries coming from behind the door of the last compartment. Removing the charges from the door, they took out six Germans, all dazed and a few only partially dressed. The engineers then withdrew to a distance of approximately four hundred yards, and at 0400 the concrete-and-steel troop shelter was destroyed. A feature of this successful operation was the excellent artillery support which prevented effective enemy interference with the accomplishment of the mission.

Some days later, in the early morning of 4 February, a strong patrol from the 406th Infantry set forth to reconnoiter and, if possible, destroy the enemy remaining in Hilfarth. This patrol, composed of one officer, thirty riflemen and a caliber .30 machine-gun section, had as its first objective a group of six buildings lying just outside and to the southwest of the village. Crossing its IP at 0300 and reaching the objective without incident, the patrol set up bases of fire and cut a lane through the enemy's tactical wire for the assault group.

As the assault group approached this lane, a low whistle was heard, and the Germans began to manifest a noisy and rather obvious concern, characterized by loud talking and the sound of sawing wood. Realizing that the approach was no longer a surprise, the assault group leader sent forward a sergeant and eight riflemen to investigate. This detachment cleared the wire and was about thirty yards from the buildings when it received



Field Marshal Montgomery visits the Ozark command post.

an estimated thirty rounds of 50mm mortar fire. The group immediately deployed and opened fire, and was given supporting fire by the other members of the patrol. The enemy replied with rifle, machine-pistol and machine-gun fire. From the volume, it was estimated that at least fifty men were in the buildings which were being attacked. Mortar fire was now called for, and the assault group withdrew to its base of fire, where it deployed and renewed the fight. The patrol leader then observed that he was being flanked on both sides. Calling for covering artillery fire, the patrol withdrew at 0700.

PLANS

In the meantime, the Division was completing its training and briefing in preparation for playing its part in Operation Grenade—the coming assault across the Roer River and the advance to the Rhine. This was an operation of the first importance, and one which—as an examination of contemporary periodicals in America and England will confirm—was being awaited with excitement and concern by a large audience. The Roer River had come to represent not just another small stream but a major obstacle in the enemy's western defenses.

Operation Grenade called for the U. S. Ninth Army, still serving under the British 21st Army Group, to attack with the XIX Corps (right) and XIII Corps abreast. On 6 February, the XVI Corps was placed on the left of XIII Corps, and relieved the British XII Corps along that portion of the Roer downstream from its junction with the Wurm. It had the mission of protecting the left flank, crossing the Roer within the XIII Corps

bridgehead, and then cleaning out the Hilfarth-Roermond-Venlo triangle. Having crossed the Roer in an easterly direction the Ninth Army was to swing to the left and attack generally north and northeast. In the meantime, the Canadian First Army had, on 8 February, launched an attack between the Rhine and Maas Rivers from the general vicinity of Nijmegen, to strike southeastward through Cleve and Goch, utilizing the Rhine as their left flank. These two converging armies would eventually meet in a pincers movement, forcing the destruction or capitulation of all German forces caught in this gigantic double envelopment. It was to be another Cannae.

The Ozark plan for the crossing operation, due to the width of the front and the subsequent turning movement, was to attack with two regimental combat teams abreast. The 405th on the right would cross at Flossdorf and Rürdorf, and the 407th on the left would cross on an extremely narrow front at Linnich. For support of the operation, the entire 5th Armored Division Artillery was attached on 8 February, and the 3d Chemical Mortar Battalion and 11th Cavalry Group joined the Division on 9 February.

Following the establishment of the Division bridgehead, the arc of which was to pass through Hottoff, the 102d, operating as spearhead of the attack on the right of the XIII Corps, was to establish the Corps bridgehead and be prepared to attack toward the north. It was also to protect the increasingly vulnerable right flank of the Corps.

D-day for Operation Grenade was set for 10 February, with H-hour at 0330. In accordance with this schedule, the final movement of assault units to their assembly positions in the river towns was to be executed during the night of 9-10 February. Beginning at 0310, they were to make their way down previously marked lanes to the river's edge. At the conclusion of a 45-minute artillery preparation, the assault boats were to be lowered into the river. Four crossing sites had been selected.

FLOOD

At 1800 on 9 February, the Division's plans were abruptly suspended, as the Roer River had begun to rise so rapidly that a flood was obviously in the making. It became evident that a crossing on 10 February was impossible since the river had risen four feet, the current had greatly increased in speed,

and the adjacent valley floor was inundated. No choice remained but to postpone the attack indefinitely.

The key to this disappointing development lay in the highlands south of Düren, where the Germans had been uneasily watching two divisions of the First Army approach the dams. These divisions, having returned to the zone of action in which they had been operating prior to the Ardennes breakthrough, resumed their attack on 8 February. Since 3 February, both the Royal Air Force and the U. S. Army Air Forces had been attempting to destroy the dams by means of bombs and torpedoes in order that the potential flood waters might be released at a time of our own choosing, and the threat which had plagued the Allies for three months be eliminated once and for all. These efforts from the air had been ineffective, but the success of the ground action now appeared probable. On 9 February, the Germans permanently jammed open the main flood gates and the impounded water began flowing into the river at a rate of more than 260 cubic meters a second. The projected time of attack now resolved itself into an arithmetical calculation of time and depth of water in the river. It then became necessary for the army engineer section to decide when the river would reach its maximum flood stage, and determine the predicted daily drop of the water level. Originally it was estimated that it would take about two weeks for the water level to reach something approaching the natural stream at that season. D-day was therefore predicted as 20 February.

That the flood occurred on the eve of the attack appeared to be quite accidental, as the Germans had no knowledge of when the Roer River was to be crossed. The effect, however, was just as unfortunate as if the enemy had been fully informed. All assault units were still on the west side of the river and, while crossing was considered feasible at certain places, it was obvious that it could be undertaken only after the over-all plan had been modified to meet the new conditions. One happy aspect of the situation lay in the fact that the enemy now had shot his bolt, so far as manipulation of the waters of the Roer River was concerned. If the flood could be considered his best hope, it was also very evidently his last. As the water level dropped his fears must have risen.

Initially, the flood effectively checked the American offensive. Bad weather also played its part. Dur-

ing the first half of February, low overcast with rain persisted day after day. Under cover of clouds and daily mists, the enemy was able to rearrange and redistribute his forces with little fear that aerial reconnaissance would detect his movements. During this time his air forces took full advantage of the greatly limited visibility of our antiaircraft weapons crews. Enemy night bombers harassed rear areas, and frequent strafing missions kept our front-line troops alert day and night as chattering Messerschmitts darted out of the overcast sky. On the other hand, movements of enemy ground troops were hampered by soft and slippery roads.

The change in crossing plans called for regrouping of troops because the river towns did not have adequate facilities for quartering the large number of men who would have to wait until a new D-day was set. Consequently two battalions of the 405th Infantry, less a few detachments were moved to Baesweiler on 13 February, while the 2d Battalion, 407th Infantry, moved to Gereonsweiler on 7 February.

Beginning 11 February, the Division devoted its principal thought and energy to planning and training for its new crossing operation, which due to passing time, was obviously to be more hazardous than the operation planned for 10 February. As a result, all assault units of the 405th and 407th Infantry Regiments received one extra day of assault-boat training at Visé, or at Lanaye, Belgium. Each squad was reoriented as to the exact part it was to play in the operation through the medium of sandtables and from forward OPs. Infantry commanders took every advantage of observation opportunities provided by artillery Cub planes. Methods for crossing irrigation ditches after leaving the river line, and standing operating procedures for passing through minefields were also further studied.

In the meantime, the enemy opposing the Division appeared to become more and more nervous. An examination of his artillery fires showed that he was especially preoccupied with the situation at Linnich—our main crossing site. This nervousness was believed to be caused chiefly by his knowledge that a general attack along the front was bound to develop in the near future. It was no doubt also due in part to the smoke and fire demonstrations which the 405th and 407th Infantry Regiments staged in coordination with their attached chemical mortar companies to keep him worried. As a test



1—406th Infantry armorer-artificer sets up in Gereonsweiler. 2—Local bridging materials were assembled. Hunting shrapnel fragments with a mine detector before sawing the logs. 3—Ederen was a boom town. 4—Cobblestone roads disappeared under heavy traffic. 5—Equipment was overhauled. 6—Six buildings occupied this site before a bangalore torpedo dump exploded.

of his reaction, on 19 February the 3d Battalion, 405th Infantry, in conjunction with Company A, 3d Chemical Mortar Battalion, laid down a dense smoke screen on the enemy side of the river from Imbusch to Gut Bischhoff and supported it with small-arms and automatic-weapons fire. The enemy immediately retaliated with artillery and small-arms fire, placing an estimated ninety rounds of mortar fire directly into the smoke screen. Again, on 20-21 February from 2400 to 0020, and on 21 February from 1200 to 1210, the 405th Infantry, with the help of Company A, 3d Chemical Mortar Battalion, demonstrated in its sector with smoke, mortars, machine guns and other small arms. Coincidentally, the 405th Infantry's demonstration interfered with a similar scheme on the enemy's part and he again wasted precious ammunition.

The growing tenseness along the front was also indicated by an increase of harassing fires directed by the enemy against the Division's forward elements. All movements on the American side of the river (particularly in the vicinity of Linnich) met with an immediate response from the German side. Nevertheless, patrols from both the 405th and 407th Infantry Regiments succeeded in crossing the river. In one instance, on the night of 19 February, a combat patrol from the 407th Infantry, supported by well planned artillery fires, attacked a bunker on the farther side of the river, killed two of the enemy and returned with four prisoners. This patrol's crossing was delayed in midstream by floating debris, but in spite of this misadventure and other more normal hazards of the mission, it returned without a casualty.

PROBLEMS

No recital of the Division's planning for the Roer crossing can be complete without reference to the yeoman service of the 327th Engineer Combat Battalion as well as of the supporting 1141st Engineer Combat Group, comprising principally the 171st, 251st, 279th and 1276th Engineer Combat Battalions, the 998th Engineer Treadway Bridge Company, and the 74th Engineer Light Ponton Company. Their performance was superb. As a single example, during the month of February, the 327th Engineer Combat Battalion expended 30,000 man hours of labor and hauled 2,200 cubic yards of rubble to keep the roads within the Division sector passable.

Another engineer problem had to do with the provision of the necessary crossing equipment, such as boats and bridging material, which had to be located so as to be readily available when needed. In addition, the engineers had the responsibility of ferrying many infantry patrols across the river prior to the crossing, and dispatching engineer patrols to obtain needed engineer information.

Throughout their association the organic and supporting engineers worked together in complete harmony. In fact, no instance occurred when a request of the 327th Engineer Combat Battalion was not cheerfully met by the 1141st Engineer Combat Group, and in numerous cases the group itself took necessary action on its own initiative to meet the situation.

The most trying problem to solve was that of traffic control. To handle the anticipated volume, a traffic control point was established in the forward area near the Puffendorf crossroads, with a mission of exercising complete authority over the movement of all vehicles in the area. As all traffic en route to the river towns had to pass that point, it could best be controlled there. The traffic control telephone net consisted of two generally parallel circuits, one from Puffendorf to Gereonsweiler to Linnich, the other from Puffendorf to Ederen to Welz to Rürdorf. When the necessity arose due to trouble at the bridge sites, it would be an easy matter to halt a column or to divert it to another bridge, even after it had passed the crossroads at Puffendorf.

As in all river-crossing operations much material had to be transported to the crossing sites and detailed

plans to include the actions of every soldier and vehicles had to be foreseen. The roadnet, beginning at Puffendorf, was not that normal to school problems. Through the shattered village of Gereonsweiler, which was always more or less under enemy artillery fire, the paved surface of the only artery to Linnich had withstood the terrific strain of traffic and was in excellent condition. It was to be the main supply route and carry the entire load of two divisions. The whole length of this route from Gereonsweiler to Linnich was exposed to enemy observations and fire. As one moved down its tree-lined grade, he became conscious of his predicament and expected momentarily to be on the receiving end of a large-caliber shell. Enemy and friendly minefields lined the road on either side. The hot spot on this route was "Windy Corner" and it was here, where the road from Lindern joined and formed a Y, that to linger meant sudden death. Linnich, also, being less than two hundred yards from the enemy lines was a daily target of Wehrmacht artillery and mortarmen. The second route to the river was through Ederen and Welz. Although safer only in that it was generally masked from enemy observers, its surface was broken and muddy throughout all but a few yards of its entire length. Much depended on the availability of these two routes and our engineers worked under hazardous conditions to prepare them for the volume of traffic they were later to take.

Movement schedules and charts were computed and prepared for every unit which was scheduled to cross the river during the early stages of the operation. Their priority of crossing was based upon recommendations which had been submitted by unit commanders with a view to insuring that weapons and other equipment would arrive on the east bank of the river as needed. Every vehicle group was assigned a movement number, in order to permit oral reference over the communication system without disclosing unit designations to enemy wiretappers. Every possible detail was given as to how and when units would move their vehicle groups from assembly areas on to the roadnet, and thence across the river.

That this control system was highly successful was proved by the dispatch with which the Division and attached units, as well as many Corps and Army units were able to move through this unavoidable bottleneck over the Roer to take part in the fight to the Rhine.



The high command talks it over. From left to right, General Gillem (XIII Corps), General Simpson (Ninth Army), General Bradley (12th Army Group), and General Keating.

After the middle of the month, the weather moderated considerably. Rains ceased and skies cleared—a development which not only exposed the enemy's rear areas and communication lines to air attack, but also again made visible to ground observation his activities on the opposite side of the Roer Valley. Flood conditions began to subside, and the river fell about one inch per day although the current remained dangerously swift, ranging from six to twelve miles per hour. Finally, on 22 February, there was a sudden decrease of three inches in the water level. Indications were that the river was subsiding at a far faster rate than had been expected.

D-day had now been set as 23 February, with H-hour at 0330. In anticipation of the new attack, assault units again moved to the river line. Thus, on 22 February, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 405th Infantry left Baesweiler and closed in Ederen, Welz, and in Freialdenhoven. During the night

22-23 February, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 407th Infantry moved from Gereonsweiler to Linnich. Division headquarters was established in a schoolhouse in Linnich jointly with the 407th Infantry, within sight of the swirling river. Preparations were rapidly drawing to a close (*see Map 12*).

One could feel the tension as darkness fell over the Roer Valley. Material for the crossing had to be carried down the precipitous bank opposite Rürdorf, and thousands of men were well within range of every weapon available to the Germans. Anything could happen and possibly would. Our fingers were crossed.

During the early part of the evening silence reigned and only an occasional amber colored flare broke the stillness of the night. Tomorrow, 23 February, only a few hours away, the big push would take place. It was the beginning of the end and many found encouragement in the thought. All believed in the success to come. The enemy, prob-

ably not sensing anything unusual, began the desultory firing of mortars, *Werfkopfers*, and machine guns. In darkened Linnich and Rürdorf men moved as silently as shadows, quickly dodging into doorways as a shell passed overhead or a bullet spattered brick dust into the street. Now and then a figure slowly emerged from a shelter to satisfy the curiosity which impelled him to see what he hoped was there. It was the first experience in the front lines for many, and their imagination tormented their souls. Several direct hits on the Division command post jarred the war correspondents into the realization that war played no favorites and death lurked in the air.

Rogers' Night Raiders—the fearless group of officers and soldiers who long ago won their spurs in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy—calmly blackened their faces and checked their weapons.

They would be the first to cross and drive the enemy from the far bank so our boats would not come under direct small-arms fire. Communications personnel, upon whom much depended, quietly performed their task of keeping the lines open, well knowing that they worked in constant danger and had to carry on. Cannoneers checked fuze settings, saw that rounds were ready to be shoved into breeches as rapidly as the ammunition allowance would permit. They would fire the first shots in the battle to come. A few tried to sleep, but peace of mind was not their lot and they tossed and tumbled on dirty floors, in any place where reasonable shelter existed. They heard the gurgling of the stream they would soon cross and it served as a reminder that tomorrow was D-day. Preparations for the Battle of the Roer had ended—its execution was in the offing. We were ready.

Contact with the enemy was a prime necessity at this time. Patrol missions became ever more hazardous and gruelling. Still the men went out. The following Silver Star Medal awards were so earned.

S/Sgt. HAROLD L. CASH, Company B, 406th Infantry . . . successfully covered the withdrawal of his patrol from Hilfarth . . . silenced a machine gun with a rocket . . . laid down a screen of automatic fire . . . was last to leave.

Sgt. CHRISTOPH J. LORENZ, Headquarters Company, 407th Infantry . . . secured a guide rope across the river . . . led his men deep into enemy territory to capture two prisoners . . . personally ferried two boats across . . . returning with valuable information.

T/5 JOHN F. McKENNEDY, Headquarters Company, 2d Battalion, 407th Infantry . . . singlehandedly laid a telephone cable across the Roer . . . assisted two other soldiers to safety when their assault boat capsized

T/5 DANA R. PALMER, Medical Detachment, 407th Infantry . . . disregarding an intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage . . . he ran to rescue three wounded soldiers . . . and saved their lives.

1st Lt. ROY L. ROGERS, Antitank Company, 407th Infantry . . . led his patrol across the Roer . . . 1,000 yards behind enemy lines . . . to ambush the enemy . . . and return with prisoners and valuable information.

S/Sgt. RUFUS M. WILKES, Company I, 407th Infantry . . . to facilitate accomplishing his patrol's mission . . . he exposed himself and thus diverted the enemy's fire . . . while the others successfully reconnoitered the area and destroyed a machine-gun position . . . then returned across the river.

The following men earned Oak Leaf Clusters for their Silver Star Medals.

1st Lt. FRANK B. NIXON, S/Sgt. LEROY D. HAINES, JR., Company A, 405th Infantry . . . patrolling across the Roer behind enemy lines . . . captured a prisoner to secure valuable information which later contributed materially in planning the crossing.

Sgt. CHRISTOPH J. LORENZ, Headquarters Company, 407th Infantry . . . led a raid across the Roer into enemy territory

. . . and destroyed two enemy machine guns . . . thus accomplishing his harassing mission.

1st Lt. ROY L. ROGERS, Antitank Company, 407th Infantry . . . although his patrol was discovered crossing the river . . . he boldly led it forward to destroy two enemy positions . . . and capture four prisoners . . . and returned with vital information.