

The Roer River Crossing

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Lucherburg, Germany, in February of 1945, a small town about two miles north of Duren and two miles west of the Roer River, was the typical war-torn town so familiar to GI Joe ... ravaged, filthy, and at the time we entered it, uninhabited. Under the miserable conditions that prevailed, we lived as best we could, with mail and chow the only bright prospects. A lone cow left in one of the barns offered quite a tempting target until AMG spotted it. However, mess sergeant Frankie and his cooks made things bearable by preparing three hot meals a day, and Billy the mail clerk saw to it that our letters and parcels got to us on time. The town was on the highest ground west of the Roer between Merken and Duren and because of its commanding view it was of extreme military value. Our squad Quarters, in a dilapidated old brick house, was an OP for our artillery and much time was spent observing the enemy through the BC scope. Things were rather quiet except for the occasional incoming artillery and, naturally "Bed-Check Charlie." Then it came.

The inactivity was broken with orders for an all out attack over the Roer. Things began to buzz with preparation. All day long assault boats were transported through the town on the way up to Merken, and in the skies above out planes were out in force. The atmosphere was alive with the hum of an all out offensive. We began to familiarize ourselves with assault boat practice, the test firing of our weapons, the checking of equipment, and the study of a planned attack of "E" Company's objective..... Stammel.

Stammel, another typical enemy town, was two miles north of Duren on the east bank of the Roer. It was directly east of Merken where our Third Battalion, who had recently relieved us, was holding. In our two week stay in Merken, constant patrols, observation, and reconnaissance familiarized us with the enemy-held town. A final orientation produced a well planned attack. We were to cross the Roer from Merken during the final fifteen minutes of a forty-five minute artillery barrage that would lift, then roll, as we advanced behind it. The Third Platoon was to break to the right, proceed over a known enemy tank ditch and a possible mine field, to the southeastern end of Stammel where teams of four to five men would take assigned houses. The second Squad would assault a lone shack one hundred yards east of the town and set up an OP. Our artillery would then box in the town to hamper a possible counter-attack from Oberzier, a town a half mile northeast of Stammel. First and Second Platoons were assigned other sectors of the town and our Company Weapons Platoon and Battalion Weapons Company would offer close support. "F" Company was assigned a factory six hundred yards north of our objective, and "G" Company was to take Huchem, a town adjoining the factory

and Stammel.

H-Hour was close at hand and a rigid tenseness gripped the men as they smoked cigarette after cigarette and ate with little appetite. We had turned in all our personal belongings and were fully supplied with weapons and ammunition. During the final checkup of equipment the word came down to delay the attack. No reason was given but, nevertheless, the reprieve was welcomed, for it broke the tenseness and once again the men were at ease. A second postponement disclosed the reason. Capture of the Roer River dams around the Schmidt, to prevent the enemy from flooding the valley, was a necessity and had to be accomplished prior to a jump-off. However, the enemy did blow the dams when Infantry threatened encirclement and thus, the Roer Valley was flooded. We could not stop at this point. It was then that SHAEF designated the morning of February 23, 1945 as H-Hours in the drive across the Cologne Plain. Men of all faiths had opportunity for final devotions and again that nervous, uneasy restless tension gripped them as they wrote a last letter home. I, like the others, consumed many cigarettes and, nervously, tried my best to keep at ease. However, the "Battle of Nerves" that results from "Sweating it out" always seems the worst. Some men tried sleeping, some played poker, some wrote letters, or some, as I did, merely talked. We discussed everything, and as usual the conversation turned to the subject of women. Finally, word came down from CP to fall in for the march to Merken. One last check of equipment, another cigarette, and out we poured into the pitch black night that enveloped Lucherburg. "Lets Go" came the Captain's determined voice as he led the way. During the march, I became confident of the successful accomplishment of our mission. We of "E" Company and of the Battalion had been fully oriented in every minute detail. We could not fail.

We reached Merken about 0130 hours. Under the cover of buildings we smoked a last cigarette and said a final prayer. At 0230 hours we proceeded through to the eastern end of the town where the assault boats were hidden and then carried them through hip deep flood waters to a point as close to the actual river as possible. We came back 150 yards and "Sweat it Out".

At 0300 hours our artillery began hitting the eastern bank of the Roer. This was said to be the greatest barrage ever mustered on the Western Front. However, the artillery barrage prior to Second Battalion's jump-off over the Mark in Holland was, to me, more intense. At 0330 hours the jump-off order was given. This was it! We, of the Second Squad-Third Platoon, went to our boat, struggled to the river, and immediately shoved off. A powerful enemy counter fire was proving effective upon the first two boats. This caused the men in our boat to become excited and to lose control as the fast current threw us downstream and grounded us. I jumped into the water from my position at the rear of the boat and gave it a shove. At that moment the current caught the boat and, in making a desperate leap to catch it, I lost my helmet which sank quickly to the river's bottom. A felling of nakedness crept over me as the constant

enemy fire grew fiercer. A look back showed confusion and turmoil on our western bank.

What was happening to the company was in the minds of all of us as we reached the enemy bank safely, but frightened, in an assault crossing through an intense enemy fire that landed us far downstream and below our mark. The boat was quickly secured by the two front engineers as we in the squad went up the bank. As we spread out and hit the ground, I, along with my squad leader, took cover in a shell hole, for Jerry was still throwing plenty of fire power. We had a twelve man squad, plus three men from "H" Company Weapons with a thirty caliber, and a few men from the other boats who did make it to shore. At this point, things looked very bad. My squad leader decided to have the men spread out on each side of the thirty caliber and dig in. He was mortally wounded in getting up from his position to pass on his plans to the men. Upon my call, the assistant squad leader crawled to my position where I relayed to him the situation. All Hell was breaking loose and still the company had not come ashore. A short time later an incoming shell hit between the BAR men and his assistant with mortal effect.

The platoon medic got ashore and immediately set about his-work of first-aid. "Doc", as we called him, was admired by all the men of the company because of his superb work under fire. While he was rendering aid, we fired scattered, harassing shots to our front not knowing their effect. In the course of the next ten minutes our squad suffered two riflemen killed, and assistant squad leader and two riflemen wounded. In our squad, that left two riflemen, Eddie and me, and about nine others. After an endless wait for help I grew desperate and decided to take Eddie and go upstream to look for elements of the Company. I informed the assistant squad leader of the First Squad and off we went back over the bank. How we made it I'll never know, for our silhouettes were obvious to the enemy. We edged slowly upstream along the bank until we came in sight of the blown out bridge over the Roer from Merken, where the bank dropped and disappeared into the water. We had felt fairly secure behind a six foot bank, but here was an obstacle. We had to get through to someone and this was no time to turn and go back.

The quick turn of events had left us a little dull for we ran splashing across the area and, I suppose, we were detected, for we had not gone very far when flares began dropping close by. With the first flare Eddie and I hit the water, but fast. Finally, after a let up, we got to our feet and started forward again. This time we advanced almost to the bridge when again enemy flares and fire filled the air. We hit the water and noticed to our left front a rise of ground that would offer fair cover so we crawled up to it. We looked everywhere but could not spot the company. BAR'S, thirty lights and heavies, and other weapons could be heard, but we were confused as to whom they belonged. To our rear was the blown out bridge and flares were dropping consistently in and around it. The probable conceived reason for this was enemy knowledge that

engineers were to repair it. We laid in the water with just our heads exposed trying to figure things out. While there, a rifleman from the First Squad, and an engineer, made shore and joined us. By this time, it was about 0430 hours and, being soaked from head to foot, cold, miserable, and frightened, we didn't know quite what to do. So, we prayed. Prayers do help and we prayed hard. However, about fifteen minutes later a shell hit the water just a few feet behind us and the effect was terrific because the next thing I knew it was 1030 hours and overhead our planes were raining havoc. I tried to get my bearings and account for that time lost between 0445 and 1030 hours. When I tried to move my limbs, I found I couldn't do so. I was paralyzed from head to foot. The other fellows with me were in just as bad, if not worse, shape. My conclusion was that the concussion through the water was of such force that it blacked me out and after laying in the water for about six hours I was paralyzed from exposure.

I tried noting any fractures, pains, or wounds, but had no feeling. Useless, helpless, and miserable, we tried to check the situation but couldn't see anything. We laid in the Roer until 1630 hours when a medic from downstream spotted us and motioned that he would be back with help. A little later we spotted some Jerry medics checking our squad area with a lone GI. We laid motionless for we believed that our squad had been captured and the check was for us. We thought that we failed in assignment.

After a five hour wait, Medics from Battalion finally found their way through the darkness to our spot and carried the four of us back across the very same position we had occupied that morning. The belief that we were to be prisoners was changed when we reached the factory, where we were placed on lifters with Jerry bearers, a "G" Company sergeant as a guard, and then told of our evacuation to the aid station in Merken. A boat took us back across the river where we were carried over many foot bridges and placed on a weasel that took us to Merken. Here my wet clothes were removed, my shoes cut from my swollen feet, and warm blankets wrapped around me. A cup of black coffee, a cigarette, and back I went in an ambulance to a hospital in Eschweiler. That was the last I saw of the others.

About four days later at a hospital in Spa, Belgium, I came upon Shoo Shoo, a buddy from Company Headquarters. After telling my story he told me his; it was then that I learned of the Company's withdrawal to Merken. When the Company didn't get ashore I should have realized the situation. However, the Company was reinforced and re-equipped in Merken and at 1630 hours they attacked through a different sector successfully.

During my eleven day stay in the hospital, I gave constant thought to what lay ahead. I saw that there were still towns to take, hills to storm, and rivers to assault before the enemy could be annihilated and thus bring final and complete victory.