



The following excerpts from *United States Army in World War II, The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Germany*, compiled by the United States Army Center of Military History, describe the participation of the 206<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion in the Moselle, Saar and Main Rivers crossings operations in November 1944, December 1944 and March 1945, respectively.

*The Moselle Crossings at  
Malling and Cattenom*

The bulk of the effort to get third Army troops across the Moselle during the November attack fell to the engineers supporting the 90<sup>th</sup> Division. In rubber assault boats of the 1139<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Group, troops of the 359<sup>th</sup> Infantry were to cross near the village of Malling on the left (north) flank, supported by the 206<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion. On the right, battalions of the 358<sup>th</sup> Infantry were to cross simultaneously near Cattenom, with the 179<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion in support. At both crossings, where the water gaps were estimated to be 360 and 300 feet wide, respectively, the engineers also were to construct an infantry support bridge, a treadway bridge, and a floating Bailey bridge, while the 90<sup>th</sup> Division's organic 315<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was to build a footbridge, operate ferries, and undertake far shore work. As soon as the expanding bridgehead had cleared the far shore of Germans, the 160<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was to construct a double-triple fixed Bailey bridge at Rettel, northeast of Malling<sup>1</sup>.

By the night of 8 November the engineers had trained with the infantry in preparation for the crossing, demonstrating the proper way to carry and load an assault boat. For each boat the crew consisted of three engineers, one a guide. That night the river began to rise, and by the time the boats of the attack wave shoved off in a drizzling rain at 0330 on 9 November, the infantry had to load in waist-deep water. In spite of a strong current the two leading infantry battalions were

on the east bank of the Moselle by 0500. As they reached their destination the troops found that the high water had actually helped the crossings: extensive minefields the Germans had prepared on the far shore were flooded, and the boats passed over without danger. Also, the enemy had abandoned water-filled foxholes and rifle pits dug into the east bank.<sup>2</sup>

After daybreak, as succeeding infantry battalions the racing yellow Moselle, enemy artillery fire fell so heavily on the east bank that many crews abandoned their boats after debarking their troops, allowing the craft to swirl downstream to be lost. But the infantrymen made swift progress. At Malling, where they achieved complete surprise, troops of the 359<sup>th</sup> Infantry captured the town by noon. The 358<sup>th</sup> Infantry, after crossing from Cattenom, faced a more formidable objective – Fort Koenigsmacker, which had to be reduced before further progress could be made. There too the 90<sup>th</sup> Division achieved surprise. Assault teams of infantry and engineers (from the 315<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion) ripped through bands of barbed wire and reached the trenches around the fort before an alarm was sounded. Braving mortar and machine-gun fire from the fort's superstructure, the teams reduced the fort, blowing steel doors open with satchel charges and blasting ventilating ports with thermite grenades or TNT.

By the end of November the 90<sup>th</sup> Division had eight battalions, including reserves from the 357<sup>th</sup> Infantry, across the Moselle. The division had advanced two miles beyond the river, overrun seven towns, and penetrated Fort Koenigsmacker<sup>3</sup>. Next day, as German resistance stiffened, little



progress was made, but by midnight, 11 November, the 90<sup>th</sup> Division's leading units held a defensible position on a ridge topped with the Maginot Line fortifications. The division had knocked out or bypassed many of the line's weakly held pillboxes and had forced the surrender of Fort Koenigsmacker with hand-carried weapons and explosives, a few 57-mm. antitank guns ferried across the Moselle, and artillery fire from the west bank. No tanks or trucks had yet been able to cross the river, and supply parties had to use rickety farm wagons and even abandoned baby buggies.

Attempts to bridge the flooding river, beginning early on 9 November, came to naught for two days. Before Fort Koenigsmacker surrendered, shellfire from the bastion had made the bridge site at Crittenom untenable and destroyed the bridging equipment. At Malling, harassing enemy machine-gun and mortar fire forced the 206<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion to abandon its first attempt to build a footbridge. At 0600 on 9 November the engineers began constructing another and simultaneously put two ferries into operation. One, using boats lashed together and powered by outboard motors, carried ammunition and rations and evacuated the wounded around the clock. The other, using infantry support rafts to carry 57-mm. anti-tank guns, jeeps, and weapons carriers, was short-lived. A few anti-tank guns got across, but at 1100 a raft carrying a jeep ran into the infantry footbridge, broke its cable, and put the bridge out of action. The infantry support bridge, then about three-quarters finished, was carried downstream and lost.

Recovering some of the equipment, the engineers decided to build a treadway bridge at the site, and the 991<sup>st</sup> Engineer Treadway Bridge Company managed to complete the new span by dusk on 10 November. But the river's continued rise had now put the road leading to the bridge under nearly five feet of water. No vehicles could

get through until the following afternoon when the floodwaters, having crested at noon on 11 November, began to recede. At 1500 the crossings began again. Ten supply-laden Brockway trucks, some jeeps, and a few light tanks and tank destroyers reached the far shore. Shortly after dawn the next morning German artillery fire repeatedly hit the treadway, so weakening it that it could no longer bear the weight of a tank destroyer. It broke loose and went off downstream.

While waiting for more equipment to come up so they could rebuild the bridge, the men of the 991<sup>st</sup> Engineer Treadway Bridge Company used bridge fragments to construct a tank ferry. Employing a heavy raft made of pontoons and treads and tying powerboats to the raft, the engineers manned the ferry, crossing a company of medium tanks and tank destroyers by dark. This work earned the 991<sup>st</sup> Engineer Treadway Bridge Company the Distinguished Unit Citation<sup>4</sup>.

Late on 12 November, the engineers were repairing the Malling bridge and building a bridge at the Cattenom site. But by now the XX Corps commander, Maj. Gen. Walton H. Walker, had decided on another site for heavy bridging to move his armored division across the Moselle. [...] General Patton...crossing the treadway under a protecting smoke screen, later pronounced the 90<sup>th</sup> Division passage of the Moselle "an epic river crossing done under terrific difficulties."<sup>5</sup>

#### *Advance to the Saar*

After envelopment to the north and south, coupled with a containing action west of the Moselle, Metz fell to XX Corps on 22 November. The lesser German forts in the area were left to "wither on the vine" (the last surrendering on 13 December) because scarce U.S. artillery ammunition had to be conserved to support the corps' advance to the Saar River.



The XX Corps was to make the main thrust, heading toward a crossing at Saarlautern, about thirty miles northeast of Metz at the strongest section of the Siegfried Line<sup>6</sup>. The XII Corps, coming up from the south, was to drive with the bulk of its forces to Sarreguemines, about forty miles due east of Metz, where the Saar swung south out of the Siegfried Line and into the Maginot Line. [...]

The plan was for the 5<sup>th</sup> Division to drive north and ultimately advance alongside XX Corps' 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The latter had not been able to follow the 95<sup>th</sup> Division over the river but had had to cross some miles to the north. Its main objective was Dillingen, on the east bank of the Saar and covering the right flank of the Saarlautern defenses. Two battalions of the 1139<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Group were to ferry the 90<sup>th</sup> Division across the Saar. Since no bridge existed, the division selected two sites for assault boat crossings. The 179<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was to ferry the 357<sup>th</sup> Infantry over the river on the left (north) flank; the 206<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was to cross the 358<sup>th</sup> Infantry on the right. The engineers were to operate the assault boats for the infantry and, after the landings, to bring over supplies and evacuate the wounded. The 179<sup>th</sup> Battalion also had to construct an infantry support bridge, an M2 treadway for tanks, other vehicles, or both, depending on the outcome of the assault. Late on 5 December the engineers brought the boats down to the riverbank as a ninety-minute artillery barrage drowned the noise of the deployment.

The first boats shoved off at 0415. Darkness protected them from enemy fire, but they had to buck a strong current in the river, which had begun rising the day before. Almost half of the boats the 179<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion operated swamped on the way over or back and went off downstream, smashing into the debris of

a blown railroad bridge. Most of the first infantry wave got across without mishap, but for succeeding waves the crossings were progressively more difficult. At daybreak the enemy spotted the boats, and smoke seemed only to attract heavier fire. When the engineers attempted to put down footbridges that first day, the Germans knocked out the spans almost as soon as work started<sup>7</sup>.

On the far bank of the Saar a strong band of pillboxes barred the way eastward. The 357<sup>th</sup> Infantry made some progress on the north, but to the south the 358<sup>th</sup> was unable to cross railroad tracks separating the riverside village of Pachten from Dillingen. At Pachten one of the engineers of the 315<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion, Sgt. Joseph E. Williams, won the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in action. Volunteering to breach a pillbox, he was wounded before he could reach it but crawled on and fired his charge. He refused to be evacuated, advanced on another pillbox, and although wounded for the second time succeeded in taking sixteen prisoners<sup>8</sup>. However, this and other acts of heroism by engineers and infantry were not enough to overcome the pillboxes. The only field gun the 90<sup>th</sup> Division had east of the river was a captured German 75-mm. piece. Frantic calls went back to the near bank for tanks and antitank guns.

To get the tanks and guns across the river the engineers tried to build M2 treadway bridges, but German artillery knocked them out. So intense was the enemy fire that the powerboats used to ferry supplies and evacuate the wounded could be employed only at night; at times ferry operations had to be suspended entirely. Not until 9 December were the engineers able to get heavy rafts into operation. That day the 179<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion crossed tanks and antitank guns on an M2 steel treadway raft, and the 206<sup>th</sup> Battalion got some jeeps, antitank guns, and tank destroyers across. Later, the 206<sup>th</sup> had sole charge of the



crossing operation<sup>9</sup>.

During the following week, despite chilling rain and snow, the engineers kept the vehicular ferry running, repeatedly repairing damage from heavy German artillery fire. As the river began to recede the engineers also built a corduroy road of logs on the far shore to keep the tanks from miring down when they rolled off the rafts<sup>10</sup>. By 15 December, after the tanks as well as the 359<sup>th</sup> Infantry had crossed the Saar, the 90<sup>th</sup> Division was penetrating fortifications protecting Dillingen. Then the attack halted for several days to give the 5<sup>th</sup> Division time to relieve the 95<sup>th</sup> in the Saarlautern bridgehead and come abreast of the 90<sup>th</sup>. The advance resumed on 18 December. Resistance proved surprisingly light, and in three hours most of Dillingen was captured.

### *The Withdrawal*

Next afternoon, on 19 December, General Patton ordered the 90<sup>th</sup> Division to give up its hard-won Dillingen bridgehead and withdraw west of the Saar. By that time German attacks in the Ardennes, beginning on 16 December, had been recognized as a full-scale offensive. After a conference with Eisenhower and Bradley at Verdun on the morning of 19 December, Patton committed to the American defenses the bulk of Third Army, including the 90<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions, leaving the 95<sup>th</sup> Division to hold the Saarlautern bridgehead – the only foothold left east of the Saar.

For the withdrawal the engineers had to depend on assault boats and the M2 treadway ferries because a heavy ponton bridge they had planned to erect was not yet in place. The first tanks and trucks went back west on the night of 19 December. After artillery fire knocked out one of the ferries during daylight operations, the crossing

continued only at night. The 206<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was in charge of the withdrawal. By noon of 22 December the 90<sup>th</sup> Division had recrossed the Saar and was headed north to take its place in the hasty defense against the last great German counteroffensive in the west<sup>11</sup>. [...]

### *The XX Corps Crossing at Mainz*

At Mainz the Rhine is almost 2,000 feet wide – one of the widest points. Directly opposite the city, which lies on the west bank of the Rhine, the narrower and slower Main River empties into the Rhine from the east. Parallel to the Main's north bank an excellent road ran to Frankfurt am Main and beyond, into the heart of Germany. Elements of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions, having broken out of the Oppenheim bridgehead, tried to cross the Main near Frankfurt between 25 and 27 March. At three places railway bridges were found still standing, but the only one that would take tanks was at Aschaffenburg, fifteen miles up the Main from Frankfurt. Demolitions had so weakened the other two bridges that only foot soldiers could get across; heavy shelling from Frankfurt prevented engineers from repairing the bridges.

Although the width of the Rhine at Mainz would place a heavy strain on XX Corps' bridging equipment, the city had a number of advantages as a crossing site: the banks were flat, the enemy lacked high ground for observation, and buildings extending to the water's edge would protect the attackers from small-arms fire and shell splinters as they embarked in the assault boats. As at Oppenheim, boat basins with slips were available to provide concealment for launching naval craft.

The XX Corps decided on two assault crossings, both of which the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was to undertake. The division's 317<sup>th</sup> Infantry



was to cross the Rhine at Mainz, where engineers were to build a treadway bridge; the 319<sup>th</sup> Infantry, using the Oppenheim bridge over the Rhine, was to cross the Main from Bischofsheim to Hochheim, three miles upstream from Mainz. At Hochheim, where the Main was less than 700 feet wide – a favorable circumstance in view of an increasing shortage of bridging material – engineers were to build a second treadway, allowing more tanks to cross to reinforce the XX Corps' armor.

In the early hours of 28 March the 1139<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Group's 135<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion paddled the first assault wave over the Rhine at Mainz. From an island in midriver and from the far bank came small-arms and machine-gun fire and some 20-mm. antiaircraft shells. The second wave, crossing in LCVPs and LCMs, encountered heavier shelling. During the assault crossing 10 men were killed, 18 wounded, and some 55 reported missing. Small-arms fire falling on the bridge site delayed a start on the treadway. Because there was no reserve bridging material, the 160<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was reluctant to run the risk of losing what equipment it had. But on orders from the XX Corps Commander, Maj. Gen. Walton H. Walker, the engineers began work at 0900.

At the Main River site there was little or no opposition to the assault crossings, which the 1139<sup>th</sup> Group's 179<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion supported. By 0900 the 206<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion's heavy rafts were ferrying tanks to help clear the far bank, and at 1855 the battalion completed a 624-foot bridge. Next day around noon, the Mainz bridge over the Rhine was ready for traffic. The XX Corps engineers were especially proud because they believed the 1,896-foot span to be the longest tactical bridge built under combat conditions in the European theater<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Combat Interview 364, Opns of 1139<sup>th</sup> Engr C Gp (8-17 Nov), Crossing of the Moselle River, XX Corps files.

<sup>2</sup> OCE ETOUSA Hist Rpt 10, Combat Engineering, pp. 116-17.

<sup>3</sup> *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II*, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> OCE ETOUSA Hist Rpt 10, Combat Engineering, pp. 117-21; Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, p. 400.

<sup>5</sup> George S. Patton, Jr., *War As I Knew It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Patton believed attacking the line where it was strongest not as foolhardy as it seemed, because "people are inclined not to occupy strong positions with as many men as they should." George S. Patton, Jr., *War As I Knew It* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Hists, 1139<sup>th</sup> Engr C Gp, Dec 44; 179<sup>th</sup> Engr C Bn, Aug, Nov, Dec 44; and 206<sup>th</sup> Engr C Bn, Jun-Dec 44.

<sup>8</sup> AAR, 358<sup>th</sup> Inf Div, 6 Dec 44.

<sup>9</sup> Hists, 179<sup>th</sup> and 206<sup>th</sup> Engr C Bns.

<sup>10</sup> Hist 1139<sup>th</sup> Engr C Gp.

<sup>11</sup> Hists, 1139<sup>th</sup> Engr C Gp and 206<sup>th</sup> Engr C Bn.

<sup>12</sup> Hist 1139<sup>th</sup> Engr C Gp, Mar 45; Third Army Rpt, vol. II, pp. Eng-32-33, *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II*, pp. 331-33.