

***The Siegfried Line Campaign: Chapter 3 (Beginning at page 56)***  
***By Charles Brown MacDonald***

***Bridgehead at Wallendorf***

From the viewpoint of both the V Corps and the Germans, the main effort by the infantry divisions had shown less promise of far-reaching results than had another attack in the south of the V Corps zone. Here an anticipated secondary effort by the 5th Armored Division had developed into a genuine opportunity for a breakthrough which showed promise of welding the three separate division actions into a cohesive corps maneuver. Withheld from immediate commitment against the West Wall, the 5th Armored Division in the interim had drawn a variety of responsibilities. Not the least of these was securing approximately thirty miles of the corps front. The division commander, Maj. Gen. Lunsford E. Oliver, assigned Combat Command A and the attached 112th Infantry to patrol the southern portion of the zone, maintain contact with Third Army cavalry far to the south, and protect the city of Luxembourg. He designated Combat Command R to probe the West Wall with patrols along the central portion of the zone and be prepared upon order to attack the West Wall between Vianden and Echternach and seize the communications center of Bitburg on the Eifel's central plateau. He gave Combat Command B responsibility for the northern portion of the division zone and alerted it for commitment upon corps order to exploit any breakthrough achieved by the infantry division.

Observers in posts along the Our and Sauer Rivers, which separate Luxembourg from Germany, and patrols that probed the West Wall brought back similar reports: In some places the pillboxes were not manned; in others the Germans were hurriedly moving in. Though the Americans did not know it, this was the sector of the great gap between the *I SS Panzer Corps* and the *LXXX Corps*, which was perturbing both enemy corps commanders, Generals Keppler and Beyer.

In the afternoon of 13 September, as the infantry divisions in the north closed to the West Wall, CCR conducted a reconnaissance by fire near the village of Wallendorf, about halfway between Echternach and Vianden. It failed to provoke a single return shot from the Germans.

Convinced that the West Wall opposite the armor was no more than weakly manned, General Gerow in early evening of 13 September ordered General Oliver to advance. With one combat command he was to attack through Wallendorf to seize high ground near Mettendorf, about five miles inside Germany, and then drive to Bitburg, twelve miles beyond the border. The 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, was to assist the attack. In directing an attack between Vianden and Echternach, General Gerow had exercised a choice between two existing avenues of approach into Germany in this region. One extends northeast from the vicinity of Wallendorf, the other almost due north from an eastward bend in the German border east of Echternach. Though the Wallendorf corridor is more

sharply compartmentalized and has fewer good roads, General Gerow chose it because it was somewhat closer to the infantry divisions (about fifteen miles).

General Oliver decided to attack from the southwestern corner of the Wallendorf corridor at the village of Wallendorf itself. Here his right flank might hug the Nussbaumer Hardt, a great forest barrier, leaving room for later broadening of the base of the penetration to the northwest and north. Though the ground rises so abruptly beyond Wallendorf that it reminded some men of the Palisades on the Hudson, similar heights bar the way all along the entrance to the corridor.

CCR knew little about the enemy situation across the border except what patrols and observers had discerned in the preceding three days. Several patrols, including that of Sergeant Holzinger on 11 September at Stalzemburg, about eight miles northwest of Wallendorf, had encountered no opposition. Reports indicated that water seepage filled some pillboxes, and that dust blanketed the inside of others; but on 12 and 13 September observers had noted a few German soldiers entering the pillboxes.

In light of the true German situation, the choice of the Wallendorf sector for an attack was fortunate. It was on the extreme right of the *LXXX Corps*, the weakest point in General Beyer's defenses. Not until the morning of 14 September, when the hastily recruited *Alarmbataillon* arrived from Trier, did any organized unit take over the sector. About two miles north of Wallendorf lay the boundary not only between the two enemy corps but also between the *First* and *Seventh Armies* and between *Army Groups B* and *G*. A certain element of divided responsibility was bound to exist.<sup>39</sup> As for the West Wall itself in this sector, it was markedly thin because German engineers had leaned heavily upon the rugged nature of the terrain. Although all bridges near Wallendorf had been demolished, the river is only about forty yards wide and at this time of year fordable at several points.

The status of supply in the 5th Armored Division was similar to that in the rest of the V Corps, although the logistical pinch might not be felt so severely since only one combat command was to see action. The three-day pause in Luxembourg had enabled the division to refill its fuel tanks and constitute a nominal gasoline reserve. Although artillery ammunition on hand was no more than adequate, a shortage of effective counterbattery fires in the coming offensive was to arise more from lack of sound and flash units and from poor visibility than from any deficiency in ammunition supply.

Shortly after noon on 14 September CCR began to cross the Sauer River into Germany at a ford below the confluence of the Our and the Sauer. When no antitank opposition developed, the commander,



WALLENDORF CIVILIANS *strive to save their belongings from the burning town after German troops have left.*

Col. Glen H. Anderson, sent his armor and infantry across together. Although the enemy's *Alarmbataillon* had only small arms weapons, the troops defended with tenacity. Not until Wallendorf was wreathed in flame and smoke caused by artillery fire, tracer bullets, and infantry flame throwers was the enemy dislodged.

The *Alarmbataillon* might have made an even better fight of it had not its artillery support, the *Alarmbatterie*, failed miserably. Court martial proceedings taken later against the battery commander revealed that (1) he was a reserve officer of Luftwaffe signal communication troops, (2) he knew nothing about artillery, (3) the battery had possessed little ammunition and almost no observation or optical equipment, and (4) among the entire enlisted personnel were only three trained artillerymen.

Continuing past Wallendorf, tanks and infantry of CCR knocked out lightly defended pillboxes to gain a firm foothold astride the first high ground, a promontory of clifflike terrain between the Sauer and the sharply incised Gay creek. As darkness came, the only exit the troops could find leading off the high bluff into the Gay gorge was blocked by a big crater. Awaiting results of further reconnaissance for another route, the tanks and armored infantry laagered for the night.

The armor temporarily stymied by the blocked road, Colonel Anderson ordered the attached 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Ross C. Henbest, to take up the attack. Colonel Henbest's infantry was to seize Biesdorf, a village beyond the Gay creek, capture of which should facilitate CCR's efforts to get off the high bluff the next morning. Unfortunately, the infantry lost direction in the foggy darkness and wandered aimlessly through the night. Having discovered another road leading north to span the Gay creek at Niedersgegen, the armor resumed the advance the next morning, 15 September. At the creek the combat command ran into an understrength company of Mark IV tanks supported by a scattering of infantry. In a noisy but brief engagement, the American gunners accounted for 3 enemy tanks and 6 half-tracks and sent 5 other tanks scurrying to the east. CCR's only loss came later when a wooden bridge over the Gay collapsed under the weight of a Sherman tank. The column crossed nearby at a spot that later came to be known by the dolorous name Deadman's Ford.

The enemy armor encountered at the creek probably was the major portion of the *Kampfgruppe* of the *Panzer Lehr Division*. Perturbed from the start about this American thrust, the *First Army* commander, General von Knobelsdorff, had announced his intentions late the day before "to commit all forces which could possibly be spared" to the Wallendorf sector. In the meantime, the *Kampfgruppe* of the *Panzer Lehr* and the remnants of the *5th Parachute Division*, which held the line farther south near Echternach, were to do what they could to oppose the penetration.

These two German units actually could do little more than harass CCR with a succession of small pinprick thrusts.<sup>43</sup> Pushing northeast and east from Niedersgegen, CCR moved virtually unopposed. In rapid succession the armor seized four villages and occupied Hill 407, the crest of the high ground near Mettendorf, the initial objective. Already CCR had left all West Wall fortifications in its wake. One column continued east and northeast and at dusk was nearing the village of Bettingen on the west bank of the Pruem River when German antitank guns suddenly opened fire. Forced back in confusion by the unexpected resistance, the column withdrew a few hundred yards into the villages of Halsdorf and Stockem to await daylight before coming to blows with the German gunners. By nightfall of 15 September CCR had advanced through the West Wall and across the western plateau almost to the banks of the Pruem, some six miles inside Germany. Though the combat command controlled little more than the roads, the fact that a force could march practically uncontested through the enemy rear augured new life to hopes of a drive to the Rhine. With the armor apparently loose behind enemy lines, General Gerow conceived an audacious scheme to assist his infantry divisions and reopen his front. He told General Oliver first to seize Bitburg, then to swing north on main roads to Pronsfeld and Pruem. This would place the armor squarely in rear of the enemy opposing the 28th Division and relieve the south flank of the 4th Division. The corps cavalry was to take over a portion of the 5th Armored Division's Luxembourg front to free another combat command, CCB, for the maneuver. The plan involved advances of from fifteen to thirty miles by two columns, parallel to, but deep behind, the enemy front.

For their part, the Germans had quickly recognized the portent of the situation. One enemy headquarters reported in alarm that American troops were only three miles from Bitburg. With no reserves to send, General von Knobelsdorff at *First Army* headquarters called for help. When *Army Group G* passed on the plea, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, the *OB WEST* commander, replied at first that responsibility for sealing off the penetration belonged to the army group, but he soon relented enough to order transfer to the *LXXX Corps* of two grenadier battalions and a flak regiment with eleven antiaircraft batteries.<sup>44</sup> By shuffling troops in another corps, Knobelsdorff at *First Army* at last managed to put his hands on a reserve to send the *LXXX Corps*. He released a regimental combat team of the *19th Volks Grenadier Division*, which began moving north by truck during the night of 15 September. The rest of the division, minus one regiment, followed two days later. In yet another move, Knobelsdorff reduced the corps sector by ordering the adjacent corps to take over the southern wing of the *LXXX Corps* front.<sup>45</sup>

In the meantime, while the Germans had been making these frantic moves and while CCR had been recording its rapid advance, Colonel Henbest's 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, had renewed the attack against Biesdorf. The battalion cleared the town by late afternoon of 15 September. On orders from the CCR commander, Colonel Anderson, the infantry then moved about two miles farther to assume positions protecting the southeast flank of the armor near the settlement of Stockigt. Organic engineers at the same time were constructing a treadway bridge across the Sauer at Wallendorf. Late in the day the attached 254th Engineer Combat Battalion began construction of a wooden trestle bridge. Upon arrival of the engineer battalion, the organic engineers moved forward to begin demolition of captured pillboxes.

At dusk (16 September) an engineer reconnaissance party investigating the Gay creek crossing at Niedersgegen ran into enemy small arms fire near Deadman's Ford. Two engineers were killed. The experience presaged the fact that the Germans were going to do something about CCR's penetration, for this was the first example of what was to become a continuing difficulty with German infiltration into the undefended flanks of the penetration. Among the first to feel the effect was the supporting artillery, which was leap-frogging forward in order to support the next day's advance on Bitburg. When the 95th Armored Field Artillery Battalion tried to cross the Gay creek at Deadman's Ford, the column came under machine gun and mortar fire from the north. Though the CCR commander, Colonel Anderson, sent back a married platoon of infantry and tanks from Hill 407 to clean out the opposition, the force failed to reach the creek. On the way, about midnight, the lieutenant in charge came upon a portion of the combat command supply trains that had avoided the enemy fire by cutting cross-country south of Deadman's Ford. Because the lieutenant knew that the trains usually followed the artillery, he assumed that the artillery already had passed and that the ford was clear. As a result, the opposition was not eliminated until the next day, 16 September, and soon thereafter German tanks appeared to interdict the stream crossing. Not until late on 16 September did all the artillery get into firing positions east of the Gay creek.

The Germans hardly could have touched CCR at a more sensitive spot. Through most of 16 September Colonel Anderson held in place, wary of racing east with the armor until the artillery could get forward. By the time the big guns were ready to fire, a heavy fog had closed in and darkness was approaching. Enemy artillery had been moving up all day and had begun to shell CCR with disturbing accuracy. When the task force at Halsdorf and Stockem did launch an attack in late afternoon, the enemy near Bettingen proved to have lost none of his tenacity or fire power from the night before. The attack faltered almost immediately.

Infiltration at Deadman's Ford and a lieutenant's error thus had cost CCR any advance on a day when every effort should have been made to exploit the penetration. As it was, only Colonel Henbest's 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, gained any ground on 16 September. The infantry moved from Stockigt through Stockem, eastward to the Pruem River at Wettlingen. Pushing quickly across the little river in the face of heavy shelling and small arms fire, the

infantry by nightfall had seized high ground several hundred yards northeast of Wettlingen. Supported by a self-propelled tank destroyer platoon, Colonel Henbest's battalion had reached a point only five miles from Bitburg.

In midafternoon CCB, commanded by Col. John T. Cole, had begun to cross into the Wallendorf bridgehead and assumed responsibility for the troublesome north flank near Niedersgegen. Even though CCR had not moved during the day, the presence of CCB and the success of Colonel Henbest's infantry engendered optimism. At the end of the day the 5th Armored Division G-2 doubted that the enemy had sufficient strength "to do more than delay us temporarily."<sup>46</sup> While the Germans had countermeasures in the making, all they actually had accomplished was to fling a papier-mâché cordon about the penetration with every available man from the *LXXX Corps* and every man that could be spared from the adjacent *ISS Panzer Corps*, the latter to hold the north flank of the penetration with elements of *the 2d Panzer Division*.

No matter what the G-2 estimate or the true enemy situation, General Gerow at 2040 on 16 September ordered General Oliver to call off the offensive. Consolidate your force, he said, and send strong patrols to develop the enemy situation in the vicinity of Bitburg. The armor was also to "mop up" the West Wall north and northeast of Wallendorf but was to make no attack on Bitburg except on corps order. General Gerow's directive meant, in effect, that the 5th Armored Division was to assume the defensive. It must have come as a shock to both troops and commanders.

That the Germans had not stopped the V Corps armor was plain. The first real adversities to come in the Wallendorf sector hit after the issuance of this order. The explanation for the halt appeared to lie instead in the decisions that had emerged from the meeting of General Eisenhower and his top commanders on 2 September at Chartres and in a critical over-all logistical situation.

In commenting later on the reasons for calling off the 5th Armored Division's attack, General Gerow explained the halt of all three of his divisions.<sup>47</sup> The plan, General Gerow said, had been agreed upon by General Hodges and himself. It was to have been an "investigation" proceeding to the ambitious objectives if resistance proved "negligible." When defense proved "so stout," the First Army had instructed the V Corps "not to get too involved."

The fact was that the V Corps had been operating on borrowed time and borrowed supplies. The presence of the corps this far east was attributable only to the fact that General Hodges had deviated from the Chartres instructions, giving the V Corps some of the limited gasoline available rather than assigning all of it, as directed, to the other two corps next to the British. Although Hodges had done this with an eye only to the limited objectives of closing the gap between the First and Third Armies and getting the V Corps across the obstacle of the Meuse River, he must have been reluctant to abandon without at least a trial the splendid opportunity which had developed to put the obstacle of the West

Wall behind in the same jump. Under the circumstances he could have countenanced continued logistical priority for the V Corps only if far-reaching successes could have been had for the asking. Though the V Corps obviously could have continued the advance, it would have taken some fighting to achieve it, no matter how makeshift the units with which the Germans had shored up the West Wall in the Eifel.

Even had General Gerow not stopped the V Corps on 16 September, a halt within a few days probably still would have been imperative. The next day, for example, the 12th Army Group commander, General Bradley, brought to First Army headquarters a doleful picture of the over-all supply situation. "It is not improbable," noted General Hodges' aide-de-camp in his diary, "that we shall have to slow up, even altogether halt, our drive into Germany and this in the very near future."<sup>48</sup>

### ***Defense of the Bridgehead***

The most serious trouble in the Wallendorf bridgehead began after dark on 16 September, after General Gerow had called off the attack. Using air bursts from the antiaircraft guns of a newly arrived flak regiment with deadly effect, the enemy counterattacked the 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, near Wettlingen. Although the infantry held in the face of almost overwhelming casualties, Colonel Anderson on 17 September ordered abandonment of the foothold beyond the Pruem.

At dawn on 17 September German armor and infantry of the *Panzer Lehr* and *5th Parachute Divisions* struck several points along the eastern tip of the salient, while elements of the *2d Panzer Division* hit Hill 407. Although CCR knocked out eight of the German tanks, not until about 1000 could the combat command report the situation under control. The Germans captured one of the American tanks.

Lamenting the basic failure of these countermeasures, the Commander in Chief West, Rundstedt, believed they might have succeeded had they been directed not at the tip of the salient but at the flanks close to the base at Wallendorf.<sup>51</sup> Though Rundstedt's criticism was largely justified, the Germans nevertheless had used much of their strength to prevent the newly arrived CCB from expanding the base of the salient appreciably. In many instances, after pillboxes were taken, the Germans had infiltrated back into them.

Unaware that the Americans had called off their attack, Rundstedt and the other German commanders saw the situation as extremely serious. **Late on 17 September Rundstedt gave Army Group B a reserve panzer brigade, the 108th, for employment under the 2d Panzer Division against the north flank of the bridgehead.** At the same time, General von Knobelsdorff at *First Army* laid plans to commit the *19th Volks Grenadier Division* in a counterattack against the south flank on 18 September.

Rundstedt also acted to remove the problem of divided responsibility occasioned by the location of the American strike along the army and army group boundaries. Extending

the *Army Group B* and *Seventh Army* boundaries south to a line roughly the same as that between the First and Third U.S. Armies, he transferred the *LXXX Corps* to the *Seventh Army*. Responsibility for eliminating the Wallendorf salient passed entirely to Field Marshal Model's *Army Group B* and General Brandenberger's *Seventh Army*.

Lack of time for preparation and a desperate shortage of ammunition and fuel forced postponement of the *19th Volks Grenadier Division's* counterattack on 18 September. As it turned out, this meant a stronger counterattack in the end, for during the day the *108th Panzer Brigade* arrived. Early on 19 September the panzer brigade, the *19th Volks Grenadier Division*, elements (probably a regiment) of the *36th Infantry Division*, and remnants of the *Panzer Lehr* were to launch an enveloping attack. In preparation, the *Seventh Army* issued two thirds of its entire fuel supply to the *108th Panzer Brigade*, a somewhat shocking commentary upon the state of the German fuel situation.

The *LXXX Corps* commander, General Beyer, directed the *108th Panzer Brigade* to hit the main positions of CCR on Hill 407 from the north while the infantry units supported by the remnants of the *Panzer Lehr* attacked from the south. Unfortunately for the Germans, the Americans were ready, and a fortuitous break in the weather made possible the first major contribution by U.S. air since the crossing of the border.

Knocking out ten German tanks, CCR sent the enemy armor and infantry reeling back from Hill 407 in disorder. Adjusted from a light observation plane, American artillery followed the retreat. Taking quick advantage of the clearing weather, two squadrons of P-47 Thunderbolts of the 365th Group took up the fight. The air strike was so effective that the First Army subsequently sent the squadron leaders<sup>54</sup> a special commendation.

German artillery, which by this time had begun to fire on the bridgehead from almost every direction, eluded the pilots until the next day when the "enemy caught hell." About fifty planes of the 365th Group participated on 20 September, primarily against German tanks and artillery. The artillery included several big railroad guns, of which the pilots claimed to have destroyed four. The armored troops rewarded the fliers with a laconic: "They sure do a fine job; thanks."

If the airmen were good on 19 and 20 September, they were superb the next day, 21 September. For the first time since the West Wall campaign began, the sky was cloudless, the ground perfectly devoid of haze. So helpful was the three-day air effort that the V Corps commander was moved to dispatch a letter of appreciation to the air commander, General Quesada.

In the meantime, during the big German drive of 19 September, Colonel Henbest's infantry and the tanks of CCB had thrown back the bulk of the *19th Volks Grenadier Division* on the south flank of the bridgehead. Nevertheless, about noon, an enemy group infiltrating from the southeast reached the eastern end of the two tactical bridges across the Sauer at Wallendorf. For about an hour the issue of the bridges was in doubt until finally fire from the

engineers and from anti-aircraft guns west of the river drove the Germans back. The bridges still were intact.

Though the 5th Armored Division had held at all points, General Oliver saw a chance to improve the positions by reducing the perimeter of the bridgehead. He ordered his battered CCR to withdraw. Defense of a reduced perimeter centering upon the high ground near Wallendorf was to pass to CCB and a fresh battalion of the 112th Infantry. The infantry and CCB were to hold the bridgehead "until corps permits withdrawal." Now that all hope of continuing the offensive was over, the 5th Armored Division plainly looked upon the Wallendorf assignment with distaste. Keenly aware of the shock role of armor, many officers in the division were none too happy about performing an infantry-type defensive role.

Heavy shelling and ground pressure continued against the reduced bridgehead. Despite relentless attacks by the same German units that had opened the drive on 19 September, CCB gave no ground except according to plan. Then, in late afternoon of 21 September, the V Corps at last gave approval to abandonment of the bridgehead.

In pulling back across the Sauer before daylight on 22 September, CCB had to use the ford which the first troops to cross the river had employed eight days before. During the preceding night the Germans once again had penetrated to the Wallendorf bridges. In reporting the situation after having driven off this second infiltration, CCB had made a notable use of understatement. "Only change," the combat command had reported, "[is] both bridges blown."

Though the Wallendorf fight had ended in abandonment of the bridgehead, neither CCB nor CCR had incurred excessive losses in either personnel or equipment. For the month of September, for example, the entire 5th Armored Division, including CCA, had incurred 792 casualties, of which 148 were killed or missing. Likewise for the entire month, the division's non-salvageable vehicular losses included only 6 light tanks, 11 medium tanks, and 18 half-tracks. The 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry, incurred losses proportionately much heavier, more than 37 percent of the original command.

At noon on 18 September, before withdrawal at Wallendorf, General Gerow relinquished command of the V Corps to Maj. Gen. Edward H. Brooks, formerly commander of the 2d Armored Division. Having been chief of the War Plans Division of the War Department at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, General Gerow had been called to Washington to testify in a Congressional investigation. In an optimistic farewell message to his command, he indicated that the opposition the Germans had mustered against his offensive had failed to impress him. "It is probable," General Gerow said, "the war with Germany will be over before I am released to return to the V Corps."<sup>59</sup>