

ELBE OPERATION by Lt. Houcek

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CHAPTER II

WESTERHUSEN CROSSING

12 - 13 April

Shortly after noon, 12 April, Task Forces of CCB were reorganized by verbal Order of the Commanding Officer, Combat Command B. Companies B and G, 41st Armored Infantry, were released from the 1st and 2d Battalions, 67th Armored Regt, respectively, to form the 1st and 2d Battalions, 41st Armored Infantry complete. At the same time the 3d Battalion, 119th Infantry Regiment (30th Infantry Division) was also attached to CCB by Verbal Order of the Commanding General, 2d Armored Division.

Thus with all units in readiness, the attack to secure a bridgehead over the Elbe River in the vicinity of Randau, was in accordance with Letter of Instructions #35, Headquarters, Combat Command B, 121630 April 45. The overall priority for a location of a bridge across the

Elbe River was:

It had to be in the division sector, and the object was to get a bridge across as rapidly as possible.

Combat Command B being the first at the river, it was decided to establish the bridgehead in their sector. Having come up to the river between Magdeburg and Schonebeck, the bridgehead had to be somewhere in that vicinity.

The most probable sites were considered from earlier photographs and engineer intelligence reports received. One being an old wagon site at Westerhusen (D705926), the other, a barge loading site, north of Schonebeck (D731893). Westerhusen was able to be reconnoitered because that town had already been cleared to the water's edge, whereas, the barge loading site, was unable to be reconnoitered because fighting was still going on. A third bridge site was considered to the south of the blown bridge leading from Schonebeck to Grunewalde (D753880), although due to the lack of sufficient troops to clear out the town, the time element, and to save casualties among our troops, the Westerhusen site was picked.

A tentative plan had been to cross the 1st Battalion somewhere above Schonebeck and try

to seize the Schonebeck Bridge from the east side of the river, if it was still intact. Further preparations for this plan were discontinued because of reasons already enumerated.

It was planned to prefabricate the pontoon floats and saddles back in a rear assembly area in the eastern edge of Gr Ottersleben, carrying the floats and saddles down to the river in dump trucks*.

*The float is an 18 ton pneumatic rubber pontoon. The saddle is the metal and plywood frame work that sets on the float and supports the treadway. In prefabricating the floats have to be inflated; the saddles have to be assembled and lashed to the float.

The purpose of prefabricating the bridge was to keep at a minimum the number of persons actually working at the site itself.

Lt Col John W. Finnel, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry, as Task Force Commander, on the night of 11 April, had taken Langenweddingen with about a platoon of tanks and two platoons of infantry while the remainder of his battalion remained as far back as 30 miles to the north and west on road block missions. Having stayed there the remainder of the night, he received orders the morning of 12 April to move to Gr Ottersleben and relieve elements of the 1st Battalion, 67th Armored Regiment, permitting then to contend their attack to secure Westerhusen. Shortly thereafter, the relief was accomplished, and he was informed by Combat Command B to remain there in reserve. Between noon and 1500, Col Finnel received additional instructions concerning the remainder of his battalion, which was to be assembled in Gr Ottersleben as quickly as possible. It was at the same time learned that there was a very good possibility of the 1st Battalion making the initial crossing of the Elbe River.

There being an ack ack battery in the vicinity of Dodendorf, Col Finnel was given a reconnaissance platoon and a platoon of tanks with the mission of not only cleaning out said battery but also the towns in that general area. Instructions stated that he was not to use his infantry because of the possibility of their making the assault of the river. Around 1630, just as Suldorf had been secured, a radio call directed the Colonel to CCB Command Post in Gr Ottersleben. Here he received instructions that his battalion would definitely make the river crossing in the vicinity of Westerhusen, using, assault boats and DUKWs*. He also learned that the 3d Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry Regiment, which was in the process of being relieved, would follow his force across.

*Truck, 21 ton, amphibious.

The tentative time set for the crossing was 1830; although by the time Col Finnel arrived at his CP it was then 1730. At this same time, the largest group of his battalion, which had made up the greater percentage of all the road blocks, was entering town. Knowing there was not time enough necessary to permit the issuing of orders, reconnoitering, and the checking of details, he called Combat Command B and informed them he could not be ready to jump off on H-hour.

Major Hastings, 1st Bn Executive Officer, having surmised the situation, had called all the company commanders together and had them present as the Colonel arrived. They were all hurriedly briefed and instructed to brief their men, so that each might get whatever equipment needed. Having given his subordinate commanders all the information he had, the Colonel turned the battalion over to his Exec and was about to leave to make a personal reconnaissance when he received a call from CCB informing him that H-hour had been set forward to 1900. During the conversation, the Colonel requested two Forward Observers and a Liaison Officer from Combat Command B. Completing the call, the Colonel went forward with his Reconnaissance Officer to see where the detrucking point was, where the crossing was to be made, and to have a look at the ground on the other side.

Having made his reconnaissance, Col Finnel's plan was to cross with two companies abreast in assault boats. The first wave would be made up of two platoons from each company abreast, while the 2d wave would consist of the reserve platoon of each company carried in DUKW's. The minutes were steadily ticking by all this time, and it again became obvious that H-hour could not be met. The Colonel attempted, fruitlessly, to contact Combat Command B Command Post and again have the time changed; but his radio being out made it impossible.

"We didn't jump at 1900 although our artillery fired the planned concentration on schedule. This was okay for they had been firing all night anyway. Brig General Sidney R. Hinds, CCB Commander, came to the bridgehead site at this time and my troops were just beginning to arrive. He was pretty hot because I couldn't get word to him that I wasn't jumping off, although I wasn't perturbed about it because I had no way of letting him know that I couldn't jump off."

The company commanders, preceeding their troops to the river, were given last minute instructions on the banks of the river by the Battalion Commander. Company C was ordered to keep the river on their left after they had crossed and to push through and establish a line (D705931 - 708932), keeping closed on the river. Company A was instructed to do the same thing on the right in the right sector moving out in an arc and pivoting on the river. A gap was known to develop in the center, if the compares kept their flanks on the river, and it was intended that the reserve company would be used to fill that gap. The assault companies crossed at approximately 2130, being ferried by the engineers in nine men lots. There was at no time, throughout this operation, any small arms or any other type fire received. Tank Destroyers and tanks had been placed next to the buildings along the west bank of the river to cover the crossing, however they remained silent throughout the night.

Both A and C Companies, shortly after arriving on the far shore, radioed Battalion and reported they were going along well with no resistance. As they continued cautiously ahead, the expected gap began to materialize. Company B was committed as previously planned, moving up, contacted Company C's right flank and then swung to the right tying in with Company A's left flank, as the battalion began to feel out the ground in front of them. The men had been told not to shoot promiscuously for it was desired to get out as far as

possible before becoming engaged.

Having established a small bridgehead running in an arc from (D705931 - 717927 - 710919), with a MG platoon disposed in depth at (D711931), covering a water gap between Companies B and C, Col Finnel reported to Combat Command B by radio that his men were completely across. CCB immediately started crossing the 3d Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry, in DUKW's around 2230. Moving fairly rapidly, the 3d Battalion relieved Company A, 41st AIR, which was then on the right flank, and started pushing out. Company A was then assembled in the rear of the 1st Battalion to be held in reserve; however, when Col Finnel received word that the 3d Battalion 119th Infantry Regiment was in the process of crossing Company A was again committed to the right flank of Company B filling the gap between the right of Company B and the 3d Battalion, 41st AIR. A Company, maintaining contact with the 3d Battalion, 41st AIR, moved slightly forward as did the right flank of Company B and built up along the levee (D720922), which was in itself a tank obstacle, large enough to take a tank dozer at least two hours in which to break a gap sufficient to allow tanks through. Up to and including this time, resistance was non-existent.

The 3d Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry, under the command of Lt Col Arthur J. Anderson, had been in the process of cleaning up Schonebeck on the evening of 12 April, when orders were received to move to Westerhusen. Upon arrival they received instructions to cross the river and secure the right flank of the bridgehead. Elements of the 3d Battalion started across the river in DUKWS at approximately 2230, completing the relief of A Company, 41st AIR early the next morning.

H Company had been outposting Westerhusen to the north and west all this time, receiving orders about midnight to assemble in town and be prepared to cross the river. Approximately 0100, 13 April, the company was loaded on trucks and taken to the river's edge where it was immediately ferried across by DUKWs, completing the move by 0300 without receiving any enemy artillery. Lt Fitzhugh stated, "There was a little confusion, for we didn't know exactly what we were supposed to do, so we stayed in an assembly area for approximately an hour." During this lull Capt Percy, Commanding officer of Company H, and Lt Fitzhugh moved southwest to reconnoiter the forward area to find out where Company H was to tie in with Company G. During the reconnaissance, it was found that Company I had a very narrow front and was tied in with G Company. As it was impossible for Company G to move, their being tied in with the 1st Battalion, H Company was brought forward, passing through Company I, to the levee where it contacted G Company's right flank and extended itself, right toward the river. While the men were digging in a few rounds of artillery were received but no damage was done.

The engineers having ferried the better part of two battalions across the river by 2300, began construction of the proposed bridge. Companies D and E, 17th Armored Engineer Battalion, had been selected for this job. Being terribly dark, the engineers had difficulty seeing even with the aid of two search lights beamed over the site to give artificial moon light. This failed to enlighten the situation for there were no clouds in the sky to reflect the light, the light, the beams simply dissipated in the sky. Even though being hindered by lack

of light, work progressed rather rapidly from then until daylight without any unusual incidents, other than a few rounds of harassing artillery fire.

The 3d Battalion, 119th Infantry, having been attached and acting as rear guard for Combat Command Reserve, was detached and attached to CCB the night of 12 April. At 2200, the battalion was ordered to Westerhusen arriving there at 0400, 13 April. Lt Col Carlton E. Stewart said, "We had absolutely no idea what our mission was to be. I received the shortest order I have ever received in my life. It was simple, 'Cross the river and be in reserve in the little patch of woods, just across on the otherside of the river'. I had no communication with the parent outfit, no armor, and no clear idea of what was required of me." The Division being in the process of building a bridge across the river, Col Stewart was assured armor as soon as the bridge was completed. The battalion started crossing in DUKWs almost immediately upon arrival, reaching the woods (708928) at daybreak. As the men started digging in, a personal reconnaissance disclosed the fact that the front lines were only a few hundred yards to the front and the battalion was as much exposed as the front lines. The woods being heavily shelled all that day, everyone continued with improvements on his position.

At 0200, 13 April, 1st Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry Regiment sent a patrol to determine whether the bridge across the Alte-Elbe River at (D724943) was intact. The patrol reached (D714943) where it surprised and captured an enemy outpost of six Germans, arriving back at the battalion command post a short time later. Col Finnel immediately sent the patrol back to get the desired information, however, they returned about 11 hours after daylight reporting they had gotten into a little scrap at (D714943) and were not able to get through.

With the light of day edging over the horizon, 0530, the engineers put smoke pots on both sides of the river, above and below the bridge site to screen the operations from enemy observation. Having experienced intermittent artillery fire throughout the night, the incoming artillery became more active as the day grew lighter. A heavy concentration of indirect and direct fire was received around 0600 from the high ground directly opposite the bridge site, destroying five floats on the bridge. Considerable fire was also received from the area on the east bank of Magdeburg, destroying a number of floats already constructed on the bank, awaiting to be ferried to the bridge. It was thus necessary to suspend operations temporarily, about an hour, due to the intensity of fire coming in.

During this same period, our artillery fired countless counter-battery missions with meager results; for after the work again began, enemy artillery was still falling, although not quite as heavily. Lt Col Louis W. Correll, Division Engineer, said, "The smoke wasn't too effective because the enemy had observation from different directions. The smoke, although, wasn't too dense, it may have blocked out observation from some spots but I'm certain there were many other points of vantage that could be used for the same purpose."

At 0930, verbal orders were issued the 1st Battalion, to attack and secure object #2, road stream crossing (D723943). At the same time, the 3d Battalion, 41st AIR was given verbal orders to attack and secure object #3, town of Randau (D735924). Col Finnel's plan was to

attack with C Company moving straight up the axis of the road (D706936), going, north then east to Perchau. Company A was to move east across the levee swinging north through the woods (D725940). Company B (-), the reserve company, was to be prepared to move in support of either company on order. Company C moved out at approximately 1100, meeting meager resistance as they pushed forward until crossing the levee at (D709939). Advancing a very short distance, heavy fire was received forcing them to drop back and build up a line behind the levee. Being unable to locate the well dug-in German machine guns and riflemen or gain fire superiority [sic], the well coordinated fires held C Company at bay, in their newly gained positions. A Company, with two platoons of B Company, attacked east and then north through the woods as previously planned, without firing a shot. As they approached the vicinity of objective #2, a five minute fire fight ensued. The bridge (D723943) was gained intact as were 30 PWs. Six Germans had been killed while A Company suffered two casualties. An artillery concentration was immediately called for to be placed in the area around Pechau, as one platoon of Company A crossed the river and established a small bridgehead.

One of B Company's platoons reinforced Company A at the bridge site (D726942), while the other platoon had swung west to hit the enemy troops, firing at C Company, from the rear. The Germans, after suffering heavy casualties, pulled out very rapidly. Shortly after the platoon of A Company established their bridgehead on the far banks of the Alte-Elbe, approximately 40 Germans were noticed advancing down the main road (D725946) from Pechau, toward the newly won bridgehead. These Germans were undoubtedly a part of the garrison of Pechau (D728952), and were evidently moving down to reinforce their 30 comrades who had already been captured. The leading platoon of Company A, not only attempted but accomplished an ambush, holding their fire until the approaching Jerries were practically upon their position, at which time every available weapon opened up for a matter of seconds. A few of the Germans were killed while the remainder immediately gave up without a single loss to A Company's lone platoon. Prior to the attack on Randau, the 3d Battalion, 41st AIR, sent two 15 men patrols from both G and H Companies to determine the opposition in town, if any. Radio contact was maintained constantly. The patrols maintained a steady advance and when reporting their position in town also stated that as yet they had received no opposition and the town seemed to be clear of Jerries.

During the period these patrols were working their way to Randoau, Col Anderson was formulating his plan of attack. He said, "Being flat and open country, I thought the only way to get Randau was by infiltration; thus I decided to push Company I from a reserve position, to secure the town, holding my other two companies in position along the levee. After I Company reached its objectives the other two companies would be sent forward, one at a time.

About noon, Randau was completely cleared and secured by Company I, who had no trouble at all and had taken about 250 willing prisoners. The company immediately set up a defensive position on the outside of the town in preparation of tying with G and H Companies. While the cleaning up process was in effect, the other two companies had

infiltrated forward, meeting no resistance but picking up a few war weary PWs while en route and then tied in with I Company. G Company, tying in with I Company at (D732926), extended left to (D726932) at which point it had visual contact with the 1st Battalion. H Company tied in with I at (D738918), extending in an arc to the right, along to Alte-Elbe to approximately (D733933). Early in the afternoon of 13 April the engineers had 25 feet more to go to reach far shore, with sufficient floats constructed on the near shore to complete the bridge. At this opportune time, another heavy concentration of artillery fire started to fall, scoring a Direct hit on the furthestmost (east) section of the bridge, three other floats further back were knocked out, and the floats along the bank, that were ready to move into position, were also punctured. One of the power bouts, used to pull pontoons into position, was also hit and sank immediately. Adding to this a direct hit was scored on an adjacent anti-aircraft gun position, killing the crew, and knocking out the gun.

Operations were suspended for the second time while our artillery tried to neutralize the enemy fire. After a 30 minute recess, an attempt was again made to repair and continue construction of the bridge; however, obviously under observation, as the work party moved to the bridge site, a heavy and continuous concentration was placed on the bridge and area adjoining. The second power boat, of which there were only two, was knocked out as were a number more floats on the bridge. As Correl phrased it. "They just continued to throw heavy concentrations all over the bridge site. So much was coming in, the Forward Observers just couldn't locate it. Haze, covering the high ground of the bridgehead area, prevented air observers from locating the gun positions, and counter-battery fire seemed to have little or no effect on the enemy artillery."

At one time, a man walked out on the bridge to check the damage and immediately 22 rounds of artillery were fired in on him. Fortunately, he wasn't hurt. By 1400, a large portion of all the available bridge equipment had been knocked out when Col Correll received orders from Gen Hinds that the bridge would be abandoned. Immediately orders were issued and the engineers began pulling out all the trucks and equipment to prevent further damage, as the fire continued to roll in. In the proximity of 1400, Col Finnel received word that Col Paul A. Disney, Commanding Officer of the 67th Armored Regiment and Bridgehead Force Commander, was wounded and he was placed in charge of the three battalions now in operation.

Minutes later, it was reported to Col Finnel that five enemy tanks with infantry mounted were attacking objective #2 from the town of Pechau. Having reached (D727946), the joint fires of A and elements of B Company succeeded in not only dispersing but killing quite a few of the enemy infantry which had been mounted on the tanks. The tanks took cover around the buildings at (725947) and started shooting direct fire into A Company's positions. While at the same moment, several tanks, which had not been encountered on the drive north through the woods, circled the wooded area to the east and attacked the flank and rear area of Company A. Col Finnel also received word of a tank at (D714943) firing at Company C, however the tank was unable to move forward because of the levee. At this point, Col Finnel ordered Companies A and B to withdraw from their positions, pull on

behind the levee which was a tank obstacle, and take up their initial positions. Word was also sent to the 3d Battalion, 41st AIR, to drop back and take up their original positions along the levee. As they started pulling out of Randau, it was realized to be in the nick of time for there were six or seven tanks operating in the woods north of there. The 3d Battalion tied in with the 1st Battalion between 1800 and 1900, with the same relative organization.

Because of the enemy being registered on the bridgehead, it was decided, at a conference between General White, Commanding General of the 2d Armored Division, and the XIX Corps Commander, to shift the bridgehead to the south in the vicinity of Schonebeck.

Col Finnel received orders, about 1900, to put into effect on his own time a movement to establish another bridgehead to the south around the town of Grunewalde. Col Finnel stated, "My one question was whether it would be that night and they said 'Yes'. I also may have added, 'Are you kidding'."

The order, covered in Letter of Instructions #36, Headquarters Combat Command B, called for the 3d Battalion, 119th Infantry to establish the bridgehead and the 3d Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry Regiment, to occupy the left flank. The 1st Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry Regiment, was to pull into a reserve position. The time of attack to secure the new bridgehead was 2100, 13 April.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) 2d Armd Div, A/A Rpt, April 45.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) 2d Armd Div, Int/w CO, Div Engr.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w CO, 1st Bn.
- (6) 2d Armd Div, Int/w CO, Div Engr.
- (7) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w CO, 1st Bn.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w CO, 3d Bn.
- (11) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w Plt Ldr, Co H.
- (12) Ibid.

- (13) 2d Armd Div, Int/w CO, Div Engr.
- (14) 119th Inf (30th Div), Int/w CO, 3d Bn.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w CO, 1st Bn.
- (17) 2d Armd Div. Int/w CO, Div Engr.
- (18) 2d Armd Div. A/A Rpt, April 45.
- (19) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w CO, 1st Bn.
- (20) 41st Armd Inf (2d Armd Div), Int/w CO, 3d Bn.
- (21) Ibid.
- (22) 2d Armd Div, Int/w CO, Div Engr.
- (23) Ibid.
- (24) 41st A.I.R. (2d Amd Div), Int/w CO, 1st Bn.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) 2d Amid Div, A/A Rpt, April 45.