

Battle of the Bulge

Q: I would like to continue on and particularly get into your experiences with the 9th Armored Division and Remagen and so forth. I think this is a point that you and I both have been looking forward to. I wonder if you'd just start from—you mentioned how you got the job in Combat Command B—first your initial impressions of the unit when you took Combat Command B, the type of officer and NCO they had at that time compared to your knowledge of them at Fort Riley, and then your initial combat with them?

A: Well, they were the same people. They had more discipline, but we were still short of experienced officers particularly in the higher groups. We had so few that were competent in the battalion grades or anything like that. That was the big problem. The men were all right and willing. We spent time on the front line. We were in the mountains before the Battle of the Bulge started. My combat command was separated from the division. It was attached to the 2d Infantry Division in the V Corps, and we were trying to break through to destroy or open up those dams on the Roer River



Brigadier General Hoge as commanding general, CCB, 9th Armored Division, Battle of the Bulge, December 1944.

which they were afraid that once we started across on the lower part would be opened up and flood the whole area to the north, which the Germans eventually did. But the infantry couldn't break through the minefield, which they'd been trying to do.

The day that the Battle of the Bulge started [16 December 1944], I went up north to the town of Monschau to see if I could get across up there and come down parallel to the front and break through the German lines and release the 2d Infantry Division. Then I was to go on out, take my combat command and go out and open up or destroy those dams on the Roer River. That was the day the Battle of the Bulge started. Then while I was up there making a reconnaissance at Monschau, I saw an attack come over against the infantry—I think it was the 99th Division—at that point. They were capturing these Germans and had a lot of them prisoners. Then I got a message to call corps—I was attached to the V Corps at that time—call corps as soon as I could. So, I went back and got a telephone back to corps, and they told me that I had been reassigned—out of the V Corps and to the [VIII] and was to go back to St. Vith and report to the commanding officer [Major General Alan W. Jones] down there. A new division had just come over, the 106th Division. Well, that division had lost two of its infantry regiments [422d and 423d Infantry Regiments] in the attack and was a shambles. They had nothing left.

But I got there, reported in to the commanding general. He was jittery and knew nothing. I had known him before but I never did think anything of him. Anyway I was told first I was to go east and capture a place called Schonberg, where these regiments were in the line beyond that, these infantry regiments belonging to the 106th Division. But the Germans had moved in there and in the meantime, the CG, 106th Division, had gotten word that the 7th Armored [Division] was coming down to assist in the defense of St. Vith, and I was to go south of St. Vith, across the river. Let's see, what river was that? (Our River) I don't remember. I'd have to have a map. Anyway I went down there and we launched an attack the next day. We got on top of the high ground. We captured a number of German prisoners, but I got no support.

The division commander [Jones] had about deserted his division by that time, but he sent the assistant division commander [Brigadier General Herbert T. Perrin] down to see me. He said, "You can continue this attack on towards this back country, but you must be back on this side of

the river by nightfall. ” Well, hell, it was afternoon then. What in the hell is the use at that point in making an attack and turning around and coming back if I was successful, give it up. Well, I had been successful up to that point. It was tough ground and there were a lot of Germans in there. So, instead of that I just went back and took up a defensive line southeast of St. Vith and stayed there. Then, my armored infantry battalion commander [Lieutenant Colonel George W. Seeley] died of a heart attack. I think he did. That was just another one of those things that had been happening all those times when we were so short. But anyway we were caught there with no roads through dense woods in the Ardennes. By that time I helped to defend St. Vith before the 7th Armored got in there. I was there a day before the 7th Armored showed up at all, but the 106th Division had disappeared completely. Anyway, the Germans were coming down from the north. They had broken through up above, and they were coming down threatening St. Vith from its rear. So, I sent a tank destroyer battalion up there—a company or two. I don’t know what it was. Anyway I sent them up there and they knocked several German tanks out. By that time Combat Command B of the 7th had arrived and they took over the defense around St. Vith, and I took up the one around the south of there joining with them. We had no commander in common. I was still attached to the 106th Division which had disappeared.

Q: I think both the 422d and the 423d Infantry Regiments, 106th Division, were cut off when you were directed south of St. Vith to take Winterspelt, I believe. Was your mission originally to go through Winterspelt and try to connect and relieve the two regiments of the 106th?

A: No, it was just to blunt an attack from that direction. The idea was just attack. It started at Winterspelt which went back some distance behind the Our [River]. Well, it’s a stream that ran down south anyway. The 106th Division had lost two-thirds of its command.

Q: The 424th is the only one that got out.

A: And that’s where Jones initially ordered me to go to relieve that, cover that flank of the division down there. Well, that’s where we started, but by that time the Germans were pouring around that flank and that outfit. Those regiments had disappeared. Pieces of them came back and were

assembled back behind the line, but they were useless. You couldn't do anything with them. They cried a lot and wanted help. Hell, we were fighting for our lives. We couldn't help anybody.

Q: During the defense of St. Vith on 17 December 1944, I believe it was Peiper, who was the battle group commander of the 1st SS Panzer Division, who ordered or allowed the Malmedy Massacre; and you lost some people, I think, from the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion. How quick did that story of the Malmedy Massacre get through your unit and what was the reaction of the troops?

A: We never got that until afterwards. We heard that there was that thing, but we were, I think, about that time in full retreat. Peiper went around my flank and hit the rear end of my column when it was headed for St. Vith, and that's why they caught the tail end of my column and got those men that we lost [Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion]. But then, after that we were so involved and we dropped back trying to save our own necks, so we didn't know about it until afterwards. Of course, we got Peiper eventually. The Engineers did a great deal in that, which they never gave them credit [for], but the Engineers—that is, the Communications Zone Engineers—did a lot to defend those bridges and turn that gasoline loose down the hill on Peiper and so on; that stopped them. But we didn't know about that until—

Q: Well, following that news, did you get any type of orders from division or any other level of command having to do with taking no SS or paratroop prisoners?

A: No, we had no such order. We never had those orders.

Q: I think the 328th Infantry is the only one that had even a mention of that possibility. Another interesting item during the defense of St. Vith was when a large part of the headquarters staff of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion again was captured. That was, I think, the night of 21-22 December. Do you recall the capture of that battalion element, and the following day it was freed by a tank-infantry combat team? I think one of the men captured was the S-2 named Glen Strange, who escaped.

A: I remember when they attacked our headquarters back there [Neubrueck], they came through that grove and we had nobody back there to defend ourselves but some cooks and truck drivers and so on. We got out of it ahead of them. We had to fight to do it and we were headquarters. Headquarters of 27th Infantry was caught in the headquarters building. I had told them to stay out of there; we had moved out of there just a few days before that and I said, "Get out of here, don't stop here because it is under surveillance and they know where we are and for God's sake don't come in here." But they did it and they moved in right behind me and they were captured, the whole thing; and then is when I sent this tank company up, and we got clear up to the building—fired right through the windows of this farm house. All the American prisoners plus the Germans were down in the basement trying to get away from us. Well, we freed our men; we lost a few, but not many. We lost, I remember, the S-4 of that regiment—battalion; he was captured and was killed, I think, there, but we got most of them and we captured the Germans that were in there.

But we had to abandon that place and we were getting ready to pull back gradually. We were trying to keep abreast of the CCB [of the 7th Armored Division] at the same time, so that we wouldn't be overrun or outflanked; so we had to move slowly. So we were moving out all the time, and I remember definitely telling that battalion commander, "For God's sake, stay out of that building because that is under observation and is subject to attack and the avenues are there to capture you." He paid no attention to me. I had trouble with command in that battalion. The original battalion commander had a heart attack; that was right early in that St. Vith business—the first day or so, I think, after we had attacked to go to Winterspelt and had been forced back.

We weren't forced back, but we would have been forced back. But the division commander, Jones, sent word up to me—we were already attacking and we had lost a couple of tanks, but we were making progress somehow—and Jones sent word to me, "You can attack if you want to, but tonight you've got to pull back." I said, "What the hell is the use of that; we are losing men all the time, pulling back in the middle of the night to a defensive position on this side of the river; it's senseless." I said, "To hell with that, we are going to quit right now, and we are going to draw back during daylight."

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platoon of Pershing tanks, and he sent those out and got those destroyed, ahead of time, by the Germans. That's when I relieved him. [Major Murray Deevers took command at 1431 on 1 March 1945 and remained in command through VE Day.] He tagged around for a while. I never let him get back in command or anything to do with it. Finally put in a Class B against him. I don't know if he ever got it. He's still in the Army as far as I know.

Q: Was that the 27th?

A: That was the 27th [Armored] Infantry.

Q: In the description General [Bruce C.] Clarke gave of trying to get his Combat Command B, 7th Armored Division, down to St. Vith, he said that it was an almost impossible move. It took him three hours to move about a mile with the people coming back.

A: Well, that whole thing just melted away. Clarke was the 7th Armored Combat [Command] B. Bruce Clarke. Anyway, Clarke was a damned good fighter. We played it just by mutual conferences. He'd tell me what he was going to do and I'd tell him. He would tell me where we were threatened and I'd tell him, and we would support back and forth as best we could. We were holding, in addition to St. Vith, we had all the southern end, and St. Vith was practically surrounded. Then a regiment of a division to the south was attached—let's see, what division was that? [28th Infantry Division.] There was some other division a long distance to the south of us down in Luxembourg, an infantry division. But I was stretched out all over that ground and we had a river and no roads through it and a dense woods behind us. So, I said to Clarke, "Tonight I'm going to move back behind that line to someplace where I can move around and have a chance of getting out if I'm attacked along the line." So, that night after dark I started and moved my combat command, one battalion at a time, up through St. Vith and turned around and came back down south on the back side of this river and took up a defensive position there. That was quite a move to make at night in the face of the enemy, and it was all parallel to the enemy lines. But there was no crossing, there were no bridges except at St. Vith. There was a river behind us—no, there was a deep railroad cut.

When I realized that there was no use in attacking, losing more men and tanks—and we weren't getting anyplace; and then he was ordering us to withdraw under cover of darkness, which was worse, and we were not winning anything. We were not relieving [anybody]—all of what was left of the 106th Division were already back behind our lines. We weren't relieving anybody; he was going to attack the Germans in prepared positions, and then we were to withdraw. Biggest damned fool order I'd ever heard of. Well, anyway, I said, 'The hell with that, I'm going to withdraw. I'm going to quit the attack right now. I'm going to get back and take a defensive position behind the river.' That was the Our River. Anyway, it was on the high ground. It was that night that this battalion commander had his heart attack. [Lieutenant Colonel George W. Seeley, 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, was evacuated on 18 December 1944.] He [Seeley] was a veteran of the First World War; he was a good man; he was a Reserve officer. But he had been a good battalion commander. Then I had one hell of a time. I sent up to get this [other] officer, a liaison officer with the 2d Division, which was on the north side there; and I sent for him to bring him back to take command of that battalion, for I had nobody else. He was a West Point graduate, should have been a good man. He was the biggest damned fool I'd ever run into, I think.

Q: Was he a major at the time?

A: He was a major, I think, or a lieutenant colonel, I'm not sure. Anyway, just as an example of things he did, we had issued to us prior to that—I didn't know anything about it—but we had some no-sleep pills issued in case of an emergency. When you got to the point where you were just exhausted and you still had to fight on, you were supposed to take these pills. Well, the first thing he did—we hadn't been in the fight more than a day, so we still had some time to sleep, and we didn't know why or what the future was going to be—he issued these to all of his company commanders and platoon commanders. Well, he knocked them all out when we needed them. That was one of the things he did. Then later—what the hell else did he do—he had flaps all the way around. I kept him until we were starting up to cross the Rhine, that same fellow; then he disobeyed my orders. I had given them orders: they were to attack going up to the Rhine—a unified attack all along the front. At that time, I had some additional troops, and we were spread out over a frontage of about two or three miles. I wanted a coordinated attack, damned if he did. And you were talking about the Pershing tanks. He had one

and they were taking some of it. Anyway we moved backwards very slowly. It took about three or four days.

Q: Is that when General Clarke had to delay a little bit to get his battalion out?

A: Yes, a couple of times he did that, and I would wait too. We finally got back to this hilltop. That was where Matt Ridgway came in to see me and he gave me orders to get out. I was all ready to go and make a final withdrawal behind the American lines during the night. But Clarke said, "I can't move because I'll lose a whole battalion. I've got to stay here until that battalion is relieved." So I stayed with him. I said, "We'll wait. I'll stay with you. We'll wait until tomorrow night." He got the battalion released. It was an infantry battalion of Clarke's. Got it out, back to rejoin his combat command. It was daylight then and when I got orders just about daybreak [0605, 23 December 1944], I had to move now or I wasn't going to move at all and to get out of there right now! So, there wasn't anything to do but go by daybreak. Of course, by that time everybody was free; we could move. So, we started with the withdrawal. I had my infantry companies spread out in the front along the line—I think six or seven miles ahead of me—and I had tanks up there too. So, I started pulling them off by echelons from the left side. A tank company would move back, loaded up the infantry, and they'd go by the next one and they'd stand there and hold on till that tank company had gotten by, and then the next tank company would come by and pick up that company. We finally got them out, but as I say, that was the day—first day we'd seen the air and it was clear. We'd had snow and fog and ice, cold as hell always before that. But that day the sun came out bright and we got air support.

Q: That was in January of 1945?

A: No, it was 16-23 December 1944. Anyway, I got my outfit out and we got back behind the lines of the 82d Airborne—we had the 82d Airborne Division just come up and we got inside their line or alongside of them fairly easily and we got back into the line. After we'd gotten back, there was one hell of an attack that night by the Germans. You see, that fellow Peiper [*Kampfgruppe Peiper* consisted of the 1st SS Panzer Regiment with 1st and 2d SS Panzer Grenadier Regiments of the 1st SS Panzer Division],

That was it. That came in there. And there were no bridges across it. There was one little weak bridge. It would handle a jeep or something like that, but that was the only thing they had. There were no roads from that. So, by morning I had my entire combat command back behind this deep railroad cut. Well, I was in the woods, but I had a chance to defend it. I strung my combat command out until we made contact with Clarke on the north and this infantry division on the south. We were very strung out if we were attacked, and we had attacks every night and day. Not big ones but they were being made and I had no reserve. When a [position] was not under attack, I'd pull a battalion out or a company out and shift it along my line. I couldn't use my tanks because the woods were so dense, but I'd pull a company out and bring it up the line. They would fight there for a while until we stopped that attack and then we'd move them back quickly before the enemy found an opening down below. We stayed there for—I know we got driven out slowly—from the banks we went back on the road. We got driven out of our headquarters back there. We had to move out. The Germans were coming up all along and so we started our retreat back towards the American lines.

Q: How long did you and General Clarke work independently? You worked together but independent of a higher headquarters?

A: Well, it was about three or four days and he would support me and I would support him. But it was all by conferences because we had no common commander. His division commander was way back too, and he only had that combat command. My division commander was way south of the bulge down around Luxembourg City. But I was attached to this 106th which had disappeared, had gone completely jittery. Anyway, I remember the defense there and holding out. Jones sent for me one night, sent his aide, wanted me to come back to headquarters back around Vielsalm or somewhere back in there. So, we went back. This aide came after midnight and drove me back to his headquarters. Well, the [VIII] Corps commander told me that I could be relieved now to rejoin my division down south. Communications were cut off in the middle of the conversation, but I couldn't do it because Clarke was there. If one of us moved out, it would leave the other exposed. We had to move together because the Germans were pressing us on all fronts and everywhere, and they were trying to get around behind us. Actually the Germans were taking rations and supplies out of dumps of the 106th that were left behind the lines. They were coming in—we were using some of those supplies

I think his name was, was running wild back there. He had that German force, armored force. He ran wild all around and damned near succeeded in stopping us. But the Engineers primarily-they set fire to a lot of gasoline. The 30th Division was coming in from above to support on the left side of the 82d, so that we were gaining some strength. Somebody had to hold them back because Peiper was beating them all along there and was trying to break through. But he was stopped several times by Engineers blowing up bridges in his face, or in one case they emptied this gasoline down the road right ahead of him and set it on fire. That stopped him, and he was out of gas, too. He finally chased us back through the line, but always on a flank. But we got back and got within the lines.

When we got in there that evening, we thought we were safe, but there was a big attack came at that time. They penetrated the line up to a point and we came under fire that night. So, we had to move again further back and we stayed there two or three days. The whole line was beginning to move back. I was in reserve for, as I remember, the 82d Division and I was in a town called Chevron or something [Vaux Chavanne] [around Malempre]. Anyway, we started to move as I remember [on] Christmas Eve. When we were safe, Christmas morning, woke up in a bed back behind the line, but that night there was a peculiar thing that happened. I had my time to go. I wasn't to move until 12 o'clock and I was supposedly behind the 82d Airborne lines. Well, when I started out everything was quiet. We got down the road a ways and I saw some firing before we turned to go north. There was a junction down there near Manhay when we turned north to this place we were ordered. I had my headquarters company ahead and the rest of the combat commanders behind me on the road. This German attack came. I saw it happen, saw the 7th [Armored] Division was fighting in this town, but we got through. We had a few shots fired at us but went on and turned north a ways. Then I discovered the rest of my column wasn't there. They had been cut by this German attack right between my headquarters and the lead combat unit behind me. Fortunately the man who was back there had enough sense to take a side road and turn north before he got to this town [Manhay] and he rejoined us later.

Q: Was that one of your battalion commanders?

A: Yes. And he got back there and rejoined us back at this bivouac area, and then I went into reserve for the XVIII Airborne Corps, Ridgway's corps.

Q: The XVIII Corps?

A: XVIII Corps. And I became the reserve for the corps and also deputy corps commander. Ridgway appointed me to that position, but we'd lost all the 106th Division completely. Ridgway at that time offered me command of that to reorganize it. I didn't want any part of that. I'd rather stay with the 9th Armored; I knew that one. I could depend on it. Anyway, we had some fights in there in that line. I know the 75th Division was brand new and fresh. They had never been in battle before and they were then in a dense woods and the Germans were attacking all along the front and they went up in the air. So I went down to get them straightened out. They were trying to man the front lines with deep thickets and you couldn't see anything. The Germans would infiltrate and get behind them and then they'd start firing with these rapid-firing pistols and what not. They made a lot of noise. They were behind them so they scared hell out of these new soldiers—so, we reorganized that division and put a light force out in front along that line. I put mobile reserves behind where they could move into the threatened point if there were a real attack. Most of this was just infiltration of a few patrols, but they'd make a hell of a lot of noise when they got back, and they'd scare hell out of these new people. That was a time, too, when they were supposed to have had Germans dressed in American uniforms, and you had to identify yourself everywhere. We had armed sentries out along the line, and they'd stop you—anybody, whether you were a general officer or what. They'd question you—something about who won the baseball pennant and so on. And you had to identify yourself, but we did that for a while, back and forth. It ended when we were finally consolidated [in] a line, and I finally was relieved and sent back to my division.

I rejoined the division down near Metz. When we were down there we were refitted and straightened out, and then when we started the advance into Germany we turned around and went up north again. I crossed the Roer River—that was after they had made that crossing and there was some pontoon bridges over it. We went in there. I think the whole division was together. I know I was at one time attached to the V Corps and one time with the 1st Infantry Division. We had some fighting across there from time to time. It was all relatively minor, but it was hard enough for us. I was responsible for being a reserve for this corps. I had to go in and be assigned to anyplace I could to support them with tanks. We were all trying to get up to the line and that's when eventually it

started—I remember an experience up there on—I’ve forgotten what river. I need a map to trace it up.

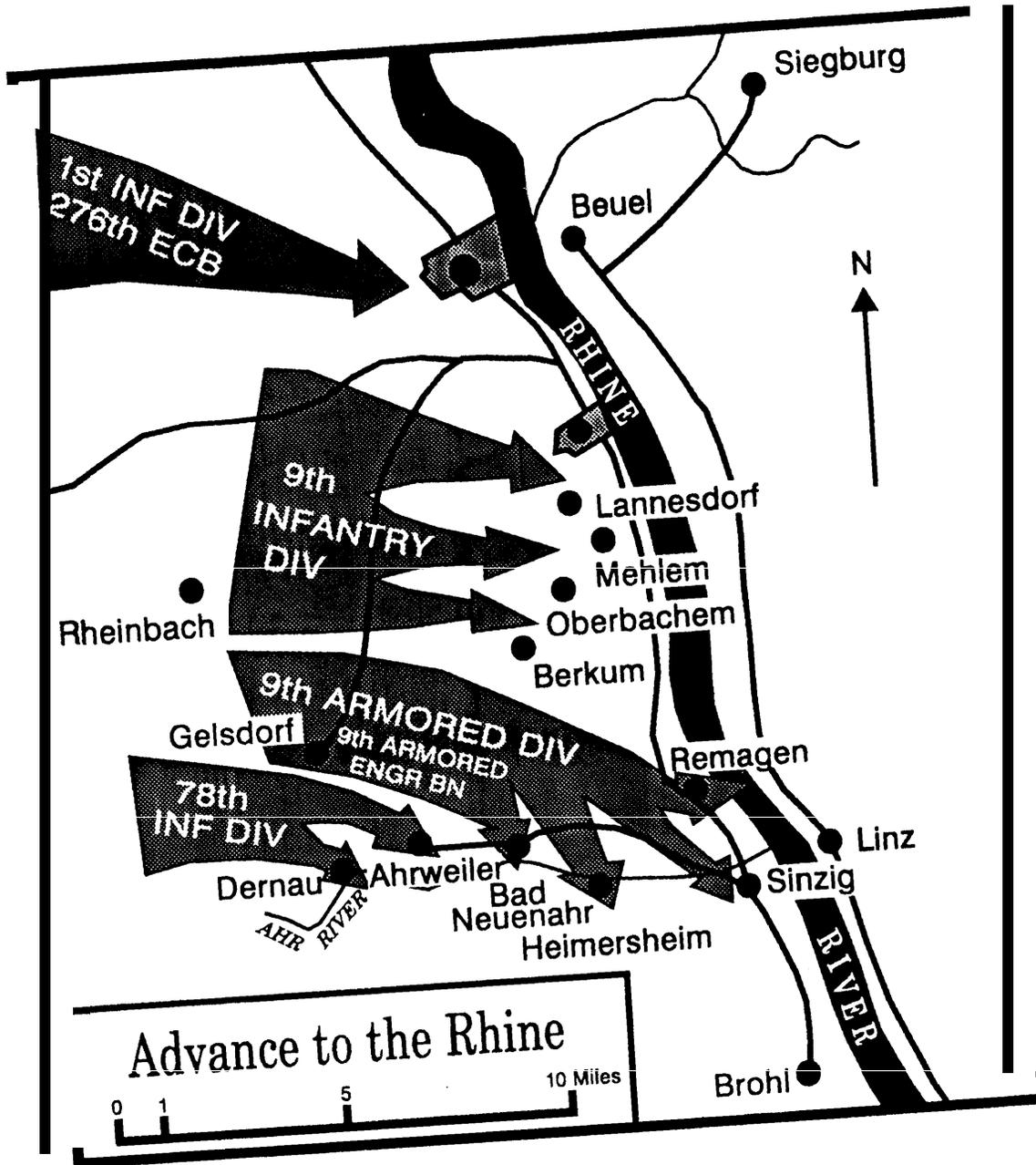
Anyway we went over there. There was a German—a town holding out with Germans. We weren’t making any progress, and I went over to see this infantry company and there was a tank company over there too. The tanks were just sitting on the hill doing nothing. The infantry were just sitting in a trench doing nothing. I went up there and got after them. I went over there and told the tank company to start out towards this town, and then I had to get out and kick the infantry out of the trenches. There were some German trenches that they had dug up there on the hill with civilian labor. I remember while we were getting that lined up, I was in the trench there kneeling down. You could hear these mortar shells coming over. I heard them coming. So, I ducked down. There was one mortar shell that landed on my left side and another one on my right side, and I could reach over the side of this trench and I could put my hand in each one. It had just thrown dirt on top of me. Well, we finally kicked this infantry company out and went down and took the village. From then on we started towards the Rhine.

Q: You’re moving south then, I believe, to join Third Army?

A: No, we were going generally east. We had to cross, then we turned up one of the smaller rivers; and when we got down there six or eight miles we turned east again and started towards the Rhine.

Q: You were still concerning yourself with V Corps reserve at the time when you were moving east?

A: I was there for a while. But I had rejoined the division. We were split when we got up there to make that final attack towards the Rhine, and I reverted back to the division. But I had helped the other divisions when I had been attached to these various divisions for limited operations only. Then I’d revert back to corps reserve.



Advance to the Rhine

Q: How long did you serve as deputy corps commander with General Ridgway?

A: Oh, that wasn't long. That was when I went back to rejoin the division in early January.

Remagen Brige

We moved east towards the Rhine. We crossed the Roer and we headed across those hills back there. Then we headed east towards the Rhine, generally east. Part of the time I had to go north to hit the proper roads. Well, we were together again—I am trying to remember—I rejoined the division at some point in there, I guess after we got straightened out. I had a very good infantry division alongside of me. I remember their code name was “Diploma.” I’ve forgotten its number [9th or 78th]. Anyway they were a good outfit, and they had good commanders. They stuck by me when we finally went across the Rhine.

But we moved up and then is when we were split again—we were in the division, but the main job then was to turn south and close that pocket because the Germans were trying to escape from the Saar Valley and cross the Rhine, get back towards the Rhine. Combat Command A was on my right and they were to clean out that back side, and my job primarily was to go up and get near the Rhine and close that. But it was primarily to grab those bridges over the Ahr River and stop any Germans coming in from that side and to open a way of getting on south. That was my prime mission. By that time I had another battalion of infantry with me. So, I had more strength, and I had a good battalion at that time with a good commander. But he was only attached. He was from the other combat command. But that's when I got up towards the Rhine. But the day we made the attack I was first supposed to capture Bonn up north of Remagen; but the night I'd issued my orders to start the next day towards Bonn—that direction, that was due east—it was changed that night. I had to change the orders during the night, get my battalion commanders in, and we were then headed south of Remagen primarily to capture these Ahr bridges and close up to the Rhine. We were then at Stadt Meckenheim. I was badly shelled, but we weren't getting any great damage at the time. That's when we started, and I had split my command—well, to keep contact on my left I had my reconnaissance troop over on that left. We could make contact with the 9th Infantry Division