

Patton Crosses the Rhine

*The U.S. Third Army's Crossing at
Nierstein and Oppenheim
22-26 March 1945*



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Army Strong! Strong Europe!

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Introduction

Commemorating the crossing of the Rhine River at Nierstein and Oppenheim by Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.'s U.S. Third Army has a special significance, not only for Americans but for Germans and Europeans as well. This breaching of the last major terrain obstacle protecting the heart of Germany was the first assault crossing of the Rhine since Napoleon embarked on his Ulm Campaign of 1805. It was conducted with swiftness and decisiveness in a highly fluid and confusing environment, in circumstances that were anything but certain at the time. It demonstrated boldness on the part of the American Soldiers involved and a determination to bring a terrible conflict to a definitive conclusion.

But Patton's assault across the Rhine is also important to Germany and Europe as a whole, not to exacerbate the raw feelings of a vanquished foe, but instead to see it as the beginning of the end of the National Socialist state and the dawning of a new era for Germany and all of Europe. It served as one of the key opening acts to bringing a new Germany into the common fold of nation states as an equal partner. It helped open the way to invigorate the best that Germany had to offer from its past, while helping it to work in cooperation with the Europe we now see today, a Europe where tyranny is eschewed, replaced by conciliation, open discussion, and a willingness to seek common ground to solve common problems while celebrating the best that each nation has to offer. And in commemorating this event, we must remember that all of these things came with a heavy cost in blood and treasure. This can possibly be one of the best ultimate lessons to learn from Patton's crossing of the Rhine River at Nierstein and Oppenheim.

A special thanks must be rendered to Herr Joakim Steinweden and LTC Thomas Clark for their contributions and assistance in preparing this booklet.

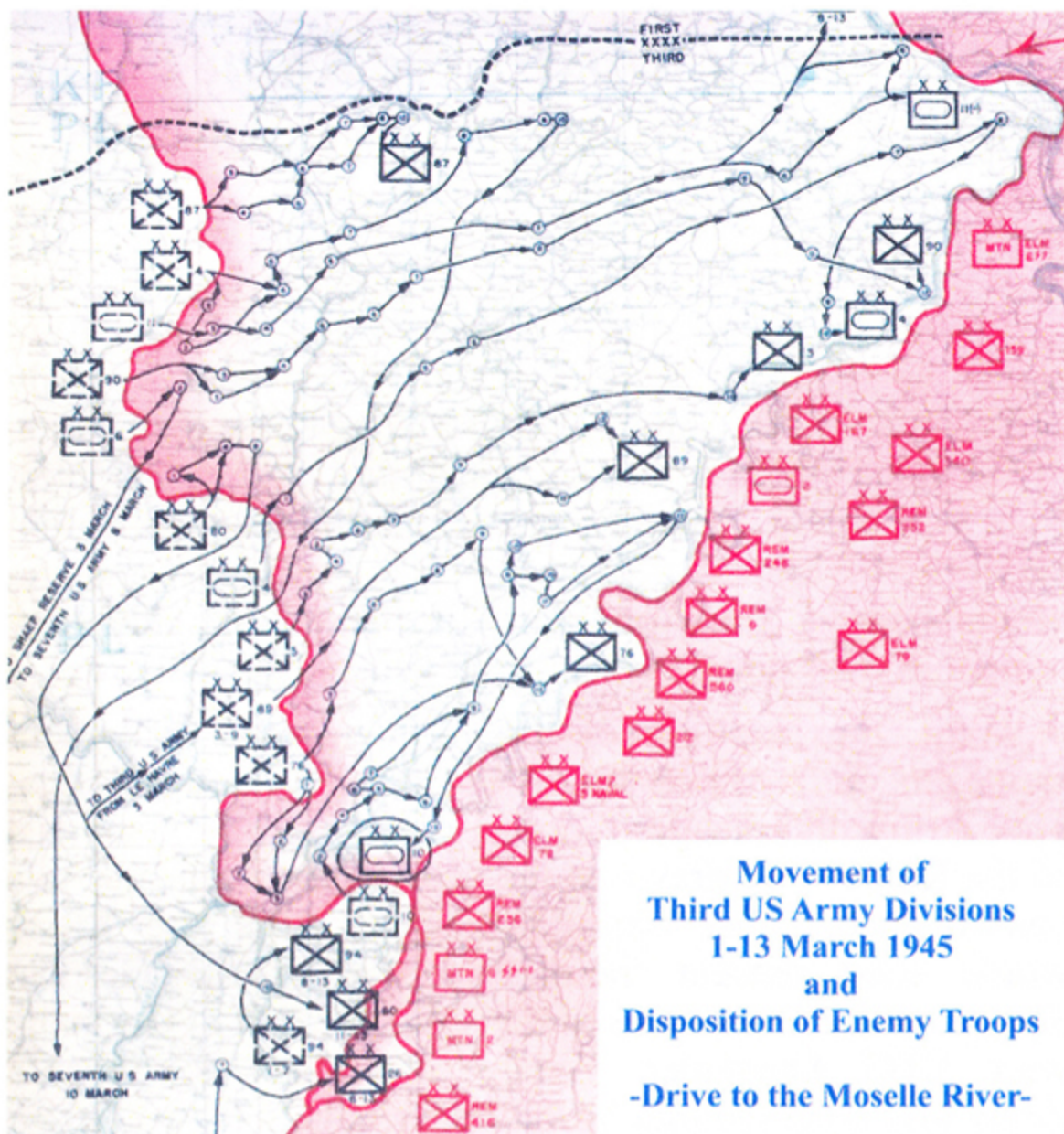
Patton Crosses the Rhine

By Russ Rodgers, USAREUR Command Historian

In January 1945, the collapse of the German front along the Siegfried Line, the border between Germany and its western neighbors, led to a large-scale dissolution of German combat forces and capability. Along the entire front west of the Rhine River, German units were caught between the immediate need to withdraw eastward and orders coming from on high that demanded that they remain in their positions and fight and subsequently die.

With the capture of the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen on 7 March by LTG Courtney Hodges' U.S. First Army, the meager German reserves still extant east of the Rhine were drawn to the growing bridgehead. As a consequence, other opportunities to cross the Rhine would soon present themselves. Facing the German *Seventh* and *First Armies* in the southern half of Germany were LTG Alexander "Sandy" Patch's U.S. Seventh Army and LTG George S. Patton, Jr.'s U.S. Third Army. With his eye on history, Patton was determined to be the first since Napoleon in 1805 to make an assault crossing of the Rhine.

Patton's earlier crossing of the Moselle River and subsequent drive to the southeast had been so fast and dramatic as to see his 10th and 12th Armored Divisions plunge across the boundary separating his Third Army and Patch's Seventh. Not only did it catch much of the German *Seventh Army* in a large pocket east of Trier, it served to contain part of Patch's U.S. Seventh Army as well. Moreover, this movement thoroughly confused the German command as to which American army was where, so much so that even after the war one German commander continued to insist that it was Patch's



Map from Third Army After Action Reports

Seventh Army that eventually crossed the Rhine at Nierstein and Oppenheim.

Even as Patton's armored columns ran helter-skelter through the rear areas of the German *Seventh Army* and cut off the advance of his southerly neighbor, the competitive American field commanders traded jabs to celebrate each other's success. Major General Leonard Gerow, commanding the U.S. V Corps, sent off a telegram to Patton, saying "congratulations on your brilliant surrounding and capture of three Armies, one of them American," a clear ribbing of Patch's U.S. Seventh

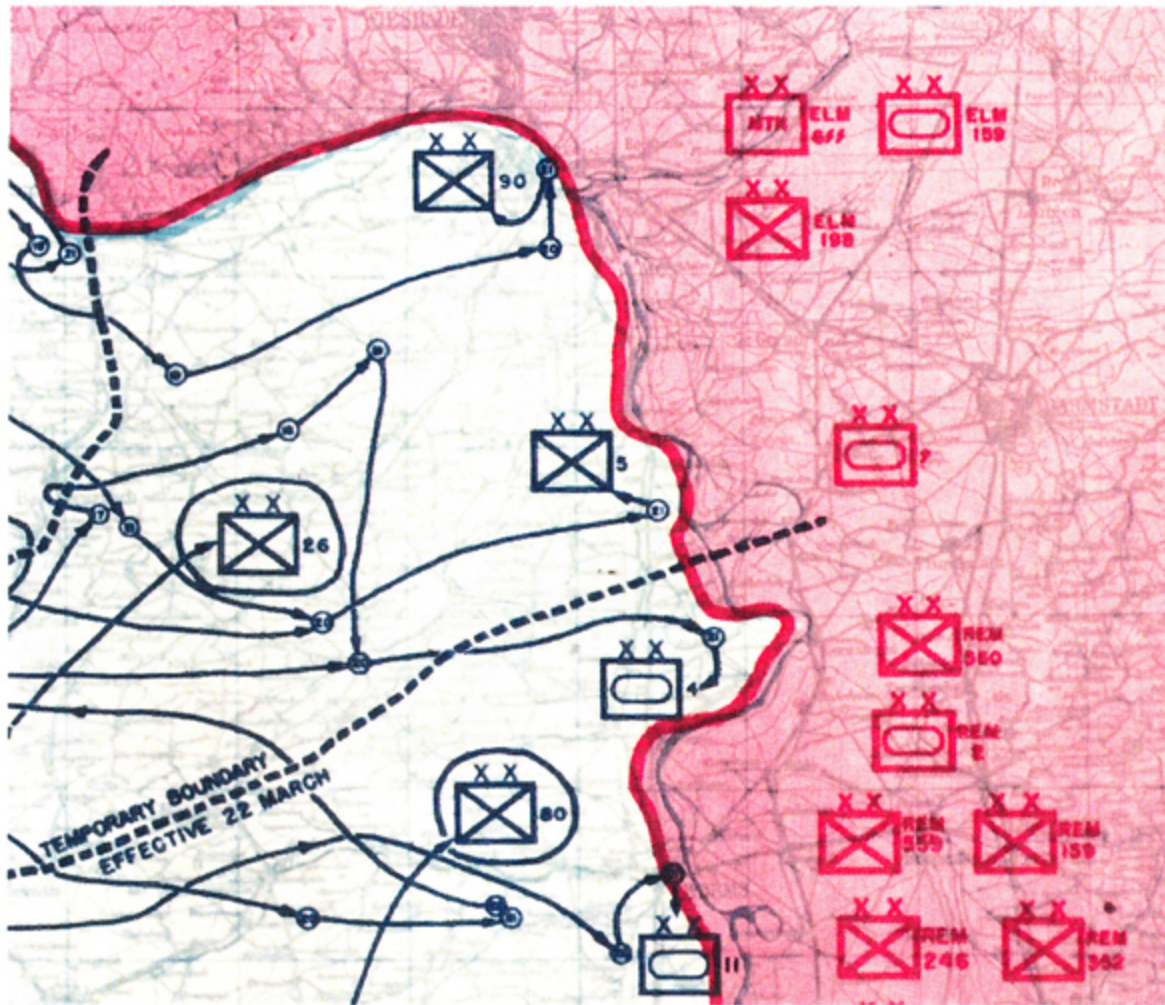


By early 1945, scenes such as this of the 11th Armored Division advancing into Wernberg, Germany became common. National Archives

Army. Concurrently, Patch displayed his chagrin over recent events with his own telegram, chiding Patton by congratulating him for “being the last to reach the Rhine.”

For the Third Army, the most logical choice for an assault crossing was at Mainz, for it served as a major railroad link from west to east, thus offering the means to logistically support an advance deeper into Germany. However, Patton was also cognizant that this would be precisely where the German Army would expect him to cross, and therefore he and his staff made rapid plans for another site, the one ultimately chosen at Nierstein and Oppenheim, about 12 miles or 17 kilometers south of Mainz.

Neirstein and Oppenheim were ideal crossing sites, in part because the bluffs on the western bank, being over 100 meters high, would allow for excellent observation of the flat eastern side. It also served as the junction of



Third Army assessment of the situation just before the crossing attempt. The 5th Infantry Division, near the center of the map, is poised to cross. Third Army After Action Reports

several major roads, allowing for rapid movement to a crossing site. The German leadership, despite the chaos in their own forces, recognized that this site presented a good crossing point. But with very limited resources at hand they had to take a calculated risk that Mainz was more important to defend. Indeed, the 90th Infantry Division under Brig. Gen. Herbert Earnest helped to reinforce this mindset with their relentless drive on the city, attacking Mainz proper on 22 March and quickly capturing it. This helped set the stage for the Third Army to cross the river further south.

Patton was particularly keen on beating his most important rival, that being Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery whose British 21st Army Group was poised



Maj. Gen. Leroy Irwin, commander of the 5th Infantry Division (seen here briefing Gen. George C. Marshall about his assault on Metz in Nov. 1944) was tasked to lead the Third Army across the Rhine. Patton Museum

to assault across the Rhine River in the area of Wesel north of the Ruhr industrial district. Montgomery was already confident that the capture of the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen would draw forces away from his projected operation, and had planned a deliberate attack complete with a massive artillery barrage, an airborne drop, and the inclusion of elements of two armies, all screened by a dense cloud of generated smoke. His assault was to begin on the night of 23 March, so for Patton there was not a moment to lose.

In preparation for this very opportunity, Patton had ordered the massing of bridging equipment, along with

their associated engineer units and small Navy landing craft, in eastern France. The division selected for the initial assault was Maj. Gen. Leroy Irwin's 5th Infantry Division, currently assigned to Maj. Gen. Manton Eddy's XII Corps. Irwin had just prior been informed that his division was to be placed in reserve to provide it a rest when he got the startling orders to make a Rhine River nighttime assault. Reinforced with one regiment of the 90th Infantry Division, Irwin selected the 1st and 3d Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment to make the first attempt at Oppenheim and Nierstein respectively.

The selection of the Nierstein-Oppenheim area was fortuitous for another reason. It was possibly one of the weakest sectors of the German front along the entire Rhine River, a fact noted by Patton's excellent G-2 intelligence team under Col. Oscar Koch. This did not mean they did not expect serious opposition. Indeed, Patton's G-2 still overestimated the strength of German forces facing them on the opposite side of the river, including the possibility of encountering a reforming panzer division. Nevertheless, Patton quickly determined based on this intelligence assessment that the best way to keep the German Army on its heels was to bounce the Rhine—at once.

While the Third Army still believed it would face serious opposition, the German forces in the area of Darmstadt and facing the Nierstein-Oppenheim area were in disarray. There was little in the way of real combat units available, the area manned by a mix of rear echelon support troops along with convalescents and training personnel thrown into ad hoc formations. Command and control at the time was exercised by the German military district known as *Wehrkreis XII* which was entrusted with administrative support for the area. It had just recently been placed under the command of the smashed German *Seventh Army*, this being led by Gen. Hans Felber. Felber was familiar from previous experience



Maj. Gen. Manton Eddy (left), commander of the XII Corps, briefs Patton on the initial progress of his forces crossing the Rhine River. Patton Museum

with organizing shattered units into some semblance of order. However, he desperately needed time. While building a line of resistance along the Rhine, Felber had but one division, the partially organized *159th Volksgrenadier* to act as an Army reserve. This division, led by Generalleutnant Heinrich Bürky, was in such bad shape that it was rated as being incapable of even marginal defensive action.

Third Army's crossing at Nierstein and Oppenheim came within 24 hours of the decision to select the site. Therefore, the staffs of the Army, Eddy's XII Corps, and of the various divisions to be employed had to rapidly coordinate the movement of five divisions, necessary boats and bridging equipment, and a host of support units along the few roads available to bring them into position. That they accomplished this feat was a testimony to both



Infantry load up in LCVP for the crossing. Apparently the ramp winch is defective as it is manually lifted. Joakim Steinweden

effective training and extensive field experience in the rapid movement and assembling of forces at a key point and time.

In addition to initially crossing the river by boat, Patton's senior artillery officer came up with a plan to ferry one battalion of infantry across the river in the Grasshopper and L-5 Sentinel artillery observation planes. Each aircraft could carry one fully equipped passenger and were capable of landing on small, rough fields. The plan envisioned each aircraft to make several trips to bring the entire battalion into action, but the idea was dropped when the boat crossing came off with complete success.

As Maj. Gen. Irwin moved his 11th Inf. Rgt. into position along the river, boats were concurrently moved forward to begin the crossing. The night of 22 March was fairly clear and moonlit, which naturally made the infantry making the effort a little nervous. While the crossing was planned to start at 2200 hours, minor

Man Spricht Deutsch
Kommen Sie den Schritt weg.
Kommen Sie den Schritt weg.
Close away the Arben.

PARIS EDITION
THE STARS AND STRIPES
Daily Newspaper of U.S. Armed Forces in the European Theater of Operations

Ici On Parle Français
C'est clair, c'est fort.
Say clear is, too.
It's clear, I am wrong.

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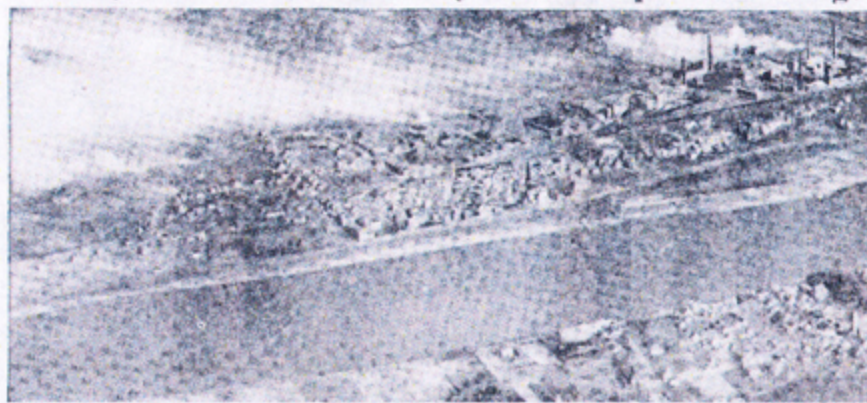
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Saturday, March 24, 1945

Third Crosses Rhine

Looking East—Yank Artillery Softens Up a Nazi Target



**Nazis Fear
New Drives
Over River**

BULLETIN

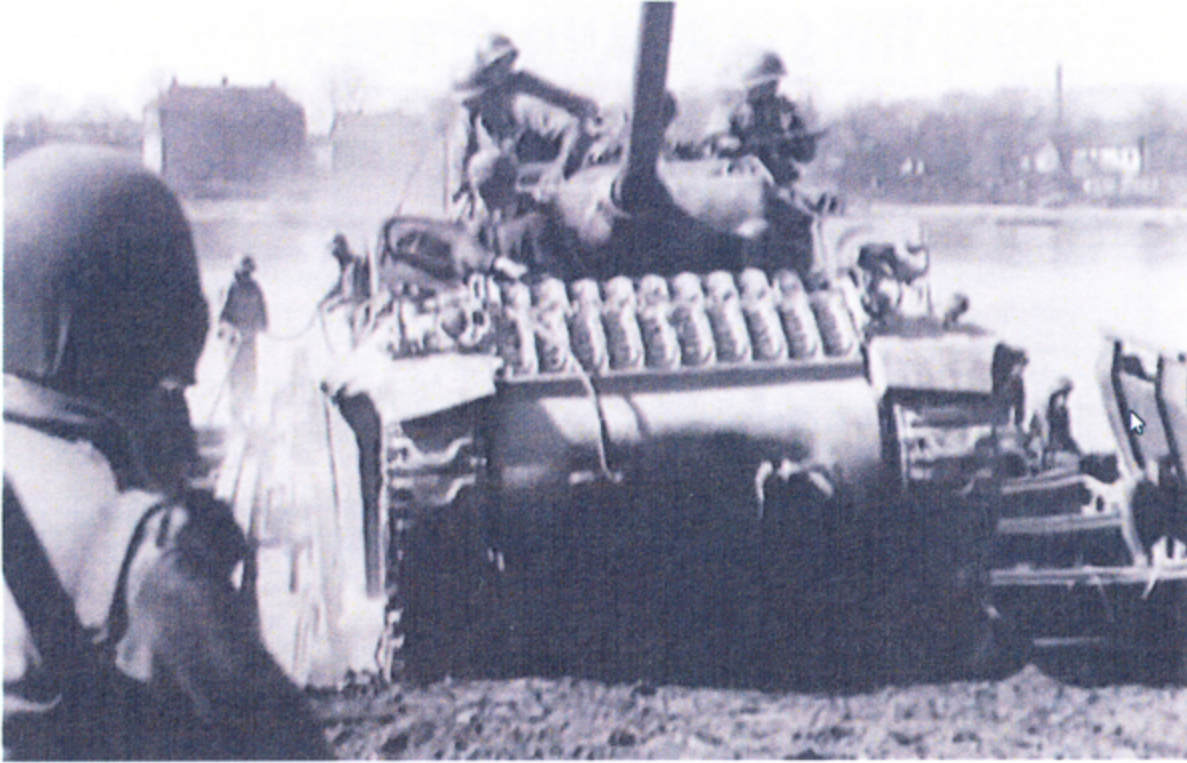
Troops of Lt. Gen. George S. Patton's U.S. Third Army crossed the Rhine at 2100 hours Thursday night and established a bridgehead on the eastern bank, it was officially announced early today. The point of crossing was not disclosed.

Patton's men made the crossing without air or artillery support. Late reports said that the bridgehead was steadily expanding. Earlier the Germans radioed American shock formations with amphibious tanks had crossed the Rhine near Oppenheim, south of Mainz. A Berlin station claimed that the troops had strong artillery protection and that additional

Courtesy Joakim Steinweden

problems in preparation caused a thirty minute delay. It was at 2230 when the first boats left the western bank of the Rhine. Noise discipline was excellent and the 3d Battalion's crossing at Nierstein came off without opposition as an assault boat with eight men, along with the commander of K Company, 1st Lt. Irven Jacobs, were the first ashore. Seven surprised Germans surrendered at once and the battalion quickly developed their initial foothold. As American troops pushed east from the shore, some German soldiers were so surprised that they were caught sleeping in some of the farm buildings. These were bypassed and mopped up by follow-on forces in the early morning darkness.

Further south and coming from Oppenheim, the 1st Battalion ran into some minor opposition when they were engaged by a German machine gun crew and a few infantry. Nevertheless, casualties were still light, with the 11th Inf. Rgt. losing but 28 men killed or wounded. Determined to rapidly develop a deep bridgehead, Irwin hustled the rest of his division across the river. By the end of the day of 23 March, he had pushed his three



An M-36 Jackson tank destroyer drives off of a ferry ramp.
Joakim Steinweden

regiments across the river, along with one attached regiment, the 359th Inf. of the 90th Infantry Division. In addition, the first tanks from the 737th Tank Battalion assigned to Irwin's division were ferried across, with some even swimming the river in their Duplex Drive, or "DD" configuration, and by the afternoon a Class 40 Treadway pontoon bridge was in place.

Early on the morning of 23 March, Gen. Omar Bradley, commander of the 12th Army Group to which Patton's Third Army was assigned, received a phone call from Patton to tell him that he had slipped forces across the Rhine. Patton initially urged Bradley to keep it secret so as avoid any embarrassment in case of failure, but by late morning and confident of success he phoned again to ask Bradley to tell the world. Bradley made a public announcement on the afternoon of 23 March, adding a few digs at Montgomery who had yet to launch his massive attack across the Rhine scheduled for later that night.

Confusion was rife on the German side and their ability to respond hamstrung by a lack of transport and poor communications. The initial reaction was uncoordinated with woefully inadequate resources, and only a handful of planes from the Luftwaffe made their first desperate strafing runs on the troops assembling in the bridgehead. *Wehrkries XII* was wholly inadequate for the task, and control in the area was quickly transferred to the German *LXXXV Corps*, but there was precious little for the corps to command.

While some sharp firefights ensued, these caused few casualties to the American forces and failed to delay expansion of the bridgehead. For the Germans there was no armor or mechanized forces in the area, and an initial decision to pull the *11th Panzer Division* from the Remagen area was fraught with serious delays. In addition, the *17th SS Panzergrenadier Division* was reforming to the south of the new bridgehead, but its



Above, an M-36 tank destroyer and halftracks with infantry await their turn in Nierstein. Joakim Steinweden



An M-4A3E8 Sherman tank is loaded onto a ferry for the river crossing. Signal Corps

condition was deplorable, having lost all of its motor transport and assault guns in its recent withdrawal actions and was thus combat ineffective. This left only the *159th Volksgrenadier Division* available for any serious attempt to reduce the bridgehead. To reinforce this poorly equipped division, the German *Seventh Army* called up the cadre and students of an officer candidate school in Wiesbaden. While under the command of the experienced Col. Gerhard Kentner, this unit, called *R.O.B. Kentner* lacked any heavy weapons save for six assault guns found at a nearby vehicle repair shop.

Even as Gen. Bürky pushed his weak division and the officer candidates to prepare for action, the Germans hurried to throw together another formation from any personnel they could find in the area. These scrapings were placed under the command of Gen.Maj. Walter Runge who commanded the Rhine River security

detachments in the region. It was composed of no more than 5,000 personnel drawn from riverine security units, supply depots, maintenance shops, and local hospitals. They were quickly assembled and provided whatever weapons could be scrounged from a local supply depot.

German *Seventh Army* demands for an immediate counterattack were met with opposition from Bürky, citing a lack of artillery as his significant shortfall. However, he was pressed to try nonetheless. Launched on the afternoon of 23 March, it made only minor headway near Groß Gerau before being smashed by a furious barrage of American artillery fire. Gen. Runge was mortally wounded under this hail of steel, the command of his battlegroup being taken by Col. von Müller. Another counterattack on the next day fared little better, and it too was broken up by American artillery fire.

By 24 March, the U.S. 4th Armored Division under Brig. Gen. William Hoge crossed the Rhine and began the exploitation phase. Even as this already famous division began its crossing, Patton showed up with his



An M-7 Priest 105mm self-propelled gun of the 22d Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 4th Armored Division moves across the Rhine to join the exploitation. Joakim Steinweden and Sammlung Leiwig



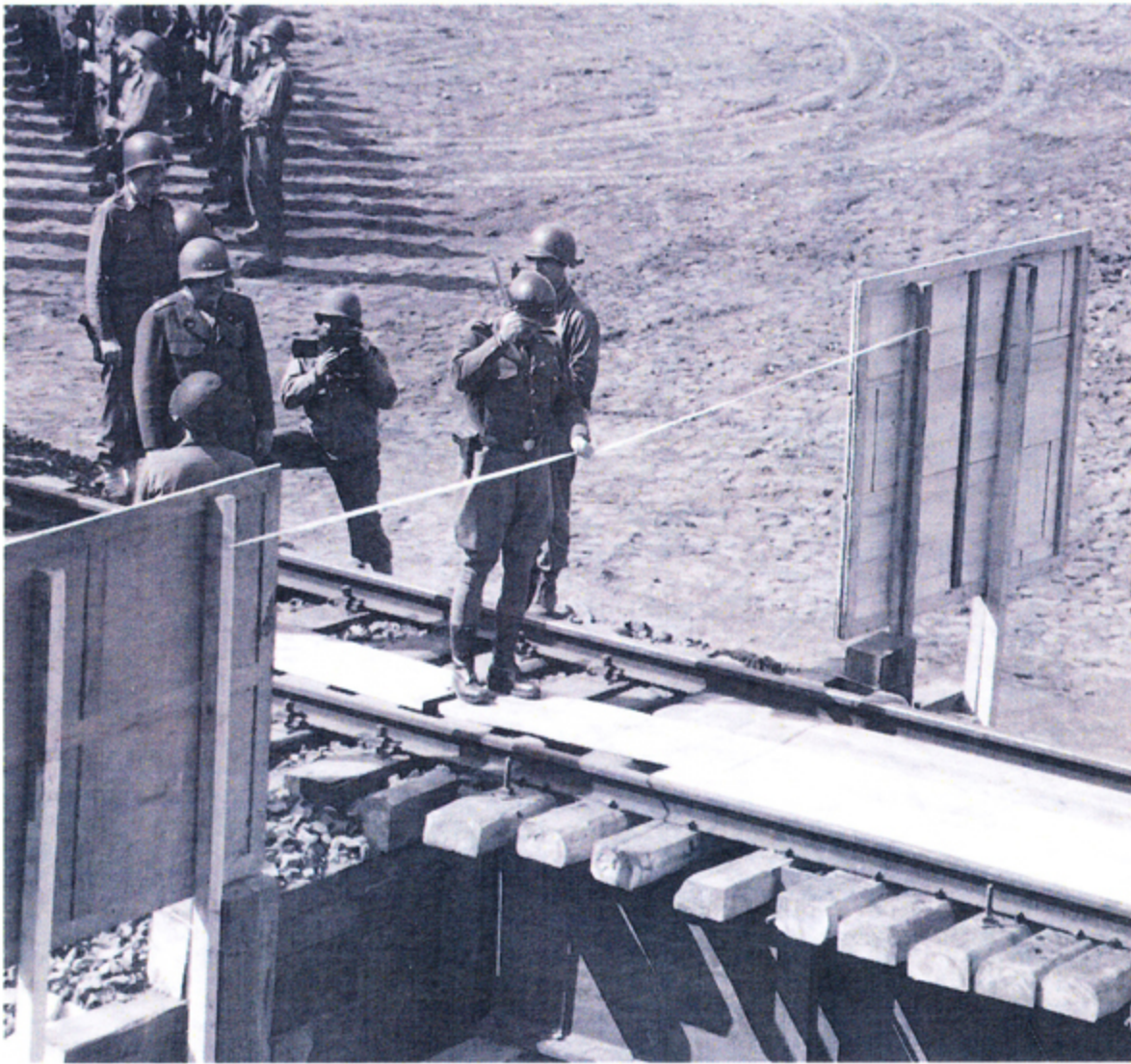
Patton reenacts his famous act at the Rhine River. While there are some photos that purport to show Patton in the act, none have been conclusively demonstrated to be a picture of the actual moment Patton Museum

aide and several of his officers. Walking casually across the bridge, the general stopped midway to

urinate into the river. "I have been looking forward to this for a long time," he said, as he buttoned his trousers. But while humorous and even a bit quirky, there was nothing humorous for the German defenders about the columns of troops, tanks and artillery pouring across the bridges at Nierstein and Oppenheim.

The German forces attempting to contain Third Army's bridgehead were severely depleted, and the plan of the German *Seventh Army* was to develop some type of defense in depth to resist the expected American breakout. With this in mind, they assembled several infantry divisions in the area between Frankfurt and Aschaffenburg, and accelerated the refitting of the *17th SS Panzergrenadier Division*. They even pulled together another ad hoc battlegroup partly composed of guards from the I.G. Farben industrial plant in Ludwigshafen. In addition to the ground forces, the Luftwaffe stepped up their attacks in an attempt to destroy the bridges now spanning the Rhine.

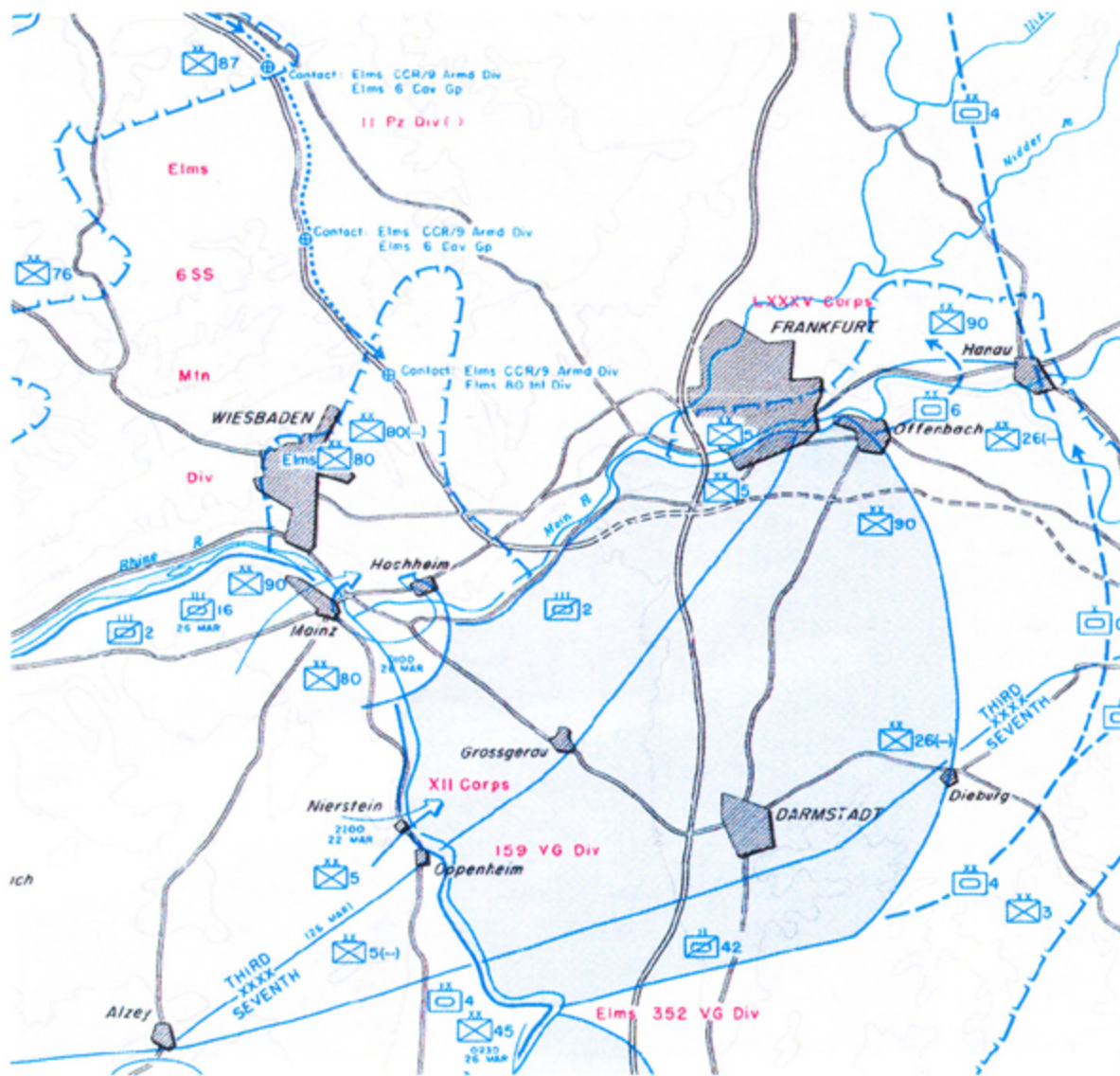
Despite these efforts, the 4th Armored Division began its breakout on the afternoon of 24 March. Their initial



Amid much fanfare on 14 April 1945, Patton cuts the ribbon to the Franklin D. Roosevelt railroad bridge erected at Mainz. This bridge became the main supply route for the Third Army as it drove deeper into Germany. Patton Museum

aim was to surround Darmstadt and to this end the Division drove to the southeast, pushing on after dark with the moon as their guide. The advance was so rapid that Gen. Felber of the German *Seventh Army* decided to abandon Darmstadt, and the city fell the next day without a serious fight.

On 25 March, Eddy ordered the 6th Armored Division to cross into the bridgehead and join in on what was quickly becoming a romp. At this point, the bridges and engineer support was so effective that the entire 6th Armored Division crossed the river in just over 16 hours.



Detail of a map showing the exploitation area of Third Army after making the Rhine River crossing. Center of Military History

With Darmstadt secured, the 4th Armored Division turned to the northeast towards Hanau and Aschaffenburg where they captured two bridges over the Main River intact.

By 26 March, the exploitation to the Main River was becoming a rout. Concurrently, Patton's Third Army began to cross the Rhine to the north near Mainz, Boppard and St. Goar, while to the south the Third Army's neighbor, Patch's U.S. Seventh Army began to cross the Rhine near Worms. Coupled with the U.S. First Army's capture of the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen and Montgomery's assault across the Rhine near Wesel,

the last major obstacle protecting the heart of Germany had been irrevocably breached. The war would come to an end in just under six weeks.

While Patton's crossing of the Rhine River at Nierstein and Oppenheim may not appear to be a major combat action, the operation demonstrated some interesting traits of planning, leadership, and command and control. There was the rapid recognition by Patton and his staff to exploit a significant weakness of their enemy, despite the weariness of their own personnel. While already having the initiative since the crossing of the Moselle River, Patton was determined to retain this and compel the German commanders in the area to react to his movements. Concurrently, this desire to retain the initiative required the rapid assembly of troops into a narrow area to make the river crossing and create a defensible bridgehead.

To accomplish these objectives involved troops trained and experienced in rapid movement and independent decision making at the tactical level, supported by units of combat engineers to make the crossing a reality. This was even more critical in light of the fact that of the three divisions making the initial crossing, two of them (the 4th Armored and 90th Infantry) had received new commanding generals just weeks or even one day prior. Therefore, success of the operation largely depended on the staffs effectively operating with only minimal guidance from their commanders and junior leaders exercising individual initiative. It was these factors that in large measure allowed the Third Army to take a tactical success and transform it into a spectacular operation triumph with their subsequent exploitation further into Germany.

Select Primary Source Quotes

"I had just finished my second cup of coffee when Patton telephoned from LUCKY.

'Brad, don't tell anyone but I'm across.'

'Well, I'll be damned—you mean across the Rhine?'

'Sure am,' he replied, 'I sneaked a division over last night. But there are so few Krauts around there they don't know it yet. So don't make any announcement—we'll keep it a secret until we see how it goes.'"

A Soldier's Story. Omar Bradley. New York: The Modern Library, 1999, p.521.

On 23 March around 2 a.m. I received an order from the VII ARMY Command as follows: "Enemy has formed bridgehead near Oppenheim. Commanding Officer of 159 INF DIV must at once take over command with small Staff command group, in the bridgehead area Oppenheim." - Subsequent to forming a Staff consisting of one general Staff officer, two officers on orderly duty several orderlies for office work, two orderlies with bicycle for transmitting orders, one radio station and one telephone detail, I motored to VII. ARMY HQC BENSHEIM in order to get some detailed information on the situation in the Oppenheim - area. The ARMY itself was absolutely in the dark about the situation. The only information I got was that a MAJOR-GENERAL RUNGE was stationed at GROSS-GERAU (10 km northwest of DARMSTADT). All of our forces resisting the enemy's bridge head were placed under my command and I was instructed that it was of importance to prevent any extension of the enemy's bridge-head.

Gen. Bürky (159th VG) assessment of the German situation. Post-war interview

Drove to the river and went across on the pontoon bridge, stopping in the middle to take a piss in the Rhine, and then pick up some dirt on the far side... in emulation of William the Conqueror.... I must construct the railway bridge [near Mainz] as that should be the main supply line.... *The Patton Papers Vol II*, Martin Blumenson, ed. . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974. p. 661 Patton diary entry.

Select Primary Source Quotes

“March 23, a red-letter day..., for just before midnight of the twenty-second, the advance elements of the 5th Infantry Division, following out the General’s careful and very secret plan, stole silently through the little vineyard town of Oppenheim, embarked upon waiting boats and rafts, and paddled across the River Rhine.... The Germans, who had been encouraged by us to expect a crossing attempt near Mainz, were so surprised that the early resistance was almost nil and our casualties hardly exceeded a total of thirty.” Col. Charles Codman (aide to Patton) Letter to his wife. Drive, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957, pp 268-69.

23 March 1945: During the night of 22 March the enemy undertook the expected transition across the Rhine between Oppenheim and Nackenheim. Since the reinforcements requested in agreement with the Deputy Corps Staff of the XII. 'Armee-korps' had not arrived, and our stock of ammunition could in no wise be enlarged, the enemy succeeded in pressing back the weak security troops on the Rhine bank to the line east of Nackenheim - Wallersteden - Dornheim - Erfelden. Counterattacks were impossible for want of reserves.

Col. Von Müller (Div. Runge) view of the American attack. Post-war interview

“For some time prior to the actual crossing, bridge building equipment had had first priority with the Third Army Quartermaster truck companies. They had been bringing this equipment up over long distances and depositing it under camouflage in strategic locations.... Vast amounts of pontoons, Baileys and treadway materials were hauled to the river in addition to assault boats and other amphibious landing craft. The latter were supplied and operated by the Navy.” *Patton & His Third Army*. Brenton G. Wallace. (part of Patton’s G-2) Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2000, p. 181.

Bibliographical Notes

The material for this booklet was taken from U.S. Army and German after action reports, diaries, letters and post-war interviews. For further reading regarding the Third Army's crossing of the Rhine, as well as other Rhine River crossing efforts, see the following:

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U.S. THIRD ARMY
Nierstein—Oppenheim Crossing Site
1943 U.S. Army map



Photo credits
Military History Institute
Signal Corps
Joakim Steinweden

