

## Task Force Baum – Behind enemy lines

(reading example)

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The imminent end of the war against *Nazi* Germany became apparent in the second half of March of 1945. In the East, Soviet troops were already at the river Oder, and were preparing the last big battle of this war - the attack on Berlin. In the West, the Allied forces had already crossed at several, well-separated locations the Rhine River -- the great barrier to the heartland of the *Reich*. In a large pincer movement two Allied Armies advanced, intending to encircle the Ruhr area, choking off Germany's industrial engine.

One of the most important military commanders of World War II was the American General *George S. Patton Jr.*, a highly aggressive and resourceful commander. Because of his extraordinary military skills before and during World Wars I and II, his career had made a meteoric rise.

*George S. Patton Jr.* was a graduate of the famous U.S. Military Academy at *West Point* and had gained experience with the new tank weapon during World War I as a cavalry officer. On the Western Front he led a *Tank Brigade*, and was, among other things, commander of a training facility for tanks. He finally ended the war as a *Colonel*. After the war he was demoted to the peactime rank of a *Captain* and served in a variety of posts in the U.S. Cavalry, including commander of the *U.S. Army Cavalry School* at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

After the horrors of World War I, the United States had developed a strongly isolationist foreign policy, and failed to keep pace with its European counterparts in the development and tactical deployment of its ground, air, and armored forces. Traditionalist officers still believed, for example, that modern wars could still be fought and won with traditional cavalry. Those with contrary opinions, the so-called Modernists, whose leading figures including *George S. Patton*, followed closely all developments in Europe and argued for modernization of the *U.S. Army*. As of 1 September, 1939, when World War II started with the invasion of Poland, the ineffectiveness of traditional cavalry was decisively proven, strengthening the Modernists' hands. Further impetus was gained through analysis of the German operations during the occupation of Belgium and France in 1940. Thanks to the huge industrial potential of the U.S., and especially the automotive industry, large numbers of SHERMAN tanks could be produced in a short time in comparison to the British tanks. Their crews came from traditional cavalry units and draftees. Armored Divisions were formed from the former U.S. Cavalry, and more armored units of different types were introduced. The training of the tank units was accelerated.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after Pearl Harbor and the USA entrance into WW II, *Major-General Patton* became *Division Commander* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Armored Division*. He was considered one of the leading tank tactician in the United States. His career as a General began initially as a shining star. On 8 November 1942, he landed as Commander of the invasion troops on Morocco's West Coast. In early March

<sup>1</sup>

Hofmann George, *Camp Colt to Desert Storm - The History of the U.S. Armored Forces*, University Press of Kentucky, USA, 1999

1943 he was put in command of the *II<sup>nd</sup> Corps*, which had previously suffered a heavy defeat by the *Afrika Korps* under *Generaloberst Erwin Rommel* at Kasserine Pass, and its commander had been sacked. *Patton's* troops were ordered to threaten *Rommel's* flank to support the advance of the *British Eighth Army* from Libya into Tunisia. On 11 May 1943, the *Axis<sup>2</sup>* forces surrendered on North African soil. The next stage was the jump of the Allies to Sicily. Due to his success in North Africa, *Patton* was given command of the *Seventh Army*. For the invasion of Sicily, he had worked out a brilliant plan - he wanted to land, where the ancient Greeks had set foot on the coastline. Unfortunately he could not prevail against the Allied High Command. As the American command was intent on a good coalition with the British allies, instead the plan of *Field Marshal George Bernard Montgomery* was selected. This plan was that *Patton's Seventh Army* should advance through rough terrain on the left flank. *Patton* was furious when he learned of this decision. After landing, the struggle for Sicily became a personal race between *Patton* and *Montgomery*. *Patton* finally succeeded to capture Messina, the capital of Sicily, before *Montgomery*. The next strategic objective was the Allied landing in Italy. *Patton* had reached the zenith of his career when he ran into serious trouble. The brilliant strategist *George S. Patton* had two notable character weaknesses: First, he could not keep his mouth shut, and second, he was prone to uncontrolled outbursts of anger. This meant that he lacked self control when talking to the press. He was reprimanded repeatedly by his superiors. In August, 1943, he was in Sicily in a field hospital, where he had slapped two American soldiers for alleged cowardice. Hospital staff had reacted by complaining to the High Command. *Eisenhower* did not want to lose his ablest commander, and so he had told him in a personal letter to apologize in front of selected delegations of the *Seventh Army* and all of the personnel involved in the incident. But the press had gotten wind of this incident and *General Eisenhower*, due to pressure from the American public, had to relieve *Patton* of his command as Commander of the *Seventh Army*. *Patton* was initially placed in cold storage.

In the spring of 1944 before *D-Day* - the Allied invasion of Normandy - *General Patton* took command of a fictitious US Army in Great Britain. The Germans were to be deceived about the actual place of the coming landing on the French Channel coast. The fictitious Army, "commanded" by *Patton* was preparing its "operation" for a landing in the *Pas de Calais*. The Allied plan worked, because the Germans could not imagine that an invasion would not be led by *General Patton*. But since the start of the invasion the High Command had no intention to sideline its best Tank- and Army Commander, and *Patton* on 1 August 1944 was given the command of the *Third Army*, which was preparing for deployment in the Normandy bridgehead. Now with *General Patton* back on the frontline, he wanted to exceed every victory he had attained so far, and it was his many intention to make no more mistakes and keep his mouth shut. *Patton* had issued strict instructions for the *Third Army* down to the level of the infantry squad about the rules of combat. *Patton* enforced his orders vigorously, and when necessary, relentlessly. He established excellent coordination between his ground troops and the *XIX<sup>th</sup> Tactical Air Force*, which was assigned to provide tactical air support for the *Third Army*. The Allied plan of operation employed *Patton's Third Army* for breaking out of the beachhead and cutting a swath through France. This was a job tailor-made for a Tank leader like *George S. Patton*. His motto was: constantly attack and give the enemy no time for countermeasures. After

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<sup>2</sup> Forces of Germany and Italy, called after the axis Berlin – Rom.

the *Third Army* had broken out of Normandy beachhead at Avranches it initially cleared the Breton peninsula. Then *Patton* pushed in a 100 km wide wedge, with his *Armored Divisions* ahead, through France, and reached on 15 September 1944 the Moselle. *Patton* had been a *Cavalry Trooper*, this mentality was reflected clearly in the performance of his attacks. *Patton* regarded the *Armored Divisions* as the modern Cavalry. They should take the terrain and the following infantry should occupy it. Few other *Army Commanders* employed their *Armored Divisions* as aggressively, as they were trained as Infantry Officers for more conventional warfare.

*Patton's Third Army* pushed so quickly through France that they outran their vital supplies. The Allied High Command ordered *Patton* to take a 10 day break. Valuable supplies were also needed elsewhere. At that time the Allied operation was focused more in the Northern Theater of operation. On 14 September 1944, Operation "*Market Garden*," a combined airborne-ground operation, was launched in Holland by British *Field Marshal Montgomery*. His goal was to push through Holland to Arnhem, where he would cross the Rhine river. The operational objective was the Ruhr region and its industry. It was to date the largest airborne operation in military history. Three Allied Airborne Divisions were to land and to take important bridges over the major Dutch rivers. The *British XXX<sup>th</sup> Corps* should attack along a single road to Arnhem via the conquered bridges and then pushing forward to the Rhine. The *British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division* deployed in Arnhem failed to capture these bridges over the Rhine, as they had landed in the middle of two German *Waffen-SS<sup>3</sup> Panzerdivisions*, which were in Holland for recuperation. Operation "*Market Garden*" ended as a fiasco, with heavy losses.

*Patton* took good advantage of the mandatory break until 8 November 1944, and was preparing his *Third Army* for the next step. On 11 November 1944, he surprisingly attacked again, despite bad weather, through Lorraine. On 13 December 1944 the *Third Army* occupied Metz, and finally, on 19 December, he prepared to attack the Saar region.

*Colonel Oscar Koch, G-2* of the *Third Army* had established an excellent intelligence service. Through continuous reconnaissance, it was noticed that the Germans had concentrated troops in the Ardennes. *Patton* suggested a major attack by the Germans might be imminent in order to regain the initiative. But the Allied High Command did not share *Patton's* estimate of the enemy situation.

On 16 December 1944 the Germans launched a surprise attack in the Ardennes with three Armies along a 140 km long front line. The *U.S. Army* had occupied this sector only with two inexperienced and two battle-weary divisions in the *Hürtgenwald*. The German plan was to split the Allied forces and push forward to the coast near Antwerp. The surprise German attack almost led to disaster for the Allied troops. Having anticipated the attack by the Germans in the Ardennes, *General Patton* had ordered his troops to make appropriate plans in advance. Within two days, he had sent two divisions 100 miles northwest to relieve the *U.S. 101<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division* which had been encircled in the Belgium town of Bastogne. After brief initial success in the coup, the Germans failed to take the Allied fuel dumps. Soon the heavy German *Tiger-* and *Panther Tanks* were out of

fuel. The favorable bad weather for the Germans had also ended. Thus, the Allies were able to demonstrate its Air superiority again. From then on, the tide turned for the Germans. It was their last major offensive.

With *Patton's* rapid advance through France and his bold intervention during the German Ardennes offensive, he again proved that he was the American "*Guderian*"<sup>4</sup>. All errors for which he had fallen out of favor with his superiors seemed forgotten.

By the end of January 1945, *Patton's* troops engaged in mopping up the Ardennes and pushing forward to the German border. The next objective was the Rhine. The great strategic importance of this barrier in the end was immeasurably overestimated by the Allies. Although the Allied Armies had occupied parts of the Rhineland, the major part of Germany began just beyond the river. The Allied High Command assumed that the Germans would prevent the crossing of the Rhine by any and all means to prevent any Allied soldier to set foot on the East bank of the Rhine. Earlier this year, the Allied armies had already indeed reached the Rhine at Arnhem and Strasbourg. But because of the Battle of the Bulge and the fortifications of the Siegfried Line, in the middle portion of the river they had not penetrated to it's bank. The aim of the spring offensive, especially for the *Twelfth Army Group*, was to take the complete West bank of the Rhine between the Dutch/German border and Strasbourg.

On 7 March 1945, the *9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* of the First Army conquered at Remagen the undestroyed *Ludendorff Railroad Bridge*, so that a first beachhead could be formed on the East bank of the Rhine. A little later, *Patton's Third Army* had also reached the Rhine's western bank. In only 4 weeks, *Third Army* had pushed from the Luxembourg border, through the Eifel, to the Rhine at Koblenz. *Third Army* was then to have crossed the Rhine south of Remagen between Andernach and Koblenz, but the Allied plans were changed by SHAEF.

The front line of the Allies ran about 740 km along the Rhine from the Dutch North Sea coast towards the Switzerland border. Along this line stood three Allied *Army Groups* ready for the final attack on Germany. In the North near Cologne was the *Twenty First Army Group* of *Field Marshall Sir Bernard Montgomery*. It consisted of the *Canadian First Army* on the left side, the *British Second Army* in the center, and the *U.S. Ninth Army* on the right side. Next to them between Cologne and Mainz was the *Twelfth Army Group* of *Lieutenant-General Omar N. Bradley*. It consisted of the *First Army* and *Patton's Third Army*. Next to that up to the Switzerland border was the *Sixth Army Group* of *Lieutenant-General Jacob L. Devers*. It consisted of the *Seventh Army* and the *First (FR) Army*.

In March 1945 the Allied Armies were preparing to cross along the Rhine river in their areas of operation in order to push you into the heart of Germany. The plan initially was to encircle the German troops in the Ruhr by the *Twenty First* and *Twelfth Army Group*. This would have eliminated the largest industrial area of Germany at one stroke. After that, the push should continue to Central Germany in the Leipzig and Dresden area. Only at the river Elbe, the *First, Third* and *Ninth Army* had to come to a halt. At the same time, the *Second British* and *First Canadian Army* should protect the Northern flank and cross the Elbe in

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<sup>4</sup> The German *General Heinz Guderian* was the inventor of the tank tactics at the beginning of World War II.

Northern Germany to push forward to the Danish border. In the South, the *Sixth Army Group* should push through Southern Germany to Austria.

The German *Wehrmacht* was numerically at the end of their forces. East of the Rhine 85 American Divisions were facing just 65 German. The Ardennes offensive in December 1944 had consumed almost all strategic reserves. What faced the Americans of the once strong *Wehrmacht* were depleted divisions, with poorly trained young men and inadequate weaponry.<sup>5</sup>

Mid-March 1945; German troops were on the West bank of the Rhine, and held only the area of today's federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate and parts of the Saarland. *Patton* intended initially to push southeasterly towards the Rhine at Worms. After a brief pause in the Eifel, the *Third Army* continued its attack to the southeast. On 15 March, elements of the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* crossed the Mosel at several places near Treis-Karden, and won bridgeheads on the East bank of the river. Through this maneuver, the northern flank of the German *Heeresgruppe G* was now endangered because their troops were still involved in fierce defense of the *West Wall* and the Saar. The breakthrough of the *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* on 17 March through the Hunsrück, brought the German command into a fatal situation. The further advance of the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* to the south along the Rhine threatened the bulk of *Heeresgruppe B* with the *7. and 1. Armee* with being cut off from their lines of communication. Near Volxheim, German troops tried counter-attacking to stop the advance of the Americans, but the attack failed because of Allied air superiority, and the troops were destroyed.

In just 14 days the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* pushed through the Pfalz and Rheinhessen and advance to the Rhine near Mainz and Worms. In the period 18 - 22 March, the *Third Army* had wiped out almost the entire German *1. Armee*, with more than 68,000 German soldiers captured by the Americans.

On 19 March, *Allied Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower*, issued an order to the *Twelfth Army Group* to break out on 22 March from the extended bridgehead at Remagen together with the *First Army*. At the same time *Third Army* was ordered to cross the Rhine in the area of Mainz. *Patton* had waited impatiently for this order. He wanted to put everything into this play, hoping to regain the initiative. In *Patton's* opinion, the attack into the heart of the German Reich belonged with him, and not in the north with *Montgomery's Twenty First Army Group*.

On 22 March representatives of the *Third Army* were briefed at *Twelfth Army Group* on the comprehensive plan for the final conquest of Germany east of the Rhine. This was focused once again in the north on *Montgomery's Twenty First Army Group* where he had amassed between 24 - 35 Divisions. The nine Divisions of the American *First Army* in the Remagen bridgehead were permitted only to enlarge the bridgehead. In addition it was ordered that only nine other divisions of the *Third* and the *Seventh Army* should cross the Rhine due to supply problems. As with operation "*Market Garden*" in September 1944, *Montgomery* received the entire supply - the American Generals got nothing!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Schillare Quentin W. Major, *The Battle of Aschaffenburg*, Fort Leavenworth, USA, 1989

<sup>6</sup> After Action Report Third US Army, Volume II, Staff Section Reports, USNA, Washington, USA (Command 12)

*Patton* had the Rhine crossing already prepared before the official announcement of the plan. On 21 March, *Major-General Manton S. Eddy's XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* received the order to prepare for an assault over the Rhine. Despite the short notice, *General Eddy* was prepared. After *Patton* had obtained permission on 19 March, *Eddy* had organized assault boats and Engineering equipment for bridge building from depots in Lorraine. The simple U. S. soldier, who watched this transport on the road, didn't need an explanation – *Patton* was about to cross the Rhine.

According to Operational Directive No. 92 of the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps*, which was issued at 21:00 hrs, the *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* should move with all elements near the Rhine, and relieve the troops of the *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* and the *90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* at once.<sup>7</sup>

The choice of a crossing point was not as easy as it may seem. The best place was downstream or North near Mainz. The area south of Mainz was less favorable, because after crossing the river Rhine, the troops would quickly have to cross the river Main, and that would be too time consuming. *Patton* knew that the Germans would assess the situation likewise and would therefore concentrate their troops North of Mainz. For this reason, he decided at to cross the stream 15 km south of Mainz between Oppenheim and Nierstein. To deceive the Germans, the U.S. troops would simulate a river crossing attack at Mainz. To further support the primary attack, the *VIII<sup>th</sup> Corps* would cross the Rhine 45 km north-west of Mainz near St. Goar and Boppard as well.

On 22 March, 17:45 hrs, Field Order No. 17 of *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* with operation planning was issued. The G-2 estimate reported:

*... The enemy continues to attempt to withdraw the disorganized remnants of his units to the East of the RHINE River. Due to the scrambled condition of troops successful in crossing the river and probable disruption of communications, it is doubtful that any well organized Divisions have been in contact with our troops. It is estimated that 198, 559 and 47 Infantry Divisions are the only ones that retain any degree of combat effectiveness. It can be assumed that the remnants of other units will be formed into Kampfgruppen<sup>8</sup> and possibly function under control of one of the above listed Divisions. Artillery will probably continue to be lacking, however, its absence will be made up for by the nature of the terrain. Reserves, capable of being used to reinforce the troops opposing our crossing, or as a counterattacking force, are an indefinite quantity. At present, 130 and 116 Panzerdivisions and 15 Panzergrenadierdivision are out of contact and have the capability of being employed as a counterattacking force. Reinforcements would probably come from Infantry Divisions out of contact, with first priority to those in the South. In the face of the situation to the North, it is doubtful that all of the Panzer type units would be employed against our crossing attempt ...<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Operational Directive Nr. 92 des XII<sup>th</sup> Corps vom 21.03.45, USNA, Washington, USA

<sup>8</sup> Kampfgruppen = Combat Groups

<sup>9</sup> Field Order No. 17, XII<sup>th</sup> Corps, 21 March 1945, USNA, Washington, USA

According to American estimates, the Germans were at the end of their rope. The 7. *Armee* was considered destroyed. Therefore, no significant resistance was expected. The operational plan for the XII<sup>th</sup> *Corps* had foreseen a river crossing in the Oppenheim area and the establishment of a bridgehead. The next step was a fast move to the northeast towards the Main river. Another bridgehead near Hanau was planned. Subsequently, the plan called for a quick move to the northeast of the Main. Here a further foothold in the Hanau area would be formed. This would be required for any further advance northeasterly towards Gießen.

After the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* had established a bridgehead, the XII<sup>th</sup> *Corps* intended to attack with two *Armored Divisions* side-by-side towards the Northeast. The *Infantry Divisions* would follow and clear the area from remnants of overrun German units. The five subordinate *Divisions* of the *Corps* received orders on how to advance and to occupy the area between the Rhine and the Main. The intention of the *Corps* was to reach the Main between Aschaffenburg and Frankfurt within two days.

The 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* was to perform the river crossing and to establish a bridgehead. Later the *Division* was ordered to clear the south bank of the Main near Frankfurt.

The 4<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division* was ordered to support the river crossing of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* with fire. Later the *Division* would hold the West bank of the Rhine in the area South of the *Corps* boundary until relieved by elements of XX<sup>th</sup> *Corps*. Then the 4<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division* was to go into *Corps-Reserve* and start preparing to move through the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* bridgehead and attack northeasterly towards Hanau and Gießen.

The 11<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division* was ordered to hold the West bank of the Rhine in its present position until relieved by elements of XX<sup>th</sup> *Corps*. Then the *Division* was to move to an assigned assembly area until its next mission, which was the same as for the 4<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division*.

The 89<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* would begin as *Corps-Reserve*. Then it was to move through the bridgehead of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* and to assist in the expansion of bridgehead or exploit it to the Northeast on the right side of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division*.

The 90<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* was ordered by the *Corps* to simulate preparations for a river crossing Northwest of Mainz, protect the left flank of the *Corps* along the Rhine river, and maintain contact with the VIII<sup>th</sup> *Corps*. The *Division* was to be prepared to follow the 89<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* moving through the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division*'s bridgehead, and to expand the bridgehead or exploit to the Northeast on the right side of the 89<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division*.<sup>10</sup>

On 22 March at 23:00 hrs by the light of a quarter moon, the 5<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division* crossed the Rhine at Oppenheim in assault boats. On the German side, there was virtually no resistance. The plan of the Americans was correct in

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<sup>10</sup> Field Order Nr. 17 of XII<sup>th</sup> *Corps* by 22.03.45, USNA, Washington, USA

predicting that the Germans did not expect the attack at Oppenheim. At daylight the river crossing was complete and the bridgehead established. With only 28 American casualties, the operation was a resounding success.

After the construction of a pontoon bridge, *Patton* went himself into the middle of the great stream of Germany and urinated into the river. Arriving on the east bank of the Rhine, he stumbled upon leaving the bridge and walked intentionally with his hands on the ground. He took a handful of earth and scattered it. So had the Roman General *Scipio* done before in Africa, and *William the Conqueror* had done when he invaded England. With this gesture, *Patton* symbolically took possession of the German *Reich*.

*General Patton* had managed to cross the Rhine 36 hours before his rival *British Field Marshal Montgomery*, which made *Montgomery* furious. - *Patton* had beaten him again with his bold foray into the parade. As usual, *Monty*<sup>11</sup> had planned and prepared thoroughly his operation "PLUNDER" - the crossing of the Lower Rhine at Wesel and the simultaneous breakout of the Remagen bridgehead. It had been planned as a continuation of the failed operation "*Market Garden*" in September 1944, for taking the Ruhr area. *Monty*'s planned Rhine crossing was in it's preparation the largest Allied operation of the war since the Normandy Invasion, and *Patton* had beaten him to the punch with a simple "slight of hand" trick, crossing the Rhine in Hussar style.

*Patton* had shown the world - especially *Montgomery* and the British - what American soldiers, especially his own, were capable of. The rapid advance through the Eifel and the Palatinate and the Rhine crossing at Oppenheim were spectacular. In America, he had now achieved fame comparable to that of *General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson*, the great hero of the Confederate troops from the *Civil War*. He was at the peak of his fame when he ran into the next - for him most disastrous - trouble.

After the successful crossing of the Rhine by night on 23 March, in the early morning hours, *U.S. Engineers* brought rubber pontoons to the river and built the first military bridge of the *Third Army* across the Rhine. At 18:00 hrs the first *M2-TREADWAY-Bridge*<sup>12</sup> was built and another Pontoon bridge was build nearby the next morning. Meanwhile, the bridgehead of *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* had expanded 14 km wide and 12 km deep.

In the afternoon of 23 March another *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* order regulated the attack towards the Main river:

The *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* assumed control of one *Regimental Combat Team* of the *90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* for crossing purposes and employment on the right side of the Division.

The *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* was supposed to cross the Rhine river on 24 March, 09:00 hrs, pass through the *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, and attack towards Hanau.

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<sup>11</sup> Nickname of *Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery*

<sup>12</sup> Pontoon bridge build with rubber pontoons with a capacity of ca. 40 tons.

The *89<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* switched to the *VIII<sup>th</sup> Corps*, with the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* receiving the *26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* and the *2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group*.

The *26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* was to relieve the *90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* in their sector and prepare to cross the Rhine and to advance North easterly on the right of the *90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*.

The *90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* would cross through the bridgehead of the *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* by successive *Regimental Combat Teams* and advance on the right of the *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* in a tentative Zone of *89<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*.

The *11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* was to relieve the *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* and hold the West bank of the Rhine River south of the *5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* crossing points. The division was further ordered to destroy all floating objects in the Rhine river south of crossing points by direct fire.<sup>13</sup>

For the moment the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* pumped its bridgehead full of infantry forces to secure and expand it. *Armored Divisions*, which were to attack after a bridge crossing, needed this space to organize and prepare. *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* had also taken care to ensure that the vulnerable pontoon bridges were not attacked by German frogmen, as they had been at Remagen.

On the morning of 24 March the preparation for another attack by the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* were complete, and the attack towards the Main river could begin. With two adjacent operating *Armored Divisions*, the *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps* attacked out the bridgehead. The *6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division*, which had just been placed under Corp's command, attacked to the north towards Frankfurt and the *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* to the north-east towards Aschaffenburg-Hanau. Both divisions had orders to cross the Main river in their assigned combat sectors and to establish bridgeheads across the river. This should create conditions for further advance of the *Third Army* to the northeast towards Giessen. The *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* had assigned the ordered objectives to their two *Combat Commands A* and *B*. *Combat Command A* attacked towards Hanau and *Combat Command B* advanced towards Aschaffenburg.

The *4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* was one of the best *Armored Division* of the *U.S. Army* in the European theater of operation. On 5 April 1941, *Major-General John Shirley "Tiger Jack" Wood* had it set in motion in *Pine Camp*<sup>14</sup>, New York, and trained the outfit for 32 months in the USA until it was transferred to England in early 1944 for the war effort in Europe. During the training, personnel were always relocated in order to establish new *Armored Divisions*. *General Wood* always took care that experienced personnel remained in the Division in order to guarantee continuity. But the frequent change of personnel had another advantage. Many young enlisted men were trained by the next higher level of command. Privates were thus able, if necessary, to take over the duties of corporals or sergeants. In combat this meant that killed tank commanders could

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<sup>13</sup> Operational Directive No 93 of *II<sup>th</sup> Corps* by 23.03.45, USNA, Washington, USA  
<sup>14</sup> today Fort Drumm

be replaced without any delay from within their own tank crews. New, inexperienced personnel replacements were thereby simply re-integrated into the crew.

*General Wood* was a very capable Tank General, who was open-minded to trying out innovations. He was tough and demanded that his officers always take the initiative. He was a founding member of the *Task Force* principles. The U.S. Field Manual explains it as followed:

*...A Task Force is a temporary tactical grouping composed of one or more arms or services formed for a specific mission of operation. The operation of large armoured formations will frequently dictate the organization of task forces. The composition of such forces will be decided only after a careful estimate of the associated means which will be required to accomplish the projected mission or operations. This estimate must consider the nature of the expected resistance, the resistance, the distance to which operations are projected, the terrain to be traversed, and the troops available for the operation...<sup>15</sup>*

The U.S. Armored Division carried and still carry today on their left shoulders of shirts and jackets a common insignia -- a three-color triangle with a gun, track and lightning bolt. The track represents manoeuvrability and armoured protection, the gun was the symbol for fire power, and the red lightning symbolised the shock effect. Red symbolized *Artillery*, blue was for *Infantry*, and yellow for *Cavalry*. The Arabic number indicated the number of the Division. After World War II name tags were added below the triangles bearing the nicknames which those *Armored Division* had earned in World War II. In contrast to the other Divisions, the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division carried no official nickname like "*Hell on Wheels*" for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or "*Spearhead*" for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division. For the soldiers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division the expression "4<sup>th</sup> Armored" was name enough. By the Germans the Division was known and feared as "*Roosevelt's Butchers*".

After six month of training exercises in England, on 14 July 1944 the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division landed at the Normandy coast of France. The Division took the lead in operation "*COBRA*", the *Third Army's* breakout from "*OMAHA*" beach and during the subsequent rapid attack through France. They cut the German lines of communication on the Breton peninsula, attacked with high speed north of the Loire river through France, defended the Mosel bridgehead against strong German Armored troops, and crossed as first Division the Saar river. They had made a name for themselves mainly for the relief of Bastogne. Now they became once again the spearhead of *General Patton's* Third Army.

The situation map of the OKW<sup>16</sup> on 24 March in Berlin didn't reflect an optimistic picture. In the East the Red Army attacked at four frontline sections simultaneously. In the South the 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group in Italy had reached the Alps. In the West, the defence of the Reich had more or less collapsed and troops were everywhere in dissolution. Until the Allies had crossed the Rhine, German defensive tactics were pretty simple: In the East fight back the Russians aggressively and delay their advance on Berlin -- meanwhile, hold the Western

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<sup>15</sup> FM 17-10 Armored Force Field Manual, Tactics and Techniques, 7 March 1942, USNA, Washington, USA (p. 4)

<sup>16</sup> Oberkommando der Wehrmacht = German High Command

front. Now the strategic situation was confusing, and after six years of war, the human, economic and mental resources of the *Third Reich* were running dry. German pessimism made the Allies optimistic. The Allies in the West had broken through the *Siegfried Line* and crossed the Rhine river. Allied troops were advancing continuously on all fronts.

Until the evening of 24 March, the 4<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division* had reached the area southeast of Darmstadt without any major resistance. The quick success of the Americans was based not the least on the fact that the opposing German forces - *General der Infanterie*<sup>17</sup> *Hans-Gustav Felber's 7. Armee (Heeresgruppe B - Generalfeldmarschall*<sup>18</sup> *Walter Model)* had lost its entire combat power during the retreat from the Rhine river. There were almost no tanks or armoured vehicles available. There was no air support. The remnants of the 20 former German Divisions were constantly retreating under chaotic conditions towards the highlands of *Spessart* and *Odenwald*. For half a day, the Headquarters of 7. *Armee* was lost, believed to be captured by the Americans. The entire main headquarters almost escaped capture by American armoured spearheads on 25 March near Bensheim. As there was no longer any radio contact with the headquarters, *OB West*<sup>19</sup> assumed General Felber and his staff to be captured by the Americans. In the evening, *Generalfeldmarschall*<sup>20</sup> *Kesselring* phoned *General Weisenberger*, the commander of *Wehrkreis Kommando XIII*<sup>21</sup> in Nürnberg, and informed him that his *Wehrkreis Kommando* was henceforth assigned to *Heeresgruppe B*, effective immediately. He was ordered to assume immediate command of the 7. *Armee*, whose Commander-in-Chief and his staff was missing in action as of this morning. Presumably the headquarters of the 7. *Armee* were captured during the retreat somewhere in the Darmstadt area. From 7. *Armee* it was known so far that the *Oberquartiermacherstaffel*<sup>22</sup> was in Marktheidenfeld, at the eastern edge of the Spessart. *General Weisenberger* was ordered to form a new Army headquarters from his staff and move to Marktheidenfeld, to be put there back into the battle.<sup>23</sup>

While *General Weisenberger* and his staff were moving towards Marktheidenfeld, the headquarters of the 7. *Armee* had returned and reported back at *Heeresgruppe B* via radio. The staff of 7. *Armee* avoided captured several times and escaped towards Aschaffenburg. A little later it arrived in Heigenbrücken in the Spessart, and took quarters in a hotel.

After the success of the previous day, 4<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division* continued its attack on the morning of 25 March from Darmstadt southeast towards the Main river. With only slight resistance, both *Combat Commands* reached the Main river near Hanau and Aschaffenburg by noon.

Meanwhile the tanks of the 4<sup>th</sup> *Armored Division* were still advancing towards the Main. The commander-in-chief of the *Third Army* - *General Patton* - saw his

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<sup>17</sup> General of the Infantry

<sup>18</sup> Army Group B – Field Marshall

<sup>19</sup> Oberbefehlshaber West = Commander in Chief West

<sup>20</sup> Field Marshall

<sup>21</sup> Defence District XIII

<sup>22</sup> Quatermaster Section

<sup>23</sup> Wehrkreis XIII, US Army Historical Division, General Weisenberger, 1946, USNA, Washington, USA

chance to make a daring operation. For some days he had considered a plan whose preliminary outline he had discussed with *General Manton S. Eddy* from *XII<sup>th</sup> Corps*. Privately he had decided to order a special mission. About 80 km from Aschaffenburg was the German POW camp *OFLAG XIII-B*<sup>24</sup> *Patton* had received information that his son-in-law, *Lieutenant-Colonel John K. Waters*, might probably be there. *Patton*, who was known for his impulsiveness, didn't want to miss the opportunity to liberate the husband of his daughter "*Little B*"<sup>25</sup> from captivity. He wanted to prevent having his son-in-law relocated and possibly injured or killed before the end of the war. Troops of *Third Army* would never come closer to Hammelburg, so *Patton* decided to act.

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<sup>24</sup> OFLAG XIII-B – POW Camp XIII-B for officers in Wehrkreis XIII  
<sup>25</sup> little Beatrice