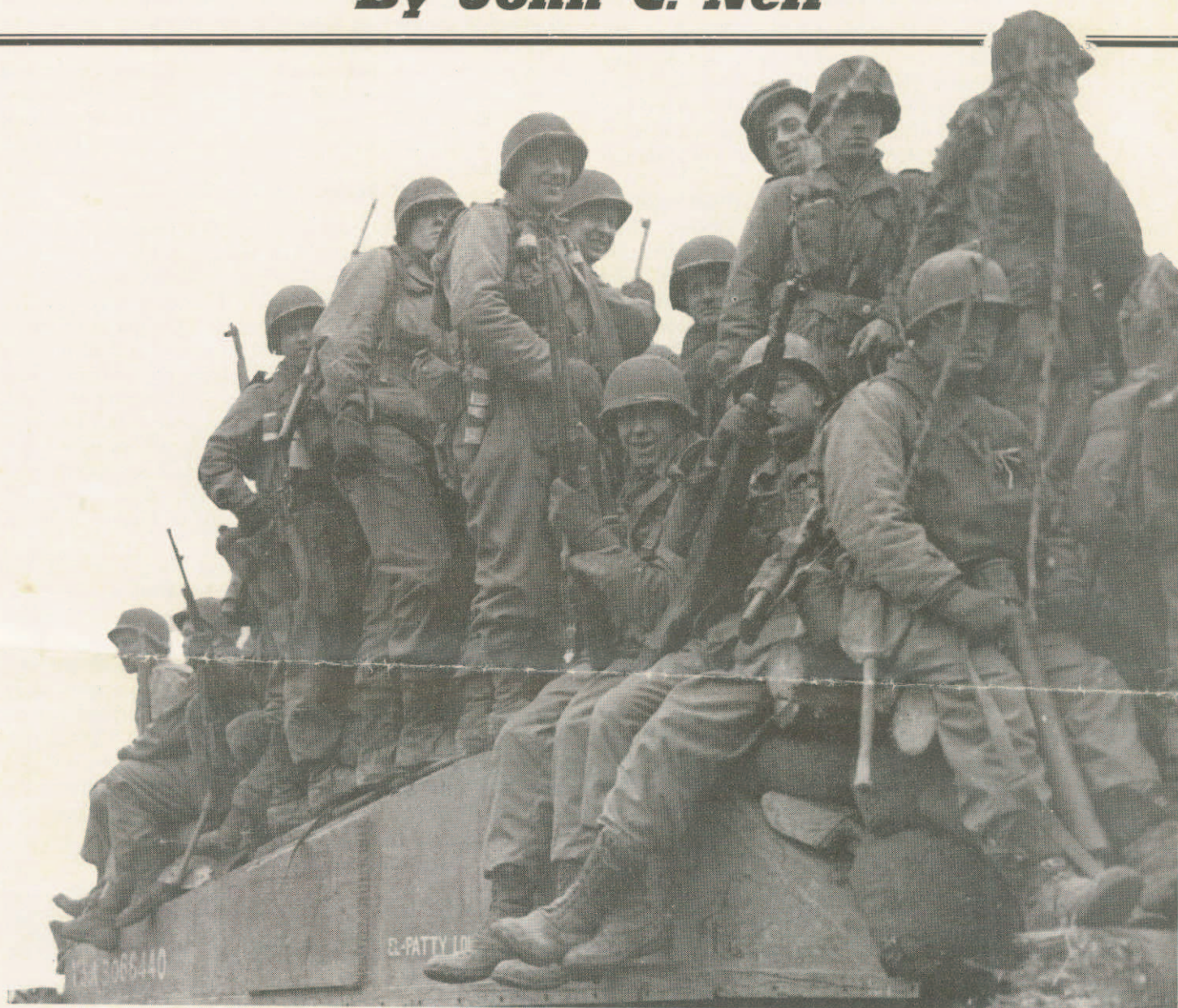


RACE TO THE ELBE

By John C. Neff



WHY DIDN'T THE YANKS TAKE BERLIN? WHY DID WE STOP—when we were so close? Beyond the shadow of a doubt we could have taken it. But orders were orders—and the one received at the headquarters of the 83d Division on April 16, 1945, was a heartbreaker. "Cease all movement eastward—consolidate your positions—be prepared to contact Soviet forces."

Terse orders, those. They took some of the wind from the 83d's sails. And the wind lessened as day after day no Russians appeared on the horizon. From the sixteenth until the thirtieth of April—exactly two whole weeks—we fiddled impatiently (while being attacked, bombed and strafed), waiting for them to appear . . . waiting, that is, for them to fight their way through what at best was light token resistance. But what really galled was that our vigil began one full week before Berlin fell. And all the time we were cooling our heels astride a wide-open highway at the eastern perimeter of the one and only bridgehead across the Elbe River, a mere fifty miles from Hitler's Reich Chancellory!

How was it that a lone infantry division could get so close to Berlin in such a hurry? Two hundred and eighty miles in thirteen days! How the devil had it, without benefit of attached transportation, managed not only to make the drive but also to maintain it with gas and oil, with small arms and artillery ammunition, with water and food and mail and even with no interruption in the publication of its daily and weekly newspaper? This is how it happened.

Ninth Army Crosses the Rhine

In the last days of March 1945 the Allies launched their greatest offensive of the war against the Germans. In the north, the Ninth Army crossed the Rhine after a powerful artillery and aerial bombardment near Wesel. Airborne troops dropped well east of the river were quickly contacted by ground troops whose crossing was supported by the U.S. Navy. XIX Corps, initially in reserve, passed through the XVI Corps Wesel bridgehead. The 83d Division, initially in XIX Corps reserve, crossed the Rhine on

March 29 and began moving eastward behind the 2d Armored. By the end of the month, the First and Ninth Armies were on the verge of joining up near Lippstadt, thus sealing off the Ruhr pocket.

After three days of slugging at the northern defenses of the Ruhr, the 83d took a deep breath, and on April 4 jumped off toward Berlin.

Improvised Transportation

One of the first problems to be whipped was transportation. The movement was eastward. Little time could be wasted shuttling. So the order was to improvise, be original, keep moving—and don't ask questions. Battalion commanders found that throwing thirty-four doughs on a tank and fifteen into a jeep was not enough. It helped, but it wasn't the answer. And corps' inability to furnish transport set off a furor of grabbing.

Men and supplies were piled into coal trucks and vegetable trucks, into big red school buses and green paddy wagons. There were fire engines and ambulances, high-powered roadsters and limousines all pelting down the highways. Some men commandeered *Volkswagens*. Sometimes a bit of olive drab paint was splashed on and a crude white star slapped on the hoods—but more often there wasn't time. It was a question of Hop-In-and-Take-off-like-a-Big-Bottomed-Bird, Brother!

Those fantastic columns streamed down the east-west roads. Artillery battalions spent most of their time on the move. A battalion once went into action only fifteen minutes after getting a fire mission—but usually the doughs were advancing so fast that targets were out of range as soon as they were in!

Division Headquarters displaced forward as often as five times a day—and regiments hardly ever stopped. The drive became a rat race. Command posts would swing into the west end of a town before the fleeing Nazis could clear out of the east end. Generally the local burgers acted as if they'd rehearsed the whole show. Directly the Heinie troops showed the seats of their pants, gigantic white flags were hung from every window. And standing on their doorsteps, the burgers assumed the innocence of a Donatello infant. A few bold souls clicked their heels, bowed and expounded on their thirteen agonizing years of "stubborn, stoic, suffering" opposition to that *verdammte Feiglin, Hitler!*

Sometimes the columns went so fast it was impossible to tell who was racing who. As witness the occasion when a small Ger-

man sedan began weaving in and out of a division headquarters column, hell bent for election. There was nothing unusual about the car. It looked like any one of the scores of mottled Wehrmacht sedans being used. But its distinctive performance attracted attention.

In and out of the column it wheeled its frantic way eastward. Now, speeding was the order of the day but there is a limit. One GI glared at the honking sedan as it flew past him—and then he gulped, swallowed, blinked and yelled. He told his driver to step on it, pass the sedan, block that bastard. For sitting in the rear of the sedan was a well-fed scrupulously tailored Wehrmacht general. But *natürlich* he was in a hurry! He had left Holland yesterday and, *Donnerwetter*, where in the name of God was the Wehrmacht!

A-Rations All the Way

With the transport problem solved, G-4 people turned their attention to supplies. Higher headquarters had decreed that the fighting troops were to use C-rations, K-rations, or Ten-in-One rations exclusively. But not the 83d. It unblushingly closed its ears and eyes to the order, and ate mightily. Quartermaster trucks averaged 300 miles each day, chased all day, chased all the way to the west bank of the Rhine—just to bring up A-rations, which were served, morning, noon and night. As a matter of record, enough food was hauled into the Division Zone in that two-week period to provide 1,211,604 hot meals. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that these meals were individually and collectively enhanced by delicacies from local cupboards and cellars. A jar of preserved wild strawberries and a thin-necked bottle of Riesling made, as one dough put it, quite a dish!

Drivers slammed their trucks east and west, west and east for sixteen to eighteen hours each day. Sometimes the traffic was thicker than it ever was in Main Street on a Saturday night.

The comparison between daily gas consumption during this operation and previous ones is interesting. The average daily consumption by the 83d in Normandy, Brittany, central France, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Rhineland, had been 8,586 gallons. But now in this wild dash across the Münster Plains, over the Teutoburger Forest and the slopes of the Harz Mountains, the daily consumption more than doubled. It stood at 19,575 gallons.

The bridge at Breitenhagen



This figure becomes significant when you remember that to move *all* vehicles of an infantry division a *hundred* miles requires 12,517 gallons of gas.

There were so many problems for all staff sections of all echelons that they hardly had time to notice the weather. Spring was just beginning to show itself when the 83d took off. By the time it had crossed Westphalia, Hanover, Prussian Saxony, Lippe, Brunswick and Anhalt, spring was in full bloom. Cherry trees were magnificently white in the barnyards and orchards—and huge white flags hung from picturesque cottages. Sometimes the *Herrenvolk* rushed down to the highways or strained their necks out of leaded windows to scream huzzas to the passing Yanks. At first the doughs were inclined to smile back (for some of the windows revealed more than heads and necks)—but they stopped smiling when they began to liberate concentration camps around Eschershausen and saw men who were neither dead nor alive. In one of the camps they found a middle-aged Dutchman half an hour after he'd had his eyes gouged out by a guard. His crime—on hearing the approach of the Americans he had begun to sing the Dutch National Anthem.

Things like that helped to increase the speed of the dashing columns. And the faster they went, the more complicated became the problems of communications. When the Division crossed the Rhine at the end of March, each unit carried its basic load of field wire and Division Signal Supply carried a reserve of 600 miles. But before the operation was completed it became necessary to draw an additional 700 miles of field wire from Army. At one time, toward the end of the dash to the Elbe, the wire reserve had fallen to less than 67 miles and arrangements were made to have some more flown in.

Maze of Communications

A total of 1,295 miles of wire was laid by Division. Alone, this would never have sufficed. Hundreds of miles of civilian open wire and overhead cable were pressed into service. This was found in a generally fair condition along highways and railways. The Heinies had taken off so hastily that practically no destruction of open wire circuits had been accomplished. They were converted to our own use by routing the wire with cut-throughs and jumpers. That meant extra work and maddening hours—but it gave out with results. The division maintained constant radio communication with Corps as well as subordinate units throughout the operation. The single technical difficulty encountered with telephone-radio link equipment was in beaming signals across the Harz Mountains. While many tactical messages had to be given in the clear, the total amount of cryptographic work by the Division Message Center exceeded the combined total for the previous four months. Message Center runs averaged between twenty-five and 250 miles round trips daily.

Nazi fanatics put up bitter resistance in the towns and villages and crossroads, in mountain passes and valleys. But the 83d roared on. It liberated the mother of the Prince Consort of the Netherlands, and took a half dozen generals prisoner. It fought its way across the Lippe and the Emmer and the Weser Rivers, and then it was the Leine, Innerste, Oker, Ilge, Bode and Saale—and finally the Elbe. While the rest of the Division plunged eastward, the 330th Infantry was ordered to cover the flank along the Harz Mountains. Quite a job for a regiment: holding off 65,000 hot-headed SS troops!

But however brilliantly the infantrymen fought, one must recall that their success was due in no small measure to the high state of coordination between ground and air. One example may be cited as typical. G-3 Air, G-2 and Air Support Party operated in the same room, from the same map. G-3 was talking to regimental S-3, G-2 to S-2 and Air Support Party to the squadron commander. Everything was going along nicely when a sudden snag developed.

The town of Holzminden flatly refused to surrender—and its surrender was essential to the advance. *Unser Leben gehoert dem Fuehrer*, they hollered (or words to that effect). G-3 and G-2 got this dope simultaneously. They gave Air Support the nod and in a matter of minutes a squadron was over Holzminden. For fifty minutes it strafed, bombed and fired rockets. The ultimatum was accepted, the town taken and passed through, the squadron sent off to another target, and the dash eastward continued.

On some days as many as twelve fighter-bomber squadrons worked with the Division and altogether no less than forty-five squadrons operated with it during the drive. This signalized the importance of the operation. It also showed that a windup for the knockout blow was in the making.

The Rhine-Elbe dash culminated in the attack by the 329th Infantry against the Elbe-side town of Barby on April 12. That night the crisis came and it was evident long before dawn what the prognosis would be. Pressure was maintained against the town throughout the night. By 0945 the following morning, April 13, the enemy surrendered . . . but just to be ornery he blew up the big double-track railroad bridge north of the town. The burgers stuck their sheets and heads out of the windows and in general repeated the performances given by their countrymen in so many other towns and villages to the west. The show was no longer even interesting.

Over the Elbe

So the entire 329th Infantry assembled in Barby. At 1330 the 1st Battalion started to cross the Elbe and within an hour had advanced to Walternienburg, well beyond the east bank of the river. The Germans made local counterattacks, which were repulsed. The 2d Battalion crossed at 1500 and joined the 1st. The 3d remained in Barby in reserve. Meanwhile the 331st Infantry moved up to Barby and began crossing. The 330th was over 90 miles to the rear. No division on the right had at that time advanced so far east—which meant a completely exposed right flank. Now at Leavenworth they would probably have given you a nice fat "U" for that. But in Germany you went ahead and exposed yourself, and kept moving. The important thing was the bridgehead. Whatever the risk, it had to be established.

The Elbe crossing had been anticipated by the 83d from the moment it had left the Rhine behind it. (For two weeks in March, indeed, it practiced nothing but river crossing technique.) Plans for this moment had been formed all the long way across the north German plains. Accordingly, while the town of Barby was being attacked and brought to terms, quantities of all essentials were rushed forward. When ferrying operations began, then, not only men but equipment as well went over.

And there you can, if you look closely enough, see the key to the success of the bridgehead. The 2d Armored Division on our left had made an attempt at establishing its own bridgehead. The cause of its failure is not a point here, but it can be safely said that the 83d bridgehead was successful because not only infantry but *heavy supporting weapons* were ferried over immediately, even *before* bridging operations commenced. Infantry alone could never have withstood the fierce counterattacks the enemy flung against the bridgehead as soon as he'd recovered from the shock. Between 1800 and 2145 hours he counterattacked four times with a battalion of infantry and a company of tanks, and to this he added bombing and strafing. But by that time, thanks to the engineers, more than 200 tanks, tank destroyers, and antitank guns had been ferried across to help the desperate doughs.

The lessons learned during those two weeks of training west of the Rhine were now paying off. Everyone knew what he was supposed to do—and did it. When the initial crossings were made

each regiment used thirty-four boats and crossed two companies abreast. Then the engineers constructed one five-boat treadway raft and three infantry support rafts. These enabled infantry commanders to be supplied *and* supported until the bridge was in. The operation of these ferries, especially the treadway, was vital, as witness the fact that it wasn't until after the TDs had been floated over that the enemy's artillery fire against the crossing was silenced.

In the meantime an M2 treadway bridge was put in at the existing ferry site just southeast of Barby, upstream from the point where the initial crossings were made. The distraught enemy again began shelling what he presumed was the bridge but what usually was the ferrying site. Just to support his misconception, the 83d Engineers that night directed searchlights on both the ferrying *and* bridging sites.

German Counterattacks

The importance that Berlin attached to the bridgehead quickly became obvious. It was the most serious threat against the capital city from the west, if for no other reason than because it was the most immediate. Against the bridges (a second one was constructed upstream from Barby) and the bridgehead itself they threw everything they had. Counterattacks were launched again and again, aircraft strafed, rocketed and bombed day and night. Drifting mines of twenty-five pounds of TNT were used. Each had a telescopic rod five feet long with an antenna extending from the top of the mine. The rod remained above the surface of the water and any deflection of the antenna detonated the mine. A total of fifteen such mines was used against the bridges. Two of them exploded on hitting booms placed upstream as anti-mine devices. The others were detonated by rifle fire.

As a second weapon against the bridges, the dwindling German air force came into action. During the first six days several bombing and strafing attacks were staged by a conglomeration of JU 88s, ME 140s, HE 111s and JU 188s. Small fighter covers were provided for the bomber formations. The largest number involved in one attack was sixteen planes at 2100 hours on April 17.

And then, in a final attempt to wreck the bridgehead, Hitler himself ordered a team of swimming saboteurs down to the Elbe. But the 83d made night activity unhealthy by simply tossing two-and-a-half-pound charges of TNT into the river every five minutes. Finally, one morning after daylight, two well equipped swimming saboteurs were picked up. Their story bears repeating.

Two groups of three men each, under the supervision of an officer, were to have used torpedo mines against the bridges. All members of the *Kriegsmarine*, they had been trained in a specialty school at Venice, Italy, in the sabotage of ships, bridges and water installations of various kinds. The school had not, apparently, included in its agenda the American tactics and technique of river crossings.

At about 2000 hours on April 18, the team was taken by truck



A toast to the joining of the East and West. A Russian colonel proposes it at a dinner celebrating the meeting of the American and Russian armies. Seated is Major General Robert C. Macon, CG of the 83d Infantry Division.

(after a hurried dash down from Berlin) to a forest near the river. A trailer carried the two torpedo mines. The following day **The** remained in hiding. Then, about an hour after midnight, April 19, they backed the trailer into the river and unloaded the two mines. Working underwater, they proceeded downstream toward the bridges. The two groups had been instructed to remain together, but because of the darkness and the swiftness of the current and the TNT they became separated. For them the situation was definitely snafued. About two hours after entering the water they got all tangled up with the mine booms. They worked for another hour attempting to free the mine. Finally they held a conference, calmly stepped out of the water and delivered themselves into the hands of the conquerors.

Holding and Waiting

Now during most of this time, from the sixteenth of April that is, the 83d Division was simply holding and waiting. Wherever the enemy resisted they knocked him down. They destroyed the city of Zerbst (one of Berlin's week-end meccas before the war) because the Krauts used it as a pivotal stronghold. After they destroyed it they went in with three D7 bulldozers and cleaned up the streets for two-way traffic—just in case someone upstairs changed his mind about that no-advance order.

But no one changed any mind and the 83d was forced to cool its heels. The spectacular honor it had hoped for, capturing Berlin, was denied it. But the Yanks could have taken Berlin, easily. For its part, the 83d was ready!