

Simpson, commenced its attack northwards towards the area where First Canadian Army was fighting a most intense battle. Owing to the delay in starting the southern thrust, the Reichswald battle had drawn enemy strength from the Ninth U.S. Army sector. The Americans took every advantage of this opportunity and advanced with admirable speed; their action in its turn eased the pressure in the North.

As Ninth U.S. Army swung North, the First U.S. Army was made responsible by the Supreme Commander for the security of its southern flank; the thrusts towards Cologne were thus related directly to our operations.

The keynotes of the battle of the Rhineland were the intense and fanatical opposition of the enemy who, as we had hoped, accepted battle West of the Rhine, and secondly the appalling weather conditions. The northern flank of the Reichswald operation was conducted mainly in various types of amphibious vehicles; in general, the mud and slush were indescribable and greatly hampered the movement of troops and supplies through the heavily wooded areas which are so lacking in roads.

On 3rd March the two armies linked up; the Americans were in Geldern, and 35 Division of XVI Corps made contact with 53 Division in the northern outskirts of the town. But it was not until the 10th that the enemy bridgehead covering Wesel was liquidated.

21 Army Group was now lined up on the Rhine as far South as Düsseldorf.

The enemy had suffered yet another heavy defeat. He had lost nearly 100,000 men in killed, wounded and prisoners. Eighteen divisions and a large number of hastily formed units had been battered.

THE BATTLE OF THE RHINE.

On 7th March, following a swift break through, First United States Army secured intact the railway bridge at Remagen and immediately began forming a bridgehead on the East bank. The importance of this bridgehead to our subsequent operations cannot be overestimated; the enemy reaction to it was immediate, and a considerable number of surviving enemy formations soon became committed in the sector.

Meanwhile, Third United States Army thrust to the Rhine at Coblenz and subsequently established a bridgehead south-west of the city over the River Moselle. On 15 March American troops thrust southwards from this bridgehead and eastwards from Trier, while Seventh United States Army attacked northwards between the Rhine and Saarbrücken. While Seventh Army fought steadily through the Siegfried defences and pinned down the German troops, armoured columns of Third Army drove into the rear of the enemy positions. Resistance east of the Moselle crumbled, the Saar was enveloped, and the Rhine cities of Mainz and Worms were captured. By the third week in March the Allied Armies had closed to the Rhine throughout its length.

While the battle of the Rhineland was proceeding, the details for the crossing of the Rhine were being worked out. Many engineering and administrative preparations had been initiated back in December, before the Ardennes counter-offensive. In particular, work had started on the roads and railways

necessary to establish our lines of communication across the Meuse and Rhine. Furthermore the Second Army depots had been stocked with some 130,000 tons of stores for the coming operations. And so 21 Army Group launched the operation for crossing the Rhine a fortnight after completion of the battle of the Rhineland.

The fortnight between the end of the battle of the Rhineland and the crossing of the Rhine was one of intense activity. Formations were regrouped and lined up in their correct positions, covered by a screen of troops holding the river bank. Dense and continuous clouds of smoke were employed to hide our intentions and final preparations.

On 9 March I issued orders for crossing the Rhine north of the Ruhr. My intention was to secure a bridgehead: prior to developing operations to isolate the Ruhr and to thrust into the northern plains of Germany.

Outline Plan.

In outline, my plan was to cross the Rhine on a front of two armies between Rheinberg and Rees, using Ninth American Army on the right and Second Army on the left. The principal initial objective was the important communications centre of Wesel. I intended that the bridgehead should extend to the south sufficiently far to cover Wesel from enemy ground action, and to the north to include bridge sites at Emmerich; the depth of the bridgehead was to be made sufficient to provide room to form up major forces for the drive to the east and north-east. I gave 24 March as target date for the operation. The battle of the Rhineland was not completed until 10 March, so that the time available for preparing to assault across the greatest water obstacle in Western Europe was extremely short. The all important factor was to follow up the enemy as quickly as possible, and it was possible to achieve this speed of action mainly because of the foresight and preliminary planning that had been devoted to this battle for some months.

The width of the Rhine on our front was between four and five hundred yards, but at high water it was liable to increase to between seven and twelve hundred yards. The mean velocity of the current was about three and a half knots. The river bed itself was composed of sand and gravel and was expected to give a good bearing surface for amphibious tanks and trestles. The course of the river was controlled by a highly developed system of dykes; the main dyke was generally sixty feet wide at the base and some ten to sixteen feet high, and formed a formidable obstacle. Although our operations in February had been severely handicapped by flooding, the waters were subsiding rapidly and the ground was drying remarkably quickly.

Ninth United States Army comprised XIII, XVI and XIX Corps with a total of three armoured and nine infantry divisions. In addition to 8, 12 and 30 Corps, Second Army included for the initial stages of the operation 2 Canadian Corps and XVIII United States Airborne Corps; the latter comprised 6 British and 17 American Airborne Divisions. The total forces in Second Army were four armoured, two airborne and eight infantry divisions, five independent armoured brigades, one Commando brigade and one independent infantry brigade. 79 Armoured Division was in support of the operation with all its resources of specialised armour and amphibious devices.