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Report on the committment of 719th Infantry

Division in the ANTWERPEN - BREDA area in

September 1944.

(Gustav Hoehne)

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Report

on the commitment of the 719th Inf - Div in the area ANTWERP-

Breda September 1944

ReportOn the Commitment of the 719th Inf. Div. in the Area Antwerp-
-Breda, September 1944

When I took over the Command in the beginning of August 1944, in Holland, the 719th Infantry Division was committed on both sides of Hoek van Holland (exclusive of den Hagg, and of Walcheren).

Its adjacent unit on the right was an SS replacement Division, its left neighbor Walcheren was a division, which was partially made up of personnel with stomach trouble. The division command post (was) at Dordrecht, that of the LXXXVIII, Corps, to which the division was at Bilthoven near Utrecht. The left adjacent corps: the LXXXIX corps at Antwerp.

The organization of the division: 2 infantry regiments with 3 battalions, Inf Regts 723 and 743. Their commanders Oberst Neumann and Bosselmann. 1 artillery regiment with 2 light battalions 1 engineer battalion, 1 antitank battalion, 1 signal battalion, 1 medical company, 1 veterinary company and the other columns and supply units.

The division had not yet been in combat. Its spirit, its conduct and the average age of about 30-32 years were good. The combat strengths of the units amounted to 75 per cent of the tables of organization.

The conversion of the division from a static (bodenstadige) division to a horse - drawn mobile division was ordered at the end of August. Hereby the status of officers and enlisted men remained as it was. The men necessary to take care of the horses were taken

from the unit. Consequently the combat strengths decreased to about 60% of the tables of organization.

Still occupied with this conversion, the division received the order, to prepare everything for relief and for commitment in the region of Brussels. The question now remained open, whether the division had to reach this region by railway transportation, motor march or foot-march. The relief of the division was difficult, since no regular division was available for that purpose and the units placed at its disposal arrived at different times.

After the completion of the relief, which had been definitely ordered for the end of August, the individual march groups were to be moved in foot march in the direction to Brussels with the fullest utilization of the road net. While the last parts of the division were still being relieved, while the first march groups were approaching BREDA- ROZEN DAAL, while the engineer battalion was already advanced in the motor-march into the region of Brussels by order of Heeresgruppe MODEL and was placed under the command of the division the following order reached the division due to the development of the situation; the enemy is approaching ANTWERP. The new march objective for the division: ANTWERP. Immediate establishment of contact with the division headquarters of SCHWERIN. There further orders concerning the holding and the defense of ANTWERP. Speed is requested. All means of transportation are to be utilized fully for the acceleration of the movements.

This order arrived at the division on the fourth of September in the noon. Due to this order the general staff officer of the division was immediately sent for the establishment of contact with the division headquarters at ANTWERP.

The division headquarters, which was at BREDA, remained there for the present. At the same time the regiments were instructed on the new situation and on their tasks. Accordingly, the 743 infantry regiment in the region of ROZENDAAL had to reach ANTWERP via ESSCHEN, MARIA ter HEIDE, BRASCHAET, MERKEN, whereas the 723 infantry regiment in the region of BREDA was turned off to ANTWERP via MEEBIELE, RYCKEVORSSEL, OOSTMALLE, WYNEGHEM. Their commanders received the order, to appear in the FORT de MERXEM or at the canal bridge of WYNEGHEM for the further reception of orders. In all movements the greatest speed was required. For that purpose all movable means of transportation such as street cars, bicycles, were used by the regiments. The available motor-transport was fully utilized in a swift operation for bringing up the troops. In spite of the difficulties in relief, the reliefs, the assembly of the individual march groups, moving the march groups, and rerouting them in new directions took place according to plan and without air action of the enemy. Retrograde movements of units of rear services caused difficulties, but they could not hinder the movements of the division and impair the good spirit of the division. The establishment of contact with division headquarters of SCHWERIN at ANTWERP revealed, that the fight for ANTWERP was already in full swing. ANTWERP was about to be taken. A calculation of distances showed the absolute impossibility for the division, to intervene in the fight for ANTWERP. The estimate of the situation led to the decision, to reach at least the canal MERXEM-WYNEGHEM to stop the further advance of the enemy. During these deliberations the division received the following new order issued to meet the changed situation. The division is to reach

and block the ALBERT-Canal from MERXEM to HASSELT. Speed is required. Point of main effort is MERXEM. One battalion each of the regiment in the rear is to be committed towards HERENTHALS, CHEEL and BEERINGEN. Enemy who crossed eventually is to be repulsed. A battalion of Dutch SS Armed Forces is subordinate and is moved by the corps headquarters towards the crossing to the north of HASSELT. Headquarters of the LXXX army corps from the 5th of September in the morning MOERGESTEL eastward TILBURG.

In this difficult situation the reconnaissance which was made immediately revealed that 1.) ANTWERP was lost, however that the enemy made no arrangements for taking possession of the important canal bridge at MERXEM. 2.) It was ascertained that all bridges across the canal were not prepared for the demolition and that they were still absolutely intact. 3.) A transportation train was on the open line between ROZENDAAL and ANTWERP. It belonged to the 347th infantry division and contained besides artillery units and engineer company of the 347th Division, which was particularly fortunate, since the engineer battalion of the division could no longer have been raked in. The transportation train was immediately unloaded and rapidly moved to MERXEM. 4.) The commander of a battalion composed of personnel suffering from stomach trouble in Fort de MERXEM, where I had gone, reported that he held the general line BERCKEREN-FORTS de MERXEM with weak forces. LILLO is held by naval units of unknown strength. The situation there was obscure. 5.) Intercepted radio messages and the establishment of contact with the division on the isle of WALCHEREN revealed that the high command of the 15th army with numerous divisions was still on the other side of the Western-SCHELDE.

The estimate of the situation showed that in any case it was important in this moment to prevent the enemy forces at ANTWERP from attacking in the rear the high command of the 15th army and the division on the isle of WALCHEREN. The air activity of the enemy increased noticeably, especially was the Western- SCHLDE closely guarded, since it was the only possible water route by which 15th army could make its crossing. The center of gravity of the next actions was recognized in the fight for MERXEM, especially for the bridges of that place. Every second counted in this situation. Accordingly under my command the combined arrival of the march groups was not awaited, but the units were rapidly committed so as they were at hand. Simultaneously the general staff officer of the division routed the march groups of the Inf Regt 723 the ordered direction and committed them. The division command post was removed from BREDA to MERXPLAS.

The quite impossible was achieved. On the 4 and 5 September the division closed up, the front having a length of 80 km was solid. The most important bridges at MERXEM and WYNEGHEM had been blasted, retreating units had been collected and committed. Contrary to expectation the enemy had not exploited his opportunity. Furthermore it was a particularly fortunate circumstance that enemy airplanes did not appear. It is to the everlasting credit of the engineer company of the 347th Inf Div to have blasted the so important bridges in such a short period.

For the composition of the division on the evening of the 5 September see overlay. The point of main effort was in every respect at MERXEM, whereas on the left wing because of the size of the sector

the canal could be occupied only in a strong point-like manner in the most important places. Here on the left wing Generalleutnant Schill of the 85th Infantry division had already on his own initiative set up a defensive front at the canal using all kinds of retreating units. I knew nothing of all this, since the situation at Merxem engrossed my attention. On the 6 September the regiment 723 was placed under his command by corps order. From the 6 September the boundary between the divisions ran to the east of HERENTHALS, TURNHOUT, BAARL, NASSAU. The division command post was transferred from MERXEM to LOENHOUT. According to my memory on the 6 or 7 September the enemy started the expected attack at MERXEM. Its center of gravity was westward of MERXEM with the obvious intention of forming first of all a bridge-head there. It failed, as did all subsequent attacks which had the same aim. They were made with changing strength and lasted till about the 12 September. They did not extend to the rest of the division front. A clear and great total success had been achieved, which would become of decisive importance for the further subsequent fights. The rear and the flank of the 15th army, crossing on the Western-SCHELDE had been covered successfully. Its divisions were available when there was need of resisting the enemy air-borne forces landed at ARNHEIM and EINDHOFEN.

Observations and reconnaissances revealed from about the 12 September the shift of the enemy point of main effort from MERXEM to the direction of HASSELT. Here and eastward the fighting on the left adjacent division's front increased in violence, and extension, they also achieved penetrations of varying depth. For the 719th division the fighting resulted in the left flank being pushed back

farther and farther to TURNHOUT or vicinity. There was danger of the division's being taken in the rear and in the flank. This danger was met by transferring the artillery main effort on the left wing and by the formation of an infantry reserve in the wooded area just east of MERXPLAS. For this the battalion of the 743 regiment committed at MERXLEM was available; its sector up to the ANTWERP-TURNHOUT canal was taken over by the 346th Infantry division, which had crossed over into WALCHEREN.

About the middle of September, the enemy crossed the canal at WYNEGHEM. At approximately the same time the division was ordered to withdraw to the ANTWERP-TURNHOUT canal. It came to violent fights. The 743 battalion, committed there, was involved in heavy combat; it prevented a break-through, but could not prevent the formation of a bridge head by the enemy, in spite of immediate counter-attack. During the night following these fights the division withdrew to the ANTWERP-TURNHOUT canal as ordered. The enemy did not follow these movements, so the occupation of the new main line of resistance could be carried out with out trouble. From its right wing at or near ST. LEONHARD to TURNHOUT it was occupied only by scraped-together units of the Army and of the Air Forces. The position alongside it was held by a battalion of the 743 regiment which, on its other flank, on or near RAEVELS HILL, ^{joined} a battalion of the Dutch SS Armed Forces. The division command post was transferred to ALPHEN, later to BAARIE NASSAU. In the wooded area just south-west of BAARIE NASSAU a battalion of the 743 regiment was available as reserve for the division, whereas the still remaining battalion of the 743 regiment was committed as corps reserve in the deep flank of the corps.

About the middle of September the division came under the command of the General Sponheimer. The town of TURNHOUT was evacuated voluntarily. The weakness of the defense of the ANTWERP-TURNHOUT canal was the very bushy cover on the opposite bank. It gave the enemy a good chance to assemble forces of any strength at any point. Furthermore the weakness lay in the quite insufficient equipment and armament of the units scraped together. This applied especially to a railway safety battalion with an average age of 45-50 years. This battalion was committed at the canal on both sides of RYCKEVORSEL. On the 18 September it was attacked by strongly superior forces. The enemy forced the crossing and took possession of RYCKEVORSEL. Counterattacks which were started on the same day did not lead to the removal of this point of penetration. I can no longer describe the further engagements of this division, especially those later on at BAARLE NASSAU, since having been taken ill, I had to be sent to the hospital at BAD NAUHEIM.

signed

Sievers