

CAVALRY AT THE WET GAP: THE 2ND AND 3RD MECHANIZED CAVALRY  
GROUPS DURING THE MOSELLE RIVER CROSSING, 1944

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by

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## ABSTRACT

CAVALRY AT THE WET GAP: THE 2ND AND 3RD MECHANIZED CAVALRY GROUPS DURING THE MOSELLE RIVER CROSSING, 1944, by MAJ Ragan T. Rutherford, 76 pages.

Contested wet gap crossings in Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) are inherently dangerous, and units conducting these operations assume extremely high levels of risk. However, history shows that the proper utilization of cavalry forces during gap crossings greatly reduces both risk to force and mission. This thesis examines how the 2nd and 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Groups (MCG) enabled XII and XX Corps of Third Army to cross the Moselle River in France from August to November 1944. Modeled after United States Army gap crossing phases, the chapters trace the advance from Normandy to the Moselle, the assault across the Moselle, and the attack from the Moselle towards the cities of Metz and Nancy. Throughout the entire gap crossing process the MCGs enabled through reconnaissance, security, and economy of force operations, ultimately allowing exploitable advantages for XII and XX Corps. They also demonstrated the necessity of disciplined initiative, fighting well, and proper task organization in cavalry formations during LSCO. Lessons drawn from this examination include potential models for the task organization and employment of corps and division level cavalry during a wet gap crossing and potential implications for the training of cavalry forces.

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I dedicate this work to the soldiers of the 2nd and 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Groups who served in the European Theater of Operations during World War II. Their relentless and selfless efforts enabled victory, liberty, and life for others.

I would like to thank my wife Morgan, and my children Mary Catherine, Jack, Michael, and Elizabeth. As with any professional endeavor, they are the first to experience the effects when my focus shifts from family to work. Time is rare and valuable, yet they gave me the time I needed to research and write. Their sacrifice and endurance throughout this process and my career leaves me forever indebted. They are heroes.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ACRONYMS.....	vii
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 ADVANCE TO THE MOSELLE .....	9
CHAPTER 3 ASSAULT ACROSS THE MOSELLE.....	27
CHAPTER 4 ATTACK FROM THE MOSELLE.....	45
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....	58
Implications for Modern U.S. Cavalry .....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	67

## ACRONYMS

AAR	After Action Report
AD	Armored Division
BG	Brigadier General
CRS	Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron
ETO	European Theater of Operations
FM	Field Manual
ID	Infantry Division
LTG	Lieutenant General
MCG	Mechanized Cavalry Group
MG	Major General
WWII	World War Two

## ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Mechanized Cavalry Group Task Organization .....	6
Figure 2. From Normandy to the Moselle.....	18
Figure 3. M8 Greyhound.....	26
Figure 4. M5 Stuart .....	26
Figure 5. XX Corps and 3rd MCG, Early September .....	32
Figure 6. Situation near Nancy, 11-14 September 1944 .....	54

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Corps cavalry was essential to Third Army's success in 1944. As Lieutenant General (LTG) George S. Patton and his army aggressively attacked from Normandy to Lorraine, the 2nd and 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Groups (MCG) enabled XII and XX Corps to approach and cross the Moselle River primarily through reconnaissance, security, and economy of force operations. They identified the suitability of crossing sites and routes, as well as the Wehrmacht's strength and dispositions. They also provided protective flank security, allowing corps and division commanders to focus main efforts on Metz, Nancy, and the effort to get infantry, armor, and engineers across the contested Moselle. Additionally, disciplined initiative by junior leaders, fighting well, and proper task organization, when necessary, heavily supported the cavalry's ability to enable these corps' efforts.

As part of Twelfth Army Group under LTG Omar Bradley, Third Army's initial purpose was to exploit the success of Operation Cobra and remove the German Army from Brittany while seizing ports.<sup>1</sup> Third Army then began its drive east across France, leaving VIII Corps in Brittany.<sup>2</sup> The next goal was passing the Seine and getting to the German Ruhr region. Penetrating to this industrial region, according to the Allies, would

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<sup>1</sup> George S. Patton and Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1972-74), 493; Bill Yenne, *Operation Cobra and the Great Offensive, Sixty Days That Changed the Course of World War II* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004), 77.

<sup>2</sup> William S. Nance, *Sabers through the Reich: World War II Corps Cavalry from Normandy to the Elbe* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 65.

consolidate significant German forces to the area, creating an opportunity to degrade the Wehrmacht.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, controlling the Ruhr region would isolate German ground forces from sustainment efforts and bring defeat to Germany.

From August 1st to September, Third Army rapidly progressed across France. By mid-month, it controlled the region between Paris and Orleans.<sup>4</sup> On August 25th, Patton ordered XII and XX Corps to seize bridges between Reims to Vitry-le-Francois.<sup>5</sup> By August 29th, Patton was already looking to cross the Meuse River.<sup>6</sup> However, the rapid drive came at a cost. Gasoline shortages came to full fruition between August 29th and 31st, bringing Third Army to a grinding halt.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Germans had time to reorganize defenses.<sup>8</sup> Patton maintained his optimism though, confident in the Germans' inability to hold anything after retreating for over 300 miles.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to a continued drive east, the XII and XX Corps had to cross the Meuse and Moselle Rivers. The Meuse was the last significant and natural obstacle prior to the

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations, Breakout and Pursuit* (1961; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), 657. Hereafter referred to as *Breakout and Pursuit*.

<sup>4</sup> Charles M. Province, *Patton's Third Army: A Daily Combat Diary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1992), 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> John N. Rickard, *Patton at Bay: The Lorraine Campaign, September to December, 1944* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 59-60.

Moselle. Along the Moselle lies Metz and Nancy, two dense urban population centers that any competent military would use to its advantage. The German's forces took advantage of these cities, utilizing pre-established forts and terrain to establish thorough defensive areas along the Moselle.<sup>10</sup> The Wehrmacht intended to primarily delay on the western side of the Moselle while focusing their defensive posture on the eastern side, with a total of "43 forts and fortified groups, with 128 artillery pieces of large caliber emplaced around Metz proper."<sup>11</sup> Near Metz, outer ring forts were utilized as artillery positions, while the inner ring forts consisted of "primarily infantry strongpoints," as described in XX Corps' official World War II (WWII) history.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the XX Corps history describes some characteristics of the forts:

There were no definitely designed fields for direct fire of automatic weapons from the forts proper. Instead, an interdefensive system of fire was devised whereby the deep moats that surround each fort or fortified system were covered by interlocking fields of automatic fire to bar infantry crossing. German infantry positions some distance out from the fortified artillery positions furnished all-round security.<sup>13</sup>

In late August, after crossing the Meuse, the XII and XX Corps prepared to close the distance with Metz, Nancy, and the Moselle. XX Corps, commanded by Major General Walton H. Walker, faced Metz. XII Corps, commanded by Major General

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<sup>10</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations, The Lorraine Campaign* (1950; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), 132. Hereafter referred to as *The Lorraine Campaign*.

<sup>11</sup> The United States Government, *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II* (Osaka, Japan: XX Corps Association, 1945), 134-135.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Manton S. Eddy, faced Nancy.<sup>14</sup> The Moselle stood between both corps and their objectives. Two MCGs enabled these corps. Colonel Frederick W. Drury, and subsequently Lieutenant Colonel James H. Polk, commanded the 3rd MCG, supporting XX Corps. 3rd MCG consisted of the 3rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (CRS) and the 43rd CRS.<sup>15</sup> Colonel Charles H. Reed commanded 2nd MCG, which was attached to XII Corps and included the 42nd CRS and 2nd CRS.<sup>16</sup> While these MCGs served the XX and XII Corps, divisional cavalry reconnaissance troops and squadrons enabled infantry and armored divisions respectively.

The organization and composition of the MCGs directly impacted the extent to which they could support XII and XX Corps. The transition from horse cavalry to mechanized cavalry was a relatively recent event at the time, and doctrine had not yet ideally aligned with organization and equipment. By 1944, mechanized cavalry's primary purpose was to serve as a light reconnaissance element.<sup>17</sup> Fighting was not expected except only as necessary. Fittingly, they were not always able to fight efficiently either, considering their composition. Lessons from North Africa did influence some change,

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<sup>14</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" - *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945* (Phoenix: 3rd Cavalry Veteran's Association, 1974); 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," (C.I., Record Group 407, National Archives II, College Park, MD).

<sup>16</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Report of Operations," September (CAVG2, Record Group 407, National Archives II, College Park, MD), 1; XII Corps, "Report of Operations," September (Record 212, Record Group 407, National Archives II, College Park, MD), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Robert S. Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower, The Emergence of the U.S. Army's Armor Branch, 1917-1945* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2008), 472.

however, and mechanized cavalry squadrons were standardized across the Army.<sup>18</sup> By September 1943, a CRS contained a headquarters troop, a 75mm Assault Gun Troop for indirect fire support, a light tank company with three platoons and seventeen M5A1 Stuart Light Tanks (37mm gun), and three mechanized cavalry troops with three platoons and twenty-seven dismounted troopers.<sup>19</sup> The mechanized cavalry platoons consisted of three cavalry sections, each with one M8 Greyhound Armored Car, one regular Jeep, and one 60mm mortar Jeep.<sup>20</sup> Occasionally supporting these elements were other units such as tank destroyer battalions, artillery battalions, engineers, and infantry.<sup>21</sup>

Because of the complex and changing nature of warfare, the MCGs were required to use these organizations and equipment for actions besides reconnaissance, such as seizing terrain or infrastructure, or conducting delaying actions. This was, doctrinally speaking, outside of their purpose. However, they fought on and consequently desired to be understood as cavalry organizations, as opposed to only reconnaissance organizations.<sup>22</sup> These cavalry organizations used what they had, fought hard, sacrificed much, and adapted quickly to enable XX and XII Corps to approach, cross, and fight from the Moselle.

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<sup>18</sup> Louis DiMarco, “The U.S. Army’s Mechanized Cavalry Doctrine in World War II,” (Master’s thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 64-65.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.; Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower*, 473; Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 24-25, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 28; DiMarco, “Mechanized Cavalry Doctrine in WWII,” 65.

<sup>21</sup> Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower*, 480.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 478.

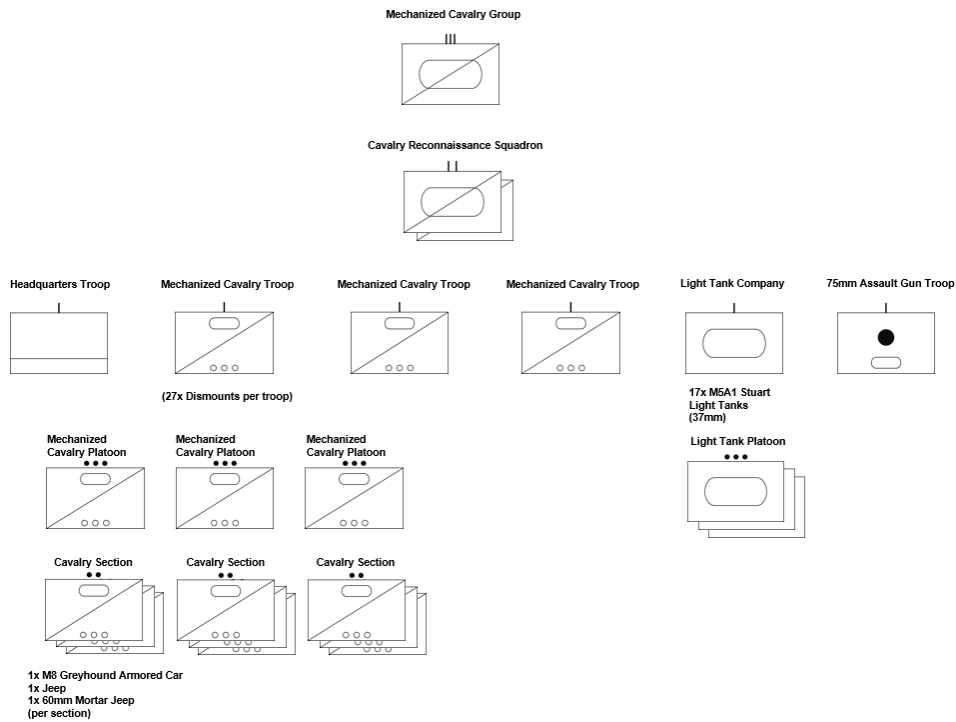


Figure 1. Mechanized Cavalry Group Task Organization

*Source:* Created by author using symbols from Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 1-02.2, *Military Symbols* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2020); Task organization derived from William S. Nance, *Sabers through the Reich: World War II Corps Cavalry from Normandy to the Elbe* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 24-25, 28.

As the most studied war in history, numerous primary and secondary sources examine the micro and macro aspects of all Army Groups in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). Recent works show that operational cavalry directly contributed to Army Groups' movement across southern France and Germany. Secondary sources such as *Patton at Bay*, *Men on Iron Ponies*, *Sabers through the Reich*, and the Center of Military History Green Books provide excellent insight into Third Army's eastward push towards and into Germany. Correspondence of the 3rd MCG commander, Colonel Polk,

and General Patton's diary entries in *The Patton Papers* also provide invaluable insight and enrich the understanding of Third Army's efforts.

Primary sources such as monthly After-Action Reports (AAR) of 2nd and 3rd MCGs granularly detail cavalry operations from western France to the Moselle River, Nancy, and Metz. These reports provide the rawest accounts of the MCGs' actions, and often describe in detail small unit engagements that affected the successes and failures of the units involved. The AARs also provide detailed, comprehensive timelines of the 2nd and 3rd MCGs during WWII. Simply put, these AARs tell the story of the Dragoons and Brave Rifles and detail actions before, during, and after the Moselle River crossing.

*Sabers through the Reich* provides one of the most comprehensive and thorough accounts of corps level cavalry in the ETO. William Nance's account focuses on the MCGs within the First Army, Third Army, Seventh Army, and Ninth Army, providing a complete narrative of their exploits from the beaches of Normandy to the Elbe River. The comprehensive nature of *Sabers through the Reich* keeps readers focused on multiple mechanized cavalry groups as the Allies maneuvered from France to Germany.

Another essential work is Charles Province's *Patton's Third Army*. In his work, Province chronologically accounts Third Army's actions from August 1944 to May 1945. Perhaps the most important characteristic of *Patton's Third Army* is the context it provides. This straightforward chronology assists in understanding the context of how the 2nd and 3rd MCGs fit into a larger effort within the ETO.

Few sources synthesize the connection between operational cavalry and their supported units in direct relation to crossing the Moselle River in 1944. Examining, analyzing, and synthesizing the actions and effectiveness of MCGs during Moselle River

crossing provides an opportunity to understand how cavalry forces can best support larger echelons during contested wet gap crossings in large scale combat.

## CHAPTER 2

### ADVANCE TO THE MOSELLE

August 1st marked the beginning of Third Army's march across France. At this point it had two major phases: clear Brittany of Axis force, and maneuver east towards Germany.<sup>23</sup> Because German forces were expected to be in disarray, Third Army attempted to take full advantage and gave orders to simply engage the enemy.<sup>24</sup> VIII Corps, under General Troy Middleton, was designated as the primary unit to handle Brittany, while XV and XX Corps were to be withheld until after the Brittany campaign.<sup>25</sup> XII Corps, responsible for organizing Third Army elements on the European continent, eventually joined Third Army in mid-August to protect its southern flank and to "seize Chateaudun and Orleans and protect the army right flank along the Loire," as described by Blumenson in *Breakout and Pursuit*.<sup>26</sup>

By mid-August, German forces continued fighting, despite the large presence of Allied forces in eastern France. Hitler assigned Colonel Hermann Oehmichen the task of creating an armored defensive area between Paris and the Allies.<sup>27</sup> Instructions were for

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher Carey, "France '44: The Wet Gap Crossings at Nancy WWII Documentary," produced by Army University Press, December 3, 2019, video, 54:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr1z1xPxMNY&t=1327s>.

<sup>24</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Yenne, *Operation Cobra and the Great Offensive*, 77-78.

<sup>26</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 564.

<sup>27</sup> Joachim Ludeweg, *Rückzug, The German Retreat from France, 1944* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 94.

Wermacht soldiers to fight as hardened tankers, despite only having dismounted anti-tank Panzerfausts.<sup>28</sup> Although the Germans maintained resoluteness, American forces undoubtedly maintained momentum. As a result, the German's withdrew east from Chateaudun and Orleans.<sup>29</sup>

During this initial push by Third Army in early August, 4th AD, temporarily part of XV corps, encountered resistance at Rennes, a critical crossroad.<sup>30</sup> However, on August 3rd, Third Army took Rennes.<sup>31</sup> While 8th ID remained at Rennes, 4th AD continued towards Lorient with the newly attached 2nd MCG.<sup>32</sup> The 2nd MCG supported 4th AD primarily through flank and route security. This significantly enabled 4th AD to isolate the peninsula. Simultaneously, the 106th MCG provided flank security to enable VIII Corps in its efforts the capture the peninsula.<sup>33</sup> Within roughly a week VIII Corps oriented towards Brest, while the remainder of Third Army pushed east. Soon after, the 3rd MCG landed on the European continent to begin its screening of Third Army's advance.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ludeweg, *Rückzug*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Yenne, *Operation Cobra and the Great Offensive*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew D. Morton, *Men on Iron Ponies: The Death and Rebirth of the Modern U.S. Cavalry* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 153.

On August 9th the 3rd MCG arrived at Utah Beach in France and on August 10th met XX Corps.<sup>35</sup> The corps immediately put the 3rd MCG Brave Rifles to work to establish contact with 1st ID and 5th ID, and to conduct reconnaissance between the corps' divisions as it attacked east.<sup>36</sup> In *Sabers through the Reich*, William Nance describes the squadron positions: "The 3rd CRS conducted reconnaissance and liaison duties between the 80th ID near Evron and the 1st ID at Mayenne, a distance of approximately fourteen miles, while the 43rd CRS reconnoitered the region between the 80th ID and the 5th ID near Angers, a tremendous frontage of forty-seven miles."<sup>37</sup> The 43rd CRS commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Leslie H. Cross gave specific guidance of reporting "on enemy troop dispositions, number, and strength" as well as bridge conditions in the sector.<sup>38</sup> Considering the interconnected hydrology in western France, focusing on bridge conditions was essential to maintaining momentum. The orders go on to describe the parameters and actions of the squadron and troops:

The north boundary for the 43rd [Squadron] will be Vaiges—Chassille—Le Mans—Connere (all incl) a distance of 62 miles. On the south our right boundary will correspond to the XX Corps right flank which will run along the Loire river from Anger to Blois, a distance of 91 miles. We will [recon] the zone to a [north/south] line [through] Connere—Vendome—Blois (incl), a width of 52 miles. B [Troop] will be on the north with one Assault Gun platoon from E [Troop] attached and it will [recon] from the north boundary to a south boundary running [through] Bazonges—St Michael—Durtal—La Fleche—Le Dude and LaChartre to Vendome (all incl). From this line (excl) C [Troop] will have the southern portion of the zone. Reports must be constant and at least every hour. F [Company] with its light tanks will go north this evening to be attached to the 3rd

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<sup>35</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 1-2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 2; Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 73.

<sup>37</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 3.

[Squadron] so as to maintain a sector in the northern part of XX Corps zone near Mayenne to counter a possible enemy attempt to [breakthrough] in the [vicinity].<sup>39</sup>

AARs for 43rd CRS indicate that the squadron encountered disjointed and unorganized resistance by the Germans. Roads remained clear, however, and the squadron identified numerous destroyed bridges, especially along the Sarthe River. The inability to identify suitable crossing sites forced the C Troop to ford the river utilizing barges made of wood, which ferried the squadrons combat power to the far side. The assault guns with C Troop, however, were too heavy for the barges. To overcome this literal obstacle, the guns moved north to B Troop's area, crossed the river near Chateau Gontier, moved south, and rejoined C Troop.<sup>40</sup>

The squadron continued its movement east, encountering minimal enemy resistance, except for an ME109 attack on August 14th.<sup>41</sup> That same evening, LTC Cross was ordered to conduct a zone reconnaissance in front of the entire corps. He arrayed his troops from north to south, B Troop, A Troop, and C Troop. At times the zone reconnaissance covered nearly seventy-seven miles in width. During the reconnaissance, B Troop identified Wehrmacht dispositions, including machine gun and anti-tank positions.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

On August 14th, XX Corps shifted efforts towards Chartres and the Seine.<sup>43</sup> During this effort, 3rd CRS temporarily attached to XII Corps to contribute to flank security. The 43rd squadron enabled the corps as it moved towards Chartres, north of Orleans.<sup>44</sup> As the squadron progressed east, German resistance increased, increasing difficulty for the cavalry since it lacked a robust armored composition. Near Tours on August 15th, the squadron approximated a German composition of nearly 650 personnel prior to receiving its order to conduct reconnaissance towards Orleans (although 3rd CRS ultimately took this responsibility on August 16th).<sup>45</sup> On the evening of August 16th, LTC Cross was ordered to return to the corps at Courville, and received new instructions from COL William A. Collier, the Corps Chief of Staff. COL Collier made very clear what the 43rd was to do next:

I want patrols on the Seine river by tonight. This is not a [recon] mission. I want you to get there. It is over 60 miles into enemy territory and we want to know what bridges or ford[s] are available to us over the Seine. Your boundaries are Versailles...on the North to Nemours...on the South. Report [enemy] concentrations in Fontainebleau forest, but do not stop to investigate; do not fight except to extricate yourself from a trap—your only job—repeat—only job—is to get patrols on the Seine by tonight.<sup>46</sup>

The squadron's obligation to identify crossing points was likely very important, as the Seine is a major natural obstacle running north to south. However, there lay another major obstacle between the squadron and the Seine, and that was German occupied

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<sup>43</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 24; 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 7f.

<sup>44</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> XII Corps, "Report of Operations," August, 2.

<sup>46</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 13.

Chartres. To focus on its reconnaissance objective, the squadron avoided Chartres, with A Troop deploying at roughly 0130 on August 17th. By 1730 that evening, the troop reached the Seine near Ponthierry with 2nd platoon. By 2100 3rd platoon arrived and deployed patrols along the Seine near Chartrettes.

An opportunity to develop the situation arose for 3rd platoon near the town of Boutigny, roughly 15 miles west of Chartrettes.<sup>47</sup> 2nd Lieutenant (2LT) Hains and his men conducted a hasty area reconnaissance of Boutigny after French forces in the area reported no Germans in the town except for a small element of roughly thirty enemy who were likely protecting a gasoline storage site. The 2LT in his armored car, with a jeep following entered the town and stumbled upon a German soldier outside the storage building. Both the German and the Americans hesitated and simply looked at each other. After about two minutes, 2LT Hains instructed the gunner to engage with the armored car's coaxial machine gun. As he began engaging, a French woman stepped directly into the line of fire. Although her straw hat was hit, she was not and fled screaming as machine gun fire killed the German soldier. Near instantly, fire erupted towards 2LT Hains' armored car and the jeep. Nearly two companies of Germans now engaged the reconnaissance patrol in Boutigny. 2LT Hains and his patrol immediately broke contact and departed the town.<sup>48</sup> Using disciplined initiative, 2LT Hains did more than just get his platoon to the Seine to determine crossing locations, but also ascertained enemy

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<sup>47</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15.

strength and disposition at a nearby town, thus painting a better picture for his higher headquarters.

3rd platoon's actions continued at the Seine. After the situation at Boutigny, Hains, his men, and some local French resistance conducted reconnaissance near the bridge at Ponthierry, almost ten and a half miles northeast of Boutigny. By this point, the platoon was nearly forty-seven miles in front of the squadron. The men drew pictures of the bridge and Hains himself moved forward to observe the bridge. Another opportunity arose at the bridge to identify and report fifteen German Tiger tanks enroute to the town of Nanville, just over three miles to the southwest of Ponthierry.<sup>49</sup> Soon after, the platoon consolidated to move back to the troop command post at Boigneville. They travelled south through Fountainbleau forest and identified numerous concentrations of Germans, although avoiding direct fire contact. The platoon identified cars of Schutzstaffel (SS) and Panzer division staff officers, as well as usable, but enemy protected, bridges.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, the 3rd CRS of the 3rd MCG pushed south and east as well. On August 11th the squadron began its movement to the area between Carrouges and Sees, roughly 100 miles west-southwest of Paris. Proceeding southeast, the group encountered resistance in various forms: enemy machine gun fire from various towns, German 88mm guns, roadblocks, 20mm guns, and squads of German dismounts.<sup>51</sup> Similar to the 43rd CRS, the troops of the 3rd CRS at times were extremely far ahead of the squadron

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<sup>49</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 7b.

headquarters, although this was not necessarily a bad situation considering the context. The troops, much like Third Army, were moving rapidly. They arrived by 1500 on August 13th. The Germans were overcome by the cavalrymen's efforts. The drive east contributed to the understanding that the German's were retreating toward Chartres.<sup>52</sup>

On August 14th, B Troop, 3rd CRS began an area reconnaissance of Sees. Their efforts gave an understanding of a less than suitable route near Sees, with blown bridges and mines along the route.<sup>53</sup> They also observed a significant enemy presence in Sees. C Troop proceeded southwest of B Troop. On August 12th, the troop moved to control ground at and between Jublains and Evron. Although they encountered obstacles overwatched by German machine guns, tanks from the attached F Company, 43rd CRS enabled the troop to overcome the obstacles. Unfortunately, the troop still took casualties from a booby trap near the obstacle.<sup>54</sup> The German's continued placing significant resistance on the troop as it attempted to take Jublains. Anti-tank and 88mm fire pushed the troopers and light tanks out of Jublains despite valiant efforts from the cavalrymen. The troop attempted to take Jublains again on August 13th but were again stopped by German fire. That morning, the squadron ordered C Troop to return to the headquarters to receive its new instructions to support the XX Corps movement to the Seine, which changed two days later to support XII Corps movement to Orleans until August 23rd.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *"Patton's Ghost Troops,"* 4.

<sup>53</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 7c.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 7f.

43rd CRS continued developing the situation near the Seine on August 18th and 19th. Germans maintained a presence west of the Seine, near Louville Le Chenard, where A Troop was located. On August 19th, A Troop received aid from C Troop and E Troop (the assault gun troop), thwarting German efforts to destroy the cavalry forces. To the northeast, B Troop fought the enemy near Rambouillet.<sup>56</sup> August 20th and 21st finally brought some rest for the squadron as they consolidated and re-organized near Louville La Chenard. On the afternoon of the 21st, LTC Cross received instructions at XX Corps headquarters at Oysonville to collect B Company of the 774th Tank Destroyer Battalion and an engineer company. As 7th AD attacked to Melun on the 22nd, 43rd CRS was to provide flank security to the north.<sup>57</sup> As a moving flank guard is one of the most difficult of cavalry tasks, the 43rd CRS had a difficult road ahead.

Additionally, despite attempts by LTC Cross to coordinate with 7th AD, the armored division was less than helpful. BG John B. Thompson, commander of Combat Command B (CCB), simply instructed Cross “whatever you do, don’t get in my way; I’m not interested in your mission; all I am interested in its getting out as fast as I can and getting to Melun.”<sup>58</sup> However, the squadron continued with its flank security mission, even through August 23rd as 7th AD was fighting fiercely for Melun. The squadron refocused on August 25th towards a new mission of leading the 7th AD across the Seine

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<sup>56</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 77.

<sup>57</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 25; *Order of Battle of the U.S. Army, World War II, European Theater of Operations, Divisions* (Paris, France: Office of the Theater Historian, 1945), 481.

in the town of Tilly.<sup>59</sup> This was rather eventful for the cavalymen as 7th AD continued its push east since the armored division kept a rapid tempo and would not stop to let the cavalry ahead.<sup>60</sup>

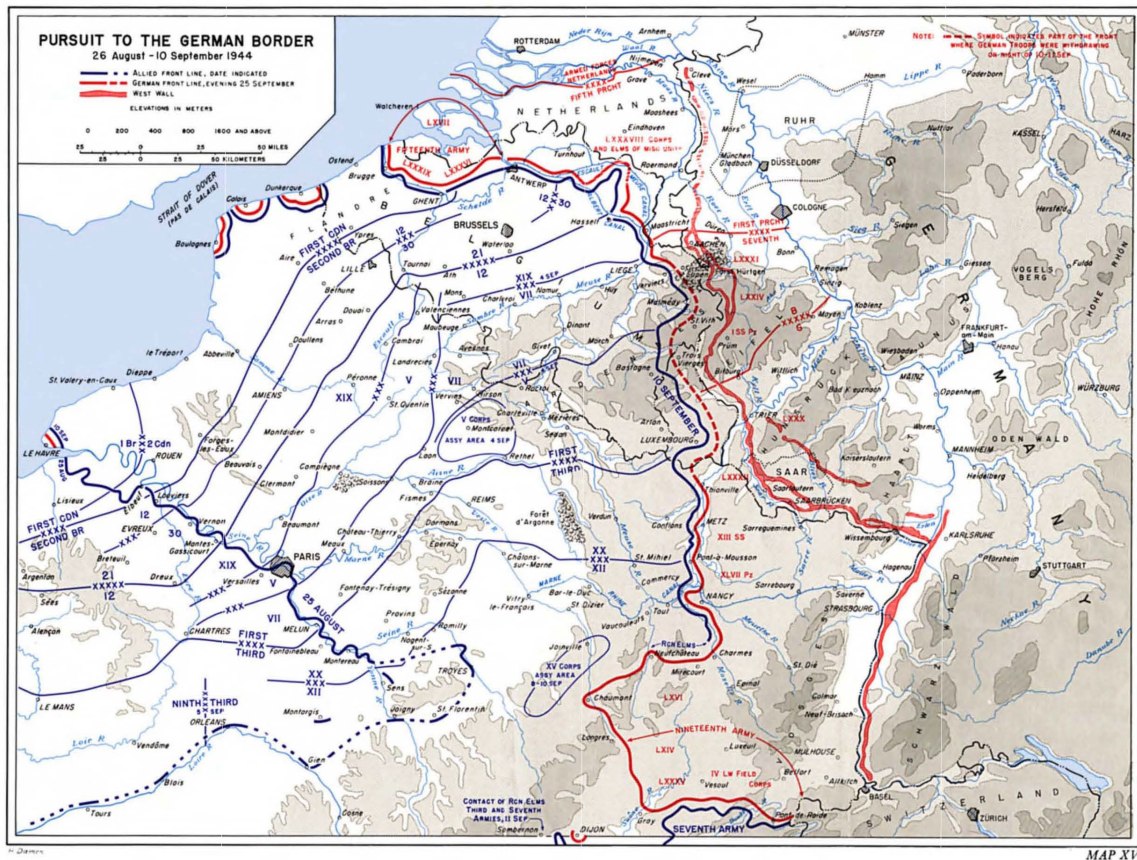


Figure 2. From Normandy to the Moselle

Source: Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations, Breakout and Pursuit* (1961; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), map 15.

<sup>59</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 78.

<sup>60</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 28.

The group headquarters kept the 43rd on its toes as on August 27th LTC Cross received another set of instructions to conduct reconnaissance of 7th AD's route to Reims, while simultaneously conducting a zone reconnaissance ahead of 90th ID, which followed behind 7th AD.<sup>61</sup> The same day, the group headquarters instructed the squadron "to seize at least one bridge over the Marne in Corps zone, hold the bridge and continue [reconnaissance] on the Marne to the north."<sup>62</sup> Despite these multiple, complex taskings and German resistance, the 43rd CRS enabled XX Corps across the Seine between August 25th and 28th.<sup>63</sup> On September 1st, 43rd CRS received yet another new order: "...push [recon] to the Moselle river in a zone bounded on the north by Sedan to Luxembourg...and on the south by a line [running] [through] Charny—Longuyon—Thionville..."<sup>64</sup>

3rd CRS finally reunited with the group on August 26th, advancing to Nogent-Sur-Seine. The squadrons next focus consisted of flank security for the XX Corps advance to Reims.<sup>65</sup> Similar to 43rd CRS, the 3rd CRS also received orders to seize bridges, but this time at the Marne. On August 30th, the 5th ID freed Reims.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, 3rd CRS pushed south towards the Meuse at Verdun to secure a bridge. By

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<sup>61</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 32.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>63</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 77-79.

<sup>64</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 44.

<sup>65</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops," 4.

<sup>66</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 668.

August 31st, XX Corps was across the Meuse and Third Army would soon face significant gasoline shortages that allowed the Germans time to prepare defensive positions along the Moselle River.<sup>67</sup> On the same day the 3rd CRS received instructions to “push [reconnaissance] east to the Moselle.”<sup>68</sup>

On August 12th, Patton instructed the XII Corps commander, MG Gilbert Cook, to send XII Corps to near Le Mans in preparation to push east with the rest of Third Army.<sup>69</sup> The corps’ initial instructions were to protect Third Army’s southern flank. It would end up on the southern side of XX Corps. In addition to providing flank security for Third Army, XII Corps also received instruction to secure Orleans. COL Harkins, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Third Army delivered this additional task late on the evening of August 14th to MG Cook: “Gen Patton directs me to tell you that the mission of your Corps is to secure Orleans. Get started as soon as possible.”<sup>70</sup>

The 43rd CRS was originally tasked to lead this advance. However, 3rd CRS quickly replaced the 43rd. The corps initially met minimal resistance on its way to Orleans. MG Gaffey, the Third Army Chief of Staff, instructed MG Cook to conduct reconnaissance of Orleans, only seizing it if he judged the situation appropriate. Cook passed similar information to 35th ID and 4th AD but gave instructions not to go beyond Orleans. By 1100 on August 16th, 35th ID and 4th AD reached Orleans and began their

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<sup>67</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 668.

<sup>68</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 44a.

<sup>69</sup> XII Corps, “Report of Operations,” August, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

attack into the city. By roughly midnight nearly half the city was cleared, and on August 17th all enemy were cleared. Third Army controlled Orleans.<sup>71</sup> Two days later MG Manton Eddy, previously the 9th ID commander, replaced an ill MG Cook.<sup>72</sup> Patton thought highly of Cook, but Cook's circulatory problems left little options for the Third Army commander other than to replace him with Eddy.<sup>73</sup> 3rd CRS of the 3rd MCG continued providing reconnaissance and security support to the corps east of Orleans, identifying a withdrawal of German forces southeastward toward Gien along the Loire River.

On August 20th the 2nd MCG joined the efforts of XII Corps.<sup>74</sup> By this point, the 2nd MCG already had combat experience. From August 1st to the 20th, the group provided significant support to 4th AD and VIII Corps. It conducted reconnaissance, security, and counter-reconnaissance at places like Vitry, the Vilaine River, La Roche Bernard, Redon, Nantes and Angers.<sup>75</sup> On August 21st, the 83rd ID began its efforts to relieve the 42nd CRS roughly between Redon, Nantes, and Angers. Meanwhile, 2nd CRS consolidated with XII Corps near Cleves to begin its support of the corps. The following day it began screening the corps southern flank.

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<sup>71</sup> XII Corps, "Report of Operations," August, 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Don M. Fox, *Patton's Vanguard, The United States Army Fourth Armored Division* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 84.

<sup>74</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Report of Operations," August, 11.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-11.

The Dragoons of 2nd MCG traveled a vast distance over the next 48 hours, covering around 160 miles. The next 24 hours brought more counter-reconnaissance and screen missions, as well as gaining and maintaining contact with 4th AD at Morcilly le Hazir. During this period, 2nd CRS made contact with “enemy columns moving [southeast] from Montargis in their rear. They destroyed one enemy column of 60 horse drawn vehicles containing much valuable [equipment].”<sup>76</sup>

The Dragoons made contact on August 25th as well, identifying retreating German forces in the vicinity of Brienen and Seignelay. However, on August 26th, 42nd CRS identified a division sized German force en route to Tonerre from Dijon, as well as a regimental sized element with supporting artillery near Carisey. The 42nd conducted an attack supported by one “company each of infantry, light tanks, and medium tanks. Artillery support was furnished by one (1) battalion of 105mm self-propelled guns,” as detailed in the 42nd CRS Report of Operations.<sup>77</sup> The attack began during night hours and transitioned into the following morning, forcing the German element to withdraw and successfully conducting a cover for 4th AD’s southern flank.<sup>78</sup> The 2nd MCG Report of Operations describes that the 42nd CRS assembled to conduct reconnaissance of Seine River crossings near Troyes, followed by reconnaissance along the “line Troyes-Vandeuire; final line to Arcis-Brienne-Boussencourt.”<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, 2nd CRS

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<sup>76</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Report of Operations,” August, 11.

<sup>77</sup> 42nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, “Report of Operations,” August (CAVS42, Record Group 407, National Archives II, College Park, MD), 16.

<sup>78</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Report of Operations,” August, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

“[screened] on line Bonnay-Touzy-Auxerre-Tonnerre-Chaource-Bar sur Seine” followed by a reconnaissance to the vicinity of Tonnerre to Les Riceys.<sup>80</sup>

On August 28th, the group received new orders to cover the XII Corps movement from St. Dizaer to Thuisy, while still conducting patrols near St. Dizaer, St. Menhould, and Sommepey. They would begin once relieved by 35th ID and 4th AD at Bar sur Seine, Brienne, Le Chateau, and Troyes.<sup>81</sup> That same day they identified a significant enemy force:

15th [Panzer] Grenadier Division was identified in Bar sur Seine, moving North on Highways N 19 and N 71. Concentrations of 15 [Panzer Grenadier] were later reported in the Bois La Chaptas, Foret de Grand Orient, and Lusigny. Elements of the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, recently moved from Italy, was identified on the right flank of the 42[nd] [CRS].<sup>82</sup>

The 42nd CRS encountered the 15th Panzer Grenadier again the following day near Lusigny and Bois du Bailly. The Germans increased their resistance as the 42nd pushed east.

XII Corps objectives as it pushed east were Nancy and Commercy. On August 30th the corps received word to begin advancing on August 31st to secure bridgeheads along the Meuse River at Commercy while protecting Third Army’s southern flank. The Dragoons’ orders were to “proceed the 80th [ID] and the 4th [AD] and to reconnoiter the

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<sup>80</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Report of Operations,” August, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Corps zone of advance...”<sup>83</sup> The 2nd CRS led 80th ID and the 42nd CRS led 4th AD.

The group did not make contact with German forces on August 31st.

By this point Third Army’s momentum was decreasing. Gasoline resupplies were short in the preceding days, and on August 30th, Twelfth Army Group reported to Third Army that a gasoline resupply would not be available until September 3rd. The shortages were due to the reallocation of fuel to the force under British General Montgomery as it prepared to take Arnhem.<sup>84</sup> This essentially halted the advance and allowed the Germans to gain time and prepare defensive positions near Metz, Nancy, and along the Moselle River. The implications were profound. First, Third Army lost advantageous momentum. Second, the German’s gained time to consolidate, reorganize and prepare defensive positions. Third, XX and XII Corps faced a significant and complex obstacle to their east consisting of prepared defensive positions near large urban areas along a major river. Essentially, what lay ahead was a contested, field army sized wet gap crossing. The 2nd and 3rd MCGs, however, provided a significant service of regimental sized cavalry forces that could conduct reconnaissance and security operations for each corps.

Throughout Third Army’s initial drive east, the Dragoons and the Brave Rifles enabled both XII and XX Corps respectively through counter-reconnaissance, zone reconnaissance, enemy and terrain focused area reconnaissance operations, liaison duties, and offensive operations. A less obvious but just as important effort of the groups was their ability to maintain the tempo of the two corps. Maintaining tempo necessitated the

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<sup>83</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Report of Operations,” August 12, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Province, *Patton’s Third Army*, 30-33.

rapid transitions the groups made between operations, which consisted of assembling the cavalry troops and assault gun troops, distributing orders, moving headquarters at every echelon, and conducting resupply. This often happened daily or every other day. The cavalry's ability to react to an ever-changing environment to keep up was just as important as their ability to conduct reconnaissance and security operations. With the enormous task of enabling a contested wet gap crossing, the Dragoon's and Brave Rifles needed to maintain this crucial ability to adapt.

The advance of the MCGs from Normandy to the Meuse demonstrated their preparedness to move far, fight, and quickly adapt. Part of the preparedness consisted of task organizing the MCGs when necessary. Although they did not organically possess engineers or tank destroyers, for instance, they did receive them when the situation necessitated. Task organizing certainly helped the advance towards the Moselle. However, even when not task organized with enablers, the MCGs had few issues enabling the advance of XX and XII Corps. The cavalry troops consisting of M8 Greyhounds, Jeeps, and dismounts, and the tank company consisting of Stuart tanks were generally all that was necessary. Getting to the river was the first major effort in relation to crossing it, and the MCGs were properly organized.



Figure 3. M8 Greyhound

*Source:* Robert S. Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower, The Emergence of the U.S. Army's Armor Branch, 1917-1945* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2008), 478.



Figure 4. M5 Stuart

*Source:* John J. McGrath, *Scouts Out! The Development of Reconnaissance Units in Modern Armies* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, 2008), 146.

## CHAPTER 3

### ASSAULT ACROSS THE MOSELLE

To Third Army's relief, the Brittany effort was essentially handled by September 1<sup>st</sup> by XIII Corps.<sup>85</sup> However, XX and XII Corps now faced a gasoline shortage, two river crossings, and a prepared enemy. Fortunately for the two corps, now at the Meuse, XII Corps maintained a position of advantage near St. Mihiel and XX Corps already controlled a bridgehead at Verdun.<sup>86</sup> The initial stages of crossing the Meuse proved relatively easy, but a more difficult obstacle lay to the east – the Moselle. MG John S. Wood, the 4th AD commander, and MG Horace L. McBride, both determined that the Moselle was the most difficult river obstacle yet encountered, even reasoning that armored forces should not attempt to cross without infantry seizing bridgeheads first.<sup>87</sup>

While Patton maintained optimism about the German inability to hold ground, the German's took advantage of the Allied halt and terrain to build their defenses along the Moselle, specifically near the cities of Metz and Nancy. These two cities were not advantageous to an attacker due to their historical ramparts and nearby hydrology.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the longer the corps were halted due to lack of fuel, the longer the German's had to prepare at these locations. However, by the first few days of September,

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<sup>85</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 35.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 58.

<sup>88</sup> Rickard, *Patton at Bay*, 62-63.

fuel was once again on its way to XII and XX Corps. Both Corps were ready for the significant battle that lay ahead.

Rapid adaptation to the environment served both 3rd MCG and XX Corps well. On the night of August 31st, the 3rd MCG conducted a raid near Etain, capturing roughly 4,000 gallons of gasoline, allowing them to conduct reconnaissance towards the Moselle.<sup>89</sup> By the afternoon of September 1st, 1st Platoon, B Troop, 3rd CRS, led by 1LT James D. Jackson arrived at the bridgehead city of Thionville, roughly fifteen miles north of Metz. Making direct, small arms fire contact with German forces at the bridge, Jackson's force of only six Jeeps and three armored cars identified an enemy force at that crossing site, and also took the opportunity to cut demolition wires at the bridge. Jackson's platoon was overmatched and forced to withdraw, but they gained an initial understanding of enemy defenses along the Moselle and near Metz. Although Jackson was wounded during the fight, his actions earned him the Distinguished Service Cross.<sup>90</sup> 3rd MCG had begun the fight for the Moselle for XX Corps.

The plan for the 43rd CRS was to provide northern flank security for the corps while 3rd CRS conducted its reconnaissance.<sup>91</sup> Nearly twenty-six miles northwest of Thionville near the town of Longuyon, 1LT Hogan of 1st Platoon, A Troop, 43rd CRS engaged in conversation with French civilians, who informed him that Lonuyon was absent of Germans. During the conversation, the platoon made direct fire contact with

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<sup>89</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 118.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.; 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 44a-44b.

<sup>91</sup> XX Corps, U.S. Army, "Reduction of the Fortress Metz, 1 September to 6 December 1944, An Operational Report" (U.S. Army Military History Institute, 1944), 6.

20mm and tank fire from north of the town and ultimately withdrew.<sup>92</sup> However, this was not before inflicting casualties and gaining further understanding of the enemy situation on the corps' soon to be northern flank.<sup>93</sup> At 2100, LT Hogan led the platoon into Longuyon, and was soon thereafter ambushed by a German machine gun position, which caused fatal wounds to Hogan and his driver. Following close behind was LT Brown of F Troop with light tanks. LT Brown's crew fired one round of 37mm into the German machine gun position, killing the enemy machine gun crew. Not long after, more Germans attempted to re-man the machine gun position, but were quickly dispatched by the light tanks.<sup>94</sup>

At Longuyon, the cavalry did what current U.S. Army cavalry doctrine describes as “[developing] the situation through action in close contact with the enemy and civilian populace,” resulting in a better understanding of Wehrmacht in the area.<sup>95</sup> The actions of the 43rd CRS at Longuyon were also perplexing to the German forces since they had just begun establishing their defensive positions.<sup>96</sup> For the cavalry, speed, initiative, and the development of the situation not only gave a greater understanding of the enemy but also confused the enemy.

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<sup>92</sup> “*Patton’s Ghost Troops*,” 51; 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 47.

<sup>93</sup> “*Patton’s Ghost Troops*,” 51.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2015), 4-2, 5-6.

<sup>96</sup> Ludeweg, *Rückzug*, 184-185; Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 118.

C Troop, 43rd CRS remained active as well with one platoon bypassing German positions, establishing observation posts by the town of Kontz, and identifying enemy actions on the far side of the Moselle.<sup>97</sup> This began on September 2nd when COL Drury asked LTC Cross for his top platoon leader to move to the Moselle to report on bridges and enemy activity at the Moselle.<sup>98</sup> 2LT Downs from 2nd Platoon took his platoon the same day with one armored car, three Jeeps, and seventeen men.<sup>99</sup> Moving 43 miles, they arrived at the town of Evrange, five miles northwest of Kontz, at 1721 hours that evening. Utilizing their interpreter, they spoke with the local populace, some of whom offered to guide the Americans. After encountering some surrendering Luftwaffe personnel, some Russian captives working a field, and compelling the surrender of their four German guards, the platoon moved onto the high ground near Kontz.<sup>100</sup> They remained several days, identifying German's establishing trenches, train movements of troops, train track repairs, and general troop traffic. On about September 5th, the platoon began running low on gas and was forced to return to the squadron command post at Abbeville. Making some visual and direct fire contact on the way back, the platoon arrived at roughly 1640 hours that evening with zero casualties.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *“Patton’s Ghost Troops,”* 51.

<sup>98</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 50.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Brave Rifles continued reconnaissance towards and along the Moselle. Further south near the towns of Rezonville and Gravelotte, a platoon from A Troop, 3rd CRS, along with the group commander, COL Drury, conducted what could be considered an area reconnaissance. The patrol met heavy resistance from German machine gun positions and small arms near Gravelotte.<sup>102</sup> COL Drury and other vehicles in the patrol were forced into a ditch for cover while the platoon leader, LT Eddy maneuvered for a better position. Meanwhile, a platoon of light tanks with the 3rd CRS commander, COL Marshall Wallach, moved forward to assist, but they were forced back by indirect fire.<sup>103</sup> A group from the patrol attempted to move forward to assist but were unable due to the intensity of the German fire. COL Drury and the eleven other men were never found. The squadron executive officer, LTC Phillip B. Davidson, took command of 3rd MCG until September 12th when LTC James H. Polk took over.<sup>104</sup> It became even more clear that day how well the Germans were defending the Moselle.

Other elements of the 3rd CRS identified more resistance near Montauville and Verneville on September 4th after German indirect fire forced cavalry patrols west from those areas.<sup>105</sup> However, XX Corps made a large muscle movement two days later towards Thionville and Metz to establish bridgeheads. Other elements from the Brave

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<sup>102</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 56a; *"Patton's Ghost Troops."* 5.

<sup>103</sup> *"Patton's Ghost Troops,"* 5.

<sup>104</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 56a-56b; *"Patton's Ghost Troops,"* 5.

<sup>105</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 56b.

Rifles led 7th AD to conduct reconnaissance of the routes. This effort identified “dug in infantry, roadblocks, mines, and numerous anti-tank weapons, all supported by mortar and artillery fire” which forced the element back.<sup>106</sup> Roughly ten miles southwest, near the town of Arnaville, cavalrymen from 3rd CRS attempted three times to cross the Moselle only to be stopped by more indirect fire. Just north of Arnaville, at Ancy, the 3rd CRS lost thirteen more men attempting to cross.<sup>107</sup>

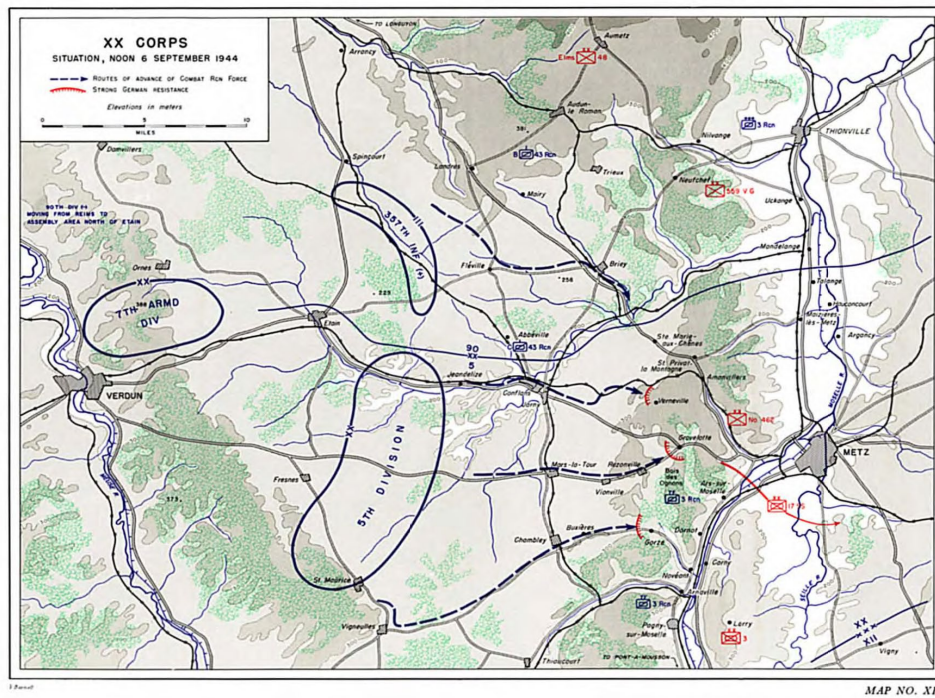


Figure 5. XX Corps and 3rd MCG, Early September

Source: Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations, The Lorraine Campaign* (1950; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), map 12.

<sup>106</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 56b.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 56c.

The German defenses were superb along the Moselle in this area. XX Corps cancelled the crossing attempt and ordered both squadrons to assemble, with 3rd CRS moving to Conflans and 43rd CRS near Abbeville.<sup>108</sup> In his book *Sabers through the Reich*, William Nance sums up the reasoning behind the cavalry forces difficulty in crossing at this point: “The failures of the cavalry from 4 to 6 September demonstrate the weakness of the mechanized cavalry in high-intensity combat, especially against an enemy in positions that cannot be bypassed. The lightly armed and armored cavalry simply did not have the firepower to bludgeon their way forward.”<sup>109</sup> This circumstance continued to halt, slow, and disrupt cavalry forces all along the Moselle in the coming months.

On September 7th, B Troop, 43rd CRS, with one platoon from E Troop, joined the 90th ID to assist in the protection of XX Corps northern flank.<sup>110</sup> The rest of the 43rd CRS also participated in the protection of the corps’ northern flank, as well as contacted V Corps from First Army. On the southern flank, 3rd CRS maintained contact with 80th ID.<sup>111</sup> During this period, the squadron conducted counter-reconnaissance and reconnaissance patrols, making frequent contact with German indirect fire. The cavalrymen of 3rd CRS also established observation posts at Ars Sur Moselle, roughly

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<sup>108</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 61a; “*Patton’s Ghost Troops*,” 5.

<sup>109</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 87.

<sup>110</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Combat Interviews,” 61.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 61a.

five miles southwest of Metz. Additionally, cavalry patrols observed German obstacles and defensive positions near the town of Gravelotte.<sup>112</sup>

Meanwhile, the 2nd BN, 11th Infantry Regiment, 5th ID made crossing attempts south of Metz near the town of Dornot. Nearby, the occupied and pre-established forts of Fort Driant and Fort Verdun caused significant difficulties for the infantrymen. Despite making progress on the east side of the Moselle, the infantry were forced back to the river. German infantry and armor counterattacks made very clear that the Dornot bridgehead was untenable. Consequently, both division and corps commanders determined to attempt a crossing at Arnaville.<sup>113</sup>

The difficulty for the 3rd MCG in early to mid-September was not fruitless. Their actions occupied the Germans while on the evening of September 10th, infantry battalions of the 5th ID successfully crossed the Moselle near Arnaville, although some elements of the 11th Infantry and 43rd Armored Infantry Battalion were pushed back by the Germans near Ancy sur Moselle.<sup>114</sup> Despite setbacks, however, XX Corps infantry and artillery elements repulsed German counterattacks.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, corps engineers installed bridges near the areas of Vandieres and Pagny, almost two miles south of

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<sup>112</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 61b.

<sup>113</sup> XX Corps, "Reduction of the Fortress Metz," 9.

<sup>114</sup> XX Corps, "Report of Operations," September (Record 220, Record Group 407, National Archives II, College Park, MD), 1; XX Corps, "Reduction of the Fortress Metz," 10.

<sup>115</sup> XX Corps, "Reduction of the Fortress Metz," 10.

Arnaville.<sup>116</sup> On September 12th, German forces conducted another counterattack, but were again stopped. The bridgehead established by this combined arms team was now considered secure, and soon after, 7th AD successfully crossed the Moselle.<sup>117</sup>

The remainder of September proved difficult for the Brave Rifles. 3rd CRS remained between 90th ID and 5th ID, focused on preventing a German penetration. They focused their efforts south of Gravelotte, oriented towards Fort Driant (part of Metz's defensive ring), often dismounted. Frequently skirmishing, they regularly received German indirect fire from artillery and mortars.<sup>118</sup> This was likely extremely difficult, as the terrain resembled that of a jungle with heavy foliage and mud.<sup>119</sup> The 43rd CRS pushed the Germans back as well. B Troop, 43rd CRS established outposts from September 15th to the 25th, north of Garche all the way to Kontz. Despite receiving enemy artillery and mortar fire, the troop fought German patrols attempting to cross the Moselle in this area, preventing a German penetration.<sup>120</sup>

Early to mid-September 1944 was a very busy and difficult time for the 3rd MCG. However, their reconnaissance immediately provided a clearer understanding of the German situation and terrain along the Moselle near Metz, and their security operations protected corps' efforts. Perhaps most helpful were their actions as an economy of force,

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<sup>116</sup> XX Corps, "Report of Operations," September, 1.

<sup>117</sup> XX Corps, "Reduction of the Fortress Metz," 10.

<sup>118</sup> *"Patton's Ghost Troops,"* 56.

<sup>119</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 61b-61c.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

which engrossed the attention of German direct and indirect fire as the infantry, engineers, and armor of XX Corps fought their way across the Moselle to establish a secure bridgehead.

XII Corps began its move east on September 3rd with 4th AD and 80th ID. The following day, the corps received the order to cross the Moselle and seize Nancy.<sup>121</sup> Fortunately for XII Corps, the 2nd MCG had already conducted reconnaissance near the Moselle and Nancy on September 2nd, identifying enemy near Allain and an enemy withdrawal from Toul, a town through which the Moselle runs. However, the Dragoons identified other enemy at Rosieres en Haye and Saizerais.<sup>122</sup>

On the same day that XII Corps began moving to the Moselle, the 2nd MCG already gained a clearer understanding of what the corps was moving towards. In addition to identifying enemy locations on September 2nd, on September 3rd the cavalrymen identified that many bridges crossing along the Moselle were in fact destroyed.<sup>123</sup> The bridges that were not destroyed were covered by German machine guns and other small arms. Other identifications consisted of various enemy trucks, a tank, and a “continuous column of enemy vehicles moving east from Pont a Mousson across the Moselle River to Mousson,” described in the XII Corps Report of Operations.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 37-38.

<sup>122</sup> XII Corps, “Report of Operations,” September, 6.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, while the 35th ID and the 4th AD protected the southern flank of XII Corps, the 80th moved to the high ground north of Toul. Most XII Corps elements at this point were closely approaching the Moselle at different points. On September 4th, the 317th Infantry of the 80th ID moved to the Moselle, while the 318th moved to the Moselle near Mattache.<sup>125</sup> South of Toul, the 42nd CRS, 2nd MCG identified a strong German defensive posture near the towns of Neufchateau and Mirecourt.

The following day, the 42nd received instructions to reconnoiter the area between Luneville and Charmes, east of the Moselle.<sup>126</sup> There was, however, a smaller river between the squadron and the Moselle, the Madon. B Troop, 42nd CRS crossed at Xirocourt, roughly seventeen miles south of Nancy, while C Troop crossed at Ceintrey, six and half miles north by northeast of Xirocourt. After crossing, B and C Troops continued their reconnaissance towards the Moselle. A Troop, initially the squadron reserve, relieved B Troop and continued observation of Neufchateau and Mirecourt, while also screening the southern flank of the squadron.<sup>127</sup> Both B and C Troops identified guarded and intact bridges. B Troop also identified anti-tank weapons, while A Troop identified enemy activity along the road from Neufchateau to Mirecourt.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> XII Corps, "Report of Operations," September, 7.

<sup>126</sup> 42nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, "Report of Operations," September, 8.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

German activity increased the following day, especially along the Madon River.<sup>129</sup> Two hundred German vehicles moved towards Tantonville from Diarville, as identified by B Troop, 42nd CRS. The squadron reacted with assault gun and artillery fire, followed by a ground attack, inflicting German casualties and pushing them to Mirecourt. This event, however, drew the attention of German forces from both the south and north. On September 7th, elements of the 103rd Panzer Grenadier Battalion broke through the squadron's screen at the Madon River.<sup>130</sup> Despite this, the squadron continued to screen along with elements of the 25th CRS, the cavalry squadron of the 4th AD.<sup>131</sup> While screening, the squadron identified enemy positions near Maizieres, Bainville, and Flavigny, roughly eight miles south of Nancy on the south side of the Moselle.<sup>132</sup>

While the Dragoons secured the southern flank of the corps, the 80th ID initiated major efforts to cross the Moselle on September 7th. They were met with significant German resistance.<sup>133</sup> The 318th Infantry Regiment, 80th ID initiated an attack at Marbache, almost eight and a half miles northwest of Nancy, at 0900. Meanwhile, the 319th Infantry Regiment attacked to clear the area near Liverdun, four miles southwest of

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<sup>129</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Report of Operations," September, 5.

<sup>130</sup> 42nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, "Report of Operations," September, 9.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.; Rickard, *Patton at Bay*, 245.

<sup>132</sup> 42nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, "Report of Operations," September, 9.

<sup>133</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 39-40.

Marbache. Both elements were successful, with the 318th capturing Marbache later that evening, and the 319th clearing the area near Liverdun.<sup>134</sup> The 319th also secured a bridgehead across the Moselle at Gondreville-sur-Moselle, four miles northeast of Toul.<sup>135</sup>

The infantry's successes did not last, however. September 8th brought a German armored counterattack from the east side of the Moselle near Liverdun to Belleville (just north of Marbache). The 318th withdrew west from Marbache and Belleville while the 319th launched a counterattack of their own to retake Liverdun. Company A of 1st Battalion, 319th Infantry took heavy direct fire from the far side of the river, suffering a high number of casualties.<sup>136</sup> The infantry disengaged and moved north of Liverdun. The Germans once again controlled the areas river crossing sites.

While 80th ID attempted to gain control of crossing sites northwest of Nancy, the 35th ID began movement to the southwest of Nancy. On September 8th Patton approved the XII Corps request to move the 35th ID, and that evening, the 134th Infantry arrived at Thuilly, eight miles southeast of Toul and thirteen miles southwest of Nancy. Meanwhile, the 2nd MCG received further instructions, transitioning from security to reconnaissance and offensive actions. With the help of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, the squadron attempted to seize bridges from Gripport and Flavigny, almost directly south of Nancy.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> XII Corps, "Report of Operations," September, 9.

<sup>135</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 40.

<sup>136</sup> XII Corps, "Report of Operations," September, 10.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

The Dragoons arrived and began patrolling along the Moselle between Flavigny and Gripport on September 9th.<sup>138</sup> They soon made contact with German artillery and infantry on the west side of the river. Near the town of Benney, the 42nd CRS defeated some German infantry, killing forty-seven and capturing eleven. Meanwhile heavy German artillery continued, preventing any approach to the Moselle. The following day, the artillery subsided, convincing the Dragoons that the German guns were changing locations. Despite the pause in indirect fire, the squadron still had awareness of a strong presence of German infantry along the river.<sup>139</sup>

The following day, September 11th, brought significant progress to the efforts of XII Corps. The 25th CRS and the 602nd Tank Battalion relieved the 2nd MCG, assuming the responsibility of screening the corps' right flank. This allowed the Dragoons to prepare for movement across the Moselle.<sup>140</sup> That same day 4th AD, with support from the 35th ID attempted to cross the Moselle near Bayon, just over fifteen miles southeast of Nancy along the river. The 35th ID's task was to secure the bridgehead with infantry in preparation for the engineers to create a bridge. However, the infantry were under heavy enemy fire, and the engineers were unable to create the much needed bridge. When tanks from the 8th Tank Battalion approached, they found no suitable crossing site, but quickly adapted to the situation.<sup>141</sup> The tankers moved north from the initial crossing site

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<sup>138</sup> XII Corps, "Report of Operations," September, 10.

<sup>139</sup> 42nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, "Report of Operations," September, 10.

<sup>140</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Report of Operations," September, 6.

<sup>141</sup> Fox, *Patton's Vanguard*, 109-110.

to identify a potential fording location. Once identified, they first had to cross a canal with a low water level and thick mud. Using their ingenuity to mitigate the challenge, they placed logs along the bottom of the canal, then fired high explosive shells into the far slope to degrade the angle of ascent for the Shermans.<sup>142</sup> The next step was the Moselle itself. To the favor of the tankers, the Moselle's water was low enough to cross with little difficulty. Once across the actual river, the 8th crossed one more canal in similar fashion to the previous canal.<sup>143</sup> By that evening, the 8th Tank Battalion and the 704th Tank Destroyer battalion were across the Moselle.<sup>144</sup>

That same day, infantrymen of the 137th Infantry Regiment, 35th ID crossed the Moselle after a very difficult crossing attempt by the 134th Infantry Regiment the day prior. Crossing near Crevechamps (twelve miles southeast of Nancy's city center), the infantrymen secured a hold on the Moselle's east bank with support from the entirety of 35th ID's Division artillery and indirect fire support from XII Corps.<sup>145</sup> Despite getting two battalions across, the infantrymen were stopped by what historian Hugh M. Cole described in *The Lorraine Campaign* as "concrete emplacements manned by four companies of the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment."<sup>146</sup> However, another battalion of the 137th sent two companies of infantry across later in the day by Neuviller-sur-Moselle

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<sup>142</sup> Fox, *Patton's Vanguard*, 110.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 71-72.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

to the south.<sup>147</sup> After nightfall, the battalion traveled east to meet 4th AD near Lorey, only about one and a half miles north of Bayon.<sup>148</sup> Near Bayon on the evening of September 12th, engineers constructed a bridge across the Moselle, allowing more infantry and armor to cross. German forces desperately attempted to force the infantry and tankers back to the west side of the Moselle but were unsuccessful.<sup>149</sup>

On September 11th, roughly twelve miles north of Nancy near Bezaumont, the 80th ID had success at the Moselle as well. In the early morning hours, battalions of the 317th Infantry Regiment made successful crossing attempts, despite indirect fire from the Germans. Nine battalions of artillery and fifty machine guns assisted the efforts of the infantrymen.<sup>150</sup> At around noon, the 318th Infantry Regiment crossed and seized positions on the far side of the Moselle as well. Along with the success of the infantry in crossing the river, the engineers began constructing more bridging. By the late evening of September 12th, two companies from the 702nd Tank Battalion, an artillery battalion, tank destroyers, and anti-tank guns had all crossed the Moselle near Bezaumont.<sup>151</sup>

Despite beginning the month of September with a gasoline shortage and a semi-prepared enemy, combined arms elements of XII and XX Corps successfully crossed the Moselle River within roughly twelve days. The first units to set conditions for both Corps

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<sup>147</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 72.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

were the 2nd and 3rd MCGs. Within hours of securing gasoline, these cavalrymen made contact with German forces and developed an initial understanding of both enemy and the terrain. This continued for nearly two weeks with a recurring conclusion: German infantry, armor, and artillery defended the entire stretch of the Moselle in Third Army's area and getting across would not be easy. This especially proved difficult since cavalry forces lacked requisite armor to seize and retain bridges. Despite this setback, however, the cavalry's services were invaluable in three ways. First, they conducted unceasing reconnaissance and continuously developed the situation along the Moselle for nearly twelve days. Second, they protected the flanks of both corps and prevented German penetration attempts. Third, the summative efforts of the MCG's equaled a considerable economy of force. This preserved XX and XII Corps combat power and prevented the overwhelming massing of German forces against multiple crossing attempts.<sup>152</sup>

Similar to the advance, the MCGs were task organized well enough to conduct reconnaissance and security during the assault across the Moselle. This was especially evident as the MCGs secured the flanks of the corps with their cavalry squadrons. Security operations are defensive in nature, the defense is naturally strong, and securing the flanks of XX and XII Corps is yet another example of why the cavalry is well suited for security operations and as an economy of force. However, offensive tasks proved more difficult for the MCGs. They were not properly organized to conduct offensive and engineering tasks against German forces defending a linear obstacle. In this case, an attachment of tank destroyers, Shermans, infantry, or engineers could have changed that

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<sup>152</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*.

circumstance. Taking advantage of an opportunity to seize a bridge or provide overwhelming suppressive firepower required infantry and robust combat power, which is something the MCGs did not have at the time.<sup>153</sup> The MCGs efforts during the assault across the Moselle demonstrates why the cavalry fight is truly a combined arms fight and why cavalry forces must be properly task organized when necessary.

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<sup>153</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 87.

## CHAPTER 4

### ATTACK FROM THE MOSELLE

On September 13th, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces Commander, General Eisenhower, issued a directive prioritizing logistical support for the forces of General Montgomery and the U.S. First Army. Consequently, Third Army was hamstrung and confined to the Moselle and Metz area, despite making significant progress in crossing the river in the previous days. According to the directive, Third Army would still contribute by occupying German troops around Metz, and thus prevent reinforcements from moving north.<sup>154</sup> General Bradley pushed for the advancement of Third Army beyond the Moselle in the days following the directive, however, discussing options with Eisenhower and Patton. Supporting his and Patton's efforts was the fact that both XX and XII Corps finally had significant combat power across the Moselle. In front of each element were the major cities of Nancy and Metz, both occupied by German forces. Both corps faced a significant struggle with the cities, but also with the fact that the remaining divisional elements still needed to cross the Moselle, and that German forces remained along the river despite Third Army's penetration of German lines.<sup>155</sup>

Crossing the Moselle allowed XX Corps to begin its attack on Metz in strength. On September 11th XX Corps' efforts to cross and create bridgeheads continued, essentially opening multiple faucets through which combat power could flow.<sup>156</sup> Around

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<sup>154</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 211.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Province, *Patton's Third Army*, 43.

the same time, the 7th AD attacked Metz from the northwest with minimal success, while the 90th ID captured Thionville. Much of the 106th Panzer Grenadier Brigade was destroyed or captured during 90th ID's effort.<sup>157</sup>

The remainder of September was difficult for the Brave Rifles. 3rd CRS remained between 90th ID and 5th ID, focused on preventing a German penetration. They focused their efforts south of Gravelotte, oriented towards Fort Driant (part of Metz's defensive ring), often dismounted. Frequently skirmishing, they regularly received German indirect fire from artillery and mortars.<sup>158</sup> This was likely difficult, as the terrain resembled that of a jungle with heavy foliage and mud.<sup>159</sup> 43rd CRS pushed the Germans back as well. B Troop, 43rd CRS established outposts from September 15th to the 25th, north of Garche all the way to Kontz. Despite receiving enemy artillery and mortar fire, the troop fought German patrols attempting to cross the Moselle in this area, preventing a German penetration.<sup>160</sup>

During this period, on September 19th, the 3rd MCG adopted the name Task Force Polk, named after its commander. Now considered a task force, the unit gained the 135th Engineer Combat Battalion, the 6th Cavalry Task Force (consisting of two assault gun troops and a tank company), and the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment of Paris.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> XX Corps, "Report of Operations," September, 1.

<sup>158</sup> "*Patton's Ghost Troops*," 56.

<sup>159</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 61b-61c.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

Task Force Polk continued its mission of preventing a penetration of German forces to the west side of the Moselle, engaging in the repulsion of German ground attacks and receiving indirect fire on multiple occasions. Additionally, despite XX Corps success in crossing the river and beginning its attack on Metz, German elements along the Moselle and north of the 3rd MCG held their ground, making the fight rough and difficult.

Although the fight was relatively stagnant in terms of ground taken or given, the actions of 3rd MCG were crucial for XX Corps to maintain its offensive against Metz. For instance, on the night of September 23rd, Task Force Polk prevented roughly 200 Germans from crossing the Moselle.<sup>162</sup> Failure to prevent this penetration could have resulted in the destruction or disruption of XX Corps command posts, supply trains, or simply taken combat power away from the primary focus of Metz.

Skirmishing occurred throughout the remainder of September, with the 3rd MCG and their enemy in a stalemate.<sup>163</sup> While this disposition favored the Allied forces, it seriously threatened the Wehrmacht since it allowed XX Corps to continue its assault on Metz. The contribution of Task Force Polk to XX Corps was crucial.

During the early days of October, XX Corps slowly attempted to gain momentum towards Metz. On the west side of the Moselle, the pre-existing and seemingly impenetrable Fort Driant caused significant issues for XX Corps. The 5th ID gained a foothold within the fort within the first few days of the month only to cede the ground on

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<sup>162</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 79.

<sup>163</sup> "*Patton's Ghost Troops*," 6.

October 12th and 13th.<sup>164</sup> Although unsuccessful, much worse circumstances could have befallen the infantrymen had the 3rd MCG not held their ground north of Metz and along the Moselle.

The 3rd MCG saw relatively little change moving into October. The Brave Rifles held their position, continuing to prevent a penetration north of Metz. 3rd CRS faced relatively little contact for the first half of October, and on October 12th was relieved by the 358th Infantry Regiment. This welcome relief allowed the squadron a three-day rest period before returning to the line on October 15th.<sup>165</sup> Meanwhile during the first half of October, the actions of the 43rd CRS were like that of their sister squadron. Elements of the 43rd conducted patrols, maintained contact with the 357th Infantry Regiment of the 90th ID, and essentially held a screen along the Moselle.<sup>166</sup>

The 3rd CRS resumed activities on October 15th, maintaining contact with the 90th Reconnaissance Troop (the reconnaissance element for the 90th ID) and continuing patrols south of Thionville. During this time, as detailed in the 3rd MCG AAR, "*Patton's Ghost Troops*," "persistent civilian reports indicated that the Germans were infiltrating in small groups through the lines and were operating in [their] rear areas."<sup>167</sup> The idea was that once enough Germans crossed to the western side of the Moselle, they would

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<sup>164</sup> XX Corps, "Report of Operations," October, 5.

<sup>165</sup> "*Patton's Ghost Troops*," 6.

<sup>166</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 81.

<sup>167</sup> "*Patton's Ghost Troops*," 7.

commence an attack. However, the reports were essentially incorrect.<sup>168</sup> Despite this, patrols of cavalrymen were still dedicated to countering this possible threat. October 18th and 19th brought more artillery shelling against the 3rd CRS, even coming close to the squadron headquarters at Hayange, almost five and a quarter miles southwest of Thionville. That same night, a cavalry patrol engaged a three-man German patrol just south of Thionville, killing two of the three Germans. Another patrol crossed the Moselle to the east side near Bertrange, around three and a quarter miles generally south of Thionville. On the east side of the river, the cavalrymen identified mines, barbed wire, and booby traps. Two nights later, on October 21st, another 3rd CRS patrol encountered two Wehrmacht soldiers on the west bank of the Moselle who quickly fled.<sup>169</sup> Clearly, the Germans were concerned about American efforts to cross the Moselle near Thionville.

The following day, another patrol identified dug-in German positions on the east side of the Moselle between the towns of Bertrange and Illange, roughly two and a half miles southeast of Thionville.<sup>170</sup> When the patrol crossed back to the west side of the river, they encountered three Germans on the west bank, resulting in a quick, close-range firefight consisting of Thompson sub-machine guns and German machine pistols. The

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> “*Patton’s Ghost Troops,*” 7.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

Americans killed two of the three Germans but were quickly scattered due to German machine gun fire from the east bank.<sup>171</sup>

The 43rd CRS experienced similar situations as they maintained their screen line north of Thionville along the Moselle. Patrols, skirmishes, engagements, and artillery fire were consistent for the remainder of October for both the 43rd CRS and the 3rd CRS. On one such patrol, the 43rd CRS incurred a significant loss of leadership. On the evening of October 20th, C Troop, 43rd CRS conducted a patrol on the west side of the Moselle near the town of Malling, just over seven and a quarter miles northeast of Thionville. During this patrol, the squadron and C Troop commanders, LTC Leslie Cross and Captain (CPT) Edor Nelson respectively, were fixed by German machine gun and indirect fire. Neither were extricated nor found. C Troop also lost LT Robert Downs to German machine gun fire. The executive officer of 43rd CRS, Major Alvin F. Utterback, then assumed command of the squadron.<sup>172</sup>

The German's were close against the east bank of the Moselle (and sometimes on the west bank) and appeared eager to maintain their positions. The cavalymen of the 3rd CRS held their positions as well and developed the situation daily. Their actions were continually significant in the protection of XX Corps' flank.

By November, Third Army's logistical constraints drastically diminished, renewing the its ability to conduct aggressive and sustained combat.<sup>173</sup> XX Corps

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>172</sup> 3rd Mechanized Cavalry Group, "Combat Interviews," 12.

<sup>173</sup> Rickard, *Patton at Bay*, 166.

projected the remainder of its forces across the Moselle to assist in the isolation of Metz and Third Army's move towards the Saar River, with 10th AD and 90th ID serving as major players.<sup>174</sup> In the days leading up to this, the 43rd CRS attacked the last German stronghold on the west side of the river in the town of Berg. Defeating this threat was necessary to allow XX Corps' push eastward since the Wehrmacht were capable of observing and disrupting Allied progress.<sup>175</sup> Over a two-day period, November 3rd and 4th, utilizing dismounted cavalymen, tank destroyers, light tanks, engineers, and artillery, the squadron seized key terrain and the town of Berg itself, defeating multiple Wehrmacht companies.<sup>176</sup> This again proved that cavalry had to fight well to truly be used as an economy of force.

With Berg under control of 43rd CRS, XX Corps could complete its assault across the Moselle. This began on November 9th when the 90th and 95th IDs surprised the Germans on the east side of the river thanks to the screening and counter-reconnaissance efforts of the Brave Rifles.<sup>177</sup> On November 14th, 3rd CRS crossed the Moselle, gained a company of engineers and a company of tank destroyers, and continued securing the northern flank of XX Corps as the attack on Metz continued. From the 14th to the 16th, the squadron conducted reconnaissance, security, and offensive operations. On the 17th, the 3rd CRS began a zone reconnaissance, with assistance from the 43rd CRS, bounded

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<sup>174</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 123-124.

<sup>175</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops," 9; Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 124.

<sup>176</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 124.

<sup>177</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops," 9-10.

by the Moselle River to the northwest and west, and “a line generally running from Kiersch through Buschdorf, Kirf, Kahren, and Saarburg” to the southeast and east, as described in “*Patton’s Ghost Troops.*”<sup>178</sup> Elements of the 3rd MCG were the first Third Army unit to enter Germany.

As the Group fought its way north and northeast, XX Corps continued its fight for Metz. On November 18th, the XX Corps completed its encirclement when 5th ID met with elements of Task Force Bacon (1st Battalion, 379th Infantry Regiment and 2nd Battalion 378th Infantry Regiment, both from 95th ID) east of Metz.<sup>179</sup> Although not complete with Metz, XX Corps’ momentum and foothold across the Moselle was generally complete by this point, thanks to the reconnaissance, security, offensive actions, and economy of force provided by the 3rd MCG. In the days leading up to the encirclement, the Brave Rifles caused significant problems to Germans on the northern flank of XX Corps and Metz. Their efforts directly enabled the fight against the Germans occupying Metz. For months, Third Army was stalled at the Moselle, which had Army Group and Theater level impacts. This was reversed, however, between September and November 1944 thanks in part to the cavalymen of the 3rd MCG.

With a large amount of combat power east of the Moselle, XII Corps’ momentum drastically increased towards Nancy.<sup>180</sup> CCB of the 4th AD continued its movement to envelop the city, while the 2nd MCG conducted security on its eastern and southern

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 11; Saarburg is roughly twenty-four miles northeast of Thionville.

<sup>179</sup> Province, *Patton’s Third Army*, 94; Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 440.

<sup>180</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 89.

flank.<sup>181</sup> Some companies from the 15th Panzer Grenadier and 553rd Volksgrenadier Divisions resisted near the forest Forêt de Vitrimont (roughly twelve and a half miles southeast of Nancy), but their weaknesses were quickly exploited by armor of CCB, 4th AD.<sup>182</sup> As elements of 4th AD moved to attack the Germans at Forêt de Vitrimont, the 2nd MCG was southeast of the city of Luneville, essentially denying access into the area.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 119.

<sup>182</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 89

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 89; The river Meurthe, splitting from the Moselle just north of Nancy, and another natural obstacle for XII Corps, did little to slow the momentum of XII Corps.

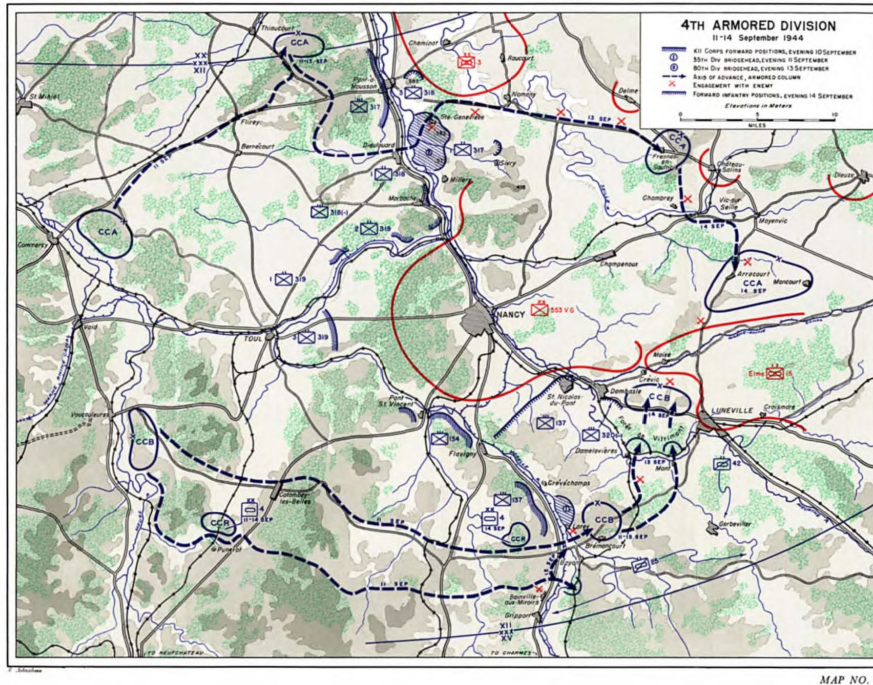


Figure 6. Situation near Nancy, 11-14 September 1944

Source: Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations, The Lorraine Campaign* (1950; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), map 10.

A few days later on September 15th, XII Corps occupied Nancy. In an unopposed movement through the city, a battalion of the 134th Infantry Regiment maneuvered to the far eastern side. To the advantage of XII Corps and Third Army, German forces occupying Nancy fled the city two days prior.<sup>184</sup> With this major urban area under control of XII Corps, movement by Allied forces across the Moselle continued favorably. There was still a threat to the flanks of Nancy, but the 2nd MCG continued serving as a protective force.

<sup>184</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 93-95.

To the southeastern flank, the Dragoons put up a significant fight against the Germans around Luneville. In *Sabers through the Reich* Nance describes Luneville as a “major road junction controlling access to Nancy,” possessing “it would greatly assist in isolating Nancy as well as preventing German interference with the 4th AD’s envelopment of the city.”<sup>185</sup> The Dragoons attacked Luneville on September 16th and defended it on the 18th as it waited for support from 4th AD. Despite the unfortunate loss of its commander, COL Reed, the 2nd MCG did exactly what was necessary of the cavalry in security operations: it preserved combat power and bought time.<sup>186</sup>

The situation calmed over the next few days. On September 20th, the 2nd MCG screened XII Corps’ right flank, beginning roughly east and about eleven miles directly east of Nancy from Einville to Bauzemont to Lezey. Both 2nd and 42nd CRS made contact with German armor and infantry near Moncourt near their screen. German activity and pressure increased slightly up to September 25th. The rest of September provided little change for the Dragoons, except for 2nd CRS becoming attached 4th AD and the 42nd assuming the role as the corps reserve on September 29th.<sup>187</sup>

Besides some internal repositioning of units, the first few days of October remained the same for 2nd MCG. Maintaining contact with the 25th CRS of the 4th AD and the 121st CRS of the 106th MCG, receiving German artillery fire, and maintaining

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<sup>185</sup> Nance, *Sabers through the Reich*, 120.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> 2nd Mechanized Cavalry Group, “Report of Operations,” September, 8-9.

screen positions occupied much of the time between October 3rd and 10th.<sup>188</sup> On October 11th, 42nd CRS seized elevated terrain and the squadron established positions near the towns of Coincourt and Parroy, roughly eighteen miles east of Nancy.<sup>189</sup> The remainder of October was relatively similar and uneventful for the Dragoons. They received sporadic artillery fire and conducted reconnaissance and security in the same general area, making occasional contact with German forces. The distance between the 2nd MCG and Nancy was likely advantageous for XII Corps, as it provided excellent time and space should any German forces attempt to assault Nancy from the east.

Capturing Nancy was much easier than capturing Metz. Since Nancy lacked fortifications like Metz, and since German forces fled the city, XII Corps secured this major bridgehead with relative ease.<sup>190</sup> The cavalymen of the 2nd MCG enabled this effort primarily through flank security, providing significant space and protection for XII Corps, especially near Luneville in mid-September, and then again near the Moncourt area in late September and October. This protection was vital, as a successful German counterattack to retake the city would have produced disastrous results for XII Corps' and Third Army's increasing momentum on the far side of the Moselle.

XX Corps and XII Corps had starkly different experiences on the far side of the Moselle. While German forces occupying Metz put up staunch resistance lasting to November, German forces occupying Nancy fled soon after a significant amount of XII

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., October, 3.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., October, 4.

<sup>190</sup> Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, 94.

Corps armor and infantry crossed the river. The experiences of 3rd MCG and 2nd MCG were different as well, although their actions in supporting both corps were relatively equal. Enduring a tough fight north of Metz, the Brave Rifles protected the northern flank of XX Corps for over three months. Similarly, the Dragoons protected the southeastern and eastern flank of XII Corps for a much shorter period with less resistance.

Nevertheless, both cavalry organizations fulfilled their purposes in securing the flanks of their customers and enabling Third Army to gain a significant foothold on the far side of the Moselle while increasing momentum towards Germany.

Yet again, the MCGs were properly task organized to secure the flanks as XX and XII Corps attacked from the Moselle towards Metz and Nancy. An advantageous position for XX and XII Corps during offensive operations required the MCGs to protect their flanks. Additionally, the natural advantage of the defensive natured flank security conducted by the MCGs mitigated their lack of organic heavy tank and tank destroyer units.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

While the advance to the Moselle was relatively rapid, conducting two corps sized wet gap crossings was no easy feat for Third Army. Especially straining Third Army was its lack of fuel at the beginning of September. This was perhaps the single greatest reason why fully crossing the Moselle took nearly three months since it gave the Wehrmacht in the area time to establish hasty defensive positions along the length of the river. Exacerbating the problem was the fact that the MCGs lacked requisite armor and infantry to seize suitable crossing sites. With that said, the MCGs were essential in the fight to get to the river, fight across the river, and protect the infantry and armor of XX and XII Corps as they took Metz and Nancy.

The two MCGs were busy from the moment they landed in western France. Since XX and XII Corps were rapidly moving east, reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance were heavily necessary to set conditions. As the 2nd and 3rd MCGs conducted reconnaissance, they encountered opportunities to degrade and dislocate retreating German forces. In a tactical sense, this meant transitioning from reconnaissance to offensive operations to seize the initiative. This also developed the situation for higher headquarters.

Conducting these transitions also meant that junior leaders needed the mental capacity and flexibility to adapt to an ever-changing and volatile combat environment. It is likely that the first few weeks of combat in August 1944 conditioned the minds and leadership capabilities of small unit leaders to quickly adapt to ambiguous situations. Additionally, as the first to encounter German forces, adapting quickly and winning the

first fight for each corps was critical. This proved relatively successful, at least until Third Army culminated near the Meuse in September. However, the fuel problem was not the fault of the MCGs, but rather a byproduct of Third Army's overwhelmingly successful drive east from Normandy.

Once the MCGs arrived near the Moselle and acquired gasoline, they continued their reconnaissance. Without hesitation, the cavalrymen began a reconnaissance of German forces near and on the far side of the Moselle, developing an initial understanding of Wehrmacht dispositions for higher headquarters. Situations arose allowing for the seizure of bridges, but as mentioned, the cavalry lacked requisite armor and infantry to seize and hold terrain. Additionally, the inability to hold terrain was partially because retreating German units gained time to establish defensive positions while Third Army stalled waiting for fuel.

Once U.S. infantry and armor battalions gained footholds on the far side of the river, the MCGs transitioned to a security focus, protecting the flanks of XX and XII Corps. Despite the two corps penetrating multiple parts of the German defensive belt, many German units maintained their positions on both the east and west side of the Moselle. This was the case near both Metz and Nancy. Wehrmacht units not only held their ground, but also attempted penetrations of their own back to the west side of the river. However, the cavalry units securing the flanks prevented these penetrations, thus preserving Third Army's armor and infantry attempting to take Metz and Nancy.

Defeating German forces and taking Metz was difficult for XX Corps. The city's naturally defensive infrastructure and surrounding areas generated significant problems for the corps' infantry and armor. The 3rd MCG supported this effort for over three

months (from September to November), continuously protecting the corps' northern flank, providing significant time and space for XX Corps. Similarly, the Dragoons of the 2nd MCG protected the southeastern and eastern flank of XII Corps, albeit for a shorter period as the corps seized Nancy during September.

Finally, the MCGs were properly task organized to conduct reconnaissance and security for XX and XII Corps during the advance to, assault across, and attack from the Moselle. Despite a lack of heavy armor and firepower, the MCGs fought well for information, time, and space. This is an excellent example of an economy of force. The corps' used the MCGs in ways that preserved the essential combat power of infantry and armored divisions for the seizing of Metz and Nancy. Although the cavalry occasionally worked with heavy tank and tank destroyer units, they generally only used their organic cavalry troops and tank companies. The greatest difficulty for the MCGs in terms of organization was the failure cross the contested linear obstacle of the Moselle in early September due to insufficient armor and infantry. Otherwise, the MCGs effectively provided reconnaissance and security for their respective corps.

#### Implications for Modern U.S. Cavalry

Observing the efforts of the 2nd and 3rd MCGs in support of Third Army's Moselle River crossing provides an enormous opportunity to understand a modern U.S. cavalry organization's role in brigade, division, and corps level wet-gap crossings. Enabling wet-gap crossings can take the form of reconnaissance, security, offense, and defense, often as an economy of force. However, the Moselle crossing provides insight into a few focused ways that 21st century U.S. cavalry forces can participate.

An aggressive option is to task organize cavalry organizations to identify and seize suitable crossing areas, and if necessary, begin bridging prior to the arrival of the main bodies. Suitable not only means suitable terrain, but also a suitable enemy situation. If a gap crossing is contested and executed like a penetration, identifying and exploiting enemy weak points is preferable, and cavalry organizations should seize opportunities gain an advantage before an enemy has time to react. To facilitate this, commanders should consider a reconnaissance in force to identify lightly contested areas, followed by an immediate initiation of a wet gap crossing and bridgehead establishment by a cavalry task force.<sup>191</sup>

If suitable, pre-existing locations are anticipated and identified (i.e., bridges and fording sites), the unit must capitalize and seize the initiative before the enemy can react. To facilitate this, commanders should consider task organizing squadrons or regiments with infantry rifle companies who excel at seizing terrain, and engineer reconnaissance teams.<sup>192</sup> If the squadron is tasked organized with infantry rifle companies, the infantry can seize and secure the crossing sites while the squadron continues its reconnaissance effort on the far side of the gap. The infantry can hold the bridges until the transfer of responsibility to follow on military police units.

If suitable, intact bridge or fording locations are not anticipated or identified, the cavalry organization must still be ready to rapidly secure the near side, secure the far side

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<sup>191</sup> HQDA, FM 3-98, 5-21.

<sup>192</sup> Robert E. Dion Jr., “Deliberate Wet-Gap Crossings in Korean Theater of Operations,” *Armor*, Fall 2019, 31.

(with infantry support), and begin the bridging process (with engineer support).<sup>193</sup> The implication here is task organizing squadrons with infantry rifle companies and engineers capable of rafting and bridging. In this case, the cavalry organizations identify the enemy strength and bridging areas, with engineers supporting. The infantry seizes the near side and far side (via swimming, rafting, or air assault) while the cavalry sections, platoons, and troops provide support by fire. Engineers follow with the bridging. The cavalry can also facilitate the forward passage of lines across the gap while a passing unit passes through and expands the bridgehead on the far side.<sup>194</sup> Following bridge establishment and bridgehead expansion, an option is to send the squadron across to continue reconnaissance efforts on the far side of the gap, or for the squadron to transition to flank or rear security.

A secondary option in the case of echeloned cavalry at corps and division includes different responsibilities for the cavalry at echelon. Corps cavalry's responsibilities would consist of an advance guard or cover to protect the corps, continued efforts to defeat the enemy's anti-access area denial bubble, identifying the least contested axes of advance for the corps' penetration division, determining exploitable enemy weaknesses at the wet gap, and flank security for the corps when necessary. Undoubtedly, this responsibility would necessitate a multi-domain capable

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<sup>193</sup> Jeffery Broadwater, James Startzell, Cale Farquhar, Scott Pancotto, and Allen M. Trujillo, "Maintaining an Armored Division's Momentum through a Wet Gap Crossing," (Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 27 August 2020), 7.

<sup>194</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-90.12, *Combined Arms Gap-Crossing Operations* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2008), 4-14 – 4-20.

armored cavalry regiment.<sup>195</sup> The responsibility of the division cavalry rests first with identifying the most suitable crossing areas for the division in terms of terrain and enemy. The secondary responsibility of the division cavalry consists of the first option mentioned above or transitioning to flank security as the brigades conduct deliberate wet-gap crossings, like that of the 2nd and 3rd MCGs at the Moselle. This responsibility would likely necessitate a multi-domain capable, task organized armored cavalry squadron.<sup>196</sup> Once bridgeheads are established, the divisions would conduct forward passages of lines of the corps and division cavalry organizations for continued flank security or the resumption of offensive operations.

By the time the cavalry groups had arrived at the Moselle, they had endured a month of combat. Combat was excellent grounds for on-the-job training and conditioning the cavalry formations for the fight ahead. Additionally, the MCGs expertise in reconnaissance and security inherently necessitated an ability to fight. This undoubtedly enabled their successes up to, along, and past the Moselle. This characteristic directly relates to cavalry formations today, especially considering the importance of the cavalry's role.

To capitalize on this lesson, cavalry formations today should heavily focus on fighting well at the troop, platoon, section, and crew levels. The success of the cavalry groups in 1944 was a result of these echelons seizing the initiative and fighting

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<sup>195</sup> Cole C. Pinheiro, "Resurrecting 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment," *Armor*, Fall 2021, 12; Nathan A. Jennings, "Considering the Penetration Division," (White Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, January 12, 2022), 1.

<sup>196</sup> Jennings, "Considering the Penetration Division," 1-2.

successfully. Today, this looks like cavalry formations training not only on reconnaissance and security, but also offensive and defensive tasks that support reconnaissance and security. In large scale combat, fighting for information, time, and space, and rapidly seizing the initiative to seize terrain and defeat enemy forces will likely become more prevalent than stealthy reconnaissance and permeable screens.

Therefore, to prepare for large scale combat, cavalry formations should also focus training on the offensive tasks of movement to contact and attack, which support reconnaissance and security tasks. Cavalry formations should also incorporate training focused on the area defense and delay, which heavily supports the security tasks of screen, guard, and area security.<sup>197</sup> The 2nd and 3rd MCGs demonstrated an excellent ability to execute those tasks along the Moselle from mid-September to November. Tactical mission tasks that deserve focus, and support seizing the initiative during wet-gap crossings, are the tactical mission tasks of occupy, retain, secure, and seize.<sup>198</sup> As the first formations to make contact with suitable crossing areas, cavalry forces must prepare to capitalize on any opportunity to ensure momentum across a gap.

Expertise in the aforementioned offensive tasks, defensive tasks, and tactical mission tasks can heavily contribute to success in reconnaissance, security, and economy of force, as seen along the Moselle in 1944. Fighting well enables successful

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<sup>197</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-90.2, *Reconnaissance, Security, and Tactical Enabling Tasks*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2013), 1-7 – 1-11, 2-10 – 2-24.

<sup>198</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2013), B-9 – B-10.

reconnaissance, the of answering priority intelligence requirements, and developing the situation in large scale combat. Additionally, it enables the ability to defend an area, delay an enemy, and effectively apply combat power to shape the battlefield.

While this manuscript primarily focused on the tactical support provided by the MCGs to XX and XII Corps, there are numerous other aspects worth analyzing. Particularly important is how the MCGs conducted logistics, sustainment, and maintenance. The groups were clearly stalled along the Meuse in late August, but this mirrored the situation of the rest of Third Army as well. Researchers and military professionals can draw numerous lessons from how the MCGs maintained operational endurance through the distribution of petroleum, oil, and lubricants, ammunition, and repair parts. Additionally worth researching is how the MCGs received replacement equipment and personnel, and conducted maintenance on their Jeeps, M8 armored cars, Stuart tanks, and other equipment.

A second avenue worth researching is the application of lessons learned from training in the United States prior to the invasion of Europe. For instance, France and the Moselle crossing was not the first time large, armored formations conducted large scale maneuvers and river crossings. As mentioned in Robert S. Cameron's *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower, The Emergence of the U.S. Army's Armor Branch, 1917-1945*, armored training in 1940 resulted in lessons that should have focused reconnaissance formations on "distant reconnoitering necessary for rapid, long-distance movements by the armored divisions," rather than close reconnaissance objectives.<sup>199</sup> Another relevant lesson was

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<sup>199</sup> Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower*, 273-274.

that failure to include bridging equipment with reconnaissance forces prevented the ability to envelop enemy forces during the exercise.<sup>200</sup> Continued study of how training affected the employment of MCGs, especially since MCGs were relatively new at the time, provides an excellent opportunity to identify the successes and failures of training and determine how the Army can apply those lessons today.

The reconnaissance, security, and economy of force provided by the 2nd and 3rd MCGs drastically increased the effectiveness of XX and XII Corps from Normandy to the crossing of the Moselle to Metz and Nancy. Enabling these major organizations in Third Army directly facilitated the eventual success of 12th Army Group during the Lorraine Campaign in Europe. The results provided by the Dragoons and Brave Rifles from August to November 1944 demonstrate the absolute necessity of cavalry formations during river crossings in large scale combat.

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<sup>200</sup> Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower*, 274.

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