

Spring 5-1-2019

The Fighting Blue Ridgers: Combined Arms Capabilities of the US Army's 80th Infantry Division in World War II, 1944-1945

Brannon Price
University of Southern Mississippi

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THE FIGHTING BLUE RIDGERS: COMBINED ARMS CAPABILITIES OF THE US
ARMY'S 80TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN WORLD WAR II, 1944-1945

by

Brannon J. Price

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

Dr. Andrew Wiest, Committee Chair
Dr. Susannah Ural, Committee Member
Dr. Allison Abra, Committee Member

Dr. Andrew Wiest
Committee Chair

Dr. Luis Iglesias
Director of School

Dr. Karen S. Coats
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2019

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2019

Published by the Graduate School



ABSTRACT

This study of the Second World War examines the tactics employed by the 80th Infantry Division of the United States Army in the European Theater of Operations in 1944 and 1945. Early historiography portrays American units as brave but less sophisticated than their German adversaries. However, recent scholarship praises American combat capabilities. Drawing largely upon official Army records and firsthand accounts from American soldiers, this thesis argues that the 80th Infantry Division developed into a highly effective fighting force in the European Theater when it properly employed the concept of combined arms (the coordination of infantry, artillery, and armor) on the battlefield with some exceptions. This study uses three examples from the 80th Division's combat record that show the importance of combined arms and the sophistication of American fighting forces late in World War II: the closing of the Falaise Pocket, the crossing of the Moselle River, and in the Battle of the Bulge.

This study fills a key historiographical gap in scholars' understanding of the capabilities of American military forces in World War II. High- and low-level studies exist of armies and companies, but little analysis has been awarded to the divisions. It is crucial to understand division level combat because changes in WWII doctrine, to include the implementation of combined arms, were "codified, refined, and disseminated" at this echelon of command.¹ In the end, this work provides a more complete picture of the way in which the United States Army fought the war against Hitler's *Wehrmacht*.

¹ Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 159.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a great number of people I want to thank for standing behind me during my entire graduate career, from applications to the completion of this thesis. This has been a long and arduous journey, and I owe these individuals so much more than any simple thanks on a page can offer. Nonetheless, I hope they know how much I sincerely appreciate their love and support as this chapter of my life comes to a close.

First and foremost I want to thank God for granting me the opportunity to pursue a graduate degree in history and for blessing me with the skills necessary to complete my MA. Without Him, all I do is for naught.

I could not have done any of this without my parents, Scott and Shawn Price who, from the beginning, encouraged me to go back to school. They helped pay for applications and entrance exams as well as accompanied me on the long road trips to visit colleges before making my decision to attend the University of Southern Mississippi. My sister and brother, Hannah and Campbell, were also extremely supportive of my endeavors. Furthermore, my grandparents, Sammy and Linda Price and Gene and Frances Beck were always there to offer their advice and love.

Without the members of my thesis committee, I would not even be able to write a thesis worth defending. Therefore, I want to thank Dr. Andrew Wiest, Dr. Susannah Ural, and Dr. Allison Abra for their support throughout this process. Thank you to my references who helped me earn acceptance letters to graduate programs: Dr. Kyle Sinisi, Dr. Stephanie Hewett, and Ken Boes.

The friends I made at the Wesley Foundation during my time at Southern Miss were a great support system. They were always there to listen whenever I had frustrations

or needed a distraction from my work. For this, I can't thank the following people enough: Holly Stokes, Ashley Thompson, Sara Clark, Albert Williams, Devon Coulter, Elizabeth Lammons, Zach and Lauren Mason, Brandon Cade, Darius Scott, Eric Davis, and David, Mary, and Connor Godbold.

My fellow graduate students at USM were instrumental in helping me through this process. I cannot thank the following enough for enduring the struggles with me and, at times, listening to me vent my frustrations: Amy Myers, Jacob Featherling, Jamie Henton, Brennan Keuhl, John Sarvela, Andy Sims, Dani Kawa, Lucas Somers, Olivia Moore, and Hayley Hasik. As they were having the same experiences I was, they understood the frustrations and were always there to offer their help.

Although they were not in graduate school with me, my classmates from The Citadel nonetheless played a role in this process. They helped me through my time as an undergraduate, which taught me the skills I needed to succeed in graduate school. Thank you to Brooks Wagstaff, Joseph Federico, Daniel Meyerhoffer, Tray Godowns, Amber Mills, Joey Parker, Kate Koller, Garen Griffin, Spencer Lukas, Josh Terry, Jonathan Mims, Eduardo Rodriguez, Ryan Burns, Brandon Larmore, Taylor Scott, John Chase Taylor, Cal Johnston, Barrett Owens, Mikey McGraw, Taylor Coleman, Mattison Wilbanks, Robb Dudley, Emily Milani, Yu-Fu Chen, Chris Gorospe, Ethan Boulware, and Wesley Kennedy.

Last, but most certainly not least, thank you to my former roommate, and another classmate from The Citadel, Zac Light (I didn't forget you!), and his wife Alyssa. They saw firsthand my highs and lows as I balanced working full time with applying to graduate programs.

If I have omitted any names, it is entirely by mistake. To everyone who was there for me during this time in my life, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Pax et Honoris, Deus et Patria

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all veterans of the Second World War; those living and those who have passed on. Thank you for your bravery and sacrifice. The world we live in today would be vastly and horribly different if not for your efforts.

Most of all, this is dedicated to the two World War II veterans nearest and dearest to my heart: Cecil Wilson Brannon (80th Infantry Division) and Alfred Clinton “Clint” Price. To me, they are simply Papa Brannon and Papa Price, my paternal great grandfathers. I strive to live up to the names I received from the both of you. You are missed. I’ll see y’all someday at the Pearly Gates.



Figure 1. Cecil Wilson Brannon and Marion Harvey Brannon (née Marion Earline Harvey)



Figure 2. Alfred Clinton Price and Lila Octavia Price (née Campbell)

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

This study of the Second World War examines the tactics employed by the 80th Infantry Division (ID) of the United States Army in the European Theater of Operations in 1944 and 1945. Early historiography portrays American units as brave but less sophisticated than their German adversaries. However, recent scholarship praises American combat capabilities with the realization that the United States Army did not rely solely on material superiority in battle. Drawing largely upon official Army records and firsthand accounts from American soldiers, this thesis argues that the 80th Infantry Division was a highly effective fighting force in the European Theater when it properly employed the concept of combined arms (the coordination of infantry, artillery, and armor) on the battlefield with some exceptions. Furthermore, it argues that the Division learned from its previous combat experiences, though not always on a linear trajectory, when engaged in combat with the forces of Nazi Germany. This study uses three examples from the 80th Division's combat record to demonstrate this, highlighting the importance of combined arms and the sophistication of American fighting forces late in World War II: the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap and the closing of the Falaise Pocket, the crossing of the Moselle River, and the Battle of the Bulge.

This thesis fills a key historiographical gap in scholars' understanding of the capabilities of American military forces in World War II. High- and low-level studies exist of armies and companies, but little analysis has been awarded to the divisions. It is crucial to understand division level combat because changes in American WWII doctrine, to include the implementation of combined arms, were standardized at this echelon of

command.² In the end, this work provides a more complete picture of the way in which the United States Army fought the war against Hitler's *Wehrmacht*.

Many of the histories that concern themselves with the events on the battlefield rather than the symbiotic relationship of combat and culture or society are narrative accounts. While having merit, these works often lack the element of a historical argument, which professional historians demand. However, there are several studies that seek to determine the major factors that led to the success of the US Army in the European war. This debate contains two schools of thought on the matter at hand. The first group believes the Americans and their allies emerged victorious due to American industrial might and material capabilities. These individuals argue the German *Wehrmacht* was a superior army to that of the United States. The second holds that the American fighting force was equal, if not superior to that of Nazi Germany and succeeded because of their combat capabilities. Major contributors to each school of thought are discussed in this introduction. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to intervene in the discussion of this topic by examining the tactics used by an individual combat division in order to determine if it adapted the lessons learned by other units in the Army, as well as those gained from its own combat experiences, to improve its fighting capabilities. The findings of this thesis indicate that the assertions of those who argue for the relative efficiency of the United States Army stand up to criticism. Although the 80th Infantry Division suffered growing pains during its early battles, its men and officers were able to improve their combat effectiveness through lessons learned on the battlefield

² Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 159.

and spending time and effort on training their soldiers for future battles based on these lessons.

Michael D. Doubler's *Closing With the Enemy* is a crucially important work for this project as this thesis borrows Doubler's model.³ *Closing With the Enemy* argues that the driving force behind the success of the US Army in the European Theater was its ability to adapt its tactics. Doubler claims that the campaigns in North Africa and Sicily served as proving grounds for the doctrine of the Army. More specifically, he argues that the Army improved its ability to employ combined arms—the cooperation of different branches of the US Army, like infantry, artillery, armor, and air power. By the time of the invasion of Normandy, military leadership saw that changes to these tactics were in order.

However, it should be noted that the Army learned further lessons after D-Day, leading to further tactical and doctrinal changes on the battlefield. *Closing With the Enemy* maintains these adaptations were possible because Army leadership organized training sessions during periods in which soldiers were in reserve rather than on the front lines. Although it was not the only factor which led to the Army's success in Europe, its ability to adapt and overcome the challenges it faced played a crucial role in the improvement of American fighting capabilities.

Another work that praises the combat effectiveness of the United States Army is Peter R. Mansoor's *The GI Offensive in Europe*.⁴ Mansoor argues the US Army was a capable fighting force that had only to learn from its mistakes in order to win the fight

³ Michael D. Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

⁴ Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*.

against the German *Wehrmacht*. Furthermore, this work claims that the Germans were a superior military early in the war because they had been fighting in modern tactics for a longer period of time. However, where Mansoor's work differs from this thesis is in its focus on infantry divisions alone, rather than their cooperation with other branches of the US Army. Mansoor places great emphasis on the replacement system of the Army, showing that, although it was an imperfect process, leadership was able to make the best of a poor situation and properly train replacements for combat once they arrived in Europe. The importance of *The GI Offensive in Europe* is that it advocates for the study of combat divisions, as this thesis does, because "The division was the key level at which these new procedures codified, refined, and disseminated."⁵

Russell F. Weigley's tome, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* is highly critical of the fighting capabilities of the Army of the United States in the European Theater of Operations.⁶ This work flatly concludes that the reason for the success of the US Army was its material superiority over the forces of Nazi Germany. Furthermore, Weigley states, "the German army remained qualitatively superior to the American army, formation for formation, throughout far too many months of the American army's greatest campaign."⁷ Other historians disagree with this assertion, but *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* stands as one of the most damning accounts of the combat effectiveness of the US Army in World War II. Weigley's work stands in stark contrast both to Doubler's work and the central argument of this thesis.

⁵ Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 159.

⁶ Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany, 1944-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

⁷ Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 730.

In 1994, Keith E. Bonn published a book entitled *When the Odds Were Even*, in which he directly challenges the idea that the German *Wehrmacht* was a more effective fighting force than that of the United States.⁸ Bonn's argument is that the only campaign of the European war in which the support capabilities (i.e. supply) of the two armies were the same was the engagement in the Vosges Mountains of France. In Bonn's own words: "it is necessary, for accurate appraisal of the relative combat proficiency of the German and American armies in the ETO, to find a time and place when the odds were even."⁹ This work concludes that in a situation in which neither side enjoyed a logistical advantage, the United States Army was able to best its German enemy, suggesting American combat units were superior to the *Wehrmacht*. Bonn's work supports the arguments made in this thesis: that American fighting forces could in fact face the challenge presented by the Germany Army.

As can be seen, the majority of works concerning themselves with US Army performance in the European Theater focus on levels of command above that of the division. The exceptions to this rule, among the publications mentioned here, are Bonn's *When the Odds Were Even* and Mansoor's *The GI Offensive in Europe*. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct further research into tactical innovations by placing an individual division under closer examination. In order to do so, this thesis borrows the model of Doubler's *Closing With the Enemy* to determine if its argument holds when searching the records of one division rather than the entire US Army. In doing so, this project seeks to fill a gap in the historiography between studies of the regimental level and below to that

⁸ Keith E. Bonn, *When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944-January 1945* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994).

⁹ Bonn, *When the Odds Were Even*, 4.

of the corps and above. Works that do so omit a close examination of divisional combat units, an extremely important link in the chain of command where changes in combat tactics were standardized.¹⁰ This thesis is one of the first works to examine an individual infantry division in relation to the improvement of its combat capabilities in World War II.

The most important archival collections for this study of the 80th Infantry Division are housed at the United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC) located at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Within these archives are several collections relating to the Blue Ridge Division during the Second World War. The most useful of these are the Barbara B. Payne Collection of Oral Histories, the Edward F. Naughton Papers, the Harold L. Rives Collection, and the 4th Armored Division Papers.¹¹ While not every individual document of these collections is relevant to this project, each offers a unique perspective on the 80th Infantry Division during World War II, and all make a significant contribution to this work. Furthermore, this thesis makes use of the books of Robert T. Murrell, historian and veteran of the 80th Division, which combine the unit histories of the 80th as well as its component regiments.¹² Each of these sources are

¹⁰ Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 159.

¹¹ Barbara B. Payne Collection of Oral Histories. US Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Edward F. Naughton Papers. USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Harold L. Rives Collection, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

¹² Robert T. Murrell, *Operational History: ETO 80th "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, Edited by Andy Adkins (Lewistown, Pennsylvania, 2001); Robert T. Murrell, *The Blue Ridge Division Answers the Call in WWII*, Edited by Andy Adkins (Lewistown, Pennsylvania, 2001); Robert T. Murrell, *317th Infantry Regiment History: WWII ETO 80th "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, Edited by Andy Adkins (Lewistown, Pennsylvania, 2001); Robert T. Murrell, *318th Infantry Regiment History: WWII ETO 80th "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, Edited by Andy Adkins (Lewistown, Pennsylvania, 2001); Robert T. Murrell, *319th Infantry Regiment History: WWII ETO 80th "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*, Edited by Andy Adkins (Lewistown, Pennsylvania, 2001).

extremely important in this study of the Blue Ridge Division and its ability to learn from its past experiences and those of the rest of the US Army during World War II.

The Barbara B. Payne Collection of Oral Histories is just that: a collection of interviews that Barbara Payne conducted with veterans of the Second World War. Unfortunately, only one of these individuals served with the 80th Infantry Division. However, the soldier who was with the Blue Ridgers, Technician 3rd Grade William W. Lamond, experienced combat during the Battle of the Bulge.¹³ As this was one of the largest and most pivotal battles of World War II in Europe, any and all testimonies from veterans who fought with the 80th are extremely valuable sources. Lamond tells of his daily experiences during the brutal winter of 1944 and offers insights into the tactics the Blue Ridge Division employed against its German foes, providing further examples of the Division's use of combined arms in the European Theater.

Some of the most important aspects of the Edward F. Naughton Papers, the Harold L. Rives Collection, and the 4th Armored Division Papers are the variety of unit histories and firsthand accounts of the experiences of these combat units. For example, housed within the Naughton Papers is a December 1944 combat narrative of the 905th Field Artillery Battalion, a unit that spent a significant portion of the war in support of the operations of the 80th.¹⁴ While it stands to reason that the histories of the 80th ID and its component regiments are the cornerstone of this research, it is necessary to study the combat records of associated units as well. Although such units are not actually infantry

¹³ Barbara B. Payne Interview with William W. Lamond, 23 August 1995, Barbara B. Payne Collection of Oral Histories. USAHEC.

¹⁴ Unit History for Month of December 1944 905th Field Artillery Battalion, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC.

formations, as is the Blue Ridge Division, they were still part of the combined arms team with the men of the 80th. Therefore, these sources diversify perspectives of the battlefield by showing the experiences of armor and artillery units in addition to foot soldiers. In this way, they illustrate how all the different elements of combined arms worked together within the organization of the 80th Infantry Division and its affiliated units.

Robert Murrell, a veteran of the 80th Infantry Division, compiled all of the reports pertaining to the Division and its component regiments (the 317th, 318th, and 319th Infantry Regiments) in several books, making access to the daily operations of the Blue Ridge Division significantly more accessible. These sources are crucial to this project because they provide the narrative of events for the 80th's war experience. From this narrative comes much of the material that allows for an analysis of the Division's fighting capabilities. In addition to these reports, Murrell also published a collection of oral histories in which soldiers of the Blue Ridge Division retold some of their combat stories, many of which are relevant to the question of the 80th's ability to employ combined arms.¹⁵ These oral histories provide evidence of the tactics the Division used in a way that is less detached than official Army reports which are, by nature, impersonal and disconnected from individual experiences of combat.

Each chapter of this thesis serves as a case study to display the combined arms capabilities of the 80th ID and its ability to learn lessons from its previous combat experiences. Naturally, the first case study is the Division's involvement in the Battle of Argentan and the closing of the Falaise Gap in August 1944, as this was the Blue

¹⁵ Robert T. Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War II*, Edited by Andy Adkins (Lewistown, Pennsylvania, 2001).

Ridgers' first significant combat experience.¹⁶ The purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for the rest of the thesis and to create a benchmark in order to measure the improvements, or lack thereof, in the 80th's time in the European Theater. While it is the goal of each chapter of this thesis to avoid heavy use of certain sources at the expense of others, there are times when significant use of some sources is virtually unavoidable. For example, when presenting an account of the operations of the division which will later be analyzed, sources such as operational histories are used as they provide a concise retelling of events on the battlefield. Otherwise, the intent is for each chapter to draw from a variety of different archival collections and other primary sources.

The case study for the third chapter is the Blue Ridge Division's attempts to cross the Moselle River in September 1944. One of the major obstacles the United States Army encountered during the war in Europe was determining how effectively to traverse rivers on its march towards Germany and ultimate victory over the Nazi forces.¹⁷ The 80th Division was forced to cross these bodies of water on more than one occasion.¹⁸ Due to the frequency with which American soldiers were forced to engage in river crossings, one such example must be examined in this work. This chapter argues that, although the 80th had experienced combat before it reached the waters of the Moselle River, its regiments had not yet completely learned the importance of the use of combined arms. While the men did eventually make it across to the eastern banks, they were forced to make more than one attempt at crossing due, at least in part, to inadequate support from other

¹⁶ "317th-AntiTank Operations Northeast of Argentan in Closing of Argentan-Falaise Gap," 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, http://www.80thdivision.com/MiscReports/317th_ATCo_Operations_NE_Argentan_17-20AUG44.pdf.

¹⁷ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, Chapter 6, 157-191.

¹⁸ Murrell, *Operational History: ETO 80th "Blue Ridge" Infantry Division*.

branches of combined arms. In addition, the chapter discusses the importance of combat leadership as embodied through General Edmund W. Searby, who was killed in action during the Moselle River campaign.

Finally, Chapter Four is a study of the Blue Ridge Division during the Battle of the Bulge. Hitler's last-ditch offensive in the Ardennes Forest was a pivotal battle in the European Theater. After this engagement, the German *Wehrmacht* would never again go on a major offensive against the Allied forces. Spanning from the 16th of December 1944 to January 25th 1945, this winter battle is a veritable goldmine of information concerning the ability of the 80th Division to learn from its past and employ combined arms to fight the Germans. Furthermore, this case study is unique because the Battle of the Bulge was, at least early in the engagement, primarily a defensive operation for the United States Army. In contrast, the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap and the crossing of the Moselle were offensive in nature. Thus, a study of the 80th on the defensive is necessary for a more complete understanding of the combat unit's combined arms capabilities and propensity to learn from prior experiences. This chapter argues that during the Battle of the Bulge the Blue Ridge Division showed the ability to learn from previous combat experiences and fought with much greater effectiveness than in their earlier engagements. For example, the division began implementing close cooperation of their armor and infantry units from the onset of battle; a practice not seen immediately at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap. One of the major factors leading to these changes in tactics were the periods of time in which the division was placed in reserve status which were used for training purposes.

As the Battle of the Bulge was such a massive engagement that cannot be studied in its entirety within the scope of this project, the final chapter contains examinations of a selection of the 80th Division's involvement; most notably its actions in relation to the liberation of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium. This final chapter will show through examples of the combined arms fighting of the division, as well as changes in casualty figures, that the Blue Ridgers had become a highly effective fighting force by the time of the fighting in the Ardennes Forest.

Although the 80th Infantry Division was an imperfect combat unit, which did not always improve on a linear path during the Second World War, it nonetheless made great strides in its combat effectiveness by the winter of 1944-1945. By taking the lessons it learned in previous engagements and applying them to their future battles—especially by way of training when they were not under enemy fire—the Blue Ridgers show that their unit supports the argument that American combat units did not rely solely on the industrial might of the United States to defeat the German *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War.

The 80th Division is the topic of this thesis for a variety of reasons. The first of these is that this unit was representative of many other infantry divisions in the European Theater in that it had not experienced battle before landing in Normandy in 1944. For this reason, it did not have the experience of North Africa or the Italian Campaign to draw upon to improve its combat effectiveness. The fact that the division had not before experienced battle is the second reason the 80th was chosen. Finally, the Blue Ridgers were studied for the author's familial connections. To avoid the potential for bias, it should be noted that one of the author's great grandfathers was a veteran of the 80th

Infantry Division. However, it is the intent of this thesis is to study a unit's improvements rather than to study its heroes, so little reference is made to this individual veteran so as to avoid partiality.

CHAPTER II – “FIRST BLOOD VICTORY”: BLUE RIDGERS AT ARGENTAN AND
THE FALIASE GAP



Figure 3. A Gun Crew of the 80th¹⁹

“First blood” is a term often used to describe the belligerent side that makes the first successful strike against its enemy. In the case of the 80th Infantry Division in the Second World War, “first blood victory” came at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap.²⁰ Although some units in the Blue Ridge Division had seen some combat since their arrival in Europe, this engagement was the first time the larger units within the Division, especially at the regimental level, fought together in the Second World War. As one report from the 317th Regiment’s anti tank company states,

As aforementioned, the 80th Division was new to combat. During the bewildering moves leading up to the positions in which we now find the division, no serious enemy resistance had been encountered. There had been numerous platoon sized actions, small scale ambushes, blind night meeting engagements, and many

¹⁹ Tracy Dungan, *Shuntus Gun Crew*, 1944, 400x266 px, 80th Division Digital Archives Project (80th DDAP), Photo Collections: Tracy Dungan Collection, <http://www.80thdivision.com/photos/Dungan/Dungan.html>.

²⁰ “317th Infantry Crushes Foe In Victories Drive Through France, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria: Seal Gap At Argentan,” *The Thundering Herd*, September 26, 1945, 1.

defended roadblocks had been knocked out. However, the division could in no wise be said to be “veteran.”²¹

The Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap was a jarring experience for the men of the division who had never before seen combat. Major James Hayes and the men of the 317th were stunned by the death of a sergeant in Hayes’s unit. He and the men then realized what combat was really like and “that the flow of combat induced adrenaline did strange things to the body.”²² Facing the enemy on a large scale for the first time, the men of the 80th Infantry Division had to find a way to cope with the realities of combat and learn how to be an effective fighting force against the German *Wehrmacht*. The confrontation at Argentan, and the closing of the Falaise Gap would be the first test of the Blue Ridgers’ resolve and courage. While this thesis does not examine the Blue Ridge Division’s combat experience primarily through the eyes of individual soldiers, some of their stories must be examined as these soldiers’ experiences help stress the importance of the events that occurred on European battlefields.

The most logical place to begin any study of a unit in an effort to trace its ability to adapt to combat and improve its effectiveness is in its first major combat action. In doing so, this chapter aims to create a benchmark, so to speak, by which later combat action of the 80th Infantry Division will be measured. A unit’s first battle is a jarring experience for many men who have never before seen combat. Would they freeze when the bullets started to fly or rely on their training and fight back? Would they be able to

²¹ 317th-AntiTank Operations Northeast of Argentan in Closing of Argentan-Falaise Gap, 17-20 Aug. 1944, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 80th DDAP, 4, http://www.80thdivision.com/MiscReports/317th_ATCo_Operations_NE_Argentan_17-20AUG44.pdf.

²² Dominique, and Hayes, *One Hell of a War: Patton’s 317th Infantry Regiment in WWII* (Wounded Warrior Publications, 2014), 33.

operate as a single unit and win or struggle to find cohesion and be cut to pieces by enemy fire? And would they be able to learn from their first military engagement and improve their fighting capabilities in the future? None of these questions, especially the last, can be answered without examining the 80th Infantry Division's first time in combat.

Before analyzing the combat effectiveness of the Blue Ridgers, a brief summary of the battle itself is in order. This examination of the engagement of Argentan and the Falaise Pocket/Gap, as well as the subsequent chapters of this thesis, will follow a pattern of analyzing the 80th Division's performance at each respective battle after the brief summary. Furthermore, this chapter also examines the doctrine of the United States during earlier stages of the war in order to understand the state of Army tactics when the Blue Ridge Division arrived in the European Theater. In doing so, the chapter continues to show the level of effectiveness with which the 80th Infantry Division fought during its first engagement in the European Theater of Operations.²³

The Situation on the Front²⁴

The Blue Ridge Division arrived in France on August 5, 1944, landing on Utah Beach two months after the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.²⁵ The United States Army, as well as the forces of the British Empire, had bogged down in this region of northern France after successfully gaining a foothold in Fortress Europe on D-Day.

²³ For simplicity's sake, only a few sources covering this battle are able to be directly referenced in the body of this work. Here follows a more complete list of relevant works. Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2001); Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*; Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*; Martin F. Loughlin, *Memoirs of World War II* (New York: Vantage Press, 2000).

²⁴ *VII Corps Advance Into Brittany, 1-12 August 1944*, 150x106px, US CMH Books and Research Materials, World War II, European-African-Middle Eastern Theater, Published Material, *WWII Campaigns: Northern France*, <https://history.army.mil/brochures/norfran/norfran.htm>, Accessed February 27, 2019.

²⁵ Robert T. Murrell, *Operational History*, 9.

Having battled the terrain, most notably the infamous Norman hedgerows, which caused significant delays for the Allied forces as they attempted to navigate these terrain features, as well as Germans in strong defensive positions, the officers and enlisted men under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, desperately needed a breakthrough. While the Americans fought to push beyond the bocage and hedgerows, General Bernard Law Montgomery and the British forces struggled just as mightily to take Caen, their primary objective upon making landfall in France.²⁶

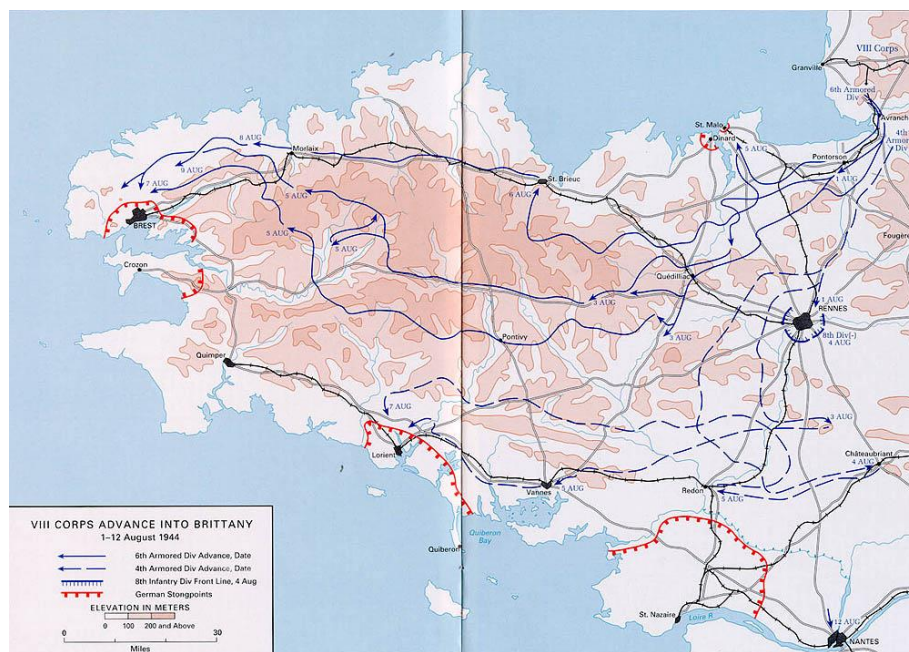


Figure 4. The Western European Front, August 1944

The Germans, for their part, had great cause to defend their positions with all their might. They were fully aware that an Allied victory in Normandy would significantly increase their chances of defeat in the Second World War. American and British forces

²⁶ Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1984), 169.

did enjoy some advantages over their Axis foes. The Allies surprised the *Wehrmacht* at Normandy, the Germans were undersupplied in comparison to the armies of the Allied nations, and the Third Reich was not as adept at replacing its casualties as the Americans or British.²⁷ This is not to say that German soldiers were not up to the task of fighting the Allies. Historian Anthony Beevor claims, through the account of an American divisional commander, that the Germans were making excellent use of the relatively little war materiel at their disposal.²⁸ While the industrial might and vast store of supplies available to the United States Army and its British counterpart did play a significant role in achieving victory in the war, this was not the determining factor in the defeat of the German forces, as the subsequent chapters of this thesis will demonstrate.

The Allied advance needed a catalyst to maintain its momentum after the breakthrough of the German lines of defense in Normandy. This would come through the assault on Falaise and the closing of the Falaise Gap. As the British, Canadians, and the 1st Polish Armored Division fought their way towards Falaise, Hitler ordered his generals to counterattack with panzers at Mortain. This attack was a significant blunder on the part of Hitler that would put the German 7th Army and 5th Panzer Army in danger of encirclement at Falaise. Even in the face of evidence showing the German dictator that this attack would put his forces in danger, the *Führer* continued to order his commander, *Generalfeldmarschall* Günther von Kluge, to press the ill-fated assault that failed in its goal of cutting of Patton's forces.²⁹

²⁷ Hastings, *Overlord*, 170-176.

²⁸ Anthony Beevor, *The Second World War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company Hachette Book Group, 2012), 597.

²⁹ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 612.

At this point of the war, truly displaying the traits of a dictator, Hitler micromanaged his military leadership. In doing so, the *Führer* handcuffed his generals, not allowing them to take the initiative on the battlefield. Historian Stephen E. Ambrose asserts that this was not an unusual occurrence in stating,

Because of the jealousies and complexities of the German high command, because Rommel disagreed with Rundstedt, because Hitler was contemptuous of his generals and did not trust them to boot, the German command structure was a hopeless muddle. Without going into the details of such chaos, it suffices to note here that Hitler had retained personal control of the armored divisions. They could not be used in a counterattack until he had personally satisfied himself that the action was the real invasion.³⁰

This tendency was so deeply ingrained in Hitler that it was a factor in preventing a crucial armored strike with the potential to prevent the Allies from establishing a beachhead during the Normandy landings from materializing.³¹ Clearly, the leader of the Nazi Party had not learned from his past and continued this pattern in ordering the attack on Mortain. Hitler simply did not trust his commanders successfully to carry out the war effort, and he continued to micromanage the *Wehrmacht*.³²

The Allies launched Operation Dragoon; the attempt to close the Gap and encircle as many of the German forces as possible before they were allowed to escape the vicinity of Falaise. However, the Gap was not properly closed because commanders of the Anglo-American Alliance did not properly utilize the forces at their disposal, allowing some of the German forces to escape.³³ In this operation, the United States Army would employ

³⁰ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge: June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1985), 124.

³¹ Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 182-183.

³² Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 124.

³³ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 612-613.

the entirety of the 80th Infantry Division for the first time in World War II. Pursuant with Field Order #6, the Division's objective was to capture the town of Argentan. The capture of this area would assist the rest of the Allied forces in closing the Falaise Gap.³⁴ This then was the situation in which the 80th Division found itself as it prepared to participate in its first major battle.

The 80th at Argentan

In order to understand the combat effectiveness of the Blue Ridgers, there must first be an understanding of the division's actions on the front. Following this will be an analysis of its performance in battle. This section of the chapter presents further context for the actions of the 80th and its men, allowing for a much more complete analysis of the combat capabilities of the division.

When the 80th Infantry Division began its operations at Argentan, the original plan called for Combat Team (CT) 318 to bear the brunt of the load by operating as the lone assault force in the initial attack.³⁵ The 317th Infantry Regiment was in division reserve with one battalion assigned to guard the flank of CT 318, while the 319th Infantry Regiment was charged with defending the French town of Angers against German attacks in an operation independent of the rest of the Blue Ridge Division.³⁶ At this point in time, the 319th Regiment was under the command of the XX Corps of the United States Army and would rejoin the rest of the 80th Division at a later date.³⁷ The Blue Ridgers' mission

³⁴ Murrell, *Operational History*, 21.

³⁵ Murrell, *Operational History*, 18.

³⁶ Murrell, *317th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 9; Murrell, *319th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 3.

³⁷ Murrell, *Operational History*, 19.

was to capture the high ground just north of Argentan to facilitate taking the town itself.³⁸ Gaining the high ground is a common objective in warfare. By controlling hills and other elevated locations on the battlefield, a military force gains the tactical advantage. In regards to combined arms and massed firepower, such terrain features are the ideal place for an artillery forward observer to direct artillery strikes. Without controlling the high ground in France, it would be significantly more difficult for the Blue Ridge Division to effectively radio in the artillery strikes which are so crucial to massed firepower.

In direct support of the 318th Regiment was B Company of the 702^d Tank Battalion, the first of many testaments to the great importance of coordinating all three branches of combined arms: infantry, armor, and artillery.³⁹ For its artillery support, the 318th relied on the US Army's 314th Field Artillery Battalion.⁴⁰ As will be seen, CT 318 relied heavily on support from these units as it attempted to take and hold Argentan to allow the Allied forces to close the Falaise Gap and encircle a significant portion of the German *Wehrmacht*, thus dealing a harsh blow to its combat capabilities.

As can be expected of a combat unit facing its first serious engagement on the battlefield, the Blue Ridgers were uncertain of themselves when they first encountered live fire from the enemy. The commander of the 318th Infantry Regiment found he was forced to resort to physical coercion, kicking some of his soldiers in order to motivate them to fight.⁴¹ While it is without question that soldiers are expected to respond and

³⁸ Colonel Ralph E. Pearson and Fred S. Ludt, *Enroute to the Redoubt: A Soldier's Report as a Regiment Goes to War* (Chicago: Adams Printing Service, 1957), 36.

³⁹ 702^d Tank Battalion Unit History by 1st Sergeant TI Hendricks, Harold L. Rives Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 4.

⁴⁰ *The 314th FA Battalion in the ETO: A Footnote to History*, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 10.

⁴¹ Hastings, *Overlord*, 292.

defend themselves when facing their enemy, historically, soldiers struggle to move toward gunfire, explosions, and the potential to be horribly maimed or killed. Historian SLA Marshall found that relatively few American soldiers who fought in World War II actually fired their weapons at enemy combatants. Indeed, he concluded in his close post-combat study of soldiers that no more than fifteen percent of American GIs used their weapons in the conflict.⁴² The same appears to have proved true of the Blue Ridgers at Argentan. While the main focus of this work is the ability of the 80th Infantry Division to improve its use of combined arms and massed firepower, the ability of soldiers simply to move forward and fight is also something that must improve during the course of a war. Although Marshall's work can be counted among some of the most influential concerning themselves with World War II, it should be noted that his findings on the number of men who actually fired their weapons in combat were fabricated.⁴³ Nonetheless, this is an instance in which soldiers of the 80th struggled to find the motivation to fight once they arrived on the battlefield. Marshall's book is still relevant as it points towards the importance of effective combat leadership.⁴⁴

In his famous WWII memoir, EB Sledge stated that "A man's ability to depend on his comrades and immediate leadership is absolutely necessary. I'm convinced that our discipline, esprit de corps, and tough training were the ingredients that equipped me to survive the ordeal physically and mentally..."⁴⁵ Any improvement in the ability of the

⁴² SLA Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), 4.

⁴³ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 4.

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 200.

⁴⁵ Eugene B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 170.

Blue Ridgers to act in the face of danger would come from the influence of their leadership and comrades. The quality of leadership on the battlefield was of paramount importance and is one of the most important determining factors of combat effectiveness.

Because other Allied units had experienced great difficulty in attacking Argentan head on, the 80th Division opted to encircle the town. This encirclement would, theoretically, allow the Blue Ridgers to take the small French community. Furthermore, the 80th Division's officers' decision to encircle the town rather than engage in a head on assault shows that these men had learned from previous experiences of the Army that direct attacks had not produced the desired effects. In order to do so, the division would have to capture the high ground north of Argentan. Designated Hills 213 and 244, these terrain features were crucial to the division's mission, as controlling the high ground was and is commonly prized as a tactical advantage on the battlefield. The Army estimated that the Germans numbered about 2,500 with 20 tanks in addition to their artillery and machine guns. These enemy soldiers had the advantage of knowledge of the battlefield terrain and the fact that they had seen combat before.⁴⁶

The tanks advancing alongside the foot soldiers quickly experienced the horrors and realities of combat. One of the tank platoons was moving towards Argentan when it reached the end of a hedgerow and German artillery opened fire on them. All four tanks in this platoon were eliminated by the *Wehrmacht*. Reports stated that the Germans used the star painted on the side of the tanks as a target and that flags on the tanks' antennae gave away their positions when they were behind the hedgerow. As the other American

⁴⁶ Tristan Rondeau, "Baptism by Fire in Argentan: The First Engagement of August 18-19, 1944, Part 1," Translated by Dennis Adams, *Normandie*, February 2013, 51-52, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_1_TristanRondeau.pdf.

units advanced on Argentan, they met stiff resistance from their German adversaries, and their assault ground to a halt on Highway N24-A, a French road near the community. It was at this stage that the infantry realized they would need massed fire support in order to take Argentan, and called upon the artillery units attached to the 80th. While the finer details of this artillery support will be examined later in this chapter, suffice to say this development swung the momentum in the favor of the attacking American forces, allowing them to continue their advance.⁴⁷

Losses for the 318th Infantry Regiment were heavy on the first day of combat, a testament to the previously completely inexperienced 80th Division. Meanwhile, the 317th had been in reserve for the entirety of August 18th. On the second day of combat at Argentan, the 318th continued to have difficulty in assaulting the town. Therefore, General Horace McBride, commander of the 80th Division, decided to pull the 318th back and send in the fresh troops of the 317th Infantry Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Russell E. Murray, one of the 317th's battalion commanders, refused to advance along the same avenue of attack as the retreating 318th. He knew his men's morale could not withstand seeing their defeated comrades and that his units would suffer similar setbacks if they use the same attack scheme, showing a propensity to learn from the experiences of other units in the 80th and improvise, adapt, and overcome to improve combat effectiveness.⁴⁸

This new assault by the 317th Infantry Regiment unfortunately faced the same problems that plagued their brethren in the 318th. Once again slowed to a crawl by

⁴⁷ Rondeau, "Baptism by Fire in Argentan, Part 1," 55, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_1_TrستانRondeau.pdf.

⁴⁸ Rondeau, "Baptism by Fire in Argentan, Part 1," 58-59, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_1_TrستانRondeau.pdf.

German artillery fire, the Americans responded with their own large caliber weaponry. However, the inexperienced artillerymen sent a barrage which fell short, leading to casualties from friendly fire. The anti tank company of the 317th attempted to send supporting fire of its own, but to no avail. As the light faded on the 19th of August 1944, the 80th Infantry Division had not yet achieved its objective.⁴⁹

During the night of August 19th, the Blue Ridgers consolidated their positions and the attached artillery units moved to more favorable positions on the battlefield. True to their status as a green combat division, two anti tank unit officers, motivated by fear or inexperience, balked or failed in their mission when ordered to support formations of infantrymen. However, at the urging of their commanding officer, Captain William J. Koob, Jr., a conversation which, according to Tristan Rondeau was “short but full of verve,”⁵⁰ these young officers overcame their apprehension, and the 80th's armor component avoided one of the oldest problems of command: motivating men to fight in the face of possible mutilation or death. Without Koob's leadership abilities, these two officers may have never carried out their missions at Argentan. The hours of darkness offered a modest respite to both American and German soldiers. Each side experienced nothing more than occasional artillery and small arms fire during the night.⁵¹

While the 80th did not receive significant enemy fire on the night of August 19th, the armored units under the command of Captain Koob discovered they no longer had

⁴⁹ Rondeau, “Baptism by Fire in Argentan, Part 1,” 59-60, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_1_TristanRondeau.pdf.

⁵⁰ Rondeau, “Baptism by Fire in Argentan, Part 2,” 66, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_1_TristanRondeau.pdf.

⁵¹ Tristan Rondeau, “Baptism of Fire at Argentan: The First Engagement of August 19-21, 1944, Part 2,” Translated by Dennis Adams, *Normandie*, May 2013, 64-66, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_2_TristanRondeau.pdf.

contact with the 2nd Battalion of the 317th Regiment. Fearing he had lost the foot soldiers who would help defend his armored units, Koob sent a runner to find the misplaced battalion, but this man was lost as well. As the various units of the division could not maintain consistent communication with one another, leadership imposed radio silence until the morning, ordering all units to remain in their current positions. As this example shows, effective communication among military forces is of paramount importance to success on the battlefield. If the 80th Division were to improve its fighting capabilities, one of the most crucial challenges it would have to overcome was difficulties in communication. With no reliable means of staying in contact with one another, officers of the Blue Ridge Division had no interest in losing further units. However, orders from General McBride would soon change, and the Blue Ridgers were once again on the attack.⁵²

During this attack, which began in the early hours of August 20th, divisional artillery hammered the German positions in Argentan, decimating the town and terrifying the remaining civilian populace who opted not to flee when the battle began. However, the German forces had already begun to retreat, abandoning their positions in Argentan. The *Wehrmacht* did continue to fight during their retreat, engaging in counter battery operations. While the presence of the 80th Division certainly played a role in the German retreat, it is possible that *Wehrmacht* forces were likely to fall back from the onset of battle, potentially adding to the likelihood of the Blue Ridgers' success at Argentan. American forces finally occupied Hill 213 around 0800 on the 20th. Having achieved the

⁵² Rondeau, "Baptism of Fire at Argentan, Part 2," 66, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_2_TristanRondeau.pdf.

objective of obtaining the high ground near Argentan, the Blue Ridgers now held the advantage over the Germans at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap.⁵³

Though the Germans were in the process of evacuating Argentan, the fighting in the vicinity of the French town had not yet come to a conclusion. American officers rushed to organize the 317th Infantry Regiment and its attached armored units. There was fierce fighting in an orchard near the town, and the Blue Ridgers took significant casualties. A lack of sufficient support from armored units greatly contributed to this problem. Again and again the Americans in the 317th struggled to find enough infantry and armor units to support one another against German resistance, an assertion which the next section of this chapter examines and analyzes in greater detail.⁵⁴

Although the fighting in the orchard was fierce, the Americans were finally able to drive the Germans out of this area with the help of tank destroyers of the 702nd Tank Battalion. It was with this support from armored units that the men of the 80th permanently controlled Hill 231. While the 317th Regiment struggled mightily to take Argentan, other units of the Blue Ridge Division fought to guard the flanks of their comrades against German attacks. Confusion abounded on the battlefield as the uninitiated division faced its first combat experience. At one point in the battle, General Edmund Searby, commander of the 80th's artillery section, told his men to stop firing because he believed their targets were actually British tanks. However, realizing his mistake, he instructed his soldiers to continue their assault. Such confusion is endemic

⁵³ Rondeau, "Baptism of Fire at Argentan, Part 2," 66-70, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_2_TristanRondeau.pdf.

⁵⁴ Rondeau, "Baptism of Fire at Argentan, Part 2," 70-72, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_2_TristanRondeau.pdf.

among men and units who have never before seen combat. Even the experienced General Searby struggled to make sense of what was happening on the battlefield.⁵⁵

It was around 1030 hours on the morning of the 20th of August that the 80th Infantry Division finally entered Argentan. The Americans moved through the community to flush out all remaining German resistance. The Blue Ridgers had finally achieved the main objective of their first battle. In taking Argentan, the men had played an integral role in closing the Falaise Gap.⁵⁶

The Coordination of Infantry and Armor

Prior to the Second World War, officers in armored units were taught that tanks should be used “in mass, employed in depth on a narrow front, and directed against weak segments of the enemy’s line.”⁵⁷ This doctrine arose from the experiences of the United States Army on the Western Front of World War I as the Great War was the Army’s first major conflict involving the use of modern artillery. When the Americans came to the realization that these tactics were ineffective in the terrain of the North African and Mediterranean Theaters, they began to use tanks as a support for infantry units. Rather than employing their armored units independently of foot soldiers, as was standard practice earlier in the war, the Army had learned their tanks were best utilized when interspersed among infantry soldiers to offer mutual support. This was especially true of tank battalions attached to various infantry units.⁵⁸ Inevitably, there were growing pains

⁵⁵ Rondeau, “Baptism of Fire at Argentan, Part 2,” 72-73,
http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_2_TristanRondeau.pdf.

⁵⁶ Rondeau, “Baptism of Fire at Argentan, Part 2,” 73-74,
http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_2_TristanRondeau.pdf; Murrell, *Operational History*, 24.

⁵⁷ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 16.

⁵⁸ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 16-17.

in determining the most effective way to ensure the proper coordination of infantry and tanks. This is to be expected from a combat force that had only employed tanks in one major military engagement (WWI), and was only further compounded by the fact that tanks and the doctrine of armor implementation was rudimentary at best during the First World War. However, over time the doughboys ascertained the best way to have these two branches of combined arms work together.⁵⁹ If the Blue Ridge Division was to defeat the Germans at Argentan and help close the Falaise Gap, it would need to ensure it effectively combined infantry and armor in France. In order to do so, they were required to take the lessons the US Army learned in North Africa and the Mediterranean Theater to make the best and most efficient use of the weapons of war at their disposal.

One commander of Company E, 317th Infantry Regiment, Captain James Mullen, recorded his observations in regards to how the textbook cooperation of infantrymen and tankers worked in the field,

The problems which arise in infantry-tank coordination are largely confined to the tank commander and the infantry platoon leader. There must be clearer understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the tank by the infantryman and a similar understanding by the tanker... The tank company usually attached to the infantry regiment should be as much a part of the outfit as any rifle company.⁶⁰

Mullen also observed that tankers and infantrymen often had unrealistic expectations of what the other could accomplish, leading each group to ask the other to perform tasks that could actually be carried out with their own weapons and training.⁶¹ Mullen's

⁵⁹ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 17-20.

⁶⁰ 317th/Co. E-Notes from Capt. Mullen Notebook, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 317th-1st Battalion Reports, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/317E_MullenJim_Capt_Notes_from_Capt_MullenNotebook.pdf.

⁶¹ 317th/Co. E-Notes from Capt. Mullen Notebook, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 317th-1st Battalion Reports, 80th DDAP, 2,

observations also point towards the importance of effective leadership on the battlefield. If, as he asserts, most problems between infantry and tank units came from the interactions between their officers, then quality leadership was the lynchpin of these military formations. Further examination of the combat record of the Blue Ridge Division will show whether or not the men of the 80th were able to take observations like these, along with the other lessons they learned in the Battle of Argentan, to improve their combat effectiveness against the *Wehrmacht*.

At the Battle of Argentan, the 80th Infantry Division experienced difficulty in making the best use of its armored units.⁶² At this point in the war, the division had learned from other units in the United States Army and knew that armor was most effective when it was in direct support of infantry units, as evidenced by the symbiotic relationship of tanks of the 702nd Tank Battalion and 318th Infantry Regiment at Argentan.⁶³ Unfortunately, General McBride did not completely learn from the lessons of other combat units, and chose to send the tanks of this battalion into Argentan without proper infantry support on the first day of the battle. Because these tanks were sent without foot soldiers alongside them, they were dangerously exposed to German fire, and all the tanks that advanced in this stage of the assault were destroyed by the *Wehrmacht*.⁶⁴

At least one veteran of the division felt that McBride did not truly understand how to command an infantry unit, as his previous experience with the Army was in the

http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/317E_MullenJim_Capt_Notes_from_Capt_MullenNotebook.pdf.

⁶² See Appendix 1 for 80th Infantry Division Order of Battle.

⁶³ 702^d Tank Battalion Unit History by 1st Sergeant TI Hendricks, Harold L .Rives Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 4.

⁶⁴ Rondeau, "Baptism by Fire in Argentan, Part 1," 54-55, http://www.80thdivision.com/pdfs/Argentan_1_TristanRondeau.pdf.

artillery branch.⁶⁵ One can extend this assertion to apply to armored units as well.

McBride was not exempt from the requirement to learn from his experiences on the battlefield. In fact, as the commander of the 80th Infantry Division, he was the individual with the heaviest burden in this regard. If the Blue Ridge Division was to reach peak combat effectiveness, its leadership needed to learn from instances such as this. Without proper leadership, it is extremely difficult for an organization, especially military units, to function cohesively.

As the face of a military unit, the commanding officer takes on great responsibility, both to his or her soldiers and nation. Urban legend in the military says that officers wear their rank on their shoulders because this symbolizes the weight and responsibility of leadership resting upon those very same shoulders. Without proper leadership, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible for any organization, let alone a combat division, to achieve its mission. It was Horace McBride's responsibility as the commanding officer of the 80th Infantry Division to ensure there was a culture of competency and commitment to success in the unit. Without this example from its commander, the 80th would face great challenges in learning from its past and improving its combat effectiveness.

Unit historian Robert Murrell argued that the 318th Regiment's difficulties in its initial attack on Argentan stemmed from a lack of adequate support from medium tanks and anti tank weapons.⁶⁶ While the 80th did have the experiences of other Army units from which to learn how to properly coordinate its combined arms capabilities, it

⁶⁵ Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War II*, 109.

⁶⁶ Murrell, *317th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 9.

remained a combat unit which had never before seen military action on this scale. Both officers and enlisted men of this division were in unfamiliar positions. Even those who may have seen combat in the First World War were fighting in an entirely different conflict, presumably at higher levels of command. For this reason, the individuals comprising the Blue Ridge Division had simply never before been forced to coordinate tanks and infantry in the face of live enemy fire in this type of highly mobile warfare. The failure of the 318th Infantry Regiment due to this lack of combined arms coordination is but one example which shows the 80th had much to learn if it was to succeed in Europe. The plain fact that armor and infantry were working together, albeit not with the desired effect, shows that the 80th's leadership at least knew these units required a symbiotic relationship for survival on the battlefield.⁶⁷

Historian Fred S. Ludt and Colonel Ralph Pearson argued that the failure of the 1st Battalion, 318th Infantry Regiment on the first day of the Battle of Argentan was due to a failure to move adequate anti tank support into the proper position in the battlefield. The reason for this difficulty was the presence of a river near the town of Argentan. While it was unfortunate that this terrain feature stalled the advance of the division, it was nonetheless one of the realities of warfare. The terrain of a battlefield almost always plays a significant role. The next chapter of this thesis will show the vast importance of traversing rivers, and cooperation with the Army's Corps of Engineers, in much greater depth. This example shows the importance of the proper coordination of infantry and armored units on the battlefield. It is imperative for infantry and armor to work closely

⁶⁷ 702^d Tank Battalion Unit History by 1st Sergeant TI Hendricks, Harold L. Rives Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 4.

together to protect one another. Without one, the other is horribly exposed in battle. Because the 1st Battalion failed to coordinate properly its infantry and anti tank units at Argentan, it was stopped short of its objectives by German armored units working in close proximity with foot soldiers. This is yet another lesson the Blue Ridgers had to learn if they were to defeat Nazi Germany.⁶⁸

One possible explanation for some of the relative inefficiency of the 80th's struggles in using its anti tank units alongside infantry was that the commander of the anti tank company of the 317th Infantry Regiment, the aforementioned Captain William Koob, had never before commanded such an organization. To make matters worse, he had never even been in charge of an anti tank company during training maneuvers. The first time Koob found himself in such a position was roughly one month before the Blue Ridgers entered the European Theater.⁶⁹ Here again is shown the great inexperience of the men and officers of the 80th Infantry Division. While Koob was able to rally his men and push on towards their objectives, this captain was nonetheless the epitome of a "green" commanding officer. Placed in a position such as this, he was able to make adjustments and eventually effectively employ his armored forces.⁷⁰ This was not a quality limited to company level officers, however. General Horace McBride, commander of the 80th Division, was trained as an artillery officer, and was also placed in an unfamiliar position

⁶⁸ Pearson and Ludt, *Enroute to the Redoubt*, 39.

⁶⁹ 317th-Anti Tank Operations Northeast of Argentan in Closing of Argentan-Falaise Gap, 17-20 August 1944, Miscellaneous Reports, 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 80th DDAP, 4, http://www.80thdivision.com/MiscReports/317th_ATCo_Operations_NE_Argentan_17-20AUG44.pdf.

⁷⁰ Rondeau, *Baptism by Fire in Argentan Parts 1-3*.

in World War II.⁷¹ Those in a variety of different levels of command were forced to learn how to lead in their new positions as the war progressed.

Ultimately, the Blue Ridgers were able to learn from their mistakes and failures to have tanks and foot soldiers working closely together within the Battle of Argentan itself. The 317th Regiment did see more success than their brothers in the 318th because they were conscious of the need for cooperation with armored units. While the Germans, with their own combined arms capabilities, held off the regiment, the Americans were able to move forward in their assault with the help of concentrated fire from tanks, tank destroyers, and artillery weapons.⁷² This displays the 80th Division's ability to take observations from previous battle experiences and apply them to future operations against the German *Wehrmacht*.

The Coordination of Infantry and Artillery

The second element of combined arms examined in this thesis is the coordination of infantry and artillery units by the Blue Ridge Division. Artillery was an integral part of the combined arms team, and according to one veteran of the US Army in World War II, "No one knows the true value and worth of good artillery support better than an infantryman."⁷³ Fortunately for the United States Army, artillery doctrine was more developed than that of armored units at the early stages of the war.⁷⁴ The primary reason for this was that American fighting forces had been perfecting the craft of artillery for a longer period of time than they had been using tanks and tank destroyers. While these

⁷¹ Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War Two*, 109.

⁷² Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 32.

⁷³ Elliott B. Cheston Letter to Edward F. Naughton, September 23, 1966, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1.

⁷⁴ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 20.

armored behemoths made their first appearance in the First World War, military forces have been hurling large projectiles at one another since the age of the catapult and trebuchet. Even the United States, which did not exist during the Middle Ages, has used artillery in some shape form or fashion since the nation's birth in the 18th Century. World War I in particular was a pivotal conflict in the development of artillery doctrine. As historian Nick Lloyd demonstrates in his book *Hundred Days*, the belligerent nations in the War to End All Wars experienced significant growing pains in perfecting the use of artillery, but were finally able to improve their use of large caliber weapons near the end of the war by implementing the use of a creeping artillery barrage rather than a full scale preparatory bombardment.⁷⁵ The end result of these factors, Doubler argues, is that "In comparison to infantrymen and tankers, artillerymen found the transition from peacetime theory to battlefield conditions less taxing."⁷⁶

One of the main reasons for the success of combined artillery and infantry operations was the ability of Army leadership to delegate authority in the proper manner. Planning for artillery operations was very centralized at upper echelons of command, while the operations themselves were left to those officers and NCOs on the front lines.⁷⁷ Micromanagement is a death knell for combat operations. The chain of command exists for a purpose, and in the case of artillery units, the Army made effective use of the chain of command. This shows that the Americans did not rely solely on their industrial might for victory in the Second World War.

⁷⁵ Nick Lloyd, *Hundred Days: The Campaign That Ended World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 3-4, 30-38.

⁷⁶ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 20.

⁷⁷ Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy*, 20-21.

When the initial assault on Argentan failed, General McBride called for increased artillery fire on the town in an effort to soften up the German defenses before renewing the attack.⁷⁸ This shows that the Blue Ridge Division's commander understood the importance of sufficient artillery. However, he had failed to use the artillery at his disposal in initial preparations for the assault on Argentan. As a general who rose through the ranks as an artillery officer, McBride should have understood how imperative it was for the division's artillery to properly bombard the Germans prior to launching an attack.⁷⁹ However, the general did show he could learn from his mistakes and ordered the artillerymen to barrage the Germans before committing his foot soldiers to a second attempt at the town. Though McBride himself was not involved directly involved in individual artillery strikes, the responsibility for the 80th Division as a whole fell upon his shoulders.

As a testament to the idea that the United States Army's artillery doctrine was more developed and sound than that of its armored units, the August 1944 after action report of the 313th Field Artillery Battalion states, "All procedures and actions were orthodox and nothing was discarded or added."⁸⁰ The artillery units attached to the 80th Infantry Division were much better prepared to carry out their battlefield missions than their comrades in armored formations, as evidenced by the fact that this particular battalion was not forced to significantly change the way it carried out its fire missions

⁷⁸ Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit: US Army in World War II, European Theater of Operations* (Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, LLC, 2012), 534.

⁷⁹ Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War II*, 109.

⁸⁰ 313th Field Artillery Battalion After Action Report, August 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 7, <http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/313FA%20AfterAction%201944-08%20Aug.pdf>.

and provided artillery support to the infantrymen in the vicinity of Argentan. While the US Army expected World War II to be much more mobile than the First World War, there were instances in this conflict, like the engagement at Argentan, in which hostilities resembled the static nature of the Great War, making it difficult for armored units to operate at the peak combat effectiveness.

A history of the 318th Infantry Regiment states that on the evening of August 19th “seven battalions of our Corps artillery subjected Argentan to a terrific bombardment, setting it aflame and crumbing the German’s defenses.”⁸¹ This is one of the clearest examples of the importance of the coordination of infantry and artillery as well as the 80th’s ability to implement this doctrine. It was on the day following this bombardment that the 80th Infantry Division was able to finally take Argentan and close the Falaise Gap, showing that the use of artillery fire played a significant role in forcing the Germans to abandon their defensive positions.⁸² As previously stated, the initial artillery bombardment was not sufficient for the Blue Ridgers to capture Argentan. At this point, the division’s officers understood they would have to increase their use of artillery fire to allow infantry units to achieve their objectives.

While support from Company A of the 610th Tank Destroyer Battalion and Company B of the 702nd Tank Battalion was a significant boost to the 80th’s assault on Argentan, it was ultimately fire from the division’s artillery which allowed the Americans to take the town.⁸³ This shows that, true to the assertions of Michael Doubler, the

⁸¹ Thomas B. Castle, Martin G. Jenkins, Peter J. Stanchak, and Basil Verlangieri, *History: Second Battalion, 318 Infantry Regiment, 80th Division*, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 13.

⁸² Castle, et al., *History*, 13.

⁸³ Murrell, *318th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 7.

coordination of infantry and artillery was more developed and effective, at least early in the war, than that of infantry and armor within the 80th Infantry Division.⁸⁴ Considering that this chapter aims to set a benchmark for the performance of the division to compare other examples of their combat record, it is important to point out that their use of artillery was more effective than their use of tanks and tank destroyers at this point in the war, as this necessitates two separate standards, so to speak, by which the division's effectiveness is to be measured.

While the 80th Division was an inexperienced combat unit, and faced challenges in its first battle because of this, not all of the subordinate units of the Blue Ridge Division struggled to stay afloat. The 313th Field Artillery Battalion's after action report for the month of August states, "The first shock-of-combat was not disrupting and all personnel conducted themselves in a business-like fashion."⁸⁵ The most likely explanation for this assessment is that the United States Army was simply more prepared to fight with its artillery weapons than its armored components. The United States Army simply had more experience employing artillery fire than its armored capabilities. Tanks had been in existence only since the First World War. Artillery, on the other hand, had been used by military forces for centuries. For this reason, the training and preparation of artillery gunners was be more comprehensive and effective than the training tankers experienced.

⁸⁴ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 20.

⁸⁵ 313th Field Artillery Battalion After Action Report, August 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 7, <http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/313FA%20AfterAction%201944-08%20Aug.pdf>.

Another possible explanation for the relative ease with which the artillerymen adjusted to the realities of combat at Argentan was their separation from the worst of the carnage. One soldier of the Blue Ridge Division's artillery section said, "Everyone talked about the devastation at Argentan. Most of us in the gun sections missed the visual horrors of that battle. All we ever saw were the members of our crew, the cooks, and the ever present 1st Sgt."⁸⁶ While artillerymen played a crucial role in combined arms during the Second World War, their combat experiences were often different than those of infantrymen and tankers who were in close proximity with the enemy. Artillery guns were typically separated from the front lines in order to prevent enemy forces from firing directly upon them. As these men of the division were not as exposed to the bloody chaotic mess that is front line combat, it was easier for them to adjust to warfare and perform their duties at Argentan.

Conclusion and Overall Performance of the Blue Ridgers

Considering the 80th Infantry Division had never before seen combat on this scale, their performance at Argentan is commendable. This is not to say, however, that their actions in this engagement were without flaws. The division's ultimate success at Argentan did not come without a cost. The 80th Division suffered 432 casualties during the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap.⁸⁷ When compared to the total number of men in the

⁸⁶ Tales from Henpeck: Folklore of the 314th FA Battalion, Argentan-The Baptism of Fire, 80th Division Field Artillery Unit Reports, 80th DDAP, 6, http://www.80thdivision.com/OralHistories/314FABn_Folklore_3.pdf.

⁸⁷ History of the 305th Medical Battalion in France August 1944-December 1944, Miscellaneous Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/MiscReports/305thMedBn_History_AUG44-DEC44.pdf.

division at the beginning of the month of August (13,943), this means the Blue Ridgers suffered a 3.1% casualty rate at Argentan.⁸⁸

Casualties are inevitable in warfare, but the goal of a combat unit is to achieve its mission with as little bloodshed as possible. Therefore, subsequent chapters will examine the preponderance of casualties at the Blue Ridge Division's later engagements in order to determine if the division suffered more, less, or roughly the same amount of casualties as they did at Argentan. While casualty analysis is a gruesome (and admittedly imperfect) method for assessing combat effectiveness, it is a necessary addition to this thesis.

At times, casualty figures may be misleading to researchers and readers. Rather than examining gross casualty figures alone, they must be analyzed using percentages of the entire fighting force. Furthermore, as some battles are much larger in scale than others this must be taken into account as well. For example, the Battle of the Bulge, the topic of the final chapter of this thesis, was a significantly larger battle than the confrontation at Argentan. The Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap lasted only a few days. The Battle of the Bulge, on the other hand, began on 16 December 1944 and did not end until the 25th of January 1945. Therefore, when comparing battles like these, it is important to remember issues such as this. While it is not the intent of this thesis to trivialize the sacrifices made by the men who fought in World War II by reducing them to statistical analysis, it is, regrettably, one of the most effective, while flawed, methods of assessing combat effectiveness.

⁸⁸ Supplemental Data August 1944, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Aug44_Pt2.pdf.

While the majority of the analysis in this chapter focuses on the coordination of combined arms, the leadership of the 80th Division is also an important aspect. Men like Horace McBride also had lessons to learn from battle to apply to future engagements in Europe. As previously stated, combat leaders are an extremely important part of their units. It is not a stretch to claim that these men were the glue that held their units together. The officers of the Blue Ridge Division found themselves in a position where they would have to improve their leadership and combat command capabilities or face possible death, destruction, and defeat.

At the Battle of Argentan, and the closing of the Falaise Gap, the 80th Infantry Division experienced growing pains, as can be expected of a combat unit when it first encounters live fire and actual enemy soldiers. While the division did eventually achieve its objectives, it was not without delays or trial and error. There were problems regarding the proper implementation of armored units, artillery strikes, and issues with communication between units. However, these men were able to adapt to the deadly new world in which they found themselves and achieve their mission. While there were initial obstacles in coordinating the cooperation of infantrymen and tankers, the infantry/artillery team proved itself a capable force at the Battle of Argentan. Therefore, the benchmark is set in such a way that armored units showed much more room for improvement than artillery batteries.

Every combat unit must face its first experience of warfare, and for the 80th Infantry Division, this came at the French town of Argentan. Major Dean Dominique said of the aftermath of his first combat experience:

There we sat in the midst of chaos which neither of us had even dreamed possible a few weeks before. The stench of death hovered over the entire battlefield and yet we ate our lunch as calmly as if we sat in a restaurant in the US. The human body and spirit is infinitely resilient and quickly adapts to any circumstance, given a strong mind which can assess the situation.⁸⁹

The shock of combat was not lost on the men of the 80th Division. They were, as the saying goes, “In the Army now.” If they were to win the war against Nazi Germany and bring democracy back to the European continent, they would have to learn from both their successes and failures on the battlefield, beginning with the engagement at Argentan. The above quote shows that there were at least some men in the Blue Ridge Division who had the personal ability to overcome the hardships of combat. But would they be able to take their experiences from their first battle and apply them to future conflicts with the *Wehrmacht*? The following chapters of this thesis seek to answer that question. It should be noted that it is possible that the relative ease with which the Blue Ridge Division adjusted to combat was due to the fact that the Battle of Argentan was a relatively small engagement when compared to conflicts like the Battle of the Bulge. A German enemy which was in a more defensive posture than at later battles would not present the same resistance, thus making the battle comparatively less jarring.

The goal of this chapter is to create a benchmark to which the improvement, or lack thereof, of the Blue Ridge Division’s combat capabilities may be compared. As the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap illustrates, the 80th Division was an inexperienced unit that was more prepared to employ its artillery units than its armored capabilities. This was mostly due to the fact that the US Army had a more developed doctrine for artillery than tanks and tank destroyers. Tanks first appeared on the battlefield in the First World

⁸⁹ Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 38.

War. On the other hand, some semblance of field artillery has been in existence since before the advent of gunpowder. Both the officers and men of the division faced the challenge of taking their experiences from this battle and applying it to future engagements to ensure the 80th was at peak combat performance against its German adversary.

CHAPTER III – BLUE RIDGERS AND BROWN WATERS: THE 80TH INFANTRY

DIVISION CROSES THE MOSELLE RIVER



Figure 5. Soldiers of the 80th in the Moselle⁹⁰

In September 1944, the Blue Ridge Division, numbering 731 officers, 44 warrant officers, and 13,121 enlisted soldiers, faced one of its greatest challenges: the Moselle River.⁹¹ Averaging a width of 150 feet, six to eight feet deep, and with a current flowing at a pace of six to seven miles per hour, this body of water and the Germans defending it would be a thorn in the side of the 80th for a significant portion of the month. While the river itself created an obstacle for the Division, the terrain on the banks further added to the Blue Ridgers' difficulties. The area immediately surrounding the water was not

⁹⁰ Robert T. Murrell, *Hot on Trail of Retreating Germans, Members of the 80th Infantry Division, 318th Infantry Regiment Wade Across the Moselle River*, 1944, 430x345 px, 80th Division Digital Archives Project (80th DDAP), Photo Collections: Robert Murrell Collections (318th, M Company), <http://www.80thdivision.com/photos/Murrell/Murrell.html>.

⁹¹ 80th Division Operational History and Supplemental Data, September 1944, Supplemental Data: 80th DDAP, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Sep44_Pt2.pdf.

suitable for the tanks which are so important to massed firepower and combined arms. According to one report produced by the 80th, “the steep heights and numerous wooded areas channel tank movement along well defined avenues; the roads frequently bounded on one side by deeply ditched streams, on the other side by rises too steep for tanks.”⁹² Compounded with the fact that traversing a body of water under the threat of enemy fire was already exceedingly difficult for military forces these factors meant the Blue Ridgers would be severely challenged as they made their way further east across the Moselle River.

On 12 September 1944, Andrew Adkins Jr. was part of the 80th Infantry Division’s attempted crossing of the Moselle River, and was wounded along the way:

One of the shell fragments split open Cpl. Sidney Folmsbee’s arm. I was going to try and help him when a small piece of shrapnel hit me in the butt, which hurt like hell! I reached around and felt blood. I thought for sure that my ass had been shot off, but I could walk and yell, so I knew it wasn’t too bad.⁹³

A former cadet at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, Adkins’s testimony is but a small part of the experience of the Blue Ridge Division soldier in crossing the Moselle.⁹⁴ Once again, the Blue Ridgers were tasked with finding a way to achieve their objectives through the use of combined arms warfare. This time, they were battle tested, and presumably, their combat effectiveness had improved since their entanglement with the Germans at Argentan and the Falaise Gap.

⁹² 80th Division-Dieulouard Bridgehead Crossing, September 1944, Miscellaneous Reports: 80th Infantry Division Miscellaneous Reports, 80th DDAP 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/80th_DieulouardBridgeCrossing_SEP44.pdf.

⁹³ AZ Adkins, Jr. and Andrew Z. Adkins, III, *You Can’t Get Much Closer Than This: Combat with the 80th “Blue Ridge” Division in World War II Europe* (Havertown, Pennsylvania: Casemate Publishers, 2005), 36.

⁹⁴ Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can’t Get Much Closer Than This* 1.

The 80th Infantry Division was no longer an inexperienced combat unit. This is best evidenced by an excerpt from the unit history of the 80th Reconnaissance troop that discusses how the men of this unit of the division were forced to come to grips with the fact that they were truly engaged in combat:

The stark reality that the enemy is no longer a dream but cold blooded, living, breathing men who had just taken the lives of fellows we had lived with for so long, makes one mad at first that slowly tapers off with the thought that we have to continue on, that there will be many more days like this, that there will be many more killed, it's a hell of a job but from then on it was definitely we or they.⁹⁵

By the time they arrived at the Moselle River and began their attempts at crossing this body of water, the Blue Ridgers had made significant strides in adapting their outlooks on warfare. No longer were they the men who had to be physically forced to fight as they had at the Battle of Argentan.⁹⁶ They understood that in order to survive and defeat the Germans, they would have to give their all on the battlefield.

As in the previous chapter covering the engagement in Argentan and the 80th's role in closing the Falaise Gap, Chapter III begins with a brief description of the battle before analyzing the Division's combined arms capabilities and propensity to learn from its previous combat experiences. This chapter argues that, while the Blue Ridgers did ultimately succeed in crossing the Moselle River, the division would not do so on its first attempt, in large part due to the failure of the division to properly use artillery support as the infantry attempted to traverse the waters. Examples such as this display that combat units do not necessarily learn from their experiences and improve their fighting

⁹⁵ 80th Reconnaissance Troop-Troop History-Part 1, Miscellaneous Reports: 80th Division Field Artillery Reports, 80th Reconnaissance Troop, 80th DDAP, 13, http://www.80thdivision.com/UnitHistories/80th_ReconTroop-TroopHistory1.pdf.

⁹⁶ Hastings, *Overlord*, 292.

capabilities on a linear trajectory. At times, they do not remember the lessons from earlier engagements and regress in their combat effectiveness. However, the fault often lies with those in command of combat units rather than the enlisted men. The division's leadership, especially General Horace McBride, did not adequately prepare for the river crossing. This caused the men of the 80th to fail in their initial attempts to reach the eastern banks.

Furthermore, this chapter examines the question of combat leadership through the example of Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby, commander of the Division's artillery units.⁹⁷ In particular, this discussion of leadership examines the relationship between officers and men, as well as the concept of an officer who "leads from the front" rather than keeping him/herself entirely detached from their soldiers and the events on the battlefield.

The Situation on the Front

This chapter must begin with a chronicle of the grand narrative of events on the battle front in the European Theater. After the US Army closed the Falaise Gap, and after the breakout in Normandy, American forces began their pursuit of the German *Wehrmacht* across the French countryside. Fortunately for Allied forces, the encirclement of the German Seventh Army in the Falaise Pocket, in addition to *Wehrmacht* losses in the Normandy campaign, dealt a serious blow to the combat readiness of Hitler's military. According to some estimates, anywhere from 20,000 to 40,000 German soldiers were able to escape entrapment within the Allied pincer. However, relatively few of these

⁹⁷ "Order of Battle of the US Army-WWII-ETO, 80th Infantry Division," US Army Center of Military History (CMH), <https://history.army.mil/documents/ETO-OB/80ID-ETO.htm>.

men were members of actual combat units, and the typical combat division numbered only a few hundred men.⁹⁸ In addition to the vast number of men who were killed or captured during the action in the vicinity of Falaise, the Germans lost a significant amount of war materiel. Historian Martin Blumenson states, “One commander estimated, probably with some exaggeration, that not many more than 50 artillery pieces and perhaps that many tanks reached safety.”⁹⁹

Although it is difficult to know exactly how many prisoners the Allies captured when they encircled the Germans near Falaise, estimates hover around 50,000 individuals, with roughly 10,000 Germans killed in action. Furthermore, this number includes three captured German generals.¹⁰⁰ While the Americans did not emerge from Normandy unscathed, the Allies, and the United States Army, faced an enemy reeling from significant combat losses as it chased Hitler’s armies across northern France following the Normandy breakout.

Background of River Crossings

The goal off assaulting forces in a river crossing was to establish a defensible bridgehead on the opposite side of the body of water. Fortunately, the methods for crossing rivers were already well established in the United States Army when the 80th Division arrived at the Moselle. When facing strong resistance, these units would launch an attack with its men spread out across a significant portion of the battlefield. Conversely, those facing light resistance would choose individual points to concentrate their main assault. The crossing itself is exceedingly dangerous for advancing troops

⁹⁸ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 555.

⁹⁹ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 556.

¹⁰⁰ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 557-558.

because they are so exposed while in or on the water. This level of exposure made it much more difficult for attacking military forces effectively to employ massed firepower and maneuver. These actions took place in three phases: the actual crossing of the body of water in boats or on bridges, expansion of a bridgehead to prevent the enemy from establishing observation locations, and yet further expansion of the bridgehead to prevent the enemy from harassing those still on the river itself.¹⁰¹ The men of the Blue Ridge Division were forced to find a way to show their proficiency in combined arms warfare in order to make their way to the eastern banks of the Moselle River.

The Germans, by nature of their status as defending troops, held the advantage in river crossings. Furthermore, the terrain of the riverbanks were better suited for defense as well. The goal of the *Wehrmacht* was to push American forces back into the water and towards the western banks of the river. Furthermore, Hitler's forces enjoyed the luxury of concentrating their forces at individual crossing sites. The 80th, on the other hand, was forced to disperse its soldiers across a wide area on the battlefield, thereby weakening their offensive capabilities.¹⁰²

Blue Ridgers Crossing the River

The division's first attempts to cross the Moselle River took place on September 5th and 6th, 1944. However, these assaults on the German positions east of the river were largely unsuccessful. The divisional history goes so far as to describe these efforts as "abortive." The 80th lost 38 assault boats which, ideally, soldiers would have ridden upon as they crossed the river. Upon the realization that the American forces were not

¹⁰¹ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 157-158.

¹⁰² Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 158.

adequately prepared to ford the river, the Blue Ridgers withdrew from their positions to ready themselves for the next assault, which was to take place on the 12th.¹⁰³

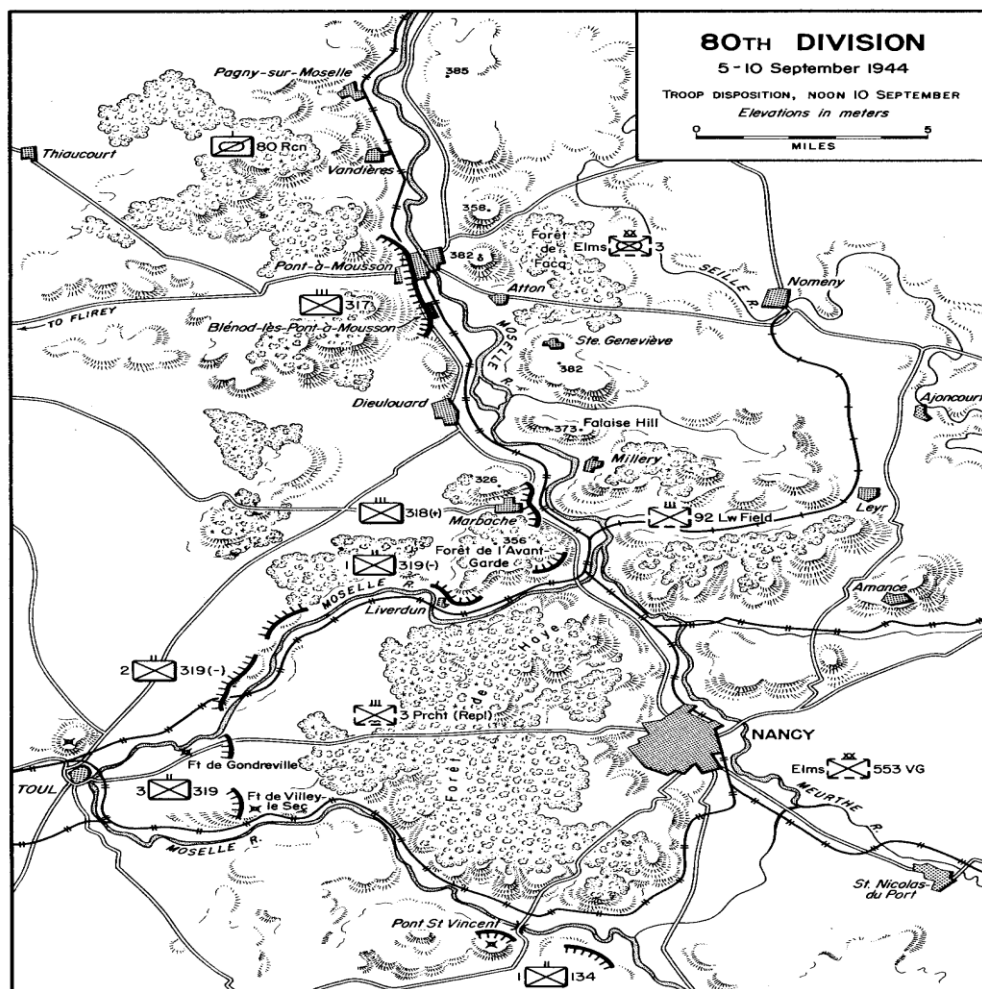


Figure 6. The Blue Ridge Division at the Moselle River¹⁰⁴

The plan originally orchestrated by the General Manton S. Eddy, commander of the XII Corps, of which the 80th Division was a part, was altered at the urgings of General McBride and General John S. Wood, commander of the 4th Armored Division. These

¹⁰³ Murrell, *Operational History*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign: United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1950), 61, https://history.army.mil/html/books/007/7-6-1/CMH_Pub_7-6-1.pdf.

officers convinced Eddy that the crossings, which had been delayed by logistical issues, should occur at several different points, with the armored units following close behind the foot soldiers, rather than using a single bridge already established by the infantry. The challenges presented by a disrupted supply chain are telling. It is imperative that a military force be properly supplied during their operations. The fact that the 80th would struggle in their first attempt to cross the Moselle may very well have played a role. While McBride and Wood thought this plan was the best course of action, no one took the time properly to reconnoiter the battleground.¹⁰⁵ Such actions on the part of McBride and Wood constitute a failure in leadership on the front. It is the responsibility of those in positions of authority to ensure their subordinates are placed in situations where they are most likely to succeed. By attempting to cross the river too soon, these men placed their soldiers in positions of undue danger.

Major James Hayes is highly critical of those who decided to send the 80th Infantry Division across the river when they did. Although an assessment of the actions of the division is later in this chapter, it is worth noting that Hayes says this decision was “a classic example of misplaced optimism on the part of the Corps Commander and his unwillingness to listen to the facts.”¹⁰⁶ For these reasons, the division was forced to reevaluate its position and the best possible crossing sites. Significant reconnaissance was in order, and the Blue Ridge Division used the days between their second and third attempts at crossing the river to gain more information on the terrain and find optimal crossing points.¹⁰⁷ It is worth noting that the Germans were in a state of retreat.

¹⁰⁵ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 161-162.

¹⁰⁶ Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 53.

¹⁰⁷ Murrell, *Operational History*, 35.

Therefore, McBride and other generals would, understandably, have wanted to press the advantage and continue the advance. However, in this situation, Army leadership would have done well to gather their troops and choose a better time to launch their assault.

When the day came for the men to make a third attempt to cross the river, leadership had a plan which was, in theory, much better developed than previous crossing attempts. The infantry would begin its assault at 0400, with artillery beginning its supporting fire a quarter of an hour later. Fifty machine guns operated by men from engineer battalions would provide small arms supporting fire. The 80th used several pontoon bridges to facilitate its crossing. These bridges were also erected by the US Army's Corps of Engineers, who one veteran describes as "unsung heroes."¹⁰⁸ Though few historians examine the war experience of these engineers, examples such as this show the crucial importance of those who were responsible for the infrastructure that allowed the US Army to continue its march across Europe.

Ultimately, the division received orders to attempt another crossing between Belleville and Dieulouard.¹⁰⁹ The 3rd Battalion of the 317th Infantry Regiment reached the opposite side of the Moselle River and created defensive positions 500 yards inland around 1500 on the 12th of September. Around the same time, the Germans began pounding the Blue Ridgers with artillery fire. However, they would not begin a coordinated counterattack against the Americans until the early hours of 13 September. The division found itself with a mixture of different types of troops fighting together. The chaos on the battlefield forced the engineers, tank destroyers, tanks, and foot soldiers to

¹⁰⁸ Loughlin, *Memoirs of World War II*, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Murrell, *Operational History*, 36.

fight in close proximity to one another and resulted in difficulty establishing communications. Ironically, this is the kind of cooperation that combined arms warfare demands of a military force. In this case, however, the division did not necessarily choose to have its different branches pushed together.¹¹⁰

After the 317th gained a foothold on the eastern banks of the river, the rest of the division followed close behind. The next task of the Blue Ridgers was to establish and consolidate a defensible bridgehead. Doing so would allow the division to bring the rest of its men and materiel across the river to continue the advance.¹¹¹ Luckily, the Americans attacked a location from which the *Wehrmacht* had recently removed soldiers to shore up defenses in other locations. The Germans would not give up Dieulouard easily, however. The *Wehrmacht* sent soldiers back to the area of the American crossing in an effort to prevent the Doughboys from advancing any further.¹¹² In order for the 80th Infantry Division to truly hold its position on the Moselle River and ensure it could continue its push across Europe, it was necessary to defend the tenuous bridgehead from German counterattacks.

After the 317th Regiment reached the opposite bank, General McBride sent the 318th Regiment across near Bezaumont, France. Much like their comrades in the 317th, the soldiers of the 318th were placed on high alert for the possibility of a German counterattack on the evening of 12 September 1944. In crossing the Moselle on this occasion, the regiment used 3,621 rounds of ammunition. For its part, the 319th Infantry Regiment conducted reconnaissance operations in a nearby forest on the eastern banks of

¹¹⁰ Murrell, *Operational History*, 37.

¹¹¹ Murrell, *Operational History*, 46.

¹¹² Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 169.

the river to determine enemy positions and possible locations for a counterattack from the Germans.¹¹³

When the *Wehrmacht* did launch the anticipated counterattack on the 13th of September, the division held its positions, with the infantry units receiving support from the 702nd Tank Battalion. The enemy—elements of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division—attacked with artillery and tank support. The 80th was learning that in order to be successful against the Germans, it must have close cooperation between its infantry and armored units. While it was not a failure of the infantry/armor team in the first attempt at crossing the river, it was nonetheless a failure in the combined arms team itself. In order to avoid further problems, the division had to make sure its foot soldiers and tankers worked together in a symbiotic relationship.¹¹⁴

The 4th Armored Division, the armored component of the US Army that worked so closely with the 80th Infantry Division, began crossing the river around 0830 hours on the morning of the 13th of September, meaning the 4th Armored did not begin to reach the opposite side of the river until over seventeen hours after the 317th Regiment reached defensive positions on the eastern banks. While there was some coordination of infantry and artillery units as the foot soldiers attempted to cross the waters, armored units did not cross the river en masse until a much later point in time. This displays that the leadership of the 80th Division, and 4th Armored Division, still had lessons to learn if they were to reach peak combat effectiveness in the European Theater of Operations. Seventeen and one half hours is a veritable eternity on the battlefield, and the soldiers of the 80th

¹¹³ Murrell, *Operational History*, 46.

¹¹⁴ Murrell, *Operational History*, 48.

Division needed all the support they could muster from their comrades in armored units. It is worth noting, however, the near impossibility of a simultaneous crossing of armored and infantry units. Simple logic states that there is only so much room for these elements on the river. Therefore, it is understandable that tankers and foot soldiers were unable to be in close proximity to one another at this time.¹¹⁵

While elements of the division faced difficulties in actually reaching the other side of the Moselle River, a different story presents itself when examining the Blue Ridgers' fighting capabilities in combat in and near towns on the eastern side of the river. The 1st Battalion of the 317th Regiment moved from positions near Landremont to a hill nearby the community of Serrieres on the 13th of September. Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion of the 318th Regiment was able to capture the town of Atton with relative ease on the 14th. This operation of the 318th was closely supported by elements of the 702nd Tank Battalion. This close coordination of armored and infantry units was crucial in the capture of Atton. Furthermore, the Blue Ridgers were able to defend against German counterattacks. While it was difficult to employ combined arms while in the act of crossing the Moselle River, the division showed that it possessed a greater ability to use firepower en masse when they were once again on dry land.¹¹⁶

Until the 80th Infantry Division could be said to have control of the bridgehead on the eastern banks of the Moselle River, its primary objective was to stave off wave after wave of German counterattacks. While the division showed it still had further lessons to learn were it to reach peak fighting power, the fact that the Blue Ridgers were able to

¹¹⁵ Murrell, *Operational History*, 48.

¹¹⁶ Murrell, *Operational History*, 48-49.

withstand these powerful assaults from the *Wehrmacht* shows that they were not an incompetent combat division. Efficiency on the battlefield, however, does not imply perfection. The 80th showed it had room for improvement while still achieving its primary objectives in the European Theater. For example, St. Genevieve and the nearby Hill 382 were alternatively under the control of the Americans and Germans on several occasions. However, the 80th was able to emerge from the struggle victorious. As the Germans launched their vicious attacks against American forces at the Moselle, the 3rd Battalion of the 319th Regiment found itself surrounded and cut off from its comrades in other units. It was during this encounter on the 15th of September that General Edmund W. Searby was killed in combat.¹¹⁷

On 16 September, the Germans attempted their final assault which was meant to push the Blue Ridgers back into and across the river. The historical record states,

...attacks against both flanks failed in the face of aggressive maneuvering by infantry and armor units and artillery and air support. Having failed to push the Americans back into the Moselle, the Germans began to withdraw toward the east. This last effort marked the end of the Dieulouard bridgehead battles, a series of engagements in which the American combined arms team showed its defensive abilities against the enemy's best efforts.

This clearly shows the ability of the division to stave off the German forces through the use of combined arms. While an imperfect coordination of massed firepower, the 80th nonetheless coordinated its infantry, armor, and artillery units in close cooperation with one another to defeat the Germans in the most efficient way possible.

¹¹⁷ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 171.

The Coordination of Infantry and Artillery

One of the problems which artillery units reported after the battle was a lack of understanding between infantry and artillery units. The after action report of the 313th Field Artillery Battalion for the month of September states, “There is a marked disregard on the part of the infantry commander on certain limitations of Field Artillery.”¹¹⁸ It is imperative that the units of different branches of combined arms understand the capabilities and limitations of one another. Without this understanding, a unit is incapable of operating effectively on the battlefield. This report also points out the importance of effective communications between all individuals involved in the use of artillery fire. It states that the location of the forward observer (men who were attached to infantry units to direct artillery strikes) was often not ideal, but that it was essential to maintain constant communication with this individual.¹¹⁹ These are lessons the 80th, and its attached artillery units, would have to keep in mind in the coming months as they drove towards the German homeland.

As previously stated, the 80th Infantry Division did not make effective use of its artillery in its first attempt to cross the Moselle River. This was a grave mistake on the part of the division’s leadership. American artillery doctrine was much more developed than its armored doctrine during the war.¹²⁰ Had the river crossing been preceded by a sufficient artillery barrage, the lives of many men may have been saved and subsequent

¹¹⁸ 313th Field Artillery Battalion After Action Report, September 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 2, <http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/313FA%20AfterAction%201944-09%20Sep.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ 313th Field Artillery Battalion After Action Report, September 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 2, <http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/313FA%20AfterAction%201944-09%20Sep.pdf>.

¹²⁰ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 20.

attempts at reaching the far banks may not have been necessary. This was a failure in military planning and operations. More importantly, perhaps, it was a breakdown in military leadership. The officers in charge of this river crossing, being responsible for the lives of the men under their command, should have taken the time to properly prepare for the river crossing.

Interestingly, during the planning phase for the crossing of the Moselle, Blue Ridge Division leadership understood that adequate artillery support was needed if the infantrymen were to reach their objectives on the opposite banks of the river. A summary of interviews with members of the division states, “Representatives of the air support and of the artillery were present...It was understood that both air and artillery support were to be used.”¹²¹ Although officers in the division understood that artillery support was vital to success in this operation, the implementation of their plans resulted in failure in the initial crossing attempt. While the Blue Ridgers had learned from previous experience that artillery was necessary, they had not yet applied these lessons on the battlefield. This resulted in significantly more casualties than may have occurred in the event of proper combined arms coordination. Again, however, it is possible that American leadership believed the time was right to press the advantage and continue the assault against the retreating Germans. Unfortunately, in this instance, things did not go according to their plans.

¹²¹ 317th-Moselle River Crossing Summary of Interviews-4-6 September 1944-Interview with Lieutenant Colonel LE Fisher, Regimental Executive Officer and Major JD Hayes, Former S-2 317th and Captain SA Ford, Former S-3 317th, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/317th_04-05SEP44_MoselleRiverCrossing_SummaryofInterviews.pdf.

There were instances, however, when the Blue Ridgers attempted to make effective use of artillery fire at the Moselle River. When in support of the 80th, the 314th Field Artillery Battalion, the 905th Field Artillery Battalion engaged in rolling artillery barrages to facilitate the division's attempts at crossing. A rolling barrage is the tactic of moving artillery fire forward at the same pace as infantry units.¹²² This requires that all parties involved pay extremely close attention to their actions, as a mistake can lead to casualties from friendly fire. Unfortunately, this particular attack did not achieve its objectives by darkness on the 6th of September. While the forces of the Blue Ridge Division were able to make their way across the river to the German defensive positions, they were unable to overtake their enemy on this particular attempt at crossing the river. However, this failure cannot be laid entirely on the divisions' artillery support. German defensive positions were particularly strong, as the *Wehrmacht* made use of heavy fortifications and pillboxes, which present a significant obstacle to attacking forces.¹²³

The importance of cooperation between infantry and artillery is shown through the account of a veteran of the 80th Infantry Division, Colonel William N. Taylor, who stated,

At the time I joined the division, it was conducting regimental combat team size field problems, and the 319th was actually in the field on one of these when I reported for duty. I recall on this exercise, as well as others that followed, the 905th always worked with us so closely and so well that we in the Infantry considered them as much a part of the regiment as the Infantry units. This same fine support and close relationship continued during combat right up to the time I was wounded...¹²⁴

¹²² Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, 30.

¹²³ 905th Field Artillery Battalion After Action Report, September 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, <http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/905AfterActionReportSep44.pdf>.

¹²⁴ William N. Taylor Letter to Edward F. Naughton, February 10, 1967, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1.

This example shows the close relationship between infantry and artillery units and how much these groups worked together. Due to these factors, it was imperative that infantry and artillery officers and men learned how to cooperate and communicate with one another to ensure the success of the 80th Infantry Division on the battlefield. Furthermore, Colonel Taylor's letter continues to display that American artillery doctrine was more developed during the Second World War than that of armored units.

On the 14th of September, the 3rd Battalion of the 317th Infantry Regiment received an extremely effective artillery barrage from the Cannon Company of the 317th Regiment and the 313th Field Artillery Battalion. A member of this unit stated, "The artillery brought four battalions of time fire on this point, and the slaughter of German troops was terrific. The dead lay on the hill like flies."¹²⁵ This particular event occurred after the successful crossing of the river. At this point in the battle, division leadership understood the importance of using artillery fire to great effect against German forces. For this reason, large amounts of ordnance were fired on the *Wehrmacht*, allowing the Blue Ridgers to stave off a German counterattack, showing a propensity for the division to learn from its previous experiences on the battlefield.

¹²⁵ 317th-Moselle Operation-12-15 September 1944-Interview with Major Hayes, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 80th DDAP, 3, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/80thAAR_Moselle_Operation_317IF_Major_Hayes.pdf.



Figure 7. An American Soldier at the Moselle¹²⁶

Although the 80th Infantry Division did not properly utilize its artillery units during the early stages of the crossing of the Moselle River, they were able to improve in this aspect and overcome the *Wehrmacht* standing in their way. The initial crossing of the river was a catastrophe due to the lack of adequate artillery support for the foot soldiers. However, subsequent crossings, as well as the consolidation and defense of the Moselle bridgehead on the eastern banks, were more successful because the Blue Ridgers and their leadership were more effective in using their artillery capabilities in conjunction with their infantry components.

The Coordination of Infantry and Armor

One of the challenges the Blue Ridgers faced in crossing the Moselle was finding a way effectively to move their tanks and tank destroyers from the western banks to the

¹²⁶ Tracy Dungan, *Damage at the Moselle River*, 1944, 400x291 px, 80th DDAP, Photo Collections: Tracy Dungan Collection, <http://www.80thdivision.com/photos/Dungan/Dungan.html>.

eastern. Due to terrain features and inclement weather, the ground was not suited for the transportation of these heavy vehicles.¹²⁷ Simply put, while the Blue Ridge Division had more combat experience than at the Battle of Argentan, the crossing of the Moselle River would present a different challenge altogether. Nonetheless, the core of the division's mission had not changed. This American division would have to find a way to effectively coordinate the various branches of combined arms in such a way that they complimented and supported one another in the European Theater.

The nature of warfare during river crossings poses much different challenges than those in which the primary objective is a city, fortified location, or geographic features like a hill. While in battles with these characteristics, foot soldiers and tanks may operate in close proximity with one another, this is not the case during conflicts in which a military force must navigate its way across a river. The situation was no different for the 80th Infantry Division at the Moselle River in September 1944. The 317th Regiment's goal on the opposite side of the river was to establish a defensible bridgehead. Only then would the 4th Armored Division be able to send the bulk of its men and materiel to the eastern banks.¹²⁸ Because of this, it was extremely difficult for tanks and tank destroyers to directly support infantry units in the act of crossing the river.

This is not to say, however, that such fire support was wholly impossible. One tactic which the US Army employed when fighting with tank support was the direct fire of large caliber weapons (i.e. artillery pieces and armored vehicles) at enemy positions.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Murrell, *Operational History*, 35.

¹²⁸ 80th Division-Moselle River Crossing Analysis-4-5 September 1944, Miscellaneous Reports: 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/80th_MoselleRiverCrossing_Analysis.pdf.

¹²⁹ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 111, 135.

In fact, the Blue Ridge Division, with the assistance of the 610th Tank Destroyer Battalion, employed direct fire of large caliber weapons at the Moselle River during the initial crossing which fell short of its objectives.¹³⁰ While the division did attempt to provide mutual support for its infantrymen and tankers, it was ultimately not until the men reached the opposite side of the river and established a bridgehead that truly effective armored support arrived.

Major James Hayes of the 317th Infantry Regiment stated, “We emplaced about 32 machineguns, with two tank destroyers, along the forward slope of the hill, Boi de Cuite. These guns were emplaced aimed and set for overhead fire by the infantry, and were to be fired by the engineers during the crossing.”¹³¹ This shows that the division understood the importance of making sure infantry and armored units were operating in close cooperation with one another, even if they could not be in each other’s immediate proximity. From the lessons learned at Argentan, leadership of the Blue Ridge Division worked to improve the unit’s combat effectiveness and fighting capabilities.

This example also shows the division’s ability to think on its feet and adapt to challenges presented by different fields of battle and terrain features. While they were unable to have tanks move alongside infantrymen as they crossed the Moselle River, officers and NCOs of the division found new methods to make the most of the firepower

¹³⁰ 317th-Moselle River Crossing Summary of Interviews-4-6 September 1944-Interview with Lieutenant Colonel LE Fisher, Regimental Executive Officer and Major JD Hayes, Former S-2 317th and Captain SA Ford, Former S-3 317th, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/317th_04-05SEP44_MoselleRiverCrossing_SummaryofInterviews.pdf.

¹³¹ 317th/2nd Battalion-Moselle River Crossing with Assault Boats-4-12 September 1944-Interview with Major James Hayes, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th-2nd Battalion Reports, 80th DDAP, 3, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/317th_2dBn_05-06SEP44_MoselleRiverCrossing_AssaultBoatCrossing.pdf.

at their disposal. Although it is the United States Marine Corps that adheres to the idea of “improvise, adapt, and overcome,” the 80th Infantry Division of the United States Army showed the ability to do just that during hostilities at the Moselle River.

Another example of the importance of the relationship between infantrymen and their comrades in armored vehicles took place on the 13th of September and involved men of the 2nd Battalion of the 318th Infantry Regiment. Still waiting for tanks and tank destroyers to arrive from the western banks of the Moselle, these men were caught in the open by German tanks with no way to defend themselves. Left with no other options, they were forced to surrender to the Germans and become prisoners of war. However, once their own armored support arrived, these Blue Ridgers were rescued and able to continue their fight against the *Wehrmacht*.¹³² Because the difficulties in sending armored units across the river after foot soldiers, American infantrymen found themselves at a disadvantage on the battlefield. However, division leadership had learned the importance of ensuring these units were in close proximity with one another, and sent tanks and tank destroyers across the river as fast as possible to avoid situations such as this.

Once the division was able to send its armored components across the Moselle River, the effectiveness of the combined arms team improved significantly. As previously stated, the division knew from its experiences at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap how to ensure cooperation between infantry and armored units. On the 16th of September, the day of the Germans’ final attempts to repel the 80th Divisions assault across the Moselle,

¹³² 318th/2nd Battalion-Moselle Crossing-12-15 September 1944-Interview with Captain Charles Gaking, S-3 318th/2nd Battalion, Miscellaneous Reports: 318th Infantry Regiment Reports, 1st Battalion Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/80thAAR_Moselle_Crossing-Interview_with_Capt_Charles_Gaking_318th_S3.pdf.

two battalions of the 317th Infantry Regiment were able to stop a *Wehrmacht* counterattack launched at the bridgehead. According to Robert Murrell's history, "The enemy counterattacked three times against the 2nd Battalion from Foret De Focq, using infantry and armor. The attack was repulsed by the 3rd and 1st Battalions along with help from the 702nd Tank Battalion."¹³³ Interestingly, the 3rd Battalion of the regiment lost the town of St. Genevieve to a German assault, and the history does not make mention of support from armored units.¹³⁴ Taken from this example, the Blue Ridgers showed they knew the most effective way to fight was through the close coordination of combined arms capabilities. However, they were not able to properly carry out this doctrine at every available opportunity.

The papers of the 4th Armored Division show that the proper use of tanks is simply different when faced with river crossings. A report used to teach proper tank warfare doctrine at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas states, "Except for such employment as attacks on fortified areas, river crossings, etc., the tanks of an armored division should lead as the striking force, even though the proportion of tanks available is less than that of infantry."¹³⁵ While this report deals specifically with events which transpired at the Battle of the Bulge, it nonetheless shows the importance of a combat unit reaching the understanding that different terrain features and objectives on the battlefield necessitate different tactics. In the case of the Moselle River crossing, the 80th Infantry Division was forced to employ its armored components in the most effective

¹³³ Murrell, *319th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 20.

¹³⁴ Murrell, *319th Infantry Regiment History*, 20.

¹³⁵ 4th Armored Division-Relief of the 101st Airborne Division, Armor-4th Division Papers, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 11.

way possible, which meant tanks and tank destroyers would not be able to operate in close proximity to infantrymen until both components of the combined arms team reached the eastern banks. These examples show that, while the division was imperfect, the Blue Ridgers had the ability to learn from their experiences on the battlefield to make the most of their combined arms capabilities and improve overall combat effectiveness.

Assessing Overall Performance

Ultimately, the Blue Ridge Division was successful in crossing the Moselle River. However, there were problems with its efforts from the outset of the assault. As previously stated, division leadership (i.e. Horace McBride) did not adequately prepare for the men to ford the river. While Major James Hayes blames the commander of the XII Corps, McBride should not avoid scrutiny.¹³⁶ By failing adequately to plan for this combat operation, McBride was “planning to fail.” For any military operation to be successful, leadership must take the time to ensure they have all the facts before proceeding with their mission. Had the commander of the Blue Ridgers realized the need to ensure his units had accurate intelligence on the terrain and quality and quantity of German defenses, disaster on the first crossing could have been avoided altogether. An analysis of the 80th's actions at the Moselle River shows that the Americans did not have an adequate picture of the situation they faced. In particular, military intelligence could not ascertain the nature of artillery at the disposal of the Germans.¹³⁷ While it is impossible to know every minute detail of the capability of enemy forces in battle, it was nonetheless a mistake to proceed with the

¹³⁶ Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 53; Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 162.

¹³⁷ Operations of Enemy in Sector of 80th Infantry Division on Attack on Moselle River, 4-15 September 1944, Miscellaneous Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/80thAAR_Operations_of_Enemy_in_Sector_of_80thID_on_Attack_on_Moselle_River.pdf.

crossing of the Moselle River without ensuring the 80th and other units had a better understanding of what lay before them.

Many in the armed forces know the core tenant of Murphy's Law: anything that can go wrong will go wrong. With this in mind, military leaders, including those of the 80th Infantry Division, owed it to their men and their country to ensure they had all the facts before deciding on a course of action. While noble to attempt to end a war quickly, and potentially spare soldiers from being maimed or killed, which these men were presumably attempting to do, their mistake was in rushing to launch a river crossing without making the necessary preparations. Thus, many men may have needlessly lost their lives.

As in the analysis of the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap, an examination of casualty figures helps researchers understand the 80th Division's effectiveness at the Moselle River. During the month of September 1944, the Blue Ridgers suffered 40 officers and 539 enlisted men killed, 118 officers and 2,279 enlisted men wounded, and 26 officers and 659 enlisted men determined to be missing in action. In total, the division saw 3,651 casualties during this month. Of these, 569 men made the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefields of France.¹³⁸ While this is a significantly large number when compared to the casualty figures from the month of August, it must be remembered that one of the major battles of that month, the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap, was significantly shorter than the crossing of the Moselle.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ G-1 After Action Report, 1-30 September, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_SEP44.pdf.

¹³⁹ G-1 After Action Report, 1-31 August, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_AUG44.pdf.

When compared to the division's total strength at the beginning of August, the Blue Ridgers suffered a 3.8% casualty rate. In contrast, this number jumps to a much higher 26.3% for the month of September.¹⁴⁰ Taken at face value, this would mean that the division's combat effectiveness was significantly lower in September than in August. However, the fact that the Germans defending the Moselle River enjoyed a marked advantage due to the nature of the battlefield and their defensive positions that they did not experience during the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap. As stated in the previous chapter on the engagement at Argentan, casualty figures are a useful tool for measuring combat effectiveness. However, confounding variables should not be overlooked in this type of analysis.

In the end, while the Blue Ridge Division succeeded in crossing the Moselle River and continuing its drive across Europe, the men and leaders of this division still had lessons to learn if they were to reach peak combat performance. McBride and other officers in the 80th would have to continue to improve the division's ability to coordinate its infantry, armor, and artillery on the battlefield. Otherwise, the Blue Ridgers would continue to see increases in casualties and further difficulty in achieving their objectives and defeating their German adversaries.

¹⁴⁰ G-1 After Action Report, 1-30 September, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_SEP44.pdf.; G-1 After Action Report, 1-31 August, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_AUG44.pdf.; Supplemental Data September 1944, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Sep44_Pt2.pdf; Supplemental Data August 1944, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Aug44_Pt2.pdf.

Combat Leadership at the Moselle

One of the most well-known memoirs from World War II's other theater, the recollections of Eugene B. Sledge, is likewise permeated with commentary on the leadership this enlisted Marine saw in the Pacific Theater.¹⁴¹ The preponderance of soldiers who wrote about their thoughts on leadership shows the importance of those in charge on the battlefield. As such, this chapter includes an examination of the leadership qualities of the Blue Ridge Division's artillery section commander, Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby.¹⁴² Officers like Searby are integral parts of military organizations. Therefore, it is extremely important to examine their leadership capabilities as they are crucial factors in the outcome of a battle. Effective leaders can turn momentum towards their side of the conflict. Likewise, incompetent leadership can lead to failure on the battlefield. As this section of the chapter will show, General Searby was well-respected by his men and embodied the idea of the officer who "led from the front."

Before examining the leadership of Searby, one must understand what was considered quality leadership in the United States Army. Only then can one understand why Searby's men remembered him in such a positive way and respected him so greatly. Generally speaking, Americans valued leaders who cared for the wellbeing of those under their authority or command. Historian Danny S. Parker argues that soldiers in the United States Army expected unique qualities of their superiors when compared to how other nations like Germany or Great Britain. Americans valued leadership by consensus, which Parker states arises from American democratic ideals. Furthermore, he argues,

¹⁴¹ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*.

¹⁴² "Order of Battle of the US Army," US Army Center of Military History, <https://history.army.mil/documents/ETO-OB/80ID-ETO.htm>.

“American commanders, like the GI troops, were expected to have a human side other than just soldiering; any US leader had to be a regular guy. This meant the ability to get the job done when need be, but then to ‘knock off’ at the appropriate times, play poker and down a drink. Anything less was suspect.”¹⁴³ By contrast, Parker states that the British were not fond of leadership by consensus and mostly based their qualifications for an officer’s commission on social status. In Germany, on the other hand, one rose through the ranks and achieved higher status through performance in combat alone.¹⁴⁴

There are times when some soldiers see examples of extremely poor leadership from a superior and learn what not to do when interacting with those they command. One powerful example of this is Major Winters’s experiences with the man who was in charge of training his company for combat in Europe. Winters says this man, Captain Herbert Sobel, was “not just unfair; he was plain mean.”¹⁴⁵ This description of Sobel displays that Winters believed officers, and anyone placed in a position of leadership, should show compassion to his or her charges where appropriate. Winters’s views of leadership are summed up perfectly in one line from his memoir: “The key to a successful combat leader is to earn respect, not because of rank, but because you are a man.”¹⁴⁶ A true leader is one who commands respect because of his or her personal qualities rather than the position of power in which they find themselves.

Eugene Sledge also delves into the issues of leadership on the front lines of combat. His company commander for part of his time in the Pacific Theater was a man

¹⁴³ Danny S. Parker, *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, 1944-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 1991), 23.

¹⁴⁴ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 23.

¹⁴⁵ Winters and Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 23.

¹⁴⁶ Winters and Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 147.

named Captain Andrew Haldane. The young Marine greatly appreciated the interest Haldane showed in his life outside of the Corps.¹⁴⁷ Sledge's commentary in this situation shows the importance of an officer who cares for the wellbeing of his men. A leader's greatest asset are the people under his or her command, and when he or she shows they care for their charges, subordinates are more willing to carry out a task for their leaders.

Another example of excellent leadership from *With the Old Breed* is when Sledge retells the time he witnessed an officer from the rear echelon—such as those in charge of supply—helping unload ammunition during the Battle of Peleliu. Although this man was not required to move towards the battle front and help enlisted men with this job, he nevertheless chose to do so, potentially putting himself in harm's way. This episode left an impression on Sledge, who goes on to mention that this officer, Captain Paul Douglas, was wounded later in the war because he continued to carry ammunition to those who so desperately needed it. Clearly this was a man who cared for the welfare of his subordinate Marines and had excellent leadership qualities.¹⁴⁸

However, much like Winters, Sledge sees examples of poor leadership during World War II. A first lieutenant whom Sledge refers to only as "Shadow" is portrayed in a very negative light:

Shadow's disposition was worse than his appearance. Moody, ill-tempered, and highly excitable, he cursed the veteran enlisted men worse than most DIs (writer's note: drill instructors) did recruits in boot camp. When he was displeased with a Marine about something, he didn't reprimand the man the way our other officers did. He threw a tantrum.

¹⁴⁷ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 46.

¹⁴⁸ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 96-97.

Sledge's commentary clearly shows that enlisted men were acutely aware of the leadership qualities of their military superiors. Generally speaking, those who can best comment on the leadership of those in a military organization are the individuals who occupy lower positions along the chain of command. For this reason, commentary on the leadership qualities of Edmund Searby will draw from sources of his subordinates within the 80th Infantry Division.

While these examples show the leadership of officers significantly lower on the chain of command than General Searby, they nonetheless show the importance of effective leadership as well as some of the qualities which make up a good leader. While not all of these traits translate exactly to the qualities of an effective flag officer, they are relevant to general nonetheless. For example, a general is not expected to be on the front lines with his or her soldiers, a quality general must make his presence felt among his subordinates. As this discussion of the leadership qualities of Edmund Searby will display, the general was highly regarded by his men, and certainly fits the bill of an excellent combat leader. "I will always remember General Searby with a special fondness, courages, and many other fine traits too numerous to mention and still with an excellent sense of humor," said one of the men under Searby's command in the European Theater.¹⁴⁹ While this quote does not provide specifics of this individual's leadership qualities, it does well to set the stage for a discussion of them. To be remembered in such high regard by a veteran of the 80th Infantry Division is indicative of a man who took great care to be an effective military leader.

¹⁴⁹ Notes on General Searby, Edward F. Naughton Papers, US Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1.

Another quality of an exceptional leader is that he or she holds subordinates accountable for their actions and expects them to act with integrity. One such example of General Searby displaying this quality is detailed by his personal driver, George W.

Shear:

Another time we had captured some prisoners and were sitting around under some trees. A Lieutenant of the Fifth Rangers came up and started berating the men for not using their guns on the prisoners, not noticing the general. The general then stood up and said 'If you big brave boys want to show them go ahead, we already have them captured and taken their weapons.' The lieutenant looked like his face fell in when he saw the general. His men looked sheepish too.¹⁵⁰

This example also shows that Edmund Searby had the propensity to show compassion to those under his supervision. Even more remarkable is the fact that the men he was protecting were his enemies, members of the German *Wehrmacht*. Even though he was embroiled in one of the most brutal conflicts of the 20th Century, Searby nonetheless understood the value of human life. He was not willing to allow his men to mistreat their prisoners, which would, in addition, bring discredit both to the 80th Infantry Division and the United States Army, something the general would not tolerate.

General Searby in this example also showed exceptional leadership in this situation simply by being present with some of his, presumably, enlisted soldiers. Much like the Marine officer who helped Sledge and his comrades unload ammunition in the Pacific, Searby was not a combat commander who refused to venture toward the front lines of the battlefield. He knew that his men were risking their lives for their country, and wanted to display the solidarity he felt with the soldiers. In doing so, General Searby

¹⁵⁰ Notes on Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby from His Driver George W. Shear, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, 1.

displayed the leadership trait of an individual who cares for the wellbeing of his charges. This seemingly insignificant event involving the general shows more than one of his excellent leadership qualities: both his refusal to bring discredit upon the United States Army and the care he showed for the enlisted men under his command.

Quality leaders are tasked with knowing when to make sacrifices for the greater good of the mission. There is no easy decision in combat, and men like Searby must be prepared to make these decisions. Again the general's personal driver tells of one of his interactions with the division's artillery commander:

The general wanted to see what was holding up the column so we drove up to the lead vehicles. Found a German road block in a grove of trees up ahead. A major reported to the general. He said if we sent a tank around the corner it will be knocked out. General Searby called for artillery which shelled the trees. General told the major to send the lead tank out followed by two more. The lead tank moved out and was hit and set on fire. The other two moved around it and got into the German positions and ended the resistance. The major, feeling badly about his tank, said we sacrificed one tank. The general said 'We could have sacrificed the whole column.'¹⁵¹

In this situation, Searby understood that, while it is unfortunate and not desirable to lose any men or materiel, it is nonetheless a necessity of warfare. While the general certainly did not desire for the tank to be destroyed, or the men inside to be maimed or killed, he knew that in order for the 80th ID to advance across Europe and defeat the Germans, they would be called upon to make sacrifices. Military action is notorious for placing men and women into positions in which they have to make nearly impossible choices. However, because the only wrong decision is to make no decision at all, Edmund Searby chose to

¹⁵¹ Notes on Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby from his Driver George W. Shear, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, 2.

send a tank into enemy fire for the greater good of the mission and the nation, proving himself to be an effective leader.

One of the most powerful examples that displays the leadership of Edmund Searby took place on the 14th of September 1944. While helping soldiers of the 80th Division fight off a German counterattack, the general was killed by enemy fire.¹⁵² According to Searby's driver, the general consistently put himself in dangerous situations as he attempted to find the best position to place his forward observers.¹⁵³ It was for reasons such as this that one of Searby's subordinate commanders commented that he believed those in infantry units were more familiar with the general than his own artillery solders.¹⁵⁴ A man willing to risk his own life, something many general officers are certainly hesitant to do, Searby showed that he prioritized the mission and the wellbeing of his own men over his own personal safety. The general made the infamous ultimate sacrifice for his comrades and his country, displaying that he was an exceptional leader willing to do whatever was asked of him to ensure victory against Hitler and Nazi Germany.

In researching the war record of General Searby, one does come across an instance in which the 80th's artillery commander stumbled in his leadership and military capabilities at the Moselle River. The 317th Infantry Regiment was forced to make more than one attempt at crossing the river, and the first attempt was a failure for several reasons. However, in regards to General Searby's leadership, the artillery fire in support

¹⁵² Murrell, *Operational History*, 51.

¹⁵³ Notes on Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby from his Driver George W. Shear, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, 3.

¹⁵⁴ On General Searby, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, 1.

of the regiment was simply insufficient.¹⁵⁵ While Searby consistently made efforts to care for his men and their wellbeing, he did not effectively do so when the 317th made its first attempt to cross the river. As the commander of the division's artillery, it was his responsibility to ensure those struggling to reach the far banks had the support they needed to achieve their objectives. Unfortunately for the men of the 317th, Searby failed in his duty to provide them with adequate artillery fire to cover their crossing.

In the defense of General Searby, he did have orders from higher command, in this case General McBride, to proceed with the river crossing. However, if leadership and decision making by consensus was truly valued in the United States Army, then Searby could have potentially raised respectful objections to his orders.¹⁵⁶ Some of Searby's superior officers showed a propensity to make decisions without fully understanding the situation at hand.¹⁵⁷ Had the general displayed more effective leadership at this point in the war, he would have recognized that his units needed more time effectively to prepare their artillery positions and procedures for the task at hand. Unfortunately, he did not do so, and the first attempts at reaching the far banks ended in failure and significant casualties for the Blue Ridge Division.¹⁵⁸

Nevertheless, Searby consistently proved himself to be an effective leader during the Second World War. His leadership qualities can be summarized in one quote from Colonel Daniel J. Minahan, commander of the 314th Field Artillery Battalion: "He was

¹⁵⁵ Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can't Get Much Closer than This*, 34.

¹⁵⁶ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 23.

¹⁵⁷ Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can't Get Much Closer than This*, 34; Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 53; Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War II*, 109.

¹⁵⁸ 317th Infantry Regiment S-1 Report, September 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_317S-1_SEP44.pdf.

one of the finest men I ever knew. Outstanding in devotion to duty, loved the Army, absolutely fearless, most concerned about the welfare of his men, indifferent to personal discomfort to himself.”¹⁵⁹ A military leader can receive no higher praise than that from his or her subordinate soldiers. As evidenced by the accounts of his driver and other men who served under Searby’s command, this general was, while imperfect, beloved by his men and dedicated to his duty as an officer of the United States Army. Individuals like General Edmund Searby played a crucially important role in leading the Allied forces towards victory.

Ultimately, those in positions of leadership play a vital role in the outcome of military actions. While it is the men in the lowest enlisted positions who do most of the “dirty work” or “heavy lifting,” there must be an individual to rally soldiers together at all different levels of command. Without someone with extensive knowledge of the finer details of military planning, training, and the conduction of combat, armed forces units can find themselves without direction. However, an effective military leader is someone who has much more than knowledge of the military alone. Much as an athlete with raw talent must refine his or her abilities to succeed in their sport, military leaders must take their knowledge and apply it with effective leadership techniques. This discussion of General Searby has barely scratched the surface of what an effective leader should be. While care for the wellbeing of one’s subordinates, willingness to lead from the front and be put in harm’s way, and the ability to make difficult decisions are vital characteristics for a combat leader, this is by no means an exhaustive list of desirable qualities. Such an examination of military leadership could without question easily fill a massive tome, let

¹⁵⁹ On General Searby, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, 1.

alone a short section of a master's thesis. Leadership is so vital because, according to General George Patton, "Leadership is the thing that wins battles. I have it, but I'll be damned if I can define it."¹⁶⁰ Without competent leaders, an army cannot function or succeed on the battlefield.

Conclusion

There were many instances in which the United States Army was forced to cross rivers in the European Theater.¹⁶¹ However, there were few, if any, which matched the lasting importance of the confrontation at the Moselle River. This particular event of the Lorraine Campaign was used, at least up until 2014, as a case study by the United States Army at the Infantry School and the Command and General Staff Colleges.¹⁶²

Furthermore, some have stated that the crossing of the Moselle "had no parallel in US military history since Ulysses S. Grant's army struggled to cross the Mississippi and strike at Vicksburg in 1863."¹⁶³ To draw comparisons between this battle and one of the decisive confrontations in the American Civil War alone shows the importance of the crossing of the Moselle River. For these reasons, it is imperative to continue studying the performance of the United States Army and the 80th Infantry Division at this battle.

The 80th Division's experiences at the Moselle River indicate that military units do not necessarily learn and improve their combat effectiveness on a linear trajectory, as shown by their failure to employ massed firepower from the onset of this battle.

However, while the 80th Division was not successful in its initial crossing of the Moselle,

¹⁶⁰ Winters and Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 283.

¹⁶¹ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 157-191.

¹⁶² Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 56.

¹⁶³ Jan Elvin, *The Box from Braunau: In Search of My Father's War* (New York: AMACOM, 2009), 37.

it did learn from its mistakes and improve its use of combined arms warfare; especially in regards to the use of sufficient artillery fire. In the case of armored units, the primary obstacle of the division was determining how to best use their tanks and tank destroyers in a situation in which they could not be in close proximity to infantry units as they crossed the river itself. Once the division reached the opposite side of the river, armored units were utilized in their full capacity as support for infantrymen. While tanks and other armored vehicles are crucial components of the combined arms team, it was ultimately the failure of the artillery branch during the division's first attempt to cross the river which was the deciding factor in the failure of the crossing itself. Once the Blue Riders effectively used their full artillery capabilities, they were able to make their way across the water and create a defensible bridgehead on the opposite banks of the Moselle River.

CHAPTER IV – BLUE RIDGERS AT THE BULGE: THE 80TH INFANTRY DIVISION
IN HITLER’S ARDENNES OFFENSIVE



Figure 8. Americans in Heiderscheid, Luxembourg¹⁶⁴

One of the greatest challenges the Blue Ridge Division faced during the Second World War came in the winter of 1944 and 1945.¹⁶⁵ One of the primary objectives for the 80th Division was the liberation of the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division which was trapped in the encircled city of Bastogne, Belgium. This confrontation, known as the Battle of the Bulge, took place from 16 December 1944 to 25 January 1945. The Germans, having been in a state of retreat virtually since the breakout in Normandy,

¹⁶⁴ Tracy Dungan, *Heiderscheid, Luxembourg*, 1944, 400x295 px, 80th Division Digital Archives Project (80th DDAP), Photo Collections, Tracy Dungan Collection, <http://www.80thdivision.com/photos/Dungan/Dungan.html>.

¹⁶⁵ The Battle of the Bulge has a large historiography from which to gather information. While only a few have been directly cited in this work in presenting a narrative of the greater events on the front, what follows is a more comprehensive list of works which at least tangentially examine the battle. Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*; Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*; Hastings, *Inferno*; Ray J. Clark, *Journey to Hell: The Fiery Furnaces of Buchenwald* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Pentland Press, Inc., 1996); Pearson and Ludt, *Enroute to the Redoubt*; Winters and Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*; Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*.

launched a last ditch assault in an effort to turn the tide of the war in their favor. Because this battle was, at least initially, defensive in nature for the US Army, it would present a much different test for the men of the 80th Infantry Division. Furthermore, Hitler directed his forces to send this attack through the Ardennes Forest, legends of which led many to believe was impenetrable by a military force.¹⁶⁶

These factors meant the Blue Ridgers would be forced to fight in significantly different terrain when compared to their engagements at Argentan and the Moselle River. However, it was the weather these men endured that was one of the greatest obstacles to success in the Ardennes Forest. William W. Lamond, a veteran of the 80th Infantry Division stated, when asked what he believed was the most difficult part of the Battle of the Bulge, “It was the cold and no place to get warm.”¹⁶⁷ In fact, the winter of 1944-1945 was the coldest that Europe had experienced in fifty years.¹⁶⁸ This battle, a final case study for the combat capabilities of the Blue Ridge Division, argues that the men of the 80th had learned from their experiences, triumphs, and failures at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap and the crossing of the Moselle River to become an effective fighting force at the Battle of the Bulge.

As the Battle of the Bulge was such a massive battle, with so many different events taking place over the course of the engagement, it is impossible within the scope of this thesis to examine the 80th's involvement in the Ardennes Offensive in its entirety. For this reason, the final chapter of this thesis will examine a selection of smaller

¹⁶⁶ Danny S. Parker, *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler's Ardennes Offensive, 1944-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 1991), 48.

¹⁶⁷ Barbara B. Payne, Interview with William W. Lamond, Barbara B. Payne Collection of Oral Histories, United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 14.

¹⁶⁸ Elvin, *The Box from Braunau*, 111.

confrontations within this battle. For the most part, these highlights, so to speak, focus on the Blue Ridge Division's involvement in the liberation and capture of relatively small cities and towns in their area of responsibility. As it is one of the most important actions of the Battle of the Bulge, the 80th's actions at Bastogne, Belgium is also examined in this chapter.

The Situation on the Front

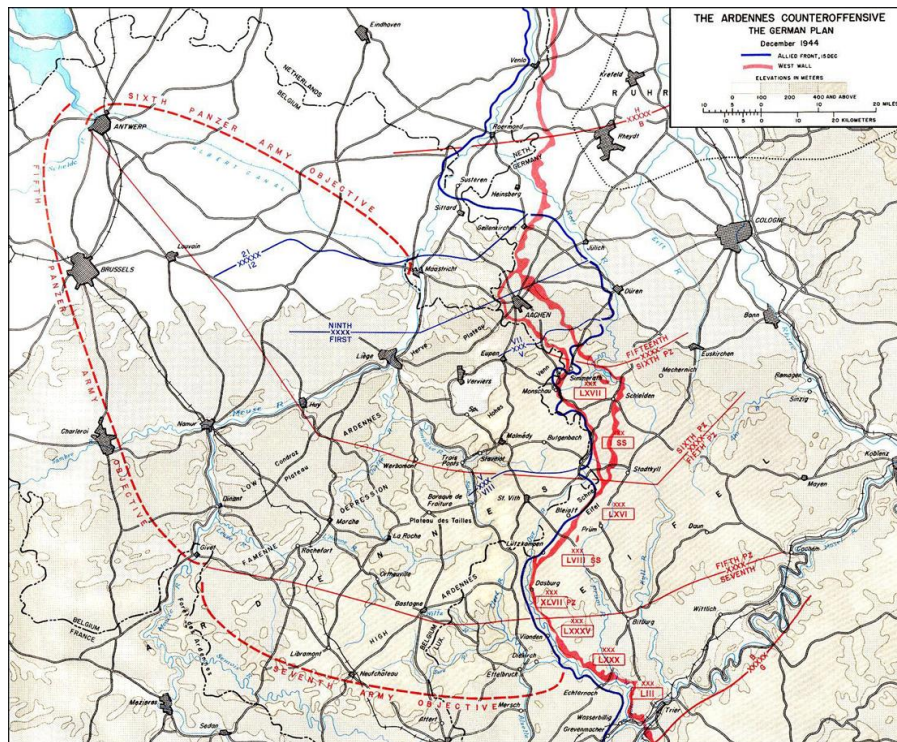


Figure 9. The German Assault, December 1944¹⁶⁹

The primary goal of Hitler's winter offensive was the capture of Antwerp.¹⁷⁰ The *Führer* had come to the realization that he would be unable to achieve an exclusively

¹⁶⁹ Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge: United States Army in World War II, European Theater of Operations* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1965), https://history.army.mil/html/books/007/7-8-1/CMH_Pub_7-8-1.pdf. A page number is not listed for this map, but it is included in the table of contents.

¹⁷⁰ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 654-655.

military victory in the war. He hoped the Ardennes offensive would drive a wedge between the United States and Great Britain.¹⁷¹ For the most part, American leadership was caught off guard by the German thrust, surprising considering the fact that the Germans had previously advanced through the Ardennes in 1940.¹⁷²

Hitler knew that this assault must end with a decisive victory for Germany if it was to bring about the peace negotiations he wanted. The German dictator chose to attack on the Western Front rather than the Eastern or Italian Fronts for several reasons. In regards to the Eastern Front, the Soviet forces were so large that a German assault would not cause significant damage to the Russian war effort, and the one-party Soviet Union was much less likely to cooperate in negotiations. Hitler also realized that attacking in Italy did not make logical sense when considering strategic goals. Furthermore, the mountains in Italy presented excellent defensive positions for the Allies. German high command knew that an attack on the Western Front could bring about a greater impact on the Allied war effort because their armies were not as large as those of the Soviets in the East. Hitler and the Wehrmacht also wanted to protect the large German industrial complexes in the western region of their country. Finally, as historian Danny S. Parker argues, Hitler thought that attacking in the West would be the blow that would drive the aforementioned wedge between the United States and their British allies.¹⁷³

True to form as a tyrannical dictator, Hitler severely micromanaged the generals of the *Wehrmacht*. Parker states that German high command, *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), “was an uneasy mixture of obedient military planners and sycophant

¹⁷¹ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 7.

¹⁷² Beevor, *The Second World War*, 656.

¹⁷³ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 6-7.

yes-men.” As such, they could not believe their ears, nor could they immediately voice their misgivings, when Hitler stated his plan for an assault through the Ardennes with the goal of capturing Antwerp.¹⁷⁴ Although he ordered his generals to draw up several possible plans of attack, the German leader ultimately decided upon combining two of their proposed plans that were the embodiment of his original plan of taking Antwerp through the Ardennes Forest. This operation was codenamed Watch on the Rhine (*Wacht am Rhein* in German). Much like he had done during the Normandy invasion, Hitler continued to believe he alone knew best how to carry out the war effort against the Allied Powers.¹⁷⁵

As previously mentioned, SHAEF and the US Army did not believe the German assault would come through the Ardennes Forest.¹⁷⁶ This was in no small part due to the fact that the Germans were masterful in their deception operations leading up to Watch on the Rhine. *Wehrmacht* leadership placed as little men as possible on the front lines in the Ardennes in an effort to fool the Americans into believing an assault would come from another location. American soldiers viewed an assignment to the region as a break from fighting. German radio communication consistently broadcast false plans with the hope that the Allies would take these transmissions as accurate intelligence. Hitler would not allow talk of the actual operation over the radio. Therefore, all communication about Watch on the Rhine occurred in person or through letters.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 9.

¹⁷⁵ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 10; Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, 124.

¹⁷⁶ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 656.

¹⁷⁷ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 35.

The Allies were so confident in their code breaking, under the codename ULTRA, that they did not believe any intelligence they got through these channels could be inaccurate. Although men like Major General Kenneth W. Strong, the personal intelligence officer of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, saw signs of a German offensive buildup near the Ardennes, other high-ranking generals, like Omar Bradley, brushed off these assertions as they believed men such as Strong had become “the boy who cried wolf.”¹⁷⁸ Ultimately, Allied leadership attributed the German build-up to a counterattack force that would be employed once the Allies pushed further into the European continent.¹⁷⁹

Once the painstaking process of planning was complete, Hitler and the *Wehrmacht* were finally ready to begin their great assault against the United States Army. German artillery began firing on Allied positions at 0530 on the morning of 16 December 1944, beginning what would become Nazi Germany’s last major offensive in the Second World War.¹⁸⁰ As the *Führer* had hoped, the attack achieved complete surprise on the unsuspecting American troops.¹⁸¹ It ultimately fell on the shoulders of General Eisenhower to determine how to stop the German advance and push the *Wehrmacht* back into its former positions and beyond. He recognized that this was a chance to engage the Germans when they were not occupying formidable defensive positions. Eisenhower’s objective was to slow the German advance until the weather permitted the use of Allied superiority in the air. American and British planes had been unable to carry out their

¹⁷⁸ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 35-36.

¹⁷⁹ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 656.

¹⁸⁰ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 656.

¹⁸¹ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 71.

missions due to poor weather conditions. His plan was to reinforce the American units located on the northern and southern sides of the salient. Ike would rely on General George S. Patton's Third US Army to shore up defenses on the southern flank of the bulge. Patton informed Eisenhower that he could attack on 22 December with three divisions. Although the Supreme Allied Commander voiced his initial misgivings that only three divisions would suffice for this operation, he eventually ordered Patton to carry out his plan with the 4th Armored Division, the 26th Infantry Division, and the 80th Blue Ridge Infantry Division. Thus began operations of one of the greatest victories in the history of the United States Army.¹⁸²

The Blue Ridgers Enter the Fray: Initial Confrontations and the Division's Drive Toward Bastogne

By the time of the German assault in the Ardennes Forest, the 80th Infantry Division was no longer an inexperienced combat unit. It had proven that, while it was not without fault, it could succeed on the battlefields of the European Theater of Operations. The Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap and the crossing of the Moselle River tested their mettle, but the men of the Blue Ridge Division had faced these challenges head on and pushed onwards towards victory. When the Germans launched Operation Watch on the Rhine, the Blue Ridgers were in corps reserve, having been relieved of front line combat duties by the US Army's 6th Armored Division. During this time, beginning on the 8th of December, the division's men recuperated, trained, and repaired damaged war materiel.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Beevor, *The Second World War*, 661.

¹⁸³ Murrell, *Operational History*, 126.

While the Army's confrontation with the *Wehrmacht* in the Huertgen Forest is not discussed in detail in this thesis, Michael D. Doubler devotes a full chapter of his work *Closing With the Enemy* to this engagement. Doubler shows that the Americans struggled mightily in this battle, fighting tooth and nail and suffering heavy casualties. Nevertheless, the GIs saw little reward for their blood, sweat, and tears. *Closing With the Enemy* argues that the United States Army simply was not prepared to fight in a forested environment when it found itself in the Huertgen Forest.¹⁸⁴ The Blue Ridge Division recognized this deficiency in American doctrine and devoted some of its training time to ensuring they could fight effectively in a forest. Though they did not know at the time, these new tactics would be of paramount importance in the coming German offensive in the Ardennes. This again displays that the 80th Division, its officers, and its men learned from their previous experiences in combat, and those of the rest of the United States Army, to improve the combat effectiveness of the Blue Ridgers.

Showing that the division's leadership understood the importance of learning from previous battles and improving combat effectiveness from these lessons, the operational history states that "an emphasis was placed on the training of assault teams in the attack of fortified positions, anti-tank work, and anti-tank infantry coordination, fighting in woods, and use of demolitions and range firing of small and automatic weapons."¹⁸⁵ As shown in the chapter covering the Battle of Argentan, the 80th Infantry Division struggled to properly coordinate operations between their armored and infantry units. Therefore, the men commanding the division, such as General Horace McBride,

¹⁸⁴ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 192-220.

¹⁸⁵ Murrell, *Operational History*, 126-127.

saw the need for subsequent training in this area when the division was away from the front lines and had time to devote to such activities.

Historian Peter R. Mansoor also shows that the 80th Division knew the importance of training by using the testimony of a Battalion Commander of the Blue Ridge Division. While this was not a problem unique to the 80th Division, it is nonetheless a member of the 80th who stated:

The most important factor in improving the combat effectiveness of my unit was training. For instance, it was not unusual to have a company reduced to a handful of men during a particularly vicious attack or defense. That night the unit was filled with replacements who came up in the dark, were placed into a foxhole in the dark, never knew what their squad leader looked like, and did not know their platoon or company commander...At every opportunity I put a different company in reserve and then had it train until it was needed. The veterans were invaluable in teaching the new replacements the vagaries of the battlefield and the new replacements learned quickly or they became casualties.¹⁸⁶

This quote from an unnamed officer in the Blue Ridge Division shows that the leadership of the 80th had learned the importance of taking lessons learned during earlier battles and applying them to subsequent engagements. While new replacements had been through basic training, they did not have the experience of soldiers who had been on the front for a longer period of time. Therefore, it fell upon veterans of the war to show the new soldiers how to fight and survive in combat, thereby improving the combat effectiveness of the 80th Infantry Division as a whole.

Prior to the creation of the bulge in the Ardennes Forest, the 80th Infantry Division was preparing for an assault of the Siegfried Line. Also called the West Wall, this served as the primary line of defense for the German border. However, historian Russell F.

¹⁸⁶ Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 193.

Weigley argues that this defensive structure, which took 500,000 workers to complete, and still did not satisfy Hitler, was not meant to completely stop an enemy from crossing the German border. Rather, its intent was to delay an enemy force to allow reinforcements the time to arrive on the front. Because the West Wall was comprised of a number of pillboxes, the Blue Ridgers realized they had to train to attack fortified positions, which they had struggled to do at the Moselle River.¹⁸⁷ Here again, the 80th Infantry Division showed the ability to learn from its previous combat experiences. Although they would not attack the Siegfried Line at this point in the war because of the German Ardennes assault, the Blue Ridge Division nevertheless made significant strides in improving its combat capabilities in the point in time immediately before the *Wehrmacht* punched through the Allied lines in December 1944.

When the Germans began their attack on the 16th of December, the 80th was ordered to help push back the *Wehrmacht* in the vicinity of the US First Army, though it was still under the command of the Third Army. They arrived at their assigned location three days later on the 19th.¹⁸⁸ The division's specific orders were to defend and hold Luxembourg City. According to Andrew Adkins, Jr., a veteran of the 80th, General Patton's orders were to "Hold to the last man" showing the great importance of the capital city of the small European nation.¹⁸⁹ US Army leadership did everything it could to stop the momentum of the German advance. Therefore, the Battle of the Bugle was, at least at the beginning of the engagement, a primarily defensive operation for the United

¹⁸⁷ Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 299; 905th Field Artillery Battalion After Action Report, September 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, <http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/905AfterActionReportSep44.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ Murrell, *Operational History*, 128.

¹⁸⁹ Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can't Get Much Closer Than*, 111.

States Army and the 80th Infantry Division. This was in stark contrast to the Battle of Argentan and the crossing of the Moselle River, which saw the Army in an offensive posture, pushing its German enemy further and further into the European continent. Although the Blue Ridgers had experienced combat before, this would be a different battle altogether and would test these men in much different ways.

When the division arrived at Luxembourg City, the 317th and 318th Infantry Regiments were tasked with taking positions near the city while the 319th was placed in division reserve. While the overall objective of the 80th was to prevent the Germans from continuing their westward push through the area, this did involve some offensive actions from the Blue Ridgers. The 318th Combat Team advanced towards the town of Ettelbruck where it encountered enemy resistance. Included in this engagement was B Company of the 702nd Tank Battalion, a platoon of light tanks from the 702nd, and one infantry company from the 1st Battalion of the 318th, showing that the division had learned from its previous battles by having its infantry and armored units operation in close cooperation with one another. In this instance, the American GIs were actually riding on the tanks towards their objective. At the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap, the division had struggled initially to properly coordinate its infantry unit with its tanks and other armored forces. However, when attacking Ettelbruck, without delay the Blue Ridgers placed their foot soldiers in the immediate proximity of their tanks. When the 80th arrived at this location, the Germans had no clue their adversaries had been on the move. It was not until the Blue Ridge Division's artillery began bombarding the *Wehrmacht* that they realized there were Americans in the area. The Germans were so surprised by the arrival of American forces that many simply turned and ran when they saw the advancing GIs.

However, many did stay behind and defend the town, with American units controlling positions nearby the town by the end of 21 December. Ultimately, the Americans were pushing towards Bastogne and continued their northward march.¹⁹⁰

The division's next task, one of the most famous and pivotal operations of the Battle of the Bulge, would further test its abilities to learn from their previous combat experiences. The Blue Ridgers, along with other units of General Patton's forces, were tasked with assisting in the liberation of Bastogne, Belgium and the 101st Airborne "Screaming Eagle" Division.¹⁹¹ In fact, the attack on Ettelbruck was the first stage of the division's movement towards Bastogne. One veteran of the Blue Ridge Division stated, "Every day seemed the same: miles of marching, intense cold, swirling fog, mysterious and general confusion... We stumbled ten to fifteen miles each day with temperatures dropping to twenty below zero."¹⁹² For the foreseeable future, this would be the lot of the division: trudging through the frozen terrain to reach its objectives. Making these marches even more daunting was the fact that, by the time the division began operations in Luxembourg, divisional logistical sections had some difficulty in supplying adequate winter clothing. Not only did Blue Ridgers have to learn to fight in the cold weather. They were also forced to learn how to adapt to the cold without proper clothing.¹⁹³

Veteran Andrew Z. Adkins, III states that during one troop movement, "Our first obstacle was a huge, steep mountain. It, too, was slick as glass and the men would have

¹⁹⁰ Murrell, *Operational History*, 131-132; Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 146.

¹⁹¹ Peter Schrijvers, *Those Who Hold Bastogne: The True Story of the Soldiers and Civilians Who Fought in the Biggest Battle of the Bulge* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2014), 69.

¹⁹² Dominique and Hayes, *One Hell of a War*, 145.

¹⁹³ G-2 After Action Report, December 1944: After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 4, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-4_DEC44.pdf.

to muster superhuman strength to get to the top. But that was only the beginning of our obstacle course. I wondered how long men could be driven like this. Would we ever get relief?”¹⁹⁴ While this excerpt comes from a later point in the Battle of the Bulge, the men struggled with viciously cold weather throughout the battle. This also points towards the improved willingness of the men of the 80th to press on in the face of hardship. While at the Battle of Argentan, at least one officer of the division found himself resorting to physical coercion to motivate his men to move forward, Adkins did not have this problem.¹⁹⁵ His soldiers, while certainly not ecstatic over the prospect of warfare, nonetheless pushed forward, showing an improved ability to carry out their duties in the face of danger.

The paratroopers of the 101st Airborne had been surrounded by the Germans in Bastogne, Belgium. When the *Wehrmacht* asked for his surrender, Brigadier General Anthony C. MacAuliffe, commander of the 101st, replied with one of the most well-known quotes of the Second World War: “Nuts!”¹⁹⁶ Eisenhower, understanding the dire situation in which the Screaming Eagles found themselves, chose to send Patton’s Third US Army to their rescue. In particular, the responsibility for this operation fell upon the 80th and 26th Infantry Divisions along with the 4th Armored Division.¹⁹⁷

December 22nd saw the 319th Infantry Regiment make its first appearance in the Battle of the Bulge. Again working in close proximity with elements of the 702nd Tank Battalion, soldiers of the 3rd Battalion took the town of Michelbach, Germany within an

¹⁹⁴ Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can’t Get Much Closer Than This*, 158.

¹⁹⁵ Hastings, *Overlord*, 292.

¹⁹⁶ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 119,190.

¹⁹⁷ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 187.

hour of their arrival. Their next objective was Merzig, Germany. Tanks of the 702nd Tank Battalion entered the town at 1040 on the morning of 22 December, and infantry formations took up positions near the town at 1100 hours. Although the division faced small arms fire and artillery from the Germans occupying the town, American forces took control of the community by the end of the day. This is in stark contrast to the division's first battle at Argentan. Fighting tooth and nail, it took the 80th Infantry Division roughly two days to take the small French town. However, only one battalion of the 319th Infantry Regiment was able to take the much larger city of Merzig in only a few hours. Between August 18th and the 22nd of December, the Blue Ridgers had significantly improved their combat effectiveness, as evidenced by the relative ease with which they took control of Merzig. While the operational history does not make specific mention of the use of artillery in this instance, the proper coordination of tanks and foot soldiers from the onset of hostilities is a telling factor in this significant improvement in fighting capabilities.¹⁹⁸

One factor which could have contributed to the division taking Mertzig so quickly was that the Germans were not occupying defensive positions when the Blue Ridgers launched their attack. Prisoners of war reported that the *Wehrmacht* soldiers' orders were to attack American positions, and the Germans were without cover and concealment when the 80th assaulted the town.¹⁹⁹ Although the German soldiers were not preparing to stave off a concerted offensive effort from the 80th Infantry Division, this does not significantly detract from the fact that the Blue Ridgers showed in this instance that they

¹⁹⁸ Murrell, *Operational History*, 132.

¹⁹⁹ Murrell, *319th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 51.

had improved their fighting capabilities. That there was much more coordination of infantry and armor from the onset of battle is evidence of this.

The 80th, and specifically the 319th Infantry Regiment, also showed their ability to effectively employ its artillery fire at Mertzig. When the German 352nd Volksgrenadier Division began a counterattack in an effort to retake Mertzig, the 905th Field Artillery Battalion fired upon the enemy to prevent the *Wehrmacht* from advancing any further.²⁰⁰ In addition, the 905th was in direct support of the 319th as it advanced further and further into German held areas.²⁰¹ By ensuring continued cooperation with artillery units like the 905th, the Blue Ridge Division showed it had improved its combat effectiveness over the course of the war in Europe, as evidenced by the fact that this artillery barrage played a significant, if not decisive, role in halting the German counterattack. Although US Army artillery doctrine was of a higher quality than that of armored units during the war, the fact that the division continued to use it in an effective way shows the Blue Ridgers learned from their previous experiences that artillery support was crucial to success on the battlefield. Therefore, they resumed the use of Howitzers at the Battle of the Bulge.²⁰²

The following day, Combat Team 319 continued its march toward German lines, taking the towns of Oberfuehlen, Fuelen, and Niederfuehlen. As a whole, the division captured Heiderscheid, Luxembourg by December 23rd. Again, this shows that the Blue Ridge Division had substantially improved its combat capabilities by the time of the Battle of the Bulge. Much like the 319th was able to take a town within a day working

²⁰⁰ Murrell, *319th Infantry Regiment History*, 53.

²⁰¹ Unit History for Month of December-319th Infantry Regiment, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 7.

²⁰² Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 20.

alone, the entire division was able to control Heiderscheid with relative ease. When compared to the engagement at Argentan, the division 80th was much more efficient. When the Germans attempted a counterattack, at Heiderscheid, the men of the 80th successfully fended off their adversaries, knocking out all but five of the seventeen tanks they faced.²⁰³

On Christmas Eve 1944, the division devoted two battalions as reinforcements for the 4th Armored Division in its final drive towards Bastogne and the encircled 101st Airborne. The Operational history of the division states, “This diminution in its rifle strength and successive collisions with German units crossing the front enroute to the Bastogne sector constituted the closest link the 80th Division would have with the dramatic effort being made to reach the encircled 101st Airborne.”²⁰⁴ While only part of the Blue Ridge Division was so closely involved in the liberation of the Screaming Eagles, the fact that they worked so closely with an armored division displays the improvements in the implementation of combined arms warfare for the division by the time of the Battle of the Bugle.

The 80th and 26th Infantry Divisions were tasked with clearing enemy resistance east of the 4th Armored Division on its drive towards Bastogne. Although the Blue Ridgers faced significant opposition from German soldiers and difficult terrain, the division was able to reach the Sauer River by December 26th. It was on the same day that the 4th Armored Division reached Bastogne and the encircled 101st Airborne.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Murrell, *Operational History*, 132-133.

²⁰⁴ Murrell, *Operational History*, 136.

²⁰⁵ Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 229.

The two battalions that were attached to the 4th Armored Division were the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 318th Regiment. In addition, the Regimental Headquarters Company was involved in the operation to liberate Bastogne. When the 4th Armored was able to reach the city itself, but unable to return to other American units, the 2nd Battalion of the 318th launched a mission to provide further support to the armored division. The battalion set out for Bastogne itself on 28 December and came into contact with elements of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division.²⁰⁶ In his memoir, veteran Martin F. Loughlin remembers, “Many did not come back from Bastogne. The 1st and 2nd Battalions later received a Presidential Unit Citation for their heroism at Bastogne.”²⁰⁷ The fact that these battalions were commended for their work through an official unit decoration is testament to the fact that they were effective at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. Though casualties were high, they were able to assist the 4th Armored Division in relieving the encircled 101st Airborne Division.

In addition to its actions at Bastogne, these two battalions of the 318th Regiment, as well as the third, which was not directly involved in liberating the Screaming Eagle Division, captured over 800 German POWs at Ettelbruck between the 25th and 28th of December 1944.²⁰⁸ Acting in conjunction with the 4th Armored Division in this operation, the Blue Ridgers were extremely effective in this instance. This is a testament to the fact that the 80th Division had learned the great importance of the close coordination of infantry and armor units truly was. While it is possible that the infantrymen could have captured enemy soldiers and taken the town of Ettelbruck without the help of the armored

²⁰⁶ Murrell, *318th Infantry Regiment History WWII*, 52.

²⁰⁷ Loughlin, *Memoirs of World War II*, 39.

²⁰⁸ Murrell, *318th Infantry Regiment History*, 54.

vehicles of the 4th Armored Division, the process was much quicker and more efficient when the two branches of combined arms worked together.

The Coordination of Infantry and Artillery

Many soldiers remember that enduring an artillery barrage as one of the most difficult challenges of their war experiences. Though he did not fight in the European Theater, EB Sledge writes in his memoir,

To be under a barrage of prolonged shelling simply magnified all the terrible physical and emotional effects of one shell. To me, artillery was an invention of hell. The onrushing whistle and scream of the big steel package of destruction was the pinnacle of violent fury and the embodiment of pent-up evil. It was the essence of violence and of man's inhumanity to man. I developed a passionate hatred for shells. To be killed by a bullet seemed so clean and surgical. But shells would not only tear and rip the body, they tortured one's mind almost beyond the brink of sanity. After each shell I was wrung out, limp and exhausted.²⁰⁹

In addition to the physical problems presented by artillery fire, soldiers on both sides had to contend with the psychological burden of a barrage. This only adds to the importance of the coordination of infantry and artillery. During the Battle of the Bulge, the 80th Infantry Division showed it had learned from previous combat experiences to improve the way in which it coordinated the operations of infantry and artillery units.

On 30 December 1944, elements of the 319th Infantry Regiment encountered German soldiers who were in the process of launching an attack against the Blue Ridgers. The unit history for this month states, "Approximately 160 enemy moved against E Company's position and were stopped cold by artillery, mortar, and small arms fire. The

²⁰⁹ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 79.

enemy retreated with heavy casualties...No further enemy action that day.”²¹⁰ In this case, the presence of supporting artillery fire was telling in the ability of these individuals of the 80th Division to repel the German attack on their positions. Furthermore, the Americans were able to do much more than simply defend themselves. The *Wehrmacht* forces suffered heavy casualties, as shown in the 319th Regiment’s unit history for December, a testament to the fighting abilities of the division in this particular skirmish. Had the artillery component of the 80th been unable to offer its support, the German soldiers may have exacted a much heavier toll upon the Blue Ridgers.

A combat history for B Company of the 702nd Tank Battalion points towards a day during the Battle of the Bulge in which American artillery was particularly effective: “Last night our artillery gave the Germans no rest. Round after round was fired along with Time on Target. It’s no wonder the Germans say we have automatic artillery.”²¹¹ At this point in the Second World War, artillery elements of the Blue Ridge Division had been in combat for roughly five months. As this example shows, as well as testament of German soldiers, the division’s artillerymen had become, if not experts, highly proficient in their combat roles. For officers and enlisted men of units like the 313th, 314th, and 905th Field Artillery Battalions, pounding German positions with shells had become second nature to them. So much so, in fact, that the Germans were in awe of the speed and consistency with which they were receiving incoming fire. Not only would this wreak physical damage upon German lines, *Wehrmacht* soldiers would have experienced

²¹⁰ Unit History for Month of December-319th Infantry Regiment, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 12.

²¹¹ Unit History, Company “B,” 702nd Tank Battalion, APO 403 US Army, Harold L. Rives Collection, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 34.

psychological damage similar to the kind mentioned by EB Sledge. The Blue Ridgers had become highly effective in both components of artillery warfare by the Battle of the Bugle.

Learning from past experiences sometimes involves a military force knowing when not to use a certain tactic or weapon. For instance, on 21 January 1945 elements of the 80th Division were ordered to attack German soldiers located in the town of Bourschied, Luxembourg. Veteran AZ Adkins, Jr. writes, “We had already seen part of the terrain we would have to cross over during the attack. It was the roughest yet: rugged hill covered with trees and piled with snow banks...Because of the nature of the terrain, we knew that artillery would be of little or no use to us.”²¹² The officers of the division understood that it would be a waste of time, energy, and resources to attempt to use artillery fire in this particular assault. They had learned from the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap, the crossing of the Moselle River, and presumably, other conflicts in which they were involved, that they would do better to refrain from firing artillery shells at the Germans. To attempt to do so would have been the antithesis of improving combat effectiveness through lessons learned.

Joe Carrasco, a veteran of E Company of the 318th Infantry Regiment recalls a time in which artillery fire was crucially important for him and the other men of his unit: “As we moved from town to town, city to city, we became surrounded. An artillery officer told us all to gather in one room of the house. He then called in the artillery coordinates. The shells started hitting the roof of the house and the Germans took off. It

²¹² Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can't Get Much Closer Than This*, 149.

felt pretty weird being shelled by our own artillery.”²¹³ The forward observer attached to Carrasco’s unit was so confident in the ability of the gunners manning the artillery pieces that he was willing to call in an artillery strike on the building in which he was located. Presumably, this is not something an individual would have been comfortable doing at earlier points in the war. By the Battle of the Bulge, he understood how effective his artillerymen were, and trusted them to do exactly as he asked. Examples such as this show that artillerymen and infantrymen of the Blue Ridge Division worked together extremely well and were able to offer each other necessary support on the battlefields of the European Theater.

The 28th of December saw the 1st Battalion of the 319th Infantry Regiment experienced a significant assault from German soldiers. The unit history reads,

At 1440 the 1st Bn. received counterattack against Company B’s position. The strength of the attack was estimated between 150 and 200 infantry. 1st Bn. placed devastating machine gun, mortar, and artillery on the enemy... 1st Bn. counterattacked and drove enemy from the high ground inflicting numerous casualties on the enemy. At no time did the 1st Bn. lose any ground to the enemy.²¹⁴

The powerful combination of machine guns, mortars, and artillery pieces played a significant role in the battalion’s ability to fend off the German advance. At this point, the veteran 80th Infantry Division understood how such massed firepower could decimate an enemy force, and made sure to send as much ordnance toward their enemies as possible. It is telling that the Germans, who were unable to force the battalion back any distance at

²¹³ Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War II*, 115.

²¹⁴ Unit History for Month of December-319th Infantry Regiment, Edward F. Naughton Papers, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 11.

all, consisted of only infantry units. Their inability to properly use massed firepower was their downfall in this assault.

The Coordination of Infantry and Armor

Much like the challenges presented by the crossing of the Moselle River, the Ardennes Forest was not well suited for tank warfare. Tanks and tank destroyers were forced to navigate confined spaces and frozen terrain, both of which made it difficult for the fighting of modern mechanized warfare with large armored vehicles.²¹⁵ Historian Danny S. Parker states that, “For this reason, as well as limitations that weather brought to armor, the Ardennes Offensive was primarily resolved as an infantry battle.”²¹⁶ This is not to say, however, that armored units of the United States Army and the 80th Infantry Division did not play a part in turning back the German assault that winter. As described previously in this chapter, and as will continue to be displayed, tankers had an important role in the Battle of the Bulge.

By this point in the Second World War, the Blue Ridge Division had significantly improved their ability to coordinate the operations of foot soldiers and tanks/tank destroyers. A sizeable portion of the Battle of the Bulge resembled the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap in that the main objectives were small cities or towns on the battlefield. For this reason, the 80th Division understood the best way to use its tanks in coordination with infantry units during these types of conflicts during the battle.

During the previously mentioned attack on Bourschied, Luxembourg which took place on the 21st of January, 80th Division officers realized they would still be able to use

²¹⁵ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 52-55.

²¹⁶ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, 54.

their tanks and tank destroyers in the assault even though they could not make use of their artillery capabilities. This example shows that Blue Ridger leadership continued to make use of their armored units as best they could. Veteran Andrew Adkins's unit's job was to cross over and take control of a stretch of terrain which was inaccessible to tanks. Here the Blue Ridge Division showed it fully understood the importance of tankers and infantrymen working in close proximity to support one another and complete tasks that the other could not do alone.²¹⁷ While these two branches of combined arms previously struggled to understand the abilities of the other, these units now knew how to work well together to complete tasks to truly support their comrades.²¹⁸ This understanding can only come from experience in combat, trial and error, and learning from both failures and successes on the battlefield.

One factor that led to the success of the infantry-armor team at the Battle of the Bulge was the way in which anti-tank units were attached to infantry units. C. Robert Harmon, a veteran of the 319th Regiment's anti-tank company recalls, "The Antitank Company was broken up just before the 'Bulge' and most of the men went to the line companies."²¹⁹ It was important that anti-tank and armored units were not independent of infantrymen on the battlefield. The most effective way to use armored units in this case was as support for foot soldiers. The US Army had learned this lesson early in the war, and the 80th took note.²²⁰ From the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, leadership of the

²¹⁷ Adkins, Jr. and Adkins, III, *You Can't Get Much Closer Than This*, 149.

²¹⁸ 317th/Co. E-Notes from Capt. Mullen Notebook, Miscellaneous Reports: 317th Infantry Regiment Reports, 317th-1st Battalion Reports, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/317E_MullenJim_Capt_Notes_from_Capt_MullenNotebook.pdf.

²¹⁹ Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War Two*, 170.

²²⁰ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 16.

Blue Ridge Division understood this concept and made certain that their armored and anti-tank units were dispersed among the rifle companies on the front to offer their direct support.

The recollections of Gene N. Barry of the 319th Infantry Regiment provide another example of the importance of combined arms warfare.

The house and barn were taking a lot of hits. Another man leaped to his feet, shouting, 'I'm getting out of here!' My Sgt. threw him to the floor. Saying, 'You're not going anywhere!' I thought this was like a scene out of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, where a man went mad from the shellfire and ran out of the dugout to be killed. It would have been certain suicide for anyone to go outside. When the shelling finally stopped, the German infantry was very close to us. We heard a German burp gun firing. A Tank Destroyer, which was parked close by, answered the shots with bursts from his .50 caliber machine gun. The attack was beaten back and the noise abated.²²¹

This example points towards the importance of artillery fire as well as armored operations in support of infantry units. In this case, however, the Blue Ridgers were on the receiving end of artillery shells. The psychological toll it took on the Americans, as well as the fact that it allowed the Germans to move so close to Barry's unit's position, shows the effectiveness of sufficient artillery fire. Furthermore, it was ultimately the presence of the American tank destroyer which was the determining factor in this skirmish. Once it opened fire on German soldiers, they were forced to retreat, saving the beleaguered Americans trapped in the barn. The close proximity of this armored vehicle further shows that the Blue Ridgers had learned how to make the best use of their armored capabilities.

²²¹ Murrell, *Stories of the Men of the 80th Infantry Division World War Two*, 105.

On the 19th of January two platoons of the 702nd Tank Battalion were ordered to assault and capture the town of Burden, Luxembourg. The attack would take place on the 20th, and the tanks were initially to attack without the benefit of infantry support. However, the unit history states that on the day of the attack, the tanks had support from the 318th Infantry Regiment. Entering the town at 1620 hours, the tanks and infantrymen were able to take the town within three hours. While early plans for this attack did indicate the tanks would act alone, officers of these units clearly thought better of this decision and added infantry support. This resulted in a much more effective task force which captured Burden with relative ease. Blue Ridge leadership had experienced enough combat in the European Theater to know their armor would be badly exposed without the 318th to offer its assistance.²²²

The time period between their first engagement at Argentan, and one of their most important at the Battle of the Bulge, the 80th Infantry Division significantly improved its ability to coordinate the use of tanks, tank destroyers, and infantry units. Rather than using their tanks as independent units, the Blue Ridgers had learned that their heavy weaponry was most effective when working in close proximity to foot soldiers. By the time the Germans launched their assault in the Ardennes in December 1945, the 80th Division had grown much more accustomed to combat and the employment of armored units.

²²² Unit History, Company "B," 702nd Tank Battalion, APO 403 US Army, Harold L. Rives Collection, USAHEC, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 37.

Assessing Overall Performance

At the beginning of the month of December, the 80th Infantry Division's strength numbered 703 officers, 41 warrant officers, and 12,103 enlisted men for a total of 12,847 men. During this month, which included a significant portion of the Battle of the Bulge, 1,328 were wounded in action, 140 went missing on the battlefield, and 344 men gave their lives for their country. In all, 1,714 Blue Ridgers became casualties of warfare in the month of December, many of which came during the Battle of the Bulge. This means the division suffered a casualty rate of 13.3% during the month.²²³

The strength of the division at the beginning of January 1945 was 664 officers, 41 warrant officers, and 13,050 enlisted soldiers, totaling 13,755 Americans. Casualties for this month were 1,782 wounded and 85 missing. 239 Blue Ridgers gave the ultimate sacrifice. In all, there were 2,024 casualties in January 1945, calculating to a casualty rate of 14.7%.²²⁴

While casualty numbers must continue to be examined in context, especially since these have been calculated for the entire month rather than just those casualties within the individual battle itself, these figures are striking. While the casualties for December and January are significantly higher than those of August, they are only half of the casualty rate for September 1944. Considering the sheer scale of the Battle of the Bulge, logic would lead researchers to believe casualty rates would be higher. However, the opposite

²²³ G-1 After Action Report, 1-31 December, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_DEC44.pdf; Supplemental Data December 1944, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2a, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Dec44_Pt2.pdf.

²²⁴ G-1 After Action Report, 1-31 January, 1945, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_JAN45.pdf; Supplemental Data January 1945, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2a, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Jan45_Pt2.pdf.

is true of this engagement. While the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap has much lower numbers, the fact that it was a battle fought on a much smaller scale than the Bulge can explain this. However, the crossing of the Moselle River was also smaller in scope than the Battle of the Bugle. This significant decrease in casualty rates despite a much larger engagement on the battlefield is strong evidence for an improvement in the fighting capabilities of the 80th Infantry Division.²²⁵

Conclusion

The Battle of the Bulge was one of the largest battles in the European Theater of Operations. In excess of one million soldiers were involved in this massive battle in the winter of 1944-1945. In the midst of the German assault in the Ardennes Forest, the Allied nations found themselves in a state of great confusion and chaos. Facing one of the great crises of the war in Europe, the 80th Infantry Division was forced to take the lessons it learned from its previous combat experiences at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap and the crossing of the Moselle River.²²⁶ While some of these examples of combined arms warfare come from points in the Battle of the Bulge after the two case studies of events during the battle, they nonetheless show the improved capabilities of the Blue Ridge Division.

²²⁵ G-1 After Action Report, 1-30 September, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_SEP44.pdf; G-1 After Action Report, 1-31 August, 1944, After Action Reports, 80th DDAP, 1, http://www.80thdivision.com/AfterActionReports/AAR_G-1_AUG44.pdf; Supplemental Data September 1944, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Sep44_Pt2.pdf; Supplemental Data August 1944, 80th Division Operational History, 80th DDAP, 2, http://www.80thdivision.com/80th-OperationalHistory/80thOperHist-Aug44_Pt2.pdf.

²²⁶ Parker, *Battle of the Bulge*, XIII.

During this battle, the Blue Ridgers displayed they did in fact have the ability to learn from their previous experiences. The efficiency with which the division captured its objectives, especially European cities and towns, is the most powerful testament to its improved combat effectiveness. This was in large part due to the fact that the men of the 80th closely coordinated their infantry, armored, and artillery units from the onset of battle. By contrast, officers of the 80th did not properly employ the concept of combined arms in their previous engagements. In addition to these explanations for the Blue Ridgers' improved fighting capabilities, there is the factor of the division learning from the combat experiences of other combat units in the United States Army. Historian Michael Doubler argues that the Army as a whole was not at all prepared to fight in a forest environment, as evidenced by the debacle that occurred in the Huertgen Forest.²²⁷ Because the 80th Infantry Division saw the need to understand how effectively to fight in a forest, it devoted some of its training time to learning such tactics.²²⁸ This training was crucial in making the division as effective and efficient as they could possibly be during the Battle of the Bulge.

²²⁷ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 192-220.

²²⁸ Murrell, *Operational History*, 126-127.

CHAPTER V – EPILOGUE



Figure 10. Cecil Brannon in Training²²⁹

On the 27th of January 1945, Private Cecil Wilson Brannon of the 318th Infantry Regiment (previously of the 319th) wrote a letter to his brother, JA “Jay” Brannon to tell him he was well.²³⁰ This was a relative term as Private Brannon had suffered a wound to his left leg on 2 December 1944 while he was still a member of the 319th Regiment.²³¹ He would carry shrapnel in his leg until his death in 1989. Brannon was with the Blue Ridge Division from the time it arrived in Europe on the RMS *Queen Mary* until the end of the war.

²²⁹ *The Brannon Heritage*, 41.

²³⁰ Cecil W. Brannon Letter to JA Brannon, January 27, 1945, *The Brannon Heritage*, 66.

²³¹ Unit History for Month of Decembe-319th Infantry Regiment, Unit Histories, 80th Infantry Division Digital Archives Project, (80th DDAP), 16, http://www.80thdivision.com/UnitHistories/319thInfReg_UnitHistory_DEC44.pdf.

Not surprisingly, he did not like to talk about the war. However, the experiences of his time in Europe did stay with him for the rest of his life. More than just the physical damage of the shrapnel in his leg, Brannon, like so many other veterans, bore psychological scars from the war. When on a city bus in Greenville, South Carolina, he suffered a flashback when there was an explosion at a nearby laundromat. Brannon fell to the floor, a knee jerk reaction after his time in the war. Near the end of his life, he suffered another flashback in a hospital. His daughter, Linda Price, stated he was lying in his bed screaming about incoming fire and the location of German soldiers.

Though he did not share much of his war experience, Cecil Brannon did mention how he loathed patrolling through abandoned communities. Though he was primarily a truck driver for the Army during the war, there were times when he was required to carry a rifle and fight with other infantrymen. Seeing the pictures of families who had been forced to flee their homes struck a chord with the young American soldier. Though his age of 27 years might have been significantly older than many soldiers, he was nonetheless a man in the early stages of life, and seeing these pictures forced him to ponder the fact that these families were suffering when it could have so easily been his own family in the crosshairs of the war. The level of human suffering which he witnessed caused him to give up hunting after the war ended.²³²

Cecil Brannon was one of thousands of members of the 80th Infantry Division who endured the most destructive war in human history. From their first major confrontation with German forces at Argentan, to the crossing of the Moselle River, the

²³² *The Brannon Heritage*, 4; The details of the life of Cecil Brannon listed here have been passed down in the Brannon and Price Families since his death in 1989. They are the combination of stories I have heard from my father, my paternal grandparents, and my paternal grandmother's siblings.

Battle of the Bulge, and beyond, the Blue Ridgers faced significant challenges in the European Theater of Operations. As is to be expected of a military force encountering its first real combat experience, the division was not at peak fighting performance at the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap. While they did ultimately achieve their objectives, it was not with the efficiency higher command, or the members of the 80th itself would have preferred.

While logic may indicate that a combat division would improve its fighting capabilities along a linear trajectory throughout warfare, this was not necessarily the case with the Blue Ridge Division. At the crossing of the Moselle River, the 80th failed properly to coordinate the branches of combined arms, especially in regards to infantry and artillery fire. Again, the Blue Ridgers ultimately achieved their objectives. It was at the Battle of the Bulge that the division truly became a well-oiled machine, as it were, on the battlefield. Because the 80th found time to devote to training while they were in divisional reserve, the soldiers and officers of the unit learned how to best fight this new modern war which the United States Army had never before experienced. The Blue Ridgers captured their objectives with much greater efficiency as they pressed on towards their major objectives like Bastogne.

The fact that the division was able to improve its fighting capabilities over the course of the war, and used periods of non combat to train in order to do so, supports the arguments of Michael D. Doubler and Peter R. Mansoor. These authors argue that the United States Army was not equal to the Germans at the onset of war, but that American soldiers learned how to fight in this new type of combat as the conflict progressed. By the end of hostilities, they state the US Army had greatly improved its combat effectiveness

through lessons learned from its past and improvements in training and other Army operations.²³³

It was the ability of the division to learn from its previous experiences and change the way it fought which ultimately allowed it to succeed against the German *Wehrmacht* in the European Theater of Operations. From the Battle of Argentan-Falaise Gap, to crossing the Moselle River, and the division's largest engagement at the Battle of the Bulge, the Blue Ridgers improved their fighting capabilities and combat effectiveness. However, this was not necessarily done in a linear fashion. Ultimately, however, the men of the 80th Division did master the concept of combined arms warfare in the Second World War and pushed onwards towards victory over the forces of tyranny in Europe.

²³³ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*; Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*.

APPENDIX A

80th Infantry Division Order of Battle²³⁴
317th Infantry Regiment
318th Infantry Regiment
319th Infantry Regiment
313th Field Artillery Battalion
314th Field Artillery Battalion
315th Field Artillery Battalion
905th Field Artillery Battalion
80th Reconnaissance Troops, Mechanized
702nd Tank Battalion (Various Attachments)
610th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Various Attachments)
691st Tank Destroyer Battalion (Temporary Attachment)
802nd Tank Destroyer Battalion (Temporary Attachment)
808th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Temporary Attachment)
811th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Temporary Attachment)
633rd Anti Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion (Temporary Attachment)
305th Engineer Combat Battalion
305th Medical Battalion
80th Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment
Headquarters Special Forces
Headquarters Company, 80th Infantry Division
Military Police Platoon
780th Ordnance Light Maintenance Company
80th Quartermaster Company
80th Signal Company

²³⁴ Shelby L. Stanton, *World War II Order of Battle: US Army (Ground Force Units)* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1984), 149.

APPENDIX B – IRB Approval Letter



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118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 12345678
PROJECT TITLE: How to Achieve IRB Approval at USM
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Jonas Doe
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Psychology
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 01/02/2015 to 01/01/2016
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board

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