

30th INFANTRY DIVISION
117th Infantry Regiment
"B" Company

BREACHING THE SIEGFRIED LINE
The First Patrol to Cross
the Wurm River
22 September 1944

GL-211
(43)

(Interview with Pvt. Brent Youenes, 1st platoon, "B" Company, 117th Infantry Regiment, 31 October 1944. ... Capt. Hechler)

"The patrol consisted of our platoon leader, Lt. Robert F. Cushman; Sgt. James Billings, Pvt. Glen Drake and myself. We were given the mission of going down to the Wurm River, finding out its width and depth, what kind of banks it had and what was the best place for an assault crossing. Nobody had previously crossed the river or even reached it; that's why it was natural that Lt. Cushman should have been given the assignment.

"The lieutenant showed us each the aerial photos of the terrain, and planned carefully the route we were to take-- which was due east to the edge of Marienberg, then northeast through a draw bordered by woods, then due east again to a tree line by the river.

"We arranged for signals-- one snap of the fingers to go, and two snaps for a halt. For equipment we took two grenades apiece, our first aid packets, and M1 rifles. We each carried a bandolier of ammunition. Lt. Cushman and I took along our bayonets. Billings and I removed the stacking swivels from our rifles so they would not make any racket. Lt. Cushman and Billings took off their rifle slings.

"We did not use any burnt cork on our faces, but killed the glare by putting mud all over our faces.

"It was raining slightly that evening, which helped us by deadening the sound a little. We were also fortunate in having a lot of enemy heavy artillery firing; whenever we saw the flash of the guns

we would get up and take off and our movements would be drowned by the roar of the guns.

"After checking with our outposts, and estimating when we would return, we crawled out to a haystack at the edge of the open field, just east of Scherpenseel, at 1800. We stayed in and around the haystack and observed from 1800 to 2000. No enemy was seen or heard during this time, but we had a good opportunity to get a general view of our location and route. Somehow I kept thinking over and over again: 'We won't get back from this patrol.' Why? Well, it was just that there were only four of us and there were so many Jerries. We had heard that the Jerries had been sending sixty man patrols out to ambush and get some prisoners from us, so they could by questioning find out when we planned to attack the Siegfried Line.

"After leaving the haystack at dark, we walked, carefully, for 200 yards and then started crawling. We advanced three yards apart, with Billings in the rear, and three in a line three yards to the front, with myself, Lt. Gushman and Drake from left to right:

X X X
X

"When we reached the brink of the hill, 1500 yards from the starting point, we got up and started to walk through the draw along the edge of the woods. We moved single-file down a road bordering the left edge of the woods in the draw. Things went well until Billings stepped on some broken china which the Germans had strung along the approach. Lt. Gushman examined it carefully, and we bypassed it. It wasn't there the day we assaulted the Siegfried; I remember looking for it particularly.

"Out of the woods we started to crawl again. Five yards out of the woods we ran across our first barbed wire; there was a single strand about a foot from the ground and just behind it three wires like an ordinary cow-pasture fence. I held the wire with my gloves while Lt. Cushman cut it. It should have been easy to get through, but just as I started across the Germans shot up a white flare from one of the pillboxes, and there I was slung across the fence and silhouetted against it. Luckily nobody saw or heard us.

"Now we started moving more slowly in the direction of a house on the north-south road which parallels the Wurm River. Half way to the river a cow made a noise exactly like a man. Lt. Cushman whispered to me: 'That sounds exactly like a human being.' But by now there was another noise, and I replied: 'No, sir, it's a cow because a human doesn't chew his cud.' Drake swore he saw a German guard patrolling the river, and then he and Billings had an idea that they saw a cigarette in the darkness. You know how it is on a night patrol-- you think every damned eye in the world is watching you. The combination of the cow and these other things caused us to stay still for full thirty minutes.

"Lt. Cushman called for me to come over, and before he could say anything, I blurted: 'What the Hell are we waiting for? Let's get down to the river.' I was cold and wet and wanted to get back. The lieutenant did not like what I had said, I guess, because he said kind of gruffly: 'Well, if you want to go so much, go ahead, I don't care.' So I took off, but only got ten yards before he called me back.

"About that time, the patrol split up, Lt. Cushman and Billings going to the right and Drake and I to the left. We looked ahead and thought that what was actually the road was the river, so we rejoined at the road-- lined up four abreast.

"We were about ten yards apart at the road. Then there were a lot of strange noises. Jerry opened up with a burp gun, but we figured it must have come from a pillbox and was too far away to have seen us. There was a machine gun firing some tracers over to the right, and occasionally a mortar would plop over to our right. It was now 1250, and we figured that we had to hurry on. Just then for the first time I began to notice a gurgling, grating sound to our immediate front. I said: 'That's a fast-running stream and it's going to be shallow.' Lt. Cushman replied: 'Probably has a rocky bottom too.' But our river turned out to be some kind of mechanized vehicle which was working up around the pillboxes.

"Not far from the road we found some more barbed wire, which was only single-strand, but it was very taut and you could not spread it to get through or under. We cut this and then covered the remaining 75 yards to the river by short rushes. We advanced by twos, Drake and Billings, and then Lt. Cushman and myself leapfrogging until we got twenty yards from the river. There Lt. Cushman placed Drake and Billings to guard facing the rear and slightly toward the sides.

"There was a broken-down barbed wire fence between us and the river, but we got through that quickly. I left my rifle at the fence post because I was afraid I might have to wade the river.

"Lt. Cushman whispered: 'You wait here.' He then reconnoitered the bank twenty yards up to the right (south) and he came back and went ten yards down to the left (north), then whispered: 'Come here a minute.' We both edged up to the bank in the blackness of the night and he asked me: 'How far down there do you reckon the water is?' It looked to me to be about fifty feet down, but I thought surely my perspective must be off a little, so I said: 'Oh, about 18 or 20 feet, I guess, sir.' Lt. Cushman

said: 'That looks about right. Hold my hand, I'm going down there.'*

That relieved me a great deal, for I felt sure he was going to ask me to wade the river, and I was all ready to reply: 'After you, lieutenant.'

He went down into the water with no noise, waded across to the opposite bank and then came back. Two more flares shot up over the pillboxes, but still apparently nobody saw us. I was afraid he was going to send me in, but when he got back he only reached up for my hand to help him up the bank. He was shivering and dripping wet when he came up the bank, and said: 'I hope those ~~backpackers~~ are satisfied.' Then we started back, and didn't give a damn about crawling; we just hightailed it back as fast as possible. We got back at 0230.

"On the way back, Lt. Cushman said he figured the depth varied between 3 and 4½ feet, and that the river averaged fifteen feet in width. I told him I felt it was more like 18 feet wide, because he had taken five and a half steps when he went across the first time.

"The next morning at breakfast, Lt. Cushman came up to us and said: 'Col. Frankland liked our work; he said that you did a darned good job.' "

** Note: The river level at this point is actually only 3-4 feet below the top of the banks.

This patrol was significant in that it was the ~~first~~ first to find out what the warm river was actually like, and as a direct result the plan to use assault boats for the crossing was abandoned. In addition, the route employed by the patrol was exactly the same as that used by the 1st platoon of B Company on the day of the assault.