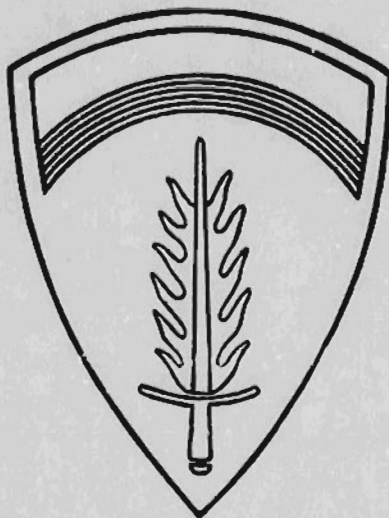




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PANZER LEHR DIVISION
(25 Feb - 7 Mar 1945)

PART TWO

By

Major a.D. Helmut Hudel

HISTORICAL DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES ARMY, EUROPE
FOREIGN MILITARY STUDIES BRANCH

MS # B-830

PANZER LEHR DIVISION
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See MS # B-768 for Part I

Historical Division
HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES ARMY, EUROPE

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PANZER LEHR DIVISION

(25 Feb - 7 Mar 1945)

ACTION IN THE MUENCHEN-GLADBACH--KREFELD--WESEL AREA

The 130th Panzer Lehr Division units, relieved by parachute units during the night of 24 February 1945, advanced toward the Schiefbahn area which they reached by the morning of 25 February but could advance no further on account of the enemy's air activities. It was impossible to refuel the tanks until darkness set in. The division command post was transferred to Schiefbahn. No final order for the division to move into the Erkelenz area was received.

After the long march Udem to Xanten and the commitment there, the division was greatly dispersed and the lack of fuel considerably delayed any reassembling. The tanks of the 2d Battalion, Panzer Lehr Regiment which had been repaired in Neroth (Eifel) could not rejoin the regiment because of lack of fuel. The 1st Battalion of the Panzer Lehr Regiment had lost many

tanks during the last engagement because of technical difficulties. On 25 February only about 15 tanks were available. Otherwise the division losses had not been too bad. The division was still fully available for commitment.

During the night of 26 February additional units assembled around Schiefbahn. Early morning the division was ordered, by First Parachute Army, to move into the Erkelenz area.

Two march groups were formed, one group was to pass on the left of Rheydt and the other on the right. There was no possibility for the groups to march in close formation, the activity of the enemy air forces made major movements out of the question. It was only possible for one vehicle to move at a time.

A liaison officer was sent to XII SS Corps. He reported to the command post at Beeck that evening and received instructions regarding the situation. The Panzer Lehr Division was urgently needed, especially its armored units, to be used as mobile antitank weapons against the dreaded American tank attacks on Rheydt and Muenchen-Gladbach. In addition, elements of the division were to launch an attack southward in order to close the gap between the left wing of XII SS Corps and the Korpsgruppe Bayerlein.

However the first Panzer Lehr Division units could not be expected to reach this area before 27 February. The date and time of their arrival would depend on the enemy's air activity.

Due to the fuel supply situation and unforeseen difficulties in transmitting orders, the division's advance elements did not get underway until 0300. As soon as it became light enemy aircraft patrolled all roads delaying the advance. The Reconnaissance Battalion, supported by the Engineer Battalion and some antitank units, reached Rheydt on the evening of 27 February.

The division staff reached the command post of XII SS Corps at Beeck at about noon 27 February. The division command post was to be established near the corps command post. By afternoon the division was assigned to XII SS Corps.

The following orders regarding 28 February were issued provided that the major part of the division got there during the night.

1. Assemble and attack the enemy advancing north and northeast from Erkelenz.
2. Establish a security line Hardt--southern outskirts of Odenkirchen--Juechen.
3. Strong forces supported by armor were to be assembled to launch an attack on Garzweiler via Hockneukirch to bridge the gap between the left wing of XII SS Corps and Korpsgruppe Bayerlein.

Since the first two orders would entail considerable dispersal of the division any attempt to carry out the third

could only mean a further dissipation of strength and nothing practical would be achieved. The division commander emphasized this opinion.

More elements of the division reached Rheydt the night of 28 February. In the morning, following orders, the division was grouped as follows: 2 battalions of 901st Panzer Grenadier Regiment; 1 battalion of the 902d Panzer Grenadier Regiment; 10 antitank and 1 tank company consisting of 12 tanks were assembled on the southern outskirts of Rheydt ready to launch an attack on Erkelenz. Hilderath as the immediate objective.

A security line was established by the Engineer Battalion from Hardt to the Muenchen-Gladbach--Erkelenz road. From the road to the southeastern outskirts of Odenkirchen by units of the 901st Panzer Grenadier Regiment. From the area north of Sasserath to Juechen by units of the 902d Panzer Grenadier Regiment. The Reconnaissance Battalion, still further on the southeast, had orders to secure and reconnoiter southwest and due south.

Since early morning the enemy aircraft had been extraordinarily active but they did not essentially hamper the assembly of the attack unit at the southwestern outskirts of Rheydt. They merely caused loss of time. The group towards noon commenced advancing and reached the Mennrath--Wickrath line. As they advanced further they encountered strong enemy tank forces which were launching an attack on Rheydt. Hilderath

and Wickrathhahn were already occupied by the enemy. Heavy fighting ensued in which about 15 enemy tanks were put out of action. The attacking German group however, was too weak in tanks and antitank units and pushed hard by the enemy they had to withdraw. Wickrath was burning and had to be evacuated by late afternoon. After artillery preparation American tanks took Mennrath. With their superiority in armor the Americans could have broken through as far as Rheydt and Muenchen-Gladbach but they did not do so.

The German forces occupied positions along the Rheindahlen--Rheydt railroad line and repulsed some weaker attacks until it became dark.

In the Engineer Battalion sector during the day, several enemy thrusts at Muenchen-Gladbach were repulsed.

The Reconnaissance Battalion encountered strong enemy armor in the area west and southwest of Juechen.

Since the gap between XII SS Corps and Korpsgruppe Bayerlein occurred here, and there was no chance to close it because of the weak distribution of forces, an envelopment was threatened.

By late evening the units west, southwest and southeast of Rheydt were withdrawn to the southwestern outskirts of the town.

The division command post was established in the northeastern part of Muenchen-Gladbach.

On the morning of 1 March the Americans launched the attack on Rheydt with heavy artillery fire. The Germans were

pushed back by the advancing massed American tanks. Since it was impossible to put up a strong defense in Rheydt and Muenchen-Gladbach, and the towns had to be spared, the division moved north. An intended counterthrust was not effected since the enemy was thrusting hard and their air activity made an assembly impossible.

That morning the division received orders to establish a line of defense from Viersen--Neersbroich--northern bank of the Neuss canal, however, this order reached the division too late. The Engineer Battalion and one battalion of the 902d Panzer Grenadier Regiment had already made contact with the enemy south of Viersen.

Toward 1400 American tanks attacked across the canal and took Schiefbahn and Unterbruch by surprise. Dive-bombers defended the few islands of resistance but 6 German tanks were lost. Since the canal position was considered very valuable a counterattack was planned for that evening to recapture Schiefbahn and the northern bank of the canal. Reinforced by 8 tanks the 1st Battalion of the 901st toward 2000 reentered Schiefbahn but they were unable to hold out there and were pushed back next day northward to Krefeld--Uerdingen. The division withdrew northward during the night and established a security line for Krefeld on the west, southwest and southeast. The division command post was situated at the northern

exit of Krefeld. The division now came again under the command of the First Parachute Army and therefore, under the Heeregruppe H (Army Group H).

By 2 March the division was not strong enough to form a permanent line of resistance. All roads converging upon Krefeld from the west, southwest and southeast were occupied by strong defense detachments reinforced by armored or antitank units. Commencing at about 0900 the enemy pushed in, at first from the southwest and later also from the south and southeast. They advanced with their armor over the roads and also cross-country. Despite hard resistance the defense detachments were slowly pushed back to the outskirts of the town. In this engagement about 10 enemy tanks were put out of action.

Fighting until late in the afternoon the 901st Panzer Grenadier Regiment withdrew to the southern outskirts of Krefeld. The 902d Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the Reconnaissance Battalion withdrew to the southeastern outskirts of Krefeld and Uerdingen. The 1st Battalion of the 901st provided cover along the railroad line southeastward of Uerdingen. 15 tanks which had recently arrived at the freight yard to join the division were unloaded.

The division proved too weak to defend the town. Several Volksturm units available or still lying in positions could not help, they had no combat value. Several Schadpanzer, light

little mobile units, and some urgently needed train units crossed the Rhine River over the bridge near Uerdingen. Toward 1800 the enemy swept into the town. Our main problem was to prevent the bridge over the Rhine from falling into enemy hands. It had been prepared for demolition but artillery fire had destroyed the communication wires. It would take some time to repair them. Four antitank units from the Antitank Lehr Battalion blocked the approaches to the bridge until evening. Only on the following day could part of the bridge be destroyed by driving a truck loaded with bombs onto it.

The commander of the Antitank Lehr Battalion had been in command, up to now, of the bridge defenses. He built an auxiliary defense line on the last bank of the Rhine River. If the Americans had brought direct pressure to bear on 2 - 3 March they might have succeeded in forming a bridgehead like the one at Remagen. During the night of 2 - 3 March the division commander drove to the command post of LXIII Corps. The 130th Panzer Lehr Division was ordered to establish a defense line south of Moers contacting the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division which had withdrawn to Moers--Homberg area. The command post was to be established at Rheinhausen.

On 3 March during the withdrawal northward engagements took place on the Werdingen--Moers road. The armored and

antitank units of the division put 24 enemy tanks out of action near Hochfeld.

The division had suffered considerable losses in its combat strength since the withdrawal from the Ueden area on 26 February. Mainly because of the large-area actions and, accordingly, difficulties of supply. In many cases tanks and vehicles had to be destroyed for lack of fuel to drive them. Continual withdrawals interrupted the repair work. Due to lack of signal equipment and the continuous pounding of the roads by enemy aircraft, communications were often disrupted. Isolated resistance groups not being able to communicate were often captured. The division was always committed at the points of main effort, therefore, its losses were very high. The strength of its panzer grenadier regiments was reduced to not more than that of reinforced battalions. The Panzer Lehr Regiment had still approximately 20 tanks combat ready. The Artillery Regiment had suffered the least losses and was still fully combat ready, the Reconnaissance and Engineer Battalions and the Antitank Battalion had suffered heavy losses. As replacement could not be expected and the field replacement battalion was already broken up, stragglers and small stray units were rounded up to reinforce the division.

The afternoon of 3 March the enemy thrust strongly from the south and the division had to withdraw further north to Moers.

The commander of the Panzer Lehr Regiment together with a small regimental staff was ordered to assemble and reorganize in the Muelheim--Angermuend area and farther east of this area, the units of the division that had already crossed to the east bank of the Rhine River. The whole division needed a short rest, to in some way reorganize, but this was not permitted.

ACTION IN THE WESEL BRIDGEHEAD

(I did not personally participate in these actions therefore I can only describe what it was possible to gather and condense from written and oral reports.)

On 4 March 1945 the Panzer Lehr Division's neighbor on its left was withdrawn to Homberg and was assembling for defense at the southern and southeastern outskirts of the town. The still committed elements of the Panzer Lehr Division were moved through Homberg that morning. According to orders they formed a line of resistance running from Rheinkamp--western edge and southern edge of the forest west of Lohmannsheide. The division command post was established in Vierbaum.

Before the division withdrew to this line the Artillery Regiment and the Engineer Battalion were sent across the bridge

at Homberg to the last bank of the Rhine River. The artillery had orders to follow the movements of the division northward and to support the defensive combat. Forward observers remained with the division on the west bank of the Rhine River. The engineers were to also follow and be ready to construct ferries to make crossing possible any time.

It was the division responsibility to see that all these measures were carried out, as the collapse of the bridgehead was anticipated and we did not want to risk losing our heavy weapons.

That afternoon the enemy resumed the attack with considerable artillery preparations. The division was pushed back. By evening it occupied a defense line from Rheinberg to Ever-sael. During these movements the division was subordinated to the LXV Corps.

On 5 March the enemy artillery fire was constantly increased however, attacks on our line of main resistance were repelled. The 116th Panzer Division was on our right. The division command post was established at Ossenberg.

On 6 March the bridgehead was gradually being narrowed by the continuous attacks. The division became weaker and weaker, only one infantry battalion and 2 tanks were available.

The bridgehead formed by remnants of the First Parachute Army extended from Birten to Ossenberg the Panzer Lehr Division

was committed on the left of the 116th Panzer Division extending from the southern outskirts of Ossenbergl as far as the Rhine River. The division command post was in the northern part of Ossenbergl. The enemy artillery fire kept on increasing. It is superfluous to describe the mood of the completely exhausted German troops.

On the morning of 7 March the division staff received orders to cross with the rest of the division over the bridge near Wesel to the east bank of the Rhine River. The division was again subordinated to Army Group B.

It was planned to allow the division to rest and be rehabilitated in the area southeast of Muelheim. The division units crossed the bridge during the morning without suffering any more losses from enemy air attacks. Staffs and personnel, almost reduced to company strength, reached the area southeast of Muelheim toward evening. The following day the artillery regiment and the engineer battalion also reached the area.

CONCLUSION

On looking back it is not possible to describe in detail the day by day commitment of the Panzer Lehr Division. Every day, often several times a day, the same thing happened. The division received an order but by the time it reached the destination to which it was ordered the situation had changed

completely. The division was too weak to face its assignments. The enemy was attacking from sides trying to reach the banks of the Rhine River. There was a shortage of troops at all points. The division was continuously torn apart and this made the supply situation most difficult.

The enemy possessed great superiority. Their continual attacks of all roads by their dive-bombers delayed every move of the division units. The heavy enemy artillery barrages caused heavy losses at the Wesel bridgehead and affected badly the troops morale.

The superior enemy forces pushed the division way northwest and north. Though the division was not able to close the gap between it and the Korpsgruppe Bayerlein it did succeed in delaying considerably the enemy advance via Rheydt, Muenchen-Gladbach, and Krefeld.