

TAC NEWS

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The Capture of Fort IX

By September 25, 1939, the Polish campaign was all but finished. For the Germans, all that remained was the elimination of pocketed diehards holed up in major urban areas. As part of this final phase of operations, the 10th Infantry Regiment, was ordered to attack Warsaw along the Wilanow-Warsaw Road. Blocking this road was a century-old fortification dubbed "Fort IX." This fort was one of a series of forts that formed the city's outer ring of defense. Regular infantry formations, lacking the specialized weaponry needed to overcome obstacles such as this, requested the support of combat engineers. The 88th Engineer Battalion was thus attached to the 10th Infantry Regiment with orders to take Fort IX by September 26.

The commander of the 88th Engineers reported to 10th Infantry headquarters on the evening of the 25th. Properly anticipating his unit's role in the assault, the commander had already conducted a reconnaissance. He reported Fort IX's concrete walls were at least three feet thick. The surrounding moat was fifteen feet deep, twenty yards wide, lined with steep banks, and full of water. On the southeastern side of



Fort IX the moat was crossed by a highway bridge. The bridge over the moat to the north of the fort was a small wooden foot structure. The garrison was estimated at battalion-strength.

The infantry and engineer staffs compared notes and formulated a battle plan.

1 Attack simultaneously from three sides of the fort at 0500 on September 26.

2 Cross the moat where necessary by means of pneumatic assault boats.

3 Attach Engineer companies to Infantry battalions in the following manner:

- A. The 2nd Engineer Company to the 1st Infantry Battalion
- B. The 3rd Engineer Company to

the 2nd Infantry Battalion C. The under-strength 1st Engineer Company would keep other engineer companies supplied with ammunition and explosives.

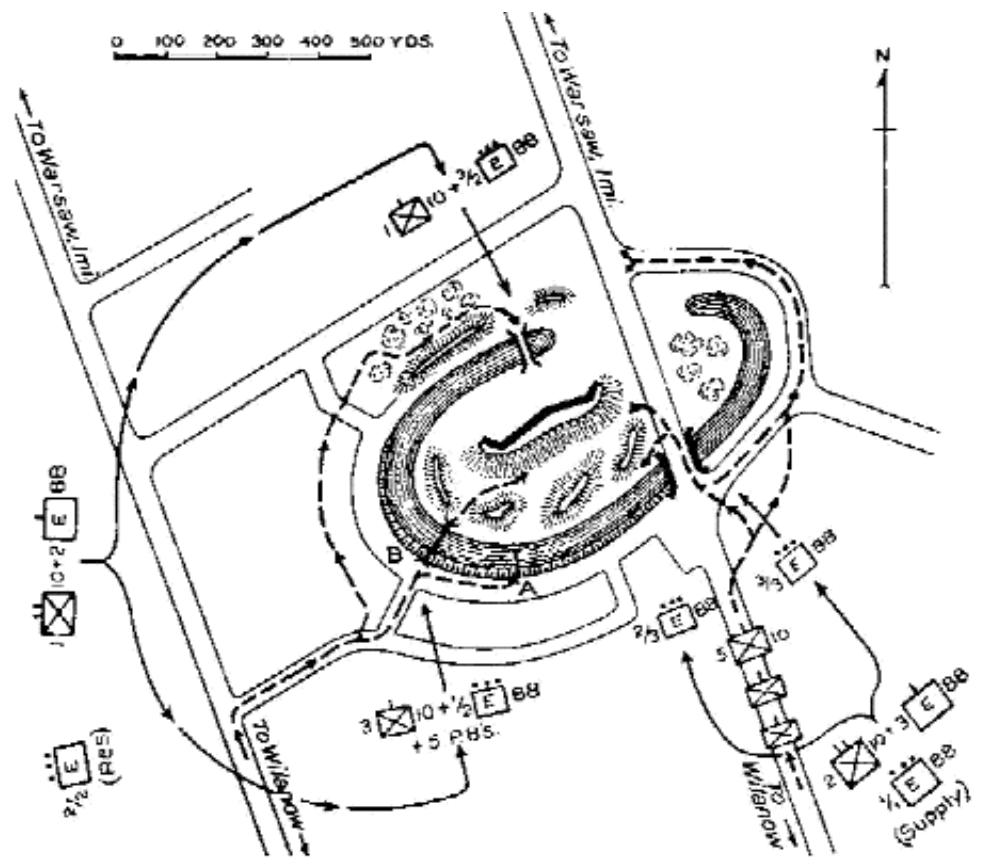
On the eve of battle, the 88th Engineers was a widely scattered unit. The battalion HQ, the 2nd (foot) Company, one platoon of the 1st (foot) Company, and the supply trains were in bivouac eight miles south of the Fort. The remainder of the 1st Company was already committed to another mission. The 3rd (motorized) Company, previously attached to the 10th Infantry for the past several days, was in bivouac with the 2nd Infantry Battalion a few hundred yards south of the Fort. It would take the rest of the day and all night to fully consolidate the unit.

The final mission briefing was in accordance with the plan noted above. All units were to bring to their assembly areas all flame throwers (proven effective in previous house-to-house fighting), all available explosives and their pneumatic boats. The units moved to their assembly areas under the cover of darkness. The 2nd Company arrived at the last minute aboard 8-ton trucks from the bridging column.

At 0500 the assault commenced.

Assault squads of the 3rd Platoon, 2nd Engineer Company, attempted to cross over the northern foot-bridge, but were stopped by automatic weapons fire. The engineers rallied on the near bank and called in machine gun and mortar fire. Despite heavy weapon support, the engineers were beaten back a second time. The local commander then ordered his men to dig in at the water's edge. No further attempts were made to force a crossing here.

The squads of the 1st Platoon, 2nd Engineer Company, emerged from the cover of houses clustered next to



the moat carrying their pneumatic boats. Supported by light mortars and machine guns positioned on roof tops, the engineers pushed their rafts up to the moat. The first pneumatic boat into the water, however, was immediately shot to pieces. With supporting fire having failed to suppress the far bank, the assault crossing at this location was also called off.

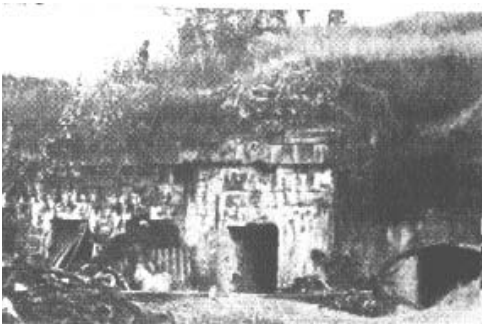
Progress, however, was being made elsewhere. The leading company of the 11th Infantry Battalion, attacking over the highway bridge, called their engineer platoon forward to silence a machine gun nest firing from the far end of the bridge. The 3rd Platoon of the 3rd Engineer

Company, flanked the nest and silenced its machine gun with hand grenades.

It was now approaching 0600. The 1st Platoon of the 2nd Engineer Company, after manhandling its boats back to the buildings, shifted them to point B on the map. Here, another assault crossing was attempted. Even though the boats were under rifle and machine gun fire, the crossing succeeded. One regular infantry section paddled across with the first wave. The remainder of the 3rd Infantry Company, parts of the 4th Machine Gun Company, and the 2nd Platoon of the 2nd Engineer Company, followed in relays. With a substantial German force now established on the casemate side of the moat, about fifty Poles, who had been firing from slit trenches dug in along the water's edge, surrendered.

While the 2nd Engineer Company thus effected a crossing on the fort's

western side, the 3rd Engineer Company was advancing with elements of the 2nd Infantry Battalion. They raced over the bridge and passed the machine gun nest knocked out by 3rd Platoon. Once across the bridge, the Germans ran into strong resistance. The lead elements did not reach the casemate until 0900. Casualties were heavy. Among the fallen was the commander of 3rd Engineer Company.



The assault troops were now pressed against a 3-foot thick wall, with about 500 Poles on the other side still of a mind to fight. The 88th Engineer commander, who had been at the CP of the 10th Infantry throughout the attack, now arrived on the scene. At 1100 he conferred with the local infantry commander. Since conventionally armed soldiers could not force the wall, it was decided to withdraw them and leave the final job of reducing Fort IX to the engineers. To support the final assault, the 10th Infantry attached one machine gun company and one platoon of light (75mm) infantry howitzers to the 88th Engineers.

To breach the walls of Fort IX, the engineers experimented with charges of varying force. Thirty pounds of TNT set against the wall caused only a few cracks. A well-tamped charge of 100 pounds produced a hole about a yard in diameter. Altogether, four 100-pound charges

were set off against the west wall of Fort IX. Into each breach the engineers tossed grenade bundles followed by jets of liquid flame. On one occasion the Poles tried throwing the grenade bundles back out, but the flame throwers forced them back. Still, the Poles were not ready to throw in the towel. One engineer section was cut off and wiped out after it entered a breach.

Unable to directly force the issue, the engineers switched tactics. They started dropping hand grenades and smoke candles down ventilation shafts. They also poured oil from the flame throwers into the shafts and then ignited the oil with smoke candles. The heat and smoke forced out one party of Poles, who emerged waving a white flag. Shouts of indignation arose from defenders within the fort, and shots were fired at the soldiers attempting to surrender. Still, the end was clearly at hand as the engineers continued to pour smoke and fire into the ventilation shafts. At high noon the white flag appeared again; this time for good. About 475 Polish soldiers, along with their officers, filed out of Fort IX.

Conclusion:

On the squad-level, the reduction of Fort IX was a brilliant operation. This was expected, because the assault was spearheaded by elite troops, superbly equipped and lead. It was unfortunate, however, that highly trained specialists were used to mop-up an isolated fort manned by secondary troops. Was the German strategic timetable so tight, that they could not afford 48 hours to soften the objective with a heavy bombardment or air attack? Apparently so, because the whole latter phase of the Polish Campaign was fought this way. Backed into their cities, the Poles fought it out house to house, thus compelling the time-starved Germans (the British and French were by now fully mobilized) to commit (and sacrifice) elite troops to close an essentially done deal. Although losses suffered by German combat engineers in the Polish Campaign were hardly decisive, it started a cumulative eroding process which eventually reached its bloody climax in the streets of Stalingrad.

by Edward Morris



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Fort IX Scenario Variants & OBs:

Both the German and Polish forces were organized in the classic "triangular" way: three squads per platoon; three platoons per company; three companies per battalion. Adjust your troops per the rules systems you prefer.

For added zest, the German forces could have employed a section or two of close assault guns. Use 15cm sIG33 below (GHQ's G124).



To counter the threat, the Poles can deploy howitzers, but without armor piercing ammunition. This was in very short supply in Poland in 1939.

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