The Battle of Lampaden Ridge

March 3, 1945, found the American 94th Infantry Division holding a bridgehead across the Saar. The attached 3rd Cavalry Group held the left flank from Tarforst to Franzeneim; the 3d Battalion 302d, was in the vicinity of Lampaden; the 2d Battalion, 302d, held Schonrach, Hernem and Baldringen; the 3d Battalion, 301st, was in position around Zerf and Ober Zerf; the 5th Ranger Battalion held Hill 3; the 1st Battalion, 302d, was located between the Rangers and the Ruwer River; the 1st Battalion, 301st, perched on Hucker Hill; the 2d Battalion 301st, held the extreme right of the line down to the Saar. The 94th Reconnaissance Troop patrolled the area south of Taben, between the bridgehead and the left of the 26th Division, maintaining defensive positions west of the Saar and in the Saarlautern bridgehead.

Enemy activity on the immediate divisional front consisted of light patrolling and sporadic artillery fire. Behind the lines, however, the Germans were franticly assembling a scratch force from the shattered 416th Infantry and 256th Volksgrenadier Divisions. Lumped into this mix of survivors were old men and invalids from various fortress battalions, ersatz battalions, alarm companies and rear echelon staff. More reliable troops from the recently transferred 2nd Mountain Division marched directly into the line as they disembarked from their troop trains.

To shield its movement into the line, the German 2nd Mountain Division planned a localized attack on Hill 5 early in the morning of March 4. The Americans promptly learned of the attack from prisoners taken that afternoon. The German 3rd Battalion of the 137th Mountain Regiment, 2nd Mountain Division would attack at 0330 hours, supported by artillery and self-propelled guns. Although the Americans knew the attack's every detail, there was little they could about it. An under-strength rifle company supported by a heavy machine gun section thinly held Hill 5. Reinforcements were available, but constant enemy shelling on the hill prevented the digging of entrenchments to shelter the extra men as they came forward. Thus they were held in reserve, committed two or three at a time when a direct hit vacated a foxhole. During the night both the heavics and one of the light machine guns were knocked out. Only one 60mm mortar remained operational.

On Hill 5 the GIs hunkered in as 0330 approached, but H-Hour passed without incident. Just as the Americans breathed a sigh of relief, the overdue German attack commenced. A deadly hail of M1 and BAR fire staggered the mountainiers, but two self-propelled guns moved in and knocked out the company's only bazooka. These assault guns then popped a flare, which brought the other two self-propelled guns of the platoon forward. Two American TDs counterattacked, but the combined German fire held them at bay. The Germans pressed the advantage and overran the company CP. A forward artillery observer and two enlisted men, captured at the CP were gassed down when refusing interrogation. Eventually the assault guns withdrew. As the GIs retook the CP, the wounded artillery spotter told of the atrocity, which quickly spread through the divisional rumor mill.

Following the deployment of 2nd Mountain Division, General Hahn, commanding the German LXXXII Corps, was assigned the 6th SS Mountain Division. The commitment of SS troops signaled a High Command desire for offensive actions. Thus, General Hahn was compelled to attack the American-held Saar bridgehead. The battalion plan called for a coordinated attack by the 6th SS Mountain Division, the 2d Mountain Division and remnants of the 256th Volksgrenadiers, to seize, respectively, the high ground along the Zerf-Petlingen, the town of Mublenberg and the heights southwest of Gutweiler.

The 6th SS Mountain Division consisted of two SS mountain regiments, a mountain artillery regiment, one tank destroyer battalion and the normal complement of engineers, reconnaissance and service troops. The division was drastically under-strength, having the bayonet strength of a reinforced regiment. What set the 6th SS Mountain apart, however, was the quality of its troops. They were young men, to the most part armed with lethal MP-44 assault rifles and instilled with Nazi fanaticism.

Fanaticism aside, three years of combat experience on the arctic side of the Russian Front had thoroughly versed the SS mountainiers in stosstruppen tactics. This meant small assault groups preceded the main assault. Making full use of the terrain, these groups filtered through the enemy's initial line of strongpoints and sought out rear echelon formations. With communications cut and artillery batteries under direct attack by assault detachments, the enemy line would collapse when struck with the main conventional attack. Thus an attacker could defeat a numerically superior entrenched defender. However, the GIs of the 94th had been initiated to these tactics two months earlier when they fought the 11th Panzer Division to a standstill.

At 2300 hours on March 5, the 6th SS Mountain left their assembly areas and crossed the Ruwer River. At 0100 hours, the 2nd Battalion of the 12th Regiment closed in on the American 3rd Platoon of Company G at Kummelroth. Further south a forty-man detail with two light machine guns, commanded by Untersturmführer Brockmann, fanned out to maintained con-
tact on the right with Kampfgruppe Dahne, which was attacking Hentern.

At 0125 hours leading elements of the 11th outposts of Company F of the 302nd Infantry challenged SS Mountain Regiment, advancing south of Lampaden. The GIs exchanged fire, thinking the German force was merely a patrol. When it became evident the German force was of considerable size, the outposts beat a hasty retreat into Lampaden, but not before several sentries were taken prisoner. The Germans then set fire to a logging mill and continued their advance up the draw between Lampaden and Schomerich. The Germans used the dense woods to advantage, successfully concealing a battalion-sized force even after the Americans lit the night sky with flares.

At 0130 hours the CP of Company G, 302d, in Schomerich lost contact with its 3rd Platoon in Kummelcrath. The last message spoke of small arms and bazooka fire coming in from all directions. Requests to battalion for reinforcements brought the 2nd Platoon of Company F from its reserve positions on Hill 467 to Schomerich. They arrived just as Schomerich came under direct attack. The 2nd Platoon of Company G on Hill 468 repulsed an heavy assault with support from the 356th Field Artillery.

Shortly before 0200 hours in the vicinity of Oberschirm, a group of men approached the perimeter of Company K, 302nd Infantry. When challenged, they returned the proper counter-sign in perfect English. Apparently prisoners taken at Lampaden divulged the password. As they advanced, Sgt. Max Ledesma recognized them as German. He opened fire, but the return fire severely wounded him and Ledesma staggered towards Oberschirm to sound the alarm. The same night worked at an outpost of First Platoon, Company B, 774th TD Battalion. After the sentry was taken prisoner, elements of 3rd Battalion, 11th SS Mountain Regiment, directly attacked the village.

Heavy fire from 2d Platoon, Company K, forced the Germans to withdraw and dig in around the town. The heavy firing, most of it blind, continued until dawn. During a lull, the mortally wounded Sgt. Ledesma was brought to the company CP. Before he died, Ledesma warned the password was compromised.

The reserves were called up. Company F in Hentern and Company E in Baldringen moved forward. The 2d Platoon of Company F reached Schomerich and went into position northeast of the village. In Lampaden, Company I attempted to reestablish its outpost line, but illumination from the blazing mill revealed any movement beyond the edge of town. The troops were recalled and artillery plastered the north and south ends of the draw. The 356th Field Artillery continued to support Company G.

The infiltration phase of the German attack was now over. At 0400 hours the 6th SS Mountain Division attacked with its full might. The 1st Platoon of Company K, 302d, repulsed an attack on Ollirnuth, but elsewhere the 3rd Battalion of the 11th SS Mountain Regiment advanced into Oberschirm and surrounded elements of the 774th TD Battalion. 3d Platoon of the 302nd's Cannon

In Oberschör, American infantry deployed into houses on the outskirts of town, while TDs, stationed in the town's center, raked the streets. In Lampeden, the hard-pressed Company I was struck on the left flank near the head of the draw. A desperate call for reinforcements brought up 2d Platoon, which arrived just in time to shore up the collapsing American center.

Near Schomerich on Hill 468, Germans entered the barbed wire ringing the 2d Platoon of Company G. One American machine gun was overrun. Second platoon's commander was ordered to make a break for town. The GIs boiled down the hill intermingled with charging Germans. Pounding on doors, screaming "We're GIs! Let us in!" the remnants of 2d Platoon found sanctuary in the southern portion of Schomerich.

In Henrtemp the 3d Platoon of Company F and company headquarters personnel fought off Kampfgruppe Dahne. In a seesaw battle, the Germans took a roadblock at the northern edge of the village near the company CP. As the Germans removed an anti-tank daisy chain laid across the road, a GI tossed a grenade into their midst and detonated the mines. The blast killed five Germans and brought down the building housing the American CP. Dahne then committed the reserve portion of his Kampfgruppe and circled to the rear of the town. Company F was surrounded.

Meanwhile, Untersturmführer Brockmann's detail attacked Baldringen. Heavy fire from the village repulsed the attack and shattered the German's morale. Brockmann sent in an American prisoner to parley surrender. (Apparently SS fanaticism was not universal in the 6th SS). Surrender was arranged, but as the Germans stacked arms and marched in, they were hit by a German artillery concentration. The entire detail, save Untersturmführer Brockmann, was wiped out. Brockmann's capitulation was not an isolated event. To the north, a 50-man assault detachment surrendered to the 3rd Cavalry after a brief engagement.

At 0700 hours, the 2nd Battalion of the 137th Mountain Regiment, 2d Mountain Division, attacked the positions of Company I, 301st Infantry in the bend of the Ruwer River northeast of Zerf. Moving steadily up the wooded slope, German assault squads filtered between the widely scattered 2nd and 3rd Platoons. Only by rapidly shifting from entrenchment to entrenchment, were the GIs able to parry each enemy thrust and hold the right knob of the hill.

As dawn approached, the American regimental and divisional staffs now fully realized the extent of the German attack. The situation was not encouraging. In Oberschör the surrounded garrison frantically requested tank and infantry reinforcement. In Lampeden, Company I was in desperate combat, while in Schomerich, Company G was also surrounded.

To relieve Oberschör, regiment dispatched a platoon from Company L with three Shermans in support. As the advance began, one of the Shermans was hit, but the GIs pressed forward using the tanks as shields. Machine guns and panzerfausts, supported by antitank fire from across the Ruwer, raked the column. Casualties were heavy, but the GIs made the crest of Hill 500, killing some fifty Germans. However, the heavy morning fog now lifted and the antitank gun across the river zeroed in on the Shermans. The tanks backed off the crest, but the infantry remained. Seizing the moment, the Germans swept around the hill's base and surrounded the hilltop.

Even though their relief was cut-off and surrounded, the Americans inside Oberschör refused a surrender offer. Regiment organized another relief force, consisting of Company C of the 302d, supported by the 1st Platoon of Company A, 778th Tank Battalion. Although this force failed to break the cordon around Oberschör, it succeeded in capturing twenty-four prisoners from Kampfgruppe Dahne.

With their window of opportunity closing, the Germans redoubled their efforts to eliminate the Americans in Schomerich. Time and time they attacked, eventually investing the eastern and southeastern parts of the town. An American infantry squad, along with a heavy machine gun and mortar section was captured. The Germans attacked again, this time wearing American helmets and field jackets.

In Lampeden, the crew of a TD rushed in reporting their vehicle was knocked-out west of town. A hurriedly assembled scratch force of cooks, drivers, and mechanics encountered a German roadblock and went into a defensive position south of the road. They surprised ten Germans at a
pumping station and took them prisoner. The prisoners stated their mission was to cut the supply route to Trier by blocking the Zerf-Pellingen road. This was confirmed when, further down the road, a weapons carrier from the 7th Field Artillery Observation Battalion was destroyed by a panzerfaust.

During this time Company L organized another attempt to clear the road into Oberschir and rescue the men trapped on Hill 500. The three tanks previously forced off the crest were teamed with a rifle platoon commanded by Sgt. George Stockman. This group moved up the hill, but the tanks were again driven back by ATG fire from across the river. Stockman and his men continued forward towards the besieged platoon. Suddenly, the machine gun fire from a nearby cemetery killed Stockman and pinned his men. The trapped men on the crest made two attempts to link up with Stockman's men, but each time the machine gun in the cemetery beat them back. An infantry squad and a tank tried to clear the cemetery, but they were driven off by automatic weapons fire and panzerfausts.

Reports of Germans west of Lampaden caused concern at headquarters until intelligence estimated the entire enemy force at just platoon-sized. A platoon of light tanks from Company D of the 778th Tank Battalion was sent to clear the Zerf-Pellingen road and reestablish contact with Lampaden. Company C of the 302d, supported by five medium tanks, cut cross-country and reached the Zerf-Pellingen road, west of Baldringen. One platoon was detailed to keep the road open and to capture any Germans discovered in the immediate area. The rest of the company and the tanks moved north to the CP of the 2d Battalion located in a pillbox five hundred yards south of Steinbach.

There they were informed of the desperate situation in Schomerich. Company C was ordered to attack Hill 468 and allow Company G to breakout. After deploying its 3rd Platoon on the left to refuse any German attack from the direction of Schomerich, Company C, supported by four Shermans (one had been held as a reserve) assaulted Hill 468. To maximize surprise there was no preparatory artillery bombardment. Opposition was light, and the hill was taken with relative ease. Radio contact was established with Schomerich. The commander requested tank support for his breakout. As the medium tanks rolled toward Schomerich, the enemy troops, having expended most of their Panzerfausts in the house-to-house fighting, began a hasty withdrawal. In short order the armor and infantry cleared the town, rescuing most of the American prisoners. The tanks then returned to Hill 468.

The tide now turned for the Americans in Oberschir as well. An infantry squad climbed aboard each Sherman tank and clung to it as it roared up Hill 500. Spraying lead in every direction, the mounted infantry raced over the crest of Hill 500 and surged into Oberschir. Dismounting in the village, the assault parties formed with their besieged comrades and soon cleared the town and the surrounding area. Seventy prisoners were taken along with twenty-six machine guns and forty-two Panzerfausts.

As the Americans moved up around Oberschir, the Germans mustered a final counterattack. Some fifty men supported by two assault guns moved in from the east. As the self-propelled guns commenced shelling the town, the Shermans on Hill 468 returned the fire. One SP gun took a direct hit on its gun barrel, shearing the tube in half. The other began to burn after taking a hit in the engine compartment. Without any direct artillery support, the counterattack fizzled. The burning SP gun limped off the field followed by the infantry.

Thus ended the German offensive at Lampaden Ridge. Much heavy fighting remained as the Americans regrouped their shattered units in Schomerich, Lampaden and Oberschir and relieved isolated pockets of men trapped on the wooded hills tops surrounding the town. 

Rescued GIs told of SS atrocities on wounded and captured Americans. One can only guess how this was repaid on any German caught behind the lines.

Even at this late stage in the war, Germany's total capitulation was just weeks away, the Wehrmacht remained a capable and dangerous foe. The German attack opened in textbook fashion. The American line was successfully infiltrated and large numbers of GIs were cut off and surrounded. The Germans turned the wooded and hilly ground, ideal defensive terrain, to their favor. Small groups, roving the forests armed with automatic weapons and panzerfausts, repeatedly blunted American armor-supported counterattacks. Unfortunately for the Germans, they lacked the strength to finish off what they had so brilliantly started. It also did not help their cause to machine gun prisoners early in the battle. Without the prospect of quarter, the GIs fought with dogged determination, forcing the liquidation of each pocket by direct assault, which the Germans had neither the time nor resources to accomplish.

For the Americans, considering they occupied this ground for some time, the battle's account has glaring omissions. There is no mention of mines and just one reference to barbed wire. Instead of entrenchments, trenches, or bunkers, (prepared positions with interlocking fields of fire), the Americans fought mostly in houses or individual foxholes. At this stage in the war, it is easy to imagine proper defensive measures not being taken. Certainly, the entrenchments on Hill 5 proved inadequate. Digging in frozen ground and falling trees to open fields of fire is hard work, especially with the end so near. Furthermore, the weather was conducive to seeking shelter in warm buildings with modern conveniences. Once the battle began in earnest, however, the Americans showed their mettle. On the command level, there was no panic as communications blinked out, and there was no call for retreat when Germans were reported deep into the rear echelons. Each situation was resolved in a deliberative manner, indicative of experienced commanders confident their men could stand toe-to-toe with elite alpine troops in wooded mountainous terrain and defeat them.

by Edward Morris