Die für den 22. März 2020 geplante Gedenkveranstaltung „75 Jahre Kriegsende in Nierstein und Rheinübergang der U. S. Armee – Nierstein Crossing – Silent Crossing“ konnte wegen der Einschränkungen infolge der Corona-Pandemie nicht stattfinden. Den Vortrag, den der als Hauptredner vorgesehene amerikanische Militärhistoriker Russ Rodgers ausgearbeitet hatte, haben wir zum 80. Jahrestag, den der Geschichtsverein mit einer großen Gedenkveranstaltung begangen hat (siehe unter Aktuelles März 2025), in der Ausgabe Nr. 31 unserer „Niersteiner Geschichtsblätter“ in deutscher Übersetzung veröffentlicht. Im Folgenden veröffentlichen wir hier die englische Originalfassung. Außerdem weisen wir auf Rodgers in englischer Sprache erschienenes Buch: Nierstein and Oppenheim 1945: Patton Bounces the Rhine (Campaign, Band 350) hin, das über verschiedene Anbieter online bestellt werden kann.

The Human Side of War: The Campaign in the Palatinate and Patton's Crossing of the Rhine

Speech for Nierstein Commemoration Event 22 March 2020

Russ Rodgers

The genesis of Patton's crossing of the Rhine here at Nierstein and at nearby Oppenheim began even before the Allies landed in Normandy in June 1944. As Patton and his staff looked over the plan for the advance through France and into Germany, he selected the Nierstein-Oppenheim area as a probable Rhine crossing point. His selection of the site was based on the roads that led up to the river, the dominating heights on the west bank, and the open terrain to the east. Naturally, he selected several other crossing sites as well, these being in the area between Bingen and Koblenz. But the Nierstein-Oppenheim area held significant advantages for a river crossing. During the campaign across France, Patton kept his eyes on a greater prize, that being to cross the Rhine and to push into Germany. This influenced all of his planning.

After the German Army expended much of the last reserves they could muster for their offensive in the Ardennes Forest in December 1944, they took efforts to defend the German frontier from the inevitable Allied offensive that would follow. By February 1945, the Allies had punched their way through the Westwall fortifications along the border and began to penetrate into Germany proper. The Rhine River represented the last major obstacle to what could be easily seen as the end of the war.

Concurrently, the German Army in the West, led by the venerable Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, took every effort they could to strengthen the front to meet the coming Allied onslaught. He was in large measure stymied by the interference of Adolf Hitler, who decided to strip the Western Front of its most well-equipped and experienced divisions, sending them east in an attempt to protect Germany's last oil reserves in Hungary. Rundstedt was compelled to defend a front extending from the Netherlands to Switzerland with a meager force of depleted infantry units and a small nucleus of worn out panzer units. It was only logical for him to concentrate what little panzer troops he had around the Ruhr industrial area, this being deemed to be the most likely objective of the Allies as they closed in on the Rhine.

The assessment of Rundstedt and his staff was largely accurate, as the Allies intended to let British forces under Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery make the Rhine River crossing on 23 March, just north of the Ruhr, and then push into Germany. This became known in high-level Allied Command circles as "The Plan," and the surprise capture of the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen by General Courtney Hodges's First U.S. Army on 7 March 1945 underscored the slavish notion that the Allies were to stick to "The Plan." In large measure, "The Plan" helped to thwart U.S. Army efforts to expand and exploit the Remagen bridgehead, and the sluggishness of the American senior leaders on the spot did not help.

But the capture of the Remagen bridge served as a lodestar for the German Army, and what few units that were available in reserve were hurried to that spot in a vain effort to eradicate the American bridgehead. It also proved to be the end for Rundstedt, who was made the scapegoat and relieved of command, being replaced by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. Even as units were scraped together for this effort, the two German armies situated in the Saar-Palatinate Triangle found themselves woefully short of support and incredibly exposed and ripe for destruction. Patton and his superiors recognized this, but it was Patton that moved quickly to exploit the weaknesses of the German units opposing him, being those of the Seventh German Army under General Hans Felber. Even as his troops closed in on the Mosel River between Trier and Koblenz, Patton ordered his XII U.S. Corps under General Manton Eddy to quickly cross the River and drive southeast.

At the time, the defense of the lower Mosel was tasked to the Eighty-ninth German Army Corps under General Gustav Höhne. In particular, the area from Treis to Brodenbach was held by the hastily rebuilt 159th Infantry Division commanded by General Heinrich Bürcky. Having been only modestly equipped and lacking sufficient training, Bürcky's mix of old veterans and raw recruits took the brunt of Patton's initial crossing of the Mosel. Within a matter of days, Bürcky's division had been overrun by the hard-charging 4th and 6th U.S. Armored Divisions, each supported by motorized infantry during their exploitation.

This drive from the Mosel River towards the Nahe River and Bingen underscored a significant difference in Patton's worldview and that of his peers among the Allies regarding combat operations. For example, in Hodges' First U.S. Army, an armored division would be typically broken up, with portions assigned to support infantry that moved at foot-pace. In Patton's army, an infantry division would be broken up and mounted in trucks and assigned to follow his armored divisions as they moved quickly through enemy positions. In this manner, Patton could move faster and farther than his counterparts. It was this different view of combat that made Patton both feared and respected by his German opponents.

Patton's original orders, even as late as 17 March, was to advance up to the Rhine between Koblenz and Bingen and to defend in place. He had no authorization to cross the Rhine, and the Nierstein-Oppenheim area was assigned to General Alexander Patch's Seventh U.S. Army. However, Patton had other ideas. His advance through the Palatinate was at a lightning pace, and by the 17th he had taken Bad Kreuznach and pushed beyond the assigned boundary. This forced a meeting between Patton and Patch, which was brokered by General Dwight Eisenhower, in which it was decided that Patton could advance towards the Rhine in the direction of Worms.

By 19 March, Patton's entire Third Army was on the move to the east, and Felber's Seventh German Army was crumbling. Small units and even individual soldiers were tasked with trying to slow the American advance as the remnants of Felber's forces raced to the Rhine to get to the eastern side. At the same time, every conceivable combat and rear area unit, and even civilians were pressed into action. Making matters worse, local Nazi Party officials used the emergency to settle old scores with their opponents, forcing some into forced labor and having shot those who showed any recalcitrance. In the midst of this chaos, the disparate elements of the army found themselves under the command of generals like Siegfried Runge.

General Siegfried Runge was a veteran of World War I where he had been decorated with the Pour le Merite in August 1918. He had served as a regimental commander in Russia, but the harsh winter had broken his health, forcing him to accept rear area assignments. Now, with Patton's army bearing down on the Rhine, Runge was forced once more into frontline action. Having just recently been promoted to Generalmajor and awarded the Knights Cross, Runge worked energetically to organize his mixed force of school troops, hospital convalescents, and even found six assault guns being repaired at a local workshop. While some of the units contained high quality personnel, throwing them together so quickly could not create a functioning unit. They would therefore be at a serious disadvantage facing Patton's battle-hardened and experienced troops.

But Patton had several other aces up his sleeve. The tactical air force supporting his troops roamed the skies above the battlefield, forcing German soldiers and commanders to dart from cover to cover to avoid being attacked. Even secret locations like Kesselring's headquarters at Ziegenberg castle near Bad Nauheim became targets. On 19 March, while receiving a visit from armaments minister Albert Speer, the castle was heavily bombed by Patton's aircraft, much to Kesselring's chagrin.

Another ace up Patton's sleeve was the quality of his staff and small unit leadership. Patton refused to micromanage his subordinates, and spent considerable time and effort training his men to think and act for themselves within the context of Patton's overall plan. This technique of mission command, what the Germans call "Auftragstaktik", was practiced aggressively by Patton and his subordinates. As a consequence, Patton's army could move, engage, and react significantly faster than his opponents, always staying ahead of any efforts to counter his moves. Time and time again, German Army planners attempted to establish control over the growing confusion, only to find themselves one step behind Patton's decisions.

The advance of Patton's army through the Palatinate essentially encircled Felber's command, leaving General Ralph von Oriola's 13th Army Corps stranded along the Mosel River. Largely unaware of the extent of the disaster unfolding around him, Oriola was at last ordered to abandon his positions and launch a counterattack to the east towards Bad Kreuznach. Oriola's severely depleted 2nd Panzer Division, under the command of Meinrad von Lauchert, was to spearhead this attack. Lauchert had on hand a mere six tanks and 200 infantry, being about one tenth of what a full division should have had. Needless to say, this attack ultimately failed, not only from insufficient forces but because Patton's advance was already moving well beyond Bad Kreuznach towards the Rhine. Having seen his share of mismanagement of the war effort,

Lauchert decided that he had had enough. With his division now all but destroyed, he decided to swim the Rhine and walk home to Bamberg to await the end of the war.

By 20 March, Patton's 4th Armored Division was rolling like a juggernaut towards Worms, which at that time had one of the last standing bridges over the Rhine in the area. But before they could reach it, the bridge was blown by German engineers, leaving only the bridge site to the south at Germersheim for German units to escape across. With the bridge at Worms gone, Patton initiated his plan to launch an assault across the river and to build his own bridges. Since October 1944, he had sequestered large quantities of bridging material and boats in the vicinity of Nancy, France, where his engineers had been honing their river crossing skills on the Meuse River. Moreover, Patton's intelligence chief informed him that the German army was busy collecting any units they could find in the area, and that in a few days they could have four infantry divisions and possibly two panzer divisions on the east bank to oppose a river crossing. This, and his desire to beat Montgomery across the Rhine was enough to spur Patton on.

On the morning of 21 March, Patton informed Eddy that he wanted General Leroy Irwin's 5th Infantry Division to make an assault crossing on the night of 22 March. But Patton was not content in just letting Irwin's troops paddle across the river. On the suggestion of one his senior staff officers, he planned to use light observation aircraft to ferry infantry over the river and land them on the other side. While this plan was ultimately not carried out, had it been done it would have been the first airmobile operation in history.

Irwin was skeptical he could maintain a bridgehead across the Rhine, but was willing to try. Boats were quickly assembled and units assembled along the hillsides outside of Dexheim. March 22 arrived clear and unseasonably warm, and the Rhine was not as flooded as expected, which normally occurred with springtime snowmelt from the Alps. That night a near full moon arose and the first assault waves silently loaded the boats, even as Irwin, having made the necessary preparations, retired to his quarters to rest, engaging in his personal passion of reading mystery novels when he couldn't sleep. By then, the first wave paddled quietly across at 2200 hours. Resistance was light, and by 2230 the first two companies were across. The American GIs advanced inland quickly, surprising many of the local defenders asleep. By daylight, most of the 5th Infantry Division and part of the 90th Infantry Division were across the river.

Needless to say, Patton was nothing short of elated. He telephoned his boss, General Omar Bradley, that morning to announce the news that he had beaten Montgomery across the Rhine. Later that morning, even as Montgomery's troops were blasting away at German positions on the opposite bank of the river, Bradley announced to the media what the Third Army had done, taking particular delight in mocking Montgomery.

While the German leadership knew that a crossing attempt was coming, they expected it to be in the area of Mainz and after a short delay for the Americans to bring materiel forward to make the effort. Instead, Patton had chosen to move swiftly so as to gain the advantage of surprise and secure a bridgehead before the German Army could prepare their defenses. The response of Felber's units was relatively weak due to a sheer lack of forces in the area. Runge's efforts to launch a counterattack against the bridgehead from the vicinity of Gross Gerau met with massed American artillery, with one salvo mortally wounding Runge near his headquarters

located where the Hellen Keller Schule is today at Königsstädten. Bürcky's long suffering division, having been partially reassembled, once more bore the brunt of Patton's crossing efforts. And again, it was a story of too little, too late.

Unlike the bridgehead at Remagen, Patton expanded and exploited his bridgehead rapidly. Indeed, it took four days before Hodges' First US Army built a second bridge next to the damaged Ludendorff Bridge, while Patton put up two bridges within 36 hours, and several more within a few days after. This allowed him to push five full divisions and their support troops, being over 60,000 vehicles of all types and over 70,000 men, across the Rhine in just four days. By 25 March, Darmstadt was captured when Felber abandoned it with hardly a fight, an action that prompted Kesselring to relieve him. But, changing army commanders would do nothing to stop the growing catastrophe before them. On 26 March, the 6th US Armored Division captured the Sachsenhausen bridge over the Main River, and by 29 March Frankfurt was taken. As Patton's army plunged deeper into Germany, the nightmare called World War 2 was now only weeks from being over.

Unfortunately, the achievements of Patton's Third Army here at Nierstein are typically overshadowed by two events, being Patton's act of urinating in the Rhine and his decision to send a small force to Hammelburg in an effort to free his son-in-law who was a prisoner of war there. By focusing on these two events, historians have done an injustice to the men of Patton's army and their accomplishments. By crossing the Rhine as quickly as they did, here at Nierstein and Oppenheim as well as at Remagen and other places, the Western Allies were able to quickly overrun a large portion of Germany, significantly shortening the war ahead of their own expectations. And thus, much of Germany was spared a harsher fate than what befell those to the east. Indeed, this could be one of the greatest accomplishments of Patton and his soldiers.

But while the history of what happened in those closing weeks of the war 75 years ago may be of interest, we must remember that war, as horrible and repugnant as it may be, is still a human activity, and from it come both the best and worst from human nature. It would be so easy to harshly judge one side and to praise the other, and thus lose sight of the good that remained in the former. The German soldiers by and large continued to exercise the discipline of combat soldiers, demonstrating a resolve and commitment that deserved a better cause. But by this time of the war, the cause for most was their homes and families, and each other.

In this way, the typical German soldier had the same things in common with American soldiers, and in large measure it is why soldiers who were once enemies can later reach across the divide and clasp hands in friendship. It is this common bond that my German Opa, a veteran of both World Wars shared with me, his grandson, the only other one in the family who pursued a military career, even if in a different uniform. It is why we can be here today. We can honor the sacrifice made in those terrible times without becoming apologists for any given cause.

But also, we must not forget the civilians who endured those terrible years as well. For across this river, tucked away on a back road, is a monument to five men and one woman who refused to give in to the tyranny that had gripped their homeland. They too, paid the ultimate price for their convictions, and unfortunately for them, deliverance came too late. Seventy-five years. So long ago and yet seems like yesterday.