

Baptism of Fire: 114th Infantry Regiment at the Battle of Domjevin

I. Introduction

During World War II, thousands of New Jersey National Guardsmen served in combat in both Europe and the Pacific. Among the Guard units heavily engaged was the 114th Infantry Regiment. Prior to the war, issues with professionalism, training, and mobilization generated uncertainty as to how Guard units would perform in combat. The case study of the 114th Infantry, though, demonstrates the unfoundedness of those concerns; after arriving in France, the 114th acquitted itself very well during its first engagement of the war, the October 1944 Battle of Domjevin.

II. The Interwar 114th Infantry and the New Jersey National Guard

The 114th Infantry claims lineage to the Civil War-era Camden militia. Officially formed in 1869, the regiment deployed to Florida during the Spanish-American War and fought in the Meuse-Argonne offensive during World War I.¹ The Guard subsequently reorganized the unit, basing most of its companies at the Camden and Elizabeth armories.²

The interwar was an important time for the NJ Guard. Increasing revanchism and aggression across Europe and East Asia prompted the significant expansion of the Guard, which added multiple new regiments and its first aviation unit, the 119th Observation Squadron. During the 1930s, to accommodate advances in military technology and organization, the Guard increased the complexity of its training and maneuvers. Meanwhile, to support these expanding operations, the Works Progress Administration built new armories

¹ Joseph S. Hasson, *With the 114th in the ETO: A Combat History* (Army and Navy Publishing Company, 1946), p. 7.

² *Historical and Pictorial Review, National Guard of the State of New Jersey, 1940* (Baton Rouge, LA: Army and Navy Publishing Company, 1940), pp. 82-125.

and upgraded old ones across the state, including those used by the 114th.³ World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, and in September 1940 the 114th mobilized for one year of service.⁴

These developments showed that the state and the nation expected the NJ Guard to play an important role in any upcoming war; yet, uncertainty persisted as to how it would perform. The National Guard in general and the NJ Guard in particular had not seen combat nor deployed overseas since World War I. Though it had performed admirably in that conflict, the Guard's professionalism declined somewhat during the 1920s, as evidenced by issues with record-keeping, recruiting, and political drama. These problems were "largely resolved" by 1930, according to NJ historian Joseph Bilby. However, readiness levels remained somewhat lower than those of the regular Army by 1939.⁵ Furthermore, confusion characterized the 1940 mobilization. New Jersey's 44th Division, the 114th's parent unit, found itself able to house less than 15% of its soldiers at Fort Dix. Facing major shortages of dining capacity and uniforms, units instructed their troops to eat breakfast at home and report in civilian clothes. Morale, too, suffered, as despite American isolationist attitudes, a Congressional vote narrowly approved a six-month extension for Guard mobilization, disappointing those expecting to demobilize in late 1941. Some high-ranking officers took the mobilization issues as evidence of the ineffectiveness of the Guard in general. The greatest critic was Lieutenant-General Lesley J. McNair, the leading architect of the US Army's training program. During the mobilization, McNair defamed Guard officers as "the blind

³ Joseph G. Bilby, *New Jersey: A Military History* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2017), pp. 195-96.

⁴ Austin G. Graham, "Battalion Order Number 7" (Elizabeth, NJ: Headquarters First Battalion, 114th Infantry, December 11, 1940).

⁵ Bilby, 194-96; Richard W. Stewart, *American Military History* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2010), pp. 62, 73.

leading the blind,” and in 1944, even after a number of Guard units had seen combat, he claimed that it had contributed little to the war effort.⁶

III. The Battle of Domjevin

With the American entry into the war following the Attack on Pearl Harbor, the War Department planned to send the NJ Guard into combat. For the next two years, the 114th and the 44th's other regiments moved across the country to train at various bases. In September 1944, the 44th became the first division to travel directly from the United States to France, disembarking at Cherbourg. On October 17, it arrived near Lunéville, France, joining the XV Corps of the Seventh Army, which was slowly advancing into the heavily defended Vosges Mountains, the last obstacle before the Allies could reach German-occupied Strasbourg and the Franco-German border at the Rhine River. The 44th Division secured the Seventh Army's left flank, relieving elements of the 79th Division.⁷ The regiment's first objectives were the villages of Domjevin and Veho, which lay along the road towards the important junction town of Sarrebourg and the Saverne Gap, one of the few passes through the Vosges. The regiment entered battle on October 19 by shelling Veho. For the next two weeks, it engaged in skirmishes with German patrols near Domjevin. On November 2, it achieved victory by advancing into and securing the town. It then consolidated its gains for five days before temporarily moving into divisional reserve ahead of the next offensive.⁸

⁶ Michael D. Doubler, *I Am the Guard: A History of the Army National Guard, 1636-2000* (Arlington, VA: Army National Guard, Department of the Army, 2001), pp. 198-201.

⁷ Christopher M. Guppy, *Battle of the Vosges Mountains: The 44th Infantry Division in the Battle of the Bulge* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1984), o. 19; Hasson, 12.

⁸ Hasson, 13-18.

IV. The 114th in Battle

A closer analysis of the Battle of Domjevin shows that the 114th fought admirably. One strength of the unit was coordination, both within the regiment and 44th Division itself, and with other independent units. Unit movements were undertaken quickly yet effectively. On the night of October 18, the 114th relieved the 79th Division's 314th Infantry Regiment in place, and in between periods of combat, the regiment effectively rotated its infantry battalions to keep the troops well-rested.⁹ The 114th also coordinated well during active engagements. Upon arriving at the front, it quickly established liaison with the 2nd French Armored Division (positioned to the unit's right), and it received support from the 44th Division's 217th Field Artillery Battalion during its first major engagement with the enemy on October 20. The following day, it launched a joint assault towards Domjevin with the 79th Division. Thanks in large part to effective coordination with artillery, the attack succeeded, resulting in the first capture of German prisoners, the destruction of an enemy ammunition dump, and the seizure of all objectives. Several days later, the 114th used 57 mm anti-tank guns to bombard a church steeple thought to house a German observation post. When this proved ineffective, the unit called upon the support of the attached 749th Tank Battalion, which used an M8 Scott and a M4(105) Sherman to destroy the structure.¹⁰

The 114th also demonstrated proficiency in not just larger, combined arms operations, but also small unit tactics. Through several skirmishes, officers and noncommissioned officers of the 114th displayed effective and valorous leadership under fire. On October 24, a patrol led by Lieutenant Robert W. Lithall killed and captured several members of a German unit guarding a bridge. In a separate action, Lieutenant Arthur Chantry destroyed a German patrol that had cut off his force from friendly lines. One soldier, Private Jacob, was left missing in

⁹ Ibid., 12, 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

action, but one cannot fault Chantry too much for such given the confused nature of the skirmish. To their credit, the 114th launched multiple search-and-rescue patrols for the private, though none found him. On October 29, Captain George Lindner led his company on a night raid that destroyed two machine gun nests and a mortar position and killed around twenty Germans, suffering just four casualties in return. Finally, on October 31, Lieutenant Henry Grosso led a reconnaissance patrol which, though successful in observing enemy positions, came under intense mortar and machine gun fire. Soldiers panicked, a concerning yet understandable occurrence given the fact that many of them had never fought before, and one which was common throughout both fresh National Guard and regular Army units. In any case, their wavering composure was corrected thanks to the exceptional bravery and valor of Staff Sergeant Robert Crew. While the rest of the patrol withdrew behind a ridge, Crew remained behind to assist the evacuation of the panicked men. According to the 114th's unit combat history, while Crew was in the process of "efficiently effecting an orderly withdrawal" which saved the lives of multiple soldiers, mortar fire killed him. "His coolness and deliberate actions under fire and his sterling leadership were an inspiration to his squad and to all members of the patrol."¹¹

Perhaps thanks to the effectiveness of these reconnaissance patrols, the 114th soon learned that the Germans were evacuating Domjevin, and on November 2 it launched the decisive attack. Meeting light opposition from the German rearguard, it occupied Domjevin and the ridge west of Veho and captured approximately twenty prisoners, advancing further than any other Allied units in the area. The only major setback of this otherwise highly successful maneuver occurred during minesweeping operations. While clearing roads near Domjevin, an anti-tank Teller Mine exploded and killed Lieutenant Warren Stevens,

¹¹ Ibid.

Technical Sergeant Ralph Mattson, and Staff Sergeant George Brown.¹² Notably, Teller Mines manufactured from 1943 onward included the TMiZ 43 fuze, which had a built-in anti-handling function to target minesweepers. Information on this new fuze was apparently not widely disseminated in October 1944—it does not appear in Field Manual 5-31 “Land Mines and Booby Traps,” published in November 1943, but does in the November 1944 pamphlet No. 21-23 “Don’t get killed by Mines and Booby Traps.”¹³ Thus, the deaths of those soldiers may be attributed as much to outdated intelligence as anything else.

In the aftermath of the battle, the 114th consolidated its new positions, moving its headquarters into Domjevin, and began patrols of the new German lines. German mortars and machine guns ambushed one of these patrols, resulting in seventeen casualties. The details of what led to the ambush, and any potential culpability for its commander, Lieutenant Jerome Dean, remain unknown; however, it is documented that Dean, despite being wounded himself, displayed notable bravery and endurance by leading medical personnel back to the battlefield to evacuate other wounded. Again, a 114th leader took the initiative to make the best of a difficult battlefield situation. The other triumph of the post-battle period saw the 114th shoot down two strafing German aircraft, capturing one of the pilots. After several days, elements of the 79th Division relieved the 114th, which rotated all battalions but one into divisional reserve.¹⁴

V. Conclusions

The 114th continued to distinguish itself in subsequent engagements. Its seizure of Domjevin helped set up Allied lines for a larger division-level offensive launched on

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ “Chapter 8: German Mine Tactics, Mines, and Fuzes,” essay, in *Land Mines and Booby Traps* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1943); 1. *Don’t Get Killed By Mines and Booby Traps* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1944), p. 27.

¹⁴ Hasson, 17-18.

November 13th. That attack resulted in the complete collapse of German lines in the area, allowing the 114th and other units to advance through Sarrebourg to Phalzweyer at the western entrance to the Saverne Gap, while the 2nd French Armored Division turned east and liberated Strasbourg. The 114th then distinguished itself in two defensive battles: on November 23 it helped blunt an assault by the Panzer-Lehr Division near the Saverne Gap, and in January it assisted in fighting off Operation *Nordwind*, a massive German counterattack meant to reroute Allied resources heading northward to the Battle of the Bulge. Subsequently, the 114th participated in the Invasion of Germany and ended the war in Austria.¹⁵

The Battle of Domjevin is especially notable, though, because it shows that the 114th performed so well during its World War II “baptism of fire.” Throughout the battle, the 114th effectively coordinated its own battalions and cooperated with independent units to win larger engagements. In smaller actions, too, it prevailed, thanks to the capable leadership and heroism displayed by its junior officers and NCOs. Its efforts culminated in the capture of Domjevin for relatively light losses. This case study demonstrates that, despite pre-war concerns with readiness and in contrast to the claims of detractors, World War II National Guard units proved themselves highly effective in frontline combat.

¹⁵ “*Mission Accomplished*”: *44th Infantry Division* (Atlanta, GA: Albert Love Enterprises, n.d.).

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