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Offensive Action in Cities

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PREFACE

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The reader's attention is called to Annex A, a map of Ortona, Italy and Annex B, a map of Aachen, Germany. A more complete understanding of the daily actions of the units in the historical examples may be obtained by referring to these annexes.

In preparing this monograph, I did not believe my own combat experience in World War II qualified me as an expert in city fighting. However, I do feel it gave me the necessary understanding to better evaluate the theme of this monograph.

The point of view expressed in this paper is that of the author -not necessarily that of The Infantry School or the Department of the Army.

Harold H. Kibbrough

INTRODUCTION

In February 1945, I was a company radio operator and from a vantage point I witnessed the start of the attack on the heavily defended city of Forbach, France. During the first day, I saw many incidents both good and bad, in my estimation, and have since wondered what the accepted procedure should have been. Later, when I rejoined my platoon in the same city, I was a part of many actions that were not clear to me as to justification or conclusion. Many of these local actions were very successful and results could be immediately noted, but many could not be so evaluated at that level. To satisfy my own curiosity and as a possible value to others, I have selected the subject relating to combat in cities.

The present Field Manuals give excellent rules to follow in this type of action but I soon realized in my research that units implemented these in many ways. With few exceptions, every author that analyzes actions in cities agrees with the basic principles and how they were employed in a particular situation. Commanders and authors are reluctant to admit violations of principles. This posed a problem of obtaining accounts of unsuccessful attacks as the conquest of each city was eventually successful. The exception was Stalingrad. I eliminated this account as tactical implications were predominate rather than principles of city fighting.

Many examples of combat in cities have been published. I have selected just two historical actions which have been well documented as to veracity. These examples provided me with the necessary information for this paper. During my research, I found many examples to support the accounts I have chosen. However, because of lack of background information, insufficient basis for conclusions and repetition I have eliminated these outside references from my discussion and bibliography.

The two accounts I selected were the assault of Ortona, Italy and Aachen, Germany. They were chosen because of their similarity in time

and troops employed. City fighting is well catalogued as a special operation, so to familiarize the reader with basic problems encountered, I have briefly described each historical example separately with an analysis following each. My discussion then compared the two analyses to determine how the application of accepted principles aided or hindered these actions.

With our armies stationed throughout the world, the knowledge of city fighting has not decreased. This situation led me to investigate our present training in this field and to briefly discuss it as a point of allied interest.

DISCUSSION

'Attack and secure' the city of Ortona, Italy, was the order given two companies of the Loyal Edmonton Battalion, part of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade in Dec. 1943 (1:1). The Allied forces were pushing north, the Canadian Brigade on the east flank with their respective east flank on the Adriatic Sea. Preceding the attack on the town of Ortona, the left flank, west, had been secured by the Princess Pat Battalion, the ground immediately to the south was held by the Seaforth Highlanders, so forming a firm base for the attack.

The city of Ortona is situated on a small table-top of land, its eastern edge dropping abruptly about 100' to the Adriatic Sea (Annex A). The land to the north, west, and south, declines quite steeply and the road from the south traverses and crosses numerous streams and gullies. The town itself was approximately 500x300 yards in area and under normal conditions housed 10,000 people. Each block was a solid mass of houses with common walls and constructed of brick or masonry. Narrow streets or alleys ran between each block and the main street and Esplanade were the only wide avenues of traffic. The city was held by elements of the 3rd Para. Regt. of the 1st Para. Division and opposition was expected to be light, if any. To facilitate control purposes, the city was divided into four bounds or phase lines (Annex A).

On the morning of the first day the Edmontons attacked the city on a two company front. They immediately encountered strong opposition but were able to consolidate on the 1st bound by nightfall. The prime capture of the day was a six story building (Annex A:1A), one of the tallest in the city and was used as an observation post during the remainder of the attack. During the second day, greater resistance was met and consolidation was made at nightfall at an intermediate line, with enemy infiltration prevalent throughout the night. Towards the end of the day the tanks were brought up and each company had a troop of tanks (4) for sup-

port. At the end of the third day, the companies had reached the 2nd bound but high casualties had been suffered and it was obvious that the two companies could not take the city. Accordingly, the Seaforth Highlanders, with three companies, were brought into the town and given the left half of the city beyond the main street. The two Edmonton Companies now had approximately a block and a half per company.

With two battalions now attacking, still no appreciable gains were made on the fourth day. It was not until the end of the fifth day that the 3rd bound was reached and consolidated. On the sixth and seventh days only small gains were made in spite of a determined effort to gain the 4th bound. On the eighth day the Edmontons reached and secured the 4th bound by mouseholing through buildings and on the morning of the 9th day, the Germans evacuated the city of Ortona. No individual company casualty reports could be found. However, the Brigade suffered 700 casualties in the taking of Ortona, a high price for a 500x300 piece of ground.

After the action was over, the officers and key personnel were interviewed and they gave an excellent analysis of the battle (1:4). I will attempt to consolidate these comments with the view of assistance in discussion of our principles. Initially, a detailed plan of the city was obtained and control lines and points established. A suitable C. P. was obtained early in the attack for control and direction of fire support. Arrangements had to be made for tremendous amounts of small arms ammunition, mortar ammunition and other ordnance used by Battalion troops. And a plan of resupplying this ammunition had to be found. The two companies of the Edmontons used over 2000 yards of mortar smoke in eight days.

Once the attack was launched, the biggest problem confronting the Company Commanders was control. (City fighting is mainly a Platoon Commanders show with great initiative on the part of the individual soldier.) The problem of control was alleviated somewhat by requiring

reports every half hour from all subordinates. Individual house clearing groups signified their advance by displaying a sheet from one of the top windows when they had cleared a building.

Tanks were found to be indispensable in city fighting although many problems arose in their employment. They found that the Infantry had to precede tanks down the streets and call for them when needed. One satisfactory arrangement was to have one tank supporting each rifle platoon. During the nights, the tanks were used for defensive fires in their consolidated positions. This action was successful only when the Infantry supplied outposts and security for the tanks. Tank fire was used effectively against enemy crew served weapons and prior to an Infantry crossing at a street intersection, the tanks were ordered to fire through the corners of the nearest buildings. On their trips to the rear to refuel and replenish their own fuel and ammunition, the usefulness of the tank was then doubled. 1. They evacuated the wounded; and 2. on their return, they solved a big problem of ammunition and ration supply to the Infantry.

The Canadians used their artillery mainly to contain the left flank beyond the city and to harass the main road to the north. Artillery fire was not effective in dislodging the enemy, although it neutralized his fire power to some extent. They limited artillery shoots to be no closer than one bound ahead of the Infantry. The rubble resulting from Artillery fire was used to conceal minefields and as obstacles covered by the fire. Several instances were recorded where artillery was used as direct fire weapons on enemy strong points with excellent results.

Techniques concerning the Infantry action were many. Some have already been listed in conjunction with other points. There were others, however, found to be emphatically stated in the analysis. Positions were to be consolidated at least an hour before nightfall and be prepared for defense during the night. An abundance of rifle fire was to be directed at all windows, open or closed, and at any suspected enemy position during an attack. Smoke was used at every chance to protect troops crossing

any open area. It was found that after a house had been cleared, men must remain behind to occupy it as the enemy quite frequently returned at night. This also meant destroying or evacuating all enemy arms and ammunition found in the houses. The established procedure of clearing from the top floor down was followed with relative ease as all the homes in one block were connected and the roofs had easily removable tiles. A second procedure was to blow holes through walls on the top floor if the roof could not be gained.

All of the preceding was an analysis of the attack on Ortona, Italy by the Canadians. Rather than re-analyze their statements, I will retain my comments until I can compare this action with another similar example in which American forces participated.

The Gateway to the Cologne plains, October 1944, is the beginning of this next historical account. The action was supplied by the famed 1st Division and, more specifically, the 2nd Battalion of the 26th Regt. in their capture of the city of Aachen, Germany(6:1). The city of Aachen, with a normal population of 160,000, is situated at the bottom of a large bowl surrounded on all sides by high ground, part of the northern slopes of the Ardennes. The Germans had made their city an integral part of the Siegfried Line and had prepared its defenses well.

Several actions prior to the actual attack on the city are worth mentioning for background interest. During the period 2-6 Sept. 1944, five German divisions were eliminated by the 1st Division and the 3rd Armored Division at Mons, France. The German troops had been planned on to bolster the defense of Aachen. On the other hand, a critical shortage of gasoline was evidenced among the American forces and all action became foot action. Therefore, when the Siegfried Line was penetrated, it took twenty eight days of daily assaulting in an attempt to surround the city and the original plans of by-passing the city had to be revised to a direct assault on the objective.

While the action to surround the city was taking place, the 2nd Battalion of the 26th Regiment, knowing their future role of taking Aachen, went into a phase of detailed planning and training. A slogan was coined, "knock them all down," referring to the buildings. This theory was practiced with platoon raids on houses known to be occupied by the enemy in towns outside the city. This prior planning brought out many foreseeable problems and tentative solutions were devised. The problem of ammunition supply was countered by establishing a battalion dump, stocked with all types of ammunition, which was to keep moving with the assault troops. Control was aided by numbering all street intersections and main buildings and by requiring constant contact among all units.

Orders were issued to make it mandatory that every room of every building be searched and all enemy and civilians evacuated to the rear. Tanks, TDs, and AT guns attached to the Infantry presented a problem in that they had to use the streets for advancing. It was decided to use these vehicles on side streets initially and movement forward would be made after the Infantry had cleared all possible AT gunsites. Because of the large area to be cleared, it was necessary to employ all three companies in the attack (Annex B) with a reserve to be supplied by Regiment. Each company had attached to it two heavy machine guns, one flamethrower, two additional bazooka teams, three tanks or TDs and two 57 AT guns.

On 10 October, an ultimatum was sent to the city to surrender, even though a gap of two miles existed between the forces surrounding the city. At the expiration of the ultimatum, 1100 on 11 October, the Air Force began a five hour bombardment of the city. This was followed by artillery and by the end of 12 October, the Artillery had fired 500 tons of ammunition into Aachen. During this period, the gap between units outside the city had been closed to 3,000 yards and the 2nd Battalion moved to the railroad tracks southeast of the city (Annex B).

The assault on the city itself began on 13 October and was well supported by fire. The Air Force bombed within 500 yards of the railroad

tracks, the Artillery fired from 100 to 500 yards beyond the tracks and the Infantry mortars covered the intervening area. By 0930 the Infantry, about 1000, were in position on the near side of the railroad embankment. At 0930 each man tossed a hand grenade over the embankment and immediately moved across after it. Little resistance was met, initially, but it increased as the advance continued. Only two tanks were able to accompany the Infantry at the first push, but by the first night all the fighting vehicles were in the city.

On the morning of the 14th, the attack was resumed with excellent artillery support firing in the same block through which the Infantry was fighting. The attack was stopped at noon because of terrific fighting by the encircling forces to the east of the town. The attack was taken up on the 15th and reached the line shown on Annex B. Just before dusk that night a counterattack penetrated G Company's area, but the line was restored after two hours of brisk fighting. The next day all companies held their positions because of continued fighting to the northeast of the city. Late that night, the encircling forces finally gained contact and Aachen was surrounded. On the 17th, the attack was renewed and increasing enemy resistance was met. This resulted in C Company being attached and placed in the northern part of the zone (Annex B). By the 18th it was found that the attacking companies could not occupy and hold what they had gained, so the 2nd Battalion of the 110th Infantry, 28th Division was attached to the 1st Division to hold the ground captured by the 26th.

The attack continued on the 19th with strong resistance met in the north and on the 21st the western edge of the city was gained. At noon on the 21st, the German garrison surrendered. In all, over 5,600 enemy were captured with a loss to the 2nd Battalion of less than 100 casualties.

Situations encountered by the 2nd Battalion, 26th Infantry were similar to those met by other units involved in city fighting. It can be

readily seen that a planning and rehearsal phase eliminated many problems such as ammunition resupply, detailed plans for control, civilian evacuation and individual training. Once the assault was initiated, maximum use of supporting artillery and air force was utilized. This was especially evidenced when artillery fired into the same block with the Infantry assault forces.

Individual ingenuity was continuously referred to and emphasis was placed on clearing and occupying each building. Stealth was of little value and a continuous fire on all possible enemy sites was maintained. In the use of attached weapons, great success was found in using tanks, TDs, and a 155 mm SP gun in a direct fire role. Control of individuals and units was found to be difficult even with prior planning. Because of this difficulty and loss of fire power, night operations were not used and positions were consolidated prior to dusk.

An unexpected result was obtained in the use of surprise. After the German Commander had surrendered his troops, he stated that the direction of the attack was a complete surprise to the garrison. Although he knew that his troops were almost completely surrounded, the majority of them were disposed in the south expecting a full scale attack there. The assault troops were well into the city by the time he was informed of the attack in the east and it was too late then to re-dispose his forces effectively.

The two examples chosen were so considered because: 1. Relatively the same amount of time was taken to capture the two cities; 2. The objectives were seized with approximately like amounts of troops. It is worthy of note that with these two factors equal, a city of 10,000 was taken by one unit as opposed to a city of 160,000 by the second unit. To say that the assault on Ortona was not successful would, of course, be inaccurate. However, I feel that the battle of Aachen was far more successful. To justify this, I will compare various situations encountered by

each unit and how each unit reacted. In most instances, the established principles of city fighting were adhered to by both organizations. It is necessary to note, however, that both units employed variations of the principles and emphasized some more than others in their assault. I have selected a few of the principles common to both units to evaluate whether one action was more successful than the other and how the application of these experiences in future battles may be used to greater advantage.

The major endeavor expended to surround the city of Aachen certainly could be justified. In fact, if the first desire of completely bypassing the city had been accomplished, its capitulation without a major battle was probable. Unless an enemy is completely fanatical, it can be assumed that he will surrender when he is encircled with no hope of a break-through in evidence. It was felt that the city could actually have been taken several days sooner if the assaulting forces had not been held up by actions of the encircling forces. This situation did not exist in Ortona. No effort was made until late in the action to surround the city and then it was not highly successful. Instead, artillery fire was used to contain the left flank and harass the northern exit from town. This allowed the Germans to reinforce their positions and when no hope was left for holding them, they were able to retreat and fight again. Another feature that presents itself is the fact that once the town has been surrounded, the attacker can select his point of assault. This requires the defender to cover all likely approaches which depletes his force and prevents consolidation of a major defending force. This principle was proven by the Americans attacking the city of Aachen from the east rather than from the logical southern approach. The Canadians, on the other hand, by not surrounding the city, had to attack directly against fortified positions.

A planning phase before the attack was well evidenced with the operation at Aachen. The American forces were extremely fortunate in having a little time prior to the assault in which to visualize problems and

prepare tentative solutions. This was especially apparent in their use of a mobile ammunition dump following the assault troops. Once the Canadian attack had started, they were forced to resupply their ammunition by using their tanks. This was a solution. However, it decreased the amount of fire support available to the reinforced unit. Both units had plans of the city prior to the assault and emphasis was placed on their needs. The American's plan was more detailed and I think their system of numbering check points was excellent for control purposes. One phase of planning that I feel was lacking in both instances was the non-realistic approach to the size of the area the companies could seize and occupy. In the Canadian example, the original area had to be reduced to less than half and in the American action, an additional company had to be attached for clearing areas and a battalion from another division was used to occupy and hold the area already cleared. Both units were fortunate that additional troops were in the area, as this condition of not being able to occupy what you have cleared may place you in a very undesirable position. e.g. Reoccupation by enemy through infiltration.

An additional aspect of the planning carried on by the Americans, was the rehearsal of their troops to make the assault. The platoons made raids in the suburbs of Aachen against known enemy positions. This allowed the Platoon Leader and all of his men to become acquainted with the job they were eventually to perform. This practice was employed in my battalion in World War II with gratifying results. If nothing else, it gave our new replacements entering combat for the first time, a gradual approach to what was expected of them. Unfortunately, the Canadians did not have the available time for a rehearsal, but moved right into the assault. In addition to the rehearsal of the platoons, the problems of the attached weapons were visualized early and the tanks, TDs, and AT guns were attached prior to the attack. This allowed the Company Commanders sufficient time, under ideal conditions, to plan for their employment and a chance to rehearse with them. Unfortunately, the Canadians

had completed almost two days of fighting before their tanks arrived. This made it necessary for the Company Commander to assume command of, and consider their employment in the middle of battle. It would certainly have been better to have the tanks before the entry into Ortona but the support rendered to the Infantry justified their arrival at any time.

With respect to fire support prior to the entry into the city, the Americans certainly capitalized on all that was available, including multiple air strikes and at one time, ten battalions of Artillery. The Canadians were evidently not so fortunate, as no reference can be found regarding prior artillery fire or air support. In fact, the general conclusion was that the attack was supported primarily by artillery and 4.2 mortar fire to seal off the town. It was later found that fire placed in the city was not too effective in dislodging the enemy and normally allowed him better defensive sites in the resulting rubble.

Once the assault has been launched, every reference empirically states that the attack becomes a small unit action, normally three or four men. Small teams must be formed for clearing each room of every house and to provide covering fire for an advancing group. Control at this stage is almost completely non-existent for the Company Commander and limited greatly even at platoon level. This was true both at Aachen and Ortona with many examples of individual aggressiveness and ingenuity described. No comparison can be drawn regarding individual or small group actions as each unit attained equal results at that level. Control of personnel so employed necessitated the Company Commanders and Platoon Leaders to be well forward. By being so positioned, leading elements could be controlled in their rate of advance. Both units required half hour reports from all leaders and by using pre-designated control points a limited amount of control was maintained.

Both units realized an oversight in planning by not having enough troops to seize the objective and then physically occupy each house.

Instances were recorded by both units that the Germans would infiltrate into the rear of the attack units, occupy previously cleared houses, requiring assault units to retake these positions. In the Aachen operation, the assault was made with all three rifle companies because of the width of the area and even this was not sufficient strength. The practice of committing all units in the assault of a city at all levels, to include Regiment, was very common. (9:10). No reference can be found on the use of reserve troops at Ortona. If the lines of advance can be interpreted freely, no reserve was used by the Edmontons as an assault unit in their advance into Ortona and were probably used as an occupying force.

The use of fire support from indirect fire weapons was used by both units with almost similar results. They found that mortars were more effective than artillery for 'close in' support and artillery was effective against heavily fortified positions. Several variations were recorded which are worthy of remark. The Canadians used maximum rounds of smoke in their attack when the Americans made no comment of using smoke in any form. Smoke was undoubtedly used but did not carry the importance as in Ortona. Most accounts of city fighting in which Americans participated state that movement was covered by fire; as opposed to the use of smoke as a covering agent by most other Armies. Several techniques employing artillery was found by each side. Both sides stated that artillery was not effective in dislodging enemy troops from their positions, but would temporarily neutralize their fire. This advantage was usually lost, however, by the time the Infantry could advance to the enemy position. If the Infantry called for artillery fire on 'close in' targets, it was necessary to withdraw the Infantry to the rear because of the possibility of error by the Artillery. This allowed the enemy to re-occupy houses that the Infantry had to leave. The Americans at Aachen overcame this disadvantage by employing their Artillery to fire parallel to the assault troops rather than the usual perpendicular technique. This was possible by having the city surrounded and allowing freedom of emplacing artillery.

The emplacement of the artillery on the flank gave overhead fire in the same block the Infantry was clearing. This is certainly a major factor to consider and a method of obtaining the maximum use of supporting fire.

In close conjunction with indirect fire support we have the employment of tanks and their resulting direct fire support. In connection with this I wish to mention the use of the one 155 mm SP gun used in the battle of Aachen. This weapon was found to be extremely accurate and useful in reducing heavily defended positions and O.P.s in steeples and towers. It was only used in direct fire missions. Tanks and TDs were also used effectively in a direct fire role to cover the advance of the Infantry. Their employment was utilized to clear intersections of crew served weapons, allowing the Infantry to move forward. When positions were consolidated, the tanks were made an integral part of the defensive if they were protected by the Infantry. One advantage that the Americans had in their attack was the opportunity to have their tanks and TDs attached before the assault. This allowed the respective commanders time to work out and eliminate tentative problems. The problems encountered by the Americans and Canadians in use of their tanks and the direct fire capabilities of these weapons are prevalent in many other historical actions. (8:22).

One final analysis of these two actions requires comment. The Americans and Canadians continually consolidated their positions within the city and prepared to defend them just prior to dusk. The general opinion was that control was so difficult during the day that advance was not feasible at night. This thinking was consistent with most other historical examples. Few night attacks against any sizeable objective could be found and most accounts describe actions of platoon size against limited objectives.(7:21). This procedure is in accordance with our doctrine (2:55) of operations, but varies with several accounts of Russian tactics.(4:89). The referred to account tells the experience of a Russian Captain in the night attack of a city and he refers to fifteen

similar engagements. This may be a line of operations that we have not fully utilized as yet.

The above concludes the analysis of the two described actions. As an interesting addition, I looked into the training of the U. S. troops for readiness in this type of action. Initially I wanted to justify the need of training for combat in cities. I went to the casualty reports of World War II to see if a comparison could be drawn in relation to other types of combat(6:72). I was very surprised to learn that city fighting had the third highest casualty rate, exceeded only by beachhead operations and breakthrough actions. The average rate per division on all operations was 1.7 per 1,000 per day. This rate jumped to 5.88 for all divisions in city fighting and individual divisions went as high as 12. This rate included all personnel of the division which included many non fighting and support troops.

Believing that Europe is still a fairly tentative battleground and similar fighting may have to be considered as in World War II, my next inquiry was into existing training (3:50). At the present time, the individual soldier receives eight hours of training for combat in cities during a twenty nine week training cycle. The junior officers are receiving little or no training in this direction and more important, the Advanced Course Officers receive none at all. This situation was rather surprising as the officers in the Advanced Classes will be the Commanders and Staff Officers in any future war and charged with the extremely detailed and difficult prior planning to an attack. Of course, this lack of training may be later introduced in TO&E units in their field courses but this prerogative is left up to the Theater Commander and may never materialize.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the two complete historical examples which have been analyzed with regard to procedure and principles of city fighting, several conclusions can be drawn in respect to established principles and means of employing these principles.

The basic principles of combat in cities actually starts prior to the assault on the city itself.

1. Surround the city and cut off any means of retreat or reinforcing of the defending force.
 - A. This containment cannot be accomplished by fire.
 - B. Final objective is more quickly obtained.
2. Prior planning is of utmost importance and must include all foreseeable situations.
 - A. Ration and ammunition resupply.
 - B. Route of advance for each unit.
 - C. Realistic area for each company to clear.
 - D. Additional troops to occupy cleared areas.
 - E. Detailed maps of city with prominent points marked to assist in control.
 - F. Arrangements for attachments prior to assault.
 - G. Rehearsal phase.
3. In conjunction with planning, a fire support plan should be established.
 - A. Indirect fire and bombing will not dislodge the enemy but will neutralize his fire.
 - B. The resulting rubble provides obstacles to vehicle movement and improves the enemy's defense.
 - C. Artillery emplacement to fire parallel to advancing troops gives much closer support.

Once the attack is launched, other principles of city fighting are

used. From analyzing my examples the following conclusions can be drawn.

1. Control is extremely difficult.
 - A. Leaders should be well forward controlling advance of their units.
 - B. Individual ingenuity and aggressiveness is the key to final success and each man must be familiar with the overall plan.
2. Primary fire support in the city comes from direct fire weapons.
 - A. Mutual protection should be obtained.
 - B. Tanks and SPs are extremely effective against O.P.s and reinforced fortifications.
 - C. Infantry must assure clearance prior to forward movement of the tanks.
3. Consolidation of positions prior to darkness and assault continued during daylight hours.
 - A. Control is regained of assault units.
 - B. Preparations made for counterattack.
 - C. Patrol activity and assault on limited objectives.

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