

Staff Department
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

STUDENT MONOGRAPH
Advanced Infantry Officers Course
Class Nr. 2
1955-56

Limitations of Surprise in
Offensive Action in Mountainous Terrain

Capt George E. Peck
Roster Nr. 140

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	2
INTRODUCTION	3
DISCUSSION	5
CONCLUSIONS	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

PREFACE

4 February 1956

The writer wishes to express thanks to those members of the Staff and Faculty, The Infantry School, with whom the material within this monograph was discussed. Their time and advice has been an invaluable assist. Further, a vote of thanks is extended to the staff of the Infantry School Library, for their forbearance, courtesy and fine cooperation, during the research period. Their detailed knowledge of the files and their willing effort in helping obtain the material for research is most appreciated.

It should be understood by the reader that 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.

George E Peck
GEORGE E PECK
Captain, Infantry

INTRODUCTION

Herein, the writer shall, by presentation and discussion of combat examples, illustrate that the element of surprise is seldom achieved by the attacking force in mountainous terrain. The combat examples relating small unit actions point up the fact that at battalion and company level, surprise is to a great degree dependent upon the terrain over which they conduct their offense.

By combat example and ensuing discussion the writer will illustrate that the following quotation from a pertinent field manual is in need of modification. Field Manual 70-10, states that, "Offensive action is characterized in all its phases by surprise attacks and attempts at flanking maneuver, combined with frontal action on a broad front".(8:13) Only so much of the above quotation as reads, " is characterized in all its phases by surprise attacks", would seem disputable in the light of this research.

Due to observation and fields of fire in mountainous terrain, when well organized by a determined defender, surprise is an illusive element which, if achieved, enables us as the attacker to gain ^{the} objective at a minimum cost in men and materiel.

In our own concepts of defensive tactics we do not normally visualize a surprise attack by the enemy when favorable terrain, such as is afforded in mountains, is held and organized by our own forces. The writer therefore cannot accept the idea that an enemy would not use these same advantages afforded by holding key terrain in mountains.

The discussion in this monograph does not in any way question the validity of principles. The question concerns the matter of application of principles. This is in an effort to dissolve any illusion the small unit leader may have concerning advantages afforded him by the element of surprise when attacking in mountainous terrain.

Research for the subject is limited in that unit histories from recognized sources are, for the most part, general in nature and are seldom specific in their discussion of small unit actions.

Evaluation of available material on "Offensive Action in Mountainous Terrain", was difficult in that the various historians did not relate the same details regarding small unit actions. The comparison of accounts does not point up any serious disagreements as regards the subject. It merely shows that individual writers considered different incidents occurring in the same action as being of more importance to the operation, whereupon each of them recorded a slightly different version. This divergence did cause difficulty in finding examples from one source which wholly substantiated that of another, especially at battalion and company level.

The purpose of the writer is to provoke thought and discussion among contemporaries as concerns the validity of portions of current Field Manuals, as written. The subject was chosen because of the many articles written on "Offensive Action in Mountainous Terrain" during World War II. The material recorded during that period can now be viewed in retrospect, and also in the light of subsequent actions.

DISCUSSION

COMBAT EXAMPLE I

The 1st Battalion, 363rd Infantry, 91st Infantry Division, a part of Fifth Army's forces in Italy, participated in the attack to secure MT MONTICELLI. The Fifth Army at that time (September 1944) was to continue the pressure in Italy, thus detaining a sufficient German strength in the Italian theater necessary to fight on that additional front.(3:21)

MT MONTICELLI was being defended by elements of the 4th German Parachute Division.(10:7) The exact strength of this position is not recorded. Positions were well dug in and organized as a part of the Gothic Line across Italy designed to halt allied advances toward the north.

The attack was made as a coordinated battalion attack. The 1st Battalion attacked in a column of companies, Company A, followed by Company C, with Company B in battalion reserve. The 1st Battalion was attacking in a coordinated regimental effort to take CASACCE on the MT MONTICELLI Ridge during the night of 12 September 1944. The battalion assembled for the attack during cover of darkness and moved out for a night attack. The battalion was to guide on MT MONTICELLI which was being marked by rounds of white phosphorus.(10:9)

The following events were recorded of this action:

1. Company A became disorganized upon reaching a position in a defile which masked its view of the white phosphorus marking rounds and was at this time engaged by heavy enemy mortar and artillery fire, while some 1200 yards short of an assault position.

2. Company A was not able to maintain contact with Company C, which company was to follow Company A in the night attack.

3. Company A withdrew to reorganize, as a result of enemy fire and loss of contact.

4. Company C was engaged by enemy defensive fires and could make no contact with Company A.

5. Company C withdrew to reorganize.

6. Both these companies were under enemy fire prior to reaching an attack position.

Captain Lloyd J. Inman relates in his monograph that the above events led up to the continuation of the battalion attack at 0800 hours, 13 September, 1944, Company A on the left, Company C on the right with Company B continuing its mission to protect the battalion left flank, and continue as the battalion reserve. The narrative is further substantiated by the unit history as written by then Captain Ralph E. Strootman.(5:69)

The action of 1st Battalion against MT MONTICELLI, as gleaned from these two accounts is as follows:

The 1st Battalion continued the attack at 0800 hours 13 September 1944, with Company A on the left and Company C on the right. Company B continued to protect the exposed left flank of the battalion. In a valley at the foot of MT MONTICELLI, Company A was again disorganized by enemy fire.(10:9)

The account of the battalion action thus far does not bring the attack to a conclusion. For the sake of closure, the narrative depicts reorganization and subsequent attacks by the battalion, until MT MONTICELLI finally fell on the third day. The

details of those reorganizations and successive attacks against the objective are not considered relevant to the subject, as they immediately lead into another similar phase of the battalion or regimental operations.

The terrain in this area is rugged, sparsely wooded on the higher slopes, and cut up by numerous ravines. MT MONTICELLI is not the highest peak in the immediate range, but does rise some 3000 feet above sea level. It is a steep cone shaped peak connected to the mountain chain by saddles. On the west is AL POZZO HILL and to the east DI CASTRO HILL. The slopes of MT MONTICELLI are steep and precipitous. The foot trails extend only up the lower slopes, and are of little value as approaches for attacking forces.(3:99)

The weather had been warm and clear, cooling at night. The fall rains had not yet begun.(10:12)

It is evident that the commanding height of MT MONTICELLI, with its excellent observation and good fields of fire, denied the element of surprise to the 1st Battalion. Each time a company of the battalion moved from an assembly area toward a possible favorable assault position, it was under observation and fire. Surprise, as such, is not mentioned in the research material however it becomes apparent by review and analysis of the combat example that this principle was not obtained to advantage. In view of the terrain and enemy organization of that terrain, surprise was not obtained. This battalion initiated its attack at night, and continued it on successive days until the objective finally fell.

Surprise probably occurs in mountain offensives on an almost

individual basis. Individuals and small patrols might successfully attain surprise against out-posts and enemy patrols by careful movement across such terrain; but the companies of this battalion were under constant surveillance and fire each time they moved out from a covered position.

Factors which deny the attacking force the element of surprise in this example are: Lack of cover and concealment for the attacking force, and the excellent observation afforded the enemy who held the high ground.

The writer does not belabor the point that such offensives in mountainous terrain are doomed to failure. History proves that certain principles can, and at times, are violated in order to bring an action to a successful conclusion. Professional soldiers must recognize the validity of principles and adapt them to specific situations as they arise.

COMBAT EXAMPLE II

This next example is that of an infantry battalion attacking in heavily forested and mountainous terrain, as related by Major Harry F. Yuill, in his monograph.(12) This example is submitted as a contrast to the first example, in order to further develop the subject as exemplified in another geographical region.

The U.S. Sixth Army had already invaded the island of LEYTE in the Philippines and had also extended its operation to the islands of SAMAR and MINDORO.

The U.S. Sixth Army had also cleared the MANILA BAY area and was pressing its attack against the mountain strongholds to the north of MANILA.

In December 1944 the newly formed U.S. Eighth Army relieved Sixth Army's forces on LEYTE, and in March 1945 inherited the mission of seizing the islands in the VISAYAN GROUP which controlled the waterways between LEYTE and MANILA. There are four large islands in this group; they are, PANAY, NEGROS, CEBU and BOHOL. For our purposes here the action is limited to the island of NEGROS.(7)

The following is a summary of information pertinent to the subject as extracted from the monograph of Major Yuill.(12)

Eighth Army launched operations on 26 March 1945 to clear the VISAYAN GROUP. By 27 April 1945 the islands were under control of Eighth Army, except for NEGROS. On this same date the 164th RCT (less 3rd Bn) went ashore unopposed on NEGROS. The interior of NEGROS is heavily forested with tropical vegetation, and is very mountainous. The coastal plains extend inland from the sea for approximately 10 miles, after which the terrain rises steeply to an estimated elevation of over 6,000 feet. One of the highest peaks in this range is MT QUERNOS DE NEGROS with a reported elevation of over 6,240 feet. The only highway follows the coastline, but is not complete. Access to the rain forest area of the inland mountains had to be made via a few existing trails and by our forces chopping their own paths up the slopes.

Generally the weather was favorable to the 164th RCT's operation. Temperature ranging from 80 - 90 degrees F., with moderate rainfall. Fog rarely existed at sea level; some cloudiness clung about the heights.(12:6)

The enemy had withdrawn to the high ridges in the interior where he was known to have mortars and automatic weapons. The Japanese force was known to have approximately three months food and ammunition supply. His morale was known to be good, and his troops well rested.

The 164th RCT had been in continuous combat for some 90 days, and had suffered heavy losses among its most seasoned troops. Replacements had been furnished, but were considered of poor caliber.(7:66)

Major Harry F. Yuill related a part of the action on NEGROS as follows: "The foothills of QUERNOS DE NEGROS consisted of a series of ridges so steep and narrow that maneuver would be restricted to two or three men abreast. Practically all these ridgelines eventually curved upward and converged at the very peak of the mountain at an elevation of 6,244 feet. This would permit the enemy to maintain excellent and continuous observation of our forces during his defense and subsequent retrograde movements. The front-line troops would have to serve as the eyes of the regiment immediately and artillery light aircraft would be available in a few days as soon as a temporary landing strip, now under construction, was completed."(12:9)

The 164th RCT made successive attacks against the slopes of MT QUERNOS DE NEGROS. On 3 June 1945 the 1st Battalion gained contact with the enemy force on the northwest slopes of MT QUERNOS DE NEGROS. To again quote Major Yuill, "From 5-12 June, the 1st Battalion made daily attacks on these

positions without success. All the difficulties of the operation thus far reoccurred here and were now more acute. . . . Supporting fires were less accurate and effective".(12:20)

The Japanese commander succeeded in evading our forces, and fighting delaying actions from 20 June 1945 until some three months later when he surrendered his forces as a part of the over-all surrender of Japanese Forces in the Philippines.(12:20)

The action described in the successive attacks against MT QUERNOS DE NEGROS, by the 1st Battalion, 164th RCT, were characterized by a lack of counterattack by the enemy, who was seemingly conserving his forces. His organization of key terrain was a succession of strong points up the ridges of the mountain. The strong points were defended in successful delaying actions on successive positions farther and farther up the heights. The terrain, though heavily wooded by rain forest and offering the attacker some cover and concealment for movement, did not however permit a surprise attack by our forces. The enemy's observation was literally down our necks and overcame any advantage that might otherwise have been afforded by heavy vegetation. Vegetation of this nature must be cut away in part by advancing troops. This activity can at times be detected by good observers who are familiar with the terrain, and also by patrols moving by stealth. The advantage belongs to he who commands the heights. Although this terrain in the Philippines is a far cry from the mountains of Italy, similar disadvantages for the attacking force are apparent.

In analysis, it is admitted that the example is lacking

in detail insofar as the maneuver of each company in the 1st Battalion is concerned. It is illustrated in this attack that when troops were forced by characteristics of the terrain and vegetation to advance up steep slopes no more than two or three men abreast, they had little or no opportunity to gain surprise, as further deployment and dispersion by the attacking force was not possible.

Surprise attacks can be characterized by speed of movement allowing arrival by the attacking force in the objective area prior to the time the enemy can bring the full effect of supporting fires on the attacking force. Although the Japanese failed to launch aggressive counterattacks, they did successfully withdraw and fight delaying actions.

Our forces although approximately of equal strength to that of the enemy were under constant enemy observation from the heights of MT QUERNOS DE NEGROS and as a result, according to Major Yuill, "advanced about 5 miles in 54 days".(12:21)

COMBAT EXAMPLE III

Another example of offensive action in mountainous terrain, as related by Technical Sergeant Lehman, tells of action in the mountains of Italy and would seem to refute any idea that surprise was uncommon in this offense. Technical Sergeant Lehman relates how Company A, of an unidentified regiment of the 34th Infantry Division gathered momentum under cover of supporting artillery fire and assaulted MT PANTANO.(9:11)

The average slope of MT PANTANO is about 30 degrees. The elevation of the mountain is approximately 3600 feet.

On 29 November 1944 Company A spearheaded the battalion

F 2

attack. At 0445 they had closed in their assembly area at the base of the mountain.

The Company attacking MT PANTANO, moved out at 0600 under cover of darkness and, "The rolling artillery barrage began and was pounding steadily over their heads when Captain Butler raised his arm and swung it forward. The Company, arranged in a wedge formation, moved slowly up the base of the hill."(9:11)

Sergeant Lehman further relates that the Company moved on up the steep slope and that, "When the company reached the crest, artillery was still pounding the top of the hill, where Jerry, not expecting visitors, was keeping down in his fox-hole."(9:13)

The analysis of this example, wherein, Company A, attacked a hill shows that a company can move successfully in darkness when in mountainous terrain, and as related here, without early enemy detection.

Surprise was obtained by Company A through use of:

1. Night attack.
2. Moving well up onto the objective under protection of supporting fires.

This attack illustrates that a company can, by utilization of a formation which facilitated its controlled and coordinated movement, literally climb onto a difficult objective in mountainous terrain and achieve surprise. Darkness, which had in previous examples, only served to confuse and disorganize the attacker, had in this instance allowed movement without enemy observation. During Company A's assault on the slopes of

MT PANTANO, the supporting fires caused the enemy to take cover and sacrifice his observation. At least some early warning might have otherwise been possible from his position on the high terrain, even though the attack was made during the hours of darkness.

This example of a unit obtaining surprise seems to be the exception rather than the rule during the conduct of the attack in that particular theater of operations. Why enemy observation posts in a commanding position such as the peak of MT PANTANO failed to function during this action cannot be ascertained.

It is reasonable to assume that in a well organized defense with outposts in operation total surprise such as shown to be achieved in this account could not be expected. Proper observation from commanding terrain should not permit such freedom of advance by the attacking force, or such a minimum of enemy opposition. Even more confusing is the lack of employment by the enemy of any defensive fires against this attack.

From a complete study of the entire action on MT PANTANO, it is believed by this writer that MT PANTANO was lightly defended, as a continuation of this scrutiny reveals that the Germans launched a counterattack before the objective could be properly organized by Company A.

The evidence points toward the fact that even though surprise to some extent may have been gained initially by Company A, it was soon to be sacrificed as the crown of the mountain was exposed to enemy observation and flanking fire from higher peaks in the area. The heights in such a mountain range are

the thief of surprise.

COMBAT EXAMPLE IV

In order to present a combat example of further contrast, we go now to an offensive action in Italy by the 86th Mountain Infantry, during their advance near QUERCIOLA which took place on 18 February 1945. Unit history relates that, "The 86th Mountain Infantry had begun its advance at about 2000 on the 18th, and before dawn had accomplished the remarkable feat of climbing, storming, and occupying the precipitous mountain wall on the left of the 87th, with only one man wounded. Ropes and rock climbers had been used in places, so steep was the ascent. The surprise was complete; and a number of Prisoners of War were taken before they had time to offer resistance. This capture, by the 86th, 18 hours prior to the attack by the remainder of the Division, denied vital observation to the Germans, and raised the hopes of the regiment tremendously." (1:20)

In way of summary and discussion of the action mentioned above, the actual scaling of MT MANCINELLO was by a platoon of Company F, 86th Mountain Infantry, who after having moved into VIDICIATICO, to position themselves for a night attack against RIVA RIDGE, a promontory of MT MANCINELLO, which was chosen as a route because it was considered unscalable.

These troops, who had trained at Camp Hale, Colorado, scaled a mountain wall at night, completely surprising the Germans. Upon interrogation as to why the approach had not been protected, a German Prisoner of War stated through an interpreter, ".... they had no idea we'd taken the ridge, and so mistook us for Germans. And he says even the SS couldn't

climb that cliff."(2:183) The complete reference for this summary extends from page 21 through page 183 of the above cited reference. It was not written in exact military form; therefore much of the content deals with individual personalities and accomplishments and for that reason is not presented herein.

The facts as derived from the above mentioned reference, in an effort to obtain only those portions relevant to the subject are these: A platoon of infantry trained in mountain warfare succeeded in climbing over the least considered approach onto RIVA RIDGE. This was accomplished after many attempts at discovering a climable route. The men had ropes to assist them in this climb. Pitons which would have assisted the climb tremendously were not available. The pitons had not been shipped with the Division equipment.

Almost total surprise was achieved in this instance. The reward was in the form of high terrain, much needed by our forces, and the fact that the platoon sustained only one casualty.

Surprise was possible due to the training of the men involved. Even though their equipment was limited, these men were able through their knowledge of mountainous terrain, their physical condition and their skill as mountain climbers, to ascend a path which was unguarded, except for one small emplacement. These soldiers who were trained in the art of mountain climbing achieved a feat during their first mission in the war, which had not been similarly accomplished by other troops who had been in Italy for a much greater length of time.

Our standard infantry regiments in Italy fought for many

mountain peaks, and as shown by the examples herein, they did ultimately gain their objectives. These objectives were purchased by high expenditures of men and materiel. Such expenditures were levied by a well organized enemy, who by control of the high ground, and use of the observation inherent to the peaks, placed fires upon our troops almost at will. The element of surprise as attained by most of our regiments fighting in mountainous terrain has appeared to be, at best, sorely limited.

The example already given herein of a battalion on the island of NEGROS, in the battle for the Philippines, also points up the fact that dense cover and concealment, during the assault of MT QUERNOS DE NEGROS was no real assurance of surprise for the attacking force.

A good knowledge of the enemy's organization for defense, by the staff who plans the mountain offensive, along with troops who have been trained for such missions seems to be the key to the success attained by the platoon of Company F, 86th Mountain Infantry. Routes for the attack of the heights must not be picked for their ease of use, or ready accessibility. Routes which would appear the most unlikely to the enemy must be utilized if surprise is to be achieved.

This presentation has included terrain with varying amounts of vegetation and in contrasting climates. Clear examples of such actions in extremely arid climates were limited; however it is believed that action in such a climate would not differ greatly with the offenses on the almost barren slopes of Italy.

The troops involved in all the examples, appear by their

unit histories and accounts by individuals, to be comparable insofar as unit strength and morale is concerned. Their status of equipment was generally the same. Training and experience was not greatly divergent except for that of the mountain troops. The 86th Mountain Infantry although not battle hardened was extremely successful due to their specialized training.

Throughout the review of combat examples which were relevant to the subject, one fact was continuously obviating itself; surprise for the advantage of the attacking force was extremely limited, and almost never achieved.

The examples show that lack of cover and concealment was not the only factor affecting surprise, as the tropical rain forests of the Philippines provided an overhead canopy.

Approaches to the objectives were limited even in the tropics, and the possible routes for our standard infantry troops were well known to the enemy. The heights occupied by the enemy again precluded successful use of surprise.

Each example had in common the fact that our forces were the invaders, which in itself was a disadvantage. It is evident that he who initially controls the heights, can by proper organization of the terrain almost entirely eliminate any chance for surprise by an attacking force.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Offensive action in mountainous terrain is seldom characterized by surprise attacks in all its phases.

2. Surprise, when achieved in mountainous terrain, enables the attacking force to neutralize their objective with a minimum expenditure of forces.

3. Cover and concealment for the movement of the attacking force can be rendered ineffective by the observation afforded the enemy when he occupies and defends dominant peaks in mountainous terrain.

4. Surprise in mountainous terrain is more easily and completely achieved by troops who are trained in the art of mountain warfare, and who are thus able to use the least likely avenues of approach.

5. Proper use of supporting fires during the attack assists in achieving surprise. Such attacks moving well onto the objective before the supporting fires are lifted. Movement under cover of supporting fires is enhanced by the steep gradients characteristic of mountainous terrain.

6. Critical terrain, with its inherent observation, allows the defender ample opportunity for early warning and serves to limit the use of surprise as a decisive factor for the attacking force.

7. If surprise is to be achieved in mountainous terrain, the night attack should be utilized. This too can fail when troops have not been sufficiently trained in night movement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 Earle, George F., Capt, Inf, History of The 87th Mountain Infantry (Denver, Colorado: Bradford-Robinson Printing Company, 1945). D809.73
.87th.E2
bU
- 2 Harper, Frank, Night Climb (New York City, N.Y.: Longmans, Green and Company, 1946). D808.3
.10th .H2
- 3 Robbins, Robert A., Maj, Inf, The 91st Infantry Division in World War II (Washington, D.C.: Washington Infantry Journal Press, 1947). D808.3
.R5 (bU)
- 4 Schultz, Paul L., The 85th Infantry in World War II (Washington, D. C.: Washington Infantry Journal Press, 1949). D808.3
.85th
.S3
- 5 Strootman, Ralph E., Capt, Inf, History of The 363d Infantry (Washington, D.C.: Washington Infantry Journal Press, 1947). D809.73
.363d
.S8
- 6 Operations in Sicily and Italy Department of Military Art and Engineering, USMA (West Point, New York, 1947). D769.1
.U 21
- 7 Panay-Negros and Cebu Operations, Victor I and II Report of the Commanding General Eighth Army (United States Eighth Army) D793.31
.U 18
- 8 FM 70-10 Mountain Operations (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1947). U167.1
.M5 U2
1947
- 9 Lehman, Milton, Technical Sergeant, "The Fight For a Hill" The Infantry Journal 54: 11-15, May, 1944.
- 10 Inman, Lloyd J., Capt, Inf, "The Operation of Company B, 363d Infantry (91st Inf Div) In The Attack on Mount Monticelli, Italy, 14-18 September 1944" Military Monograph, Advanced Infantry Officers Class No. 1, 1949-50, The Infantry School Library, Fort Benning, Georgia.
- 11 Swett, Daniel H., Capt, Inf, "Infantry Company Attacking a Village in Mountainous Terrain" Military Monograph, Advanced Infantry Officers Class No. 2, 1948-49, The Infantry School Library, Fort Benning, Georgia.
- 12 Yuill, Harry F., Maj, Inf, "Infantry Regimental Combat Team Attacking and Holding Successive Key Terrain Features in Heavily Forested and Mountainous Terrain" Military Monograph, Advanced Infantry Officers Class No. 2, 1949-50, The Infantry School Library, Fort Benning, Georgia.