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THE OPERATION OF THE 3RD PLATOON, COMPANY "L", 157TH IN-
FANTRY, (45TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE BATTLE AT ANZIO
DURING THE PUSH TO ROME, 22-24 MAY 1944.
(ANZIO CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Sergeant)

Type of operation described: AN INFANTRY PLATOON
ATTACKING ACROSS FLAT OPEN TERRAIN.

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO II

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THE OPERATION OF THE 3RD PLATOON, COMPANY "L", 157TH INFANTRY, (45TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE BATTLE AT ANZIO DURING THE PUSH TO ROME, 22-24 MAY 1944.

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph will cover the operation of the 3rd Platoon of Company L, 157th Infantry, 45th Infantry Division, during the Allied break through at the Anzio beachhead 22-24 May 1944.

This operation must be presented against the background of the operation of the VI Corp during the Anzio Campaign. The over-all Allied strategy was to land the U. S. VI Corp at Anzio and cut the German lines of communication to the 5th Army front, by capturing the mountain range, ^ACollis Laziali, and cutting highways No 6 and 7 leading south from Rome. (1)

At 0200 hours, 22 January 1944, the assault elements of the U. S. VI Corp landed on the beaches in the vicinity of Anzio and Nettuno, almost unopposed. The landing was a complete surprise to the German High Command. Consequently, the German forces in this area were caught off balance momentarily, but due to the disposition of the German XIV Corp, they were able to move troops in sufficient strength to the beachhead area to contain the initial landing force to an area only 8 miles deep. By 30 January the Germans had an estimated 71,500 troops opposing the beachhead forces. (See Map A) (2)

The 45th Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division

(1) A-3; A-1, p. 193, 195, 196; (2) A-1, p. 62; A-5, p. 26.

minus Combat Command B, reached the beachhead by 30 January, building up the strength of VI Corp to 61,332. (3)

On 30 January, VI Corp troops launched an attack which met with limited success; gains could be measured in hundreds of yards. Small scale attacks were made by VI Corp on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of February. By 3rd February the VI Corp was put on the defensive with lines as shown. (See Map B) (4)

During the month of February the Germans launched an all out offensive with the mission of reducing the beachhead. By 4th March, it was evident to the German High Command in Italy, that their attacks had failed to accomplish the primary mission; the annihilation of the Allied beachhead forces. Although, the beachhead could not be reduced with the German forces in Italy, it was felt that the Allied forces could be contained within the beachhead area with limited forces; releasing some troops to be employed against the Southern front. The German Commander ~~in command~~ of the troops in this area was ordered to organize and defend the line established during the counterattacks against the beachhead. On 4th March, we find both forces on the defense with lines as shown. (See Map B) During the months of March, April, and May, front line activity was limited to small skirmishes and artillery duels. (5)

In addition to holding the beachhead line, VI Corp was committed to training, building up stock piles of am-

(3) A-5, p. 26; A-1, p. 71; (4) A-5, p. 30-32;

(5) A-5, p. 104.

munition, and other supplies. During this time units were rotated in the line, allowing each division some time in the rear area for rest and recuperation. Even though there was very little front line activity, plans were being drawn up to launch an all out offensive from the beachhead, to be coordinated with a push from the Southern front. The VI Corp drew up three plans of attack, and on 5th May the plan to be used was ^{which one?} adopted. (6)

THE GENERAL PLAN

The VI Corp mission was essentially the same as it was in January; to cut the German lines of communication to the Southern front. The over all plan^o call^d for a break through on the Cesterna front, another break through on the Velletri front to capture Mount ^oCalli Lazi^oli, and continue on to Valmontone cutting Highway No 6, while the left flank of the beachhead line would make faint attacks to prevent the Germans detecting where the main effort would be made. The 45th Infantry Division was to be the left flank element of the main effort. The division was to attack through the Carano sector along the ⁱCesterna, Campoleone railroad as far as Campoleone station. (7)

Reorganization and the relocating of units commenced in the early part of May; this was accomplished so that units would be familiar with the terrain over which they would attack. The 45th Infantry Division was already located in the Carano sector where it had relieved the 3rd Infantry Division

(6) A-5, p. 105, 117; (7) A-5, p. 117, Map 21.

on 1st May. (8) (See Map B)

The 157th Infantry Regiment occupied the right portion of the Division front and if the operation proceeded as planned, the 157th Infantry would attack on the right flank of the division. On 20th May, the Regimental Commander discussed forth-coming attack plans with unit commanders. (See Map B) (9)

BATTALION SITUATION

The 157th Infantry Regiment held a front of approximately 3000 yards, with two Battalions on line and one Battalion in reserve. The 1st and 2nd Battalion occupying the front line, with the 3rd Battalion in reserve. On 20th May, the 3rd Battalion moved into the front line where it relieved the 2nd Battalion. (10)

On 21st May, the 3rd Battalion was disposed with I and K Companies along the front line with Company L in reserve, and Company M in support of the front line Companies. Company L was ordered to plan patrols to the front of the Battalion for the purpose of locating German mine fields, outposts, and their main line of resistance. (See Map C) (11)

On the afternoon of 21st May I was instructed to report to Capt. Austin, then Company Commander of Company L. Upon arriving at the Company Command Post, he informed me that I would take a patrol out at 2000 hours that night. He also, instructed me to report to Captain Huggins, the Battalion S-3 for further instructions since this patrol was ordered

(8) A-7, p. 85; (9) Personal knowledge; (10) A-8, 20 May 44; (11) Personal knowledge.

by Battalion. Upon arriving at the Battalion Command Post I received information gained by previous patrols and my mission. This patrol was considered of utmost importance if current attack plans were to be carried out, the patrol would gain the latest information that final plans could be based upon. It was to patrol the entire Battalion front, as far forward as possible without becoming engaged in a fire fight.

Upon returning to the company, I reported to Captain Austin by phone from the platoon area; then began organizing the patrol. I had been instructed to pick the best men in the platoon for this mission, but realizing the close cooperation that was necessary for this type mission, I selected men from one squad. After dark I instructed the patrol as to the mission and my plans for accomplishing it. At 2000 hours the patrol moved through Company K; as the patrol moved to the vicinity of the cemetery in front of Company K, German soldiers were observed digging around the cemetery. The patrol then moved to the right toward the Carano stream to a position approximately 500 yards in front of Company I, where a German patrol was encountered; after a small skirmish both patrols withdrew. (See Map C) Upon arriving back in the Battalion area I reported to the Battalion by phone the information I had obtained. (12)

On the afternoon of 21 May the plan of attack was made known to all units, although, the time and date was not

(12) Personal knowledge.

given. Units were also instructed to minimize their activity especially the front line companies. Due to the nature of the terrain, vehicles could not be brought forward of the reserve company area; supplies were carried forward by carrying parties to the front line companies. Most of the Battalion area could be covered by German long range machine gun fire. (13)

THE PLAN OF ATTACK

On 22nd May the Division Commander instructed the Regimental Commander that current plans would be carried out. Upon receipt of this information the Regimental Commander issued the Regimental attack order. (14)

The Battalion Commander immediately issued the Battalion attack order which was little more than to order current plans to be carried out. The Battalion plan of attack was, Company I and L forward with Company K in reserve to remain in its present position, Company M to support the attack with one platoon of machine guns attached to Company I; one platoon of machine guns to support the attack with long range fire from positions on the high ground in the right sector of the Battalion; mortars to remain in general support; the 645th Tank Destroyer Battalion and 191st Tank Battalion to furnish anti-tank support; artillery support to be furnished by the 158th Field Artillery Battalion.

At 1500 hours, 22nd May, Captain Austin called all Pla-

(13) A-6, p. 81; Personal knowledge; (14) A-8, 22 May 44.

toon Leaders and Platoon Sergeants to Company Headquarters where he issued the Company attack order. Even though, most everyone knew the general plan, the actual detail plan and time of attack had been kept secret to prevent any possibility of the enemy getting information that would materially effect the outcome of the operation. Captain Austin issued the following order in detail.

The company will attack at 0630 tomorrow, 23rd May. The Battalion's plan is to attack from its present positions, north on a 2000 yard front to the Cisterna Campoleone railroad, then northwest along the railroad to Campoleone station. The Battalion objective is the high ground north and south of the railroad bed, approximately 3000 yards north of the cemetery. Company I will attack on the right; Company L on the left; the 1st Battalion will be on the left of Company L.

The Germans are well dug in along our front with their main line of resistance along the high ground south of the railroad, extending left along the high ground, with outpost generally along the cemetery line. (See Map C) Most of the front can be covered by machine gun fire from their positions along the high ground. They have laid mine fields throughout the area between our present position and the cemetery.

Company L will attack through the cemetery sector with the right boundary 400 yards east of the cemetery; the left boundary 500 yards west of the cemetery. The Company objective is hills 84, 87, and extending west along the railroad across the small stream. (See Map C)

Company formation will be two platoons forward, 1st Pla-

toon on the right and 3rd Platoon on the left, with boundary between platoons along the west side of the cemetery. The 2nd Platoon will follow the 1st Platoon approximately 300 yards. The light machine gun section will be attached to the 3rd Platoon; the Mortar Section will support the attack from positions in the Carano Creek bed initially. The command group will follow the 1st Platoon.

The Artillery will fire a 35 minute preparation commencing at 0545. Commencing at 0630 Artillery will fire a rolling barrage in front of assault elements and lifting one grid line every 5 minutes; fires may be lifted by calling Battalion. Anti-tank support will be sent forward as soon as roads have been cleared of mines. Ammunition will be brought forward as soon as the objective has been taken.

Communication will be maintained by SCR 536 radio within the Company, and by SCR 300 radio to Battalion. Runners may be used, but to a limited degree until mines have been cleared from trails. Green star parachute flares may be used for signals to lift artillery fires.

The Battalion aid station will be located in the Carano Creek bed approximately 500 yards north of Carano.

The Company will close in on the line of departure which is along the Carano Creek before 0530. At 1600 Capt. Austin completed the issuance of the attack order. (15)

(See Map C)

(15) Personal knowledge.

PLATOON PLAN OF ATTACK

Approximately 1630 Lt. Nation, Platoon Leader of 3rd Platoon issued the Platoon attack order, which was essentially the same as the Company order. The machine gun section leader was present along with all squad leaders to receive the order. Squad leaders in turn carried out the instructions put out by Lt. Nation.

The formation adopted for the attack was two squads forward and one squad to the rear. The 1st squad on the right, 2nd squad on the left, with the 3rd squad following the 2nd squad to protect the left flank. The machine gun section to follow the 1st squad. Lt. Nation would go with the first squad and I would move at the head of the 3rd squad. Squads to be deployed in open squad column with 8 to 10 yards between men.

By 2000 hours every man in the platoon had been checked for equipment and ammunition. Men were instructed to get as much rest as possible, but due to the movement throughout the area and the thought of H hour kept most of the men awake.

At 0300 hours 23 May the company was alerted and ordered to move into positions along the Careno stream bed; by 0445 the Company was in position.

During the ^{minutes} hours that followed men were quiet, they were checking their weapons, their ammunition, adjusting packs, and praying.

Men looked out to the front and saw the familiar sight, flat plains with little or no concealment and hoped that our own artillery would make large holes. They knew that shell

holes would be the only cover until they reached the objective. The troops moral was very high. They knew this was their first real chance to leave the Anzio Beachhead. (16)

THE ATTACK OUT OF THE ANZIO BEACHHEAD

At 0545 the preplanned artillery preparation began; it continued until 0620. At 0630 the Platoon crossed the line of departure in the midst of a light rain which obscured visibility. Formations were closed up to 5 to 7 yards between men. Radios were opened and contact was made with the company commander.

The Platoon moved forward approximately 300 yards where barbwire was encountered; a gap was cut and the platoon continued the advance. By 0700 the Platoon had advanced to positions approximately 300 yards west of the cemetery, where it was receiving fire from our own artillery. Lt. Nation called Captain Austin and asked that fires be lifted; he was told that Battalion was lifting the fires.

At approximately 0715 the Platoon lost contact with Company B on the left; a patrol was sent to regain contact. By 0730 the Platoon had advanced to a position 300 yards northwest of the cemetery, where the two forward squads came under machine gun fire from 3 German machine guns approximately 75 yards to the front. (See Map D) By this time the rain had ceased and the smoke from the artillery fire was lifting. This allowed the Germans to place observed fire on our troops.

(16) Personal knowledge.

An attempt was made to contact Capt Austin by radio to ask for artillery or mortar fire. This could not be done since the radio had been damaged when the machine guns opened fire on the Platoon. A further attempt was made to get artillery fires when a messenger was sent back. The messenger was wounded by machine gun fire as he attempted to leave the Platoon position.

The machine gun section was caught in the fires of the three machine guns and could not move. The 3rd Squad had not yet come under the direct fires of the machine guns, but was receiving ricochets. I could not reach Lt. Nation since he was caught in the fires of the machine guns. Thinking I would be able to flank the German gun position by using the cover afforded by a small drainage ditch approximately 50 yards to the left, I moved the 3rd Squad to the left. As the Squad reached a position on line with the 1st and 2nd Squads a German machine gun in 1st Battalion sector opened fire. (See Map D) The Squad was caught in the cross fire and two men were wounded. Although the squad had failed to reach the ditch, I had managed to get within 10 feet of it; by crawling, I managed to get in the ditch and was now inside of the machine gun fires. I kept crawling and was able to reach a position within 20 feet of the right machine gun; with the use of a hand grenade it was eliminated. By doing this the center gun crew was exposed from the flank; by the use of a submachine gun, this gun was eliminated. By this time, the squads could see my position and moved forward.

The crew of the left gun surrendered. After moping up the area the advance was continued and a messenger was sent to contact Captain Austin and inform him that the Platoon radio was out. By this time, the 1st Platoon had overcome the difficulty it had encountered in taking the cemetery and was moving forward. (17)

The platoon continued the advance, but was slowed down due to the slow advance of the 1st Platoon. The messenger reporting back to Lt. Nation reported that the 1st Platoon had hit an anti-personal mine field and the company executive officer, platoon leader, and platoon Sergeant of the 1st Platoon had been wounded.

By 0850 the Platoon was within 800 yards of the objective, and it was receiving artillery fire from our own artillery. Lt. Nation told me to contact the Company Commander and have the fires lifted. On my way back to contact him, I met Captain Mitchell, the Battalion Executive Officer; I asked him to have the fires lifted. He instructed the artillery liaison officer who was with him to have the fires lifted to the railroad. By the time I reached the Platoon we were able to continue our advance.

By 0930 the platoon had reached the objective, and after small skirmishes with German riflemen, the platoon secured its objective; several prisoners were captured while moping up, and by 0935 moping up was complete. (See Map D)

(17) Personal knowledge; A-9.

The Germans had an elaborate network of trenches and gun positions throughout the area, but due to the tactical surprise we had attained, and the close artillery support most of their positions were unoccupied.

By 1015 the platoon had organized the objective, local security was sent out to the railroad, and along the small stream line.

The Platoon was ordered to dig in, but be prepared to move on orders. By 1130 hours the platoon was well dug in along the defense line the Germans had occupied, only they were facing in a different direction. The 1st Platoon had moved up on the right, and the company observation post was established between the 1st and 3rd Platoon, approximately 100 yards to the rear. Contact with the 1st Battalion on our left had been lost since 0715. A patrol was sent out to make contact and inform them of our location.

At 1300 hours, four tanks from the 191st Tank Battalion arrived in the company area to furnish anti-tank support. After looking the situation over, the tank commander decided to move his tanks forward on the 3rd Platoon position. Captain Austin agreed to move the left flank of the Company forward to provide security for the tanks.

At 1400 the 3rd Platoon moved forward to positions approximately 200 yards south of the Railroad, along a small stream and began digging in. The ground was hard and digging was difficult. (See Map D) (18)

(18) Personal knowledge.

GERMAN COUNTER ATTACK

At approximately 1415 hours information was sent down by Company messenger that German tanks were moving toward our positions. Men worked hard trying to dig in, in order to be prepared for the counter attack; most of the platoon was deployed across the open terrain. Artillery fires were called for and ^{was} fired in front of our positions. At approximately 1500 hours, 3 German Mark VI tanks had opened fire on the tanks in our positions, from positions north of the railroad; direct hits were made on two of the tanks, while the other two withdrew. The German tanks moved down the railroad bed and underneath the tress^l into the area of Company L. Three of the tanks came through the left portion of the 1st Platoon while two moved along the railroad bed splitting Company I and L. The three tanks that overran the left half of the 1st Platoon changed direction and moved toward the 3rd Platoon positions. The 1st and 2nd Platoon withdrew across the open fields to small ditches and tributaries of the Carano stream. (See Map E) (19)

Men could not stay out in the open with only shallow slit trenches, so Lt. Nation ordered the platoon to withdraw to the hill where we had completed positions, leaving myself and one squad to try and hold the positions until the other two squads could make the withdrawal. As the tanks approached our positions, German Infantry were observed advancing along the stream near the railroad tress^l. I ordered

(19) A-8, 23 May 44; Personal knowledge.

the rocket launcher team to give me the rocket launcher so they could move to positions where they could fire their rifles at the advancing infantry. While Staff Sergeant Armstrong, the Platoon guide took command of the squad and fired on the advancing Infantry, I moved to a position where I could fire on one of the tanks. With the second round I got a hit on the rear portion of the track of the leading tank. The track broke and rendered the tank disabled to move. By firing at the tank, I was able to keep it buttoned up. The remaining two tanks advanced toward the platoon positions on the high ground, while the tank that had been hit caught on fire. I ordered Sergeant Armstrong to move the squad back to the positions where the platoon was, by moving up the small ditch, I further instructed him that I would bring up the rear of the squad. By the time the squad had reached the positions where the platoon was to pull back to, the two tanks had moved to the left to fire on American tanks that were withdrawing along the Carano stream bed. We found the positions unoccupied. Lt. Nation and the two squads had withdrawn further to the rear. They had left two men who were wounded earlier in the afternoon. One of the wounded men was a member of the supporting tank crew. The other man was Cpl. Gimberling, one of the assistant squad leaders of the 3rd Platoon.

With the squad and the Rocket Launcher team we organized the position and managed to stop the advancing German Infantry. At approximately 1545 we began to receive friendly artillery on our position. Realizing that this artillery

was being directed against the counter attack, at 1615 I ordered the squad to move to the vicinity of the cemetery out of our own artillery fire. As we moved out we carried the wounded with us. Upon arriving back in the vicinity of the cemetery we contacted element of the 1st Battalion. The wounded were left with an aid man from the 1st Battalion, since neither of the men could walk. I took the squad to a position along the Carano stream where the 1st and 2nd Platoons had withdrawn to and rejoined the Company. (See Map E)

By 1900 hours the company moved back to position where it had been overrun by the counter attack. (See Map D)

During the night the company was resupplied with ammunition and water. Platoons were ordered to dig in and be prepared to continue the attack on the 24th. A small force was sent forward for local security while the platoon got as much rest as possible. Men were exhausted from the days operation and needed the rest. The living in foxholes and eating C Rations left them in poor physical condition.

At 0600, 24 May, Lt. Nation was instructed that the platoon would remain in position until the unit on the right of the Battalion moved up. Activity was minimized during the day; occasionally the Germans would drop a shell in the Platoon area.

At 1700 hours, instructions were sent out to all platoons that they would remain in positions throughout the night. (20)

(20) Personal knowledge.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

After a thorough study of the operation, it is my opinion that the operation was a complete success. In analyzing all phases of this operation, I find the biggest difficulty encountered was communication. The lack of coordination with supporting units certainly impeded the operation.

Even though the operation was a success there were certain tactical principles violated along all echelons of command.

Unless I severely criticize certain decisions of higher commanders the true facts cannot be brought out. I shall begin with the Battalion, inasmuch as the Battalion Commander is responsible for the coordination within his Battalion and with adjacent units. Although each unit commander realized the importance of close coordination, there was very little emphasis on this one phase of planning. From the Battalion Commander down to the Platoon Leader, there were no efforts made to coordinate with the 1st Battalion. The Company was on the line of departure when the 3rd Platoon received information as to what company was on our left. Consequently, the first contact made with Company B was when we crossed the line of departure. This violation did not materially effect the outcome of the operation, but it did leave the left flank of the 3rd Platoon, Company L and the 3rd Battalion exposed.

The supporting fires were effective throughout the operation, although in many instances fires were not lifted

in sufficient time causing troops to remain out in the open subjected to enemy artillery and small arms fire. Adequate means of lifting artillery fire should be provided when a rolling barrage is used. *James*

Decisions in the employment of anti-tank support can be criticized justly; also, the decision to move troops from a well prepared position for the purpose of protecting tanks. It is my opinion that the employment of tanks in this operation violated the principle of security. Tanks could have remained on the reverse slope in hull defilade 50 yards in rear of the 1st Platoon and accomplished their mission. There was an unsound decision made when the 3rd Platoon was moved forward when a counter attack was probable. One squad or even a smaller force could have provided the necessary security for the tanks.

The mistake that is too often overlooked is prevalent in this operation; that is the failure of unit commanders to see that all men dig in once they have taken the objective. The failure of one squad to dig in can cause a company to lose control of an entire platoon. This was brought out when a few men in the 1st Platoon left their position in the face of a tank attack causing the entire platoon to withdraw.

No analysis

A leader should always inform his subordinates when he changes plans even though the situation is difficult. Leaving wounded on a position when they can be evacuated is a serious mistake.

A Commander should always check with the subordinates

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before firing into an area of penetration. Often times small elements will break through when the main force has been stopped. A commander should never concede the loss of a position until he is sure he has lost it.

In summary; an operation of any size must have adequate communication if it is to succeed. Throughout the entire operation it was clearly brought out that the small unit leaders when well trained, can overcome certain difficulties caused by mistakes in his superiors planning.

The results of the operation of the 3rd Platoon cost the Germans 21 prisoners captured and a number that would exceed that killed, one tank and three machine guns destroyed, with loss to the 3rd Platoon, one killed and seven wounded.

The success of the operation can be attributed to the aggressiveness of all members of the Platoon, along with the quick and sound decisions made by its leaders.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons brought out during this operation are:

1. Coordination between units of all echelons of command is essential.
2. Communication between the units furnishing supporting fires and the assault platoons is necessary if maximum effect of supporting fires is to be obtained.
3. Changing the location of an entire unit on the objective once it is dug in and when a counterattack is probable is a grave mistake.

4. A front line should never be moved forward of a prepared position for the sole purpose of providing security for tanks.

5. The objective should be organized as soon as it is taken and troops should dig in even though the advance is to be continued.

6. A unit commander should always confirm reports, and never make the mistake of firing artillery on his own troops.

7. A commander should never concede the loss of ground until he is sure he has lost it.

8. Troops should be given some type of physical exercise when they are engaged in front line defense for long periods of time.

9. High morale among troops is, in itself, a great weapon.

10. Aggressiveness on the part of leaders in combat is of utmost importance and in most cases the aggressive leaders are successful.