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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY F, 134TH INFANTRY
(35TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE REDUCTION
OF A SALIENT IN THE VICINITY OF HAN AND FOSSIEUX, FRANCE
29 SEPTEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Cannon Company Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: RIFLE COMPANY ATTACKING
AND HOLDING A TOWN

Captain Donald F. Barraclough, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. II

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company F, 134th Infantry, 35th US Infantry Division in the reduction of a salient in the vicinity of HAN and FOSSIEUX, FRANCE, 29 September 1944.

In order to orient the reader, it will be necessary to briefly discuss the major events that led up to this action.

The initial landings on the continent of EUROPE were made on 6 June 1944 by the American First Army and the British Second Army. These landings were successful in establishing a firm hold on the NORMANDY coast, and the Allies were able to push the Germans inland and build up sufficient forces to prepare for a major offensive. (1)

On 1 August 1944 the Third US Army consisting of VIII Corps, XII Corps, XV Corps and XX Corps became operational in NORMANDY under command of Lieutenant General George S. Patten, Jr. (2)

The initial mission of the Third Army was to seize the BRITTANY ports, but after the successful flanking of the German defenses at AVRANCHES by American forces on 1 August 1944, the primary mission of the Third Army was changed to one of rapid exploitation to the east with strong armored

(1) A-5, p. 126

(2) A-5, p. 133

forces on the general axis LAVAL-LE MANS-CHATELAIN. (See Map A) (3)

The rapid advances of the Third Army in its spectacular dash across FRANCE put terrific demands on supporting supply installations, and by early August, it became quite evident that the shortage of gasoline in the Third Army was critical and by early September there was also a critical shortage of 105mm and 155mm ammunition which was due to the failure of supply installations to keep pace with the needs of the tactical units. During the rapid advance of the Third Army the principal requirements had been for small arms ammunition; consequently, by the early part of September, large calibre ammunition was not in the forward area supply points in any great quantities. (4)

To make the supply picture still more gloomy, Third Army troops were without overshoes, blankets and mackinaws, and the chilly fall weather was setting in. All of these supplies had been requisitioned from Communication Zone by Third Army G-4 while still in NORMANDY but were still not supplied. (5)

During this period, Third Army's losses were extremely heavy, and assault units soon began to be critically short of combat personnel. Badly needed replacements were coming up in small dribbles, and during the ensuing months, all divisions of the Third Army were to continue fighting considerably understrength. (6)

On 25 September the Third Army was holding the "Line of

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- (3) A-5, p. 136
 - (4) A-1, p. 136; A-6, G-4, p. 17
 - (5) A-1, p. 134, 135
 - (6) A-1, p. 135

the Moselle", and at that time, it received orders to assume the defensive. This amounted to halting its advance and organizing its position for defense. (7)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The XII Corps established a defensive line extending from the SEILLE RIVER near MANHOUE to the east, then south through the GREMECEY FOREST facing the enemy held towns of COUTRES and CHAMBREY. The line then extended east and south through the BEZANGE LA GRANDE FOREST. The 4th Armored Division was defending on the right flank of the Corps. The 35th Infantry Division was in a position to the left of the 4th Armored Division, with the 80th Infantry Division on the left of the 35th Infantry Division. The 6th Armored Division was east of NANCY in Corps reserve. (See Map B) (8)

The initial disposition of the 35th Division on 29 September was as follows. 134th Infantry on the left with all three battalions on the line, 3d Battalion, 320th Infantry on the right of the 134th, and the 137th Infantry with all three battalions on line on the right of the division zone. (9)

The enemy opposing XII Corps were building up their forces. Since the "assume the defensive" order had been issued to Third Army, the enemy had had sufficient time to reorganize in the vicinity of GREMECEY and CHATEAU SALINS FOREST. Reinforcements were moved in from the north in such strength as to indicate the possibility of a counterattack.

When Field Marshal Rundstedt assumed command of OB West on 5 September 1944, he was directed by Hitler to stop the

(7) A-1, p. 143

(8) A-10, Chapter VII

(9) A-9, p. 237; Personal knowledge

Allied advances far to the west as possible, to hold the part of BELGIUM north of SCHELDE and all of the NETHERLANDS, and to take the offensive in the NANCY-NEUFCHATEAU sector by launching a counteroffensive towards REIMS. This counter-offensive in which the Fifth Panzer Army would be used was to be the most ambitious since MORTAIN, and the date of the offensive operation was set as 12 September 1944. The initial objective was to wipe out the XII Corps forces in the vicinity of LUNEVILLE and NANCY and then restore the MOSELLE line to the north. (10)

Due to the pressure from Allied forces to the south, some of the Panzer Divisions had to be committed prematurely to hold the line in that sector, and it was not until 18 September that the Fifth Panzer Army launched a counterattack near LUNEVILLE. The enemy ran into limited objective attacks of the XII and XV Corps and were stopped in their tracks. Another counterattack was launched by the enemy on 22 September, and this attack was also stopped by the combined efforts of the XIX Tactical Air Command and Third Army armor.

On the 24th of September, the German First Army which had been reorganized and strengthened after its hasty retreat from south of PARIS, launched an attack west of CHATEAU SALINS to help the Fifth Panzer Army pinch off the XII Corps salient. The troops of the XII Corps held fast, and by the 29th of September the enemy counteroffensive was broken. (11)

The enemy counteroffensives were marked by bitter fighting all along the XII Corps front and resulted in XII Corps throwing in everything it had to halt this aggressive enemy

(10) A-5, p. 195
(11) A-5, p. 195

effort. (12)

The enemy forces opposing the Third Army during this period in the zone of XII and XV Corps consisted of the 553d Volksgrenadier Division, 559th Volksgrenadier Division, and the 113th Panzer Division plus the German First Army and the Fifth Panzer Army which were assembled in the CHATEAU SALINS area. (13)

The combat efficiency of the enemy forces at this time was excellent. The counteroffensive in the sector of the 35th Division was aggressive, and the enemy forces were quick to take advantage of the slightest gain made by their attacking forces. Also the enemy was well supported by artillery and armor which they used to the maximum extent.

The combat efficiency of the friendly forces could be regarded as excellent; however, units were understrength and short on equipment and weapons as well as ammunition of heavy calibre. This however did not reduce the fighting capabilities or the esprit de corps of the already well indoctrinated veterans. (14)

The terrain occupied by the 35th Division at this time consisted of a number of small towns located, for the most part, on secondary roads with a considerable number of ridge lines, the possession of which gave a marked advantage to the defender. The area was dotted with small patches of woods and large forests, and the heavy rain received during September reduced the capabilities of the secondary roads and made cross country movement with heavy vehicles and armor a difficult operation. (15)

(12) A-3, p. 224

(13) A-8, p. 89; A-5, p. 196

(14) Personal knowledge

(15) Personal knowledge

The supply situation was far from desirable with Third Army troops short on rations, gasoline, ammunition, winter clothing and replacements. In fact it was not until the Battle of the Bulge some three months later that higher headquarters finally produced an adequate number of replacements for Third Army's depleted divisions. (16) The critical shortage of artillery ammunition during this period necessitated firing only on definitely located observer targets and for marking air strikes for the Air Corps. (17)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 134TH INFANTRY

On 29 September 1944, the 134th Infantry was in a defensive position in the area of the FORET DE GREMEGEY with all three battalions on line. (See Map C) (18)

On this date, the regiment was given the mission of launching a limited objective attack with the 2d Battalion to capture HAN and reduce the enemy salient in the vicinity of HAN and FOSSIEUX. By reducing this salient, the regiment hoped to straighten out its front lines which at this time followed a very irregular pattern and were extended over some 12,000 yards. (19)

The Commanding Officer of the 134th Infantry had made a special request to higher headquarters for 150 rounds of critically rationed 105mm ammunition to be fired by Cannon Company in support of the attack on HAN. This request was approved since division artillery would not be firing in support of this attack. (20)

(16) A-1, p. 135

(17) A-7

(18) Personal knowledge

(19) A-2, p. 83; Personal knowledge

(20) Personal knowledge

The regimental order for the attack was issued at 1000 hours on the morning of the 29th of September to the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, and at this time, he was informed of the availability of the 105mm ammunition to support the attack.

The 2d Battalion Commander immediately contacted the Cannon Company Platoon Leader who was supporting his battalion. After a brief reconnaissance in the area northwest of MANHOUE, the plans of supporting fires were arranged and a dominating observation post selected in a hay loft in MANHOUE which looked directly down into the town of HAN some 800 yards to the northwest. (21)

THE BATTALION SITUATION (See Map D)

The 2d Battalion, minus Company F, was to remain in its present position to protect the left flank of the division which was exposed at this time since contact had not yet been established with the 80th Infantry Division on the left.

Company F was to attack from positions in the vicinity of ARMOUCOURT, capture HAN and be prepared to defend in that location and to establish contact with Company B in MANHOUE on a new regimental MLR. (22)

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK (See Map D)

The battalion attack order was issued in ARMOUCOURT at 1200 hours, and at this time coordination of the plan of attack and fire support was planned between the Commanding Officer of Company F and the Cannon Company Platoon Leader who was to be

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- (21) Personal knowledge
(22) Personal knowledge

the forward observer for this attack.

The combat strength of Company F was 50 men and 3 officers at this time and the company had no light machine guns in the weapons platoon. The shortages of personnel and the lack of light machine guns would considerably limit the capabilities and firepower of the company. (23) Although these shortages had existed for a considerable length of time, they had not been replaced.

The terrain over which Company F was to launch its attack was low, open meadow land with the exception of one dominating piece of high ground and an apple orchard some two to three hundred yards west of the objective. (See Map D)

The enemy forces in the objective area consisted of the 1st Battalion of the 1120th German Infantry Regiment with the battalion CP located in HAN. (24)

The weather during the entire day of the 29th was clear and cool, and visibility was virtually unlimited.

The plan of attack was coordinated between the Company Commander of Company F and the forward observer, and contact and fire missions were to be controlled by SCR 300 radio. The Cannon Company forward observer had two two SCR 300 radios, one of which was furnished by the 2d Battalion and the other by Cannon Company. The plan was to listen in on the battalion radio which was on the same channel as Company F's radio while the other radio was operating on Cannon Company's channel and would be used for transmitting "fire missions". (25)

At 1330 hours the Cannon Company forward observer, his platoon sergeant and radio operator had completed last minute

(23) Personal knowledge

(24) Personal knowledge; A-2, p. 84

(25) Personal knowledge

plans with the Company Commander of Company F about 300 yards west of MANHOUE to insure that all details had been coordinated for the attack. The forward observer and his party then proceeded to the OP in MANHOUE to register in the guns of the 1st and 2d Platoons of Cannon Company which were in different battalion sectors. (See Map C) (26)

A "base point" for registering both the 1st and 2d Platoons was selected 100 yards east of HAN and registration of both impact and time fire accurately computed. The time of attack was 1400 hours. There was sufficient time prior to H-hour to permit the forward observer and his party to bring down continuous heavy fire in the forward edge of the town to keep the enemy under cover. During these preparatory fires, it became apparent from the OP that the impact fuzes were exploding immediately on contact with thin tiles roofs of the houses in HAN and were doing little damage to the enemy who were in the first floors and cellars of the houses. An immediate radio transmission to both the 1st and 2d Platoons ordering all firing to be with fuze delay shells until further notice attained the desired results and the heavy 105mm shells were penetrating the roofs of the houses before exploding and, in most cases, were exploding in the first floors or cellars of the houses, inflicting heavy casualties on the occupants.

NARRATION

At 1400 hours Company F crossed the line of departure, (See Map D) with two platoons abreast. The progress from the line of departure to the near edge of the orchard west of

(26) Personal knowledge

HAN was rapid and without incident. Upon reaching the forward edge of the orchard one rifle squad was sent forward to reconnoiter the high ground to the north while the remainder of the company remained in the near edge of the orchard.

The rifle squad proceeded on to the high ground and found no sign of enemy; however, foxholes and weapons emplacements had been dug on this commanding ground and at this time were unoccupied. The rifle squad immediately returned to inform the company commander of this matter and Company F then proceeded through the orchard, 1st Platoon on the right, 2d Platoon on the left, until they came upon a stone wall some 100 yards west of HAN and just out of the concealment of the orchard. The fire of the Cannon Company platoons was falling in the near edge of town and was keeping the enemy well under cover. (27)

As Company F prepared to cross this stone wall and advance to the east to take cover behind another stone wall at the western edge of HAN, all artillery fire was shifted to the far edge of town. At this time the enemy forces detected the presence of Company F and immediately opened fire with all available weapons; however, Company F was ready for what came and launched their assault from the vicinity of the second stone wall. (See Map D)

The leading elements of Company F were able to gain a good foothold on the western edge of HAN since the close in artillery fire support given them prior to their assault had driven the enemy under cover in HAN. The limited distance to be traversed from this assault position to the outskirts of

(27) Personal knowledge

see
P12 | the town permitted Company F to catch the enemy unaware and caused the enemy to be unable to bring down maximum effective fire on the attackers before they reached the cover of the buildings. (28)

more detail needed → | The mopping up in the town amounted to almost individual actions by members of Company F who were routing the enemy out of the cellars, barns and stables. (29)

At approximately 1445 hours, the enemy could be seen withdrawing to the northeast from HAN over a route almost through the "base point" of initial registration of the 1st and 2d Platoons. At this time, the forward observers called for a fire mission on the "base point" by the 2d Platoon. This fire was immediately received and it hit almost in the middle of the dozen or so enemy soldiers who were attempting to withdraw to the northeast to FOSSIEUX which was in enemy hands.

The effect of the fire was immediately noted since only three of the enemy got up after the concentration and attempted to continue their withdrawal up the grassy slopes to FOSSIEUX. The forward observer then called for the fire of one cannon to attempt to eliminate the three withdrawing enemy and was successful in halting the rearward movement of two of the three before they reached the high ground south of FOSSIEUX.

Meanwhile Company F was completing mopping up in HAN and reorganizing on the far edge of the town in preparation for a counterattack.

more detail needed → | By 1645 hours, the reorganization was complete, and HAN was secure in the hands of Company F. At this time the company

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- (28) Personal knowledge
(29) A-2, p. 84

Defensive positions?

commander start the evacuation of his wounded personnel which amounted to four or five walking wounded and one litter case and also 35 enemy prisoners, including the battalion commander of the enemy unit which was located in and around HAN. In addition, some 30 enemy dead and wounded were found in the barns and houses in HAN. (30)

At approximately 1730 hours the forward observer who was in an observation post located in a hay loft spotted an enemy counterattacking force of approximate company size coming over the high ground south of FOSSIEUX. The Commander of Company F was immediately notified. Since Company F had no light machine guns or heavy weapons company support, the company commander asked the forward observer to do everything possible to break up the counterattack. The hasty plan decided upon was for the forward observer to take the enemy force under fire as soon as effective fire could be brought to bear. In the meantime, Company F would hold all fires until the enemy was within 100 yards of the town. Should the enemy escape the artillery fire, all of the company weapons were to open fire at close range. (31)

While this coordination was going on between the forward observer and the Commander of Company F, the forward observer's platoon sergeant was on the other SCR 300 radio alerting the platoons with a "fire mission". At the same time he notified the 1st Platoon to cut the fuzes on the 105mm shells for the required time setting for time fire on the base point which had been accurately computed and fired at the time of initial registration.

(30) Personal knowledge; A-2, p. 85

(31) Personal knowledge

The attacking enemy forces continued down the slopes northeast of HAN using the same route the withdrawing enemy had previously used in their withdrawal from the town, and when they were approximately at the location of the base point, the orders were given to the 1st and 2d Platoons to fire everything they had on the base point and to continue firing until a "cease fire" was given or a subsequent "fire mission" was ordered.

The fire of both platoons immediately fell on the base point. These enemy who were not killed or wounded immediately withdrew to the vicinity of FOSSIEUX, leaving behind them all their dead and wounded.

Within 30 minutes, heavy mortar and artillery fire started falling in HAN and MANHOUE, but no more enemy activity developed during the balance of the day and the night, and Company F continued to improve their defenses in HAN.

More details needed.

While Company F was consolidating and reorganizing in the town for the night, plans were being made to send patrols out to the open area just north and east of the town to evacuate the enemy dead and wounded and to obtain as much intelligence material as possible.

As soon as it was sufficiently dark to still be able to see a limited distance and at the same time, not be silhouetted in the open ground, the patrols from Company F accompanied by personnel of the 2d Battalion Headquarters Company proceeded to the open area where the enemy personnel were scattered on the ground. Within 30 minutes they had succeeded in evacuating 35 enemy dead and wounded from this open area. (32)

(32) Personal knowledge; Statement of Major General Butler B. Miltenberger, then Commander of 134th Infantry Regiment, 1 October 1944.

As soon as the patrols had returned and the evacuation of the enemy dead and wounded was completed, Company F settled down for the night in HAN to enjoy a well earned rest.

During the night, supporting Engineers mined the fords north of HAN and laid concertinas and anti-personnel mines. (33)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. SUPPLY

The lack of timely replacement of the missing weapons of Company F seriously limited the effective firepower of the company and further resulted in their relying on supporting weapons to bolster their reduced firepower.

Had the attack of Company F been detected prior to their reaching the stone walls and a fire fight ensued, the outcome of the fight might have been in favor of the enemy since they were well supplied in automatic weapons even though they had little chance to use them due to the shelling of their positions coupled with the rapid progress made by Company F once the assault was under way.

2. REPLACEMENTS

The lack of adequate replacements during the period immediately preceding this operation to bring the company up to authorized strength resulted in the company's fighting considerably understrength and the combat efficiency of the units being lowered. This shortage of personnel also hampered the effective reorganization of the unit since depleted squads and platoons had to be reconstituted from the available personnel, many of whom were of limited experience.

(33) A-9, p. 237

P10
OK

17
More emphasis
needed on
evacuation.

3. FRONTAGES

The attack on HAN was a success for Company F, however, the extended area over which the company was to establish a defensive line was far in excess of the capabilities of the company at this time. Had the counterattack which came down towards HAN not been detected and halted prior to reaching the town, it is believed that the enemy would have been successful in driving Company F back out of the town. This overextension of lines could not be avoided, however, due to the 12,000 yards of frontage assigned to the regiment.

More detailed report needed in narrative

4. ARTILLERY SUPPORT

The effective artillery fire support furnished Company F for this attack sent the enemy seeking cover and resulted in Company F being almost on their objective before being detected. Company F followed in close behind this fire, and by coordination and control it was possible to shift this fire when the company was ready to launch its assault. This greatly aided Company F since it eliminated the necessity of the company engaging in a fire fight before it reached its assault positions.

OK supported

5. OUTPOSTING DEFENSIVE POSITIONS

The failure of the enemy to outpost the high ground or the apple orchard in the vicinity west of HAN was in my opinion the most important factor that aided Company F in capturing the town.

Supported

Had the enemy established a one or two man observation post or listening post either on the high ground or in the orchard,

the approach of company F could have been detected in ample time to bring effective fire on the company making the capture of the town a far greater and costlier task.

6. ARTILLERY REGISTRATION AREAS

The failure of the enemy to select adequate routes for his counterattack plans was a deciding factor in the complete failure of later attempts by the enemy to retake HAN.

Suggested

The registration in the open area east of HAN should have indicated to the enemy that weapons were being registered. However when the enemy withdrew, they proceeded to withdraw through the previously registered area. When they launched their counterattack to retake HAN, they used the same route they had used in withdrawing and recrossed the artillery "base point" which was immediately brought under fire, and the counterattack disintegrated.

7. PERSONAL CONTACT BETWEEN SUPPORTED AND SUPPORTING UNITS

More support needed - too general

A close personal relationship between the commander of Company F and the Cannon Company forward observer prior to, and during this operation promoted mutual confidence and cooperation which made coordinated teamwork during the attack possible. This teamwork contributed much to the final success of the operation.

LESSONS

1. Prompt resupply of shortages in combat is necessary to eliminate a loss or curtailment of combat efficiency.

2. The flow of replacements to combat units must be steady and adequate in order to maintain efficiency and to insure the availability of qualified rated personnel necessary to replace combat losses.

3. Defensive frontages assigned after a limited objective attack must be within the capabilities of the units defending them.

4. Close, effective artillery fire support greatly aids the forward movement of assault units, the break up of enemy counterattacks and minimizes friendly losses.

5. Defensive positions must always establish some form of an outpost or listening post system no matter how small, to give early warning of approaching enemy forces.

6. Registration areas of artillery or mortars should be avoided and when used by necessity, these areas should be traversed as rapidly as possible.

7. A close personal relationship should be developed between commanders of supported units and representatives of supporting units in order to facilitate good teamwork.

more detailed support needed