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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 135TH INFANTRY  
(34TH INFANTRY DIVISION) AT HILLS 609 AND 531, SOUTHWEST  
OF MATEUR, TUNISIA, AFRICA, 26 APRIL-2 MAY 1943  
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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this Monograph and Company Commanders of 1st Bn collabo-  
rated and assisted in the compiling of this report.  
There are several errors in the above, these errors have  
been checked and verified by Major Donald Landon and  
Major Charles Fanning who commanded Company A and Company C)  
(TIS Library)

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 135TH INFANTRY  
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Battalion 135th Infantry Regiment (34th Division) in the battle of Hills 531 and 609 - 26 April-2 May 1943 (Tunisian Campaign).

In order to properly orient the reader with a sufficient background, it is necessary to review some of the earlier actions which had an influence on the outcome of the final struggle.

The invasion of North Africa by the Allies was the initial phase of a plan to pull a long range pincer movement on the Germans in this theater. (1)

There were four main reasons why the Allied Commanders wanted to drive out or kill the Axis forces in North Africa:

1. It would facilitate Allied Global operations. (2)

This would put them within striking distance of Europe.

(3)

2. It would remove the constant threat of German activity in North Africa and add to the strength of the Allies while gathering forces to administer the final blows. (4)

3. If it could be carried out without embittering the French, it would provide a setting for the reconstitution of the French Army in its preparation for its return to France. (5)

4. Various political reasons. (6)

(1) A-6, p. 144; (2) A-7, p. 18; (3) A-7, p. 18 and personal knowledge; (4) A-7, p. 18; (5) A-7, p. 18; (6) Personal knowledge

The allies landed at three main points in North Africa on 8 November 1942. On 10 November resistance ceased at all points. (7)

Although the Germans were permitted to land over 1,000 troops a day in Tunisia, the outlook of the Allies in North Africa was better. In addition to the landings by the Allies, General Montgomery had started to push the German armies under Rommel back across Egypt and Lybia. (8)

During the months of November and December the Germans acted with speed and efficiency to win the race for Tunisia which succeeded in postponing the invasion into Italy for six months and gave them time to strengthen other defenses. Because of the lack of supply facilities and transport, the allies could send only small forces which accounted for the failure to seize the strategic important cities of Bizerte and Tunis whose fall would have meant the collapse of the Axis powers in North Africa. (Map A) (9)

Having lost the race to Tunis and Bizerte, the front became somewhat stabilized except for some minor skirmishes during January and early February 1943. (10) The front at this time extended from the Mediterranean Sea to Chott Djeriol in the South. (Map A)

From this front it can be seen that General Von Arnim, the German Commander in the Northern Area, had a coastal corridor to keep an open route for supplies and communications for Rommel who was operating against Montgomery to the South and East. (11)

(7) A-10, p. 8, 15; (8) A-10, p. 16, 17; (9) A-10, p. 17, 20, 21; (10) A-10, p. 19; (11) A-10, p. 21, 22, 23

Because the Eighth Army had stretched its supply lines, in its drive across Egypt and Libya it was some time before they could continue the drive; which left the enemy troops free to launch attacks against the Allies. (12)

The American troops comparatively inexperienced in warfare bore up well under the brunt of main axis attacks stopping the Germans just short of Tebessa, the supply base for the forces in their sector. (13)

Rommel, after these attacks, launched further attacks against the British and French directly north of this sector. Von Arnim also met with local success further north. (14)

In March Rommel attacked Montgomery who was further South attempting to disrupt the expected drive North. This met with little success. The Eighth Army started the assault and successfully pushed north. (15)

The American forces were also successful on a minor scale by threatening and moving eastward against Rommel's flank. (16) The American forces continued this pressure on Rommel's flanks attempting to divert his strength until the Eighth Army pushed through the Mareth Gap (near Mareth) and if successful the Americans were to increase the pressure and attempt to push to the sea. (17)

In April junction was made by the Eighth Army and the Americans. The continued pressure on Rommel's flanks and front and the threatened drive to the sea which if successful would cut off his retreat caused Rommel to execute a withdrawal. (18)

The enemy withdrew back to Enfidaville. The resulting advance by the Eighth Army squeezed out the American forces. (19)

(12) A-10, p. 24; (13) A-10, p. 24-27; (14) A-10, p. 29;  
(15) A-10, p. 29-31; (16) A-10, p. 29-31; (17) A-5, p. 18;  
(18) A-10, p. 36; (19) A-10, p. 36 and personal knowledge.

Although all elements of the 34th Division had not participated in the earlier action in North Africa, by the first part of February all of them had seen some action. The Division then took part in all the later phases which resulted in the Germans withdrawing to a final stand.

During this time the Allies had gradually gained air superiority with a resultant concentration on the enemy transportation, rear areas, convoys and shipping which paved the way for later success. (20)

The front at this time was on a line Enfidaville-Bou Arada-Medjez el Bab-Sedjenane. (21)

#### GENERAL SITUATION

It was evident to the Allies that the Axis intended to make a determined stand and that they would defend along a line which was the present front.

The Axis had approximately 9 German Divisions and 5 Italian Divisions to accomplish this mission. (22)

A large scale regrouping of the Allied Divisions was planned for the final attack of these defenses. (23)

General Alexander's 18th Army Group consisted of the following:

1. British-French First Army (North Sector)
2. British Eighth Army (Enfidaville Sector)
3. U.S. II Corps (Still in South)
4. French XIX Corps (North Sector) (24)

For the final drive Alexander had more than 20 Divisions in three main groups on a front of about 140 miles. (25)

The plan was for the 8th Army to attack from Enfidaville to maintain pressure and advance into the Cap Bon.

(20) A-7, p. 25; (21) A-10, p. 36; (22) A-2, p. 2; (23) A-10, p. 36;  
(24) A-2, p. 2; (25) A-2, p. 2

Peninsula. (Map A) The main Allied attack was to be delivered in the center of the front by the British-French First Army (V and IX Corps) which in the meantime would be supplemented by elements of the Eighth Army, while the French XIX Corps drove on the left flank of the 8th Army.

The U.S. II Corps with Franc d'Afrique was to drive on the north flank. This would endanger the flank and rear of the enemy blocking the British drive.

It was simply a powerful thrust in the center supported by Armor with secondary attacks on the flanks to hold the enemy down and prevent him from concentrating forces to meet the main effort. (26)

For nearly four months, the U.S. II Corps had been fighting on the Southern front and when orders were received to carry out this plan it meant a movement of 150 miles, for over 100,000 troops with all the supplies and equipment, across the communication lines of the British 1st Army. (27)

This difficult movement was completed by 22 April with the 34th Division 12 miles east of Beja. (28)

Prior to the completion of the move, the II Corps completed the plans that the 1st Division, 1st Armored Division and 34th Division were to make the main attack. The 1st Division was to attack into the hills north of the Tine River. (Map B) The 6th Armored Infantry of the 1st Armored Division was to attack into the hills just above Tine River. The 34th Division was to attack in the sector left of the 1st Division. The Ninth Division was to attack through the hills north of the other Divisions with Corps Franc d'Afrique attacking along the coast.

(26) A-2, p. 2,3; (27) A-10, p. 36; A-5, p. 21; (28) A-10, p. 36; A-8, p. 63

Si Nsir, Hill 374 and Hill 484. This was to be a line of departure for use later.

#### THE BATTALION SITUATION

There were two important factors which greatly influenced the actions of the Battalion during this action.

The first was terrain.

The terrain facing them was rugged and somewhat similar to what they had been accustomed to in the southern part of Tunisia.

A description of the terrain could be briefly summarized as follows: (Sketch 1)

Rock-Mud; Djebals (Mountains)-Marshes; Grit-Dust; Bog-Stones.

By the time the Battalion had reached Northern Tunisia the rainy season was over. The days were warm but the nights were chilly and in order to have necessary protection the soldier needed at least a blanket at night.

The hills, while as steep and rocky as Southern Tunisia, had little vegetation on the lower slopes, however, at the base of the Djebals there were some cultivated strips. The higher slopes were bare and jagged, and often so steep that at times it was a considerable feat to climb them without equipment, weapons or opposition. (31)

These peaks were part of a difficult terrain which is in a belt of rugged hill country 15 to 20 miles in depth and had to be crossed before the Battalion could reach the center of the enemy communications at Mateur. There were no broad corridors for advance. The heights averaged about 500 to 1000 feet above

(31) A-12

the floors of the few narrow valleys. (32)

There were two hard surfaced roads but they were not important to the Division as a route forward but for use as supply lines. This road net was controlled by the high hills and rugged country toward Mateur.

This was natural country for defensive fighting and as usual the methodical Germans who were well versed in the art of defense would have a warm reception for the advancing units in form of machine guns and mortars with superior observation to control the few narrow approaches. From experience and partially confirmed by reports, it was evident these few narrow valleys had been heavily mined and booby trapped. (33)

It was indeed evident that the Battalion was in for some bitter hill to hill fighting which could also develop into a long bitter trek and battle over the rugged terrain immediately to the front. (34)

Grim Hill 609 overshadowing its flanking peaks directly in the path of the Battalion was the key enemy stronghold as well as holding the observation to control the Highway and Railroad to Mateur. It was the controlling height which dominated the country. The hill was flanked by many smaller fortresses, which had to be taken before 609 could be assaulted. (35)

In order to fully understand the background, it is necessary to look at the second factor and acquaint the reader with the beating the 1st Battalion had taken in its last battle.

Although, the Battalion had suffered reverses during the campaign in Tunisia, it was not until during the early part of

(32) Personal knowledge; (33) A-2, p. 9; (34) A-10, p. 36 and personal knowledge; (35) A-2, p. 11; A-5, p. 21 - personal knowledge

April when the Battalion with the Division had the mission of pushing through Fondouk Gap (near Fondouk - Map A) that they were really tested. This area was held by the Germans who had the strength and time to prepare positions in solid rock. The Battalion had assaulted time and time again over bare and flat approaches, through barbed wire and booby traps, being hurled back at each attack. It was simply a series of head on assaults against an enemy in territory where they could not hit the enemy with counterfire and normal infantry weapons. After much bitter fighting the enemy was forced to withdraw.

The unit not only suffered from adverse terrain but from errors, inexperience and had to learn the hard way. Although they took the objective it was indeed a beating.

Following this grueling and discouraging introduction to a first major battle, they moved to Maktar where they underwent a vigorous training program for 10 days. Emphasis was on coordination, night and day attacks, cooperation with supporting weapons, between artillery and infantry especially the need of following closely the initial fires on the attack. Many realistic and combat firing exercises were held. The recent battle was critiqued. All realized their mistakes and measures were taken to prevent further repetition that would be disastrous in the following campaigns.

During this time the Division was transferred into a fighting machine.

The terrific beating taken and the intense training undergone had a decided effect on the outcome of the next battle in which the Battalion engaged. (36)

(36) Personal knowledge

## INITIAL ATTACKS ON HILL 531

The Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert P. Miller, with his staff and company commanders, arrived shortly after noon on the 26 of April in the vicinity of Hill 575 to make a reconnaissance prior to the movement of the Battalion into an assembly area. (Map C) As the plans of the attack were being discussed, a German deserter who had been picked up by the 168th Infantry was brought in. The deserter stated that Hill 609 was only lightly held by disloyal German troops; and since the main force had withdrawn, it would be easy for us to capture the Hill if we launched an attack immediately. He further stated that about 50 men could do the job.

There was excitement in the air and the tone was for an immediate attack. It was evident that the present plans would be changed. Lieutenant Colonel Miller was told to complete his reconnaissance but be ready to attack as soon as his troops arrived.

The reconnaissance was completed and final plans were made.

The troops closed in an assembly area behind Hill 575 by 1800 hours. Extra ammunition and rations were issued at this point. (37)

The original plan had called for an attack northwards by the 135th Infantry along a zone 3,000 yards wide with Hill 609 on the extreme right of the 34th Division zone of action. In the meantime the change in the plans was received. Lieutenant Colonel Miller received orders to move out immediately. The orders further stated that the time of attack had been moved up and that the Battalion would attack that night under cover of darkness, seize Hill 609 in a night attack then proceed

(37) Personal knowledge - Statement by Major Landon, who was then C.O., Co. A

northward as rapidly as possible.

The Regimental plan of attack placed the 1st Battalion on the right with the 3rd Battalion on the left each to move forward and destroy all enemy in its respective zones of action. These two Battalions were to move out via Hills 374 and 484 as previously planned. The 2nd Battalion was placed in Regimental reserve. Up to this time no further enemy information was available.

Lieutenant Colonel Miller issued his attack order to the companies at once. Captain Landon was to take Company A secure the LD (Hill 484) and move on to seize Hill 609, laying a strip engineers tape for the other companies to use for a guide. Company B was to follow then move around to the left of Company A. Upon arrival at Hill 484, the Battalion Commanding Officer would give the complete plan. Company C was to be in reserve. (38)

The Battalion moved out at 1900 hours in single file, Company A leading with one Heavy Machine Gun Platoon (carrying only two guns - remainder of the members carrying ammunition) on a mission type order with the Company. This platoon followed the Weapons Platoon and was ahead of the Rifle Platoon at the rear of Company A. The next group consisted of Battalion Command Group followed by the 81 mm Mortar Platoon. Company B was next in line with one Platoon of Heavy Machine Guns (carrying only two guns) in the same formation and on a similar mission with them as the other platoon that was with Company A. Company C brought up the rear with one complete platoon carrying ammunition for the Heavy Weapons Company. The members of the 37 mm Platoon were also used for ammunition carriers since there was no immediate need for these weapons. It was also impossible to transport these weapons over

(38) Personal observation and statement by Major Bailey, who was the Bn S-3

the rugged terrain ahead.

The movement was slow through the dark night over the twisting and steep trail. At times men would be lifted over rocks and their equipment handed to them when they reached the top of the peaks. (39)

Captain Landon with the leading Platoon of Company A reached Hill 501 at approximately 2200 hours. There he contacted elements of 168th Infantry. After checking information that this unit might have, he again set out for Hill 484. (40)

The route to Hill 484 was as difficult as the preceding route to Hill 501. Company A continued the advance, occasionally receiving artillery fire. The only casualties suffered were men falling off cliffs which resulted in fractured legs or arms by the troops.

Company A closed in on Hill 484 without further incident at approximately 0500 hours on 27 April.

It was too late now to make a night attack on Hill 609. Company A however sent out patrols to the front and flanks. Contact was also made with the 3rd Battalion which had reached Hill 374.

The platoon of 81 mm mortars from positions on Hill 484 assisted the 3rd Battalion by firing on enemy automatic weapons in front of Hill 374. The 3rd Battalion's mortars had not as yet reached Hill 374. The balance of the 1st Battalion was on Hill 501. (41)

Prior to noon Captain Landon received orders to move to Kef el Guebli (commonly called Kef) which is part of Hill 529. The 81 mm Mortar Platoon was to remain in position to stop counter

(39) Personal observation; (40) Statement by Major Landon;  
(41) Personal observation

attacks and engage targets on Hill 609 which might interfere with the advance of Company A. (42)

Captain Landon moved his Company in single file directly east over the southern slope of the high peak of Hill 530. Long range Machine Gun fire and Artillery fire were encountered until the Company had moved over Hill 530. As the leading Platoon reached the road between Hill 529 and Hill 530 the leading element followed the road to the south instead of to the north. The leading Platoon Leader had taken the wrong turn and it was necessary for Captain Landon to reorient him. (43)

Company A reached its objective, but immediately upon taking up positions, heavy mortar, artillery and machine gun fire was received. Not only were casualties received from fragments and small arms fire but numerous cases of concussion developed from the reechoing of the explosions on the rocks in the circular depression on Kef el Guebli. During a telephone conversation, Captain Landon stated that the explosions of the artillery shells in the depression were amplified to a terrific degree and that one of the men had gone crazy. The adverse psychological effect was noted. (44)

During the afternoon and evening of 27 April Companies B and C moved from Hill 501 keeping well south of the entire hill mass of Hill 530 and occupied Hill 529. The 81 mm Mortar Platoon, in battery with one of the Heavy Machine Platoons, was in position on Hill 530 just off to the southwest of the road. The other platoon of Heavy Machine guns was in position on Hill 529. By this time a 1/4 ton truck had brought the other Machine Guns up. (45)

(42) Statements by Major Bailey and Major Landon; Personal observation; (43) Personal observation; (44) Statement by Major Landon and personal observation; (45) Personal knowledge

The terrain in the immediate path of the Battalion at this time was not very encouraging. It did not differ much from the original expectations.

The hill mass of 531 and 529 rose out of the Southern base of Hill 609. Hill 529 and Kef el Guebli were actually one hill, rising better than 300 feet from the road directly to the south. The hill appeared as two but actually 529 was separated by a draw which served as a possible approach to Hill 531. Hills 531, 529 and Kef el Guebli were of a rocky substance making it nearly impossible to dig in unless explosives were used.

Hill 531 was a rock formation with jagged cliffs and crevices. It was a huge fortress blocking all approaches to Hill 609. The slopes facing the 1st Battalion were steep except for a gradual slope in the center. This hill was in turn covered from the northeast by two slightly smaller but just as rugged Hills, RR and Hill 455 rising from the base of 609.

In order to reach or flank Hill 609, these surrounding key fortresses would have to be eliminated.

On 28 April the Battalion had the mission of supporting the attack of the 1st Division who were to attack northeast from positions east of Hill 529. The 3d Battalion was to make a main effort from Hill 451 after seizing Hill 490. The 1st Battalion was to demonstrate toward Hills 609 and 531. (46)

The Battalion demonstrated by fire and attack, with Companies A and G making several unsuccessful attempts against stubborn resistance, to seize Hill 531.

During the demonstration the 81 mortars and Heavy Machine guns concentrated fires on Hills 609 and 531. Much of this fire had been concentrated on the reverse slopes of Hill 609 and on

(46) A-12, Personal knowledge

the reverse slope of the knob just south of Hill 609. This area was covered by fire because information had been received that a counter attack was forming. The area appeared as a likely enemy route. After the heavy fire on the reverse slope of this knob no attack developed.

The mortars had a field day. It was established that they had neutralized 3 OP's on Hill 609, several automatic weapon positions and field pieces. The mortars operated in battery. The fire was more flexible when operating in this manner. Ammunition was brought up by 1/4 Ton Truck via a trail south and east of Hill 530. By nightfall all of Hill 529 and Kef el Guebli were in the possession of the 1st Battalion. (47)

During the night of 28 April the Battalion received orders to make a night attack and seize Hill 531. The attack met with such terrific opposition that the Battalion made practically no progress.

The morning of 29 April found the Battalion tired and pretty well beaten. The men were short of rations because the supply route was difficult and most of the manpower was used to resupply ammunition. (47)

The 2d and 3d Battalions on the left were successful in seizing Hills 435 and 490. (48)

Several unsuccessful attacks were made again on 29 April by the 1st Battalion to seize Hill 531.

During the day of 29 April the 81 mortars after displacing to Hill 529 neutralized two gun emplacements on Hill 531. The Heavy Machine Gun Platoon had also displaced from Hill 530 to Hill 529. Several hours after these weapons had displaced,

(47) Statement by Major Bailey and personal knowledge;  
(48) A-12

heavy enemy artillery fire was concentrated on Hill 530. The displacement was timely as the platoon escaped the artillery fire.

During the afternoon, Company A had observed enemy movement between Hills 531 and 609 in a cactus patch. Due to heavy fire they could not advance near enough to rout the enemy. The Agent Corporal from Company D suggested that mortars be fired into this area. The Corporal relayed the information back. Fire was placed in the area flushing the enemy and as they retreated to the rear the machine guns and rifles picked off all of them. (49)

During this time the 1st Division also attempted to seize the southern part of Hill 531 without success. (50) According to reports received a Battalion of the 1st Division had bypassed Hill 531 early on the evening of 29 April, passing behind the hill and bypassing both RR and Hill 455 while making a night attack on Hill 523. (51)

Late on the night of 29 April orders were received by the 1st Battalion Commander to secure Hill 531, proceed and attack Hill 609 from the Southeast. Although little planning had been initiated due to the late receipt of the orders the attack was made. After meeting stiff resistance, Company C was able to obtain a foothold with one platoon on the southern base of Hill 531 under an overhanging cliff. Dawn caught the platoon of Company C in that location, they could not advance or move back as the enemy fire covered both approaches.

Throughout this action the difficulties of subordinate units were increased as information from higher Headquarters both in the 34th and 1st Division as to locations of units were in error.

(49) Personal knowledge; (50) Statements by Majors Landon and Fanning; (51) Statement by Major ~~McIntire~~, who was a Platoon Leader in this Battalion

In the mean time the 3d Battalion had reached the escarpment on the Southwest slopes of Hill 609. It was further learned that a night attack on Hill 523 by the 1st Division had been disastrous as the Battalion making the attack had been counter attacked resulting in heavy casualties and loss of the hill.

The locations of the Battalion had not changed much by the morning of 30 April. Company A still held positions on Kef el Guebli. Company B was on the reverse slopes of Hill 529. Company C on Hill 529 and 531. The 81 mm Mortar Platoon was on the rear slope of Hill 529, one Heavy Machine Gun Platoon was still in position on Hill 529 and one on Kef el Guebli. The 37 mm Platoon had been ordered in position on the road south of Hill 529 to protect the left flank. (52)

Enemy machine gun fire swept the tops of hills and covered possible avenues of approach. Enemy mortars and artillery covered approaches and the rear slopes of the Hills held by the 1st Battalion. (53)

#### SECURING OF HILL 531

At 1145 hours 30 April Lt Col Miller received orders to make a coordinated attack, seize Hill 531, then proceed to RR and the knob south of Hill 609, outpost the ground and defend Hill 531. H-hour was to be 1230. The attack was to be preceded by a 10 minute artillery concentration and smoke on Hill 531. This attack was to be in conjunction with a large scale attack on all fronts of the Corps. The remainder of the 34th Division was to make a coordinated attack with tanks on Hill 609. The 1st Division on the right was also to attack with tanks. (54)

(52) Statements by Major Bailey and Major Fanning; Personal knowledge; (53) Personal knowledge; (54) A-13; Statements by Major Bailey and Major Fanning; Personal knowledge

All the enemy situation known by our forces was that the Hills 509 and 531 were strongly held.

The plan of the Battalion was to have Company A move up the trail between Hill 529 and Kef el Guebli, pass in front of Kef el Guebli under cover of the smoke and seize the northeast half of Hill 531. One platoon of Company A was to seize the Knob. (Map D) Company C was to move up the low ground in the center, and the right side of Hill 531 to seize the southeast half of the hill. After this both Companies were to send patrols to RR and Hill 455. Company B was to move to the positions vacated by Company A and afford protection in case of a counter attack. Company D was to support from their present positions with the 81 mortars supplementing the smoke and take up all the smoke and HE when the artillery ceased.

Since it would not be practicable to issue all the orders and be sure everyone was thoroughly prepared as well as completing the plans on supplies, the Battalion Commander obtained permission to postpone the time of the attack to 1300.

Each company was to continue to lay wire from their present line which was tied in to the Battalion and back to the rear. This was to continue to be a party line. In fact many sound power phones and EES were tied into this net and by simply giving an order to fire to the guns-ammunition supply points, Company Commanders, and the Battalion Commander could hear all the conversation. It was an overloaded net but it worked.

When the attack was ready to jump off, Lt. Col. Miller observed a counter attack of considerable force estimated to be several Battalions attacking from the high ground north of Hill 523. Lt. Col. Miller ordered the companies to continue the

attack and directed 34th Division Artillery along with 1st Division Artillery, Cannon Company, and 81 mortars against the enemy, successfully breaking up the attack. The counter attack was completely routed as the few enemy who were observed moving about were throwing away equipment and fleeing in every direction except to the south and southwest.

It is noted here that the original Artillery fire planned for the attack was not used against the counter attack but other artillery and also some of the 1st Division's artillery was used. The 81 mm Mortar Platoon although operating under the old T/O of a four gun platoon had five firing mortars for this attack, three had continued the mission for the attack and two fired on the counter attack.

As the attack jumped off Company C received some short artillery rounds in their area and did not advance for several minutes. In the meantime Lt. Col. Miller rushed forward and urged them on, stating that the fire was not all ours but was a German trick. After moving a short distance Company C was again stopped by Machine Gun and sniper fire. Their Weapons Platoon and Company D Heavy Machine Guns immediately engaged these targets.

Observers from Hill 529 could locate the targets but could not engage them with Mortars as the conformation of the hill was such that mortar rounds would go over or fall short of the enemy who were on a narrow shelf. Commander Company D issued the order to place one of the 37mm guns in position on Hill 529 to engage these targets.

Aided by the fire support of the Machine Guns and being personally led by Lt. Col. Miller, Company C was able to move slowly against bitter fire to the top of the right half of

Hill 531. The Company was unsuccessful in an attempt to move up the low part in the center of the Hill as this area and the complete area between 529 and 531 including the path between 529 was covered by enemy machine gun fire. As the Company reached the top of the hill they received heavy fire from RR and local counter attacks supported by fire from the rear slope of 531. These were beaten off while the Company slowly advanced.

In the meantime Company A had moved quickly through the draw between Hill 529 and Kef el Guebli under cover of Smoke, Artillery, Mortar and Heavy Machine Gun fire. Company A Weapons Platoon supported from Kef el Guebli.

The 81 mm Mortar Platoon continued to fire Smoke and HE after the artillery ceased.

As Company A moved up to the assault, the Heavy Machine Gun Platoon gave close overhead fire. Due to the terrain this fire had to be very close and by close cooperation with the Machine Guns, Company A moved up under the fire. When the fires were masked, rather than ceasing fire the Machine Guns lifted their fire just above the heads of the enemy and enough to clear Hill 531 to enable Company A to move in for the kill. The crack of bullets over the heads of the enemy had the desired effect even though there would be no casualties from this type of fire. (55)

The 1st Platoon of Company A with the 60 mortar continued to attack toward the southern knob of Hill 609. The 3d Platoon of Company A with every man firing and following its supporting fires closely reached the crest but were stopped cold temporarily by "potato mashers", and fire from Field Guns and Machine Guns coming from R.R. Company A's hand grenade supply was exhausted

(55) A-13; A-14

and with the exception of some NCO's the Second Platoon was still to the rear carrying ammunition for the 4th Platoon. Very shortly five NCO's and some of the ammunition bearers were committed with a fresh supply of ammunition. (56)

The Light Machine Guns of Company A displaced to Hill 531. Captain Landon requested mortar fire on a Field Piece on RR and a Machine Gun on the rear slope of Hill 531. By giving a description of the area the weapons were located on the map. Company D Commander in Company C sector did not have observation necessitating that the data be computed by map. Captain Landon adjusted the fires by relay. The fires were very accurate and with less than fifteen rounds both targets were destroyed (these positions were later located to prove this). The initial round on one target fell only 50 yards over.

Company A continued the assault into the enemy position and during some very close fighting were able to seize the northeast part of the Hill, which caused the few remaining enemy to drop back over the flat ground near RR. The First Platoon was now only about 200 yards short of their objective. They had contacted the 3rd Battalion on their left. The retreating enemy from Hill 531 was observed and engaged by the 1st Platoon elements of the 3rd Battalion and by a section of Heavy Machine Guns that had displaced. None of the retreating enemy reached RR.

After the Machine Guns and Field Pieces on RR were destroyed, Captain Fanning, Company C Commander, had been able to advance the Company further up their side of Hill 531. However there still appeared to be a pocket of resistance between Company C and Company A. Some enemy on Hill 531 could be observed by observers on Hill 529 but the friendly forces were too close to

(56) Statements by Majors Bailey and Landon

use Mortars. Actually the enemy held only a pocket of about 35 yards in width. The top of the Hill here consisted of deep crevices and huge boulders that demanded each crook be cleared. Rifle grenade range was almost too great to attempt fire without firing into Company A. That 37 mm Gun would do the job but it was an impossible feat to get it into position on Hill 529 and was never accomplished.

Another large force of Germans was observed approaching from the area north of Hill 523 toward Hill 455. There was a brief discussion as to whether they were carrying a white flag. Giving them the benefit of the doubt they were not taken under fire immediately. But their tricks were known and kept in mind. On closer observation it was noted that they appeared to be carrying weapons and ammunition and instead of moving over the uncovered areas, they were moving directly toward Hill 523. The columns were somewhat closed up and were estimated to be at least a full strength Battalion. During this time the artillery from 34th Division and 1st Division boxed the enemy in on their rear and flanks and were instructed to fire on call. The Mortar Platoon sealed the open end of the box. The plan was to fire on signal with half the weapons remaining on the edges of the target, the remaining to move inward and outward.

In all fairness several rounds of mortar were fired between the columns and Hill 523 attempting to keep them from assembling behind this hill. Immediately the enemy swung toward Hill 523 and attempted to place some mortars and other weapons into position. The intentions of the enemy were clear. The signal to open fire was given. The dust cleared up after some time of firing. It was then noted that the attack had been stopped and very few men were

still active. Another counterattack had been routed.

About this time the familiar "BRRP" of the enemy machine pistol was directed into Company C from the vicinity of the pocket. A light machine gun from Company A sector was also heard. Company C returned fire into the pocket and prepared to assault.

Company A reported that they were also receiving small arms fire from the same pocket. (57)

Company C was ready to assault the position. As a final precaution, Company A was called and was given the information concerning the planned assault. During the conversation it was learned that Company A had employed several captured enemy weapons. Upon closer checking it was noted that they were close to the suspected enemy position. To verify their locations each company fired a signal. After verification of positions it was found that there were no enemy in the pocket at this time. They had evidently pulled out during the counterattack. Company A and C made contact.

Artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire continued on Company A positions until friendly artillery and 81 mm mortar fire was directed on the enemy positions. (58)

The First Platoon of Company A had reached its objective after some resistance and had not lost contact with the Third Battalion.

The remainder of the Division consisting of elements of 168th Infantry Regiment and 133th Infantry Regiment and the remainder of the 135th Infantry were ready to mop up the North and Northeast slopes of Hill 609. (59)

The 1st Division was making slow progress and due to the difficult terrain the tank attack was held up. The Division was

(57) A-11; A-12; A-13; Personal knowledge; (58) A-12; A-13; Personal knowledge; (59) A-11; A-12; Statement by Major Bailey

concentrating on plan to make a wide swin right.

Several local counterattacks from the rear northeast slopes of Hill 531 were repulsed early in the evening. Early in the evening Lt. Midkiff, Company Commander of Company B, was ordered to move Company B and reinforce Company C, secure the right half of Hill 531 and to patrol toward Hill 455 and RR. During the night some sniper and artillery fire was received in this sector. By early morning all of Hill 531 was in the hands of the 1st Battalion.

Early the next morning two platoons including the Weapons Platoon of Company B were sent to occupy RR. This was successfully accomplished after meeting only light resistance. During 1 May the Battalion completely secured RR and Hill 455.

Again following their displacement from Hill 531 the positions the Platoon of Heavy Machine Guns had vacated were taken under enemy artillery fire.

During the evening all mortars and ammunition were brought up by vehicle. Although a path had not been cleared through the mine field between Hill 531 and Hill 609 the Mortar Transportation Corporal drove a vehicle through the field thus clearing a path for all the supplies of the Battalion.

The night of 1 May was very quiet. On the morning of 2d May several enemy counterattacks were stopped by friendly Artillery and 81 Mortar fire.

Early on the afternoon of 2d May all enemy activity ceased except three field guns, which while attempting to get into position, were destroyed by the 81 mortars firing at a range of 3900 yards. To reach out to this range extra increments were added to the rounds.

The Battalion had a chance to observe the results of their efforts and the devastating effects of the supporting weapons and small arms fire on the enemy. The results of the unsuccessful counterattacks were also noted.

The battle area was littered with German dead and equipment, especially on Hill 531. Samples of this equipment and all maps found were sent back to the S-2.

The enemy dead in the low area behind the south knob of Hill 600 illustrated the results of a unit caught in the assembly area by mortar fire prior to attacking. Approximately 50 Germans dead were found here.

The fall of Hill 609 had made the other hills untenable and from all indications the enemy had withdrawn.

On the night of 2 May the 168th Infantry relieved the 135th Infantry of the responsibility of Hill 609. The Battalion went into defensive positions near Si Nsir and reverted to Division Reserve.

A look at the ammunition situation revealed that the 81 mm Mortars had fired over 6,000 rounds of ammunition. The Heavy Machine Guns averaged from 20 to 25 chests per gun. The Rifle Companies fired 90-95% more than they had fired during any previous action of this time length.

On inspection of Hill 531 there were found to be locations for over 70 Automatic Weapons. Hill 455 and RR had many positions for Field Pieces and Automatic Weapons which could cover Hill 531.

German prisoners asked if the Americans ever slept as they attacked all the time. German prisoners also later stated that the Germans had 75 men on the right portion of Hill 531, 50 of whom had been armed with automatic weapons.

Company C had little more than 60% strength when it attacked Hill 531.

Company A had approximately 65% of its strength for the attack.

The enemy who had defended the hill came from a German Air force Regiment called "Regiment Barethin". These troops had been deeply imbued with the Nazi Doctrine and were boldly and courageously led. They were on par with those German troops later known as Paratroops. Prior to this action they had received specialized training in mountain fighting.

During this action the 34th Division found itself. After knowing bewilderment, bitterness and hard experience the 34th Division now had one of the most outstanding achievements of the Tunisian Campaign to its credit. (60)

The success here went far to safeguard and assist the advance which the 1st Division was making in the hills to the east and assisted in opening the Tine Valley for the final armored blow.

The final stage for the pincer movement after many hard months of fighting was set and resulted in the capture and destruction of the Axis force in North Africa. (61)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A study of this operation by the 1st Battalion 135th Infantry indicates that the Battalion in its final attack adhered close to sound tactical principles.

It is especially noted that errors previously made at Fondouk and corrected during the training period were not repeated.

(60) A-11; A-12; A-14; Personal knowledge; (61) A-2, p. 3-6, insert; A-11; Personal knowledge

The Battalion was not set for its first attack from Hill 575 due to the time being moved up resulting in failure initially.

The objective for a night attack should be limited and there should be time for planning.

An hour for the final attack was delayed to allow for the information to be given to necessary leaders and personnel. It is necessary that key personnel have proper knowledge of the plans and that there is time to prepare the supply setup. It was illustrated in the success of the final attack that the delay was necessary.

There was excellent coordination of supporting weapons which included Battalion Weapons and Artillery. This was shown by the rapid fire and control of this fire on the counter attacks.

The intelligent use of smoke enabled the companies to move to assaulting positions with few casualties.

Company C should have taken a few casualties from the artillery fire and without hesitation should have kept close to the initial fires. If it had done so they might have seized their objective earlier.

By lifting Machine Gun fires rather than ceasing fire the enemy was kept partially down assisting the assaulting troops.

The S-2 must carefully weigh all information and it must be confirmed before action is taken. Along with this a change of plans should not be based on information unless there are several verified sources.

Men of the Rifle Companies fired their rifles at the objective even if there was no enemy in sight. This had a two fold effect. First all the lead flying around helped to keep the enemy down. Secondly it had a decided psychological effect

on the men who fired, they felt as if they had a part in the fight and also it kept them busy.

The communication for the Companies was CELL sets hooked to assault wire. Although the units had contact, which proved very necessary, there was an undesirable overload on the line. However, it worked. More nets should have been established. The SCR596 proved ineffective. More than one channel of communication is necessary.

Members of the fighting teams had to be used to carry ammunition. This decreased the efficiency of the assault units, as the weary men had to carry supply instead of getting some rest. The A.T. Company could have been used to relieve some of the riflemen used as ammunition bearers.

An unsuccessful attempt was made to haul the 37 mm Gun to the top of Hill 529. The weapon was too heavy to manhandle up this steep route.

The mutual support exchanged by adjacent units did much to aid in accomplishing the mission. Rapid displacement by supporting weapons assured close and continuous support. Aggressive use of vehicles insured ample ammunition supply. The supporting weapons did not fire all its missions from the same positions. The value of this was illustrated by the enemy artillery fire on the positions that had been vacated.

Although the double envelopment of the Battalion was successful, control is very difficult and can end in disaster, especially, if friendly units engage in a fire fight with each other.

Enemy weapons may be used when our supply is low but all units must be informed, or friendly fire may be brought down on the firing weapon.

The men and officers deserve much credit for their courage, team work and for their participation in this action.

The enemy defended his observation by surrounding key terrain features. The defenses were around the base and flanks of hills as well as on the rear slopes. The rear slope defense was also covered by another hill. The day and night positions were usually different.

The Reserve Company was not committed until the hill was almost secure. It is felt that due to the terrain and situation the Company was committed at the proper time. The right flank was open and there were no other approaches to use for another company to attack.

Although a Battalion Commander should not normally lead the attack, he showed good judgment and initiative here at a critical time when his presence influenced the attack. Company C was stopped but the actions by him inspired the men and was the deciding influence to get them underway again.

Higher headquarters did not give accurate locations of subordinate units which greatly endangered success of actions.

The Machine Guns sacrificed two guns per platoon initially. This assured an ample supply of ammunition. It is better to have few guns with lots of ammunition rather than many guns with little ammunition.

The Battalion in the 1st Division which reportedly had bypassed Hill 531 was possibly in error as to location. If not the enemy had infiltrated back into the positions or they had not observed the movement. In this case it is felt that such a piece of key terrain, since numerous attacks had failed to take it, should have been occupied at that time, and not left unguarded.

To sum up the battle:

The 1st Battalion succeeded in frontally attacking a tenacious enemy seizing a portion of Hill 609 and all of Hill 531, RR and Hill 455 after six days of attacking and continuous pounding.

The objectives were important as the enemy made desperate attempts to regain them by counterattacks.

The enemy casualties were heavy as noted by the number dead on the objectives.

The Battalion casualties were three officer casualties and approximately 50 enlisted men. The low casualty rate was due to aggressiveness and concrete application of tactical principles.

It was a victory that was gained through growing experience and aggressiveness and ranks as one of the major battles of the Regiment.

To summarize the operations I wish to quote a statement General Bradley wrote "A strong enemy attack was repulsed. Fighting all day intense and bloody. The enemy was engaged with bayonets and grenade and there were many cases of outstanding bravery."

#### LESSONS

These are not all lessons that have not been known by some but rather those that were not followed or remembered:

1. Combat firing exercises, a rigid, and an extensive training program is an important phase before going into combat. This is especially true of a unit that has just completed a phase of combat. Maneuver mistakes are battle mistakes.

2. Close cooperation and flexibility is needed with supporting weapons to stop counterattacks and for other missions. Troops must follow initial fires closely.

3. Adequate communication is necessary. Wire proves the most reliable. Alternate channels are necessary.
4. Units are prone to move too fast before the attack and too often attack before they are ready. It is better to delay the attack and to prepare proper plans.
5. Men should be trained to fire their individual weapons. Too many of our riflemen do not fire when in combat.
6. Do not exhaust rifle troops by using them to carry supplies.
7. There is a definite need for accurate information on enemy installations and friendly locations. Also do not base decisions on one unreliable source.
8. High points are used for observation and many times defended by surrounding key terrain and by fire. Rear slope defense when correctly used is very successful.
9. Troops must be physically hardened before battle.
10. 81 Mortars should be used in battery when possible. They are a very effective weapon.
11. Supporting weapons should move to alternate positions and not fire all missions from one location.
12. Aggressive use must be made of vehicles.
13. Aggressive action on the part of the attackers results in less casualties for their unit.
14. Do not under estimate or over estimate the enemy.
15. Much of our equipment, weapons and ammunition need further development. There is a definite need for light weapons. There is also a need for a better radio for front line companies.
16. There is a definite need for a light weight direct fire weapon that is mobile and has the punch of the 81 Mortar.