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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION,
504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY (82ND A/B DIV) IN THE GERMAN
COUNTER-OFFENSIVE, 18 DECEMBER 1944 - 10 JANUARY 1945
(ARDENNES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion S-3)

Type of operation described: REDUCTION OF A SALIENT

Captain Victor W. Campana, Infantry

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry, 82nd A/B Division, in the Ardennes Campaign, from the time this battalion was in its rest area at Camp Sissonne, France 17-18 December 1944 until the 82nd A/B Division was relieved and put into Corps reserve 10 January 1945.

Before discussing the subject of my monograph, it would be well to briefly outline the events which took place prior to and on the 17th of December 1944.

On 21 October 1944 the First U. S. Army, part of the 12th U.S. Army Corps, had been given the mission of attacking to the East, reach the Rhine River in the vicinity of Cologne and Bonn, and to secure a bridgehead across that river if the situation permitted. During the attack which followed, the Germans resisted stubbornly. The First U. S. Army was also confronted by the additional obstacle of the Roer River, whose crossing was denied because of the fact that the Roer Dams, being in German hands, presented a serious threat to our forces and had to be captured foremost. Accordingly, new Letters of Instructions were issued on the 6th of December to V Corps and VII Corps, part of the First U. S. Army, which directed V Corps to seize the Roer Dams while VII Corps was to advance and seize the west bank of the river and prepare to cross the river on orders. By the 15th of December 1944, VII Corps had reached the west bank of the Roer River in the vicinity of Duren. (1)

Meanwhile, during the early part of December, First U. S. Army

(1) A-1, p. 67, p. 88, p. 91.

Intelligence had been very much concerned with the build-up of enemy infantry and armor in the Cologne, Trier and Dusseldorf area. In a section of the G-2 "Summary of the Situation" a notation was made that "the strategy of Von Rundstedt was to let his situation deteriorate in both the Upper Rhine and South Moselle sectors, while conserving reserves in the Dusseldorf and Cologne area". Of the four enemy capabilities deduced by G-2 First U. S. Army, the one concerning an enemy counterattack was considered most likely to occur. (2)

On the morning of 16 December 1944, the enemy struck with the greatest counter-offensive against the Allied forces since Normandy.

The broad plan of the enemy was as follows: (1) to thrust towards the Meuse River and on to Brussels and Antwerp with the Sixth SS Panzer Army; (2) to drive towards Namur with the Fifth Panzer Army. A diversionary attack was to be made by the Seventh German Army with Luxembourg as its objective. The area of the attack was a sixty mile front between Eifel and the Ardennes. (3)

In conjunction with this German counterattack, a special operation known as "Grief" was to be undertaken by a special force using American uniforms, weapons, and equipment. This operation was to commence once the high ground west and southeast of St. Vith had been taken. (4)

Long range reconnaissance units, known as the "Einheit Stielan", consisting of thirty jeep loads of Germans dressed in American uniforms, were to infiltrate American lines at various points and join up with tanks at the Meuse River crossings. Eight hundred German parachutists were to be also dropped in the vicinity of the Eupen-Monschau area in support of these operations. (5)

(2) A-1, p. 101-102; (3) A-1, p. 103-104; (4) A-1, p. 104; (5) A-1, p. 104.

On the 17th of December the situation along the First U. S. Army front was becoming critical. The main counterattack was being directed against the VIII Corps front, and already several penetrations had been made. Two regiments of the new 106th U. S. Infantry Division, the 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments, were believed to be maintaining positions along the Schnee Eifel, although communications with them had been severed. At 1015 hours 17 December, those two regiments had been completely cut off. By nightfall the situation in the 28th U. S. Infantry Division sector was also very critical in the vicinity of Clerf and Pintoh. The 7th U. S. Armored Division was attached to VIII Corps and closed in an assembly area west of St. Vith to meet the German thrust. (6)

As the scene shifts to Camp Sissone, France on the 17th of December, we find the 2nd Battalion 504th Parachute Infantry engaged in a state of reorganization and training for future airborne operations. The battalion had returned less than a month ago from the Holland operations where it had spent fifty-seven continuous days in the front lines. The battalion had recently acquired a new and inexperienced battalion S-3, who had formerly been company commander of D Company. The training during the stay at Camp Sissone consisted mainly of small unit training to include night compass problems, range firing and road marches. Regimental and division reviews, intermingled with three day passes to Paris filled out our program. Christmas was just eight days away and everyone had visions of a peaceful Christmas holiday accompanied by that very appetizing turkey dinner which does not come too often in the Army. (7)

On Sunday evening about 2130 hours 17 December, word was passed through the officers' quarters that Colonel Reuben H. Tucker, the regimental commander, had been summoned to Division Headquarters

(6) A-1, p. 105-106; (7) Personal experience, self.

for an important meeting. Some of the officers who had been listening to the radio during the course of the evening stated that the radio announcer had mentioned a series of German attacks in the Ardennes sector and possibly that was the reason for the meeting. Many of the officers discredited that assumption and prepared for bed. However, word traveled around again that Colonel Tucker had called a battalion commanders' meeting. The three battalion S-3's, who were living in the same room, decided that something eventful must be taking place and each battalion S-3 decided to report to his respective battalion headquarters and await his battalion commander for the release of some information. (8)

Lieutenant Colonel Edward Wellems, commanding officer of the 2nd Bn 504th Parachute Infantry arrived at battalion headquarters about 2230 hours. He immediately instructed the adjutant, 1st Lt. Chester Garrison, to phone the company commanders for an immediate meeting. He then gave the S-3 an overlay and some French road maps. The overlay was very scanty, merely showing the proposed route of march to a general area in the vicinity of Bastogne. (9)

The Company commanders soon arrived. They were Capt. Robert Cellar of Hq & Hq Co., Capt. Adam A. Komosa of D Co., 1st Lt. William Sweet of F Co., and 1st Lt. John Thompson, executive officer of E Co. Capt. Felix Simon and 1st Lt. Ross I. Donnelly, the battalion surgeon and supply officer respectively, were also present. Capt. Herbert H. Norman, commanding officer of E Co., was on pass in Paris as were also 1st Lt. Ramsey, the 81 mm mortar platoon leader, and other key officers and non-commissioned officers. The battalion commander immediately acquainted us with the situation. Extracts of this meeting were as follows:

"The Germans have made a breakthrough in the Ardennes sector,

(8) Personal knowledge, self; (9) Personal knowledge, self.

near Bastogne. Some American units have already been overrun, particularly the 106th U. S. Infantry Division. We move out tomorrow at 0900 hours in 10 ton semi-trailers. Lt. Donnelly will issue K rations and ammunition tonight to the companies. One machine gun, half loaded, will be manned on the cab of each truck in case of enemy air attacks. Lt. Brown, from D Company, will be in charge of the battalion rear echelon. Each company will leave at least two men behind for the rear echelon. Kitchen personnel will also be left behind initially. All weapons that are in ordnance will be returned to us before we leave." (10)

Upon the completion of this meeting, the company commanders returned to their respective orderly rooms and started immediate preparations for the move the next morning. Equipment being left behind was packed and stored. K rations and ammunition were distributed to the men. All sections of the battalion staff packed and stored material not vital for the move. (11)

About 0100 hours 18 December, replacements came to the battalion direct from England. These replacements included men without combat experience plus former members of the unit who had been wounded during the Holland operations. It was not until 0230 hours 18 December that everyone finally went to bed for a few hours sleep, tired and somewhat concerned as to how serious the German counterattack was. (12)

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

Before going any further it is best that I describe the terrain with which this battalion was confronted during its course of operations in the Ardennes Mountains.

The Ardennes is a high plateau, varying from two hundred to three hundred meters in height, along whose crest are several iso-

(10) Personal knowledge, self; (11) Personal knowledge, self; (12) Personal knowledge, self.

lated domes of greater altitude. Aligned from southwest to northeast the plateau constitutes the oldest surface in Belgium, with streams flowing in wide open valleys having very little slope. The climate is fairly rigorous. The greatest amount of snow falls in the Ardennes where depths of twenty-seven inches have been recorded. (13)

The Ardennes stretch along the south of Namur and attain their culminating point southeast of Liege at Stavelot, where the height exceeds 2,000 feet. Nearly one-fifth of Belgium is covered with forest, the greater amount of which is located in the provinces of Namur and Luxembourg. (14)

Generally speaking, the Ardennes Mountains formed a rugged, broken, terrain, characterized by deep ravines, narrow valleys, and steep hills with numerous intervening streams and cross compartments. Consequently, the Ardennes afforded the Allies an excellent opportunity to canalize enemy armored attacks by use of cross compartment defenses, slow his attack down and finally eject him from the Ardennes salient. (15)

MARCH TO WERBOMONT *

At 0830 hours 18 December, the battalion was assembled and loaded into the huge semi-trailers. Approximately sixty men with all their personal equipment plus crew-served weapons were loaded into each truck. The 2nd Bn followed the 1st Bn serial with a five minute interval. The battalion commander and the S-3 led the battalion serial in a jeep. The route to be followed was from Sissone, Charlesville, Sedan, Recogne, Sprimont, and Bastogne -- a distance of one hundred and fifty miles. (16)

About 1900 hours the 2nd Bn motor serial came to a halt in the vicinity of Sprimont. The road ahead was crowded with vehicles, al-

(13) A-5, p. 351; (14) A-6, p. 457; (15) A-4, p. 9; Personal Knowledge, self; (16) Personal knowledge, self.

* See Map A

most bumper to bumper. We discovered that we were behind Division Artillery; somehow or other the artillery serial had managed to insert itself between the 1st Bn and the 2nd Bn. After waiting in the cold night for almost two hours in open vehicles, we finally moved on again. However, we discovered that instead of turning south towards Bastogne we were now headed towards Werbomont. The reason for this last minute change was that Lieut. General Hodges, Commanding General of the First U. S. Army, to whom the 82nd A/B Division was now attached, had ordered Major General Gavin of the 82nd A/B Division to take his division not to Bastogne but to Werbomont. The town of Werbomont contained an important road net to the North, South, East and West and the retention of this town would prevent the enemy from reaching Liege, which at that very moment the Germans seemed intent upon doing, having no opposition before them to prevent their advance. "Liege by Christmas!" was the slogan of the enemy, according to German prisoners of war whom we captured later on. (17)

WERBOMONT

Lt. Col. Wellems checked in at the Division C.P. and then reported to the regimental C.P. He had gone on ahead and had left the battalion in charge of the S-3, waiting at the release point behind another tie-up of vehicles. The Bn S-3 brought the battalion forward several minutes later and halted the serial at a road intersection where other units had been dismounting. It was now 2300 hours. Lt. Fust, the battalion S-2, who had preceded the battalion to Werbomont earlier that day, met us at the dismount point along with company guides. The battalion was given a sector to defend on the high ground about one-half mile northeast of the town. The battalion Command Post was located in a small wooden shack next to an ^{odorous?} odious pig pen and outhouse. By the time the companies were in position,

(17) A-2, Section II, p. 1, and personal knowledge, self.

it was long after midnight. (18)

On the following morning, 19 December, the battalion commander had a patrol from E Co. dispatched with instructions to contact American troops located somewhere to our front. Five hours later, the patrol returned and 2nd Lt. Simpson, the patrol leader, reported that he had contacted a battalion of the 119th Infantry Regiment, 30th U. S. Infantry Division some three miles to the east of Werbomont. The battalion commander of that unit had been overjoyed to learn that the 82nd A/B Division had now come up into the lines. He stated that the 106th Infantry Division and the 7th Armored Division were having a difficult task in warding off frequent German counter-attacks. The report from this patrol was immediately forwarded to regiment. That afternoon Capt. Norman, Lt. Ramsey, and the other members of the battalion who had been on pass in Paris, reported to the battalion. On that day also, German armor cut the road between Werbomont and Bastogne in the vicinity of Houffalize, just after the tail of the Division Armor column had cleared that town. (19)

RAHIER *

Immediately after dark on 19 December the regiment received orders to attack east of Werbomont and seize the town of Rahier. The regiment moved off in a column of battalions; each battalion in a column of companies and each company in a column of two's. The 2nd Bn was the advance guard. The order of march for the battalion was F Co., E Co., D Co., and Headquarters Co. F and E Companies each had a light machine gun^{Section} attached from Headquarters Company. The 2nd Bn was ordered to attack, seize and hold the town of Rahier. (20)

The battalion moved out on foot at 1900 hours 19 December. Except for a long six hour trek over some very hilly terrain, the march

(18) Personal knowledge, self; (19) A-2, Section II, p. 2, and personal knowledge self; (20) A-2, Section II, p. 2 and personal knowledge, self.

* See Map B

was uneventful. There were no enemy in Bahier. The battalion immediately prepared defensive positions to hold the town.

A perimeter defense was established with the companies disposed on the outskirts of town from right to left as follows: F Co., E Co., and D Co. The battalion C.P. was set-up in town and the 81 mm mortars were located on the west edge of the town. A platoon of Company G, 307th Engineer Combat Bn, was attached to us during this movement. Later on, this platoon under Lt. Womack was given a sector to defend on the left of D Co. The Bn S-3 obtained extra hand grenades when requested by Lt. Womack, but was unable to get him any automatic weapons. (21)

After we had arrived in Bahier, we questioned civilians about the location of enemy troops. The civilians reported that many enemy vehicles, about one hundred and twenty-five in number, including thirty tanks, had moved through the town that afternoon (19 December) on the way to Cheneux, located on the very high ground about two miles to the northeast of Bahier. (22)

This information was passed on to General Gavin by Colonel Tucker when the former visited the unit later that morning. General Gavin then ordered Colonel Tucker to seize Cheneux and the nearby bridge which crossed the L'Ambleve River. The reason for this order was that the heavy German armor was unable to cross the creek obstacle at Hablemont after engineers had blown up the bridge. The enemy, therefore, intended to use the main road through Stoumont and La Gleize. (23)

Therefore, a patrol from D Company led by Sgt. Venable made its way towards Cheneux. On the ridge about one-half mile west of the town, they fired on a German motorcyclist accompanied by a small

(21) Personal knowledge, self; (22) A-2, Section II, p. 2 and personal knowledge, self; (23) A-2, Section II, p. 2.

patrol. Sgt. Venable was wounded in the hip during the brief exchange of shots that followed. (24)

That afternoon about 1300 hours, 20 December, the 1st Bn began its march to seize the town of Cheneux and the nearby bridge. As the battalion, minus A Company, was leaving the outskirts of Rahier, a dark column from the vicinity of Cheneux suddenly appeared moving towards them. The 1st Bn engaged the enemy force which later turned out to be a reinforced battalion of the 1st SS Panzer Division. All during that day and night and through the morning of the 21st, the 1st Bn fought an enemy superior in numbers and in equipment but finally managed to seize its objectives. Approximately one-third of that battalion had become casualties and at least one-sixth of the casualties had been killed. It was a costly victory. The 1st Bn later received the Presidential Citation for this action. (25)

Meanwhile, the 2nd Bn maintained its defenses around Rahier. Nothing unusual happened except for one incident. Two jeeps carrying five "Americans" stopped at the regimental C.P. and engaged in a conversation with the regimental S-2. These men soon left for Cheneux where it was later reported that these "Americans" became excited and fled when one man from the 1st Bn accidentally pointed a bazooka at them. One was wounded, but escaped. These "Americans" were actually Germans and no doubt part of the enemy reconnaissance unit known as the "Einherit Stielan". (26)

CHENEUX *

On the afternoon of 22 December, the 2nd Bn was ordered to relieve the 1st Bn at Cheneux. On arriving in that town, we saw evidence of the bitter fight which had taken place. German dead and equipment laid strewn on the main road and adjacent fields. A dis-

(24) A-2, Section II, p. 3 and Statement by Sgt. Venable, June 1945;
(25) A-2, Section II, p. 3; Statement by Lt. Colonel Berry, Executive Officer 1st Bn 504th Precht Inf; Personal knowledge, self; (26) A-3.

abled self-propelled gun and tank were on the road. Some of the enemy dead were clad in American olive-drab shirts and wool-knit sweaters beneath their uniforms. The battalion took over the defenses of the town and bridge and waited for events to happen. Sounds of brisk fighting on our left flank could be heard, intermingled with tank gun fire. It was the 119th Infantry attacking the Germans in La Gleize with assistance from the 740th Tank Bn. (27)

Late that night enemy planes were overhead and we thought that parachutists were being dropped. It was later reported that the Germans were trying to resupply their troops in the vicinity of La Gleize, but most of the resupply bundles fell into American hands. (28)

LIERNEUX *

On the morning of the 23rd of December, the 2nd Bn was suddenly ordered to move out. The destination turned out to be the town of Lierneux, where we were attached to the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment commanded by Colonel Billingslea. The battalion was placed in Division reserve on the high ground some five thousand yards southwest of Lierneux. The 325th Glider Infantry C.P. was located in the town of Verleumont on the high ground southeast of Lierneux. This move was part of the division plan to hold the Lierneux ridge since it dominated the road nets at Regne, Fraiture and Hebronval. The battalion of the 325th Glider Regiment, which was originally in reserve, had been returned to its mother unit when Division orders had required the regiment to further extend its right flank to include Regne and Fraiture. This extension was necessitated by the failure of the third Armored Division on the right flank to maintain

(27) Personal knowledge, self; (28) A-3, and personal knowledge, self.

* See Map C

physical contact with the 82nd A/B Division. It was imperative for the airborne units, in keeping with orders from XVIII A/B Corps, that contact be made and maintained with American units in the Vietsalm-St. Vith area and provide an exit for their extrication. The forces in the Vietsalm-St. Vith area were the 7th Armored Division, the 106th U. S. Infantry Division (minus 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments), the 112th Regiment of the 28th U. S. Infantry Division, and some Corps artillery units. (29)

The 2nd Bn 504th Parachute Infantry immediately prepared and occupied defensive positions astride the Regne-Lierneux road. The battalion C.P. and aid stations were located in two adjacent houses about eight hundred yards to the rear. Shortly afterwards, the battalion commander and his S-3 went to the C.P. of the 325th Glider Regiment for instructions. While there we heard reports over the radio stating that 7th Armored Division tanks were still coming through the road blocks. (30)

That afternoon, 23 December, the enemy attacked and captured the town of Regne. The Division commander immediately ordered the recapture of that town, which was accomplished by the 325th Glider Regiment with the aid of supporting armor. During the recapture of Regne, the regimental adjutant of the 2nd SS Panzer Division was captured with orders for the advance of the following day. These orders were quickly relayed to higher headquarters. That same afternoon, the important crossroads at Fraiture were taken by the enemy. (31)

Just before dusk that afternoon, the 2nd Bn 504th Parachute Infantry was ordered to retake the crossroads at Fraiture. An artillery liaison officer from the 320th Glider Field Artillery Battalion came down to the C.P. but could not promise us any artillery support, except possibly from corps artillery. At this time all

(29) A-2, Section II, p. 3; (30) Personal knowledge, self; (31) A-2, Section II, p. 5-6.

Division Artillery was busily engaged along the 25,000 yard sector which was then being held by the Division. Thus, without artillery support and without armor, the battalion moved out at 1930 hours to recapture a terrain being held by an enemy superior in numbers and fire power. The only prior reconnaissance made was from a map. The outlook was very black indeed, and the battalion commander had accordingly designated his succession of command before we moved out. The march was made in silence. We had now turned off the main road and were now approaching the town of Fraiture itself. The battalion commander went into the town ahead of the battalion to obtain as much information as he could from the unit of the 325th Glider Infantry holding Fraiture. Suddenly Major Colville, the executive officer, received a radio message stating that the attack had been called off. The Battalion S-3 suggested that this message be authenticated before adopting any action whatsoever. This was done. The message was from the battalion commander announcing that the attack had definitely been cancelled. The entire battalion did an about-face and returned to Lierneux much happier. (32)

Late that night, the first of a series of long range patrols were sent to Malempre', four miles to our right, to keep the battalion informed of any possible enemy envelopment on that flank. (33)

The following day, 24 December, the 3rd Bn 504 Parachute Infantry Regiment, minus G Company, was placed in position on our right in the vicinity of the woods Bois Houby and Bois de Groumont. Germans attempting to infiltrate that sector were driven off after some bitter fighting. (34)

Late in the afternoon of 24 December, the 2nd was informed that the 82nd A/B Division had been ordered to withdraw to a new and shorter defensive position eight miles to the rear. Each unit was

(32) Personal experience, self; (33) Personal knowledge, self; (34) A-2, Section III, p. 3 and personal knowledge, self.

ordered to leave a covering force equivalent to one third the size of the unit. This covering force would remain in position until 0400 Hours 25 December and would then return by track to the new defense positions. Accordingly, one platoon from each rifle company was left behind with Lt. Fust, Battalion S-2, designated as covering force commander for our battalion. (35)

Just after dusk, 24 December, the battalion minus the covering force started its withdrawal. The battalion S-3 and executive officer were not informed of the location of the new defense positions nor were they informed of the route to be followed to the rear. Christmas Eve was a very cold, bright moonlight night. Along the route, we saw evidence of prepared demolitions and road obstacles executed by our engineers. For the most part, the withdrawal was accomplished without any difficulty, except in the sector to the north where the 505th and 508th parachute regiments were constantly being harassed by a very persistent foe. (36)

BRA *

At 0030 hours 25 December, the battalion arrived in the vicinity of Bra. The company commanders were then given definite instructions for the defense of the battalion sector and immediately made their ground reconnaissance and placed their troops in position. The positions occupied by the battalion were as follows: F Company on the right, contacting the 3rd Bn of our regiment; E Company in the center along the high wooded ground; and D Company minus the 1st Platoon on the left in the vicinity of Bergifaz, contacting the 3rd Bn 508th Parachute Infantry. The 81 mm mortars were set-up on the reverse slope of the hill behind E Company. The battalion C.P. was set-up in a house about four hundred yards in rear of F Company and the battalion aid station was located about one mile in the rear of

(35) A-2, Section III, p. 8 and personal knowledge, self; (36) A-2, Section II, p. 8 and personal knowledge, self.

the MLR in the vicinity of Trou de Bra. (37)

About 1000 hours 25 December, the regimental commander visited the battalion C.P. on his tour of inspection. The battalion commander was out at that time checking for battalion defensive system. He asked for, and was shown the disposition of the battalion defensive system. However, he noticed the village of Floret about one thousand yards to our front and astride the Bergifaz-Lierneux road and inquired as to what the battalion had done to outpost that town. When the battalion S-3 replied that nothing had been done as yet, Colonel Tucker instructed him to tell Lt. Colonel Welles to outpost that town immediately. (38)

Not long after Colonel Tucker had departed, Lt. Colonel Welles returned to the C.P. and the regimental commander's order was transmitted to him. The battalion commander then phoned D Company and told Captain Komosa to send the reserve platoon to outpost Floret. An additional SCR 300 was given to this outpost from Headquarters Company. (39)

At 1500 hours 25 December, the 1st Platoon of D Company, under the command of 2nd Lt. Harry W. Rollins, moved out to Floret. By dark, the platoon had erected two road blocks and had established wire communication to the road blocks and to the company C.P. Engineers assisted in laying anti-tank mines at the main road block across the Lierneux-Bergifaz road. This latter road block, designated as #1, was controlled by Sergeant Dunnagan and his squad. The other road block, designated #2, was controlled by Corporal Larison and his squad. The platoon C.P. was set-up in the town itself and the 60 mm mortar squad was set-up about two hundred yards away. (40)

At 0150 hours 26 December, road block #1 was hit by an enemy patrol which was driven off with casualties to the patrol. At 0330

(37) Personal knowledge, self; (38) Personal knowledge, self; (39) Personal knowledge, self; (40) Statement, Lt. Rollins, March 1947.

hours, road block #1 was again hit by a larger enemy force employing grenades and small arms fire. This enemy force was also driven off. At 0730 hours, enemy artillery fire was dropped into the area between road block #1 and the platoon C.P. Lt. Rollins accompanied by his runner, Pfc. West, and two communication men, T/5 Coffin and Pvt. Krantz, decided to visit Sgt. Dunnagan and also repair the broken telephone line. While out in that open field, a mortar round landed near the group, killing Pvt. Krantz and wounding T/5 Coffin. Lt. Rollins ordered Pfc. West to return to the company C.P. for litter bearers and litter bearers and then applied first aid to T/5 Coffin. Not long afterwards, the casualties were removed and Lt. Rollins returned to the C.P. (41)

At 1130 hours, Lt. Rollins received a call from Sgt. Dunnagan who stated that his squad was now being attacked by a strong enemy force employing grenades, rifle and automatic fire, and that his position was becoming untenable. The platoon leader ordered Sgt. Dunnagan to withdraw about twelve hundred yards and set-up another road block with the view of protecting the withdrawal of the remainder of the platoon later on. (42)

At 1430 hours, Lt. Rollins was called back to the company C.P. to give the company commander information on his new dispositions. Lt. Rollins returned to Floret an hour later and decided to visit Corporal Lanson's road block. Before he left the C.P. he ordered the platoon sergeant to be prepared to withdraw to Sergeant Dunnagan's new road block. On the way up, he met an excited man running towards him stating that road block #2 had been hit hard by an enemy force. On arriving at the positions that were to have been occupied by Corporal Larison's squad, he found the positions unoccupied. Lt.

(41) Statement, Lt. Rollins, March 1947; (42) Statement, Lt. Rollins, March 1947.

Rollins then informed the battalion C.P. on the SCR 300 of the situation and was ordered to withdraw and be sure that the radio did not fall into the hands of the enemy. By this time enemy small arms tracer fire was covering the main road through the town, so Lt. Rollins fired two rounds from his .45 calibre pistol into the SCR 300, putting it out of action. He and his runner made their way to the outskirts of Floret, passing by the 60 mm mortar position and noting that it had been knocked over as though someone tried to disable it in a hurry. Suddenly, as they turned around the corner of a building, they spied twelve Germans against the side of the building. Lt. Rollins quickly fired and emptied his pistol clip. He then ran, trying to reload his weapon. However, he did not get very far, because a sudden, loud explosion stunned him and knocked him to the ground, wounding him slightly in the arms and legs. Seconds later he found himself surrounded by Germans and was taken prisoner. (43)

The remainder of the battalion in the rear was feeling the effects of enemy artillery fire while the outpost at Floret was absorbing the initial shock of the enemy attack on the 26th of December. On that morning, the battalion commander very wisely ordered the executive officer and adjutant to set-up another C.P. in a wooded draw about eight hundred yards in the rear and approximate center of the MLR. The present C.P. was too exposed to enemy observation from the high ground one thousand yards to our front. Accordingly, most of the C.P. group, including the runners and message center, departed. The battalion commander, his S-3, S-2, radio operator, and the field artillery liaison party remained in the present C.P. Late that afternoon D Company reported that wire communication to its outpost was out. Shortly after that, a clouded radio message from

(43) Statement, Lt. Rollins, March 1947.

Lt. Rollins' platoon stated that the Germans were making an all out attack against their positions. Instructions were issued to withdraw and destroy the SCR 300 if necessary to prevent its capture by the enemy. (44)

The battalion was soon engaged in a bitter fight all along its sector. All companies reported that they were engaging the enemy who was attempting to cross the creek obstacle in front of our positions. At about dusk, the enemy attack waned and stopped. Casualties were received mainly in the sector defended by E and F Companies. Late that night, stragglers from the outpost in Floret drifted through E and F Companies. On checking with D Company, it was discovered that Lt. Rollins and fourteen other men were still unaccounted for. (45)

The following day an enemy flack wagon was destroyed on the road between Floret and Bergifaz by members of E Company. Occasional artillery and mortar fire fell on our positions, particularly in the E Company sector. Several casualties were caused by tree bursts. (46)

On the morning of 28 December, the regimental commander made another inspection tour and paid us a visit. After he left, the battalion S-3 ate his Christmas dinner which consisted of a small piece of cold turkey, supplemented with crackers and jelly obtained from the artillery liaison party, who always seemed to be well fed. About half an hour later, we noticed shells being dropped about two hundred yards from the C.P. Seconds later, the rounds came much closer, showering dirt against the window panes. The battalion commander immediately ordered everyone to move down to the cellar. Down in the cellar, we huddled, listening to the shells shattering the window panes and shades. Suddenly, a terrific noise was heard and a gaping hole in the cellar wall became visible. Some of the men were showered with debris. The battalion commander immediately ordered the

(44) (45) Personal knowledge, self; (46) A-2, Section III, p. 4 and personal knowledge, self.

artillery liaison officer to get some artillery fire on the enemy weapon which appeared to be a self-propelled gun. Orders were then issued to evacuate to the new C.P. located in the wooded draw. The battalion commander later told the S-3 that the gaping hole in the cellar wall had been caused by a dud from at least a 105 mm gun. The dud had rolled underneath the cellar stairway a few feet from where we had been gathered. (47)

The next few days were spent in relative peace, except for the occasional enemy artillery and mortar fire on the company positions and in the draw occupied by the battalion C.P. group. The only bright feature of the battalion S-3's stay at Bra was an invitation to dine with Captain Kamosa, D company commander, whose C.P. was the only one in the battalion that was located in a house; a C.P. that contained desirable livestock to supplement the daily K ration which we had been eating since the operation started. It was during this period also that Lt. Fust, our Bn S-2, was assigned to regiment as assistant regimental S-3. Consequently, in addition to his other duties, the Bn S-3 became Bn S-2 also. (48)

On the night of New Year's Day, 1 January 1945, while the battalion commander, his executive officer, and his S-3 were gathered in the C.P. dugout, an enemy rocket barrage struck the C.P. area. A combination white and red flash was visible as the blackout curtain was blown aside. Suddenly Lt. Garrison, the adjutant, staggered into the dugout bleeding from the mouth. Lt. Colonel Wellems immediately gave him a morphine injection. In the meantime, the radio operator who was also in the dugout, complained that his hand had been cut and also his back had been hit by some terrific force. Upon investigation it was discovered that the radio operator's back

(47) A-2, Section III, p. 5 and personal experience, self; (48) Personal knowledge, self.

had been hit by rock fragment and was merely bruised. The battalion S-3 assisted in the evacuation of Lt. Garrison shortly afterwards. (49)

On the 2nd of January, the battalion commander and his S-3 visited the 3d Bn C.P. for a meeting with some 3d Armored Division officers. It was learned that the Armored Division was to attack on 3 January through our positions in the direction of Floret and Lierneux. After giving what recommendations he could concerning the enemy dispositions and obstacles in his sector, the battalion commander and his S-3 left. Upon returning to the C.P., instructions were issued to all companies to stick to their foxholes when the attack commenced because the enemy would surely react quickly by sending in some heavy artillery fire. (50)

On the 3rd of January, Lt. Colonel Welles went to D Company C. P. to view the attack on Floret. The attack was launched, and true to form, the enemy retaliated by shelling our positions. However, the 3d Armored Division was making good progress and by that afternoon had cleared the enemy out of Floret and the surrounding area. (51)

Late that afternoon the battalion received word that it would be relieved by the 83rd U. S. Infantry Division that same night. We were relieved about 2100 hours and the battalion moved out. Again the battalion S-3 was not told where the unit was going. Snow had begun to fall and the temperature dropped close to zero. The march by foot was slow and tedious. It was after midnight when we arrived in the wooded high ground in the vicinity of Derriere le Thier, tired, hungry and cold. This was our assembly area and word was passed around that we would be moving out early the next morning. (52)

(49) Personal experience, self; (50) Personal knowledge, self; (51) Personal knowledge, self; (52) A-2, Section III, p. 1 and personal experience, self.

MONT *

The Second Battalion moved out at 0900 hours 4 January in a column of two's. The S-4 and his assistants passed out ammunition, K rations, and heat tablets as we passed by. The battalion marched for hours over ice-coated roads, uphill and downhill, stumbling and cursing as the individual pack became heavier. By late afternoon we arrived in the town of Fosse, which had been captured the day before by the 505th Parachute Infantry. The battalion commander reported to the regimental C.P. which was set-up in that town. The battalion commander received the regimental attack order which was to seize the high ground southeast of Fosse, overlooking the crossings of the Salm River in the vicinity of Grand Halleux. (53)

After receiving his attack order, Lt. Colonel Wellens issued his orders to his company commanders who had been assembled by the S-3. The battalion was to advance approximately four miles through dense woods, void of any good roads except a few trails and fire-breaks covered by waist-high snow. The formation for this advance was D, F, E, and Headquarters Companies, with a platoon of tank destroyers attached to D Company. One IMG section was attached to both D and F Companies. One platoon of 57 mm towed AT guns was attached to the battalion. (54)

The battalion commander led the way originally, attempting to find the trail leading to his objective. He finally discovered one trail and the unit progressed for at least three hundred yards and then stopped. While the battalion commander was checking his map along with his compass, a mortar round landed next to the lead tank destroyers, killing one man and wounding the platoon leader of the advance party and the field artillery liaison officer. The batta-

(53) A-2, Section III, p. 1 and personal experience, self; (54) Personal experience, self.

* See Map D

lion commander then dispatched Lt. McCash of F Co. to take a patrol and reconnoiter another trail which he had just discovered. By this time it had become dusk and the cold air began to penetrate our clothing. Lt. McCash finally returned with the good news that it was the right trail. The battalion, after slight confusion, was turned around and proceeded along the trail. The trail was narrow and traversed with frequent streams. The attached tank destroyers and 57 mm AT guns could not advance and consequently were left behind. During the next seven hours the battalion trudged along in deep, knee-high snow. The weather had suddenly turned very cold and the wet, stiff web equipment stuck to one's outer garments. The battalion commander made frequent but short halts to check his route of march by compass. The battalion had now been marching for fifteen hours from the time it left the assembly area that morning, but not once did we have an opportunity to stop for any length of time to even eat a K ration. (55)

At 0100 hours 5 January, the battalion arrived at what we thought was the objective. It was a black, dreary, wooded area void of everything but snow and one or two firebreaks. D Company was placed into position on the left flank and set-up a roadblock across the trail which was the boundary between the Second and Third Battalions. F Company was on the right flank, and it too set-up a roadblock. E Company was put in reserve approximately two hundred yards from where the battalion C.P. was established. Since it was still dark, positions for the 81 mm mortars were not set-up. The battalion aid station was located in the town of Fosse, the only place where there were houses. Our bed rolls did not come up that night and the men did not obtain any sleep. Everyone was completely exhausted by hunger and by the sixteen hour march in intense cold over deep snow and

(55) Personal experience, self.

ice-glazed trails. The situation was so bad that the men could not lie down on the cold snow for fear of freezing to death, nor could they move about too long to provide body circulation because of their exhausted condition. Fires were not possible because of the close proximity of the enemy. (56)

About 0300 hours, six mortar rounds dropped into the area occupied by D Company. Soon a phone call from Capt. Komosa was received requesting several litters immediately. The mortar rounds had landed among his C.P. group. Unfortunately, no litters were on hand, nor were there any members of the battalion aid station present either. It certainly was a sad state of affairs. Half an hour later, the wounded men from D Company stopped at the battalion C.P. on the way to the rear. Captain Komosa's runner had been seriously wounded in the head and was being carried on a makeshift litter formed by tree limbs and an overcoat. S/Sgt. Parks, the supply sergeant; Sgt. Kimball, the communication sergeant; T/4 Starbuck, the SCR 300 radio operator; and a first-aid man had all been wounded. The battalion S-3, immediately obtained some men from the 81 mm mortar platoon to assist the wounded men back to the rear. (57)

As day broke on 5 January, all company positions were moved forward at least six hundred yards when it was discovered that the 3d Bn on our left was unable to make contact with us because we were too far behind. That same morning approximately sixty-five men from the battalion had to be sent to the rear because of trench foot. Later still, Lt. Colonel Williams, the regimental executive officer, visited the battalion C.P. and wanted to know why the 81 mm mortars had not been set-up in position. He stated that German troops, consisting mainly of horse drawn artillery, were reported to be leaving the town of Mont, some two thousand yards away. Lt. Colonel Williams

(56) (57) Personal experience, self.

wanted something done about that situation immediately. Accordingly, the 81 mm mortars were set-up approximately thirty yards from the battalion C.P. and began firing as soon as their observers were in position near D Company's observation post. After several minutes of firing and when no further lucrative targets had appeared, the mortars were displaced forward. Nothing exciting happened the remainder of that day. (58)

The next three days, 6-8 January, were spent in consolidating our positions and sending patrols out to the vicinity of Mont. (59)

About 2200 hours 8th January, the battalion commander was suddenly summoned to the regimental C.P. for a meeting. He returned about midnight and had the company commanders assembled for a meeting. Crowded into the C.P., which consisted mainly of the battalion commander's dugout with a field phone inside, we heard the attack order which was as follows: The regiment was to attack at dawn 9 January and seize the town of Mont and the west bank of the Salm River in its sector. The Third and First Battalions were to attack in their zone of action, in a pincers movement, while the 2nd Bn would make a secondary attack from the front, using only two platoons. Lt. Dreuner's platoon from D Company and Lt. Harris' platoon from F Company would make the assault. The meeting then broke up at 0130 hrs. 9th January. (60)

Dawn broke and the attack was soon under way. About 0930 hours, D Company reported that Lt. Dreuner's platoon had seized Mont ahead of the Third Battalion. Under the aggressive action and leadership of this platoon leader, the platoon had covered approximately two thousand yards of wooded and open terrain, bypassing and destroying enemy outposts in their advance until they had seized the regimental objective. The platoon, however, sustained several casualties. (61)

(58) (59) (60) Personal knowledge, self; (61) A-3, and personal knowledge, self.

The attack being conducted by Lt. Harris' platoon was not going too well. This platoon had taken the small town of Farnieres, but when it commenced its advance beyond that town over exposed rolling terrain, the platoon was subjected to machine gun and small arms fire. Lt. Harris was killed almost immediately and two or three of his men were killed when they attempted to recover his body. Lt. Middleton of F Company, not being a participant in the attack, observed the difficulty which that platoon was having and immediately set out to locate the hidden enemy machine gun. He fired several rifle grenades and put that machine gun out of action. The 1st Bn later assisted F Company's advance by dispatching some men to destroy some enemy outposts. (62)

Lt. Sachse, platoon leader of the Third Platoon of D Company, was sent to relieve Lt. Dreaner in Mont. (63)

The following day, 10 January, the battalion S-3 was ordered by the battalion commander to personally carry a message to Lt. Sachse, requiring him to cover the open terrain between Mont and our positions in the woods as a further check against any possible enemy groups still remaining there. The message was carried by foot and transmitted to Lt. Sachse. He was given three tank destroyers from the 3d Bn; after seeing that Lt. Sachse was well on his way, the battalion S-3 returned to the C.P. on foot exhausted. (64)

Late that night units of the 75th U. S. Infantry Division relieved our battalion and the unit was sent to the rear for a much needed rest. (65)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

From a study of the operations just described, no one can be

(62) A-3; Personal knowledge, self; Statement by Lt. Middleton, January 1945; (63) Personal knowledge, self; (64) Personal knowledge, self; (65) A-2, Section III, p. 3; A-3; Personal experience, self.

oblivious to the many problems and difficulties encountered by an airborne unit engaged in a continuous infantry role during a winter campaign in the midst of mountains without adequate equipment, clothing, and hot food. Despite all these obstacles, however, this battalion, as a cog of a fighting machine, contributed greatly to the missions assigned the division; mainly, to aid in the extrication of American units in the St. Vith area, to contain the enemy by repelling his tenacious attacks, and finally to grasp the initiative out of his hands and drive him back.

Departing from the generalized discussion contained in the previous paragraph, let us glance into the microscope and focus our attention on the minute but important criticisms of these operations.

1st: The lack of sufficient and suitable transportation provided undue hardship on the men. Men were required to walk ten or even fifteen hours preceding an attack, burdened with equipment and crew-served weapons. As a result, the men were in no physical condition or in a state of high morale to press forward any attack with much enthusiasm.

2nd: The familiar phrase of "feed the troops a hot meal" was unheard of during these operations. A human being subsisting on K rations continually without any hot nourishment is apt to lose his combat efficiency and succumb during the cold weather.

3d: The neglect of the battalion commander to continually acquaint members of his staff with the current situation was obviously evident. During the moves from Lierneux to Bra and Bra to Mont, the battalion S-3 was never made acquainted with the situation. Had any accident befallen the battalion commander, the battalion as a whole would have suffered because the staff members were ignorant of the situation.

4th: The evacuation of casualties was slow and inefficient, particularly when litters were unavailable for the wounded from D Company and the latter had to walk or be carried back by hand at least two miles. Had our unit been issued weasels initially, our supply and evacuation difficulties would have been solved.

5th: The mission assigned the Second Battalion to seize the crossroads at Fraiture on the night of 23rd December would have been a disaster to the unit had the mission not been called off at the last moment. In this incident, a night attack was to have been made without artillery support and with no time to make even a ground reconnaissance against a stronger enemy force equipped with armor.

6th: The lack of litter bearer teams in an airborne unit was also felt when 81 mm mortar men were employed to carry wounded to the aid station.

7th: The number of engineers to perform the many tasks assigned them during the withdrawal and in the defense at Bra was obviously insufficient. Had there been at least one additional engineer company available for road maintenance, sufficient engineers would then have been available to erect wire and minefields before the Germans hit our defenses at Bra. As it was, the engineers had to erect minefields in the battalion sector in piecemeal fashion over a period of three nights because the battalion was in contact with the enemy.

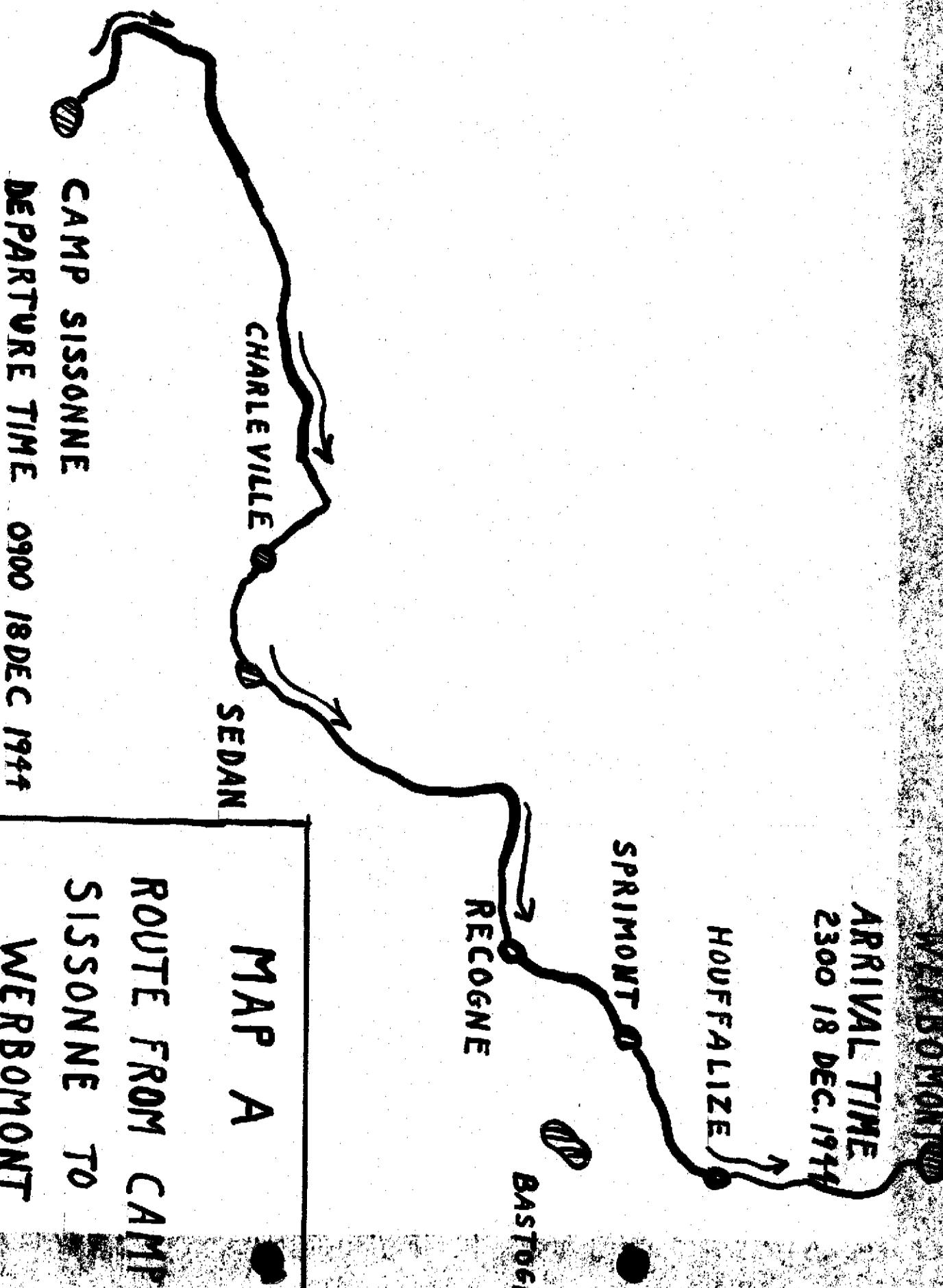
8th: One individual should not be both battalion S-3 and S-2 in any unit, particularly during combat operations. A combination of these two duties results in inefficiency of carrying out each assignment.

9th: Leaving the battalion S-2 as covering force commander during the withdrawal from Lierneux prevented his usefulness to the unit back at Bra where he might have better been employed in evaluating the terrain in front of our positions.

LESSONS

The lessons derived from a study of these operations are enumerated as follows:

1. In a defensive situation involving mountainous terrain, a cross compartment defense is the best.
2. An outpost line of resistance must maintain contact with similar lines of resistance of adjacent units in order to accomplish its mission properly with regard to the safety of its members.
3. A night withdrawal is difficult, but when properly executed with trained personnel, a unit can disengage itself from battle with few casualties.
4. An airborne unit cannot operate efficiently for any great length of time in an infantry role unless it is given the additional transportation and equipment necessary for sustained ground combat.
5. In mountain warfare under extreme weather conditions, supply and evacuation problems become more difficult.
6. In a night attack, proper daylight reconnaissance must be made in advance, and sufficient time should be allowed for all personnel to become acquainted with his task.
7. Canalization of possible enemy armored attacks are mandatory for a well prepared defensive position.
8. A combination of two or more staff assignments to one individual lessens his efficiency in either capacity.
9. A unit commander must acquaint his staff members at all times with the current situation.
10. The individual soldier can not fight efficiently for any great length of time during extreme winter conditions when subsisting merely on cold rations.
11. Finally, that although modern equipment and tactics are important in warfare, the fighting spirit and determination of individuals are most essential and instrumental in winning the battle.

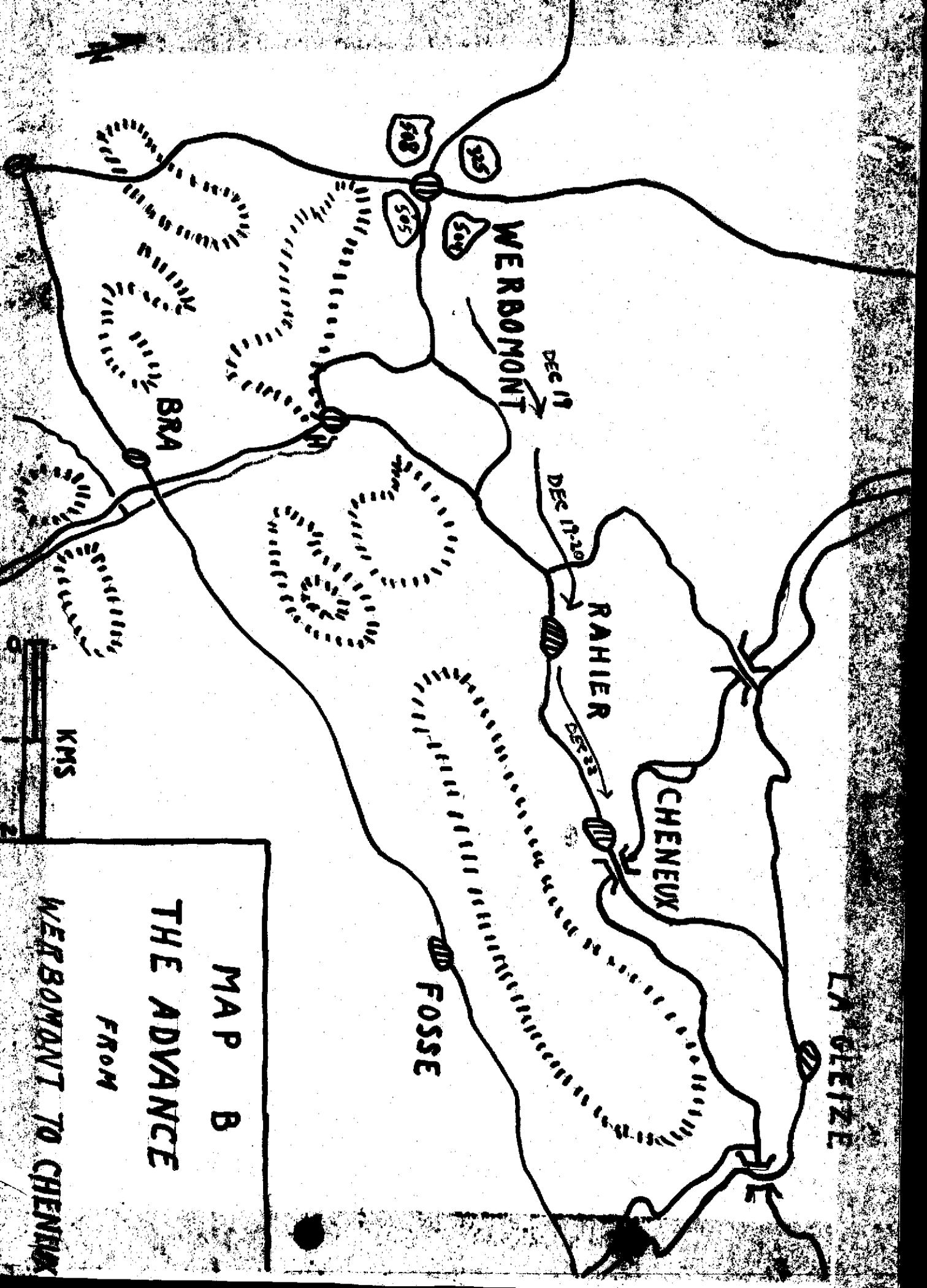


CAMP SISSONNE
DEPARTURE TIME 0900 18 DEC 1944

ARRIVAL TIME
2300 18 DEC. 1944

MAP A
ROUTE FROM CAMP
SISSONNE TO
WERBOMONT

SKETCH



MAP B
THE ADVANCE
FROM

WERBOMONT TO CHENIEUX

LA GLEIZE

WERBOMONT

BRA

RAHIER

CHENIEUX

FOSSE

DEC 17

DEC 17.30

508

509

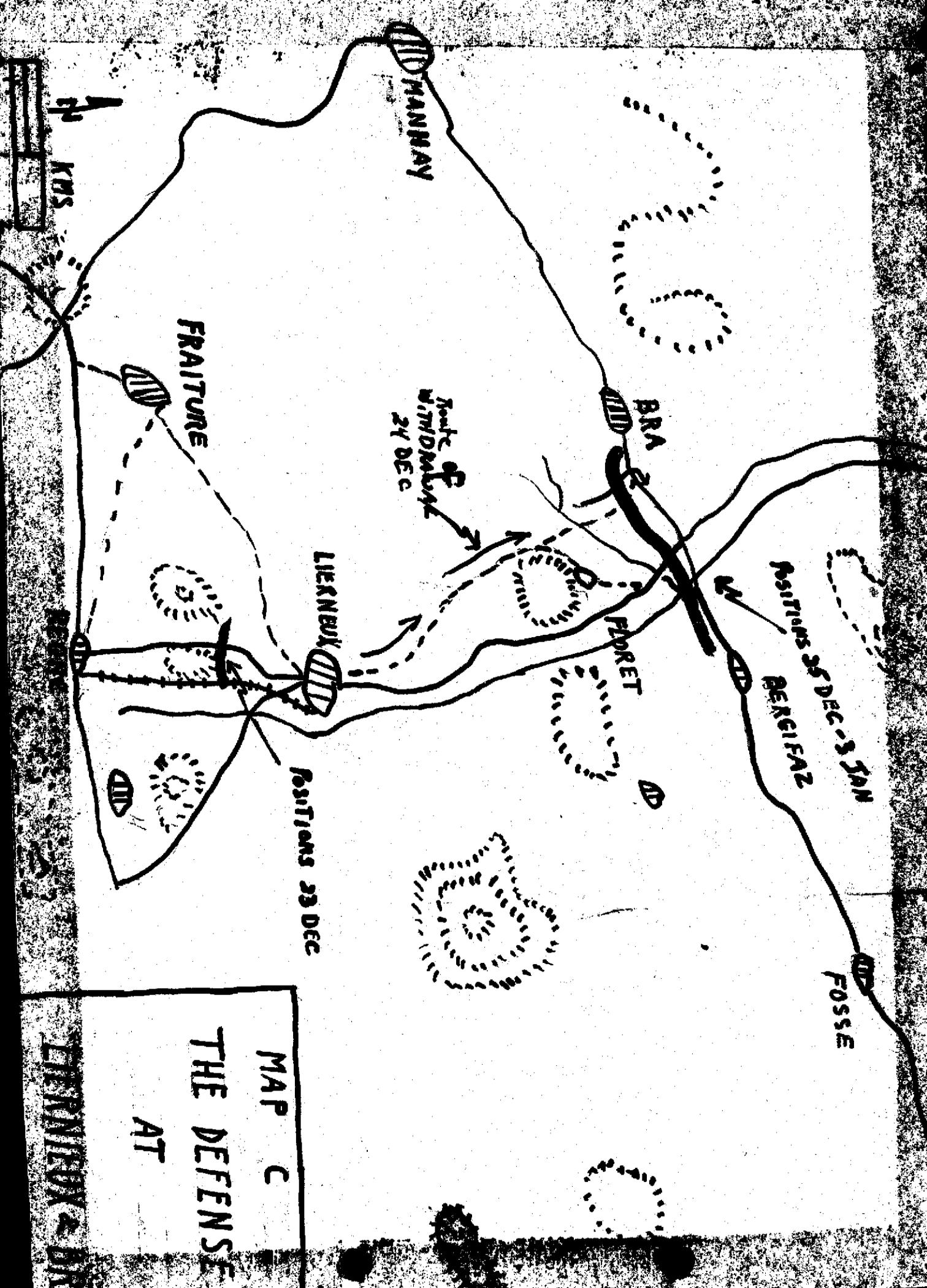
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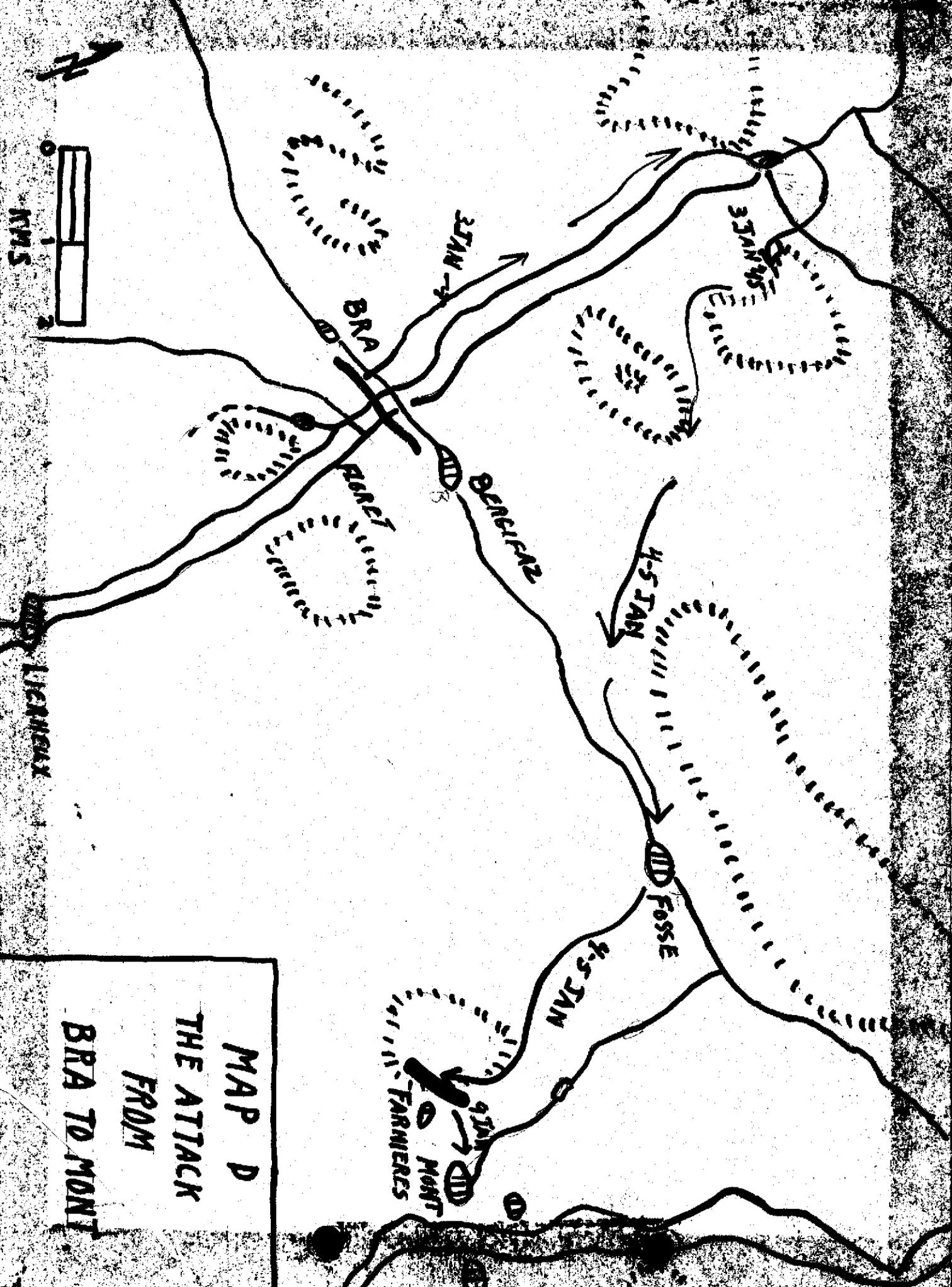
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MAP C
 THE DEFENSE
 AT

LIERNEUX - BR



MAP D
 THE ATTACK
 FROM
 BRA TO MONT