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THE OPERATIONS OF A TASK FORCE OF COMBAT COMMAND "B"
4th ARMORED DIVISION, AT BAERENDORF, SAAR VALLEY,
FRANCE, 23 - 24 NOVEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of Task Force Commander)

Type of Operation Described: ARMORED TASK FORCE IN THE ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph deals with the operations of a Task Force of Combat Command "B", 4th Armored Division, XII Corps, Third United States Army, 23-24 November, 1944, in the capture of Baerendorf, Saar Valley, France. As a prelude to the operation referred to above a short resumé of operations and the general situation on the Third Army front during and prior to the month of November is essential to properly orient the reader.

With the closing of Summer the Third Army's headlong advance across France ended abruptly owing to lack of supplies, (1) and as of the 25th of September the Army had gone on the defensive. (Map A) (2) During the period from the 25th of September to the 8th of November the entire Third Army, for the first time in World War II, dug in and remained in a purely defensive status, and were restrained to limited objective attacks to improve minor positions. (3) The Army was fighting with inadequate means against equal or superior enemy forces in excellent defensive positions. (4) In addition, the seasonal rains had commenced about the 25th of September and had continued unceasingly since that date. Rivers, streams and canals were in flood stage. All but the best roads were quagmires, and fields and meadows were impassable to any but full-track vehicles and, in many instances, on low ground impassable even to tanks. (5)

During the interim 21st of October to 8th of November, intensive preparations were made by the Third Army preparatory to the renewal of the offensive. (6) At the same time, the respite offered the Germans was an interval in which their genius for organization and improvisation was utilized to the fullest extent. Regrouping, refitting and strengthening, their passive delaying defense passed to an aggressive defense, with counter-attacks increasing in size and scope. (7)

(1) A-7, p. 188, 192, 196; (2) A-7, p. 196, A-8, p. 87; (3) A-3, p. 84; A-6; (4) A-1, p. 139, A-10 p. 54; (5) A-1, p. 138, A-4, p. 45, A-7, p. 246, A-8, p. 97; (6) A-3, p. 196, A-7, p. 242; (7) A-3, p. 109, A-8, p. 127, 129, A-9, p. 15; A-10

Warning orders had been issued to all units of the Third Army and preparations were completed for the resumption of the offensive on the 5th of November, an offensive designed to dash the enemy's hopes for a winter breathing spell in which he could rest and refit and thus face the Spring with renewed confidence. (8) At a conference a few days prior to this date, held at the Command Post of the 4th Armored Division, General George S. Patton had talked informally with certain members of the Division of this coming offensive, and had given as the ultimate objective of the Third Army the smashing of the German Army to its front; the reduction of the Fortress Metz; the breaching of the Siegfried Line, and the reaching of the Rhine River. (9) The General had discussed the enemy in his peculiarly distinctive and forceful style and predicted that this imminent test would be the last battle of the war in Europe, as his Third Army would utterly smash the Germans and end the conflict. He exuded confidence and imbued these officers present with a feeling of immediate and spectacular success. (10)

As an illustration of General Patton's confidence, in a personal statement to the writer, who had been designated the Advance Guard Commander of Combat Command "B", 4th Armored Division, he mentioned that the 11th of November had always been his lucky day and consequently requested the reaching of the Siegfried Line as his primary objective as of that date, his birthday, as a birthday present. (11)

The 4th Armored Division, at the time this narrative opens, was considered a seasoned organization, having participated in the Normandy campaign, the St. Lo breakthrough, the pursuit through Brittany and across France. It had particularly distinguished itself during the aforementioned defensive phase in a series of savage tank battles against numerically superior German Panzer forces, in which a total of 281 German tanks were destroyed in three

(8) A-3, p. 126; (9) A-2, 162-5-6, A-7, p. 250, A-8, p. 116; (10) A-1, p. 162, Personal Knowledge; (11) Personal knowledge

weeks of combat between the 21st of September and the 7th of October, defeating the massed efforts of the 11th Panzer Division, 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, the 111th and 113th Panzer Brigades, to break through its defensive position at Arracourt. (12) At the conclusion of the tremendous tank battles, and after 87 days of continuous combat, the Division was relieved by the 26th Infantry Division on the 12th of October and went into XII Corps Reserve. (13)

GENERAL AND CORPS SITUATION

The disposition of the units of the Third Army and XII Corps as of the 8th of November are as shown on Map B. The line had not changed materially since the 21st of September. The XII Corps, comprising the 26th, 35th and 80th Infantry Divisions, the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions and the 2nd Cavalry Group, was to jump off first with the mission of clearing the southern portion of the Saar Valley and, in conjunction with XI Corps, to advance northeast and establish a bridgehead over the Rhine River. (14)

All preparations were completed and the troops keyed to a resumption of the offensive. A large air strike by the 8th Air Force on the immediate front of the 80th Infantry Division was scheduled at daylight of the 5th of November, just prior to the attack. (15) Due to the inclement weather, however, the attack was postponed until the 8th, but the bombers, 500 mediums, came in on the late afternoon of the 5th, flying through low over-hanging clouds and proceeded to execute as much of their mission as possible through rain and fog, dumping the remainder of their loads deep in Germany. (16)

At daylight, 0600 hours the 8th of November, XII Corps of the Third Army, three Infantry Divisions abreast, jumped off supported by 700 guns. (17)

DIVISION SITUATION

At 0505 hours the 9th of November, preceded by a thunderous artillery concentration of thirty-three battalions, the two Combat Commands, Combat

(12) A-2, p. 90, A-4, p. 40, A-7, p. 210, A-8, p. 91; (13) A-4, p. 44, A-5 p. 8; (14) A-1, p. 153, 154, A-7, p. 246; (15) A-1, p. 164, 162, A-3, p. 127; (16) A-1, p. 162, A-2, p. 165; (17) A-1, p. 166

and Combat Command "B", 4th Armored Division, passed through the 35th and 26th Infantry Divisions respectively, Combat Command "B" on the north in two columns near Fontenoy and Combat Command "A" on the south in the vicinity of Harracourt near Morhange. Both advanced slowly against heavy resistance. (19) (Map B)

Both Combat Command "A" on the south and Combat Command "B" on the north inched ahead. All along the line the Germans fought bitterly, tenaciously and savagely with massed artillery and armor contesting the way. Mines littered the roads and fields; obstacles, tank ditches, trenches and fixed positions were encountered by the score, and the rain continued. The armor was at times completely road-bound, and the highways were mined and covered by fire from well emplaced and dug-in 75mms and 88mms. (20) As an instance of the type of opposition encountered, on the 13th of November, in the vicinity of Marthille on one hill alone, twenty-one anti-tank guns (10 88mms and 11 high velocity 75mms) were knocked out in thirty minutes by Combat Command "B", (21) while Combat Command "A" on the road from Conthil to Rodalbe lost six tanks in as many minutes to intense artillery and anti-tank fire. A few days later on the outskirts of Rodalbe more than 900 mines were cleared by the Division Engineers. (22) (Map C)

After a week of slow but steady advance, on the 15th of November, XII Corps stopped for one day to regroup. (23) The attack was resumed on the 16th and by the 20th Dieuze had been taken by the 26th Infantry Division and elements of Combat Command "A", 4th Armored Division. (24) With the capture of this town, Combat Command "B" was ordered to break contact on the north at Torcheville, to retrace its steps, move east through Dieuze, Mittersheim and Fenetrang and seize crossings over the Saar River. (25) (Map C)

The bridge at Fenetrang was blown and the river unfordable. (26) Reconnaissance elements attached to the Advance Guard ranged the river north

(19) A-14, A-4, p. 46, A-7, p. 252; (20) A-3, p. 190, A-8, p. 126; (21) A-4, p. 47; (22) A-4, p. 46, 50; (23) A-4, p. 50; (24) A-3, p. 136, A-4, p. 50; (25) A-4, p. 50, A-7, p. 262, A-8, p. 132; (26) A-4, p. 54

and south of Fenetrange and at Gosselming discovered a bridge intact. Lieutenant John Keenan, Platoon Leader, C Troop, 25th Cavalry Mechanized, and his Platoon rushed the bridge, overwhelmed the guards, and secured the crossing for the Advance Guard of Combat Command "B". The demolition crew of Germans, charged with the responsibility for blowing the bridge, were surprised and captured while having coffee in a nearby café, totally oblivious to the advent of the Americans. (27)

COMBAT COMMAND "B" SITUATION

Immediately on reaching the Saar River, Combat Command "B" was again divided into two separate Task Forces. The Advance Guard, with some few additions, was designated the East Task Force, and was composed as follows:

53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, minus
C Company, 8th Tank Battalion
C Company, 166th Engineer Battalion Combat
1st Platoon, C Troop, 25th Cavalry Mechanized
Assault Gun Platoon, 25th Cavalry Mechanized
253rd Armored Field Artillery Battalion

The East column was under the immediate command of the author, the Executive Officer of the 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, and under the overall command of Lieutenant Colonel George Jaques (later Colonel), Commanding Officer, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion.

The West column was composed as follows:

8th Tank Battalion, minus
C Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion
B Company, 166th Engineer Battalion Combat
2nd Platoon, C Troop, 25th Cavalry Mechanized
22nd Armored Field Artillery Battalion

This column was under the command of Major Thomas Churchill, Commanding Officer, 8th Tank Battalion. (28)

The mission of these two columns was to proceed north along adjacent parallel routes and push ahead aggressively with the town of Bitch on the Siegfried Line as the ultimate objective. (29)

A brief explanation is interjected at this point to explain the compo-

(27) A-4, p. 55; ((28 29) Personal knowledge

sition and use of Task Forces in the 4th Armored Division, a composite organization which became prevalent in the majority of armored units as the war progressed.

Experience had demonstrated that a battalion commander was severely handicapped in his ability to exercise the necessary control due to the type of operations engaged in by armor, including depth and width of frontage, and the instantaneous, on-the-spot decisions required. Furthermore, the tank-infantry team in an armored division was an integrated, cohesive unit, welded together over a long period of time, wherein each tank company and armored infantry company habitually worked together. Thus on occasions a tank or armored infantry battalion might have as many as six or more companies under its command; for example, three tank and three armored infantry, in addition to organic heavy weapons and administrative support. As a consequence, in order to improve control and to exercise immediate supervision and command over these tank-infantry teams, a staff officer from one of the battalions, either tank or armored infantry, was generally designated as the commander and actually directed the operation under the overall supervision of the senior battalion commander. At times an additional battalion staff officer was assigned to assist the Task Force commander. In following months, as the war opened up and the exploitation phase began, a battalion might have a whole series of minor Task Forces each under command of a staff officer.

TASK FORCE SITUATION (EAST TASK FORCE)

Advancing from Geseelzing without opposition (30) contact was made with a flank screen of the 71st Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Division, Seventh United States Army, at Kirrberg at approximately 1200 hours 24 November. This screen was out of contact with the enemy and was defending and patrolling ^{the} east. (31)

(30) A-6, p. 95; A-7, p. 262; (31) A-6, p. 95, Personal knowledge

Passing through Kirrberg, the long armored column moved slowly down the winding road, rain beating down fitfully in sudden squalls. Low scudding clouds raced across the bleak sky, skirting and enveloping the low, wood-crested foothills. The monotony of the late autumnal landscape was broken only by the shiny, rain-glistened sides of the tanks, half-tracks and assault guns as they rumbled forward. (32)

G-2 intelligence reports indicated elements of the 25th Panzer Division and 130th Panzer Lehr Division hastening to intercept the advance of the 4th Armored Division and elementary calculations pointed to their interception in the not too distant future. (33)

The artillery liaison pilot, spotting ahead of the column, had just reported to the Task Force Commander that the weather was closing in and forcing him to land. (34) In one final sweep over a large hill, approximately a mile to the northeast, the pilot suddenly burst on the air to report excitedly approximately 25 to 30 tanks moving west; that they were definitely hostile, Mark Vs as nearly as he could judge, and that further observation was impossible as the weather precluded his staying up any longer. (35)

As this alarming bit of news was being digested, a burst of machine gun fire sounded from the head of the column, then the sharp bark of the M8 assault guns reinforcing the Cavalry Reconnaissance Platoon. The column halted and pulled over to the side of the road, jammed up almost bumper to bumper. The Task Force Commander worked his peep up the column until he reached Lieutenant John Keenan, Cavalry Reconnaissance Platoon Leader. Lieutenant Keenan reported that he had spotted a few German tanks which had promptly withdrawn into the village to the immediate front; that he had also seen a few individual soldiers, and that his assault guns were firing into the town more or less on general principles. (36) (Map D)

(32) Personal knowledge; (33) A-11, G2c; (34, 35) A-11, G2c, Personal knowledge; (36) Statement by Lieutenant John Keenan to author November 23, 1944

The Task Force Commander then proceeded to analyze and estimate the situation. The time was 1400 hours. His column was on a high ridge-line from which the road dropped sharply down into a flat plain. In the center of the plain ran a swollen stream, crossed by a single bridge, and at the far end of the plain lay a small village. To the rear of the village, due north, rose a high hill which overlooked and gave perfect observation to anything that happened in the valley below. To the front and to the east of the village rose an even larger hill which dominated not only the town and the valley, but also all approaches to the town and valley. (37) (Map D)

TASK FORCE PLAN OF ATTACK

The problem presented itself as follows: The column had to advance; to continue the advance, the town had to be taken; to take the town, hold it, and then continue the attack, the nearest and highest hill southeast of the town had to be captured, first.

The decision was quickly made and the attack order given: A Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, to move up the road, dismount, cross the stream and occupy the high ground southeast of the town; B Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, to dismount, seize the bridge ⁽²¹⁾ for the tanks and deploy in the valley preparatory to assault on the town; C Company, 8th Tank Battalion, to follow B Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, advance over the bridge, deploy in front of the town preparatory to assaulting it in concert with B Company; Cavalry Reconnaissance platoon to move to the west and screen that flank; mortars and assault guns to fire smoke and HE on the outskirts of the town and to keep smoking until deployment on the plain was accomplished; artillery to fire on call of the Forward Observers with companies and to lay a TOT (time on target) on the town as the assault began. (38)

Simple orders: The beginning of a nightmare. As B Company and the tanks moved out a German Forward Observer got on the job. Close upon the shrill

(37 38) Personal knowledge

shriek of an 88mm appeared the black powder charge of a high-time burst, and adjustment techniques for range and deflection. Another high-time burst exploded and then a murderous fire swept the road. Interspersed with the unmistakable alarm of the 88mm was the heavier whine and clump of medium artillery, plus the terrible crump of the 120mm mortar. Two half-tracks of B Company were hit, one of which began to burn with a thick, scalding black smoke, serving to further orient the German artillery as to the column's position. (39) To the Task Force Commander, huddled behind his jeep in a rain-filled ditch, the action portended more than was at first apparent. So much supporting fire hinted at least a reinforced battalion, and the concentration of 25 to 30 German tanks was, to say the least, disquieting.

At this moment heavy and sustained firing was heard to the west. Switching to the radio channel of Task Force Churchill it was ascertained that the West Task Force had succeeded in attracting the enemy tanks to itself, and at the moment was heavily engaged. (40)

Down the road the tanks of the East Task Force could be seen moving out to the bridge, while the armored infantry was already across and lying in the water-filled ditches, either side of the road. A jeep behind the first tank suddenly disappeared in a blinding, yellow flash - a direct hit. The lead tank, Captain MacClannery's (C Company Commander, 6th Tank Battalion) rumbled over the bridge safely. Fifty yards behind, the second tank was seen to shiver and clouds of smoke billowed out: a miss. The remainder of the tanks hesitated momentarily until the voice of their Captain was heard on the radio telling them in unmistakably forceful language to move up and cover him. Another tank lumbered up, by-passing on the shoulder of the road the disabled tank, a brave thing to do, and moved forward safely. Another and another, and shortly all were across without further mishap. (41)

As the tanks spread out on the plain before the town, the infantry moved

(39 40 41) Personal knowledge

into position to their rear, a platoon of infantry teamed up with a platoon of tanks. Off to the right A Company was now fording the stream. They were under desultory artillery and mortar fire, a human chain in the water, laden down with heavy clothes and equipment, and pulling each other across in ice-cold water up to their necks. (42)

The Task Force Commander decided to move further forward along the road with a section of the Reconnaissance Platoon of Headquarters Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, as local protection and messengers. An alert enemy Forward Observer spotted the Command group. A whine rose to a screaming crescendo, then came a slam. The air was filled with the bitter ruck of cordite. Lying in the ditch, where the first shell knocked him, the Task Force Commander watched additional salvos burst in the midst of the Reconnaissance Platoon. He saw a soldier struggle to his hands and knees with the bewildered look of the badly wounded and try to crawl out of the fire. The shelling lifted and searched on up the road. What remained of a badly shaken Reconnaissance Platoon and the Task Force Commander continued forward. (43)

The assault on the town was predicated on A Company's taking its objective and was to begin immediately on the culmination of this operation. The Task Force Commander watched A Company, a slow bedraggled column, straggling up the hill. Suddenly, it was seen to stop, run rapidly to its left, or north flank, and form a line of skirmishers. The crest of the hill suddenly erupted with puffs of black smoke. The Forward Observer had called for time fire by the entire Artillery Battalion. Three volleys crashed on the hill and then the line of skirmishers commenced rearing quickly forward following their own marching fire. The crackle of heavy rifle fire floated down. In a few minutes only occasional desultory shots were heard, and then complete silence. (44)

(42 43 44) Personal knowledge

The Task Force Commander tried again and again to raise A Company to no avail. From where he was standing, however, it was apparent that the hill had to be taken. About ten minutes later two wet and miserably cold individuals, Captain Frank Kutak and Lieutenant Joseph Underwood (now Captain), A Company Commander and 1st Platoon Leader respectively, reported to the Task Force Commander at his one-quarter ton and announced that the hill had been taken; that four German 88mm guns were in their hands, plus sixteen prisoners, and that the artillery time fire and their own marching fire had so demoralized the enemy gun crews that when A Company began its assault no resistance had been met. In addition, the guns had all been facing south or southeast and no supporting or defending troops other than the artillerymen had been on the hill; that the two Company radios, SCR536s, had been soaked in crossing the stream and were unserviceable and only the Forward Observer's radio was in operation. They also reported that A Company's casualties were minor: one man drowned and a few hit by HE; that the stream had been considerably deeper and the current stronger than anticipated, in fact over the heads of the tallest men. Consequently, every man was soaked to the skin and miserably cold and wet. Permission was granted, upon A Company's organizing the hill and contingent on the situation, to dispatch a platoon at a time back to the half-tracks for food and dry clothing. (45)

With the hill secure and observation and flank protection assured, all was now set for the assault on the town itself. The order was given and the artillery crashed on the town in a tremendous torrent; the mortars and assault guns adding to the inferno by dumping white phosphorous into the town, setting it afire. The machine guns of the tanks began to chatter, covering the approaches to the town with a criss-cross of tracers. The infantry, preceding the tanks, jumped off at approximately 1600 hours. From the start,

(45) Statement by Captain Frank Kutak, A Company Commander, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion to author November 23, 1944, Statement by Lieutenant Joseph Underwood, 1st Platoon Leader, A Company to author November 23, 1944

the attack ran into heavy and determined enemy resistance. A quadruple mount 20mm anti-aircraft gun depressed its barrels and sprayed the advancing infantry. Not too much damage was done, but psychologically the weapon was effective. (46)

The advance continued and the infantry disappeared into the town, enveloping it left, right and center, the center platoon only having a platoon of tanks actually following it into the town proper. The right and left tank platoons dispersed in the surrounding orchards and fields and proceeded to fire at point blank range into houses and at enemy soldiers in slit trenches and emplacements holding up the infantry and at individuals as they ran from the town. (47)

Within a short time a steady stream of walking wounded, both enemy and our own, began to straggle up the road. As an interesting sidelight on the type and calibre of opposition encountered, a wounded Prisoner-of-War coming up the road alone and unattended was intercepted by a member of the Reconnaissance Platoon. He was brought over to the Task Force Commander, stood at attention and saluted with a bloody stump at the wrist, at the same time requesting the direction of the ^{*}"Lazaret" and apologizing for having to go there as he could no longer fight for his Fatherland in his present condition! (48)

Information elicited from another Prisoner of War brought out the fact that the town was defended by two reinforced companies of the 901st Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the 130th Panzer Lehr Division. (49)

It was now about 1700 hours and repeated attempts to raise B Company on the radio had been fruitless, so the Task Force Commander decided to move into the town and find out for himself what the situation was.

The town was literally blown to bits, the streets filled with the debris of shell fragments, shingles, rafters, doors, crockery and the inevitable

(26 27 48) Personal knowledge; (49) A-4, p. 55; A-11, G2c, personal knowledge

sprawled inert bodies. Firing still continued at the far end of town, but at the near end was a handful of GIs guarding approximately eighty Prisoners-of-War, all of whom were seated and barefoot. (50)

The Task Force Commander expressed amazement at this fact and was told by a soldier that the Company Commander had ordered it, why, the soldier could not explain. After ordering the shoes put back on and the Prisoners-of-War marched to the rear, the Task Force Commander went forward looking for the B Company Commander. In alleyways and in buildings he found groups of men standing aimlessly about. Inquiry as to the whereabouts of officers or NCOs elicited no coherent information. (51)

A call on the radio to Captain MacClammery brought the information that he had lost another tank to enemy action, leaving him nine out of his original eleven, and that he was reassembling his tanks on the north side of town in an orchard. He had not seen the B Company Commander since the start of the action in the town. The Task Force Commander immediately ordered Captain MacClammery to push on over the north bridge with two platoons and to take up reverse slope defensive positions on the hill due north of town and to block any penetration into the town from that direction. The third platoon (two tanks) to remain in town and aid in the close-in defense of the town. (52)

As these instructions were being issued there came the shrill shriek and terrific slam of artillery exploding on shingles. For twenty minutes the shellfire poured into the village with lulls of such short duration that each time the Task Force Commander got to his peep thinking it was over, a new onslaught would force him to scramble rapidly to the dubious cover of a doorway. (53)

Finally it stopped and the Task Force Commander rushed out looking for an officer or NCO or B Company. He saw a familiar figure walking dazedly

(50 51 52 53) Personal knowledge

down the street. It was the B Company Commander and he was crying and incapable of making any sense. However, he did manage to lead the Task Force Commander to his Command Post in a deep cellar of a battered house and there, huddled together, the Task Force Commander found the Company Executive Officer and a few enlisted men. (54)

A query as to why the Executive Officer was holed up at the Company Command Post when no one was making any attempt at reorganization, that the Company was scattered without control, and that no defense had been set up brought the response that both Platoon Leaders, Lieutenant Green and Lieutenant McCormack, had been killed, the Forward Observer and all the Sergeants killed, and so what could be done? A few choice words from the Task Force Commander told him what could be done and in a few seconds the Executive Officer left to reorganize the Company, establish a road-block on the eastern approach to town with a 57 anti-tank gun and one squad; to furnish a platoon for close-in protection of the tanks, and to take care of resupply and feeding. (55)

It was now about 1830 hours, getting pitch black and still drizzling. The B Company Commander was evacuated. The half-tracks of B Company were ordered forward to provide extra firepower and the morale aid that the presence an armed vehicle has. (56)

After leaving word for the Executive Officer of B Company to report his strength and dispositions and after checking with A Company, the Task Force Commander and his driver went next door and ate their evening meal of K rations.

After an hour's wait for a report from the Executive Officer of B Company the Task Force Commander went back to the Company Command Post and found that the officer had not returned. At the same time Captain MacClammory was screaming on the radio that no infantry had arrived to protect his posi-

(54 55 56) Personal knowledge

tions and that unless they came soon, and by soon he meant now, he was going to pull back over the bridge. (57)

The Task Force Commander realized that B Company was through as a force until it could be pulled out and reorganized, so he immediately called Headquarters Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion and told them to send the Machine Gun Platoon into the town and set up a defense of the north bridge, prepare it for demolition, and blow only on his order or if in danger of immediate capture. He next found a NCO of F Company and ordered him to round up as many men as he could and report back in ten minutes. (58)

The Sergeant returned with approximately twenty men and a light machine gun, and was then led up the road to the east bridge personally by the Task Force Commander where ten men and the Sergeant were left, while the remainder, under a Corporal, were told to retrace, turn right, and continue over the north bridge on up the road until they met a tank; that their mission was to stay with the tanks, protect them, and to take orders from Captain MacClannery. He then called Captain MacClannery and told him to be on the watch for the men. (59)

Realizing that a counterattack was inevitable and that no reserve was available to meet it, the Task Force Commander decided some reserve had to be procured immediately. He started back for the 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion Command Post, a large barn on the northern outskirts of Kirrberg, and on arriving there found it under heavy mortar fire. After discussing the situation with Lieutenant Colonel Jaques it was decided to call Brigadier General Holmes E. Dager, Combat Command "B" Commander, outline the situation to him and request reinforcements. This was done and they were told there were none. With the realization that higher Headquarters could provide no assistance for the moment, C Company, 166th Engineer Battalion Combat came to mind. (60)

The C Company Commander of the 166th Engineer Battalion Combat was

(57) Statement by Captain MacClannery, C Company Commander, 8th Tank Battalion to author November 23, 1944, Personal knowledge; (58 59 60) Personal knowledge

called and ordered to alert his Company and report to the Battalion Command Post. This officer reported about one-half hour later, looking slightly apprehensive. The situation was explained and the Engineer Company was ordered to move to an assembly area on hill "C" (Map D) without delay, and to be prepared to move on order to take over the interior defense of the town. (61)

The Captain left, looking quite worried and dubious, no more so, however, than the Task Force Commander was. A few minutes later, Captain Kutak and Lieutenant Underwood came in, chilled to the marrow and announced that their Forward Observer had been killed and that they were in dire need of a replacement. Otherwise the Company was in fair shape. (62) The Task Force Commander then repaired to the Battalion Aid Station to ascertain the number of casualties treated that day. To his not complete surprise he found that the Executive Officer of B Company had shortly before been brought in, thus leaving no officers in B Company. A quick recapitulation showed casualties so far had been heavy: Reconnaissance Platoon, three killed and three evacuated; A Company, two killed, one missing and four evacuated; E Company, sixteen killed and fifty-five evacuated. 253rd Field Artillery Battalion, one Forward Observer killed and two evacuated; C Company, 8th Tank Battalion, three killed and seven evacuated. (63)

The Task Force Commander then returned to the Battalion Command Post to try and get some rest. It was now midnight. Once again, the Command Post was the center of a severe shelling, and though the roof was hit, no one was hurt. At approximately 0100 hours Lieutenant Erwin Smith, Platoon Leader, Machine Gun Platoon, called to say that there were no troops from B Company guarding the east bridge and consequently that flank was wide open (64)

B Company could not be raised and, realizing the futility of trying to

(61) Personal knowledge; (62) Statements Captain Kutak and Lieutenant Underwood to author November 23, 1944; (63) A-12, A-13, Personal knowledge; (64) Statement by Lieutenant Erwin Smith, Platoon Leader, Machine Gun Platoon, Headquarters Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion November 23 1944

place any men from that Company in any positions of responsibility above their leaders, A Company was called and ordered to send a platoon (Lieutenant Underwood's) immediately to this bridge and to defend and block any attempted penetration from that flank. (65) (In fairness to B Company it should be interjected at this point that with the return from the hospital of Lieutenant Robert Eversen (later Captain) on the 27th of November, the Company was reorganized and quickly developed into an aggressive and dependable unit.) (66)

COUNTERATTACK

The Task Force Commander lay down, and it seemed as though but a few seconds passed by when he was awakened by his driver with a message to the effect that Captain MacClannery and Lieutenant Smith were calling and that both sounded "pretty wild". Artillery could be heard crashing into the town, and, fearing the worst, the Task Force Commander called Captain MacClannery to inquire of the situation. (67)

His information was disheartening. The enemy had begun a long artillery preparation, commencing at 0200 hours on his hill, working on down to the town and shifting from one end to the other. His positions were being heavily mortared by both 80mm and 120mm calibres and with the first few rounds his infantry had withdrawn precipitately. On the lifting of the mortar fire he had heard two heavy explosions in quick succession immediately after which one of his tanks began to burn fiercely, while another one had been put out of action by a shot from an enemy tank at point blank range. The enemy had then by-passed him and continued on down the south slope of the hill toward Baerendorf.

Captain MacClannery therefore assumed that he was cut off and was preparing to abandon his tanks and move back on foot. He was told to hold

(65 66 67) Personal knowledge

where he was and that instructions would be given to him in a few minutes.

(68)

Lieutenant Smith was called and he reported heavy artillery and mortar fire on his position around the bridge, two of his men killed, so wounded; that he could hear tanks moving to his front, but that so far he had not been attacked. He also reported that some men of B Company who had been near him had taken off when the artillery came in. (69) He was told to defend the bridge and not to blow it, save as a last resort, as it was desired to extricate Captain MacClasmary's tanks if possible. (70)

(Lieutenant Underwood reported .. + morning that the bridge had not been prepared for demolition, a fact which had it been known to the Command Group the night before would have caused consternation. However, Lieutenant Smith did have the bridge strewn with anti-tank mines.) (71)

The artillery and mortar fire increased in intensity on the Command Post and vicinity and made impossible, for a short while, the Task Force Commander's idea of going forward. (72) Lieutenant Smith came on the radio again and reported that he had fallen back to the south side of the bridge under attack by enemy infantry, and, as near as he could ascertain, two tanks; that he had been forced to abandon one of his guns in retiring to a new position and at the present moment the enemy infantry were trying to cross the bridge and pick up the mines, but that he was firing at them, and for the time being had the situation under control. However, if any enemy tried to swim the stream and flank his position, he was through unless some additional support was sent up to him immediately. (73) He was told to sit tight and hold the bridge until ordered otherwise. (74)

A Company was called, reported all quiet and no artillery. Captain Kutak was told to get hold of Lieutenant Underwood and find out what his

(68) Statement by Captain MacClasmary to author November 24, 1944; (69) Statement by Lieutenant Smith to author November 24, 1944; (70) Personal knowledge; (71) Statement by Lieutenant Underwood to author November 24, 1944; (72) Personal knowledge; (73) Statement by Lieutenant Smith to author November 24, 1944; (74) Personal knowledge

situation was and to report immediately. C Company, 166th Engineer Battalion Combat was alerted and reported some mortar fire, but nothing else. (75)

Captain Kutak called back and reported Lieutenant Underwood's Platoon in good condition, but that the Forward Observer with him had been killed; that the Platoon was in position under intense mortar fire, and that the enemy in attempting to cross the east bridge had been repulsed with approximately ten casualties to them. (76)

Approximately two minutes later Captain MacClannery called and said that he had seen a tank looming up on his right flank and had fired when it was no more than twenty feet from him, hitting the turret and setting it afire. This act apparently, from Captain MacClannery's report the next morning, had started several wild seconds with both German and American tanks firing frantically at top speed in all directions, not knowing who or what they were firing at. To the Battalion Command Post personnel on the hill 1500 yards away, the night seemed alive with red stabbing tongues of flame piercing the blackness on all sides. (77) Within a few minutes the mist was over and somehow the Germans extricated themselves and disappeared. From tracks evident at daylight, four tanks had made the attack, one of which was destroyed. We had lost two. (78)

It was now about 0430 hours and all was quiet, save for a few desultory mortar rounds dropping at random here and there. The entire force heaved a sigh of intense relief. The artillery and mortars slacked off and fired only enough to harass and annoy. (79)

A tally showed A Company intact; Captain MacClannery's Company minus two more tanks and no infantry in support; B Company, no report; they had ceased to exist to all intents and purposes; Machine Gun Platoon firmly established on the bridge. (80)

Feeling certain that another attack, probably at first light, was certain

(75) Personal knowledge; (76) Statement by Captain Kutak to author November 24, 1944; (77) Statement by Captain MacClannery to author November 24, 1944; (78 79 80) Personal knowledge

to occur, a platoon of C Company, 166th Engineer Battalion Combat, was ordered forward to Captain MacClannery. Guides were arranged for to meet them and, after discussing the overall situation with Lieutenant Colonel Jaques, the Task Force Commander called General Dager. (81)

The situation was explained in detail and the General told that if a determined counterattack was pressed home the Battalion unquestionably would be forced to withdraw to hill 307A and A Company would have to be used to enable Captain MacClannery to extricate himself. (It should be disclosed here that in further conversation with C Company Commander, 166th Engineer Battalion Combat, he had pointed out that the Company had never had combat as infantry and that it had spent one-half hour training in a defense situation back in the States. Hence their usefulness in a combat role had to be completely discounted.) (82)

The General explained that the West Task Force had had about as rough a going over and was almost in the same shape. However, "Hold on" and the Combat Command Reserve, D Company, a light tank Company of the 8th Tank Battalion, would appear at dawn to be committed in the event of another counterattack. The Task Force Commander thanked the General and rang off. (83)

All units were ordered to stand to at 0500 hours until daylight.

Daylight materialized with no further enemy activity save sporadic artillery fire. A reconnaissance patrol, sent out at first light, disclosed the enemy had withdrawn to the next high ground approximately one mile to the northeast. (84)

(81-82) Personal knowledge; (83) Statement by Brigadier General Holmes E. Dager to author 24 November, 1944; (84) Personal knowledge

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analysing and criticising the operation at Baerendorf, events come into focus more sharply if we divide the various factors into three categories.

1. Factors beyond the control of the local commanders.
2. Operations of the Task Force controlled or influenced by the Commander.
3. The German commissions and omissions.

Analysing each in turn, the first uncontrollable factor to be considered was the weather and, only in so far as effected by the weather, the terrain. The unceasing rainfall, continuous for over a month, effected the operations of armor adversely in that two of its prime assets, speed and mobility, were lost. The armored personnel carriers were useless off the roads, the maneuverability of the tanks severely restricted. Hence the Task Force was constrained from employing its habitual tactics predicated on mass, shock power, speed and deception, but instead was relegated to the speed of its slowest element, the armored infantry on foot.

Another factor beyond local control was the unbalanced Task Force composition dictated by higher Headquarters, an organizational hodge-podge, which restricted the local Commander in his efforts to establish a base of fire and maneuver with his Tank-Infantry team while at the same time retaining a reserve.

In addition, the type of operation engaged in by the Division was abnormal in that the campaign was one of attrition, not exploitation, and armor was endeavoring to force its own breakthrough against the most determined resistance.

Lastly, the total collapse of B Company was a totally unforeseen event and one that could have resulted disastrously had the Germans reacted more rapidly.

In analysing and criticising the controllable factors, the failure to institute more extensive reconnaissance prior to issuing the attack order

was reprehensible in that the enemy dispositions would have become apparent and the possibility of launching a flanking rather than a frontal attack might have been observed.

Another criticism can be aimed at the Task Force Commander for his failure to discern earlier the condition of B Company. A Company, comparatively fresh and unburnt, might have relieved B Company in Baerendorf, while B Company took their place on hill 307A to reorganize. The net result would have been a Task Force in far better condition to meet any counter-attack and would have saved much worry, anxiety and piecemeal shifting of troops later on. In any event, an officer from the Battalion should have been detailed to assume command of B Company temporarily, as the Company was wholly useless minus officers.

The failure to keep out a reserve is a criticism that is difficult to refute. Only the good fortune of A Company in seizing their objective with minor losses enables the Task Force Commander to utilize them when needed. Had A Company been mauled as severely as B Company, or had they become fully committed and pinned down, the lack of a reserve might have had serious consequences.

Lastly, the lack of any staff to assist the Task Force Commander was an error as an additional mind might have called attention to potential and actual errors of command.

In analysing and criticising the operations conducted by the Germans, we have much to consider and benefit by. Their most immediate failure was in not blowing the north bridge. If they desired to keep this bridge for future utilization for their own forces, they should have prepared it for demolition and covered it with fire. Our ability to take the town against the size and calibre of the defending forces would have been severely restricted and delayed until we could have bridged the stream and crossed our tanks.

The establishment of a mine field in front of the bridge along the road was effective as it destroyed two vehicles. However, this mine field was not covered by fire nor did it extend into the fields on either side of the road. Hence its value was limited and served only to harass, not even to delay. Had the mine field been properly placed on both sides of the bridge and in the meadow adjoining the town, our attack would have been far more costly to the armor.

A glance at Map D will show that hill 307A is a dominating terrain feature due south of Baerendorf. The holder of this hill denies the approaches into the valleys on either side of the hill and into the town of Baerendorf itself. If the objective was to hold Baerendorf as a communication center for future offensive operations, hill 307A had to be defended. The incomprehensibility of why four high velocity anti-tank guns of 88mm calibre on a hill dominating the approaches to the major defensive position in the area should have been pointed away from the attacking force, and should fail to fire one round at the force cannot be ascertained. A major tactical error was made by the Germans in failing to protect these guns by a screen of infantry, particularly so, in that the guns were some distance ahead of their main line of resistance.

The defense of Baerendorf by the Germans has no justification from a tactical point of view. Two hills, 307A and 307B, dominate the town and control the town. Through defending within the town itself key terrain and observation were sacrificed, the main defending position was disclosed, maneuver was impossible and defeat "in toto" practically assured, in that once the town was taken there was no place to retire to.

The failure on the part of the Germans to deliver their counterattack until approximately eight hours after we had captured the position was a major error in judgment on their part. Had they counterattacked during our reorganization stage, we would have unquestionably been driven out of town.

LESSONS LEARNED

No new lessons were learned during the Baerendorf operation, but the application of fundamental principles were reemphasized.

1. The retention of key terrain is essential. The seizure of Hill 307A was a vital factor in the destruction of the German forces at the Baerendorf in that it gave observation, flank protection and the dominating ground to the attacker, and denied the enemy any ability to reinforce. The failure of the Germans to retain this hill insured their defeat for it permitted the attacker to move on the German main battle position without danger to their flank, with supply lines and rear secure, and it trapped the Germans in the town.
2. Eliminate unsatisfactory leaders promptly. It was known that B Company was weak in leadership. This had been apparent since Normandy. Many men were unquestionably sacrificed needlessly due to this Company's faulty leadership. Prompt replacement of these leaders would have insured a more efficient and capable organization and prevented the ultimate disintegration that transpired.
3. Train subordinate leaders to assume command. This must be insisted upon and plans prepared both in the company and the battalion so that in the event of casualties individuals are present within the company to take over or can be promptly sent down from battalion.
4. Keep a balanced task force. Only in the exploitation phase against disorganized resistance can unorthodoxy in the composition of task forces or units continually succeed. In the Baerendorf operation, the absence of the 3rd Rifle Company, 53rd Armored Infantry Battalion, was a severe handicap.
5. Use troops and weapons over terrain best suited to exploit their maximum capabilities and potentialities. The complete "road-boundness" of the armored infantry half-tracks, and the ineffective cross-country mobility of the tanks reduced the effectiveness of the armor markedly.

6. Speed and determination in pressing home an attack were vital to insure success. The vigor and tenacity with which all units pressed home the attack unbalanced the Germans, reduced their effectiveness by lowering morale and causing a number to surrender.

7. Cooperation and coordination of all arms insure success. The long training of the tank-armed infantry team paid off in that the attack against the town was executed almost instinctively and a minimum of orders had to be issued.

8. Deliver counterattacks promptly. The failure of the Germans to mount their counterattack during our reorganization phase cost them their objective. A late counterattack is worse than no attack at all for it only succeeds in costing the counterattack excessive casualties.

9. Boldness and unorthodox tactics, provided no principles are violated may often achieve surprise and success. This was demonstrated by the use of tanks at night in rain and fog. Only the smokes of the fumes and the failure to press home the attack prevented them from entering Baerendorf.

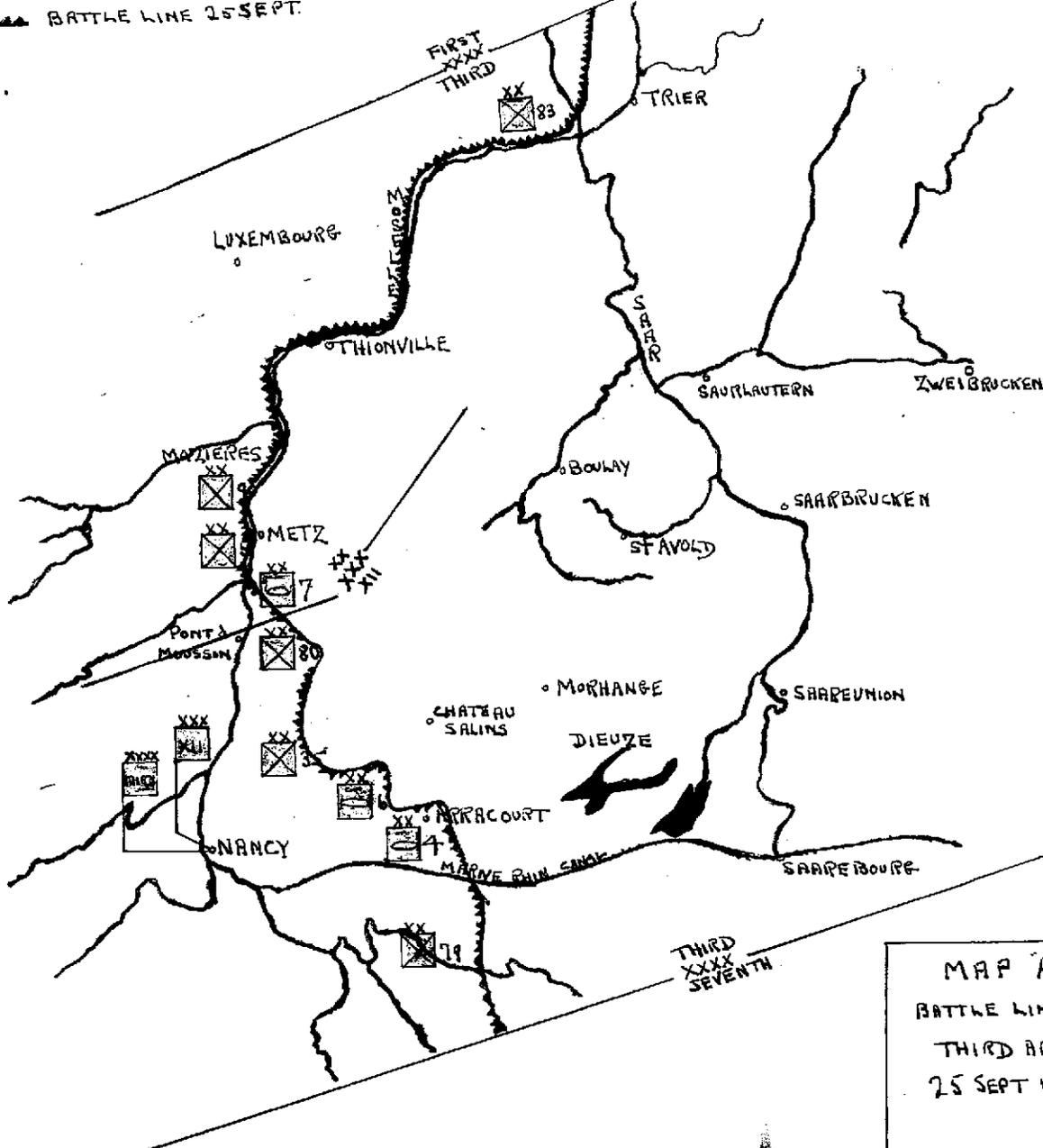
10. A reserve must be kept when possible. Without a reserve a unit loses flexibility once its forces are committed.

11. Institute reconnaissance whenever possible. Even though the action at Baerendorf was a meeting engagement, a short reconnaissance might have disclosed or demonstrated a flank attack was in order. The fact that the type of attack made happened to be the solution is incidental and fortunate for those concerned. Reconnaissance still is essential.

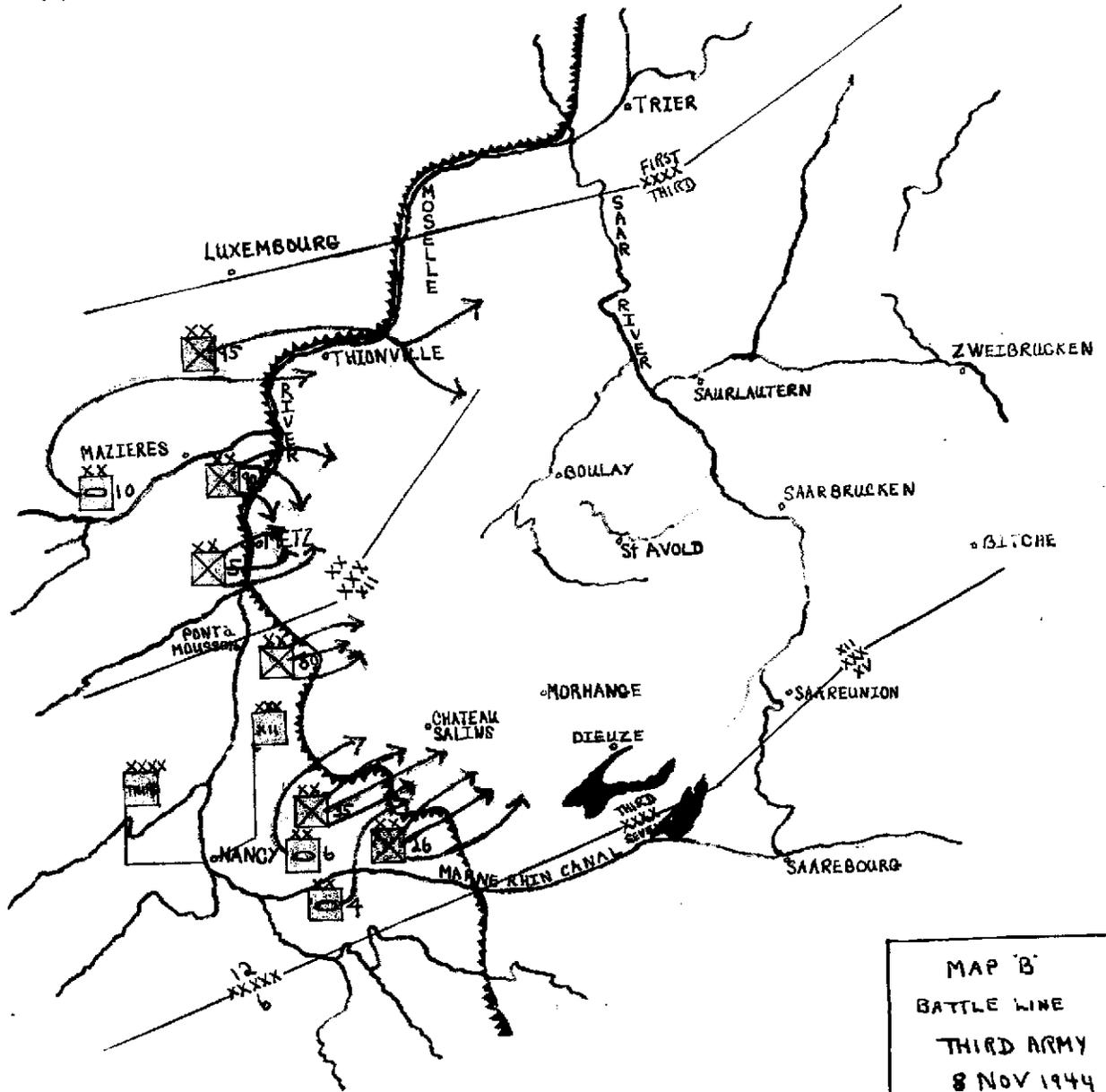
12. Surprise is a vital factor in an operation. The Germans manning the 88mm's on hill 307A were obviously expecting an attack from a different direction, and consequently never fired a shot.

SCALE OF MILES 20 40

BATTLE LINE 25 SEPT.

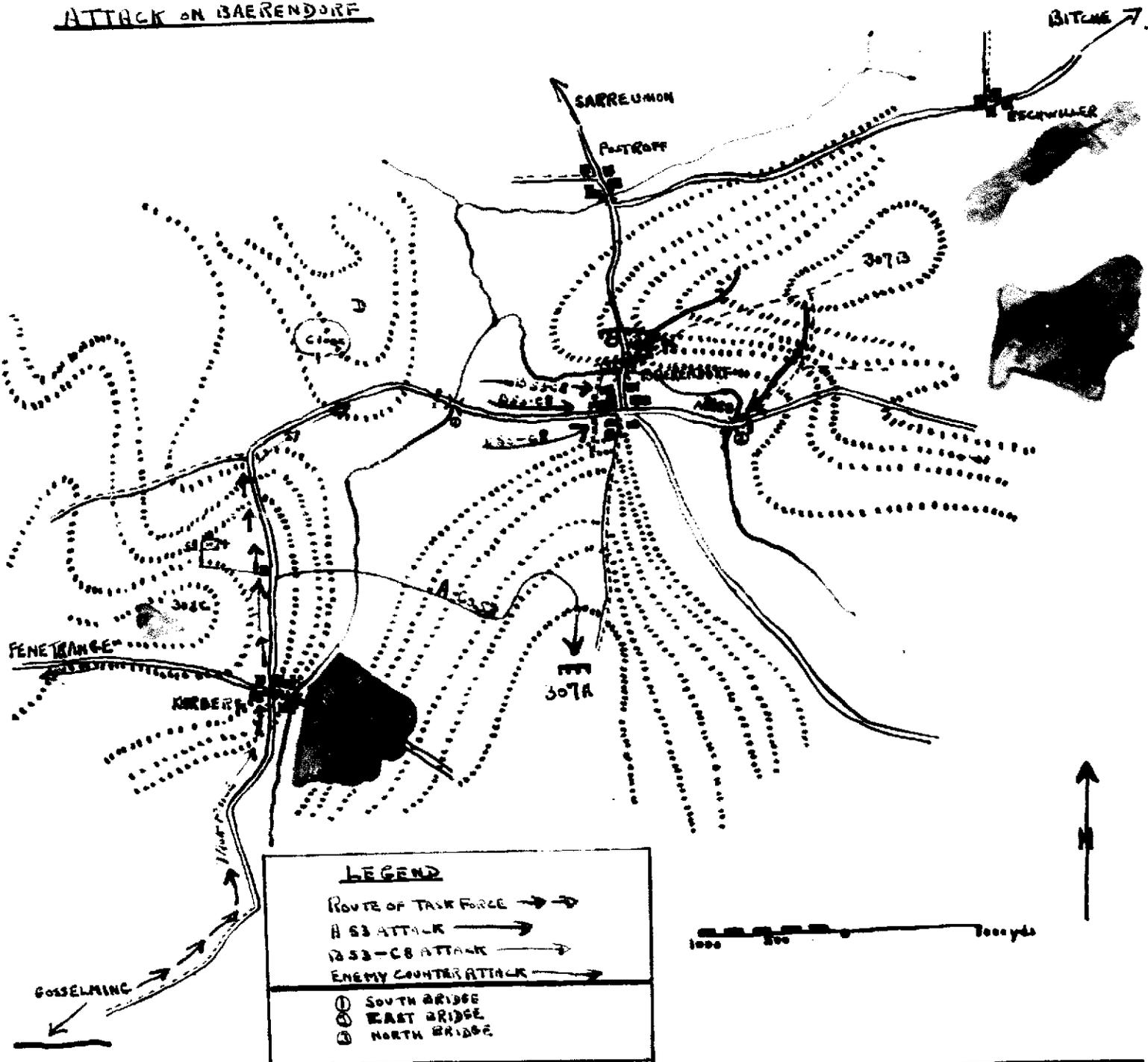


0 20 40
SCALE OF MILES



MAP D

ATTACK ON BAERENDORF



MAP
C

ROUTE CCR - CCA 4 NOV 1944
 9 NOV - 23 NOV 1944
 SARRIS OFFENSIVE
 LEGEND
 --- CCR
 --- CCA

