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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 334TH INFANTRY
(84TH INFANTRY DIVISION) NEAR PRUMMERN,
GERMANY DURING THE NOVEMBER OFFENSIVE
23 NOVEMBER - 24 NOVEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

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Type of operation described: RIFLE COMPANY IN THE
ATTACK ON AND SUBSEQUENT WITHDRAWAL FROM
FORTIFIED POSITIONS

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company K 334th Infantry, 84th U.S. Division in the attack on and subsequent withdrawal from fortified positions near PRUMMERN, GERMANY, 23 November, 24 November 1944 during the November offensive.

In order for the reader to fully appreciate its significance, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the main events which preceded this action.

In early June 1944 the Allied Forces of Canada, Great Britain and the United States successfully invaded the northern coast of France. On 15 August the Seventh U.S. Army and the French First Army effected a landing on the southern coast of France. PARIS was liberated on 28 August and by 4 September the sorely needed port of ANTWERP had fallen. AACHEN, the first large German city to be captured, surrendered on 21 October. Thus, the early part of November found the allied armies poised generally along the line of the German west wall prepared to strike again, this time toward the heart of the enemy homeland. (See Map A) (1)

The 84th U.S. Division left the United States on 20 September 1944 and by 1 November, after a brief stay in England, was trekking its way across France destined to join the Ninth U.S. Army for a part in the November offensive. After arriving in the combat zone the 84th

(1) A-8, Maps 4,7,10,12,14b
A-6,p.14
A-7,p.19

Division was first introduced to combat under the operational control of XXX British Corps (18-22 November 1944) for the purpose of eliminating the "GEILENKIRCHEN SALIENT" which lay astride the boundary of the U.S. Ninth and British 2nd Armies. (See Map B) (2)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The German west wall, better known as the SIEGFRIED LINE, consisted of mutually supporting pill boxes constructed of reinforced concrete approximately six feet thick. This line was systematically organized in depth and took advantage of every terrain feature. It was approximately 400 miles long, extending along the German frontier from the Dutch border to the Swiss border. (3)

Although these fortifications had been breached in some places, they still afforded the enemy the opportunity of conserving his forces and maintaining a large mobile reserve. The threat of such a reserve prevented the concentration of the allied forces for a break through on a narrow front which would have invited a major enemy counter-offensive. (4)

The Ninth Army, consisting of the XIII and XIX Corps, had as its primary mission the protection of the north flank of the First Army which was to make the main effort east to the RHINE RIVER. However, the immediate objective of the Ninth was to fight through the SIEGFRIED LINE to establish bridgeheads at JULICH AND LINNICH on the ROER RIVER. XIX Corps, composed of three veteran divisions, (30th and 29th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Armored Division) was to make the main effort by opening the offensive in a drive east to establish the bridgehead

(2) Personal knowledge; A-4, p.83

(3) A-9, p.60; personal knowledge

(4) A-6, p.30

at JULICH. The 2nd Armored Division on the Corps left flank would attack as far as GERONSWEILER which would place them about two miles east of LINNICH. At this point XIII Corps was to pass through the elements of XIX Corps and continue the easterly attack to establish the other bridgehead at LINNICH. (See Map B) (5)

XIII Corps, composed of the 102nd Infantry Division and the 84th Infantry Division minus, (335th Infantry Regiment attached to 30th Infantry Division XIX Corps) planned for the 102nd Division to pass through the 2nd Armored Division at GERONSWEILER and continue the attack east to establish the bridgehead at LINNICH. The 84th Division which returned to operational control of XIII Corps on 22 November had as its first objective under the Corps a cluster of five small villages, namely, WURM, MULLENDORF, BEECK, LEIFFARTH and LINDERN. These villages were so compact that they were almost one, and the enemy had chosen to defend strongly this position. From this well fortified area LINNICH was within easy shelling distance, and if the 102nd Division was to be successful in the drive to establish the bridgehead, it would indeed be necessary to eliminate this strong point. (See Map D) (6)

The terrain in the XIII Corps sector was generally flat and slightly rolling. The ground was highly cultivated, but limited to crops that never attained a height of more than a few feet above the ground. Previous rains had turned the surface of the flat lands into

(5) A-4, p.70-77

A-2, p.54

A-1, p.13

(6) A-1, p.13, 44, 47

A-2, p.55

sticky mud, and as a result, poor trafficability made armored support sporadic and uncertain. The landscape was almost devoid of any natural foliage making observation and fields of fire excellent to both the attackers and defenders. The area was dotted with small villages from one to two miles apart. These villages were located on the main road centers and the heavy type construction of the buildings added emphasis to the prepared fortifications. (7)

It might be well at this point to discuss briefly the technique of using "artificial moonlight". The British Forces employed this technique as an aid to night operations and due to the proximity of this ally on the left flank of the XIII Corps, our own troops were subject to its effect. "Artificial moonlight", or "battlefield illumination", as it is sometimes called, is merely a means of lighting the battlefield by use of powerful search lights. These lights are placed several thousand yards behind the front lines and the rays are beamed toward low hanging clouds which reflect the light onto the desired area. The light derived from this method is approximately that of a full moon. (8)

On the 22nd of November the zone of the 84th Division extended from just outside of MULLENDORF on the left flank to a point midway between PRUMMERN and GERONSWEILER on the right flank. The 102nd Division extended from the right flank of the 84th Division to a point slightly north and east of GERONSWEILER on their

(7) Personal knowledge.
(8) A-10; Personal knowledge.

right flank. This was the zone of the XIII Corps. Opposing these units were remnants of the 183 Volksgrenadier Division and elements of the 9th Panzer and 15th Panzer Grenadier Divisions. (See Map C) (9)

Since its initial engagement on the 18th of November 1944, following the opening of the November offensive on 16 November, the 84th Division had been continually attacking without quarter. Enemy action and severe weather had taken a heavy toll in casualties. Although few replacements had been received and many key personnel had been lost, a good nucleus still remained in most units. The early return of some key personnel who had been slightly wounded early in the first battle greatly enhanced the esprit de corp and, in general, the morale was excellent. Over-extended supply lines could not maintain adequate supplies of every description. However the only critical item was artillery ammunition which had to be rationed to a degree far inadequate to the needs of a front line unit. [On the enemy side, notwithstanding the air attacks of the Allies on industrial centers and supply lines, their stock was sufficient but not abundant. The enemy had suffered heavy losses, however, he had the advantage of choosing the place to wage battle and the warmth of his pill boxes and bunkers for rest periods. To the individual soldier the war had assumed additional meaning, that of fighting on his own soil in defense of the "fatherland". The combat efficiency of the opposing forces compared favorably with that of our own. (10)

(9) A-1, p.44; A-14 Overlay to Field Order #4
A-2, p.60; Personal knowledge

(10) A-6, p.24; Personal knowledge

The 84th Division planned a frontal attack on the cluster of villages which was the most direct route of approach. The 333rd Infantry would drive east to seize MULLENDORF. The 405th Infantry, 102nd Division, under operational control of the 84th Division, would attack north to capture ^{WACK}BEECK and secure the high ground beyond. The 334th Infantry (-) was in Division reserve.
(11)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 3RD BATTALION (See map D)

Having been constantly in the attack since the 19th of November, the 3rd Battalion, 334th Infantry, had gained a position on the reverse slope of MAHOGANY HILL, northeast of PRUMERN, by the evening of the 22nd of November. Company L occupied the reverse slope and Companies I and K were closely echeloned to the right rear.

The 3rd Battalion was attached to the 405th Infantry and was to attack on the left flank of the Regiment which had the mission of clearing BEECK and securing the high ground beyond. Company K would lead the attack initially by passing through Company L on MAHOGANY HILL. The initial objective was two pill boxes which presently confronted the Battalion. The ultimate mission was to pass around the left of BEECK and join the 405th Infantry on the high ground beyond. Company L was to secure the line of departure, which was the crest of MAHOGANY HILL, and be prepared to follow closely behind Company K to assist in accomplishing the final mission. Company I which was reduced in strength to approximately platoon size and had no officers, was to be attached to Company K.

(11) A-1, p.46; Personal Knowledge

All heavy weapons of Company M were to deliver long range supporting fire during the initial phase of the attack. Thereafter, the machine gun platoons were to follow in close general support and the mortar platoon was to continue to support from positions in rear of MAHOGANY HILL. (12)

THE COMPANY SITUATION (See Map E) (13)

MAHOGANY HILL was a large rise in the rolling flat terrain. The reverse slope of this hill was steep, rising to a height of about forty feet. Near the top, the hill gradually became a plateau which sloped gently to the front and both flanks.

From good observation posts on top of the hill, the attack zone of the Company was clearly visible and well defined. There was a narrow finger sloping gradually from MAHOGANY HILL to the left of BEECK. The finger was about four hundred yards in width, sloped gradually on both sides and was nestled between terrain of equal elevation on each flank. The entire surface of the attack zone was planted with sugar beets which had attained a height of about twelve inches. There was no natural growth except for a few thinly scattered trees and underbrush, devoid of foliage, located in a small gully which ran parallel to the attack zone on the right flank. A small road leading from PRUMMERN and following the general direction of the attack was located on the high ground on the left flank. The two pill boxes, immediately confronting the Battalion, were located on the narrow finger and for future reference will

(12) Personal knowledge; Statement of Capt. Busby, Battalion S-3, 15 December 1949.

(13) Personal knowledge.

be referred to as Number 1 and Number 2. Number 1 was a small box situated on the right portion of MAHOGANY HILL and about twenty five yards down on the forward slope. Its direction of fire was generally northwest and was such that it could support Box Number 2. Pill Box Number 2 was a large box located about four hundred and fifty yards down the slope of the finger and in the center. Its direction of fire was toward BEECK. There was a hastily prepared network of trenches around both pill boxes; however, the two boxes were not connected. It was known that there were many pill boxes in the vicinity of BEECK, but the exact pattern of these fortifications had not been ascertained. Pill Box Number 1 was known to be manned by approximately five enemy soldiers and Pill Box Number 2 was estimated to garrison about twenty. Beyond this the local enemy situation was vague. He was known to have recently reinforced the general area, but details as to the strength and disposition of his forces were not certain.

The weather was cold and the skies were overcast. Previous rains had almost reduced the cultivated terrain to the status of marsh lands.

Since Company K was to launch the initial attack, it was decided to move the Company into PRUMMERN for the night of 22nd-23rd November for reorganization and rest.

The early hours on the evening of the 22nd of November were spent feeding a hot meal, cleaning muddy weapons and reorganizing the platoons. The entire first platoon of Company K, with the exception of two men, had been captured four days previously which prompted the use of I Company troops in organizing a support platoon.

The mortar section of the weapons platoon was so badly depleted that it was disbanded. The light machine gun section though under strength was operational. The rifle platoons consisted of two bazooka teams of two men each, two automatic rifle teams of two men each, and approximately ten riflemen. Each platoon was adequately staffed with key personnel and though the groups were small the unity was superb. Due to the poor efficiency of the 536 radio in previous operations, their use had been discontinued and the 300 radio in the Battalion command net was the only radio in the Company.

THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK (See Map E) (14)

The line of departure was to be the crest of MAHOGANY HILL. Time of the attack was set for 0725 hours 23 November 1944.

The plan for the first phase of the attack was to assault Pill Boxes 1 and 2 simultaneously. The 3rd Platoon was to cross the line of departure in the center of MAHOGANY HILL in a line of skirmishers with the bazooka and automatic rifle teams in the center. Their objective was Pill Box Number 2. The 2nd Platoon was to cross the line of departure about one hundred yards to the right of the 3rd Platoon and in the same formation. Their mission was to capture Pill Box Number 1 quickly, if possible, and support by fire the assault of the 3rd Platoon. If not successful in capturing the box, they were to cover it by fire to protect the 3rd Platoon in its assault on Pill Box Number 2. The light machine

(14) Personal knowledge.

gun section was to support the assault of the 3rd Platoon from the line of departure between the crossing sites of the two assault platoons. The Support Platoon was to remain in rear of MAHOGANY HILL to be prepared to assist in the assault of either platoon. The Company Command Group was to follow the assault of the 3rd Platoon. A Company ammunition point was to be established on the reverse slope of MAHOGANY HILL. The assault position would be in rear of MAHOGANY HILL.

At H hour the attack was to be supported by artillery "time fire" placed on Pill Box Number 2 and a smoke concentration on a line to the left of BEECK. Since the battalion had been recently furnished with a new and inexperienced forward observer, the Artillery Liaison Officer was to direct personally the artillery fire. No mortar observers were available to the company.

Beyond Pill Box Number 2 the plan of attack was not outlined in detail except that the attack would continue down the narrow finger to the final objective.

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK AND MOVEMENT TO THE LINE OF DEPARTURE. (15)

After about six hours rest the Company was fed a hot meal at 0500 hours on the morning of the 23rd. Since the line of departure was only about one-half mile from the Company rest area in PRUMMERN, all ammunition and rations were issued prior to moving out to the final assembly point. Each man was issued one-third of a type K ration. The bazooka and automatic rifle teams

(15) Personal knowledge.

were issued as much ammunition as each man in the team could carry with the aid of ammunition carrying bags. The teams had been instructed to coordinate their fire so that one of each type weapon would be firing continuously during the assault on the pill boxes, and a large expenditure of ammunition was anticipated during the first phase of the attack.

At 0645 hours, 23 November, the Company moved out of PRUMMERN in a column of platoons. The 2nd Platoon led, followed in order by the Machine Gun Section, 3rd Platoon and Support Platoon. The company arrived at the line of departure at 0700 hours. Here, as last minute instructions, the men were again reminded that the success of the company depended on how fast they could shoot and move toward the first objectives.

NARRATION

ASSAULT ON PILL BOXES 1 AND 2

The planned time fire began at H hour and needed only slight adjusting which was quickly accomplished by the Artillery Liaison Officer. The Company Commander from his observation post signaled the 3rd Platoon to cross the line of departure and move into the attack. The troops moved forward and hesitated; it was hard to move across the top of this bald hill into the face of the devastating fire the pill boxes usually put forth. The Company Commander, sensing a "bog down" in the attack, moved forward to the topographical crest of the hill and again signaled the platoon forward. The Battalion Commander, Major Charles Murrah, and the S-3 Captain John Busby moved along the line of troops in an effort to rally the attack. Slowly the troops

began to move forward under the control of 2nd Lt. Edgar Rothschild. (16)

Over on the right flank the 2nd Platoon under the aggressive leadership of 2nd Lt. Oliver O'Kier was moving rapidly toward its objective. Lt. O'Kier could be seen running from one man to another shouting directions and words of encouragement. The automatic rifles were pouring fire toward the pill box and surrounding trenches.

The 3rd Platoon cleared the crest of MAHOGANY HILL and began moving forward using "marching fire". As the platoon moved across the top of the hill the Light Machine Gun Section opened fire on Pill Box Number 2. The platoon advanced approximately one hundred and fifty yards without a casualty. At this point the platoon began receiving tank fire from the right front. The first round hit in front of the advancing platoon without causing casualties, but did succeed in halting the advance. The tank continued to fire but fortunately the fire was not accurate, most of the rounds landing just in rear of the platoon on the forward slope of MAHOGANY HILL. The tank also succeeded in stopping temporarily the fire of the Light Machine Gun Section though the section had not been hit. (17)

Lt. O'Kier's 2nd Platoon had met with great success. Advancing to within fifty yards of Pill Box Number 1, the two bazooka teams began a bombardment of the pill box embrasure while the automatic rifles maintained a chattering fire. Under cover of the fire from the automatic rifles and bazookas, individual riflemen closed in

(16) Personal knowledge; statement of Capt. Busby, 15 December 1949.

(17) Personal knowledge.

for the kill. When the advancing riflemen arrived at the pill box, one rifleman climbed to the top and dropped a smoke grenade down the ventilator. This quickly induced two of the enemy to come out of the box. The two men attempted to escape in the direction of their own lines, but were brought down by fire of the rifleman on top of the pill box. Immediately thereafter five more of the enemy came out with hands behind their head in token of surrender." The 2nd Platoon had sustained one casualty. (18)

The 2nd Platoon was now in a position to support the advance of the 3rd Platoon by fire as planned. Lt. O'Kier quickly reorganized his platoon and directed its fire on Pill Box Number 2. The timely success of the 2nd Platoon saved the hour for the 3rd Platoon as the "time fire" of the artillery had ceased allowing the enemy in and around the fortifications of Pill Box Number 2 to again take up firing positions. However, before the enemy could concentrate the full effect of his fire on the exposed 3rd Platoon, the 2nd Platoon, from its covered position in Pill Box Number 1 was covering Pill Box Number 2 and vicinity with a murderous concentration of fire.

Through some stroke of good fortune, the enemy tank, though its exact location had not been determined and no fire had been placed on it, ceased its fire. This relieved the men of the 3rd Platoon of the paralyzing fear which direct fire from an enemy tank produces. The time was ripe for a continuation of the assault.

(18) Personal knowledge

The Company Commander at this point contacted the Artillery Liaison officer back on top of MAHOGANY HILL and hurriedly arranged to bring more "time fire" on Pill Box Number 2. Within a very few minutes the artillery fire was forthcoming and was so deadly accurate that it needed no adjusting.

No coordination had been made with Lt. Rothschild at this point due to lack of time for personal contact. However, as the Company Commander was going forward to get the 3rd Platoon started in the attack, Lt. Rothschild leaped to his feet, firing his weapon and yelling for the men to move forward. His fighting spirit spread quickly among the men in the platoon and they seemed to rise from the ground in a body yelling wildly and firing rapidly. The assault was again under way.

There was another three hundred yards to Pill Box Number 2. Supported by fire from the artillery, the 2nd Platoon and the Light Machine Gun Section, the 3rd Platoon moved forward rapidly. The enemy was forced to seek the safety of his pill box and since the embrasure was toward BEECK no return fire could be delivered from the opening. No prearranged signal for lifting the "time fire" had been made between the Company Commander and the Artillery Liaison Officer; however, from his observation post on MAHOGANY HILL, the view was such that he could closely determine the right moment to lift the fire. He, being determined to give the dough-boys as much support as possible, waited until the last minute to lift the fire and a few fragments were

hitting the ground among the assaulting troops. Luckily, this did not cause any casualties.

When the 3rd Platoon arrived within approximately fifty yards of Pill Box Number 2, the fire of the Light Machine Gun Section was masked by the advancing troops, and the 2nd Platoon had to shift its fire to the sector of trenches to the right of the pill box and limit it to that portion only. Riflemen of the 3rd Platoon began closing in rapidly, using the automatic rifles and bazookas as the base of fire. Again, hand to hand combat was not necessary. The riflemen moved in and approximately fifteen prisoners were taken. The 3rd Platoon had sustained two casualties.

Now was the period for some reorganization and preparation for a continuation of the attack. The 3rd Platoon was instructed to reorganize in the prepared position to the left of the pill box. The 2nd Platoon was to reorganize in the position to the right. By means of a messenger the Company Commander directed the Support Platoon to move forward to Pill Box Number 2. Each man was to bring all the extra ammunition he could carry from the ammunition point located in the same area. This extra ammunition was to be used to resupply the 2nd and 3rd Platoons.

Men from the Support Platoon began moving forward in groups of two and three carrying the ammunition resupply. This did not take long and by 0900 the Company was administratively ready to continue the attack.

(19)

During this period of reorganization the Company

(19) Personal knowledge

Commander was busily engaged in surveying the enemy positions to the front. It was noted at this time that the elements of the 405th Infantry which should have attacked on the right of the Company had not moved forward. The narrow finger was still clearly defined. With the aid of field glasses, numerous pill boxes and prepared positions could be seen directly in front of BEECK. Beneath the road bed on the left flank there were nine pill boxes, all of which had not been visible from MAHOGANY HILL. The view of the right front was not too good and no enemy pill boxes were clearly visible. However, the Communications Sergeant, observing from the right rear of the pill box, spotted the enemy tank which had been firing on the Company previously and pointed it out to the Company Commander. Its position, in partial defilade, was approximately one hundred yards to the right front of Pill Box Number 2 and it was facing MAHOGANY HILL. Apparently there was no activity in or around the tank.

(20)

The Company Commander hastily directed one of the near by bazooka teams to bring fire on the tank. The bazooka team quickly occupied a firing position near the top of an embankment in rear of the pill box and fired. The gunner scored a direct hit, but evidently little or no damage was done. The tank immediately trained its 88 gun on the pill box and began a rapid fire bombardment, wounding both men of the bazooka team. The Company Commander quickly and definitely decided not to try the bazooka method on the tank again. Since the Artillery

(20) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain Busby
15 December 1949

Liaison Officer had remained in position on MAHOGANY HILL and the Company Commander had no radio contact with him, artillery fire was not immediately available. The communications sergeant made every effort with the 300 radio to contact the Battalion Commander, but without success. However, communication with Company L located on MAHOGANY HILL was good and assistance in the form of artillery fire or anti-tank fire was requested. No definite answer to this request was received and aid in the form requested was not forthcoming.

The tiger tank continued its fire on the pill box and vicinity for a short time, but without causing further casualties. This, in itself, signified the impregnable nature of the enemy's fortifications.

At approximately 1000 Company L came over the crest of MAHOGANY HILL and descended upon the position of Company K without receiving fire of any type. Shortly thereafter the Battalion Commander came running down the hill and also arrived without mishap.

From good observation points in and around Pill Box Number 2, the Company Commander oriented the Battalion Commander on the enemy positions. It was the Battalion Commander's decision to continue the attack after calling for more smoke on the enemy positions to the left front of the Battalion. The original smoke screen had long since disappeared. Companies L and K would attack abreast; Company K on the right. Company M's machine guns were to continue in close general support and the 81 Mortar Platoon was to continue to support from its position in rear of MAHOGANY HILL. The enemy tank,

apparently out of ammunition, would be by-passed. A misting rain had begun; the already soggy soil was turning into mud which was later to become one of the worst enemies of the friendly troops. The Company Commander, in a low voice that no one else could hear, told the Battalion Commander that it would be suicide to continue the attack as planned. The Battalion Commander, his face the very picture of determination and yet his voice betraying a slight hint of sadness said, "Yes, I know, and I will lead the attack". (21)

THE ATTACK ON THE FINAL OBJECTIVE

After the initial success in capturing the two pill boxes the troops were in high spirits and it was not difficult to get the attack moving again toward the objective.

At 1100 the smoke screen was laid down and the attack was under way. The Battalion Commander, without his radio, was well forward between the two companies. Company K moved forward with the 3rd and 2nd Platoons abreast, the 2nd Platoon on the right. The Support Platoon was to follow closely behind the 2nd Platoon to protect the exposed right flank of the Company. Since the distance to the objective was so great that the machine gun section could not adequately support from Pill Box Number 2, it was decided to have them move forward between the 2nd and Support Platoons.

The troops moved forward rapidly not fully realizing what the immediate future held in store. There was no firing since there was nothing close enough to present a definite target and the momentum increased with every step until the troops were almost running. The tiger

(21) Personal knowledge; Statement of Capt. Busby, 28 December 1949.

tank had been by-passed without difficulty, which may have been due to a shortage of ammunition or to a cunningly pre-planned trap.

After the Company had advanced swiftly five hundred yards an enemy machine gun opened up from the right front firing tracer ammunition approximately fifty yards in front of and parallel to the advancing platoons. The 2nd Platoon began to falter in its advance. It was obvious that the fire of the machine gun was ridiculously high and Lt. O'Kier, quick to observe the fact, yelled to the Platoon, "it's high, let's go". The men of the Platoon needed no further encouragement, and again were moving forward rapidly.

At this point the 3rd Platoon continued to move, but veered greatly to the left. This caused a gap between the two platoons which steadily increased as the attack continued. The support platoon following closely also shifted its course slightly to the left. By this time the ever increasing momentum had developed a frenzied tempo. The entire company, racing beneath the tracers of the machine gun, advanced another two hundred yards before the enemy let go with the full force of his fire power. On the left flank and front numerous automatic weapons opened up from the pill boxes beneath the road bed. On the right flank the tracer fire ceased and low grazing fire began mowing the tops of the sugar beet plants. The Company was definitely caught in a vicious three-sided cross fire.

The simultaneous fires of the many enemy pill boxes and emplacements gained a certain amount of surprise

and a heavy toll in casualties was taken before the troops could take advantage of the scanty cover available. The fire of the machine guns was so low that some men were hit while lying flat on the ground. After the Company was well pinned to the ground the enemy dropped in a few mortar rounds for good measure instead of the wholesale bombardment which is usually expected in such a situation. Throughout the remainder of the afternoon the Company was held pinned to the ground. The slightest movement would bring a very accurate burst of machine gun fire zipping through the beet plants. The Company Commander, from his position in the vicinity of the machine gun section, had no means of communication with the platoon leaders or the Battalion Commander. An attempt to contact them by crawling and yelling was unsuccessful. No further efforts were made to continue the attack and nightfall found the company in the same positions in which the attack had been stopped. (22)

THE WITHDRAWAL

At approximately 1900, with the coming of darkness, the Company Commander began a survey of the situation within the Company. It was found that of the four platoon leaders three had been killed and one was badly wounded. Many casualties were lying unattended. Not one weapon which would operate, including that of the Company Commander, was found throughout the Company. In many cases it was difficult to tell whether an object was a weapon or a stick of mud. At this time the Company Commander combed the area in an attempt to contact the Battalion Commander personally, but without

(22) Personal knowledge

success. Also at this time efforts to contact L Company Commander were to no avail.

The Company Commander believed the Battalion Commander to be dead or seriously wounded. He also realized that with the coming of daylight the present positions would be untenable. Therefore, in view of the existing situation, it was the Company Commander's decision to ask higher headquarters for permission to withdraw.

The Weapons Platoon leader of Company L (Lt. Kirby), the only able-bodied officer available, was contacted and informed of the Company Commander's intentions. He was instructed to maintain the present positions and begin an evacuation of casualties to Pill Box Number 2. At approximately 2030 the Company Commander departed for the Battalion Command Post still located in PRÜMMERN.

(23)

Upon arrival at the Command Post it was learned that the Battalion Commander had managed to crawl back to comparative safety and proceed on to the headquarters shortly after dark. The Company Commander related the detailed situation of the Battalion to the Battalion Commander and was in turn informed that a request for withdrawal had already been made to higher headquarters. The request was approved at approximately 2100 hours.

(24)

About 2130 the Company Commander arrived back on the Company position and learned that enemy combat patrols were cutting through the area. Also at this time

(23) Personal knowledge

(24) Personal knowledge: Statement of Capt. Busby
15 December 1949.

the British Forces had begun operating their "artificial moonlight" stations which, in this instance, was working to advantage for the enemy patrols and to a disadvantage for our evacuation and withdrawal operations.

To accomplish the evacuation of the wounded and withdrawal of the other troops, two man patrols were formed to traverse the narrow finger down which the Battalion had attacked. The process was slow as the patrols had to be formed from personnel of Battalion Headquarters Company who were not familiar with the location of the units. The "artificial moonlight" hampered freedom of movement and large enemy combat patrols were an ever present threat. There were very few able-bodied key personnel to assist in this operation. Those who were not killed or wounded were in a frozen and dazed condition, for with the mid-day drizzling rain had come a drop in the temperature. Some men who had been fortunate enough to find cover in a shell crater filled with water had to be assisted to the rear because of their frozen condition. The actual physical accomplishment of this particular phase of the operation consisted of searching the ground for individuals, evacuating those who were wounded and directing the others to move back to the original positions at the line of departure. When the platoon sergeant of the 2nd Platoon (T-Sgt., later 2nd Lt. Orville Barr) was located and directed to move back to the line of departure he was in such a dazed condition that he headed in the direction of the enemy lines.

One of our own patrols, which consisted of the Company Commander and one other man, twice evaded probable

capture by enemy patrols by playing dead. Although the enemy patrols had no solicitude for the wounded, they left them unmolested. Capturing the able-bodied soldiers was, by all indications, their primary mission. The patrols operated throughout the Battalion area with no apparent effort to conceal their activities. This aided our own patrols in detecting and avoiding the enemy, thereby making it at least possible to continue our own efforts to withdraw the Battalion. In effect it became a race between the opposing forces--one endeavoring to salvage man power and the other attempting to prevent it.

At approximately 2400 higher headquarters, upon the earlier request of the Battalion Commander, succeeded in having the "artificial moonlight" turned off. This greatly assisted in the continued evacuation and withdrawal operations. Also, about this time litter teams and jeeps sent by Regiment arrived on the scene. This assistance was sorely needed for the further evacuation of casualties to the rear.

At 0200 all efforts to withdraw every living man had been exhausted and the early morning hours of 24 November found the battered remnants of the Company occupying positions on MAHOGANY HILL.

In summary, it can be concluded that the attack was a failure from the standpoint of capturing the final objective. However, it did serve the purpose of helping to prove that a frontal attack on this position was not the best method to use, and therefore, a change in strategy was necessary. It can, I believe, be assumed

that the pressure of this frontal attack caused the enemy to dispose his forces in a manner that would greatly aid the successful implementation of a different plan of action. The capture of Pill Boxes 1 and 2 gave the friendly forces complete control of MAHOGANY HILL which was an advantage they had not previously enjoyed. Other than approximately twenty-two prisoners taken, exact enemy losses are not known, and it would be difficult to say whether they were sufficient to compensate for our own, which was approximately fifty percent in the number killed, wounded and captured. Among those who were captured was Captain Ernest L. Edwards, the Commanding Officer of Company L. (25)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

ACTION OF 2ND PLATOON IN INITIAL ATTACK

Upon the first burst of "time fire" at H hour the 2nd Platoon began an aggressive assault which never relaxed. Even though the platoon had no direct supporting artillery to aid their assault, there was never a moment's hesitation on the part of any member of the platoon. This can be largely attributed to the dynamic leadership of Lt. O'Kier. It is true that the defenders of the pill box were all on the inside and were attacked from a blind approach, however, this fact was not definitely known at the time. The platoon had to work around the pill box to obtain a position from which fire could be delivered upon the embrasure. After attaining this position the platoon could have fulfilled its secondary mission of covering the box by fire to protect the assault of the

(25) Personal knowledge

3rd Platoon. The platoon did not stop at this point, but continued in maximum pursuance of the ultimate mission using every means at its disposal. By completely capturing the pill box and quickly reorganizing to bring fire on Pill Box Number 2, the overall success of the company was made possible. Due to the time element involved, the initial and continued aggressiveness of the platoon was important. If there had been any delay throughout the operation, the platoon would not have been in position to maintain the advantage gained by the artillery "time fire" on Pill Box Number 2.

ENEMY DEFENSE OF PILL BOXES 1 & 2.

Although the enemy had numerous hastily prepared trenches surrounding these two pill boxes, he failed to properly utilize these positions. As both pill boxes were attacked from the rear and so called "blind side", the enemy should have made every effort to protect these approaches with local security if only two or three men were employed. A few men armed with automatic weapons strategically located just outside of the artillery impact area around Pill Box Number 2 would have materially aided the defense of these strong points. As the attacking platoons crossed the line of departure they were able to concentrate their fire power on the entire position of the enemy at once, thus forcing him to seek constantly the protection of his pill box. The enemy had the right idea, but made the mistake of localizing his defense area to the point of depending almost entirely upon the pill boxes. This allowed our own supporting artillery immediately

to gain the initiative for the assault on Pill Box Number 2. The 2nd Platoon gained the initiative due to the proximity of Pill Box Number 1 to the covered approach up to the line of departure. Also, by aggressively moving and maintaining constant fire on the pill box and vicinity, the platoon was able to maintain the initiative throughout. If the enemy had placed outposts a considerable distance away from the pill boxes the artillery and assault platoons would not have been able to cover his entire position simultaneously by fire. The result would unquestionably have been a greater price paid for the pill boxes.

BAZOOKA VS TANK

In viewing the hasty action of the Company Commander in directing the bazooka fire upon the stationary tank, it is difficult to visualize other action which would have been more appropriate. There was no covered or concealed route by which a better firing position could have been gained. Neither was the distance to the tank out of proportion with the capabilities of the bazooka as the accuracy of the round fired readily indicated. It may have been well not to have fired at the tank at all, as the tank was not delivering any fire on our own position at the time. Still, this passive method would have left the tank in an excellent position to effectively block the further advance of the company. This probability later proved to be a needless worry, but it certainly could not have been foreseen. The tank was slightly on an angle from the

bazooka position when fired upon and the round hit about the mid section of the tank. The extent of damage to the tank could not be determined. It is entirely possible that damage was done to some part of the propelling mechanism; however, the rapidity with which the tank brought fire on our own position after being hit indicated that the turret mechanism and the crew had not been disturbed in the least.

ACTION OF BATTALION COMMANDER IN LEADING ATTACK

Due to the personal courage displayed by the Battalion Commander it is difficult to criticize his actions in physically leading the attack during the final phase. Nevertheless, the results of such procedure if commonly practiced would too often be detrimental to the overall operations of a unit, as it proved to be in this case. For approximately seven hours the Battalion Commander was forced by circumstances to play the role of an individual rifleman and therefore was of no assistance to the battalion in his capacity of Battalion Commander. In analyzing the action of the Battalion Commander, it is quite natural to conclude that there were good reasons for the action. In my opinion, the primary reason was the fact that he knew the mission of the battalion to be extremely dangerous and felt that he must share the danger which he was asking his troops to face. The reluctance of K Company Commander to continue with the original plan of attack, as evidenced by his statement to the Battalion Commander that it would be suicide to continue the attack as planned, no doubt further influenced his decision. There are many times when the

mere presence of higher commanders contribute greatly to the success of a particular operation and as such should always be encouraged. In this particular instance the presence of the Battalion Commander at Pill Box Number 2 placed him in an ideal spot for supervising his battalion and it was not necessary for him to sacrifice this position to lead the attack. If we assume that the Battalion Commander had not led the attack and therefore had been free to exercise his command abilities, the question of what he could have done to aid the battalion then arises. There were no reserves in the battalion which he could have employed to influence the situation. However, it is possible that he could have obtained permission to withdraw the battalion immediately upon the fall of darkness and thus saved some men from being captured by the enemy combat patrols which began actual aggressive operations quite a while after nightfall. Another possibility would have been a high concentration of smoke behind which the battalion could have withdrawn early in the afternoon. The Battalion Commander could also have exerted his influence upon higher headquarters in soliciting aid for his command.

EMPLOYMENT OF ENEMY WEAPONS

In studying this operation, the fact that the enemy initially opened fire with only one machine gun during the final phase of the attack, coupled with the fact that it was firing tracer ammunition unusually high, has become quite significant. The contour of the ground at this particular point was such that in a short time the battalion would have been partially hidden from the fire of the pill boxes on the left flank. The firing

of this machine gun caused a human reflex action of swerving the attacking units, with the exception of the 2nd Platoon, to the left. This tended to canalize the main force of the battalion toward the left of the finger and zone of attack. As a result, the major portion of the Battalion was placed in the direct line of fire from the pill boxes on the left flank. In doing this, the enemy made very skillful use of their exact knowledge of the terrain to gain the maximum benefit from the major portion of their pill boxes in the area. I believe the enemy forces could have brought crippling fire on the Battalion long before they did. However, by waiting for the opportune moment and using simultaneous fires he was able to render a much more crushing blow.

PLAN OF ATTACK ON FINAL OBJECTIVE

The final objective, defined as the high ground beyond BEECK, was much too general for a unit operating among fortified positions. It was known that there were many enemy pill boxes between the final objective and the line of departure. Every means possible should have been used to determine the pattern of these fortifications and a detailed plan of attack should have been formulated on the basis of this information. The line of nine pill boxes beneath the road bed on the left flank of the attack zone were blind except for the embrasures to the front and would have been comparatively easy to eliminate by means of a detailed plan. Since these pill boxes were primarily responsible for the failure to complete the mission, a change in the course of action even after the capture of Pill Box Number 2

would have been justified. By-passing these pill boxes in an effort to go on^{to} the final objective was a serious mistake, even though these fortifications were in the zone of the unit on the left flank. In some cases by-passing of fortified areas may be wise if it will not jeopardize the successful completion of the mission. The lack of plans to bring simultaneous fires on the enemy positions allowed the enemy to concentrate the fires of all pill boxes which brought the entire company under fire at one time.

ENEMY COMBAT PATROLS

During the period after darkness the planning for the withdrawal of the platoons and evacuation of the wounded was very hasty and fragmentary. Nevertheless, the execution of the plans was good and would have been completely successful if it had not been for the activities of the enemy combat patrols. The systematic operations of these patrols cutting through the area greatly hampered our own activities, especially due to the fact that friendly troops had no serviceable weapons with which to engage the patrols. Although there are no accurate figures on the number of friendly troops taken prisoner during this action, it is probable that the number approximated that of the wounded. In view of the daring which the patrols displayed it is likely that the enemy either sensed the precarious situation of the friendly troops or progressively increased their patrolling as they learned the ease with which it could be done.

LESSONS

1. Leaders and individuals of assault platoons must be fully cognizant of their vital role in a coordinated attack on fortified positions.
2. When defending a fortified position concentration of all troops too closely around individual pill boxes should be avoided.
3. The effectiveness of the bazooka against heavy armor is questionable.
4. Battalion and higher unit commanders should always select their battle stations with infinite care, keeping in mind the level of responsibility involved.
5. Automatic weapons skillfully employed in a defensive position will often canalize attacking forces into a desired zone.
6. Detailed plans and organization, including the assignment of special assault teams to individual emplacements, is mandatory in the attack of a fortified position.
7. When an attacking force has been decidedly repulsed, and is conducting a night withdrawal, aggressive combat patrolling can greatly impede the withdrawal operations.