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OPERATIONS OF THE 81-mm MORTAR PLATOON, COMPANY "D",
305TH INFANTRY, (77TH DIVISION) IN SUPPORT OF THE
1ST BATTALION DURING THE ADVANCE ON SHURI, OKINAWA,
7-15 MAY 1945 (RYUKYUS CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of an 81-mm Mortar Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: 81-mm MORTAR PLATOON IN SUP-
PORT OF AN INFANTRY BATTALION ATTACKING A FORTIFIED LINE.

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OPERATIONS OF THE 81 mm MORTAR PLATOON, COMPANY
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INTRODUCTION

As early as August 1943 the invasion of the Ryukyus Islands had been considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Quebec Conference. The specific directive for this operation was issued by Central Pacific Forces on 3 October 1944.

(1)

The basis of our entire strategy in the Pacific had been directed toward the seizure or destruction of the industrial heartland of Japan. In order to accomplish this objective, it was necessary to secure a large base from which the full weight of our air power could be thrown against the Japanese homeland. The seizure of Okinawa would also permit additional operations against the enemy in regions bordering the East China Sea, break Japanese communications to the south, and permit the maintenance of pressure against the enemy with fatal attrition to his air and naval forces. Okinawa would be the ideal base from which to invade Japan proper. (2)

(See Map A) The Germans had not been bombed out of the war and the Japanese had shown to date, a far greater tenacity in fighting than the Germans, so it seemed unlikely that the Japanese would succumb without an invasion of the homeland.

(3)

(1) A-1, p. 56; (2) A-1, p. 57; (3) A-10, p. 355.

Okinawa is sixty five miles long and from two to eighteen miles wide, having a total area of some 485 square miles. It is fairly level in some sections and suitable for the construction of airfields. The island affords excellent anchorages and sufficient area for the staging of major forces. (4)

Operation Iceberg, as the invasion of Okinawa was designated, did not promise to be an easy task. Intelligence reports indicated at least 60,000 troops in well prepared positions, the majority of which were in the southern part of the island. Landing beaches were well fortified according to aerial maps and seven airfields were in existence. Planning was further complicated by the necessity of establishing bases concurrently with the assault. The problem presented by large numbers of enemy civilians also had to be dealt with. (5)

Isolation of Okinawa began well ahead of L-Day, April 1, 1945, the target date for the invasion. All available allied forces were used by Admiral Nimitz to achieve this strategic isolation. Task Force 58 under the command of Vice Admiral Mitscher moved to within 100 miles of Kyushu and launched a carrier assault on the airfields there. In addition to 102 Japanese planes shot down, numerous others were destroyed or damaged on the ground, and base installations heavily damaged. The following day, Kure and Kobe, important naval bases were attacked successfully. Carrier based attacks were made on Skikoku and southern Honshu. The Fifth Air Force struck Formosa every day with 200 bombers and fighters

(4) A-1, p. 58; (5) A-1, p. 59.

from the 18th to 25th March. The Fourteenth Air Force struck Hong Kong and enemy airfields along the coast of China. The XXI Bomber Command, Strategic Air Force, and Task Force 57 struck at enemy air installations in Kyushu, Honshu, Bonins, and northern Ryukyus. (6)

On 23 March, Task Force 58 arrived in the objective area and quickly established absolute control of the air. A vigorous bombardment of enemy defensive installations by warships and carrier planes was instituted. All preparations to repel strong enemy counteraction were put into effect. (7)

The stage was set for what proved to be the last battle of World War II and one of the most bitterly contested.

THE RYUKYUS CAMPAIGN, 26 MARCH - 6 MAY (SEE MAP B)

On 26 March, the Western Islands Attack Group under the command of Major General A. D. Bruce arrived from Leyte. Under cover of a naval and air bombardment, the 77th Division made six separate landings on Kerama Retto, a small group of islands 20 miles west of Okinawa. (See Map B) The Retto was secured on 28 March against only slight resistance and a seaplane base and anchorage was established there. In addition, 350 Japanese suicide boats intended for use in the main invasion of Okinawa were captured or destroyed. (8)

On 31 March, the four low sandy islands of Keise Shima (See Map B) were seized by elements of the 77th Division and two battalions of 155 mm guns were emplaced to support the landings on Okinawa, Easter Sunday morning. Following the Kerama operation, the 77th Division, minus the second bat-

(6) A-11, p. 236; (7) A-1, p. 64; (8) A-3, p. 223.

talion, 305th Infantry who remained as garrison forces on Kerama, reembarked to act as a floating reserve for the main effort on Okinawa. (9)

The newly formed Tenth Army, consisting of the XXIV Corps and the III Amphibious Corps, was designated to make the landing on the Hagushi beaches of the southwestern coast of Okinawa. (See Map B) The XXIV Corps at this time consisted of the 77th and 96th Divisions who were to participate in the landing, as well as the 77th Division in floating reserve, and the 27th Division in area reserve. The III Amphibious Corps was composed of the 1st, 6th, and 2d Marine Divisions with the former two divisions participating in the initial landing and the latter in floating reserve. (10)

During the night of 31 March, 1300 ships of the Joint Expeditionary Force arrived off the beaches of Hagushi, the Demonstration Landing Group took positions off the southeastern coast of the island, prepared to execute the planned feint landing there. Ten battleships, nine cruisers, twenty three destroyers, and a group of 177 fire support craft delivered the preliminary bombardment against the beachhead aided by numerous carrier air craft. This bombardment, heaviest ever to support a landing in the Pacific, commenced twenty minutes before dawn at 0530. At 0830, the first assault troops hit the beaches and encountered absolutely no opposition. By 1240, both Yontan and Kadena airfields had been captured with little or no resistance. Over 50,000 troops came ashore the first day and Tenth Army held a beachhead eight miles long

(9) A-3, p. 238; (10) A-1, p. 62.

and up to three miles in depth. (11) (See Map B)

On 2 April, the 77th Division reached the eastern shore of Okinawa completely severing the enemy's north-south communications. On the 3d, the XXIV Corps started their move south and the III Amphibious Corps drove toward the north. The latter met virtually no opposition but suddenly the XXIV Corps ran into a hornet's nest. The total lack of opposition on the beaches did not mean that the Japs would not make an all out effort to hold the island. The enemy was simply following a new procedure, calculated to hold up our advance long enough to permit Kamikaze planes and suicide boats to destroy our surface fleet. To accomplish this mission of holding as long as possible, the Japanese commander did not defend the beaches but retired to his prepared defenses in the south. (12)

The Kamikaze Corps started a fierce 36 hour assault on the 6th of April which turned out to be an extremely destructive air battle. Nearly 700 Jap planes struck at our shipping and although 383 were shot down, 30 of our ships were sunk or damaged. Throughout the campaign, suicide planes continued to attack our fleet, although never again in such numbers. (13)

The III Amphibious Corps continued to move rapidly in the north but the XXIV Corps hit a highly organized line of defense at Machinato-Kakazu-Tsuwa and was forced to suspend its attack pending the arrival of more supplies and a full determination of the enemy defenses. General Buckner decided to finish off the northern half of the island first, which was in conflict

(11) A-1, p. 67; (12) A-1, p. 68; (13) A-1, p. 69.

with the original plan of conquering the southern half first. By the 13th of April, the III Amphibious Corps had reached the northern tip of Okinawa and by 19 April, operations were virtually concluded in that sector. (14)

The 77th Division, which had been in floating reserve, was ordered to attack and capture the island of Ie Shima, just off the northwestern coast of Okinawa, to secure the operational airfield there. After six days of bitter fighting, the 77th secured the island but at the cost of more than 1100 casualties. (See Map ⁶ 8) (15)

Operations from 9 April to 19 April remained virtually at a standstill. Constant probing of the Jap defenses revealed no weak spots in the Machinato line. About this time General Hodge, the XXIV Corps commander wrote: "It is going to be really tough. There are 65,000 to 70,000 fighting Japs holed up in the south end of the island, and I see no way to get them out except blast them out, yard by yard. Our attack is set to go soon and I think we are ready. The Japs have tremendous amounts of artillery and have used it far more intelligently than I have ever seen them use it to date. Our best estimate shows around 500 or more individual weapons of 75 mm or larger, including some 175 of 105 caliber or larger. The most powerful weapon of long range we have encountered to date is the 150 rifle with a range of 27,000 yards, which fires occasionally upon the two airfields from the vicinity of Shuri. They are using quite a few of the Spigot 320 mm mortars, 250 mm mortars, and aerial bombs up to 250 kilograms fitted as rockets. The terrain is decidedly rugged and cut up with many cliffs and natural and man-made lime-

(14) A-1, p. 70; (15) A-3, p. 281.

stone and coral caves organized over long periods of time."(16)

Because of severe casualties, the 96th Division was pulled out of the line and the 27th Division replaced it on the right flank of the XXIV Corps.

Twenty seven battalions of artillery plus naval guns fired a tremendous preparation on the morning of 19 April, and the XXIV Corps attacked the Machinato line with three divisions abreast. Despite the artillery and naval gun fire and 650 aircraft attacking the enemy fortifications with rockets and napalm fire bombs, only moderate gains were made and no penetration was achieved. The accuracy of General Hodge's statement, mentioned previously, was very apparent after this twenty four hour action.

Day after day the XXIV Corps attacked key terrain features in the Machinato line. Gains were registered in yards and enemy counterattacks were frequent. This unremitting pressure however, finally forced the Japanese to withdraw from his Machinato defenses to the even stronger defense line running between Naha on the west coast to Yonabaru on the east coast with the center of the line anchored at Shuri. (See Map B)(17)

Casualties in the 7th and 27th Divisions had been extremely high due to constant frontal attacks against the enemy fortifications. The 77th Division and the 1st and 6th Marine Divisions were relatively fresh. After considerable debate, it was decided to renew the frontal assault on the Shuri line rather than attempt a landing on the southeastern coast of Okinawa in the rear of the enemy troops. In keeping with this plan, the 1st Marine Division took over the zone of the 27th

(16) A-1, p. 73; (17) A-1, p. 74.

Division and the 77th Division minus two battalions replaced the 96th Division. (18)

Assaults all along the front were made on 1 - 2 May but only limited progress was made. The Jap commander at this juncture decided the time was ripe to launch a full scale counterattack. The Japanese 24th Division moved up from the south to bear the brunt of this offensive. On the night of 3-4 May, another mass suicide raid was carried on by the Jap Air Force in support of the counterattacking ground forces. Small landings in rear of our lines were also attempted. The Jap attack was smashed by our artillery and mortar fire and never succeeded in effective a penetration of more than a few hundred yards. More than 5,000 casualties were inflicted on the Japs in this three day action while our forces suffered only about 1,000 casualties. The Japs again reverted to the defensive and our troops were once more faced with the problem of breaking the tremendous Shuri line. (19)

SITUATION OF THE 305TH INFANTRY

Following the Kerama Retto operation, the 2d Battalion, 305th Infantry was established there as a garrison force. The successful conclusion of the Ie Shima campaign saw the 1st Battalion installed there as a garrison force. The 3d Battalion went into 77th Division reserve on Okinawa. (20)

"The division was very tired from the fierce fighting on Ie Shima and was far below normal fighting strength due to casualties." (21) This applied especially to the 305th Infantry

(18) A-1, p. 76; (19) A-1, p. 77; (20) Personal knowledge;
(21) A-2, p. 78.

who had made the main effort on both Kerama and Ie Shima as well as being last out of the line on Leyte. Constant stevedoring between the Leyte and Ryukyus operations had given little or no time to train the few replacements which had been received. The Regimental commander, executive officer, and all members of the regimental staff had been killed or wounded when a Kamikaze plane sank the transport U.S.S. Henrico, 2 April 1945, in the Kerama anchorage. This necessitated the making up of a new regimental staff from the battalions of the regiment.

When the warning order was issued on 6 May to the 1st Battalion to be prepared to move to Okinawa from Ie Shima, where they were garrisoning that island, the strength of the entire battalion was 24 officers and 800 enlisted men. (22)

The 81 mm mortar platoon in which we are particularly interested had 34 enlisted men, including 10 untrained replacements. The platoon was thoroughly experienced in the mechanical aspects of firing but section and squad leaders had no experience in rapid methods of fire adjustment or the use of distributed fires. The platoon leader, who had joined the battalion near the conclusion of the Leyte campaign, had somewhat alleviated this by blackboard instruction while en-route to the Ryukyus. (23)

At 0400, 7 May, the 1st Battalion went aboard ships and were taken to Okinawa. Coordination somewhere along the line was apparently lacking because the battalion stayed on the beach waiting for trucks to haul them to the front until late afternoon. (24) "A steady rain with a heavy overcast pre-

(22) Personal knowledge; (23) Personal knowledge; (24) Personal knowledge.

vailed throughout the day." (25) At 1500, the trucks finally appeared but due to the extremely muddy roads, progress was slow and the troops were forced to debark from the trucks while still four miles from the line. Relief of the 3rd Battalion, 307th Infantry, was scheduled to have been completed by 1800 but it was 1800 before the 1st Battalion could march to the designated assembly area. It was nearly dark, raining heavily, and sporadic enemy artillery fire was falling around the assembly area. Many of the guides had taken cover from the enemy artillery and could not be found. It was a scene of almost indescribable confusion. Major Eugene Cook, the battalion commander, with characteristic calmness, assembled the guides, and managed to get the three rifle companies into position by 1930. The heavy machine gun platoons of the 3rd Battalion, 307th Infantry stayed in position until relieved by our machine gunners. On orders from Major Cook, the mortar platoon dug their positions in the assembly area. The 1st Battalion completed the relief at 2000. The strong leadership of the battalion commander was never more in evidence than during this relief operation. (26)

The battalion had gone into position as the XXIV Corps right flank. (See Map C) On the right was the 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division and on the left the 3rd Battalion of the 305th. A gap of approximately 400 yards existed between the battalion and the Marines who were echeloned to the right rear leaving our right flank exposed. To the front "the defenses in the Division zone of action were the most

(25) A-4, p. 7, 111, 18; (26) Personal knowledge.

highly organized and tenaciously held of any encountered by the Division in all it's engagements. The terrain with abrupt escarpments and an intricate network of gullies, knolls, and ridges lent itself most favorably to the closely knit defensive system of the Japanese." (27)

ACTION ON 8-9 MAY

It was still raining steadily on the morning of 8 May. Most of the day was spent in consolidating the position that had been occupied the previous night. The mortar platoon was moved forward to the rear of a small knoll approximately 400 yards to the rear of the long ridge occupied by the battalion. Only about 80 rounds of ammunition were available at this time, but some of it was put to excellent use in the afternoon. The intelligence observers, working with Battalion S-2, spotted an emplacement on Ridge 88 (See Map C) with a periscope protruding from it. Mortar fire was quickly adjusted and a direct hit was registered on the middle of the emplacement.

The 7th Marine Regiment on the right flank attacked that day, supported by artillery and machine gun fire from our battalion, but ~~were~~ unable to close the gap. Our right flank continued to be exposed and as a result the men in Company A on the right were unable to leave their holes without receiving enfilade small arms fire. (28)

Supplies were extremely slow in coming up due to the bad road conditions brought on by constant rain. Nearly 15 inches of rain fell during the month of May. (29) At 1700, the mortar platoon received another 200 rounds of ammunition.

(27) A-2, p. 84; (28) Personal knowledge; (29) A-4, 7-111-19.

The mission of the platoon that night was to cover the exposed flank with mortar fire as often as the ammunition situation permitted. A staggered fire schedule was set up which provided some flank protection throughout the night. (30)

Our artillery was handicapped by the command restriction on ammunition which had not been entirely lifted as yet. (31) The 4.2 mortar platoon, which was firing in direct support of 1st Battalion, were also having ammunition difficulties from defective fuzes which had caused muzzle bursts. This platoon was able to fire only about one fourth of its normal ammunition supply. As a result, the battalion commander had to make every round of his supporting fire count heavily.

The 81 mm mortar platoon was also having ammunition difficulties but Battalion S-4 had promised to have 4000 rounds on the position by nightfall. The firing of the night before had uncovered another difficulty. After about 10 rounds, the base plates of the mortars sank so far into the muddy ooze that previously determined data for night firing could not be used. It was necessary to dig the base plates out and set the mortars up beside the emplacements in order to continue firing. It was a dangerous and rather inaccurate procedure. During the day sandbags were procured and the mortars fired from the tops of these sandbags throughout the balance of the campaign. (32)

The platoon leader was faced with communication difficulties as well. The SCR 536 radio refused to function in wet weather. (33) The sound power telephone set up called for a

(30) Personal knowledge; (31) A-9, p. 26; (32) Personal knowledge; (33) A-5, p. 27.

line to each of the two forward observers and one to the platoon leader. It was extremely difficult to keep these lines policed as the platoon was already short handed.

The 1st Battalion continued to mop up in its zone of action throughout 9 May and to make preparations for an attack on the following day. The marines on the right had not been able to advance despite a localized attack. Orders had been sent down from Tenth Army for a general attack all along the front on the following day.

The forward observer for the 81 mm mortars with Company A succeeded in destroying two Japanese spigot mortars with 81 fire late in the afternoon after their positions had been picked up by a rifleman. These 320 mm mortars had been firing into the 3rd Battalion zone all day, but their positions were so cleverly camouflaged it took a long time to find them. The positions were only about 500 yards to the left front of the battalion. The maximum range of these spigot mortars is only 2200 yards, which accounts for the fact that they were in such a forward area. (34) Army G-2 in his report on the Ryukyus operation said that spigot mortars were nearly all destroyed by mortar rather than artillery fire. (35)

The Battalion S-4, true to his promise, brought up the 4000 rounds of mortar ammunition at about 1700 hours but was unable to bring his trucks any further up Highway 5 than a trail junction with Highway 5 about 300 yards from the mortar position. (See Map C) This necessitated a hand carry but

(34) Personal knowledge; (35) A-8, p. 8.

with the help of C Company in reserve, more than 2000 rounds were on the mortar position by nightfall. A staggered firing schedule was once more set up to include the exposed flank and the reverse slopes of Hill 187. (See Map C) Major Cook, the battalion commander, greatly favored heavy mortar concentrations on reverse slopes at night. He was of the opinion that the Japs could be caught out of their caves then and later events showed this reasoning to be exactly correct.

During the night, the battalion was subjected to a very intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage which caused a number of casualties in Company B. (36)

THE CAPTURE OF HILL 187

Hill 187 was the key terrain feature in the battalion zone of action. Orders for its capture had come down from regiment late in the afternoon of 9 May. The plan of attack called for Company A to move on the right along Ridge 88, Company C to move along Ridge 78 on the left with Company B initially in reserve. (37) Preparatory fires were to begin at H-4 with the artillery firing on the forward slopes of Hill 187 and Ridge 78. The 4.2 mortars were to fire preparations on Ridge 88 and the reverse slopes of Hill 187 with the 81 mm mortars firing initially on Ridge 88 and shifting fire to Hill 187. A platoon of medium tanks was to place direct fire at suspected enemy emplacements along the crest of Ridge 88. In addition to the medium tanks, a section of flame throwing tanks and a platoon of engineers were also attached to the battalion.

(36) Personal knowledge; (37) Ridges 88 and 78 were so designated by the author for clarity. These ridges actually had no numbers as far as could be determined.

Preparatory fires began on schedule and the troops moved over the line of departure at 0700 hours. Company C advanced down Ridge 88 for about 100 yards when the leading elements came under machine gun fire from the vicinity of the wooded gully along the base of Ridge 78. This particular gully had not been fired upon during the preparatory fire. It was later determined that the battalion commander had ordered 81 mm fire on the draw during the preparation but the heavy weapons company commander had failed to designate the draw to the mortar platoon leader as a preparation target. The forward 81 observer with Company A adjusted fire and neutralized or destroyed the machine gun position and the advance continued. Company A had advanced about 100 yards along Ridge 78 and Company C had moved nearly 200 yards along Ridge 88 when extremely heavy enemy machine gun and mortar fire from tomb and cave positions further down the ridges stopped the advance. A section of M-4 tanks was sent forward between the two ridges but the soft muddy ground bogged the leading tank down while the rear tank prudently moved back to the road in front of the line of departure. At this time, a Japanese anti-tank gun firing from the vicinity of Hill 187 knocked out the bogged down tank. The second tank returned the fire without success and seconds later was knocked out by the same anti-tank gun. The battalion commander ordered the artillery liaison officer to bring fire on Hill 187 while the 81 mm mortars fired on both ridges 88 and 78. Enemy fire was effectively neutralized but a few minutes later Company A came under fire from the exposed flank on the right. Per-

mission was gained from the Marines to fire in their area but the forward observer with Company A being nearly 500 yards off the line mortar-target had difficulty in adjusting fire and the ridge from which the fire emanated was only partially covered. Only the right two mortars were used on this target, No. 2 section continued to fire on Ridge 78 and No. 3 Section on Ridge 88. The platoon leader adjusted the fires of the No. 2 Section. This was the only time during the entire operation that three sections were used to fire on three separate targets except at night. (38)

Despite the fires of all the supporting weapons in the battalion, no further progress was made until about 1500 hours. A lucky round from one of the 81 mm mortars tore the camouflage from the Jap anti-tank position, which had previously knocked out two of our tanks. Before the Japanese could move the gun out, artillery and mortar fire destroyed the anti-tank gun as well as another anti-tank gun located about 25 yards from the first. The remainder of the tanks were then maneuvered into position and using direct fire knocked out three caves on Ridge 78 and two caves on Ridge 88. The rifle companies were able to advance about 50 yards before enemy mortar and artillery stopped the advance. The battalion commander then decided to consolidate the positions for the night as casualties among the rifle companies had been extremely heavy.

While reorganization was taking place, the Japanese counter-attacked in platoon strength along Ridge 88 but the enemy force was wiped out by mortar and artillery fire before they had advanced more than 100 yards. (39)

(38) (39) Personal knowledge.

A check of the mortar platoon's activities for the day revealed that 4600 rounds of ammunition had been fired. A platoon of Company B in reserve had been used to hand carry mortar ammunition from the supply dump on Highway 5 to the mortar position. The Battalion S-4 had brought up an additional 3500 rounds of ammunition during the day and it was already on the platoon position. In addition, he had procured four SCR 300 radios which was like manna from heaven to the mortar platoon. Eight men had been used all day long to keep the sound power lines in operation and the SCR 536 was still worthless. Communications throughout the balance of the campaign were perfect. One SCR 300 was left with the platoon and one each went to the two forward observers and the platoon leader. (40)

Planned fires for the night of 10 May included 81 mm mortar concentrations along Ridges 88 and 78, the exposed right flank, and the reverse slopes of Hill 187. The fires on the two ridges were registered only 50 yards in front of Companies A and C. It was also planned to have the 60 mm mortars of Company B fire illuminating rounds concurrently with 81 concentrations in an effort to discourage counter-attacks as much as possible. Only about 30% of the illuminating shells worked but several enemy soldiers were killed by riflemen and mortar fire trying to infiltrate the lines as a result of this device. (41)

"Continuous and intense enemy small arms, machine gun, and mortar fire from the concealed positions along the base of Hill 187 localized gains throughout the area." (42)

(40) (41) Personal knowledge; (42) A-7 (6-12 May) p. 2.

The Marines had failed to advance more than 200 yards and the 3rd Battalion on the left had also been stopped 150 yards to the left rear of Company C. With both flanks now exposed, regiment ordered 1st Battalion to hold in place and support by fire the elements on the left and right of the 1st Battalion. More than 2000 rounds of 81 mm mortar were fired each day during 11-12 May in these support missions. Observers were sent directly to the supported elements. Included in the 4000 rounds fired were about 800 rounds of H. E. Heavy ammunition. This ammunition had absolutely no effect on the Jap positions. In addition, firing the heavy rounds with only one section of mortars caused the base caps to leak making both mortars useless. The platoon got along on only four mortars for the balance of the campaign with no reduction in efficiency. (43)

During the nights of 11-12 May, planned fires were coordinated as usual with artillery, 4.2 mortars, and 60 mm mortars. The same heavy concentration were laid on the reverse slopes of Hill 187. A Japanese prisoner who was captured during the attack on 13 May said that Japanese casualties in the sector from mortar concentrations at night had been extremely heavy and movement had been restricted to a minimum.

The 3rd Battalion had made short gains on the left during 11-12 May and the Marines had also advanced but not enough to close the gap between them and the 1st Battalion. Orders came down from regiment on the afternoon of 12 May for the 1st Battalion to once again attack and capture Hill 187. Company B replaced Company A on the right of the battalion, otherwise (43) Personal knowledge.

the situation remained about the same as for the attack order of 10 May. Artillery and 4.2 mortars were to fire a ten minute preparation on Hill 187 and the 81 mm mortars were ordered to fire preparation on Hill 187 and the 81 mm mortars were ordered to fire preparations on both Ridges 78 and 88. No rain had fallen for two days and the ground was firm enough to support both M-4 and flame throwing tanks. (44)

Following the preparatory fire, Company B and C jumped off at 0630 hours. The cave and tomb positions along the ridges had apparently been softened up to a considerable extent by supporting weapons because the two assault companies moved fairly rapidly down the ridges. The two flame throwing tanks moved along the low ground next to the ridges and just in rear of the infantry. This combination proved highly effective until one of the flame throwing tanks was knocked out by a Japanese anti-tank gun firing from the extreme left portion of Hill 187. An infantryman spotted the enemy gun position and an M-4 Tank was brought up from the right rear of Ridge 78 and destroyed the anti-tank gun emplacement.

The assault companies reached the end of the two ridges and moved down on the lower ground to continue the attack on Hill 187, but were stopped by murderous machine gun fire from cave positions at the base of Hill 187. The battalion commander ordered the artillery to put smoke on the objective but a check revealed that only about 50 rounds of smoke was available at the artillery position. The 81 mm mortar platoon had 40 rounds of white phosphorus and the 4.2 mortars about the

(44) Personal knowledge.

same number. It was decided to have the 4.2 mortars fire on the right section of the objective and the artillery on the left section with the 81 mm mortars reinforcing the screen. Despite a fairly strong wind, this plan was successfully carried out and under cover of the smoke the rifle companies advanced to the base of Hill 187. The attached platoon of engineers also came forward under cover of the screen and the job of blowing caves, tombs and emplacements on Hill 187 was begun. By 1700 hours the riflemen had reached the top of Hill 187, reorganization had been completed, and one of the toughest bastions in the Shuri line had been taken. (45)

The battalion had moved 800 yards in the face of determined opposition. The capture of Hill 187 forced the Japanese in the Marine section to pull back and the gap between the XXIV Corps and III Amphibious Corps had been finally closed, but the price in casualties to the 1st Battalion had been a heavy one. Only 127 riflemen remained and the ranks of the machine gun and mortar platoons had been depleted. Four ammunition bearers, two wiremen, and the instrument corporal of the 81 platoon had been killed or wounded during the days activities. At least 25% of the battalion casualties were combat fatigue cases.

In order to strengthen our defensive line for the night against the menace of a Jap counterattack, all available cooks, supply personnel, and clerks in the rear were brought up at 1800 hours and placed in positions on the line.

Following the capture of Hill 187, the 81 mm mortar

(45) Personal knowledge.

platoon displaced by section to new firing positions behind a spur of Ridge 78. The Battalion Supply Dump was also moved forward to a position just west of Highway 5 about 200 yards from the new mortar firing positions. Inasmuch as the platoon had expended 3600 rounds during the day, the movement of the supply dump simplified the problem of hand carrying ammunition. (46)

THE CAPTURE OF HILL 62 AND RIDGE 59.

The terrain in front of the battalion from Hill 187 south looked very similar and just as rugged as the ground which had just been captured. On the left of the battalion front was a C shaped ridge which extended about 400 yards more or less perpendicular to our axis of advance. In the center was a small steep knoll separated from a larger knoll by a very deep draw. The right section was fairly flat and offered little in the way of cover or concealment. Just on the east of Highway 5 in the Marine sector was a continuation of the long low ridge which was sparsely wooded at this particular section of it. About 1300 yards to the front, the rubble which had been the city of Shuri could be plainly seen.

Hoping to catch the enemy disorganized, the attack was ordered to continue the next day with the objectives of capturing Ridge 59 and Hill 62. The attack order called for Company A to seize Hill 62, Company C to capture Ridge 59, with Company B in reserve. No preparatory fires were scheduled for the attack because Major General Bruce, the division commander felt that these fires only served as a warning to the enemy.

(46) Personal knowledge.

As soon as our fires began, the Japs would return to their caves and as soon as the fires lifted they would sally forth again unharmed and ready to defend the ground.

It rained heavily on the night of 13 May but fortunately the Japanese did not use the miserable weather as a cover for a counterattack. Battle weary infantrymen with their ranks reduced to about platoon strength for each company prepared to resume the attack on the Shuri defenses. All the rifle platoons in the battalion were now being led by sergeants or corporals.

The ground was once again a mire due to the heavy rain and would not support tanks. The 4.2 mortars had no ammunition at the mortar position. The situation as a whole did not augur well for the success of the attack. (47)

The assault rifle companies moved over the line of departure at 0800 hours and advanced 200 yards without a shot being fired by the enemy. Surprise had been effected but the Japs quickly recovered and poured machine gun and mortar fire on the advancing troops who were forced to take cover. Two of the Jap machine gun positions along Ridge 59 were destroyed by 81 mortar fire but the troops were still unable to move without being met by enemy fire. Artillery time fire was used on the ends of the two objectives but enemy fire continued relentlessly.

The battalion commander, determined not to lose the ground already gained, ordered the 81 mm mortar platoon leader to place what might be termed a rolling barrage in front of Company C. This promised to be a tricky business for it necessitated (47) Personal knowledge.

ed placing fire only 50 yards in front of the troops and to keep moving the barrage ahead as the troops advanced. The mortar platoon leader went forward to the leading elements of Company C and after an extremely hasty visual reconnaissance decided to use two mortars on this mission. He adjusted one mortar about 50 yards in front of the Company and the second about 100 yards in front of the Company with one mortar firing at a range of 700 yards and the second at 750 yards. At these ranges, two turns of the elevating crank would move the impact of the round about 25 yards. Artillery continued to pour fire on Hill 62 to neutralize the enemy position in that area. Company C moved very slowly behind this curtain of mortar fire. The Japs moved back into their cave positions to get out of the fire and became easy prey for flame throwers and satchel charges. Seven caves were taken care of in this fashion as the advance moved slowly forward. The mortars were each firing at a rate of about 10 rounds per minute. Fortunately, because the ground was so wet, the explosions did not obscure the vision of the mortar platoon leader. Some rounds fell as close as 25 yards to the troops and three riflemen were wounded by fragments. It was a case of the lesser of two evils and in 45 minutes Ridge 59 had been secured. From the positions on Ridge 59, the rifle troops were then able to support by fire the movement of Company A. The Japs offered only minor resistance from Hill 62 and it was quickly secured after the capture of Ridge 59. (48)

These two positions marked the furthest point of advance

(48) Personal knowledge.

of the 1st Battalion in the Shuri line. Consolidation of the positions occupied the greater portion of 15 May and although the battalion stayed in the line until 21 May, no further gains were made of any consequence although some attacks were launched.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

It is not the purpose of this writer to attempt to criticize the overall conduct of the Okinawa campaign. Whether it would have been better to have made a beachhead on the southern tip of Okinawa instead of a frontal attack against such strongly defended positions is an extremely debatable matter and not within the province of this writer. A great many logistical considerations entered into the decision made by the Tenth Army Commander to continue the frontal attack. A thorough analysis of this decision has been made by our top ranking Army officials and the general conclusion seems to be that General Buckner made the only possible decision.

Instead of dwelling on the big picture, let us look at the activities of the 1st Battalion, 305th Infantry during the attack on the Shuri line. The 1st Battalion, vastly under-strength, had moved forward 1400 yards in 8 days. Measured by ordinary standards, this might be termed a snails pace, but no ordinary yardstick can be applied to this particular situation. We must first consider the fact that "during the period 8 April - 31 May, 190,000 troops fought on an 8,000 yard front with gains averaging 133 yards a day". (49) Another factor that limited gains in our area was the fact that the regiment never had the services of the second battalion who remained in

(49) A-1, p. 84.

garrison in the Keramas. This made it necessary for the 1st Battalion to remain constantly in the line and never have that few hours rest which a reserve battalion enjoys. Being constantly in the line also added greatly to the number of combat fatigue cases which constituted 25% of the Battalion casualties. Throughout a great portion of this period the right flank of the battalion was exposed which restricted movement greatly. Tanks could not be employed to any great extent because of the terrain and extremely muddy ground. Artillery and 4.2 mortar ammunition was limited especially the latter. Rifle platoons were led by sergeants and corporals during the latter part of the eight days. The rifle companies were no larger than ordinary rifle platoons in the closing days of the period and even at the beginning were considerably understrength. Add all these factors together plus the fact that a determined fanatical enemy from a heavily fortified defense line sold every yard of ground at a terrific price and the 1400 yards gained by the 1st Battalion grows in significance.

Throughout the period, the battalion commander demonstrated time and time again an intelligent use of supporting weapons. He squeezed the last ounce of fire support from the weapons which he had available. He insisted on a minute coordination between the artillery liaison officer, 4.2 mortar platoon leader, heavy weapons company commander, and 81 mortar platoon leader. This coordination paid excellent dividends especially well illustrated by the combined smoke mission which aided so materially in the capture of Hill 187.

During the period 7-15 May the mortar platoon fired 19,000

rounds of ammunition. In every sense of the word, the 81 mm mortars were the battalion commander's own artillery. He employed them as artillery on many occasions with splendid results. He used them for close in supporting fire, to supplement artillery fires and on point and area targets. It is extremely doubtful if the 1st Battalion could have accomplished as much as it did without the support furnished by the 81 mm mortars.

It is admitted that the situation was an ideal one for the use of mortars. In a fast moving situation, the mortars could never have given such a volume of fire support. Too much credit cannot be given to the battalion supply officer who made the ammunition available at all times.

The campaign illustrated the need for a fire direction center to facilitate control and speed up adjustment. It also illustrated that four mortars can perform the work of six in almost any given situation. The platoon never functioned really effeciently until SCR 300 radios were supplied.

Captain Frank O'Hara, Commanding Company C, made the statement that the men in his company preferred close in 81 mm mortar fire to the more advanced artillery fire support. Captain Hugh Flowden, Commanding Company B, stated that he had never realized the potentialities of mortar fire until the Shuri advance. There can be no doubt that the intelligent and continuous use of the 81 mm mortars was a decisive factor in the success of the 1st Battalion.

LESSONS

1. A coordinated fire support plan is a most essential

factor in the attack of infantry units.

2. The 81 mm mortars, properly employed, can be used in place of artillery in some instances and to supplement of the fire of artillery in other cases.

3. Troop safety limits for 81 mm mortar fire could safely be reduced to 100 yards.

4. More than four mortars in the 81 platoon is a waste of man power that can be more effectively utilized in carrying ammunition.

5. The SCR 536 radio cannot be effectively used in wet weather.

6. The addition of SCR 300 radios to the 81 platoon increases the efficiency of the platoon materially.

7. H. E. Heavy ammunition is useless against permanent type fortifications and will cause the mortar base cap to leak if too many rounds are fired in succession.

8. A modification of the mortar base plate to prevent it settling deeply in muddy ground is desirable.

9. The closer the supporting fire falls in front of advancing troops, the more effective is it's use.

10. The fire direction center now incorporated into the set up of the mortar platoon should aid materially in the adjustment and control of mortar fire.

11. Forward observers should be given more training in off-line sensing.

12. An exposed flank makes a position untenable and restricts manuever.