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OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION, 28TH INFANTRY REGIMENT,
(8TH DIVISION) IN THE RUHR POCKET, VICINITY OF WISSEN,
GERMANY, 31 MARCH - 5 APRIL 1945
(CENTRAL EUROPE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Regimental Headquarters Observer)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph deals with the operations of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, 8th Infantry Division, in the Ruhr Pocket during the period 30 March to 5 April 1945.

In order that the reader may have a better perspective of this operation, a review of events leading up to the encirclement and capture of the industrial Ruhr Valley seems desirable.

On 7 March 1945 the railway bridge across the Rhine River at Remagen was captured intact by elements of the 9th Armored Division operating in the zone of the First Army. Inasmuch as the Rhine was considered by military experts to be the greatest water obstacle in western Europe, the importance of this event needs no elaboration. The fact that the possibility of such an occurrence had not been overlooked enabled the American forces to effect an immediate and steady build-up of troops within the bridgehead in spite of intense artillery fire and frequent air attacks directed by the enemy upon the bridge itself. As a matter of fact, the bridge sustained some direct artillery hits which necessitated suspension of traffic over it at times and contributed to the weakening of the structure so that it finally collapsed under its own weight on 17 March. However, by this date other bridges and ferries had already been put into operation in the area of the bridgehead. (1)

By 24 March the bridgehead had been expanded so that its perimeter ran generally along the line junction of Rhine and Sieg Rivers - Buisdorf - Uckerath - Windhan - Berscheid, thence generally south to the Rhine again near Neuweid. (See Map A) The next day, 25 March, First Army launched a coordinated attack to effect a break-out from the bridgehead. This attack, which was made by three Corps, VII Corps on the left, III Corps in

(1) A-1, p. 19, 21, 24, 26, 27, 28, 34; A-2, p. 248

the center, and V Corps on the right, was continued to accomplish the First Army mission defined by a letter of instruction dated 25 March from Twelfth Army Group, that of seizing a bridgehead from the Rhine along the Sieg River to Siegen and thence south to Giessen. (See Map A) By 28 March some units had reached the eastern objective, the line between Siegen and Giessen. (2)

While operations continued in the Remagen bridgehead, units of Twenty-first Army Group, on the night of 23 March, launched a river-crossing assault farther down the Rhine in the vicinity of Wesel. This assault was augmented on 24 March by Allied airborne landings east of the Rhine in the same general area. Operations in this bridgehead were successful though less spectacular than in the Remagen bridgehead. The area was interlaced by numerous waterways over which many bridges had been destroyed. However, on 28 March enemy resistance began to disintegrate and more rapid advances were made by Twenty-first Army Group. (3)

By 29 March certain factors had become evident which were to influence further operations. Those factors may be summarized as follows:

(a) After the bridgehead had been established at Remagen it seemed likely to the enemy that the main Allied force would be directed to the northeast across the Sieg River and to the rear of the Ruhr area. (4)

(b) As a result of the above estimate by the enemy, comparatively stiffer resistance was encountered on the north flank of the First Army, indicating that more rapid progress could be made on the right. (5)

(c) Although advances in the Anglo-American bridgehead to the north had been slower initially, the increased

(2) A-1, Map No. 1; A-1, p. 41, 43, and 47 (3) A-2, p. 255 and 257; A-3, p. 41, 42, and 43 (4) A-3, p. 37 (5) A-1, p. 48

tempo of operations in that area beginning on 28 March, plus the availability of an excellent road net in the zone of Twelfth Army Group, indicated that an encirclement of the Ruhr Valley and an early link-up with units of the Ninth Army were possible. (6)

Whereas the previous plan of First Army was to advance to the northeast in the direction of Kassel, plans were now made to attack almost due north from the Siegen - Giessen line. Accordingly, on 29 March, the 3rd Armored Division, operating under VII Corps, sprang out from the vicinity of Marburg, and on 1 April made contact with elements of XIX Corps of Ninth Army at Lippstadt. (7)

From a strategic point of view, the situation, with relation to the pocket thus created, was more or less "cut and dried." The great industrial Ruhr Valley had been cut off from the rest of Germany, and the estimated 150,000 troops trapped therein were lost to the enemy for the remainder of the war. (Actually the number of troops in the pocket proved to be nearer 350,000 and comprised more than one third of the German forces on the western front.) However, from a tactical standpoint, the Ruhr Pocket meant a state of fluid warfare, in the true sense of the word, from the time the encirclement was completed until all enemy troops therein had been killed or taken prisoner. (8)

Operations within the Pocket were characterized by the following:

(a) Bold advances by American units, operating usually at battalion strength, and often as even smaller forces, making rapid advances and paying somewhat less than normal heed to protection of their flanks and rear.

(b) Delaying action by the enemy, varying all the way from very feeble resistance to an almost fanatic

(6) A-1, p. 48; A-3, p. 41, 42 (7) A-1, p. 48, 51; A-3, p. 42
(8) A-1, p. 52; A-3, p. 43

determination to hold occupied positions.

(c) Repeated local enemy counterattacks, also of varying intensity, usually of company strength or smaller, and often supported by armor.

In summarizing events leading up to the operation with which we are concerned, the most significant factor to note is the fluid situation which resulted from the encirclement of the Ruhr Valley - particularly from the standpoint of tactical operations by the lower echelons. The operation to be discussed herein will support this statement.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Except for the last few days of the operations thus far considered, the 8th Division had occupied positions on the west bank of the Rhine south of Cologne. On 29 March the Division was relieved by the 86th Division, and the following day, after crossing the Rhine south of Bonn, the 28th Infantry relieved elements of the 1st Division in the zone of VII Corps. In so doing the regiment went into the line approximately three miles south of the Sieg River on the right flank of the 78th Division, which at this time held a line extending about 30 miles along the south bank of the same river. Concurrently the 1st Division sideslipped to the east and went into action on the right flank of the 8th Division. (9)

The relief of the 1st Division elements in the zone assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, was completed in the late afternoon of 29 March. The troops of the 1st Division in this area, apparently anticipating relief, had temporarily lost contact with the enemy and could supply no information of value as to his dispositions. The battalion commander, desirous of regaining contact and of learning as

(9) A-1, p. 46 and 49; A-5, p. 206

much as possible about the enemy, promptly ordered motorized and foot patrols out to the front in an attempt to locate him. (10)

Reports by these patrols, which had probed to within about fifteen hundred yards of the Sieg River without encountering any resistance, indicated that the assigned area south of the river could be cleared with no difficulty. However, operations that night were limited, and the troops occupied small villages between the river and the line on which relief of the 1st Division had been completed. Plans were made for the continuation of operations the next day. (11)

TERRAIN ANALYSIS

Before carrying the discussion of operations further, a brief analysis of the terrain in this area will serve to benefit the reader.

To the military eye, the most important terrain feature in the zone of the 2nd Battalion is the Sieg River. The terrain on either side of the river is characterized by steep hills rising abruptly from the river itself. Numerous tributaries have cut deep ravines between the hills, which are, for the most part, thickly wooded by evergreen trees. Normally the river, in most places, is less than fifty yards wide and there are numerous places where it could be forded in spite of its steep banks. However, during periods of frequent or heavy rains - and such conditions prevailed during the period of this operation - the river reaches flood stages rapidly.

An excellent highway parallels the river on the north side and a double track railroad weaves through the narrow valley, crossing and recrossing the river at many points. Both the road and railroad connect many industrial towns in the valley of the Sieg, and there is an excellent road net in the area in spite of the rough terrain. The only town in the 2nd Battalion zone worthy of mention, other than for this small-scale operation, is Wissen, where there is a sizable marshalling

(10) Personal Experience (11) Personal Experience

yard, a railroad roundhouse, and several small industrial plants. There are, however, many small villages in the area.

From a military standpoint, the terrain is particularly well adapted to defense. The tree-covered hills, which are criss-crossed by firebreaks, offer plenty of cover and concealment as well as good long-range observation. On the other hand, there are many covered routes which would be available to an attacker and his observation, naturally, would compare favorably with the defender's. All points considered, the advantage of the terrain lies with the defender.

THE MISSION

At this time, 30 March, the mission of VII Corps was to continue the attack to the north to contact the Ninth United States Army. The Corps had no left boundary east of the Rhine, and the main effort was being made on the Corps' right flank. The mission of the 8th Division was simply to attack to clear the enemy from the area within its zone. The zone of the 28th Infantry was approximately 10 miles wide, and of this the 2nd Battalion was assigned the left $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles, roughly, which actually contained about 8 miles of river line. The 1st Battalion was assigned the remainder of the regimental front, while the 3rd Battalion was in reserve. (See Map B)

In furtherance of its mission, the 2nd Battalion, during the daylight hours of 30 March, cleared the enemy from the area within its zone with the exception of the town of Wissen. Extensive patrolling was carried out, reconnaissances were made, key terrain features were outposted, and plans were formulated for a night attack on Wissen.

THE NIGHT ATTACK ON WISSEN

This attack was planned by the battalion commander, and he accompanied the troops into the town, though only a rifle company participated in the attack, which was executed in accordance with the plan.

At about 2000 hours Company "F", accompanied also by an artillery forward observer, moved from its assembly area west of Altenbrendebach in a column of platoons and proceeded northwest along the road to Schonstein, passing through a road block which had been established by elements of Companies "G" and "H". (Point "A", Map C) Upon reaching Schonstein the company turned left, climbed the steep hill to the southeast of Wissen, skirting the town, and proceeded along the road into town from the south. Surprise was gained and the company was in the town before they were discovered. There was only a small amount of firing, and several German prisoners were taken, mostly in groups of two's or three's moving about the town. Shortly after the presence of the Americans was discovered heavy artillery and mortar fire began falling in Wissen. ^R Later that night two patrols crossed the river in the vicinity of Schonstein. The first, crossing at about 2200 hours, (Route P, Map C) reached the line of buildings on the far bank, met no opposition, and returned. Not satisfied with the meager information this patrol brought back, the battalion commander ordered a second patrol dispatched. This one crossed at the same point (Route Q, Map C) at about 0100 hours, reached the railroad track, and then proceeded downstream along the tracks to the roundhouse, where it received considerable small arms fire. It then returned, bringing information of more value than had been gathered by the first patrol. In the first place, it ascertained that all bridges across the river in this area had been destroyed with the exception of a small footbridge alongside the railroad bridge. Secondly, it reported that the river could not be forded by vehicles of any type, and, thirdly, the presence of the enemy on the far shore was established. (12)

The next morning "F" Company, with one platoon of heavy machine

(12) Statement of Lt. M. B. Westhoff, Bn. S-2, 5 Jan. 48; Statement of Capt. Hugh Fischer, Commander "H" Company, 4 Jan. 48; and Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander "E" Company, 9 Jan. 48

guns attached, and utilizing motorized patrols, completed the clearing of that portion of the town south of the river, taking several more prisoners in the process. Arrangements were made to maintain contact with the 78th Division by patrols east of Wissen. (12)

THE SITUATION ON 31 MARCH

Thus by the morning of 31 March the enemy had been cleared from the 2nd Battalion zone south of the Sieg River. The troops were disposed as follows: (See Map C) "E" Company, with one machine gun platoon attached, was manning a series of outposts on key terrain features east of Wissen and south of the river. "F" Company, with one machine gun platoon attached, was occupying Wissen. "G" Company was in reserve in the vicinity of Altenbrendebach, where the battalion CP and aid station were located, while "H" Company, less two heavy machine gun platoons, was located on the edge of Schonstein. A battalion observation post had been established in the area held by "E" Company. With these dispositions, and by intensive patrolling, it was planned to hold the ground within the assigned zone.

THE NEW MISSION

The situation of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, at this time, spread as it was over a broad front, seemed to dictate that its role would be one of holding the river line just reached. However, such a role was to be of short duration. During the late afternoon of 31 March, the 8th Division received a new mission, that of pushing across the Sieg River to establish a bridgehead in order that the east - west road along the river could be used. In a message from Headquarters, 8th Infantry Division, dated 311930 March, the 28th Infantry was given its mission. Briefly the task assigned to this regiment was to cross the Sieg River during the night of 31 March - 1 April, seize the high

(12) Knowledge acquired by conversation with participating personnel at the time of the operation and statement by Capt. Hugh Fischer, Commander "H" Company, 4 Jan. 48

ground between the Sieg and Brol Rivers, (the latter being a tributary of the Sieg, joining it at Wissen) and be prepared to continue to seize the high ground to the northeast. No bridging equipment was to be available to the regiment and no engineer support above one attached platoon could be expected. (13)

THE REGIMENTAL PLAN

The regimental commander issued his attack order at approximately 2030 hours, 31 March. His plan, briefly stated, was as follows:

1. "The 2nd Battalion on the left of the regimental sector was ordered to cross the Sieg River in the vicinity of Wissen, seize and hold the north section of Wissen now occupied by the enemy, seize and hold 'Hill 321' and be prepared to continue the attack to the north. No efforts were to be made to hold the ground between Wissen and 'Hill 321'." (14)

2. The 3rd Battalion was to pass through the line now held by the 1st Battalion, cross the river west of Betzdorf, seize the high ground north of the river in that area and be prepared to continue the attack to the north. (15)

3. The 1st Battalion was to hold its present positions, assist the 3rd Battalion in its crossing, and be prepared to cross the river in the vicinity of Kirchen the following night to seize the high ground north of the river in that area. (16) (See map B)

4. "Cannon Company was attached to the supporting Field Artillery." (17)

5. "Anti-Tank Company and the I & R Platoon remained under regimental control." (18)

(13) A-6; A-7, p. 65; A-8, p. 8 (14) A-8, p. 9 (15) A-8, p. 9
(16) A-8, p. 9 and 10 (17) A-8, p. 10 (18) A-8, p. 10

6. "One platoon of Company 'B', 644 Tank Destroyer Battalion, was attached to each battalion." (19)

7. "Time of attack for the 2nd Battalion was set for 2300 hours. Missions of both the 2nd and 3rd Battalions were to be accomplished by daylight 1 April 1945." (20)

8. "No artillery preparation would be fired except on call of the battalion commander." (21)

PLAN OF THE 2ND BATTALION

The battalion commander of the 2nd Battalion issued his attack order at approximately 2130 hours. Due to the fact that there had been no opportunity for a detailed reconnaissance, and since there was little time remaining before the attack was scheduled, the plan of attack was necessarily simple. The crossing site selected was the footbridge which had been discovered the previous night. "G" Company, with one heavy machine gun platoon attached, was to cross first, followed by "F" Company. These companies were to attack in column along a trail which a map reconnaissance indicated would lead along the nose of the ridge to Hill 321. "E" Company, with one heavy machine gun platoon attached, was to move from its positions on the high ground south of the river, leaving one small outpost there, and hold Wissen after "F" Company crossed the river. The mortar platoon of "H" Company was to remain in battery positions in the vicinity of Schonstein to support "E" Company. There was to be no artillery preparation. (22)

THE RIVER CROSSING

As was to be expected under the circumstances, the attack was approximately 30 minutes late jumping off. Immediately upon crossing the river "G" Company encountered hostile small arms fire from the railroad yards. This was shortly followed by mortar fire directed at the crossing

(19, 20, 21) A-8, p. 10 (22) Personal Knowledge; Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander "E" Company, 9 Jan. 1948; Statement of Capt. Hugh Fischer, Commander "H" Company, 4 Jan. 1948

site. However, the crossing continued, and slow but steady progress was made as the intensity of the small arms fire decreased. The inaccuracy of the maps in use, plus the fact that numerous fire breaks joined the trail at varying angles, made maintenance of direction difficult. This condition was partially offset, however, by the conformation of the terrain, a map reconnaissance having revealed that an advance up the nose of the ridge would lead to the objective. Several automatic weapons were encountered along the trail, but these withdrew in the face of marching fire by the leading elements of "G" Company. The objective was reached at approximately 0230 hours and a form of all-around defense was established. Each company was disposed in a horseshoe-shaped line, with "G" Company on the eastern portion of Hill 321 and "F" Company on the western part. The battalion observation post (more frequently referred to by the 2nd Battalion as the forward Command Post) was located in a house which was situated in a saddle between the company positions. (See Map D) No attempt had been made to lay wire forward, but it was laid from the OP to the two companies. (23)

"E" Company, in the meantime, occupied positions previously held by "F" Company in Wissen. The battalion command post was also moved into the town. From the time the crossing began the town was subjected to intense artillery and mortar fire; and after the building which housed the command post received two or three direct hits, this installation was moved again at approximately 0300 hours to Schonstein. (24)

THE COUNTERATTACK

When radio contact was again established with the forward command group, it was learned that the forward Observation Post was being counter-attacked. At about 0330 hours a group of about 70 Germans ambushed and captured a small outpost about 250 yards south of the forward OP. They

(23) Knowledge acquired by the writer from participants at the time of the operation; statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly 9 Jan. 1948; statement of Capt. Hugh Fischer 4 Jan. 1948; statement of Lt. M. B. Westhoff 5 Jan. 1948 (24) Personal Knowledge; Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly 9 Jan. 1948

then surrounded the building in which the command group was housed and closed in from all sides simultaneously. The guards outside the building were overpowered before they had an opportunity to resist or give an alarm. While some of the enemy entered the house to capture the personnel inside, others located the telephone line to "F" Company, which they promptly cut. Another group outside the building found the antenna of the artillery liaison radio which was protruding from a window and, in their efforts to pull the radio out through the window, engaged in a tug-of-war with the Artillery Liaison Officer. The latter found himself on the losing side as he was captured from the rear by the group of Germans who had entered the building. The remaining Americans in the house, by this time, had been aroused and began barricading doors leading into other rooms. Realizing that they were outnumbered and that to employ their weapons would mean suicide, they withheld their fire. The barricades were eventually reduced by the Germans and the assembling and disarming of Americans began. During this confusion, however, the battalion commander managed to reach the telephone to "G" Company, which the Germans had overlooked.

"Start shooting," was his command to the lieutenant who answered.

"Where do you want us to shoot?" the lieutenant asked.

"I don't give a damn where you shoot, but start shooting. The Krauts have the OP surrounded," was the battalion commander's reply.

In the meantime the Americans were being herded into the basement of the building. The battalion commander, realizing that there was nothing to lose, decided to carry his ruse to the limit by telling the Germans that there was no point in taking the Americans prisoner - that they themselves were surrounded. While this discussion was in progress, the "Start Shooting" command was complied with and the firing began. Simultaneously an American soldier in the attic, which the Germans had

failed to search, dropped a hand grenade out the window into the midst of the enemy below, killing and wounding several of them. Also another platoon of "G" Company, which had been alerted, began to arrive on the scene and the Germans conceded that it was they who were surrounded. The situation was then reversed, and the remaining Germans, numbering about fifty, were placed in the cellar. The OP, of course, resumed operations. (25)

OPERATIONS 1 APRIL TO 4 APRIL

Shortly after dawn that morning, 1 April, approximately a platoon of the enemy emerged from the woods about 800 yards northeast of Wissen moving toward the town. They were observed by some 81 mm mortar observers who quickly brought a heavy concentration of fire down upon them. The Germans dispersed and withdrew into the woods. However, fearing that this was only a reconnaissance patrol and that a counterattack would soon follow, the battalion commander ordered "E" Company to withdraw from Wissen and take up positions in Schonstein. The expected attack did not materialize, and the entire area remained comparatively quiet for the remainder of the day. (26)

During the day a radio relay station was established at the rear OP location south of the river. (See Map D) This was necessitated by difficulty in maintaining radio communications with the forward elements, a condition apparently due to the irregularities of the terrain. From this relay station, with brief exceptions, radio contact was thereafter continuously maintained with all units of the battalion. (27)

Also plans were made on 1 April to get food and ammunition to the troops north of the river. The battalion S-4 made a reconnaissance of the river line and selected a route forward. A crossing site was chosen about 2500 yards due south of Hill 321. From this point a gravel road

(25) Knowledge acquired by the writer at the time of the operation; statement of Lt. M. B. Westhoff 5 Jan. 1948 (26) Personal Knowledge; Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander "E" Company, 9 Jan. 1948; Statement of Capt. Hugh Fischer, Commander "H" Company, 4 Jan. 1948 (27) Personal Knowledge

extended about half way to the troop location and a trail continued into the position. (See Map D) Several considerations influenced the selection of this supply route. Some of these were as follows:

(a) A crossing site which was fordable by vehicles was very desirable for the evacuation of the wounded as well as for hauling supplies forward.

(b) The route followed by the troops in the initial crossing could not be used because of the absence of a suitable crossing point, the ruggedness of the terrain, and the known presence of the enemy along the route.

(c) It was known that resupply would have to be carried out during the hours of darkness. The route selected, in addition to being the most direct route, would be the easiest to follow. (28)

As a result of the severe attack by the enemy on the forward Observation Post the battalion commander ordered one platoon from "E" Company to join Companies "F" and "G" on Hill 321 on the night of 1 April. This platoon was to follow the supply route selected by the S-4 and was to move forward with the carrying party to protect it against an expected attack. Upon arrival on the hill it was to be attached to "F" Company. (29)

The platoon and carrying party departed from the high ground south of the river at approximately 2000 hours. They progressed without incident until they reached a point approximately half way between the river and Hill 321. There they were hit by an attack by enemy infantry from the woods to their left flank. Fortunately this attack was not carried out as aggressively as the attack on the OP; however, in repelling it a portion of the supplies were abandoned. (30)

Shortly after dawn the following morning, 2 April, the enemy launched

(28) Personal Knowledge (29) Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander Co. "E", 9 Jan. 1948; Personal Knowledge (30) Knowledge acquired by conversation with participating personnel at time of the operation

a second attack on the forward OP. This attack, of approximately company strength, came from the southwest and was pushed vigorously for approximately an hour. The enemy suffered over fifty per cent casualties, and the last German to carry on was killed approximately 25 yards from the building as he prepared to fire a panzerfaust into the observation post. (31)

The remainder of the day was comparatively quiet on Hill 321. However, our patrols operating in Wissen discovered that the enemy had again occupied the town, presumably having come in during the night from either the southwest or from the north. Accordingly, "E" Company, less one platoon, was ordered to retake and occupy the town, which it did with little difficulty. (32)

Meanwhile a prisoner captured by the returning carrying party stated upon interrogation that a force of about 700 Germans was in the woods to the west of the supply route and that they planned to seize the supply route after dark on the night of 2 April. It was difficult to credit the enemy with such a large number of troops in that area, but the battalion commander did not feel that the report could be ignored. Since he did not feel that he could afford to employ any troops of his battalion to counter this thrust he requested the regimental commander to furnish reinforcements. At this time all three battalions of the 28th Infantry were engaging the enemy north of the river. However, the mine platoon of the Anti-Tank Company was made available. Also one section of quadruple-mount Cal. .50 anti-aircraft guns was placed at the disposal of the battalion commander for that night to use as he saw fit. (33)

In accordance with the prearranged plan for the employment of these troops, the mine platoon crossed the river at approximately

(31) Statement of Lt. M. B. Westhoff, Bn. S-2, 5 Jan. 1948

(32) Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander "E" Co., 9 Jan. 1948

(33) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lt. M. B. Westhoff 5 Jan. 1948

2145 hours and proceeded without incident along the supply route to the group of buildings where the gravel road ended. Here they organized a defensive position in and around the buildings. (See Map D) This platoon was also to act as a counterattacking force in case the carrying party was attacked. The anti-aircraft guns moved into position on the high ground south of the river (Map D) and, from fire data computed during daylight, sprayed for about fifteen minutes the area pointed out by the prisoner to be the location of the Germans who were to cut the supply line. The anticipated attack did not materialize. Another prisoner captured by the mine platoon the following morning verified the report that the attack had been planned. However, he stated that there had been only 100 to 150 Germans in the area and that the proposed attack had been cancelled after the anti-aircraft guns had been fired. He gave as a secondary reason why the plan was not executed the fact that the only officer with the group had withdrawn to the north earlier in the night. Upon being questioned further as to the effect of the firing, the prisoner stated that few casualties had resulted but that it had caused a great deal of confusion, a further lowering of morale, and an increased fear among the troops. He indicated that the large volume of tracers which ricocheted in all directions was the greatest contributing factor in the effect of the fire. (34)

THE ATTACK ON BRUCKHOPE

By the night of 3 April enemy activity in the vicinity of Hill 321 had decreased and thereafter consisted mainly of patrol action and minor attacks along the west side of the line held by "F" Company. Considerable artillery fire still fell on the position. On the other hand, enemy troops had been observed in that portion of Wissen north of the river.

To relieve this situation "F" Company was ordered to attack early

(34) Personal Knowledge; Statement of Lt. M. B. Westhoff, Bn. S-2, 5 Jan. 1948

4 April back down the hill by the same route it had gone up. After clearing the enemy from this area it was to relieve "E" Company in Wissen.

"E" Company, less one platoon which was to assume responsibility for the position vacated by "F" Company, was to cross the river at the footbridge, attack Bruckhofe from the east, and secure the town.

Execution of this plan began at dawn on 4 April. "F" Company, attacking down the hill, met no resistance and occupied Wissen with two platoons south of the river and one platoon north of the river.

"E" Company, in the meantime, had started crossing the river at the same point the initial crossings had been made. Contact was made with "F" Company, who furnished a guide to lead the company up the trail to the east of Bruckhofe. From this trail the company began its attack through the woods to the west. No resistance was encountered until the company reached the edge of town. However, as the leading troops entered the town they were greeted by enemy small arms fire which was followed shortly by heavy artillery and mortar fire. The company pressed its attack and forced its way into town. The house to house search which followed was completed about dark and the troops began preparations to meet the inevitable counterattack. "E" Company had suffered several casualties during the day and these had to be evacuated over the long route used to enter the town. (See Map D) (35)

The Germans launched their anticipated attack shortly after dark. It was supported by heavy artillery and mortar fire and for some time the enemy was quite stubborn. He succeeded in penetrating the thin defense and again house to house fighting developed. The Americans held the town, however, and captured about 100 prisoners. Casualties suffered that night could not be evacuated until the following morning. (36)

That day, 5 April, was comparatively quiet until mid-afternoon,

(35, 36) Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander Co. "E", 9 Jan. 1948

when the enemy launched another counterattack to seize Bruckhofs. The attack came from the north (Map D), and in addition to the usual heavy artillery and mortar support, this attack was supported by two tanks, one of which penetrated the lines held by "E" Company. Early in this attack the artillery forward observer was wounded. The company executive officer took over the adjustment of artillery fire and a few well-placed concentrations dispersed the enemy infantry. The tanks, having lost their close-in protection, withdrew. (37)

This counterattack had no sooner been repulsed than the company was ordered to withdraw to Wissen as soon as darkness would permit. Here the battalion was to assemble, eat, and entruck for a movement preparatory to launching an attack in a new area the following day. (38)

The 8th Division had passed to operational control of XVIII Corps (Airborne) at 1200 hours on 2 April. One battalion of the 310th Infantry, 78th Division, under the same Corps, was to relieve the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry. This relief was not completed by the customary exchange of troops on position. At the time the 2nd Battalion entrucked to accomplish its scheduled movement, only the advance party of the relieving battalion had arrived in the area. (39)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing these operations consideration should first be given to "F" Company's attack on Wissen, though this attack, as related, may seem insignificant.

It seemed apparent that either the enemy did not expect a night attack at all or that he had expected it to come along the road paralleling the river from the west or along the main road leading into town from Schonstein. To follow either of these roads would have meant to "F" Company an attack through a defile and a sweep of the town from end to

(37, 38) Statement of Capt. H. P. Hesterly, Commander "E" Company, 9 Jan. 1948 (39) A-6; Personal Knowledge

end in order to clear it. It is certain that during daylight hours, the enemy, from positions on the high ground northeast of Wissen, had excellent observation on the route selected, and he had apparently given this factor considerable weight in his defense of the town against an attack from the south. "F" Company, in making its entry here, was able to achieve surprise and rapidly gain a foothold in the center of town with little effort. The soundness of the battalion commander's plan was thus proved.

The second point worthy of consideration is the fact that no warning order for the crossing of the Sieg River was received by the 2nd Battalion, nor, for that matter, as far as could be determined by the writer, was any warning order received by either the regiment or division. Just where this criticism should be placed is uncertain; however, with regard to this phase of the operation, the Operation Report, 8th Infantry Division, states, "A new mission was received by the 8th Infantry Division from the First United States Army late in the afternoon of 31 March 1945." At any rate, the troop leaders and those personnel who were to make the crossing were denied the opportunity to make a detailed daylight reconnaissance, which, particularly in an operation of this sort, is in violation of a very sound principle of tactics. Although extensive patrolling and considerable reconnaissance of the area south of the river had been carried out during the day, these efforts had been directed toward an efficient defensive system rather than an offensive river crossing.

In considering the broad aspects of the operations of the 2nd Battalion over the period discussed, it would be incorrect to state that the battalion was given a mission beyond its capabilities. Unquestionably consideration by division and higher headquarters was given to the generally disorganized condition of the enemy in assigning

such tasks to the lower echelons of command. It is recognized that full exploitation of this state of disorganization was desirable and necessary. However, the stated purpose of the river crossing, that of securing a bridgehead deep enough to permit use of the east-west highway, leaves some doubt in the mind of the writer as to whether or not the advantage thus gained was worth the effort expended. If such were the true purpose of the operation, then personal observation shortly after this operation would indicate that full advantage was not taken of the availability of the road thus gained. There is also some doubt as to whether or not the urgency of the situation justified the ordering of a crossing without allowing more time for reconnaissance and planning - without so much as a warning order. A more logical reason for the river crossing might have been to secure a jumping-off area for the final attack to eliminate the Ruhr Pocket and thus avoid opening this attack by a river crossing operation. If this were the purpose of the mission assigned to the 2nd Battalion, its importance would have justified the entire operation.

There is little room for criticism of the actions or decisions of personnel participating in these operations, except perhaps the personnel of the outpost which was captured and the guards around the building in which the OP was located. These men were surprised by such an overwhelming German force that resistance was hopeless. However, some means should have been arranged to give a warning in case of such an emergency. Otherwise all personnel conducted themselves in a very creditable manner. The battalion commander is to be commended for his quick thinking in the emergency which confronted him during the initial counterattack on the forward OP in addition to the manner in which he employed his troops to meet each new situation. The actions of all battalion medical personnel are worthy of praise. The normal problems of evacuation of the wounded were multiplied many times over since most evacuation had to be carried

out at night, since the troops were widely dispersed and since a river, at times unfordable, lay between the troops and the aid station. Much credit is also due the supply personnel and the carrying parties who did most of their "pick and shovel" work. Food and ammunition were habitually carried forward at night, and until sufficient protection was placed on the supply route the carrying parties expected to be and were attacked on each trip forward. The fact that some supplies were abandoned reflects no discredit upon them.

The tactical situation also dictated that prisoners be evacuated at night which posed another problem. Adequate troops to properly guard the prisoners while en route from the forward areas to the Battalion Command Post could be ill afforded.

The final point for analysis concerns the manner in which the relief of the 2nd Battalion was conducted. The XVIII Corps (Airborne), under which the 8th Division was now operating, had been given the mission of cleaning up the Ruhr Pocket south of the Ruhr River. The all-out attack for the reduction of the Pocket was scheduled to begin at 0600 on 6 April. Therefore, when viewed from the corps level, perhaps the withdrawal of the 2nd Battalion prior to the time the exchange of positions with the relieving elements had been effected was justified. Certainly the battalion commander had no alternative if he was to be in position to carry out his initial mission in the large scale attack to wipe out the Pocket. However, it is difficult for the soldier, be he officer or enlisted man, at the battalion level or below to conceive such action. Aside from the fact that a relief thus executed is tactically unsound, there is a great morale factor involved. Troops do not fight hard to gain an objective, withstand numerous counterattacks to hold it, suffer many casualties among their comrades, and then pull out and leave the place without wondering why they did it. This is sometimes difficult for their leaders to

explain, particularly on the ground and at the time that such action occurs. Although the subsequent operations of the relieving unit is beyond the scope of this monograph, the following extract from the Operations Report of First United States Army is quoted to emphasize the fallacy of such a relief.

"The 78th Division continued the attack north of the Sieg River. The right flank made advances of about a mile and a half to the northeast and had one unit on the ridge two miles northeast of Wissen."

This quotation is from the report on the operations of 7 April, two days after the relief of the 2nd Battalion.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following points highlight the lessons learned from the operations herein discussed:

1. A well-executed night attack, under the proper circumstances, is an effective means of gaining the necessary surprise to reach an objective quickly with a low cost in casualties.

2. To be effective the night attack need not necessarily result in clearing all troops from the objective, but it must gain a foothold firm enough to insure that the objective can be held and cleared within a short time, perhaps under more favorable conditions.

3. The issuance of a warning order is of primary importance in any operation and of the utmost importance in an operation involving a river crossing.

4. Commanders of all echelons must know their enemy. This includes the ability to make a sound estimate of his state of training, his morale, and his combat efficiency. Certainly the higher commanders took these factors into consideration in ordering

such operations as those just discussed. That the battalion commander knew his enemy was demonstrated by his actions when the forward OP was attacked.

5. A counterattack must be executed in accordance with a well-conceived and predetermined plan including alternate plans. The counterattacks initiated by the Germans were poorly planned and poorly led. They were usually launched with some determination and were executed aggressively up to a certain point, but once it became apparent that their plans were doomed to failure their main course of action was surrender.

6. Communications systems must be kept flexible and all communications personnel must be alert to relay messages when necessary. The establishment of a relay station may be the simple solution to radio communications difficulties when units are operating over extensive areas. In this connection it is often advisable in combat to have on hand one or more extra radios above those authorized by Tables of Organization and Equipment.

7. The supporting Field Artillery Communications systems can be put to valuable service by infantry commanders.

8. The importance of having as many infantrymen as possible trained in the adjustment of artillery fire cannot be overemphasized.

9. The relief of one unit by another must be so coordinated that the unit being relieved does not withdraw from its positions before the relieving troops occupy them.