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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 9TH INFANTRY,  
(2ND INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE HASTY DEFENSE AGAINST  
AN ARMORED ATTACK NORTH OF ROCHERATH, GERMANY, 17-18 DECEMBER 1944  
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Executive Officer)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION IN HASTY  
DEFENSE AGAINST AN ARMORED ATTACK

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division in the defense against the German Counteroffensive in December 1944.

In order to orient the reader, it will be necessary to discuss briefly some of the major military operations which led up to this action.

On 6 June 1944 the Allied Armies successfully invaded the continent of Europe and by early December had pushed inland across FRANCE and BELGIUM. The Seventh US Army and the First French Army invaded the southern coast of FRANCE on 15 August 1944, moved rapidly north and joined the Third US Army on the German Border. (See Map A) Here the Allied Armies faced the German Siegfried Line. (1) The Siegfried Line consisted of mutually supporting defenses in depth. These defenses were built around reinforced concrete pill boxes. (2)

The First US Army prepared plans for the continuation of the attack through the Siegfried Line. (3)

The 2nd Infantry Division landed in FRANCE on D plus 1 and fought through the hedgerow country of NORMANDY as part of V Corps. On 16 August 1944 the 2nd Infantry Division was withdrawn from the NORMANDY fighting and moved to the vicinity of BREST, FRANCE to participate in the capture of that city. (4)

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- (1) A-2, Situation Map #6  
(2) A-2, p. 51, 52  
(3) A-2, p. 71  
(4) A-1, p. 48

On 18 September 1944 the city of BREST fell and the 2nd Infantry was again on the move across FRANCE and into BELGIUM. (5) The division closed into an assembly area in the vicinity of ST. VITH, BELGIUM and prepared to move into a defensive position in the SCHNEE EIFLE region. (6) The division moved into positions in the SCHNEE EIFLE and remained there until 11 December 1944. At this time the division moved to the north and rejoined the V Corps in the vicinity of ELSENBORN, BELGIUM in preparation for the First Army attack through the Siegfried Line. (7)

THE GENERAL SITUATION (See Map B)

Since the middle of September the attention of the First US Army had been directed at the ROER RIVER dams. It was realized that no large scale crossing of the ROER RIVER below the dams could be undertaken, until the dams were in friendly hands. (8)

Orders for V Corps, as part of First Army, to attack and secure the ROER RIVER dams were issued on 7 December. (9) V Corps consisted of the following divisions: 2nd Infantry Division, 8th Infantry Division, 78th Infantry Division and the 99th Infantry Division. Also the 102nd Cavalry Group, Combat Command B, 9th Armored Division, and Combat Command R, 5th Armored Division were in Corps reserve. (10) The 2nd Infantry Division was to seize successively the following objectives: the vicinity and road junction northwest of ARENBERG, the ridge southwest of the road junction west of SCHONSEIFFEN, the HARPERSCHIED-SCHONSEIFFEN area and the DREIBORN area, FERHAIN-MORESBACH area, a large area including the nose north of DREIBORN, the vicinity of WOLLSEIFFEN, and the important URFTTALSPERRE Dam.

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(5) A-1, p. 72

(6) A-1, p. 72, 75

(7) A-1, p. 82

(8) A-2, p. 95

(9) A-2, p. 97

(10) A-2, p. 97

Objectives of the 99th Division were to attack in conjunction with the 2nd Infantry Division and to capture the high wooded ground west of HELLENTHAL and south of HARPERSCHIED.

The operations of the 78th Infantry Division were to be in three phases. During the first phase, the initial effort was to push east from the LAMMERSDORF area to seize the high ground at KESTERNICH, and then the high ground west of RUHRBERG overlooking the PAULUSHOFF Dam area from the west. During the second phase, it was to support this action on the right of its initial effort by seizing KONZEN, IMGENBROICH, and EICHERSCHEID. During the third phase, it was to drive through ROLLESBROICHAND, seize STEEKENBORN, advance up the ridge and seize SCHMIDT. Turning southeast, it was to secure a final objective on the ROER west of HASENFELD, including the HASENFELD Dam.

The 8th Infantry Division's efforts were limited to maintaining pressure along the KALL RIVER, and in being prepared to attack on the Corps order into the KOMMERSCHIEDT-SCHMIDT area to secure objectives in the GERMUND FOREST between HASENFELD and the south of the KALL RIVER.

The 102nd Cavalry Group, CCB 9th Armored Division and CCR 5th Armored Division were held in Corps reserve. (11)

The attack moved off on 13 December. By 16 December the attacking elements of V Corps were as shown on Map B.

On the morning of 16 December the German Counteroffensive began in pre-dawn attacks all along the 99th Infantry Division's sector of V Corps. (12) During the afternoon the orders from higher headquarters stated that V Corps was to continue the attack on 17 December.

(13) (For disposition of major German units opposing V Corps see Map B)

(14)

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(11) A-2, p. 97

(12) A-1, p. 87

(13) A-1, p. 87; A-3, p. 347; A-4, p. 109; - ,

(14) A-1, p. 90; A-2, Situation Map #8

The Sixth SS Panzer Army threatening the 2nd Infantry Division was spearheaded by the 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions. The 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions were the German Elite troops, meticulously trained, who doubtless would be used in a sector where success was vital to the overall German strategy. The 12th SS Panzer Division was described as fanatical, their one aim was to kill as brutally as possible. Prior to the attack the division commander had addressed the troops as follows: "I ask you and expect of you not to take any prisoners with the possible exception of a few officers to be kept alive for questioning." (15)

The troops of the 2nd Infantry Division were battle tested and the morale was high. (16)

The terrain in the area was generally rolling and in some sectors covered by heavy forest. ROCHERATH, KRINKELT and WERTSFELD commanded an important road net that led to ELSENBORN. The weather was cold and generally cloudy. The ground was covered with from one to two feet of snow and ice. During the night heavy fog settled over the country side. Observation was extremely poor. (17) Supplies were well forward and constituted no immediate problem.

#### DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF THE 2ND INFANTRY DIVISION

Major General Walter M. Robertson, Commanding General, 2nd Infantry Division, took immediate steps to cope with the situation. Higher headquarters had not sensed the extent of the threat and had ordered a continuation of the attack towards Corps objectives on 17 December. General Robertson, on the spot, sized up the situation and acted decisively. (18) When reports came in that the 99th Division had been overrun, the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, was ordered to move

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(15) A-1, p. 90

(16) A-3, p. 347, Personal knowledge

(17) Personal knowledge

(18) A-3, p. 347

from its assembly area north of ROCHERATH to a position south of WERTZ-FELD and KRINKELT. The 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, located in a reserve position southwest of WEHLERSCHIED, was moved at once to KRINKELT and ordered to maintain a defensive position. The 9th Infantry Regiment was ordered to move all three battalions to a defensive position south of WERTZFELD. The 38th Infantry Regiment was ordered to move its remaining two battalions to a defensive position around ROCHERATH. The 1st Battalion, 23rd Infantry was moved into a defensive position around MURRENGEN. At this time the 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, was fighting a defensive action east of ROCHERATH in the sector of the 99th Division. (19) (For the plan of defense as outlined above see Map C)

After hearing of the rapid deterioration of the defenses east of ROCHERATH in the sector of the 393rd Infantry Regiment, 99th Division, General Robertson intercepted the 9th Infantry Regiment column 4000 yards northeast of ROCHERATH. The 9th Infantry was moving in column in order of 2nd Battalion, 3rd Battalion, and 1st Battalion. General Robertson cut the column. He directed K Company and some elements of Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, to go into position on the cross roads 2000 yards northeast of ROCHERATH. He then proceeded down the road and met the 1st Battalion. Here the General ordered the 1st Battalion to move into a defensive position 2000 yards northeast of ROCHERATH and hold the position at all cost until ordered to withdraw. General Robertson stated that he had already directed some elements of the 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry into the position, and that one platoon of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) was in position covering the road crossing. General Robertson instructed Lieutenant Colonel McKinley, 1st Battalion Commander, that he would take command of any

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(19) A-1, p. 87-91

troops that attempted to withdraw through the road crossing from the northeast. The division commander further stated that two battalions of the 38th Infantry were to withdraw down the road from WEHLERSCHIED to ROCHERATH, and that the cross roads must be held until the 2nd Infantry Division was able to form a defensive line to the west. (20)

#### THE BATTALION SITUATION

At 1700 hours the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry, moved to the road crossing and began organizing its defenses. K Company, 9th Infantry, thirty men from 3rd Battalion Headquarters Company and a platoon from the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion were already in position at the road crossing. With these reinforcements the battalion was brought up to approximately sixty-five percent strength.

The terrain in the area was generally flat with a gradual rise in the direction of the expected attack. A small ridge line lay 200 yards west of the cross roads. (21) The battalion ammunition vehicles included a one and one half ton truck and four jeeps with trailers. These vehicles were located 600 yards in the rear of the defensive positions. The ammunition vehicles carried a basic load of ammunition and in addition, seventy-five rounds of bazooka ammunition along with fifteen extra bazookas.

During a short rest period in early December, the battalion commander had directed the training of extra bazooka teams within each company. (22)

The German forces opposing the battalion were elements of the 12th SS Panzer Division and the 277th Infantry Division. (23)

The weather was extremely cold, and snow covered the ground to a depth of one to two feet. An extremely heavy fog settled over the

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(20) Personal knowledge  
(21) Personal knowledge  
(22) Personal knowledge  
(23) A-1, p. 90

battalion positions and visibility was practically nil. (24)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF DEFENSE (See Map C)

The plan of defense called for A and B Companies to prepare positions on the main line of resistance. B Company was given the left sector and the responsibility of the main road leading into the battalion position. A Company was assigned the sector on the right of B Company and given the responsibility of tying in with Company K on the right. C Company was assigned a position on the left flank of the battalion with the mission of giving depth to the battalion position and of refusing the battalion's left flank. The heavy machine guns of D Company were set up on the MLR with near maximum grazing fire to the front and flanks. The companies were instructed to remove all bazookas from the transportation and to place teams in each strong point on the MLR. Artillery fires were planned all along the front of the battalion. Concentrations were planned on the road in front of B Company extending to the wooded area 2000 yards to the northeast. (25)

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR ACTION

At 1800 hours on 17 December 1944 a meeting was held at the battalion command post. All unit commanders were given final instructions as to the urgency of the situation and were further instructed to again imbue the men with the absolute necessity of holding the position at all cost. The Company Commander of B Company made arrangements for the platoon leader of the 644th Tank Destroyers to deliver what antitank mines his platoon had to the road crossing. The Company Commander of B Company was instructed to plant mines on each side of the road leading into his position, and to place a necklace<sup>?</sup> of mines across the road when the enemy armor made its appearance. The companies were warned

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(24) Personal knowledge

(25) Personal knowledge

that there were still remnants of routed friendly troops to the front, and that there were probably some friendly tanks still to be withdrawn from the front. At this time the artillery liaison officer gave the company commanders the number of three artillery concentrations that he had been able to register before darkness. The companies were issued extra ammunition. Particular attention was given to placing extra machine gun, and extra bazooka ammunition on the defensive positions. The radio and wire communications were checked. The command radio was unable to reach the 9th Infantry and it was decided to save the batteries for the artillery radio, as no extra batteries were immediately available. (26)

#### NARRATION

#### THE DEFENSE OF THE CROSS ROADS THE NIGHT OF 17 DECEMBER

At 1930 hours a phone call from Company B indicated that three tanks followed by approximately thirty infantrymen had passed through their lines and were proceeding towards ROCHERATH. Lieutenant John Milesnick, Commanding Officer of Company B, stated that the tanks and infantrymen were believed to be friendly; however, he had not positively identified them due to the darkness and heavy fog that had settled over the countryside. Lieutenant Colonel William D. McKinley, Battalion Commander, 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry, immediately directed Company A to identify the tanks and infantry. This was done by a patrol from Company A, and the tanks and infantry were identified as German. Lieutenant Stephen A. Truppner, Commanding Officer, Company A, directed artillery fire on the German force with good results. He reported that one tank was set on fire, and that the troops were screaming and had dispersed in all directions.

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(26) Personal knowledge

At approximately 2000 hours Company B reported that tanks could be heard in the heavily wooded area 2000 yards to the northeast of the battalion position. (See Map C) This was verified by reports from the other front line companies. By this time the noise could be heard from the battalion command post. It sounded as if a large column of tanks was approaching the battalion position from the road leading from the heavily wooded area to the northeast. The battalion commander directed that B Company mine the road in front of their position. This was done by Lieutenant Roy Allen by placing a necklace of mines across the road and covering it with two bazooka teams.

Shortly after this was completed, the column of armor came down the road toward the battlion's defensive position. The column of armor was in closed formation with a distance of approximately fifty yards between tanks. Each tank was followed by a platoon of infantry. Hitting the necklace of mines, the leading tank was disabled. The second tank in column attempted to move around the disabled tank and was disabled by the mines. The two disabled tanks formed a road block. The tank column was partially canalized by the high road banks on each side of the road, however, several of the tanks were able to pull off the road to the left continuing towards the battalion position. Lieutenant Milesnick dispatched two bazooka teams to attack these bypassing tanks in the flank as they moved around the road block. Two additional tanks were destroyed by the bazooka fire. Lieutenant Milesnick reported the events to the battalion commander and further stated that the tanks were continuing to move out of the woods to the northeast. There was evidence of confusion among the German forces as the tanks continued to close up in front of the battalion position. (27) The battalion commander was

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(27) Personal knowledge; Statement made by Lieutenant John Milesnick, 16 December 1945

quick to make an estimate of the situation. The German forces had apparently been surprised by the battalion's defensive position. This was believed to have been brought about by the failure of the first elements of the German force to report the battalion's position as they passed through earlier in the evening. The battalion commander directed that all available artillery be brought down on this enemy column. In approximately five minutes, Lieutenant Granville, Artillery Liaison Officer, had the entire 15th Field Artillery Battalion firing on this target. The road was searched from a point just in front of B Company to a point 2000 yards to the northeast where the main road leading into the battalion position emerged from the woods. The artillery fires caught the German column in an extremely vulnerable position and the results were evidenced by the cries from the Germans and the burning tanks that had received direct hits from the concentrated artillery fire.

Fires from two light, four medium, and one heavy artillery battalion were available and full advantage was taken of this support. The road to the northeast and the heavily wooded area was under almost continuous fire during the entire hour that followed. The road between the battalion position and ROCHERATH was interdicted for the remainder of the night.

At approximately 2100 hours the Germans deployed the tanks that they had been able to pull of the road. In conjunction with a company of infantry, they attacked the battalion position frontally. Six to eight tanks moved to within 200 yards of the battalion position attacking the front lines by fire for thirty minutes. Then the German infantry attempted to move in and eject the defender. The German attack failed when the attacking force ran into the final protective line of fire laid

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down by the heavy machine guns from D Company. The enemy soon saw the futility of this sort of tactics and withdrew only to attack again in a few minutes with the tanks and infantry moving in together. The tanks penetrated the front lines all along the front of B and A Companies. The fire from the tanks, however, was very ineffective due to the blindness of the tankers in the night and heavy fog. The German infantry was stopped at the MLR with heavy losses. Due to the lack of visibility bazooka teams were able to move in to within ten yards of the tanks that had penetrated the lines and destroy them. (28) There were two tiger tanks that the bazooka teams could not destroy due to the thickness of their armor. These tanks made a stationary pill box within the battalion lines and continued to harass B Company by machine gun fire. Corporal Roberts from D Company and Sergeant Bone from B Company teamed up to destroy these tanks by using gasoline. One of the men mounted the tanks, while the other passed him a five gallon can of gasoline that was placed over the motor of the tank. A thermite grenade on the gasoline can did the rest. (29)

By 2400 hours the entire attack had bogged down and all was quiet except friendly artillery fire.

#### RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF CONTROL AND RE-SUPPLY

The remainder of the night was spent in re-establishment of control, readjustment of front lines and re-supply. Leaders who had become casualties were replaced. Front line positions were improved. All ammunition was resupplied to the front line companies by the 81 mm Mortar Platoon of D Company. The close proximity of the ammunition truck simplified their task considerably. After the ammunition was resupplied, the 81 mm Mortar Platoon was used to tie in the rear of the battalion with C Company on the left and K Company on the right. Roving patrols moved

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(28) Personal knowledge

(29) Personal knowledge

throughout the battalion area for the remainder of the night. It was believed that the Germans would make a determined effort to infiltrate in and around the battalion position during the night. A patrol from D Company checked into the battalion command post at 0100 hours and reported that all was quiet throughout the battalion area. Leaving the command post, the patrol leader jumped into the sunken road which ran by the battalion command post. Hitting the ground, he found himself face to face with a five man German patrol that was preparing to attack the battalion command post. The patrol leader with one short burst from his Thompson Sub-machine gun killed four of the Germans.

Shortly after midnight, the battalion commander ordered C Company to move to a position just north of ROCHERATH to prevent the Germans from infiltrating behind the battalion position and subsequently into ROCHERATH. Captain Arnold Algier, Commanding Officer, C Company, moved his company down the road to the designated spot. Upon arrival he discovered that a company of the 38th Infantry had been ordered into the position. Captain Algier moved his company back over the same route to his original position on the left flank of the battalion. (SEE

During the night, a wire line was laid between the battalion position and the 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment. Colonel Boos, Commanding Officer, 38th Infantry Regiment, called Lieutenant Colonel McKinley and informed him that the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry was now attached to the 38th Infantry. Colonel Boos further stated that the battalion could withdraw some time the following day when the 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry completed the establishment of a line west of the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry's present position. (See Map D) Colonel Boos emphasized the urgency of the entire situation, and further stated that the present battalion position would be held at all cost until ordered to withdraw. This, however, was unnecessary as the division commander

had been very emphatic about the battalion's mission in the initial orders.

#### THE GERMAN ATTACK ON 18 DECEMBER

At 0600 on the morning of 18 December the full force of the German attack struck the entire battalion front. Fog was extremely heavy and visibility was limited to a few feet. The Germans attacked with tanks and infantry moving in simultaneously. The real gallantry and tenacity of the front line units proved to offset the superior forces of the Germans. As the tanks and infantry attempted to roll over the positions they were met with all means available. The tanks were permitted to pass into the lines while the accompanying infantry was attacked from all sides with bayonets and trench knives. This battle raged spasmodically for the following two hours. The defenders succeeded in defeating the foot troops. Several tanks were destroyed by bazooka fire.

At 0830 hours the German force attacked again all along the front. Since the fog was lifting to some extent, three German tanks that had penetrated the positions earlier in the morning came to life. (The tanks moved all along the front destroying the machine guns on the MLR while they were firing on their final protective lines.) By this time A and K Companies were desperate. The Germans had completely overrun their positions, and the remnants of the two front line platoons of A Company had been taken prisoners. The support platoon and company headquarters were still holding out. Company B was still holding the road crossing. C Company had succeeded in preventing the left flank of the battalion from being turned by a platoon of infantry. (See Map D)

At 1100 hours the battalion commander received orders from the commanding officer, 38th Infantry, to formulate plans to withdraw through the 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry, which was endeavoring to form a line to the west. The withdrawal was contingent, however, on the formation of this

defensive line.

#### THE COUNTERATTACK AND WITHDRAWAL

All companies were contacted and given the tentative plan of withdrawal. At this time A and K Companies reported that it would be impossible to extricate any of their personnel with the possible exception of a few of the command post group. Lieutenant Truppner, Commanding Officer, Company A, called over his SCR 300 a few minutes later stating that he was destroying all his radios. As a last request he asked that a ten minute artillery barrage be fired on his own position. He further informed that the few men that remained in his company could take cover in their fox holes, and that the Germans were moving over his positions in mass. The artillery barrage was fired. No more was heard from A Company.

At 1100 hours the battalion commander called the Commanding Officer, 38th Infantry, informing him that it would be impossible to withdraw his battalion without the aid of tanks or tank destroyers. This conversation had not been completed when Lieutenant Henski, the Battalion Antitank Officer, walked into the command post with a tank platoon leader from the 741st Tank Battalion. Although the tank platoon leader had been cut off by the enemy, he had managed to escape. He had four Sherman tanks a mile down the road towards WEHLERSCHIED. Volunteering his services, the tank platoon leader, Lieutenant Colonel McKinley and Captain Harvey, the Battalion S-3, set to work formulating a plan of counterattack in conjunction with the proposed withdrawal. The plans were as follows: first the tank platoon was to destroy three German tanks that had B Company pinned to the ground, and secondly the tank platoon was to envelop both flanks of the penetration in the vicinity of A and B Companies' sector. A thirty minute artillery concentration was planned in conjunction with the counterattack.

Shortly after 1100 hours the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry, notified Lieutenant Colonel McKinley that the withdrawal could commence at 1200 hours. The completed withdrawal plan was given to all troops within reach. A Company by this time was no longer considered in the withdrawal as their positions had been completely overrun. Captain Garvey, Commanding Officer, K Company, stated that he preferred to stay with his company as it was impossible to withdraw any of his platoons. At 1115 hours the artillery preparations began and lasted until 1145 hours. The four Sherman tanks which moved into position under cover of the artillery fire, attacked the three German tanks destroying two, while the remaining tank escaped towards ROCHERATH. Under cover of the initial counterattack the following companies broke contact and withdrew to the rear: C Company, the majority of B Company, Battalion Headquarters Company, and D Company less the two heavy machine gun platoons. The 644th Tank Destroyer Platoon withdrew at this time.

The tanks withdrew to the vicinity of the battalion command post. From this position they launched another attack from a slightly different direction. In conjunction with this counterattack the remainder of B Company with two or three men from A Company broke away and withdrew to the rear. At this time the battalion commander, S-3, and the tank platoon withdrew to the rear.

In brief summary of this battalion's eighteen hour defensive stand against overwhelming odds, it can be stated that the mission was completely accomplished. The eighteen hour delay of the German force at this vital road crossing gave the remainder of the 2nd Infantry Division time to set up a defensive line to the rear which held and remained intact during the entire German counteroffensive.

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The immediate results of the stand prompted Colonel Boos, Commanding Officer, 38th Infantry, to tell Lieutenant Colonel William D. McKinley, "You have saved my regiment."

Prompted Major Daniel Webster, 2nd Division G-3, to say, "You have saved the entire 2nd Infantry Division."

General Hodges was prompted to phone the following message to Major General Walter M. Robertson, 2nd Infantry Division Commander, "What the 2nd Division has done in these last four days will live forever in the history of the United States Army". (30)

The total strength of the reinforced battalion at the time of the attack by the German force was 26 officers and 487 enlisted men. Of this total, 20 officers and 220 enlisted men survived the withdrawal on 18 December 1944. The 308 officers and enlisted men who failed to withdraw are accounted for as follows: 17 known killed in action, 61 wounded in action, 17 non-battle casualties, and 213 missing in action. Although the losses of men and material were heavy, the eighteen hour delay had not only saved the 2nd Infantry Division from being cut off, but had also permitted the piecemeal withdrawal of elements of the 99th Division through the 2nd Division Lines. (31)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. PREPARATION OF THE DEFENSE

Time and mission were the main factors to be reckoned with in the preparation of the defensive position. It should be remembered that two and one half hours after the battalion arrived on the position the Germans made their initial contact. The battalion commander's decision to place the defenses on and in front of the cross roads instead of occupying positions on the higher ground to the rear and covering the

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(30) A-5, p. 20

(31) A-5 p. 20

cross roads by fire proved to be sound. Had he chosen the latter position the German armor could have infiltrated the cross roads and moved into ROCHERATH under cover of the heavy fog and darkness. All machine guns on the MLR had near maximum grazing fire to the front and flanks. The extra bazooka teams placed in each strong point assisted immeasurably in stopping the brunt of the attack. In order to insure close command control, all command posts were located well forward.

## 2. DEFENSE OF THE CROSS ROADS ON THE NIGHT OF 17 DECEMBER 1944

The surprise of the German attacking force, and the swift reaction of Lieutenant Colonel McKinley to the situation when this surprise became evident, saved the battalion from being completely overrun on the night of 17 December. The three tanks and infantrymen that had passed through the battalion position at 1930 hours on 17 December apparently had been the advanced guard of the larger force that was to follow. This advanced guard had failed to warn the remainder of the enemy column of the battalion's presence at the cross roads; therefore the column of armor and infantry was caught in a most vulnerable position. The tremendous amount of artillery fire that was directed upon the enemy force while it was in this helpless position prevented it from making a coordinated attack against the battalion that night. This was particularly significant in the light of the fact that the battalion had had such a short time to prepare its defenses when the German force struck.

## 3. ARTILLERY SUPPORT

The vast amount of artillery support and the timely use thereof saved the battalion from complete decimation on the night of 17 December. It is my opinion that the continuous closed concentration of artillery on the road leading into the battalion position from the heavily wooded

area to the northeast, prevented the German armor from completely overrunning the battalion position on the night of 17 December. This is particularly true due to the fact that the armored column was canalized until it emerged from the woods, and partially canalized until it reached the cross roads. During the hours of 1930 17 December and 0600 18 December over 8000 rounds of artillery ammunition were fired in defense of the battalion position.

#### 4. CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE ON 18 DECEMBER

When the enemy renewed the attack at 0630 hours on 18 December, the courage and tenacity of the front line soldiers prevented a complete breakthrough along the entire front of the battalion position. Although tanks penetrated the positions all along the front, the German infantry was stopped by machine gun fire and small groups and individuals who sprang from their fox holes with bayonets and trench knives. The tanks were eliminated later by all means available. In the latter stages of this attack when the Germans had overrun A Company and had captured the remnants of the two front line platoons, Lieutenant Truppner registered artillery fire on his own position as the German infantry moved in in mass.

#### 5. COMMUNICATIONS

The battalion would have been blind during this operation had the SCR 300 radios failed to operate. Both radio and wire communications were used during this operation; however, the wire was undependable due to the action of the enemy tanks. The 536 radios within the companies failed to operate satisfactorily due to the constant jamming by the Germans. The radios with the artillery forward observers failed. The SCR 300 radios were used to control all artillery fire forward of the battalion command post. Their use by the company commanders enabled close and accurate artillery support. There were no communications

between the battalion command post and higher headquarters until 0100 on 18 December. The battalion command radio was not functioning due to battery shortage. Although the mission of the battalion was clear, it is my personal opinion that more effort should have been made to keep higher headquarters in constant communications with the battalion.

#### 6. SUPPLY

At the beginning of this operation the battalion had one basic load of ammunition on the troops and at the gun position. The battalion ammunition truck and several jeeps with trailers carried another basic load of ammunition. In addition the battalion had approximately 75 rounds of bazooka ammunition that had accumulated over a period of time. The battalion ammunition dump was established within the battalion perimeter and thereby simplified the ammunition resupply problem. On several occasions during the operation had it been necessary to resupply the ammunition from higher echelons, the battle would have been lost. The battalion was without antitank mines when it moved into position on the evening of 17 December. The mines provided by the platoon of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion aided in the initial defenses of the position. Had more mines been available, the defenses would have been greatly strengthened.

#### 7. THE GERMAN ATTACK

The German attack failed in its early stages due to their surprise and lack of reconnaissance to determine the flanks of the battalion position. Had proper and aggressive reconnaissance been carried out by the German force, it could have easily bypassed the cross roads to the right of the battalion position. This move would have given them access to the main road that ran down the rear of the battalion position and into ROCHERATH. Had the German force contained the battalion's front

with a small force and enveloped the battalion's left flank, the force could have moved on into ROCHERATH without much interference.

#### LESSONS

1. When a specific terrain feature is to be held at all cost during periods of poor visibility, the position must be physically occupied by the main defensive force.
2. Surprise of the enemy must be capitalized upon immediately.
3. Timely application of artillery fire at the crucial point can turn the tide of a battle.
4. To hold a position at all cost against overwhelming odds, troops must be imbued with the determination to fight to the finish.
5. Alternate means of communications must be planned and provided for during combat operations.
6. When a terrain feature is to be held at all cost, ammunition requirements must be readily accessible.
7. In the attack reconnaissance must be aggressive and continuous.