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THE OPERATION OF COMPANY "E", 120TH INFANTRY (30TH
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE VICINITY OF FLECHTINGEN,
WOLMERSTEDT, AND BARLEBEN, 13-14 APRIL 1945.
(CENTRAL EUROPE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY ATTACK-
ING WITH AN ATTACHED COMPANY OF TANKS AND PLATOON OF
TANK DESTROYERS.

Captain Thomas F. Hooper, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO II

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THE OPERATION OF COMPANY "E", 120TH INFANTRY (30TH
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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the operation of Company E, 120th Infantry Division during the period 13-14 April 1945, describing the coordinated action of an Infantry-tank team in the attack.

By March 1945, the Allied Armies had swept across France, Belgium and Holland, and were on the west bank of the Rhine River. After a brief period of consolidation and regrouping the attack of this river barrier was initiated and on the 24th of March with little difficulty the crossing was accomplished. (1)

As the attack pushed away from the Rhine along the entire front, the Ruhr industrial area was flanked by the Ninth Army on the north and the First Army on the south. These two armies continued the drive to the east, accomplished a pinch maneuver, and on the 29th of March linked up to form the Ruhr pocket. (2) (See Map A)

With the Ruhr garrison trapped, the Ninth Army's drive to the Elbe could be facilitated. The Army plan called for the XIX Corps, with two armored divisions and two or three infantry divisions, to be the southern prong of the drive to the Elbe, and for the XIII Corps to push the attack to the

(1) A-1, p. 243; (2) A-1, p. 243.

east in the north sector. (3) (See Map A)

In the XIX Corps zone the offensive began with the 83d Division on the left followed by the 30th Division and the 2d Armored Division on the right, with the 113th Cavalry screening the flanks. This drive pushed forward at a continually increasing speed and by the 7th of April had reached the west bank of the Weser River where it was held up briefly. (4) (See Map A)

GENERAL SITUATION

The XIX Corps was ordered to discontinue the attack upon arriving at the "no advance line" which had been delineated along the Leine River. This delay gave the Corps an opportunity to consolidate and reorganize and to bring the 30th Division from its mission of mopping up rear areas to a sector on line beside the 83d Infantry Division and the 2d Armored Division. (5)

The southern edge of the north German plain lay within the zone of advance of the 30th Division. This area is characterized as moderately hilly, broken by formidable forests, numerous canals, rivers flowing generally northward and populated areas varying in size from a small village to a thickly populated city. (6)

The German forces were capable of moderate to bitter resistance when sufficient forces and material could be organized for local stands, or could effect broken withdrawals

(3) A-1, p. 243, 404, 296, 286; (4) A-1, p. 296, 297; A-2, p. 51; (5) A-2, p. 51; (6) A-1, p. 286, 287.

ahead of the constantly pressing elements of the 30th Division. (7)

Generally, the enemy units were made up of small battle groups, service troops, flack personnel, replacement and training units, or hastily organized, undermanned units of company or battalion size. These units scattered and disorganized though they were, often fought bitterly with every available man using all conceivable types of weapons. Volksturm units, made up of old men and young boys recruited from the newly organized home guard, also appeared at this time. (8)

Because of Allied air superiority the German air force was forced to content itself with harassing attacks conducted at infrequent intervals against Allied forward elements. (9)

On the 9th of April, the no advance line restriction was lifted and on the 10th of April assisted by ideal, warm, clear weather, the 30th Division began its drive from the banks of the Weser River, pushing to within four miles of Brunswick the first day. On April 11th, the attack of the city was launched and by nightfall the city was cleared sufficiently to allow the bulk of the division to continue the drive eastward. (10) (See Map A)

Thus on the morning of the 12th of April, with its mission still unchanged, the 30th Division pushed forward. Transportation requirements were excessive because of the necessity of moving swiftly in order to maintain contact with

(7) A-1, p. 287; (8) A-1, p. 286, 287; (9) Personal Knowledge; (10) A-1, p. 289; A-2, p. 51; A-3, p. 265; A-4, p. 228.

the fleeing German forces retreating rapidly to the east. However, these requirements were met and the division moved as planned in two motorized columns. Each column consisted of one infantry regiment and its attached or supporting troops and half of the service units of the division. Leading these columns were two platoons of the 30th Division reconnaissance company. (11)

The division plan of attack called for the 117th Infantry Regiment to attack in the north or left half of the Division zone and the 120th Infantry Regiment to attack in the south or right half of the zone. These units were to strike along the main highways so far as was tactically possible and at other times to use secondary or unimproved roads in their sector. The leading elements were to clear the roads and to either side of the road only so far as was necessary to continue the advance. The units following would mop up by-passed areas. (12)

The 120th Infantry moved out into the attack in a column of battalions with the 2d Battalion in the lead. This battalion was completely motorized by the attachment of tanks and tank destroyers and additional $2\frac{1}{2}$ ton cargo trucks. A varying number of riflemen rode each tank and each tank destroyer while the remainder of the men followed behind in the cargo vehicles. (13)

The units of the 2d Battalion were employed in the same formation as that which was used by regiment. This called

(11) A-3, p. 263; Personal Knowledge; (12) A-3, p. 263; Personal Knowledge; (13) A-4, p. 231; Personal Knowledge.

for the employment of a column of companies with G Company in the lead, followed by companies E, F, H, and headquarters, respectively.

The battalion objective was the Elbe River, to be reached as rapidly as possible. All resistance was to be overcome by employing as much of a force as was necessary. If Company G could not overcome the enemy, Company E was to be prepared to assist in any way possible. (14)

Progress on April 12th was steady, meeting only slight resistance in the form of road blocks and hastily constructed tank barriers. As the fighting was light the advance continued until 2330 hours when the battalion passed through the town of Flechtingen and halted 500 yards to the east. (15)
(See Map B)

COMPANY SITUATION

Company E had been riding on the decks of tanks and tank destroyers for 16 hours. Everyone was tired, hungry, dirty and cold. Although the company had not been committed to action during the day, it was in need of a rest, nevertheless. (16)

The company commander had been riding in his jeep at the head of the company column and the company executive officer in a jeep at the tail of the unit with the remainder of the company riding on sixteen tanks and six tank destroyers that had been attached to it for this operation. The company was

(14) (15) (16) Personal Knowledge.

spread out in a column of platoons along the highway and still on the move even though it was almost 2330 hours and very dark. (17)

When it seemed to everyone that the advance was going to continue throughout the night, the column halted and word was passed back along the road for the tanks to remain as they were and for the men to remain mounted.

At this same time the company commander received a message over the SCR 300 ordering him to report to the battalion command post immediately. The company commander sent a runner to the executive officer with a note saying that the men were to stay in place until it was definitely established as to what was going to happen and that he, the company commander, was going forward to a meeting with the battalion commander.

Accompanied by his runner, the company commander walked up the line of tanks until he reached the position of the battalion command group. Here he was directed to a house a short distance off the road. Already assembled were the battalion staff and company commanders of the battalion, also the tank company commander of one company of the 743d Tank Battalion, the platoon leader of one platoon of the 30th Division Reconnaissance Company, the tank destroyer platoon leader of one platoon from the 823d Tank Destroyer Battalion and the artillery liaison officer. (18)

A few light hearted remarks were passed among the officers and speculations were made as to the type of operation

(17) (18) Personal Knowledge.

for the next day.

The battalion commander entered the room accompanied by the S-3. Maps and overlays were distributed and a fragmentary order for the operation to follow was issued orally.

The E Company commander's notes taken at the meeting were substantially as follows: The attack would jump off at 0500 hours 13 April, employing the same formation as that today (12 April). Company E would take the lead followed by Companies F and G, then Headquarters and H, followed by the medics, (with the aid station).

One platoon from the Division Reconnaissance Company would scout the front and act as a point for the column. This platoon would be mounted on three jeeps and one M-8 reconnaissance car. Two jeeps would lead, followed by the M-8 and behind that a third jeep. Behind this platoon would come Company E and its attachments. (19)

Attached to Company E was one company of tanks and one platoon of tank destroyers. These were to be the same tanks and tank destroyers on which the company was presently riding. Also attached was one platoon of heavy machine guns mounted on its organic vehicles. (20)

The objective given Company E was the Elbe River in the regimental zone, to be reached as quickly as possible. Company E was to clear the route of advance and a short distance to either side and the units following were to conduct the mopping up operations. (21)

(19) A-4, p. 232; Personal Knowledge; (20) (21) Personal Knowledge.

After receipt of the order and before leaving the Battalion Command Post, the company commander checked with the leaders of the attached units to make certain that they understood their assigned mission and to coordinate the time and place of assembly just prior to the attack. He also checked to be sure that they knew their position in the column and which rifle platoons and tanks were to work together.

At the outset of the meeting the company commander had sent his runner back to the company executive officer with instructions to bed down for the remainder of the night and to make the necessary preparations to lead the attack the next morning. (22)

Now, after receiving his order, the company commander hurried back to the area of Company E and found the men already asleep in the houses and barns that were close by, and the necessary administrative details in the process of execution. Vehicles were being refueled and checked for functional defects; ammunition had been issued; one K ration had been issued to each man and the men had been examined as to physical condition.

After assuring himself that all was in readiness for the attack, the company commander made a hurried recheck of the plan he had formulated, called his platoon leaders together, and issued the following attack order.

Company E will attack along the route as shown on the overlay. (See Maps B, C & D) The objective will be the

(22) Personal knowledge.

Elbe River in the zone of the 120th Infantry and it will be reached with all possible haste. Resistance will be overcome along the highway, and to either side only as far as is necessary to continue the advance. Units following will take care of the rest.

The formation will be a column of platoons with the 2d Platoon mounted on one platoon of five tanks in the lead. The 1st Platoon will follow the 2d, mounted on the second platoon of five tanks. Next in column will be the 4th Platoon mounted on four tank destroyers. The 3d Platoon will be in support and be mounted on the remaining six tanks. Company headquarters will bring up the rear mounted on the other two tank destroyers and the heavy machine gun platoon of Company H will have one section following behind the 2d Platoon and the other section behind the 1st Platoon. (23)

This fragmentary order issued by the company commander was all that was necessary as all leaders concerned knew exactly what was expected of them and just how they were going to accomplish it.

By the time the order was issued and the platoon leaders had gone back to their platoons it was after 0300 hours, and there was still much to be done. After instructing the executive officer to make a final check as to the status of ammunition and rations and condition of vehicles the company commander hurried to the Battalion Command Post to obtain, if possible, any last minute information pertinent to

(23) Personal knowledge.

the operation. As there was none and it was nearing H-hour he returned to the company area.

The men were awakened at 0420 hours and immediately began to prepare for the attack. Last minute instructions were issued by all commanders while the men were eating a dull and uninteresting breakfast of K ration. (24)

By 0440 hours the company was ready and the order was given to mount on assigned tanks. As soon as all were mounted the company commander again checked with his platoon leaders and attached commanders to make doubly sure that they all knew exactly what was expected of them.

NEEDING NEEDED HERE - THE DISTANCE OF PURSUIT etc.
At 0450 hours the company was loaded and ready to move out into the attack, and at 0500 hours the reconnaissance platoon moved out, followed closely by Company E. Dawn was breaking when the lead scout jeep approached the Ohre River. (See Map B) Fearing that the bridge might be prepared for demolition, the men of the lead jeep dismounted and made a hasty inspection of its base. As it was intact, the jeep continued, followed by the M-8 reconnaissance car and the tanks and men of Company E. The company commander felt much relieved as here he had expected to meet the first serious obstacle of the attack.

The attack progressed with increasing ease and as it neared the town of Uthmoden, white flags appeared on the houses along both sides of the main street. Passing through the town without difficulty the column continued out into

(24) Personal Knowledge.

open flat country, with uncultivated fields stretching in every direction. The early morning quiet was broken only by the rumble of tanks and the whine of jeeps as they moved steadily along the highway. (See Map B) (25)

By 0700 hours Company E had moved approximately six and one half miles and was nearing the town of Dorst. As leading elements by-passed the village there was heard the clatter of small arms fire and the unmistakable swish of the panzerfaust. This brought the column to an abrupt halt.

(26) (See Map ^B/_D)

Dashing forward from his position behind the lead tank of the lead platoon, the company commander immediately discovered what had happened. Just beyond Dorst the woodline of the Forest Calvorde recedes from the road to leave a large open area where the men in the lead vehicles had almost bumped into an enemy column moving northeast along the forest edge. (27)

Recovering quickly from their initial surprise, the battle seasoned leaders of the reconnaissance platoon and those of the 2d Platoon of Company E maneuvered into a favorable battle position and were soon pounding away at the enemy. The open field gave the lead tanks ample space to swing off the road and to form a line facing the vehicles of the German column. At the same time the riflemen dismounted, took cover behind the hulks of the tanks, and returned the fire of the enemy. Within a matter of minutes a full scale firefight

(25) Personal Knowledge; (26) (27) A-4, p. 253; Personal Knowledge.

had developed. (28) (See Map B)

As soon as the company commander saw what was going on he called the battalion commander on his SCR 300 radio and gave him the situation, telling him that it did not appear necessary to commit the remainder of the company, and further that he would not need assistance from other units of the battalion.

It was apparent at this time that quick aggressive action was necessary to gain a sudden victory, for the advantage of concealment of men and movement was with the enemy since they were in the edge of the woods whereas Company E was out in the middle of an open flat field. (See Map B) This led the platoon leader of the 2d Platoon to commit his entire platoon as well as the five tanks immediately. As fighting progressed the riflemen were restricted in movement because of the open terrain, but the tankers were having a field day. Enemy vehicles were scurrying in all directions trying to escape, thereby giving the tank gunners many lucrative targets and allowing them to pile up a score of fifteen vehicles knocked out in a few minutes of action. (29)

The company commander, sensing that the enemy would try to retreat to the northeast, ordered two tanks of the 1st Platoon to swing off the road to the right or east of the 2d Platoon, thus forming an arc and blocking one route of escape. (See Map B) With this accomplished, the automatic fire and cannon of seven tanks was available. The advantage

(28) (29) Personal Knowledge.

of this larger volume of fire soon began to tell and within one and one half hours, the enemy convoy was destroyed and all personnel were either killed or in full retreat. For the Germans it was a complete rout. Vehicles which tried to escape were destroyed, and an enemy mortar position was overrun. Thus, another victory was credited to Company E and its indispensable partner, the tanks. (30)

Although the 1st Platoon was ready to be committed to action at any time, it was not needed due to the overwhelming firepower and swift maneuver of the attacking platoon.

The 3d Platoon was left in place on the road, as it was felt that it could be better employed from that position if the need arose. It was further felt that from this position the platoon could protect the flanks and rear of the company. The automatic weapons of the weapons platoon and those of the attached heavy weapons platoon were not employed because of the automatic fire power on the tanks. They were left to assist the 3d Platoon in protecting the flanks and rear of the company. (31) (See Map B)

The reconnaissance platoon had of necessity pulled back after initial contact and had engaged in the fight from a position on the left flank of the line of tanks.

The commander of the M-8 reconnaissance car had been wounded by a near miss of a panzerfaust and that vehicle had been temporarily out of action while the wounded man was removed. But it was ready to go again in a few minutes.

(30) (31) Personal Knowledge.

A hasty reorganization of the unit showed that with the exception of the one man from the reconnaissance platoon there were no casualties and that there was sufficient ammunition to continue the attack. (32)

As soon as reorganization was completed the company commander called the battalion commander on his SCR 300 and gave him a final report of the action and told him that the company was continuing its attack. It was at this time that the company commander was informed that the remainder of the battalion and the regiment would stay where they were on the road, southwest of Uethmoden and that they would remain there until the Forest Staats and the town of Born had been cleared by Company E. (See Maps C & D) (33)

By 0900 hours, the company began to move forward again, and almost immediately entered the Forest Staats where visibility was restricted to a few hundred yards, because of the thick woods that came to the edge of the unimproved trail. This necessitated a reduction in the rate of advance, as caution was now extremely important for not only were the flanks and front of the company exposed but also the rear.

The company advanced two and one half miles without incident, when the leading elements came to a large open area with the village of Born in the center. As one jeep and the M-8 reconnaissance car moved cautiously out of the forest and over a slight rise they were greeted with a hail of automatic fire from the edge of the village. (See Map C) (34)

(32) (33) (34) Personal knowledge.

Pulling back to the cover of the woods the commander of the scout car dismounted and went over to the tank on which the 2d Platoon leader was riding. At the same time the company commander came forward, prompted by the firing, and also went to the tank of the platoon leader. The three commanders then went forward to a point where they could see the village. A quick analysis of the terrain revealed that the village contained approximately fifty five houses and half that number of barns and sheds. All of the houses appeared to be built of wood and the barns full of hay. The main street ran parallel to the edge of the village from west to east, then turned at a right angle and ran south to north. Houses were on either side of the street, clustered mainly in the south and east ends of the village. West, north, and northwest of the village were flat open fields sloping gently toward it, giving the defenders excellent fields of fire and good visibility. To the south and east the forest of large bushy trees came almost to the doorsteps. There were no visible signs of emplacements and no apparent preparations had been made to defend. However, this could not be definitely established. All in all this was not a very inviting picture, as the village could prove very troublesome. (See Map C) (35)

It did not take long to decide to attack directly over the open ground to the front, astride the trail leading into the village. (See Map C) This course of action was felt necessary due to the importance of speed and the dif-

(35) A-4, p. 233; Personal knowledge.

difficulties that would be encountered attempting to flank the village through the thick forest. Also the shock action and fire power of the tanks would be lost, were a flanking maneuver undertaken. The attack plan was a simple one, calling for a frontal assault with one platoon of tanks and one platoon of riflemen supported by the attached heavy machine gun platoon. The on line formation was to be employed with the five tanks approximately one hundred yards apart. Between each tank would be placed a heavy machine gun mounted on its organic vehicle and manned by a skeleton crew. The rifle platoon would remain mounted until the village was reached and then dismount and continue the attack. The company commander was to ride in his jeep beside the tank of the platoon leader. Tanks and jeeps mounting automatic weapons were to advance, firing continually until ordered to cease fire. (36)

The 1st Platoon with its tanks was to be prepared to flank the village from either direction if the need arose, and the weapons platoon was to be prepared to support the 1st Platoon if it were committed. The 3d Platoon would remain in reserve along with the remainder of the tanks and tank destroyers. (37)

It was further decided to use all tracer ammunition in the automatic weapons and for the tanks to attempt initially to set fire to the barns full of hay. It was hoped that the psychological effect of the tracer ammunition and the burning buildings would cause rapid disintegration of

(36) (37) Personal knowledge.

the units defending the village.

At 0945 hours the platoon leaders were called together and the attack order issued, and immediately thereafter they moved back to their platoons. (38)

Within ten minutes after the platoon leaders had received the order the tanks with the 2d Platoon mounted and the heavy machine gun platoon were in position on the edge of the forest.

The company commander, by the use of hand and arm signals gave the order to attack and at the same time had his jeep begin to move forward, followed by the attacking echelon. (39)

Here difficulty was encountered in controlling the advance as the radios belonging to the platoons were useless while the operators were mounted on tanks and there was no means of communication with the tank platoon leader. Therefore the company commander was required to depend upon visual means only. This handicap did not retard the attack however, and control was excellent even though progress was rapid.

The first rounds of tracer ammunition and the rounds from the cannon started fires throughout the village. All automatic weapons were firing at a rapid rate, as were those riflemen on the tanks who were in a suitable position to fire. Even the .30 caliber machine gun on the company commander's jeep, manned by the runner, was doing its bit. With all of this automatic fire there appeared to be a con-

(38) (39) Personal knowledge.

tinual band of tracers across the entire platoon front. (40)

Enemy fire coming from the village was light, probably due to the large volume of fire pouring into the town keeping the Germans under cover. As the attack progressed the enemy could be seen running into the woods on the far side of the village. (41)

The shock action of the tank-infantry team had its desired effect and the edge of the village was reached without difficulty. Immediately the infantry dismounted and within a few minutes were continuing on foot. Without delay the squad leaders moved their squads to previously assigned areas and began the task for which they were extremely capable, that of mopping up the village. A squad moved down either side of the street, clearing one building after another. (42) They were followed by a third squad which cleared those buildings which were apart from the rest. Supporting these squads were two tanks which leap-frogged forward along the street on which the riflemen were working. (43)

While the 2d Platoon was clearing the town the company commander took time to gather up the loose ends. First, he called the battalion commander on his SCR 300 radio and reported his latest position. Then he called the company executive officer on the SCR 536 radio and told him to prepare the remainder of the company column for a continuance of the attack beyond the village of Born and to send the reconnaissance platoon into the village immediately. The executive officer was further instructed to send the company

(40) (41) (42) (43) Personal knowledge.

jeeps forward with ammunition for the .30 and .50 caliber machine guns and small arms ammunition for the men.

As it was apparent that most of the Germans had left the village, the company commander felt that it was time to bring the entire company forward into the village where he planned to issue the ammunition to the company just as soon as possible in order to speed up the advance. (44)

A call was received from the 2d Platoon leader over the SCR 300 saying that the village was clear and that one prisoner had been captured. Thus at 1100 hours, Born was cleared and the way open for the column to continue toward the Elbe.

The company commander then called his executive officer on the SCR 536 and told him to bring the remainder of the company forward and to proceed to the southeast corner of the village where the 2d Platoon was in the process of re-organizing. (45) (See Map C)

From his new position in the southeast end of Born, the company commander attempted to call the battalion commander on the SCR 300 but was unsuccessful. The range was too great for the radio, as these sets were now more than six and one half miles apart. This was a problem that had to be solved. Fortunately the solution was easy, as one of the reconnaissance platoon jeeps was near at hand, enabling the company commander to reach the battalion commander through the regimental command net. Through this SCR 610 a message was relayed to the

(44) (45) Personal Knowledge.

battalion commander giving the results of the Born encounter and stating that the company was going to continue through the Forest Staats.

At 1130 hours, Company E and its attachments were reorganized and ready to move. Even though the 2d Platoon had been in action twice that morning the company commander decided to have them continue to lead. This decision was influenced by the necessity for speed. Delay would be caused by making a change and, too, the platoon and attached tanks had received no casualties up to this time. (46)

During the reorganization the company commander had been making a hasty study of the map of the area. From this study it was evident that the route from Born would be difficult to follow as there were no improved roads and the only way through was by the use of trails or fire breaks. The forest appeared to be very thick and from the map it was difficult to determine where the trails began or ended. As the company commander was completing his map reconnaissance, the commander of the 30th Division Reconnaissance Company came up. Together they discussed the situation and possible lines of action and decided that the Reconnaissance Company Commander would personally lead the Reconnaissance Platoon until the edge of the forest had been reached. (47)

The route was decided upon and the Reconnaissance Platoon moved out, followed by Company E. (See Map C) After about a mile of slow but steady progress the column came to

(46) (47) Personal Knowledge.

a halt, and the E Company Commander went forward to determine the cause. The reason for the sudden stop was soon apparent, for directly in front of the lead scout jeep were narrow paths leading in all directions, none of which appeared passable. A hasty ground reconnaissance verified their impassability, and it was apparent that the column was on the wrong road and would have to turn and go back to Born. (48)

At Born a hasty ground reconnaissance by the company commanders showed the correct trail to lead to the northeast instead of to the east, where they had initially gone. (See Map C)

Again the column moved out, this time on a more improved trail.

At this time a radio message was received over the SCR 610 radio of the Reconnaissance Platoon, asking the position of the leading elements and directing the company commander of E Company to remain where he was and wait for the battalion commander, who was coming up along the route of advance.

After receiving this message, the company commander sent his runner back through Born to meet the battalion commander to guide him forward. In approximately ten minutes the messenger returned with the battalion commander and S-3. A complete picture of the operation to date was given them and the remainder of the advance to the objective coordinated. The battalion commander reminded the company commander of his mission to reach the Elbe River as soon as possible and

(48) Personal Knowledge.

also stated that the remainder of the battalion was moving up into Born and would stay there until Company E had reached the far edge of the woods. At that time the company commander was to send a message back by either radio or motor, stating his position. It was then that the battalion would move forward. (49)

The company commander rejoined his unit which had been moving along at a slow, cautious, but steady pace, against scattered resistance that was immediately overcome by a few well placed rounds from one of the two leading tanks. (50)

At one place, half way through the forest, a large enemy truck was caught and set afire. This proved to be a slight hazard to the remainder of the column as the rockets and mortar ammunition on the truck continued to explode, sending fragments in all directions, causing the column to detour through the woods around the burning vehicle. (51) (See Map D)

Company E emerged from the Forest Staats at 1400 hours. (See Map D) In a period of five hours it had advanced through ten and one half miles of thick forest and had fought its way through one village.

As he emerged from the woods the company commander dispatched a message over the Reconnaissance Platoon's SCR 610 giving the location of the company and stating that only slight resistance had been encountered. However, this message was unnecessary as the battalion commander had decided to

(49) (50) (51) Personal Knowledge.

follow closely on the heels of Company E and in so doing had closed the gap between the company and the remainder of the battalion. (52)

At the edge of the forest was the town of Dolle, a small place slightly off the route of advance. It was decided to by-pass this town for two reasons: one, German soldiers could be seen in full flight across the fields on the far side of town and, two, the platoon leader of the 2d Platoon had picked up two officers of the German Army, who had stated that the garrison in Dolle had withdrawn across the Elbe. (53) (See Map D)

At 1415 hours orders were received from the battalion commander directing the company to turn south and proceed with all haste to a newly assigned objective, a sector along the Elbe River north of Magdenburg. This meant that the company had five hours of daylight in which to travel twenty five miles, but the change of plans entailed no great difficulties as the lead vehicles had only to turn south on the improved highway and continue. (54) (See Map D)

A hasty map reconnaissance showed that the terrain between Dolle and Magdenburg was to be much more favorable. There was a two lane cement highway apparently in excellent condition extending all of the way to Magdenburg with but a short stretch of woods to pass through. The landscape was flat allowing for excellent visibility and there were two large towns to pass through, neither of which was thought to

(52) (53) Personal Knowledge; (54) A-4, p. 233.

be strongly defended. (55)

The company commander had received word that Magdenburg was in the hands of the 2d Armored Division so was not worried about that city. In fact he could see little to hinder the advance of the column the remainder of the way to the Elbe.

At 1425 hours the company turned south on the hard top highway and began to advance at increased speed. It moved easily through the Forest, Colbetz and on into Wolmustedt. Along the entire route enemy could be seen running through the fields fleeing from the vicinity of the highway.

The further the advance the lighter the hearts, here was the type of war one liked to fight, no shooting and no being shot at. However, this was much too easy to last and something was bound to happen, as it did.

The column had entered Wolmustedt and was nearing the center of the city. One jeep and the M-8 reconnaissance car had passed beyond the main intersection; and the lead tank carrying riflemen was approaching it, when from the road to the right or west appeared an enemy half track. Both the tank and the half track approached to within a few yards of the cross road before either saw the other. Immediately two Germans manned the guns of the half track and the remainder deserted their vehicle to take cover in the nearby buildings. Those on foot were halted by a few bursts from the 50 caliber machine gun mounted on the lead tank. (56) (See Map D)

The half track and enemy soldiers were easily captured.

(55) (56) Personal Knowledge.

However, the discovery of three wounded American soldiers in the half track dampened the high spirits of the men of Company E. Further it was learned that these three soldiers had been wounded by the fire of Company E in the fight that had just taken place. (57)

As soon as the short skirmish was over the company commander ordered a hasty search of the nearby buildings to make certain that there were no enemy in them. As there were none, the men were quickly mounted on their respective tanks, ready to move on.

The order was given to continue and as the column moved out the company commander called the battalion commander on his SCR 300 giving him the details of the short encounter and bringing him up to date on the progress of the company. Next the company commander talked with his executive officer on the SCR 536 radio checking with him on the status of vehicles within the Company E column. The executive officer was at the rear of the column and therefore in a position to know the number of vehicles that had fallen out because of mechanical failures. He stated that the column was still intact and that no jeeps or tanks had fallen out. (58)

The miles slid swiftly by and at 1630 hours the lead vehicles entered the town of Barleben without difficulty. (See Map D) Here again as in other towns white flags were flying from many of the houses. The company had thus advanced twenty one miles with one slight delay caused by the engage-

(57) (58) Personal Knowledge.

ment with the German half track. (59)

As the column moved slowly through Barleben the company commander received an additional mission over the radio, that of seizing the bridge which spanned the Elbe just north of Magdenburg. To do this it would be necessary to turn north on the autobahn that ran north and south beyond the town and follow it to the bridge. This order had also been received by the reconnaissance platoon leader and therefore without further orders the column turned on the autobahn and continued as directed. (60)

To more clearly picture the action that follows it is necessary to understand the type of terrain in this area. The autobahn is a super highway built up from ten to twenty feet above the level of the surrounding ground. It was a two lane highway running between Berlin and Brunswick passing on the outskirts of Barleben, between it and Magdenburg. Flat open fields spread out from Barleben in all directions, as well as between Barleben and Magdenburg. Therefore the autobahn, built up as it was, provided excellent cover for the company as it advanced beyond the town. (61) (See Map D)

As the lead jeeps and M-8 reconnaissance car moved beyond Barleben and up the incline onto the autobahn they received a heavy volume of fire from the vicinity of Magdenburg and from the banks of the Elbe beyond. Quickly they moved back to the cover provided by the autobahn. (62) (See Map D)

Hearing the whine of German 88s and the snap of small

(59) (60) (61) (62) Personal Knowledge.

arms fire the men lost no time in scrambling from the tanks and taking cover in the buildings nearby, or the ditches along the side of the road. From the volume of enemy fire, it was estimated that this resistance was not merely a road block but more likely a well organized defensive position. The information received previously was in error, since it was quite obvious Magdenburg was not in the hands of friendly troops but held by the enemy. (63)

Within a few seconds after receiving the first fire, mortar and artillery barrages began to fall on the column and enemy fire continued with increasing intensity. (64)

The company commander, in order to get a better picture of the situation, went to the autobahn with his 2d Platoon leader and from a position on its bank observed Magdenburg and the Elbe River beyond, with its steep, high, far bank. It was quite clear that these hills afforded excellent observation from which the enemy could direct the artillery and mortar fire then falling. (65)

The Germans continued to shell Company E, making movement very difficult. But something had to be done. Therefore, the company commander moved back to the edge of Barleben and was joined there by the regimental and battalion commanders who had come forward from further back in the column.

Making a hasty estimate of the situation the regimental commander ordered a halt to the attack and temporary positions prepared by Company E on the outskirts of Barleben

(63) Personal knowledge; (64) A-4, p. 233; Personal knowledge; (65) Personal knowledge.

and along the autobahn. (66)

Assembling his executive officer and platoon leaders the company commander gave the order to prepare the positions that he had quickly decided upon. He gave the 3d Platoon the mission of securing the front of the battalion, supported by the weapons platoon. The 1st and 2d Platoons were to secure the forward flanks of the battalion area with as few men as possible to allow the larger number of men to move into buildings in their assigned areas for a much needed rest. (See Map D) The company executive officer was to assign the platoon areas and take care of the administrative details such as food and supplies. (67)

After insuring that his instructions were being carried out, the company commander again went forward to a position on the autobahn where he could see the entire front. He wanted to make a mental picture of the area so as to plan a course of action in case of any emergency. (68)

It was 1900 hours and almost dark when the company commander moved back to the company area. He found that the executive officer had the buildings assigned and the men of the company and attached units had already moved in. Shortly thereafter the kitchens were brought up and the men fed their first hot meal in two days.

At 2030 hours the company was in position and ready for any eventuality. The 3d Platoon, supported by the weapons platoon, was in position along the autobahn, one squad each from the 1st and 2d Platoons was in position on the flanks

(66) A-4, p. 235; Personal knowledge; (67) (68) Personal knowledge.

and the remainder of the company was in billets. (69) (See Map D)

The night of 13 - 14 April was very quiet and the entire company was able to rest except those men who were necessary to secure the position and the one five man patrol sent out to probe the enemy defenses and to determine if possible the main German positions and those that were weakest. The patrol returned just before daylight bringing with it the discouraging information that the enemy was dug in on the outskirts of Magdenburg and was apparently ready to defend the city as long as possible. (70)

On 14 April no attempt was made to continue the attack and the company spent the day in improving the positions it occupied and preparing for the attack that was to be launched within the next few days. (71)

The day's action, while not continuous, had been extremely exhausting. Riding on the deck of a tank is difficult in itself, add to that the necessity for strict alertness, continual readiness for action and the weight of combat equipment and the individual has had a tiring task. Company E had covered thirty five miles in fourteen hours, fought two decisive engagements, destroyed seventeen or more vehicles, captured seven or more prisoners and killed an undetermined number. (72)

Although only one rifle platoon, one tank platoon, the heavy machine gun platoon and the reconnaissance platoon saw action, the other platoons were nevertheless always prepared

(69) (70) (71) (72) Personal knowledge.

to assist, as plans were continually being formulated for their employment. (73)

“ Had resistance been less isolated and more determined, one day's advance such as this would have been impossible. Speed, however, was the order of the day and to this end the company bent all effort. Company E had been wholly successful in accomplishing its assigned mission! (A letter in my personal possession written by Major Philip Chandler, acting battalion commander at the time of the action.)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

From a study of this operation it is apparent that speed was placed above other tactical considerations. This type of operation requires that the attacking unit keep contact if possible with the retreating enemy, but it is not considered tactically sound to place so much emphasis on speed as to disregard all other tactical doctrines. These errors will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The bold and aggressive action of Company E was successful and did achieve the desired results. However, there were many times throughout the day when a vigorous countermove by the enemy would have cut the company off from the remainder of the battalion.

To maintain contact with the next higher headquarters is a must at all times. Therefore, prior to this operation, the commanders concerned should have seen the need for long range radios and had them available. As it was, when the

(73) Personal knowledge.

necessity arose for such a radio, the company commander did not have one and so had to rely on a means other than that provided to transmit his messages.

During the night immediately before the attack, it is wise to give as many men as possible an opportunity to rest. Here the company commander overdid this and allowed his entire company to sleep. Some precautions should have been taken to guard against a possible raid on the area by the enemy.

The preparations for the attack by the executive officer of Company E cannot be criticized. Through his thoroughness the company was in complete readiness to move before the company commander returned from his meeting with the battalion commander.

The company commander was very thorough in his coordination with the attached units. This is absolutely necessary in an operation such as that of Company E. The tankers and infantry alike must know what the other arm is going to do as well as exactly what they themselves are supposed to do.

Contact with the German column demonstrated the platoon leaders ability to act quickly and correctly. In so doing he achieved the important initial advantage of being the aggressor and also of gaining the initial fire superiority so necessary in quick decisive engagements.

During this action the company minus the 2d Platoon was left in a column along the road. Here, the company commander should have dispersed the unit as a measure of passive

resistance at least. The possibility of a counterattack should never be overlooked and measures must always be taken to guard against it.

After the enemy convoy had been destroyed and the Germans killed or routed, the company commander would have used better judgement by continuing the attack with the 1st Platoon. Even though a small amount of time would have been consumed, the advantages of evenly distributing the dangerous assignments, plus that of keeping fresh troops in the lead, should have been taken into consideration.

The frontal attack on the town of Born although successful, could have easily resulted in failure. Here the company commander gambled on a long chance and got away with it. The woods to either side of the town afforded excellent cover for the attacking infantry. A coordinated tank-infantry attack could have been launched, with the tanks moving across the open ground and the infantry using the woods. Also, as nothing was known about the strength of the defenses or of their position, a patrol sent along the forest edge could have obtained this information in a very short while. With this, the company commander would have had a basis on which to plan his attack. Here is a clear indication of too much importance being placed on speed of advance with security disregarded.

During the initial assault on Born, the company commander placed himself where he should not have been. Rather than leading the attack, his place was in rear of the assaulting echelon, where he would be better able to control

and direct the actions of his unit. Furthermore, leading the attack as he did increased his chances of becoming a casualty or of being pinned down by enemy fire and made incapable of controlling his unit. Also, with one platoon in the attack and three held mobile, the company commander's place was with the larger portion of the unit. A formation such as was used in this attack is not tactically sound in that the use of jeeps as an assault vehicle is not considered proper. The jeep itself and the men riding in the jeep are extremely vulnerable to any type of enemy small arms fire. The infantry riding on the decks of the tanks are also vulnerable to enemy fire, but it is often times necessary to employ them in this manner, in order to take full advantage of mechanized speed.

As the attack reached the town of Born, squad leaders demonstrated their leadership ability by directing the men through this portion of the operation in a swift but efficient manner. In village fighting such as this, the company commander must depend entirely upon his subordinates. Control and coordination becomes extremely difficult and therefore necessitates a complete understanding of the individual requirements by each squad leader. This was demonstrated here.

The position of the company commander while the town was being cleaned out was as it should be. From his position he could direct the operation as well as coordinate the movements of the remainder of the unit. The possibility of a flank attack, counterattack or attack from the rear must

never be forgotten. The company commander took all of these possibilities into consideration when planning for the initial attack.

After the town had been cleared, the company commander allowed the 2d Platoon to remain in the lead. Here it would have been advisable for him to exchange assignments with one of the two platoons that had not been committed to action. In action such as this, a continual alert attitude is necessary. The 2d Platoon by this time was undoubtedly tired and should have been given an opportunity to rest by putting them in reserve. The same is true of the lead platoon of tanks, their position in the column could very easily have been changed.

Before the attack was continued and during the company reorganization there should have been a more thorough map study and ground reconnaissance conducted by the company commander. Had this been done the column would not have moved out on the wrong trail but would have started initially in the proper direction. No grave difficulties were caused by this error, but had the trail not ended so abruptly the column might have advanced miles before discovering the mistake. In the writer's opinion there is no excuse for errors such as this.

Adequate communications at all times to all echelons of command is an absolute necessity. Because of a lack of proper communications, the company commander of Company E was required to stay behind his unit as it advanced and consult with the battalion commander. Had a radio of greater

range than the SCR 300 been made available to the company commander this would not have been necessary.

There is no need of commenting on the movement of the company through the Forest Staats as it was little more than a motor march.

The feasibility of accepting the word of two German officers captured is questionable. A motorized patrol could have moved quickly through the village of Dolle and definitely established the truth of the statements as they were given. As it was the entire column could have been swept by enemy fire as it came abreast of the village. Here as before it is evident that speed was foremost in the mind of the company commander as he pushed forward without regard for his unprotected flanks.

When the order was received changing the zone of action of the 120th Infantry Regiment, the direction of attack was changed smoothly and without delay.

When the leading elements of the company were surprised by the German halftrack the commanders displayed their combat efficiency by their unhesitating action. Had the enemy been given time to open fire there no doubt would have been a number of killed and wounded among those men riding on the tanks.

Incidents such as the wounding of the American soldiers captured by the Germans are unfortunate, but cannot be helped. Had the tank not fired as quickly as it did there would probably have been many more casualties.

Trying to seize the bridge over the Elbe River was a

bold venture and one well worth undertaking, but should have been attempted with more caution. Had the reconnaissance platoon been halted in town and a scout sent forward to the autobahn, he would have seen the futility of such a move. Instead, infantry might have been sent on foot and by following the autobahn, which would furnish the necessary cover, they might have been able to reach the bridge without being discovered. As it was the intentions of the company were immediately made known to the Germans.

The regimental commander showed excellent judgement in holding the company where it was. There no doubt would have been a large number of casualties had the attack continued. The volume of enemy artillery and mortar fire was evidence enough as to the Germans intentions.

The bringing of the hot meal forward as rapidly as was done in this case indicates initiative and forethought on the part of the battalion S-4. Hot food could not have been made ready so rapidly had the cooks not been preparing it well in advance of the halting of the column. Here also the battalion commander showed good judgement in having the kitchens following the column. A hot meal so quickly after a hard days operation certainly increases the morale of the troops.

On April 14th, the company commander used sound judgement in continuing to improve the positions he was holding. No matter how long a unit is in a given position, it should continually improve its position.

LESSONS

1. Complete coordination is essential in a tank-infantry team action.
2. Radio communication is of utmost importance in any fast moving situation.
3. There should be a sure means of communication between all components of any attacking combined arms team.
4. Taking the initiative immediately contributes much toward the final success of any engagement.
5. All commanders should be thoroughly familiar with the tactical employment of the components they are working with.
6. Infantry can engage in a fire fight while mounted on the tanks.
7. A thorough map and aerial photograph study is absolutely necessary before attacking over unfamiliar ground.
8. Company commanders must be certain of their routes of advance before moving out in the attack.
9. Information received as to the positions of flank units cannot always be relied upon.
10. Reconnaissance units can successfully be employed as the security and point for a motorized attacking unit.
11. Infantry can ride on the decks of tanks for an extended period of time and still be in a condition to fight when necessary.
12. Motorized units in the attack can easily change their direction of attack without decreasing the efficiency of the unit.

13. A commander in the attack must make many snap decisions to keep his unit moving rapidly.

14. Infantry platoon leaders must ride on the tank of the tank platoon leader in order to achieve complete coordination, while the infantry platoon is mounted on the tanks.

15. Knowledge of map reading is an absolute necessity for commanders of all echelons.

16. In village fighting often times individual squads are the maneuver element and fight independently.

17. A superior executive officer will assist materially in achieving success in an attack.

18. Orders changing the mission may be received at any time even during the progress of the attack.

19. Hot meals can be prepared for the men although the unit is on the move.

20. The tanker and the infantryman must have complete confidence in each other in order to make an operation a success.