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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 232ND INFANTRY  
(42ND INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE DEFENSE OF  
THE RHINE RIVER, NORTH OF STRASBOURG, ALSACE,  
24 DECEMBER 1944-18 JANUARY 1945  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Rifle Company Commander)

Type of Operation Described: RIFLE COMPANY IN THE DEFENSE  
OF AN EXTENDED FRONT

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of B Company, 232nd Infantry, Task Force Linden, during the period 24 December 1944 to 18 January 1945. This action incorporates the occupation of defensive positions in OFFENDORF, STATMATTEN and SESSENHEIM, FRANCE, the conduct of the defense of these towns to include counterattacks to regain them after losing them due to enemy action.

It will be necessary to discuss briefly the events that led up to this action, to include the larger units involved so that the reader may understand the action clearly.

On 15 August 1944 the Seventh Army, under the command of Lt. General Alexander M. Patch, assaulted the shores of southern FRANCE in the vicinity of ST. TROPEZ with three divisions abreast, the 3rd, 36th and 45th. (1) This operation known as DRAGOON, drove north through Southern FRANCE, and on 11 September 1944 made patrol contact with General Patton's Third Army west of DIJON. Contact in force was made on 21 September 1944 in the vicinity of EPINAL, FRANCE. (2) The drive continued, generally to the northeast, after junctioning with the Third Army, and by 16 December 1944 elements of the Seventh Army had crossed the German border, in the vicinity of NEIDERSCHLETENBACH, SCHWEIGHOFEN, SCHEIBENHARD and BERG. (See Map A)

The assault in the ARDENNES launched by the Germans 16 December 1944 was destined to halt the brilliant drive of the Seventh Army.

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(1) A-5, p. 145

(2) A-1, p. 66

On 21 December 1944, the Seventh Army received orders to halt the defensive and dig in. (3) To relieve Third Army for the maximum effort against the German threat, Seventh Army's left boundry was extended to the left to ST. AVOLD. (See Map B). Its frontage now extended eighty four miles westward from the RHINE. (4) The shift took four days and was completed on 26 December, during which time little action took place other than the shifting of positions by both the German and American forces. Positions were adjusted in the VI Corps area, generally along the traces of the MAGINOT LINE. (See Map B). VI Corps area was occupied by the 79th and 45th Divisions and Task Forces Herron, Hudleson and Linden. The Linden and Herron Task Forces were composed of the Infantry Regiment only of the 42nd and 70th Divisions respectively.

#### THE BACKGROUND OF TASK FORCE LINDEN

A critical need for Infantry troops to assist in the Winter operations of the U.S. Armies in EUROPE in late 1944, necessitated the shipment of Infantry elements only of several Infantry Divisions in the Zone of Interior to that Theater immediately. One of those units whose Infantry elements were shipped in advance of the remainder of the Division, was the 42nd Infantry Division. The 42nd Division was activated in July 1943, and began basic training of its fillers in October 1943. By January 1944 basic training was completed and unit training was begun. Shortly thereafter, the Division was besieged with requests for men qualified for overseas shipment to be transferred to other units. By April 1944 the three Infantry regiments had shipped out more than 5600 men. (5) These men were replaced by men from specialists training schools, the Air Force and branches of the service other than Infantry. The requests did not

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(3) A-6, p. 494

(4) A-6, p. 495

(5) A-11, p. 3

cease however, and many of these replacements were shipped out after receiving only short refresher courses in basic training. The Division was becoming, in effect, a Replacement Training Center.

(6) This procedure continued until 14 October 1944 when the Division received orders to stop all other training and prepare the three Infantry Regiments for overseas shipment. Men were to complete all POM requirements. (7)

On 25 November 1944, the three Infantry Regiments under the command of Brigadier General Henning Linden, the assistant Division Commander, and hurriedly assembled small staff, embarked at New York and sailed for Europe. The greater part of the men had little more than six weeks unit training at this time. Officers and men, who in many instances had met only a few weeks or even days before, were moving out as a unit for combat. This is the unit whose actions will be described on the following pages. (8)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

Task Force Linden arrived in the Port of MARSEILLE, FRANCE on 7 December 1944 and debarked on 8 December. Movement to DELTA BASE staging area, fifteen miles north of MARSEILLE, was accomplished by foot and motor.

Upon arrival at the bivouac area, which was located on a wind-swept and stony hill, the units busied themselves unpacking the equipment which accompanied the troops. Units at this time were up to full TO&E less the vehicles which were issued a few days later. Troops were issued, also at this time, items of winter combat equipment, which included shoe pacs, extra heavy wool socks, pile liners for field jackets, and combat trousers.

Combat efficiency, considering the lack of training, could be

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(5) A-2, p. 471  
(7) A-11, p. 8  
(8) Personal knowledge.

rated as satisfactory. Morale was good, and everyone seemed eager to move out for their first combat experience. On 20 December 1944 the units moved out by motor and rail, with STRASBOURG, ALSACE as its destination. The bulk of the units closed into STRASBOURG on 23 December.

The Task Force originally was destined for the 7th Army. Orders were received on 15 December transferring the unit from the 7th to the 3rd Army. On 20 December the Task Force was transferred back to the 7th Army initially for a few hours under 15th Corps, and then as 7th Army reserve. 7th Army ordered Task Force Linden, on 21 December, to take over the RHINE RIVER sector in the zone of the 36th Division. This sector extended from HERLESHEIM on the north, to PLOBSHEIM on the south, including the city of STRASBOURG. (See Map B). The mission of the Task Force was to occupy the west bank of the RHINE RIVER, to locate and destroy enemy patrols in that area and to prevent enemy patrols from infiltrating across the river.

General Linden disposed the three Regiments as follows: 242nd Infantry to occupy positions south of STRASBOURG, 232nd Infantry to occupy positions north of STRASBOURG, 222nd Infantry to occupy positions in the city of STRASBOURG. (See Map B). Adjacent units were Task Force Herron on the north, with a similar mission, and elements of the 1st French Army on the south, with the mission of containing the Germans in the COLMAR pocket.

Enemy activity prior to, and at the start of Task Force Linden's operations, was negligible other than occasional enemy patrols. This inactivity was short-lived, ending when the enemy mounted a major offensive in the STRASBOURG area on 5 January 1945. This offensive was to be known as Operation Nordwind, and was designed to retake STRASBOURG, and the

SAVERNE GAP from the Allies. (See Map C)

It had been the intention of 7th Army to place Task Force Linden in a relatively quiet sector, but circumstances made this sector a point of bitter fighting. (9)

#### DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 232ND INFANTRY

The Regiment planned to dispose all three Battalions on line. Necessity for this was dictated by the excessive frontage assigned the Regiment, which extended from HERRLISHEIM on the north to STRASBOURG on the south, exclusive. (See Map D) The terrain in the area was flat, but cut up with canals, rivers and patches of woods. Although this type of terrain would permit the occupation of maximum frontages, the assigned frontage would only permit the physical occupation of small towns and other key terrain features in the area. The weather was very cold and damp, with almost a continuous overcast. During the last ten days of the operation described, approximately two inches of snow fell.

#### NARRATION

##### THE OCCUPATION AND DEFENSE OF OFFENDORF, GAMBESHEIM AND STRASBOURG

The 1st Battalion, 232nd Infantry arrived in STRASBOURG just prior to darkness, on 23 December, and was billeted in a school building, in the heart of the city. Upon arrival there, the Company Commanders were alerted that the Battalion was moving out the next day, to relieve elements of the 35th Division on the line north of STRASBOURG.

At 0730, 24 December 1944, B Company Commander was informed that his company was to relieve elements of the 36th Division in the town of OFFENDORF. (See Map D) Attached to B Company would be one section of heavy machine guns from D Company. At this time B Company inquired as to the availability of ammunition in as much as the total

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(9) A-5, p. 598

amount of ammunition possessed by his Company was one clip of M-1 rifle ammunition per weapon. He was informed that none was available, but ammunition would be issued as quickly as it could be attained.

At approximately 1000 hours, B Company was loaded in amphibious trucks of the 830th Amphibious Truck Company, and moved out of STRASBOURG to effect the relief at OFFENDORF. As the column approached GAMBSHEIM, just south of OFFENDORF, (See Map D) it was halted and dispersed as GAMBSHEIM was under enemy artillery fire. The B Company commander moved forward by jeep and contacted the Battalion Commander in GAMBSHEIM. Directions were received to proceed by jeep to OFFENDORF and arrange for relief of the unit there. Contact was then made with elements of Company F, 143rd Infantry, and arrangements were made for immediate relief. B Company Commander's concern for additional ammunition was greatly relieved when arrangements were made with the relieved unit to leave all of their excess ammunition on position.

The relief was accomplished by infiltration and was completed by 1700 hours. Work was begun immediately to improve positions and to prepare additional ones. A motorized patrol was organized and given the mission of patrolling to HERRLISHEIM on the north (See Map D), which was unoccupied, and to GAMBSHEIM to the south, which was occupied by Battalion Command Post and C Company. A Company at this time was located in KILSTETT and LA WANTZENAN, the Command Post being located in the latter.

The first night in the line, which was Christmas Eve, passed without incident other than overeager riflemen and machine gunners firing at rustling leaves and foraging rabbits. Due to the bitter cold, men were rotated in their fox holes, leaving the positions only half

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manned.

At dawn on 25 December, a combat patrol was organized to move down to the RHINE RIVER with the mission of destroying any enemy patrols in our area, and to observe enemy activity on the east bank of the RHINE RIVER. The patrol moved to the river without incident, where they remained all day, where they observed the enemy improving his positions on the east bank of the RHINE. This procedure was repeated daily until 27 December, during which time a considerable amount of information concerning enemy positions was obtained and forwarded to higher headquarters.

Early 27 December, the Company was alerted to relieve elements of the 222nd Infantry in the City of STRASBOURG. An advance party was dispatched immediately to make arrangements for the relief which was to take place by 2400 hours, 27 December. This movement was the first of a series of most disconcerting moves, which for the most part, left the Company in a state of confusion as to our situation, and the enemy's. This first move was a result of the Regiment being relieved in its northern sector by elements of Task Force Herron.

The company moved out by motor at 1500 hours on 27 December and proceeded to STRASBOURG, and the relief was effected by 2200 hours. The positions occupied by B Company were on a man-made island in the RHINE RIVER, which was separated from STRASBOURG proper by a canal. The balance of the night was spent in an attempt to organize the position, which was so extensive that it required three platoons on line. Daylight on 28 December found the Company fairly well organized with wire communications into all three platoon command posts. The speed in occupying these positions can be attributed to a large extent to a German loudspeaker set up on the east bank of the river, which repeated

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at intervals, "We're coming back on the 28th, Yanks! " This meant that they were going to attempt to retake STRASBOURG that very day.

This threat however, was of short duration, for at 1100 hours, on the 28th, the Company was ordered to load up and proceed back to GAMBSHEIM. The relief by Task Force Herron had been changed and the Regiment had been ordered back to its original positions north of STRASBOURG. B Company moved out of STRASBOURG with no reluctance, by motor, and arrived in GAMBSHEIM at approximately 1700 hours, 28 December. The Battalion Commander placed A and C companies on the line. B Company was to be in reserve in GAMBSHEIM, where the Battalion CP was located. B Company's mission was to defend GAMBSHEIM, prepare and rehearse three counterattack plans, and assist A and C Companies in their patrol missions.

The company became busily engaged in carrying out its assigned missions, but four days later, on 1 January 1945, the Battalion was alerted for another move. An enemy threat south of STRASBOURG, caused the 222nd Infantry to be moved into that area, with the 232nd Infantry taking over the area vacated by the 222nd, in and around north of STRASBOURG. This move extended <sup>B</sup>to Regimental front to nineteen miles. (10) To cover this front the 2nd and 3rd Battalions were placed on the line, and the 1st Battalion was held in reserve in SOUFFELWEYERSHEIM. (See Map D). B Company closed into SOUFFELWEYERSHEIM at approximately 1500 hours on 2 January 1945. Upon arrival there, B Company Commander was immediately informed that the Battalion was moving out that night to relieve elements of 274th Infantry in the towns of SOUFFLEUHEIM, STATTMATTEN and DAUSENHEIM. (See Map D).

#### OCCUPATION AND DEFENSE OF STATTMATTEN

The movement to effect this relief was to begin immediately after

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(10) A-11, p. 15

darkness, on 2 January, and was to be completed by 0600 hours of 3 January. B Company was to relieve the troops in STATTMATTEN. This move extended the Regimental front to thirty three miles, with its north boundary at KOENIGSBRUCK. (11) (See Map D).

Immediately after darkness, 2 January, B Company moved out, loaded again on lumbering and unwieldy amphibious trucks. The column moved without incident to SOUFFLENHEIM, arriving there at 0100 hours on 3 January, where it was met by a guide from the 274th Infantry who was to guide the company to STATTMATTEN. Approximately three miles out of SOUFFLENHEIM, the guide confessed that he was lost. This presented a problem in that the road was very narrow with deep ditches on both sides. Amphibious trucks require a tremendous turn around space. After a lengthy reconnaissance on foot, B Company Commander found a suitable turn around space in a large field. Upon completion of turn around, the Company proceeded to STATTMATTEN, arriving there at 0400 hours. The relief was completed by 0600 hours and the relieved unit moved out. During the relief the only enemy information obtained from the unit Commander being relieved, was that there were no Germans between STATTMATTEN and the RHINE.

B Company now occupied a front extending from the town AUENHEIM on the north to the south edge of the woods just north of DRUSENHEIM. (See Map E). Physical occupation of such a frontage was impossible. It was decided to defend strong points at AUENHEIM and STATTMATTEN, and patrol by jeep from STATTMATTEN to DRUSENHEIM, which was occupied by A Company. C Company on the left, occupied SOUFFLENHEIM and patrolled north to KOENIGSBRUCK. The 3rd platoon of B Company took up positions in AUENHEIM. The remainder of the Company, with one section of

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(11) A-11, p. 15

heavy machine guns attached, took up positions in and around STATTMATTEN, utilizing one pill-box in the area which was part of the MAGINOT LINE. The kitchen and supply was moved into a school building in the center of STATTMATTEN. New positions were dug and an attempt to provide for the all around defense of STATTMATTEN was begun.

On 4 January, a patrol was organized to move across the MODER RIVER, proceed through the woods east of STATTMATTEN and locate the enemy, reported by civilians to be in FORT LEWIS, two and a half miles east of STATTMATTEN. The patrol returned in approximately three hours, reporting that they had encountered a strong enemy patrol when they arrived at the eastern edge of the woods. (See Map E). The enemy patrol was caught in the open, and the B Company patrol had inflicted an unknown amount of casualties before withdrawing. The Company motor patrol meanwhile, had reconnoitered the town of DALEHUNDEN and reported it unoccupied by enemy.

On 5 January the enemy crossed the RHINE RIVER, north of STRASBOURG, attacked and captured GAMBESHEIM, OFFENDORF and HERRLISHEIM. This bridgehead was established by a force about the strength of an Infantry Regiment. It contained two battalions of SS troopers. They were supported by twenty tanks and self-propelled guns, 81 and 120mm mortars, self-propelled 75mm anti-tank guns, 75mm field Howitzers and artillery. (12) This enemy action became known as the GAMBESHEIM bridgehead. This bridgehead, in the attempt to push north, attacked A Company in DRUSENHEIM. As a result of this action, B Company was ordered to send one rifle platoon to support A Company. The last platoon was chosen for this mission and moved out immediately to join A Company. This left the 2nd platoon, the weapons platoon, and the

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(12) A-11, p. 16

heavy machine gun section in STATTMATTEN.

At 1700 hours on 5 January, the pillbox occupied by B Company was attacked by an enemy patrol, but after an exchange of fire, withdrew. In anticipation of a night attack, B Company Commander reshuffled what remained of the Company into a more compact perimeter of the town. The 3rd Platoon in AUNHEIM, meanwhile, had reported no enemy action in its area.

As anticipated, the enemy attacked at 2300 hours that night, with the strength of a reinforced Company. (13) The main effort was launched against the north side of STATTMATTEN. At approximately 0100 hours the enemy captured a company strongpoint, consisting of a BAR team and three riflemen, which was defending the west side of the town. This was a turning point of the battle, and soon the enemy had captured the western half of the town, cutting the company completely off. By 0200 hours all wire and radio communication was out, and the Company Commander, moving about in an attempt to influence the fire fight, had become separated from his command group by the enemy. It was decided to make an attempt to contact the Battalion and inform them of the situation. At 0430 the Company Commander obtained four volunteers and broke through the enemy encirclement. At daylight the group commandeered a civilian vehicle in SESSENHEIM and proceeded toward Battalion Headquarters which was in SCHIRHOFFON. (See Map D). As the group approached SCHIRHOFFON it encountered the Battalion Commander, Lt. Colonel Brice C.W. Custer, with a small force which he had mustered, with the intention of recapturing STATTMATTEN. This force consisted of a platoon of light tanks from Company D 781st Tank Battalion, and approximately fifteen riflemen. (14) The Battalion Commander was informed of the situation as the B Company

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(13) Personal knowledge obtained from captured enemy.

(14) Personal knowledge.

group joined with the Battalion group.

As the group approached STATTMATTEN, the enemy opened up with small arms fire coming from the west side of the town. The Battalion Commander moved up the light tanks and fired fifteen minutes of preparatory fire with the 75mm guns and the machine guns mounted in the tanks. This action caught the enemy by surprise. The foot elements and the tanks, led by Lt. Colonel Custer, then moved in to assault the town. A series of swift and intense fire fights ensued, but with the tank assistance, STATTMATTEN was resecured at 0930 hours, one hour after the counter-attack began. The rescued men of B Company began mopping up immediately. Enemy casualties for this action amounted to approximately thirty killed and sixty six captured. B Company's casualties were four killed, six wounded and six captured. Among those killed was 1st Lt. William C. Clark, the Company Executive Officer. (15)

#### OCCUPATION AND DEFENSE OF SESSENHEIM

It was decided by Regiment that SESSENHEIM was a more favorable town to defend than STATTMATTEN, and at 1500 hours 6 January 1945, B Company was ordered to move back and defend SESSENHEIM. (See Map D) C Company, at the same time, was moved from SOUFFLENHEIM to RUNZENHEIM and AUNHEIM. (See Map D). This relieved the 3rd Platoon of Company B in AUNHEIM, which returned to SESSENHEIM and rejoined the Company on 7 January. Work was begun immediately to organize defensive positions in and around SESSENHEIM, with outposts being established in STATTMATTEN and DENGELSHEIM.

Meanwhile, enemy pressure on A Company in DRUSENHEIM had increased. This pressure was released by the 2nd Battalion, 314th Infantry, which attacked to the south of DRUSENHEIM in an effort to contain the enemy exploitation of the GAMBSHEIM Bridgehead. This attack was successful

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(15) Personal knowledge.

and resulted in the release of the 1st Platoon of B Company from attachment to A Company. The platoon returned to B Company in SESSENHEIM on 8 January, and was placed in position on the line around the town. At the same time, K Company from the 3rd Battalion, 232nd Infantry, was moved into position in the BOIS de SESSENHEIM (See Map E) between B Company and DRUSENHEIM. This shortened B Company's frontage, considerably. The front now extended from the north edge of the BOIS de SESSENHEIM to the southern edge of BOIS de ROUNTZENHEIM, a distance of about three thousand yards.

Company strength was now approximately one hundred and fifty five.

(16) Attachments at this time consisted of one heavy machine gun section, one platoon of 57mm anti-tank and a VI Corps Artillery Forward Observer Team.

It was decided that to best defend SESSENHEIM, due to the numerous approaches, a perimeter defense of the entire town would be necessary. This was accomplished by placing all three platoons in the perimeter with a small reserve held mobile in the center of the town. Due to the extreme cold, positions were established in buildings, other than those protecting the anti-tank and heavy machine guns. This was definitely a mistake. The anti-tank guns were placed so as to cover tank approaches from the north and east. The heavy machine guns were tied in with the light machine guns of the weapons platoon, so as to cover the entire front of the town. Lateral wire communication was established with K Company on the right and C Company on the left. Foot patrols maintained physical contact with K Company during darkness. The contact point being a MAGINOT LINE pillbox on the north edge of the BOIS de SESSENHEIM. The outposts in SPATTMATTEN and DENGELSHEIM consisted of five men each. Wire

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(16) Personal knowledge.

was laid to both outposts and to each platoon CP.

8 and 9 January passed without incident in the B Company sector. In HATTEN, seven miles north of SESSENHEIM, however, the enemy launched a strong Infantry and tank attack on the 9th and were successful in occupying half of the town. (17)

At 0600 hours on 10 January, the outpost in STATTMATTEN reported by phone that an enemy patrol of twenty men was approaching the town from the woods to the east. The outpost Commander reported the exact formation of the patrol and described their equipment. The outpost being on the second floor of the house was in a most advantageous position with no obstruction between them and the enemy patrol. B Company Commander, hoping to get the entire patrol, directed the outpost to hold their fire until the enemy was approximately one hundred yards away. In a few minutes the outpost commander reported that the patrol was within the prescribed range. He was ordered to open fire. Not a round was fired. The Company Commander frantically tried to regain contact with the outpost, but was unsuccessful. Shortly thereafter, the telephone wire was cut. The 1st platoon was ordered to move out immediately to attack STATTMATTEN and regain the outpost. Upon arrival there the platoon found the town clear of enemy and also the five-man outpost.

The period 11 through 15 January was uneventful, and advantage was taken of this lull to improve positions in and around SESSENHEIM. K Company on the right, in the meantime, had encountered several patrol skirmishes, and reported that the enemy was building up a concentration of troops in the town of DALHUNDEN and the woods to the north of the town. (See Map E).

On 16 January at 0800 hours, the enemy attacked from the woods north of DALHUNDEN and captured DEMGELSHEIM. The outpost reported before the

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(17) A-11, p. 21

wire was cut that the force consisted of approximately seventy men. To prevent a build-up of enemy forces in DENGELSHEIM it was mandatory that a counterattack be launched immediately. Due to a critical shortage of artillery ammunition at that time, it became necessary to attack without artillery support. The plan of attack was as follows: the 2nd Platoon to attack the northern edge of DENGELSHEIM along the road running southeast of SESSEMHEIM. (See Map E). The 1st Platoon to make a wide envelopment and attack along the road running west and slightly south out of DENGELSHEIM. The 1st Platoon maneuver was masked by the roads in this area which were built up above the ground level.

The attack jumped off at approximately 1000 hours. The 2nd Platoon moved to within one hundred and fifty yards of the western edge of the town, and was stopped by small arms and automatic weapons fire. Meanwhile, the 1st Platoon had moved around to the south of DENGELSHEIM, and was moving into assault position. The maneuver was going as planned, when one of the 1st Platoon men, unintentionally fired his rifle. This alerted the enemy in the southern sector of DENGELSHEIM, and the platoon was caught in the open with rifle and machine gun fire. The platoon was forced to withdraw, after receiving several casualties.

Meanwhile, the frontal attack over open terrain was pinned down. The Company Commander did not feel that he could use the 3rd Platoon to assist due to the fact that it was the only thing left in SESSEMHEIM to stop an attack on that town from another direction. The Company Commander therefore requested assistance from Battalion. The Battalion Commander, with a platoon of tanks from Company A, 781st Tank Battalion, and one platoon from L Company, arrived at approximately 1200 hours. This force, with what could be withdrawn from the fight of the 2nd Platoon, assaulted

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DENGELSHEIM from the north. The town was cleared at 1345 hours and eight prisoners were captured. (18) B Company's losses were three killed and eight wounded.

The enemy withdrew to the woods north of DALHUNDEN, and were pursued by tank fire only, into the woods. Had the attack been pressed at this time, to continue on and clear out the woods north of DALHUNDEN, and destroy the bridge over the MODER RIVER, the enemy would have been seriously delayed in his persistent offensive.

Harrassing small arms and mortar fire was received from the vicinity of the DALHUNDEN woods, and considerable difficulty was experienced in evacuation of the DENGELSHEIM casualties. An air strike was requested on the DALHUNDEN area, and at 1545 hours four P-47's bombed and strafed the town and the woods with unknown effect. (19)

An outpost was re-established in DENGELSHEIM and reinforced with a light machine gun. Communication to the outpost was repaired and the company moved back to its positions in SESSENHEIM.

At 1700 hours Colonel Guster arrived in SESSENHEIM with a platoon of tanks, platoon of A Company and a squad of Engineers. He stated that he had received a mission from Regiment to blow the DALHUNDEN bridge. Colonel Guster requested one platoon of B Company to assist in this operation. The 3rd Platoon was assembled and moved out accompanied by the Company Commander. The line of departure for this attack was the railroad tracks running through the BOIS de SESSENHEIM in K Company's area. (See Map E). Upon arrival there it was found that the tanks could not move over the railroad embankment. Darkness was rapidly approaching, and rather than waste time reconnoitering for another tank crossing, it was

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(18) Personal Knowledge.

(19) A-8, 17 January 1945.

decided to move on without the tanks. The two platoons moved out abreast across the railroad tracks, with the right platoon under Colonel Custer guiding on the MODER RIVER. (See Map E). The formation moved to within three hundred yards of the bridge when the left platoon encountered enemy riflemen digging in. A swift exchange of fire began. This alerted the enemy troops in DALHUNDEN and their hobnail boots could be heard as they pounded across the bridge to reinforce. It became obvious that the bridge could never be reached. It was getting dark and the men were firing at everything that moved in the woods. In no time they would be firing at each other in the darkness. The attack was abandoned and the force withdrew.

The 3rd Platoon was returned quickly to its positions in SESSENHEIM in anticipation of a night attack. However, the only action throughout the night were reports from the DENGELSHEIM outpost of the sound of tanks moving in the vicinity of DALHUNDEN.

At 0700 hours on 17 January the outpost in DENGELSHEIM reported the movement of enemy riflemen and tanks toward DENGELSHEIM and STATTMATTEN. By 0800 hours the outposts in both towns were driven in. SESSENHEIM was now under an enemy attack consisting of approximately two Infantry companies and four Mark IV tanks. (20). Two of the enemy tanks were quickly disabled by artillery fire, and the other two withdrew to DENGELSHEIM. Enemy Infantry, however, infiltrated into SESSENHEIM, and house to house fighting was taking place. At 1200 hours enemy had infiltrated into the rear of <sup>EN</sup>SESSHEIM from the south. B Company was now surrounded. Fierce fighting from house to house continued.

Upon being informed of the situation early in the morning, the Battalion Commander started gathering up a small force to counterattack. At 1500 hours the counterattack was launched against the west side of

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(20) Personal knowledge.

SESSENHEIM. The counterattacking force, under the command of Lt. Colonel Custer, consisted of: (21)

- 1 Rifle platoon, Company A
- 1 81mm Mortar section, Company D
- 1 81mm mortar section (as riflemen)
- 1 Platoon of tanks, Company A, 781st Tank Bn
- 2 Tank destroyers, 827th TD Bn.

By 1530 hours the counterattack had progressed to the center of the town, and was joined there by B Company Commander and a few men from B Company in that area. The counterattack had continued on east and cleared the town by 1700 hours. Reorganization was begun immediately to restore the defensive positions. In anticipation of an armored enemy counterattack the tanks were placed in position to block the north and east approaches to the town. The tank destroyers were placed in position to block approaches to the southeast and south of the town. While placing the tank destroyers in position, two enemy Mark IV Tanks were spotted moving just south of DENGELSHEIM. Both enemy tanks were destroyed by two rounds fired by one of the Tank Destroyers. (22)

Although darkness was approaching, it was imperative that DENGELSHEIM be resecured. The Battalion Commander decided to attack with two platoons of B Company and the platoon of tanks. The line of departure for the attack was to be the railroad tracks running along the eastern edge of SESSENHEIM. (See Map E). The 1st and 2nd Platoons were ordered to move to the line of departure. At this time accurate enemy artillery and mortar fire was falling continuously on the eastern part of SESSENHEIM, making it extremely difficult to move the men up to the line of departure. The attack was to move out on order of the Battalion

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(21) A-8, January 18, 1945

(22) Personal knowledge.

Commander. Regimental Cannon Company was requested to fire preparatory fire along the western edge of DENGELSHEIM, which was approximately three hundred yards from the line of departure. To protect the movement of the troops across the line of departure, smoke was requested on DENGELSHEIM. The first round of white phosphorous fired by the Cannon Company was a direct hit on B Company Commander's orderly, killing him instantly and wounding several others. It was nearly dark and despite frantic efforts by the Battalion Commander, only one tank had been moved up to the line of departure. This was due primarily to lack of communication between the tanks and Infantry. For these reasons the attack was finally called off, and the two platoons were moved back to their defensive positions with instructions to hold at all cost and to be alert for enemy infiltration during the night.

Enemy artillery and mortar fire continued making evacuation of the wounded difficult. Interdiction fire falling in the center of SESSENHEIM, which was a key road junction to the rear, restricted the movement of ambulances. Direct hits in the buildings which housed the kitchen and supply, destroyed the building and all the equipment and supplies within. As midnight approached, the mortar and artillery fire had decreased and by 2400 hours had ceased. In the meantime, telephone reports from the platoons indicated that the enemy was infiltrating the east and southern sections of the town in large numbers. The tank platoon Commander, without notifying B Company Commander, withdrew his platoon to SOUFFLENHEIM at approximately 2300 hours. Apparently, in an effort to save his tanks from enemy panzerfaust teams. Wire communications to the platoons started going out at 0100 hours, and by 0200 hours, all wire communication was out and contact with the

platoons could not be obtained on the 536 radio. Contact with Battalion was still intact on the 300 radio. Platoon messengers in the Company CP were dispatched to gain contact with the platoons and return. None of the messengers returned. Small arms fire throughout the night however, indicated the platoons were making an attempt to stop the infiltration.

At 0600 hours there was sufficient light to observe from the second floor of the command post. The extent of the infiltration was very apparent. Enemy could be observed everywhere. Four were killed with rifle fire from the command post windows, within ten yards of the building. (23) The Battalion Commander, meanwhile, had given instructions to hold out until he was able to move into, and counter-attack from, the southern edge of BOIS de ROUNTZENHEIM. (See Map E)

Intense small arms fire could be heard from the platoon positions since daylight, indicating the platoons were still holding out. Enemy tanks could be heard moving about in the southern section of the town. An enemy aid man attempted to enter a side door of command post and was killed in the doorway. As he fell the machine pistol he was carrying clattered to the ground. (24). A few minutes later a Mark IV tank halted outside the command post and took the building under point blank fire. Fortunately, the first two rounds were fired into the second floor of the building. As the building started to burn, it was decided this was the obvious time to move the command post. The command group displaced to a previously selected Command Post which was located in one of the last buildings on the road out of SESSENHEIM to SOUFFLENHEIM, arriving there at approximately 0845 hours. (See Map E)

Small arms fire in the eastern section of the town had quieted down considerably. This indicated the platoons were probably running

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(23) Personal knowledge.

(24) Personal knowledge.

out of ammunition or had been captured. Radio contact was made with the Battalion Commander, and all pertinent information was transmitted.

At 0900 hours a group of nine men, led by Lt. Alvin D. Squires, weapons platoon leader, joined the command group. Lt. Squires reported that the remainder of his platoon had either been killed or captured. A small perimeter was formed with all the men available, approximately twenty, in an effort to hold until Colonel Custer attacked. This plan was short lived, for only a few minutes later a Mark IV tank halted again at point blank range and fired into the buildings that were occupied. With no anti-tank weapons available other than M1 rifles, there was no choice other than to withdraw. The company commander ordered the group to withdraw to the BOIS de ROUNTZENHEIM to join the Battalion Commander and his group. This was done without a single casualty, although the tank machine guns kicked up snow all around the men as they dispersed and ran for the woods.

The counterattack did not materialize, and SESSENHEIM was lost.

In summary, B Company's mission to defend SESSENHEIM was a dismal failure. B Company's losses were approximately one hundred and thirty five enlisted men and four officers. Information gained from Lt. Robert Champion, 2nd Platoon leader, who was taken prisoner at SESSENHEIM and freed at the end of the war in May, was that the enemy losses on 18 January 1945 were very heavy. He further stated that there were so many dead and wounded Germans in front of his platoon position, when his platoon ran out of ammunition, that he feared retaliation from the Germans after he surrendered. From this information and personal observation of B Company Commander, it is believed that the German casualties exceeded B Company's casualties. Although B

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Company failed in its mission of holding SESSENHEIM, it did succeed in preventing the enemy from expanding the GAMBSHEIM bridgehead for a period of eight days. This delay was costly to the German plan and contributed to its eventual defeat.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. THE TASK FORCE MISSION

The original mission of Task Force Linden, was to locate and destroy enemy patrols west of the RHINE, and prevent enemy patrols from infiltrating across the river. It is believed that this mission could have been accomplished even though the frontages were extended and the troops inexperienced. Enemy activity however, changed this mission to one of defense against a major German offensive. On 5 January 1945, as the GAMBSHEIM bridgehead developed, the 232nd Infantry attempted to defend a front of thirty one miles. This frontage was more than ten times the distance prescribed for a Regiment in defense in current field manuals. It is the opinion of the writer that had a withdrawal been made along the entire VI Corps front to shorten and strengthen the lines prior to the enemy attack in the GAMBSHEIM area, a great savings in men and materiel would have resulted.

##### 2. USE OF INEXPERIENCED TROOPS

The use of inexperienced and partially trained troops in the heretofore described operation, proved to be costly. Seasoned troops would have done well to duplicate the feats of the units involved. Although a man learns quickly in actual combat, what he learns for the most part are the various ways and means of protecting himself. Little is learned from experience about teamwork and coordination, especially on the squad and platoon level. Teamwork and coordination of effort is best obtained by intensive training in such, prior to commitment in combat. It is

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therefore the opinion of the writer that VI Corps, in view of the impending enemy offensive to retake STRASBOURG and the SAVERNE GAP, made an error in committing Task Force Linden in the STRASBOURG area.

3. PIECEMEAL COMMITMENT OF B COMPANY AT STATTMATTEN

The decision to use the 1st Platoon of B Company to assist A Company at DRUSENHEIM left only one rifle platoon and the weapons platoon to defend STATTMATTEN, the other rifle platoon being at AUNHEIM at that time. This decision left the company commander with insufficient troops to effectively defend STATTMATTEN. The value of the 1st Platoon to A Company was debatable. The use of the platoon to assist B Company during the enemy attack on STATTMATTEN would have been invaluable. Had the probing attack on B Company, on the afternoon of 5 January been more carefully evaluated, it is believed that the decision to commit the platoon piecemeal to A Company would not have been given.

4. INEXPERIENCED LEADERSHIP

During the attack on STATTMATTEN the Command Post was located in the center of the town. This location was ideal for the command and direction of the Company's actions. The decision of the Company Commander to leave the command post and attempt to influence the action was very poor. The result of this poor decision was the Company Commander becoming cut off from his command group and communications. This action channelized his efforts to only a small portion of the town in which he was surrounded.

5. ACTION OF THE OUTPOST IN STATTMATTEN

The capture of the company outpost in STATTMATTEN on 10 January

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1945 will probably never be explained. At best one can only surmise as to just what took place. Experience has shown that on occasion, new men in combat are reluctant to fire their weapon at their first enemy. Apparently this reluctance is caused by fear of enemy retaliation in the event they miss their target. This type of behaviour can be attributed to the lack of confidence by the soldier, in himself and his weapon, both the result of insufficient training. This could possibly be the reason for the outpost unresisted surrender.

#### 6. CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE IN SESSENHEIM

The decision to defend entirely from buildings in SESSENHEIM, because of the cold weather, was definitely an error. Obviously, buildings offer good shelter from the weather and the enemy fire. Conversely, they become excellent targets for tank fire and permit enemy infiltration. Dug-in Infantry, by ducking in their fox holes may permit the tanks to pass and then engage the accompanying foot troops by fire while still possessing the advantage of being dug-in. Further, troops defending in buildings and feeling comparatively safe, are not as alert for enemy infiltration as the men in fox holes. The discomfort caused by the cold weather while occupying fox holes, could have been alleviated at night by rotating the men to the buildings to get warm. During daylight hours fewer men could have been used in the fox holes, while the rest were nearby and ready for immediate use. The failure of the Company Commander to adopt the above procedure was probably the primary reason for the loss of SESSENHEIM.

#### 7. FAILURE TO EXPLOIT SUCCESS

On two occasions, B Company failed to exploit a success, thereby permitting the enemy to attack again with disastrous results, especially

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in the second instance. The first occasion was immediately after retaking DENGELSHEIM on 16 January. With three rifle platoons and one tank platoon available, the attack should have continued into the woods south of DENGELSHEIM, destroyed all enemy north of the MODER RIVER, and held the bridge until engineers could destroy it. This would have delayed the enemy in employing armor against SESSENHEIM. The second occasion was the failure on 17 January to continue the attack. After clearing SESSENHEIM of enemy, the attack should have continued and driven the enemy out of DENGELSHEIM. This action would have delayed the attack on SESSENHEIM on 18 January, and permitted the Battalion Commander to strengthen the SESSENHEIM area in time to save it.

#### LESSONS

1. When it becomes apparent that a unit's mission cannot be accomplished, measures should be taken to alleviate that situation.
  2. When it becomes necessary to commit inexperienced and partially trained troops, they should be committed in a comparatively quiet sector where experience can be gained with a degree of orderliness.
  3. Tactical integrity of a unit is of paramount importance and piecemeal commitments <sup>are</sup> usually a costly mistake.
  4. A leader should never allow himself to become involved in a portion of an action which might cause him to become separated from the bulk of his command.
  5. Prior to actual combat a man should become imbued with complete confidence of the capabilities of himself and his weapon.
  6. When a choice between your men's comfort and accomplishment becomes imperative, the accomplishment of the mission comes first.
  7. Exploitation of a success is a phase of combat that should never be overlooked.
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