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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1949-1950

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY G, 385TH INFANTRY  
(76TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK AGAINST  
PILLBOXES OF THE SIEGFRIED LINE NEAR MINDEN,  
GERMANY, 19-22 FEBRUARY 1945.  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

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PILLBOXES OF THE SIEGFRIED LINE NEAR MINDEN,  
GERMANY, 19 - 22 FEBRUARY 1945  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Rifle Platoon Leader)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company G, 385th Infantry, 76th Infantry Division during the offensive against the Siegfried Line in the vicinity of MINDEN, GERMANY, 19 - 22 February 1945.

In order to orient the reader, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the major events which lead up to this action.

On January 3, 1945, nineteen days after the start of the futile German attempt to reach the Belgian port of ANTWERP, American First and Third Armies launched a coordinated counter-offensive to reduce the salient caused during the Battle of the Bulge. By 28 January 1945, this first phase was successful and the German Army was forced to retire to the security of the Siegfried Line along the Ardennes Front. (See Map A) (1)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Siegfried Line was a belt of pillboxes that protected the western border of GERMANY. The pillboxes were so located to compliment natural obstacles and were also located in depth. Mine fields and tank traps protected areas that were not covered by fire from the pillboxes or artillery con-

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(1) A-1, p. 288

centrations. The Siegfried Line was constructed so that its defenders could contain an attacking force until a successful counterattack could be launched.

The portion of the Siegfried Line along the SAUER RIVER was to be the real obstacle to the men of Patton's Third Army as they began their attack on 29 January to strike into the heart of GERMANY. VIII Corps spearheaded this offensive. On 6 February 1945, this offensive gained momentum as XII Corps joined VIII Corps in attacking east. VIII Corps continued its attack on PRUM and XII Corps was to attack BIEBURG. (See Map B) (2)

XII Corps attack was supported by a five hour artillery bombardment that included all Corps artillery plus three artillery battalions from III Corps. During the early morning hours of 7 February 1945, XII Corps assaulted across the SAUER RIVER with the 80th and 5th Infantry Divisions.

The 5th Infantry Division on XII Corps right flank was reinforced with Combat Team 417 of the 76th Infantry Division. The mission of the 5th Infantry Division was to seize the high ground in the vicinity of ERNZEN and FERSCHWEILER. This was the first offensive mission for any element of the 76th Infantry Division. Previous to this action, the Division held a defensive position along the SAUER RIVER in the vicinity of ECTERNACH, LUXEMBOURG.

The 5th Infantry Division and its attached Combat Team experienced great difficulty crossing the flood-swollen SAUER RIVER. The Germans were strongly emplaced in pill-

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(2) A-1, p. 288

boxes and natural rock barriers located on the far shore. The steep banks along the shore were extensively barbed-wired and mined. All approaches were covered with artillery and direct fire weapons causing the attacking force to pay heavily in men and equipment. However, after four days of bitter and costly fighting, the reinforced 5th Infantry Division battered across the SAUER RIVER, established a firm bridgehead and successfully defended itself against a strong enemy counterattack. (3)

At 1200 hours, 11 February 1945, Combat Team 417 reverted back to 76th Infantry Division control. Though heavy casualties were suffered after five days of bitter fighting, their difficult mission was accomplished. (4)

On the same date, the 76th Infantry Division was given the mission of expanding that portion of the SAUER RIVER bridgehead in the zone occupied by the 417th Combat Team. Immediately plans for the support and relief of the 417th Combat Team were put into effect. During the night of 11-12 February 1945, elements of the 385th Infantry were motorized and sent to the relief of the 1st Battalion, 417th Combat Team.

#### DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 385th INFANTRY

During the following five days, the remaining elements of 385th Infantry plus the attached 2d Battalion, 304th Infantry completed the relief of the 417th Combat Team.

The 385th Infantry was now located on high ground between the SAUER and PRUM rivers. This position, deep in the outer defenses of the Siegfried Line, faced an average

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(3) A-3, p. 78  
(4) A-5, p. 263

of 40 pillboxes to the square mile. (See Map C) The 385th Infantry assumed the mission of expanding the SAUER RIVER bridgehead by attacking towards the PRUM RIVER (5) Forward movement was a slow progress. The rolling terrain provided little cover and very few roads. The Germans, emplaced in their mutually supporting pillboxes, had good fields of fire on any attacking force. It was a story of squads and platoons in small unit action; a story of riflemen against concrete, steel, mines and the deadly machine guns.

#### THE COMPANY SITUATION (See Map<sup>C</sup> D)

Initially, Company G was in battalion reserve and occupied the following positions: The 2d Platoon occupied position "A" which furnished protection for the right flank of the 2d Battalion. Company Headquarters, 3d and Weapons Platoon occupied pillboxes in the vicinity of position "B".

Company G remained in these positions for approximately three days awaiting orders from the battalion commander. This intervening period afforded the company an opportunity to become accustomed to the "pillbox country." The company was at full strength in men and equipment since it had never been engaged in any offensive action. Previous experience had been of a defensive nature along the SAUER RIVER during the early part of February.

At approximately 1200 hours, 19th of February, Company G received the mission of advancing along the right flank of Company E and securing three pillboxes on a hill northwest of MINDEN, GERMANY.

The enemy situation was vague. The company was in battalion reserve and had little information of the enemy facing the 2d Battalion. Doubt existed as to whether the

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(5) A-4, p. 71

pillboxes were enemy occupied. This lack of information was partly due to the failure of the 417th Combat Team to positively identify each pillbox in its area before being relieved by the 385th Infantry. There were rumors that some of the pillboxes in front of the battalion were occupied by seriously wounded and dead personnel of the 417th Combat Team.

The weather conditions were good and the visibility was clear. There had been little rain so the ground was dry and firm. The only cover available to Company G was dotted patches of woods on the gently rolling farmland.

#### THE PLAN OF COMPANY G

Due to the fact that the attack was scheduled for 1400 hours, there was little time for a detailed reconnaissance. However, the company commander took the platoon leaders to the line of departure and pointed out the direction of attack which was along a draw that led to a woods. This was the limit of the terrain that could be viewed from the line of departure. (See Map D)

The attack formation called for 1st and 3d Platoons to move abreast along the draw that lead to the objective. The First Platoon was to be on the right and the 3d Platoon was to be echeloned to the left. The Company Command Group and Weapons Platoon were to follow the assault echelon. The 2d Platoon was to be in support and would follow the Weapons Platoon. There was no support from the Heavy Weapons Company. Each platoon was equipped with an SCR 536. Company Headquarters was in contact with Battalion Headquarters with an SCR 300.

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## FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

Arrangements were made to eat a hot meal in the company area before departure. Bedding rolls were left in the company area with the supply sergeant to be brought up when the situation so dictated. Although the situation did warrant the issue of flame throwers and dynamite charges, none were issued. The last hour prior to the attack was spent checking weapons, equipment, and writing short letters home. At 1330 hours, the company left its assembly area and marched to the line of departure.

## NARRATION

### COMPANY G ATTACKS

Promptly at 1400 hours, 19 February, Company G crossed the line of departure led by Captain Robert S. Ferrari. (6) The battalion commander was notified that the company had "jumped off" on schedule. The two leading platoons moved rapidly along the draw and entered the woods without incident. At this point, the 3d Platoon advanced directly through the woods to its front. However, the remainder of the company proceeded along the right edge of the woods. (See Map D) As a result, the 3d Platoon lost physical and radio contact with the remainder of the company. The heavy density of the woods made it impossible to use SCR 536 for radio contact.

At approximately 1500 hours, the 3d Platoon reached the far side of the woods and halted while the platoon leader and the platoon guide moved to the high ground on reconnaissance. From this vantage point, the platoon lead-

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(6) Personal knowledge.

er could observe the company objective as well as elements of the 1st Platoon in the woods to his right front (See Map D)

At this time the Company Commander decided to continue the attack on the objective with only the 1st Platoon. As the 1st Platoon emerged from its position in the woods, it was hit with a heavy mortar concentration and small arms fire. The platoon was forced to withdraw to the positions that it had just vacated. Because of fast approaching darkness, battalion ordered the company to dig in its present location for the night. Casualties had been light but morale was low because the company had not accomplished its mission. That night local security was posted and wire was established with battalion.

#### THE SECOND DAY

The following day, the company commander planned to resume the attack at 1400 hours. However, this time the objective was to be attacked by assault squads furnished by the 1st and 3d Platoons. The attack time of 1400 hours was selected in order to provide time for Company E to reduce a pillbox in its zone which had observation and fire on Company G. After paying a heavy price in casualties, Company E accomplished its mission by 1800 hours.

Before proceeding further with the narration, I want to explain the composition of the assault squads. Nine picked men formed each squad which consisted of a team leader, an assistant team leader, two automatic riflemen, two riflemen, one man equipped with a flame thrower and two demolition men.

At 1300 hours, the 3d Platoon leader moved his assault squad to the 1st Platoon Area which was to be the line of de-

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parture for this attack. However, upon arrival, the entire company area was subjected to violent artillery fire. Although the artillery fire decreased after the first 15 minutes, rounds continued to fall for the next 30 minutes. The company suffered casualties despite the fact that it was well dug in. The enemy had the company area "zeroed in" and any movement was impossible. All chances for a surprise attack were lost. Consequently, the company commander postponed the attack and proceeded to survey the damage done to the company. Casualties were light. Two men had been killed and six were wounded.

That night, the 3d Platoon moved from its foxholes to the shelter of a large pillbox which was located on the left edge of the platoon area. From this pillbox, the platoon was able to cover by fire its portion of the company front. The remainder of the night was spent without incident. After a hot meal, the company outposted its area and waited for dawn and another chance to accomplish its mission.

#### THE THIRD DAY

The shock of the first baptism of fire was over. The company had stood its ground long enough. Now it was time to make the enemy pay the price. Combat had become a very personal affair.

The plan of attack was to be the same as the preceding day. The assault team from the 3d Platoon was to secure pillbox #1 and the assault teams from the 1st Platoon were to secure pillboxes #2 and #3 (See Map D). Time of attack was to be 1000 hours. One tank destroyer from the 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion was to furnish the base of fire for the

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maneuvering assault teams.

The attack plan called for the supporting tank destroyer, located on the high ground southwest of the objective, to fire on pillbox #2 just prior to 1000 hours. It was to continue firing until the 1st Platoon's Assault Teams approached to within 75 yards of their objectives. The tank destroyer's fire was then to be shifted to pillbox #1 until the 3d Platoon's Assault Team was within 75 yards of its objective.

At 0900 hours the assault teams were briefed on the new plan by their team leaders. At 0930 hours the 3d Platoon's Assault Team had moved to its pre-attack assembly position in the 1st Platoon Area.

At H-5, the tank destroyer commenced firing on pillbox #2. Promptly at H-hour, the three assault teams crossed the line of departure each on its own direction of attack. The deadly accurate fire from the tank destroyer had the desired effect. Although initially the destroyer was firing only on pillbox #2, the occupants of pillboxes #1 and #3 sought shelter within their pillboxes.

The assault squads of the 1st Platoon moved quickly to their objectives and closed in on them as the tank destroyer's fire lifted. The surprise had been complete and pillboxes #2 and #3 were taken without a shot being fired. (7)

However, the 3d Platoon almost had a disastrous story to report. After crossing the line of departure, it moved up the draw and stopped in a concealed position about 150 yards from pillbox #1 (See Map D) Their plan was to wait in this position until the tank destroyer placed fire on the pillbox and then move in on the assault. However, when the

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(7) A/A Reports 385th film

tank destroyer's fire lifted from pillbox #2, it did not shift to pillbox #1. The platoon leader immediately contacted the company commander by sound powered phone, and was informed to assault without the tank destroyer's support. Realizing there was no time to lose, the 3d Platoon Leader quickly moved the assault squad forward. As they neared their objective, an unmanned machine gun was seen pointing in their direction of the advancing team. The machine gun furnished protection for the rear of the pillbox. The assault squad was about 90 feet from the pillbox when two German gunners appeared and attempted to man the machine gun. They were surprised by the nearness of the attackers and sought cover immediately from the hail of hand grenades being thrown by the assault squad. The assault squad then closed in on the pillbox and captured it. The pillbox yielded six enemy prisoners and one enemy killed without any casualties to the assault squad. Immediately, an all around defense of the pillbox was organized for the coming night. The platoon leader then returned to the bulk of his platoon.

No further activity occurred until 2300 hours. At that time, the squad leader in pillbox #3 called the company commander and reported he was surrounded by an unknown number of Germans. The attackers were firing a heavy weapon, presumably Panzerfaust on the pillbox and had driven the men inside the pillbox. The company commander informed Sergeant Joseph Baird, The Squad Leader, to remain inside the pillbox and that he would call on Company E to spray the pillbox with machine gun fire from their zone. The plan worked and the attackers were driven off.

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The following nite the enemy again attempted to take pillbox #1. At about 2300 hours, the platoon leader of the 3d Platoon was moving up to relieve pillbox #1 with another squad when he could hear a firefight taking place in the vicinity of pillbox #1. Upon arrival, he was notified by Sergeant Baird that the enemy had attacked again. However, the assault squad had command of the situation and had taken nine prisoners after a brief firefight.

This was the last enemy attempt to retake the pillboxes from Company G. Shortly afterwards Company G was relieved by Company L and sent on an attack mission north of IRREL.

To sum up the results of the operations of Company G: The company did accomplish its mission on the third day of their attack despite failures on the preceeding two days. If viewed from a battalion level or higher, there was nothing outstanding in the accomplishment of this mission. However, if viewed from the company and platoon level, the results of this action had a lasting effect on the men of the company. First and foremost, the company, having initially assumed the offensive and having accomplished its mission, attained for itself an optimistic attitude and much needed confidence. These outstanding characteristics were to be valuable assets to the company throughout the remainder of the war. Secondly, the officers had established their combat leadership during this first offensive action, thus confirming the trust the men of Company G had placed in them.

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## ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

### 1. ENEMY INFORMATION

As it was stated in the narration, the situation on the objective was vague prior to the attack. It was not definitely known whether the pillboxes were enemy occupied.

It is my belief that had a complete and detailed report of enemy positions been passed on from the 417th Combat Team to the 385th Infantry, this obscure situation would not have existed. All enemy information should be disseminated to all using agencies promptly or it is of no value. Failure to pass on enemy information in this case caused a duplication of effort.

### 2. PREATTACK RECONNAISSANCE

The failure of the attacks of the first two days was due partially to a lack of ground reconnaissance. The company commander did not have sufficient time to select a suitable avenue of approach and a line of departure in the vicinity of the company objective. It is my opinion, that had the company been moved quickly to such a line of departure, a surprise attack could have been effected. The enemy having been warned in sufficient time, was able to stop the assault with mortar and small arms fire.

### 3. USE OF SUPPORTING WEAPONS

You will remember, Company G was not given the benefit of any supporting weapons from Company H, Division Artillery or tank destroyers during the first two days of the attack. Finally, on the third day, the fire of one tank destroyer was sufficient to provide the necessary margin for success.

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At every opportunity, full use must be made of all supporting weapons if objectives are to be taken quickly and with minimum casualties. I feel that lack of experience in understanding capabilities of supporting weapons was the main reason Company G was not given any support until the last day of the attack.

#### 4. ENEMY POSITIONS

The enemy located in the pillboxes on the company objective had a definite advantage over any attacking force. They had the advantage of long range observation, cover, and excellent fields of fire. However, these factors are advantage only as long as the occupants are willing to remain at their gun positions where they can observe and direct accurate fire. However, when gun positions are abandoned for protection within the pillbox, it then becomes a cell of condemned men.

#### 5. AGGRESSIVENESS IN THE ATTACK

Lack of aggressiveness was another contributing factor which prevented Company G from accomplishing its mission before the third day. On the two preceeding days, the proposed attack was stopped by enemy artillery fire before the assault could be launched. Although these fire caused casualties and confusion, the attack should not have bogged down.

Aggressiveness in the face of enemy opposition is absolutely necessary if an attacking force is to achieve success.

#### 6. SECURITY

A pillbox will furnish cover but not security.

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During the night of 21-22 February, the 3d platoon's assault team neglected to maintain sufficient security around pillbox #1. As a result the squad was taken by surprise by the attacking enemy patrol. Since they were not in a position to defend themselves, they sought cover inside the pillbox. This almost proved to be a fatal mistake. Conversely, the following night the squad posted sufficient all around security and was prepared for the attacking enemy patrol.

#### 7. ASSAULT SQUADS

On the final analysis of the operations of Company G, it is noteworthy to discuss the effectiveness of assault squads which proved to be the answer to the reduction of pillboxes.

Although the assault squads were small units, they consisted of an adequate number of men and weapons to accomplish their mission. The two BAR'S formed a base of fire. The remainder of the squad formed the maneuvering element that closed in on the pillboxes and neutralized them with the flamethrowers or dynamite charges.

Despite the fact that the assault teams of Company G were able to achieve their mission without employing the use of any of their special weapons, it is important to point out how they could have been used.

#### LESSONS

1. Relieved units must pass on all enemy information to relieving units in order to eliminate duplication of effort.
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2. Unit Commanders should be allowed sufficient time to conduct a ground reconnaissance.

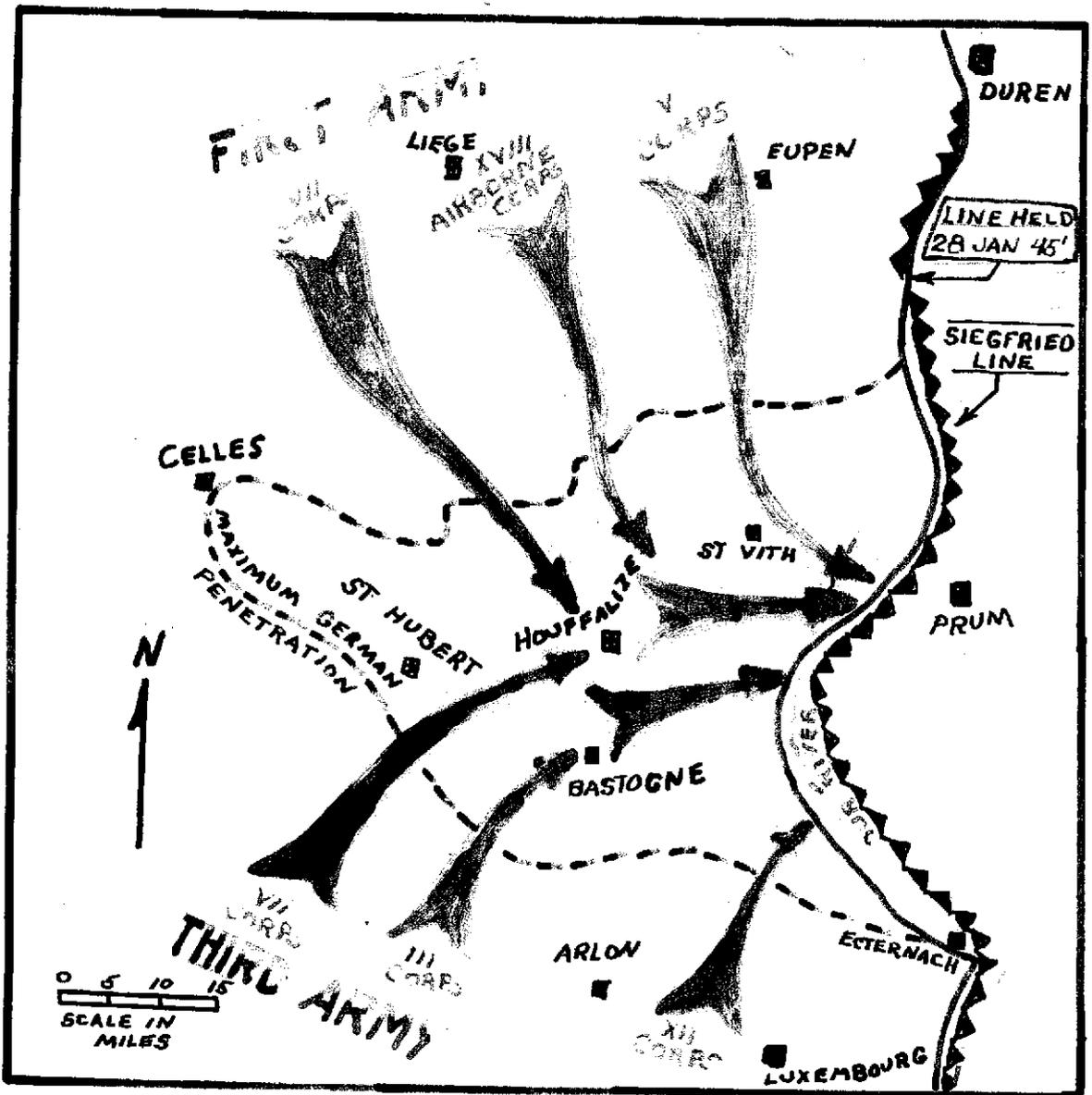
3. Maximum use of all available supporting weapons must be used in every type of operation.

4. Static defensive positions are vulnerable to attacking mobile forces.

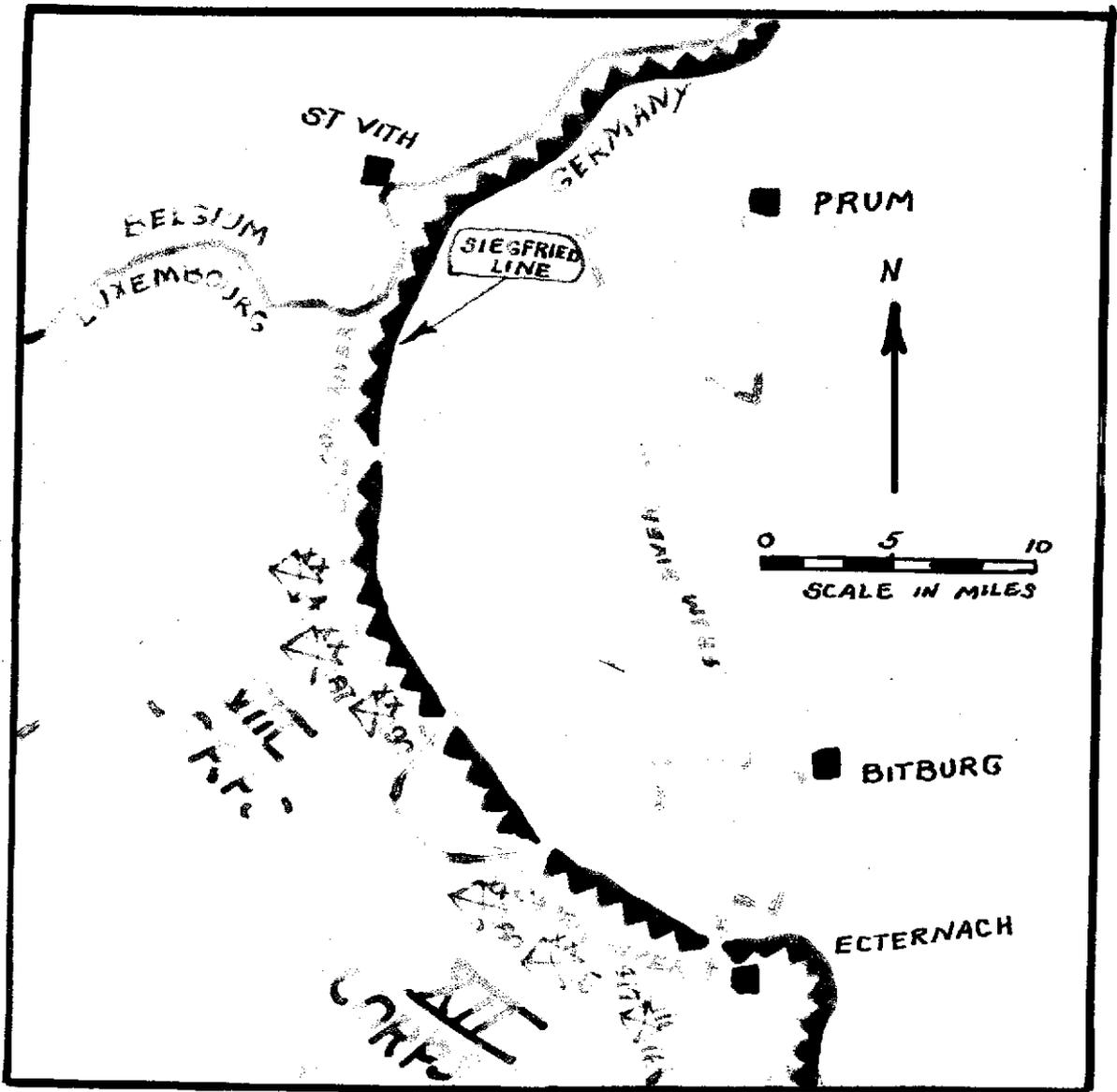
5. Aggressiveness in the attack is necessary to accomplish the reduction of enemy emplacements.

6. Every Unit is responsible for its own all around security.

7. Assault squads are an effective infantry weapon for the reduction of pillboxes.



**MAP "A"**  
**REDUCTION OF THE**  
**ARDENNES SALIENT**



**MAP "B"**  
**THIRD ARMY ATTACKS**  
**PRUM AND BITBURG**