

General Subjects Section  
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT  
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS  
1948 - 1949

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "A", 504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
(82D AIRBORNE DIVISION) IN THE DEFENSE OF HILL 424 NEAR  
ALTAVILLA, ITALY, 17 SEPTEMBER - 19 SEPTEMBER 1943.  
(NAPLES - FOGGIA CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of the Company Operations Sergeant  
and Acting First Sergeant)

Type of operation described: COMPANY IN DEFENSE

First Lieutenant Otto W. Huebner, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO II

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index . . . . .	1
Bibliography . . . . .	2
Introduction . . . . .	4
The General Situation. . . . .	7
Company A's Situation. . . . .	10
Hasty Defense of Hill 424. . . . .	15
Continued Enemy Attacks. . . . .	19
Final Enemy Attack . . . . .	22
Final Regimental Situation . . . . .	25
Relief . . . . .	26
Analysis and Criticism . . . . .	27
Lessons. . . . .	30
Map - A    Invasion of Italy	
Map - B    Salerno Beachhead	
Map - C    Altavilla and Vicinity	
Map - D    Hill 424 and Vicinity	
Map - E    Company Positions	

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "A", 504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
(82D AIRBORNE DIVISION) IN THE DEFENSE OF HILL 424 NEAR  
ALTAVILLA, ITALY, 17 SEPTEMBER - 19 SEPTEMBER 1943.  
(NAPLES - FOGGIA CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of the Company Operations Sergeant  
and Acting First Sergeant)

INTRODUCTION

I believe the reader will agree with the author that everyone in the course of his life has had an incident happen which seemed to be the most important thing happening in the world at the time. One of these incidents where circumstances place added responsibilities on your shoulders with little hope or indication of easing up or relief. Nevertheless, to an outsider, the incident may seem insignificant and trivial.

This is the feeling Company "A" of the 504th Parachute Infantry, 82d Airborne Division felt in the defense of Hill 424 near Altavilla, Italy, from 17 September to 19 September 1943, against a determined and stubborn German force. Hill 424 was a critical terrain feature on the Salerno beach-head. (1)

In order to orient the reader it will be necessary to turn back a few pages in history, back to the time when General George Patton Jr., finally chased the Axis forces from the shores of Africa. (2) Following this victory, the Americans and British had successfully invaded the shores of Sicily, July 1943, and 38 days later the last German resistance ceased. (3)

(1) A-3, p. 40; (2) A-2, p. 41; (3) A-1, p. 23.

Now the time had come to invade Italy. How, where and when was the big question?. (4)

The 82d Airborne Division was made available to General Mark Clark, Fifth Army commander, for this operation. (5)

The division participated in the Sicilian Campaign, and was now scattered in rest areas in Sicily, reorganizing, training, and getting set for any new task it might receive. (6)

General Clark had made several plans to use the division for its principal punch in the invasion of Italy, but due to circumstances beyond his control, he canceled each of these missions. (7)

The first of these proposed missions was to assist the invasion force on the Salerno beaches by dropping inland near Nocero and Sarno, capture the two towns and block the Germans from reinforcing their resisting troops on the Salerno beaches.

After considerable study by the Air Corps, it was decided that the long range supply problem plus enemy fighter interception was too dangerous to make the mission feasible. General Clark agreed, and on 12 August the operation was cancelled. (8) (See Map A)

On 18 August, the division started planning for a new mission called Giant I. The division was to drop just south of the Volturno River, northwest of Naples, with the mission of keeping the enemy from crossing the river. It was to be

(4) A-15, p. 4; (5) A-11, p. 22; (6) A-12, p. 36;  
(7) A-11, p. 22; (8) A-11, p. 23.

reinforced by an amphibious beach landing, south of the mouth of the Volturno. The Navy finally decided this landing place unsuitable for landing craft. The airborne resupply problem was too big without help from an amphibious force, so therefore the entire mission was called off. (9) (See Map A)

On 2 September, the division once again started planning for another airborne operation. This operation was known as Giant II. The division was to seize Rome with the aid of the Italian Army. Due to the increase of German troops in Italy during the last few days, the Italians, however, backed down on this proposal and the mission was called off while the men were already loaded in transports waiting to take off. (10) (See Map A)

Finally at 0330 on 9 September 1943, the Fifth Army landed on the beaches of Salerno (11), without the assistance of the division. (12) (See Map A)

The beachhead<sup>was</sup> expanded about 10 miles inland when it met with stubborn resistance and finally was held up. At this time the Germans began a counterattack which penetrated the right section<sup>of</sup> of the Fifth Army line. General Clark had already committed his reserve, (13) so he called for one Regimental Combat Team from the 82d Airborne Division which was still in Sicily to drop behind the friendly lines, with the mission of filling a gap in the American lines. The division commander picked the 504th Parachute Infantry for

(9) A-11, p. 24; (10) A-11, p. 25; (11) A-3, p. 17;  
(12) A-1, p. 31; (13) A-3, p. 53.

the mission. (14) (See Map A)

### THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Fifth Army was composed of two Corps, the British 10th, commanded by Lt. General Sir Richard L. McCreery and the American 6th commanded by Major General Earnest J. Dowley. The 10th Corps occupied the <sup>Left</sup> right half of the beachhead and the 6th Corps the <sup>Right</sup> left half with the two areas divided by the Seale River. (See Map B) The American 36th Infantry Division, commanded by Major General Fred L. Walker, was the assaulting force in the 6th Corps sector. (15)

*plan not given*  
The landings went off on schedule (0330 hours 9 September) and progressed according to plan. <sup>(?)</sup> (16) By D plus 2, elements of the 36th Division had pushed about ten miles inland to the high ground near the town of Altavilla, (See Map B) (17) which was the dominating terrain feature on the beachhead. From this position, observation <sup>could be</sup> was obtained over the entire beach, as well as observation over any movement made to the north ~~mass~~, which would make it difficult for the enemy to withdraw through that sector. <sup>(what)</sup> (18)

Due to steadily increasing resistance in the 6th Corps sector, General Dowley <sup>(who is he)</sup> committed <sup>his</sup> ~~the~~ floating reserve, the 45th Infantry Division commanded by Major General Troy H. Middleton. <sup>P</sup> At 2400 on 11 September, the beachhead consisted of 35 to 40 miles of coastline with the average depth of 6 to 7 miles. (19) (See Map B) By 12 September, elements of the 26th Panzer Division and the 29th Panzer Grenadier

(14) A-12, p. 36; (15) A-15, p. 28; (16) A-3, p. 17;  
(17) A-3, p. 49; (18) A-8, p. 3; (19) A-3, p. 50.

*new symbols  
not shown*

Division, arriving from the south had reinforced the 16th Panzer Division in the 6th Corps sector. (20) The 10th Corps was faced with similar problems as the <sup>(what were they)</sup> Germans began to counterattack all along the beachhead. Each of these stubborn attacks <sup>was</sup> ~~were~~ repelled (21) and only in the Seale-Calore corridor was the beachhead insecure. (22) (See Map B) *Not emphasized on map*

The Germans finally struck hard with a double pincer movement in the Altavilla area, which was held by the 142d Infantry of the 36th Division. (23)

The area was particularly difficult to defend, due to the numerous approaches as well as poor fields of fire from the hill mass. The Altavilla area consists of one large hill mass dominated by Hill 424 and an unnumbered hill to the south of Hill 424. The entire mass is very uneven ground divided by stream lines, small knolls, valleys and scrub growth scattered throughout the mass. All this, including the ditches and ravines hid the trails up to the top, which made it easy for troops to infiltrate through defensive positions. (24)

On 13 September, because of severe losses and the infiltration of the enemy through its lines, the 142d Infantry was ordered back to Albanella Ridge line. (25) (See Map B) At the same time the 45th Division, on the left of the 36th Division was repelling heavy German counterattacks and suffering heavy casualties. (26) The Fifth Army had committed

- (20) A-3, p. 53; (21) A-15, p. 30; (22) A-3, p. 54;  
(23) A-8, p. 2; (24) A-7, p. 1; (25) A-7, p. 4;  
(26) A-3, p. 54.

all its reserve except the 82d Airborne Division. (27)

On 14 September, the 6th Corps reorganized and set up a defensive line along the La Cosa River. (28) (See Map B)

It appeared as though the Germans might drive all the way to the Salerno Beach. (29) The nearest units that could be used to prevent a break through were elements of the 82d Airborne Division in Sicily. (30) As a result, General Clark called for a Regimental Combat Team to jump behind the friendly lines, move up and fill a small gap that existed in the 6th Corps area. (31)

The 504th Regimental Combat Team as stated before was selected for this mission. (32) The team consisted of the regiment less 3d Battalion (who were in floating reserve), Company C, 307th Airborne Engineers, Battery B, 80th Airborne Anti-Aircraft Battalion, Detachment 307th Medical Battalion and a Detachment of the 82d Reconnaissance Platoon. (33)

The combat team jumped by units in a small meadow near Paestum with very few casualties. (34) (See Map C) The units organized and were taken up to the front lines by waiting trucks and guides. (35) Company A went into the line on the north slope of Mount Soprano, tying in with other units of the Battalion. The 2d Battalion was on the left of the 1st Battalion. (36)

At 0300 hours 14 September, the units were ready in

- (27) A-3, p. 66; A-15, p. 33; (28) A-3, p. 67; A-15, p. 35;  
(29) A-3, p. 68; (30) A-1, p. 41; A-3, p. 69; (31) A-3,  
p. 73; A-13, p. 120; (32) A-12, p. 30; (33) A-9, p. 2;  
(34) A-12, p. 29; (35) A-12, p. 29; Personal knowledge;  
(36) A-3, p. 71; Personal knowledge.

the line. It had taken only eight hours from the time the unit was notified of the operation until the unit was in line ready to fight. (37)

*had enemy contact in night*

The units were notified to expect an enemy attack on the morning of 15 September. Company A dug in and sent out local security but no enemy attack resulted. The battalion sent out small patrols to Albanella to contact the enemy, but the patrols were unable to establish contact. (See Map C) A few men from the 36th Division came through our lines that day from the previous Altavella battle. (38) At about 1200 the following day, an order came down to the Company that the Regiment had been ordered to move out at 1400 with the mission of seizing and holding Hill 424. At 1400, the two battalions moved out in column with the 1st Battalion leading, "A" Company in front with the 1st Platoon as the point. (39)

*Plan of Regt not given*

COMPANY A'S SITUATION

Company "A" consisted of one hundred and thirteen men and six officers.

The march to the objective was long, hard and tiresome. The winding trails were narrow and rocky, with overhanging brush in many places, which made it very difficult to follow. From the last positions on Mt. Soprano to Albanella, the distance was four miles and yet that was only about half the way to the company's objective. Near Albanella, enemy artillery shells began to drop along the column. It was more

(37) A-12, p. 30; (38) Personal knowledge; (39) A-16, p. 53; Personal knowledge.

harassing than harmful, but it slowed the column down considerably. Gaps began to show between men, and it became very difficult to keep contact. (40)

The company commander, Captain Willard J. Harrison, told the point to move faster because the column was behind schedule.

As the First Platoon reached a small creek just north of Albanella, two enemy machine guns opened fire on the point, without inflicting a casualty, but caused the front of the column to take cover. It was easy to observe the fire, for the enemy was using tracer ammunition and the fire was about five feet off the ground. The 1st Platoon Leader, Lt. Horton, put his 60 mm mortars into action and knocked out the machine guns in quick order. (41)

After this short action, the column continued to move again but at a much slower pace. The men were very tired and began to lag. About this time the enemy artillery began falling with greater intensity and accuracy. Calls for medics from wounded men in the column could be heard frequently. (42)

The officers and NCO's had to move up and down the column to get the men on their feet and keep them moving. The men had a tendency to lay down when the artillery came close and not watch the individual in front of him, thereby losing contact. The battalion commander, Lt. Colonel Warren R. Williams and Captain Harrison, the company commander,

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

came up to the point many times and directed the route. About 2200, word came up the column to the company commander that most of Company C and all of Company B had lost contact. Lt. Colonel Williams, who was still with Company A, gave the order to Captain Harrison to move on anyway to the objective. After proceeding a short distance we came directly into a German occupied position, which surprised us as well as the Germans. <sup>well</sup> The small detachment of Germans gave up without a fight. By this time the company knew they were getting deep into enemy territory. As the point came to a small hill, three or four enemy machine guns opened fire. Everybody hit the ground and it looked as if we were going to have a rough fire fight. As the men lay on the ground, word came down the column to fix bayonets and get prepared to charge the enemy positions, which were only about 50 yards to the front. The only real concealment one had was the deep darkness of the night. The squad leaders managed to get their squads in a skirmish line. Then a voice rang out along the line, "Let's Go". The men got on their feet and took off hooting and yelling like a tribe of Indians on the war path. The Germans took off on the double without a shot fired on either side. (43) Total captured, one small, skinny medic and he was too scared to run.

After the company reorganized, they moved on toward the objective and shortly thereafter came to a hill. The company commander, with a small party, reconnoitered the hill

(43) Personal knowledge.

*Enemy detachment  
seen.*

*Enemy not seen  
on Mt. C.*

and on his return summoned the platoon leaders. (44) He told them this was the objective and then gave the company defense orders. He ordered the platoon leaders to prepare an all-round defense, close to the crest of the hill with the 1st Platoon on the forward slope, 2d on the left, 3d on the right, tying in all the way around. This was about 0200 hours, 17 September. (45)

As the company found out later, this was not Hill 424, but an unnumbered hill just to the south and rear of Hill 424. (See Map D)

In the meantime the regimental commander, Colonel Reuben H. Tucker, had left Albanella with his CP group and was trying to locate his two battalions. In the process he ran into Company C and using this company seized Hill 424 with little resistance. Company C found one small enemy OP group and following its capture, prepared a hasty perimeter defense and dug in for the remainder of the night. (46)

About 0400, one of Company A's listening posts heard troops approaching our position but investigation proved them to be Company B who then took up positions in the perimeter and put out security. (47)

At dawn the 1st Platoon was ordered to move out and investigate troop movement on the hill to the north and front of Company A's position. As the lead scout, PFC Ralph R. Young went down the crest about 200 yards, he spotted troops to his front. Thinking they were friendly, he

(44) (45) Personal knowledge; (46) A-14, p. 1;  
(47) Personal knowledge.

did not take cover and was fired upon and killed. The platoon leader, Lt. DuVall went out to help him and was hit in the legs with shrapnel from a 50 mm mortar shell. During the small fire fight that followed one more man from the 1st Platoon was killed. The company commander then ordered the platoon back to the hill crest. (48)

Following this, the Germans attacked the hill with a small force supported by two tanks. The company repelled the attack, but suffered five casualties. (49)

At about 0800, only fifteen minutes after the attack, men from Company C began to dribble into our positions and finally, Colonel Tucker came up the hill. Colonel Tucker then called together the company commanders and Lt. Colonel Williams, the battalion commander, and told them he had occupied Hill 424 the previous night, but in the morning German troops filtered through his defenses there and forced his withdrawal to our position. All this time, radio communications were out, due to the terrain and heavy static in the air, making it impossible for any of the units to coordinate. (50)

Colonel Tucker then gave the order for Company A to move out immediately, seize Hill 424 and defend at all cost. Company C would follow shortly and Company B would defend the unnumbered hill until the 2d Battalion came, at which time the 2d Battalion would take over the unnumbered hill and Company B would join the battalion on Hill 424. (51)

In single file, well dispersed, Company A moved down the

(48) (49) Personal knowledge; (50) A-14, p. 1; (51) Personal knowledge.

slope with the 2d Platoon leading. They passed down the gully and started up Hill 424, when a machine gun opened fire, killing three men instantly. The 3d Platoon, who was in the rear of the column, moved around the west side of the hill in a flanking movement, attacked the position and eliminated it quickly.

The 3d and 2d Platoons abreast moved up to the top of the Hill at once with the 1st Platoon following. As the platoons reached the top of the hill, Captain Harrison ordered the 2d Platoon to move to the right, 3d to the front, and 1st to the left.

Just as the platoons were moving to the crest in their sector, a strong force of Germans started moving over to the crest on the opposite side. Company A immediately set up what one might call a very hasty defense. (52)

#### HASTY DEFENSE OF HILL 424

The company was now in the process of defending the hill. One advantage the company had, was the fact that they were on the hill while the main enemy force was still climbing. As for surprise, both were stunned but the Germans threw the first punch.

Every man hit the ground and scuffled about seeking any kind of cover or concealment. After a few seconds elapsed and the men gathered their wits, each man that could bring fire to bear on the enemy opened up without being told. This caused the enemy to hunt for cover and as the men noticed how ef-

(52) Personal knowledge.

fective their fire was, they seemed to gain confidence and the company's fire power really increased. For the first ten minutes it was each man for himself but after a short time the men began to coordinate and give each other a little mutual support. By this time, the officers and N.C.O.'s began coordinating the company's fires.

About now one could hear familiar voices shout out, "Heide, Peper, move over to the right and cover that draw." "Hey, John, there are two coming up to your right," "Chuck, put that BAR fire in those bushes to the right," "Sergeant Brown move your squad forward," "God dammit Prahowski, you can't fire through that knoll, use a grenade." (53)

Finally the 1st Platoon drove the Germans back over the crest and closed in fast, taking up positions along the crest. The 1st Platoon then swung part of its fire to the right in front of the 3d Platoon, causing the Germans to withdraw in that sector. Every step the Germans took backward, the company would take forward using every possible means of cover. Finally the company with all three platoons abreast held the entire forward crest of the hill. The Germans continued the fire fight for about half an hour, trying to break through in spots, then slowly they withdrew down the hill. It was hard trying to keep track of them after they had gone a few yards, because of the rough terrain and heavy foliage.

The fires soon ceased; the attack was repelled, but the company suffered eight casualties, though the enemy suffered

(53) Personal knowledge.

many times more. (54)

Immediately the company commander ordered a hasty defense set up in a moon shaped design with the 1st Platoon on the west overlooking Altavilla, the 3d Platoon to the north and the 2d Platoon to the east, all tieing in. Company headquarters to the rear and center of the company, and a couple of small security positions to the rear facing the unnumbered hill for rear security. (55) (See Map D)

The sight on the hill was an unpleasant one. This was the same place that the 1st Battalion of the 142d Infantry, 36th Division 4 days previously was finally forced to withdraw after great losses were inflicted on both sides. (56)

The hill was infested with scattered dead German and American soldiers, supplies and ammunition. There were machine guns still in their original emplacements, rifles, packs, clothing, ammunition belts, machine gun boxes and stacks of 60 mm mortar shells scattered all over the hill. One machine gun was still manned by two men of the 142d Infantry.

The ammunition was gathered up and distributed through the company as soon as possible. Without this ammunition the hill could not have been held. (57)

The platoons began digging positions in their sectors. Fox holes dug by the 142d Infantry were improved and used in many cases. Slit trenches were also used in many instances instead of fox holes, because the hard ground made digging difficult.

(54) (55) Personal knowledge; (56) A-7, p. 61; (57) Statement of Captain William Harrison; Personal knowledge.

The officers and N.C.O.'s directed the exact spots of positions. They tried to arrange them to cover the most likely enemy approaches, have each position give mutual support to the one on the right and left with observation, fire and depth in that order of priority. Due to the terrain as previously described, it was very difficult but it was accomplished. (See Map E) To add fire power, the machine guns that were left on the hill by the 142d, were put in the platoon positions. (58)

*When were tanks*

It was about 1100 now and the men were still digging their position, when enemy tanks began to shell the hill. One could hear the tank fire and about a second later the shell would burst. The men dug deeper because the fire was extremely accurate causing many casualties.

The tank fire continued on without a let up. <sup>P</sup>The men were quite hungry about this time for they had not had any rations since the day before. A few were lucky enough to find a little bread and jam in the dead German's packs. Water was also scarce. There was a well down the draw to the northwest, about two hundred yards, but every time anyone would go for water, they would either get in a fire fight or be shelled. (58)

The company radio operator had finally gotten through to battalion on the unnumbered hill and Lt. Colonel Williams, battalion commander, told Captain Harrison, the company commander, that Company 'C' would be on their way to help. The radio operator had a difficult time working his 511 radio as (58) Personal knowledge.

he was wounded in both heels by a shell while driving into his hole.

It was impossible at this time to evacuate the wounded, (58) but the company medical personnel were doing a fine job of taking care of them. Their greatest assistant was the little morphine syringe. (59)

The shelling increased with mortar and heavy artillery falling and everyone stayed low in his hole. At noon the shelling became almost unbearable. It was so bad that the sides of the fox holes began caving in. The air was thick with smoke and dust from the bursting shells, and then -- all was quiet. (60)

#### CONTINUED ENEMY ATTACKS

The quiet period continued for only a minute, as heavy enemy machine guns began blasting away from the front of the 3d and 1st Platoon areas supporting a German assault force approaching the positions.

The men ducked their heads in the fox holes to escape the machine gun fire. A couple of alert squad leaders immediately noticed the machine gun fire, approximately two feet off the ground in most places, and yelled to the men to get their heads up and start firing -- which they did. The two platoons laid down a heavy base of fire with every possible weapon being fired. The 60 mm mortars were employed singly with each platoon. The 1st and 3d Platoon mortars began laying down fire within a hundred yards of the front line positions traversing back and

(59) (60) Personal knowledge.

forth.

The company radio operator finally managed to communicate with battalion again on the unnumbered hill and the company commander requested artillery support. The 36th Division Artillery was the support of the battalion. (61)

When the company opened up its final protective fire, it momentarily stopped the assault. After a few minutes of hesitation, the Germans began rushing the positions in groups while another group would support by fire, but for some unknown reason their fire was very inaccurate. After the company had killed or wounded the first two or three attackers, the remainder of the groups fell back.

In the 1st Platoon, a Private Schneider, of German descent and who spoke German well, began shouting orders to the Germans in their native tongue caused a considerable amount of confusion, making it very easy for his platoon to pick them off. This still did not take away their aggressiveness for they continued the fire fight and moved forward by leaps and bounds.

Soon the hand grenades flew like snow balls from both sides but for every shot or grenade from the Germans on the 1st and 3d Platoon positions, they received two back. The officers and N.C.O.'s were up in the front fox holes firing with the men. Heavy artillery began falling on the hill, only this time it was falling in the middle and lower crest of the hill in the enemy position, which was deeply appreciated by the

(61) A-14, p. 1.

company, because shortly after, the attack seemed to become disorganized and easier to control by fire. Before long the Germans began to withdraw down the crest. Once the 2d Platoon Leader had to yell at a couple of men to get back in their fox holes, for they began to pursue the enemy. (62)

It was later found out that the attack which had been repelled was composed of about two companies. (63) The company had killed approximately fifty Germans, but had suffered almost half that number in casualties.

The squad leaders now checked on their men, redistributed ammunition and reported in detail to the platoon leader. The platoon leaders did the same and reported to the company commander. (64) Evacuation of the wounded was still impossible and the best place for them was in their fox holes.

For the next few minutes all persons on the hill thought the attack started all over again due to the fact that in the 2d Platoon area on the east, a small arms fire fight began. We didn't know if the Germans were getting aggressive again or not, but it was only a five or six man patrol trying to penetrate the lines. They were repelled without much trouble.

Shortly after this small fire fight, the enemy started shelling the hill again. Much to our delight Company C had just come up the hill to help. The Battalion Command<sup>er</sup> and his CP Group were with them, including the Battalion Medical officer, <sup>T.M.O.</sup> ~~who~~ was needed greatly and ~~who~~ performed miracles, including two amputations, with his meager stock of medical sup-

- (62) Personal knowledge; (63) Statement of Captain Harrison;  
(64) Personal knowledge.

plies.

The Battalion Commander moved Company C into position occupying the east and part of the north slope, and Company A closed up and moved a little more of the company to the west slope overlooking Altavilla. Company A put two outposts down the slope about 100 yards, consisting of three men each. Due to the rough terrain, with its ravines, knolls and curves it was impossible to put the outposts any further down the crest without danger of being cut off.

The Germans once again started these small unit attacks at both company's positions, as if they were feeling out the line. They were repelled without too much difficulty. (65)

#### FINAL ENEMY ATTACK

The battalion command post was about 100 yards to the rear of company command post. Information came from battalion that 2d Battalion would take over the unnumbered hill, and Company B was on its way to assist in the defense of Hill 424. (66)

*Co and S. J. Co. ex  
By Battalion map*

Battalion aid station was set up in a gully near battalion C.P. Evacuation of the wounded was still impossible and to add to the evacuation problem a heavy concentration began falling on the hill, including numerous air bursts, which caused many additional casualties. The average man would have given his right arm for any kind of roof for his fox hole. History repeated itself once again as the bombardment stopped and an attack started. This one seemed worse than the last large attack. The Germans began advancing by fire and move-

(65) (66) Personal knowledge.

ment taking advantage of the cover afforded by the good approaches. They were hitting all three platoons of Company A with the main force coming up the west slope. One could also hear a fire fight in Company C's area and it sounded as if the attack was coming from all sides. (67)

Due to the shape of the hill mass, it was impossible to lay down a good final protective line. The field of fire was very limited, in places only 50 yards. One outpost was cut off and later eliminated, while the other fought its way back, giving the company very little notice of the attack. With the large volume of fire the enemy was laying down, it sounded as if the entire German army was attacking. Firing was going on in all directions.

The individual rifleman played a great part in defending his own little area. The company had placed at least two men to a fox hole or two or three fox holes in a small group.

The 60 mm mortar squad leader stayed close to the platoon leader in each case and gave close in support as directed by the platoon leader. Sound power telephone communication was used to the mortar position. When it went out, physical contact could be made as the mortar positions were only a few yards to the rear. (68)

Mortar targets were picked and fired upon as close as 50 yards in front of the troops. Its fire was very effective and most valuable in disorganizing assaults. Firing that close to friendly troops, the company could account for only

(67) (68) Personal knowledge.

one minor casualty by a short round. The mortar positions were pushing so many rounds down the tubes, that it sounded like an old Model T Ford warming up. (69)

In one squad of the 3d Platoon the BAR team was killed and four or five Germans penetrated that area. Fast thinking NCO's grabbed a couple of men from the two man fox holes, charged the penetration area killing all the Germans. The platoon sergeant jumped in the BAR position and took over command. (70)

Frequently potato masher grenades would be thrown, but unless they went off in the fox hole, they had little or no effect. One dropped in a fox hole with a man but he jumped out and when the grenade went off, he jumped back.

The company commander kept calling back to battalion for artillery fire. The battalion commander said the only kind he could get was from the naval boats off the beaches, and it was very dangerous to fire so close to friendly troops. The company commander said he had to take the chance and the battalion commander agreed. (71)

The fire fight continued on and in it's second hour casualties began mounting on both sides.

The word was passed along for the men to get deep down in their holes as the navy began firing. (72) The shell bursts, landing on the northwest slope, seemed to rock the entire hill. The fox holes cracked like glass and the top soil around the fox hole sprinkled in to the fox holes with

(69) (70) Personal knowledge; (71) A-14, p. 3;  
(72) Personal knowledge.

every burst. One could hear terror stricken screams coming from the Germans along the slope of the hill, which made one's back bone quiver.

A few Germans still tried to come forward but the bombardment disorganized them completely and before long the enemy withdrew. The hill was still ours although Company A suffered twenty more casualties during that attack. The Germans suffered many many more.

During the attack Company B came up the hill and took positions to the rear, tying in with Company A's left flank and Company C's right flank, the battalion thereby assuming a perimeter defense.

#### FINAL REGIMENTAL SITUATION

The regimental situation was not too bright at this time as the Germans had surrounded the two battalions. They circled between the unnumbered hill and Hill 344 to the rear, and around Hill 315 which isolated the two battalions completely. (See Map D) (73)

The ammunition supply was still good because of the large quantity left by the 142d Infantry. The water supply wasn't too bad because the country wells supplemented the supply. Rations were very limited and the evacuation of the wounded was impossible. There was no way to remedy it at the present.

Early that evening an order came from 6th Corps Headquarters for Colonel Tucker, the regimental commander, to withdraw the two battalions back to Albanella. (74) Colonel Tucker radioed back, "Retreat, hell! send me my 3d Battalion." (73) A-14, p. 2; A-12, p. 30; (74) A-12, p. 30.

The battalion was then sent on its way to join the regiment.  
(75)

#### RELIEF

The Germans continued to shell Hill 424 and the unnumbered hill all night. Enemy combat patrols tried to penetrate the two battalion's positions throughout the night.

About 0300 the 3d Battalion broke through to the 2d Battalion on the unnumbered hill. Colonel Tucker then had the 3d Battalion take up positions on Hill 344, which was just south of the unnumbered hill. (See Map C) (76)

Small scale attacks continued on throughout the darkness hitting the regiment at different positions, but were repelled without great difficulty. (77)

Dawn came without an attack but light shelling continued. Company A organized a combat patrol with the mission of contacting the enemy. (78)

Instead of seeing the enemy coming up the hill that morning, Company A saw the most beautiful four legged animals in the world, as the battalion S-4 led in a mule train of supplies. A few men got out of their holes and kissed the animals with joy. One of the animals took a dim view of that by turning around and kicking one soldier, breaking his finger. The medical officer did not deem the break as deserving a Purple Heart.

The patrol returned about two hours later and reported no contact with the enemy. They had gone through the town of

(75) A-12, p. 30; (76) A-14, p. 2; Statement of Colonel Tucker; (77) A-12, p. 30; (78) Personal knowledge.

Altavilla, headed north for approximately a mile and returned without sight of a German.

At once another combat patrol was sent out to head north and try to contact the enemy. (79)

During the day the carrying parties evacuated the wounded and the men were fed and resupplied. About 1400 hours word came down to Company A that the 36th Division would relieve the regiment the morning of 19 September.

The second patrol returned later in the afternoon and reported it had not contacted the Germans.

After putting proper security out, the men managed to get their first real sleep in three days. The next morning, we witnessed with great thankfulness the men of the 36th Division approaching the hill.

Company A and all units of the regiment were relieved.  
(80)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Company A had accomplished its mission and by doing so made it possible for the regiment to do the same. General Clark stated that this action was "responsible for saving the Salerno beachhead." "The battle of Altavilla was the battle that turned the tide of the German onslaught on the beachhead and frustrated their attempts to contain the Fifth Army within the confines of the plain reaching as far as Altavilla." (81) "Brigadier General Wilbur, Assistant Division Commander of the 36th Infantry Division said in his estimate it would take the majority of two combat teams to

(79) Personal knowledge; (80) A-12, p. 30; (81) A-12, p. 30.

adequately defend the hill mass against a determined attack by the enemy". (82)

The author believes this entire operation illustrates that one can perform the maximum with the minimum. Company A suffered approximately sixty casualties, the greater number by artillery fire. (83) Altavilla area for years had been a firing range for a German artillery school, which accounted for their accurate mortar, tank and artillery fire.

The officers and men both must receive credit for the spirit in which they received and carried out orders without a question. Throughout the operation, word was very seldom passed down to the troops as to the what, where, when and why. (84) Proper training and discipline of the individual soldier proved most valuable in the operation. It was the soldier's skillful shooting, his maximum use of cover and concealment, his determination, will to fight, trust in leaders and his self initiative that beat the enemy. Contributing to this, was the excellent leadership of the officers and non-commissioned officers, especially in making decisions such as the case of the N.C.O.'s in their quick action to eliminate a company penetration during the defense.

A great factor in breaking up the German attacks was the heavy base of fire laid down by each man. The machine gunners and BAR gunners had fired the maximum ammunition he could afford to expend. Each rifleman got in there and fired his weapon, most of all, picking off a few of the first attackers; this seemed to make the remainder lose aggressiveness. Each

(82) A-7, p. 5; (83) (84) Personal knowledge.

rifleman gave his neighbor mutual support which made it difficult for the attacker to penetrate the positions in this rough terrain.

The 60 mm mortars were priceless when used in close support of each platoon as demonstrated by the platoon leaders who directed fire on the approaching attacker. As soon as the enemy took advantage of cover from flat trajectory weapons, the mortars opened up with accurate close supporting fire.

The supporting artillery and naval gun fire played a very important part in disorganizing and breaking up the enemy attacks.

Digging deep and good fox holes is a must. The company never could have withstood the intense and continuous enemy artillery concentrations without deep and well built fox holes. To make the men feel more secure, two man fox holes were dug whenever possible.

The ammunition left on hill 424 by the 142d Infantry turned the tide in our favor. If the men had not been in good physical condition the mission may not have been accomplished. Double rations should have been issued before leaving for the objective. If radio contact could have been made <sup>several</sup> ~~several~~ times the company may have had continuous artillery support. It was very difficult to maintain local security in this type terrain, but if at all possible, it should be done. Company A had very little security out while in defense, which could have been costly. Flexibility was not applied in this de-

fense, fortunate for the company it was not needed.

In conclusion the author believes the outstanding leadership of the officers and the willingness to <sup>carry out</sup> orders of the individual soldier above all made the unit victorious.

### LESSONS

1. The seven principles of defense as taught by the Infantry School must be applied whenever possible:

- a. Organization of key terrain.
- b. Mutual support.
- c. All-around defense.
- d. Organization in depth.
- e. Coordinated fire plan.
- f. Coordinated anti-tank plan.
- g. Flexibility.

2. Well trained and disciplined troops are essential; well trained to use their weapons effectively, use the terrain to the maximum for cover and concealment, deceive the enemy, well disciplined to willingly receive and carry out orders and use initiative in carrying them out.

3. Good leadership is a must/ and when the chips are down for the officers and N.C.O.'s to get in there and pitch with the men -- it's a good morale factor.

4. The front line platoons should lay down an intense base of fire when warding off an attack. Heavy fire takes the aggressiveness away from the attacker.

5. Make a point to kill the first couple of attackers, if possible, because it takes the aggressiveness out of the following attackers.

6. Each rifleman must give mutual support by fire and observation to the man on his right and left to keep the enemy from penetrating into any area.

7. 60 mm mortars must be employed singly with each platoon for close fire support in rugged terrain.

8. Always check and recheck radio communications for proper functioning.

9. Have local security out, if only a few yards.

10. When in very close combat let the enemy show his hand, such as a movement or fire, then proceed to cope with it. Experience and good judgement is the main factor here.

11. Dig deep and good fox holes.

12. Leaders should know their men by name. When giving orders during the heat of battle it helps to keep confusion to a minimum.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 Operations in Sicily and Italy (July 1943 to May 1945)  
Department of Military Art and Engineering  
U. S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., 1945  
(TIS Library)
- A-2 War as I Knew It  
Mrs. George Patton, Jr.  
November 1947  
(TIS Library)
- A-3 Salerno-American Operations From the Beaches  
to the Volturno (9 September to 6 October 1943)  
Military Intelligence Division, U. S. War Department  
(TIS Library)
- A-4 82d Airborne Division in Sicily, Italy  
82d Airborne Division, Undated  
(Personal property)
- A-5 82d Airborne, Master of the Hot Spots  
By Martha Gelhorn  
Saturday Evening Post, 23 February 1946  
(Personal property)
- A-6 Airborne Activities in the Avalanche Operation,  
By Major Patrick D. Mulchay,  
Hq., A. G. F. Document, 9 October 1943  
(TIS Library)
- A-7 Attack and Defense of Hill 424 Altavilla By 142d  
Infantry From 10 September to 13 September 1943,  
A. G. F. Board Document, Part 2, Undated  
(TIS Library)
- A-8 Avalanche Operation of the 36th U. S. Division  
From Beach Inland, 9 September to 17 September 1943  
A. G. F. Board Document, Part 1,  
(TIS Library)
- A-9 Field Order #3 Bigot-Avalanche September 1943  
D769 3U 382 Restricted Document  
(TIS Library)
- A-10 Reports on the Operation Avalanche,  
Document 731 1 N 51 Number 38 Restricted  
(TIS Library)
- A-11 Airborne Plans and Operations in the  
Mediterranean Theater,  
By Major General James M. Gavin,  
The Infantry Journal, August 1946  
(Personal property)

BIBLIOGRAPHY CONTINUED

- A-12 Devils in Baggy Pants,  
504th Parachute Infantry  
Regiment History, Undated  
(Personal property)
- A-13 Sage of the All American  
By Forrest W. Dawson,  
P.R.O. 82d Airborne Division  
(Personal property)
- A-14 Report of the 504th Parachute  
Combat Team in Operation Avalanche  
By Colonel Reuben H. Tucker, U.S.A.,  
A.G.F. Board Document D730, A23 Part 3, p. 1.
- A-15 Fifth Army History  
U.S. Army, Fifth Army  
(TIS Library)
- A-16 Sicily and Italy  
82d Airborne Division, Undated  
(Personal property)