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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 309TH INFANTRY,  
AND THE 2D BATTALION, 310TH INFANTRY, (78TH INFAN-  
TRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON KESTERNICH, GERMANY,  
14 - 15 DECEMBER 1944.

(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Division Inspector General)

Type of operation described: BATTALIONS IN THE ATTACK

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 309TH INFANTRY, AND THE 2D BATTALION, 310TH INFANTRY, (78TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON KESTERNICH, GERMANY, 14 - 15 DECEMBER 1944.  
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, 78th Infantry Division, in the attack on the town of Kesternich, Germany, 14-15 December 1944, during the offensive to seize the Roer River dams.

For the purpose of orienting the reader, it is essential to present the situation on the Western Front, and the events leading up to this action.

By the fall of 1944, the German army had been driven from France, Luxembourg, and Belgium.

Seven Allied armies faced the Germans on the Western Front. The First United States Army had taken the German city of Aachen on 21 October, and in early December was generally disposed along the Siegfried Line defenses. The Ninth United States Army to the north had reached the Roer River. To the south the Third United States Army had reached the Saar and Moselle Rivers and had breached a portion of the Siegfried Line at Saarlautern. (1)

The Siegfried Line, built on natural barriers immediately east of the German border, consisted of dragon's teeth antitank obstacles, pillboxes, dugouts, trenches, and wire entanglements, constructed in series. In areas

(1) A-1, p. 1; A-3, p. 25, 26; A-12, p. 55.

where nature provided the least for defense, artificial obstacles were the strongest. Dragon's teeth were more numerous where river barriers were lacking. Pill-boxes were made of heavy reinforced concrete and steel, constructed in clusters to provide mutual support by interlocking bands of fire. Some were built into the sides of hills and were well camouflaged while others were in sub-basements of what appeared to be nothing other than German family residences. They were equipped with telephone intercommunication systems and, in the larger ones, sleeping quarters. (2)

To provide depth, many villages well within the German border, containing houses of heavy concrete construction, were well fortified as strongpoints. (See Map A) This was particularly true of the villages of Schmidt, Steckenborn, Eichersheid, Gemund, Schleiden, and Losheim, southeast of Aachen, and in the path of the First United States Army. (3)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Roer River, a small river approximately ten thousand yards east of the First United States Army front, was not in itself a major barrier. (See Map A) However, seriously restraining the progress of the First and Ninth United States Armies were the dams on the Roer and Urft Rivers in the vicinity of Schmidt, approximately ten miles southeast of Aachen in the V Corps zone. Lakes created behind these dams held billions of gallons of water which,

(2) A-1, p. 51-52; Personal knowledge. (3) A-1, p. 53; Personal knowledge.

if unleashed by only a two-thirds destruction of the largest of the dams, the Schwammenauel, would cause the river to rise an estimated twenty-five to thirty feet in six hours and to widen to one and one-half miles at Duren to the north for a period of two days, as well as cause an increase in velocity from five to sixteen feet per second. (4)

Concerning the importance of these dams, the Chief of Staff, United States Army, in his Biennial Report for the period 1 July 1943 to 30 June 1945 states, "He (the enemy) is assisted in the area, however, by the flooded condition of the Roer River and the capability he has of producing a sudden rush of water by blowing the dams near Schmidt. Bradley has about come to the conclusion that we must take that area by a very difficult attack from west and southwest." (5)

Destruction of these dams by aerial bombing would immediately cut off those German forces west of the Roer River and would insure eventual Allied crossings without threat of flood disasters during the operations. However, destruction by bombing had been tried earlier. Heavy bombs failed to effect destruction of the dams due to their combined earth and concrete construction. (6)

American forces had previously attempted to capture the dams by attacks, via Schmidt, from the northwest. As late as 2 November the 28th Infantry Division attacked with the mission of securing the Vossenack - Schmidt -

(4) A-1, p. 95; A-2, p. 329; A-12, p. 55. (5) A-11, p. 42. (6) A-1, p. 102; A-2, p. 329; A-3, p. 26.

Strauch area for the purpose of gaining control of the dams. Its 112th Infantry entered the village of Schmidt on 3 November but withdrew under an enemy counterattack, by the German 89th Infantry Division and 116th Panzer Division, suffering ~~no~~ heavy casualties and equipment losses. (7)

The enemy was determined to deny penetration of the approaches to the two key dams, the Schwammenauel and the Urfttalsperre. Fully aware of our intentions in this area he had increased his capability of defending west of the Roer with divisions of the Sixth SS Panzer Army in addition to the 2d and 116th Panzer Divisions which were available for local counterattack. (8)

V Corps with its recent addition of the 2d and 78th Infantry Divisions, was ordered by First Army to attack not earlier than 13 December with the mission of seizing and securing the Schwammenauel and Urfttalsperre Dams. (9)

On 7 December, V Corps issued its order for the attack. (See Map A) The 2d Infantry Division, in conjunction with the 99th Infantry Division on the Corps right, was to advance east to the Urft River and seize the Urfttalsperre Dam. The 78th Infantry Division (less 311th RCT) on the left of the 2d Infantry Division was to pass through the line held by the 102d Cavalry Group in the Lammersdorf area and attack in three phases. Phase one included the seizure of the towns of Rollesbroich,

(7) A-1, p. 68, 69, 72; (8) A-1, p. 102; (9) A-1, p. 88.

Bickerath, Simmerath, Kesternich, and the high ground east thereof. Phase two provided for a turn to the south to capture the towns of Konzen, Imgenbroich, and Eichersheid, in order to secure the right flank. Phase three included an attack to the northeast to capture the towns of Strauch, Steckenborn, and Schmidt; then a turn to the southeast to seize the final objective, the Schwammenauel Dam. The 8th Infantry Division (plus 311th RCT) on the Corps left was to exert pressure along the Kall River line. (10)

#### THE DIVISION SITUATION

This operation was to be the 78th Division's initial combat experience in World War II. This division was re-activated on 15 August 1942. In October of that year it was designated as a "replacement" division and from that time until 15 March 1943 processed and trained almost fifty thousand replacements. Following 15 March 1943 it trained as a combat division and participated in Tennessee maneuvers in early 1944. In April 1944 it lost all of its infantry and artillery privates and privates first class as overseas replacements. These losses were replaced with men from the Army Specialized Training Program and with former Air Corps cadets. (11)

The 78th Infantry Division, composed of the 309th, 310th, and 311th Regimental Combat Teams, arrived on the continent of Europe on or about 22 November 1944, and at the end of the month was closed into the Tongres, Belgium area in Ninth United States Army reserve. In

(10) A-1, p. 97; A-2, p. 330; A-3, p. 27, 28. (11) A-3, p. 8-13; Personal knowledge.

early December it was assigned to the V Corps, First United States Army. Pursuant to V Corps orders for the attack to seize the Roer River dams, the Division's 309th and 310th Regimental Combat Teams closed into assembly areas in the vicinity of Lammersdorf, Germany on 9 December. (12)

The initial Division Field Order assigned the 310th Regimental Combat Team, less its 2d Battalion (See Map B) the mission of capturing the area comprising the town of Rollesbroich and the high ground south thereof. (13)

The 309th Regimental Combat Team, with the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry attached, was to attack and seize the area comprising the towns of Bickerath, Simmerath, and Kesternich and the high ground east thereof. (14)

At 130600 December the Division attacked with two regimental combat teams abreast. Its 310th Regimental Combat Team, on the left, encountering heavy mortar, artillery, and small arms fire, in addition to mines and pillboxes, reached its objective by mid-afternoon. (15)

The 309th Regimental Combat Team, with the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry attached, moved out with its 1st Battalion on the left, attacking in the direction of Witzerath and Simmerath. The 3d Battalion, on the right, attacked Bickerath, and moved toward its objective, the ridge immediately west and south of Simmerath. The 2d

(12) A-3, p. 20, 22. (13) A-1, p. 97; A-3, p. 28.

(14) A-1, p. 97; A-3, p. 28. (15) A-2, p. 334; A-3, p. 29-31; A-4, p. 33-35.

Battalion, 309th Infantry, followed the 1st Battalion to a forward assembly area south of Lammersdorf where it was to remain until Witzerath had been captured. Upon the capture of Witzerath, the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, with attached tanks, was to attack Kesternich from the north. The 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, moved into the wooded area two thousand yards southwest of Lammersdorf where it was to remain in reserve. (16)

Weather conditions at this time were unfavorable due to a cold, clinging, ground fog which greatly restricted visibility. Slushy snow and mud hampered the progress of foot troops and attached armor. Radio communication was unsatisfactory due to atmospheric and terrain conditions. (17)

As the 1st and 3d Battalions, 309th Infantry, moved forward in the attack, surprise was attained. They encountered little resistance from enemy fire. The 1st Battalion ran into an antipersonnel mine field and wire entanglements about half way to its objective. Although these obstructions caused considerable casualties, the companies continued to advance, coming upon pillboxes for the first time. These were reduced and by 1130 hours A Company had troops in Witzerath. B Company, followed by C Company, was at this time entering Simmerath. The 3d Battalion was mopping up the last enemy resistance in Bickerath. (18)

At approximately 1230 hours, the 2d Battalion, 309th

(16) A-3, p. 39; A-7; A-8; A-13. (17) A-7, Personal knowledge. (18) A-7.

Infantry, was ordered to move to Witzerath and attack Kesternich from the northwest. At the same time the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, was ordered to move via Lammersdorf to an area west of Paustenbach and await further orders. (19)

The 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, arriving at its line of departure in Witzerath, jumped off in the attack at 1400 hours to seize Kesternich. E Company, mounted on one platoon of tanks of the 709th Tank Battalion (attached), led the attack, proceeding astride the Witzerath-Kesternich road. Approximately two hundred yards beyond Witzerath the tanks bogged down in slush and mud, whereupon the infantry dismounted and moved forward under heavy artillery and mortar fire without tank support. Suffering heavy casualties, the Battalion reached a line about three hundred yards northwest of Kesternich. Reorganization during the night was hampered by radio and wire failure. Coordination for the resumption of the attack the following morning was accomplished by personal visits of the Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson L. Burley, Jr., and his staff to the various units. (20)

At approximately 131300 December the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, now in the Paustenbach area, was ordered to move to Simmerath to assist the 1st Battalion, 309th Infantry, in mopping up the town, and to prepare to move on Kesternich from the west. The Battalion moved out

(19) A-3, p. 40, 41; A-8. (20) A-3, p. 43, 44; A-8.

with E Company in the lead, followed by G, H, and F Companies. Entering the town of Simmerath, E Company encountered and eliminated some sniper fire and moved approximately four hundred yards east of town where it ran into heavy mortar, artillery, and small arms fire. It dug in on this position for the night. G Company moved into position northeast of Simmerath, tying in with E Company. F Company was positioned in the west edge of Simmerath with the mission of protecting the rear, where, at nightfall, an active pillbox still remained. (21)

#### THE ATTACK ON KESTERNICH

At 140600 the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, resumed the attack on Kesternich (See Map C) from the northwest with E Company to the right (south) and F Company to the left (north) of the Witzerath-Kesternich road, each company with the mission of seizing that portion of the town of Kesternich in its zone. G Company was to follow F Company with the mission of outposting the high ground east of town. The attack was preceded by an artillery and mortar preparation. The enemy was fully prepared to meet the attack as evidenced by the immediate concentration of artillery, mortar, and small arms fire on the attacking troops. Heavy casualties were inflicted by the enemy, including Lieutenant Colonel Wilson L. Burley, Jr., the Battalion Commander, and Major Mark R. Hudson, Jr., the Battalion Executive, both of whom were killed prior to mid-day attempting to make personal contact with the

(21) A-7; A-13.

rifle companies. At this time Captain Douglas P. Frazier, commanding H Company, assumed command of the Battalion, and was ordered to continue the attack; however, the assault was repulsed by the enemy and at the close of the day the Battalion settled in the positions held during the previous night. (22)

At 140600 the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, (See Map C) jumped off from Simmerath with the mission of assisting the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, in the capture of Kesternich. E Company followed by G Company advanced on the left (north) of the Simmerath-Kesternich road. F Company, at dawn, with the support of two tank destroyers, reduced the pillbox at the west edge of Simmerath which had not been reduced the day before. Following this action F Company proceeded toward Kesternich to the right (south) of the Simmerath-Kesternich road and to the right of E and G Companies. As F Company came abreast of E Company, approximately nine hundred yards east of Simmerath, it came upon a Schu mine field. In the meantime E and G Companies had been pinned down by intense fire from a large and previously undisclosed pillbox at the west edge of Kesternich. Tied in with this pillbox was a series of organized hedgerows which also contributed to pinning down the attackers, who were at this time approximately five hundred yards west of Kesternich. (23)

All requests by this Battalion to bring artillery fire on the enemy positions were denied for the reason

(22) A-1, p. 97; A-2, p. 336; A-3, p. 47; A-8. (23) A-2, p. 336; A-3, p. 49-50; A-13.

that it was believed that friendly troops from the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, were in Kesternich. The situation in the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, at this time was so fluid that the Battalion Commander himself did not definitely know whether or not he had any troops within the town of Kesternich. Communications had not improved over the previous day. (24)

The 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, made no further gains on 14 December, and completed digging in for the night approximately five hundred yards west of Kesternich. (25)

At 150100 December, Lieutenant Colonel Creighton E. Likes, Executive, 309th Infantry Regiment, was placed in command of the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry. These battalions, with a platoon of tanks and a platoon of tank destroyers attached, were, as a task force, to launch a coordinated attack to seize the town of Kesternich commencing at 0700. (26)

In the plan for the attack, the tank destroyers were to improve their positions before daylight so as to bring direct fire on the embrasures of the pillbox at the western outskirts of Kesternich commencing at 0700. Following the reduction of the pillbox by the engineers, they were to support the attack on Kesternich. Immediately following a preparation on the town by two battalions of field artillery, E Company, 310th Infantry, was to move rapidly,

(24) A-4, p. 40; A-8; A-13. (25) A-2, p. 336; A-13; A-15. (26) A-4, p. 41; A-10; Personal knowledge.

on the road, through Kesternich to the northeast edge of town. G Company, following E Company into town, was to clear the north portion and then move to the right of E Company and secure the southeast edge of town. F Company was to advance from its present position, south of the Simmerath-Kesternich road, and clear the south portion of the town; thereafter to dig in on the south. Tanks were to support the infantry in the attack and then move to the east portion of town where they were to be utilized in the defense. An engineer demolition team was to follow the infantry and reduce the pillbox. (27)

The 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, (See Map D) was to advance and tie in with E Company, 310th Infantry, northeast of Kesternich. (28)

The attack by the foot troops commenced on schedule following the artillery preparation. E and G Companies proceeded up the road and into the town. E Company encountered sniper and automatic weapons fire which slowed its progress considerably. It reached its objective, however, about midday. G Company encountered a determined enemy set up in fortified houses. Intense house to house fighting resulted with the Company fighting in squad groups. Unit control, coordination, and mutual support of fighting groups weakened as the attack progressed. Small groups became isolated in separate fire fights. Casualties, especially among leaders were heavy. Manpower was further weakened by soldiers returning to the rear area with their small groups of prisoners. This

(27) A-3, p. 54-55; A-4, p. 41; A-10; A-15. (28) A-8.

Company, however, succeeded in clearing the north portion of town and moved to its objective in the southeast edge of town about 1400 hours. (29)

F Company moved east in its zone and encountered a Schu minefield, covered by enemy fire, in the vicinity of the pillbox. It skirted the minefield to the south, entered the town and experienced the same house to house fighting as did G Company. It cleared the south portion of town by 1400 hours. (30)

The tanks had not engaged in the house to house fire fight. They had accompanied the foot troops to the west edge of town where they ran upon a Teller mine field. Two tanks were destroyed by enemy antitank fire while the other three took cover to the rear. (31)

Fire by the tank destroyers had kept the pillbox buttoned up. (See Map D) The engineer demolition team used a 500 pound charge in an effort to reduce this pillbox. The charge had little penetrating effect on the 16 foot walls; however, the concussion caused the occupants to surrender. Fifteen of the enemy occupants had been killed by the concussion and thirty-nine were taken prisoner. (32)

The remaining tanks and tank destroyers moved to the east part of town at about 1400 hours where they took up positions in the defense plan. (33)

During the progress of the attack in the forenoon, the Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, established his command post at the west end of Kesternich.

(29) A-3, p. 54; A-4, p. 41, 43; A-10; A-13; A-15. (30) A-3, p. 54-55; A-4, p. 41, 43; A-5, p. 48; A-13, A-15.  
(31) A-10; A-15. (32) A-4, p. 41; A-15. (33) A-10.

At approximately 1400 hours he moved his command post into the middle of town. However, he ordered his artillery liaison section to remain at the old command post location. From this time on no requests for artillery fire were made by the infantry through his section. Furthermore, this artillery liaison section was not in communication with its forward observers. Nevertheless, the artillery liaison officer called for and received fire on distant targets. (34)

Lieutenant Colonel Creighton E. Likes, commanding the task force, had been present in Kesternich during the forenoon where his main concern was the progress of the attack of the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry. After conferring with the Battalion Commander, concerning the establishment of the defenses of the town, he withdrew to the RCT Command post in Simmerath "to report on the situation", wherein he reported that the town of Kesternich was seized and that preparation for the defense was in progress. (35)

Reorganization and preparation for the defense, which provided for digging in on the perimeter of the town, were delayed. This delay was caused by the absence of sufficient leaders due to casualties, physical exhaustion of personnel, the inclement weather, and constant harassment by enemy fire. Control became difficult as personnel, when not under immediate supervision, frequently sought shelter in houses and basements. Prepara-

(34) A-3, p. 55; A-4, p. 43; A-10. (35) A-10; Personal knowledge.

tion for the defense was only partially completed, when, at approximately 1615 hours the enemy launched a counter-attack from the northeast, east, and southeast behind a heavy artillery preparation. By darkness enemy troops and armor had succeeded in penetrating the town defenses, thereby separating and isolating the defending units. The attached tanks and tank destroyers, lacking close infantry protection, withdrew to the west of town under orders from their respective platoon leaders. (36)

Lt. Col. Likes, learning of the counterattack, proceeded to Kesternich, where at the west of town, he met the withdrawing tanks and tank destroyers. He then contacted the Battalion Commander, 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, and directed further preparation for the defense of the town, but did not order the tanks and tank destroyers to return to their defense positions within the town. He again withdrew to the RCT command post "to report on the situation". (37)

It is to be recalled that the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, was to tie in with E Company, 310th Infantry, to the northeast of Kesternich during this operation. Contact, however, was never accomplished. Several attempts were made to contact elements of the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, all of which failed. The ~~most bold~~ <sup>boldest</sup> attempt was made around 160230 December when Captain Brey, leading a patrol into Kesternich, observed the presence of enemy troops in considerable numbers, but failed to

(36) A-4, p. 43; A-10, A-13; Statement of Captain Alfred E. Fix, Co Comdr, Co E, 310th Inf, March 1946. (37) A-10.

defense on 16 December as the Germans launched the Ardennes Counteroffensive. (42)

Near midnight 19-20 December, two men from the ill-fated 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, entered the Command post reporting that they had just returned from a cellar in Kesternich where a group composed of three officers and fifty-three enlisted men, mainly from F Company, were isolated, some of whom were suffering from battle wounds and others suffering from trenchfoot. A patrol of one officer and three enlisted men was immediately organized for the purpose of locating and evacuating the isolated personnel. The two men who had returned from Kesternich were unable to accompany the patrol as guides due to the fact that they were suffering severely from trenchfoot and exhaustion. The patrol entered Kesternich but was unable to locate the isolated group and returned to the Command post. Early the night of 20-21 December, the same patrol was preparing to repeat its mission into Kesternich when two more men from the same isolated group reported. One of these men guided the patrol to the correct location. All personnel, including litter cases, were evacuated from Kesternich. (43)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing this operation, it is my opinion that the mission assigned to the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, already depleted in strength, of seizing and securing the

(42) A-1, p. 98. (43) A-3, p. 66-68; A-4, p. 44-45; A-6, p. 35-36; A-10; A-15.

town of Kesternich on 15 December, was too large. This belief is predicated on the fact that, on 13-14 December, the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, with the same mission, experienced no success.

Although the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry, was to participate in the coordinated attack on 15 December, its assigned mission of tying in with the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, to the northwest of Kesternich, was but a small part of the overall mission to be accomplished, and might more profitably have included a convergence on the town with the other battalion. Furthermore, the presence of this additional battalion would have contributed materially in securing the objective.

The assignment of the Executive Officer, 309th Infantry, to the command of the two infantry battalions resulted in a hastily improvised command lacking a staff and a communications center. Furthermore, the two battalions concerned were from different infantry regiments and had not previously trained or fought together as a team, a combination which is considered ill-advised. It is felt that a better solution would have been the attachment of one battalion to the other, thereby utilizing an established headquarters.

The Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry, erred in isolating himself from his artillery liaison section. This act deprived his command of close in, coordinated artillery support. Furthermore, he neither requested nor directed the preparation of an artillery defense plan following the capture of the objective.

The Commanding Officer of the task force withdrew to the RCT command post in Simmerath on occasions, during the attack, "to report on the situation", when his presence with his command was essential. It is felt that the information concerning the situation might well have been transmitted by messenger.

Infantry-armor coordination was lacking in that the armor withdrew at a crucial time of battle. Furthermore, the commander, on learning of the withdrawal of the armor, failed to take decisive action toward reestablishing effective infantry-armor coordination. This failure might well have been the deciding factor in the turn of battle.

The opening phase of the attack on 15 December was characterized by close infantry-artillery coordination. The foot troops following closely behind the artillery preparation ~~and~~ entered Kesternich to find a stunned and surprised enemy. This initial advantage, however, was lost when units became disintegrated through lack of aggressive command, and failure to promptly organize the objective.

#### LESSONS

1. Successful conduct of battle is dependent on adequate communication.
2. Upon reaching an objective, reorganization, in all aspects, must be executed without delay.
3. A Commander should properly utilize the special ability, training, and judgment of his staff.

4. Coordination of infantry, artillery, and armor  
is vital to successful operations.

5. Combat in towns is characterized by difficulty  
in control of troops.

6. A deliberate, organized attack, with the nec-  
essary mass and surprise, is the ultimate to be desired.  
Piecemeal and hastily planned attacks of fortified posi-  
tions must not be undertaken unless definitely warranted  
by the urgency of the situation.