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OPERATIONS OF THE 612TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION (T),  
SECOND INFANTRY DIVISION, IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE,  
VICINITY OF EISENBORN CORNER, 16-31 DECEMBER 1944  
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Executive Officer)

Type of operation described: A TANK DESTROYER BATTALION  
SUPPORTING THE ATTACK OF AN INFANTRY DIVISION BEING FORCED  
TO THE DEFENSIVE BY A VIOLENT ENEMY COUNTER-OFFENSIVE DURING  
WINTER OPERATIONS

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, (T), Second Infantry Division, during the Battle of the Bulge, in the vicinity of EISENBORN CORNER, 16-31 December 1944.

In order to properly orient the reader, it will be necessary to make a few brief statements concerning the history of the battalion and of the major events leading up to this particular operation.

The 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (T) was composed of three gun companies. Each of these companies was armed with twelve 3" guns towed by half tracks. The Headquarters Company was composed of two reconnaissance platoons in addition to the usual supply and administrative platoons. Upon arrival in ENGLAND, 15 April 1944, the battalion was organically attached to the 2d Infantry Division and was destined to remain with that valiant fighting force throughout the war. The necessary teamwork, so essential to combat operations, was effected soon after arrival in NORMANDY.

In review of the operations preceding this action, it is well to remember that General Eisenhower had emulated a great quarterback by sending his armies scampering across FRANCE to

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the frontier of GERMANY. After vicious fighting on the beaches of NORMANDY, the breakout at ST. LO had far exceeded the expectations of even the most optimistic. American tanks and infantry ploughed through FRANCE and BELGIUM with amazing rapidity. This, of course, resulted in the supply lines being stretched from OMAHA and UTAH BEACHES to the GERMAN frontier and forced the flaming offense to a halt in October. (See Map A) (1)

In spite of the fact that our supply lines were extended beyond efficient functioning, our forces were tired and depleted and no plan had been effected for a concentrated drive into GERMANY, there were those who, because of the unusual successes of the Allies, predicted immediate German surrender.

General Eisenhower, therefore, was faced with a very difficult decision. His generals urged that plans be made for an immediate resumption of the offensive. It was either this, or the only other alternative, the committing of all forces on a general line to await supplies and reinforcements before resumption of the general offensive.

General Eisenhower chose to reject the "finger like" approach advocated by Generals Bradley and Montgomery as impractical in view of the acute supply situation. He decided that once the supplies had caught up with the troops, the armies would again push forward and, as he had long proclaimed, meet and defeat the German Armies west of the RHINE.

The soundness of General Eisenhower's decision to await necessary supplies was clearly illustrated by the terrible losses received as a result of Allied force attempts at an air-

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(1) A-1, p. 57

borne drop to secure the lower RHINE, the forced withdrawal of the penetration of the West Wall in the ARDENNES, and the bloody nose received by Patton when he ran smack into the defenses at METZ.

There were many indications that the German withdrawal from FRANCE, even though disorganized and costly, was not the rout that has so often been pictured, but instead, was a race to the West Wall. (2)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

Late September found the Allies busily engaged in making preparations for resumption of the attack all along the front of the Allied Armies. Supreme Headquarters set into motion effective plans which would result in -

(1) the destruction of the German forces west of the RHINE, and

(2) a concentrated, flaming offensive into the RUHR-- the cradle of German industry.

Implementation of such a plan would require intensive re-organization and consolidation. Thousands of tons of supplies flowed from the beaches and, finally the ports, to huge dumps near the German border. Roads, railroads and bridges were placed in working order. All available troops which had been used to capture BREST and in trucking supplies had been brought to the West Wall and given their battle indoctrination. (3)

In order to meet the troop requirements for the grand offensive, it also became necessary to apply the principle of economy of force which resulted in a line some 75 miles long

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(2) A-5, p. 63

(3) A-5, p. 66

between TRIER and MONSCHAU, being held by no more than four divisions. In so disposing his forces, General Eisenhower took a calculated risk, based on the following sound reasons.

(1) the absence of strategic objectives or large depots within the area,

(2) the Germans were known to be using this area to rest and refit units from other fronts;

(3) the relative difficulty of the terrain. Here the "ghost front" or "quiet sector" was born. (4)

Immediately following the "great decision", re-groupment of troops was effected. Some units moved from the ARDENNES sector north to the Ninth Army and British sectors while others moved south to Third Army sector. Those remaining units were assigned wider frontages and greater areas of responsibility with the remote possibility of reinforcements.

After a general build up, the First US Army faced the ROER RIVER as the last natural obstacle to be mastered before breaking out into the plains before COLOGNE. With the advent of heavy Autumn rains and early Winter snows in Mid-October, the ROER RIVER became a more serious obstacle to contemplated operations. (See Map B)

The Germans held the headwaters of both the ROER and URFT RIVERS, where a series of dams controlled huge resevoirs of water which could be let loose at any time by opening gates or blowing the dams. In view of this situation, it became necessary to consider seriously what would happen should the Germans release the tremendous amount of water contained by this gigantic dam system.

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(4) A-5, p. 75

Destruction of these dams could, and would, have a vital effect upon planned operations below the dams. Should the advance cross the river, the leading units might be cut off from combat and logistical support. In event Allied troops were in the river bottom, serious loss or complete annihilation would result. Since the major effort of the First and Ninth Armies was to be on the north flank in the area threatened by possible flooding, it was realized that the ROER RIVER should not be crossed until the dams had been taken or destroyed. (5)

It was decided that attempts would be made to knock out the dams from the air. The Royal Air Force executed bombardment missions with 500 pound and 1,000 pound bombs against these dams without causing any material effect upon the flow of water.

It, therefore, became apparent that the dams would have to be taken by ground troops.

Early in December V Corps was given the mission of seizing the dams. The Order of Battle of the V Corps was as follows:

- 8th Infantry Division
- 78th Infantry Division
- 2d Infantry Division
- 99th Infantry Division
- CCB 9th Armored Division (Reserve)
- 102d Cavalry Group (Reserve)
- CCR 5th Armored Division (Reserve)

Field Order No. 33, Headquarters V Corps, 072300A, December 1944 outlined the Corps mission as follows: "V Corps at-

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(5) A-1, p. 96

tacks on D Day at H hour (to be announced) with divisions abreast; 99th Infantry Division, 2d Infantry Division, 78th Infantry Division and 8th Infantry Division from right to left in that order, to secure Dam # 3 and Dam # 5 and to advance east and protect the right flank of VII Corps. Target date 13 December 1944".

Paragraph 3 b is quoted as follows:

"2nd Inf Div (Reinf):

(1) Attached: 741st Tank Bn (M) "C" Co 86th Cml Bn  
612th TD Bn (T) 644th TD Bn (SP)  
(less 1 Co)  
462nd AAA Bn (M) 1 CC, 9th Armd Div

(2) On movement from VIII Corps assemble in area of CAMP ELSENBORN.

(3) Attack at H hour to seize Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 as rapidly as possible.

(4) DAM No. 5 at (069235) will be secured and held at all costs.

(5) Maintain contact with the 99th Inf Div on the right.

(6) Designate to 99th Inf Div lanes to be cleared through friendly mine fields." (6)

THE GERMAN PLAN (See Map C)

Upon gaining the protection of the West Wall, the Germans were faced with two problems: (1) the reformation of a front and (2) the prevention of the Allied invasion of GERMANY.

The enemy wished to regain the initiative and realized that to do so he must create an armored reserve. This he was able to do by taking advantage of the winter weather and the pro-

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(6) A-3,

tective defenses of the West Wall. He managed to refit a number of Panzer Divisions, including the bulk of the SS: these divisions were re-equipped to the scale of about 100 tanks each, comprising the latest type of Panther and Tiger. (7)

Hitler himself made the decision to pledge this reserve in a major gamble and ordered his Western Armies readied for a last desperate attack, which was to surprise the Allies, cross the MEUSE and drive to ANTWERP. (See Map C) He also aimed at the destruction of our will to fight.

This operation was planned in the greatest of secrecy and with great care and skill. One can easily visualize the elation of Hitler when one of his generals pointed out the thinly held ARDENNES area to him. Being aware of the manpower and supply difficulties facing the Allied forces, he was quick to realize a weakness. Also remembering German successes through the sector in 1940, he was quick to give the order to concentrate troops for the attack. In doing this, he was greatly assisted by the extremely bad weather which almost completely halted Allied air reconnaissance. (8)

The enemy plan was to attack between MONSCHAU and ECTERNACH with the Sixth SS Panzer Army on the right and the Fiftieth Panzer Army on the left, each including four Panzer Divisions. They were to secure crossings over the MEUSE between LIEGE and GIVET, dropping off infantry divisions to hold the flanks. No less than seventeen infantry, parachute and Panzer Grenadier divisions were to be committed behind the spearheads. This powerful striking force had three objectives which were stressed in the final orders: to the north, the vital ELSENHORN

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(7) A-4, p. 276-277

(8) A-6, p. 10-30

RIDGE; in the north center, the SCHNEE EIFFEL and to the south, the confluence of the SAUER and OEUR RIVERS, a key hinge upon which they hoped to swing that southern pivot. (9)

And so the final details were set. After the last approach march and as the men were lined up for the attack, they were to be given the mission. Scrawled in the flowery hand of one German officer, in a diary lifted from his frozen hand, these words: "There is a general feeling of elation, everybody is cheerful". (10)

#### THE PLANS OF 2D INFANTRY DIVISION

Field Order No. 33, Headquarters V Corps, dated 072300A, December 1944 directed the 2d Infantry Division with its attached and supporting units to pass through the 99th Infantry Division and sieze the following objectives: The attack was to begin 130700 December 1944.

Objective No. 1 - ROHERN

Objective No. 2 - Road Junction HOFEN-ROCHERATH at  
WEHLERSCHIED

Objective No. 3 - Hill mass 3000 yards east of RJ  
at WEHLERSCHIED

Objective No. 4 - High ground east of DRIEHORN and  
HORPERSCHIED

Objective No. 5 - Road junction and high ground at  
MORSBACK

Objective No. 6 - Dam No. 5 and ridge to south.

Field Order No. 12, Headquarters 2d Infantry Division, directed the 9th Infantry Regiment to attack astride the

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(9) A-6, p. 108

(10) A-6, p. 45

KRINKELT-ROCHERATH-WEHLERSCHIED ROAD; to seize and secure the RJ on the international boundary at WEHLERSCHIED, GERMANY; and to be prepared to continue the swing north inside the SIEGFRIED LINE to take the town of ROHREN. The 38th Infantry would make the main effort through the MONSCHAU FOREST toward DRIEBORN. The 23d Infantry would be in division reserve initially and would be prepared to exploit the success of either regiment.

The 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, (T) would provide anti-tank defense for the division. (11)

The division jumped off as ordered on 13 December 1944 and, after some of the most vicious fighting in its history, had succeeded in capturing objective No. 2, the all-important road junction at WEHLERSCHIED and on 16 December 1944, was deployed as shown on Map D.

#### THE BATTALION SITUATION AND PLAN

The 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion had fought with the 2d Infantry Division across FRANCE to the relief of the 4th Infantry Division in the SCHNEE EIFTEL FOREST 4 October 1944. The first mission on German soil had been the defense of a sector along the SIEGFRIED LINE.

The battalion was relieved of its above mission by elements of the 106th Infantry Division and on the night 11-12 December 1944, arrived in an assembly area at SOURBRODT, BELGIUM. At this time little was known of its future mission.

After the battalion had closed into the area, the battalion commander reported to Headquarters 2d Division for instructions and upon returning immediately ordered a meeting of

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(11) A-9

the staff and unit commanders. At this meeting, the division plan of attack was carefully outlined. The mission was clear to everyone and the secrecy with which the operation was to be launched was impressed on the minds of all present. The mission of the battalion was to provide anti-tank defense for the division. The following plan for the use of the battalion was given: Company A would be in direct support of 9th Infantry Regiment and from a previously occupied position in HOFEN, GERMANY would be prepared to support the regiment's attack by direct fire on ROHREN, GERMANY. The battalion, minus Company A, would be in division reserve initially. Company C would be prepared to support the 38th Infantry Regiment as soon as objective No. 2 had been seized by 9th Infantry Regiment. Company B would be prepared to follow along with the 23d Infantry Regiment which was to be used in an exploiting role. The battalion commander stressed the fact that little was known of the terrain, nor of the enemy forces located within the zone of action. He, therefore, ordered the two reconnaissance platoons and Companies B and C to initiate extensive reconnaissance throughout the sector for routes, positions, and probable avenues of approach. He also instructed the S-2 to contact division G-2 in order to find out all that was to be known of the enemy situation. This intelligence information would be disseminated to all concerned. Combat efficiency of opposing forces was assumed to be approximately equal. (12)

Upon conclusion of the meeting, the battalion commander, S-3, company commander and platoon leaders of Company A proceeded to HOFEN. This sector was in the zone of the 99th In-

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(12) A-9; Personal knowledge

fantry Division and was occupied by the 3d Battalion, 395th Infantry Regiment. The necessary coordination had been made by the G-3's but it was necessary that Company A and 3d Battalion, 395th effect necessary coordination on the ground. (See Map E) The battalion commander was very happy to see them, especially in view of the fact that his area of responsibility was quite large and that his troops were green, never having been battle-tested. He felt that, in addition to providing additional fire power, the companys presence would probably tend to have a "steadying influence" on his inexperienced men. He was very cooperative and plans were made for a night movement of the company. This movement was to be made as secretly as possible in order to preserve the element of surprise. (13)

The town of HOFEN, situated on a ridge overlooking the town of ROHREN, controlled access to the EUPEN HIGHWAY. The only access road was a winding trail, crossed by a stream, and exposed to enemy observed fire. The road to the north was patrolled and it, too, was under enemy observation. The road to the south moved directly into enemy territory.

On 14 December the company commander, platoon leaders and gun commanders made a daylight reconnaissance of the area. Exact positions for the guns were selected and also routes into the positions. The positions were selected primarily to afford direct fire into ROHREN.

Positions having been selected, the company moved in that night, driving so slowly and quietly that many of the infantry troops were unaware that the Tank Destroyers were in the area.

Since one battalion of infantry was far from sufficient

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(13) Personal knowledge

to protect the area, it had, of necessity, been spread rather thinly. The line consisted of a series of strong points. Some of the twelve TD guns were placed practically within the front lines. In order to give some degree of flexibility to the defense, the battalion had constituted a reserve of one platoon which was located near the TD company.

On the 15th, the gun commanders of Company A briefed the crews, gun positions were prepared, sand bagged and covered with logs. Snow was falling and the weather was bitterly cold. In view of the heavy snow, it became necessary to camouflage the gun positions with sheets which had been furnished by battalion supply. The communications section tied in wire lines to the infantry battalion CP. An artillery forward observer from 2d Division artillery reported during the day and plans were made for the use of artillery support. These plans were also coordinated with the artillery and mortar fire plan of the 3d Battalion, 395th Infantry. (14)

Rationing of ammunition had been in effect for two months and as a result the battalion had its prescribed basic load of ammunition. Supply was of no particular problem for the forthcoming mission. Combat suits had been issued but the battalion was short a few boots of hard-to-get sizes. Supply and evacuation would be governed by the battle tested SOP.

During the period reconnaissance was vigorous and continuous; this was to pay great dividends later.

The battalion CP moved to WIRTZFELD, BELGIUM, closing into the area at 150900.

The night of the 15th found the battalion bedded down with

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(14) A-11

a secure feeling that it was up to strength and prepared to capably perform its mission. (15)

#### NARRATION

16 DECEMBER 1944

The German artillery served as an alarm clock all up and down the entire front. At 160525, a tremendous barrage of artillery, mortar and rocket fire fell along the area occupied by the 3d Battalion, 395th Infantry Regiment and Company A, 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion. The executive officer, Company A, roused the company commander to state that the schoolhouse, fifty feet away, had been hit by artillery and had caught on fire, along with several other buildings in the area. This barrage accomplished a tremendous amount of damage within the town. All wire lines were immediately severed. Company A immediately dispatched a radio jeep to the 3d Battalion CP in order to maintain communications for it was apparent to all that the town was about to be attacked. Wire crews began repairing the severed lines which would be so vital to a defensive battle position. Reports were made to higher headquarters. Every doughboy and tank destroyer in the area was alert.

At 160550, the entire front was glowing with artificial moonlight produced by high powered searchlights employed by the Germans. As the Germans played these powerful lights against the low hanging clouds, the men of Company A, along with the doughboys, were set for the attack. Visibility was increased to a few hundred yards.

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(15) Personal knowledge

The Germans came. (See Map E)

At 160600, they seemed to rise from the haze in front of HOFEN and approached the town in that slow determined walk which had become so characteristic. They somehow got through the tremendous barrage of artillery and mortar fire which was being laid down in front of the battle position by the supporting weapons and hit the front line infantry.

It was immediately apparent to the commander of Company A that the Tank Destroyers might be in trouble since communications were out. He dispatched runners to platoon positions in an effort to determine the situation. At this time a messenger came running from 3d Platoon, which was located immediately in front of the company CP, to report that his platoon needed more machine gun ammunition. By this time German machine gun fire began hitting the Company CP. The company commander, with the first sergeant, immediately headed for 3d Platoon. The messenger was left at the CP to get the much needed ammunition. Upon arrival at the platoon CP, the platoon leader reported the Germans had over run the infantry front and had penetrated to a position a few yards in front of the Tank Destroyer platoon. Here it had been met by the withering fire of automatic weapons which were carefully positioned to protect the TD guns. The Germans had been stopped, temporarily at least, and had taken up positions in a house previously occupied by our own infantry. It was decided that these positions would be attacked by fire. The 30 and 50 caliber machine guns were turned on the house and began pouring their devastating fire through the windows and doors. Some of the 3" TD guns fired HE in also. It was now decided to attack the position

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in order to restore the MLR. Some of the infantry and the TD men, by use of walking fire and supported by the direct fire of the MG's and 3" TD's, were able to drive the Germans out.

Amid the groans of the dying and wounded, the Germans could be seen withdrawing. The 3" guns began peppering them with HE, which completely demoralized them as they withdrew in confusion toward ROHREN, leaving many dead and wounded. In their confused withdrawal, they left the previously "captured" doughboys. It can be positively stated that these men were very happy to be "liberated" so soon.

Captured prisoners revealed they had been told the position had been thinly held by a battalion of infantry only. They were completely surprised to suddenly bump head on into the position of the TD's. The direct fire of the 3" guns, along with the other fires, had proved too much for them.

The penetrated area had been sealed off by artillery and mortar fire which allowed the destruction of those caught in the penetrated area and prevented re-inforcements. Over 100 dead and 41 prisoners were left behind. The battle position had been restored. (16)

The infantry battalion commander and commander of Company A got together to insure effective coordination. Everyone was elated over the temporary success but it was now realized that more was to come. The TD platoons were tied in by wire with the infantry and the radios of Company A were distributed throughout the area to insure an alternate means of communication. All effort was concentrated on improvement of the positions.

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(16) A-11; Personal knowledge

At 161235, the enemy made another effort. This time an attack was launched of company size. The Germans apparently wanted the road to use as a means of approach into the area. This attack was beaten off very quickly by the infantry in coordination with terrific artillery and mortar fire.

This was the last attack which developed on the 16th, but rest for the weary soldiers was not to be had. Supplies had to be replenished, dead removed and some of the debris cleared to permit the vehicles to move around on their supply missions. Minefields were laid and guns were shifted in an effort to make further penetrations impossible. (17)

The attack was reported to the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion headquarters. The battalion commander went to 2d Division Headquarters and while there found that attacks had been made all along the First Army front. (18) He returned and called for the S-4. It was decided to stock Company A's position with all necessary supplies. This was done during the night.

In the early afternoon December 16th, Company B with 1st Reconnaissance Platoon attached, was attached to 23d Infantry Regiment, which had come under direct control of V Corps. Liaison was sent to the 23d Regimental Combat Team by Company B.

At approximately 162100, Company B was alerted for movement by the 23d Infantry Regiment and was told to be prepared to move on the road to BULLINGEN. No mission was given at this time. Company C was alerted by 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion. (19)

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(17) A-11

(18) Personal knowledge

(19) A-9; A-12; and Personal knowledge

17 DECEMBER 1944

During the night of 16-17 December, Company B arrived at the IP. (See Map F) Here an hour was spent before a messenger came from 23d Infantry Regiment stating the company would move on the road to BULLINGEN. While enroute, the company commander received conflicting orders from 23d RCT. The first order stated that Company B was to report to an Engineer officer in BULLINGEN. The second order received by messenger a few minutes later stated that he would report to a Tank Destroyer officer instead. This certainly was confusing but the company continued to move as ordered along the designated route. The vigorous reconnaissance previously engaged in by the company paid dividends, otherwise this move would have been extremely difficult. At 170130, the company arrived at RJ931022 where it was met by the Anti-tank officer, 99th Infantry Division and a company commander of 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion. The AT officer stated that Company B's mission was to protect the right flank of the 99th Infantry Division from armored attack. One platoon would go into an assembly area vicinity of RJ931022 and at dawn would take up a defensive position covering the road leading north from ST. VITH. The re-inforced company, minus one platoon, was to proceed to HONSFELD under the guidance of the 801st TD Company commander. In the HONSFELD area, the company would employ one platoon south of town at dawn, while holding the other platoon in mobile reserve within the town.

The company commander, based upon this fragmentary order, made a hasty estimate of the situation and arrived at the following plan of action: The third platoon would drop off into

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an assembly area in the vicinity of RJ931022; the first and second platoons, the 1st Reconnaissance Platoon and the Company CP would move into HONSFELD. The 1st Platoon would be in mobile reserve, while at dawn, the 2d Platoon, with 1st Reconnaissance Platoon, would take up primary positions covering the southern approach to HONSFELD.

The company, minus one platoon, moved into HONSFELD without incident. The company commander of 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion, whose unit had been in the area for some time, ordered the company commander to bed his men for the night and stated that at dawn he would direct the company into position.

(See Map F)

The company commander left the CP at 170400 and proceeded toward BUTTENBACH where the 99th Infantry Division CP was supposed to be located in order to receive further orders and to be briefed on the situation confronted by the Division. At 170415, the company commander's radio operator established communication with the company CP in HONSFELD. (20)

At 170430 a tremendous artillery concentration was fired into all the towns along the entire V Corps front. The Battalion CP in WIRTZFELD was subjected to tremendous fire but luckily no direct hit was scored. The radio operators were maintaining a listening watch; therefore, were highly alert. Communication was established with Company C and Headquarters Company, but Company B could not be reached because of its being temporarily attached to the 99th Infantry Division. Headquarters Company and Company C reported that they, too, had been subjected to intense artillery fire but no casualties re-

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(20) A-12; Personal knowledge

sulted. It was realized that something unusual must be in the offing since Jerry never failed to follow up such a violent preparation of artillery fire. The battalion commander hurried down to 2d Infantry Division CP to determine the situation. (21)

At 170500, the company commander of Company B received a report by radio that tanks were attacking HONSFELD. He immediately decided to try to reach HONSFELD by going through BULLINGEN. While going down the road toward HONSFELD, he was met by elements of 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion moving on foot who told him that their positions in front of HONSFELD had been hit by hordes of German tanks, followed by infantry, and that the company had nothing left--only a few personal weapons. The company commander then decided to approach HONSFELD on foot. Since enemy planes had become very active and flares were being dropped throughout the area he, therefore, had no trouble looking into the town. What he saw was a very shocking sight, even to a company commander who had been fighting the Krauts since soon after D Day. The entire town was surrounded by enemy troops and tanks could be seen milling around the area. It was immediately apparent that elements of Company B and the reconnaissance platoon had been lost. With a heavy heart, he proceeded to BULLINGEN, where a direct wire to the 99th Infantry Division CP was found and the chaotic situation reported. He was ordered by the Chief of Staff to gather any available troops and to block the road to BUTGENBACH. He then decided to try and reach the platoon which he had left at RJ931022. Upon arrival there it was found the platoon leader

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(21) Personal knowledge

had been very aggressive and had the guns in position. The crews were hastily attempting to improve the positions in preparation for the onslaught which they were sure would hit soon. A short time later, a platoon leader of Company D, 741st Tank Battalion came up and reported that the company commander had sent him up to offer the services of his light tank company which was located nearby. It was incorporated into the hasty defense plan of the area, along with approximately 60 engineer stragglers. At 170700, this little group was prepared to give a good account of itself should the attack come as expected. (22) (See Map F)

At 170700, V Corps reported to 2d Infantry Division that an enemy force of an estimated 30 tanks and a battalion of armored infantry was approaching BULLINGEN. The division commander took immediate steps to cope with this situation. Troops were alerted. Command Post personnel left posts in kitchens, motor pools and offices to form a defense around the town. The CP group of the 612th TD Battalion was given a sector of responsibility. (23)

The battalion commander contacted G-3 and was told that V Corps had advised the situation was chaotic and had directed the division to disengage and withdraw to ELSENBORN ridge where a defense would be established covering the approaches to EUPEN. Company C was to be attached to 99th Infantry Division to assist in the protection of the area during the disengagement of the 2d Infantry Division. Now that the proposed attack of the 9th Infantry Regiment on ROHREN was no longer a possibility, the battalion commander recommended that Company

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(22) A-12; Personal knowledge

(23) Personal knowledge

A be attached to the 3d Battalion, 395th Infantry in HOFEN with a mission of supporting the infantry in the defense of that area. This recommendation was approved and orders were sent to Company A and information to 99th Infantry Division, who had concurred by telephone. The 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion would continue to perform supply mission for the company.

The 2d Infantry Division's main supply route was the road ELSENBORN-BUTGENBACH-BULLINGEN-KRINKELT-WEHLERSCHIED. Maps showed a road leading from WIRTZFELD to ELSENBORN but this road had never been completed. Engineers had begun making this route safe for one way traffic and were now directed by Division to open up the road since the main supply route had been cut by the enemy at BULLINGEN. All vehicles except those essential to combat were ordered to move at once toward ELSENBORN, using this one way road. (See Map F)

At 170800 enemy tanks and half-tracks followed by infantry came out of the mist on a ridge 800 yards south of WIRTZFELD. The combined fires of all weapons defending this sector were turned on this enemy force. A stiff battle ensued; the tanks and half-tracks were knocked out and the infantry was forced to withdraw. During this heated engagement, a battalion of the 23d Infantry Regiment arrived and seized the ridge. No further threat developed, although on several occasions enemy armor and infantry appeared to be massing in BULLINGEN for further attacks on WIRTZFELD. Prompt and intense artillery fire was delivered on each of these concentrations. Each threat was neutralized, therefore a share of the credit for saving the division CP must go to the Artillery.

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At 170900, the battalion executive officer reported to division G-3 and was informed the division CP would withdraw to ELSENBORN and the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion CP would be established in SOURBRODT. Upon returning to the battalion CP, he found the intelligence sergeant calmly destroying all classified documents. The CP group was then alerted and quickly moved out, via the newly established supply route, to SOURBRODT. The move was made without incident and at 171030 the Command Post group had closed into the new area. (24)

(See Map F)

171100 found Company C, with 2d Reconnaissance Platoon attached, moving into previously reconnoitered positions in the area south of BUTGENBACH. Here it was deployed and the machine guns placed on ground mounts and employed to protect the TD guns. Orders were that this position was to be held at all costs. During the rest of the day, Company C was subjected only to heavy artillery and rocket fire. No casualties resulted. (25) (See Map F)

Throughout the 17th, Company A, in HOFEN, had been subjected to heavy artillery fire and German planes had strafed and bombed the town again and again. Material damage was heavy but luckily, the company received no casualties. (26) (See Map F)

As the afternoon of the 17th dragged by, the "task force" at RJ 931022 grew in size as men continued to straggle in from every unit which was, or had been, located in this area. A ring of anti-tank mines had been placed around the position. The enemy was apparently somewhat confused, since he had not

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(24) Personal knowledge  
(25) A-13; A-9; Personal knowledge  
(26) A-8

attacked this lightly held area. Fire fell intermittently on the group and the enemy continued to gradually move forward. At 171530 the group was relieved by elements of the 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division. The regiment was just in time since this small group was in process of being surrounded, even though they were giving battle. (See Map F)

Company B was ordered by 2d Division to assemble at SOURBRODT and a roll call was then taken. It was found that 3 officers and 110 men of Company B, 1 officer and 20 men from the attached reconnaissance platoon, and 3 aid men from the battalion medical platoon were missing in action. (27)

Between 171730 and 171900, one officer and two men of Company B and the platoon sergeant of the reconnaissance platoon, which had been attached to Company B, straggled into SOURBRODT. The officer and the platoon sergeant had both been captured in HONSFELD but had escaped. The other two men had eluded the Germans by hiding in a barn and never were captured.

The group was interviewed by the battalion executive officer and the following is a brief account as related by them: After the company moved into HONSFELD, billets had been found in a couple of buildings. Security was posted and the men had tried to get some rest. In the early hours of the morning, the town was hit by a terrific concentration of artillery fire. The men were alerted and immediately following the preparation, German infantry and tanks were pushed into the town. The men fought desperately from the houses and even were able to man a couple of the TD guns which knocked out 3 half-tracks, 2 SP guns and 3 tanks. After a short seige the entire town was

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(27) A-9

surrounded and surrender was demanded. The situation was completely hopeless so the group decided to surrender. They were lined up in a field and instead of being marched away, it became readily apparent that another disposition was to be made of this group. They were to be murdered. The SS soldier who was to do the job started down the row of men, firing as he went. Men who were on the end farthest away ran for the buildings and fields. Only two were able to escape through the German line to safety. The reconnaissance sergeant was wounded by our own artillery fire but was ever grateful for that fire; it was used as a means of locating the general direction of the American forces.

The men were suffering from shock so the surgeon took them to the aid station for treatment. The story these men told was confirmed in January 1945. The Germans were later driven out of HONSFELD and a German priest led investigating officers to a common grave containing the bodies of several American soldiers. At this time it was revealed that he had been present when the men were killed and had actually helped bury them. A total of 17 of this group were identified as being men of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion. (28)

#### 18 DECEMBER 1944

There was no sleep for the men of the battalion during the night of 17-18 December. The Germans continued to pour in artillery and rocket fire.

At 180330, the commander of Company A went to the battalion CP in HOFEN to learn of conditions elsewhere along the

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(28) A-9; Personal knowledge

front and to await further developments. He did not have long to wait for the Germans dropped parachutists in HOFEN as well as elsewhere along the Corps area. They did no damage as they were either shot or herded in very quickly.

At 180345 the enemy launched another attack against the HOFEN area. Again the infantry lines were penetrated, despite heavy mortar and artillery fire. One of the TD gun crews, in a house located well forward and offered mutual support to a section of infantry, was captured. The infantry did not interfere nor did they report the action until the next morning. At daylight the Germans were again driven out of the town.

(See Map E)

At 180830, HOFEN was subjected to another artillery, mortar and rocket preparation. This one was even more intense than that of the 16th. The Germans came again, this time with elements of two regiments supported by tanks and armored cars. The fighting which took place was very bloody. During the attack, one of the gun positions which was located in an old convent was surrounded. The fight became so desperate that mortar fire was called on the position. This fire was delivered and proved very successful, killing many Germans and saving the position. No harm was done to the TD's because of the heavy masonry construction of the old convent. The infantry lines were breeched again and, again, the TD's, fighting as infantry, met the attacking Germans with a hail of lead. Light machine guns were fired from the hip by the keyed up Americans who were determined to halt the advance of the fanatical Germans. The additional fire power and "battle wisdom" of the TD men "stood them in good stead". The armored

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cars got into the fight using their 50 cal. anti-aircraft weapons. The 3" guns were fired against the attacking ground troops, into the town of ROHREN and against the threat of tanks and armored cars. None of the tanks or armored cars were knocked out, but were prevented from entering the battle positions.

The 3" guns had become frozen into the ground and could not be moved or shifted to fire in any other direction; therefore, plans had been made for the destruction of these guns in the event evacuation of the town became necessary. This was not to become a reality for a battalion of untried infantry and a company of Tank Destroyers again denied HOFEN to a fanatical enemy.

The German attack was broken up and the infantry withdrew in disorder, being followed into the haze by the tanks and armored cars. Had the tank destroyer guns been self propelled, they would not have been allowed to get away.

At 181000, a force of battalion size made another desperate attack and succeeded in making another penetration. After an hour and a half of desperate fighting, the combined fires of artillery, infantry and TD's proved too much for even the most fanatical. The enemy again withdrew leaving many dead and wounded. The prisoners revealed that forces attacking HOFEN had been expected to effect a link-up with other forces enroute to EUPEN. (29) (See Map E)

This action ended the enemy's abortive efforts to take HOFEN.

At 181200, the 612th TD Battalion was ordered to form all

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(29) A-11; A-8; Personal knowledge

available personnel into a group which was to be placed in the line. This group included men of the personnel section, maintenance platoon, and cooks of headquarters company. The maintenance officer was placed in command and the group was attached to "Task Force Hoke". This force was to hold a position SE of BERG. Remnants of Company B were also ordered to the BERG area, which was to be held at all costs to allow the withdrawal of the regiments of 2d Infantry Division. (30)

(See Map F)

By afternoon of the 18th, Company C had grown considerably. It had the following temporarily attached and in a defensive position: one company of light tanks, one platoon of TD's from 801st TD Battalion, twenty-four AAA 40 mm guns and about fifty infantry who had straggled in throughout the period. 2d Infantry Division had ordered all stragglers, be they individual, section, platoon, company or battalion, placed in the lines. (31)

During the day there was very little activity in this particular area. Intermittent artillery and rocket fire continued to fall which did nothing more than harass the troops and disrupt the wire lines.

#### 19 DECEMBER 1944

The night of 18-19 was not a quiet one. The determined Nazis continued to rain high angle fire on all elements of the battalion. Rest was denied the fatigued "destroyers". The S-4 and his small group were busy re-supplying all elements of the battalion.

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(30) A-9; Personal knowledge  
(31) A-12

At 190530, a messenger arrived at Company C with orders relieving it of attachment to 99th Infantry Division. The company was to be in direct support of the 38th Infantry and was to be in position east of WIRTZFELD by 190700. Here again previous reconnaissance paid dividends. The company was in position 190800 with a mission of anti-tank protection for the regiment and, in addition, ordered to fire on targets of opportunity. Throughout the day, the company fired hundreds of rounds of HE into the town of BULLINGEN, making life rather miserable for the Germans and serving to prevent any further concentrations for attack. Company C thoroughly enjoyed this day, since during the past two days, it had been subjected to terrific artillery fire with very little opportunity to "fight back". (32) (See Map F)

The position in HOFEN was subjected to constant enemy pressure in the form of raiding patrols, which were easily beaten off, usually with mortars and artillery fire.

The personnel section and Company B improved the defensive positions in the BERG area. Artillery, mortar and strafing served to interrupt their activities during the period, but luckily, no casualties resulted. (33)

At 192000, the company commander of Company C was called to regimental headquarters, 9th Infantry, where plans had been made for a night withdrawal to ELSENBORN RIDGE. Company C was ordered to remain in position to provide anti-tank protection to the withdrawing infantry. This decision was protested by the company commander but to no avail. Company C did move last and with considerable difficulty due to heavy artillery

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(32) A-12  
(33) A-9

being placed on the withdrawing troops. Trying to move in the wrong direction with twelve 3" guns towed by half tracks proved to be a very trying experience. The company closed into the new area at 200300 with loss of only one man. The rest of the night was spent in digging. (34) (See Map F)

20 DECEMBER 1944

The 20th found the 2d Infantry Division, with all attached troops, again disposed on high ground of its own choice. While engaged in the arduous task of hacking foxholes and defensive installations out of frozen ground, the men were under constant enemy artillery fire and suffered repeated strafing attacks by enemy planes. Long range machine gun fire fell on the laboring men. (35)

All units of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion were in good defensive positions and well emplaced by 201200. Supplies, including many mines, were dumped on position. (See Map F)

At 201300, the "defensive platoon" from Headquarters Company, which had been attached to "Task Force Hoke", was relieved and returned to the company at its location in SOURBRODT. During the evening meal, a 380 mm caliber shell struck the kitchen, mess hall and battalion CP, causing eleven casualties. One of the men died enroute to the hospital. (36)

The battalion commander was directed to take command of the anti-tank defenses of 99th Infantry Division. In order to carry out this temporary duty, he moved to ELSENBORN and established a forward CP. (See Map F)

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(34) A-12

(35) A-9; Personal knowledge

(36) A-9; Personal knowledge

By late afternoon the 2d and 99th Infantry Divisions, with attached troops, held a strong and continuous position along ELSENBORN RIDGE and was in control with other V Corps units on either side. Attempts of the enemy to break through to the vital ELSENBORN-EUPEN road had been frustrated. (37)

21 - 31 DECEMBER 1944

During this period it became clearly evident that the Germans had gambled and lost. All along the entire 2d Division front, the Germans kept pressure which lessened in intensity as the days passed. He continued to shell the battle position and strafed again and again with his planes. Even this was soon to stop as the mist cleared somewhat and our Air Force again took command of the skies.

On Christmas Day all of the troops in the battalion were fed a hot turkey dinner which, of course, became cold the minute it left the marmite can and hit the messkit, but it was good and impressed the men very favorably. Along with this meal went many sacks of the ever-welcome letters from home. Morale was extremely high. These men had met and mastered the best the German High Command had to send against them. They became very anxious for a resumption of the offensive. It seemed to be apparent, more than ever before, that the end of the war was in sight. Everyone was anxious to complete the dirty work and be on the way home.

On 29 December, an order was received which stated that the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (T) would be converted to a self-propelled unit and would be armed with the M-18 Tank De-

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(37) A-5, p. 103

stroyer. Companies A and B were immediately relieved of front line duties. The battalion, minus Company C, moved under the direction of the battalion executive officer, to an assembly position two miles east of VERVIERS, BELGIUM. Company C was to maintain its position in the vicinity of BERG until the conversion of Company A was completed. (38) (See Map F)

The weather was steadily getting colder; snow falls amounted to two feet and was drifting to four and five feet as Companies A and B raced against time in efforts to become self-propelled.

#### TO SUM UP THE ACTIONS DURING THE PERIOD

It is reasonable to state that the heroic efforts of the battalion were rather insignificant in comparison with other units engaged in repulsing this tremendous German counter offensive, but the officers and men feel that they gave their best. The battalion, for the most part, fought as infantry-- a method of employment for which it had not been trained. It fought in support of two different infantry divisions under the most severe conditions and against the best troops the Germans could put on the field of battle. Its losses were as follows: wounded 16, killed 3, missing 143.

Company A fought bitterly in stemming German penetration efforts in the HOFEN area and under the provisions of section IV, Circular 2, Headquarters First United States Army, dated 4 January 1945, was awarded the Distinguished Unit Badge. The citation is quoted as follows:

"During the period of 12th December 1944 to 29th December

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(38) A-3; Personal knowledge

1944 in the vicinity of Hofen, Germany, Company "A", 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion distinguished itself by exhibiting outstanding courage and superior heroism in the presence of the enemy. The officers and men of Company "A", 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, by spirited and outstanding aggressiveness, were successful in preventing a breakthrough by the enemy in the sector occupied by the 3d Battalion of the 395th Infantry Regiment. During the entire action the personnel of Company "A", 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion were employed in the role of infantry, one for which they were not trained nor to which assigned, fighting with the courage and spirit of infantrymen and being responsible for the capture of many enemy personnel and enemy materiel as well as the killing of numerous Germans. Their outstanding courage, bravery and discipline exhibited to all that this was a superior fighting unit and was instrumental in resisting the northern arm of the German Pincer aimed for Eupen, Belgium through Monschau, Germany. Had the enemy offensive successfully overrun the positions of Company "A", 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, the entire northern flank of the First United States Army would have been endangered, and the major supply depots in the vicinity of Eupen and Verviers threatened".

Company B was overrun early on 17 December by German armored spearheads which burst through the lines of the 99th Infantry Division at HONSFELD. Later remnants of the company fought in direct support of the 23d Infantry in vicinity of BERG.

Company C, although not as hard hit as A and B, fought valiantly throughout the period and held ground which was ex-

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tremely important to the success of the withdrawal ordered by V Corps.

Headquarters Company had its two reconnaissance platoons engaged throughout the period and lost the 1st Platoon when HONSFELD was overrun. The personnel section and members of the maintenance platoon saw action as members of Task Force Hoke in the vicinity of BERG. The company suffered 11 casualties on 20 December when hit by a large caliber shell. The supply section had continued supplying the companies even during periods of attachment to other units. The CP Group was in action against the enemy in defense of the town of WIRTZFELD.

The battalion has since been cited twice to the order of the Belgium Army with attribution of the FOURRAGERE. The periods covered were 13-19 and 19-30 December 1944. The citations were given under the seal of Charles, Prince of Belgium, at BRUXELLES on 17 June 1946. (39)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. COMBAT INTELLIGENCE

V Corps ordered the 23d RCT, Company B attached, to reinforce the center of the 99th Division sector on 16 December. On the night of 16-17 December, Company B was further ordered by RCT to move on the road to HONSFELD and that an officer from Headquarters, 99th Infantry Division would give the company commander further orders. The company was met by the Division Anti-tank officer who ordered the company into HONSFELD to provide anti-tank defense for this sector. No informa-

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(39) A-3; A-4, p. 105; Personal knowledge

tion of enemy positions or activities was given to the unit commander although this information was available and was known to the 23d RCT, 99th Division and Corps Headquarters.

The commander of Company B was ordered to "bed his men down and that the company would be moved into position at dawn".

The unit which Company B was to support failed utterly in briefing the company commander and this negligence resulted in loss of two platoons of the company, plus a reconnaissance platoon.

Had the company commander been properly briefed as to the enemy situation and the extent of enemy penetration, it is very unlikely that Company B, veterans of many days of combat, would have been lost without a fight.

## 2. RECONNAISSANCE

The extensive reconnaissance ordered by the battalion commander paid dividends throughout the period. During the period 13-16, Companies B, C and the reconnaissance platoons covered the entire corps sector south of HOFEN and, therefore, were able to make difficult night moves into position when ordered to do so.

Company A, as a result of its detailed reconnaissance of the HOFEN area, selected positions and moved into them so effectively that secrecy was maintained, thereby completely surprising the Germans when they attacked the town.

## 3. INFANTRY-ARMOR COORDINATION

The coordination of effort as demonstrated by the 3d Battalion, 395th Infantry and Company A, 612th TD Battalion in HOFEN was responsible to a great extent for the success of the

defense of that town. Although Company A was placed in the town to fire in direct support of the 9th Infantry Regiment in its attack on ROHREN, the infantry and tank destroyer fire plans were closely coordinated. As a result, the enemy penetrations were effectively blocked and the Germans either forced to retire in the face of devastating fires or local counterattacks by the combined infantry-tank destroyer reserve.

#### 4. ARMOR

The necessity of armored, self-propelled, high velocity guns within the organic structure of the infantry battalion was demonstrated throughout this action. Had the guns of 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion been self-propelled, the companies would have been able to give much better protection from both armor and infantry to the battle position. In the BUTENBACH area Company C was "chained to the ground" as well as was Company A in HOFEN. In HOFEN guns were frozen to the ground; therefore, there was a complete lack of mobility and shock action. Had the company been able to maneuver its guns more of the enemy would have been destroyed and fewer casualties would have resulted among our own troops.

#### 5. RESERVES

Reserves are essential to the success of any tactical operation and especially that of the defense.

In the defense of HOFEN the front line positions were breeched early and again and again. Each time the penetration was stopped when it came under the fire of the platoon of infantry reserve and that of the tank destroyer company. A small

counterattacking force was successfully employed from this local reserve.

Companies B and C, plus the two reconnaissance platoons, were initially in Division reserve but were quickly employed throughout the sectors of the V Corps to give depth to the positions of the infantry and thereby contributed to the overall success of the operation.

## 6. COMMUNICATION

Armored units in the defense must employ wire communication.

This was borne out during this operation. Company A tied in with the infantry in HOFEN and even carried this out down to and including the platoons. Company B was never in wire communication with the 99th Division until after HONSFELD was overrun. By use of wire the company commander was able to report the situation and receive further orders.

Company C was tied in with the local infantry at each position; therefore, seldom resorted to the use of radio even though it was available. Radio was used as an alternate means of communication when wire failed.

## 7. COVER

Gun positions and individual fox holes should be provided with over head cover and continuously improved.

In HOFEN, the guns of Company A were either emplaced in buildings or were well dug in with logs overhead. The gun crews spent every spare moment in improvement of these defensive installations.

The entire battalion fought for the most part as infantry from well dug-in and camouflaged positions, yet suffered very few casualties as a result. This can be attributed largely to the experience previously gained in the use of protective means against high angle weapons.

During this period the Germans resorted to the use of artillery, mortar and rocket fire more than ever before.

#### 8. MORTAR AND ARTILLERY FIRE

In the defense of HOFEN, as well as elsewhere in the sector, our artillery and mortar fires were successfully used to seal off penetrated areas, to break up impending attacks, to deny entrance to lightly held areas, and in the destruction of the enemys supporting weapons.

Particularly effective were the massed fires of several battalions. Here the artillery came into its own, clearly proving that the success of a defensive position is dependent upon the adequacy of artillery and mortar fires.

#### LESSONS

1. Combat intelligence must be disseminated to all concerned and is the responsibility of commanders at all echelons.
2. Extensive reconnaissance must be initiated early and be continuous throughout any tactical operation.
3. Infantry-armor coordination is essential to the coordinated defense of a sector thinly held by infantry.
4. Armored, self-propelled, high velocity guns should be organic to the infantry.
5. Reserves, even though small, must be provided even if

at the expense of front line units.

6. In a defensive situation armored units must always employ wire communications when operating as part of an infantry team.

7. Gun positions and individual fox holes should be constantly improved and should include overhead cover.

8. The success of any defensive operation is in direct proportion to the adequacy of protective fires furnished by the mortar and artillery.