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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "C", 691ST TANK DESTROYER
BATTALION AT RECHICOURT, FRANCE, 7 OCTOBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Tank Destroyer Company Commander)

Type of operation described: MOVEMENT OF A TANK DESTROYER
COMPANY INTO A DEFENSIVE POSITION.

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company "C", 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion, in its movement into a defensive position at RECHICOURT, FRANCE, during the NANCY BRIDGEHEAD operation.

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

Early in June of 1944 the ALLIED FORCES successfully invaded the continent of EUROPE. The landings were made in the NORMANDY SECTION of FRANCE. By early July 1944 the U.S. Third Army headquarters had been moved from ENGLAND into the enlarged bridgehead in the CHERBOURG PENINSULA. (1)

During the months of August and by the first part of September 1944 the U.S. Third Army had swept across southern FRANCE and reached the MOSELLE RIVER in the vicinity of METZ and NANCY. (2) (3)

By the middle of September 1944 the U.S. Third Army's XII Corps captured NANCY. With its 4th Armored Division, the XII Corps continued approximately twenty miles to the west and occupied the high ground in the vicinity of RECHICOURT. (4) (See Map A)

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- (1) A-1, p. 6-7
(2) A-1, p. 16
(3) A-1, p. 64
(4) A-3, p. 3

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The 11th Panzer Division was opposing the 4th Armored Division. This was a well trained, alert, and aggressive armored unit. Its combat efficiency was excellent.

The supply picture for the 4th Armored Division was good except for the shortage of gasoline. The division's tanks hardly had enough fuel to turn their motors over. Due to this situation the tanks of the tank battalions of the division were held well back in the rear areas.

The weather had been clear and dry for days.

The terrain between NANCY and RECHICOURT is a series of gentle rolling hills, with small knobs completely dominating the landscape.

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 4TH ARMORED DIVISION

The 4th Armored Division was occupying forward positions on a series of small hills and ridges in the vicinity of RECHICOURT.

The plans for the immediate future of the 4th Armored Division were to improve their present positions and hold the bridgehead.

THE BATTALION SITUATION

The 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion, less Company "C", had been attached to the 4th Armored Division throughout the bridgehead operation. The battalion had been further attached, within the division, to Combat Command "B" (CCB) one of the three Combat Commands which made up the 4th Armored Division. CCB sector extended from northwest of JUVECOURT, then

around JUVECOURT and to the southeast of RECHICOURT, and then southwest from RECHICOURT. The 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion had Company "A" on one flank and Company "B" on the other flank. (See Map B)

DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF COMPANY "C"

Company "C" had been attached, on 20 September 1944, to the headquarters of the XII Corps, which moved into NANCY on that date. Company "C" had twelve (12) towed three inch (3") guns occupying firing positions just within the edge of the city on all road entrances into NANCY from the east.

(5) (See Map B)

The company was at full strength in manpower and equipment. The morale and combat effectiveness of the company was superior. On the evening of 6 October 1944 the company commander of Company "C" was called to XII Corps headquarters and notified that his company was released from the present attachment and would return to its battalion control, effective the next morning, 7 October 1944.

Upon the return of "C" Company's Commander to his command post he contacted the battalion commander of the 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion, by telephone, and passed on the information of the company's release from XII Corps. The battalion commander stated that Company "C" would be placed in the line on 7 October 1944. He also requested that the company commander join him early the next morning. (6)

A conference was held in Company "C" Command Post with all the platoon leaders and the company plan of movement for

(5) A-2, p. 210

(6) A-4

the next day's action was announced.

The plan was as follows: The company would assemble at the company command post at 0700 hours the following morning, less the 1st Platoon. The 1st Platoon was to pull out of its firing positions and assemble off the main supply route, which it had been guarding, leading out of NANCY toward ARRACOURT. The 1st Platoon would fall into the column at its tail as the company passed. The 2d Platoon, 3d Platoon, and the Headquarters Platoon would move from the command post at 0730 hours in the morning. The order of march would be, 2d Platoon, Headquarters Platoon, 3d Platoon, and the 1st Platoon joining the rear. The 2d Platoon would be responsible for the frontal security, the 3d Platoon for the flanks, and the 1st Platoon for the rear. The executive officer would be in charge of the movement to the forward assembly area. The company commander would leave the command post for ARRACOURT with the reconnaissance sergeant and a guide at 0630 hours. The guide would be left on the road outside of ARRACOURT at a point selected by the company commander for the executive officer to move the company off the road into the assembly area. The platoons were also informed to serve breakfast before assembling at the company command post, and to issue canned rations to the men for the next two meals. The company commander then asked if there were any questions. The executive officer asked if anyone needed additional gasoline or ammunition -- no one did. There were no more comments, therefore the meeting adjourned.

The platoon leaders returned to their own platoon command posts and passed on the necessary orders plus additional

instructions of their own. The company executive officer assembled the company command post group and the rest of the Headquarters Platoon and passed the orders and instructions on to them. As the night moved along everyone was familiar with the situation. Those that could went to sleep.
(7)

NARRATION

The morning of the 7th of October 1944 came around in a hurry. The company command post was up and busy at 0530 hours and ready to move at 0600 hours, which was time for breakfast. The company commander, reconnaissance sergeant, and the guide were ready to move out at 0630 hours. The weather was bright and clear as the vehicle moved through the streets of NANCY and the sun began to shine.

Riding through NANCY the company commander came upon the 1st Platoon positions and stopped. The platoon leader was outside checking the loading of his vehicles. The platoon leader came over and stated that everything was under control and that they would be ready in plenty of time. Both wished each other 'Good Luck', and with that, the company commander moved out of NANCY across the bridge and down the MSR toward ARRACOURT. The road was blacktop and in good condition. The terrain was generally rolling. The distance between NANCY and ARRACOURT is only about twenty miles. The trip was uneventful and soon the group reached the vicinity of ARRACOURT. The company commander rode on, looking for an assembly area just off the MSR which was well

concealed, well covered, and that offered a good standing for the vehicles. Many areas were spotted but none met all requirements. Finally an assembly area was selected just on the outskirts of ARRACOURT. Although the area was not very well covered, the ground was strong enough to hold the half-tracks and the towed three inch guns. The guide was then dropped from the vehicle at the junction of the MSR and the entrance to the assembly area. The company commander again went over his instructions with the guide, which were to turn the company off the road into the assembly area. With this done, the company commander moved on into ARRACOURT and the command post of the 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion. (See Map C)

Upon the arrival at the battalion command post, the company commander was greeted by the battalion S-3, Major Charles Love, who welcomed him to the fighting army. The company commander asked what the situation was and what Company "C" was going to do now. (8) At that moment the battalion commander entered the command post.

After greetings were exchanged, the battalion commander told the S-3 that he and the Company "C" Commander would go up to the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion, a part of CCB, command post. Enroute there he would orient the company commander on the situation.

The two officers left the battalion command post. The battalion commander suggested that the company commander ride in his vehicle with him and let the reconnaissance sergeant follow behind in the other vehicle.

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As the vehicles moved out of ARRACOURT the battalion commander announced that "C" Company was really needed in the RECHICOURT sector of the 4th Armored Division's front. That sector, he went on, had been the subject of numerous counter-attacks.

After a very short ride the vehicles entered RECHICOURT. RECHICOURT was a small average FRENCH village that had been in the middle of battle several times and lost. The vehicles moved on through the village on its one street. As the vehicles left the village they turned off the road to the right and halted.

The terrain was shaped like a large U, with a hill behind and ridges on each side rising about thirty feet and generally sloping. There was a small patch of trees to the right, in the bottom of the U. The vehicles moved on up to the edge of the woods and halted. Here the battalion commander announced that Company "C" would be attached to the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion. The infantry battalion command post was located in the group of trees. (See Map C)

The 10th Armored Infantry Battalion was commanded by Lt. Colonel Arthur West, Jr. Lt. Colonel West moved out of the trees toward the two officers. He greeted the 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion commander and was introduced to the Commander of Company "C". Lt. Colonel West asked the location of Company "C". The company commander told him that the company was moving up from NANCY and should be near ARRACOURT or already in its assembly area, right outside of ARRACOURT.

(9)

(9) A-4

Lt. Colonel West suggested that the three officers get in his light tank and make a reconnaissance of his battalion's area to orient the new company commander. Lt. Colonel West stated that the light tank was just about the only way to move around in the forward part of the U during daylight hours. The enemy had observation to the front and to the right part of the U, as they had an observation post some of the time somewhere on HILL 265. (See Map C)

The 10th Armored Infantry Battalion was spread very thinly along the ridge line of the U for approximately five thousand yards. Lt. Colonel West stated that Company "A" of the 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion was on the right and Company "B", of the same battalion, was on the left. Both companies were well forward right in line with the infantry. The tank moved out and then halted. Lt. Colonel West stated he would like "C" Company to go into position between the other two companies, and right up in the U as far forward as the infantry was dug-in. He also stated that because the enemy would normally fire on anything that moved in the forward area, Company "C" should make the move under cover of darkness. At that moment one could hear the passing enemy shells overhead and to the rear.

As the tank turned around and started moving toward the left flank the Commander of Company "C" saw, much to his surprise, Company "C" moving into the U in all its big bulky-self. Twelve (12) half-tracks pulling twelve (12) three inch guns plus twenty one (21) one-quarter ton vehicles intermixed throughout the column.

Lt. Colonel West stated that as long as they had arrived

they might as well go on and get into position. He would tell everyone to keep their heads down. The 691st Tank Destroyer Battalion Commander announced that he had better go and check on some of the other companies. "C" Company Commander dismounted and the light tank moved off.

The company commander ran for the head of his company's column, which was making a circle inside the U. As the company commander reached the lead vehicle he recognized the executive officer and noticed the three platoon leaders running up from the rear of the column. (10) After a few blank expressions and glares were extended, the company commander told the executive officer to disperse the company in the rear area and for the platoon leaders to come with him.

The company commander quickly stated to the platoon leaders that he had heard that there were enemy to the front and flanks around this U. Company "A" was some where on the right and Company "B" was on the left. "C" Company would occupy the center of the U and extend along its sides. All guns would be placed as far forward as possible to the crest of the ridge to get the maximum range for their guns. The 1st Platoon would occupy the center of the U, with the 2d Platoon to occupy the left and the 3d Platoon the right sides of the U. After the platoons were in, readjustment could be made if necessary within the company and the adjacent companies. The company commander ordered the platoon leaders to orient their platoons as quickly as possible. The main consideration was to get the platoons in before the enemy started shelling. The company command post would be

(10) A-4

located in the center of the U. The platoon leaders were to contact the infantry company commanders before they moved into their positions. The platoon leaders were told to notify the company command post when they were in position. With that the company commander's order was over. The platoon leaders ran back toward their platoons and each platoon leader picked up his own squad leaders and moved toward the assigned areas. (See Map C)

The company executive officer joined the company commander and was immediately asked what had happened to the company and why did he allow it to pass the assembly area and reach it's present location. The executive officer quickly explained that the company moved out from NANCY on time and that the movement from NANCY was without incident until the column neared ARRACOURT when he began looking for the guide to the assembly area, about three miles to the west of ARRACOURT, but he never did see the guide. The executive officer stated that he then assumed that the assembly area was beyond ARRACOURT and led the column on through the village, still looking for the guide. When the column reached RECHICOURT, the executive officer stated, he was looking for a place to pull the company off the road while he started a further search for the guide or the company commander, or someone else that could give him the current situation. (11)

Eventually the guide was returned to the company area and stated that he must have been relieving himself and missed the column when it passed by.

The company commander then briefed the executive officer.

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The executive officer was told where to place the company command post and told to have a wire line run to the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion Command Post just as soon as the major portion of the vehicles had moved forward.

With this taken care of the company commander started out to supervise the movement of the platoons into their position.

Enemy artillery and mortar shells began to fall within the U in scattered rounds.

Each platoon leader was checking with the infantry units in their assigned sector and picking out positions with their squad leaders. The vehicles were well dispersed in the rear area and none had been hit.

Soon the 1st Platoon Leader returned with his squad leaders and within a few minutes started moving his platoon forward into the center of the U. The 3d Platoon Leader was next back and his platoon began moving up on the right. Finally the 2d Platoon Leader returned and his platoon moved off for their sector. By this time the intensity of the enemy fire had increased in the rear area and it was good to get them moving.

The 3d Platoon was the first to have their guns on the line and began to dig them in position. After releasing the guns the vehicles were dispersed to their rear area. (12)

The 1st Platoon halted in the bottom of the U, well forward. They released their guns and turned the half-tracks around in order to push the guns into the selected positions.

Enemy artillery and mortar shells were falling all over

the bottom of the U in increasing volume.

In the meantime the 2d Platoon had moved into position, dispersed their vehicles, and had begun to dig-in.

One gun of the 1st Platoon was just in position when a shell fell to its right. Although the half-track received a few cuts and some of the gun crew's clothing was torn, none of the men were hit. Within a few minutes all four of the 1st Platoon's guns were in position and their crews were digging as fast as possible.

The company commander moved up into the 1st Platoon's area. A lieutenant, from one of the companies of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion, was talking to the 1st Platoon's Leader. The lieutenant stated that he had spotted a group of Germans on HILL 265 and thought that they might be the ones directing the artillery and mortar fire. He asked if one of the three inch guns could hit them and the tank destroyer platoon leader said that they would try. The infantry platoon leader pointed out the target to the number one gun squad leader who directed two rounds of H.E. be fired; both rounds hit the target and within a few minutes the enemy fire ceased. (See Map C)

Each platoon continued to dig in its guns and individual foxholes at the gun positions. The company command post was established and wire communication with the infantry battalion was made. Additional wire was laid to each gun platoon. (13)

Within one hour after the company arrived in the battle position all guns were in firing position, partially dug-in,

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individual holes were dug, and wire communication with higher headquarters was established. Although the improvement of the positions continued for days, the company was in position. The company commander called the battalion commander of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion and reported that Company "C" was in position and one enemy observation post had been destroyed.

To sum up the results of this operation: Company "C" did arrive at the battle position, although not at the planned time. If the movement is viewed from the planning side of the picture it was very poorly executed. On the other hand, if the movement is viewed from the results it brought, it was successful.

Company "C" remained in this position for a period of over thirty days and assisted in destroying numerous enemy foot and armored attacks. (14)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. SUPPLY

There was no supply problem in this operation. The company maintained its basic load of ammunition at all times and was ready for any type of operation. Sufficient rations were carried by each individual to supply him during the time required for the movement. The vehicles were serviced, checked and ready to move.

2. INFORMATION

The company commander never received complete informa-

tion of the situation from anyone. He was therefore never able to orient his company properly.

3. FAILURE OF THE GUIDE

The failure of the guide to be at the properly appointed place of duty at the appointed time, resulted in the company executive officer bringing the company, unprepared, into the battle position.

4. THE PLAN OF MOVEMENT

The plan of movement should have been complete. It should have included a check point or some additional means to prevent the company from passing the assembly area.

5. COMMUNICATIONS

In the initial order of the company commander no instructions were made toward the use of a superior radio communication net provided for the company. If this radio net had been used the chances are that Company "C" would not have arrived in the battle position unannounced.

6. CONDUCT OF THE MOVEMENT

The successful movement was made possible only by the aggressiveness and the courage of the men and their platoon leaders. While under continual enemy artillery and mortar fire they were able to move into their unprepared positions and destroy the enemy.

7. THE POSITION

In making a study of this operation, it is my opinion

that, the position assigned to Company "C" was too small an area for a twelve gun company. Since two of the three platoon positions on the front were covering the same area, the platoon on the right and the platoon in the center. One platoon could have covered the fields of fire. The other platoon could have been placed on the high ground in rear of the U overlooking all of the positions. This would have added depth to the entire anti-tank defense of the sector.

LESSONS

1. In order to carry out any type of operation successfully, each unit must insure that its supply levels are properly maintained.
2. All personnel must be oriented as to the situation both friendly and enemy, whenever possible.
3. Personnel selected for responsible duties must be reliable.
4. In planning a motor movement to an unknown assembly area, check points should be used to prevent the loss of a unit.
5. Unless security prevents its use, radio control of an armored type unit should be used, in addition to the other means of communication available.
6. A well trained unit will carry out it's assignment under adverse conditions.
7. The employment of a specialized type of unit should be made upon the recommendations of someone who is trained in the capabilities and limitations of that unit.