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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY A (LESS ONE PLATOON)
88TH MOUNTAIN INFANTRY REGIMENT (10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION)
IN ATTACK ON MANCINELLO-CAMPIANO RIDGE, ITALY 18-22 FEBRUARY 1945.
(NORTH APENNINES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY IN THE
ASSAULT OF A MOUNTAINOUS RIDGE UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS.

Captain William E. Neidner

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. 1

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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY A (LESS ONE PLATOON)
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This Monograph covers the operation of Company A (less one platoon) of the 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Infantry Division in the attack of the MARCINELLO-CAMPIANO RIDGE 18-22 February 1945 during the winter offensive in Northern Italy.

As a full year of fighting "Italian Style" was brought to a close at the end of 1944, the Allied Armies in ITALY were forced to stop and get their second wind. The soldiers were plentiful who could give first hand information of such historic battles as the SALERNO Beachhead, the ANZIC Beachhead, the VOLTURNO RIVER crossing, CASSINO and many other bitter struggles. Mountains, snow, ice and mud were not new recruits in the ranks of these combat veterans. They had fought long and hard to come across the rugged Italian terrain and their last main surge had shattered the Gothic Line but left little power to exploit their success. Supply lines were difficult and the enemy position on the high mountains had brought their advance to a stop. It was now apparent that their advance into the rich PO VALLEY would have to wait till a later date. (1)

The Line was held by two armies under the 15th Army Group. The 5th Army under Lt. General Truscott on the left and on the right the British 8th Army with Lt. General Sir Richard L. McGrerry at its head. (2)

The front of the 5th Army covered approximately 100 miles of mostly rugged, snow-capped mountains to dig into for the winter siege. The left flank of the 5th Army position was on the coast of the LIGURIAN SEA south of

(1) A-1 P.5

The main town of MASSA. The line ran generally east through the mountains
to the 4th Army north of highway 87 at a point 15 miles north
of the town of MASSA. (3)

The situation generally consisted of patrol action to exp-
lore the front, exchange of artillery fire and occasional feints by the Allies
at different points along the line. Even though the Allied offensive in this
sector had bogged down almost to a standstill, it forced the Germans to keep
about 25 of their divisions occupied in ITALY thus denying their employment
in EUROPE. (4)

GENERAL SITUATION

Three Corps and one Division under the control of 5th Army were en-
trenched on the front lines. The British XIII Corps on the right flank, II
Corps in the right center. The left center was held by IV Corps and the 92nd
Division held the left flank. (See Map No.1) (5)

Task Force 45, the 1st Brazilian Infantry Division and the 6th Armoured
Division under command of Lt. General Crittenden made up the bulk of the
troops assigned to IV Corps. Task Force 45, occupying the left center po-
sition of the corps front, was comprised of former anti-aircraft units who
were now acting as infantry personnel. (6)

Such was the situation when the 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment, the
first element of the 10th Mountain Division, arrived in NAPLES on 23 December
1944. On 5 January 1945 the Regiment was assigned to IV Corps and on the
next day was further assigned down to Task Force 45. No time was lost by
this headquarters in placing the 86th on the front line and on the night of
9-10 January 1945 the 1st Battalion of the Regiment was trudging its way up
icy roads to relieve elements of the Task Force. (7)

The other two Battalions of the 86th followed in quick succession

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- (3) A-1 P.5
 - (4) A-2 P.336
 - (5) A-1 P.6
 - (6) A-1 P.8
 - (7) A-3 P.3

replacing other anti-aircraft units belonging to task force 45. The remainder of the 10th Mountain Infantry Division closed in rapidly and the Division Commander, Maj. General G. P. Hays, took over the eastern part of Task Force 45's area. (8)

The over all plan of Fifth Army at this time was to carry on an active defense mission. Several limited objective attacks were planned. These limited attacks accomplished two things; they kept the enemy off balance and improved our position for the opening of the Spring Offensive. (9)

SPECIAL SITUATION

In the area controlled by the 10th Mountain Division was a large land mass called the MOUNT BELVEDERE-BELLA TORRICIA RIDGE. The Krauts held this key terrain feature and had successfully repulsed three previous attempts of the Allies to capture MOUNT BELVEDERE. The Observation afforded the enemy in holding this ridge allowed him limited vision into our rear and to observe all movements along Highway 64 (the PISTOIA-BOLONGA Road) in the vicinity of PORRETTA, and allowed him to place accurate long range fire on any troops moving in that area. (10)

The capture of that critical terrain feature was the mission assigned the 10th Mountain Division. However, before this operation could begin, an escarpment known as the MANCINELLO-CAMPIANO RIDGE due west of MOUNT BELVEDERE and slightly higher had to be occupied. This was to deny the Germans its use in observing artillery and mortar fire on the rear of our assaulting elements, and also to enable us to see what lay beyond the summit of MOUNT BELVEDERE. Being one of several missions assigned to the 88th Mountain Infantry the actual job one day prior to the main Division attack, was given to the 1st Battalion. This monograph is concerned with the part that Company A took in helping the Battalion accomplish its mission. (11)

(8) A-3 P.3

(9) A-1 P.74

(10) A-1 P.75

GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

In as much as this historical event deals with an operation in mountainous terrain a more detailed study of the locality is as follows. About six miles west of the town of PORRETTA from our position in the area immediately surrounding the little town of VIDIGLIATICO where the unit was first committed to the line, one has the impression of being in the bottom of a bowl. On the northeast and sloping across our front to the north was the squatting shape of MOUNT BELVEDERE, 3,736 feet.

Directly to the north on a spur of MOUNT BELVEDERE that comes down is the small fortified town of ROCCO CORNETA. On the west flank starting from ROCCO CORNETA is an imposing ridge called the MANCINELLO-CAMPIANO RIDGE, sometimes referred to as "RIVA RIDGE". It runs generally in a southwest direction and rises abruptly from the town of ROCCO CORNETA (1989 feet) to the first summit, PIZZO DI CAMPIANO (3175 feet). Then in order are the summits of MOUNT CARREL BUSO (3800 feet), MOUNT SERRASICCIA (4600 feet), MOUNT RIVA (4672 feet), MOUNT MANCINELLO (4800 feet), MOUNT CINGIO DEL BURE (4628 feet), MOUNT LE PIAGGE (4900 feet) and up to the top of MOUNT SPIGOLINO (6030 feet). The entire length of the ridge is approximately seven miles. There are no sharp breaks or passes in it. On the east side it is very steep, broken with cliffs, steep ravines and shoulders. The gradient in most places is about 30° though in many it is as steep as 40°. On the side we could observe, the ridge was a rugged, precipitous wall of rock, snow and ice. The DARDAGNA RIVER which flowed along the base of the ridge tumbled from about 3500 feet at the southeast end of the ridge to 1500 feet at the north end. (12) (13)

RECONNAISSANCE

Before any definite word of the operation was announced, the 1st Battalion was placed on the left flank of the Regiment, right at the base of the

(12) Personal Knowledge

(13) 2-1 P 70

ridge for the purpose of becoming familiar with the terrain. (14)

Up to now there had been no thought given to actually seeking routes of ascent up the steep sides of the escarpment. With about four to five feet of snow on the ground, the ridge presented a very formidable barrier. Any trace of a trail was impossible to see because of the snow and ice, and any route selected would have to be done with great care if a large body of troops were to follow over it. In almost all cases the patrols were made at night. This had to be done because the enemy could observe every move during daylight hours from his position on the ridge. Only when there was a fog or low cloudy weather could the men go out on short patrols in daylight. Here the mountain experience and training was put to excellent use and the officers and men were put to the test of night climbing in the face of the enemy. (15)

At the end of a week the Battalion was relieved by elements of the 86th and 87th Regiments and during the night of 28-29 January 1945 moved to an area outside of LUCCA. The entire unit moved with the exception of the Battalion 3-2, Lt. Wilson Ware, and an officer and two men from each company. They were designated to remain in the vicinity of LA CA to continue patrolling, to watch the snow conditions on the side of the ridge, and to locate enough housing space in the vicinity to billet the Battalion. A daily report by phone from the 3-2 kept the Battalion Commander informed and assisted in the detail planning necessary for a specialized operation such as this. (16)

By 12 February 1945, the snow was no longer an obstacle on any of the trails, as it had either melted or had settled enough that it would hold the weight of a man without requiring skis or snowshoes. (17)

PLANNING

As a result of this continuous reconnaissance, the following plan was evolved; to attack the ridge with five forces using five different trails.

(14) Personal Knowledge

(15) Personal Knowledge

(16) Personal Knowledge

(17) Personal Knowledge

The trails were numbered from right to left with #1 going to FIZZO DI CASPIANO, #2 to MOUNT CAFFEL BUSSO, #3 to MOUNT SERRASICCIA, #4 to MOUNT MANCINELLO, and #5 to MOUNT LE PIAGGE. Company "F" would support the left flank of the 1st Battalion. (See map NO. 2) (18)

These forces worked together for about two weeks at LUCCA. The roughest terrain in the area was utilized and heavy loads were carried to accustom the men to the task ahead. Each force of Company size selected an assault platoon whose mission in addition to being the first element of the Company was to select the exact route and to place any fixed ropes necessary to facilitate the movement of the heavier laden men that followed. (19)

Even though the entire Division had received sufficient training in the specialized technique of mountain climbing, last minute replacements of untrained personnel made it necessary to conduct instruction along this line. An abandoned quarry was found and special instruction in the use of ropes, load lifting devices and walking on thin rocky ledges was given. In addition to making the troops better qualified, it helped build morale and Esprit de Corps in the new men and gave them the feeling they were a real part in a specialized unit. (20)

At Battalion Headquarters a room was set aside in which all the latest aerial photos, maps, S-2 reports and a sand table were placed. Each Company Commander along with the officers of the company were kept abreast of all new developments. This room was used right on down to the platoon leaders and their platoons so that every man in the Battalion knew what each element was to do. (21)

On 14 and 15 February 1945 the Battalion Commander and the Company Commanders were flown over their objectives in the small artillery liaison plane. This provided first hand information of the objective. The pilots

(18) A-8

(19) A-9

(20) Personal Knowledge

of the small planes were reluctant to stay too close to the ground so the views were from the maximum altitude, however, the information gained was of value. (22)

A very complete and detailed written operation order was drawn up and distributed by battalion. However, all Company Commanders and others concerned knew its contents and the desires of the Battalion Commander at least four days in advance of its issuance.

SUPPORTING FIRE

Artillery - Three Battalions of field artillery in direct support of the 86th Mountain Infantry. No registration fires were desired so as not to jeopardize the element of surprise that was needed to make the attack a success. However, a very complete fire plan had been worked out with the artillery and a forward observer and party with wire and radio accompanied each Force Commander. (23)

INFORMATION OF THE ENEMY

The following intelligence was available. The 7th Company 1044 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 232nd Division, with possible elements from the 14th AT Company held a triangle bounded by MOUNT PIZZO DI CALPIANO - MOUNT SPIGOLINO and FANANO with approximately 170 men. Two Mountain Battalions had been reported in SESTOLA on 14 February 1945 by Italian Partisans. SESTOLA is located about four miles northwest of FANANO. The strength on the ridge at any one time was estimated to be 40 - 50 men. (24) (25)

The enemy manned positions in the day time that were well dug in and had good fields of fire, mostly plunging type, on the likely avenues of approach. As had been learned by our patrols these positions were not manned at night but security was kept in the form of patrols. One patrol having a dog with them was encountered in the vicinity of MOUNT CAFFEL BUSO.

[22] Personal Experience

[23] A-8

[24] A-1 P-73

[25] A-9

The German potential for defense was good. They held the commanding ground on the ridges with dug in positions and even though the troops were not made up of young men those that were encountered were well disciplined and aggressive. Their observation during the daylight was excellent.

As a result of the flight over the ridge, two possible enemy bunkers were located. One between the south end of the lake and MOUNT MANCINELLO and the other north of the lake back of MOUNT SERRASICCIA. (26)

RESUPPLY

As the primary means of resupply and evacuation was by individual hand carry, an average of 80 men had been assigned to the Battalion. These men were organized into a Pack Platoon or Porter Platoon and their efforts in making trips up and down the ridge with supplies, casualties and POWs contributed greatly to the success of the operation. (27)

COMPANY PLAN

Company "A", commanded by Captain William E. Neidner, had an odd role to play. One of its platoons was to be detached and attack MOUNT PIZZO DI CAMPIANO at the right flank of the Battalion. Lt. Loose, Platoon Leader of the Second Platoon, and his platoon were given this job. The remainder of the company was to attack MOUNT MANCINELLO on what was almost the left flank of the Battalion objective four miles away. (28)

The plan of the Company was to move under Battalion control by motor and 14 miles on foot to the town of LA CA where the men were to pick up extra ammunition and rations as they marched by the supply point, and then under Company control proceed about a half mile down to the little town of POCCHIOFORAFA on the banks of the DARDEGNA RIVER at the foot of the ridge. As usual all movement was conducted under blackout conditions but with the aid of searchlights shining into the sky. Although these lights were placed

(26) Personal Knowledge

(27) Personal Knowledge

(28) 440

between 5 and 7 miles back of the front lines, they cast an eerie glow over the still snow covered terrain and afforded some light for movement. (29)

On arrival in the little town of FOGGIOLFORATA, the platoons were dispersed to the numerous buildings previously reconnoitered and sound power lines strung to the Company C.P. Everyone was aware of the fact that once it became light enough to see they were not to move from the houses until the next evening. The day had been long and tiring and it was after 0300 when the last elements of the Company closed in. The platoon leaders came to the C.P. after they had seen their men located in the empty buildings, and reported that all were fairly tired and needed sleep. A small guard was posted and the Company settled down to wait. (30)

Wire lines from the Battalion C.P. at FARNIE had been laid the night before, 16-17 February 1945, but they did not function. This was a bad situation because the communication personnel could not check the lines until after dark the next night. This meant that there would be no contact with the Battalion until sometime after the attack had started. Radio silence had been ordered until contact with the enemy had been made. (31)

FORMATION

The Company was composed of the following elements: Company A (less one platoon), two Litter Squads, one Pioneer Squad, one Forward Observer and party. (32)

It would initially start out in a column of platoons with 3rd Platoon as the Assault Platoon leading. The Company headquarters with the F.O. and wire teams followed by the Weapons Platoon, first Platoon and the Litter Squads. The A&P Squad would leave as soon as it was dark to begin work on the bridge that was necessary to cross the river. (33)

(29) Personal Knowledge

(30) Personal Knowledge

(31) Personal Knowledge

(32) A-P

(33) Personal Knowledge

EQUIPMENT

Rifle men carried 96 rounds of ammunition. Men armed with carbines carried at least two extra boxes of 50 bullets each. The Weapons Platoon were the most heavily burdened. Although they were required to carry only 2000 rounds per L.M.G., the Platoon Leader, Lt. Wadleigh, and his Platoon Sargent, Richard Gallyon, made the loads a bit heavier with the understanding that the extra ammunition would be dropped along the route of march if it became too much. This would mean there would be a resupply closer to the top of the ridge if needed in a hurry. (34)

Twenty-four rounds of mortar ammunition were carried by each man normally assigned that duty. In addition to this each officer in the Company would carry three rounds and each sargent in the Weapons Platoon would do the same. This was done because it was felt that the observation from the top of the ridge would present many good targets for the mortar. (35)

The individuals wore the regular combat boots in most cases, there being a few pairs of the mountain boots scattered throughout the ranks. Wool uniforms over the "Long Handles" and an outer garment of the M-1943 field jacket. In addition to this and the regular cartridge belt each man took one blanket and some took toilet articles. Sleeping bags had been requested but not received. Everything was kept as light as possible in order that the individuals would not become too fatigued during the climb. One "K" ration per individual was carried. (36)

COMMUNICATION

The cooks of Company "A", other than the mess sargent, had received training in the art of wire laying and other duties of a lineman ever since the Battalion was alerted to attack the ridge. These soldiers under control of the communication sargent would be with the Company Commander and would

(36) Personal Knowledge

(36) Personal Knowledge

lay wire as they went up the ridge.

The radios of the Company would remain silent until enemy contact was established.

For identification purposes a strip of white adhesive tape was placed on the back of everyone's helmet in addition to the strip on the left front of the helmet as required by Battalion. (37)

RESUPPLY

The Executive Officer, Lt. Craig, was to follow the Company at about an hours time using all the men that were over-strength and what headquarters personnel that could be spared to pack extra ammunition and rations. He was to establish a dump at the top of the trail and maintain some ammunition and rations and about 6 men to act as a litter team if need be. Also from this point on the left flank he would be able to establish contact with "F" Company. The rolls that the men left behind would be brought up if necessary. (38)

WEATHER

Snow still remained on the ground in the valley. However it was well settled and formed a hard packed surface. On the side of the ridge the snow had almost entirely disappeared, leaving only a few scattered patches, but the top of the ridge was still covered with snow. (39)

Temperatures on 18 February 1945 were 35°-38° with no precipitation. This had been the normal situation for the past three days. It was anticipated that the temperature on top would be slightly cooler. (40)

DAYLIGHT 18 FEBRUARY 1945

Almost everyone slept till the middle of the morning. In fact it was hoped the men would rest as much as possible all day in preparation for the nights work. It was apparent though, that after about 1000 hours no one did

(37) Personal Knowledge

(38) Personal Knowledge

(40) A-2

much sleeping as they were up and talking over the plans, cleaning their weapons, and some were writing letters.

With our wire net within the Company, some regular administrative details were handled but the majority of the traffic seemed to be between the men themselves. It was a good way to ease the tension.

The officers were together in a building with the Company headquarters and were going over the last minute plans again. Lt. Anderson, who had been the officer left behind to carry on the reconnaissance, was convinced that the trail the unit was presently assigned, #4 would be a very hard one to cover. However, he said that a mile or so up the valley on the trail selected for "F" Company the going would be much easier. Inasmuch as "F" Company was not scheduled to start their ascent before 2200 hours, it was decided to ask permission to change.

There being no means of communication to Battalion, the Company Commander and an Italian speaking messenger disguised as Italians went back to Regiment. After creating a mild disturbance with the operations sergeant and the S-3 over the lack of adequate security, their identity was finally disclosed. They asked about the change of trails and received the Battalion Commander's O.K. by phone. (41) (42)

NARRATION

LINE OF DEPARTURE

The A&F Squad headed by Sergeant DiMascione left as soon as it was dark. At 1930 the trek up the valley began with the line of departure or area of departure being the last house at the edge of town. Darkness had existed since about 1800 and the men had had ample time for the final preparation. Still no wire contact with Battalion. The trail up the valley on the east side of the river was good and the entire unit moved rapidly. The wire team

(41) Personal knowledge

of Company "A" and the one accompanying the forward observer had no trouble keeping up with the Company Headquarters group. It had been decided to lay parallel lines for added insurance. The hike of about one and a half miles up the valley released the tension that most of the men started with. (43)

ASCENT

Upon reaching the crossing point of the river, Sargent Diamacone, was waiting with a make shift crossing. He planned to improve it after the Company had crossed so that the supply personnel would not have any difficulty. Contact was made by phone with the first sargent back at the U.P. and the progress reported.

Now the real climb began. Altitude gained to this point was only 495 feet and there was still 1490 feet to go to the top of the ridge. Difficulties began almost immediately. As there was no well defined trail but just a general route, the footing was insecure. Darkness and brush presented the main obstacles and retarded the movement.

The mission of reporting in every hour to Battalion through the Company had to be given up. The wire teams fell further and further behind the Company Headquarters group in their efforts to place the wire off to the side of the route of march.

The climb started out by having a five minute break every half hour, but as the slow hard process of climbing continued the breaks became more frequent. At the final stages of the climb the rule was ten minutes of movement and five minutes rest.

Even though movement was slow and white pieces of tape had been placed on the helmets, contact was difficult. It might have worked better if the tape had been stuck on the seat of each soldiers trousers, because the steep angle of the slope placed the man in front too high for the tape on the helmet

to be of any use. (44)

The Assault Platoon, because of its lighter loads, moved faster and it had been agreed that they would move as rapidly as possible to the objective. Any contact would be by connecting files from the next unit back. This, however, proved very inadequate and the Assault Platoon proceeded on its own.

When the main body of the Company finally did reach the crest of the ridge on MOUNT CINGIO DEL BURE at 0045, two men from the Assault Platoon were there with information that the Platoon occupied the objective and no enemy had been seen. (45)

Still no means of contact with the rear C.F. and the wire team was somewhere down the slope in the rear. When most of the column was closed up on the ridge and a guide was left to gather the stragglers and wire personnel to bring them on, the Company moved toward MOUNT MANCINELLO.

Lt. Yeomans, Commanding the Assault Platoon, had arrived on the ridge and moved off along the ridge to the objective. As no enemy were seen, his progress was fast and on arrival he spread his men around the highest point to await the Company. (46)

With fair visibility, firm hard snow and going on only a slight up hill grade, the Company arrived on the objective by 0130. Platoon sectors were organized in more or less a semi-circle with the flank on the edge of the cliff. At about 0200 a fog enveloped the entire position and the men were forced to stay very close to their positions. The wire teams and the litter squads arrived with the guides, and by 0250 conversation by phone with the first sergeant at ROGGIOLFORAPA over about five miles of wire was possible.

Lt. Craig with his Pack Platoon had found the going easier because of a better defined trail and had made very good time. He arrived on the ridge just ahead of Company "F". Captain Rideout, Commanding "Fox" Company made a

(44) Personal Knowledge
(45) Personal Knowledge

personal visit to the C.P. of "A" Company at about 0345 to ask the latest developments and to state that he had followed the trail "A" Company had used and experienced no difficulty. His Company had been given the mission of protecting the left flank of the 1st Battalion from positions on MOUNT LE PLAGUE. The fog still made movement very slow. (47)

ON TOP

It was about 0415 that a deep voice came over the wound power phone. Col. Tomlinson, the Regimental Commander, was on the wire. Capt. Weidner told him that everyone was in position, contact with "E" Company had been made and that no enemy had been contacted. News about the other forces at this time was scant. (48)

The squad of the Assault Platoon that had been selected to find and destroy the enemy underground shelter had departed. Armed heavily with sub-machine guns and hand grenades they left the Company area in the fog and proceeded out on the open snow field. In about an hour they returned and reported that they had not found anything. A reorientation on the ground indicated that their previous route might have been too close to the crest of the ridge so they started off again, this time a little lower. Visibility was so limited that a man 10 yards away could not be seen. As could be expected under these conditions, the Company Commander was not too surprised when the patrol returned the second time without success. It was close to 0530 by this time and the decision was made to wait until the fog lifted.

The terrain in the immediate vicinity consisted of the top of MOUNT MARCINELLO, rocky and thinly wooded. On the east was a sheer cliff of about 50-70 feet and on the north the ground followed down the ridge to MOUNT RIVA. The west side starting from the edge of the woods was a long evenly sloped snow field of about 400 yards in length. The south approach was slightly

(47) A-8 19 February 1945

(48) A-8 10 February 1945

down hill from the very top of MOUNT MANCINELLO to MOUNT CINGIO DEL BURR. The terrain on the west side of the ridge was much different than the side that the unit had just climbed. It was a gentle rolling slope that formed a large broad valley. (49)

The troops could do little digging in the frozen rocky ground but very satisfactory cover was obtained by building up rocks. Two men to a position is practically a must in the mountains because of the necessity of combining sleeping equipment for warmth.

The fog lifted at about 0830 and our position of vantage on the mountain top was better than it had appeared the night before. The machine guns had practically their maximum fields of fire over an unbroken field of hard packed snow. Observation was excellent in all directions and everyone was amazed at how well the movements of personnel and equipment could be seen in the valley they had just left. (50)

ENEMY CONTACT

Movement: A lone figure was seen out on the snow field about 500 yards away and about 200 feet below. Dressed in a white parka and carrying what was later found to be a ski pole, he was just out walking on the snow. Every weapon except the mortars opened fire, and the target, after running about 50 yards, disappeared into a hole in the snow. This must be the bunker the patrol had missed the night before. As the P.O. had just begun to register in defensive fires, this known target made the job more interesting.

It was soon apparent that the "Kraut" thought something was wrong because about twelve men came out of the hole and took what looked to be prearranged positions. They did not offer much resistance by firing probably because A Company's advantageous location offered a poor target. After the Company had expended a few rounds of small arms ammunition a plan was

(49) Personal Observation

(50) Personal Knowledge

evolved for the first Platoon to attack. (51)

By going around to the left flank a few hundred yards, the Platoon could approach the bunker unnoticed. The remainder of the Company from their present position could see the attacking Platoon and the enemy and could give maximum fire support to the attacking Platoon. Lt. Anderson and his Platoon went over the snow field on the left flank and down into a broad level valley which put them about the same altitude as the enemy. The Platoon formed a broad front with two squads abreast and moved toward the Germans. All the while the remainder of the Company kept the enemy pinned down with rifle and machine gun fire. As the attacking Platoon came into position to engage the enemy, the Company fire stopped. The fight that followed was over in about 15 minutes. The bunker was cleaned out and yielded one more man. It turned out to be similar to a log house. Large enough to house about fifteen men and completely buried beneath the snow. After stripping the inside of the bunker of everything that might be of value, the Platoon started back across the snow to MOUNT MANCINELLO. They had killed four and captured eight. (52) (53)

One of the captured enemy personnel was a medical-aid man. His pockets contained packages of bullets instead of pills, however. In fact he could have acted as an ammunition resupply man for his squad. There was no officer in the group and the N.C.O. in charge had been one of those killed. (54)

The prisoners were mostly middle aged men and seemed quite stunned that they had been captured. On questioning, the prisoners said they had heard activity in the valley below that night but thought nothing of it. They had even heard the Company as it was organizing the position but didn't realize what it was. It was their opinion that it was next to impossible to move a large force up the steep side of the ridge and they were very much amazed that

(51) Personal Knowledge

(52) A-3 P-13

(53) Personal Knowledge

(54) Personal Knowledge

so many men were here. (55)

The first Platoon was in high spirits. Their first attack successful and no casualties. Platoon Sergeant, Torger Tokel, had obtained a highly prized German pistol for his efforts, and for a while was the envy of the Company.

Among the odds and ends of equipment found was a pair of skis. These were unanimously voted for the mess sergeant, Sergeant Dreghorn, who was back at the Company C.P. Of course, such a group of ski minded people had to try them out a few times before they were sent down. Even being in close proximity of the enemy did not take away the ability of the men to have some sort of fun.

The remainder of the day at the position passed uneventfully. We got as much news of the other forces of the Battalion as was possible. From all reports every other force was experiencing more difficulty than we were. "Fox" Company on the left flank killed or captured an entire patrol of 30 enemy. (56)

Lt. Craig came over from his position at the head of the trail for a visit. It was decided that the individual rolls of the men would not be brought up as it was too much of a strain on the packers. These men with pack boards loaded down were continually hauling food and ammunition up on the ridge. The supplies would come from VIMICLATICO by "weasel" to POGGIOLFORATA and from there they had to be back packed. The route up the ridge was even too steep for the use of mules. The pack personnel did an outstanding job.

The Company spent the day combing the ridge line and searching all the observation posts the enemy had used. A small range finder was found and presented to the Weapons Platoon. It worked very well, and they used it for

(55) Personal Knowledge

(56) 2-8 19 February 1946

the remainder of the war to good advantage.

That night every one was sort of anxious about the main attack by the Division and thought they could observe the action. However they were disappointed because what the darkness didn't obscure, a slight haze did, so everyone attempted to get some sleep.

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Again a fog enveloped the position and made everything damp. It cleared about 0830 the next morning and shortly after an order was relayed through the Company from Battalion that the unit was to leave one Platoon on MOUNT MANCINELLO to secure the left flank of the Battalion and the remainder of the Company was to proceed to MOUNT SERRASICCIA to support "C" Company's position. "Fox" Company of MOUNT LE PIASGE was relieved and would rejoin the 2nd Battalion. (57)

Lt. Anderson and his Platoon was designated to remain on MOUNT MANCINELLO. Lt. Craig would give him what supplies remained, close out his station and return to Company C.P. in POGGIOLFORATA. Future supplies would come over the trail on MOUNT SERRASICCIA.

The Company consisting then of a small Company Headquarters, the Third Platoon, the weapons Platoon and two litter squads proceeded towards MOUNT SERRASICCIA. With a small flank patrol on the ridge on either side, the unit crossed the frozen lake and arrived at the north side of MOUNT SERRASICCIA. Here the men halted and had lunch, "K" rations again. The Company Commander, Lt. Madleigh, and the Platoon Sargent of the Third Platoon, Sargent Hunter, along with two messengers went on forward to contact "Charlie" Company Commander, Captain McClure.

The situation on MOUNT SERRASICCIA had not been as easy or as simple as that on MOUNT MANCINELLO. Here, although no enemy were encountered initially,

(57) Personal knowledge

there had been three counter attacks and one patrol from "C" Company had either been captured or killed including Lt. McGown, an outstanding mountaineer. The Company was down to their last 10 rounds of 60 mm mortar ammunition. Their mission now was to attack down the ridge and secure RIDGE "X" which offered a good avenue of approach into their position. (58)

The attack was to jump off at 1800 and the time now was 1130. Lt. Radleigh was instructed to move his mortars into firing position in the vicinity of the mortars of "C" Company. He was also to give some of the extra mortar ammunition to "Charlie" mortars. The machine guns of "A" Company would, if it were possible, support the attack from the crest of MOUNT SERRASICCIA. (59)

One of the messengers was sent back with a message to Lt. Yeomans to bring the Company forward as rapidly as possible. In about 45 minutes the mortars were placed in position and the extra ammunition distributed.

The men of the 3rd Platoon took up positions on the highest points of the terrain and were ready to assist by fire if necessary. The attack got under way and "Charlie" Company met with little opposition until they had advanced about 500 yards. Here a small group of enemy offered stiff resistance for a short while. Things had worked out much easier than expected.

The forward elements of "C" Company had reached their objective and were carrying on with the reorganization. The attack had taken a little less than an hour. Then another fire fight started with the Support Platoon of Company "C" located about 300 yards down the ridge from where the 3rd Platoon of "A" Company occupied the top of MOUNT SERRASICCIA. It appeared that the Kraut had divided forces and "C" Company's attack had only encountered about half of the enemy. (60)

The rifle men of "A" Company were able to effectively cover the flank

(58) A-3 P. 15

(59) Personal Knowledge

(60) Personal Knowledge

attack on "C" Company's Support Platoon by fire. During the next half hour each man with a pair of Binoculars assisted the rifle men nearest to him to adjust their fire on the Kraut that were caught on the exposed steep slopes of the ridge.

It was during this action that the aid man from the 3rd Platoon, wearing his brightly painted Red Cross helmet was shot while administering help to a wounded "C" Company man. This was one reason that the men took a special delight in seeking out and shooting the Germans exposed on the side of the steep cliff. (61)

If the Kraut had been able to have supporting weapons for their attack, the casualties would have been many. As it was there were only two men wounded in "A" Company and one man, the aid man, killed.

Darkness came and the men were busy trying to prepare places to get out of the wind and dampness. Everyone was chilled because of lying or crawling in the snow made damp by the afternoon sun.

As the sun went down, the chill of snow covered terrain and high altitudes became very noticeable. Again not much rest was to be had. There were no trees in the close proximity of the position and no one was able to construct any protection from the elements. (62)

It was a very miserable, uneventful night for everyone. A Pack Platoon had arrived lead by Captain Burk of the 10th Quartermaster Truck Company. His limited news that the Division had been successful at the start of their offensive was encouraging.

The personnel from the Pack Platoon were instructed to carry down the wounded men. This was not a simple task. Their route lead over steep rocks and on narrow ledges that required fixed ropes for added security. The minimum time, it was found out later, was eight hours to remove a litter patient

(61) Personal Knowledge

(62) Personal Knowledge

off the top of MOUNT SERRASICCIA. The trip up MOUNT SERRASICCIA by the packers took between six to seven hours. Even to make the trip in that length of time was exceptionally good. Some of the men in the platoon made as many as three trips in two days which meant that they had less than sixteen hours to rest, eat, and repack their loads. (63)

21 FEBRUARY 1945

The dawn of 21 February 1945 showed only cold, miserable individuals wrapped up in blankets. There had been no enemy activity during the night for which everyone was thankful. The sunlight, after a while began to provide some heat, and everyone became more lively. They went about making breakfast and making a fire out of the empty ration boxes for hot coffee. After the initial canteen of water was finished, the men had to melt snow and add halazone tablets to the water. Every little scrap of burnable material was used to construct the fires and by working together everyone was able to have some sort of a hot drink. (64)

Lt. Anderson and his Platoon on MOUNT MANCINELLO had nothing to report except that they were mighty cold.

As the day grew warm the men started to really fix up some kind of shelters so that they would not have to put in another uncomfortable night. It was during this time, around 1000 hours, that a phone call from Battalion came through with information that the 10th Mountain Anti-Tank Battalion and the 10th Reconnaissance Troop would relieve the 1st Battalion sometime in the late afternoon or early evening. A night relief was not necessary as an enemy threat no longer existed. However, this hoped for daylight relief did not materialize, and the turn-over of position was not accomplished until around 0100 on the morning of 22 February 1945 as far as "A" Company was concerned. (65)

(63) Personal Knowledge

(64) Personal Knowledge

(65) 2-3 P.17

Never-the-less, the news of the coming relief was welcome to the men. From sometime during the day of 18 February 1945 till 21 February 1945, there had been little or no real sleep and most of the time the clothing of the men had been wet. There had been no really hard decisive battle fought with the enemy, yet there was tension all of the time. This combined with the terrain and weather made the coming relief most welcome.

It was not until 0700 on 22 February 1945 that the Company was all assembled at the little town of POGGIOLFORATA at the base of the ridge. It was a joyous welcome that the men received from the villagers. Lt. Anderson had brought his Platoon from MOUNT MANCINELLO to MOUNT SERRASICCIA at dark, and the Company had made the long descent together.

Experience in the mountains will reveal that descending a very steep slope is sometimes harder than climbing up it. The men, however, were lightly loaded and anxious to come down, so the difficulties of the long trip did not matter too much. (66)

SUMMARY

The Company and attached units did climb the rough precipitous MANCINELLO-CAMPIANO RIDGE under cover of darkness. Although the original trail was the more difficult, the trail used was still too steep to be traveled by mules. Even though enemy contact was slight, the objective and the underground bunker were captured and destroyed. The men were exposed to the elements found at high altitudes for a period of over three days and showed no ill effects. By capturing and holding the ridge, the Battalion made possible the main attack of the Division.

The wire communication from the top of the ridge to the little town of POGGIOLFORATA at its base was installed and functioned throughout the operation, with the exception of the actual climbing of the ridge.

The extra ammunition carried by the men of the weapons Platoon proved very valuable and contributed to the success of "Charlie" Company's attack.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. COMMUNICATION

The mission of contacting the Battalion C.P. every hour was not accomplished. Even with extra wire men, the fact that no real trail existed made wire laying a slow process. Once in, however, the wire contact worked very well. The employment of the kitchen personnel in the role of line men proved successful.

2. CONTACT

Additional plans should have been made to insure contact between individuals while making the night climb. The pieces of white adhesive tape were of no value. With the Company Headquarters following the Assault Platoon there were not enough men available to maintain a connecting file. If there had been a fire fight on the objective, the Assault Platoon would not have had the support of the weapons of the weapons Platoon.

3. SUPPLY

Because the Battalion Commander had anticipated the hand-carry problem, and assigned some additional men, the supply of essential items was good. The load on each individual of his personal equipment was as light as possible. The men had to "Buddy-up" to combine blankets. Because of limited loads the most use of equipment must be made. All burnable items were put to use to provide a water supply by melting of snow. It may be said, however, that sleeping bags are a definite necessity in the mountains. Wool blankets are not adequate and are too heavy. The personnel exposed to the sudden chill of high altitudes must be able to have a means of warmth and the sleeping bag is it. This item of equipment is of great importance in preventing "shock"

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men casualties have to wait to be transported or on their slow journey down from mountainous altitudes.

4. PLANNING

The success of the operation was due to detailed planning, the early issuance of warning orders and time to train for the attack.

The extensive use of the sand table by all men in the Company was a great help in the orientation. For example, it gave the men the ability to correctly recognize MOUNT MANCINELLO in the darkness once they had attained the top of the ridge. The Battalion Commander did not hesitate to ask the opinion of subordinates, even privates, when he thought they had more knowledge of the situation than he did.

5. RECONNAISSANCE

By continuous patrol action, the latest news of weather and its effect on the ground condition was provided. The lack of snow, ice or mud to the extreme, made it possible to move the large number of troops necessary for an attack. It must also be remembered that detailed reconnaissance was made of housing areas so that the entire Company was moved into some sort of shelter at night in a town they had never seen before. Flying over the ridge gave the Company Commander a good indication of the terrain on the top and far side of the ridge.

6. THE TRAIL

The Company Commander may be criticized for asking to switch routes at such a late time. This might have resulted in a lot of confusion with Company "F". It may be considered fortunate that no conflict came about by these last minute changes in the detailed planning.

7. TRAINING

By training the new men in the unit in the specialized techniques of

mountain climbing, the morale and combat efficiency of these men is raised. Training over terrain similar to that of the objective is desirable whenever possible.

6. SURPRISE

A night attack, concealing troops during the day and no preparatory fires were the contributing factors to the successful surprise on the enemy. The precipitous sides of the cliff were thought to be an adequate barrier to any large force. With the relatively few enemy on the ridge, the key terrain feature could have been held if surprise of the attack had not been complete. The thought of a night attack against such an obstacle was not contemplated by the Krauts as was evidenced by their lack of adequate security.

LESSONS

1. During a night attack in mountainous terrain prompt wire communication is feasible only if there is a well defined trail along which the wire can be laid.
2. Adhesive tape on the helmets for the purpose of promoting contact between individuals is of no value when traversing a steep slope.
3. An organized Porter Platoon for the purpose of supply should be considered by units operating in the mountains, especially during winter months, ie. one platoon per front line company.
4. Complete and detailed orientation, careful planning with the early issuance of warning orders, and time to train for the attack are factors that cannot be over emphasized in a specialized operation.
5. The intelligence necessary for the conduct of mountain operations can best be obtained by the use of trained mountaineers.
6. Although changing detailed plans at the last moment is not recommended, a plan that has the feature of flexibility is recommended.

7. New men in a specialized unit should be indoctrinated as soon as possible with the characteristics peculiar to that unit in order that they may develop Esprit de Corps and increase their combat efficiency.

8. Mountain strong-holds are most vulnerable at night.