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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST PLATOON, BATTERY "C",
80TH AIRBORNE ANTI-AIRCRAFT BATTALION
(82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION), IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE
17 DECEMBER 1944 - 3 JANUARY 1945
(ARDENNES - ALSACE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described:
ANTITANK PLATOON IN SUPPORT OF INFANTRY REGIMENT

Captain Marshall W. Stark, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. 2

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Platoon, Battery "C", 80th Airborne Antiaircraft Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, in a portion of the Battle of the Bulge.

Because the concept of Airborne Divisions was still relatively new, the tables of organization within such a specialized unit were frequently changed. Therefore, before going further, it would be well to orient the reader on the composition of this platoon, as well as its parent organization at the time of this action. The 80th Airborne Antiaircraft Battalion, a separate battalion in the division, was composed of a Headquarters Battery, three Antitank Batteries and three Antiaircraft Batteries. The antitank batteries were further divided into two platoons, and the antiaircraft batteries, into three platoons each. Each antitank platoon had, as its principal weapon, four British six-pounder antitank guns. This weapon was similar in most characteristics to the American 57 millimeter antitank gun. Airborne units were equipped with this gun because it could be transported by the standard American CG-4A glider, while the American gun could not. (1)

In an airborne division, the parachute regiments had no antitank weapons other than antitank grenades and 2.36 inch rocket launchers. Therefore, the antitank batteries were usually attached, one to each parachute regiment.

(1) A-3

The regiments, in turn, ordinarily assigned the two platoons to their two front line battalions. Such an attachment would normally be in effect for an entire campaign. In the Battle of the Bulge, Battery "C" was attached to the 504th Parachute Infantry. For the action covered in this period, the 1st Platoon was attached initially to the 3rd Battalion, then to the 1st Battalion, and later to the 3rd Battalion again. (2)

Generally speaking, in an attack, the platoon would advance somewhere along the column of the main body. However, with few exceptions, this platoon was roadbound, since the prime mover of the weapon was the standard quarter ton truck, the only vehicle that could be transported by air. For this reason, if an attack was launched on a cross country route, the platoon would follow as closely as possible, using the existing road nets, or would be left near the line of departure until called for by the battalion commander. The quarter ton trucks were equipped with hitches on the front bumpers, so that the guns might be pushed. In this manner, weapons might be placed in action more speedily. The system just described was generally practiced in the actions to be narrated in this monograph. (3)

GENERAL SITUATION

On 17 December 1944, the entire 82nd Airborne Division was stationed at two locations — Camp Sissone, about thirty-five miles northwest of Reims, France, and Camp Suippes, about the same distance southeast of that city. (See Maps A and B) The 82nd Airborne Division Artillery, the 505th Parachute Infantry, and the 80th Airborne Antiaircraft Battalion (2) Personal Knowledge; (3) Personal Knowledge

were the units located at Camp Suippes. The division had been in these camps for about a month, or since its withdrawal from the combat zone in Holland. Refresher training was being undertaken while the division awaited replacements and rested, pending another airborne mission, which was expected within six weeks. Along with the 101st Airborne Division, which was also located near Reims, and the 17th Airborne Division encamped in England, the division was in strategic theater reserve. (4)

Regardless of where the division was located or what type of training it was undergoing, the basic loads of ammunition for vehicles and personnel and an appropriate supply of field rations were always maintained, so that they could be issued to the troops within a few hours if an emergency should arise or a sudden mission be assigned to the division. (5)

At about 1945 hours, on the evening of 17 December, the Commanding General, 82nd Airborne Division Artillery, who also commanded Camp Suippes, was instructed by the Division Commander to alert troops under his command for movement to the combat zone commencing the following morning. The Germans were making what appeared to be a determined and serious breakthrough in the vicinity of the V and VIII Corps fronts. The extent of the penetration and the gravity of the situation were not known at that time. Shortly after midnight, the troops in general were awakened and informed of the situation. The initial destination of the division was to be Bastogne, with the mission of assembling in that area, and awaiting further orders. (See Map B) The 80th Airborne Antiaircraft (4) Personal Knowledge; (5) A-1, p. 1

Battalion was to cross the initial point at 0830 hours, 18 December 1944. The few remaining hours between the time of receipt of the movement orders and the initial point time were busily spent drawing and issuing ammunition, rations, and strip maps, and making preparations to leave Camp Suippes. (6)

SPECIAL SITUATION

The 1st Platoon, leading the Battery "C" march unit, cleared the initial point on time and, for about an hour, maintained a satisfactory rate of march. However, before the scheduled time for the first halt had arrived, the preceding unit, which had been forced to stop, was overtaken. For the remainder of the day, the column proceeded only short distances at a time, with frequent stops, usually lasting for several minutes. Due to unforeseen obstacles or improper minimum time intervals, all march units and serials had closed up on the leading elements, thus losing their identity. (7)

The total distance, as shown on the strip maps, was one hundred nine miles from the initial point to Bastogne. (See Map B) When darkness came at about 1700 hours, the vehicle in which the Platoon Leader, 1st Platoon, was riding had traveled only eighty-three miles during the entire day. The remainder of the trip took a relatively longer time, as only blackout lights were permitted. At 2300 hours that same night, the vehicle had traveled one hundred twenty-eight miles, so apparently the column either was lost or was going to a destination other than Bastogne. Presumably the latter

(6) A-1, p.1; and Personal Knowledge; (7) Personal Knowledge

was the case and the column in general had not been informed. (8)

Originally, the Platoon Leader of the 1st Platoon, Battery "C", 80th Airborne Antiaircraft Battalion, had been leading one march unit. At about 0100 hours, 19 December, after a stop lasting for several minutes, the Platoon Leader dismounted from his vehicle and started walking forward, principally to have some exercise and warm up, but also to ascertain if possible why there was such a long delay. He was also curious to learn where the division was going. After traveling forward about fifty or sixty vehicles, asking questions of the occupants of the vehicles as he proceeded, and learning nothing, he came to what appeared to be the leading vehicle of the column. Both the driver and the assistant driver were asleep in the cab of the truck. They were awakened and did not know how long the truck in front of them had been gone. The Platoon Leader mounted the truck and started the column moving forward again. This was an anxious period for him, for he did not know where the column in front of him had gone or what was the destination of the division. This anxiety was relieved in about twenty-five minutes when the column, which he was temporarily leading, caught up with the preceding vehicles. After admonishing the driver to remain awake, he dismounted and waited for his own vehicle to come along and pick him up. (9)

Once again, after advancing a short distance further, the column stopped, and again the Platoon Leader dismounted and started moving forward. However this time, after going about five hundred yards, he came to the crossroads in Wer-

(8) Personal Knowledge; (9) Personal Knowledge

bomont, Belgium, where the assistant division commander, Brigadier General Ira P. Swift, was directing units to their respective assembly areas. Here the Platoon Leader learned that this was the assembly area — not Bastogne as originally anticipated, but a point about forty miles to the north.

(See Map B and C) This was but a beginning to the complex jockeying about of troops in an effort to locate the enemy, engage him and stem his offensive tactics. (10)

Little more was known at that time concerning the German forces than had been known when the units had departed from France about eighteen hours earlier. A general estimate of the situation seemed to indicate that the German offensive was directed at driving through to the Meuse River, possibly on to Paris, and concurrently pushing through to Liege and Antwerp, thus splitting the Allied Forces.

As units arrived at Werbomont, they were initially directed to assembly areas in that vicinity. As units closed, they were ordered by Major General James M. Gavin, the division commander, to occupy and defend previously selected areas. The Platoon Leader was ordered by the battery commander, to place one section of two guns on the edge of the town leading east from Werbomont and the other section on the road leading north, or toward Aywaille. A hasty reconnaissance was made, and the guns were emplaced a short distance off the roads, so that these two approaches were covered. (See Map C) (11)

(10) A-7, Belgium History; and Personal Knowledge; (11) A-1, p. 2; and Personal Knowledge

MARCH TO RAHIER
ATTACHMENT TO 3RD BATTALION, 504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY
19-20 DECEMBER 1944

At about 1100 hours, 19 December, the Platoon Leader was informed that Battery "C" had been attached to the 504th Parachute Infantry, and that in turn, the 1st Platoon had been attached to the 3rd Battalion. This message had come via a platoon messenger normally stationed at Battery Headquarters. He did not know the location of any part of the 504th; other than that it was east or southeast of Werbomont. The Platoon Leader went to the Battery Command Post, in an effort to locate the present position of either the 3rd Battalion or the 504th Headquarters. Upon arrival at the Battery Command Post, the First Sergeant informed the Platoon Leader that the Battery Commander had departed immediately upon receipt of the battery attachment orders. The First Sergeant further stated that the Commanding Officer, 3rd Battalion was desirous of establishing immediate liaison with the 1st Platoon. At this time, the Platoon Leader still had not received a map of the area and there were none at the Battery Command Post. (12)

After directing the Platoon Sergeant to assemble the platoon on the eastern edge of Werbomont, the Platoon Leader departed in search of the 504th Parachute Infantry. About 1500 hours, after wasting considerable time riding around the country side, he found the 3rd Battalion Command Post located in the town of Chevron. The Battalion Commander was extremely disturbed to learn that the antitank guns were still back in Werbomont. He directed that they be brought forward immediately and emplaced commanding the two roads leading northeast from Chevron. These roads

(12) Personal Knowledge

appeared to be the only possible armored approaches into the battalion area. About 1600 hours, all guns were placed in hastily prepared positions, and this was reported to the Battalion Command Post. (See Map C) (13)

Everyone in the platoon was most anxious to know the general situation. Upon visiting the Battalion Command Post, after emplacing the guns, the Platoon Leader was more amiably received, and was thoroughly oriented by map as to his location, his platoon dispositions, and the general situation of the division. He was also given a map of the area for himself. He returned to his own command post and then visited each gun position to inform the men of the situation with reference to the Germans, which was as follows: On 18 December, at about 1900 hours, a road block of the 30th Infantry Division in the vicinity of Hablemont had been struck by what appeared to be a German armored reconnaissance party. Several Germans had been killed and about five armored vehicles had been destroyed. No other enemy contacts had been established, and the present location of German units was as yet unknown. (14)

In as much as the platoon had had very little rest the preceding forty-eight hours, a minimum guard was maintained on each gun, thus providing the maximum rest for everyone. Although the situation was quiet at that time, there was a general feeling that this might be the calm before the storm. Therefore, the Platoon Leader himself went to bed at about 1900 hours. (15)

At 2100 hours, he was summoned to the 3rd Battalion Command Post and informed that the entire 504th Parachute (13, 14, 15) Personal Knowledge

Infantry was preparing to move out toward Rahier via Forges, Chauveheid, and Froidville, with the mission of seizing the high ground northwest of Rahier. The antitank guns were to be immediately displaced and assembled in Chevron. This task was accomplished by about 2300 hours. Instructions were then received to advance behind the foot troops toward Rahier. (See Map C) (16)

The route from Chevron to Forges was only about one half mile, but in that distance there was a drop in elevation of seventy meters, or about two hundred twenty feet. (See Map C) Nearly half of this two hundred twenty foot drop in elevation was concentrated within four hundred feet of Forges. This fact is particularly important, as the antitank guns weighed approximately twenty-two hundred pounds and were towed by quarter ton trucks. Therefore, the Platoon Leader cautioned all drivers to use four wheel drive and low gear when they descended the hill. Even with this added precaution, the brakes would probably have to be used extensively. A driver then remarked that during the trip from France, something had happened and that his only brakes were the emergency brakes. Upon learning this fact, the gun was detached from the Platoon Leader's vehicle, and a test run was made down the hill to determine if low ratio and low gear would have sufficient retarding action to permit a quarter ton truck to descend the hill safely. The experiment proved this to be impossible. Therefore, the decision was made to detach the gun from the vehicle that had no brakes, place it behind the Platoon Leader's vehicle so that the bumpers were touching, and then proceed

(16) A-1, p.2; A-7, Belgium History; A-13, 19 December 1944; and Personal Knowledge

down the hill depending entirely upon the brakes of the leading vehicle. This was accomplished without incident, although there was considerable strain on the leading vehicle. On the next two successive trips, the Platoon Leader's truck brought the two antitank guns down the hill. (17)

While this involved situation developed and was being solved, the foot troops had moved on toward Rahier. By the time the antitank guns arrived in that town, the troops had already attained the high ground they were to seize. Once again this had been accomplished without making contact with the enemy. (18)

OFFENSIVE MOVEMENT -- RAHIER TO CHENEUX
ATTACHMENT TO 1ST BATTALION, 504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY
20-22 DECEMBER 1944

A visit to the Regimental Command Post disclosed that the 1st Platoon, Battery "C", was now attached to the 1st Battalion. This unit was generally located on the northern part of the high ground northwest of Rahier. (19)

At this time, about 0700 hours, 20 December, the Platoon Leader went on a reconnaissance with the Battalion Commander for possible gun positions. The road leading south from the Ambleve River through Xhierfomont appeared to be the only approach for enemy armor into the area, so the two sections, of two antitank guns each, were placed in depth along this road in general locations recommended by the Battalion Commander. One section was located between the crest of the hill and Rahier, and the other, near a church at Xhierfomont. While the Platoon Sergeant supervised the emplacement of the guns near Rahier, the Platoon Leader was with the other
(17, 18, 19,) Personal Knowledge

section. (See Map C) (20)

As the gun positions of the forward section were being improved, the Platoon Leader looked around the area to determine in which company's sector his guns were located, but he could find no one. He started back toward the Battalion Command Post when, much to his surprise after going back on the road about five hundred yards, he came to a hasty anti-tank mine field, which had been laid on the road after he had taken his guns forward. This mine field was being covered by a few riflemen who stated that they were two hundred yards in front of the main line of resistance. This deployment of antitank guns and troops was unsound, and consequently he suggested to the battalion commander that the two forward guns be withdrawn to the rear of the mine field and preferably back to where they would have proper infantry protection. The request was granted and the guns were hastily moved back to approximately the main line of resistance, where they were emplaced covering the road. (21)

During the remainder of the morning, considerable firing could be heard and seen in the vicinity of Stoumont, which was in the 30th Infantry Division sector. This town was approximately two miles from the platoon location. (See Map C) (22)

At that time several reports had been received, from civilians in and around Rahier, to the effect that about one hundred twenty-five German vehicles, including thirty tanks, had moved east through that town during the preceding day. The indications were growing stronger that we were coming

(20) Personal Knowledge; (21) Personal Knowledge; (22) A-13, p.186; and Personal Knowledge

closer to the enemy than we had been at any time since arriving in the area. (23)

On the morning 20 December, orders were received by the 1st Battalion to advance on Cheneux, a small town about two miles east of Rahier, toward which the German forces had been reported moving the previous day. 1500 hours was the time set when the 1st Battalion would move out along the Rahier-Cheneux road. The Battalion Commander ordered the antitank guns to take up positions along the eastern edge of Rahier, where they had observation of this road for nearly half the distance to Cheneux. In addition, at about 1455 hours, the Platoon Leader was requested to furnish two men to operate a German 77 millimeter howitzer mounted on a half track, which had been abandoned somewhere in the area. Prior to this request, one or two test rounds had been fired, and apparently the entire half track and its gun were in perfect operation condition. Two of the best men of the platoon were selected to perform this mission. At this time, the point of the column was all set to move out and was awaiting the scheduled time to advance. The Battalion Commander desired that this reinforcing armor, as he called it, accompany the point during the advance. Therefore, he decided to delay the advance until these two men were briefed on the operation of the weapon. For two men who had never seen a weapon of this type other than in pictures, the five minute interval allotted to the Platoon Leader for orienting them was rather brief, and only the minimum knowledge necessary for operation could be imparted. Actually, this was the first time that the Platoon Leader himself had ever seen one

of these weapons. (24)

Upon leaving Rahier, the Battalion Commander expected that he would be in Cheneux before dark and that as soon as he arrived there, he would want the platoon of antitank guns to come forward, to aid in the accomplishment of his mission, which was to seize and hold the bridge crossing the Ambleve River to the east of Cheneux.

About the time that the head of the main body of the 1st Battalion went out of sight, considerable small arms fire, augmented by a great deal of 20 millimeter fire and some larger caliber direct fire weapons could be heard coming from the direction of the advance of our troops. Information received at Regimental Headquarters at about dusk indicated that the advancing 1st Battalion had met a strong German force, consisting of infantry supported by armor, advancing toward Rahier on the high ground west of Cheneux. The Battalion Commander did not want the antitank guns brought forward at that time.

Later on that evening, the Platoon Leader learned that the man acting as gunner on the German half track had been wounded and evacuated, but no facts were available concerning the vehicle's usefulness. The next day the following story came forth. During the time of initial contact and the advance to the edge of the town, all the high explosive and most of the armor piercing ammunition had been expended, the latter being fired principally at personnel targets after the high explosive ammunition had been consumed. After the gunner was wounded, the vehicle was abandoned. The firing had caused a small number of enemy casualties

(24) Personal Knowledge

and had succeeded in knocking out two or three enemy half tracks. Even so, many reports indicated that a large percentage of the rounds went high of their targets and caused a minimum of damage to the enemy. (See Map C) (25)

During the night, 20-21 December, bitter fighting continued on the outskirts of Cheneux. Much of the 20 millimeter flak that was missing the troops in the forward areas was exploding in and about the town of Rahier. A platoon of tank destroyers was also attached to the 1st Battalion during the night, and before dawn, at approximately 0400 hours, this unit moved toward Cheneux to contact the Battalion Commander. At 0730 hours, the Battalion Commander had not yet seen them, and called for the Antitank Platoon to move forward, in the belief that the Germans were massing their armor for an all out attack against his positions. Since all gun squads had been on the alert, movement toward Cheneux was started in a matter of minutes. The Battalion Commander wanted the Platoon Leader to come to his command post, which he said was located in the first house on the right hand side of the road, as one moved toward Cheneux. When the platoon reached a point four hundred yards west of the command post, the tank destroyers were seen halted along the road. Their commander stated that he did not know where the Battalion Commander was located, and also that he was unable to move forward any further. The Platoon Leader decided that if the tank destroyers were not able to advance beyond this point, the further advance of quarter ton trucks towing antitank guns would not be a wise move. Therefore, after dismounting and directing the troops to disperse, he moved forward on foot to contact the Battalion

(25) A-1, p.3 ; and Personal Knowledge

Commander. Upon going about one hundred yards, he saw some 81 millimeter mortars firing from the eastern edge of these same woods. He inquired of the personnel manning them as to the exact location of the front lines and the command post. Through some bushes, they pointed out a house about three hundred yards forward, stating that that was the command post. They further stated that they were firing in that direction at a range of three hundred fifty yards. With this knowledge, the Platoon Leader moved forward along the ditches of the road. (See Map C) (26)

About half way to the house, he met the Battalion Commander running toward the rear. He had just learned that the tank destroyers were sitting back in the woods, and he was going after them. The antitank Platoon Leader led him back to the commander of the tank destroyers. After a brief heated discussion between the Battalion Commander and the tank destroyer platoon leader, in which the latter said little, the tanks were finally moved forward to the edge of the woods, or about one hundred yards. The platoon leader refused to move them any further forward. The situation appeared critical, as many armored vehicles could be heard moving about in the town. Since the tank destroyers were of no value, the order was given to move the antitank guns forward so that the road and the broad open fields north of the road would be covered. On the south side of the road, the terrain dropped off sharply and was considered to be sufficient antitank protection. (27)

The Platoon Leader made a reconnaissance and found some excellent locations for positions, if the weapons and crews could reach these points without being knocked out. To arrive (26) Personal Knowledge; (27) Personal Knowledge

at these sites, open spaces within sight of the enemy had to be traversed. Two of the guns were attached to the front of the vehicles, permitting them to be pushed into their positions. Then they would be quickly disconnected, so that the vehicles could go in reverse for a short distance and be relatively safe from direct fire. The other two vehicles and guns, using standard towing procedure, were to rush across the open ground into a defiladed area, disconnect the guns and then push them forward slowly into barrel defilade. Two men from each squad were to go individually to these positions by crawling or rushing. Only the driver would go with the vehicles to the positions. The other members of the squads were to remain back in the woods and were to dig fox holes. (See Map C) (28)

After the proposed positions and plan had been approved by the Battalion Commander, each man of the Antitank Platoon was told how and what he was to do. From the time the Platoon Leader had first contacted the Battalion Commander until this time, about one hour had elapsed, and it was then 0845 hours. The first of the men had barely started to move toward their positions, when a fog or mist, which reduced visibility to less than one hundred yards, covered the entire area. With this situation prevailing, rather than have the vehicles rush across the open spaces as previously planned, they moved across very slowly, making a minimum of noise. This move was accomplished quickly, the guns were dug in to give them added protection, and all personnel went to the vicinity of their weapons, rather than remaining back in the woods. The heavy part of the fog remained a sufficient length of time to permit the entire position preparation to

(28) Personal Knowledge

be accomplished unobserved, or about thirty minutes. By 1000 hours, the visibility was back to normal. (29)

Though the Battalion Commander had feared that the Germans were massing their armor and forces for an all out attack against his positions, this apparently was not the German plan, for the vehicular movement that had been heard continuously was becoming more distant. Not one vehicle of any type was seen during the day from any of the gun positions. During the afternoon the 1st Battalion, assisted by the 3rd Battalion which had enveloped Cheneux from the direction of Monceau, made an all out attack and accomplished its mission, that of seizing the bridge across the Ambleve River. (30)

After Cheneux had fallen, there were indications that perhaps the Germans had been unable to launch a mass attack, supported by armor, against the American forces because of the lack of gasoline. A few scattered parachutes and empty gasoline containers were found in the vicinity of the town and a few were discovered that the Germans had overlooked. During the night of 21-22 December, the Luftwaffe either had not received word that Cheneux had fallen to the Americans, or else they missed their drop zone, for the entire surrounding area was showered with supplies, principally gasoline. (31)

Here the writer wishes to digress and describe an incident that occurred during this action. Intelligence information received in higher headquarters had indicated that as a part of the overall German plan, small groups of Germans, who could speak English with an American dialect, would be dressed

(29) Personal Knowledge; (30) A-7, Belgium History; (31) A-13,
23 December 1944

in American uniforms, would drive captured American vehicles and would operate behind our front. Some would work close to the front line, while others would operate far in the rear areas to locate supplies, unguarded bridges and other items of information that would be of value to them. This information was not disseminated to the front line troops. At about 0845 hours, 21 December, when plans had been completed for moving the antitank guns into position, two quarter ton trucks from the 99th Infantry Division came along the road from Rahier. In each of them were four people who looked like American officers and enlisted men. They were forced to stop because the tank destroyers and antitank guns, which were about to move out, were effectively blocking the road. A major in the leading vehicle dismounted and stated that he was anxious to see Colonel Harrison. The Platoon Leader had never seen this officer, but since he desired to see Colonel Harrison, who was the 1st Battalion Commander, the guns were moved so that he could advance. The Platoon Leader told him that driving his vehicles more than two hundred yards further would be excessively dangerous, for the road was effectively covered by small arms fire. After telling the Platoon Leader, in an offensive tone, that he was capable of making his own decisions, he mounted his jeep and drove on toward the Battalion Command Post. The Platoon Leader watched him go and then stood dumbfounded as all the German small arms fire in that area ceased while the vehicles sped by the command post, through the front lines, and on down into Cheneux. Obviously these men were Germans, though this fact was unsuspected until too late. (32)

(32) Personal Knowledge

With the taking of Cheneux and the bridge across the Ableve River, offensive action was temporarily halted. All antitank guns were placed in positions so that they covered all angles and approaches to the bridge across the river. (See Map C) The Platoon Leader, desiring to replenish his supplies, principally rations and gasoline, tried to locate these supplies. The 1st Battalion had failed to draw supplies for its attachments, and in turn, the regiment had not made any provisions for the resupply of the attached anti-tank platoons, as it believed the battalions had included them in their requests. The Battery Commander and the Platoon Leader finally received supplies from their own Battalion Headquarters. All echelons of the unit to which the platoon was attached were contacted, so that the situation would not recur. (33)

Near one of the gun positions overlooking the bridge was a knocked out German Tiger Tank. The Platoon Leader was curious to know exactly what effect a shell fired from a 57 millimeter gun would have on the front of this tank. Such an opportunity had not previously been afforded. Permission to fire the gun was received from the Battalion Commander. A special round of super high velocity armor piercing shell was fired from a distance of about two hundred yards, and the front of the tank was penetrated slightly above the axle. However, this penetration was not the most interesting finding of this experiment.

When this gun fires, return to battery is accomplished, under normal conditions, in a fraction of a second. Due to the extreme cold, this weapon did not return to battery until

(33) Personal Knowledge

part of the hydraulic fluid had been drained off. A second round could not have been fired until the barrel had returned to its original position. Immediately, the remaining three weapons were tested by mechanically pushing the barrels to the most rearward position. The results were all the same, for none of the barrels would return to firing position until part of the fluid had been drained from the recoil cylinder. This information was passed on to Battery Headquarters and the same condition was found in the other guns of the battery. Had this been discovered during an enemy armored attack, there might have been some embarrassing moments. (34)

ACTION IN LIERNEUX - BRA AREA
REATTACHMENT TO THE 3RD BATTALION, 504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY
23 DECEMBER 1944 - 3 JANUARY 1945

After Cheneux had been seized, enemy activity in this sector was limited, but this was not true on other parts of the division front. For this reason, early in the morning of 23 December, the 504th Parachute Infantry was alerted for a move to another portion of the division sector. At about this same time the 1st Platoon, Battery "C", was attached to the 3rd Battalion. The order to march came at about 0545 hours, 24 December. The motor column moved back through Rahier, to Hablemont, Lansival, and went into assembly areas in the vicinity of Jevigne. (See Maps C and D) (35)

The situation, as given to the Platoon Leader at this time, was that the 325th Glider Infantry was holding the general line from Regne to Fraiture, but that they were being strongly attacked and were having a difficult time. To back up their lines, the 3rd Battalion, 504th, was to take

(34) Personal Knowledge; (35) A-1, p.6,7; A-13, 24 December 1944

on the high ground southwest of Lierneux to add depth to the defense. Though the Platoon Leader did not hear any rumors, many were circulating to the effect that the 325th had been completely overrun. The 3rd Battalion Commander directed the Platoon Leader to make a reconnaissance and place his guns in positions where they could cover the road leading from Malempre to Fraiture, on the high ground overlooking Fraiture. He also desired protection for the trail leading directly north to Malempre from the Werbomont-Houffalize road. (36)

The Platoon Leader, riding in one of his vehicles, left the assembly area at about 1100 hours. He had been directed to follow the road leading southwest from Baneux, but after traveling less than one half mile, this road, which was nothing more than a trail, became impassable to quarter ton truck, because of deep ruts, mud, water, and snow. The driver was left with his vehicle while the remainder of the reconnaissance was made on foot. Both places were reconnoitered and some excellent locations found, but no satisfactory routes thereto could be located. (See Map D)

The Platoon Leader noticed several soldiers milling around in the woods about two hundred yards from him. Since he always desired to know what units were going to be in the vicinity of his gun locations, he started walking toward them to see who they were and just where they were going to dig their positions. After moving toward them a short distance, he saw that they were Germans and not Americans, so a cautious, but hasty withdrawal was made. In returning to the vehicle, he saw several more Germans in various parts of the

(36) Personal Knowledge

woods, and had difficulty in by-passing them undetected.

Nearly three hours had been consumed in making this reconnaissance, largely because so much detouring had been made on the return trip. By that time, the division had been directed to make a general withdrawal to shorten the defensive lines and strengthen the right flank, which was most endangered in the present situation. The 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry, was at this time in the process of setting up a defensive position, as had been directed. The 325th, while still hard pressed, was holding its own and was in no immediate danger. In the entire 3rd Battalion area, there were only two places where antitank guns might be placed, other than in positions where guns could not be towed. One section was employed covering two trails in draws leading toward Lierneux from the south and southwest. The other section was left in the vicinity of Jevigne. (See Map D) (37)

The plan for the withdrawal, which was to take place during the night 24-25 December, provided for the 325th Glider Infantry to withdraw through the 504th Parachute Infantry lines. The 504th in turn would withdraw all except a minimum covering force, which would not come in to the new areas until shortly before daylight. The antitank guns and vehicles would be last to leave the position, with the exception of the covering force, so that there would be protection for the entire withdrawal, and so that mortars, machine guns, and ammunition could be loaded on the vehicles and carried to the rear. (38)

During the afternoon of 24 December, the route back to the new defensive area was reconnoitered to insure that no one became lost during the withdrawal in darkness. As the (37) A-1, p.7; and Personal Knowledge; (38) Personal Knowledge

Platoon Leader was returning to the gun locations after making the route reconnaissance, he noted some engineers preparing to destroy a bridge on the route between Lierneux and Jevigne. They informed him that the bridge would be blown at 2400 hours. He expected to make his withdrawal about 2200 hours, therefore there would be no difficulty encountered in that respect. At that time the antitank vehicles were the only vehicles forward of that stream, the Groumont River.

Shortly after dusk, the 325th Glider Infantry commenced its planned withdrawal, and it was accomplished smoothly. Soon after the entire regiment had passed to the rear, the companies of the 504th, minus their shells, started their withdrawal. Reports were received that the shell of the 508th Parachute Infantry had been cut off. This caused considerable anxiety as they were on the immediate left of the 504th. The most apparent thing to do at that time was to move the antitank guns and vehicles to the rear without delay. The vehicles were quickly loaded with weapons, mortars, and ammunition, and at about 2100 hours they started their rearward movement. Scarcely had the move begun, when a loud explosion was heard coming from the direction of the bridge that was to be crossed. Because of several reports or rumors of the enemy's presence in Lierneux, the men left at the bridge had blown it. The only other way to go back to the new area was by going through Lierneux. (39)

The Platoon Leader had foreseen this possibility and had previously told his men that if there appeared to be danger in attempting to go through Lierneux, all except two men per (39) A-1, p.8; and Personal Knowledge

vehicle would walk about a mile cross country to a point on the Lierneux-Hablemont road, where they would meet the vehicles. Since there was a strong possibility that the Germans had entered the town, the Platoon Sergeant accompanied the men cross country, while the Platoon Leader guided the vehicles. Upon reaching the western outskirts of Lierneux, a tracked vehicle could be heard some distance into the town, or possibly east of the town. After moving slowly into town without incident for about ten minutes, the vehicles finally reached the road leading to the north. A few minutes after the vehicles arrived at the designated meeting point, the squads also arrived. All men loaded on the vehicles and guns and went back to the vicinity of Bra, where the new defensive positions were going to be established. (See Map D)

The digging and preparing of the new positions was already well underway by midnight. The 3rd Battalion Commander had not yet decided where he wanted to have the antitank guns emplaced. The 3rd Battalion was on the right flank of the division and was to make contact with Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division. Their sector was between Tri-le-Cheslaing and Manhay, but at that time no contact had been made with them along the new line. At 0100 hours, 25 December, the Platoon Leader was directed to place one section of guns on the western edge of Bra to protect the entire approach from the southeast into the town. (See Map D) The other section was to move toward Tri-le-Cheslaing and go into position near the right edge of the battalion sector, so that the roads in that area would be adequately covered. (40)

Positions were selected for the first section and work
(40) A-13, 25 December 1944; and Personal Knowledge

was started immediately to emplace the guns properly and to protect them further with sand bags. After selecting these positions, the Platoon Leader moved on down the road toward Tri-le-Cheslaing with the other section. When the unit had proceeded down this road for about a mile, a great amount of noise, that of tank motors, could be heard. The noise grew louder and louder, and presently the fact was disclosed that these tanks were coming rapidly toward Bra on that same road. The vehicles and guns were unable to move off the road, as both sides were heavily mined, and the Platoon Leader did not know if any gaps existed. Since it was not known whether these were enemy or friendly tanks, the guns were quickly placed in firing positions along the edge of the road. They turned out to be friendly, but they were proceeding rearward at a high rate of speed. Sixty-three tanks passed and finally the parade ended with a quarter ton truck following. This vehicle was stopped so that the identity of this unit might be learned, as well as the reason for its rapid movement toward Bra. The driver, in excited tones, stated that this unit was Combat Command "B", 9th Armored Division, and that the Germans had captured Manhay and were headed toward Tri-le-Cheslaing with at least 12 Mark VI tanks. With the prospect of facing a heavy armored attack, efforts were renewed to find a way through these mine fields so that the weapons would have at least a chance at the tanks if they appeared. Finally, after about two hours of probing and calling division engineer to see if he had an overlay or record of where these mines had been placed, a small gap was located where the vehicles and guns could move off the road and cover the road excellently from the flank. (See Map D) The remainder of the night was one

of anxious waiting, but nothing developed or was enemy armor heard. By daylight, a battalion of the 325th Glider Infantry had moved in to take up positions on the right of the 504th Parachute Infantry. (41)

Immediately after daylight, the antitank gun positions were well prepared, for an estimate indicated that a strong attack might well be launched anywhere along that sector, in as much as there had been a large build-up of enemy forces about the time of the withdrawal. In addition, the fact was known that two panzer divisions were in the general area and the terrain was excellent for tank operations.

After satisfactory positions were prepared by both the infantry and the attached weapons, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, for no enemy attack had been launched before the unit was adequately prepared. It was Christmas Day and the weather was clear and sunny, with the skies filled with all types and numbers of friendly aircraft. Once again it was time to consider the supply situation. No ammunition had been expended, therefore only rations and gasoline were required. The antitank platoon may have been forgotten once, as far as food was concerned, but on Christmas Day, both battalion and regiment of the 504th and battery and battalion of the 80th delivered to the Platoon Command Post a hot meal consisting of turkey and all that goes with such a dinner. Each man had the opportunity to eat four turkey dinners that day. (42)

During that same day, more desirable positions were located for the section of guns that had been placed near Bra.

(41) A-1, p.9; A-13, 25 December 1944; and Personal Knowledge;

(42) Personal Knowledge

On 26 December, these two guns were moved during the hours of darkness to the new locations, which provided considerably enlarged fields of fire. (See Map D)

By this time, the men were beginning to wonder if they were going to have an opportunity to fire any of their weapons, either antitank or individual. The possibility of a German attack being launched against these prepared positions seemed to be waning as time went on. On 27 December, late in the afternoon, considerable activity and movement could be observed in the woods to the front of the positions at several points along the division defensive line. Not only could movement be observed, but as the afternoon progressed, shouting and yelling, such as one might hear at a football game, could also be heard. Finally, at about 1600 hours, an attack was launched. The attack was unsupported by anything other than numerous machine guns and mortars, and consisted of great numbers of the enemy running forth from the woods, shouting, yelling, and cursing in the American language. In crossing the wide open spaces between the woods and our front lines, they made little or no attempt to use any natural protection, such as ditches, but just kept running. Devastating fire from our weapons rained down on them, but still they continued to pour forth from the woods. (43)

All members of the antitank squads had been trained to be cautious about disclosing gun positions against targets other than tanks, but at the same time if they had good targets, squad leaders could use their own judgement about opening fire. Many mortar and machine gun positions could be easily seen from the antitank gun positions, so two of the

(43) Personal Knowledge

squad leaders elected to open fire and in a short time all four guns had joined in the fight. Those men of the squads who were not engaged in hauling ammunition or loading were firing their individual weapons. Numerous of these mortar and gun positions were knocked out by direct high explosive fire from the antitank weapons. Two of the guns were located on the front lines, so that during this attack a few Germans came to within one hundred yards of the guns before they fell killed or wounded. After all the high explosive ammunition carried by these two forward squads had been expended, a few rounds of armor piercing shells were fired at personnel who were within close range. Finally, the attack was driven off along the entire front without giving up any ground. Enemy casualties had been extremely heavy, while our own, from prepared positions were few. The antitank platoon did not suffer a single casualty. (See Map D) (44)

This attack ended the German offensive action in this part of the salient. From that time until 3 January, when preparations were made to launch an attack, the 1st Platoon did little more than to keep well covered to avoid enemy artillery. (45)

RELIEF AND SUMMARY

From 16 December 1944, when the Germans started their Ardennes offensive, until 3 January 1945, the main mission of the Allied Forces had been to stop the advance of the enemy forces. In accomplishing this task, limited objective attacks had been launched, but to a greater degree, all units had organized strong defensive positions. In addition, (44) Personal Knowledge; (45) Personal Knowledge

during this defensive phase, the American forces in this area had been strengthened by moving elements of the Ninth United States Army south, elements of the Third United States Army north, and the theater reserve of three airborne divisions to the combat zone.

On 3 January, a general offensive was launched to retake the ground that had been lost when the Germans attacked. At 0830 hours, elements of the 82nd Airborne Division started their advance. The sector then defended by the 504th Parachute Infantry was not included in the division zone of attack. At this same time, the 329th Infantry Regiment of the 83d Infantry Division passed through the 504th lines, thus relieving the airborne unit and its attachments. This regiment then became the division reserve. (46)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In examining this series of actions in retrospect, one can find several situations that might well be studied and analyzed to see wherein correct or incorrect procedures had been followed.

The original warning order for movement of the division from its locations in France reached the camp commander at Suippes at approximately 2000 hours, yet about five and one-half hours elapsed before this information was disseminated to all personnel. By that time, less than eight hours remained before they would be moving into combat. Even though, as was pointed out, combat loads of ammunition and rations were always maintained within the division, distributing them is only a small portion of the preparations that must be made

(46) Personal Knowledge

prior to a move of that type. In this particular instance, several men and officers did not have sufficient time to pack their clothing and other personal items, so that they could be properly stored by the few guards who were left behind. As a result, when the troops finally returned to Camp Suippes more than two months later, many of them had lost some of their personal effects. Without exception, everyone could have profitably made more adequate preparations during any additional time that might have been given.

On the trip into the threatened zone, unscheduled halts for varying lengths of time were numerous, particularly during the hours of darkness. Due to the hasty preparations made for the move, undoubtedly many of these stops were unavoidable, but unless successive vehicles move forward when the vehicle in front of them moves, serious consequences might occur. At the time of the long pause, when the Platoon Leader moved forward and found a driver asleep, he had not thought of such a possibility causing a delay. If all officers had immediately moved forward when an unscheduled stop occurred, this gap would never have come in the truck column. Later news was received that the tail of the motor column passed by the crossroads in Houffalize about five minutes before four German tanks rolled up to that corner and cut the highway leading north. To say the least, confusion would have been high had this happened before the column had completely passed this point; therefore, any steps taken to move a column forward rapidly may be of subsequent benefit.

Clarity, brevity, and conciseness of orders alone can determine the success or failure of a mission. The first of these principles was completely disregarded in the initial

attachment orders given to the Platoon Leader. The other two principles were closely followed, but this fact was immaterial since the order was not clear. This platoon had been attached to a parachute regiment, yet no information was given as to the location of this unit, and no maps of the area were provided. In a situation of this type, when information of the enemy was nonexistent, one group trying to find another group might easily become completely lost, and at the same time, the unit desiring the services of a specialized platoon might be badly in need of some help. Maps of this area were not available at home bases in France at the time of departure. Since this was the situation, the thought should have been foremost in every commander's mind that vital information was to be passed on verbally. In this particular situation, no harmful effects came from the fact that the antitank weapons were lost to the attached unit for several hours, but that is not substantial proof that such a practice can be allowed to recur frequently without harmful effects.

Another delay was brought on by the fact that one of the vehicles towing an antitank gun had no brakes. The driver of this vehicle had known this fact for nearly twenty-four hours, but had not reported the same to anyone. If he had told the Platoon Leader, this vehicle could have been exchanged for the Battery Commander's vehicle and the delay would have been avoided.

Whenever a specialized unit, such as an antitank platoon, is supporting a unit, infantry protection must be furnished by the attached unit. This protection can well be the normal disposition of troops, provided the guns are placed within

the squad, platoon or company areas. On one occasion, a battalion commander had the platoon pick out some positions several hundred yards forward of an antitank mine field, which in turn was well forward of the infantry positions. Each gun squad is capable of limited protection of its main weapon and personnel, but certainly a strong enemy attack would have quickly overwhelmed the entire unit. Apparently, this commander was either careless in the employment of the troops under his command, or was poorly informed as to the degree of protection which was desirable for this particular type of unit.

Certainly not all items of intelligence that are learned or evaluated by higher headquarters are of benefit or value to front line platoons. However, when indications are present and apparently reliable to the effect that enemy personnel dressed as Americans, are working behind friendly lines, such information should always be passed on to the front line troops. During the attack on Cheneux, the Germans who posed as Americans aroused no suspicions when they asked to see the Battalion Commander. Perhaps the Platoon Leader should have been suspicious, and had he been warned that Germans were working in rear areas, it is more probable that he would have questioned their identity. Security, one of the basic principles of war, had been violated in that such information had not been relayed to all troops.

The platoons in a larger fighting unit might be compared to links in a chain. As a chain's strength is determined by its weakest link, so is the success of a fighting unit determined by the abilities of its smaller components. The attached Antitank Platoon was one of these links which was

weakened when the battalion failed to draw supplies for its attached units. The attachment of one unit to another automatically should place the responsibility of supplying the attached unit upon the unit to which the attachment was made. In this series of actions, the normal system was not followed on two separate occasions. The first was the time that no rations or gasoline were available for the antitank platoon, and the second was on Christmas Day, when four different supply echelons sent turkey dinners to the entire platoon. Whenever the latter happens, there is needless waste. But more important still, when supplies are not forthcoming as they are needed by various units, the "links" of the chain are weakened, not only by reduced physical strength, but also by lowered troop morale.

During much of the fighting in this period, the temperature was many degrees below the normal freezing point. Most of the weapons of the modern armies are constructed so that they will operate at their maximum efficiency when the weather conditions are temperate. Habitually the American soldier assumed that his weapon, regardless of type or caliber, would perform in a satisfactory manner in any type of weather. The fact that extremely cold weather might affect the operation of an antitank gun had never been considered by the Platoon Leader, Battery Commander, or any of the personnel from other antitank batteries. This unknown defect in the weapon might have caused serious difficulties. More adequate testing prior to combat use would have eliminated this danger. If such testing were thoroughly done and the findings were properly disseminated, personnel would have complete knowledge of their weapons' capabilities under any and all circumstances.

In preparation for the general withdrawal during the night 24-25 December, the Platoon Leader did make a route reconnaissance to the rear and also gave an alternate plan of withdrawal to his platoon. However, he accepted without question the statement of one man that a bridge on the route would not be blown until 2400 hours. He erred in assuming that this plan would be followed.- The bridge was destroyed before the stated time, and the Antitank Platoon was forced to withdraw on the alternate route, which was considerably more dangerous. To avoid risking his troops and equipment any more than necessary, the Platoon Leader should have obtained more accurate information from the proper authorities concerning the plans for demolition of the bridge. It might also have been helpful if he had maintained closer contact with personnel at the bridge until the withdrawal of his platoon across the bridge was safely accomplished.

On this same night, due to extensive mine fields on both sides of the road, considerable time was lost in emplacing the antitank guns. No gaps in these mined areas were located, and none of the antitank platoon personnel had been trained in removing mines. In addition, no records of their extent, their exact locations, or the emplacing unit were available. As a result, crews and guns were forced to remain on the road in what appeared to be a critical time. Lack of proper coordination had again caused unnecessary delay, endangering the entire unit.

This entire period is unique for this platoon in that not once was an enemy tank seen. However, these antitank guns aided materially in repelling an infantry attack, due to the fact that all personnel in the platoon had been trained

in a manner which would develop their initiative. When the occasion to fire high explosive ammunition at located positions was presented, this opportunity was not lost for fear of disclosing positions or because of the absence of the Platoon Leader and Platoon Sergeant. Development of initiative was imperative, for on many occasions, individual guns of a platoon were scattered over wide areas, and the Platoon Leader or Platoon Sergeant could not always be present to give the signal to commence firing in any given situation.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this series of actions are:

1. The pick and shovel man needs every possible minute for preparation at any time, but particularly in an emergency. Therefore, when vital information is received, that same information and how it affects the troops should be disseminated to them immediately.

2. In a motor march, whenever unscheduled halts occur, particularly at night, and when no radio communications are set up in the column, all commanders of march units should immediately dismount and move forward, at least to the head of the preceding march unit, to insure that no unnecessary delays occur.

3. Orders must be clear, brief, and concise. In this action, the initial orders received by the Platoon Leader were vague, and for this reason, the supported unit was deprived of its deserved protection for several hours.

4. Driver training should include instructions to include

form appropriate personnel immediately of any malfunctions or unusual conditions of a vehicle.

5. Specialized attachments, if they are unable to provide for their own security, must either be given infantry protection or so placed that they will naturally be secured within the normal dispositions of the troops.

6. Commanders of all echelons should familiarize themselves with the capabilities and limitations of attached units before attempting to employ them.

7. Each successive higher echelon of command is always anxious to receive every small detail of enemy information that may come from the individual soldiers. Likewise, when these higher echelons have any pertinent information concerning the enemy, every effort should be made to disseminate that information to the individual soldiers.

8. Commanders of units to which attachments are made must not overlook these attachments when considering the resupply problem.

9. All weapons should be tested under all conditions, prior to combat, so that their limitations may be thoroughly understood.

10. When the success of accomplishing a mission depends upon crossing a bridge that is prepared for destruction, close liaison with personnel assigned the task of destroying the bridge must be maintained constantly, until the crossing is completed.

11. Whenever mine fields are emplaced, their exact locations should be accurately plotted and passed on to successive units occupying such areas.

12. Training in development of initiative in every man will preclude the chance of a unit failing to take advantage of a favorable situation, even though incorrect decisions may be made.