

Staff Department
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1949-1950

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 48TH ARMORED
INFANTRY BATTALION (7TH ARMORED DIVISION)
IN THE VICINITY OF
MEIJEL, SOUTH OF NIJMEGEN, HOLLAND,
27 - 29 OCTOBER 1944.
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: AN ARMORED INFANTRY COMPANY
ATTACKING AND DEFENDING VITAL GROUND IN SWAMPY TERRAIN.

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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ITEM NO: 3545

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph describes the operations of Company B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, 7th Armored Division in the vicinity of MEIJEL, HOLLAND, 27-29 October 1944, during the British offensive to clear the SCHELDT ESTUARY.

For the purpose of orientation, major events which led up to this action will be discussed briefly.

During the latter part of August 1944 the 21st Army Group, consisting of the First Canadian Army on the north and the Second British Army on the south, crossed the SEINE RIVER and advanced rapidly through northern FRANCE and into BELGIUM. (1)

In early September the Second British Army had seized BRUSSELS, cleared the port city of ANTWERP, and continued its advance into HOLLAND. (2) On 17 September airborne troops were dropped in the vicinity of ARNHEM, NIJMEGEN and EINDHOVEN in an effort to seize vital road and railway bridges in preparation for the battle of ARNHEM. (3) The remainder of the Second British Army drove northward and joined forces with the airborne troops which by 30 September resulted in a salient extending north just beyond NIJMEGEN. (4) (See Map A)

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- (1) A-1, p. 159
(2) A-1, p. 160
(3) A-5, p. 67
(4) A-6, p. 319

Early in October the Second British Army was attempting to expand its salient while the First Canadian Army was meeting determined resistance along the western coast of HOLLAND.(5)

After a rapid advance across FRANCE and into BELGIUM with the Third U.S. Army, the 7th Armored Division was assigned to the First U.S. Army on 24 September 1944. (6) The division was ordered into HOLLAND to take part in clearing the PEEL SWAMP west of the MEUSE RIVER which contained an enemy pocket considered dangerous to both the First U.S. Army and the Second British Army. (7)

The division engaged in several offensive operations in carrying out this mission capturing several small towns. At OVERLOON, HOLLAND, the division met particularly strong resistance and was committed there from 3-7 October 1944. (8)

On 8 October the division, due to a change in Army boundaries, was transferred from the First U.S. Army to the Second British Army, commanded by Lt. General Miles G. Dempsey. It was further assigned to the VIII British Corps, the right flank Corps of General Dempsey's Army. (9)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In mid October after having ordered the Second British Army to halt its offensive operations in the NIJMEGEN salient, Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery planned to have the Second British Army attack west to TILBURG and on toward the coast while the First Canadian Army was to renew its efforts in clearing SOUTH BEVELAND and WALCHEREN. (10) The main objective

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- (5) A-1, p. 199
(6) A-8, p. 86
(7) A-9, p. 55
(8) A-4, p. 20
(9) A-4, p. 20
(10) A-7, p. 12

of this plan was to clear the approaches to the SCHELDT ESTUARY as there was an urgent need for the use of the port of ANTWERP. (11)

In order to carry out its part of the plan, Second British Army shifted the bulk of its strength toward the west of the NIJMEGEN salient. Consequently the divisions of VIII British Corps on the eastern side of the salient were necessarily assigned greater zones of responsibility. (12) (See Map B)

During the last week of October VIII British Corps assigned the defensive mission of protecting a portion of the eastern flank of the Second British Army to the 7th Armored Division while the offensive to the west was undertaken. (13)

The defensive responsibility of the division centered at MEIJEL, HOLLAND, and stretched north along the DEURNE CANAL and southwest along the NOORER CANAL resulting in a total front of approximately twenty-two miles. (14) All bridges across both canals within the division sector had been blown. In order to cover this extremely large sector the division was compelled to spread its elements sparsely along the canal lines. Outposts varied in size from a few men to a platoon and were located in some instances as far as one-half mile apart. Foot patrols were used extensively to cover open gaps. The armor of the division could not be used to the maximum extent possible due to the condition of the terrain. All major components of the division were committed except the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion and the 17th Medium Tank Battalion which under Combat Command Reserve constituted the reserve of the division. (15)

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- (11) A-5, p. 68
 - (12) A-1, p. 20
 - (13) A-2, p. 1
 - (14) A-4, p. 21
 - (15) A-4, p. 23

In the division sector the terrain was low, flat and generally swampy. Improved roads were few in number and the majority of these centered at ASTEN. There were numerous unimproved roads and trails the bulk of which could not support heavy vehicles. Extensive peat bogs in many cases covered by several inches of water accounted for the swampy condition of the terrain throughout the sector. Canals of varied size were interlaced with drainage ditches and small dikes. Any combination of these features presented formidable obstacles not only to tracked and wheeled vehicles but to men on foot as well. (16)

Enemy patrols had been quite active all along the division zone and it was known that elements of the enemy comprised mainly of former paratroop and engineer personnel were deployed along the DEURNE and NOORER CANALS facing the division. The German 9th Panzer Division and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division were reported to be in the general vicinity but their exact locations were unknown. Information as to activities behind the immediate front lines of the enemy was practically nil since the weather had kept air reconnaissance on the ground for several days. (17)

The status of supply of the enemy was considered to be good since they had left no servicable equipment behind in their retreat across BELGIUM and southwestern HOLLAND. Their morale was lowered somewhat due to serious personnel losses and repeated withdrawals but this was offset by their determination to keep the Allies from entering their homeland and the fact that the terrain was favorable to the defenders. (18)

(16) Personal knowledge

(17) A-4, p. 21

(18) Personal knowledge

See MAP B

The division had lost some key personnel since it entered combat and although replacements had been received periodically, they were not sufficient in numbers to bring the infantry units up to full strength. Morale however, was considered excellent. The battle at OVERLOON had not only further depleted the strength of the infantry units but also resulted in a shortage of mortars, mortar ammunition, binoculars, compasses and radios. Replenishment of equipment and some types of ammunition was complicated since long supply journeys, over restricted routes into the First U.S. Army zone were usually necessary.

(19)

Taking everything into consideration, the combat efficiency of our forces and the Germans was approximately equal.

DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF THE 48TH ARMORED INFANTRY BATTALION

The 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, a part of Combat Command Reserve, moved into ASTEN, HOLLAND during the night of 25 October 1944 for a five day rest period. (20)

On the morning of 27 October the battalion commander, Lt. Colonel Richard D. Chappuis, received information that a strong enemy combat patrol had succeeded in crossing the DEURNE CANAL east of MEIJEL. This town was eight miles southeast of ASTEN and connected by a good, two lane, hard surfaced road. MEIJEL was being defended by two platoons of Troop D, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, 7th Armored Division. Subsequent reports revealed that during an hour and ten minute artillery preparation the enemy had put a considerable number of troops

(19) Statement of Capt. Walter Pennino, S-4, 48th Armd Inf Bn, 29 July 1949.

(20) Personal knowledge

across the DEURNE CANAL and Troop D had been forced to withdraw from MEIJEL. Upon receipt of this latter information the battalion commander alerted the battalion and orders to prepare for movement were issued. (21)

As additional reports flowed in it became apparent that the situation was serious and developing rapidly. The Combat Command Commander, Colonel Jack L. Ryan, Jr., who had been given the mission of repelling the enemy attack ordered the battalion commander to dispatch two companies on individual missions to protect the left and right flanks of the Combat Command. Companies A and C were dispatched at approximately 0800 hours to the right and left flanks respectively. (22)

At 1000 hours the battalion commander received an order to attack at 1300 hours with the mission of repelling the enemy attack and recapturing MEIJEL. Company A, 17th Medium Tank Battalion and the 1st Platoon of Company A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion were attached to the battalion for this mission. (23)

The battalion minus Companies A and C moved on half-tracks from ASTEN at approximately 1030 hours. Due to a sudden temporary lapse in reports of the enemy to the front the battalion moved by bounds up the main road to a forward assembly area approximately three miles northwest of MEIJEL arriving there about noon. (24)

Since Companies A and C had been given mission type orders earlier that morning the battalion commander was forced to

(21) A-4, p. 22

(22) A-3, p. 1

(23) Statement of Lt Col Richard D. Chappuis, Commanding Officer, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion.

(24) Personal knowledge

launch the initial attack with Company B. This company would attack astride the ASTEN-MEIJEL ROAD with one platoon of tanks attached. The remainder of the tank company would be held in battalion reserve since forward movement of the tanks was restricted almost entirely to the few substantial roads in the area. Company A which was protecting the right flank of the Combat Command would effect an envelopment of the enemy left flank when Company B came abreast of it in its frontal attack. Company C, protecting the Combat Command left flank would be relieved of its mission and follow Company B as battalion reserve. The 489th Field Artillery Battalion would be in direct support. The battalion assault gun platoon would also support the operation from positions in the vicinity of the present assembly area. (25) (See Map C)

THE COMPANY SITUATION

After receipt of the battalion attack order in the forward assembly area there was insufficient time remaining before the time of the attack for any ground reconnaissance to be made by Company B personnel. Therefore the company commander's reconnaissance was confined necessarily to a brief map study.

There was an understrength of from ten to fourteen men in each of the three rifle platoons of the company whereas the anti-tank platoon was understrength about six men. (26)

No shortages in clothing or individual weapons existed within the company. However, equipment shortages included several compasses, binoculars, one 60 mm mortar and one SCR

(25) A-3, p. 1

(26) Personal knowledge

300 radio. The supply of mortar ammunition and radio batteries, particularly batteries for the SCR 510 radio, was very limited. Basic loads of ammunition with the one exception of mortar ammunition were available on each squad's half-track. (27)

The weather was chilly and very damp. Overcast skies and heavy cloud formations which had prevailed for several days offered no hope that reconnaissance aircraft could assist in the operation.

The zone of attack of Company B offered one hard surfaced road which was the main road connecting ASTEN and MEIJEL. Elevation of the ground was practically non-existent for it was flat as far as observation permitted. Numerous swamps and peat bogs dotted the area. The largest of these laid directly in the zone of attack and extended laterally more than a mile on either side of the road. There were numerous unimproved roads and trails throughout the area but few appeared capable of supporting vehicles.

Latest reports from front line units indicated that Troop D, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron now held a line astride the ASTEN-MEIJEL ROAD, 1200 yards west of MEIJEL and confirmed the fact that the attacking enemy force was not composed of nondescript paratroop and engineer elements but rather well equipped organized units. Elements of the 9th Panzer Division and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division had been identified. (28)

THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK (29) (See Map C)

The line of departure would be the crossroads just forward of the present assembly area. The company would cross

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- (27) Personal knowledge
 - (28) A-1, p. 207
 - (29) Personal knowledge

it dismounted, at 1300 hours.

The company plan was to attack southeast, astride the ASTEN-MEIJEL ROAD, and advance through the position of Troop D continuing on to recapture MEIJEL. Troop D was to remain in position and support the company by fire until the latter reached the town.

The 1st and 3d Platoons would lead the attack on the right and left of the road respectively. Upon reaching MEIJEL each platoon was to clear that portion of the town lying on its side of the main road, continuing on to the eastern limits of the town itself.

The attached tank platoon, under company control, was to follow the leading rifle platoons on the road since their maneuverability was limited. As soon as contact with the enemy was made the tanks were to support the leading platoons by fire and advance by bounds to available positions on order of the company commander.

The 2d Platoon would be in support and follow the tank platoon on the right side of the road. It was not to follow so closely that its maneuverability would be lost once contact was made.

The Anti-Tank Platoon would remain in the present assembly area and be prepared to move forward on call.

The company command group, consisting of the company commander, two radio operators and three messengers would follow immediately in rear of the leading platoons.

Requests for artillery support would be made to the company commander since the artillery forward observer would be with him initially. Fires of the battalion supporting weapons

would also be secured on call. Visual contact would be maintained between all elements of the company and the tank platoon initially. Radio communication in the company and tank platoon would be by SCR 300 radio. Communication between company and battalion would be by SCR 510 radio which had been dismounted from one of the company $\frac{1}{4}$ ton vehicles. The battalion command post and the battalion aid station were located adjacent to the road just in rear of the present assembly area.

Instructions were also issued for each man to carry one blanket, a full canteen of water, two-thirds of a K ration and a full load of ammunition. Resupply would be accomplished after dark.

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK (30)

After the attack order had been issued by the platoon leaders little time remained for final preparation. Checks were made to insure that each man carried the proper amount of ammunition, equipment and rations. All radios were tested and found to be in proper operating condition.

The company commander notified battalion that the artillery forward observer had not yet reported. Arrangements were made to have the forward observer sent forward to wherever the company was located as soon as he arrived. In the meantime, requests for artillery support were to be made to the battalion S-3.

As the company moved from the assembly area artillery fire began to fall just beyond the vehicles in the area.

(30) Personal knowledge

NARRATION

THE ATTACK TOWARD MEIJEL (31) (See Map C)

Company B crossed the line of departure at 1300, 27 October 1944, astride the ASTEN-MEIJEL Road.

The 1st Platoon, commanded by 2nd Lt. Steve Kozy in his first combat action, was echeloned to the right on the right side of the road. Squads were well extended laterally and in depth.

The 3d Platoon, commanded by Tech. Sgt. Roland Lavrenz was in a similar formation echeloned to the left on the left side of the road.

Initial progress was fairly rapid until one or the other leading platoons would have to traverse a peat bog or swamp. Then it became necessary to slow down the advance of the opposite platoon.

The tank platoon was moved forward by bounds and kept within close supporting distance of the leading platoons. There were few positions adjacent to the road where the tanks were able to deploy before again moving forward.

The 2d Platoon commanded by 2nd Lt. Ernest Van Winkle, moved steadily forward behind the tank platoon on the right side of the road.

After the company had proceeded about a mile it was confronted by a very large peat bog. The bog extended more than 1000 yards to the right and left of the road and was covered in most places by a few inches of water. In addition a small

(31) Personal knowledge

canal ran along the left of the road. The advance was slowed considerably as the men found it difficult to retain their footing.

Small arms and some mortar fire could be heard to the front while occasional artillery fire could still be heard falling back in the vicinity of the assembly area. The company itself was receiving no enemy fire.

At approximately 1430 as the company came within sight of the two platoons of Troop D, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron the company commander moved forward to contact the commander of Troop D in order to secure information of the enemy dispositions. Troop D was deployed at a bend in the road from where the first houses of MEIJEL could be seen. On the right side of the road Troop D had two light tanks, two armored cars and a jeep. The ground on the left of the road appeared soggy. The squadron commander who was at the position stated that since Troop D had withdrawn to its present position it had received small arms and mortar fire but no enemy automatic weapons had been located. No enemy armored vehicle or tanks had so far been observed. He confirmed the fact that Troop D would remain in position until Company B was well beyond their present location.

The company commander immediately ordered the attached tank platoon leader to place his tanks in position on the right side of the road from where they could support the leading platoons by fire. The tanks moved into position just as the first elements of Company B started through Troop D's positions. Be-

fore the leading platoons had completely cleared the positions, the forward elements of Troop D immediately withdrew. (32) At the same time enemy artillery fire began to fall on the position. Tank fire coming from the edge of the town was being directed at the vehicles and tanks on the right side of the road. The leading platoons of Company B were pinned to the ground. While the company commander was calling for artillery fire to be placed on the edge of the town, the enemy launched an attack from a woodland about 300 yards in front of the 1st Platoon with approximately two platoons of infantry supported by three tanks. Two vehicles which had been left behind by Troop D and one of the tanks attached to the company had been hit and started to burn. At this time the remaining tanks supporting the company became completely disorganized, moved out of their positions and followed Troop D to the rear. (33) All efforts to keep these tanks from leaving the position went to no avail. In spite of seeing Troop D withdrawing prematurely and the supporting tanks moving to the rear the men of the company held their ground and concerned themselves with repelling the enemy. Friendly artillery fire was shifted from the edge of town onto the attacking enemy. Under this fire combined with the fires of the company the enemy infantry withdrew back into the woods. The enemy tanks however skirted the woodland in front of the 1st Platoon and then disappeared into the woods towards Company A's location.

The 2d Platoon of the company had been ordered to dig in on the right side of the road about 400 yards in rear of the present positions of the 1st and 3d Platoons.

(32) A-3, p. 1
(33) A-3, p. 1

The situation was reported to the battalion commander by radio and he ordered the company to defend in place.

It was soon found that it was impossible to dig a slit trench on the left side of the road as a shallow hole would immediately fill with water. The area of solid ground on the right side of the road at ground level permitted no observation over the left side of the road whatsoever since the road was raised approximately four feet at that point. Therefore, permission was requested and received from the battalion commander to move back about 400 yards to an area on the right side of the road that provided solid ground and observation over the bog on the left of the road. Since the 2d Platoon was already at this location the 3d Platoon on the left of the road was withdrawn while the 1st Platoon remained in position. After the 3d Platoon was in position on the right of the 2d Platoon the squads of the 1st Platoon began their withdrawal. This short withdrawal was carried out without receiving any enemy fire. The 1st Platoon took up positions in rear of the 2d and 3d Platoons forming a perimeter.

The company experienced no further enemy attack for the remainder of the afternoon but mortar fire continued to fall on the company area sporadically. About twelve casualties, the majority of them from the 1st Platoon, were evacuated. In addition, six men of the 1st Platoon including the platoon leader were reported by the platoon sergeant, Tech. Sgt. John De Goey as having been captured by the enemy. These men had been farthest forward of the 1st Platoon when the enemy attack was launched from the woodland to their front.

Reported
at
what
Time.

Organization of the company position continued and local security was placed out to the front of each platoon. Artillery concentrations which had been fired in the afternoon attack were marked and plans for interdicting the road forward of the company position were completed just prior to dark.

THE FIRST NIGHT ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF MEIJEL (34) (See Map D)

The company was notified that Company A, in position in the woods about 800 yards south of the ASTEN-MEIJEL Road, would take up positions on the right of Company B at approximately 2000 hours. Word was also received from battalion that some tanks would be sent forward to further strengthen the position.
(35)

Shortly after 2000 hours Company A comprizing about two platoons moved in on the right flank of Company B. Fires of the light machine guns of the two companies were coordinated and the position was further consolidated. The company commander of Company A stated that they had received an enemy infantry-tank attack at the same time that afternoon that Company B had received their attack. Further that three enemy tanks had overrun his command post and continued past Company A's position to the northwest.

At 2315 hours the company was notified that an artillery forward observer would be sent forward. The company commander was directed to meet this observer at 0430 at the location of the anti-tank platoon of Company A. This platoon was located at a farm house adjacent to the road some 800 yards to the rear

(34) Personal knowledge

(35) A-3, p. 2

of the company. Arrangements were made at this time to have water, rations and ammunition delivered to the same location prior to 0430.

Since the afternoon attack enemy action had consisted solely of occasional mortar and artillery fire. Noises could be heard to the front indicating considerable movement of vehicles and some tanks. Several times during the night Company B called for the artillery concentration to be fired on the enemy in the woods southeast of the road.

Between 2200 and 0300 hours three reconnaissance patrols had been sent out from the company. The 1st Patrol which had reconnoitered along the front of Companies A and B reported that the enemy had security groups about 400 yards to our front and that they had heard the movement of five or six tanks apparently coming from or just beyond the woods to our front. The 2d Patrol which had been sent across the ASTEN-MEIJEL Road to investigate the left flank reported no indications of enemy positions but had been fired on by a large enemy patrol moving toward MEIJEL at a point 400 yards northeast of the company position. The 3d Patrol which had scouted the right rear of the position located three enemy tanks with about a platoon of infantry in a small woods about 700 yards northwest and in rear of the defensive positions of Company A and B. After locating this enemy to our rear this patrol contacted the anti-tank platoon of Company A, reported the enemy position to them and returned to the defensive position shortly before 0300 hours.

At 0300, 28 October, shortly after the outguards in front of the company gave warning, the enemy renewed the attack with-

out prior artillery or mortar preparations. The first increment of enemy foot troops was attacking Company B frontally with small arms and automatic weapons fire. As soon as the enemy had began firing, friendly artillery fire was brought down about 200 yards forward of Company B on the enemy. The 2nd and 3d Platoons of the company had began firing as soon as the enemy had started firing. Our artillery appeared to be falling beyond the bulk of the enemy and it took considerable urging to get the artillery to bring their fires down another hundred yards. By this time enemy artillery fire was falling on Company B but the enemy was unable to penetrate either platoon area. Shortly after the enemy artillery fire had started falling, enemy infantry followed by several tanks attempted to move past the left flank of the 2nd Platoon. Small arms fire from the platoon drove off the infantry but the tanks continued moving on the road along the company flank raking the area with machine gun fire. In spite of this fire and the lack of observation due to darkness two rocket launchers which were in position on the left flank to cover the road fired a total of six rounds at the tanks. Two rounds had found their mark but apparently no serious damage was done to the tanks as they continued on past the flank of the company. The fire fight continued for about forty-five minutes until the enemy attacking frontally withdrew. Seven enemy tanks had succeeded in passing the company left flank during the attack. (36)

A few minutes after the enemy withdrew from the front the artillery concentration on the woods was called for and fired. It was apparent when the fire lifted that it had been particular-

ly effective this time as was indicated by the noise and shouting that could be heard coming from the enemy in the woods.

Considering the amount of fire the company had received during this attack casualties were not too heavy as two men were killed and three men were wounded. It was unnecessary to evacuate the wounded men as their injuries were very minor in nature.

About 0415 the company commander, a messenger and a guide for the carrying party started out for the position of the anti-tank platoon of Company A to meet the artillery forward observer. As they came within 100 yards of the farmhouse, the enemy tanks which had passed beyond Company B opened fire on the anti-tank platoon position. A short but violent fight left the farmhouse in flames with no further answering fire coming from the anti-tank platoon position. As the enemy tanks moved forward and occupied the position the company commander and the two men with him returned to Company B's defensive position. It was apparent that the company would receive no water, rations or ammunition that night nor would it have the assistance of an artillery forward observer for the time being.

Upon his return to the company, the company commander reported what had taken place to the battalion commander and informed him that the company was getting low on ammunition, had little water and one-third of a ration for the coming day. In turn he was informed that the attached tank company had become completely disorganized and that it was likely that no tank support would be available to the company. He emphasized the necessity of holding the present position.

As dawn broke over the horizon Company B had enemy on three sides of its position. Known positions of the enemy were in the woods 700 yards to the front; three enemy tanks and infantry in a small patch of woods 700 yards to the right rear; and seven enemy tanks 800 yards directly to the rear. (37)

Since no rations or ammunition were going to be received this information was passed on to the men and a redistribution of ammunition was effected. The company commander realizing that future casualties could not be evacuated from the position so informed the company medical aid men and cautioned them to conserve their remaining supplies accordingly.

THE SECOND DAY (38) (See Map D)

At 0800, 28 October approximately two platoons of enemy foot troops could be seen moving west about 800 yards beyond the left flank of the company. Riflemen on the left flank fired a few rounds but their fire had little effect except to slow the enemy advance somewhat. The company mortars were not permitted to fire since the supply of mortar ammunition was almost exhausted. Artillery fire requested and adjusted by the company commander was placed on the enemy causing them to disperse widely and become disorganized.

As the morning wore on it was apparent that no enemy were dug in between the company and the woods to the front. However movement could be observed just inside the woods. Short exchanges of rifle fire continued at irregular intervals with an occasional mortar round landing within Company B's position.

(37) A-3, p. 2

(38) Personal knowledge

Shortly after 1300 hours a few rounds of enemy artillery fell in the center of the company defensive area and within the space of a few minutes increased to such proportions that it was apparent another attack was to be launched by the enemy. The marked artillery concentration on the woods was requested immediately. The enemy preparation lasted five minutes and when it lifted approximately a company of enemy foot troops were within two hundred yards of the front line platoons. They were fairly well dispersed and taken under fire by the 2nd and 3d Platoons. The friendly concentration on the woods was repeated to keep any reinforcements from joining the attacking wave. The fire fight had been going on for about ten minutes when another concentration of enemy artillery fire was received. It again lasted for about five minutes but was so far forward on the company position that the enemy foot troops were unable to assault the front line platoons. While the company was being subjected to this second concentration additional enemy troops had come out of the woods to reinforce these directly in front of the company. Once again friendly artillery placed fire on the same woods. The machine guns and automatic rifles of the 2d and 3d Platoons were not only effectively stopping the enemy in front of the position but were inflicting heavy casualties as well. While this frontal assault was taking place a platoon of enemy infantry appeared to the left rear of the company moving rapidly. The 1st Platoon took them under fire and after several minutes individual enemy foot soldiers could be seen attempting to withdraw. The enemy to the front continued their firing and each time reinforcements attempted to leave the woods

they would be scattered by friendly artillery fire. The concentration on the woods and several other concentrations between the woods and Company B's position were fired repeatedly throughout the afternoon until eventually the few enemy remaining directly in front of the company withdrew.

The fire fight had lasted fully two hours and had been costly to both the enemy and Company B. Three men had been killed and eight men were wounded. Fortunately none of the eight were seriously wounded for evacuation was impossible. Shrapnel from the enemy artillery fire had rendered one mortar and one SCR 300 radio useless. No mortar ammunition was left and the supply of machine gun ammunition was practically exhausted. The SCR 510 radio, the only means of communication with battalion, had been in use continuously and was becoming very weak. Arrangements were made whereby the set would be turned off except to receive messages from battalion each hour on the hour or as needed to transmit emergency messages to them.

The remainder of the afternoon was relatively quiet except for the sporadic fire of enemy mortars.

THE NIGHT WITHDRAWAL (39) (See Map D)

At 1800 battalion notified the company commander that the executive officer of Company B, 1st Lt. Avery Tucker, would attempt to reach the company position and that he had orders for both Companies A and B. Lt. Tucker, knowing the precarious position of both companies, had volunteered for this assignment. (40)

Some three and a half hours later the executive officer and

(39) Personal knowledge

(40) A-3, p. 3

one enlisted man arrived at the company command post. He brought orders that both companies were to withdraw as soon as possible. He was also able to orient the company commander on the current dispositions of the remainder of the battalion and the battalion installations. The forward battalion command post was now located about 500 yards forward of the road junction which had been Company B's line of departure the afternoon before. Company C was now in position astride the ASTEN-MEIJEL Road on the northwest end of the large peat bog. The battalion aid station was still in its initial location. The direct support artillery battalion was prepared to fire a box barrage forward of the positions of Companies A and B on call to cover the withdrawal. The executive officer indicated on the map the route he had used in joining Company B pointing out two locations from which he had received enemy small arms fire.

The following plan was decided upon. The companies would use the same route and attempt to avoid the known enemy locations. Two alternate routes were also selected. The withdrawal would begin as soon as every man was oriented. The executive officer would lead with the two platoons of Company A. Company B would follow with its company headquarters, 1st Platoon, 3d Platoon, 2d Platoon and local security in that order. Since there was no moonlight and the night was very dark the formation would be two single columns separated laterally as far as visual contact would allow. Each platoon would provide small security detachments to its flanks. All men were to be cautioned not to fire their weapons once the withdrawal started unless so ordered by their squad or platoon leaders. This order was felt necessary

since the company commander did not want to risk a complete disorganization in the event the column encountered an enemy patrol or an outguard. The 2d Platoon Leader was designated to move at the end of the column with a half-squad of riflemen. He was instructed that in the event the column was fired upon, he with the half-squad would maneuver to the flank from which the fire came in order to engage the enemy and draw their fire from the bulk of the company.

By 2300 hours every officer and man had been informed of the withdrawal plan and each one knew exactly what he was to do. With everything in readiness the company commander called for the artillery box barrage.

As the first rounds landed the withdrawal started. The figures of the men of Company A started to move quickly into the darkness. Several minutes later while Company B personnel were still in their foxholes waiting to move out enemy artillery fire began to land in the area. It lasted about two minutes and stopped. After waiting another minute or so for the rest of Company A to move, the company commander of Company B investigated and found one squad of Company A still in their foxholes. The squad leader stated that he had lost contact with the rest of his unit when the enemy artillery had landed. Noise of the movement of Company A was lost in the din of friendly artillery which was still being fired. The company commander instructed the squad leader to integrate his squad with the company headquarters of Company B. Word was passed along from man to man and the company started their withdrawal with the company commander leading since he was most familiar with the route decided upon.

Movement was slow and frequent halts were necessary to insure that control was being maintained within the company. The only tangible guide available was the occasional flash of friendly artillery guns far in the distance. When crossing bogs or swamps progress was slowed still more in order to eliminate as much noise as possible. After the company had been moving for about an hour there was still no sign of Company A nor had there been any contact with the enemy. The bogs were becoming less frequent and the ground more firm and dry. The company was moving generally in a northwest direction alongside of a small canal. After another half hour the company changed direction and went north until it came to a trail junction where contact was made with an outpost of the battalion. The company had arrived at a point 600 yards west of the forward battalion command post.

Company B then received orders placing it in battalion reserve. It was to take up positions once again astride the ASTEN-MEIJEL ROAD in the vicinity of the battalion command post.

Company A which had arrived thirty minutes previously was moving to positions on the right flank of Company C.

As soon as each platoon of the company had closed into its respective area the men who had been wounded that afternoon were evacuated. Rations, water and ammunition were then distributed. A head count indicated that all men were accounted for and no one had become separated during the withdrawal.

The company was disposed with the 1st Platoon on the left of the road, the 3d Platoon in positions on the right of the road, and the 2d Platoon spread thinly around the flanks and rear.

THE LAST DAY IN DEFENSE (41) (See Map E)

At 0800 hours, 29 October the enemy launched their strongest and most determined attack since this action had begun two days earlier. Attempting a double envelopment of the positions of Companies A and C, both of which had suffered heavy personnel losses the first day, the enemy was employing tanks and infantry. A furious fire fight ensued for over an hour and although the double envelopment failed, a revived frontal assault with additional tanks and infantry succeeded in overrunning the positions. (42)

Company B, having been alerted, braced itself and prepared for the coming enemy attack. Although there were no tanks at the present position, a platoon of medium tanks and a platoon of tank destroyers had just moved into position some 500 yards to the rear at Company B's original line of departure.

The battalion commander issued orders to the effect that Company B in its present position would delay the enemy as long as possible to gain time for the organization of the defenses at the crossroads. The 2d Platoon of the company was ordered to displace to the crossroads position at once and take positions on the left of the main road.

The enemy tanks and infantry appeared advancing on either side of the road at about 1030 hours. The 1st and 3d Platoons opened fire at long range. The tank destroyers and the tanks at the crossroads engaged the enemy tanks and a fierce gun duel raged between them. The enemy tanks continued to fire and advance. The enemy foot troops moved forward by short bounds making use of what cover was afforded by small ditches in the

(41) Personal knowledge

(42) Statement of Major Lynn Carlson, Exec. Officer, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, 13 June 1949.

area. The one 60 mm mortar of the 1st Platoon, the only one left in the company, was firing continuously. When the enemy had come within 300 yards his advance was stopped but the firing continued. A few minutes later another group of enemy foot troops about the size of a platoon were advancing from the northeast toward the left flank of the 1st Platoon. They too were immediately taken under fire and stopped some 300 yards out from the flank. Friendly artillery fire being adjusted by the battalion S-3, Major Sid Frazier, who had remained at the position, was helping considerably in keeping the enemy pinned to the ground. At this time the S-3 instructed the company commander to have the 3d Platoon on the right flank start moving back to the crossroads. The platoon was ordered to displace a few men at a time and upon arrival at the crossroads to organize their position on the right of the main road. The S-3 before following the last few men of the 3d Platoon back to the crossroads told the company commander to withdraw the 1st Platoon when he felt the position could no longer be held.

About twenty minutes later with the fire fight between the enemy and the 1st Platoon still going on, as was the gun duel between the opposing tanks, another wave of enemy infantry was moving up to reinforce those directly in front of the 1st Platoon. The men of this platoon now numbering about twenty were firing as rapidly as their weapons would operate. Enemy mortar fire which began to fall on the position was effective in cutting down the rate of fire of the platoon. Each time mortar rounds would burst the enemy foot troops would advance a few more yards. The company commander decided it was time to withdraw the platoon and called for artillery fire in

front of the position. The platoon well dispersed started moving rapidly back towards the crossroads. The enemy which had been attacking the left flank were not receiving any of the artillery fire and consequently began firing at the men of the 1st Platoon. They in turn were taken under fire by one section of heavy machine guns of the battalion Headquarters Company in position on the left flank of the crossroads. Upon arrival at the crossroads the 1st Platoon was placed on the left flank of the 2d Platoon. The combination of the fires from the artillery, tanks, tank destroyers and the infantry troops were sufficiently heavy to temporarily halt the enemy advance.

The organization of the defensive position at the crossroads under the supervision of the battalion commander had just about been completed by the time the 1st Platoon of Company B arrived. Besides a platoon of tanks, a platoon of tank destroyers, the heavy machine gun platoon of battalion Headquarters Company, and Company B there were also artillery forward observers from the 489th Field Artillery Battalion and the British 25th F.D. Regiment. The position was strong and well organized. It was the first time in three days that the men of Company B felt that they would be fighting the enemy on a more even scale.

At this time the battalion commander passed on to all subordinate commanders the order from higher headquarters that this position had to be held at all cost to allow British Second Army time to move reinforcements into the area. (43)

At 1400 hours the enemy launched an Infantry-Tank attack

(43) Statement of Lt Col Richard D. Chappuis, Commanding Officer, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion.

that was almost a replica of the attack on Company B earlier that day. Enemy infantry and tanks began a frontal attack just as enemy artillery began to fall on the defensive position. Simultaneously, a second prong of the attack also including infantry and tanks was coming from the northeast. The enemy tanks at this time had some ground on the north side of the main road upon which they could maneuver. However, the only concealment available to them was a few widely scattered farm houses. Consequently they were immediately fired upon by tanks and tank destroyers and the duel between armor broke out anew. As the enemy infantry, estimated to be of battalion strength, continued their advance they came under the fire of the small arms and machine guns of Company B and the machine gun platoon of the battalion Headquarters Company. Artillery fire was used against the tanks as well as the enemy infantry and was instrumental in repeated disorganization of the attacking force. Small groups of enemy infantry that did get within close range of the position were ineffectual and quickly disposed of by the fires of Company B. Considering that the enemy was well aware of our position, the artillery and mortar fire directed upon the position was not as heavy as expected. The majority of enemy artillery was passing overhead apparently directed at installations further to the rear. Three successive attempts by the enemy to penetrate the position failed. Each attempt being repulsed by the combined fires from within the position and the supporting artillery.

By 1600 hours it became apparent that the full weight of the attack had been broken. Seven enemy tanks that had been knocked out could be seen to the front and left front of the

position. (44) The enemy infantry casualties were known to be extremely high for there was so little cover available and any movement on the surface of the ground could be seen easily at 200 yards. Company B's casualties for the day amounted to two men killed and twelve wounded.

The remainder of the afternoon and evening brought no further attacks by the enemy. Combat action after dark was limited to patrolling to the front and flanks.

Early in the evening the company received word that a relief would be effected at midnight and that Company B would remain in position until notified to move out. At 2330 hours the tanks and tank destroyers began to move out under cover of artillery fire. Concurrently the machine gun platoon of battalion Headquarters Company did likewise. At midnight, the company after having received the order to clear the position started its rearward movement to the vehicle assembly area.

The relieving units were from the 15th Scottish Division. They were in a well prepared defensive position approximately one mile to the rear of the position Company B had just vacated. (45)

To sum up the results of this battle: Company B while it did not succeed in carrying out fully its initial mission, did repel the enemy attack. The company carried out its subsequent defensive missions successfully even though fighting against numerically stronger forces. It seems apparent in considering the conduct of the enemy attacks that the enemy had underestimated the opposing forces. The determined and repeated attacks indicate the importance the enemy placed on the operation. Had

(44) A-3, p. 3

(45) A-3, p. 3

the enemy succeeded in breaking through, the entire NIJMEGEN salient would have been endangered. Casualties sustained by the company included seven killed, six missing, and thirty-five wounded. The enemy losses, though not enumerated, were known to be much greater than our own.

Further evidence of the importance of the battle was expressed in a letter from Lt. General Miles C. Dempsey to the Division Commander which stated: "I congratulate you all on the splendid way in which you held off the strong enemy attack which came against you at MEIJEL. You were heavily outnumbered, but, by holding firm, as you did, you gave me ample time to bring up the necessary reserves. I appreciate the high fighting qualities which your division showed." (46)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. INITIAL EMPLOYMENT OF THE BATTALION

The piecemeal employment of major elements of the battalion greatly reduced its effectiveness as a unit. Two companies having been dispatched on individual missions left the battalion commander with only one rifle company and the battalion Headquarters Company for employment on a battalion mission. Upon receipt of the mission to repel the enemy attack and recapture MEIJEL the battalion commander had no alternative but to attack with the one remaining rifle company toward the main enemy threat. The attachment of one medium tank company provided little more than a reserve since maneuverability of tanks was so restricted in the area of employment. Each rifle company was carrying out a different mission thus making any coordinated

(46) A-4, p. 26

effort on the part of the battalion a virtual impossibility until such time as the two flank companies were relieved of their individual missions. The battalion plan included this consideration and was tactically sound. However, before any coordinated effort by the battalion could be realized each company had become engaged separately. Employment of the battalion as a unit would in my opinion have met with considerably more success. A coordinated attack by the battalion as a unit initially would surely have presented a better opportunity for completion of the entire mission.

2. RECONNAISSANCE

There was not sufficient time between the receipt of the battalion order and the time designated by higher headquarters for the attack to permit any ground reconnaissance. This coupled with the temporary lapse of information on the situation to the front influenced the plan of attack of the company. A ground reconnaissance, if time had been available, would have disclosed certain terrain conditions which were not indicated or were in error on the map sheets available. Areas indicated on the map as swamps, woodlands or small areas covered with water were not in all cases found to be in that state on the ground. In some instances the opposite was true. A ground reconnaissance would also have provided the opportunity of prior coordination with the commander of the unit through which Company B was to pass. However, the time element permitted only a brief map study and the plan of attack had to be made accordingly.

3. PREMATURE WITHDRAWAL OF TROOP D

As the leading platoon of Company B passed through the positions of Troop D, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, that unit withdrew in spite of the fact that assurance had been given that the unit would remain in position until Company B was well beyond them. Whether the withdrawal was ordered at that particular moment or whether it just "took growth" is unknown to the writer. The point to be brought out is that had Troop D remained in position the chain of events which followed may have been altered in our favor. The enemy attack launched just as Troop D withdrew could have been repulsed much more rapidly and Company B could have continued its attack. Instead the support of that unit was lost and the first and third platoons of Company B, plus artillery support, repulsed the enemy attack but in the process the platoons suffered heavy casualties.

4. THE INFANTRY-TANK TEAM

The failure of the attached tank platoon to provide the expected support in repelling the first enemy attack could not be laid to the lack of orders, faulty communications nor the unsuitability of the terrain. The only plausible explanation of the action of the tank crews could be that they lacked confidence in the troops with whom they were fighting. The tanks were in firing positions, off the road, from which they could have supported Company B's attack right into MEIJEL. When the enemy anti-tank fire was directed at them it was only a matter of seconds when one of the tanks was hit. Instead of returning the fire at once the tank crews moved from their posi-

tions one after the other and fled to the rear leaving Company B to carry on alone. The sight of their supporting tanks moving to the rear was demoralizing to the men of Company B to say the least. However they held fast, absorbed the enemy attack and succeeded in repelling it. If the tanks had remained in position and assisted in beating down the enemy attack, the complexion of the entire operation may have been different.

5. THE DEFENSIVE POSITION THE FIRST NIGHT

In organizing the position occupied on the night of 27 October 1944 consideration was given to being able to defend in any direction since the company was isolated from the rest of the battalion. When the company first occupied this position it was not known that Company A would later in the night take up a position on the right flank of Company B. Therefore a perimeter was formed by the three platoons each of which placed small security detachments to its front. One of these detachments gave prior warning of the enemy attack early on the morning of 28 October and by the time the attack struck everyone was fully prepared for it. The company was attacked frontally and on the left flank. The latter threat, supported by tanks, was the more serious but by virtue of being in a perimeter the enemy was unable to penetrate the position.

6. THE NIGHT WITHDRAWAL ON 28 OCTOBER 1944

The success of the night withdrawal of Company B was directly related to the complete orientation of every man. Sufficient time was taken for this to insure that everyone

knew the plan and the part they were to play in it. Each man knew exactly whom he was to follow and who was to follow him. Each one knew that contact had to be maintained and that information would be passed from man to man as rapidly as possible. Precautions were taken to lessen the chance of complete disorganization in the event the enemy was encountered. The night was so dark and observation so limited that any deployment would have been extremely difficult to control. The route of withdrawal and the alternate routes to be used if necessary had been pointed out on the map to platoon and squad leaders. Weapons were not to be fired unless so ordered by the leaders. If the enemy had been encountered indiscriminate firing by individuals certainly would have resulted in great confusion. Provision was made for a small detachment to maneuver and engage any enemy encountered, solely for the purpose of drawing the enemy fire away from the company. The movement itself was cautious and unhurried. Contact was retained throughout the move and the company arrived at its destination as a unit. No one had become lost or separated during the withdrawal.

7. ARTILLERY SUPPORT

The artillery fired in support of the company throughout the operation was excellent. During the 27th and 28th of October, when no artillery forward observer was with Company B, the artillery support was of prime importance in repelling each enemy attack. During this period all artillery fired in support of the Company was called for and adjusted by the company commander or platoon leaders. Each time a concentration was fired it was marked and assigned a number which permitted subsequent

requests to be fired more rapidly. In spite of the fact that each request had to be made through battalion the fires were forthcoming in a minimum length of time due to excellent cooperation of the artillery liaison officer at battalion. At no time was a request for artillery support denied nor was the fire delayed. Without this support it is very doubtful whether Company B could have repelled the repeated enemy attacks.

LESSONS

1. Piecemeal employment of individual elements of a combat unit reduces the effectiveness of that unit.
2. A plan of operation should provide sufficient time for unit leaders to make a ground reconnaissance whenever possible.
3. A unit attacking through the positions of another unit should be supported by the fires of that unit until they become masked.
4. Mutual confidence gained through extensive training is a prerequisite to successful employment of the infantry-tank team.
5. A perimeter defense provides the most suitable defense for an isolated unit.
6. Complete orientation of every individual is mandatory to insure a successful night withdrawal.
7. Every infantry unit leader, down to and including squad leaders, should receive training in requesting and adjusting artillery fires.