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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 141ST INFANTRY
(36TH INFANTRY DIVISION), IN THE ATTACK ON HERRLISHEIM,
NORTH OF STRASBOURG, ALSACE, 1 - 3 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Commander)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

Major Walter R. Bruyere III, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

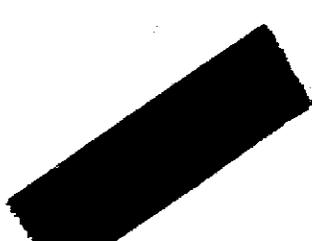


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INTRODUCTION

"The approach march of two companies of the 3rd Battalion of the 141st Infantry, which began at 0300 hours on 3 February, was very difficult. Clouds overcast the sky, and the troops waded through water to their hips. Where the water was not deep the ground was very muddy and slippery. Troops came up to the edge of Herrlisheim without realizing they were so close to it in the darkness. They became involved in a heavy fire fight which lasted until 0645 hours, when the men saw the houses of the town directly ahead of them, and dashed for the cover of the buildings. From then until 1030 hours the 150 to 175 men who had gained shelter in the houses watched for supporting tanks to appear. At 1030 hours, German tanks and infantry launched an attack, and American troops started withdrawal to Weyersheim." (1)

These words, as contained in the Report of Operations of the Seventh United States Army, describe the attack of the 3rd Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division on 3 February 1945.

The purpose of this monograph is to present a clear concise picture of this operation, as seen and experienced by the Commander of the 3rd Battalion, in order that the student of military history may fully understand the basis on which the lessons learned were formulated. Experience is the most valuable source of information upon which future operations

(1) D, page 657

can be planned and carried out. Taking the thought of Bismarck, "that only fools learn by their own mistakes, the wise prefer to learn from the mistakes of others", it is hoped that the student of military history can profit from this experience and will appreciate the value of the lessons learned from this attack.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In order to know more of the situation confronting the battalion at the time of this attack, it is best to see what events had taken place earlier in this sector. To do so, the best starting point is to note a warning received by Seventh Army Headquarters on 24 December 1944 from Sixth Army Group:

"Excellent agent sources report enemy units building up in the Black Forest area for offensive. Other indications for imminent enemy aggressive action exist. Imperative that all defensive precautions be immediately effective." (2)

At the time of receipt of this warning, Seventh Army, consisting of two corps, the VI and XV, was covering a one hundred and twenty-five mile front, from five miles south of Strasbourg, to ten miles west of Saarbruecken. (See Map A) An extension of the left boundary of the Seventh Army from the vicinity of Bitche to its present location had taken place a few days earlier in order to release divisions to the Third Army for the Ardennes counter-offensive. (3)

Because of this extension of the boundary and the threat of German offensive action in its sector, the mission of Seventh Army was to go on the defensive and to yield ground

(2) D, page 498; (3) D, page 495

rather than endanger the integrity of its forces. (4)

The new year of 1945 was hardly minutes old when the German offensive was launched. Designed to retake the Saverne Gap and annihilate Seventh Army troops in northern Alsace, this attack, with initial drives in the Rohrbach - Bitche sector, made limited penetrations of the Seventh Army defensive positions. Subsequent attacks in the Wissembourg sector, coinciding with attacks from the Colmar pocket, and the establishment of a bridgehead across the Rhine River in the vicinity of Gamsheim, forced Seventh Army troops to carry out planned withdrawals to the Moder River line. This German offensive continued until the last week in January, when the furthest advance, a bridgehead across the Moder River into the Ohlungen Forest, was halted by American troops. The enemy withdrawal from this bridgehead was made during the night of 26 January and all further offensive action ceased. (5)

Before taking up the resumption of the Seventh Army offensive by the 36th Infantry Division on 31 January, it is desired to mention some of the actions which occurred in the vicinity of Herrlisheim during the German offensive.

The key towns of the German bridgehead established across the Rhine River on 5 January were Gamsheim, Herrlisheim and Offendorf. (See Map B) Herrlisheim lay on the main route of advance from the bridgehead area toward the north and was essential for the German plan of attack to effect a juncture with the forces pushing south from Wissembourg. Occupation of this town and Gamsheim on the south

(4) B, page 9; (5) B, page 10 and D, Chap. XXII

by American forces would make the bridgehead untenable and force a withdrawal back across the Rhine River. Hence, we find the American troops in this sector making determined attempts to seize these key towns.

Of the numerous attacks and counter-attacks made in this sector by elements of the 42nd Infantry Division and the 12th Armored Division, the first attack made on Herrlisheim on 9 January 1945 by the 56th Armored Infantry Battalion succeeded in driving the Germans from the northern half of the town. However, the attacking force was surrounded and cut off by German counter-attacks. On 10 January the surrounded force was reached by elements of the 714th Tank Battalion and all forces withdrew to Rohrwiller. The next attack on 17 January made by the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion and elements of the 43rd Tank Battalion succeeded in occupying the southern half of the town. This force was in turn surrounded by the Germans and was completely lost. An attack on 18 January by Company B, 66th Armored Infantry Battalion and Company B of the 23rd Tank Battalion, to relieve the forces thought to be in the town, was repulsed by the Germans. (6)

A later count of knocked out Sherman tanks in Herrlisheim and vicinity revealed between fifty and sixty tanks, some of which were undamaged and had been put to use by the Germans. (7)

Herrlisheim was proving to be a tough nut to crack.

During this period of the German offensive along the Seventh Army front, the 36th Infantry Division initially occupied defensive positions on 1 January in the area south of Bitche. On 18 January the Division minus the 141st Infantry

(6) D, pages 607-8-9; (7) Personal knowledge, eyewitness

Regiment was ~~ordered~~^{ordered} to the Bischwiller ~~area~~^{area}. The 141st Infantry remaining in the Bitche sector was attached to the 100th Infantry Division. (8)

The initial orders for the 36th Division called for a limited offensive to eliminate the enemy in the Drusenheim - Herrlisheim area. Upon arrival in the Bischwiller sector, the division was directed by the VI Corps Commander to relieve elements of the 12th Armored Division occupying defensive positions from Bischwiller south to Kurtzenhausen. (9)

(See Map B)

The 141st Infantry Regiment remained in the Bitche sector until relieved on 22 January, when it moved to an assembly area in the vicinity of Saverne and remained in VI Corps reserve. The regiment was released to division control on 29 January and took over the defensive positions while the other two regiments prepared attack plans to carry out the original mission of driving the enemy out of the Drusenheim - Herrlisheim area. (10)

Briefly, the division plan of attack, which was scheduled to start on 30 January, called for a two regiment assault. (See Map B) The 142nd Infantry Regiment was to cross the Moder River, at Bischwiller, seize Oberhoffen, swing east, seize the Bois de Drusenheim, and then attack Drusenheim. The 143rd Infantry Regiment, after crossings of the Moder River were secured, was to attack to the east, seize Rohrwiller, then cross the Zorn River and attack Herrlisheim from the north. The 141st Infantry was to remain in defensive positions and upon the occupation of Rohrwiller by the 143rd Infantry,

(8) G, page 18; (9) D, page 610; (10) G, pages 20-21-22

was to occupy a line extending southwest from that town to the woods 1500 yards east of Kurtzenhausen. (11)

This attack was postponed and did not "jump off" until the evening of 31 January, because a sudden thaw had made the ground soft, muddy, and unable to support heavy armor and equipment. (12)

The situation of the 141st Infantry, just prior to this attack, found the regiment occupying the defensive positions from Bischwiller to just north of Weyersheim. Elements of the 14th Armored Division, attached to the 36th Infantry Division for the attack, occupied Bischwiller on the north left flank and the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron on the right south flank. The 2nd Battalion was the only battalion of the regiment committed to this defense. The 1st Battalion was in reserve in the vicinity of Gries and the 3rd Battalion, also in reserve, was in the vicinity of Wingersheim. (13) (See Map B)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

The 3rd Battalion of the 141st Infantry had closed into Wingersheim on 30 January, where it remained during 31 January and the morning of 1 February. (14)

At noon on 1 February the Battalion Commander was directed to report to the Regimental CP, located in Gries. There he was given instructions by the Regimental Commander. The 3rd Battalion would be used in conjunction with the attack of the 143rd Infantry on Herrlisheim. He was directed to make a

(11) J, page 1; (12) D, page 653; (13) H, page 4; (14) Personal knowledge

reconnaissance and prepare a plan of attack on the town.

The plan was to be based on three factors. The Zorn River was to be crossed at a crossing site to be secured by elements of the 2nd Battalion. The town was to be approached from the southwest and the battalion was to be in position for an assault at daylight on 2 February. (15)

Transportation had already been sent to move the Battalion to Gries. Instructions were sent to the Battalion Executive Officer regarding the move and he was directed to have the company commanders meet the Battalion Commander at the Regimental CP at 1400 hours, prepared to make a reconnaissance. (16)

The information received at this time from the Regimental S-2 indicated that Herrlisheim was being held by the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd SS Police Regiment, with a strength of approximately two hundred and fifty men. It was believed that the main defensive positions were along the edges of the town, with strong outpost positions along the Zorn River, and the entire area was estimated to be heavily mined and booby trapped. (17)

The battalion reconnaissance party assembled and was able to leave the CP at 1430 hours. The actual reconnaissance was limited to the present front line, which was along the edge of the large woods, between Kurtzenhausen and the Bois de Langenau, occupied by the 2nd Battalion. (See Map C) However, from here it could easily be seen what the battalion had to face in order to reach the town. The terrain was flat.

(15) Personal knowledge; (16) Personal knowledge; (17) K

and open, crisscrossed with drainage ditches and small streams. The Zorn River flowed diagonally across the entire front toward Herrlisheim in the distance. This river, approximately seventy-five feet wide, was held to its course by small levees. These levees were the highest ground of the area, rising three feet above the general ground level. Cover and concealment were non-existent, with the exception of the two wooded areas on the west side of the Zorn River. From the present positions, there were 4000 yards of flat open country and a river to cross before reaching the town. The ground itself was soft and provided little support for wheeled or tracked vehicles. The only road from the regimental sector, that entered the town, started at Weyersheim and ran parallel to the Zorn River not crossing the river until it reached the edge of Herrlisheim.

There was much to be desired, particularly so, because previous operations of the battalion during the last five months had been in mountainous, wooded terrain. This flat open country left a feeling of exposure and nakedness in the minds of all officers making the reconnaissance. (18)

The battalion commander returned to the Regimental CP at 1630 hours and was informed that the attack would be postponed for twenty-four hours. The 3rd Battalion would go into an assembly area in Weyersheim, relieving elements of the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which would move to Gamsheim and provide assistance to the attack by making feints toward Offendorf. (19)

The battalion closed into Weyersheim by 2000 hours and

(18) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (19) Personal knowledge

instructions were issued to all commanders and staff, covering reconnaissance and preparation to be made on the following day. It was now known that Company A, 753d Tank Battalion, one platoon of Company B, 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion and one platoon of Company A, 111th Engineer (Combat) Battalion would be attached to the 3rd Battalion for the attack. (20)

During the night of 1-2 February the 1st Battalion relieved the 2nd Battalion and an outpost of platoon strength was established on the Zorn River (Point A, Map C) The engineers put in a footbridge across the Zorn River at this point, and made reconnaissance for (armor supporting bridges) along the Zorn River and the Landgraben Canal north of the Stainwald Forest. (21)

On 2 February further reconnaissance was made, by 3rd Battalion personnel, of the approaches to the town from the vicinity of the footbridge and the Stainwald Forest. It was determined by this reconnaissance that better flank protection from enemy forces in Offendorf would be gained if advantage was taken of a crossing site (Point B, Map C) that was available over the Landgraben Canal near the northwest corner of the Stainwald Forest. (22)

At 1500 hours a meeting was held at the Regimental CP and final plans for the attack were discussed with all commanders concerned. The 1st Battalion, now occupying the defensive positions, was instructed by the Regimental Commander to send a patrol to Herrlisheim at 1700 hours to gain further information on enemy dispositions and positions. It was now known

(20) Personal knowledge and L; (21) H, page 5; (22) Personal knowledge

that specific orders had been issued prohibiting the use of the 2nd Battalion in an attack on Offendorf. (23)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

The plan of attack to be made by the 3rd Battalion was formulated to try to give the enemy the impression that Offendorf would be the initial objective. It was hoped that by the use of deception, such as the feint by the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron on Offendorf and activity in the Stainwald Forest, the assault troops would be able to reach the edge of Herrlisheim with some degree of surprise. It was also felt that any preparatory fires on Herrlisheim just prior to the assault would cause the enemy to lay final protective fires with automatic weapons, catching the assaulting troops in the open. (24)

With these ideas in mind the following plan of attack was finally decided upon. (See Map C) Company I with one platoon of Company A, 753rd Tank Battalion and one platoon of heavy machine guns attached, was to cross the Landgraben Canal at crossing site "B" at 0300 hours, proceed in a northeast direction and using the highway as a guide, establish contact with Company K at Point "C". Company I would then cross the highway and attack the south edge of the town at daylight. The highway would be used as a boundary between companies. After reaching the edge of the town, Company I was to establish a road block on the Herrlisheim - Offendorf road and then proceed to objectives within the center of the town. The platoon of tanks was to cross the Landgraben Canal upon

(23) H, page 7; (24) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan:

completion of a bridge at Point "B", which was to be constructed by the 40th Engineer Regiment. Company I was to leave a small force at the bridge site to accompany the tanks into the town. (25)

Company K, with one platoon of Company A, 753rd Tank Battalion and one platoon of heavy machine guns attached, was to cross the Zorn River at 0300 hours, using the foot-bridge at Point "A". The company would proceed in an easterly direction, contact Company I at Point "C", and attack the southeast edge of the town, west of the highway, at daylight. The mission of Company K was then to attack north through the town and secure the bridge crossing the Zorn River into the town. The attached platoon of tanks was to cross the Zorn River, as soon as a second bridge to be constructed by the 40th Engineer Regiment was completed at Point "A", and support the attack of the company on the town. (26)

Company L was to follow Company K across the Zorn River at Point "A", and was to initially occupy positions on the east side of the Zorn River at Point "D". Company L was to be prepared to support Company I and Company K in the assault on the town and the capturing of final objectives. (27)

The 81-mm mortar platoon of Company M was to support the attack from positions in the Stainwald Forest. (28)

The tank company, Company A, 753rd Tank Battalion, consisted of a total of two platoons with four medium tanks each. The tanks attached to each company were to carry extra ammunition and grenades for resupply of the assault companies. (29)

(25) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (26) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (27) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (28) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (29) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan

The platoon of the 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion was to provide anti-tank protection from positions in the north-east portion of the Stainwald Forest. Their main sector of fire was to cover the enemy routes leading to and from Offendorf. (30)

The 40th Engineer Regiment, constructing the two bridges, estimated that the bridges would be completed by 0500 hours. This allowed ample time for the tanks to cross and be in position to assist the assault on the edges of the town at daylight. The platoon of the 111th Engineer (Combat) Battalion was to take over maintenance of these bridges upon their completion. (31)

The personnel of the battalion anti-tank platoon, and ammunition and pioneer platoon were to be prepared to carry out resupply missions in the event vehicles could not negotiate the route into the town. (32)

Artillery support from the 131st Field Artillery Battalion was to be on call. No preparatory fires were to be used. Forward observers were to accompany both I and K Companies. (33)

The 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron would place a twenty-minute concentration of fires on Offendorf at 0530 hours. (34)

In addition, elements of the 143rd Infantry Regiment, after seizing Rohrwiller, were to cross the Zorn River and attack Herrlisheim from the north. (35)

(30) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (31) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (32) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (33) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (34) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan; (35) Personal knowledge, Bn Comdr's Plan

THE BATTALION ATTACK

Prior to the departure of the 3rd Battalion, from the assembly area in Weyersheim, the Battalion Commander received information from the 1st Battalion that their patrol had reached the edge of Herrlisheim and had encountered no enemy positions or troops. Another ominous piece of information came from the engineers constructing the footbridge over the Landgraben Canal at Point "B". This message stated that water had covered the original route of approach to the bridge and guides were being sent to the battalion to guide the troops over a new route. (36)

At 0100 hours on 3 February the Battalion moved out to forward assembly areas in the vicinity of the two bridges. The weather was unseasonably mild and rainy. Artificial moonlight provided by searchlights on the high ground far to the rear cast a dull glow on the low overhanging clouds. The quiet of the night was broken only by the occasional distant bark of an artillery piece and the muffled tread of feet on wet muddy ground. Dante's Inferno was taking a ten-minute break. (37)

The battalion commander arrived at the Zorn River crossing area at 0200 hours. Here the initial Battalion CP had been established and wire communication was already in with regiment. Crossing the footbridge over the Zorn River, which at this time had risen to the tops of its levees, the battalion commander saw that the entire area east of the river was flooded. (See Map D) Regiment was immediately notified of this condition

(36) Personal knowledge; (37) Personal knowledge, eyewitness

and a short while later the Regimental Commander arrived at the bridge to make a personal investigation. (38)

In the meantime a patrol was sent along the east levee of the Zorn River to determine the extent of the flooded area. The patrol returned and reported that they had reached a point midway on the arc of the levee where it curved eastward in a semi-circle from the main stream. (See Map D, Point C) They had been able to see nothing but water on each side of the levee. (39)

The battalion commander hoped that orders would be received for a postponement or delay of the attack because of the unknown element of the flood condition. However, no changes were received and at 0300 hours I and K Companies crossed the footbridges and the attack of the 3rd Battalion on Herrlisheim was "launched".

The only change in the original plan was to have Company K move along the levee to where it curved back north (Point C, Map D), then move directly toward the town. The commander of Company L was instructed that if the flood conditions were such that no positions were available within the assigned sector, the company was to follow Company K into the town. (40)

After crossing the footbridges, the approach march of the companies was very difficult. The flood conditions were waist deep in places and often beneath the water was a sheet of ice. Movement was slow and unsure, and constant falling, because of the mud and ice, drenched clothing and clogged

(38) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (39) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (40) Personal knowledge, eyewitness

weapons. In spite of the extreme difficulties, excellent control was maintained by all squad and platoon leaders. (41)

Company I, instead of moving in a northeast direction toward the highway as planned, was forced to head due north in order to avoid as much of the water as possible. Company K, after leaving the levee at Point "C" (Map D), was forced to head almost due east. Thus, when contact was established between the two companies at Point "D" at 0445 hours, it resulted in the bulk of both companies being close together, with little dispersion between the advance elements. (42)

After this contact was made the advance toward the town continued, with Company I on the right, Company K on the left and Company L following behind Company K. The advance had covered a little more than two hundred yards when an enemy automatic weapon opened fire from the vicinity of Point "F". (Map D) This fire was directed at the left flank of I Company and the right flank of K Company. The leading elements of both companies engaged this enemy position and after a short exchange of fire, silenced the German gun. (43)

The enemy was now alert and knew that our forces were advancing on Herrlisheim. This initial action had taken place far from the edge of the town. The element of surprise was lost and now it was a question of reaching the town or being caught out in the open. This question was emphatically answered after the leading companies had advanced a further three hundred yards. Reaching the general line from Point "E" to Point "F" (Map D), Company I was fired on by what was estimated as three machine guns firing from positions along the line from Point "I"

(41) F, page 94; (42) I, page 3; (43) I, page 3

(Map D) to the houses on the unimproved road at the southwest edge of the town. This fire was initially thought to be part of the enemy main line of resistance, but after a quick sharp fire fight these positions were silenced and three prisoners were taken. (44)

There was a very short lull in the fighting, soon both leading companies received very heavy direct fire across their entire front. At the same time two machine guns, firing from point "H" and two machine guns firing from point "J" caught the exposed troops in a criss cross of fire. The fire of these machine guns was directed at Company L and the rear elements of Companies I and K. (45)

It was now about 0630 hours, and still very dark. No buildings of the town could be seen nor was there any indication of what distance remained to be covered before the edge of the town could be reached. The leading companies were heavily engaged and the reserve and supporting elements were caught in the grazing fire sweeping the entire area. It would soon be daylight and to be caught in the open exposed positions would bring disaster. At this point the element of confusion entered the scene. Company L and the rear elements of the leading companies were ordered to withdraw from the area of criss-crossing fire. This withdrawal once started soon gathered momentum, which in spite of orders to reorganize in the vicinity of the bridge over the Zorn River, did not

(44) I, page 3; (45) Personal knowledge, statement of Captain E. Saffold, Comdr, Co. I

stop until the majority of L Company was all the way back to Weyersheim. (47)

While this was occurring, the rifle platoons of both Company I and Company K were engaging the enemy positions to their front. Company K was able to maneuver its left flank squad into a position from which small arms and bazooka fire soon silenced the machine guns firing from point "J" (Map D). (48) At about the same time a bazooka round that had been fired at an estimated enemy position, hit a house and ignited some debris. The fire clearly outlined the house and other houses less than a hundred yards away. This was the first indication of how close the assault platoons were to the town. Once this distance was known, and seeing how close they were to the houses in the town, the bulk of both companies rushed to the cover of the buildings. (49)

Up until this time good control had been maintained over the assaulting platoons. Scattering of individuals during the rush for cover resulted in the companies becoming intermingled and disorganized. Weapons that had become clogged with mud and water during the approach march failed to function. Further advance would depend entirely upon rapid reorganization and the arrival of the armor. (50)

Thus as dawn broke over Herrlisheim we find some elements of the battalion on their initial objective, some elements located at the bridge and other elements back in Weyersheim.

(47) I, page 4; (48) I, page 4; (49) I, page 4;
(50) I, page 4

The situation could well be called "fluid" in more ways than one.

However, these were not the only difficulties being encountered. The engineers who had the mission of constructing the bridge over the Zorn River were also having their troubles. The river had risen to the tops of its levees and the swiftness of the current made bridge building almost an impossibility. All attempts to put the bridge in met with failure with the result that at 0400 hours the tanks, which were to cross this bridge, were ordered to proceed to the other bridge site north of the Stainwald Forest. Construction activities were halted at the Zorn River bridge site. (51)

The conditions at the Landgraben Canal bridge could hardly be described as better. Here the engineers had been able to make some progress and it appeared as if a bridge would be completed. But at what time, no one was able to predict. The plan for the use of armor was rapidly fading. The tanks would be unable to cross the Landgraben Canal and begin movement to the town until after daylight. The flood conditions would restrict movement and make the tanks more vulnerable to fire from enemy weapons in Offendorf. The knocked out tanks that littered the open area between the forest and Herrlisheim served as a grim reminder of the previous attempts made by armor to reach the town. (52)

(51) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (52) Personal knowledge, eyewitness

The elements of the battalion that had withdrawn during the attack consisted of the weapons platoons and company headquarters groups plus the attached heavy machine gun platoons of both I and K Companies, and all of L Company. These elements were ordered by the battalion commander to reorganize in the vicinity of the footbridge over the Zorn River and to be prepared to reenter the town. However some personnel, once back across the bridge, continued on into Weyersheim. They were assembled there by the battalion executive officer and returned to the footbridge area. It was 0900 hours before the reorganization of these units was completed. By that time, the battalion commander considered it inadvisable to order the movement to town because of the open and flooded approach and lack of armor support. (53)

To further complicate the situation, the troops that had gained the cover of the buildings in the town, found at daylight, that the houses they occupied were in the middle of a strong German defensive area. Also, that they had not actually reached the town itself, but an isolated group of buildings on the southwestern outskirts of the town. (54) (See Map E)

These troops, consisting of the rifle platoons of I and K Companies, were intermingled throughout this small group of houses. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Platoons of Company K, with elements of the 1st and 2nd Platoons of Company I, were located in houses Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8. The 3rd Platoon of

(53) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (54) Personal knowledge, statement of Captain E. Saffold, Comdr Co. I.

Company I with one squad of the 2nd Platoon was in house No. 12 and an estimated one half squad of the 2nd Platoon of Company I was in a German trench and foxholes just to the south of house No. 12. Altogether there were between one hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy five men who had reached these positions. (55) Within this same area the Germans still occupied strong points in houses No. 4 and No. 11 and the houses immediately north of house No. 12. (56)

To top this all off, the flood conditions made the area between houses Nos. 1, 2 and 3 and houses Nos. 6-11 virtually a lake. A similar condition existed in the area north of and across the road from houses Nos. 6-11. (57)

From 0700 hours until 0900 hours the officers and non commissioned officers made every effort possible to get their units reorganized and to carry out the attack. Numerous trips were made between the various groups in the houses by the company commanders but little could be accomplished because of the volume of German fire over the flat terrain. During this period of attempted reorganization, one platoon leader of Company K was killed and fifteen men wounded. (58)

The lack of the ability to reorganize and maneuver caused little change in the original location of the troops during the remainder of the morning. Movement depended upon the arrival of the supporting armor. At 0900 hours the company commander of Company I had informed the Battalion Commander by radio that they would need the tanks in order to knock out enough of the

(55) I, page 4; (56) I, page 5; (57) I, page 5;
(58) I, page 5

German resistance to permit reorganization before they would be able to carry out further attacks on the town. (59)

The tanks, at this point, were still assembled in the Stainwald Forest, all attempts to cross the bridge had failed. The engineers had finally completed the bridge at 0800 hours, but the activity around the site had caused the Germans to place anti-tank and mortar fire, from the vicinity of Offendorf, on the bridge approaches. Every time a tank attempted to cross, it was soon forced back into the cover of the woods. Because of the difficulty involved in crossing the open area in the face of direct anti-tank fire, and the uncertainty of having a route to take to the town, the tanks were never able to take part in this attack. (60)

The platoon of tank destroyers that was to be in position in the Forest to cover the town of Offendorf never reached its assigned area with the result that the German anti-tank fire was able to continue uninterrupted. (61)

The companies in the town were notified that there was difficulty in getting the armor across the canal. In spite of this they were to continue to hold their positions and endeavor to knock out as much of the German resistance as possible. (62)

In the meantime the Germans were preparing to give the battalion more trouble. At 1030 hours two German tanks came north from Offendorf to firing positions just east of the point where the Herrlisheim--Offendorf road crosses the

(59) Personal knowledge; (60) Personal knowledge;
(61) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (62) Personal knowledge

railroad. (See Map E) These tanks initially placed concentrated fire on house No. 12 where the 3rd Platoon and elements of the 2nd Platoon of Company I were located. During this fire the platoon leader of the 3rd Platoon was killed. (63)

The enemy armor continued firing for approximately thirty minutes, after which a counterattack from the northeast, made by an enemy force of platoon strength was launched against house No. 12. The troops in the house held off the combined armor and infantry attack for forty-five minutes before the position fell. Lack of ammunition, the overwhelming enemy fire and inability to obtain support from the other elements of the company had caused this group to surrender. The enemy was seen taking some captured personnel back into the town, but the actual number of men who had fallen into German hands was unable to be determined. (64)

The fall of this position allowed the enemy to reoccupy their dug in positions along the east edge of the highway. From here they were able to place additional fire on the troops within the other houses. German reinforcements were seen entering the houses on the west side of the highway and it appeared as if a counterattack could be expected at any moment against the rest of the forces within the town. (65)

THE WITHDRAWAL

The two company commanders realized that their position

(63) I, page 5; (64) I, page 5; (65) I, page 5

was rapidly becoming hopeless. Throughout the entire morning they had been unable to maneuver or expand their positions. They lacked the heavier weapons and armor support which would enable them to make a break out of the isolated area and many of the men were now out of ammunition. Knowing, also, that from their present location they were unable to cover the approach of reinforcements, they decided that the only course of action open to them, was to withdraw. If they tried to remain where they were, it would only be a question of time before the German armor and infantry attacked again. This would probably result in each house being knocked out, one by one, until the entire area was once more in German hands.

(66)

The battalion commander was notified, at 1215 hours, of the decision that had been reached. At this time there were no other troops in position that would be able to provide cover for the withdrawal. Elements of the 1st Battalion trying to push frontally toward the town, over the open ground on the west side of the Zorn River, had been unable to progress very far. The attack being made by elements of the 143rd Infantry was stopped 1000 yards north of the town. Thus, even in the final phase of this attack, conditions were still unfavorable. (67)

In order to provide some protection for the withdrawing troops the artillery and mortars were called on to fire smoke missions on the open area southwest of the town. The artillery

(66) I, page 6; (67) Personal knowledge

rounds, because of the inability to properly adjust, landed east of the town where the southwest wind carried the smoke away from the desired area. The mortars were somewhat successful but most of the rounds were far short and the smoke dissipated by the time it reached the houses. (68)

The company commanders in the town were unable to make a definite plan for the withdrawal because of the difficulties in communicating with the groups in each house. They were able to select a route to be taken back to the Zorn River but other than that it was every man for himself. (69)

The aid men with the companies were able to treat all of the wounded prior to commencing the withdrawal. However, they were forced to leave ten men behind, who had suffered leg wounds and could not be moved without litters. (70)

When the withdrawal started it was a matter of "getting the hell out in a hurry". One could say that the withdrawal was simultaneous, along parallel routes and executed at great haste. Some effort was made by a few rifle and BAR men to deliver fire while withdrawing, but the majority of the men just made a break for it and hoped for the best. (71)

The route back was as difficult as the route into the town, with the added difficulty of being covered by an intense volume of enemy fire. The Germans conducted a limited pursuit but did not press their advantage other than to re-occupy the evacuated buildings. (72)

(68) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (69) I, page 6;
(70) I, page 6; (71) I, page 6; (72) I, page 6

The majority of the troops reached the bridge exhausted from their struggle with the enemy and flooded terrain. Many had been wounded during the withdrawal including the company commanders of both I and K Companies and approximately nineteen other men. (73)

All troops of the battalion were ordered to return to Weyersheim for reorganization and resupply. Litter squads were sent to cover as much of the route to the town as possible to pick up any wounded who had been unable to reach the bridge. (74)

Herrlisheim was still a tough nut to crack.

Thus at 1530 hours the footbridge across the Zorn River was turned over to the control of a platoon of B Company and another river crossing was entered in the history of the 3rd Battalion of the 141st Infantry which already included the Rapido, the Moselle and the Meurthe. (75)

It is interesting to note that the Germans evacuated the Herrlisheim--Offendorf area on the night of 4-5 February, withdrawing north to Drusenheim. (76)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

This attack was a case of where an initial violation of sound combat tactics precipitated a chain of troubled events which no one was able to foresee or to stop. It is not the intention of the author to point out various and numerous "ifs" that might have been attempted and to show how each

(73) Personal knowledge, eyewitness; (74) Personal knowledge;
(75) Personal knowledge; (76) H, page 14

would have effected the operation. Time and space do not permit. It is believed that the reader can deduce many of these from the narration itself. However, it is intended to base this analysis on the main points that caused this attack to fail and to show the effect each point had on the operation.

The first and most important point is that this attack should never have been allowed to start. It should have been postponed until a complete and thorough reconnaissance could have been made to determine the extent of the flood condition. It was essential to know what effect the flood would have on the original plan. To endeavor to carry out the operation under the existing circumstances left too many questions that remained without hope of answer. How much of the open approach to the town was flooded? What effect would this have on the construction of the bridges? Were there routes that would be suitable for the tanks? Could supplies and reinforcements be sent if the troops managed to reach the town? These questions were only answered by each subsequent failure throughout the attack. There was too much that was completely unknown to attempt to make hasty alterations in the original plan and still hope for any measure of success.

The next point is the flood condition itself. Once the attack was started the water caused extreme difficulty in movement and control. It resulted in Company I contacting Company K far from the objective and confining the bulk of both companies to a small area at the time of initial enemy contact. The flood directly affected the withdrawal of

Company L by leaving no alternative, once with withdrawal started, other than to reorganize back at the bridge. Company I was restricted from approaching the town within its assigned sector which resulted in both I and K Companies becoming disorganized and confused when the troops made the rush for the cover of the buildings. The water prevented reinforcement and resupply of these troops and it prevented covering their route during the withdrawal. The effect it had on the construction of the bridges needs little discussion other than to mention that it halted construction of one bridge and delayed construction of the other to the point where it was useless.

The next point for consideration, which was a direct effect of the preceding point, is the failure of the armor to support the attack. It was quite obvious during the planning of this attack that armor would be essential for the success of the operation. It was also necessary that the tanks be with the troops just prior to or shortly after the assault on the town commenced. A great amount of dependency was placed on this armor support by all personnel of the battalion. Thus when it failed to materialize the effect on the operation was disastrous. Without this support the troops were unable to maneuver and expand their positions. The result was a complete static situation from which little action could be accomplished. The initial German counter-attack soon proved that without armor there was nothing that could be done but to withdraw.

The last general point for analysis is the subject of morale. This cannot be considered as having a direct tangible effect on the operation but there are some factors worth discussion. All of the troops of the battalion were materially affected by the first operation of the battalion over flat open terrain. The visible results of the previous attacks did not help this situation. It was aggravated further by the flood conditions and the failure of the armor to arrive. At no point during this attack was there a favorable condition.

In an attack of this type it is believed that the final outcome can either be complete success or complete failure. It is true that many chances must be taken but advantage must also be taken of all obvious courses of action that will help to minimize the element of chance. It is felt that the chances of success would have been far greater if the entire regiment had been utilized by making a coordinated attack on both Herrlisheim and Offendorf. The town of Offendorf was a distinct threat to the entire area. Failure to attack it permitted the enemy to reinforce and concentrate his troops against our forces in Herrlisheim.

The use of artillery has been little mentioned throughout the attack. The element of surprise that was hoped to be gained was lost when the initial contact was made with the enemy. The use of concentrations of artillery fire, at this time, would have assisted the advance by preventing the enemy from placing intense fire of all types on the assaulting troops. The forward observers attached to I and K Companies were with the elements on the initial withdrawal. They were thereafter unable to find positions from which observed fires could be

placed on the town. The commander of Company I conducted some observed fire but other than this most of the artillery firing consisted of unobserved firing into the general areas of the town.

For a recapitulation of the casualties of this attack, there were two officers and four men known to be killed in action. Two officers and thirty-one men were wounded and one officer and fifty-eight men were missing in action. A total of five officers and ninety-three men were casualties. The price in personnel was too high and is definitely related to the fact that the principles as carried in the book are sound. Violation of these principles will prove costly. (77)

In summing up this analysis and criticism it can be stated that any single course of action that might have been taken at any time during the attack might have affected the outcome one way or another. However, from the main points covered in this discussion it can be seen how each one had a direct bearing and influence on the other. The unknown element into which this attack started made any prediction as to its outcome purely a matter of conjecture. It can only be emphasized again that a complete change in a physical condition will require a complete change in a plan of operation. In other words, to use an old adage, "Look before you leap".

LESSONS

1. When a situation or condition arises which has a direct effect on the ability to carry out the original plan, consideration should be given to permitting further reconnaissance and change of plans, prior to the commitment of forces.

(77) I, page 9

2. To attempt an operation in unknown conditions will usually result in confusion and disaster.
3. If a hasty last minute change of plans is considered, weigh the advantages expected to be gained, against the disadvantages of the difficulty involved in having all personnel know and understand the change, before making a decision.
4. If the tactical situation permits, patrols should be sent, from the unit assigned to make the attack, covering the area over which the attack is to be made.
5. A strong enemy position that presents a threat to the success of an operation should be contained by a blocking force or should be included as an attack objective if troops are available.
6. Surprise is a potent weapon, however plans should include alternate courses of action in the event the element of surprise is not gained.
7. Command support and strong leadership are essential to overcome the morale factor of a series of unfavorable events.
8. In the attack of a strongly defended town each individual should be thoroughly briefed as to his specific route, task and objective.
9. Armor support is essential for a successful attack against a determined enemy in a well defended town.
10. The success of an attack should not be dependent on one factor alone, such as armor support.
11. Once an initial objective is gained, aggressive leadership is required by all leaders to effect a rapid reorganization and continuation of the attack.

12. If a hopeless situation arises it is best to make a limited withdrawal.