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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 18TH INFANTRY (1ST DIVISION)
AT EL GUETTAR, TUNISIA, 17 - 25 MARCH, 1943
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Heavy-Weapons Company Commander)

Types of operations described:
BATTALION IN THE ATTACK
BATTALION IN DEFENSE
BATTALION IN NIGHT OPERATIONS
BATTALION IN WITHDRAWAL

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INTRODUCTION

The Allied situation in Tunisia was very fluid and unstable during the late winter of 1943. There were several factors that aided the enemy in his ability to hold the Allied forces. His lines of communication were short with only the Sicilian Channel separating him from his supplies and mainland. This, compared to the long water routes, poor roads, railroads and telegraph systems of the Allies, gave him much advantage. The Allied Air Forces and Naval Forces were hammering at his communication lines but he continued to reinforce with men and material. (1)

The enemy could strike with force at the place and time he selected against American, British and/or French Forces. This was a result of his short interior lines compared with the hundreds of miles of travel by Allied Forces. (2)

In the south the 8th Army (British) occupied Tripoli 23 January 1943 and continued its march to Tunisia. Its line of communication had just about reached its limit and ~~their~~^{its} drive halted at the Mareth line where the Africa Corps had built a strong defensive position. The Port of Tripoli had to be opened to replace the Harbors of Benghazi and Tobruk. Reserves had to be built up in the forward areas before another offensive could be launched. (3)

An armored column of 80 German tanks took the Faid Pass from French forces and firmly established itself, 30 January 1943. Leaving this position the enemy struck towards Sbietla, 14 February, with the supply bases around Tebessa as his objective. American losses were near 5000 men and over 100

(1, 2) A-1, p. 3; (3) A-1, p. 2

tanks from the 1st Armored Division and the 34th Infantry Division. This thrust was halted in the Kasserine Pass and Sbiba area by the 1st Guards Regiment and 26th Armored Brigade (British) and the 16th and 18th Regimental Combat Teams of the 1st Infantry Division (American). The enemy withdrew 25 February after eleven days' hard fighting. In conjunction with this attack, 14 February, the small garrison of American forces in Gafsa were forced to withdraw to Ferriana. (4)

At the Casablanca Conference 18 February 1943 the need for a single Allied Commander to co-ordinate the operations of the Allied Forces against the Axis Forces were settled by appointing General Eisenhower, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces in North Africa. The new Commander in Chief of the Middle East was to be General Maitland Wilson (British) who was administratively responsible for the 8th Army but no longer had it under his operational command. Field Marshall (then General) Alexander (British) was appointed commander of the new 18th Army Group which consisted of the British 1st and 8th Armies, the American II Corps and the 19th French Corps. (5)

An enemy attack in the Medjez el Bab sector (Northern Tunisia) 26 February 1943 gained 7 to 8 miles. Strong counter-attacks by the British regained most of this lost ground, However, there were heavy losses of men and material on both sides. (6)

The 8th Army (British) was attacked by strong Axis Forces the 3, 6, 18 and 19 March 1943. These attacks consisted of tanks, artillery, infantry and air bombardment. The Mareth line was a strong position and the 8th Army was making practically no headway with its patrols and thrusts. (7)

Estimated enemy forces in Tunisia 19 March 1943 were 220,000 men, 350 German tanks, 90 Italian tanks, 750 field and medium guns and 900 anti-tank guns. (8)

(4) A-1, p. 7; (5) A-1, p. 3; (6) A-1, p. 7; (7) A-1, p. 2, 5, 6;
(8) A-1, p. 7, 10

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The 1st Division was pulled out of the line for a short^{when} rest, replacements (3rd Division men), one meal of fresh beef (the first fresh beef in 4 months), new equipment and a short training period. (9)

Gafsa was the next objective. It was held by Italian troops of unknown quantity, quality and support. This was to be the first attack of the 1st Division as a Division. Heretofore the Division had fought as Combat Teams including being attached to the 1st British Army and the 19th French Corps. (10)

Taking Gafsa and moving towards Gabes would draw forces facing the 8th Army away from their front, cause a juncture with the 8th Army or split the enemy forces so that they could be disposed of piecemeal. Therefore, any threat to the enemy through this sector would cause a strong immediate reaction. (11)

The Italians holding Gafsa sensed our attack and had withdrawn to the high ground east of El Guettar. The town of Gafsa was taken over by the 1st Division 171230 March 1943. The 1st Ranger Battalion moved east to occupy and hold El Guettar. The 18th Infantry turned east and went into a defensive position between Gafsa and El Guettar. (12)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

The 1st Battalion of the 18th Infantry moved to a wadi (Point A, Map A) three and one-half miles west of El Guettar. This position extended north from the Gafsa-El Guettar road to the eastern end of Hill 456. The ground sloped gently down toward Lortess. Large rocks and boulders made a direct tank threat very improbable on this position. At our rear the ground inclined gently for 100 to 200 yards and then declined gently toward Gafsa. Our left flank was a sheer wall approximately 2500 feet high. The right flank was open and flat affording an excellent avenue for tank operations

(9, 10, 11) Personal Knowledge; (12) A-2, p. 781

1000 yards wide. South of this strip was a salt lake, Chott el Guettar, which was an impassable barrier for tanks and vehicles. (13)

Positions of the 1st Battalion, reinforced with a platoon of M-10 tank destroyers, in this area were set up to stop a tank attack. German tank units had been very active during the past five or six weeks in Southern Tunisia and were apt to strike in great strength most any time, any place, especially to regain an area that had just been taken from them. (14)

The companies all had positions in the wadi with outposts in small gullies to the front. The left company had an outpost at the foot of the mountain. At night the right company sent a covering force of automatic weapons to cover a mine field that had been laid by the regimental Anti-tank Company and the 1st Battalion, Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon. This mine field extended from the wadi to the salt lake. The attached platoon of M-10 tank destroyers were placed in defilade to the rear. These guns could take any tanks under fire from the flank as they reached the mine field or could fire to the front from hull defilade positions. All of the machine guns in the Battalion were placed in positions to form a network of cross fires to our front and all guns could fire to the right flank. The 81-mm and 60-mm mortars were set up in the wadi and coordinated under Battalion control. This was done to give the Battalion maximum fire on any point with its organic weapons. Ammunition, vehicles, rations and other supplies were all under cover and dispersed in the wadi. (15)

In this position there were no movements during the day except those that were absolutely essential. The men ^{apparently} did a good job of staying down out of sight, for units to our front and rear received occasional artillery fire but we received no artillery fire while on this position. (16)

(13) A-8, p. 1; (14) A-8, p. 2; (15, 16) A-8, p.2 and Personal Knowledge

PREPARATION FOR FURTHER ACTION

After moving into the wadi and buttoning up early in the evening, 18 March 1943 the Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. York, and several of the Company Commanders went to the Command Post of the 1st Ranger Battalion in El Guettar. There we talked with Brigadier General (then Lieutenant Colonel) William O. Darby to find out the disposition of his battalion and what information patrols from his battalion had reported as to the enemy to the east. (17)

The Rangers had positions on the eastern edge of El Guettar and an Observation Post on Hill 276 (Point B). Hill 276 was a mound over 150 feet high just east of El Guettar. Actually it seemed as if it was put there for an OP. It dominated the entire plain, north, south, east and west. (18)

Patrols had gone out on the roads to the east and south-east. They reported barbed-wire and mine fields all along the western edge of Oued el Keddab (Point C). The barbed-wire was covered by machine gun fire near the roads. An anti-tank gun located near the west end of the Gafsa-Gabes road as it passed through Oued el Keddab had fired at a motor patrol that approached its position. Italians were heard talking and they were not sure if they had heard any Germans. No enemy patrols had been sent out. (19)

We asked for permission to visit their OP on Hill 276 (Point B) the next day so that we could look over the ground to the east and south-east. This permission was granted. (20)

As soon as the sun was shining directly into the hills in the afternoon, 19 March 1943, the Battalion Commander, S-3, and Company Commanders went to the 1st Ranger Battalion OP on Hill 276. The observation was excellent. There we studied the approaches and routes of advance to different parts of the enemy's position. Routes to the east were through the low

(17) Personal Knowledge; (18) Statement of Brig. Gen. William O. Darby, 18 March 1943; (19) Statement of Brig Gen William O. Darby; 18 March 1943; (20) A-8, p. 2

hills at the foot of the mountains to the left or through the wadi south of the Gafsa-Sfax road. However, routes to the south-east were open, flat and void of cover or concealment of any kind. There were not even any large rocks or small scrubby bushes. Just a sparse amount of grass about six inches high covered the plain. Therefore, the route south-east to put us in the foot hills of Oued el Keddab south of the Gafsa-Gabes road was an azimuth to Djebel Berda at Hill 772 (Point D) which could be seen for many miles on a clear night and could be seen from any place along the route of advance. We left the OP and went back to our Command Post wishing all the time for any route except to the south-east.

(21)

Just after daybreak, 19 March 1943, a battalion observation post was established on Hill 456 (Point A, Map A). From this OP we could see over Hill 276 (Point B). In fact, we could see over Oued el Keddab (Point C) and a portion of the Gafsa-Gabes road east of Oued el Keddab running up to and disappearing through the hills to the east. (22)

Artillery observers were stationed at the Battalion OP and enemy vehicles were taken under fire as they traveled the Gafsa-Gabes road. No vehicles were hit, but they increased their speeds considerably. Many large bodied trucks of the moving-van type, which were used by the Italians for supplies, were ^{being} used by the enemy. (23)

Part of the 32nd Field Artillery Battalion moved into position north of Lortess the night of 19-20 March 1943. As soon as they opened fire the morning of 20 March they were taken under fire by very accurate enemy artillery. Missions had to be cancelled, for the gun crews had to pull the lanyards and get into their foxholes on the double. The enemy kept an eye on this artillery and the writer actually believes that just as soon

(21) A-8, p. 2; (22) Personal Knowledge; (23) Personal Knowledge

^{the enemy}
as he saw these guns fire he fired in return. The shells passed somewhere between our guns and the enemies guns for the men of the gun crews who were slow getting into their foxholes were hit. Casualties among the gun crews were high even when the men were in their fox holes. The enemy was using a battalion of 105-mm artillery that was located east of Oued el Keddab (Point C) but it could not be spotted. (24)

In analyzing the enemy situation we had the following information; the Italians had been pushed out of Gafsa and El Guettar; activity against the Ranger Battalion patrols was very weak; the enemy did not patrol to our positions; their trucks were large such as the Italians used and artillery with such accuracy and consistency was definitely Italian, for they were excellent with their artillery. Enemy strength was estimated to be a regiment of infantry, one or two battalions of field artillery, some anti-tank weapons and anti-aircraft-artillery (anti-aircraft-artillery fire came from the east of the enemy's position every time Allied aircraft flew over that area). (25)

There had been no enemy tanks observed within the vicinity of the enemy's position. However, the German armored activity had us worried and there was always a threat to our positions or movements by enemy armor. (26)

THE ORDER AND THE ATTACK ON OUED EL KEDDAB ("WOP HILL")

Just at dusk, 20 March 1943, the Battalion Commander received a call to report to the regimental command post. We had been expecting the call but had hoped it would have been earlier so we could have looked the ground over and definitely planned our attack. While the Battalion Commander was at regiment we picked up our things, made rolls, got our equipment together and issued rations and ammunition. This was done in short order and we waited for the return of the Battalion Commander. (27)

(24) Personal Knowledge; (25, 26) Personal Knowledge; (27) A-8, p. 2

It was very dark when the Battalion Commander returned but we knew the moon would be up about 2200 or shortly thereafter and we would have sufficient light the rest of the night. All the Company Commanders put their heads under a blanket along with the Battalion Commander and the attack order was issued. (28)

The 1st Division plan of attack was for the 1st Ranger Battalion to move through the mountains to the north and attack the pass on the Gafsa-Sfax road from the north in the rear of the enemy's position. The 26th Infantry was to follow the 1st Ranger Battalion and attack north and south of the Gafsa-Sfax road and seize the pass. The 18th Infantry was to attack to the south-east and seize Oued el Keddab (Point C). The 16th Infantry was in Division reserve. (29)

The 18th Infantry was to attack astride the Gafsa-Gabes road. The 2nd Battalion was to seize that part of Oued el Keddab north of the Gafsa-Gabes road. The 1st Battalion was to seize that part of Oued el Keddab south of the Gafsa-Gabes road. The 3rd Battalion was in Regimental reserve. The plan called for a motor move from our position to El Guettar. This was frowned upon by the Battalion Commander for he feared the noise would draw a great deal of artillery fire on us but since other units were using motors anyway he finally decided we might as well use them. This would save three miles hiking and the men would be that much fresher the next morning. (30)

Definitely and most assuredly we had drawn the route most dreaded, the open plain with nothing between bullets and us, if we were spotted, except a prayer. (31)

Our battalion plan was for C, B, A and D Companies to move out in a column with thirty to fifty yards between two columns and five to ten yards between men. The moon would be out as we marched the five miles over the

(28, 29) A-8, p. 2; (30, 31) A-8, p. 3

plain. It was imperative that we have this formation in the event we were shelled. There was one platoon of heavy machine guns attached to each, C and B Companies. The 81-mm mortars and their ammunition were to be carried on one jeep and trailer per section moving between the two columns of their section. (32)

When the trucks arrived the moon was up but there was a light haze and a perfect halo around the moon. This gave enough light for the men to see how to move around, load and unload. Djebel Berda could be seen at Hill 772 (Point D) but we could not see the hills that were our objective. (33)

The road to El Guettar was heavy with traffic. Artillery was moving up to go into positions around El Guettar. Our column moved slowly down the road, turned south at El Guettar and then east again. The trucks stopped and we got off against a large dirt wall and formed up for the march across the desert. There were a few dogs and Arabs moving around in the shadows and doorways to watch us leave El Guettar. So far the enemy had not sensed our moves and we were safely out on the plain. (34)

It was well past midnight and we had to reach the cover of Oued el Keddab before daylight. The battalion column was moving at a fast pace. Suddenly there was machine gun fire from the vicinity of the Gafsa-Gabes road at Oued el Keddab. We were sure our presence had been discovered. However, the fire ceased after a few short bursts. Word was passed back from the head of the column that the fire was against a friendly patrol who had been sent out to make the nightly visit to that area seem a normal event. After this small action and the withdrawal of the patrol everything was quiet. The effect of the patrol on the enemy was complete. He then settled down for the rest of the night the same as he had done on other nights. (35)

(32) A-8, p. 3; (33) Personal Knowledge; (34) A-8, p. 3; (35) Personal Knowledge

Our column suddenly reached the wire that marked the minefield. Quietly and carefully we crossed the wire and the minefield. There before us was the objective. Company C had passed over the hills, moved north-east across the Gafsa-Gabes road and back of Hill 336. Once, C Company was challenged by an Italian sentry and an Italian speaking soldier replied, "corrigoni". Their surprise at our approaching from the rear was complete. It was becoming daylight rapidly and C Company did not want to be caught out in the flat. Their only cover was a small ditch and some grass that barely covered an individual. Had they been seen from the top of Hill 336 they could have been readily dispatched. A self-propelled gun fired several airbursts down to our right flank. The Company Commander of C Company asked the Battalion Commander what he should do. It was just about H-15. Before the Battalion Commander could advise the Company Commander of C Company of his plans the company assaulted the hill. This assault was so rapid and spontaneous that every man rose as one and moved to the top of the hill. The Battalion Commander seeing this action immediately ordered B Company to deploy and be prepared to support the assault of C Company. However, the assault so caught the Italians off guard that the battle was over immediately. (36)

Once C Company was on Hill 336 our artillery fired a salvo on the hill. Our artillery liaison officer contacted the artillery and told them to cease fire, that our men had Hill 336. Another salvo landed on the hill. Again the artillery liaison officer contacted the artillery and told them that our men were on Hill 336 and for them to cease fire. Again a salvo landed on the hill. This time the liaison officer and the Battalion Commander contacted the artillery. The artillery was told that our men were on the hill and to stop their firing. Then the artillery said that they could see men on Hill 336. They could see enemy. Once again they were told that there were men on the hill but the men were our men and not the enemy. The artillery very reluctantly ceased their fire. (37)

(36, 37) A-8, p. 3. and Personal Knowledge

Fortunately the men of Company C were in holes and many ran behind the crest of the hill when they heard the artillery shells coming in. There were no casualties caused by the artillery and our men mopped up the enemy on the hill just as soon as the artillery ceased its fire. Our men captured about 175 Italians and 30 were killed or wounded. The soldiers labeled Oued el Keddab "Wop Hill". (38)

The artillery liaison officer had just been assigned to the 1st Battalion and his communications were not working so well, ~~at the time~~. Being new to the unit and not quite familiar to the way we worked, also confused him, ~~at the time~~. However, he soon overcame this and his work was excellent from then on. (39)

Soon after the capture of "Wop Hill" the Corps Commander and part of his staff, along with the 1st Division Commander, visited the OP of Dog Company. A proper report was rendered. The D Company Commander explained the attack and the situation to the front in a few words, with the caution that they could be observed by the enemy and also, that as soon as the enemy had time to place their guns we could expect to receive artillery fire. No sooner had this been said than, wheeeeeee boom, boom, boom, boom, a battery salvo hit the road to our immediate left rear. Since the Company Commander of D Company had just dug himself a hole on his OP behind a two foot bank he made for same. Everyone else also made for the hole. Never before has the Company Commander of D Company had so many "stars" trying to get to the bottom of his foxhole. We soon unscrambled and the Corps Commander said, "It's too damned hot. Let's get the hell out of here". Never again did the Company Commander of D Company have so many distinguished guests at his OP. (40)

(3) Personal Knowledge; (39) A-8, p. 4; (40) Personal Knowledge

THE PREPARATION, THE ORDER AND THE ATTACK ON DJEBEL BERDA

Later in the afternoon the regimental commander visited our position on "Wop Hill" and decided to continue the attack on up the south valley. About the time he had issued his order to do this, however, artillery fire came in almost like machine gun fire right near where he was standing. This convinced him that it would be a dangerous thing to move out on the plain in the daylight, so he ordered us to dig in and hold what we had. (41)

In the meantime the 26th Infantry and the 1st Ranger Battalion had been successful in seizing the gap through the northern valley. (42)

Company A sent a patrol out across the plain to the east to feel out the enemy and report on his actions. This patrol had moved about two and one-half miles to the east when they spotted about fifteen enemy tanks and some infantry further east up the plain. The patrol did not try to move out any nearer the enemy for it was too open and they would have been seen. It returned to the battalion just before dark. (43)

During the morning of 22 March 1943 German dive bombers visited our position but hit to the left rear of our battalion. They were after the artillery and vehicles and did very little damage to either. This was the first time we were dive-bombed by twin motored medium bombers releasing a stick of bombs near the end of the dive. (44)

A patrol was sent south across the plain to Djebel Berda. They were to occupy some high ground where they could observe the enemy. No enemy could be found directly across the valley but out in the distance towards the eastern end of Djebel Berda a few enemy could be seen moving around. (45)

Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the assistant division commander, came up to see the regimental commander, Brigadier General (then Colonel) Frank U. Greer. They decided that the regiment should move toward

(41, 42, 43, 44) A-8, p. 4 and Personal Knowledge; (45) A-8, p. 5

the east and seize the tips of the mountains just north and east of Djebel Berda, overlooking the Gafsa-Gabes road. The battalion commander was given these instructions about 1130, 22 March 1943.

As the battalion commander put it, "This was another movement that I really sweated out in view of some of the artillery fire that we had been receiving. I knew that if the Germans spotted us moving across the desert to Djebel Berda that they could cut us to ribbons with artillery fire before we could reach the high ground on the other side, and frankly, at that time I did not see how in the world they could help but see us. I would have much preferred to make this movement, as you probably know, at night time. Since we can't always choose our assignments, however, we had to move out."

Company A with a platoon of heavy machine guns attached moved out across the valley in a very extended formation sending one platoon out and then feeding the other platoons into the formation. Company B with a platoon of heavy machine guns attached followed and then C Company. D Company followed the three rifle companies in this movement. The 81-mm mortar platoon carried one gun per section and the rest of the section carried ammunition. (46)

The battalion moved across the plain without being spotted by the enemy. Actually the ground that appeared to be absolutely flat had a very gentle roll to it which was just enough to hide the column as it marched across the desert. Company A used all the cover available and reached the patrol that had been ordered to stay on Djebel Berda and observe. The column could go no farther without exposing itself unless it moved backward and then circled over miles of very rough terrain. The objective had to be reached before dark so the battalion moved over the exposed section to a large ditch that ran parallel to the mountain. This exposure was seen by the enemy and all of his artillery and mortar fire fell ~~all~~ along the

(46) A-8, p. 5

column at a terrific rate in an attempt to halt the advance of the battalion. (47).

Lieutenant Colonel York states, "Resounding off of those hillsides and down through the valley, it made noises I shall never forget. However, we continued to push on up along the mountain toward our objective."

A messenger reached the heavy weapons company commander to inform him that his executive officer had been killed at the exposed portion of our route and that the mortar platoon leader was seriously wounded and evacuated. The messenger was sent back with a message for the 1st Sergeant to take over the duties of the Executive Officer and for the mortar platoon sergeant to take over the mortar platoon. (48)

Most of Company A had reached the objective when the column was cut by the fire of a large caliber machine gun firing explosive bullets. A platoon leader of A Company was killed assaulting the position. The Battalion Commander ordered the 81-mm mortar platoon into action. The mortar platoon sergeant had just reached this position and behind the hill, hid from the machine gun, was the mortar section of A Company sitting by waiting for orders. The mortar platoon sergeant took one 60-mm mortar, placed it just behind the crest and with direct alignment the first round fired hit the machine gun that was firing upon the column. A second round was fired for good measure and the enemy machine gun was never heard from again. (49)

In the meantime the battalion was moving forward on another route found by a quick reconnaissance. Just after dark the battalion reached position D and took up a tentative defensive position.

Lieutenant Colonel York described position D thus, "When we reached the vicinity of our objective it seemed as if the terrain would just swallow

(47) A-8, p. 6; (48) Personal Knowledge; (49) Personal Knowledge

our battalion. I recall uttering the statement "All this and heaven too". It was a position in a crescent but was overlooked by Hill 772 which was a wall of mountain, practically sheer, a thousand feet over our heads.

The wire team had a line into regiment shortly after our arrival in this position. The Battalion Commander gave the situation to the Regimental Commander who thought we should continue the attack. After the Battalion Commander explained that we had three patrols out to the north, northeast and east to feel out the enemy positions the Regimental Commander then decided to ^{order} move the 2nd Battalion who had been moving east from their positions to move across the valley, join the 1st Battalion and attack north and northeast towards the Gafsa-Gabes road.

When the patrols returned they reported enemy to the north and the north-east. (50)

Having moved this far without artillery it now had come time for us to use some on the hills to the north. There had been a displacement of artillery to positions east of "Wop Hill" so that they could support our attack. This meant that there had to be a registration and that it had to be made at night. The artillery liaison officer said that he could use white phosphorous and make the adjustment on the hills. This adjustment was made very easily because the hills were covered with sparse bushes two to three feet high and rocks of a similar size. The white phosphorous bursts could be easily seen by the observer. (51)

It was now 0300 23 March 1943 and everything had become very quiet. Guides had been sent to meet the 2nd Battalion and lead them to our position. Just before 0400 we heard a noise to our front that sounded like many motors. This was reported to regiment at 0400. (52)

(50) A-8, p. 6 and Personal Knowledge; (51) Personal Knowledge

(52) Personal Knowledge

At 0430 the 2nd Battalion had reached our position and were ready to move out into the attack at 0445. Such a move was made because Lieutenant Colonel York had drawn up plans for the direction of attack and the artillery support. The 2nd Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ben Sternberg, accepted these plans. The 2nd Battalion was to attack to the north-east with E Company on the right, G Company on the left with F Company in reserve. The 1st Battalion was to attack to the north with B Company on the right and A Company on the left with C Company in reserve. (53)

At 0440 there was a heavy five minute artillery concentration on our objectives. This concentration ended with a round of white phosphorous from each gun which was the signal for the attack. The enemy was stunned by the very accurate artillery fire and readily gave up. The artillery just happened to be on top and to the rear of the enemy positions which was perfect. The objectives had to be mopped up before digging in defensive positions. All of a sudden at 0500 the noise in the valley to north sprang into action. Luckily the trains of the 2nd Battalion had just moved into the hills to join us. (54)

THE ATTACK OF THE 10TH PANZER DIVISION

There were red, white and blue tracers being fired from the noise in the valley to the north across the valley. Soon these colors were joined by green, purple, yellow and orange tracers. Soon after this the larger guns began firing. It appeared that every time there were point ricochets these would be followed by the large caliber guns. It was very dark at this time and nothing could be seen except the source of this large volume of fire slowly moving westwards. Within half an hour daylight started breaking and before us in the valley was an entire panzer division. (55)

(53) A-8, p. 8; (54) Personal Knowledge; (55) Personal Knowledge

Our men were digging in getting ready for a counterattack if one came our way.

However, the enemy only blocked to the south and fired a small amount of artillery and self-propelled fire on our position. Other than this we sat up on the hills and watched the great show that was going on in the valley.

The 10th Panzer Division was in an armored square with infantry interspersed among the tanks and self-propelled guns. Other armored infantry made a slow S turn and moved up to their detrucking position (Point E). As the sheaf of fire moved west the infantry followed it closely. They used the folds in the ground to advantage and steadily advanced.

Near Point 277 the tanks broke into a formation of three columns. The north column moving towards the north-west, the central column moving astride the Gafsa-Gabes road and the south column started on a sweep to move to the south and beyond "Wop Hill" (Point C). This south column had more than thirty tanks in it and was to be the main strength of the attack.

When the attack started it hit the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion ^{which were} ~~who were~~ in position to protect the artillery that had moved to positions east of "Wop Hill". The tank destroyer battalion had its reconnaissance force screening out near point 227. This force was rapidly disposed of by the enemy and what was left withdrew to join the remainder of the tank destroyer battalion. This all happened just before daylight. (56)

As soon as it was light enough to adjust fire the artillery opened up with all of its guns. The tank destroyers with their 75-mm guns on halftracks also opened fire when the enemy was within range. Soon the valley was just a mass of guns shooting, shells bursting, armored vehicles burning and tanks moving steadily westward.

(56) A-3, p. 22

For the first hour we sat in awe watching the attack of the 10th Panzer Division. The precision and timing of the huge iron fort moving down the valley was a thing of magnificent beauty that few persons will only see once in a lifetime and the majority will never have the opportunity to view.

Although we were stunned by such force for a short time we were soon realizing that if the unit flanking "Wop Hill" succeeded we would be cut off from all Allied units except the French forces south of Djebel Berda. The picture did not look good for our forces as the panzers were closing in on "Wop Hill".

The 3rd Battalion of the 18th Infantry ^{which was} ~~who were~~ in position east of "Wop Hill" ^{were} being overrun by tanks. The tanks would run their treads over the foxholes and as they cleared the foxholes two or three German soldiers would be pointing their guns at the occupants. Many of the soldiers were crushed by the tanks.

Company K, 18th Infantry was completely run over by the tanks but held their ground even among the tanks. They gained the first unit citation for the regiment. (As a sidelight, Company K, 18th Infantry ended the war with four unit citations and four Medals of Honor. It was truly a great company.) (57)

The minefield which had been laid in front and to the right flank of "Wop Hill" was instrumental in stopping the enemy attack, especially the south prong that tried to flank "Wop Hill". Once the tanks reached the minefield they were exposed to flanking fire from the tank destroyers. In all eight tanks were accounted for at the minefield. (58)

Our artillery was doing a splendid job. The 32nd Field Artillery Battalion, 105-mm Howitzers, was firing from its positions in front of

(57) Personal Knowledge; (58) A-8, p. 7 and A-3, p. 23

"Wop Hill" until their guns were so hot it was dangerous to fire them. The gun crews poured cans of water on the tubes to cool them down so they could be fired. Just before their positions were overrun they spiked their guns and made for cover.

The 5th Field Artillery Battalion, 155-mm Howitzers, was overrun. Their crews also had to spike their guns and seek cover.

Company B, 103 AAA Battalion was overrun and lost many of its ~~Refors.~~

All the artillery that was further to the rear continued firing until the attack was halted and the enemy withdrew to the cover of some knolls between "Wop Hill" and the Gafsa-Gabes road. (59)

Upon their order to withdraw the enemy tank crews got out and hooked up the disabled tanks so that they could be towed to the rear. This was done in the midst of artillery fire which did not appear to faze those working outside the tanks at all. From the time of withdrawal until dark the enemy recovered thirty-eight tanks. Some of the tanks were towed to positions near point F where repair units had set up work. Other tanks moved back east to an assembly area for repair.

The estimated attacking force was 125 Mark 3 and Mark-4 tanks. The writer did not see any Mark VI, Tiger, tanks in this attack.

Some of the German prisoners of war who were brought in near the end of the attack were crying. When asked why they were crying they stated that it was the first time they had been stopped by infantry and artillery. (60)

Once the enemy had obtained positions in defilade the M-10 tank destroyers came out on the Gafsa-Gabes road east of "Wop Hill" (Point C). As soon as they were in sight the enemy tanks would move up to a position of hull defilade and knock them out. After the leading vehicles were

(59) A-8, p. 8 and A-2, p. 78; (60) Personal Knowledge

knocked out the remainder stayed under cover the rest of the day.

During the day we wanted to fire the artillery but the regimental commander said no. The units being attacked had first priority on all artillery fire. We saw all the enemy movements from the rear and had there been enough artillery for us to fire we could have made things very uncomfortable for the enemy.

Next we called for air missions. This we couldn't have for the planes were busy elsewhere. Finally we did get a mission on some tanks and troops in an assembly area near Point G. There were twelve medium bombers on this mission and that was all we saw of our air force for the day. The result was good but hundreds of planes could have been used to advantage. (61)

About 1500 we got word from regiment that there had been an intercept that the Germans would again attack at 1600. A short time later another intercept told us that the Germans would attack at 1640.

A strong force of approximately twenty-five twin motored bombers with strong air cover dive-bombed our artillery positions at "Wop Hill" at 231630. Minor damage was caused but several guns and some personnel were lost.

At 1640 the enemy moved from behind a hill where they had been assembling by infiltration all afternoon for the attack. The enemy tanks did not move out on this attack. As soon as the enemy was out in the open our artillery opened fire on them and drove them back behind the ridge that they had just left. Time fire was then placed on these troops and it was devastating. Nearly every enemy soldier was either killed or wounded. This was the end of the attack of the 10th Panzer Division on "Wop Hill".

(62)

(61, 62) Personal Knowledge and A-2, p. 781

ENEMY COUNTER-ATTACK AGAINST THE 2ND BATTALION 18TH INFANTRY

The only thing our battalion did during the day was to knock out a troop carrier that had moved into a position in a wadi not knowing where we were and firing some 81-mm mortar fire at a small group of infantry.

March 24, 1943 was a quiet day for our battalion also. However, the 2nd Battalion was getting direct fire from assault guns and tanks all day. Company G was exposed on a rock ridge where they could not dig fox-holes and had to take cover behind rocks. The enemy actually sniped at these troops all day with their large guns. Just after dark the enemy moved its tanks and assault guns near G Company's position and opened fire at point blank range. This barrage was followed by whooping hopped up German soldiers. Company G disintegrated under the impact, many of whom were captured, killed and wounded.

The 2nd Battalion Commander ordered his battalion to withdraw to Point D. This left Companies A and B exposed and they had to be pulled in so they wouldn't be cut up by the enemy. We then formed a strong position with the 2nd Battalion on the right and the 1st Battalion on the left at Point D. (63)

Just after daybreak 25 March 1943 some enemy troops were seen atop Hill 772. They had a very good view of our positions but for a very short time. The 81-mm mortar platoon had registered on the point the morning of 23 March 1943. They set up a mortar in the open, using the hill for an aiming point, and with 2450 yards range made short order of the enemy and their stay on this hill. The enemy scampered down the hill with mortar shells dropping amongst them until they were out of sight and range.

Company E was sent to secure Hill 772 shortly after the enemy had been driven off. This move was made by circling southwest, south and southeast

(63) A-8, p. 8 and Personal Knowledge

without difficulty. Once they moved to take up a defensive position their movements were spotted and the enemy fired upon them with assault guns. They moved back behind the hill and were ordered to withdraw. This bald point, high above friendly and enemy forces, was untenable by either side and was "no mans land". (64)

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM DJEBEL BERDA

During the day the 1st and 2nd Battalion Commanders talked with the regimental commander about further operations. The 2nd Battalion Commander wanted to withdraw for he did not think we could hold the position. The 1st Battalion Commander thought we could hold the position for it was impossible for the enemy to get tanks or self-propelled guns into the hills where we were, without extensive labor and time. We could fight off enemy infantry from our position (Point D). We also asked for reinforcements so we would have enough troops to cover the north and east of this tremendous hill mass. With the aid of another regiment we could take all of Djebel Berda and open the road to Gabes, giving the armor an opportunity to drive a salient through to the sea, splitting the enemy forces. We also knew from past actions that if this ideal defensive position which was taken from the Italians was ever occupied by the German forces it would not be taken from them without great loss to the attacking forces. Although the hills were practically solid rock the German engineers always brought their air-drills up and dug foxholes for the infantry. This was a service the American soldiers did not have at the time. (65)

II Corps Headquarters sent orders down to us to withdraw. Lieutenant Colonel York states, "When we got those orders I told the Regimental Commander that I thought the ground we held was tactically important enough to hold if any unit planned to operate over that sector again. I further told him that I thought that we would be able to hold it. However, he

(64) A-8, p. 9 and Personal Knowledge; (65) Personal Knowledge

decided that, since Division had issued instructions, which apparently came down from Corps, we should go ahead and withdraw."

The 1st Ranger Battalion which had moved into our area the night of 24-25 March 1943 had sent patrols to high ground on Djebel Berda and screened our right flank. The order of withdrawal was for the 2nd Battalion followed by the 1st Battalion to pass through the 1st Ranger Battalion. We were to march to "Wop Hill" and from there take trucks back to El Guettar. This move was made very successfully. There was a small counterattack against the Rangers after we had withdrawn. (66)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The attack on "Wop Hill" was a well planned and executed battalion maneuver although the Battalion Commander received the attack order after dark to attack this position the next morning. Such a success was the result of all Company Commanders visiting OP's with the Battalion Commander to make terrain studies and analyze the ground over which future operations were to be made. Likewise, Company Commanders in turn studied the terrain and exchanged ideas with their platoon leaders who in turn did the same thing with members of their platoons. Such studies start immediately upon occupying a new position.

Although our move by trucks was only three miles it saved the men an hour's walk and gave them that much more energy for the remainder of the operation.

Night moves are best made when crossing open terrain or through mountainous terrain, if one has well trained troops, thorough reconnaissance and a good plan of maneuver. Such moves afford concealment and surprise. Also numbers seem greater at night. The writer believes that the counter attack made on the 2nd Battalion was not over a company in strength but the sudden attack after the direct fire of the tanks made the attacking

(66) A-8, p. 10 and Personal Knowledge

force seem as though it were a battalion. (67)

Moonlight affords enough light to define objectives and allows an attacking force rapid and accurate maneuvering. This accounts for the success of the attack on "Wop Hill" by the 1st Battalion.

The assault on "Wop Hill" by Company C did not take place in the 1st Battalion sector but in the 2nd Battalion sector. However, the complete surprise and sudden attack caused the entire position to fold rapidly, giving the 2nd Battalion an uninterrupted advance to its objective. (68)

The patrols that were sent out by the 1st Battalion immediately after securing positions kept the battalion in constant contact with the enemy and gained information in which to plan future operations.

It is the opinion of the writer that if Division had held off until dusk to order the move to Djebel Berda we could have made an operation equally as successful as the operation against "Wop Hill".

The attack of the 10th Panzer Division was as perfect as an armored division could execute. Although such precision of movement and firepower at first brought success it also channelized the enemy into our minefield where he was destroyed. Small arms and tank destroyer's flanking fire prevented the removal of the mines which stopped the advance of the enemy and forced his retreat or destruction.

Although our losses of material and men were great the tenacity of stout hearted soldiers, artillery fire, tank destroyer fire and a minefield turned the tide of battle. (69)

Our Air Corps flew only one mission over a target that could have given them tremendous returns if they had made an all out attack as the enemy was withdrawing. Their glaring absence and lack of support did not escape the attention of a single soldier fighting the battle. Their

(67) Personal Knowledge; (68) Personal Knowledge; (69) A-8, p. 67 and Personal Knowledge

presence and support would have annihilated the 10th Panzer Division.

(70)

The value of artillery fire even when adjusted at night can never be overlooked. Fire adjustment can be made from map, triangulation on a flare from ones position to locate ones lines, and then an adjustment in the desired direction, or triangulation on a 60-mm mortar flare fired over the enemy's position. There are many improvised methods of adjusting artillery at night which are accurate. Never go without artillery fire because there were no daylight registrations. (71)

The withdrawal of our forces the night of 25-26 March 1943 from Djebel Berda was a very serious error on the part of Corps if they knew there were going to be other operations through the sector, and I am sure they did. To substantiate this statement, the division making the attack through the sector moved into bivouac near Gafsa the 25 and 26 March 1943 preparing to attack on 27 March. The attack was delayed but was made on 28 March.

Units of this division detrucked at the RJ near 227 and moved across the flat to attack Hill 369. The right elements of the division were caught in wadi and found themselves subjected to tremendous machine gun fire from all sides. Their massacre was nearly complete. The left elements did not gain a foothold in the hills that had been occupied by the Germans after our withdrawal and were pinned down on the open plain. These troops could not move, had very little cover, if any, and were subjected to devastating machine gun fire the entire day.

This division made numerous attacks against Djebel Berda and an after battle study of the area made by the writer proved that this division did not reach the position occupied by the 18th Infantry until the enemy withdrew the 6-7 April 1943. The area was then occupied without opposition. (72)

(70) A-8, p. 8 and Personal Knowledge; (71) Personal Knowledge;
(72) A-6 and a personal after battle reconnaissance of the battlefield which this Division fought.

Had the attacking unit moved by night near the foot of the mountain and attacked through our positions or attacked in conjunction with us as we desired, the objective could have been taken, opening the road to Gabes and allowing the bisection of the enemy forces. However, this was not done and the casualties of this division (less one combat team) were: WIA-872, KIA-120, MIA-316, Injured-186, Exhausted-207, Disease-111 giving a total of 1812 casualties. Of this number 425 were returned to duty leaving a total of 1387 evacuated or missing. (73)

The personnel losses of the 1st Division or of the 10th Panzer Division could not be found but the writer estimates that they were approximately the same.

The 1st Division losses in material to the 10th Panzer Division were:

- 21 Tank Destroyers of which 8 were repaired
- 8 1/4-ton Trucks
- 4 Halftracks
- 1 3/4-ton Truck
- 12 105-mm Howitzers)
- 12 155-mm Howitzers)---50% of which were recovered.
- 13 40-mm Bofors) (74)

Over fifty tanks of the 10th Panzer Division were disabled or knocked out. Of this number the writer counted 38 recoveries and 13 that had been destroyed on the battlefield. (75)

LESSONS

Some of the lessons learned and/or emphasized during these operations are:

1. Never give up dominant terrain that is to be used for future operations.
2. Night operations are more successful over open or mountainous

(73) A-6, p. 9; (74) A-2, p. 782 and A-3, p. 29; (75) Personal Knowledge

terrain if the attacking unit knives its way through the enemy position or flanks the enemy position and then attacks from the flank or the rear.

3. Continuous terrain study and analysis is essential for success in all operations.

4. Immediately upon securing a position feel out the enemy's actions with patrols.

5. Minefields properly placed will channelize a superior enemy armored force into such a position that he may be destroyed by a weaker force without armor.

6. Artillery fire can be accurately adjusted at night.

7. Always move troops by carriers to conserve their energy and save time.

8. Boundary lines marked on maps and overlays by higher headquarters should be flexible enough to allow one unit to aid another if it does not alter the overall plan of the higher headquarters.

9. Always study the phase of the moon to determine if it will aid or hinder the action.

10. Numbers always seem greater at night.