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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 26TH INFANTRY
(1ST INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE REDUCTION OF
ENEMY POSITIONS IN THE HARZ MOUNTAINS 17-18
APRIL 1945.

(CENTRAL EUROPE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: COMPANY IN THE ATTACK.

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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 26TH INFANTRY, (1ST INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE REDUCTION OF ENEMY POSITIONS IN THE HARZ MOUNTAINS 17-18 APRIL 1945.

(CENTRAL EUROPE CAMPAIGN)

(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company B, 26th Infantry, 1st U. S. Infantry Division in the Harz Mountains, Germany, 17-18 April 1945, during the Central Europe Campaign.

This group of mountains, the most northern chain in Germany, extending a length of 56 miles and an average width of 18 miles (or approximately 1,008 square miles) is a very heavily wooded, mountainous range which rises abruptly from the plain on every side, especially on the N.W. The city of Nordhausen is situated on the southern slopes. The entire area is dominated by lofty Mount Brocken, the highest mountain in central Germany, reaching to an elevation of 3,746 feet. The Brocken railroad has its terminus atop this peak. (See Maps A and B). (1)

In order to properly orient the reader on events leading up to the reduction of the Harz Mountains area it is deemed advisable at this point to return to the closing of the Ruhr pocket on the eastern bank of the Rhine River, 1 April 1945. (See Map A). On this date units of the First and Ninth Armies made contact west of Paderborn, at Lippstadt, thereby creating the largest double envelopment in the history of warfare. Entrapped were the whole of Germany Army Group B and two corps of Army Group H. (2)

(1) A-1, p. 305, 312, 331, 332; (2) A-2, p. 104; A-3, p. 51.

The final collapse of the pocket yielded 325,000 prisoners, including 30 general officers and enormous quantities of supplies. Twenty-one divisions were destroyed, including three panzer, one panzer grenadier and three parachute divisions. (3)

The encirclement and liquidation of the Ruhr was the worst single defeat suffered by the Reich. In addition to the loss of a large number of her very best divisions, plus vast quantities of military equipment, she also lost a great portion of her heavy industries which were still in production, though crippled by the air forces. (4)

Germany could not write off the Ruhr and the Rhine River defensive line and retire to a strong line in the rear because no such line existed; the Weser and Elbe Rivers were barriers of no great importance. For a further defense in the west "the only possible ace in the hole -- the case ace -- was the Harz Mountains, an area as difficult and forbidding militarily as it was scenic in peace time. There the enemy might hope to reassemble whatever forces he had on hand to stage a reverse Bastogne. It would take time to reduce the mountains if for no other reason than the terrain, and when defended by even the low caliber of troops at hand the area might possibly hold out successfully enough to throttle down the high-gearred drive into the vitals of the Reich". (5)

Upon the closing of the Ruhr pocket complete defeat was facing Germany; the whole world was aware of this fact--probably including most of the Germans--but all the indications

(3) A-2, p. 105; A-4, p. 99; (4) (5) A-5, p. 77.

were that her leaders planned to continue the struggle. Even before the Rhine was crossed the success of the Allied cause was no longer in doubt, a conviction that was undoubtedly shared by the German General Staff. Continuance of the struggle was by now merely evidence of Hitler's fanaticism. (6)

The gains made by the Allies in the Ruhr were of great importance, but probably of equal importance was the fact that a vast bridgehead had been secured from which the Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, could launch an assault to accomplish the final objective assigned to him by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the destruction of the German armed forces. (7)

When the elimination of the forces in the Ruhr had progressed far enough to present no threat to the Allies, General Eisenhower turned his attention to the east for further gains; here, three avenues of approach into Germany were open to the forces under his command: (8)

1. In the north, a route lay across the north German plains towards the Baltic and Berlin. (9)

2. In central Germany, an easy advance was offered from Kassel, through Erfurt and Leipzig to Dresden as a result of the gap in the German lines created by the entrapment of the vast forces in the Ruhr pocket. (10)

3. In the south, an axis of advance was open through Nurnberg and Regensburg, via the Danube Valley into Austria. (11)

After weighing the relative advantages which would ac-

(6) A-2, p. 96; (7) A-4, p. 96; (8) (9) (10) (11)
A-2, ps. 105, 106.

crue in the adoption of either of the three plans, General Eisenhower settled on plan 2. This thrust through to Dresden would cut Germany in two and afford the maximum degree of flexibility for future operations, since the Allied forces could then be switched rapidly to the north or south as the situation developed. (12)

As a result of his decision to make the main thrust across central Germany, General Eisenhower instructed General Omar N. Bradley, commanding the 12th Army Group, to launch an offensive with the central group of armies, consisting of the First, Third and Ninth Armies, from the Kassel area towards Leipzig. He was to seize any opportunity of capturing a bridgehead over the Elbe River and be prepared for further operations to the east. (13)

On 5 April 1945 the main Allied advances to the east were launched with the First Army in the center, the Third on the right, or southern flank, and the Ninth on the left, or northern flank. (See Map A) (14)

By 6 April the First Army was fighting on two fronts: to the west to complete the reduction of the Ruhr pocket with the XVIII Airborne Corps and the III Corps; and in the east advancing towards the Elbe River with the V and VII Corps. The VII Corps on the extreme left flank of the Army zone and consisting of the 1st and 104th Infantry Divisions and the 3d Armored Division was to advance rapidly eastward, by-passing, but containing, any resistance in the Harz Mountains; the V Corps consisting of the 2d and 69th Infantry Di-

(12) (13) (14) A-2, ps. 105, 106.

visions and the 9th Armored Division was to advance eastward on the right, or southern, flank of the Army zone. (See Map A) (15)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 11 April 1945 in the VII Corps zone elements of the 104th Infantry Division were blocking the southern approaches of the Harz Mountains to protect the rear and flanks of the 3d Armored Division which was in the vicinity of Nordhausen, completing its preparations for a drive further to the east. The 1st Infantry Division had advanced to, and entered, the western edge of the mountains against increased resistance which included road blocks, blown bridges, tanks, small arms and bazooka fire. Elements of the Ninth Army (the 83d Infantry Division) were moving through the northern edge of the Harz to effect a meeting with elements of the First Army's VII Corps on the eastern edge to complete an encirclement of the mountains and sever the corridor from the east. The V Corps was to the south of the VII Corps (See Map B) and, as was true of all elements of the 12th Army Group, advancing eastward, making rapid progress. The Third Army was to the south of the V Corps. By 13 April the 9th Infantry Division had been placed under the VII Corps and had assumed control of a sector on the southeast corner of the Harz Mountains. (See Map B) (16)

THE DIVISION SITUATION-(11, 17 APRIL 1945)

On 11 April the 1st U. S. Infantry Division from its position on the left flank of the VII Corps (on the left

(15) A-3, ps. 57, 60; (16) A-2, p. 107; A-3, ps. 61-63.

flank of the First Army) launched its attack east through the Harz Mountains to effect the reduction of this area of approximately 1,000 square miles of heavily wooded, and very mountainous, terrain. The 26th Infantry was on the left, or north, flank; the 18th in the center, and the 16th on the right, or south, flank. Elements of the 104th Infantry Division were blocking the southern exits. (See Map B) (17)

In the Harz Mountains the 1st soon realized that the Germans were defending the area with four corps instead of only one, as had been thought--the 6th, 9th, 67th and 69th Corps with the overall command being invested in the 11th Panzer Army. In addition to these four corps there were large numbers of battle-groups formed from men who had drifted into the area from various units that had been overrun. None of the corps organizations were near the level of that existing in the Wehrmacht's better days; however, there were enough troops in the area to make the reduction of the Harz a difficult task, especially as there was also a great number of SS personnel present, plus a core of experienced staffs from divisions no longer in existence, to do the planning. It was believed that there were about 100,000 fairly well organized troops in the area.

The terrain in the Harz was as forbidding to an attacker as could be found anywhere. The road net was more limited than in the Ardennes, and those capable of carrying heavy traffic were very easy to block. The number of trees that could be felled across the roads at critical points was

(17) A-2, p. 107; A-3, p. 61.

only limited by the number of men available to handle saws. The area was rougher than the Hurtgen Forest because the woods were thicker and the ground more broken by ravines, hills and draws. The winding roads could be cratered at a moments notice. For defense of the Harz the Germans had supporting weapons in strength which gave them equality, if not superiority, in all except artillery. (18)

The morning of 17 April found the division deep in the Harz stronghold, disposed on a line running generally from Torfhaus to a point just northwest of Braunlage through Benneckenstein to a point east of Ellrich where the 9th and 1st Division boundaries joined in the south. (See Map B). The Regiments were disposed on the line in the same manner as on the 11 April. (19)

The advance of the division 11-17 April had been made against increasing resistance and rapidly improving organization of units; the effect of the stragglers pouring in from units being overrun in the east and in the Ruhr pocket was being felt. (20)

THE REGIMENTAL SITUATION AND PLAN OF ATTACK

On the morning of 17 April, the 26th Infantry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Francis Murdock, was disposed on the left of the division as follows: (See Map C)

The 2d Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Derril M. Daniel, was disposed around RJ 34 just south of Torfhaus. (21)

The 1st Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Dulligan, was disposed around RJ 35 and the dam of

(18) A-5, p. 80; (19) A-7, ps. 262, 263; (20) A-5, ps. 81, 82; (21) A-8; Statement of Major Thomas J. Gendron (S-3, 2d Bn at time).

Oder Lake. (22)

The 3d Battalion, commanded by Major Walter M. Nation, was disposed around RJ 36, just northwest of Braunlage. (23)

The plan called for the regiment to continue the drive eastward through the Harz. At 0900, 17 April, the 2d and 3d Battalions were to move out in the attack, the former upon the town of Schierke and the latter upon the town of Braunlage. When Braunlage was secured the 1st Battalion was to move from its position at Oder Lake, pass through the 3d Battalion and secure Elend. The 1st and 2d Battalions would make contact between Schierke and Elend. (See Map C) (24)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

On the morning of 17 April 1945 the 1st Battalion was disposed in the vicinity of RJ 35 and the Oder Lake dam, between the 2d and 3d Battalion, with C Company on the right, A on the left and B around RJ 35; Headquarters and Headquarters Company and D Company were located near the west end of the Oder Lake dam. (See Map C) B Company was commanded by the author. (25)

THE BATTALION AND COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK

At about 0800 on the morning of 17 April all companies of the 1st Battalion were alerted by telephone for a move to the east; ordered to start assembling, and all company commanders were to report to the Command Post for orders. At the Command Post everyone was brought up-to-date on the situation; instructions had been given the previous evening to expect an attack towards Elend the following day. It was

(22) A-9; Personal knowledge; (23) A-10; Statement of Captain Walter Stevens, (S-3, 3d Bn at time); (24) A-8; A-9; Personal knowledge; (25) A-8; A-9; Personal knowledge.

learned from Colonel Dulligan that the 2d and 3d Battalions were moving out at 0900 towards their assigned objectives, Schierke and Braunlage, respectively. At 1500 the 1st Battalion would move through the 3d in Braunlage (after it had been secured) and continue towards Elend in a column of companies with B in the lead, followed by A, the battalion command group, C and then D, followed by Headquarters Company. A Company was to be prepared to deploy to either side of the road leading into Elend, and to assist B in capturing the town if necessary. C Company was to be battalion reserve. The 81mm mortar platoon of D Company was to go into position west of Braunlage to deliver supporting fires. B and A Companies were each to have two tanks and two TDs attached for the operation, effective at once; their commanders to report to each company Command Post. Two observers, artillery and 81mm mortar, were to report to B Company's Command Post at once.

The line of departure would be the eastern edge of Braunlage; the time of attack at 1500 hours. (26)

It was felt that very little opposition, if any, would be encountered prior to reaching the railroad overpass at 48, just west of Elend. (See Map C) The S-2 felt that this overpass would be destroyed by the Germans prior to the battalion reaching it and that the high railroad embankment west of the town would be strongly defended. (27)

Upon reaching Elend, B Company would turn north and follow the street around to 50 and would establish positions

(26) A-9; Personal knowledge; (27) A-9; Personal knowledge.

between 51 and 53 on the eastern edge; A Company would follow B and occupy the north section of town, making contact with B at 51; C Company would occupy the south section of town, contacting B at 53 and A north of 54.

Mortars would be set up to fire to the east of town. Strong points would be established at 51 and 53.

The aid station and battalion ammunition dump were to be in Braunlage, near the LD, until Elend was secured.

Distance to Braunlage from RJ 35, 4 miles; from Braunlage to Elend, 3.5 miles.

C Company would march to the assembly area in Braunlage; other companies would be shuttled by all available transportation. (28)

Returning to his Command Post at RJ 35 the B Company Commander oriented all platoon leaders, plus attachments, of all he had learned at the battalion Command Post and issued these additional instructions: the company would move into an assembly area in Braunlage just in rear of the LD, shortly after the 3d Battalion had secured it, on all available transportation, -- tanks, TDs, and the three company 1/4 ton vehicles; upon arrival in town platoon leaders, tank and TD commanders, plus observers would report to the head of the column at the eastern edge of town. The company would move up to the LD in Braunlage in the following order: 2d Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant James Cunningham; 1st Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Florian Lis; 3d Platoon, commanded by T/Sgt Oscar Davidson; B Company's weapons platoon; the two tanks

(28) A-9; Personal knowledge.

and the two TDs, with company headquarters, under Lieutenant Anthony Matukonis, at the rear of the column. (29)

At about 1130 word was received from battalion that the 3d Battalion had entered Braunlage and was clearing it. At this time the company commander took Lieutenant Cunningham, one messenger, radio operator and driver and departed for Braunlage to make a reconnaissance and to locate the LD. The executive officer, Lieutenant Matukonis, was instructed to keep the company alerted and ready to move into town, and was advised that Lieutenant Cunningham would be back shortly to guide him down into Braunlage. At the western edge of Braunlage the 3d Battalion S-3, Captain Walter D. Stevens, was contacted; he stated that I Company, under Captain Claude Croft, was still cleaning out the eastern edge of town. B Company Commander and his party moved on through and located Captain Croft near the road leading towards Elend, clearing the last few buildings. He stated that the Germans appeared to be falling back towards Elend and to the south of the Elend road and that he felt certain B Company would meet stiff resistance before reaching 48. He suggested that B Company cross the LD in a deployed formation with an especial alertness for trouble from the south. (30)

After a reconnaissance of the eastern edge of Braunlage and the LD, Lieutenant Cunningham returned to guide the company from RJ 35 to the forward assembly area. B Company Commander remained near the LD observing down the road towards Elend.

(29) (30) Personal knowledge.

At about 1400 B Company entered Braunlage on vehicles, dismounted and moved towards the LD in the formation prescribed. Soon afterwards the remainder of the battalion moved into the forward assembly area. (31)

Platoon leaders, observers, TD and tank commanders reported at the head of the column, near the LD at the eastern edge of Braunlage, where the following orders were issued: B Company to cross the LD at 1500 hours with two platoons abreast, the 1st on the left and the 2d on the right of the road leading into Elend, with contact between platoons being maintained on the road. The company command group would follow at about 75 - 100 yards followed by the 3d Platoon, ready to be committed to either side of the road, but being especially alert towards the right flank. The two tanks, two TDs, the 60mm mortar section and the company headquarters group would follow, under control of the executive officer. The light machine^{gun} section was attached to the 2d Platoon. Each rifleman was issued a second bandolier of ammunition and everyone was issued a one-third K ration, to be consumed in event the company was too occupied to be served a hot meal that night.

The weather was warm and sunny and the ground very soft from the thaws; the nights were cold.

The combat strength of Company B at this time was approximately 120 EM and 4 officers.

The radio communications for the company consisted of an SCR 536 for the company commander, each platoon leader,

(31) Personal knowledge; A-9.

the light machine gun section and two in the 60mm mortar section; two SCR 300 -- one for the company commander and one for the executive officer. (32)

THE ATTACK ON BLEND (17 APRIL).

At 1500 B Company moved across the LD in the formation prescribed by the company commander and had progressed about 800 yards when Lieutenant Cunningham called for a halt over the 536, and asked that the "tin cans" (TDs and tanks) be moved up. He and Lieutenant Lis had requested that the tanks and TDs be kept back in the column and sent up when needed. The company commander signaled the armor forward and proceeded along the road with them to where Cunningham was standing in the road at 41. His platoon was deployed to the right of the road in the thick woods, 40, and the 1st Platoon, under Lis, was deployed to the left of the road on the bare ridge, 39; both platoons had taken cover. (See Map C) This ridge sloped gently down to the bridge at 43, over Bremke Creek, while on the other side the ground rose very sharply to the crest of the ridge 44. North of the road the area east of the creek was heavily wooded while on the south it was virtually bare--exactly opposite from the terrain on the western side, where the company was halted. (See Map C) (33)

At 44 two enemy medium tanks were backing into position with their 88mm weapons pointing towards B Company, approximately 800 yards distant; they had good visibility almost all the way into Braunlage but had not observed B Company's movements. It was planned to move the two tanks attached to B

(32) (33) Personal knowledge.

Company to the left on the road and leave the two TD's on the road and all four fire, at a given signal, on the two enemy tanks. However, the gunner in one of the tanks became over anxious and fired at the left rear of the left German tank; the round penetrated it causing it to burst into flames immediately. The gunner in the other tank quickly fired his weapon at the remaining German tank, but the round ricocheted off the turret. At this moment the Germans blew up the bridge over Bremke Creek and the resulting dust cloud blotted everything from view, affording the other tank an opportunity to pull back over the crest of ridge 44 and escape. The tanks, and TD's which up until now had not fired, began firing blindly over the crest of 44. Later it was discovered that they hit, and burned, a German personnel carrier which was not in view on ridge 44, loaded with troops. All were killed and burned. At this time such an intense artillery and indirect tank fire concentration came down on 39, that an immediate advance towards Bremke Creek was ordered over the 536's. The men of the 1st Platoon at 39 moved through the artillery towards the creek. (34)

Up until now no small arms fire had been noted, but as the two assault platoons approached the creek a terrific hail of machine pistol, machine gun and rifle fire greeted them from dug-in positions on the eastern bank of the creek and from the slopes of the ridge at that point. Again both platoons took cover, and the two tanks and two TD's moved down and thoroughly covered the areas north and south of the

(34) Personal knowledge; A-9.

bridge with point blank cannon fire. While this was happening the two assault platoons, under the leadership of their leaders - both platoon and squad leaders - moved up to within assaulting distance of the enemy positions and took up the fight, with every weapon firing as rapidly as possible. Through radio contact the two platoons moved out at the same time (after Lieutenant Cunningham had ordered the tanks to stop) firing every weapon at a very rapid rate. The platoons kept up this withering rifle fire and moved across the creek and up on the ridge at 44, either killing or driving all the Germans before them. This was an excellent demonstration of tank-infantry action and effective "Marching Fire" on the battlefield. (35)

After the high ridge at 44 was secured the remainder of the company moved down to 43. The 60mm mortars were set up. All small arms fire had ceased and very little artillery was falling in the area. The remainder of the battalion was still in Braunlage.

A reconnaissance made at 1530 revealed that the bridge across Bremke Creek was destroyed, that the area was too marshy for the tanks to ford, and that there was no by-pass. A radio call was made to battalion for engineers and a dozer to make a crossing over the creek. At about 1545 an engineer officer and a platoon of engineers with a bull-dozer moved down and started working to repair the bridge sufficiently for the tanks to cross over; he estimated it would take from 2-4 hours to finish the repairs. This platoon of engineers

(35) Personal knowledge; A-9.

had been attached to the battalion for the operation.

A check made of the eastern bank of Bremke Creek revealed that the Germans were defending from foxholes, with six machine guns emplaced near the bridge and on the slopes of the high ridge east of the creek. Eight machine pistols and a large number of rifles were discovered; also several rocket launchers. Evidently the troops present on the position had no desire to defend against point blank tank fire and the marching fire from the M-1 rifle. (36)

At about 1600 vehicles were heard moving around in the woods north of the bridge, in the vicinity of 42. The 3d Platoon was committed on the north flank of the company's direction of advance, across Bremke Creek, to tie in with the 1st Platoon on the left and to ward off any counterattack that might come down the creek. The two tanks were disposed to cover that approach and the two TD's placed to cover Bremke Creek to the south.

At this time a wire line was brought down to the Command Post from battalion by vehicle. The battalion commander was informed of all that had transpired, and permission was given to the company commander upon request to hold up until the tanks could cross the creek to accompany the attacking platoons. When he learned that the support platoon of B Company had been committed to the north he instructed its company commander that A Company would move a platoon, with two light machine guns attached, up and tie in with the 2d Platoon on the south to protect the right flank for the 2-4

(36) Personal knowledge.

hours it would take the engineers to repair the bridge. Also, he instructed the company commander to use his own judgement as to further offensive action towards Elend that evening; if he could move on into town, to do so, but if he felt that it could not be accomplished he would have the company dig in on present position and resume the attack the next morning, 18 April. (37)

From the right of 44 Lieutenant Cunningham dispatched a combat patrol into the roads to his right to search for enemy positions; from these woods his platoon could be swept by grazing fire. The patrol destroyed two machine guns there, capturing part of their personnel.

At about 1645 a patrol was dispatched down the road towards Elend with the mission of locating any road blocks further to the east and to proceed, if possible, to the railroad overpass at 48 (See Map C) to determine if it had been destroyed. A short while later strong small arms firing could be heard several hundred yards along the road, and about 1745 the patrol returned with the news that about 700 yards along the road towards Elend was a small unguarded road block of trees, and about 1700 yards from 44 another had been encountered that was approximately 75 yards in width covered by heavy small arms fire. The patrol had come under fire here and had had some difficulty in extricating itself. The overpass had not been reached. The patrol leader pointed out the location of the covered road block on the ground and on the map and the forward observer brought artillery fire down

(37) Personal knowledge.

on the position.

While this artillery fire was being placed on the enemy road block five U. S. fighter planes appeared from the southeast, and thoroughly strafed the town of Elend for approximately 20 minutes, and then disappeared to the northwest. Evidently they had located German vehicles moving in the town. The battalion commander then called for, and received, an artillery TOT of 5 minutes placed on the town. (38)

At 1830 the engineers had repaired the bridge sufficiently to allow the attached armor to cross. From 44 the move towards Elend was resumed, having been decided after a conference with the platoon leaders that it would be better to push on with the attack that evening rather than wait until the following morning. The battalion was notified by Lieutenant Matukonis via telephone and the other companies began moving out on the road to Elend. The platoon from A Company continued protecting the south flank, while the 3d Platoon of B Company remained on the company's left flank; both platoons had been instructed to move in close to the road (the route of advance) to facilitate control.

The first tree road block past 44 was reached, secured by the rifle platoons, and removed by the engineers in about 30 minutes. It was now about 1930, and dark; contact and control had become difficult. The radios were still operating.

Vehicular movement was heard to the north and when battalion was informed, the other two platoons of A Company were

(38) Personal knowledge; A-9.

committed on that flank.

The second tree road block was reached and secured by the assault platoons at about 2030, and the engineers, who had been attached to B Company at 43 for the duration of the operation, moved up to reduce it. This block was about 100 yards in width and thought to be mined, but a close inspection revealed none present. Like the other block, this could not be by-passed due to the terrain and heavy woods; by necessity a passage had to be forced. The bull-dozer, by lifting its blade, was finally able to drive through this block of smaller trees; the engineers assisted by sawing some of the trees. This block was no longer covered by fire; the artillery and mortar fire placed there earlier in the evening apparently had been effective. (39)

While the removal of this large road block was taking place a very heavy rainstorm arose, completely blotting out all vision and making work on the block and control of the company extremely difficult. The SCR 536's were no longer in operation, and contact by the SCR 300 was very infrequent. Messengers were being utilized for all messages.

All trees of any size along the road to Elend had been nicked for road block purposes.

The road block was finally pushed aside, and at 2200 B Company resumed its advance towards its objective. The rain had almost ceased but the unusual darkness, coupled with a strong wind, made control very difficult.

At about 2230, 2-3 track vehicles were heard directly

(39) Personal knowledge.

to the front of B Company but were not visible; they moved down the road into Elend. After the company passed and secured the trail on the north that ended on the road near 48 it was realized that these vehicles were those heard earlier in the evening. (40)

At about 2300 both assault platoons sent word to the company commander that they had closed up to the railroad embankment and were sending patrols to its crest to determine if it were defended; in addition, Lieutenant Cunningham was sending a patrol to the overpass to determine if it had been destroyed. At about 2330 hours word was sent back from both platoons that the embankment was not defended and the overpass had not been destroyed and apparently was undefended; Cunningham's patrol had advanced through it to RJ 34. Instructions were issued to both platoon leaders on the road, to move to the road and pass rapidly through the underpass with the 2d Platoon leading; at RJ 54 the 2d Platoon would turn north and move down the right side of the street towards 50; (See Map C) the 1st Platoon would parallel it on the left side of the street. They would converge on 50 and the 1st Platoon would extend north to 51 and the 2d towards 53; the 3d Platoon would pass through and extend from the 2d Platoon on over to C Company at 53. The tanks and TDs would be disposed at 50 and 51 after the town was secured. Buildings were not to be searched until the entire town was sealed off on the eastern side. The leader of the A Company platoon was instructed to wait at 48 until A moved up and then report

(40) Personal knowledge.

back to its CO.

At 2345 B Company started its movement through town and by 2400 had reached its objective -- the eastern edge of town. The other companies moved in and the town was secured. (41)

CONSOLIDATION IN ELEND (18 APRIL)

B Company, with the rest of the battalion, continued to consolidate on positions. The enemy had been taken by surprise at the appearance of this battalion in Elend. Prisoners were rounded up and sent to the rear during the entire day. No resistance was offered other than a small patrol that came in from the north near 51 at about 0600; it was eliminated.

It was discovered that the entire town was filled with hospitals.

At about 1000 battalion sent down information that a battery of (5) 120mm horse-drawn cannon had been reported located Northwest of Elend near 49; (See Map C) B Company would locate and capture it. A patrol was sent out and at about 1130 returned with the news that it had been located and its complement captured -- one youthful member of the Hitler Jugend (found asleep under a gun) and five horses (ridden back into town by members of the patrol). A detail from Headquarters Company was guided out to demolish the pieces. (42)

At about 1400 five U. S. fighter planes appeared from the southeast and were welcomed by the battalion as they passed over; a few seconds later they reappeared from the northwest and strafed the town on three passes and were over for

(41) (42) Personal knowledge; A-9.

the fourth when B Company signal panels were displayed along with smoke. They passed over and continued to the Northwest. Later it was learned they had seen the German trucks moving around the town (driven by men of the battalion) and had assumed it was still occupied by the Germans as on the previous day. In this strafing no one was injured; fortunately all rounds landed at the edge of town.

SUMMARY

On 17 April the 2d Battalion in its attack towards Schierke had been able to progress only to 38 where, in the face of stiff enemy resistance, it had halted for the night; on 18 April Schierke was entered and cleared, and on 19 April contact was established with A Company of the 1st Battalion on the high ground between Elend and Schierke. (43)

In its attack upon Elend B Company captured 100 Germans; many others were killed. One EM was killed; five others, including the executive officer, Lieutenant Matukonis, were wounded in this action.

In its movement towards Elend from Braunlage C Company was able to round up another 150 Germans and, upon moving into Elend, captured another 200 in the southern sector of town. The total prisoner haul for the battalion for 17-18 April was approximately 500.

To all intents and purposes this ended serious opposition in the Harz Mountains; the open corridor to the east was severed on 18 April in the 9th Infantry Division zone and on 21 April the last organized resistance in the Harz area

(43) Personal knowledge; A-8.

ceased. (44)

In retracing the course of the attack on Elend the B Company Commander found that in addition to the enemy positions disposed of at 43 on 17 April and the two road blocks reduced east of 43, an AT gun at 45 pointing towards 44, two tanks at 47 and one multiple mount dual purpose 88mm anti-aircraft weapon at 46 had all been overrun during the night of 17 April; all were in working order, but, like the personnel manning the artillery battery northwest of Elend, these men had come in to surrender on the 18th, when they found the battalion several hundred yards to their rear. (45)

Besides the 500 Germans captured 17-18 April 500 more were rounded up 19-21 April, including 1 Major General. During the reduction of the Harz Mountains the 1st Division captured 30,343 enemy troops and these, when added to those taken by the adjacent units walling up the other sides of the trap, made a grand total of 73,490 taken in the area. (46)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation, it is felt by the author that this operation could have been a very difficult one had the Germans made a greater effort at putting up a more intensive defense. If this had been done the mission given to B Company to drive on Elend and secure it might have been too great; it would have been more appropriate for two companies to attack abreast. Witness the attack by the 2d Battalion on Schierke; the town could not be taken on the 17th because of the fierce resistance offered by the Germans

(44) A-2, p. 102; (45) Personal knowledge; (46) A-9; A-5, p. 85.

west of the town, it being well up in the day of the 18th before it was cleared. Before then the 1st Battalion had already secured Elend, to the south and slightly to the east of Schierke.

The force facing the 1st Battalion on the 17th of April was equal to or greater in strength than the battalion but was not as well organized, or as closely knit. Morale and esprit de corps were high throughout the 1st Battalion and the men were in an excellent frame of mind. They could see the early end of the war and themselves as the conquerors. Many of the old seasoned veterans had returned from the hospital; a large percentage of these had been fighting the Germans since Africa and were happy to be back for the kill, or finish. Casualties had been rather light in B Company for the past several days, consequently, it had a comparatively large force in the line. In sharp contrast, the Germans were very low in spirits and morale, knowing the end was not far off and that their cause in the Harz was hopeless. Only the large numbers of SS troops could keep the Wehrmacht in line and resisting; however, an SS trooper in the rear was an excellent excuse for resistance.

On the night of 16 April when the battalion closed at RJ 35 the commander informed the company commanders to expect an attack upon Elend the following day; B Company was to lead the attack. It is felt that a more detailed reconnaissance should have been made by the B Company Commander from the time the attack order was issued at 0830 until the LD was crossed at 1500; he left for Braunlage after the 3d

Battalion had entered it at 1130. If he had gone down and witnessed the type of resistance the 3d Battalion was encountering it would have been to his advantage. When he went forward at 1130 he took with him only the one platoon leader whose platoon was due to lead out of Braunlage in the tentative plans made at RJ 35. He should have taken the leaders of the assaulting platoons (1st and 2d) or, better still, all platoon leaders. The company executive, a very superior officer in every respect, was very capable of readying the company for combat, assisted by the 1st Sergeant and the platoon Sergeants, and moving them to the LD. However, this failure was off-set somewhat by the company commander having his attack order ready for his subordinates when the company moved up to the LD at 1400; they had approximately 50 minutes left in which to reconnoiter the LD and brief their squad leaders, while their platoon sergeants and assistant squad leaders were readying the platoons and squads.

The instructions issued by the battalion commander in his orders were brief, but sufficient for the purpose; each company commander knew his company's role. It was felt that the enemy's weakening resistance and his apparent state of confusion warranted an attack on Elend in a column of companies in a hard driving effort to close in behind him between Elend and Schierke, thereby creating a pocket.

The company commanders were not informed that Elend was almost entirely a hospital town. It seems that the S-2 should have known this. If B Company Commander had been informed his plans might have been made differently; it was

not the custom of the Germans to defend close to, or inside, a small hospital town.

The decision to have the two tanks and two TDs move at the end of the company column was sound in this case. With both platoons well deployed along the sides of the road and Lieutenant Cunningham moving down the road observing to the front, the assault platoons were able to advance to line 39 - 40 - 41 without the noise and dust created by armor, drawing attention to their lines. The two enemy tanks at 44 could have caused considerable casualties in B Company had they been alert for the advancing troops. As it was, Lieutenant Cunningham and the company commander were able to properly deploy all four vehicles to firing positions without being detected, though only approximately 800 yards separated the opposing vehicles; only after one had been hit and was burning did the other detect the U. S. armor.

It is difficult to understand why the Germans placed so much artillery fire on 39 where the men had some cover behind the logs, large boulders and folds in the ground, rather than on the woods at 40 where the tree bursts could have almost eliminated the 2d Platoon where it was halted for the short time the armor was engaged.

When the assault platoon had been halted by the intense small arms fire from 43 and 44 the armor moved up to Lieutenant Cunningham without hesitation, and thoroughly covered the entire area until ordered to cease by Cunningham so the infantry could take over. This was an excellent example of tank-infantry cooperation in the attack.

The movement up the slopes of 44 behind a wall of withering small arms fire was an excellent example of what is known as marching fire. While the armor was covering the area with fire the platoons closed up to the creek, and each man fired 2-3 clips of ammunition; when the tank fire ceased they stood up and moved up 44, firing rapidly all the way. Casualties suffered in this action consisted of 1 EM killed and 2 EM and 1 officer wounded.

After 44 had been secured it became apparent the Germans had planned an ambush at this bridge. They had expected the company to move down the long sloping hill from 41 to 43 in a column of platoons with the armor near the front (the usual method) and had planned to destroy the bridge after the armor had crossed, or while still on the bridge, and then destroy the tanks and TDs as they turned broadsides in an effort to turn around and get back up to 41. In the meantime the dug-in infantry would destroy B Company, while the Germans at 42 would drive a line in rear to separate the company from battalion assistance. The alertness of Lieutenant Cunningham prevented the success of this plan.

The attack from 44 towards Elend was launched just prior to darkness and the company commander realized that darkness would find him moving towards the town, some two miles or more away, through at least two road blocks and possibly more. This is against the doctrine of short limited attacks at night, but it was felt that the eagerness of the men of B Company to move on and the apparent weakening resistance was worth the risk involved, especially with the rest of the bat-

talion to the rear. The Company commander should have taken steps, prior to resuming the attack from 44, to secure better communications; more SCR 300, and 536 could have been secured from battalion for this attack. Also, assault wire could have been following the two attacking platoons. This would have facilitated control throughout the advance and especially when the rainstorm arose and created the inky blackness that it did and put the radios out of operation.

On the road into Elend the bulldozer was used very successfully on the two tree road blocks; the blade was quite adept in pushing aside the hasty blocks made by felling trees across the road.

In Elend the following day, 18 April, the battalion was fortunate in not losing any personnel from the strafing received at 1400 from the five U. S. fighter planes. Allowing the men to drive these captured German vehicles around the area was negligence on the part of the officers and NCOs.

To sum up the results of the attack on Elend 17-18 April 1945: The 1st Battalion accomplished its mission of capturing and securing the town and moving in rear of the Germans defending so vigorously in the vicinity of Schierke. A large number of prisoners were taken; plus an artillery battery, one AT gun, three tanks, one multiple mount dual purpose 88mm AA gun; a personnel carrier loaded with infantry was destroyed and its occupants killed and burned.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. That all orders in combat be clear, brief, concise and timely. The 1st Battalion Commander's order included

everything that the company commanders needed to know. Previous operations by the battalion and the understanding by everyone obviated the necessity of some details in his orders.

2. If sufficient time is available prior to an attack, every attempt should be made to get all platoon leaders up to the LD for a reconnaissance. In this operation, the B Company commander failed to do this, though possessing sufficient time.

3. In making an attack don't always follow the same pattern, especially along a road; an ambush can be placed to fit a known formation. Study the terrain, if possible, and try to anticipate where the enemy might place his defenses and then alter attack plans accordingly.

4. Adequate communication is very vital to the successful conduct of an attack. Don't depend altogether on radios, especially the SCR 536; if time permits, and you can do so, secure additional radios, 536's and 300's. If possible string wire and maintain telephone contact with the assaulting platoons.

5. Old method of infantry establishing communication with the tanker by pounding on the side of the tank with a large stick was found inadequate.

6. The reserve platoon should be so located and disposed that it can be quickly committed to assist the forward movement of the assaulting platoon.

7. The bull-dozer is a good vehicle to assist in removing hastily established tree road blocks in the pursuit stage.

8. If the attack slows down, or stops, aggressive patrolling to the front and flanks will pay dividends; attempt to keep the enemy located to the front and flanks.

9. If a night attack is contemplated, make every preparation possible prior to moving across the LD; a short objective is best, but under certain circumstances, i.e. disintegrating enemy resistance, a calculated risk may be advisable to take a more distant objective, 2-3 miles.

10. The tank itself is an excellent "weapon" for furnishing shock action to an attacking force. The aggressive tank commander that will move his vehicle up as close as possible to lend fire support is of tremendous value to the attacking infantry echelons. The new T/O that places the Tank Company in the Infantry Regiment should be a great improvement. The Infantry and Tank Platoons should have excellent opportunity to train together.