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OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION, 9TH INFANTRY (2ND INF. DIV.)
IN THE ATTACK ON PILLBOX SECTOR AT WEHLERSCHIED, GERMANY
(HEARTBREAK CROSSROADS) 13--16 DECEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal experience of a Battalion S-3)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK *of*
a fortified position.

Captain John A. Frye, Infantry

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd U. S. Infantry Division, at Wehlerscheid, Germany, 13--16 December 1944.

In order properly to orient the reader, it will be necessary to review the events just prior to this operation regarding the action of U. S. forces on this sector of the Western Front.

General Eisenhower had emulated a brilliant quarterback by sending the scintillating Armies of Generals Bradley and Patton from the Normandy Beaches in late July, across France, into the frontier of Germany by early October 1944. (1)

With supply lines stretching from Utah and Omaha Beaches to the frontiers of Germany, the Armies of the U. S. were forced to halt the far reaching aggressive offensive in early October. (2)

After a general buildup and well coordinated local actions, the First U. S. Army faced the Roer River as the last natural obstacle to be mastered before breaking out into the plains before Cologne. (3) ✓

When the heavy autumn rains and early winter snows began to fall in mid October, the Roer River became a more serious obstacle. (4)

The Germans held the headwaters of both the Roer and Urft

(1, 2) A-1, pp. 57, 58; (3) A-1, p. 84; (4) A-1, p. 95.

Rivers, where a series of dams controlled huge reservoirs of water that could be let loose at any time by opening the gates or blowing the dams. (5)

Therefore, it was necessary to consider seriously what would happen if the Germans released the tremendous amount of water held by this gigantic dam system. (6)

The two main dams were

1. The Urft Alspene Dam, located on the Urft River northwest of Gemund, with a capacity of approximately 42,000 acre feet. This dam is 177 feet high, in the form of a concrete gravity arch. The Urft River empties into the Roer River east of Monschau, just up-river from the Schwammenauel Reservoir.
2. The Schwammenauel Dam, located on the Roer River directly west of Hasenfeld, with a capacity of approximately 81,000 acre feet. This dam is 180 feet high, earth filled. (7)

Destruction of these dams could have a vital effect upon operations below the dams. If the advance crossed the Roer River in the Duren region, Allied leading units might be cut off from support and supply. If Allied leading troops were in the river bottom, there would be serious loss or immobilization of men and equipment. The flood conditions would affect the region of Julich, but not in as great a degree, flood rise at Julich being estimated at 16 feet compared to the 25 feet at Duren. Little flooding would be caused above Bilstein because of the narrow twisting gorge. (8)

Since the major effort of the First and Ninth Armies was

(5, 6, 7, 8) A-1, pp. 95 - 96.

made on the north flank in the area in danger of being flooded, it was necessary to gain control of these dams. (9)

Therefore, early in December changes were made in V Corps dispositions in order to attack the areas of the Roer and Urft River Dams. For this operation the 2nd Infantry Division came under control of V Corps on 11 December 1944. (10)

The 2nd Infantry Division, after landing at Omaha Beach D 1, 7 June 1944, had fought through France to the reduction of the Fortress Brest on the Cotein Peninsula. From Brest the Division moved across France and relieved the 4th U. S. Infantry Division in the Schnee Eifel Forest, Germany, on 4 October 1944. After more than two months of stabilized warfare in the mud, rain, and snow of the Schnee Eifel Forest the Division received orders to move to the vicinity of Camp Elsenborn, Belgium. (11)

The 9th Infantry Regiment, an old Regular Army unit, was activated originally in 1798. Although composed of over 90 per cent selectees and reserves, the fine old traditions of the Regiment, gained in actual combat from Sacketts Harbor, in the War of 1812, to Brest, were a challenge to every officer and enlisted man to uphold and keep the faith of those who preceded them in building an esprit de corps of the highest order. (13)

CONCENTRATION AND PLANNING

Relieved in the Schnee Eifel Forest, Germany, by the 106th Infantry Division on the night of 10 - 11 December 1944, the 2nd Infantry Division moved into a rear assembly area in the

(9) A-1, p. 73; (10) A-1, p. 97; (11) A-3, pp. 23, 50, 73, 82; (12) A-2, p. 336; A-3, p. 12; (13) A-9, pp. 3, 11.

vicinity of Camp Elsenborn, Belgium. (14)

The 2nd Battalion of the 9th Infantry moved from the Schnee Eifel Forest on the night of 10 - 11 December in a severe snowstorm. The Battalion closed in an assembly area in the vicinity of Camp Elsenborn at approximately 0100, 11 December. The bivouac was an open field, bordered on one side by a woods about 100 yards wide. There was no available shelter except two blankets and a shelter half per individual. Officers and men alike made the best of the situation in two feet of snow and a high wind that caused drifts three to six feet deep. The temperature was 24° F. (15)

The storm abated early on the morning of 11 December, with the temperature ranging between 20 - 30° F. (16)

The 11 - 12 December were spent preparing for combat in the usual manner. Two pyramidal tents were erected in the vicinity of each company kitchen, for the purpose of providing shelter for the men at mealtime, washing and shaving locations, and a place to write letters. Each platoon was given certain times to use the tents. The severe weather was hard on everyone. In the previous position in the Schnee Eifel Forest, although in contact with the enemy, the men were exposed very little, since much time had been spent building shelters and all the comforts of a stabilized position without sacrificing the tactical principle involved. Three hot meals were served each day, and equipment was checked, repaired and completed. (17)

Field Order #33, Headquarters V Corps, directed the 2nd Infantry Division to seize the following objectives: (See Map "A")

(14) A-2, pp. 330, 334; (15) A-3, p. 82; Personal knowledge, self; (16, 17) Personal knowledge, self.

Objective #1. Rohren.

#2. Road junction, Hofen-Rocherath Road.

#3. Hill mass 3000 yards east of road junction.

#4. High ground east of Dreiborn and Harperscheid.

#5. Road junction and high ground at Morsback.

#6. Dam #5 and ridge to south (The Urft Alspene Dam on the Urft River northwest of Gemund).

Objective #2 was to be taken first; then Objectives #1 and 3 simultaneously; thence Objectives #4, 5, and 6. (18)

Field Order #12, Headquarters 2nd Infantry Division, directed the 9th Infantry Regiment to attack astride the Krinkelt-Rocherath-Wehlerscheid Road, to seize and secure the road junction on the International Boundary at Wehlerscheid, Germany, and be prepared to continue the attack on order. (19)

On 11 December 1944 orders from the Regimental Commander directed the 1st and 2nd Battalions to attack abreast at 0830, 13 December, to seize and secure by surprise the pillbox area at the Wehlerscheid Road Junction and be prepared to continue the attack on order to the north. The 1st Battalion, on the left, would move cross country, guiding on the Krinkelt-Rocherath-Wehlerscheid Road, to cut the Monschau-Wehlerscheid Road in their zone. The 2nd Battalion, on the right, guiding on the Krinkelt-Rocherath-Wehlerscheid Road, would move cross country also, to cut the Wehlerscheid-Dreiborn Road in their zone. Both Battalions were to be prepared to continue the attack to the north on order. The 3rd Battalion, in reserve, would follow the route of the 2nd Battalion. (20)

The order further stated that the Battalion S-2 would

(18) A-4; (19), (20) A-6.

immediately contact elements of the 99th Division, now outposting the proposed line of departure, for the purpose of sending out patrols to gain additional information regarding terrain, obstacles, and disposition of enemy. (21)

The order was accompanied by an operations overlay, designating a forward assembly area to be occupied prior to darkness 12 December. This movement was to be screened by elements of the 99th Division, until properly relieved by elements of the 9th Infantry Regiment. (22)

The 2nd Battalion S-2 moved out shortly after receipt of the above stated orders, accompanied by the Battalion Ranger Squad, to contact elements of the 3rd Battalion, 395th Infantry Regiment, 99th Division, reported holding the present line. (23)

Members of the 2nd Battalion Staff, including the S-1 and quartering party, moved out early on the morning of 12 December. The S-1 selected a forward assembly area for the Battalion, approximately 2000 yards forward from the areas designated by Regiment. This new area was approved by Regiment. (24)
(See Map "B").

The Battalion Commander and S-3 contacted the 2nd Battalion S-2 at the Command Post of the 3rd Battalion, 395th Infantry Regiment. The S-2 had been in this vicinity since 11 December, sending out patrols and becoming acquainted with the general situation. (25)

Aerial photos were made available, and a brief reconnaissance was made by the Battalion Commander and S-3, led by the S-2. It was decided all plans would have to be made from maps

(21, 22) A-6; (23, 24, 25) Personal knowledge, self.

and aerial photos because of the rugged, densely wooded terrain. (26)

A Command Post was established in a house in the area. Since there was no artillery and enemy contact was spasmodic, this was considered a safe place and afforded shelter from the snow and 24° F. temperature. (27)

The road junction at Wehlerscheid controlled movement south, northwest and northeast from the Roer and Urft Dam areas. Therefore, in order to secure the vital dams of the Roer and Urft Rivers, it was necessary to control this road junction. (28)

This area was known to be a highly fortified pillbox sector of the Siegfried Line, but was believed to be lightly held by a poor quality troop. The present front was held by elements of the 99th Division. Contact with the enemy was made only upon patrol action into the German Frontier, which was 4000 yards from the outpost line of the 99th Division. (29)

The terrain within the sector was almost all heavily wooded, affording cover and concealment for attacker and defender alike. The ground was practically level throughout the area. (30)

Fields of fire were limited within the woods, but numerous fire lanes and unimproved trails, in addition to the main roads through the sector, afforded excellent fields of fire. The trees were good impact areas for mortar and artillery fire, offering maximum opportunity for tree burst. (31)

Observation, likewise, was limited within the woods, but

(26, 27) Personal knowledge, self; (28) A-10, p. 5; (29) A-10, pp. 2, 3; (30, 31) Personal knowledge, self; Statement, Bn. S-2.

improved along roads and fire lanes. (32)

The Krinkelt-Rocherath-Wehlerscheid Road was an improved, metalled road, approximately 5.5 meters wide. Trails and fire lanes through the woods provided routes for foot traffic. (33)

Obstacles consisted of pillboxes, abatis, mines (antitank and antipersonnel), antitank ditches, and barbed wire (double apron and concertina), in addition to 18 - 24 inch snow, with the ground beneath the snow only slightly frozen. The temperature ranged from 20-30° F. (34)

The majority of the man-made obstacles were in the vicinity of the road junction at Wehlerscheid. However, the abatis were on the main road and many of the trails. These blocks were thoroughly mined and booby trapped. (35)

The pillboxes known to be in the area were of the usual fighting and observation type, mutually supporting, with troop shelter boxes within the area. No accurate location of the pillboxes was known. Patrols sent out to contact the enemy and reconnoiter for obstacles were unable to definitely locate the pillboxes. However, there was located a heavily mined and wired-in sector, with an antitank ditch in a cleared belt, approximately 300 yards south of the road junction. (36)

There followed two hours of discussion between the Battalion Commander, S-2, and S-3 concerning the plan of attack.

There was no detailed information on the German dispositions in this sector. The sector was reported thinly held by elements of the 277th Volksgrenadier Division. There were estimated to be three light battalions and one medium battalion of enemy artillery. There were no local reserves known. (37)

(32, 33) Personal knowledge, self; Statement, Bn. S-2; (34, 35) A-10, pp. 2, 3; (36) A-10, p. 2; (37) A-10, p. 3.

Recent enemy activity had been limited in the proposed zone of action. Patrol action had been meager, and artillery and mortar fire had been relatively light. In short, the Division G-2 report stated that this had been a quiet sector in contrast to the area north of Schmidt. (38)

However, conclusions drawn as to the enemy capabilities were

1. To defend his present positions stubbornly.
2. To reinforce his troops in the Division zone.
3. To defend in successive positions when forced to withdraw.
4. To make local counterattacks against the flanks or rear of the penetration.
5. To launch a major counterattack from the Gemund-Schleiden area. (39)

These were all general conclusions, and no doubt the enemy would put each and all into effect when the time came. Ignorance of the enemy, his disposition and strength, weighed heavily upon the Battalion Command Party.

After more than two months of defensive combat in the Schnee Eifel Forest, where the Battalion fought the weather as well as the wary Germans, there was evidently formed or acquired a defensive psychology. This psychosis no doubt resulted from the fact that the Battalion had spent over two months constructing a defensive sector which it believed could not be breached. Therefore, it was hard to believe a sector of the Siegfried Line would be held so lightly it could be overrun by doughboys armed with bayonets.

(38) A-10, p. 2; (39) A-10, p. 3.

However, orders were to attack, so it was decided to throw all effort into the element of surprise and give the best possible.

Friendly forces consisted of elements of the 99th Division, who were on the right flank, with the mission of protecting the 2nd Division right flank and attacking in conjunction with them. The 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment, was on the left flank. All supporting fires were planned, but would not be fired except on order of the Battalion Commander through the Regimental Commander. (40)

The direction of the attack was parallel to the Krinkelt-Rocherath-Wehlerscheid Road. The line of departure was the present outpost line. The time of the attack was 0830, 13 December 1944. It was decided to maintain control visually with the 1st Battalion, on the left, through flank elements. Contact on the right would be maintained by elements of the support platoon of the right leading assault company. (41)

Control, after crossing the line of departure, would be maintained by reports from leading elements when phase lines, designated by Regiment, were crossed. These phase lines were firebreaks and key terrain features, that could be easily recognized on the map, and should be picked up without difficulty on the ground. (42)

Formations and plan of attack were discussed quite freely. It was finally decided that two companies would be used, moving abreast, each company covering a 300 yard front. E Company, with the 1st Platoon of Heavy Machine Guns, the 2nd Platoon of the Regimental Antitank Company and one-half squad of the

Battalion A & P Platoon attached, would be on the left, guiding on the Krinkelt-Rocherath-Wehlerscheid Road. G Company, with the 2nd Platoon of Heavy Machine Guns, Battalion Antitank Platoon and one-half squad of the Battalion A & P Platoon attached, would be on the right, guiding on E Company. F Company, initially in Battalion Reserve, would follow G Company. H Company; the 1st Platoon would be attached to E Company, the 2nd Platoon attached to G Company and the 3rd, or Mortar, Platoon would support the Battalion from successive positions, displacing by section. The initial position was to be the present assembly area. From Headquarters Company, one-half squad of the A & P Platoon would be attached to each assault company to clear necessary paths through any obstacles encountered. The Battalion Antitank Platoon, with 2.36" rockets, would be attached to G Company. The 2nd Platoon of the Regimental Antitank Company, with 2.36" rockets, would be attached to E Company. All units would do whatever was necessary to maintain complete secrecy in order to gain complete surprise. (43)

In an area approximately 500 yards from the pillbox area combat packs and overcoats would be dropped. Bayonets would be fixed and all assault units checked. The assault elements would move out on order of the Battalion Commander to overrun and seize enemy installations within the zone of action, and kill or capture any enemy encountered.

Administrative details were left up to the Battalion Executive Officer, S-1, and S-4. They were taken up in detail at a later meeting. (44)

Radio silence would be in effect until contact with the

(43) Statement, En. C. O., Personal knowledge, self; (44) Statement, En. C. O.

enemy had been made. The Battalion Wire Team would follow the Command Party, laying W110 wire. Current S. O. I. was in effect. (45)

This conference ended with the tentative plan made to issue the Battalion attack order at 1930, 12 December 1944, at the Battalion Command Post. In the meantime the Battalion Commander would coordinate his plan with the Regimental Commander, Regimental S-3, Artillery Battalion Commander and adjacent Battalion Commanders. The Battalion S-3 would orient the Company Commanders prior to darkness on routes to the line of departure, the line of departure and direction of attack. The S-2 would continue a study of all available aerial photos, and contact adjacent units and Regiment for all additional enemy information and intelligence available. (46)

The Battalion closed in the forward area by 1600, 12 December. The Company Commanders were oriented by the Battalion S-3 prior to darkness. The Battalion Commander issued his order at 1930, 12 December, as planned.

The weather was warmer, temperature about 30° F. The night was reasonably comfortable, for the woods were dense, and there were several log huts in the area. These were used for shelters in which to warm the men and dry out clothing. Fir branches and limbs were used for shelter and mats to sleep on.

THE ATTACK

After a hot breakfast the 2nd Battalion jumped off at 0830, 13 December 1944. Snow was falling and the temperature seemed to be rising. Visibility was approximately 200 yards. The Battalion moved in silence under cover of the deep forest. In

(45, 46) Statement, Bn. C. O.

order to maintain the element of surprise, no artillery preparations were fired. (47)

As the men pressed through the snow-covered fir branches, the rising temperature, together with body heat, melted the snow freely until it was almost like rain. After an hour everyone moving within the Battalion advance was drenched to the skin from head to foot. (48)

Since the line of departure was approximately 4000 yards from any known enemy or suspected enemy installations, the move was made in good order, formations well up and direction maintained through reports as each phase line was crossed. (49)

At 1115 lead scouts reported a fortified area. Each assault company was ordered to drop packs and fix bayonets. From observation points along the outer edge of the woods little could be seen. The area had considerable second growth and vegetation, all covered with snow. Several huge mounds, with trees growing on top of them, and a dense wall of trees to the rear could be observed. From two of these mounds smoke was seen to curl upward and be blown away in the gusty, raw wind. After a quick check from the Companies it was decided this was the fortified area; and since the element of surprise was still being maintained, the Battalion Commander decided to move across the cleared area with the utmost speed. (50)

At 1200 the Battalion Commander ordered E and G Companies to move from the covered area of the forest as fast as possible to overrun obstacles in view. Each company moved as directed, but immediately upon coming into the cleared area, they came under intense small arms fire. (51)

(47, 48) A-3, p. 83; (49, 50) Statement, Bn. C. O.; Personal knowledge, self. (51) Statement, Bn. C. O.; Personal knowledge, self.

Progress was continued, but became slower as the men began to hit antipersonnel mines and wire, and light mortar fire started to fall. However, Captain Ross of F Company and Captain Force of G Company pushed their assault units forward with the utmost energy. E Company assault units, after moving through five separate rows of single apron barbed wire, finally became enmeshed in a field of barbed wire, antipersonnel mines, and concertina. G Company got elements of one platoon to the communication trench in their sector, but was stopped by intense small arms and mortar fire. The Battalion Commander, seeing the surprise falling through, contacted Captain Force personally, sending the S-3 to contact Captain Ross personally. The Company Commanders were instructed to move forward at once or all would be lost. However, the situation continued to get worse as more men hit antipersonnel mines, became enmeshed in barbed wire, and were hit by small arms and mortar fire. (52).

Artillery and heavy mortar fire started covering the area in tremendous volumes. From the intensity of the fire of all types, there was little doubt as to the fact that the enemy main positions had been hit and the enemy surprised. The violent reaction, by fire well directed from behind seemingly well fortified positions with good observation, threw the Battalion attack completely off balance. (53)

The Battalion Commander immediately called for fire on the suspected pillbox location and ordered the Battalion mortars to open up. The artillery and mortar fire was adjusted by forward observers, from positions within 100 to 200 yards

(52) A-3, p. 84; Personal knowledge, self; (53) Eye witness, self.

of the pillboxes. However, area targets of suspected enemy installations were the best that could be gotten. The snow, along with the mined area and enemy fire, made movement of individuals extremely difficult. Despite the situation, five pillboxes were located, and artillery and mortar fire was laid on and around them. It was quite definite the fire was doing very little if any damage to the fortifications. (54)

Throughout the afternoon the main effort was in the G Company sector. There was some concealment due to the folds in the ground and a neck of woods that extended out into the clearing. Also, there seemed to be more undergrowth. The 1st Platoon of G Company, with a detachment from the Battalion A & P Platoon, with bangalore torpedoes and wire cutters, worked under the most severe conditions of weather and enemy fire to breach a sector of the wire. Several explosions from the bangalores were heard, and some progress was made, but it was extremely slow since the movement of the party had to be made by crawling. Just before dark contact was lost between the Platoon and the Company. Contact was not regained until after 2100 that night. It was reported that the party had been unable to get through the wire. While this effort was being made, the 2nd Platoon was attempting to find a route farther to the right, but was stopped in two attempts. (55)

E Company was practically helpless, with the entire company scattered through the cleared area, under intense artillery, mortar and small arms fire. Any attempt to move about was almost certain death. Many men were caught in the maze of wire and antipersonnel mine fields. Captain Ross was ordered

(54) A-3, p. 84; Eye witness, self; (55) Personal knowledge; Eye witness, self.

to hold what he had and have the men dig in for protection. Medics and litter bearers were sent in to get the wounded out. (56)

At 1900 Regiment ordered the Battalion to dig in and hold what they had for the night. The front line was approximately 100 yards from the line of pillboxes that could be identified more easily all the time. The artillery and mortar fire was beginning to defoliate numerous strong points. The snow had continued to melt throughout the day. Visibility was still poor; the maximum had been 500 yards around noon. (57)

During the day the 1st Battalion of the 9th Regiment, on the left, suffered an experience very similar to the 2nd Battalion. The unit of the 99th Division, on the right, succeeded in taking two pillboxes, but was unable to move farther. The Battalion was in contact with friendly troops on both flanks. (58)

The night was bitter cold. The melting snow froze again and became very slippery. Foxholes were improved by placing fir branches in them. A roll of two blankets per man was brought forward and distributed. Also, by infiltration, two hot meals were fed to most of the men during the night. Mortar and artillery fire continued, but was less intense after darkness. Little rest was gained by any members of the Battalion during the night of 13 - 14 December. Evacuation of the wounded and dead was pushed. Lanes through the mine fields up to the front line positions were cleared.

Plans for renewal of the attack at 0800, 14 December 1944 were received. The 3rd, or Reserve Battalion, was ordered to

(56) Personal knowledge; Eye witness, self; (57, 58) A-3, p. 84.

attack, with the 2nd Battalion, on the right flank. A 15 minute artillery preparation would be laid on, starting at H-15, covering located pillboxes. The 2nd Battalion would continue its main effort in G Company sector. (59)

The attack jumped off at 0800, 14 December, as planned, with the 3rd Battalion on the right. Again heavy small arms, mortar, and artillery fire covered the zone of action, especially the wire obstacles through which it was necessary to move in order to get to the pillboxes. The 3rd Battalion fared no better than the 1st or 2nd Battalions. Guns, located in pillbox emplacements of concrete and steel, swept all obstacles with withering small arms fire and observed mortar and artillery fire. The heavily wooded terrain behind the line of pillboxes was saturated by friendly mortar and artillery fire. (60)

The subfreezing temperature and snow covered ground made the task of leadership a most difficult one. Casualties mounted steadily throughout the day. E Company lost most heavily, due to the attempted penetration through the wire on 13 December. G Company fared some better, in that they were able to receive more cover and concealment from the ground folds and vegetation within the area. F Company, although in reserve, suffered heavily from mortar and artillery fire, along with Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company. In addition to casualties inflicted by enemy fire, many men were getting sick from exposure and exhaustion due to the severe weather. (61)

As a result of the failure of all Battalions to gain access to the pillboxes, the attack was ordered halted at 1415. Regiment ordered a withdrawal of front line units to allow for

(59, 60, 61) A-3, p. 85; Personal knowledge, self.

an air strike and registration of heavy and medium artillery to destroy all obstacles. (62)

After dark E and G Companies were pulled back approximately 500 yards. The 3rd Battalion moved back into the reserve position. A great deal of movement of units and reorganization took place during the night of 14 - 15 December. The artillery that started firing soon after the attack was called off early in the afternoon covered this type of movement very well. After dark enemy fire became spasmodic and was practically all interdiction fire. The Battalion was organized with E and G Companies facing the direction of the enemy, F Company tied in the rear area; and H Company, less detachments, and Battalion Headquarters Company made up the center of the sector. The Battalion was in contact with friendly units on both flanks. Blanket rolls were brought up and two hot meals were brought forward during the night. The weather was cold, with the temperature below freezing. Much of the snow had melted but froze again, making the trails very slippery. (63)

The artillery fired throughout the night and the next day. The firing was on located pillboxes, suspected locations and interdiction.

The following artillery was used:

- 1 battery 240 mm howitzers
- 2 battalions 4.5 rockets
- 2 gun battalions S. P. 155 mm guns
- 4 battalions 155 mm howitzers
- 8 battalions 105 mm howitzers. (64)

(62) A-2, p. 338. (63) Personal knowledge; Eye witness, self; (64) A-2, p. 333; Personal knowledge, self.

On the morning of 15 December the air strike was prepared for by laying out marking panels to mark the front line of friendly troops. But because of poor visibility, due to snow and low ground fog, the target was obscured and this strike was called off. However, the aforementioned artillery continued to pound the area with both observed and unobserved fires. (65)

Positions for direct fire weapons were reconnoitered and picked out, so that all direct fire weapons available to the Battalion could be brought to bear upon embrasures and other point targets. The use of direct fire weapons depended upon the ability of the engineers to clear roads in order to get them into firing positions. It was expected a road would be open by noon, 15 December. Enemy artillery and mortar fire continued to fall on the afternoon of 14 December and the night of 14 - 15 December until about 1000, 15 December. Suddenly all enemy mortar and artillery fire ceased falling. It was unbelievable, and it was quite some time before it was realized by the entire unit. Small arms fire from automatic weapons, however, continued to cover the wired sector in front of the pillboxes. (66)

About 1200, 15 December, the fact was reported that enemy mortar and artillery had ceased in the sector. A similar report was obtained from the 1st Battalion sector. Close reconnaissance was intensified and pillboxes, suspected heretofore, were definitely identified and located. The intense artillery bombardment was slowly defoliating the area. It was unbelievable that the German would pull out of his fortified

(65) A-2, p. 333; Personal knowledge, self; (66) Personal knowledge; Eye witness, self.

position for anything other than a counterattack. Therefore, positions were rechecked and close-in mortar and artillery fire was registered. Rocket teams were placed on all tank approaches, which were few. An attack or a ruse of some sort was really expected. (67)

As the afternoon wore on and enemy mortar and artillery fire was still absent, the Battalion Commander decided upon a daring plan, come darkness. During the morning of 15 December, when inspecting G Company lines, it was learned from the Company Commander, who had taken over G Company when Captain Force was wounded, that he had had a squad through the wire into the communication trenches of the pillbox area. Sergeant Dunn and several members of his squad had gapped the wire on the night of 13 - 14 December, made contact with the enemy and were driven off. (68)

As a result, the Battalion Commander decided if enemy mortar and artillery fire continued to be silent, he would attempt an infiltration through the gap into the communication trenches and surround the pillboxes with whatever force he could filter through the gap. Once within the pillbox area, he felt it would be possible to reduce the pillboxes systematically. The artillery pounding had reduced the woods to a tangled mass of tree trunks and limbs which would provide excellent cover and concealment if it was necessary to continue the attack after dawn. Since the pillbox area was quite large and the strength of the 2nd Battalion was reduced to approximately 400 combat persons, it was decided to bring the 3rd Battalion through the gap, if the 2nd Battalion got through, and exploit the bridge-

(67) Personal knowledge; Eye witness, self; (68) Statement, C. O., G Co. and Sgt. Dunn, G Co.

head as much as possible. (69)

Thus armed with all the latest intelligence and information, the Battalion Commander presented the above plan to the Regimental Commander. The plan was approved by the Regimental Commander and passed on to Division for approval. Division approved the plan and ordered the 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, to pass through the 9th Infantry Regiment as soon as the first row of pillboxes was reduced after daylight. (70)

At 1700, 15 December 1944, the Battalion Commander issued his order for the intended infiltration. The plan called for Sergeant Dunn, who had led the group from G Company into the communication trench on the night of 13 - 14 December, to take a reinforced patrol through the wire and establish an outpost at the communication trench, just inside the wire, and surround the first pillbox. The patrol would take communication personnel, who would lay assault wire and take an EE 8A telephone for communication, as well as one SCR 300 and one SCR 536 radio. A demolition detachment from the Battalion A & P Platoon was to go along with the patrol to clear mines, wire and other obstacles necessary to get a path through. This path would be marked with engineer tape by the 2nd Platoon, G Company, who would follow the telephone wire laid by the advance party. This 2nd Platoon from G Company would outpost the route of advance and act as guides. When the G Company Platoons were in position, F Company would follow, continue past the last elements of G Company and surround the next pillboxes encountered. E Company would follow F Company, cross the road or firebreak in the rear of the pillbox sector and protect F Company during

(69) Statement, Bn. C. O.; (70) Personal knowledge, self.

the actual assault on the strongholds from the rear. G Company, less the patrol, would constitute the Battalion Reserve. (71)

The communication trenches referred to in the foregoing paragraph consisted of trenches 4 to 6 feet deep and 2 to 3 feet wide, running between the pillboxes and around them. The trenches offered cover and concealment for personnel necessary to guard the pillboxes from infiltration and to fight from when necessary. The trenches also served as excellent routes of communication from pillbox to pillbox. According to Sergeant Dunn, these trenches were around the pillboxes in the area he was in^d on the night of 13 - 14 December. (72)

If the 2nd Battalion was successful in getting E, F, and G Companies, less the route guides and security party, through the gap, the 3rd Battalion would follow on call. No effort would be made to reduce any of the pillboxes, surrounded by units of the 2nd Battalion, until the 3rd Battalion cleared the 2nd Battalion bridgehead. However, if it was necessary to reduce a pillbox in order to get the 3rd Battalion through, it would be done on order of the 2nd Battalion Commander. The 3rd Battalion would move through the bridgehead made by units of the 2nd Battalion on to the^d trail or firebreak in the rear of the line of pillboxes. They would continue down this trail and cut the Wehlerscheid-Dreiborn Road at the junction. They would reduce any pillboxes within a 300 yard radius of the road junction. H Company would support the infiltration from its present position. Battalion Headquarters Company, less the communication and A & P detachments, would remain in its

(71) A-3, p. 85; Personal knowledge, self; (72) Personal knowledge, self.

present position. (73)

This was a bold plan, with the element of surprise the most effective principle being relied upon. Friendly heavy and medium artillery fire continued to pound the pillbox sector, and fires were planned to box the area through which the Battalion planned to infiltrate. At 2000 the G Company Commander sent Sergeant Rivera to the Battalion Command Post to lead the reinforced patrol. Sergeant Rivera had been a member of the group who entered the trench previously and was in better physical condition than Sergeant Dunn. After approximately 45 minutes Sergeant Rivera reported in by telephone, stating he was lost and could not find the gap. He was told to follow the wire back to the outpost and return. Sergeant Dunn was sent for and arrived about the time Sergeant Rivera's party returned. Sergeant Dunn set out immediately and 30 minutes later reported he was in the communication trench ready to check the first pillbox. 15 minutes later Sergeant Dunn reported the pillbox appeared to be empty. He was ordered to hold what he had, and the Battalion Commander ordered F Company and the Battalion Command Party through the gap, to be followed on order by E Company. F Company moved through the gap, and two more pillboxes were surrounded. Not a shot had been fired. E Company was ordered through immediately. By 2400 the 2nd Battalion had a 300 yard bridgehead within the pillbox sector. The 3rd Battalion was called for and started through the gap at 0100, 16 December 1944. After passing through elements of E Company on the trail, the advance party was fired on by pillbox guards. These were quickly taken

(73) Statement, Bn. C. O.; Personal knowledge, self.

care of, and the 3rd Battalion pushed out and cut the main road running through Wehlerscheid and Dreibern. (74)

At 0530 a tremendous artillery barrage opened up to the east. It was noticed by everyone; however, little attention was paid to it since the Battalion was ready to assault 15 pillboxes at daybreak. (75)

Lieutenant Colonel Walter M. Higgins, Jr., the Battalion Commander, personally led units of F Company through the communication trenches to surround the next pillbox in line from the one surrounded by the patrol from G Company. Moving through the communication trenches looking for a pillbox at night was strictly serious business. However, it was easier to move in the trenches than on top of the ground, because the ground was a tangled mass of limbs and trees that had been felled by the tremendous artillery pounding to which the area had been subjected. (76)

After three days and nights in the snow and subfreezing temperatures, these shelters could hardly be denied the men of the 9th Infantry Regiment another day. Still there was no enemy mortar or artillery fire in the Battalion zone of action. As soon as the 3rd Battalion cleared the 2nd Battalion area, F Company commenced to clear the pillboxes from the rear. It was necessary to place beehive charges against the entrance doors, thus blowing the doors open, and then using hand grenades or bazookas on the occupants. The pillbox embrasures were kept buttoned up by using automatic weapons. F Company moved along the line of pillboxes, assaulting them as fast as possible. Three platoons were used, moving from one pillbox to another.

(74) A-3, p. 85; Personal knowledge, self; (75) A-7, p. 82;
(76) A-3, p. 85; Personal knowledge, self.

While one platoon surrounded and assaulted a pillbox, the other two platoons would surround and cover the next two in line. At daylight two pillboxes were noticed on the Battalion right flank, 500 yards from the line of those being reduced. A platoon from F Company was sent to clear these. Upon moving to these boxes, the platoon was attacked by a 17 man German patrol. A bitter fight followed in the tangled mass of trees and underbrush. Four Germans were killed, four wounded, four captured unhurt, and five escaped. One American was wounded. This was the only man wounded during the entire night of operations. (77)

By 1000 24 pillboxes had been cleared within this sector. The 2nd Battalion, 38th Infantry, passed through the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, and continued the attack to secure the Division objective previously stated. (78)

CONCLUSION

During this three day and three night operation the 2nd Battalion lost 31 men killed, 13 missing in action, 120 wounded and 172 evacuated due to disease and injury; a total of 336. This left a Battalion with approximately 400 persons, relieved from combat and most desirous of one good night's rest before moving again, without reinforcements, into another bitter four day and night action against a determined, offensive-minded enemy. 161 prisoners were captured and many were killed during this operation. The greatest number was killed by artillery while manning the security positions outside their pillboxes. No doubt the heavy artillery pounding drove security elements as well as light mortar crews inside. It is believed all enemy artillery and heavy mortar elements were shifted east to

(77) A-3, p. 85; Personal knowledge, self; (78) A-3, p. 85; Personal knowledge, self.

support the counteroffensive, which was initiated at 0530 by the tremendous barrage noted by members of the Battalion while moving through the gap in the wire of the fortified sector. (79)

A point worthy of note concerns the movement of two Battalions of Infantry, at reduced strength, single file, over one trail, without a single casualty of any type. The following morning, while moving a column of prisoners over this same trail, antipersonnel mines were set off, causing severe injury to six prisoners in the column. The explanation of this was that the snow and ice had frozen hard enough to render the mines useless, so long as it stayed cold. However, on the morning of 15 December the weather grew warm, melting the snow and ice, thus reactivating the mines. (80)

The fact that the 2nd Battalion was provided with two hot meals and blanket rolls on each night of this operation must not be overlooked. In order to accomplish this supply mission, the utmost coordination and cooperation of the supply echelon were necessary. Credit for this superior job was due to the untiring efforts of Major Frank E. Ball, Battalion Executive Officer, Lieutenant Herman Byrum, Battalion S-4, supply sergeants, mess sergeants, and administrative personnel of each company. It was necessary to move a distance of five miles from the train bivouac to the forward elements of the Battalion. The greater part of the distance was along roads under continuous interdiction by enemy artillery fire. The last 1000 yards all supplies had to be hand-carried. (81)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation the functioning of a

(79) A-8, Sec. 13, p. 6; (80) Personal knowledge, self; Statement, Bn. S-2; (81) Personal knowledge, self.

typical Infantry battalion during an operation that became typical for many similar organized units during the winter of 1944 and 1945 in the European Theater can be seen.

Although the assault of this fortified sector was not accomplished in accordance with approved doctrines as taught in Service Schools, it has been shown that the method for doing the things the Battalion had control over were, for the most part, done in accordance to approved doctrines. In combat it is often necessary to attempt a mission wherein all the proper techniques cannot be used for many reasons. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the leaders concerned with the mission to do what is possible in accordance with known doctrines and principles.

After more than two months of defensive warfare, it seems the individual acquires a complex that makes it difficult to execute energetically an offensive mission. Working in a protected defensive position is definitely safer than assaulting such a position. If possible it would be a more efficient use of manpower to rotate units through defensive and offensive sectors more often than every two months. Had the 2nd Battalion been more offensive-minded in the initial assault, more success might have been realized the first day.

During the planning phase Battalion Staff Officers were required to assist the Battalion Commander in the usual duties of detail work concerning information and plans. Due to the lack of time, it was impossible to train and organize a battalion to attack a fortified position in the normal manner. Therefore, a logical means was resorted to -- that is surprise. However, it should be pointed out that lack of time to organize,

train, and make proper reconnaissance is more normal than abnormal in combat. Therefore, it is the duty of the Battalion S-3 to plan training and organization regardless of the present mission of the Battalion. Prior planning and training is vital in combat regardless of the present mission of the unit.

The fact that key leaders in combat units will usually become casualties at some time or other dictates that follow-up leaders or key men must at all times know as much about the situation as the present leaders or key men. Had the second in command of G Company known that a patrol from his unit had penetrated to the communication trench on the night of 13 - 14 December, an entirely different light might have been cast upon the entire operation. Again, the help of the Battalion S-3 could have been used to a greater advantage by this new Company Commander if the Battalion S-3 had checked more thoroughly on the disposition of G Company troops at the end of this day's operation.

The ability of all unit leaders to lead their men into a night action and to have those men operate and conduct themselves in a most superior manner, after three days of the most difficult combat under the most severe weather conditions, is an example of the highest type of combat leadership. No replacements were available at any time.

The ability of the Battalion Commander to lead and personally supervise small units of the Battalion, without losing control of the Battalion, is an example of the superior combat leadership necessary to the success of any difficult operation.

The 2nd Battalion's loss of men, through exposure and sickness, caused a severe strain upon those that were left.

No doubt many men were sent back who could have stayed through the action had they been in the best physical condition at the beginning of the action. In an action of this type, under such weather conditions, personnel should be checked carefully for the ever present malingerer before being evacuated. The efficient use of medical personnel in a combat operation is very necessary, especially under severe weather conditions.

LESSONS

Through this operation many lessons were reviewed and learned.

1. Surprise is always an effective and important principle to be employed whenever and wherever possible. Although a failure at the beginning, it was successful in the final phase of the operation.

2. The principle of cooperation stems from the basic two man outpost, where each man protects the other, and runs through all units to the largest. The cooperation of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions in a night infiltration, down to the small units reducing the pillboxes, is an excellent example of cooperation.

3. Movement is always necessary in the successful conduct of the attack. However, the proper control of this necessary principle is the key to the success of the operation. Control of all units during the approach and during the attack of this operation illustrates the principle of movement in an excellent manner.

4. Simplicity is of the utmost necessity in combat. This principle must be observed in all phases of planning, organization and execution. The difficult operation, brought to a successful conclusion through the efforts of the 2nd Battalion,

was an example of simplicity from start to finish.

5. Proper objectives are definitely necessary in order to accomplish the mission assigned. Road junctions that control key areas are objectives of high priority.

6. It is possible to feed hot meals and bring blanket rolls forward under the most chaotic conditions, provided administrative and supply personnel are properly supervised and the proper coordinations are made with the tactical situation.