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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY I, 121ST INFANTRY
(8TH INFANTRY DIVISION) NEAR HURTGEN, GERMANY,
21-27 NOVEMBER 1944 (RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Heavy Machine Gun Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: COMPANY IN THE ATTACK

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY I, 121ST INFANTRY
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(Personal Experience of a Heavy Machine Gun Platoon Leader)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the actions of Company I, 121st Infantry, 8th Infantry Division, during the battle for Hurtgen, 21-27 November 1944.

To bring the reader abreast of the situation prior to this time, it will be necessary to go back and briefly cover events leading up to this action.

Following the breakthrough in Normandy and the pursuit of the enemy across France, the early part of September found the American Armies fighting in the fringes of the Siegfried Line. Initially minor penetrations were made, but during the period 18-30 September heavy resistance developed and by 30 September the Germans were able to re-establish their lines running generally along the German border, except in the vicinity of Aachen in the north. Here, a furious battle took place in the early part of October and Aachen finally surrendered to the United States First Army 21 October 1944.

(1) (2)

On 3 October, the VIII Corps of the Ninth Army, following cessation of fighting in the Brittany Peninsula, moved to the vicinity of Luxembourg and took over part of the First Army zone in that area. The VIII Corps now consisting of only the 2nd and 8th Infantry Divisions, moved into a sector along the Our River generally between Bollendorf and St Vith. The

(1) A-1, p. 55; (2) A-1, p. 61

2nd Division locating in the north and the 8th Division locating in the south. (3) (4) (See Map A)

The sector occupied by the 8th Division was a twenty mile stretch of the German border along the Our River. For defense of this twenty mile area, the division front was divided in three areas of responsibility; 13th Infantry in the north; 28th Infantry in the center, and the 121st Infantry in the south. (5)

In general, the greater part of the front was covered by patrols, with the armor and the bulk of the troops being held mobile, in order to move to any part of the division zone that might be threatened. The 709th Tank Battalion and the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion were attached to the Division to assist in the defense of this sector. In addition, elements of the 9th Armored Division assisted in this defense from 20 October to 9 November 1944. The 9th Armored Division had just recently arrived in the VIII zone and this duty was designed to give them some battle experience. (6)

The 121st Infantry, less the 3rd Battalion, was concentrated in the vicinity of the Wallendorf crossing. It was in this sector that the 5th Armored Division had penetrated the Siegfried Line 5 September, however, due to extended frontages and mounting enemy counterattacks, by 19th September the 5th Armored was forced to withdraw back across the Our River. (7) (8)

(3) A-6, p. 63; (4) A-3, p. 56; (5) A-1, p. 66
(6) (7) A-1, P. 66; (8) A-1, p. 50

Secret

Secret
Auth: CG 8th Inf Div
Date 2 October 1944
Initials LEM

CT 121
APO 8 U. S. Army
021130 A Oct 1944

F. O. # 1

Maps: Central Europe 1/100,000

1. a. See enemy situation overlay (to be issued).
- b. VIII CORPS (2nd Inf Div and 8th Inf Div) relieves 28 Inf Div and 5th Armd Div in place beginning 1 Oct 1944, 2nd Inf Div on the left and 8th Inf Div on the right, and holds the line now held by the 28th Inf and 5th Armd Div.
- c. 8th Inf Div relieving elements of the 28th Inf Div (109 Inf) in its sector and 5th Armd Div prior to 030600A Oct 44 will hold the sector as shown on overlay (Annex 1) and maintain contact with the Third Army (83 Div) on the right.
2. CT 121 (less 3rd Bn on TD in Rennes) with Co C 644 TD Bn attached will hold in strength its portion of the Div sector (see Annex 1) maintaining contact with Third Army (83 Inf Div) on the right and protect the Div right flank.

* * * * *

Jeter
Comdg.

Official:

Mellen /s/
Mellen
S-3

This is a true extract copy, only pertinent parts included.

Francis D. Linse
Capt, Inf.

Action along this front from 1 October to 19 November consisted mainly of extensive patrolling by both sides. Enemy patrols, in this zone, were particularly active at night, and it was very dangerous for lone vehicles to travel the roads during the hours of darkness. (9) (See Map A-1).

SPECIAL SITUATION

With the capture of Aachen 22 October 1944, the First Army pushed eastward with the fighting centering in the Hurtgen Forest to the southeast. Progress was very slow in this sector. The forest itself was a natural barrier, and with the help of pillboxes and mine fields the enemy was able to make any advance very costly to our forces. The first American units entered the forest about 13th September with the 9th Division doing most of the fighting up until this time. (10) (11)

The Twelfth Army Group ordered a general attack to the east on 21 October. In compliance with this directive, the V Corps ordered an attack by the 28th Infantry Division in the Vossenack-Schmidt area, with the mission of securing control of two large dams on the Roer River south of Schmidt. The 12th Infantry, 4th Division, was attached to the 28th Division for this attack. (12)

This attack by the 28th Division took place between 2 and 14th November 1944. The 28th Division captured Vossenack,

(9) Personal Knowledge; (10) A-6, p. 63; (11) A-1, p. 50
(12) A-1, p. 69

crossed the Kall River and reached Schmidt. Due to mounting enemy counterattacks and the inability to bring up armor, the 28th Division was unable to hold Schmidt, and by 14 November had withdrawn across the Kall River. In this action the 28th Division suffered severe losses in both men and equipment. (13)

On 14 November, due to these heavy losses and need of reinforcements, V Corps directed the relief of the 28th Division with the 8th Division, relief to be completed by dark 20 November 1944. In order to effect this relief, the 8th Division in the VIII Corps in the vicinity of Luxembourg, was moved approximately 100 miles north to the 28th Division sector in the V Corps. The exchange of these divisions was accomplished by using trucks, one regiment being moved at a time. (14) (15)

The order of march of the 8th Division was 28th Infantry, 13th Infantry, 121st Infantry. Two days prior to the movement of the 121st Infantry, the 3rd Battalion which had been on special duty at Rennes, France, rejoined its unit. (16)

The 121st Infantry began the movement north on the morning of 19th November. By 1600 hours the column was entering the forest at Rotgen, Germany, and by 1800 hours all units had cleared into their assembly areas in the forest. Kitchens were released to the companies, and the troops were ordered to take it easy and to get all the rest possible in preparation

(13) A-1, p. 69; (14) A-1, p. 72; (15) Personal Knowledge; (16) Statement of Major Wesley R. Hogan, then Commander 3rd Bn 121st Infantry, 23 November 1947.

for the coming action. (17) (Change to Map B)

The rest did not last very long. On 19 November V Corps ordered the 8th Division to attack on 21 November, with the mission of capturing Hurtgen and Kleinbau, and securing the road connecting these two towns. For this mission C C "R" 5th Armored Division, C Company 86th Chemical Battalion, and the 18th Field Artillery Battalion (4.5 rockets) were attached to the 8th Division. (18)

The division plan for the attack was as follows: An attack through positions now held by the 12th Infantry, 4th Division to complete the clearing of the woods to the west of Hurtgen. When this had been accomplished CC "R" 5th Armored Division was to attack north along the Gemeter-Hurtgen Road to capture Hurtgen and Kleinbau. (19)

The 121st Infantry was to make the main effort. Three Battalions would attack abreast, 3rd on the right, 1st in the center, and the 2nd on the left. Attached to the 121st Infantry was the 12th Engineer Combat Battalion, A Company of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion and B and C Companies of the 86th Chemical Battalion. In addition, priority of fires of all division artillery units except one battalion was given to the 121st Infantry. Each battalion of the 121st Infantry would attack through the area of the respective battalion in the 12th Infantry. (20)

Early the morning of 20 November, Captain Thomas Edwards,

(17) Personal Knowledge; (18) A-2, p. 510; (19) A-5, p. 35;
(20) A-5, p. 37

Headquarters V Corps
APO 305

Auth: C. G. V Corps
Date 19 Nov 44
Init
192230 A November 1944

SUBJECT: Letter of Instructions

TO: Commanding General 8th Inf Div.
5th Armd Div.
V Corps Arty.

1. Letter of Instructions, this headquarters, dated 182200 A November is hereby cancelled.
2. C C "R" 5th Armd Div, attached 8th Inf Div in place effective 192400 A November. "C" Co 86th Cml Bn attached 8th Inf Div effective 200800A November. 18th F A Bn (4.5 Rocket) will be attached 8th Inf Div effective on arrival.
3. 8th Inf Div will attack 21 November and capture Hurtgen and Kleinbau. It will hold these towns and the connection road between secure against enemy attack from the North, East and Southeast. See overlay for boundaries.
4. C. G. V Corps Arty will coordinate artillery support for the operation.
5. Now temporary V Corps-VII Corps boundaries effective 202400A November.
6. Air support consisting of continuous armed reconnaissance and bombing of critical areas will be requested, G-3 air, V Corps, will coordinate.

By Command of Major General Gerow

O. C. Mood
Colonel GSC
Chief of Staff

Official

John G. Hill /s/
Colonel, GSC
AC of S, G-3

This is a true extract copy.

Francis D. Linse
Captain, Infantry

commanding officer, Company M, informed his company that the battalion was moving to a forward assembly area that afternoon, and issued orders for the platoons to be ready to move on order after 1300 hours. The 1st Platoon was to be attached to Company I, and the 2nd Platoon attached to Company L. These attachments becoming effective when the move started. Platoons of Company M would join their respective companies after 1200 hours on order for the move to the forward assembly area. Weapons were placed on carriers and would join the platoons that night in the forward assembly areas. (21)

ACTION 21 NOVEMBER 1944

Company I reached the location of its forward assembly area about 202200 November after having been on the march since 1400 hours that afternoon. The distance covered was approximately six miles, but, owing to the poor roads and the congestion the move was very slow. Vehicular movement was exceptionally heavy causing the foot column to halt frequently. C C "R" 5th Armored Division, with its tanks and many vehicles, moving into assembly areas, was chiefly responsible for this congestion.

The night could not have been any blacker. After moving off the road, the troops had to grope and feel their way in finding a place to lie down. At once it became very evident that in order to prevent any one from getting lost the platoons would have to be kept very close together. Because of this, the company was kept near the road, and constant checks were made as to the location of each platoon. Enemy artillery was (21) Personal Knowledge

active all night. Fortunately for us, the target seemed to be our artillery positions far to the rear. However, the sound of these shells singing overhead all night was not a comforting one for troops just prior to making an attack. The officers were much concerned as the troops were bunched together and a few rounds of enemy artillery would have caused company I a great many casualties. Some attempts were made to disperse the troops but it was not considered advisable to move around in the woods because of the mines. (22)

Captain Melton, commander of Company I, returned from a meeting with the battalion commander about 0300 hours. The platoon leaders were quickly summoned to the company command post. The next hour or so was spent going over the final plans for the attack next morning.

Company I was to attack through positions now held by Company K, 12th Infantry, 4th Division, astride the main Germeter-Hurtgen Road. The line of departure being their present front lines. The company objective was the edge of the woods east of the road about 1000 yards to the front. Information of the enemy obtained from the commander of Company K was very little. The exact enemy position or strength was not known. Enemy artillery and mortar fire was very heavy and mine fields could be expected to be anywhere. Company K had been in their present positions about 15 days and after eight attacks had been unable to advance. (Change to Map C)

After considering the recommendations of the platoon

(22) Personal Knowledge

leaders, Captain Melton decided to make a sneak attack. Due to the heavy artillery and mortar fire which assumed to fall with uncanny accuracy, he hoped to reach the objective before the enemy was aware of what was happening. The denseness of the woods, and the poor visibility during the early morning, were other factors that gave this plan good chance for success.

(23)

Plans were made for two different formations to be used in the attack the next morning. First, for the movement of the company from the assembly area to the line of departure it was decided to use a column of platoons. The first platoon leading, followed by the third and second. The weapons platoon and the heavy machine gun platoon were to follow the second platoon. This formation was adopted for ease of control, as no contact with the enemy was expected before reaching the line of departure. On crossing the line of departure the formation used by Company I was two platoons forward, echeloned to the right, with one platoon in support. The first and third were to lead, with the 2nd platoon in support. Because of the road on the left, first enemy contact was expected to come on the right, and Company I was formed to attack in that direction.

Initially there was little that a heavy machine gun platoon could do to support the attack, so the platoon leader gave instructions for the platoon to remain in the vicinity of

(23) Personal Knowledge

a saw mill, which was near the line of departure. As the right flank and rear of the company were wide open, the platoon sergeant was ordered to watch these areas and to be prepared to fire on any enemy attack that might develop. The platoon leader with two runners planned to join Captain Melton just behind the leading platoon. (24)

About 0500 hours the company was awakened and fed a hot breakfast. At the same time each man was issued a K ration. This was the last hot meal that Company I had for the next three weeks. A guide from Company K, 12th Infantry met Company I at 0600 and lead the company to the line of departure. The line of departure was reached without incident and the attack jumped off on time.

On crossing the line of departure Company I immediately went into an attack formation with two platoons forward, echeloned to the right, with one platoon in support. The first platoon was on the left guiding on the road and the third platoon on its right a little to the rear. Within the platoons, the formation was two squads forward and one in support. After covering a distance of about 600 yards the forward movement was stopped by a barbed wire entanglement extending just across the front. At the same time a few rounds of artillery fell near the 3rd Platoon and it was evident that something had to be done quickly. Captain Melton immediately ordered the two leading platoons to assault

(24) Personal Knowledge

straight into the wire. (25)

The first platoon, led by 2nd Lt. Stanley L. Schwartz, at once assaulted the wire with two squads. The going was tough. Before the scouts had advanced very far an enemy machine gun opened fire directly to their front. Pfc John W. Minick, one of the leading scouts, knocked this gun out with grenades single handed. The advance continued and the platoon succeeded in breaching the wire.

While this action was taking place the third platoon, led by 1st Lieutenant Lawrence D. Grover, began its assault through the same wire about 100 yards to the right. Lt. Grover made his assault with two squads leaving one squad, led by Sergeant Walter E. Wheeler in the woods about 75 yards to the rear. Lt. Grover, too, succeeded in breaching the wire. (26)

After crossing the wire both platoons were pinned down by machine gun fire coming from their right front. This fire put the first and third platoons in a very bad situation. One of Lt. Grover's men volunteered to go back and carry a message to Sergeant Wheeler. On receiving this message, Sergeant Wheeler moved his squad to the right about 100 yards, crossed the wire and attacked these machine guns from the rear. In this maneuver a squad of 12 men knocked out two machine guns and captured over 35 German prisoners. With this fire lifted the first and third platoons quickly over

(25) (26) Statements by 1st Lt. Lawrence D. Grover, then platoon leader, 3rd Platoon Company I, 14 December 1947.

ran the German position and in a very short time all enemy action had ceased.

Sergeant Wheeler by his initiative and courage had succeeded in turning what might have been a disastrous defeat into a great victory. Shortly afterward, Sergeant Wheeler was given command of the 1st Platoon when the platoon leader got in a mine field and had both his legs broken. Later, on 25 January 1945, he received a battle field promotion to 2nd Lieutenant, almost entirely for his actions in this attack.

The wire entanglements assaulted by the first and third platoons of Company I were heavily mined and covered by enemy machine gun fire. This wire had previously stopped five attacks of Company K, 12th Infantry, 4th Division. While passing through the wire, the Company I men could see some of the dead of Company A that still remained in the wire. Casualties to the first and third platoons in this assault were very heavy, each platoon losing between 12 and 15 men. (27)

A check of this position showed that it controlled a narrow neck of woods astride the main road into Hurtgen. It was protected by mines on three sides and the road on the other. In addition to the mines and wire facing Company I in their attack, was a series of machine gun bunkers built of logs which were from eighteen to twenty four inches thick. The position was so organized that every man had a place with cover built of layers of logs so that he was protected from artillery tree bursts. Nothing less than a direct hit by a

(27) Statements by 1st Lt. Lawrence D. Grover, then platoon leader, 3rd Platoon Company I, 14 December 1947.

105 or 155-mm shell would have been effective against these positions.

The third platoon in attempting to continue the attack ran into another mine field. Pfc Minick was killed by a mine and 2nd Lt. Schwartz shortly afterward had both his legs broken when he too got into the same mine field. The attack was then held up and word was sent to the battalion commander of the situation. Captain Melton soon afterward received orders to organize the position for defense and to hold it at all cost. Company I was soon to find out that to take a position is one thing, to hold it is another. (28)

The third and first platoons were assigned areas to the front generally along the edge of the woods. The mine field which they had been unable to penetrate served as a protective barrier against attack from the north. The second platoon was placed along the east side facing the wooded approach. This seemed to be the weakest flank, one from which any counter-attack was likely to come. One section of heavy machine guns located so that their fire covered this approach. The other section was located to cover the rear of the company position. Existing enemy emplacements were utilized to good advantage. Enemy wire and mines helped protect the rear of the company. In a relatively short time Company I had established a strong all around defense. Concurrently with this organization the wounded and dead were evacuated to the rear. (29)

(28) A-4, p. 48; (29) Personal Knowledge.

The situation as of 1200 hours found Company I with a strong position controlling the main road into Hurtgen. The company command post had been established in a house near the line of departure about nine hundred yards to the rear. Between the command post and the forward position was a stretch of woods with nothing to prevent the enemy from infiltrating in from the east and cutting Company I off. Captain Melton brought this to the attention of the battalion commander and requested something be done to protect his rear.

Enemy artillery which had been unusually light began to quicken in tempo during the afternoon to a point where it seemed to rain shells at times. The concentrations fired by the enemy were the heaviest experienced by the division since their first days of combat. The Germans used every caliber gun they had including big railroad guns. Duds measuring twelve inches in diameter and over three feet long fell in the company area. This artillery took a heavy toll in casualties the next six days. One near hit on a position occupied by one machine gun squad killed one man and injured two others. There was always the problem of evacuating the wounded. Men attending to the wounded always had to take their chances with new concentrations as they started to fall. Due to the heavy casualties among our aid men we never had more than two or three available at one time. (30)

After dark the artillery fire letup and most of the night

(30) Personal Knowledge

few shells fell in our area. This lull was a godsend. The men were able to get out and stretch their muscles and to begin improvements on their positions.

The first supplies, including water, rations and ammunition, arrived about 2100 hours. In addition to this, engineer tools that had been asked for were brought in. This heavy artillery fire during the day made it mandatory that all work be carried on at night.

The other battalions of the 121st Infantry made little progress the first day. The first battalion, in the center, made only slight gains and the second battalion, on the left, was unable to advance. These units encountered extensive minefields and heavy artillery fire and suffered many casualties. Company L, attacking north on the left of the main road to Hurtgen, was only able to move about one hundred yards. Company I was the only unit of the 121st Infantry that succeeded in reaching its objective on the first day.

ACTION 22 NOVEMBER 1944

The night 21-22 November was very quiet and no artillery fell between 2400 hours and 1600 hours. At approximately 0030 hours word was received from the battalion that a company of Rangers were on their way up to our position. Their mission was to tie on to our right flank and extend it, furnishing protection and filling the gap between Company I and the 28th Infantry on the right. The Rangers furnished the protection to the right flank and to the rear, but the gap between Company I and the 28th Infantry was never closed. Patrols were never able to make contact with the 28th Infantry. The Rangers' job of moving into position in the dark was an extremely hazardous

one. Although they were given all known information pertaining to the mines, heavy casualties were suffered while moving into position. (31) (32)

In the morning a light rain began to fall and it got colder. This day, except for a light counterattack at about 1000 hours, was spent sweating out the artillery. After each period of exceptionally heavy shelling, a check of all the bunkers and dugouts was always made. It was very rarely that someone was not found wounded and a small portion of our troops was always kept busy escorting or carrying these men to the rear. Returning along the trail to the company rear command post during daylight hours was almost as dangerous as remaining at the forward position. The enemy had good observation from the high ridge to the east and any movement along the route back drew heavy mortar and artillery fire.

The counterattack at 1000 hours, which was made with about a squad of enemy, was engaged by fire. After about 10 minutes, the enemy ceased firing and withdrew. As this was the first reaction of the Germans other than artillery fire, it was thought that he was checking to see if the position was still occupied.

Fortunately, the days were short and darkness fell by 1800 hours. Just after dark the Ranger Company, later identified as Company B of the 2nd Ranger Battalion, was replaced by Company C of that battalion. The Commander of Company B stated when he left that from his original strength of about sixty men he had only twenty-five left. These casualties were

(31) Personal knowledge; (32) A-2, p. 316.

sustained from mines, artillery and mortar fire in a twenty-four hour period. They were certainly glad to be leaving. The rest of the night was quiet and passed without incident. (33)

ACTION 23 NOVEMBER 1944

This day passed very slowly and seemed to be the most monotonous of the six that were spent in that position. The artillery, as usual, began at dawn and kept pounding all day long. By now the troops were getting accustomed to the shelling and it did not bother them as much as the first two days. On this morning a count was made of the shells falling over a two-hour period. Well over seven hundred shells had fallen; no doubt a large part were mortar. The big rounds, probably 240-mm fired from railroad guns, could be picked up and recognized a long way off. They sounded like flying boxcars and the time of flight after first heard was between 10 and 15 seconds.

Just before dark a heavy counterattack was received. I Company's right and rear were the hardest hit. At such times as this the need for communications was felt most. Captain Melton was forward with his 3rd and 1st Platoons at the time. The enemy attack consisted mainly of automatic weapons and the sound of machine pistols and machine guns was a familiar one. Company I quickly returned the fire. The wire and mines served equally well against the enemy and no penetrations of the position were made. After a 30-minute fire fight, the attacking force, estimated to be about a platoon, withdrew. It was later

(33) Personal knowledge.

learned that there had been attacks at this time simultaneously across the entire regimental front. (34) (35)

The night of 23-24 November passed very quietly. Although it continued to rain, the temperature had not dropped to freezing and the troops were able to keep fairly dry and comfortable in the bunkers. With security properly posted the men were able to get a good night's rest.

ACTION 24 NOVEMBER 1944

Captain Melton and the heavy machine gun platoon leader returned to the rear command post of Company I at about 0900 hours. Four days had passed since the attack and Captain Melton was anxious to get out of that position if possible. The constant pounding from the artillery was beginning to show its effect on the men. Major Hogan, the battalion commander, told him that he would have to hold on a little longer.

During this time the 1st and 2nd Battalions had been fighting desperately to reach the edge of the woods on the north and west of the town of Hurtgen. As called for in the original plan, C C "R" 5th Armored Division, was to make a tank assault supported by armored infantry down the Germeter-Hurtgen road when the edge of the woods had been reached. The time was not just right for this attack, although it was learned that tanks were assembling to the rear. (36) (37)

Upon returning to his company, Captain Melton took along a wire team to replace the wire. Communications were always a constant problem. It was almost impossible to keep wire in, and due to the rain the radios functioned very poorly. The

(34) Personal knowledge; (35) A-2, p. 318; (36) Personal knowledge; (37) A-2, p. 318.

536 radios were useless. However, the 300 radios did continue to work. This gave the company contact with the rear command post and battalion, but left no intercommunication within the company position. This handicap was never overcome.

At 1800 hours a call was received for Captain Melton and the heavy machine gun platoon leader to report to the company rear at once. There they were met by a jeep and taken to the regimental command post, which was located in a former pill box about two miles back in the woods. Here a detailed briefing was held, as the armored assault on Hurtgen was to take place at 0730 hours the next morning. (38)

Just forward of the position now held by Company I near the bend in the main road into Hurtgen the enemy had blown a big crater. Before this assault could be launched this crater had to be breached and the road swept clear of mines to a point beyond the bend in the road.

The plan was as follows. During the night 24-25 November elements of the 12th Engineer Battalion were to clear the road of mines and build a bridge across the crater. The next morning the armor was to break out of the woods, cross the bridge and roll on into Hurtgen. The attack was to be supported by heavy artillery concentrations and the initial movement of the tanks out of the neck of woods screened by smoke.

Captain Melton and the heavy machine gun platoon leader returned to the front line positions shortly after 2300 hours. The engineers were already there and had started to work. The building used as a rear command post by Company I afforded

(38) Personal knowledge.

them some protection, and the engineers used it as a point from which to coordinate their work. This work continued all night and by dawn the engineers had succeeded in putting a bridge across the crater and in clearing the road of mines. (39)

ACTION 25 NOVEMBER 1944

High hopes were had for this armored attack. The tankers were very confident and their commanding officer made the statement to Major Hogan that they would be in Hurtgen by 0900 hours.

About 0700 hours the troops of Company I were able to hear the tanks moving along the road toward the neck of the woods. Either the tankers had not been told or else they were taking no chances. The tanks were moving very slowly with all machine guns firing. Elements of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion which were to assist in the attack were moving along through the woods on the east side of the road, keeping abreast of the tanks. Some of their men had walked into the mined wire along the rear of I Company's position before they were aware of the danger. (40)

The first tank had almost reached the crater before it was knocked out by antitank fire coming from a gun positioned near the edge of Hurtgen. The next tank bypassed the disabled tank and made an attempt to continue the attack. It too was knocked out in short order. In a matter of a few minutes four tanks were lost and the assault was stopped cold. The tanks shortly thereafter withdrew back up into the woods. (41)

The armored infantry accompanying the tanks was not able

(39) Personal knowledge; (40) (41) A-2, p. 318.

to accomplish anything. The mined wire had stopped their forward advance and a column of their troops reached back to the I Company Command Post. These men were digging in and apparently were not aware of the danger from artillery that they were exposed to. This situation was quickly brought to the attention of the officers leading these troops. Shortly afterwards they withdrew entirely from our area. An armored combat command had failed to break out of the woods and take Hurtgen. (42)

For the rest of that day the enemy artillery was more active than usual. Apparently the Germans thought the tanks had only withdrawn temporarily and were going to try another attack. As a result, in addition to the Company I position, a great volume of fire was placed on the road itself. This fire was maintained for the rest of the day until dusk. Then, as was typical, the fire let up and it quieted down.

ACTION 26 NOVEMBER 1944

Nothing of any consequence happened the night of 25-26 November. By now it had stopped raining. The next morning Captain Melton issued the order for all weapons to be cleaned and checked. In the past six days, due to the rain and mud, the weapons had been badly neglected. The order was also issued to check ammunition and other equipment and to be ready to move on short notice. At this time no definite orders to move had been received. However, the situation throughout the regimental sector looked very good and it was apparent that before long something was going to happen.

(42) Personal knowledge.

That afternoon Company K moved in on the left and Company I had to give way to the right a little to make room for them. While this consolidation and digging in was going on Major Hogan assembled the commanders of Companies I and K and issued the order for an attack to take place the next morning. Company I followed by Company K was to attack at 0630 hours to the east from its present position. It was to guide on the draw running generally to the southeast and to secure the wooded area immediately southeast of the town of Hurtgen. For this action Captain Melton decided to attack in a column of platoons. 2nd Platoon, led by Lt. Hatcher, was to lead the attack, followed by the 3rd and 1st Platoons. Company K was to follow Company I and to keep contact with the rear elements. Patrols had been active in this area and Captain Melton expected to be able to move for at least 200 yards before meeting any resistance. (43)

After dark extra ammunition and water were brought up to the company and the final plans for the attack the next morning were gone over. The morale of the men was very high. To get out of that position was what everyone had been waiting for and when the order was given for the attack every man was ready to go.

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The weather the next morning was clear and cold with no early morning fog, which usually could be expected in the woods at that time of year.

The attack jumped off on time and progress was very rapid.

(43) Personal knowledge.

No opposition was encountered for the first 300 yards. Lt. Hatcher on a patrol the day before found a gap in the mine field to the east. It was through this gap that he lead the attack. Just before reaching the draw, the leading platoon came upon a small group of enemy who seemed to be outposting that vicinity. They had little will to fight and after a few bursts of fire from a tommy gun surrendered very quickly. After that, the company moved rapidly along the edge of the draw and by 0900 was on its objective. (44)

All units of the 121st Infantry were now in position for the final assault on Hurtgen. The 2nd Battalion and Company C of the 13th Infantry had reached the edge of the town from the northeast. On the afternoon of 27 November the 1st Battalion made an attack through the newly won position of the 3rd Battalion and succeeded in reaching the edge of the town. It was not until noon of the 28th of November that Hurtgen was finally cleared and all enemy resistance had been wiped out. (45)

The 3rd Battalion remained in the woods along the draw to the south and southeast of Hurtgen with the mission of clearing out the remaining enemy and with an additional mission of outposting this area against possible reoccupation by the enemy.

After continuous attacks by the 8th Division since 21 November the town of Hurtgen had been captured and the first phase of the mission assigned to the division had been successfully completed. (46)

(44) Personal knowledge; (45) A-2, p. 319; (46) Personal knowledge.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

After a study of this operation, it is my opinion that Company I should be commended very highly for the way they carried out their mission. The key to the success of the whole plan for the capture of Hurtgen lay in the capture of the narrow neck of woods astride the main Germeter Road. By controlling this road, the Germans were able to prohibit the use of armor in any attempts to capture Hurtgen. Other units, mainly the 12th Infantry, 4th Division, had paid heavily in men and material in their efforts to capture this position. The constant pounding of this position with artillery by the enemy is ample proof that he too considered this approach very important. Although he was unable to dislodge Company I by counterattack and reoccupy the position, by ever increasing amounts of artillery fire, the enemy made every attempt to deny this route of approach to the attacking forces.

As a whole, the action for the first six days showed a definite lack of knowledge by our troops of the technique of fighting in woods. Especially was this true in regard to control, communication, and evacuation. In this respect, perhaps the Division was too hasty in rushing the 121st Infantry into this attack. It seems that if the attack had been delayed a few days the officers would have been able to contact the units which they were to relieve. By learning of their problems, definite steps could have been taken to remedy them. Thorough briefing, too, of the men might have been very helpful. To my knowledge, no information regarding the coming attack was given to the soldiers until just prior to the attack. As further

evidence of these deficiencies, the enemy had this to say of the fighting of the American troops: by the 183rd V.G. Division - "In combat in wooded areas the American showed himself completely unfit."

The 3rd Battalion plan for carrying out the mission assigned to it by regiment was sound. However, a more timely exploitation of the successes of Company I might have been used to great advantage. Company L, on the left, had made constant attacks against a heavily mined area with little success. Had Company L and Company K been used in an attack to the east on 22 November through Company I's position, the whole wooded area from the road to the draw south of Hurtgen might have been taken. When this attack was finally made on 27 November, little resistance was encountered and Company I was on its objective in a few hours.

C C "R" 5th Armored Division failed badly in their attempt to break out of the woods along the Gemeter-Hurtgen Road. This was due mainly to their failure to use their mobility and shock action. Long before the edge of the woods was reached, the tanks were firing their machine guns and any chance for surprise was lost. The movement, too, of the tanks was very slow, approximately two or three miles per hour. This firing was unnecessary, as the road was cleared of all enemy along its sides. If the tanks had been rolling when they broke out of the woods, their momentum might have carried them beyond the bend in the road. After rounding this bend, being a frontal target, the tanks would have been less vulnerable to antitank fire. A fear of enemy infantry in the woods along the road seemed to be their main concern.

Communications too failed badly in this attack, and no workable solution for keeping wire in was found. To start with, in addition to the radios, the plan called for a wire team to lay wire following the attacking platoon. This plan had worked satisfactorily in the past and at the beginning of the action. No reasons were apparent that it would not work in this case. Sound power wire, W120, was used, which was very easily cut by the artillery fire. No doubt had arrangements for a heavier wire been made, the communication would probably have been much better. It is questionable, however, whether this heavy wire would have been the answer to the problem. In the end, radios were relied upon entirely for all communications, the 300 radio being the most dependable. Arrangements for additional 300 radios within the company in my opinion would have been the best solution to this problem.

Evacuation was only possible by hand carry, a condition when casualties are heavy which taxes the medical facilities of a regiment to the maximum. This burden was additionally increased by the fact that all three battalions of the regiment were engaged at the same time, and all suffered heavy losses. After the first day, losses in company aid men created another problem in addition to the one of evacuation. After periods of heavy shelling, it was impossible for a few men to attend to all the casualties at once. In one specific case, a man whose leg had been severed just above the knee by a large piece of shrapnel, died from loss of blood before medical aid could reach him.

To sum up this action, Company I did reach its objective in the initial attack. The aggressiveness of the officers

and men was the prime factor that made this possible. Had the enemy known of the attack, and been able to occupy his positions, it is questionable that any force of less than a battalion could have taken that objective. In reality, this was the beginning of the end for the German forces attempting to hold Hurtgen. This foothold in the edge of the woods was later extended to place our troops in a ring around the town, and to make the fall of Hurtgen only a matter of time. Losses to the enemy are not definitely known although twenty were killed and approximately 50 were taken prisoners. Casualties to Company I for this period were approximately 140 killed and wounded, to the heavy machine gun platoon 23 men either killed or wounded. (46) (47)

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Adequate time should be given for reconnaissance and personal contacts before the relief of a unit is executed. Invaluable information as to enemy locations, volume of artillery fire and mines used, and nature of the terrain can be obtained.
2. Close support of the infantry by the artillery is not possible in heavy woods.
3. Extra wire and radios must be provided to facilitate communications.

(46) Personal Knowledge; (47) Statement of 1st Lt. Lawrence D. Grover, then platoon leader, 3rd Platoon Company I, 14 December 1947.

4. Where evacuation and supply by motor is impossible, additional personnel for carrying parties must be provided.

5. Aggressiveness of subordinate leaders and small units, especially platoons and squads, is mandatory in successful attacks through wooded areas.

6. Small advantages should be exploited to the maximum by all units.

7. Breaching of heavily mined areas is costly, both in men and time used, and every attempt must be made to locate gaps or to by-pass such obstacles.

8. Open fox holes are useless and troops must provide overhead cover for their protection. Extra pioneer tools must be provided for this use.