

Staff Department
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

STUDENT MONOGRAPH
Advanced Infantry Officers Course
Class Nr. 2
1955-56

Parachute Assault of a Bridge

Capt Lawrence W. Jackley
Roster Nr. 93

TABLE OF CONTENTS

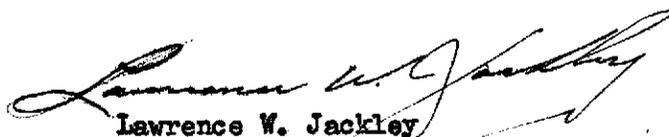
	PAGE
PREFACE.....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	3
DISCUSSION.....	6
CONCLUSIONS.....	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	13
ANNEX A.....	14
ANNEX B.....	15
ANNEX C.....	16
ANNEX D.....	17

PREFACE

8 February 1956

The reader will find the study of this paper to be more rapid and meaningful if he will unfold the maps contained in Annexes A, B, and C, when following the discussion. The maps have been placed in the monograph so that they may be spread out to the side, for the convenience of the reader.

The point of view expressed in this paper is that of the author-- not necessarily that of the Infantry School or the Department of the Army.


Lawrence W. Jackley

INTRODUCTION

This paper will deal with parachute units and bridges. The importance of airborne operations was made known to the world on a grand scale in Europe in 1944. In almost every paratroop action of the war, bridges were critical objectives; their capture resulting in furthering the advance of our own forces, blocking an enemy withdrawal, or preventing an enemy reserve from influencing the action. We were not alone to realize the criticality of bridges, however. The enemy could be counted upon to protect the crossings along a major route in strength, and to prepare them for demolition if our capabilities included their use. Intact bridges, therefore, if to be captured at all, had to be captured quickly.

In the face of these problems, however, certain factors favor the attacker in a parachute assault of a bridgehead. The natural result of an airborne operation is surprise, confusion, and shock in the ranks of the enemy. It is the author's contention that this strategic surprise must be further exploited by the tactical surprise of a double envelopment of the bridgehead. Coupled with speed and aggressive action, this tactical maneuver can be used, and as I will show, has been used, with great success, to capture a bridgehead intact.

In order to spring this tactical surprise on the enemy, it will be apparent to the reader that a commander must select drop zones on both sides of the bridgehead. The selection of drop zones has always been one of the most important decisions that an airborne commander must make. The most critical period for a parachute unit is the first few hours immediately following the drop. The success of this first few hours will be determined greatly by the staff

work and command decisions in the planning phase, and the selection of drop zones will always have a high priority in the planning sequence. The words of General Gavin inform us, " The selection of drop and landing zones has a greater influence on the final outcome of an airborne operation than any other planning step. Their proper selection is absolutely vital to the final outcome." (2:81)

There are many factors which must be considered in the selection of drop zones, and many events which cannot be foreseen. Quite often, these factors and events assume paramount importance in the success or failure of an airborne operation. Every major parachute action of World War II and of Korea was considered by the author in selecting material for this paper. Consideration was given to only those operations in which the decision to drop on one or both sides of a bridgehead was the determining factor of success or failure. Many parachute actions that failed in the accomplishment of initial missions, in the opinion of the author, were doomed to failure from the beginning because of a decision not to use a double drop and envelopment to capture the objective. However, in all of these actions, there were so many contributing factors, that it would be neither logical nor fair to point out one reason, and to say that this was the cause of failure. Nor has consideration been given to operations in which a higher headquarters restricted the selection of drop zones, or in which certain conditions prohibited the selection of multiple drop zones.

I will consider two 'classic' examples of the combined vertical and double envelopment to capture a bridgehead--the German assault of the Corinth bridge, and the capture of the Grave bridge by the 504th PIR. In each of these examples, the success of the operation was assured by selecting drop zones so that the airborne soldiers

were able to exploit the initial surprise with the tactical surprise of a double envelopment. The limitation of dealing with battalion or smaller size units has also narrowed the research somewhat, inasmuch as the basic unit considered in airborne operations is the regiment. Under the stated limitations, the two examples selected, in the opinion of the author, vividly demonstrate the fundamental principle of capturing bridges by parachute assault: vertical envelopment--double envelopment.

DISCUSSION

The Germans not only introduced the world to the employment of parachute troops in conjunction with regular ground troops, but demonstrated a complete grasp of the subject from the beginning. Their operations were bold in concept, but fundamentally sound in their tactics. Their ability to use this weapon was never more completely demonstrated than in the so called 'minor' operation in Greece.

In April, 1941, the German advance into the Balkans had backed the British well down in the Greek peninsula. It now became a matter of survival for the British to withdraw rapidly to the Peloponnese.(4:40) (Annex A) If the Germans were to be successful in cutting off the retreat across the Isthmus of Corinth, the capture of the bridge at Corinth was imperative.(5:19) (6:10)

The German motorized Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler Division was to spearhead the advance down the peninsula. Paratroops were to assault the bridge, with the aid of tactical aircraft strafing the troops in the immediate vicinity. To achieve tactical surprise, the paratroops were to be dropped on both sides of the bridge. Once landed, the airborne soldiers were to move in quickly from both sides to keep the British from executing their demolitions.(4:41)

Early in the day, tactical aircraft strafed security troops in the vicinity of the objective. These aircraft were followed immediately by troop carriers which dropped several hundred paratroops on either side of the bridge from an altitude of about 200 feet.(4:41) They moved in immediately, backed by more fighter aircraft strafing the British. Even though complete tactical surprise was obtained, a British officer managed to set off one of the charges which partially destroyed the bridge.(4:41)

(5:19) (6:10) The security forces were eliminated, and the bridge was put back into working order the same day.(4:41) The operation can be rated a success, for it prevented the total destruction of the bridge, and subsequent delay of the advancing division. (4:41) Had the operation been executed three days earlier, it would have cut off most of the retreating British troops, but even then, it prevented the delay of the German pursuit.(5:15)

In this operation, the surprise was double--the fact that paratroops were used at all, and the added surprise of a double envelopment. Although there was no heavy resistance on the objective, and though an aggressive British officer did partially destroy the bridge, the operation was a complete success. Here, the Germans exploited the natural confusion and shock of an airborne attack by pressing in from both sides of the objective before defending troops could reorient themselves and establish a coordinated defense. In view of the aggressive leadership displayed by the British, it is a safe assumption that had the defenders been forced to fight in only one direction, they would have had more time to put into effect their defenses, and as a result, more time to properly execute the charges to completely destroy the bridge. This was the 'classic' airborne operation on the part of the Germans during the war.

Unfortunately, the lessons handed over by the Germans, in the finer points of the handling of airborne troops, were lost upon the Allies during the invasion of Europe. The invasion from the dark skies of early morning of 6 June 1944 was for most part directed against targets such as causeways and critical bridges. On a battalion level, none of the targets were attacked from both sides by selecting drop zones on both sides of the bridges. However, there were so many contributing reasons for the failure of some of

the units to reach their initial objectives on schedule, or to hold these objectives once a foothold had been gained, that it is impossible to pick out one over-riding reason for failures. Actually, the most picked on reason for failure in the Normandy operation was the poor drop. This was caused by the pathfinders not being able to get their equipment up in time in the face of enemy resistance on the drop zones, a bad fog, and pilots not following orders to hold their course in the flak, thereby causing the drops to be scattered. As a result, coordinated fighting according to the original plan did not emerge until late in the day. Therefore, no matter how skillful the plans, the unforeseen events of enemy, weather, and pilot error assumed paramount importance in influencing the action.

Three months later, these object lessons from the German actions and from the Normandy operation had not yet been completely impressed upon the Allies. We undertook a bold operation, known as "Market-Garden", and with one outstanding exception, which is the second of the 'classic' examples, we completely overlooked the value of the combined vertical and double envelopment of bridges on a battalion level.

In the fall of 1944, the Allies were in a serious predicament, supply wise. Never before in the history of warfare, had any army consumed so much food, ammunition, and gasoline. The Port of Cherbourg, the beach terminals, and the highways leading to the front were loaded to the peak. The French railroads had not yet been repaired to a usable condition, after the retreating Germans had torn them up. The Port of Antwerp was not yet in use, nor would it be until we had cleared the Schelde Estuary. The outlook of the war at this time was for prolonged fighting into the heart of Germany through the Siegfried Line. With the expense that would

incurred by the Allies in material and manpower, the Germans might very well bring about a negotiated peace, contrary to our announced war aims.(2:71)

A plan, "Market-Garden", designed to accomplish several objectives at one sweep, was ordered into operation. An end run around the Siegfried Line, across the Rhine, and into the heartland of Germany while avoiding the bulk of German troops was to be the mission of the British Second Army. (2:72) (Annex B) This army was now abreast the Meuse Escant Canal. All supplies, especially gasoline, were diverted to this operation. The Army pulled back several miles, as if straightening out lines for the winter, while the US Armies to the south made demonstrating attacks all along the front.(1:1)

The axis of advance for the British Second Army was to be the route following Eindhoven, Nijmegen, and Arnheim, and across the Rhine into Germany.(2:72) To make this crossing of the many rivers and canals possible, without the necessity of stopping to fight for each one, the newly formed Allied Airborne Army was given the task of laying a carpet along the route of advance, and securing the bridges from Eindhoven to Arheim, inclusive. Units available for this operation were the U.S. 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions, the British 1st Airborne Division, the 1st Polish Airborne Brigade, and XVIII Airborne Corps Special Troops.(2:73) (Annex B)

The mission of the 82d Airborne Division was to seize the bridge over the Maas River at Grave; seize the main bridge over the Waal River at Nijmegen; seize, organize, and defend the high ground in the vicinity of Grosbeek; and seize the bridges over the Maas-Waal Canal. The dominating terrain at Grosbeek was ordered to be consolidated before any effort was made to seize the bridges, with the exception of the one at Grave. (2:98)

The 504th PIR was given the mission of seizing the Grave Bridge, and attacking the Maas-Waal Canal Bridge from the west. The 2d Battalion drew the task of seizing the Grave Bridge. About thirty-six hours before the jump, the battalion commander received permission to drop one company on the south side of the bridge.(2:98)

The regiment jumped at 171300 September, and all troops landed on the correct drop zone. As the drop was made in daylight, pilots had no difficulty in locating their panels, and only an occasional aircraft was seen to be taking evasive action. Losses from flak were fairly light.(2:99) (7:1) "Objectives for the 504th Parachute Infantry were separated by four miles, so that the battalion dropped on separate zones to be nearer assigned objectives. Half an hour after dropping on DZ#0" west of Overasselt, enough men of the 2d Battalion had collected to set out for its objective, the 640-foot bridge over the Maas at Grave. Company E of that battalion dropped on the other side of the bridge west of Grave and worked through the ditches and canals toward the bridge from that direction. Snipers and fire from emplaced 20mm antiaircraft guns harassed the attackers, but a party of eight men went for the bridge. They got into a flak tower at the north end of the bridge--the gun shield had been out by strafing aircraft, but the gun was still operative--and turned the weapon against the one remaining German gunner who was covering the bridge from the flat. At 1630 Company E fired green flares to signal that it controlled the south end of the bridge, and a half hour later men were crossing back and forth. The battalion captured Grave and established a bridgehead to the south."(3:VII-57) (2:99)(Annex C)(Annex D) The bridge was actually secured at 1700 hours, according to the message sent to the Commanding Officer of the regiment.(7:1) Mines were immediately laid to protect the approaches. Contact was made with the advance elements of the

British Second Army at 0835 hours, 19 September. At no time during this period did the Germans regain control of the bridge.(7:1)

This operation is a most convincing example of how properly — selected drop zones can influence an action. Here, as with the Germans at Corinth, strategic surprise was exploited with the tactical surprise of a double envelopment to gain a decisive victory. Colonel Reuben Tucker, the commanding officer of the 504th PIR strongly felt that the bridge could be taken intact in this manner. (2:97) Subsequent events demonstrated that he had made one of the soundest tactical estimates of the airborne part of the war. The success gained by one battalion was all the more impressive because of the numbers of enemy involved. According to the synopsis of the regimental unit journal for that period, there were "several company size units in the immediate vicinity of the bridge,"with well-coordinated defenses. The enemy was denied the full use of his defenses because of the tactical surprise gained from hitting the bridge from both sides.(7:1) For a battalion to cut down resistance of this magnitude and secure its objective within four hours after arrival is success of an outstanding nature. These numbers, with well planned defenses, if forced to fight in but one direction, would have been most effective. Here again, strategic surprise was exploited with tactical surprise. The setting was a natural for the airborne double envelopment play, with a daylight drop and easily identifiable objectives. Bridges that are critical are usually prepared for demolition in advance. Time becomes of the essence. After achieving strategic surprise by use of paratroops, it would be senseless to hand over the initiative to the enemy, by permitting them time to put into effect their planned defenses, to include the destruction of a vital bridge.

CONCLUSIONS

The actions described in the preceding section fully demonstrate the requirement of dropping paratroops on both sides of an objective bridgehead. At Corinth, even the most aggressive action on the part of the defenders was nullified by the tactical surprise gained by the Germans in their double assault upon the bridge. At Grave, a force nearly equal in size, and well entrenched, were completely overcome when two fast moving and hard hitting forces assaulted them from both sides. In both of these examples, time was the important factor. The absolute necessity of holding on to the initiative, which is a fleeting opportunity at best, compels acknowledgment of the following conclusions as fundamentals in the airborne assault of a bridgehead:

1. The natural result of an airborne attack is surprise in the strategic sense.

2. This strategic surprise must be exploited by tactical surprise on the ground in order to keep the initiative, and to make best use of limited time available to the attacker.

3. The attack of a bridgehead by a double envelopment achieves this tactical surprise on the ground.

4. Since the type and direction of ground maneuvers is intimately linked with selection of drop zones, it is therefore, a requirement that these drop zones be selected on both sides of a bridgehead.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- | | |
|--|-----------------------|
| 1. Gagarine, Alexis M., Capt, Inf, "An Airborne Assault Designed to Secure Bridges in Front of Advancing Ground Troops", Military Monograph, Advanced Infantry Officers Class Nr 2, 1948-49, The Infantry School Library, Fort Benning, Georgia. | |
| 2. Gavin, James M., <u>Airborne Warfare</u> (Washington, DC: Infantry Journal Press, 1947) | 940.542 G
Post Lib |
| 3. Huston, James A., <u>The United States Army in World War II, Airborne Operations, Chapters I through IX</u> , Washington, D.C., Office of the Chief of Military History. | D809.1
A12pR |
| 4. Miksche, F.O., <u>Paratroops</u> , London: Faber and Faber, Limited. | Ug671
M58 6 U |
| 5. Department of the Army Pamphlet Nr 20-232, <u>Historical Study, Airborne Operations, A German Appraisal</u> , October, 1951. | U133 U21
Nr 20-232 |
| 6. Military Intelligence Service, War Department, <u>Enemy Airborne Forces</u> , 2 December 1942. | D731.1
V45#7 |
| 7. Film Report, <u>Unit History 504th PIR 6 June 44-April 45</u> . | D-134
Item 2136 |