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Use Of Small Strongpoints
In Extended Position Defense

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PREFACE

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I would like to express my appreciation to the personnel in the Infantry School Library, and the Main Post Library who so willingly and efficiently assisted me in the gathering of source material for this monograph.

Annex A and Annex B have been included to help the reader better understand the combat examples discussed herein.

Considerable experience in the occupation of an extended position defense was acquired by the author in Korea during the winter and spring of 1952.

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

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INTRODUCTION

"All warlike and fighting virtues such as daring, decision, courage, offensive spirit, destructive will and self confidence are awakened by, and take their full value from, offensive action. The moral power of self-confidence, of initiative, make the offensive superior to the defensive. The attacker feels superior in power and will. That is why the offensive is the force which, in the conduct of war and combat proper, wins the decision. It fulfills the primary aim of war, forces the enemy down, vanquishes him, compels him to give way and makes him disposed to accept peace." (4:1)

"From all this, one might infer that in combat one should utilize only the offensive as the surest means of attaining success. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case; nor is it possible." (4:3) Often armies must assume the defensive. Some reasons for assuming the defense are: overextended supply lines that make it impossible to move further because of lack of vitally needed equipment, impassable mountains, extreme weather conditions, and attacks launched in one sector of a front requiring the defensive to be assumed on another sector of the front to insure the attackers flanks and rear are secure. It should also be noted that in every war in which the United States has participated, we have initially found ourselves on the defensive. As evidence of the many situations requiring the defense, history reveals that eighty percent of the combat time in Korea and World War II was spent on the defensive. (5)

Another interesting observation is that in both the recent conflicts defense on an extended front was the rule rather than the exception. On the Russian front in World War II "the frontages on which the German Divisions were forced to deploy averaged between twenty and twenty-five miles. Even in critical sectors such as that near Moscow the average

division frontage was from ten to fifteen miles." (2:192) Should the foregoing prove inconclusive, compare the front we must defend in Western Europe as opposed to the troops with which we have to defend it.

With all this in mind and assuming that in conformance with the principle of mass, wherein the enemy will attack us 'at our weakest point, (3:76) it is believed pertinent for the military student to have a sound knowledge of the extended position defense.

The field manual states that in a defense of a wide front "the front line company physically occupies a normal frontage." (6:303) The purpose of this monograph is to show how an extended position can be successfully defended by employing companies physically occupying more than their normal frontage through the utilization of small strongpoints along the main line of resistance. For purposes of the following discussion, normal frontages for the rifle company and the infantry battalion will be considered to be from six hundred to twelve hundred yards and from twelve hundred to twenty four hundred yards respectively, as taught at The Infantry School.

The small strong point method is not currently being taught at The Infantry School, nor can it be found in any field manuals. Inasmuch as the small strong point method has been employed successfully in combat, as will be shown later, I believe it should be brought to the attention of the military student.

It is the author's assumption that the conflicts our army may have to fight in the near future will be small and not considered worthy of the use of nuclear weapons. In other words, similar in that respect to the Korean conflict. Therefore, the discussion is limited to the position defense and the strongpoints referred to herein are not to be confused with the strongpoints used in the mobile defense that is being taught in an attempt to solve the problems of dispersion presented by atomic warfare. Furthermore this discussion will be limited to defensive tactics of units no higher than the infantry battalion.

DISCUSSION

In any defensive situation the fundamentals of defense should be applied to the maximum degree possible. However, certain modifications of each particular fundamental must be made to conform to the eccentricities of various situations. For the readers convenience these fundamentals are: (7:2-3)

- A. Proper Utilization of Terrain
- B. Security
- C. Mutual Support
- D. Defense in Depth
- E. All Around Defense
- F. Coordinated Fire Planning
- G. Coordinated Barrier Planning
- H. Flexibility

The fundamental that will primarily concern us is the proper utilization of terrain.

With regard to the proper utilization of terrain in an extended position defense, it is believed that a company or a platoon can successfully defend terrain by physically occupying more than its normal front if the units organize the terrain with a series of small mutually supporting strong points. Undue influence has apparently been exerted on our extended position doctrine through the lasting impressions from Korea where, in the beginning, we had understrength divisions manning extremely extended positions containing dominant terrain. (1:39-40) Both the extremely extended positions and the dominant terrain, with excellent observation and fields of fire, created a situation that was readily adaptable to platoons and companies rimming the crest of a ridge and in order to cover large areas with fire by physically occupying their normal frontages.

However, it is entirely possible that in future conflicts, units will be assigned terrain to defend that, due to its nature, will be impossible to defend by physically occupying a normal frontage. Examples of this are heavily wooded hills with level tops where limited fields of fire and poor visibility would cause your unit to physically expand in order to adequately defend all approaches thereto. Should the unit confine itself to one portion of the crest in order to physically occupy its normal frontage, it would not be long before the hill would be jointly occupied by both friendly and enemy. Another type of terrain that physical occupation may have to be expanded in is flat terrain where high grass or crops are present. If you did not expand, large enemy forces could infiltrate through your lines and attack you from the rear making your position untenable. These are two situations that I believe lend themselves to defense by units physically occupying more than their normal frontages. You may say to yourself, "Well, why not put more units in such a position?" If we had them, fine, but many times in combat you will find that our units are understrength, thus necessitating the extended position defense.

It is believed that terrain similar to that discussed above can be successfully defended by the utilization of a system of small strongpoints within the company. These strongpoints should each have an automatic weapon, preferably a light or heavy machine gun. Also each strongpoint, in addition to the crew for the automatic weapon, must be given all-round protection by three or four riflemen. It is desirable that these small strongpoints be mutually supporting. When this is impossible, additional supporting fires and obstacles should be planned to fill in the gaps. Employment of this method might, and probably will, require the platoon with attachments to occupy more than 400 yards in the extended position defense.

Attached supporting weapons such as tanks and recoilless rifles can

be integrated into your strongpoint system to defend with fields of fire toward likely avenues of approach for enemy armor.

A very important requirement is that both radio and wire communications be provided to enable the platoon leader to communicate with each of his strongpoints and also to enable the strongpoint commander to communicate with adjacent strongpoints on his flanks, if these are out of sight or at a great distance from him. In addition to helping the commander in keeping abreast of the situation, these communications will serve to ease the minds of the soldiers occupying the strongpoints, because these soldiers know that, if they are attacked, they can get help in the nature of supporting fire by merely calling their commander.

The location of these strongpoints is of paramount importance. They should be located primarily where they can cover likely avenues of enemy approach. Coordination up through the chain of command will be required to insure that all likely avenues of enemy approach into the assigned battalion defensive area are adequately covered. No mention will be made here of guide figures pertaining to distance between strongpoints because these distances will vary greatly with the terrain, visibility, and situation, consequently the determination of these distances will be left up to the commander. The erroneous impression "that terrain is defended only when it is physically occupied, instead of recognizing that it is really defended only when it is adequately covered by fire, must be discouraged.

(4:156)

In front of these strongpoints the unit commander must, of course, employ his normal security measures such as listening posts and patrols so as to give early warning to the main line of resistance in case of an enemy attack or preparations for an enemy attack. Also, listening posts and patrols between strong points separated by great distances should be maintained.

In order to make this strongpoint system work, more equipment will have to be made available to the infantry companies than the organic equipment presently available. The main items that will be needed are additional machine guns, mortars and communications equipment. It is not necessary to make these items organic but they should be immediately available to a unit from ordnance and signal supply dumps when it is determined that a unit is going to go into a defensive situation. Commanders should not be burdened with any additional paperwork to obtain these items once their defensive mission is established and the decision is made to use the small strongpoint system. Coordination and prior planning by supply officers at Army level would help insure availability of this equipment.

Naturally, the additional equipment will require training by commanders in order to teach their men how to use this equipment. If time permits, the training can be provided prior to taking over the defensive sector. If not, the less desirable method, of on the job training in the occupied strongpoints and in the mortar positions, will have to be used. This will be accomplished by positioning one or two experienced men with each weapon and having them conduct the training, supervised by the commander.

A very important feature of the physical construction of these strongpoints is that they must be extremely well constructed with particular attention given to overhead cover. These positions should be continuously worked on and improved. Large logs, previously cut by the engineer battalion or the P and A platoon, should be made available to the frontline infantry. Also, technical instruction by qualified personnel from either of these units must be provided to insure that these strongpoints are well constructed and will withstand the maximum impact without collapsing. Every effort has to be made to carefully camouflage

these positions. Firing apertures should be only as large as needed and not resemble picture windows, because the larger they are, the easier it is for the enemy to pick them up and fire into them with their direct fire weapons.

If time permits the construction of alternate positions is a must, because enemy intelligence, if given time, will soon have most of our strongpoints located with the aid of aerial photographs and extensive patrolling.

If at all possible, the commander using the small strongpoint method of defense should provide himself with a reserve to give his unit flexibility and add depth to his position.

Aggressive leadership on the part of the defending commanders is mandatory. Troops on the defensive in a quiet sector are inclined to believe and act as though they are in reserve. Commanders must insure that the positions are continuously improved and that sanitary conditions prevail. Do not hesitate to make changes in the defensive set up of the unit that was relieved if you think these changes will enable you to better accomplish your mission. Daily inspections by commanders and their staffs must be made to insure implementation of the foregoing.

In an attempt to support the theory of the effectiveness of these small strongpoints, two combat examples have been chosen from World War II. Both units involved used the strongpoint method, however, the two actions take place on two entirely different pieces of terrain as you will see.

The first action involves the third battalion, 395th Infantry, 99th Division in the defense of Hoften, Germany in the hilly Ardennes Forest on the 16th of December 1944. The mission of the Third Battalion was to defend a hill some 6000 yards in length and 1600 feet high. (See Annex A) The 99th Division had a sector of approximately 22 miles, with each regiment having a little better than seven miles to defend. The Allies in

October 1944 were short of men and equipment due to the unforeseen rapid advance from Normandy, so in an effort to economize on forces, troops were moved from the relatively quiet Ardennes sector to other sectors on the front. German intelligence was on the alert and in October of 1944 the Ardennes area was chosen as the locale for the final German counter-offensive, later known as the "Battle of the Bulge".

The area the 3rd Battalion was to take over consisted of the previously mentioned hill on top of which was the town of Hofen, Germany, consisting of about one hundred houses perched on the razorback that formed the crest of the hill. The slopes of the hill were steep and heavily forested.

Before the battalion took over the area, the Battalion Commander immediately noted that the original positions consisted of 6000 yards manned by a thin line of riflemen and automatic weapons with inadequate supporting weapons (mortars) and communications. In addition, the previous commander did not have a reserve.

The 3rd Battalion took over the position on 19 November 1944, placed all three companies on line I on the north, K in the center, and L on the south, with a platoon from L company held back as a reserve. (See Annex A)

From then until the 15th of December 1944, every effort was made to strengthen and consolidate the battalion defensive position. "No longer were found thin lines of riflemen - strongpoints consisting of a light or heavy machine gun protected by riflemen manned the front and all approaches thereto." This necessitated platoons and companies to physically occupy more than their normal frontage. Additional mortars were procured and mines and barbed wire were emplaced. Also extra communication equipment was obtained and put into use. Phones were eventually installed in every strongpoint and observation post, enabling the Battalion Commander to be informed of the situation along his entire 6000 yard front.

Also, while all this was going on, patrols were dispatched around

the clock to probe into the Ardennes forest. These patrols met with very little opposition giving the impression that the German lines were lightly manned.

In addition to the foregoing, a coordinated fire plan and a coordinated barrier plan had become a reality.

" By the 15th of December 1944, all possible measures had been taken to make the battalion position impregnable. The morale was high and every man had the impression that the Battalion would never be caught napping and subsequently defeated.

" On the 15th of December 1944, the 3rd Battalion buttoned up for the night, as usual. There was snow on the ground and it was seasonably cold. All was quiet during the early hours of darkness, but at 2300 hours, outposts and frontline positions along the entire battalion sector sent in a steady stream of reports, concerning unusual noises in the vicinity of Rohen (see Annex A) and in the woods surrounding this town.

" Artillery and mortar concentrations were fired into the reported areas until 0300, 16th of December 1944. At that time reports indicated that nothing unusual was taking place.

" At 0525 a tremendous concentration of heavy artillery, mortar and rocket fire fell along the entire battalion position, with the heaviest concentration falling in the I and K company areas and in and around the Battalion Command Post, located near the center of Hofen. The concentrations continued until 0545 at which time they promptly ceased.

A tremendous amount of damage was caused within the town of Hofen. Fires raged everywhere and streets were filled with debris of smashed buildings and fallen telephone poles. The Battalion Command Post, having been hit again and again, had lost all wire communication with subordinate, adjacent and higher headquarters. Also, all sentries on guard nearby had been killed or wounded.

For a moment it seemed that the whole Battalion was stunned but this condition was quickly remedied. Immediately, radio communication was established, wire crews dispatched, and the necessary reports to Regimental Headquarters were accomplished. The Battalion was alert.

At 0550 the entire front was aglow with artificial moonlight produced by the enemy by playing powerful searchlights against low hanging clouds. I and K company commanders reported that the light was very favorable to their troops in the front lines because visibility was increased two hundred yards. These reports turned out to be very important inasmuch as the artillery forward observers had computed the general location of the searchlights and had requested permission to fire on them. Consequently permission was refused.

At 0600 the enemy came.

Out of the haze they appeared in front of the battalion position. They were in groups moving forward in their characteristic slow walk. Their mass was centered along the boundary between I and K company and approximately along the left flank of I company. It is estimated that it was at least a battalion sized attack. L company reported only small patrol activity to their front.

The artificial moonlight outlined the approaching Germans perfectly against the background of snow, and every weapon in the battalion opened fire on the attackers. This fire appeared to surprise the enemy and practically swept them from in front of the battalion position. All weapons had held their fire until the enemy was within two hundred yards of the main line of resistance. The automatic weapons had a field day. As the enemy deployed to engage the fire of the automatic weapons in an attempt to knock them out, the strongpoint system of defense proved its effectiveness - riflemen dug in on the flanks and rear of each automatic weapon, making it practically impossible to approach the position from

any angle and the Germans suffered heavy casualties.

The 81 mm mortars had to fire both the artillery and mortar concentrations because communications between the artillery liaison officer and his fire direction center were out. However, the attack being generally centralized made it possible to use all ten mortars per concentration with a devastating effect. Communications with the artillery were restored at 0650 enabling them to resume firing.

German losses were terrific, and at 0655 they began to withdraw. Some heavy fighting continued around strong points in the K company area, but it soon ceased and what remained of the enemy retreated to the confines of the heavy woods in front of the battalion.

The entire battalion was elated over the action because of the visible success of the defense. In front of the positions, in the shell-marked snow, lay the bodies of over one hundred enemy dead. In addition, forty-one prisoners of war were taken.

The elation was short-lived because at 1235 the enemy again launched a company-sized attack against the K company front. K company was dug in along a sunken road and it appeared that the Germans wanted the road to use as a means of approach into both I and L companies from their flanks. This attack was stopped cold by small arms fire and artillery and mortar concentrations. More enemy dead dotted the snow covered approaches to the battalion.

This was the last attack by the Germans on the 16th of December, but rest for the fatigued battalion was out of the question. New stocks of food and ammunition was dumped on position, positions were improved, dead removed, and streets cleared of debris to permit vehicle traffic to roll. By nightfall the battalion was again ready to go. (8:5-17)

This combat example appears to be an outstanding example of a successful defense by a United States Infantry Battalion. It must be considered,

however, that this unit had almost five weeks to prepare their frontline positions, and that during this time, the enemy did not hinder them at all. In many cases a unit will not have nearly this much time.

However, much credit must be given to this battalion because it made the maximum use of this time to improve their defensive setup. The Battalion Commander, through his dynamic leadership caused the unsatisfactory positions of the previous unit's line of riflemen to be changed to a system of small strongpoints. In addition, he saw the need for a reserve and immediately established one even though the previous commander of that area saw no need for a reserve. In subsequent action the establishment of this reserve proved its worth.

The procurement of extra mortars so the entire front could be adequately covered and also the procurement of extra communications equipment, both of which proved invaluable during the German attack, could well have turned the tide of battle in favor of the defending forces. However, the positions would have been better off had the unit obtained radios for each strongpoint as well as phones to provide themselves with two means of communication.

The mighty construction of the unit's strongpoints was verified by the fact that they withstood the tremendous German artillery concentrations prior to the attack allowing the soldiers in them to be able to adequately defend the positions once the attack was launched.

All in all, very little adverse criticism of this action can be made by this author. One of the most outstanding features of the defense, was the fact that the unit was so well disciplined so as to be able to hold their fire until the enemy got within two hundred yards of their positions. This is indicative of the superb leadership that must have existed in the battalion.

Now we have seen the small strongpoint system effectively employed by a unit who had been on the line quite a few days before their real test

came in the hilly section of the Ardennes Forest. Let us turn next to a unit that used the same defense on the flat plains of the Anzio Beachhead in Italy on the first day in combat for fifty per cent of its assigned personnel.

The unit concerned in this action is F Company, 180th Infantry, 45th Infantry Division, 16 to 18 February 1944, on the Anzio Beachhead, some thirty miles south of Rome, Italy. The mission of the entire VI Corps, to which the 45th Division belonged, was to assume defensive positions in an effort to stem enemy efforts to wipe out the beachhead. The enemy, at this time, had ten divisions in the area against the five divisions of the Allies. On the 2nd of February, almost two weeks after the landing on the Anzio Beachhead, the initiative had passed to the Germans.

F Company had moved into their positions on 10 and 11 February and immediately began improving the line turned over to them by the battle weary understrength unit that they had replaced. The morale, esprit de corps and discipline of the F Company men at this time was excellent.

The area for which F Company was responsible had a frontage of better than 2000 yards and was as flat as a pool table. Positions were located in the center of what had been a thriving agricultural community. To the immediate front and northeast, at a distance of approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, the terrain sloped gently upward and favored enemy observation. The position was bounded on both flanks by small creeks and had a road running through it perpendicular to the main line of resistance. (See Annex B) Small irrigation ditches ran perpendicular and parallel to the front and offered protection to an attacking force. The soil was muddy and soft. Observation was extremely limited due to the remaining crops in the area and it was necessary to establish a company observation post in the second floor of one of the five houses along the road through the area.

Due to the excessive frontage, the Company Commander requested that an additional platoon from G Company (battalion reserve company) be placed on the left to cover the left creek and a platoon from E Company, which was the right flank company of the battalion, to be responsible for the small creek on the right flank. This request was granted by battalion, thus protection was afforded to the two dangerous covered approaches on each flank of F Company. (See Annex B) F Company Commander placed two of his platoons on line, 2nd Platoon on the left side of the road and the 1st Platoon on the right side of the road with the 3rd Platoon in reserve. (See Annex B)

F Company Commander requested and received an additional fifteen light machine guns and 700 sandbags. From the 11th of February until the 16th of February, F Company worked day and night organizing their position in a series of mutually supporting small strongpoints causing the company to physically occupy more than its normal frontage. However, it was very difficult to construct good positions because it was impossible to dig more than one foot without striking water.

Security was sent out in the form of listening posts and patrols and also a small outpost was established 300 yards in front of the positions on the road that ran through the company sector (See Annex B) Also, artillery and mortar concentrations were registered.

During the five days that the positions were being improved, F Company was subjected to aggressive enemy patrol probes and heavy accurate enemy artillery fire. Also, resupply was constantly hindered by low flying planes dropping anti-personnel bombs.

This increasing activity on the part of the enemy indicated that a large scale attack was imminent, and the accurate artillery fire further indicated that the enemy was aware of the location of the friendly dispositions. Accordingly, the Company Commander had two alternate positions

prepared for each primary position and also had the Third Platoon prepare supplementary positions for the company 600 yards to the rear of the front lines. Overhead protection of the position was improved as well as additional wire lines laid to battalion and the 81 mm mortars.

At 0630, the 16th of February, the Germans launched the first of their attacks all along the front. Twenty minutes later, after a tremendous artillery and mortar barrage, an estimated two enemy companies hurled against F Company positions. For some unexplained reason the attacking force did not move in under the protection afforded by their covering fires. As soon as the enemy artillery lifted, the enemy could be seen deploying in a skirmish line, some twelve hundred yards in front of F Company's positions. Artillery and mortar concentrations were placed upon them and as soon as they came within automatic weapon's range all strongpoints opened up on them. They were stopped after they had advanced by a series of short rushes some four hundred yards in front of the main line of resistance. The exposed Germans had suffered a great many casualties. As soon as they were pinned down their supporting fires again came crashing down on F Company positions, enabling the enemy to dig in to the soft ground giving them some protection. All wire communications in F Company were cut, however, radio contact with Battalion and with the platoons remained in effect.

F Company had held their ground effectively utilizing the small strongpoint method of defense. Total casualties for the days activity amounted to three friendly killed, nine friendly wounded, and approximately one hundred enemy casualties. The enemy had, however, with total disregard for losses moved their lines to within four hundred yards of F Company's positions.

The next day, the 17th of February, saw the enemy attack abating somewhat. However, enemy mortar and artillery fire pounded the front

line positions unmercifully and kept F Company personnel down in their holes. While this was going on, the Germans were moving up large caliber antitank weapons and, on the 18th, thirty minutes before dawn, the heaviest artillery and mortar barrage yet received fell on F Company. The Company Commander had fortunately made many of his strongpoints move to their alternate positions during the night thereby saving the lives of many soldiers.

At dawn the enemy was able to knock out some strongpoints with their direct fire antitank guns and by use of an overwhelming force, approximately a reinforced battalion, massed on a narrow front one hundred yards on either side of the road. The platoon-sized reserve was committed but was immediately pinned down by direct fire antitank guns. With utter disregard for losses, the Germans were able to push F Company back 600 yards to its previously prepared supplementary positions. (9:6-26)

The failure of this company to hold its extended position by the utilization of the small strongpoint method can be attributed to several factors, all of which were beyond the control of the Company Commander.

First of all, the unit had only five days to prepare the positions and during this time the enemy kept constant pressure on them through the medium of aggressive patrolling, constant artillery and mortar bombardments, and intermittent air attacks. Consequently, the company had to actually spend a large portion of these five days defending itself from the harassment by the enemy.

Another important consideration is the fact that approximately fifty percent of the company were new replacements, including half of the officers. The mutual confidence developed through success in previous actions that is present in a veteran unit was most likely lacking in this unit. When one strongpoint was overcome by the Germans, this lack of experience could have caused members of other strongpoints to feel that they could not hold,

and, therefore, should fall back.

The soft ground was indeed disadvantageous to the construction of good, solid, strongpoints.

Finally, the outnumbered and beleaguered defenders bore the brunt of the German attack. The attackers apparently were determined to seize this objective at all cost.

All in all, one of the reasons for the failure does not appear to be the method of defense utilized. The Company Commander did the best he could with what he had and his men inflicted a tremendous amount of casualties on the enemy and received relatively light casualties themselves. The Company Commander used good judgement in insuring that his flanks were secured by battalion and also by causing his men to occupy alternate positions once he realized the primary positions were known to the enemy gunners.

CONCLUSION

The reader has been shown how an extended position can be successfully defended by employing companies physically occupying more than their normal frontage through the utilization of the small strongpoint method.

In view of the foregoing, it is believed that the following action should be taken:

- a. The present doctrine of having a frontline company occupy its normal frontage in an extended position defense should be made more elastic by the addition of the words "if possible".
- b. Infantry School students should be taught the small strongpoint method of defense, thus giving them an additional solution to consider when confronted with the problem of organizing an extended position defense.

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