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RECONNAISSANCE ACTION IN MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN

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PREFACE

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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.



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INTRODUCTION

The great generals of Military History have noted that mountains are the most formidable of barriers along with rivers and deserts. Although this is generally accepted it is also true that a great portion of the earth's surface is covered by mountainous and in today's global warfare we must expect to fight over this terrain.

Our doctrine with regards to offensive operations in this type terrain states that "Attacks in mountainous areas are characterized by highly centralized planning and de-centralization of operations to semi-independent groupings" (:176). This places a greater amount of responsibility upon the smaller unit commander and demands that he make all possible use of the terrain in his area of operations.

Mountain operations are most characterized by small unit actions in which these units are fighting for the dominating terrain in their areas. The plans of maneuver are to a great degree dictated by the terrain itself and therefore the commander of these units must make use of all possible means by which he may familiarize himself with the terrain over which he must fight his unit.

The purpose of this paper is to stress the importance of timely, accurate and complete ground reconnaissance prior to and during small unit (Battalion, Company and Platoon) offensive actions in mountainous terrain. Particular emphasis is placed on ground reconnaissance by small patrols with regard to the selection of the best possible routes forward to the enemy position and the use of these reconnaissance elements to act as guides for the leading Infantry units.

Due to the numerous irregularities of the ground itself in mountainous terrain, even the best at ground observation will not insure the commander that he has selected the best routes of advance. And even though "reconn-

aissance aviation will be the principal means of obtaining information of terrain, hostile dispositions, etc." (ANNEX A) There will be many times, when due to a lack of visibility, weather conditions or enemy actions, the use of aircraft will not be possible.

Therefore it is of utmost importance that all small unit leaders understand the necessity of a physical ground reconnaissance (if at all possible) of the terrain over which their units are to move during the offensive action.

DISCUSSION

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "A", 350TH INFANTRY, 88TH INF DIVISION, IN SECURING THE MONTERUMICI RIDGE, NORTH WEST OF ANCONELLA, ITALY, 17 APRIL 1945.

The operations of Company "A" in securing the MONTERUMICI RIDGE was a small action in itself but played an important part in breaking the German mountain defenses guarding Highway 65, "The Gate way to the PO VALLEY" in the spring offensive of the U.S. FIFTH ARMY. (4 :3)

Company "A" was ordered to secure the areas of DI SOTTA and LA TORRE as part of a 1st Battalion attack to secure the MONTERUMICI RIDGE. Prior to this time the 3rd Battalion had attempted to seize the LA TORRE - DI SOTTA - DI SOPRA or left portion of the RIDGE while the 2nd Battalion was to seize the right portion. (See Annex B) Both attempts failed with Company "K" being almost completely destroyed in the DI SOTTA - LA TORRE area. These initial actions took place on 15 - 16 April 1945. (4 :5-10)

The company commander of Company "A" had excellent information of the terrain and some enemy gun positions obtained from personal observation of the battle on 16 April and from wounded who returned from the 3rd Battalion's attack. (4 :10) The plan of attack was to move out at 2345 hours 16 April from LA PIANA in a column of platoons in order, 2nd, 3rd, 1st, Company Hqs and Weapons Platoon and make a dawn attack. Sufficient time was allowed for reconnaissance prior to the attack. The route of initial advance was along the trail from LA PIANA to DI SOTTA. (See Annex C) "By 0300 hours 17 April the company had reached a point about 500 yards east of LA TORRE." (4 :11)

At this point the company commander sent out a reconnaissance patrol consisting of three men of Indian-Mexican decent who had proven their

ability to move over difficult terrain at night and give complete and accurate reports. The patrols mission was to reconnoitre for an off-trail route to DI SOTTA. Within half an hour they returned reporting a difficult but passable route along the bluff to DI SOTTA. With one of the patrol leading, the company moved out. (See Annex D.)

By 0500 hours the company had reached a position directly east of DI SOTTA, after having taken one and one-half hours to move less than 500 yards.

From this position the Company Commander found the distance to DI SOTTA to be about 250 yards with an upward incline of about 30 degrees. As all of this area would be covered by grazing machine gun fire it was considered unfeasible and another assault position sought for. The area directly to the left of DI SOTTA, although as steep as the one facing them, was only a distance of about 50 yards from the bluff to the village. Even though no route seemed possible along the face of the bluff to this position, a reconnaissance element consisting of the 3rd Platoon Leader and two men were dispatched. They returned shortly with the information that a very small rock ledge existed in the area of the proposed assault position and that only about 30 men could be accommodated.

The Company Commander decided to have the 3rd Platoon, whose leader had made the reconnaissance, move out to assault from the left while the remainder of the company would support the assault by fire from the present positions. After approximately one hour the 3rd Platoon reached the assault position and under machine gun, tank, and mortar fires assaulted and seized DI SOTTA which turned out to be the key enemy position. By the close of the day the entire MONTERUMICI RIDGE fell.

It is clear that although the Company Commander and Platoon Leaders had excellent ground observation of the DI SOTTA = LA TORRE area from LA PIANA during the actions of the 16th, this did not give them sufficient

knowledge of the terrain they must cross in the attack. The use of skilled personnel in making a physical ground reconnaissance immediately prior to the assault and leading the units over the selected routes was the key to Company "A"'s success. Indeed, if the Company Commander had assaulted from the first position without sending someone to reconnoitre the seemingly impossible route to the left of DI SOTTA, it is likely that the assault would have failed.

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "B", 338TH INFANTRY, 85TH INF DIVISION, IN MOVEMENT TO ATTACK MONTE ALTUZZO, GOTHIC LINE, ITALY, 13-14 SEPTEMBER 1944.

The attack of the 1st Battalion, 338th Infantry against the German positions on MT. ALTUZZO had begun initially as a formation of a column of companies with Company "A" leading, followed by Companies "B" and "C". The lack of definite information of the enemy caused the Battalion Commander to adopt this formation. On 13 September 1944 Company "A" was stopped by enemy positions on Hill 782 and the Battalion Commander laid out his plan for a coordinated two company attack to begin at dawn 14 September. (3: 112-133) This plan called for Company "B" to leave its forward assembly area in the vicinity of the 1st Battalion CP and move under cover of darkness to join Company "A" prior to dawn. At dawn a coordinated attack would move out, Company "A" on the west slope of the ridge leading to MT ALTUZZO and Company "B" on the east or right slope. (3: 133-134) (See ANNEX E)

Now let us turn to the actions of Company "B" after they were given the plan for the attack of the 14th on the afternoon of the 13th. After receiving the plan the Company Commander sent out a reconnaissance patrol with the mission of locating a suitable route of advance to the

This patrol consisted of a squad leader and four men from the platoon selected to lead the movement forward. The patrol only went forward to the near side of the ROCCO CREEK draw. At this point the patrol leader noted a little irrigation ditch leading toward the draw. "By use of this route, Sgt. Brown (the patrol leader) concluded, Company "B" could gain shelter of the creek bed and once there would be at the edge of the lower slopes of MT ALTUZZO". (3: 140) After receiving this report, the Company Commander was so sure that there would be no difficulty in locating the attack position that he saw no need in asking for guides from Company "A". So sure, that when asked how he knew he could locate them, he replied, " Oh, I'm an old hunter- I can't miss". (3: 140)

In addition to the reconnaissance patrol being dispatched, the Company Commander took all commissioned and non-commissioned officers to the top of a hill above the battalion CP and pointed out MT ALTUZZO and the ridge which led to it.

At 2130 hours 13 September Company "B" crossed its initial point at the battalion CP in a single column and moved to join Company "A". About 2230 hours, Company "A" lost contact with other units due to radio failure and the fact that no wire was in at this time. Communication was not renewed until 1430 hours 14 September.

The movement of Company "B" forward during darkness was over rough terrain unfamiliar to anyone in the company and without any guides. As Company "B" reached a location about 200 yards southwest of Hill 624 Battalion was notified of their location. Shortly after this, continuing along a trail in the direction of Hill 782, the Company Commander became unsure of his location as while in a low area he noted that he could now see two equally prominent ridges, one to his

left and one to his right. Unable to locate or contact Company "A", he requested smoke rounds on the peak of MT ALTUZZO. These rounds were fired but could not be located.

As dawn was approaching the Company Commander made the decision that the peak to the left was MT ALTUZZO moved the company forward accordingly. The remainder of this action is of no great importance except it suffices to state that Company "B" continued the attack at dawn up the Western Ridge alone. It was not until after 1500 hours 14 September, that the true location of Company "B" was established. By the end of the day Company "B" had suffered over fifty percent casualties and had to be withdrawn from action.

The failure of Company "B" to join Company "A" in a coordinated attack is a failure of the commander to make use of the proper ground reconnaissance to be assured of correct routes to the attack position. If the patrol sent out on the afternoon of the 13th had been instructed to locate Company "A" and select routes forward this would not have happened. Also if the Company Commander had asked for guides from Company "A" he could have been sure of reaching his attack position. The use of only one reconnaissance patrol which did not even move over the ground to conduct observation from a distant vantage point of the objective area were clearly NOT enough.

CONCLUSIONS

All means available must be utilized by the commander to familiarize himself and his subordinates with the terrain to be crossed in an offensive operation. This is especially true in mountainous terrain as observation is greatly limited. The combat examples discussed specifically show the necessity for a physical ground reconnaissance prior to and even during movement forward in mountainous terrain and the use of these elements as guides for leading units.

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ANNEX A - Quote from Advance Sheet 2274-A3

"Infantry Battalion in Mountain Operations"

Section II para 8

RECONNAISSANCE IN MOUNTAINS

Mountainous regions are seldom as fully or as accurately mapped as flatter terrain. Numerous important irregularities of the ground often are not shown on maps because the contour interval is usually larger. A study of maps of mountain areas seldom will give a completely true appreciation of the ground. This appreciation can be gained only by a study of the ground itself through detailed reconnaissance supplemented by a study of aerial photographs.

Reconnaissance in mountain operations is facilitated by the restriction of enemy movements to the available road nets and defiles. However, active patrolling is hazardous and fatiguing to our own troops. Dismounted patrols will bring in much information of the enemy and the terrain, but they will be handicapped by rugged terrain, sudden and violent changes in the weather, and the possibility of ambush. Patrols should be equipped with radio, a means of visual signaling, and night vision devices. Local guides, if trustworthy, can be of great assistance.

Aggressive reconnaissance executed by specially trained patrols operating in difficult areas which are weakly guarded will generally produce results high in proportion to the effort expended. The capabilities for reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance by small elements operating with boldness should not be overlooked.

Good ground observation is especially important in mountain operations. Some observation posts offer distant views and afford opportunity for extended lateral observation. However, observation posts should be echeloned in altitude as well as in depth and width. Since even excellent obser-

vation may fail to disclose critical obstacles, a physical reconnaissance of prospective routes should be made prior to initiating a movement.

Reconnaissance aviation will be the principal means of obtaining information of the terrain, hostile dispositions, installations, and troop movements in the rear areas. Infantry commanders should use their organic fixed and rotary wing aircraft for surveillance of enemy forward areas.