

Staff Department
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

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

TITLE
Infantry in Defense on a Wide Front

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Roster Nr. 7

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PREFACE

6 February 1956

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

Shortly after the landings at Anzio and during the "Bulge", American forces were to assume the defense against some of the most vicious German counteroffensives of World War II. In both theaters, these attacks were launched against lightly held portions of the American lines, confronting units with one of the more difficult defenses: that of an extended front. To the commanders of these units, this presented a problem with which many were not totally prepared to cope.

A study of a few of these operations will verify that the fundamentals of defense as now taught are still valid; however, modifications must be made. (2) These modifications are not the introduction of any new techniques but the subordination of one fundamental to another. In other words, all can not be applied; some must be sacrificed for others.

A degree of importance must necessarily be attached to each fundamental. The one that becomes most important is that of organization of critical terrain. If in a particular sector there is more critical terrain than can effectively be defended, the most critical must be occupied. The unit commander must be decisive in selecting this terrain in order to avoid dwindling away his strength. (This brings up a question which is not within the scope of this paper. At what level can these decisions be made?

The fundamental which must be sacrificed for this all important organization of critical terrain is mutual support. One of the most frequent errors committed by unit commanders will be that of attempting to gain mutual support by spreading their troops out thinly along the MLR. This attempt to defend the sector by occupying the entire

front is detrimental to the defense of the critical terrain.

In the losing of this mutual support, compensations can be made by applying a greater degree of flexibility in the defense on a wide front. This can be effected in several ways. The first will be that of preparing a larger number of supplementary positions. A second method is that of aggressive patrolling, particularly between units.

The last fundamental to be discussed is that of the depth in such a defense. This will be greatly dependent on the extent of organization of critical terrain and the degree of flexibility which can be attained. This depth is particularly important since, on an extended front, the flanks are exceptionally vulnerable.

The discussion to follow will be confined to actions which occurred in Europe during World War II. Consequently the lessons pointed out will be applicable mostly to what might be considered average terrain.

DISCUSSION

On 16 February 1944 Company "I", 179th Infantry, was given the mission of defending a front of thirteen hundred yards in the vicinity of Aprilia, Italy (Map A). In this sector a large German force was preparing to counterattack in order to thwart the initiative of the Americans at Anzio.

Company "I"'s front was very flat and open, being a part of the Pontine Marshes. The critical terrain in this area was a group of buildings called the "factory", five hundred yards to Company "I"'s left front. It offered good cover and concealment to the Germans, and also good firing positions for their infantry and tanks. Two hundred yards from the "factory" Company "G", 179th Infantry was located. Observation over the entire front was very good from any position within the center of Company "I"'s area. To defend the wide front, the company commander placed three platoons abreast along the MLR with very little interval between them, even though good fields of fire would have made possible excellent mutual support. The platoons were echeloned slightly to the right rear, which dangerously exposed the company's left flank to any fire that might come from enemy located in the buildings.

On the afternoon of the 16th, Company "I" was subjected to the fire of tanks from the factory. The Germans began to exert pressure along the whole front. They overran Company "G"'s right platoon, leaving the left flank of Company "I" entirely open. They then assaulted this flank by forming an skirmish line. To repel the attack, Company "I"'s commander had his center platoon adjust its position to block the oncoming force. Before the attack was finally

contained, the entire left platoon had been routed. A few infiltrators succeeded in getting within the CP; however, they were very promptly dealt with by the personal actions of the company commander and first sergeant. Under cover of nightfall the company reorganized on a line one hundred yards to the rear of the MLR with a total of five officers and seventy-five enlisted men remaining from the original eight officers and one-hundred and sixty-five enlisted men.

(3)

Although the front assigned Company "I" was not particularly wide, the positioning of the three platoons on line resulted in riflemen being separated too far apart, consequently, lowering their morale to the point that they did not give the company commander the attempted assistance, but cowered in their holes from fear of tanks returning fire. If the company had had a reserve platoon to the rear of the MLR, very possibly the rout of the left platoon would have been prevented by this support. Such a reserve platoon could also have protected the CP from infiltrators. The violation of the fundamental of depth almost proved disastrous.

On 12 September 1944, the 2nd Battalion, 143rd Infantry was given the mission of defending a sector about three thousand yards in the vicinity of Persano, Italy (Map B). The MLR was to extend from the Sele River on the north (left) to the Calore River on the south (right). This sector covered a gap between the 45th Division on the north and the 3rd Battalion, 143rd Infantry on the south. The battalion commander was ordered to hold the position at all costs. On occupying it, he sent out patrols to the flanks to locate the adjacent units. Reports of these patrols indicated that the flanks of the battalion were completely open; the nearest element of the 45th Division was located three kilometers to the battalion's left rear. The nearest flank of the 3rd Battalion was in Altavilla, about two and one-half kilometers to the south. The terrain was favorable to the use of tanks and German armor had been thought to be in Eboli, located six kilometers to

the north. To defend the sector, the battalion commander's plan, as evidenced by the overlay sent to the regimental commander, was to place Company "G" on the COPL and to hold the MLR with Company "F" on the north (left) and Company "E" on the south (right). Unfortunately the actual disposition of the battalion differed from the plan. Company "E" was spread out along a north-south line, occupying a front of about thirteen hundred yards and apparently covering the entire battalion's front. Company "F" was deployed with three platoons abreast along a road perpendicular to the MLR and leading into the town of Persano. Its right flank was in rear of Company "E". Company "G" was occupying the COPL as planned.

At 1600 Company "G" was forced to withdraw the COPL by German tank-infantry team moving on the Gennuta di Persano Road. This team continued in the direction of Persano and brought fire to bear on the MLR. A second tank-infantry team hit the right flank of Company "E" and moved down the MLR forcing riflemen one at a time to surrender or flee. A third enemy team attacked the left flank of Company "F" and rolled it up in the same manner. Within a short time, all of the battalion's positions were overrun. During the entire action there was no evidence of any firing of rocket launchers or anti-tank rifle grenades except on the COPL. (1)

Probably the largest cause of defeat was not the organization of the battle position but the failure to fire anti-tank weapons. Concerning this action, Major General Walker later stated, "Had I been in there with a few anti-tank rifle grenades and "bazookas", I think it would have been a picnic knocking off those tanks moving as they were in the grass fields and roads at such close range". (1) In analysing the organization of the battle position, it should be indicated that it was not sound to deploy Company "E" on such a wide front with three platoons abreast. Large distances between men caused by this could well have been the reason that the men refused to fire on the tanks and subsequently surrendered so easily. Neither the

battalion nor the companies had any effective reserve. With depth of reserves, the units would have had better protection against the flanking attacks of the Germans. The battalion's strength was greatly reduced by the placing of an entire company on the COPL. The COPL in addition was too near the MLR; this offered very little warning of the impending attack. In placing only a small portion of Company "G" on the COPL, the battalion commander would have been able to constitute an effective reserve with the company minus and cope with the attack from Persano. Three violations of the fundamentals of defense should be pointed out here:

(1) The lack of depth of the units; (2) The inflexibility to contain the flank attacks; and (3) the spreading out of the platoons in disregard of organizing any critical terrain.

On 10 December 1944 the 1st Battalion, 110th Infantry was assigned a sector of about ten miles wide in vicinity of Hinercheid, Luxembourg (Map C) to defend and hold at all costs. The MLR was along the main road running north and south through the towns of Hinercheid, Fischback, and Manbourg. The Intelligence Report received by the Battalion S2 indicated that the enemy's capabilities were (1) to defend in present positions or (2) to make small scale raids across the Our River. The main road leading into the area from the east was running through Dasburg and Manburg. Wooded areas offered considerable obstacles to tanks. The battalion commander planned to defend the sector by placing strong points in all villages along the MLR. Company "A" was assigned the north (left) portion of the MLR to include the villages of Fischback, Hinercheid, and Kalborn. Company "B" was assigned the south (right) portion of the MLR to include Roder, Marnach, and Manburg. Company "C" was placed in reserve in vicinity of Reuler.

On the morning of 16 December the Germans attacked along the entire front with infantry supported by tanks. Company "A" was surrounded early during this action; Company "B"'s position in Marnack was pen-

etrated; Company "C" was committed very shortly with one tank platoon in support to eject the enemy within Marnack. Company "C"'s initial counterattack from the southwest proved unsuccessful with the company sustaining heavy casualties. However they succeeded in clearing the town in a second counterattack, this time from the west. They then were ordered to consolidate with Company "B".

On 17 December the Germans regained the initiative and continued their pressure along the front. They overran the P & A Platoon, which was reconstituted as reserve, defending the Battalion CP. On 18 December the defense collapsed with the capture of all the villages along the MLR by the Germans. (5)

Considering the original Intelligence Report, which gave indications of only small scale raids, the battalion commander's plan of defense seemed adequate. However, in light of what actually did occur, a strong enemy attack, the organization of the MLR with seven strong-points proved ineffective. The companies initially put up strong resistance against the attacking force even though they had lost contact with the Battalion CP. It is then conceivable that, if the battalion had organized fewer positions or occupied a smaller front, the defense may have been successful. However, as the battalion's strength was dissipated over such a wide front, the most determined effort of the defenders could not have held it for very long. The role of Company "C" as a counterattacking force was effective only in reinforcing Company "B". Except for the P & A Platoon there was no appreciable depth to the battalion. (The fundamental of organizing the critical terrain was violated here in ^{not} having ~~not~~ enough strength in any one place to hold against a determined foe.) The enemy isolated the companies very readily.

On 21 January 1945 Company "K", 222nd Infantry was given the mission of defending a front of twenty-two hundred yards along the Moder River in vicinity of Neuborg, France (Map D). The initiative had been arrested from the American forces by the Germans and they were

preparing to put into execution their "Operation Nordwind".

Company "K" had a strength of five officers and one-hundred and twenty enlisted men; their equipment was in good condition; and their morale was relatively high, considering that a large portion of the company was made up of newly assigned replacements. Attached to Company "K" was a machine gun platoon from Company "M". The west (left) boundary of Company "K" included the bridge in the vicinity of Mill d' Neuburg, the east (right) boundary included the bridge in the vicinity of Mill d' Uhrbruck. Company "I" was on the left and an understrength Company "E", 222nd Infantry on the east (right). The MLR traced generally along the forward edge of the woods of Le Herren Wald and Bois d' Uhlwiller. In front of the left portion of the company, the cultivated ground astride the Moder River gave good observation and fields of fire to about two thousand yards to the north. Forward of the right portion of the company the cultivated area narrowed, offering only about two-hundred yards of observation and fields of fire.

To defend this sector, the company commander placed three platoons on the MLR. The first platoon with a thirty-two man strength was positioned on the left, occupying a front of seven-hundred yards. The third platoon with a strength of eighteen men was located in the center, occupying a front of six-hundred yards. The second platoon with a strength of thirty men was placed on the right. The machine gun platoon from Company "M" was attached to the center platoon with sections on each of its flanks, their FPL's covering a large portion of the company's front. A pair of organic light machine guns was placed on the right, exchanging fires with Company "E". A second pair was located in the vicinity of Neuburg, trading fires with Company "I". In an attempt to occupy the entire front, as wide as it was, the riflemen were positioned on the MLR in two-man foxholes with distances of over fifty yards between adjacent holes. During the night of 24 January, the Germans launched a series of uncoordinated assaults against

Company "K". The initial one which was in the east against the right platoon was repulsed. However, a later attack against the second platoon from the right flank (Company "E"'s position had been penetrated) succeeded in capturing their area. About half of the second platoon had fled to the rear. The penetration was finally contained by the center platoon. On the left flank, the Germans made several attacks towards Neuburg, but got no farther than the outlying buildings near the Moder River. On 26 January a counterattack by the battalion reserve restored Company "K" entire MLR. (4)

Again, it has been indicated what can easily happen when riflemen are spread out thinly in a futile attempt to occupy a wide front. A penetration is made easy and an opportunity to roll up the flanks is given. The critical areas were Neuburg on the west and Mill d'Uhrbruck on the east. With a strengthening of these two at the expense of the MLR, both might have been held. The inflexibility of three platoons abreast was demonstrated by the rout of the right platoon.

CONCLUSION

1. In the defense on an extended front, the fundamentals of defense on normal front are applicable with some modifications.

~~2.~~ The organization of critical terrain on an extended front is the most important fundamental to be applied.

~~3.~~ Mutual support will have to be sacrificed for the fundamental of organization of critical terrain.

~~4.~~ A greater degree of flexibility is necessary.

5. Defense in depth must be attained in order to protect the unit since the flanks are particularly vulnerable in the defense on a wide front.

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4. Woelfer, Carlisle P., Capt, Inf, "Operations of Company K, 222nd Infantry, in the Alsace-Ardenes Campaign," Military Monograph, Advanced Infantry Officers Class Nr. 2, 1947-1948, The Infantry School Library, Fort Benning, Georgia.
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