

THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
GENERAL SECTION
MILITARY HISTORY COMMITTEE
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

ADVANCED OFFICERS COURSE
1946-1947

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BATTALION, 349TH INFANTRY
(88TH INF. DIV.) IN THE BREAKTHROUGH AND PURSUIT TO
THE PO RIVER, 15-24 APRIL 1945
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the 2nd Battalion, 349th Infantry (88th Infantry Division) in the attack of the German line at Furcoli-Monterumici, Italy, 16-18 April 1945, the break through and the pursuit of the enemy to the Po River which was reached on 24 April 1945.

To orient the reader properly I would like to return to the month of January 1945 and give a short resume of the events that led to the final and decisive action of the battalion that marked the turning point of the Italian campaign.

During the latter part of January 45, the battalion was in a position just east of Highway 65 near the town of Liverngino (See Map A). The personnel of the battalion at this time consisted of about fifty per cent replacements most of whom had seen no offensive combat, having reached the division too late to join in the action of the fall and winter 1944, in which during a 52-day period the division had suffered some 9000 casualties. The rest of the command were veterans many of whom had nearly a year of combat to their credit and who had returned to the battalion during the quiet months of December 44 and January 45. Since the stop of the drive in 44 the only offensive action of the battalion had been in patrols, but this had been nearly a nightly affair and in the opinion of this writer that is one of the most difficult types of action to engage in over a long period of time. Due to the condition of the troops the decision was made to pull the division from the line for a short rest period, to be followed by a very intensive training period, which was to stress small unit training over the type of terrain that the spring push would bring; this was done during the month of March 1945.

At the close of the training period, 1 April 45, all units were ordered to black out, (Note: This consisted of removing the insignia from all clothing and equipment and of covering the bumper markings of all vehicles with a heavy coat of grease) and prepare to move back into the lines.

On 2 April 1945 the 2nd Battalion was attached to the 91st Infantry Division and moved into positions near BELLE FORMICHE (See Map A), the remainder of the regiment being in reserve attached to the 34th Infantry Division. (1)

The above mentioned move was purely a screening action to assist in deceiving the enemy. During this period all of the Company Commanders of the regiment had an opportunity to make an aerial reconnaissance of the terrain behind the enemy lines over which the attack was to be launched, and on 12 April the regiment was consolidated and moved into an assembly area near MONZUNO (See Map B).

Field Order No. 1, Headquarters, 349th Infantry, dated 11 April 1945, gave the plan of attack. The II Corps was to attack with 4 Divisions on line. The 34th Infantry Division on the right was to capture BOLOGNA, and the 91st Infantry Division on the center right was to capture MT. ADONE. On the left the 6th South African Division was to seize MT. SCOLE, on the center left was the 88th Infantry Division who was attacking with two regiments abreast, and on the right the 350th Infantry was to capture the key terrain feature of MONTEROMICI. For the 34⁹th Infantry a sector was indicated that was bounded on the right by MONTEROMICI and on the left by Highway 6620 (See Map ^cβ). The plan called for the 3rd Battalion to launch a company strength raid in feint toward the town of VAOO, while the 1st Battalion with F Company attached was to attack the town of FURCOLI, the high ridge immediately to the north, and the high ground to the west. After the leading companies had seized their initial objectives, F Company was to pass through, take the town of IL POGGAILE, continue the attack to the North and capture the railroad town of NUZZANO. The 2nd Battalion initially in reserve, was to be used to exploit

(1) A-1, p. 1.

any penetration of the enemy lines. The regiment was to continue the attack to the north, and was to be pinched out some 4000 yards to the north. (2) (3)

ENEMY SITUATION

The G-2 reports had shown that there were still 25 German Divisions in Italy; while they were spread over a large front, the reserves were so disposed that they could quickly be moved to meet any major attack. Immediately in front of the 349th Infantry was the crack German 305th Infantry Division, one of the best that the enemy had on this front. They were old foes of the regiment and had proven many times how tough they were to oust from prepared positions. On these positions it was known that the enemy were living in heavily reinforced caves and dugouts that afforded almost complete protection from artillery and mortar fire. Due to many patrols, air reconnaissance, etc., the enemy main line of resistance was known to be an almost impregnable barrier of mortar and machine gun fire; all possible approaches were mined, and the terrain favored a very strong enemy defense. (4)

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

Immediately to the right of the division sector lay the spire-shaped peak of MT. ADONE, which was to be taken by the 91st Infantry Division. To the left lay MT. SCOLE, to be taken by the 6th South African Division. Within the division sector lay the FURCOLI and MONTERUMICI features, the key point of the German defenses. The terrain was well known^r to all units of the division, for during the winter the regiments had been so rotated that all of them had been in this sector.

THE 349TH INFANTRY LAUNCHES THE ATTACK

On the night of 13 April, the regiment moved from their assembly position to an area in rear of the line of departure, relieving elements of the 168th Infantry, 34th Infantry Division. The 1st and 2nd Battalions,

(2, 3) A-1, p. 2; (4) A-1, p. 4.

less D, F and H Companies, occupied the town of CADI GUILLETTA. D and H Companies were in positions from which they would support the attack. F Company had occupied a front line position and would remain there until such time as they were called upon by the 1st Battalion. The 3rd Battalion was in an assembly area just west of the town. (See Map B for all areas).

It had been the practice for many nights for the artillery to lay down terrific barrages at different times during the night, in an effort to confuse the enemy as to where and when the actual attack was coming.

At 2200 hours, 15 April, the front erupted with a flaming roar. Artillery, tanks, tank destroyers and all available weapons poured thousands upon thousands of shells into the enemy positions. (5) Even the .50 caliber machine guns had been brought up, emplaced and manned by kitchen personnel and were used in this barrage.

Later PWs who were taken, some of whom were veterans of the African Campaign, reported that the barrage was one of the most intense that they had ever been under; but due to the fact that one of the 1st Battalion Companies moving to a forward assembly area prior to the barrage had been seen when they crossed an exposed area, the enemy correctly interpreted that an attack was about to begin, and even as the first shells fell, they were in the shelter of their caves and foxholes. (6)

At 2230 hours the Infantry crossed the line of departure. While the 3rd Battalion launched a company strength attack in a feint to the left, the 1st Battalion attacked their objectives. Alert and virtually unharmed by the barrage which had not penetrated their deep caves, the KRAUTS had immediately reoccupied their defensive positions and opened up with machine guns and mortars, covering it all with a blanket of flares that made the terrain as light as day.

All of the companies of the 1st Battalion fought terrific battles during the night and day of the 15 and 16 April, but failed to gain their

(5) A-1, p. 3; (6) Statement from Regimental S-2, May 1945.

objectives. During the day on 16 April, the reserve company was committed and managed to gain the objective of Company B, but were so weakened by casualties with both flanks exposed to murderous fire that they were unable to hold their position against the inevitable counter attack that came. They were ordered to pull back to the east side of the hill during the night. (7)

THE 2ND BATTALION ENTERS THE ACTION

The first action of any 2nd Battalion personnel in this attack was in the initial attack wave. To later assist them in moving thru anti-personnel mine fields that were breached or gapped by the 1st Battalion, F Company had attached a taping team, (Note: men to lay white engineer tape), consisting of 3 men from their communication section, to B Company. In the first mortar barrage that the enemy laid down, these men were seriously injured and had to be evacuated.

Field Order No. 2, dated (2) April 1945, returned F Company to the 2nd Battalion and ordered the battalion to pass through elements of the 1st Battalion, with the mission of seizing IL POGGALLE and LE BRAINE. (See Map B). At 2200 hours the 2nd Battalion jumped off. (8)

Company F was chosen to lead the attack and was given the mission of taking LE BRAINE and capturing or destroying all the enemy on this position. They were to proceed to FURCOLI and from there were to follow an old oxcart trail that led to the objective. F Company moved off in a column of platoons with the 1st platoon leading, followed by the 3rd and 2nd in that order, with the 4th platoon still in their original positions supporting the attack. The company moved into the town of FURCOLI and around the eastern edge without opposition and progressed some 200 yards beyond the town.

When the column halted, the company commander, moving forward, found that the leading platoon was at a trail junction that did not show on the map, and the platoon leader was undecided as to which was the correct trail.

(7) A-1, p. 5; (8) A-1, p. 6.

The company commander moved out in front of the column some 100-150 yards and determined that the right trail was the one that was wanted. During this reconnaissance the company commander was unhampered by the enemy which, in the light of what followed, was most unusual. The company moved down the right trail and had advanced approximately 100 yards when a red flare followed by a green arched overhead. Immediately enemy machine guns to the front and flanks opened up, and almost before the flares had burned out the whole column was under a heavy mortar barrage. The first burst of enemy fire had killed the lead scout and a man from the leading squad. The 1st platoon deployed along both sides of the trail and attempted to move forward, but forward movement was impossible. In this action the platoon suffered several casualties, among whom was the platoon leader. Turning the 1st platoon over to the executive officer to try and continue the attack, the company commander, after calling for mortar fire, led the other two platoons in a flanking movement to the left. Following the route that he had been over in his earlier reconnaissance, the attack moved off and progressed approximately 100 yards, when again the red and green flares came up, and again the murderous barrage came down on the company causing heavy casualties. The enemy position seemed to be all around and the flanking fire could not be avoided. These platoons along with the 1st platoon on the right made three more coordinated attacks against these positions, but were unable to dislodge the enemy.

√ To effect a reorganization the company withdrew to the eastern edge of FURCOLI. After the reorganization was completed, the company commander took a reinforced platoon and scaled a small cliff in the rear of the battered town, crawling approximately 100 yards. The platoon was able to surprise some enemy machine gunners and took their position without firing a round. Leaving men at this position the platoon turned to the right and secured the ridge taking two more positions, having opposition only on the last one. (9)

(9) Eyewitness, Self.

As F Company was reorganizing, G Company was preparing to launch an attack against IL POGGIALE, which if gained would give the battalion a position from which fire could be delivered into the rear of the German-held Hill. (10)

Led by the platoon leader, the lead platoon advanced slowly working their way through interlocking bands of machine gun fire, while all the time the red and green flares were overhead calling down the ever present mortar fire. When the company commander with the main body of the company attempted to advance, the enemy fire reached its peak and it was virtually a hail of steel raining down on the unprotected troops. After suffering heavy casualties the company commander ordered the main body of the troop to withdraw, while he moved forward to reorganize the 1st platoon. (11)

Leading the platoon in an assault that virtually powered its way over and through the positions, the platoon reached its objective and seized the house at IL POGGIALE, taking prisoner four German aid men who were using the house for an aid station. (12) Though this attack was successful and made the first penetration of the enemy lines, the force soon found that they were completely surrounded by the enemy. They had made the penetration, but an alert enemy had immediately closed the gap behind them. The company commander, realizing the precariousness of his position and unable to reach any one in the company radio net, dispatched a runner, who was successful in reaching the F Company CP just prior to daybreak. After giving the oral message he was delivering, he also reported that G Company had several seriously wounded men, and that along the route that they had followed in reaching the objective were a number of men in need of medical attention.

The F Company Commander, after reporting the above mentioned message to the Battalion Commander, requested mortar fire for the trapped troops. This request was granted, and that night and the following day the battalion mortars poured hundreds of rounds of mortar into this area on known enemy positions in an attempt to relieve the pressure on the surrounded men.

(10, 11) A-1, p. 7; (12) A-1, p. 7.

Shortly after daybreak F Company dispatched two wire men with assault wire to try and establish communication with the men at IL POGGAILE. The men were able to get approximately 200 yards, when sniper fire wounded one of the men and forced them to withdraw.

In an attempt to reach the wounded men the Battalion Medical Administrative Officer with two aid men and two litter teams volunteered to go into the enemy position. With a cessation of our own mortar and artillery fire and protected only by a large white flag with a red cross, prominently displayed, they moved toward the entrapped men. The enemy observed the sign of the Geneva Convention and did not fire on this party. However, as soon as they entered the enemy lines they were taken prisoner and immediately taken to the enemy company headquarters. At once Lt. Mazur (the battalion MAC) tried to convince the enemy company commander that they should be released and allowed to care for our wounded. After much discussion it was agreed that they could return to their own lines with what wounded men they could take with them, if the German aid men held by Captain Kelly (G Company Commander) were also released. Lt. Mazur, under guard, was taken to IL POGGAILE to confer with Captain Kelly on this arrangement. When first told of this, Captain Kelly, knowing the working of the German mind, was reluctant to agree, but knowing how much our own men needed medical attention and being more anxious to help them than for his own safety, he agreed to the exchange. His hopes had been that he could hold out until darkness fell and then effect a withdrawal. We shall see what the Germans had in mind when they were so anxious to get their own men, and why Captain Kelly hesitated to agree. (13)

Through the day the men from G Company had poured fire into the reverse slope of Hill 427 and FURCOLI ridge. Vulnerable to fire from their rear many of the Krauts were forced to withdraw and more than twenty of them were killed while frantically seeking new cover. The enemy had poured continuous machine gun and mortar fire into the house at IL POGGAILE, but had refrained

(13) Statements to Self by Lt. Mazur and G Co. men recaptured, April 1945.

from mortaring the house because of their own aid men in the roofless building. At noon the enemy counter attacked, firing into windows and doors. They surrounded the building, calling upon the Americans to surrender. Captain Kelly refused, urging the men to beat the enemy off. Hurling their last grenades, the men forced the enemy to withdraw leaving fifteen dead and many wounded around the house. It was at this point that Captain Kelly made the decision to withdraw under the cover of darkness. It was only a few hours later that the exchange of prisoners was made, and it was a very short time later that the enemy mortared the position. The house was roofless, and from three sides mortar shells were lobbed into the structure. A number of the men were wounded and several were killed, but still they failed to surrender. Just prior to dark, a shell landed in the room where Captain Kelly was standing, mortally wounding him. Later in the night, out of ammunition and with only a handful of men left, the platoon leader surrendered to the enemy. (14)

During the latter part of the night, 16 April, E Company had launched an attack against IL POGGAILE, but the attack was not successful, and by the time the company had reorganized, daylight was at hand and an attack of company strength was out of the question.

During the day of 17 April, F Company had called for an air strike on the enemy positions directly to their front, but due to the direction that the planes would have had to make their run and the close proximity of the friendly troops to the enemy position, the mission could not be carried out. (15)

From positions secured the night before, F Company was able to bring automatic rifle on the rear of some of the enemy positions and succeeded in silencing two of them. (16)

Field Order No. 3, dated 17 April, ordered the 2nd Battalion to continue the attack, secure Hills 375 and 403 (See Map B), while the 3rd Battalion was to clear VADO and the NUZZANO ridge. For forty-eight hours the gains had been measured only in yards. FURCOLI Ridge was partially occupied by F and B Companies. The only real penetration, if it could be called that, had been made

(14) A-1, p. 8; (15, 16) Eye witness, Self.

by G Company at IL POGGAILE. (17)

The battalion plan for the attack was for F Company to pull out of their positions, swing to the right and traverse an anti-personnel mine field some 400 yards in depth, in an attempt to seize all of FURCOLI Ridge and the nearby town of LE BRAINE. At the same time G Company with a platoon of machine guns attached was to pass through the old F Company position and work along the reverse slope toward MONTERUMICI. Company E, along with K Company was to sweep the NUZZANO Ridge to the high ground beyond.

The mine field that F Company was to attack through covered the road and the approaches to the MONTERUMICI positions. It consisted chiefly of the German Shu mines, with some Stoltz mines in the grass along the road. A path through the mine field had been cleared and marked with white engineer tape for a distance of about 100 yards by Company B, before they were forced to withdraw.

F Company, with a strength of about 75 men, moved out in a single file, with the company commander leading. They progressed rapidly to the end of the tape, but there it became necessary for them to move only a few feet at a time, as each inch of the ground had to be probed before advancing. As day broke, it became apparent that progress in this manner was out of the question, as there were literally hundreds of the Shu mine detonators sticking out of the trail ahead. The decision was made to return to the entrance of the mine field and wing to the right of the trail and see if better progress could be made. This was done, and with all personnel following in the exact footsteps of the leader, good time was made, but even with this method the company suffered seven casualties due to carelessness of the men in where they stepped and to leaving the trail when the column halted. Among the injured in this move was the last rifle platoon leader of the company. All of this movement had been covered by the company mortars, and within thirty minutes the company was through the mine field and deployed along the bluff that faced them.

(17) A-1, p. 9.

A reinforced squad was sent to the left to wipe out some cave positions that covered the approaches. A few minutes later the rest of the company, well deployed, went over the top of the bluff. The squad that went to the left surprised some Krauts that were not alert, and took over forty enemy from these positions. With the pressure thus relieved, it was only a matter of minutes until the company had overrun the rest of the positions and was at last on top of the hill.

Company G succeeded in working along the reverse slope of the ridge and in so doing also captured some forty prisoners.

Shortly after dawn, the 2nd Battalion Battle Patrol (Note: This was a group of men trained especially for difficult jobs, particularly patrols, but used in this operation as an assault force), attacked the Eastern slope of Hill 427. A tank that had come up on the night of 16 April, and the only one that had been able to get through the mine fields until now, was able to give the Battle Patrol close supporting fire in their attack. The patrol had to work through a mine field to reach their objective, but this was done with no casualties, with the tank fire keeping the enemy in their holes. The men worked to within grenade-throwing distance, signaled the tank to cease fire, rushed the position, and forced the enemy out of their holes, killing eight, wounding twelve and taking twenty-seven prisoners in the attack. (18)

F Company, upon their objectives, immediately called their weapons platoon forward. While they were moving up the rest of the company reorganized and the company commander registered some artillery fires to support the attack on the next objective, LE BRAINE. For once the battalion held the commanding ground, and at 0900 hours F Company jumped off. The objective was taken almost without resistance, with only a few rounds of small arms fire being encountered. The company quickly pushed on by the objective, and in searching the enemy caves and positions just beyond, captured twenty-six Krauts and recaptured three lightly wounded men from Company G, who were being held prisoner there.

(18) A-1, p. 10: Statements from Lt. Swell, April 1945.

After withstanding repeated assaults and massed artillery fires for over forty-eight hours the German lines had split wide open. (19)

The battalion commander quick to seize this opportunity, ordered F Company to move for the regimental objective. E Company, who had been sweeping the NUZZANO Ridge was to drive forward and get abreast of F. G Company, badly depleted in strength, was to follow in reserve. The opposition was now completely gone, and by 1200 hours the battalion had reached and secured the regimental objective. Reorganization was completed, with the battalion emplaced to defend against a counter attack.

In searching out the enemy rear areas, it was found that the enemy had prepared positions that were bomb-proof. The railroad that ran through the middle of their sector passed through several mountains, resulting in many tunnels, some of which were several miles in length. Their engineers had constructed alternate baffle walls at each end of the tunnel, each wall being several feet thick, which prevented even a direct fire weapon from penetrating the tunnels. These positions were well lighted, and were used for supply dumps, kitchen areas, aid stations and small hospitals, in which there were a number of enemy wounded.

As called for in the original plans, the regiment was pinched out at this point by the 351st Infantry on the right and the 6th South African Division on the left.

At 1600 hours, 18 April, the battalion was ordered to withdraw to the vicinity of MONZUNO, near their old assembly area. As the first part of the return march was through the heart of the old German battle position, it was easy to see why it had been such a "tough nut" to crack. Every draw, ridge and reverse slope had been covered by well prepared positions, and it was almost impossible for an attacking force to move against it without being exposed to fire from several of the positions.

The battalion had suffered severe casualties in taking these positions.

(19) A-1, p. 11.

Company E had the least with only about fifteen enlisted men being wounded. Companies G and F were both hard hit, G Company losing every officer in the company and approximately fifty enlisted men. F Company had lost about forty enlisted men and all of the officers except the company commander and the weapons platoon leader. In spite of the high casualties, the battalion had inflicted at least a three-to-one loss on the enemy.

Shortly before dark on the evening 18 April, the battalion reached the entrucking point and at once fell out to grab the opportunity of a few hours rest, while the trucks which were to take them to their new area were being brought up.

A BREAK FOR THE ENEMY

I would like to explain here an incident that was a decided break for the enemy. As explained before, the division had been blacked out and moved from sector to sector in an attempt to confuse the enemy intelligence agencies. Some months before when one of the regiments had been in the FURCOLI sector, one of their patrols had engaged an enemy patrol. In the resulting fire fight one of our men had lost a helmet, on which was painted the division insignia. Approximately a week before the division launched the spring attack, an enemy patrol had found the helmet and returned it to their intelligence personnel, who decided they were faced by the 88th Division. Knowing that it was a 5th Army policy to throw this unit into the tougher sectors, they through sheer luck, deduced that this was to be one of the main efforts, and so were able to reinforce their positions at this decisive point. (20)

Several days later two PWs were taken from the G-2 section of the German 65th Infantry Division Headquarters. When questioned separately they revealed a wide and accurate knowledge of the disposition of the American troops prior to the jump-off. Both agreed that it was the break through scored by the 349th Infantry that made it impossible for them to hold MT. ADONE and MONTERRUMICI, thus splitting the carefully prepared positions and causing a large scale withdrawal to be started. (21)

(20) Statement from Regimental S-2 and S-3 to Self in April 1945; (21) A-1, p. 12.

MOVE AND REORGANIZATION OF THE 2ND BATTALION

The battalion entrucked on the night of 18 April to move to their new area, and by early morning 19 April, the move had been completed. They were now in assembly area near the town of VERGATO (See Map A), resting and reorganizing. G Company officers had to be completely replaced. F Company was also badly in need of more officers, and to make the problem more difficult the other battalions of the regiment had suffered heavy officer casualties. F Company was given one officer from the battalion heavy weapons company, one from the battalion headquarters company, and one from the regimental service company. Both F and G Companies received approximately twenty enlisted men, from the regimental replacement pool. All companies were fed hot meals, weapons were cleaned and equipment replaced, and by the late afternoon of 19 April, the battalion was ready to go again, to resume the offensive while the enemy was still disorganized.

THE MARCH TO THE PO VALLEY

On the night of the 19 April, the battalion moved by truck to LAMA (see Map A), and on the morning of 20 April started the march into the mountains, following the 351st Infantry at 1000 yards.

The column moved rapidly, passing through LA TORRE and LA GUNE (see MapA), and when dawn broke, the regiment was moving down the last foothills leading into the PO VALLEY and at 0900 hours, 21 April, entered the valley proper.

Visualize, if you can, what it meant to these battle weary veterans to see the miles and miles of level terrain stretching in front of them. It was the first time since arriving in combat that they would be engaging the enemy on even terms; it was no wonder that every one was anxious to again engage the enemy and show them what would happen when the tactical advantage was not theirs.

THE 2ND BATTALION IN THE PURSUIT THROUGH THE PO VALLEY

Shortly after reaching the valley the regiment was given a sector and committed. Field Order No. 4, dated 21 April, gave the direction of attack

as due North with the mission of reaching the PO RIVER with all possible speed. (22)

The regiment was to attack with two battalions abreast, 2nd Battalion on the right. The 2nd Battalion was attacking with two companies abreast, G Company being in reserve.

In the late afternoon, 21 April, the 2nd Battalion was approximately one mile short of Highway 9. They were to attack at 2000 hours, cut Highway 9, swing west to CASTEL FRANCO and again north along a canal to the town of S. GIOVANNI. When Highway 9 was reached, F Company was to send one platoon due north and wipe out an enemy strong point east of S. GIOVANNI. (See Map D for route of advance).

As the battalion moved off in the attack, F Company, on the right of the battalion, was met by "Burp Gun" fire from a canal bank to their right front. When met by this fire, the right platoon immediately deployed. With one squad wading and swimming the canal to get on the enemy flank, the platoon closed in, and in a matter of minutes cleaned out the enemy, destroying three gun positions, killing four and wounding two of the gunners. The company hardly slowed down during the attack. The reserve platoon was brought up and replaced the platoon that had been in action. That platoon was moved into reserve.

The battalion quickly cut Highway 9 and swung west toward CASTEL FRANCO, which had already fallen to another division. The battalion encountered no resistance along the highway, and soon had passed through CASTEL FRANCO and swung north along the canal.

The canal banks were some thirty feet higher than the rest of the terrain, and at the top the enemy had prepared spider type foxholes all along the bank. At the bottom they had prepared reinforced dugouts to protect them against air bombardment.

The battalion moved north from CASTEL FRANCO in a column of companies, F Company leading. For the first 2000 yards no enemy were encountered, but

(22) A-1, p. 13.

at this point the leading company came under fire from two automatic weapons, a lucky burst from one of them killing a squad leader and one of his men. In the darkness the enemy position could not be located. The lead platoon of Company F was deployed along the top of canal and opened up in the general direction of the enemy with all weapons. This had the desired effect and the enemy gunners withdrew. The lead company again moved out, but the rate of march was reduced so that all of the holes could be searched. No further enemy were encountered and the battalion reached their objective, where they stopped for the night. As F Company moved into their assembly area, a message was received from the platoon that had moved due north from Highway 9, stating that they had encountered stronger enemy than expected and had suffered a few casualties and were no longer able to advance. Another platoon of F Company, reinforced by a section of light machine guns was sent to assist in taking care of this problem and did so in good shape.

The battalion had been in this assembly area for three hours when the order was received to continue the attack immediately. At 0300 hours the battalion again moved out, E Company leading, followed by G and then H Company. Company F still was short two platoons and the company was left behind and instructed to regain contact with the battalion as soon as possible.

During the morning of 22 April, the battalion was joined by 5 tanks and 3 tank destroyers. Lt Col John W. Lyon, the battalion commander, ordered the lead platoon of E Company to get aboard the tanks. Climbing aboard the lead tank, Lt Col Lyon started the force north toward the town of DECIMA (see Map D), which was just to the left of the battalion sector. As they neared the town which was on their left, they were fired upon by enemy tanks, which were in the shelter of the buildings. The small task force attempted to withdraw so they could continue on their principal mission, that of reaching the PO RIVER with all possible speed. The determined enemy would not permit this maneuver and opened up with all weapons, which was later found to be a company, reinforced

with tanks and self-propelled guns. (23)

Since the battalion was once again consolidated, it was decided to launch an attack even though the enemy was out of the sector. E Company, supported by Company H, launched an all-out attack against the town. The Germans fought fanatically and it became necessary to employ G Company around the left flank. The fight was short, but very very bitter, and one platoon of E Company had to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat to destroy them. Squad leaders in this action showed a great deal of initiative in maneuvering their squads against enemy strong points, and as always it was a compilation of small unit action that crushed this determined enemy in a very short time. There were over forty enemy killed in this action, more than twice that number wounded, and one enemy tank destroyed.

The battalion had pressed the attack to the north edge of the town and was reorganizing when the order was received extending their sector several hundred yards to the west. During the reorganization, enemy artillery began falling with uncanny accuracy on the battalion positions causing several casualties. It soon became apparent that someone close at hand was directing the artillery fire. Several small patrols were dispatched to search all of the nearby houses. However, it befell the lot of an alert company clerk to discover the enemy in the upper story of a house in the center of the company positions. Without hesitation the clerk moved in on the observer and took him prisoner and almost immediately the fire ceased to fall on the position.

After the reorganization was completed, the battalion again moved off, with the PANARO RIVER as their intermediate objective (See Map D). During the rest of the daylight hours, only very light resistance was met, and as darkness fell they changed from a deployed formation to a column of companies, which greatly facilitated control and speeded the movement.

The battalion made excellent time and had only one more brush with the enemy. This was a short encounter in which E Company took 6 officers and 72

(23) Eye witness, Self: Statement from Battalion Commander, April 1945.

enlisted men prisoner and at 2400 hours the battalion pulled up on the banks of the PANARO. (24)

THE FINAL DRIVE TO THE PO RIVER

It was during the next thirty hours that the 349th Infantry unleashed the full might of its power, striking to the North, first in one direction and then another. The whirlwind pace was maintained in a smashing attack that carried the regiment a distance of more than twenty miles to the PO RIVER, netting 8,785 prisoners and bringing to death many hundreds of the enemy. (25)

In this action the 2nd Battalion was accredited with 5000 of the prisoners and approximately 1000 of the enemy dead.

Although large numbers of the enemy gave up without a fight, it was far from being a mass surrender. A majority of the enemy fought with the fanaticism of old, only to be overwhelmed by the combined weight of infantry, tanks and planes. Working in perfect coordination they swept through town after town (see Map D for route of march), leaving a wake of burning tanks and vehicles, shattered buildings and enemy dead. An endless stream of prisoners flowed to the rear, and when the regiment pulled up on the banks of the PO RIVER in the early morning hours of 24 April, it was to look back upon the scene of death and destruction that spelled the end of organized German resistance in ITALY. (26)

It was almost as if you could feel the war drawing to a close. It seemed humanly impossible for an army that had lost the men and equipment and was in such a state of disorder and rout as this enemy was, to ever again offer an organized resistance.

I would like at this time to give credit to the 57th Fighter Squadron and any other aircraft that might have participated in this action. Time after time the fighter bombers pulled the ground troops out of tight situations. With the fluid situation existing that this action had turned into, it was

(24, 25, 26) A-1, p. 18.

only to be expected that all units had exposed flanks and could not properly protect them, and on a number of occasions were caught by surprise; but each time they would give "Rover Joe" (Note: name given to the Air Corps Liaison Officer) a call and here would come the P-47's, sometimes bombing and strafing within 200 yards of the leading troops. The accuracy of the aircraft was uncanny. There were literally hundreds of houses and barns that had been bombed or strafed and were left burning, but not one time was one observed that there was not an enemy installation in or near the building. Such excellent cooperation and coordination cannot fail to subdue an enemy, even though superior in numbers.

By 0800 hours, 24 April, the 2nd Battalion had crossed the PANARO RIVER, a stream that is narrow but very deep and swift. The advance of the battalion had been so rapid that hardly any engineer equipment was available, but an alert engineer procured rubber boats and the battalion crossed in these. Civilians on each bank assisting pulled the boats across the river by the use of ropes.

As the day dawned there was nothing to indicate that it was to become the most hectic and exciting day in the history of the battalion. Leadership proved that it is the greatest requirement of all commanders. We also were to find that with the proper coordination and cooperation of the fighting arms we were invincible.

After crossing the PANARO, the battalion advanced to the town of MASSA FINALESE (see Map D), where they were joined by a platoon of tanks, four tank destroyers, a platoon of the division reconnaissance troop and "Rover Joe".

The battalion commander, seizing the opportunity that the armor offered, ordered Company G to board the tanks and the tank destroyers. On the lead tank, LT COL LYON headed the task force due North, driving for the PO RIVER. The task force moved very rapidly, bypassing many small groups of the enemy, the co-axial guns of the tanks and the riflemen on the decks firing while the tanks were moving. They literally blasted their way along the roads, until they reached the vicinity of the VIA DELLE DUCHESSIS road junction. Here

it was to prove that the decision of the battalion commander to send the armor ahead was a master stroke.

The task force was brought under fire by some German self-propelled 88's. One of our tanks was hit and put out of action. The infantry deployed from the tanks and moved forward with them. The enemy self-propelled guns proved to be an outpost for an enemy regiment in bivouac. The outpost was overrun, and the force crashed through into the bivouac proper. The Germans were completely surprised by the appearance of the Americans in this area and were thrown into a wild state of confusion. Their leaders lost control, and by the hundreds they fled into the nearby fields to take cover in the irrigation ditches. Many of them returned the fire poured upon them but were wild and sporadic in their shooting. A battalion of enemy field artillery in the area did manage to get a few guns into action, but their shooting was so wild that it was no hinderance to the advancing troops. (27)

The Air Corps Liaison jeep was contacted and they in turn contacted a flight of P-47's which were nearby. Suddenly, above the noise of battle there was a snarling whine overhead. Five planes broke out of the sun and swept the battlefield. At the sight of the familiar white star, the men of Company G waved their helmets. In answer the leading plane dipped his wings, banked, turned, and with machine guns blazing streaked down on the enemy position. In quick succession, five thunderbolts made passes over the Germans. Vehicles exploded and burned; men and horses were thrown into the air like dolls as the planes bombed and strafed, sometimes only a few hundred yards ahead of the advancing troops. (28)

G Company quickly overran the remaining enemy resistance. One company of Germans, taking shelter in a group of houses, was engaged by a platoon from the company. Fifty of them were killed and over one hundred captured in a short bitter fight.

As could be expected, there were hundreds of the enemy escaped; however

(27) A-1, p. 20; (28) A-1, p. 20.

some two hundred were killed and over four hundred taken prisoner. The majority of those that escaped were later rounded up by the rest of the battalion.

While this action was taking place, the rest of the battalion was moving forward on foot with E Company leading. Just north of MASSA FINALESSE E Company was brought under fire by a group of Krauts that had been bypassed. One platoon was sent after them and, after killing a number of them, returned with several prisoners.

While E Company was taking care of the above enemy, F Company had pushed into the lead. Near LE MAGNANINE (see Map D), sounds of firing were heard. As the company neared the town, it was discovered that elements of the division reconnaissance force were pinned down by an enemy of superior numbers. F Company deployed on a wide front and worked toward the enemy strong points. The enemy resisted bitterly, but were soon overcome by the advancing troops. It was a short bitter fight, characterized by individual and decisive action on the part of the squad leaders. After the first positions were wiped out, the enemy came forward by the score with hands raised. A few refused to quit and were quickly dispatched by the advancing troops. (29)

The type of action as described in the above paragraphs was typical all during the day as the battalion drove to the PO RIVER. Individual unit action could be mentioned almost without end. The enemy in front of the battalion simply could not stand against the onrushing might of infantry, armor and air. The situation was very fluid, and any and all methods were used to advance.

✓ In the afternoon the armored task force of the battalion moved into the town of SAN MARTINO and reorganized. There more armor joined the battalion. Again the battalion moved toward the PO RIVER. Just north of the town of **MAGAZZIN**, the column was forced to a halt on the edge of a canal by a blown bridge. As no crossing could be found in the vicinity, the troops dismounted and moved forward on foot, while the tanks went in search of a crossing. At **MONDINE** (see Map) the entire battalion was reassembled and rejoined by the armor. The task force was again organized, with G Company and two platoons of F Company

(29) Eye witness, Self.

loading on the tanks. The final drive was on. North through the town of CARBONA swept the column, blasting everything from their path and at 2000 hours pulled into the town of BORGA FRANCO on the banks of the PO RIVER. The foot elements of the battalion were being led forward by the battalion executive officer, Major James P. Lyons, and by 2100 hours they had reached the road paralleling the river. This element of the battalion turned and moved west toward the town of REVERE, with the mission of sweeping the river bank for a distance of 6000 yards.

When the first elements of the battalion reached the river, many enemy were trying to cross using rafts innertubes, horses or anything that would swim or float. Machine guns were turned on them and only a very few lived to reach the other bank. At BORGA FRANCO more than one thousand enemy were trapped among which were fifty officers. The force moving West along the debris ridden bank added over five hundred more prisoners to the bag. When this action was completed the battalion was organized in a defensive position over the wide front that they occupied. Most of the defense was pointed toward the south so as to apprehend any enemy still trying to escape across the PO.

Thus ended one of the most hectic days in the history of the battalion. Between two rivers, the PANORO and the PO the battalion exacted a terrific toll on the enemy, and the results of a single day's fighting made it doubtful that the enemy would be able to reorganize his forces for another stand. Troops, guns and equipment were seized on a large scale, a complete hospital was taken intact, and hundreds of vehicles were captured or destroyed. Among the prisoners was the commanding general of the 65th Infantry Division together with many of his staff. In the fighting both his assistant division commander and the division artillery were killed. The cost was slight. Casualties were few. It was the overwhelming power, the terrific momentum which was developed and maintained, that cut the enemy to ribbons, and when at last the PO RIVER was reached the men of the 2nd Battalion had experienced a day seldom seen by troops in combat. (30)

(30) A-1, p. 28, 29.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation it will be seen that the 2nd Battalion 349th Infantry was given a very difficult mission in attacking the FURCOLI-MONTERUMICI line. It was known that this was one of the key points of the German defense. Initially the battalion was in reserve and then they were given the mission of a frontal attack against a position where one battalion had failed to make any noticeable gains. Their attack was very canalized due to the extensive mine fields with which the enemy had reinforced his position, and an alert enemy was prepared to meet them.

The pursuit in the PO RIVER VALLEY was not a difficult operation if measured in the number of casualties that the battalion suffered, but it took very close coordination on the part of all leaders to gain the maximum efficiency that the battalion gained by the proper use of planes and armor.

Those points in reference thereto which admit of criticism are:

1st: After careful preparation to conceal the time and place of the attack, the advantage was lost by one company exposing themselves needlessly to the enemy.

2nd: The original attack of the regiment was launched in insufficient strength. Only two companies of one battalion were used to attack an enemy of greatly superior numbers who were entrenched in heavily fortified positions.

3rd: When the 2nd Battalion, the regimental reserve, was committed, they were employed piecemeal instead of using their full strength in a coordinated attack against the enemy.

4th: The failure of higher commanders to take more aggressive action in clearing the mine fields and in getting more armor into position to help the assaulting troops.

5th: The failure of the junior commanders of G Company to push through in force and exploit the penetration that the company commander with one platoon had made. However, the gap did close behind the platoon very rapidly and it would have taken immediate action and unusual courage to have kept this route open.

6th: The failure of the F Company Commander to seize the opportunity

offered when he made his initial reconnaissance in front of the company. If this opportunity had been grasped it is very probable that a force of company strength could have penetrated the enemy position and provided the wedge by which the battalion could have taken the position much sooner.

7th: The failure of all units to practice counter-intelligence to the utmost degree, and thus letting the enemy gain accurate knowledge of our strength and dispositions.

Before passing to Lessons Learned, favorable mention must be made of Captain Kelly's heroic stand at IL POGGAILE. While the entire force was lost, the enemy was forced to divert men and weapons from other positions to meet this threat--thereby allowing other units to gain a toehold at decisive points. Mention should also be made of F Company in gaining a very small but tenacious toehold on FURCOLI Ridge. If measured in yards the gain was small, but it did allow them to deliver fire on the rear of some of the enemy positions.

It is seen that the success of the FURCOLI battle and the PO VALLEY pursuits was greatly attributed to by the aggressive action of small unit leaders, who, with indomitable courage, simply refused to be beaten.

In summing up the results of this action it is seen that the 2nd Battalion 349th Infantry, attacked and defeated an enemy of superior numbers at FURCOLI RIDGE. Even though the battalion had suffered heavy casualties in the action they quickly reorganized and started the historic drive through the PO VALLEY. It fought and defeated elements of at least 13 German Divisions, killing hundreds and taking thousands of prisoners.

It can be said that the battalion lived up to the name given to the division by "Axia Sally", the German propaganda agent, who, early in the Italian Campaign had called them "THE BLUE DEVILS".

LESSONS LEARNED

Some of the lessons learned from this operation were:

1. Training: The fact must be recognized that when a unit has been in the lines for a long period of time and their efficiency has dropped below normal, it can best be restored by an intensive training period that stresses

small unit action over terrain similar to that over which the attack is to be launched.

2. Secrecy must be maintained at all costs, The least bit of relaxation in counter-intelligence measures will give the enemy the information that he needs to make your task doubly difficult.

3. Leadership: There is no substitute for a good leader, and when they become casualties previously trained personnel must take their place in an efficient and aggressive manner.

4. Once a penetration or gap has been created in the enemy lines, commanders must take immediate action to exploit them; any hesitancy, and an alert enemy will deny the opportunity offered you.

5. In attacking a well-prepared, heavily fortified position, the initial attacking force must be strong enough to carry out your mission. The practice of holding the major portion of your command in reserve will generally lead to greater casualties and loss of time in taking the position.

6. Your reserve force should be used in strength to exploit an advantage gained or to regain the initiative.

7. With the proper coordination and cooperation of the fighting arms a striking force can be developed that even the most determined enemy cannot hold in check for long.

8. Advantages can be gained by quick action on the part of unit commanders. One of the examples from this monograph is the action of Lt Col John W. Lyon in quickly organizing the small task force when the platoon of tanks was attached to his battalion.

9. Sectors can be changed in the midst of the battle to conform to the situation as it develops.

10. Verbal orders: In the action as portrayed in this monograph, nearly all orders, even those of the higher unit commanders, were verbal. These are entirely sufficient as long as they are clear, concise and complete.

11. It is very necessary for the reserve units to do a thorough mpping-up to prevent undue casualties, to supply routes and other units moving up from the rear.

12. Keeping contact with the enemy is of the utmost importance. If you keep a strong, aggressive contact it will not give him the opportunity to get organized in prepared positions.