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OPERATIONS OF THE WEAPON'S PLATOON, COMPANY  
"E", 413TH INFANTRY REGIMENT (104TH INFANTRY  
DIVISION) NIGHT RIVER CROSSING OF MARK RIVER,  
HOLLAND, 2D NOVEMBER 1944  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: Night River Crossing.

Captain Cecil H. Bolton, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO II

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OPERATIONS OF THE WEAPON'S PLATOON, COMPANY "E",  
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of a Weapons Platoon in a night river crossing during the attack of Standarrbuiten, Holland.

In order to orient the reader and bring him up abreast of the situation, it will be necessary to go back a few months. After the break through at St. Lo and during the drive across France, the course open to the Allies upon reaching and crossing the Seine River "was to drive to the Rhine River on a broad front." (1)

"The supreme commander eventually decided on a broad front policy." This decision dictated the need to open deep water ports for the improvements of our maintenance facilities (2) and lines of communications, most important of these was Antwerp, which had to be cleared at all costs. Possession of it would solve a most critical situation.

This port had a capacity of 40,000 tons of supplies a day exclusive of gas and oil. (3) The allies physically held Antwerp but could not operate it as the Germans controlled the northern approaches and southwest Holland. (See Map A)

GENERAL SITUATION

These approaches had to be secured. This task of clearing both banks of the Scheldt Estuary fell to the

(1) A-3, p. 151; (2) A-3, p. 151; (3) A-3, p. 206.

1st Canadian Army of the 21st Army Group which included British, Polish and American troops. (4)

Defending the northern approaches of the Maas Estuary was the 15th German Army which consisted of about 20 weak divisions or battle groups, including four Panzer Divisions. Behind this line hastily reformed were remnants of Panzer Divisions, S. S. Divisions and Parachute Divisions, which were being kept ready in case of an allied break-through or further airborne landings. (5)

On 16 October the 104th Infantry Division was attached to the I British Corps, a part of the 1st Canadian Army. (6) 104th Infantry Division was the first American Division to serve under Canadian Command. (7) On 22 October the I British Corps, commanded by Major General John A. Crocker, directed the 104th Division to relieve the 49th British Division in the vicinity of Wuestwezel, Belgium (8) and to establish strong defensive positions in that area. (See Map B)

The front to be occupied by the Division faced north to the Maas-Waal Estuary, approximately 22 miles away. The Division had a frontage of approximately 16,000 yards, cutting the main highway running northeast, from Wuestwezel. (9)

The 1st Polish Armored Division was on the right; the 49th British Infantry Division on the left.

The Division occupied positions with three regiments abreast. Orders soon came down from higher headquarters to take the offensive. On 25 October the Division launched its attack to the Maas Estuary, with the mission

(4) A-9, p. 17; (5) A-3, p. 199; (6) A-1, p. 47;  
(7) A-6, p. 246; (8) A-1, p. 151; (9) A-1, p. 151.

of driving the enemy north with all possible speed. (10)

The terrain was generally flat with an almost imperceptible slope to the northwest. Under the sandy surface impervious clay prevented standing water from draining. This necessitated ditching not only the roads but also the fields, and all vehicular traffic was road bound. Main highways were of stone construction and were good, all other roads were narrow and incapable of two way traffic. Buildings and steeples provided the only observation posts. (11)

The weather was cold. Sleety rain beat down on the troops, who went for days soaked to the skin and slimy with mud. The only place to dig a fox hole or slit trench which would not fill with water was on the dikes, which were approximately fifteen feet high and twenty feet across. (12)

The enemy attempted to form a last line of defense south of the Maas Estuary, along the Mark River. (13)  
(See Map C) German officers in units along the Scheldt had signed pledges to fight to the death and never give up. (14)

The Division closed on the Mark River on 30 October. The units on the right and left were still short of the river. Corps ordered an immediate crossing. The 415th Infantry Regiment was assigned the mission of making the initial crossing by daylight, 31 October. The first battalion to cross became heavily engaged. It was surrounded and cut off and had to fight its way out. It

(11) Personal knowledge; (12) Personal knowledge;  
(13) A-3, p. 208; (14) A-6, p. 229.

withdrew because of excessive casualties. (15) After this attack failed, the Division planned a coordinated attack.

#### DIVISION MISSION AND PLAN

The Division mission was to force a crossing of river Mark, securing the Corps bridgehead and develop and exploit gains north to the Maas River.

The prepared plan was a coordinated attack to cross the river with two Regiments abreast in the vicinity of Standaarbuiten, Holland. The 413th Infantry was to make the main effort and to seize Phase Line F (See Map C) prior to darkness 3 November. (16)

#### REGIMENTAL PLAN

The Plan of the <sup>413</sup>regiment was two battalions abreast; 2d Battalion on the left and 1st Battalion on the right, 3d Battalion in reserve. The 2d Battalion was to make the initial crossing followed by the 1st Battalion, then the 3d Battalion. The crossing was to commence at 2100 on 1st November. The artillery preparation was to begin at 2000. (17)

#### BATTALION SITUATION AND MISSION 31 OCTOBER

The 2d Battalion was in position in reserve in the vicinity of Seppe, Southwest of Oudenbosch. When the Battalion Commander returned from receiving the regimental attack order, a warning order was sent out, and all Company Commanders reported to the Battalion Command Post. (18)

The Battalion executive officer explained the mission of the Battalion, and gave them the situation.

(15) A-5; (16) A-1, p. 81; (17) Personal knowledge;  
(18) Personal knowledge.

For orientation he used a large sand table prepared from a pool table which was in the building in which the Battalion Command Post was located. He also issued aerial photographs, taken only a few hours before of the town of Standaardbuiten and the river crossing sites. (19)

The Battalion executive officer requested each rifle Company Commander to send to him one patrol of six men, led by an officer. The patrols were briefed on the sand table and sent back to remain with their companies until 2100 that night. (20)

When the men returned from the Battalion Command Post, the company executive officer of E Company went over the aerial photographs with each man in the patrol, individually. Each man was then required to draw a picture on the ground with his bayonet showing the routes to be taken going and returning, and the formations to be used. The chain of command in the patrol was outlined and the getaway men were designated. The importance of the mission was impressed on the men. Everything was in readiness when the patrol were carried in jeeps to the vicinity of the river at 2100 31 October. (21)

The Division engineers ferried the patrols across the river in the vicinity of the crossing sites, and returned them as planned a few hours later. The patrols returned with prisoners and much information which the Division, Regiment, and Battalion did not possess. One of the prisoners was a 1st Sergeant whose company had just moved into the lines. He was out inspecting the

(19) Personal knowledge; (20) Personal knowledge;  
(21) Personal knowledge.

outposts when he was captured. He told of a tank trap approximately fifty yards from the river, consisting of a large ditch filled with water 3 to 4 feet deep, and of outguards in fox holes half way between the town and the river. (22)

After the information which the patrols brought back was disseminated to the companies, the company commander and the Weapons Platoon leader went on a reconnaissance, which they completed by lying on the reverse slopes of dikes and observing the enemy terrain with field glasses. All the area between the Mark River and the Maas was as flat as the top of a billiard table, bordered by canals, ditches, and dikes, with roads built along the top of them.

The Germans customarily dug in on reverse slopes of the dikes, set up positions in houses along the roads and masked their mortars behind buildings which made them very difficult to knock out. They set up machine guns in ditches and beside houses and fired tanks from dug in positions. (23)

#### BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

The 2d Battalion plan of attack was to use two companies abreast with Fox company on the left and George company on the right with Easy company in reserve. Fox and George companies were to cross abreast. Fox was to move to the left following the tank trap until it reached the 2d Battalion zone, cleaning out all resistance and ready to aid George Company with flanking fire, if nec-

(22) Personal knowledge; (23) Personal knowledge.

essary. George company was to move up the small road into the town turning left and cleaning out all enemy until they reached the 2d Battalion zone, also to aid Fox if necessary by maneuver. Easy company was to follow George company after crossing the river, assemble at the end of the dike where the town made a right turn in following the dike, and be prepared to move on order. (See Map C). One platoon of heavy machine guns was attached to each assault company. The 81mm mortars were in general support. (24)

#### MISSION OF E COMPANY WEAPONS PLATOON

When Easy Company Commander received the Battalion attack order he again made a reconnaissance with his platoon leaders of the routes to be followed to the forward assembly area, the location of each platoon in the area and the routes to be taken to the river from the assembly area; terrain features were picked to guide upon.

The weapons platoon leader picked positions for his 60mm mortars, behind houses and dikes where observation could be gained and the weapons and crews would be protected. Positions for his machine guns, were chosen carefully as the weapons platoon forms the base of fire for the rifle company. He then gave his recommendations to the company commander, also pointing out the positions he had chosen and explaining the different types of fires that could be used if the company was committed.

The platoon leader had a formation of his platoon explaining to them the mission, the objective and then

(24) Personal knowledge.

drew a picture on the ground of the operation. He explained the time the platoon was to cross the river, where to assemble after the crossing, the formation to be used, routes of ammunition supply, and location of the company ammunition supply point. The boat each man was to be in and the equipment he was to have was explained. At 1700 on 1 November everything was in readiness for the crossing that night. However at this time orders were received from higher headquarters postponing the river crossing until the night of 2 November. (25)

The next day the weapons platoon leader rechecked his platoon to see that every man knew his job and that all in the mortar section knew the 60mm mortar, firing table. Machine guns were fired for correct head space, ammunition in the ammunition bags was rechecked. Each man had 12 rounds of mortar ammunition, and every man in the mortar section was carrying ammunition including the section sergeant. The platoon leader kept his men busy during the day to keep their minds off the river crossing.

The 60mm mortar section with a T/O strength of 16 men had only 11 men assigned, however they carried two complete mortars and one spare tube. The machine gun squads, had only 3 men each. (26)

The company received 11 replacements including one 2d Lt., a recent graduate of OCS at Ft. Benning. The company commander did not assign him a platoon but in-

(25) Personal knowledge; (26) Personal knowledge.

structed him to go along with company headquarters, until the next day when he would assign him a platoon. It was believed better for the platoon sergeant to be in command that night as he had been on reconnaissance and understood the plans and the set-up.

At about 1700 on 2 November a hot meal was fed and one "D" ration was issued to each man. At 1930 the company began its movement to the forward assembly area. Before leaving the rear assembly area the platoon leader again checked his men to see that each knew his boat group and the number of the boat to which he was assigned.

The night was clear and cold, water and mushy ice ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> standing in puddles throughout the area and as the platoon moved out the platoon leader checked the area to see that nothing was left behind. While he was doing this an old Dutchman asked him what he was doing, the platoon leader said he was going to kill some Boche, whereupon the old Dutchman gave him a bottle of Cognac which later proved of value to the platoon. (27)

When he caught up with his platoon, the platoon leader was informed by his company commander that the latter had sent his platoon sergeant to the river, on orders of regiment, to handle a 50 cal. machine gun set up on the bank of the river to protect the engineers. All other 50 cal. machine guns of the regiment were also set up along the river bank for engineer protection.

The platoon arrived in the assembly area around 2000, immediately afterwards the artillery preparation began,

(27) Personal knowledge.

consisting of 120 guns, American and British, of all calibers. (28) The preparation was so intense that it seemed like a continuous earthquake; time fire was bursting all over the fields and the sky was brilliantly lighted.

The forward assembly area was approximately 500 yards from the Mark River with only a dike between the area and the river. (29) The men dug slit trenches which soon filled with water and within a few minutes everyone was soaked to the skin. The platoon leader passed the bottle of Cognac around among his platoon and every man received at least one drink which helped to warm him up.

At approximately 2110, engineer guides came to the assembly area to lead the platoons to the river and to their boats. As the men picked up their boats and crossed the dike enroute to the river, they were exposed to small arms fire. (30)

The Mark River is a slow moving stream, approximately 50 feet wide and from 8 to 10 feet deep. The weapons platoon crossed it with company headquarters which followed the three rifle platoons. When the platoon reached the far bank of the river, it was found that they had lost one machine gun during the crossing.

The platoon was now on the Standaarrbuiten side of the river. (See Map C). Standaarrbuiten is the largest town in the bridgehead area and consisted of about 75 houses situated on the dike which is approximately a mile and one-half long. (31)

The platoon leader assembled his men by voice on the banks of the river, located the road they were to

(28) A-2, p. 37; (29) Personal knowledge; (30) A-2, n. 37; (31) A-7, p. 56.

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move up and placed his men in an approach march formation. The platoon moved out and reached a tank trap approximately 50 yards from the river bank, this ditch was about 15 feet wide and 5 feet deep. Remembering that he had seen a long heavy plank on the bank of the river, a remnant of the bridge which the Germans had blown up a few days before, the platoon leader sent two men to return the plank to him. The plank was placed across the tank trap and the platoon began to cross.

Everything was confused, George company which was to move up the road had followed Fox company to the left. Easy company was scheduled to follow George company up the road but about one-half of the company was across the ditch intermingled with others and under heavy small arms and mortar fire. The improvised bridge across the tank trap had become very slippery and the men began to fall into the tank trap, whereupon the platoon leader leaped into the ditch to help his men across with their heavy loads of ammunition. (32) During this time the other two companies were heavily engaged, having hit the German MLR.

When the platoon leader climbed out of the tank trap it seemed that all hell had broken loose and his platoon was scattered all over intermingled with the rifle platoons. Tracer bullets were snapping about 4 feet off the ground, 105mm artillery fire was heavy and the Germans were checkerboarding the area with 120mm mortars, 81mm mortars, and the small 51mm mortars. The weapons platoon

(32) Personal knowledge.

Leader

began calling for his machine gun section which, by now had only one gun,<sup>?</sup> and he could only find the two men with a gun which was by now without its tripod. (At this time the platoon did not have the 1919A-6 machine gun with the bipod mount. The platoon had only the 1919A-4 type with the tripod mount.) The platoon leader got the one gun into action by placing the gun across the back of a man who was laying down, ~~he~~ fired at a window from which enemy tracers were coming.<sup>?</sup> The 60mm mortar section meanwhile went into action, firing onto the dike with traversing fire. When this firing began, it drew a great amount of return fire from the enemy.

The company commander was in the rear shouting for the weapons platoon leader to establish a base of fire. At this point a 105mm artillery shell exploded close to the weapons platoon leader killing the 2nd Platoon leader and platoon sergeant. The concussion from the shell lifted the weapons platoon leader high into the air, rendered him unconscious and caused numerous fragment wounds in his legs. When the platoon leader regained consciousness he realized something had to be done and done quickly or the company would be completely annihilated. There were cries all over the field for the medics. He attempted to get the company moving forward and one or two men would rise up and move forward only to hit the ground again shortly. At this point only two enemy machine guns were firing, with occasional mortar shells interspersed, and from the way that the machine gun fire was traversing he was able to tell that they were firing on the same base point. He again tried to get the men

up out of the line of fire, knowing how methodical the German soldier was he reasoned that if he could get the men forward before the Germans changed base points he would reduce the number of probable casualties. The platoon leader could see the muzzle blast of the machine gun firing from his right flank and reasoned that if he could knock this gun out he might be able to get his men forward. (33) He noticed a canal approximately 50 yards to his right flank running in the direction of the gun and began to crawl forward toward the canal. After a torturous journey under enemy fire, he finally reached it. The Germans had placed barbed wire in the canal consisting of two strands running parallel to the canal and one strand diagonally across it. The canal was 4 to 5 feet deep, with approximately 3 feet of mushy ice water in it which came up to the platoon leader's armpits as he worked his way down the canal toward the enemy machine gun. After traveling approximately 150 yards he came upon two men with a rocket launcher and 3 rounds of ammunition. (34) Ordering the two men to follow him, they moved to where the canal joined another one running parallel with the dike. He instructed the two men to cover him with the rocket launcher while he located the house from which the machine gun was firing and stated that when he located the house he would throw a white phosphorus grenade at the gun which would be their signal to fire the rocket launcher into this enemy location. Creeping forward he

(33) Personal knowledge.

located the gun firing from a first floor window, the gun crew had placed wet blankets across the window and were firing through them which hid the muzzle blast to a great degree. (35) The platoon leaders threw the white phosphorus grenade, however he did not get any rocket fire from the two men who had remained in the canal. Fearing that he would be discovered if he remained in the area, he threw a fragmentation grenade into the window even though the firing had ceased due to the effect of the white phosphorus grenade. Wishing to take no chances, the platoon leader then crawled out of the canal and entered the building through the door, going into the room where the gun was situated he found 4 German soldiers who had been killed by the fragmentation grenade and their clothing was burning having been fired by the white phosphorus grenade. He took the machine gun, a German MG42 heavy, which looked like a plumber's nightmare, and threw it and the remaining ammunition from the window into the canal. Making his way back to the two men he asked why they had not fired the rocket launcher at the pre-arranged signal; they both confessed they did not know how to load the launcher as the sergeant had merely given them the weapon and the ammunition to carry. (36)

From where the platoon leader and the two men were on the dike they could plainly see the other machine gun firing from a dug-in position in the dike. The platoon leader loaded the rocket launcher and with the two men

(35) Personal knowledge; (36) Personal knowledge.

commenced working their way to the other gun position. The platoon leader was on the right of the canal and the two men on the left and when approximately 50 yards from the gun position the platoon leader was sighted by the enemy security personnel stationed around the gun. ~~who~~ opened fire and grazed him across the upper lip, however the wound was not serious. The two riflemen had not been observed and they opened fire with their rifles killing the sniper. (37) The two men were spotted by this burst of fire upon the security man and the machine gun directed at them began firing, whereupon they jumped into the canal out of range. The machine gun was in an emplacement dug into the dike and covered with heavy logs. The gun was firing from an opening about 12" square. The platoon leader could plainly distinguish the gunner from where he was and firing with his carbine instantly killed the gunner. The two men waded up the canal fired the rocket launcher point blank into the embrasure and then threw three hand grenades inside killing six men and destroying the gun.

The platoon leader could see that the company was not receiving much fire therefore he sent one of the men back to bring up the company, as he had lost his 536 radio. The one man left on top of the dike said, "Lieutenant, what is that firing over there?" Whereupon the platoon leader crawled to the top of the dike and could distinguish a self-propelled gun close to the wall of

(37) Personal knowledge.

a barn approximately 300 yards away, which had about half of the chassis protruding from the wall, firing into the company area. The gun would fire 10 or 12 rounds and then pull back completely behind the barn and out of sight. The platoon leader loaded the rocket launcher and gave it to the man to carry as they made their way over the dike and into another canal, working their way to the rear of the self-propelled gun and advancing to within 50 yards of it. (38) The man who fired the launcher into the machine gun embrasure fired at the rear of the self-propelled gun completely missing it. The AP round went into the barn and the platoon leader realizing what had happened grabbed the man by the arm and they moved approximately 50 yards down the canal, well knowing the security personnel of the gun would start firing at the place they had been. Reloading the launcher and placing it on the man's shoulder the platoon leader fired at the self-propelled gun which was trying to get the motor started. This round from the rocket launcher hit the breech of the gun on the self-propelled gun ricocheted into some ammunition inside the shield of the gun blowing it up and knocking it out completely. The round that went into the barn must have exploded inside for when the self-propelled gun was knocked out a panther tank came out of the barn up onto the dike and moved to the rear. The platoon leader did not even know a tank was inside the barn.

The platoon leader threw down the rocket launcher and started making his way back to his own lines. Dur-

(38) Personal knowledge.

ing this move he was shot by an enemy sniper, the rifle bullet entering his left shoulder at his neck went through the heavy muscles of his back and came out the center of his left side. The man with him exchanged shots with the sniper driving him off. The platoon leader weakening fast from the loss of blood ordered the man with him to get the company up fast, not knowing that every officer in the company was a casualty with the exception of the new 2d Lieutenant, as were the battalion commander and the company commanders of the other two rifle companies. (39) While making his way back to his own lines the platoon leader passed out and was picked up unconscious 13 hours later by the medics. He rejoined his company 65 days later on the Roer River. The platoon leader's accomplishments of that night enabled his battalion to take its objective quickly. (40)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation, that most of the principles of war were demonstrated. The use of only two companies in the initial crossing was certainly an economy of forces.

The Artillery preparation of the 120 guns employed in the crossing, by placing all the fire power on the town of Standaardbuiten and the German defense, demonstrated the use of mass fire.

Surprise was lacking due to the fact that the artillery preparation of one hour duration, undoubtedly

(39) Personal knowledge; (40) A-10.

indicated an attack to the German leaders.

The objective was taken on schedule.

After the bridgehead was secured the rapidity of the remainder of the regiment in crossing and deploying to exploit its gains demonstrated the principle of movement.

The principles which we were taught for night river crossings proved sound. Reconnaissance, both ground and air was very aggressive and thorough. The crossing was rapid and audacious. By a bold attack, a bridgehead was established which protected the remainder of the command. The small arms fire and observed artillery fire was eliminated from the crossing. In selection of crossing sites, concealment was hard to get but advantage was taken of what small concealment there was.

Good use was made of the engineer troops and material. Close and continuous support was given by the artillery, as was shown. Control was very difficult; it is up to the small unit leaders as the higher unit commanders have no control until the first objective is taken. Radio must be used for communications as no wire can be laid during such a rapid attack.

The unit was in the forward assembly area ~~far~~ too long and when the men moved out of the area they were very nervous and soaked to the skin. Troops should not be in a forward assembly area longer than necessary.

Best laid plans go wrong under the stress of combat, even if they are simple, as the example of George Company, not moving up the small road but following Fox

Company clearly indicates.

After the artillery lifted the reserve company did not cross the river quickly enough. The two lead companies did not receive any fire at all until the reserve company began crossing and this company then received the bulk of the fire. There was a general lack of leadership among the non-commissioned officers, none of them trying to keep their squads or sections together for control, especially among the crew served weapons. Replacements sent to the Infantry must know the weapons of the Infantry, as demonstrated by the men with the rocket launcher not knowing how to load it. Some incentive must be found to get the men up and firing instead of just taking it and not attempting to fire in return.

Aggressive reconnaissance pays off in combat, as demonstrated by the patrols which were sent across the river. They returned with pertinent information that was previously unknown and which proved to be of great value. This was accomplished by the patrols being properly oriented, every man in the patrol knowing his job, where he was going and knowing his exact mission.

All officers should have some troop duty before being sent to a line unit in combat. The new 2d Lieutenant was a company commander the next morning.

If the enemy had planned an active defense and counterattack when all the confusion was reigning, just after the river crossing, they would have wrought great havoc among this unit. If they had placed more local se-

curity for the crew served weapons and track vehicles they probably would not have lost them as easily as they did.

### LESSONS

1. Agressive leadership among the non-commissioned officers must be taught.
2. Crew served weapons must be kept together.
3. Every man in the Infantry must know all Infantry weapons and know how to load them.
4. Troops must be imbued with the spirit to move under fire and to fire their weapons at the enemy in return instead of staying in fox holes or on top of the ground and taking it.
5. Agressive reconnaissance pays off in combat.
6. There must be adequate local security for all crew served weapons and track vehicles.
7. Communications are very important. The radio must be carried even if some less important item of equipment has to be abandoned.
8. All officers must have some troop duty before being sent into combat.
9. Patrols if properly oriented will prove of great value providing everyone in the patrol knows his exact job, where he is going and the mission he is to accomplish.