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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY A, 1ST BATTALION, 168TH
INFANTRY IN THE BREAKTHROUGH OF THE GERMAN
APENNINE LINE, 18 - 20 APRIL 1945
(PO VALLEY CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company A, 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry (34th Division) in the breakthrough of the German Apennine Line, 18-20 April 1945, during the early part of the PO Valley Campaign.

Following the breakthrough at the Anzio beachhead on 25 May 1944, the Allied Fifth and Eighth Armies advanced rapidly up the Italian Peninsula. (See Map "A") ROME fell on 4 June 1944, and the forces raced northward attempting to destroy or capture the retreating German troops. Although nearly 70,000 German troops were lost, Field Marshal Kesselring, the German commander, by skillful maneuvering was able to get the bulk of his forces behind the Gothic Line. When Allied forces reached the outposts of this line, the stiffened German resistance plus extended supply lines brought the drive to a temporary halt early in July. Furthermore, the rapid pursuit had caused some disorganization in Allied units. (1) (2)

By 18 July, the Allies had effected some reorganization and had brought up sufficient supplies to resume their advance. The advance was at a much reduced rate compared with the progress made formerly. In slightly over three months, however, the Gothic Line had been reduced and the two Armies faced the Apennine Line, last main German defensive position between Allied forces and the PO Valley. (See Map "A") (3) (4)

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- (1) A-2, p. 780
(2) A-4, ch. XXII
(3) A-2, p. 780
(4) A-6, p. 5

It was originally planned that Allied forces would continue the advance after they had breached the Gothic Line. Early in November, the Fifth Army terminated large-scale offensive operations until the following spring. Several factors influenced this decision, the most important of which were: (1) the advent of winter; (2) the stubborn German defense; (3) the large number of casualties incurred in breaching the Gothic Line; and (4) the unsatisfactory logistical situation. (5)

For a period of 5 months, November - March 1945, the positions of the opposing forces underwent little change. Neither side attempted any major operations, but several limited objective attacks, particularly by the Allies, were carried out. The most significant gain by the Fifth Army was the capture of commanding terrain overlooking Highway 64. (6)

The period of winter stalemate was particularly beneficial to the Allies. Replacements and reinforcements built up the strength of the units during these months. Badly worn vehicles were replaced by new ones, and ammunition reserves were piled up. By 1 April 1945, the Fifth and Eighth Armies had completed their program of rehabilitation of men and equipment and were ready for the coming spring offensive. (7)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Apennine Line (named the "Ghengis Khan Line" by the Germans) extended from just south of MASSA on the LIGURIAN Sea to the Lake COMMACHIO Spit on the ADRIATIC. (See Map "A") (8)

The Germans had worked with characteristic thoroughness to improve their defensive positions along this Line during the five months of defensive operations. They had built bomb and shell-proof personnel

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- (5) A-1, p. 1
(6) A-5, p. 9, 10
(7) A-1, p. 1
(8) A-1, p. 2, 3

confirm that a change in plans was being considered as early as the morning of 18 April 1945, and the Commander, Company A should have been notified.

8. DEEP PENETRATIONS

This attack was a vivid example of the tactical value of deep penetrations against weakening enemy resistance. Whereas the attacks by the 2nd and 3rd Battalions on 16 and 17 April had been made against successive objectives, the attack of companies A and B was made against an objective deep in the enemy defenses. The success of the attack attested to the fact that the regimental commander chose the proper time and method to exploit the successes made by the two assault battalions.

LESSONS

1. Surprise is of the greatest importance in any operation and can be effectively employed by any size unit.
2. Commanders of all echelons must always provide adequate security for their units; they must not be lulled into a false sense of security by physical barriers.
3. Effective radio communication is of utmost importance in an operation involving a deep penetration of enemy lines.
4. Adequate provision must be made for contact between elements of a unit during a night attack.
5. Commanders must be taught the value of quick recognition and exploitation of key terrain.
6. Plans must be made to provide extra rations for attacking units in the event an attack does not progress as scheduled.
7. Commanders should immediately disseminate to their subordinate leaders any probable changes in operational plans that might effect the subordinate units.
8. Commanders must be constantly on the alert to employ deep penetrations against weakening enemy resistance.

dugouts on the reverse slopes of hills. Strong points of the defense had been tied in with interlocking fires, and antitank and antipersonnel mines had been laid on all road and important cross-country avenues of approach. Their artillery was well emplaced and with plenty of time for registration was extremely accurate. (9) (10)

ALLIED ATTACK PLANS

The allied plan was designed to capture or destroy the German Army before it could withdraw through the Alpine passes and take up new defensive positions in the "Redoubt" area of Austria. The plan was divided into three phases; it was hoped however that there would be no pause between phases in executing the plan. During Phase I the British Eighth Army was to cross the SANTERNO River and attack toward BASTIA and BUDRIO; the Fifth Army was to debouch into the PO Valley with the secondary mission of capturing or isolating BOLOGNA. Phase II provided for a breakthrough by either or both Armies to encircle enemy forces south of the PO. In Phase III operations were directed toward crossing the PO and advancing northward to capture VERONA, gateway to the Brenner pass, thus sealing the main German escape route from Italy. (11)

It was planned that the Fifth Army make the main effort in the attack since, after its debouchment into the PO Valley, the terrain to its front favored a quick breakthrough and rapid advance.

The decision of the Fifth Army Commander was to attack with II Corps and IV Corps abreast, the main effort to be made by IV Corps on the left along the axis of Highway 64. The secondary effort by II Corps was to be made along the axis of Highway 65 which ran directly south from BOLOGNA.

(See Map "B"† (12)

All four divisions assigned to II Corps were to make the initial attack. The Legnano Group, an Italian unit, was disposed along the Corps

(9) A-1, p. 15

(10) A-4, ch. XXIII

(11) A-5, p. 9

(12) A-5, p. 21

right flank with the initial mission of vigorous patrolling and maintaining contact with Eighth Army. The 34th Division was on the Corps right with the 91st Division, 88th Division, and 6th South African Division on the left of the 34th in the order listed. (See Map "B") (15)

The 34th Division had occupied a defensive position astride Highway 65 during the month of March 1945. On 2 April, the Division was relieved in place and sent to the rear for training and rest. Four days later, the Division received orders to prepare for the attack.

The 34th Division zone of attack, as directed by II Corps commander, was east of Highway 65. In the first phase of the operations, the Division was to capture DEI MORI Hill and Hill 356, two enemy strongpoints. After the initial objectives were taken, the Division's left flank was to be extended to Highway 65 and the weight of the Division attack would then be north along this road which led directly to BOLOGNA. (See Map "B") (14)

During the period of defensive operations, the 34th Division had absorbed sufficient replacements to bring the unit almost up to authorized strength. During the time that the Division was out of the line, a vigorous retaining program had been carried out with special emphasis on breaching minefields and reducing fortified areas. The logistical situation was excellent and morale was high. Combat efficiency was generally excellent although the Division had been in action for over two years. (15)

The weather was extremely favorable for offensive operation. Spring had come early in Italy and the winter snows had melted. There had been few rains, and roads were excellent for motor movement. Furthermore, the good visibility afforded aircraft, assured effective air support of ground operations.

(13) A-5, p. 25

(14) A-4, Ch. XXIV

(15) Personal knowledge

ENEMY SITUATION

The German units immediately opposing the 34th Division were elements of the 65th Grenadier Division, namely the 146th and 147th Regiments. (See Map "C") Also near the Division zone were elements of the 305th Division and the 1st Parachute Division. The combat efficiency of 65th Grenadier Division can best be described by pointing out that previous limited objective attacks in this sector had met with a stubborn and frequently successful defense by the Germans. (16)

The enemy defenses in the Division zone were based primarily on two long parallel ridges running slightly east of north and separated by a steep-sided gully. On the SEVIZZANO ridge on the west the enemy positions roughly paralleled a little east-west road across the ridge. On the eastern ridge enemy defenses were centered around the ruins of GORGOGNANO Church and Cemetery and DEI MORI Hill. It was believed that secondary German positions had been prepared to the rear and parallel to these positions. These German positions had been prepared with methodical exactness. SEVIZZANO ridge was bristling with automatic weapons and a deep ditch had been dug across the open ground in rear of the positions leading to the CAVINSANO River supply route. The GORGOGNANO Church position had been developed to the point that the Germans could stay in underground tunnels and call for artillery and mortar fires on the position without danger of being hit themselves.

To the left of SEVIZZANO ridge on the division west flank was CAVINSANO River running in a southwest-northeast direction. On the right of the same ridge was the RIO CAMPIRILE River, the boundary between battalions. This river ran almost directly north. (See Map "C") (17) (18)

(16) A-6, Annex No. 1-A

(17) A-9, Annex 1-13

(18) A-1, p. 80

34TH DIVISION PLAN OF ATTACK

Since the 34th Division already had one regiment on the present defensive line and the zone of attack was fairly narrow, General Bolte planned to commit only one regiment, the 168th, in the initial attack. The 168th was to attack with the mission of seizing SEVIZZANO ridge, GORGOGNANO Church, DEI MORI Hill and continuing the attack to the north. (19)

ATTACK PLAN, 168TH INFANTRY

The attack of the 168th Regiment, as planned by Colonel Henry C. Hine, Jr. the Regimental Commander, called for the 2nd and 3rd Battalions to make the initial assault with the main effort being made by the 2nd Battalion on the left. The 1st Battalion was initially in regimental reserve. The battalion was to prepare to pass through either assault battalion to maintain the continuity of the attack. Special attention was to be given to the battalion in the left sector of the regimental zone. (See Map "C") (20) The attack jumped off early on the morning of 16th April and after two days of severe fighting the 2nd and 3rd battalions had secured their initial objectives and were reorganizing preparatory to continuing the advance.

MOVEMENT TO LINE OF DEPARTURE

At 2225 hours on the night of 17 April, Company A, 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry was ordered to move from the battalion assembly area south of MT. BELMONTE and occupy a position along the western edge of SEVIZZANO Ridge. (See Map "D") The mission of the company was to protect the left flank of the regiment and be ready to attack on order. The movement to the new position was completed by 0210 hours, 18 April. There was no enemy fire directed against the advancing elements, but progress was slow because of the rough, hilly terrain and the inherent difficulties of cross-country night marches. (21)

(19) A-4, ch. XXIV

(20) A-9, p. 1

(21) Personal knowledge

The Battalion Commander, Major Barrows, had notified the company commander that the probable objective of A company would be C. SPUNGIOLA*, two shell-wrecked buildings on high ground about 400 yards northwest of SEVIZZANO ridge. He had ordered the commander, Company A, to send out a combat patrol to find a feasible route to the objective, as soon as the company was in position on SEVIZZANO ridge. This patrol, consisting of twenty men and the platoon leader of the 1st platoon, was sent out as soon as directed. It returned at 0535 hours with word that the steep banks bordering the CAVINSANO River on the company's left flank had made it impossible for the men to cross the river and complete the mission. (22)

On learning of the failure of the combat patrol to find an attack route, the company commander at 0635 hours ordered two reconnaissance patrols sent out with the mission of plotting a path through the minefield believed to exist southeast of the company's position. Both patrols were ordered to complete the mission as soon as possible. The patrols returned at 0830 hours and one patrol was successful, reporting that a German minefield (Schu-mines) had been discovered and that a footpath had been marked through the field with white tape. The patrol had also physically reconnoitered a route as far as the river and had visually examined an extension of the route to the objective on the slope west of the stream.

When the battalion commander was notified of the failure of the combat patrol, he indicated that another patrol would have to be dispatched. At 1015 hours, however, a telephone order was received stating that no patrols would be sent out until further notice.

Company A continued to occupy positions along the western half of the ridge during the daylight hours of 18 April. The positions were shelled at frequent intervals during the day, the heaviest barrage occurring at 0930 hours. At that time the house located near the middle

(22) Personal knowledge

*Letter C. is abbreviation for CASA, meaning house

of the ridge received two direct hits. There were no casualties as the building was not occupied by any of our men. Most of the enemy rounds then and later in the day cleared the ridge and landed in a draw south of our position.

At 1830 hours the battalion commander contacted the A company commander and ordered the company to prepare to attack at nightfall. No attack objective was given. One hour later the battalion commander again called and gave an attack order as follows: "The 1st Battalion will attack through the 2nd Battalion, jumping off at 2000 hours tonight. The objective will be the terrain feature at RIOSTO which must be taken before daybreak. Companies A and B with Company A leading will make the attack. Company C will be in reserve. All supporting weapons of the battalion with sufficient range will fire on the objective until notified by the assaulting elements to lift their fires. I recommend that the attacking units, Companies A and B, follow the route of the CAVINSANO River to reach their objective." The company commander informed Major Barrows that he had not seen the objective on the ground as all his attention and planning had been directed toward C. SPUNGIOLA which he thought would be the objective. The battalion commander stated that the company commander should be able to locate the objective on the ground if he could find it on the map. He again reemphasized that RIOSTO must be captured before daylight. (25)

Since less than 30 minutes remained before the attack jumped off, there was little time for planning. Furthermore, a visual reconnaissance was not possible from the company location. A short map study to determine the location of RIOSTO and the routes thereto was all that was feasible. The most logical formation to traverse the river was a column of platoons with each platoon also in column and this was the formation adopted. The order of march was the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and Weapons platoon, followed by the Machine Gun Section of Company D and Com-

(23) Personal knowledge; no copy of attack order exists.

pany Headquarters. The Company Command Post at the start of the march was at the head of the 2nd platoon. No detailed plan of attack could be made since the exact nature of the terrain at the objective was unknown and enemy strength there was undetermined.

NARRATION

ADVANCE DOWN THE CAVINSANO RIVER

At 2000 hours Company A crossed the line of departure. Although the objective had been changed at virtually the last minute, the path through the minefield could still be used as a route to the CAVINSANO River. In accordance with the battalion commander's recommendation, it was planned to follow the river until a point opposite RIOSTO had been reached and then make plans for assaulting the objective.

When the company reached the river and started downstream, eleven Germans appeared in front of a dugout on the east bank of the stream. They were waving white flags in a gesture of surrender. Two men were detailed to take all the prisoners except one back to battalion headquarters which was located on the south slope of MT. BELMONTE. One prisoner was persuaded to remain and guide the company through any minefields that might be encountered. (24)

The company continued to advance along and through the river for about 400 yards. A route along the sides of the river was followed as much as possible, but at times the steepness of the banks forced the men to wade the stream which in places was waist deep. The column was now in enemy territory and the men were warned to be on the alert for enemy patrols. They were also ordered to cut any communication lines which they discovered. (25)

After continuing for another 300 yards, a light was sighted on the reverse slope of a small hill. The first platoon had halted when they sighted the light and the company commander and four men from the pla-

(24) Personal knowledge.

(25) Personal knowledge.

toon went forward to investigate. A German dugout was discovered cleverly constructed on the reverse slope of the hill, and the light was coming from cracks in the door. The 1st platoon was deployed in an arc around the dugout; one man jerked the door open; and the Krauts were ordered to surrender. They gave up without a fight and, when questioned, said that three more Germans were manning a machine gun position about 100 yards from the dugout. One squad of the first platoon took one of the Germans and proceeded to the machine gun position. Here the German called to the crew, telling them to surrender as they were surrounded by American troops. Thus three more prisoners were added to our total. The last three prisoners captured said that other enemy dugouts were located farther up the slope on the east side of the river. It was a tempting development. It was doubtful if the Germans in these dugouts had the slightest idea that two company-size units were in the vicinity. The company commander, however, decided against assaulting these dugouts since it was now 0200 hours and only four and one-half hours of darkness remained in which to complete the mission. Therefore the company resumed the advance down the river. (26)

After this last action, the company commander had contacted the battalion commander and informed him of the situation and the location of the company. He also informed the battalion commander that he still could not see the objective since the night was very dark and ground forms were difficult to recognize. The battalion commander said that he would request the 105mm Howitzers to fire white phosphorus on the terrain feature. This expedient did not prove too successful. The projectiles could be heard passing overhead, but the high, steep sides of the river bank prevented a view of their point of impact. (27)

After the column had continued down the river for approximately twenty minutes, the operator of the SCR-300 notified the company commander that he was unable to contact the battalion command post.

(26) Personal knowledge

(27) Personal knowledge

Since the unit was traveling along low ground, the operator was ordered to climb the bank of the river and again try to reach the command post. This effort met with failure. There was no mystery as to what was wrong; the battery of the radio had gone dead and there were no replacements. Thereafter, the company was out of radio contact with battalion headquarters for some time. (28)

THE SKIRMISH AT THE DRAW

After another hour of slow progress down the river, four more Germans were surprised on sentry duty outside a dugout and taken prisoner. The lack of security forces around the German positions was amazing and difficult to account for. It can perhaps best be explained by two facts; (1) the heavy artillery and mortar barrages that they had been receiving made them reluctant to do any night patrolling; and (2) the rear echelon troops expected that the front line troops would give them adequate warning of any attack. In any event, the enemy troops were much surprised at A company appearing behind their lines.

One of the captured Germans said that the unit was near several German dugouts, in fact, only about fifty yards from them. He was ordered to tell the occupants to surrender. This method, which had worked so well before, failed completely. Instead of surrendering, the Germans answered with a volley of rifle and machine pistol fire. The 1st platoon returned the fire and a fire fight lasting for about fifteen minutes ensued. Abruptly the firing broke off; the Germans had either withdrawn to a new position or else were holding their fire until we tried to assault their positions. (29)

It is pertinent to examine the terrain at this point. Directly to our front and extending to the left was a deep draw. In the rear of this draw was the outline of a high hill. (See Map "D") One of the

(28) Personal knowledge

(29) Personal knowledge

recently captured prisoners had told us that we were near RIOSTO and had pointed in the general direction of the hill when he was asked to indicate where it was. From this information and making a rough estimate of the distance traveled, the company commander believed that the company was close to the objective. He was unwilling to try to cross the draw in the darkness, so a decision was made to have the men dig in on the south side of the draw and make the attack on the objective at daybreak, if the battalion commander approved the plan.

At 0430, the battalion wire team which was following B company laid a line to the Company A Command Post. Major Barrows did not think much of the scheme. He pointed out that the regimental commander wanted the objective taken before daylight, and that there would still be an element of surprise if the company attacked within the next two and one-half hours. The company commander doubted that there would be much surprise in view of the recent fire fight, but he informed the battalion commander that he would take the objective if it could be located. Therefore, the men were ordered out of their slit trenches and the company continued the advance, moving along a trail which had been discovered along the west bank of the river. (30)

ADVANCE TO LA CROCE

When the advance down the river was resumed, the 2nd Platoon was ordered to the front of the column followed by the 3rd Platoon, Machine Gun Section of Company D, 1st Platoon, Weapons Platoon, and Company Headquarters. The company traveled along the bank of the river and crossed the river to the other side, still following the trail. Since the unit was now well in enemy territory, the company commander moved up to the head of the column. This was a poor move, in view of subsequent events. A further advance of 200 yards was made, and word came from the rear of the column that contact had been lost with B company

(30) Personal knowledge

and two platoons of A company plus the company A headquarters group. A patrol of four men were sent back to try to regain contact, with orders to rejoin the company within thirty minutes if the missing elements could not be found. This was necessitated by the fact the time was now 0500 hours and with daybreak approaching it was felt that no more time could be spared in an attempt to regain contact. The patrol returned at the end of the allotted time with word that the remainder of the column could not be located. (31)

The situation was such that a decision would have to be made as to the future action of the unit. It was still uncertain as to the exact location of the objective. The fact that it would be daylight in another half hour required that something be done immediately. The river bed would be a very undesirable location after the night was over. The company commander decided that the company would move up the highest hill on the west bank of the river; attack and capture the hill if necessary; and attempt to reestablish communication with battalion headquarters. Therefore, just at daybreak the company moved up a trail toward the top of a hill which appeared to be one of the highest terrain features in the area. (See Map "C")

The men of the unit were fairly well exhausted. The company had been moving all night and had stopped to dig slit trenches at one time. The military crest of the hill was reached after a slow arduous climb shortly after 0600 hours. Here, a system of German trenches was discovered and the commander ordered the men into these positions.

ACTION AT LA CROCE

The company had just occupied the trenches when eight Germans were sighted moving up the same trail by which we had reached the summit of the hill. The Germans were well spaced out along the trail with about ten yards between each man. The company commander waited until the first

(31) Personal knowledge

enemy was about five yards from our positions, then ordered them to surrender. The Germans were obviously surprised at the presence of American troops on the hill. One of them laughed and made a gesture as if to say: "Don't play jokes on us so early in the morning." A second look convinced him and the rest of the group that the men in the trenches were not German troops. All the enemy except one, surrendered immediately. The man at the end of the column, whom we later found was an officer, started running back down the trail. A volley of shots was fired at him but he had only about five yards to run before he was hidden from view, and he made good his escape. The other seven enemy were disarmed and placed in the trenches with our troops. The eight men informed the company commander that they constituted an anti-tank squad which was to occupy the position that the American troops now held. (52)

Since it was daylight, the company commander made a detailed study of his map to find out exactly where the unit was located. In a short time he had ascertained that the company, (minus two platoons assumed to be with B company) had passed the objective and was on a hill in the vicinity of LA GROCE. The position now held was about 800 yards north of the RIOSTO terrain feature. (See Map "E") The assigned mission had not been accomplished in the strictest sense of the word, but the company, if it could hold the present hill, had actually done more in the way of taking terrain than was intended. (See Map "E")

From a defensive standpoint the position of the company was not too good. Approximately one hundred men occupied a defensive system that was roughly 150 yards wide and not more than 15 yards deep. The defensive installations consisted of one long trench that made a slight arc and six two-man foxholes. The large trench was about five feet wide and two feet deep. It would offer good protection against small

(52) Personal knowledge

arms fire but would be of little use against artillery and mortar fire. The company commander had lost the opportunity for employing a defense in depth when he failed to occupy the entire terrain feature on arrival at the top of the hill. At that time if he had ordered the company to attack, the entire ridge plus the Palace* of RIOSTO might have been taken. The Palace of RIOSTO stood on the highest piece of terrain in the area, and German weapons from in and around this Palace were to cause us much anxiety for the next seven hours. (See Map "E") (33)

The company commander believed that the unit was almost completely surrounded by enemy troops. He knew that the enemy occupied the Palace of RIOSTO and that other enemy forces were to the north. RIOSTO was also occupied by an enemy force unless Company B plus the two platoons of Company A had captured it; this was unlikely since no firing had been heard from that vicinity. The situation on our right was unknown. The company had not been ordered to maintain contact with the unit on our right flank. (See Map "E")

Tangible evidence of enemy troops in most of the areas listed above was forthcoming when machine guns started firing from RIOSTO and the Palace of RIOSTO and artillery rounds came in from the north. (See Map "E") The machine gun fire was more annoying than harmful. The machine gun firing from the Palace was emplaced in a position higher than our location, but the angle of fire was not great enough to penetrate the trenches. Therefore, all required of the men was that they did not expose themselves. The machine gun firing from RIOSTO could not possibly hit the men in the trenches as it was firing from a location no higher than the terrain feature that the company occupied. The artillery caused much more concern as any direct hit in the trench would cause several casualties. Casualties are normal, but casualties at this time would be of particular concern since their evacuation would have to be carried

(33) Personal knowledge

*Shown on maps as PAL DI

out through about nine hundred yards of enemy territory. Moreover, the company commander could not call for litter bearers or any other medical support. (34)

During the next two hours the company was subjected to fairly heavy machine gun fire and artillery barrages. Neither type of fire caused us any damage. The fact that the unit came through all the artillery barrages unscathed was an unusually fortunate circumstance. The artillery rounds would start falling about two hundred yards beyond our position and begin creeping back toward our trenches. Usually, when the rounds were falling close enough to the trenches to cause casualties, the firing would cease. Several times had the enemy guns continued firing at a reduced range they would undoubtedly have hit our men in the trenches.

About 1000 hours, planes of the Tactical Air Force started attacking German front line positions. These attacks were made by P-47's, using both rockets and machine guns. Some of these low level attacks were being carried out uncomfortably close to the A company position. Since the unit was actually in a German defensive position, the company commander decided to employ a recognition signal in order to make sure the position would not be bombed and strafed by our own air force. Therefore, two yellow smoke grenades were thrown in front of the trenches. The aircraft undoubtedly saw the smoke from the grenades. So did the German artillery observers. The smoke was no sooner released than fifteen to twenty artillery rounds came in. Judging from the sound of the gun and the high velocity of the shells, it was estimated that these were rounds from self-propelled artillery. Fortunately the grenades had been thrown about thirty yards from the trench and that is almost exactly where the shells landed. No more grenade signals were used.(35)

At 1000 hours, increased firing was heard in the vicinity of the

(34) Personal knowledge

(35) Personal knowledge

Palace of RIOSTO. We could recognize the firing of a United States machine gun and it was believed that possibly an attack was being launched on this strong point either by B company or elements of the 91st Division. The company commander made plans for attacking across the 400-500 yards of terrain between our position and the Palace. This would aid the attacking unit if an actual assault was in progress. The two machine guns of the section were set up in firing position and commenced firing on the Palace and surrounding area. If an attack was made, it was planned to send both platoons abreast toward the Palace. Firing was received from the Palace, but no attack by our forces materialized. After our machine guns had fired for about five minutes and the ammunition box had been shot off one of them, the company commander decided that no attack by our forces was in progress. Therefore the machine guns were pulled back down in the trench. (36)

THE ATTACK ON RIOSTO BY COMPANY B

Approximately one-half hour later extensive firing was heard from the vicinity of RIOSTO. Since this was the attack on A company's original objective, and two platoons of A company were involved, it is pertinent to consider the action of B company at this time. 1st Lieutenant James C. Vaughan, B Company Commander, reorganized his company and prepared to move when the order to advance was received south of the draw. The 1st platoon and weapons platoon of A company were slow in getting ready to move and did not move out with their parent company. The B company commander thereupon incorporated these units into his column. The head of the B company column moved across the draw and, instead of continuing downstream as A company had done, followed a trail to the left. (See Map "D") (37)

✓ The B company commander was near the head of the column at this time, and he observed a white phosphorous shell strike near the top of

(36) Personal knowledge

(37) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain James C. Vaughan

the hill to his front. The company commander halted the column and waited to see if any more white phosphorous shells would fall at the same location. The battalion commander had stated that white phosphorous shells would be fired on the objective at five minute intervals. During the fifteen minutes that the B company commander observed, the shells fell at exact five minute periods. Lieutenant Vaughan was thus able to locate the objective. (38)

Although the battalion order had directed that A company make the assault on the objective, the B company commander decided to move toward RIOSTO. He was in a similar situation to that in which the A company commander had previously found himself, in that daybreak was approaching and his company was on low terrain. He therefore deployed his platoons in line with each platoon as skirmishers and ordered the entire company plus the two platoons of A company up the hill toward C. VALL. The company was within thirty yards of C. VALL when enemy fire was received. The men of B company returned the fire and a brisk fire fight lasting for about twenty minutes ensued. At the end of this time, fifteen Germans occupying positions in the vicinity of C. VALL surrendered. Their decision to surrender was undoubtedly influenced by the great volume of fire that they were receiving from a reinforced company. (39)

One of the prisoners spoke English fluently and was a valuable source of information. He informed the B company commander of the exact location of RIOSTO. He also "Volunteered" the information that over a platoon of Germans occupied a hill just south of RIOSTO. (See Map "E")

Lieutenant Vaughan immediately made plans to capture this hill. He realized that resistance, if judged by the number of Germans oc-

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- (38) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain James C. Vaughan
(39) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain James C. Vaughan

cupying the position, would be more determined than at C. VALL. Also, he believed that a frontal attack against the hill, even if successful, would result in some of the Germans withdrawing to defensive positions in the rear. He therefore disposed two platoons, the 3rd platoon of company B and the 1st platoon of company A, plus the machine guns of the weapons platoons in the vicinity of C. VALL to form a base of fire for his maneuver elements. He placed the mortars of the two weapons platoons south of C. VALL near the deep draw. The 1st platoon of B company was sent around the left of the hill to attack it from the left rear and the 2nd platoon around the right side to attack the hill from the right rear. These two platoons successfully executed this enveloping movement and moved up the slopes of the hill to assault the enemy positions. The Germans did not give up without stiff resistance. For nearly an hour they successfully beat back the attempts to capture the hill. Finally the officer in charge of the German troops was wounded and resistance ceased almost immediately. B company took a total of forty German prisoners from the hill. After the company had captured the hill, the company commander directed the two assault platoons to advance toward RIOSTO. No resistance was encountered in the small hamlet. Any Germans that may have been occupying the hill earlier in the morning had either withdrawn to the Palace of RIOSTO or had taken up positions on the hill captured by B company. (40)

When the men of B company reached RIOSTO, they sighted the men in the positions near LA CROCE and notified their commander. The B company commander directed that no one fire at the positions unless fired upon. He observed the personnel in the trenches through his field glasses and definitely ascertained that they were American troops. Upon establishing that A company was in the positions, he notified the battalion commander that the portion of the company A which had been

(40) Personal knowledge; statement of Captain James G. Vaughan

out of contact had been found. He was informed by the battalion commander that A and B companies would clear the Palace of RIOSTO and the surrounding area that night, attacking from positions the companies now held. (41)

When the men of company B had definitely established that A company occupied the positions near LA CROCE, they gave a hand signal. This signal was returned, and the personnel of A company felt much better now that enemy troops were no longer in the rear area.

Although the morale of the men was higher, their desire to eat was also great. Since the objective was to have been captured by daylight, no ration other than the evening meal on 18 April had been issued. An extra ration should have been issued to take care of the contingency that the objective might not be captured on schedule.

THE AFTERNOON AT LA CROCE

The report on our exact location had an immediate effect on the firing against the Palace of RIOSTO. Before noon, no artillery had been directed against this strong point as the regimental commander thought that the missing A company elements might be at this location. On learning that the company did not occupy the position, he dispatched a section of tanks to the high ground on the east bank of the CAVINSANO river, directly opposite the Palace. These tanks opened up with direct fire against the Palace and surrounding area. Both the tanks and the impact area could be seen from the A company position. The second volley from the tanks landed in front of the Palace and, almost the same instant, three Germans emerged from a dug in machine gun position and started running for cover. The two machine guns of the section attached to A company immediately started firing at the Germans but failed completely to hit them. Although this failure should not be condoned, the Germans did put on a beautiful exhibition of broken-field running in dodging the bullets. The machine

(41) Personal knowledge; statement of Captain James C. Vaughan

gun which had harrassed us all morning from the Palace fired no more. (42)

The rest of the afternoon was spent in position, but conditions were not as fatiguing as they had been in the forenoon. Both machine guns which had been firing at A company all through the morning had been eliminated. Moreover, the artillery fire which had been coming from the front had dwindled until only two or three rounds every half-hour were now landing. The company commander should have attempted to send back a patrol to contact company B at this time. There is also a possibility that a patrol sent back when the company first arrived at the position could have reached the battalion command post. Although the company commander had made positive decisions up to the time the position had been taken, he had thereafter adopted a cautious attitude. Although the action had been completely successful, it might not have been so had not the enemy been planning an early withdrawal. The company's poor defensive position and the complete lack of contact with battalion headquarters would have caused much difficulty had the enemy made a determined counter-attack.

Nothing eventful happened the remainder of the afternoon. At approximately 1800 hours, the positions and surrounding area received one of the heaviest artillery barrages of the day. Although the company commander was relatively inexperienced in combat operations, he believed that this indicated a German withdrawal.

ATTACK ON THE PALACE OF RIOSTO

When darkness fell, the company commander immediately took an eight-man patrol and started toward RIOSTO to contact the B company commander. The patrol reached the B company position in twenty minutes and there, between hurried bites on a sandwich, the company commander was briefed on the actions of B company up to that time. The A company commander then contacted the battalion commander who repeated the order

(42) Personal knowledge

that had been given to the B company commander, namely that A and B companies would attack simultaneously from their present positions at 2400 hours, 19 April to capture the Palace of RIOSTO and the surrounding area. (43)

The A company commander returned to LA CROCE. He utilized the two platoons of the company which had been with B company plus the patrol to carry C rations to the positions.

On arriving at the company position, the rations were distributed to the men. The company commander formulated a plan of attack immediately since it was nearly midnight, the time the attack was to start.

Unlike the operation on the night of 18 April, there were few unknown factors for this attack. The area of operations and the objective had been under scrutiny all day. The company commander decided to employ 1st and 2nd platoons abreast to clear the ridge, 1st platoon on the right. The 3rd platoon was to follow the right platoon and on order clear the area north of the ridge. The machine guns were emplaced to fire in a gap between the 1st and 2nd platoon and toward the flanks. The mortars were emplaced to fire on any enemy counterattack that might develop. As the situation developed, such a complete and detailed plan was not needed. The ridge and the area in the vicinity of the Palace were devoid of German troops. The 3rd platoon sighted a group of withdrawing enemy troops on the north slope of the hill and wounded three of them. The mission was completed at 0230 hours, 20 April. (44)

The Germans in this sector had started a complete withdrawal on the night of 19-20 April. (45) On the morning of 20 April, elements of the 133rd Infantry passed through A company. The 1st Battalion Commander was at the A company command post the next morning and directed the company to return to the rear for a short period of relief. (46)

(43) Personal knowledge

(44) Personal knowledge

(45) A-1, p. 87

(46) Personal knowledge

This operation was a complete success in spite of the failure of the company commander to locate the objective and the loss of contact between elements of the attacking column. The company advanced through over a mile of enemy-held terrain; captured twenty nine Germans; and suffered no casualties. Together with B company, nearly a hundred enemy troops were captured during the operation. The movement of the company to LA CROCE outflanked the key position at the Palace of RIOSTO and forced the enemy to withdraw from this position. The RIOSTO-Palace of RIOSTO-LA CROCE area was a strong German secondary position, and the capture of this terrain complex played an important part in forcing a German withdrawal in this area.

No less important to the company commander was the great effect of the operation on the morale of the men. Although success in battle is one of the greatest morale factors, success without casualties has an even greater effect on morale. Morale of the company following this operation was at its peak.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. SURPRISE

In spite of the fact that the Germans in this sector had been under attack for three days and their initial defensive line breached, the quick movement of the company down the river caught them completely unprepared. They undoubtedly expected that the advance would be made in orthodox stages with reorganization after the first attack and objectives assigned which would not be so far in the rear of their line. Too they probably did not visualize the CAVINSANO RIVER, a narrow, steep sided stream, as a likely avenue of approach into their position. As a rule, attacks by our forces had previously been made along ridges and high ground, where possible, rather than along low terrain. The attempted movement of a German gun crew into the defensive position that the company occupied near LA CROCE and their refusal, at first,

to believe that American troops were occupying these positions is a dramatic illustration of the amount of surprise achieved. The surprise of the operation more than compensated for the tactical errors that were committed.

2. SECURITY

The success of the mission was due largely to the failure of the enemy to provide adequate security for his forces. No commander of a unit, no matter how large or small it may be, can depend on someone else to provide him warning of an impending attack. The use of flares, mines, and other passive measures should not be overemphasized at the expense of the human element. A clever or even a lucky opponent may avoid these. The eyes and ears of the trained soldier are much harder to bypass. They may, at times, be fooled but will usually be suspicious enough to cause an alarm.

If the enemy had discovered the long column soon after it started down the river bed, he could have prevented our using that route. The draw through which the column traveled would have been untenable if subjected to artillery and mortar fire. If this had happened, the company would have had only two courses to follow: (1) go forward and receive prohibitive casualties; or (2) withdraw and reconnoiter for another route, a difficult proposition on a dark night.

A commander must realize that no matter how efficient a system of security may be during the day, it will have to be reinforced at night. The fact that night operations are the exception rather than the rule should not lull any unit into a false sense of security during darkness.

3. COMMUNICATIONS

No matter how trying the conditions under which a unit is operating, the communications equipment should be checked before starting an attack. Good communication is somewhat like an insurance policy;

when needed the worst it is often lacking. In an attack operations where wire lines may not or cannot be laid, it is essential that radios be in efficient working order. The axiom that signal communication is the voice of command should never be forgotten because, when communication fails, so does command. Had the SCR-300 of the company remained effective, the company could have: (1) notified the battalion commander of our location; (2) called for artillery fire on the enemy positions that we had located; and (3) with battalion approval, captured the Palace of RIOSTO ten to twelve hours before it was actually siezed.

4. TERRAIN APPRECIATION

The Commander, Company B should have appreciated the value of the terrain feature at the Palace of RIOSTO. If he had quickly grasped the fact that this was the key terrain the area and siezed it early on the morning of 19 April, it would have had significant and immediate results. Primarily, it would have cut off completely the enemy at RIOSTO and forced their surrender or withdrawal. Secondarily it would have meant that the company would not have had to spend the entire day pinned down by enemy fire.

The position of Company B on the high ground in the vicinity of LA CROCE was extremely poor from a defensive standpoint. There was scaracely any depth to the position, consequently an attack against either flank would probably succeeded in overrunning the one position very quickly. Furthermore, a strong frontal attack, if not stopped in front of the trench would have had little difficulty in penetrating such a shallow defense.

The limited area in which the unit was situated made it extremely vulnerable to artillery and mortar fire. It was pure luck that none of the enemy artillery shells landed in the position, and for some unknown reason no mortar fire was received during the day on the hill.

5. CONTACT DURING NIGHT MOVEMENTS

Night movement of units are extremely difficult to control. Every effort should be made to insure that men remain within signalling distance of each other. In the column formation that the company used in advancing down the river, the company commander should have made sure that each man in the column understood that he was to remain in contact with the men to his front and rear. This undoubtedly would have prevented the loss of contact between elements of the column. Furthermore, the position of the Commander, Company A at the head of the column did not help the situation. In this position he was the last man in the column to receive word that contact had been lost.

6. RATIONS

Some thought should have been given to the possibility that the attack would not go as scheduled. If that had been done, the battalion commander, and A company commander would have realized that extra rations were needed. The men were carrying only their individual weapons and ammunition and could easily have carried one-third or two-thirds of a ration. As it was, the absence of food had no adverse effect on the operation, but the men would have been in poor condition for any severe fighting on 19 April.

7. DISSEMINATION OF PLANS AND ORDERS

The Commander, Company A should have been notified that the objective contemplated for his company might be changed. This is not intended as an excuse for the failure of the company commander to locate the objective. It is true that changes in plan are normal, but any information that the plans might be changed is of great value to a subordinate leader. Due to the fact that the attack order almost coincided with the time of departure, the commander had insufficient time to devise a plan. He further did not have time to make a visual reconnaissance of the area over which his unit was to operate. Historical records