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OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 304TH INFANTRY  
(76TH INFANTRY DIVISION) CROSSING THE KYLL RIVER  
AND SEIZING ORENHOFEN, GERMANY, 3-5 MARCH 1945  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION AT-  
TACKING A RIVER LINE AT NIGHT, FOLLOWED BY AN ATTACK  
ON A TOWN AND A COUNTERATTACK BY THE ENEMY

Captain Don R. Hickman, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. I

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OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 304TH INFANTRY  
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INTRODUCTION

The "Battle of the Bulge" was over by 28 January 1945, and the American 3d Army lines were being reconstructed along the German - Luxembourg border. The ground lost in the German drive into the Ardennes had been regained and the Allied Armies shifted men and units along the Siegfried Line for what proved to be the last great drive into the heart of Germany. (1)

On the 6th of February the XII Corps of the US 3d Army attack northeast from Echternach, Luxembourg. This Corps consisted of the 5th, 76th and 80th Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armored Division. Specifically, the mission of the Corps was to secure a bridgehead over the Sauer River, attack and seize Bitburg and be prepared to continue the attack north or northeast. (2) (See Map A)

On 28 February 1945, elements of the 5th Infantry and the 4th Armored Divisions entered Bitburg thus accomplishing the first part of the Corps mission. Now the Corps was to regroup and be prepared to continue its drive east and northeast on order. (3)

*Terrain not shown*  
The terrain over which the Corps had been attacking was a series of cross compartments. These obstacles were formed by several successive rivers, including the Sauer,

(1) A-8, p. 164; (2) A-3, p. 255; (3) A-11, p. 322.

Prum, Nims and the Kyll. They had presented a formidable barrier to armor. On 3 March 1945, only the Kyll River stood between the 3d Army and a speedy run to the Rhine River. (4)

In Letter of Instructions No. 16, dated 23 February 1945, Headquarters 12th Army Group, the 3d Army was given the mission of seizing the necessary bridgeheads over the Kyll River and to concentrate forces in preparation for further advance to the east. (5)

This monograph covers the operations of the 3d Battalion, 304th Infantry, 76th Infantry Division of the XII Corps, 3d United States Army and the part the battalion played in the accomplishment of the Army mission.

#### 76TH DIVISION SITUATION

The XII Corps had closed up to the Kyll River by 3 March with the 80th Division on the left, the 5th Division in the center and the 76th Division on the right. The 4th Armored Division closed in behind the 5th Division on the night of 3 March and was prepared to pass through the 5th Division bridgehead after its establishment across the river. (6) The 10th Armored Division, the left flank unit of the XX Corps was along the Moselle River and on the right of the 76th Division. (See Map B) There was a gap of six miles between the 76th Division and the 10th Armored Division. On the morning of 3 March, Major General William R. Schmidt, Commanding the 76th Infantry Division issued his

(4) A-11, p. 320; (5) A-3, p. 293; (6) A-6, p. 318.

Field Order. (7) It directed the 304th Infantry to cross the Kyll River in the vicinity of Orenhofen-Hosten with the mission of establishing a bridgehead from which the Division could continue its attack to the east. (See Map C) The regiment was reinforced with Co. A, 301st Engineer Battalion, Co. B, 702d Tank Battalion, Co. A, 301st Medical Battalion and Company C of the 91st Chemical Mortar Battalion. (8)

The 385th Infantry (less 1st and 2d Battalions) with one troop of the 2d Cavalry Group in support, was directed to take up screening positions along the river to support the crossing. The 417th Infantry was in Division Reserve. (9)

Behind the 304th Infantry, an armored task force was formed from other elements of the division and attached troops. (10) The mission of this unit was to exploit east through the Division bridgehead. (11)

This force, known as task force "Onaway", was composed of the 17th Armored Group Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 702d Tank Battalion, the 1st and 2d battalions of the 385th Infantry (motorized), the 355th Field Artillery Battalion, Company B, (-) 301st Engineers, 76th Division Reconnaissance Troop, Co. B - 808th Tank Destroyer Battalion, Battery B - 778th A.A.A. A.W. Battalion, and the necessary administrative personnel to sustain them. (12)

Now the die was cast and it remained only for the commanders to make the necessary reconnaissance, issue orders

(7) A-4, p. 117; (8) A-4, p. 118; (9) (10) (11) (12) A-4, p. 118.

and for the troops to move.

### THE ENEMY

Let us consider, here, the enemy that was confronting the division on 3 March. Elements of the 212th, 560th and 9th German Infantry Divisions were across the river <sup>(where)</sup> trying to recover their balance lost as a result of the jar received, both in the "Battle of the Bulge" and from the continuing drive of the 3d Army. (13)

They were not all the cream of Hitler's once great army, but they still constituted a formidable force.

To give some accurate picture of their efficiency on 4 March, let us examine figures from a study made of 40,395 prisoners captured by the 3d United States Army between 19 February 1945, and 13 March 1945. It was found that 59½% were first rate combat elements from enemy divisions, second rate elements constituted 11% -- including replacement battalions and Volkstrum units, 29½% were classified as: service and supply troops of divisions, G.H.Q. Artillery, Engineers and flak units, personnel of higher headquarters and G.H.Q. supply and service units. (14)

### 304TH INFANTRY REGIMENTAL PLAN OF ATTACK

The 76th Division plan called for the 304th Infantry to attack and seize the bridgehead in the Orenhofen-Hosten area. The 304th Regimental Commander's plan was for the

(13) A-4, p. 117; (14) A-7, Column II, III.

2d Battalion, with one company of the 1st Battalion attached, to attack from Idenheim and take Hosten on the left of the regimental zone and for the 3d Battalion on the right to seize Orenhofen. (See Map C) The regimental reconnaissance dictated that the 2d Battalion would move across the Kyll in assault boats. It was evident that assault boats could not be carried to the river bank in the 3d Battalion area, therefore it would necessitate the erection of a foot bridge in that zone. (15)

Company A, 301st Engineer Battalion attached to the 304th Infantry for the attack was to furnish the necessary boats for the 2d Battalion and bridging material for the 3d Battalion.

The important elements of information relayed by the regimental commander to his subordinates were: (1) that the regiment was to be the right flank unit of the XII Corps; (2) that there was a gap of six miles between the 3d Battalion, on the right flank of the XII Corps, and the 10th Armored Division on the left flank of the XX Corps, along the Moselle River. This made the position of the 3d Battalion critical. (16)

#### PREPARATIONS AND THE ATTACK OF THE 3RD BATTALION

It was 1400 hours on 3 March 1945, when the company commanders of the 3d Battalion, 304th Infantry were called to their telephones for a conference call. (17) Lt. C.

(15) Statement of Major J. F. Pugh, Regt S-3; (16) Statement of Lt. Col. Arnold T. Barber, 3d Battalion Commander, Dec. 1945; (17) Personal knowledge.

P. Smith, III, the Battalion S-2, was making the call for the battalion commander and the directive he issued was for all the company commanders to assemble at the command post in Ittel-Kyll for a warning order. "Is it good or bad?" asked the Company I Commander, and the answer was, "It's good if you like to fight, and I like to fight."

The 3d Battalion had just finished a three day attack, taking Alsdorf, Meckel and Gilzem. (18)

The men were tired but morale was high and everyone wanted "to get it over with." (19)

The battalion had moved into the area relieving elements of the 80th Division, on the night of 2-3 March. Company I had moved to Hofweiler while the remainder of the battalion moved to positions in and around Ittel-Kyll. The battalion command post and the battalion aid station were in Ittel-Kyll. The entire battalion was to move to Hofweiler to start the attack. (20) (See Map C)

At 1430 hours, 3 March, company commanders reported to the command post at Ittel-Kyll and were told by the battalion commander that the battalion had been given the mission of crossing the Kyll River at any possible crossing site and that they would seize and hold Orenhofen across the river. The 2d Platoon, Company A, 301st Engineer Battalion was attached to the 3d Battalion and was assigned the mission of constructing the bridge across the Kyll at a site yet to be chosen.

The battalion commander directed the company commanders,

(18) (19) (20) Personal knowledge.

with their platoon leaders, to make a reconnaissance of the area to the front and along the river and report back to the command post at 1630 hours for the Battalion Attack Order. (21)

The company commanders were unprepared for what they saw when they looked across the gorge through which flowed the Kyll River. The river separated them from their objective - Orenhofen. There it was in front of them, 750 feet to the waters edge on either side and the enemy-held bank looked more like a cliff, than a hill. Heavily forested with spruce, scarred only by occasional trenches and perpendicular except for occasional draws which ran from the water's edge to the defended summit on the enemy side it was indeed a formidable barrier. (22) (See Sketch 1) The river was only 75-100 feet wide.

At 1600 hours the executive officer of Company I, with a party which had been ordered to reconnoiter near the river returned to the Company I Command Post and reported that he had found a trail which led to the river's edge. The officer said the battalion would have to move single file and it was estimated, by him, that the engineers could move their bridge to the River along this trail. How could the battalion scale the heights on the enemy side? That was a question left unanswered at this time. It was probable that once across the river one of the draws which seemed to lead to the top of the mountain would afford the solution.

(21) (22) Personal knowledge.

At 1630 hours the company commanders returned to the battalion command post and made their reconnaissance reports, after which they received the Battalion Attack Order.

The 2d Platoon, Company A, 301st Engineers was to move to the waters edge on the trail recommended by Company I Commander.

Telephone wire would be layed by the communication section of Headquarters Company from the Company I Command Post to the proposed site of the bridge. The battalion commander's plan called for the battalion to move down the mountain single file, leaving their present positions 15 minutes before the estimated time the bridge was to be completed. An officer from the battalion was ordered to accompany the engineers and inform the battalion commander by telephone of the progress made on the bridge. Company I would move first, followed in order by Company K, Company L and the 81 mm Platoon of Company M. One Heavy Machine Gun Platoon was to move with and support each of Companies I and K. The battalion aid station and command post were to move to Hofweiler and remain there until ordered to follow the battalion. The A. T. Platoon and A & P Platoon of Headquarters Company were ordered to contact the 2d Battalion and move across the 2d Battalion's foot bridge and into Orenhofen after the town was taken. If Orenhofen was not taken before these platoons crossed, they were to move behind the 2d Battalion across the bridge with the A.T. Platoon to support by fire the 3d Battalion's attack on

Orenhofen from positions east of Hosten.

Company I was designated as the company to move down the trail first and once across the foot bridge it was to fan out securing the area. Companies K, L and the 81 mm Section would move through Company I by any trail or gully and in any formation possible up the cliff into Orenhofen.

Once in the town Company L was to secure the left flank and left front. Company K would seize the right flank and right front. Company I was to follow on order and secure the rear of the town. A perimeter defense was to be used in holding Orenhofen after it was taken. The time set for the attack was 2300 hours 3 March 1945.

During the time from the completion of the order at 1700 hours and darkness, each leader of all units down to and including the squad, made his reconnaissance. The reconnaissance was limited due to the fact that movement was restricted as the area around Hofweiler was subject to enemy observation. (23)

At 2200 hours 3 March, a messenger arrived at the battalion command post from the Regimental S-2. The messenger delivered a map of the opposite river bank showing a trail up the enemy held cliff, positions of mine fields, troop dispositions and numbers and the location of enemy field artillery positions. This information had been obtained from a prisoner who had been captured at 1930 hours. (24) The information was relayed from the battalion to the company commanders who hurriedly made their plans for movement

(23) Personal knowledge; (24) A-5, p. 107.

after they crossed the river, based on the map study. On the map was a trail immediately across from the proposed bridge site, unmined and leading into Orenhofen. The map further showed positions of enemy two man outposts immediately across the river. (See Map C) The remainder of the troops, the prisoner said were in Orenhofen. They were, he reported, snug, secure and certain the river could not be crossed in this area.

At 2300 hours, the time set for the attack, the battalion did not move. The Engineer Platoon had passed through Hofweiler at 2115 hours, and guided by the Company I executive Officer, Lt. Donald J. Katz, who had made the initial reconnaissance of the trail they moved forward single file down the mountain, hand carrying the sections of the bridge.  
(25)

The battalion commander directed that Company I, the leading company, remain in Hofweiler until word came from Lt. Katz with the engineers that the bridge was nearing completion.

At 2330 hours, Lt. Katz reported, via telephone from the bridge site, that the bridge was within 15 minutes of being completed, but that the patrol and the engineers were taking a pounding from enemy mortars and could not move.  
(26)

This was the last information received by the battalion commander by telephone as the line was blown out.

At 2340 hours Lt. Katz returned to the battalion com-  
(25) (26) Personal knowledge.

mander at Company I Command Post in Hofweiler and reported that the bridge was in but that the mortar fire was now thickened with artillery fire and that the engineers were still pinned down at the bridge. The battalion commander gave orders for the battalion to move at 2400 hours. (27)

The attack was much different from training days when the rule had been two up and one back. Now it was a battalion attacking at night, single file and across almost impassable terrain.

By 0030 hours 4 March, Company I was across the bridge and into the first obstacle. The leading man in Company I hit a wire fence which stretched parallel to the river along the bottom of the canyon. The fence was covered with cans and the rattle echoed up and down the walls of the canyon. All was silent as the soldiers hit the ground and waited for the machine gun fire which seemed certain to come. No machine gun fire came and all was still except for the enemy artillery falling in the area. The Company I Commander who was near the wire motioned for one of the soldiers to cut the wire. The captain held it with his handkerchief while the soldier cut. (28) In a matter of seconds the wire was cut and the leading platoon of Company I fanned out to the right to complete the mission as directed in the battalion order. The 2d Platoon was across and off to the left. Everything seemed to be going without opposition when the German word "Halten\*"rang out from the right and echoed from the canyon walls. The word was followed by three quick

(27) Personal knowledge; (28) Personal knowledge; \*"Halten" in German means to hold on, halt.

shots and then the leading scout yelled, "I've been hit pretty bad." This scout stumbled back to the rear of the platoon and said that he had shot it out with a German sentry. He added that the sentry was not over three yards from him when they exchanged shots. The scout had been hit through the mouth and through the shoulder. Later the body of the German sentry was found, his own rifle along side of him and the M-1 of the scout across his chest. It had been close! (29) The second member of the outpost, who had also fired, quickly surrendered.

On the left, the 2d Platoon moved 200 yards within 30 minutes and captured the occupants of three other outposts, numbering six men in all. In each of these positions the Germans were sleeping or were too afraid or surprised to shoot. (30)

A machine gun in front of the platoon, off to the right, began to fire on the company and the right platoon moved toward it. With the platoon covering his advance, the platoon leader, T/Sgt. Frank Mucedola, neutralized the position with a hand grenade. (31)

During the time the action described in the preceding paragraphs was taking place the remainder of the battalion waited in single file along the trail. The battalion extended almost back to Hofweiler.

Now the way was open for Companies K and L to move through the initial bridgehead which Company I had established. The bridgehead was now 400 yards wide and 200 yards deep.

(29) Personal knowledge; (30) Reported to author, after action by Lt. Richard Keefe, CO 2d Platoon; (31) A-5, p. 122.

Companies K and L moved forward, hampered only by small arms fire and a continually increasing mortar harrassment. They followed the trail as indicated by the map sent down from the Regimental S-2 as a result of the interrogation of the prisoner. (32) Still moving in single file, slipping and stumbling they moved on and into Orenhofen.

At the edge of town the companies split according to plan, Company K going to the right through town and Company L moving through the left portion of the town. They expected fire, but no fire came and once into the town they were greeted only by a very surprised German paymaster who was counting his money preparatory to paying his troops. The remainder of the German force totalling 75 men were captured as they slept in their beds. (33) The time was now 0300 hours, 4 March 1945.

#### DEFENSE OF ORENHOFEN

At 0400 hours, Company I moved from the initial bridgehead to the rear of the town and completed the battalion perimeter, and by 0800 hours the battalion command post and aid station moved into the town. (See Map D) The commander coordinated boundaries. Range cards were made for high trajectory weapons. There was, however, not enough thorough planning and work done to prepare for the counterattack which seemed certain to come. No anti-personnel or anti-tank mines were layed and no trip flares or wire was prepared. Throughout the daylight hours, 4 March, the enemy pounded

(32) (33) Personal knowledge.

Orenhofen with artillery fire and Nebelwerferes.\* Many houses burned, two of these were the command posts of Company I and Company M. The battalion commander estimated the counterattack would come as soon as it was dark. At 2100 hours it was dark -- the company commander of Company I checked his troops and found that his lines were still tied in well with Company L, but that the troops on the right flank of Company K had moved from where the two company commanders had coordinated earlier in the day. (34)

The Company Commander of Company I informed the battalion commander by telephone of the gap between the two companies and was told to return to the area and meet the Company K Commander. The I Company Commander returned to the area and made another attempt to contact a Company K representative without success. He returned to his command post and called the battalion commander again, advising him of the gap and of his inability to contact Company K. The Commander of Company I was told that he should secure his own area and that he (The Battalion Commander) was confident that Company K could take care of their own position. (35)

At 1900 hours, 4 March, it had been reported that enemy troops had been seen forming in a grove of trees, 500 yards to the front of Company K. The Battalion Commander ordered an artillery concentration in the area and in addition, all battalion high trajectory weapons fired on the area. (36)

(34) (35) (36) Personal knowledge.

\* Rocket weapons also known in ETO as "Screaming Meemies".

## COUNTERATTACK

At 2200 hours the counterattack came. It was estimated to be of one company's strength. The enemy moved through the gap between Company K and Company I, and for the next five hours the town belonged to both the 3d Battalion and the German Army. At 2230 hours, tanks were reported approaching on the road to the northeast of town. The battalion commander ordered the S-2 to make an investigation. The S-2 went to the Commander of Company L and asked for a statement of the situation. He was told that the strength of enemy tanks was not known, but that there were at least two near the cemetery, northeast of town. (37) The S-2 moved through the front lines toward the cemetery. He did not report back to the battalion commander that night.

The German troops set up a machine gun in the center of the town and fired at any movement. (38) Several enemy soldiers entered the aid station and secured helmets with red crosses. Other enemy personnel remained in the aid station. The Battalion Surgeon, with his aid men had vacated the main floor but had bolted themselves in the basement. Even the building itself was occupied by soldiers from both armies, each side had a floor for itself. The personnel of the aid station remained quiet and motionless in the basement, while the Germans set up their Command Post on the main floor. (39)

Companies K and L reported German soldiers, with Red

(37) As told to author after operation by Lt. David Lindeman, CO, Co. L; (38) Personal knowledge; (39) A-5, p. 113.

Cross helmets yelling as if drunken and asking in good English if aid men were needed. When an affirmative answer was given by the Americans, the request was answered by German hand grenades. (40)

By 0300 hours on 5 March, the Germans had been scattered and disorganized. They began to surrender in small groups and by 0400 hours the 3d Battalion had over 200 of the enemy troops locked in the city church. One of the enemy tanks, previously reported near the cemetery, had been abandoned for no apparent reason. The other had moved out.

As soon as it was light the battalion began to take stock of itself and its prisoners. Over 200 enemy troops had been captured and the battalion had lost 3 officers and some 37 enlisted men. Numbered among the dead was the S-2, who "liked to fight." (41)

The town of Orenhofen was still held by the 3d Battalion and the right flank of the XII Corps was secure. The mission of the battalion was accomplished and across the flats toward Hosten, Task Force "Onaway" could be seen moving east toward the Rhine.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The factors which contributed most toward the success of this operation were:

1. Surprise.
2. Timely use of information obtained from prisoners.

(40) (41) Personal knowledge.

3. Use of wire communication for coordination of the unit.

4. A thorough reconnaissance by leaders and proper briefing of all men in the unit.

5. The application by individuals of methods learned in training such as tactical training of the individual soldier, viz -- snap shooting and wire cutting.

6. Aggressive action by the battalion and its leaders in the face of almost impassible terrain and a situation which, when first presented seemed impossible.

The surprise <sup>6</sup>affected was superior and proved that a tired enemy, feeling that terrain alone would secure his position, is a defeated enemy. The enemy was not alert, as a result of German leaders feeling that the gorge could not be crossed in this particular area. However, the surprise gained here was primarily due to the selection of the crossing site in this particular area.

The information provided by the captured prisoner proved to be timely and accurate, and while information coming from a source such as this must be carefully evaluated, still it should not be ignored.

The telephone wire placed forward of the attacking troops proved invaluable in keeping the battalion commander oriented and the battalion coordinated. Wire, however, is easily shot out by artillery, and must be used as, or with, an alternate means of communication.

The reconnaissance of the battalion was thorough, and included briefing down to and including every man.) It is

*How would  
have affected  
5 p.m.*

believed by the author that had not this been done and had not individual soldiers acted with initiative that in the darkness the attack may have stopped.

*5 p.m.*

In two specific instances the individual tactical training of the soldier paid off and proved to be the deciding factor in whether the battalion should move on or stop. These instances were:

1. When the wire fence was reduced by aggressive action to eliminate the obstacle.

2. When the leading scout encountered the enemy outpost and did not hesitate to snap fire, thereby eliminating the position.

Aggressive action on the part of the battalion and its leaders was probably the determining factor in the success of the entire operation. Leaders were at the critical points at the time decisions were needed. An exception of this was, of course, the failure to effect proper coordination between Companies I and K during the defense of Orenhofen.

As criticism, we can say that the battalion, once in Orenhofen, did not use every method at hand during the day, 4 March, to secure its position against counterattack. Trip flares, wires and mines should have been placed around the battalion position to warn of an enemy attack or infiltration. This was not done primarily because the town was being pounded by artillery fire throughout the day and the leaders were reluctant to leave the security of their command posts. This was also the primary reason that thor-

ough coordination was not made between leaders in planning the defense of the town.

The battalion commander should have personally coordinated the tie-in between companies around the town and checked the execution of his order throughout the night. Finally there was no plan of action in case of an enemy infiltration into the town. If the enemy had attacked in greater force or had used a coordinated plan in their counterattack it is doubtful if the battalion would have held Orenhofen.

### LESSONS

1. There is no single solution to a tactical operation.
2. A thorough reconnaissance must be made of an area by every leader, down to and including squad leaders, for night operations.
3. Surprise is an essential element in a night operation.
4. An objective may easily be gained by surprise, but once taken a thorough organization of the ground must be immediately effected.
5. Once a defense is organized and troops are on position, officers must continually check to assure that men remain on position.
6. Troops must be thoroughly trained in individual combat tactics.
7. Snap firing is an important part of the tactical training of the individual soldier.

8. Officers should not foolishly give their lives for information, when the information can be gained by other means.

9. In a perimeter defense, unnecessary movement must stop within the area once it is dark.

10. Trip flares and anti-personnel mines should be placed around a perimeter defense to warn of enemy counter-attacks or infiltration.

11. Wire communication can be very useful forward with the attacking echelons at night. *at any time*

12. A unit defending a town should have a definite plan of action in case of penetration.

13. What seems to be an impossible objective may prove to be an easy accomplishment if the attacker has initiative and aggressiveness.