

General Subjects Section  
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT  
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1948 - 1949

THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST BATTALION 517 PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
REGIMENT AT SOY, BELGIUM, 22-24 DECEMBER 1944  
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Liaison Officer)

Type of operation described: A BATTALION ATTACKING TO SEIZE  
AND SECURE CRITICAL TERRAIN AND TO ESTABLISH  
A MAIN LINE OF RESISTANCE

Captain Sidney M. Marks, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index .....	1
Bibliography .....	2
Introduction .....	3
German Counteroffensive .....	4
General Situation .....	5
Terrain Analysis .....	6
Move to Contact .....	7
The Attack .....	9
Analysis and Criticism .....	19
Lessons .....	21
Map A - Situation 12th Army Group 16 December 1944	
Map B - German Penetrations 22 December 1944	
Map C - Night Attack 22-23 December 1944	
Map D - Battalion Action 23-24 December 1944	
Overlay I - Battalion MLR, 24 December 1944	

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 Report by the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945.  
By General Dwight D. Eisenhower. (TIS Library)
- A-2 First United States Army Report of Operations, Part I, 1 August 1944 to 22 February 1945. (TIS Library)
- A-3 Dark December  
By Robert E. Merriam.  
(Personal Possession of Author)
- A-4 Invasion of Western Europe, Part I, 6 June to 31 December 1944.  
United States Military Academy. (TIS Library)
- A-5 Crusade in Europe  
By General Dwight D. Eisenhower.  
(Personal Possession of Author)
- A-6 Spearhead in the West  
The Third Armored Division. (TIS Library)
- A-7 Normandy to the Baltic  
By Field Marshal Montgomery.  
April 1946. (TIS Library)
- A-8 Mission Accomplished XVIII Airborne Corps,  
Airborne Section TIS.
- A-9 12th Army Group Report of Operations, Part II. (TIS Library)
- A-10 Attack Immediately  
By Captain Charles E. La Chaussee,  
Infantry Journal March 1946. (TIS Library)
- A-11 Letter from Colonel Rupert D. Graves, former Commander  
517 Parachute Infantry Regiment, January 1949.  
(Personal Possession of Author)
- A-12 Operations of the First Battalion 517 Parachute Infantry  
Regiment, 21 to 26 December 1944.  
(Personal Possession of Author)
- A-13 Personal Knowledge of the Author, Captain Sidney M. Marks.
- A-14 Statement of Captain Charles E. La Chaussee, former Commander  
C Company, 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment, January 1945.
- A-15 Statement of Captain Milton M. Kienlen, former Executive  
Officer A Company, 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment. January 1945.
- A-16 Statement of Captain Dean D. Robbins, former Commander  
B Company, 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment, December 1944.
- A-17 Statement of Captain James M. Townsend, 81mm Mortar Platoon  
Leader, 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment. January 1949

THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST BATTALION 517 PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
REGIMENT AT SOY, BELGIUM, 22-24 DECEMBER 1944  
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Liaison Officer)

INTRODUCTION

Like many other units of the American Forces in Europe during the winter of 1944, the 1st Battalion of the 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment played its part in the Battle of the Bulge.

Prior to the great German counteroffensive, in the early days of December 1944, the United States 12th Army Group had advanced to the Siegfried Line on the western border of Germany, and was preparing its winter offensive. (See Map A) This group, composed of the United States First, Third, and Ninth Armies, was commanded by General Omar N. Bradley. By 6 December, the Third Army, on the south with three corps, had captured Metz and had reached the Moselle River. (1) The Ninth Army, with two corps, had fought its way by 3 December to the Roer River, and held an eight mile strip on the west bank. This army was preparing for a crossing of the Roer, pending capture of the dams which controlled it. (2)

The First Army, composed of V, VII, and VIII Corps, had taken Aachen and had driven through the Hurtgen Forest to the approaches of the Roer River. (3) VII Corps, in the extreme north of the sector had been ordered to attack on 10 December to seize the west bank of the river in its zone, and to be prepared to cross on order. (4) V Corps in the north central sector was to launch its attack on 13 December, to seize and secure two of the Roer River Dams. (5) VIII Corps held an eighty mile front in the Ardennes sector with the 106th, 28th and 4th Infantry Divisions, and the 9th Armored Division less Combat Command B. Its mission was to continue an active defense within the corps zone. (6)

(1) A-7, p. 215; (2) A-1, p. 60, A-4, p. 66; (3) A-3, pp. 66-70, A-2, p. 158; (4) A-2, pp. 88-91; (5) A-2, p. 88; (6) A-2, pp. 88-98.

### GERMAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE

Employing the same strategy he had used so successfully to destroy the French Armies of 1940, General Field Marshal von Rundstedt, unleashed his panzer armies against the thinly held Ardennes sector of the Allied line with the following order of the day: "We gamble everything now -- we cannot fail." (7) (See Map B)

Under a heavy artillery barrage at 0530 hours, 16 December 1944, the German with three newly outfitted armies, started his drive into the Allied front. Two Panzer Armies, the Sixth on the right (north) and the Fifth on the left (south) struck simultaneously on the U.S. VIII Corps front in their drive to the Meuse River, with Antwerp and Brussels as their ultimate goals. The Seventh Germany Army struck in a diversionary attack on Luxemburg. (8)

Using the principles of mass and surprise, the Germans quickly penetrated the lines of the U.S. 106th and 28th Divisions, and drove through those units with such rapidity that no effective defense could be formed. By the evening of 17 December, the Sixth Panzer Army was advancing through a nine mile gap in the 106th Division sector. On the following day, it captured Stavelot, and by 21 December had taken St. Vith, after which it turned to the northeast toward Liege. The Fifth Panzer Army, achieving similar success, was driving through the 28th Division line on a twelve mile front by the evening of 17 December. On 20 December it had surrounded Bastogne, and was racing toward the Meuse River in the vicinity of Marche and Hotton. (9)

In an effort to stem the German drive to the north and west the 82nd Airborne Division, Third Armored Division, and 30th and 84th Infantry Divisions were disposed along the northern flank of the German salient from Malmedy to Marche. (10)

(7) A-1, p.62, A-2, p.105; (8) A-2, p.103; (9) A-3, pp.115, 165;  
(10) A-2, p.111.

### GENERAL SITUATION

The middle of December 1944 found all airborne units in the theater assigned to XVIII Airborne Corps. Except for the 17th Airborne Division, which was stationed in England, subordinate units of the corps were located in the Reims area, preparing for the Allied spring offensive. (11)

The 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment was stationed at Soissons, France, where it was reorganizing and resting from ninety-six days of continuous action since the invasion of Southern France, 15 August 1944. The regiment was engaged in normal garrison duties, and was preparing for intensive training to begin on the first of the year. (12)

Even though civilian radios gave vague bits of information about the German attack in the Ardennes on 16 and 17 December, the regiment was still looking forward to spending a comparatively quiet winter in Soissons. This prospect was short lived, however, for on 18 December, the Commanding General XVIII Airborne Corps notified the regimental commander, Colonel Rupert D. Graves, by telephone, to be prepared to move his unit on two hours notice. (13)

Just prior to its relief from the line in late November, the regiment had received replacements, and had been refitted. Consequently, there was no real supply or personnel problem, and within a few hours, except for procuring and issuing ammunition and rations, the regiment was ready to move. (14)

On 21 December, XVIII Airborne Corps ordered Colonel Graves to proceed with his regiment to Namur, Belgium, where a staff officer from corps would meet and direct his 1st Battalion to an undisclosed point for a separate mission. The remainder of the regiment was to be in XVIII Corps reserve. (15)

In accordance with instructions, Lieutenant Colonel William J. Boyle, (11) A-8, p. 18; (12) A-13; (13) A-13, A-12; (14) A-13; (15) A-11.

commander of the 1st Battalion, left immediately by jeep for Namur, where he was informed that the 1st Battalion was to be attached to Combat Command R, 3rd Armored Division, in Soy, Belgium, where he would report to the commander of that unit, Colonel Robert L. Howze. (16)

With no idea of what mission would be assigned the battalion, it was impossible for the battalion executive officer, Major Donald W. Frazer, to make definite plans. However, he gave oral instructions to the unit commanders concerning the route to Namur. Ammunition and rations were distributed, and 1st Battalion moved out of Soissons at 1800 hours, 21 December, for an unknown destination. It was later determined that the ultimate destination of the battalion was Soy, Belgium. (17)

#### TERRAIN ANALYSIS

The Soy - Hotton area lies between the Wy Ridge line on the east, and the Ourthe River on the west. (See Map C) Soy is located on a plateau, 310 feet above sea level, overlooking the both open and heavily wooded terrain which slopes gently down to Hotton, 180 feet above sea level, and 6000 yards to the southwest.

The critical terrain features in this area are the Haid Hits Crossroad, which controls the Soy - Hotton Highway, and the town of Hotton, a vital communications center containing the bridge across the Ourthe River, which carries the highway leading north to Liege. The best avenue of approach is along the Soy - Hotton Highway, which lies between the railroad on the north, and the stream line on the south. There is little cover or concealment from Soy to the Haid Hits Crossroad, except for scattered underbrush and folds in the ground. Beyond the crossroad the area is heavily wooded, and in places progress by foot is hindered by the dense underbrush. Observation and fields of fire are excellent between

(16) A-12; (17) A-13.

Soy and the Haid Hits Crossroad, but both are reduced to a few yards in the wooded area. There are no serious obstacles to foot troops in the area. (18)

#### MOVE TO CONTACT

The motor march to Namur was slow because of the heavy two way traffic, but at 0400 hours, 22 December, the battalion arrived in Namur, where it was instructed to proceed to Soy to join the battalion commander.

(19) In one of the heavy traffic jams, C Company, less its 3rd platoon, became separated from the battalion, and was personally dispatched to join Combat Command A, 3rd Armored Division, by Major General Maurice Rose, Commanding General of the division. C Company did not rejoin the battalion until 27 December, and except for its 3rd platoon, did not participate in the action described herein. (20)

The convoy arrived at an assembly area 2400 yards northeast of Soy at 1600 hours. The men were ordered to detruck and to stack their bedrolls, while all company commanders were to report to the battalion commander at the head of the column. Battalion staff officers and company commanders crowded around a 1:50,000 scale map of the area, where Lieutenant Colonel Boyle briefed them on the situation and gave them the battalion mission and his plan of attack.

Information of both enemy and friendly situations was obscure. Through intelligence it was known that an enemy road block had been established at the Haid Hits Crossroad and that a German force, supported by armor, had cut off elements of 3rd Armored Division's rear CP in Hotton. Enemy strength and dispositions were unknown. Contact had not been established with either the 84th Infantry Division or Combat Command A, which were operating on the right and left flanks, respectively. (21)

(18) A-13; (19) A-13; (20) A-14; (21) A-13.

The mission of the battalion was to attack immediately along the Soy - Hotton Highway, seize the Haid Hits Crossroad and Hotton, and to establish a main line of resistance along the Soy - Hotton Highway. The plan called for the battalion to cross a line of departure at the west edge of Soy and to advance along the highway in a column of companies. A Company was to lead, with B Company echeloned to the left, followed by Headquarters Company, and the 3rd platoon of C Company. A Company, assisted by B Company if the situation warranted, was to destroy the road block at the Haid Hits Crossroad, where the 3rd platoon of C Company was to set up a perimeter defense. The 81mm mortar platoon was to go into position within the perimeter, and be prepared at daylight to support the battalion if its attack on Hotton had bogged down. It was contemplated that the remainder of the battalion would continue its advance astride the highway and would capture Hotton.

The plan called for the battalion supply section and aid station to be located in Soy. Mess personnel were to assist in the distribution of ammunition and "K" rations, and in the evacuation of wounded. Signal instructions ordered that radio silence be maintained until enemy contact had been made, after which the SCR 300's, in the battalion command net, were to be the principal means of communication with the companies. A wire team was to move with the advance party, in the command group, to provide additional communication with the battalion CP in Soy.

The company commanders returned to their units, issued their orders, and at 1715 hours, the 1st Battalion moved out of its assembly area to the line of departure. To avoid a heavy enemy artillery concentration which was falling on Soy, the column moved off the road and turned south through the woods. Movement through the woods was slow until Lieutenant Colonel Boyle, the only person in the battalion who had made even the slightest reconnaissance of the area, moved forward to act as a guide. By 1930 hours

*Route from  
assembly area  
to HD could  
have been  
shown on  
Map C.*

the battalion had arrived at the west edge of Soy. (22)

#### THE ATTACK

It was dark and the temperature was dropping steadily as the 1st Battalion crossed the line of departure at 2000 hours, 22 December 1944. The battalion moved slowly, in a column of companies, along the right side of the Soy - Hotton Highway. It had advanced approximately 1000 yards beyond Soy when the leading elements of A Company received machine gun fire from the vicinity of Haid Hits, the vital crossroad between Soy and Hotton. These elements immediately deployed astride the highway, and returned the fire. The enemy was estimated to be two reinforced platoons, located southwest and northwest of Haid Hits. Lieutenant Colonel Boyle ordered Captain Joseph Broudy, A Company commander, to increase his efforts in continuing the attack along the highway. He then attached a section of machine guns to B Company, and ordered the commander, Captain Dean D. Robbins, to move across the highway, down the edge of the woods, and to attack Haid Hits from the south. The rest of the battalion was forced to deploy in the open field on the right of the highway due to enemy light artillery fire which had begun falling over the entire area. This fire continued throughout the night.

A Company was not successful in silencing any of the enemy's automatic weapons, and was later subjected to flat trajectory fire from an estimated five or six self-propelled anti-tank guns or tanks, located along the woods north and west of Haid Hits. To attack frontally into this heavy volume of fire would be extremely costly, consequently the battalion commander decided to halt A Company in its position until B Company was able to deliver flanking fire on the enemy positions. (23)

By 2045 hours, B Company, in platoon column had crossed the highway and had reached the edge of the woods, where it came under the small arms (22) A-13; (23) A-13.

fire of an estimated reinforced platoon from the vicinity of two farm-houses. Captain Robbins ordered his two leading platoons to deploy and to engage this enemy by firing all automatic weapons at the general location of their positions, and delivering aimed rifle fire at the flashes of the enemy weapons. After approximately fifteen minutes of this exchange, the enemy suddenly ceased firing, only to resume at the company's attempt to move forward. After about thirty minutes of intense fighting, B Company had inched its way to within twenty-five yards of the enemy. Advancing aggressively with assault fire, they broke through the enemy defenses, and overran their positions. So far in this action, B Company's casualties had been comparatively light, but unfortunately two of the wounded were platoon leaders who had been with the unit since its activation in March 1943.

As B Company was reorganizing, enemy tanks moved up from the south, deployed, and opened fire on the company. Bazooka teams, supported by riflemen and the attached machine gun section, quickly moved forward and managed to locate two of the tanks. After several rockets had been fired, a disabling hit was registered on one of the tanks, and the others withdrew.

(24)

By midnight of the 22nd, the 1st Battalion had found no weakness in the enemy's defense. With absolutely no knowledge of the terrain by any members of the command except Lieutenant Colonel Boyle, further attempts to flank the known enemy positions seemed impossible. Therefore Lieutenant Colonel Boyle decided that his battalion could better accomplish its mission by holding its gains, and by launching a coordinated attack shortly after daylight. Colonel Howze, commanding officer of Combat Command R, would not approve the plan, however, as the tactical situation dictated that Hotton be taken immediately if the battalion was to be of any value in stopping

(24) A-15.

the German drive toward Liege. (25)

As an alternate plan, Lieutenant Colonel Boyle decided to take a small force along a north and east route through the village of Ny, in an attempt to envelope Hotton. A Company, less one platoon, with four medium tanks, six half-tracks, and a field artillery team from Combat Command R, 3rd Armored Division, were to comprise this force which was to liberate the besieged garrison. Communication with Combat Command R was to be by means of the radios of the tank platoon leader and the field artillery forward observer. (26)

Another task force composed of B Company, and the remaining platoon of A Company with one machine gun platoon, was organized. This force, left under command of Major Frazer, was given the mission of making a feint down the highway toward Hotton. It was hoped that this diversion, plus speed and surprise, would allow Boyle's force to reach Hotton against little resistance. (27)

The 3rd platoon of C Company and the 81mm mortar platoon were ordered back to Soy to provide security for the CP of Combat Command R. The 3rd platoon of C Company was directed to establish combat outposts on the south edge of Soy, and to patrol the woods to the south, while the 81mm mortar platoon was to patrol between Soy and Frazer's force, and to establish a road block at the southwest edge of town. (28)

*See map for location*

Mounted on the vehicles, Boyle's force moved out of Soy at approximately 0200 hours, 23 December, and proceeded without incident to Ny, where it received fire from a small outpost south of the village. Before the infantry had time to dismount, the enemy had been destroyed by fire from the lead tank. Just north of Hotton, on the left of the highway, the unit was again delayed by a small enemy force supported by two 20mm guns. Fire from the tanks and the 50 caliber machine guns of the half-

(25) A-13; (26) A-6, p. 225, A-13; (27) A-11, A-13; (28) A-13, A-16.

tracks soon neutralized this position, and by 0400 hours, Lieutenant Colonel Boyle's force had entered Hotton and had contacted 3rd Armored Division's beleaguered rear CP.

When this force attempted to swing east, however, and drive back to Soy, it was stopped by a hail of small arms fire from German defenses which had been set up in the houses on the outskirts of the town. The 1st Battalion troops were forced to take cover in the surrounding buildings, and a furious fire fight ensued. Some minutes later, however, it dwindled to spasmodic firing. Because of the darkness, and the complete lack of knowledge of the town, Lieutenant Colonel Boyle sent out security forces and the attack toward Soy was delayed until daylight. (29)

Meanwhile, after laying down a heavy volume of fire on suspected enemy positions, Major Frazer's force had moved forward in the diversionary attack from its positions along the Soy - Hotton Highway, at approximately 0200 hours. From dug-in positions, the German retaliated, and slowly increased his defensive fire. After about thirty minutes of a furious exchange of fire, the enemy gained fire supremacy, and stopped Frazer's advance. When this happened, outposts were established on the forward slope of the slight rise of ground then held, while the remainder of Frazer's force moved back onto the reverse slope to reorganize for a coordinated attack, which was to be directed toward Hotton at daybreak. During the interim, wounded personnel were evacuated by litter, and ammunition and "K" rations were distributed. Numb from the freezing temperature, the men awaited the hour to move out again. (30)

As Major Frazer was formulating his plan, he received a message from Colonel Howze that four light, and five medium tanks were to join his unit at 0730 hours 23 December. In order to utilize the tanks, he therefore decided to attack across the open field. His plan was for B  
(29) A-6, p. 225, A-13, A-15; (30) A-13.

Company to move from its present position in a skirmish line, followed closely by the tanks. The platoon of A Company, and the machine gun platoon were to be echeloned to the left rear. (31) (See Map D)

Frazer's force moved out as planned at 0900 hours. German small arms fire and mortar fire which had been falling in the area, gained in volume as the unit advanced. By the time B Company had reached the middle of the open field, it was no longer in its original skirmish line, but the squads had fitted themselves around the lumbering tanks. Enemy self-propelled guns, which had been used as anti-personnel weapons against A Company during the previous night, now opened fire on the two platoons of tanks. Within a few minutes all of the light tanks, as well as two medium tanks, had been destroyed. The paratroopers fought furiously, but due to their highly exposed position could not penetrate the enemy's grazing fire. As the fire fight raged, enemy mortar concentrations fell with deadly accuracy on the left flank, which further disorganized the force, and pushed it north toward the railroad. (32)

In order to gain cover from the small arms fire the troops crossed the railroad, and entered the woods. Enemy mortar concentrations continued, however, until the gun positions were located by Lieutenant James M. Townsend. These guns were soon silenced by counter-battery fire. The Frazer force reorganized, and the three remaining medium tanks returned to Soy. (33)

Meanwhile, in Hotton, Boyle's force had been engaged all morning in light skirmishes but had been unable to make any progress against the enemy positions on the outskirts of the town. During the night the enemy had emplaced two anti-tank guns astride the highway east of Hotton, which prevented the use of armor. The supply situation had also become serious, and until the Soy - Hotton Highway was cleared, there could be no re-supply.

(31) A-12, A-13; (32) A-12, A-13; (33) A-13, A-17.

Food was no problem, for the houses in the area were fairly well stocked, but ammunition was low -- too low to risk the dwindling supply in an attack, which might not be successful in clearing the enemy from the town, and then to repel the counterattack which could be expected if the attack did succeed. Under these circumstances, Boyle's force limited its activities to small local attacks in order that a substantial force might be diverted from resisting the remainder of the battalion at the crossroads. The field artillery forward observer, meanwhile, directed harassing fire on the enemy positions and critical terrain features. (34)

During this day Frazer's hastily reorganized force again moved out in a skirmish line along the edge of the woods toward Hotton. It had gained only a few hundred yards when enemy outposts began firing burp guns along the front. These positions delayed the force for some time, but they finally were neutralized, and the men pushed on through the dense underbrush, slowly forcing the enemy back. German resistance stiffened as the force neared the Haid Hits Crossroad, where an estimated reinforced company had established a series of well dug-in strong points, reinforced with automatic weapons. Doggedly the troopers fought their way to within yards of the German position, only to be repulsed by an enemy who was superior in numbers and equipment. (35)

Shortly before dark, Major Frazer ordered the positions to be held, and leaving the battalion S-3, Captain John E. Duggan, in charge of the battalion, returned to Combat Command R to explain the situation to Colonel Howze. The capture of the crossroad, without reinforcement, promised to be a long costly struggle, which at that time could not be afforded. Colonel Howze agreed with Major Frazer and ordered that a new attack be launched immediately. This was made possible by the arrival of the platoon of C Company which had been relieved of its security mission in Soy by the (34) A-6, p. 225, A-15; (35) A-12, A-13.

81mm mortar platoon. During this lull in the fighting, while reorganizing for the new attack, ammunition, badly needed by the battle weary paratroopers, was distributed. (36)

A heavy snow had begun to fall by the time the C Company platoon arrived in the area, and the platoon leader had reported to Major Frazer for instructions. The plan, as given, was to deploy the force in a skirmish line with the 1st platoon of A Company on the right flank, B Company in the center, and the 3rd platoon of C Company on the left flank, thus extending the front from the railroad on the north to the Soy - Hotton Highway on the south. There would be no attempt to surprise or flank the enemy. It was to be a frontal assault across the seventy-five yards of heavy underbrush to the dug-in German positions. Major Frazer concluded that the success of the drive would depend almost entirely upon the individual soldiers, and the smaller units of the force, the squads. It would be up to the individual soldier and his buddy, with perhaps the help of the man on his right or left, who by firing and driving their way forward, would individually and collectively destroy the enemy. (37)

While awaiting the attack, the men seemed to forget the gnawing in their empty stomachs, the bitter cold, and their weariness from the long hours of fighting. Their morale was high, and the arrival of the platoon of C Company had increased the fighting strength some twenty-five per cent. The fact that their battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Boyle, and his small force of their fellow troopers were cut off in Hotton, seemed to give them added incentive, and perhaps most important of all, the Germans had been located, and could even be heard as they talked in their positions.

At approximately 2100 hours, 23 December, Frazer's force again started its advance under a cover of small arms fire. The Germans replied with like fire, and a furious fight raged for nearly an hour. Casualties were (36) A-13; (37) A-13.

heavy during this time, and all gains were confined to minor ones. Finally, taking the initiative, the C Company platoon leader, on the left flank, began a drive with a portion of his platoon. Moving through murderous fire, this group worked its way to within twenty yards of the Germans. The remainder of the platoon followed closely behind, firing as it moved, until the entire platoon was established in a ragged line. B Company, simultaneously with the platoon of A Company, started to move forward in its sector, and soon managed to join the C Company platoon to establish a new front.

The fighting at this point reached fanatical heights. The Germans were using hand grenades and panzerfausts in a desperate attempt to stop the paratroopers. The Americans retaliated with hand grenades of their own and, with the objective so near, fought more determinedly to close with the Germans. In an effort to dislodge Frazer's force from its new position, the Germans launched a counterattack in the sector of the C Company platoon. This attack was soon hurled back, however, and a steady stream of lead continued to pour across the narrow area between the two lines.

While the Germans were still disorganized from their thwarted counterattack, the C Company platoon started another push forward. It had gained about ten yards when there was a slight lull in the enemy's firing. This was what the paratroopers had been waiting for, and to a man the platoon rose, and behind a stream of lead, firing from the hip they stormed through the decimated German lines to take the crossroad of Haid Hits. All along the line, German resistance was waning, and their positions at the railroad crossing soon fell before the onslaught of the A Company platoon. Even with his flanks destroyed, the German struggled vainly to hold his position, but was unable to stop the advance of B Company, and by 0200 hours, 24 December, all enemy resistance in the area of the crossroads had ceased. (38)

(38) A-13.

As the force reorganized, southwest of Haid Hits, each unit established the necessary security to its front, and sent out patrols to make contact with the enemy. All commanders were notified that the attack would continue shortly after daybreak. Ammunition was redistributed, and the wounded were hand-carried to the railroad, where jeeps were waiting to take them to the aid station located in Soy.

While the fatigued men were getting what rest they could, the hum of a German reconnaissance plane was heard in the distance. As it came nearer and made a run over the area, it was intercepted by an American night fighter. The ground seemed to tremble as machine gun fire rent the air, and the sky suddenly was ablaze as the reconnaissance plane burst into flames and disintegrated. The night was clear, but a blanket of snow covered the ground. Despite the lack of rest, no bedrolls had been brought forward, since the only loads carried so far had been ammunition and "K" rations. During the few remaining hours of the night, the tired troopers were forced to stay on their feet and continually move about to keep from freezing in the bitter cold.

The patrols which had been sent out during the night reported that small enemy groups could be heard digging in the area to the front. Major Frazer then decided to move out as soon as possible in a skirmish line along the Soy - Hotton Highway. Combat Command R dispatched two medium tanks to his depleted unit, and at 0800 hours, 24 December, Frazer's force continued its drive on Hotton. Presently an alert tank sergeant spotted two enemy tanks which were advancing on the right flank. The sergeant quickly gave a fire order to his gunner, and both enemy tanks were destroyed before they could maneuver into position to fire. (39)

Snipers and small enemy groups formed the only other defense that the unit encountered. These scattered enemy were hard to locate, however, (39) A-13.

because of the dense, snow-covered underbrush which limited visibility to no more than twenty yards. The snipers wore camouflage clothing which made detection even more difficult. They were soon located, however, and were killed in their positions by alert scouts. The small groups of enemy were quickly destroyed by the platoon in whose sector they were located.

As Frazer's force emerged from the woods, it found itself in the rear of the Germans who were engaged in the fight with Boyle's force. The German positions soon became untenable in a deadly crossfire, and they withdrew to the south in a complete rout. By 1130 hours, 24 December, Major Frazer had joined forces with Lieutenant Colonel Boyle.

"K" rations were hastily eaten while the battalion reorganized in Hotton, and at 1230 hours it moved out of the town toward Soy, to further clear the Soy - Hotton Highway. The enemy, reeling and disorganized from his recent defeat, did not stand to fight, but fled before the advancing 1st Battalion. (40)

B Company and a platoon of A Company set up positions along the highway and were prepared to defend against any possible attack from the south. (See Overlay I to Map D) The 290th Regimental Combat Team, 75th Division, had by this time been attached to Combat Command R, and was to use the highway as the line of departure for an attack to the south, at 2330 hours 24 December. (41)

The remainder of the battalion returned to Soy, and was placed in reserve for Combat Command R. Bedrolls and rations were distributed, and the men of the 1st Battalion were able to heat their food, and to obtain their first rest since leaving Soissons, at 1800 hours, 21 December. (42)

The 1st Battalion, committed to action by Combat Command R, 22 December 1944, had fought continuously for two days and nights, in snow

(40) A-13; (41) A-6, p. 226, A-13; (42) A-13.

and bitter cold, without rest or hot food. It had cleared elements of the 116 Panzer Division from its sector between Soy and Hotton, relieved the besieged garrison of Hotton, and established a main line of resistance along the Soy - Hotton Highway, from which further attacks on the enemy were to be launched. Victory had been costly, however. The battalion had suffered approximately twenty-five per cent casualties in subduing a savagely fighting enemy.

For this action, the 1st Battalion, 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Let us now stop to analyze this operation from the time the warning order was received in Soissons until the accomplishment of the battalion's mission, 24 December 1944.

✓The vagueness of the warning order which directed the battalion to Namur, where a staff officer from XVIII Corps would disclose its ultimate destination, was directly responsible for the loss to the battalion of C Company, less one platoon. Units separated from their convoys on the congested highways were placed in the line by the headquarters at which they reported. The battalion lost almost one-third of its fighting strength for the entire operation, as a result of C Company's employment in another sector.

✓Under normal conditions, the mission assigned to the 1st Battalion would have been within its capabilities. It was committed to the attack, however, with no allowance of time for the unit commanders to make the reconnaissance necessary to familiarize themselves with the situation, or to make detailed plans for their units. It was primarily because of these conditions that the battalion was delayed in the accomplishment of its mission.

✓ Employment of the 81mm mortar platoon as security for Combat Command R, thus denying the battalion the use of its only heavy organic fire support, was a grave error in judgement. Had this platoon been available to fire preparations on the Haid Hits Crossroad, it would have greatly increased the chance for success of the attack on this objective during the morning of 23 December by Frazer's force.

✓ Due to the lack of knowledge of the proper employment and capabilities of armor, six of the nine tanks in support of the attack of Frazer's force were destroyed when they were committed over open ground against known enemy anti-tank gun positions. Such action is a violation of the doctrine of tank infantry employment. Had the tanks been employed in hull defilade, to support the attacking force by fire, greater success could have been achieved with a minimum loss of armor.

By utilizing the principle of surprise, Boyle's force gained initial success in effecting the envelopment of Hotton, however the small force was easily contained by the enemy on the outskirts of the town for the rest of the operation. Had the majority of the battalion been used as the maneuvering element, the German positions at Hotton could probably have been overrun, and the strong defenses at the Haid Hits Crossroad effectively struck from the rear.

The performance of the individual soldier in this action cannot be overemphasized. Despite the fanatical fighting of a determined enemy, endurance of the sub-freezing temperature without benefit of hot food, sleep or adequate clothing, and the extended continuous action, his morale remained high. There were many individual actions which exemplified the esprit de corps of the unit and greatly contributed to the successful accomplishment of the mission.

## LESSONS

✓1. Commanders whose units are engaged in a motor movement, must insure that each vehicle commander has knowledge of the route and destination.

✓2. A successful night attack requires reconnaissance and detailed planning by all commanders involved in the operation.

✓3. A unit must never be committed piecemeal if it can possibly be avoided.

✓4. A parachute infantry battalion, given an attack mission, should not be denied its organic 81mm mortar support.

5. An envelopment may force the enemy to defend on terrain not of his choosing. Infantry commanders should not overlook this advantage when planning an attack.

✓6. An enveloping force must be given sufficient strength to accomplish its mission.

✓7. Infantry commanders must have a thorough knowledge of the employment of armor.

✓8. Control is difficult when attacking through heavily wooded areas, and success will depend to a great extent upon the initiative of the small unit leaders.

9. Troops must be prepared to repel a counterattack after any advance against the enemy, no matter how slight the gain.

✓10. Marching fire, properly delivered, is very effective in destroying the will of the enemy to defend his position.

✓11. Combat commanders at all echelons must know the capabilities and limitation of any units which may be placed under their command.

*General* ✓12. Good leadership and adequate training pay off in battle.