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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY C, 8TH INFANTRY (4TH INFANTRY  
DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK OF THE HURTGEN FOREST, GERMANY,  
19 - 21 NOVEMBER 1944  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Rifle Company Commander)

Type of operation described: A RIFLE COMPANY ATTACKING  
FORTIFIED POSITIONS IN HEAVILY WOODED TERRAIN

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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY C, 8TH INFANTRY (4TH INFANTRY  
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company C, 8th Infantry, 4th U. S. Infantry Division, during the period 19 - 21 November 1944, in the Battle of the HURTGEN FOREST, GERMANY.

For orientation the major events which led up to this action will be discussed briefly.

On 6 June 1944, an Allied Force composed of American, British, and Canadian Units invaded EUROPE by landing on the NORMANDY Coast of FRANCE. (See Map A) (1)

Just after the middle of July this force reached a line running generally from the English Channel near CAEN, CAUMONT, ST. LO, and thence to the west coast of the CHERBOURG PENINSULA. (See Map A) (2)

On 25 July a major breakthrough was accomplished near ST. LO, and the "Battle of the Beachhead" was over. (3) The exploitation phase of the operations now began.

On 15 August an Allied Force composed of American and French Units landed on the shores of Southern FRANCE near ST. TROPEZ and ST. MAXIME. This force pushed northward rapidly and established firm contact near EPINAL, FRANCE, on 21 September with the Allied Force which had landed on the NORMANDY Coast. (4) (5) (See Map A)

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- (1) A-5, p. 253  
(2) A-5, p. 272, 273  
(3) A-5, p. 255  
(4) A-5, p. 295  
(5) A-6, p. 66

During the month of September the SIEGFRIED LINE was penetrated by the American forces in the SCHNEE EIFEL FOREST, GERMANY, east of ST. VITH, BELGIUM and in the HURTTGEN FOREST, GERMANY, southeast of AACHEN, GERMANY. (6)

Many persons at this time thought the end of the war was imminent since they believed the Germans could not stop the advance of the Allies, but the pursuit across FRANCE and BELGIUM had been so rapid that supplies in sufficient quantity to sustain the drive along the entire front could not be delivered, and it was necessary to call a halt until such time as the supply situation could be improved. (7)

Through strenuous efforts in repairing the railroads and the operation of a highway system known as the "Red Ball Highway" the supply situation was greatly improved by the end of October. (8)

AACHEN, GERMANY, an important communications center, was captured on 21 October by the VII U. S. Corps. (9)

By the first of November, the Allied Forces were disposed as shown on Map A.

#### GENERAL SITUATION

On 21 October, Twelfth Army Group directed First Army to attack to the east to "reach the RHINE in the vicinity of COLOGNE and BONN and to seize a bridgehead if the situation should permit. Failing a successful crossing of that river, the First Army would clear the enemy from the area between the MOSELLE RIVER on the south and COLOGNE (incl) on the north."

(See Map B)

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- (6) A-1, p. 49-50
  - (7) A-6, p. 60
  - (8) A-7, p. 197
  - (9) A-1, p. 61

Suitable flying weather and availability of ammunition would determine the actual date of the attack. (10) The date of the attack would be not later than 16 November. (11) The largest air effort ever attempted in close support of ground troops was to precede the attack. (12)

The First U. S. Army consisted of the V Corps and the VII Corps. The VII Corps was to make the main effort. (13) This Corps was given the mission of seizing COLOGNE. (14) On 10 November the order of battle of the VII Corps was: 1st Infantry Division, 4th Infantry Division, 104th Infantry Division, 47th Regimental Combat Team, 4th Cavalry Group, CCR, 5th Armored Division, and the 3rd Armored Division. (15) For disposition of the VII Corps on 15 November see Map B.

The 4th Infantry Division was composed of the 8th Infantry, 12th Infantry and 22nd Infantry. On 10 November, the 8th Infantry closed into an assembly area near ZWIEFALL, GERMANY. (See Map C) This had been a secret move. Some personnel had worn insignia of other units and bumper markings had been obliterated. (16)

The mission of the 4th U. S. Infantry Division was "to seize the crossings of the ROER RIVER in the vicinity of DUREN and south thereof, assist the 1st Division on its left, protect the right flank of the Corps, and continue the attack in the southern section of the Corps zone to seize COLOGNE". (See Map B) (17)

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(10) A-1, p. 67  
(11) A-1, p. 74  
(12) A-1, p. 73  
(13) A-1, p. 67  
(14) A-2  
(15) A-1, p. 71  
(16) A-4, p. 85  
(17) A-2

The plan of attack of the 4th U. S. Infantry Division was to attack with all three regiments abreast. The 8th Infantry, 22nd Infantry and 12th Infantry were to be in order from left to right. (18)

The plan of attack of the 8th Infantry was to attack in a column of battalions in order of 2nd, 1st, and 3rd. The mission of the 8th Infantry was to seize the high ground in the WENAUX FOREST. (Part of the HURTGEN FOREST) (19) (See Map C)

The enemy units in the VII Corps zone from west to east were the 29th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, the 246th Fusilier Battalion, elements of the 12th and 275th Infantry Divisions, the 47th Volksgrenadier Division, and elements of the 116th Panzer Division. (20)

The HURTGEN FOREST covers an area of approximately fifty square miles. It is roughly in the shape of a triangle formed by the three towns of AACHEN, MONSCHAU and DUREN, GERMANY. (See Map B) (21) The forest consists of alternate groves of hardwood, large pine and small pine trees. The entire forest is divided into numerous small squares or rectangles with fire-breaks approximately forty feet wide separating each square or rectangle. Several narrow valleys run through the forest. The sides of the majority of these valleys rise very abruptly to a height of one hundred to two hundred feet. On top of these abrupt rises the land is generally level for distances up to two thousand yards when another valley begins. Numerous small streams join the larger streams in the valleys. In the more

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(18) A-2  
(19) A-2  
(20) A-2  
(21) A-1, p. 165

dense portions of the forest visibility is sometimes reduced to as little as ten yards. (22)

During the fall of 1944 this entire area was covered by alternate rain and snow storms. As a result all roads and trails rapidly became quagmires. The ground was completely saturated with water. (23)

At the beginning of the battle the morale and combat efficiency of the 4th Infantry Division was extremely high. The fierce fanatical resistance encountered by the 4th Division was to prove that the combat efficiency and morale of the enemy was equally high. (24)

The main enemy defenses consisted of well dug in and well camouflaged individual and automatic weapons positions which had overhead shelter and were connected by communication trenches. These positions overlooked barriers composed of triple concertina barbwire and minefields containing both anti-tank and anti-personnel mines that were placed in front of, in, and behind the barbwire. All of the barriers were protected by high angle fire as well as small arms fire. These positions were distributed in depth throughout the forest. (25)

The only serious shortage of supplies or equipment that existed was the lack of adequate winter clothing. Overshoes (arctics) were not available in large sizes. (26) Shoe pacs were not available until well after the operation was over. (27) These shortages resulted in extreme discomfort and caused casualties from trench foot even though every effort was exert-

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- (22) A-3  
(23) A-3  
(24) A-3  
(25) A-3  
(26) A-1, p. 93  
(27) A-3

ed to obtain dry socks as often as possible and to insure that the feet of each man were rubbed daily in order to restore circulation. (28)

#### DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 8TH INFANTRY

On 15 November the 1st Battalion moved from its initial assembly area near ZWIEPFALL to a more advanced assembly area near BEND. (See Map C)

On 16 November the attack which had been delayed since 4 November waiting for good weather for the air effort was launched. The visibility above the target area had improved and at 1145 the air attack began. Although the results of this air attack were not immediately evident to the infantry since the airplanes could not bomb close to the front lines due to the impossibility of definitely marking the front lines through the forest it achieved good results. The enemy suffered extensive damage to his artillery and had at least one division practically eliminated. (29)

At 1245 the 2nd Battalion attacked from its line of departure. (See Map C) It advanced about 200 yards when it was halted in front of an enemy defensive position by intense artillery, mortar, and automatic weapons fire. The defensive position consisted of triple concertina wire, anti-personnel minefields and dug in positions. Throughout the remainder of the day the 2nd Battalion vigorously pressed the attack but was unable to progress. The Battalion lost approximately 135 officers and men including three Company Commanders. On 17 November the 2nd Battalion was still unable to breach the position

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(28) A-3

(29) A-1, p. 74

although it had been able to get one tank up the steep slope immediately in rear of the Battalion to assist it. Again the Battalion sustained heavy casualties. (30)

The 1st Battalion remained near BEND until late in the afternoon of 17 November when it moved to the line of departure from which the 2nd Battalion had attacked. (See Map C)

On 18 November the 1st Battalion relieved the 2nd Battalion. This relief was not completed until late afternoon. The 1st Battalion was disposed with Companies A and B on line and Company C in reserve. (See Map D) The Battalion was ordered to attack at 0900 hours 19 November to seize a road junction about 1500 yards to the northeast. The left flank of the Battalion was generally along the SCHEVENHUTTE-DUREN road and extension thereof. The right flank of the Battalion was about 1400 yards to the southeast of the SCHEVENHUTTE-DUREN road. (31) (See Map D)

The plan of attack of the 1st Battalion was to attack in a column of Companies in order of C, A, and B. The direction of attack would be generally astride the firebreak leading to the northeast until the SCHEVENHUTTE-DUREN road was reached. The attack would then turn to the right and proceed astride this road to the objective. Companies A and B plus a platoon of heavy machine guns from Company D would, from their present positions, support by fire the attempt of Company C to breach the barrier directly to their front. If this attempt was successful they would then move in column behind Company C. No close support artillery or 81 mm mortar fire would be available since there was great danger of rounds falling short due

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(30) A-9, p.26

(31) A-3

to the trees. The 29th Field Artillery Battalion and the 81 mm Mortar Platoon of Company D would, beginning at H hour, fire intermittently on the firebreaks leading to the objective. This fire would be lifted on call. Company C would have attached one platoon of medium tanks and one platoon of light tanks from the 70th Tank Battalion, one platoon of tank destroyers from the 803rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, one squad of engineers from the 4th Division Engineer Battalion and one heavy machine gun platoon from Company D, 8th Infantry. One forward observer from the mortar platoon and one from the 29th Field Artillery Battalion would be with Company C. The platoon of tank destroyers had four tank destroyers for the operation. If Company C succeeded in breaching the initial minefield Battalion would be responsible for further widening and marking the breach. Additional litter teams would be employed. The time of attack would be 0900. The line of departure would be that line presently held by Companies A and B. (32) (See Map D)

Company C was assigned the mission of attacking astride the firebreak to its left front to breach the barrier that had stopped the 2nd Battalion, cut the SCHEVENHUTTE-DUREN road, turn to the right astride that road, and capture the Battalion objective. (33) (See Map D)

Upon questioning the Battalion Staff, the Company Commander, Company C, was informed that no aerial photographs were available for this operation even though there had just been two days of good flying weather.

THE SITUATION OF COMPANY C ON 18 NOVEMBER

Following the completion of the relief of the 2nd Bat-  
(32) A-3  
(33) A-3

talion the two front line companies of the 1st Battalion, Companies A and B, were near the top of a hill about 1,000 yards southeast of SCHEVENHUTTE, GERMANY. This hill rises abruptly from the floor of the valley to a height of about 240 feet. Company C, the reserve company, was in position near two rock quarries about halfway up this hill and about 200 yards in rear of Companies A and B. (See Map D)

Company C was at nearly full strength with 5 officers and approximately 165 men present for duty. A Technical Sergeant commanded the 3rd Platoon.

The morale and combat effectiveness of the company was at a high peak.

The ground in front of Company C rose abruptly for about 200 yards and then was approximately level in the direction of the advance until about 250 yards in front of the final objective of the Company a gentle slope began which extended to the top of a small hill on which the objective was located. This entire distance, except for the firebreaks, was covered by alternate growths of large pines, small pines and hardwood trees. Immediately in rear of the company the ground sloped sharply down to the floor of a small valley. One narrow road wound up this hill to the rock quarries where Company C was located and thence to the top of the hill where the line of departure was. One tank had been able to get up this trail. No other road existed in the zone of attack of Company C until the SCHEVENHUTTE-DUREN road was reached. Due to the lack of roads the only route of advance for vehicles was firebreaks.

The ground was saturated with water due to rain and snow

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of BEND to complete the plan of attack.

The plan was substantially as follows:

(1) The tank destroyer platoon from positions near the line of departure would, at H-5 minutes, fire high explosive rounds at the base of the triple concertina wire. This fire would continue until H hour. (The reason for this firing was that previously a tank had been unable to break this wire, and it was hoped that shell fragments would cut some of the wire and thus make it possible for a tank to go through. The 2nd Battalion had lost a large number of men due to anti-personnel mines when they attempted to breach this wire with bangalore torpedoes.) Beginning at H hour the tank destroyers would place automatic fire on the enemy positions on both sides of the point where it was planned to breach the barrier. This fire would continue until the bulk of the company passed the barriers.

(2) At H hour one medium tank was to move out and attempt to breach the barrier. If this attempt was successful then the remainder of the medium tank platoon would follow, and all would move in column straight down the left side of the firebreak. If the barrier could not be broken by tanks then the medium tanks would assist the tank destroyers in protecting the engineer squad while it breached the wire with demolitions.

(3) The platoon of light tanks was to follow the medium tanks through the wire and then immediately turn to the right and move down the right side of the firebreak. (The reason for the light tanks going down the right side was that the

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until ordered by the Company Commander. (This was necessary since the depth of the minefield was unknown.)

(11) No close support mortar or artillery fire would be available. (This was due to the trees preventing it.) Beginning at H hour the mortar platoon of Company D and the 29th Field Artillery Battalion would fire on the firebreaks leading to the company objectives. This intermittent fire would be lifted on call.

(12) A Company and B Company plus one heavy machine gun platoon would initially support the attack by fire from their present positions.

(13) The line of departure would be the line presently held by Companies A and B.

(14) The direction of attack would be astride the firebreak leading to the northeast until the SCHEVENHUTTE-DUREN road was reached when the direction of attack would swing to the right and continue astride this road.

(15) H hour would be 0900.

(16) When the tanks arrived at the rock quarries extra ammunition of all types plus water and C rations would be placed on them.

(17) Battalion would be responsible for widening and marking the breach in the minefield.

(18) The Battalion C. P. would be in BEND.

(19) The Battalion Aid Station would be at the foot of the hill in rear of the position presently occupied by Company C. Additional litter teams would be procured.

This plan was not completed until late at night. It was

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ing and the leading medium tank started forward. At this time the tank destroyers shifted to firing machine guns at the flanks of the point where the breach was to be made. Companies A and B and the heavy machine gun platoon began firing as scheduled. As the tank reached the edge of the minefield the explosion of anti-personnel mines under its tracks could be heard. All were nearly breathless as it reached the wire barrier and nosed into it. The tank was momentarily stopped, but with a great roar of motors it backed up and then charged the barrier again. It was through! Just then one of its tracks was blown off by the explosion of an anti-tank mine.

During this time only occasional mortar and artillery fire had been falling on the barrier. As supposed then it was later learned from prisoners that when the assembled armor had arrived the enemy had withdrawn and for some unknown reason had failed to shoot concentrations of artillery and mortars on the position.

As soon as the lead tank had passed through the wire the attack continued as planned. The next tank in column bypassed the knocked out tank and then cut to the left to get on the left side of the firebreak. The passage of the barrier proceeded as planned.

The progress of the medium tanks was slowed in order to let the light tanks come abreast. When this was accomplished the attack proceeded as rapidly as possible. The attack had progressed about 300 yards when three things happened almost simultaneously:

- (1) A call was received from the Company Executive Of-
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ficer stating the entire company had cleared the barrier without the loss of a single man.

(2) The leading medium tank was knocked out by a land mine. Fortunately, there were no casualties within or without the tank. In fact, the tankers seemed quite happy as they came out of the tank.

(3) A concentration of artillery fell on the column.

The column halted because the tanks halted. The medium tank platoon leader was contacted by radio and ordered to continue the advance. The next medium tank pulled around the knocked out tank and the infantry which had been following the lead tank fell in behind it. There could still be heard the occasional pop of an anti-personnel mine under the tanks so the original formation was maintained.

The advance continued about 200 yards farther when the first fire break running perpendicular to the line of advance was sighted. The Company Commander attempted to contact the medium tank platoon leader by radio, but could not do so. He then attempted to use the telephone on the outside of the platoon leaders tank, but it too was out of order. Contact was then established by him climbing on the tank and getting the turret open. Contact by wire or radio was never reestablished throughout the operation. This was to make adequate control of the tanks very difficult. The column was finally halted just short of the firebreak. The engineer squad was called forward and ordered to sweep the firebreak. They did this under the protection of the riflemen and tanks and reported there were no mines in the road.

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A patrol consisting of one squad from each column was then ordered to precede the column at the limit of visibility. Flank security was also sent out. This was the first time the Company Commander of Company C had felt he could take these actions without excessive loss from mines.

The column then started its advance again. Contrary to the reports of the engineer squad the firebreak did have anti-tank mines in it. Again the lead medium tank was lost due to hitting a land mine. The Engineer Squad Leader said it had been a plastic mine and the sweeper would not pick it up. A passage across the road was then probed and the advance continued.

Just after the firebreak was crossed a firefight involving the two lead patrols broke out and concentrations of mortars and artillery fire started falling on the column. The column was halted and the Company Commander and the 1st Platoon Leader moved forward to determine the situation. They found the two patrols firing on three well camouflaged positions. The lead medium tank and the lead light tank were moved forward and the two patrols and tanks together advanced on the positions. The positions were overrun. Two Germans were captured and three were found dead. The remainder had been able to withdraw due to the excellent selection of their positions and the restricted visibility.

The advance continued and the second firebreak which ran perpendicular to the route of advance was crossed without incident.

The majority of the column had crossed this firebreak

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when the patrols reported they were about 50 yards from the main road that constituted the initial objective of the Company and that tanks could not cross the road. This was due to a small stream that ran close and parallel to the near side of the road and the abrupt rise of the ground from the stream to the road. The presence of this stream had previously been unknown. The patrol further reported that an abatis covered the road for more than a hundred feet and that seven or eight German soldiers had been seen. This information was verified.

Wire had not been able to keep up with the advance, but constant contact had been maintained with Battalion CP by radio.

The Battalion Commander was informed of the situation, and permission to change the route of advance and proceed directly to the final objective was obtained.

It was approximately 1100 hours. The advance had covered about 1,000 yards. There was about 1,000 yards left to go. So far only seven men had been lost due to artillery fire. No casualties from small arms fire had been suffered.

The change in direction which amounted to a ninety degree turn to the right was made, and the advance continued.

After proceeding for about 300 yards the patrols reported they had arrived at the edge of a space in the woods that obviously had been recently cleared. The column was halted and the Company Commander and the 1st Platoon Leader moved forward to join the patrols. Upon arriving at the edge of the clearing they found it to be almost a perfect square. It extended for about 250 yards on each side. The felled trees had been removed and, as we later learned, had been used in fortifica-

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tions. The limbs that had been trimmed from the trees were left in the clearing. Although this square was only approximately 250 yards across, no evidence of fortification on the far side could be seen even though field glasses were used in searching the area.

The Company Commander felt so strongly that this must be a heavily defended area he decided to make preparations to launch a major attack even though as yet no enemy had been seen. Accordingly he ordered one patrol to reconnoiter the right flank of the position and the other patrol to reconnoiter the left flank. All platoon leaders, attached and assigned, and the Field Artillery and mortar observers were brought forward. All were shown the area. The greatest stealth was used. Both patrols returned and reported finding an extensive trench system on each flank of the position. This confirmed the Company Commander's opinion that this was a strongly fortified position, and he determined to throw everything in the first assault in an attempt to avoid being repulsed.

The platoon leaders were withdrawn, and the attack order was issued. The order was substantially as follows:

(1) The 1st Platoon, Company C, would move to the left flank and attack generally astride the trenches.

(2) The 2nd Platoon, Company C, would swing around to the right in order to get in a position parallel to the trench system which made up the far side of the clearing. It would then attack astride those trenches and join with the 1st Platoon at the far left corner of the square.

(3) The 3rd Platoon, would move down the right side of

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the square to protect that flank of the Company and be prepared to assist the 2nd Platoon.

(4) The attached heavy machine gun platoon from positions in the 1st Platoon area would support the attack of the 1st Platoon and be prepared to support the attack of the 2nd Platoon. It would fire until:

- (a) its fires were masked by the 1st Platoon;
- (b) ordered to stop by the Company Commander, Company C;
- (c) on red star signal from the 2nd Platoon.

(This platoon's fire was not expected to be very effective since it could not secure positions at the very edge of the clearing and the forest was so thick that from positions just a few feet inside it the fields of fire were very limited.)

(5) The platoon of tank destroyers and the remaining two medium tanks would move into position where they could fire directly across the clearing. All of the weapons on the tanks would be fired. This fire would be lifted under the same conditions as stated for the heavy machine gun platoon.

(6) The light tanks would move directly across the clearing until they arrived at the far edge where they would continue firing into the woods. This fire would be lifted under the same conditions as the fire of the heavy machine gun platoon. (The reasons for the light tanks advancing was due to so little being known about the clearing that it was felt they might be needed to advance beyond the clearing, and the forest on the far side of the clearing looked of such nature that it was doubted medium tanks would be able to advance.)

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(7) The light machine guns of the weapons platoon were to remain with the platoons they were presently attached to.

(8) The 60 mm mortar section was to go into position at the last firebreak passed and fire on the far edge of the clearing.

(9) The fire of all supporting weapons would begin three minutes prior to the jump-off and would continue under the conditions imposed except the 60 mm mortar section which would cease firing at the end of the three minutes.

(10) The artillery and mortar observers would call for fire on the battalion objective since their close support could not be given to the attack.

(11) The engineer squad would remain in the immediate vicinity of the medium tanks.

(12) The Company Executive Officer, with a SCR 300 radio, would remain with the platoon leader of the medium tank platoon in order that radio communication could be maintained between the tank platoon leader and the company commander.

(13) All fires were to begin on the order of the Company Commander, Company C, and the attack was to proceed as planned thereafter. (See Map D)

So far all the plans and preparations had been made more on a "hunch" of the Commanding Officer of Company C than on any information concerning the enemy.

All units moved into position. It was now about 1230 hours. The Company C Commander stood up to make a final check and picked up the hand set of the radio to inform the Battalion Commander that the attack was about to be launched when sudden-

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ly the air apparently became saturated with small arms and high angle fire. Rifle fire, machine gun fire, artillery up to 170 mm, and mortar fire ranging from 60 mm to 150 mm fell on Company C. Never had this veteran company experienced such sudden overwhelming fire. It was nearly unbelievable that so perfect timing of such devastating fire could be achieved. The company commander's radio operator was severely wounded and the radio destroyed by small arms fire. The 2d Platoon Leader and the Weapons Platoon Leader were severely wounded. The number of other personnel wounded is unknown. There was no cover anywhere from the rain of death. The enemy mortar and artillery shells striking and exploding in the tree tops were particularly effective since they were air bursts and no man could find shelter from the shell fragments. The company was temporarily completely disorganized.

The Company Commander, Company C, immediately decided the only thing to do was attack as soon as control was regained. The Executive Officer was ordered to take command of the 2d Platoon, but it was soon evident that he had been too badly shaken by the concentrations to do so. He was then relieved of this duty and ordered to supervise the evacuation of the wounded and see that no man evaded combat by leaving the area. The Platoon Sergeants of the 2d Platoon and Weapons Platoon were ordered to assume command of those platoons. A SCR 300 radio was obtained from the Weapons Platoon and contact was re-established with the Battalion C. P. The reorganization required approximately one half hour. This reorganization was made extremely difficult due to the constant intense concen-

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trations of high angle fire and the small arms fire that blanketed the area.

Just before the attack was to be resumed a P-47 started strafing what at first appeared to be the area occupied by the 1st Platoon, Company C, but then was seen to be actually the opposite side of the clearing. This was only 250 yards in front of Company C.

The three minute preparation was ordered begun and while this was being fired the P-47 made another attack, and then just as the preparation ended it made its last attack. No prior planning could have coordinated such perfect support from the Air Corps.

The attack jumped off. The 2d Platoon had not advanced more than fifty yards when the platoon leader reported the platoon was encountering bunkers dug into the ground, automatic weapons positions, and individual riflemen. He was ordered to press the attack and to pass on by the bunkers leaving only one or two men to guard each until the 3d Platoon could arrive to clean them out. The 1st Platoon reported encountering well dug-in positions but that those positions were being slowly overcome. The platoon of light tanks had moved out and was advancing slowly across the clearing. Enemy bazookas started firing but were extremely inaccurate, probably due to such heavy fire being placed on the enemy positions that the gunners could not accurately aim their weapons. The Company Commander then moved forward with the 3rd Platoon. The 1st Sergeant was ordered to remain with the tank platoon leader instead of the Executive Officer, who was busy with the last

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duties assigned him. Again the lack of direct communication with the tank platoon leader was proving annoying. The 3rd Platoon arrived in rear of the 2d Platoon and started clearing out the bunkers. The light tanks were stopped about fifty yards short of their objective, the edge of the clearing, by a maze of barb wire attached to short stakes. Since they were more or less "sitting ducks" in that position they were ordered to return across the clearing. All infantry elements of the company moved slowly forward. Fierce fighting took place in each platoon area. Many hand grenades were used and practically all of the fighting was done at ranges under 25 yards. At last the 1st Platoon reported it had fought its way to the corner of the square where the 2d Platoon was to join it. The 1st Platoon was ordered to remain in position since any further advance would have exposed it to the fires of the 2d Platoon. Shortly thereafter the 2d Platoon advanced sufficiently so that the fire of the tanks was lifted. The heavy machine gun platoon had ceased firing before this. The 2d Platoon then fought its way to a junction with the 1st Platoon. In the meantime the 3rd Platoon completed its mopping up mission. Immediate consolidation and reorganization was begun.

In the attack on the clearing twenty five Germans were captured and fifteen were killed. Every German captured had been wounded as the enemy had resisted to the utmost. (35)

It was now 1630 hours. It was evident that due to the complete reorganization necessary Company C would be unable to advance further that day due to the approaching darkness. The Battalion Commander was informed of the status of Company C.

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(35) A-8

A check revealed that in the days action Company C had lost two officers and sixty three men; the heavy machine gun platoon lost ten men; the engineer squad had lost one man. There had been no personnel lost in the tank or tank destroyer platoons while three medium tanks had been knocked out by mines.

All three rifle platoons were placed on line on two sides of the square facing the enemy. The 60 mm mortar section and the armor were ordered to remain in position. The heavy machine gun platoon was brought across the clearing and disposed in squads along the front occupied by Company C.

Upon closer inspection of the position just captured it was found the majority of the trenches and bunkers had been constructed about five yards inside the forest from the edge of the clearing. The bunkers had been constructed so that they extended about three feet above and below the ground. The sides were made of only single large logs, but the roofs were three alternating layers of large logs and dirt. Some of the bunkers were as much as forty feet long and fifteen feet wide. All had beds made of laced rope and straw mattresses for the occupants.

Had aerial photographs of this area been available the existence of this clearing would have been known, and plans could have been made before hand for its capture. Time and personnel might have been saved if the location of this clearing had been known.

Immediately in rear of the trenches and bunkers the forest became very dense. The large pine trees were so close together that tanks could not move any further in that direction.

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A small patrol was sent to the front to determine the location of the next German position. Another small patrol was sent to the right to see if tanks could be taken forward in that direction. The first patrol returned and reported the dense pines extended about 100 yards and then gave way to large hardwood trees. This was about 250 yards from the 1st Battalion and Company objective. The patrol leader stated that as he emerged from the pines he was fired upon by an automatic weapon from the direction of the objective. A short while later the second patrol returned and reported that the dense forest extended so far to the right that tanks would be unable to advance in that direction. All of this information was given to the Battalion Commander by radio.

All of the water, ammunition, and food that had been carried on the tanks was brought forward to the positions presently occupied. The 1st Platoon was ordered to establish one listening post at the edge of the thick pines.

Almost immediately after Company C had captured the clearing, high angle fire started falling within the area. While daylight lasted this fire was intense, and throughout the night harassing fire continued.

All day Companies A and B had followed C Company by bounds, and although they had not participated in the attack they had suffered severe casualties from mortar and artillery fire. Just before dark these companies moved forward and joined Company C. At this time Company C consolidated its position so that it occupied only the trenches on the side of the square that faced northeast. Company A moved to the left and Company

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B to the right of Company C and extended and joined so as to form a perimeter defense of the square.

It was rapidly getting dark and still many wounded lay where they had been hit. Some were unable to move due to the nature of their wounds while others were immobile due to shock. The litter carry now involved a one way distance of about 1800 yards. About 500 yards was through known or suspected mine-fields that had only been marked by the tank tracks. As yet this path had not been widened or marked by Battalion. Litter teams therefore were restricted to the tank tracks in moving through that area. Litter team casualties had been caused by mortar and artillery fire, and it was soon evident that all the wounded could not be evacuated from the battlefield that night. All companies began searching for the wounded and brought them to the bunkers where they could at least have shelter and receive first aid. This search went on far into the night since the mpans of the wounded led searches to them. The litter teams continued working throughout the night, but in spite of their tremendous efforts all of the wounded were not evacuated by morning.

The night was intensely cold, and even though it had not rained during the day the ground was so wet that the clothing of the men had been soaked through when they had been forced to crawl. No bedrolls were available since none had been carried and all efforts were being directed towards the evacuation of the wounded. Perhaps the greatest discomfort was caused by wet cold combat boots and though each man carried an extra pair of socks there was no way of drying the pair taken off. All

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personnel were rotated so that each man spent part of the night in the bunkers. During this time he was required to remove his boots and rub his feet so that circulation would be restored.

Throughout the day no other unit in the Regiment had actually attacked the enemy.

#### THE ATTACK ON 20 NOVEMBER

During the night telephone communication with the Battalion CP was established. Shortly before daybreak the Company Commander of C Company received an order by telephone from the Battalion Commander that the battalion would attack again at 0900 hours in the same order as the previous day. No close support mortar or artillery fire would be available since there was such great danger of the rounds striking the tall trees overhead. The objective was to be the same as the final objective of the previous day.

The plan of attack of Company C was generally as follows:

(1) The 1st and 3d Platoons would attack abreast, with the 3d Platoon on the right.

(2) The 2d Platoon would follow in rear of the 1st Platoon.

(3) The light machine gun section would be attached to the 3d Platoon.

(4) The heavy machine gun platoon (which in the course of its reorganization had dwindled to a section) would be attached to the 1st Platoon.

(5) All of the armor would remain in its present location.

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(6) The 60 mm mortar section would move into the clearing and be prepared to deliver fire on the objective on call.

(7) Company Headquarters would remain in its present location until ordered to displace.

(8) The engineer squad would remain with the Company Headquarters and be prepared to use demolitions if the company encountered a minefield.

(9) The artillery and mortar observers were ordered to request fire on the roads in rear of the objective.

(10) The direction of the attack would be due east.

(11) The line of departure would be the trenches now occupied by Company C. (See Map D)

After daybreak the reorganization of the company was checked again, and it was found that four men had been wounded during the night. This left a total strength of 3 officers and 98 men remaining in Company C.

A message was received from battalion that the minefield had finally been cleared and additional litter teams were being employed.

Since daybreak the enemy artillery and mortar concentrations had steadily increased in intensity and by 0830 hours seldom did a period as long as five minutes go by without a concentration falling on the clearing. Evacuation of the wounded or any other movement was made difficult.

At 0900 hours Company C moved out of its trenches. The company had not moved fifty yards when concentrations of mortar and artillery fell in its very center. It began to appear as if the enemy had some supernatural being directing its fire

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since it was so accurate. Again the tree bursts of the high angle fire exacted a heavy toll. The company pushed steadily forward and upon arrival at the edge of the thick pines the two leading platoons sent scouts farther ahead, deployed more, and then moved into the hardwood forest. Visibility here was as much as 100 yards in some directions.

Shortly after leaving the thick pines the high angle fire decreased in intensity since the slight slope of the ground caused the artillery shells to pass on overhead.

The company had moved about 100 yards from the edge of the thick pines and the scouts were only about 50 yards from the objective when suddenly the enemy opened fire with machine guns, rifles, bazookas and a direct fire weapon. The scouts were all killed or wounded and several casualties were sustained in each of the leading platoons. The Company was halted. Although several enemy machine guns were firing only two could be definitely located. Bazookas and rifle grenades were brought forward to fire on these positions. The majority of the rounds fired by the bazookas failed to go off due to landing short and striking soft ground. One machine gun position was silenced. The rifle grenades were of little value since a direct hit could not be scored with them.

The two leading platoons were ordered to move forward by fire and movement. This was to be done with all squads abreast. This advance was attempted and did not gain more than a few yards at the cost of several casualties among which was the Platoon Leader of the 1st Platoon. The company was stopped again.

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The Executive Officer was called forward to take command of one of the platoons. Just as he joined the Company Commander a mortar round burst in the tree over them, and the executive officer had to be evacuated. The only officer left was the Company Commander.

The 1st Platoon did not have a platoon sergeant or platoon guide since both had been wounded on the first day. The Platoon Guide of the 3d Platoon was placed in command of the 1st Platoon. It was impossible to maneuver to the left since a machine gun from an unlocated position was sweeping the ground in that area. The 2d Platoon was ordered into a position on the right flank of the company. When it was in position the 60 mm mortar section was ordered to fire on the objective even though some rounds might fall short. As soon as the mortar section started firing another attack was launched and again the attack was stopped. Seemingly the fire of the 60 mm mortar section had no effect as more casualties were sustained. It was now about 1400 hours.

The Battalion Commander had been kept informed of the situation all day and was now informed that Company C had been completely stopped.

Neither Company A nor Company B had moved throughout the day. About 1430 hours Company A was ordered to attack on the left of Company C and Company B was ordered to attack on the right., Company C was ordered to join in the attack.

Shortly after Company A moved out of its position and got one squad on the high ground across the road on the left flank of the battalion the "supernatural" fire of the enemy was explained. A well dug-in camouflaged enemy artillery observation post was captured.

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Both Company A and Company B launched their attack, but neither ever got abreast of Company C. Company C was unable to move.

Just before dark Company C withdrew approximately fifty yards where better positions could be occupied. This was far enough back down the hill to allow the men to move around stooped over and thereby not be hit by small arms fire. In the most advanced positions it had been impossible to even rise to one's knees without becoming an immediate target for the enemy small arms fire.

The results of the days action were:

- (1) Company C had advanced only about 150 yards.
- (2) Many casualties had been suffered.
- (3) It could not be definitely established that a single enemy had been killed or wounded and none had been captured.

The need for reorganization was great as the total non-commissioned officer strength remaining in the forward area was the 1st Sergeant, the Weapons Platoon Sergeant, one Platoon Guide, three Rifle Squad Leaders, and one Light Machine Gun Squad Leader. The light machine gun section consisted of a squad leader and two men. Company Headquarters was reduced to the 1st Sergeant and a radio operator. (This did not include the Supply Sergeant, Mess Sergeant and six cooks) The 60 mm mortar section had remaining the Weapon Platoon Sergeant and six men. It was determined that forty men were present in the forward area. It was then decided to temporarily disband the 60 mm mortar section since they could not furnish close-in support in this particular area. Two men of this section were

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assigned to the light machine gun section in order that both guns of that section could be manned. The remaining four men became riflemen. The remaining riflemen were consolidated into two platoons. The only platoon guide remaining was placed in command of one, and the Weapons Platoon Sergeant commanded the other. Therefore, one platoon had sixteen men and the other had seventeen. The light machine gun section had five men. During the days fighting two officers and fifty men had become casualties.

The heavy machine gun platoon was reduced to eight men. The Platoon Leader of this platoon was returned to the bunkers in the clearing since any further action on his part would have resulted in another casualty due to combat fatigue.

While this reorganization was being made an order was received directing the detachment of the engineer squad and the armor and their return to the Battalion C. P. immediately. The Battalion C. P. had moved to a location near the rock quarries. These units left to report to the new location at once.

All of the wounded were evacuated prior to darkness, but it was not possible to remove the dead.

The shortage of ammunition which existed in the company was taken care of by the Supply Sergeant and the mess personnel acting as carrying teams during the night.

The company was disposed for the night in a single, approximately straight line that extended from a point near the road on the left flank for about 150 yards to the southeast. The two heavy and two light machine guns were spaced equally

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along this line. Actual contact on the left flank was not made with Company A, but contact on the right flank with Company B was made. (See Map D)

The men started digging holes for the night but soon found that a hole not more than six inches deep could be dug until it started filling with water because the ground was water-soaked. The men had learned time and again during the past two days that shelter trenches dug in the woods were practically useless unless they could be covered with logs, and since this could not be done in this situation presently all attempts to dig ceased. Bed rolls were still not available since all efforts had been directed towards evacuation of the wounded and resupply of ammunition. Soon after dark it became bitterly cold, and, as the clothing of all was watersoaked, the only way warmth could be obtained was through exercise. The night was spent in alternate periods of exercise and rest. No one was able to sleep. Again the most severe discomfort was caused by inadequate footwear. The only comfort during the night was that the majority of the enemy artillery rounds were passing overhead and landing to the rear. Only occasional mortar rounds fell on the position during the night. No order was received from Battalion.

#### THE COMPANY SITUATION -- 21 NOVEMBER

All anxiously awaited dawn and the little warmth it would bring. In the first false light of dawn the Germans launched a counterattack of approximately one platoon strength. Eight Germans were killed and four were captured. The attack was

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repulsed. Five members of Company C, including the Platoon Guide acting as Platoon Leader, were wounded.

The total fighting strength of Company C was now one officer and thirty five men. Other<sup>than</sup> the 1st Sergeant there was one sergeant, the Weapons Platoon Sergeant, remaining in the forward area.

Information concerning this action was reported to the Battalion Commander and the Battalion Commander then ordered Company C to withdraw to the clearing and be prepared for the 3d Battalion to pass through at 0800 hours.

This order was executed, and when the 3d Battalion passed through at approximately 0800 hours the fighting for the period 19-21 November was over for Company C.

Briefly the results of the operation were: Company C did not gain its objective, but it did make an advance of approximately 1800 yards, and in making this advance it created a breach in one very large minefield, <sup>and</sup> captured an extremely well prepared, fanatically defended major position. This strongpoint was the key to the enemy defenses in that particular area of the forest. The total known enemy losses, dead and captured, was 57. The total losses of Company C and attachments was approximately 148. Three medium tanks were lost. These losses were high, but when attacking such well prepared, stubbornly defended positions in such terrain high losses must be expected.

For its actions Company C was commended by Order of the Day, Number 68, 5 January 1945, Headquarters 4th United States Infantry Division.

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## ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. Many who were wounded on 19 November were not evacuated until 20 November. This resulted in much additional suffering for all of those persons and possibly in death for a few. This failure was due to four things:

(1) The extremely high number of personnel wounded not only in Company C but also in the remainder of the Battalion.

(2) The litter carry was long in that it involved a carry of approximately 1800 yards from the point where the majority of the men were wounded to the Battalion Aid Station.

(3) Since a path through the minefield had not been marked by other than tank tracks the litter teams were restricted to those tracks and were thereby slowed down.

(4) Even though additional litter teams were employed a greater number should have been secured since all units that had participated in this area had suffered severe casualties.

2. The plan of action of Company C did not include a widening or marking of any breach it was successful in making in the initial minefield. The tank tracks were deemed to be sufficient marking until Battalion further widened and marked the breach. This responsibility of Battalion was not performed on 19 November. This failure resulted in all who went to or from the rifle companies using only the tank tracks as a path for excessive distances since they did not know the depth of the minefield.

3. On 19 November the only actual assault Company in the Regiment was Company C. This allowed the defenders to mass their fires on this one Company. Had other units been employed in

the attack probably less casualties would have been sustained and further advanced may have been made.

4. Neither Company A nor Company B was actually committed until about 1430 hours 20 November. By this time Company C had lost the majority of its combat efficiency. Had these two units been committed earlier it is felt that probably the Battalion objective could have been captured that day.

5. The attached heavy machine gun platoon did not fire all of the ammunition it hand carried, and yet all members of the platoon, with the exception of approximately one squad, became casualties. The platoon fired in the attack on only one occasion. That occasion was the attack on the clearing on 19 November. Two guns did fire against the counterattack. On neither occasion was the fire very effective since adequate firing positions could not be found. Particularly in the attack on the clearing was this true since the guns could not be emplaced on the very edge of the clearing, and a position as much as five yards within the thick forest resulted in very limited fields of fire. It is felt that the support rendered by a heavy machine gun unit in the attack in woods of this type is not sufficient to justify the high loss of personnel.

6. Only one radio and one telephone, both on one tank, was provided for communication to control two platoons of tanks and one platoon of tank destroyers. This lack of foresight in providing more means of communication proved to be a great hindrance in rapid control of these units.

7. The company more or less stumbled onto the clearing in the

forest. Had the existence of this clearing been known, plans to capture it could have been made beforehand and probably the loss of men and time in capturing it could have been materially reduced. No aerial photographs of the area were available, and since the square was cleared only shortly before the attack its existence did not show on a map. Photographs should have been available.

8. By far the majority of losses sustained was due to enemy artillery and mortar fire. This fire was particularly effective in that the majority of the rounds burst upon contact with the trees thereby creating air bursts. When the company was stopped the men attempted to dig in but found their digging was of little value since overhead protection could not be provided.

#### LESSONS

1. Adequate provisions for evacuation of wounded must be made well in advance of an operation.

2. When a small breach has been made in a minefield this breach must be widened and marked as rapidly as possible.

3. When attacking strong enemy positions the attack should employ more than one company in the assault echelon since the fires of the defender can be massed against this one company.

4. Timely employment of reserve forces must be made in order to successfully influence the course of a battle.

5. Heavy machine guns are of little value in the attack in heavily wooded terrain since their fields of fire are so limited.

6. Adequate means of communication must be established and maintained in order to effectively control supporting armor.

7. Current aerial photographs should be made available down to and including companies when an attack is to be made against an organized position.

8. Slit trenches and foxholes are of practically no value in a forest unless overhead protection is provided.