

HOLD THAT HILL

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EDITORS NOTE: We began the Infantry in Action series four years ago as a way of highlighting the U.S. Infantryman—through historical accounts of his past combat actions—as one of the best fighting men in the world. The series has included several original articles as well as reprints from various sources.

This article continues that tradition. Reprinted from INFANTRY's predecessor, the Infantry School Quarterly (April 1953, pages 38-52), it tells how the men of a small unit—Company K, 7th Cavalry—took and held an important hill near Yon-

chon, Korea, in September 1951. It is a story of infantrymen who, when confronted with a difficult situation, proved themselves to be highly competent, resourceful, and heroic fighters and leaders.

The author, who commanded Company K and served in various staff assignments with the 7th Cavalry, was assigned to the Infantry School upon his return to the United States, serving as an instructor in what was then called the Tactical Department.

Taking Hill 339 wasn't so bad—but holding it was different. It looked to us as though the enemy had only one mission in life—to knock us off that hill. Let's see why this particular hill and the terrain surrounding it were so important.

The average elevation of the friendly main line of resistance (MLR) and of the enemy MLR 4,000 yards away was approximately 300 meters. Between the two opposing lines was a series of short narrow valleys and 300-meter hills. The major exception to this was a triangle of three hills about 1,000 yards from the enemy positions. These hills, 339, 321, and Ridge 330, formed a rough triangle with 339 the apex pointing toward the enemy. The peaks were about 1,000 yards apart. Hill 339 was commanding terrain in the area and for two months was alternately in friendly and enemy hands. It provided United Nations forces a good observation post for the placing of artillery on enemy emplacements, artillery and mortar positions. It was also an excellent advanced departure point for patrols.

For these reasons, the 3d Battalion of the 7th Cavalry was ordered to seize and hold Hill 339 as a patrol base. It was decided that after seizure, Company K would hold 339 and the connecting ridges for a frontage of 900 yards. Company L would tie in with Company K and extend over 321 for a

1,000-yard front and Company I on the other flank of Company K would tie in at the road and extend back over 330 for a 1,000-yard front. Due to the rough nature of the terrain and the necessity for maximum protection especially toward the front and flanks, which were cross compartmented with many minor ridges and ravines, the 700-yard rear of the patrol base would be merely outposted and the valley closed off by tanks.

The area was seized without organized opposition on 21 September. It was noted that the enemy had outposted Hill 339. On the approach of Company K's leading platoon the enemy set out a red smoke signal before withdrawing. Company K moved into its assigned area and as soon as friendly troops began clustering near the peak, the area was subjected to an intense 20-minute enemy mortar and artillery bombardment that was placed accurately along the ridge line and over the peak. There were several casualties. This enemy fire began a pattern that did not vary for seven days. Due to the advanced position of the hill and a slightly concave enemy MLR on the front of it, Hill 339 was under enemy observation from three sides, and any movement on the peak or grouping of personnel on the reverse slope drew immediate pre-registered fire.

The hill itself presented several problems of defense. Com-

any K's area was "L" shaped with two ridges joining at the peak. The peak was a symmetrical dome, very steep on the front face and dished out on the rear, so that immediately behind the very crest there was only a ten-yard slope before it dropped off as a rock cliff for another 20 yards. This drop-off extended right and left for a hundred yards behind the hill, permitting no direct foot route to the peak, but rather forcing us to come to the ridge on either side of the obstacle and then to the peak.

There were two direct enemy routes into the hill. These were on two entry ridges 200 yards apart that came into the shoulders of the peak and joined the two flank ridges that formed the L (Figure 1). This brought up two important decisions for the company commander: How to deploy the platoons for the best defense of the peak and where to place his headquarters and the mortar section.

After a careful look at the terrain, the company commander reasoned that the battle for the peak would be fought on the flank ridges. Any direct assault on the front face could easily be resisted. It was bare and enemy troops would have to physically crawl up the steep slope. If the enemy attempted envelopment of the hill, the rear cliff would prevent him from assaulting the position from directly in the rear. He still would be forced to attack the highest ground up the two flank ridges. But if the enemy were able to seize the two critical points on either flank of the peak, where the flank ridges and the entry ridges joined, then the peak would be isolated, lateral communication cut, and because of the convex shape of the company front, the enemy would have short range direct fire and observation on the rear slope.

With these enemy possibilities in mind the company commander decided on a flexible defense with the greatest attention paid to the two entry ridges. He deployed the first platoon on the left, tying in with Company L, and extended its front up to the critical ridge junction on the left shoulder of the peak. The attached heavy machinegun section from heavy weapons company was given the left entry ridge and twenty yards farther up the hill to the right to defend. One 57mm recoilless rifle was employed to cover the left entry ridge. The peak, for a front of approximately fifty yards, was covered by ten attached Republic of Korea (ROK) soldiers with one light machinegun covering the front face.

The second platoon went from the military crest on the right of the peak down over the right entry ridge for a 200-yard front along the flank ridge. The other 57mm recoilless rifle was placed to cover the right entry ridge. The third platoon joined the second and defended a 300-yard front joining Company I at the road on the right.

A tank was placed by the battalion commander on the road at the top of the pass. While a section of tanks would have been more desirable, there was room for only one.

There were two basic choices for the 60mm mortar section and the company command post. Either could be emplaced on the peak where it would be confined to an area less than 15 yards from the crest and less than 25 yards from the riflemen's positions, or else down at the base of the sheer hill, an elevation difference of about 100 meters. If the enemy seized the two critical areas on the flank of the peak, then no route

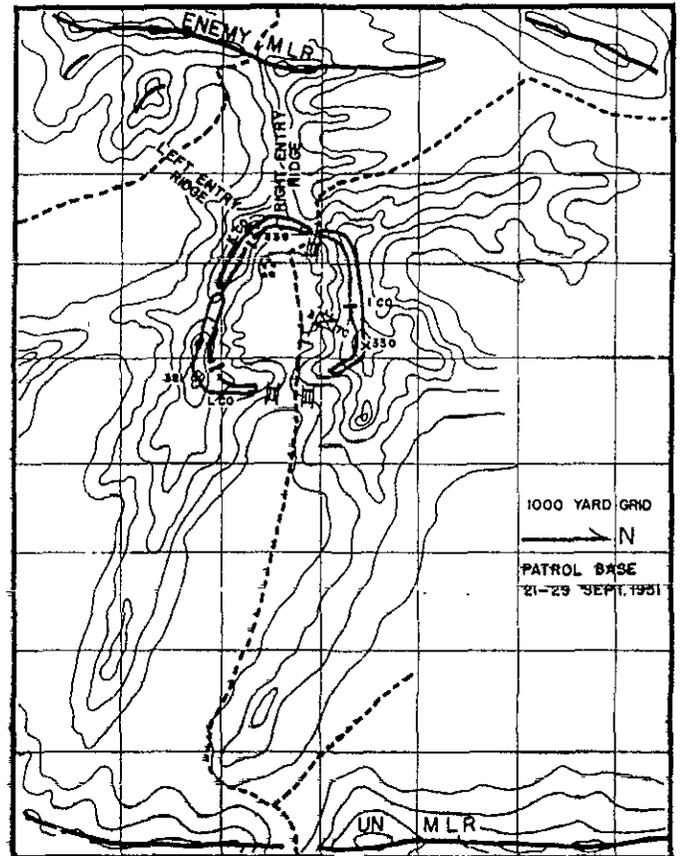


Figure 1. Patrol base 21-29 Sep 51.

would be available to the OP, and the enemy could descend directly on the command post and the mortars. Although the enemy 120mm and 82mm fire was particularly intense on the reverse slope of the peak, the company commander decided to place his mortars on the peak, on the right half, and his command post on the left half.

An organic ammunition trailer was placed at the base of the hill, 400 yards away, as an ammunition supply point. Two men with a sound power phone were there.

There was a large number of enemy and friendly bunkers available for use until the men had a chance to get dug in. The company moved into position as rapidly as possible so it could get organized almost completely by nightfall. However, the bald face of the peak was under direct observation and as the men attempted to get over the crest of the hill and dig in on the forward slope of the peak, the enemy placed heavy volumes of artillery and mortar fire on them with good effect. After several attempts to dig in on the front, the company commander directed that the forward slope of the peak be occupied after darkness. The intense fire made this a daily occurrence and permitted only two constant observers on the forward slope.

As soon as he had walked the company front once to insure complete coverage of the ground, the company commander moved with his weapons platoon leader, 81mm FO, 4.2 FO, and artillery FO to the OPs available near the crest and planned his defensive fires. (The types and locations of the planned and pre-fired concentrations are shown on Figure 2.) The company commander directed that the 4.2 mortar concentration

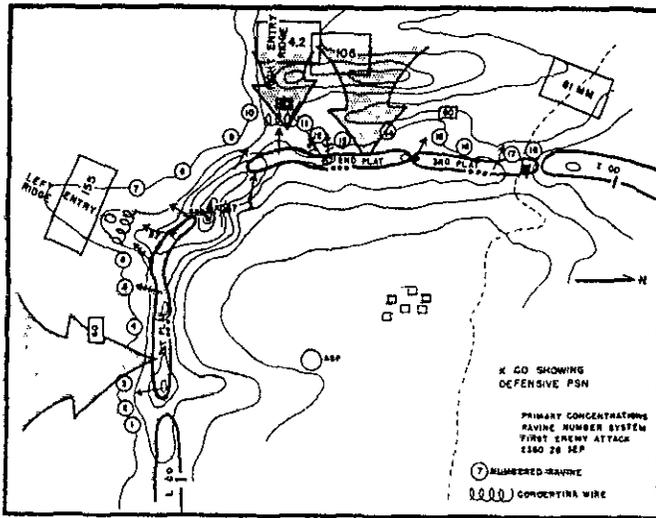


Figure 2. Company K's defensive position.

plotted on the right entry ridge be registered to within 150 yards of the friendly positions. He directed that the artillery concentration on the left entry ridge be registered to within 200 yards of the friendly foxholes. These distances were selected to give the maximum effect against the enemy, who had been recently using the technique of closing his assaulting elements and supporting automatic weapons to within 200 yards of the objectives before assaulting so that normally placed defensive fires would fall beyond him.

The trajectory of the artillery fires supporting Company K did not pass overhead when they fell in front of the left portion of the company zone; hence any dispersion affecting the company would be caused more by errors in deflection than in range. This permitted the very close registration of artillery, but the 4.2 mortars had five short rounds in the next seven days. The 81mm FO was given normal distance concentrations with particular emphasis on the extreme right flank and the road.

The 60mm mortars were given concentrations all along the company front, and on the right entry ridge were registered to within 100 yards of the 2d Platoon positions. The 60mm mortars had an angle frontage of 270 degrees to cover with their three tubes. Because of this, the tubes were laid on different concentrations, the center tube set on a flare concentration over the right entry ridge.

By nightfall, half of the plotted concentrations had been registered. The company commander retained a contour sketch of the company front with all the defensive fires plotted and numbered.

Due to the heavy enemy fire and anticipated action, an extensive communications network was planned and executed. A wire line was laid to each platoon from the CP for EE8 telephones. Wire was then laid between platoons as an alternate EE8 line. A sound power line was then run all along the company fronting in each platoon and continued down behind the hill to the company ammunition supply point and back up to the other flank, making a complete circle. Thus the line would have to be severed on both sides of a telephone to put it out of contact. Each wire line was laid over a different route.

An SCR 300 radio was given to the 1st Platoon and to the 3d Platoon, with the extra radio at the command post. All radios were on the battalion command net. Two lines were run from the battalion switchboard to Company K; one dropped over the cliff behind the command post and the other ran up a flank ridge. The four operable company SCR 536s were given to the mortar section for fire control. The command post was in voice contact with the mortar section.

In spite of this communication setup, enemy fire caused wire contact to be lost with battalion headquarters on an average of three times a day. Within the company net, a wire was severed on the average of once every two hours for seven days. This required continuous repair by the communications section. The platoon runners stationed at the company command post were used to help repair lines.

Extra ammunition was brought up the hill by Korean civilian carriers and platoon carrying parties. The first night, each rifleman had three grenades, five bandoleers and a flare grenade on position. The light machineguns had 2,000 rounds, the 60mm mortars 200 rounds for the section, and the two 57mm recoilless rifles had 25 rounds apiece. At the company command post a box of 25 hand grenades, three cases of bandoleers and 2,000 rounds of machinegun ammunition were kept. This would permit some resupply flexibility. (The ammunition supply point at the bottom of the hill was only 400 yards away, but a round trip required almost 40 minutes.) About 20 trip flares were set out by the platoons. All the foregoing was completed by 2100 hours on the first night.

The company commander ordered that the C-rations issued in the morning had to last till the next morning (since two Korean civilian carrying parties were destroyed by mortar fire).

The platoons would be placed on a 50-percent awake status. Platoon headquarters would check into the company switchboard every 30 minutes.

Before darkness the company commander required each platoon leader to give his men these instructions:

- That under a mortar barrage each man must stick his head out from his bunker to observe every few seconds, since it was the enemy's practice to come in and enter positions under his own mortar fire.
- That in case the enemy penetrated the company line and their own positions became untenable, they must move toward the peak and delay the enemy at each automatic weapons position. Under no circumstance were they to leave the ridge line and fall back toward the battalion command post.
- That if casualties became heavy they must make certain the machinegun nearest them was manned at all times, since the machineguns would be the best defense against mass attacks.

ACTION 21 SEPTEMBER

Enemy fire slacked off at 2030. The 2d Platoon reported the sounds of digging to their front at approximately 2230. At 2330 an intense barrage of artillery, 120mm, 82mm, and 60mm mortar fire was received. As soon as the company com-

commander determined the heaviest area of enemy fire, which was on the right flank ridge in the 2d Platoon area, he requested defensive fire on the right flank concentrations. He also requested an artillery flare on the right.

In 10 minutes (2340), defensive fires were falling on the right but no enemy was observed. At 2400 another enemy barrage of all types fell on the peak and the right flank. These artillery and heavy mortar fires suddenly let up, however, and only 60mm mortar fire was received for some minutes.

An automatic weapon began firing from a position about 150 yards in front of the 2d Platoon. Five minutes after this fire commenced, an enemy assault of approximately platoon strength came across the short saddle on the right entry ridge. The enemy soldiers fired rifles and submachineguns, supported overhead by an automatic weapon. They came in while their light mortar fires were still falling.

The company commander ordered the 60mm mortars to fire flares every minute and to fire the 2d Platoon concentrations at a maximum rate. At the same time the 3d Platoon reported an enemy column moving up the road in front of them. The company commander shifted the 81mm fire to the road. The 3d Platoon held its fire until the enemy was within 100 yards of the tank position. When the tank opened fire with its .50 caliber machinegun and the platoons flanking the road fired their weapons, the surprised enemy scattered and withdrew. The first enemy assault was halted by the 2d Platoon.

The enemy attacked again at 0045 but due to the illumination from artillery, 81mm and 60mm mortar flares, and the continuous 4.2-inch and 60mm mortar fire within 150 yards of the 2d Platoon, the enemy assault did not reach the 2d Platoon's riflemen. Defensive fires were lifted at 0115.

The 2d Platoon reported that it was short of grenades and machinegun ammunition. It was resupplied from the company command post. The mortar section reported only 30 rounds left on position. A five-man carrying party was organized from headquarters personnel and sent to the ammunition supply point. (The mortar ammunition bearers had to act as riflemen on part of the extended line.)

At 0130 another barrage was received and a small enemy force, supported by three automatic weapons firing from a knoll 50 yards in front of the 2d Platoon, attempted to enter the platoon positions by infiltration and occasional rushes in small groups. Close defensive fires were called for and the company commander ordered the 60mm mortars to fire within 75 yards of the 2d Platoon. The enemy was repulsed.

The 1st Platoon reported movement within 200 yards at 0400, and 81mm defense fires were called in for 10 minutes. At daylight five enemy dead were found within 10 feet of the 2d Platoon's light machinegun. Enemy equipment was found along the right flank.

The company commander, after directing that the company continue to improve its positions and supplies, closely questioned the members of the 2d and 3d Platoons as to what they had observed the night before. By 1000, the company commander determined where the enemy had placed his supporting weapons and had a picture of the enemy's assault technique. During the action, four breaks had occurred in the right flank telephone lines and two in the battalion line, but wire

communications had been maintained on alternate lines.

Certain problems arose during the action:

First, the 60mm mortars were too slow in delivering their initial rounds of defensive fires. This was corrected by having the 60mm weapons platoon leader constantly rehearse the mortar section on the shifting of fires, and to have prepared rounds on hand to fire. This procedure cut the 60mm elapsed time to 15 seconds for an initial round on the normal barrage target and to 30 seconds for a new concentration.

Another problem was that the riflemen and machinegunners had fired indiscriminately and too rapidly, even when not under attack. To solve this problem, the company commander ordered the platoon leaders to exercise more fire discipline and to pass fire commands through the squad leaders during a fire fight.

Finally, during the initial phase of the attack, the company commander had not been able to get accurate enough information from the platoons as to the exact position of the enemy in front of the lines. To solve this, on the second day the company commander walked the company front from left to right. Beginning with the leftmost ravine, he numbered each ravine consecutively across the company front (Figure 2). There were 18 such ravines along the broken ground leading into the ridges occupied by the company. He required each rifleman to memorize the number of the ravine in front of him, and to post the number on a cardboard sign in his foxhole and also on a tree or rock outside his foxhole. Each ridge separating the ravines was numbered by joining the numbers of the ravines adjacent to it. Thus the ridge between ravines 6 and 7 was numbered 67. Each platoon leader had a sketch of his area and a sketch contour map with the numbers on it. The company commander retained a company sketch.

Thus, each man occupying a foxhole could quickly and easily notify his squad and platoon leader of any enemy to his front, and the company commander could pinpoint the enemy and bring more accurate fire on them. By posting the numbers visibly, changes in personnel were handled with no loss of control, and a rough guide of the company area was furnished to guide wiremen or other personnel, even during the night, to specific points.

For the remainder of the day, more trip flares were laid, overhead cover was worked on, and defensive fires were adjusted for better control. Two flamethrowers were brought up and placed on the right entry ridge. The company commander carefully approved each automatic weapon emplacement.

The enemy probed the company positions for the next five nights. He still prevented the forward slope of the peak from being organized during daylight by his continuous fire. When attempts were made to lay barbed wire, casualties became excessive, but eight barbed concertina rolls were placed, blocking the two entry ridges to the peak. A small area was finally covered with anti-personnel mines 50 yards in front of the 2d Platoon positions.

The company sent daily platoon-sized patrols out on battalion order, and they ran into stiff resistance 800 yards from Hill 339. This later proved to be the enemy MLR. During the day, the artillery FO fired continuously on enemy positions and weapons with good effect. By 28 September, the enemy

decided that the patrol base was a painful thorn near his MLR, and he made a strong effort to remove the United Nations troops occupying it

By this time the company had evacuated 29 casualties which had resulted from enemy artillery, mortar fire, and patrol actions. This required replacing some riflemen with weapons platoon ammunition bearers and manning part of the peak with headquarters personnel.

The strain of continuous bombardment was beginning to tell on the nerves of the men, and the nightly probes robbed them of rest. No hot meals could be brought up, but the company kitchen did go all out to provide hot coffee and soft pastry every day, and this supplement to the combat ration raised morale considerably. The company commander also made a point of visiting and talking to each man for a few moments each day.

The company commander requested and received three additional heavy machineguns and one light one. He positioned two of the heavy machineguns in the 2d Platoon zone to cross fire the entry ridge on the right, and the other he kept as a company reserve near his command post. The light machinegun was placed on the left portion of the peak and was manned nightly by headquarters personnel. Weapons—especially machineguns—had a way of bolstering morale.

The evening of the 28th was filled with heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire all along the company front.

At 2330 the enemy directed a heavy barrage on the peak of Hill 339. The 1st Platoon reported two trip flares had gone off in draws number 3 and 4. The company commander called in all defensive fires along the company front with the exception of the 60mm mortars. He called for artillery flares on the left and 4.2 flares on the right flank. At 2340 small arms fire was coming up the ravines into the 1st Platoon positions.

At 2345 the company commander noted a red Very pistol star going up on the left flank and one on the right. Immediately a barrage of 120mm mortar fire landed exactly on the peak of 339 while small arms fire fell into the 2d Platoon area from the ridge 50 yards to its front. By 2350 an enemy company was attacking the 1st Platoon up draws 3 and 4, while an enemy company attacked the 2d Platoon in draws 13 and 14 and across the entry ridge.

Meanwhile, the company commander had placed 60mm fire on the enemy on both flanks and ordered mortar flares every half minute. The enemy soon overran the left flank of the 1st Platoon and then directed his attack up the ridge toward the peak. By 2400 the enemy had also penetrated and overran one squad of the 2d Platoon and turned their attack up the ridge. These enemy soldiers moved across behind the cliff to the rear of the company and joined with those on the other flank, completing the double envelopment and cutting the wires to battalion headquarters. The 3d Platoon had not been attacked. Enemy mortar fire continued to come in on the mortar position and the company command post.

The force of the enemy assault rolled up the flank of the 1st Platoon, overrunning a light and heavy machinegun and the platoon command post. The platoon leader, however, gathered the men around him and delayed the enemy for

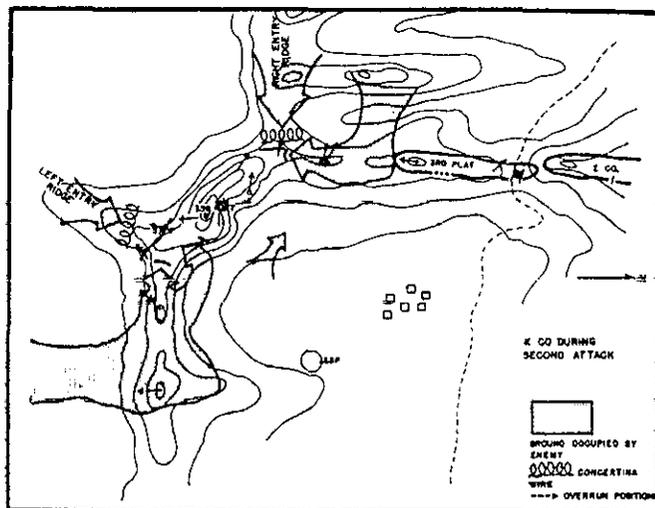


Figure 3. Company K during second attack.

several minutes while the wounded were carried to the company command post. Part of this delaying group was overrun and the platoon fell back still farther up the hill.

On the right flank, the enemy continued to attack up the ridge and overwhelmed a heavy machinegun. The 57mm gunner pulled back, and when the enemy started firing the captured machinegun, he knocked it out with his recoilless rifle. A second assault was launched across the right entry ridge and the machinegun at the junction of the two ridges was soon under attack from two directions. Riflemen formed a line there, however, and repelled the enemy.

On the left flank, a second assault started up the left entry ridge toward the 57mm position. The gunner held fire until the enemy started to cross the concertina. He then fired with good effect. The remainder of the 1st Platoon was scattered by the enemy and the company commander intercepted the stragglers at the peak and formed a new line tied in with the 57mm around to the reverse slope at the cliff. The enemy followed after the withdrawing platoon.

The company commander quickly placed his reserve, one heavy machinegun, in the path of this assault. He directed a radio operator to man the weapon. The enemy was now within 20 yards of the command post bunker, which was filled with wounded (Figure 3). The heavy machinegun was placed just beyond the bunker, and it inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. The enemy set up 60mm mortars on the ridges on both flanks and placed fire on the weapons on the peak at a range of 100 yards. The heavy machinegunner on the left waited until he saw the powder sparks fly from the tube below him and then fired, destroying the crew and weapon.

The company commander realized that his left flank, now pushed to within 30 yards of the peak, was in danger of giving way. He ordered the artillery FO to bring fire in as close as possible on the left. The enemy succeeded in getting behind the 57mm recoilless rifle and the lower heavy machinegun. The company commander ordered the first sergeant to go down to these weapons and displace them upward to form a line higher on the hill. As soon as the two weapons started to pull

back, the enemy took advantage of the darkness and confusion to try and mingle with the gun crews and walk to the peak. A few succeeded but they were shot by the headquarters personnel. It was now 0120.

Another enemy attack started on the right flank, and the company commander moved to that flank to see how he could influence the action. The enemy had reached the 2d Platoon's command post and forced them out and up. The company commander, seeing the light machinegun under attack from two directions, ordered the platoon to withdraw higher and tie in with the mortar platoon. This would present a complete perimeter around the peak. Enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire covered the rear slope and made the firing of the 60mm mortars difficult. One mortar base plate broke, but by resetting the tube each time, the crew of that weapon was able to fire flares. The enemy attempted to attack from the rear and crawl through the mortar positions, but the squad leaders and section sergeant killed them individually.

Fire control became increasingly difficult for the 60mm mortar crews. One squad leader crawled to the topographical crest and began adjusting fire by calling out handle turns and degree raises. The fire continued to be effective in front of the 2d Platoon at a gun-to-target range of 55 yards where enemy soldiers were moving in all along the platoon front. Another mortar base plate broke. It, too, was reset after each round. Artillery and mortar flares became unavailable at 0200. A C-47 flare plane appeared at 0330, however, and gave good general illumination the remainder of the night.

The company commander's estimate of his position at that time was roughly this: The enemy held 200 yards of terrain on the company right flank and 300 yards on the left flank. The peak was isolated. The enemy behind him made both evacuation and resupply impossible. The company still had a perimeter established around the peak with four machineguns and approximately 50 men. One mortar was still operable but it had only 35 rounds of ammunition. Carbine ammunition was low but other types were adequate for at least one more assault.

The enemy, reasoned the company commander, was probably preparing for another assault. He reported these facts of the situation to battalion headquarters by radio and then prepared for the enemy attack.

He moved the good mortar to the top of the peak with half of the remaining mortar ammunition. It was registered in on the left ridge at 75 yards range. He ordered that the wounded men be carried to the open foxholes on the very peak. He announced that if the enemy were to overrun a portion of the line the remainder would draw halfway up to the peak (which was 25 yards from their present positions).

The enemy attacked again at 0240 (Figure 4). On the left, an apparently new company moved up the entry ridge toward the concertina wire. The artillery FO moved to a very exposed position overlooking that ridge and called 105mm and 155mm fire to within 150 yards of himself and the riflemen. By stacking used BA 70 batteries around him, he maintained some cover and the batteries absorbed several rounds of small arms fire. The reserve heavy machinegun overheated. The coolant can was shot through, but a can of cold coffee was used successfully as a substitute.

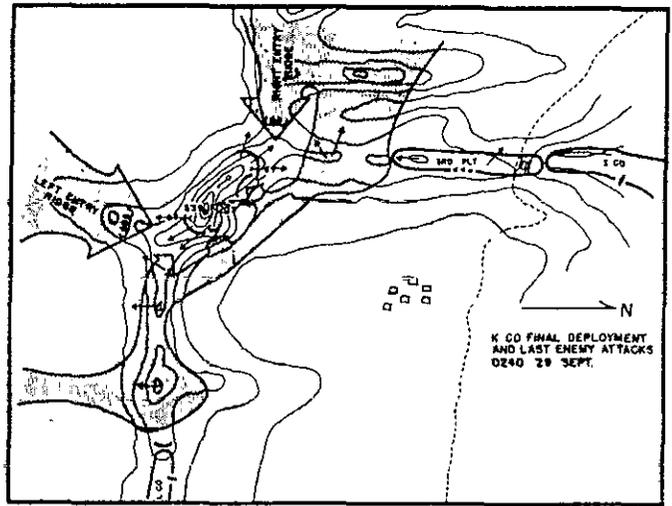


Figure 4. Company K's deployment and last enemy attacks, 0240 29 Sep.

When the enemy attack reached the barbed wire, the artillery FO called for maximum fire. This fire caught the center and trailing elements of the enemy units. They withdrew, carrying dead and wounded. The leading units tried to assault the reserve heavy machinegun, which would have given them entry to the peak of the hill, but the machinegunner placed effective fire on them. The few enemy that reached the skirmish line were killed by grenade and carbine fire.

On the right, the enemy assaulted again, but in less strength. At 0300 about 50 enemy rushed across the saddle firing their submachineguns in an attempt to overrun the light machinegun there. A rifleman of the 2d Platoon found he was in a foxhole complete with a flamethrower. He turned it on the enemy soldiers in one long burst just as they reached grenade range. Eight or ten enemy soldiers were caught in the burst. The light machinegunner opened fire, and the enemy skirmishers withdrew, throwing down their weapons.

That was the last enemy assault. It was now 0330. Ammunition was nearly exhausted.

Within 30 minutes enemy indirect fire resumed on the hill and heavy concentrations were placed on the flanks of the peak, preventing any movement on those ridges. At first light, the company commander ordered the 2d Platoon to attack down the right ridge and clear the enemy there. This was done, but no live enemy remained. Contact was reestablished with the 3d Platoon. The company commander then went with the 1st Platoon down the left ridge, clearing it. Large numbers of enemy dead were found along both ridges.

Firing started again on the right flank of the 2d Platoon at 0630. It was the fire of disorganized isolated groups of enemy soldiers who were attempting to escape toward their MLR. They were taken under tank, mortar, artillery, and small arms fire with good effect.

Company K had held Hill 339. The men were exhausted, the company was still under fire—but morale was high. The company commander realized, as have company commanders before him, the deep satisfaction that comes with a successfully accomplished mission.