

Infantry In Action



The Sieg River Incident

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Violating the chain of command in establishing this patrol

undoubtedly contributed to its failure, but perhaps more important was the patrol leader's apparent inability, or unwillingness, to make sound and timely decisions. This article points out clearly the need for soldiers at all echelons to have that ability and willingness when functioning without specific orders.

Decisions are made at all levels. Books have been written about the decision to invade Normandy in 1944, and volumes have also been written about the decision to drop the atomic bomb.

On the other hand, little has been said about the many decisions made at the lower echelons of command—at the so-called foxhole level. This is, of course, most unfortunate, since many of these foxhole decisions hold lessons for the student of military history just as great as those on the strategic plane. A good case in point is an incident on the Sieg River, where a decision by an Army private first class (PFC) took on great significance—at least to those who were involved in the episode.

It was late in March 1945. The encirclement of German forces in the Ruhr by American troops neared completion. General Eisenhower's appeal for German surrender was disregarded, and forceful reduction of the pocket of resistance in the Ruhr became necessary. This promised to be a for-

midable task, because an estimated 150,000 German troops occupied the Ruhr area.

In preparing for the reduction of the Ruhr pocket, American forces needed information about German troop movements within the pocket. The collection plan of higher headquarters involved a series of patrols, each to reach a vantage point from which enemy road and rail traffic could be studied and reported.

This is the story of one of those patrols, sent out by an infantry battalion, and of the decision that confronted the PFC who led it.

The patrol's mission was to penetrate approximately six miles into enemy territory and reach a hill overlooking a major highway intersection. The pattern, intensity, and nature of the traffic was to be noted and, radio range permitting, reported. Otherwise, the information would be delivered upon the patrol's return.

The schedule called for a movement of about four miles the



Members of a World War II intelligence and reconnaissance unit get instructions before going out on patrol.

first night, after which the patrol would hole up during the daylight hours. The second night, the objective would be reached and the night traffic would be observed. Throughout the second day, the traffic observation would be continued. On the third night, the patrol would return to friendly lines (which were expected to be somewhat close at that time).

It was decided that a member of the battalion intelligence section would lead the patrol, since that section had considerable training and experience in patrolling. All four available members of the section volunteered, although one developed a suspiciously sudden hacking cough that caused the S-2 to immediately disqualify him. The acting section leader, a PFC, was ultimately selected to lead the patrol.

The other four patrol members were furnished by the reserve company. A requirement was that one of these four men speak German and that another be experienced in operating the SCR-300 radio. The result was that a sergeant (German-speaking) and a corporal (radio operator), plus two privates, were placed under the PFC's command. However, the non-commissioned officers, upon volunteering, had accepted this situation.

The briefing for the patrol was conducted by the division G-2 section using aerial photos projected on a large screen. German positions, possible approaches, and obstacles were pointed out and discussed. The route finally selected by the PFC led across the Sieg River where it formed a salient into American lines and was said to be lightly defended by the Germans. From there the route climbed to the high ground dominating the river valley; it then paralleled the river to a trail which could be followed to the objective area. A more direct return route was tentatively selected.

In addition to the radio, the patrol's equipment included a small boat in which to cross the Sieg, two "grease guns," two carbines, a pistol, a flashlight, knives, and a garrote. The men wore OD shirts and trousers, combat boots, field jackets, and soft caps. They carried what food they could stuff into their pockets, principally D-ration chocolate bars. The PFC carried the patrol's only map.

The patrol left at 2100 hours and carefully approached the river. Men from a forward rifle company followed with the boat. Upon reaching the river bank, the first three patrol members embarked and paddled silently across, covered by

the men remaining on the near side. The boat was pulled back across the narrow river by a rope attached to the end and held by the other two patrol members. These two men then completed their crossing, and the boat was pulled back across and carried away by the men of the rifle company.

No enemy troops were encountered during the crossing. The patrol moved out in a diamond formation, the PFC leading, along the route to the high ground. It was quite dark, with the cloud cover permitting only a faint glow in the sky. At one point, German voices in subdued conversation caused a deviation in the patrol's route; at another point, faint lights were given a wide berth.

As the high ground was reached, the patrol swung left as planned. It was already behind the principal German positions pointed out in the briefing. The sergeant then whispered to the PFC that their present course might skyline them to troops below, and the PFC, agreeing, veered slightly downhill. The patrol's stealthy movement continued for several minutes when, very suddenly, and only a few yards ahead, a figure quickly darted toward a small bunker built into the side of the hill.

The figure was two or three steps down the dirt stairway of the bunker before the PFC, leaping forward, was able to grasp his shoulder and yank him back onto the ground. Before the PFC could draw his knife to kill, the German relaxed completely, said "Kamerad" and was a prisoner.

As the patrol closed in, the PFC knew that he had a decision to make. What would he do with this man? And how would this affect his mission?

Interrogation of the German through the interpreter, and a

brief reconnaissance by the two privates, revealed that the nearest enemy position was less than a hundred yards away. The German stated that he did not expect a relief that night but that occasionally security patrols or wire teams passed his position. He added that since it was late (about 0200), there might not be any additional checks that night. He also stated that he was not required to make periodic reports from the telephone at his observation point.

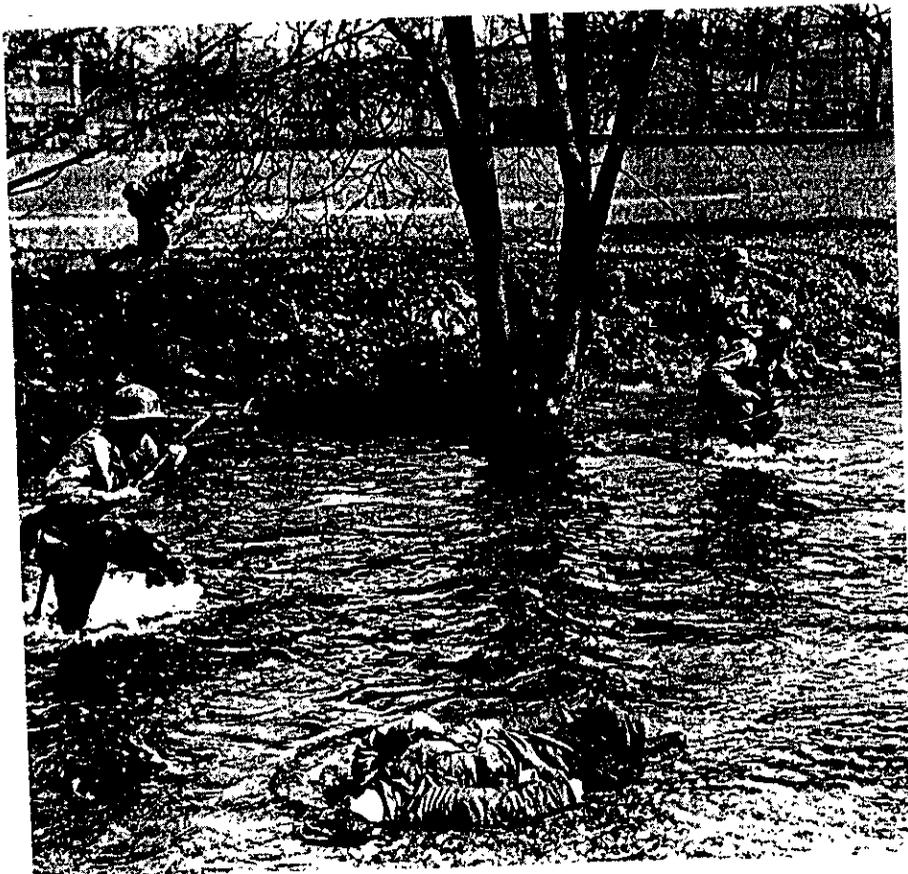
The interrogation continued as the corporal and the two privates occupied local security positions.

The German revealed that he was an artillery observer, as was the neighboring German position a hundred yards away. Within the cramped bunker, by carefully shielded flashlight, the German pointed out on the PFC's map the positions of the observation post and of his artillery battalion. He strongly expressed a desire to be taken captive and thus trade the danger of his present role in a war already lost for the relative security of an American prisoner of war camp.

Along with all of these factors, the PFC considered the fact that the patrol had a mile or more to go before it reached the planned hideout area. He also knew that the area must be reached by 0400 to ensure time to find a suitable place to hide before daylight.

What to do? Whatever it was, it had to be done fast. Every moment in the present location was precarious. A visiting patrol, the neighboring German position, a phone call, a relief, an unexpected check by a wire team—any number of things might disclose the patrol's presence to the enemy.

Of course, he could abandon his mission and take the prisoner back to American lines. But this went against the first



A World War II infantry platoon crosses a small German river.

duty of a soldier, and besides, forward area prisoners were a dime a dozen at this time. He could send the prisoner back with two of his men and continue the patrol mission with the remainder; this was tempting but there were disadvantages.

The PFC felt that losing any of his patrol would seriously jeopardize his chances for successful accomplishment of the mission. What's more, it was doubtful that the men he sent back would be able to reach friendly lines before daylight. This course of action would also run the risk of having the prisoner escape. Guarded by only two men, in the dark, in a position where a shot could scarcely be risked, the chances for the prisoner to escape were good.

DECISIONS

Then what about taking him along with the patrol? An awkward situation, with two full days and nights left to go, with every man's full attention necessary for security and observation, and with the ever-present possibility of the prisoner's attempting to escape or sounding the alarm. Also, he might, through clumsy fear or lack of understanding, give away the patrol.

How about leaving him in his position with a promise to see that he was later escorted to American lines? A terrific risk. The German could well be lying about his desire to remain a prisoner. Even if he were sincere at the moment, it seemed extremely doubtful that he would, upon release, deliberately violate his training and indoctrination and refrain from reporting the patrol in the hope that he would be led to safety. Also, he might soon realize that if the patrol were captured and reported his dereliction of duty, things would go extremely hard for him.

Kill him? From the mission's standpoint, this was the best solution. There would then be no danger of the German's talking. Likewise, there would be no danger of his giving away the patrol, and there would be no need to split the patrol. If the prisoner's body was hidden well enough, the Germans might think his absence was just another desertion, and they would not be alerted to the presence of the enemy in the area.

If the German were killed, the PFC would, of course, have to do it. One quick knife thrust and it would be finished. But the German was a legitimate prisoner of war and, by the rules of warfare and of decency itself, he was entitled to the protection of his captors.

The PFC, who had recently celebrated his 19th birthday, had not given much thought during his short life to the ethical course to follow in a clash between mission and morals. He considered it now, however.

The accomplishment of his mission might result in the saving of an appreciable number of American lives and might hasten victory. What, really, did the life of one German soldier weigh on the scale against accomplishment of such a goal? Could he reasonably spare the life of an enemy when that enemy's death might contribute toward the saving of many American lives?

On the other hand, when a man fights for certain principles,

is he justified in disregarding those principles for the duration of the fight? All of these thoughts must have flashed through the PFC's mind with a rapidity induced by the demands of the situation. It is doubtful that he considered consciously all of the factors mentioned. Nevertheless, the essence of the foregoing "estimate of the situation" guided his decision, a decision formulated in the very few moments spent interrogating the German prisoner.

Initially frustrated by the complex and contradictory issues, the PFC asked the American sergeant for his ideas. There was no help forthcoming, however. The decision was strictly up to him. A 19-year-old PFC had a decision to make which could conceivably affect the length of the war, a matter involving perhaps thousands of lives.

Finally, he made his decision. The German was told that the patrol would return that same night and that he would be picked up at that time and taken to the safety of American lines. He was further told that it was, of course, necessary to bind and gag him to ensure his good behavior pending the patrol's return. The PFC hoped, somewhat forlornly, that the misinformation given the German might mislead the enemy as to the patrol's projected actions.

HIDEOUT

Upon leaving, the patrol cut the telephone wire and dragged it for several hundred yards. The PFC felt that there was less danger in risking a wire crew's checking a break than in the German sergeant's freeing himself sufficiently to use the telephone. Hopefully, the PFC also radioed the coordinates of the German bunkers back to the artillery battery shortly after his patrol cleared the area.

The patrol's movement to the hideout area was uneventful. The first rays of sunlight were beaming over the eastern horizon as the men took positions in a wooded area to spend the long day in anticipation of the night, at which time they would move again. Shortly after dawn, however, strong German patrols began searching the vicinity of the hideout. It was not long before the American patrol was found and taken prisoner. Eventually, it was learned that the German had been discovered by his own troops. Unbound and released, he had immediately initiated a vigorous search for the patrol.

As the PFC was later marched back toward friendly lines in a column of war prisoners, he realized that he had probably made the wrong decision. However, as the column passed the familiar area where the German bunkers had been, the PFC was able to smile weakly at the sight of huge shell holes where the German bunkers once had been.

Although this is the end of this true story, there seems to be more that could be said—and perhaps more that could be learned from this isolated, seemingly insignificant experience of fifteen years ago. Does it have any application today? I think it does.

In retrospect, it would seem that the PFC made the wrong decision. But was there a "right" or a "wrong" decision? Perhaps not. The point is that a decision had to be made. In its own way, it was an important decision in its consequences.



The question then arises. "Was the PFC properly equipped to make that decision?" For that matter, are the other PFCs and lower-ranking enlisted men in today's Army ready to assume the same kind of leadership if and when the time comes? Or is our training geared to that eventuality?

In many instances in the future, a key decision may again lie in the hands of a private or PFC in the rear echelon. On a nuclear battlefield, this is more than a remote possibility. If the PFC is the only survivor who is physically able to make a decision in a situation, the lives of many others may depend on how well he has been prepared for battlefield leadership.

The Army operates on the theory that leaders are made, not born. Leadership can, in part, be taught. To the extent that it can be taught, it is being taught to those whose normal positions demand leadership. However, in view of the fact that

any soldier may be called upon to exercise leadership (as it was exercised in this example), would it not be wise to teach and emphasize to *all* men the principles which we use as guidelines for leadership? Furthermore, would it not also be wise to give these men an opportunity to practice leadership and initiative in their daily duties and in tactical exercises? Or should we continue to limit our leadership training to NCOs and potential NCOs?

Even if the average private is never thrown into an abnormal situation requiring an important decision from him, an understanding of the principles of leadership—of the fact that it may sometimes be necessary to make difficult or unpopular decisions—will make him a better follower, and will help prepare him for the day when normal promotion demands that he assume leadership on the battlefield.

