

Every Soldier is a Rifleman

CAPTAIN LEO BARRON

Every Soldier is a rifleman. The Army seems to relearn this lesson in every war. Sadly enough, it is usually as the result of lost lives — lives the Army might have saved if had not forgotten lessons from its past. Currently, we are engaged in a war against a foe who seeks to strike our forces where they believe we are the weakest. The insurgents plant improvised explosive devices along roadsides to kill Soldiers on a mail run. They lie in wait, weapons ready, while a chow truck drives into their kill zone. Our enemy knows that attacking a well-trained infantry squad will end in disaster for them, and so they choose to strike our cooks, our clerks, and our drivers — men and women who know little about Battle Drill One Alpha, Squad Attack, or any other of the infantry battle drills found in the Army Field Manual 7-8, the Infantry Bible.

Attacking enemy supply lines is not a new tactic. It is as old as warfare itself. Crusaders living in the Holy Land routinely ambushed Arab caravans heading north from Mecca because they were easy pickings and profitable targets. In 1415, during the Hundred Years War, French knights, sensing victory in the Battle of Agincourt, rode down an English baggage train while the English archers slaughtered their comrades. In World War II, partisans throughout Europe attacked German supply routes prior to major invasions. The idea of “rear areas” and “forward areas” is a fallacious premise and dangerous one that leads to complacency and overconfidence on the part of our Soldiers. We owe it to our Soldiers to train the combat support Soldiers and dispel the foolish notion that only 11Bs face danger every day. We can do this by preparing all of our Soldiers, and in doing so, we train a better prepared Army.

Fortunately, we are on the right path. General Peter J. Schoomaker, the Chief of Staff of the Army, has ordered that all Soldiers must undergo more rigorous infantry training. When better-trained Soldiers reach the battlefield in places like Mosul, Hammam al Alil and Fallujah, the foreign fighters and former regime loyalists will find that the supply convoy is no longer just a supply convoy, but a killing machine that happens to be carrying supplies.

In World War II, experience taught harsh lessons to Soldiers who thought that only the infantrymen did the fighting. In major battles like the Hurtgen Forest and the Battle of the Bulge, commanders had to call on support troops to play decisive roles in desperate battles. In some of the worst cases, commanders simply had run out of combat Soldiers, due to death and wounds. Someone had to fill the gaps. For the airborne units, this was not a problem. Paratroopers and glidermen of the 101st and the

82nd Airborne Divisions were ready to step up when the frontline infantry could not accomplish the mission alone. The men saw themselves as paratroopers and glidermen first — not cooks or clerks. During the Battle of the Bulge, support Soldiers from the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, played a pivotal role in the battle’s outcome, fighting outside the besieged city of Bastogne.

On 16 December 1944, the German Army surprised almost everyone, hurling three armies, the Fifth Panzer, Sixth SS Panzer, and Seventh Armies, headlong through the Ardennes in a battle that historians named the Battle of the Bulge. Crashing through the green troops of the 106th and 99th Infantry Divisions, the German forces achieved a breakthrough, but not a breakout. At every major road junction, the American Soldiers held on with fierce tenacity, upsetting the precious German timetable and preventing the German army from rupturing the American lines.

Two such vital road hubs were St. Vith and Bastogne. Without these transportation centers, the advancing panzers would have to find alternate routes, costing them precious time and, more importantly, precious fuel. General Eisenhower, commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, foresaw this and ordered his only reserves into the battle, the 101st and the 82nd Airborne. He wanted those divisions to hold those vital junctions.

For the men of the 327th, relaxing and recovering from several



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Infantrymen attached to the 4th Armored Division fire at German troops in the advance to relieve pressure on surrounded airborne troops in Bastogne in December 1944.

months in Holland, the thought of going back to the line before Christmas was something they did not want to think about. Unfortunately for the glidermen, the regiment received orders on 17 December to head for Belgium. On 18 December, the men filed onto “deuce and a half” trucks and left for Belgium. From 1955 to 2400, the regiment was winding its way from its World War I barracks to Werbomont and not Bastogne. The men did not have all of their equipment. Many of their heavier weapons, their machine guns and mortars, were at depots undergoing repair from the long campaign in Holland. Furthermore, in the cold of December, they also lacked winter clothing. Making matters worse, many of the units had not received all their replacements from the losses they sustained in Operation Market Garden.

But onward they went. Almost before it was too late, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe received word that Bastogne, and not Werbomont, would be the 327th’s destination. The men of the 327th were not aware of all this. They soldiered on, huddling in the trucks from the bitter cold. At 1000 on the 19th, the men de-trucked at the tiny village of Flamizoulle, Belgium, west of Bastogne.

Luckily, the Germans were not there to meet them. Through roadblocks at towns like Baraque d’Alleboro, the Combat Command Reserve of the 9th Armored Division had slowed down the German advance just enough to allow the 101st to reach Bastogne and assemble a hasty defense. As their battle raged from the 17th to the 19th, the 327th began to make their preparations. After stopping for a short time at Mandé St. Etienne, much of the regiment moved by foot to the area south of Bastogne. By 0830 on the morning of the 20th, 2-327 Infantry Battalion was almost complete in relieving combat engineers from the 326th Engineer Battalion who were guarding vital road junctions near the town of Marvie.

Unfortunately, the Germans had other plans. The 901st Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the Panzer Lehr Division struck the American defenses in the nearby town of Wardin, southeast of Bastogne. From there, they headed south to avoid Lieutenant Colonel James O’Hara’s blocking position of tanks and tank destroyers from the 54th Armored Battalion



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A U.S. Soldier guards a group of enemy prisoners of war in December 1944.

of Combat Command B, 10th Armored Division. In doing so, they ran into the engineers who were attempting to pull back from their roadblock. Though these men were combat engineers, their usual job did not entail holding terrain like infantry Soldiers. In fact, the 101st, having to defend a wide perimeter, used the engineers as infantrymen, guarding key roadblocks and pieces of terrain from the very beginning of the operation.

The Panzer Lehr Division, under the command of Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein, was not at the force level it had been during the Normandy Campaign, but with 57 tanks, 30 of which were the much-feared Panther tanks, it was still a formidable threat. As the lead tanks from the 901st Panzergrenadier Regiment broke through the fog on the morning of the 20th, the men of C Company, 326th Engineers opened fire with small arms and bazookas. The result was telling. Within moments, they had knocked out two tanks and one half-track, killing and injuring many German soldiers. It was not without cost, though. Private Anthony Varone lay dead on the field, but his bravery earned him the Silver Star for his actions at the roadblock that day.

The stinging repulse at the roadblock earned the glidermen from the 327th time

to organize their defenses. It would be close. Marvie sat astride a road that led directly into Bastogne. General Bayerlein knew this and so did General McAuliffe and Colonel Harper. If Marvie fell, so would Bastogne.

At 0945 that morning, while the engineers conducted a delaying action at the roadblock that led to Marvie, 2-327th Infantry started to receive indirect fire from enemy artillery and mortars. This continued for a half an hour. When the barrage lifted, the German onslaught swept across the wet fields as seven half-tracks and five Panzer Mark IV tanks headed directly towards E Company, 2-327th Infantry. According to the S2, another 100-150 men followed, as they approached the American lines. Suddenly, artillery shrapnel wounded Lieutenant Colonel Roy Inman, who was inspecting the lines. Despite the serious wound, he gave orders for all companies to hold their ground.

By 1300, thanks to the engineers’ delaying action and the withering fire from O’Hara’s tanks, the attack petered out as the men of 2-327th Infantry forced out the few remaining German infantry who managed to make it to the southern end of the village. After Inman’s injury, Major R.B. Galbreith took over the battalion, and for the next couple days, German attention looked elsewhere for a way to break into

Bastogne. This allowed the Soldiers to build their foxholes and clear fields of fire. They knew whom they were facing. Having captured several German prisoners, they learned that it was the 901st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Panzer Lehr Division. They also knew that the attacks were far from over.

On the night of 23 December, the enemy returned. Starting at 1715, the Germans unleashed a massive barrage of indirect and direct fire on G Company's position. The Wehrmacht Soldiers started to advance through the snow, emerging from woods south of the town of Marvie. Since it was dark and the Germans wore snowsuits, the glidermen could not engage them with their typical, ruthless efficiency. Onward they came, and soon they reached Hill 500, a piece of key terrain in the center of 2-327th Infantry's defense. The Panzers surrounded a platoon, forcing them to surrender, and continued forward. During this advance, an M3 half-track towing a 57mm anti-tank gun was trying to reach the summit of Hill 500. Earlier in the day, Colonel Harper, seeing the importance of the hill, ordered the anti-tank weapon. The Germans swarmed over the hill. The driver of the half-track, seeing the Mark IV Panzers, hurriedly turned around and began to drive back towards the center of Marvie. When the remaining glidermen from G Company and the rest of E Company saw the half-track approach from a hill they knew the Germans had seized, they opened fire on the hapless vehicle, setting it ablaze and killing the crew. The two Mark IV's followed the half-track into the village, but the smoldering wreckage of the M3 acted as a blocking obstacle on the road, preventing the tanks from moving any further up that avenue of approach.

Despite this initial setback, the German forces were in Marvie now, and Major Galbreith had a serious fight in his sector. At 2000, he called back to the regimental headquarters and reported to Colonel Harper that Germans were approaching the southern end of the village, pushing back the remaining U.S forces who

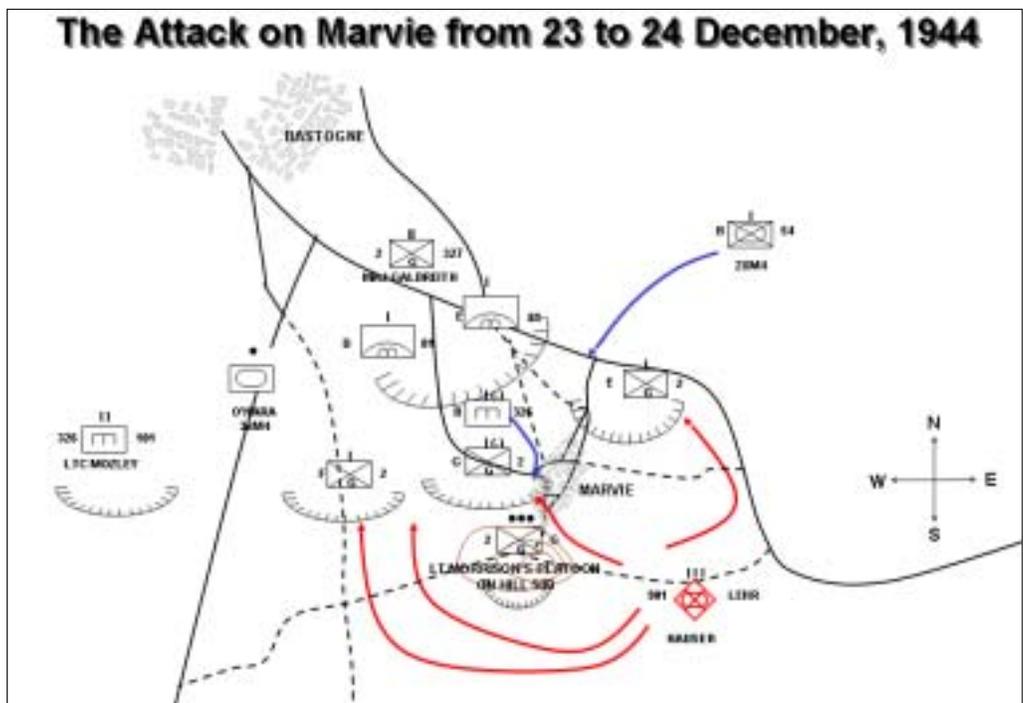
held the north and west end. German tanks, having seized Hill 500, were shelling the village from the high ground, causing havoc amongst the American forces. Sensing a decisive point now in the battle, the regimental headquarters ordered several units to converge on the village to buttress the glidermen of 2nd Battalion. At 2145, 40 paratroopers from the 501st Airborne Infantry Regiment linked up to reinforce F Company, and at 2330, the division attached D and E Batteries from the 81st Airborne Anti-Aircraft Battalion to the beleaguered regiment. Two more units were 2nd and 3rd platoons of B Company, 326th Engineers. Under the command of 1st Lieutenant Charles J. Roden, the platoons were positioned in and around the village. Once again, combat support Soldiers were in the role of infantry. Galbreith knew he could count on the engineers to accomplish the mission. He needed fighting Soldiers, and the engineers delivered.

Time was running out, though. The battle was swinging in the Germans' favor. After encircling and overwhelming Lieutenant Morrison's platoon on Hill 500, the same two Mark IV tanks were now working their way through the southern portion of the town, leading several squads of Panzergrenadiers who began to clear the various buildings. One of the tanks actually reached within 75 yards of the battalion command post of Major Galbreith. And despite the coming reinforcements, G Company's Command Post came under direct fire, and the command section had to fight their way out to avoid encirclement. According to the S2 reports, four or five German tanks had broken through the lines during the initial push. With one platoon gone, G Company had to fall back to new defensive positions, leaving F Company separated from the rest of the battalion with the panzers in between them. Major Galbreith called on the intelligence section and supply section to defend the command post since the men from G Company had to defend other sections of the line. These men were not infantry Soldiers, but they had undergone the rigorous

training that was common in the 101st Airborne Division. They knew how to fight.

At 2030, the first engineer elements reached the area. Lieutenant Robert Coughlin left to reconnoiter the positions as the rest of the combat engineers prepared for the coming hostilities. Private Carowick, who wrote extensively on the experience, told of how the fires burning in the village of Marvie provided excellent illumination. As they approached their squad defense sectors, they passed Soldiers from G Company, 2-327th Infantry who told them that the Germans were coming on strong, and that the Germans might break through the defenses.

Luckily for the men of 3rd Platoon, B Company, they were defending good ground. Their platoon ran east/west along a stream



that faced the main road heading northward into the town. The stream was better than a tank ditch, providing a turning obstacle that would slow the enemy armor down. Furthermore, the former occupants had already dug foxholes along a fence-line that followed the stream. With air-cooled M1919 machine guns along 1st and 2nd Squads' lines and bazookas positioned near four-and-half-foot high culverts, the men waited for the tanks to come. Private Carowick could hear their engines idling as they slowly clanked their way forward. Suddenly, a flare shot up, and the engineers could see three Mark IV tanks with snow clad infantry following closely behind them.

The flare acted as a signal for both sides. The night erupted as the American machine guns opened up on the German invaders. The lumbering Mark IV's, seeing the muzzle flashes, replied with their 76mm guns. The giant shells slammed into the trees above the machine gun positions, showering the gunners with splinters of wood. Some of the gunners, realizing the futility of machine guns against tanks, began to slacken their fire to fool the Germans into thinking they had knocked them out. However, some of the other gunners kept firing. One squad leader sent a runner to order them to hold their fire, but a shell from one of the tanks exploded nearby, killing the runner. Still, the machine gunners had killed some of the infantry. Carowick could hear the moaning and cries of wounded Germans amidst the cacophony of shell and bullets.

While both sides exchanged blows, one of the tanks turned onto the culvert, in an attempt to cross the stream. Facing the culvert was a barn that was also the position of Privates Duffie and Knarr, a bazooka team. Seeing the tank attempting to cross over the culvert, Duffie opened the window and ducked out with the bazooka on his shoulder. As the tank started to actually cross, Duffie squeezed the trigger. Sparks flew as the rocket shot out and hurtled into the right sprocket of the Panzer's track. The tank shuddered and halted, another obstacle to the other tanks.

The tank commander popped his hatch and inspected the damage. Wrongly concluding it was a mine, he started to yell, "Minen, Minen, Minen!" to the others. Instead of leaving immediately, the tank

crew then shot up their remaining rounds into the already burning village. After they had done this, they left their tank and withdrew.

This was not the only fight, though. The engineers had only neutralized one tank, and the additional German tanks had already moved into other parts of Marvie and were winning the fight, even though more units had started to arrive to stem the German tide.

Major Galbreith called Colonel Harper again. "They are all around us now and I must have tanks," he said to his commander. Major Galbreith had called earlier asking for tanks at 2000, but now it was urgent. Without tanks, the acting commander knew the town would fall. Harper acted fast. He ordered Galbreith to call Team O'Hara and send two Shermans to support the glidermen and the engineers. Harper knew he did not have the authority to move those tanks. Only division could order that, but he decided to go ahead anyway.

"You call O'Hara on the radio and say the commanding general orders that two Sherman tanks move into Marvie at once and take up defensive positions," he said to 2-327th's acting commander. Obviously, he did not have the authority, but his officers were experienced Soldiers who knew when they needed help. He had to act fast. His move was the right one.

Within minutes, the two tanks from Team O'Hara moved out. Meanwhile, First Lieutenant Thomas J. Niland, the battalion S-2, acting under Major Galbreith's orders, had organized the intelligence section, the supply section, and the cooks into a last-ditch defense around the battalion command post. Braving intense direct fire from the Mark IVs and German MG 42s, Niland sprinted across enemy fields of fire to establish these positions with the support staff. In the center of town, two Mark IVs shelled the buildings and engaged the headquarters troops under Niland. Seeing the tanks, Niland guided them into position and continued the fight. Two Soldiers from the S-2 section, Privates Feeney and Panik, then killed a machine gun team that had pinned down many of the glidermen. The tanks, called in without authorization, proved the difference. They denied the Germans their main access into Bastogne.

For the next several hours, the fight

seesawed back and forth. Though the panzer grenadiers had seized the eastern portion of the town, they could not force the Americans out of the western portion of Marvie. By 0330, the battle quieted down. Later on that morning, the weather cleared and Allied airpower, namely P-47's, attacked the German positions that remained in Marvie. For the Germans, the way to Bastogne through Marvie was blocked. The door would never open again.

Throughout the battle, several of the decisive points centered on combat support troops thrust into an infantry situation. They performed beyond expectations. The engineers had bought time for the regiment in the beginning of the battle, and then, support Soldiers with another company of engineers held back the panzers before they could enter Bastogne. Lieutenant Niland wrote, "Our previous battle experiences were of great value to us. We could anticipate the situation and did not panic when it happened. Everyone took it upon themselves to stop the attack..."

Lieutenant Niland's words demonstrated the level of training that was common in the 101st Airborne Division in World War II. All glidermen were infantrymen first. Once they accomplished their mission and seized the enemy objective that was usually behind enemy lines, then they could continue their "other" jobs. When Major Galbreith called on the headquarters' sections to stem the German tide, he knew he could rely on them to do their jobs because though they were cooks, clerks, and intelligence specialists, they were infantrymen first. The German Soldiers learned the stark truth when their assault stalled amongst the burning buildings of Marvie. Can we say that of the combat support Soldiers of today? For some, the answer is sadly, no. We recognize this dangerous trend away from preparedness though, and we are changing it through intensive infantry training. We must hope that no other lives are lost due to a lack of combat training.

Captain Leo Barron served as a rifle platoon leader, battalion adjutant, company executive officer and brigade battle captain with the 101st Airborne Division's 1st Brigade, 327th Infantry Regiment. He is currently attending the Military Intelligence Captain's Career Course at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.
