

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

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1948 - 1949

OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST PLATOON, COMPANY B, 319TH INFANTRY
(80TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ASSAULT ON THE SIEGFRIED
LINE AT WALLENDORF, GERMANY, 7-15 FEBRUARY 1945.
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: RIVER CROSSING INTO AND AT-
TACK ON A FORTIFIED POSITION AT NIGHT.

Captain W. M. Cunningham, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

designed to discourage fraternization was shown to the assembled battalion. On the afternoon of the 6th the company commander addressed the company and stated that Division G-2 had reported that eighty per cent of the Germans in the pill box infested area about to be invaded actually wanted to surrender.

On the evening of the 6th a hot meal was fed just prior to darkness during which time the company suffered a few casualties from enemy artillery which had become increasingly active as the day raced on and which continued to increase in volume on into the night. Immediately after the meal religious services were held for those who cared to attend and the remainder of the evening was spent in making last minute preparations for the forthcoming attack which jumped off according to the plan and schedule previously outlined.

THE ATTACK

At 0130 hours, 7 February 1945, according to plan, friendly artillery began to bombard the German side of the Our River which was the Siegfried Line. The bombardment continued until 0300 hours which was the time appointed for it to lift.

At 0200 hours the Battalion moved out in route column and proceeded along the pre-determined route shown on Map II to the crossing site.

Order of companies was C, B, A with 1 platoon of the heavy machine guns of Company D attached to each of the two lead companies. The 81mm mortars of Company D were in posi-

tion between Kleinreisdorf and the foot of Hill X. (See Map II) They had registered during the afternoon and at 0230 hours, along with all other weapons in the area, they were to fire in support of the attack.

The order of platoons within Company B was 2nd, 1st, 3rd, and 4th. Company and platoon command groups marched at the head of the units which they commanded and an interval was maintained which would permit visual contact with the man immediately preceding. This interval was, of necessity, short as the night was very dark and a light rain was falling. Each leader was required to wear a piece of luminous tape about 1 inch by 2 inches on the back of his helmet to facilitate control.

Words cannot describe the fury of the artillery bombardment which was falling on the other side of the river. As far as one could see artillery and mortar shells of all sizes were bursting constantly. So intense was the fire that the landscape was almost continuously illuminated and to make oneself heard was practically impossible.

All went well until the head of the column was just starting the descent of Hill X to the river. This must have been about 0230 hours for, at that moment, all of the small arms in the area opened up as planned. This noise added to that of the artillery preparation already in progress, created a din that defies description.

One of the machine guns of a friendly unit had been laid slightly too low and it was firing grazing fire with occasional tracers along the length of Hill X about 20 yards

to the right of the column. Someone unidentified perhaps thinking that the battalion had been surrounded, yelled, "GO TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL!" Never was a command more promptly obeyed. In a matter of seconds, except for the command groups and possibly a very few others, that which before had been a well-organized column was a fleeing mob. Almost en masse and in a quite disorderly fashion, the entire group executed a right flank to the reverse slope of Hill X. A few seconds prior to this, 3 or 4 light artillery rounds exploded near the head of the column and produced a few casualties. Although the friendly machine gun continued to fire, no one in this group was injured by it.

The reader can readily imagine the chaos which resulted from this untimely sounding-off. Caution was abandoned and leaders went about shouting for their men by name. This may seem to have been ill-advised, but it actually was not; for since the shouts could hardly be heard in the immediate vicinity, they surely could not be heard across the river several hundred yards away. Further, this was the only possible means of restoring organization.

After a time the units were reorganized, and Company C, the leading company, began its crossing. As previously stated, the river was at flood stage and its current was swift. This slowed the operation considerably. German artillery and direct fire began to land in the vicinity to further complicate matters. The column now moved toward the river in slow stages advancing only as the men loaded on boats manned by the engineers and were ferried across

the river. The current was so swift that the boats would be carried several hundred yards downstream before they could reach the far shore.

Companies B and C and one platoon of Company A had crossed the river at approximately 0630 hours when it became evident that daylight was going to arrive before the remainder of the battalion could be brought over. These units were in an assembly area on the river bank; an area which was completely exposed except for darkness. Neither friendly nor enemy artillery was active at this time and the scene was comparatively quiet. These units remained in this area unmolested for about 45 minutes while the battalion command group was crossing the river. This group, daylight, and German small arms fire arrived simultaneously. The fire was coming from enemy-occupied pill boxes many of which could not be seen because they were almost perfectly camouflaged.

The battalion (-) might be said to have been pinned down and several casualties were suffered. The entire group was lying on the ground almost head to foot -- no dispersion whatever.

Perhaps 2 or 3 minutes after the initial enemy small arms fire had been received and it became evident that the Germans were firing from the pill boxes, the battalion commander and the two company commanders suddenly jumped to their feet and in true Hollywood style, shouted and waved the unit forward to assault Hill Y.

The battalion (-) moved out in a line of skirmishers

with Company C on the right. (The writer is unable to find written reference to the fact that one platoon of Company A was present at this time. However, it is believed that the platoon was attached to Company C and that some time later in the day, when the remainder of Company A had crossed under a smoke screen, it reverted to its parent unit.)

The topographical crest of Hill Y was reached without difficulty except for the steepness of the slope and the fact that, as the crest was neared, an enemy machine gun which had been by-passed fired into the back of Company C. By 0825 the battalion (-) was digging in on the line shown on Map III. (18) Hill Y was quite steep and at this point the battalion was about 200 yards from the river. The assault was made with every man firing his weapon continuously. Leaders had to constantly encourage their men in order to keep them moving, so steep was the ascent.

Units were in the same relative position on Hill Y in which they started the assault. No perimeter was formed and the companies intrenched in a comparatively straight line. By this time enemy artillery including Nebelwerfer*, mortars, and small arms had become active again and inflicted a few more casualties.

As the day wore on several prisoners were taken and

*Nebelwerfer was a type of German rocket artillery. The shells made a screeching sound in flight, and so it was a psychological as well as a casualty producing weapon.

(18) A - Sect. VII, 7 Feb 45; B - p. 3.

others were seen to be wading the river to surrender to the American forces on the other side.

The platoon leader of the 1st Platoon of Company B was called to the Company CP at approximately 1500 hours and there he was told of the plan for the night which was to form the perimeter shown on Map III. By 1600 hours this had been done.

The greater part of the 1st Platoon of Company B was near the foot of Hill Y, but the platoon leader was ordered to remain with the smaller portion of his unit near the top of the hill so that he would be nearer the Company CP since radio and wire communication were non-existent within the company. The dampness had rendered the SCR 536 radio inoperative, and wire had not been installed.

The remainder of Company A had crossed the river under a smoke screen during the day and the company was ordered to attack Wallendorf and outpost the high ground to the north and east. Company A reported the town cleared by 2015 hours.
(19)

During the night of 7-8 February the 2nd Battalion succeeded in crossing 27 men in addition to the part of Company F which had made the crossing the preceding night in the vicinity of Hoesdorf. (See Map III) Devastating artillery fire prevented more crossings and wrecked the boats of the 3rd Battalion which had been ordered to cross the river.
(20)

(19) A - Sect. VII, 7 Feb 45; B - p. 3; (20) A - Sect. VII, 8 Feb 45; B - p. 3 & 4; D - p. 7.

In the area of the 1st Platoon of Company B the night passed without incident other than artillery and Nebelwerfer fire. The most of this fire, however, was placed on the river line itself. Inclement weather continued.

On the day of the 8th of February a limited number of K Rations and blankets were secured by the platoon from the vicinity of the original crossing site. These had been carried down to the river by the kitchen personnel of the several companies of the battalion under cover of darkness and the engineers had brought as many as possible across the river under heavy artillery fire. The K Rations were issued only to those who were without food for re-supply was uncertain. The day was spent in improving positions and the weather remained unchanged. Enemy artillery and sniper fire continued. Again the bulk of the enemy artillery was concentrated on the river and possible crossing sites with the obvious purpose of preventing supply, evacuation, bridging, and the crossing of more American troops. It accomplished its mission.

The night of 8-9 February passed without noteworthy event in the 1st Battalion sector and the 2nd and 3rd Battalions made repeated attempts to cross the Our, but they were hampered by ever-present and well-directed enemy artillery concentrations. The 2nd Battalion did, however, succeed in crossing the remainder of Company F. (21)

Throughout the period 7-11 February the engineers, both those in support and those attached, attempted to

(21) A - Sect. VII, 8 Feb 45; B - p. 4; D - p. 7.

bridge the Our, but every try was defeated by the swiftness of the river current or enemy artillery or both. On 11 February all units on the German side of the river were still being supplied as well as possible by boat. (22)

At approximately 0600 hours 9 February the platoon leader of the 1st Platoon of Company B was awakened by a runner of the 2nd Platoon who informed him that these two platoons (1st and 2nd) were expected at the top of Hill Y prepared to move out in an attack in 30 minutes. (For LD, see Map III) A lone man without equipment would have done well to have climbed this hill in that length of time.

The battalion had now been across the river almost exactly 48 hours. This platoon had received a limited number of K Rations, but no ammunition and much had been expended in the initial attack on Hill Y. The supply of oil for weapons was almost depleted as much had been required because of the dampness of the weather.

K Rations were issued, blankets were piled hastily on position, and the 1st Platoon moved out followed by the 2nd Platoon. The two units arrived at the line of departure on Hill Y (See Map III) where Company C and the remainder of Company B were assembled. The platoon leaders reported to a very impatient company commander as the time was now about 0720 and they were some 50 minutes overdue.

The platoon leader of the 1st Platoon received the following attack order: "You see that high ground above Wallendorf? We are going to take that. The 2nd Platoon will

(22) A - Sect. VII, 11 Feb 45; B - p. 5; D - p. 10.

be on the right and your platoon will be echeloned to the left rear. Move out!"

The area over which this attack was to be launched was a curving ridge. It was relatively smooth, without trees, and except for pill boxes which were occupied by the enemy, there was nothing on the surface save an occasional shell hole to offer individual cover. There were several pill boxes visible within this area and others which were there could not be seen because of the camouflage.

Day was just breaking at this time and the attention of the company commander was called to a column of Germans on the horizon approximately 500 yards away in the direction of the proposed attack. A counterattack was feared and everyone took position behind the retaining wall which was the line of departure. The counterattack did not materialize and in 2 or 3 minutes the attack was on the way. It followed the route shown and it stopped at the point indicated on Map III.

Company B moved out as ordered to be followed by Company C. The platoon of heavy machine guns from Company D was still attached to Company B and they were to move out with the 3rd Platoon which was in support. The company command group followed the 1st Platoon. No time had been allowed for getting units organized into any formation for this attack and the 1st and 2nd Platoons moved out in a sort of open column with all men walking at top speed and firing on pill boxes or any other features which might harbor enemy soldiers. After an advance of about 200 to 300 yards in this manner,

enemy machine gun and rifle fire was received from the left flank of the column and it produced several casualties. The platoon leader of the 1st Platoon directed several of his men to fire on this group of enemy for they were plainly visible outside a pill box -- a machine gunner and several riflemen. This order was immediately carried out and the Germans started to abandon the position just as the company commander ordered these men to stop firing on this group and continue in the attack. The enemy forthwith resumed the position and the fire fight and continued to inflict casualties on the company.

Just after passing this position, the 2nd Platoon bore off toward the left of the intended route and the leader of the 1st Platoon, upon order of the Company Commander, directed his men to change their route of advance farther to the right. This was done and when the two platoons were abreast, they were hit with withering small arms, artillery, and mortar fire. The rifle and machine gun fire was intense, but no enemy nor enemy positions were visible. The fire came from all sides.

Actually, the Germans had allowed the column to get well within their position before they let go with all they had. Company C, and the Machine Gun Platoon of Company D were cut off and withdrew to their former positions and Company B was thus isolated in the position shown on Ridge B of Hill Y. (See Map III)

When the Germans opened up all men hit the ground and the leaders attempted to form a defensive perimeter. Little

could be accomplished in this direction and with a very little adjustment of position, all stayed as near the ground as possible and attempted to dig in.

The 1st and 2nd Platoons were in some semblance of a line with the 1st Platoon on the right. The platoon leader of the 1st Platoon and the platoon sergeant (a few minutes before he had been the platoon guide) took refuge in a shell hole which was about 50 feet in rear of the line. It could not be dug deeper so the dirt loosened by the shell burst was piled up around the crater for added protection. Word was received to, "Hold what you have".

A check revealed that the platoon sergeant, 2 squad leaders, and at least 2 men had been wounded and 4 others on the right flank of the platoon had been killed. All squads were now led by assistant squad leaders.

Nebelwerfer, artillery, and mortar concentrations rained on the position. The mortars were so close that the explosions could be heard as the rounds left the weapons. The enemy observation was such that if one stuck his hand out of a hole, it would be shot at. The shelling continued, but an expected counterattack did not come. Word was received during the morning that Company A would attack from Wallendorf and contact Company B. They were unable to get more than 100 yards out of town.

With the coming of darkness, all personnel got out of their holes and walked or ran around them in an effort to get warm. This unit had been across the river 60 hours now

without hot food or dry clothing and rain had fallen intermittently during the time. Further, though the position was just below the crest of a hill, the holes filled with water as though each was a spring. One could not dig to a depth of more than 6 to 8 inches and so the men had not stood in the water, they had lain in it for protection. It was necessary to bail the water out of these holes each 15 to 20 minutes and that only prevented one from being almost entirely submerged. Everyone on the position was as thoroughly wet as it is humanly possible to get.

No further mention has been made of the wounded. It was impossible to materially aid them. There were no medical supplies, and there was no available comfort of any sort. Only rain coats and shelter halves water soaked and muddy ones, were available with which to cover these men in an effort to keep them warm. This was futile since they were lying on the wet ground and rain fell occasionally. The platoon leader and the platoon sergeant visited each of the men in his position often during the night, but there was little in the way of encouragement to offer. Though there was no help in sight, not one complained. The only aid man remaining in the company had been left to man the battalion aid station.

At 2400 hours Company C had cleared three pill boxes and had contacted Company B. (23) In the meantime Company B had continued to be harassed by artillery and mortar fire as well as patrol action.

(23) A - Sect. VII, 9 Feb 45; B - p. 4.

With the arrival of Company C it was decided to attempt to evacuate as many of the wounded as possible. One man from the 1st Platoon had to be carried. This required at least four men although it seemed that they could not be spared from the line.

No litter was available nor was there anything from which to improvise one except rifles and shelter halves. This is a difficult feat even under ordinary conditions, but with everyone and everything soaking wet, cold, and muddy it was next to impossible. There were few left on the position who were able to carry their one-quarter of the load which the wounded man represented, so the platoon sergeant was sent on this mission. This party departed to make their way through enemy territory to the battalion aid station at about 0100 hours on 10 February, but dawn came prior to their arrival and they were compelled to spend the day in a pill box in the enemy line.

Snow fell during this day (10th) as well as rain. Several attempts were made to supply the position by liaison plane, but the supplies fell into enemy hands on every occasion. The enemy continued all types of fire on the position, but it was mainly of a harassing nature now. Several harassing patrols contacted the company, but their fire was not often returned unless they came very close to the position.

Darkness came on the night of 10-11 February and the men again got out of their holes and moved about in an ef-



fort to get warm. Many were so cold and weak that they could take the low step out of their holes only after repeated attempts and some of those who attempted to run could not.

About 2200 hours the company commander, who with the advent of darkness had gone to the battalion CP, returned with the news that the company was to be relieved very shortly. In approximately one hour the relieving unit arrived. It was that part of Company C which was not already on position. Company B started the infiltration back through enemy lines for they had not yet been completely cut. Just how this was accomplished without serious incident is a matter of conjecture as it was almost impossible to maintain silence. Some men were wounded and others had frozen feet. To say that this group was cold, wet, and hungry would certainly constitute an understatement. They were soaked having lain in water for no less than 36 hours; they were almost frozen having been practically immobile and thoroughly wet in temperatures that were cold enough for snow for a like period; and they were half-starved, some of them having gone through this period with as little as one-third K Ration. The ground was rough and wet and the night was black. Some were so miserable that when an ankle was turned or one would stumble and have to use a little added energy to prevent a fall, he would cry audibly and unashamedly.

By approximately 2400 hours on the 11th the 1st Platoon was in a pill box in the same area from which it had moved

out on the morning of the 9th. Local security was posted and the men were made as comfortable as possible for the remainder of the night.

On the morning of the 12th reorganization of the platoon was begun and word was received that with the coming of darkness a composite platoon made up of the more able members of the 1st and 2nd Platoons would have to go back to the position which they had so recently left. This was to be done each alternate 24 hour period until further orders were received.

By the 14th of February 6 or 7 men in the pill box occupied by the 1st Platoon had frozen feet and were unable to walk. That night they were evacuated to the battalion aid station which was already filled to overflowing.

On the afternoon of 15 February Company B was relieved and moved to Wallendorf where the men received their first hot meal and clean clothing in 8 days. The 1st Platoon of Company B which had numbered 39 enlisted men and 1 officer at the outset of this operation now was made up of 12 enlisted men and 1 officer. Of the 27 casualties approximately 50 per cent were the result of enemy action and the remaining one-half were due to exposure.

By 12 February all 3 battalions of the 319th Infantry had succeeded in crossing the Our, and on that day the 3rd Battalion passed through the 1st Battalion and attacked northeast from Wallendorf. (24) The bridgehead was secured and the regiment continued to advance into Germany.

(24) D - p. 11.

LESSONS

Some lessons brought out by this operation are:

1. A river crossing into an enemy fortified area at night requires much prior planning and preparation on the part of all concerned.
2. Every effort should be made to thoroughly brief each participant in an attack in which overhead supporting fire is to be used.
3. In a frontal attack on an enemy fortified area all available weapons should fire on the enemy position regardless of whether he is visible.
4. In a difficult operation, both subordinate and higher commanders should strive to maintain close liaison.
5. If an attack is to pass through enemy occupied positions, attacking personnel should keep moving in order to present a poor target to the enemy.
6. Small units such as platoons and companies in attacking a fortified area, should clear that area of enemy as they advance.
7. In a river crossing operation, adequate preparation requires more than the usual number of medical personnel and supplies.
8. A mobile counterattacking force is a prerequisite for the successful defense of a river line against a determined enemy.