

UNIT: 3d Bn, 319th Inf Regt, 80th Inf Div

PERIOD: 19 Dec 44 - 29 Jan 45

ACTION: Reducing the Bulge

SOURCE: Lt Col Elliott Cheston, Bn CO
Capt Robert J Bee, Jr, Bn S-3

PLACE AND DATE OF INTERVIEW: HEISDORF, LUXEMBOURG, 2 Feb 1945

MAPS: Scale, 1/50,000; France and Belgium Arlon Sheet 137, Wiltz Sheet 122;
Luxembourg (sheets 22 and 23)

INTERVIEWER: Capt D G Dayton

INTERVIEW conducted with unit records.

When the 80th Div received orders to move north to assist in stopping the German counterattack the 3d Bn, 319th Inf Regt, was in ROHRBACH, FRANCE (657297). The battalion was not yet in the line and had only been in ROHRBACH about 15 hours, having recently moved from MERLEBACH, FRANCE (330620). About 1300 on 19 Dec the battalion received orders to prepare for movement, motorized. The battalion knew it was going to move north but did not know its exact mission. It entrucked about 1830 and moved via SARRALBE-ST AVOLD-METZ and LUXEMBOURG CITY. The battalion traveled all night using lights intermittently, depending on the zone. This made driving difficult because of the necessity to frequently adjust to the change. The battalion arrived in WOLFERDANGE, LUXEMBOURG (845190) in the morning 20 Dec and bivouacked there. It was given no information as to mission immediately, but Capt Bee contacted a Lt Col from the 9th Armd Div Hq and the latter informed Capt Bee the Germans were only a few miles up the road and that the 9th Armd had been cut up considerably by the German thrust. The colonel told Capt Bee that in view of the critical situation the battalion would probably be used immediately.

On the morning of the 21st the battalion received orders to move to BROUCH (784278), about 16 kilometers northwest of the city of LUXEMBOURG. The

battalion was to occupy and defend the high ground in that vicinity. On arriving at BROUCH the battalion received orders via radio that the orders were changed, to return to the area at WOLFERDANGE. Before the return movement was completed, orders were received to go back to BROUCH and carry out the original mission. The high ground in the vicinity of BROUCH and BUSCHDORF (755290) was occupied, with the battalion defending to the north. During the night of the 21st orders were received to attack to the north at dawn the next morning until contact was made with enemy, which was expected to be in the vicinity of MERZIG (755384). It was assumed that the latter town was in friendly hands but the situation was so fluid and cloudy that it was felt necessary to move in an attack formation from a point about 10 kilometers from the objective.

The battalion jumped off from BUSCHDORF about 0530 in an approach march formation with two light tanks (702d Tk Bn) and a platoon of infantry, motorized, reconnoitering to the front. The point reached the town of VICHTEN (750350) without incident and contacted elements of the 109th Inf Regt, 28th Div. These elements reported that their 3d Bn CP was being attacked in MICHELEUCH (766368) and requested immediate assistance. One platoon from Co I, 319th, was motorized and given the mission of getting to the CP and containing the situation until the arrival of the battalion. The platoon from I Co got into the town and contacted the CO, who informed the platoon that the situation was under control. A short time later the battalion arrived and immediately took up positions on the high ground north and east of the town with Cos K and L. Co I remained in MICHELEUCH. The Bn CO from the 109th Inf Regt said his troops had withdrawn from MERZIG under pressure the previous night because the Germans were infiltrating entire companies behind the lines. He said his companies were spread out over several miles in the woods and had no contact on the flanks.

The 3d Bn, 319th, attacked MERZIG immediately, with Cos K and L supported

by a platoon of Co C/702 Tk Bn and a platoon of Co A/610 TD Bn. There was no definite information concerning the enemy. The companies attacked abreast, one company on either side of the road. There was light enemy artillery and mortar fire. Both companies succeeded in entering the town. The M Co machine guns were placed on the high ground in the southwest edge. From there they fired on enemy vehicles, which were evidently surprised while in the streets of the village. There was considerable enemy small arms fire in the town and only about 1/3 of the town had been cleared of the enemy by dark. Artillery and tanks from the high ground south of MERZIG were, for about an hour before dark, firing on small German groups straggling out of the north edge of the town toward the woods. At dark the companies were ordered to outpost and hold what they had and await further orders. At dawn the following morning, 23 Dec, the companies resumed the attack through the town and by 1100 had taken 118 PWS, five of which were junior officers, and killed about 60 Germans. There were 11 AT guns (probably 75s) captured and destroyed in the town. When MERZIG had been cleared of the enemy, the 3d Bn was given the mission of continuing north to HEIDERSCHEID and contact the 2d Bn, 319th, which passed through the 1st Bn zone and made a night attack capturing HEIDERSCHEID. The 3d Bn moved through OBERPEULEN (777402) and proceeded northwest via the road toward the town. The column was halted in the edge of the woods about 1000 yards southeast of HEIDERSCHEID (736446) and requested, by radio, the situation from the 2d Bn. The 2d Bn reported that the counterattack by the enemy infantry and tanks in the morning had been repulsed but that artillery and direct fire from enemy tanks was coming into the town. Lt Col Elliot B. Cheston, the Bn CO, and Capt Robert J Bee, Bn S-3, went forward to HEIDERSCHEID and left the battalion in the edge of the woods. While in the town Lt Col Bandy, 2d Bn CO, was contacted and the complete picture obtained. Col Cheston then ordered the 3d Bn to attack with two Cos, K and L, abreast and I in reserve. The battalion was to bypass HEIDERSCHEID on the east and seize the town of

TADLER (750472). TADLER was located in the bottom of a valley flanked with very steep slopes that led up to high ground. The battalion approached it from the south via the high ground, but could not see the town until they were directly above it. In reaching this point they came under observation and heavy mortar fire. At this time Col Cheston received orders via radio to send a company to HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND (726463) to assist in outposting the river line. I Co, the reserve company, was ordered on this mission. The remainder of the battalion pressed the attack on TADLER. While a platoon of K Co and two tanks covered the approach to the town from the high ground to the south, the rest of the troops moved down the steep slope into the town. There was no small arms fire but the mortar fire continued. After moving through the town, men were sent to the bridge sites to hold the same or make reports if they had been blown. The bridges across the SURE River at TADLER were blown but I Co had found the bridge west of HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND across the main highway intact, but being used by a German armored column. The company remained in the woods while Capt LeRoy and some of his sergeants reconnoitered the town. On the basis of his reconnaissance (he discovered by his reconnaissance that individual German vehicles were using the road in the valley floor through HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND and that German columns were using the main highway to the west) Capt LeRoy kept his men in the woods until dark and then moved into the town. He set up roadblocks on the secondary roads leading in and out of HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND. Several individual enemy vehicles were ambushed from these positions. The captain sent out an outpost to observe the main road, instructing it to report all enemy movement. (When I Co moved into the deep valley wherein HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND was located, the battalion lost radio contact with it. The only contact was through infrequent patrols.) The remaining troops of the battalion stayed in TADLER; The Bn CP was in HEIDERSCHEID.

HEIDERSCHEID was counterattacked again on the morning of the 24th so the

3d Bn was ordered to move toward the town and assist the 2d Bn. A platoon of K Co was left to contain TADLER and the remainder of the troops moved to accomplish the mission. The battalion (less I Co and one platoon of K Co) reached the high ground northeast of HEIDERSCHEID without contacting the enemy and took up positions to protect the town from the east. (The German counterattack had meanwhile been repulsed by the 2d Bn.)

During the night of 24-25 Dec I Co was relieved in HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND by the 2d Bn, 104th Inf Regt, 26th Div, and joined the 3d Bn which had meanwhile returned to TADLER. (HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND was in the 26th Inf zone but was taken by the 3d Bn in an effort to get bridges across the SURE River. During this period the 26th Div was advancing to the left rear of the 3d Bn, 319th Inf Regt.) The 3d Bn had its Christmas dinner in TADLER.

While the 3d Bn was in TADLER the 2d Bn moved up from KNILLEN and seized RINGEL on 25 Dec. On 27 Dec the 1st Bn relieved the 2d and the former battalion received a counterattack at RINGEL. K Co was sent up from TADLER to protect the left flank of the 2d Bn. The situation stabilized and K Co returned to TADLER the same night.

On the 27th the 3d Bn moved to HEIDERSCHEID, set up at perimeter defense of the town, leaving a platoon of K Co to hold TADLER. On the 28th a company from the 2d Bn relieved the platoon of K Co at TADLER and the platoon returned to battalion control at HEIDERSCHEID.

The 3d Bn remained in position at HEIDERSCHEID until the night of 5 Jan. During this period it received unusually heavy artillery fire. On 3 Jan L Co was ordered to outpost the river line between TADLER and HEIDERSCHEIDERGRUND. The company held these positions until the night of 5 Jan.

On the morning of 6 Jan the battalion was ordered to cross the SURE River, to seize and hold the town of DAHL (737498). The 166th Engr C Bn built a

treadway bridge at the site of the original bridge (722466) during the night of 5-6 Jan. (NOTE: A Bailey bridge partially constructed at 2200 was knocked out by artillery fire. Then the treadway was put in. It was not fully completed but was passable for foot troops when the battalion began crossing at 0400 6 Jan.) At 0400 the first foot troops crossed the yet uncompleted treadway and proceeded north toward BUDERSCHEID (712498) in a column of companies, each company in a column of twos. Preceding the leading company was a squad of riflemen and a mine squad from the Bn A & P Plat. The battalion plan of attack was based on the elements of surprise and speed. It was to move via the main road north to BUDERSCHEID thence east through the woods in single file into an assembly area in the edge of the woods just west of DAHL. Here they planned to deploy the battalion with two companies, I and L, in the assault and K Co to remain in the edge of the woods in reserve, at the same time covering the advance of the two assault companies. The advance to BUDERSCHEID was made without incident and the battalion contacted elements of the 26th Div. From BUDERSCHEID the battalion moved in a column of files through the woods, L Co leading. It was just getting light when the battalion began crossing a clearing in the woods (723498). L Co and one platoon of I moved across this area without mishap but the platoon following was fired on by two German machine guns which were located on high ground 700 yards north of the battalion (725503). Lt Col Cheston halted the battalion and rerouted it south and then east around the clearing, leaving one squad of Co I to reconnoiter and protect the battalion's flank. (NOTE: This squad of 8 men never did return to the battalion. A few days later another patrol found two of the men's bodies and squad equipment. The others are missing in action.) It was hoped that the Germans would think this was merely a patrol action, and this proved to be the case.

The battalion reached its assembly area in the edge of the woods and organized for the attack. What proved to be the most difficult part of the attack had been

accomplished. The march over the steep and slippery snow-covered ground, carrying heavy equipment, was a strenuous task and a tiring prelude to an attack. The companies formed in the edge of the woods, K on the right, L on the left and I in the center. Cos I and L each had attached one platoon of heavy MGs from Co M. The 81mm Mortar Plat went into position with K Co. At 1230 L and I jumped off against DAHL and moved rapidly into the town, taking the enemy completely by surprise. Nine Germans were killed in the town and 27 captured. After the assault companies had reached the town the remainder of the battalion followed up. K Co's leading elements were just entering DAHL when the enemy's defensive fires, consisting of heavy nebelwerfer and artillery, fell on the town. This barrage was calculated to be about the heaviest the battalion had encountered. It continued intermittently for about four hours, and caused about 20 or 25 casualties to the battalion. The 1st Bn had taken GOESDORF (730483), the town immediately south of DAHL earlier in the day. Since the treadway had been completed across the SURE, the 3d Bn was able to bring up its attached tanks and TD's (two platoons Co C/702 Tk Bn and one platoon Co A/610 TD BN (SP) 90mm.). The battalion immediately organized for a perimeter defense of the town, L Co protecting the north and west, K to the south and southeast, and I to the south and west. A squad was sent to patrol the road from DAHL to GOESDORF to prevent the enemy from infiltrating and blocking the supply route. The regiment had planned, after DAHL and GOESDORF were taken, to move the 1st Bn to DAHL, the 2d Bn to GOESDORF and have the 3d Bn attack and seize NOCHER. The 1st Bn did not reach DAHL until about 1730, just as it was getting dark, so the orders were changed to delay the 3d Bn's attack on NOCHER until the following day.

At 0300 on the morning of the 7th the Germans placed a heavy artillery barrage on DAHL which lasted for about 30 minutes. This barrage was followed by a counterattack consisting of about one infantry company and four tanks. The artillery had alerted the battalion, but the German force, clothed in snow suits, got

right into the outpost on the northwest edge of town. By using 60mm mortar illuminating flares, the TDs knocked out two German tanks and forced the others to withdraw. The infantry was engaged until dawn in very close fighting--some hand to hand--but the enemy were repulsed. All during the day artillery fell intermittently, but heavily on the town. The battalion suffered about 15 or 18 casualties. By nightfall necessary shifts had been made in troop dispositions and positions had been consolidated. Prisoner of war reports indicated that the town of DAHL was to be taken by the Germans at all costs.

At 0500 8 Jan DAHL was again counterattacked--this time by four battalions of infantry, one company of combat engineers and a number of tanks. The battle continued until about 0700. A machine gun platoon from Co M was cut off from L Co to which it was attached. The squad had to fight its way back as riflemen because its basic weapons were destroyed by direct fire from tanks. One FO, 276th FA Gp, and one squad, L Co, were cut off and surrounded in a house on the north edge of town for two hours. The FO continued to adjust fire on the enemy while the riflemen kept the enemy away from the building being used as the OP. (The FO was awarded the Silver Star.) 2d Lt Michael N. Micketanic of an M Co MG Plat throttled a German to death and killed nine with an M-1 rifle. (He was recommended for an oak leaf cluster to the Silver Star.) The attack was repulsed by 0700. The Germans lost 4 Tiger tanks and 5 Panthers--2 from bazooka fire and 7 from TDs and tanks. Two other German tanks were probable losses, but were retrieved by the enemy the following night. About 60 PWs were taken and more than 130 German dead were counted. The 3d Bn lost one tank and one TD and suffered less than fifty casualties.

From 8 Jan until the 18th the 3d Bn and 1st Bn remained in DAHL maintaining contact through patrol action. It was decided to move the 3d Bn against NOCHER after which the 2d Bn would take the high ground east of NOCHER. At 0700 18 Jan the 3d Bn, with Co G attached, and supported by two platoons of medium tanks and a

section of TDs, attacked north to seize and hold NOCHER. K Co, with a MG Plat of Co M attached, was to take the main road junction (729512) west of NOCHER leading to WILTZ. L and I Cos were to seize the town itself while G Co protected the right rear. L Co on the right moved slightly ahead of I, swung around and took up positions north and northeast of NOCHER. As they did so, I Co hit the town from the south and began cleaning it out house by house. Since the enemy were flanked on all sides of the town it was impossible for them to retreat. Some of the Germans surrendered; some did otherwise. In one house in the north edge of town 19 Germans led by an officer refused to surrender. I Co contained the house with a squad until the tanks arrived from DAHL. Then the tanks fired into the house until no further resistance was manifest. Inspection subsequently revealed that all occupants had been killed. During the attack on NOCHER German artillery and nobelwerfer defensive fires were placed on the battalion; approximately 10 casualties were suffered. K Co, meanwhile, had been hit on its left flank by enemy infantry and reached its objective, the road junction, only after about eight hours of bitter fighting. In the attack on NOCHER one TD and 3 tanks were lost. Approximately 130 Germans were killed and over one hundred captured. The battalion consolidated its positions about NOCHER. (Capt Bee says that NOCHER was about the most beat up town he had ever seen. There were no houses with roofs remaining.)

The 3d Bn remained in the vicinity of NOCHER until 24 Jan during which time patrols were sent to the WILTZ River to reconnoiter for crossings and obtain information concerning the enemy. On 24 Jan the battalion was ordered to cross the river into MERKOLS (741528). A patrol which had entered the town the previous night reported no enemy in the town. About 1000 on the 24th a platoon of I Co was sent forward to reconnoiter the route of advance. The platoon was trapped in an anti-personnel minefield about 1000 yards northwest of NOCHER and suffered one man killed, one wounded. A mine detector squad was sent to clear a route for the platoon out

of the minefield, and the platoon returned to NOCHER.

I Co, with one squad of Co C/305 Engr Bn with mine detectors attached, moved along the road to MERKOLS and crossed the river at a point where it was frozen sufficiently to support troops. That night, 24-25 Jan, while I Co occupied MERKOLS and defended to the north and east, C/305 Engr built a makeshift wooden bridge at (742523) across the WILTZ strong enough to support only jeeps. This type bridge was constructed of necessity. At this point the road paralleled the river and was too narrow and steep for any steel bridge equipment to be brought to the bridge site by large vehicles. I Co and all the armor remained at NOCHER and at 0830 25 Jan the remainder of the battalion joined I Co in MERKOLS. The battalion did not advance beyond this town. On the 26th the battalion moved via NOCHER-DEHL-GOESDORF-HEIDERSCHIED-FEULEN-ETTELBRUCK-DIETRICH to BETTENDORF. Immediately upon arrival the battalion detrucked and relieved one battalion of the 12th Inf Regt and a battalion (less a company) of the 8th Inf Regt, both of the 4th Inf Div, in the line FOURHEN-LONGSDORF and vicinity. These defensive positions were held until the battalion moved to a rest area in HEISDORF and STEINSEL just north and west of LUXEMBOURG on 29 January 1945.