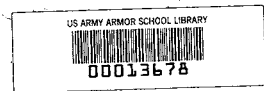


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AOAC 2-72
4 June 1972

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ARRACOURT: ARMOR IN DEFENSE



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STATEMENT OF INTENT: This article is intended to illustrate a historical example of a successful defense by U. S. armor units at brigade level and below against opposing armor units and emphasize some of the lessons learned in this action that are still applicable today.

I. Introduction

II. Setting

- A. Strategic position
- B. German Plans
- C. Unit Dispositions

III. Equipment and Organizations

- A. 37th Tank Battalion
 - 1. Sherman tank
 - 2. M-10 tank destroyer
- B. 113th Panzer Brigade and the Panther tank

IV. Conduct of the action

- A. C Company's actions
- B. CPT Dwight and tank destroyer's
- C. Task Force Hunter

V. Conclusion

- A. Training
- B. Leadership

Although World War II is replete with examples of defense against armored forces by armored formations, the U. S. Army had relatively little experience in this area compared to the combatants on the Eastern front. In addition, most actions of this nature involving U. S. troops are described from the viewpoint of division or higher levels of command. There are relatively few examples available that show how company and battalion commanders of U. S. armored units handled the problems of defense against opposing armor. This article illustrates a successful defense conducted by units at brigade level and below. In order to aid the reader's understanding, the equipment and organizations involved will be briefly described, but this article will not attempt to correlate the tactics with present U. S. tactical doctrine. However, some lessons still applicable to armor leaders will be pointed out.

Mid-September, 1944, found Patton's Third Army across the Moselle River. In particular, the XII Corps had enveloped the town of Nancy, France, and was holding a large bridgehead there; the Corps was consolidating this bridgehead and preparing to advance east to the Rhine River. The 4th Armored Division held the eastern side of the bridgehead, covering a wide frontage of approximately 30 miles (2:223, Map 12). Meanwhile, the German high command determined that they would attack and destroy the Nancy bridgehead (2:216-218).

As early as 28 August, Hitler received a suggestion from his staff that the Third Army should be counterattacked (2:190). Included in his instructions to the German high command in the west (OB West) was a plan for a large scale counter thrust to be delivered against the U. S. Third Army (2:191). He allotted six divisions and six panzer brigades to the operation; however, these units were largely designations only.

Some had been reduced to skeletons, the panzer brigades were still forming in Germany or enroute to France, and some divisions were heavily engaged (2:191-192). Hitler found it easy to move pins on the map in his East Prussian headquarters. Often these "divisions" consisted of a few tanks and four or five hundred infantrymen.

By 4 September the date of the attack had been set for the 12th (2:192-193). This plan originally called for a thrust to Reims, some 50 miles in the allied rear (See Map 1)(2:Map 21). However, the grandiose German plans were constantly upset. The Third Army continued to advance and put pressure on various portions of the front that would then need to be shored up by German reserves. This process captured the terrain from which the Germans hoped to attack and ground up the units earmarked for the offensive. For example, the 112 Panzer Brigade advanced against the 2nd French Armored Division and, after unfortunately finding the French near Dompaire, was forced to retreat minus 70% of its new tanks (2:198-201).

Finally, pressure from Hitler could no longer be resisted and the attack was definitely set for 18 September. The German commanders in the west had prevailed upon Hitler to accept a much smaller scale effort that would attempt to cut off the U. S. armor in the Nancy bridgehead by capturing Luneville and Chateau-Salins (2:216-219).

Initially, the attack was opened on the 18th by the 111th Panzer Brigade and elements of the 15th Panzer Grenadier (armored infantry) Division who attacked Luneville. They rapidly bogged down and OB West changed the direction of attack for the next day from Chateau-Salins to Nancy in an effort to relieve German forces still in Nancy and eliminate the bridgehead (2:220-222). Thus, the 113th Panzer Brigade was to attack due west toward Nancy and would not wait until

the 111th Panzer Brigade could move from Luneville to support it (2:222). Their new direction of attack found ~~the~~ Combat Command A, 4th Armored Division lying directly in its path.

Combat Command A (CCA) was spread over a wide area (Map 2). Its only tank battalion, the 37th Tank Battalion, commanded by LTC Abrams, had sent one company to support the Luneville defense and another north to form part of CCA's sector. C Company, commanded by CPT K. R. Lamison, and the battalion headquarters remained at Lezey to outpost this important crossroad (2:223).

The 37th Tank Battalion was similar to today's armor Battalion (1). It had three medium tank companies of 17 tanks each. They were equipped with M4 Sherman tanks with a medium velocity (2030 fps) 75mm gun. In addition the battalion had a light tank company (D Co.) equipped with M5 Stuart light tanks. The 37mm gun and thin armor of the Stuart made it nearly useless for anything but reconnaissance.

Another armored vehicle available to CCA was the M-10 tank destroyer of the 704 Tank Destroyer Battalion. It was a lightly armored vehicle on an M4 chassis and carried a high velocity (2600 fps) 3" gun. The tank destroyer battalions were organized to operate as independent units but were habitually attached to infantry and armored divisions.

The 113th Panzer Brigade was organized around two panzer battalions, one with MKIV tanks and one with MKV (Panther) tanks. In addition to ninety-eight tanks the brigade had two panzer grenadier battalions. It had been recently organized in Germany, and the attack on CCA was its first action(2:194).

The Panther was the tank chiefly involved in the attack against CCA. Undoubtedly, it was the finest medium tank in the world in 1944. Its high velocity (3000 fps) 75mm gun could penetrate the M4 at 2000

yards. It was more maneuverable than the M4 and its frontal armor could not be penetrated by the Sherman's 75 at any range. However, it was infamous for its poor mechanical reliability, but this factor was mainly significant in the number of Panthers that managed to arrive on the battlefield and not in the effectiveness of those that did arrive.

The Sherman's chief advantages in a fight against Panthers were reliable mobility and efficient turret power traverse. Sherman crews were often able to fire three or four rounds while the Panther was still traversing its turret (1). The Sherman was effective against the flanks and rear of the Panther.

The M-10 tank destroyer had generally the same advantages as the Sherman, but its 3" gun was more effective. However, it, too, had a difficult time penetrating the Panther's thick frontal armor.

The terrain in the Arracourt area was generally open with low rolling hills and some woods (1). The weather was very significant. Until about 1100 each day ground fog limited visibility to 30 or 40 yards (1). This negated two vital American assets, airpower and artillery. However, it also nullified the Panther's range advantage.

The 111th Panzer Brigade, therefore, did have a favorable combat ratio against CCA. It had 3 to 1 advantage in technically superior tanks. It also had weather and terrain favoring its attack.

The attack was generally a surprise to the Americans. As late as 18 September, XII Corps only gave the Germans the capability of launching small, harassing attacks in the CCA area. Neither did the tactical units of CCA expect an attack (1).

Good security from C Company and the 37th Tank Battalion kept the German attack from being a tactical surprise. The first warning was at 2330 hours on the 18th of September. The C Company outpost SE of Lezey

(See Map 2, B) heard a column on the road to its front (3). The column turned off to Ley to bivouac and a patrol was sent from the OP which discovered tank tracks leading off the road (3). C Company dispatched a patrol, largely made up of assistant drivers, to find out what was in Ley (3). The patrol adjusted artillery fire on the Germans and forced them to move (3). Meanwhile artillery had been registered on the cross-roads (See Map 2, A) by C Company and fired at the Germans as they passed through (3).

First contact with the attack came at Moncourt the following morning. After destroying a half-track (German APC) and truck, the light tank platoon leader sighted five Panthers and withdrew back to Lezey (3).

The next encounter came at about 0730 at a C Company outpost (See Map 2, C). The tank section at the OP had placed a smaller OP with land line communications farther down the road (3). Warned by this OP, the section destroyed two Panthers as they loomed into view (3).

The major German attack was directed toward Lezey. As the attack developed the two OP's were strengthened to platoon size (3). CPT Lamison used the remaining platoon as a roving reserve and to block further west. C Company gained a significant tactical advantage through the use of landline OP's during the action that followed. The 37th habitually carried a field phone and wire on each tank (1). During this fight the assistant drivers had been dispatched to positions 60-100 yards in front of each tank with a field phone (1). These men directed tank fire against the German armor while the U. S. tanks were still protected by the ground fog (1). The German attack in the Lezey area was completely disorganized by this tactic. Twelve tanks were destroyed, and, when the fog lifted at about 1100 C Company directed artillery and

airstrikes on the Germans "milling around" to its front (1). This was the first time that the Americans realized the magnitude of the German attack. After this the German attack degenerated to a number of company-size probes throughout the Rechincourt-Bezange area (2:224).

Meanwhile, during his routine run from CCA to the tank battalion, the Liason officer, CPT Dwight, heard the initial firing and radioed ahead to ask if he should go on to Lezey (3). After a negative reply he returned to CCA headquarters where he received a platoon of Tank destroyers from COL Clarke, the CCA Commander, to move to Lezey and reinforce the 37th (3). He moved back toward Lezey with the four M-10's and encountered German tanks near Bezange (3) (Map 2, Overlay 1). One M-10 was lost almost immediately but the remaining three knocked out nine tanks while losing two more M-10's (3).

Shortly after CPT Dwight's action the CCA had dispatched a tank destroyer platoon to the Rechincourt area. This platoon arrived in time (late morning) to repulse another German attack with the help of artillery. Destroying eight tanks, they put the remainder of a tank company to flight (2:225). One platoon from C/37 that was sent to the area on CCA's orders after the fighting had died down near Lezey assisted them (1).

MAJ Hunter, the 37th's S-3 at Luneville with A Company, heard the action through radio traffic, and was able to obtain a release at 1100 from General Eddy, XXI Corps Commander (3). His instructions from LTC Abrams were a mission type order saying, "Dust off the sights, wipe off the shot, and breeze right on through!" (3). He left Luneville without the infantry company that had been part of his task force (3). B Company minus one platoon had also been released and arrived at Arracourt in time to repulse a German attack (3). MAJ Hunter arrived in time to

assist in this defensive action (3). Task Force Hunter then moved toward Rechincourt to make contact with CPT Dwight (3) (See Map 2, Overlay 2). The Task Force arrived at CPT Dwight's position at 1400 and he was able to point out a German concentration on Hill 297 (3) (See Map 2, Overlay 2). MAJ Hunter moved around the southwest side of Rechincourt to hit the Germans on the flank (3). He attacked with A Co. on the left and B Co. on the right. The mass of A Co. hit the Germans head on, opening fire at 400 yards, while one platoon wheeled around to the left flank (3). Meanwhile, B Co. struck the Germans on the right flank and closed to 250 yards before opening fire (3). Task Force Hunter destroyed eight tanks and killed about 100 infantry (3). After this action the task force moved to the battalion positions at Lezey to spend the night.

MAJ Hunter's attack was the last significant action for the day. CCA claimed forty-three tanks, nearly all new Panthers, were destroyed (2:225). The 37th Tank Battalion accounted for twenty-nine of these and, in addition, some 200 infantry killed (3). U. S. Forces lost five tanks, three tank destroyers and six men killed. CCA had achieved a decisive tactical success against the German attack.

The key to success was not superior equipment or massive air power. The main German thrust was stopped before air power could intervene. The keys were training and good leadership.

The 4th Armored Division was at a very high state of training. The division had been formed in 1941 and had trained constantly before being committed to combat in July, 1944 (1). Drivers and gunners who began training in 1941 were the same ones who were fighting in 1944. This division was skilled when it crossed the beaches in July, and, by the time it reached Arracourt, it was also seasoned (1). For example, the

technique of directing tank fire by land line is probably not in the bag of tricks of present-day tank units. Another example are the infantry skills available that allowed C Company to conduct dismounted night patrols.

The importance of training in this action makes a good argument for more emphasis on training in today's army and less on maintenance. Two or three tanks with superior crews appear better than a full platoon of five tanks crewed poorly. The M60A1 is certainly not at the same disadvantage against a Russian T-62 as the Sherman was against the Panther. However, good equipment is only effective if properly used.

Aggressive leadership was another key to this successful defense. Commanders in the 37th Tank Battalion received mission-type orders, reacted aggressively and kept their commander informed (1). It took good leadership to inspire tankers to conduct attacks against superior equipment. The aggressive reconnaissance before the German attack and MAJ Hunter's attack are fine examples of good leadership. CCA did not wait for German assaults but, instead, sent out units to find and kill Germans.

The U. S. Army still tries to build good leaders. Mission-type orders and giving initiative to junior leaders should continue to be emphasized. Commanders need to build confidence in their junior officers and NCO's even though the latter's mistakes while learning might embarrass senior officers.

Arracourt was a fine example of armor in defense. The leaders in the 37th Tank Battalion wasted little time bemoaning the technical deficiencies of their tanks. They made the most of their men and equipment and achieved a decisive tactical victory.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Captain Charles M. Baily, O94-36-8333, was commissioned in 1966 from USMA. Following the Airborne and Ranger Courses, he was assigned to 3d Battalion, 77th Armor at Ft. Carson. After that he served as a platoon leader with E Troop, 17th Cavalry, 173d Airborne Brigade in Vietnam. He then attended flight school and was subsequently assigned to 3d Armored Division Artillery in Hanau, Germany. In 1970 he returned to Vietnam and was a platoon leader and troop commander in the 3d Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry. In 1971 he returned to CONUS and is presently attending the Armor Officer Advanced Course.