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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: ATTACK ON FORTIFIED POSITIONS

SCOPE: To bring out the training which was undergone by a unit to attack a well known fortified area and to show how this unit successfully breeched the Siegfried Line.

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## ATTACK ON FORTIFIED POSITIONS

As long as there have been wars there have been fortified positions of some kind to crack. Principal areas to be considered are: Coast lines, river lines, mountains, and cities. All of these will be fortified. In addition, minor fortifications will be encountered in small towns, villages, and isolated groups of buildings.

In the past War our major consideration in Europe was the Siegfried Line or the West Wall. It was recommended by a board of officers at the engineer school, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, that all divisions destined for operation in Europe, be given special training in the assault of fortifications.

Although the West Wall was definitely a defensive obstacle, Germany was very emphatic in pointing out that these fortifications were fundamentally offensive in character. They could make it possible to concentrate a relatively great proportion of the field forces for action at any given point. The general principle on which the German fortifications were designed was that of organization of the terrain in great depth. This involved the extensive use of obstacles and the covering of the terrain by fire from emplacements. The Maginot line compared with the German West Wall was a system of field fortifications in which the obstacles were more formidable, and much of the fire was delivered from fortified works.

The West Wall covered Germany's western frontier from about the point where the Rhine River flows into Holland, to, and including the Swiss frontier. From front to rear the West Wall consisted in general of field fortifications, including trenches, barbed wire entanglements, machine gun emplacements, observation posts, and artillery emplacements.

Altogether, the depth of the West Wall was from eight to fifteen miles. More than 22,000 separate works existed in 1939. The length of the wall was about 350 miles. Since there were two zones in general, the average density of the fortified works was about one bunker or fort per 55 yards in each zone. The depth of the wall would make the average distance between works about 165 yards, this figure of course varying in accordance to the terrain.<sup>1</sup>

The German doctrine of highly fortified zones was to serve two purposes: It must protect some vital area or interest of the defender; it must serve as a base for military operations against the probable enemy. It permitted lateral movement of troops for counterattack. For strategic offense it should be placed close to the border of the country against which it was to serve as a basis for military operations. For strategic defense it must be far enough back so that the enemy attack would have to slow down before it reached the defenses. It must then serve as a basis for counterattack.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The Engineer School, Ft Belvoir, Virginia, A Report on the Attack of a Fortified Position, p. 24.

2. Ibid. p. 25.

The attack on fortified positions to most Infantrymen of the 3rd Battalion, 411th Infantry, meant suicide and death, especially in the Bobenthal area. In my opinion this operation is the toughest fighting a unit will encounter after the initial landing, which in most cases is a combination of the assault landing and attacking fortified positions.

For an operation against fortified positions a unit must have an unlimited amount of training in every phase, and with all their special weapons. Every man on the team must be trained to use the weapon or equipment carried by his nearby buddy who might fall. There must be extensive training and coordination with the Infantry, Engineers, Artillery, Tanks, and any other supporting unit.

After Third Army maneuvers in the latter part of 1943, the 103d Infantry Division moved to Camp Howze, Texas. Here, an assimilated fortified position was set up, conforming as nearly as possible with the Siegfried Line. All information available on the West Wall was used in the setting up of this "mocked up" area. Assimilated dragons teeth, booby traps, protective wire, and false fortifications were built in depth as well as in width to bring out as nearly as possible to the troops, just what they were later to attack in reality. The area was large enough for a battalion to attack with sufficient ground to maneuver. Each battalion was

allowed about four days in this area.

The initial training started back in the post theaters where troops saw War Department training films of attacks on fortified areas. Next in their individual training areas they started at the bottom and worked up. Each man was given several hours mechanical training with the flame thrower. He witnessed a demonstration with it, and then had a chance to fire the flame thrower himself. Demonstrations were put on with rocket launchers, showing the men how the projectile would pierce a steel plate. The men then had the opportunity to fire the rocket launcher, but with dummy rockets, as the supply of live rockets was limited. Units witnessed demonstration of pole and satchel charges, beehive charges, bangalore torpedoes, and wire breaching. Courses in booby trap and antipersonnel mines were set up.

This type of training went on for several days. The 411th Infantry set up a flame thrower school to better acquaint men with it. Each rifle company sent six men, two from each rifle platoon, for a period of three days. They learned everything about it from assembly and disassembly to its employment.

After several days of training with special weapons and equipment, companies were broken down into assault teams, usually one team per platoon. Field manuals and W D circulars were followed closely in the make-up and training of these teams which were made up as follows:

a. Wire cutting teams consisted of four men who were equipped with one five foot length of Bangalore torpedo each, and an M1 rifle each.

b. Demolition party of four men, two with pole charges, and two with satchel charges.

c. Flame thrower teams consisting of two men with a portable flame thrower each, and an assistant for each, who must stay with the number-one man at all times.

d. Two rocket launcher teams consisting of the gunner and assistant gunner for each team.

e. Next under the command of the platoon sergeant was the remainder of the riflemen, the automatic riflemen, and their assistants. This group was known as the support group, used to fire on pill boxes to keep them closed up and to support the advance of the assault groups of the platoon.<sup>1</sup>

Combined training by platoons was carried on for several days before training by company was started. They were to carry out their same missions, but here they had to coordinate and move along with units on their right and left. The weapons platoon was usually kept under company control. Platoons learned to hold up and support movements of other teams by fire and also to move in to the assault by support of others. After undergoing a sufficient amount of training by companies, everyone was ready for the big test, coordinated attack by an Infantry battalion and its supporting

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1. FM 31-50, Infantry Battalion. (1944)

artillery.

Booby traps, antipersonnel mines, and dynamite charges had been placed by engineers. The battalions moved to the division fortified training area. Here the battalion commander issued his order to the companies. Reconnaissance was made, and the company attack order was given, allowing platoon leaders time for a reconnaissance. Everything was set up as realistically as possible.

Artillery was in place to fire, 81 MM mortars were put in position, and heavy machine guns of the Heavy Weapons Company were placed in firing positions under battalion control. Men of the battalion were to jump off at H hour for the most realistic phase of their training. Never before had they attacked with artillery, mortar, and machine guns firing over their heads and landing to their immediate front to such a great extent. As a matter of fact, it was a bit too realistic at one unfortunate moment. A short mortar round fell amid one company in the attack position. A few of the men did know what it was like to have mortar fire on them.

The attack went on the way, units coordinated perfectly. Assault teams within platoons and companies had excellent coordination. Companies were well coordinated within the battalion. Artillery, machine gun, and mortar fire was lifted from one area and placed on another with perfect timing. The intensive training of the weeks before had proved successful. The division commander and representatives from corps were well pleased with the performance

of the unit. About a month after this hard, backbreaking training, approximately fifty per cent of the enlisted men and officers were sent out as overseas replacements. The majority of those remaining were killed, wounded, or captured before the division reached the Siegfried. Replacements for these men came from ASTP, Air Corps, and other units. There was little time for unit training before shipment to the European theater.

On December 15, 1944, the 3rd Battalion, 411th Infantry, entered Germany about five or six miles west of Wissembourg in Alsace. The regiment had been attacking continuously since the early part of November through the Vosges Mountains to Selestat, a few thousand yards from the Rhine. This push involved two river crossings which resulted in a large number of casualties. Upon reaching Selestat the division was relieved by the French and moved Northwest about twenty miles. Here the push for the Maginot and Siegfried started.

The Maginot was partially defended by the Germans, mostly small holding forces in trenches outside the old pill boxes and the main routes of approach. They defended it just enough to delay the battalion and cause it to deploy, however, they did inflict several casualties.

The regiment was back into the mountains again and receiving frontal fire shortly after crossing the border. The hill from which the fire was coming was taken about dark and everyone dug in



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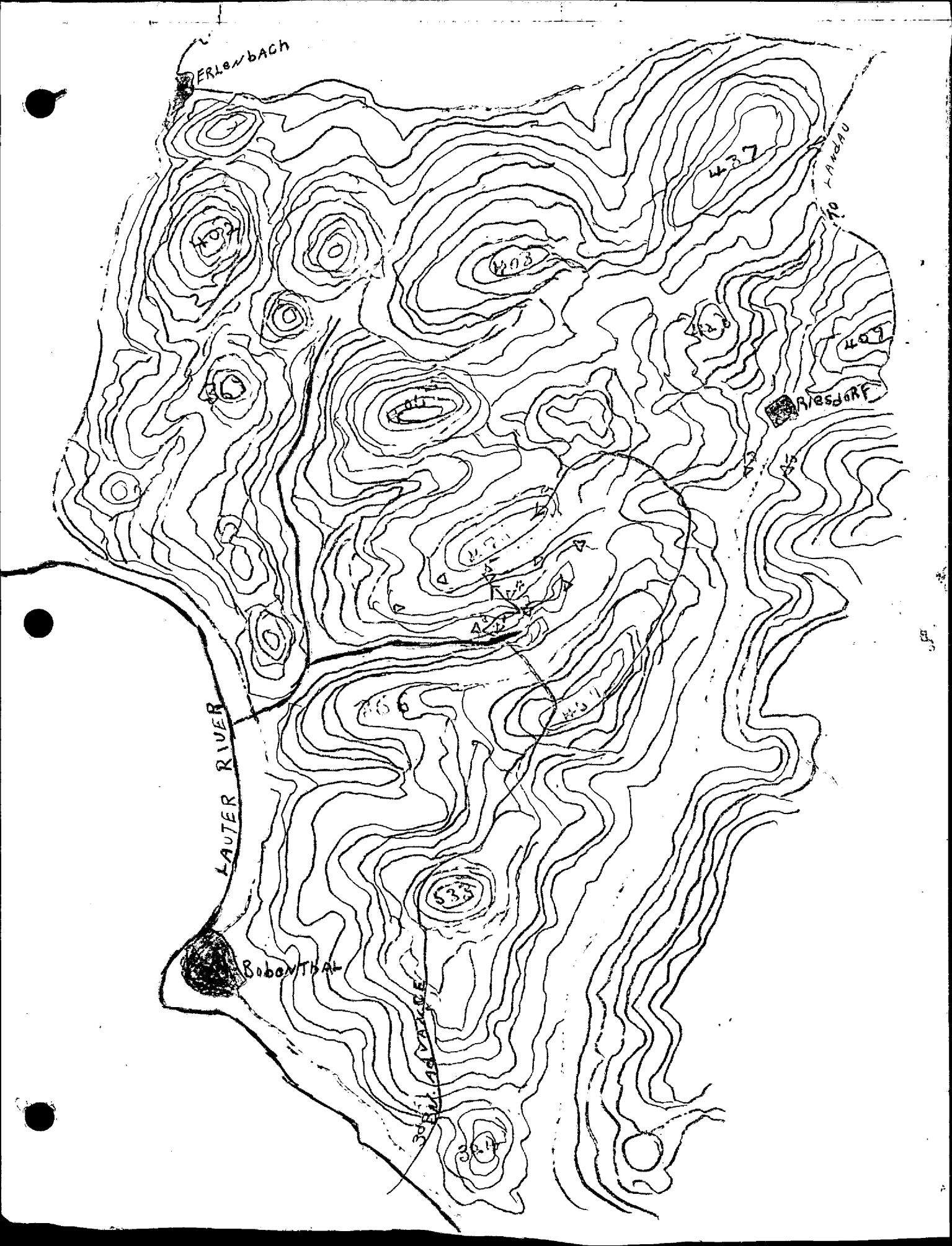
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to spend the night. The message came in that the battalion was the first in the Seventh Army to enter Germany. The word was quickly passed through the ranks and the men's morale jumped about one hundred percent.

The battalion was ordered to resume the attack on the morning of the 16th. It crossed the road south of the Bobenthal about thirty minutes after it pulled out and started the long hard climb up hill 533 and to the Siegfried, knowing nothing of what the Germans had in store.

The weather was rainy and cold. Troops had a tough time slugging it out with the steep slopes of the mountain and the cold rainy weather, to say nothing of the slugging that followed with the Jerries in the bunkers.

Troops knew that the pill boxes were near but they couldn't be seen. As the lead scouts of the battalion moved cautiously along the nose of hill 459, a sudden "burp" of machine gun fire from vicinity of hill 476 brought them to the ground. The battalion stopped, withdrew to better firing positions, and a patrol of one officer and six enlisted men were sent to each flank by the lead company. The battalion commander, his staff, or other officers in the battalion were observing from every vantage point in the sector. Both patrols were fired upon as soon as they reached the bottom of the hill and started up hill 476. The two lead companies dug in across the front. Heavy machine guns and mortars were set up.

Battalion and company O Ps were immediately dug and covered with logs and dirt. All commanders were continuously observing that afternoon, trying to pick out the enemy positions on the next hill. Bunkers were known to be there but no one knew exactly where or how many.

The 1st Battalion on the right was having it tough from positions in their sector along the Reisdorf road. Elements of the 45th Division on the left, on the NiederSchlettenbach road had hit the same. Everyone was stopped.

During the night patrols were sent out. They located three of the bunkers, and ran into antipersonnel mines before they could get close enough to determine very much about them. The next day a large combat patrol of one officer and about fifteen men was sent to hill 476 to locate any weak points possible, and to pin-point all enemy bunkers they possibly could.

The enemy let this patrol advance across the creek and about fifty yards beyond, then opened fire. Only six of these men got back. The officer, however, did get a chance to do a bit of observing and returned with his report. The bunkers had three apertures and were grown over with bushes and weeds. The area on the left was so thick with trees and thick undergrowth that it was impossible to get through. The hill couldn't be flanked from the left. Each bunker was surrounded with barbed wire, and zigzag communication trenches joined them. Enemy riflemen were placed in

communication trenches outside the bunkers. Due to the steep hill and the creek, it was impossible to get tanks in the enemy area. All approaches were booby trapped. The area to the right of the hill was impassible as there was a deep gully which was matted with trees and logs that the enemy had cut to fill in the gulley, making the possibility of by-passing on the right, and attacking from the rear impossible.

The enemy had cut the Reisdorf road and had it well defended. Tanks could not maneuver to either side so the 1st Battalion proceeded to try to take the bunkers on both sides of the road with supporting fire from the 76 MM tank weapons and artillery. They took three or four bunkers then were stopped. Elements of the 45th Division on the left were stopped also.

The remainder of the second day and night was spent preparing for the attack the following morning, issuing extra ammunition and waiting for the attached tank platoon to get up the hill from Bobenthal. It took all day to get the tanks up with the help of an engineer platoon. There were no roads to speak of, just one trail which was very limited to transportation. Prior to this, the only thing possible to get over the trail was the mule train to bring in rations and ammunition.

A few hits had been made with 105s and 155s, but no damage was done. From the reconnaissance that had been made, the attack had to be limited to a very narrow area and it had to be frontal.

The attack called for one company supported by the Heavy Weapons Company from positions on hill 459, tanks from hill 459, Division Artillery and Corps 240s to fire in the initial barrage which lasted about five minutes.

The attack jumped off as planned on the third morning. The artillery kept all bunkers closed except number one and two. These were silenced by the riflemen and the heavy machine guns of "M" Company. Booby traps and antipersonnel mines were set off by men who never lived to tell about it. The defensive wire was cut and number one bunker was taken. All of the outer defense personnel were killed and all of those inside except two men.

At this time snipers began firing on the company, also artillery and mortars which forced the troops into the communication trenches and bunkers. The bunkers offered excellent security against the intense artillery fire and were also good shelter for the company aid station. They were of solid concrete except for the four to eight inch steel doors, walls approximately eight feet thick, the two story type, one under ground and one above. There were accommodations for twelve to twenty men with bunks and enough rations and ammunition to hold out indefinitely. Each one was equipped with a telephone and a kerosene lamp.

As soon as the artillery and mortar fire ceased, the attack proceeded. The attack moved very slowly due to the enormous amount of antipersonnel mines, booby traps, fire from snipers who couldn't

be located, and the intensive mortar and artillery fire that came in every few minutes.

By nightfall the company had taken three bunkers but had suffered very heavy casualties. About forty men were left. Now the zone of attack was forced to be limited to the width of the communication trench.

There was still the thick impassible underbrush on the left. On the right was a solid mass of barbed wire and booby traps. The Germans must have worked weeks on this.

As soon as dark came, relief of this company was started. The relieving company had a platoon of heavy machine guns attached, for it was pretty certain of a counterattack that night. They also had extra automatic rifles which came from the company being released, and from the reserve company. The relief was slow and the battalion commander realized that the enemy knew a relief was taking place, so he ordered the relieving company to move on into position.

There has never been more confusion than that which occurred the next one and one half hours. The night was pitch black, the sprinkle had turned into a cold miserable rain, and passing men in the trench was almost impossible. Mortar fire was still coming in and tracers were flying everywhere ahead.

About the time the leading elements of the main body of the company got into position all hell broke loose from the

right front, left front, and the front. Luckily the one platoon and section of heavy machine guns were already in position. The Jerries came down the hill with marching fire and got close enough to throw hand grenades into the trench. The remainder of the company and the other section of machine guns opened up and the counterattack was finally stopped.

The platoon leader, all three squad leaders, and several men of the lead platoon were killed. By midnight things were fairly quiet with the exception of the digging of gun emplacements on the sides of the banks. Men also dug individual shelters into the banks to protect themselves from tree bursts. The company order was to shoot everything that moved outside the trench; therefore there was no trouble keeping the men in the trench. By this time the rain had ceased with the exception of a fine mist. However, one could hear a crack of the bush when something moved, this of course caused everyone to be jumpy and trigger happy.

About 0130 there came another counterattack from the same direction as the first. This time enemy on the left were firing through the thick brush. This fire was ineffective but had a definite morale factor. The attack was broken up in about thirty minutes with only six or eight casualties suffered.

At this time it was definitely necessary to relieve this leading platoon. The weapons platoon leader who went up to command the leading platoon and who had previously been commander of

it, was wounded and the men had just taken all they possibly could take.

With the exception of occasional rifle shots, bursts of machine gun fire, and a few mortars, things were pretty quiet until 0400, when the enemy tried another counterattack but failed.

The enemy snipers came with daybreak. Just about everyone who stuck his head above the trench got shot.

At 0900 the attack jumped off again supported by the platoon of heavies firing from their present positions, another platoon of heavies, 81 mortars and tanks from hill 459 and the artillery. After about one and one half hours of fighting, bunker number four was taken. It was discovered that the whole hill was very heavily defended. At this point, it was only a matter of the enemy rolling grenades down the hill on the company.

About 1100, word from the battalion came to evacuate all casualties as quickly as possible. The engineers were coming in to blow the captured bunkers. The battalion was to move to another sector to be prepared to withdraw in one hour.

This order of withdrawal was music to men of Company K for they knew that the worst was yet to come if they stayed there.

Three hundred pounds of demolition was placed on each bunker; the hill was thoroughly smoked and the withdrawal began. Each bunker was blown as the company withdrew out of danger. When the company returned to hill 459 there was one officer and approxi-



mately sixty enlisted men left. Everyone was glad to get out of the trench, but they knew that it would be hell to retake.

Elements of the 45th Division took over the 411th Regiment zone on a line, hill 356 - 459. The line was so thinly held that the Germans retook it a few days later. By this time the bulge was in full swing, and the 103rd Division was moved to the vicinity of Sarrbruken to take over positions occupied by the 6th Armored Division.

The division stayed in this vicinity in defense until 17th January when Heinrich Himmler, Nazi number-two man, had taken command of German troops opposite the Seventh Army and opened his drive around Haguenau.<sup>1</sup> At 0800 that day the 3rd Battalion loaded on trucks and was in this new sector in line by dark. They stayed here until the withdrawal of the elements of the Seventh Army which was a few days later.

Between the time of the Seventh Army withdrawal and March 15th the unit was in defense. Enough reinforcements came in to bring the unit up to approximately eighty percent strength. Men were in front line positions for two weeks and back in reserve one week. During the time in reserve extensive training was taking place, preparing for the new Siegfried assault.

On March 15 the battalion jumped off on another battle for

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1. Ralph Mueller and Jerry Turk, Report After Action, the Story of the 103d Infantry Division, p. 67

the German border. The battalion crossed the border March 18 just a few hundred yards from where it crossed in December.

As Bobenthal was approached, one could see in the faces of the old men of the battalion, the dread they had for what was to come, especially when hill 405 came into view. The new men were happy because they were on German soil.

By nightfall the battalion was occupying the same holes which were dug in December on hill 459. Instead of being the left flank battalion of the division, this time it was the right flank of the regiment. The 409th Regiment had one reenforced battalion with one company of tanks from 761 Tank Battalion and one platoon of the 614 T Ds attached. This small task force, all motorized, was called "Task Force Rhine" and was to break through just as soon as an opening occurred at Reisdorf and race for the Rhine.<sup>1</sup>

As soon as the 3rd Battalion arrived at hill 459 and took up their old positions, one officer and four men of the company that last attacked the positions, and who were volunteers, were sent on patrol to investigate hill 476. This patrol was gone approximately four hours and returned with information that the bunkers taken in December were unmanned, but that enemy was dug in on the crest of the hill. A member of the patrol tripped an enemy

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1. Ralph Mueller and Jerry Turk, Report After Action, the Story of the 103d Infantry Division, p. 96.

flare and they were discovered. The officer who joined the unit about two weeks previous was killed. The patrol also reported that the whole hillside from the first bunker, to almost the top of the hill was literally covered with trees felled by the enemy. This accounts for the length of time that it took the patrol.

The hill facing the 3rd Battalion was the highest in the sector and it was evident that it was the strongest defended. It was certain that it couldn't be attacked frontally this time. The plan was for tanks and mortars to fire on the hill from their present positions. One company was to fake an attack up the hill in the same direction as it had been attacked before and one company was to bypass through the deep gully on the right as soon as the 409th had taken bunkers number 13 and 15. This company was to swing around and take the hill from the rear.

Plans were thoroughly made and coordinated on the first day. At 0900 of the second day the supporting artillery and all attached tanks opened up. The 409th on the right, 2nd Battalion, 411th on the left, along the NiederSchlettenbach road, and the company of the 3rd Battalion with its fake attack was started.

After about thirty minutes of fighting bunkers number 13 and 15 were captured. The enveloping company of the 3rd Battalion then started its back-breaking job of getting through the gully which was matted with fallen trees and had a few antipersonnel mines. Only five or six casualties were suffered getting through.

The artillery and supporting fires from tanks continued to blast the hill to keep the Germans down until the attacking company called for the fires to be lifted. The Germans were completely surprised by the attack from the rear, and about 60 of them surrendered without putting up any further resistance.

The battalion was then ordered to proceed to Erlenbach, to capture it, and stop all enemy who might attempt to withdraw on the east-west road to the Siegfried positions in the rear, a few miles farther east.

There was very little resistance until they arrived at Erlenbach where 260 Germans were taken. A strong road block was set up at the crossroads. About this time resistance gave way at NiederSchlettenbach and at Reisdorf. "Task Force Rhine" broke through and destroyed hundreds of wagons, troop carriers, and artillery pieces on their way to Landau, about fifteen miles from the Rhine. They met elements of the 10th Armored Division at Landau. Here the division was held up until the crossing of the Rhine.

The rapid movement of "Task Force Rhine" and the cutting of the enemies road nets behind them did not allow them an opportunity to withdraw and man their rear Siegfried positions.

In conclusion, it is the author's opinion that personnel of all units who are expected to participate in the attack of a fortified area, must have thorough training in the technique of

such an attack. The terrain will seldom, if ever, be in the attacker's favor, and no two commanders will attack an area of this type in the same manner. The enemy must be made to keep his head down and button up with supporting fires while assaulting troops advance. There cannot be too much prior planning and reconnoitering. The enemies weak spot must be found, attack with force and aggression, and make every effort to reduce fortified localities by siege or by an attack from the rear.

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