

ADVANCED OFFICERS CLASS # 1

DATE 7 May 1948

MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: Hedgerow Fighting Near Carentan

SCOPE: A detailed study of one of the many methods of hedgerow operation, with particular attention paid to the teamwork necessary between the assault units - infantry and tanks.

A study is made of the assault squad and platoon, and the tank platoon working in conjunction with the infantry along the front-line secured hedgerow. A method of breaching the hedgerow is described, and control measures and communications are explained. The cooperative assault action of the riflemen and tanks, in their advance from one hedgerow to the next, is described. Sketches showing deployment of infantry and tanks and method of assault are included.

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Prepared by: Charles D. Folsom

Captain, Cavalry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A grateful acknowledgement is hereby given for the use of an unnumbered memorandum published by Headquarters, 30th Infantry Division, dated 2 July 1944, entitled Infantry-Tank Organization.

This memorandum has been of great assistance in portraying the sequence followed in infantry-tank operation in the hedgerow country of Normandy, and the training sketches have served as a basis for the sketches in this monograph.

My regiment, the 329th Infantry, landed in this hedgerow country after two long days aboard ship off Omaha Beach, and went into an assembly area in the vicinity of Bricqueville, several kilometers from the beach and not too far from the city of Carentan.

After several days in this assembly area, we marched through Carentan to relieve the elements of the 101st Airborne which were on an established line about five kilometers southwest of the city, and there we received our hedgerow baptism.

The 329th was first in division reserve, less one battalion in the city proper. It was in this reserve area that we received most of our training in hedgerow reduction, and we borrowed from the experience of the older units in the beachhead. Particular emphasis was placed upon infantry-tank teamwork, for our training with tank units to this time had been very limited. Demonstrations and instruction, under the sponsorship of division, were given to each unit. These units worked on a cycle arrangement with the available tanks, and squads and individual men were given the most thorough orientation possible in the tactics of hedgerow fighting. We were fortunate in having the assistance of experienced tank outfits such as units of the 2d Armored Division, which had worked with the 101st Airborne in their operations around Carentan and through the closed-in farmlands in the vicinity.

In June, 1944, the 83rd Division began its combat career with the relief of the 101st Airborne Division in the Carentan sector of the Normandy beachhead. Like many other divisions, including those with combat experience, we found ourselves confronted with a problem that we had never before encountered. The vigorous training which we had undergone in North Wales in the preceding months had not taken the hedgerows into consideration. Here, in Normandy, we saw nothing but hedgerows, a few swamps, small villages and more hedgerows.

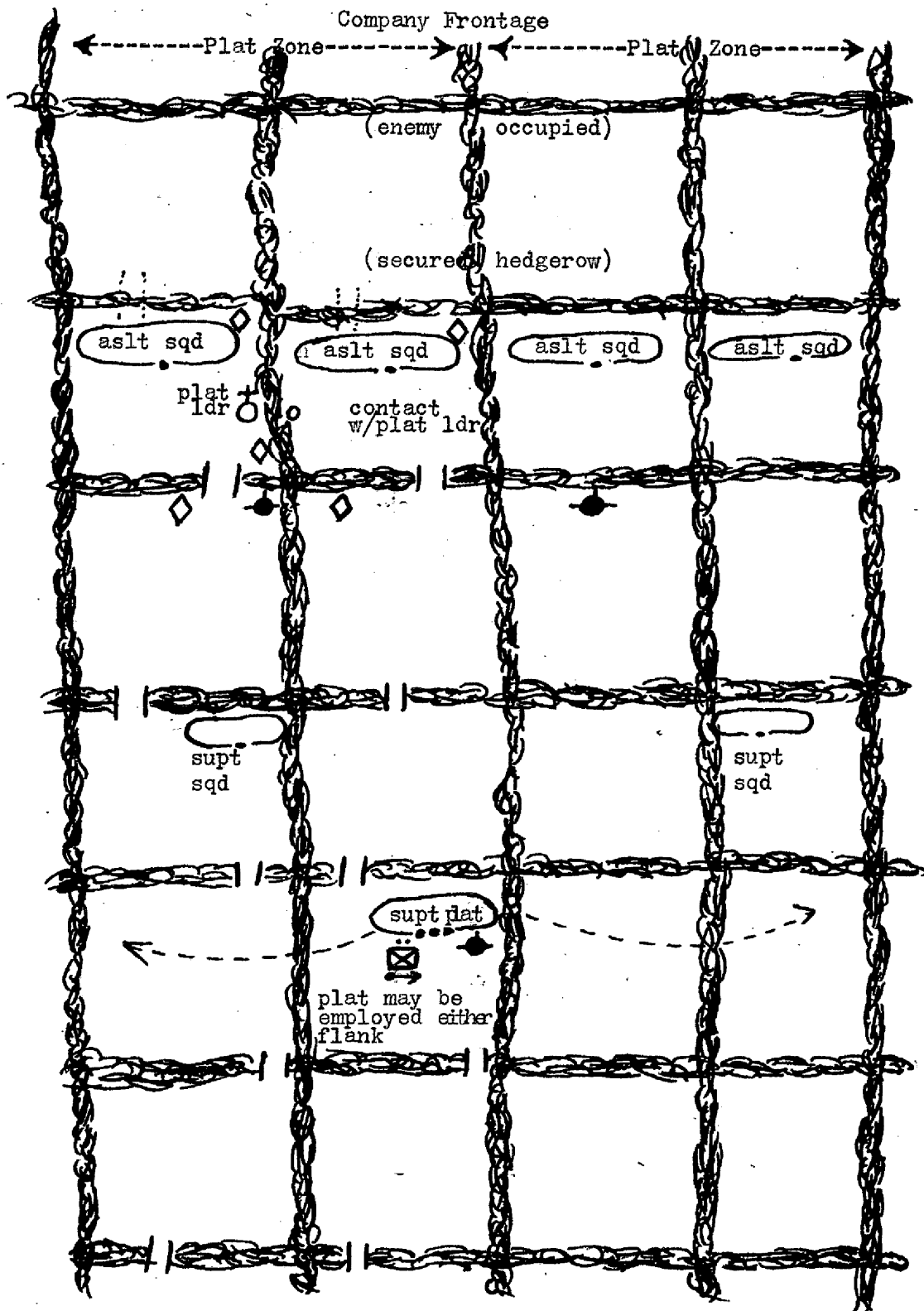
These hard earthen banks, with their matted headdress of stumpy trees and hedges, have been standing for centuries, as boundaries between tracts of land parceled out in the days of feudalism. As time went on, the land had been sub-divided in order to give each son a plot which he could call his own, until now the fields and orchards bordered by these hedgerows are so small that further sub-division would render most of them useless for any form of farming or grazing. These hedgerows are fifty to one hundred yards apart, on the average, and made very formidable barriers to our advance, for the earthen portions range from three to eight feet in height and anywhere from three to ten feet in thickness at the base. From the tops of these banks grow the trees and hedges, thickened by the indiscriminate pruning carried on by the Norman farmers, who use the faggots as a principal source of fire kindling wood.

The problem of advancing through the hedgerows was solved on the ground, so to speak, and here I intend to present one method used by an infantry regiment in successfully reducing a difficult obstacle, with emphasis on assault teamwork.

The general plan for operation, finally adopted by practice and from the experience of older units, was comparatively simple. It was, however, a plan requiring a high degree of coordination, which will become apparent upon inspection.

Normally, a rifle company, in usual attack formation, was responsible for a zone four fields in width. (See sketch 1.) This, of course, varied in some instances where a field was triangular in shape or where the fields together were too wide for company employment. This latter instance, in our area, was very rare. The assault platoons were assigned two fields each, and the formation further broken down by the assignment of one field to each assault squad. The support squad in each platoon followed the assault echelon near the center of the zone and two or three hedgerows to the rear.

For the purpose of clarity, I shall confine the majority of this writing to assault squad and platoon employment with tanks, and only minor reference shall be given to artillery and organic weapons support. The tactics of the company and higher units were based upon these smaller key units, and a larger perspective can be had by visualizing more zones to be cleared.

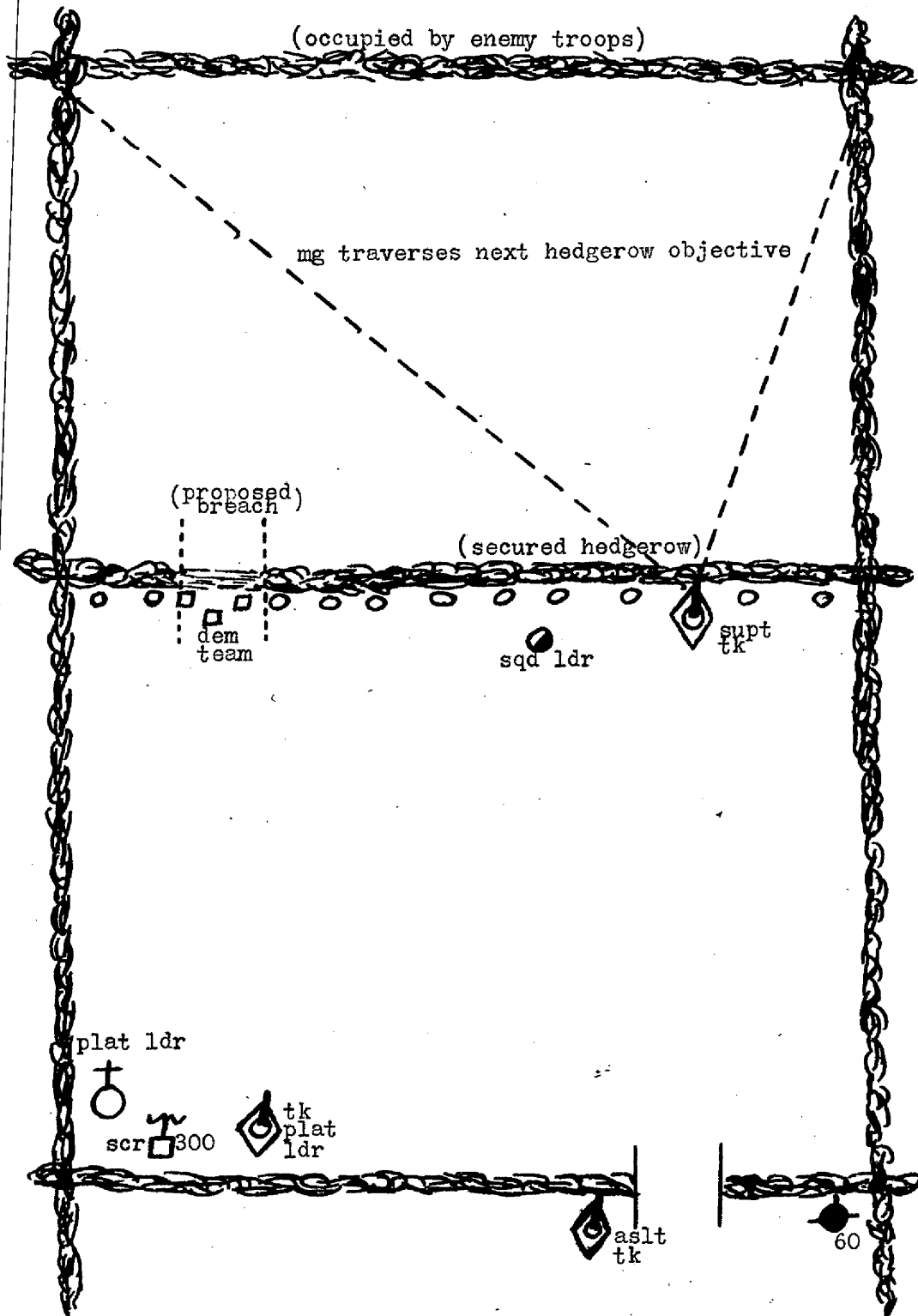


Sketch 1

In assaulting the hedgerows known to be held by the enemy, the squads were kept well deployed and advanced by fire and maneuver, marching fire, or a combination of both. The unit occasionally had to use the hedgerows paralleling the direction of attack as a route of advance, but mines and accurate mortar fire made this method quite unpopular.

The supporting tanks, from positions immediately in rear of the secured hedgerow, sprayed the next objective with machine gun fire, and the tank cannon was brought to bear on definitely located weapons positions. (See sketch 2.) Particular attention was paid to the corner junctions as a likely place for automatic weapons, and a round was put into these corners as a precautionary measure if the locations were not definite.

The heavy and light machine guns, when used, were fired in conjunction with the co-axial on the tank. These guns were fired without mounts; simply placed across the top of the earth embankment and traversed freely. After firing approximately half a belt, it was conducive to good health to move from that position for the bursts could be picked up too easily by an alert observer and mortar fire brought down right in the gunner's lap. Our own mortar and artillery observers were kept busy directing fire on known enemy positions. The use of smoke was most effective in these close operations, with an added ratio of WP for casualty effect.



Sketch 2



While the leading echelon was accomplishing this mission of preparatory fire, a team composed of two or three infantrymen, or engineers, was preparing a spot along the secured line for breaching. This breaching job was necessary if we were to have tank support on the next objective, for it afforded an exit for the tank and enabled it to assume rapidly its support role across the next field. The breaching was accomplished by digging two holes, about six feet apart, into the earthen bank. When the estimated center of the bank was reached, a charge was placed in each hole. These charges consisted of 20 to 25 pounds of TNT blocks placed in a sand bag or strapped together in a manner similar to an engineer satchel charge. Each charge had four or five feet of prima cord attached and had a single block of TNT and a non-electric cap for a primer. As soon as the charges were in place and the prima cord extending from the holes, the loose earth was tamped back over the charges and the two lengths of cord joined. The prima cord was ignited and a gap blown. When the dust had cleared away, there existed a clear path, at ground level, approximately ten feet wide and capable of accommodating the tanks.

Tanks equipped with dozer blades and rhinos were also used; however, the general employment of the tanks with the infantry, which I shall cover in detail, limited the number of hedgerows that could be breached by these specially equipped tanks.

To this point, I have shown the mechanics of the assault echelons along the secured hedgerow, in preparation for their attack of the next. Here, briefly, are some of the necessary control measures that leaders must exercise in this type of combat.

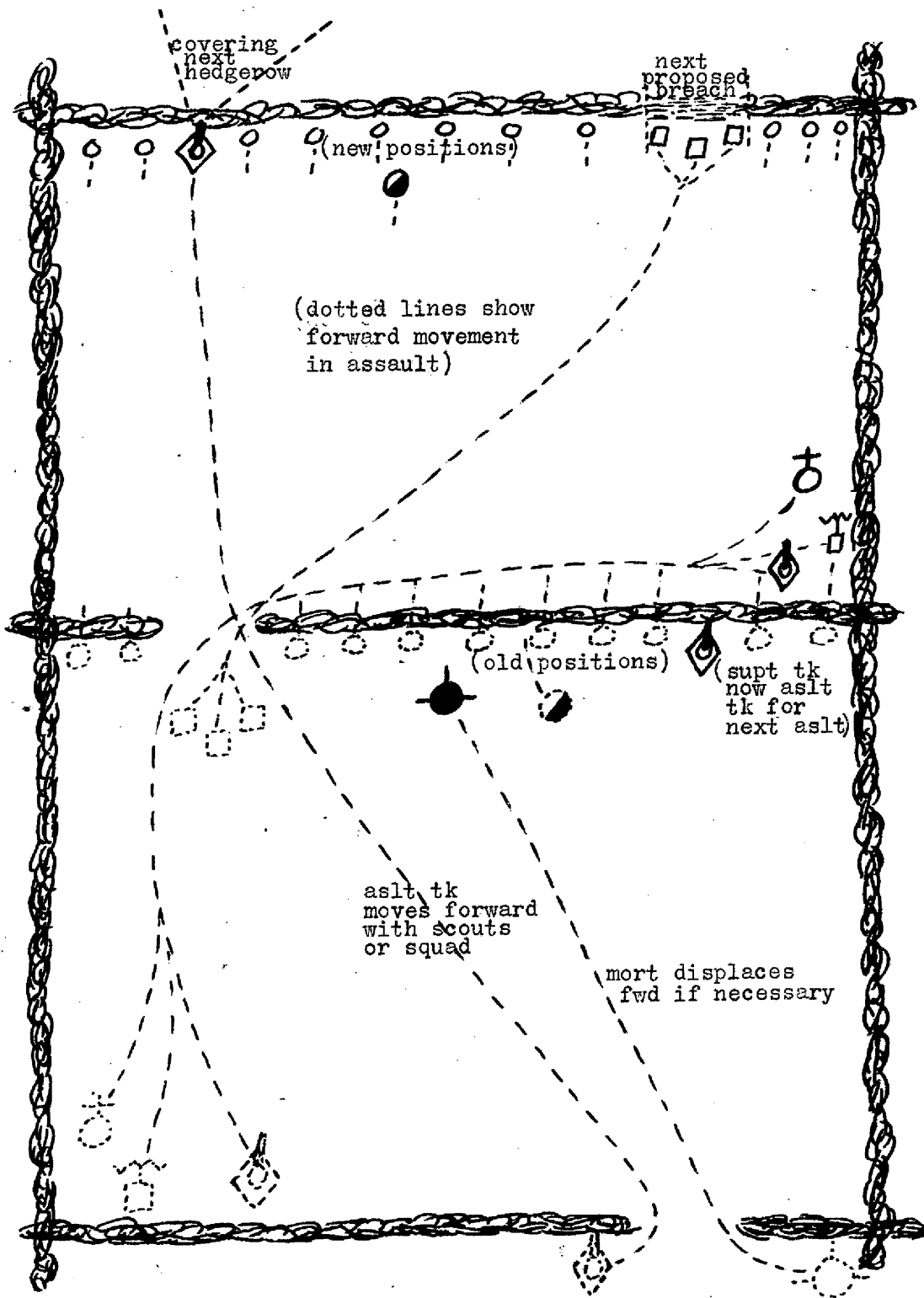
In hedgerow operation, when infantry and tanks worked as a team, the basis for employment was a tank platoon with an infantry platoon, even though the tank platoon may have been attached or in support of the company as a whole. It was found better, for control purposes, to have the tanks operating in a platoon zone rather than spreading them across numerous hedgerows and out of visual contact. If the platoon operating without tank support was held up by enemy resistance, the supported platoon was held up on company order. The tanks could then be dispatched to the flank to help neutralize the resistance and enable the unsupported platoon to resume its advance. The company commander in this manner could maintain a constant pressure in his zone of attack and at the same time assure himself of not having any gaps in his formation resulting in an exposed flank or rear.

Unit control was made easier by the lettering of each field and the numbering of each hedgerow surrounding the field. This proved invaluable, for the commander, through brief reports, could know the exact location of each and all his elements.

Control was further facilitated by the use of hedgerows, which ran perpendicular to the direction of attack, as phase lines, or lines on which the platoons were halted to await orders to continue the advance.

The tank platoon leader usually furnished an SCR 300 radio to the platoon with which he was working, further enhancing the coordination of effort at the platoon level. When the tank platoon was ordered away from this platoon, the radio was taken along to be supplied to the next unit. In this manner, the tanks and infantry could be assured of good communication with the minimum amount of trouble. The use of these control measures will be brought out again in the progress of the attack.

After the detonation of the two charges, the lead tank proceeded through the breach and advanced with the infantry scouts, covering them by firing into the next hedgerow. (See sketch 3.) The scouts searched the paralleling hedgerows as they moved forward, being particularly watchful for any exposed mines or trip-wires. The advance of the tank and scouts was covered at this time by the tanks and troops still in position along the secured line. When the entire squad or platoon advanced simultaneously, without the scouts out, they covered their own advance by a steady volume of fire from all available weapons. This marching fire, employed by a reinforced rifle platoon, can be very discouraging to any enemy.



Sketch 3

Upon arrival at the next position, the scouts methodically searched the hedge for mines and gun positions, and signalled the remainder of the unit forward. The infantry then moved across the field as skirmishers, keeping the maximum interval between men. The supporting tank remained in position, awaiting the breaching of the next line, when it could then pull out in conjunction with the scouts as they continued their advance. The tank platoon leader moved from his position in the rear of the field to the same relative position in the next field forward, and the advance continued.

The infantry platoon leader was able to maneuver his platoon in two separate fields by positioning himself near the center hedgerow in one field and maintaining visual and voice contact with an observer in the other. Contact with the tank platoon leader, as mentioned before, was accomplished through the SCR 300 or through a EE8A field telephone, attached to the rear of the tank and connected to the tank interphone system. It was extremely important that the infantry platoon leader keep the tank platoon leader informed at all times of the action as it developed and the position of his lead troops, for without this information the tanks could not effectively support the operation. There were cases when the infantry platoon leader became so engrossed in his own unit that he failed to notify the tanks, and unnecessary casualties resulted in some instances.

The position of the support squad, when following the assault echelon, enabled the platoon leader to commit it in any part of his zone in the least practicable time. In some cases, the support squad was used to reinforce the fire of the maneuvering elements from positions on the forward hedgerow.

The support platoon, in the company formation, was employed against local counter-attacks, as an additional flank security force, or as a maneuvering element to either flank. This was the principal tool which the company commander could use to influence the action in his zone of attack. In a similar role, the reserve company of the battalion could be employed if the company support platoon was insufficient to cope with the situation or if a success was available for exploitation.

I have presented a picture of infantry and tanks working together in terrain most difficult to either the infantryman or the tanker. By cooperative action, closely coordinated, this infantry-tank team accomplished its mission against stubborn and cunning resistance. I do not mean to imply that the advance through the hedgerows of Normandy was by any means spectacular. There were days when the regiment was lucky to gain two hedgerows. During one operation, the 3rd Battalion attacked for three days to capture an orchard which was held by a die-hard unit of the 17th SS Panzer Division. The fighting in these hedgerows was all for limited objectives.

The records indicate, however, that once the advance was begun from the static positions on the perimeter of the beach-head, it was pushed vigorously and relentlessly until the breakthrough on the 25th of July. A more thorough inspection of the records will further indicate that the steady gains, the slow but sure decimation of such battle experienced units as the 17th SS Panzer Division, were due to one paramount factor. That one factor was cooperation; cooperation in all arms, but more specifically the splendid teamwork displayed by the doughboy and the tanker, winning a slugging match against a very determined and capable enemy.

We may never have to fight on such terrain again; yet, no terrain could be considered ideal from the viewpoint of the attack, and no wars have ever been concluded decisively without attacking. The lessons learned, in that hard push through the hedgerows of Normandy, are one foundation stone in building an even greater team to do the pick and shovel work in any future operation.

I have shown this method of hedgerow reduction in order to make evident the harmony of effort required by the assault units. Infantry and tanks will always fight the tangible war. To carry out their assigned missions, each must always have confidence in the capabilities of the other; each must realize the limitations of the other, and both their middle names must be Teamwork.