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COMBAT COMMAND R, 5th ARMORED DIVISION

OPERATIONS IN THE HURTGEN FOREST

BY

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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

**TITLE:** Combat Command R, 5th Armored Division  
Operations in the Hurtgen Forest

**SCOPE:** To display the role of armor in woods operations  
by an historical combat operation.

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## AN HISTORICAL EXAMPLE OF ARMORED EMPLOYMENT IN WOODS

Operations in the Hurtgen Forest will be long remembered in the minds of many American soldiers who so gallantly fought in this, the most bitter forest battle of World War II. It has been stated by the Germans that this was the most terrible and ferocious battle in the history of all wars.<sup>1</sup>

The history of this battle compiled from observers, documents, and after action reports cannot possibly do justice to the undaunted determination, outstanding courage, and grim tenacity of those men of the fighting divisions who played so vital a role. It is the intent of this article to display a portion of that role, the employment of armor in woods, an historical example of Combat Command R, 5th Armored Division.

The employment of armor in woods poses many problems and difficulties. At first sight, it would appear that armor could not be employed, and if used, committed in a piecemeal and fragmentary manner until the tactical integrity of tank units ceased. Though the primary characteristics of armor in woods is not attained, considerable support can be furnished to further the advancing forward elements.

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1. Time Magazine, December 11, 1944

## Roer River Dams

The forest area covering approximately fifty square miles within the towns of Aachen-Duren-Monshau is the Hurtgen Forest. Closely packed fir trees ranging to the heights of 75 to 100 feet are found on the hilly slopes. The roads are few, soft, narrow, and steep. This constituted the battle field. This was to be the gateway to the all important Roer River dams. The capture of these dams was of imminent importance to future operations. To have crossed the Roer River without the dams in our possession would have invited a major defeat. One of two things had to be done; first, to capture the dams so that a crossing could be made, or secondly, to destroy the dams by bombing or forcing the Germans to blow the dams prematurely. British Royal Air Force bombing had little or no effect on the dams. The only problematical method of accomplishing the mission was to attack and seize the dams. The 28th Infantry Division, part of the United States V Corps, was assigned this task. After capturing the village of Schmidt, repeated German counterattacks and effective artillery and mortar fire turned back this division badly mauled. The 8th Infantry Division, then relieved the 28th Infantry Division, in this, the Hurtgen-Vossenaek area.

## Pre-planning the Hurtgen Attack

The period 11 to 24 November 1944, CCR, 5th Armored Division, organized plans to assist V Corps in clearing the Hurtgen Forest area. This combat command was then attached to the 8th Infantry Division on 19 November, for this coordinated task.

The components of the CCR organization were:

- Headquarters Reserve Command, 5th Armored Division
- Detachment A, Hq. and Hq. Company, 3d Armored Group
- 10th Tank Battalion
- 47th Armored Infantry Battalion
- 95th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
- C Troop, 85th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mech)
- C Company, 22d Armored Engineer Battalion
- C Company, 628th Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP)
- C Company, 387th Antiaircraft (AW) Battalion (SP)
- C Company, 75th Medical Battalion (Arm'd)
- Det., C Company, 127th Ordnance Maintenance Battalion

The tank and infantry elements of CCR, "married" prior to D-Day, in England. This formation was consistent throughout the European campaigns for CCR, except when special missions required a tank heavy force or an infantry heavy force. The 10th Tank Battalion, known as Task Force Hamberg, was commanded by Lt. Col. William A. Hamberg. This force contained the married A Companies, C Companies, and the light tank D Company, as the major components. Lt. Col. Howard E. Boyer, commander of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion, was called Task Force Boyer, which consisted of the married B Companies, C Company of the 628th Tank Destroyer Battalion less 1 platoon, and the Armored Platoon of C Company, 22d Armored Engineer Battalion.

The plan of attack prescribed that the woods southwest of the village of Hurtgen was to be cleared by the 121st Infantry Regiment of the 8th Infantry Division. The edge of these woods was designated as the line of departure for CCR. Task Force Boyer was to lead the attack, to seize and hold Hurtgen until relieved by the 13th Infantry Regiment. Task Force Hamberg prepared to pass through Boyer at Hurtgen, to attack and hold Kleinbau and the high ground northeast of Kleinbau, Hill 401. The movement was to be made 23 November to Rotgen, the selected assembly area. Task Force Boyer was to move the same night from Rotgen to the attack position west of the line of departure, dismount the infantry and meet the tanks of B Company at 0730, time of the attack. C Company, 22d Engineers had the mission of marking the route of march from the assembly area to the attack position to facilitate the night movement. In addition, they would be prepared to support the attacks of both task forces by locating and removing mines. Road guides for the night movement was to be furnished by C Troop, 85th Reconnaissance. The 95th Field Artillery was in direct support of CCR.

The attack of CCR was postponed. Elements of the 8th Infantry Division had difficulty mopping up the wooded area that was to be seized prior to the armored attack.

## The Hurtgen Attack

During the night 24-25 November, the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion married formation, moved from the assembly area at Rotgen on order of the Commanding General, 8th Infantry Division, to the attack positions. The impenetrable woods and narrow roads canalized the lead tanks of B Company down the main axis of approach, the Germeter-Hurtgen road. The lead tank came upon a large unpassable crater in the road. This crater had been previously reported as bridged, with treadway bridge, by the 8th Infantry Division. There being no other passage of this obstacle, engineers of CCR began spanning construction of the crater which was completed at 1000 hours, two and one half hours after the ordered time of attack. The lead tank starting to push forward struck a mine, the tank was then demolished by anti-tank fire, again blocking the road. While B Company tanks were attempting to progress, the infantry of B Company moved forward to the line of departure under the continual smoke screen place on the southern part of Hurtgen. The area to the line of departure had not been cleared as reported. This company was soon to experience the bloodiest set-back it had encountered to this time. Owing to a relatively stable situation for several weeks prior to this attack, the enemy had had ample opportunity to prepare his defenses. A large number of SCHU mines in the forested area and HOLTZ mines along the roads and in the open fields had been prepared.



Artillery preparation, fire trenches, and gun emplacements were among the defensive measures assumed by the Germans. Tree bursts from artillery and mortar fire, and numerous anti-personnel mines reduced the combat efficiency of B Company well over fifty percent. The tanks unable to move because of the blocked road, mine fields, and direct anti-tank fire, compelled the Commander of CCR to withdraw the tank elements until passage could be accomplished. The infantry of the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion was immediately regrouped for a concerted attack, with tank support, to seize the initial objective, Hurtgen. This attack jumped off at 1430 hours with little progress attained. The superior firepower of the enemy and his defensive organization had proved too strong; the element of surprise was lost.

The first defeat for CCR was acknowledged. It's proud and cocky infantry was to reassemble in Rotgen to rest, reorganize, regroup, and to lick their wounds.

The reason for the failure of CCR to take Hurtgen was the premature employment of the command. The line of departure had not been cleared to the edge of the woods to permit the passage of the infantry, as reported. The only possible avenue of approach for tanks had not been cleared, nor the crater bridged, as reported. This necessitated the forward elements of CCR to battle for the line of departure under the most disadvantageous conditions. It must be borne in mind that the surprise element, so necessary, was lost.

### The Kleinhau Attack

From 26 to 28 November, CCR, now regrouped as before, prepared plans for operations against Kleinhau. The CCR engineers in conjunction with divisional engineers of the 8th Infantry Division, filled the crater, cleared the road and mine field. The 121st Infantry Regiment had succeeded in taking Hurtgen.

The original plan of Task Force Hamberg, 10th Tank Battalion, to seize and hold Kleinhau was put into effect at 0806, 29 November. The 47th Armored Infantry Battalion was in CCR reserve. It was planned that the 1st Battalion of the 13th Infantry Regiment would relieve Hamberg at Kleinhau upon its consolidation. The married C Companies led the attack, following an artillery preparation, with the 3d platoon forming a base of fire; the 2d platoon marching on the objective; and the 1st platoon attempting to flank the village from the west by moving cross country. The B & C platoon soon became bogged down on terrain that had been cultivated with in the previous growing season and due to continual and heavy rainfall, was too soft to insure good support for tank maneuver. Infantry on foot, accompanying the tanks, had difficulty keeping abreast because of the accurate well observed artillery fire the Germans were laying down on the attacking echelons. After one hour's fighting, the 2d platoon reported taking the objective, but without their married partner, the platoon of infantry.

This endangered the tanks to some extent as enemy bazooka men were still to be flushed out of the buildings. Shortly after, the C Company infantry and the remaining tanks were in the village consolidating their positions and mopping up. Direct fire was being received from Grosshau, and it had been reported that two panzer regiments were moving south towards Grosshau. Artillery was requested which temporarily halted the enemy fire allowing the infantry to operate more efficiently in their mopping up operations. White phosphorous and fragmentation grenades were used to flush the enemy from his concealed positions.

Task Force Hamberg occupied defensive positions to the north and to the east of Kleinhau. The anticipated armor threat from the north required mine laying and the attachment of C Company, 628th Tank Destroyer Battalion. As planned, the 13th Infantry Regiment relieved most of the 10th Tank Battalion on the night 29-30 November.

Rallying positions for the task force had been selected earlier in the day in the woods west of Kleinhau by the CCR Commander, Colonel Glen H. Anderson. This plan was refused by V Corps orders, forcing the 10th Tank Battalion to rally in the open fields west of Kleinhau, there to spend the entire day of 30 November in this position under intense enemy mortar and artillery fire and direct fire weapons.

It is interesting to note at this phase of the attack the attitude of the German defense. Elements of two infantry divisions were holding the line with the normal attachments of engineers, grenadiers, anti-tank battalions, artillery and mortar batteries. Prisoners of war reported that these elements were about one third normal strength. It was assumed that not more than one regiment faced CCR during this assault. The enemy was exceedingly stubborn and reluctant to relinquish any ground as evidenced by a captured field order for the defense of Kleinbau, which read, "hold Kleinbau at all cost." The lack of aggressiveness, contrary to his usual custom, was apparent because of the failure to counterattack after forcing to give ground so bitterly defended. The German self-propelled guns were used purely in a defense role and not as a counterattacking instrument.

This most adequate defense, manned by a limited number of personnel, can be attributed to the clever use of obstacles, in which sufficient preparatory time had been made available, and also to the most effective mortar and artillery support.

#### The Brandenburg Attack

Two more objectives, two more villages, were to be the next objectives for the task force of Lt. Col. Hamberg. Brandenburg and Bergstein were situated on a narrow ridge flanked on either side by woods.

The dominating terrain to the east and north of Bergstein were to remain in control of the enemy after the armor's final objective had been taken. The 10th Tank Battalion would again lead the attack down the only possible avenue of approach, the Kleinhau-Brandenberg road. The 47th Armored Infantry Battalion, would remain in CCR reserve in their assembly position at Germeter prepared to assist in the seizure of Brandenburg or to assist in the defense of that village. CCR received the 56th Field Artillery Battalion and a battalion of 155mm guns to reinforce the direct support fires of the 95th Field Artillery Battalion. D Company, 10th Tank Battalion was to protect the flanks of Task Force Hamberg. The 22d Engineers mission was to sweep the road for mine fields.

Progress was slow during the morning; anti-tank fire from Brandenburg and Kommerscheid dispersed the lead elements forcing the tanks to deploy. Mine fields were encountered in the open fields on either side between the road and the woods. These mine fields were covered by machine gun and other small arms fire that prevented the removal of the mines. A break in the weather permitted the forward air controller to contact and direct two flights of P47's to strafe and bomb the adjacent woods and Brandenburg.

The situation became inactive. A Company, who had lost 4 tanks to mines and anti-tank fire, reorganized, turning their gains over to D Company, which had also lost 4 tanks.

It was then decided by Colonel Anderson to hold the gains and clear a path through the mine field during the night and continue the attack on Brandenburg the following morning. D Company held the forward positions during the night 2-3 December while C Company, 22d Engineers, breached the mine field removing 250 wooden boxed mines.

The married C Companies attacking at 0800 the following day, with the support of fighter aircraft, were on the objective 3 hours later.

#### The Vossenack Attack

The Vossenack area, in the zone of the 28th Infantry Regiment, had not been taken; at 1200, 3 December, the 47th Armored Infantry Battalion was attached. This area was heavily mined, with the major resistance consisting of a fire trench, located in a rubble pile east of Vossenack. It was planned to smoke the west and north portion of the village with assault guns and mortars of the battalion to conceal the movement while the lead tank, a newly attached "flail tank", using a swinging chain principle to detonate mines, opened a gap in the mine field. It eventually hit a mine and was disabled. Three attacks were launched; one, in the afternoon which had made little progress; the second, an unsuccessful night attack; and the third, on the following morning that was successful.

The failure to seize the objective initially was due to the piecemeal employment of the understrength tank-infantry companies. A thought to be well remembered is that in the attack of an objective, a sufficiently large force should be employed. If this doctrine is adhered to, an objective can be taken with maximum fire support and speed, with a minimum loss of personnel and equipment.

Plans were then made to attack south and east from Vossenack to mop up resistance with the remaining 4 tanks left in B Company. The infantry of B Company, 47th Armored Infantry Battalion was to accompany two tanks; the infantry of C Company, 28th Infantry Regiment riding the other two tanks. This attack never materialized as the company from the 28th Infantry Regiment could not be rallied and organized to ride the tanks in the attack. At 1600, the same day, Task Force Boyer was relieved from attachment to the 28th Infantry Regiment and reverted to CCR control. Boyer was then alerted to move to Brandenburg and attack, on order, with Hamberg against Bergstein.

#### The Bergstein Attack

The Bergstein plan was to be accomplished with Task Force Hamberg leading, securing the north, northeast parts of the village; Task Force Boyer to follow Hamberg into Bergstein, seize and hold the south and southwest parts of the village.

D Company and one platoon of the 85th Reconnaissance Squadron were ordered to protect the rear, Brandenburg, and to keep the main supply route open. Priority in Bergstein, after the mopping up phase was completed, was the establishment of road blocks and anti-tank defenses. The CCR engineers would be prepared to assist the advance of both task forces and to prepare Bergstein for defense by constructing field fortifications, laying mine fields and obstacles, and if need be, to occupy a defensive position.

Air support was intended to implement the attack, but bad weather halted the attack until 1400 hours, 5 December, when air support became available. Excellent results were obtained through air strikes. The forward air controller requested the planes to "stick around" after their ammunition had been expended. This materially aided in decreasing enemy artillery fire allowing the advancing infantry to maintain the momentum with the lead tanks. The pilots of the covering aircraft were eager to remain over the target area when they were informed of the results.

The impetus of the advancing tanks and infantry through swift, aggressive action brought CCR on the objective in 30 minutes. Mopping up operations had begun and by 1720, Bergstein was in CCR's possession. In taking the town, the assault gun platoon of the 10th Tank Battalion, employed well forward to offer direct fire support, encountered a heavily mined area and lost 4 of their tanks.



The heavy weapons element of Task Force Boyer, Headquarters Company, 47th Armored Infantry Battalion, suffered numerous casualties attempting to reach Bergstein as heavy artillery concentrations were interdicting the Brandenburg-Bergstein road, forcing these elements into secondary positions in the vicinity of Brandenburg. That evening, two platoons of the 85th Reconnaissance Squadron and the machine gun platoon of Task Force Boyer were sent forward to Bergstein to reinforce the defensive positions as infantrymen. C Company, 22d Engineers, was placed in Brandenburg to assume defensive positions in preparation for an enemy attack of that town.

Considerable difficulty with artillery communications was presented in Bergstein. Two forward observers of the 95th Field Artillery had lost their tanks and one observer had been killed. Immediate requests were made of the 8th Infantry Division for forward observers and communication facilities. They reported the following day.

The left and right flanks were extremely vulnerable at this time. The left flank had a considerable sized gap due to slow progress of infantry through the infested woods. This gap was to be covered by an artillery concentration during the first night's occupation. The right flank was bolstered by an additional infantry company and two platoons of tank destroyers from the 8th Infantry Division. However, a large gap was still existent.

The night 5-6 December, was used to better improve the defensive positions, to bring supplies forward, and to evacuate the dead and wounded. The transportation of supplies and evacuation was accomplished by the use of half tracks and light tanks.

The Germans began their counterattacks against CCR positions at 0700, 6 December. Approximately 6 companies of infantry and 10 tanks attacked the positions of the married B Companies, forcing B Company to relinquish 7 houses to the enemy. By 0900, the first attack had been repulsed and B Company reoccupied their original positions. The second attack at 1400 hours, was a piecemeal effort which was eventually driven off. A third enemy attack was attempted with their remaining infantry and tank support, but as in the other attacks, CCR stood firm.

The 2d Ranger Battalion, attached to the 8th Infantry Division, was ordered to pass through CCR and seize the high ground east of Bergstein, known as Berg Hill. This battalion moved forward early morning on 7 December, and reported "mission accomplished" at 0905.

CCR was then relieved of its positions on the night 8-9 December, to return to Walhorn, Belgium for reorganization. When relieved, CCR's fighting components had 70 infantrymen of the original 750, 8 tanks remaining of 58, and 1 tank destroyer left. The green of the Hurtgen Forest was now tainted red, the red blood of gallant men.

### Conclusions

In none of the attacks in the Hurtgen Forest was CCR able to properly employ its tanks to the fullest advantage. This was chiefly due to the limited amount of open terrain, impassable wooded area, and the avenues which were strewn with mine fields. It must be anticipated when troops are employed against well dug in positions on terrain which limits maneuverability that excessive casualties in personnel and equipment will occur.

From the experiences developed from this bitterly contested battle, definite conclusions may be drawn. The writer believes that, in this operation calling for the employment of armor to assist the infantry units, gaps must be made in the enemy line to permit a rapid thrust of massed tanks, through the outer defenses. This had not been done. The line of departure and the road leading to the attack positions had been reported cleared by the infantry elements. The failure to clear this area resulted in extreme casualties of infantry personnel attempting to advance to the line of departure, and it did not permit the armored support to advance, because of these unforeseen obstacles. The complete lack of surprise and inability to advance rapidly and seize the initiative resulted from this error.

Tanks cannot be effectively employed without a gap or clearance through which to penetrate. This was proven by the lead tank striking a mine field 50 feet from the line of departure.

Armored units must have adequate protection when rallying or reorganizing once an objective has been taken, as they are most vulnerable during this phase.

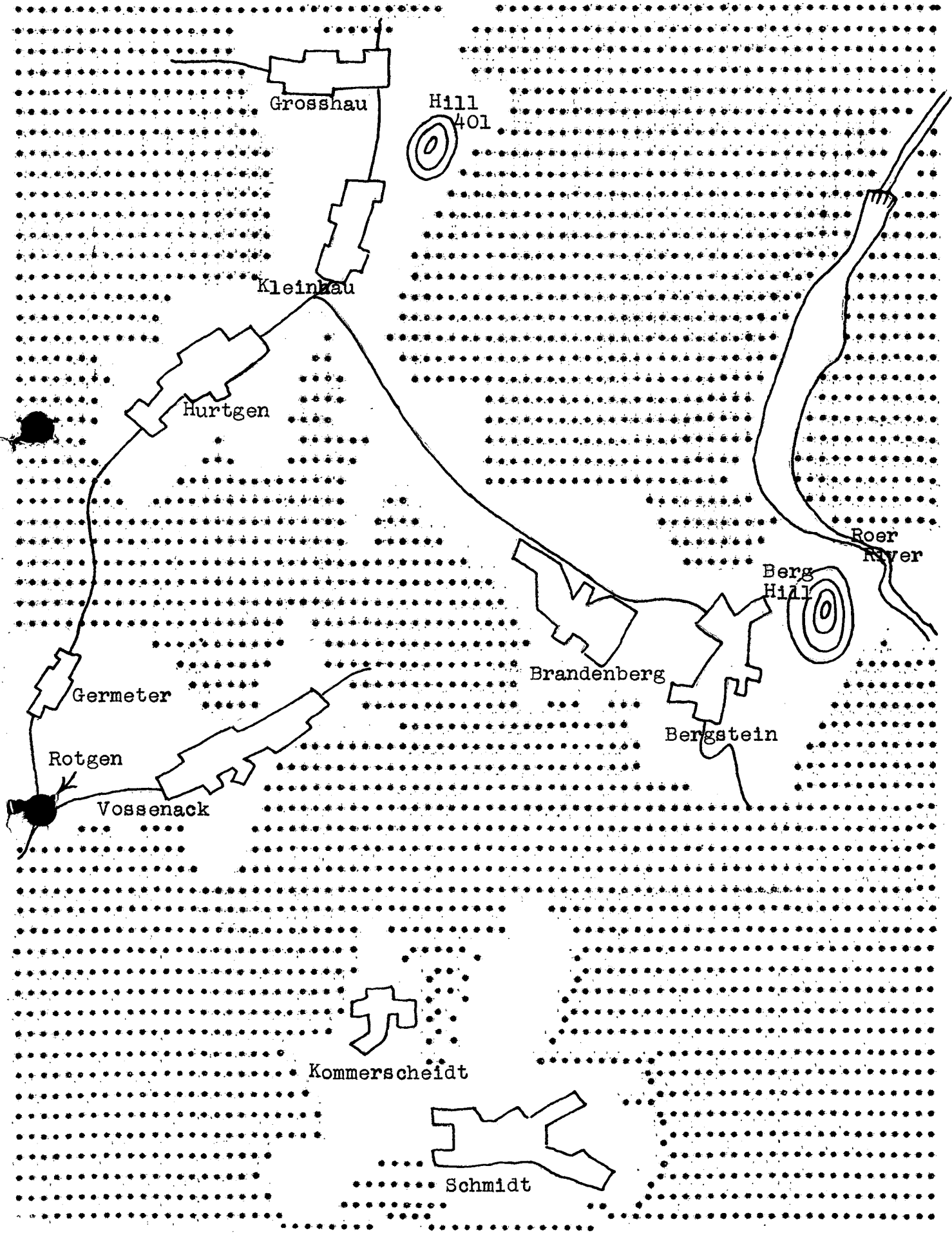
Whenever possible, air support should be employed to effectively assault a position. Granted, this is not always possible, but the coordinated effort of armor, infantry, artillery, and air support has proven the most potent type of attack.

One of the most difficult missions for armor to perform is the holding and the defense of a position. This may be done for short periods of time, but the more effective role is that of a mobile reserve and as a counterattacking force. Casualties in personnel and equipment were relatively light in the attack on Bergstein, tremendous losses occurred in defending the objective. Infantry elements should be caused to relieve armored units as quickly as possible to insure the maximum integrity of a defensive position. Armored infantry and reconnaissance units can satisfactorily perform dismounted defensive missions, but in doing so, these skilled, technical, and specialized personnel degenerate from their primary mission for which they were trained and intended.

The employment of armor in woods is a feasible mission within the capabilities and limitations of its actions. The characteristics of armored units are best adapted if the mission warrants the firepower, maneuverability, and the incomparable shock action.

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Grossshau

Hill  
401

Kleinhau

Hurlgen

Roer  
river

Berg  
Hill

Brandenburg

Bergstein

Germeter

Rotgen

Vossenack

Kommerscheidt

Schmidt