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Defensive Action In
Mountainous Terrain

Capt Benjamin F. Gibbons
Roster Nr 61

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE.....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	3
DISCUSSION.....	5
CONCLUSIONS.....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	21
ANNEX A.....	22
ANNEX B.....	23
ANNEX C.....	24
ANNEX D.....	25
ANNEX E.....	26
ANNEX F.....	27

PREFACE

20 January 1956
Date

In following the examples of actions described herein it is felt periodic reference to the annexes prescribed may facilitate interpretation of the actions. Although the details of each action are not required to be extremely explicit in order to grasp the principles involved reference to the sketches in the annexes may be of some avail to the reader.

The point of view in this paper is that of the author-not necessarily that of The Infantry School or the Department of The Army.

Benjamin F. Hillman
Signature

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this monograph is to show, by example, certain principles of defense with respect to the counterattack, and how such actions can either succeed or fail depending upon whether these principles are followed.

With reference to the title, the author interprets a mountain as "any land mass which projects conspicuously above its surroundings", in accordance with the definition by Webster.

It is intended to prove that our current doctrine with respect to counterattack applies, regardless of the type of terrain over which such missions may be executed.

In the writings which follow it is intended that the reader interpret the information from the standpoint of battalion level. On occasion it may provide a more clearly defined picture of the author's objective if the reader briefly places himself at the regimental level. Many of the principles discussed may not hold true in every single example; however, each one in itself must not be overlooked by virtue of being hasty in a decision or lack of knowledge of that principal.

Certain limitations arise in research for this type of paper. Overclassification of material appears to be very prevalent within the Infantry School Library with regards to historical examples. This places a decided limitation on being able to effectively

illustrate the material or even develop the discussion in a manner that you desire to. Periodical publications should be permitted to be withdrawn for a two or three day period, or possibly over the weekend. With a large group of individuals working within the library conditions are not conducive to a thorough study of those articles. This particular limitation I feel is of prime importance because it tends to reduce the stimulation of interest in your work.

DISCUSSION

"The principles of war upon which our military doctrine is based emphasizes the offensive nature of our tactical concepts. By assuming the offensive we gain the initiative, which in time permits us to select our objectives and the means for accomplishing our mission.

Defensive operations are resorted to only that we may gain time to prepare for assumption of the offensive or to economize our forces for the same. The counter-attack is the expression of this offensive concept during defensive operations. It is the decisive element of the defense.

This discussion will be limited to the counter-attack as it applies to the position type defense, wherein the bulk of our force is disposed on selected terrain where the decisive battle is to be fought."(6:23)

"A counterattack differs only from an attack in that it is executed from a defensive position or situation. Similarly, it is equally dependent upon surprise and speed of execution and requires the same coordinated support of all available weapons. Counterattacks are made to restore the original battle position or to destroy the hostile penetration at a point favorable to the attacking force. All of the examples we shall discuss will be of the type to restore the original battle position."(2:5)

The basic planning for the counterattack begins with an assumed situation, which normally implies the

loss, or threat of losing, a critical terrain feature, or when the enemy has created a dangerous gap in the defensive position from which he can exploit his success.

Let us assume that the conduct of our defense by utilizing a large volume of supporting fires has not succeeded in breaking up the enemy attack. He has penetrated one of our platoon positions and threatens to expand his penetrations throughout the company area. This is the period during which he is most vulnerable. He has yet to reorganize and consolidate his position adequately and bring up supporting weapons. He is also still relatively unfamiliar with the terrain. This is the moment that the sector commander must be able to recognize and commit his counterattacking element. The minimum amount of time with which this force can strike, commensurate with the maximum amount of surprise, can mean success or failure of this operation. (7:2) The sector commander must be able to recognize the course of a battle developing towards a climax that may result in his utilization of the reserve. "He must be capable of recognizing when the enemy force becomes over extended, exhausted, or disorganized to the extent where they can no longer continue the momentum of the attack." (1:39) When he sees this occurring he must judge the exact moment at which to order the forward movement of the counterattacking element, to permit it to strike a violent and decisive blow during the critical period of the enemy's reorganization.

To initiate this encounter too early, before the attack has lost its forward movement, or to execute it

to late after reorganization and consolidation have been accomplished, may very well result in defeat. Similarly, piecemeal commitment of a reserve unit is a violation of principle. Once the decision to counterattack has been made the commander utilizes all available troops to achieve a decisive result and avoid a piecemeal defeat.

One example of a small unit counterattack to eliminate an enemy penetration of the battle position occurred during the classic perimeter defense conducted by the 23d Regimental Combat Team, 2d Division, at Chip'yong-ni, Korea, from 13-15 February, 1951. This example illustrates the violation of certain principles upon which successful counterattacks are built.

This regiment was ordered to make a stand at Chip'yong-ni against the Chinese Communists, following the withdrawal from North Korea at the end of 1950. There were no adjacent units, the closest being 15 miles to the south so the regimental commander organized the unit into a perimeter defense (Annex A) on the low hills surrounding the town. (S:108)

This particular episode occurred in the 2d Battalion sector after almost two days of continuous fighting. On 14 February, just after dark, the Chinese again began their attacks for the night, this time concentrating on the sector occupied by Company G (Annex B, Fig.1). Severe fighting continued with elements of Company G losing their positions and counterattacking to retake them. This continued until approximately 0230 hours 15 February, when the company commander finally was forced to

report the loss of his position to the battalion commander (Annex B, Fig.2). (5:21) The battalion commander ordered his reserve, which consisted of a platoon minus one squad from Company F, to counterattack along with remaining elements of Company G. Since a break in the perimeter was extremely critical, the information was immediately passed back to the regimental commander. His entire reserve at that time consisted of one Ranger Company (approximately 100 men), but because of another serious threat to his 3d Battalion, he was reluctant to commit the entire unit. He did however furnish one platoon and a tank to the 2d Battalion. Both the Ranger platoon and the platoon (-) from Company F arrived at 0330 hours. Since so few of Company G's men were left the battalion commander placed a lieutenant from his battalion staff in command of both platoons. He encountered trouble right away from the Ranger Company Commander, also a lieutenant, who happened to come along with his platoon. He objected to having his platoon attached to another unit for the counterattack and refused to take orders from anyone except the regimental commander, since he was a part of the regimental reserve. The lieutenant immediately reported the incident to his battalion commander who then placed a captain from his staff in command. (5:12) Upon arriving at the scene where both platoons were, the captain found them intermingled and lying along the ground firing against the hill in an attempt to discourage any further penetration.

When the platoons were finally separated and positioned, ready to cross the line of departure after a

short mortar preparation, enemy mortar rounds began landing among the troops. The Ranger Company Commander called to the mortar crews nearby to stop firing, believing that friendly rounds were falling short among his troops. This again delayed the counterattack so the force commander ordered the ranger officer to evacuate his casualties. He hoped both to get rid of the officer and the wounded men. (S:126) The counterattack jumped off and both platoons reached the top of the hill (Annex C), but suffered extremely heavy casualties and were unable to retain it. The Company F platoon had 23 casualties out of 25 men and the ranger platoon had almost similar numbers. During this time the Ranger Company Commander, who had returned, was killed. For the remainder of the night, efforts were directed at containing the penetration.

When daylight arrived on 15 February another counterattack was made by the remaining two platoons of the Ranger Company, plus Company B. This was under the direction of the battalion commander and received tank, artillery, and air support. It finally succeeded in restoring the position by that evening.

It appears from a study of the above example that the Ranger Company Commander was responsible for a considerable delay in the counterattack, as a result of his independent actions, particularly when first reporting to the 25 Battalion. He was undoubtedly an inexperienced officer who was not given a clearly defined order as to his exact mission and command status while working with that battalion. If not for the

above reason it may be assumed that this officer did not know what obligation he was under as a result of being in an attached status. It is felt that the delay caused by his reactions in being subordinated to a battalion staff officer of equal rank can be associated with contributing to the failure of this counterattack. Both platoons were together at 0330 hours but by the time a senior officer was placed in command and the counterattack began an hour or more had elapsed. During this period the number of enemy reinforcements and addition of crew served weapons that arrived on the position, to assist in reorganization, could have been sufficient to the extent that this was one of the reasons for its failure.

Since the remaining two ranger platoons, in addition to another rifle company, were required to counterattack again the following morning it is questionable as to whether the decision to commit only one ranger platoon during the night may not have been the overall reason for the failure of this attack. Had the Full Ranger Company reported to the position where the lieutenant in charge of the counterattack was met by the ranger platoon officer at 0330 hours the dispute over command would hardly have arisen. It is reasonable to assume the battalion commander would have designated the Ranger Company Commander as counterattack commander and that the other lieutenant would then have subordinated himself immediately to the commander of the larger unit. This could have permitted the attack to have been launched an hour sooner, and by a unit

which demonstrated a particular knack for aggressiveness. The reserve platoon reached the top of their objective first, but through heavy casualties were driven off again along with the F company platoon.

Analysis of the above example reveals the following principles essential to a successful counterattack were violated:

A single counterattack command was initially designated but all participating units were not adequately informed.

Reserves were committed in a manner which resulted in ineffective action.

Attempts were made to counterattack a strong enemy penetration with inadequate reserves, instead of containing it and striking a strong blow which was eventually required to be done.

The element of surprise was lost when both platoons engaged the enemy while waiting for a senior commander to arrive.

In the preparation of counterattack plans rehearsals by the reserve unit are absolutely essential for apparently obvious reasons. In addition these rehearsals will also provide some experience figures involving time and space factors with which the sector commander can use in determining when to commit his reserve, should he see such a possibility developing. When conducting defensive operations in mountainous terrain a battalion commander will frequently not be able to place his reserve within a reinforcing distance of a very few minutes, after they have been alerted. The terrain

may be such that this unit could be required to be on or behind another ridgeline of some distance to the rear, or possibly occupying an independent terrain feature so located as to require a considerable amount of time to either reinforce or attack from. Either of these or other varying conditions can mean a considerable delay in moving the counterattacking unit to the attack position, and arriving there in a condition, and at an appropriate time, which will allow them to conduct an immediate counterattack.

It may not always be possible to conduct rehearsals for the counterattack because of other missions or the enemy dispositions. A reserve company with the mission to counterattack, and relieve pressure against, or restore a critical outpost, may find that enemy observation and ability to place fire on the routes of approach may prevent the rehearsal of such a plan. In this eventuality some method should be devised whereby unit leaders, down to the lowest level possible, receive the opportunity to either observe or travel over the route. Possible methods of accomplishing this could be either by air, use of armored vehicles, or even a night reconnaissance.

Rehearsals conducted at night should not be limited to areas that are dominated by enemy fire and observation, but should be an integral part of every counterattack plan. It has been proven many times that terrain has a decided different appearance at night and the ability to move quickly during this period into a counterattack has been demonstrated innumerable

times in our recent wars.

During the last battle for the Korean Outpost Pork Chop, which occurred during the period 6-11 July, 1953, and was conducted by a succession of companies from the 7th Infantry Division, the principles of surprise and timeliness in the conduct of counterattacks in mountainous terrain can be quite clearly derived.

Pork Chop was one of those outposts which in addition to delaying, disorganizing, and deceiving the enemy was virtually to be held at all costs in order to insure the safety of the main battle position.

On the night of 6 July, 1953, this outpost was occupied by Company A, 17th Infantry Regiment (Annex D). At 2256 hours that evening Company A reported receiving automatic weapons fire on the south side of their position. Four minutes later they reported the enemy had occupied the left sector of the outpost and the company commander requested reinforcements. Alert for just such a possibility the regiment kept a reserve company ready to move. This unit, Company B, was behind Hill 200, about 1000 meters by foot to the southeast (Annex D). It moved out shortly after being alerted and made contact with Company A on the outpost. A counterattack was made and the left portion of Pork Chop was restored. As other sectors of the hill were being cleared the enemy again attacked and occupied a portion of the outpost. This resulted in another rifle company being sent out to reinforce the defenses. (8, 12)

"The decision was made for a night counterattack

on 7 July. Company F, 32d Infantry Regiment was assigned to prepare for this mission. Plans were made to exploit a possible surprise and to support the attack with troops already on the hill. The plan adopted by Company F was to march down the forward slope of Hill 317 (Annex E), across the stream swollen by recent rains, and up Drinson Finger. They were then to sweep the Chop from west to east. A night-time single file march through barbed wire, across the stream, and through a swampy valley, all in unfamiliar terrain was a difficult assignment. At 2030 hours 7 July, Company F departed for their counterattack on Pork Chop. Almost five hours later this company worked its way virtually unopposed into the western trenches. When the Chinese recovered from their surprise increased artillery and mortar fires were placed on F Company while it was trying to continue to the top of the hill. At 0425 hours 8 July, after almost three hours of extremely difficult fighting Company F found itself virtually surrounded. Being low on ammunition and grenades the company withdrew through the valley between Hill 317 and Pork Chop (Annex E).

Although this counterattack was not successful in restoring the entire position to friendly lines it is given the credit of breaking up the strong enemy assault made at the same time on Pork Chop Landing, a position on the rear slope of the outpost where armored personnel carriers unloaded supplies and removed casualties." (8:13)

The night move of Company F which took almost

five hours, across unfamiliar, rugged terrain is a very good example of the time and space factors that a commander must be familiar with in order to wisely commit his reserve. This unit was required to move at night over terrain that included ridges, a stream, and swamps before going into the attack. This also illustrates the fact that even though a unit is not in reserve with the specific mission of counterattacking, all commanders should be afforded, time permitting, the opportunity to effect the reconnaissance of critical terrain features against which counterattacks are likely to be executed. These features may be indicated by past enemy actions against them such as in the case of Pork Chop. There were three previous major attacks against this outpost; one each in December 1952, April 1953, and March 1953, which indicated that it was terrain desired by the enemy.

In our discussion of the initial enemy attack on night of 6 July, the timely arrival of Company B from its position behind Hill 200 (Annex D), appears to be the primary reason why Pork Chop was not lost in the initial attack. This company was advantageously placed in a concealed position from where it could move rapidly to the outpost to conduct a counterattack or reinforcing mission. At this time it did both. The additional move of Company E to Pork Chop, beginning prior to dawn, indicates that had Company B, for example, been in a position similar to Company F, 32d Infantry, and required five hours to move into position, the entire outpost could have been completely overrun be-

fore assistance arrived.

During the battle for Pork Chop five battalions from the 7th Division had been committed to the action. These were almost invariably all committed, one company at a time, because of limited space within the defenses. In spite of this effort to retain control all attempts were unsuccessful because the enemy was willing to expend unlimited numbers of his men in his repeated assaults. Pork Chop was finally abandoned to the enemy on 11 July.

Even though these small unit counterattacks were unsuccessful in retaking the actual piece of terrain, it is very apparent that they, in all probability, stopped a possible penetration of the main battle position. It is estimated that an entire enemy division was lost in their attempts to secure Outpost Pork Chop.

An interesting example of how the principle of surprise was utilized by a German rifle company, to regain a hill lost by the regiment to the Russians as a result of the same principle, occurred on 15 November, 1941. (10:15)

The German 164th Infantry Regiment occupied a sector sixty miles northeast of Rzhev, on its advance towards Moscow. Hill 747 was on the regiments right flank and provided good observation into the German rear area. Because of this the Russians had made several attempts to seize it permanently, with the result that it frequently changed hands but was presently held by the Germans. Russian actions indicated that another attempt would be made soon to retake the hill.

As a result of this the regimental commander pulled his G Company out of the line and placed it in reserve on the right flank. On this same afternoon while the company commander was returning from a reconnaissance during a snowstorm, the Russians attacked and seized Hill 747. They utilized no artillery or mortar support, but took advantage of the weather to work in close and obtain surprise.

The commander of Company G was instructed to counterattack at 2200 hours that night and retake the hill (Annex F). The company, reinforced with supporting weapons, was formed into three assault units and moved out after dark. The center unit, under the company commander, worked to within 35 yards of the enemy position. Observation indicated that they had obtained complete surprise. The Russian guards were snoring from the cold and far from alert, also supplies and rations were being given out. Upon a signal the supporting weapons opened up and the assault got under way. (10:16) In their assault the Germans shouted loudly as they broke into the Russian position. The Russians became confused and attempted to get away to the rear however the routes had been blocked. Communication lines were also severed which prevented their receiving fire support. Within forty five minutes Hill 747 was secured and the main line of resistance had been reestablished. Approximately sixty prisoners were taken and after daybreak seventy dead were counted on the position. German casualties numbered five, of which only one was seriously wounded.

This example illustrates how both the Russians and

the Germans utilized the principle of surprise to obtain the same objective from each other within a period of a very few hours. The Germans however were attempting to reestablish their main line of resistance and the selection of the time of attack indicates that the commander knew enough about his enemy to determine when he could attack decisively.

The aggressiveness of this counterattack in conjunction with the surprise achieved, are apparently more responsible for the success of this operation than the fire support received.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this discussion certain principles essential to concluding a defense with a successful counterattack were brought forward. Where some of these were not adhered to is illustrated by the results obtained. It is realized that in certain very critical situations it may be necessary to violate some of these, however, the possible indecisive results and high casualty rates must be carefully weighed in making the decision.

The following conclusions have been derived as a result of this study. In essence they uphold our present doctrine as outlined in FM 100-5, September, 1954.

- a. One commander must be placed in charge of the counterattack and all participating units informed as soon as possible.
- b. Small units should not be thrown into the penetration piecemeal, if the numerical superiority of the enemy or the size of the penetration will just absorb them.
- c. A counterattack should strike from a new direction.
- d. The counterattacking element should not attempt to initially contain the penetration and then suddenly move out in a counterattack.
- e. Reserves should be advantageously placed where they are concealed from hostile observation, yet close enough to a route from which they can quickly move over, both during the daytime and at night, to counterattack.

or reinforce.

f. The counterattack must be executed without delay or at a time the commander feels will best take advantage of the element of surprise.

g. Surprise at night or during periods of restricted visibility will frequently prove of more benefit than a large volume of supporting fires.

h. Reconnaissance by all commanders, of all possible routes to critical terrain features that are expected to be held indefinitely, is essential. This is especially true if the critical terrain is essential to the defense of the main battle position for an entire regiment or division, and virtually any company or battalion is liable to be assigned the mission of restoring it.

i. Where time and the situation permit, rehearsals by units contemplated to counterattack is most essential. These should be conducted both at night and during the daytime. They should include all routes that are extremely difficult, but in order to achieve surprise may be required to be utilized.

j. When a penetration appears likely, counterattacking elements should be moved to positions from where they can strike a violent blow immediately upon the commanders order.

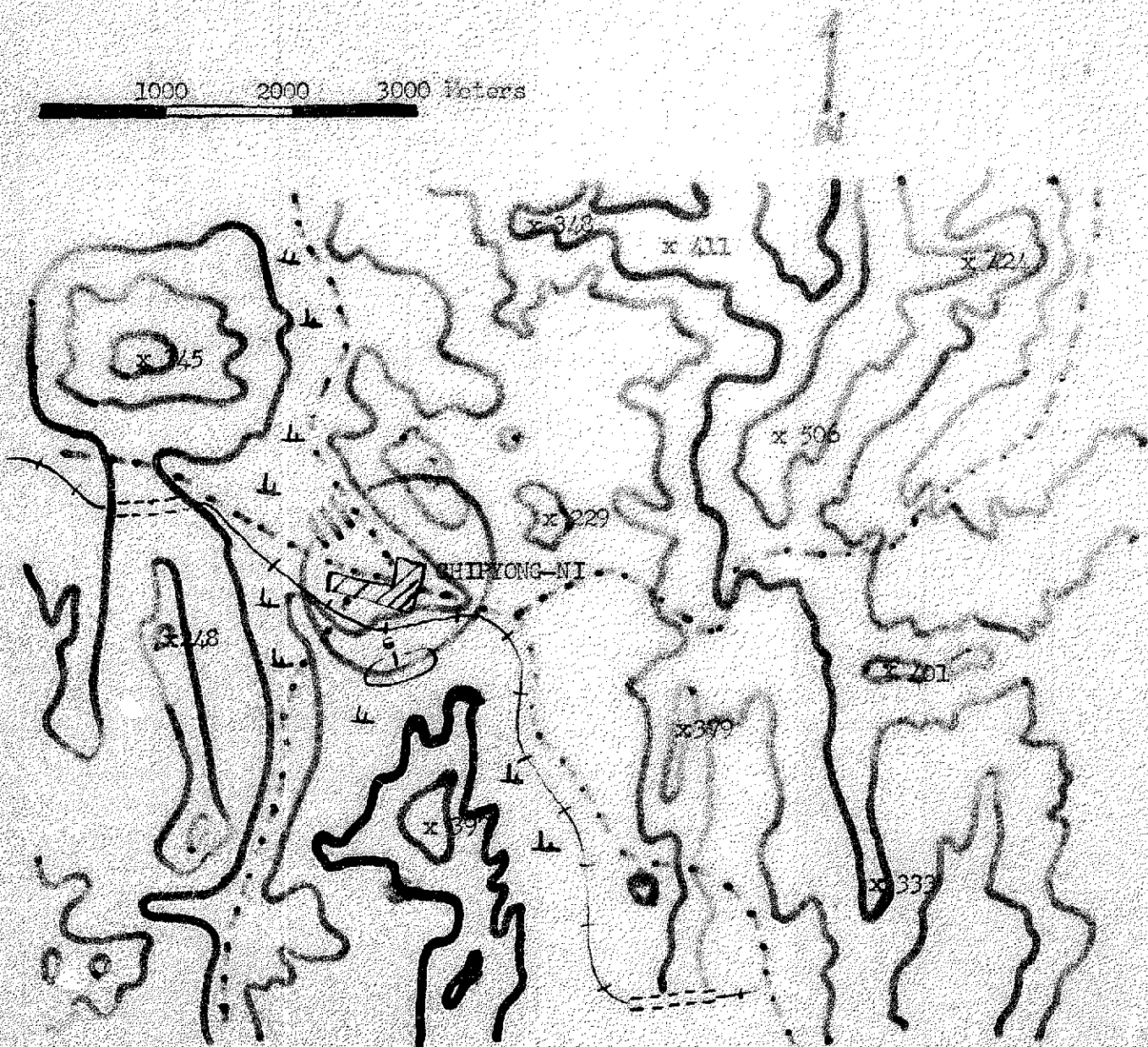
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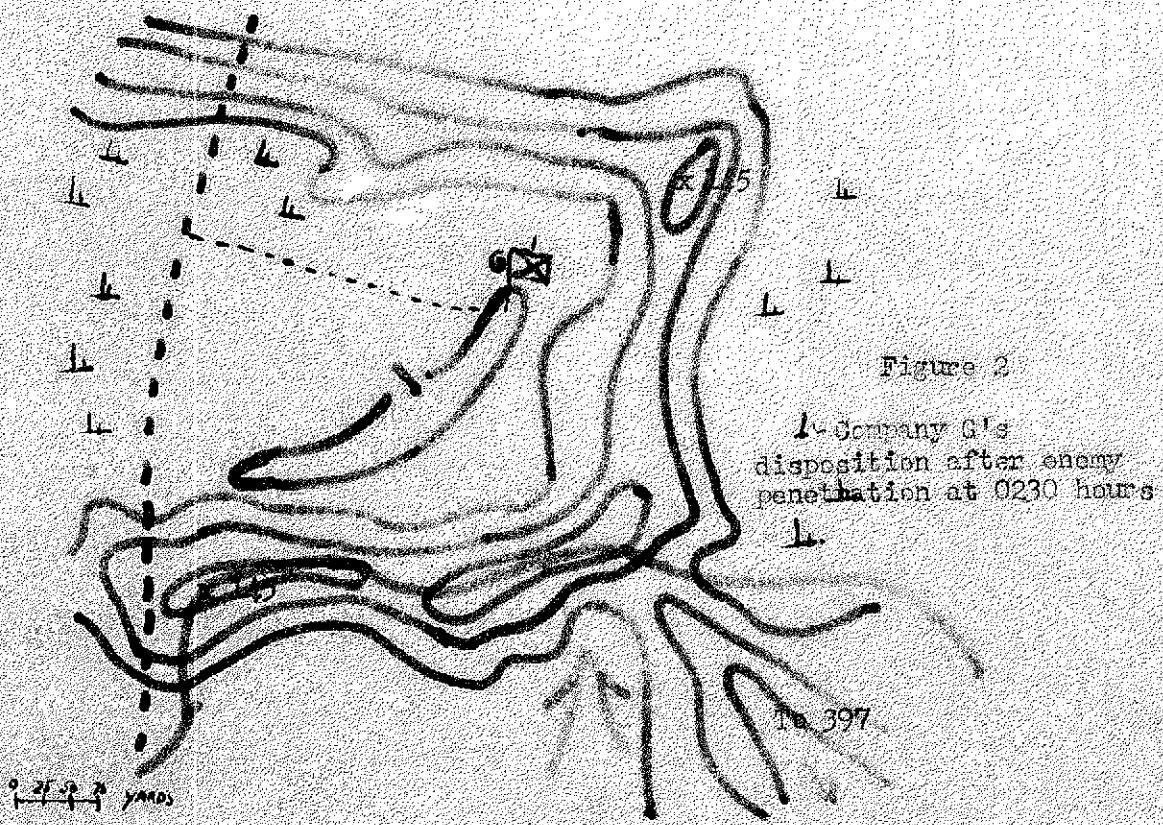
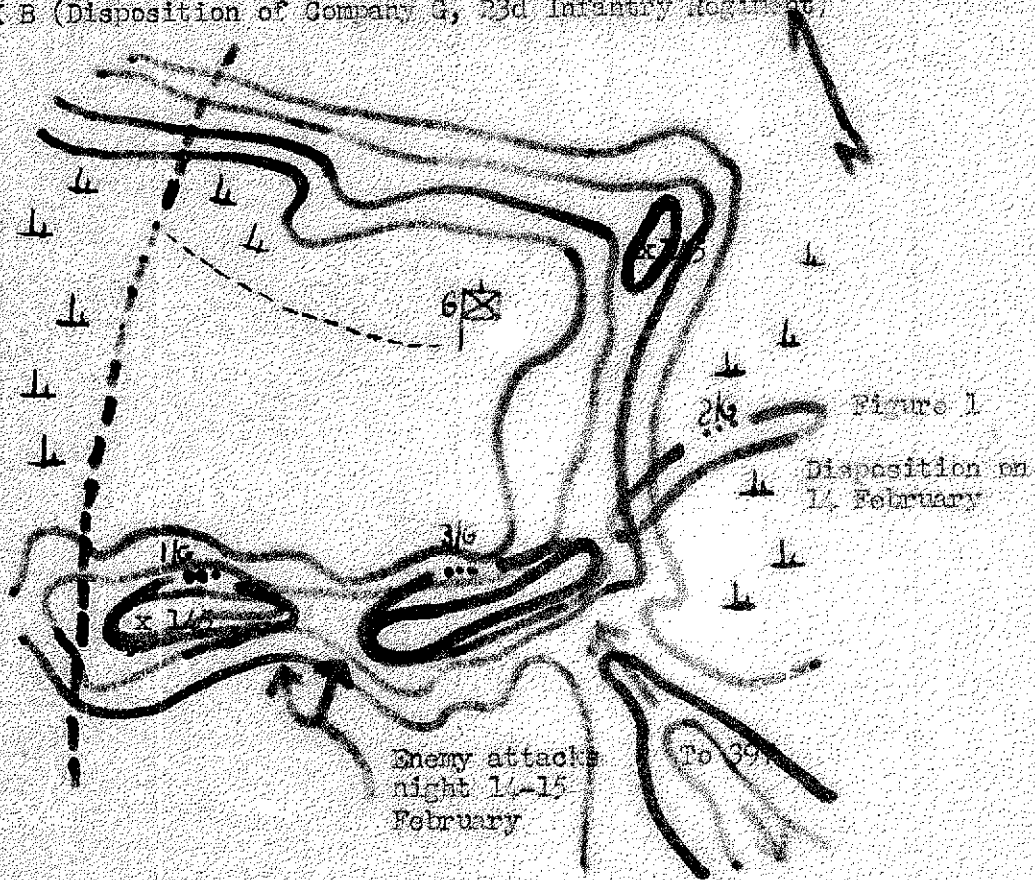
ANNEX A (Disposition of 23d Regimental Combat Team at Chipyong-ni,
Korea, on 13 February, 1951)

Map: Korea, 1:50,000, Chorwon, 6628 IV

All elevations in meters



ANNEX B (Disposition of Company G, 23d Infantry Regiment)



ANNEX C (Counterattack objectives of Ranger and Company F platoons
at 0430 hours 15 February)

