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Attack by Small Units over Seemingly
Impassable Barriers in Mountain Operations

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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

Offensive operations in mountains are generally considered to be characterized by restricted movement in narrow defiles and on sharp ridges. The very character of mountainous terrain limits maneuver and sometimes dictates that advancing units attack in single file against an enemy in prepared positions. The history of American arms is filled with such examples - Mount Altuzzo, Heartbreak Ridge and Triangle Hill, to name a few.

However, maneuver over apparently impassable obstacles is possible and has paid rich dividends to enterprising commanders when used against a thoroughly entrenched and complacent enemy. The basic field manual for operations of the United States Army sets forth the principle that "surprise may be readily achieved by movement of small mountain-trained forces over seemingly impassable terrain" and the correlated principle that "attacks should attempt to strike the enemy in the flank wherever possible". (3:176) The basic field manual pertaining to mountain operations further develops these principles by stating that such forces will be small in size; that the assault should be made under cover of darkness or fog; that undefended points of attack should be chosen; and that detailed planning is necessary. (2:132)

The purpose of this monograph is to prove by actual combat examples the primary axiom: "Seemingly impossible barriers may be traversed by small units to launch a surprise flanking attack in mountain operations." The scope of this monograph includes an investigation of certain examples of the crossing of supposedly impassable terrain barriers to enter the enemy's flank or rear. Examples were chosen to illustrate three different ways that three different units applied this

principle. One unit made such an attack as a special operation; one did so as a routine attack; and another did so as an opportunistic flanking maneuver. In search of common characteristics, each example will be considered as to amount and detail of planning, reconnaissance, type of training or experience of unit concerned, equipment, security, selection of objective, size of force, formation and fire support.

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the best known example of operations over "impossible" terrain by American forces is the attack by the 1st Battalion, 86th Infantry, on the Mancinello-Campiano Ridge in Italy from 17-22 February 1945. This action was necessary to secure the left flank of the 10th Division for its drive on Mount Belvedere and to prepare the way for the Fifth Army's final push to the Alps.

Mancinello-Campiano Ridge is a rugged "razor-back" seven miles in length, running in a general north-south direction. It completely dominates all approaches to Mount Belvedere and would subject an attacking force to observation throughout its approach. It was referred to as "Riva Ridge" by soldiers of the 10th Division, as derived from one of its more pronounceable peaks and will be referred to as "Riva Ridge" in the remainder of this monograph. On its eastern side, it is a precipitous wall of rock, almost vertical in gradient, while on its western side it slopes more gently to the valley floor. At one point, it rises to a height of 6030 feet and slopes to the south in a series of lower peaks. (Annex A) Extending to the northwest from Mount Serrasiccia is a ridge which slopes gradually into the valley. At the time of this operation patches of snow clung to the sides of the ridge and the winter snow still covered the top. (9:6)

Information about the enemy was rather sketchy. An estimated 170 troops garrisoned the area with approximately 50 men on the ridge at any given time. They occupied forward positions in the daylight, dominating all approaches by good fields of fire. They maintained security at night by a system of patrols. These troops had occupied the position throughout the winter and had prepared bunkers and dug-outs. Two possible

enemy bunkers had been located by aerial reconnaissance. (9:9) In addition, a battalion of excellent, seasoned German troops was located at the base of the ridge and could be expected to counter-attack within 24 hours. (10:19)

Troops of the attacking unit were extensively trained in specialized mountain techniques, having been trained as a special mountain division prior to being shipped to the theater of operations. (7:4) The unit had been in the theater of operations for only six weeks, but the deficit in combat experience was certainly offset by the mountain training. (8:377) Replacements were trained for approximately one week in rock climbing techniques while in a rear area. All personnel of the unit received refresher training and practice at climbing with maximum loads while in reserve prior to the operation. (9:7)

The battalion was in a defensive sector at the base of the objective ridge for a period in January, enabling all members to have some knowledge of the terrain. During this time, the battalion had received a directive to locate routes for moving troops on to Riva Ridge. Due to dominant enemy observation patrolling in most instances was limited to nights and periods of poor visibility. One instance is recorded whereby a patrol climbed near enough to the summit to attempt to capture a prisoner. (10:7) After the battalion was moved into reserve, the S-2 and one officer and two enlisted men from each company remained in the area to continue reconnaissance and locate concealed forward assembly areas. In addition, the battalion commander and all company commanders made an aerial reconnaissance. (9:8)

Detailed planning was conducted in the reserve location. A war room with maps, aerial photographs, and sand table was set up and all officers and NCOs were thoroughly briefed in all particulars of the operation. Elements of the battalion and all attachments were broken

down into task forces and rehearsed together. (10:9) (Annex B) Units from battalion to squad were given careful orders and rehearsed in detail. A complete, very detailed operation order was issued at battalion level.

One battalion of field artillery reinforced by the remainder of 10th Division Artillery was placed in direct support of the attack. In addition, one platoon of tanks, one platoon of tank destroyers, and one platoon of 4.2 inch mortars were in support. Since surprise was the paramount factor if success were to be achieved, no preparation was to be fired, but an extensive fire support plan was arranged in event the attack was discovered. No registration was conducted. (10:16)

The battalion was to attack the ridge in five task forces. (Annexes A and B) The 2d Platoon of A Company (Force A) was to secure the right flank of the battalion by seizing Mount Campiano. B Company (Force B) was to seize Mount Capel Buso; C Company (Force C) was to seize Mount Serrasiccia; and the remainder of A Company (Force D) was to seize Mount Mancinello. F Company (Force E) was to protect the battalion left flank by seizing Mount Piagge. Each force of more than platoon strength planned to assault its objective with one fast climbing, lightly equipped "assault platoon". The plan was to move under cover of darkness on the night of 17 February to a forward assembly area, climb the ridge during the night of 18 February, and be on the objective at dawn on 19 February.

Since it was judged impossible for men to make the climb and assault the objective while carrying packs, the problem of personal equipment was serious. There is some disagreement among writers who participated in the operation as to exactly what was taken in the way of equipment. (9:12 and 10:17) A load consisting of one K ration, individual weapon and ammunition, and one blanket could not be far from

correct. Regular winter clothing, M1943 field jackets, and shoe packs or combat boots composed the uniform. Climbing ropes were carried by Force A, and the only other bits of special equipment recorded are four short tube 81mm mortars with 60mm mortar bipods and base plates issued to D Company. (10:4)

As planned on the night of 17 February, the battalion moved into assembly areas in villages at the base of Riva Ridge. The battalion remained concealed in the houses throughout the day and, although under enemy observation, was not detected simply because no man stirred out of doors.

At 1930 hours on 18 February all task forces crossed the line of departure. Each force will now be considered separately.

Force A advanced in single file over very difficult terrain requiring the use of a fixed rope in crossing an avalanche area. The forward observer party became lost during the climb and was not located until after daylight. At 0545 on 19 February Force A occupied the objective without opposition. Ten Germans were located nearby and were either killed or captured. The enemy had maintained no security as he believed no force could climb the cliff at night.

Force B made the climb without incident. The assault platoon reached the crest at 0217 hours and encountered at least one German sentry who fired and retired. Force B did not return fire but moved rapidly to its objective. The objective was consolidated without resistance by 0400. For some unknown reason no force was alerted by the German sentry.

Force C reached the summit without incident at 0505 after a climb of 2550 feet vertical distance.

Force D encountered a small problem of control during the climb. The third platoon, which was to be the assault platoon, was lightly

equipped and consequently climbed faster than did the rest of the task force. It was the decision of the company commander not to slow the attack of the assault platoon but to allow it to climb as rapidly as possible and to follow as fast as the more heavily laden men could climb. Connecting files were established, but contact was soon broken due to the widening gap and the difficult terrain. The main body reached the top of the ridge at 0045 hours, to learn that the assault platoon had reached and occupied the objective with no enemy contact. The company closed on the objective by 0130 hours.

Patrols were sent out during the night in an attempt to locate an enemy bunker known to be in the vicinity. However, no contact was made during the night. At dawn the bunker was observed approximately 500 yards from the position. It was attacked with four Germans killed and eight captured. One prisoner stated that surprise had been complete. The Germans had heard activity in the valley the night before and had actually heard the company occupy their objective. But they did not believe that any large force could scale the ridge; therefore, they did not even investigate.

Force E reached its objective at 0407 without enemy contact.

Three days of counter-attacks and consolidation remained for the battalion, but a discussion of this action would be superfluous to the purpose of this monograph.

The Riva Ridge operation was handled as a "special operation" in all aspects of planning. The entire month devoted to its preparation was justified by its flawless execution. The detailed reconnaissance of such an obstacle was necessary to assure that each task force could reach its objective once it had started. The detailed operation order, the terrain model, the briefings and rehearsals paid off as each subordinate leader understood the plan and was prepared to operate independently.

The principle of centralized planning and decentralized control is illustrated to the maximum, as each unit was operating independently under the command of its own leader once the line of departure was crossed.

Although the battalion was trained in mountain techniques, Force A was the only element that was forced to utilize any type of specialized training. Certainly the entire unit was assisted by training, but it is highly probable that the operation could have been executed without specialized training. Training probably contributed an immeasurable amount to the confidence of the unit as it was participating in its first major combat action.

Special mountain equipment was used only to a limited degree. Climbing ropes and the special mortars previously mentioned apparently were the only items used.

The limited size of units which may be moved across such barriers was emphasized in this operation. The largest organization to be moved in a group was a reinforced rifle company. All forces moved in a single file to maintain contact and facilitate control, yet two units still had separated elements.

The success of the operation as planned hinged entirely on surprise. Darkness was utilized to cover movement, and the complacency of the enemy made him oblivious to noise. Routes were selected to bring the battalion to the top of the ridge at points that were believed to be unoccupied. Only one force in five encountered the enemy, and in this case the enemy was evidently a contact patrol. Radio silence was maintained until after daylight on the 19th. The operation was very susceptible to compromise during daylight on the 18th while the battalion was in the forward assembly area. At that time a small screening patrol could have upset the entire plan. The battalion capitalized upon the complacency of an enemy that supposed the obstacle

protecting his flank to be impassable.

The assault of Folgorito Ridge by the 3d Battalion of the 442d Infantry on 3-5 April 1945 is a second example of utilizing the impassable terrain to achieve tactical surprise. The seizing of Folgorito Ridge was the initial phase of the 92d Division's campaign to seize La Spezia in the final drive to rout the Axis forces in Italy. This terrain feature is a long "hog back" ridge reaching an elevation of 4850 feet and dominating the flat coastal plain of western Italy. (annex C)

The plan for this operation, as in the Riva Ridge operation, called for the occupation one night before the attack of a forward assembly area in a village at the base of the objective. Then while the 100th Battalion launched a frontal attack directly up the conventional approach from the south, the 3d Battalion was to flank the position from the east. No particular preparations were made from the standpoint of equipment. The heavy weapons company exchanged its heavy machine guns for light machine guns, and left all but two of its 81mm mortars behind. (1:1) In addition all battalion reserve and support units carried extra mortar ammunition.

On the night of 3 April 1945, the 3d Battalion was moved over a rough, difficult trail to a forward assembly area in the village of Azzano. During this march the battalion received 25 casualties when men fell from the steep trail. (1:2) The village was occupied under cover of darkness, and the battalion remained in the village under enemy observation from three sides throughout the day of 4 April. From this point each man in the battalion could observe the terrain that he was to traverse that night.

At 2300 hours, 4 April, Companies I and L departed Azzano and began their climb. Company K remained in Azzano as a reserve. The

leading companies reached the line of departure (the ridge line between Mount Folgorito and Mount Garchio) at 0500 hours, 5 April, after traversing much of the distance on hands and knees. No trail was available for most of the climb.

A ten minute artillery preparation was fired on the ridge at 0450, and at 0500 the 100th Battalion jumped off in a frontal attack. Surprise was complete despite the artillery preparation and the attack of the 100th Battalion. An unmanned machine gun was found on the top of the ridge and 16 sleeping enemy were found in a nearby dug-out. (1:3) He apparently considered the preparation only routine fires after being subjected to heavy artillery fires throughout the winter stalemate.

At 0600 Company L moved south to attack Mount Folgorito and Company I moved north to attack Mount Garchio. Company K was moved from its reserve position in Azzano at 1000 hours to the top of the ridge, receiving 21 casualties from observed mortar fire during the ascent. (1:3) Although the battalion objectives were not seized the first day, Companies I and L were in position for an assault by nightfall of 5 April. The discussion of remainder of the operation is beyond the scope of this monograph.

This operation did not require the specialized mountaineering techniques of the Riva Ridge operation but was an admirable feat of endurance and climbing skill in its own right. The unit involved had not received specialized mountain training but had been in the theater of operations for some ten months and was experienced in mountain operations. (8:282) Again through necessity, an attack position was located in a forward area under enemy observation. The attack was not preceded by the amount of deliberate planning, sand table briefings, rehearsals and ground reconnaissance of the previously discussed example. However, it was carefully planned and well timed. The unit concerned

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treated the operation as a routine attack rather than a special operation.

The ascent was made under cover of darkness and was timed to allow for a dawn attack. The route was selected to bring the battalion astride the ridge at a point calculated to be unoccupied rather than into an organized position on one of the peaks. Once the crest of the ridge was gained, the attack down the ridge was calculated to be fought on relatively equal terms rather than with a top-heavy advantage to the defender.

In this instance two reinforced rifle companies were moved in single file over one trail. Once the ascent began the companies moved without control from battalion, and the attacks by the companies went in opposite directions under the leadership of their respective commanders.

The battalion commander attempted to achieve flexibility by keeping one of his companies in reserve. However, it is questionable that he could have derived any benefit from this reserve five hours down the ridge had the assault units met resistance at the top. Perhaps he should have brought his reserve to the top of the ridge under cover of darkness and positioned it at the line of departure to be used as he later saw fit. At any rate, movement during darkness would have prevented the 21 casualties incurred during the climb.

The element of surprise was unduly jeopardized by the ten minute artillery preparation just before the battalion reached the top. Such a preparation is not particularly effective against troops in well prepared positions, and these German troops had been in position throughout the winter. This preparation was so ineffectual that the Germans were not even awakened. The actual purpose of this preparation is not discussed in the Command Report of the 442d Infantry which leaves the possibility that it was intended to cover the noise caused during the last few yards of movement.

Again in this operation the attack was most susceptible to com-

promise while the attacking unit was in the forward assembly area. A screening patrol would have discovered the presence of the battalion and rendered the attack impossible. The complacency which descends upon a force supposedly protected by an obstacle is emphasized.

A unit of the 350th Infantry of the 88th Division demonstrated an opportunistic utilization of difficult terrain in a "fluid situation" during the seizing of Monterumici Ridge on 16-17 April 1945, in the break-out into the Po Valley. Again the enemy had been in position throughout the winter and had thoroughly entrenched himself. The ridge was believed to be held by a battalion of German mountain troops. Atop the ridge were four strong points in the zone of the 350th, the small villages of Di Sotto, Di Sopra, La Torre and a cemetery near Di Sopra. (annex D) The villages were reduced to heaps of rubble which the Germans effectively converted into fortified positions. (4:81) The division attack pushed off at 2230 hours, 15 April, and was brought to a halt throughout the daylight hours of the 16th. The 3d Battalion, 350th Infantry participated in a near disastrous daylight assault on Di Sotto and the cemetery. The 1st Battalion was given the mission of attacking through the 3d Battalion during the night and seizing Di Sotto and Di Sopra. A Company of this battalion was to seize Di Sotto and G Company was to seize Di Sopra.

The company commander and all officers of A Company had observed the action of the 3d Battalion throughout the day of the 16th and had a good knowledge of the location of automatic weapons and mine fields. To supplement this knowledge the company commander interviewed wounded as they were evacuated. His plan was to launch a dawn attack from the slope below Di Sotto. (4:85)

The company moved out at 2345 hours on the 16th in order to reach the slope below Di Sotto in time to conduct a reconnaissance and locate

and occupy an assault position before daylight. The trail from the assembly area followed a narrow ledge along a cliff necessitating movement in single file and the passing of individual weapons to the next man while certain more difficult spots were negotiated. At 0300 hours the company stopped 500 yards short of La Torre and sent out a reconnaissance party to locate an assault position. A route along the face of the bluff to a position directly below Di Sotto was located. Although no mountaineering techniques were required, this was an extremely difficult route requiring one and one-half hours to move 500 yards. At 0500 hours the company was located at the base of a steep slope 250 yards from their objective. To assault the objective would require moving up the steep slope in the face of grazing machine gun fire which the company commander judged to be suicidal.

At this time it was daylight and mortar fire began to fall near the company. The dominating enemy-held heights were immediately smoked preventing the adjustment of fire. While the mortar shells continued to fall, they did not get any nearer friendly troops.

In analyzing his situation, the company commander of A Company determined that the slope to the left of the village, while equally as steep, was only 50 yards in length. The bluff underneath the slope appeared impassable, but a reconnaissance revealed that it could be negotiated by a small group. He ordered his 3d Platoon to move across the face of this bluff while the rest of the company diverted the attention of the enemy by firing up the slope. The 3d Platoon left behind all equipment other than individual weapons and one radio as they were required to hold on to roots and bushes in order to move. One hour was required to move the 250 yards. (4:88)

When the platoon was in position the platoon leader notified the company commander by radio. A five minute preparation was fired by the

remainder of A Company and supporting tanks and mortars at the termination of which the 3d Platoon assaulted the objective. Di Sotto was taken with only one casualty and an immediate counterattack was beaten off. La Torre was then taken without a fight resulting in the capture of 166 prisoners in the two villages.

According to a prisoner the bluff used by the assaulting platoon was considered impassable by the defenders; consequently, the entire defense was oriented to the front and toward La Torre rather than toward the bluff. (4:94)

In this example the use of the supposedly impassable terrain was not contemplated until the opportunity actually appeared. The company commander was alert to his opportunity and capitalized upon it, emphasizing the requirement for aggressive, resourceful leadership by small unit leaders in mountain operations. The unit concerned had not received specialized mountain training and utilized no mountaineering techniques. It had been in action in this theater in similar terrain for over a year, and of course, had received invaluable experience in movement through mountains. (6:46)

Prior reconnaissance of the objective was limited, and the company commander had little knowledge of the terrain in the immediate vicinity until he was actually in the position from which he originally intended to assault. Careful reconnaissance of the terrain before he committed his company revealed the route along the face of the bluff and undoubtedly prevented many casualties.

The shelling which began immediately after daylight points up the necessity of moving under darkness or under cover of smoke when the enemy holds the dominant terrain. The isolation of the mountain battlefield is particularly emphasized in this instance, as one platoon of A Company

and a portion of C Company were making the attack effort for the entire regiment. Although the enemy possibly was not aware of the force moving to his flank, he was well aware of the pressure of an attacking force. There was no doubt after daylight that there was to be an attack, but surprise as to direction of attack was still possible.

Movement in single file was imperative on the narrow ledge. The location where the platoon was to leave the narrow ledge fortunately was not occupied by enemy personnel or the movement would have been impossible. After traversing the cliff the platoon was in position to meet the enemy on reasonably equal footing.

Fire support was effectively used for two purposes. It distracted attention from movement along the cliff and served its usual purpose of softening the position for the assault.

Throughout the three attacks described, the circumstances were somewhat different, and the techniques used were quite different. However, the basic principles of movement of a small, experienced unit over difficult terrain to a point of vantage for a surprise attack remain the same.

CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing discussion the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. Seemingly impossible barriers may be crossed by small units to attack the enemy's flank or rear.
2. Units used to cross mountain barriers should have received specialized training in mountain operations or should have participated in actual operations in mountainous terrain.
3. Detailed planning may be considered to be essential in attacking over barriers. However, an unexpected opportunity should be exploited without elaborate preparation.
4. Unoccupied initial objectives or check points should be selected to allow the attacker to gain the heights before he is forced to fight.
5. Detailed reconnaissance is imperative for all leaders and desirable for all other participants.
6. The attacking unit should be as lightly equipped as possible to climb the obstacle and still be able to accomplish the mission.
7. While a unit as large as a battalion may participate in a coordinated attack over a barrier, companies and platoons must act under their own initiative once the operation begins.
8. Movement to the objective is almost always in single file as a dispersed formation cannot be controlled on the face of a cliff.
9. Movement must be accomplished under cover of darkness, fog or smoke.
10. Surprise is the most important single factor in attacking over barriers.

11. No fire preparation should precede the attack. Fire support should be planned but not registered lest the enemy be alerted.

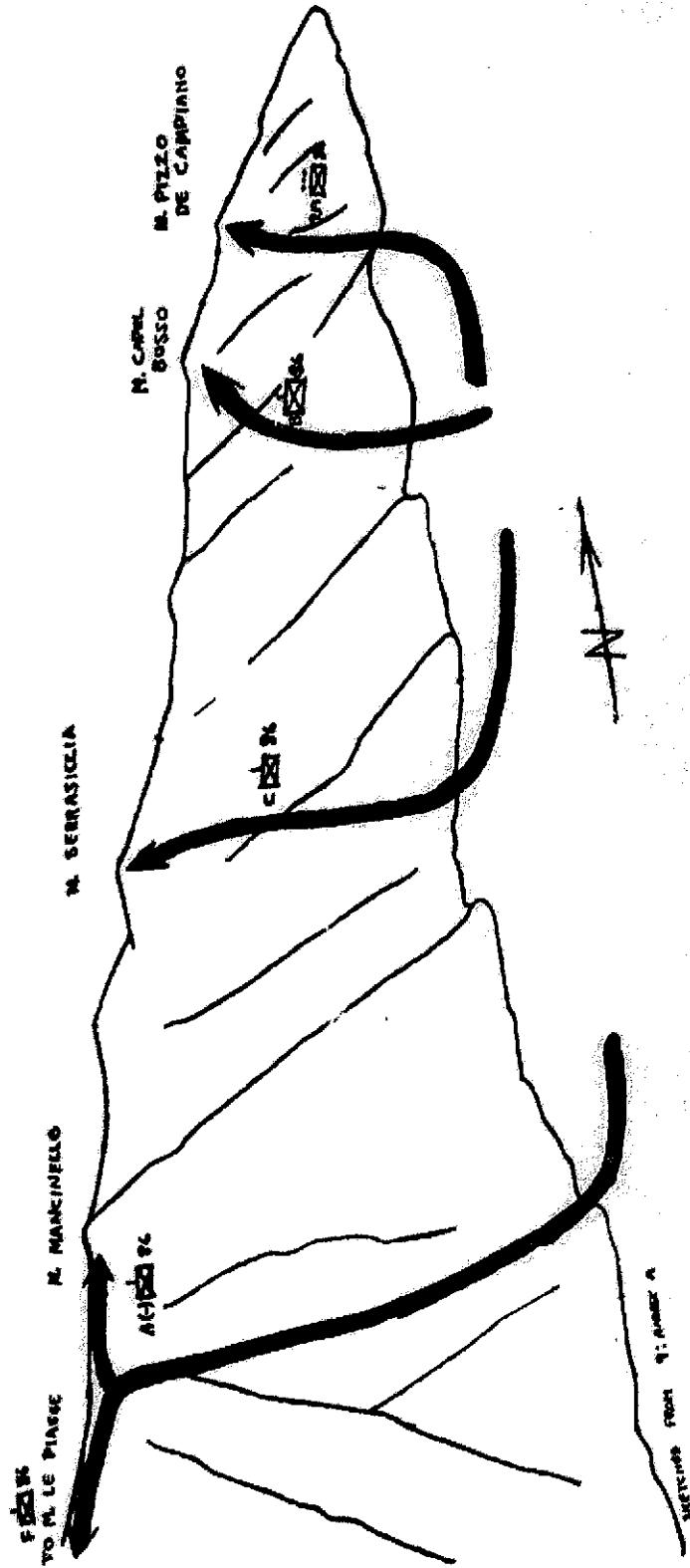
12. The enemy protected by a supposedly impossible barrier on his flank is likely to become complacent. His defense is not likely to be oriented toward the flank.

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ANNEX A (Sketch of Riva Ridge)



Routes of attack and objectives of 1st Battalion 86th Infantry attack on Riva Ridge

ANNEX B (Task Force Organization of 1st Battalion, 86th Infantry for Attack on Riva Ridge) (10:14)

Force "A" - One Rifle Platoon, Company "A"

One Section Light Machine Guns

One Artillery Forward Observer Party

Two Litter Squads

Force "B" - One Rifle Company, Company "B"

One Machine Gun Platoon

Two Sections 81 M.M. Mortars

Two Litter Squads

One Artillery Forward Observer Party

Force "C" - One Rifle Company, Company "C"

One Machine Gun Platoon

One Section 81 M.M. Mortars

Three Litter Squads

One Artillery Forward Observer Party

Force "D" - One Rifle Company less one platoon, Company "A" minus

Two Litter Squads

One Pioneer Squad

One Forward Artillery Observer Party

Force "E" - One Rifle Company, Company "E"

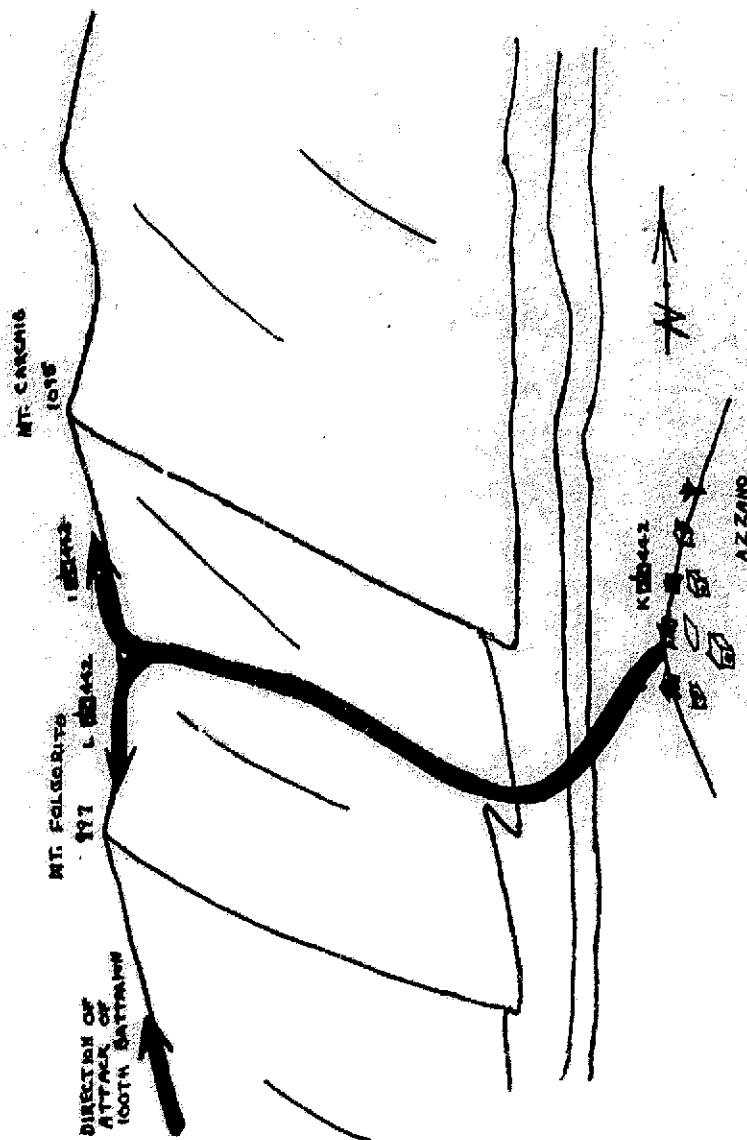
One Machine Gun Platoon

One 81 M.M. Mortar Section

Two Litter Squads

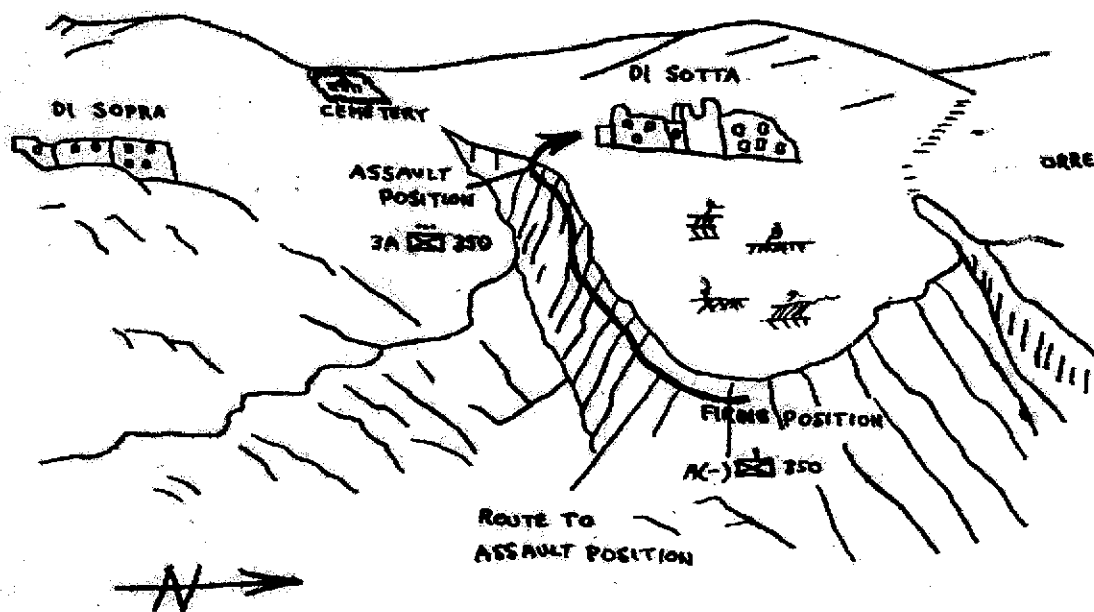
One Artillery Forward Observer Party

ANNEX C (Sketch of Folgorito Ridge)



Routes of attack and objectives of 3d Battalion 442d Infantry attack on Folgorito Ridge

ANNEX D (Sketch of Mount Monterumici Area)



Attack of Company A, 350th Infantry on Di Sotto and La Torre (4:87)