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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 339TH INFANTRY
(85TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK OF HILLS 66 AND 69,
NEAR TREMENSUOLI, ITALY, 11-12 May 1944
(ROME-ARNO CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Weapon Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY ATTACKING
IN MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN

Captain Wyndham H. Bammer, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I.

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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 339TH INFANTRY
(85TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK OF HILLS 66 AND 69)
NEAR TREMENSUOLI, ITALY, 11-12 MAY 1944
(ROME-ARNO CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Weapons Platoon Leader)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company K, 339th Infantry, 85th Infantry Division in the attack of Hills 66 and 69 near Tremensuoli, Italy on 11-12 May 1944, during the breakthrough of the Gustav Line.

After the successful landings of the Allied Forces at Salerno in September 1943, the enemy fought a series of delaying actions up the Italian Peninsula, by making the most of demolitions, minefields, and rear guard actions in an attempt to slow our advance. During this retrograde movement, the enemy worked to complete defensive positions on the Gustav Line where they fully intended to make an all out effort to stop and hold the Allied Army. (See Map A)

The Italian campaign had been in progress a little over four months when the Fifth Army, under Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, reached the Gustav Line on the 15 January 1944. (1) This line extended from the Tyrrhenian Sea, through the mountains south of Minturno, north along the Garigliano and Rapido Rivers, through Cassino and Cairo, then north-east across Mt. Marrone to the Fifth Army boundry. This drive marked the end of the Winter Lines Drive. (See Map B) (2)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Gustav Line was a deliberately organized position which the Germans had built by the use of their own troops, prisoners of war and forced labor. It consisted mainly of a series of minefields, wire barriers, pillboxes constructed under concrete

(1) A-2, p.1; (2) A-2, p.58;

houses, and concrete bunkers covering all possible avenues of approach. In building these defensive positions the Germans took into consideration the natural barriers offered by the terrain in this area which they considered to be practically impassable. The terrain consisted mainly of steep rugged mountains with a small coastal strip west of Minturno and a small plain north of the Liri River. The Mountains were defended with a few automatic weapons on the forward slopes and the bulk of the forces on the reverse slopes. The scarcity of good roads in the area presented a major problem to both the defender and the attacker. The only good roads in the area along the axis of advance were Highway 7 on the left and Highway 6 north of the Liri River. The Allied Forces depended on these roads for their main routes of supply. (3) One lateral road branches off Highway 7 west of Minturno which runs generally north through Ausonia to Cassino. The Germans depended on this road for lateral supply and communications. (4) At this time the German Forces, under the overall command of Field Marshall Albert Kesserling, had twenty-two divisions in Italy which was about the same number as the Allied Armies had in Italy.

The Fifth Army sector of the Gustav Line on the Southern Front was defended by the German XIV Panzer Corps, which consisted of the 94th Grenadier Division, the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, reinforced by elements of the Hermann Goering Panzer Division, the 44th Grenadier Division and the 5th Mountain Division. (5)

When the Fifth Army reached the Gustav Line in January the supplies were moved forward and plans formulated to attack this line immediately.

(3) A-2 p.8; (4) A-3 p.7; (5) A-2 p. 2;

During the subsequent attacks along the Gustav Line from 15 January to 31 March 1944 very little ground was gained in terms of miles. The British 10th Corps had succeeded in establishing a bridgehead across the Garigliano River on the high ground north of Tremensuoli and Minturno. (6)

The American II Corps and the French Expeditionary Corps on the right made slight gains to the north and west of Cassino. (See Map C) (7)

By the end of March 1944, our attacks along the Southern Front had been stopped and the Fifth Army decided to abandon the attack and hold what they had gained. (8)

On the 5th of March, General Sir Harold R. L. Alexander, Commanding the Allied Armies in Italy, realizing that he had to create new reserves and build up the strength of the Allied Forces, ordered a regrouping of forces to prepare for the coming offensive in May.

In April the Fifth Army, under command of Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, had completed its regrouping, and its sector along the Gustav Line - consisted of a narrow strip 13 miles wide between the Tyrrhenian Sea on the left and the Liri River on the right. (9) This line was held by the American II Corps on the left and French Expeditionary Corps on the right. (10)

The II Corps sector was held by the 85th Infantry Division on the left from east of Scauri, north through Tremensuoli, northeast to Minturno; and the remainder of the Corps area from Minturno to the Corps boundary was held by the 88th Infantry Division. (11)

The German reinforced 94th Grenadier Division was defending the sector of the Gustav Line held by the II Corps. (See Map D) (12)

(6) A-2 p.37; (7) A-2 p. 100; (8) A-1 p.75; (9) A-3 p.2;
(10) A-2 p.12; (11) A-4 p.63; (12) A-3 p. 12-13;

During the remainder of April the 85th Division continued its mission of active defense by aggressive patrolling and artillery action. All units of the division were rotated on the front in order that all men would gain experience and become familiar with the terrain to the front. In the rear areas equipment was being repaired, supplies being moved forward and training being conducted for the coming spring offensive. (13)

On the 5th of May, Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark issued the attack order which was to mark the opening of the spring offensive on the Southern Front in Italy. H-hour was 2300 D-day 11 May 1944. The Fifth Army plan was to attack with Corps abreast, the American II Corps on the left, and the French Expeditionary Corps on the right, with the ultimate objective of cutting the Itri-Pico road west of Itri. (14)

The II Corps plan was to attack west with the 85th Division on the left, the 88th Division on the right, and the 36th Division in reserve. (See Map D) (15)

"The 85th Infantry Division plan was to attack in assigned zone, with the 339th Infantry on the left, the 338th Infantry on the right, and the 337th Infantry - in reserve. The mission was to seize and hold that part of "S" ridge in its zone, to seize and hold San Martino Hill. It was further to protect the II Corps left flank, organize on the objective and be prepared to continue the attack on order." (16)

The 339th Infantry planned to attack with three battalions abreast, the 1st Battalion on the left with the mission of containing Scauri, the 2nd Battalion in the center with the mission of capturing Hill 79, the 3rd Battalion on the right with the mission to seize and hold San Martino Hill, and the 1st Battalion of the 337th Infantry was to be attached in Regimental reserve. (17)

(13) A-6 p.1; (14) A-3 p.26; (15) A-4 p.59; (16) A-6 p.1; (17) Statement of Captain Philip Smith, then Executive Officer, Company K, 339th Infantry, 11 May 1944;

The enemy 27th Infantry of the 94th Grenadier Division was defending the sector in front of the regiment. (See Map E) (18)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

On the 3rd of May 1944 the 3rd Battalion, 339th Infantry, had moved back into the front lines after a few days rest in the rear area, and was occupying defensive positions on the reverse slopes of Hills 103, 127, 119 and west 113. Company I, with a machine gun platoon of M Company attached, was occupying Hills 127, 119 and west 113. Companies L and K, - with L Company on the left, and K Company - with a machine gun platoon from M Company attached - on the right, were occupying positions on Hill 103 south east of Tremensuoli. The 81 mm mortars were located about 300 yards south of Tremensuoli. During this period, active patrolling was being conducted in order to become more familiar with the terrain to the front; especially San Martino Hill.

San Martino Hill consisted of two gentle swells; the eastern swell was known as Hill 69, which drops 125 feet on its east slope to the Capo d Acqua Creek, a swift little stream about 15 feet wide and 4 feet deep; the western swell was known as Hill 66, which was about 325 feet high. The terrain between the Capo d Acqua Creek and Hill 66 was relatively smooth and covered with grass about a foot high. Four small trees were standing on the south side of Hill 69, near the base of the hill.

The enemy situation was not definitely known; however, it was believed that they had small outposts on Hill 69 and a reinforced company on the reverse slopes of Hill 66.

(18) A-3 p. 12;

The 3rd Battalion planned to move to the line of departure, which was the Capo d Acqua Creek, along the trail which ran from the present positions through Tremensuoli, then down the draw between Hills 127, and east 113. The formation was to be a column of companies with L Company leading, followed by I, and K Company in single file. Company L was to place 2 planks across the creek to be used by the other companies in crossing the creek, and then seize and hold the left portion of Hill 69. Company I was to seize and hold the right portion of Hill 69. Company K was to move to the left of Hill 69 and then attack to seize and hold Hill 66, organize on the objective and be prepared to continue the attack on order of the Battalion Commander. The machine gun platoons of Company M were to be in direct support of I and K Companies. The 81 mm mortars from present positions were to be in general support of the battalion. (19) Beginning at H-hour, a 30 minute artillery preparation was to be fired on Hill 66 and 69 and emplacements beyond. The 2nd Chemical Battalion was to reinforce the artillery fires by placing a 1200 round concentration on Hill 66 beginning at H-hour to H plus 5. The 131st Field Artillery Battalion was to place a 5 minute concentration at H-hour on Hill 69 and then switch its fires to Hill 66 for 10 minutes. (See Map F)

(20)

THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK

On the night of 10-11 May 1944 the Weapons Platoon Leader and six men were sent on a night reconnaissance patrol with the mission of moving 300 yards to the front of Hill West 113 and listen and observe after the moon came up, for any enemy activity along the front of Hill 69. The patrol moved out after darkness

(19) Personal knowledge; (20) A-3 p.65;

and passed through our front lines at 2030 hours. Each man in the patrol carried a thin stick, which he used in feeling for any trip wires that might be in the area. About 2400 hours the patrol reached a point on the forward slope of Hill West 113 about 50 yards from the Capo d'Acqua Creek. Shortly after arriving at this point a noise of what was estimated to be a mule train was heard in the direction of Hill 66. During the time the patrol was out the enemy fired flares from the vicinity of Hill 66 every hour. At 0300 hours 11 May, the patrol moved back to the battalion command post and reported this information to the Battalion S-2.

About 1600 hours on 11 May the order to attack that night at 2300 hours was issued by the Company Commander. The platoon leaders were issued an aerial photograph of Hill 66 and given their specific missions. After the receipt of the order the platoon leaders briefed all their men on the situation and studied the aerial photographs. From a study of the photographs, there appeared to be two pillboxes on the forward slope of Hill 66. In as much as this was the first photograph the platoon leaders had seen of this area, it was impossible to draw any definite conclusions at this time. After the men had been briefed, the remaining daylight hours were utilized in issuing ammunition, in the preparation of packs and in writing letters home. The men in the rifle platoons were issued three extra bandoleers of ammunition in addition to their normal unit of fire. Two men in each rifle platoon were to carry two rounds of rifle grenades. Two other men in each platoon were to make up the bazooka team and carry two rounds of bazooka ammunition. All of the men in the company were to carry two or three fragmentation and concussion grenades on their belts.

The ammunition bearers and the squad leaders in the light machine gun section were each to carry two boxes of machine gun ammunition. The ammunition bearers and squad leaders in the 60 mm mortar section were to carry twelve rounds of 60 mm mortar ammunition. The basics in company headquarters were to carry two rounds of 60 mm mortar ammunition in addition to the ammunition for their individual weapons. The cooks, under control of the supply sargeant, were to hand carry extra small arms ammunition from our present position to a dump in the draw just east of Tremensuoli, after the attack started. In addition to the ammunition each man was to carry his gas mask and combat pack, which was to contain a blanket, shelter half, raincoat, and a days supply of K rations. All the men were instructed to cut a piece of white cloth about twelve inches square and pin it on the back of his pack as an aid in keeping contact.

The company at this time was up to full strength in officers and enlisted men with the exception of weapons platoon sargeant, who was in the rear area undergoing training in human and animal packing in the mountains. In general, the morale was high as all of the men were anxious to get going after being in a static position. As darkness approached at 2100 hours all the men had completed the initial preparations. Some men were sleeping, some were gathered around in small groups talking and waiting for H-hour to arrive.

The line of departure was the Capo d Acqua Creek, which extended generally parallel to our front about 1800 yards from our present positions on Hill 103.

The company formation in moving to the line of departure was to be a column of platoons with the 1st Platoon leading, followed by the 3rd Platoon, M Company Machine Gun Platoon, Weapons Platoon, 2nd Platoon, and the Company Command Group, under the executive officer, was to bring up the rear.

Upon reaching the line of departure, the company would attack with two platoons abreast; the 1st on the left, the 3rd on the right, the 2nd Platoon in support to follow generally in rear of the 1st Platoon, and the Weapons Platoon was to follow the assault platoons in close support. The Machine Gun Platoon from Company M was to follow in close support. (See Map F)

THE ATTACK

At 2230 hours 11 May, Company K, started moving out slowly and quietly up the trail southeast of Tremensuoli towards the line of departure.

At 2245 hours, about the time the company had completed getting the column on the trail, four rounds of enemy artillery landed near the trail causing a little confusion and six casualties in the 2nd Platoon.

When the preparatory fires opened up at 2300 hours, Company K, held up by the company in front of them, had moved about another 100 yards which left them 100 yards south of Tremensuoli and about 1600 yards from the line of departure.

Once these fires were opened the column moved a little faster but now started to move like an accordion. By 2330 hours, Company K had reached a point on the trail just past Tremensuoli opposite Hill 127. As the Company reached this point our initial fires had lifted and the enemy opened up with his nebelwerfers, mortars, and artillery, concentrating the fires on this trail, Hills 127,

113 and the draw between Hills 127 and East 113, ^{This fire} which lasted for approximately thirty minutes.

When these concentrations appeared to be lifting, the column remained spread out along the trail. About fifteen minutes had passed when the Company executive officer, who had been following with the command post group in the rear, came forward. When he arrived at the head of the column he found that someone in the 3rd platoon had lost contact and the rest of the company had moved out. About ten minutes had passed after the executive officer had gone forward and nothing seemed to be happening as the column failed to move. The Weapons Platoon Leader then went forward and contacted the executive officer who was standing at the head of the column unable to determine the direction of the objective.

At this time the area was full of smoke and dust from our initial preparations and those of the enemy, and you were unable to see over three feet in any direction. Fortunately the Weapons Platoon Leader had been on patrol in this general vicinity the night of 10-11 May and had taken compass bearings on the objective. After checking his compass, the platoon leader said, "I'm sure I know the way, let's move out."

The column, led by the Weapons Platoon Leader, started to move once again down through the draw towards the Capo d'Acqua Creek. As the column neared the creek quite a bit of confusion was heard ahead so the column was guided in that general direction.

Upon reaching the creek it was learned that the banks of the creek were almost straight up and down and about 10 feet high. The two temporary bridges, which L Company was to place across the creek could not be found. Instead two men had been placed on the east bank to help lower and guide the men into the creek.

The Company Commander had succeeded in getting across the creek by this time and was on the west bank helping the men out of the creek. He had gotten the remnants of the 1st Platoon and part of the 3rd Platoon across. As the men crossed the creek a lot of the equipment and ammunition was lost in the creek. After the men had crossed the creek several casualties were suffered by anti-personnel mines which had been placed at the base of Hill 69. Any enemy that had been on Hill 69 had either been killed by the preparatory fires or withdrawn after the initial concentrations.

At about 0030 hours 12 May the weapons platoon leader had crossed the creek and reached the left portion of Hill 69 where the 1st platoon leader was reorganizing the men of his platoon and the men of the 3rd Platoon under the platoon sargeant. The weapons platoon leader ran into one man from Company L in the vicinity of 1st and 3rd Platoon, who had been wounded by a mine but no other members of L Company were observed at this time. Visibility was somewhat better now as the moon was beginning to come up over the mountains.

The Weapons Platoon Leader then started back towards the creek and ran into the platoon sargeant of the 2nd Platoon and helped him assemble his men on the south east side of Hill 69 as he stated he had not seen his platoon leader since about 2300 hours. After the 2nd Platoon was assembled the Weapons Platoon Leader placed them along the southeast slope of Hill 69. Meanwhile the company commander remained at the creek helping the rest of the men across.

The Weapons Platoon Leader noticed the 1st and 3rd Platoons were not around and upon questioning the wounded man from Company L, he was informed that they had moved out. The SCR 536 radios

failed to function so contact could not be restored with the 1st Platoon Leader.

not for my
The Weapons Platoon Leader again returned to the vicinity of the creek and was met by the section sargeant of the light machine gun section, and his section which was followed by the mortar section. The light machine guns were placed in the 2nd Platoon area and the mortars near the east side of Hill 69. The mortars were not able to fire at this time because the location of 1st and 3rd Platoons was not known. The company commander had now reached Hill 69 in the vicinity of the mortars.

About this time the 1st Platoon leader appeared and reported to the company commander that the 1st and 3rd Platoons had reached the foot of Hill 66 and had become engaged in a fire fight but were forced to withdraw when they encountered a heavy volume of small arms fire from two pillboxes on the forward slope of Hill 66 and mortar fire from the reverse slope. The company commander then ordered the 1st and 3rd Platoon to take up positions and extended the right flank of the 2nd Platoon. From the platoon leader's reports the company strength now was estimated to be about 90 men.

By this time, of course, the enemy knew that someone was occupying Hill 69 and began directing mortar and artillery fire from the southwest, the west and the north, on and in the vicinity of Hill 69.

During the crossing of the Capo d Acqua Creek the SCR 300 was lost which left the company without any radio communication with battalion. The platoon leader's SCR 536 radios were not in working order so the company depended on runners for its communication.

About 0300 hours the Company Commander of Company L appeared in the vicinity of where the Company Commander of K Company was located. He stated that his company was on the right of Company K but that he only had about forty men left and that he had communication through his SCR 300 with the battalion observation post which was located on West 113.

Company I was reported to be on the right of Hill 69 just to the right of Company L. Their casualties had been heavy and they were down to about 70 men.

All companies were then ordered to dig in, hold present positions, and be prepared to meet any counterattacks which were sure to come at daybreak which was at 0500 hours.

During the remaining early hours of 12 May enemy artillery and mortar fire from the southwest, west and the north, fell on Hill 69. Wounded men were crying for the aid men, but evacuation was next to impossible. The walking wounded attempted to return to the rear but whether they ever succeeded was not known. The battalion litter teams were doing the best they could to clear the wounded men off the trail which we had used in moving to the line of departure.

At daybreak the anticipated counterattack started with a 15 minute concentration on Hill 69. The Germans were observed moving around on Hill 66 as the concentration opened up.

The Company Commander of L Company, who had dug in about fifteen yards from the company commander of K Company, was notified and he immediately called battalion to get mortar and artillery fire on Hill 66. In about five minutes the mortar and artillery fires were brought down on Hill 66 which broke up the counter-attack.

About fifteen minutes after the Company Commander of L Company had called for this fire, a round of our own artillery fell short, landed in the fox hole he and one of his platoon leaders were occupying, killing both of them and destroying the SCR 300. Once again we were without radio communications with battalion.

During the remainder of the morning the enemy fired 10 minute artillery and mortar concentrations which fell on Hill 69 about every thirty minutes.

At 1300 hours on the 12th what appeared to be a company came down the draw between Hills 127 and 113 to our rear. The Germans saw them as they crossed the saddle and immediately shelled the entire area. About ten of our men reached Hill 69. (21)

The 1st Battalion, 339th Infantry on the left flank of the regimental sector had met intense machine gun fire from pillboxes on San Domenico Hill and artillery from Mt. Scauri, and were forced to dig in the east of Scauri.

The 2nd Battalion, 339th Infantry had taken the crest of Hill 79 and was holding a portion of the hill. (22)

At 1400 hours on the 12th of May the 1st Battalion, 337th Infantry, supported by Company B, 756th Tank Battalion and four battalions of Field Artillery, who were to fire concentrations on Hill 66, passed through Company K. Within an hour this battalion was fighting its way up the forward slope of Hill 66 when the enemy artillery opened up and drove them back to the foot of the hill. After a second attack in the afternoon and evening they succeeded in taking the crest of Hill 66. (23)

(21) Personal Knowledge; (22) A-3 p.66; (23) A-3 p.3; A-7 p.2;

Three tanks of Company B, 756 Tank Battalion somehow managed to get to the east bank of Capo d Acqua Creek, however they bogged down and were unable to cross. They expended their ammunition on Hill 66 and then withdrew. (24)

THE RELIEF OF COMPANY K

At 2030 hours on the 12th of May the 3rd Battalion, 339th Infantry received orders to withdraw to the reverse slope of Hill 103 southeast of Tremensuoli and reorganize and prepare to continue the attack. Company K started its withdrawal at 2100 hours. As the company was moving out one of the squad leaders of the light machine gun section stepped on a mine and was seriously wounded. The company closed into the assembly area near Tremensuoli at 2145 hours.

During the night of 13-14 May, replacements were brought forward to bring the company up to full strength again. (25)

This same night the Germans started their withdrawal all along the front of the 339th Infantry Regiment. (26)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The method used to attack the Gustav Line in May was one in which all units along the Southern Front attacked simultaneously. Any slight gain along the line would prevent the enemy from knowing where the main thrust was to be and in turn he would be unable to properly employ his reserves.

good. The element of surprise was gained when viewed from an Army picture, as ^{later} documents showed, the Germans expected the attack at 2400 hours on the 24th of May; however, as far as Company K was concerned, the element of surprise was lost when our own preparatory fires lifted and the company was still 1000 yards from the line of departure.

(24) A-7 p.2; (25) Personal knowledge; (26) A-3 p.67;

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The preparations and orders for carrying out the mission assigned Company K were full and complete except that proper consideration of the time element in moving to the line of departure was not given by battalion. As it turned out Company K reached the line of departure about one and one-half hours after the preparatory fires had lifted.

J.
In my opinion, the assigned objective of Company K was too large particularly for a night attack and should have been assigned to a battalion. It is believed that a strong combat patrol of approximately one platoon could have moved out after darkness, placed two temporary bridges across the Capo d'Acqua Creek and secured Hill 69 prior to the attack. Secrecy would not have been given away as it was customary for patrols to be in this general area. In so doing the bulk of the battalion could have been concentrated in the assault of Hill 66. It was learned later that Hill 66 was defended by a battalion of the 267th Grenadier Regiment.

J.
The Company Commander of K Company should have assigned someone else, possibly the executive officer to help the men across the creek, and he should have been up where he could have coordinated an attack against Hill 66; as it was two platoons attempted to take the objective without the necessary coordination and failed.

J.
The necessary steps were taken in order to maintain contact by placing white cloth on the packs of each man; however, it is felt that there were too many men in one column which slowed up the move to the line of departure. Company K could have crossed

over Hill 119 and this way have eliminated the loss of contact and certainly would have put them in an attack position much earlier.

As an indication of the fighting that took place on Hills 66 and 69 the 3rd Battalion lost 398 men and officers killed or wounded during the period from 2300 hours 11th May to 2200 hours 12th May.

Much credit is due the 2nd and 3rd Platoon Sargeants during this battle for the manner in which they handled their platoons after the platoon leaders were wounded. These two platoon sargeants were among the first men in the division to win a battlefield commission.

LESSONS

1. The reverse slope defense is strong but must include a strong outpost on the forward slope to prevent surprise. The Germans position on Hill 66 consisted of two pillboxes on the forward slope with good communication to the reverse slope.
2. Communication is vital in the conduct of the attack and several means including wire should be used.
3. Crossing the line of departure on time can save many needless casualties.
4. Attacking troops should take advantage of an artillery preparation and move at full speed toward the objective.
5. Reserves should not be committed in piecemeal fashion.
6. Patrols should be given specific missions.
7. Aerial photographs can be very useful if time and facilities can supply a running account of an area.

8. Platoon sargeants must be trained and capable of taking command of a platoon at all times.

✓ 9. Unnecessary equipment will slow the combat effectiveness of your men.