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Staff Department
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1949-1950

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY L, 13TH INFANTRY (8TH
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON DUREN, GERMANY,
AFTER THE CROSSING OF THE ROER RIVER,
23 - 25 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY ATTACKING
AFTER A RIVER CROSSING.

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AGO MICROFILM

ITEM NO:

3559

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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY L, 13TH INFANTRY (8TH
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company L, 13th Infantry, 8th U. S. Division in the attack on Duren, Germany after the crossing of the ROER RIVER, 23-25 February 1945.

In order to provide an orientation, it is necessary to briefly discuss the events prior to this action.

The 8th U. S. Division prior to 7 February had had a holding mission along the west bank of the ROER RIVER, in the vicinity of the HURTGEN FOREST, GERMANY. (1) On 7 February the 8th U. S. Division, pursuant to orders from VII Corps, was relieved by the First U. S. Division and given the mission of relieving elements of the 104th U. S. Division on the west bank of the ROER RIVER in the vicinity of DUREN. (2) (See map)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The 13th Infantry relieved the 414th Infantry, 104th U. S. Division in the vicinity of GURZENICH, ROLSDORF and DERICHSWEILER with the mission of preparing for crossing the ROER RIVER, and seizing the city of DUREN, and the Corps bridgehead on or about 14 February 1945. (3) The plans for

- (1) A-4
- (2) A-4
- (3) A-6, p. 44

a jump off on 14 February were abruptly altered on 9 February when the Germans opened the gates of the SCHWANAMENAUER DAM to the south or towards the source of the ROER RIVER. (4) This created an impassable barrier, in the 13th Infantry sector, as the ROER RIVER which had been fordable was now a raging torrent, approximately 10 to 15 feet deep, with a current speed of 10 to 15 miles per hour. (5) The creation of this man made barrier, while postponing the scheduled attack, gave all U. S. units an opportunity for development and practice in the art of river crossing, an opportunity to continue the build up of supplies and equipment, an opportunity to further train any new replacements and most important of all, an opportunity for detailed study of maps and the latest aerial photographs, as well as daylight visual reconnaissance of the western portion of DUREN. (6)

Supplies and equipment to include supporting units were poured into this area so that the general area of DERICHSWEILER-GURZENICH resembled a rear area supply point rather than a reserve battalion sector, all within mortar range of the enemy. (7)

Training in river crossings took place, however the practice was on a small almost still-water creek. The equipment used was standard engineer assault boats operated by engineer personnel. (8)

Intensive study of all maps and aerial photographs was done by all personnel down to and including squad leaders.

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- (4) A-4
 - (5) A-6, p. 44
 - (6) Personal knowledge
 - (7) Personal knowledge
 - (8) Personal knowledge

Visual reconnaissance over a large sector of DUREN was made by all personnel. (9)

The 13th Infantry was, as were all units in this general sector, committed, yet awaiting the drop in the ROER RIVER. It had the 1st Battalion deployed in defensive positions in the town of ROLSDORF, along the western banks of the ROER RIVER. The 2d and 3d Battalions were in DERICHSWEILER and GURZENICH respectively in assembly areas awaiting "jump off" day. This regiment had the 104th U. S. Division on the left and the 28th Infantry of its own division on the right. (10)

The 3d Battalion was billeted in the town of GURZENICH with no tactical formation as use was being made of suitable quarters along the one large main street of this town. L Company, the to be reserve company of the attack, was well set up in the most comfortable quarters to be found in its section of town.

The plan for the 13th Infantry was for the 2d and 3d Battalions to attack abreast through the 1st Battalion with the 2d Battalion on the right and the 3d Battalion on the left. (11)

The 13th Infantry was opposed by elements of the 12th Volksgrenadiers, the 353d Infantry Division and the 363d Infantry Division. (12)

The combat efficiency and Esprit de Corps were very high, as all troops were rested, well trained, fully equipped and rearing to go. During the period of waiting for the ROER RIVER to recede to normal the only combat realized was

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- (9) Personal knowledge
(10) A-6, p. 44
(11) A-6, p. 44
(12) A-4

some light mortar fire as well as propaganda leaflets issuing the 8th U. S. Division an invitation to attempt the river crossing. These rather than cause any alarm brought to mind "how did the Germans know who was waiting to cross" plus a feeling of slight amusement. (13)

The enemy was well set defensively although the number of troops apparently was not too great. It is believed their morale and efficiency was high as they had their river, in addition to a well dug-in set of defensive positions, protected by minefields.

The terrain on both sides of the river was similar, flat with good footing, as the spring thaw was about over and the ground had partially dried out. However, armor, if and when used would be required to stay on roads. The enemy had the advantage of a more built up area, and a slight advantage of long range observation as the eastern side of DUREN was the commanding ground in this area. The weather was fair with visibility well over 3000 yards although generally overcast skies. (14)

Logistical support for the offensive was excellent, despite the heavy mud in the roads as well as heavy rains in early February. The improved weather after 15 February assisted with the logistical problem so that no items were in short supply. The enemy supply situation was known to be poor due to our Air Force constantly bombing their supply dumps, road nets and key railroad yards. This bombing as well as strafing further reduced the number of motor vehicles they could muster to support any operation. (15)

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- (13) Personal knowledge
(14) Personal knowledge
(15) A-4

THE PLAN OF THE 3D BATTALION

On 15 February the 3d Battalion in its assembly area in GURZENICH had the following plan of attack. Upon receipt of D-day orders, it would jump off from its line of departure, the west bank of the ROER RIVER, by use of engineer assault boats and attack the city of DUREN. I and K Companies were to attack abreast with K on the right and I on the left followed by Battalion Headquarters, and L Company in reserve. The Heavy Weapons Company was, until the balance of the battalion had crossed the river, to be in general support with both its machine guns and its mortars. (16)

On 21 February the long awaited word for the attack was received. The scheduled time was to be 0330 hours on 23 February. The artillery preparations were to start at 0245 hours and were to be the heaviest artillery barrage ever fired by the 8th Division Artillery. This barrage was to be further intensified by Corps and Army Artillery, plus all the mortars of the regiment. To give some picture of the intensity 60 mm mortars had only one target each, an area of twenty-five square yards, as out of the target area, would have been over lapping fire with heavier weapons. As a further indication Corps Artillery had by 2200 hours 23 February fired 86,000 rounds. (17)

THE PLAN OF COMPANY L

L Company as the battalion reserve, with the balance of the battalion, during the night of 11 February was to move from its assembly area in GURZENICH, to final assembly areas in houses just back from the river in ROLSDORF. It

(16) Personal knowledge

(17) A-4

was anticipated that the first units would be across the river by 0400 hours. The plan for crossing was to be as follows: 2d Platoon, 3d Platoon, Company Headquarters, 1st Platoon followed by the Weapons Platoon minus the light machine guns which were with the two assaulting platoons. The 60 mm mortars after taking their part in the initial barrage were more or less instructed to follow along as their use was not anticipated. Needless to say all men had all the ammunition they could carry, as all except those members of crew served weapons had at least three hand grenades, a well filled belt plus two bandoleers of extra ammunition. L Company once across the river was to follow I Company through the main part of town, which was on the battalion left flank. (18)

PREPARATION FOR THE ATTACK

At 0245 hours the artillery preparation began with a deafening roar as the artillery, Division, Corps and Army, plus unit mortars started really pouring thousands of shells into the city of DUREN. This barrage fell on the east bank of the river, on the water front buildings and then further back into the heart of the once proud German city. While other units in this theater may have had heavier fire, it seems upon looking back impossible because what had been a still night with the muffled noises of troops moving, suddenly and abruptly became a version of the Hell of a Hollywood produced battlefield. (19)

(18) Personal knowledge
(19) Personal knowledge

NARRATION

THE CROSSING OF THE ROER RIVER

The artillery lifted from the east bank and water front buildings at 0330 hours when the initial units of the 3d Battalion, platoons of I and K Companies, shoved off from the west bank of the ROER RIVER in engineer assault boats powered with outboard engines. These motors were to have been warmed up during the preparation but many failed to start, so the first wave saw some transported by power boat, and some going across under the power of paddle wielded by the infantry. German mortar and artillery fire raked the east bank and the river, knocking out boats, causing casualties and generally raising havoc with our troops. (20)

The first wave saw one officer per company, each with approximately half of his platoon across the river where they deployed into a few buildings on the river bank. (21)

The return trip was even more disastrous to the engineer boats as practically all were either swept downstream where they either crashed into pilings of a knocked-out bridge, that formerly connected DUREN with ROLSDORF, or were swept into the sector of the 104th Division where many men were rescued. This left the small first wave the bridgehead for the 3d Battalion, 13th Infantry. (22)

During the balance of the morning, until daylight, constantly under heavy enemy fire, frantic efforts were made to cross the ROER by the use of cables stretched across the river to guide the few remaining assault boats. These experiments

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- (20) Personal knowledge
 - (21) Personal knowledge
 - (22) Personal knowledge

helped cross the balance of the platoon of J Company and almost a full platoon of K Company before they were knocked out. (23)

Daylight on 23 February saw these two small portions of the battalion across and that's all, because as soon as it was daylight the fire controlled from observation points made it all but impossible to operate along the river. Attempts were made to bridge the river, but they proved disastrous, as no one could, under these conditions, accomplish any mission. It was during this time Lieutenant Colonel Leonard S. Wilhelm, Commander of the 3d Battalion was killed. (24)

During the day of 23 February the units in DUREN were forced to do the job intended for a battalion as no help other than fire support could be given them. L Company, the balance of the battalion and all service units spent the day under a cover of smoke from 4.2 mm mortars, in getting more equipment ready to cross the river as soon as darkness fell. One idea was introduced of using a flying ferry operating on a cable utilizing the river current as a means of power, as an expedient. (25)

As soon as darkness fell the operation of river crossing started again to get troops across both by boat and by the new method of a flying ferry. This expedient worked so well that by 2200 hours the 3d Battalion was on its way. The balance of I and K Companies were crossed to assist their elements and to forge ahead in the attack on DUREN. (26)

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- (23) Personal knowledge
 - (24) Personal knowledge
 - (25) A-6, p. 44
 - (26) Personal knowledge

These companies were followed by Battalion Headquarters which set up its Command Post in what was left of a building near the former main highway bridge into the city. (27)

L Company still in battalion reserve crossed after the Battalion Headquarters Group. As portions of it crossed the river it gradually formed a unit in a reserve area in rubble of buildings near the Battalion Command Post. Shortly after L Company crossed the VII Corps engineers had completed construction of a bridge into the city. This bridge was under construction for over ten hours, a job which normally would have been completed in two or three, so severe was the accurate shelling of this area.

With the crossing of the entire battalion and the completion of the bridge, just about twenty-four hours behind schedule, all were set to really enter and clear the western section of the city and proceed to the regimental objective, the railroad running northwest to southeast on the eastern side of the City of DUREN. (28)

THE CHANGE OF MISSION

The mission of L Company was soon altered as progress of both I and K Companies was slower than had been expected due to greater sections of the city containing larger and larger numbers of delaying positions as the higher ground away from the river was approached and the attack of the 2d Battalion on the right veered away from the 3d Battalion's line of attack. It is believed much of this German troop strength was forced into this sector by the 104th Division, on the left, which was

(27) Personal knowledge
(28) Personal knowledge

ahead of the 13th Infantry Regiment. This compelled the battalion commander to commit his reserve leaving the battalion only with a reserve of portions of Headquarters Company.

L Company was committed between I and K Companies, to enable K Company to swing to the right in the general direction of the 2d Battalion, and attempt to establish contact with them.

(29)

THE ATTACK

L Company joined the actual attack at 1300 hours on 24 February in the western third of DUREN approaching the heart of the once thriving city of 30,000. The formation for the attack was 2d and ^{1st} 3d Platoons in assault, each with attached machine guns, followed by the 3d Platoon, Company Headquarters and Weapons Platoon minus its machine guns.

In moving up to occupy the area between I and K Companies, the 1st Platoon was to receive its greatest casualties of the attack. This entire platoon sought cover from the ever incoming artillery, in the entrance of what had been a large school, when with German good luck, a very large shell, approximately 240mm, landed near the entrance, killing four men and wounding seven additional, including one squad leader and two assistant squad leaders.

The two assault platoons made their contact with I Company on the left and K on the right and started forward under some light mortar fire, and some machine gun fire from buildings, quite a distance to the front. The orders were to clear out the buildings as the unit progressed, so forward motion was

(29) Personal knowledge

very slow. The buildings, many of them mere shells with cellars, somehow standing up under tremendous piles of rubble, at first contained few if any Germans, and those quite willing to surrender, but after about two blocks resistance stiffened. With streets as final protective lines and entrances to further penetration, slow progress slowed down even more. Each squad and platoon started to really fight to gain ground. Artillery supporting fires were not of much assistance, as buildings gave the enemy the necessary cover from fragmentation, so the only gain was by fire and movement, with good use being made of hand grenades. (30)

The 2d Platoon after gaining about two blocks to the business heart of the city was held up by one enemy machine gun, apparently high up in a building to their front, firing thru gaps in buildings and between buildings. This fire although plunging, was accurate, as it accounted for one man killed and three wounded. Finally about four men with a B A R by use of rubble for cover, were able to flank this gun to find them in a second story of a false fronted building, and kill two die hard Germans.

The progress of the 3d Platoon continued to move along slowly, as building after building was searched for enemy. A few Germans were flushed out, some to become more or less happy prisoners of war, some to withdraw to the rear and some to be killed by hand grenades, which preceded the men into buildings.

The balance of L Company was following the assault platoons in bounds, without seeing any action of any kind, other

(30) Personal knowledge

than the flow to our rear of the prisoners. The mortar section so far, had not fired a round other than in the original preparation of the city.

This slow progress continued for the units on the left and on the right until late in the afternoon when K Company on the right, on a more or less exposed flank, received a minor counterattack as they paused in a somewhat open area. This became a serious fire fight for a few moments, until artillery from the 8th Division, 41st Field Artillery Battalion landed squarely on the attacking Germans, causing numerous casualties and a hasty withdrawal. (31)

L Company's progress was speeded by direction of the battalion commander who contacted the three companies on line thru the wire which each unit was laying as it moved forward. It was now about four o'clock in the afternoon of 24 February with resistance quite light. As the platoons continued in the assault in coordination with the other units of the battalion, the clearing of buildings became somewhat sketchy so that, we learned later, Battalion Headquarters began to take prisoners who realized their part of DUREN was definitely in the hands of the American forces.

With darkness rapidly approaching, progress slowed down as contact and control were much reduced in a night with a cloud covered sky. The same absence of light which hindered our progress, favored the Germans, who wished to pull back rather than face the assaulting wave of American troops, so even with slow movement forward, it was steady and block consuming. With the approach of daylight L Company as well as

(31) Personal knowledge

the adjucant units were approaching the outskirts of DUREN after a night of practically no action. L Company had recieved sporatic mortar and artillery fire but without observation, this was merely harrassing, as no casualties were received. A few times, one or two Germans had manned an automatic weapon and fired a few bursts along the company front, however no one was killed and only three were wounded. Once these bursts were fired from a point the gun would be picked up, and moved back, so in all but one case a search of the area where it was believed the fire came from was to no avail. (32)

The once case occurred in the 3d Platoon area, when one squad was searching for the gun position. The squad had with complete silence covered a large building, and sent two men in as an advanced group to start the search. These men walked thru the main entrance which faced to the left from the line of attack when they rounded a hall and at the same time spotted two GERMENS in the act of picking up a gun. It was a pleasure, they said, as each man got a German, which completely removed this small piece of resistance.

As day break, 0600 neared, L Company still pushing forward thru the gradually thinning portion of the city, advanced more rapidly. During this period one isolated prisoner who spoke quite good English gave himself up to a member of the 2d Platoon. He claimed he had left his unit in their withdrawal to wait for us, as he had enough of a losing war. This prisoner stated that at about 0400, with the approach of the American forces, the balance of the defenders of this portion of DUREN had withdrawn to the town of MERZENICK, east of the

(32) Personal knowledge

city.

The statement of the P W must have been accurate, because he was the last of the enemy seen by Company L. At this time progress of the adjacent units was also satisfactory, as all three units were on line, in a wide sweep thru the eastern portion of the city.

The end of DUREN proper, was reached about 0630, and from there, to the regimental objective, was one smooth clean sweep with no opposition. By 0700 on 25 February, I, K and L Companies stood on the final objective, the railroad around the eastern side of the city. (33)

To sum up the results of the operation: L Company, 3d Battalion, 13th Infantry, attacking twenty-four hours behind schedule after elements of the battalion established a small isolated bridgehead, and after long preparations which had been hard and costly, did clear and take its' portion of DUREN, and did assist in taking the regimental objective.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

The build up of all supplies both as reserves, and for use in the attack was excellent except for the shortage of engineer assault equipment, namely boats and outboard engines. The small elements of I and K Companies were isolated on a far side of a river from their parent unit for over 14 hours, partially due to the lack of this equipment.

(33) Personal knowledge

2. PROPAGANDA LEAFLETS (PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE)

The use of weak forms of psychological warfare against troops that are well trained, equipped and with high morale is pointless. The German use of leaflets on the 13th Infantry while in assembly areas on the western side of the ROER RIVER did nothing towards helping their case, except to cause wonder regarding the counterintelligence of the American forces.

3. PREPARATION

The preparation and orientation for the crossing of the ROER RIVER, was made in great detail, as all studied both maps and aerial photographs, as well as visual reconnaissance. This preparation requirement for any successful operation was well accomplished, and would have paid off, had the river crossing been more successful.

4. RIVER CROSSING

The crossing of the ROER RIVER in a piecemeal fashion should have been avoided, so that once the attack started all elements of a unit could have continued on their mission. The training was conducted on a still water creek which could not approach the proper and required level of troop training for success. Engineer troops should be trained extensively in the proper care, maintenance and operation of outboard motors, if they are to be used successfully.

5. FIELD EXPEDIENTS

After a delayed crossing the 3d Battalion of the 13th In-

maintain operative wire communications. In a built up area where the line of sight characteristics of some of the smaller infantry radios might cause them to fail, wire could well be the only means available.

10. BYPASSING OF ENEMY

The City of DUREN was skimmed through in the effort to speed up the attack. This is a calculated risk which could prove disastrous, if too large an area is bypassed. It proves that at best, city or town fighting to completely clear the area is slow, tedious work, requiring large numbers of troops.

LESSONS

1. In any attack supply levels should be at their peaks to include reserves particularly in technical equipment for special operations.
2. Psychological warfare to succeed should be used when the enemy is at a distinct disadvantage, to gain their worth, as indiscriminate use as an attempt to harrass, is without value.
3. A thorough preparation and orientation for all echelons prior to an attack is a must, both for morale and success in an operation.
4. Training in special operations must not be simulated, but must be as close to actual needs or requirements as possible to succeed.
5. The proper and prompt application of field expedients can, when standard tried and true methods fail, be the difference between success or failure.

6. The use of reserves in line is a must if a situation so warrents, but the risk must be well calculated before hand.

7. Emphasis on the basic rules in training can not be stressed too frequently so that in combat they become second nature.

8. The use of artillery weapons is limited in built up areas, therefore all infantry should be taught the true replacement value of recoilless weapons.

9. The use of wire communications in the attack is to be highly regarded, as it might well be the only quick means of communications.

10. By-passing areas or sectors where the enemy might be waiting is a calculated risk, that must be taken in cases where lack of troops or time does not permit the complete clearing of an area.