

Staff Department
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1949-1950

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION 309TH INFANTRY
(78TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON THE
SCHWAMMENAUDEL DAM, SOUTHEAST OF SCHMIDT, GERMANY,
9-10 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Operations Officer)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION ATTACKING
AT NIGHT, THROUGH HEAVILY WOODED, HILLY TERRAIN TO SEIZE
A KEY OBJECTIVE

Captain Robert J. Bigart, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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ITEM NO: 3557

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Battalion, 309th Infantry, 78th US Infantry Division in the capture of the SCHWAMMENAUER DAM on the ROER RIVER, GERMANY, 9-10 February 1945, during the final assault on the SIEGFRIED LINE.

To orient this action to the overall operations in EUROPE it is necessary to discuss a few of the major events which preceded it.

On 6 June 1944 the Allied Armies invaded the continent of EUROPE across the beaches of NORMANDY. This was followed by the subsequent invasion of southern FRANCE on 15 August 1944 which gave added vigor to the Allied attacks. (See Map A) (1)
The main effort of the Allied Armies upon reaching the German frontier was to be in the north, generally along the AACHEN-COLOGNE axis. The flat COLOGNE PLAIN would permit a rapid closing to the RHINE and capture of the industrial RUHR VALLEY.
(2)

By early September 1944 the German Armies had been driven from most of FRANCE and BELGIUM and were rapidly withdrawing to the protection of the SIEGFRIED LINE. This defensive line had been constructed just inside the German border from SWITZERLAND to the NORTH SEA. ROTGEN, a small road center south of

(1) A-1, p. 62, 68

(2) A-1, p. 79

AACHEN, became the first German town to be captured; falling to elements of the First US Army on 13 September. Here a partial penetration of the SIEGFRIED LINE was made. It was planned at that time that a rapid advance to DUREN on the ROER RIVER would take about five days. As we shall see in this monograph it actually took five months to achieve this objective. (See Map B) (3)

Repeated attacks by several US Divisions during September, October and November in this sector made practically no gains into the stubborn SIEGFRIED defenses. (4) (5)

The situation was somewhat better in other portions of the First Army front to the north. There US Divisions were approaching the ROER RIVER. (6) They would not be able to cross, however, until the ROER RIVER DAMS east of ROTGEN were captured, as these dams gave the Germans the capability of flooding the ROER whenever they deemed it profitable to their defense.

A heavy bombing attack by 205 aircraft in early December produced many hits but did not breach the dams as they were constructed of a concrete core covered with earth. (7)

On 13 December the 78th Infantry Division, newly arrived from the United States, attacked under V Corps in another attempt to take these dams. This attack had barely started when the German ARDENNES counteroffensive forced the division to go on the defensive. (8)

By 26 January 1945 the German offensive had been stopped and driven back to the shelter of the SIEGFRIED LINE defenses. (9)

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- (3) A-7, p. 239
 - (4) A-5, p. 280
 - (5) A-7, p. 309
 - (6) A-2, p. 42
 - (7) A-3, p. 95, 96
 - (8) A-9, p. 63
 - (9) A-6, p. 370

First US Army was now preparing an all out offensive to capture the ROER RIVER DAMS. (10)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The SIEGFRIED LINE at this point took advantage of the excellent defensive terrain in both a strategical and tactical sense. (See Map B) The ROER RIVER DAMS had been built here, where the ROER, URFT, OLEF and many smaller streams converge, as an integral part of the defensive system. (11)

The ROER RIVER flowed north from here, generally along the eastern edge of the SIEGFRIED LINE, until it entered HOLLAND at ROERMOND 50 miles to the north. Thus, these dams, located as they were on the north edge of the ARDENNES-EIFEL hill mass, served to extend that superior defensive obstacle out across the COLOGNE PLAIN. By controlling the ROER RIVER with the dams the Germans were able to impede the advance of the major portion of the Allied Armies on the vital northern front. (12) This also was the southeastern corner of the HURTGEN FOREST and tactically presented innumerable obstacles. (See Map C) The whole V Corps sector was traversed by numerous small streams, in wooded, deeply cut valleys. These formed, for the most part, cross corridors to the attack. All of these natural obstacles were cleverly exploited by well concealed pill-boxes, dragon's teeth, and minefields. (13)

Early February 1945 saw the cold weather of the two previous months gradually give way to the mud and slush of an early spring. The poor roads in V Corps forward area were becoming a threat to the adequate movements of heavy support wea-

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- (10) A-2, p. 121
 - (11) A-10, p. 31
 - (12) A-5, p. 280
 - (13) A-3, p. 52

pons, armor and supply activities. (14)

The 78th Infantry Division had, in its two months of combat, undergone a brief but costly attack phase followed by five weeks of defensive warfare and local attacks against key SIEGFRIED pillboxes. Adequate replacements had been received by late January and morale was excellent. There had been a shortage of winter clothing but the better weather now made this a relatively unimportant matter. On the other side of the line the Germans were not in as good a position, except for terrain. Morale had naturally been lowered by the failure of the ARDENNES counteroffensive. The units were all understrength and some were only remnants of larger units. Allied air activity was causing serious problems in resupplying the SIEGFRIED positions, although there were adequate local stocks on hand. The overall combat efficiency of the US forces was excellent and that of the German forces good.

W
case
Opposite the dams and the front held by the 78th Infantry Division, the principal enemy force was the 272d Volksgrenadier Division reinforced by numerous fortress units. (15)

The preliminary phase of the First Army's spring offensive called for the capture of the ROER RIVER DAMS. This would be followed by crossings of the ROER by the First and Ninth Armies to the north. The mission of capturing the dams and the high ground to the east and south was given to V Corps. (See Map C) (16)

V Corps planned for the 9th Infantry Division to attack the URFT DAM in the south portion of the corps sector. The 78th Infantry Division was to attack the SCHWAMMENAUDEL DAM in

(14) A-4, p. 120

(15) Personal knowledge

(16) A-2, p. 119

the extreme northern portion of the sector. The latter was the largest and most important of the five dams and was the control center of the whole flood system. (17)

In compliance with the corps plan the 78th Division planned to attack from its line of contact in a four phase attack to seize the SCHWAMMENAUER DAM. (See Maps C, D) Phase 1 called for the use of all three infantry regiments in the seizure of the STRAUCH-SCHMIDT ridge as far as the barracks area. Phase 2 was to extend the front line to include the important town of SCHMIDT. Phase 3 was to seize the last high ground north of the dam. Phase 4 was to be the actual attack on the dam itself. (18)

This 78th Division portion of the corps attack began on schedule at 0300 hours 5 February 1945. Phase 1 was completed the same day with only moderate resistance. Phase 2, the capture of SCHMIDT, KOMMERSCHIEDT and HARSCHIEDT, was not completed until 1400 hours 8 February. This period of three days had seen very bitter fighting by all three infantry regiments. Both the 310th and the 311th Regiments shared in the capture of SCHMIDT with the 309th capturing KOMMERSCHIEDT. The Division had started the 310th Infantry on Phase 3, the drive for the high ground east of SCHMIDT, even before that town was completely cleared. (19)

The V Corps situation at this time was as follows: The Army Commander had just called and stated that the SCHWAMMENAUER DAM must be captured immediately. The Corps Commander, personally directing the action, decided to commit the 9th Division through the 78th Division, attaching the 309th and the

(17) A-6, p. 372, 385

(18) A-9, p. 95

(19) A-9, p. 113

311th Infantry Regiments to the former division. The 9th Division had completed its capture of the URFT DAM on 4 February. At 2100 hours on 8 February this division assumed responsibility for the zone. The 9th Division planned to attack at 0530 hours 9 February with the 60th Infantry and the 311th Infantry abreast to seize the high ground above the dam and HASENFELD. The 309th Infantry was then to be committed to make the final attack on the dam as originally planned by the 78th Division.

(20)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLAN OF THE 309TH INFANTRY

Upon attachment to the 9th Infantry Division, the 309th Infantry assembled in the SCHMIDT-KOMMERSCHIEDT area. (See Map D)

The regiment planned to have the 1st Battalion attack and seize the SCHWAMMENAUER DAM. The 3d Battalion and 2d Battalion, in that order, would be prepared to reinforce the attack if necessary. These two battalions were also instructed to prepare plans to cross the river after the dam had been captured.

(21)

THE BATTALION SITUATION (See Map D)

Throughout this operation it had been planned that one battalion of the 309th Infantry would make the final dam assault. Having been selected for the task, the 1st Battalion was not committed in the attack during the first four days of the operation. It had, however, held portions of the front line in the woods west of SCHMIDT and had suffered some casual-

(20) A-6, p. 378

(21) Personal knowledge

ties. Combat effectiveness of the battalion was excellent and strength was about 90 per cent.

Shortly after noon on 8 February, the battalion closed into the rear assembly area on the western edge of SCHMIDT.

While this move was taking place, the battalion commander was receiving confirming orders to plan the dam operation in detail. Major Harry E. Gerlman and four other specially trained men from the 303d Engineer Battalion were attached to the 1st Battalion. This team would inspect the dam for demolitions and other technical details. For the first time aerial photos of the objective became available and from these a detailed study of the terrain was made. A series of numbered check points for map reference was established and applied to the photos before they were distributed to the companies. Actual reconnaissance and observation of the area of operations was impossible as the forward assembly area was still 2000 yards within the German lines. The objective was 1500 yards beyond that, and at the bottom of a deep defile formed by the ROER. The terrain sloped downward steeply from the assembly area to the objective; the drop amounting to 600 feet. The expected zone of attack would be 500 yards wide bounded on the west by the ROER formed lake above the dam. Aerial photos disclosed that this zone was completely wooded with a distinctive line of heavier evergreens leading generally from the assembly area to the objective. The eastern boundary of the battalion zone sloped away toward HASENFELD, a mile east of the dam. The opposite side of the river presented similar terrain that rose abruptly into wooded hills which gave the Germans excellent observation and fields of fire on the dam from the south, west

and northwest. (22)

The German units engaged in the division zone at this time had been identified as elements of the 9th Panzer; 3d Parachute; 3d Panzergrenadier and the 85th Infantry Divisions. (23)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK (24) (See Map D)

As the battalion commander completed his final plan, late 8 February, there were many details that had to be considered as tentative.

The line of departure would be the south edge of the forward assembly area and H hour as ordered by the Commanding Officer 309th Infantry.

The 1st Battalion's plan of attack was to cross the line of departure with A and B Companies abreast, A Company on the right. These companies would attack straight down the long slope to the dam, using the line of heavy trees as a guide between companies. A company would capture the gate house at check point 1; the building between there and the top of the dam; and the west (right) half of the knob overlooking the dam. It would also send a patrol with the attached engineer team to inspect the dam. B Company would capture the east (left) half of the knob; the valve house at the bottom of the dam and the powerhouse nearby. C Company, initially in reserve, would follow B Company on order. One machine gun section of D Company was attached to A Company and the other sections were in general support. The 81 mm mortar platoon was to be in general support from positions near the line of de-

(22) Personal knowledge

(23) A-9, p. 115

(24) Personal knowledge and statement of Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Schellman, then Battalion Commander, 1st Battalion, 309th Infantry, on 24 November 1949

parture.

The attached platoon of light tanks from D Company, 774th Tank Battalion would move to the forward assembly area after the foot column. They would then be employed in the attack if ground reconnaissance pointed out a useful mission for them.

The battalion command group was to follow A Company. Due to the expected brief stay in the forward assembly area, and the difficult terrain, radio was planned as the primary means of communications to the companies. It was also visualized that wire lines from regiment to battalion would be difficult to install and that radio would probably be the most dependable communication. With this dependence on radio; plans were made to have extra amounts of spare batteries on hand. The simplified operations code that the battalion had been using, plus the check point system of map references, would be used to permit rapid and accurate messages with short transmissions.

The battalion command post (rear), the ammunition SP, and the aid station were to be in two buildings along the road west of the assembly area.

As the time for movement from the rear assembly area to the forward assembly area and the attack were unknown, normal feeding plans were continued. Each man was to carry the normal blanket roll and K rations.

MOVEMENT TO THE LINE OF DEPARTURE AND FINAL PREPARATIONS
FOR THE ATTACK (25) (See Map D)

During the night 8-9 February the 1st Battalion was ordered to plug a gap in the line in the vicinity of HARSCHIEDT and

(25) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lieutenant Colonel
Schellman, 24 November 1949

this mission was given to C Company.

The morning of 9 February started with savage fighting by the 60th and 311th Infantry to force the Germans off the high ground that was to be the 1st Battalion's forward assembly area. This battle raged until late in the afternoon, when the 1st Battalion's assembly area was finally seized. At 1550 hours the battalion moved forward through battered SCHMIDT in a column of companies, order of march: CP Group, A, B, D, and Headquarters Company. C Company was to rejoin the battalion as it passed through SCHMIDT and fall in behind B Company in the column.

The road from the rear assembly area to the forward assembly area was under observed German artillery fire, and casualties began to mount. Among these was Captain Rufus Cox, commander of C Company.

By 1745 hours the battalion was closing into the forward assembly area and rapidly digging in as protection from the mortar and artillery fire that was even more effective here due to tree bursts.

Darkness was rapidly settling on the area and a light rain fell intermittently. The battalion commander and everyone else expected that the attack would continue in the morning. This was the situation at 1830 hours when orders were received from regiment to attack immediately!

Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Schellman, the Battalion Commander, decided to make few changes in the plan as everyone had been thoroughly briefed. He hastily assembled the company commanders and gave them their last minute orders. Shell bursts at this time were so numerous that the orders had to be

shouted into the ear of each officer in turn. The following changes in the formation were made. C Company would follow the road as far as possible, keep echeloned to the left rear of B Company, protect the left flank of the battalion, and block the HASENFELD ROAD near the objective. On the recommendation of Captain Edward J. O'Melia, D Company Commander, one machine gun platoon would follow each assault company in direct support. The platoon of light tanks would remain in the forward assembly area for the night. With visual control being impossible now, the command group would move at the head of the reserve.

NARRATION

THE ATTACK BEGINS

At 1900 hours on 9 February 1945 the 1st Battalion moved out of the forward assembly area toward SCHWAMMENAUER DAM led by A and B Companies. A Company was on the right and the interval between companies was about 100 yards. (See Maps D, F)

These two leading companies were forced, by the inky blackness and heavy underbrush, to move in a column of platoons and within the platoons in single file. In fact it could be said that the companies were in single file and completely closed up.

Even in this relatively effective formation progress was very slow and the column was frequently broken by the combined obstacles of complete darkness, heavy underbrush, and terrain that sloped downward on an average of one yard in every seven traveled. The only redeeming feature was the fact that artillery fire passing overhead and the water rushing through the dam effectively deadened the noise of the advancing columns.(26)

(26) Personal knowledge

The company commanders and platoon leaders leading A and B Companies were able to read their maps and aerial photos by using a flashlight inside a poncho. The original plan of using a distinctive line of trees leading into the objective was not feasible as it was so dark that they could not be distinguished.

The battalion command group moved out of the assembly area on the HASENFELD ROAD at the head of C Company.

An hour passed in which the stumbling, groping columns traversed about 800 yards; or roughly, half the distance to the dam. Surprisingly there had been no contact with the enemy and the companies pushed stealthily forward.

In the meantime the battalion command group had, by the sheerest luck, discovered a small dugout in the side of the hill. As radio contact with A and B Companies was becoming difficult, the battalion commander decided to use this dugout to install new batteries in the SCR 300 radio. Communications again became clear and it was now decided to establish the CP here as control by radio was of utmost importance. While the battalion CP was being set up, C Company was sent forward on its mission.

Another half hour passed and still no contact with the enemy. The officers of A and B Companies checked their aerial photos and maps frequently because they knew the objective was very close. It was virtually impossible to ascertain exact locations and B Company was amazed when they found they had reached the road in the vicinity of check point 49, exactly as planned. (See Maps E, F)

It was now 2100 hours as Captain Donald H. Gothard de-

ployed B Company with the 1st and 2d Platoons on line and the 3d Platoon in support and pushed slowly forward. (27)

FIRST CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY

This formation had just been organized when Lieutenant William J. Biggart, platoon leader of the 2d Platoon, stepped into a two man German foxhole. The next few minutes were truly a nightmare. Apparently this was the first inkling the Germans had that an attack was underway. Their reaction was immediate and violent. Flares burst directly above B Company and machine gun and small arms swept the position from the powerhouse only fifty yards away. The flares also disclosed to B Company that they were right in the middle of a line of German foxholes. The occupants of these positions were quickly eliminated and the fire from the powerhouse was returned with all the small arms and bazookas of B Company. (28)

In the meantime A Company was having a similar experience. In descending the slope no enemy contact was made until the leading platoon stumbled into German foxholes, between check points 8 and 1. Although the element of surprise was lost the situation remained confusing for both sides.

Captain John H. Miller led his company toward their primary objective; the building that housed the intake gates. The company was now within assaulting distance of the gate house, and the several buildings directly to the south. The platoons spread out according to plan with one platoon on the left advancing toward check point 6 on the knob overlooking the dam itself. The other two platoons advanced toward the

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- (27) Personal knowledge; Statement by William J. Biggart, then Platoon Leader in B Company, on 17 November 1949.
(28) Personal knowledge; Statement by William J. Biggart, then Platoon Leader in B Company, on 17 November 1949.

buildings from which heavy small arms fire was now coming.

(29)

In B Company the fire fight for the powerhouse had been raging for about 15 minutes. The bazookas were proving to be the decisive factor and the enemy fire weakened and finally ceased. Several German soldiers came into B Company's position to surrender, creating considerable confusion in the darkness. With only the light of an occasional flare, and with other Germans still in their holes, Captain Gothard's men were having great difficulty in distinguishing friend from foe. The handling of PW's in the dark was something that hadn't been planned for and in the turmoil some of these surrendering Germans were killed before they could be organized into a semblance of order. (30)

It was just as resistance ceased in the powerhouse that the event everyone had been dreading took place; the unmistakable, dull rumble of demolitions. Fortunately it was only the valve house and not the dam itself. This little building about 100 yards to the west (right) of the powerhouse was completely demolished; and more important, the control valves it contained as well. The water now rushed out in an uncontrolled torrent. The low steady undertone that had aided the assaulting infantrymen to approach so close now became a deafening roar. (31)

THE BATTLE TO REACH THE DAM

At this time, A Company was experiencing a very similar situation and the same perplexing problem of managing PW's, and trying to maintain control and organization in the darkness.

(29) Personal knowledge

(30) Personal knowledge; Statement of William J. Biggart, 17 November 1949

(31) Personal knowledge; Statement of George Ampacher, then Platoon Leader in D Company on 1 December 1949.

Resistance at the gate house had been overcome by the use of grenades and heavy small arms fire at point blank range; but not before the Germans had succeeded in damaging the intake gates and thoroughly jamming them in an open position.

One after another the buildings between the gate house and the top of the dam were captured in a similar manner. The left platoon of A Company, on the knob above, was attempting to clean out German positions in the heavy underbrush. (32)

By now check point 64, the north end of the road across the dam, had been reached. It was time for Captain Miller of A Company to bring up his attached engineer team and organize a patrol to take them over the top of the dam. This was the most important part of the whole operation. Division G-2 had provided detailed blueprints of the dam which were now invaluable. These showed that directly under the road leading across the dam was a massive concrete core. Running lengthwise inside this core was a tunnel with its main entrance on the south (enemy) side of the dam. Everyone in the battalion was thinking of this tunnel now; seeing it packed with demolitions, with the Germans waiting for the opportune moment to press a button and send it sky high. Now that they had damaged the intake gates and blown the outlet valves, it was obvious that a thorough demolition plan was in effect. (33)

PATROL ACTION ON THE DAM

This was the situation at 2300 hours as the A Company patrol and the five man engineer team started to cross the

(32) Personal knowledge and Statement of Lawson M. Safely, then Platoon Leader in D Company, on 1 December 1949

(33) Personal knowledge

400 yard exposed roadway. German flares revealed them almost immediately and machine gun fire from the high ground south of the dam drove them back to the shelter of the buildings at check point 64.

The battalion commander now called for an artillery preparation along the south bank of the river to silence enemy small arms fire. The artillery liaison officer, Captain Andrew W. Sullivan, of the 308th F. A. Battalion, had been waiting impatiently for just such a mission. This was to be his chance to fire a really imposing array of artillery. The importance of the dam was such that V Corps had lined up every piece of artillery within range; which amounted to approximately 43 battalions of all calibers. Within a few minutes 30 of these battalions were firing a T.O.T. concentration. It was truly impressive to watch it hit along the German side of the river. This intense fire effectively covered the area a half mile to the east and west of the dam, and two hundred yards inland to the south, momentarily illuminating the river and dam. (34) (35)

Lieutenant Colonel Schellman now ordered both A and B Companies to send patrols across the dam. The original patrol from A Company started out again with the same mission of getting the engineers into the main tunnel entrance. This time only a few stray bullets impeded their progress as they ran across the top of the dam. As they reached the south side of the dam they were brought to an abrupt halt when they found that the bridge over the spillway had been blown. The spillway at this point was 50 feet wide and about 40 feet deep with

(34) Personal knowledge

(35) A-7, p. 312

vertical concrete walls; crossing by any improvised means was out of the question. The only other entrance to the tunnel was on the lower face of the dam, 200 yards northeast from the blown bridge. The patrol proceeded down the steeply terraced east face of the dam toward this new objective. In the darkness they stumbled into the rear of a German machine gun nest and captured six prisoners without suffering any casualties. Within a few minutes the patrol reached the tunnel entrance, and the engineers entered to make their inspection, while the infantrymen took up defensive positions.

During this time the patrol from B Company, led by 2d Lieutenant William J. Biggart, was operating in the same general area; having previously cleaned out the last resistance in the powerhouse. When the main spillway bridge was found to be blown, B Company's patrol searched for an alternate means of crossing. They found the lower bridge over the spillway intact and free of demolitions. The battalion commander ordered the patrol of B Company to cross this lower spillway bridge and hold the south end of it to protect A Company's patrol and the engineers working inside the dam.

When the engineer team completed their inspection, they returned to the worried doughboys waiting at the entrance. It was with the greatest relief that their report was received. Incredibly, the dam itself had not been prepared for demolitions! This report was joyfully flashed back to A Company; then to the battalion CP, and on to the rear. Division, Corps, Army and Army Group were waiting almost as anxiously as the men at the dam as the capture of this objective was the primary mission of most of these units. (36)

(36) Personal knowledge

THE DAM IS SECURED

The two companies at the dam continued to patrol and clean out sporadic resistance on the north side of the river. Another patrol from B Company crossed the lower spillway bridge and worked its way almost to the top of the dam without detection. On the way back, after recrossing the bridge, this same patrol ran into some barbed wire and booby traps on the face of the dam near the spillway.

It was now about 0200 hours 10 February 45 and A and B Companies were closely linked in the confined area immediately to the north of the dam. In fact they were sharing the same CP; a narrow tunnel in the side of the hill. This offered the best shelter in the area and consequently was also being used as a forward aid station.

Throughout the attack radio contact with C Company had been broken several times. It appeared that the new company commander of this organization was having great difficulty in maintaining control and finding his way in the darkness. Fortunately, no enemy positions were encountered and C Company finally reestablished contact with B Company at 0300 hours. (37)

Daylight of 10 February was a most welcome sight to the men of the 1st Battalion. There was still some mopping up to be done, but it was mostly a matter of collecting prisoners. Many Germans were still in their foxholes throughout the area between check points 1 and 49. Some had tried to surrender the night before; but a few put up a fight until they saw that they were surrounded. Small enemy groups were also

(37) Personal knowledge; Statement of Lieutenant Colonel Schellman, 24 November 1949

eliminated in the right rear portion of the battalion area. Patrols cleaned out the area east to HASENFELD which had just been captured by the 60th Infantry after an all-night battle. Contact was also established with the 3d Battalion of the 309th Infantry which had moved up to positions south of the forward assembly area. Reconnaissance elements of the 2d and 3d Battalions moved into the confined area at the dam to complete plans for the expected assault crossing. (38)

The elimination of the last German resistance north of the dam brought a change in the enemy activity. They now began to pour in heavy artillery and mortar fire from the commanding ground on the south side of the river. Division artillery and the battalion 81 mm platoon fired many counter-battery missions but with only moderate success. An unfortunate incident occurred during this artillery fire; through an error at the guns, one concentration landed on the battalion, causing several casualties. By now it was impossible for the men to move out of their foxholes, due to the steady rain of enemy mortar shell. This situation continued throughout daylight of 10 February. It was not until nightfall that all of the wounded could be evacuated to the rear by vehicles and rations and ammunition brought forward to the dam.

In summing up the results of this battle it is obvious that the 1st Battalion, 309th Infantry was extremely successful. Admittedly the units that had captured SCHMIDT, and the high ground to the southeast, had much to do with this success and made possible the rapid dash to the dam. However, it was the 1st Battalion's execution of a hastily planned night at-

(38) Personal knowledge and statement of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Monroe, then Executive Officer 3d Battalion, 309th Infantry, on 1 February 1950

tack that achieved decisive results in securing SCHWAMMENAUER DAM. This eliminated the enemy capability of flooding the ROER RIVER VALLEY. The water impounded by the dam was dissipated within two weeks and the 12th and 21st Army Groups made their long delayed crossings of the ROER. German losses in the action at the dam amounted to 153 prisoners of war and about half that number killed; this against 50 killed and wounded in the 1st Battalion. However, the battalion was to suffer more casualties holding the dam, than were lost in taking it, due to the concentration of a large number of troops in a small, exposed area. (39)

The 1st Battalion, 309th Infantry was cited for outstanding performance of duty during this action; and was awarded the Distinguished Unit Badge under the provisions of Section II, General Orders, Number 87, War Department, dated 9 August 1946. (40)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. THE PLANS OF HIGHER HEADQUARTERS

The concept and execution of the overall plans for the capture of the Dam were very sound. The 78th Division's early designation of one specific regiment to execute the operation aided planning by that unit. In turn, the tentative assignment of the 1st Battalion continued this desirable course. However, these plans could have been helped if aerial photographs had been made available to the battalion sooner. This was an important point because absolutely no ground recon-

(39) Personal knowledge; statement of Lieutenant Colonel Schellman, 24 November 1949

(40) A-11, p. 1

naissance could be made prior to the attack. In view of this it seems apparent that aerial observation from liaison planes, might well have been employed. The decision of the 9th Infantry Division to retain the basic plans and troop assignments of the 78th Division was fortunate in view of the short time available. The results of the hastily ordered night attack were spectacular. However, some warning that a night attack might take place should have been given to the 1st Battalion during the planning phase. The fact that this battalion had no experience in night attacks, plus an unsuccessful attack of this type by the 310th Infantry on 6 February, led all concerned to discount such a possibility.

2. THE BATTALION PLANS AND ORDERS

Due to the situation the original plan of the battalion commander was kept as simple as possible; rather than inject many items that could at best be tentative. It was a sound plan though; and assigned separate, easily identified routes, and key objectives to each of the two assault companies. This plan was formulated and issued to the companies in a minimum of time so that they could thoroughly brief all key men. This was to pay high dividends. The battalion commander's decisions in the forward assembly area, when notified to make an immediate night attack, were commendable. Knowing the thoroughness of the original briefing, at the company and platoon level, and the high capacity for flexibility in his officers; he decided to modify his plan as little as possible. In this way the companies attacked on time and assumed new formations without confusion or noise. Many desirable features of night at-

tack orders had to be sacrificed but the essential elements of simplicity, surprise, direction, and control were achieved. ✓

3. COMMUNICATIONS AND CONTROL

Adequate communication was maintained throughout the operation with both the companies and regiment; with the exception of C Company. This was due primarily to superior communication SOP's in the battalion. One of these was the insistence of the battalion commander that every radio would always have a minimum of one extra battery with it. Regiment ✓ was tardy in getting a wire line forward to the battalion CP but this can be understood in view of the darkness, terrain, and heavy enemy shelling. The ability of the battalion CP to immediately coordinate the fires of 30 FA battalions was due to superior communication from company to battalion and from there to the rear. Another important factor in this control was the use of a simple, efficient system of numbered reference points on the aerial photos which were the primary maps in this operation. These check points, as they were called, enabled all elements to report locations and information accurately and with a minimum of time and effort. This proved highly important when these photos were being read under most difficult conditions. ✓

4. THE CONDUCT OF THE ATTACK

In the movement from the forward assembly area to the place of first enemy contact, A and B Companies displayed superb discipline. Noise was kept to a minimum and was effectively muffled by the sound of the river and enemy artil-

lery fire passing overhead, as the battalion moved down into the defile. This was so effective that complete tactical surprise was achieved. Company objectives at the dam were located, assaulted, and captured by the predesignated companies and platoons with less confusion than was expected.

There was, in fact, more confusion in C Company, the reserve, than in the two assault companies. This was due to the fact that the company commander had no time to orient himself to the job. Having recently joined C Company he assumed command less than an hour before the attack started.

5. HANDLING OF PRISONERS OF WAR AT NIGHT

Special consideration in managing prisoners of war was completely overlooked in the battalion plan and order. This resulted in considerable confusion in both A and B Companies when the success of the attack exceeded expectations. There was great delay in evacuating any PWs to the rear; some were killed and others dispersed. These were intermingled with our troops throughout the night. This condition caused considerable mopping up the next morning. No really effective method of solving the problem was improvised.

6. LEADERSHIP

The true key to success in this operation was leadership. It was exercised to a marked degree from the battalion commander's unruffled acceptance of a last minute change in orders to the actions of squad leaders in the final hand-to-hand fighting at the dam. Everyone was rather skeptical of a hasty night

attack under the existing circumstances. The aggressive drive of Captains Miller and Cothard, and most of their platoon leaders, was undoubtedly the most important element of all. These two company commanders personally led their companies to the objective in a minimum of time and effectively employed them in the dark to carry out their mission. The contrast in C Company was marked and this unit did not as effectively carry out its mission. This was not due so much to a lack of inherent leadership on the part of the C Company Commander as it was to the unavoidable events which prevented him from effectively applying leadership. A like situation in A or B Company could easily have led to disaster.

7. OPERATIONS IN A DEFILE

In making an analysis of this attack into the ROER RIVER defile, it is apparent that a night attack was the best method of reaching the objective with a minimum of casualties. Though this particular night attack was hastily conceived, planned, and executed, it is doubtful if any other type would have worked in view of the superior German observation. In this instance, capture of objectives in the bottom of the defile was quickly made. A careful study of the terrain would have revealed that the opposite side of the defile would take considerably longer to capture. The ROER RIVER was a formidable obstacle and precluded a rapid crossing in force, by either belligerent. Once the dam was secured a small alert garrison would be sufficient to hold it. A rifle company would have been ideal for the limited area available. With an organization of this size fewer casualties would result and supply

and evacuation problems would be simplified.

8. ENEMY POSITIONS AND ACTIONS

In weighing all the factors that led to the successful attack on the dam the failures of the Germans can not be overlooked. They had fought savagely for all the critical terrain protecting the dam for the previous five months. Two hours before the attack, they had finally been driven from the last high ground on the route to the dam. They had apparently expected that no night attack would be made and consequently their security was inefficient. The 1st Battalion was able to slip by several sizable groups on its approach to the objective. Here also, security was lax; permitting our forces to advance to the enemy positions before they were discovered. If the enemy had detected our advance early; or if they had used mines across the rather narrow zone that was available, it seems likely that a successful attack would have taken several more days. The Germans had lost commanding ground north of the river but they retained unassailable observation and fields of fire from the high south bank. The enemy demolition plan was most effective, however, in that it made maximum use of the twenty two billion gallons of water in the reservoir. By blowing only the valves in the underground flume a sufficient flood was created to delay crossings of the ROER for another two weeks. Had the dam itself been demolished it would have caused a flash flood that would have been expended in about one day.

LESSONS

1. In night attacks the timely designation of units and the early issuance of detailed plans and orders is of added importance.

2. At the battalion level plans must be kept so simple and flexible that they can be modified or changed on a moment's notice.

3. Control in a night attack is one of the essential elements and can often be achieved only by superior radio communication.

4. The achievement of surprise and the avoidance of confusion are deciding factors in night attacks.

5. Some workable system for evacuating PW's during a night attack must be planned in advance.

6. Confident, aggressive leadership at all echelons is particularly necessary in night operations.

7. In attacks on limited objectives, within a defile, prior planning must consider the withdrawal of some of the attacking troops; if these troops will not be needed to defend the objective.

8. The defense of a critical terrain feature must make maximum use of its defensive capabilities as long as possible.