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THE OPERATIONS OF THE THIRD PLATOON, COMPANY E,
7TH INFANTRY REGIMENT (THIRD INFANTRY DIVISION),
EAST OF OSTHEIM, IN THE COLMAR POCKET, ALSACE,
22-23 JANUARY 1945
(ALSACE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: RIFLE PLATOON IN THE ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph is the story of an American rifle platoon that fought to help clear a part of Alsace, France, of a force of Germans who held control of a bridgehead on the western bank of the Rhine River around the city of Colmar in January 1945. These enemy forces had held tightly to their bridgehead since late November 1944, when elements of the American Seventh Army and the First French Army, together on the north, and elements of the First French Army, alone on the south, had closed to the Rhine River on both their flanks. (See Map C.) (1)

Constricted on the Colmar plains and in the bordering mountain country to a pocket about 30 miles across at its widest point and 50 miles long at its greatest length (1a), with its heart itself in the city of Colmar, its farthest outposts dug in among the snow-covered mountainous terrain edging the flat plains, and its supply route across the Rhine River east of Neuf Brisach firm and secure, this hostile force held tenaciously to its bridgehead----through the end of November and early December 1944, when all the allied armies were rolling toward Germany, and then through the rest of December 1944 and early January 1945. During the critical days of the Battle of the Bulge, this enemy pocket constituted a grave threat to the right flank of a thinned-out Seventh Army which had had to extend its left in order to take over an area of responsibility from the American Third Army when this latter force was utilized to thrust north into the underbelly of the German westward smash into the Ardennes. (2)

- (1) A-1, p.197, p.200; p.505; (1a) A-4, pp.505-506;
(2) A-4, p.495; A-9, par.133a(1), par.145; A-10, p.44

The actions to be described took place 22 January through the night of 23-24 January 1945. The platoon to be followed was the Third Platoon of Company E, Seventh Infantry Regiment, of the American Third Infantry Division.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In January 1945 the Third Division was in contact with an enemy with which it had been continuously engaged for more than five months, ever since its assault landing across the beaches of Southern France on 15 August 1944. In those five months the division had fought its way from the Riviera up the Rhone Valley to the foothills of the Vosges Mountains, and then across these mountains in a bitter winter campaign to the Alsatian city of Strasbourg on the Rhine River, from where, in the latter part of December 1944, it moved to relieve the American Thirty-Sixth Infantry Division on the Colmar perimeter. (See Map A.) For the rest of December and the early days of January 1945, the division occupied defensive positions opposite the German forces which had been built up inside this bridgehead. (3)

In its five months of sustained combat, the Third Division had moved from the near tropical weather of Southern France to the chill of autumn around Besancon, France, and eventually to the rain and sleet and snow of winter in the Vosges Mountains. Bitter fighting, particularly in the approaches to the Vosges Mountains and in the crossing of that difficult barrier, had depleted its front-line companies of most of the men and officers who had landed with the division in Southern France. Filled with replacements in the mountains on several occasions, the division had lost many of these men also. (4)

The Third Platoon of Company E, Seventh Infantry, was typical of the rifle platoons in the division. By 3 December 1944, after a fierce struggle to clear holding forces of Germans from the western side of

(3) A-1, p.199, pp.126-204; (4) A-5, p.281, Table of Casualties.

Expecting to be catapulted across the Rhine River in the vicinity of Strasbourg, men of the platoon instead were surprised when they were sent to relieve elements of the Thirty-Sixth Division and became a part of the French forces. Once again the platoon was back in the Vosges Mountains, high, snow-laden, bleak, cold. For almost a month the platoon engaged in the dirty attrition of defensive mountain warfare. (9) It lost a few men, but in turn gained a few others who returned from the hospital.

By 17 January, when a platoon from a spanking new engineer company relieved it, the Third Platoon had built up its strength to about 24 men. It had lost its platoon sergeant and acting platoon leader, Sgt. Rickles (now a technical sergeant), who was sent to Epinal to receive a commission and several weeks training. Its new leader was S/Sgt. Blum; its platoon guide, S/Sgt. Adams (still unwounded, but not long to remain so); its two rated squad leaders, Sgt. Heskitt and Sgt. Fox. In addition, two other men had proved themselves in the mountain patrol clashes and were coming to occupy roles in the platoon leadership---Pfc. Clifford L. Hubbs and Pfc. Dean W. Spaeth. Of these men, Blum, Adams, Fox, Hubbs, and Spaeth were to be the actual leaders when the attack date in Colmar came. (10)

ATTACK PLANS

The General Plan

The attack of the United States Third Infantry Division was part of the combined efforts of all units under control of the First French Army to wipe out the German bridgehead in Colmar. Two main efforts were to be made. On 20 January 1945 the First French Corps was to open the assault with a thrust from the south, in the vicinity of Mulhouse. This operation was to be followed two days later by a night attack from the northwest, to be launched by the Second French Corps, of which the American division

(9) A-1, pp.197-204, p.289; (10) Personal Knowledge

was a part. The initial night assault in this last area would be followed the next morning by a new blow, when the Premiere Division Infanterie Marocain (11) jumped off in an attack against the northern flank of the pocket. The prongs of these thrusts, with the total weight of the First French Army behind them, were aimed at Neuf Brisach and the German supply-escape routes across the Rhine River in the neighborhood of that town. (12) (See Map C.)

The Third Division, in its sector, was ordered to force crossings of the Fecht and the Ill Rivers and then to pivot for a slash to the south across the Canal de Colmar, with the view (1) to isolate the city of Colmar itself and (2) to seize and hold important terrain features to the east of Colmar city, preparatory to a continued attack. (13) (See Map C.) The Seventh Infantry and Thirtieth Infantry were selected as the assault regiments. Plans called for the Seventh Infantry to force crossings of the Fecht River at Guemar and then to fight south towards Colmar city between the Fecht and Ill Rivers, the regiment to keep its right flank on the Fecht, its left on the Ill. (See Map B.) The Thirtieth Infantry, on the left flank of the division, likewise was to cross the Fecht at Guemar, but would continue on east to the Ill River, which it was also to force. The Thirtieth planned then to pivot to the right and sweep south, seizing assigned objectives in its zone. (13a)

This, then, was the division plan of attack: the Seventh Infantry to force crossings of the Fecht River at Guemar and pivot south, sweeping the area between the Fecht and the Ill Rivers; the Thirtieth Infantry to cross the Fecht River also and then to continue on east to the Ill River, which it would force and then turn to attack south. (See Maps B and D.)

(11) First Moroccan Infantry Division; (12) A-1, p.204; A-4, pp.626-630; A-7, pp.12-13; (13) A-1, p.204; A-5, p.302; (13a) A-5, p.303; A-6, p.308

Seventh Infantry Plan

The attack of the Seventh Infantry was an envelopment. All three of its battalions (initially two in assault, one in reserve) were to cross the Fecht River at the same point (Guemar), where they would pierce and plunge through the German lines on a very narrow front. Once this penetration was made, the battalions were to wheel to the right, deploy on line, and then roll south, crumpling the German winter defense line in an assault made upon that line's flank and rear. During this operation, the regimental left flank would be protected by the Ill River and by the Thirtieth Infantry on the other bank of that stream; its right flank would be protected by the Fecht River. (14) (See Map B.)

This was a simple plan, with obvious advantages in that powerhouse envelopment, which it was planned would roll down the German lines like a steel tape measure that was being wound up on its reel. But if the plan insured that the American regiment would smash into the German defenses from the flank, it also insured that in the path of these same forces lay every enemy position, every enemy weapon, and every enemy soldier that had been placed on the eastern banks of the Fecht River in two months of defensive warfare. Men of the Second Battalion (Company E) were told that the number of enemy would be about 400, a considerable under-estimation, as events proved. (15)

The First and Third Battalions were designated assault units for the Fecht River crossing, which was scheduled for both battalions on the south edge of Guemar during the night of 22-23 January. (16) Prior to H-Hour, which was set at 2100, each of these battalions was to move one assault platoon across the river in order to seize and secure bridgeheads for the crossings and to furnish protection for bridge-building parties from Company A, Tenth Engineers. The engineers would erect two foot-

(14) A-1, pp.204-205; Personal Knowledge; (15) Personal Knowledge;
(16) A-1, pp.204-205;

bridges ("Red" and "Blue"); and when these were completed, the First and Third Battalions were to cross the river and then attack south and south-east, the First Battalion to be the right battalion, with its flank on the Fecht, the Third Battalion to be the left battalion, with its left flank on the Ill River. (See Map B.) The attack was to be made by stealth. The Second Battalion, initially in reserve, was to cross the Fecht River on regimental order and attack south, taking its place in the center, between the other two battalions. (17)

Main objective for the First Battalion was the town of Ostheim. This was an important mission, inasmuch as Ostheim was to be the site for a vehicle bridge. (18) Until Ostheim was secured and this bridge built, the fighting battalions would have no armored support in their ranks. After Ostheim was secured, the First Battalion was to send at least one company about three-quarters of a mile south, where this company was to set up a strong roadblock north of the Chateau de Schoppenwihr. In this position the First Battalion company would (1) protect its own battalion from any enemy movement from the south and (2) protect the right flank of the Second Battalion, which would be passing through the Rothleible Woods, just east of this roadblock. (19)

The Second Battalion, once it was ordered to cross the Fecht River behind the First and Third Battalions, was to attack south through the thickly wooded Colmar Forest to a point just east of Ostheim, where the forest ended. (See Map B.) Here the battalion was to cross a flat, open plain and enter the Rothleible Woods, a long finger of new forest running south and southwest and comprising at this point the battalion's zone of advance. When the southern edge of the Rothleible Woods was secured, the battalion was to have one company dig in and hold this position, while with the remainder of its forces it attacked west from the woods in order to take the Chateau de Schoppenwihr from the rear. (20) In its attack

(17) A-1, p.205; Personal Knowledge; (18,19) A-1, p.205; (20) Personal Knowledge

against the chateau, which was a known enemy stronghold, the battalion was to receive supporting fires from the Seventh Infantry Battle Patrol and two medium tanks. (21) These last forces were to be located in the vicinity of a railroad bridge crossing the Fecht River northwest of the chateau. Once the chateau was stormed and taken, the Second Battalion was to move south again, seizing Rosenkranz and certain important road junctions just outside the suburbs of the city of Colmar. The battalion was to organize these final positions against any possible enemy attack and also was to send strong combat patrols south into the outskirts of Colmar city itself. (22)

The Third Battalion, one of the two original assault battalions in the crossing at Guemar, was to swing southeast through the Colmar Forest, seizing objectives in its zone. (23) The route of the battalion carried it completely through the Colmar Forest, Brunwald (a wooded area just east of the southern edge of the Rothleible Woods), the town of Houssen, and successive objectives to the south, until its final positions, like those of the Second Battalion, were just outside the suburbs of the city of Colmar. The Third Battalion was to set up blocks against any enemy armored thrust from the city and also was to send strong combat patrols to the south. The battalion was responsible to the regimental commander for a report on all available crossings over the Ill River in its area, as well as for maintaining contact with the Thirtieth Infantry on the left, on the far banks of the Ill.

As can be seen from the information above, the three attacking battalions would have with them no armored support initially. The bridges at Guemar were footbridges only. The regiment intended to get its vehicles and armored support across the Fecht at two points: (1) the site at Ostheim and (2) a second site on the road between Rosenkranz and Sigelsheim, a position which was to be seized and secured by the Battle Patrol after the capture of the Chateau de Schoppenwihr. (24)(See Map D.)

(21) A-1,p.205; A-8; (22) Personal Knowledge; A-1,p.205; (23) A-1,p.205;
(24) A-1,p.205

During the first phases of the night attack the regimental forward command post was set up in Guemar, near the river. Other elements of the regimental command group were stationed at first in the town of Beblenheim, west of Ostheim (25). This latter group was moved eventually to the west banks of the Fecht, in a part of the village of Ostheim on the friendly side of the river. (26)

Second Battalion and Company E Plans

The broad outline concerning objectives and missions of the Second Battalion has already been covered briefly in the consideration of the regimental plan of attack. At the time they were to be briefed on this assault, men of the Second Battalion were in billets in the town of Kayzersberg, to which they had moved after being relieved (on 17 January) of their early January defensive positions high in the snow-laden Vosges Mountains west and south of Ribeauville. (27) (See Map B.)

These men knew that their stay in Kayzersberg was to be short---probably only three or four days---and that at the end of this time they would begin a new attack. Their activity, however, showed surprisingly little concern for the future. They busied themselves with other things. All of the men had been quartered in buildings and an attempt was made for rest and comfort and rehabilitation. (28) Gas-protective capes had been sacrificed for window-panes in the bomb- and shell-torn structures; fires were started where possible in salvaged stoves; security guards were limited to a single sentinel in each platoon or billet and the rest of the men were encouraged to sleep. Company kitchens were brought up and the men were fed three hot meals a day---meals which honest-to-God cooks had cooked---with the result that nine men out of every ten acquired a case of "bellyache" and the "runs" and had to make hurried trips to the battalion aid station for a strong dose of paregoric,

(25) A-1, p.207; (26) A-1, p.208; (27) Personal Knowledge; (28) Personal Knowledge

a dose which proved an effective and immediate cure in most cases. (29)

So that all these home-comforts would not stale the men for the work which everyone knew lay ahead of them, a limited training and conditioning program was undertaken during this period. (30) Files of men plodded westward from the town every morning and noon, to muscle-loosening hikes along the snow- and ice-covered roads or to small scale maneuvers and fire-fights on the vineyard-stepped hills outside the village.

The Third Platoon of Company E was engaged on some such program also. (31) It was billeted on the second floor of a large building that had suffered only slight damage in the battles which had torn and scarred and burned a large proportion of the neighborhood. Its non-commissioned officers used up many a bottle of insecticide and many a C-ration can of gun oil in smokey attempts at candle-light for their card game of Casino, at which partners were changed frequently enough to keep everyone happy and about even in the won-and-lost columns. Members of the platoon were relaxed; they were satisfied with the warmth and the food and the limited training and the long nights of untroubled sleep.

As a platoon, they were mirthful over an incident which concerned themselves and a platoon aid-man who had earned for himself a considerable reputation for fearlessness---a hard-won reputation, incidentally, to which the man added in subsequent actions. (32) The entire platoon, except for one guard, was sound asleep the second night of their stay in Kayserberg when one of the enemy shells which usually plumped hollowly into far neighborhoods in search of a 4.2 chemical mortar unit, pounded instead to an ear-splitting detonation just outside the platoon quarters. All the gas-caps windowpanes were blown in and shrapnel tore chunks out of the ceilings of all rooms facing that one side of the building. In the darkness and confusion which followed, high above the hub-bub rang out one voice, beginning in the vicinity of the aid-man's bunk on the floor and

(29) Personal Knowledge; (30) A-1, p.204; Personal Knowledge; (31) Personal Knowledge; (32) Eyewitness

moving miraculously out into the dark hall and down the mysterious black well of the stairs, from which the last syllables floated up to the second floor:

"The aid station'll be in the basement!"

That no man needed the services thus offered merely made the incident more lasting as a bit of anecdote and folk-history of the platoon, capable of drawing a laugh months later.

The afternoon and evening of 21 January brought the thing for which everyone was waiting. (33) All of the officers and non-commissioned officers were called to the company CP and oriented as a body on the coming attack. Following this meeting, the platoon leaders alone remained behind to receive maps and the detailed company plan. In his orientation to the larger group, Captain James F. Powell, commanding the company, outlined these points (34) concerning the battalion plan of attack:

1. The battalion, when it crossed the Fecht River at Guemar and swung south to take up its position between the First and Third Battalions, would attack in a column of companies.

2. Company E would be the leading company in this formation.

3. Company E would be the assault company as far as the southeastern tip of the Rothleible Woods, where it would hold up and dig in until other elements of the battalion attacked and reduced the Chateau de Schoppenwihl. (See Map D.)

4. Upon capture of the chateau, Company E would launch an attack against Rosenkranz, possibly in coordination with another company from the chateau area.

5. Company E would continue the assault to the final battalion objectives south and southwest of Rosenkranz.

At the meeting of platoon leaders, Captain Powell led them in a detailed map study, since no actual physical reconnaissance of the terrain was possible. (35) It was agreed that little could be told concerning

(33,34,35) Eyewitness

the density of the Colmar Forest and of the Rothleible Woods or of the obstacles, German-made or natural, which would be encountered. Captain Powell ordered (36) that initially, upon entrance of the Colmar Forest, the Third and Second Platoons attack abreast, each with two squads forward. If possible, this formation would be maintained as far as the final objective.

The Third Platoon was assigned the left half of the sector of advance. (37) To it was attached the company section of light machine guns, with orders that these guns were to be carried well forward and in a spot to cover best the left flank of the company when it became engaged with the enemy. The platoon was to guide on the Second Platoon, which would be on its right. Upon reaching the southeastern edge of the Rothleible Woods, the Third Platoon was to maintain defense of the company's left flank and left front, tying in with the Second Platoon, which would be in position to its right and right rear, and with the First Platoon, which would set up a rear defense in the company area. In addition, the Third Platoon at this time was to send a strong patrol southwest into Rosenkranz.

When the Chateau de Schoppenwihr fell and the company received the battalion order to continue the attack, the Third and Second Platoons, still attacking abreast, were to take Rosenkranz, definite sectors of which were allotted to each platoon. (38) Once Rosenkranz was secure, the same two platoons were to advance to the last two objectives southwest of Rosenkranz---important road junctions. Besides taking its part in formation of a strong roadblock with the rest of the company on the second of these last objectives, the Third Platoon again was to send out a strong patrol---this time south along a main road into Colmar city as far as the patrol could go, with the mission of observing any enemy activity either outside the city or inside the city itself, if the patrol were fortunate

(36) Eyewitness; (37, 38) Personal Knowledge

enough to get that far.

In addition to the section of light machine guns, the Third Platoon was given control of its 2.36 rocket-launcher team, which at this time normally was under control of the company commander of Company E. (39) Since the attack was to be made initially without any armor support, Captain Powell ordered that a full load of rockets be carried and that the rocket-launcher teams be charged with anti-tank protection of the platoons and of the company. In addition, rifle grenadiers were to carry a maximum number of AT grenades. Riflemen were to carry a full belt of ammunition, plus four extra bandoleers. Every man in the platoon was to carry four hand grenades---three fragmentation and one white phosphorous. One day's K-ration would be issued to each man, gas masks were ordered to be carried, and white camouflage suits (known as "spook suits") were to be worn. (40)

Weapons in the Third Platoon included two carbines (carried by the platoon sergeant, who was also the acting platoon leader, and by his messenger), four Thompson sub-machine guns (carried by the platoon guide and the three squad leaders), and one automatic rifle in each squad. Everyone else carried the M1 rifle, with one rifleman in each squad acting as rifle grenadier. (41)

THE ATTACK

Dawn of 22 January found members of the Third Platoon of Company E eating their last breakfast in the safety of bomb-shattered Kayzersberg. A good part of the morning was spent in thorough orientation of the squad leaders and their men. (42) Ammunition loads were distributed and the men spent some time contriving to make their loads compact and transportable. To give greater freedom to the individual, both the pack and cartridge belt were worn on top of the "spook suits", a method which

(39) Personal Knowledge; (40) From notes taken on 21 January 1945;
(41, 42) Personal Knowledge

sacrificed something of camouflage to the greater need of easy access to weapons and ammunition. For a like reason, it was decided not to wear the hoods of these suits, as it had been proved in the Vosges Mountain positions that the various type hoods issued for protection against the weather worked a very dangerous disadvantage in hearing ability to the wearer. (43)

By noon everyone had stood in the chow line one last time and was ready for the move to a concentration area around Riquewihr, northeast of Kayzersberg. (See Map G.) The platoon was to make this move about 1400 hours, when the Second Battalion moved out behind the other two battalions. (44)

Kaysersberg was the initial point for all three battalions, their order of march being: First Battalion, Third Battalion, and then Second Battalion. (45) While the Third Platoon of Company E was still making last minute preparations for its move, troops of the Red (First) Battalion at 1000 hours crossed the IP on schedule. Leaving Kayzersberg behind them, these troops moved east, toward the front lines, as far as road junction 229.3 on the edge of Kientzheim, where they turned north towards Riquewihr along an unimproved road which crosses a saddle between the wooded mountains of the Bois de Kientzheim and Mont de Sigolsheim. (See Map B.) Their movement up this road, which in some places had high banks, was detected from the south by enemy observers, who immediately brought down artillery fire on the road, covering it from the vicinity of the junction to the point where the road disappeared over the first rise. Despite this fire, the First Battalion moved its troops up and over the hill successfully.

Less fortunate was the Third or Blue Battalion, which followed behind the First at 1230. (46) The enemy, now aware of troop movements along the road up over the saddle, were waiting and unleashed heavy

(43) Personal Knowledge; (44) Personal Knowledge; A-1, pp.206-207;
(45) A-1, pp.206-207; (46) Personal Knowledge; A-1, p.207

fire upon the Blue Battalion troops as they struggled up the hill. Most of the shells landed on either side of the road, among vineyards; but a few fell in the road itself, causing casualties and some confusion, before the last man had passed the danger zone and disappeared over the hill.

The Second Battalion was delayed some little while by the accident which befell the Blue Battalion (47); but finally it also moved out of Kayzersberg, to be subjected in its turn to the same interditory fire. The troops hurried up the hill, struggling in the icy tracks left by vehicles, crouching low as each shell went overhead to plump into the vineyards and snow, occasionally hitting the banks as one came exceptionally close. In this fashion man after man successfully negotiated the slippery track, past the spot where red blood marred the snow and the white camouflage suits on the bodies of Third Battalion men who had been caught and mangled by shell fire earlier in the afternoon.

Company E, with its Third Platoon in the lead, passed successfully up the shelled road and closed into its concentration area in Riquewihr about 1800. (48) It was already dark by the time the company reached this area. The night was exceedingly cold and the men had found the dangerous trip over the Kientzheim-Sigolsheim saddle wearing on both their strength and nerves. (49) They sought warmth close to the walls of buildings and in cellars, small groups finding their way into basements filled with old bottles and wine-casks and straw and the stale smell of animals and manure. The platoon moved out about an hour later, when the battalion began the march to its forward assembly area southwest of Guemar. The long trek along the icy roads to this assembly area was completed without further mishap, and by 2100 hours the battalion had closed into its position.

Company E found itself dispersed in a field covered with lumber. (50) The Third Platoon began its wait among the piles of boards, in the snow.

(47) Personal Knowledge; (48) A-1, p.207; (49) Personal Knowledge;
(50) Eyewitness

However, the cold eventually led all three squads to seek shelter in a huge, hanger-like building filled with the lumber. Here the men found some protection, although not much. Four hours were to be spent here, waiting, while the cold bit deep and deeper. Some of the men finally slept, stretched out on the board piles.

H-Hour, 2100, crept past, with few men marking the slow drag of seconds and minutes. In the blackness towards Guemar a few shells fell, but all else was silent. Apparently the two assault battalions were being successful in their stealthful crossing of the Fecht River. It was not until about 2130 that shelling in the vicinity of Guemar intensified. At this time also an anti-aircraft half-track, of whose existence at a nearby position the men of Company E had been unaware, blasted the night wide open with light and the crack of its guns, firing long range harassing fire across the Fecht. (51)

Gradually, the thump of shells around Guemar fell off---there was left only an occasional sound of far-off small arms fire, crackling faintly for brief periods and then dying away.

It was about 0100, already into the new day of 23 January, when Captain Powell returned to his company and passed word quietly for the platoons to get ready to move out. (52) In a column of two's, with five yards between men, the company filed out of the lumberyard behind its commander and a guide. The troops crossed some railroad tracks and trudged silently down a tree-lined, ice-covered road. They had barely swung into the outskirts of Guemar itself when they turned to the right and, following a high, old-fashioned stone wall, were guided by white engineer tape to one of the two footbridges which had been erected across the stream. The Third Platoon crossed on this bridge, in an eerie silence unbroken by either enemy or friendly fire. (See Map D.)

Once on the other bank of the Fecht River, the platoon found itself

(51, 52) Eyewitness

confronted by low-rolls of concertina wire, easily crossed, and by an anti-tank mine field, in which the mines had been hastily laid on the surface of the ground, where the snow covered them. (53) Dark splotches against the snow in this field showed where shells or mines had already exploded that night. The platoon picked its way cautiously but rapidly across this mine field and covered the rest of a wide meadow, to enter the fringe of the Colmar Forest. So far the platoon had been following snow-tracks made earlier in the night by men from the other two battalions and here in the edge of the woods found trace also, in the silent forms of one or two dead Americans, of the earlier crossings. (54)

Inside the woods, the platoon threw out two squads on line, tied in its right flank with the Second Platoon, which had formed a like formation, and began picking its way through the closely spaced trees. (55) Control was difficult in the thick woods, where the snow was deep, the bushes and small trees dense, and visibility poor. When the platoon had progressed about 250 yards, the men crossed a woods road which cut immediately across their front. (See Map D.) It was evident by this time that a skirmish line of two platoons was impracticable. The Third Platoon was having difficulty keeping its own two squads on a slow-moving line and had completely lost contact with the platoon on its right. (56)

The platoon leader immediately contacted the company commander and requested permission to shift his platoon by itself out in front of the company, which could then advance in a column of platoons. This permission was granted; and the Third Platoon, taking up its new position, switched to one squad forward and two echeloned to the rear. (57) The forward squad pushed two scouts out about 15-20 yards, the limit of visibility, while the rest of the squad kept a closed squad column behind these scouts. The two rear squads maintained much a column of files, finding this the simplest means to advance. As the platoon progressed in a

(53, 54, 55, 56, 57) Eyewitness

direction almost due south, the forest continued to be as dense as at the point of entry and the men stumbled frequently among the snow-covered bushes and logs and gullies on the forest floor.

— Sounds of an intense small arms fight, off to the east in the woods where the Third Battalion zone lay, broke out. (58) The crackle of rifles came sharp and clear, with the swift, sudden rap of German automatic weapons answering, while in the lulls of firing could be heard the cries of American leaders shouting orders. Explosions and flashes of light split the dark off in this area. The Third Platoon scouts showed a tendency at this point to slow down, to find enemy in every half shadow and snow-bent bush; but the squad leader, Pfc. Spaeth, acting immediately behind his scouts and sometimes even taking their place, pushed his squad on under the trees, until eventually the sounds of combat were coming from the platoon's left rear. A sudden, fierce crescendo came finally to that firing---and then an instant, complete silence from the same area, a silence that told neither of success nor of failure for the friendly unit on the left.

Even in a closed column, the men of the lead squad could not see more than four or five of their companions at one time, while the two irregular files drifting like ghosts through the trees to the left rear and right rear were indistinguishable, only a man or two being in view---and that not all the time. Each man's shoepacs, crunching in the snow, made the only sound in his world, until he stopped, when he could hear the same subdued crunching from the man or men nearest him. (59) The sense of being alone in that vast woods was strong upon them all. There was nothing in that slow-moving handful of shadows to indicate that through all that loneliness a battalion was following them.

The platoon leader and his runner moved constantly back and forth in the lead squad, sometimes with the squad leader and his scouts, sometimes

(58, 59) Eyewitness

in rear of the squad. (60) The men of the platoon did an excellent job of teamwork and control all this time and good progress was made. About 0400-0430 the lead scout came out among the trees along the edge of a large field. (See Map D.)

The squad leader immediately gave the signal to halt and waited for the platoon leader to join him. (61) The two then made their way up to the scout, who was kneeling silently beside a tree looking out into a white gloom that gave no indication of definite size, just simply a feeling of emptiness and vastness. The advance squad was brought up and deployed on the edge of the woods. Because of the poor visibility, flank men were warned to remain silent and to listen for any sounds of possible enemy. (62) One man was then sent cautiously out into the gloom of the field as forward security; he took up a position about 50 yards away from the trees, where he was already lost to view. A second man, going forward to reconnoiter, returned to report that there were no enemy to the immediate front in the field.

This report was received just in time to be given to Captain Powell, who had come forward to learn the reason for the halt. (63) He approved the measures which had been taken so far. The other two squads of the Third Platoon were brought up at this time and deployed on a long line among the trees and bushes, extending the security still farther to the flanks. While this deployment was in progress, the company commander and his platoon leader made a brief reconnaissance.

The result of this reconnaissance was an agreement that the platoon had emerged on the southern edge of the Colmar Forest a little east of the point which had been intended. A blob of darkness which was a little deeper than the rest of the night in the southwest was identified as the Rothleible Woods. To the west, from beyond the woods, came sounds of a battle, which was taken as the struggle by First Battalion troops for the

(60) Eyewitness; (61) Personal Knowledge; (62, 63) Eyewitness

town of Ostheim. The firing in this sector was sporadic, with lulls, stray shots, and occasional fierce outbursts. (See Map D.)

Major (now Lt.-Col.) Jack M. Duncan, commanding the battalion, arrived; and he and Captain Powell held a conference there on the edge of the woods. Someone provided a blanket, and with their heads under this light-concealing cover the two commanders got out a flashlight and consulted their maps. (64) A phase line ran through the center of the field facing them, and it was decided to hold at the woods edge. (65)

The Second Platoon of Company E, under the command of First Lieutenant Willis B. Conklin, moved up meanwhile and took over control of the right flank of the company. (66)

In the Third Platoon, the squad leaders and platoon leader made frequent inspections along the line of men spread among the trees and bushes in the snow. Their progress to this point had been so simple and easy in its unopposed advance that some few among these men, despite the sounds of conflict in Ostheim to the west of them, were inclined to relax and give in to the feeling of tiredness and numbing cold which had by this time begun to grip them all. Such men dozed; and so their leaders had to keep moving among the positions, warning the lazy and assuring themselves as well that the wakeful remained alert.

Some minutes after 0600 hours Captain Powell contacted the platoon leader of the Third Platoon and ordered him to move his platoon about 250 yards to the west, to where a corner of forest out toward the south and the Rothleible Woods. (67) It had been determined earlier, in the conferences under the blanket, that this corner or point of woods provided the shortest route across the open plain into the ether tree belt, a distance of about 450 yards over the snowy tableland. (See Maps D and E.) The platoon was told to tie in with Lt. Conklin's platoon for a two-platoon attack across the field. Each platoon was to have two squads on a skirmish line, with the right flank of the Third Platoon guiding on, and extending, the left flank of Lt. Conklin's Second Platoon. The ID was (64,65) A-3, Lt.-Col. Duncan; (66) Personal Knowledge; (67) Eyewitness

to be the edge of the woods; jump-off time, 0630. (68)

The time interval allowed the Third Platoon to gather in its security from the front and the left flank and then to move to the LD proved too short. (69) Some difficulty was experienced also in contacting Lt. Conklin's platoon, which had been warned earlier than the Third and so had moved out already to the LD. By the time the Third Platoon pulled into position to the left of the guide platoon, it was already past H-Hour. (70) The Second Platoon was not ready either, however, one of its squads having been on the receiving end of an artillery concentration some minutes before. (71)

Captain Powell, impatient at the delay, used this opportunity to inform the Third Platoon leader that the rest of the battalion was following the two attack platoons across the open field and that if the platoons were fired upon they were to go right into the assault---that the support platoon of Company E and the companies behind Company E would be following right in, as a sort of second wave. (72) This word was passed to the squad leaders and their men as they fanned out into formation in the deep snow just outside the edge of the woods.

Formation for the attack consisted of two squads on a skirmish line, the right squad being in contact with the left-most man of a similar line formed by the Second Platoon. (73) The remaining rifle squad in the Third Platoon was placed just behind the rifle squad on the right, which it was to follow at 20 yards distance. The section of light machine guns was placed on the very heels of the left squad, with instructions to the section leader that he was to swing up on line to the left of this squad, set up his guns, and fire to the front, the left front, and the left flank if the platoon hit opposition. (74)

It was 0650 by the watch of the Third Platoon leader when the quiet word came from the right that the Second Platoon was moving out. (75)

(68, 69, 70) Personal Knowledge; (71) Personal Knowledge; (72, 73, 74, 75) Eyewitness

His own platoon moved out also.

The men were trudging through deep, powdery dry snow which had a frozen crust. In the misty gloom of the night up ahead, they could make out dimly, somewhat to their right, a dark blob of woods, their objective. The men stumbled often where snow-covered weeds tripped them or a dip in the ground provided an extra-deep pocket of snow.

About midway across the flat plain, the skirmishers began to close to the right. (76) Intervals which had been ten yards between men shrank to five yards and in some cases two men would be trudging through the snow almost shoulder to shoulder. It had become apparent by this time that the Second Platoon, on the right, would enter the Rothleible Woods first, since the dark line of trees drifted back and away from the sector fronting the Third Platoon. (77) (See Map E.)

Men anxious to edge over toward the safety of the trees were hard to correct when they began closing to the right. The platoon leader ranged from one end of his skirmish line to the other, ordering the men to open again to the left. Under this urging, the interval between men widened somewhat, although still remaining dangerously under the five-yard mark in many cases. The dark line of trees ahead and to the right front grew taller and bolder against the night sky. The only sound was the faint crunch of the dry snow crust as the men trudged through it. The platoon could almost feel the dark trees reaching out and over them with new cover and concealment.

This quiet world was suddenly broken.

To the right, from the snowy obscurity in front of the Second Platoon, rang out one word, "Halt!". The voice sounding it began on a low, hailing note---but wound up on a loud, startled, questioning challenge that hung in the air. (78)

The whole line in the Third Platoon quivered and stopped at the

(76, 77, 78) Eyewitness

shock of that word, as though a barrier had clamped down shut in front of it. (79) One or two voices shouted unintelligible words over in the darkness obscuring the other platoon. A rifle shot exploded in the night, and then two, and then a ragged volley. Almost immediately a German heavy machine gun burst into a flaming chatter about 50 to 60 yards in front of the point where the Second and Third Platoons joined. This gun was firing to its left front and so away from the Third Platoon, directly into the bulk of Lt. Conklin's men. (80)

A bedlam had suddenly broken loose. All up and down the American line rifles cracked and spat, squad leaders and platoon leaders of both platoons were shouting to their men to push on in upon the enemy. Fire from the one German heavy machine gun set aflame an accompanying line of angry rifle splats and flashes to either side of it and quickly awoke, far over in front of the Second Platoon's right flank, a second enemy machine gun that spluttered once and then settled down to fierce, savage bursts of prolonged fire. (81)

At this point the Americans did an awful thing---almost to a man, they hit the flat, open ground as though they were on a rifle range and began a duel with the enemy line in the darkness to their front. (82) The platoon leader of the Third Platoon ran along his line of prone men, screaming to them above the firing to get up and move forward. His shouts and the cries of the squad leaders caught the enemy's attention; and for the first time since that initial startled challenge and the following shots, the nearest German automatic weapon turned its fires squarely upon the Third Platoon, concentrating fire towards its leaders' hoarse shouts. (83) Tracer tore across the snow knee-high, raking the area. A man lying on the snow a little to the right rear of the platoon leader received the full impact of one burst of enemy fire which tore past the platoon leader's knees. (84)

(79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84) Eyewitness

Men of the platoon remained glued to the ground. In the desperate belief that the men would rise and follow him, the platoon leader moved forward and out in front of his platoon. (85)

Despite the horrible din, he caught---or thought he caught---the voices of at least two of his squad leaders answering him. So, crying for his men to follow, he moved forward. About ten yards out he suddenly stumbled into a shallow ditch, falling to his knees when the ground disappeared from under his feet.

Discovery of this ditch, which was about four feet wide and one foot, deep, seemed a godsend. The firing to his immediate front was still only weak rifle fire, and the German machine gun to his right front had again changed its tactics and was making the mistake of firing at any and all areas to its front and flanks. (86) The enemy defense on this flank seemed weak. He devoted his attention to an effort to get his men up to the ditch, where he now felt there was a good chance to organize a small-group assault on the enemy's weak right flank that would not only be successful, but which would provide a position for enfilade fire down the enemy's line toward both hostile machine guns.

Darkness was rapidly fading away. (87) The added light was most apparent when he realized that he now not only saw the German machine gun's flashes but could actually see clouds of smoke billow up with the shattering light and noise. He faced towards his platoon and shouted for the men to come forward---that there was protection in the ditch with him. One man ran up and threw himself into the ditch---Pfc. Stephen Ludlam, a rifle grenadier. (88) Ludlam was told to concentrate on the enemy machine gun to the right front, to keep the gun silent at all costs.

The soldier fired all of his rifle grenades at this gun and then, when none of these was successful, laid down a steady, rapid fire upon the enemy weapon with fire from his M1. He was firing too fast, however---

(85,86,87,88) Eyewitness

eight shots of rapid fire every time he loaded a clip. A single shot from an enemy rifleman smashed into his forehead and killed him. (89)

A BAR man---Pfc. Emmett R. Teague---dashed up to the ditch and threw himself forward into it, receiving, even as he fell, a death wound that made him grunt and go lax. (90) His body hit the snow bank on the other side of the narrow ditch with a thud and lay still. Two of the squad leaders---Pfc. Spaeth and Pfc. Hubbs---^{won} ~~win~~ up to their platoon leader also, both entering the ditch about ten yards to his right. Each of these men carried a Thompson sub-machine gun---neither of which was functioning. (91) Nor could the two men remedy the malfunctions.

The only men whom the platoon leader had with him at this time were two squad leaders, the dead rifle grenadier, and the dead BAR man. Of the three men living, the platoon leader had the only weapon which worked--- a carbine, for which he had left one magazine that he could reach, the others having been dropped and lost in the snow. (92) He had used up his hand grenades, in throws that did not reach the hostile machine gun. His fingers froze to the iron of the grenades when he held them in his bare hand. After Ludlam's death, the platoon leader himself directed an occasional aimed shot at the enemy machine gun to his right front. Perhaps partly because of this fire, but mostly because the American skirmish line which had at first existed in front of it gradually vanished in withdrawals of individuals back across the field or in the deaths of those who were still left, this gun no longer fired as often or as rapidly as it had during the first hot minutes of surprise.

But the attack had failed. In the fast-growing gray light of dawn no living, effective members of Company E remained in the flat, open field. (93)

The platoon leader and his two squad leaders were alone. All three now kept their heads low in the ditch, which they discovered was a stream or irrigation ditch, covered with ice about two to three inches thick. The

(89,90,91,92,93) Eyewitness

banks were from a foot to eighteen inches high. Pfc. Spaeth, one of the two squad leaders, retrieved the M1 belonging to the dead Ludlam. An effort, made just before daylight, to make use of the BAR belonging to the other dead man, had been unsuccessful. (94) The weapon would not fire.

American artillery began to fall in on the field, artillery that was meant for the Germans in position about 30 yards away from the frozen stream-bed in which the three Company E men were trapped. (95) The danger from this friendly fire was as great as had been the danger earlier from enemy small-arms fire---and it was a danger that was to last over a longer period than had that other.

Lying flat in the stream bed, the platoon leader dragged a rumpled map from his pocket and he and his squad leaders crawled together and consulted the map. (96) They decided to crawl farther toward the east. In this direction the stream curved in to meet the woods, in which Germans could now be expected; but the three pooled their ideas concerning the German resistance and agreed that no fire had been coming from this section of the woods earlier. Hand grenades were retrieved from both the dead men, and Pfc. Spaeth gathered up what M1 ammunition he could from Ludlam's body; there were only a few clips.

During this time two more men were discovered in the ditch---a rifleman and the section leader of the light machine guns. Both were a short distance to the east---and both had weapons which had jammed, an M1 rifle and a Thompson sub-machine gun. (97)

Bullets cracked across the top of the stream without letup, their sound constituting a constant reminder that there were still Americans on one side of the field and Germans on the other side. The trapped men were themselves so close to the German positions that they could hear enemy soldiers talking. (98)

All five of the survivors were exhausted---mentally and physically. (99) The ice often cracked under their weight and they lay in icy water an inch

(94,95,96,97,98,99) Eyewitness

deep. They crawled out of one bad spot only to slide into another, until they were so tired and wet and cold that they frequently stopped and lay where they were, water or no. They took off their gloves in order to rub snow into their fingers and to massage their hands, in an almost hopeless effort to restore circulation. Their toes and feet were a cold numbness in sweat-wet shoeleathers. To crawl was an exhausting struggle. The men stopped often and rested on their sides or backs, in order to relieve strained, cold muscles. Small arms fire constantly crisscrossed just over their heads above the stream; and artillery fire crashed and crunched on either side of the narrow ditch, sending pieces of hot shrapnel flying into the snow about them.

Their progress was snail-like. In an hour they had covered perhaps 50 yards. (100) In two hours, they had not moved more than 100 yards from their original positions. They were discouraged, too, by the discovery--- from the small arms fight---that the Germans had moved over to bolster that weak right flank and that probably already the enemy stood astride the point where the stream turned and entered the tree line.

About 1000 hours all of the small arms firing increased in intensity, following an unusually heavy concentration of friendly artillery. Shortly thereafter, Pfc. Hubbs made the discovery that Americans were in the stream bed to the west, in approximately the positions from which the five men had spent all morning escaping.

These men whom the squad leader saw proved to be the left flank of an attacking force formed by Company G and a reorganized Company E. (101) When this yelling line of men leaped out of the ditch and closed with the enemy, the five men left from the Third Platoon of Company E joined in on the charge---keeping their position about 100 yards to the left of the larger force. (102)

They overran several Germans in a ditch paralleling the Ostheim road

(100) Eyewitness; (101) A-1, p.209; Eyewitness; (102) Eyewitness

which ran across the front of the woods. Three of the men remained in this ditch, while the platoon leader and Pfc. Spaeth, who had the only two weapons functioning, pursued an escaping German machine gun crew southeastward. (103) Twice this group stopped and attempted to set up the gun, but each time accurate 30 caliber fire from the M1 and carbine broke up their efforts. The crew of about six men lost several members, either wounded or frightened into wild plunges for escape. This enemy crew eventually disappeared in some bushes among the trees. By the time the two Americans had approached this position cautiously, no trace of the enemy was there.

The two men were now exactly on the northeastern corner of the Rothleible woods, from where they could look south down the huge open field which lies to the east of this woods. (104) (See Map E.) They were in an excellent position to fire upon anything or anyone breaking from the eastern edge of the woods away from the assault forces, so threw themselves against a mound of earth and watched. They were rewarded almost immediately.

Approximately 400 yards away, about 30 men broke from cover of the forest. (105)— A number of white-camouflaged figures among these Germans were mistaken for American prisoners and so the group was not initially fired upon. The two Americans soon saw that these white figures were also enemy, however, and took the group under fire with both the carbine and M1.

The carbine proved useless at this range, which rapidly grew as the enemy soldiers ran across the field away from the woods. Once under fire, many of these Germans hit the ground and crawled in the snow. Several were knocked down by the rifle fire, but much the greater number simply ran, until they could take shelter in what was either an irrigation ditch or a stream about 400 yards out in the field. Here they took cover and were concealed from both view and small-arms fire.

All this while, shots and cries had been coming from the interior of the woods. No further enemy issued out into the open field on the eastern

(103,104,105) Eyewitness

fringe, however, and so eventually the platoon leader and his squad leader returned to the point where they had left the other three men. (106) Thus reunited, the small band set off west along the Ostheim road in search of Company E.

One of the first persons encountered was Major Duncan, by the side of the road just outside the woods. (107) All about the major lay evidence of the terrific pounding given this area by American artillery. Torn trees and limbs littered the snow-covered ground, the snow itself was churned up and beaten about in wild disorder, the debris from a routed enemy lay scattered about, and out in the field itself lay the human jetsam and debris left by the battalion in its two assaults across the field.

Company G, in shouldering the main load of the daylight attack, had suffered severe casualties; and men of this company, including the company radio operator with his SCR 300, lay on the field in numbers greater even than those of Company E men. (108)

Major Duncan himself was seeking to contact the company commanders of E and G Companies and at this time knew only the general location of these units, which had plunged into the woods, where their men engaged in any number of small, isolated actions. But the major pointed out the area where Easy Company had crossed the field this second time; and after a few minutes search the five men had relocated Captain Powell and scattered elements of the company, including S/Sgt. Adams, Third Platoon guide, and five other men of the Third Platoon. (109) These six, with the four who had been trapped in the stream bed (the fifth man in the stream was the machine gun section leader, it will be recalled), made a total of ten survivors of the platoon which had crossed the Fecht River the previous night.

S/Sgt. Adams was glad to reunite his six men with the four from the stream bed. The sergeant had had the difficult task of reorganizing survivors in the edge of the Colmar Forest that morning and of leading this

(106,107) Eyewitness; (108) Eyewitness; A-1, p.302, 23-25 January 1945 KIA lists; (109) Eyewitness

small group back across the field in the daylight assault. (110)

A hasty reorganization was necessary. The platoon still had all three of its squad leaders, as well as its platoon guide and its platoon sergeant-leader. But the small band of men was short on ammunition; a number of weapons, particularly sub-machine guns, were still not functioning in good order; and no one had any food. All of these deficiencies were replenished by a quick salvage trip back out to the field among the dead and wounded. (111)

The platoon, even while still in process of this reorganization, joined with the rest of the company in a movement to the eastern edge of the Rothleible Woods, to where the southernmost of four fingers of woods jutted out from the main forest itself. (112) Here the company was looking out over the same open terrain which the Third Platoon leader and his non-commissioned officer had fired across an hour earlier. The company was ordered to dig hasty shelters here. (See Map E)

Progress of the whole battalion was held up at this point, while Company F was sent on a mission to clear the zone behind the battalion of large numbers of enemy who had infiltrated from the flanks. (113) This delay enabled the Third Platoon of Company E to reconstitute itself in all supplies, both weapons and ammunition. The cries of several wounded Germans in the woods behind them were especially wracking during this entire period, but nothing could be done for these wounded. The battalion medics and company aid men were all busy with Americans in the field some 600 yards to the rear. (114)

By approximately 1430 hours Company F had reported its mission accomplished. The battalion commander gave the order for the battalion to continue on south through the Rothleible Woods, with the task of clearing all enemy from the timber. (115)

The formation for this attack consisted again of E and G Companies

(110) Personal Knowledge; (111, 112) Eyewitness; (113) A-1, p.209; (114) Eyewitness
(115) A-3, Lt-Col. Duncan;

abreast, with E on the left and G on the right. (116)

Company E placed all of its riflemen on a single skirmish line, whose left flank guided on the eastern edge of the woods. The right flank of the company tied in with a skirmish line formed by Company G.

— In this formation, the Third Platoon of Company E occupied the center of the line in its company, with Lt. Conklin's Second Platoon on its left and the First Platoon (which had lost its platoon leader that morning) on the right. (117) Thus, as part of a huge dragnet cast across the eastern half of the woods, the Third Platoon moved out in the attack once more.

The sky was the gray overcast of winter; the light, clear and bright. Visibility in the woods, which had less underbrush than the Colmar Forest to the north, was excellent; and the trees were once again tall giants against the wintry sky.

The long skirmish line moved steadily forward. About two-thirds of the way to the southern tip of the Rothleible tree belt lies a house, the Maison Rothleible, situated on the eastern edge of the trees. (See Map E.) This house, facing south, nestles back under the shelter of the high trees. As they approached this building, the American riflemen discovered ahead of them under the trees huge log and earth shelters, with some enemy. The skirmishers opened fire on these hostile troops and on the doors and windows of the rude shelters. Everyone was tired, so the line simply employed marching fire, moving in at a steady walk. Enemy were seen to turn and run among the trees up ahead, away from the log shelters toward the Maison Rothleible and past it across a road and so out into the woods beyond.

The Third Platoon had the log shelters and the house directly in its path. (118) Its men closed in on these shelters, to each of which the platoon leader sent one or two men as clearing parties. The main line of men continued on to the road fronting the Maison Rothleible. This road out

(116,117,118) Eyewitness

the woods from west to east on almost a straight line. Captain Powell of E Company and Captain Leonard D. Hanney of G Company contacted each other here and agreed to hold up at this road. (119)

The Third Platoon moved on across the road to several barns. (120) Here the men were posted to cover the front to the south; and security was sent out into the woods itself, which here became a rough growth of wild underbrush and small trees, with only a few tall trees like those through which the platoon had been advancing. Visibility was out to a minimum in this underbrush.

German forces in the heart of this wilderness could be heard shouting to each other. (121) Numerous fresh snow trails, beginning at the road and heading straight south, showed where a considerable body of enemy troops had escaped just ahead of the battalion. The platoon CP was located inside one of the barns, which the Germans had cleverly used as camouflage for two small, dirt-reinforced rooms which could have withstood any amount of artillery fire, no matter what happened to the outer shell of the barn itself. Double bunks along the walls of these two rooms provided living accommodations for about 16 men altogether. Abandoned German rations, including the enemy's sour soldier bread, were salvaged and consumed by Third Platoon men.

The platoon spent about a half hour here, when a runner from Captain Powell brought warning that E and G Companies were to move out again and finish clearing the southern third of the woods. (122) Because of the wild jumble of underbrush immediately to the front, the two companies swung to the western half of the woods, to the other side of an unimproved north-south road that cut the entire length of the woods. The left flank of Easy Company guided on this north-south road. (123)

In this sector, the forest once more took on an open, clear aspect, under tall trees.

The Third Platoon again was the middle element of a skirmish line consisting of all three platoons abreast. The men had scarcely begun to

(119, 120, 121, 122, 123) Eyewitness

move south when enemy artillery began to lay unobserved harassing fire into the woods, where tree bursts high in the air sent shrapnel whistling and crackling down to the ground. Unaware of the exact location of the American troops, the enemy scattered this deadly fire indiscriminately across the length and breadth of the woods. Some casualties were suffered from the tree bursts which occasionally hit in the vicinity of the advancing companies (124), and there was a general tendency for the advance to slow down; nevertheless, the men continued to move forward until they were within 20 yards of the southern limits of the woods. Here, looking south from the trees, the men could observe German troops in the field between the woods and the town of Houssen. A company order was given for the men to dig in where they stood.

A long half circle, with its left flank the Second Platoon of E Company near the north-south road through the woods and its right flank the farthest elements of G Company, was the defensive formation now set up by the Second Battalion. (See Map E.) In this defense, the Third Platoon of E Company occupied positions to the right of Lt. Conklin's Second Platoon. (125) The men paired up and set to digging two-man fighting holes. They dug holes of a standard type in the platoon, holes which had an open end similar to the field-manual type fighting hole for two men but which had also a portion that could be covered for overhead protection. With logs or tree limbs for cross-pieces, covered with a blanket or gas-protective cape and topped with the dirt excavated from the hole itself, these standard holes gave a maximum of protection and a strong boost in morale to the owners. Such holes also took a long time to build. They began with a shallow shelter from which two kneeling men could fight and were then enlarged as time permitted. (See Appendix A.)

By midnight men of the Third Platoon all had completed some such hole, digging it in ground which proved to be sandy and surprisingly easy to work once a shallow frozen crust of earth was penetrated. (126)

(124, 125, 126) Eyewitness

About dusk, the southern edge of the woods was lashed by a storm of enemy artillery. (127) Ear-splitting tree bursts whipped the area with shrapnel, causing casualties in G Company and also in Lt. Conklin's platoon in E Company. This artillery continued for some while, ceased, and then was picked up again spasmodically until about 2000 hours, when it stopped.

The night itself came clear and cold. Dead tired, the men were allowed to have half their number sleep; but one man was kept awake in each hole all the night. The platoon leader, who had lost his runner in the morning attack, shared a foxhole with his platoon guide---and these two men alternately caught fitful sleep throughout the night. The wakeful member prowled through the platoon area, keeping sleepy men awake and alert.

After dark, word was received that the First Battalion would take over the mission of capturing the Chateau de Schoppenwihr; and during the night these troops moved through G Company and out into the country to the west, where they met stiff opposition from enemy automatic weapons, tanks, and artillery. (128) All night the side of the woods facing toward the chateau was kept fitfully alive with the light and noise and sounds of battle.

The Third Platoon of Easy Company had no attack to make. The area immediately in front of it, south towards Houssen, was quiet this night.

For purposes of this monograph, no effort will be made to describe the actions of the platoon past the period already covered, which includes the night 23-24 January. Mention must be made, however, that the platoon played a prominent role in all subsequent actions of the company and battalion--- and once, in Wihr-en-Plaine, teamed with Lt. Conklin's platoon, with the regimental Battle Patrol, and with elements of the battalion OP group to fight off a combined tank-infantry counterattack by an overwhelming German force. At one time the platoon was down to four effectives. Two privates of this platoon, killed in action during the Colmar Pocket attack in the

(127) Eyewitness; (128) A-1. pp.209-210; Personal Knowledge

period 22 January through 8 February 1945 , were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. (129)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In an analysis of the performance of the Third Platoon during the period covered by this monograph, two major factors must be considered as important: (1) the manpower problem and (2) the leadership problem. Both of these problems were the result of the five long months of combat which the division had fought.

As has been brought out in the narration, the Third Division had been in the line over a long period of time that saw its smaller units--- platoons and companies---whittled down to the bone. The dearth of well-trained reinforcements is evidenced best by the replacement system inaugurated in the latter part of 1944 by the Seventh Army, when a training depot to convert service troops into infantry replacements was set up. (130) At the same time, Seventh Army gave priority for junior-officer replacements to the Third, Thirty-Sixth, and Forty-Fifth Divisions---because these divisions, with about two years combat each, had virtually exhausted their stocks of officer material from non-commissioned ranks. (131)

The Third Platoon of Company E, Seventh Infantry, was in process of finding new leadership for itself. The non-commissioned officers--- and the acting non-commissioned officers--- actually composed a fine nucleus around which a strong platoon organization could be built. They lacked experience, however. The Colmar Pocket was to give them this experience.

Platoon tactics were not ill-chosen. The shift in formation just inside the northern limits of the Colmar Forest was justified by circumstances and in accord with good infantry doctrine. Even the movement across the flat snowy tableland to the Rothleible Woods, with its waste of one squad in support, was a formation which, in similar situations before and afterwards, was successful. On the outskirts of Nurnberg, Germany, the night of (129) A-1, p.311; (130,131) A-4, p.530

17-18 April 1945---in a situation analagous to this Rothleible-Woods attack almost detail for detail---two squads shook off the effects of an enemy's surprise automatic fire and closed in to drive a superior force back and so secured a foothold among houses and buildings. (132) The elements lacking on the morning of 23 January 1945, "in front of the Rothleible Woods, was the knowledge by all men that an attack, when it has pushed itself inside the assault line, must be pressed home.

Likewise, when a unit is within assault range, its leader must adopt a formation which will enable him to deliver a maximum of fire power and strength at the enemy. He cannot afford, particularly in a night attack, to waste one of his squads by dubbing it "the reserve" and having it trudge on the heels of the assault squads, in which position it can help neither itself nor the rest of the platoon in the actual assault. Sound tactics would have dictated the use of all three squads on line in the Third Platoon attack.

The three days of training in Kayzersberg actually had not fitted the platoon for combat on terrain that was as flat as a billiard table. The platoon had spent those days attacking up the vineyard-stepped hills with which the Kayzersberg vicinity abounds. For 14 days in Colmar, the Third Platoon did not once attack up a hill---it attacked across some of the flattest terrain the unit has ever seen.

During the training, emphasis had also been placed on fire and maneuver---of squads laying down a base of fire and of other squads maneuvering to knock out the enemy. In attacks across the flat terrain it encountered in the Colmar action, such as on the morning of 23 January, the platoon had to put all of its power and striking force into one punch---and had to deliver that punch as quickly as possible, in a straight line. Flat open fields are not terrain in which a platoon can employ fire and maneuver. (133)

(132) First Platoon, Company G, Seventh Infantry; Eyewitness

(133) A-11, p.38, par.40b(12)

In front of the Rothleible Woods the two platoons of Company E got within thirty yards (the right platoon was closer even than that) of an enemy who apparently had posted no security. This enemy force had every appearance of a hasty effort to stem any American success in Ostheim. Its strength initially was almost completely along the flank closest to Ostheim. The positions its men occupied were deep ditches on either side of the Ostheim Road, just outside the tree line.

The leader of the Third Platoon of Company E---as well as his company commander---used poor troop-leadership procedure between 0430 and 0600, when they both allowed the Third Platoon to become engrossed in protecting the front and flank of the head of a column of companies which did little more than relax and rest behind it in the Colmar Forest. The Third Platoon was to be used as a striking force that night, by earlier company order. The platoon leader should have remembered that, eventually, his men were going to attack towards the Rothleible Woods and then through those woods to even other objectives; and he should have attempted to hold his platoon together, in order to be able to move out in the attack quickly upon order, and meanwhile to give his men some rest. There were other units in that column---even the support platoon in Company E---which could and should have been security during that long halt.

The difficulty the Third Platoon had in attempting to gather in its security and form up on its ID shortly after 0600---and its failure to do so on time---points up this mistake to use the platoon economically and efficiently in conjunction with the other units in the company and battalion. The effect in dulling the vigilant senses and reactions of the men can only be guessed at. Men cannot be kept at key pitch for more than four hours without suffering a considerable letdown. Their disastrous hesitation later when faced with enemy fire at point blank range in the dark---their failure to react under stress just once more to their leaders' orders---these things might all be traced back, at least in some measure, to the poor judgment

which kept them straining all of their senses, with fingers on triggers, from the moment they crossed the Fecht River about 0200 hours until that moment, about 0700, when they threw themselves on a flat, coverless piece of ground within grenade-throwing distance of an enemy who chopped them up mercilessly.

The platoon---and company---violated many of the principles deemed necessary for a successful night attack. (134) These mistakes will be brought out under the lessons which were emphasized by the action.

LESSONS

Lessons emphasized by the operation include;

1. In a night attack, the plan must be simple; usually, there should be just a single, limited objective. (135) The regimental, battalion, and company plans in this operation called for the units to cover extensive distances and to reach a series of objectives---all in an area which could reasonably be expected to be defended spiritedly and even fanatically.

Heinrich Himmler, SS leader, had earlier been credited as leader behind the German resistance in Colmar. (136)

2. A night attack should, if possible, be preceded by a rehearsal. There was no such rehearsal in the three days in Kayserberg. The Third Platoon practiced attacks, in daylight, up steep hills. The conflict itself found the platoon attacking---not in daylight and not up hills---but always at night (throughout the Colmar campaign) and always across flat plains.

3. A sound platoon formation for a night assault across open terrain is one in which all three squads are abreast. Elimination of maneuver is a recognized characteristic of night combat.

4. If a daylight reconnaissance of the company zone of advance is impossible and dependence must be made upon a map study, planned formations and movements of platoons for a night attack should be flexible. Such

(134) A-11, pp.31-40; (135) A-11, p.32, par.38(1); (136) A-4, p.523

flexibility was incorporated by the commanding officer of Company E in his plan for traversing the length of the Colmar Forest.

5. An attack during the last hours of darkness should begin in time to complete capture of the objective at least one-half hour before daylight.

(137) Such a cushion of time allows for the reorganization of the assault troops under cover of darkness and for preparations to meet counterattack.

6. Night attacks place increased importance upon close combat and upon aggressive leadership by squad and platoon leaders.

7. Night attacks across open terrain avoid heavy losses which would be suffered by daylight attacks across the same areas. The daylight assault of the Second Battalion, while successful, actually cost the battalion more casualties than had the unsuccessful pre-dawn attack.

8. In cases where enemy and friendly troops may wear similar camouflage clothing---as, for example, the white suits in this campaign---a means for identification of friendly personnel must be provided. On 23 January 1945 no such means were provided. Later, Second Battalion troops were ordered to cut off their white hoods and to wear these around their helmets until a certain designated phase in each attack, when these cloths were removed. Friendly troops could then be identified both by the design of the helmet and by a distinctive green-camouflage net which covered their helmets.

9. Night training in a unit must be kept up-to-date. Even an organization with a long history of successful night operations behind it must be alert to this necessity.

10. Once a unit is within assault distance of an enemy, vigorous and aggressive action to close with the enemy must be the order and desire of every individual.

11. The principle of security cannot be violated. The German forces on the edge of the Rothleible Woods had no security to their north. In consequence, they were surprised by two American platoons. The Americans

(137) A-11, p.34, par.40b(2)(b)

failed to press home their initial advantage, however, a mistake which emphasizes the next lesson.

12. The principle of surprise, even when attained against an enemy, loses its value unless instant, unhesitating, coordinated aggressiveness is employed to drive home the advantage won.

13. Troop-leading procedure must be emphasized. The Third Platoon, as has been pointed out in the analysis and criticism, suffered from poor judgment of its leader between the hours 0430-0600.

14. Training in the care of weapons for particular climates cannot be ignored. Generally, weapons function better in extreme cold if kept dry of oil. (138) A point perhaps worth noting here is that the platoon-leader's carbine, which habitually was kept "dry," functioned throughout the engagement, while the automatic weapons---particularly Thompson sub machine guns---which were often kept drenched with oil, developed malfunctions and jammed.

15. The loss of experienced small-unit leaders---on squad and platoon level---should be an important consideration for commanders of organizations which have been in combat long periods of time.

16. In extremes of climate, troops which are to make an attack should not have to move long distances on foot before reaching the Line of Departure. For example, the long move from Kayzersberg to Guemar---in bitterly cold weather and, at one point, along a stretch of road open to enemy observation and artillery fire---was taxing upon the strength of men who were expected to make an attack in sub-zero weather against a bitter enemy.

17. Transmission of sound is increased markedly by cold air. (139) Security outposts at night can make good use of this phenomenon---and, at the same time, must be warned not to make noise themselves.

18. Training must be objective.

19. Reorganization is a continuing process throughout an engagement.

(138) A-2, pp.1,3,77,80; (139) A-2, par.129

20. The present Quartermaster-issue glove, with its leather palm and heavy stitching in the fingers, is awkward and inefficient in winter combat, where a soldier must have a glove supple and pliant, through which he can attain the sense of touch necessary for such tasks as loading small rounds of ammunition in carbine magazines---at night, for example, when such loading must be done largely by the sense of touch alone. A knitted glove or a simple wool-cloth glove---though perhaps not as long-wearing as the leather-reinforced item---does not demand of a rifleman that he remove his gloves in sub-zero weather to perform simple acts upon which his military efficiency and even his very own safety depend.

21. There is need for a snow-camouflage suit that can be worn without donning it---like a Mother-Hubbard dress---completely over all of a soldier's equipment. Some German mountain troops in Colmar had an excellent snow-camouflage ski uniform. These consisted of separate light-weight garments for trousers and jacket; and these garments were equipped with pockets. Such uniforms, when worn, did not cut the individual off from storage places for his maps, ammunition, and other small equipment.