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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 134TH INFANTRY (35TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE BATTLE OF LUTREBOIS, BELGIUM, 28 DECEMBER 1944 - 4 JANUARY 1945 (ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN) (Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION IN THE ATTACK OF A TOWN

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3D BATTALION, 134TH INFANTRY (35TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE BATTLE OF LUTREBOIS, BELGIUM, 28 DECEMBER 1944 - 4 JANUARY 1945 (ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN) (Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 3d Battalion, 134th Infantry, 35th US Division in the Battle of Lutrebois, Belgium, 28 December 1944 - 4 January 1945, in the Bastogne phase of the Ardennes-Alsace Campaign.

In late November and early December, 1944, the Allied Armies had advanced to the western borders of Germany at many points. During this period, Intelligence reports repeatedly indicated the formation of a strong mobile reserve, identified as the Sixth Panzer Army, capable of mounting a strong counteroffensive. (1) On 16 December 1944, the First US Army, commanded by General Courtney H. Hodges, was struck by this reported enemy force in a surprise attack. The V and VIII Corps of the First Army, thinly spread on what was considered a "Quiet front", were unable to contain the German advance. (2)

The enemy's general plan, apparently, was to seize Liege, the Allied communications and supply center, and with bridgeheads across the Muese River he planned to swing north to Antwerp, the great Allied port of supply. If successful in the seizure of Leige and Antwerp, his plans would have split the American and British Armies and greatly endangered the entire allied supply position. (3)

(1) A-14, p. 1-13; (2) A-2, p. 337 and 342; (3) A-1, p. 195.

General Von Rundstedt, commanding the German effort, used two Panzer Armies to effect this penetration. The Sixth Panzer Army, in the north, drove toward Liege. The Fifth Panzer Army, in the south, drove toward Bastogne and bridgeheads across the Muese River. (4) (See Map A)

On 17 December, to counter the German thrust toward Bastogne, the 101st Airborne Division and elements of the VIII Corps were directed to occupy and hold the Bastogne area at all costs. By 20-21 December, these units were completely surrounded by the enemy. (5)

On 18 December, General George S. Patton's Third US Army was ordered to swing the bulk of its weight to the north and attack the German salient in the area south of Bastogne. (6) This order resulted in what has since been described by Brig. Gen. Brenton G. Wallace as, "Without doubt, the fastest and greatest mass movement of an Army in history". (7) Within 48 hours following the order, a great part of the Third Army was on the road north. (8)

The 35th Infantry Division was one of the many units in the Third Army effected by this order. It had just crossed the German Border, east of Sarrguemines, to fight on German soil for the first time. (9) Severe fighting in this area had depleted its units to a skeleton of its effective strength. (10) On 19 December, the Division was alerted for the coming move. It was relieved during the night of 20-21 December by elements of the US Seventh Army. (11) On

(4) A-1, p. 195; (5) A-11, p. 156; (6) A-1, p. 196; (7) A-11, p. 151; (8) A-11, p. 151; (9) A-5; (10) Personal knowledge; (11) A-5.

22 December, the Division moved to Metz, France, where its regiments were once again filled to fighting strength. (12) Two thousand replacements with less than a week of Infantry training joined the Division on Christmas Day. (13) These were in addition to 1500 men received during the period 18-22 December. (14) Shortly after 2400 hours, 25 December, the Division mounted trucks and moved to an assembly area north of Arlon, Belgium. There, it became a part of Lt. Gen. John Millikin's III Corps. (15) (See Map A)

TOPOGRAPHY AND CLIMATIC CONDITIONS

So that the reader will have a clearer understanding of the difficulties encountered other than fighting the enemy in this area, the author has included the following information. The area south and southeast of Bastogne is dotted with many small towns located, for the most part, on secondary roads to the right and left of the (Arlon-Bastogne) main highway. Bastogne was the hub for the roadnet and therefore was an important military feature to both the enemy and Allied forces. Long corridors, running generally northeast and southeast, had many small streams and rivers flowing through them. The ridge lines, on the limits of these corridors, were not very high, but did offer an advantage of key terrain to the units holding them. The weather was very cold, with about six inches of snow covering the ground. (16)

(12) A-6, p. 103; (13) A-3, p. 5; (14) Personal knowledge; (15) A-8; (16) A-15, p. 39; Personal knowledge.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The mission of the III Corps was to advance north to reduce the enemy salient in its zone and relieve the surrounded US troops in Bastogne. (17) The plan adopted to accomplish this mission placed the 35th Infantry Division between the 4th Armored Division on the west and the 26th Infantry Division on the east. (18) (See Map B)

On 26 December, word was received that elements of the 4th Armored Division had succeeded in entering the Bastogne area contacting elements of the 101st Airborne Division, north of Assenois. (19) This contact, on a secondary road, could not be maintained by other than single tanks running through very heavy direct fire from enemy positions on the high ground east of the (Arlon-Bastogne) highway. (See Map B) The task to alleviate this situation became the mission of the 35th Division. (20)

Major General Paul W. Baade, Commander of the 35th Division, on 27 December, committed the 320th Infantry on the right (east), the 137th Infantry on the left (west), and held the 134th Infantry in reserve. (21) By 29 December, the 320th Infantry and the 137th Infantry had advanced to a line south of Harlange-Villers-la-Bonne-Eau. The 134th Infantry in reserve had moved to the vicinity of Warnach on 28 December. There, its Third Battalion on the same date was sent forward to relieve a Battalion of the 318th Infantry, 80th Division (attached to the 4th Armored Division) in a woods north of Sainlez. (See Map B) (22) At 1930 hours, 28 De-

(17) A-5; (18) A-5; (19) A-15, p. 43; (20) Personal knowledge; (21) A-5; (22) A-6, p. 103.

cember, orders were issued committing the 134th Infantry the following morning. (23) The plan of Butler B. Miltonberger, commanding the 134th Infantry, was to attack north at 0800 hours in a column of Battalions; 3d, 1st, and 2d. The 3d Battalion to seize Lutrebois and be prepared to continue the attack north to Marvie. The 1st and 2d Battalions to follow the 3d Battalion and be prepared to by-pass the 3d Battalion, should it become involved, and continue the attack to the north. (24)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

By 1630 hours, 28 December, the 3d Battalion had completed the relief of the battalion of the 80th Division without incident. An examination of the area revealed it had been used as a drop zone by the enemy. Enemy dead, dressed in new US Armored force uniforms, were strewn over the area. The new uniforms soon began to appear on men of the 3d Battalion, who felt a greater need for them than their former owners. Much of the enemy equipment, some of it still attached to parachutes, was also US material. (25)

The strength of the battalion at this time was full with the exception of a few officers in the companies. However, its full strength was made up of mostly untried replacements. Few of its original officers and men were left. This was especially true in each of the companies. Only two of the original Company officers, who had landed at Omaha Beach

(23) A-8; (24) A-7; (25) Personal knowledge.

on D plus 30, were still fighting. Original non-commissioned officers were almost non-existent. Many of the non-commissioned officers in the line companies were untried in battle, having earned their warrants in other branches of the service. It was difficult for company commanders to place this type man in charge of squads and many times these men could be found fighting as riflemen without command, trying to prove themselves capable of assuming the role of combat leaders. (26) Living conditions in the cold and snow covered ground, plus the knowledge of the enemy's great advance, added to the difficulties already mentioned. The morale and the esprit de corps of the battalion was present, but was far from that desired.

At 2130 hours that night, orders were issued for the attack the next morning. (27)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

The 3d Battalion's plan of attack was as follows: (See Map B)

"2. This Battalion will attack to seize LUTREBOIS, prepared to continue attack north to MARVIE. Formation: Column of companies; L, I, K; LD: Present front line of Co L. Direction of attack: North. Time of attack: 0800

3. a. Co L will attack to N, seize and mop up LUTREBOIS.

b. Co I will follow Co L by 200-300 yards prepared to attack on right. Provide security patrol to right flank (contact 137th). Prepared to pass

(27) Personal knowledge.

through Co L at LUTREBOIS and continue attack.

c. Co K will follow Co I by 200-300 yards prepared to attack either on right or left, provide security patrol to left flank.

d. Co M -- 1 MG plat direct support Co L.
1 MG plat prepared to support Co I.
81 mm mortars in position to fire on LUTREBOIS and area to front. Observer with Co L.

x. Possible contact with friendly troops vicinity of MARVIE". (28)

Little was known of the enemy position in the battalion zone of action. No contact had been made with the enemy to this time. The battalion was warned that the enemy was still dressing many of its men in US uniforms. It was reported the enemy was identifying those so dressed by a colored scarf worn around the neck. Wearing of scarfs was popular with our troops, so to minimize confusion in that respect orders were issued to remove all scarfs and to shoot on sight anyone seen wearing them. (29)

A complete K ration and extra ammunition would be distributed with the serving of hot coffee at 0600 hours the following morning. Each man was instructed to carry one blanket. The battalion commander planned to follow Company L with his command group. Initially the command post would remain in its present location in the woods and be prepared to displace forward on order. (30)

(28) A-7; (29) Personal knowledge; (30) A-7.

Prior reconnaissance was impossible, due to darkness and the early start the following morning. Realizing this, the company commanders requested permission to move to the outskirts of Lutrebois under cover of darkness the following morning so that the lack of reconnaissance might be overcome with the use of surprise. Permission was granted by regiment and the time of attack for the 3d Battalion was moved forward to 0500 hours. (31)

THE ATTACK

At 0500 hours, 29 December, Company L moved out followed by Companies I and K. Company L, to prevent possible enemy ambush, sent an officer-led patrol on ahead of the column. The patrol had advanced about a thousand yards to the north when an enemy machine gun opened fire. By 0605 hours, Company L had forced the machine gun to withdraw, but now the enemy was alerted and other automatic weapons and small arms took up the fight as the column advanced. The enemy positions appeared to be small outpost groups holding up the advance. Their fire was ineffective as no casualties were reported, but they did succeed in delaying the advance. It wasn't until 1000 hours that the leading elements of Company L arrived at the edge of the woods on the southwest edge of Lutrebois. Here the battalion commander made new plans for the attack. (32)

Lutrebois was a small town situated at the north end of a valley. This valley, bounded on the east and west by heavy

(31) Personal knowledge; (32) A-7.

woods, extended southeast about 1700 yards and terminated there in heavy woods. The ground north and northwest of the town was slowly rising and devoid of cover and concealment. To the east, northeast, and west the ground rose sharply with the higher of the two ridges on the east. The roadnet into the town was excellent from all directions. (33)

Due to the delay of the 3d Battalion by the enemy, the 1st Battalion was ordered to bypass to the left and continue the attack to Marvie. The 2d Battalion tied onto the rear of the 3d Battalion along the west side of the road entering Lutrebois from the southwest, with orders to protect the right flank of the regiment. (34)

The new plan of attack for the 3d Battalion was for Company L to seize Lutrebois. Companies I and K from their positions along the road southwest of Lutrebois would attack east, seize and occupy the wooded area south and southeast of the town. From this position Companies I and K would be able to cover the approaches into the town. One platoon of machine guns from Company M would support the attack from positions in the woods on the high ground southwest of the town. The 81 mm mortars from positions in a draw southwest of the town would support the battalion attack.

The battalion command post moved to a chateau some 1600 yards southeast of the town. The battalion observation post occupied a position on the high ground in the woods at the southwest edge of the town. (35)

(33) Personal knowledge; (34) A-8; (35) A-7.

The objective given to Companies I and K was about a thousand yards to the east which would give them an exposed right flank, if the 2d Battalion remained in its new position. To avoid the danger of an open flank, the 2d Battalion was ordered to join in a coordinated attack with the 3d Battalion. Their objective was an extension of the 3d Battalion's objective to the south in the woods southeast of Lutrebois. It was hoped they would be able to make contact with the 137th Infantry, ~~who~~ which was also attacking. To stretch their lines as far as possible to the south to accomplish this contact, the 2d Battalion employed all three of its rifle companies on line. (36)

At 1300 hours the attack jumped off. Company L quickly moved into Lutrebois and completely surprised the enemy. By 1600 hours Company L was consolidating its position. (37)

Companies I and K, with excellent overhead machine gun fire supporting their attack, moved across the valley toward the objective. As its forward elements neared the objective, heavy small arms fire could be heard on the right in the 2d Battalion area. The companies moved onto the objective without meeting nor observing any enemy troops. The area gave evidence of recent enemy occupation. Freshly dug soil covered the snow around many foxholes, which indicated a well prepared position for defensive action. The men of Companies I and K were quick to take advantage of these positions when word was quietly passed around that German soldiers could be

(36) Personal knowledge; (37) A-7.

observed in the woods across the road. (38) (See Map C)

It was evident the enemy was unaware of the presence of American troops as he was walking about in a very unconcerned manner, paying no attention to the firing still going on in the 2d Battalion area.

A check with the 3d Battalion Commander, using the SCR 300 radio, revealed that the 2d Battalion had been unable to cross the line of departure. Heavy enemy fire had prevented any movement toward the objective and further movement was not anticipated under the circumstances. The K Company Commander was advised by the battalion commander to organize a perimeter defense to protect his right flank and rear.

Before the K Company Commander could plan this defense, the enemy opposite him began moving out of the woods across the road toward the I and K Company positions. The companies, who had held their fire to this time, now opened fire against the unsuspecting enemy. The enemy force consisting of about forty men was killed, wounded, or captured. Taken by complete surprise, the enemy had been unable to return the fire. About thirty minutes later another enemy group, smaller in size and picking their way among the dead of the first action, advanced toward the Company K position. Again, as in the first attack, the enemy advanced seemingly unaware of the presence of K Company. Once more, the enemy force was eliminated.

The growing number of prisoners in the position was causing some concern to the company commanders. Another radio

(38) Personal knowledge.

conversation with the battalion commander cautioned against any evacuation of the prisoners as the area to the rear and across the valley was suspected of containing enemy. This information caused the company commanders additional concern as this meant possible isolation of routes to the rear. Ammunition was running low and the K rations carried by each man would last only through breakfast the following day. Fortunately, no casualties had been suffered by either company to this time, but each company commander realized immediately there would be no evacuation service should any of his men become casualties. (39)

The commanders of Companies I and K planned a perimeter defense together. They pulled their front line platoons into the woods and placed outposts on the forward and rear edges of the tree line. The support platoons of both companies were in physical contact with each other and in turn were tied in with the forward elements forming a solid chain of positions around each of the company command posts. Each company commander had an excellent observation post near the forward edge of the woods, with good coverage of the road some fifty yards to the front.

Meanwhile, the L Company Commander had decided his position within the town would be unable to repel a counter-attack, if it were launched from the woods on the high ground to the northeast. To improve his position, he sent a platoon to outpost and patrol those woods. The platoon advanced to

(39) Personal knowledge.

the high ground and on into the woods a short distance straight into an enemy ambush. The enemy opened fire with machine guns, mortars, and an 88 mm gun. In wild panic, the platoon turned and fled back to the town. The company commander then decided to occupy the high ground in rear (southwest) of the town with the attached heavy machine gun platoon, the command group, and the company mortar section. This was the only position of depth in the battalion. (40)

The 1st Battalion had succeeded in seizing the town of Marvie where it had contacted elements of the 101st Airborne Division. With the capture of Lutrebois and Marvie, the 4th Armored Division was able to fight its way into Bastogne on the main (Arlon-Bastogne) highway. (41)

It might be well to mention here the peculiar position the regiment found itself at this time. The 1st Battalion, in Marvie, found itself separated from the 3d Battalion 4,000 yards to the north. The 2d Battalion's left elements were about 500 yards south of Lutrebois with enemy between it and the 3d Battalion. The 3d Battalion found itself with two companies isolated a 1000 yards to the front and the battalion command post cut off completely from all the companies. Radio was the only means of communication in the regiment.

At 2130 hours the same day (29 December), the 3d Battalion Commander informed the company commanders that an

(40) Personal knowledge; (41) A-6, p. 103.

armored infantry battalion and tanks of the 4th Armored Division were preparing to move into the 3d Battalion zone during the night, to strengthen the defense and tie in the left flank with other elements of their division. He cautioned against firing at vehicles without first investigating as to whether they were enemy or friendly. He concluded his conversation with the information that an attack order would be issued the following morning at 0730 hours.

By 2400 hours that night, Companies I and K had reported hearing armor movements several times. The night was exceptionally dark with visibility zero. Sound seemed impossible to locate in the extreme cold. Each company commander was reluctant to send investigating patrols for fear of losing the men to the enemy and weakening their already hazardous defensive position. The sound of armor moving continued through the night. (42)

At 0430 hours the following morning (30 December), Company I reported enemy moving out of the woods to their front toward Lutrebois. Artillery fire was requested and delivered with good effect, but by 0515 hours Company L reported enemy coming into the town on two sides with tanks and Infantry. (43) The two forward platoons of Company L, with a section of light machine guns attached, managed to hold the enemy for a short time but enemy tanks traveling on the road through the town soon dispelled any hopes of containing the enemy advance. Those men who were able to

(42) Personal knowledge; (43) A-7.

free themselves withdrew to the company command post location on the high ground southwest of the town. The rest, 49 men in all, were captured by the enemy. Now the attached heavy machine gun platoon went into action, inflicting severe casualties among the enemy. They were soon outflanked and withdrew to positions near the battalion command post. (44)

It should be remembered that defense in depth was nonexistent within the entire regiment. To counter the enemy advance, Company E was withdrawn from the 2d Battalion and sent to the aid of the 3d Battalion. This company found itself helpless to cope with the large enemy force. Badly battered and suffering many casualties, it returned to 2d Battalion control. (45)

Now, at dawn, Companies I and K found themselves still untouched by the enemy but completely cut off on all sides from friendly units. As visibility improved, their positions appeared even more hopeless. Fifteen Tiger Royal Tanks were observed in the edge of the woods east of the road directly opposite them. The tanks had backed into the woods for cover and each tank gun was pointed toward the I and K Company positions. Again it was evident the Germans had no idea of the presence of the American force so near to them. One German officer crossed the road and turned over a few of the dead Germans, killed the previous day, in front of the Company K position. He satisfied himself and returned to the tanks, without even looking into the K Company

(44) A-6, p. 104; (45) Personal knowledge.

position. The men of Company K were instructed to hold their fire as the company commander felt any offensive action by his company would only result in its annihilation at very little cost to the enemy. Needless to say, the order was obeyed to the letter.

The company commanders contacted the 3d Battalion Commander, reported the presence of the tanks and requested artillery support and an air strike. Coordinates were used to direct the initial fire of the artillery after which the company commanders adjusted the fire, knocking out four of the tanks. Seven men in K Company were wounded by the initial fire. A few of the rounds burst in the tree tops over their position. The remaining tanks pulled out on the road only to be caught in that position by rocket-firing American planes. The planes brought their fire to bear on the tanks which immediately broke up into two groups; one sped to the north, the other to the south. Because of the close proximity of the two companies to the road, the rocket firing caused them an additional 15 casualties. Ironically, all the casualties suffered by the two companies to this time were caused by their own supporting fires. (46)

During this time the enemy had continued his advance through Lutrebois and was slowly approaching the 3d Battalion Command Post. Seeking a reserve force of some sort, the battalion commander employed his headquarter's group, elements of Company L, the heavy machine gun platoon previously mentioned, Company M Headquarters, and the bat-

(46) Personal knowledge.

talion staff to stop the enemy. The headquarters of an armored infantry battalion sharing the chateau as a command post location, also joined the defense position adding a tank and a half-track to the growing number of men and weapons. The Germans, with no attempt to use cover and concealment, boldly advanced into the defensive fires to a point just short of the building itself. At this point, the attack fell apart disintegrating completely in the 3d Battalion zone. However, Lutrebois was once more in enemy hands and Companies I and K were still surrounded. (47) (See Map C)

It was soon discovered that the German attack had been conducted on a large scale. Using two divisions; the 1st SS Panzer Division and the 167th Volksgrenadier Division, he had attempted to smash his way through the 35th US Infantry Division to the Arlon-Bastogne Highway and thence to Bastogne. In other areas he had employed three additional divisions to support the same effort. (48) In the 3d Battalion zone, the enemy employed two infantry battalions and 40 tanks. (49) Twenty-five of these tanks were destroyed in the 3d Battalion zone. (50)

During the period between 1330 hours and 1600 hours, new plans were made for the continuation of the attack the next day. Companies I and K were notified to withdraw to the line now held by the 2d Battalion. There K Company would tie in to the left of Company E, and Company I would

(47) A-6, p. 104; (48) A-3, p. 6; (49) A-6, p. 103; (50) A-6, p. 105.

extend left from Company K to make contact with the 51st Armored Infantry, ~~who~~ which was fighting its way south to occupy this position. (51) (See Map D) This was the same armored infantry unit that had been reported to Companies I and K the previous night as moving into the area to strengthen the defense. (52)

At 1700 hours just before dark, Company K followed by Company I began its withdrawal. The formation was strange in that they moved in a column of platoons, single file, across the valley toward the 2d Battalion. One extra platoon had been organized and placed between the two companies. They included the prisoners carrying three litter cases and the walking wounded of both companies. An officer was given the responsibility of getting this group back as best he could, should the companies become involved with the enemy. It was a fortunate arrangement. As Company K entered the woods west of the valley, the company commander observed an enemy machine gun position at the edge of the woods along the road leading north to Lutrebois. He held up the column long enough to instruct one platoon leader to surround the machine gun and to try to eliminate it, using hand grenades. Any use of small arms against the position would have endangered possible friendly troops on the west side of the road.

Next, he sent a patrol well to the right of the enemy position with instructions to cross the road, turn left in

(51) A-7; (52) Personal knowledge.

the woods and move south until they contacted the 2d Battalion. After seeing them successfully across the road, he waved the remainder of the column forward and notified the battalion commander of the action taken. Using the same route the patrol had taken, the company commander advanced his column across the road into the woods and had turned south about a hundred yards when the enemy machine gun opened fire. The first burst of the gun killed three men and wounded several others near him. Using his 536 radio, he contacted the platoon leader on the other side surrounding the gun. The platoon leader explained the Germans had heard the column moving and were aware of his position to their rear, making it impossible for any of his platoon to get within grenade range. The company commander, holding his temper in check, instructed the platoon leader to get his platoon across the road and join the rest of the company. (53)

Meanwhile, the officer in charge of the prisoners and wounded personnel moved deeper into the woods when he heard the machine gun open fire. He found a trail going south through the woods which he used, making the move much easier on the wounded men. He succeeded in reaching friendly elements in the rear of the 2d Battalion, who relieved him of further responsibility. (54)

I Company, hearing the fire of the machine gun, moved further to the right and crossed the road without difficul-

(53) (54) Personal knowledge.

ty. (55)

Shortly after 1800 hours, the K Company patrol after making contact with the 2d Battalion, returned to guide the column to its position. (56)

The returned companies were ordered to employ all platoons on the front line so as to maintain physical contact with the units on their right and left. The 2d Battalion, reduced in numbers due to casualties, had stretched its three rifle companies to the limit to make contact with elements of the 137th Infantry on the right. The 2d Battalion line ran from a point inside the woods on the east side of the road, diagonally to the southeast to the left elements of the 137th Infantry. (57)

Company K, to tie in with both the 2d Battalion and I Company, was forced to place one platoon on the east side of the road and the other two platoons on the west side of the road. The platoons on the west side of the road ran generally along the road and then slowly curved off to the northwest to contact Company I. Company I had considerable difficulty building its line, without the knowledge of where the still missing armored unit would finally locate itself. (58) (See Map D)

Company L, which had been reduced to about a third of its strength in the day's action, was combined with; the Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon, the Regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, and the Regimental Military

(55) A-7; (56) A-7; (57) Personal knowledge; (58) A-7.

Police Platoon to form a reserve for the 2d and 3d Battalions. (59)

By 2400 hours that night, each of the 3d Battalion Companies had been resupplied with rations and ammunition by a battalion carrying party. Wire communication was also established with battalion. Because of the fluid situation, requests for bedrolls and hot rations were refused by regiment. (60)

At 0800 hours 31 December, the 2d and 3d Battalions moved out in the attack to mop up what they thought was light enemy resistance. Both battalions were thrown back to their initial positions by very heavy enemy resistance. The 2d Battalion suffered very heavy losses in its short skirmish with the enemy. After the attack was repulsed, both battalions stayed in position for the remainder of the day. In the late afternoon, the 2d Battalion stopped an enemy counter-attack against its right flank. This attack again severed contact with the 137th Infantry on the right. The enemy, using artillery and mortars, pounded the 2d and 3d Battalion positions continually throughout the day. (61)

That night, to welcome the New Year, word was passed on to the men that every artillery unit in the III Corps would mass their guns at midnight for a series of time-on-target fires on the enemy. Five battalions of 4.2 Mortars and all available armor would also join in the firing.

(59) A-6; (60) A-7; (61) A-8.

This news proved to be a much needed shot in the arm for the morale of the men. They planned additional unhappiness for the enemy in the two hours prior to midnight. They received permission to fire all their weapons toward the enemy. The battalion commander arranged for all the mortars to fire on Lutrebois and the high ground beyond. It may appear to the reader that this was a foolish waste of ammunition. Actually, all the targets had been well selected from information obtained from enemy deserters.

At 2355 hours the firing began. The artillery, using the new Proximity type fuse for the first time in this area, methodically covered the entire town and its vicinity. The flash of the shells landing illuminated the sky for miles around. For twenty minutes this firing continued, pounding the enemy and as suddenly as it had started it stopped. Enemy vehicles could be heard withdrawing from the town. A group of enemy, punch drunk with shock, surrendered themselves to the battalion. They told of the heavy casualties inflicted by the firing. (62)

1 January 1945, found the battalion once again preparing to attack. The time of attack was scheduled for 1330 hours. The objectives assigned were Lutrebois and the high ground to the east of the town, the same as they had been three days before. The gap between the 2d Battalion and the 137th Infantry was filled by elements of the 28th Cavalry Squadron who were committed for that pur-

(62) A-7; Personal knowledge.

pose. This permitted the 2d Battalion to join the 3d Battalion in plans for the afternoon attack. (63)

The road leading north to Lutrebois was the boundary between battalions, with the 2d Battalion on the right and the 3d Battalion on the left. The objectives were divided; the 3d Battalion to take Lutrebois, the 2d Battalion to take the high ground southeast of the town. With Company I on the left and Company K on the right, the attack jumped off at 1330 hours. By 1530 hours, the 3d Battalion reached the forward edge of the woods looking into Lutrebois. There the companies were forced to stop because of heavy enemy fire of all types. The 2d Battalion was also forced to hold up at the forward edge of the woods to the right of the road. No further advance was made that day. (64) (See Map D)

The next morning, 2 January 1945, the 3d Battalion prepared to resume the attack. Hot coffee was served the troops at 0600 hours, the first they had received in many days. The plan of attack remained for the most part the same as the previous day. (65)

Enemy prisoners, interrogated at regiment, reported two hundred and forty enemy occupying the town supported by mortars and tanks located on Hill 540 to the northeast. Additional enemy elements were reported in the woods to the northeast, whose commanders were under orders to attack until the last man died attacking. (66) (See Map D)

The supporting artillery fired several concentrations

(63) A-8; (64) A-7; (65) A-7; (66) A-7.

on the reported locations of the enemy, prior to the attack. At 0830 hours, Company K began the attack on Lutrebois once again. Company I, from positions on the forward edge of the woods, supported the attack by fire. A platoon of heavy machine guns occupying the same positions it had been forced to withdraw from a few days before, also supported the attack.

Elements of K Company, advancing toward the first house just outside the edge of the woods, were forced to a stop by heavy enemy machine gun fire coming from several directions. The platoon sergeant reported to the company commander that he had observed several enemy in the first house. This house was the key to entering the town as it blocked the most covered approach from the woods. (See Map D) Too close to his own troops for artillery fire, the company commander ordered two bazooka teams to try to knock out the house. They expended several rounds without success. It was apparent the enemy had turned the house into a fortress. The bazooka rounds fired through windows revealed bales of straw and sandbags as they exploded.

Next, the company commander ordered a squad to attack the house from the west. This side of the house was windowless but the approach to it was over flat barren ground. As the squad moved out the battalion commander informed the company commander by radio that the 2d Battalion had moved out toward the high ground southeast of the town and, reported seeing enemy moving along the valley toward the

town. He ordered one platoon to be sent to the edge of the woods along the valley to protect that flank. A platoon was quickly dispatched along with a section of light machine guns to the position indicated by the battalion commander.

Meanwhile, the squad attacking the house had been pinned down in the open ground by machine gun fire. The platoon sergeant ran out to the squad and tried to get it to move. Failing in this, he sped for the house all alone. He succeeded in reaching the blind side of the building. Once again he tried to get the squad to join him and again they refused. Spying a ladder he quickly set it against the building and climbed to the roof. Completely disregarding the hail of machine gun fire coming at him from several directions, he very calmly threw fragmentation and white phosphorus grenades down the chimney. While he was climbing down, twenty seven Germans came out of the house and surrendered to the company. This sergeant (later a battlefield commissioned lieutenant) was awarded a Silver Star for this action. Now the way was open into the town. (67)

The two available platoons of K Company quickly found their way into buildings on the edge of the town. Company I using the same approach also entered the town. Now the enemy realizing the strong point had been eliminated, began firing mortars and artillery at the point of woods the companies had used to enter the town. Prior to this

(67) Personal knowledge.

firing no enemy shelling had occurred on this point, due to the close proximity of the enemy occupied stronghold. (68)

Clearing the town of the enemy took the next two days. Each house captured was a battle in itself. Like the first house, each one had been transformed into a miniature fortress by the enemy. The town was finally cleared of enemy on 4 January. (69)

In establishing the defense of the town for the second time, the entire battalion was used. Company I built its defense positions along the left side of the town with observation to the northeast, north, and northwest. Company K on the right had visual contact with the 2d Battalion to the southeast and observation to the south. What was left of Company L plus the heavy machine gun platoon remained as a reserve on the high ground southwest of Lutrebois. The enemy was unable to penetrate this defense thus ending the battle of Lutrebois for the 3d Battalion. (70)

So that the reader will not be left with an unfinished story the following information is added.

The 1st Battalion located in Marvie was ordered on 4 January to attack southeast through the woods northeast of Lutrebois. This attack lasted through the night to 0300 hours on 5 January. A few of the men were able to get through to the 2d Battalion position, but not in any strength. (71) The attack failed and heavy losses were suffered by the battalion. On 5 January the 3d Battalion

(68) A-7; (69) A-6, p. 105; (70) Personal knowledge; (71) A-6, p. 106.

attacked against the same woods and was repulsed with heavy losses. Finally on 8 January; two battalions of the 320th Infantry, elements of the 6th Armored Division, the 3d and 1st Battalions of the 134th Infantry launched a coordinated attack from the north, south, and west. This action defeated the enemy and captured the all important woods and high ground northeast of Lutrebois. (72)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

As proven by the final paragraphs in the previous chapter of this monograph, the objective given the 3d Battalion, 134th Infantry was beyond the capabilities of a battalion. Commanders that are not permitted time for reconnaissance should make a careful map study in their estimate of the situation. It is my opinion that a careful map study would have revealed the town of Lutrebois and the wooded terrain surrounding it, the only avenue of approach the enemy could profitably use in this area.

I fully appreciate the fact that this operation against an all out counteroffensive forced commanders to make decisions that were not normal in their efforts to stop the enemy. However, basic principles of good tactics cannot be overlooked in any operation.

The principle of depth was violated throughout the action by companies and battalion alike. Higher headquarters directed that physical contact would be maintained

(72) A-6, p. 109.

between units wherever possible. To accomplish this, commanders lost their reserve and support units to provide that contact. This violation might have been overcome by using reserve and support elements in patrol missions to maintain contact with friendly units on the right and left.

The use of men with little infantry experience in this action was necessary to build depleted units. It was impossible for company commanders to know the capabilities of these men in combat. The action of the squad, against the house that caused Company K so much trouble in gaining entrance to Lutrebois on 2 January 1945, is one example of how the lack of combat experience effected the action. The machine gun fire pinning the squad to the ground was well over their heads, as proven by the platoon sergeant's movement through the squad to the protection of the house. Seasoned combat troops would not have permitted themselves to be pinned down when protection was available a short distance to the front.

The use of exploitation through the breach in the enemy positions, made by Companies I and K in the initial attack on Lutrebois and the high ground to the southeast, might have accomplished the mission in a shorter period of time. It will be remembered that these companies on 29 December 1944, advanced to the high ground southeast of the town and remained there for two days without being discovered by the enemy. Additional units, if committed through that gap made by Companies I and K, would have been in position

to strike the enemy positions on the flanks and rear. In addition, an excellent approach to the heavily defended woods northeast of the town would have been available.

The 2d Battalion's failure to reach its objective in the above action permitting the enemy to surround Companies I and K could have caused serious consequences, had the enemy been aware of their presence.

Evacuation of wounded men and the replenishment of ammunition should receive a high priority from higher headquarters when the normal procedure breaks down because of enemy action.

Units committed against an enemy known to be using tanks should have accompanying armor support. The 3d Battalion found itself helpless to cope with the enemy counter-attack on 30 December 1944, only because they had no defense against the enemy tanks. The use of artillery and air support against tanks is effective only in breaking up the tactical unity of the enemy tanks for a short time. Those tanks not receiving direct hits are free to fight again. It is interesting to note that of the twenty-five enemy tanks destroyed in the 3d Battalion area, tank destroyer units and 4th Armored Division tanks firing at long range claimed credit for all but the four knocked out by artillery fire in front of the I and K Company positions.

The L Company Commander was fully aware of his inability to perfect an adequate defense of Lutrebois because of its low position in the valley. As occupation of the

high ground to the northeast was impossible because of the strong enemy force, an additional force should have been sent to bolster the defense of Company L. In the final phases of the operation the entire 3d Battalion was used within the town to successfully defend it.

Troops fighting in snow and cold must receive hot food to build resistance against the elements, as well as the enemy. K rations may be a good substitute but they will never supplant hot food in the mind of the fighting man.

In summary, the 3d Battalion did accomplish its mission by capturing the town of Lutrebois. In eight days of fighting the 3d Battalion lost two hundred and sixty-seven men killed, wounded, or captured. The exact number of enemy casualties in this operation is unknown except for the findings of Lt. Eldephonse C. Reischel, the 3d Battalion graves registration officer. He found German dead mounted to eight times the number of American dead found in the Lutrebois area. (73)

By General Orders Number 62, Washington, D. C., dated 3 July 1947, the 134th Infantry Regiment was cited for extraordinary heroism against the enemy in connection with the relief of Bastogne. By order of the President of the United States and confirmed by Section IV, WD Circular 333, the regiment was awarded the Distinguished Unit Badge.

LESSONS

1. A commander's estimate of the situation must in-

(73) A-6, p. 110.

clude thought on the size and importance of the objective, so as to commit troops in sufficient numbers to accomplish the mission in the minimum amount of time and with the minimum amount of losses.

2. Unit commanders must be allowed time for reconnaissance to properly plan their unit's employment.

3. Contact patrols between adjacent units will eliminate the need for long, thinly spread front lines.

4. The principle of depth cannot be sacrificed without weakening a unit's position.

5. New replacements must have adequate training and battle orientation before being committed to action.

6. Higher commanders must be alert to employ reserve units in exploitation tactics when the opportunity occurs.

7. Infantry-Tank teams should be employed in operations against a known tank supported enemy.

8. Artillery and air support are effective in breaking up the tactical unity of enemy tank concentrations.

9. A defense of a town, dominated by an enemy on high ground, must have a defense in sufficient strength to overcome the enemy advantage.

10. Hot food is essential to the fighting man in defending himself against an enemy in snow and cold climatic conditions.