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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 104TH INFANTRY
(26TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK FROM
GROSBOUS TO WILTZ, LUXEMBOURG, 22 - 29 DECEMBER 1944
(THE ARDENNES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Heavy Weapons Company Commander)

Type of operation described: ~~BATTALION IN ATTACK~~

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III Corps. Thus the wheels were set in motion that were to move multiplied thousands of troops northward to the Ardennes sector. (4)

On 19 December 1944, 1800 hours, 2d Battalion, 104th Infantry was alerted to move on one hour's notice. Shortly after midnight THregimental movement order was received and by 0730 hours, 20 December, 2d Battalion along with the rest of the 26th Division was on the road headed north. (5)

THE ENEMY SITUATION

Due to the fact that the enemy had achieved tactical surprise in launching his attack and the fact that he had the offensive, enemy information was rather indefinite on 20 December when III Corps arrived in the Ardennes Area. The situation was what has been described as fluid.

~~We see~~ ^{some} twelve to fifteen enemy divisions had ~~broken through~~ lines in what Von Runstedt called an all out gamble. (6)

Very little information was available on the battalion and regimental level at this time because most planning was being done concurrently with changes in the situation.

At the conference in Verdun 20 December operational control of VIII Corps, which supposedly consisted of the 4th, 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions and the 7th and 9th Armoured Divisions passed to operational control of the Third Army. Actually part of the 106th Infantry Division and parts of the 7th and 9th Armoured Divisions were pushed to the north and were later committed by the First Army. (7)

III Corps mission was to rapidly advance to the north and relieve American forces surrounded at Bastogne and to cut off the enemy penetration.

Disposition for III Corps attack was 4th Armoured Division on the left, 26th Division in the center and 80th Division on the right.

The 26th Infantry Division plan of attack was to have two regiments

(4) A-7, p.3, (5) A-5 (6) A-2 (7) A-1

Upon being relieved from the line the 26th Division closed into Metz, France on 13 December 1944, and came under operational control of US III Corps, whose headquarters was at Metz.

The 26th Division received 2585 replacements upon arrival at Metz. These replacements were derived from a five per cent quota of all Army and Corps headquarters and service troops that the Army Commander had ordered to be trained as infantry riflemen. (2)

The 2d Battalion was billeted in some old barracks which had been occupied by German officer candidates prior to the fall of Metz. At the time these barracks were assigned to us they were very dirty and lacking many windows. We cleaned the barracks and received mail and Christmas packages and, consequently, morale was high. Without fear of contradiction I can say everyone was praying that we would be privileged to stay in Metz out of the cold until after Christmas.

During the period 13-19 December 1944, some very badly needed maintenance was performed on all weapons and vehicles. Some training was conducted and men were transported to quartermaster shower facilities daily.

Shortly after 16 December 1944 we heard about the Von Runstedt offensive and, I believe, all our hopes to stay in Metz until after Christmas were shattered.

THE MOVEMENT NORTH

Before departing to Verdun for a meeting with General Eisenhower, General Patton ordered his staff to take preliminary steps to move III Corps to the Ardennes Area and a shift in his front line to be made in order to extract more divisions to be committed to the north. (3)

When asked by General Eisenhower how soon he could attack to the north, General Patton replied that he could attack 23 December 1944 with

(2) A-1 (3) A-1

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Battalion, 104th Infantry, 26th Infantry Division, in the Attack from Grosbous to Wiltz, Luxembourg, period 22 - 29 December 1944, during the Ardennes Campaign.

In order to orient the reader with this unit up to the time of this action the following few facts are presented. Prior to the action I am about to describe the 2d Battalion had been engaged with the enemy in a combat situation for 67 days. This action included a period from 6 October to 8 November which, for morale purposes, has been described as an offensive defensive. The Army Commander wanted all troops to maintain an offensive attitude. During this offensive defensive period the 2d Battalion participated in two costly limited attacks. However, this action was rich in experience for a unit newly committed to action.

The real offensive which was promised by the Army Commander started 8 November and lasted for the 2d Battalion, 104th Infantry, until 12 December 1944, when we were relieved by the 2d Battalion, 346th Infantry, 87th Infantry Division. At the time of this relief the 2d Battalion, 104th Infantry, was on the right flank of the Third Army and facing the main Siegfried Line defenses.

The purpose of the relief of the 2d Battalion and the entire 26th Infantry Division, it has later been learned, was to bring the division up to strength, to train replacements and to give the unit some rest prior to an air blitz of the Siegfried Line in the Zwiebrucken Area. (1)

(1) 47

SCR 300 radio. As the action proceeded Company F was committed on the right of Company E and was engaged in the battle.

The enemy began advancing from a patch of woods to our left front and were immediately taken under fire by the 81-mm mortars of Company H, and a few minutes later by supporting artillery. The enemy acted in a very aggressive manner and continued to advance under heavy mortar and artillery fire. However, the fire on them was effective and the threat to our left flank was reduced. It is my opinion that the enemy was in complete ignorance as to the strength with which he was being attacked.

(12)

About 1200 hours the enemy action became so violent that Company E was somewhat disorganized. One platoon leader of Company E came from the woods and stated that all of the rest of Company E was surrounded and the company had suffered many casualties. The men with the platoon leader of Company E were put into a position to block any further advances of the enemy. Also a machine gun platoon of Company H was put in position to repel any penetration along the road.

At 1500 hours the 1st Battalion was committed to our left in an attack toward Buschrodt. The 3d Battalion was moved into a reserve position on some high ground to the rear of 1st Battalion.

Before dark Company E had been reorganized by its Company Commander, Captain Spagleberg, and it was found that the situation was not so bad in Company E as the lieutenant had represented. Company E had inflicted many casualties on the enemy and knocked out one enemy towed anti-tank gun.

During the action of 22 December Company G was moved to a position in the vicinity of Reimberg with the mission of protecting the battalion's right flank and making reconnaissance with view of making a flanking attack. (13)

(12) Personal knowledge (13) A-9

2d Battalion formed and began moving out at 0600 hours in the direction of Bettborn and Grosbous. (MNH-2)

The column had moved a very short distance when Captain Hendrix of the 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion reported to our battalion commander that he had two platoons of tank destroyers for the support of the 104th Infantry. (9)

In order that the reader may see the piecemeal manner in which this attack was formed, it is noted that the 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion had been in contact with the enemy east of the Saar River 69 miles away the morning before and had just made contact with us. (10)

As the column moved forward it began to snow and, other than this, the morning was uneventful until we reached the little town of Pratz, at which time the regimental reconnaissance platoon leader reported that the enemy was in Grosbous. As the point rounded a curve in the road they were fired on by the enemy. Company E deployed on both sides of the road and a section of tanks were brought forward to give fire support. As the fire developed, it was noted that the enemy had a preponderance of automatic weapons. Every move on our part brought a hail of small arms fire from the enemy. Our section of tanks began firing on the enemy and E Company was able to advance into the edge of the woods. About 100 yards in an anti-tank gun opened up on our tanks and they halted.

As the battle developed E Company was heavily engaged and the situation there became rather confusing. This was caused, in part, by the fact that the enemy was using some captured American Army machineguns and automatic rifles. (11)

According to operation procedure, the 81-mm mortars of Company H were set up for firing as soon as the column was halted and contact was made. This was made possible by the fact that the mortar platoon had a

(10) Statement by Captain Hendrix, 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 23 December 1944, (11) Personal knowledge

abreast in column of battalions, advance along parallel routes, 328th Infantry in reserve.

Upon arrival in assembly area northeast of Arlon 2d Battalion was assigned the mission of blocking all roads leading into the regimental assembly area.

The afternoon of 20 December 2d Battalion received its quota of replacements which had had three or four days training in a division replacement training battalion that had been organized at Metz.

As the companies and platoons made final preparations for the attack, battalion and regiment attempted to add to the sparse information they had about the enemy.

THE MEETING ENGAGEMENT

On the afternoon of 21 December the battalion commander, S-2, S-3 and heavy weapons company commander went forward to make a reconnaissance of the line of departure which was to be the Attert River running generally east and west through the little town of Reichlange, Luxembourg. Since the exact location of the enemy had not been determined, and it was known that he was attacking, it was necessary to secure the line of departure. For this mission one machinegun platoon of Company H and the battalion anti-tank platoon were moved to Reichlange by their organic transportation prior to dark to set up a defense of the town. After dark, the rest of the battalion moved to Reichlange and all troops were disposed in town in such manner as to defend against attack from any direction. (8)

During the night one platoon of the 735th Tank Battalion arrived in town and was integrated into the attack plans for the next morning.

The formation for the 104th Infantry attack was column of battalions, 2d Battalion leading. Prior to daylight in almost complete darkness the

(8) Personal Knowledge

11557100

Wire communication was established with the 81-mm mortar^s, which were located nearby. Shortly afterwards, from this observation post about 2000 yards to the northwest a few soldiers were observed moving around at the edge of some woods. Presently, about twenty-five soldiers began advancing in the direction of Grosbous in a tactical formation. Due to the distance these troops could not be identified as either friendly or enemy forces. In order to check, the reconnaissance sergeant of Company H was sent to the battalion operations section to see if we had any friendly forces operating in that area. While this check was being made, more troops moved out followed by a tank or self propelled vehicle. Further observation indicated that they were likely enemy troops, so in order to make a quick adjustment one round of WP was fired in the direction of the approaching troops at a range of 1500 yards. More troops emerged from the woods, plus another tank. By this time it was fairly evident that the troops observed were enemy. The sergeant reported that there were no known friendly forces in that area. All six mortars were ordered to fire one round with a range and direction adjustment from the data that was on the mortar which fired the round of WP. This was done in order to get surprise mass fire on the enemy. The area of dispersion of all six rounds on the ground was approximately 300 yards wide by 200 yards in depth, which was a good block of mass fire that could be easily shifted in order to cover the target. Fortunately, the first small concentration fell in about the center of the attacking infantry and two tanks. Another five rounds per gun were ordered to be fired immediately. This fire also fell beautifully. The next order was down five zero ten rounds per gun. This fire was effective and pleased the observers so well that the next order was down one hundred, keep firing. At this time communications went out temporarily. All mortars kept firing for the few minutes that communications were out.

Twenty-six enemy soldiers and one officer were caught by surprise, and captured without firing a shot. However, Lt. Abel did have a struggle with the enemy officer in order to keep him from destroying some situation maps and information. Upon flushing the town about fifty or more sleepy prisoners were taken, many of whom had been wounded. (16)

The town of Grosbous was secured by Company G at 2210 hours and the rest of the battalion reinforced, minus Company E entered Grosbous according to plan number one. This little night escapade was rewarded the next morning when two German tanks were knocked out by our tank destroyers. (17)

Early on the morning of 23 December, Company E was relieved from the position they held containing the enemy pocket by Company I.

Company E was moved to the right in order to box the enemy in and protect the by-pass route over which the 2d Battalion had moved from enemy action.

At 0800 hours 23 December, the two platoons of tank destroyers were relieved from support of 2d Battalion and given another mission in the division area. Companies F and G were moved to a temporary defensive position northeast of Grosbous. One heavy machinegun platoon was assigned missions of direct support to each rifle company on line.

Due to the nature of the terrain, it was very difficult to get long range observation to the northeast. There was, however, a fairly large church in Grosbous with a high steeple. The possibility of using the church steeple was investigated and found to be the most satisfactory position for an observation post and it was used. Although it had had several rounds of direct fire artillery placed in it, it was very likely to receive more.

(16) Statement made by Captain Carl M. Abel, 20 December 1947, A-5, A-9, Personal knowledge (17) Personal knowledge, A-5

A patrol from Company G moved around the enemy's left flank and observed an estimated fifty or more enemy moving into the woods where Companies E and F were engaged. Company G was ordered to hold its position on our battalion's right flank and to continue their patrols and report information. Artillery concentrations were fired into the woods where the enemy was observed and also on the road leading south from Grosbous. This artillery fire was effective because twelve or fifteen enemy dead were later observed along this road. (14)

THE NIGHT ATTACK ON GROSOUS

Late in the afternoon, 22 December 2d Battalion was ordered to continue the attack at night and seize Grosbous. The forces for the attack were: Companies F and G supported by Company H, two platoons of tank destroyers and one platoon of tanks. Company E was to remain in position containing the enemy until relieved by Company I 3d Battalion.

Since there was not enough time for a detailed plan for a night attack, it was thought best to keep the attack as small as possible with the possibility of seizing the town of Grosbous.

The plan was to have one platoon of Company G move into the town and secure it, if possible. If this advance platoon was not able to seize the town by its own force it was to feel the enemy out and the rest of the battalion with support was to launch an assault. (15)

There was felt an urgency to get the tanks and especially the tank destroyers into Grosbous because enemy tanks had been holding up our advance along the main road that leads from the south into Grosbous.

The platoon of Company G led by Lt. Carl M. Abel (now Captain) made a surprisingly successful night attack. By flanking a great distance around to the right of town and using a draw that afforded some cover the platoon was able to enter unobserved by two enemy security outposts that were along two roads leading southward and eastward from Grosbous.

of seizing a bridge, if possible. Second Battalion, 104th Infantry moved through Eschdorf in the direction of Esch-sur-la-Sure. About 500 yards north of Eschdorf, 2d Battalion set up a temporary defense and sent patrols to Esch-sur-la-Sure and they reported enemy activity in the town. It was almost dark this day, 26 December, so the battalion remained in temporary defense for the night.

Another patrol was sent to Esch-sur-la-Sure after dark and it reported back at 0030 hours, 27 December with information that both bridges across the Sure had been destroyed and that the enemy had evacuated the town. (25)

The night of 26,27 December, Major General Willard S. Paul, 26th Infantry Division Commander, visited the battalion command post located in Eschdorf. General Paul commended the officers and men on the past good work of the battalion and stated the general plan for the next day's attack. (26)

Before daybreak the morning of 27 December battalion foot troops moved into Esch-sur-la-Sure. Soon afterward the battalion vehicles started to move into town and one of Company G's jeeps was blown up by an American anti-tank mine. The mine field was removed and soon afterward a bridge platoon of the 101st Engineer Combat Battalion moved into Esch-sur-la-Sure and started construction on a Treadway Bridge and a footbridge. The engineer crews were harassed by machinegun and mortar fire until Company F crossed the river in assault boats and secured a bridgehead. The footbridge was completed and the rest of the foot elements of the battalion crossed the river and took up a defensive position on the high ground to the north. At 1500 hours the Treadway Bridge was completed and the battalion heavy weapons and one platoon (less one tank) Company C, 735th Tank Battalion crossed the river. (27)

(25) A-5 (26) A-9, Personal knowledge (27) A-5, Personal knowledge

was conducted, the only indication of enemy action was some anti-tank mines which were detected and removed.

Christmas Day roast turkey was sent to us from the kitchens which were several miles to the rear. The turkey was cold when it reached us but, at least, we had one indication other than the snow that it was Christmas.

In order to fill the need for a unit with speed and punch Task Force Hamilton consisting of the following units was formed: 2d Battalion 328th Infantry (26th Division), Company C (less one platoon) 735th Tank Battalion, one platoon Company A 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion, one section Battery C, 390th AAA Battalion, and one section Company C, 101st Engineer Combat Battalion. (22)

Early Christmas morning this force attacked the town of Eschdorf, which dominated the approaches to the Sure River in the 26th Division zone of action. The enemy had the town well fortified with camouflaged tanks, infantry camouflaged in snow suits, and many dug-in machineguns. There was bitter fighting throughout Christmas Day and the town was captured the morning of 26 December. In this battle seven enemy tanks were knocked out, five by tank or tank destroyer and two by artillery fire. Task Force Hamilton lost two tanks and a large number of infantry. (23)

After the loss of Eschdorf the enemy retaliated with ^{an} air attack on our forces. The 390th AAA Battalion which was operating with 26th Infantry Division shot down thirteen enemy airplanes and damaged three others which were counted as probable loss to the enemy. (24)

After the battle for Eschdorf, Task Force Hamilton and 1st Battalion, 104th Infantry attacked in the direction of Bonnal and Lultzenhausen in an attempt to seize a bridge across the Sure River. Third Battalion, 104th Infantry ~~attacked in the direction of Heiderscheider-grund~~ with the mission

(22) A-3 (23) Statement by Lt. Col. Hamilton 20 December 1947
(24) A-6

This worked well for the enemy had halted and taken cover in a slight draw, supposedly waiting for the fire to lift. When the fire did not lift, but continued in intensity on them, the enemy started to scatter in panic. One of the tanks was in such a heavy concentration that the crew foolishly bailed out. The other tank withdrew and some of the enemy reached the edge of the woods nearby. Most of the enemy were killed or wounded. Ammunition expenditure was three hundred rounds. (19)

During the day of 23 December, the pocket of resistance contained by Companies E and I denied our use of the main road from Pratz to Grosbous. Companies E and I, supported by a platoon of tanks attacked with partial success. They knocked out two enemy light tanks and reduced the pocket of resistance in size.

At 1930 hours 23 December, one platoon of Company F was ordered to a position south of Grosbous to further assist in containing the enemy. (20)

On the morning of 24 December Companies E and I and one platoon of Company F engaged the enemy sufficiently to press him in and locate him definitely. All troops then withdrew according to plan to allow our artillery and mortar fire to be placed in heavy concentration on the enemy. After the artillery and mortar fire was lifted, Company E and the platoon of Company F attacked the enemy in the woods and seventy-one prisoners were taken, most of whom were wounded. There was an uncounted number of enemy dead in the area. This was the remnant of what was originally estimated to be a reinforced enemy battalion. Some of the enemy ^{are} is believed to have escaped the night of 23 December, but for the most part the battalion was destroyed. (21)

THE CROSSING OF THE SURE RIVER AND THE ATTACK ON BUDERSCHIED

For the two days 24, 25 December the 2d Battalion was given the mission of protecting the division right flank. Extensive motor and foot patrolling

(19) Personal knowledge (20) A-5 (21) Personal knowledge

We cleared the town of enemy by about 1700 hours and set up a defense for the night.

The following day we advanced to the high ground about 1200 yards south of Wiltz and came under artillery, mortar, rocket and direct tank fire. Our battalion was in no position to attack against such resistance. Most of the enemy fire was coming from our right flank which was wide open.

The 80th Division which had been on our right flank had passed from operational control of III Corps to XII Corps and was still south of the Sure River. (31)

Due to our present vulnerable position our mission was changed from one continuous attack in the direction of Wiltz and St. Vith to one of protecting III Corps exposed right flank.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The speed with which Third Army changed direction, planned new operations, moved, and supplied itself marks a high degree of skill in large scale tactics.

This operation was conducted in severely cold weather for which our troops were not well equipped. Shoes that were better suited for extremely cold weather and snow would have prevented many frostbite and trenchfoot casualties. Our troops were subjected to long periods of exposure, to sub-zero weather, and consequently the morale and efficiency of the individual soldier was lowered.

It is my opinion that in field problem training, a relief system should be worked out and recommended. This would keep the morale and efficiency of a unit at a higher level and would reduce casualties from both the enemy and the weather.

The night attack on Grosbous was a success in that it defeated easily

(21) A-1, Personal knowledge

In the meantime the 1st and 3d Battalions crossed the river in the vicinity of Lutzenhausen and were moving into position on the left of 2d Battalion. (28)

At 0135 Regimental Fragmentary Order No. 36 was received and at 0245 the battalion order for an attack in the direction of Wiltz was issued.

At 1000 hours, 28 December, the next day, the 2d Battalion moved out. The formation was Company F on the left, Company G on the right and E Company escheloned to the rear of Company G. One machinegun platoon of Company H was in support of Company F and one in support of Company G. There was also one 81-mm mortar observer with an SCR 300 radio attached to each front line company. The attached platoon of tanks was to follow the attack by bounds.

~~The battalion advanced down over the snow covered hills in the~~
direction of Buderscheid. After advancing to the northeast to within 700 yards of the town, Company G came to a lone farmhouse on the hillside and caught an enemy outpost of three men by surprise, killed one and took the other two prisoners. (29)

As we came nearer to Buderscheid, the enemy could be seen milling around in the town and digging in on a slope to the northeast. Artillery and mortar fire was directed on the enemy and also Companies F, G and H fired a large volume of small arms on the enemy. The attached tank platoon was called forward to assist in an assault on the town. As the tanks approached the tank platoon leader was standing in the turret of the lead tank and was killed by enemy small arms fire. This resulted in an awful blasting of the town of Buderscheid by tank fire. After this, the battalion moved in and cleaned out the town capturing 50 or 60 prisoners. The enemy suffered very heavily in casualties from artillery and mortar because of the fact that they had just begun to set up their defense. (30)

(28) A-5 (29) A-9 (30) A-9, Personal knowledge.

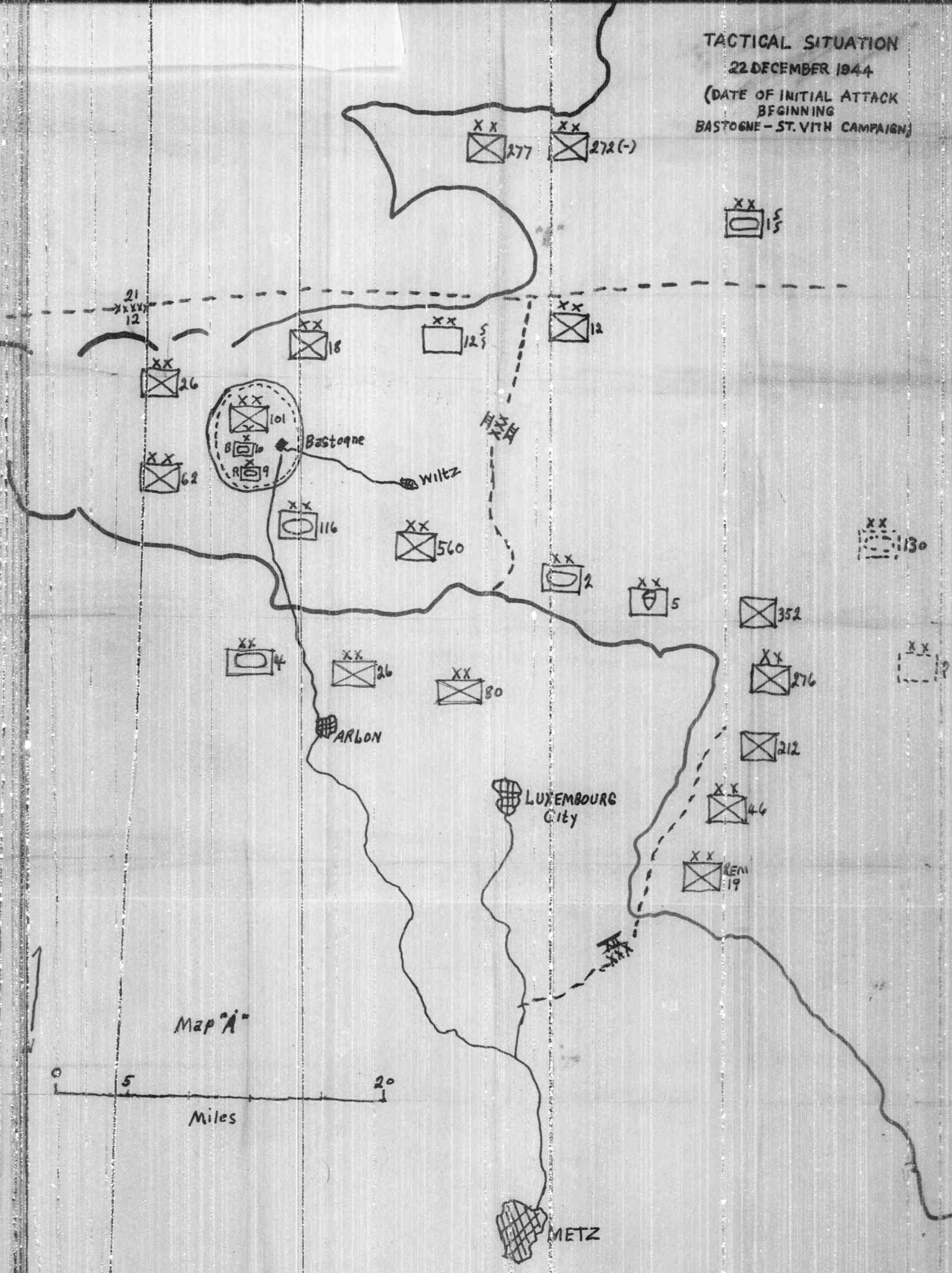
the same type enemy that fought stubbornly in the daytime.

The crossing of the Sure River and the attack on Buderscheid was successful because the enemy was never able to overcome the advantage our forces had over him by initial surprise.

LESSONS

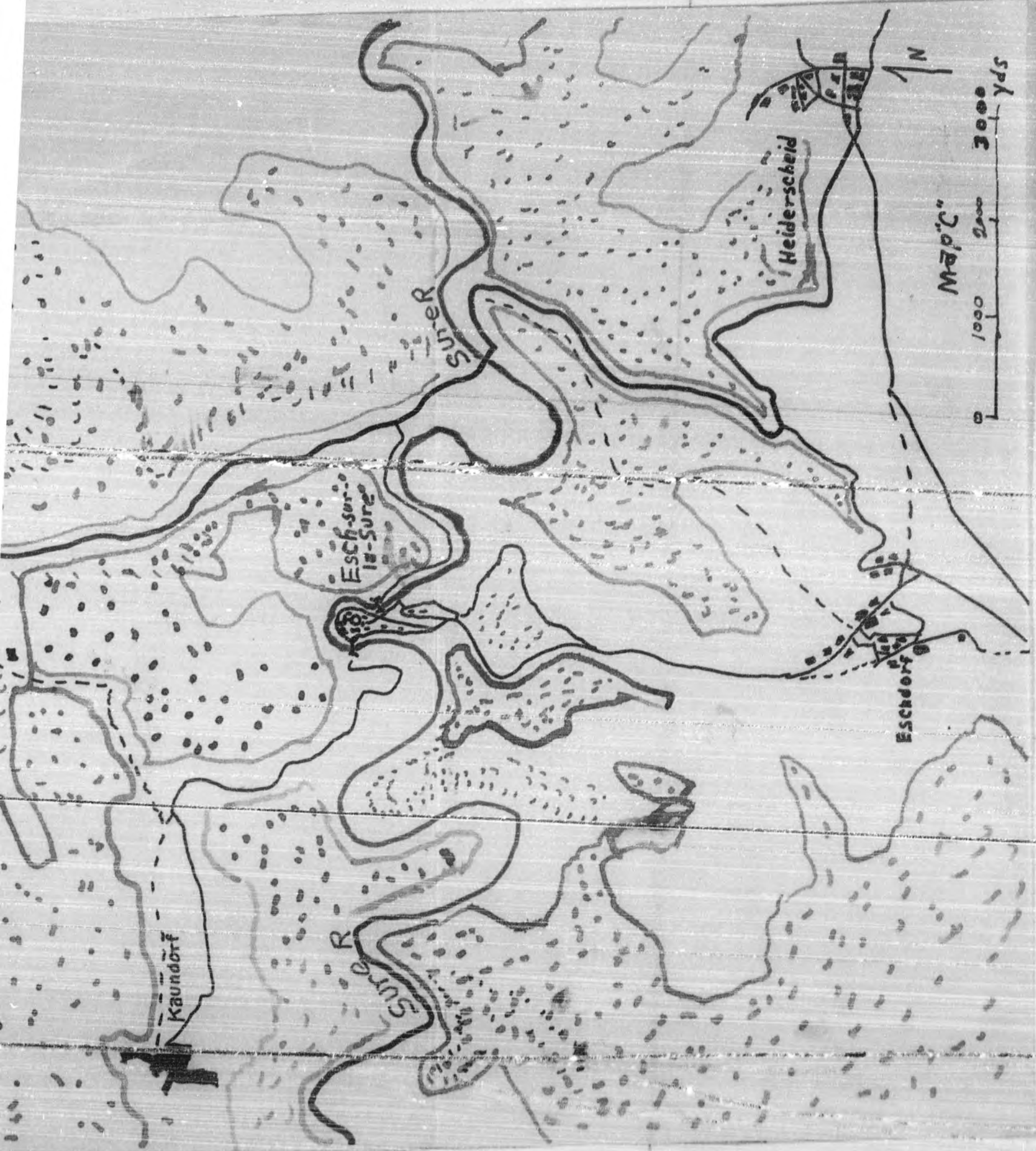
1. Surprise is essential to success in battle.
2. Troops must be equipped to meet the hazards of weather.
3. It is fatal to outrun the extent of your artillery support.
4. Night attacks at the proper time pay large dividends.
5. Mass fire by mortars and artillery increases in effectiveness in proportion to the amount of surprise that is achieved in the initial volume of fire.
6. When you have the enemy off balance, never let him recover.
7. Victory in battle is often determined by the force that is willing to go just one yard farther.

TACTICAL SITUATION
22 DECEMBER 1944
(DATE OF INITIAL ATTACK
BEGINNING
BASTOGNE - ST. VITH CAMPAIGN)



Map "A"

0 5 20
Miles



Kaundorf

Esch-sur-18-Sura

Sura R.

Sura R.

Heiderscheid

Eschdorf

Map C

0 1000 2000 3000 yds

