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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 35TH DIVISION
IN THE VICINITY OF ST LO, FRANCE, 11-18 JULY 1944
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY DIVISION ATTACKING
AND SECURING KEY TERRAIN IN HEDGEROW FIGHTING

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FOREWORD

DESCRIPTION OF A HEDGEROW

Various authors have attempted to describe a hedgerow. In order that the reader may have some idea of a hedgerow and why the assaulting forces encountered so much difficulty in negotiating these hedgerows, I attempt here to condense these opinions and give a brief description of a hedgerow.

A hedgerow varies from 5 to 30 feet in height. The bases were of mounds of earth and rock, topped by vegetation of all types from bushes to large old trees. At the bottom of each hedgerow were trenches varying in width and depth.

The origin and use remain a matter of speculation according to one writer. Some people believe they were early landmarks, while others believe they were built by natural erosion and growth. Still others look upon them as some primitive form of vegetation.

Caesar is said to have written of these hedgerows and described them thus, "they present a fortification like wall through which it was not only impossible to enter but even to penetrate with the eye".

Whatever their origin they presented a difficult problem to the attacker and gave the defender every advantage.

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 35TH INFANTRY DIVISION
IN THE ATTACK OF ST LO, FRANCE, 11-18 JULY 1944
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 35th Infantry Division, a part of XIX Corps, in the attack on ST LO, FRANCE, 11-18 July 1944 during the NORMANDY Campaign.

A knowledge of events and happenings prior to this time is necessary in order that the reader can see the necessity for this operation and the problems confronting the Allied leaders during the early stages of this campaign.

Allied forces, consisting of the 2d British Army and the First United States Army, under the overall command of Field Marshall Montgomery, landed successfully on the beaches of FRANCE, on 6 June 1944. (See Map A) (1)

Having once established and cemented a beachhead, the plan was for the British forces in the Caen sector to feint a breakout in that area thereby drawing the enemy reserves into the area, to contain them there, and actually effect a breakout in the western or American sector. (See Map A) (2)

Since a major breakthrough would necessarily mean the use of a large force and require considerable supplies, the British and American forces set about the task of cementing their beachheads and capturing sufficient ground necessary for a build up of troops and supplies. By 12 June 1944 the beachheads were linked. (3)

- (1) A-2, p. 60
- (2) A-2, p. 21
- (3) A-2, p. 21

By 20 June 1944, First United States Army consisted of four Corps, the VIII and XIX having become operational since the V and VII Corps had landed and fought their way inland. (See Map B)

PROBLEMS CONFRONTING FIRST UNITED STATES ARMY

The Allies were anxious to make a breakout; but many problems faced them and had to be solved before any breakthrough could be made.

The terrain in the First Army sector was divided into two distinct areas by the VIRE RIVER. East of the river was broken hilly terrain composed primarily of east-west ridges. The other area was covered by marshy ground caused by the many sluggish streams in the area. This was unsuitable tank country and was even difficult for foot troops. To help nature along and further complicate matters, the Germans had flooded a good deal of the land in order to add strength to their defenses.

Another problem was that of suitable road nets. East of Caretan there was only one north-south road and that was still under fire. West of Caretan there were three roads but these would help only after the Port of Cherbourg was in operation.

Another feature of the terrain was the many hedgerows that criss-crossed the countryside. These hedgerows aided the defense of the area and put the attacker at a definite disadvantage. Attacking the hedgerows was unlike anything the Americans had encountered so far. Because of the numerous hedgerows in the area, this operation is sometimes referred to as The Battle of the Hedgerows. (4) (For a description of a "Hedgerow" see Foreword.)

(4) A-4, p. 1, 2

The objective then of First United States Army, in early July, was the line COUNTANCES - MARIGNY - ST LO. By securing this line First Army would have possession of a suitable road net and would be out of the marshy and hedgerow terrain; they would, in fact, be in possession of terrain suitable for maneuver and poised for the breakthrough effort. (See Map B) (5)

GENERAL SITUATION

XIX Corps objective was the high ground east and west of ST LO. The city of ST LO was not of too much importance but the capture of the high ground adjacent to the city was. This area was also the hub of a network of roads leading in all directions. Capture of this area would provide a springboard for the breakthrough that was planned as well as prevent the enemy from shifting his forces from west to east.

XIX Corps zone was divided by the VIRE RIVER, a river, 40 to 60 feet in width, quite deep and very swift. On the left of the river the terrain was low and swampy restricting maneuver, while on the other side the area was quite hilly and the whole area was crisscrossed with the dreaded hedgerows. (See Map B) (6)

Elements of the German Seventh Army were facing the units assigned the XIX Corps. Many of the German units were far below strength due to losses inflicted during the previous part of the campaign; further, the Germans were not receiving replacements because of the air superiority enjoyed by the Allies. American forces while sustaining many casualties, were building up forces and with the taste of victory were mentally and physically equipped to continue their success. (7)

(5) A-4, p. 5

(6) A-4, p. 5

(7) A-4, p. 7

XIX Corps opened its attack in accordance with the First Army plans on 7 July with the 29th and 30th Divisions; and by 7 July 1944 had succeeded in capturing the northern-most crossing of the VIRE RIVER, located at PONT HEBERT. The 35th Division was scheduled to join the XIX Corps, but had only just landed and would need sometime before it could get into the battle. When they did arrive it would help the situation considerably. (8)

ARRIVAL OF THE 35TH DIVISION AND ITS PLAN FOR BATTLE

While XIX Corps was opening up with its attack, the 35th was on its way to FRANCE from ENGLAND. By afternoon of 7 July all troops had landed and the division moved into an assembly area west of COLOMBIERES, FRANCE. While the division was on its way to the assembly area, the Division Commander, General Baade, along with members of the division staff, was in conference with Corps leaders.

The stay in the assembly area was short lived; and on 9 July 1944 the division commander ordered the 137th and 320th Infantry Regiments into line, relieving elements of the 29th and 30th Infantry Divisions in the vicinity of La MEAUFFE from the VIRE RIVER to La NICOLLERIE. (9) (See Map C) 10 July the division spent in place familiarizing itself with the terrain over which it was to fight.

General Baade planned to use two regiments abreast in the attack that was to be launched the next day. His 134th Infantry was placed in Corps reserve. No mention was made of a division

(8) A-4, p. 9

(9) A-4, p. 69

reserve and events to happen later seem to point this fact out. The division objective was to be the north bank of the VIRE RIVER west of ST LO. For dispositions and objective area. (See Map C) (10)

NARRATION

FIRST DAY IN BATTLE

Promptly at 0500 hours on 11 July division and corps artillery opened fire. Some 200 guns blasted away at the enemy positions for an hour. As the artillery lifted its fire, the assaulting elements of each regiment jumped off in the attack. The many days of training in the United States and more recently in England were to be put to the test. (11)

All along the front the assault elements met heavy machine gun and mortar fire reinforced with medium and 880 mm artillery fire. The enemy, taking every advantage of the terrain, organized the roads and hedgerows and lined his positions with skillfully prepared foxholes and machine gun positions. Despite murderous crossfire from the well prepared positions, the men maintained their attack but advanced only a few yards at a time. The enemy was difficult to rout from his positions and many times his positions were only reduced when they were rushed and eliminated in hand to hand combat. (12)

Making steady progress, the leading elements of the 137th made a few hundred yards before reaching ST GILLES where they were pinned down by heavy fire from enemy positions. The Germans

(10) A-4, p. 69

(11) A-6, Chap III, p. 6

(12) A-6, Chap III, p. 6

had fortified a chateau and prepared positions in an old church whose walls were some eighteen inches thick. After encountering considerable difficulty, assaulting force reached a point within fifty yards of these positions but could not force the enemy from his strongpoint. At 1830 hours the regimental reserve was committed; but even this extra push, coupled with a pounding by Corps and Division Artillery, failed to dislodge the enemy. The 2d Battalion farther to the west was meeting equally stiff resistance but had managed to keep fairly well abreast. (13)

On the east of the division sector the 320th was having similar bitter experiences on its opening day of fighting. One difficulty encountered by the 320th was that of executing a wheeling movement; and, until the right of the regiment could be brought up on line, any progress by elements on the left would only further expose their flank to the enemy. By nightfall the first battalion had succeeded in coming abreast. The worst mishap for the day befell a platoon of Company E, which had been fooled into withdrawing by a fake order of the Germans. As the platoon withdrew the enemy poured mortar fire on them and all but 14 of the platoon were lost. Communications proved difficult throughout the attack as few radios remained in operation and enemy fire continually cut wire lines. On the whole little progress had been made by the division and what was made was measured in yards. (See Map C) (14)

(13) A-6, Chap III, p. 9

(14) A-4, p. 70

SECOND DAY IN BATTLE

Resuming the attack for the second day, the 1st Battalion 137th woke up to find the same problem confronting them as had faced them when they dug in and tried to get some rest the previous night. Assistance was to be offered by the artillery firing a 45 minute preparation and ending with a rolling barrage. Tank destroyers that had been attached meanwhile moved into position and fired point blank into the strongpoint. At 1045 hours, and following the rolling barrage, the 1st Battalion stormed the position and succeeded in reducing it. While the 1st Battalion busied itself with this strongpoint, the 3d Battalion bypassed the position and made a gain of approximately a thousand yards before being forced to a halt by enemy fire. The 2d Battalion was having trouble not unlike that encountered by the other battalions and spent the greater part of the second day around a center of resistance, a group of houses at La PETITE FERME, which changed hands several times during the day. Late in the day the battalion reserve had been used in an effort to break away, but this measure was unsuccessful. (15)

The 320th on the east tried without success to get an attack under way; and, when the day ended, an advance of 200-300 yards had been accounted for. The Germans had thrown a vicious counterattack at the positions held by the 3d Battalion and for a time the entire position was in jeopardy. Some units were forced into confusion and started to withdraw in the face of the

(15) A-4, p. 81

blistering enemy fire, and only the courageous stand of several officers and men influenced the two units to reform and recapture the ground in dispute. (16)

THIRD DAY OF BATTLE

Attempts to advance on the third day of battle proved unsuccessful for any elements of the division. Unknown to the attacking forces at the time, the Germans had changed their tactics somewhat. Up to this time, the enemy had organized his defense in a linear manner and backed it up with mobile forces to stop any breakthrough. Now he shifted to a defense in depth. Just west of the small village of Le CARILLON the Germans had organized a small nose of ground that projected between two small streams. This portion of the terrain was only slightly higher than the ground surrounding it but the enemy had recognized the value of this small piece of terrain and used the ground to the best advantage. Having organized the position, the Germans could send out patrols to the north and to either flank; and, if pushed around any, they could retire to their prepared positions along tunnels and sunken roads while the attacking forces were punished severely by fire from the many automatic weapons the enemy had emplaced. Actually, the boundary between battalions assisted the enemy in the defense of his position. The greater portion of the position fell in the zone of the 137th Infantry and the balance in the zone of the 320th Infantry. As a result, neither regiment was hitting the position squarely in order to determine the real strength of the strongpoint. (See Map C) (17)

(16) A-4, p. 81

(17) A-4, p. 81

The assaulting regiments never did succeed in reducing this position but events of a later date were to make the position untenable and force the Germans to abandon the well fortified position. (18)

In order for the reader to understand the difficulties encountered in the hedgerow country let us digress and see what one man who fought through the area as a front line combat man thought about this type of fighting. This portion of the study is quoted in full as I do not believe that the full picture could be summarized in a few words.

"There were just three ways that our Infantry could get through the hedgerow country. They could walk down the road, which always makes the leading men feel practically naked (and they are). They could attempt to get through gaps in the corners of the hedgerows and crawl up along the row leading forward or rush through in a group and spread out in the field beyond. This was not a popular method. In the first place often there were no gaps just when you wanted one most, and in the second place the Germans knew about them before we did and were usually prepared with machine gun and machine pistol reception committees. The third method was to rush a skirmish line over a hedgerow and then across the field. This could have been a fair method if there had been no hedgerows.

"Usually we could not get through the hedge without hacking a way through. This of course took time, and a German machine gun can fire a lot of rounds in a very short time. Sometimes

(18) A-4, p. 84

the hedges themselves were not thick. But it still took time for the infantryman to climb up the bank and scramble over, during which time he was a luscious target, and when he got over the Germans knew exactly where he was. All in all it was very discouraging to the men who had to go first. The farther to the rear one got the easier it all seemed.

"Of course the Germans did not defend every hedgerow, but no one knew without stepping out into the spotlight which ones he did defend.

"It was difficult to gain fire superiority when it was most needed. In the first place machine guns were almost useless in the attack because about the only way they could be used was to fire from the hip. If you set them up before the advance started, they had no field of fire and could not shoot the enemy. If you carried them along until you met the enemy, still the only way to get them in position was to set them up on top of a hedgerow bank. That was not good because the German was in the next bank and got you before you set the gun down. Anyway, it had to be laid on the bank, no tripod, just a gun barrel lying unevenly on its stomach. On the other hand the Germans could dig their guns into the banks in advance, camouflage them, and be all set to cover the road, trails, and other bottlenecks our men had to use." (19)

The writer of the above continued to point out the difficulty encountered by the artillery and tanks. I have chosen, however, only that portion of the topic dealing with the problems confronting the infantry.

(19) A-4, p. 72

FOURTH DAY OF BATTLE

Corps at this time ordered the main effort on the left near the VIRE RIVER, and as a result the 137th continued the attack with all three battalions in line. The 3d Battalion on the right, the 1st in the center, and the 2d Battalion on the left with its flank against the heavily fortified position at Le CARILLON. Aided by tank destroyers, which were used as assault guns, and by the artillery, the attack got under way on the 4th day at 0800 hours. No more than just started the assault elements met heavy machine gun fire and encountered enemy minefields. Nevertheless the attack stumbled on. Using the TDs as assault guns paid off, as they placed heavy fire on the hedgerows just in front of the Infantry and their efforts were rewarded with a bag of 19 machine gun emplacements and four mortar positions. This assistance aided greatly and as the day slipped away the 1st and 3d Battalions finally broke out and raced as far as the PONT HEBERT - ST LO highway. (20)

This push by the right wing of the 137th and the action of the 29th Division on the east of Le CARILLON were making the situation for the enemy at the nose near Le CARILLON very uneasy. (21)

Trying as best they could, the 320th Infantry was unable to do anything with the determined Germans around Le CARILLON and the stalemate continued in that sector. (22)

(20) A-4, p. 86
(21) A-4, p. 86
(22) A-4, p. 86

While the assaulting regiments were doing their best with a determined enemy the Corps Commander was preparing for a coordinated attack on the following day. Essentially the plan remained the same with the main effort to be made by the 29th Division. In order to add weight to this attack the 134th Infantry was released from Corps reserve and moved into line relieving elements of the 115th Infantry of the 29th Division thereby reducing the 29th's sector and widening that of the 35th Division. (See Map D) (23)

Thus, for the first time since entering combat, the division had all the regiments under its control. Although new to battle the 134th was to play a very important part in the events to transpire in the remaining days before the fall of ST LO. Just as Corps was to make the main effort on the left so was the 35th Division. The Corps objective remained ST LO and the high ground adjacent to the city. (24)

FIFTH DAY OF BATTLE

Initiating its first attack at 0515 hours with two battalions abreast, the 134th had as its mission the destruction of enemy forces in its zone, the capturing of Hill 122, and seizing and occupying ST LO. This was no small task for a unit just committed and thus far untried in battle. The terrain over which the 134th was to attack was similar to that throughout the front; rolling country with large hedgerows. Hill 122 was the dominating feature in the 134th zone and was composed of a series of gradually elevated plateaus, printed with fields, hedgerows and sunken narrow

(23) A-4, p. 102

(24) A-4, p. 102

roads. This all added up to good defensive terrain for the defender and a number of unsolved problems for the attacker. (25)

Early gains were registered but not without considerable resistance being offered by the enemy. The 1st Battalion, by afternoon, had reached the town of EMILIE and was met by a stubborn enemy who had converted every house into a fortress halting the attack. Gaining momentum again in the afternoon, and following a rolling barrage, the 1st Battalion burst into the town and, in hand to hand combat, reduced all opposition in the town. Other battalions were also meeting with stiff resistance but were making progress. (26)

At this point the Division Commander ordered the Assistant Division Commander to assemble a task force and take Hill 122. Elements composing the task force consisted of the 134th Infantry, the 737th Tank Destroyers, one platoon from the 654th Tank Destroyers, Company C, 60th Engineers and the 2d Battalion of the 320th Infantry. Supporting elements consisted of three battalions of artillery and one battalion of 4.2 mortars. By early evening General Seebree had organized the task force and ordered an assault on Hill 122. The actual attack was preceded by a strafing and bombing attack by P 47s and a 15 minute preparation by Division Artillery. Following a rolling artillery barrage as close as 75 yards, and pushing back several enemy counterattacks, as well as weathering the well directed fire of the German defenders, the 134th reached the northern slopes of the hill by 2300 hours. (See Map E)

(25) A-6, Chap III, p. 13

(26) A-4, p. 106

Unable to advance further the attackers dug in for the night and prepared for a counterattack. (27)

While the 134th was making excellent progress the Germans on the nose at Le CARILLON repulsed the effort made by the 137th and 320th Infantry. Much of the failure of the 320th to advance can be attributed to the fact that the enemy had captured a copy of the regimental plan of attack. By now this strongpoint which had been a thorn in the side of these two regiments for so many days formed a sharp salient into the American lines. (28)

SIXTH DAY OF BATTLE

Striking again just before dawn on 16 July the 1st Battalion, 134th was determined to capture the Hill 122 and the Germans were just as determined to stay there. Fighting against fanatic resistance, the doughboys refused to be denied, even though the Germans launched repeated counterattacks and infiltrated small suicidal parties that had to be reduced in hand to hand combat. By noon Hill 122 was in American hands. The Germans made every effort to retake the hill in repeated counterattacks, and his artillery rained down on this position; but determined men of the 134th were not to give up such hard won terrain. By early evening other battalions of the regiment had been able to push up fairly well on the flanks and added security to the position. (29)

SEVENTH DAY OF BATTLE

Unable to do much the previous day, the 320th and 137th Infantry jumped off with renewed vigor and fought a raging battle

(27) A-4, p. 107

(28) A-4, p. 107

(29) A-6, Chap III, p. 15

all across the front. The German still offered plenty of resistance, but the pressure that had been exerted in the previous days and terrific artillery fire forced the enemy to give up his position on the Le CARILLON strongpoint. Throwing everything into the battle, the 137th finally broke loose and by midnight punched their way through the German lines and made their way to their part of the division objective. (30)

CAPTURE OF THE DIVISION OBJECTIVE

Pushing the attack with all battalions, on 18 July, against determined but crumbling resistance, the division finally reached objectives all along the VIRE RIVER. Elements of the I&R platoon had pushed their way in to the northern part of ST LO, reconnoitered and returned. On the same day other American units closed upon the city. (See Map E) (31)

SUMMARY

In summation, the division successfully accomplished its assigned mission. This accomplishment, and that of other units, contributed greatly to the plans of higher commanders. The fighting experienced by this untried unit was some of the fiercest to be encountered in any part of the European theatre. The terrain over which the battle took place was certainly some of the most difficult.

A tenacious enemy had been dislodged from ideal defensive terrain and the defeat inflicted on the enemy was to tell in later stages of the war. While we can look on this operation as a successful one it was not one without mistakes.

(30) A-4, p. 114

(31) A-6, Chap III, p. 17

In all the division suffered some 2437 casualties; the number inflicted on the enemy is unknown.

For its part in the operation the 1st Battalion 134th Infantry was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. RESERVES

Upon entering the battle the 134th Infantry was put in Corps reserve. The division plan called for the use of two regiments on line, and from studying the various references it appears that the division commander did not constitute any reserve, nor did he put any strings on any of the battalions. The fact that he did not constitute a reserve is apparent from the use of the remaining elements of the division. Had the division been able to retain the 134th Infantry, or had a reserve been constituted from the remaining elements of the division, it seems quite probable that he could have used this reserve to influence the action in the first days of the attack.

2. BOUNDARIES

The attacking regiments were hindered in their advance due to the fact that the boundary between regiments ran through the terrain feature at Le CARILLON. As a result the boundary did not give either regiment sole responsibility. This prevented either regiment from determining the full strength of the position or hitting this position squarely enough to determine the strength. Had either regiment been assigned sole responsibility it is most probable that the regiment would have been able to determine just what the disposition was on this strongpoint and

devise a method of reducing it. This in turn would have speeded up the advance, reduced casualties and given the attackers possession of the little high ground in the area.

3. ENEMY POSITIONS

The German commander of the defensive position at Le CARILLON used the terrain to every advantage, made it work for him. It is of interest to note that this piece of terrain was not exceedingly high, but only a few feet higher than the ground approaches.

However the enemy realized the value of terrain and organized it to such an extent that the occupancy by a relatively small force actually held up the advance of a much larger force for some time. The attackers did not succeed in reducing the position but only forced the defender from the position after some time and after he had inflicted a considerable number of casualties. If we are to succeed all leaders of every echelon must be aware of the advantages offered by the terrain and must exploit these possibilities to the fullest.

4. TAKING ADVANTAGE OF SUPPORTING WEAPONS

Supporting weapons are just that. It is evident from this study that assaulting forces were quick to realize and take advantage of an enemy bewildered and dazed by fire from supporting weapons. It has been shown in several instances that the rapid advance and overrunning of positions immediately after supporting fires have lifted, or by following a rolling barrage, offers the attacker an opportunity to hit the enemy before he can recover from the effects of this fire.

5. ORDERS

Here there are two criticisms to be made. First we must consider the platoon that was almost wiped out due to a false order being given by the enemy. The issuance of a false order by the enemy was not unusual and we should be aware of the fact that the enemy will use every means at his disposal to play havoc with our forces. The fault lies in failure of the platoon leader to request confirmation or to have the order confirmed.

The second criticism to be made is with regard to orders being in a position where there is danger of compromise. It is granted that every man and every officer is required to know what is essential to the successful accomplishment of his mission. However, plans, such as the regimental plans, should never be carried so far forward that there is danger of compromise. The delay, and probably the needless casualties, caused this regiment were indeed severe but the results could have been even far more disastrous.

6. CAPITALIZING ON SUCCESS

Commanders must be ever alert to take advantage of a success in one part of their zone and push this success with all the force necessary to insure the rapid accomplishment of their mission. In this case we see a division commander seizing the opportunity for the further accomplishment of his mission by capitalizing on the unexpected advance of one of his regiments. By so doing he enabled units on his flanks to advance and furthered the advance of the remainder of his unit. In effect he not only accomplished his mission as a result of this move but furthered the accomplishment of the mission assigned higher commanders.

LESSONS

1. Reserves must be constituted in order to provide the commander with an element with which he can influence the action.

2. Boundaries must be assigned providing responsibility for a terrain feature to one element.

3. Terrain offers many advantages, either to the attacker or to the defender; everyone must be aware of the value of terrain and use it to the best advantage.

4. Considerable advantage can be gained from the quick exploitation of supporting fires and the following of a rolling barrage, striking the enemy before he has fully recovered from the effects of this fire.

5. Orders must be confirmed; and orders of considerable importance must either be memorized, or a line or echelon established beyond which certain orders will not be carried.

6. Commanders must be ever alert to capitalize on success in one part of their zone thereby assisting other elements and furthering the rapid accomplishment of his mission.