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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 272D INFANTRY
(69TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE VICINITY OF
ERMSCHWERD, GERMANY, 7 APRIL 1945
(CENTRAL EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion S-3)

Type of operation described: AN INFANTRY BATTALION IN AN
ATTACK TO SEIZE A BRIDGE

Major Albert C. Davies, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Battalion, 272d Infantry, 69th Infantry Division, in the vicinity of ERMSCHWERD, GERMANY, 7 April 1945, during the final phase of the war against Germany.

A brief discussion of the most important events preceding this action will be necessary in order to orient the reader.

The victorious landings of the Allied Armies on the continent of Europe and their subsequent successful advances to the RHINE RIVER are a matter of glorious military history.

On 7 March 1945 elements of the United States First Army's 9th Armored Division, displaying initiative and courage in the highest traditions of the service, seized the Ludendorf Bridge at REMAGEN, where a bridgehead over the RHINE RIVER was quickly established. Armor, closely followed by Infantry, immediately exploited this success, racing to the north and northeast, isolating large enemy reserves and severing communications between major enemy units. By 5 April the First Army had achieved two noteworthy gains. It had seized the industrial area of KASSEL and, by joining the Ninth Army at LIPSTADT, had established and contained the Ruhr pocket. (See Map A) (1)

(1) A-2, p. 940

General Dwight D. Eisenhower now had the difficult task of deciding which of the three main avenues of approach he should select for his principal thrust deeper into Germany: (See Map B)

(2)

- (1) To the north toward the BALTIC SEA and BERLIN
- (2) In Central Germany from KASSEL through ERFURT and LEIPZIG to DRESDEN
- (3) In the south through NURENBERG and REGENSBURG to AUSTRIA

Each route had distinct advantages as opposed to the other two. However, the central route was selected, as this would cut Germany in two and thus provide the maximum flexibility for future operations. (See Map B) (3)

General Bradley's 12th Army Group was subsequently given the mission of accomplishing the main central thrust from the KASSEL area to LEIPZIG and being prepared for further advance to the east on order. The First Army was part of the 12th Army Group. (4)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 5 April the First Army issued a letter of instructions outlining the army's plan for further operations. The mission appeared to be twofold; first, to clear the Ruhr pocket in conjunction with the Ninth Army and second, to advance to the east along the axis LEIPZIG - DRESDEN, to gain contact with the Russian Armies and to exploit a possible bridgehead across the ELBE RIVER. (See Map C) (5)

- (2) A-1, p. 105
- (3) A-1, p. 105
- (4) A-1, p. 105
- (5) A-3, p. 54

Reliable information seemed to indicate that the enemy was prepared to set up strong defenses to the east of KASSEL. One of the foremost indications was that friendly patrol actions east of KASSEL had been confronted with strong, aggressive enemy action. Speed was of the essence, therefore, in the execution of immediate plans. The V Corps and VII Corps were to comprise the eastern force of First Army for the attack of the LEIPZIG axis. The V Corps attacked on 6 April with a mission of seizing a general line DUDERSTADT - SCHLOTHEIM. (See Map C) (6)

V Corps, under command of Major General Huebner, was at this time composed of the 2d and 69th Infantry Divisions and the 9th Armored Division. (7) The plan of attack was to advance from the vicinity of KASSEL with two infantry divisions abreast, with the 69th Division on the right to seize the Corps objective mentioned above. The 9th Armored Division would be initially in reserve, prepared to pass through either of the two infantry divisions, and initiate a pursuit to the east. (See Map C) (8)

The terrain east of KASSEL was dotted with a series of small farm villages and connecting secondary roads for the most part. The area, in general, was heavily wooded with winding, twisting trails on the proposed routes of advance. The towns offered the enemy numerous opportunities to set up strong points of resistance. The WITZENHAUSEN STADT forest was in the zone of advance and limited observation considerably. Many small rivers and streams

(6) A-3, p. 55

(7) A-3, p. 55

(8) A-4, p. 422

ran laterally across the entire Corps zone. On the whole, the best route of advance seemed to be in the zone of the 69th Division. (See Map D) (9) In this zone there existed a good secondary road between KASSEL and WITZENHAUSEN. (See Map D) (10)

The 69th Infantry Division had entered combat at the SIEGFRIED LINE near BORN, BELGIUM, in February 1945 and, fortunately, had sustained comparatively few casualties. Replacements had been received from time to time but, because of the small loss in personnel, this problem was a minor one. Because of the rapid advance across Germany, the morale of the Division was exceedingly high. Logistical support was a problem, however, as the Division had moved a great number of miles daily, before arriving in the KASSEL area. This presented a definite transportation problem, which was solved by infantry riding tanks and tank destroyers and by shuttle movements. (11)

Since the RUHR pocket had been sealed, the Germans, on the other hand, had reached a new low in their morale. Large commands had been cut off from their subordinate units and other major commands by the exploitation phase of the operations. It appeared that now the resistance would be made by heterogenous units under fanatical but capable leaders, rather than a coordinated organized effort. Their communications, routes of supply and installations of all types were in a shambles and gradually but firmly were being compressed to the east. The combat efficiency of the two

- (9) Personal knowledge
- (10) Personal knowledge
- (11) Personal knowledge

opposing forces could hardly be compared, what with the excellent condition, both mental and physical, of the American forces as opposed to the rapidly deteriorating armies of the German. (12)

In accordance with V Corps order, the 69th Division would attack from the vicinity of KASSEL to seize the right portion of the Corps objective with two regiments abreast, the 272d on the right, the 273d on the left, and the 271st in reserve. (See Map D) (13)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 272D INFANTRY

The 272d Infantry Regiment, part of the 69th Infantry Division, relieved elements of the 80th Infantry Division in the KASSEL area on 5 April. (14) On the morning of 6 April, the regiment commenced its advance to the east, clearing the towns of BETTENRODE, USCHLAG, SCHEINSTEIN, and DALHEIM in its zone of advance, DALHEIM had been reached by late afternoon and the regiment prepared to hold up for the night, but orders were received to continue the advance to seize crossings over the WERRA RIVER in the vicinity of WITZENHAUSEN. The plan of the regimental commander was to advance in column of battalions, 1st battalion leading, followed by the 2d and 3d battalions in that order. The move would be made on foot and on one route. The weather was clear and cool and the night very dark as the regiment moved out from DALHEIM to attack toward WITZENHAUSEN, the Division objective. (15)

(12) A-1, p. 41

(13) A-6, p. 1

(14) Personal knowledge

(15) A-5, p. 30

THE BATTALION SITUATION

The 2d Battalion, after securing DALHEIM, had a slight pause while a hot meal was brought up from the rear and fed to the troops. The battalion then continued to follow the 1st battalion throughout the night of 6-7 April. The advance was made under extremely difficult road conditions and considerable harassment by enemy sniper fire, aided by tanks falling back to successive delaying positions throughout the entire advance. The route was through a dense forest that terminates at KLEINALMERODE near WITZENHAUSEN. About 0915 the 1st battalion attacked and secured KLEINALMERODE and had pushed on to WITZENHAUSEN. About this time a friendly liaison plane flew above the positions of the 2d battalion and appeared to be lending aid to the 1st battalion's efforts. The 2d battalion was held along the road just west of KLEINALMERODE. (See Map E) (16)

When the 1st Battalion reached WITZENHAUSEN, it was discovered that the bridge across the WERRA RIVER had been blown. (17) It was now 1500. Regiment ordered the 2d Battalion to advance through KLEINALMERODE, proceed north to HUBENRODE, then attack east to seize ERMSCHWERD and the bridge at GERTENBACH. (See Map E) This bridge was needed for the advance of the regiment east of the WERRA RIVER and for the subsequent advance of the 9th Armored Division which was expected to make a passage of lines sometime after a bridgehead was established. (18) The regiment had

(16) Personal knowledge

(17) Statement of Major Joseph Lipsius, 272d Regimental S-2

(18) Statement of Lt Col Springer, 2d Bn Comdr, 272d Regiment

Company B, 777th Tank Battalion, attached to it for the overall operation. Lt Col Wayne G. Springer, 2d Battalion Commander, had his S-3 request a platoon of tanks from regiment to support the battalion as speed of execution seemed to be the prime requisite. This request was refused, as the regimental commanders concept of employment of tanks was to maintain them under the centralized control of regiment. (19) The afternoon was growing short as Lt Col Springer made his plan of attack.

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

The plan of the battalion commander was to move, without delay, through KLEINALMERODE to seize HUBENRODE in a column of companies. Company E would lead, followed by Companies G, F, and H, in that order. The 1st Platoon, Company B, 661st Tank Destroyer Battalion, an attachment to the battalion, would move just in rear of Company G. The command group would be positioned just in rear of Company E. The 880th Field Artillery Battalion was in general support of the regiment, and Captain Leyborne, the artillery liaison officer with the battalion command group, assured Lt Col Springer that the artillery would be in position to deliver fires on call. He further stated that he had check points plotted of the area from which he could adjust fire within the battalion zone of attack. (20)

After HUBENRODE was secured it was tentatively decided that, to seize ERMSCHWERD, Company E would secure the high ground south

(19) Personal knowledge

(20) Personal knowledge

of the narrow road entering ERMSCHWERD and, Company G would position itself on the corresponding high ground to the north of the road entering the town. (See Map E) As there had not been time for a ground reconnaissance this plan, of necessity, was made from a map study. It was decided that, after the lead companies were in position, the order would then be firmed up for further advance.

Enemy information was almost nonexistent. It was known, however, that a force designated as Combat Team KG KASCHNER had been delaying the advance throughout the night 6-7 April. (21) Few prisoners had been taken, consequently the strength, and dispositions of the enemy force were unknown at this time. The weather continued clear and cool as the battalion prepared to advance. The company commander was ordered to report to the battalion commander to receive the attack order.

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

While the battalion commander was issuing his order, final preparations for the attack were in progress. As the battalion had been halted for sometime, and the troops were carrying K-rations, they availed themselves of this opportunity to eat part of the ration. The A&P platoon delivered extra ammunition to the companies and distribution was then made to the individual riflemen and crew served weapons. Arrangements were made to pick up the individual blanket rolls so as to decrease individual hardship

(21) Personal knowledge

as much as possible. It must be remembered that the entire battalion had been advancing all the previous night and had not had any sizable degree of rest in about 36 hours. The company commanders returned, disseminated the battalion order to their commands, and the battalion was ready to advance. (22)

NARRATION

THE ADVANCE TO ERMSCHWERD

The 2d Battalion, with Company E leading, moved through KLEINALMERODE at 1515 and advanced toward HUBENRODE in a column of companies. This town was secured without incident and the battalion continued in the same formation toward ERMSCHWERD. (23) The terrain to the east of HUBENRODE was not too favorable for the continued advance of the battalion. High hills loomed on both sides of the road that entered ERMSCHWERD, and that town was hidden from view. (See Map E)

From a previous map study, it was evident that the entrance to the town was through a narrow defile between the two highest hills in the immediate area. The enemy, if he so chose, had a very definite capability of stubborn defense from these two terrain features. As the leading elements approached the defile, the tentative plan for occupying the hill masses became effective. Company E advanced to the forward slopes of the south hill overlooking the town and Company G veered to the left to ascend the right hill for its attack position. (See Map E) About this

- (22) Personal knowledge
- (23) Personal knowledge

stage of deployment, a loud explosion was heard somewhere to the front. Since there had been occasional artillery reports throughout the area, not too much attention was paid to this particular explosion.

As the battalion continued its deployment, the platoon leader of the attached tank destroyer platoon noticed a large set of tracks that completely straddled the narrow road on the route of advance. After pacing off the distance between the tracks he came to the announced conclusion that the tracks were made by a Mark VI enemy tank, and that it had come to this point in the road, and had returned along the road to ERMSCHWERD. Needless to say, this made the advance more cautious, to say the least. It was assumed immediately that the town would be defended. (24)

Companies E and G arrived on the forward slopes of their respective hills overlooking the town and the battalion commander, in order to firm up his tentative plan, led the way to a position forward of the advance elements of Company E on the south hill to set up his OP from where he could best direct all the elements of his command. (See Map E) His command group included the S-3, the artillery liaison officer, and a radio operator. In the meantime, a radio message was sent to the company commanders to report to the OP for the order to seize ERMSCHWERD. It was now about 1600.

Looking over the town (and a good view of it was available from this vantage point), little activity was noted. It appeared

(24) Personal knowledge

as though the advance had been a surprise. However, thinking back to the tank that had retreated, and, ascertaining the excellent observation the enemy would have had of our advance from the positions we were currently holding, it was an unlikely possibility. Therefore, the battalion commander asked Captain Leyborne, the artillery liaison officer, if the supporting artillery battalion was in position to deliver a preparation. The latter replied that it was ready to support from positions near KLEINALMERODE. It was then decided that the artillery would place a preparation on the town, at the cessation of which, the two assault rifle companies would move into ERMSCHWERD from present positions. (25)

At this point Lt Col Springer issued his order. In effect, Company E would attack through the right portion of ERMSCHWERD, proceed to the northern edge with its right flank along the WERRA RIVER and be prepared to continue to the north to the bridge at GERTENBACH on order. Company G would attack the left portion of the town and continue to mop up within the confines of the town, then revert to battalion reserve but be prepared for employment in the zone of either assault company. Company F, initially in reserve in position on the road entering ERMSCHWERD, would, after the town was secured, pass through to the left northern portion of ERMSCHWERD and attack on the left of Company E. Company H would be prepared to support the entrance into the town and to furnish one section of machine guns to each assault company after

(25) Personal knowledge

ERMSCHWERD had been secured. In addition, the company was to be prepared to furnish mortar support of the attack beyond ERMSCHWERD. The tank destroyer platoon initially to remain in position near Company F and after capture of ERMSCHWERD to be prepared to support the attack north on order. Artillery would support the attack by firing a preparation starting at the river portion of the town and continuing through town to its near edge. The time of attack: when the artillery had reached the near edge of town. (26)

THE ATTACK ON ERMSCHWERD

At 1615 the artillery liaison officer called for his first rounds on the river side of ERMSCHWERD. Captain Leyborne accomplished a fine piece of shooting and adjusting so that the rounds fell throughout the town, gradually approaching the near edge adjacent to the assault companies positions. It was difficult, inasmuch as the hill masses on which the assault elements of the battalion were positioned were almost above the near edge of the town. A calculated risk was in order, as the trajectory would just clear the trees of the hills on the final shots of the preparation. The preparation was fired as planned, with the exception of two tree bursts directly above the battalion's positions. Fortunately there were no casualties. The preparation ceased, and, as ordered, the two assault companies raced into town and after short, isolated skirmishes, secured ERMSCHWERD, taking about forty

(26) Personal knowledge

prisoners. Company E continued on through the town without delay to the northern edge to await orders to continue the attack. Company G rapidly searched the town for German troops and restricted civilians to the houses to prevent interference with our operations. (See Map E)

The command group moved down the hill toward the road where it entered ERMSCHWERD. The result of the explosion heard earlier was in evidence. The enemy had blown a huge crater in the most strategic part of the defile that made the road impassable to all vehicles. It was approximately ten feet deep and cone-shaped. The A&P Platoon Leader was sent for and, upon arrival, was asked for his recommendations. He said that, with more manpower than he had available in his platoon, he could make the block passable for vehicles in about twenty minutes. Lt Col Springer ordered Company F, which was now at the site, to assist the A&P Platoon, and the battalion vehicles closed into the town about thirty minutes later. There was a look of consternation on the PWs faces as the battalion vehicles rolled into ERMSCHWERD through their much-counted on road block. (27)

THE ATTACK TO THE BRIDGE SITE

The job was only half done, however, and while reorganization was taking place, a CP was hastily set up in the center of town. Mortar and artillery fire started to fall on the town. The crack of enemy self-propelled gun fire was noted and seemed to be coming

(27) A-5, p. 76

from GERTENBACH, a town that was plainly visible to the northeast. Company F now moved through town to take up its prearranged positions on the left of Company E and on the outskirts of town. (See Map E)

The battalion commander proceeded to an OP from which he could view the entire sector to the north. The much-wanted bridge was in plain sight and enemy vehicles and personnel could be seen crossing over the river into GERTENBACH. The terrain between ERMSCHWERD and the objective left much to be desired for the attacker. The ground was extremely flat and offered the bare minimum of both cover and concealment. There was approximately a three foot difference in grade between ERMSCHWERD and GERTENBACH, a distance of about twenty five hundred yards. (See Map E)

Maneuverability was hampered by the WERRA RIVER on the right flank, and there was not time to take advantage of the hilly wooded terrain on our extreme left flank. This would afford a concealed route only part of the way and the advance would be difficult. To reach the objective, the assault troops would eventually have to cross open terrain to our front. The enemy had excellent observation from across the river on the high ridge that ran parallel to our line of advance. (See Map E) (28)

At this time, the platoon of tank destroyers was moving into position around the OP, and this movement brought direct enemy fire on the OP from a tank that could be seen in partial defilade

(28) Personal knowledge

at a point east of GERTENBACH across the river. It was felt that this was the tank that had been on the road earlier in the afternoon. The tank destroyers fired but the German tank was a difficult target, as he would move out, fire a round, then move back to the cover of a hill.

The battalion commander requested the artillery liaison officer to place time fire on the bridge site in order to deny the enemy the use of the bridge as much as possible and also assist in trapping that portion of the enemy forces that were still on the west side of the WERRA RIVER. (29) The fire mission was immediately requested and the battalion was informed that the direct support artillery battalion had other priority missions. Consequently, the fire was not received and the enemy continued to cross the bridge at will.

The plan of attack was to advance with two companies abreast, immediately, to seize the bridge at GERTENBACH and the town of BLICKERHAUSEN. Company E was to attack with its right flank along the river and seize the bridge. Company F was to attack on the left of Company E and seize BLICKERHAUSEN. (See Map E) (30) Because of the flat terrain between ERMSCHWERD and the objectives it was deemed necessary to again request assistance of tanks from regiment, which at this time were in WITZENHAUSEN about two thousand yards to the south. A radio message was dispatched to

(29) Statement of Lt Col Wayne G. Springer, 2d Battalion Commander, 272d Infantry

(30) Personal knowledge

that effect and regiment assured the battalion commander that the complete tank company would be dispatched and attached immediately. It was further decided not to hold the attack until the tanks arrived but rather, support the attack with the platoon of tank destroyers from firing positions near the battalion OP. Time was the determining factor and it was growing dark rapidly. (31)

It was the consensus of opinion that the battalion had too large a mission assigned to it to be completed in the daylight hours remaining. Nevertheless, the attack pushed off in the growing dusk and, for a short while, the advance went well.

It seemed as though the enemy had waited until the two assault companies were well out of the town in the open, for, at this point, both companies were hit with devastating machine-gun and rifle fire from the front and also from the ridge across the river that ran parallel to the axis of attack. Artillery and mortar fire began falling on the two companies. They were held up on flat, open terrain with a minimum of cover, with the result that many casualties were sustained. The riflemen had been ordered to use marching fire and were rapidly running short of ammunition. Resupply was almost impossible due to the untenable positions, but heroic volunteers, moving in short rushes, returned to the battalion ammunition supply point in ERMSCHWERD and made their way back and forth numerous times, thus effecting resupply.

During these hectic moments, it seemed that First Sergeant Dean H. Grove of Company F was leading a charmed life. He stayed

(31) Personal knowledge

on his feet throughout the entire action, exhorting his men to shift their individual positions and not present a point target to the enemy fire. Later on, when the action had subsided, he remained with a few volunteers to guard the dead and wounded until evacuation could be effected. Brave men like this should live but Sergeant Grove was killed shortly after. Meanwhile, the stalemate continued until the growing dusk made enemy observation more difficult and the assault companies were able to advance slowly. (32)

Company B, 777th Tank Battalion, arrived at this time and Captain Jarrett, the company commander, after a hasty review of the situation and a visual reconnaissance in the dim twilight, recommended that his company initially take a concealed route on the left of the battalion zone and then move into the open about three hundred yards from town and join the infantry companies in the frontal assault. This was done, and it was felt that the appearance of the entire tank company on the battlefield disintegrated organized enemy resistance, as track and wheel vehicles could be seen moving eastward across the bridge. The direction of the attack must have indicated to the enemy that we wanted that bridge and they took the risk of using it for their evacuation until the last light of day and the appearance of the tanks. Further, they must have sensed that we would not fire at their vehicles using the bridge for fear of damaging the span.

As the tanks, with Company F riding them, and E Company advancing on foot, began to close in on the bridge site, a

(32) Personal knowledge

terrific explosion was seen and heard to the front. It was the bridge blown to complete destruction and with it went the hopes of the battalion accomplishing the mission.

It was now 1755. Almost complete darkness had set in, but the advance continued rapidly. BLICKERHAUSEN was entered and cleared. Artillery fire was finally made available and was directed on GERTENBACH in sufficient quantities to assure the complete withdrawal of the enemy from that vicinity.

On battalion order, the assault companies withdrew to ERMSCHWERD and, with proper security put out, bivouacked there for the night. Word had been received from regiment that the 2d battalion would cross the WERRA RIVER the following morning over an engineer bridge that was being constructed at WITZENHAUSEN. The tank company was released and returned to WITZENHAUSEN. (33)

It is a sad commentary that the men who lost their lives at ERMSCHWERD should not have lived to cross either a treadway bridge or an infantry assault bridge that were completed during the night of 7-8 April and over which the battalion crossed with a minimum of delay early the next morning.

In summary, the battalion, while it did fail to accomplish its mission of securing a crossing of the WERRA RIVER at GERTENBACH, did succeed in forcing the enemy eastward from excellent defensive terrain. It was found later that the battalion had been engaged with elements of two reinforced battalions of Combat Team KG KASCHNER. (34)

(33) Personal knowledge

(34) Statement of Major Joseph Lipsius, Regt S-3, 272d Infantry

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. LACK OF RECONNAISSANCE

It is felt that the lack of information caused this battalion unnecessary delay and undue casualties. The artillery plane operating over the area could have been an invaluable source of enemy information and the terrain in the vicinity of ERMSCHWERD. If information had been requested from this source, it is believed that the battalion would have requested regiment to be allowed to by-pass ERMSCHWERD and use a more covered route to the vicinity of the bridge site. The battalion advanced from HUBENRODE to ERMSCHWERD almost blind, as no reconnaissance, other than a map study, had been made of the area. However, the speed with which the unit was required to execute this mission was the reason for the lack of unit reconnaissance.

2. AMMUNITION AND PIONEER PLATOON

(a) The ammunition and pioneer platoon gave excellent support to the battalion when it made the road block passable, with the minimum of delay, entering ERMSCHWERD. But, because of its small size and various and sundry duties, some of its tasks must be augmented by additional manpower. The large crater blocking the entrance into ERMSCHWERD could not have been made passable within thirty minutes by the ammunition and pioneer platoon alone. The foresight of the battalion commander to support the platoon with part of the reserve company accomplished the filling of the crater in the minimum possible time with the facilities available.

(b) In the attack across open ground, the assaulting companies used marching fire in their advances. The ammunition and pioneer platoon could not physically keep the riflemen supplied and carrying parties had to be made up within the companies and sent back repeatedly to the battalion ammunition point to effect resupply. It is felt that the ammunition and pioneer platoon leader could have recommended or the company commanders concerned could have requested that the riflemen carry at least an extra bandoleer of ammunition because of the rapid expenditure in this type of fire.

3. INDIVIDUALS UNDER FIRE

When the assaulting companies were held up by automatic fire, the individual riflemen held their positions too long. It is felt that, if the men had constantly shifted their positions by short rushes, the casualties would have been much less. We stress "hitting the ground" in our training but, along with that, we should emphasize short movement under fire so as not to become a definite target of adjusted mortar and automatic rifle fire.

4. EMPLOYMENT OF ARMOR

(a) All commanders should know how to correctly employ armor in order to obtain maximum efficiency from this excellent weapon. Had regiment allotted a platoon of tanks to the battalion initially, a mobile striking force would have undoubtedly been used over another route and the chances of accomplishing the mission would have been greatly enhanced. Most certainly the casualties would have been considerably reduced.

(b) As has been mentioned heretofore, enemy observation was excellent throughout the zone, so they waited until just before dark and the concurrent appearance of the supporting tanks on the scene, before moving the bulk of their wheel and track vehicles across the bridge. This enemy decision to execute a rapid withdrawal from the west bank of the river at this time was definitely influenced by the arrival of the tanks and their commitment into the action. Most of the enemy fire ceased as the tanks advanced toward GERTENBACH.

5. ARTILLERY SUPPORT

The artillery preparation laid down prior to entry into ERMSCHWERD was an excellent support to this battalion. The accuracy of the fire and the split timed execution left nothing to be desired. However, when Lt Col Springer requested time fire on the final objective and it could not be furnished because of other priority missions to be fired, it is felt that this was one of the determining factors in the failure of the overall mission. Had time fire been placed on the bridge site and been maintained, it is feasible to assume that the enemy would have been denied the use of the bridge and possibly would not have been able to execute the demolition of the bridge. An infantry battalion, executing a mission where speed is essential, should be assured of the priority of fires of a direct support artillery battalion. This would insure artillery fires when and where they are most vitally needed.

6. ENEMY ACTIONS

There were strong indications that the enemy's mission was clear cut; to impede the advance and, after their units were safely across the river, to demolish the bridge. To accomplish this mission, they had outstanding observation of the advance from the ridge beyond the east bank of the river and the high ground just east of GERTENBACH. They adjusted artillery and mortar fire at will from many vantage points in their zone. It is felt that failure to blow the bridge would of necessity have been a demolitions malfunction rather than anything within the attackers province of accomplishment. Their use of cover and concealment was excellent throughout. The calculated risk to use the bridge up until the last possible moment was good tactics, for they estimated correctly, that we would not fire in the immediate vicinity of the bridge site for fear of damaging the bridge itself. Therefore, the retreat of their vehicles across the WERRA RIVER was greatly facilitated, and, further, when they reached the far bank, they immediately became defiladed from observation because of the hill mask adjacent to the bridge site.

7. TIME AND SPACE FACTORS

This operation was almost entirely dependent on the amount of daylight hours remaining and the distance to be covered. In the writer's opinion, it was a regimental error to expect an infantry battalion, moving on foot, to attack through two towns to seize a bridge objective more than four

miles away in approximately two and a half hours before dark. With a tank company available to the regiment, the battalion could have been partially motorized, thereby saving time in movement and possibly accomplishing the assigned mission.

LESSONS

1. Prior to an attack, every means to gain information should be exhausted in order to aid the accomplishment of the assigned mission.

2. (a) The pioneer and ammunition platoon should, when necessary, be augmented by extra personnel to expedite its assigned tasks.

(b) When riflemen are using marching fire they should be issued at least an extra bandoleer of ammunition.

3. Enemy stops advances with automatic fire and then follows with mortar fire. Throughout their training, men should be taught to constantly adjust their individual positions so as not to become a definitely located target.

4. (a) Commanders of all echelons should know how to employ armor so as to obtain its most efficient use.

(b) The appearance of armor on the battlefield has a tremendous demoralizing effect on enemy delaying forces.

5. To deny the enemy the use of a bridge, time fire should be made available to the assaulting infantry battalion on a priority basis.

6. The force possessing the dominant terrain of the battlefield has the distinct advantage and controls the action.

7. Time and space factors must be thoroughly thought out in a commander's decision to employ any size unit.