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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2ND BN., 123D INF., (33D INF. DIV.)
A NIGHT ATTACK ON HILL 3000, 29 MAR-3 APR 1945
(LUZON CAMPAIGN)
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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Night Attacks In The Phillipines

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INTRODUCTION

This Monograph covers the operations of the 2nd Bn., 33rd Infantry Division in a night attack on Hill 3000 29 March-3 April 1945 in the Luzon Campaign.

The Thirty Third (33rd) Division shipped overseas in July 1943 with the 123rd, 130th and 136th Infantry regiments making up the Division infantry components. The division spent 10 months in the Hawaiian Islands and in April of 1944 under the command of Maj. General Percy W. Clarkson they were sent to Finchshven, British New Guinea. The Division participated in the Wadke-Sarmi Campaign and in the 2nd Battle of Morotai in the Halmahera group. On February 10, 1945 they landed on Luzon to participate in the campaign. (1)

In order to orient the reader it will be necessary to go back and relate the events leading up to this action.

The 33rd. Division, a component of I Corps, after relieving the 43rd Infantry Division and the 158th Regimental Combat Team had been assigned the mission of attacking north and capturing Baguio. (2)

The 136th Infantry was assigned the mission of driving on Baguio up the Kennon Road which ran from Rosario north to Baguio through the Benquet Mountains.

(1) A3 (2) A1 p.46

The 130th Infantry mission was to drive up the coastal Highway and take the town of Aringay and Buauang while the 123rd Infantry was given the mission of driving northeast from Pugo to capture Baguio. This presented many problems as there were no roads and very few trails in the area, and the maps of the area were poor and were not reconcilable to the areas shown.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

The area in which the action takes place is very rough and mountainous. The Benguet Mountain range which surrounds the City of Baguio is characterized by rugged hills and deep cut gorges. Overlooking the entire range is Mount Santo Tomas, eight miles from the city. The southern slopes of the Benguet Range are characterized by thickly wooded rain forest, very akin to the jungles of New Guinea, while the Northern slopes are openly wooded pine forest, interspersed with thickly wooded draws and canyons. Many of the mountains rise abruptly from the gorges in steep cliffs, and ^have only one or two small trails leading up to them. This type of terrain lent itself wonderfully to General Yamasgitas' plan of defense for the Island of Luzon. And it was into this mountainous area that the 2nd Battalion of the 123rd Infantry was projected, direct from the New Guinea jungles. (3)

(3) A-2 p.7

ACTIONS OF 2ND BATTALION

During most of the period 10 February-28 March the three Battalions of the 123rd Infantry had been fighting in widely divergent areas, insofar as the Division was operating on a front of approximately twenty-five miles, this was found to be necessary.

The 2nd Battalion had been slowed down considerably due to the supply problem. The 1st Platoon of the 108th Engineer Battalion had been building a road following the attacking echelons of the Infantry, but the main supply element was carrying parties composed mainly of Igorots, or Filipino natives. (4)

By the 20th of March, the 2nd Battalion under the command of Lt. Col. James W. Hilton, had driven as far north as the barrio of Palina. The following week was spent in aggressive patrol action, covering the barrios' of Kagaling and Alicawan; and the area through which the road would eventually run. (5)

On the 27th of March 1945 the "E" Company Commander was called to the Battalion CP in order to accompany the Regimental Commander, Col. Paul C. Serff and the Battalion Commander to the Battalion OP to make a visual reconnaissance for an attack to be launched on 28 March. (6)

Hill 3000, so named because of its topographical height of 3000 feet, was the outstanding terrain feature in the immediate Battalion area; though the Battalion was later to fight up to the height of 7200 feet.

(4, 5, 6) Eye witness, Self.

In a conference with the above named commanders the "E" Company Commander was given the mission of capturing a ^hHill 2500 feet in height which dominated the approaches and the trails leading to Hill 3000. The "E" Company Commander was asked what his plan of attack would be in taking the objective. Permission was asked for and granted for Company "E" to make a night attack on the objective. (7)

Night attacks were seldom used in the war with Japan. Documents captured in The Phillipines had shown that Japanese intelligence had disseminated the information that all American troops broke contact and dug in around 1600 every day. For this reason the "E" Company Commander had asked if he might attack the objective at night, thereby completely surprising the enemy. (8)

Previous reconnaissance of the area had given many of the officers and non-commissioned officers of the company a good knowledge of the trails and paths which led to the objective. Therefore plans were laid to jump off at 2030, 28 March, for the objective. (9)

Officers and non-commissioned officers were taken to the OP and the plan of attack was worked out. The information was passed on to the men on the morning of 28 March and ammunition and rations were issued. (10)

In a conference with the Battalion Commander of the 122d Field Artillery, Lt. Col Roland P. Carlson, artillery

(7, 8, 9) Eye witness, Self. (10) Statement, T/Sgt Hannon

fires were planned to cover the trail and approaches to the objective. Lt Stephen J. Allured was assigned as the forward observer, having been with the company on a number of other operations. (11)

In working out the artillery fire plans, the 81 mm mortar and the 4.2 chemical mortar platoon leaders were also assigned harrassing missions on the known trails in and around the objective area, these fires were planned to be fired intermittently throughout the night. (12)

In the plan of attack it had been decided in order to better preserve silence in the move, that radio silence would be observed unless an emergency forced the silence to be broken. With this view in mind the company was assigned two messenger dogs from the 35th Infantry Dog Platoon for use in sending messages to and from the Battalion CP. In order to warn the company of impending action a scout dog and handler from the 35th Infantry Scout Dog Platoon were also assigned for use in the attack. These scout dogs had been used by the Battalion a number of times before and found to be highly successful in ferreting out hidden enemy. (13)

At 1700, 28 March all of the group participating in the attack were called together and a final briefing of the men was given. This included warnings as to the actions of all the men in case of attack and the warnings again for the silence of all the men. Immediately after the briefing the men were fed a hot meal and a final check of equipment was made by the

(11) Statement, Lt. O. M. Hamilton, and Eye witness, Self. (12, 13) Eye witness, Self.

officers and non-coms.

At 2030, 28 March, just after the moon had risen, "E" Company jumped off in the attack. The Company was trailbound, due to the terrain, and as a consequence the formation was a column of platoons and the platoons in a column of squads: 1st platoon, 2nd platoon, company headquarters, 4th platoon with the 3rd platoon bringing up the rear. Men were moving with fixed bayonets and no firing was to be done unless necessary except by those men carrying sub-machine guns.

Lt. Charles E. Gaines, who was an expert bayonet fighter was placed with the scout dog and his handler. Other men carrying sub-machine guns were assigned to cover the advance of the main column. (14)

A fairly bright moon was of great advantage to all of the troops in avoiding noises caused by falling or by breaking brush.

Approximately half way to the objective the sentry dog alerted, and the entire column was held up while a small patrol was sent to investigate. Nothing was found, but crashing noises were heard in the brush and it was believed that a Jap patrol had heard the company and moved off the trail. (15) At this point the company had to cross an open rice paddy 300 yards in width. This was done as quickly as possible, in order to get under cover again to forestall the threat of being caught in the open by mortar

(14) Eye witness, Self. (15) Statement, T/Sgt E. J. Hannon

and machine gun fire. After crossing the rice paddy the company began moving up a steep trail which led up to the objective. Halfway up the hill the company was halted to allow a reconnaissance patrol to move forward about 500 yards and reconnoiter the objective. This patrol returned at 0330 and reported that they encountered a small Jap patrol which had run off after glimpsing this group. The company then moved on to the objective, and the perimeter was laid out, but no digging in was to start until daylight. At 0430 artillery and light mortar shells began falling in and around the rice paddy and surrounding area. Radio silence was broken and our supporting artillery was requested to fire a counter-battery mission on the area from which the fire was coming. This was done and enemy fire ceased immediately. At 0545 the men began digging in, in the positions which had been previously selected. (16)

At 0630 the 3rd platoon under Lt. Owen G. Posner was sent out on a combat patrol to a small knoll about 200 yards to our left flank. (17) This patrol had just left the perimeter, when some Japs were observed about 500 yards to our rear, shaking out their blankets, entirely oblivious of our presence. A small patrol was sent out to clean up this group of 5 Japs. They returned in a few minutes having accomplished this mission.

Lt. Posner had run into a rather determined group of enemy on the small knoll and a brisk fire fight

(16) Eye Witness, Self. (17) Statement, T/Sgt Hannon.

ensued in which 14 Japs were killed, two heavy machine guns, one light machine gun, and one knee mortar were taken. He returned to our position at 0745 to be greeted with a warm reception from the Japs who held positions on three sides of the company. They opened up with machine guns and knee mortars upon our positions which were approximately two-thirds completed by this time. Artillery, 81 mm and 4.2 inch chemical mortars were called for, and in about 10 minutes the enemy guns were silenced. By 0900 the company was well dug in and prepared to resist any counter-attack which might be thrown at them. Observers were kept on the alert to break up any group of enemy which they observed. The observers were kept firing throughout the day at enemy personnel on the forward slopes of Hill 3000 who were attempting to get into position to fire on our positions. (18)

The Battalion Commander came up to the position at 1000. He informed the Company Commander of "E" Company that the Battalion would attack Hill 3000 on the night of 1 April in another night attack. This was due to the success of the attack of the night before, and thus, he wished to exploit this success. The attack on Hill 3000 was to be delayed until 1 April in order that air strikes and systematic artillery fires could be placed on the Jap positions, which were now under our observation on Hill 3000.

(18) Statement, Lt. O. M. Hamilton.

Small combat patrols were sent out covering the area thoroughly which had been traversed the night before with a total score of 17 Japs killed and two "E" Company men wounded. Also a section of heavy machine guns attached from "H" Company were placed in position to deliver long range harassing fires on the forward slopes of Hill 3000.

This completed "E" Company's defense perimeter which had been set up in order to hold the position until the attack jumped off again to capture Hill 3000.

At 2230, 29 March a small group of Japs attempted to break into the perimeter, three of them were killed, the rest driven off with no casualties to our men. The rest of the night was uneventful with no other forays against the perimeter by the enemy. (19)

The morning of 30 March "E" Company was attacked by a small group of apparently disorganized enemy, the entire group of eleven enemy were killed, with a loss of 4 wounded to our forces. Combat patrols were sent out during the day and one heavy machine gun and one knee mortar were taken with three more Japs killed. One of the officers, Lt. Stephen J. Pytlik, was wounded slightly by a hand grenade exploded by an apparently dead Jap. An air strike of 12 P-38 fighters carrying 500 lb bombs and making a number of strafing runs was held at 0945 30 March, with seemingly very good results on the objective. (20)

The night of 30 March was very quiet ther being

(19, 20) Eye witness, Self, Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon.

no Japs attempting to infiltrate through our perimeter.

On the morning of 31 March "F" Company under the command of Captain James F. Gilreath (21) moved up to occupy the small knoll on the left flank of "E" Company in preparation for the attack on 1 April. The move of "F" Company was to coincide with an air strike and the artillery bombardment of Hill 3000. "F" Company moved into position at 1000 31 March. At 1030 the Japs opened up on both the position which had recently been occupied by Company "F" and the position of "E" Company, with machine gun and long range rifle fire. Two men from "F" Company and one man from "E" Company were wounded.

In the afternoon of 31 March Lt. Col Hilton and Lt. James H. Jones, Company Commander of "G" Company came up to the position to lay plans for the night attack on 1 April on Hill 3000. All plans were made for the Infantry attacks and artillery and other supporting weapons were alerted for the attack. In addition to the other fires, a full platoon of machine guns was to move on to Hill 2500 to fire long range overhead fires if they were needed and called for by the attacking echelons. This platoon was to move into position and dig their positions on the morning of 1 April.

The night of 31 March was spent very quietly with "F" Company killing one Jap who attempted to get through their perimeter.

(21) Eye witness, Self; Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon.

Undue activity was held to a minimum on 1 April, however it was necessary to dig in the machine gun platoon. The Japanese took notice of this activity by laying a heavy volume of fire on the position at 1730. One man was killed and two were wounded by the fire. (22) These Jap positions were quickly silenced by a M-7 self-propelled mount from Cannon Company which had moved up the Engineer road.

At 2200 "G" Company moved up in rear of the "E" Company position in preparation for the jump off at 2400. This move was accomplished with no difficulty and under the cover of darkness, thereby denying the enemy observation of their move. The attack jumped off at 2400 as planned with both companies using scout dogs to warn them of enemy troops in their area through which they were moving. The artillery was firing harassing missions throughout the night. The missions were fired at different intervals and were targets which had been selected by the liaison plane observer during the preceding day.

"F" Company was to move up the west nose of the Hill and "G" Company was to attack on the eastern portion of the hill. The plan was to arrive on the objective at daylight in order that any counter attacks which the enemy might mount would of necessity come in daylight. At 0445 intense firing brokeout in "F" Company's zone of action. A radio message from Captain Gilreath to the Battalion Commander was heard

(22) Eye witness, Self, Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon

which stated that "F" Company had run into a sizeable Jap bivouac. This bivouac was about 300 yards short of the objective and that they were holding their position until daylight to attack this position and gain their objective. The Battalion Commander asked if it were possible for them to by-pass this bivouac and gain their objective. Captain Gilreath stated that they would attempt to go around and proceed to their objective. They attempted to maneuver around this bivouac only to run into more Japs who had been alerted by the firing. Thus it was impossible for them to move without taking heavy casualties and having already had 1 man killed and 3 wounded, Captain Gilreath decided to wait for daylight which was now only a few minutes away. At dawn "F" Company attacked and overran the bivouac and surrounding positions. Company "F" moved on to the objective at 0730 but only after a large number of fanatical Japs had died for their Emperor. "F" Company's score in this action was 37 Japs killed. Their casualties were 2 killed and 5 wounded. Three machine guns, three knee mortars, and one barrage mortar were taken by them during this action. (23)

"G" Company reached their objective at 0500 with no enemy contact. This respite from enemy action was short however for at 0600, just as they were preparing to dig in their perimeter, the Japs mounted a counter-attack. This attack by the Japs was to

(23) Eye witness, Self. Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon

characterized all of the next 36 hour period.

"G" Company repulsed all of the counter-attacks during the day, and were able to get completely dug in by 1500 and to evacuate their casualties which were 2 killed and 3 wounded. At 2200, 2 April, the Japs drove toward the "G" Company perimeter with the ever familiar "Banzai." This attack was preceded by a knee mortar barrage which killed 2 men in their holes and wounded 1 man. The Japs were beaten off after a small penetration of two Japs into the perimeter. The throwing of hand grenades and the firing of an occasional burst of light machine gun fire into the perimeter was kept up by the Japs until dawn.

In the meantime "F" Company had been able to push patrols out about 800 yards. These patrols were accompanied by a forward observer party which were able to take under fire two large concentrations of Japs by the artillery. The casualties inflicted on the Japs was never determined, as the patrols were forced back to the perimeter by snipers and machine gun fire. During the night "F" Company was also subjected to a fierce counter-attack by the Japs. "F" Company had 1 man killed and 2 wounded during the night. (24) These men were evacuated early next morning by Igorot litterbearers. Japanese casualties could not be determined as the dead and wounded had been taken away by daylight.

At 0500 2 April the Company Commander of "E" Company was given the order to move laterally around the base

(24) Eye Witness, Self. Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon.

of Hill 3000 and take a small nose which was about 500 yards to the left flank of "F" Company. It was reported by "F" Company that they could not bring effective fire on this and feared an attack from this quarter unless this hill was taken. The "E" Company Commander requested that a Cannon Company self-propelled mount be brought up the road which by this time the Engineer platoon had completed up the base of Hill 3000.

By going into position about 700 yards from the nose they could bring effective direct fire on the nose. With this support "E" Company jumped off at 0700 to attack and take this objective. The attack had progressed only about 300 yards when the company came under sniper fire. This held the company up only momentarily and they moved on only to come under machine gun fire and grenades thrown from caves well dug in and camouflaged. The company moved in and cleaned out the caves by the use of white phosphorous grenades. The total action netted 23 Japs killed with 1 "E" Company man slightly wounded. (25) The objective was attained at 1100 with no enemy on or near the hill. The enemy group which had been encountered earlier in the action had apparently moved into this position where "E" Company first came under fire, from the point where "F" Company had observed them earlier in the morning on the nose of the hill mentioned above.

The taking of this objective by "E" Company concluded the action of the 2nd Battalion 123rd Infantry in the

(25) Eye witness, Self. Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon.

capture of Hill 3000. The 3d Battalion of the Regiment moving in to relieve the battle weary veterans of "Hilton's Hillbillies" on 3 April 1945. After spending 53 days of continuous combat, the Battalion moved to a rest area in the vicinity of Tubao where they were given a period of 17 days rest before going back into the line. (26)

The total in weapons taken in the actions of the Battalion were; 9 light machine guns, 5 heavy machine guns, 11 knee mortars, 1 barrage mortar and 1 77 mm mountain gun which "G" Company captured early on the morning of 3 April before being relieved. This in addition to a large number of rifles and ammunition for the above named weapons. The enemy casualties have already been enumerated as have the casualties inflicted on the men of the Battalion by the Japs. Credit for killed in action by the Battalion in the operation was 58 Japs to 1 American killed.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of the operation it may be seen that the 2nd Battalion of the 123d Infantry was not assigned a too difficult mission but the outstanding thing was the fact the objectives were taken in night attack and with very few casualties to our troops.

Too much credit cannot be given to the non-commissioned officers and the men of all the assaulting echelons. The troops were in their first night attack and after being trained for daylight operation and in all actions up to this time they had operated only in daylight, their conduct was outstanding.

(26, 27) Eye witness, Self. Statements, Lt. Hamilton and T/Sgt Hannon

In an analysis of this operation the teamwork of all the supporting arms cannot be overlooked.

1. The Engineer Platoon with very little material to work with did a very good job in constructing a road up through the mountains in order that the supported elements might be supplied.

2. The artillery, 4.2 chemical mortars and 81 mm mortars cannot be given too much credit for their support. A prisoner taken on 8 April states that during the action leading to the taking of Hill 3000 that all but 3 of a company of 113 men were killed by the artillery and mortar fire laid on the objective or targets of opportunity by the observers with the assault companies.

3. The Air Corps should be given credit for a fine job of bombing the very profitable targets on Hill 3000.

4. The heavy machine guns were very instrumental in giving overhead supporting fires, and giving the perimeters the volume of fire needed to repulse the fierce counter-attacks launched by the Japs.

5. It will be seen that with well trained, well disciplined aggressive troops many objectives may be taken at night with fewer casualties than by combat in daylight hours.

To sum up the results of this action; the 2nd Battalion's aggressive action was to open up the back door to Baguio and was the key by which the Division was to open up the entire defenses of Baguio.

LESSONS

1. Surprise is the essential element of a successful attack either night or day.

2. Reconnaissance is an essential of any well planned night attack.

3. Liaison and teamwork between the supported and the supporting arms is an integral part of a coordinated attack or defense.

4. Any point of intelligence which the enemy has, which may be worked to the advantage of our troops, in this case the Jap intelligence has disseminated the information that the Americans only attacked during daylight hours, may be exploited to the utmost.

5. Infantry troops must be disciplined in all phases of training and combat. The action could never have been successful if the troops had not been well trained and well disciplined and have confidence in their leaders.

6. Maneuvers must be held to a minimum in night attacks. This was brought out very forcibly by "F" Company attempting to by-pass a Jap bivouac, only to run into more prepared positions, which may well have caused leaders to lose control of their men if the Japs had immediately counter-attacked and exploited their initial success.