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THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD PLATOON, COMPANY A,
504 PARACHUTE INFANTRY, (82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION)
IN AN ASSAULT ACROSS A DRAW ON THE MERDESROTT
HEIGHTS, IN THE SIEGFRIED LINE, NEAR NEUHOF,
GERMANY, 2 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: PLATOON IN THE ASSAULT

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

Following successful landings in NORMANDY, a rapid advance across FRANCE and a delay of two months for supply lines to catch up, by mid-January 1945 the Allied Armies were generally against the SIEGFRIED LINE from the NORTH SEA to SWITZERLAND, except in the ARDENNES area. (1) (See Map A)

Here on 16 December the Germans had launched a desperate counteroffensive which had penetrated sixty miles, splitting the First and Third United States Armies. By the middle of January, however, these two armies had pinched off the nose of the salient and made juncture. (2) (See Map B)

The mission of the First and Third Armies now was to destroy the German Forces remaining in the ARDENNES and close to and, if possible, penetrate the SIEGFRIED LINE. (3)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 28 January, XVIII Corps (Abn) - attacking with the 82nd Airborne and 1st Divisions abreast, right to left - launched First Army's final drive to the SIEGFRIED LINE. (4) Advancing rapidly against considerable obstacles of weather, (5) by 1 February (6) the Corps arrived at the SIEGFRIED LINE, overrunning and disorganizing in its advance forces on which the Germans counted to man the Line in this sector. Patrol reports confirming that the Line was not fully manned (7) and that the Germans were making frantic efforts to get

(1) A-1, pp 32-45

(2) A-2, pp 18-42

(3) A-2, p 44

(4) A-3, pp 147, 148, 150. A-5, XVIII Corps F.O. #3, 251600 Jan.

(5) A-4, "Bulge - Last Stages"

(6) A-5, XVIII Corps Sitrep 82, 011200 Feb.

(7) A-5, 82nd Div G-3 Periodic Rpt 44, 012400 Feb; FUSA G-2 Est 66, 2 Feb.

troops into it from the rear, orders for the 82nd Airborne and 1st Divisions to be passed through were postponed; (8) and the two divisions were ordered to attack with all possible speed to seize the SIEGFRIED LINE in the Corps zone. The objectives of the 82nd Airborne Division were the fortified towns of NEUHOF and UDENBRITH and the ridgeline extending to the southeast, the MERTESROTT HEIGHTS. (9)

Reacting with characteristic speed, the Division attacked 020400 February with four regiments (325 Glider, 504, 505, 508 Parachute) echeloned to the right in the order they could reach the line of departure and a fifth regiment (517 Prcht RCT, attached) in reserve. (10) 1200 Hours found the 325 Glider Infantry heavily engaged in NEUHOF, one battalion of the 504 Prcht Inf on the MERTESROTT HEIGHTS, and the 505 and 508 Prcht Inf on the Division's right flank, making good progress to the southeast. (11) (See Map C)

The terrain in the division zone consisted of rugged, forested heights, the most dominating of which, the MERTESROTT HEIGHTS, extended in a ridge-line southeast across the division zone. This hill mass was deeply cut and cross-compartmented by the WILSAM RIVER and numerous draws along which had been cited heavy concrete pillboxes of the permanent fortifications type. Open ground on the north was controlled by the fortified town of NEUHOF, which was accessible by road from the line of departure and in turn connected with FRAUENKRON, outside the division sector, by an unimproved road running across the MERTESROTT HEIGHTS. Except in the NEUHOF sector, there were no roads from the line of departure into the objective area; and because of terrain barriers none could be constructed within the time and means available. Foot movement was difficult on steep and slippery forest trails. Fourteen inches of snow covered the ground; the temperature varied between 10 degrees at night to 25 degrees during the day. Visibility was too poor for ground

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- (8). A-5, XVIII Corps Opn Instrs 39, 031200 Jan
(9) A-5, 82nd Div Opn Instr Confirming Verbal O, 1 Feb
(10) A-5, 82nd Div Opn, Instr Confirming Verbal O, 1 Feb
(11) A-5, 82nd Div Sitrep 021200 Feb

adjustment of artillery fire and for air observation. (12) (See Map C)

German resistance was spotty but stiffening as the 82nd advanced. The morning's PW haul identified remnants of the 3rd Parachute Division, which had opposed the 82nd Division in its advance to the SIEGFRIED LINE, together with an assortment of Alarm, Fortress, and Service Units, and produced a report that a Regiment of the 9th Panzer Division was closing into FRAUENKRON. (13) Enemy morale was low. However, remnants of the 3rd Parachute Division were fighting tenaciously, the terrain favored the enemy, and the Regiment of the 9th Panzer Division, should it be able to engage in time, would be a powerful reinforcement. (14)

Except for two weeks in Corps reserve, the 82nd Airborne Division had seen continuous service in the bitter winter fighting in the ARDENNES. Both the enemy and the cold had taken their toll. Battalion strengths were 45% throughout the Division. However, the 82nd was an elite division and a veteran of five campaigns and two winters of fighting. No amount of hardship or loss could effect its morale. In the rugged and roadless terrain now confronting it, the divisions light organization and tough, aggressive infantry would be used to maximum advantage. Combat efficiency was excellent. (15)

The Division had been adequately equipped and supplied when it left the line of departure. Now, however, it was imperative that the 325 Glider and 504 Prcht Inf seize their objectives with utmost speed - and in the case of the 504, with the rations and ammunition on its back - as the 4000 yard hand-carry distance to the 504 was prohibitive of an extended action and could be shortened only after the road through NEUHOF was cleared. Evacuation for the 504, already difficult, was being accomplished with the aid of PW's en route to the rear. (16) (See Map C)

(12) Personal knowledge; A-5, Msg ASP to 82nd G-3, 021550 Feb; A-7, "Belgium History"

(13) A-6, S-2 Journal 2-3 Feb

(14) A-6, S-2 Journal 2-3 Feb

(15) Personal Knowledge; A-5, 82nd Div Per Rpt, 1 Feb. Regarding Bn strengts, those of 504 and 508 Prcht Inf were about 45%; there is no reason to believe the other two regts were stronger

(16) A-7, "Belgium History"; Personal knowledge

THE DISPOSITIONS AND PLAN OF THE 504 PARACHUTE INFANTRY (See Map D)

At 1200 hours the lead Battalion (2nd Battalion) of the 504 Parachute Infantry was on its objective, the central portion of the MERTESSROTT HEIGHTS, and coming under piecemeal counterattack in battalion strength from its left.

The 1st Battalion, which had been ordered at 1035 hours to pass to the right of the 2nd Battalion and seize the southeastern portion of the heights, had arrived with its head at a draw immediately adjacent to and abreast of the 2nd Battalion position. The 3rd Battalion had proceeded through the 325 Glider Infantry sector and was attempting to come down on the left portion of the objective from the north. (17)

THE DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 1ST BATTALION (See Map D)

The 1st Battalion started for its objective in a column of companies, C, B, A. It was out of supporting distance of its 81mm mortars. Its artillery forward observer was with C Company. Upon arrival of the head of the battalion at the draw, however, C Company was at the WILSAM RIVER, where it had dropped off to reduce a pillbox to permit the passage of the Battalion; and B Company, for some reason, had turned southeast at the draw. Thus, at 1200 hours, A Company, in reserve, arrived at the draw leading the Battalion. (18)

THE DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF A COMPANY (See Map D)

A Company arrived at the draw as a two-platoon company, with its platoons in column, 1st, 3rd. It had reorganized into two platoons earlier in the attack. Its strength now was three officers and 59 enlisted men, including an aide man. (19)

As the Company Commander arrived at the head of his column, he noted that F Company on his left, deployed on the right flank of the 2nd Battalion objective, was receiving small arms fire from across the draw. He also noted that his company was leading the Battalion. He was temporarily out of

(17) A-6, S-3 Journal 2 Feb, items 1028, 1040, 1041, 1250

(18) Statements of Capt John N. Pease, Co Cmdr, Co A on 2 Feb;
Personal knowledge

(19) Personal records in possession of author; Personal knowledge

radio contact with Battalion. Knowing that speed was paramount, he decided to proceed with the Battalion mission. He ordered the 1st Platoon to attack across the draw at once. (20)

THE SITUATION OF THE 3RD PLATOON (See Map E)

The 3rd Platoon, in support, arrived at the draw in platoon column between F Company and the 1st Platoon. Sporadic fire from a machine gun and several rifles was being received from the area in front of A Company. This fire seemed unaimed and was not sufficient to deter movement, most of it being directed at F Company. No enemy could be seen, but the platoon leader assumed that he was occupying a blocking position across the draw in platoon, or greater, strength. (21)

The platoon consisted of an officer, a platoon sergeant, and 21 enlisted men organized as an 8-man rifle squad (the "1st Squad"), a 10-man rifle squad (the "2nd Squad"), and a 3-man light machine gun team. The 1st Squad, armed with 2 Browning Automatic Rifles, 1 Thompson Sub-machine Gun, and 5 rifles, had been organized the day before from remnants of all of the rifle elements of the platoon. The 2nd Squad, armed with 2 Thompson Sub-machine Guns and 8 rifles, had been organized a half mile down the trail from the remnants of the platoon's mortar squad and six men from the company's dissolved 2nd Platoon. (22)

Individual base loads of ammunition were still intact - the platoon having been in support throughout the morning. Browning Automatic Rifles were loaded with tracer, one tracer to three ball. The platoon was without an aide man. It had consumed its 1/3 K ration hours earlier. (23)

In the attack to the SIEGFRIED LINE the platoon had lost 2 officers, and 6 out of 8 NCO's & two thirds of its numbers. The new platoon leader was seeing his first action with the platoon but not his first combat. Squad identities had been lost; and the men were suffering from frozen feet, hunger,

(20) Statements of Capt John N Pease on 2 Feb; Personal knowledge. Bn was also out of contact with Regt - A-5, Msg 504-3 to G-3, 021214 Feb

(21) Personal knowledge

(22) Personal knowledge. For T/O & E Prcht Rifle Co and Plat see T/O & E 7-37, 1 Aug 1944

(23) Personal knowledge

and exhaustion from the hard climb over slippery trails. However, it was a veteran platoon, proud of its fighting record and proud of its regiment and division and long emured to change and hardship. Although understrength, it was a balanced team, high in fire power, and was an excellent size for control. Combat efficiency was good. (24)

The draw in front of the platoon was about 100 yards wide and 50 feet deep, with gently sloping sides. It came to a head about 80 yards to the left in front of F Company. The ground on both banks of the draw was covered moderately densely with pine trees with boles up to 30 inches in diameter. The trees thinned out down the sides of the draw, becoming open along the bottom. Observation from the top of one bank to the other was limited due to the trees, and the bottom of the draw was not visible to the far bank because of the contour of the ground. The head of the draw was thinly wooded and open to observation from the enemy side. The draw deepened toward the south, and the woods on the far side extended more toward the bottom on A Company's right. The ground was covered with 14 inches of unmarked snow; the weather was cold, sky overcast; ground visibility was fair at 200 yards. (25)

THE PLAN OF THE 3RD PLATOON (See Map E) (26)

The plan of the 3rd Platoon was to assault on the left of the 1st Platoon as soon after the 1st Platoon had drawn fire as the Company Commander might permit. The platoon leader reasoned that momentarily artillery and mortar fire might make the present position untenable; and that once the enemy had disposed himself to meet the assault of the 1st Platoon, a second assault pressed home quickly might achieve surprise. Moreover, he estimated that the assault of the 1st Platoon would be unsuccessful since he had noted that the 1st Platoon leader was following, rather than leading, his platoon's assault.

(24) Statement of Capt John N. Pease and Cpl John H. Stubbs, Plat Sgt 3rd Plat, on 31 Jan; Personal knowledge

(25) Personal knowledge

(26) Personal knowledge

The formation would be two pairs of scouts abreast, followed by a skirmish line consisting of the 1st Squad, followed by the light machine gun team, followed by a second skirmish line consisting of the 2nd Squad. Each squad would furnish two scouts and the 2nd Squad would give two men to the 1st Squad to give each squad a strength of eight men without scouts.

The 1st Squad would be disposed with the platoon leader in the middle, a Browning Automatic Rifle team on each flank and the squad leader and assistant squad leader on either side of the platoon leader midway to each flank. The light machine gun team would follow the first skirmish line by twenty yards. The second skirmish line would follow the first within signalling distance but not so close as to receive the bulk of the fires directed at the first skirmish line. The platoon sergeant would be at the middle of this line. The platoon sergeant would come forward rapidly if the platoon leader should become a casualty. The platoon would form in its present position within the woods and be in the assault as it left the tree line. There would be no fire support. Ammunition would be conserved. Seconds and thirds in command for all elements would be designated now. In case of casualties, no automatic weapon would be left behind. The platoon leader would coordinate with F Company to the extent of cautioning the nearest elements not to fire into the platoon as it moved out. The platoon leader assembled the two squad leaders, the platoon sergeant, the light machine gun leader, and the four scouts, and gave them this information.

The 1st Platoon jumped off and disappeared into the trees at the foot of the far slope. Light firing broke out and a PW drifted back. The firing continued, but it became apparent that the 1st Platoon was halted short of the objective. The Company Commander then ordered the 3rd Platoon to jump off. The 3rd Platoon immediately formed as planned, broke back the bolts on its weapons to make sure they were not frozen, and moved out from the tree line.

good
best of cold weather
Practices

NARRATION (27) (SEE MAP E)

MOVEMENT OUT OF THE WOODS

The platoon moved out at approximately 021210 hours. (28) The platoon leader waited until the scouts cleared the woods by about thirty yards before starting forward with the first skirmish line. When the line cleared the woods by about twenty yards he ordered it to take up a light marching fire and started firing himself. After a few steps all of the line was firing satisfactorily. It was then instructed to continue firing but to conserve ammunition. The skirmish line continued a slow fire, the men taking care not to hit the scouts ahead. As the scouts progressed, the second one in each pair turned from time to time to see that they were maintaining the right direction, enabling the platoon leader to keep them aligned by voice and hand signals. When the first skirmish line cleared the woods by about 40 yards, the platoon sergeant started forward with the second skirmish line. The platoon, now clear of the woods, maintained a deliberate pace as the men, heavily loaded and awkward in many layers of winter clothing, had heavy going in the deep snow. The platoon leader set a slow pace, as the success of the assault depended on a steady advance all of the way to the objective.

THE FORMATION COMES UNDER FIRE

As the formation reached the open ground in the bottom of the draw and the forward elements started up the gradual slope of the far side, the scouts came under fire. The scouts halted and returned the fire at pointblank range, while the first skirmish line, continuing at a steady pace, gradually closed on them. The initial enemy fire against the scouts was light. The platoon had achieved surprise. The skirmish line now came progressively under fire as the enemy lifted his fire from the scouts to direct it at the greater threat and, shifting his positions, brought more weapons to bear. However, the fire of the first skirmish line picked up quickly, each weapon firing,

(27) Personal knowledge, except as otherwise noted

(28) All times are interpolated from A-6, S-3 Journal, items 1041 and 1250

and the noise of automatic and semi-automatic fire all but drowned out the sound of the enemy fire.

CLOSING TO THE OBJECTIVE

In another ten yards enemy heads and rifles could be seen protruding from behind the bases of large pine trees. The first skirmish line, now reinforced by the scouts, on which it had closed, advanced into an area of scattered trees. As the men continued forward, bark flew from the trees around them, and the sharp crack of bullets past their ears became more distinguishable in the racket of the firefight than the duller report of enemy weapons. As the enemy fire became heavier and the range closed, the first skirmish line tended to bend back at the flanks, but the aggressive firing of the Browning Automatic Rifle gunners on the flank extremities and the exhortations of the leaders brought the flanks on line again. The platoon leader saw that the Germans were not dug in but were firing from prone positions behind the trees, using the tree trunks as cover; and he yelled to the men to fire into the boles of the trees. Whether, in the noise and confusion, the order was heard or not, PFC Freeman, (29) the left Browning Automatic Rifle gunner, fired into the tree trunks and his tracers set the example for the rest.

The progress of the line became slower as individuals advanced a step or two, fired two or three aimed shots, and advanced again, each man firing at those Germans most threatening him. The Browning Automatic Rifle gunners fired from the hip, aiming by their tracers, and in spite of the confusion carefully returned empty magazines to their belts. (30) The line was building up fire superiority and continuing to move in. The platoon leader fired occasionally with his carbine (31) but gave his attention to his formation and the actions of the enemy as much as possible.

As he moved abreast the right lead scout (32) who was crouching by a tree, the scout shouted that his rifle would not fire. The platoon leader

(29) PFC Harold J. Freeman, 9 3 Main St, Willemanlick, Conn. *Williamant.c*

(30) Magazines were difficult to replace and, consequently, had taken on a value almost as great as the BAR itself.

(31) The Plat leader considered this an unsatisfactory type of weapon but had had no time to get another prior to the attack.

(32) The plat mortar gunner. He had vol. to be a scout when the mortar sqd had been converted to riflemen.

told him to wait and get another from a casualty. Suddenly the scout's helmet flew off and he slapped his head as though he had been stung. A stream of blood an inch in diameter arched out from his temple and continued to run like an open spigot, melting a hole in the snow. The scout gradually relaxed and died in his crouching position...

DESTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY

In a few yards the line reached level ground above the draw. About forty Germans could be seen prone behind trees, their positions exposed to the advancing line. The skirmish line almost halted as the men fired flat-footed into the nearest Germans, who were only a few feet away, some returning the fire and some already dead. On the right, a German crawled forward, pushing a MG 34* ahead of him in the snow, and was killed as he tried to put it into action. A second German, moving as though in a trance, tried to man the gun, but it was kicked out of his hands and he was killed as he reached for it a second time.

Looking back to check the progress of the second skirmish line, the platoon leader saw that it had closed on the first and was adding its fires to the fight. Cpl. Stubbs, (33) the platoon sergeant, was steady as a rock as he pushed his men forward.

Further down the slope two men were down, one holding his leg and one face down in the snow. A man from the 1st Platoon was bending over the latter going through his pockets...

Suddenly the platoon leader found himself staring down the barrel of a German rifle sighting at him from the ground fifteen feet away. Reacting slowly, he stepped to one side and fired at the steel-helmeted head behind the rifle without apparent effect. Firing three more rounds and clearing his malfunctioning carbine (34) between each round, he moved on, the German rifle continuing to point aimlessly...

* German LMG model 1934

(33) Cpl. John H. Stubbs, Magee, Miss.

(34) A new weapon which had not been check-fired prior to the attack

The platoon had gained positive fire supremacy and the men spontaneously slacked off their fire and called "Kemerad !Kamerad !" to the enemy to give him a chance to surrender, took up the fire again when he did not, and then repeated the process; but no German availed himself of the opportunity.

The line advanced among the most forward of the Germans, most of whom were dead, and fired into enemy deeper in the position. Being anxious to end the action as soon as possible and hoping to get flanking and sealing fire on the Germans, the platoon leader worked himself slowly across in front of the firing line and to its right. Turning to call up the light machine gun team, he found the gunner at his elbow carrying the entire mounted and loaded machine gun. The gunner calmly moved to the left and slightly to the rear of the enemy, set down his gun in the snow, and from a kneeling position fired systematically into the German backs, his tracers ripping into one exposed prone figure after another.

Suddenly two Germans at the rear of the group got up and made a break for the woods to the left. A rifle grenadier from the 1st Platoon, just joining the fight, ran forward cursing, took deliberate aim from his shoulder, and struck one of the Germans squarely between the shoulder blades with a grenade... The right Browning Automatic Rifle fired four or five long bursts at the second running German at a range of 40 yards and missed. The German's flapping Geneva Red Cross apron (35) became visible as he disappeared into the edge of the woods, the only man to escape.

In the center of the enemy group a German Lieutenant got to his knees, looked about at his dead comrades, and quit hesitatingly as though reluctant to live. He lurched by, dazed, with bullet holes showing through the nape of his helmet and laced through the back of his overcoat. Suddenly all firing ceased and the woods were still. The time was 1230; the assault had taken about twenty minutes.

(35) German enlisted aide man

THE REORGANIZATION

Inspection of the position showed 40 (36) Germans of the 3rd Parachute Division all dead, most of them shot more than once through the head. (37) The bases of the trees behind which they had taken up firing positions had served well as aiming points for the platoon. Thirty caliber bullets had penetrated the 30-inch pine trunks without even slowing up. The fact that the enemy had fought to the last man, even though repeatedly given the opportunity to surrender, was mute testimony of the quality of this group.

From tracks in the snow it was apparent that the German group had been moving forward when they had encountered the right flank of F Company. Initially they had crawled to the edge of the draw and disposed themselves to fire across it. The arrival of A Company and the abortive assault of the 1st Platoon had caused them to redispense themselves to their left, and then the assault of the 3rd Platoon caught them in their right flank. The action in some respects had had the characteristics of a small meeting engagement.

The platoon was now in possession of the ground but in a vulnerable position, as the flat ground above the draw was devoid of cover and concealment and exposed to the woods on either flank and the open area to the front. Moreover, the platoon had become badly mixed with the 1st Platoon, which had drifted into the position. With the sudden release from the tension of the assault, the men were talking excitedly, mingling with friends, looting the enemy dead, and oblivious to all danger. The platoon leader of the 1st Platoon was nowhere to be seen.

The platoon sergeant was instructed to put out local security and immediately start reorganizing the platoon. The platoon leader made a hasty reconnaissance to the front which revealed no enemy but strengthened his opinion that the platoon should reorganize with all possible speed.

(36) Capt John N. Pease stated on 3 Feb that there were 50 to 75 dead. 82nd Div G.O. 40, 22 Mar 45, states 70. In the writer's opinion there were at least 40.

(37) A Bn staff G. later remarked to the writer that he had never before seen so many enemy dead of head wounds in one group.

Upon returning to the platoon five minutes later, he found the platoon sergeant struggling to regain control, but the two platoons were still badly mixed. The light machine gun and a Browning Automatic Rifle were sent forward 40 yards to the right and left as security, and the platoon leader, after some loss of time, finally separated the two platoons by directing that they assemble under separate trees about 40 yards apart. Both areas were exposed, but it seemed the best way to regain control. The platoon sergeant then set about to reorganize the squads while the platoon leader checked on the casualties.

The Browning Automatic Rifle gunner, PFC Freeman, helmetless and with a deep bullet crease along the side of his head but still clutching his BAR, was being restrained from running on into the woods to take on the whole German army alone. The tension of the assault, in which he had contributed more than his share to the platoon's success, and the shock of his head wound, had temporarily unbalanced him. The platoon leader calmed him as best he could, took his BAR and ammunition belt and sent him to the rear, wondering if he would wander off and get lost in the woods.

The dead scout was stiffening in his crouching position by the tree. A check of his rifle showed that ice had prevented the bolt from closing. (38)

Further down the hill a Browning Automatic Rifle gunner from the 1st Platoon was face down in the snow. Apparently he had been killed as he moved over from his platoon to give the 3rd Platoon a hand. His prized BAR and belt were quickly appropriated.

To his right the Thompson Submachine gunner from the second skirmish line was sitting with his broken leg stuck out in front of him. A bullet had penetrated the shin cleanly from the front. The platoon leader told him he would have to wait for evacuation until someone came along, and cautioned

(38) A common occurrence in the winter weather. When weapons were not being fired, bolts had to be broken open every few minutes to keep them from freezing tight.

him not to take morphine*. The man replied, "Don't worry about me, Lieutenant," looking pleased with his wound. Apparently both this man and the dead Browning Automatic Rifle gunner had been struck by fire directed at the first skirmish line.

Returning to the platoon, the platoon leader found the light machine gunner in bad condition with frozen feet, and sent him to the rear.

The squad leaders were now in control of their squads and had them separated and disposed on the ground. A detail picked up the weapons and ammunition from the casualties and these were redistributed. A count of ammunition showed that there were only four magazines per Browning Automatic Rifle and six clips per M-1 rifle left, an alarming fact since there could be no resupply until some time after the regimental objective had been taken. The platoon leader took the Thompson Submachine Gun that had belonged to the casualty, discarding his carbine.

Just then the company commander came up and said, "Man, I thought you were wasting ammunition until I saw what was here." He ordered the platoon to attack directly to the east as soon as it was reorganized. He was in contact with Battalion again. (39)

The miserable, exhausted platoon formed slowly and at 1255 continued the attack to the east, the erstwhile support platoon of the reserve company now leading the Battalion.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF THE ACTION

To sum up the results of the action, the platoon was successful in its mission of removing the obstacle from the path of A Company. Moreover, the enemy group had been destroyed and therefore would not have to be fought again. The action had taken about 45 minutes; 40 enemy had been killed and one taken prisoner at a cost of one dead and three wounded (one of them a weather casualty). About two thirds of the platoon's ammunition had been expended.

* Morphine would make him helpless, a dangerous state in winter weather and uncertain evacuation.

(39) Statement of Capt John N. Pease at that time

As it turned out, this action was instrumental in the accomplishment of the Battalion mission, as A Company promptly proceeded to, and seized, the Battalion objective, and held it against mounting pressure until the remainder of the Battalion, which was much delayed by actions enroute, arrived.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

SPEED AND INITIATIVE

The speed with which the platoon was able to deliver its assault was probably a major factor in its success. The initiative was taken away from the enemy, surprise was achieved, and the possibility of other enemy forces intervening in the action was minimized. Moreover, the time that was gained for the Battalion by the speed of this small action probably spelled the difference between success and failure on the Battalion objective. In part, this speed was achieved by the platoon leader's having anticipated the company commander's order and having made his plan and preparations ahead of time.

Moreover, the action took place in a setting of speed and initiative. The company, in reserve, finding itself accidentally at the head of the Battalion, and out of radio contact, did not hesitate to assume the mission of the lead company, and the actions of all echelons were correspondingly aggressive.

FORMATION

The platoon's formation, in effect, echeloned the assault in depth and enabled the platoon to strike accurately at a decisive point on a narrow front with a sudden and ever-increasing pressure.

The first echelon, the two pairs of scouts, accurately guided in the main body of the formation, assured that the formation was preceded by aggressive individuals, and prevented the enemy from bringing the full shock of his fire against the main formation.

The second echelon, the one-squad first skirmish line, provided the maximum fire to the front that could be positively moved and controlled. This echelon, being weighted with the bulk of the fire power of the platoon, assured that the target received the maximum weight of effective fire at one time.

The third echelon, a one-squad skirmish line, by following the first line, automatically threw in the support at the moment of greatest momentum, obviated the need for communications, kept the support out of the bulk of the enemy fire until the decisive moment, and served to push along the first line.

The light machine gun team between the second and third echelons gave the platoon leader a means to influence the fight at a decisive moment, added to the fire power of the platoon, and, by following closely, obviated the need for communications.

THE LEADER'S POSITION IN THE FORMATION

The platoon leader's position in this action was in the center and abreast of the main element (first skirmish line). From this position he was able to exercise some control over the scouts to his front, lead the main element, and exercise some control of the second (support) skirmish line to his rear.

Doctrine states that the leader should be at the point where he can most influence the action of his unit. In the case of the platoon in the assault against fire, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this point is well forward, where his personal presence can be felt.

The action of A Company's two platoons shows an example of an assault that was led from the front and was successful and one that was led from the rear and failed. General Patton has described this phenomenon in terms of a piece of wet spaghetti that can be pulled forward but bends if pushed.

GETTING THE MEN TO FIRE

Probably every man in the 3rd Platoon fired with the exception of two casualties who were hit before they could fire. (40) This action shows that it is possible and practical to get all of the men to fire if sufficient consideration is given to formation, distribution of leaders and automatic weapons, and psychological factors.

The measures used with the first skirmish line, for example, were strengthening the flank extremities - the weakest points of a line advancing against fire - with Browning Automatic Rifles, placing the platoon leader at the middle and a squad leader and assistant squad leader midway to each flank, having the men fire under controlled conditions prior to the firefight in order to break down any resistance to firing, and firing by the leaders to set the example. The nine-man line contained one leader and one automatic weapon in every three men.

Since the number of men who fire killing or neutralizing fire at the desired place and time is the true measure of a small unit's combat efficiency, and in the average American unit in the last war perhaps only 15% (41) of the men fired in a given action, it can be seen that a tremendous advantage accrues to the unit that can get a high proportion of its men to fire.

FLEXIBILITY

The platoon was able to fight effectively even though its recent leaders were gone, its original squad identities lost, its crew-served weapons men serving as riflemen and vice versa, and its organization differing radically from, and its strength considerably below, T/O. (42) Its maintenance of fighting efficiency was due in part to the following:

The men had great pride in unit, identifying themselves not only with their squads and platoon, but even to a greater degree with regiment and division. Thus the loss of squad identities - platoon identity in the case of

(40) Personal observation during the action & results of the check of ammo during reorgn,

(41) A-8, p. 54

(42) T/O & E 7-37, 1 Aug 44

the six men from the dissolved platoon - did not greatly effect their esprit.

The men had been trained in all of the weapons of the platoon - a division policy - and had had impressed on them that quick switches of jobs would be made as casualties required. Thus they were technically and psychologically prepared to take on new jobs in an emergency.

As the strength of the platoon fell, reorganizations had kept its weapons and manpower in balance. Moreover, as a 22-man platoon it was at a better "fighting strength" than at its T/O strength because of improved control.

REORGANIZATION

There was a dangerous loss of time in reorganization on the objective. Had the enemy been able to react with fire or counterattack, the platoon easily could have lost the objective it had just taken and have suffered heavy casualties. The delay resulted essentially from two causes. The platoon leader had not foreseen the possibility of his unit becoming mixed with a leaderless unit on the objective and therefore was slow in taking positive action to separate them. Secondly, he did not anticipate that the objective, which offered good defensive ground to the enemy, would offer him no cover for his reorganization.

TRACER-LOADING THE BROWNING AUTOMATIC RIFLE

In this action tracer loadings in the Browning Automatic Rifles facilitated hip shooting by the BAR gunners and fire control by the leaders and, it is believed, was a favorable morale factor for the other soldiers of the platoon who could see fire as they advanced.

A tracer loading of one tracer round to three rounds of ball gave good tracer visibility. Tracers were obtained by unloading the tracer from light machine gun belts. The light machine gun belts were then filled up with ball and could be used for night firing.

THE PENETRATING POWER OF THE CALIBER 30 RIFLE BULLET

By shooting through the tree trunks behind which the enemy was firing in prone positions, the platoon was able to use the trees as aiming points and to inflict greater casualties than would have resulted if the enemy had fought in the open. Because the enemy was prone, a bullet fired through the base of a tree was likely to cause a fatality by striking him in the head or passing longitudinally through his body. It was found that 30 inches of green pine did not stop Caliber 30 rifle bullets.

LESSONS

1. In the attack speed and initiative are often the keys to success.
2. A platoon formation which echelons an assault in depth adds power to the assault and improves control.
3. In the assault the platoon leader must lead from the front, not push from the rear.
4. In the platoon assault it is possible to get practically all of the men to fire if adequate consideration is given to formation, distribution of leaders and weapons, and psychological factors.
5. Platoon organization should be flexible so that combat efficiency is maintained regardless of strength.
6. In planning for the reorganization on the objective, the leader must anticipate the possibility of friendly units being mixed on the objective, and that the objective may offer no cover for the reorganization.
7. The effectiveness of the Browning Automatic Rifle for daylight firing is increased when it is loaded with tracer (1 to 3).
8. In woods fighting the ability of small arms fire to penetrate trees should be used to advantage.