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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "M", 38th INFANTRY
(2nd INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE VICINITY
OF KRINKELT, BELGIUM, 17-20 DECEMBER 1944
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: Infantry Heavy
Weapons Company in Withdrawal and Defense.

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "M", 38th, INFANTRY
(2nd INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE VICINITY
OF KRINKELT, BELGIUM, 17-20 December 1944
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)
Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company "M", 38th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division in the Ardennes-Alsace Campaign, Belgium, 17-20 December 1944.

To facilitate the reader's understanding of this operation it is necessary to pause a moment in retrospect and see what major events took place prior to 16 December 1944 that have a bearing on this action.

After the allies successfully established themselves in France, in June and July 1944, and had built up sufficient strength to sweep across France, Luxembourg, and Belgium to the German borders, there came a time of consolidating their gains and plans were made for future operations. (1) (See Map A) The port of Cherbourg belatedly began supplementing the open beaches in unloading the critical supplies that had been spent in the spectacular battle of France. (2) By October 1944, decisions were being made as to troop dispositions for defense and for the renewal of the offensive into Germany. (3)

In November 1944, the estuary leading into the port of Antwerp was cleared and supply ships began pouring supplies into Europe over a modern undamaged port. (4) This gave impetus to the plans of General Bradley, 12th Army Group Commander, for an early winter offensive into Germany. He planned to have the Third Army break out and head for Frankfurt, Germany and the First Army would strike for Cologne, Germany through

(1) A-7,p.224; (2) A-7,p.225; (3) A-7,p.226; (4) A-7,p.236.

Aachen, which was the first major German city to be captured by the Allies. (5) *Map B -*

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In the northern sector of the First Army, where preparations were being made for the winter thrust into Germany, an obstacle lay, the Roer River, which could be made into a dangerous barrier by the release of water from four dams on its headwaters and upper tributaries. It was reasoned that these dams must be under our control in order to cross the river further down stream where the main effort was to be made. (6)

As it was in their sector of responsibility, the V Corps was executing plans for the capture of these dams: the Urft-talsperre Dam on the Urft River; the Schwammenauel Dam on the Roer River; the Paulushoff Dam on the Roer River; and the Heimbach Dam, also on the Roer River, down stream from the Schammenauel Dam. (7) (See Map B) ^{*partly laid out -*} Since September 1944, several attempts had been made at seizing these dams. The 4th and 28th Divisions had each in turn been badly treated in their futile efforts to capture them. (8)

It is now December 1944 and the 2nd Division has been relieved from the thinly held VIII Corps line in the Schnee Eifel Forest, by the 106 Division fresh from the states, for a place in V Corps' plan of attacking the Roer River Dams. (9)

Thus, by mid-December an explosive ^Ssituation had developed along the First Army front. On the Roer River, the VII Corps, north and south of Duren had created a build-up and was ready to spring across for the main effort into Germany. (10)

(5) A-7, p.237; (6) A-1, p.95; (7) A-1, p.95; (8) A-5, p.77;
(9) A-5, p.76-77; (10) A-1, p.95-97.

In the VIII Corps the line was held thinly as it was felt to be an unlikely avenue for the enemy to attack, if able to at all. (11) The stage is set and General Hodges' First Army began the attack with the V Corps in the vicinity of Monschau, Germany, first objective the Roer River Dams. (12) (See Map B)

V Corps' plan of attack included a series of objectives for the 2nd Division, of which the Urfttalsperre Dam was the final objective as far as this particular action was concerned. (13) (See Map B)

The area of the intended operation for the 2nd Division was heavily forested, and featured by narrow, deeply-cut valleys and steep ridges, containing few villages and towns, and very little open ground. Across it ran the enemy's Siegfried Line fortifications, running generally along the line Hofen, Wehlerscheid, and the German border within the V Corps sector, with additional fortifications in depth between Wehlerscheid and Dreiborn. The Crossroads at Wehlerscheid was surrounded by a particularly strong defensive position, being a critical point in the road net there. (14) (See Map B)

(cannot see terrain and zone on this map)

On 13 December 1944 the 9th Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Division attacked northeast towards Wehlerscheid with two battalions, one on each side of the Rocherath-Wehlerscheid road, with the mission of breaching the Siegfried Line to allow the 38th Infantry of the 2nd Division to pass through for the main effort of capturing Dreiborn, Germany. (15)

"Detail not on map B"

The 9th Infantry was held up during the 14th of December at which time they made extensive preparations for the assault of the located enemy positions. By the night of 15-16 December

(11) A-5, p.76; (12) A-1, p.97-98; (13) A-1, p.97; (14) A-4, p.82-83; (15) A-4, p.83-84.

starting at dark, assault detachments of the 9th Infantry infiltrated into the enemy's fortified line under cover of darkness and assaulted individual pillboxes, reducing one after the other. Two battalions followed the assault detachments in single file through gaps in the hostile wire cleared by bangalore torpedoes. On the morning of 16 December the Wehlerscheid position had fallen. Meanwhile the 38th Infantry of the 2nd Division passed through the 9th Infantry positions and prepared to continue the attack toward the northeast with two battalions in the assault. The 3rd Battalion was in reserve and protecting the right flank of the 9th Infantry. (16)

Overshadowing this local success of the 2nd Division, on 16 December the enemy opened a great offensive against the allied center, with attacks on a 60 mile front. They struck with more weight and fury than they had mustered at any time since their ill-fated Normandy Campaign. The main thrust was headed by ^{General} Generaloberst Walter Model. (17) His heaviest strike was delivered in the heart of the Ardennes, east of Malmedy, Belgium, where they overran the U. S. forward positions entirely, and advanced several miles into Belgium. His plan was to blitz through the Ardennes to the Meuse River, gain crossings and proceed through Liege and on to Antwerp. At Antwerp he would have split the American and British forces. This action called for two main drives toward the Meuse between Liege and Givet with the Sixth SS Panzer Army on the right and the Fifth Panzer Army on the left. (18) (19) (See Map B) *Situation is not shown nor described*

BATTALION SITUATION

The 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry of the 2nd Division was (16) A-3,p.89; (17) A-5,p.224; (18) A-11,p.77; (19) A-1,p.103.

given the mission of protecting the right flank of the 9th Infantry in their initial assault of the Siegfried Line, and to be prepared to assist in the assault of Dreiborn by the remainder of the 38th Infantry. After the 9th Infantry had breached the Siegfried Line and the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 38th Infantry had passed through their lines on the way to Dreiborn, the 3rd Battalion was alerted to prepare to assist them in a flanking movement to the right. (20)

On the morning of 17 December 1944, the 3rd Battalion Commander alerted the company commanders and staff to be prepared to attack that afternoon and meet him at the Battalion Command Post at 1000 hours to receive the battalion order.

Accompanied by the S-3, Heavy Weapons Company Commander, and radio operator the Battalion Commander proceeded on a hasty reconnaissance to include the contacting of the 395th Infantry of the 99th Division to our right flank, as we were to pass through them in our attack. A line of departure was located; initial objectives were plotted on the situation map; the Heavy Weapons Company Commander located general areas for the 81-mm Mortar Platoon so as to be able support the Battalion in the attack; no suitable machine gun positions were located to be of use in general support so it was recommended that the two Heavy Machine Gun Platoons be attached to the leading rifle companies. (21)

During the time of the Battalion Commander's absence a message had been received from the Commanding General 2nd Division ordering the 38th Infantry to move with all possible speed to vicinity of Rocherath and Krinkelt, Belgium to prevent the

(20) A-4, p.87; (21) Personal knowledge.

enemy from cutting off the 2nd Division from the rear, and to protect the vital road net around these two towns. It was emphasized that the positions named must be held at all cost, as the entire division would have to use the road net to successfully get itself turned around to meet the major threat to the rear. Since the 3rd Battalion was not in physical contact with the enemy at the time, it was ordered to move out first. (22)

Information of the enemy was given out fragmentarily to the effect that in the early morning hours of 17 December, enemy tank and infantry forces broke through the lines of the adjacent division on the 2nd Division's right, and an armored spearhead rolled through the rear area toward the village of Bullingen, Belgium, on the main supply route of the Division, while other armored elements, smashing at the center of the adjacent division, threatened to break through toward the villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt, also on the 2nd Division main supply route. (23) (See Map C)

Antitank Company and Service Company of the 38th Infantry were both located in Rocherath at this time. They were alerted for the probable intentions of the enemy and of the orders to redeploy the entire regiment in that vicinity. (24)

COMPANY SITUATION

Company "M" had made elaborate plans on their anticipated attack toward Dreiborn, Germany; but they were all for naught as all orders and plans were cancelled as soon as the Commanding General had ordered the threat to the division's rear and right flank to be stopped. (25)

(22) Personal knowledge; (23) A-4, p.87; (24) A-2, p.20; (25) Personal knowledge.

During the time the Company Commander was on reconnaissance for the attack the company was in a forward assembly area six miles north of Krinkelt, Belgium in the Monschau Forest. The company was dug in with overhead cover made from logs that were plentiful in the heavily wooded area. The previous day 50 axes per company had been issued through the Regimental S-4 making it rather simple to erect the overhead cover. It was found to be extremely important to have overhead protection from the high explosive tree burst that occur in a timbered area during an artillery concentration. During the morning of 16 December through the morning of the 17th increasing amounts of artillery had begun to fall in the company and battalion area. In two different instances the overhead cover prevented injury to the occupants of two two-man foxholes during the morning of 17 December.

Many of the preparations for the attack were equally applicable to the situation upon which the company was about to enter. The motor mechanic had been very busy getting the vehicles in shape. Three vehicles were on the verge of being deadlined, but the short period in this assembly area gave ^{time} ~~him~~ ^{mechanic} and the drivers time to have all vehicles in good condition.

The kitchen truck had been under battalion control for the past two days and hot meals were being served three times daily. The last hot meal for some time to come was breakfast on 17 December, however. (26)

The two Machine gun Platoons were checking their weapons very closely as they had traded weapons with the members of the 106th Division who had relieved them six days before in the (26) Personal knowledge.

Schnee Eifel area, and they had not fired or had much of a chance to inspect them thoroughly. The guns were new and, as it turned out, were in good condition.

The Communication Sergeant had some difficulty in obtaining extra batteries for the 300 radios as we had been operating two 300 radios with the 81-mm Mortar Platoon, in addition to the one TO&E radio that was authorized in the company. The Battalion Commander and Battalion Communication Officer were both aware of the condition and the company obtained the extra batteries before moving out.

Winter conditions prevailed, with snow-covered ground and freezing temperatures adding to the difficulties of operating in the broken, heavily forested area; never-the-less, the company was in excellent spirit inspite of the pending action and exposure to the elements. (27)

COMPANY PLAN OF WITHDRAWAL

As all previous plans and orders were called off the Battalion Commander issued fragmentary orders to effect the movement of the battalion from its present location to its new location to the southwest, south and east of Krinkelt, Belgium. Company "M" was ordered to load all weapons and a skeleton crew to each weapons carrier and proceed to Krinkelt as soon as the company could assemble and load. The Company Executive Officer was placed in command of this force. The remainder of the company was placed under command of the 1st Sergeant and ordered to follow the leading rifle company on foot. The organic transportation took in addition to the platoon officers, Company Executive Officer, and Communications Sergeant, all (27) Personal knowledge.

squad leaders, section leaders, and the number one and two of each weapon. This would be sufficient personnel to replace the weapons properly in action and enough crew to actually man them if the need arose.

From a hasty map reconnaissance it was planned to withdraw along the 2nd Division main supply route as it was the quickest and surest route. (See Map C) The Battalion Commander, Heavy Weapons Company Commander, and a radio-telephone operator were to ride in the lead vehicle, followed by the S-3, "M" Company Reconnaissance Sergeant, and the Battalion S-2. These two vehicles would be ready 30 minutes before the heavy weapons vehicles, so the Battalion Command Group was to proceed immediately to make a reconnaissance and guide M Company into the proper area.

This appears to be movement, not a withdrawal.

Move
WITHDRAWAL TO KRINKELT

The Battalion Command Group left the assembly area at 0930 and proceeded in great haste along the 2nd Division main supply route toward the twin villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt. About one mile from Krinkelt the Command Group stopped at a crossroads which possibly would have to be defended. While looking over the approaches from the exposed flank that this Crossroads afforded the enemy, it was decided to deploy the company there until further reconnaissance in and about Krinkelt had been made. In the mean time "M" Company had arrived at this crossroads and was given the mission of preventing the enemy from using the road to ^einter our flank. (28)

A very disconcerting operation was going on in the adjoining fields to this crossroads. Many of the division's (28) Personal knowledge.

artillery and attached artillery had been employed there to support the offensive that had just previously been going on. The peril to the rear and flank had also caused orders to be issued as regards the artillery and they were very hurriedly carrying them out. It was a little demoralizing to the men that were being placed there now as not a bit of time had been given to telling any lower echelon personnel the information as to the plans and the enemy situation, except that there had been a break through to our right flank. They were almost totally in the dark as to what to expect. (29)

The Battalion Command Group continued on into Krinkelt to make the reconnaissance. Two ME 109 German planes circled overhead but did not attack at that time. The Battalion Commander and "M" Company Commander drove on through Krinkelt for one mile down in a little draw to a creek and a small bridge. Just before crossing the bridge a 2½ ton truck was passed that had been destroyed by an armored-piercing shell that was presumed to be from a tank gun. The driver of the vehicle was dead and laying beside his truck. The truck had been headed in the same direction that the Command Group was now going. The Battalion Commander decided it would be too hazardous to continue further, even though being on the road that led to the division rear. It was plain to see the situation in the rear area was critical. The command vehicle made a quick turn around and headed back to Krinkelt. Just after getting turned around and headed back, a shot from a heavy caliber high velocity gun was heard as it passed close overhead. A quick look back disclosed a German tank about 500 yards south of the creek (29) Personal knowledge.

-not on map

on a long, bare ridge that was south of Krinkelt. The command jeep picked up speed and reached the south edge of town in short order where Brigadier General John H. Stokes, Assistant Division Commander, was met. He stated that he had been placed in command of all troops in the Rocherath-Krinkelt area. The Battalion Commander gave him his tentative plan of defense which included "I" Company on the right, and south of Krinkelt; "K" Company on the left, and east of town; "L" Company in reserve and inside town. General Stokes gave only encouraging comments; and the reconnaissance was continued.

As time was of the essence it was decided to send for "M" Company back at the crossroads north of Krinkelt while the reconnaissance was being finished. The S-2 was sent back to guide them into town. The Battalion Commander and "M" Company Commander detrucked and waded out the main line of resistance and checked several likely avenues of approach. The S-3 located the ^{a location for} Battalion Command Post and checked the rear area. The Reconnaissance Sergeant of the "M" Company was given the task of locating 81-mm mortar positions and the Company Command Post. At 1030 hours the S-2 led "M" Company vehicles and skeleton crews into a temporary assembly area on the south side of Krinkelt. (30)

COMPANY PLAN OF DEFENSE

In order to save as much time as possible the Company Commander issued the company order for defense in fragmentary form to the platoon leaders and section leaders at the same time. Provision was made to find out additional information as soon as the positions were occupied.

(30) Personal knowledge.

*Rifle Company
shown*

The following fragmentary order was issued: 1st Platoon on the right in general support of Company "I", with the right section covering the road running along the right of the battalion; left section covering a wooded draw that approached the center of the battalion area from the south; final protective lines to cross sections in front of Company "I". (See Map D) The 2nd Platoon on the left in general support of Company "K" with both sections covering a wooded draw leading in from the left front; final protective lines to cross sections in front of Company "K". (See Map D) The 81-mm Mortar Platoon from positions in the southern edge of town would be in general support of the battalion; concentrations to be placed on the road to the right of the battalion, the draw in the center, and the wooded draw to the left flank. (See Map D) Machine gun platoons hold fire until riflement open fire or until within 500 yards; ^{of which} mortars fire at targets of opportunity within range of the weapon; before firing any weapon be sure of the identity of the target as small groups of American soldiers have been infiltrating back through this area from the over-run division on the right; fire on all enemy vehicles to button them up. First Priority of work was digging gun positions as the ground was open and no fields of fire were necessary to clear. Five boxes of ammunition to be placed at each machine gun position with remainder left on the vehicles at a designated platoon ammunition point in the south-edge of town. The 81-mm mortars ^{was to} place their vehicles near to positions initially so as to facilitate the supply to the guns without a long carry. (31)

Company Command Post to be in corner building on left side of road at the last cross street on the south side of Krinkelt. The Communication Sergeant would start laying wire as soon as possible. (See Map D)

By 1400 hours Company "M" was well established with wire communications back to the Command Post and anxiously awaiting the rifle troops and the remainder of the company to arrive. Work on the positions continued with great effort.

The Company Commander made an overlay of the company positions and submitted it to battalion for their situation map.

At 1500 hours the Company Commander and the Reconnaissance Sergeant made an inspection of the company positions. The 1st Platoon on the right was progressing very satisfactorily in spite of the hard and frozen ground. A matter that concerned the platoon leader very much was the fact that the area could be spotted very easily from the air as the snow-covered ground made an excellent background for the dark clothes of the men and the fresh earth that was being excavated. It was recommended that snow be placed over the fresh earth as soon as possible to camouflage it to some degree. Information was given to the platoon leader that the enemy could be expected from three main directions; from the south-west along the Division main supply route; from the south-east through the wooded draw on the left front; and from straight east which had a fair road net from the east. (See Map C) The right flank was open but as the terrain was difficult to maneuver through, it was ruled out as a major threat (32) Anti-tank and Service Companies were in the town of Rocherath joining (32) Personal knowledge.

Krinkelt on the north; the 1st Battalion of the 38th was expected to be on the left of this battalion if and when it successfully extracted itself from the attack that they were executing. The company mission was stated in forceful language that no part of the company would withdraw without specific orders from the Battalion Commander or the Company Commander.

At the 2nd Platoon on the left flank, the platoon had a small shadow of concealment afforded by a fence-row that ran along the platoon position's front. There were no large trees there but even the weeds several feet high helped to conceal the fresh earth being dug up. In substance the same instructions were given the 2nd Platoon leader as were given the 1st Platoon Leader.

The 81-mm Platoon in the southern edge of Krinkelt had some good luck in their individual mortar positions as the enemy had stopped bombs in that exact area the day before. There were three craters each suitable for a mortar to be placed in. The craters were evenly dispersed so as to give one to each of the three sections, leaving only one position per section to be dug in. The camouflage was no problem with all the dirt from the bomb craters scattered over the area. The same information was given as was given the machine gun platoons.

By 1530 hours the remainder of Company "M" arrived following "I" Company. These elements of the company were guided in to their respective parts of the area by the Reconnaissance Sergeant. The 1st Sergeant began immediately to operate and expand the Company Command Post. (33)

(33) Personal knowledge.

Company "I" was ordered to the south of town and began coordinating the company position with the 1st Machine Gun Platoon in that area. "M" Company Commander recommended that "I" Company light machines be placed on the company left flank as there was a wide stretch of open ground not being covered by the heavy machine guns. During the occupation of "I" Company's position a German fighter bomber attacked and dropped one bomb just missing the 2nd Section of the 1st Platoon's machine guns, hitting a platoon of "I" Company not yet dug in. That particular platoon became inoperative as a result of the numerous casualties received by the bomb.

The remainder of the battalion closed into Krinkelt by 1700 hours. Company "K" went immediately to the left flank and started to coordinate with the 2nd Machine Gun Platoon of Company "M". Company "L" was employed in the town to prevent infiltrating enemy from assembling and becoming an active force to deal with. (34)

THE DEFENSE OF KRINKELT

Shortly after Company "K" reached its assigned defensive sector and before any coordination of units could be made, the enemy attacked the left flank of Company "K" with tanks and infantry. This attack caught the company off balance, but after much confusion Company "K" repulsed the attack without the use of the heavy machine guns. The enemy withdrew a short distance in front of the defensive position and prepared for a new assault. This assault came at 2100 with tanks and infantry again. Company "M" mortar fire and supporting artillery together with a stubborn defense by the riflemen and Company "M" machine guns repulsed the attack once more. The (34) Personal knowledge.

disposition of Company "I"?
What is enemy at?
What is following picture?

attack must show

enemy again withdrew leaving numerous dead almost on the defensive position. Many of the dead were accounted for by final protective fire from the heavy machine guns. In spite of all measures taken on the main line of resistance and of "L" Company's attempts to repel infiltration, the enemy was able to penetrate to the left of the 3rd Battalion with at least three tanks and approximately a company of infantry. Battalion Headquarters Company of the 3rd Battalion was engaged during the remainder of the night of 17 December dealing with this group of enemy. As no ground threat had occurred from the south at this time a platoon of Company "I" on the south and right of the battalion was sent to assist 3rd Battalion Headquarters Company in clearing the enemy from the rear area. (35)

not included
was in 99th Div?

During the afternoon and night of 17 December and all day of 18 December a great number of 99th Division men continually passed through the company sector. They created a hazard in cluttering up the roads and preventing, in many cases, our firing on the enemy until it was almost too late. In some instances the fleeing troops were just ahead of the enemy and fires were prevented by the mask of friendly troops. It was extremely demoralizing as these stragglers' units had been hit hard and as far as they individually were concerned the situation was hopeless and they were free in passing this type of comment on to other troops that they met. The Battalion Commander took it on himself to incorporate as many of these men in the battalion as he could. This practice was later ~~ordered~~^{b/} the Commanding General to be carried out. Each com- (35) Personal knowledge.

pany commander would gather the men as they came through the lines and use them as reinforcements. There were so many coming through by "M" Company's Command Post that the Company Commander organized a provisional platoon, placed the Company Executive Office in command, and sent it in the lines to help protect the right flank where the platoon of Company "I" had been pulled out, and where the 1st Machine Gun Platoon was located. (36)

On 18 December at approximately 1100 hours an American soldier, from Cannon Company of the 395th Infantry, 99th Division, came into "M" Company Command Post. He stated that he and about 100 other captured men from the 99th Division were held in the wooded area about 500 yards to the south and east of the battalion front lines; and that a German SS Officer had sent him forward into our lines to arrange for a trade of prisoners as it was thought by the Germans that a great many German captives were held in the American lines. Previous to this man's appearance some enemy movement of vehicles and men had been reported by "I" Company patrol in that area; and a heavy concentration of artillery and 81mm mortars had been placed there. This soldier reported that some of the American prisoners had been killed and wounded and some of the enemy had also been killed and wounded by the fires. This is when the German SS Officer was stated to have arranged for the prisoner exchange. This situation was reported to the Battalion Commander and the man was incorporated into "M" Company's Provisional Platoon. No action was taken regarding the prisoner exchange. The only exchange the Germans got was another good concentration. (36) Personal knowledge.

Not in map.

tration of artillery and 81-mm mortars as one could see the enemy movement in the forward edge of the woods at this time; and it looked very much like an assembly area for an attack. Sure enough at 1300 sharp an enemy force estimated at about a battalion supported by tanks began moving out of the woods toward the battalion sector. Another concentration of artillery and mortars with the heavy machine guns delivering deadly accurate fire broke up the attack before they had barely started. The enemy hastily with^{drew} into the woods. (37)

*2nd 1st 2nd
of 1st 2nd 3rd
of 1st 2nd 3rd*

Company "L", which had been engaged throughout the night of 17 December in mopping up infiltrating enemy in Krinkelt, was detached, on the morning of 18 December from the 3rd Battalion and attached to the 2nd Battalion which was having a hard time in plugging gaps in their sparse line to the north of Rocherath. This left the 3rd Battalion with only two companies on a precarious front and already ^{and} enemy in scattered spots through Rocherath and Krinkelt to our immediately rear. The movement of "L" Company from the battalion rear made movement there extremely hazardous; and now the Germans in the towns became bolder and began local harassing attacks there. One Tiger tank that had made a rendezvous with a small group of infantry, started a break through toward the south, presumably to make contact with Germans forces that were now known to be in Murringen just 3 kilometers directly south. (See Map C) The accompanying infantry were dispersed or killed by rifle fire from miscellaneous troops of Service Company, Regimental Headquarters Company, and 3rd Battalion Headquarters Company. The lone Tiger tank proceeded on its way down the main road (37) Personal knowledge.

*2nd 1st 2nd
of 1st 2nd 3rd
of 1st 2nd 3rd*

to "M" Company Command Post and paused a moment as if wondering which road to take. Not twenty-five feet from the Tiger was an American Sherman tank with its gun pointing at the enemy tank broadside. The "M" Company Commander was standing beside the Sherman and expected to see its 75-mm gun go into action against the side of the Tiger; but no, what did he see but the Sherman tank crew dismounting with well practiced, precision drill, and explaining in terrified gesticulations that their armor was no match for the Tiger and that it would be suicide to stay in their tank with an "88" on the loose. They failed to realize that they had the Tiger broadside and could undoubtedly have penetrated the side armor. The enemy tankers had apparently not seen them, either. Before the "M" Company Commander could get the crew back in the Sherman tank by physical persuasion, a tank destroyer that was farther down the road in the direction the Tiger tank was going, took it under fire head-on. The first shot was wild and hit a medical jeep and trailer penetrating the complete jeep and trailer lengthwise. By this time which was only a matter of seconds the Tiger started forward again. At precisely the same moment the Regimental s-4 in his jeep turned the corner and met the enemy tank face to face in a position where there was not enough room to pass by a wide vehicle such as the Tiger tank was. (38) The S-4 and his driver had only time to eject themselves, as if by jet-propulsion, when the Tiger tank ran over the jeep leaving a flattened out scrap heap in its wake. It seemed odd that the tank had not fired its 88-mm gun by now, but evidently its turret had been damaged by some of the many fires placed on all tank approaches in that area, as it was seen to pull to (38) Personal knowledge.

the right side of the road and sideswipe a telephone pole with its 88-mm gun in an effort to jar the turret loose; (it was found out later that this tank's turret had been damaged by a 57-mm anti-tank gun of Anti-tank Company, 38th Infantry). The 88-mm gun all this time was uselessly pointing in the opposite direction from all of the activity in that particular area. Two telephone poles were snapped off in trying to jar the jammed turret loose. Another near miss from the tank destroyer and the Tiger speeded up and tried to make a get away down the hill that led out of Krinkelt to the south. By this time a Rocket Launcher team from "M" Company that was located farther down the hill was alerted by the excitement and prepared to take the Tiger tank under fire at close range as it would have to pass by them on that road. Before the enemy tank got to the rocket launcher team, the tank destroyed connected; at which time the Tiger burst in flames. The enemy crew started jumping out of the burning tank firing their machine pistols as they came. An "M" Company 50 Caliber Machine gun mounted on a jeep near by opened up on the escaping enemy. Two managed to get out and were captured by the Rocket launcher team; the third was caught half way out by the 50 Caliber fire and blocked any further exit; the two remaining died in the flaming interior, it was disclosed the next day. (39)

For a period of four hours, from 1600 to 2000 hours, on 18 December enemy began shelling the company and battalion area from the front lines back through to the south edge of Krinkelt. The shells were varied types, 170-mm, 88-mm tank fire, nebelwerfers, and 120-mm mortars. It all came in at a. (39) Personal knowledge.

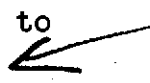
steady moderate rate. During this time communications were sometimes out for short periods. The 536 radios were not giving continuous communication because of the buildings that the Command Post was in. The Communication Sergeant worked continuously and courageously to regain communications as soon as it would go out. By his super-human effort the company was never out of communications with its platoons for more than fifteen minutes at a time. The 81-mm Mortar Platoon had accumulated some extra wire and along with what the Communication Sergeant found that had been abandoned by other units previously occupying this town, he was able to lay a double line to each machine gun platoon and a tripplywire to the 81-mm Mortar Platoon as it was closer to the Company Command Post. Just as soon as communication wire would go out, the Communication Sergeant would send a wire team down each wire leading to the platoon that was out of communication. By using some of the 99th Division personnel he was able to keep the wire going almost continuously. During this time the 1st Sergeant also had created a messenger pool that he could use in case the need might arise.

During this period of prolonged shelling the only casualties in the Company were someone 81-mm squad that received almost a direct hit on the position. One man was killed and five others of the squad were wounded and subsequently evacuated. The weapon was not damaged by the shell. (40)

On the night of 18 December from 2000 to 2300 hours the enemy artillery fires ceased and vigorous enemy patrols began operating in the two towns. The situation was somewhat fluid (40) Personal knowledge.

and movement was extremely hazardous as the local security behind the front lines was very "nervous on the trigger". Many of these patrols were destroyed by rear echelon troops and small arms fire was heard intermittently all night.

At 182300 December another attack of tanks and infantry struck into the "I" Company area. It came from the same general area as the abortive attempt earlier that afternoon. Artillery and 81-mm fires were brought to bear on the attack area and the tanks withdrew. The infantry continued vigorously and launched an ~~attack~~ ^{assault} ~~of~~ ^{against} the "I" Company and 1st Machine Gun Platoon area. A hot fire fight ensued at close range and the final protective fires were called on. After suffering numerous casualties at close range the enemy withdrew.

In the early morning of the 19 December at about 0300 hours tanks were again heard to the left flank of the battalion. This information was passed back from the 81-mm Mortar Platoon Observer in "K" Company area. Artillery and 81-mm Mortars repulsed the attack even though one tank did get through to be destroyed by rocket launchers from "M" Company. 

From information gathered from prisoners taken in an about Krinkelt it was learned, by the Battalion S-2, that the armored enemy were from the 12 SS Panzer Division "Hitler Jugend"; and the infantry were from the 277 Volksgrenadier Division. There were very few prisoners taken in this area and most of them were from the Volksgrenadier Division. The two "SS" Panzer prisoners of the "Hitler Jugend" that were captured by "M" Company from a disabled tank were very supercilious and boasted that their outfit would be in Paris by Christmas. (41)

(41) Personal knowledge.

WITHDRAWAL TO ELSENBORN RIDGE

During the afternoon of 19 December word was received that the 2nd Division along with the 99th Division, that by now had become so intermingled with the 2nd Division that it was attached to the division, were to make a night withdrawal, to terrain more suitable for defense, ^{this area was} about four kilometers west of Krinkelt on a ridge just west of the town of Wirtzfeld. (See Map C) This area had been reconnoitered by the 1st, 2nd, and 9th Division Commanders who were to set up a coordinated defense that would be far more secure than the salient of Rocherath, Krinkelt, and Wirtzfeld ^{held} that the 2nd-99th Divisions were now holding. (42)

During the night of 19 December the planned withdrawal of the 3rd Battalion took place. The 3rd Battalion was to be the last of the 38th Infantry to leave and through a mixup "M" Company, although not planned to have been the last out, was the last of the battalion to leave the Rocherath-Krinkelt area. Company "K" was supposed to be the last company but it was receiving another attack from the left flank about one half hour before its scheduled withdrawal and as soon as ^{the attack} it had been repulsed by artillery fire, the company was moved back to the battalion rear and got on the road ahead of "M" Company which was just beginning its withdrawal. As the road was clear to the intended route of withdrawal the Battalion Commander let "K" Company proceed on in "M" Company's order of march rather than take a chance of a big mix up in the middle of the night with German troops expected to attack again from the choice of several directions. (43)

(42) A-4, p. 103; (43) Personal knowledge.

It seemed odd that "M" Company had not been given a more forward place in the Battalion march plan but ^{due} to the confusion that was rampant on the night of 19 December it was understandable. The weapons had been picked up earlier in the night and were back at the new position waiting.

Company "M"'s formation for the withdrawal was the Provisional Platoon of the 99th Division men, 1st Platoon of Machine Guns, 2nd Platoon of Machine Guns, and the 81-mm Mortar Platoon. The radios were all working and communication was excellent. An 81-mm Mortar Platoon extra 300 radio was placed at the rear and communication was had from the rear to the front of the company facilitating control a great deal.

The company's move to Elsenborn Ridge soon became a race as the leading troops were moving as fast as possible to avoid the artillery and nebelwerfer fire that was beginning to cover the only road leading to the new position. Each unit frantically trying to keep contact to the front soon multiplied the cadance by the time it reached the tail end of the column. With heavy overshoes and overcoats the men began to show signs of exhaustion before going over a mile. A lot of the men threw away their overcoats making the going somewhat easier, an act which was regretted upon arrival at the new position. (44)

When the head of the battalion reached the interior of the small town of Wirtzfeld the enemy lifted the bulk of its fires from the road leading in and concentrated on the town. A few casualties were suffered in the rifle companies and some delay resulted as the troops became disorganized in seeking shelter in the buildings. Company "M" had caught up by now (44) Personal knowledge.

and began to push into the town amid burning buildings, milling troops and continuous nebelwerfer salvoes. To add to the confusion a battalion of the 23rd Infantry, 2nd Division was still in this town and one of their jeeps with considerable small arms ammunition had been set on fire by the nebelwerfers. This jeep was parked along side a narrow street that had to be used by the withdrawing troops and the exploding rounds added harassment to the already harassed foot-soldiers. But to heap insult upon injury, the road leading out of Wirtzfeld to the new positions was jammed with tanks and tank destroyers whose personnel seemed content to sit out the night on this narrow, over-crowded, one-way road.

OCCUPATION OF ELSENBORN RIDGE DEFENSIVE POSITION

At about 0100 hours of the night of 19-20 December the 3rd Battalion was guided into an open field 1000 yards north and west of Wirtzfeld, Belgium. (See Map E) The enemy had not decided to fire that far back as yet, and was still plastering Wirtzfeld with nebelwerfer and artillery fires. It was quite and peaceful in this snow-crested field, but the bedraggled and exhausted "M" Company had by now become insensible to the usual human interests and stood stolidly in confused groups waiting to be led to their new positions. (45) See Map E)

During the time the combat units of the 2nd Division had been defending the critical road net in and about Rocherath and Krinkelt a force, made up of clerks, cooks, military police, and what ever personnel was available in a division rear Command Post, was put to work constructing a defensive position along the the Elsenborn Ridge within the zone of the 2nd Division. The work was only partially finished by 20
(45) Personal knowledge.

December but an outline of the positions had been defined, thus facilitating the movement into the area. (46)

The Regimental S-2 guided the 3rd Battalion Commander, Battalion S-3, and "M" Company Commander to the positions to be occupied by the battalion. As can be seen there was not any time for reconnaissance of the area before dark and the battalion was trusted to the guiding hand of the Regimental S-2. With remarkable smoothness the maze of tangled units began to unfold and the battalion was in its position in less than an hour. Company "M" machine gun positions were clearly defined on the forward slope of the almost bare ridge, and the weapons that had been waiting there were placed in their proper positions. (See Map E) The 81-mm mortars were in defilade about 500 yards in rear of the machine guns, in an open field devoid of all cover and concealment. (See Map E) Orders were issued for half of each gun crew to continue working on the positions while the other half gained some rest in two hour shifts. By dawn the gun emplacements were completely dug in with work started on overhead protection which was to be of vital importance later that day and the following week. Fence posts, pole gates, and anything available were rummaged from the nearby fields and placed as a frame work for sand bags, that were issued the next day, ~~to be placed.~~

Company "M" Command Post was located about half way between the machine gun positions and the 81-mm mortars, in a dug in position constructed by the Company Commander and Executive Officer. (See Map E) It was about 300 yards to the Machine Gun Platoons and a little less to the 81-mm mortars. (46) A-2, p. 24.

Up until 201000 December no enemy fire had been placed on the position, but starting shortly thereafter artillery and 120-mm mortars began registering. These fires were to continue with increasing volume all day and far into the night. The enemy finished the night with harassing fires on the front lines to include the 81-mm mortar positions. Interdictory fires fell day and night on the only road that led back to the 3rd Battalion Rear Command Post at Berg, Belgium. The artillery fires that were coming in during the afternoon were falling on the 81mm mortars and over. The 120-mm mortar fire was falling along the crest of the ridge just in rear of the machine positions and back to include the Company Command Post.

During the afternoon of 20 December a great effort was made to resupply the company with ammunition by use of the weapons carriers. The battalion ammunition point was on the west side of Berg, and the road leading out to the positions was interdicted by artillery fires. The company position was under almost a continuous rain of artillery and heavy mortars. By infiltrating individual vehicles and running the gauntlet of fire the company was able to have sufficient ammunition on the positions to build up a supply on the positions. Because of the long and harassed supply route, it was decided to dump one half basic load on the positions.

It might be appropriate to mention that the bulk of the enemy artillery was falling harmlessly 200 yards to the rear of 81-mm Platoon; if the enemy had reduced the range 200 yards, the effect would undoubtedly have neutralized the Command Post and the 81-mm Platoon, as the area where they fell was literally pulverized. (47)

(47) Personal knowledge. *Alvin Karpis*

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Thus by 20 December the northern hinge of the German Bulge was secure and the Germans had failed to widen the northern shoulders of the penetration. (See Map F) General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander in Western Europe, felt that the shoulders of the German Bulge must be held firmly in order to successfully carry out the over all plan of defense. (48)

General Von Mantuffel, Commander of the Fifth Panzer Army, in a message to his troops, prior to the Ardennes offensive stated: "Our ground mission must be continuous; otherwise we will not achieve our goal."

Continuity
His ground mission was not continuous and in his own words: "We failed because our right flank near Monschau ran its head against a wall." Part of that wall was Company "M", 38th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division. (49)

After the German Counter-offensive struck on 16 December, it is the opinion of the author, that the First Army Commander was too slow in ordering a change in disposition; as the V Corps was ordered to continue the attack on 17 December. It was not until the enemy had penetrated all the way into the 2nd Division's rear, did Major General Walter M. Robertson, Commanding General of the 2nd Division, act from first hand information and, from a quick estimate of the situation, take immediate steps to counter the blow that was threatening the very existence of the Division. (50)

The moving of "M" Company's weapons carriers along with the weapons and skeleton crew to a position that was expected to be attacked at any time was questionable without rifle
(48) A-8, p.347; (49) A-4, p.106; (50) A-8, p.347.

Develop more
support. The creditable part was that the Battalion Commander acted decisively and provided the quickest movement of troops possible, as Company "M" was able to dig in and was able to withstand the terrific shock action that was to be thrown at them.

not until R.O.
The coordinated anti-tank plan of defense of Krinkelt was, without question superb. The rocket launcher teams of all companies coordinated thoroughly with all heavier anti-tank weapons supporting the defense.

Company Company "M" being left to the last at Krinkelt was an error in judgement. The heavy weapons platoons should have been attached to the nearest supporting rifle troops instead of moving independently at the rear of the column. (*more development needed*)

platoons
Organizing the ground on Elsenborn Ridge by the Division rear echelon showed aggressive planning on the part of the Division G-3. It raised the morale of the Company immeasurably when they moved into the position where great effort had been made to dig gun and other defensive positions in.

Statement
The orders from the Regimental Commander and Coordination with his staff were always timely, concise, and clear. The 38th Infantry's withdrawal to Elsenborn Ridge and the overall execution there-of was excellent. (51)

The communications within Company "M" were a deciding factor in the success of this operation. The Company and Battalion were kept immediately informed of the tactical situation day and night by the platoons communication to company. The fire control, although decentralized to platoons during the night, was effectively and decisively placed on the (51) Person knowledge.

(wire control plan...)
enemy by the use of wire and radio communications during the day.

statement
The use of artillery and mortars in firing on enemy forward assembly areas and attack positions can not be over-emphasized. These fires are especially effective in heavily wooded areas as were east of Krinkelt.

The use of the supporting tanks, although well used in the coordinated anti-tank defense, were not used to their full advantage in fire missions other than anti-tank. They could have been firing artillery missions in conjunction with the artillery and 81-mm mortars. (52)

In an appendix to an after action report Colonel F.H. Boos, then Regimental Commander of the 38th Infantry, stated: "As a result of this experience, the 38th Infantry has gained once more a pride in its achievements and a confidence in its ability to fulfill any task, which I regard as a positive augury of future success. I take pride in recording that I and all battalion commanders received the personal thanks of the First Army Commander and the Division Commander for breaking and ruining the German plan of attack in this sector, thereby impairing the entire German offensive." (53)

By General Order #63, 1946 the Presidential Unit Citation was awarded the 3rd Battalion for action during 17, 18, and 19 December 1944.

LESSONS

1. In order to maintain battle field efficiency, maintenence of all equipment must be continuous.

2. Regardless of the situation reconnaissance must be made by leaders of a withdrawing force prior to the occupation
(52) Personal knowledge; (53) A-12, Appendix.

of a defensive position.

3. A ~~mortorized~~ advance detail to occupy a defensive position should contain riflemen if at all possible.

4. Camouflage and concealment from air observation is of vital importance.

5. The success or failure of an operation can be measured, very often, by the communication system.

6. The 2.36 inch rocket launcher is an effective weapon in anti-tank defense against the heaviest know tanks when in the hands of well trained crews who know where to hit a tank.

7. Tanks with no infantry support are not to be greatly feared in the rear of a position.

8. In the defense ^{of a position} enemy artillery and mortars can be minimized by the elaborate construction of overhead cover with materials usually at hand.

9. Personnel behind the front lines, regardless of job specialty, must be imbued with a fighting spirit in order to eject or neutralize enemy infiltrations.

10. Stragglers from other units, in the path of an enemy advance, can and must be utilized to reinforce the existing lines.

11. The confusion created by the uncontrolled withdrawal of a unit through a position will not break the position of a well trained and disciplined unit.

12. A position can be held by inferior forces if the troops are infused with a fortitude from their leader to hold at all cost.

13. A confused and chaotic condition can be salvaged by aggressive leadership among the company officers of a command.