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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION
IN THE VICINITY OF MONS, BELGIUM
1 - 4 SEPTEMBER 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY DIVISION IN A
PURSUIT AND MEETING ENGAGEMENT

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION
IN THE VICINITY OF MONS, BELGIUM
1 - 4 SEPTEMBER 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st U.S. Infantry Division in the vicinity of MONS, BELGIUM, 1 - 4 September 1944.

For purposes of orientation, it will be necessary to relate the major events which led up to this action.

In the early morning hours of 6 June 1944, the long awaited invasion of the EUROPEAN CONTINENT by the Allied Armies was realized along a fifty mile front of the NORMANDY coast of FRANCE. (1) By nightfall, the 21st Army Group, commanded by Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery and composed of the First U.S. Army and the Second British Army, had breached the formidable enemy defenses and had secured their beachhead. (See Map A) (2)

Allied strategy initially involved the securing of the NORMANDY beachheads and the capturing of CAEN, ST. LO and the essential port of CHERBOURG. From there, the Allied Armies were to advance through BRITTANY, secure the ports southward to NANTES, drive east along the LOIRE RIVER toward PARIS and prepare to cross the SEINE RIVER by D plus 90. The ultimate objective was to destroy the German forces in the west. (3)

With a foothold on French soil, the Allied Armies pushed

- (1) A-1, p. 88
- (2) A-1, p. 102
- (3) A-2, p. 1287

forward in all directions to expand their beachheads and secure a lodgement area of sufficient size in which to build up a fighting force commensurate with the future mission. (4)

The German Armies, surprised and bewildered by the impetus and determination of the Allied attacks, withdrew on all fronts toward the north and northeast. By 1 July, the strategic port of CHERBOURG was secured by the First U.S. Army; and on 8 July, the British Second Army completed the capture of CAEN. On 18 July, the key communication center of ST. LO fell to the U.S. First Army. (See Map A) (5)

On all fronts, during the month of August, the Allied Armies relentlessly pursued the remnants of the disorganized German forces eastward toward the SEINE RIVER. On 19 August, the FALAISE - ARGENTAN pocket was closed, and some fifteen enemy divisions were trapped. This trap broke the effective fighting force of the German Armies in NORMANDY and opened the way for the Allied advance across FRANCE and BELGIUM. (6) On 25 August, PARIS was liberated and the Allied Armies had reached the SEINE RIVER. This fulfilled the primary mission of the Allied plan, to secure a lodgement area in western FRANCE between the SEINE and LOIRE RIVERS, ten days ahead of the planned date. (See Map A) (7) By the end of August, the Allied momentum had carried it's armies across the SEINE, the MARNE and the AISNE RIVERS to a line seventy-five miles south of the BELGIAN BORDER. (See Map B) (8)

(4) A-2, p. 1292

(5) A-2, p. 1296

(6) A-1, p. 144

(7) A-1, p. 147

(8) A-2, p. 1305

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 31 August 1944, the Allied 12th Army Group consisted of the First and Third U.S. Armies committed from left to right on a general line. (See Map B) (9)

The First U.S. Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Courtney B. Hodges, occupied a front of some one hundred miles extending south from COULLEMILLE to CREIL, east to SOISSONS, north to LAON and east to REMAUCOURT. (See Map B) The three corps composing this Army were disposed as follows: to the west (left), the XIX Corps maintaining contact with the XXX Corps of the British Second Army; the V Corps in the center and the VII Corps on the east (right) maintaining contact with the XX Corps of the Third U.S. Army. (See Map B) (10) The mission of the First U.S. Army was to continue the advance northeast, with the main effort initially in its zone, and to be prepared to continue the advance into GERMANY on order. (11)

The German forces opposing the First U.S. Army consisted of the reinforced LXXXI Corps of the Seventh German Army on the left; the I and II SS Corps of the Fifth Panzer Army in the center and the LXXX Corps of the First German Army on the right. (See Map B) (12) The general plan of the enemy had been to withdraw toward the west wall setting up successive lines of defense along the SEINE and SOMME RIVERS. This plan never materialized. Instead, the German Armies continued in headlong retreat along the entire front. They were a dis-

(9) A-3, p. 289
(10) A-4, p. 30
(11) A-1, p. 150
(12) A-4, p. 34

organized and thoroughly confused enemy fleeing toward the sanctuary of the SIEGFRIED LINE. (13)

The combat efficiency and morale of the German forces, by the end of August 1944, was exceedingly poor. So devastating had been their losses in men and materiel that entire armies had been destroyed. (14) The best that could be offered by the vaunted Wehrmacht, now, was light rear guard action with occasional fanatic resistance by isolated pockets.

In contrast, the combat efficiency and morale of the First U.S. Army was extremely high, inspired by continuous victories, aggressive leadership and superior equipment. (15)

To the north, across the First Army zone of advance, stretched the OISE, AISNE, SERRE and SAMBRE RIVERS. Many small wooded areas were prevalent throughout the entire area and an extensive forest existed north of the SAMBRE RIVER. Within the zone, a vast network of roads prevailed, with the main arteries running north and east through the cities of BAVAI, MAUBEUGE and MONS toward the heart of BELGIUM and GERMANY. The terrain, in general, consisted of a rolling countryside marked with occasional hills rising from 100 to 300 feet in height. (See Map C)

The weather was fair with occasional rains during the last few days of August and at times there was considerable fog. Both conditions hampered air operations but did not deter ground operations.

The logistical situation was serious. The rapid movement of the First U.S. Army forces places an additional strain on the already overextended supply lines. Transportation and

(13) A-4, p. 31

(14) A-2, p. 1302

(15) A-2, p. 1302

gasoline were critical items -- conservation was the key word. Supply points were as much as 150 to 200 miles in rear of the assaulting elements. Every available means of transportation was mobilized to push the supplies forward. Entire Army and Corps Field Artillery Battalions were transferred into provisional truck battalions in order to alleviate the existing condition. (16)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE VII CORPS

The VII Corps, composed of the 1st U.S. Infantry Division, the 9th U.S. Infantry Division and the 3d U.S. Armored Division, occupied a line extending northeast from SOISSONS on the west (left) to REMAUCOURT on the east (right). Elements of the 4th Cavalry Group, which were reconnoitering north in the VII Corps zone, had reached the towns of MARLE and LAMBRECY. (See Map D) (17)

As had been known for some time, the main forces of the German Armies were withdrawing from the west toward the SIEGFRIED LINE. Intelligence sources reported that a large enemy force was operating west of the LAON-MONS HIGHWAY. Late on 31 August, the VII Corps changed it's direction from northeast to due north with the object of trapping this hostile force of unknown size by cutting off the main escape routes leading east into GERMANY. Accordingly, the west boundary of the VII Corps was changed and now extended due north from LAON through the west edge of the FORET DE MORMAL. (19) (See Map D)

The plan of the VII Corps, in accordance with the mission

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- (16) A-4, p. 35
(17) A-4, p. 30
(18) A-5, p. 42
(19) A-4, p. 33

assigned by higher headquarters on 26 August 1944, was to drive north through FRANCE to the SIEGFRIED LINE and destroy the enemy within it's zone. In compliance with the First Army plans, the VII Corps ordered the 3d Armored Division to change from a northeasterly direction of attack toward CHARLEVILLE to due north with MONS, BELGIUM as the object. The 1st Infantry Division, on the west of the VII Corps zone, was given the mission of securing the roadnet at MARLE and of protecting the exposed left flank of the VII Corps which was northeast of the advanced elements of the V Corps. The 9th Infantry Division, on the right of the VII Corps zone, was to continue the advance northward following the 3d Armored Division and at the same time protect the rear of the Corps' east flank. The boundary between the 1st and 9th Infantry Divisions extended along the highway north from SOISSONS through VERVINS, AVESNES and MAUBEUGE to MONS. (See Map D)

The 4th Cavalry Group was given the mission of securing the right flank of the VII Corps and maintaining contact with the XX Corps to the east.

The IX Tactical Air Force directly supported the operations of the VII Corps' armored elements by furnishing continual column cover and making direct attacks on enemy motor and armored columns. (20)

THE SITUATION OF THE 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

After crossing the SEINE RIVER east of PARIS on 26 August 1944, the 1st Infantry Division relentlessly pursued the enemy northeast toward BELGIUM and the SIEGFRIED LINE behind the

(20) A-6, p. 83

spearheading elements of the 3d Armored Division. Only light rearguard action, with occasional small enemy pockets of resistance, was encountered in this mad dash across north-east FRANCE. On the night of 31 August 1944, the division combat teams had taken up defensive positions protecting the VII Corps' exposed left flank extending from LAON through CHAILLEVOIS and ALLEMANT to SOISSONS. (See Map D) Elements of the 4th Cavalry Group formed a reconnaissance screen across the Division front at MARLE, and the 1st Reconnaissance Company screened the left flank from LAON southward. (21)

The 1st Division had been formed into 3 Regimental Combat Teams, each consisting of an infantry regiment, two field artillery battalions, a tank destroyer company, a company of combat engineers and some medium tanks. Attached to the Division were the 980th Field Artillery Battalion and Battery B of the 13th Field Artillery Observation Battalion from First Army, which were held under Division control.

The Combat Teams were formulated as follows: CT 16 consisted of the 16th Infantry Regiment, the 7th Field Artillery Battalion and the 188th Field Artillery Battalion; CT 18 was composed of the 18th Infantry Regiment, the 32d and 5th Field Artillery Battalions; CT 26 contained the 26th Infantry Regiment, the 33d and 957th Field Artillery Battalions in addition to the engineer and tank destroyer attachments from the Division. (22) The formation of the Combat Teams, by the attachments of the divisional units, served a dual purpose. First, it enabled the Division to be almost completely motorized by transporting the infantry on the attached units' vehicles,

(21) A-4, p. 30

(22) A-7, p. 109

thus saving transportation for use in the critical supply situation; and, secondly, with the artillery well forward, it was better able to furnish close support when needed. Both factors were of utmost importance if the Division was to maintain continuous pressure on the enemy and prevent the hostile forces from reorganizing. (23)

On 31 August, intelligence reports indicated that elements of the German 348th and 47th Infantry Divisions were withdrawing from the west across the Division zone, and that elements of the 9th Panzer Division were leading this retreat; however, the 1st Division was unable to overtake the main body of these units. (24)

The Division was approximately 75% of T/O strength, mainly due to the light enemy action encountered. The morale and combat efficiency of the units was extremely high. Logistical problems were being encountered that approached the critical point at times. Due to the rapid advances made by the 1st Division in the past weeks, a strain was placed on sorely needed transportation facilities for troop movements and the maintenance of supplies well forward. Gasoline and, at times, ammunition were critical items. (25)

The terrain in the zone of advance offered no great obstacles. Many bridges across the rivers and streams which flowed perpendicular to the main route of movement, however, had been destroyed by the retreating Germans, which delayed the armor and infantry columns. An excellent roadnet extended north and east within the Division zone. The countryside was mostly farm land with low rolling hills. North and

(23) A-7, p. 112

(24) A-5, p. 42

(25) A-4, p. 36-37

west of MONS, BELGIUM were numerous heavily wooded areas of which the FORET DE MORVAL was the largest, approximately 10 miles long by 8 miles wide. The area of operation was well populated with many typical French and Belgian villages. (See Map C) (26)

THE PLAN OF THE 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

The plan of the 1st Infantry Division for securing MONS, was to advance as rapidly as possible in column of Combat Teams following the spearheading elements of the 3d Armored Division, to seize successive objectives and block all roads leading to the east through the 1st Division zone. With the simultaneous advance of the XIX Corps on the extreme left of the First Army zone, a pocket would be created to trap the German Divisions retreating eastward through BELGIUM. (See Map D)

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ACTION

As the action herein described developed spontaneously, no prior preparations were possible. Plans and orders were made and issued as the many and varied situations arose.

NARRATION

THE PURSUIT NORTH

At 0300 hours on 1 September, the 1st Division received word from VII Corps of a change in both the left and right Division boundaries. This change in boundary necessitated a

(26) Personal knowledge; Statement of Major Thomas Gendron, then S-1 of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, during February 1950.

change in the direction of advance of the Regimental Combat Teams within the Division from northeast to due north, toward MONS. (See Map D)

At 0900 hours, VII Corps ordered the 1st Division to hold it's present line, protecting the Corps' left flank, until the V Corps could move up and close the gap between the two units. At the same time, however, the 1st Division was ordered to secure the road hub of MARLE to the north. (27)

On 1 September, the 3d Armored Division, which had been operating with the 9th Infantry Division on the extreme right of the VII Corps, was now operating in the 1st Division sector due to the change in direction of movement. The 3d Armored Division, spearheading the drive northward toward MONS, BELGIUM with 3 CTs abreast, had reached LANDRIECY, LA FOLIE and the north edge of the FORET DU NOUVION by nightfall. Continuous small arms, tank and artillery fire had been encountered along the entire route. (See Map E) (28)

The 26th Infantry was alerted at 0935 hours to move to the vicinity of BOSMONT, on Division order, and protect the right flank of the Division. It was not until 1400 hours that the Regiment, in column of Battalion Battle Groups with the 1st Battalion leading, moved out. The Regiment, motorized by utilizing the attached 33d and 957th Field Artillery Battalions to help transport the infantry, advanced along the Division right flank, due north, toward the objective. (See Map E) (29) At 1715 hours, the 26th Infantry headquarters received orders from the 1st Division to send one Infantry Battalion to relieve elements of the 47th Infantry of the 9th

(27) A-8, p. 3

(28) A-6, p. 8

(29) A-6, p. 9

Infantry Division at VERVINS. The 3d Battalion was sent forward and accomplished the relief at 0200 hours on 2 September. The remainder of the Regiment went into positions on the high ground in the vicinity of BOSMONT, protecting the northernmost portion of the Division left flank. The entire march, from the vicinity of SOISSONS to the objective, was made without any enemy encounters. (See Map E) (30)

The 18th Infantry, in the vicinity of LAON, received orders from Division at 1100 hours to proceed as soon as possible to relieve elements of the 14th Cavalry Group which were holding a road block around MARLE. The 2d Battalion, in LAON, was awaiting the arrival of the 1st Battalion of the 16th Infantry from SOISSONS to relieve it. The relief was accomplished by 1515 hours, at which time the 18th Infantry moved out at once, in column of Battalions, with the 1st Battalion as the advance guard. The 32d Field Artillery Battalion and the 5th Field Artillery Battalion were attached and followed at the tail of the column. (31) By breaking down the Regimental Combat Teams into Battalion Battle Groups and by utilizing transportation from the Division attachments, the unit was completely motorized. As the column moved north toward MARLE along the LAON-MARLE-MONS HIGHWAY, the advance guard Battalion ran into a small group of enemy moving east in the vicinity of DRECY. The 1st Battalion detrucked and took the enemy under fire; meanwhile, the remainder of the column was forced to hold up the advance until this pocket of resistance was reduced. The enemy, in a state of withdrawal and not too well organized, fought a surprisingly stubborn resistance. However, it was

(30) A-8, p. 2

(31) A-8, p. 3

short lived and fifty-eight prisoners were taken. The 1st Battalion then moved into DRECY and took up positions to protect the left flank of the 18th Infantry. The remainder of the column moved forward toward MARLE with the 2d Battalion going into position around ATTENCOURT and the 3d Battalion relieving the 14th Cavalry Group unit in MARLE by 1540 hours. Perimeter defenses were set up by each unit for the night for complete security against possible infiltration by the numerous roving groups of enemy in the vicinity. (See Map E) (32)

The 16th Infantry, during this period, remained in position between ALLEMANT and CHALLEVOIS securing the southernmost portion of the Division left flank. The 1st Battalion relieved the 2d Battalion of the 18th Infantry in LAON and set up road blocks and defensive positions covering all entrances from the north and west into the town. (33) The 1st Reconnaissance Company was busy, during the morning, reconnoitering north and along the left flank of the Division. In the afternoon, this reconnaissance was extended to CRECY. (34)

THE MONS POCKET FORMS

On 2 September, from positions reached the previous day, the three Combat Commands of the 3d Armored Division continued to spearhead the advance of the 1st Division forming a pocket with the advance elements of the XIX Corps on the extreme left flank of the First Army zone and the 1st Infantry Division driving northward. By early evening, the spearheads had raced 40 kilometers across FRANCE, into BELGIUM, and had reached the key road center of MONS, the VII Corps objective. Road blocks

(32) A-9, p. 91

(33) A-10, p. 6

(34) A-6, p. 9

were immediately set up to cover all approaches to the city. Road blocks were also set up in BAVAI, to be held until relieved by elements of the 1st Division. Frequent small pockets of resistance were encountered indicating a general exodus eastward of the German troops from western FRANCE. Resistance was more determined but still was not organized into anything more than rear guard action. However, during the night, the enemy infiltrated between the 3d Armored Division CP located five miles south along the MONS-MAUBEUGE HIGHWAY and the Combat Commands in MONS. A relief force was sent from the 26th Infantry to reinforce the headquarters. (35)

The rapid advance northward to MONS continued in the early morning of 2 September. The 1st Division, maintaining contact with the 9th Infantry Division on the right, was to seize a line running northeast from LE SART through CARTIGUES to AVESNES on the right flank and at the same time protect the VII Corps' exposed left flank. (36) The 18th Infantry would advance north in the left portion of the 1st Division zone while the 26th Infantry would follow a parallel route in the right portion of the Division zone. The 16th Infantry would follow the 18th Infantry, as Division reserve, protecting the rear and left flank of the Division while maintaining contact with the V Corps elements on the left. The 1st Reconnaissance Troop would screen the front and left flank of the Division, while the I & R Platoons of the 16th Infantry would screen the left flank. (See Map E) (37)

The 18th Infantry moved out in a column of Battalions, motorized, north toward LE NOUVION, the objective, with the

(35) A-6, p. 10

(36) A-8, p. 4

(37) A-8, Item 1951

1st Battalion as advance guard for the Regiment. On the outskirts of LEME, the security elements of the Battalion encountered an enemy strong point located astride a crossroad and received intense machine gun fire. A platoon of tanks, with the infantry mounted, was sent forth from the advance guard to engage the enemy. After a surprisingly determined stand, the enemy strong point was reduced, with the capture of eighteen prisoners. The column continued to march forward through LEME. At a crossroad just north of the city, the column ran head on into an enemy anti aircraft group moving toward the east. This encounter netted sixty additional prisoners and proved to be the forerunner of many similar actions in the days to come. The enemy, in their withdrawal, marched in administrative column and was not disposed to fight. A lack of communications and knowledge of the situation left the Germans totally unaware of the presence of American troops in the area, and under these disadvantages, the enemy fell easy prey to the aggressiveness of the Division units in these meeting engagements. After mopping up the enemy in the vicinity of LEME, the 18th Infantry moved forward without any further serious delays. Small enemy groups were met from time to time but advance guard elements were immediately disposed to take care of them. This enabled the column to continue an uninterrupted advance and reach the objective at LE NOUVION by early evening, where the Regiment took up defensive positions covering the roads leading from the west. (See Map E) (38)

In the meantime, the 26th Infantry moved out from its positions early in the morning, moving north along the Divi-

(38) A-9, p. 2

sion right flank toward AVESNES. Equal progress was maintained with the 18th Infantry on the left. The 26th Infantry moved in column of Battalions, with the 1st Battalion as the advance guard followed by the 2d and 3d Battalions in order. The column met no enemy interference until it reached a point just south of AVESNES. Upon coming under small arms fire, the 1st Battalion detrucked and with one Company cleaned out the opposition. The remainder of the Battalion moved on to AVESNES and secured the high ground just north of the town. A short time later, it was joined by the remaining Company. The 2d and 3d Battalions had also detrucked south of the town and had taken up positions to the southeast. (See Map E) Only weak enemy opposition was encountered by the 26th Infantry during it's advance to AVESNES, which was reached by early evening. A check of the bridges across the HELPE RIVER in AVESNES found them in good condition and capable of supporting the Regiment's heaviest vehicles.

At 0800 hours, the 1st Battalion of the 16th Infantry moved north from it's position in LAON along the Division left flank, parallel to the route of advance of the 18th and 26th Infantry Regiments. Contact was made with the leading elements of the 5th Armored Division of the V Corps in the vicinity of GRECY at 0900 hours. The 1st Battalion continued north meeting small pockets of enemy resistance at almost every main crossroad. The skirmishes were frequent but of short duration; no determined organized resistance was met. The 16th Infantry, minus the 1st Battalion, remained in position south of LAON protecting the Division left rear flank and

maintaining contact with the V Corps on the left. At 1315 hours, the Regiment moved north and by 1825 hours had reached the town of GUISE, it's objective. (See Map E) (39)

At this time, the enemy situation was extremely confusing; although there were adequate troops available, the Germans were still unable to find sufficient time from the relentless pressure of the 1st Division to reorganize their forces into a coordinated defense. The numerous units represented by the captured enemy prisoners indicated the apparent disorganization of the German forces fleeing toward the east. Communications had completely broken down. German officers captured had no knowledge of their own situation or of the fact that American forces were so far north. The last order from German higher headquarters had been to move east as rapidly as possible to the SIEGFRIED LINE. (40)

Reports obtained from prisoners captured at this time indicated that the main German forces opposing the 1st Infantry Division consisted of the 5th, 47th, 275th and 384th Infantry Divisions in addition to the 6th Parachute and 18th GAF Divisions. The main axis of the enemy retreat were over the VALENCINNE-BAVAI-BINCHE and VALENCINNE-MONS-CHARLEROI ROADS. (41)

THE MONS POCKET IS CLOSED

In the early morning hours of 3 September, the 26th Infantry received orders to send the 1st Battalion, at once, to be attached to the 3d Armored Division at MONS. The 1st Battalion, motorized, moved north along the MAUBEUGE-MONS HIGHWAY.

(39) A-6, p. 13

(40) A-11, p. 50

(41) A-5, p. 47

Approaching MAUBEUGE, the leading element of the column ran into light enemy resistance which was soon neutralized and the 1st Battalion moved through MAUBEUGE without further incident. In the town, the Battalion Commander learned from the populace that a large German column had just passed through heading east from the vicinity of BAVAI. It was now apparent that the enemy could be met at almost any crossroad on the MAUBEUGE-MONS HIGHWAY. This supposition proved unexpectedly true in a very short time. As the leading Company of the Battalion reached BETTIGNES, it ran head on with a large enemy motor, wagon and foot column moving east. (See Map F) The Battalion immediately deployed on the reverse slope of a small hill which offered observation of both the crest and the main road. As the enemy advanced over the crest of the hill, they were caught in the murderous cross-fire of all Battalion weapons. (42) The enemy, marching in administrative column, were not disposed to engage in a meeting engagement with an alert and aggressive opponent; however, with their superior strength, the enemy was unable to be wholly contained by one Battalion. The Battalion continued to maneuver and blocked the escape route of this large enemy column. It's capabilities were limited, however, and some enemy were able to infiltrate through and around the position. The Germans made five frontal attacks to break through the 1st Battalion position; all were repulsed with the aid of a strafing attack instigated by the protective air cover overhead on the request of the TACP representative. This added to the carnage inflicted by the 1st Battalion; enemy casualties were unbelievable -- the count, 2400 prisoners taken and over

(42) A-11, p. 51

200 lay dead on the crest and slopes of the hill.

By way of explanation, a TAC Party had already been attached to each Regimental Combat Team which, with their VHF radios, were able to contact the planes overhead and direct attacks on desired targets. Representatives of these TAC Parties were further attached to Battalion when necessary. Armored elements also had TAC Parties attached which directed air strikes at the request of the infantry units. (43)

Upon learning of the situation of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry in the vicinity of BETTIGNES, the 1st Division ordered the Commanding Officer of the 16th Infantry, who with his unit was moving northeast toward AVESNES, "to assume command of the situation north of MAUBEUGE and fight the force into MONS". (44) Upon arrival at 1345 hours just south of MAUBEUGE, the 16th Infantry detrucked. The 3d Battalion advanced north up the MAUBEUGE-MONS HIGHWAY; the 2d Battalion advanced to the northeast to clear the BOIS DE LANIER, which was reported to contain many German forces. (45)

The situation was now becoming confused and extremely complicated. Enemy were everywhere and were constantly being encountered by the Regiments at almost every crossroad leading east. Every meeting engagement added to the growing toll of enemy prisoners. The handling of these prisoners posed a most difficult problem for the unit commanders. A Battalion cage was built; but, as the hours passed, it had to be expanded to take care of the numbers of enemy now surrendering.

The guarding of so vast a number of prisoners both during the

(43) Personal knowledge; Statements by Major T. Gendron, then S-1, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry and Captain A.E. Koenig, then Company Commander, 18th Infantry, 1 March 1950.

(44) A-8, p. 6

(45) A-8, p. 7

movement to the rear and in their processing required the use of many combat personnel. This depleted the fighting strength of the infantry units. How great an effect this may have had on any particular situation cannot be determined.

The 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry, because of its complicated situation, was unable to reach MONS to reinforce the 3d Armored Division CP and was ordered to hold the critical crossroad it now occupied. As night approached, perimeter defenses were set up covering all entrances and exits of the position. The 3d Battalion of the 16th Infantry moved through the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry toward MONS.(46)

In the meantime, the 1st Battalion of the 16th Infantry was ordered to move east of MAUBEUGE toward MONS as attachment to the 3d Armored Division to replace the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry now engaged. It, too ran into many enemy detachments which had by-passed the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry, and only after fighting its way through these pockets of resistance was the Battalion able to reach MONS by 2100 hours. The 3d Battalion of the 16th Infantry reached its objective north of MONS by 2135 hours, having taken almost 1000 prisoners along the route. (47) The 2d Battalion of the 16th Infantry, during this struggle, had proceeded toward the BOIS DE LANIER. As the Battalion approached the BAVAI-GIVRY ROAD, 20 to 30 P-47's were observed strafing the road immediately to the front. (See Map F) The target could not be seen due to the heavy woods, but it was surmised that another enemy column had been spotted by the IX TAC planes and taken under attack. As the 2d Battalion

(46) A-11, p. 5

(47) A-8, p. 7

column reached a point approximately 400 yards from the road, as if by a prearranged signal, the strafing ceased and there ahead was the enemy column in a state of utter confusion and bewilderment. On the road, lined up solid, four abreast, were German tanks, half-tracks, horse drawn vehicles, trucks and personnel. The sight which met the eyes was unbelievable. The Battalion went into action at once. Tanks pulled into the fields and raked the column from end to end; units deployed and opened fire, while individuals and small groups raced across the fields after the fleeing Germans. Artillery shelled the column from positions along the road. Part of the enemy column had turned off on a side road when the strafing began and were by-passing this carnage when they ran into the tail of the 2d Battalion column. The chemical mortarmen of the Chemical Mortar Company and the Heavy Weapons Company personnel, who brought up the tail of the column, took them under fire. Every man in the entire Battalion column turned rifleman. As night approached, the battle raged and all through the night fighting continued in the BOIS DE LANIER. Finally, at 0400 hours on 4 September, a German Captain arranged surrender terms. He had no idea there was only a reinforced infantry Battalion, minus one Company, facing him. When the total count was made, 3200 prisoners were taken, over 700 enemy were wounded and countless lay dead in the Battalion area. (48)

The 26th Infantry, less the 1st Battalion, was beleaguered by a similar situation. At 0800 hours, the Regiment, minus the 1st Battalion, had moved out from AVESNES along a road leading northwest toward MONS through LA LONGUEVILLE and FRAMIERS. (See

(48) A-12, p. 150-151

Map F) (49) The entire Regiment was motorized by the formation of Battalion Battle Groups, which enabled all men to be carried on the tank destroyers, engineer and artillery vehicles, attached tanks and the organic transportation and still maintain unity of command. (50) As the Regiment raced across the countryside toward MONS, the elements of the 3d Battalion, which had been sent ahead to reconnoiter the area around FRAMIERS, ran into an enemy column moving east through LA LONGUEVILLE. After a heavy engagement, this leading element forced it's way to the 3d Battalion objective at FRAMIERS, 13 miles north. A runner was sent back to bring the remainder of the 3d Battalion forward as quickly as possible. As it advanced, the Battalion also ran into the flank of the elements of several enemy divisions composed of transports and foot troops moving east on the BAVAI-BINCHE HIGHWAY. The meeting was spontaneous as the point had discovered the enemy when only 900 yards to it's front marching in administrative column. The Battalion, less the Company now in FRAMIERS, immediately deployed. Tanks ranged in on the leading vehicles in the column, tank destroyers picked out the motor transports as their target and the infantry and machine guns raked the personnel and horse drawn vehicles. At will, the column was covered by fire, but in view of the vastly superior number of enemy, the Battalion Commander called for an air strike by the air forces of the IX TAC which had been covering the Division movement all day. The covering force immediately complied and raked the double banked columns from end to end. The destruction was beyond comprehension -- untold hundreds of destroyed vehicles blocked

(49) A-8, p. 6

(50) A-13, p. 1

the road for miles. The number of dead from this engagement were beyond counting. The 3d Battalion pushed on north to FRAMIERS and joined with it's long isolated Company F. (51) In the meantime, the remainder of the 26th Infantry had halted, awaiting the outcome of the battle ahead. By late in the afternoon, the enemy had been sufficiently reduced that the Regiment could continue toward it's objective. So confused was the enemy situation, however, that the Regimental Headquarters was set up in LA BOUVERIE until the present confusion was cleared up. Due to the strafing by the air force and the tremendous onslaught by the 3d Battalion, the enemy were thoroughly confused and completely disorganized. The enemy, in small groups, large groups and individually roamed the area. Slowly, elements of the Regiment rounded up these shattered remnants of the once vaunted Wehrmacht. (52)

During the hours of darkness, the 26th Infantry field train left it's bivouac in the vicinity of AVESNES and moved north to join the remainder of the Regiment in the vicinity of FRAMIERS. As the lead vehicles of the column reached the crossroad in SANS LA BRUYERE, they were met by the lead vehicles of a German medical and supply column moving east. Simultaneously, the cooks, drivers and clerks of the 26th Infantry field train and the medics and other personnel of the German column dismounted and a severe fight was immediately in progress. As the skirmish progressed, it was obvious that the enemy was too strong for so small a unit, and the 26th field train was forced to withdraw, saving as many vehicles and as possible, but not until 145 enemy prisoners had been taken.

(51) A-11, p. 52

(52) A-11, p. 54

The column moved south to the bivouac area of the 33d Field Artillery Battalion and the 103d Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. Shortly after their arrival, a strong enemy attack was launched against the area. The multiple .50 caliber machine guns of the Anti-Aircraft Battalion went into action immediately, as did all the personnel. The fight continued through the night and it was not until the following morning that the enemy was finally subdued. (53) The enemy, in this attack, had cut off the 26th Infantry completely from the rear echelon. An improvised task force was sent from the 18th Infantry to reinforce the Artillery Battalions; however, it was not until almost noon that the enemy situation was neutralized and the chaos cleared up. The total of enemy killed and taken prisoner was 250. Approximately 50% of the field train was salvaged. (54)

The 18th Infantry had moved out at 0800 hours on 3 September from LE NOUVION north toward the key road center of BAVAI with the 1st and 3d Battalions in a column, the 1st Battalion leading. As the Regiment reached a point just south of BAVAI, the 1st Battalion ran into an enemy defensive position which was protecting a long German column moving east through BAVAI. To quickly reduce this obstacle, the 3d Battalion, then in reserve, was committed and the enemy retreated. By 1330 hours, the leading elements of the 18th Infantry reached the outskirts of the city where fierce resistance was met from an Armenian Battalion and a German Anti-Aircraft unit defending in the town of BAVAI, with orders to hold at all cost. The town was being used as one of the main escape routes for German

(53) A-11, p. 54

(54) A-8, p. 8

columns moving northeast toward AACHEN. A long enemy column could be seen moving through the town from the west. Artillery elements attached to the Regiment immediately took the column under fire, shelling it from one end to the other. An airstrike was called for by Regiment from the IX TAC overhead which complied immediately by strafing the column from end to end. (55)

It might be well to note here, that the coordination and cooperation between the airforces and the ground forces was exceedingly fine. Through the TAC party equipped with a VHF radio, attached to each Regiment airstrikes could be directed on any target at will. The air cover and the ability to call for airstrikes when necessary played an important part in the successful destruction of a constantly numerically superior enemy.

(56)

The 18th Infantry with the aid of air and artillery support fought it's way into the town of BAVAI and by 1700 hours the town had been cleared with the exception of light pockets of resistance and occasional snipers. Casualties suffered by the 1st Battalion were relatively heavy in this action; but enemy losses were far greater, there being 400 taken prisoner and 150 killed. By cutting off this main artery of the German route of withdrawal, the enemy was forced to seek out less favorable routes to the south and north. The 18th Infantry immediately set up defenses around the city covering all avenues of approach from north, south and west, and by 2230 hours the road block was completed. The enemy which escaped this onslaught sought refuge in the FORET DE MORMAL. The 2d Battalion

(55) A-8, p. 7

(56) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain A. E. Koenig, made 10 March 1950

was moved into an assembly area southeast of the FORET DE MORMAL in the late afternoon. (See Map F) (57)

By 2400 hours on 3 September, an estimated 7000 enemy troops had been either taken prisoner or killed by 1st Division units. Resistance was contained mainly in the vicinity of BAVAI and MAUBEUGE, but conditions, as a whole, were chaotic. Thousands of enemy troops wandered aimlessly throughout the 1st Division area. Even the 1st Division and VII Corps Headquarters troops took their toll of prisoners. A force of 80 enemy anti-aircraft personnel, led by a Major, marched mistakenly into the Division CP in their attempt to flee east; but they, too, were either killed or captured. (58) A VII Corps advanced CP Group, while enroute to BELGIUM to reconnoiter for a future CP locations, ran headlong into a German column and, after a considerable skirmish, added 705 to the toll of enemy prisoners, 60 additional killed and 40 wounded. On this day of days, every man in the 1st Division had added his contribution to the growing list of enemy killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

THE MOPPING UP OPERATION

In the early morning hours of 4 September, all units were engaged with remnants of German units vainly attempting to break through the 1st Division and 3d Armored Division defenses in the vicinity of MONS. The 1st Infantry Division continued to protect the left flank of the VII Corps and block the escape routes of the enemy forces.

The 3d Battalion of the 16th Infantry had pushed on to

(57) A-6, p. 16

(58) A-5, p. 47

the high ground north of MONS after clearing out sniper fire and small pockets of resistance in the town and had consolidated the Battalion position by early morning. The 2d Battalion, meanwhile, was still busily engaged in clearing out the BOIS DE LANIER. At 0630 hours, in accordance with surrender terms made with the enemy, group after group of Germans surrendered. These prisoners were sent back to a large enclosure in the vicinity of MAUBEUGE. By 0900 hours, the situation around the BOIS DE LANIER was fairly well in hand, and the 2d Battalion was ordered into Division reserve.

The 1st Battalion in MONS remained attached to the 3d Armored Division until 1400 hours, when the 3d Armored Division moved east toward NAMUR, on order of the VII Corps. A change in the direction to the east was indicated by the victory at MONS.

The 18th Infantry was engaged throughout the early morning mopping up enemy pockets of resistance within the area in the vicinity of BAVAI. At 0935 hours, the 2d Battalion was sent to NEUF MESNIC to pick up approximately 200 enemy who, according to the civilian reports, wanted to surrender. The task was accomplished. Another task force was sent to clean up the enemy along the BAVAI-LE CHEVAL ROAD. Elements of the 18th Infantry spent the morning clearing the FORET DE MORMAL of the many enemy troops which had taken refuge there from the previous day's attacks. By noon, the enemy situations in the vicinity of BAVAI and the FORET DE MORMAL were well in hand. Patrols were exceedingly active throughout the area during the afternoon, gathering together the enemy stragglers.

The 26th Infantry around LA BOUVERAI, in the early morning

hours of 4 September, found itself in the middle of retreating enemy forces. As has been previously stated, the field train was attacked in the vicinity of BETTIGNES while moving toward LA BOUVERAI. The Artillery Battalions attached to the Regiment, likewise, were under attack by enemy forces. The situation was extremely fluid and the Regiment spent the day mopping up the enemy within the area and consolidating positions covering the enemy escape routes through FRAMIERS.

By evening on 4 September, the 1st Division protected the left flank of the VII Corps with the 16th Infantry at MONS, the 26th Infantry at LA BOUVERAI and the 18th Infantry, the only unit still in FRANCE, at BAVAI. With the mission now accomplished, the 1st Division was awaiting orders to drive east toward AACHEN. (See Map G) (59)

In summary, it may be said that the action of the 1st Division around MONS, BELGIUM on 1-4 September had a profound effect upon future successes of the Allies. The remnants of some 20 German Divisions, totalling more than 25,000 men, were liquidated in their vain attempt to reach the sanctuary of the SIEGFRIED LINE. The 1st Division, alone, captured over 17,000 of the enemy; the 3d Armored Division, fighting along side of the 1st Division, captured over 10,000 additional prisoners. Untold thousands of enemy dead were left where they fell. Thousands of destroyed vehicles blocked almost every road leading to the east. The casualties suffered by the 1st Division, in comparison to the carnage wrought upon the enemy, were extremely light.

It is equally plain that with the loss of these troops, the German power to hold the SIEGFRIED LINE around AACHEN had been infinitely lessened. (60)

(59) A-8, p. 9

(60) A-4, p. 34

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. AIR - GROUND COOPERATION AND COORDINATION

The IX TAC, supporting the First United States Army, furnished continual air cover for the rapidly moving columns of the 3d Armored and 1st Infantry Divisions in their advance toward MONS, BELGIUM. The air force units informed the ground elements of enemy columns moving in their direction. The ground forces were able to contact the air cover on the VHF radios and direct airstrikes against enemy targets in event of a sudden encounter. An example of this cooperation was the meeting engagement between the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry and a large enemy force moving eastward just north of MAUBEUGE on the early morning of 2 September. With the aid of airstrikes upon the column, over 2000 enemy were taken prisoner, over 200 enemy were killed and countless vehicles were destroyed. Another similar example occurred northeast of BAVAI when the 3d Battalion of the 26th Infantry attacked a long enemy column which far outnumbered the Battalion. An airstrike was requested and was immediately brought to bear upon the entire column completely disorganizing this force and making it possible for the infantry to destroy an enemy force many times its strength.

2. ARTILLERY SUPPORT

Here we see the artillery of the 1st Division and some units of the VII Corps Artillery attached to the Infantry Regiments and Battalions. By placing these attachments well forward in the columns, the Infantry Regiments had close and

continuous support when needed. The advantage of having the artillery attached and well forward in the column was clearly shown in the action of the 2d Battalion of the 16th Infantry in the vicinity of the BOIS DE LANIER where a large German column was unexpectedly met. Although greatly outnumbered, the Battalion attacked the column aggressively, and with the artillery support, was able to prevent the enemy column from breaking through the Battalion positions. Artillery ranged in on the column from one end to the other. This battle continued throughout the night and next morning before surrender was effected. 3200 prisoners were taken and countless enemy lay dead in the surrounding area. Much of the success of this Battalion against so numerically superior an enemy can be attributed to the excellent and timely Field Artillery support. Without this close support of the attached artillery, it is seriously doubted that such a degree of success could have been achieved.

3. TRANSPORTATION

In a tactical operation involving a pursuit, rapid movement forward is essential if the enemy is to be denied the opportunity for reorganization and the setting up of a strong defense. The relentless pressure exerted on the fleeing enemy on 1 - 2 September by the 1st Division was possible only by utilizing every available means of transportation within the 1st Division. This was accomplished by the establishment of Regimental Combat Teams and Battalion Battle Groups within the Combat Teams. By the attachment of a Field Artillery Battery to each Infantry Battalion along with a Platoon of Combat Engineers, a Platoon of tanks and a Platoon of Tank Destroyers, maximum use

was made of all transportation. This enabled all units to be completely motorized, thereby denying the enemy a moments respite from pursuit. The formation of Battalion Battle Groups may not be the accepted doctrine, but it was the answer in this instance to solve the critical transportation shortage. Because of the overextended supply lines, all available transportation was needed for hauling supplies and this method released additional vehicles for supply purposes.

4. SECURITY

The actions during the period 1 - 4 September indicate the lack of proper security measures on the part of the German columns as they moved east. It was clearly shown by statements of captured German officers and enlisted men that no one had any knowledge of their own or of the enemy situation. An apparent lack of knowledge of the enemy situation was also evident in the Germans march formation of administrative columns. It is true that the orders were to move out to the SIEGFRIED LINE the fastest way possible and in close column is the most rapid means and still maintain control. However, security for his unit at all times is the responsibility of the commander. It may be readily assumed, had proper security measures been exercised by the German Commanders with the preponderance of forces, their available equipment and their apparent determination to follow orders blindly, that an entirely different story would have been written. Security measures should have been exercised at all times by all units, no matter how small or how large. Had the German Commanders concerned followed this procedure, it is inconceivable that AVESNES, BAVAI, MAUBEUGE and MONS would

have had any significance in the history of WORLD WAR II. Instead, they will remain as symbols of the carnage inflicted upon the German forces in the vicinity of MONS, where five elite German Infantry Divisions were completely stricken from the Nazi Order of Battle Records.

5. MEETING ENGAGEMENT

In the actions of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry at BETTIGNES, BELGIUM on 3 September is depicted the quick decisions, and the rapid and aggressive actions of a Battalion Commander and his unit necessary for success in this type of operation. The meeting was spontaneous without prior knowledge of either the enemy or the 1st Battalion. Almost as spontaneous as the meeting, were the bold actions of the Battalion Commander, who immediately deployed his entire Battalion along the road and on the reverse slope of a low hill nearby. Immediately all available fires were brought to bear on the enemy. The Battalion was greatly outnumbered, but with the rapidity of action and the aggressiveness of the Commander and men alike in their pressure upon the enemy, the result was complete disorganization and confusion on the part of the enemy. This is shown by the five suicidal frontal attacks made by the Germans against the 1st Battalion position. This meeting engagement was successful as a result of the immediate and aggressive action on the part of the Battalion.

6. RECONNAISSANCE

During the period 1 - 4 September, the 4th Cavalry Group screened the Division front, maintained road blocks at key in-

tersections and reconnoitered the route of advance. The I and R Platoons of the Infantry Regiment constantly reconnoitered to the flanks and rear for possible enemy columns approaching the Division route of advance. The speed with which these reconnaissance elements transmitted information of approaching enemy units to the Division expedited the actions of the various Infantry Regiments in destroying or capturing the hostile forces. This fulfillment of the mission of reconnaissance enabled the Division to more rapidly continue the advance to the north.

7. PRISONERS OF WAR

The excessive numbers of captured enemy personnel imposed tremendous problems for the Battalions and Regiments of the 1st Infantry Division during this operation. With the situation so fluid, hundreds and thousands of prisoners were surrendering at one time. The securing and moving of these prisoners required many of the combat personnel, which, in necessity, depleted the effective combat strength of the units. Prisoner of war cages had to be set up and maintained which required additional personnel. With the enemy roving in large groups throughout the area, large numbers of guards had to be utilized to prevent the prisoners from being released by their own forces. The necessity of using large numbers of combat personnel for the securing of enemy prisoners is depicted after every meeting engagement. Large numbers of prisoners must be anticipated in any rapidly moving situation and plans made to secure them without depleting the combat strength of a unit.

8. ARMOR - INFANTRY COOPERATION

The cooperation between the 3d Armored Division and the

1st Infantry Division was continuous throughout the operation. Gaps between the spearheading armored units and the infantry mopping up in the rear did occur at times; however, motorized infantry followed close behind to maintain contact between the slower moving Infantry Division and close these gaps. The close support is shown this operation when the 1st Battalion was dispatched on the morning of 3 September to reinforce the armored units in the vicinity of MONS. The armored units could spearhead the attacks, but they also needed protection from infantry units. Infantry units, usually a Battalion, were continuously attached to the Armored Combat Commands as reinforcements. The close cooperation in the MONS operation paid huge dividends in the ultimate success of the 1st Division.

LESSONS

1. Air-ground cooperation and coordination materially assists the rapid movement of the ground forces and increases their ability to deal decisive blows on the enemy.
2. In the pursuit, artillery should be attached and placed well forward in the infantry columns to give immediate and adequate support.
3. Motorized infantry troops are essential in expediting the relentless pressure necessary for success in a rapidly moving situation.
4. Success or failure of a withdrawal operation depends primarily upon the security measures taken to protect the command against hostile attack.
5. Meeting engagements require rapid decisions and aggressive actions on the part of all commanders.

6. In rapidly moving situations, reconnaissance for determining strength, direction and disposition of enemy forces must be complete and continuous in all directions.

7. In a pursuit, definite plans must be made in advance for the handling of anticipated large numbers of prisoners so as not to deplete the fighting strength of the unit during the operation.

8. Marriage of armor and infantry units is essential to success in pursuit operations.