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OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 313TH INFANTRY (79TH INF. DIV.)  
IN ALSACE, 8-9 DECEMBER 1944  
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of a Battalion S-2)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 Report of Operation, 7th U. S. Army in France and Germany.
- A-2 Report by the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Forces.

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 3rd Battalion, 313th Infantry, 79th U. S. Infantry Division, in the attack on the town of Bischwiller, Alsace, France on the 8-9 December 1944.

On 23 November 1944 the Seventh Army had driven through the Vosges Mountains at Saverne Gap and on to take the city of Strassbourg, stopping there on the banks of the Rhine River. This ended the eastern drive.

On 24 November General Eisenhower changed the Seventh Army's direction of advance. Its main force was ordered to drive northeast to clear the enemy from the zone which was bounded by the Rhine River on the east, the Siegfried line on the north, and the Sarre River on the west.

By 5 December this main force, consisting of the VI and XV Corps, had completed re-grouping and was ready to attack in the new direction. The VI Corps was to attack in the right of the Army zone with its right flank on the Rhine River. The 79th Division was to attack to the northeast in the right half of the VI Corps zone, take the city of Haguenau, and clear the Rhine River Valley on its right flank.

Since the Division zone was wide (15 miles) and the mission included the words "clear the enemy from" the Division Commander asked for help to clean out scattered enemy groups in the villages to the right of his main attack routes. The Corps Commander agreed to this and the 94th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was attached to the Division to secure its right flank. On 7 December

this squadron was in position and the Division Commander issued his order. (1)

The Division would attack with three regiments abreast at first light, 0630, 9 December.

The line of departure would be the present position.

The 314th Infantry, on the left, was to take the city of Haguenau. (2)

The 315th Infantry, in the center, was to clear the southeastern arm of the Haguenau Forest. (3)

The 313th Infantry, on the right, was to cut the two roads leading from Haguenau to the east and northeast. (4)

After taking these objectives all units were to be prepared to continue the attack to the northeast.

On 7 December the 313th Infantry was in position on the Division's right flank, holding the line running through the town of Gries and then south to the east of Kurtzenhausen. The 2nd Battalion was on the left in the vicinity of Gries. The 1st Battalion was on the right in the vicinity of Kurtzenhausen. The 94th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron extended the flank to the east and south. The 3rd Battalion moved into Kurtzenhausen on the night of 7 December while the Regimental Commander was issuing his attack order.

The Regiment was ordered to attack in accordance with the Division attack order.

The 2nd Battalion would attack from its present position, clear the enemy from the woods to its front and capture the left (west) portion of the town of Bischwiller.

(1) All facts, dates and missions for Corps background from Reference A-1, Vol. II, P 457.

(2,3,4) See Map A.

The 3rd Battalion was to pass through the 1st Battalion and take the right (east) portion of the town of Bischwiller, making all possible effort to capture the bridge over the Moder River before it could be destroyed.

The boundary between battalions was to be the main road running north through Bischwiller, the road inclusive to the 3rd Battalion.

The 1st Battalion, after being passed through, would revert to regimental reserve and prepare to exploit any river crossing made by either attacking battalion.

#### PLANNING PHASE

Great stress had been laid by the Regimental Commander on the importance of capturing the Moder River Bridge intact. The other bridge over the Moder River, east of Bischwiller, had already been destroyed by the enemy. Both civilian information and aerial reconnaissance had confirmed it as being completely demolished, the abutments on both sides having been blown. There were no other bridges in the vicinity.

The Moder is a sluggish river and only twenty yards wide, but its banks are soft and the surrounding territory is low and wet, especially during the winter rains. The entire area east and southeast of Bischwiller is flat and criss-crossed with drainage ditches. The rains of November and December had soaked the ground so that it was almost a swamp. The rising water had driven the enemy from all his dug in positions south of the town.

The town itself is built on high ground, not hills, just high ground. The paved roads are all fill-raised six to eight feet above the surrounding farm land.

The reconnaissance patrols of the 1st Battalion had determined that the area east of the main road was solid enough for

foot troops for a distance of about two hundred yards. Beyond that solid strip were water soaked gardens and pasture. These were not impassable, but any movement there was under enemy observation in the daylight and so noisy at night that it could not be used as a route of advance. The only growth over three feet high was the brush along the permanent streams and the inevitable poplar trees along each side of the road.

When the Battalion Commander checked this terrain analysis he realized that the only chance to surprise the town garrison was to move to within 1000 yards of the town under cover of darkness. Once that close the attacking troops could close with the enemy under cover of artillery fire. Since the attack was timed to jump off at first light (0630), he requested permission from the Regimental Commander to move the line of departure for his battalion to the creek running northwest to southeast across the main road, 800 yards southwest of the near edge of Bischwiller. This request was granted. Although the new line of departure was a bottleneck in the zone of advance, the change permitted the battalion to get across most of the open terrain between the 1st Battalion positions and the enemy in the town of Bischwiller under cover of darkness. It also enabled them to use the strip of solid footing beside the road as a route of advance.

A platoon of medium tanks and a platoon from the Division Engineer Battalion were attached to the 3rd Battalion for this operation. One battalion of light artillery was in direct support of the battalion.

Most of the enemy information had been gained from civilian sources, and, wherever possible, checked by patrols and air observation.

The bridge over the creek at the line of departure had been

damaged by enemy demolition. The extent of this damage was not known. The report said only that three holes had been blown through the pavement. There were no known road blocks in the town streets. The main bridge across the Moder River in the town of Bischwiller had been prepared for demolition. A large bomb had been placed on each end of the bridge over the abutments. Wires ran from each bomb into houses on the east bank of the river.

The following enemy positions had been definitely located:

A towed anti-tank, anti-aircraft gun, manned by anti-aircraft personnel, was dug in about 500 yards northeast of the damaged bridge at the line of departure. There were several holes dug for riflemen around the main emplacement.

There were holes dug in the hedges around the houses in the southeast tip of the town. These holes were sited to command all approaches to the buildings over the open ground to their south. At least two machine guns were emplaced along this line, but were not always mounted in the same holes. Most of the men manning this position (estimated to be about forty) spent the majority of the time in nearby houses, but two or three were always on each gun.

There had been several estimates of the total strength of the enemy in the town. The best evaluation possible indicated the presence of an under-strength battalion (200 men). Most of these were Infantry, but many branches were represented including anti-aircraft troops and bicycle reconnaissance detachments.

The 1st Battalion, 313th Infantry, had been sending out two patrols each night. One patrol before midnight and one just before dawn. The Battalion Commander accepted the staff recommendation that a patrol be sent out right after dark on the 8th to



keep up this pattern. The most important item of information needed was whether or not tanks could cross the damaged bridge and, if not, how long it would take to repair it so they could. Since the approach to the line of departure would be made in darkness it was also necessary to make a route reconnaissance. It was decided to combine these two missions.

The plan was to have this patrol led by the Platoon Commander of the leading platoon of the lead company. Company L Commander was notified that his company was to lead the attack. He, in turn, designated his 3rd Platoon to lead the company. The patrol was made up of five men; a tank non-commissioned officer and an engineer to make the technical reconnaissance of the bridge, the Company L platoon leader and two men from his platoon to make the route reconnaissance and protect the technicians while they examined the bridge.

Since the patrol could not complete their mission and report earlier than 2100, the planning for the attack could not be delayed until their return.

The Battalion Commander's plan was to use Company I on the left and Company L on the right with Company K in reserve. Company L, with one heavy machine gun platoon attached, was to move out from the line of departure at H-hour, cross the 500 yards of open ground under cover of artillery fire placed on known enemy positions from H-hour to H plus 5 minutes, and attack the enemy position in the southeast section of the town.

The artillery was to fire white phosphorous the last twelve rounds of their preparation, this being a signal for Company L to assault the enemy positions. It would then shift to Company I's initial objective (see Map B), lift on call of Company I and then place harassing fire on the main bridge.

Company I, with one platoon of heavy machine guns attached, was to move out from the line of departure at H plus 1 minute with its left on the main road. It was to by-pass Company L's objective when Company L assaulted, cross the 400 yards of open ground to the left and take the group of buildings near the battalion boundary.

As soon as initial objectives were taken, both Company I and Company L would push their attack on to the battalion objective. Company L was to clear the two roads running north along the east edge of the town so that the tanks could make a dash for the bridge to capture it before it could be destroyed. A platoon of Company K was to be mounted on the tanks to give them close-in protection during this maneuver. Company I, with its left on the battalion left boundary, was to continue the attack in the left of the battalion zone. Both companies were to push vigorously and to exploit any chance to capture the bridge.

Company K (minus one platoon) would follow Company L and protect the right rear of the battalion.

The Engineer Platoon was to move with the tanks to assist them in crossing the bridge at the line of departure and then remain in support of the entire battalion.

The A & P Platoon was to detail two trained demolition men to accompany each of the lead companies and the tanks. These men were to be prepared to disconnect the detonators of the demolitions on the bridge. The remainder of the platoon was attached to the engineers for the operation.

The Battalion Commander ordered all unit commanders to stress to their subordinates the supreme importance of bending every effort toward taking the bridge intact.

The battalion order was issued at 1200, 8 December. As the

patrol sent out to determine the condition of the bridge at the line of departure could not report until 2100, 8 December, the Battalion Commander explained that if it was impossible for the tanks to cross this bridge the attack would proceed as planned without them. In any case, the tanks would not warm up their motors until the artillery fire was falling to cover their noise.

The patrol returned at 2130 and reported that the bridge was only superficially damaged. It probably would hold a medium tank without any repairs, if not, it would require only about twenty minutes work to lay enough planks over the holes so that the tanks could pass. The patrol also reported that the route to the line of departure was passable for the battalion and could be traversed quietly enough to preserve surprise.

#### THE ATTACK

The move to the line of departure was made in column of companies. The order of march was Company L, Battalion Command Group, Company I, then Company K minus one platoon. The tanks, with the Company K platoon, remained in the assembly area until the Engineers had swept the road clear of mines and started to repair the bridge.

Company L was across the creek and deployed on the rising ground north of the line of departure at H-hour. The artillery preparation began and Company L moved out to assault when it lifted. Company I crossed the line of departure and moved up echeloned to the left rear of Company L.

Company L moved to within 100 yards of their objective. As soon as the white phosphorous rounds fell they assaulted the dug-in positions. The initial objective was quickly secured and Company I by-passed to the left and moved in to take its initial objective.

Neither company met serious enemy resistance. The artillery

preparation had caught the enemy in breakfast formation and the emplacements not manned. A few men had attempted to get to the guns but were killed by artillery fire or shot down by the assaulting companies. As soon as Company L reported that the anti-tank gun was under control, the Battalion Commander ordered the tanks forward.

Within a few minutes full daylight broke and the first hitch to the plan had appeared. Beginning about fifty yards north of the bridge over the creek at the line of departure, the enemy had blocked the road by felling trees across it from both sides. The trees were large enough to be an effective block to tanks and the removal of this obstacle was complicated by the fact that the enemy had filled it with uncamouflaged but, nevertheless, damned dangerous "S" mines.

The Battalion Commander's reaction to this discovery was not too pleasant. He turned to the S-2 and, pointing to the fallen trees, said, (among other things) "You missed that one. Get over there and get those tanks through!"

The Engineers arrived at the bridge just as the S-2 completed surveying the situation. The bridge turned out to be no problem. A few planks were laid over the holes and it was ready for use. The road block was something else. The Engineers and the Battalion A & P Platoon went to work on it but it was a slow and painful labor. The "S" mines were dangerous and hard to neutralize at best and, even though uncamouflaged, efforts to work on them were hampered by the tangled limbs and trunks of the trees.

It became apparent that the only way to get the tanks into operation in time to be of any assistance in preventing the destruction of the main bridge was to by-pass the block. This brought up the possibility of mines in the by-pass routes. All

available mine detectors from the Engineer Platoon and the A & P Platoon were put to work on one by-pass route and in about thirty minutes it was declared to be clear. No mines were found. However, the tank platoon leader, who had arrived at the block just as the mine sweepers had finished, would not believe that the route had been properly checked and refused to move his tanks over it.

It is known the S-2 is a staff officer and has no command function. His order to the tank platoon leader to use the by-pass set off a rather heated discussion. The timely arrival of the Regimental Commander prevented bloodshed, however. After a brief discussion, in which the Regimental Commander took part, the tanks, with the Company K Platoon aboard, by-passed the road-block and moved into the town. The Regimental Commander does have command functions! As soon as the first tank had safely passed the barrier the S-2 left to rejoin the Battalion Command Group.

It was now 0745. The assault companies had reorganized and were pushing on through the town toward the battalion objective. Company I on the left, was progressing, but slowly. Company L on the right, was moving against light resistance from individual enemy with rifles and automatic weapons. These appeared to be rear-guard actions. They would fire a few rounds from a window, or from behind a garden wall, then move out when rifle grenade or 60 mm mortar fire began to fall close. By 0900 Company L was within 500 yards of the bridge and no explosion big enough to be the demolition had been heard.

It was time to commit the tanks. They should have been up to Company L by now, but no one knew where they were. No radio communication had been provided, so a messenger was sent to look

for them.

At 0930 Company L had reached the bend in the river and had pinched off the enemy in the houses to the east. (See Map B) One platoon was left to contain this group and the rest of the company pushed on towards the bridge.

The messenger sent in search of the tanks returned and reported that they were not on either of the east roads in Company L's zone. He had been back to the line of departure and could not find them. When asked why he hadn't followed their tracks he replied that he hadn't even thought of it! With a few well chosen words he was convinced that tanks leave a trail and that he could follow it. A few more words sent him scurrying to put his newly acquired knowledge to the test.

At 0945 Company L Commander reported that he had committed his support along the river bank and captured the bridge. Since the A & P demolition expert had been lost in the shuffle, Tech. Sgt. Willis, Platoon Sargeant, 3rd Platoon, Company L, had cut the wires on the live bombs on the bridge and taken one squad across to the east bank.

Company L Commander also reported that, though he had the bridge, he had no organized platoon to put across to secure the enemy approaches. He stated his belief that one squad was too weak to hold the position against a determined enemy counter-attack. One platoon of Company K was attached to Company L and sent to the east side of the river to hold the bridge.

At about 1000 the tanks were found. They had been with Company I for about three hours, helping mop up the Company I zone of advance. The Company I Commander simply took them as a gift from Heaven and said nothing. The tank platoon leader thought he

was behind Company L and doing his job so was guilty of nothing except losing his way. The Battalion Commander was so pleased with his other company's success that he overlooked this minor mix-up.

By 1100 the battalion zone and objective were mopped up and the battalion was reorganized and prepared to continue the attack to the northeast.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In this action, the 3rd Battalion made the Regimental Main Effort. In spite of the fact that it was a flank battalion and, therefore, had a wide and indefinite zone of operations, this assignment was justified by the open, swampy ground on its right and the narrow front of the enemy position in its zone.

The battalion plan was complete and detailed down to attaching trained demolition men to each attack element, but communications with the tanks were neglected. Because of this oversight the tanks were not under control when the time came to commit them and so their services were lost.

During this attack Company L lost two killed and nine wounded, Company I six killed and sixteen wounded. The initial assault was less costly to Company L, the assault troops followed the artillery by 100 yards and had no casualties from the enemy. However, four men were wounded by a short round from our own artillery. Company I stayed 200 yards from the artillery and lost two killed and five wounded by enemy fire, but none hit by our own shells.

The Staff Intelligence Officer should have found out that the road was blocked beyond the bridge in time for the Commanding Officer to have included it in his plans. The patrol should have been ordered to make a thorough reconnaissance of the route as far forward as they could possibly get, or another patrol sent out be-

yond the bridge. In addition to this it was learned after the action that one of the company commanders in the battalion had learned that the road block was there on his reconnaissance the day before the attack. He was told about it by a company commander from the 1st Battalion, who also had failed to report it to higher headquarters. Both the S-2 of the 1st Battalion and the Regimental S-2 denied having had any knowledge of this block before the attack.

All echelons were informed of the battalion mission and its importance was emphasized. This forethought enabled the platoon and company commanders to make correct decisions when the critical points were reached.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons to be learned from this operation are:

1. A comparison of the casualties suffered by the two lead companies indicates that fewer men are hit if the assualting troops follow the artillery preparation by 100 yards. This cannot be determined positively by this action due to Company I preparation being fired five minutes later than that fired for Company L.
2. Communications and liaison to all subordinate units must be established and maintained throughout combat. Control is impossible without one or the other.
3. Staff members should check and supervise the execution of orders. Especially S-3 should constantly check the location and combat preparations of all subordinate and attached units.
4. In order to insure prompt and correct decisions all information on mission and plans should be disseminated to the smallest units.
5. Units of the Infantry-Tank Team should train together prior to combat in order that personality and tactical conflicts



may be ironed out before real damage can be done.

6. Perhaps the greatest lesson of all is that luck plays an important part in all military operations. Alert and informed attention to detail and prompt exploitation of enemy mistakes or other "breaks" often decide important issues.