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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 168TH INFANTRY (34TH INFANTRY
DIVISION) IN THE RAPIDO RIVER CROSSING, 28 JANUARY-
10 FEBRUARY, 1944
(ROME-ARNO CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Cannon Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY REGIMENT ATTACK-
ING A HEAVILY FORTIFIED DEFENSE LINE ✓

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INTRODUCTION

The regimental action of the 168th Infantry, 34th US Division, in the crossing of the Rapido River and subsequent operations into the mountains north and west of Cassino, Italy, 28 January-10 February 1944 is described in the following monograph.

To plunge into the action without explanation would necessarily leave much to the imagination so a resume of events just prior to this action will make the situation more understandable.

After the Sicilian conquest by the Allies on 17 August 1943, plans were made to push our attack into Italy itself. Advantages which the Allies hoped to gain by this operation are as follows:

1. The strategic initiative, assumed by the invasion of North Africa, would be retained. Italy was the only place where we could continue our attack on the Germans as we were not prepared to invade France at the time. (1)
2. We could obtain more complete control of the Mediterranean. (2)
3. By opening even a small scale "second front" in Europe we could engage some German divisions which might otherwise be used against Russia. (3)
4. We could secure air bases closer to important targets in Austria, Rumania, and some parts of Germany. (4)

Italy was invaded by the Allies at two points with the British Eighth Army landing on 3 September 1943 on the southwestern tip at Messina and the main attack by the US Fifth Army following on 9 September on the beaches of Salerno Bay. (See Map A) The two armies made a junction on 16 September 1943 at Vallo. (5). Fifth Army was (1, 2, 3, 4,) A-1, p.26 (5) A-5, p.129

under the command of Lt. General (now General) Mark W. Clark and the Eighth was commanded by General (now Field Marshall) Montgomery. (6)

It was the Fifth Army's mission to take the Port of Naples and make secure the airfields of that area. (7) By 1 October the city of Naples had been captured at which time the Germans began to withdraw across the Volturno River. With the acquisition of Naples the Allies had a great port from which support to subsequent offensive operations could be obtained. (8) By 6 October our troops everywhere commanded the south bank of the Volturno, thus 27 days after D Day the main objective of the Salerno landings had been achieved. (9) From 6 October to 15 November the Allied Armies had won an area 20 to 60 miles in depth across the Italian peninsula. (10)

The Germans continued their withdrawal to the Winter Line. On 15 November Fifth Army temporarily halted before this line in order to build up supply levels, to reorganize, and to rest its weary troops. (11) Fatigue was not caused by combat alone, for the battle against the Italian winter weather was a source of constant strain. Rains had swollen creeks to the size of rivers, causing them to overflow their banks and make a quagmire of the trails. Many troops were living in the open, some without tents and sleeping in wet blankets. (12) The fall rains which had begun early in October with unusual intensity slowed our advance and caused morale to decline. (13)

The German Winter Line consisted of a series of well-prepared positions along the shortest possible line across the central portion

(6) A-1, p.29 (7) A-2, p.2 (8) A-1, p.44 (9) A-2, p.90 (10) A-3, p.114

(11) A-7, p.1 (12) Personal knowledge (13) A-4, p.1

of Italy--from the Garigliano River on the west through mountains in the center to the Sangro River on the east. (14) (See Map B) Though this forward line was planned only to delay the Allied Armies, the enemy's success in stopping our advance units at its approaches in the first part of November led them to the decision to hold it as long as possible before falling back to their main defenses. So in spite of the fact that it was temporary in its original plan, the Winter Line presented a formidable barrier to the Fifth Army. Each mountain had to be taken, a valley was to be cleared and then there were more mountains ahead and yet another main defense line to break. (15) For the individual soldiers of the Fifth Army the familiar pattern of attack became that of bitter fighting from hill to hill. (16)

Fifth Army had delivered the main attack in the Italian campaign during the period up to mid-November and had drawn against itself the bulk of the enemy forces. (See Map B) There was a chance to surprise the enemy if suddenly the weight of the Allied effort were to be shifted to the Eighth Army on the east coast. Plans were made to this effect and on the night of 19/20 November Eighth Army jumped off for an attack through the Winter Line on the lower Sangro River. The enemy contested every yard of the hills overlooking the river and engaged Eighth Army in heavy fighting. (17)

Fifth Army moved forward to break the Winter Line south of the Apennines shortly after Eighth Army began its part of the operation. The plan was to smash through the forward defenses of the enemy so as to place our troops at the entrance of the Liri Valley. Thus

(14) A-4, p.1 (15) A-4, p.7 (16) A-4, p.1 (17) A-4, p.7

SECS
MAP C

Rome would be threatened from the south by Fifth Army and from the east by General Montgomery's forces. (18) The beginning of the Liri Valley, less than eight miles in front of the Fifth Army, is known as the "Gateway to Rome"—but the gateway has all the defensive advantages that nature can bestow. Mountain masses such as Mt. Cairo above Cassino bound it on either side; these mountains in turn are guarded by the terrain features of the Winter Line. (19)

For the next two months the attack on the Winter Line progressed and everywhere that an infantry company tried to advance it met with a crafty enemy in well prepared positions; concrete-and-steel pillboxes did not appear along the Winter Line but the dugouts were well protected and mine-filled approaches were covered by machine-gun and mortar fire. (20)

The first attack was delivered against the group of peaks known as the Camino hill mass, consisting of Mount Camino (Hill 963), the dominating peak, two slightly lower peaks, Mount la Difensa (Hill 960), and Mount Remetanea (Hill 907). At the upper end of the Camino feature are the numerous peaks of Mount Maggiore. After meeting heavy resistance every foot of the way and after very bitter fighting the Allies held the Hills 907, 960, and 963 by 9 December and organized resistance ceased in that area. (21) The operation was definitely a success and in nine days II Corps and 10 Corps had driven the enemy from practically the entire Camino feature, including Mount Maggiore. Fifth Army now controlled the heights on one side of the corridor which gives access to the Liri Valley. (22)

(See Map C)

Still more mountains presented obstacles, among them Mount Pantano, and Hills 769, 460, 470, 855, and 895. (23) (Figures used in (18) A-4, p.7 (19) A-6, p.19 (20) A-6, p.60 (21) A-4, p.25 (22) A-4, p.28 (23) A-4, p.36

identifying hills and points designate elevation in meters above sea level.) (24) The 168th Infantry of the 34 Division encountered fierce resistance in its battle for Mount Pantano, and for its effort in capturing the hill one battalion received a unit citation. (25) Following this action relief of the entire 34th Division was begun by the 2nd Moroccan Infantry Division. (26)

The second phase of Fifth Army's plan of attack to begin on 7 December was to take Mount Lungo, San Pietro, and Mount Sammucro. After ten days of bitter fighting Mount Lungo was taken and our patrols found San Pietro abandoned by the Germans. (27) Less successful was the attack on Mount Sammucro although we held the high crests. On Christmas Day units made some gains on its western slopes. (28)

There followed in succession hard-fought battles for San Vittore, Mount Raino, Mount Rotundo, Mount Molino, Hill 960, Mount Porchia, Mount Majo, Cedro Hill, Mount Trocchio, and Cervaro. The Germans made every gain of the Allies as costly as possible and each victory was marked by heavy loss of men, supplies, and mules by which our supply line was kept moving. (29) Cold and wet weather and loss of sleep during weeks of continual fighting contributed to the great amount of sickness among the troops and disease removed far more men from combat units than did enemy action. (30)

The Winter Line campaign ended in mid-January with Allied gains on both sides of the Appenines. On a thirty-five mile front, Fifth Army had forced the enemy back into his Gustav Line and reached the edge of the Liri Valley, main corridor for advance to Rome from the southeast. (31) (See Map C) This introduction leads up to the action in which the Allies endeavor the crush the German Gustav Line.

(24) A-4, p.17 (25) Personal knowledge (26) A-4, p.43 (27) A-6, p.71

(28) A-4, p.82 (29) A-4, pgs. 83-112 (30) A-4, p.87 (31) A-4, p.113

THE GENERAL SITUATION

MAP
The terrain of the Garigliano-Rapido area consisting of rivers and mountain masses makes the area of the Gustav Line one of the most favorable for defense and one of the most difficult for offense.

(32) The Rapido River flows swiftly through mountains to Sant'Elia where it crosses the upper valley and skirts the Cassino headland. This valley varies in width from two to three miles and is cut by numerous streams and canals. Mount Cairo, 1669 meters in height, dominates the mountains on the north flank of the valley. Lesser peaks extend southwest to form the Cassino headland which terminates in Monastery Hill. (33)

The principle route leading into the Cassino area is Highway 6 which runs generally along the northside of the Liri Valley, passes through Cassino and then leads northwest into Rome.

While the Winter Line Battle was being fought the enemy had been busily working on his positions behind the Rapido and Garigliano rivers. The Todt Organization, aided by forced labor, constructed a belt of defenses which extended in depth from Mount Marrone southwest to Belvedere Hill, then south to Cassino, Sant'Angelo, Sant'Ambrogio, and west of the Garigliano to Mount Scauri.

At each end of the line there were in general fewer and less carefully prepared defensive works than in the center. The mountains on the north were themselves obstacles of tremendous proportion. On these the enemy placed the usual mortars and machine guns on the reverse slopes while the forward slopes were covered by well camouflaged emplacements containing automatic weapons. Natural approaches were blocked by minefields and each trail was covered by machine guns. The strongest portion of the line was known to extend from the village of Cairo south to Sant'Ambrogio. The dam above

(32) A-7, P.5 (33) A-7, P.6

Cassino had been blown by the enemy thus diverting the water of the Rapido onto flat ground east of the river, rendering the area too soft for armor. In addition the approaches to the river were mined extensively. The box mine which contains almost no metal and is hard to detect was used in profusion. Even more minefields were laid between the river and the mountains, and along the west were stretched bands of wire. Very carefully constructed emplacements were blasted and dug into the steep barren slopes west of the river. These concrete-and-steel fortifications, large enough to contain living quarters for troops, could withstand direct hits by artillery shells. Concealed communication trenches led to machine-gun emplacements. Fields of fire were cleared and so interlocked as to command all approaches from the east. Observation posts on the mountains and in the Abbey of Montecassino which was atop Monastery Hill gave the enemy a perfect view of the approaches to the Rapido. (34)

The area of the Gustav Line had long provided the Italian General Staff with ideal terrain for field exercises. In these problems forces representing the enemy had never been able to penetrate the defense. The Italians considered the area as an impregnable obstacle to any army attempting to capture Rome from the south. The Germans were determined to prove this point. (35)

General Sir Harold R. L. Alexander, commander of 15th Army group, on 2 January 1944 ordered execution of the plans to land at Anzio. The purpose of this operation was to cut the enemy lines of communication and to threaten the rear of XIV Panzer Corps. The date was set to fall between 20 and 31 January as close to the former as possible. On the southern front Fifth Army was to "make (34) A-7, p.7 (35) A-7, p.8

as strong a thrust as possible towards Cassino and Frosinone shortly prior to the assault landing to draw in enemy reserves which might be employed against the landing forces and then to create a breach in his front through which every opportunity will be taken to link up rapidly with the seaborne operation". (36)

Major General Charles W. Ryder was commanding the 34th Division at this time. (37) As part of II Corps plan of attack the 34th Division on the right flank of the 36th Division was to make a coordinated attack to contain the enemy on the Cassino front while the 36th Division was to attack to establish a bridgehead in the Sant'Angelo area as far west as Pignataro. As ordered by higher headquarters no firing by 34th Division's infantry or artillery was to be directed upon the Abbey of Montecassino. (38)

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The 36th Infantry Division was to cross the Rapido river at Sant'Angelo on 20 January. After two efforts, both of which ended in disaster, the division withdrew to the east side of the river. The division, a veteran one which had won victories in the battles of Salerno, Mount Maggiore and San Pietro had suffered defeat. The effort to cross the Rapido was summed up as a costly failure. (39)

THE REGIMENTAL SITUATION

On 21 January General Ryder issued orders to the 34th Division for the attack into the mountains northwest of Cassino. (40) So on 23 January the 34th Division prepared to cross the Rapido north of Highway 6 while the 36th Division assumed a defensive role. (41)

It was the mission of the 133rd Infantry to capture Hills 56 and 213, the barracks area, and the road to Cassino south of the

(36) A-7, p.9 (37) Personal knowledge (38) A-7, p.40 (39) A-7, pgs 41-48

(40) A-7, p.51 (41) A-7, p.47

barracks. (See Map D) Direct pressure on Cassino was to be maintained by the 135th Infantry which was to be ready to attack Cassino from the north. At this time 168th Infantry was to be in reserve at an assembly area one mile east of the barracks and was to be prepared on the night of 24-25 January to pass through the 133rd Infantry and push forward to capture the division objectives which were Mount Castellone, Sant'Angelo Hill and Albaneta Farm. The division was also instructed by II Corps operations plan issued on 23 January to cut Highway 6 and prepare to capture Piedimonte or to advance south to aid in a prospective attack by the 36th Division. The 36th in the meantime was to make a demonstration at the sites of its former crossings to give the appearance of a renewal of its previous efforts to establish a bridgehead and prepare to force the Rapido north of Sant'Angelo to establish a bridgehead for the passage of armor. 34th Division had Corps artillery in support.

(42)

On 24 January all three battalions of the 133rd Infantry attempted the river crossing but met with little success.

With a slight change of plans on 25 January all three battalions had succeeded in crossing shortly after midnight and were reorganizing on the west bank.

Since the 133rd had made very little progress in its attack on 26 January it was decided that the 168th Infantry would not pass through to seize the division objectives until 27 January. The 135th Infantry was to cross the river south of the barracks, and turning south along the west bank, clear the enemy from the east slopes of the high ground.

(42) A-7, p.51

The gains of the action on 26 January were negligible, and every attempt to make a crossing and establish a firm bridgehead failed. (43)

However, by nightfall of 26 January the 133rd Infantry had a small bridgehead across the Rapido, won by suffering more than 300 casualties. An operation instruction of 26 January directed the 34th Division to continue the attack to capture Hill 213, so it became the task of the 168th Infantry to make the Rapido river crossing. (44)

Since 30th December when the 168th Infantry relieved elements of the 36th Division at Mount Sammucro it had been in constant contact with the enemy, either by close combat or by being subjected to enemy mortar and artillery fire. The stiff battles for the key terrain feature of Hill 396 and the town of Cervaro had resulted in the Regiment suffering heavy casualties. When the 168th Infantry reached the Rapido it was at approximately 80 per cent of its normal combat strength and no replacements were received at this time.

From 22 January-26 January not knowing the exact location where the 168th was to be committed, constant reconnaissance was maintained by all three battalion commanders along the east bank of the Rapido within the 34th Division sector. Daylight reconnaissance parties were under constant enemy observation and many casualties were inflicted on these groups of personnel. The entire area for approximately 3000 yards east of the Rapido was almost entirely void of cover.

The assembly area in which the 168th Infantry found itself at
(43) A-7, pgs. 52-53 (44) A-7, p.53

this time was also under enemy observation and was intermittently shelled by enemy artillery. (45)

THE REGIMENTAL PLAN OF ATTACK

On 26 January General Ryder ordered the 168th Infantry to cross the Rapido and attack to seize and hold Hills 56 and 213, the time for the attack being 0700, 27 January. The 756th tank battalion, commanded by Lt. Colonel Sweating, was to be in direct support of the Regiment. A one hour artillery barrage was to precede the attack. At 1900 hours, 26 January, Colonel Mark W. Boatner, commanding the 168th Infantry called his battalion commanders and other subordinate leaders to the regimental CP to receive the following order which in effect was: At 0700 hours on 27 January the Regiment is to attack across the Rapido, passing through the 133rd Infantry positions to seize and hold Hills 56 and 213 and to continue the attack on regimental order. The formation will be two battalions abreast with the first battalion on the left, the third battalion on the right. The second battalion will be in reserve and will occupy an assembly area east of the river and be prepared to pass through either the first or third battalions on regimental order. Cannon Company will be in general support and will participate in the artillery preparation schedule one hour prior to the attack.

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At midnight 26-27 January the Regiment received a message from Division delaying the time of the artillery preparation and the attack by one-half hour. (46)

(45) Personal knowledge (46) Personal knowledge

THE RIVER CROSSING AND ATTACK ON HILLS 56 AND 213

At 0600 hours 27 January the 1st and 3rd battalions found themselves assembled along the ^{EAST?} right bank of the Rapido which was now flowing along the Atina-Cassino highway. The dam three-fourths of a mile southwest of Sant'Elia had been blown by the enemy, causing the water to flow south along and over the highway. The old river bed which ran 400-500 yards west and parallel to the highway was by this time dried up.

The 133rd Infantry had succeeded in making a narrow gap through the mine fields (on the east bank of the river just opposite the trail which leads west from the Atina-Cassino highway just north of the barracks toward the base of Hill 56.) The 1st battalion of the 168th Infantry was to cross at this point.

The 3rd battalion of the 168th Infantry was to cross the river about 1000 yards north of the point of the 1st battalions's crossing and proceed along the trail leading west toward the village of Cairo.

A platoon of tanks was to precede each battalion to tear gaps in the barbed wire and clear paths through the mine fields.

At 0630 hours 27 January the artillery preparation consisting of some nine battalions of light and medium artillery began pounding the forward slopes of Hills 56 and 213. The Cannon Companies of 168th and 133rd Infantries concentrated on close-in targets in the vicinity of the barracks area. Ten minutes prior to its culmination the artillery barrage was lifted and placed in the draws behind Hills 56 and 213 and on the forward slopes of Mount Castellone which commanded the objective. The eight guns of Cannon Company, 168th Infantry, firing at a rate of three rounds per gun per minute fired approximately 1200 rounds during this preparation.

Prior to 0730 the tank platoon leader supporting the 1st bat-

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talion tried in vain to find an area firm enough to support his tanks in crossing, for here the flat ground had allowed the river to spread out and render the area too marshy and soft for tank movement.

So as the artillery lifted at 0730 the 1st battalion, without tank support, pushed off wading across the Rapido. When the leading elements of the 1st battalion reached the west bank of the river the enemy mortar and artillery observers, who no doubt realized that after the artillery preparation an attack was imminent, were ready. The 1st battalion was met with a heavy artillery and mortar concentration which kept them pinned down for approximately one half hour. Company commanders and platoon leaders were busy trying to keep the men moving forward by crawling. Troops were forced to take advantage of shell craters and other meager cover afforded by the terrain. As the 1st battalion reached a point at the dried-up river bed about 300 yards north of the barracks it received murderous flanking machine-gun fire from the barracks area and plunging fire from positions along the military crest of Hill 56. However, Companies A and B continued to push forward slowly and by dusk had reached the base of Hill 56. A number of the enemy machine guns had been silenced by accurate tank fire rendered by the 756th Tank Battalion from positions east of the road.

Shortly after dark Company C was moved across the river and passed through Companies A and B. Within an hour one platoon of Company C was occupying positions along the crest of Hill 56. Shortly afterward its positions were counterattacked by a strong enemy combat patrol, but with the aid of 1st battalion mortars, Cannon Company, and the 175th Field Artillery battalion the patrol was driven off. Since its flanks were completely exposed the commanding

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officer of Company C decided his company position formed a dangerous salient. With the permission of the 1st battalion commander, Lt. Col. Casteel, Company C withdrew to the east bank of the river and there dug in and established a defensive line.

The 3rd battalion began moving its forward elements across the river at 0730 with Company L in the lead. When the leading elements which included the company commander, Captain Thompson, reached the west bank, they as the 1st battalion received a very heavy artillery and mortar concentration. The gaps through the mine fields were only about ten yards in width and with our troops canalized in these narrow lanes it was comparatively simple for the enemy to hold up our advance. About 0800 Captain Thompson was wounded and evacuated.

By this time two tanks had succeeded in crossing the river and had pushed forward about 150 yards. Here one of them hit a mine and a few minutes later the second one was knocked out by a direct hit through the turret from a self-propelled gun firing from the barracks. This gun was later captured and was found to have been built into a regular pillbox. The gun had been placed inside one of the barracks with its tube protruding from a window and large rocks had been piled all around it to a thickness of 8 to 10 feet between it and the walls of the building.

By 1930 two more tanks were across the river but shortly thereafter one was knocked out by a rocket grenade fired from the vicinity of a house below Hill 213. The other tank expended its ammunition against pillboxes and dugouts and in attempting to return to replenish its supply slipped from the muddy trail into a ditch and was rendered immobile. Other tanks were prevented from crossing the trail east of the river that day for it was effectively blocked by two tanks which had gone into ditches on either side of it.

The roads with the ever-present Italian mud presented the engineers with what constituted a nightmare, and the work of constructing alternate routes and removing mud-bound vehicles went on endlessly.

The artillery and mortars constantly pounded the narrow lane in the vicinity of the river through which all our troops and tanks were passing and so devastating was their fire that the 3rd battalion was effectively prevented from advancing. Company L, leading the assault, was unable to advance and remained at the river throughout the day. (47)

By dusk the graves registration officer had arrived and was attempting to gather up the dead. Many of the bodies having been lying there for a period of from one to two days and being subject to constant artillery fire had become quite dismembered. It was with great difficulty that the graves registration group could distinguish and identify the individuals. Over ninety bodies were identified within ^{WHERE?} an area less than 200 yards in length and less than 50 yards in width. These casualties were from both 168th and 133rd Infantry, the 133rd Infantry not having had an opportunity to remove its dead. (48)

Since it appeared to be impossible to advance at this point without additional tank support reconnaissance groups were sent north to attempt to locate an alternate route. They crossed the Corps boundary and continued north until they reached the ^{SYMBOL NEEDED} blown dam. It appeared that the dry stream bed might be utilized as an alternate route for both tanks and infantry. Upon recommendations from Regiment, higher headquarters gave permission to move the 3rd battalion across the Corps boundary into the French sector. There they were met by

(47) Personal knowledge (48) Personal knowledge: statement of Lt. Charles L. Snowden, Graves Registration Officer, 168th Infantry,

27 Jan 1944.

a French officer who guided them through the minefields. Dawn of the 28th found a platoon from Company K dug in along a stone wall about 1000 yards east of Cairo. They remained in that position throughout the 28th observing enemy activity in and around the town of Cairo and forming a security element for the engineers working to remove the mines and make the dry stream bed passable for armor.

The Regiment planned to renew the attack on 29 January. The 2nd battalion preceded by a company of tanks was to cross the river at the point formerly attempted by the 3rd battalion with its objective the saddle between Hills 56 and 213. The 1st battalion was to cross again at its original point and proceed to capture Hill 56. The 3rd battalion reinforced by a company of tanks was to proceed down the dry river bed from the northeast to capture the north portion of Hill 213.

At dawn of 29 January the three battalions of the 168th Infantry pushed off on schedule. By 0700 hours seven tanks supporting the 2nd battalion were across the river with Company E following in their tracks. The tanks began systematically knocking out dugouts and pillboxes pointed out to them by the infantrymen of Company E. Captain John J. Sheehy personally directed the fire of the tanks on an SP which had been firing from behind one of the buildings on the road just south of Cairo.

By noon the advance elements of Company K leading the assault of the 3rd battalion had reached a point about halfway between the river bed and Hill 213. Here they held up until the tanks moving down the dry river bed could reach their position to further support their advance. By early afternoon more than 20 tanks had been able to negotiate the route formed by the river bed and were now in position to fire on targets on the northeast slope of Hill 213. The devastating fire of our tanks on the enemy's left flank allowed the

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assault elements of all three battalions to advance and by dusk advance elements of each battalion had reached the base of Hills 56 and 213. Shortly after dark the 1st battalion had secured Hill 56, the 2nd battalion had captured the saddle to the north of Hill 56, and Company K of the 3rd battalion had two platoons on Hill 213. The remainder of the night was spent consolidating these positions in preparation for any counterattacks that might be launched the following morning. As dawn broke on the morning of 30 January a heavy fog concealed all movements of our troops. Captain A. Q. Smith ordered the first platoon of Company K to advance up the road to Cairo under cover of this fog and to attempt to seize the town. Half an hour later he received a message from his platoon stating that they had reached the first buildings at the southeast edge of the town. He then ordered his second platoon to follow the first platoon into the town of Cairo. In the meantime the first platoon had surprised the German CP group of the 131st Grenadier Regiment and captured it intact. The regimental commander was included among the prisoners. By this time the second platoon had arrived and continued mopping up the area. With the aid of bazookas a total of 87 prisoners was taken by Company K in and around the town of Cairo. (49)

This brought to a total 147 prisoners taken by the 168th Regiment since the operation began.

About the middle of the afternoon of 30 January a counter-attack estimated to be one company was launched from Mount Castellone by the enemy. They were repulsed with heavy losses leaving behind approximately 30 dead in the draw between Hill 213 and the base of Mount Castellone.

After the fall of Cairo an examination of the fortifications in the area revealed a new type not hitherto encountered. It was a new
(49) Personal knowledge: statement of Captain A. Q. Smith, Commanding Officer, Company K, 168th Infantry, 3 November 1948.

type of pillbox consisting of a large metal boiler approximately four feet in diameter and seven feet long. It was sunk into the ground on end with about 18 inches of it remaining above the surface. Into the upper end of the boiler a slit was cut through which a machine gun could be fired. It was well camouflaged and could be detected only with great difficulty.

Examination of the area around the bases of Hills 56 and 213 revealed a total of 86 machine-gun emplacements, most of the guns having been knocked out during the attack. (50)

THE ATTACK ON ABBEY HILL

On 31 January the 135th Infantry Regiment received orders to pass through the 168th Infantry and attack Mount Castellone. The 169th Infantry was to support the attack by fire from its positions along the crests of Hills 56 and 213. Under cover of heavy fog the 135th Infantry took Mount Castellone and by 2 February had captured Mount Majola. By 3 February the 1st battalion of the 135th Infantry had captured the north portion of Hill 593. Here they met with strong counterattacks by the enemy which drove them back to Hill 443. A prisoner of war captured in the area revealed that the 3rd Parachute Regiment which had been rushed in from Ortona was now defending the Hill. (51)

The Division commander ordered the 168th Infantry Regiment to reinforce the 2nd battalion of the 135th Infantry. Colonel Boatner ordered the 3rd battalion of 168th Infantry to proceed to the vicinity of Hill 443 and from this position Company K attacked and recaptured the north ridge of Hill 593 by midnight. (52)

During the period 29 January-31 January the 142nd Infantry of the 36th Infantry Division was ordered to attack through the French (50) Personal knowledge (51) A-7, p.90 (52) Personal knowledge: statement of Captain Smith, 3 November 1948.

sector toward the town of Terelle on the east slopes of Mount Cairo. By 31 January they had captured their initial objective at Manna Farm. By 2 February Hill 875 about one mile southeast of Terelle had been ^{BY WARTIME} captured. At this time General Butler, assistant Division ^{30 FEB 1945} commander, ordered the 2nd battalion of the 142nd Infantry to hold fast at Manna Farm to be joined later by the 2nd battalion of the 168th Infantry for an attack on Terelle. The 1st and 3rd battalions of the 142nd Infantry were to attack south to seize ^{NOT SHOWN MAP} Santa Lucia Hill. The 2nd battalion of the 168th Infantry was then moved up the slopes of Mount Cairo to a position in the draw just south of Manna Farm. Here they received very heavy mortar fire for the remainder of the day 3 February and the morning of 4 February and suffered approximately 38 casualties. The plan to attack Terelle was abandoned and the night of 4 February the 2nd battalion of the 168th Infantry rejoined the Regiment in the vicinity of Cairo. (53)

During the period of 31 January-3 February the 133rd Infantry had crossed the Rapido in the area secured by the 168th Infantry and in attacking south had captured the barracks area, the east slope ^{NOT SHOWN MAP} of Hill 175, and was now occupying several buildings on the north edge of the town of Cassino. (54)

The weather had taken a turn for the worse. There was alternately rain, snow, and sleet. Pack mules were the only means of supplying the troops in the mountains north of the Abbey. It had been over a week since the troops had had a hot meal. There was no shelter, and disease, especially trench foot, was beginning to take its toll among the troops. There were no reserves. The regiments were forced to continue the attack with about 50 per cent combat strength.

(53) Personal knowledge (54) A-7, p.91

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The plan of attack for 6 February called for the 1st and 3rd battalions of 168th Infantry to attack Monastery Hill from a line of departure on point 445. The 1st battalion of the 135th Infantry was to secure the left flank of the 168th Infantry. At dawn on 6 February the 3rd battalion attacked in column of companies with Company L leading. They reached the draw midway between Hill 445 and the Abbey where they came under very heavy machine-gun fire from the Abbey to their front, Hill 193 to their left rear, and Hill 593 to their right rear. The Company was pinned down for the remainder of the day and at dark withdrew to positions behind Point 445 where they relieved the 1st battalion of the 135th Infantry. (55)

Plans were then made for the 168th Infantry to make another assault on Monastery Hill at dawn on 8 February. The 135th Infantry was to attack Hill 593. By this time the enemy had succeeded in reinforcing the 34th Division sector with fresh troops. With no reserves the situation appeared to be almost hopeless. Personnel from regimental headquarters, regimental anti-tank company, and clerks and drivers were gathered up and brought up into the hills to form a provisional regimental reserve.

The 1st and 3rd battalions of 168th Infantry moved out from Point 445 at dawn on 8 February with the 1st battalion on the right. Companies A and B upon reaching the draw just north of the Abbey were again stopped by very heavy machine-gun and small arms fire from positions in front of the Abbey and the east slopes of Hill 593. Company K leading the assault of the 3rd battalion arrived in the draw south of the 1st battalion positions and was also pinned down by heavy mortar and small arms fire. It was impossible to withdraw the battalion during daylight and by dark it had suffered very heavy

(55) Personal knowledge: statement Captain Smith, 3 November 1948

casualties. In the 1st battalion Companies A and C were combined to form one provisional company. In the 3rd battalion Companies K and L were combined and even with the combination had less than 50 men. (56)

All three battalions of the 168th Infantry spent 9-10 February shivering in foxholes behind Hills 445 and 475. During this period there was an almost constant snowfall. Heavy mortar and Nebelwerfer fire forced the men to remain in the foxholes which were partially filled with snow and slush. (57)

Plans were being made at this time for relief of the 34th and 36th Divisions by the New Zealand Corps but General Alexander was reluctant to commit the New Zealand Corps unless II Corps failed in its attack. General Keyes therefore ordered another attack to begin on 11 February. The attack plan called for the 36th Division to capture Albaneta Farm and Hill 593. The 168th Infantry would again strike at Monastery Hill. (58)

The 168th Infantry was to attack Monastery Hill while the 133rd Infantry was to renew its attack within the town of Cassino. The 2nd battalion of 168th Infantry, considered to be in better shape than the 1st and 3rd battalions, was ordered to make the assault on the Abbey. Just prior to the attack, Lt. Colonel John L. Powers, commanding the 2nd battalion of the 168th Infantry, estimated the effective combat strength of the battalion to be 73 men and 3 officers. At dawn on 11 February the 2nd battalion preceded by a heavy artillery barrage moved out toward the Abbey from its position behind Point 445 in defilade. Visibility was limited to a few feet by a heavy snow storm. The troops were able to move undetected until they were within 200 yards of the north wall of the Abbey. At this time the snow storm

(56) Personal knowledge: statement Captain Smith, 3 November 1948

(57) Personal knowledge (58) A-7, p.95

lifted. The Germans immediately opened fire from positions along the Abbey wall and Hill 593 forcing the battalion to withdraw with heavy casualties. This was the last offensive action of the 34th Division in this area. They were relieved during the period 13-14 February by the 4th Indian Division.

At this time the 168th Infantry was less than 25 per cent of its effective combat strength. (59)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

During the period 27 January - 11 February we find the 168th Infantry initially and the other Division units subsequently making a serious breach in the enemy's main line of resistance. The mission had been to break through and cut Highway 6 in the vicinity of Piedimonte. The 34th Division was unable to do so and for this reason the operation from II Corps standpoint was a failure. Yet to the men of the Division who were there and knew the difficulties of the assault, the tremendous strength of the German fortifications teamed with the adverse weather conditions, this operation was the outstanding achievement in the division history.

At this time Fifth Army had been stripped of all reserves to support the Anzio operation. This was unfortunate because at the time the Division units reached Hills 445 and 593 a follow-up by a similarly trained unit made up of fresh troops would no doubt have supplied the drive necessary for the accomplishment of the mission.

The failure to grant priority of men and equipment with which to wage a successful war in the Italian theatre is the chief criticism in the minds of all Americans who participated in that theatre of operation. Because of this the assault which was made on the enemy's most strongly fortified defensive line had to be made by troops already tired from nearly 30 days of continuous combat.

(59) Personal knowledge

An air strike on the Abbey just prior to the first assault of the 168th Infantry on Abbey Hill would probably have added the punch necessary to capture the hill. The men of the 168th Infantry were very bitter about the fact that an air strike, at that time the largest ever made on a single target, was granted the day following their relief by the New Zealand Corps.

LESSONS

1. The attack on a well organized and fortified position should be made by fresh troops.
2. Adequate reserves must be available and held in readiness to exploit any success accomplished by the assault echelons.
3. Close tank support is a must for successful attacks against a well fortified position.
4. In attacking across a valley which affords good observation to the enemy, a general attack should be the rule; otherwise the enemy can easily mass his fires in the area attacked and thus limit the penetration.
5. Exploitation of local successes is difficult if the enemy defenses are organized in depth. In the case of the Rapido operation each hill was supported by positions on the next hill behind it.
6. Under ^{extreme} weather conditions such as were encountered at Cassino men must be fed hot meals as often as possible and relieved regularly if morale and combat efficiency are to remain high.
7. Daylight reconnaissance parties should be kept to a minimum. German artillery and mortars were constantly engaging parties of this nature and inflicting casualties among key personnel.
8. The best organized defensive line can be breached by a determined attacker who is willing to pay the price.