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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY C, 320TH INFANTRY
(35TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE CROSSING
OF THE SAAR RIVER IN THE VICINITY OF
SAARGUIMINES, FRANCE, 8 DECEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: RIFLE COMPANY CROSSING
A RIVER AND CAPTURING A TOWN AND KEY FEATURE IN
OPEN TERRAIN

Captain Henry G. Morgan, Jr., Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

The operations of Company C, 320th Infantry, 35th Infantry Division, 8 December 1944, included the crossing of two water barriers, a canal and a river, a short attack across entrenched ground to capture a town, and then the seizure of high ground beyond. The actions were part of a battalion coordinated attack and typify the fighting in the Third Army during the last half of November and the first half of December, 1944. (1) No spectacular successes were achieved during this period, but, day after day, units continued their short advances through the province of Lorraine, France. (2)

By the date of this operation, the 35th Division had been engaged in combat for five months. It had fought for St. Lo back in Normandy and shortly after the St. Lo breakthrough had joined XII Corps of the US Third Army in its rapid advance eastward across Northern France. (See Map A) While it did not establish contact, it was on occasion closer to the forces advancing north from their beaches in Southern France than any other Third Army unit. (3)

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- (1) Personal knowledge
(2) A-5, p. 188
(3) Statement of Captain Carlton C. Thornblom, 21 January 1950, commanding Company C, 320th Infantry, when ordered to make such contact.

The last half of September, all of October, and early November, was an unprofitable period for the 35th Division and for the whole Third Army. (4) During this time the principal effort of the Allies was in the north with two major objectives: establishing a bridgehead across the lower Rhine, and opening the approaches to the great port of Antwerp. (5) Finally, however, offensives were resumed farther south. On 8 November, Third Army was allowed to begin its first major offensive action in nearly two months. (6) By early December units were closing to the Saar River all along the front. (7)

GENERAL SITUATION (See Map B)

By 6 December, the 35th Division had reached the Saar River at Saarguimines and cleared the west bank along its front. (8) Here was a formidable barrier. Just a few yards west of the river and paralleling it was a canal. On the other side, the enemy was defending the towns and occupied permanently fortified positions on commanding ground. These fortifications were outposts of the Siegfried Line. (9)

To arrive at this position, the division had recently fought some tedious and costly battles. Rainfall had been the heaviest in many years, and the resulting trench foot exacted a heavy toll from the Infantry. (10) The muddy fields and swollen streams made movements even of foot troops extremely difficult, and mobility was further reduced by the many artificial obstacles employed by the enemy. The obstacles, minefields, road blocks, and blown

(4) A-2, Chap. VII; A-5, p. 138
(5) A-3, pp. 306 and 307
(6) A-5, p. 164
(7) A-9
(8) A-2, Chap. VIII
(9) Personal knowledge
(10) A-4, p. 71; personal knowledge

bridges, were the most extensive yet encountered by the 320th Infantry. (11) These conditions made supply and evacuation especially difficult below division level. Success in pushing the enemy back, however, had kept the morale of the troops reasonably high.

The division had been attacking the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. The boundary of that division had recently been shifted to the north and the 11th Panzer Division, previously in reserve, was placed in line. This last division, comparatively fresh, was now responsible for most of the front facing the 35th Division. (12) While the weather must have had its ill effects upon the enemy, it nevertheless favored his defense. His positions sheltered his troops against the debilitating effects of the weather. His supply of clothing, rations and small arms and mortar ammunition evidently was good. He could and did lay down strong concentrations of artillery fire at critical points, but in this arm he patently was considerably weaker than the Americans. (13) Continued withdrawal is not a course of action calculated to strengthen morale. The German's will to resist, nevertheless, was increasing as the fighting front neared the soil of his own country. Already, on 5 December, the first rounds of 35th Division Artillery had landed within Germany. (14) In numbers, morale, and materiel, the enemy was not the equal of his American opponent, but the usual, and at this time, unusual, advantages accruing to him as the defender, made the difference in effective strength slight. (15)

(11) A-8, p. 156

(12) A-9, pp. 143 and 156; personal knowledge

(13) Personal knowledge

(14) A-2, Chap. VIII

(15) Personal knowledge

Third Army had to reach the main defenses of the Siegfried Line by 19 December, at which time a breakthrough to the Rhine was planned. The plan was made on 6 December, and XII Corps operations subsequently "became a horse-race against time". (16) The immediate objective of XII Corps, then, was getting the 35th Division across the Saar. (17) The Corps' right division, the 26th, was already across. The 35th Division ordered the 134th Infantry on the left and the 320th Infantry on the right to cross the river on the morning of 8 December. Two Engineer task forces were placed in support of the assault regiments. The fires of two additional Field Artillery battalions, attached from XII Corps, were allotted to reinforce the normal fires of the 320th Regimental Combat Team. (18) The regiment ordered its three battalions to cross simultaneously, the 1st in the center, 2nd on the left, and 3rd on the right. 1st Battalion was allotted sufficient assault boats to cross its foot elements and in addition one Infantry footbridge to be used for supply and evacuation. If all three battalions made successful crossings, 1st Battalion would be pinched out and revert to regimental reserve. (19)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF 1ST BATTALION, 320TH INFANTRY (20)
(See Map C)

The 1st Battalion Command Post was in Siltzheim. Companies A and C were outpostting the river line, and Company B was in reserve. The battalion attack order was issued at the command post late in the afternoon of 7 December. The battalion planned to attack with three

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- (16) A-5, p. 184
(17) A-5, p. 186; personal knowledge
(18) A-2, Chap. VIII; personal knowledge
(19) Personal knowledge
(20) Personal knowledge

companies, from left to right, Companies B, C and A, all companies to cross the canal (the line of departure) and river by assault boats. Company C, with one heavy machine gun section attached, was to move directly on the town of Dieding and revert to battalion reserve after clearing the town. Companies B and A would by-pass the town on the left and right and seize Hill 311. Boundaries were not designated but general areas for crossing were. In the interest of surprise, there would be no artillery preparation. The platoon of tank destroyers which had been supporting the battalion would support from the west side of the river. The footbridge allotted the battalion for supply and evacuation would be constructed in the vicinity of the Company C crossing after the western edge of town was cleared. Besides the hot meal being served that night, each company was being issued two-thirds of one K ration. Radios would be silent until contact was made with the enemy or until a unit was in trouble.

SITUATION OF COMPANY C (21) (See Map C)

Of the personnel who had entered combat with Company C, none of the officers and few of the enlisted men remained. Four officers were now assigned. Recent replacements had brought the company to about seventy percent of its authorized strength. Although all units were understrength, the rifle platoons continued to employ three squads each and all crew-served weapons were being manned. The company commander was evacuated during the afternoon of 7 December because of fatigue and stomach ailments, and the B Company Executive Officer was at the same time placed in command of Company C.

Supply, except of radios, was good. The Weapons Platoon did not have an SCR 536, and the second one for company headquarters was missing. Something over the basic load of ammunition was present in each platoon area.

The command post and Weapons Platoon were in a farmhouse along the highway one and one-half miles south of Siltzheim. The 2nd Platoon was located in a building at the eastern edge of Siltzheim. Farther east, the 1st Platoon, at Kremerich Farm, and the 3rd Platoon, at Farm de Wittring, were outposting the river to their front.

After receiving the battalion attack order, the new company commander immediately returned for the command post group and the Weapons Platoon. It should be noted here that the C Company First Sergeant had earlier been allowed to go to the regimental trains area to attend to some pressing administrative matters. He was not recalled to participate in the attack. The march back to Siltzheim, thence to the 2nd, 1st and 3rd Platoon areas was time-consuming and conducted entirely during darkness. Upon reaching the 2nd Platoon, it was found that the men had just completed their supper (a hot meal) and had been issued the emergency ration. The platoon leader was informed of the attack and was directed to join the company commander, while the platoon sergeant would bring in the outposts and move the platoon to Kremerich Farm, there to be prepared to move on orders to Farm de Wittring. A section of heavy machine guns supporting the platoon would be attached to the platoon for the movement, while the section leader also moved on with the company commander. The Weapons Platoon would wait and

move on with the 2nd Platoon. At Kremerich Farm, the 1st Platoon Leader was similarly warned of the impending attack. He was instructed to have his platoon sergeant prepare the platoon to move on order to Farm de Wittring, and, after bringing in all but necessary local security, to allow the other men to sleep. The platoon leader would accompany the company commander to the 3rd Platoon.

Upon arriving there, the 3rd Platoon Leader was warned of the attack and was questioned about the situation to his front as he knew it. He reported that he had maintained patrols and outposts along the near bank of the canal. Some enemy activity had been observed around the edge of the town of Dieding, where entrenchments appeared to be extensive. Also, movements of individual soldiers had been observed in the vicinity of a bunker on the forward slope of Hill 311. The enemy had been patrolling the far bank of the river at night, but had made no crossings. From this and other information received from the 1st Battalion, it was estimated that the enemy occupied Dieding with a force of from one reinforced platoon to one company. In addition, enemy of unknown strength occupying Hill 311 could support the defenders in town. The assembled leaders were then told of the tentative plan for the company to attack with the 1st and 2nd Platoons abreast, the 1st on the right.

At around midnight, as previously arranged by the battalion commander, a staff sergeant, representative of Company C, 60th Engineer (Combat) Battalion, arrived. He reported that seven assault boats would be dumped in the company area

in time for the attack. One experienced soldier from his company would be available to accompany each boat.

Runners were dispatched to Kremerich Farm to guide the remainder of Company C to the vicinity of Farm de Wittring, designated at that time as the company command post. The 3rd Platoon Sergeant was directed to prepare for the arrival of the company, placing the men under shelter in the area insofar as possible.

A reconnaissance party, consisting of the company commander, the heavy machine gun section leader and the four platoon leaders, each with one runner, and the Engineer sergeant then proceeded to the canal, where a platoon outpost was maintained. The distance was five to six hundred yards. The ground sloped sharply after crossing the road, and, although it was wet and slippery, it had not been under cultivation for some years and was not excessively muddy. Upon reaching the near bank of the canal, it was found that the bank was an earthen dike, built up to a height of approximately five feet above ground level. The canal was narrow, not exceeding twenty feet. Because of the darkness and the high banks of the canal, only the far bank of the river, which was lined with heavy growth and numerous trees, could be seen. The ground between the canal and river was thirty to forty feet in width and relatively clear. The river appeared to be somewhat wider than the canal. Only part of the outline of the town could be seen, but a fairly accurate division of the zones of responsibility of the two assault platoons was pointed out on the ground. The Engineer sergeant estimated the current in the canal to be seven to eight

miles per hour. The current of the river was assumed to be the same. As there had been no heavy rains for two or three days, the current was not expected to change during the night. But it was swift enough to cause some concern, despite the relatively short crossings. Skill on the part of the Engineers and discipline among the Infantrymen would be required for a successful crossing. The distance of drift during the crossing was estimated, and from that estimate the initial crossing points were selected. At that, the party retraced its steps.

COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK (22) (See Map C)

It was planned that the 1st and 2nd Platoons would cross initially at 0500 hours, 2nd Platoon on the left, 1st Platoon on the right, the company commander crossing with the right platoon. The Weapons Platoon and 3rd Platoon would cross in the second wave and follow the 2nd and 1st Platoons respectively. Once in the town, the Weapons Platoon would fire on targets of opportunity in support of the company. The attached heavy machine guns would give general support to the company from the near bank of the canal and would cross by foot when the bridge was constructed. As the boats had to be hand-carried to the canal, the 3rd Platoon would be divided to assist the other platoons in the carry. The weapons sections would be engaged in carrying their crew-served weapons. Leaders were impressed with the necessity of maintaining strict discipline during the movement to the line of departure and during the crossings. Footing on the steep, slippery slopes would be difficult,

(22) Personal knowledge

especially while carrying the heavy assault boats. In addition, there was danger in the 3rd Platoon's failure to reorganize quickly after assisting in carrying the boats. Despite these difficulties, noise would be kept to the absolute minimum. The troops were to understand that the Engineer soldiers were in command of their boats and that all occupants would follow their directions. The two Infantrymen per boat who would assist in paddling were to dip their oars gently and not attempt to buck the stream.

While the company order was being issued, the remainder of the company arrived. When the platoon leaders returned to orient their platoons and to issue their orders, the Engineer sergeant was requested to return to his unit and to have the assault boats dumped as near as possible to the crossing site. It was then about 0300 hours.

FINAL PREPARATIONS AND MOVEMENT TO THE LINE OF DEPARTURE (23)
(See Map D)

Just before 0400 hours, the Engineer sergeant reported that the boats had been dumped alongside the road two to three hundred yards east of the command post. The company assembled and filed by the stacked boats, and under the direction of the Engineer soldiers, lifted each one and began the difficult movement down to the canal.

The men were apparently confident of what they were doing and moved in perfect order. Even those individuals who lost their footing and fell to the ground arose quickly and quietly without interfering with the movement of others. Each boat had to be lowered about three times to allow for short rests. The first boat reached the canal in about half

(23) Personal knowledge

an hour's time. The last boat had arrived, the platoons were organized, and the supporting machine guns had been set up at 0455 hours. There had been no reaction from the enemy, and the only sounds that could be heard came from the running water. The signal was given to raise the boats to the bank of the canal.

NARRATION

MOVEMENT TO DIEDING

At 0500 hours, the boats were lowered into the water. The men pulled themselves up to the bank, took their places in the boats, and the crossing began. The current was somewhat more swift than anticipated and one or two boats lost control temporarily. Control was regained and in five minutes' time the boats were being unloaded and pulled up on the far bank of the canal.

Here, as previously arranged, both platoons halted to resume the movement on command of the company commander. It was desirable that the two platoons reach the edge of town within their respective sectors at as nearly the same time as possible. However, no further coordination by company was contemplated until the platoons were in the town. Upon reaching the far bank of the river, the position of the troops would be exposed. There, reorganization and further movement would be under platoon control and would be effected as rapidly as possible. (24)

Upon signal, the platoons carried the boats across the ground from the canal to the river. The troops were still exhibiting an unexcelled discipline. There was still no

(24) Personal knowledge

reaction from the enemy. No difficulty was experienced until the far bank was reached. There, because of the heavy growth and the darkness, most boats had to move along the bank, right or left, for several yards, in order to find a spot where the men could disembark in shallow water.

The platoons disembarked, were reorganized, and proceeded on their separate routes. Both platoons moved in single file, passing through the barbed wire and over the trenches without incident. The 2nd Platoon arrived at the edge of town at 0545 hours. The platoon leader, Second Lieutenant Harold C. Heiman, was at the head of his platoon. Just as he entered the street, he met the head of a formation of several German soldiers, the morning relief for some of the machine gun crews in the trenches. Although dawn was just beginning to break, the enemy formation was within a few yards of the lieutenant before he saw it. Armed with a carbine, he immediately unlocked his piece to fire. The magazine from his carbine dropped to the ground! In his haste he had pressed the magazine release instead of the safety. Fortunately, a soldier just behind him was armed with a machine pistol and opened fire, killing the German soldier at the head of the column, wounding another, and dispersing the formation. Except for a mechanical mistake, the whole formation might have been captured or otherwise eliminated. The platoon was hurried into town and began, house by house, to clear its assigned sector. (25)

The 1st Platoon, under Second Lieutenant A. F. C. Greene, reached the edge of town at about the same time as did the

(25) Personal knowledge

2nd Platoon. Their movement was detected then for the first time. One enemy soldier was killed in the street. The remainder of the platoon hurried into town and was followed by the company commander who set up his command post in the first house on the right side of the street. At the same time, automatic fire broke out in the trenches, apparently directed at the crossings of Company A and the remainder of Company C. (26)

The current had disorganized Company A during its crossing, and the first wave of the company had landed in the area of Company C. This, at the time, was unknown to Company C. That part of Company A which had crossed returned the fire from the enemy. At the same time a part of 1st Platoon Company C fired at the trenches from the town. For a while thereafter, the Germans in the trenches merely had to duck low while Companies A and C exchanged fire. During this time an officer in Company A was severely wounded and the company was further disorganized. (27)

Company B also had been disorganized during the crossing, being swept some distance downstream. Fortunately, the company commander, Captain Charles F. Guilford, landed at an old mill with ten or eleven men. With great resourcefulness he began his reorganization. During the morning his company captured about nine prisoners from the mill and nearby trenches. (28)

CLEARING THE TOWN

After the men reached the comparative safety of the first few houses and had cleaned them out, the attack slowed down. Each platoon leader found himself in one house while his

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- (26) Personal knowledge
(27) A-8; personal knowledge
(28) Statement by Captain Charles F. Guilford, B Company Commander, 21 October 1949; personal knowledge

subordinate leaders were in others. A volume of enemy and friendly fire began to build up in the streets and considerable confusion ensued. Both platoon leaders experienced difficulty in organizing their squads and resuming their attack. Radio contact among the platoon and company command posts was established immediately and the platoons were directed to organize quickly and to take advantage of the enemy's confusion. Thereafter, radio contact with the 2nd Platoon was intermittent but remained reliable with the 1st Platoon. Runners, too, were used for communication to the 1st Platoon, but the enemy still held the area between the command post and the 2nd Platoon and therefore runners could not be used between these two positions. Radio contact with the battalion command post was established at about 0630 hours and the first report of the company's progress was made. It may be noted at this time that no code had been prearranged for the company to report progressively how much of the town was cleared, i.e., one-half, three-fourths, etc., or when the objective was completely cleared. As the attack went on, the battalion commander was anxious to have this information. The company commander attempted then in an esoteric American jargon to convey this information and still maintain some degree of radio security. If the enemy were monitoring, however, he could have understood the code by an intelligent analysis.

By 0730 hours, the 1st Platoon had six prisoners and had inflicted a number of casualties upon the enemy, sustaining only one casualty itself. But progress continued to be tedious. After reaching the main intersection in

town, part of the 1st Platoon turned east. The enemy was present in every house, in the barns, and behind the walls and stone fences. It is pointed out that Map D makes no attempt to show these fences and barns, most of which were as strong and thick-walled as the houses. The enemy had to be shot or captured one by one. There were no group surrenders. By midmorning, the eastern part of town was cleared except in the vicinity of the church and cemetery, where a group of enemy resisted stubbornly and skillfully. (29)

Earlier, the 2nd Platoon advanced more rapidly, moving north and cleaning out the houses on both sides of the street. Because of the lack of clarity in the 1:50,000 scaled map, a distinct division of the zones of responsibility of the two assault platoons had not been possible. As a result of this there was a section in the middle of town which neither platoon attempted to clear. In this area between the routes of advance of the two platoons, a small number of enemy was surrounded but remained to harass the company with small arms fire.

The company command post consisted of the company commander and his runner, the communications sergeant, the radio operator, and four platoon runners. While two runners were used to defend the first floor of the house in which the command post was located, two more were put in positions in the attic where they could fire into the trenches. At least one enemy machine gun crew remained in the trench southeast of town. If the enemy could organize a counterattacking force, the trench could be used to approach the rear of the

(29) Personal knowledge

company. The company commander intended to use the 2nd or 3rd Platoon to clear the trench and, using it as an avenue of approach, to attack the eastern end of town to assist the 1st Platoon. Early in the morning it seemed that the 2nd Platoon would shortly be available for this envelopment. However, by 0900 hours, that platoon also had run into heavy resistance on the north side of town. When, by late morning, it had made no further progress, Company B, now completely reorganized, was ordered to clear the northern part of town to relieve the pressure on Company C.

Company B also ran into the resistance which had been holding up the 2nd Platoon of Company C. The resistance centered around the building which apparently was the command post of the enemy unit defending Diding. Company B was forced to launch a coordinated attack by two platoons, supported by mortar fire to take the building. This was not completed until some time after 1200 hours. When the position was taken, it was found that every enemy soldier had been armed with an automatic weapon. (30)

The enemy laid high angle fire intermittently along the canal and river all morning long but avoided hitting the town. This fire did not seem to be observed and was not effective.

Late in the morning, the footbridge was erected. The remainders of Company C and Company A crossed over and the battalion aid station was established in town. Also the company commander of Company D established an observation post in the same area, with telephone contact to the battalion

(30) Statement by Captain Charles F. Guilford, B Company Commander, 21 October 1949.

command post. All these arrivals were unknown to the C Company Commander, except the arrival of the remainder of his own company. Radio contact was established with the 3rd Platoon, which was ordered to move to the company command post.

When after a reasonable period of time the platoon had not arrived, it could no longer be contacted by radio. The company commander was now faced with the decision of whether to leave his command post and personally contact the 3rd Platoon to get it moving. He had not yet formed a firm opinion of the leader of that platoon and did not know whether the officer was simply stalling or would eventually arrive. Other considerations, too, made the company commander decide to remain where he was. First, the command post was as good an observation post as was available. Second, if he took a radio with him, he would have no radio communication with the command post. Also, it would leave the communication sergeant the senior man and only non-commissioned officer at the command post. Displacing the whole command group would have endangered it unduly as the area to be passed through was still infested with enemy snipers. This is the kind of situation wherein the lack of a company executive officer is felt, and this particular time is when the company commander realized his error in not requiring the presence of the first sergeant.

Eventually that part of Company A which had entered town was used by its company commander to round up the snipers. (31) Company A was materially assisted by one

(31) A-8; personal knowledge

60 mm mortar squad leader of Company C. On his own initiative and from his position on one side of a high stone fence, this squad leader fired a number of rounds at enemy positions on the other side. To do this he had to set his mortar at almost a ninety degree angle. A slight change of wind would have brought the projectiles down on his own position. (32)

Another example of individual initiative is the action of Private First Class Wilson, runner for C Company Commander. Even at company level he considered his position "rear echelon" compared to that of members of a rifle squad. He was continually anxious to prove himself a fighting soldier. At one point during the morning when the company commander was trying vainly to get the 3rd Platoon for employment in clearing the trenches, Wilson, after repeated requests, was allowed to reconnoiter the trenches alone. He entered them and moved east. After going only a few yards, he encountered one enemy soldier with whom he exchanged several rounds of fire around the corners of a narrow, zig-zag trench. This was not immediately effective in forcing the enemy back, but it at least confirmed for the company commander that that particular trench was still occupied. Also it must have indicated to the enemy that C Company also occupied a part of the trenches and possibly discouraged any plan he may have had in using them in moving to counterattack C Company's rear. Later in the morning Wilson assisted, while under fire, in evacuating the wounded A Company officer, who still lay near the bank of the river. (33)

A few minutes after Company B had cleared the northern part of town, 1st Platoon Company C eliminated the last

(32) Personal knowledge
(33) Personal knowledge

resistance in the cemetery. The report was sent to the battalion that the town was cleared. Many Germans had escaped, but many had not. Companies A and B were ordered to move out immediately to seize the crest of Hill 311, one and one-half miles to the east.

THE ATTACK ON HILL 311 (See Map E)

In a few minutes' time (at about 1300 hours), Company B began moving east toward the objective from the north of Dieding while Company A moved via the main east-west street. Just as the command group of Company A reached the edge of town, a one-round concentration from four to six mortars fell on it, killing the first sergeant, communication sergeant and two or three other men, and wounding several others. This was the last of a series of misfortunes which befell Company A during the day. It completely shattered the waning morale of the company. It was particularly unnerving to the company commander since all the men killed were among the few left of those who had fought with him since Normandy. (34)

Meanwhile, the C Company Commander had been engaged in reorganizing his company for the defense of the town against a possible counterattack. While engaged in this, he was called to the D Company Observation Post. The battalion commander was on the telephone and wanted to know his opinion of A Company's condition. By this time he was acquainted with the situation. Although his company was tired from its strenuous work during the morning, he reluctantly recommended to the battalion commander that Company C replace Company A. The battalion commander accepted the recommendation and

(34) Personal knowledge

ordered Company A to withdraw into town and Company C to resume the attack on the right of Company B. The road and trail to the top of the Hill was to constitute the boundary between companies. C Company Commander informed the battalion commander that all anti-tank ammunition in the company had been lost in crossing the river or had been expended during the fighting in town, that few hand grenades remained, and that other ammunition was short. The battalion commander assured him that sufficient artillery was in support to take care of any enemy armor. In fact, an artillery forward observer had some time ago established an observation post at the old enemy command post and had been firing on two pillboxes on Hill 311 and along the railroad tracks two hundred yards beyond town.

Company C was brought in from its defensive positions, and the new attack order was issued. The company moved out in column, 2nd Platoon leading, to join on to the right flank of Company B, at that time just short of the railroad cut, which ran perpendicular to the route of advance. The two pillboxes were one hundred and fifty and three hundred yards beyond the railroad cut. The two companies advanced, passing the two pillboxes, which were no longer occupied, and meeting no resistance. The leading platoons were about halfway to the objective when a column of enemy, later determined to be composed of two tanks and ten half-tracks carrying Infantry, was sighted by Company B. (35) The column was advancing from Wiesviller, two miles to the northeast. It split in two, one column advancing toward Dieding along the low ground north of Hill 311 and the other moving two or

(35) A-10; personal knowledge

three hundred yards more to the south, directly toward B and C Companies. Except for two or three clumps of bushes and an occasional tree, there was no natural cover or concealment on the whole hill. Near-panic struck the leading platoons as shouts of "tanks!" went up and passed to the rear. The C Company Commander immediately went forward to a point where he could see a part of the enemy column, but not the head of it. From what he could see, the column appeared to be composed principally of tanks. While the B Company Commander was also forward, his company broke and ran to the rear, his platoon leaders unable to keep control. Company C was still under control, but some of the men were wavering, as all could see the actions of Company B. A quick survey of the situation made the company commander realize that positive action was necessary immediately or his company, too, would join the disorderly retreat of Company B. Believing the position untenable against armor, he ordered his platoons to return to the west side of the railroad cut and take up positions in the trenches. (36)

Meanwhile, the B Company Commander, with his radio operator, moved to a position where he could see most of the enemy counterattacking force and there established an observation post. By radio he requested all artillery fire possible, stating that he would adjust. He had no idea where the firing batteries were in relation to his own position. This difficulty he overcame by facing toward Wiesviller and then adjusting. The battalion artillery liaison officer corrected the fire orders and relayed them. Within five minutes one battalion of artillery was firing and in another fifteen or twenty minutes five battalions

(36) Statement by Captain Charles F. Guilford, B Company Commander, 21 October 1949; personal knowledge.

of artillery were firing. The firing forced the tanks and half-tracks to disperse and forced the enemy Infantry to dismount and disperse. Captain Guilford was forced to move his observation post once because of tank and small arms fire. From the new position he continued to search for targets and adjust fire. (37)

After sending his company back, Company C Commander also remained on the Hill with his radio in a position about fifty feet from B Company Commander for fifteen to twenty minutes. He had remained because radio contact between Company B and the battalion command post at first was not clear, while his own contact with both stations was good. Once the artillery fire seemed to be effective, he returned to his company.

This left Captain Guilford and his radio operator alone, six or seven hundred yards in front of the foremost positions of the battalion. Unknown to him, the lead tank of the northern column almost succeeded in enveloping his position, but just as it neared a firing position, it was knocked out by supporting fire from tank destroyer positions west of the Saar River. One enemy soldier, coming up from a small draw in front of Captain Guilford's position, was captured by his radio operator. Fearing now that other enemy dismounted troops were close to his position, he reported to the battalion commander that if someone could not get to him to provide close-in support very quickly he would be forced to destroy his radio and return to his company. (38)

(37) Statement by Captain Charles F. Guilford, B Company Commander, 21 October 1949; personal knowledge.

(38) Statement by Captain Charles F. Guilford, B Company Commander, 21 October 1949; personal knowledge.

The C Company Commander began to doubt his judgment in withdrawing his whole company and was preparing to send one platoon back to the Hill. However, he learned that the D Company Commander had personally led the light machine gun section of Company B back to Captain Guilford's position. One squad of this section, upon reaching the position, captured ten enemy soldiers, the remainder of the load from the same half-track that had carried the prisoner captured by the radio operator. At this time the enemy armor began to withdraw toward Wiesviller and friendly air support arrived to finish the job. Two tanks or half-tracks were caught on the road and an air strike was then made on Wiesviller.

At the direction of the battalion commander, the C Company Commander assisted in the reorganization of Company B, effected the necessary coordination, and together the two companies again advanced up the Hill. This time both companies were ordered to stop short of the crest in order to take advantage of the better positions in the vicinity of the two pillboxes. These positions could be easily defended and actually commanded the crest. Company C was disposed with the 2nd Platoon on the left, 3rd Platoon on the right, extending to the river. (See Overlay 1, Map E) The 1st Platoon furnished outposts farther up the Hill. In these positions the company spent the night. Resupply was effected after dark. The only incident occurred shortly before midnight when the outpost captured a small enemy reconnaissance patrol. (39)

Company C, then, in the course of one day had crossed a canal, and a river, and had captured a town with some

(39) Personal knowledge

assistance, especially from Company B. The company had captured a number of prisoners, inflicted casualties on the enemy and had forced back a larger number of enemy. It then participated in an attack on a hill beyond the town and assisted in its seizure.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. PLANNING SURPRISE

In the interest of gaining surprise, higher headquarters had planned to have no artillery preparation, and further, had ordered radio silence until the enemy was contacted. In furtherance of this plan, it is felt that the planning of the company was excellent. Salient points to be commended are the following: First, those details of planning designed to maintain order and quietness during the movement to and the crossing of the line of departure. Those measures consisted of instructing the men how to carry the boats, dividing the platoons into carrying teams and reconnoitering the exact routes of the teams, and placing those teams under command of the Engineer soldiers, who were specialist in such operations. Second, was the planning for just the right amount of coordination during the movement to insure the assault platoons' reaching town at the same time. Overcoordination would have resulted in undue delay and the halting of the platoons in exposed positions. The principal aim of these measures was to achieve surprise. Certainly that aim was realized.

2. BOUNDARIES BETWEEN UNITS

The division of the zones of responsibility of the assault platoons was made as clearly and as well defined as was possible with the maps available and through a night reconnaissance. This allowed each platoon to proceed rapidly to

exploit any success in its own area without being slowed by slower progress of the other platoon. The division was not exact, however, and enemy resistance that could fairly easily have been eliminated was by-passed. This by-passed resistance hampered subsequent operations by its harassing action. While the existence of this situation can hardly be blamed on the company, except in that some initiative on the part of the platoon leaders was wanting, it nevertheless points up a peculiarity of combat in towns. Combat in towns is similar to that in close terrain in that there is the constant danger of infiltration of friendly lines by the enemy and danger of unintentionally by-passing strong points. This is not meant to imply that only frontal assaults should be attempted in towns. Deliberate by-passing and enveloping maneuvers may well be employed with success. In this case, however, such action had not been provided for in the plan. It, therefore, is important that boundaries be defined as clearly as possible in combat in built-up areas.

3. RECONNAISSANCE

In this operation there was no choice of time for making a reconnaissance. If a reconnaissance were to be made, it had to be made at night. One was made by all the principal leaders in the company. Important benefits accrued from this night reconnaissance. First, it revealed the condition of the ground to the line of departure. Also, it allowed a close estimate of the current of the two streams of water. This, in turn, indicated specific points from which the boats should be launched, and allowed a very accurate estimate of the probable landing points on the far bank. Moreover, despite the darkness, the ground reconnaissance assisted in defining the zones of responsibility of the assault platoons.

4. AMMUNITION SUPPLY

The company commenced the attack carrying approximately its basic load. Battalion made no provision for an automatic resupply and the company commander did not give this problem sufficient attention. After Dieding was cleared of the enemy, all the company's anti-tank ammunition had been expended. That type ammunition is particularly useful in combat in town and its expenditure should have been anticipated. True, the company expected to remain in town in reserve for a period during which time it could have effected its resupply. But in war, of course, such things must not be counted upon. This condition would have meant the loss of Hill 311 except for the actions of one man, the company commander of Company B.

5. OPERATION OF THE COMPANY COMMAND POST

While he is at his command post, a company commander has enough to occupy his time without having personally to prepare for its defense, checking on the communication, and controlling the individuals present. Preferably, an executive officer and the company first sergeant should habitually be present. In this operation, the shortage of an executive officer and the company commander's failure to require the presence of the first sergeant contributed to restricting his movement from the command post. Too many details within it occupied his attention. It is rare during an attack that the company commander can best control his company from his command post and in this particular instance, his presence with the 3rd Platoon was required if that platoon were to be used in the planned envelopment. The example of this one operation is hardly conclusive, but one point here was so impressed upon the writer during later

personal experiences that it is emphasized at this time. The point is this: when only two officers remain in a rifle company, and except when peculiar conditions dictate otherwise, the second-ranking officer should be relieved of any duties as a platoon leader and should assume the duties of the company executive officer.

6. COMMUNICATION

The shortage of two SCR 536's in the company net (one which normally would be with the executive officer at the command post and one with the weapons platoon) hampered the operations of the company. This shortage also contributed to restricting the company commander's movements. If the Weapons Platoon Leader had had a radio, he could have assisted the company commander in contacting the 3rd Platoon. At least it would have facilitated a more effective use of the Weapons Platoon. Supply of radios was beyond the control of the company. Nevertheless, the shortage was a painful reminder of the increasing importance of radio communication within small units. The evidence points toward more and more dispersion of small units in the future, and, hence, toward a still greater need for signal communication.

The evidence is quite circumstantial, but the possibility was strong that security violations in the battalion net caused the unfortunate shelling of the command group of Company A as it left town to attack Hill 311. Until then, it will be remembered, the only enemy mortar fire had fallen outside of town.

7. ACTIONS OF THE ASSAULT PLATOONS IN TOWN

Except for a short period just after entering town, the actions of the two assault platoons, especially the 1st

Platoon, were commendable. A period of reorganization, however, was necessary. It was time-consuming and the difficulties were aggravated not only by the actions of the enemy but also by the reluctance of individuals to leave the safety of the first buildings captured. A workable, clearly understood standing operating procedure for the squads and platoons would have assisted the platoon leaders. At the moment, the enemy was confused. A few minutes saved at this time would have given greater advantage over the enemy and would have saved a great deal more time during the whole operation.

8. THE RETREAT FROM HILL 311

After the enemy counterattacking force was spotted and the company commander went forward personally to observe, he made two principal errors in his estimate of the situation. First, he overestimated the enemy's strength in tanks. Second, he underestimated the effectiveness of his supporting artillery against armor. It is still believed that the results would have been disastrous if both companies had remained on the Hill and the enemy armor had broken through. In Company C there was not a single round of anti-tank ammunition for its close-in defense. If some cover had been available and if the proper ammunition had been on hand, another decision would have been correct. However, it is believed that one platoon could have protected itself from the enemy armor simply by dispersion, while in conjunction with friendly artillery, could have stopped the enemy Infantry. Certainly, when it became clear that the B Company Commander was going to remain on the Hill, immediate steps should have been taken to furnish him some close-in protection. Under the circumstances,

almost any decision would be liable to some adverse criticism. The fact remains that the courage and initiative of one man, Captain Guilford, turned the tide of battle.

LESSONS

1. Surprise in combat is not a thing of chance but is the reward of careful planning.

2. Clearly defined boundaries between small units are more important in towns, where vision is limited, than in open terrain.

3. Reconnaissance at night can be effective, and is desirable for an operation which is to be conducted during darkness.

4. In planning a river crossing, consideration must be given Infantry's increased vulnerability to enemy armor once the Infantry has reached the hostile side of the river, and special measures must be taken to minimize this vulnerability.

5. The command post of a rifle company should always have present a person of sufficient authority to make important decisions and should be organized to operate efficiently without the presence of the company commander.

6. Reliable radio communication should always be available to units at least as small as platoons.

7. Squads and platoons of a rifle company should perfect standing operating procedures for house to house combat.

8. The initiative and courage of the individual soldier (the machine age notwithstanding) are as important as ever, and the display of these characteristics by one man may reverse the course of a battle.