

THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
GENERAL SECTION  
MILITARY HISTORY COMMITTEE  
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

ADVANCED OFFICERS COURSE  
1946-1947

OPERATIONS OF COMPANY L, 26TH INFANTRY, FIRST DIVISION, in the  
NIGHT RAID ON MAKNASSY, 17 DECEMBER 1942 (TUNISIA CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of a company commander)

Type of operation described: RIFLE COMPANY IN A NIGHT RAID

Major Stephen B. Morrissey, Infantry

2497

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Index .....	1.
Bibliography .....	2.
Introduction .....	3.
From Oran to Feriana .....	5.
Maknassy Becomes a Focal Point .....	9.
Preparations For the Raid .....	12.
The Raid .....	17.
Analysis and Lessons .....	25.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lessons and Trends (Tunisian Campaign),  
No. 22, The Infantry School, Fort  
Benning, Georgia, 1943.

Map: Tunisia 1/200,000; El Ayacha Sheet

Colonel John W. Bowen, Infantry  
then C.O. 3rd Bn, 26th Infantry

Lt. Col. James B. Carvey, Infantry  
then S-3, 3rd Bn, 26th Infantry

Lt. Carmelo Falconieri, Infantry  
then C.O. 1st Platoon, Co.L, 26th Infantry

Lt. Donald Megrail, Infantry (deceased)  
then C.O. 3rd Platoon, Co.L, 26th Infantry

Capt. Paul Egan, Infantry (deceased)  
then 1st Sgt., Co.L, 26th Infantry

Personal recollection of the author.

OPERATIONS OF COMPANY L, 26TH INFANTRY, FIRST DIVISION  
NIGHT RAID ON MAKNASSY, 17 DECEMBER 1942 (TUNISIA CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

I

INTRODUCTION

Official histories of World War II, it has been claimed, will be the most complete and most accurate ever written. With maps and statistics, they will describe the maneuvers of regiments, divisions and armies around the world. The maps will be in gay colors. Strong, fat arrows will coil, penetrate, envelop and hammer at enemy forces. Decisions of famous leaders will be analysed exhaustively.

These histories may almost begin to tell the real history of the war. In occasional paragraphs, the exploits and failures of rifle companies, platoons and squads may be mentioned.

To front line veterans below the rank of major, these records will be inadequate. They will have the feeling that at least 75 per cent of the story should emphasize the achievements, the "war effort", and the sacrifices of riflemen in the small units. The most important lessons of the war, they feel, are psychological rather than tactical or strategic. The inner lives, emotions and motivations of the men who did the real dirty work should be studied.

Surviving infantrymen can remember the times when this feeling of self-importance was the very thing which kept them going. They felt they were in the vanguard of history.

They can remember also how men in rifle companies would fight for the prestige and reputation of a rifle company beyond any other motive.

To get mentioned in the newspapers was another incentive. Ordinarily, it was nothing but a continuous, secret hope, never to be realized. The natural human desire for fame and glory had to be enjoyed vicariously, through identification with big arrows, the names of generals, or headlines like "YANKS LAUNCH OFFENSIVE".

Many other motives, of course, energized infantrymen to endure the primitive conditions of combat. A military historian trying to give a scientific account of them would also have to be a genius in the psychological fourth dimension. This monograph must therefore limit itself to the viewpoint and experience of an amateur observer of human frailty.

The desire for prestige is one motivation with which we are concerned in the story of the Maknassy raid.

On 16 December 1942, early in the Tunisian Campaign, Company L, 26th Infantry, First Division pulled a night attack on Maknassy, a small town about 250 miles south of Tunis, and about 40 miles inland from the coastal route which the Afrika Korps used in its withdrawal from El Alamein to Tunis.

Not until several months later did this area become a noteworthy battleground. In December 1942, it was routine patrol country, where the 3rd Battalion, 26th Infantry had been assigned to present a show of force. The rest of the regiment and Headquarters, First Division were still back in Oran, about 350 miles to the northwest. At this time, the 3rd Battalion was the main strength of a task force commanded by Colonel Edson Raff, paratrooper.

Whether or not the 3rd Battalion actually contributed to history during this month of December 1942 is questionable. But in the minds of the men, their work was important. In their imaginations it was like life must have been in the badlands of our old south-

west. The semi-arid desert steppes, the treeless mountains, and the little French-Arab towns helped to suggest this illusion. To the members of Company L, at any rate, the Maknassy raid was cowboy-Indian stuff.

This action had a decisive effect on the morale of one rifle company. That is mostly why it is important. The raid sharpened group loyalty within Company L. Within the battalion, the company gained a reputation and a prestige commensurate with that of the other rifle companies. Even the newspapers picked it up.

The men acquired, in the wild experience of one night's action, a feeling of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-importance which almost gave them ambition to see more action.

Since such positive morale results of infantry combat are rare, it may be of interest to explain how they developed. The Maknassy raid may thereby serve as a psychological case study, as well as a small piece of tactical history.

## II

### FROM ORAN TO FERIANA

Company L's peculiar mental condition, which was purged at Maknassy, began at Oran, where the First Division went into bivouac after the battle of 8-10 November 1942.

The 3rd Battalion, 26th Infantry, was guarding La Senia airport. Troops were in comparatively good humor, having weathered their first combat. In numberless bull sessions, they rehashed their adventures, swapped rumors. There were arguments as to which company in the battalion had "had it toughest".

One day the Company Commander overheard Paul Egan, top sergeant of Company L, leading an old soldier's discussion on this topic. The first sergeant of Company K was present and a crowd of men were gathered around an argument. Egan would not admit that L Company was not a thousand times better than K Company.

As a matter of fact, Egan knew and everyone else in the battalion knew that K Company had done an outstanding job in the two day battle up on Djebel Murdjajo. K Company had borne the brunt of the fighting. If any company deserved credit for courage, casualties and good tactics, it was Company K.

A person sensitive to the real feelings of Company L, for instance, could plainly see that in some future action, Company L would have to perform some kind of battle exploit if only to provide ammunition for the GI bull sessions.

Otherwise, it was reassuring to know that the First Division was together in Oran. On that higher level, there was a secure sense of prestige. Under the competent leadership of Terry Allen and Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the Division was a proud, battle-tried team. Super-imposed over the finely-spun psychological condition in the 3rd Battalion, was this indirect feeling of self-importance derived by identification with a famous parent outfit.

The Division had been mentioned on the second page of the New York Times. Company L had not been mentioned; even Company K had not been recognized. But that was all right. The rest of the Army and the folks at home would know that if the First Division took Oran, Private Smith and Private Jones of Company L had been chiefly responsible.

This larger psychological support was snatched out from under the 3rd Battalion within two weeks after the battle of Oran. Roused from its bivouac at La Senia, the battalion was dispatched 700 miles into southern Tunisia -- airborne.

To go by air was a sort of compensation for the loss of confidence in being separated from the Division. The urgency of the order and the novelty of the transportation were exciting.

Think of the publicity! What would the history books say?

The prospect of air travel had its disturbing side also. Ninety per cent of the men had never been up in a plane. None of them had had any airborne training. Further, it was not reassuring to know that the planes would travel unarmed and only lightly escorted along the Algerian coast, thence into Tunisia. Any furtive inspection of a map could lead you to visualize swarms of Luftwaffe and hordes of German infantry waiting in ambush.

Pride in their being chosen to do the unusual and the dangerous, however, overcame any psychological barriers. Company I led off the battalion order of march from Oran. Company L went the following day, to be followed by Battalion headquarters, M and K Companies at one day intervals.

The long flight was made in two hops, via Algiers, thence over the rocky Tell Atlas mountains. C-47 transports, loaded 14 men to a plane, carried the battalion without mishap to a natural airfield at Youks Les Bains, near Tebessa. Several days before I Company arrived, this airfield had been secured without opposition by Colonel Raff and two companies of the 509th Parachutes. Colonel Raff had then pushed overland to Feriana with one parachute company and Company A of the 701st Tank Destroyers.

When Company L arrived at Youks, they were deflated by news that Company I, had already moved to Feriana, 50 miles eastward. Company I together with the tank destroyers had gone on to chase an Italian force out of Gafsa. They had captured Gafsa. That happened on 28 November 1942.

Company L did not move on to Feriana for several days. They were ordered to guard the airfield at Youks, from which P-38's and A-20's were already beginning to operate. Meanwhile, Headquarters Company and M Company flew in and passed through Youks to Feriana.

December 4th, McLaughlin, the 3rd Battalion S-4, pulled into the L Company Bivouac at Youks. "You missed it," he said. "The battalion had one hell of a fight at Faid Pass the last two days."

He said that two platoons of Company I, Headquarters Company, M Company, the Tank Destroyers, a parachute company and a French company had captured Faid Pass. 121 prisoners had been taken. A lot of men had been killed, 50 casualties of our own altogether. He said that Company I and the A&P Platoon of Headquarters Company had been chiefly responsible for the victory. M Company mortars and machine guns had done good work, too.

Then, to the little group of L Company men, McLaughlin intoned in that sympathetic, yet self-important way of the veteran talking to the recruit:

"You should'a been there. They were Germans, too. It was rough."

Thus, within a few short days, L Company's stock in self-esteem had taken another slump. When the company arrived in Feriana on 5 December, the victorious battalion had returned from Faid Pass, leaving French colonial troops to organize the defense. L Company men had to listen patiently to all the details of the battle. It had been a good one, but it is human nature to want to participate equally in any discussion.

Now I Company wore the battalion laurels. Even the A&P Platoon was arrogant. Even the mortarmen of M Company were more experienced. In exploits, L Company now ranked last.

This being last place in the competition for honors was getting a little wearing. And as both the L Company Commander and the battalion commander realized, it was not good for the morale of the battalion either. It was desirable that there be

an equality of achievement among the three rifle companies. A group of men can be as sensitive as any individual personality.

It was a lesson in psychology which none of the officers had learned prior to war.

### III

#### MAKNASSY BECOMES A FOCAL POINT

After the battle of Faid Pass, the 3rd Battalion, basing in Feriana, sent out motor patrols, day and night, toward points of expected contact with the enemy. L Company took over most of this patrolling during December, forged ahead a little bit in prestige.

Six or twelve man outposts were established astride the most likely approaches into this area from the Tunisian coast. Every night, jeep patrols went out along these roads from Feriana and Gafsa. The terrain made it evident that, if the Afrika Korps wanted to spill over into the area held by the Americans and the French, they would come thru Faid Pass, Maknassy, or El Guettar. On the other hand, if sufficient American forces could be brought into southern Tunisia on time, for the purpose of cutting off the retreat of the Germans from eastern Africa, these three places would be crucial points of passage through to the coast.

Such possibilities gave some importance to the patrol work being done by the 3rd Battalion out of Feriana and Gafsa. They were only a few hundred men, but they were pleased to receive newspapers from home, telling of the "race for Tunisia". One newspaper map showed a big arrow pointed at Feriana, marked "Raff Task Force". The men were a little bit amused to think that really, they were ahead of the map arrow, and a good deal ahead of the Task Force.

French Colonial troops occupied Faid Pass and Gafsa, but did not participate in the patrolling. They had no vehicles at

all. As Allies, they were still regarded a little bit askance by most of the Americans. But they were of some help in giving a semblance of strength to a line which was actually thin. The French had a way with the Arabs, too, and often provided enemy information which, even if it was not always reliable, was never dull.

A P-40 squadron moved into Thelepte early in December, and helped to provide enemy information as well as protection to the 3rd Battalion there. Almost every day, they would put on a pretty good show against German planes over Feriana and Gafsa. But the patrol work of the battalion provided the most interesting gossip.

Lieutenant Don Megrail of the 3rd Platoon, Company L, took a jeep patrol from Bir Mrabott all the way to Gabes one night. There is a good macadam road between Gafsa and Gabes.

The next night, on the same mission, Megrail collided head on with a German patrol near El Hafey. Actually, these two patrols almost smashed up before they recognized each other. They stopped bumper to bumper. One German stayed in his vehicle and let go with a machine pistol while Megrail was firing at him with a machine gun mounted on the front of the jeep. The German lost the duel. The other three gave up.

Megrail became the hero of Company L, because he was the first man in the company to meet a German soldier at close quarters.

He added to his laurels and to those of his company the following night by returning to El Hafey, where he discovered an enemy column on the road. They were Italians. He counted them as they moved into a position there.

Meanwhile, under skillful German direction, an Italian force had been established in the defile at Djebel Ank. There was in-

creasing evidence that the enemy was probing toward Gafsa via El Guettar.

Colonel Raff then began to worry about Maknassy. It was too quiet. He ordered more patrolling in that direction.

The night of 13 December, Lt. Norman Woods of L Company's 2nd Platoon took a jeep patrol through Maknassy to Mezzouna, 15 miles beyond. He was outflanked by a couple of mysterious green flares. On the way back, he walked around Maknassy. In the railroad station, he roused the agent, a Frenchman. The Frenchman mistook Woods for a German. He said that a lot of Americans were in Gafsa. Woods could not figure out whether his allegiance was German or American. He was so wrapped up in this problem that he did not look around Maknassy closely enough to fix in his mind a layout of the streets. He had not been ordered to do this, but if he had, it might have helped out later.

The next night, 14 December, Sergeants Henning and De Cristo, and a French sergeant, went to Maknassy. They approached the town via Ferme Lovy. They interviewed M. Lovy. He told them that a battalion of Italians had moved into Maknassy. He even plotted their positions. According to this information, the enemy was setting up at least four machine guns and two anti-tank guns in front of Maknassy. They were digging trenches around the western edge of the big olive grove south of the town. The patrol did not verify these facts personally.

On the 15th, after Henning's patrol had returned to Gafsa, French headquarters tried to make a phone call to Maknassy. Up 'till then, the line had been open, and the French has been able to contact Maknassy every day. The line was still open, but a German voice answered. This was enough to send the French officer on the other end of the line into a fit of hysteria. He called Colonel Raff.

But the situation did call for a bit of investigating. Colonel Raff called Colonel John W. Bowen, commanding the 3rd Battalion. He ordered Bowen to send a rifle company into Maknassy.

"Raid the place;" he said, "Shoot it up. Take prisoners. Come out at daylight."

This happy idea was rapidly relayed to the Company Commander, Company L, who was still a little bit worried about that exploit his company needed to boost its ego.

"Raid Maknassy?" he repeated. "Yes sir. That's fine, fine."

"Tonight," the battalion commander said.

That wasn't much time to get ready. It was already noon. Maknassy was 100 miles away. Enemy information was as comprehensible as it ever was. But without doubt, this was the opportunity of the season for Company L. Here was a golden chance to do something spectacular. It had all the ingredients.

#### IV

#### PREPARATIONS FOR THE RAID

Colonel Bowen entrusted the planning of the raid to the Company Commander. He would accompany the raiders himself, but it was characteristic of his leadership to admit some intelligence in his subordinates.

The order had been issued at noon the 16th. A number of decisions had to be made before leaving Feriana.

The problem which quite often confronts any infantry commander arose -- how many men and weapons to take along in order to do the job most economically and efficiently.

Colonel Raff had specified a "rifle company". But the 2nd Platoon of Company L was outposting El Guettar, and could not be assembled in time. No need was seen for the Weapons Platoon, and this agreed with the doctrine of night attacks that the Weapons

Platoon is not ordinarily employed initially. Even two rifle platoons and company headquarters seemed an excessive number of men to take on a long range mission where the enemy situation was unclear.

At any rate, it was decided to make the raid with the 1st and 3rd Platoons and company headquarters.

In order to help preserve secrecy, the men were not told where they were going. A detailed order would be issued in Gafsa that evening. But the word got around somehow. As the five 2½ ton trucks pulled out of Feriana at 1300, every soldier in the battalion knew that an attack was going to be made on Maknassy that night. This was disturbing because the Arabs who loitered around might have ways of getting the news overland by signal fires. They had done this more than once.

The 40 mile truck move to Gafsa was made by infiltration, since the road was subject to daily attacks by German planes. It was completed safely by 1700. The troops detrucked at the French barracks in Gafsa to wait for darkness at 1830.

This allowed 1½ hours to plan the attack and disseminate the order to every man.

The Company Commander assembled his platoon leaders, and all the men who had been on patrol in the Maknassy area. Time would not permit a personal reconnaissance before the raid, since Maknassy was over 50 miles east of Gafsa. No air photo of the town was available. The only map available, a 1/200,000, made Maknassy look no larger than one of these typewritten letters.

No street map, or detailed plan of the town's layout was available; and unfortunately, none of the men who had been in Maknassy could sketch it clearly.

It was agreed only that Maknassy was a small place, much smaller than Gafsa. There was a big olive grove on the south side, and some high ground on the north. There were trees along the dirt streets. The only street that anyone could describe at all was the main road, and the position of the railroad tracks and the station with respect to it.

The Company Commander put a magnifying glass on the 1/200,000 map and tried to make a blow up sketch of the town, using every particle of information thereon. It was a French map and some of the symbols he could not understand. Precious minutes were lost getting them interpreted.

When the sketch was drawn, it didn't make Maknassy look too complicated.

For the approach march, the only solution was to utilize the knowledge of Sergeants Henning and De Cristo, who had gone up to Ferme Lovy the night of the 14th. The company would follow the same route they had taken to a detrucking point five miles short of the town, thence on foot via Ferme Lovy to the distinct line of olive trees leading into the objective.

Henning and De Cristo would ride in the second of two jeeps preceding the five trucks. Another jeep leading the column would act as point security. This jeep would also move on up to Maknassy as soon as the shooting started. It had a heavy machine gun mounted, and could protect the trucks when they came back to a rendezvous point on the road. A wadi crossing the road about three miles west of Maknassy would serve as this point of reorganization for the return march.

Speaking of security on the approach march, the Company Commander suddenly realized that our last outpost was at Sened. This

meant that the company would have to ride a total of 18 miles to the detrucking point without any assurance of safety from enemy patrols. It was a chance which would have to be taken.

For the plan of attack on Maknassy itself, the Company Commander was probably influenced by his desire to have L Company perform a spectacular tactical masterpiece. Contrary to elementary principles of night attack which the Infantry School has stressed for years, he conceived an envelopment, and an attack in two directions.

Lt. Megrill's 3rd Platoon and company headquarters would separate from the 1st Platoon at a point southwest of the town. The 3rd Platoon would then move generally northwest in single file, guiding on the outermost buildings as far as the main road. They would then extend to their right, facing northwest, firing in that direction if necessary; or, they would engage the enemy in the southwest quadrant of the town. The 3rd Platoon would not advance north of the main road unless ordered. Command post would be with the 3rd Platoon.

Meanwhile, Lt. Falconieri's 1st Platoon would follow the line of olive trees completely around to the rear of the town, moving across its eastern exit to the railroad tracks. Here they would turn about and using the tracks as the platoon left boundary, deploy on a hundred yard front facing toward Gafsa. Whether to use squad columns or skirmishers was a decision to be made by the platoon leader. The 1st Platoon would then walk slowly westward, taking what they met.

Arriving at the railroad station, Falconieri would shoot a green flare and call the 3rd Platoon to lift fire if that was necessary. The 1st Platoon would then continue their attack thru the northern half of the town, moving beyond to the Gafsa road,

thence to the waiting trucks.

Withdrawal time at 0400 would be signalled from company headquarters. A series of colored flares would be fired.

Possibly another reason for this complicated maneuvering was the fact that the several suspected enemy positions had not been exactly spotted; and without definitely known landmarks, it was unlikely that they could be located in the dark. Therefore, since the 3rd Platoon was expected to rouse the enemy first, an opportunity would be afforded the 1st Platoon to spot enemy guns by sound and flash from the rear.

In short, the 1st Platoon might achieve a second stage of surprise provided that it got into position by the railroad station in good order.

As a general rule within the company, for control purposes, it was agreed that the men would be instructed to guide themselves on recognizable bursts from their squad BAR's, and by means of squad leaders' tracer ammunition. With this in mind, only squad leaders were to carry tracers.

As sign and countersign, the words which the First Division had used at Oran were used; "HI HO SILVER, AWAY."

These were the main outlines of the attack order given to the platoon leaders and key non-commissioned officers of Company I in the French barracks at Gafsa. It was then about 1745. Forty-five minutes remained before departure time.

The subordinate leaders started to leave the room when two strange men entered. They looked like Red Cross workers at first sight. One of them had a beard.

"What the hell do you want?" the company commander barked. Then he simmered down. He noticed their green armbands, and their shoulder patches which read "War Correspondent".

"I'm Jack Thompson, Chicago Tribune," the bearded man said. "This is Donald Coe of United Press. We'd like to get a story from you tomorrow when you get back."

The Company Commander felt his heart leap. Here it was, the big opportunity for real fame. American newspapers! Headlines! Just exactly what L Company needed!

He mustered up every trick of politeness he had ever learned. To these two strange men who represented the power of the press, he offered cigarettes, chairs, and even a drink from a precious bottle he'd been hiding from his best friends. He even obliged by promising them a roster of Company L, complete with names and addresses.

Turning to the little group of L Company men and officers present, the Company Commander said, "Let the men know about this, too." Unless he was very much mistaken, it would be good for morale.

## V

### THE RAID

The column started out of Gafsa on schedule at 1830 the night of the 16th December. The weather was good, clear and cool. The stars were already out and there would be a moon later on. The men were in high spirits, but quietly took their places in the trucks. It would be a long ride.

The Company Commander rode in the front seat of the leading  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ton truck. The battalion commander rode in the 5th or last truck.

For mile after mile, the column churned along the sandy road, past Station Zannouch, and finally past our last outpost at Sened. The black line of the railroad track which paralleled the route, and

the looming shadows of the mountains to the south served as comforting guides. Otherwise, the road might have been indistinguishable from the rest of the flat, scrub-covered desert.

Behind every clump of cactus and in each wadi, it seemed that the enemy was waiting in ambush. The closer the trucks came to Maknassy, the louder the motors whined. Shifting gears seemed to accentuate a noisy warning which rang out for miles ahead of the raiding party.

Just how far the sound of the motors carried that night, the Company Commander never knew; but he was glad that a detrucking point several miles short of the objective had been chosen.

At 2230, after four hours of nerve-wracking inaction inside the lumbering vehicles, the troops detrucked in the shadows of an olive grove near Ferme Lovy. They formed in a column of two's for the foot march. Colonel Bowen came up to the Company Commander at this time and asked if an officer had been brought along to take the trucks back to the rendezvous point. This little item had been forgotten, so the battalion commander decided to take this job on himself, though he had wanted to go along with the company.

Over the route which they had followed the night of the 14th, Sergeants Henning, De Cristo and the French sergeant led the company column toward Ferme Lovy. Incidentally, Henning spoke German, De Cristo Italian, and the French soldier knew both French and Arabic; so that the point of the advancing party was on challenging terms with any of the languages it might run into.

M. Lovy had dogs, and as the company moved into his backyard, they barked and yowled. M. Lovy woke up and opened his front door. He was forced to invite the L Company Commander and several other soldiers inside.

There were Italian troops in Maknassy, M. Lovy said. Some

Italian officers had been to his place that afternoon. They had carried away three barrels of wine. He was unable to give any other coherent information. One of the men found his telephone and cut the wire. He was then permitted to go back to bed.

It was still three miles to Maknassy. The company started up again across the open. By this time, the moon was brighter and dogs barked louder. The column reached the big olive grove and kept moving in along its north border. Suddenly, the moonlit grayness of the desert on the left gave way to the unmistakable lines of buildings. They had white plaster walls. There were cactus hedges and trees.

Except for the dogs who could now be heard barking in the town, not a sound could be heard. It looked pretty peaceful and quiet, in contrast with the tension, suspense and suppressed excitement of the attacking force.

The 1st Platoon kept on marching and disappeared. The 3rd Platoon moved toward the nearest building, thence along the walls and fences in a northwesterly direction as planned. There was a fairly distinct line to follow. The 3rd Platoon kept in single file about 25 yards out from the buildings. It was exactly 0130 when things began to happen.

Lt. Megrail suddenly found himself staring into a hole filled with sleeping men. The dugout was about 15 feet square surrounded by stone bricks piled about waist high. It looked like an old covered up well.

At his feet, Megrail saw a heavy machine gun all set up. Along side it, a belt of ammunition curled around the tripod; the new cartridges gleamed in the moonlight.

One of the sleeping men woke up and poked his head over the wall. He came face to face with one of Megrail's men and let out a shriek. The American soldier shot him.

The dugout became alive with men, jabbering Italian. Someone magnanimously threw a grenade among them.

About 25 yards away, another enemy machine gun post was aroused. It was located at the corner of a building in a clump of bush. The 3rd Platoon column had already come abreast of it and would have missed it if the companion gun had not been run into. This group was quickly rushed by members of the 3rd squad. Half a dozen Italian soldiers surrendered here without a shot being fired.

By this time, however, at least four other machine guns had opened up some distance away, north of the road. An anti-tank gun started to shoot down the road toward Gafsa. The bright tracers illuminated the road.

Within a few minutes, the enemy must have realized the stone dugout had been taken, because they smartly shifted their fire to this flank. It was too high to do any damage. The 3rd Platoon moved quickly over to the shelter of the nearest building. No enemy fire could be heard from the east.

The 3rd Platoon and company headquarters were bunched up wondering what to do next. The Company Commander looked for Lt. Megrail and found him still out by the stone dugout. He was trying to work the Italian machine gun, but without success. The Company Commander tried to operate it, but quickly gave up because he hadn't had the least idea how it worked. Megrail and the Company Commander also discussed how the enemy weapon could be destroyed since it was too heavy to carry away. They couldn't solve that one either.

The squads of the 3rd Platoon were dispatched into the town with orders to "take the first left" and move up to the main street according to plan. The 2nd squad was ordered to make a similar shift beyond that. The 3rd squad was to contact the 1st Platoon.

Within its limitations, this part of the plan worked out fairly well. The 3rd Platoon roved through the streets in its assigned area. The 2nd squad surprised a mortar section in action inside a courtyard surrounded by a high wall. The 1st squad destroyed an anti-tank position by means of a rifle grenade and BAR fire at close range. Several more prisoners were taken, and sent to the company command post, which had been established near the gun positions first overrun. The 3rd squad made contact with the 1st Platoon at the railroad station about 0230. By this time also, Lt. Megrail had managed to organize his platoon along the main street facing north.

Enemy machine guns continued to fire from positions which appeared to be about 200 yards north of the road.

Had 60 mm. mortars been available, effective fire might have been directed at the gun flashes of enemy machine guns and anti-tank guns. The muzzle flash of one anti-tank gun was plainly visible.

It was evident that Maknassy had not been built in a way to convenience strangers on a night raid. There were all kinds of courtyards and alley-ways. The buildings were odd sizes, built at all angles. They were two story and one story. Cactus hedges were everywhere. To make control even more difficult, the moon disappeared behind clouds after 0300.

But I Company was having the time of its life. That is un-

usual in modern war. Jubilant cries of "Silver!" could be heard all over Maknassy. Bursting grenades, sporadic rifle fire and tracers made it look like the Fourth of July.

Meanwhile, the 1st Platoon was having a similar field day on the far side of town. Soon after the 3rd Platoon became engaged, contact was established using the 536 radios. The Company Commander was able to get a running account of the 1st Platoon action.

The 1st Platoon had come around exactly as planned. They found a truck park near the road and killed or drove away the drivers and guards, all of whom were asleep. One squad was left to wreck the vehicles, but had difficulty, since no one had through to bring tools or explosives for that purpose.

At 0200, the 1st Platoon reached the railroad station, keeping single file as they had not yet been discovered. At this time, they could see the enemy fire being directed at the 3rd Platoon from the positions northwest of the station.

They were about 25 yards from the station when several men were seen leaving it in a northerly direction. A BAR opened up on this group and killed two Italians. The others disappeared in the dark toward the enemy position. The 1st squad of the 1st Platoon rapidly came up to the station.

Falconieri yelled in Italian. Ten men came out with their hands up.

Falconieri left one squad at the station and with his remaining squad started following the enemy up the path just west of the station. A stream of fire came at him down the path, wounding two men. The enemy had been alerted to the presence of the 1st Platoon in the area of the station.

Falconieri spent about 30 minutes trying to get his bearings on the enemy guns. But the terrain was unfamiliar. Northwest of the station, he observed, it rose slightly and was covered with

random olive trees and cactus patches. It was very dark. In addition to enemy fire, there was also a lot of wild fire coming from the 3rd Platoon area. Although L Company men should have been able to recognize the sound of their own rifles and BAR's, their tendency was to look and listen for any weapon, then shoot.

Under these circumstances, Falconieri called the Company Commander at 0300. One hour remained before withdrawal time. He wanted to know whether it would be feasible to shoot his green flare and continue the attack as it had been planned. Falconieri was able to get the first sergeant and Lt. Megrail, but not the Company Commander.

The latter, not to be outdone in cowboy tactics, had started for the 1st Platoon with his runner. He had no radio. By the time he reached the station, it was 0330.

Falconieri, meanwhile, after a talk with Megrail, had decided not to cross the front of the 3rd Platoon. If the 1st Platoon were to walk west along the tracks, it would not only miss the enemy positions, but would certainly be fired on by the 3rd Platoon. To try a coordinated attack farther to the north against the indefinitely located enemy positions, furthermore, would be fruitless at that late hour.

For these reasons, Falconieri decided to assemble his platoon and rejoin the 3rd Platoon. This itself was a difficult job in the dark. At any rate, the 1st Platoon moved out in single file at 0325, preceded by scouts and with complete flank security to guard against being mistaken by the 3rd Platoon. This proved to be about as hazardous as it might have been if they had marched west along the tracks. But it was accomplished without anyone getting hurt.

At 0330, the Company Commander arrived at the railroad station to find no one there. He was baffled. Frantically, he

searched around to no avail, then hurried back to his command post, where he should have remained.

Promptly at 0400, Company L departed from Maknassy in good order. The withdrawal was made via the route of entry. About 15 men were not accounted for, but showed up along the road to be picked up during the early morning hours. Everyone got a ride back, including 21 prisoners.

It was fortunate that Colonel Bowen had taken charge of the transportation. Anti-tank fire had destroyed the jeep which acted as security, and the 2½ ton truck drivers required a little persuasion to wait for the riflemen who came in piecemeal during the first hour of daylight. Almost all of the ground from Maknassy to Gafsa is flat, except for occasional wadis. The prospect of a four hour ride back in daylight was bothersome.

But three P-40's from Thelepte flew over at daylight to escort the trucks back. These planes also helped to complete the enemy's confusion in Maknassy by bombing and strafing the place at 0600.

The return to Gafsa was in sharp contrast to the tense ride the night before. The sun came out, bright and hot. The P-40 pilots buzzed the column, exchanging greetings with the troops. The men were now relaxed, happy and satisfied with their night's work. The open, desolate landscape, and the jagged, towering mountains to the south held no mysteries.

As they talked of Maknassy, they thought of it as their own special town. The surprise and terror which they had inflicted on the enemy became the butt of their jokes. Their individual exploits and "snafus" started to build up the fantastic picture which was to become an L Company tradition.

By the late afternoon, when "the conquerors" returned through

the crowded streets of Gafsa, this picture had taken shape, compounded of both fact and imagination.

The war correspondents interviewed the men while they were having chow. The battalion commander praised every man individually. Colonel Raff was pleased. He sent a message to Algiers immediately. The French were ecstatic; they threw a party for the battalion staff.

Company L remained in Gafsa, and the battalion came down from Feriana. There was no question now about the morale of Company L. The Maknassy exploit had carried them to the top. Their prestige within the battalion was assured.

## VI

### ANALYSIS AND LESSONS

As a matter of fact, the Maknassy raid was nothing to rave about from a coldly objective, tactical viewpoint. It accomplished the mission assigned, discovered that a reinforced company of Italian troops were in Maknassy, killed and captured and confused a number of this force, and got away with but two Americans wounded.

It's success was due primarily to the surprise achieved. For long afterwards, the company was aware of what can happen to a military unit which fails to post proper security.

But luck played a part too. Many basic errors had been made. The raiding party was too large, considering both the mission assigned, and the obscure character of the enemy situation. The same mission could have been accomplished by two squads, instead of two platoons.

The plan of attack, though hastily contrived on poor information, contained a basic violation of night attack doctrine. The 1st and 3rd Platoons should have been on line; no envelop-

ment should have been attempted. In this case, maneuver in two directions by night proved more hazardous to ourselves than to the enemy.

Means for destroying enemy equipment should have been taken. 60 mm. mortars would have been useful. Litter equipment should have been carried. Booby traps might have been useful. An officer should have been assigned to care for the trucks.

But as a psychological study, the Maknassy raid proved to be almost a classic.

In the first place, it had a cathartic effect by giving the soldiers who went on the raid a chance to build up to a peak of suspense; then to break out in a four-hour orgy of shooting, yelling, and miscellaneous self-expression which left them content, and relaxed afterwards. More bloody, unsuccessful actions do not result in this feeling.

Secondly, and most important, the Maknassy raid resulted in a flood tide of heart-warming glory for Company L, not only in the local area around Gafsa, but all the way back home.

Several weeks after the raid, the men began to get clippings from their home towns. In each case, their individual names had been inserted in the original story of the raid written by Thompson and Coe. This story had been distributed by press associations all over the country.

Even the radio program of the same name had re-enacted the Hi Ho Silver part of the raid in fine style. The men gleefully heard about that, too.

Typical headlines read: "YANKS SHOUT INDIAN WHOOPS - FOE SLAUGHTERED IN SURPRISE RAID - AMERICANS STRIKE FLANK OF AFRIKA KORPS", etc. etc.

The only newspapers that did not pick up the story were the Army papers in Algiers. This omission made a bad impression on everyone in the 3rd Battalion. They were disappointed that their own newspapers had not given them recognition. Stars and Stripes favored freak news from the rear echelons, they said.

But the pay-off came when a member of Company L received a newspaper clipping, in this case one of those little map inserts published to keep the home front abreast of "the big picture" in Tunisia. Altogether out of scale, this map showed a huge black arrow cutting across southern Tunisia, running all the way from Feriana to Maknassy. At Maknassy, the arrow split into two arrows: one of them hitting Maknassy from the west, the other coiling around and enveloping it from the south, the way Falconieri's Platoon had gone.

The size of the arrows seemed to suggest that at least two divisions had been there!

The men got a kick out of that, too.

\* \* \* \*

Thus, Company L had its desire for prestige satisfied beyond its expectations. A minor action resulted in a surge of high morale. It was not entirely by accident that Colonel Bowen, the battalion commander, accomplished this. He had used the prestige motivation within his battalion to good effect.

It was purely by accident, however, that Company L won newspaper recognition. Bloodier, more deserving company exploits later on were never so publicized nor, for that matter, were their details recorded at all.

Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here. In the next war, it might be good for the record and good for morale if a psychologist, a historian and a reporter were attached to each rifle company in combat.