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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD PLATOON, COMPANY G,
505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY (82ND A/B DIV) ON THE SALM RIVER
IN THE VICINITY OF PETITE HALLEUX, BELGIUM, 18-25 DEC. 1944
(ARDENNES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of Operation Described: PLATOON IN THE DEFENSE
PLATOON IN THE COVERING FORCE

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 The Story of the 82nd Airborne Division in the Battle of the Belgian Bulge in the Siegfried Line and on the Roer River.
- A-2 "Mission Accomplished" -- A Summary of Military Operations of the XVIII Corps (Airborne) in the European Theatre of Operations, 1944-1945.

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 3rd Platoon, Company G, 505th Parachute Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division, in the Battle of the Belgian Bulge, from the beginning until Christmas Day, 1944.

The 82nd Airborne Division, veterans of Sicily, Italy and Normandy, had just been withdrawn from the ill-fated operation "Market" in Holland. On the move from Nijmegen to base camps near Rheims, a keen observer could have noticed three important facts concerning the troops. First, there were fewer of them than there had been when they left departure airdromes in England, 17 September 1944. Second, they were not in the excellent, tip-top physical condition which is characteristic of Airborne soldiers. Third, their clothing and equipment was in need of repair and replacement. (1)

On 17 December, 1944, the 505th Parachute Infantry, located at Camp Suippes, France, was resting from the last campaign and readying itself for the next. Although some replacements had been received and were being assimilated, the arrival of others was anxiously awaited. The regiment was at approximately seventy-five per cent of its authorized strength. About ten per cent of those present were survivors of three campaigns. The S-4 struggled with the problem of regaining the proper level of equipment and supply. Companies started to reestablish the usual high standard of physical proficiency. Training was continuous. (2) (3) (4)

About 2200 hours on the evening of 17 December a group of officers was gathered in the Officers' Club in Suippes drinking Coca-Cola and discussing various military problems when the Regimental Executive Officer entered and called attention. He stated that the Germans had broken through the

(1) Eye Witness, Self; (2) A-1, Preface; (3) A-1, Page 1; (4) Eye Witness, Self.

American lines in Belgium in what looked like a major-scale counter-offensive. The regiment was to be ready to move into combat any time after 0800 hours the following morning. All officers were to proceed to their posts and commands at once and set into motion the thousand and one little cogwheels necessary to field a fighting machine. All combat supplies available were to be issued to the troops immediately, and additional ones distributed as they came in from the supply dumps. (5) (6)

At 0900 hours, 18 December, after a night of feverish preparation, the troops loaded in ten ton semi-trailers and began the 150-mile move to the combat area (see Sketch #1). At 1730 hours the same day, just 22 hours after the Division Commander had received his first warning order, the head of the column reached the crossroads hamlet of Werhomont, Belgium. The troops made a tail-gate jump and took up hasty defensive positions around the strategic crossroads as dusk fell (see Map #2). (7) (8)

No one knew anything about the situation. The usual semi-official and unofficial sources of information were conspicuously quiet that night. Continuous cannon fire to the southeast, toward St. Vith, indicated that there must be American troops fighting in that area. Just as the troops were going into position, they heard gunfire from less than two miles to the east. This was the extent of the briefing. (9)

Before first light on the morning of 19 December, the men made up their rolls and began to move by foot toward the sound of the guns. (All moves henceforth were to be by foot) The head of the column had scarcely gone two miles before they came upon the source of the close firing of the previous evening. Three German Armored Cars and two German self-propelled guns were knocked out on the road and in the ditches, with their occupants sprawled around them in the grotesque attitudes of death. A few soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 119th Infantry, 30th Division, manned a road block here. When the German vehicles, apparently part of the reconnaissance force of a Panzer Division had appeared, they had picked them off with an

(5) A-1, Page 1; (6) Eye Witness, Self; (7) A-1, Page 2; (8, 9) Eye Witness, Self.

antitank gun and rocket launchers. Later, during the night, they had heard a large amount of enemy armor passing northeast on the Habiemont-Rahier road. (10) (11)

The 505th Parachute Infantry continued to push to the east on 19 December. Just after nightfall they went into defensive positions on the high ground north of Haute Bodeux and Basse Bodeux. All of the villagers in this area spoke freely and excitedly of huge German armored forces, which had passed west the previous day. It seemed certain that this was the force whose reconnaissance element had been destroyed at Habiemont and which had turned northeast toward Rahier and La Gleize. The 504th Parachute Infantry made contact with this unit, the 1st SS Panzer Division, at Cheneux, 1400 hours, 20 December. (12) (13) (14)

On 20 December the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, contacted a company of the 51st Combat Engineer Battalion, who had remained in Trois Ponts. Although they had been engaged several times, no major enemy force had passed their road block as yet. The 2nd Battalion relieved them and secured the bridge by placing two companies across the Salm River. (15)

The 3rd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, moved southeast again on the night of 20 December, and before daybreak was in position along the west bank of the Salm River. Company G was in the vicinity of Petite Halleux, the 2nd Platoon on the left, the 3rd Platoon on the right, the 1st Platoon across the river on the high ground beyond Grand Halleux as a combat outpost (see Map #3). (16)

THE DEFENSE AT PETITE HALLEUX

The 3rd Platoon, with an authorized strength of 2 officers and 35 enlisted men, was actually composed of 1 officer and 27 enlisted men. Of these, 4 were veterans of 3 campaigns. The platoon was organized into a platoon headquarters of 6 men, a mortar squad of 5 men, and 2 rifle squads

(10) A-1, Page 2; (11) Eye Witness, Self; (12) A-2, Page 7; (13) Eye Witness, Self; (14, 15) A-1, Page 3; (16) Eye Witness, Self.

of 8 men each. In the platoon headquarters there was a 2-man bazooka section. Each rifle squad was armed with a light machine gun and a BAR team. In addition, in this situation each squad had a heavy machine gun which had been picked up and presented to the platoon by the S-4. The Platoon Leader assigned the regular machine gunners to the heavy guns and gave each of them two inexperienced assistants as understudys. He assigned the regular assistant gunners to the light guns and gave them two ammunition bearers as assistants. The other four men were divided into two BAR teams. This accounted for all of the soldiers in the platoon leaving none to act as riflemen. (17)

The 3rd Platoon line ran from the bridge in Petite Halleux along the railroad embankment to the next crossroads to the south, a distance of 880 yards or half a mile. The automatic weapons were placed in position as shown on the map. The bazooka was placed in position covering the bridge, which was also covered by a bazooka from the 2nd Platoon and a section of .50 caliber machine guns from the 80th Anti-aircraft Battalion. The bridge was prepared for demolition as well, and a man from the 307th Engineer Battalion constantly stood by the switch. The 3rd Platoon Command Post was in a butcher shop-residence in Petite Halleux. The 3rd Platoon Observation Posts were in the attic of this house and the top of the station across the street. The mortar squad was to support the platoon from a position 100 yards south of the platoon command post. The mortar squad and the command group constituted the platoon support, to take care of any enemy breakthrough which might occur. The command post and the mortars were placed near the left flank in view of the importance of the bridge and the town as a likely crossing site. It was felt that the command post and the mortar observation post should be near these key features, and that all weapons should be capable of bearing on the enemy approaches to the bridge. (18)

Extra ammunition and grenades were stacked beside each gun. Range

(17, 18) Eye Witness, Self.

cards were prepared. Wire communication was established from Company G to 3rd Platoon. The platoon command post was connected to the gun positions by sound-powered telephones. One man at each gun position was required to be alert at all hours, day and night, and all men were standing by their guns from one hour before daylight until one half hour after daylight. The Platoon Leader and the Platoon Sergeant took turns inspecting all positions to insure that these orders were complied with. (19)

On 21 December two bonafide cases of sickness developed. One man was evacuated with acute appendicitis and another man had a recurrence of malaria. This left our line really parachute-thin. (20)

The primary mission of this defense was to contain the enemy penetration. The secondary mission was to provide an escape route for the safe withdrawal of the American forces in the St. Vith pocket. On 23 December and 24 December, elements of the 106th Infantry Division and the 7th Armored Division passed through the 1st Battalion lines at Vielsalm, and the mission was accomplished. (21)

THE 1ST SS PANZER DIVISION REPULSED

On the morning of 22 December the 2nd Battalion bridgehead at Trois Ponts was attacked and driven back across the river by a battalion of the 1st SS Panzer Division. The bridge was blown. Later in the day a platoon of Company I which had crossed the river at La Tour to protect the bridge there was driven back and destroyed their bridge. At 1800 hours the SS troops descended from the hills above Grand Halleux in a screaming charge which overran the 1st Platoon outpost and carried to the bridge before it was stopped. The 1st Platoon killed and wounded a considerable number of Germans before they withdrew. Many more were accounted for by the 2nd and 3rd Platoons, the battalion mortars, and the section of .50 caliber machine guns. The SS Troops attacked swiftly and aggressively, with no regard for cover and concealment, yelling "Hande Holte" (hands up), and literally

(19, 20) Eye Witness, Self; (21) A-1, Page 4.

charging in over their own dead. As the last man from the 1st Platoon cleared the bridge, the watching engineer pushed his plunger, and the whole bridge with three Germans already on it lifted 30 feet into the air and disintegrated. (22)

As soon as the bridge was blown, a devastating avalanche of artillery and mortar fire was loosed on Grand Halleux. All automatic weapons continued to pour lead into the town. As dusk fell a white phosphorus round from one of the 3rd Battalion mortars ignited a building in the town. The light from this fire silhouetted any Germans who moved between it and the river, and made them excellent targets for the 3rd Platoon's expert gunners. The enemy suddenly lost interest in crossing; the attack ended as abruptly as it had begun. (23)

Since the enemy removed his dead during the night, the 3rd Platoon cannot claim any accurate figure for the counted dead. Due to the fact that the SS troops kept coming in standing up and the platoon weapons were all sited to cover the approaches to the bridge, a heavy toll of Hitler's best was exacted that evening. During the night the 3rd Platoon listening posts heard armor moving up to just in rear of the town and enemy troops digging in along the river line. (24)

THE GAMMON GRENADES AND THE TANKS

On the night of 23 December, a man from the 1st Platoon, who had remained hidden under a porch in Grand Halleux the previous night, waded and swam back across the river. He reported that the enemy was using ambulances to bring up supplies, that their tank park (platoon size) was behind the church, that their command post was in the church, and that they had an observation post in the church belfry. He estimated the enemy strength in the town to be a reinforced company. All of this information was passed on to battalion headquarters. (25)

(22) A-1, Page 3; (23, 24, 25) Eye Witness, Self.

At midnight the 3rd Platoon was ordered to send out a patrol armed with gammon grenades to locate and neutralize the tanks. A four-man volunteer patrol was selected, briefed, and prepared for the mission. As they did not get started until 0200 hours they did not have many hours of darkness during which to accomplish their mission. They crossed the Salm at the bridge the 1st Battalion still held on the 3rd Platoon's right flank. They made their way to the church, and located the tank park. Each man selected a tank, and on the patrol leader's signal each man threw his two gammon grenades and departed. They met at a rendezvous point and started to make their way straight to the river, as it was almost time for daylight. On their way to the river bank they came upon a platoon of the enemy digging emplacements. They left their calling cards here in the form of hand grenades, plunged into the icy stream chest high, and waded back to the friendly side without casualties. Immediately upon their return, the church was plastered with artillery and mortar fire. (26)

THE TANK DESTROYERS AND THE TANKS

The morning of 24 December dawned clear and fair. This was the first flying weather since the beginning of the counter-offensive, and the friendly P-47's and P-51's were overhead for the first time. The ME-109's were up too, and all hands were busily watching the dog fights many thousands of feet above their heads. (27)

While the attention of the 3rd Platoon was centered on this great air show, approximately two platoons of the enemy began to withdraw from Grand Halleux. Part of this force was walking, and part of it was riding in two American 2½ ton trucks and a German half-tracked vehicle. They were wearing parts of the American uniform. They were nearly half way up the hill when noticed. At the same time, the Platoon Leader observed on the top of the hill, at a range of 1500 yards six mark VI tanks. The Platoon Leader shouted to the Mortar Sergeant to fire on the troops and (26, 27) Eye Witness, Self.

trucks, told the Platoon Sergeant to get machine gun fire on them, and started to run toward the upper end of Petite Halleux to tell the tank destroyer crews of the perfect target the tanks made. He had gone only a few yards however, when he heard a tremendous roar from one of the tank destroyers. Looking up, he saw one of the German tanks burning. Two more shots from the other tank destroyer set another enemy tank ablaze. The tanks made no move to retire, but the tank destroyers would not expose themselves to fire again. The 3rd Platoon mortar and machine guns knocked out one of the American $2\frac{1}{2}$ ton trucks, the German half-tracked vehicle, and about half the personnel trying to escape over the hill. (28)

THE COVERING FORCE

On Christmas Eve the Company Commander visited the 3rd Platoon Command Post. He explained that the Germans had probed all along the 82nd Division front, from north to south, looking unsuccessfully for a soft spot. The thin line could not stretch any farther to the south, and the enemy was now in process of turning the Division's right flank. Accordingly, the Commanding General, 21st Army Group, had commanded the Commanding General, 82nd Airborne Division to withdraw. The Company Commander ordered the Platoon Leader to assume command of the Company Covering Force. (29) (30) (31)

The Covering Force was to remain behind when the Main Body moved out at midnight, to hold the present line until 0500 hours 25 December, and then to withdraw to the new defensive position near Basse Bodeux. The Covering Force was composed of a squad from each platoon in the company. The commander of the Covering Force kept only BAR's, bazookas, and one 60mm mortar. All other heavy weapons were sent to the rear with the Main Body. The Battalion Covering Force Commander kept a section of 81mm mortars to support the Battalion Covering Force. (32)

Each squad leader was instructed to take over the frontage formerly

(28) Eye Witness, Self; (29) A-1, Page 7; (30) A-2, Page 7; (31) A-2, Page 10;

(32) Eye Witness, Self.

held by his entire platoon and to use the former Platoon Command Post. He was to patrol his front constantly, to fire on any enemy who tried to cross the river, to keep a man on the phone at all times, and to withdraw only on order of the Covering Force Commander. The wire was to be left in, but on withdrawal the squad leaders were to cut out a section every fifty yards, making it worthless to the enemy. The Commander of the Covering Force would be in the former Company Command Post. (33)

When the tank destroyers moved out shortly after dark, it sounded like an armored division to the men of the Covering Force. When the Main Body moved out at midnight, it sounded like an army to the men who were to remain behind. Surely all this movement must be audible to the enemy, a scant 200 yards away. In the hope of distracting the enemy's attention from the noise of the troop movement, the Commander of the Covering Force ordered the 60mm mortar to lob a few rounds into Grand Halleux. As the crew of this weapon had a large supply of ammunition they did not care to carry back to the new position, they fired with a will, and with very good results. (34)

This mortar fire ignited a building on the enemy side of the river which silhouetted them if they moved. At the same time the glare from this fire prevented them from seeing the 3rd Platoon in the bright moonlight. (35)

The squads phoned in negative reports half-hourly until 0230 hours when the one on the left reported a very large enemy patrol passing to their left, between them and Company I. When fired on, it had merely deviated to the north, and the squad leader thought it had crossed the railroad track. Battalion headquarters, Company I, and the other two squads of Company G were notified that there was a large enemy patrol behind friendly lines. (36)

At 0400 hours another enemy patrol passed through the line held by the Covering Force. This one turned the right flank to the accompaniment

(33, 34, 35, 36) Eye Witness, Self.

of a flurry of small arms fire. The Commander of the Covering Force reported this to 3rd Battalion Headquarters and received permission to begin withdrawing. He notified all squad leaders to assemble their men and rendezvous at the schoolhouse in Petite Halleux at 0430 hours. Then he started a grass fire in a small lot and scattered .30 caliber ammunition all over the lot. At 0500 hours, as the burning ammunition exploded and a squad of the 307th Engineer Battalion mined the road, the little group marched up over the hill. Four hours and ten miles later they were in the new defensive position at Basse Bodeux. Thus ended the first phase of the Battle of the Belgian Bulge for the 3rd Platoon of Company G. (37)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The fact that Airborne troops make an ideal reserve became more apparent than ever in this campaign. The aggressive spirit of these troops, their self-sufficiency in combat, and their flexibility and mobility, make them ideal for throwing into the area of opportunity or reverse. Used to confusion and the "fog of battle" in the first few days of combat they acquitted themselves admirably during the Battle of the Belgian Bulge, where no small-unit commanders knew what the picture was, and most of the senior commanders were in the same boat for the first few days. A situation of this sort might tend to destroy the morale of an average soldier, but the paratrooper actually fights better when isolated and surrounded.

During this phase of this campaign only oral and fragmentary orders were issued. Paragraph one of any Field Order which might have been issued would have been extremely sketchy, because G-2 and G-3 just didn't have the knowledge of the friendly troops and the enemy in the area. The operation was unique for the Airborne troops because they went into it "cold". Usually they spent weeks planning and rehearsing for their initial mission. Here they didn't even know the situation after they had been committed. Be it to their everlasting credit that they fought bravely,

(37) Eye Witness, Self.

well and successfully in spite of the dearth of information. The fragmentary oral orders worked too, because the staffs and commanders had just finished a campaign in which they had learned to work together and to understand each other. Junior officers had developed the ability to "get into the minds" of their superiors.

One of the most interesting things about this entire action was the attitude of the men toward the withdrawal ordered for Christmas Eve. They did not like it, and they openly criticized it. If they could have been looking down from a mile high airplane and could have seen the Germans turning the division's right flank they might have taken a more conciliatory view toward this retrograde movement. The division history was filled with phrases like, "Thirty-three days of action without relief, without replacements; every mission accomplished, no ground gained ever relinquished." Such phrases are good brave-sounding passages for a division history, and quite true of the division up until this time. But here they gave up ground, on orders, and they gave it up skillfully and expertly. They did not suffer heavy casualties in disengaging. They were not driven out; they withdrew on order. It was a good thing for the division to take a few steps backward. It rounded out their military repertoire.

One of the main reasons for the success of this speedily ordered and hastily executed mission was the Division Commander's policy that "Training is continuous". In the introduction it was stated that the troops were resting. This does not mean that the men were lying around in their bunks during the days after their return from Holland. No, they were busily training, welding the replacements into the machine, and brushing up on the phases of combat which they had not used in the campaign in Holland. This accounts for their ability to leap into action so rapidly.

The flexibility of the Airborne troops was illustrated by their ability to take advantage of the extra heavy machine guns although they had been trained on and had always used light machine guns. Training on the use of the heavy machine gun was actually conducted on the main line of resistance.

It was surprising that the patrol on the night of 23-24 December was successful and suffered no casualties. It was ordered so late that there was insufficient time for complete reconnaissance, briefing, and preparation. In fact, there was not sufficient time for the patrol to accomplish its mission before daylight without dangerous hurrying.

There were present in the 3rd Battalion a number of men who had contracted malaria in Sicily. Every time these men were exposed to wet, cold, and fatigue, they had a recurrence of the disease. Therefore, as combat effectives, they were not of any value. The hospitals would treat them until they were back on their feet, then they would send them back to the battalion. As soon as the battalion went into field living these men would have another relapse.

The successful repulsion of the SS attack on the Grand Halleux-Petite Halleux bridge was the direct result of the realization by all commanders that this was a war of roads. It was obvious that there were panzer divisions probing the road network in this area looking for a weak spot to break through to Namur and Liege. Consequently, all weapons in the Petite Halleux defense line were placed with an eye to their possible employment against an attack on the bridge. This placement of weapons paid dividends on the night of 22 December.

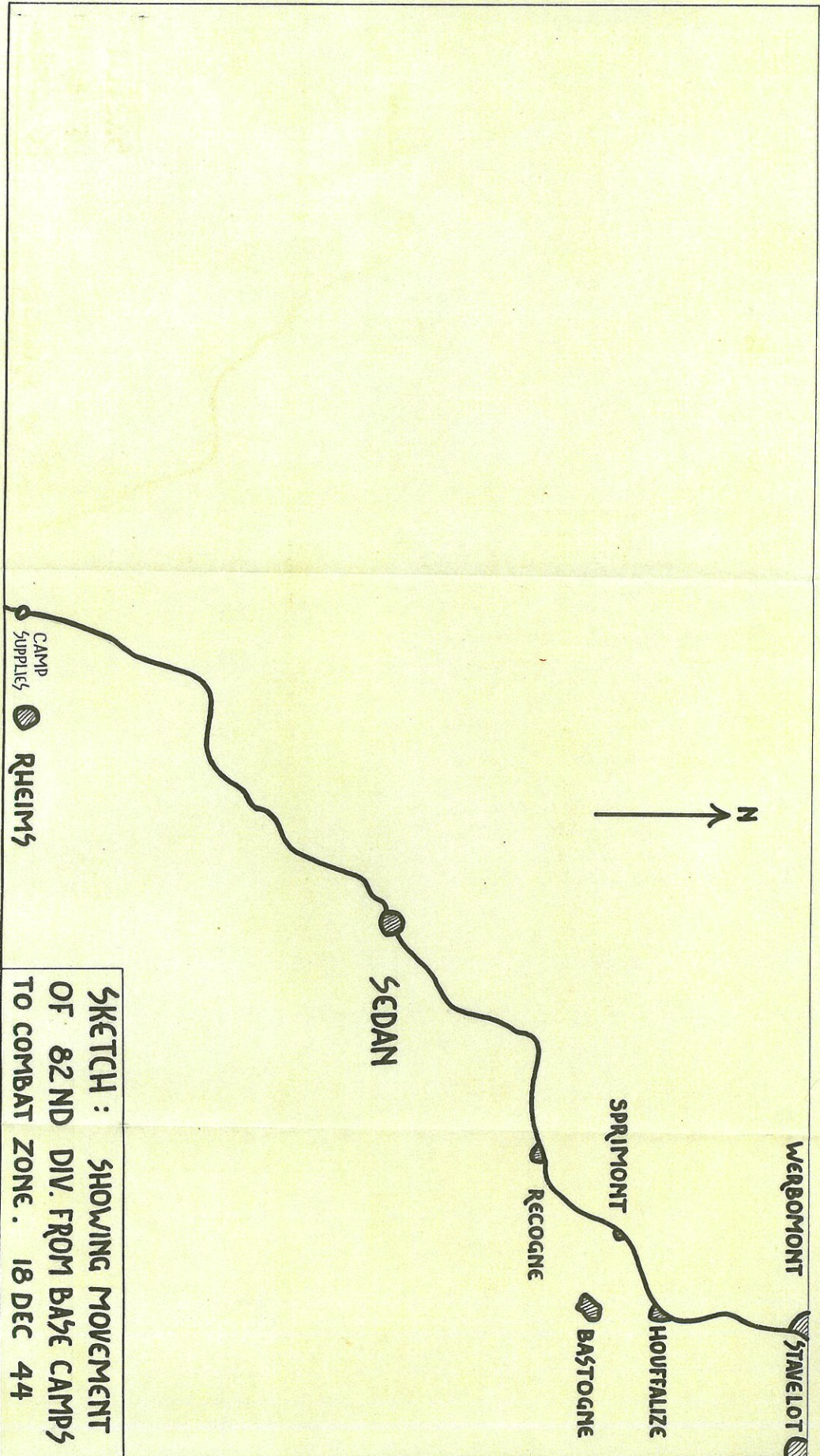
The Germans in Grand Halleux took good advantage of the air show on 24 December to withdraw part of their force. The enemy formation was halfway up the hill before they were noticed by the Americans, who were busily engrossed in watching the dog fights overhead.

The Germans captured supplies and rations when they overran the American lines in their initial break-through. They used the American uniforms they captured to clothe their own troops. Therefore, it was impossible to tell from a distance whether a soldier was friend or foe.

LESSONS LEARNED

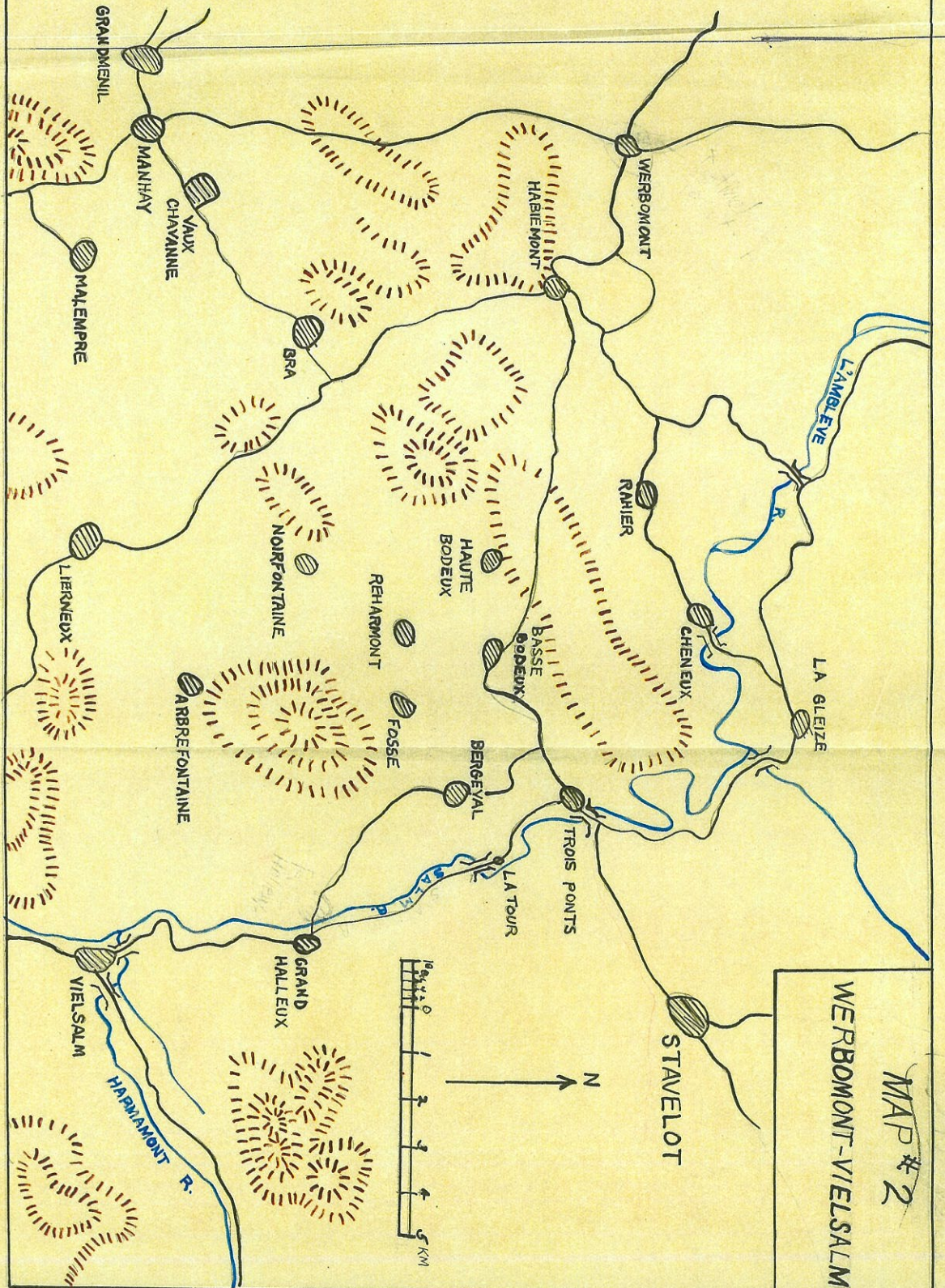
1. The proper, judicious, and timely use of the reserve can and often does spell the difference between victory and defeat.

2. Small units, knowing their mission, can operate without knowing the details of the "big picture".
3. In a retrograde movement, the main body of troops should retire unobtrusively to keep the covering force from being overrun by an enemy attack.
4. In assigning patrols, higher headquarters should allow sufficient time to subordinate units to give proper briefing and preparation, to include daylight reconnaissance, if possible.
5. Flexibility is essential to the defense.
6. Men who contract malaria should be evacuated to the Zone of the Interior.
7. Training must be continuous.
8. Replacement must be continuous.
9. Friendly civilians can be an extremely valuable source of enemy information.
10. Defense against armor should pay special attention to covering bridges.
11. The use of white phosphorus to light fires behind the enemy during night defensive operations is of inestimable value.

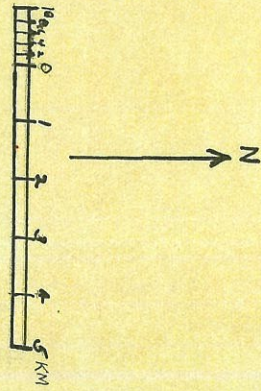


SKETCH : SHOWING MOVEMENT
OF 82ND DIV. FROM BASTOGNE
TO COMBAT ZONE . 18 DEC 44

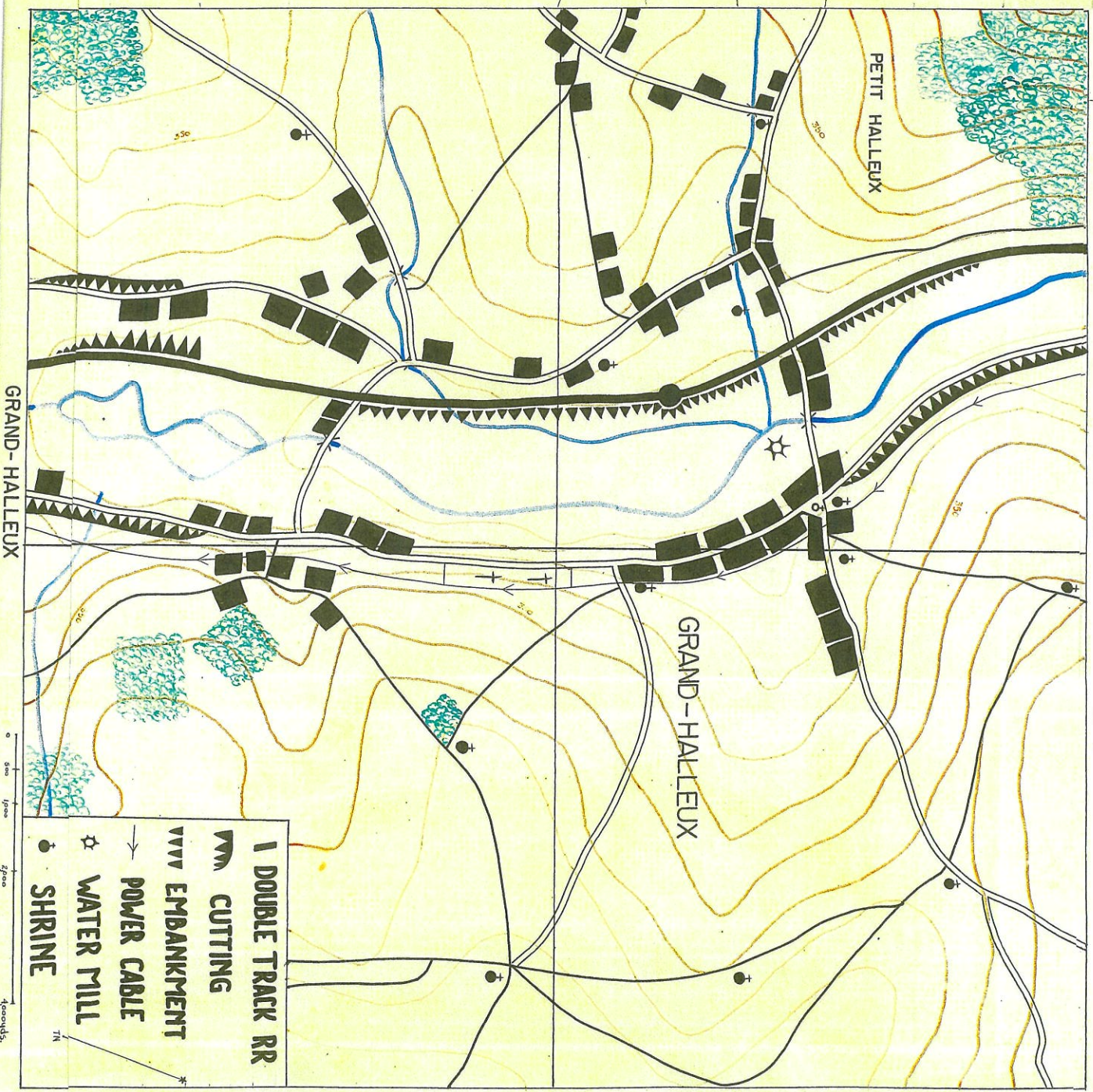
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MAP # 2
WERBOMONT-VIELSALM



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MAP 3