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THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST BATTALION, 86TH
MOUNTAIN INFANTRY REGIMENT (10TH MOUNTAIN
DIVISION) ON RIVA RIDGE
17-22 FEBRUARY 1945
(NORTH APENNINES CAMPAIGN, ITALY)
(Personal experience of a Heavy Weapons Com-
pany Commander)

Type of operation described:
BATTALION IN A NIGHT ATTACK

Captain Erwin G. Nilsson, Infantry

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the First Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment on Riva Ridge during the capture of Monte Salvadore, Italy by the 10th Mountain Division, from 17 February to 22 February, 1945.

January 1945 found the Italian front for the most part buried deep in snow or freezing mud. Progress of the Allied Armies in Italy had ceased with the advent of winter in November 1944. (1) Though the forward progress had been halted, the bitterness of the fighting had not been diminished as only troops engaged in limited objective fighting and patrolling knew. While the spot light was on the battle for Germany both in the East and the West, there was an estimated 25 Divisions of undefeated and aggressive Germans in Northern Italy (2) still to be accounted for in the final battle. These troops were available to fill the southern border and furnish the bulk of the troops for the anticipated last ditch stand of the Germans in the so called "Southern Redoubt". (3)

The Western half of the front of the 15th Army Group was occupied by the American Fifth Army composed of the Second Corps on the right and the Fourth Corps on the left. During January and February of 1945, the Fourth Corps occupied a front of some 54 miles in very rugged and mountainous terrain with two American Infantry Divisions, a separate

(1) A-3, p.3; (2) A-2, p. 335; (3) A-3, p. 64;

~~Concrete~~ infantry regiment composed of converted AAA units learning to be infantrymen the hard way, training by fighting the enemy. Together with the American troops was the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, of about one Division size and a varying number of Italian Partisans. The sector of the Fourth Corps extended from the Ligurian Coast east to and included the Reno River and Highway 64, through the heart of the Apennine Mountains with elevations running from sea level to 7000 feet. Most of the front was covered with varying amounts of mud to six feet of snow and as a result cross country operations for forces larger than patrols were well nigh impossible. (4)

Late in January the 10th Mountain Division was given the mission of clearing hostile forces from the high ground surrounding Forretta Terme, near the confluence of the Silla and Reno Rivers on Highway 64, an important North-South Italian highway. The Silla River enters the Reno a few hundred yards north of Forretta. The area in and around Forretta Terme offered the first and largest piece of flat terrain north of the Arno Valley within the IVth Corps sector for installations. It was, with this thought in mind that the above mission was given to the 10th Mountain Division, for, if German observation was cleared from the high ground, this would give the Corps room for future operations, perhaps sufficient supplies and installations could be established in the IVth Corps area, for it to make the main effort in the inevitable all out drive to destroy the German in Northern Italy. (5)

TERRAIN FEATURES

The actual summit of Monte Belvedere lies some five

miles northwest of Forretta. A high ridge runs northeast from Monte Belvedere which dominates the valley area of the Reno River north of Forretta for some seven miles. Highway 64 runs north, from Pistola in the Arno Valley, to Bologna in the Po Valley and is an important hard surfaced two lane highway. After reaching the summit of the Apennines travelling from Pistola north, the highway drops into a deep jagged canyon and emerges into a more gentle valley near Forretta and from there it follows the Reno River on to the Po Valley. (6)

However, the Forretta area was completely dominated by German observation altho it was well behind the American lines. In order for any activity to take place in the valley during daylight hours it was necessary to fill the valley with smoke which was done by means of a Chemical Corps smoke generator installation at Silla. This pretty well covered the Silla-Forretta area but was contingent upon wind conditions and the Germans still secured sufficient observation to make anything other than front line installations untenable. (7)

The Silla River flows east partly supplied by tributaries arising from the southern slopes of Monte Belvedere and from the eastern slope of the local divide running between Monte Belvedere and Monte Grande, a peak to the west of Forretta. Upon the northern slopes of Monte Grande lie the resort towns of Vidiciatico and Lizzano, in pre-war times, Apennine ~~and~~ resorts. The front lines bent to the west and south from Vidiciatico and ended near a small village called La Ga, from here, there was a gap of some 8 miles in the front lines to the nearest friendly position

to the west. The intervening area was rough and jagged and was covered with two feet to six feet of snow. This area was patrolled by both friendly and hostile ski patrols to assure no undue activity by either side. (8)

To the west of Vidiciatico, rising immediately above La Ga and running generally northeast was the very rugged and precipitous escarpment known as Campiano - Mancinello Ridge, subsequently named Riva Ridge by members of the 10th Mountain Division, after one of its higher points, and hereafter in this monograph this terrain feature will be called Riva Ridge. Riva Ridge extends from the summit of the Apennines and its highest peak, Monte Spigolino (elevation in feet is given for this and succeeding peaks, 6050) generally to the northwest some seven miles in a series of gradually lowering peaks. In order, to the north following Monte Spigolino are: Cingio Sermidiano (5400), Terra dei Barchetti (5009), Lo Piaggio (4887), Cingio del Suro (4738), Monte Mancinello (4917), Monte Riva (4672), Monte Serranocchia (4593), Monte Capel Buse (3798) and Pizzo di Campiano (3175), and from Campiano the ridge abruptly drops down into the Dardagna Valley. (9)

This monograph deals largely with the last four terrain features and for simplicity the peaks will be numbered, Points 1 to 4, starting with Pizzo di Campiano Point 1, Capel Buse Point 2, Serranocchia Point 3 and Mancinello Point 4.

Extending to the northwest from Point 3 is a ridge, for operational purposes, called ridge "X", which sloped gradually into the Fanaro valley near the enemy held town of Fanaro. (10)

From the base of Point 1 to the summit of Belvedere is a distance of some 3000 yards and through this gap emerges the Dardagna River to join the Senaro River a thousand yards to the north. Running immediately below the precipitous eastern face of Riva Ridge is the Dardagna River with an elevation of 2475 feet at the base of Point 4 dropping to 1650 feet as it passes the base of Point 1. (11)

There are no sharp breaks or passes in the ridge but it gradually lowers toward its northern terminus. The eastern face is abrupt and bold being a series of cliffs, ledges and buttresses with sharp steep shoulders emerging from the summit and extending down to the valley floor. Between these shoulders are precipitous ravines or canyons. The western face of the ridge, on the other hand, is much more gentle and rolling, gradually descending into the Senaro Valley. The lower slopes are open and conifer groves cover the higher slopes but are not at all thick or dense. There is little vegetation on the eastern face, except on protected ledges and sheltered coves, as most of the face is exposed to rock and snow avalanches. (12)

While Belvedere dominates the Reno Valley in the vicinity of Porretta, it was apparent to the most casual observer, that Riva Ridge completely controlled the southern slopes of Belvedere and the German lines from Rocca Cornetta through Polla, Gerona and on to the summit of Belvedere. Any large scale troop movements in the upper Cilla Valley, any activity west of the Belvedere-Grande divide on which Vidinatico is located is subject to observation from the northern end of Riva Ridge. Thus while capture of Belvedere would eliminate hostile

observation on the Sella fields, any attempt to capture Belvedere before controlling Riva Ridge would be most difficult and perhaps disastrous. (13)

PRELIMINARY RECONNAISSANCE

During the month of January while the First Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry held the Vidiciatico defensive sector, a directive was received from Regiment directing the Battalion, (hereafter the First Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment will be simply referred to as 'the Battalion'), to reconnoiter for routes and determine the feasibility of moving troops onto the summit of the six northerly peaks. Maps showed trails to Point 1, 2 and 4, but no reliable information could be secured about these trails, and more over, they were buried under deep snow. In accordance with the above instructions, patrols were sent out to locate and reconnoiter routes. (14)

On 15 January a patrol led by Sgt. Casperson of Company B was directed to reconnoiter for possible routes of approach to Point 1. This patrol after studying the terrain so timed its departure as to reach the apparently difficult portions of the trail at dawn and continue on towards the summit in daylight. This patrol located a substantial bridge across the Bardagna River at Pianacci, which was later used. The patrol reported back the following information, the trail as shown on the map existed, however at the present time it was largely obliterated by the deep snow and in one portion where it led down into a ravine it steepness of the slope at this place, fixed ropes would be

necessary to enable fully armed men loaded with extra ammunition and rations to pass with any degree of safety. This patrol further reported that enemy had been contacted just short of the summit, as they approached the summit they heard a dog bark and the patrol took cover on a ledge beneath a cliff. Immediately thereafter several Germans appeared above them, but did not locate the patrol. Sgt. Freelicher, a patrol member called in German "Hands Up" but one 'Jerry' went for his gun and the patrol fired, knocking both down but immediately a machine gun opened up and the patrol jumped down over a few ledges and was soon under defilade of the cliffs and made their way back to the American lines. (15)

A patrol led by 1st Lieutenant George Schiomer of B Company several days later reconnoitered toward Point 2, crossing the Bardagna on the Pianassi bridge. The patrol proceeded with out incident to a point just short of the summit where they contacted the enemy but managed to withdraw undetected. The trail as shown on the map existed and was a substantial trail and after packed by several hundred men could be used for mule pack. However, a disagreeable feature was the location of the trail which followed a ridge crest with steep broken cliffs dropping away on both sides. The crest could be raked with automatic fire from numerous spots on the summit ridge. If an alert ^{ENEMY} was encountered on this route it could be easily denied as there was absolutely no place to maneuver or to gain the summit without using the crest of the ridge. (16)

The rock buttress with its broken cliffs, vertical chutes and ledges leading to Point 3 during this period was

untenable even for a small reconnaissance party due to the avalanches resulting from the heavy snows, consequently no detailed information could be obtained regarding routes to Point 3. However, it was apparent to a most casual observer that to negotiate the sheer cliffs and gullies of the buttress which guarded Point 3, would require detailed and tedious reconnaissance plus a good deal of mountain sense. It was a mountaineering problem, first, a constant problem, second. (17)

Attempts to locate routes to Point 4 were unavailing, although Lieutenant Gordon Anderson of Company A did considerable work in this area. The long distances involved, required a patrol to remain beyond our lines for 18 hours and besides the enemy, it was a long and arduous ski trip. However, Lt. Anderson found a suitable crossing over the Dardagna near Poggioforato. Late in January a "weasel" (M-29) trail was broken into Poggioforato and it was planned to garrison this town ^{to} enable close reconnaissance on Point 4. However, before this could be accomplished the Battalion was relieved of the Vidiciatico defensive sector. (18)

TRAINING FOR THE OPERATION

This was the status of the information about the ridge when the Regiment reverted to IVth Corps reserve and was ordered to bivouac in the vicinity of Luoga. (19)

Here the Battalion rehabilitated itself, after three weeks of front line duty, though in a quiet sector, the ravages of the harsh climate and the inadequate living conditions of a trench in four feet of snow had taken its

toll in physical deterioration along with the actual casualties.

After a few hot meals, hot baths, clean clothes and several nights of good sleep, the Battalion was ready to go to work in preparation for the coming Belvedere operation. First in priority was physical conditioning, for in a sense the terrain and weather was to be a more vicious enemy than the German. Besides the rugged slopes of Riva Ridge itself, there was an average vertical ascent of some 2500 feet, through snow and ice. In addition to this there would be a 10 to 14 mile march from the detrucking point over rugged mountain trails to the various areas of departure. So, the question which confronted the Battalion commander was, "Is it physically possible to put 500 men on the summit of Riva Ridge". (20)

The Battalion training program consisted largely of conditioning marches with heavy packs over the roughest and steepest terrain in the vicinity. A rock climbing course was set up to refresh the memory of the men in the installation and handling themselves on a fixed rope over precipitous rock. Also, there was some one hundred replacements who in two weeks of working with trained mountaineers performed very credibly. A mountaineer cannot be trained in two weeks, but by placing green men with experienced personnel and giving them some mental conditioning along with the technical training, they are able to care for themselves with little assistance from their friends. (21)

Task forces were organized for each point to be assaulted and were thoroughly trained together. They went through exercises of unassisted action both against the ground and

the enemy. Thirty of the reinforcements were organized into a porter platoon to assist in ammunition resupply. All weapons were checked and test fired. Four short tube 61 M.M. Mortars (Jugla Mortar), with the 60 M.M. Mortar bipod and base plate, were issued to the heavy weapons company. (22)

A sand table model of the ridge was built which enabled all leaders and men to become thoroughly familiar with the terrain as it affected their plans and their part therein. Excellent photographs and maps, 1 to 25000 were available, and maps were distributed to each platoon. Explicit and detailed orders and plans from battalion down to and including the squad were developed and thoroughly rehearsed until understood by all. (23)

FINAL RECONNAISSANCE

On 12 February an advance party consisting of one officer and a reconnaissance detail from each company, together with the Battalion intelligence section, all under the direction of the Battalion S-2, 1st Lt. Wilson Ware moved to La Ca. La Ca had previously been garrisoned by troops of the Battalion, so information available to the Battalion of this area was quite complete. Mission of the advance party was, to select a battalion C.P., company C.P.'s, company assembly areas, areas of departure and to reconnoiter the designated routes of approach in order to ascertain their conditions resulting from the unseasonal thaw, which had occurred shortly after 1 February and was continuing. Since no route had yet been found up Point 3, 1st Lt. John McJannet was assigned this task, as this officer was the best qualified and experienced mountaineer within the Battalion. The

Battalion Commander Smith, this period was by flight over the ridge to become thoroughly familiar with the terrain and to receive any last minute enemy information that might be visible. (24)

Between 12 February and the arrival of the Battalion, the advance party definitely located routes to all points to be assaulted. (25) The thaw had turned the valley floor into knee deep mud during the afternoon hours and a sheet of ice at night. The thaw had appreciably reduced the depth of the snow on the east face of the ridge but at the same time presented the problem of ice at night and made footing very difficult and tricky. Patrols on Point 1 route reported the slide portion to be practically a gushing waterfall in the afternoon hours and at night almost a vertical sheet of ice, which would require installation of fixed ropes and step chopping. (26) Lt. McGown reported that he had routes to Point 3 located which were satisfactory altho considerable roping would be required and very slow progress could be expected. Lt. Anderson continued his reconnaissance for routes to Point 4 and reported that he had things pretty well in hand. However the crossing of the Dardagna at Poggioforato was going to present a problem now that it was swollen by the thaw. (27)

All patrols but one during this period had escaped enemy detection except one patrol to Point 1, which had been severely mortared. Apparently the enemy had an advance listening post on the trail and mortar fire had been called as the patrol approached. (28)

PLANS AND ORDERS

On 16 February 1945, Lt. Col. Harry J. Hampton, the Battalion Commander was handed Field Order No. 3, formally published that day by the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, which consolidated into writing, oral directives and instructions which had been previously issued. Field Order No. 3 directed the Battalion "to attack, seize and hold Cammaso Ridge (east side) from D-Day at Cammaso south to and including Cingio del Suro prior to daylight of D day". (29)

The mission of the Battalion as contained in Field Order No. 3 was three fold:

1. Attack Riva Ridge north of but including Cingio del Suro, occupy, organize and defend its key terrain features to deny enemy observation on the south slopes of Monte Belvedere. (The division attacks Monte Belvedere at 2300 D day.)
2. Protect the left flank of the Division. (Remember the Division was attacking with an exposed left flank).
3. Support by fire and aid by observation the left Regiment (87th Mountain Infantry Regiment) in its attack against Monte Belvedere. (30)

Further, by holding Riva Ridge a vast portion of heretofore concealed German terrain was under American observation one of the few times during the war, (31) and eliminated the possibility of undisclosed shifting of enemy reserves in this area.

Units attached or in support of the Battalion: (32)

1. 605 Field Artillery Battalion, reinforced by the balance of the 10th Mountain Division artillery until 2300 hours D day.
2. Seven 81 caliber Machine Guns, manned by H Company, 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment fired from positions in the vicinity of attacks and in Ca. in direct support.

4. One platoon of tank ~~ammunition~~ in position for direct fire.
5. One platoon of 4.2 inch ~~ammunition~~ Mortars in direct support.
6. Co. B 126th Mountain Engineer Battalion in direct support.
7. Collecting Company, 10th Mountain Medical Battalion in direct support.
8. F Company 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment, attached.
9. Two squads, Alpini Pack Mules, Italian.
10. Porter Platoon, Service Company 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment, attached, this platoon consisted of fifty men for back packing.

In planning for the operation, one cardinal principle stood out above all others, surprise. The attack would have to be initiated and carried to its conclusion in utter secrecy. An alert enemy with but few weapons and men could hold a most determined attacker at bay. The routes to the summit were few, there was no area for maneuver, routes of approach were canalized, by cliffs and unpassable terrain, to exposed shoulders and ridges. The only method by which attackers could reach the summit was in column formation. (33) Very few machine guns properly placed could deny an attacker the summit. Another element to a successful movement to the summit, was complete and adequate reconnaissance. So there resulted a delicate balance between secrecy and reconnaissance since a successful assault demanded both.

The plan of maneuver as developed by the Battalion Commander was to seize the four northerly dominate terrain features by individually self contained task forces. The extent to which each force might ultimately be able to support another would remain largely uncertain until the ~~side was notified.~~ It appeared from a map study and

visual reconnaissance that the two northern most peaks were critical points so far as the Division was concerned, as enemy observation south of Point 2 would not be so valuable for the enemy and observation from Point 1 was essential if the Battalion was to properly execute its mission of assisting the attack by artillery observation and direct fire from the Battalion's own weapons. Fortunately the best approach to the ridge led to Point 2 which dominated the ridge from there on north, and ultimately proved capable of supporting Point 3. It was therefore planned that the strongest force should occupy Point 2. (34)

As a result of this planning the following task forces were organized:

- Force "A" - Objective Point 1, Trail 1 (Pizzo di Sampiano). One Rifle Platoon, Company "A"
 One section Light Machine Guns, A-5, attached
 One Artillery Forward Observer Party.
 Two Litter Squads, attached.
 Under command of 2nd Lt. James Loose, "A" Company.
- Force "B" - Objective Point 2, Trail 2 (Monte Capel Buso).
 One Rifle Company, Company "B".
 One Machine Gun Platoon, 2nd Platoon Company "D", equipped initially with Light Machine Guns, but heavy machine guns to be brought up D day, attached.
 Two sections 81 M.M. Mortars, 1st and 2nd sections Mortar Platoon Company "D", one section equipped with short tube Mortar, attached.
 Two Litter Squads, attached.
 One Artillery Forward Observer Party.
 Under command of Captain Kenneth Slegmann, "B" Company.
- Force "C" - Objective Point 3, Trail 3 (Monte Serracella)
 One Rifle Company, Company "C".
 One Machine Gun Platoon, 1st platoon Company "D" equipped with Light Machine Guns, attached.
 One section 81 M.M. Mortars, 3rd section Mortar Platoon Company "D" equipped with short tube mortars, attached.
 Three Litter Squads, attached.

(34) A-11, Conversation with Battalion Commander, Lt. Colonel Harry J. ...

Force "D" - Objective Point 4, Trail 4 (Route
Machinista).
One Rifle Company less one platoon,
Company "D".
Two Litter Squads, attached.
One Pioneer Squad, attached.
One Forward Artillery Observer Party.
Under command of Captain William Niedner,
"A" Company.

Force "E" - Objective Point 5, Trail 5 (Cingio Del
Bura).
One Rifle Company, Company "E".
One Machine Gun Platoon, 1st platoon
Company "E", attached.
One 81 M.M. Mortar Section, Mortar Platoon
Company "E", attached.
Two Litter Squads, attached.
One Artillery Forward Observer Party.
Under command of Captain Percy Hideout,
Company "E". (35)

Force "E" was to provide left flank security for the
Battalion until it had secured itself on the ridge at which
time it would be withdrawn. (36) Suffice it to say, that
force "E" accomplished its mission and shall not be further
considered in this monograph.

The final plans for the assault of the ridge were
approved by the Battalion Commander and issued to all con-
cerned several days prior to the receipt of the Regimental
Field Order. The Battalion Field Order was meticulous in
detail but simple in plan. The attack would be launched
immediately after dark on D minus 1. This should allow
sufficient time for the Battalion to reach the summit to
comply with its orders. If any force experienced serious
enemy resistance as it neared the objective, it would be
able to assault the objective at daylight with artillery
and mortar support and more intelligently maneuver, provid-
ing of course, there was any room in which to maneuver. (37)

As surprise was number one priority, it was decided
to forego any artillery preparation.

and comprehensive fire plan was drawn up. There was to be no registration of fires until the objective had been gained. If serious enemy resistance was met, artillery would be available to any task force on call. (38)

Radio silence would be maintained from the time the Battalion entered the area until its objective had been attained or the Battalion was engaged in a fight, the Battalion Command net would be opened when the attack jumped off, but no transmissions until the enemy was aware of the presence of the Battalion. (39)

Wire was laid to all company departure areas the night of D minus 2 and each assaulting force was to lay wire as it progressed up the ridge, and in this manner the Battalion Commander would be in constant communication with each group. Wire could easily be laid as this was not going to be any fast moving situation, but on the contrary, mighty slow, and further, wire communication would be in when the Battalion changed over from the attack to the defense. (40)

Direct fire support for the 67th Mountain Infantry Regiment would be furnished by four .50 caliber Machine Guns, to be placed in position on Point 1 and manned by a provisional platoon from D Company. The guns and ammunition were to be packed to Point 2 by the Porter Platoon of Regimental Service Company and would be moved down the ridge to Point 1 by D Company so as to be in position by daylight of D plus one. (41)

A 75 MM Pack Howitzer to be manned by the Battalion Antitank Platoon would be fired from a position just below

Regiment. The piece and ammunition would be moved

position by the two squads of Alpini Peak Mules. (42)

A difficult decision was reached by the Battalion Commander as to what personal equipment would be carried by the assaulting troops. It was mid winter on a high mountain ridge with deep snow and cold nights. (43) Finally it was decided that each man would carry one K ration, an extra pair of heavy wool socks, arms and extra ammunition including one pound of mortar ammunition and the normal issue winter clothing. No bedding, blankets or packs would be taken to the summit until such time as the ammunition supply was adequate. A limited number of sleeping bags were taken to the summit to protect casualties prior to and during evacuation. (44)

It was physically impossible for men laden with packs to make the initial assault. A risk of casualties from exposure had to be taken in order to avoid loss during the assault from exhaustion. (45)

Force "C" was given the additional mission of clearing ridge "X" of enemy as soon as it had secured Point 3 and if it proved to be difficult, Force "C" would be relieved of responsibility of Point 3 and then be able to concentrate its entire weight against ridge "X". Ridge "X" appeared to be critical, a natural route of approach from the vicinity of Fagnano where the German reserves were thought to be. (46)

The Battalion was to march from the detrucking point near Parretta to the base of the ridge during the night of D minus two, a march of between ten to fourteen miles varying for units, over rough mountain trails through freezing mud, ice and snow. Extra ammunition and two rations would be issued along the way. Some animal husbandry would be

several miles beyond Valsaiatese. The Battalion would separate at Valsaiatese in order to reach the assembly areas with a minimum of marching. (47)

The advance party had quietly surveyed the small villages at the base of the ridge and had selected sufficient houses in the departure areas to conceal the troops during the day of D minus 1, as this would give the troops a good rest and insure secrecy. The village would be sealed up to prevent any gossip from reaching improper ears. Departure area for Forces "A" and "B" was in Pianacci and Ca di Julio, near the bridge at the beginning of their route. Force "C" would billet in Miglianti and "D" at Poggioforatto. It was necessary to use the villages as departure areas as there was no other adequate concealment. (48)

It was necessary to set up three aid stations, one in each departure area as there were no lateral routes of communication along the base of the ridge. Evacuation was to be a difficult problem. Litter hauls had to be made by hand on all routes, even though mules were subsequently available on route to Point 2, because of the excessive steepness. Personnel from the division collecting company assisted in the evacuation from the field to the Battalion Aid Station. All Porter parties and ammunition carriers assisted with evacuation. However, it did require six to eight men from six to eight hours to carry a casualty from the ridge to an aid station. One litter team was good for one round trip every 24 hours. To state it mildly, evacuation in the mountains is a problem which can be solved only by hard work and patience. (49)

Company B 125th Mountain Engineer Battalion constructed

by D plus 1 an aerial tramway 1/3rd the distance up to Point 2 and this reduced the time and effort spent in evacuation and resupply correspondingly. (50)

D day was set for 19 February 1945, and the Battalion entrucked at 1100 on 17 February for the 85 mile trip to Parrotta, detrucking at a nearby point called Castelluccio at dusk. The Battalion closed into its assembly areas just prior to daylight of D minus 1. (51)

ENEMY INFORMATION

Enemy installations and personnel had been contacted by the Battalion on Points 1 and 2, observed on ridge "X" and in the saddle between Points 3 and 4. Enemy positions extended from Point 1, through Rocca Cornetta, Polla, Corona and on to the summit of Monte Belvedere. (52) Corps G-2 identified the unit on Riva Ridge as the 7th Company, 1044th Regiment, 232nd Division. (53) The Battalion itself had secured no identification of the unit on the ridge.

Fartisans reported that a unit known as the 4th Mountain Battalion was in the vicinity of Fanano. Corps G-2 on 17 February predicted that this unit could be expected to counter-attack on the Ridge within 24 hours after our attack. (54) On 20 February, prisoners from the 4th Mountain Battalion were taken. (55)

Prisoners from these two different units were as different as day and night, those from the 7th Company were a sad looking lot, old men and boys scraped, apparently, from the bottom of the Reich manpower barrel, while those from the 4th Mountain Battalion were finely equipped, possessed good morale, at least as good as that possessed by any

(50) A-7, Personal Knowledge; (51) A-9, p. 29, Personal Know-

German troops at this stage of the war, and were generally fine physical specimens. One of the reports called the 4th Mountain Battalion, "An excellent group of experienced mountain troops". (56)

It was estimated that garrisoning the triangle between Fanano, Monte Spigolino and Point 1 were some 170 enemy, with approximately 50 men on the lower four peaks at any one time, and in addition the 4th Mountain Battalion was in reserve. Fanano and Ospitale were "G. P." installations of unknown sized units. (57)

THE ASSAULT

During the day of D minus 1, the troops rested in their billets and not a soul stirred throughout the valley. Artillery was negligible, no apparent difference from other days in this remote sector.

Darkness descended into the valley and at 1930, D minus 1, 18 February 1945, all task forces moved from their areas of departures. (58)

Each force shall now be considered individually until such time as it had seized and consolidated its objective.

Force "A" although, it had the least vertical elevation to climb, its route was very difficult. As the party approached the avalanche area, a fixed rope was installed and the party crossed without real difficulty. This was a very nasty portion of the route and successful passage by fifty men was quite a mountaineering feat in its self. Shortly after crossing the slide area, at about 0100, a heavy fog or mist descended upon the ridge, and the platoon itself became separated, and the Forward Artillery Observer

Party (see map 2-304), D DAY Force "A" moved onto Point 1

(56) 4-7-45; (57) 4-5, 7, 10, 4-11; (58) Personal Knowledge

disadvantage to the Germans, since the snow had remained to a much greater extent than on the precipitous east face. The thawing snow on the east face had also brought slides and avalanches which had almost cleared the snow from the east face, but the snow on the west slope was gradually melting and there still remained on the average about two feet of soft heavy snow for the Germans to move in. (51)

Force "B" made the ascent of Point 2 without incident and the trail though steep and slippery did not delay the party. At 0217 the assault platoon reached the summit and encountered several German sentries who retreated rapidly back towards Ridge "X", letting go with a few burps from their machine pistols. Force "B" moved onto its objective without returning fire. Here again surprise had been achieved, and the German completely caught off guard. One resolutely manned machine gun could have held this force at bay indefinitely, since the column could not move off of the exposed ridge. At 0400, Force "B" had closed in and was preparing their positions. (62)

The assault platoon of Force "C" after a very rugged climb reached the summit of Point 3 at 0505 and the entire company with attachments was soon digging in. It is interesting to note that this Force made a vertical ascent of 2550 feet in nine and one half hours over very difficult terrain requiring the best of mountaineering technique and skill. The horizontal distance from the area of departure to the summit is only 1800 yards, making the average gradient on this route approximately 50 per cent. To put this ascent on top of Point 3 at night was a first class mount-

Point 3 took on quite a different appearance on the ground than it did from the map. There are in fact two peaks, the northern one, some 45 feet lower than the southern, but from the higher point, the draw which formed and extended to the north was defiladed. (64)

Force "C" was exhausted to the last man on reaching the summit and though it did get several patrols out towards Ridge "X" it did not push on forward to the northern peak immediately. (65)

Force "D" assisted by the Ammunition and Pioneer Squad crossed the Bardagna and gained its objective without enemy contact and was organizing its position at 0259. Contact was established with Force "E" to the south at 0407. (66)

So far the Battalion had accomplished its mission and complete surprise, the very essence of the plan had been achieved. Prisoner interrogation showed that the enemy had no conception of the force which had been put on top of the Ridge, apparently the German 8-2 had not listed this as one of the enemy's capabilities. (67)

THE FIRST DAY - D DAY

About noon the fog began to lift and a very brilliant and warm sun crept through the mist, but at the same time Germans appeared in all directions, and for the rest of the day it was a veritable field day for mortar and artillery observers, and marksmen and snipers. The Germans were completely baffled otherwise there is no explanation for the undue exposure to which they subjected themselves this first day. (68)

(64) Personal Reconnaissance; (65) Conversation with
No Clue; (66) A-9, p. 11; (67) A-6, p. 8; (68) Personal
Observation

the first morning and get organized for the inevitable counter attacks. As soon as the sun had lifted sufficient artillery fires were registered and close in protective fires arranged. During the mid morning an enemy patrol approached but was not at all aggressive, apparently looking the situation over, and they were dispersed with artillery. At 1300 contact was established with Force "B". At intervals throughout the day the position was subjected to intense artillery concentrations, but thanks to the well prepared positions, only two casualties were sustained. (69

The litter squad attached to this Force had been dropped off some 600 yards below the summit where there was a small shelter, and the squads operated from here. This conserved the strength of the squads and did not unnecessarily subject them to the artillery.

At 1700, Lt. Speros Boudoures of D Company set out from Point 2 towards Point 1 with the provisional .50 Caliber machine gun platoon. This platoon was made up of 8 machine gunners from the second machine gun platoon who were to man the guns. Hand carrying the guns and ammunition into position were 35 men from D Company of whom thirty were replacements and six from D Company's kitchen. As the route had but shortly before been reported as open, Lt. Boudoures moved off leading the group towards Point 1 without further reconnaissance. They passed through the positions of Force "B", and onto a knife ridge which led to Point 1, the right side of the ridge dropped off sharply for several hundred feet, forming a very steep snow slope. This ridge widened some 400 yards from Force "B" into a small inlet.

However, just as Lt. Boudoures was about half way across this knife ridge several rifles opened up from the knoll, the first round struck the Lieutenant and knocked him down the steep snow slope for several hundred feet, where he caught onto some scrub trees. Four other men had been hit, and with this the balance of the Porter platoon with four exceptions disintegrated. Pvt. Michael Bostonia, a replacement, who had been with the Battalion but a few days, spotted two Germans moving a machine gun into position and he knocked them both out with his carbine. The Germans who opened with their rifles had prematurely disclosed their position and had the machine gun not into position to ambush the platoon, the results surely would have been tragic. Bostonia with his several assistants held their positions engaging the enemy and managed to retrieve all the wounded except the Lieutenant, who could not be reached until dark. This put an end to moving the machine guns that night. (70)

While the above was occurring, Point 1 underwent a heavy artillery concentration and at 1830 hours a GERMAN counter attack was launched towards both flanks with an estimated 70 Germans. The telephone went out, the artillery radio was dead, but Battalion C.P. was still in with the SCR 300 radio. A heavy fight occurred, later in the evening about midnight the Germans had infiltrated within the position and Lt. Innes called for artillery on his own position. After verifying the request the concentration was placed on Point 1. The area had never protected before

(70) Conversation with Lt. Boudoures, Silver Star Citation
Pvt. Michael Bostonia.

a constant fight on its hands with the enemy at grenade distance. (71)

D day had been comparatively quiet at point 2, being slightly mortared and receiving some long range machine pistol fire about noon with several casualties. After the fog rose and visibility improved, approximately 15 Germans were observed digging in on the northern slopes near Point 3 and others moving up the draw immediately in front of Point 2. The enemy on the slope near Point 3 were driven into the woods on Ridge "X" by mortar and machine gun fire. The enemy in the draw was put under mortar fire and they withdrew but not until after severe casualties had been inflicted upon them. (72)

Today at point 3 proved to be a very rough spot. Shortly after noon, Force "A" with artillery and mortar fire pushed us out to the northern peak and after a short but bitter fight, drove the Germans off. The Germans were reluctant to give up their last high point on the ridge, as apparently they now realized that the Americans in force were on the ridge. The enemy immediately counter attacked the new positions on Point 3, but it was poorly coordinated and the Germans were quickly repulsed.

Late in the afternoon a group of approximately 30 Germans came out of the woods on Ridge "X" waving a large Red Cross Flag. Force "C" withheld their fire and Sgt. M. J. Pennington commanding the machine gun platoon on Point 2 observed this parade, ordered a section of his guns to track the Germans. Just below the positions of Force "C" on top of the ridge, ran a small draw, momentarily the

knowledge.

deployed and attacked as fast as they could through the deep snow toward the American positions. Force "G" immediately opened up and assisted by Sgt. Pennington's machine guns, the ruse failed and the Germans retreated back to Ridge "X". (73)

A strong patrol from Force "G" was sent forward after the fleeing Germans, their mission was to destroy the Germans and set up an out post on ridge "X". This was the last which was seen of these men, during the late afternoon or evening they either stumbled into an ambush or in some manner were overrun. Just what happened is unknown. (74)

Early in the evening a five man patrol lead by Lt. Mc Gown moved out toward Ridge "X" to determine what had happened to this group. The patrol ran into withering fire, three men including Lt. Mc Gown were killed. The Germans still hold Ridge "X" in force and almost a platoon of Company C had been destroyed attempting to take it. This ended the action of Force "C" on the first day. (75)

The first day at Point 4 was comparatively quiet, two German patrols were destroyed and seven prisoners taken. An aid man with brassard and Red Cross helmet was shot by a German at close range while he was assisting a wounded man. This eliminated any desire for further capture of prisoners on Point 4. (76)

The artillery observer was a busy man on Point 4 all during the day, as the Germans were unaccustomed for their opponents to have the high ground and were very careless in exposing themselves. (77)

The Battalion had ring side seats that night, for at 2300 hours, after a brief but intense artillery preparation

the rest of the Division jumped off for Monte Belvedere. It was a spectacular show for the men sitting detached upon an adjacent mountain peak to observe the battle commencing far below.

THE SECOND DAY

We left Force "A" defending itself from a series of bitter and vicious counter attacks which continued on into the morning hours of the second day. All efforts by Force "B" during this time to drive down the ridge to the relief of Point 1 were unavailing. Ammunition was running short. Captured German weapons and ammunition were being used against the enemy. Dawn came and Point 1 was still surrounded. (78)

The Battalion Commander arrived at Point 2 to personally direct the relief of Point 1. Shortly after daylight renewed efforts were made to push through from Point 2, the plan was to put pressure on the summit ridge and attempt to maneuver a force through the cliffs, some five hundred yards down the east face. Finally, at 1600 hours these efforts were successful. (79)

~~Force "A" had been surrounded and cut off for 24 hours.~~
No resupply had been made in the previous 28 hours. Fortunately, communication had been in at all times by means of the SCR 300. By the time that the relief party made contact, Force "A" had sustained fifteen casualties, six killed and nine wounded. None of the wounded had been evacuated altho, some of them had lain in fox holes in winter weather for 24 hours, and now the casualties were faced with a six hour litter trip to the Aid Station. (80)

In and around the positions on Point 1, 26 dead Germans

were counted as a result of this continuous 24 hour fight. The remaining men of Force "A" were exhausted as a result of the two nights and two days of strenuous physical exertion, exposure and bitter fighting. A platoon of Company 3 took over the defense of Point 1. (81)

At dawn, from Point 2, fires from the 75 M.M. pack howitzer and the .50 caliber machine guns which were directed at Rocca Cornetta, ^{which} and was captured on 22 February by the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment. (82)

No action on point 2 itself occurred during the second day other than the relief of Point 1 and fire support for Force "C". (83)

During the morning hours of the second day, Force "D" relieved Force "C" of responsibility for Point 3. Little activity had taken place on the extreme left flank and Force "D" moved north to Point 3 leaving a platoon on Point 4. (84)

Force "C" was now able to concentrate its strength against Ridge "X". At 1310, after an intense but short preparation, Force "C" jumped off, supported by mortar and machine gun fire from Point 2, and very quickly advanced some 400 yards down Ridge "X", ~~over~~ ^{over} ~~running~~ ^{running} several large dug outs. Ridge "X" had, as indicated by the enemy installations, been the main German position on Riva Ridge, it was the center of troop concentrations, sentries and observers were sent forward from here to Points 2, 3 and 4 and the dugouts were used as living quarters. With the capture of Ridge "X", there was no question, that Riva Ridge was solidly in American hands. (85)

Bodies of most of the men sent forward from Force

~~...~~ conversation with Lt. ... (82) A-12,
D-55; (83) ...
A-15; conversation with ... No. 11...

"X" to ridge "Y" the previous day were found, somewhere presumably were taken prisoner. The good German positions here afforded Force "G" the first respite from the elements in three days. (86)

During the night the first rations were brought to the summit since the attack had begun. It had not yet been possible to bring any bedding or shelter to the ridge, the severe fighting had put a strain on the porter and mule pack service. (87)

THE THIRD DAY

With the successful occupation of Ridge "X", enemy activity on Riva Ridge was at a minimum. The Division was making rapid progress on Monte Belvedere and while Riva Ridge was the way to Monte Belvedere, there was no route forward into enemy territory from Riva Ridge. The route to the Po Valley and the one ultimately used lay behind Monte Belvedere. (88)

Only one serious counter attack was made by the enemy on the third day and that was against Point 1 again. At approximately 1500 some thirty Germans made their way around to the east face of Riva Ridge and attempted an attack from the friendly side of the position. However, this maneuver exposed the enemy to direct tank and tank destroyer fire and the four .50 caliber machine guns of Company H, located near Plinardo, this fire made short work of the enemy. (89)

Relief of the Battalion from Riva Ridge was effected by the 104th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and at 1700

mentally prepared and physically able to cope with the strain of a severe mountainous operation and exposure to the elements, together with a combat mission.

The mountain and winter equipment available to the Battalion was complete and a favorable word must be injected here in that regard as the Battalion did not suffer any casualties from exposure, frost bite or trench foot. The footgear used was both the shoe pack and the mountain boot, the latter being far superior.

Ample time, almost two weeks were given over to the preparation for this operation. As a result all leaders and men were thoroughly briefed and understood in detail their part therein. An operation of this nature requires the most exacting of plans and preparations. The use of a sand table model of the terrain is an excellent means of orientation.

A complete and adequate reconnaissance was made. This was scattered over a period of more than a month and special care was given to guard against permitting a period of intense patrolling to alert the enemy.

Supply will always be a problem in mountain operations and every means available must be utilized, no man should be allowed on the approaches either going forward or to the rear without assisting either in resupply or evacuation.

Two means of communications were provided, radio and wire. Special care must be given when operating radios at low temperatures to protect the batteries as the batteries will deteriorate rapidly.

Some question might be asked why more troops were not placed on Point 1, but as a matter of geography, there was not room for more than 50 men on Point 1 at one time

without interfering with one another.

It will be noticed in this operation that no initial reserve was held out by the Battalion Commander. Generally, this is unwise, but in this case, if the objective was not seized at the first instance, the presence of reserves could hardly influence the action. A precipitous slope with few routes of approach, and those already clogged with the assaulting troops, does not lend itself to the employment of a reserve. The Battalion, further, was attacking on a front of some 3000 yards with four key terrain features to seize on the Battalion objective, there were no routes of communication between the four points. More-over, if a central reserve had been withheld, its distance from the objective would necessarily have left such reserve beyond supporting distance and rendered it useless.

LESSONS

1. Mountain operations are special operations requiring extensive special training, both for a specific operations or to be qualified to participate in a specific mountain operation.
2. Decentralization is characteristic of mountain operations. Tactical groups operate independently to capture their objective in order to carry out the plan of the force as a whole.
3. Reconnaissance executed by specially trained personnel operating in difficult areas often produces excellent results.
4. The rate of march in the mountain is influenced by elevation above sea level, steepness of the grade, kind of footing, depth of snow, and relative humidity.

avalanche danger, ice coated rocks and snow.

3. Tactical groups usually make their main effort along crests and early possession of the heights is essential.

6. Whenever possible dual means of communication should be employed.

7. undue reliance of a terrain obstacle is fatal. A terrain obstacle only remains an obstacle so long as it is protected by alert troops.

8. Physical and mental hardening are essential to mountain operations. Mountain operations call for both physical endurance and ability to withstand exposure to severe elements.

9. Surprise is the most essential feature of a night attack. Preparations for a night attack must be carefully concealed from the enemy.

10. A night attack must be made with stealth or full use of all available fire power.

11. Full and complete daylight and night reconnaissance is essential to a successful night attack.

12. Orders for a night attack must be detailed and exact. Precise and complete instructions for every phase of the attack is essential.

13. Simple maneuver and formations must be used in a night attack with emphasis on control.

14. The objectives for a night attack must be limited and easily identified.

15. Fire discipline of troops in a night attack must be excellent. Return of enemy small arms fire, often will only disclose the location of the attacker without damage

to the defender. Use of the hand grenades is to be emphasized.

15. Use of the night attack will reduce casualties and enable approach to positions with superior observation.

17. Counter attacks which do not strike in force and with coordination will not succeed. Piecemeal commitment of reserves for counter attack is fatal.