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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST PLATOON, COMPANY "B", 401ST
GLIDER INFANTRY, (101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION) IN THE
BATTLE OF BASTOGNE, BELGIUM, 25 DECEMBER 1944
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY RIFLE PLATOON
ATTACKING ENEMY ENTRENCHED IN BUILDINGS

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST PLATOON, COMPANY "B",
401ST GLIDER INFANTRY, (101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION)
IN THE BATTLE OF BASTOGNE, BELGIUM, 25 DECEMBER 1944
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph describes the operations of the 1st Platoon, Company "B", 401st Glider Infantry, 101st Airborne Division in the Battle of Bastogne, Belgium, 25 December, during the German Counter-offensive 16 December 1944 - 2 January 1945.

For reader clarification, it will be necessary to briefly review the paramount events which transpired before this particular action took place.

In late autumn of 1944, as the Allied Armies approached the formidable defenses of Western Germany, Allied strategy for penetrating these defenses was molded. The Allies would continue the offensive, striking the enemy at the Ruhr and Saar. (1) In carrying out these separate offensive thrusts it would be necessary to hold thinly some sectors of the front in order to build up strength at the attack points. (2) Before this decision was finally consummated, the Allied High Command carefully considered the capabilities of the enemy. It was felt by General Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, that before Germany submitted to total defeat she would concentrate her every effort in an attempt to regain the initiative lost with the Allied landings in Normandy. The conclusion reached was that this attempt would, in all probability, be made in the Ardennes sector. (3) (See Map A)

(1) A-1, p. 44; (2) A-1, p. 44; (3) A-2, p. 338.

However, General Bradley, Commander of 12th Army Group, in analyzing this possibility with General Eisenhower, pointed out several salient factors favorable for continuing the offensive. Foremost amongst these factors was that stagnation of the front would allow the Germans to perfect their defenses and afford ^{him} ample time to train his troops, thus prolonging the war. The disposition of the 1st US Army and 3rd US Army then poised on the flanks of the Ardennes preparing for the offensive penetration of Germany, able to be immediately employed against the flanks of any German counter-offensive; the logistical difficulties the enemy would have to cope with; and finally, the certainty that the enemy could be prevented from crossing the Meuse River. During this discussion, General Bradley traced on a map the maximum estimated penetrations he thought the enemy could effect. (4)
(5) (See Map A)

These factors coupled with the Supreme Allied Commander's strategic concept for defeating Germany, resulted in General Eisenhower's decision to take a calculated risk and unleash the offensive designed to crush German resistance, occupy the Fatherland and force Germany to surrender.

The 1st US Army's attack against the dams over the Roer River jumped off on 13 December 1944, meanwhile, the 3rd US Army was preparing for renewal of its offensive against the Saar. This attack was to begin on 19 December 1944.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

At 0530 on the morning of 16 December 1944, the contem-
(4) A-2, p. 340; (5) A-2, p. 388.

plated' all-out German counter-offensive was launched striking at the VIII US Corps defenses. (6)

Broadly, the German offensive scheme was to protract the Allied offensive plans by attacking in a lightly defended sector with the immediate objective of severing Allied lateral communications. The ultimate objective was to seize the important port of Antwerp, Belgium, the loss of which would introduce a serious problem of supplying the northern Allied Armies. (8) (See Map B)

The mission of VIII US Corps was to defend in place. (See Map C)

The enemy, supported by long range artillery concentrations along the entire VIII US Corps front, followed by strong infantry-tank attacks had, by the evening of 19 December, driven two gaps into the lines of VIII US Corps. (See Map C) During this period, Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division was released from V US Corps and attached to the 106th Infantry Division. (9) The 7th Armored Division was attached to VIII US Corps from the Ninth US Army. (10) On 17 December 1944, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were released to General Bradley from SHEAF Reserve. (11) The 101st Airborne Division attached to VIII US Corps went into the assembly area near Bastogne on 18 December 1944. (12)

The mission assigned to the 101st Airborne Division on 18 December was to stand and defend Bastogne, Belgium. (13) The situation confronting the 101st Airborne Division was

(6) A-2, p. 340; (7) A-6, p. 103; (8) A-4, p. 43; (9) A-6, p. 104; (10) A-6, p. 105; (11) A-2, p. 338; (12) A-6, p. 108; (13) A-8.

highly fluid and tactical confusion reigned. It was not until 20 December 1944 that defenses around Bastogne were established according to any plan. At 1330 on 20 December, operational control of Vlll US Corps was given to Third US Army. Order of battle of Vlll US Corps at this time consisted of these elements: (14)

4th Infantry Division	10th Armored Division
28th Infantry Division	9th Armored Division
106th Infantry Division	7th Armored Division
101st Airborne Division	

As of 21 Dec 1944
The Germans continuing their advances had, by the morning of 21 December, completely cut off the defenders of Bastogne composed of the 101st Airborne Division with GCB, 10th Armored Division, CCR (37th Bn), 4th Armored Division, 705th Field Artillery Battalion, Company C, 9th Armored Engineers, and the 969th Field Artillery attached. (See Map D) *not on map*

At 1130 on December 22, the besieged garrison of Bastogne received a demand to surrender. (15)

"...The fortune of war is changing. The order for firing will be given immediately after this two-hour term. All the serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well-known American humanity." (16)

After General McAuliffe's curt answer---"NUTS"---was delivered, the enemy continued his attacks against the Bastogne perimeter with renewed fury.

On this same day, lll US Corps of Third US Army made up of the 80th and 26th Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armored Division began counterattacking the southern shoulder of the (14) A-7, p. 173; (15) A-5, p. 509; (16) A-9.

enemy penetration. (17)

The Air Forces, immobilized since the German breakthrough because of inclement weather, effected aerial re-supply to the 101st Airborne Division on 23 December 1944. A total of 260 aircraft took part in the operation, dropping 334 tons of critically needed supplies. (18) Continued good weather permitted the Air Forces to successfully drop additional supplies on 24 December and also to work over the German tanks and artillery with Thunderbolts. (19)

Christmas Day found the defenders of Bastogne still surrounded and the enemy launching determined attacks to capture the town. (See Map E)

The 327th Glider Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division, with the 1st Battalion of the 401st Glider Infantry Regiment attached, defended the western segment of the Bastogne perimeter. "A" and "B" companies of the 1st Battalion, 401st Glider Infantry, defended the northern sector of this segment. (See Map D) At 0710 hours Christmas Day, the Germans made a concerted tank-infantry assault against "A" company and coursed along the left flank of "B" company of the 1st Battalion, 401st Glider Infantry Regiment. (See Map E) By 0720 hours the enemy had rolled over "A" and "B" companies only to be repulsed by point blank artillery fire. Simultaneously, another strong German tank-infantry attack was probing the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment north of the 1st Battalion of the 401st Glider Infantry in the vicinity of CHAMPS. (See Map E) Savage fighting raged between the opposing forces the entire morn-

(17) A-2, p. 358; (18) A-3, p. 386; (19) A-3, p. 387

ing, but by midday the German attacker had been ejected, and "A" and "B" companies of the 1st Battalion were disposed in their original early morning positions. (20)

THE PLATOON SITUATION

On 25 December 1944 the 1st Platoon of "B" company, 1st Battalion, 401st Glider Infantry Regiment, theoretically in reserve, had the mission of defending the open ground between "A" and "B" companies in the event of enemy penetration. This defense was to be accomplished from the position then occupied. Understrength upon arrival in Bastogne, the platoon had been further reduced by battle casualties to 15 men and 1 officer. (21) In an earlier German attack against the battalion in the vicinity of Flamierge, Belgium, a seven man rifle squad, separated from "C" company, was absorbed by "B" company and subsequently attached to the 1st Platoon. (22) This force in its entirety was deployed along the left of the company sector on the morning of 25 December 1944. (See Map F)

Worship
Although not according to its Table of Organization and Equipment, the platoon was well equipped. Morale was superior. The troops were seasoned combat veterans, the aerial resupply and friendly air strikes against enemy armor, the inspirational Christmas Eve message from General McAuliffe, plus the knowledge of the 4th Armored Division attacking towards Bastogne from the south, all contributed to produce this high state of morale. (23)

When the enemy attacks of the morning trundled over "A" company, the platoon remained in its positions. The deadly accurate enfilade fire delivered by the platoon forced the
(20) A-10, p. 151; (21) Personal knowledge; (22) A-10; (23) A-12.

3
enemy to drive to the east thus preventing him from turning northward and rolling up the flank of "B" company. (24) (See Map E)

may not follow
position not on map
Shortly after noon, suffering only minor casualties from the sharp morning conflict, the platoon consolidated and re-organized its position. The early afternoon hours were comparatively quiet with only sporadic artillery and unaimed small arms fire falling in the area. Close to 1545 hours, Captain Robert J. MacDonald, the company commander, called the platoon leader to the company observation post. (25) (See Map F)

3
Upon reaching the OP, the company commander without *formal* formality began orienting the platoon leader. Pertinent points of the orientation were as follows: During the last two hours, German soldiers had been infiltrating into a group of farm buildings located approximately 700 yards to the right front of the company observation post and almost 900 yards forward of the ^{2nd} 3rd platoon entrenchments. (See Map F) Neutralization of this build-up by artillery and mortar fire was not possible because of a shortage of ammunition. The massing of these enemy troops indicated a probable night attack. (26)

So as to be sure they know the location of the OP
After a brief discussion of the enemy capabilities, the vulnerability of our lines, and the combat effectiveness of the platoon, the company commander made a snap decision--the 1st platoon, supported by a tank destroyer, would attack. Mission of the platoon was to break up the enemy attack preparations and capture a prisoner if possible; time of attack, 1615 (24) Personal knowledge; (25) Personal knowledge; (26) Personal knowledge.

hours; line of departure and attack formation to be selected by the platoon leader. The tank destroyer commander would report to the platoon CP for the attack briefing and to effect coordination. The tank destroyer at this time was settled in the woods occupied by the ^{2nd} 3rd platoon. (See Map F)

Destroyer Area
The terrain over which the platoon was to attack offered neither cover nor concealment. The ground sloping gently forward rose gradually to the left of the objective. Beginning at the military crest of this rise, a clump of woods extended westward. A ridge line running in a northerly direction behind the farm dominated the attack area. A slight hollow wandering toward the objective leveled out about halfway across the field. (27) (See Map F)

Organization and equipment for the attack was not complex. The assigned personnel of the platoon were formed into three rifle squads of five men each, consisting of a squad leader and his assistant, two riflemen, and an automatic rifleman. All were armed with an M1 rifle with the exception of the automatic rifleman who carried his individual weapon. Each man carried at least two fragmentation hand grenades. The attached squad from "C" company was composed substantially as the organic squads with two additional riflemen.

THE PLATOON PLAN OF ATTACK

His estimate of the situation already formulated, the platoon leader returned to his CP only moments before 1600 hours. Realizing that time dictated hasty preparation (27) Personal knowledge.

could use estimate?

for the coming attack, he ordered his platoon sergeant and squad leaders to assemble at the company observation post immediately.

LD?

As soon as the non-commissioned officers reported to the observation post, the situation was quickly explained to them and the platoon attack order was given. The platoon, with the tank destroyer attached, would cross the line of departure at 1615 hours and move in a ^{Platoon} column ^{with} of ^{squad} ⁱⁿ columns to a point indicated by the platoon leader. (See Map F)

The formation would move out with the first squad leading, followed by the "C" company squad, and the second and third squads in order. Here, upon order from the platoon leader, the platoon would form a skirmish line and using assault fire, move rapidly into the cover afforded by the outlying buildings. The platoon would push its attack until ordered to disengage. The same route used for the attack would be used for returning to the company area. The tank destroyer would support the attack from the edge of the draw between the main company position and the ^{2nd} 3rd platoon. (See Map F) As soon as the platoon reached the assault position, the tank destroyer would follow up the advance of the platoon and move into a close support position. The position selected for the tank destroyer was behind a rise short of the farm proper. (See Map F) The platoon sergeant would bring up the rear. The platoon leader would be at the head of the column. No aid men were to accompany the platoon. The platoon on moving to the line of departure would file passed the company ammunition point and secure any additional ammunition needed. (28)

(28) Personal knowledge.

THE PLATOON ATTACK

The attack formation crossed the line of departure at the specified time. Although control was not considered a problem, the platoon moved slowly until the entire column had cleared the line of departure. The tank destroyer was not tailing the column. Without the support of the tank destroyer to neutralize hostile observation and fire, the advance to the objective would be difficult. Consequently, the platoon leader increased the speed of movement in order to reach the assault position with a minimum of exposure. After advancing almost three hundred yards, the attack leader glanced rearward and observed the tank destroyer clanking into its initial support position. (See Map F) At this time the platoon sergeant was signaled forward to join the platoon leader. About two hundred yards short of the objective the platoon deployed as skirmishers so as to attack the enemy stronghold frontally. The first two squads formed the right portion of the line while the remaining squads led by the platoon sergeant filed to the left. (See Map F) (29)

Speed movement started to slow

The situation at this time was unique. The tank destroyer had not fired a round and further movement forward by the platoon would mask its fires. The attackers, although well within the range of enemy small arms, had not been fired upon. The objective and the commanding ridge line to the rear was devoid of enemy activity. Quick interpretation of these facts led the platoon leader to believe that the enemy might have withdrawn from his position. (30)

(29) Personal knowledge; (30) Personal knowledge.

A little more than a hundred yards from the farm buildings the platoon leader gave the order to commence firing and waved the tank destroyer forward at the same time. The latter was accomplished by hand and arm signals, the only means of communication available. By this time the troops were within fifty yards of the objective. As the men measured the distance anxiously, a withering fire swept the left sector of the assault wave. (31)

Hitting the ground, the men melted into the irregularities of the terrain to seek escape from the devastating fire. The remainder of the troops, faltering momentarily upon hearing the firing, cautiously continued their advance. At this time the platoon leader directed a German speaking soldier of his command to shout a surrender ultimatum to the enemy garrison. For an answer the Germans delivered saturation fire against the attackers. Up until this time this group had not been subjected to any enemy fire. With all the troops pinned down, the decision was made to send a messenger to the rear with instructions to have the tank destroyer move forward and assist in the assault. (See Sketch, Note 1) After delivering these instructions the messenger was to report to the company commander, give him the platoon situation, and request rocket launcher teams be dispatched to the aid of the platoon. (32)

The problem of reaching the protection of the buildings without sustaining crippling losses presented itself. Movement was practically impossible, yet immobility would event-
(31) Personal knowledge; (32) Personal knowledge.

ually spell annihilation. Signalling for increased rates of fire the squads were ordered to move forward and the messenger was sent to the rear. Surging forward the men gained the cover of the buildings in one bound. As soon as the buildings had been reached a hasty reorganization was effected. (See Sketch, Note 2) Casualties had not been too heavy in light of the action. One man had been killed and two were seriously wounded. Unknown to the platoon leader the messenger sent to the rear had also been killed. (See Sketch, Note 3) Ammunition supply was more than adequate. The situation of the remainder of the platoon had improved only slightly. Two riflemen had taken up a position behind a small tree on the extreme left of the left squads, and were pumping effective fire into the buildings. (See Sketch, Note 4) The plight of the platoon was precarious. Half of the men were transfixed by enemy fire while the other half, shielded by the buildings, were stymied, unable to persist in the attack. (33)

Gathering the first and second squad leaders together, the platoon leader quickly outlined his plan for regaining the initiative. The plan, if successful, would permit the other squads to reach the protection of the outlying buildings. The plan was simple. A few men of the first squad would slip around the right side of the buildings to the rear and knock out what weapons they could. The rest of the men would throw grenades into the open loft above the ground floor in an attempt to set the building afire. The (33) Personal knowledge.

second squad would cover the action of both of these groups by fire. (34)

Without further preparation this phase of the attack was instituted. The platoon and first squad leader, an automatic rifleman and the rifleman moved as planned. Upon reaching the right rear corner of the building, two enemy soldiers evidently bent on a similar mission appeared. A burst of fire from the automatic rifleman cut them down before they could react. (See Sketch, Note 5) An enemy machine gun protruding from a basement window to the rear of the men began firing but was ineffective because of its restricted traverse. The squad leader, with his back to the wall, eased up to the window and dropped a grenade into the opening. The gun was silenced, but in so doing the squad leader was seriously wounded. With the silencing of this weapon, the platoon leader ordered the men to fall back to their original position. Meanwhile, the other men had set the hay loft on fire with a white phosphorus grenade.

(35) (See Sketch, Note 6)

Sensing the opportunity these diversionary actions had created, the men in the open had closed into the building area. The two men on the extreme left had not vacated their position and were still firing. Command of this group had been assumed by the leader of the third squad after the platoon sergeant and the fourth squad leader became casualties.

(36)

Total casualties of the platoon now amounted to three killed, (including the platoon sergeant and the messenger), (34)Personal knowledge; (35)Personal knowledge; (36)Personal knowledge.

four seriously wounded, and an undetermined number of slightly wounded.

The platoon huddled in small groups behind the outlying buildings were stalemated--their combat effectiveness completely neutralized. The farm building was burning slowly, and knowing that the building would soon become untenable for the enemy, the platoon leader made another decision. He would set up a killing zone to the right of the farm. This would prevent easy withdrawal of the enemy to the rear. (37) (See Sketch, Note 7)

Immediately after this decision was carried out, the platoon was racked by fire from behind. The tank destroyer having moved to within fifty yards of the platoon was firing all its guns into the objective. All attempts to signal and shout cease fire orders to the tank destroyer were futile. Consequently, the platoon leader ran to the tank destroyer and ordered the commander to lift his fire from the building, shift to the right and cover the ridge to the rear.

The platoon in the meantime was hammering the enemy with everything at their disposal. The loft, smoldering rather than flaming, was choking the enemy out of their positions. Some enemy attempting to escape met deathly fire from the riflemen from the flanks. (See Sketch, Note 4, 7) The enemy who were able to survive this fire were caught in the fire of the tank destroyer now firing from its new position. (38) (See Sketch, Note 8)

Returning to the platoon, the platoon leader gave orders to continue firing but stipulated that under no circumstances (37)Personal knowledge; (38)Personal knowledge.

would the platoon advance forward of their present position. At dark the platoon would withdraw, evacuating their casualties as far to the rear as possible. A messenger would be sent to the company to guide personnel forward to assist in the further evacuation of the non-ambulatory cases. Request would also be made to have a jeep-ambulance brought forward to the company area for immediate evacuation to the battalion aid station of the more seriously wounded. (39)

Minutes later, as twilight faded into darkness, the enemy fire from the buildings slackened considerably, but the ridge line in rear of the objective erupted violently. Heavy concentrations of small arms fire from automatic weapons exploded to the right and rear of the platoon. At the same time the enemy broke from the objective, withdrawing under cover of the fire from the ridge.

The tank destroyer responded quickly to this retrograde maneuver and placed a heavy volume of fire upon the ridge including high explosive shells from its 75^{mm} gun. The fifty calibre machine gun manned by the tank destroyer commander was searching the open ground between the objective and the ridge. (40) (See Sketch, Note 9, 10)

The effectiveness of this fire could not be fully determined because of the limited visibility.

Under the screen of nightfall and the enemy's own retirement, the platoon leader dispatched a messenger to the rear with requests for the aid previously decided upon. The squad leaders were ordered to prepare for withdrawal. The second squad was designated to cover the withdrawal. (41)

(39)Personal knowledge; (40)Personal knowledge; (41)Personal knowledge.

Shortly after these orders were issued the enemy fire from the ridge ceased as abruptly as it began. The platoon instituted their withdrawal, carrying out their evacuation of casualties as planned. Halfway to the rear, remnants of the attacking force were met by several members of the company and the operation was completed without incident. After remaining in the objective area for several minutes, the platoon leader and the covering force withdrew to the main company positions. (42)

Reorganization of the platoon revealed that manpower losses sustained in the attack had been costly. Three men were killed, one man was missing in action, five had been seriously wounded, and four men had received slight wounds. (43)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A comprehensive study of this operation reveals the fact that the mission as assigned to the platoon could have been more effectively accomplished by a night attack, using relatively the same force. Further, execution of a night attack would have precluded the heavy losses sustained by the attackers.

The estimate of the situation by the company commander was in all probability correct, and his decision to attack was sound, however, his selection as to the time for the attack was not well chosen.

The objective was well defined and easily recognizable. It was well forward of any known enemy position, thus re-

(42) Personal knowledge; (43) Personal knowledge.

ducing the ability of the enemy to support its defense. Preparations for the attack would have been without complications. The time gained in waiting for nightfall would have enabled the subordinate leaders of the platoon, through visual reconnaissance, to familiarize themselves with the terrain, the objective and the actions of the enemy. The smallness of the attacking force would have permitted control to be maintained without difficulty. In addition to these facts, certainly some degree of surprise would have been attained with the achievement of a night attack. In view of all these advantageous night attack conditions, it is difficult to understand why the company commander decided to commit the platoon to a daylight attack.

The platoon leader in preparing his unit for combat failed to include the rocket launcher as an item of special equipment, and after the attack began he was unable to secure them. This weapon would have been of invaluable assistance to him in knocking out the automatic weapons of the enemy.

If the platoon leader had informed the company commander that the tank destroyer commander had not reported to receive the platoon attack order, the company commander might have postponed the attack until the proper coordination between these components had been constituted. Failure on the part of the platoon leader to provide himself with adequate communication facilities for contact between himself and the tank destroyer, proved to be a costly mistake. This, however, might very well have been avoided if the coordination mentioned above had been made.

The silence and apparent absence of the enemy led the platoon leader to believe that the enemy had withdrawn. This was certainly not true. Nevertheless, the platoon leader may have unknowingly achieved surprise. The platoon leader was not able to appreciate this possibility, and as a result did not alter his original attack plans. Ability to recognize this potentiality and adjust accordingly would have insured the complete success of the platoon operation. The control exercised by the platoon leader, once the engagement began was creditable, and the aggressiveness displayed by the individuals of the platoon was a tribute to the American soldier.

Although the operation was successful in driving the enemy from his building position, ^{no} further action was taken to deny him the accessibility of the position at any future time during the night. Passive protection measures such as patrols and listening posts or both would have materially lessened the enemy chances of perpetrating a successful night attack and would also have warned the company commander of any impending hostile action.

In conclusion, the fact that the troops had been subjected to continuous fierce attack for a week must be fully considered before judgement of the actions of the company commander and the platoon leader can be made.

LESSONS

A few of the outstanding lessons to be learned from this operation are:

1. Commanders should be thoroughly versed in the utili-

zation of the night attack as an instrument in accomplishing attack missions.

2. When the situation permits, subordinate leaders must be given ample time to complete their troop leading procedure.

3. Commanders of every echelon must keep the next higher commander informed at all times of the existing situation.

4. Coordination between all elements of an attacking force must be effected prior to the jump off time.

5. Adequate communications between attacking forces and those in support must be provided.

6. Hand and arm signals cannot be relied upon as a sole means of communication.

7. Control in any operation is a vital asset.

8. Favorable reaction of the individual soldier, under adverse conditions, is a direct result of good training.

9. When crossing open terrain, and while vulnerable to hostile fire and observation, it is mandatory that the formation selected for movement afford speed and easy control.

10. Commanders should make full use of all organic weapons.

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