

General Subjects Section  
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT  
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1948 - 1949

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 18TH INFANTRY  
(1ST INFANTRY DIVISION) AT EL GUETTAR  
17-23 MARCH 1943  
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of Executive Officer, Heavy Weapons Company)

Types of operations described:  
BATTALION IN THE ATTACK  
BATTALION IN THE DEFENSE  
BATTALION IN NIGHT WITHDRAWAL

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159-7

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AT EL GUETTAR, TUNISIA, 17 - 23 MARCH 1943  
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INTRODUCTION

2/15 x  
On November 8, 1942, the Allies landed successfully in North Africa at Casablanca, Arzew, and Algiers. Immediately, all available forces were rushed eastward to seize the strategic key to the Central Mediterranean - Tunisia. (1)

2/15 x  
The Allied plan was, in effect, a squeeze play with all available troops pushing toward Bizerte and Tunis, while Montgomery's Eighth Army swept Rommel and his Africa Korps toward Northern Tunisia. (2)

The British First Army, commanded by Lt. General K. A. Anderson, was sent swiftly eastward toward Tunis. This force (as yet an army in name only), which was still weak in numbers (particularly infantry), consisted of three slim British brigades and elements of the American First Armored Division. Stiff resistance was encountered about twenty miles west of Tunis and operations then became stabilized on a wide front extending from Sedjenane in the north to Gafsa in the south. (See Map A) (3)

The Allied situation in January 1943 was desperate. They lacked sufficient forces to take the offensive and were slowed down by torrential rains which had turned the whole country into a sea of mud. Long water routes, bad roads, railroads, and poor communication facilities added much grief and misery. After a few hours rain, tanks and vehicles bogged down and were sometimes out of action for weeks. Both sides were furiously engaged in gaining numerical superiority, both on the land and in the air. The Allies had in action on a two hundred mile front, only three British, one American, and three French Divisions. The French Divisions were especially weak, lacking in numbers and equipment as well as armored protection. (4)

(1, 2) A-1, p. 55; (3, 4) A-2, p. 2.

The enemy situation toward the end of January 1943 was much more favorable than that of the Allies. The Germans had selected excellent positions to cover approaches to the huge coastal plain extending from Tunis in the north, to Gabes in the south. They held dominating terrain and thus controlled the fine network of highways on the coastal plain leading south from Tunis to Tripoli. The enemy had the advantage of short supply lines with only the Sicilian channel separating him from his base of supplies. He was able to rush reinforcements and equipment quickly to Tunisia and gain numerical superiority. Flexibility of movement behind his natural topographic barrier, enhanced by air superiority, enabled him to concentrate his rapidly increasing forces and to strike quickly and in superior numbers. (5)

"The German troops in Tunisia, at this time, included the 10th Panzer Division, the 334th Infantry Division, and the Broich Group in the Tunis - Bizerte area. <sup>elaborated</sup> The 21st Panzer Division was concentrated west of Sfax. Approximately three Italian divisions were in action and faced the French in the Kairouan-Fondouk-Mastour section." (6)

On 23 January 1943, the British Eighth Army reached Tripoli, but since the retreating Germans had extensively damaged the Port of Tripoli, it could not be used as a base for supplies until repaired. The Eighth Army's supply line was extremely long and time was required for re-supply and reorganization before the next phase of the offensive could be undertaken. Meanwhile, the Germans were preparing to make a determined stand at the Mareth line while delaying the British in the south until the line was strengthened. (7)

On the 14th of February 1943, a German column headed by two battalions of tanks, struck the front of II Corps west of Faid. Their objective was the supply bases around the pivotal town of Tebessa. The Americans were unable to concentrate their armor in time to meet this attack and received a terrific mauling. Losses included about

(5) A-2, p. 3; (6, 7) A-2, p. 1.

*This is vague and includes a reference to where it is*

5,000 men and over 100 tanks. The penetration was stopped in the Sebiba-Kasserine Pass area by the 1st Guards Regiment, and the 26th and 18th Regimental Combat teams of the 1st Infantry Division (American). On February 25th, the enemy withdrew after eleven days of hard fighting. This surprise thrust exposed the small force at Gafsa, making it necessary to withdraw it to Feriana. <sup>where?</sup> (See Map B) (8)

The need for the coordination of the British First Army with Montgomery's Eighth Army was apparent, so on February 18, 1943 at the Casablanca Conference, General Eisenhower was appointed Commander-in-Chief of all the Allied Forces in Africa. Field Marshall Alexander was appointed commander of the new 18th Army Group which consisted of the British 1st and 8th Armies, the American II Corps, and the 19th French Corps. (9)

On February 27, 1943, the enemy struck again. This time he penetrated the British V Corps front at Medez-el-Bab for gains up to seven or eight miles. It was apparent that the Germans suspected that troops had been withdrawn from this sector earlier in the month, and sent to the Kasserine Pass to stem the German attack proceeding towards Tebessa. However, due to strong British counter-attacks, most of the lost ground was regained, but there were heavy losses of men and materials on both sides. (See Map B) (10)

"Estimated enemy forces in Tunisia in March 1943 were 220,000 men, 350 German tanks, 90 Italian tanks, 750 field and medium guns, and 900 antitank guns." (11)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

When General George S. Patton (then Major General) assumed command of II Corps early in March 1943, it consisted of the following units: 1st, 9th, and 34th Infantry Divisions; the 1st Armored Division; and the 1st Ranger Battalion. II Corps was operational under the 18th Army group which was commanded by Field Marshall Alexander. (12)

(8) A-2, p. 7; (9) A-2, p. 3; (10) A-2, p. 6; (11) A-2, p. 8; (12) A-1, p. 92.

*Resupplying*

Early in March 1943, the 1st Infantry Division, commanded by Major General Terry de la M. Allen, was reassembled. This was the first time since November 1942, that all units of the division were together under a single command. Heretofore, the regiments (16th, 18th, and 26th) had fought as combat teams, operating under the British First Army and the 19th French Corps. (13)

The division assembly area was located in the scrub forests of Bou Chebka near the key town of Tebessa. Here all units took stock of the situation. Fresh beef was to be had for the first time in many months. Resupply of ordnance and equipment was given first priority by the division G-4. Replacements from the 3rd division came up to fill the losses the regiments had suffered since December 1942. The troops rested, cleaned their equipment, and speculated on what was going to happen to the division. While rumors flew thick and fast, the first American offensive operation on a divisional scale was planned. (14)

The 1st Infantry Division was given the mission of capturing and defending the town of Gafsa. The high level plan was to use this famous old oasis town as a new supply base for General Montgomery's Eighth Army, now approaching the Mareth line from Tripoli. It was felt that the capture of Gafsa would alarm the Germans to such an extent that they would divert troops from the Mareth line to recapture Gafsa. This, in effect, would relieve some pressure on the Eighth Army's front. (15)

On the night of March 16-17, the 1st division moved by truck over roads previously demined by the division engineers and at 0800 all units were in forward attack positions. <sup>where?</sup> The assault on Gafsa was delayed until 1000 in order to allow an air strike. Finally, after the air strike, the division, supported by artillery, moved in only to find that the operation was a dry run. The Italians defending Gafsa

(13) A-1, p. 92; (14, 15) A-1, p. 64.

finding the high ground on both sides of the town occupied, wisely withdrew. The German 580th Reconnaissance battalion screened the Italians in their withdrawal. (16)

The 18th Infantry now turned east and went into defensive positions astride the Gafsa-Gabes highway. (See Map C) The 1st Ranger battalion, now operating with the 1st division, was sent farther east down the highway to occupy and hold El Guettar. (17)

The first part of the 1st division's mission, that of capturing Gafsa, had been accomplished. The second part of the mission called upon the division to defend Gafsa. Since the town itself was unsuited for any type defense, the division commander decided that gaining the high ground east of Gafsa near El Guettar would be the best means of defending Gafsa. Plans were soon drawn up for the capture of the high hill mass east of the town of El Guettar. (18)

#### THE BATTALION SITUATION

By 1300, 17 March 1943, the 3rd battalion, 18th Infantry, which had attacked along the high rocky ridges northwest of the town, occupied defensive positions approximately 5 miles east of Gafsa astride the Gafsa-Gabes highway. Later in the afternoon patrols from Company "K" pushed southeast toward El Guettar and contacted three enemy light tanks (Italian) west of El Guettar. Upon contact, these tanks withdrew eastward along the highway. The patrols from Company "K" were withdrawn when elements of the Rangers and the 1st Reconnaissance troops moved through and gained contact with Italian mechanized units near El Guettar. Probing action by these forward elements located the Centauro Armored Division (Italian) in strength on the high ground approximately 3 miles east of El Guettar. Estimated enemy strength in these positions was 3,000 Italian troops. (19)

On the night of 17-18 March, torrential rains poured down causing dry wadis to become veritable rivers which rushed across the highway slowing up motor movement, and in some cases, washing away jeeps and (16) A-1, p. 65; (17) A-1, p. 87, (18) A-1, p. 66, (19) Personal Knowledge.



other light transport. Troops bivouaced in orchards and wadis became mired in mud further adding to their discomfort and misery. It wasn't until 20 March that the flooded areas receded enough to allow the division plan of attack to be put into effect. (20)

By 20 March the battalion commander expected movement orders to come down from regimental headquarters at any time, consequently all companies were alerted to move on an instants notice. Extra ammunition and combat rations had been issued to all units of the battalion. All weapons and transport were checked and found to be in good working order. Basic loads were in place on the carriers. Finally late in the afternoon on the 20th, the battalion commander was called to the regimental command post for the attack order. (21)

The information that we had concerning the enemy at this time was very meager. Patrols had reported that the enemy occupied the high ground east of El Guettar. The 1st Ranger battalion occupied El Guettar which was under intermittent artillery and mortar fire. The 1st and 2nd battalions of the 18th Infantry were in defensive positions astride the Gafsa-Gabes road about 3 miles west of El Guettar. (22)

#### THE ORDER AND THE ATTACK ON OUED EL KEDDAB

The battalion commander returned from regiment with the attack order about 2030, 20 March. The plan for the attack on the enemy positions east of El Guettar was given to the company commanders as follows; The division plan of attack was to seize the high ridge line about 3 miles east of El Guettar. (See Map C) The 18th Infantry was to attack from the southwest and seize that portion of the objective in its zone of action. The 1st Ranger battalion was to move through the mountainous Djebel Orbata (3500 feet in altitude) on the left of the division sector and attack the pass on the Gafsa-Sfax road from the north in rear of the enemy. The 26th Infantry was to attack astride the Gabes-Sfax road and seize the pass from the south. The 16th Infantry was in division reserve in the vicinity of El Guettar. (23)

(20, 21, 22, 23) Personal Knowledge.

The 18th Infantry was to attack astride the Gafsa-Gabes highway and seize the high hill mass of Oued El Keddab. The 1st battalion was to attack and seize that portion of the hill mass south of the Gafsa-Gabes road. The 3rd battalion was to attack and seize that portion of the hill mass north of the Gafsa-Gabes road. The 2nd battalion was in regimental reserve in vicinity of El Guettar. (24)

The battalion commander told us that the battalion would be shuttled forward to El Guettar by 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -T trucks. There the battalion would detruck and move by foot to its forward assembly area in a deep wadi about 1 mile east of the town. All weapons would be hand carried and transport would remain under battalion control. The orders from regiment were to attack at daylight. (25)

The moon was out when the trucks arrived to move the 3rd battalion to El Guettar. Visibility was extremely good. It was possible to see fairly clearly up to distances of 200-300 yards. As the troops were silently loading on the trucks, two enemy planes flew overhead and we waited for them to drop flares and to release their bombs, but finally after circling the area once, they disappeared to the east. The movement forward to the turn-around in El Guettar was without incident. Much traffic was noted in the vicinity of the town and we expected that the noise would cause artillery fire to come down, but not a single round was observed. The 3rd battalion marched silently forward to its assembly position - a deep wadi which was at least 500 yards long and 20-30 feet deep. This wadi stretched from the Gafsa-Gabes road toward the northeast and was approximately perpendicular to the direction of the attack. The battalion commander had designated it as the line of departure (see Map C) for the 3rd battalion. H-hour was set for 0600 on the 21st March. Around 0530 it began getting light and ground features to our front could be distinguished fairly well. Sporadic firing was heard to our (24, 25) Personal Knowledge.

right front in the 1st battalion zone at approximately 0545. As yet we had no information of the enemy or how the attack was progressing. At daylight the battalion moved across the open plain to the front toward the objective - Oued El Keddab. (26)

The battalion formation moving across the open plain was two rifle companies abreast in deployed squad columns with the heavy weapons company and reserve rifle company following in that order. The movement of the 3rd battalion across the flat ground toward the objective met little resistance. The 1st battalion attacking south of the Gafsa-Gabes highway swung wide and actually attacked to the northeast. The 2nd battalion was committed early due to the gap that was created by the 18th Infantry attacking to the east and the 26th Infantry attacking northeast along the Sfax road. The 2nd battalion moved to the north of the 3rd battalion and attacked the regimental objective from the northwest. This coordinated attack resulted in a double envelopment with the 3rd battalion acting as a holding force. All three battalions reached their objectives by midmorning. Resistance had been negligible and casualties light. The enemy had been taken by surprise. It was extremely fortunate for us that the enemy had been surprised. The organization of the enemy position was quite extensive. Minefields had been laid and extensive barbed wire entanglements and obstacles erected. Gun positions had been dug in and elaborate fox holes with connecting trenches constructed. It is certain that the position would have offered stiff resistance if it had been defended by a determined enemy. (27)

Upon reaching Oued El Keddab, heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire fell on the 3rd battalion. Numerous foxholes and erosion cuts in the nearby area were immediately utilized to their fullest extent. The battalion commander was hit by a shell fragment, but not seriously enough to cause his evacuation. Approximately 175 prisoners from the (26, 27) Personal Knowledge.

Centauro Armored Division were seen being taken to the rear by members of the 1st battalion. (28)

3RD BATTALION ATTACK ON DJEBEL MOHELTAT

The 3rd battalion was ordered to move immediately from its position on Oued El Keddab and seize the high ground to the left of the Gafsa-Gabes road on Djebel Moheltat. We moved out at once in a column of companies in the order "L" Company plus one platoon of heavy machine guns, "I" Company plus one platoon of machine guns, and "K" Company followed by the 81 mortars of "M" Company. The formation used by the companies was two platoon abreast in deployed squad columns with the weapons platoon and support platoon following in that order. (29)

The terrain towards the objective was extremely rough, characterized by steep, rocky hills and deep wadis. The going was slow especially for the heavy weapons company which hand carried its weapons. Upon clearing Oued El Keddab and moving out onto the bare rocky hills, the battalion was strafed by low flying German fighters<sup>ox's</sup>, but the advance was not materially slowed up. It was late in the afternoon and daylight was running out rapidly when the battalion halted behind a rough rocky horseshoe formation which the battalion commander determined was our objective. However, he was not absolutely certain as to our exact location on the map and hesitated to report to regiment that the objective had been reached. The maps, in use by the battalion, were of 1:50000 scale confusing as to detail and positive elevations. He decided to occupy the horseshoe to our front and prepare defensive positions for the night. (30)

At 0700 on 21 March, the battalion dispositions were as follows: "K" Company on the left of the horseshoe, "L" Company on the right, and "I" Company on a rock ridge formation about 350 yards to the rear of the horseshoe. One platoon of heavy machine guns were attached to "K" Company (28, 29, 30) Personal Knowledge.

and "L" Company. The 81-mm mortar platoon remained in a rocky out in rear of the horseshoe under company control. The battalion command post was located in the center of the horseshoe behind a rock ledge. Wire had been strung forward from Oued El Keddab (Hill 336) so communication was immediately established with regiment and our approximate location was reported. (31)

On 22 March the 3rd battalion consolidated its position and dug in as well as they could on the rocky hill mass. The battalion commander and his staff decided after visual and map reconnaissance that we were on our objective. Observation posts were established, but no contact was made with the enemy on 22nd March. Enemy mortar and artillery rounds landed in the battalion area infrequently throughout the morning and afternoon. Late in the afternoon, we received heavy artillery fire from our rear. It was estimated that the rounds coming in were of 155-mm caliber. Regiment was hastily called and requested to lift the fire, but before action could be taken another salvo landed in "K" Company's area. Finally, the fire was lifted, but not until some choice expletives had been used concerning the unit that had fired in our area. (Artillery fire came from recently attached field artillery battalion.) (32)

Late in the afternoon the 1st battalion moved eastward along the flat plain south of the Gafsa-Gabes road and occupied Djebel Berda. The 2nd battalion moved up in rear of the 3rd battalion position after dark and crossed the plain to the south of the Gafsa-Gabes road clearing the valley about 0400 on the morning of 23 March. At 0445, the 1st and 2nd battalions, executing a coordinated attack, secured commanding positions on Djebel Berda. (See Map D) (33)

In the meantime the 1st Engineer battalion had laid an extensive minefield between two natural tank barriers - the high rugged terrain just south of 336 to the deep wadi south of the Gabes road. The 3rd battalion, 16th Infantry was moved into a position in the vicinity of (31, 32, 33) Personal Knowledge.

336 and dug in behind the minefield astride the main road. The 601st Tank destroyer battalion took up positions on the high ground east of 336. (34)

#### THE ATTACK OF THE 10TH PANZER DIVISION

At 0500 on 23 March a distant rumbling noise, similar to that made by tanks, could be heard by the 3rd battalion in the valley to the right front. At 0545 tracers could be seen and dim shapes of tanks and vehicles could be discerned rolling up the valley toward the hill mass of Oued El Keddab. The regimental commander called on the phone and wanted to know what the noise and firing was in the 3rd battalion sector. He was told that it sounded as if a whole panzer division was moving up the valley toward Gafsa, but that only a few tanks could be seen at this time. (35)

At 0630 it was light enough to see well out into the plain. The 3rd battalion position was approximately 900 yards from the level of the plain and the position was marked by a great many deep ravines and rock cliffs not accessible to tanks. We watched from grandstand seats the show of magnitude and precision put on by the 10th Panzer Division. (Heroes of the Sedan break through in France.) The enemy attack moved up the valley toward Oued El Keddab followed closely by infantry. Approximately 75 tanks were counted - MII, MIII, and MIV types. Half tracks loaded with troops followed the wave of advancing infantryman. They proceeded up the valley slowly in a deployed formation. Infantryman walked straight up and did not seek to take cover except behind tanks. In little draws along the hill mass we could see platoons of Mark IV tanks pull in and wait for a call to assemble. The 3rd battalion had its platoon of 37-mm guns in position to fire, but at a range of 950 yards they could have done little damage to a Mark IV tank. (36)

(34, 35, 36) Personal Knowledge.

As it was getting lighter at approximately 0730, heavy concentrations of enemy mortar and artillery fire fell on the 3rd battalion position. Following these concentrations the Germans assaulted our forward positions with infantry supported by half-tracks and armored vehicles. The enemy rode up and over foxholes sometime crushing men in their holes, but the 3rd battalion fought back savagely and held firmly to its position in the horseshoe. (37)

Company "K" on the left was the hardest hit. Although the company suffered a great many casualties and seemed at times about to be overrun by numerically superior infantry and armored forces, it fought stubbornly and courageously with every weapon at its disposal. (38).

The 81-mm mortar platoon of Company "M", operating under company control, fired continuously on the advancing Germans. Over 500 rounds were delivered in the morning's firing. The mortar barrels turned a dull red color caused by the intense heat created by the rapid rate of fire. This mortar fire was adjusted effectively from an observation post near "K" Company's area by a sergeant who was later recommended for the Silver Star for his heroic action under direct enemy fire. This deadly accurate fire was, in part, instrumental in repulsing the enemy attack on the 3rd battalion front during the morning of the 23rd March. (39)

*Several half-tracks and light tanks were destroyed by rocket launcher teams in the "K" Company sector. The cannon platoon (direct support) and 81-mm mortars kept up a continuous devastating fire into enemy ranks. Forward observers of the 32nd Field Artillery battalion in the 3rd battalion area had a field day in directing fire on enemy positions throughout the valley.* (40)

(37, 38) A-7 and Personal Knowledge; (39) Personal Knowledge; (40) A-5.

Meanwhile, the 10th Panzer Division, followed closely by infantry-  
men, continued its advance westward along the flat plain paralleling the  
Gafsa-Gabes road toward the hill mass of Oued El Keddab. Near point  
(325)<sup>??</sup> the tanks broke into three columns. The northern column moved  
northwest toward the rear of the 3rd battalion position threatening  
to isolate that unit. The center column moved straight up the valley  
astride the Gafsa-Gabes road. The south column, consisting of the  
most armor, seemed to be the main effort of the enemy. This column  
moved southward endeavoring to flank Oued El Keddab. (See Map D) (41)

When the center column reached a point approximately 2000 yards<sup>?</sup>  
east of Oued El Keddab, it was taken under fire by the 601st Tank  
Destroyer battalion which had moved into positions east of Oued El Keddab to  
protect the division artillery. "B" and "C" Companies of this tank  
destroyer battalion commenced firing with armor piercing shells at  
1500 yards. The main thrust found itself with soft ground on its  
right and "A" Company on its left. The Germans laid smoke on "A"  
Company, but the tanks were 2200 yards away when it lifted. Immediately  
"A" Company opened fire knocking out eight tanks. Realizing they could  
not penetrate the position at this point, the Germans withdrew towing  
4 disabled tanks with them. The remaining tanks in this thrust joined  
the other two columns after withdrawing out of effective range. "B"  
and "C" Companies, firing continuously at the advancing tanks, were  
supported by fire from the division artillery. (42)

The north thrust of the enemy penetrated the rear of the 3rd  
battalion position and all contact except radio contact was lost with  
regiment. The 32nd Field Artillery battalion was firing from positions  
in rear of the 3rd battalion. Their guns became so hot they had to  
pour water on the barrels to cool them down so that they could be fired.

(41) Personal Knowledge; (42) A-3, p. 24.



The tanks, supported by infantry, closed in on the artillerymen forcing them to spike their guns and make for cover, but not before delivering extremely effective fire on the enemy until the very last minute. Elements of the 5th Field Artillery battalion and Company "B", 103 AAA battalion were also overrun and lost many guns. (43)

All of the organic and attached artillery farther to the rear, west of Oued El Keddab, continued to fire until the attack was halted and the enemy withdrew out of range. (44)

Early in the afternoon, Company "E", 16th Infantry (Division Reserve) made a limited counterattack southward from the vicinity of Hill 483. (See Map D) This counterattack cleaned out some of the enemy who had been searching out the hill mass in rear of the 3rd battalion position. (45)

This writer estimates that the Germans used between 100-125 tanks in the morning attack. Mark II, III, and IV type tanks were observed during the attack, but no Mark VI's to the best of my knowledge were used at this time. (46)

#### THE 3RD BATTALION IN DEFENSE OF DJEBEL MOHEL TAT

The 3rd battalion was ordered to hold out at all costs in its present position in the horseshoe. The battalion commander ordered an all around defense and we prepared for a fight to the finish. Around noon, however, the pressure eased up considerably as the Germans withdrew to regroup and reorganize. All companies found their ammunition supply dwindling. During the 22nd all carriers had been brought forward and were now in the battalion rear defensive area. The need for replenishment of our ammunition supply was so great that it was decided to send the nineteen jeep drivers of the heavy weapons company through direct enemy artillery and tank fire to the regimental ammunition dump. The drivers left at approximately 1230 and at 1600 thirteen returned (43) Personal Knowledge; (44, 45) A-1, p. 69; (46) Personal Knowledge.

with the much needed ammunition. Three drivers had been knocked out by direct artillery fire on the route back and three by stuka dive bombing at the dump. (All of the drivers who made this trip received the Silver Star for their heroic efforts in face of superior enemy fire.) The 3rd battalion relaxed a bit. Enough ammunition was on hand to stop the attack everyone knew must come. (47)

At approximately 1430, word was received at the 3rd battalion command post from regimental headquarters that the radio code being used by the German attackers had been broken by Division Intelligence, and that an intercepted message indicated the entire 10th Panzer Division would make an all-out assault against the 1st Division positions at 1530. The attack was to be preceded by an air strike against the division artillery positions. The defenders of the 3rd battalion prepared for the assault. At 1520 a telephone call from regiment stated that a second intercepted message indicated that the attack would be delayed until 1600. Gradually artillery fire from both sides slackened and almost ceased. The battlefield was ominously silent. At 1550, the drone and throbbing of aircraft motors could be heard from the northwest. The noise became louder and the roar of the motors of countless enemy aircraft filled the valley. At 1555 the air strike was made against our division artillery positions. Some damage was done and confusion was great, but the crews stood by their guns. (48)

At 1600 tanks began to move up the valley toward Hill 336. Personnel carriers moved forward at precisely the same moment. Infantrymen could be seen moving steadily forward ahead of the tanks. With the first move of the enemy armor, the first shells of the remaining artillery pieces began to erupt on the valley floor. Our artillery, previously ranged in, smothered the attackers with time and point detonating fire. Mortars and Cannon Company fires assisted in making (47, 48) Personal Knowledge.

the exploding rounds sound as if automatic artillery fire was being used. The 3-inch guns of the 899th Tank Destroyer battalion (arrived on battlefield in early afternoon) took the leading tanks under fire as they approached the main battle positions. The enemy infantrymen continued to move forward under this withering fire - 100 yards - 200 yards - 300 yards - and then they broke. What had been a well organized attack became the movements of a disorganized mob. (49)

Meanwhile, at 1615, the Germans resumed their attack on the 3rd battalion position with increased intensity. The 2nd platoon of Company "K" was overrun with only eight men surviving. However, the battalion line held fast. The Germans attacked in waves with armored half-tracks preceding the infantry. Antitank grenades, .30 cal armor piercing ammunition, and 2.36-inch Rocket Launchers fired effectively at half-tracks disabling at least two. Artillery concentrations were delivered and adjusted accurately by the battalion liaison officer. Both the 60-mm and 81-mm mortars were instrumental in halting the German attack. Finally, battered and worn and suffering many casualties and loss of equipment, the enemy withdrew in haste and confusion.

*finish* Company "K", on the left of the battalion sector, had held fast to its strategic position, the loss of which would have been disastrous to the 3rd battalion. (Company "K", 18th Infantry was awarded the Presidential Citation for its heroic actions during this operation.) (50)

With the repulse of the Germans before Hill 336 and in front of the 3rd battalion position, the battle of El Guettar to all intents and purposes was ended. The 10th Panzer Division was defeated. This defeat was astounding to the Germans since it was the first time in the history of World War II that a Panzer Division had been defeated by an Infantry Division. (51)

(49) A-5; (50) A-7 Personal Knowledge; (51) Personal Knowledge.

### NIGHT WITHDRAWAL OF THE 3RD BATTALION

Because of the isolated position of the 3rd battalion and since the days fighting had revealed to the enemy the weakness of the lines of communication between the battalion position and the main positions to the rear, orders were issued to the battalion to withdraw under cover of darkness to positions on the high ground northeast of Hill 336. (See Map D) (52)

The plan of withdrawal was for "I" Company to leave its positions under cover of darkness at 2000 and occupy its new positions. "L" and "K" Companies to each leave one platoon as a covering shell and withdraw after "I" Company occupied positions in the new area. By 2200, "I" Company reached its new defensive positions. The remainder of the battalion, less one platoon from each of "K" and "L" Companies, now started their withdrawal to Hill 336. All units moved out in a column of files silently. The only noise to be heard was the muffled tread of feet and occasionally the sound of a metal ammunition box hitting a machine gun water can resounded from the dark walls of the rocky ravines. The battalion had just withdrawn from its position when a strong attack was launched against the covering platoon of Company "K". Heavy rifle and machine gun fire could be heard during the rearward movement of Companies "L" and "K". By 2330 quiet had again settled down over the evacuated positions. The covering platoon of Company "L" rejoined the battalion at 0100 and reported that after a sharp encounter, the enemy overran the "K" Company platoon. This proved to be true the next day when a few wounded stragglers who had hidden in caves and escaped being captured by an overwhelming German force reached the new battalion position. The Germans did not exploit this success, but withdrew without further action at this time. The 3rd battalion dug in and consolidated its new defense position. (53)

(52, 53) Personal Knowledge

## ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

Night shuttling movements are effective in preserving the energy and morale of the troops and is in accord with the principle of getting the most men in a position to do the greatest damage to the enemy in the least amount of time. The shuttle movement of the 3rd battalion from Gafsa to El Guettar saved the troops from walking 7-8 miles when their energy was most needed and placed the 3rd battalion quickly in an advantageous position to exploit success. (54)

Although the men of the 3rd battalion came under intense mortar and artillery fire as well as air strafing, they continued forward in their advance to the battalion objective. The training and esprit de corps of the 3rd battalion were the catalysts which helped the men accomplish their mission in almost their first attack of World War II. (55)

The attack of those elements of the 10th Panzer Division and supporting units which assaulted the 3rd battalion position in the horse-shoe was fierce and stubborn, but our troops held firm in their positions although almost overrun. The supporting weapons of the 3rd battalion and the organic artillery gave excellent support. Without this splendid fire it is doubtful if the positions could have been held on the 23rd since they were penetrated not once, but twice during the day. The men of the third battalion and especially "K" Company, gave a good indication of what a well trained soldier could do by their stubborn superiority on the battlefield on the afternoon of 23 March 1943. Many exploits of individual bravery went unheralded amidst the confusion and firing, but above all was the thought in every man's mind - that the 3rd battalion must and would hold. (56)

During the lull between the morning and afternoon attack, the 3rd battalion was resupplied with ammunition and ordnance by the drivers (54, 55, 56) Personal Knowledge

of the heavy weapons company who ran the gauntlet of direct tank and artillery fire on the Gafsa-Gabes road and stuka dive bombing at the dumps. Their heroic efforts enabled the weary 3rd battalion to prepare itself to meet the next attack which came at 1615. Without this resupply it is certain that the battalion would have run short of ammunition and had to resort to the bayonet as the last resort. (57)

Through the efforts of the 601st Tank Destroyer battalion, and the division artillery, the main thrust of the 20th Panzer Division was halted. The accurate fire placed between the 3rd battalion and Qued El Keddab by the organic and attached artillery of the division prevented complete encirclement of the 3rd battalion on the morning of the 23rd and forced the enemy to withdraw and lick his wounds. A second attack in the afternoon was also in vain. (58)

This day, the 23 March 1943, marked the first time that a Panzer Division had been stopped by an infantry division and attached units. Some proud troopers of the 20th Panzer Division, who had been taken prisoners, wept because they considered their defeat a disgrace. It must be remembered that the members of this unit belonged to the famed Africa Korps and were imbued with their own invincibility and superiority. (59)

The withdrawal of the 3rd battalion on the night of 23 March was well executed and coordinated. That the enemy did not know of the 3rd battalion's withdrawal is certain as was learned later by prisoners captured from the same German unit. The covering shell gave a good account of itself and successfully accomplished its mission of protecting the withdrawal of the 3rd battalion. Hand-to-hand fighting took place and the two men of the covering shell who escaped said, "It was hard to know who to hit and who not to hit, it was so dark." Lt. Tripp, the platoon leader, was captured and ended up a prisoner in Germany. (60)

(57, 58, 59, 60) Personal Knowledge

On the morning of the 23rd an air mission had been requested by the 3rd battalion. This mission was called for when the 10th Panzer Division was moving up the Gafsa-Gabes road in close formation - a lucrative target for the air. However, due to pressure required on the Mareth line by Montgomery's Eighth Army, the planes were unavailable to support the 1st Division on the 23rd. On the 24th one mission was flown but the advantage had been lost and little damage was done. If the Air Force (Corps) had given the 1st Division support on the morning of the 23rd, in all probability the 10th Panzer Division would have been completely wiped out. Every man in the 3rd battalion realized the value of air support at this time and wondered about its glaring absence. Later, when the facts were known, an explanation was made and the reasons for the lack of air support was understood by all concerned. (61)

During this operation the inadequacy of the maps on hand caused much confusion and varied opinions as to our exact location on the ground. It is understood why there might be a scarcity of topographic maps available, but certainly not why there should have been a scarcity of aerial photographs. This writer does not know whether or not aerial photos of the area of operations had been requested by the regimental S-2, but he is certain that they would have been of inestimable value in the location of enemy positions and the positive location of our own positions on the ground. (62)

This writer has been unable to find the number of personnel losses of the division in this operation, but it is estimated that losses on both sides were approximately equal. (63)

"The division losses in material on 23rd March to 10th Panzer Division were:

- (21) Tank destroyers of which 8 were repaired.
- (8)  $\frac{1}{2}$ -ton trucks.
- (4) Half trucks.

(61, 62, 63) Personal Knowledge

- (1) 3/4-ton trucks.
- (12) 105-mm Howitzers.
- (12) 155-mm Howitzers ( $\frac{1}{2}$  of which were recovered).
- (13) 40-mm Bofors.

The enemy losses in tanks were 50 tanks knocked out. Of these the Germans recovered 38 and 13 remained on the battlefield." (64)

#### LESSONS

Lessons to be learned or emphasized from this operation are as follows:

1. Observation and seizure of dominant terrain is essential to the success of infantry.
2. Training in mountain and hill warfare is essential if we are to fight successfully and avoid excessive losses. ?
3. In order to sustain a successful operation, supplies must flow uninterruptedly from front to rear. This is especially so in rocky, mountainous terrain such as found in southern Tunisia.
4. Adequate communication is essential to success in battle.
5. Training of all troops in night operations is mandatory for success in combat. ?
6. Effective use of the mortars and artillery depends upon properly trained forward observers.
7. Proper training in the use of maps and aerial photographs is a must for all officers and non-commissioned officers.
8. Coordination of all supporting weapons is necessary both in the attack and defense in order to secure successful accomplishment of the mission with minimum losses.
9. Always move troops by motor whenever possible to conserve energy, raise morale, and save time.
10. An estimate of the enemy's capabilities must always be made to insure success in combat. ?

(64) A-8, p. 781.