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27 Nov.*

Staff Department  
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1949-1950

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 551ST PARACHUTE INFANTRY BATTALION  
(ATTACHED TO THE 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION AND THE 517TH  
PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT). IN THE ATTACK, IN THE  
VICINITY OF "TROIS PONTS," BELGIUM, 2-7 JANUARY 1945.  
(ARDENNES CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of Headquarters Company Commander)

Type of operation described: PARACHUTE INFANTRY BATTALION  
IN A CONTINUOUS ATTACK IN WOODS AND DURING A PERIOD OF  
EXTREME COLD

Captain Bill G. Smith, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 551ST PARACHUTE INFANTRY BATTALION  
(ATTACHED TO THE 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION AND THE 517TH  
PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT), IN THE ATTACK, IN THE VICIN-  
ITY OF "TROIS PONTS," BELGIUM, 2-7 JANUARY 1945.

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## ORIENTATION

### INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 551st Para-  
chute Infantry Battalion, attached to the 517th Parachute  
Infantry Regiment, and the 82nd Airborne Division, over the  
period 2-7 January 1945, during the ARDENNES CAMPAIGN.

In order to orient the reader it will be necessary to  
discuss the major events which led up to this operation.

On 16 December 1944, the Germans attacked through the  
lightly held EIFEL-ARDENNES sector with Army Group "B," under  
the command of Field Marshal Walter Model. Army Group "B"  
was composed of the Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies and the  
newly reorganized Seventh Army. This blow was aimed at the  
LIEGE-NAMUR-ANTWERP area and it was delivered with such ter-  
rific force and surprise that the four American Divisions in  
that sector were quickly overrun or driven back. The German  
Armies then proceeded North and West almost unchecked. (1)

(See Map A)

Units from the Second British Army, Ninth US Army, First  
US Army, Third US Army, and the First Allied Airborne Army  
were quickly rushed to the threatened area and by 27 December  
1944, the German offensive had been stopped and the Allied  
position was stabilized. (2) (See Map B)

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(1) A-1, p. 558U

(2) A-5, p. 124

The blow had split the Twelfth Army Group into two parts, making control by General Omar N. Bradley all but impossible. Recognizing this situation, General Dwight D. Eisenhower fixed a boundry running East and West through the breach from GIVET to PRUM. (3) All forces north of this boundry were placed under the command of Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery while General Bradley retained command of that part of the Twelfth Army Group south of this boundry. Field Marshal Montgomery's forces included the First Canadian Army, the Second British Army, the Nineth US Army, and the First US Army reinforced with portions of the First Allied Airborne Army (XVIII Airborne Corps). (4) (See Map B)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 20 December 1944, Field Marshal Montgomery received instructions from General Eisenhower to attack to the south with his forces and link up with the Third US Army in the vicinity of HOUFFALIZE, BELGIUM. (5) The Third US Army was to begin its attack toward the north on 22 December 1944. The Third US Army relieved the embattled 101st Airborne Division at BASTOGNE on 26 December 1944. (6)

Accordingly the First US Army was given the mission of attacking south toward HOUFFALIZE, BELGIUM and making contact with the Third US Army in that vicinity. (7)

The attack was ordered for 030830 January 1945, and the general plan of the Army was as follows: the XVIII Airborne Corps, consisting of the 30th Infantry Division, the 75th

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- (3) A-1, p. 558U  
(4) A-1, p. 559Y  
(5) A-6, p. 282  
(6) A-1, p. 559V  
(7) A-5, p. 123

Infantry Division, the 106th Infantry Division (-), and the 82nd Airborne Division, would attack south and southeast from its present position secure the SALM RIVER line and the town of VIELSALM, BELGIUM; the VII Corps was to attack south through the gap opened by the XVIII Airborne Corps and effect the link up, in the vicinity of HOUFFALIZE, BELGIUM, with the Third US Army. (8)

The XVIII Airborne Corps assigned the mission of seizing and securing the SALM RIVER line and the town of VIELSALM to the 82nd Airborne Division. The Division in turn planned to attack south and southeast at 030830 January 1945, with three regiments abreast: the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and the 325th Gilder Infantry Regiment in that order from left to right. The 504th Parachute Infantry and the 508th Parachute Infantry were to be initially in division reserve. The line of contact was to be the line of departure. Contact was to be from left to right. (9) (See Map C)

#### DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 517TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT

The 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, as of 1 January 1945, had its 2d and 3d Battalions in an assembly area north of TROIS PONTS, BELGIUM. The 1st Battalion was enroute from an action while attached to the Third Armored Division and probably would not be available on the morning of 3 January 1945. However the 1st Battalion was to be available to the regimental commander at approximately 1200 hours, 3 January

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(8) A-5, p. 124

(9) A-2, p. 2 January Section

1945. (10)

The Commanding General of the 82nd Airborne Division ordered the Regimental Commander of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment to relieve the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment during the night of 1-2 January 1945, and to attack south and southeast at 030830 January 1945, from its positions and secure the SALM RIVER line from TROIS PONTS, BELGIUM to GRAND HALLEUX, BELGIUM. (11) (See Map C)

The 3d Battalion 517th Parachute Infantry was ordered to effect the relief of the 504th Parachute Infantry on the night of 1-2 January 1945. On 2 January 1945, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion was attached to the 517th Parachute Infantry for the attack commencing 030830 January 1945. (12)

The regimental commander decided to attack with two battalions abreast: the 2d Battalion and the 551st with the 551st on the right and the 3d Battalion in reserve, to assemble in rear of the 2d Battalion after passage of the lines at 030830 January 1945. (13)

THE B ATTALION SITUATION  
(See Map C)

The 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion had been in an assembly area to the rear of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment since making a night attack 27-28 December 1944. It was only slightly understrength in men and was up to T/O and E in equipment. The morale was excellent and the combat efficiency of the unit was excellent. (14)

Before proceeding further it would be wise to review the

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- (10) Statement of Capt. W. G. Irwin, S-3, 2d Bn 517th  
(11) Statement of Col. W. G. Joerg, CO 551st  
(12) A-2, p. 1 January Section  
(13) Statement of Lt. Col. W. G. Joerg  
(14) Personal knowledge

organization of this separate parachute battalion. The battalion had been reorganized during May and June of 1944, while in ITALY. This reorganization, under the authorization of NATUSA, had increased the strength of the battalion slightly by; (1) relieving headquarters company of its organic battalion administrative personnel and converting it into a heavy weapons company with one platoon of light machine guns, (two sections of four guns each), one 81mm mortar platoon (four guns), and an anti-tank and demolition platoon (one anti-tank section of nine rocket launcher teams and a demolition section of twelve men); (2) organizing a battalion headquarters detachment comprised of the battalion staff and all battalion administrative personnel; and (3) organizing a service company detachment to perform the necessary logistical services for the battalion. Furthermore, after the invasion of Southern France, the battalion had been issued sufficient one-quarter ton trucks to be issued two per rifle company and five to headquarters company.

(15)

At approximately 1200 hours, 2 January 1945, the battalion commander was notified to proceed to the Regimental Command Post, to receive the regimental attack order for the following day. He was told that his battalion would be one of the assault battalions and was given the boundries for the regimental zone of action. (16) (See Map C)

The battalion commander immediately notified the company commanders of the impending attack, ordered them to make a

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(15) Personal knowledge  
(16) Personal knowledge



quick reconnaissance of the regimental zone, notified them that the battalion attack order would be issued at 021400 January 1945, at the B attalion Command Post, and departed for the Regimental Command Post. (17)

The weather on 2 January 1945, was foggy, heavily overcast and cold (below freezing night and day). There was a blanket of snow on the ground about twelve inches deep and frozen almost solid. Because of the fog visibility was limited to between one hundred and two hundred yards in the low areas while the high ground was completely obliterated. (18)

A quick reconnaissance was made but little knowledge of the terrain in front of the line of departure was gained, because of the fog. The Headquarters Company Commander and his platoon leaders proceeded to a high point, northeast of BASSE BODEUX, in the right (west) portion of the regimental zone. Observation was limited to the present line of contact and about two hundred yards beyond. Based on the scant information available and a presumption of what would happen if the battalion were assigned the right (west) portion of the regimental zone, initial position areas were picked for all the platoons and so designated to the platoon leaders. Contact was also made with an observation group from the 3d Battalion 517th Parachute Infantry and some information of the terrain to the front was gained. (19)

At 021400 January 1945, the company commanders assembled at the B attalion Command Post to receive the battalion attack

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(17) Personal knowledge  
(18) Personal knowledge  
(19) Personal knowledge

order. (20)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK  
(21) (See Map D)

The battalion commander, after some consultation with S-3, the S-2, the Artillery Liaison Officer, and the Headquarters Company Commander, issued the following oral order. (22)

An estimated enemy battalion, reinforced with some tanks, of the 62nd VG Division faces the regiment. Strong enemy positions are known to exist on the high ground south and south-east of BASSE BODEUX.

The 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment attacks at 030830 January 1945, and secures the SALM RIVER line from TROIS PONTS to GRAND HALLEUX. The 2d Battalion on the left and the 551st Parachute Battalion on the right. The 3d Battalion of the 505th Parachute Infantry is on our right. Contact is from left to right. The 460th Parachute FA Battalion is in direct support of the regiment. There will be an artillery preparation from 0815 hours to 0830 hours on the initial objectives the last five minutes of which will be smoke. (See Map D)

This battalion will attack at 030830 January 1945, along the axis ST-JACQUES-DAIROMONT-PETIT HALLEUX and secure the crossings of the SALM RIVER in the vicinity of GRAND HALLEUX. Company A on the left, Company C on the right, and Company B in reserve. Line of Departure is present line of contact. Forward assembly area is indicated on overlay. (See Map D)

Company A, with one section of machine guns attached, will seize objective ONE and be prepared to continue the attack

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- (20) Personal knowledge  
(21) Personal knowledge  
(22) Personal knowledge

on order.

Company C, with one section of machine guns attached, will seize objective TWO and be prepared to continue the attack on order.

The 81mm mortar platoon will be in general support of the battalion and be prepared to fire smoke missions at 0830 hours on the near edge of objective TWO. Forward observers with SCR-300 radios will be furnished to A and C Companies.

The anti-tank and demolition platoon will furnish three rocket launcher teams for the protection of the battalion command post. The demolition section will be prepared to remove any mines discovered along roads in the b attalion zone. Priority initially in zone of Company C. The balance of the platoon under control of the company commander.

Company B will be in battalion reserve. Initial position in forward assembly area. (See Map D) Move forward on order of the battalion commander.

The battalion aid station at BASSE BODEUX to open at 030830 January 1945. The battalion ammunition distributing point at BASSE BODEUX. Squad rolls will be placed in company areas and picked up in that area by the S-4 tomorrow. Men will not wear overcoats or overshoes. One-third of a K ration and the SOP amount of ammunition will be issued in this area prior to the movement as it is impossible to get vehicles into the forward assembly area.

See overlay for the Battalion Command Post. (See Map D)

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Communications SOP, and the command group will follow Company C initially.

A forward assembly area had been selected and each company was instructed to send one noncommissioned officer to the assistant S-3 (a Captain) who would acquaint them with the area and the route thereto. The company commanders were given the location and ordered to make their own reconnaissance of the forward assembly area. (23)

After receiving the order there was approximately one hour of daylight left (the order was finished at approximately 1600 hours) in which to execute a hurried reconnaissance and issue the company attack order. It was necessary to give the platoon leaders time to plan for their actions on the following day. The platoon leader of the machine gun platoon was sent to Company C while his assistant platoon leader was sent to Company A. The Headquarters Company Commander accompanied by the executive officer, the mortar platoon leader, the demolition officer, the company operations sergeant, the company communications sergeant, a radio operator, and a runner proceeded again to the high ground just east of BASSE BODEUX and made as detailed a reconnaissance as was possible in the remaining few minutes of daylight.

The terrain was generally heavily wooded with ridge lines running in a north-south direction. The elevation of the ridge lines was from 400-500 meters. Small streams followed the low ground between the ridges but they, in themselves, did not

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(23) Personal knowledge

constitute obstacles. The road net running east-west was generally good but the one running north-south was generally poor. Wheeled vehicles were pretty much restricted to the existing roads due to the forests and the snow. The terrain sloped gently down toward the line of departure and was open and smooth from the forward assembly area to the line of departure. From the line of departure to the initial objectives the terrain sloped gently upward and was open. The initial objectives were wooded high points approximately 800 yards from the line of departure. (24)

It was decided to emplace the mortar platoon in a draw just east of BASSE BODEUX, the anti-tank and demolitions platoon (minus three teams) would move in the vicinity of the reserve company, the Company Command Post would be in a building in BASSE BODEUX, and the company commander, the operations sergeant, a radio operator, and one runner would move with the battalion command group. It was further decided that the mortar platoon would occupy their positions prior to 2400 hours, 2 January, as the division had, beginning at 2400 hours, allotted the road running south into B ASSE BODEUX to certain specified units at certain specified times.

The company attack order was given at approximately 021830 January 1945, and due to the group reconnaissance earlier it was very brief. At approximately 1845 hours the platoon leaders began to orient their men and issue their own attack orders.

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(24) Personal knowledge

Immediately after the men had been fed the units attached moved to their respective company bivouac areas, thus allowing the rifle company commanders to integrate them into their company organization much better. These attachments consisted of a machine gun section to each assault rifle company, a mortar forward observer team with an SCR-300 radio to each of the assault rifle companies, and three rocket launcher teams to the battalion headquarters.

The company commander and the mortar platoon leader contacted the B attalion S-4 and obtained two additional two and one-half ton trucks which they immediately had loaded with 81mm mortar ammunition. The 81mm mortar platoon then moved into its firing positions completing the move at approximately 022330 January 1945.

MOVEMENT TO THE LINE OF DEPARTURE AND FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK  
(25) (See Map D)

At 030430 January, the battalion moved out of its rear assembly area and began its march to the forward assembly area in the following order of march; (1) Battalion Command Group, (2) Company A, (3) Company C, (4) Company B, (5) Anti-tank and Demolition Platoon (-), (6) Battalion Command Post, and (7) Headquarters Company Command Post. The march was to be a move generally southeast on the road toward BASSE BODEUX for approximately three thousand yards then northeast cross country for another one thousand yards into the forward assembly area.

The road was covered with a thick coating of ice making

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(25) Personal knowledge

the going rather slippery, particularly so for the heavily laden soldiers. A gap quickly began to form between the battalion command group and the leading rifle company. The battalion commander was not worried about this as he intended to stop at the turnoff, and he didn't believe the column could get lost following the only road in the vicinity. However the leading rifle company commander had not found the forward assembly area the day before and the assistant S-3 had made his reconnaissance of the wrong area. Consequently the non-commissioned officer, who had been oriented by the assistant S-3 the day previously, led the company and the column to the wrong turnoff. The company turned northeast off the road on to a trail approximately one thousand yards short of the correct turnoff.

Upon reaching the correct turnoff the battalion commander discovered that the column was not following the command group at all. He dispatched an officer back to find the column and bring them to the correct turnoff. The column was found and brought back to the correct route and forward to the turnoff, but it was 0730 hours before the head of the battalion moved off of the road toward the final assembly area. There was still one thousand yards to go and it was mostly cross country and the marching was slowed considerably by the snow. The final assembly area was reached at 0815 hours and the companies quickly deployed, made their final checks and moved toward the line of departure at 0845 hours.

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## NARRATION

### THE ATTACK ON 3 JANUARY 1945

At 0915 hours Companies A and C crossed the line of departure, after having received some artillery fire on their approach to the LD.

On the right Company C advanced rapidly toward its objective crossing the open space and entering the woods before it became engaged with the enemy. (See Map D) Once in the woods stiff resistance was encountered. Germans in well dug in positions about two hundred yards inside the woods opened fire and brought down considerable large caliber mortar fire on Company C. The company deployed and overran the first few German positions capturing about ten Germans. The German mortar fire increased in density, in accuracy, and in effectiveness due to the tree burst, and the company was momentarily stopped. (26)

On the left Company A was met with intense artillery and small arms fire the moment it crossed the line of departure. Most of the small arms fire was coming from the zone of the 2d Battalion of the 517th on their left. Tanks were observed in the vicinity of MONT DE FOSSE and their fire was added to the weight of the German fires directed at this company. By moving aggressively the company advanced in spite of this fire to a position about one hundred yards from the woods where it was stopped by fire from its front. (See Map D) At this time the company was being hit by extremely accurate fires from its

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(26) Personal knowledge



left flank, from the vicinity of MONT DE FOSSE, and fire from its front, from the edge of the woods. The company had suffered about twenty casualties including the company commander and one platoon leader. (27)

Meanwhile in the zone of Company C, Capt. Quinn, the Company Commander, had committed his support platoon and had slowly advanced toward his initial objective. The German mortar fires increased, but by 1100 hours Company C had captured its initial objective and was preparing to continue the attack southwest down the ridge toward FOSSE, and to seize the road running from FOSSE to ST-JACQUES. Contact between Company A and Company C had been lost at about 1130 hours and had not been reestablished. Every effort to send patrols toward the A Company zone were blocked by Germans in positions along the creek running northeast through the battalion zone. (28)

(See Map D)

The Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Joerg, ordered Company B, the reserve company, to displace forward to an area north of objective TWO and be prepared to attack and seize ST-JACQUES from objective TWO. (29)

Company A, by employing artillery on the Germans in the vicinity of MONT DE FOSSE, (this fire had to be cleared with the 2d Battalion of the 517th) and mortars on the Germans to their front, had managed to advance into the woods. Within the woods this advance was slow and bitterly contested every foot of the way. The company executive officer, who had taken

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- (27) Statement of Capt. M. A. Dalton; personal knowledge  
(28) Personal knowledge  
(29) Statement of Lt. Col. W. G. Joerg

over the company when the company commander had been wounded, Lt. Booth, had committed his support platoon just prior to entering the woods. The company advanced with three platoons abreast with their right flank generally along the creek. (See Map D) This slow advance continued until the company reached the near edge of objective ONE. There the company halted momentarily and attempted to assault the German positions. After a sharp hand to hand engagement the company was thrown back and quickly counterattacked. This counterattack came at about 1300 hours and was supported by two German tanks. After more severe fighting the company was forced back to the edge of the woods. There it dug in and remained for the balance of the day. (30)

Contact between Company A and the 2d Battalion on its left had never been made and with Company C on its right had never been regained. The company commander had, although, been in contact with the battalion commander by radio all day long. Company A had suffered approximately fifty casualties during the day due mainly to the lack of contact with the 2d Battalion on their left. Even after being driven back from their objective they continued to receive fire from the vicinity of MONT DE FOSSE until darkness. Two small counterattacks from the left were also repulsed during the late afternoon. (31)

At approximately 1300 hours the battalion commander notified the regimental commander of his situation and his plan

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(30) Statement of Lt. Booth  
(31) Statement of Lt. Booth

to commit the reserve company. The regimental commander concurred in this decision and notified the battalion commander that he would do something to take the pressure off his left flank. (32)

In the zone of the 2d Battalion, 517th, a very bitterly contested fight for the town of TROIS PONTS was shaping up. The entire battalion had been stopped immediately in front of the line of departure by a tremendous fire from the vicinity of TROIS PONTS, MONT DE FOSSE, and the high ground between the two towns, consequently a gap of about two thousand yards existed between this battalion and Company A. (33)

(See Map D)

Shortly after notifying the regimental commander of his intention to commit Company B the battalion commander heard heavy firing from the vicinity of objective ONE. Upon contacting the A Company Commander he was informed that they were commencing the assault on objective ONE. In the hope that Company A would be successful Company B was ordered to hold their attack on ST-JACQUES. Shortly thereafter the battalion commander was notified by Company A that they were being driven back by a strong counterattack. Company B was then ordered to execute the attack as planned except the objective would be objective ONE, the line of departure would be the creek running northeast, and the time of attack would be 1400 hours. This attack would be in conjunction with a continuation of the attack by Company C. (34)

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(32) Statement of Lt. Col. W. G. Joerg at the time

(33) Statement of Capt. W. G. Irwin about 1 March 1945

(34) Personal knowledge

At 1400 hours Companies B and C launched their attack after a short mortar preparation on their respective objectives. The battalion commander and his command group accompanied Company C.

Company B advanced slowly after crossing their line of departure against surprisingly light resistance and by 1600 hours had occupied objective ONE. (35)

Company C, however in its advance down the ridge toward FOSSE, was subjected to intense and extremely accurate heavy mortar fire. The caliber was estimated at the time to be 120mm. In spite of this fire the company advanced slowly clearing German positions to their front and by 1700 hours were in position overlooking the road between FOSSE and ST-JACQUES. Here the company was forced to dig in on a terrace of the ridge and it underwent one of the heaviest mortar and artillery barrages, which lasted about thirty minutes, of its experience. (36)

At approximately 1800 hours the Battalion Command Post displaced forward to a position on objective TWO. The mortar platoon was ordered to displace forward to a position just southwest of objective TWO and the three rifle companies were in approximately the same position they had been in at 1700 hours. At this time the battalion commander received a message from the regimental commander outlining the plan of action for the night of 3-4 January. To complicate things snow began to fall at about 1830 hours. (37)

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- (35) Statement of Capt. J. E. Evans, CO Co B, 3 January 1945  
(36) Statement of Capt. T. A. Quinn, CO Co C; personal knowledge  
(37) Personal knowledge

THE NIGHT ATTACK OF 3-4 JANUARY 1945  
(See Map E)

The regimental commander had ordered the 1st B attalion of the 517 to move through the zone of the 551st, attack east, capture ST-JACQUES, BERGEVAL, and the HIGH GROUND south of MONT DE FOSSE, and establish and maintain contact with the 551st on their right and the 2d Battalion on their left. The regimental commander on division order instructed the 551st to execute an attack to the south and capture a barracks area that was thought to exist. (See Map E) The 551st was also to maintain contact with the 505th on its right. (38)

The battalion commander planned to attack in a column of companies in order B, C, and A. As it was dark and he was anxious to begin the move with as little confusion as possible he decided the attachments would remain as they were during the day. The mortar platoon would remain in its present position, the Battalion Command Post would remain on objective TWO, and the command group would follow Company B. (39)

At approximately 032200 January the 1st Battalion of the 517th had cleared our zone and launched their attack. By daylight they had captured the objectives assigned to them. At approximately 032230 January, after the 1st Battalion cleared our zone, the battalion commander ordered the movement to begin. Contact with the enemy was broken and the companies moved out. (40) (See Map E)

Snow fell most of the night making visibility almost an impossibility. The movement was slow and halting but at about

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(38) Personal knowledge  
(39) Personal knowledge  
(40) Personal knowledge

040230 January the battalion was in position for the attack. The battalion commander, because of the snow and darkness, ordered a patrol out to reconnoiter the approaches to the objective. The patrol quickly returned and reported that they had found no barracks nor Germans. The battalion commander then made a personal reconnaissance accompanied by two company commanders and they found the same situation to exist, no barracks and no Germans. Due to the possibility of being lost and the fact that radio contact with the Regimental Command Post was out, the battalion commander decided to remain in position until daylight. (41) At daylight the battalion commander found the supposed barracks to be nothing more than a series of fire breaks in the forest in which were stored giant stacks of logs. This fact was immediately dispatched to the regimental commander. In the meantime the battalion was disposed as indicated. (See Map E) The companies were ordered to bring up a one-quarter ton truck each with rations and ammunition. The men were issued one K ration (a full ration) and in certain protected areas fires were permitted. The battalion command received a message from the regimental commander indicating a change in plans and ordering the battalion commander to meet him in the Battalion Command Post at 1000 hours. (42)

THE ATTACK OF 4 JANUARY 1945  
(See Map F)

At 1000 hours 4 January the battalion commander met the regimental commander in the Battalion Command Post and was ordered to resume the attack at 1400 hours. (See Map F)

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(41) Personal knowledge  
(42) Personal knowledge

Attack east, seize DAIROMONT and the HIGH GROUND west of ROCHELINVAL and be prepared to continue the attack on order to the SALM RIVER. The division command had committed the 504th on the right of the 551st with the mission of seizing the high ground west of PETIT HALLEUX. (43)

The enemy situation in our zone, at that time, was extremely vague. DAIROMONT was known to be occupied by the Germans but it was not known at what strength. For this reason the battalion commander decided to move in a column of companies, in the order A, C, and B, attack DAIROMONT from the northwest, continue east along the DAIROMONT-PETIT HALLEUX highway and occupy the assigned objective. (44)

At 1400 hours the battalion resumed the attack. In moving through the woods west of DAIROMONT a sharp encounter was made by Company A with a strong German patrol. Approximately ten Germans were captured and six were killed. The battalion continued to move in column and Company A emerged from the woods advancing toward DAIROMONT but were stopped by heavy small arms and artillery fire from the vicinity of DAIROMONT. It was approximately 1630 hours, about one hour before darkness and the battalion commander felt that it would be extremely difficult and costly to attempt a direct attack on DAIROMONT during daylight. It was then decided to by-pass DAIROMONT, move around it during the night, and attack the town from the east at daylight with one company while occupying the battalion objective with the other two. The battalion was then

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(43) Statement of Lt. Col. W. G. Joerg at the time  
(44) Personal knowledge

disposed along the woods facing DAIROMONT awaiting darkness. Periodic mortar and artillery fire continued to fall on the battalion positions. During this period the Battalion S-3, Major Herman, an Artillery Forward Observer, whose name is not presently known, with Company C, and the Executive Officer of Company C, Lt. Serio, became casualties. (45)

The battalion commander called the company commanders together and with the aid of a flashlight and a shelter half, briefed them on the movement for the night. The battalion was to move in a column of companies, in the order C, B, and A, cross country, seize DAIROMONT with Company A and the HIGH GROUND west of ROCHELINVAL with Companies <sup>B?</sup> A and C, Company C on the left, at daylight on 5 January. (46) (See Map F)

#### THE NIGHT ATTACK OF 4-5 JANUARY 1945

At about 2000 hours the battalion moved out in a column of companies, and because of the heavy underbrush and forest, the companies were in single file. The march was slow and tortuous with halts every few minutes to keep the battalion intact.

The weather cleared during the night of 4-5 January and by midnight a full moon was out, which combined with the snow made the night almost brilliant. The temperature went down to slightly below zero which added to the discomfort of the men. (47)

At approximately 0300 hours the battalion was halted parallel to the DAIROMONT-PETIT HALLEUX road about one thousand

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- (45) Personal knowledge  
(46) Personal knowledge  
(47) Personal knowledge



yards southeast of DAIROMONT. A patrol was dispatched to the road to report any Germans discovered. They quickly returned and reported a German column halted along the road of about battalion strength. Another patrol was dispatched to the front and they quickly returned with the report that they had encountered Germans in position about one hundred yards to the front. The strength of this position was estimated to be in excess of one platoon. Sgt. Spletzer, the Battalion Rigger Sergeant, was a skilled interpreter and he led each patrol. In each case, when the patrol was challenged, Sgt. Spletzer, answered in German and evidently satisfied the Germans because there was no firing. (48) (See Map F)

The battalion commander then decided to turn the column around strike the road and attack east astride the road with Companies B and C while Company A seized DAIROMONT. This turn around was accomplished with difficulty as most of the men had fallen asleep and it was extremely difficult to awaken them. By now the cold weather was taking its toll of casualties. Those men who had made the mistake of falling asleep were literally frozen. In two cases the men had to be forcibly exercised for over an hour before it was possible to evacuate them. The boots and socks of the majority were frozen when they were awakened. From this time on to the end of the period described the non-battle casualties increased. These casualties were primarily frozen feet and respiratory diseases.

(49)

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(48) Personal knowledge

(49) Personal knowledge

By about 0400 hours the turn around had been completed and by about 0430 hours the head of the battalion was at the edge of the woods, south of the highway and east of DAIROMONT. The companies halted and for the next two hours reconnaissance in preparation for the attack was made. Patrols fixed the position of the German column halted along the highway and it was discovered that DAIROMONT was still occupied. Shortly prior to daylight the three rifle companies moved to attack positions and at daylight the attack began. (50) (See Map F)

During the night the Battalion Command Post, the 81mm Mortar Platoon, and the Headquarters Company Command Post had displaced forward to ST-JACQUES. Radio communication during the night had been excellent and as a result the 81mm mortar platoon was in position to support the attack. (51)

Company A captured DAIROMONT with only a few shots being fired. It suffered no casualties, one or two Germans were killed, and about thirty were captured. (52)

Companies B and C faced a little different situation in their attack east along the road. The head of the German column was encountered about five hundred yards inside the woods and a brisk fight developed. The German column retreated quickly toward ROCHELINVAL leaving only a strong rear guard behind. This rear guard was slowly driven in and by 1200 hours the high ground designated as the objective had been captured. With the capture of the objective Companies B and C were ordered to organize a defense on their present positions and to

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(50) Personal knowledge  
(51) Personal knowledge  
(52) Statement of Lt. Booth

contact the 1st Battalion of the 517th on our left and the 504th on our right. (53)

At about 0900 hours the regimental commander had visited the battalion. He informed the battalion commander that the 1st and 2d Battalions had occupied the high ground west of the SALM RIVER in their zones during the previous night. The battalion commander was instructed to prepare his objective for defense when captured and that he did not know how long we would remain on the defense but to make plans for the continuation of the attack. (54)

The afternoon of 5 January was spent organizing the positions for defense. The squad rolls were brought up and issued out to the men, ammunition was replenished, mail was given out, and a full ration of 10 in 1 (Ten in One) was issued to the men. (55)

The battalion situation as of 1500 hours was as follows: (See Map G) Companies B and C, each with one section of machine guns attached, were in position on the high ground west of ROCHELINVAL, Company A was in battalion reserve in an area behind Company B, the Battalion Command Post as indicated on Map G, and the 81mm mortar platoon, in position just east of DAIROMONT. (56)

At approximately 1500 hours the Headquarters Company Commander was ordered to blow the bridge over the SALM RIVER just south of ROCHELINVAL sometime during the night of 5-6 January. It was hoped that by accomplishing this the Germans in the

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- (53) Personal knowledge  
(54) Statement of Lt. Col. W. G. Joerg  
(55) Personal knowledge  
(56) Personal knowledge

vicinity of ROCHELINVAL would be unable to reinforce their positions in front of the battalion with additional armor from east of the river. Lt. Farrin was ordered to constitute a reconnaissance party from the demolition section of five or six men and be ready to accompany the company commander on reconnaissance about 1800 hours. (57)

At about 1600 hours the Regimental S-2, Lt. Nyler, visited the battalion position. He and Lt. Farrin conferred on the bridge job and apparently decided to make an early reconnaissance on their own. These two officers without other support and without notifying the commanders concerned started off. They advanced to a position about two hundred yards in front of Company B where they were ambushed by a small German patrol. In the resulting melee Lt. Farrin was killed and the Regimental S-2 escaped to the rear. This took place at about 1630 hours. (58)

The regimental S-2 reported to the Headquarters Company Commander of the action and upon a report to the battalion commander it was decided not to blow or attempt to demolish the bridge during the night. This decision was made in the light of the experience of the two officers and a patrol report from Company B that had just come in. The patrol reported Germans dug in in strength along the high ground southwest of ROCHELINVAL and around the town itself. It was decided that to be successful a large combat patrol would have to be sent out to seize the bridge while it was being prepared for demolition and that

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(57) Personal knowledge

(58) Statement of Lt. Nyler, Regimental S-2

this being the case it was not worth while. This estimate was borne out in later operations. The Germans did not attempt to bring armor across the river. The reason being that they had better firing positions for it on the east side. (59)

#### THE DEFENSIVE OPERATIONS OF 6 JANUARY 1945

The night of 5-6 January was relatively quiet, the only action being patrol activity engaged in by both sides. During the night the battalion had ordered patrols out from both front line companies to determine the extent of the German position and attempt to estimate the strength of the Germans in position in the vicinity of ROCHELINVAL. On the morning of 6 January the Battalion S-2, Capt. Hartman, estimated the German strength to be approximately 500 and to consist of elements of the 9th SS Panzar Division. (60)

At approximately 0900 hours a German counterattack in an estimated company strength supported by mortars, nebelwerfer, and some artillery struck Company B. Company B however was aware that the attack was coming, as a local security outpost reported it, and heavy artillery and mortar barrages were placed on the advancing Germans. The counterattack was broken up before it reached the lines of Company B and the Germans withdrew. Considerable nebelwerfer fire continued to fall on the positions of the two front line companies during the remainder of the morning. (61)

Aside from a direct hit on the battalion message center at about 061200 January by a nebelwerfer salvo, which destroy-

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- (59) Personal knowledge  
(60) Statement of Capt. E. W. Hartman  
(61) Statement of Capt. J. M. Evans

ed considerable Christmas mail and packages, the day was relatively quiet. At about 1400 hours the battalion was detached from the 517th and attached to the 504th. The battalion was to remain in place, its zone was not changed except that the battalion left boundry became the regimental left boundry.

(62)

THE PREPARATION FOR AND THE ATTACK OF 7 JANUARY 1945

At approximately 1500 hours 6 January, the battalion commander was called to the Regimental Command Post and told that the regiment would attack at 070830 January to drive the Germans east of the SALM RIVER and capture the towns of ROCHELINVAL and GRAND HALLEUX. The regiment would attack with two battalions abreast, the 551st and the 1st Battalion, with the 551st on the left with the mission of seizing ROCHELINVAL. One platoon of light tanks from the 740th Tank Battalion would be attached to the 551st effective 070200 January. (63)

Upon his return from the Regimental Command Post, about 1630 hours, the battalion commander called the company commanders together and gave his attack order. It was briefly as follows: the battalion would attack with two companies abreast, Companies A and B, Company A on the left. With the objective of ROCHELINVAL to Company A and the high ground southwest of ROCHELINVAL and the railroad to Company B. (See Map H) Each assault company would have one section of machine guns attached and a mortar forward observer would be furnished to each assault company. Company C would be in reserve and assemble in the vicinity of

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(62) Personal knowledge

(63) Statement of Lt. Col. W. G. Joerg; A-3, p. 85

the Company Command Post after passage by Company A. Company C also would support the attack of Company A with a section of machine guns and be prepared to reduce the road block between their positions and ROCHELINVAL. (See Map H) The tank platoon would be in reserve and assemble in the vicinity of the Battalion Command Post. The 81mm mortar platoon would support the attack from its present position with a five minute preparation of ROCHELINVAL with the priority of its fires going to Company A. (64)

During the night of 6-7 January intensive patrolling was carried out by both Companies A and B reconnoitering routes and approached to their objectives. The patrols in all cases were reconnaissance patrols and had no fights with the Germans during the night.

To completely understand the forthcoming action it will be necessary to review the casualties suffered by the battalion up to date. The battalion had suffered approximately 400 casualties since 3 January, approximately 200 of which were killed, wounded, or missing, (ten men were listed as missing up to this date) another 200 were non-battle casualties. (Trench foot, frost bite, and respiratory disease.) The Rifle Companies with the exception of Company A had an effective strength of approximately 50 men and officers. Company A had an effective strength of approximately 30 men and officers. The Headquarters Company had an effective strength of approximately 60 men and officers. During the night of 6-7 January two replacement

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(64) Personal knowledge

officers were assigned to the battalion and delivered to the Battalion Command Post about 2300 hours. They were promptly reassigned to Company A. Both were casualties by noon of the following day. One was killed and the other wounded. (65)

THE ATTACK OF 7 JANUARY 1945

Exactly at 0830 hours Companies A and B crossed the line of departure, which was the line of contact, on their attack east toward the SALM RIVER. Each was met with a heavy volumn of artillery, mortar, nebelwerfer, and small arms fire.

(See Map G) Company B however made rapid progress in its zone and by 1000 hours had captured the high ground assigned as one of its objectives. Company B had experienced some casualties and had killed or captured about forty Germans. The battalion commander ordered Company B to continue its attack and clear its zone down to the west bank of the SALM RIVER. (66)

In the zone of Company A the situation was considerably different. The company had been met with considerable German fire when it crossed the line of departure and as the company advanced the fire increased. When the company cleared the trees and began its advance across the open ground in front of ROCHELINVAL the fire became murderous. The Company Commander, Lt. Booth, and one of the newly assigned replacement officers, were both killed as the company advanced across the open ground. The advance continued however until the lead elements reached a positions about one hundred yards west of the town where they were stopped completely and finally. Radio communication with

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(65) Personal knowledge

(66) Statement of Acting S-3 (Name unknown at present)



the battalion was out, but the mortar forward observer was still alive and operating his radio, unfortunately he was separated from the two remaining company officers (a Rifle Platoon Leader, Lt. Durkee, and the Machine Gun Platoon Leader, Lt. McNair) and could not reach them. This mortar observer directed considerable accurate mortar fire upon the German position and about 1100 hours called for a smoke mission to cover the withdrawal of the remnants of the company. (67)

At the Battalion Observation Post confusion was king. The observation post was in the immediate vicinity of a machine gun section of Company C, supporting the attack, and considerable German mortar fire was falling in the area. The battalion commander was aware of the situation of Company B but was very much unaware of the situation of Company A. He was certain that Company A had been halted by German fire because he could observe the intensity of it, but being that he had no communication with the company commander, and being unaware until about 1100 hours that he had been killed, he was reluctant to arbitrarily order fire into the area or to commit the reserve company. Some German positions within the buildings were picked up and the battalion commander ordered the light tank platoon to come forward and take them under fire. This they did, the tank fire was very effective and assisted considerably the withdrawal of Company A. The battalion commander was killed as Company A began to withdraw. (68) The mortar fire that had been falling upon the Battalion Observation Post all morning was

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(67) Statement of Lt. McNair

(68) Statement of Lt. J. M. Hill

very effective.

The Battalion Executive Officer, Major Holms, was immediately notified. He arrived shortly from the command post, took a quick look at the situation, ordered the tank platoon attached to Company C, and ordered Company C to attack ROCHELINVAL from the northwest and southwest with two groups simultaneously, utilizing at least one tank with each group. The company commander was ordered to move his company into attack positions immediately and to notify him, Major Holms, when ready to attack. The mortar platoon was ordered to place continuous fire in as heavy a rate as possible until Company C was ready to assault the German positions. The mortar platoon fired approximately seven hundred and fifty rounds into and in the vicinity of ROCHELINVAL in support of the attack of Company C. (69)

At approximately 1300 hours Company C with the tank platoon attached attacked the town. As the company neared the town the mortar fires lifted and the town was taken with very little fighting. Company C captured over two hundred and fifty Germans inside the town. A count of the German dead in that vicinity totaled over 100. At approximately 1430 hours Company C had control of the west bank of the SALM RIVER in its zone and the entire battalion was closed in on its objective. (70)

#### SUMMARY

In summation it may be said that this battalion accomplished every mission given it. The men fought valiantly and at the critical times demonstrated their superiority over the

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(69) A-3, p. 85; personal knowledge  
(70) Statement of Capt. Halleck

Germans. The battalion had suffered 475 casualties in officers and men during the period 3-8 January. (71) The fact that a large per cent of the non-battle casualties were needless can be laid to a number of causes. First, it was not anticipated that the men would be without their rolls for a period of three days, second equipment to be carried was sacrificed for the sake of speed, and last, the unit commanders were inexperienced in combating trench foot.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. RECONNAISSANCE AND ORDERS

Prior to a large scale attack it is absolutely necessary that small unit commanders, company, platoon, and squad, make an adequate reconnaissance of forward assembly areas, routes into and out of, and the line of departure. Had this reconnaissance been made by all company commanders the column would not have broken early in the morning of 3 January 1945, and the entire battalion would have closed into the forward assembly area in time to have crossed the line of departure at the time prescribed. This vital bit of reconnaissance, the forward assembly area, was intrusted to the assistant S-3 and was consequently bungled. There were several solutions to this at the time. The best one, I believe, would have been for the battalion commander to have issued his orders from the high ground northeast of BASSE BODEUX. He then could have personally conducted the company commanders on a short reconnaissance of the forward area, the company commanders in turn, by having their platoon leaders present in the area, would have had sufficient time to issue their orders prior to darkness. Another

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(71) A-4, p. 392

thing, had the battalion order been issued outside in the cold, it would have been considerably shorter than it was, thus allowing more time for reconnaissance.

Reconnaissance forward of the line of contact must be made in sufficient force to allow it to be successful. Only rarely should one or two officers, alone, go forward attempting to accomplish this. It is believed that had Lt. Farrin taken one or two men with him he would have accomplished his mission on 5 January and not have been killed.

## 2. USE OF RESERVES AND CONTACT WITH FRIENDLY UNITS

The attack on 3 January of Company A failed because this company was completely isolated. Contact with the 2d Battalion of the 517th had never been made and contact between Companies A and C was lost at the critical moment. The battalion commander was aware from the start of the situation on the battalion left flank. The reserve company could and should have been used immediately to relieve this situation. I believe Company B should have been committed as early as 031100 January against Company A's objective. The attack could have been launched from the zone of Company C. Company A, after gaining the cover of the woods could have reverted to battalion reserve with the mission of protecting the left flank of the battalion. Had this been done I believe the casualties for the day would have been lighter, the battalion would have advanced farther, and the regimental commander would have committed his reserve battalion much quicker.

## 3. CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY

Once gained this contact must be maintained. Contact with

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the enemy was broken on the evening of 3 January. This was not regained, except momentarily, until the morning of 5 January. Had patrolling been immediately instituted by the battalion on the evening of 3 January it is doubtful if the battalion would have had to have been moved, as it was, during the night of 3-4 January against a non-existent objective. A patrol of platoon strength could have discovered the nature of the objective had it been dispatched immediately upon the receipt of the regimental order the evening of 3 January 1945.

#### 4. OBJECTIVES

When attacking during the extremely cold portion of the winter it is better where possible, to assign built up areas, no matter how small, as unit objectives. In this situation it would have been difficult to assign built up areas as objectives every day, but it is believed that more use could have been made of them. For example ST-JACQUES and DAIROMONT, although within the battalion zone, were not utilized as such and it is believed that Company B could have advanced into ST-JACQUES on 3 January had they been so ordered. I believe that had this been done the non-battle casualty list would have been reduced considerably. Simply because a portion of the men would have been able to have been under cover some of the time.

#### 5. THE UTILIZATION OF 81MM MORTARS

I believe that the 81mm mortars were utilized by the companies to their fullest extent. In order to accomplish this it was necessary to procure equipment that was not allowed by the existing T/O and E. For example, the communication within the mortar platoon consisted of five SCR-300 radios. The

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T/O and E authorized only sound powered telephone equipment. These five radios were used as follows; one to a forward observer sent to each rifle company, one with the platoon gun positions, and one with the company commander. The mortar platoon leader, by utilizing the platoon sgt., instrument corporal, and a runner, had set up a small fire control center. He used this to control and record the fires delivered in support of the rifle companies. The forward observers were furnished by utilizing the two section sergeants and one squad leader. The radio operators came from company headquarters and were holding T/O and E positions as fillers, cooks, etc. It would have been much easier had these individuals been organic to the platoon. The Platoon Leader, Lt. Buscher, and the Company Executive Officer, Lt. Hill, displayed a commendable amount of aggressiveness in planning and executing the employment of the mortar platoon. They specified certain reference points throughout the battalion zone of action which the forward observers used in their initial data for fire missions. As these reference points came within range the mortar platoon would register on them and they proved to be of great value in the quick deliverance of mortar fire to the companies. These officers further planned for the displacement of the mortars in such a way that the battalion was never without mortar support. It was also found that, on vital targets, the simultaneous adjustment of the four guns proved to be the most effective method. Ammunition supply is also a problem that must be solved. The success of the attack by Company C on 7 January was due, in part, to the mortar preparation fired

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in support of it. Approximately 750 rounds were fired on this one mission. This was possible only because of the two two and one-half ton trucks furnished the platoon leader by the S-4 and the insistence of the company executive officer that these two trucks be kept loaded and full.

#### 6. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

The supply of this operation was generally good, but the activities of the Battalion S-4 were restricted considerably by the lack of transportation. The one striking defect was the complete lack of hot meals during this period. The fault here lay with the company commanders as the cooks were utilized in other jobs during action, as has been outlined in "5" above. In retrospect this is undoubtedly a false economy in the use of manpower as the cooks could have probably done more good cooking meals than operating radios.

The evacuation was excellent considering the situation and their lack of transportation. The company aid men utilized the one-quarter ton trucks assigned to the companies in evacuating the casualties to the battalion aid station. The battalion aid station had organically assigned a three-quarter ton ambulance which was of very little use in the forward areas. One or two one-quarter ton trucks modified for litter carry would have been much more satisfactory. Capt. Battenfield, the Battalion Surgeon, had the aid station set up initially in BASSE BODEUX and advanced it as the situation demanded. He did manage to keep this installation under cover and the wounded were fed before they were evacuated farther.

#### 7. THE USE OF TANKS

At 070200 January 1945, a platoon of tanks from the 740th

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Tank Battalion was attached to the battalion for the attack on ROCHELINVAL scheduled for 0830 hours of that day. The battalion was aware of the German strength in the vicinity. The Battalion S-2, Capt. Hartman, had estimated that approximately four hundred Germans defended ROCHELINVAL. It was known that the capture of the town would be difficult at best. It is believed that had these tanks been employed with Company A in the initial attack this company's attack would have been successful. Instead the tanks were placed in reserve and not utilized at all until it became necessary to support the withdrawal of the remnants of Company A. Later when Company C attacked the town, the tanks were attached to this company, and used by the Company Commander, Lt. Sano, to an exceptional advantage.

#### LESSONS

1. A reconnaissance by small unit leaders is an absolute necessity in the planning for a large scale attack. Orders, on battalion level must be brief, concise, and to the point. A runner should be with an officer at all times in the forward area and an officer should not attempt a reconnaissance forward of the line of contact alone, or in the company of another officer, until other means have been tried.
  2. Reserves must be committed aggressively, and quickly when needed. Contact between friendly units, particularly companies of the same battalion, must be maintained. When it is lost every possible method must be resorted to in order to re-establish it.
  3. Contact with the enemy, once gained, must be maintained.
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Commanders must realize that in the offense a continuous pressure is necessary.

4. In fighting in extremely cold weather within an area containing towns and built up area, these towns and built up areas should be the day to day objectives of the attack. The overall plan will be much more successful if every unit commander will take maximum advantage of these towns.

5. The 81mm mortars are the quickest and most effective support the battalion commander has under his control. It is absolutely necessary that this platoon be organized and trained to deliver quick and accurate fires of such a volume to be effective when called for by the rifle companies. Direct liaison with the rifle companies in the form of senior noncommissioned officers as forward observers does much to increase this effectiveness.

6. Adequate transportation is an absolute necessity to satisfactorily supply and furnish evacuation for a unit. This transportation must be under the control of the unit S-4 and the Surgeon. Hot meals are more important to a fighting unit, particularly during extremely cold weather, than is generally recognized. Where possible a unit must feed hot meals.

7. Tanks should not be used totally in reserve. When the enemy situation is known with any degree of certainty they can and should be committed entirely with the assault units. Every means possible must be used in capturing the assigned objective.