

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

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1948-1949

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 81mm MORTAR PLATOON,  
HEADQUARTERS COMPANY, FIRST BATTALION,  
517th PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM,  
AT SOY, BELGIUM, 21-26 DECEMBER 1944.  
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of an 81mm Mortar Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: 81mm MORTAR PLATOON  
SUPPORTING THE ATTACK OF A BATTALION TO RELIEVE  
A SURROUNDED GARRISON AND ESTABLISH A MAIN LINE  
OF RESISTANCE.

Captain James M. Townsend  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index .....	1
Bibliography .....	2
Introduction .....	4
General Situation .....	5
Special Mission Assigned .....	8
Terrain Analysis .....	9
Battalion Plan of Attack .....	11
The Attack .....	12
Analysis and Criticism .....	28
Lessons .....	31
Map A - Line Held 15 December 1944	
Map B - The German Plan	
Map C - Area Assigned XVIII A/B Corps and Penetration 19-20 December 1944	
Map D - Situation 22 December 1944	
Map E - Situation 23 December 1944	
Map F - Situation 24 December 1944	

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 History of XVIII Corps, Airborne, (17 January 1942 to May 1945) Photostatic Copy (Library, Airborne Section, TIC)
- A-2 Mission Accomplished - The Story of The Fighting Corps XVIII Corps, Airborne, History (TIS Library)
- A-3 Report by The Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Force (6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945), 13 July 1945, pages 56-66 (TIS Library)
- A-4 Dark December  
By Robert E. Merriam (Personal possession of author)
- A-5 Spearhead in the West, 1941-1945  
History of the 3rd Armored Division, pages 221-226 (TIS Library)
- A-6 Encyclopedia Americana, Vol III, Belgium, page 48  
(Personal possession of author)
- A-7 The Battle of the Bulge, Operations of the First Battalion, 517 Parachute Infantry, 13th Airborne Division, 21-26 December 1944, Ardennes Salient (Personal possession of author)
- A-8 The Invasion of Western Europe, Part I, (6 June - 31 December 1944) Department of Military Art and Engineering U. S. Military Academy, West Point, N. Y. 1946, pages 69-76 (TIS Library)
- A-9 Saga of the All-American  
History of the 82d Airborne Division  
Edited and Compiled by W. Forest Dawson (TIS Library)
- A-10 The 13th Airborne Division History  
Book VII, 517 Parachute Infantry (TIS Library)
- A-11 The Strategy of the Battle of the Ardennes  
By Lieut Col Alfred H. Burne, DSO  
The Fighting Forces, February 1945, page 281 (TIS Library)
- A-12 Attack Immediately  
By Capt Charles E. LaChaussee  
The Infantry Journal, March 1946, page 48 (TIS Library)
- A-13 Ardennes Battlefields  
By Lieut Col R. M. Raynsford, DSO  
The Fighting Forces, February 1945, page 302 (TIS Library)
- A-14 My Three Years with Eisenhower  
By Capt Harry C. Butcher, USNR (Personal possession of author)

- A-15 Crusade in Europe  
By General Dwight D. Eisenhower (Possession of Capt  
Henry LaFevbre)
- A-16 General Order 95, War Department, 30 October 1945  
Congressional Medal of Honor to Melvin Biddle (TIS  
Library)
- A-17 Reference Data, Infantry Regiment, August 1948,  
TIS Ft Benning, Ga., Chart 5 (Personal possession of  
author)
- A-18 First U. S. Army  
Report of Operations  
1 August 1944, 22 February 1945 (TIS Library)

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 81mm MORTAR PLATOON,  
HEADQUARTERS COMPANY, FIRST BATTALION,  
517th PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM,  
AT SOY, BELGIUM, 21-26 DECEMBER 1944.  
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of an 81mm Mortar Platoon Leader)

INTRODUCTION

During the latter part of November and early days of December 1944, the Airborne forces on the continent of Europe, under command of XVIII Airborne Corps, began concentration in the vicinity of Rheims, France for training, rehabilitation and the establishment of a general reserve for SHAEF. (1) (2) Major forces comprising XVIII Airborne Corps, at this time, were the 17th, 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions and the 517th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team. (3) (4) The latter was located at Soissons, France. It is with the operations of the 81mm mortar platoon of the First Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team in the Ardennes-Alsace Campaign that this monograph will deal.

In order that one may better understand this operation, the problems it faced and what it accomplished with its limited means, it is well first to understand the organization of this unit and its mission. The 81mm mortar platoon was a part of the Battalion Headquarters Company of the Parachute Infantry Battalion. It consisted of four squads of seven men each, organized for tactical purposes with two sections of two squads per section. The platoon headquarters consisted of two officers

(1) A-1, page 18; (2) Statement by Col Rupert D. Graves, then C.O. 517th Pch Inf Regt C. T., 16 Jan. 1949; (3) A-2; (4) Personal knowledge.

and five men. The mission of this platoon was to furnish close fire support to the battalion. (5) The men of this platoon were seasoned from two previous campaigns. Each man knew his job and that of the other members of his squad. The casualties had been moderate and esprit was very high.

#### GENERAL SITUATION

By 3 December 1944, Ninth and First Armies had reached the Roer River after very difficult fighting in the Aachen sector. (Map A) First Army was preparing to continue the attack on 13 December to capture the vital Roer River dams at Schmidt. This would enable the Ninth Army to cross the river and continue the attack toward the Rhine--an attack that could not be made prior to the capture of the dams because of the danger of being trapped should the enemy blow these dams. (6)

During the preceding November offensive in the Aachen sector, the Ninth and First Armies had employed seventeen divisions in its maximum effort to breach this bastion of the West Wall. (7) As a result of the decision to employ the maximum effort in the offensive in this sector, other fronts were weakly held. In the Ardennes, a line extending for some 75 miles from Trier to Monschau was held by only one corps. (Map A) This gamble, the so-called calculated risk, was based "on the absence of strategic objectives or large depots in the area and also on the relative difficult terrain." (8)

The VIII Corps was holding the major portion of the line along this 75 mile front. The Corps was employing divisions which had been relieved from the more strenuous fighting for

(5) A-17, Chart 5, Personal knowledge; (6) A-3, p. 60;  
(7) A-3, p. 60; (8) A-3, p. 62.

*Plans that  
showed an  
attack*

the Roer River Dams and had been shifted to the VIII Corps front for a rest. On 16 December, the Ardennes front was held by the 4th, 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions and the 9th Armored Division (-). (9)

The weakness of the American line in this area was well known to the German Army, for they too had been using this sector of the front as a rest area for battle weary divisions. This thinly held line had been spotted by the German High Command as early as September 1944 and plans for a counterattack made accordingly. (10) Throughout the ensuing months, the plan was developed for an all-out offensive against this weak area in the American lines. By 12 October, the final plan had been made. This plan called for an attack through the Ardennes sector. The plan was to use three armies: the Sixth Panzer Army, Fifth Panzer Army and the Seventh Army. The panzer armies were to plunge through the center of the American lines and make a mad dash for the Meuse River, to be reached on the second day, then on to Liege and Antwerp. (11) (12) The Seventh Army was to block to the south and protect the south flank of the penetration. One corps, borrowed from the Fifteenth Panzer Army to the north, was to protect the north flank. (13) (MapB)

In the early morning hours of 16 December, following a violent artillery preparation, the German counteroffensive was launched through the thinly defended Ardennes sector. (14)

With the rapidity of the attack, VIII Corps communications rapidly broke down, and what at first appeared to be a local attack was in reality the German all-out counteroffensive of the West front. Surprise was fully achieved. The counter-

(9) A-3, p. 63; (10) A-4, p. 10; (11) A-4, p. 13; (12) A-3, p. 62; (13) A-4, p. 12-13; (14) A-3, p. 62.

offensive rolled rapidly through the disorganized American divisions.

By 19 December, two penetrations had been made. One penetration, on a narrow front north of St. Vith, had reached the Ambleve River at Stavelot. The second penetration, on a wide front, had cut the Houffalize-Bastogne Road and was threatening Bastogne. (15) (Map C)

To counteract this swiftly developing thrust, the divisions of XVIII Airborne Corps were ordered, on 17 December, to move from their rest areas in the vicinity of Rheims, France to the east. Enroute to the corps assembly area at Bastogne, units of the corps were detached and attached to other corps already fighting in the line.

On 19 December, XVIII Airborne Corps Headquarters, re-routed from Bastogne, arrived in Werbomont, Belgium and was assigned the mission of preventing any enemy penetration in the area Polleur-Stavelot-Manhay-Houffalize-Laroche-Hotton and to counterattack to halt the enemy advance to the northwest. Boundaries could not be assigned until the situation had somewhat stabilized. (16) (Map C)

The 3rd Armored Division (-), still in its bivouac area in Stolberg, <sup>map A</sup> Germany, was attached to the newly arrived corps, on 19 December, and ordered to move to the Soy-Hotton <sup>map C</sup> area. (17) Within twenty-four hours, this force had closed in its assigned area.

From vicinity of Soy, CCR 3rd Armored Division, under the command of Col Robert L. Howze, was ordered to attack south (15) A-18, p. 111-112; (16) A-18, p. 111; (17) A-5, p. 221.



and southeast, destroy all enemy encountered and secure the roadnet in its zone. (18)

Meanwhile, the German 116th Panzer Division was attacking northwest and, on the morning of 21 December, was repulsed in an attack on Hotton by elements of 3rd Armored Division Headquarters Company and Signal Company. The enemy did, however, succeed in occupying the high ground overlooking Hotton and cutting the Soy-Hotton highway. (19) (Map D)

CCR was ordered to move through Soy to Hotton and relieve the isolated garrison but could not get through an enemy roadblock at Haid Hits.

#### SPECIAL MISSION ASSIGNED

On the morning of 21 December in Soissons, France, Col R. D. Graves, commanding officer of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team, received a telephone call from XVIII Airborne Corps (rear) ordering the combat team to move to Werbomont. Col Graves was informed, at this time, that one battalion would be detached from the regiment to go on a separate mission, and a staff officer from corps would meet this battalion in Namur, Belgium. (20) The First Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry, was selected as the battalion to undertake this mission.

Lt Col William Boyle, commanding officer First Battalion, preceded the battalion to Namur where he was ordered by an officer from XVIII Airborne Corps to report to CCR, 3rd Armored Division at Soy. (21)

The battalion entrucked in Soisson at 211800 December, (18) A-5, p. 222; (19) A-5, p. 224; (20) Statement by Col R. D. Graves, then C. O. 517th Prcht Inf Regt C. T., 16 Jan. 1949; (21) A-7.

the convoy moved out for Namur. Before the convoy had reached Rheims, it was apparent to most of the officers and non-commissioned officers riding in the cabs of the trucks that the drivers, tired from three days of moving other units of XVIII Airborne Corps forward, would not be able to continue with their duty. At Rheims, most of the drivers were replaced by officers and non-commissioned officers. No road maps were available for this move. All officers and NCOs were given the route over which the convoy was to move and were instructed to have the trucks stay in a closed column. The inexperienced drivers were unable to maintain a closed column, however, and on arrival in Namur 10 hours later, it was discovered that two platoons of Company "C" and a section of 81mm mortars were missing from the convoy. (22)

At Namur, the battalion executive officer, Major Donald Fraser, was met by the same XVIII Airborne Corps staff officer and ordered to continue on to Soy where the battalion commander would meet them. The situation, as ascertained from this staff officer, was meager and indicated that the advance of the Germans had not been checked.

#### TERRAIN ANALYSIS

*General*  
The Ardennes consists of rugged, semi-mountaneous terrain, characterized by deep ravines, narrow valleys and steep hills with numerous intervening streams. This hilly terrain forms a series of cross-compartments offering excellent observation for the defender and permitting unobserved movement on the reverse slopes. Much of the area is heavily forested. This, coupled with the deep snow which was to cover the ground

(22) Personal knowledge.

throughout the operation, created a natural fortress for whoever held them. Mechanized forces, at this time, were canalized through the narrow valley roads which sliced through this rugged terrain. Once off the roads, the tanks would quickly bog down in the quagmire or become so slowed by the loss of traction on the snow as to become sitting ducks for anti-tank weapons. The streams, for the most part, are small but, due to the steep banks, create delaying obstacles, particularly for mechanized movement. Fields of fire between cross-compartments are excellent.

Villages scattered through the Ardennes are small, usually located at crossroads or road junctions, and consequently occupy positions of great tactical importance. The villages are very compact with houses constructed of brick and stone. This made each house virtually a pillbox in itself.

*Specific  
map D* ✓ In the Soy-Hotten area, this terrain was typical. The highway between these two towns had originally been a hard surfaced road. During the German occupation, however, it had deteriorated into a second grade road. Just south of the road, the ground dropped sharply for 75 to 100 feet, creating a small cliff. A broad valley extended from the base of this cliff south to the hill mass La Roumier & Ol Fagne. At the western end of this valley, the high ground Sur-Les-Hys rose to controlling heights. The roadnet at Hotten offered an excellent crossing of the Ourthe River and rapid expansion toward the Meuse River. (23)

(23) Personal knowledge.

### BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK

*All trucks  
found not  
indicated  
anywhere*

The First Battalion arrived at a detrucking point one mile northeast of Soy at 221600 December. At a meeting with the battalion commander, the status of the battalion, at this time, was revealed as consisting of: Company A with 151 men, Company B with 142 men, Company C with 31 men (minus company headquarters and 2 platoons) and Headquarters Company with 123 men (minus 1 section of 81mm mortars). (24)

This loss to the mortar platoon necessitated a quick reorganization in order to utilize all four mortars, which had somehow gotten on one truck. Four squads were organized by taking the assistant gunners and two ammunition bearers from each of the two full squads and organizing a squad under each section leader. This gave the platoon four squads operating directly under the platoon commander and required doubling up in order to carry the ammunition and the mortar. The men met this situation very well and by the time the battalion was ready to move, the platoon was ready to move with it.

The enemy situation and the mission of the battalion as outlined by Lt Col Boyle was: "enemy forces have cut the Soy-Hotton highway and are well dug-in in the woods on commanding ground around the road junction at Haid Hits. The mission of the First Battalion is to capture the commanding ground Sur-Les-Hys commanding the roadnet at Hotton; to clear the woods on each side of the road; establish a main line of resistance between Soy and Hotton; and break through to the Hotton garrison". (25) CCR did not have contact with 82d Airborne D1- (24) Personal knowledge; (25) A-7.

vision on its left or the 84th Division on its right.

Not knowing the location or strength of the enemy, the battalion plan of attack was to move out in a column of companies with Company A leading in the direction of Hotton. When the enemy was encountered, Company B, following Company A, would be committed in a flank attack while Company A constituted the holding force. Although the position of the enemy roadblock at Haid Hits was known, it was not believed that any strong enemy resistance would be encountered until after Hotton was reached. The 81mm mortar platoon, therefore, was to accompany the battalion in column behind Company B. The battalion CP, aid station and supply point were to be established in Soy and would move forward on battalion order. (26)

*81mm mortar platoon assigned to the mortar platoon*

#### THE ATTACK

As orders to attack were issued, the men hastily dropped their bedrolls, readjusted their packs and prepared to move. Time did not permit the preparation of a meal. Despite all efforts on the part of Lt Col Boyle to persuade the commander of CCR to postpone the attack until more adequate preparations could be made, the column departed the assembly area at 1715.

Company A led the attack, followed by Company B, the 81mm mortar and light machine gun platoons of Headquarters Company and the platoon of Company C. In order to avoid the artillery fire falling on Soy, the column moved south of the town, through the woods and back onto the Soy-Hotton highway at the line of departure on the west edge of town. Darkness had fallen as the leading elements of the battalion moved out (26) Personal knowledge.

*Remarks not indicated in map*

of town and attacked into the unknown. One thousand yards after crossing the line of departure, the leading elements of Company A received fire from enemy positions on the high ground in the vicinity of Haid Hits. (Map D) This fire was immediately returned as Company A maneuvered into firing position. Lt Col Boyle, at once analyzing the situation, committed Company B on the left flank of Company A. During the ensuing action, the 81mm mortar and light machine gun platoons and the platoon of Company C were all but forgotten.

While the two rifle companies fought the enemy in the dark, the remaining units of the battalion took cover on the side of the road to await orders. Light artillery was falling over the area. It had grown foggy and was bitterly cold. The light field jackets, only outer clothing brought forward from Soissons, were inadequate against the freezing weather. The men, sensing the unknown situation, were becoming a little uneasy, but any effort to contact the company commander or battalion staff proved futile. The radios in the battalion command net, which had functioned in a pre-combat check in Soissons, were now inoperative and no radio contact existed between units of the battalion. A messenger, dispatched to the battalion rear-command post in Soy, returned with the information that they were out of contact with the forward elements of the battalion and unaware of the situation.

It was not until 2115 that Lt Sidney Marks, executive officer of Company C acting as liaison officer between the First Battalion and CCR, found the platoon leader of the mortar platoon. Lt Marks, explaining the situation as he knew it, gave

the platoon leader instructions to move his men back onto the edge of town, and make plans to maintain contact with the forward elements of the battalion throughout the rest of the night. In compliance with these instructions, the platoon leader moved his platoon back into Soy and occupied two houses on the edge of town. Plans were made to maintain contact with the battalion by the use of four-man patrols operating on the right side of the road and parallel to it. The patrol was to be rotated throughout the platoon, in order to give each man the maximum amount of rest possible. By this time, the distance from the edge of the town to the forward rifle companies had been extended to 1200 yards. It was estimated that one patrol could make the round trip in an hour; but in the event a patrol did not return within an hour, the next patrol was to start out. By 2200, the first patrol was organized and departed for the forward rifle companies. The platoon leader accompanied the first patrol since the front line positions were not definitely known. This was the first patrol work the platoon had been called on to do. At first, the going was easy as there was little underbrush and few trees to delay movement but, as the patrol progressed, the going became increasingly difficult. The heavy fog decreased their speed of advance. Forty minutes after departing the platoon CP, the patrol had made contact with Company A and learned that the battalion commander had ordered them to hold their present line for the rest of the night. This line was 400 yds east of the crossroads at Haid Hits. Company A reported that they were in contact with Company B on the left flank. The patrol returned to Soy over

the same route and met the second patrol about 400 yds outside of the town. After explaining the situation and outlining the best route to Company A, the first patrol proceeded on to the platoon CP. Patrolling continued throughout the night, despite automatic weapons fire that swept the area and the ever present mortar and artillery fire. Several times during the night, carrying parties from the rifle companies reported in to the platoon CP to wait for a patrol to depart, in order that they might take advantage of the additional protection. (27) (Map D)

At dawn 23 December, the battalion, minus 2 platoons of Company A, reorganized north of the Soy-Hotton highway and prepared to continue the attack against the road junction at Haid Hits. Two platoons of Company A, under Lt Col Boyle, were in the northeast edge of Hotton, having made an enveloping move through Ny during the night. This small force was stopped on gaining a foothold on the edge of town and was unable to advance. (Map E)

The battalion executive officer assumed that the mortar platoon had been taken away from him for the duration of the operation and made plans to operate without it. The mortar platoon received no further orders, after the night of patrolling, and surmised that they were to return to the battalion.

Plans had already been completed for the attack on Haid Hits when the platoon leader 81mm mortar platoon met the platoon leader light machine gun platoon, who was a casualty returning to the aid station, and learned from him the battalion plan. This plan had not included the mortar platoon, as the (27) Personal knowledge.



company commander of Headquarters Company had not informed the platoon leader of any such attack. Despite this lack of knowledge, the platoon leader 81mm mortar platoon, acting on his own initiative, made a reconnaissance and located an excellent position for the mortars to support the attack. This position, in rear of an eroded hill mostly to the right of the Soy-Hotten highway, offered excellent cover from direct fire weapons. A small stone building on top of the hill offered exceptionally good observation of the area. The conformation of this area was such that, by using one of the eroded gullies for each of the mortars, three mortars could be placed relatively close together on the right side of the road, and the fourth just across the road. (Map E) All mortars were located so close together that the sound-powered telephones were not needed.

Although one of the primary concerns of a mortar platoon leader--that of the location of good firing positions to support an attack--had been met, another major problem was presenting itself--that of communication with the rifle companies. Normal means of communication between battalion and the 81mm mortar platoon was through one SCR 300 radio in the battalion command net. This was most inadequate. There were no other means of communication available, since the amount of wire normally carried was only sufficient for inter-platoon communication. The only solution was to rely on the SCR 300 radio in the battalion command net. In accordance with this system, forward observers were sent to the rifle companies with instructions to use the SCR 300 radio of the company to which they were

attached. A new battery for the platoon radio had been secured from the battalion supply point in Soy. This radio communication system was to be short-lived, however, for soon after the attack had gotten underway a near-miss by a mortar round in the position knocked the radio out. The only alternative now remaining was to fire by direct observation from the platoon observation post on any targets that could be picked up without jeopardizing the battalion. Suspected mortar and anti-tank gun targets were located by sound and by questioning casualties from the battalion, drifting back to the aid station. One mortar position, on the high ground La Roumiere Ol Fagne, was silenced. Other targets were also engaged on Sur-Les-Hys controlling the roadnet at Hotton. (28)

When the initial supply of ammunition began to run low, a request was submitted to the battalion S-4 for 300 rds. At 1300, the platoon leader was notified that this ammunition had been dropped at the two houses on the edge of Soy which the platoon had occupied the previous night. It was necessary to hand-carry the ammunition from this point to the mortar positions because of the danger of direct fire along the Soy-Hotton highway. This worked a hardship on the platoon, already reduced by a section, but by mid-afternoon the ammunition had all arrived on position.

When B Company pulled back from their positions to reorganize to continue the attack, a tiger tank moved in. The presence of this tank was discovered shortly after the mortar platoon moved into position. A staff officer from CCR visited  
(28) Personal knowledge

*2nd Lt  
Patton  
Hobbs  
May 6*

the platoon early in the afternoon and learned of the presence of this tank. He offered a Silver Star to Sgt Joe Kelly or any member of his squad who would go over the cliff and knock out the tank. This tank could not fire from the position it was in due to the steep cliff. Sgt Kelly explained to this officer that the tank had been there all morning and that he had posted a man to watch it. He further explained that there were no weapons in the platoon capable of knocking out a tank. This explanation satisfied the officer and nothing more was said about it. As dusk was falling, the tank attempted to make a dash for the cover of the terrain on La Roumiere Ol Fagne and was knocked out by three rounds from the 75mm gun located on the edge of Soy. (29)

The direction of the attack toward Hotton gave the battalion a completely exposed left flank which was only covered by occasional fire from the mortar platoon and by fire from the 75mm gun. The fluidity of the situation, together with the nature of the terrain and mission of the battalion, caused this open flank. Had the enemy been more alert and known the situation, they might have launched an attack which would have destroyed the battalion.

The battalion progressed slowly in its attack on the cross-roads, having lost 6 of the 9 supporting tanks of CCR in crossing the open ground early in the morning. Heavy casualties had been suffered, due to mortar and artillery fire. The savageness of the fighting between the 116 Panzer Division and the paratroopers can best be attested to by the fact that there (29) Personal knowledge.

were no prisoners taken in the two days of fighting for the crossroads. The morale of the German troopers was high and they greeted each attempt of the battalion to advance with the English expression, "Merry Christmas you American Sons of B\_\_\_\_\_". This exclamation would be followed by rapid burst of machine pistol and rifle fire. By dark, the battalion had been forced north across the railroad and had reorganized.

A messenger from CCR arrived at the platoon position at 1600 with instructions to move to new positions southeast of Soy. There the platoon was to relieve Company C, which had established a roadblock and was protecting the two tanks of CCR covering a mine field and the roadblock. The platoon leader issued instructions to the sergeant to have the men eat their "K" ration before going out of action. He then outlined a tentative route for the platoon to follow to their new positions. All ammunition that exceeded 6 rds per man was to be left behind. The platoon leader then departed with two squad leaders and platoon headquarters for the roadblock. Arriving at the roadblock, the mortar platoon leader learned the new mission from the platoon leader Company C. This mission was to take over the roadblock at the position, protect the two tanks covering the mine field and establish an outpost 400 yds southwest of the roadblock. (Map E) Learning the mission of the platoon and realizing that the 81mm mortars would not be needed, the platoon leader dispatched a messenger to meet the platoon and have them drop their mortars and ammunition at the company command post in Soy.

The two officers then went on a reconnaissance of the

positions that had been occupied by the platoon of Company C. These positions proved adequate to accomplish the mission. It was decided originally to use 3 squads at the roadblock and to protect the tanks covering the mine field at the roadblock. Weapons to man this position were furnished by the tanks of CCR and consisted of a bazooka with 6 rds of ammunition, and a light machine gun with two boxes of ammunition. The main defense of the roadblock was located behind a stone fence about 4 ft high, adjoining a stone house. The position of the two tanks was just across the road in a small clump of trees where good fields of fire covering the road could be obtained. The house offered some shelter for the men and permitted the preparation of hot food on the stove found inside. Two-man outposts were established to be on duty at all times with the rest of the platoon readily available. The outpost in a church 400 yds southwest of the roadblock was not as well off. One squad of four men was given the mission of occupying this position, but on recommendations of the platoon sergeant, who visited the position later in the evening, the platoon leader decided to bring another squad from the roadblock down to strengthen the outpost. It was necessary to keep at least half of the squad alert at all times, as there were good covered routes of approach to the church through the woods. The night passed without incident. (30)

During the night of 23-24 December, it began to snow and covered the ground to a depth of 2 in. The weather had been miserably cold up until this time, and the bed rolls, which had been left in the assembly area, had not been brought forward due to the lack of transportation.

(30) Personal knowledge.

At 0630, the platoon turned the roadblock over to a detachment from CCR and, moving over the route used the evening before, returned to the positions occupied the previous day.

The skies had cleared by 0800 and this was the first day that our air force had any opportunity to strike against the German thrust. The beautiful sight of the hundreds of bombers thundering overhead toward the German lines was marred only by the occasional flash of red as a bomber was hit by enemy fire and burst into flames. This was counteracted, however, by the German fighter plane that was shot down by an American P-47 a few hundred yards in front of the line held by the battalion. Many cheers could be heard along the line as this plane crashed in flames.

The battalion still had not reached its objective. It made very slow progress during the night, but did succeed in capturing the road junction at Haid Hits sometime after midnight. Capitalizing on this success, the battalion again reorganized, brought up two medium tanks of CCR and continued the attack.

Still out of contact with the battalion, and assuming that they were to support the battalion, the 81mm mortar platoon resumed firing on targets on La Roumiere Ol Fagne and the high ground Sur-Les-Hys. At 1130, word was received that the forces of Lt Col Boyle and Maj Fraser had linked-up in Hotton and were turning back to Soy.

The enemy, now completely dislodged, fled before the attacking troopers and by 1630 all enemy action ceased. The battalion completely controlled the Soy-Hotton highway and

established a main line of resistance. The surrounded garrison at Hotton was relieved and returned to Soy. Company B was left on the high ground Sur-Les-Hys to hold the MLR. One platoon of Company A established a roadblock at Haid Hits. The mortar platoon was left in position to support Company B. The remainder of the battalion assembled in Soy and was placed in reserve by the commander of CCR, Col Howze. (31) (Map F)

The fact that the mortar platoon was apparently supporting two units proved of some concern to the mortar platoon leader. The problem of serving two commanders had arisen over the platoon being continually pulled away from support of the battalion for special missions; and the platoon leader failing to receive any instructions from company or battalion commanders. The poor communications with battalion also created a problem requiring an immediate solution. In order to clarify the situation, he turned the platoon over to the sergeant and returned to the battalion CP. At the CP, it was explained, for the first time, that Col Howze, in order to make maximum use of all troops available to him, was employing units of the battalion individually. Since all of the battalion was under his command, he could employ all troops as necessary to meet any situations.

Checks with the S-4 and the communications officer revealed that they could secure enough wire for a team to lay wire from the forward observers to the mortar position. The SCR 300 could also be replaced. Plans were adopted to coordinate with the communications section for assistance in laying wire, and it was decided to give this a try the next time committed. The (31) Personal knowledge

ideal situation, that of sufficient radios for direct communications between the forward observers and the mortar position, could not be attained since the T/O did not authorize this. There had been insufficient time to accumulate them through "combat supply". (32)

The 290th Infantry Regiment was attached to CCR during the early afternoon and started moving into positions in rear of the MLR. The 81mm mortar platoon, of the 1st Battalion, 290th Infantry Regiment, occupied positions to the rear and further west of the 81mm mortar platoon of the 1st Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Despite the fact that their battalion was preparing to attack south during the night, this platoon made no effort to find out any information on the enemy situation and actually assumed a hostile attitude when information was offered. (33) (Map F)

At dusk, the platoon received orders to move back into Soy and shortly thereafter the platoon leader was sent to the CP of CCR where plans for a patrol were outlined. The mortar platoon was selected to make this patrol since they had had it a little easier during the last few days than other units of the battalion. This patrol was to proceed the attack by the 290th Infantry Regiment and make a reconnaissance for enemy positions in the woods north of Wy and west along the stream Lisbelle. The platoon leader returned to his CP and selected three volunteers to accompany him on the patrol.

It was a bright moonlight night and, because of this fact, it was decided best to plan a route through the woods rather (32) Personal knowledge. (33) Personal knowledge.



than in the open. After planning the route to be followed and all necessary signals, the patrol departed the battalion area. Coordination with the tanks at the roadblock on the southeast edge of Soy was accomplished. It was 2030 when the patrol started through the woods parallel to the Soy-Wy road. The patrol moved 1500 yards south to the branch of the stream Lisbelle, then turned west along this stream for 400 yards. After crossing the stream, the patrol stopped to check their position and to observe in the direction of Wy. Several fox holes were found in this area, but all had been vacated and seemed to indicate that the enemy had withdrawn. It was decided not to proceed into the open ground toward Wy, since observation in the direction was very good and no enemy movement could be seen. The patrol proceeded west to the stream junction and, encountering no enemy, returned around the nose of the hill entering Soy at the point of departure. (Map F) The patrol arrived back at the battalion area at 2315. The platoon leader immediately reported to the CP of CCR that the patrol had returned and no enemy had been encountered. The route followed was explained to officers of the 290th Infantry Regiment. (34)

At 2330, the 290th Infantry attacked south from the Soy-Hotton MLR, held by Company B, with two battalions abreast. Objectives of this attack were the high ground La Roumiere Ol Fagne and the near by town of Wy. By noon Christmas Day, this attack had met with little success. The left battalion had reached its objective at Wy, but the right battalion failed

(34) Personal knowledge.

Not  
clear on  
map.

to accomplish its mission. The reserve battalion, which had been committed, also failed to take the assigned objective.

Col Howze ordered Lt Col Boyle to attack and take the objective La Roumiere Ol Fagne. The First Battalion now consisted of: Company A, one platoon of Company C, light machine gun platoon and the 81mm mortar platoon. The battalion, together with an assorted group of tanks and half-tracks from CCR, attacked at 1400. Company B was still holding the Soy-Hotton highway, and with the existing situation it was imperative that they continue to do so.

The 81mm mortar platoon reoccupied the positions 400 yds west of Soy and prepared to support the battalion in their attack. Forward observers were attached to the two rifle companies. Accompanying them were two makeshift wire teams composed of men from the mortar platoon headquarters and the communications section. It was hoped that this time communications with the rifle companies would be satisfactory. The attack of the battalion could be easily observed from the CP forward of the mortar positions, and an initial preparation was fired on the woods and high ground which was the battalion objective. (Map F) As the battalion got underway, communications worked perfectly, but this was not to last for long. The tanks and half-tracks accompanying the battalion soon chewed up the wire and once again the SCR 300 radio proved to be ineffective. Wire teams were at a minimum and more could not be spared to maintain the wire. Since the attack of the battalion could be observed, it was decided to continue to fire on the objective until the troops could no longer be observed. In the meantime, a messenger was sent to the battalion rear CP

in Soy to request another SCR 300 radio since contact could not be maintained with the attacking company. The messenger, returning in 35 minutes without the radio, reported that the battalion had sufficient artillery support, having both artillery from CCR and the 75th Division artillery. He brought instructions from the executive officer stating that the battalion had captured the objective, and that the mortar platoon was to return to the vicinity of the CP in Soy for the night. It was dark by the time the platoon arrived at the CP. On checking with Maj Fraser, the battalion executive officer, the platoon leader was brought up to date on the situation and the plan. The platoon was to rejoin the battalion on the objective the following morning. (35)

On taking the objective, the battalion commander and his company commanders reorganized the battalion of the 290th Infantry Regiment. Col Howze placed Lt Col Boyle in command of all troops on the hill. It was unnecessary to move the mortar platoon up to the objective since the mortar platoons of the 290th Infantry were once more in position to support the battalion.

Plans for the following day had not yet been made. At 2000 the platoon leader was notified to report to the battalion commander on the objective and to be prepared to make recommendations for the displacement of the platoon to support the battalion the following morning.

At 2030, the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant departed for the battalion forward CP on La Roumiere Ol Fagne to make a reconnaissance for positions for the platoon the  
(35) Personal knowledge.

following morning. The battalion CP was found atop the hill and the plan for the following morning was ascertained from the S-3, Capt Dugan. The plan called for the two battalions of the 290th Infantry to attack the following morning. The First Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment was to hold the line in order to prevent any chance of a break-through in the event of a counterattack. The battalion commander wanted as much of the battalion on the hill as possible. Permission was obtained to reconnoiter for positions in rear of the hill mass in an area to the right of the road noted enroute to the battalion CP. This permission was granted and an excellent area for the mortars was located to the right of the road. This location offered good routes for ammunition resupply, cover and concealment. The distance to good OPs on the top of the hill would be only 400 yds from the mortar positions. (36)

The platoon leader and platoon sergeant returned to the platoon CP sometime after midnight and prepared the platoon to move forward. At 0330, the platoon arrived in position and work was started immediately on preparation of mortar emplacements. (Map F) Leaving the sergeant in charge, the platoon leader went forward to the battalion CP to notify the S-3 that the platoon was in position.

At daylight all plans were changed, and the battalion received word that it was to be relieved from the sector. Preparations were immediately made to move back into Soy and the operations of the battalion in the Soy-Hotton area were completed.

(36) Personal knowledge.

### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

In making an analysis of this operation, it is my opinion that the mission assigned to the battalion was sound and well within its capabilities. There are, however, several factors that merit comment at this point.

Although the commander of the convoy enroute to Namur, Belgium was well aware of the route that the battalion was to follow and had disseminated it to all officers and non-commissioned officers, it would be only by the best of luck that the battalion could arrive at Namur with all trucks present in the convoy. The fact that what actually amounted to a full company was lost enroute to the battalion forward assembly area greatly hampered the battalion in accomplishing its mission.

The commitment of the First Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment into an unknown situation at night was a grave tactical error. I believe that a critical situation, such as existed at Soy, could be met much more efficiently by the use of sound tactics and thorough planning. Had the battalion been committed to secure the town of Soy at dusk the evening of 21 December, and time permitted a reconnaissance the following morning, the attack could have progressed much faster. As it was, only the bold aggressive action of the paratroopers forced the Germans on the defensive and prevented any further advance in their assigned sector.

*Attacking point?*  
The mortar platoon, from position in the vicinity of the assembly area, would have been in a more advantageous position to support the battalion attack. Despite the fact that an initial estimate of the situation revealed that the roadblock

at Haid Hits was of insufficient strength to stop the battalion, I believe that the mortar platoon should have occupied initial positions at this point and displaced forward as the necessity arose.

The decision to envelop the left flank of the enemy, during the night of 21-22 December, was tactically sound but only resulted in accomplishing what the enemy could not succeed in doing--that of splitting the battalion. The force in Hotton was too small to accomplish any great success once a foothold was gained.

By 23 December, the battalion was fighting as small scattered units over a wide area. The two platoons of Company A in Hotton did not have the strength needed to exploit the success gained as a result of the execution of an envelopment. The force fighting with Maj Fraser was so reduced by the 3 days fighting that it was by sheer determination and aggressiveness that they were able to advance. ✓ The 81mm mortar platoon, instead of being used in support of the battalion, was separated from the battalion and used on missions which it knew little about.

Commanders of all echelons should acquaint themselves with the capabilities and limitations of other units in the army which might at some time be attached to them, in order that they may better make the maximum use of them.

✓ The crucial point of the entire operation, from the standpoint of the 81mm mortar platoon, centers around the fact that the battalion staff assumed that the 81mm mortar platoon had been detached from them and that they were to operate without this potent supporting force. Had coordination existed, I

Superior  
Point -  
#10 HITS was  
not within  
range of the  
81mm mortar  
but supporting  
by not being there.

believe that the mortar platoon could have greatly facilitated the advance of the battalion, if not making possible a complete accomplishment of its mission on 23 December.

There seemed to exist, at that time, an erroneous idea among commanders that an 81mm mortar platoon <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ incapable of firing or occupying firing positions after darkness had fallen. There existed at the time of this operation night firing devices to facilitate firing the mortar after dark. This is a great supporting weapon and commanders must learn its capabilities if they are to develop a well organized fighting battalion.

*Superior point*  
✓ An analysis of the lack of communications throughout this operation reveals that the method of communication between the companies of a parachute infantry battalion and the 81mm mortar platoon was faulty from the start. Confusion and lack of ability to transfer messages can only result when units, attempting to accomplish different missions, use the same radio net. The fact that this same type of communication had been used by this battalion during two previous campaigns in Italy and Southern France cannot be compared to the fluid situation as demonstrated by the fighting in the Ardennes. Since the end of the war, improvements in the TO/ & E have been made which give the mortar platoon its own radio net and provide immediate and continuous communications between the mortar platoon and the forward observers.

✓ The rapidity of reorganization of the mortar platoon and the ability of each man to fill in the job of any other man aided greatly in the operation of the platoon. It is an im-

portant factor in training that all men, insofar as possible, learn all of the jobs that are necessary to the efficient functioning of a given unit.

The mortar platoon, while committed to missions unfamiliar to it, performed creditably. Although close contact with the enemy did not become necessary, it is highly probable that, had this been necessary, they could have met and overwhelmed the enemy.

### LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Units making long overland movements <sup>should</sup> ~~must~~ secure road maps of the routes.
2. Guides <sup>should</sup> ~~must~~ be posted on long overland moves.
- ✓3. ~~In preparation for a night attack, it is imperative that clear detailed orders be issued and adequate reconnaissance made.~~
4. Specialized infantry units, such as a mortar platoon, must be instructed in fulfilling duties other than those in which trained. *The lesson should be more specific →*
- ✓5. Adequate means of communication between the 81mm mortar platoon and units of the battalion must be established.
- ✓6. Units, attacking through another unit holding a line, should make every effort to secure information of the enemy situation, disposition and strength.
- ✓7. ~~There must be some means of AT protection available to the 81mm mortar platoon.~~
- ✓8. Commanders of all echelons should familiarize themselves with the organization and capabilities of other units with which they may be associated.



*later working  
needed*

9. The employment of mass and the preservation of unit integrity will stand a greater chance of success than the piecemeal commitment of a unit.