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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "I"  
32ND INFANTRY (7TH INFANTRY DIVISION)  
ON ATTU ISLAND, 13 - 30 MAY 1943  
(Personal Experience of a Company Executive Officer)

Type of operation described: COMPANY IN THE ATTACK

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## INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company I, 32nd Infantry, 7th US Infantry Division in the battle of Attu Island, Aleutian Islands, 13 May-30 May 1943.

In order to properly cover this action I believe it is necessary to give some background of the organization involved in the operation.

During the summer and early fall of 1942 the 7th Division was engaged in maneuvers on the Mohave Desert of California as a motorized division. In October 1942 the division left the desert, less all vehicles common to a motorized unit such as half-tracks and self-propelled weapons, and returned to their home station, Camp San Luis Obispo, California. The division then had to undergo a period of minor reorganization to take the field as an infantry division. During this period all men of the division were given the opportunity of taking a short leave and certain key personnel were sent to school at Fort Benning, Georgia. In January 1943 the division was transferred to Fort Ord, California where a strenuous program was undertaken with emphasis on unit training, (platoon, company, and battalion) physical conditioning, and amphibious operations. The amphibious operations included several small landings and one large scale landing at San Clemente Island just off the coast of Southern California. (1)

An observer from the 7th Division made the landing with the 3d Infantry Division in North Africa. The information brought back was of great importance and corrected many of the faulty impressions by several people and helped correct some of the mistakes before they had a chance to become a habit.

(1) Personal knowledge

The one thing the observer did not mention was the unloading of supplies from the ships and resupplying the front line troops. This part of the training was also passed over lightly during all of the exercises and the practice landing operations. I do not know the reason for it, but they probably could not get the supplies in the quantities necessary and did not feel that it was a necessity. (2)

#### PLAN OF ATTACK

The task force for this operation consisted of two regimental combat teams, reinforced, commanded by Major General Albert E. Brown, Commanding General of the 7th Division. The main elements of the force were:

- 17th Infantry Regiment
- 32nd Infantry Regiment
- 1st Battalion 4th Infantry
- 48th Field Artillery Battalion
- 49th Field Artillery Battalion
- 50th Engineer Battalion
- Attached Coast Artillery (AA) Troops
- Attached Medical Troops
- Other attached units

The force left San Francisco, California the latter part of April 1943. Each infantry battalion was combat loaded on one ship with one battery of field artillery and other attached units making a separate battalion combat team. (3)

The information available concerning the enemy on the Island of Attu was fairly complete. The Japanese were concentrated in Holtz Bay and Chichagof Harbor on the Northeastern part of the island. These two places were well defended with automatic (2,3) Personal knowledge

weapons and dual purpose anti-aircraft artillery. The strength of the force on the island was 1587 and none of them were on the Western part of the island. The maps available for the operation were not complete. All they showed was the shoreline of the island. The photos taken by the air force did show some of the topography of the island and some of the Japanese defenses but no more were received after the initial issue. (See Map A)

The general plan for the attack was to have four separate landings. (See Map A)

The main landing force was to land at Massacre Bay on the Southern part of the island with the mission of seizing Jarmin Pass and Clevesy Pass and moving into Holtz Bay to join the Northern Force. <sup>The Southern</sup> This force consisted of the 2d and 3d Battalion combat teams of the 17th Infantry and the 2d Battalion combat team of the 32nd Infantry.

The Northern force composed of the 1st Battalion combat team of the 17th Infantry was to land on Red Beach about three miles North of the main Japanese Camp at Holtz Bay. The mission of the Northern force was to clear the West Arm of Holtz Bay and secure the high ground between the two arms of Holtz Bay. After contacting the Southern Force coming over Jarmin Pass the Northern Force was to complete the capture of Holtz Bay and clear the valley to the southwest.

A subsidiary landing was to be made at Austin Cove by the 7th Scout Company and the 7th Reconnaissance Company less one platoon. Their mission was to move to the West end of Holtz Bay, attack the enemy there forcing it to fight to the West while the main attack came from the North. They were then to join the 1st Battalion of the 17th Infantry as part of the

Northern Force.

A fourth landing was to be made by one platoon of the 7th Reconnaissance Company on Alexei Point with the mission of covering the rear of the forces landing at Massacre Bay, secure and pass on all possible information, and join the Southern Force at Clevesy Pass.

The 1st and 3d Battalion combat teams of the 32nd Infantry were to remain in floating reserve and the 1st Battalion of the 4th Infantry was to remain in reserve at Adak. (4)

The landing was to be made on 7 May and the two forces were to meet in Holtz Bay in 36 hours. (5)

Certain items of special equipment had been provided for the troops in this operation. Some units issued it on the ship on the way to the island and others issued it on the Pier in San Francisco. The main items were:

Heavy field jacket

One pair of heavy leather boots

Arctic sleeping bag

Heavy wool socks

Two piece rain suit

All of the equipment was new and was well preserved on the way to the landing.

#### LANDING AT RED BEACH

Even though the landing had been set for 7 May the actual landing did not take place until 11 May due to the heavy sea, fog, and poor visibility. The landing time on the 11 th of May was 0740 but the troops did not land in any strength until 1620. The landing was unopposed on the beach. (6)

(4) A-1, p.6&7 (5) A-2, p. 62 (6) A-1, p. 7

Red Beach is very small. It is less than 100 yards long and could not accomodate more than two landing craft at the same time. Extreme care had to be exercised by the crews to avoid the large rocks just off the shore. The beach was fairly level for about 75 yards inland, then it <sup>Rise</sup> raised almost straight up for about 250 feet. In order to get up the steep slope the men had to dig steps in the side of the hill.

At 1800 the 1st Battalion of the 17th Infantry started moving forward in a column of companies toward Holtz Bay. One platoon was sent down the beach as a flank guard. The advance continued until 2200 when the battalion halted for the night because of darkness and heavy fog. (7)

At 0900 12 May the fog cleared and the battalion attacked Hill X by envelopment. The enveloping company was pinned down just after it started out by heavy automatic fire from the objective and little progress was made until 1600. At that time the battalion commander ordered the reserve company to make a frontal attack under the covering fires of the artillery. Carrier based fighters strafed and bombed the base of the hill at 1650 and the attack started at 1700 moving closely behind the artillery fire. The climb up the hill required about an hour and a half, but the hill was taken without a casualty. The enemy immediately counter attacked but the company held and the attacks stopped at dark. However, the enemy placed effective artillery fire on the top of the hill causing some casualties. (8)

On the morning of 13 May the battalion captured the rest of Hill X and consolidated their position but made no further advance that day.

(7) A-5, p. 7 (8) A-5, p. 9



*what happened?*

The advance was not going as well as had been expected and the battalion commander sent word that he could use some help. It was decided to land the 3d Battalion combat team of the 32nd Infantry on the afternoon of 13 May. The Regimental Commander of the 32nd Infantry was given command of the Northern Force at this time.

The 3d Battalion combat team ~~was~~ <sup>had been</sup> in the harbor at Adak for several days and had received no information as to the progress of the battle. On 11 May the small convoy sailed from Adak and arrived off the shore of Attu the morning of the 13th. The only special instructions given to the unit ~~was~~ <sup>were</sup> that it was to reinforce the force already on shore and to contact Lt. Col. Fish on the beach. The officers in the companies knew that he was the executive officer of the 17th Infantry but had no idea what he might be doing on the beach.

In the early part of the afternoon the battalion loaded <sup>13<sup>th</sup></sup> into landing craft with Company I going in first. Each man carried his personal articles, two days rations, a basic load of small arms ammunition, two hand grenades, and <sup>SOME</sup> ammunition for the weapons platoon. Two very important items were ordered left behind-the rain suits and the sleeping bags. The rain suits were packed in the duffle bags and the sleeping bags were to come ashore as soon as possible.

The sea was especially rough that afternoon and only 25 men could be carried in the landing craft instead of the 36 that had been planned for. The ship was quite a distance off shore and it took about an hour to reach the beach. By that time everyone was wet from head to foot and almost everyone was sick. The beach was under fire from the AA dual

purpose guns from Holtz Bay but they were doing very little damage because of the 250 foot slope just behind the beach. The fire did create confusion in Company I and it did take several minutes to get the men up and moving along to clear the beach for the next landing craft coming in.

As soon as contact was made with Lt. Col. Fish the battalion started moving with Company I in the lead over the same route taken by the 1st Battalion of the 17th the first day they landed. The ground was wet and slippery and spotted with patches of snow. The high hills on the right were completely covered with snow. It was dark before the assembly area had been reached and it began to freeze. When Company I reached the assembly area they dug in for the night to get what sleep was possible in a slit trench with only a shelter half for protection from the wet ground and ice.

#### ATTACK ON HOLTZ BAY

The morning of 14 May was spent by the men checking their equipment and cleaning and oiling their weapons. The 3d Battalion of the 32nd was to attack on the right of the 1st Battalion of the 17th and take the West Arm of Holtz Bay that afternoon.

The attack was to start at 1600 from the line held by the 1st Battalion of the 17th with Company I on the right, Company K on the left, and Company L in reserve. Company I was to attack with the 1st platoon on the right, 2d on the left, and the 3d in support. The weapons platoon following the first on the exposed flank. On the way to the line of departure the company came under scattered small arms fire and immediately hit the ground. One observer stated that it was pinned to the ground for approximately five hours. (9) This is a slight

(9) A-5, p. 11

exaggeration but it did take two or three hours to get the men on their feet and moving again to the line of departure. This delay did get the company to the line of departure too late to make the attack. The fog had again rolled and it was getting close to darkness.

The company had just been ordered to dig in for the night when a barrage of artillery from the high ground between the two arms of Holtz Bay moved up and down the battalion area for about 30 minutes. It was the first artillery fire the company had been in and they stood it very well when you consider they were in as exposed a position as it is possible to find. Two men were killed and a few were wounded. It would have effected more if half of the company had not been in the snow. The first platoon leader was one of the two men killed during the artillery barrage. The company finished digging in and slept for the second night with only a shelter half. The rest of the night was spent without incident and the attack was scheduled to start at 0700 the next morning. The attack was postponed because of fog and finally jumped off at 1000. The approach to Holtz Bay was down a slope just as steep as the one to come onto the plateau at the beach and almost twice as high. This was a good attack and very successful probably because there was no enemy. They had pulled out under cover of darkness to the high ground between the two arms of the Bay. The attack moved on across the valley about half way and was held up by heavy small arms fire. The distance was great and one or two men could move but the general advance was halted. Good cover was available in the shell holes made by the heavy naval guns prior to the landing. The company was ordered to hold and prepare to continue

the attack the next day.

This was the third night the company had spent without the sleeping bags.

The attack the next day sent the third platoon on the left and the first still on the right. A strafing mission from the carrier based fighters came over that morning and did a perfect job on our own front lines. The signals were finally called right and in about an hour they came back and did the job. The attack jumped off but did not get very far. The company commander and the third platoon leader were both hit and the third platoon bogged down. The first platoon continued across the creek and held at the first cover available. Contact was lost until just before dark when a runner found them and brought them back to participate in a night attack on the high ground between the two arms of the Bay. The 1st Battalion of the 17th had managed to get to their objective with one company and were trying to hold it.

The night attack was ordered to escape the automatic weapons that had held us up and to relieve the pressure on the unit on the left.

Company I started out in a company column with the second platoon in the lead followed by the third, weapons, and first. The attack started at 0010 and the battalion arrived on the objective without firing a shot. When daylight came it was possible to see that the Japs had pulled out again.

The Northern Force now had their objective. Patrols were sent into the East Arm of Holtz Bay to make sure that the Japs were not trying to pull a fast one, but they had gone over the ridge to Chichagof Harbor.

For the first time since Company I landed they had sleeping bags to sleep in that night and had a hot meal for supper, even if it was C rations.

#### OCCUPATION OF JARMIN PASS

On 19 May Company I was ordered to relieve Company K of the 17th Infantry in Jarmin Pass between Holtz Bay and Massacre Bay. The company commander returned from the hospital that morning to take over the company for the move. Company I was reinforced with a section of machine guns and a section of 81MM mortars from Company M.

It took about three hours to get to the pass because of the heavy loads carried by the men and the soft, spongy tundra or ground. Certain parts of the valley <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ a sea of mud to make matters worse. Company K of the 17th had a well organized defense even to the kitchen set up and in working order.

Company I spent the rest of the day strengthening the defenses, sending carrying parties after rations at a dump about half way to Massacre Bay, and getting the kitchen personnel up to the position. They had not been brought along in the first place because nothing was known of the kitchen in the pass. Breakfast the next morning was really something. The men had all of the hotcakes they could eat, even though it took until noon to get them all fed. About this time it looked like this was the place to finish the battle. The rest of the day was spent on reconnaissance and further organizing the defensive position. The only casualty while in this position was one man falling down a mountain from an outpost.

The rest and recuperation were over. The company received orders to get ready to come back to Holtz Bay. Company A of the

32nd was to relieve Company I in the pass.

Company I moved out of the pass back to Holtz Bay on 21 May to join the rest of the battalion in an attack toward Chichagof Harbor to relieve the pressure on the Southern Force and go into Chichagof Harbor, if possible.

#### ATTACK OF FISH HOOK RIDGE

The 3d Battalion of the 32nd Infantry less Company I had moved to the high ground on the South side of Holtz Bay on the 19th. Companies K and L had made two unsuccessful attacks into the valley below and had to pull back under cover of fog.

On 22 May Company I was ordered to move up with the rest of the battalion and prepare to attack the next morning. The company less the first platoon moved up into position on the left of the battalion into a defensive area and started preparation for the attack. The first platoon spent the rest of the day manhandling a 37MM gun up the steep slope to assist in the attack the next morning. It took the platoon six hours with the aid of ropes to get the gun where the battalion commander wanted it. It was used to good advantage that afternoon for sniping at enemy dug in positions with high explosive. Several direct hits were registered in dugouts and foxholes across the valley at a range of about 1800 yards.

The attack started the next morning with I on the left and 23<sup>MM</sup> K on the right. Company I made the attack with the second platoon on the right and the third on the left with the first and weapons in support on the hill. Fog had rolled in and visibility was very limited. The advance had moved about 300 yards when the fog lifted and the Japanese cut loose on three sides pinning both companies in what little shelter they could find. There

the valley and had received orders to withdraw at 0300. Why the orders were issued and who issued them is not known or is not clear, but the company did withdraw apparently to get a hot breakfast before the assault into Chichagof. It just so happened that this was the area that the Japanese were using in their attack and they hit just as the company<sup>A</sup> leaving the position. When it was hit from the rear, the company practically disintegrated leaving the road open to the rear. (14)

Late in the afternoon of 30 May the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 32nd, the 3d Battalion of the 17th, and Company A of the 4th moved into Chichagof Harbor with practically no resistance. This was the end of the battle but some mopping up continued for several days. (15)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing this operation it must be admitted that it was a success. The forces assigned to the task accomplished their mission.

However, there were many mistakes made by everyone. The greatest fault of the entire operation was the underestimation of the terrain. The plan as received by the 3d Battalion of the 32nd Infantry was for the island to be under control in 36 hours after the initial landing. One company of infantry on the island could have prevented the forces from accomplishing this. This underestimation caused the entire operational plan to change as far as supply was concerned on the Northern side of the island. It was not anticipated that the troops would have to be supplied by overland carrying parties as had to be done for the first five days of the battle. It also led to the use of a poor

(14) A-1, p. 21 (15) A-1, p. 22

type of footgear for the terrain. This alone accounted for more casualties than anything except battle.

The lack of information of the situation on shore was a serious handicap to the reserve units on the ships. This lack of information forced the battalion commander to make decisions that he later regretted, such as leaving the sleeping bags on the ship to come later. Definite orders could not be given to the troops going ashore which resulted in confusion on the beach.

There was a serious lack of patrolling on the part of Company I in this operation. Very few patrols were used in this entire battle. The proper use of patrols would have reduced the number of casualties in the company and would have probably have cut the time of the operation. Some units lost two or three patrols and then stopped sending them out. Others just did not use any. (16)

The men of this company were not aggressive when they first went into action. More realistic training and more emphasis on movement through scattered small arms and artillery fire must be given. The combat efficiency of the company progressed as the number of days of battle passed even though the strength of the company went down. Much more realistic training could help overcome this to a great degree.

Subordinate leaders must be properly trained to take over the next higher or an alternate position. The most successful attack made by Companies I and K of the 32nd Infantry was after the Company commander of I had been killed and the Company Commander of K had been wounded. This was on the Bahai Ridge on 26 May and both companies received a unit citation for their (16) Personal Knowledge



were no covered routes of advance in any direction and the enemy could not be definitely located. This information was sent to the battalion commander who ordered them to come back to the top of the ridge when they could safely do so. The fog rolled in again in about two hours and both companies withdrew back to the high ground. This was the third time an attack had been launched in this same area with no success. The only route of advance was down into a valley and up another hill. Observation was good when the fog lifted but the Japanese would move from one position to another under cover of the fog.

That night a small counter attack was repulsed with no losses. The company commander was called to Holtz Bay to receive another order. The Southern Force had managed to get to the approaches to Chichagof Harbor and was launching a large scale attack the next day. The 3d Battalion of the 32nd was to join the Southern Force in this attack.

The next morning, 24 May, Companies I and K moved over Pendergast Ridge to join the two forces. The route taken by Company I was over a saddle in the ridge and along the south side. The entire trip was through snow and ice varying from one foot in depth to several feet. The day was clear and the best seen on the island so far.

The initial attack was made by the 2d Battalion of the 17th and Companies I and K of the 32nd. The 1st Battalion of the 4th and Companies C and D of the 32nd were in reserve. The 2d Battalion of the 17th went up the face of the hill with I and K of the 32nd on the left, K with an exposed left flank. Fire support was the best seen on the island, including heavy bombers, land based fighter bombers, and all of the artillery available.(10)

(10) A-1, p. 19

The attack did not get very far, however. The unit on the right held for the night on the ground they had taken as did Company I, but K was forced to withdraw under cover of darkness because of the exposed left flank. Company I reinforced its position and prepared to continue the attack the next morning.

The next morning the unit on the right made good progress but the two platoons of Company I could not move more than a few yards. The first platoon was committed on the right to aid the advance of the company. The company commander was killed during this action but the first platoon made good progress cleaning out two trenches and the company was able to advance to the left section of the mountain just below the Bahai Ridge. This position was consolidated for the night.

The next <sup>DAY</sup> all eyes were focused on the Bahai Ridge. It was well defended and covered the only approach to Washburn Peak overlooking Chichagof Harbor. One company of the 17th tried to take the ridge from the flank but was beaten with severe losses.

The 3d Battalion of the 32nd was given the mission of taking the ridge and going on to take the high ground overlooking the harbor. Companies I and K were to attack frontally with L and M supporting the attack by fire from positions on Pendergast Ridge. The 1st Battalion of the 17th was to come through O'Donnel Valley, clear off the nose of the ridge, meet I and K on top of the ridge and continue to take Washburn Peak.

Company I had reorganized into two platoons of about 20 men each and a weapons platoon. The company had three officers left, one for each rifle platoon and a company commander.

The attack started about 1700 with I on the right and K on the left moving fast under the covering fire of the rest of the Battalion. Near the bottom of the ridge the attack was halted

for several minutes by heavy automatic weapons fire from the top of the ridge inflicting heavy casualties. However, the men moved forward on their own and were protected from direct fire as soon as they reached the base of the steep slope. The advance up the slope was a slow process. The men had to crawl on their hands and knees using rifle butts as an anchor. As the men approached the top the Japs rolled hand grenades down the hill in an effort to stop the advance. This caused some delay and confusion but very few casualties. The men reached the top one at a time and started to work. One squad leader of the first platoon reached the top first and personally cleaned out several holes by the time the rest of the company arrived. The entire position was cleaned out in about fifteen minutes after the company started to work on top of the ridge.

The company had started to reorganize on top of the ridge to continue the advance and were stopped by scattered small arms fire. The men hit for cover and it was hard to get them on their feet and moving again. At this time the battalion commander arrived on the position and personally led the attack on Washburn Peak. Time was important. It was almost dark by now and the enemy was disorganized. Only light resistance was encountered and the peak was in our hands by dark. Several enemy were killed on the reverse slope of the peak, apparently attempting to reinforce the defenses there.

Company I organized a defense of top of the peak at dark and held until morning. The company was low on ammunition and a strong counter attack could be successful so priority was given to resupply of ammunition and supporting weapons. About 0300 heavy machine guns from Company M were in position and

plenty of ammunition was on hand. That night was the most miserable spent by Company I during the entire time on the island. It was colder than any other and the protection of the snow is not very much. However, Company L relieved Company I about 1000 the next day. (11)

#### THE LAST ASSAULT

The company moved down off the mountain on 27 May to rest and reorganize before the final assault into Chichagof Harbor.

The company now had two officers instead of three and were short several more men, however, several men came back from the hospital, having only suffered minor wounds or injuries. The weapons were all cleaned and put in working order, the men were issued clothing to replace the torn clothing they were now wearing, and they were getting three hot meals a day.

The final assault into Chichagof Harbor was figured to be tough and the force commander was maneuvering to get the entire force in position to make the final assault. Plans were made for this to take place on 29 May. (12)

The plans for the assault were upset in the early morning of 29 May when the Japanese Force broke through the Southern Force in an attempt to reach Massacre Bay and the Supplies there. They were finally stopped by the engineers about half way after they had created havoc in the rear area including a clearing station. It was not until about noon on 30 May that the situation was under control. (13)

In order to explain the success of the breakthrough a few of the facts must be presented. In an effort to get the operation over the force commander had not left himself a reserve. Company B of the 32nd were occupying a position on the floor of  
(11) A-1, p. 86&87 (12) A-1, P. 20 (13) A-1, p. 22

action there. (17)

Intelligence information was very poor from start to finish. The enemy information furnished the 3d Battalion of the 32nd Infantry was inaccurate as to numbers and no other figures were furnished even though one month had elapsed. Instead of 1587 Japanese on the island as we had been told, there were actually about 2300. (18) The maps and photos were old and inaccurate by the time we were to use them. To my knowledge there were no photo reconnaissance missions over the island during the operation. If there were, no photos were furnished the 3d Battalion of the 32nd Infantry.

#### LESSONS

1. Aggressive movement of troops must be stressed in training for combat.
2. The problem of supply, both initial and resupply, must be given every consideration in an operation of this type by all commanders.
3. Subordinate leaders must be well trained to take over the next higher or an alternate position.
4. Patrolling is a must in combat.
5. The value of reserves cannot be underestimated.
6. Intelligence information must be accurate and continuing as the battle progresses.
7. Organization of key terrain features is a strong defense even with an inferior force.
8. Cross compartments are difficult to take when they are properly organized.

(17) A-4, p. 22 (18) A-1, p. 23