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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY L, 38TH INFANTRY
(2ND INFANTRY DIVISION) IN ATTACK ON HILL 154,
VICINITY BREST, FRANCE, 22-23 AUGUST 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY ATTACKING
A WELL ORGANIZED, FORTIFIED, KEY TERRAIN FEATURE

Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Utley, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. 2

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company L, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, in the attack on HILL 154, vicinity of BREST, FRANCE, 22-23 August 1944.

To orient the reader the major events leading up to this action are discussed briefly.

On 6 June 1944 the First US Army, as part of The Allied Expeditionary Forces, waded onto the shores of FRANCE at OMAHA and UTAH BEACHES to participate in the assault against GERMANY's highly vaunted ATLANTIC WALL. (See Map A) (1) The First Army under command of General Omar N. Bradley consisted of the V and VII Corps. The initial attacks met with success, and by 1 July 1944 the VII Corps had secured the port of CHERBOURG. VII Corps then moved south to join the V, VIII and XIX Corps in the vicinity of ST. LO in preparation for the First Army's break out from NORMANDY. (2)

On 25 July 1944 historic "OPERATION COBRA" was launched at ST. LO during which the First Army smashed the left wing of the GERMAN Seventh Army and opened the gateway for the Third US Army to enter the action and make its drive across the BRITTANY PENINSULA and into the heart of FRANCE. (See Map A)

(3)

- (1) A-4, p. 17
- (2) A-4, p. 20
- (3) A-4, p. 21

On 1 August VIII Corps, now assigned to the newly operational Third Army, was directed to advance to the south and west and secure the port of BREST and the QUIBERON BAY area. At the same time the remainder of Third Army continued its dash to the east. (4)

By 18 August the VIII Corps had succeeded in clearing the majority of inland cities of the BRITTANY PENINSULA and was concentrating most of its forces on the reduction of the cities of LORIENT, ST. NAZAIRE and BREST. (5) The importance of the BRITTANY PENINSULA action and the VIII Corps mission was recognized by Allied planners long before the invasion. It was estimated that offensive operations could be sustained by supplying over the NORMANDY beaches and through the port of CHERBOURG until early September. After that date the port of BREST would have to be in Allied hands in order to continue the offensive throughout the winter. (6)

The 2nd Infantry Division was committed in FRANCE on D / 1, 7 June 1944. As part of V Corps it landed behind the 1st Infantry Division on OMAHA BEACH in NORMANDY. After landing, the division, as part of V Corps, advanced some seventy kilometers through heavily defended hedgerow country in sixty-eight days of continuous combat. (See Map A) (7)

With the fall of TINCHEBRAY, FRANCE, on 15 August the 2nd Division was released from V Corps of First Army and directed to join VIII Corps of Third Army in the reduction of "FORTRESS BREST" 200 miles to the west. (8) Other elements of VIII Corps were already grouping for the attack.

- (4) A-5, p. 16
- (5) A-5, p. 35
- (6) A-3, p. 23
- (7) A-1, p. 48
- (8) A-1, p. 50

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The defense of BREST had fallen to Major General Herman B. von Ramcke and an estimated 50,000 troops. Major units represented were the 266th Infantry Division, the 343rd Infantry Division and the 2nd Parachute Division. (9) General von Ramcke using his elite 2nd Parachute Division as the heart of his defense had organized an intricate system of interlocking strongpoints around the city. (10) Numerous concrete pillboxes organized in depth and manned by fanatical paratroopers presented a formidable line in which there were no apparent weak points. All antiaircraft weapons and coastal defense guns had been incorporated into the plan of ground defense. General von Ramcke had orders to deny the Americans the port facilities of BREST for at least ninety days, and his preparations were complete in every detail to accomplish this mission. (11)

The morale and combat efficiency of the German defenders were excellent. (12) Included in all defensive positions was a sprinkling of well trained and combat seasoned paratroopers. These men, fanatical fighters themselves, inspired confidence in the hodgepodge groups of naval and airforce personnel who had been pressed into the defense. Troops of the VIII Corps on the other hand were battle-wise veterans of the NORMANDY fighting. Flushed with their victories in NORMANDY and their rapid dash across FRANCE morale was excellent, and every officer and man was confident of success in this operation. All units were near full strength. (13)

- (9) A-3, p. 27
- (10) A-1, p. 51
- (11) A-1, p. 51
- (12) A-3, p. 27
- (13) A-3, p. 25

The terrain surrounding the city of BREST presented no particular obstacles. A range of low-lying hills, not exceeding 110 meters in height, ringed the city on the north. Along the low hills numerous concrete pillboxes and dugouts covered all approaches to the city and extended in depth into the city proper. The PENFIELD RIVER cutting through the hills from the north continued to the south and divided the city in half. This afforded the most likely approach into the city. (See Map B) To the south the harbor of BREST, covered by excellent coastal defenses, would make an assault from the sea a costly operation. To the east of the city and separated by the harbor and the LANDERNEAU RIVER lay DAOULAS PENINSULA. (See Map B) This peninsula with hills ranging up to 155 meters presented a serious threat to the VIII Corps since it offered excellent observation and firing positions from which the defenders could bring flanking fire against the left flank of the Corps as it closed on the city. (14) Information indicated that the peninsula was well organized for defense. (15)

At this time the supply lines of VIII Corps extended half the distance across FRANCE. Despite this fact, supply and logistical support with the exception of artillery ammunition was adequate for the initial phases of the operation. Initially most types of artillery ammunition were in short supply. This condition improved as the attack progressed due to emergency measures taken by VIII Corps supply personnel. (16) At the

(14) A-1, p. 52

(15) A-7, p. 3

(16) A-3, p. 28

same time the enemy supply situation was considered good. Units withdrawing to the city had salvaged much of their supplies to add to the already bulging warehouses and dumps of the great naval base. (17)

Weather conditions on the BRITTANY PENINSULA at this time were ideal for military operations. Mild clear days and nights prevailed throughout the campaign. (18)

The VIII Corps' plan for the reduction of BREST called for a coordinated attack on 25 August by the 2nd, 8th and 29th Infantry Divisions. (See Map B) (19) It was hoped that a coordinated attack by three infantry divisions would force the defenders to capitulate without a prolonged defense. (19)

Prior to launching the main attack, VIII Corps' separate "Task Force B," commanded by Brigadier General James A. Van Fleet, Assistant Division Commander, 2nd Division, was to clear all resistance from DAOULAS PENINSULA in order to remove this threat from the Corps left flank. (20) Separate "Task Force A" was to clear the CROZON PENINSULA, still further to the east. (See Map B)

"Task Force B" was composed of the 38th RCT of the 2nd Division, the 3rd Battalion, 330th Infantry Regiment of the 83rd Division, the 323rd Field Artillery Battalion and two companies of the 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion. (21) The Task Force planned to take DAOULAS PENINSULA by having the 38th RCT

(17) Personal knowledge

(18) Personal knowledge

(19) A-3, p. 24

(20) A-1, p. 52

(21) A-1, p. 52

attack along the high ground on the north of the peninsula while the 3rd Battalion, 330th Infantry protected the left flank of the Task Force and maintained contact with "Task Force A" operating on CROZON PENINSULA. (22) By clearing the high ground on the north of the peninsula the enemy would be denied its use for directing fires against the left flank of the units of VIII Corps attacking BREST. Also, the remaining peninsula defenses could be dominated from these positions. (23)

THE PLAN OF THE 38TH RCT

The 38th RCT planned to attack on 21 August with the 3rd, 1st and 2nd Battalions in column to take HILLS 150, 155 and 154. Upon taking HILL 154 the 3rd Battalion was to remain in position and support by fire while the 1st and 2nd Battalions attacked abreast to take PLOUGASTEL and clear the balance of the peninsula. (See Map B) (24)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 38TH RCT

On the morning of 21 August the attack was launched as planned and by 1600 hours the 3rd Battalion had taken HILLS 150 and 155. (See Map B) (25) At this time the Battalion was directed to halt, reorganize and prepare to continue the attack the following day. During the delay artillery and air bombardment pounded the heavy coastal guns on the peninsula in an attempt to silence their fires.

At 1800 hours the 3rd Battalion Commander issued attack orders for the following day. The Battalion was to attack from

(22) Statement of Lt. Col. O. M. Barsanti, then Commander, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, on 5 October 1949

(23) Personal knowledge

(24) A-1, p. 52

(25) Personal knowledge

present positions at 221300 August to seize HILL 154. I and L Companies were to be in the assault and seize that portion of the hill in their respective zones. The sunken road north of HIGHWAY 4 was to be the boundary between companies. (See Map C) K Company, in reserve, was to follow L Company by bounds and protect the left flank of the Battalion. M Company was to attach one platoon of machine guns to each assault company; 81mm mortars to be in general support. The attached tank destroyer platoon and the Battalion antitank platoon, in general support, were to give priority of fires to L Company. (See Map C) (26)

THE COMPANY SITUATION

When L Company's advance was halted on the afternoon of the 21st the two assault platoons were disposed on a frontage of approximately 500 yards. (See Map C)

The 2nd Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Ralph W. Winstead was on the right, the 3rd Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Glenn R. Torkelson was on the left. The 1st Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Harold H. Horn, was in support and was halted 300 yards to the left rear to protect the open flank. Company Headquarters and the mortars of the Weapons Platoon were 200 yards in rear of the assault platoons. Morale in all platoons was excellent and the men were eager to continue the attack before the enemy had time to prepare new defenses.

Enemy resistance on the Peninsula had been comparatively light. Only three casualties had been suffered during the day which left the company only seven men under authorized strength.

(26) Statement of Lt. Col. O. M. Barsanti, then Commander, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, on 5 October 1949

The rapid advance during the day had been opposed by small enemy groups, obviously fighting a delaying action with some support from long range artillery and coastal defense guns. (27)

On receipt of orders to halt the advance all platoons dug in and prepared positions for the night. Artillery fire was adjusted across the front. Patrols sent to the left flank reported a gap of 700 yards between the 3rd Platoon and elements of the 3rd Battalion, 330th Infantry. The 1st Platoon was given the mission of patrolling this gap throughout the night. Contact with I Company on the right was made and defenses coordinated.

A request to Battalion Headquarters for permission to send patrols to the front to maintain contact with the enemy was refused. Refusal was based on the fact that the Task Force Commander wanted no restrictions on the operations of the Air Corps and the Artillery during their systematic bombardment of the peninsula's defenses. (26)

During the night the Company was able to feed a hot meal, completely resupply with ammunition, and make detailed preparations to continue the attack the following day.

The terrain to the front of I Company was comparatively flat for approximately 1200 yards. Small hedgerows and sunken roads separated the fields and promised some cover for the following day's attack. A few small patches of woods dotted the area and offered some concealment. To the right, in I Company's sector, the ground dropped away sharply to the LANDERNEAU RIVER.

(26) Statement of Lt. Col. O. M. Barsanti, then Commander, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, on 5 October 1949

(27) Personal knowledge

To the left the open fields gradually sloped away toward positions held by the 3rd Battalion, 330th Infantry. HILL 154, the dominating terrain feature in the area, was directly to the front at a range of approximately 1800 yards. (See Map C)

From prisoners captured early on the 21st it was learned that elements of the GERMAN 366th and 343rd Infantry Divisions constituted the principal forces on DAOULAS PENINSULA. These units reinforced by various naval and antiaircraft personnel were carefully supervised by a small group of paratroop officers and noncommissioned officers. (28) Information indicated that the principal defenses were in the vicinity of HILL 154 and extended south to the coast from that point. Prisoners and natives in the area confirmed previous information that HILL 154 was elaborately defended by well concealed concrete and steel pillboxes; a complete network of trenches protected by single apron barb wire surrounded the hill on all sides. Approximately two reinforced companies manned the HILL 154 positions. An estimated 3000 troops manned the entire peninsula defenses. (28)

From Company observation posts no fortifications could be seen on HILL 154, however two large concrete pillboxes were discovered 600 yards to the left front of the 3rd Platoon positions. These pillboxes will be referred to be in subsequent action as Pillboxes A and B. They were located so as to cover the LANDERNEAU-PLOUGASTEL road and all open ground to the east of HILL 154. (See Map C) (29) Several bursts of machine gun fire from the pillbox area during the afternoon established the fact that they were occupied.

(28) A-5, p. 4

(29) Personal knowledge

No other enemy activity was reported along the front during the afternoon and night. Intermittent artillery fire fell throughout the company area during the night and during the morning of the 22nd but no casualties resulted.

The weather for the past three days had been warm and clear, and the same was forecast for the following day.

THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK (30)

L Company's line of departure for the coming attack was to be the unimproved road presently occupied by the 2nd and 3rd Platoons; H hour was to be 221300 August. (See Map C)

The Company planned to attack initially with the 3rd and 1st Platoons in column. The 3rd Platoon from its present position was to lead out, followed by the Company command group and the 1st Platoon at 300 yards. The 2nd Platoon was to remain in present positions until the 3rd Platoon had cleared Pillboxes A and B. It would then move out with all possible speed to come abreast the 3d Platoon. The attack would then be continued with two platoons abreast. The 1st Platoon was to be responsible for protecting the left flank of the company.

One section of the Heavy Machine Gun Platoon was to be attached to the 3rd Platoon and one section to the 2nd Platoon. The Company Light Machine Gun Section would be attached to the 1st Platoon. The Mortar Section of the Weapons Platoon was to initially remain in its present position prepared to support the attack on call. It would displace on order to Pillboxes A and B to the left front. Company Headquarters would follow the 2nd Platoon at 300 yards.

(30) Personal knowledge

No preparation was to be fired prior to the time the Company crossed the line of departure. Planned fires of two artillery battalions, M Company's 81mm Mortar Platoon, the Tank Destroyers Platoon and the Battalion Antitank Platoon had been registered and would be fired on call. Targets for planned fires included the two pillboxes to the left front, the houses at KERUDU and the forward slopes of HILL 154. (See Map C) All Tank Destroyers were in positions from which they could fire on the forward slopes of HILL 154. Artillery concentrations were also planned on the reverse slopes of the HILL.

The Company plan of action was based on the belief that the 3rd Platoon would be able to infiltrate to Pillboxes A and B and take them by surprise. It was feared that preparation fires prior to the attack would alert the enemy and bring down a large volume of defensive artillery fire which would be more costly than taking the position by surprise attack. After capture of Pillboxes A and B it was hoped that speed would enable the company to cover the remaining distance before the enemy opened fire.

The purpose of leaving the 2nd Platoon in position was to have them support the 3rd Platoon by fire if enemy positions from north of the pillbox area opened fire during the assault. When the 3rd Platoon had cleared the pillboxes the 2nd Platoon was to move directly forward until abreast of the 3rd Platoon and north of Highway 4. From that point the advance would be continued to HILL 154 with two platoons abreast. During the advance the 2nd Platoon would place its right flank on the sunken road designated as the Company's right boundary in order to allow room for the 3rd Platoon to move north of Highway 4 at road junction "T". (See Map C) On arrival at the sunken road directly to the east

of the hill the two platoons would make a coordinated assault of the position. (See Map C) The 2nd Platoon would take that portion of the hill to the north of the transformer station. The 3rd Platoon would take the remainder of the hill. (See Map C)

The Battalion Aid Station for the attack was to be in BOTAUENAL. The Battalion Ammunition Dump was to be in the woods north of BOTOUENAL. (See Map C) Communications between Company Headquarters and Platoons would be by SCR 536 radios and between Company Headquarters and Battalion Headquarters by SCR 300 radio.

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

By 1130 hours on the 22nd all plans were complete. A hot meal was served to the Company and one meal of a K ration issued to each man. Two grenades were issued to each rifleman with a warning to save them for the final assault on HILL 154. All men of the 3rd Platoon were cautioned not to fire unless forced to, prior to arrival at the first two pillboxes. All platoons were warned that after the 3rd Platoon had cleared the pillboxes, movement to the final objective must be with all possible speed.

Prior to crossing the line of departure a liaison officer from the Tank Destroyer Platoon joined L Company for the purpose of directing fires on enemy guns located during the attack.

Shortly prior to crossing the line of departure each Platoon Leader was issued a special map on which each road junction, each field and all similar critical points had been given a number. With this map Platoon Leaders would point out targets and report locations, in the clear, by radio.

NARRATION

THE ATTACK ON PILLBOX A AND B

The scouts of the 3rd Platoon crossed the line of departure promptly at 1300 hours 22 August 1944. (31) On hands and knees they cautiously advanced to the first hedgerow 200 yards to the front. When they had reached the comparative safety of the hedgerow, Lieutenant Torkelson with the two assault squads quickly moved out and joined the scouts. The support squad and the attached machine guns overwatched their move across the open field. After a brief pause at the new position the cautious advance was continued until the last hedgerow east of the pillboxes was reached.

At this point the machine guns were placed in position and the two assault squads were alerted to make a final dash to the position. On signal from Lieutenant Torkelson the two squads vaulted the hedgerow and dashed for the pillboxes, 100 yards away. All supporting weapons waited for the burst of enemy fire, which never came. The two squads reached the trenches surrounding the position and rapidly moved through them. Here it was discovered that the position had been completely abandoned. A careful check by the Company Commander indicated the positions had been abandoned the previous night.

The Company Commander, knowing that the Platoon was extremely vulnerable in this open area, directed that they move out immediately for the final objective, rather than

(31) Personal knowledge

waiting for the 2nd Platoon to move abreast. The 2nd Platoon was informed of the change and directed to move out without delay and overtake the 3rd Platoon. The 1st Platoon was directed to follow the 3rd Platoon at 300 yards. Some forty-five minutes had already been lost in taking positions that had been abandoned by the enemy several hours before.

THE ADVANCE TO BASE OF HILL 154

The 3rd Platoon advanced approximately 200 yards west of Pillboxes A and B when the first enemy fire was received since crossing the line of departure. (32) At this time self-propelled weapons opened fire from positions 800 yards to the front. (See Map C) The Platoon immediately took cover along the hedgerows and called for artillery fire. While fire was being adjusted on these targets the 2nd Platoon was directed to push forward as rapidly as possible to the sunken road at the base of the hill.

As the 2nd Platoon reached positions approximately 400 yards from the base of the hill it received extremely heavy artillery, mortar and long range machine gun fire across the entire platoon front. Two casualties were suffered in attempts to infiltrate forward and the platoon reported it was unable to advance. Enemy artillery fires in the platoon sector were apparently not directed at any particular group but ranged across the entire platoon front. Machine gun fires were at such extreme ranges that the Platoon Leader made no attempt to return the fire.

(32) Personal knowledge

In the 3rd Platoon sector, at this time, small arms fire was negligible but the platoon continued to receive continuous fire from the two self-propelled guns. A request to the Tank Destroyer Liaison Officer, with the Company, for fires against the two weapons brought immediate results. Two tank destroyers to the left rear opened fire on the position and the enemy guns immediately withdrew. The 3rd Platoon then continued the advance against occasional long range small arms fire and almost continuous artillery fire. On reaching positions 500 yards from the base of the hill and to the south of Highway 4 the Platoon came under very heavy machine gun and small arms fire from a sunken road 100 yards to its front. At the same time enemy light mortar fire was directed on the Platoon from positions in rear of the hill. Artillery fire was called down on the mortar positions and it soon silenced their fires. At the same time fire from L Company's mortars was directed on the enemy positions in the sunken road. Machine guns were placed in position and under cover of their fires the Platoon assaulted the position. On arriving at the position an exchange of hand grenades netted the 3rd Platoon two casualties but the enemy withdrew leaving several casualties behind.

Immediately upon moving into the sunken road the 3rd Platoon was again subjected to enemy artillery and mortar fire. Machine guns and 40mm guns from trenches and pillboxes on the hill also opened fire for the first time. The Platoon taking advantage of the recently abandoned enemy positions engaged in a thirty minute small arms fire fight but were unable to

advance. Artillery fires directed on the enemy positions on the hill had no apparent effect. The tank destroyers fired on the positions but ranges were so great that the fire was inaccurate and ineffective. Attempts to maneuver the 3rd Platoons support squad to better firing positions north of Highway 4 were unsuccessful in the face of direct 40mm fire down the highway. When the squad was sent to the left it was pinned down in positions directly to the left of the squads already on line.

It was now 1700 hours. The 2nd Platoon was still receiving heavy fire in its sector and had made no progress during the past hour. The Company Commander at this time decided to commit the 1st Platoon. With the 1st Platoon Leader he went forward to the 3rd Platoon positions and pointed out the plan of maneuver for the platoon. The Platoon was to follow the sunken road just inside the 330th Infantry's boundary through the village of CARNE and to a point 400 yards west of the village. At this point the Platoon was to turn north and take up positions along Highway 4. From this position the Platoon would, on order, launch a coordinated attack with the 3rd Platoon against the southeast slopes of the hill. The 2nd Platoon from its position east of the hill would support the attack by placing maximum rifle and machine gun fire on the eastern slopes of the hill.

A request was made to the Battalion Commander for a five minute preparation by all available artillery and tank

destroyers prior to the assault. The request for fires was approved and The Battalion Commander stated that I Company was attempting to envelop the northern knob of the hill at the same time. L Company was directed to exert all possible pressure on the southern slopes in hopes that the attack would divert the enemy fires from I Company's attack. (33)

While the 1st Platoon moved to positions for the attack the 2nd Platoon was completely oriented on the plan and lateral limits of their fires pointed out. The Mortar Platoon at the same time was directed to keep intermittent fires on likely targets on the southeast slopes of the hill. Targets were pointed out to the tank destroyers and all fires coordinated.

The 1st Platoon moved without incident until they reached the village of CARNE where they came under scattered small arms fire. The Platoon Leader was unable to contact the Company Commander to report the situation due to a temporary failure of the SCR 536 radio. (34) In the absence of orders the Platoon Leader by-passed the village to the north and continued with the original plan. Soon after passing the town the Platoon came under fire from positions to the west and the Platoon Leader again tried to by-pass the fire by moving to the north. While doing this the Platoon came within range of positions on the hill and were taken under

(33) Statement of Lt. Col. O. M. Barsanti, then Commander of 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, 5 October 1949

(34) Personal knowledge

heavy small arms and mortar fire. This fire forced the Platoon to deploy and resulted in their taking up positions 250 yards to the east of those intended. (See Map C) The Platoon soon was heavily engaged with the same positions that were so successfully holding up the 3rd Platoon. After a fire fight of some thirty minutes duration, in which the 3rd Platoon also was engaged, the Platoon Leader reported that the Platoon was unable to reach their attack position.

When this information was relayed to the Battalion Commander, he directed that the Company keep the enemy as heavily engaged as possible from present positions in order to divert enemy fires from I Company's attack. A short time later orders were received to "button up" for the night and be prepared to continue the attack at 0730 the following morning. It was then 2130 hours.

THE NIGHT OF 22-23 AUGUST

On receiving orders to "button up" for the night the Company Commander decided to rearrange his platoons for the attack the following day. The 1st Platoon was directed to remain in its present position and prepare to launch a coordinated attack with the 3rd Platoon against a southeast slope of the hill the following morning. The 3rd Platoon was directed to cross Highway 4, after dark, and take up positions along the sunken road at the eastern base of the hill. From this position it would be prepared to attack the following morning. The 2nd Platoon was directed to pull back as support

platoon and occupy positions along the hedgerows 500 yards from the base of the hill. From these positions the 2nd Platoon's attached machine gun section would support the attack the following morning.

During the day I Company had met with considerable success and by 2130 hours had occupied the nose extending to the north of Hill 154. A gap of some 600 yards now existed between I and L Companies. After dark K Company was moved to positions in rear of the gap to stop any possible enemy attack through that sector. (35)

At 2200 hours the 3rd Platoon started its move across Highway 4 to the sunken road. One squad had crossed when an enemy antitank gun opened fire from approximately 200 yards to the front. Enemy machine guns in the same area took up the fire and for fifteen minutes Highway 4 was virtually alive with antitank and machine gun fires. The one squad of the Platoon, north of the highway, moved forward to the sunken road and completely surprised an enemy squad moving across an open field to reinforce the antitank gun position. The enemy squad was immediately taken under fire and seven were killed or wounded, and the others forced to withdraw. The antitank gun and the machine guns ceased fire at this time and the balance of the 3rd Platoon moved across the highway and into the sunken road.

(35) Personal knowledge

A bazooka team from Company Headquarters was brought forward to destroy the antitank gun. Under cover of fires of the 3rd Platoon the team successfully moved forward and with three well-placed rounds put the gun out of action. As a result of the bazooka fires and the fires of the 3rd Platoon the enemy abandoned this position. Several casualties were inflicted during their withdrawal.

The remainder of the night passed without incident. All platoons were resupplied with ammunition. Hot soup and a K ration were served for supper and K rations issued for breakfast and lunch the following day. The 1st and 3rd Platoons patrolled the front during the night in search of covered routes to the pillbox and trench positions on the objective. None were located. At 0400 hours the Company Commander was called to the Battalion Command Post to receive final details on the attack to take place at 0730 hours.

The Battalion plan was for I Company to support L Company's attack by placing fires on the crest and northern slopes of HILL 154. At the same time I Company would attempt to close the gap between the two companies. L Company was to seize the hill and be prepared to continue the attack to the southwest. A fifteen minute preparation was to be fired on the hill by the two direct support artillery battalions, the 81mm Mortar Platoon, the Battalion and Antitank Platoon and the Attached Tank Destroyer Platoon. The tank destroyers would continue their fires on known pillbox positions until requested to lift by the assault companies.

THE ENEMY COUNTERATTACK

At approximately 0600 hours the enemy seized the initiative and opened the day's activities. Completely unobserved an enemy platoon infiltrated through the gap between I and L Companies and launched an attack against the Battalion Command Post which was then located in KERUDU. A reinforced platoon from K Company was quickly moved forward and engaged the enemy around the command post in a furious forty-five minute small arms fight. During this activity the support squad of L Company's 3rd Platoon was moved along the sunken road to positions just to the south of KERUDU to protect the right flank of the company. This squad also became engaged in the fire fight, and when the action was finished a check around the Battalion Command Post disclosed a total of thirty-eight enemy captured, killed or wounded.

CAPTURE OF HILL 154

While the enemy fires were lifted for their counter-attacking force the 3rd Platoon seized that opportunity to infiltrate the right assault squad and the machine gun section forward. The squad succeeded in reaching hedgerow positions only seventy-five yards from the barbed wire surrounding the hill. The enemy apparently intent on their counterattacking force completely overlooked the slowly advancing riflemen. So skillful was the squad's use of the small amount of cover available that not one casualty was received during the one hundred fifty yard move. When informed of the advantage gained, the Battalion Commander

directed that the preparation fires be delayed and that L Company attempt to infiltrate all of the 3rd Platoon to assault positions.

The 1st Platoon was immediately directed to launch their attack on the southern slopes of the hill to divert the attention of the enemy from the 3rd Platoon. Under cover of this diversion the men of the 3rd Platoon slowly inched forward to the assault position. Enemy machine gun and 40mm fire was directed into the 3rd Platoon's area during this move but no casualties resulted. The men of the Platoon did not return the fires for fear of prematurely disclosing their new position.

When the Platoon was in position for the assault Lieutenant Torkelson, the Platoon Leader, ordered all riflemen and machine gunners to open fire on the positions to the front. Under cover of this withering fire Lieutenant Torkelson dashed forward, cut the barbed wire surrounding the position and leaped into the nearest enemy trench. The entire platoon, inspired by this act of gallantry, sprang forward through the gap and quickly killed the crew of the one machine gun covering that portion of the hill. The enemy was so taken by surprise that only one casualty was suffered by the platoon during this assault. One member of the attached machine gun section was killed as he dashed forward to place his gun in a forward firing position.

On reaching the trench the platoon was quickly reorganized. One squad was sent to the left through the

trench, one through the trench to the right, and Lieutenant Torkelson personally led the 3rd Squad in an assault over the top of the hill to clear out two pillboxes on the crest.

(See Map C)

On seeing the success of the 3rd Platoon the Company Commander directed the 1st Platoon to launch its final assault on the southern slopes of the hill. This assault supported by prearranged fires from two tank destroyers was quickly under way. With the Liaison Officer directing fires from front line positions the tank destroyers soon silenced the fires of one 40mm gun in the area and systematically destroyed several machine gun positions. In the face of this highly accurate fire the defenders soon withdrew to positions near the crest of the hill. The 3rd Platoon moving along the crest from the north cleared these positions from the flank and rear and joined with the 1st Platoon on the southern slopes of the hill.

The 1st and 3rd Platoons were then directed to continue around the hill and occupy positions on the reverse slopes. On approaching the reverse slope it was soon discovered that the enemy still occupied positions as extensive as those on the forward slope. Machine guns were quickly employed and the two platoons engaged in a thirty minute down-hill attack which resulted in complete defeat for the reverse slope defenders. The Company Commander and Artillery Forward Observer had followed the 3rd Platoon onto the hill and were in position to support the final attack with artillery and

mortar fires. Several battalion volleys quickly demoralized the defenders, and the two platoons virtually shot their way to the base of the hill.

While reorganization was taking place the Artillery Observer discovered an enemy foot column of company size approaching the hill on Highway 4 from the direction of PLOUGASTEL.. (See Map C) This column was taken under time fire by two battalions of artillery and an estimated fifty casualties inflicted. The column quickly dispersed and withdrew to the southwest. At 1400 hours the company objective was secure and reorganization was complete.

To summarize L Company's operations in the attack against HILL 154: The Company in twenty-five hours advanced some two thousand yards over comparatively open ground to seize a key terrain feature in the face of a numerically superior force heavily entrenched in concrete pillboxes and dug in positions. The success of the attack is made apparent by the fact that during the operation the Company's losses were five men killed and seventeen wounded, while in L Company's sector the enemy's known losses were sixty-three killed, ninety-seven wounded and over one hundred others captured. (36) Total enemy losses in the entire 3rd Battalion sector during this action were one hundred known dead, one hundred fifty four captured and an estimated additional three hundred killed or wounded. (37)

(36) Personal knowledge

(37) A-6, p. 2

The tactical importance of the position taken in relation to the overall attack on the city of BREST is evidenced by the following:

1. Nine artillery observation posts were established on HILL 154 within twenty-four hours after its capture. From these observation posts observed fires could be directed over most of the city of BREST. (38)

2. From 1-10 September, a special organization under control of the 2d Division Artillery operated from HILL 154 and vicinity. During this period the organization fired a total of 307,273 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition and 2,624 rounds of direct fire high explosives into the city of BREST from the positions on the hill. (39)

3. From HILL 154 direct fire weapons supported the attack against all remaining positions on DAOULAS PENINSULA. From these remaining defenses a total of 3,000 prisoners were taken and fifty coast artillery and antiaircraft guns were destroyed. (40)

4. As a result of the fall of HILL 154 the enemy was forced to destroy the bridge between the DAOULAS PENINSULA and the city of BREST; thereby separating the enemy forces on DAOULAS and CROZON PENINSULAS from the city's main garrison.

For action at HILL 154 the 3rd Battalion received the first Distinguished Unit Citation awarded to any unit of the 2nd Division in World War II. (42) The courage, initiative and cool daring of the individual riflemen of L Company carried the major part of the action in the fight for HILL 154. (43)

{38} Personal knowledge

{39} A-1, p. 56

{40} A-1, p. 56

{41} A-1, p. 54

{42} A-1, p. 54

{43} Statement of Lt. Col. O. M. Barsanti, then Commander, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, on 5 October 1949

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. RECONNAISSANCE

The operations of L Company against HILL 154 can be considered successful in view of the fact that the objective was taken with a minimum of casualties. However, had aggressive patrolling been conducted on the afternoon and night of 21 August and the information gained immediately acted upon, it is probable that the objective would have been taken much sooner and with even fewer casualties. The initial attack disclosed positions between the Line of Departure and the objective had been abandoned the preceding night. Aggressive patrolling on the night of the 21st would certainly have disclosed this information. A night attack or an attack at dawn on the 22nd based on this information would probably have been highly successful. A night attack was feasible since all unit commanders had completely familiarized themselves with the terrain to the front during the afternoon of the 21st.

Lack of patrolling is hardly excusable in this case in view of the fact that the attackers had been opposed only by delaying forces up to this time and had no reason to assume that the enemy's main battle position had been reached.

2. INFILTRATION TACTICS

The successful infiltration tactics employed by L Company in the attack on HILL 154 is a prime example of the "pay off" for intense small unit training. In several instances when frontal assault tactics completely failed, each individual rifleman unhesitatingly moved forward by stealth to attain the objective which he knew his unit must reach. The actions of

individuals in this case was not the result of orders issued on the spot but the automatic actions of trained officers and men, instilled with a sense of duty, pride of unit and absolute confidence in each other. Such actions are only seen when men have trained together, lived together and fought together over a long period of time. This statement is substantiated by the fact that in later actions in Europe this type of individual initiative and aggressive action in L Company was less evident as the percentage of original members steadily decreased. There can be no doubt that in this case the infiltration tactics employed were highly successful after standard assault tactics failed.

3. USE OF TANK DESTROYERS IN SUPPORT OF INFANTRY

The value of direct fire weapons in support of infantry in the attack against fortified positions was clearly demonstrated in this operation. The presence of numerous hedgerows and concealed enemy antitank guns made it impractical for the tank destroyers to accompany the infantry in the attack. Despite these obstacles the weapons gave almost continuous support from overwatching positions to the rear. Fires from tank destroyers repeatedly silenced enemy guns that would have held up the advance of the infantry. This close support was made possible by the presence of a liaison officer from the Tank Destroyer Platoon with the Company Command Group at all times. From his forward position with the Rifle Company Commander it was possible to accurately describe targets to the gunners far to the rear. Such excellent results could not have been obtained from observation posts to the rear or from the actual tank destroyer position. Results obtained contributed to a large degree to the success of L Company's attack.

4. THE ENEMY COUNTERATTACK

The counterattack launched by the enemy on the morning of the 23rd proved to be one of the critical errors made in the defense of HILL 154. In this case the enemy sent a platoon out of a well prepared, fortified position to counterattack a force that had not yet been able to penetrate the position. Although evidence shows that the platoon came very near to accomplishing its mission of destroying the Battalion Command Post the fact remains that the mission failed and at the same time contributed to the success of the attacker. This same platoon, had it remained in prepared positions in defense or acted as a counter-attacking force against L Company on the crest of the hill, could possibly have turned the tide in this operation. By moving forward of the prepared positions the counterattacking platoon forced the enemy to lift defensive artillery fires from a critical avenue of approach. This enabled L Company's 3rd Platoon to infiltrate forward while the counterattacking force was engaged by K Company. Effective enemy artillery fires were never resumed in this area once they were lifted for the counterattacking force.

5. REORGANIZATION

Prompt reorganization by the platoon of L Company upon reaching the crest of the hill and the rapid displacement of the Company Command Group with the artillery and mortar observers prevented the enemy from effectively defending their reverse slope positions. It also made possible the complete routing of the enemy reinforcements arriving from PLOUGASTEL. Had the company failed to quickly reorganize on the objective, to include displacement of machine guns, and had the artillery and mortar

observers not been in position to bring down fires on the enemy reinforcements, it may well have been a much more costly operation to take the reverse slopes of the hill. The reverse slope defenders were completely taken by surprise before they were fully aware that the forward positions had fallen. A few minutes delay in reorganizing to continue the attack would have been sufficient time for the enemy to alert the defenders and reinforce the position. L Company possibly would have lost the initiative as a result.

6. EMPLOYMENT OF THE SUPPORT PLATOON OF L COMPANY

The employment of the support platoon of Company L, as an enveloping force, on the afternoon of the 22nd was not sound because it was not coordinated with the unit on the left. The Company Commander made no attempt to determine location of the front lines of the unit on the left but "assumed" they were abreast. As a result of this assumption the Platoon encountered enemy positions which forced it to deviate from the planned route. The Platoon Leader, intent on accomplishing his mission altered the route without first contacting the Company Commander. As a result he led his platoon in an envelopment that was entirely too shallow and became engaged with the enemy at a point where no tactical advantage was gained. Thus through an error in judgment, on the part of the Platoon Leader, ^{and Company Commander} the 1st Platoon was lost as a maneuvering force and L Company was without a reserve during a critical phase of the action.

7. USE OF SMOKE

Although elements of L Company were under artillery fire almost continuously during the attack smoke was never used on HILL 154. It is felt that both the Company and the Battalion

Commander were guilty of failing to give the men of the Company all available support in the attack. The fact that the enemy artillery fires were never extremely accurate was due to excellent use of cover by the men. Smoke properly used on the hill could have greatly assisted the advance.

LESSONS

1. Units temporarily halted in the attack must maintain contact with the enemy by continuous patrolling to the front, in order to prevent surprise as a result of shifts in enemy dispositions.

2. Infiltration tactics against organized positions are most successful when used by well trained, well disciplined units and will often succeed when direct assault has failed.

3. Infantry units in attack derive maximum benefits from direct fire weapons when their fires are coordinated and directed by trained observers from front line positions.

4. In defense of a well organized position small unit reserves should be used to block or counterattack after the position has been penetrated and not as a counterattacking force in front of the position.

5. After capturing a position prompt reorganization by small units, to include displacement of machine guns and artillery observers, is necessary for the successful continuation of the attack and complete destruction of the opposing forces.

6. Flanking movements must be carefully coordinated with the adjacent unit and must be made in sufficient depth to strike the enemy from a new direction if maximum results are to be obtained.

7. Smoke if properly used in the attack can greatly facilitate movement and will reduce casualties from enemy artillery fires.