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

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1947 - 1948

OPERATIONS OF THE 3D PLATOON, COMPANY "E", 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT (82D AIRBORNE DIVISION) IN THE SEIZURE OF THE NIJMEGEN BRIDGE, 19 - 20 SEPTEMBER 1944. (OPERATION OF THE 1ST ALLIED AIRBORNE ARMY IN THE INVASION OF HOLLAND) (RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: Seizure of a Bridge.

Captain John D. Phillips, Jr., Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. II

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OPERATIONS OF THE 3D PLATOON, COMPANY "E", 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT (82D AIRBORNE DIVISION) IN THE SEIZURE OF THE NIJMEGEN BRIDGE, 19 - 20 SEPTEMBER 1944 (OPERATION OF THE 1ST ALLIED AIRBORNE ARMY IN THE INVASION OF HOLLAND)

(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 3d Platoon, Company E, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in the seizure of the Nijmegan Bridge, 19-20 September 1944, during the 1st Allied Airborne Army's invasion of Holland.

By early fall of 1944 the Allied Armies were suffering a serious handicap to the continued rapid advance along the Western front in that they were badly in need of supplies, and no Army was capable of making a sustained offensive. This situation had developed because the Seaports serving the Armies were so far to the rear that the supply lines could not adequately carry the tremendous burden required. (1)

It was necessary for the Armies to plan and execute a decisive offensive or the war would go on into the summer of 1945, and thus give the Axis leaders the time they so desired to recover from their losses and improve their defenses or negotiate a better peace. (2)

Confronted with these conditions the Allies devised a plan to deliver the final blow on the Axis. This plan was designated as Operation Market-Garden. Operation Market was the airborne phase and was to be coordinated with the ground effort. (3)

(1) A-1, p. 22; (2) A-1, p. 23; (3) A-1, p. 23.

All armies on the Western front would halt their advance for the time being, except the British Second Army which would receive all supplies that could be adapted to its use and prepare for an all out effort. (4)

The British Second Army in conjunction with the First Allied Airborne Army would advance from a line generally along the Albert and Escaut Canals in Belgium to the Zuider Zee in Holland in an effort to cut off the German armies in western Holland. The Allies could then strike around the northern end of the Seigfried Line and straight into Germany and eliminate the tenacious task of making a frontal assault through the Line. (5)

The advance would be along a narrow front, following one road through Eindhoven, Grave, Nijmegen, Arnhem, Apeldoorn, and spearheaded by the XXX Corps with the VIII Corps on the right and the XII Corps on the left, advancing more slowly on the flanks. (6)

The purpose of Operation Market was to land airborne troops in areas where they could seize bridges over the Maas, the Waal and the Neder Rijn along the route of advance of the British Second Army, and open a corridor for the spearhead to pass on northward. (7)

Missions of the airborne task force were as follows: "The 101st Airborne Division to sieze bridges over the Aa River and Willems Vaart Canal near Veghel, over the Dommel River at St. Oedenrode, over the Wilhelmina Canal near Zon, and the city of Eindhoven: the 82d Airborne

(4) A-1, p. 23; (5) A-1, p. 23; (6) A-3, p. 10 & 11; (7) A-3, p. 10, 11.

Division to capture the bridges over the Maas at Grave, over the Waal at Nijmegen and over the Maas-Waal Canal between; the 1st Airborne Division (British), together with the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade, to capture the bridges at Arnhem. In each case the surrounding area was to be held until the Guards Armoured could effect a junction and then the Airborne troops were to protect the sides of the corridor. The 52d (Lowland) Division (Airportable) was to come into the Arnhem area as soon as an airstrip could be prepared by the Airborne Engineers." (8)

The mission of the 82d specifically stated that the high hill mass in the Greesbeek area would be seized, organized and held. This is the highest ground in all the Netherlands. The Commanding General of the 82d was directed by the Corps Commander that all other missions would be accomplished before seizure of the Nijmegen Bridge was attempted. (9)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 16 September 1944 the 82d Airborne Division closed at airfields in England 24 hours prior to take off time. Last minute briefings and equipment checks were made of all personnel, bundles and aircraft.

Starting at 0950 17 September 1944 the Division took off for the flight to Holland. This flight took approximately three hours, the first serials landing on the drop zones at 1250 hours. All units landed on their prescribed

(8) A-3, p. 12; (9) A-1, p. 25.

drop zones with the exception of the 2d Battalion of the 505th Parachute Infantry, which was dropped two thousand yards northeast of its scheduled drop zone. (Map A)

Following the drop all units reorganized and moved to their assigned objectives, eliminating the local enemy resistance, and by 2300 hours initial missions had been accomplished. (10)

The 504th Parachute Infantry had dropped west of the Maas-Waal Canal on three separate battalion drop zones. One Battalion captured the bridge at Heuman and bridge sites near Blankenburg and Hatert, the bridges at these sites having been destroyed by the enemy prior to the arrival of the troops. One battalion cleared the western sector of the division area of all enemy and blocked movement on the Grave-Nijmegen highway. One battalion had dropped troops on either side of the Maas at Grave and both forces moved against the bridge, capturing it at 1430. The town of Grave was abandoned by approximately 400 enemy and occupied at 2300.

The 505th Parachute Infantry dropped on drop zones in the vicinity of Groesbeek, seized the town and cleared all enemy from its area. Contact with the 504th Parachute Infantry was made on the bridge near Heuman. (Map A)

The 508th Parachute Infantry dropped on drop zones northeast of Groesbeek and upon receipt of information from the Dutch underground that the town of Nijmegen held few troops, moved to take the Waal River bridges. Their attack was stopped by heavy enemy resistance about

(10) A-5, p. 1 & 2.

400 yards from the highway bridge and the regiment established road blocks to prevent any movement to the South. One company encountered considerable enemy resistance in clearing glider landing zones in the area Northeast of Groesbeek. (11) (Map A)

D plus 1 found the 504th and 505th Parachute Infantry conducting vigorous patrol activities, capturing additional secondary bridges over the Maas-Waal Canal and disrupting enemy communications. E Company of the 505th Parachute Infantry captured a train loaded with supplies and personnel trying to escape into Germany.

Because of strong enemy resistance being encountered by the company previously sent to clear the glider landing zones Northeast of Groesbeek the 508th Parachute Infantry withdrew one battalion which had been in the town of Nijmegen, to assist in this mission. Complete surprise was effected and the landing zone secured by 1400. At 0900 one company again moved into Nijmegen and was stopped by the enemy upon reaching the same area in which the regiment had been stopped the day before. Furious fighting raged through the day and at 1500 the company was withdrawn to the vicinity of Berg en Dal. (12) (Map A)

During the morning 450 gliders were lifted from bases in England and towed to the landing zones in the vicinity of Groesbeek. This lift was made up of one anti-tank battery of the 80th Airborne Anti-Aircraft Battalion, 519th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, 320th Glider Field

(11) A-5, p. 2; (12) A-5, p. 3.

Artillery Battalion, 456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, and the 307th Airborne Medical Company. (13)

The glider recovery was quite satisfactory even though several gliders overshot the landing zone and landed in enemy territory across the Dutch-German border.

The arrival of the artillery Battalions was indeed a welcome sight and they were immediately put into action, one battalion being put in direct support of each of the Parachute Regiments. (14)

On D plus 2 contact was made with the Guards Armoured Division by the 504th Parachute Infantry at Grave. (15)

This regiment, less three companies left to guard the bridges at Grave, Heuman, Heninghute, and to patrol the highway from Grave to the Heninghute bridge, was moved east to the Maas-Waal Canal where they relieved the 2d Battalion of the 508th Parachute Infantry. One battalion was placed in division reserve. (16)

The 505th Parachute Infantry, less the 2d Battalion continued to hold its sector on the South of the Division area, conducting extensive patrol activities throughout the day. (17) (Map A)

508th Parachute Infantry seized high ground along the Nijmegen-Cleve highway between Ubbergen and Wyler, establishing road blocks at these points in addition to those at Beek and In Thal. Repeated vicious counter-attacks against positions in Teufels Berg during the course of the day were repulsed. (18)

(13) A-5, p. 3; (14) A-5, p. 4; (15) A-5, p. 4;
(16) A-5, p. 4; (17) A-5, p. 4; (18) A-5, p. 4.

THE BATTALION SITUATION

At about 1100 on 19 Sept 1944 the Battalion Commander of the 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, was called to the Division Headquarters where he received a special mission for the battalion. This mission was to accompany the Guards Armoured Division north to Nijmegen and capture intact, if possible, the vital bridge crossings of the Waal River.

The battalion located in the vicinity of Groesbeek was alerted and after placing individual packs in a dump started the move to Nijmegen at 1245, under the command of the Battalion Executive Officer. (Route - Map A) The Battalion Commander had gone forward to coordinate plans for the seizure of the bridges with the Commander of the British tank unit and the Dutch underground. The partisan elements stated that the bridges were prepared for demolitions and heavily defended by German SS and Parachute troops.

As the battalion reached the outskirts of the town the Battalion Commander rejoined the column and halted it. The Company Commanders were called forward and the following order was issued:

E Company, with one section of LMG's attached, would lead the attack into the town, assaulting the enemy positions located in the Park and along the approaches to the highway bridge. Upon reaching the bridge the company was to move rapidly across the river and go into a defensive

position 200 yards from the north end of the bridge, its right flank extending back to the river and contact being made with F Company on the left:

F Company, with 7 tanks attached, would follow E Company to the Park area and upon entering the Park would move to E Companies left flank and assist in the assault to the bridge, following E Company across the river and take up a defensive position on E companies left and extend the left flank back to the river line.

D Company, with one section of LMG's and eight tanks attached, would move northwest through the town to seize and hold the railroad bridge.

81mm mortar platoon would go into position on the outskirts of town and be prepared to support attacks on either of the two bridges. (Point 1, Map B) (19)

The orders issued to his platoon leader by the E Company Commander were as follows: 1st Platoon lead the assault and move along the right side of the Park area; 3d Platoon would follow the 1st Platoon and upon reaching the Park, move through the center and onto the bridge; 2d Platoon would follow the 3d Platoon and coordinate with the 1st Platoon in supporting the 3d Platoon with small arms and 60mm mortar fire: Company Headquarters and the attached LMG section would move to the edge of the Park and await further orders; Company Commander would be with the 1st Platoon.

A few minutes was taken by the Company Commanders to orient their attached tanks andthe battalion started

(19) Personal knowledge.

moving at 1600. As the column moved through the town artillery started to fall causing a few casualties.

It was now known that the enemy had concentrated the bulk of his force around the highway bridge, and as the head of the column approached the Park -- through which ran the entrances to the bridge - it came under heavy fire. E and F Companies deployed in an attempt to feel out the enemy defenses; the attached tanks, in trying to go into positions to fire on the enemy were met by a withering fire from anti-tank and machine guns. This resulted in the loss of four tanks. (20)

THE COMPANY SITUATION

E Company moved through the streets of Nijmegen encountering very little enemy fire until the column reached a point about two blocks from the approaches to the highway bridge; here it was met by a hail of automatic and anti-tank fire. At first it appeared the enemy had prepared a successful trap for the company as they were receiving fire from the flanks as well as the front. Using smoke grenades to cover their movements the company managed to move into the buildings overlooking the Park, which in many cases still contained enemy strong points. Here the fighting raged from building to building and from room to room throughout the afternoon.

The extent to which the enemy had prepared the defense of the bridge soon became evident. Anti-tank guns covered every street approach and automatic weapons fired from numerous loop holes in an old Dutch fort which was

(20) Personal knowledge.

the center of resistance. Attempts to place the tanks into firing positions had already resulted in four of them being knocked out.

The troops within this enemy position consisting of SS and Parachutists fought with a fanaticism never before witnessed by these veterans of Sicily, Italy and Normandy.

The company was ordered to take positions in buildings on the edge of the Park and the balance of the afternoon was spent in fighting to this point. The troops moved through houses and buildings in the area, hurling hand grenades into the windows and firing as they entered. Groups of three or four would close in hand to hand fighting with nests of Germans found in the rooms. The destruction, dead, and wounded found the next day testified to the ferocity of this fighting. The men being well aware of the positions they were to occupy by nightfall fought individually and collectively to reach them. (21)

That night the company was in positions overlooking the Park area and were able to pour small arms and mortar fire into the enemy emplacements. The company held on throughout the night in spite of a terrific pounding by enemy artillery which included white phosphorus, causing numerious fires.

One platoon infiltrated into the Park from the right flank and with knives and bayonets moved from one emplacement to another killing and capturing many of the confused enemy.

(21) Personal knowledge.

THE PLATOON ACTION

When the company was stopped by the enemy fire, smoke grenades were set off to cover the movement of the troops. The 3d Platoon moved across the Dalshe Weg at an intersection about two blocks from the Park, going into buildings on the right of the approach; they proceeded to fight from one building to another, at times in hand to hand combat. Fighting lasted for about an hour in this area before the entire block was secured. (Point 2 and 3, Map B)

The 2d Platoon was ordered to take over this area as the 3d Platoon was to be withdrawn to the cover of a large church in the block. Completing the assembly at the church the Company Commander gave the Platoon Leader another mission. To move across the street opposite the buildings they had previously secured and take up positions in the buildings along the East side of the Park. When all men were in position to open fire on the enemy with the LMG's and BAR's, the remainder of the platoon was to move into the Park and close with the enemy. The 2d Platoon would assist in the assault from their present positions and would jump off when the 3d Platoon opened fire. (Point 4, Map B) (22)

The platoon moved a block to the East and crossed the street into the buildings, being covered from enemy machine gun fire by two knocked out tanks burning in the street and cutting off the fields of fire. These build-

(22) Personal knowledge.

ings had been large three story apartment houses of brick construction, but the Germans had set them on fire on D plus 1 to prevent troops from taking positions in them should they progress that far. The majority of the walls were still standing but all of the wooden parts had burned and fallen through to the ground level, the rubble still smoldering and very hot.

Shortly after entering the buildings, enemy artillery began to fall on the area but the men continued to work their way forward to take up their pre-designated positions. As the platoon was going into position a runner from the company arrived and stated the Company Commander wanted the platoon brought out before it was eliminated by the artillery.

Three men were hit and had to be carried back to the location of the Company Command Position where the Platoon Leader received another order. This time to move two or three blocks to the east and then north to a parkway, attack west, clearing the parkway in an effort to flank the enemy or get in behind his park positions.

The platoon, with one section of LMG's attached, moved six blocks northeast to the eastern end of the parkway. Here the platoon was halted and left under cover of the buildings while the Platoon Leader with two men went to make a reconnaissance of the area. (Point 5, Map B) (23)

It was about 2000 and darkness had fallen over the countryside; however the section of the town being fought

(23) Personal knowledge.

over was well illuminated from the fires that were burning.

The east end of the parkway came to a dead-end at the point where the Platoon Leader and his patrol entered. (Point 6, Map B) Using the cover of a sunken lawn to conceal their movement to the opposite side they moved in behind a bank on the north side of the parkway, and discovered that it extended along the rear of the enemy positions for about two blocks, dropping off steeply to a street some twenty or thirty feet below.

This was the break the platoon had been looking for; so the patrol moved along behind the enemy positions and using Tommy Guns, hand grenades and knives eliminated the enemy in this area in less than an hours time. (Point 7, Map B)

The bank was perfect cover for movement of the patrol from the rear of one position to the rear of another; and with the fires in front of the enemy, their heads protruding above the foxholes made perfect targets. In some instances an enemy's head was no more than two feet from the muzzle of a gun when the trigger was pulled. (24)

Artillery was still falling and the enemy along the parkway was so busy pouring fire into the buildings across the street that the activities of the patrol went unnoticed until it reached a point where the parkway converged with the Park. (Point 8, Map B) Here it was discovered and fired on by a machine gun. The fire was re-

(24) Personal knowledge.

turned by the patrol but none of the men could get into a position to assault the enemy gun. Two men held the ground while the third man was sent back with an order to the Assistant Platoon Leader to bring the platoon forward and occupy the recent enemy positions. Two LMG's were to be brought forward to the Platoon Leader and set up to cover the enemy machine gun. By 2200 the platoon was in position and the enemy gun that fired on the patrol had been forced to take cover.

All automatic weapons were left in position and the remainder of the platoon was organized into four man patrols to enter the north section of the park in an effort to destroy the enemy anti-tank guns and all of the enemy that could be found. This section of the park was on a lower level than the South section and offered a defiladed area in which the patrols could operate in and not be endangered by small arms fire from our own troops on the South. (Point 9, Map B)

Patrol activities continued throughout the night with the net result of one five centimeter anti-tank gun and crew being destroyed, several enemy killed and a few taken prisoner. The patrols were withdrawn to their own lines prior to daylight and resupplied with ammunition.

At 0530 20 September the battalion ordered a direct assault into the Park from the three sides held by our troops.

The platoon was to move back into the North end of

the Park where they had been patrolling, assault the enemy gun positions from the rear then proceed on to the bridge.

The Germans had brought reinforcements across the bridge during the early morning, and when the platoon moved into the assault it was met by a terrific volume of automatic weapons fire and forced back into its previous positions. (Point 9, Map B) (25)

Two bazooka teams were brought forward and put into action against the gun positions in the Park and an old Dutch fort that was located near the bridge. They were successful in eliminating the gun positions to their front in the Park, but their weapons had no effect on the fort other than to drive the enemy gunners from one window at a time. When the fire was shifted to another window the gunners who had previously been fired on would reappear and take up their firing positions.

Enemy snipers that had infiltrated into the buildings behind the platoon were beginning to make their presence felt and it was necessary to put a four man patrol into these buildings in an effort to eliminate them. (Points 10 and 11, Map B) By 1200 they had killed six Germans and the harrassing fire in the rear of the platoon had subsided. The Germans however had succeeded in killing three men and wounding four others so seriously that they had to be evacuated.

Artillery had started to fall on the platoon positions about 0700 and continued throughout most of the day. The enemy batterys were located behind a dike on the opposite side of the river and each time they fired the

(25) Personal knowledge.

report gave sufficient warning for everyone to get down in their foxholes. Their efforts were not totally unrewarded, as the platoon was receiving numerous casualties. (26)

At 1000 the three 60mm mortar squads in the company were grouped and attached to the platoon. These squads were put into position and given several targets to fire on. They had fired on the first target for effect when the enemy artillery located the position and knocked it out. Five men were injured and two mortars damaged so badly they could not be used.

It was learned later that the enemy had observers to the rear of the platoon position, thus accounting for their accurate fire on every move being made by the men.

The battalion Medics were unable to evacuate all the casualties so the platoon aid man moved the injured men into the basement of a building where he could care for them and await help to effect their evacuation.

The order was issued by the battalion for a combined assault with the British Armour to take place at 1445.

The platoon mission was to move into the north end of the Park from the flank and cut the enemy off from the rear. (Point 9, Map B) This assault was successful and all enemy resistance on the south end of the bridge was eliminated by 1800. The first British tank crossed the bridge at 1830 and made contact with the 504th Parachute Infantry who, during the day, had effected a river crossing in assault boats down stream at the western edge of

(26) Personal knowledge.

town.

The platoon was relieved of its sector of responsibility and given the mission of patrolling the town to mop up by-passed enemy.

At 0800 21 September the platoon was relieved in Nijmegen and sent two miles East on a separate mission.

During this engagement the platoon with one section of LMG's and two 60mm mortar squads attached, suffered the loss of five men killed and seventeen evacuated due to wounds received. (27)

The enemy in the park area were estimated to total three hundred and fifty, of which one hundred and fifteen were killed, ninety one captured and numerous others wounded.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation, it is my opinion that the original mission assigned the 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry should have had the support of another battalion. All the rifle companies were engaged in the fighting initially and thus eliminated a reserve or manuevering element of any strength.

The Battalion Commander realized the enemy force was made up of well trained and experienced troops, but the extent of their prepared positions and supporting fire was not anticipated to be so great.

A more thorough reconnaissance of the Park Area prior to the attack would have been a great advantage, and possibly the loss of four tanks could have been avoided. The

(27) Personal knowledge.

known, or suspected location of the enemy prepared positions would undoubtedly have changed the tactics used, and the main effort having been made into the enemys left flank from the East side of the Park.

The E Company Commander exercised exceptional judgment by using his 3d Platoon as a manuvering force, and the eventual infiltration of patrols to the rear of the enemy positions.

In the actions of the 3d Platoon it is evident that its technique in street fighting and patroling was the result of intensive individual, and small unit training. The ability of these men to fight in small groups, perfectly coordinated, using their individual weapons and knives to the maximum advantage was the decisive factor in accomplishing the mission.

When the platoon was initially fired on, smoke grenades were set off and with no hesitation whatsoever, the men moved under cover of the smoke to close with the enemy in the buildings. This action made it possible to secure positions overlooking the Park area and confine the fighting to the Park.

The proposed assault from buildings on the East side of the Park, if effected, might have proven very costly as a reconnaissance of the right flank had not been made, and it later developed that machine gun positions in that area could have delivered very effective flanking fire on the platoon.

The patrol activities of the platoon through the Parkway, and into the rear of the enemy positions, during the night was again evidence of perfect team work

and high morale. These men had complete confidence in their leaders and their own ability to close with and destroy the enemy.

The activities of the sniper hunting patrol to the rear of the platoon positions prevented additional casualties from that source, but should have been put into operation earlier.

The final assault on the Park was a well coordinated and determined effort which further proved that enemy in prepared positions cannot be disloged by small arms fire, but must be overrun and destroyed.

As authorized by Executive Order 9396 (Sec. I, WD Bul. 22, 1943), superseding Executive Order 9075 (Sec. III, WD Bul. 11, 1942), the 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, 82d Airborne Division, is cited by the War Department under the provisions of section IV, WD Circular 333, 1943, in the name of the President of the United States as public evidence of deserved honor and distinction. (28)

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Realistic and extensive small unit training is essential to preparation for combat.

2. Troops must be in perfect physical condition.

3. Agressive, determined patroling can be the decisive factor in accomplishing victory.

4. Surprise is an essential element.

(28) W.D. General Orders.

5. Enemy in prepared positions can not be driven out with small arms fire alone.

6. Underground and partisan elements had a definite use.