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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 18TH INFANTRY (1ST INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE DEFENSE OF THE RAVELSBERG, AT HAAREN, NORTHEAST OF AACHEN, GERMANY, 15-19 OCTOBER 1944. (RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of an Attached Officer)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY RIFLE COMPANY IN THE DEFENSE OF A FORTIFIED POSITION AGAINST ENEMY COUNTERATTACKS ON SUCCESSIVE DAYS

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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 18TH INFANTRY
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(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION (See Map A)

This monograph covers the operations of Company K, 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, in the defense of the RAVELSBERG, at HAAREN, in the vicinity of AACHEN, GERMANY, during the period 15-19 October 1944, while the 1st Infantry Division was engaged in the offensive against the city of AACHEN.

In order to give the reader a more complete understanding of the action to be described, it is necessary to give a brief general introduction to the events preceding this action.

Following the breakout by the allied forces at St. Lo, on 31 July 1944, after establishment of the beachhead on the COTENTIN PENINSULA, the US First Army drove to the east, while the Canadian First Army and the British Second Army on the north flank of the beachhead followed along the Channel coast toward CAEN, and the recently formed US Third Army, on the south of the US First Army, drove southeast and east towart LAVAL and LE MANS, with a force swinging to the west to clear the enemy from BRITTAINY. (See Map A)

On 7 August, in a final attempt to seal the allies into the peninsula, and to cut off and defeat the US Third Army in detail, the German Seventh Army launched a counteroffensive against the US First Army at MORTAIN. This action resulted in the German forces being caught in a pincers between the British forces on the north and the US Third Army on the south, while the US First Army held the enemy in position. The result was the virtual anihilation of the German Seventh Army as a fighting force, at the ARGENTAN-FALAISE gap, and was culminated by the pursuit by the allied armies across northern FRANCE.

By 25 August, the allied line of advance extended as far east as TROYES, and followed generally northwesterly along the line of the SEINE RIVER to the Channel coast.

During the remainder of the month of August this advance continued, so that by 3 September the line ran northwesterly along the MEUSE RIVER from BAR LE DUC to the BELGIAN border, and along the BELGIAN border to MONS, which was held by elements of the US First Army. West of MONS there was a pocket between the US First Army and the British Second Army, whose salient formed a long finger running nearly to BRUSSELS. West of this the line dropped sharply back, in front of the Canadian First Army, and joined the ENGLISH CHANNEL at the mouth of the SOMME RIVER, in the vicinity of ABBEVILLE.

As the enemy elements attemped to withdraw eastward toward GERMANY from the pocket at MONS, they ran unexpectedly against the 1st Infantry Division, on the left flank of US First Army, blocking their line of retreat, and the enemy suffered another major defeat.

While the action at MONS was taking place, the remainder of the US First Army drove to the GERMAN border.

By 14 September the advance had continued, with the Canadian First Army on the SCHELDT estuary, the British Second Army on the BELGIAN-HOLLAND border along the ALBERT CANAL, the US First Army along the GERMAN border from north of MAASTRICHT to the southern border of LUXEMBOURG, and the US Third Army extending to the south along a line running in the vicinity of METZ and NANCY.

All along its front the US First Army had run up to the GERMAN WEST-WALL, or SIEGFRIED LINE, a line of mutually supporting reinforced concrete pillboxes and personnel bunkers, interspersed with antitank barriers and organized positions and obstacles, established along the first tactically defensible terrain east of the GERMAN frontier, and extending from KLEVE,

in the north, to the SWISS border on the south. (1)

The overall objective of the allied forces at this time was to drive to the RHINE RIVER, force a crossing, and isolate and reduce the RUHR, the industrial heart of GERMANY, thereby fatally crippling the war making potential of the enemy. (2)

At this time, however, a new factor made itself felt. Although ANTWERP, the finest port in EUROPE, had fallen into allied hands virtually unharmed on 4 September, it was not until 9 November that the islands in the SCHELDT estuary controlling the approaches to the port fell into our hands, and two weeks later before the waters could be cleared of mines, which made it 26 November before our supply ships began to use this great port. (3) (4)

In the meantime, the great bulk of supply for the fighting force was coming in over the beaches of NORMANDY and into the port of CHERBOURG, with the resultant long haul to the front across FRANCE and BELGIUM.

Despite all efforts, by the middle of September the available limited highway and rail facilities had been strained to the limit, and, although enemy resistance was disorganized on all fronts, it was logistically impossible to support further general advances.

Much has been said and written about what might have been done had any one of the allied armies been given the logistical support it needed at this time, even at the expense of the other armies. What effort was made was by the BRITISH in the north, in a coordinated attempt to bridge the RHINE and flank the SIEGFRIED LINE on the north at ARNHEM, in conjunction with an airborne operation, on 17 September. This operation met with only limited success.

In any event, at this time the advance bogged down on the GERMAN

(1) A-11, pp. 125-162; A-10, pp. 3-46, Maps 5, 6
(2) A-11, p. 148
(3) A-11, p. 161
(4) A-2, p. 328

frontier for lack of supply, and the enemy gained the time needed to man his defenses and reorganize his forces to prepare to meet further allied attacks.

THE GENERAL SITUATION (See Map B)

On 14 September US First Army was disposed from EYSDEN, approximately 10 miles north of MAASTRICHT on the BELGIAN-HOLLAND border, along the GERMAN frontier south to GRAVENMACHER, in LUXEMBOURG. The British 21st Army Group was to the north, and US Third Army was on the south.

US First Army, during this period, consisted of XIX Corps in the north, extending from the army boundary south to a point on the DUTCH border northwest of AACHEN, VII Corps extending south from the XIX Corps south boundary to a point about five miles northeast of St. Vith, and V Corps holding the southern sector to the US Third Army boundary. (See Map B)

From 14 September to 1 October XIX Corps advanced generally across the southeastern panhandle of HOLLAND to the GERMAN border; VII Corps, with the 1st Infantry Division on the north, 3rd Armored Division in the center, and 9th Infantry Division south of the 3rd Armored, began the advance through the SIEGFRIED LINE with the elements on the north. The 4th Armored Cavalry Regiment, attached to VII Corps and on the south (right) flank of the corps, and V Corps held the already established line to the south. (5)

By letter of instruction issued by US First Army on 29 September, XIX Corps, in addition to other missions, was directed to launch a coordinated attack on or about 1 October, objective to breach the SIEGFRIED LINE, drive south, and make contact with VII Corps on the boundary between the two corps east of AACHEN. At the same time, VII Corps was to attack north to meet XIX Corps, and to clear AACHEN. After the juncture, both corps were to drive to the east. (6)

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(5) A-10, pp. 47-54, Maps 5,6
(6) A-10, p. 54

The plan of XIX Corps was to drive eastward with the 30th Infantry Division to a point south of GEILENKIRCHEN, then to pass through the 30th Division with the 2nd Armored Division, which would continue the drive to the ROER RIVER between LINNICH and JULICH, while the 30th Division was to be diverted to the south in a drive to tie in with VII Corps. (7)

This offensive started on the morning of 2 October, and had advanced to the vicinity of ALSDORF by 7 October and to BARDENBERG by 9 October.

The plan of VII Corps was to continue the encirclement of AACHEN by driving to the north along the high ground east of that city, using the 1st Infantry Division, the left flank unit of the Corps, in the main effort to complete the encirclement and, thereafter, to capture the city. The 2nd Armored Division would protect the right flank of the 1st Infantry Division, and clear the town of STOLBERG. Pending the capture of AACHEN, eastward advances along the southern portion of the corps zone were limited.

SITUATION AND PLAN OF 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION (See Map C)

On 1 October the 1st Infantry Division was engaged in a close-in envelopment of AACHEN on the south and east. The 16th Infantry was tied in with elements of the 3rd Armored Division in STOLBERG, on the right, and one battalion of the 16th Infantry was attached to a task force of 3rd Armored Division assisting in the clearing of STOLBERG. The 3rd Battalion, 18th Infantry was attached to the 16th Infantry.

The 26th Infantry, on the left of the 16th Infantry, held the line extending southwesterly from EILENDORF to the right flank of the 18th Infantry.

The 18th Infantry, on the left of the division, had its 1st and 2nd

(7) A-10, p. 55; A-11, pp. 192-3

Battalions on the south os AACHEN, in the AACHENER STADT FORST. (See Map C)

The division plan, at this time, was to relieve the 18th Infantry from its positions on the south of AACHEN, and to continue the drive to the north, through the 16th Infantry Regiment with the 18th. Upon completion of the encirclement of AACHEN, an ultimatum to surrender was to be delivered to the commander of the AACHEN garrison. In the event this ultimatum was refused, the city was to be reduced by aerial bombardment and artillery shelling, and the 26th Infantry was thereafter to effect the capture by attacking from the east. (8)

SITUATION AND ACTIVITIES OF 18TH INFANTRY REGIMENT 2-14 OCTOBER 1944

In accordance with the division plan, on 2 October the 18th Infantry, less the 3rd Battalion, was relieved in its positions south of AACHEN by two battalions of the 1108th Combat Engineer Group, and the entire 18th Regiment was assembled in an area in the vicinity of BRAND preparatory to launching an attack to the north along the ridge line extending from EILENDORF through VERLAUTENHEIDE to WURSELEN to seize Hill 239, later to become better known as CRUCIFIX HILL because of the large cross thereon, and to join up with the 30th Division on the Corps boundary.

This attack crossed the line of departure at EILENDORF at 0400 on 8 October, with the 2nd Battalion attacking through the positions of the 16th Infantry to seize VERLAUTENHEIDE, which was reached by 0700, and at 1330 the 1st Battalion attacked through the 2nd Battalion positions and took CRUCIFIX HILL by 1630.

At 1300 the same day the 3rd Battalion, after patrolling in HAAREN, attacked the town, and by 1600 the battalion was disposed along the northwest side of the town.

At dawn on 9 October the enemy launched a counterattack, principally affecting the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 18th. This attack was repulsed.

(8) A-7, p. 70

On this date I Company was attached to the 1st Battalion, and, in a surprise night attack, Companies I and B advanced northwest along the ridge from CRUCIFIX HILL, and, without a struggle, seized HILL 231, also named the RAVELSBERG, with its strongly fortified positions.

This advance effectively cut all enemy routes into and out of AACHEN, for, although a gap still existed between the 1st Battalion 18th Infantry and the southern most unit of XIX Corps in BARDENBURG, the gap was completely dominated by artillery fire. (9)

On 10 October the surrender ultimatum was delivered to the commander of the AACHEN garrison. (10)

On 11 October the 18th Infantry continued mopping up and consolidation of positions, and a counterattack was repulsed in the vicinity of VERLAUTENHEIDE late in the afternoon. This was typical of the type of action that was to take place in front of the elements of the 16th and 18th Infantry Regiments throughout the ensuing period until AACHEN finally fell, as the enemy to the east made constant attempts at all points along the front to find a spot at which he could break through our defenses and relieve the city.

On 12 October, no reply to the surrender ultimatum having been received, the attack to the west into the city proper by the 26th Infantry was begun, and for the next nine days, while the 26th moved slowly forward into AACHEN proper, the two regiments to the east followed the pattern of consolidating and holding against counterattack. (11)

During this period, many units which had been separated from their parent organizations by attachment to other organizations during the advance were relieved and shifted to bring them back under the control of their parent organization.

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(9) A-4
(10) A-3, pp. 262-3
(11) A-3, p. 262; A-7, pp. 64-87

SITUATION OF 3RD BATTALION, 18TH INFANTRY (See Map D)

As previously pointed out, during the night attack by the 1st Battalion on 9 October from CRUCIFIX HILL to the RAVELSBERG, I Company had been attached to 1st Battalion, and in the ensuing occupation of positions, I Company ended up on the line between A and B Companies. (12)

On 15 October, in a general readjustment in this sector, 3rd Battalion was given responsibility for the left (north) flank of the regiment, I Company reverted to 3rd Battalion control, and B Company was to be relieved in the 3rd Battalion sector. The boundary between battalions was established along the road leading northwest from HAAREN to WEIDEN. (13)

At this time K Company was occupying positions in the northeast outskirts of HAAREN, tied in with L Company on the right, and a composite company consisting of the Regimental I & R Platoon, AT Mine Platoon of AT Company, and the Reconnaissance Platoon of 634th TD Battalion (known as "J" Company) on the left.

At approximately noon on 15 October Company K was ordered to relieve Company B on the RAVELSBERG after darkness that evening, and to tie in with Company I on the right, and Company L on the left. B Company was to revert to 1st Battalion control in the CRUCIFIX HILL sector while 3rd Battalion would then be on the left flank of the regiment, with a refused flank in the area south of WURSELEN where contact was to be made with the 30th Infantry Division to close the gap and complete the physical encirclement of AACHEN. (See Map D)

NARRATION

THE OCCUPATION OF THE RAVELSBERG

Upon receiving the battalion order, the company commander went forward to the B Company area on reconnaissance, and to arrange the details of the relief. (14)

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(12) Personal knowledge
(13) Personal knowledge
(14) Personal knowledge

The RAVELSBERG was a low wooded knoll located about midway on a north-south line between WURSELEN and HAAREN. It extended westerly as a spur off the ridge line running northwest from EILENDORF to WURSELEN. It was along this ridge that the 18th Infantry was deployed, and included the small town of VERLAUTENHEIDE in the 2nd Battalion sector, and CRUCIFIX HILL in the 1st Battalion sector. Included within the sector occupied by B Company were several bunkers of the permanent fortifications of the SIEGFRIED LINE. These bunkers were utilized as personnel shelters, company and platoon command posts, and observation posts for mortar and artillery observers. Those on the extreme north of the position were under direct observation of the enemy in the southern outskirts of WURSELEN, confining movement to communication trenches between portions of this sector. (See Map D)

Following the reconnaissance of the B Company position, a tie in was made to determine the flank locations of the adjoining companies. L Company occupied positions facing generally west, in the vicinity of the AACHEN-WURSELEN highway, and I Company, which had its command post in a large house about 250 yards southeast of the B Company command post, extended southeast to the vicinity of the road between HAAREN and WEIDEN.

After completing his reconnaissance, the company commander of K Company spent the greater part of the remainder of the afternoon at the I Company command post. About 1630 hours he returned to the K Company position and directed the company executive officer to move the company from HAAREN to the draw on the south side of the RAVELSBERG, where he would meet it and guide it into position. The company commander then returned to the I Company command post to await the company. (15)

By 1730 hours K Company had arrived in its assembly area, was met by the company commander, and the relief was started, although darkness had not yet set in.

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(15) Personal knowledge

K Company occupied the position without incident, and by 1830 with darkness just falling, and B Company still on the position preparing to move out, the Germans began shelling the position with mortars. The fire was very accurate, and numerous tree bursts made it particularly effective. Although K Company suffered no casualties, B Company lost three men before it was able to move off the position. (16)

It could not be determined whether the shelling was routine harassing fire or whether the relief had been observed, and the shelling followed. From the volume, however, it could be assumed that the relief had been observed.

The night 15-16 October passed without incident. A patrol sent out to contact the 119th Infantry of the 30th Infantry Division, moving down from the north on the west of WURSELEN, returned without completing its mission, and reported that it had heard men, carts, and animals moving along an unimproved road to the east of the main AACHEN-WURSELEN highway. This was reported to the 3rd Battalion commander, artillery fire was placed in the reported area of movement, and the road was interdicted throughout the night. (17)

On 16 October the company improved its positions, supplies were brought forward and placed on position, and, except for the fact that the enemy increased his mortar activity, there was little activity in the K Company sector. An attempt was made to knock out a suspected enemy observation post in a house at the intersection of the roads from WURSELEN to VERLAUTENHEIDE and from HAAREN to WEIDEN, about a thousand yards east of the position, but due to the extremely low available supply rate on artillery and mortar ammunition at this time the attempt was terminated before it could be brought to a successful conclusion.

About noon the company commander was called to the battalion command

(16) Personal knowledge
(17) Personal knowledge

post where he received an order for K Company to place a roadblock that night on the road along which movement had been reported the previous night. Due to the fact that the company was occupying an extended front, and that all three platoons were on line, this order was protested by the company commander.

In response to the protest the company commander was advised that the roadblock had been ordered by the regimental commander to insure that there was no movement into or out of AACHEN along the road on which movement had been reported the previous night, and, that if necessary to strengthen its positions, K Company should install barbed wire and anti-personnel mines. Although suggested, no action along this line was taken during the period K Company occupied the RAVELSBERG. (18)

During the 15th and 16th the counterattacks against the 1st Division line to the south continued. These counterattacks, and many subsequent, were made by elements of the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division which had just arrived from the south as the principal counterattack force, supplementing elements of the German 12th and 246th Divisions in the area. From vehicular movements and observation of enemy troops, it was determined that the 3rd Panzer Division was largely assembled in the PROPSTIER WALD, north of ATSCH. Many of its counterattacks were launched down the axis of the four lane autobahn leading from ESHWEILER to VERLAUTENHEIDE, known as the "bowling alley", and many proposed counterattacks were apparently forestalled through the use of our massed artillery. (19) (See Map C)

Fortunately, by the time the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division arrived in the division area, the positions along the VERLAUTENHEIDE RIDGE were too well established for the enemy to seize them.

CONTACT ON THE CORPS BOUNDARY

By 15 October the 119th Infantry of the 30th Infantry Division had

(18) Personal knowledge
(19) A-5; A-3, p. 263

pushed south, bypassing WURSELEN, to a point just west of the town, and a link-up between the 1st and 30th Divisions on the Corps boundary, in the area south of WURSELEN, was imminent. (20)

Shortly after dark on 16 October contact was made with a patrol from F Company, 119th Infantry, and contact between VII and XIX Corps, completing the physical encirclement of AACHEN, however tenuous, was complete. (21) (See Map E)

This same night, in compliance with the battalion order, elements of the 2nd Platoon moved from their prepared position to the foot of the hill on the north and formed the roadblock, by reliefs. The night passed without incident or activity, and, at dawn, the roadblock withdrew.

On 17 October, following the establishment of contact with the 119th Infantry, K Company, with 3rd Platoon, Company B, 745th Tank Battalion attached, was ordered to make a local attack at 1000 hours on 18 October, to assist in the consolidation on the corps boundary. (22)

On the evening of 17 October the tank platoon leader reported in to the K Company command post, and the tank platoon, consisting of 3 tanks, moved forward into the wooded draw on the south side of the RAVELSBERG. (23) Plans were laid for the attack to be made the following morning.

The roadblock, from the 2nd Platoon, was ordered out under the same conditions as on the previous night.

THE FIRST COUNTERATTACK

At dawn on 18 October, as elements of the 2nd Platoon withdrew from the roadblock to the position on the company line, they were followed into the position by a strong German counterattacking force. Apparently the roadblock withdrew without providing for its security and adequate cover was not provided from the company position, for the counterattack was

(20) A-9, p. 16; A-8, pp. 70-71
(21) A-10, p. 59; A-8, pp. 71-72
(22) Personal knowledge
(23) Personal knowledge

undetected until the enemy troops had closed on the position, and a major portion of the 2nd Platoon, including the platoon leader, together with a section of heavy machine guns, were captured before any resistance could be offered. The bunkers in the platoon area were taken by the enemy who also moved on top of the bunker occupied by the mortar platoon leader and the personnel of the machine gun section, forceing the surrender of their bunker to the enemy before assistance could be brought. (See Map E)

When word of the enemy counterattack was received at the company command post, the company commander immediately moved forward to determine the extent of the enemy penetration. He personally reorganized the remainder of the 2nd Platoon and diverted portions of the 1st and 3rd Platoons to hold the enemy against further penetration within the position. Thereafter, he ordered the tank section leader to move the tanks around the right of the position, behind the 1st Platoon, to assist in eliminating enemy penetration.

After a quick reconnaissance, the tank platoon leader stated he believed that there was not enough traction on the slopes of the RAVELSBERG to permit the tanks to operate, and that he was afraid there were anti-tank mines in the area.

He was directed to make the attempt, regardless of other considerations, and the tanks were started forward from their defiladed assembly area. As the lead tank was crossing the field south of the company command post it struck a mine which blew a track, and rendered the tank useless. The crew abandoned the tank and withdrew to the company command post. The remaining two tanks of the platoon withdrew to their previous assembly area, and made no further attempt to leave it. (See Map E)

Unfortunately, however, the tank which had been knocked out of action was in a position where it was within full view of the enemy positions to the east, and during the remainder of the day the enemy covered the reverse

slopes of the RAVELSBERG with heavy artillery and mortar fire, completely disrupting wire communication and making any movement in that area virtually impossible. (24)

In the meantime, the enemy had run tanks in front of the position occupied by the 1st Platoon and assaulted these positions by fire, seriously wounding the platoon leader of the 1st Platoon. In this sector the position held, and the enemy withdrew without attempting to bring his tanks into the position, probably for the same considerations that had made the attached tank platoon leader hesitant to use his tanks in the area. (See Map E)

In the 2nd Platoon area, after the initial enemy victory in the threatened area, the situation had somewhat stabilized. The company commander, by his personal presence and activity throughout the day, reorganized the defense of the company position to limit the enemy penetration, and to ultimately restore the position, despite the unfortunate loss of tank assistance. Because of the proximity of the defending troops, the use of high angle weapons was limited. However, the enemy was unable to make any further advances, and his attempts to reinforce met with disaster, for although the bunker in which the forward observer from the 32nd Field Artillery had his observation post was partially surrounded, the enemy was unable to take the position, which had commanding observation of the open ground over which it was necessary for the enemy to move any reinforcements, and his attempts to reinforce were thwarted by artillery fire, supplemented by the company mortars, at great cost to the enemy. (25)

Simultaneously with the counterattack on the K Company positions, the south flank of the 119th Infantry, which was held by elements of the 99th Infantry Battalion, an American-Norwegian Battalion, attached to the 119th Infantry, was hit by a counterattack by elements of the 3rd Panzer Division at about 0900 hours. Although the attack was driven off, heavy casualties were suffered by our forces. From the positions on the RAVELSBERG, this

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(24) Personal knowledge
(25) A-5; A-6

attack could be observed, although no help could be offered. The enemy forced the surrender of bunkers occupied by the 99th Infantry Battalion by the expedient of running tanks up outside these positions and threatening to assault them with direct fire. It could be observed that the enemy did not take prisoners after the bunkers surrendered. (26) (See Map E)

At about 1500 hours, the enemy launched another attack against the positions of the 119th Infantry, using infantry and tanks on a narrow front. Again, although meeting with limited success, the enemy was beaten off by the massed combined fires of 1st and 30th Division artillery, reinforced by the artillery of the two corps. (27)

By the middle of the afternoon the situation in front of Company K had not changed materially. Neither side possessed sufficient strength to move the other. The enemy continued to use his artillery and mortars on the approaches to the RAVELSBERG from HAAREN and on the K Company position, and movement across the top of RAVELSBERG from the command post to the penetrated area was rendered progressively more difficult because of tree tops and branches which littered the ground as a result of tree bursts. While attempting to negotiate this route, the company executive officer was wounded by a mortar fragment.

By 1700 hours the enemy in the K Company position had pulled into the bunkers they had taken during their initial assault, and it was determined to hold them there until after dark, and then to retake the bunkers by night assault.

At about this time, the platoon leader of the weapons platoon, who had been active in the forward area throughout the day's action, was killed by a burst of fire from a machine gun from one of his own men who mistakenly believed him to be an enemy as he came into the entranceway of one of the forward bunkers. (28)

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(26) A-8, P. 73
(27) A-8, p. 73; A-5
(28) Personal knowledge

ACTIVITIES ON THE NIGHT 18-19 OCTOBER

The night assault on the bunkers held by the enemy was a success, and was accomplished through the application of a comparatively simple plan. A five man team was assigned to each bunker. While three men covered the exits, two men, with a five gallon can of gasoline, moved on top of the bunker, located the air exhaust pipe, poured gasoline into the tube, and ignited it. As the Germans came out the door of the bunker, they were greeted by the other three men on the team, waiting under cover outside.

All but one of the bunkers were retaken in this manner during the night 18-19 October. (29)

During this entire night the enemy continued interdictory mortar and artillery fire on the reverse slopes of the RAVELSBERG. Wire communication still had not been regained with the 3rd Battalion, and the problem of the evacuation of the wounded was accute.

Despite the enemy fire, a wire team from the regimental communications platoon succeeded in establishing a wire line by midnight, and by 0300 the wounded had been evacuated, although additional casualties from shelling were suffered during the movement down the path to the command post of I Company, where the road began.

On the morning of 19 October the position was readjusted, and the one bunker still in enemy possession was retaken, together with four prisoners, one of whom was an officer. The company was reorganized to cover the position with the force available and other necessary readjustments made. To the extent possible, personnel were permitted to rest. (30)

THE SECOND COUNTERATTACK (See Map E)

At 1430 hours, on 19 October, the enemy laid in an intensive preparation. Those in the company who had been with it since the days of the landings in North Africa stated that it was the most intense artillery preparation they had ever undergone. Personnel within the bunkers were relatively safe;

(29) Personal knowledge
(30) Personal knowledge

however, any movement in the open was rendered impossible. Wire communication to the rear was severed by shell fire almost immediately. The SCR 300 in the battalion command net was so weak as to be practically ineffective from the defilade of the entrance outside the command post bunker from which it had to operate. However, the radio of the forward observer, who happened to be in the command post bunker at the time the preparation started, was comparatively effective. (31)

While the preparation was at its height, it was reported, by telephone from one of the bunkers on the north side of the RAVELSBERG, that an estimated battalion of enemy infantry together with an undetermined number of tanks was forming for an attack along the ridge to the east of the company position.

At this time the forward observer called for a numbered concentration that had been used in connection with the previous day's action. From this concentration the four divisional artillery battalions and two battalions of corps artillery fired a counter preparation of twenty six different concentrations, which picked up the enemy as he formed for the attack, and followed him right on through into the K Company positions. It was estimated that the enemy left five hundred personnel, as well as numerous tanks scattered out along his route of advance to the position, and, although he reached the position and was able to assault five bunkers, the back of his attack had been broken. (32)

K Company also suffered numerous casualties. It would be difficult to differentiate between those who suffered from the enemy artillery and from our own artillery because of the intensity with which both were laid in the area. However, many casualties also were suffered as a result of the direct assaults on the bunkers, particularly as a result of the firing of panzerfausts through the embrasure of the bunkers.

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(31) Personal knowledge
(32) A-1; A-5; A-6

Those bunkers which were lost in this assault included those which had been lost on the previous day, indicating a desire on the part of the enemy to gain control of those bunkers and positions on the high ground overlooking the route through MURSELEN.

Although, in this action, the troops of K Company gave a good account of themselves in the hand to hand fighting when the enemy closed, the effective strength of the company had been greatly reduced, both through the losses resulting from the counterattack on the 18th and from the effects of the enemy preparation. Those who were still effective by the time the enemy closed were dazed by the effects of the intense artillery fire. It can safely be said that had the enemy assaulted our positions, following his preparation, with the cohesive force with which he started, our position would probably have been overrun. However, the effect of the counter preparation and the follow through by our artillery was so devastating that the enemy only reached and assaulted the bunkers in small groups, and could go no further.

RELIEF BY COMPANY B.

As soon as the situation permitted, B Company was sent to the RAVELSBERG to reinforce K Company, and, between the two companies, the lost bunkers were retaken, practically without resistance. When the position was secure, K Company was withdrawn from the RAVELSBERG, leaving it in the hands of B Company, whom it had relieved four days previously. (33)

By the time the company was reassembled in a new position and personnel checked, it was determined that the total company strength had been reduced from a figure in excess of one hundred sixty, including personnel with the trains, on 15 October to just over sixty. The company had lost over one hundred of its personnel, including four officers, in a period of thirty-six hours. (34)

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(33) A-4
(34) Personal knowledge

In summary, it can be said that the company accomplished its mission to the extent that it gained and maintained contact with the 30th Division on the north, and that in the face of strong enemy attempts to dislodge it and to break through to relieve the AACHEN garrison, the position, though dented, held. It would appear, in retrospect, that the counterattack on the morning of 18 October resulted from a lack of vigilance on the part of 2nd Platoon as it withdrew from the roadblock, coupled with the unfortunate coincidence of an enemy reconnaissance in force in the area at the same time, for the subsequent actions of that day would indicate that while the enemy desired the position to deny our observation, the principal objective of his major force on this date was to make a breakthrough in the sector of the 119th Infantry to the north. Also, it follows, that after trying up and down the entire line held by the 16th and 18th Infantry Regiments, from STOLBERG to the RAVELSBERG, to find a point at which he could effect a breakthrough in force to relieve AACHEN, without success, he again, on the 19th with everything he could muster against this sensitive point at which the boundaries of the VII and XIX Corps met, made what turned out to be his final attempt to break through.

On 21 October 1944, the AACHEN garrison surrendered to the 26th Infantry, and the chapter was closed.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. CONCEALMENT OF TROOP MOVEMENTS FROM ENEMY

Prior to making the relief of B Company on the RAVELSBERG, K Company closed in its assembly area, during daylight, and the actual relief was executed prior to darkness. Although the RAVELSBERG was wooded and provided a large measure of concealment, most of the forward troop positions were in the open and were exposed to enemy observation. It must be expected that an enemy will lay down fire on any remunerative target that presents itself, and a concentration of troops in a comparatively small area under such circumstances as a relief offers such a target, if located.

Consequently, for security reasons, reliefs of front line units generally must be executed under cover of darkness, fog, or smoke.

While it cannot be definitely stated that the shelling of the position during the relief was a direct consequence of the failure to observe this principle, the corelation of events is so close as to make this a reasonable assumption.

2. USE OF ARTIFICIAL OBSTACLES IN A DEFENSIVE POSITION

The battalion commander recommended to the company commander, prior to the first counterattack, that in order to strengthen the defenses of the position, with its extended frontage, the position be wired, and that anti-personnel mines be placed. There are several reasons why this action was not taken, the principal reasons being the difficulties of moving wire onto the position undetected by the enemy, and of laying wire and placing mines at night in an exposed position under enemy fire. Also, prior to the first counterattack, the order was received to continue the attack, in which case the wire and mines would have constituted an obstacle to the advance within the position. Nevertheless, events proved that had wire and mines been placed, as suggested, despite the difficulties, the enemy advance could have been impeded, thereby reducing his ability to move into the position in the manner developed.

3. PROTECTION OF POSITIONS

The fortifications in the company area were of two general types. First were those which were designed primarily as firing positions for automatic and light anti-tank weapons and which fitted into a series of mutually supporting strong points. The second type constituted the personnel bunkers for housing the close-in defensive and counterattacking forces. This type of shelter could be distinguished by limited observation and narrow fields of fire. It was necessary to have troops stationed outside in order to provide adequate protection from direct assault, particularly under conditions of reduced visibility. On four separate occasions, during the period of this action, bunkers were lost to opposing forces through direct

assault, due either to the failure, or to the inability of the defender to provide adequate all around protection on the outside of the position.

4. LOCAL SECURITY

It is a military maxim that every unit, regardless of size, or of its relationship to another unit, is responsible for its own security. In view of the fact that the personnel of the roadblock, including the platoon leader, were captured, and that the main position of the company was entered by the enemy and a section of machine guns captured before a shot was fired, the conclusion that adequate security was not provided is inescapable. Even though the counterattacking force may have been in sufficient strength to overwhelm the patrol, the patrol should have been able to give advance warning, and the personnel in the company position should have been able to provide support to the roadblock and to insure the integrity of the battle position.

5. USE OF COMBAT VEHICLES ON UNRECONNOITERED ROUTES

Prior to its capture by B Company, the RAVELSBERG was occupied by enemy troops who had prepared the position for defense against attack by the troops of the 1st Division. Subsequently, it was occupied successively by B and K Companies of the 18th Infantry. At no time was any information given relative to the location of any minefield within the area. The minefield which the lead tank of the 3rd Platoon of Company B, 745th Tank Battalion encountered certainly was not located in an area that would be considered conducive to the cross country operation of tanks, as evidenced by the reluctance of the platoon leader to operate his tanks in the area, and of the failure of the enemy tanks to attempt to advance through the area. While it is true that in emergencies chances must be taken, events proved that the gamble of moving tanks across an unreconnoitered route did not pay off. Anticipation of the existence of mines in the area and adequate reconnaissance could have changed the entire complexion of the action by making the tanks available at a critical time .

6. TROOP LEADING

The ability of K Company to maintain its position on 18 October in the face of constant enemy attack and in spite of the crippling losses of the early action that morning can be attributed in large measure to the forceful personal leadership of combat experienced company officers. When the counterattack started, through the application of the element of surprise, the enemy achieved an initial superiority over the troops of K Company who were disorganized and confused, with a large gap in their line, unbacked by any support, through which the enemy could have exploited his initial advantage. The company commander immediately went forward to the threatened area and reorganized the defense so as to contain the enemy force until plans could be brought into play to eject the enemy from the position. This occurred at a time when the forward defenses in the 2nd Platoon area were practically non exixtent, and the exercise of positive leadership was essential.

7. COMMUNICATIONS, SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

K Company, on the RAVELSBERG, occupied an exposed salient, with restricted routes of communication, supply, and evacuation to the rear. The enemy, through effective use of mortar and artillery fire, was able to sever these routes, and to virtually isolate the company from its adjoining and supporting units. Although wire communication was restored, under fire, it was severed, almost at will, by the enemy prior to the second counterattack. Radio communication, with infantry radios, was not effective. However, the artillery radio remained capable, and through this channel fires were called for and adjusted at times critical to the defense of the position. Fortunately, as a result of stockpiling of rations and ammunition on position during the period prior to the counterattacks, the supply situation did not become critical. Evacuation of the wounded had to be accomplished at night, over a fairly long route, and under intermittent fire which resulted in additional casualties.

8. INGENUITY AND SIMPLICITY IN PLANNING SPECIAL OPERATIONS

On the night of 18-19 October, the enemy was driven from the bunkers he had taken during the day. The plan by which this task was accomplished was simple in concept and execution, and did not require elaborate preparation or complicated equipment. Nevertheless, it effectively achieved the desired result, and no casualties were suffered. This is in contrast to the frequently elaborate plans and complicated preparations entailed in the assault of bunkers. A combination of factors favored this action: First, the enemy was buttoned up in the bunker, with no outside protection. Second, the bunker was in territory dominated by our forces. Third, the assault was made under cover of darkness. Nevertheless, the assault of such a bunker was no small task, and due credit must be given to the simplicity and ingenuity of concept of the plan, and to the daring of the execution.

9. EFFECT OF MASSED ARTILLERY

Throughout the counterattack period the enemy made effective use of the harrassing and disrupting effect of his mortar and artillery fire on the RAVELSBERG position. He did not make any use of massed artillery preparation until the afternoon of 19 October, when his fires were intense, movement in unprotected positions was rendered virtually impossible, and wire communication to the rear was severed. However, the defending troops were in the comparative safety of bunkers and trenches. The enemy, on the other hand, attempted to advance in the attack, across open terrain, under observation, through the massed fire of six battalions of artillery. The effect of this fire was so devastating that to it can be given the primary credit for the break up in the cohesion of the enemy attack and the preservation of the position against what might have developed into a major breakthrough.

LESSONS

1. The movement and countermovement of troops in such operations as

a relief should be made under such circumstances as will minimize the chance of the enemy gaining timely knowledge of the operation.

2. Every opportunity should be taken to strengthen and supplement the natural defenses of a position by the intelligent installation and utilization of artificial obstacles.

3. While overhead protection of troops is desirable, and may in many cases be necessary, provision in such cases for adequate all around defense, either from within the position or from mutually supporting positions, remains an absolute requirement.

4. The responsibility of all units, regardless of size, to provide adequate local protection to guard against surprise cannot be over emphasized.

5. The employment of vehicles of any type over previously unreconnoitered routes invites disaster to the vehicle, and results in the possibility of the loss of its capabilities at a critical time.

6. Forceful personal leadership, continuously exercised, is essential to success in combat.

7. While covered routes of communication are of great importance, it will not be unusual, particularly in fighting over ground previously held by the enemy, to find that the enemy dominates such routes with his fires, thereby disrupting communications, supply, and evacuation to the rear, and frequently isolating small units.

8. The exercise of ingenuity in combat, as well as under other circumstances, can simplify problems, save manpower, and reduce casualties.

9. The casualty producing effect of the massed fires of preregistered artillery on observed targets is so great as to swing the tide of battle.