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THE OPERATIONS OF "A" COMPANY, 508TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY, (82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION) NEAR RENCHEAUX, BELGIUM (ARDENNES CAMPAIGN) 22 - 25 DECEMBER, 1944.

(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described:
COMPANY IN DEFENSE AND WITHDRAWAL

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THE OPERATIONS OF "A" COMPANY, 508TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY, (82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION) NEAR RENCHEAUX, BELGIUM (ARDENNES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company A, 508th Parachute Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division near Rencheaux, Belgium, 22 - 25 December 1944.

In order to orient the reader with the situation, and also to acquaint him with the state of morale, training, and equipment, it is necessary to go back to the 12th of November 1944. It was on this date that the 82nd Division was relieved from the lines at Nijmegen, Holland, and sent to Sissone, France. There camp was set up in a French Caserne.

It was highly logical to assume that the Division had been withdrawn to prepare for an Airborne assault across the Rhine sometime in early 1945. This was anticipated with enthusiasm since many an airborne officer felt that the services of this type of unit were wasted on other than airborne missions.

When the division arrived at Sissone, they were not immediately re-outfitted or re-equipped. In fact, the division had a very low theater priority. That equipment which the division did have, was, for the most part, either salvaged or sent back to the troops, fighting in Germany. Clothing and shoes were also turned in for salvage, while the weapons were sent to ordance for a very necessary check up.

Because there were no replacements available, the division was not immediately built up to strength again. Their Parachute school in England was helping out a little, but there were very few volunteers for Parachute duty at this time.

The first few weeks after the division's arrival at Sissone, training was kept to a minimum, and stress was laid on rebuilding the morale of the troops. Recreation played an important role in the schedule. Most of the time was taken up by athletics, but each day there was also either an inspection or close order drill. Since spit and polish were emphasized

the division gradually regained some of the discipline which an outfit invariably loses in combat. For entertainment a system of passes to Paris was instituted, and USO and French shows from Paris were imported to Sissone.

On the 1st of December approximately, training became more intense, and it soon became obvious by its pattern that it was for a gradual build-up to an Airborne drop.

When the 82nd Division was about to begin to feel sure of a comfortable winter in the communication zone, the Germans decided to change things by starting their winter offensive in Belgium. As the German attack progressed, it became clear to SHAEF that it would be necessary to move the Airborne into the battle to help to stem the tide. The possibility of losing the use of the Airborne Division in a Spring offensive would have to be risked in the face of the present emergency.

Thus it was, that General Gavin was alerted on the night of 17 December 1944 around 1930 hours. He was told to be prepared to move the 82nd Division to Bastogne, Belgium, the next day. (1) Around 2000 hours the Company Commanders had been alerted, and were given the very fragmentary order: "Be prepared to move to Bastogne, Belgium, by truck by 1100 tomorrow". (2)

At first it seemed like an impossible task. Weapons were still in ordnance. The requisitions on clothing had not been filled, and winter clothing was virtually non-existent in the Division. However, it was only a short time before ordnance and quartermaster depots in the immediate vicinity were rushing equipment to the Division. 1 K ration per man was issued, and ammunition was distributed from each Regiment's basic load. As if there were not confusion already, the rifle companies received 30% replacements at 0300 18th December. (3) This necessitated assigning the new men, - checking their equipment, - making up shortages, - preparing new rosters, and briefing them.

However, by 1100 hours on the 18th, the Regiments were loaded

(1) 82nd Division Report, page 1. (2) Personal knowledge

(3) Personal knowledge.

on the trucks and on their way. It is true that some of the men were pitifully short of clothing and equipment. Many had no overcoats or gloves. Probably the item in the poorest condition was the footwear. Weapons were also still not in A-1 shape. A good many of the machine guns were without tripods, and the mortars, without bipods. Still the important thing was that the division was on the road. That they were able to move in such a short time was because of experience in the past, which usually consisted of sudden commitments.

The division followed the general route via Sissone, Charleville, Recegne, Sprimont, Houffalize and Werbomont. (Map A) While en route the march objective was changed from Bastogne to Werbomont. (4)

Altogether the entire division had moved 150 miles, and in less than 40 hours after the initial alert; while some of the combat elements had gone into position in less than twenty hours. (5)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The best way to describe conditions at this time is to give the furthest points reached by the Germans' rapid advance. It must be kept in mind however, that the situation was so fluid that there was no set front line, but that there were American forces still fighting behind the enemy.

By the 19th of December, the Germans had reached Stavelot, and had sent patrols forward to Trois Ponts. (Map B) They were driving hard towards St. Vith and Bastogne. (6) Within two hours after the last element of the 82nd Airborne Division had passed through Houffalize, that town was taken by advance elements of the German attack. (7)

Upon arrival at Werbomont, the regiments of the division set up an all around defense, and immediately sent out reconnaisance patrols in an effort to locate the enemy. Numerous German patrols were soon contacted in the vicinity of Trois Ponts, but it was found that the Germans had no

(4) 82nd Division Report, page 1; Personal knowledge.

(5) 82nd Division Report, preface. (6) 82nd Division Report, pages 2 and 3.

(7) 82nd Division Report, page 2; Personal Knowledge.

large bodies of troops in this area as yet. On the afternoon of the 19th, the 82nd occupied and organized the high ground to the east and south of Werbomont. (8)

On the following afternoon, the division received orders to establish a defensive line from Cheneux through Trois Ponts, Grand Halleux, Vielsalm, Salm Chateau and Hebronval. (Map B) Contact was to be made at La Gleize with the right flank of the 30th Division. The 3rd Armored Division was on the right, and was to be responsible for the sector to the west. Contact was to be made immediately with units reportedly cut off in the area of Vielsalm - St. Vith. (9)

REGIMENTAL SITUATION

The 508th Parachute Infantry was assigned the sector extending from Vielsalm to Salm Chateau. The Regiment in turn, assigned the mission of defending the ground immediately around Vielsalm to the 1st Battalion. (10)

BATTALION SITUATION

On the night of the 20th of December, the 1st Battalion moved by motor to Rencheaux, across the river from their objective. (Map B) Intelligence had been very vague. The Battalion commander was merely told that the command post of the 106th Division was believed to be located in Vielsalm, and that there were no Germans there.

The move to Rencheaux proved to be uneventful. However, in the town itself everything was in a state of confusion. At a road block covered by a 57 mm Anti-Tank gun, advance guards of the Battalion made their first contact with the 106th Division. This gun was protecting the approaches from the west. The 106th Division had had some disastrous experiences recently, of having their positions overrun by Germans in American uniforms, and they did not intend to let it happen again. The night was pitch black, and to make matters worse, the 82nd Division had not received the password. By identifying themselves as American Parachutists, the

(8) 82nd Division Report, page 2; Personal Knowledge.

(9) 82nd Division Report, page 3. (10) Personal Knowledge.

1st Battalion only managed to arouse further, the suspicions of the men of the 106th Division. Finally, after much time had been lost, positive identification was made, and the Battalion proceeded on into the town. However, progress proved very slow, because they would run into another outpost every few yards, and the same procedure of identification would have to be repeated. (11)

The command post of the 106th Division was located in Rencheaux, instead of Vielsalm as believed. This had originally been the division rear command post, but the forward one had moved back from St. Vith when two regiments of the 106th had been surrounded there a few days previously. At this time the Division was out of contact with these two Regiments.

Nevertheless a command post was found to be located at Vielsalm, but it was that of the 7th Armored (12) and the bulk of that Division were located between Vielsalm and St. Vith.

The commander of the 508th's 1st Battalion decided that, with all this protection, and because there had been no previous reconnaissance, nothing would be accomplished by attempting to occupy positions in the dark. Consequently the Battalion was bivouaced for the remainder of the night in a Belgian Caserne in Rencheaux.

COMPANY SITUATION

At dawn the next morning, the 21st of December, a preliminary reconnaissance was made and the companies were assigned sectors. A Company was given the mission of occupying a position to the west of the Salm river astride the main road. B Company was on A Company's left, and the 3rd Battalion, 112th Infantry of the 28th Division, who were cut off in that area were attached to the 508th Regiment, and occupied positions on A Company's right. (13) The company commander of A Company was told that there would be no withdrawal, and that this would be where the 82nd Division would make its stand.

(11) Personal Knowledge. (12) 82nd Division Report, page 3; Personal Knowledge. (13) Personal Knowledge.

In order to better understand A Company's position at this time, a brief terrain analysis is in order. The Salm river is actually a small stream about ten feet wide, running from north to south. Under ordinary circumstances this would not be considered much of a barrier. However, at this point of the country, the current was very swift and had cut a gorge about eight feet deep, thus being unfordable to both vehicles and foot soldiers. Two railroad bridges and a wooden road bridge were the only means of crossing. On the eastern side of the river and immediately to the north of the road crossing, the terrain was heavily wooded. The ground rose very gradually for about 200 yards, and then, very sharply. In Vielsalm there were buildings on a cliff overlooking the river. These were about 50 to 75 feet above the stream bed.

On the west side of the river a railroad ran parallel to the stream. Beyond it, the ground rose sharply to the height of 100 feet, for a stretch of about 400 yards. (Map C).

The platoons were assigned their defensive positions, - the first platoon on the right, - the third platoon on the left, and the second platoon in reserve. In assigning these positions, the company commander kept two things in mind. First, there would be no withdrawal. Consequently he disregarded any consideration as to routes for this. He reasoned that re-supply, and the feeding of the platoons could be accomplished at night under the cover of darkness. Secondly, his mission was to keep the enemy from crossing the Salm river. It was therefore necessary in some instances to sacrifice fields of fire for observation on the opposite bank of the Salm.

The third platoon was to maintain contact with B Company. There was a gap of about 300 yards between the two companies. However, it was open ground, and could easily be covered by fire in the day time, and by patrols at night. Two squads of the third platoon were placed on the slight knoll located in the triangle formed by the railroads. (Map C). Once contact had been made with the Germans, it would be impossible to move to or from this knoll in the day time. However, it was the only site which could command the banks of the river immediately to the north of the road

bridge. (14)

The first platoon on the right was in somewhat the same plight as the third. They were located on the forward slopes of a hill, completely devoid of any cover or concealment.

The second platoon in reserve was astride the road. Because of the numerous houses, it was necessary to have them well forward. At the most, they were only 50 yards behind the two front platoons.

A Company had three days in which to organize their position. Every advantage was taken of this much appreciated delay from combat. Individual fox holes were dug, and overhead cover was constructed, so that each one was virtually a fortress. Wire was laid to all positions. Each platoon was equipped with German field telephones which had been secured in previous campaigns. Officers and non-commissioned officers became acquainted with the replacements they had received four days previously. Some of the more serious shortages in equipment, such as overcoats, shoes, and machine gun tripods, were made up from the meager supplies which the Division had managed to secure. Shortages of supply were also supplemented by equipment thrown away by retreating American forces. Footwear more and more became an item of importance. Snow followed by rain had created a slush which soon penetrated the parachute boots everyone was wearing. It did not take the men long to locate a supply dump of the 106th Division containing overshoes. Requests were made to have these issued, but were refused. By various means the men of A Company managed to secure overshoes nevertheless. As this supply dump was captured a few days later, this proved to be no great breach of supply discipline.

It was soon clear that the 7th Armored and the remnants of the 106th Division would not be able to hold the salient across the river. The road through A Comany's position was one of the main routes of retreat. During the 22nd and the 23rd of December, there was a constant flow of traffic from the front. A Company's commander was greatly concerned about the effect it

(14) Statement of Captain Combs, 2 March, 1948.

would have on the morale of the men to see everyone taking off to the rear, knowing that they themselves were to stay. He was especially concerned that the men might become infected with the state of terror of the majority of these retreating forces. It was no uncommon occurrence to see groups of ten and twenty men, who had thrown all their arms away in order that they might travel faster. The A Company commander put out the order that none of his men would be allowed to speak to any of these troops, and that they would not be allowed to stop in the A Company area. His fears, however, were unfounded.

The 1st seargent, in the meantime, was combatting rumors. He finally solved the problem by starting his own, and later tracking them down and revealing their source. As a result, the men would not believe anything at all, unless it was given as part of an official order.

On the 22nd of December, a platoon from D Company, 325th Engineers, prepared the three bridges in front of A Company for demolition. A small detachment was left to supervize their destruction. (15) A Company was given the responsibility of seeing that this was accomplished. The company commander instructed the 2nd platoon leader to place a squad of men as outposts at the approaches to the bridges. During daylight, these were to be well forward, but at night the platoon leader was to pull them in, so that they would not be cut off.

On the morning of the 23rd, the company commander was told that the 7th Armored Division was withdrawing its screening forces. The northern railway bridge would be blown at 1500 hours, and the other two bridges would be destroyed at 2200 hours, or immediately after all the troops of the 7th had been withdrawn, - whichever was earlier. The company was alerted; especially the outposts of the 2nd platoon whose leader made a special point of checking the demolition charges.

At 1500 hours the railroad bridge was blown as planned. Information was received at about the same time that the 3rd Battalion had made contact

(15) Report of the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, dated 10 January, 1945

with the enemy at Salm Chateau. To the north at Trois Ponts, the 504 had contacted the enemy on the previous day, (16) while the withdrawal of the 7th Armored Division was progressing effectively in the A Company sector.

At 1800 hours in the evening, A Company commander met General Hasbrouck, Commander of the 7th Armored Division near the two remaining bridges. The General said that he believed all of his troops had withdrawn, but that he was not sure. He told the company commander to withhold blowing the bridges until midnight in order to take care of any isolated groups which might still be on the other side. Since this conflicted with his orders, A Company commander contacted the Battalion, and got permission to have the time changed to 2400 hours. (17)

Almost simultaneously, the company commander received a call from the 1st platoon leader that the Battalion on the right had withdrawn from the positions they had been occupying. The commander went over to contact this Battalion, and found it in positions a good 500 yards behind the river line. The Battalion commander explained that he wanted grazing fire for his weapons, and that this position furnished him the best possible. It is true, that he did have approximately 400 yards of grazing fire, but about 100 yards of the western bank were in complete defilade, thus leaving A Company with an exposed flank. A Company's mission was to keep the enemy from crossing the Salm, not to get grazing fire. After a short, and futile argument, A Company commander saw that a higher authority was needed to get any changes made. He went back to his own Battalion command post, and notified his Battalion commander of the situation. Regiment was immediately notified, and the 3rd Battalion, 112th Infantry was ordered to move back into their original positions. (18) Just at this time, firing was heard from the 2nd platoon's outpost across the river. Consequently the 3rd Battalion, 112th Infantry never did move forward again, and for the next forty-eight

(16) 82nd Division Report; Report of the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, dated 10 January, 1945 (17) Personal Knowledge

(18) Personal Knowledge

hours, A Company was operating with an exposed flank.

While the company commander of A Company had been trying to straighten out this problem, the outposts had been on the alert. At approximately 2200 hours, one of them saw a column of men approaching. The outpost was not sure whether or not they were Americans. When, at a distance of about ten yards, the column proved to be Germans, the outpost opened fire on them at point blank range. He did not stop to count the casualties, but did know that the Germans were in confusion. The platoon leader immediately gave the predetermined signal for the other ouposts to withdraw, and started checking them back across the bridges. Some of the outposts were a little slow returning. By the time the last man was crossing the bridge, the Germans had recovered from their confusion, and were almost to the edge of the river, firing across it. As the platoon leader crossed the bridge, he gave another blast on his whistle; the arranged signal for the demolition men to do their job. He then took cover behind the railroad bank. When nothing happened, he looked for, and found the demolition men who had not been in position when the action began, and were afterwards unable to reach it.

It was then realized that a foolish, and probably costly mistake had been made in preparing the bridges for demolition. No consideration had been given to the possibility of blowing them from cover. Instead thirty second fuzes were located at the bridges themselves. The Germans now were on the very edge of the river, and some had even crossed it. (19)

The company commander ordered the platoon leader to get the bridges blown somehow. He, in turn, got his eight outposts together, and ordered them to rush back across the bridge followed by the demolition men. On signal the fuze lighters were to be pulled. The men were to get back to the railroad bank under cover. This plan, hasty as it was, succeeded, chiefly because the Germans did not expect such a sudden show of aggressiveness; or rather it succeeded in part, because only the railroad

(19) Statements of Lt. Lamm, Sgt Preztos, and Sgt. Clement, 26 December, 1944.

bridge was destroyed. The fuze lighter for the road bridge failed to work. (20)

Regiment and Battalion called down to the company demanding a reason for the delay, as emphatic orders had been given to blow the bridges at all costs.

All the while the German strength was building up. What had originally been estimated as a platoon, assumed the strength of a company; probably a reconnaissance unit. The fire of six machine guns could be heard. A tank came up, and almost approached to the abutments of the new defunct railroad bridge, from where it systematically fired at the houses just across the river. (21)

It was apparent that it would now take more than the fire of the eight men from the 2nd platoon to drive the Germans back. The 1st and 3rd platoons were ordered to fire at the maximum rate, if possible at the flash of the enemy's guns. This concentrated burst caused the Germans to take cover, so enabling a small force from the 2nd platoon to again cross the bridge, while the demolition personnel attached another fuze light. Using the same tactics as before, the covering force once more withdrew on signal. This time the fuze exploded, but the demolitions again failed to do so.

Meanwhile the 3rd platoon was having trouble with a few Germans who had crossed the bridge on the initial assault, and were now entrenched behind some of the houses on the western bank of the stream. Several of the platoon went and eliminated them, (22)

The Field Artillery forward observer was in the 3rd platoon area, attempting to call for fire on the opposite bank. However, this was ineffective, and most of the rounds were lost in the darkness of the night. (23)

The 2nd platoon secured a box of Composition C-2, and placed it in the center of the bridge. They exploded it by firing a bazooka round into it. This blew up the bridge except for several stringers, which were easily destroyed.

(20) Personal Statement of Lt. Lamm, 26 December, 1944. (21) Personal Knowledge; Statement of Capt. Combs, 2 March, 1948. (22) Statement of Capt. Combs, 2 March, 1948. (23) Personal Knowledge.

Immediately peace settled down on the area, and, except for brief spasmodic bursts of rifle fire, the enemy made no further moves. All during the night though, vehicles and tanks could be heard coming up into position. Early next morning, the Germans could be heard moving wood in a lumberyard along the river, about three or four hundred yards to the north of Vielsalm. There was no doubt in the minds of the A Company men, that the Germans were securing this in preparation for a river crossing, but they were unable to do anything, because of the complete failure of the artillery to register.

About 0400 hours, a German plane flew overhead taking photographs. A few minutes later, A Company was alerted by Battalion, who warned them that parachutists were dropping in the area. (24) Much to the disappointment of the men, these turned out to be dummies.

THE WITHDRAWAL

Dawn of the 24th broke clear for the first time since the 82nd Division had arrived in Belgium. As has previously been explained, some of A Company's positions were completely out in the open. However, because of the excellent fortifications built, only one man was wounded, and this happened when he needlessly exposed himself.

In the meantime an important decision was made at 1st Army Headquarters. The 82nd Division had accomplished its mission of covering the withdrawal of the 7th Armored Division. This left the 82nd in a dangerously extended salient with a frontage of 18 miles. Furthermore, it was known that the Germans were planning an attack on them with the 2nd and 9th SS Panzer Divisions, and the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division. The Division commander was therefore ordered to withdraw to the Trois Ponts - Erria - Manhay line. (25)

Extracts of Field Order #4, Headquarters, 508th Parachute Infantry, concerning this read as follows: "...At H hour on D night, 82nd Division withdraws to new defensive position.....Covering force will consist of

(24) Statement of Major Milam, 21st February, 1948. (25) 82nd Division Report, page 4; Dark December, Robert E Merrian, page 169

one rifle platoon per company ...." 1345, 24 December, 1944. (26)

At 1500 hours, the 1st Battalion was alerted for the withdrawal. The Battalion commander, Company commanders, and Battalion staff made a rapid reconnaissance of the route and the new defensive positions, ten miles to the rear. Before leaving on this survey, the A Company commander gave brief instructions to be carried out during his absence. He selected the 2nd platoon as the covering force to stay behind. They were picked, because, being in reserve, they could cover the other platoons in case the Germans attacked while the withdrawal was in progress. Orders were given that all heavy equipment, such as blanket rolls and extra ammunition would be sent to the rear, where it would be picked up by the Battalion S-4. (27) Specific orders were then given that each man individually, would have the reasons for the withdrawal explained to him. The Battalion commanders had told all company commanders that both the Regimental and Division commanders were greatly concerned with the attitude of the troops towards the withdrawal. This was the first time in the combat history of the Division, that it, or any of its units had to execute such a maneuver. They feared that the Germans' use of American arms and uniforms might cause great confusion in such a withdrawal. These fears were unfounded, and later General Gavin was to say: "....I have never seen a better executed operation than the withdrawal on Christmas Eve. The troops willingly and promptly carried into execution all the withdrawal plans, although they openly and frankly criticized it, and failed to understand the necessity for it. But everybody pitched in, and the withdrawal went smoothly." (28)

When the company commander returned from his reconnaissance, his instructions had been carried out. In addition, the 2nd platoon leader had received his orders from the Battalion executive officer, who was commanding the Battalion covering force.

At 2000 hours, the withdrawal started. A company's progressed

(26) Report of the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry, dated 10 January, 1945. (27) Personal Knowledge. (28) 82nd Division Report.

very slowly. Because of the bright moonlight and their exposed positions, it was necessary for them to go back one by one to a previously designated company assembly area in Rencheaux. In spite of these difficulties, the company, with the exception of the 2nd Platoon, had withdrawn completely by 2115 hours, and were marching to the rear with the rest of the Battalion. The Germans gave no indication that they were aware of any movement. The march ten miles back to the new defensive positions was uninterrupted, except for a ten minute break at midnight. Every one was thinking about past and happier Christmases, but all kept their thoughts to themselves. Upon reaching the new positions, work was immediately started on digging in.

Meanwhile, at Rencheaux, the 2nd platoon placed skeleton forces in the 1st and 3rd platoon positions as these withdrew. They then settled down to the long vigil until 0300 hours, when they too would withdraw. The only contact they had with the commander of the covering force was by messenger. All the mortars of the Battalion had been withdrawn with the main body, and the only supporting fire that could be counted on, was from the ineffective artillery.

Around 2200 hours the sound of German vehicles and voices could be heard across the river. Judging by the hammering noises, it appeared that they were preparing a span of bridging. Word of this was sent back to the Battalion command post, and an attempt was made to get an artillery concentration. The artillery liasion officer's radio would not work, so the Battalion Executive officer sent him back to the rear in disgust. (29)

At 2340 hours, the Germans launched a full scale attack. One of the heaviest artillery barrages yet sustained by the 2nd platoon, fell on them and the town of Rencheaux. A few minutes later a smoke screen started to drift over. Two tanks edged up to the river bank, and began returning the fire of the 2nd platoon.

By 0045 hours, the Germans started crossing the river. The 2nd platoon were prevented from using their maximum fire by the Germans' artillery and tanks, but nevertheless, inflicted many casualties. The

(29) Statement of Major B.F. Delamater, 27th December, 1947

platoon leader sent a runner back to the battalion to orient them of the situation.

Twenty minutes elapsed without word from Battalion. The Germans were progressing foot by foot up the main road into Rencheaux. The platoon leader realized that he could not hold out much longer. He therefore, sent the assistant platoon leader back to the Battalion, requesting permission to withdraw. The assistant platoon leader arrived at the command post, where he gave a distorted report that the platoon was withdrawing. The Battalion executive officer, knowing the platoon leader from previous combat, felt however, that he would never withdraw without an order. He therefore sent a runner back to him with orders to withdraw. He sent the assistant platoon leader to the Battalion area, but he never reached this as he was captured. The messenger never reached the 2nd platoon either. (30)

Meanwhile the platoon leader waited. He soon realized that there was only one thing left to do, and that was to withdraw. The Germans had completely split his platoon, and were coming up the road in force. His men, who had been flanking the road were casualties, or had retreated. The remainder were silent, and no firing could be heard from the other company areas either. He therefore gave the order for his troops on the right of the road to withdraw, while he himself crossed it, collecting all the men he could find. He had already left the town of Rencheaux, and joined up with the remainder of his platoon, when he heard a machine gun open fire back in his old area. Immediately he realized that this was the guncrew who had been buried by a shell burst early in the fight. Apparently they had dug themselves out and put their gun back into action. The platoon leader went back into the town as far as he could, calling for these men at the top of his voice. He waited and soon the chatter of the US .30 stopped, and two soldiers appeared, carrying a gun, triped and two boxes of ammunition. (31)

The 2nd platoon of A Company was unable to get to the Battalion assembly

(30) Statement of Major B. F. Delamater, 27 December, 1947. (31) Report of the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry, dated 10 January, 1945

area but continued cross country back to the new defensive positions. They lost ten men in this action, but, in conjunction with the covering force of the rest of the Battalion, had withdrawn in the face of what was estimated as a battalion plus of Germans, and had held them up for two hours.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing this operation, two things in particular stand out.

The first of these is the failure of the demolitions on the night of the 23rd December. When the bridges were prepared, it was not taken into account that they might be under fire at the time they were to be blown. This was a grave error from both the technical and tactical points of view. The solution would have been the use of a longer fuze, which should have been placed in such a position that it could be fired from cover. In fact, two sets of fuzes should have been laid as an added precaution, to take care of the possibility of a misfire, such as did happen. But for the aggressive action of the 2nd platoon, the bridges might have been captured intact by the Germans.

The second point was the inability of the artillery to render any support, on the nights of the 23rd and 24th. It is easy to criticize this thoughtlessly, but an explanation is in order. Prior to the German attack on the night of the 23rd, the artillery had been unable to register any of their fires. This was because of the presence of friendly troops throughout their range, and because it is almost impossible to adjust artillery fire at night, particularly in hilly terrain, without prior registration.

Another point was the failure of the artillery communications on the night of the withdrawal. This was inexcusable, and merely bears out part of the old saying: "Artillery must be able to march, shoot, and communicate".

No mention has been made of the use of the company's 60 mm mortars. They were not used to very good advantage, and at no time played an important part in this action. There are several reasons for this, and the same faults had been present in other companies, and in other

in other campaigns. Under the then current table of organization of a parachute infantry regiment, the mortar squad was an integral part of each platoon. However, since a 60 mm mortar used singly, is not very effective, they were placed in battery during the action covered by this monograph. Unfortunately this method was not much more successful because of the lack of centralized control, and of the different standards of training of each squad. Furthermore, a parachute company did not have any transportation. Therefore the only 60 mm mortar ammunition available was that which the men carried. Frequently there was no re-supply. Companies were consequently prone to use their mortars only in cases of extreme emergency.

The withdrawal itself was excellent, and there is little to critize about it, though it was a mistake to rely on messenger service only within the covering force of the Battalion. Even if there were no spare radios available to leave behind, the platoon should at least have been given some telephones.

LESSONS

1. In an emergency, airborne units can be used efficiently and effectively as regular Infantry.

2. Parachute units should be organized as closely as possible along the lines of corresponding ground units.

3. If artillery defensive fires are to be effective, they must be previously registered.

4. Effective liaison is necessary for the proper functioning of the Artillery - Infantry team.

5. Troops properly dug in can withstand a vast amount of artillery fire.

6. Morale is an important factor in any combat operation, but it is especially so in a retrograde movement.

7. Adequate communication is necessary for success in combat.