

# **Soy-Hotton After Action Report**

**By Sgt. Gordon J. Lippman**

Combat operations of the 517th Combat Team, 1st Brigade, had pushed up from southern France, through the Maritime Alps and into Belgium from August through December in 1944. What follows, drawing from both Sgt. Lippman's personal notes and references to Army records from the 517th and General Eisenhower's strategy session - covers perhaps the most arduous stretch of this long trail - the beginning days of the "Ardennes Salient". The 1st Battalion fought in its assigned sector to aid in staying the fanatic advance of Marshall Von Rundstedt's counter-offensive of December 1944. This brief narrative does not cover the entire period of the Battle of the Bulge, or the courageous actions of other American units engaged in this effort, but only so much of that battle finding the German force on the offensive against the 517th, in the earliest days of the battle. Following this period, the 1st Battalion rejoined the full 517th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) and fought until the beginning of February 1945 in the reduction of the salient.

The 1st Battalion motor convoy departed Soissons at 1800 on 21 December, with orders to proceed to Namur, Belgium, where further orders were to be issued. The Battalion Commander, Lt. Colonel Boyle, preceded the Battalion and at Namur received orders to proceed to Soy, Belgium, and report to the commander of the 3rd Armored Division, Major General Maurice Rose.

Pressure from German armor had made the situation so fluid that it was impossible to tell exactly where the front began. Company D was immediately attached to the 3rd Armored's Task Force Kane. This unit held the key point on which the front hinged. Companies A and B detrucked northeast of Soy and were ordered to attack along the highway leading from Soy southwest to Hotton.

The mission of the 1st Battalion was to take the commanding ground around Haid-Hits, then remove the enemy from the high ground at Sur-Les-Hys. The object was to facilitate a breakthrough and free surrounded elements of the 3rd Armored in Hotton.

Company B led the attack until forced to hold a line due to heavy tank and automatic weapons fire.

It became necessary for Company A to bypass the planned route to Hotton. While this maneuver saved casualties, it was necessary to fight for every foot of ground along the entire route. Fighting on the return trip from Hotton to Soy was as heated as on the trip going in.

## **22 December 1944**

The Battalion convoy arrived at Namur at 0400 on 22 December, and there the Battalion Executive Officer received orders from XVIII Corp Airborne to move the Battalion to the vicinity of Soy, Belgium, where their Battalion Commander would meet them. Three trucks were missing from the convoy, having dropped out because of motor troubles, and instructions were left to have these trucks proceed to Soy following their repairs. Company C was ordered to proceed to the 3rd Armored Division Command Post and report to Major General Rose. Very little information could be obtained from staff officers, except that the situation remained vague and apparently the advance of the German forces had not been checked.

At 1600, the Battalion detrucked in the wooded area northeast of Soy. The town of Soy, where the 3rd Armored Div Command Post was located, was receiving heavy and continuous artillery fire.

Lt. Colonel Boyle furnished the following information: the towns of Marche and La-Roche had been engulfed by German Armor; Hotton, manned by 3rd Armored HQ troops, had been bypassed and surrounded by the enemy; German armor was moving astride the two main highways leading north probing a salient toward Liege. There was no contact on the right with the 84th Infantry Division and none on the left with the 82nd Airborne Division. The 82nd Airborne Division was holding Soy and Hotton with depleted forces which had met and momentarily stopped the German forces in their tracks.

The 1st Battalion was ordered immediately to attack at 1715 along the highway leading southwest from Soy to Hotton. At this point Gordon was assigned to Headquarters Company as a Technical Sgt. The gravity of the situation was so severe that no rest could be considered, although there had been trouble in the area for 23 continuous hours. No time could be used to prepare a hot meal.

The Battalion moved to Soy and crossed the line of departure over the north-south road through Soy, jumping off in the attack toward Hotton.

Effective strength of the Battalion present at this time was:

COMPANY	Officers	Men
Headquarters	8	153
"A"	10	141
"B"	11	131
"C"	3	29
Total	32	454

Six officers and 117 enlisted men of Company "C" had been detached and reported to General Rose at Treynean.

Enemy forces had cut the Soy-Hotton highway and were well dug in the woods on commanding ground around Haid-Hits. The mission of the 1st Battalion was;

- To capture this commanding ground
- To capture the high ground at Sur-Les-Hys, commanding the road not at Hotton
- To clear the woods on each side of the road
- To establish an MLR (main line of resistance) between Soy and Hotton
- To break through to the Hotton garrison.

In view of the mission to be performed, equipment available to the team is outlined below:

Vehicle	1 jeep for resupply and evacuation
Rifles	260
BAR	19
LMG	12
60MM Mortar	6
81MM Mortar	4
Rocket Launchers	10

The crew served weapons personnel also carried carbines for the most part. The number of 30 caliber carbines in this case was about 110.

The Battalion would normally have three medics per rifle company and a Battalion aid section along with a communications platoon.

The Battalion moved west, with Company A leading and Company B echeloned to the left. The remnants of Company C were used as a reserve force .

Headquarters Company's 81MM mortar platoon went into position at, which point enemy fire started raining in from machine gun emplacements. That trajectory fire was received from an estimated six self-propelled guns and possible tank fire. Artillery and mortar fire fell over the entire area.

Lt. Col Boyle ordered Company B to move across the road to the south, deploy and attack on the left flank. Company B, in the action to follow, reduced two machine gun positions and killed or drove out a platoon of enemy from positions but drew an attack from six tanks. One tank was knocked out and the others were forced into retirement. The reason is not apparent for the heavy armor was impenetrable to our rocket launcher. The one damaged tank resulted from a lucky hit.

Weather for the period was freezing with snow flurries. Up to this point, the Battalion had moved only a short distance because the terrain was bare of trees and the ground only gently sloping, which afforded practically no cover or concealment.

### **23 December 1944**

At about 0030 Lt. Colonel Boyle felt that a frontal assault on these excellently prepared positions would be a needless waste of time and life. He was granted permission to take Company A into Hotton by the road leading through My. Four medium tanks and six half-tracks were placed at the disposal of Lt. Colonel Boyle. Two Platoons of Company A along with the section of LMG (Light Machine Guns) mounted vehicles for the movement. The remainder of the Battalion, under the command of the Executive Officer, Major Fraser, was dispersed in the following manner: Company C, with 32 men, to the high ground and supply protection for five of our tanks that were concealed in a position north of the road; Company B and 1 platoon of Company A were to move into position. All were to be prepared to launch a coordinated attack toward Hotton to meet the forces of Colonel Boyle that were to move through Hotton and back up the road attacking the Germans from the rear. With the Germans drawn to the south of the attack of Company B,

it was thought that Lt. Colonel Boyle would meet only light resistance on the northern road through My, and the plan was based on this expectation.

The force of Lt. Colonel Boyle rolled quickly through My, receiving small arms fire from an enemy position on the south of the town. On the north of Hotton, the force received sudden and heavy 20 MM fire from a German outpost which was quickly dispatched by the tanks and the paratroopers manning the machine guns on the half-tracks. Lt. Colonel Boyle then pushed in to relieve the besieged garrison of Hotton at daylight on the 23rd of December. As he sought to wheel and return to Soy, he was held up by the German armored infantry which had command of the houses in the east side of town and had erected a veritable brick wall across the road leading back to Soy. At the same time, the American held end of town was receiving artillery fire from German guns across the river to the southeast. The narrow streets walled in by houses on both sides made defense by the Germans easy and attack by Lt. Colonel Boyle extremely difficult. A house to house campaign was begun, with Lt. Colonel Boyle feeling that by continually engaging the enemy with substantial force and fire, this would divert German attention from the remainder of the Battalion.

The force of Major Fraser, Company B and one platoon of Company A, with five medium tanks, attacked toward Hotton along the Soy-Hotton railroad, jumping off from that vicinity. German self-propelled high velocity guns, that had been used as anti-personnel guns the previous night, opened up from wooded positions to the southwest and within a few minutes, six of our tanks were knocked out. At the same time, heavy mortar concentrations were laid down by the Germans further wounding tankmen and the supporting troopers. The entire remaining force regrouped in the woods, licked their wounds, and again continued a determined push through the wooded area, south, along the railroad. We walked through extremely thick undergrowth, which was not suitable for tanks, so the remaining tanks had to return to the vicinity of Soy.

Throughout the second night of continued fighting the "Fraser Force" pressed the attack through incredibly dense undergrowth, scrub cedar and shrubbery that limited visibility often to 10 yards and never more than 30 yards.

- Casualties to date - 6 officers - 48 EM
- Weather - near zero

## **24 December 1944**

With Major Fraser at this time were 187 officers and men from the three companies. Their attack continued throughout the night with every inch of the wooded area fanatically defended by German fire teams in excellently prepared positions. Enemy strength was later determined to be a reinforced company in this area. All of the positions were overrun and the defenders killed in position. As a manifestation of the excellent morale and determined resistance of the enemy, German machine gunners shouted loudly the words they had been taught, "Merry Christmas, American Bastards", as they fired long bursts at the attacking Americans. Although this German gesture was meant to disrupt the attack, it greatly antagonized and encouraged the troopers, for many had not realized it was Christmas Eve. Someone was going to pay through the nose for these miserable conditions. In the end, fifty enemy soldiers lost their lives in those foxholes. The remaining Germans beat a hasty retreat to new positions closer to Hotton.

Capitalizing on the this bloody success, the Fraser Force regrouped at 0600 on 24 December, brought up two medium tanks and moved out. Two enemy tanks spotted and immediately wheeled on the force to open fire but were knocked out by one of our tanks before either could get their guns trained. The force continued on the north side of the road to Hotton, hampered by many snipers and hastily formed a defensive group of squad strength. Advancing with matching fire, all resistance along the road folded up and two self-propelled guns which fired on the Boyle Force in Hotton, were knocked out, while the supporting infantry fled badly in disarray.

By 1130, Fraser Force had joined Boyle's Force in the outskirts of Hotton, relieving most of the pressure on the beleaguered garrison.

At 1230, after hastily eating k-rations and weary with two days and two nights of continuous fighting in the freezing weather, the entire force pushed off to further clear the Soy-Hotton highway while the enemy was still reeling and disorganized. The remaining enemy did not stand to fight but fled before the advancing 1st Battalion, which overran the high ground at Sur-Les-Hys, taking commanding ground overlooking Hotton and controlled the road network at Hotton. Company B and one platoon of Company A were left to occupy Sur-Les-Hys, to set up and a main line of resistance and to defend it against possible attack from the south. A

Panzer Division was reported enroute to the town of Hotton from the south, but, was intercepted by the American 84th Division before it could get there. At the road junction of Haid-Hits, six German tankmen, fighting as infantry, were captured. Company B was further assigned the mission of establishing a road block at this point. It was later determined that the enemy, who had thus far escaped, probably withdrew to the vicinity of Werdin.

The remainder of the Battalion (2 platoons of Company A and 1 platoon of Company C) returned to Soy. The Headquarters Company 81MM mortar platoon moved into Soy, half of the LMG (light machine gun) platoon was attached to Company B and provided the main line of resistance. It was here that these men received their first warm meal since departing Soissons, France three days ago. This group of the 1st Battalion was then placed in reserve, along with the 290th Infantry Regiment/75th Division, which had just been attached to the Battalion.

The German Army drive into the north had been stopped. The forces in Hotton had been relieved. Enemy elements between Soy and Hotton had been destroyed and the high ground had been captured. A stable line of resistance had been established from which an attack to the south could be launched.

The mission of the 1st Battalion had been completely accomplished over continuous and tireless fighting covering the last 72 hours.

- Total casualties since beginning of action: Officers - 8 Enlisted Men - 93
- Weather was freezing to zero visibility

The first Battalion took a well-deserved breather, holding the line it had established. The 290/75 was preparing to attack south.

## **25 December 1944**

Just prior to midnight, 24 December 1944, the 290th Infantry pushed off in a night attack from the Soy-Hotton main line of resistance manned by Company B, reinforced.

Two Battalions of the 290th were attacking abreast southward, with objectives on the high ground at La Roumiere Ol Fagne and the nearby town of Wy, the 1st Battalion of the 290th was assigned to the right objective and the 2nd Battalion was assigned the left objective.

This regiment was receiving its' "baptism of fire", facing the fanatically inspired troops of Marshal Von Rundstedt, in bitter cold weather, spotted with snow flurries. They had two strikes on them before they crossed the line of departure.

At 1200 hours, Lt. Colonel Boyle was informed that the left Battalion had all but taken the town of Wy, but that the right Battalion had failed to accomplish its' mission. The regimental reserve battalion failed to reach their objective and was badly disorganized.

Lt. Colonel Boyle received orders to attack and take the objective at La Roumiere Ol Fagne. The forces of Lt. Colonel Boyle consisted of Company A with 30 men, Company C with 21 men as well as 22 men of the light machine gun Platoon, with Sgt. Lippman leading this final group. The 81MM mortar platoon went into position the night before to support the MLR so it remained in position. It was now vitally essential for Company B to remain in its' present position on the MLR. Lt. Colonel Boyle made plans to attack the enemy position on the right flank with Company A, and Company C was to support. The two battalions of the 290th were somewhere in the area north of the objective, and it was reported that all soldiers of that unit reaching the objective had apparently been killed.

Jumping off at 1400 hours, the first Battalion moved through the thickly wooded approaches from the northeast, preceded by artillery. Initial progress was slow as the high ground was approached due to intense small arms fire from machine guns, rifles and a high proportion of machine pistols.

Realizing that being pinned down would also invite mortar fire, the men charged across the stream Lisbelle and up the slope through intense fire, engaging with the enemy at close enough distance for wide use of hand grenades. The Battalion, suffering the loss of 46 men, slashed through and folded up the enemy positions facing them. We outflanked the Germans by 1730 and were on the objective, patrolling forward.



At dusk, the men of the first Battalion had achieved their objective, and the enemy was annihilated.

Information from prisoners captured indicated that the objective had been occupied by a German battalion which was reinforced. Further captured information taken later in the night indicated that none of the occupying enemy forces escaped. An exact count of enemy cannot be quoted inasmuch as the 1st Battalion was relieved the following morning before a count could be made. The entire enemy Battalion was, as near as anyone can discern, completely annihilated. The resolve with which the German forces fought can be measured by the fact that not more than 15 prisoners, from Battalion strength, had been taken by all of the attacking forces.

### **26 December 1944**

The early part of the night was spent in patrolling in the wooded area, in the forward slopes, to wipe out the remaining scattered enemy groups. During the night Lt. Colonel Boyle was placed in command of all the troops on the objective, including the two Battalions of the 290th Infantry.

Lt. Colonel Boyle, with his staff and Company officers, oriented each of the company commanders of the 290th, assisted them in reorganization, and placed them in defensive positions along the south edge of the woods on the objective. At 0600 as one of the companies was placed in position, a counter-attack started launching from the south - estimated platoon size - they were completely routed with fifteen killed, and four prisoners taken, without American loss. Enemy artillery bombarded the hill throughout the remaining time that the first Battalion occupied the position.

At 0800 the next day, First Battalion relieved the 290th on the hill. This relief was completely effected by 1600. The battalion was re-assembled from its position on the MLR Soy-Hotton highway and La Roumiere Ol Fagne and marched back to Soy.

Mission accomplished.

### **SUMMARY:**

The first Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Combat Team, called to action as the German offensive gained momentum, had established a stable main line of resistance on a 6,000 yard front between Soy and Hotton. In accomplishing its

mission, the 1st Battalion fought the greater share of three days and nights in bitter cold weather, without sleep, and with only a meager amount of "K" rations; they stopped a fanatical advancing enemy; they drove the enemy from their sector; relieved the beleaguered town of Hotton; and on the fourth day, the 1st Battalion was further committed in a critical situation which threatened to neutralize all it had accomplished. The 517th achieved a mission which two battalions had failed, and did it with only a handful of men .

For its victory, the unit had paid a dear price of 157 casualties, but in doing so, accounted for at least 210 enemy dead, took 18 prisoners, knocked out 3 tanks and 9 self-propelled guns, and destroyed one of each of the following; a half track, an armored recon car, a Volkswagen, and an ammunition truck.

**Results:**

1. Western Allied offensive plans were delayed by five or six weeks.
2. German offensive exhausts their resources on the Western Front.
3. German collapse opens way for the Allies to ultimately break the Siegfried Line.