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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY E, 517TH PARACHUTE
INFANTRY COMBAT TEAM, IN A RIVER CROSSING AND
ATTACK AT LA ROQUETTE, FRANCE, 27-28 Aug 1944
(SOUTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of Attached Officer)

Type of Operation Described: INFANTRY COMPANY CROSSING A
RIVER BY INFILTRATION AND ATTACKING A TOWN FROM THE REAR

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OPERATIONS OF CO E, 517TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY
COMBAT TEAM, (1st ABTF), IN A RIVER CROSSING
AND ATTACK AT LA ROQUETTE, FRANCE, 27 - 28
AUGUST 1944.

(SOUTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of an Attached Officer)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of Co E, 517th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team, (First Airborne Task Force), (Chart No. 1), 27 - 28 August 1944, in the crossing of the VAR River and the attack on the town of LA ROQUETTE, in the initial phase of the invasion of Southern France.

To properly orient the reader as to the purpose and mission of this unit it is necessary to discuss the train of events preceding this operation.

The Allies had successfully invaded Hitler's "Fortress Europa" on 6 June 1944 and by the middle portion of the month of August were pushing a mailed arm through a disorganized enemy withdrawing to their much vaunted Siegfried defenses. (1)

It had been so planned by the Allied staff that to further aid the moment of victory and prevent the reinforcement of the SIEGFRIED LINE from troops in Italy and Southern France that the Allies would launch an invasion on the Southern Coast of France, (2), this to be known as "ANVIL" for planning purposes and "DRAGOON" for execution. (3) DRAGOON was to be a joint airborne/amphibious operation and would depart from Allied held Italian territory to land on the Southern coast of France, east of TOULON. (4)

(1) A-12, p. 291

(2) A-1, p. 23

(3) A-1, p. 56

(4) A-1, p. 50

This invasion force was to be initially under the command of the United States Seventh Army, (Lt. General Alexander M. Patch, Jr.) (5). American ^{ground} land elements consisted of the U.S. Third, (3rd), Thirty-sixth (36th), Forty-fifth (45th), First Airborne Task Force (1st ABTF), and attached service and support units. (6) Further Allied forces embraced in this command were two (2) French Corps which consisted of five (5) infantry divisions and two (2) armored divisions, and in its entirety to be known as French Army "B". (7) These troops were commanded by General de Lattre de Tassigny (8), and would have the honor of being the first French troops to fight on native soil since the defeat of France in 1940.

In general the mission of the major elements were: U.S. VI Corps, (Lt General Lucian K. Truscott commanding US Forces), (9) would land D Day, 15 August 1944, secure a beachhead east of TOULON, exploit north along the RHONE River to LYON and VICHY; French forces would land D + 1, pass through the US VI Corps and seize the harbors of TOULON and MARSEILLES, which were to be refitted for use to supply this southern army. (10)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Enemy troops in area consisted of the German Nineteenth Army embracing two (2) Corps of eight (8) Infantry Divisions and one (1) Panzer Division in position from the Spanish Border east to the Italian Border. (See Map A)

Combat efficiency could be considered fair, strength roughly 75% of normal, and fire power somewhat limited to smaller type weapons. With the exception of the 11th Panzer Division, the units

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- (5) A-1, p. 8
 - (6) A-1, p. 57
 - (7) A-1, p. 151
 - (8) A-1, p. 16
 - (9) A-1, p. 46
 - (10) A-1, p. 57

in this command were of a reserve nature, or units sent to the area for refitting and replacement. Replacements that had been received had been largely Russians, Czechs, and persons of Balkan descent and presumed to be serving under duress. (11)

The U.S. VI Corps would assault with three divisions simultaneously in the selected beachhead area and advance rapidly inland to contact friendly airborne forces previously dropped. Airfields in the vicinity of Le MUY would be prepared immediately for use of Tactical Air Command. All units would hold on reaching Objective No 1, "Blue Line", and would continue the expansion on order. (12) (See Map B)

Amphibious forces were successful in landing in vicinity of ST. RAPHAEL - ST. TROPEZ - FREJUS area on D Day, 15 Aug 44. Airborne forces (1st ABTF) landed via parachute on D Day, H Hour minus (0430 hour) on DZ's in vicinity of Le MUY - LES ARCS - La MOTTE and successfully blocked any movement of enemy reserves from the west and north that might have driven our amphibious forces back into the sea. A reinforcing para-glider unit drop arrived in the secured DZ 1800 hours, D-Day. (13) VI Corps assault unit successfully overcame the stout German defenses in the coastal area and by D / 2 had secured their objective of "Blue Line". (See Map B) (14)

VI Corps ordered the 3rd, 36th, and 45th Divisions to send certain of their forces to Le MUY on 17 Aug to be formed into an Armored Group to be known as "TASK FORCE BUTLER", and to be prepared to execute the second phase of Operation DRAGOON with the remainder of the Divisions. The time had arrived to exploit the initial

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- (11) A-1, p. 34
(12) A-1, p. 118
(13) A-5, p. 11-12
(14) A-1, p. 145

advantage held by the Seventh Army (15).

On 18 Aug the exploitation had begun. The US 3rd Division was to seize and hold positions in the south portion of the beachhead until passed through by the II French Corps, thence to advance along Highway 7 to the RHONE RIVER DELTA; the US 45th Division would advance NW, skirting the MAURES MOUNTAINS to the North; US 36th Division would advance eastward towards CANNES, and as soon as the beachhead was secured, be prepared to thrust northward along Highway 85; II French Corps would advance west and seize TOULON and MARSEILLES; Task Force Butler was to drive to the DURENCE RIVER near MANOSQUE or ST PAUL, seize a bridgehead and be prepared to drive either north to GRENOBLE or MONTE LIMAR. (16) (17) (See Map C)

GENERAL SITUATION, 1st ABTF

This fast moving action on the part of the 3rd, 36th, and 45th Divisions caused the east (right) flank of the VI Corps to be exposed to any forces that might be sent from the German Forces in Italy, and held the possibility of a thrust by the enemy to separate the fast moving US Forces from their supply bases in the beachhead area. To close this gap and protect the east flank, VI Corps ordered the 1st ABTF to advance to a line FAYENCE - LA NAPOULE and prevent any enemy movement to the west. (18) (19) This line was eventually extended to the Franco-Italian Border from the MEDITERRANEAN SEA to the LARCHE PASS, some fifty (50) miles to the north. (20) (See Map D)

Enemy troops now facing the advancing 1st ABTF were identified as 148th Division (Inf): 200th Grenadier Regiment of the 90th Panzer Division (dismounted): 80th Regiment of the 34th Division (Inf): an

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- (15) A-1, p. 147
(16) A-1, p. 173
(17) A-1, p. 151
(18) A-3, p. 5, Operations
(19) A-1, p. 188, 230
(20) A-1, p. 238

unknown number of a special SS Force, and supporting Corps Artillery.

(21) These units fought a bitter delaying action, yielding only when outflanked or killed, however indications pointed to a lowering of morale by personnel of the 148th Infantry Division by reports of limited supplies, and high desertion rate.

It became increasingly apparent that the German High Command would not attempt any large scale operation from the TURINI PASS (NICE-GENOA Highway) when all elements of the delaying force initiated a wholesale and complete demolition program of all roads, bridges, culverts, and railroad tunnels. (22)

This action did little to change the mission of the 1st ABTF except now importance would be placed on preventing raids of small force on the Seventh Army.

ADVANCE OF THE 517th RCT TO THE VAR RIVER

1st ABTF having secured the line FAYENCE - LA NAPCOULE by 20 Aug, now ordered the 517th RCT to act as the left flank unit of the Task Force on the eastward advance to the Italian border. (23)

First objective given the RCT was the town of ST VALLIER which fell to an attack on the 21 August. An additional mission was given to the 517th RCT at this time; the responsibility of patrolling the roads on the left of the Task Force sector and maintaining contact with VI Corps at DIGNE, a considerable distance for foot troops. To accomplish this task the reconnaissance platoon of the 645th Tank Destroyer Battalion was attached to the unit. (24)

The combat team moved slowly across the rugged mountain terrain with objectives of ST. CEZAIRE - LE BAR - north along the LOUPE RIVER

(21) A-3, Summary of Enemy Operations No. 16

(22) A-1, p. 239

(23) A-1, p. 250

(24) A-3, p. 7, Operations.

to COURSEGOULES to LA BROG which overlooked the VAR RIVER. (25)

(See Map D)

Enemy resistance had been only a token force or demolition crews who demolished all bridges, cratered roads, and generally disrupted the advance along any roadway, however interrogation of PW's by S-2 indicated that the VAR RIVER could be expected to be defended in force.

It will be noted that all Infantry units assigned to the ABTF were lightly equipped, without adequate transportation, and not designed to enter sustained combat. Coupled with this the enemy had blown all bridges on his withdrawal and had effectively caused the units to fight across the extremely mountainous terrain. Supplies, of necessity, were limited, and ammunition and rations were at a premium. To assist the foot units of the 517th RCT each battalion had been issued some fifteen (15) mules which were used to transport ammunition, heavy weapons, and a limited amount of other necessities. Rations had to be carried on the person and resupplied when vehicles could be rerouted to the column or the Engineers could fix a suitable crossing. (Chart II)

(26)

These conditions, coupled with the fact the units were facing a numerically equal force in an ideal defensive country, made the progress of the units extremely costly and painful.

SECOND BATTALION SITUATION, 27 August 1944. (See Map E) (27)

The 2nd Battalion 517th RCT moved along the highway BEZAUDUN les ALPES - LA BROG and approached the VAR RIVER opposite the town of LA ROQUETTE, which was situated on the eastern bank and commanded the only available bridge across the VAR in this zone. This bridge was as yet undamaged.

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- (25) A-3, p. 8 Operations
(26) A-4, p. 13
(27) Personal Knowledge

The Bn CP was established in the town of LA BROG by the Bn C.O., Lt. Colonel R.J. Seitz, by mid morning 27 August.

Battalion had received orders that the bridge in this area would be secured intact if at all possible, for a supply route to be used by the supporting units on the advance to the east.

A combat patrol consisting of a reinforced platoon had been sent to this bridge location early on the morning of the 27th, and had surprised the enemy security force charged with the holding or demolition of the structure. As the battalion moved into the vicinity of LA BROG, the patrol was finding a most determined enemy making successive attempts to demolish the structure, which had been previously mined for demolition. Enemy forces would lay down a tremendous concentration of machine-gun and mortar fire, and under the protection of this would send patrols to attempt the destruction, but each time these were driven back by a just as determined patrol from the battalion.

It was felt by the Bn CO that if a force could effect a crossing on this bridge and neutralize the demolitions, that they could establish a bridgehead sufficient to allow the remainder of the Regiment to advance.

Company "F", reinforced with a section of LMG from the Battalion Headquarters Company, was given this mission. Attempts were made to force a crossing near the bridgesite but it was found that due to the nearly perfect defensive terrain on the east bank of the river and the excellent observation, that to cross was not worth the cost in casualties.

Enemy machine gun and mortar fire effectively discouraged all attempts to send even small patrols across during daylight hours. This situation however, worked equally as well for both forces. The

mortar, machine gun, and supporting artillery fire of Co. "F" denied the enemy any success in his numerous attempts to destroy the structure.

Reconnaissance patrols were dispatched to find possible crossing sites but in each case of a likely crossing site the area was well covered by well directed automatic small arms and mortar fire.

Attempts by the attached engineer platoon of the 595 Airborne Engineers to clear a path through the extensive mine field proved unsuccessful due to enemy fire and the very nature of the emplaced mines. Six foot wooden poles had been set in the river bed approximately twenty five (25) feet apart. From the tops of these wire had been strung to connect each pole, and suspended from between each of these poles, hanging nose down, approximately eight (8) inches from the ground was an activated 170mm high explosive projectile with quick fuze. To stumble into the wire or molest it so that the projectile would touch the ground would cause the projectile to explode. To make matters more difficult anti-personnel mines had been sprinkled throughout the area.

It was apparent that a force must be sent across the river at some other location to seize the town of LA ROQUETTE and the hill mass to permit the Battalion to advance and to seize the bridge intact.

SECOND BATTALION INTELLIGENCE SITUATION (28)

Weather at this season of the year was extremely warm during daylight hours but was disagreeably chilly during darkness. It had not rained in the area for some weeks making the scattered scrub growth dry and highly inflammable.

Terrain in this area consisted of a series of jagged, rock studded, scrub-covered mountain ridges rising to a height of some

(28) Personal knowledge

fifteen hundred (1500) meters at the crests, with the VAR RIVER cutting a course running generally north-south through the terrain mass. The mountains extended to the banks of the VAR and dropped abruptly down to the river's edge.

This being the dry season of the year, the river was approximately one hundred fifty (150) to two hundred (200) yards in width with a reported average depth of three (3) to five (5) feet. The bridge across the VAR RIVER in this area was of concrete construction, two (2) lanes in width, pier supported, and approximately three hundred (300) yards in length. Mountain ridge due east of the bridge site rises to a height of six hundred (600) meters and commands the approaches on either bank.

Highway No 202 parallels the east bank of the river southward to NICE.

Enemy in area was estimated to be a reinforced battalion of Infantry, with positions on ridge line situated east of, and paralleling the VAR RIVER. Approximately one (1) company estimated to be in and in vicinity of LA ROQUETTE. Enemy was well dug in and had prepared positions in the area to command all approaches to the bridge and had organized all key terrain features along the east bank of the river. Extensive anti-personnel mine-fields were located in the river bed in the area of the bridge and extended approximately one (1) mile north and south. Wire barriers had been erected on all likely avenues of approach to the east bank defenses. Travelling patrols moved along Highway 202 during hours of darkness. Support was in form of an unknown number of mortars (80mm and 120mm) and a few pieces of small calibre mountain artillery. No tanks were reported in the area.

SECOND BATTALION ATTACK ORDER, (27 Aug 44) (29)

By 1200 hours 27 Aug the Battalion situation was stagnant. Co. "F" was undergoing no intense hardship as forward movement had ceased,

(29) Personal knowledge

but the engagement thus far could be called a checkmate.

A most welcome visitor was ushered in to see the Bn C.O. at approximately 1200 hours, name unknown, to members of the command, but later known as "Louie". He proved to be a member of the well organized FFI Forces (*) in the area and was volunteering his services and knowledge of the terrain. After verification of his status from Task Force Headquarters "Louie" stated that down river approximately one (1) mile that the channel was shallow and that the area was now unguarded, and further the FFI had a schedule of all enemy travelling patrols on Highway 202.

Map study and reports from the I & R section and the Field Artillery Aerial Observer indicated this could be true.

To preclude any hint of a crossing in this area all patrol activity in this area was withdrawn until darkness. Thus with the stage set the Battalion Commander issued his order.

The 2nd Battalion would attack 1700 hours, 28 Aug 44, seize the bridge across the VAR RIVER, the hill mass east of the bridge, and the town of LA ROQUETTE. On order, would advance to next objective of LEVENS. Support would be given by 450 Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and Battalion Headquarters Company 81mm mortar platoon. Co F would continue pressure on bridge until H hour; Co D would move to area generally to the west and south of Co F and support the crossing by fire, would be committed on Bn order. H hour, Co. F would force a bridge crossing and seize the high ground east of the bridge. Co D would, on order, advance rapidly to vicinity of LA ROQUETTE and assist Co E should it be needed. Co E, reinforced, was given the mission of making a river crossing, by stealth, 0200 28 Aug, moving to the rock-bound ridge in rear of LA ROQUETTE, cut the LA ROQUETTE - LEVENS Highway

(*) FFI - Free French Forces of the Interior

at 1500 hours, and attack the town of LA ROQUETTE from the rear at 1630 hours. Artillery liaison would be with Co. E and would place fire on enemy positions firing on bridge site commencing 1530 hours. (See Map E)

COMPANY E, PREPARATION AND ORDER

Upon receipt of the Bn order activity increased in Co E area. While the Company Commander and the attached officers discussed a plan of action the company busied itself in preparing for the operation. This was not an unusual undertaking to the men, as training in night operations and participations in numerous night movements had instilled the necessity of thorough preparation of men, weapons, ammunition and plans. The attached Hq. Co machine gun section, rocket section, and demolitions personnel were absorbed in the scheme of events and preparation forged ahead. All weapons were oiled, checked, and further prepared for the river crossing. Ammunition was issued to all participating personnel. Machine gun ammunition boxes were submerged in water to assure the gunner that lid seals did not leak, extra cardboard was inserted to prevent the belted ammunition from making any noise. All loose metal was either taped, tied, or discarded; 60mm mortars were reduced to two (2) and extra ammunition carried by the surplus crews; personnel were instructed to carry the very minimum of equipment and were issued grenade bags and extra white phosphorus and fragmentation grenades; 2/3 K rations would be carried and a hot meal fed before departure, the first since leaving Italy.

The attack plan of Co E was simple in nature. Co E (plus) would depart LA BRCC 0130 hours, 28 Aug 44, in order of 1st Plat, Com'd Grp, 2nd Plat, Wpns, and 3rd Plat, bringing up the rear and securing the tail. Company would cross the VAR RIVER at the indicated ford,

move to position 600 yards in rear of LA ROQUETTE, would remain until 1600 hours, at which time would cut the LA ROQUETTE - LEVENS Highway and attack the town from the rear at 1630. (30)

NARRATION

THE MOVE TO THE RIVER CROSSING (See Map E)

The weather at 0130 hours, 28 Aug was clear, with a sliver of a moon. None of the usual fog had fallen and the bed of the river could be felt by the damp chill rising from the stream.

At 0130 hours, Co passed through the security detachments of LA BROU in single file, led by "Louie" and I&R Sect guides, and followed the tortuous path down the mountain side to the river crossing site.

One can well imagine the difficulty of moving a group of men in the dark of night on flat terrain, increase this some hundredfold and the picture will equal the column of men moving down the side of the mountain, with equipment, over a rock strewn path.

Progress was slow and control difficult. As radio silence would be observed this necessitated the passage of orders verbally along the column. This resulted in some confusion as to the original intent of the message but did not seriously impede the progress down the mountain. Further difficulty was encountered in low hanging bushes slapping each person in turn and catching on items of equipment, causing no end of uncomplimentary ejaculations from the men.

Another situation caused some concern as the path became more precipitous. Loose rocks would become dislodged by the passage of men and would roll several yards down the steep slope, causing what seemed to be a young avalanche. Orders were passed back along the

(30) Personal knowledge

column and urged the selection of proper footholds, and in addition the rate of descent was slowed considerably. This corrected the major portion of these incidents and possibly eliminated the possible detection of the Company's advance to the water's edge.

For some forty five (45) minutes the column slipped, slid and grunted its way to the floor of the river bed and emerged on the narrow east bank of the VAR RIVER.

The river fog caused the river to assume the appearance of some gigantic snake lazily moving to an unknown destination, but the peaceful appearing stream nearly cost the lives of five men by its swift undercurrent.

THE RIVER CROSSING (31)

After a fifteen (15) minute rest halt the column moved downstream for some six hundred (600) yards to the so-called ford known to "Louie" and the I & R section guides.

All personnel were instructed to take a last minute check of equipment and were told to form a human chain upon entering the water by holding to the back of the person's harness to their front. Individual arms were to be held out of water insofar as possible to assure their ability to function should the need arise in the immediate future.

It had been decided to cross two (2) columns each in single file to expedite the company reorganization on the eastern edge of the water, and the company was being so organized for the crossing.

The water at this point was reported to be at low stage due to lack of rain, and 75 to 150 feet in width. The personnel of the

(31) Personal Knowledge

company had been told to expect water to a depth of not more than three (3) feet.

A reconnaissance and security patrol was sent across to determine the best crossing and secure the eastern edge of the water to allow the main body of the company to cross. The patrol crossed and by pointing chins to the sky managed to keep from drowning. The patrol leader sent two of the tallest of his patrol back to the Company Commander to inform him of this fact. Coupled with this unexpected depth was the fact that the river at this point was flowing some five (5) to six (6) miles per hour, which was to be a dangerous undertaking for foot troops with no safety ropes.

The I & R section guides together with "Louie" were accosted with this fact and asked if there could possibly be a mistake in the location of the crossing site. Company Commander was assured that this was the intended site, however it was found that the I & R section, who had been charged with determining the depth, width, and velocity earlier in the evening, had failed to make a physical reconnaissance and had relied upon the word of the French FFI guide. "Louie", when asked specifically if he had actual personal knowledge of the crossing said that he personally had never crossed at this particular spot but had been told by the FFI Commander of this area that it was shallow and easily fordable.

The men were informed of this development and instructed as to the depth, width, and velocity. Squad leaders were told to make certain that all short men would be behind a tall person in the crossing column. To guard against loosing the heavier loaded weapons crews, two columns were to be used as before but the weapons group

would now cross two (2) to three (3) yards upstream from the riflemen. This would give some protection to the crewmen should they lose footing and be carried downstream by the swift current.

Both columns entered the river and had advanced approximately three quarters of the distance across without mishap when a crew member of a 60mm squad, carrying a tube and extra ammunition, lost his footing and was swept downstream. In an effort to save the man, the person next in the column had hung on to the man's harness and was jerked from his feet. In a like manner the next three were jerked from their feet and carried downstream. Fortunately the riflemen, with a firm grip and not as heavily loaded, grabbed, or was grabbed, by a passing body. All persons were saved but individual weapons of four of the riflemen were lost in the stream. The column moved without further incident to the eastern edge of the water.

Watersoaked and gasping for breath the column moved some fifty feet east of the water and halted to reorganize.

The security patrol leader reported that he had encountered no mines and that he had advanced some one hundred (100) yards to the east and had heard no sound that would indicate that the area was physically occupied or patrolled. "Louie" assured the commander that no German patrols were due to pass this general area for some thirty (30) minutes.

The column was quickly organized into the original single column for control, and prepared to move to the eastern bank of the river bed.

FROM THE RIVER TO THE RIDGE

The next checkpoint on the night movement was a large culvert some six (6) to eight (8) feet in diameter located some two hundred (200)

to three hundred (300) yards to the east of the present position. This culvert allowed a small stream to flow under Highway 202 paralleling the VAR RIVER.

The FFI guide and a careful study of the terrain from the west bank during the daylight hours had indicated that this pipe was free of any wire or other man-made obstacles, and due to this, had been tentatively selected as a possible crossing into the enemy positions.

Reconnaissance proved this to be false, and other places of entry through the concertina and barbed wire had to be found. "Louie" vowed that though he had been wrong on the ford and the culvert, that of a certainty he knew of a breach in the wire on the east bank. For the first time since the beginning of the operation the FFI produced positive intelligence. The breach proved to be clear of mines and completely through the wire barrier.

The column approached the gap and security elements were sent both up and down the road to prevent enemy patrols from arriving at the time the column would be crossing the road. The FFI guide had assured the company commander that patrols were not due in this area for some time, but due to his wrong information on two previous occasions, it was felt that he could be wrong again.

No noise was made as the column moved across the roadway and moved as rapidly as possible away from the roadway. The guide had chosen an evidently little-used trail through one of the small fields bordering the river. This was evidenced by the sticks, stones, and various other obstacles that caused the column to stumble and mutter as it proceeded to its objective.

There was no evidence that the movement had been sensed or discovered by the enemy, as no shots or illuminating shells had been fired. The only noise in the night was an occasional spatter of

artillery or mortar fire and the stuttering rip of a German M-42 (*) and the answering heavy pounding of an American machine gun. From the noise it was apparent that the bridge was still an undecided issue.

From this point to the ridge where the company would spend the day in hiding was strictly enemy territory. This particular section of terrain had been screened from view from the far bank and it was now up to "Louie", a careful map study, and a great deal of prayer that someone would not kick a trip-flare and expose the maneuver to the enemy.

It was now 0330 hours 28 Aug, with the company still approximately one (1) mile from the ridge and daylight at 0445. The FFI guide continued to lead off in the right direction with a supposed knowledge of the course he was following.

After marching for some twenty (20) uneventful minutes the Artillery Forward Observer, Captain James Lantz, remarked that a small wooden foot bridge the column was then crossing looked strangely familiar, and indeed it was. "Louie" had become lost and had wandered in a circle.

At this time the Command Group oriented themselves with the aid of a covered map and informed "Louie" that he was free to leave and complete his secondary mission of coordinating the FFI Forces in a harrassing mission in the rear areas. Needless to relate, his services had not been appreciated.

Guided by an azimuth and dead reckoning the column moved out for the ridge. For some thirty minutes (30), the column wound upwards and

* German fast-firing (1400 rds per minute) machine gun

at 0420 the head of the column could see the outline of the ridge top ahead. Patrols were dispatched to secure the area and the column moved into the selected area.

With the fear of being exposed by the dawn, the platoons were hurriedly given an area among the boulders, last minute instructions were given on security and the long wait began.

THE DAY ON THE RIDGE (32)

Dawn found the exhausted company securely nestled among the granite boulders on the ridge top and to all appearances in a position that was impenetrable except to heavy artillery concentrations or direct air strikes.

With the coming of first light it was found that the town of LA ROQUETTE could be seen situated some six hundred (600) yards to the North and West, enthroned on the very top of an extension of the ridge line on which the company was located. A hog-back, or saddle, could be seen connecting the town's ridge top with that of the company's, fairly open, minus any large boulders, and offering an approach directly to the rear gate-way to the town. There was a difference of some one hundred (100) feet in elevation between the town and the company's location, which gave an additional advantage of being able to partially see into the interior of the town proper.

To the rear (east) of the position, at a range of some two thousand (2000) yards was another ridge line, slightly higher and extending as far as the eye could see. It was hoped that the enemy did not have this terrain occupied, as observation from this vantage point could permit a keen eye to notice an attack forming the coming afternoon.

(32) Personal knowledge

To the south was a canyon up which the company had advanced the night before.

To the north was the hill mass overlooking the bridge. The enemy had this mass occupied in force and from the present position a fairly accurate location was made of some of the automatic weapons locations causing no end of trouble to the forces still on the west bank of the river.

The morning serenade of mortar and light artillery opened up on the bridge site. It was noticed that at least one (1) large calibre mortar was firing from within the town. Although a portion of the town could be seen, the gun could not be accurately located but was marked down as a number one objective in the town.

As yet no definite orders had been issued to the platoons leaders in regard to specific objectives within the town proper. Up until this time no plan had been formulated due to lack of knowledge of the interior of the walled town. The FFI guide, "Louie" had provided a crude map of the town layout, but after his other mistakes no one was willing to take anything that he had dealings with as gospel.

Observation into the town from this vantage point revealed that the town was divided by two streets, each approximately two hundred yards in length, with the stone houses side by side with no alley room. Width of the street appeared to be some fifteen (15) to twenty (20) feet. Two (2) gates led into the town, one from the east and one from the north, each capable of passing an automobile.

From this position visual reconnaissance was carried out down to the assault squad leaders, but was restricted in movement to prevent possible detection of movement by the enemy.

Based on this visual reconnaissance orders were issued to the company. Two platoons would be used in the assault. One platoon (-) would remain initially in reserve to the east of the town on the ridge and be prepared to enter the town and advance down either of the two streets. Weapons, both MG and mortar, would go into position in rear of the ridge and cover the advance of the assault platoons. Rally point would be in the town square. Each squad leader was informed that if his squad became lost or separated due to heavy fighting or darkness, that he would take one house, clear it, and remain until the company could extract his unit or direct it to the main body.

The second platoon was elected to be the right street unit and the third platoon would be the left. To each was attached two (2) rocket launchers for breaching stone walls. First platoon, minus the road block squad, would be in support and would remain in position on the ridge. Due to the hour of the attack, it was felt that with the coming of darkness that the entire company would be brought into the section of town that had been cleared and would remain as a compact unit until the town was either captured, cleared, or the company forced to retire.

ATTACK PREPARATIONS

At 1530 hour the radio silence, imposed for security reasons, was lifted. The artillery liaison officer, Captain James Lantz, was immediately occupied by directing very accurate artillery fire on the plotted automatic weapons position and other suspected enemy targets. The accuracy of this fire was evidenced by the fact that enemy could be seen moving away from the hill mass and a

considerable lessening of the automatic weapons fire on the bridge site. Enemy movement of an estimated company strength was noticed some fifteen hundred (1500) yards to the east moving in the direction of LEVENS. These were immediately taken under fire by the artillery, directed by the FO in the grandstand seat, as far as observation was concerned.

At 1545 hours a reinforced squad, under the command of S/Sgt Craig, moved under cover along the east slope of the ridge to establish a road block on the LEVENS - LA ROQUETTE Highway. His orders were specific. He would establish a block, prevent any enemy from either entering or escaping the town of LA ROQUETTE. He would remain in this position until relieved or ordered to return to the company.

At 1600 hours the company moved along the eastern slope of the ridge to a position in rear of the town. Machine guns and 60mm mortars were set up and prepared to cover the riflemen's advance to the gate in the town's wall. At this point it was discovered that two of the ammunition bearers for the machine guns had discarded half of their ammunition, (one box of 250 rounds, belted), their explanation being that during the night movement to the ridge they were just so tired that they couldn't carry it any longer!

A last minute visual reconnaissance of the town now revealed that instead of two streets there appeared to be three. This last being more of an alleyway between the wall and the rear of one row of buildings than a street, but nevertheless being a thoroughfare that must be cleared. To this task the first platoon (-) was assigned, and a reserve was constituted from among the various ammunition bearers of the weapons sections.

THE ATTACK OF LA ROQUETTE (Map F)

At 1625 hours the artillery preparation for the company

attacking the bridge began and the leading elements of the Co. E platoons moved from under cover and advanced towards the town. Up until this time it is believed that the enemy was totally unaware that any force could possibly be in his rear areas, however at this time he took notice and began to fire on the advancing troops with small arms and mortar. Fortunately for the attacking force a large calibre mortar is not effective at a range of some two hundred fifty (250) yards and little damage was done to the troops by the scattered small arms fire. The weapons crews on the ridge did not fare quite so well. A mortar round fell near one of the 60mm mortar positions and seriously wounded one of the crewmen, but the weapons continued to fire to cover the advance.

Under the cover of supporting fires, and by the use of marching fire, the assault platoons rushed into the gate of the town and sped toward their assigned streets. Muted rifle reports, the sharp reports of grenades, and the billow of white phosphorus smoke marked the beginning of the clearing of the houses. Excellent progress was made by assault platoons for the first few houses, but by this time the enemy had recovered from his surprise at being assaulted from the rear and had turned his attentions on the company. The platoons advances began to slow, halted and carried on only by the sheer powers of leadership and profanity of the platoon leaders. However, a later investigation proved that the personnel of the platoons had not been to blame. In the case of both of the major assault platoons no teams organized had been assigned for the house fighting that should have been an SOP order from the platoon leaders, (teams support each other from opposite sides of the street, one team clears a house, signals, and covers the advance of its sister team on the opposite side of the street).

Another obstacle was encountered in the fact that squads were not fully clearing the houses. In the case of the third platoon the clearing squads neglected to clear the upper story of some two or three houses with a result that the enemy dropped concussion grenades on the platoon leader and the support squad, causing several temporary casualties. Due to these neglected instructions the advance of the company was held up some twenty (20) to thirty (30) minutes while readjustments could be made, this time of course was used to good advantage by the enemy who succeeded in moving his scattered forces to a more centralized position in the town.

The first platoon on the northern portion of the town had succeeded in clearing the houses along its street by 1745 hours and radioed the command group that it was now on the western end of the town with approximately fifteen (15) prisoners. It was instructed to hold fast and prepare to assist the advance of the remainder of the company if this could be done without firing into each other.

The weapons section was ordered into the town and displaced without incident to the east gate. Mortars were set up and told to be prepared to fire on order of the Company Commander only.

The two major assault platoons, second and third, now radioed that their grenade supply was nearly depleted and asked for help in clearing the buildings. The only remaining fire power of the company was in the four light machine guns which were now out of action, and had displaced into the eastern edge of the town. This section, together with members of the 60mm mortar squads was formed into a provisional platoon and given the mission of aiding the advance of the third (left) platoon. Machine guns were formed into two teams; two would work down each side of the street; the mortar crewmen and machine gun ammunition bearers, though armed with carbines,

would be the assault riflemen and clear the houses after the machine guns had sprayed the inside.

Upon arrival at the third platoon area it was found that the platoon leader was suffering from a slight concussion from a grenade dropped from an upstairs window, and the platoon well scattered throughout several houses, mostly ones that had been previously cleared.

The provisional platoon moved forward, and by a series of literally spraying the doorway and windows with machine gun fire from a hip-held position, allowing the carbine carrying personnel to enter, that it was making a rather rapid advance. At this time the rifle platoon was reformed and with the combined force the attack swept swiftly along to the tune of numerous "kamerad" (*) shouted from the enemy.

The enemy Company Commander, a captain, was captured at approximately 1830 hours and informed that he would send out the order for all of his personnel to surrender by 1900 or a systematic annihilation of those who refused would follow as the battalion closed into the area. This he did and by 1930 hours only those that were wounded or dead remained in the area.

Radio contact was established with battalion and they were informed that the town was clear. The battalion ordered a contact patrol sent down the road to meet the advancing units who had succeeded in forcing their way across the bridge with a minimum of casualties.

The attack on the town of LA ROQUETTE from the rear had caused what troops remaining on the hill mass east of the bridge to withdraw, as was later corroborated by PW reports.

It was now dark and any movement outside the town to the east was immediately challenged. Although the German commander had stated that his force was to be the last to withdraw after destruction of the

(*) Surrender.

bridge, it was felt that some enemy force might attempt a spite attack before withdrawing to the next defensive line.

Reinforcements were sent to the road block and the report was returned that the only action encountered had been a motorcycle that they had been forced to shoot to stop. Papers found in a dispatch case on the driver ordered the troops on the hill mass, east of the bridge, and the company in LA ROQUETTE to withdraw to LEVENS effective 2130 hours, after demolition of the bridge AT ALL COST.

The 2nd Battalion passed through the Co E road block at 2000 hours and occupied the hill mass east of the bridge against a possible return by the enemy and to protect the passage of the remainder of the regiment across the bridge the next day.

The next day an enemy 80mm mortar was found to be emplaced in a circular pit dug in a walled courtyard. This weapon could be fired in any direction with complete safety to the crew and be assured of safety except for a direct hit.

In a summary of this operation, Co E had succeeded in accomplishing its assigned mission and in so doing had allowed the battalion to secure an undestroyed bridge, which furthered, by some days, the Allied advance to the east. Had the company failed in this mission, casualties could have been extremely heavy in any attempts to secure the bridge by direct assault.

The company and its attachments were complimented for a job well done by the Regimental Commander, Colonel Rupert D. Graves, and by the First Airborne Task Force commander, Major General Robert Fredricks.

Enemy losses were 26 killed and 81 captured in the town of

LA ROQUETTE. Co E losses were none killed, 10 wounded. An unknown number of enemy had been killed or wounded by the well directed artillery fire on the hill mass overlooking the bridge.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. AIRBORNE TROOPS IN SUSTAINED COMBAT

All units, including the Subject Company, had landed in France with only the equipment carried on the individual or that which had been dropped by supply bundles. With this equipment the unit was ordered into a sustained combat role in a region that would have been extremely difficult even for a specially trained and equipped mountain unit.

From the 15 Aug until the 28 Aug 44, men of this company had subsisted on either "K" or "C" type rations, had received no replacement clothing or equipment, and was operating under terrific supply handicap which in turn resulted in a physical hardship being imposed above and beyond that normally expected in combat.

Due to this lack of transportation, needless toll was taken of human lives that might have been spared if the necessary equipment and ammunition had been available to replace the physical assaults by unsupported soldiers. This applied especially to supporting fires of the 81mm mortar platoon in the headquarters company. Of necessity, rounds were restricted as all ammunition had to be carried on human or mule pack. In many cases the support artillery could not reach the assigned objectives by fire due to non-existent roads. Thus the individual soldier was forced to do by physical assault what the supporting mortar fires should have accomplished.

2. COMBAT PATROLS

Bold and aggressive action by the combat patrol leader succeeded in surprising the enemy and allowed the patrol to prevent the enemy from destroying the bridge that was later used to advance the following units on their drive to the east.

It is conceivable that had the patrol leader failed to exploit his initial surprise against the security detachment found at the bridge that the unit might have been held up for an unknown number of hours. This also could have been costly in human lives had the unit been forced to make a crossing in face of nearly perfect enemy defenses.

3. PREPARATIONS FOR NIGHT MOVEMENT

The adoption of the attack plan by the battalion caused no undue anxiety to the unit in regards to preparation for the night movement. All participating troops had, during the Italian campaign, participated in night operations, night movements, and all small unit leaders were well aware of the need for adequate preparation. However, the training did not stop. This subject of night operation had been carried on even in the rest areas. Each individual was well versed in the preparation of his individual equipment and in what manner it should be carried.

This knowledge was instrumental in making a success of both Company E attack and that of the Second Battalion.

4. RECONNAISSANCE

It will be remembered that the FFI guide and the I & R Section was only too eager to give information on any portion or position

of the terrain through which the unit was to pass. This information was taken as intelligence by the unit.

Success of the operation was most certainly not measured by the calibre of intelligence disseminated by either the S-2 or the FFI guide.

Had it not been for a unit that had been trained to expect the unexpected, the operation could have been doomed to failure due to unconfirmed information.

Time was not so limited that the company commander could not have dispatched a reconnaissance patrol at least as far as the eastern edge of the river. No unit should completely rely on unconfirmed reports.

5. SECURITY OF REAR AREAS

German positions on the east bank of the VAR RIVER was a mutual supporting key terrain defense. Although an estimated battalion faced a reinforced regiment at this particular point, the defender had the advantage of a nearly perfect defensive terrain and commanded all approaches into his positions.

It is believed that these positions could have held against the attacking force for an indefinite length of time had it not been for the attack, from the rear, on the key point of LA ROQUETTE.

This attack so unnerved an already tottering enemy that his entire defensive line crumbled when it became aware that the attacking force was in his rear area.

Had the enemy maintained a vigorous patrol action in his lightly held rear areas, it would have been impossible for a unit the

size of a company to remain an entire day in the rear of his defenses without detection.

6. ORGANIZATION FOR TOWN FIGHTING

The neglect of the platoon leaders to organize the small units into teams for town fighting caused a delay that could have been fatal to that unit. Normally the platoon leader should have organized the platoon into team organization upon receipt of the company order of attack. The answer "that they assumed that the squad leaders would organize themselves" was an indication that a state of over-confidence and neglect due to knowledge can exist in a well trained unit.

This however, did not relieve the company commander from his primary duty of supervision. This neglect should have been discovered prior to the unit's entry into the town through a thorough check of the preparedness of the unit.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Lightly equipped airborne troops should never be ordered into sustained ground combat without alteration of organic equipment and transportation.
 2. Patrol action should at all times be bold, aggressive, and capable of showing a considerable fighting ability.
 3. Success in night operations starts not at the time the plan is conceived but in the training phase of the participating unit.
 4. Reconnaissance should be initiated by a unit commander even though intelligence has been passed down covering all points on a unit's advance.
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5. Assuming that rear areas are clear of enemy is to court
defeat. Patrols should be constant in the rear areas to prevent
any enemy force from maneuvering into a strategic position in
rear of your lines.

6. A leader is responsible, not only for his decisions and
orders, but for the constant supervision until they are executed.