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THE ATTACK OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 517TH PARACHUTE
INFANTRY REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM (SEPARATE)
IN THE VICINITY OF BERGSTEIN, GERMANY
4-8 FEBRUARY 1945. (RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Communications Officer,
without Emphasis on Communications)

Type of operation described: A PARACHUTE INFANTRY
BATTALION IN THE ATTACK OF A FORTIFIED POSITION

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NOTE: Personal knowledge references in this monograph are based on memory, letters and conversations with former officers of the organization to include the Combat Team Commander.

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph is the account of the 3rd Battalion, 517th Parachute Combat Team, in an attack on defenses of the Roer River Dam area in the vicinity of Bergstein, Germany, beginning 4 February 1945.

In order that the reader may appreciate fully the situation which confronted the subject battalion, it will be necessary to discuss briefly two subjects; (a) events leading up to the operation, and (b) organization and combat history of the unit involved.

In October 1944, the Allied armies in western Europe were generally deployed against the main defenses of the Siegfried Line, and had made major penetrations in the Aachen area. (See Map A) Hitler's gates thus having been opened, the Roer River with its mountainous, rugged banks was the only major barrier to the gently rolling plains which beckoned Allied armor to the west bank of the Rhine. Aggravating the seriousness of this barrier were four dams on the Roer, which if blown, would put at flood stage all of the river lying north of the dam sites. Thus, any attacking force from the First or Ninth Armies which might be across the river, could be isolated and destroyed. (1)

Dam number two, the Schwammenauel Dam, directly west of Hasenfeld, offered by far the greatest threat to military operations. It was calculated that two-thirds destruction of the dam would cause the river to rise twenty-five to thirty feet within six hours at Duren, and would increase the width at that point to a mile and a half for a period of at least two days. The velocity of the water would be increased from five to sixteen

(1) A-1, p. 95, A-4, p. 69.

feet per second. If this dam should be blown, in conjunction with the destruction of another dam upstream, it was estimated that two full weeks would be required to restore any communications across the river. (2)

*Detail
the situation*

The major effort of First Army was being made by VII Corps, on its north flank, into the area in danger of being flooded. Therefore, V Corps to the south, was assigned the mission of capturing the dam. (3) This mission, in turn, was assigned to the 28th Infantry Division, which on 2 November jumped off from the Hurtgen Forest with Schmidt as its initial objective. Schmidt lies on a high ridge overlooking the dam, some 2,000 yards to the southeast. At 1600 hours on 3 November, the 112th Infantry entered the town of Schmidt, but was unable to hold against heavy armored attacks and fire from the Brandenberg - Bergstein ridge to the north. On the following day the regiment was forced to withdraw to the west bank of the Kall River after extremely heavy casualties. (4)

On 19 November, the 8th Infantry Division took over the 28th Division sector and attacked northeast toward Hurtgen and Kleinhau, but made no material gains. On this same day, the Air Force dropped thirty-two tons of bombs on Bergstein without apparent effect on the defenses of that area. It was now realized that the Brandenberg - Bergstein ridge dominated all the surrounding terrain, and that it could not be neutralized by air or artillery. Consequently, on 1 December, V Corps launched an offensive to capture the ridge, and on 3 December, after three heavy air strikes, CCR of the 5th Armored Division, attached to the 8th Infantry Division, took Brandenberg. On 5 December, CCR which included the 2nd Ranger Battalion, supported by the IX TAC, 8th Division Artillery and 32nd Field Artillery Brigade, captured Bergstein. (5)

On 8 December, the RAF dropped 797 tons of bombs on the dams in an effort to unleash the floods so that eastward operations might begin

(2) A-1, p. 95; (3) A-1, p. 95; (4) A-1, p. 68; (5) A-1, p. 86.

without further threat of floods, after the water had subsided. However, aerial photos showed that no material damage was done by the bombing. (6)

In an all out ground effort to remove this thorn from the sides of the impatient First and Ninth Armies, V Corps, reinforced by the 78th and 2nd Divisions, launched another attack on the dam on 13 December. This attack was still in progress when, after slight gains, on 16 December the German launched his great Ardennes Counteroffensive. Its right flank having been exposed by the German penetrations, the V Corps offensive to the east was forced to halt temporarily. (7)

"Had the Schmidt operation succeeded, First Army might have reached the Rhine in November or early December and the counteroffensive in the Ardennes might conceivably never have been launched." (8)

ORGANIZATION AND HISTORY

On 15 March 1943, the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment was activated as part of the 17th Airborne Division. After a brief training period, followed by airborne maneuvers, the regiment was relieved from the division and a separate combat team was formed. (See Chart 1) This combat team consisted of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, and the 596th Airborne Engineer Company, all jumpers. (9) This unit was outfitted with only equipment which could be dropped by parachute, and had less vehicles than a standard infantry unit of corresponding composition.

31 May 1943 found the new combat team disembarking at Naples, Italy, and a few days later the four months old unit received its baptism of fire with the 36th Infantry Division near Grossetto, Italy. (See Map B) On 26 June, the combat team was relieved in this sector and moved back to the vicinity of Rome where it staged for the forthcoming invasion of Southern France.

(6) A-1, p. 96; (7) A-1, p. 91; (8) A-2, p. 2; (9) A-3, p. 2.

Before daylight on 15 August, troopers of the 517th Combat Team bailed out of their C-47 aircraft in a widely dispersed area inland from The Seventh Army invasion beaches in Southern France. After accomplishing its preliminary missions, the combat team attacked east, until by late September it held a fifteen mile front running generally north from the Mediterranean coast to the Maritime Alps along the French - Italian border.

(10) By 16 November, all of the important objectives in that area had been secured and the combat team was relieved by the 14th Armored Division. It was in this rugged mountain fighting that the seriousness of the lack of fire and logistical support, which is so vital to successful sustained ground combat, was first realized. (11)

The 517th then went north by "C-40&8" to Soissons, France, where it was attached to XVIII Airborne Corps, along with other major airborne units in Europe. It was expected that First and Ninth Armies would make an early crossing of the Roer and secure the west bank of the Rhine. XVIII Airborne Corps was to be held in readiness at staging areas to secure a bridgehead across the Rhine, by airborne assault, at the first opportunity. (12)

The Germans, however, were well aware of our troop buildup in the Aachen area which weakened our lines to the south, and on 16 December 1944 they launched their counteroffensive in the Ardennes sector. (13) 19 December found the combat team well on its way to helping stem the tide of the onrushing Germans. By the end of January, the 517th had stopped portions of the German attack in three places, had made five major attacks in reducing the German penetrations, and had been attached either in whole or in part to eight different divisions. As one mission was accomplished, orders would be received to move several miles on foot, through knee-deep snow, to launch another attack immediately on arrival in the new sector. Although the combat team accomplished all missions and received many commendations,

(10) A-3, pp. 8-15; (11) A-3, p. 16; (12) Personal knowledge;
(13) A-4, p. 71.

the "Battle of the Bulge" with its miserable, zero weather had taken a grim toll of the fighting potential of the 517th. Battle casualties had depleted the infantry and engineer strength until the strongest combat company had a bare fifty men. All but a handful of the old leaders were among the casualties which further reduced the combat unity of the team. Personnel remaining in the combat team were little more than walking dead; dysentery, frost bite, trenchfoot and fatigue were prevalent along with secondary wounds in almost every man. Morale at this point was hanging on tradition and hopes of early relief. (14) These were the proud, fighting paratroopers about which the following action is written.

FIRST ARMY PLANS

By the end of January 1945, the German withdrawal from the Ardennes was in its final stages and V Corps was once again concerned with the Roer Dam problems. On 4 February, First Army issued a Letter of Instructions assigning the 517th to operational control of V Corps and in turn to the 78th Infantry Division. The letter further stated that as soon as XVIII Airborne Corps could be relieved from its present sector, it would take over a new sector on the left of V Corps, with its right boundary at the junction of the Kall and Roer Rivers, thus relieving the 8th Division and VII Corps of part of their responsibility. (See Map C) When XVIII Corps became operational in the new zone, the 517th along with the 78th Division would come under its control.

It was decided that the 517th would make a diversionary attack through the 8th Division, in the vicinity of Bergstein, not later than 5 February, while the 78th Division made the main effort through Schmidt to the dam. The diversionary attack was planned for two reasons: (a) to prevent reinforcements from moving in to intercept the main effort, and (b) it was thought that by using parachute troops in the 8th Division (14) Personal knowledge.

sector the enemy would think the Airborne Corps in its entirety was present and that the main effort was being made north of Dam No. 2. (15) (See Map C) The foregoing facts, however, were not known to the combat team commander until after the action, so from this point only those facts and situations actually known at the time will be discussed.

On 3 February 1945, at the time control of the 517th passed to V Corps, the combat team was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division which was making an attack east of St. Vith, Belgium. (16) Early on 4 February, the 517th received orders that the combat team was to proceed to the V Corps area. The commanding officer with staff members and battalion commanders moved out to V Corps Headquarters at Eupen. The regimental executive officer was left to await transportation and to move the combat team by truck later in the day. At V Corps Headquarters the combat team commander was given the mission of attacking out of Bergstein the following day to seize the high ground northeast of Schmidt. From there he was guided to the 78th Division Headquarters where the general situation was presented. In the meantime, the combat team was entrucked, late in the afternoon, and was proceeding to Eupen. A guide had been sent back to intercept the convoy and direct it to Kleinhau. (17)

From the 78th Headquarters, the command and staff party went to Brandenburg, where a meeting with the commanding officer of the 113th Infantry, 8th Division, had been arranged. One battalion of the 113th occupied Bergstein, which was to be the line of departure for the attack. The current situation was presented, and necessary coordinating details were worked out. (18)

At approximately 050330 February, the 517th convoy reached the de-trucking point at Kleinhau. The tired, hungry, half frozen troopers of the 3rd Battalion climbed down in a freezing rain to the muddy road and were

(15) A-1, p. 154; (16) A-5, 3 Feb, 1945; (17) Personal knowledge;
(18) Personal knowledge.

guided to an assembly area between Kleinhau and Brandenburg. As they were moving along the road, a violent fire fight broke out a short distance to their left, and a number of illuminating flares allowed the troops their first glimpse of the area. What they saw can best be described as a Hollywood version of "No Mans Land". At the assembly area the troops were deployed among knocked out German bunkers which, although filled with water, provided the only shelter in the area. Needless to say, little of the much needed rest was gotten that night. The battalion CP was set up in the cellar of a destroyed farmhouse, and communications were quickly established with the regimental CP at Brandenburg. (19)

THE PLAN OF ATTACK

At 0900 the morning of the 5th, the battalion staff and company commanders assembled at the CP to receive the attack order. The battalion commander stated that there was a force estimated to be one German parachute division facing the combined efforts of the 78th Division and the 517th Combat Team. These forces were believed to be in prepared positions on both sides of the Roer. The regimental plan was for the combat team to pass the line of departure about 100 yards east of Bergstein at 052400 with two battalions abreast, 2nd on the right, 3rd on the left. Each battalion was to move out in a column of companies guiding on the road leading south out of town, (Route A) cross the Kall River and seize objective one. The attack was to be initiated without an artillery preparation, in hopes that the main enemy defense could be penetrated by surprise and shock action. Objective one was to be secured by daylight, at which time the 3rd Battalion would swing north, clear the west bank of the Roer and seize objectives two and three. The 1st Battalion, which had been hardest hit in the preceding operations, was to occupy Hill 400 and then would revert to regimental reserve. As the Bergstein Ridge formed a deep salient into (19) Personal knowledge.

the enemy lines there would be no contact with friendly units on either flank until contact was made with the 310th Infantry, 78th Division, which was attacking from the south. The 460th Parachute FA Battalion was to be in general support of the combat team.

The battalion plan was for G Company, light machine gun platoon attached, to lead, followed by H Company, with I Company in reserve. The attached engineers from the 596th were to follow H Company, prepared to clear mines from the road, if any, and prepare a vehicle crossing of the Kall River. The 81mm mortar platoon was to be in general support from gun positions in Bergstein. Daylight reconnaissance was limited by 8th Division to two officers per rifle company, and necessary staff, with no reconnaissance beyond the 8th Division defenses. Resupply would be made to the objectives as required. White arm bands were to be worn at night for identification. The battalion aid station was to be in the vicinity of the CP in Bergstein. SOP radio nets were to be used until the objectives were taken, then normal wire was to be installed. (20)

While the attack order was being given a heavy enemy artillery concentration landed, and it was apparent that the enemy had detected some new American activity in the area. Following the order, reconnaissance parties were organized and the Headquarters Company personnel set about accomplishment of the supply and administrative matters necessary to initiate and support the attack. Due to the nature of the Brandenburg - Bergstein salient, movement along the Kleinhau - Bergstein Road was extremely difficult. Any vehicular movement east of Brandenburg brought down a hail of small arms and artillery fire. Consequently the reconnaissance parties moved from Brandenburg on foot and even then were forced to take cover at several points. Once in Bergstein it was possible to observe for great distances, but little could be seen to the immediate front due to the heavily wooded (20) Personal knowledge.

areas. Only the tree line of the Kall River, to the south could be observed, although Schmidt and surrounding towns were in plain view. The Schmidt - Bruck Hetzingen Road could be seen from Schmidt to a point 1,500 yards north-east of Harscheidt. To the east, after 200 - 300 yards of open ground, the woods obscured the terrain. Hill 400 dominated the wooded area. Due to the limited observation no enemy activity or fortifications were observed in the objective area. Almost all traces of snow were gone and the ground was extremely muddy and soft. The ground dropped off abruptly to the banks of the Roer and Kall Rivers on three sides of the point of the ridge, further obscuring observation. It was learned from officers of the 3rd Battalion, 113th Infantry, that for several weeks there had been little activity on the front except for exchanges of artillery and mortar fire. The only known enemy emplacement was a machine gun reported to be located approximately 300 yards down the road which was to be used in the attack. The troops in the 113th were dug deeply into the cellars of the demolished buildings and were protected by one towed anti-tank gun dug in on the right flank of the town. 517th reconnaissance parties noted that there was little space available for any installations. However there was one building on the north-western outskirts of town with a portion of the lower floor still intact which was not occupied. This building was designated as both the battalion CP and aid station. Due to the inadequacy of the building it was decided that only the bare essential CP and medical personnel would come forward and the present CP would remain operational as battalion rear. Any movement in town during daylight, was strongly protested by members of the 113th, but it was finally agreed that the 81mm mortar platoon could move in and register before dark. All other personnel of the 517th were to move in after dark. (21)

(21) Personal knowledge.

THE ATTACK

Approximately one hour before dark, the mortar platoon closed in the town and dug in their gun positions behind the highest point of the center hill top in town. As the battery was registered the enemy immediately retaliated with countermortar fire. Just after dark the new battalion CP was opened in Bergstein and wire communications were established to both battalion rear and regiment. Shortly after 2300 all troops had closed into the town. I Company moved to its forward assembly area in the eastern outskirts, and G and H Companies lined up in preparation for the attack. By 2355 only F Company and the battalion command group of the 2nd Battalion had come up abreast on the right, but in spite of this, it was decided to jump off on schedule.

At exactly 2400 the leading elements of G and F Companies, abreast, passed the line of departure. (See Map D) Rain was falling heavily and visibility was absolute zero, despite the white arm bands worn by all troops. Contact could be maintained only by each man holding to the shoulder of the man ahead. This necessitated the column formation being completely closed. Before the rear elements of H Company had cleared the line of departure, someone at the head of the column set off a trip flare lighting up the entire area. Immediately, enemy machine guns opened up from several points. This fire was apparently final protective fire, and due to the ground formation at that point, most of it passed harmlessly overhead. As the troops deployed, most control was lost, however H Company moved up on the right of G Company, and an attempt was made to continue the attack. At this time a machine gun, from a pillbox at the edge of the road where it entered the woods, opened up with aimed fire and several casualties were sustained. The lead scout of H Company finally succeeded in dropping a grenade into the embrasure, and all occupants of the pillbox were either killed by its fragmentation or as they fled from the rear door. This seemed

to cause increased machine gun fire from all directions and it was discovered that fortifications were emplaced in depth on both sides of the Kall. (22)

Enemy small caliber mortar fire began to fall at this time and leaders attempted to get their units forward and out of the fire. Both physical and radio contact with the 2nd Battalion had been lost by this time and control of organic elements became increasingly difficult. The battalion commander went forward to find that both companies had entered a concentrated anti-personnel minefield and were suffering casualties in every attempt to move forward. Deciding that further attack in the dark was hopeless for the time being, he ordered a withdrawal back into town. Upon reaching the outskirts of town it was learned from the 2nd Battalion commander that he too had ordered a withdrawal, but that the F Company commander with his leading platoon were not accounted for.

While their battalions reorganized, the two battalion commanders contacted the regimental commander and it was decided to continue the attack after an artillery preparation. However, in connection with the new attempt, it was decided that the 3rd Battalion would follow the road out of town to the north (Route B) leading to objective three, as little fire had been detected from that area. The 2nd Battalion was to continue according to the original plan. In the meantime the 1st Battalion had occupied Hill 400 with little effort.

It was learned that there would be some delay in getting fires from Division and Corps Artillery, so it was decided to continue the attack after a ten minute preparation from the organic 460th FA Battalion. Although the F Company commander was still unaccounted for, permission was granted from the 2nd Battalion to fire artillery anywhere north of route A. Accordingly, a ten minute battalion preparation was fired in the new area of the 3rd Battalion, as close in as the hill mass would allow. The battalion mortars
(22) Personal knowledge.

were not used in this preparation because of the possibility of drawing counterbattery near the line of departure. (23)

After the action, it was learned that in the initial assault, the F Company commander had succeeded in finding a gap through the enemy defenses on both sides of the Kall and had led his leading platoon to the high ground just south of the junction of the Roer and Kall. He then deployed his men in that area, and since his radio operator had been killed and the radio was destroyed, he sent the platoon leader back to guide the remainder of the 2nd Battalion, which he thought was close behind, through the gap. The platoon leader, a recent replacement, managed to return and reported to the battalion commander. However, due to battle fatigue or some other unexplained cause, he reported at that time that he had become lost from the company commander and his platoon in the initial fire fight and did not know where they were. Therefore, as it was learned later, when the 3rd Battalion called for the artillery concentration all members of the platoon were either killed or wounded. The company commander, himself painfully wounded, gathered the survivors to the bank of the Roer River, where they were ultimately captured. (24)

At approximately 0430, the 3rd Battalion once again crossed the line of departure in another attempt to break through the stubborn enemy defenses. This attempt led to a situation not unlike the first, and although two more fortified positions were destroyed, the extensive minefield proved to be a most effective barrier in the dark. As it was now becoming daylight it was decided to wait until it was light enough to possibly probe a path through the mines. However, daylight only brought more aimed and high angle fire to bear on the exposed troops. Due to his exposed position, the G Company commander then asked permission to withdraw his troops. This permission was denied, since higher headquarters had ordered any gains to be held at all (23), (24) Personal knowledge.

costs. The company commander then asked permission to push forward through the mines which was also denied, as the battalion commander realized it would be futile to proceed until the engineers could clear a gap. Finally, the desperate G Company commander, unwilling to leave his troops exposed to this fire and suffer greater casualties, announced to the battalion commander that he had ordered his company to withdraw back into town. H Company, thus exposed on both flanks, was then ordered to withdraw. The G Company commander disposed his troops in defensive positions on the outskirts of town and then asked the battalion commander to be relieved of this command which was granted. (25)

Heavy concentrations of enemy artillery and mortar fire fell in Bergstein until noon after which it subsided to fire more of a harrasing nature. Our own fires also increased in intensity all day. The artillery liaison officer and battalion S-2, with a composite patrol, went forward to a vantage point and adjusted fire on many emplacements with good results. It was learned that the 310th Infantry of the 78th Division, on the right across the Kall, had made little progress.

Late in the afternoon the wooded area to the front was smoked and the attached engineer platoon moved forward together with I Company and succeeded in clearing a narrow gap through the minefield about midway between routes A and B. Mine clearing was extremely slow and dangerous as the mines were all of the non-metallic type, and were sown more thickly than had yet been encountered by the battalion. The enemy, apparently thinking the smoke to be a screen for a full scale attack, reacted violently with fire of all types. As darkness fell, a platoon of I Company moved through the minefield, marking the path with engineer tape as they went. They reconnoitered the northern banks of the Kall until they found a suitable crossing and then passed to the south bank toward objective three. Due to a heavy fog, visibility was (25) Personal knowledge.

as poor as the night before and little could be accomplished by the reconnaissance.

In the meantime H Company had moved up behind the remainder of I Company at the entrance to the gap in the minefield. The reconnaissance platoon from I Company continued to probe the defenses south of the Kall and, although they overran several small groups of Germans in the dark, most of the enemy fortifications remained strangely silent. The I Company commander who had been keeping in touch with the situation decided to take the rest of the company through, and he was promptly followed by H Company. H Company moved into position on objective two and I Company was moving to the Kall when both companies were suddenly struck by a counterattack. Germans and Americans intermingled in the dark and control was lost by both sides. Hand to hand combat between individuals had reached a violent pitch when the German commanders could be heard shouting orders to withdraw. During the fight elements of both sides had gradually worked back into the minefield. (26)

The situation then became relatively quiet as the Germans attempted to evacuate their casualties, and the leaders of G and H Companies were able, to a certain extent, to reorganize and consolidate positions on objective two. As soon as the German withdrawal had been completed, mortar fire began to fall on I Company, and at dawn the enemy again counterattacked. As movement of I Company was restricted by the minefield, the counterattack was beaten off only after heavy casualties occurred, including the I Company commander who was killed by a mine while attempting to remove a wounded officer from the minefield. By this time, the attached corps litter bearer teams (these were habitually attached by corps) had themselves all become casualties, so the major part of G Company was organized into litter bearer teams and the evacuation of casualties took most of the morning. H Company (26) Personal knowledge.

*Icos active
at the entrance
to the gap in
minefield
at 1900
19*

with the aid of the IMG and 81mm mortar platoons held off a second counter-attack while the casualties were being evacuated.

Severe German mortar fire continued to fall throughout the morning and several more of the few remaining leaders were killed including the liaison officer from the 460th FA Battalion. During the morning, the battalion commander observed a German mortar battery in operation behind a building marked with a red cross in Bruck Hetzingen. He was reluctant to call for fire on the mortars for fear of hitting the aid station, but as he pondered the situation an ambulance drove to the front of the building and unloaded ammunition, which was carried into the building. This removed any doubt from his mind and after only two rounds for adjustment of his own mortars, the battery was silenced. (27)

The regimental commander ordered objective two held if possible, and ordered the 1st Battalion to attack after dark, capture Zerkall, then turn south. When contact with the 3rd Battalion was made, both battalions would continue south abreast, 3rd on the right. It was hoped that the two battalions could push through to link up with the 2nd Battalion^{where}, thus clearing all enemy north of objective one. Two prisoners captured early that morning had identified their unit as the 6th German Parachute Regiment, and gave indications that all German forces would soon withdraw across the Roer.

As all concerned wishfully thought over this information, the Germans once again counterattacked the position of H and I Companies with an estimated battalion. At about 1600 the two companies, each by that time less than a platoon in strength, were ordered to withdraw through the gap under a smoke screen. During the counterattack each company lost an SCR-300 radio, with operator, and it was not known whether the radios had been captured intact. When the withdrawal was complete, all available artillery and mortar fire was thrown into the area. As darkness approached on the evening of the (27) Personal knowledge.

7th, G and H Companies moved back toward objective two, but it was soon discovered that the enemy had resown the mines in the gap and had re-occupied the previously knocked out pillboxes. The two companies soon broke through again, however, and by 2000 had retaken objective two. The 1st Battalion, in the meantime, had reached Zerkall but was under counter-attack and was unable to make further progress. The 2nd Battalion on the right was also held up by heavy resistance. (28)

Realizing that it was futile to leave the two small forces exposed on objective two, G and H Companies were ordered to withdraw to Bergstein on the morning of 8 February, where they took up defensive positions.

It was soon discovered that the Germans had at least one captured radio in use, as they frequently attempted to issue false orders to units of the battalion.

At approximately 1000 hours, a force estimated to be a platoon of Germans approached the middle of the open area approximately 500 yards south of town and began digging in, apparently oblivious to the situation around them. The mortar platoon, with the gunners observing their own fire, soon eliminated the entire force.

The 78th Division launched an all out coordinated attack on Schmidt on the morning of the 8th, preceded by a P-38 air strike and heavy artillery bombardment. At approximately noon, great numbers of enemy could be seen withdrawing on the Schmidt - Bruck Hetzingen road. The 78th Division gave the 517th permission to fire on these troops, and in a matter of minutes all the mortars of all three battalions were in action. Vehicles were knocked out, blocking the road, and a great many casualties were observed. (29)

Orders were received early in the afternoon that the regiment was being relieved by the 508th Parachute Infantry. Although wire communications existed to all companies by this time, to top off the entirely unfortunate (28), (29) Personal knowledge.

preceding events, an officer in the battalion CP radioed all units, in the clear, to move out of position and form on the road fifteen minutes after darkness. As the troops began to leave town, a heavy enemy concentration covered the road. Three of the remaining ninety-six officers and men of the 3rd Battalion were hit, and the others escaped only by their expeditious advance to the rear.

At a later date the G-3 of V Corps told the combat team commander that although the 517th did not physically occupy the assigned objectives, the desired diversionary effect was accomplished. The Germans prematurely committed the bulk of their reserves in the 517th area, thus relieving pressure from the main effort at Schmidt. (30)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

It is extremely difficult to unfavorably criticize the units involved in this operation, as the heroic actions of many small groups and individuals made it seem at the time that all possible was done in an attempt to accomplish the mission. However, in spite of the foregoing and the apparent futility of the mission, it must be realized that a great many sound tactical principles were violated.

The shortage of logistical and fire support of airborne units will not be discussed as these inadequacies have since been rectified by new and adequate T/O & E's.

In the planning stage, it should have been considered that this unit had been either in the attack or in movement almost constantly since the 18th of December, in the worst kind of weather and had suffered severe casualties. Committing parachute units to prolonged ground combat indicated a lack of knowledge on the part of higher planners as to their organization. This was especially apparent in the fact that they were committed in the (30) Personal knowledge.

attack of heavily fortified positions. Had their limitations been realized and the necessary units attached to support the lightly armed rifle units, much greater success with far fewer casualties could have been attained.

Using the combat team on a diversionary mission from Bergstein, necessitated an attack with both flanks exposed. The enemy took full advantage of this situation with their fire from the south bank of the Kall. Had the attack been coordinated with another regiment on the right, with the boundary just to one side of the Kall or the other, it would have given one regiment a mine free corridor which would have left the prepared fortifications vulnerable to a night attack.

Another factor to the disadvantage of the combat team was attacking in the zone of one division while attached to, and supporting another. The 8th Division, although helpful in many respects, was not sympathetic to a situation which would attract fire and attention to their zone while they were in a defensive attitude. As the division boundaries were also corps boundaries, V Corps Artillery support of the combat team had to first be cleared through VII Corps. For the most part this precluded any effective support by corps artillery.

Neither time nor permission was available to the combat team for the extensive reconnaissance and patrolling which would have been necessary to insure at least some measure of success. Perhaps the shortage of time was unavoidable, but this could have been partially overcome had coordination been affected so as to have elements of the 8th Division in Bergstein accomplish some reconnaissance prior to the arrival of the combat team.

As to the conduct of the attack itself, it is believed that the two battalions were prematurely withdrawn on the first attempt. This was probably due to the almost complete lack of knowledge of the enemy defenses, which in turn was caused by lack of reconnaissance. Again it must be emphasized that only two officers per company had seen any of the terrain in

daylight. However, if both battalions could have passed through the minefield to the rear of the fortifications, surprise and confusion among the enemy would have been great enough to allow a reduction of his fortifications before an effective daylight counterattack could be organized and launched. This was partially proved by the complete freedom of the F Company commander in the vicinity of objective one.

In continued attacks later, all intermediate gains were lost due to the inability of the units to consolidate their positions so as to withstand the strong counterattacks. Due to the reduced strength of the attacking companies and the exposed flanks, a small perimeter defense might have repulsed the enemy. However, this could not be accomplished due to the terrain and minefield restrictions. The enemy preparatory fires were very effective, but lifted long before the counterattacks. The counterattacks themselves were poorly executed, and were successful only through overrunning the companies positions with superior strength, and at the expense of heavy casualties.

The violation of radio security on the last day of the operation was the apparent cause of three needless casualties. However, had the battalion been up to strength and strung out to a correspondingly greater distance, the results could have been disastrous. Also it is reasonable to assume that the enemy deduced a change in units was taking place which undoubtedly was a basis for his future plans.

LESSONS

1. Units whose tactical unity has been lost due to the decreased strength of men and leaders should be committed only in a dire emergency.
2. Units should be committed only in the zone of the superior ^{unit} to which they are attached.
3. Attacks on fortified positions should be conducted only after extensive planning and reconnaissance by the attacking unit.

4. Daylight reconnaissance by leaders, down to and including the squad, must be conducted before a night attack.

5. Specialized units, such as airborne, should be adequately reinforced when committed as regular ground infantry.

6. A surprise attack, once launched, should be exploited to the utmost regardless of initial losses, as subsequent losses will be much greater once the enemy is on the alert.

7. It is suicidal for a small unit to attack a strongly fortified position with both flanks exposed.

8. Gains will inevitably be lost if the attacking force is not strong enough to cope with the enemy's reserve.

9. The slightest violation of signal security can produce disastrous results.