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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY K, 398TH INFANTRY
(100TH INFANTRY DIVISION), IN THE VICINITY
OF HILL 578, OVERLOOKING MOYENMOUTIER, FRANCE
19-21 NOVEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described:
INFANTRY RIFLE COMPANY ATTACK THROUGH MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company K, 398th Infantry, 100th U.S. Division in the vicinity of HILL 578 overlooking MOYENMOUTIER, FRANCE, 19–21 November 1944 during the fighting through the VOSGE MOUNTAINS.

For orientation purposes some of the major events leading up to the action will be briefly reviewed.

On 15 August 1944, the U.S. Seventh Army successfully invaded southern FRANCE. (See Map A) (1). It fought its way northward through FRANCE against generally weak German resistance.

On the night of 10–11 September, near DIJON, it contacted elements of the Third United States Army which had advanced eastward across FRANCE from NORMANDY during August. This meeting of the two armies thus joined the NORMANDY front with that of Southern FRANCE. (2) Following this juncture of forces, the direction of attack for the Seventh Army changed from north to generally east-northeast, with the VOSGES MOUNTAINS rising in the line of advance. (3)

By the end of October 1944, American advance had carried to the German Winter Line in the VOSGES, which followed generally along the MEURTH RIVER in the southern sector and east of the river north of BACCARAT. (See Map B) (4).

(1) A-1, p. 103; A-3, p. 285

(2) A-1, p. 271

(3) A-1, p. 273

(4) A-2, p. 363

The 100th Division had sailed from the UNITED STATES on 6 October 1944, and landed at MARSEILLES, FRANCE on 20 October 1944. (5) After a few days of regrouping in a staging area just outside of MARSEILLES, the division moved by rail and motor to the north and came under control of the Seventh Army. It relieved the 45th Division which had been in combat continuously since 15 August. This relief took place just west of the MEURTH RIVER and RAON L ETAPE, and was completed 9 November 1944. (See Map B) (6)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Seventh Army consisted of the XV Corps on the north and the VI Corps in the southern sector. (See Map B) (7). VI Corps was composed of the 100th Division, 3rd Division, 103rd Division, and 36th Division disposed on line in that order from north to south. The 45th Division was in army reserve, having been relieved by the 100th Division (8).

During the month of October, the Seventh Army had secured positions from which to launch an offensive the following month against the German VOSGES defenses. (9). An army directive, dated 5 November 1944, is quoted in part: "Mission: the Seventh Army attacks on D-Day; destroys enemy in zone west of the RHINE; captures STRASBOURG and maintains contact with right flank of Twelfth Army Group". VI Corps was to continue operations through the VOSGES MOUNTAINS, introduce the 100th Division to combat, and attack toward STRASBOURG. (10)

The greater part of the area between the VI Corps positions

(5) A-5, p. 42-44

(6) A-6, p. 54; personal knowledge

(7) A-2, p. 336 and p. 339

(8) A-2, P. 363

(9) A-2, p. 357

(10) A-2, p. 397

along the MEURTH RIVER and the objective, STRASBOURG, was mountainous, averaging a little over 5,000 feet in height, generally heavily wooded, possessing a fair road network winding through the valleys and around the slopes, but void of vehicular roads in the higher areas. Several streams originate in these heights, among these being the MEURTH RIVER which flows from the higher mountains in the south, northwest past RAON L ETAPE and BACCARAT, and the smaller PLAINE flowing from the hills southwestward into the MEURTH at RAON L ETAPE. The VOSGES, in the fall, are cold, foggy, and damp, with considerable rain and some snow. (11)

Up until September, the Germans had been withdrawing as rapidly as possible through southern FRANCE, but upon reaching the VOSGES which offered formidable terrain particularly favorable to defense, their tactics changed from disorganized retreat to stubborn resistance. They quickly took advantage of the mountains and forests, to compensate to some extent for their lack of man-power, material and morale. During September and October, they reorganized and reinforced the units in this sector, occupying previously prepared positions east of the MEURTH RIVER, so that by early November six German Infantry Divisions were opposing the Seventh Army. (12) Four of these divisions, the 708th, 816th, 16th and 360th were disposed in front of the American VI Corps. (See Map B) (13) These positions consisted of the main defense line along the crests with passes heavily fortified, a system of trenches, machine gun positions throughout the area, and a few self-propelled gun, anti-tank gun and anti-aircraft gun positions. (14) With these conditions existing, it became apparent that the

(11) A-2, p.337; Personal knowledge

(12) A-2, p. 398, and A-4, Part IV, p. 1

(13) A-2, p. 423

(14) A-2, p. 425

Enemy planned to hold the defensive positions in the VOSGES, rather than falling back immediately to the Siegfried Line. (15)

Though the American forces were superior in number and equipment and possessed higher morale, the long supply line which extended from the port of MARSEILLES was a disadvantage. The Germans had shortened their supply haul and held the dominating terrain. The Americans possessed the initiative and had received fresh troops, thus having a slight advantage over the opposing Germans. (16)

As part of the VI Corps offensive, the 100th Division had the mission of capturing RAON L ETAPE and continuing east. (See Map C). From its position along the western banks of the MEURTH, the division moved north, crossed the river over a bridge taken by other allied forces at BACCARAT and launched an attack south toward RAON L ETAPE. The 397th Infantry was on the right, the 399th Infantry on the left, and the 398th Infantry was protecting the bridgehead at BACCARAT and the northeast flank of the division. (17) The leading regiments began the attack on 12 November, and despite stiff resistance and adverse weather conditions, by 16 November had forced the elements of the 708th German Division into, RAON L ETAPE and into the hill mass south of LA PLAINE RIVER with the 397th holding high ground north of RAON L ETAPE and the 399th the rugged TETE DU RECLOS southeast of NEUFMAISONS. (18) The 398th Infantry was then moved into the gap between the two regiments and given the mission of crossing LA PLAINE and seizing the dominating heights southeast of RAON L ETAPE and northwest of MOYENMOUTIER. Meanwhile, the 397th Infantry was to continue the attack against RAON L ETAPE, and the 399th Infantry was

(15) A-2, p. 336

(16) Personal knowledge.

(17) Statement of Major General Withers A. Burress, formerly 100th Division Commanding General, on 30 December 1944.

(18) A-6, p. 61

to protect the left flank and rear of the division. (19)

The original plan of the 398th Infantry called for the 1st Battalion to cross LA PLAINE in the vicinity of LA TROUCHE on 18 November, capture the heights to the south, swing southwest along the ridge line and seize HILL 578; the 3rd Battalion to cross the stream in rear of the 1st Battalion, move to the right along the lower edge of the ridge, and capture the woods known as BOIS DU PETIT FAYS which were at the northwestern foot of HILL 578 and about 1200 yards southeast of RAON L ETAPE; the 2nd Battalion to be in reserve in positions to the right rear of the 3rd Battalion. (See Map D) (20). However, after the 1st Battalion met heavy artillery, mortar and small arms fire, and was unable to take its first objective on 18 November, it was decided that the 3rd Battalion should attack on the right of, and in conjunction with, the 1st Battalion at dawn on 19 November, and seize the same previously assigned objectives. (21)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF 3RD BATTALION

The 3rd Battalion had moved into an assembly area approximately 3000 yards north of LA PLAINE RIVER on 17 November, preparatory to launching its attack on 18 November, and remained in this same area during 18 November when the 1st Battalion failed to succeed in its attack. (See Map D) (22)

To accomplish its mission assigned by regiment for 19 November, the battalion was to attack in a column of companies with K Company leading. I Company was to be second in column and move on order of the Battalion Commander, while L Company would move on order behind I

(19) A-6, p.64

(20) A-8, FO 3 attached to sheet 17-18 November

(21) A-7, p. 28 statement of Lt. Colonel Floyd E. Stayton, former 3rd Battalion Commander, on 4 December 1949

(22) Personal knowledge

Company. K Company was to capture the first objective, which was the near edge of the woods on the northern slopes of the hill mass forming the regimental objective, and approximately 550 yards on the southeastern side of LA PLAINE RIVER, and be prepared to continue the advance. (See Map E) Plans were made for I Company to pass through K Company after the first objective was secured, and lead the attack to the second objective, but the decision as to which company should lead following the capture of the first objective was to be withheld until the action had taken place.

The commander of K Company was ordered to reconnoiter for crossing sites of the stream, send patrols across LA PLAINE and toward the first objective on the night 18-19 November, and to attack at 0630, just prior to daylight, on 19 November, seize the first objective and be prepared to continue the attack. LA PLAINE RIVER was designated the line of departure, while no boundaries were designated. Plans for preparatory fires were left to the discretion of the K Company Commander. (23)

THE COMPANY SITUATION

When, in the early hours of 18 November 1944, Company K, located in the battalion assembly area, was alerted to lead the first attack of the 3rd Battalion, 398th Infantry, since entering combat, it was realized that the first real test of the War for the unit was about to be faced. The company had entered the line at two (2) under TO&E strength, had suffered two (2) casualties from previous artillery fire, so now consisted of one hundred eighty three (183) E.M. and six (6) officers. Two (2) more battle casualties were added to the list during the day, so that by

(23) Personal knowledge

nightfall on 18 November, K Company was made up of six (6) officers and one hundred eighty one (181) E.M., all green combat troops. (24)

The company commander, along with other company commanders and key staff officers of the battalion, joined the battalion commander at an OP on a hillside a few hundred yards north of LA TROUCHE, while the company executive officer set about the task of readying the unit for its mission.

From the battalion OP, a good view of the prospective K Company battleground could be obtained. (See Map E) The village of LA TROUCHE, with a lumber yard at its southwestern edge, lay at the foot of the slope, while LA PLAINE RIVER, more like a creek according to American terminology, wound its way through town, then twisted and turned through an open valley to the right toward RAON L ETAPE and the MEURTH RIVER. On the southeastern, or far side of the stream, HILL 450, which the 1st Battalion had attempted to take, rose from the edge of LA TROUCHE, and the ground continued to rise to the main ridge line. Right of this hill, extending from the small river toward the regimental objective was approximately 550 yards of open ground on a gently sloping hillside, then a heavily wooded hill rising abruptly from the clearing, with a small rectangle of trees protruding from the hill onto the open ground. This rectangular wooded terrain feature was the first objective of Company K.

Personal reconnaissance and daylight reconnaissance patrols revealed to the company commander that a bridge, appearing to be intact, existed across the stream in the vicinity of the lumber yard.

Enemy activity on 18 November consisted of all types of fire in

(24) Personal knowledge

the zone of the 1st Battalion, and artillery fire placed on the 3rd Battalion assembly area and a road leading from the assembly area to LA TROUCHE. No action was observed in the area through which K Company was to attack and no information of the enemy was received by the company, but actually elements of the 708th German Division were occupying the steeper slopes in previously prepared positions. (25)

The day was typical of this time of year in the VOSGES, cold, grey, and damp.

THE COMPANY PLAN OF ATTACK (26)

The K Company plan of maneuver was to cross the bridge over LA PLAINE RIVER in the vicinity of the lumber yard at 0630 on 19 November 1944, then swing to the right and along the river for approximately 450 yards, at which point it would be opposite the first objective. (See Map E) Formation for crossing the bridge and movement along the stream was to be a column of platoons, with platoons in column of files. As each platoon reached the area opposite the objective, individuals would change their direction of advance approximately 90° to the left, so then platoons would be in a line formation. The order of crossing the bridge was to be:

3rd platoon, light machine gun section, and Company Commander's group;

1st Platoon; 2nd platoon, 60mm mortar section, and remainder of company CP under the executive officer. Upon executing the change of direction, the formation should then become: 3rd Platoon, with light machine gun section, leading; 1st Platoon approximately 100 yards in rear of the 3rd platoon and echeloned to the right; then, the 2nd platoon and mortar section following the 1st platoon at a distance of approximately 150 yards; company commander with

(25) A-6, p. 61 and p. 110; personal knowledge.

(26) Personal knowledge.

3rd platoon, and executive officer's group in rear of the 2nd platoon. The 3rd platoon was assigned the mission of taking the objective, with plans made to commit the 1st platoon immediately if any appreciable resistance was encountered.

In an effort to achieve surprise in crossing the open ground, no artillery or mortar preparations were to be fired prior to the jump off. It had been demonstrated by the enemy, in his shelling the battalion assembly area and routes leading to LA TROUCHE, that the presence of the unit was known, but, as the 1st Battalion was to continue its attack at the same time of the K Company attack, it was considered possible that it might be believed these units were being committed in the same area. It was felt that preparatory fires on the company objective would needlessly disclose the plan of attack.

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK (27)

To secure more information concerning the enemy and the terrain over which the attack was to be launched and to comply with the order of the battalion commander, patrols were sent across the stream and toward the objective during the night of 18-19 November. The platoon sergeant and two squads of the 2nd platoon composed the force from which the personnel for these patrols were drawn. To minimize the distance each patrol had to move, the company commander, his runner and communications sergeant, along with the 2nd platoon group, established positions a little forward of where the battalion CP had operated during the day, and patrols were dispatched from this point. A wire line was run to this area by battalion communications personnel so that the K Company commander should be in contact with the remainder of the battalion in the assembly area. Specific missions assigned the patrols were: determine whether or not mines were present in the

(27) Personal knowledge

vicinity of the bridge near the lumber yard; check the ground over which the movement in column of files was to be executed; move as near as possible to the edge of the woods on the objectives and determine whether or not enemy forces were present; and avoid disclosure of the presence of patrols.

Four patrols were sent out during the night, each consisting of half a squad. It was learned that the bridge was clear and could be used for the attack and that a road ran generally parallel to the stream and could be used for the initial movement after crossing the bridge. It was further determined that shell holes were present in the open fields, indicating that fire of enemy weapons had been adjusted on the area as friendly weapons had not fired into this sector. The edge of the woods had been reached without encountering enemy, but the sound of horse drawn weapons had been detected farther in the woods and hills. When, at approximately midnight, an attempt was made to send this information to the remainder of the company and to inform them that the attack would be executed as had been planned, it was found that the wire line was out. The company communications sergeant checked the wire in the vicinity of the advanced location, but was not sent the entire route back to the assembly area as it was not felt that personnel to accompany him could be spared, and it was thought the battalion communications personnel would seek the trouble from the other end. However, communications were not reestablished during the night.

The executive officer had supervised the issuing of rations and ammunition in the assembly area. Individuals were issued three (3) type K ration meals. Each rifleman drew two (2) bandoleers of

ammunition, while each machine gun squad carried two (2) boxes machine gun ammunition. Twenty four (24) 60mm mortar rounds were drawn by each mortar squad. Each individual was to carry the light-weight sleeping bag which was in his possession, but no blankets. Individuals at the forward area with the company commander possessed the prescribed ammunition, but had not received the ration issue prior to moving out of the assembly area.

At 0615 on 19 November, the time at which K Company was scheduled to arrive at the forward position occupied by the Company Commander, the company had not arrived. The company commander had previously attempted to contact the assembly area via telephone to ascertain that the company had moved out on time. However, the wire line was still out. Shortly after 0615, the company commander started back toward the assembly area and met the company several hundred yards down the trail. The executive officer explained that the delay was caused by being unable to locate the one squad of the 2nd platoon in the darkness of the assembly area. When the elements of the 2nd platoon had moved to the forward area for patrolling, a gap had been created between the remaining squad and the other elements of the company. The executive officer had finally moved out without this one squad.

As the grey streaks of dawn were beginning to break through the darkness, speed became more important than the passing of information to subordinate leaders, so the instructions of the company commander were limited, and consisted chiefly of attempting to point out the bridge to the 3rd platoon which was to lead the attack. Although

within a few yards of the bridge, the leader of the leading squad of the 3rd platoon, obviously nervous, seemingly could not see it. As it was now approximately 0700, and the ever-increasing light of dawn was a very dangerous factor, no further explanation was given, but orders were issued to follow the company commander.

NARRATION

ATTACK FOR FIRST OBJECTIVE (See Map F)

At 0700 hours on 19 November, 1944, the K Company commander and his runner, followed by the 3rd platoon, 1st platoon, and 2nd platoon (minus), in that order, in a column of files, crossed the line of departure. (28)

As the turn to the right along the road was made, it was discovered that the bank of the road bed was high enough to give a man protection from observation and small arms fire from most of the open slope leading toward the objective. Though this fact had not been discovered in the darkness of the preceding night, it was quickly used to the advantage of the company. The column moved slightly to the right of the road in its run to the point where the change of direction would be made.

After the 3rd platoon moved on the run for approximately 450 yards, the objective lay almost directly to its left flank, some 500 yards up the open slope. Each individual turned to the left, and the platoon began its move in a line formation toward the rectangular spur of woods. The 1st platoon executed the same type movement so that it was following approximately 100 yards behind the 3rd platoon and echeloned slightly to the right. The elements of the 2nd platoon made the same move behind the 1st platoon. (29)

(28) A-8, sheet 18-19 November; personal knowledge

(29) Personal knowledge

A fire fight could be heard to the left when the 1st Battalion had resumed its attack prior to the jump-off of Company K, but initially no fire was directed against the company. It was now light enough to afford complete observation of the area. The 3rd platoon and company command group had moved approximately 550 yards up the slope and were roughly 150 yards from the edge of the woods, when machine gun and rifle fire was received from a position slightly to the left of the woods and at a range slightly over 150 yards. The fire appeared to be delivered by one machine gun and, at first, only four or five riflemen. The men of K Company hit the ground instinctively and the order was issued to open fire, but the company weapons remained silent. The company commander, in an effort to get his unit firing, opened up with his carbine, and after he had delivered six or seven shots toward the machine gun, the ice was broken and the entire 3rd platoon began returning the enemy fire. However, the German machine gun and rifle fire continued, and seemed to increase in volume and rate rather than wither. The machine gun section which was with the 3rd platoon, went into action, but any attempt to advance met with directed increased small arms fire. The 3rd platoon was unable to move forward.

The company command group was near the right flank of the 3rd platoon, and though members were unable to rise to move, there was a small dip, which had been formed by water running from the hillside toward the river in the valley, that afforded a few inches protection for crawling movement. To the right could be seen a small rounded draw which would offer some cover for men to move up to the right of the objective. Orders were issued over the SBR 536 radio for the first platoon, which was far enough down the slope that it could move as long as individuals did not attempt to stand upright, to move

the right up this draw, seize the company objective from the right flank and bring fire on the enemy elements holding up the third platoon. To insure complete understanding, the 1st platoon messenger was dispatched from the company command group to point out the planned route to the platoon leader. At the same time, the weapons platoon messenger was sent to the mortars, which were still at the foot of the slope, with instructions for them to bring mortar fire on the enemy machine gun positions. They were further told to have the observers watch the 1st and 3rd platoons and to lift fires as either began to enter the impact area. The 3rd platoon leader was informed of these plans via radio. (30)

After several minutes, during which time the 3rd platoon continued to fire against the enemy position and the 1st platoon began to move up the draw toward the objective, the mortars began to drop their shells with deadly accuracy on the enemy machine gun position to the left of the woods. After five or six rounds, the machine gun fire ceased and the rifle fire decreased. At this time, Lt. Henry Pajek, leader of the 3rd platoon, dashed toward the enemy positions and the platoon immediately joined in the assault. Simultaneously, the 1st platoon moved onto the company objective, firing at enemy attempting to escape as it advanced. By 0800 the 1st platoon, 3rd platoon, and company command group were on the objective, and the remainder of the company quickly closed in, including the balance of the 2nd platoon which had overtaken the other units during the engagement.

It was now discovered that the wooded area did not continue solidly up the hill mass to the front, but that there was a clearing of approximately 75 yards, then the extremely steep, heavily wooded hillside.

(30) Personal knowledge

The 1st platoon, which the company commander planned to have lead in case Company K continued to lead the attack to the next battalion objective, was placed on line at the edge of the woods toward the hillside. The 3rd platoon took up positions along the left edge of the wooded rectangle, prepared to protect the left flank as the fire in the 1st battalion sector was heard to the left rear, indicating that this battalion had not advanced as rapidly as K Company. The 2nd platoon was placed on the right edge of the woods. The 60mm mortar section went into position at the rear of the woods near the open ground over which the company had just advanced.

A check of casualties revealed that the weapons platoon leader had been wounded, a squad leader of the 3rd platoon killed, and two other members of 3rd platoon wounded. The company aid men tended the wounded and properly marked the location where they had fallen so that the litter bearers could evacuate them to the rear. All casualties had been from small arms fire as no artillery or mortar fire had fallen on the company.

The battalion commander was informed that the objective was secured and that the company would be ready to continue the attack by 0830. He instructed the company to jump off at 0900 and seize the next objective which was the head of a draw approximately 1000 yards around the right or western edge of the wooded hill.

PREPARATIONS FOR, AND MOVEMENT TO THE SECOND OBJECTIVE (See Map G)

It was to be necessary for the company to cross approximately 75 yards of cleared ground before entering the more concealed terrain along the slopes of the ridge. It was believed that enemy positions

existed on the hill overlooking this clearing. Because of this fact and since surprise was no longer a leading factor, it was decided that supporting fires should now be used to assist in further advance. It was planned that artillery should fire on the hill side commencing at 0855, or H-5, and should lift at 0900. The 60mm mortars of K Company were to commence firing on the far edge of the clearing at H-2 and fire for two (2) minutes. As it was known that enemy was present to the left of the area in front of the 1st Battalion, it was felt that the sector to the left front of the company was a critical point. It was decided that the 3rd platoon and light machine gun section, from position along the left edge of the woods, should spray this area with small arms fire from 0859 until the leading platoon had crossed the clearing and entered the woods on the hillside.

The order for crossing the open area was to be: 1st platoon, 3rd platoon and machinegun section, 2nd platoon and mortar section. The command group would cross in rear of the 1st platoon, while the remainder of the company headquarters would follow the mortar section. All units would cross the open space on a run in a line formation. Upon entering the woods, the 1st platoon would continue in line with its right flank on the edge of the woods, the light machine gun section would move in column in rear of the 1st platoon, the 3rd platoon would move to the left rear of the 1st platoon and farther up the side of the hill and would close to 50 yards distance as soon as it was able to do so, the 2nd platoon and the mortar section would follow along the edge of the woods in column formation.

The artillery preparation fell with timeliness and preciseness on its previously designated areas, the 60mm mortar rounds landed on

schedule and perfectly along the wooded hill side, and the 3rd platoon opened with a volley of fire that sounded like an entire battalion engaged in a firefight and gave the 1st platoon a feeling of security as it dashed across the narrow open strip at exactly 0900. This maneuver had gone as planned and on schedule. As had been suspected, occupied German positions, well prepared with overhead cover and camouflage, were found, but the leading elements of K Company had moved in so quickly after the preparatory fires and in conjunction with the small arms fire of the 3rd platoon, that the enemy was still in the holes. Several positions were immediately overrun and the occupants taken prisoner. After the leading elements had advanced a few hundred yards, the company halted momentarily to permit the machine gun section to move up with the 1st platoon. The movement toward the objective then continued in the formation as outlined in the plan, with the 1st and 3rd platoons clearing the German positions. Many of the enemy came from their positions with hands overhead, while a few remained in the holes until routed out by members of K Company. A few fled toward HILL 578. The only shots fired during this advance were by members of the 1st platoon as they attempted to fell these fleeing Germans. The company received no enemy fire. The leading elements of the company moved onto the second objective at approximately 1115 hours.

K Company suffered no casualties during the move, while twenty four (24) Germans were taken prisoner and one (1) horse-drawn artillery piece was captured. Members of the squad of the 2nd

platoon that had remained in the assembly area the night before were used to evacuate the prisoners. (31) The Battalion commander was notified via radio of the situation and informed that K Company was prepared to continue the attack to the third objective.

CAPTURE OF, AND NIGHT IN BOIS DU PETIT FAYS (See Map G)

The third objective, BOIS DU PETIT FAYS, was west and slightly northwest of the second objective and approximately 950 yards away. It lay at the northwestern foot of the towering HILL 578, some 1300 yards from the summit. BOIS DU PETIT FAYS was approximately 1200 yards southeast of RAON L ETAPE, and had been designated an objective as its possession would facilitate the capture of RAON L ETAPE. However, the 397th Infantry had captured RAON L ETAPE prior to the time K Company, 398th Infantry had taken its second objective. (32) Also the 3rd Battalion, 398th Infantry had been given the mission of capturing HILL 578 which had originally been the objective of the 1st Battalion. (33) Despite these facts the Battalion commander order K Company to continue the attack and seize BOIS DU PETIT FAYS.

At approximately 1130 hours, K Company moved from the second objective toward BOIS DU PETIT FAYS. Its route carried it along the northern base of HILL 578. The 1st platoon and light machine gun section led the column, followed by the 3rd platoon echeloned slightly to the left. The mortar section and 2nd platoon were in rear of the 3rd platoon, but moving along the same route as the 1st platoon. The company commander moved with the 1st platoon while the executive officer brought up the rear of the column. All units were in column of squads. The 3rd platoon was given the mission of observing to the left flank toward HILL 578, but was instructed to

(31) A-8, sheet 18-19 November and sheet 19-20 November; personal knowledge.

(32) A-6, p. 64

(33) A-8, sheet 18-19 November.

avoid becoming engaged with any enemy in that position, if possible. The company commander had not been informed of the change of mission, and believed the hill to be the objective of the 1st Battalion. He had been told that the 1st Battalion had made little progress and that the left flank of K Company was exposed. (34)

During the move toward the third objective, four Germans were taken prisoner from their positions along the lower slopes of HILL 578m but no firing had taken place.

Although an artillery concentration had been placed on BOIS DU PETIT FAYS during the move of K Company from the first to the second objective, no supporting fires were placed on the objective as the company advanced to seize it.

The 1st platoon moved onto the objective and advanced toward the northeastern edge of the woods, which it was ordered to secure. The 3rd platoon was just closing onto the objective and moving toward its assigned sector on the northwestern edge when machine pistol fire was received by the 1st platoon and rear elements of the 3rd platoon. The fire came from a position forward of the first platoon. The 3rd platoon was ordered to continue to its assigned area and the remainder of the company was closed onto the objective. The fire continued in the 1st platoon area and riflemen of this platoon returned the fire into the woods though the source could not be discovered. The 1st platoon leader pushed forward with his platoon to locate and destroy the opposition. At the same time the 3rd platoon moved toward the

(34) Personal knowledge

extremity of that objective in its sector. Just as it began to take up positions to secure its area, an enemy counterattack was received directly on its front. All weapons of the platoon opened fire immediately with one BAR team being outstanding in its coverage of the entire platoon front. A fierce fire fight raged for only a few minutes and the counterattack was repulsed. Twelve Germans of the attacking force surrendered, while no casualties were suffered by the 3rd platoon. However, the platoon sergeant, while attempting to speed his men into positions a few minutes earlier had been wounded by fire from the 1st platoon area.

The company commander had originally been with the 1st platoon, but had moved to the 3rd platoon area at the time of the counterattack. Upon returning to the 1st platoon, it was found that an advance of only a few yards had been made, when the platoon leader and two riflemen were killed and a third rifleman seriously wounded. The fire continued spasmodically in the area. The 1st platoon and light machine gun section were now ordered to spray the woods to their front with fire and to move to the far edge of the woods. As this action took place, the enemy fire ceased and the objective was secured, however the source of the fire was never discovered.

K Company had moved into BOIS DU PETIT FAYS just prior to 1300 and had succeeded in clearing the area at approximately 1345. The Battalion commander was informed of the situation and the company was ordered to dig in and hold the area, and was informed that the remainder of the battalion was well behind. The company then organized a perimeter defense with the 1st platoon on the east and a portion of the north of the area, the 3rd platoon joining the left

flank of the 1st platoon on the north and extending to cover the western side, and the 2nd platoon organizing the southern edge.

Shortly after 1500, I Company arrived in the area, and went into a perimeter just south and adjacent to K Company. This formation was used as the members of K Company were well progressed in the preparation of their positions prior to the arrival of I Company and the changing of the defense organization would have meant extra work for men already tired from the day's fighting.

It had been hoped that litter bearers would be with I Company to evacuate the two K Company wounded men, but they were not. In addition it was learned from members of I Company that the wounded had not been evacuated from the vicinity of the first objective when they passed through the area approximately two hours after the fighting had occurred. Furthermore, members of K Company that had evacuated prisoners to the rear, reported upon returning to the company that these casualties were not evacuated until approximately noon. With this information considered, it was decided to construct litters and have members of the 2nd platoon of the company carry the wounded to the battalion aid station, still in the vicinity of the original assembly area. However, one of the company aid men informed the company commander that the wounded man in the 1st platoon had died. As darkness was approaching rapidly and it was diagnosed that the leg wound of the 3rd platoon sergeant, though painful, was not seriously in need of additional medical care immediately, it was decided that the risk of evacuation in darkness would not be taken, but that it would be accomplished the following morning. The wounded platoon sergeant was placed in the company CP which had been established in a

German constructed dugout in the area, and remained there overnight.(35)

A check of the company revealed that many of the men had dropped their lightweight sleeping bags during the first fire-fight and were without any bedding for the night other than their clothing.

Furthermore, the members of the 2nd platoon who had been on patrol the night before, and some members of the command group, were without rations other than what they might have had on their person from the preceding day, as they had not been issued rations prior to the attack.

By redistributing the ammunition among the individuals, no shortage in this item was felt. Casualties for the day had been one platoon leader killed, one wounded, a platoon sergeant wounded, a squad leader killed, three other members of the company killed, and two wounded. (36)

No wire line was laid to the company and radio communication to battalion failed in the early evening, so that the company was without communications to the battalion other than by messenger, and the situation precluded the use of this means during darkness. No supplies were brought forward to the company (37).

The night passed uneventfully, except that two groups of Germans, four in each group, walked into the K Company line and were taken prisoner.

THE ATTACK ON HILL 578 (See Map H)

On the morning of 20 November, evacuation of the wounded K Company sergeant was begun, but members of the company executing the evacuation had only progressed a few hundred yards, when litter bearer teams from battalion were met and evacuation was accomplished—some eighteen hours after the wound had been inflicted.

A messenger also arrived from battalion with a message stating that the 3rd battalion would attack HILL 578. L company was in the

(35) Personal knowledge

(36) Personal knowledge

(37) Personal knowledge

vicinity of the area that had been the second objective the day before and would advance from this position on the left of the battalion, I Company would attack on the right from its present position, K Company would be in reserve.

The K Company commander decided to move the company in rear of I Company. No specific instructions for its location had been received from battalion. As the slopes of the hill were extremely steep and there was much scrub underbrush present, a column of files was chosen as the formation to be used, with the command group leading, followed by the 1st platoon and light machine gun section, 2nd platoon, mortar section, and 3rd platoon in that order, with the company executive officer and remainder of company headquarters bringing up the rear of the column. Connecting files were established between the leading elements of K Company and the rear of I Company.

The battalion moved out toward the objective at 1000 hours on 20 November 1944. Just as the advance began, a slow, dreary rain began falling from the grey clouds above. The advance through the underbrush up the rocky, cliff-like hillside was slow, but by 1255, after meeting scattered resistance, the leading elements had reached the summit. (38)

K Company had struggled up the steep, rugged slope behind I Company and the head of the column was near the crest when small arms fire broke out along the ridge in the area of both I and L Companies. The K Company commander passed word back along the column for the men to lie down in place and to face to the flanks of the column, with each individual facing in the opposite direction

(38) A-8, Sheet 19-20 November and Sheet 20-21 November; personal knowledge

of the man ahead of him. The fire-fight ahead raged fiercely for a few minutes, then slowed to a few scattered shots and finally died completely. When the forward units failed to move, the K Company commander and his runner moved onto the crest to determine the situation. The battalion commander was located on the ridge near the right flank of L Company, having moved up the hill with that unit. He instructed I and L companies to move down the forward slopes of HILL 578 and K Company to move onto the crest and begin the organization of the position.

Just as the K Company commander returned to his company and the units began their move forward, a counterattack was received against the I Company area. Small arms fire filled the air and a heavy volley of fire was delivered against K Company. The enemy forces could not be seen, but the fire continued at a high rate. The command group of the company was forced to take cover behind the rocks and trees in the area. A large volume of the enemy fire seemed to be directed at this group as bark from trees and chips of rocks behind which cover had been sought, flew into the air, as struck by the enemy bullets. The same situation existed in I Company. Attempts to return the fire brought increased fury from the enemy weapons. The command group of K Company was unable to move. The radio operators were too far from the K Company commander to be used to issue instructions and any verbal shouts were drowned out. The fire continued for several minutes when suddenly American weapons were heard firing off to the right flank. The German fire continued, but was no longer directed at the leading elements of the company. It finally ceased completely. As the men who had been

held to the ground by the intense volley began to rise, the 3rd platoon of K Company came through the woods from the right of I Company. When the head of the column had been caught in the fire, Lt. Pajak, the 3rd platoon leader, realizing the situation, had moved his platoon from its position at the rear of the column and had come up the hillside to the flank and rear of the German force, surprised them completely, and broken up the attack. Several Germans had been killed, three prisoners taken, and the remainder of the group forced to withdraw. (39)

The only casualties were the artillery forward observer operating with K Company and one member of the 1st platoon wounded.

It was now nearly 1600 with darkness approaching rapidly. The battalion was ordered to dig in on the hill with K Company along the crest, and I and L Companies approximately 500 yards down the southeastern slopes. (40)

THE NIGHT ON HILL 578

Positions were only partially completed before darkness closed in and work was impeded. Holes were not dug to their proper depth and the majority lacked overhead cover which was so vital in this type terrain. The units on the hill had no communications with any other elements of the division as wire had not been laid this far forward and the radios did not function. (41) No supplies had been brought forward and members of K Company were without ration. A second night without protection against the elements other than rain-soaked clothing was to be spent by the company. Again the wounded had not been evacuated. With this situation existing, though troops were occupying HILL 578, it could not be considered absolutely secure. (42)

(39) A-7, p. 39; personal knowledge

(40) A-8, sheet 20-21 November

(41) A-8, sheet 20-21 November

(42) Personal knowledge

Though the fear of a German counterattack or artillery shelling, or both, existed, the night of 20 November proved to be a battle against the elements rather than against the enemy. The rain, which had been falling since the middle of the morning, continued intermittently throughout the night and the temperature fell to near freezing. Shortly after dark, several men found their way to the bodies of dead Germans that had been noted earlier, hoping to secure the overcoat which was worn by all Germans. Many found that another person had beaten them to their loot. An alert of twenty-five percent of the command at all times had been ordered in K Company, but this proved to be unnecessary. The number of men sleeping was only a very small fraction of the command, even though a tiring day had been endured, as the discomfort outweighed the need for rest. Individuals moved about in the darkness attempting to restore circulation, and build up body heat, which normally was obtained thorough food and warm clothing. The night wore on, each minute like hours, each hour like days. Finally, after what seemed to be eternity, the dawn broke and the rain ceased, and those who were able, rose from their holes. Many had to be helped onto the surface of the ground and could not move for several minutes, some of whom required medical attention. The morale of the men was raised to some extent, when the battalion commander, Lt. Colonel Floyd E. Stayton, who was not as young as the majority of the junior officers and enlisted men, rose from his position just forward of K Company, and immediately set about the task of checking his battalion and preparing it for further action. (43)

At approximately 0800 hours on 21 November, a carrying party and litter bearers, led by the battalion executive officer, arrived

(43) Personal knowledge

on the position with much needed ammunition, some water, and a small supply of type K rations; and in addition, orders to attack at 0700 to seize MOYENMOUTIER to the southeast. (44)

When at a little after 1000 hours on 21 November 1944, the units of the 3rd Battalion moved down the slopes of the rugged hill, the action around HILL 578 was brought to a close, though the memory of this first real offensive operation will dwell in the minds of those participation for years to come.

A summary of the results of the fighting: K Company, 398th Infantry played an important part in the capture of the regimental objective—the high ground in the vicinity of RAON L ETAPE and MOYENMOUTIER. The Germans had been driven from one of their key positions in the VOSGES MOUNTAIN winter line and forced to withdraw toward the RHINE. Fifty-one (51) prisoners had been taken by K Company and an undetermined number of Germans killed or wounded. The company had suffered the following casualties: Two (2) platoon leaders, one (1) platoon sergeant, one (1) squad leader, and six (6) other members of the company.

A letter of commendation from then Major General Edward Brooks, VI Corps Commanding General, to Major General Withers A. Burress, then 100th Division Commanding General, hailed the capture of RAON L ETAPE and surrounding area as an operation which “breached the hinge of the German defense positions and at the same time drew forced from the center” (45)

The stage was now set for the move toward STRASBOURG.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout the operation there was a lack of adequate communications.

(44) A-7, p. 41

(45) A-2, p. 380

Though the need for wire between the battalion assembly area and the position of forward elements of K Company used for patrolling duties the night prior to the first attack was realized, and a line was laid, this service became broken, and neither the battalion nor the elements of K Company took adequate steps to restore it. Because of this failure of communications, the company commander could not be informed of the delay in the movement of the company. Had he received the information promptly, the decision could have immediately been made to attack without the squad causing the delay, and the company could have crossed the line of departure on time. Furthermore, it prevented the passage of complete information concerning the attack to subordinate leaders in the company prior to the jump-off. The lack of adequate communication facilities on the night of 19-20 November, denied units of information of the situation, and forced the battalion commander to delay the issuance of the order to attack HILL 578 until after daylight on 20 November, this throwing the operation late for the entire day and finally resulting in the inadequate organization of the position when occupied. Though this inadequate preparation only resulted in discomfort to the men, it could have led to a grave situation had the enemy shelled or attached the position. When, on HILL 578, the battalion had no communication with other units, a complete lack of information of the situation existed and the unit moved out on an attack exactly three hours late because of the delay in the receipt of the order.

2. SUPPLY

The supply plan was entirely inadequate and plans for resupply were practically non-existent. The company commander failed to

insure that all men of the company received rations for the day of 19 November and elements which had been forward of the company moved out without the receipt of the ration. No plans for resupply following the seizure of the objectives were made and no resupply was accomplished during the night 19-20 November, with the result that men of K Company were without rations and did not have the full amount of ammunition normally carried. Again, after the capture of HILL 578, no supplies were received until the following day. Though the failure to obtain additional ammunition did not prove to be a critical point, had an increased amount of firing been required, a very serious situation could have resulted. The lack of food most certainly decreased the fighting efficiency of the men and added to their discomfort on the night 20-21 November. A plan had been made for the members of K Company to carry sleeping bags for use following the capture of the objectives, but the execution of the plan was not carried out. The item, though lightweight, proved too cumbersome to the majority of the men in the attack, and was discarded, with the result that members of the company were forced to spend two cold, fall nights in the VOSGES with only their clothing as protection against the elements. A more suitable plan would have been to drop these items prior to the attack and have them brought forward for use at night.

3. EVACUATION

No plans were made prior to the operation to have litter bearers teams following close behind the assaulting unit. As a result of this lack of prior planning and the absence of prompt action as the situation developed, evacuation was completely inefficient and inadequate. The aid men with Company K performed their duties

admirably, but this was the only link in the chain of evacuation functioning properly. It is entirely illogical that the rearward movement of casualties from an objective which a company had taken in less than an hour, should not begin for over four hours as was the case of those wounded in the capture of the first position. When BOIS DU PETIT FAYS was captured on the afternoon of 19 November, there was adequate time for evacuation prior to darkness had the medical personnel followed up the assault units closely enough. However, they did not and the result was that one wounded man died before he was evacuated and another remained in the woods for approximately eighteen hours after he was wounded before movement to the rear was begun. Finally, on HILL 578, the casualties were forced to remain overnight in the vicinity of where they had fallen, and in most unfavorable weather conditions. This complete failure of the evacuation system, definitely caused unnecessary suffering for the wounded, lowered morale of all troops in the vicinity, and possibly caused the death on one man. Both the battalion commander and company commander failed in their planning, and both should have taken more aggressive steps to put evacuation into effect when the need arose, even though plans had not been made.

4. COMPANY LATE FOR INITIAL ATTACK

In my opinion, one of the greatest sins that can be committed in combat is the failure to cross a line of departure on time. Company K committed this sin in its first attack of the war on 19 November 1944. This was caused by the fact that part of the unit could not be located in the assembly area, an area which had been occupied for more than

one day by the company. The cause for the inability to locate this squad was the fact that two squads of the platoon had been moved out from the position. However, this was no excuse as several steps could have been taken to prevent this occurrence. The squad could have been shifted to a position adjacent to the other platoons, or if this were not done, the route to the squad should have been carefully located during daylight, and marked if necessary. In addition to the above, the squad leader should have been so well informed of the situation that he would have taken necessary steps to have his squad awake and ready to move out with the company on schedule. Even after difficulty was encountered in locating the unit, the company executive officer made the decision immediately to move out without this portion of the company, a decision he finally made. In justice to the executive officer, it should be pointed out that this lack of a prompt decision was to a great extent related to the personality of the company commander and his procedure in running the company. Throughout training and during the short while of combat prior to this operation, he demanded that he personally make the majority of decisions, regardless of how minute, this making the executive officer hesitant in making his decision. As was pointed out when discussing communications, the failure of the wire line prevented contact of the commander. This delay in crossing the line of departure, forced the company to cross open ground under conditions of good visibility and permitted the enemy to observe and fire upon the company, thus causing delay and casualties. It is felt that had the company moved out on time, the advantage of restricted visibility could

have been employed to hasten the capture of the objective and to minimize the number of casualties.

5. POSITION OF LEADERS DURING ATTACK

The company commander and his platoon leaders fought at or near the head of their respective units throughout the engagement. As was noted in the crossing of the line of departure and in the initial firing, when subjected to enemy fire the men, having never made a previous attack, were nervous and hesitant in moving out and in returning the enemy fire. The final assault against the first objective resulted when the 3rd platoon leader rushed out ahead of his platoon. In the clearing of the third objective the 1st platoon leader moved out at the head of his platoon and was killed. In the movement onto HILL 578, the company commander was out in front of the company and was unable to move due to the volume of enemy fire.

By the leaders moving in front of their units, aggressive action was maintained throughout the fighting. Had the company commander not let from the line of departure, further delay would have been encountered and it is possible that full appreciation of the terrain might not have been obtained by subordinates when initially moving in column. Though the officers of a unit are not designed to be riflemen, it became necessary for the commander to fire the first rounds against the enemy position to break the tenseness and start his unit firing. This could not have been accomplished from a position farther to the rear. By being with the leading units, the commander grasped the situation immediately and took decisive action quickly. However, an adverse situation resulted when he was unable to move on the slopes of HILL 578 and this had no control over his company and was unable to effect any

action. Also the positions of the subordinate leaders of the company resulted in a high percentage of casualties among leaders—two platoon leaders, one platoon sergeant, and one squad leader, almost fifty percent of the total of nine casualties suffered on 19 November, causing their loss to the company for future operation.

6. USE OF SUPPORTING WEAPONS

One of the means by which a commander may influence an action is the use of supporting fires. For the operation on 19 November, the decision as to the use of this means was delegated to the assault company commander by the battalion commander. The decision of not using any supporting fires preparatory to the attack across open ground toward the first objective in an effort to gain surprise, apparently met with some success. This point is indicated in the fact that no high angle of fire weapons were brought to bear against Company K, though the capability of firing in the area existed since the 1st Battalion elements were subjected to artillery and mortar fire. Surprise was not complete however, but this can more readily be considered to have resulted from the fact that K Company moved out late, rather than the fact that the lack of preparatory fires failed to achieve surprise. After surprise had been lost, there was no need to restrict the use of supporting fires other than the limitations of the weapons. The 60mm mortar fire was correctly and effectively employed against the enemy machine gun position delaying the company near its first objective. The use of artillery and 60mm mortars preparatory to the jump-off for the second objective proved very effective, due both to the accuracy of these fires and to the close and rapid following of the fires by the leading elements of Company K. The result was that

Germans in well prepared and camouflaged positions, and holding the advantage of observation in the thick woods, were unable to deliver any fire against the rapidly moving assault troops. Though the success of properly used supporting fires had just been witnessed, the company commander did not take full advantage of these weapons in the capture of BOIS DU PETIT FAYS and an actual misuse of the weapons occurred in connection with this objective. The fires placed on the area while the company was moving from the first to the second objective may have had some effect, but since they were not followed by a preparation immediately prior to the company closing onto the position, it is felt that any effectiveness, as used, was outweighed by the fact that the enemy had been warned over two hours ahead of time to expect our forces. Had the company commander requested and received artillery or 81mm mortar fire on BOIS DU PETIT FAYS when within assaulting distance, and followed this fire by closing rapidly, it is felt that the position could have been more easily secured and that fewer casualties, would have resulted.

7. USE OF RIFLE PLATOON TO SUPPORT ASSAULT UNIT BY FIRE

When it was discovered that the move off the first objective toward the second objective would require the crossing of a cleared strip approximately 75 yards in width directly in front of highly probable enemy positions, and with exposed flanks, the decision to use a rifle platoon and the light machine gun section to support the advance of the assault platoon by fire, was reached. This fire delivered at the most rapid possible rate and directed to spray the wooded area to the left front, assisted in preventing the delivery of enemy fire as the leading elements of the company crossed the clearing. In addition to this fact, the large volume of friendly fire, had a definite psychological effect on the members of the 1st platoon in the assault as they moved out without hesitation and with speed and confidence. Had this fire not been

delivered, it would have been possible for any Germans to the left front of K Company to deliver flanking fire on its leading elements when in the clearing. Though this use of a platoon is not a prescribed doctrine, it proved successful in this particular situation.

8. FAILURE OF THE BATTALION TO ATTACK HILL 578 ON 19 NOVEMBER

Though the battalion commander had received a change of mission and orders to capture HILL 578 prior to the time K Company moved from its second objective, the company was ordered to continue to the original third objective, rather than diverting its attack to accomplish the new mission. The position of the company was only approximately 500 yards from the summit of the hill, while the distance to BOIS DU PETIT FAYS was some 950 yards, and these woods were approximately 1300 yards from HILL 578. With the fall of RAON L ETAPE to the 397th Infantry, the importance of the third objective was decreased. If the battalion commander felt that two companies were necessary to achieve the new mission, as he did on 20 November, I Company would have been moved forward to attack along with K Company to HILL 578, and BOIS DU PETIT FAYS bypassed. The enemy had been dislodged from their positions in the area K Company had passed through and were probably not prepared for an attack against the higher hill. By delaying this drive another day, the opportunity was afforded the Germans to gather disorganized personnel from both the zone of the 3rd battalion and that of the 1st battalion to defend this height. It is felt that had the initial successes of K Company been followed by an attack against HILL 578, the enemy would have been caught unprepared, the casualties suffered in BOIS DU PETITS FAYS could have been avoided, and one less day without resupply in the mountainous terrain would have resulted.

LESSONS

1. A good communications system is essential for efficient operations in combat.
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2. An attack in mountainous terrain demands careful planning for resupply.
3. Litter bearer teams should follow closely behind assault units in the attack.
4. Units in assembly areas must take all necessary steps to insure crossing the line of departure on time.
5. Company commanders and leaders of company units should be near the head of their units in an attack to insure prompt and aggressive action, though casualties must be expected and occasional loss of control anticipated.
6. Surprise may be gained by attacking without preparatory fires, but once surprise is lost, supporting weapons should be used to fire on likely enemy positions on wooded objectives, and fires closely followed by assaulting infantry.
7. A rifle platoon can be effectively used to support an attack by fire in special situations.
8. Once the enemy has been dislodged from its initial positions, the attacking force should take advantage of success and act aggressively to seize its objective.