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Character

OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 311TH INFANTRY
(78TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON
KESTERNICH, GERMANY
30 JANUARY - 1 FEBRUARY 1945.
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander,
Cannon Company Which Supported This Action)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION ATTACKING
AND SECURING A HEAVILY DEFENDED TOWN

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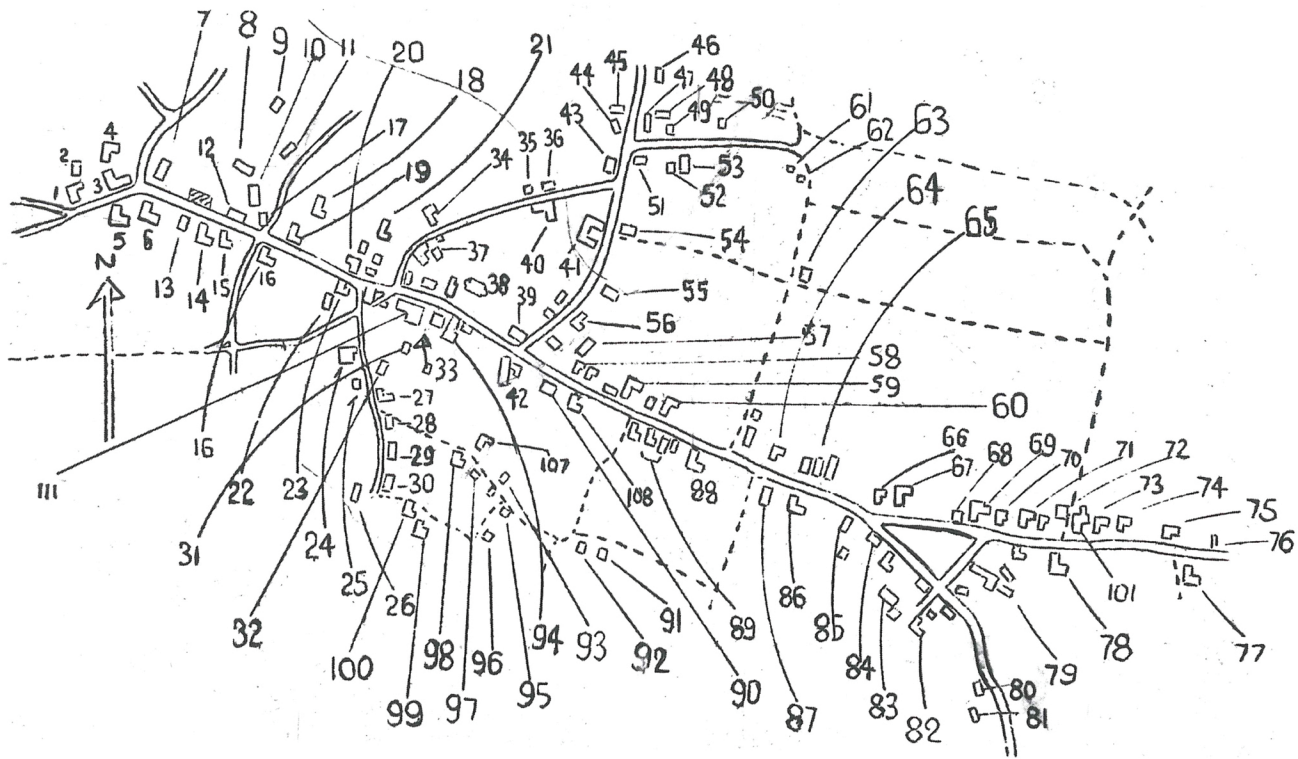


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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Battalion, 311th Infantry, 78th Infantry Division in the battle for KESTERNICH, GERMANY, 30 January - 1 February 1945, during the Ninth U.S. Army's offensive from the ROER RIVER to the RHINE RIVER.

In order to understand how this action occurred and why it was necessary it is required that a brief examination be made of events which presaged this attack.

During the night of 5 - 6 June 1944, the Allied Forces crossed the ENGLISH CHANNEL and made initial landings on the NORMANDY BEACHES on the morning of 6 June. (1) By 23 August, PARIS had been liberated. (2) On 21 October the German garrison defending AACHEN surrendered to elements of the United States First Army. (3) A closer examination of operations to the east of AACHEN will reveal the manner in which the forthcoming attack on KESTERNICH was conceived.

Included in these operations was the 78th Infantry Division's first combat experience. As a part of First Army, V Corps, it was ordered to seize and secure the dams of the ROER RIVER near HASENFELD. This attack ended short of the object-

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- (1) A-1, p. 726
(2) A-1, p. 763
(3) A-3, p. 61

ive. (4) To the north the Ninth Army was closing up to the ROER RIVER. (5) Before completion both of these actions were interrupted on 16 December 1944 when the German counteroffensive in the ARDENNES forced the Ninth and First U. S. Armies to assume defensive roles. (6) (7) (See Map A)

Although the German counteroffensive in the ARDENNES, commonly called the "Bulge", did not extend northward to this area it did result in a wholesale regrouping of forces between the First and Ninth Armies. By 1 January 1945 the Ninth Army had assumed a portion of the First Army's zone and held a defensive line from SIMMERATH to LINNICH with the VIII and XIX Corps abreast. The 78th Infantry Division was on the south (right) flank at this line. (8) (See Map B) Patrolling, raiding, and artillery fire comprised the Ninth Army's aggressive action during most of January 1945. Including the British sector to the north, the enemy was cleared from all but a few pockets on the west bank of the ROER RIVER. (9) Ninth Army was informed that the general plan of their proposed operation "Grenade" had been approved. This plan provided for an attack to the northeast, across the ROER RIVER, with its right flank on the general line JULICH - DUSSELDORF. (10) Before this action could be effected it was necessary to eliminate the threat of floods on the ROER RIVER occasioned by the enemy held dams to the south. (11) (See Map B)

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- (4) A-3, p. 88
 - (5) A-2, p. 115
 - (6) A-2, p. 115
 - (7) A-3, p. 91
 - (8) A-2, p. 118
 - (9) A-5, p. 1
 - (10) A-2, p. 139
 - (11) A-2, p. 143

These dams influenced all planning north of their location. By manipulating or demolishing them the enemy could make a crossing of the ROER RIVER impractical, or if a crossing had already been made he could interrupt the supply of forces on the eastern bank for a considerable period of time. (12)

The first phase in the elimination of this threat to operation "Grenade" included XIX Corps directive to the 78th Infantry Division to seize the towns of EICHERSCHEID, IMGENGROICH, HUPPENBROICH, and KESTERNICH. (13) This attack was also planned to protect the north (left) flank of the First Army's drive to the river. (14)

The terrain and prepared defenses presented many hindrances to successful operations on the southern flank of the XIX Corps zone now occupied by the 78th Infantry Division. Buildings and houses which commanded good fields of fire and provided observation were reinforced by the defenders. Many houses had fortress-like cellars and twelve-inch concrete for roofs. (15) Recent snowfalls had left from six inches to six feet of crusted snow over all roads and fields. Deep draws along the western bank of the ROER RIVER provided excellent enemy mortar positions and assembly areas for reserves. Many concrete and steel-turreted pillboxes remained to the front. (16)

During the period from 18 December 1944 to 29 January 1945 the 78th Infantry Division occupied defensive positions

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- (12) A-2, p. 85
(13) Personal knowledge
(14) A-3, p. 150
(15) A-2, p. 84
(16) Personal knowledge

in a two mile deep salient which had been driven into the enemy lines during the attack prior to the German counteroffensive. The western edge of KESTERNICH laid at the point of deepest penetration. The 272d and 246th Volksgrenadier Divisions opposed the division. These divisions were reinforced with Volksturm and Fortress Units (composite companies of miscellaneous personnel) of varying size and composition. These units appeared on the line from time to time and were then withdrawn. (17)

Since its initiation into Combat on 13 December the 78th Division had experienced eight weeks of bitter winter fighting. The initial attack to secure the ROER RIVER dams had ended in failure and resulted in the loss of major portions of the 2d Battalion, 310th Infantry and the 2d Battalion, 309th Infantry in the town of KESTERNICH. During the time this ill-fated attack was made, the 311th Infantry had been detached from the 78th Infantry Division and attached to the 8th Infantry Division in order to provide relief for the low strength 13th Infantry of that division. Here in the HURTCEN FOREST numerous casualties resulted from mortar fire, anti-personnel mines, and enemy harassing action. (18) The morale in the 311th Infantry was lowered somewhat for the reason that offensive action was impossible at this time, however combat efficiency remained excellent. (19) On 27 December 1944 the 311th Infantry rejoined the 78th Division and occupied a portion of the division defensive sector. The division had entered the line without sufficient rubber overshoes for all troops; combat boots soaked up the water and mud like a sponge.

(17) A-15, part II, p. 1, 2

(18) Personal knowledge

(19) Statement of Lt. Col. Keyes, on/about 25 December 1945.

Very few camouflage snow suits were available therefore sewing machines were salvaged from ruins and bed sheets used to make these much needed suits. Morale among the Germans was good. Although some units were composed of sub-standard troops the Wehrmacht officers in command maintained a high state of discipline and there were no indications of mass surrenders or desertions. (20) The Volksgrenadier Divisions had proved that they were capable of holding a defensive line. (21)

As directed by Field Order No. 29, XIX Corps, the division plans for the attack provided for the seizure of AM GERICHT crossroads, KONSEN, and IMGENBROICH by the 310th Infantry now located on the south (right) flank. The 311th Infantry was assigned the mission of capturing KESTERNICH and HUPPENBROICH as well as assisting CCA, 5th Armored Division, which had been attached to the 78th Infantry Division, in the capture of EICHERSCHEID. The 309th Infantry, from its present positions on the north (left) flank of the division, was to hold in place and be prepared to repel counterattacks. (22)

(See Map C)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 311TH INFANTRY

On 28 January the 311th Infantry occupied defensive positions in the KESTERNICH salient with two battalions abreast.

(See Map D)

The essential elements of Field Order No. 1, 311th Infantry, 291500 January 1945 which was issued for this operation were as follows:

The 1st Battalion was to hold in its present position

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- (20) Personal knowledge
(21) A-3, p. 84
(22) A-15, part I, p. 12, 13

until a passage of lines was effected by CCA, 5th Armored Division. It would then be attached to this combat command. The 3d Battalion would attack in its zone to capture HUPPENBROICH. The 2d Battalion, with Company A 736th Tank Battalion attached, was to attack and seize successive objectives in KESTERNICH, consolidate on its objective for defense, and tie in with the 309th Infantry on the north (left). (23) (See Map D)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

Initially the 2d Battalion had occupied a sector of the front line held by the 311th Infantry Regiment upon its return to the 78th Division on 27 December 1944. On the night of 18-19 January 1945 the 2d Battalion was relieved by the 3d Battalion, 309th Infantry Regiment which had been attached to the 311th Infantry. Upon relief the 2d Battalion took up positions on the regimental reserve line in the vicinity of LAMMERSDORF. (24) (See Map C)

While in this position one rifle company from the battalion was attached to the 1st Battalion until two days prior to the forthcoming attack on KESTERNICH. (25) Plans were made for a withdrawal and rear positions were developed. In spite of these preparations which were generally believed to be training exercises it was felt that an attack would take place in the near future. For this reason the battalion carried on an extensive training program in the techniques of assault on fortified positions and the training of tank-killer teams. (26)

(23) A-11, par. 3
(24) A-8, p. 5
(25) Personal knowledge
(26) A-8, p. 7

When the mission for the 2d Battalion was assigned the Battalion Commander was absent and due to an unavoidable delay could not rejoin the battalion until 29 January 1945, the day before the attack. The entire planning load was carried by the executive officer and battalion staff. Plans were made and all orders were issued prior to the return of the Battalion Commander. Since it had been impossible to keep the Battalion Commander informed of developments during his absence it was necessary for him to digest all plans and orders in one day as well as direct the execution of an operation in which he had no part in planning.

KESTERNICH, the battalion objective, sits on high open ground with little change in elevation within the town itself. The buildings in the town are not joined in solid block formations. Intervals exist between each building. Open areas surrounding the town are divided into fields by dense hedges. Excellent fields of fire made it impossible to envelop the town from either side. About 1000 yards to the south of the town an extremely deep draw fingers up from the ROER RIVER. Two branches of this draw point northward toward the town. Numerous other draws to the east and northeast of the town afforded the enemy excellent positions in which to emplace mortars or to assemble troops for counterattacks. The slopes of these draws are densely wooded and very precipitous. KESTERNICH was a critical terrain feature for the reasons that it commanded the approach to the STRAUCH-STECKENBORN RIDGE and the assembly areas in the draws along the ROER RIVER.

The weather was cold. Snow covered the ground in varying

depths from six inches to six feet. In spite of the proximity to frontlines a portion of the road between SIMMERATH and KESTERNICH, which was to be used by the battalion, was cleared of snow with the aid of bulldozers. The snow offered one small advantage. In some instances the crust would support the weight of a soldier to the extent that anti-personnel mine fields could be crossed without detonating the mines. (27)

On 26 January numerous readjustments within the 311th Infantry were made in preparation for the attack on 30 January. The 2d Battalion, with K Company, 309th Infantry attached, relieved the 3d Battalion, 309th Infantry (- Company K). This placed the 2d Battalion back on the line they had previously held. F and G Companies were placed on line with F Company on the north. (28) By 29 January E Company had been moved to SIMMERATH and K Company, 309th Infantry had reverted to parent unit control. (29) (See Map D)

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK (See Map E)

The line of departure would be the present front line held by the 2d Battalion; H hour, 0530 hours; D day 30 January 1945.

The 2d Battalion's plan of attack was to cross the line of departure with F Company, three platoons abreast, two of which would be north of the main street in KESTERNICH. F Company was to pivot to the north to secure objectives 26 and 27, with a zone of action extending south of objective 27 to building 63. The 1st Platoon of H Company's machine guns was to be in direct support of F Company with positions in F Company's

(27) Personal knowledge

(28) A-8, p. 8

(29) A-17, p. 3

1st Platoon area. Fire missions included leading the 2d and 3d Platoons by fire as they swung to the north and also firing on any enemy counterattacks coming from the north.

G Company was to attack on the right flank of F Company with two platoons in column, penetrate the enemy main line of resistance south of the main street, and then turn south to secure objective 22. The 2d Platoon of H Company's machine guns was to be in direct support of G Company. One platoon of G Company had the mission of protecting the south (right) flank of the battalion by moving south from the line of departure to a position where it could overlook the deep draw on this flank. From this point it was to turn east and secure objective 543 which consisted of a small bit of high ground between the two fingers of the main draw. After securing objective 543 this platoon was to establish contact with the 3d Battalion by sending patrols through the draw to the south.

E Company was to be assembled in houses immediately in rear of the line of departure. As F and G Companies penetrated the main defenses and wheeled to the north and south respectively E Company, in a column of platoons, was to attack through the gap thus formed and secure objective 28. From this point E Company was to continue the attack eastward with two platoons to secure objective 30. The remaining platoon of E Company was to attack to the northeast and assist F Company in the capture of objective 27.

The 81 mm Mortar Platoon, in battery positions to the rear of the line of departure, was to be retained under battalion control. Each rifle company was to be accompanied by one mor-

tar forward observer who would operate an SCR 300 in the mortar fire control net. (30) Observers from the 4.2 Mortar Platoon, combat team artillery, and Cannon Company (attached to 307th Field Artillery Battalion) were also available.

The Battalion Anti-Tank Platoon was to cover the flanks with special attention to the north flank which offered the best tank approach from along the STRAUCH-KESTERNICH ROAD. This platoon was to follow the advance by bounds.

One platoon of tanks was attached to F Company and one platoon to E Company. One section of a tank destroyer platoon was placed in direct support of F Company. This left one platoon of tanks and one section of tank destroyers for the battalion reserve.

No artillery preparation was planned in the hope that tactical surprise would be achieved and the enemy positions overrun before they could effectively man any fixed defenses in the area. The battalion had no priority on the fires of any artillery except the Regimental Cannon Company.

Each soldier carried a one pound block of explosive with detonator. Each machine gun squad carried one (1) twenty pound shaped charge. These explosives were to be used for digging into the frozen ground after objectives had been taken. Each tank carried one four foot section of bangalore torpedo in a position readily available to the infantry.

The Battalion Command Post was established just south of the road leading into KESTERNICH and near the line of departure. The Aid Station was set up in the cellar of a house just across the road to the north of the Battalion Command Post. Radio

(30) A-12, p. 3, 4, 5

silence was to be observed until fire was received from the enemy. (31)

MOVEMENT TO THE LINE OF DEPARTURE

Traffic control on the KESTERNICH-SIMMERATH road was essential during the period immediately prior to the time of attack. Company E, 2d Battalion and Company A, 796th Tank Battalion were required to move east from SIMMERATH toward KESTERNICH on this road and be cleared from the road prior to 0500 hours, 30 January. This was necessary in order to make the road available for use by the 3d Battalion and elements of CCA, 5th Armored Division.

The movement was accomplished with a minimum of difficulty. Company E, 2d Battalion and Company A, 796th Tank Battalion were in position ready for the attack prior to the designated time.

Inasmuch as the two assault companies were already on their line of departure no further movement was necessary.

The 2d Battalion was now ready to launch their attack.

(31.1)

NARRATION

THE FIRST DAY AND NIGHT IN KESTERNICH, 30 JANUARY (See Map F)

The leading elements of the 2d Battalion crossed the line of departure at 0530 hours. (32) It was still dark and a steady snowfall driven by a light northeast wind helped add to the confusion during this time. The hedgerows through which

(31) Personal knowledge
(31.1) Personal knowledge
(32) A-9, p. 2

the men moved had acted as "snow fences" and unusually large drifts were encountered. By 0600 hours first light appeared and some observation was gained although it was limited to 150 yards. F and G Companies hit the initial enemy defenses consisting of anti-personnel mine fields and wire barriers. (33) This had been expected and immediate breaching operations began with the use of explosives. (34) Concentrations of 50 mm and 120 mm mortar fire and 105 mm artillery began to fall on the troops performing these breaching operations. It was apparent that surprise had not been achieved and that the enemy was alerted for the attack. (35) Panzerfausts were fired into the trees, thus obtaining tree bursts which inflicted further casualties. Enemy automatic weapons including machine guns and machine pistols raked the area.

In order to add impetus to the attack the attached tanks of F Company were called on to assist in the neutralization of enemy automatic weapons. As the tanks moved forward into position their communication with F Company failed. The tanks were "buttoned up" and did not engage any targets or attempt to contact the foot elements.

Finally F Company's 3d Platoon Leader mounted the lead tank which was located just south of building 16 and from this position directed the movement of the tanks and his platoon. As a squad of F Company worked on building 22 and 23 the balance of the 3d Platoon and the tanks moved forward on the right. (36) As the lead tank approached building 24 it ran over a mine, throwing the F Company Platoon Leader to the ground. The re-

(33) A-12, p. 5

(34) A-9, p. 3

(35) A-6, p. 1

(36) A-9, p. 2

sulting explosion also wounded the 3d Platoon Sergeant, two members of a BAR team and a rifleman. Another tank received a hit in the turret by a Panzerfaust and withdrew from action.

This Platoon Leader again mounted a tank as they approached more enemy wire just north of building 24. When the wire was reached he dismounted and assisted one of his men in placing the bangalore torpedo carried by the tank. This action breached the anti-tank mines which normally accompanied enemy wire in the area. After guiding the tank through the lane thus cleared the Platoon Leader remounted and continued to direct both the tanks and his platoon forward. (37) By this time buildings 22 and 23 had been cleared and the 3d Platoon of F Company started to swing north in accordance with the battalion plan of maneuver. (38) As the tank on which the Platoon Leader was riding crossed the main street of town it was hit by direct fire from an enemy self-propelled gun. The Platoon Leader was wounded and the tank knocked out. Enemy pressure on the right flank of F Company prevented it from crossing the street. The platoon stopped and reorganized on the south side of the street in buildings 23 to 94. That portion of F Company north of the street had made little progress during this time. It was expected that E Company would pass through momentarily although they had not arrived by 1930 hours.

Meanwhile G Company, with their 3d Platoon leading and echeloned to the right rear of the 3d Platoon of F Company, had breached the enemy wire and mine fields in their sector and had driven into the enemy defenses in buildings 25, 27, 28, and 29.

(39) Although some casualties had occurred G Company was still

(37) A-12, p. 6

(38) A-9, p. 4

(39) A-9, p. 7

a fighting unit as it wheeled south toward buildings 26 and 30.

At about 1030 hours the 1st Platoon of G Company passed through the 3d Platoon with the mission of securing building 98 to the east. After moving about 100 yards forward of buildings 27 and 28 they also stopped and waited for the arrival of E Company. (40)

While the previously described actions were transpiring, the 2d Platoon of G Company had moved out to overlook the deep draw on the south flank of the 2d Battalion's zone of action. An enemy strong point was encountered which consisted of a machine gun emplaced behind an anti-personnel mine field and concertina wire. (41) After mortar fire had failed to completely eliminate this strongpoint, the Platoon Leader ordered an assault with marching fire which successfully overran the position. Fifteen men remained in this platoon. (42) The strongpoint had been reduced by 0800 hours and the platoon continued to the east toward objective 543. At about 0900 hours the platoon received small arms and machine gun fire from the south end of this objective. The platoon withdrew about 50 yards to the southwest where a wooded draw afforded cover and concealment for reorganization. Medical aid men attempting to evacuate casualties left in the open as a result of this withdrawal were met with heavy mortar concentrations. (43)

All forward movement of the 2d Battalion had stopped in order to await the arrival of E Company. Considerable difficulty was experienced by the Battalion Commander as he attempted to commit E Company through F and G Companies. The

(40) A-12, p. 6

(41) A-9, p. 9

(42) A-9, p. 5

(43) A-6, p. 3

time lag and inaccuracy in the flow of information from front line companies to the Battalion Observation Post contributed to the late start forward by E Company. At 0845 hours the Battalion Commander tried to contact E Company but it was not until 0908 hours that a report was made to the Regimental S-3 that E Company was moving according to plan. (44) By 1000 hours E Company had made slow progress in its move forward due to continued mortar and artillery fire throughout the entire area. One of the attached tanks was lost when it became stuck in the snow which filled a sunken road. As E Company approached the line of contact both F and G Companies renewed their attack.

The 1st Platoon of F Company wheeled to the north toward objective 26. Heavy mortar and automatic weapons fire was received from buildings 35, 36, and 40. Eleven casualties sustained during this small maneuver included a squad leader, two assistant squad leaders, a rocket launcher gunner, a runner, and the assistant gunner and ammunition bearer of the light machine gun section. (45) The 1st Platoon of H Company's heavy machine guns located in this area also received heavy losses as it fired in support of F Company. The Platoon Sergeant reported that each gun of the platoon had fired approximately one belt of ammunition when a mortar concentration scored a direct hit on his platoon. Two machine guns were destroyed. Twelve casualties (four killed), included two section leaders, three squad leaders, and 3 gunners occurred. As this platoon displaced forward the platoon sergeant encountered another serious difficulty. In attempting to use his "Beehive"

(44) A-9, p. 5

(45) A-12, p. 7

shaped charge he learned that all the detonators had been given to one man in the platoon; this man was now a casualty and the detonators had been evacuated with him. (46)

The 1st and 2d Platoons of F Company continued to push forward and cleared buildings 12, 8, 10, 17, 18, 19, and 20. This forward movement relieved the pressure on the 3d Platoon which crossed to the north side of the main street. F Company was now regrouped for better tactical control.

After a slow start E Company gained momentum as their attack carried the 2d Platoon to buildings 42 and 39 which constituted Objective 28. The self-propelled gun which had previously knocked out an F Company attached tank was overrun during this advance. Additional forward movement of the 2d Platoon was blocked by intense small arms fire. In an attempt to continue his advance the E Company Commander committed his 3d Platoon on the right. This platoon had been decimated previous to this commitment when it was caught in an enemy mortar concentration near building 32. Casualties included the platoon sergeant and a squad leader. As this platoon moved forward it was hit by another mortar concentration in the vicinity of building 33. As it came abreast of the 2d Platoon it was stopped by fire from buildings 90 and 108. Still probing for an opening the 1st Platoon of E Company was committed on a wider maneuver around the right flank. This platoon was stopped at building 107 by fire coming from buildings 93 and 95 as well as from organized enemy defensive positions across the open field to the east. (47)

E Company's attached tank platoon continued to dwindle as

(46) Statement of T/Sgt. Fitch, October 1949
(47) A-12, p. 7

it moved forward. The lead tank lost a track as it ran over a mine located about 50 yards to the east of building 32. The platoon leader plus two of his crew members were killed as they abandoned the tank. Another tank received four direct hits from a self-propelled gun firing from a ridge on the southeast edge of town. Thus after less than four hours of action two tanks, with no platoon leader, remained operational to support E Company. Very little support had been secured from the tanks during the attack thus far. They were now held up by fire from an assault gun firing from buildings 84 and 67. The E Company Commander reported that his company was pinned down and unable to advance. (48) The Company Observation Post was reported to be in building 107.

The 2d Platoon of H Company's heavy machine guns in direct support of G Company had also suffered heavy casualties during its displacement. The same mortar concentration which had caught the 3d Platoon of E Company also blanketed this platoon destroying one machine gun and killing or wounding the entire squad. This concentration also caused the loss of the G Company 1st Platoon Leader and the concussion started a creeping paralysis through the G Company Commanders back and shoulders.

(49) This concentration consisted of 50 mm and 120 mm mortar fire as well as self-propelled gun fire. It was contained in an area about 200 yards in diameter. During this fire, as well as throughout much of the action, the troops would bunch behind available cover which offered safety from small arms fire. Such protection offered no immunity from high angle fire. This tendency materially increased the number of casualties suffer-

(48) A-9, p. 9

(49) Statement of Capt. Lindrose, 5 February 1945

ed by the 2d Battalion.

The questioning of prisoners taken during the morning revealed that the boundary between the 980th and 981st Regiments was located 400 yards south of KESTERNICH's main street. In addition several prisoners reported that the 9th Battery, 272d Field Artillery, consisting of six 150 mm howitzers, had located its observation in the town. The battery location could not be determined. (50)

By approximately 1200 hours it was apparent to the Battalion Commander that all attacking elements of the battalion had been stopped. The weather had turned bitter cold. Automatic weapons failed to function. Water in the canteens had frozen solid preventing wounded personnel from taking their wound tablets. Wire crews, who worked barehanded as they felt through the snow for wire lines, were seriously handicapped by this weather.

The Regimental Commander suggested that the remaining tanks be committed at this time to overcome the enemy automatic weapons fire. This did not appear to be the solution to the problem in light of the poor support received from the tanks thus far. (51) The Battalion Commander, accompanied by his Artillery Liaison Officer, H Company Commander, and SCR 300 operator, started forward from building 3 on a reconnaissance and inspection to determine the exact situation. As the Battalion Commander moved forward he noticed that the sketch did not include certain buildings. Also many of the roads ran through deep cuts and were filled with snow. This condition did not appear on the sketch and would have been of assistance

(50) A-6, p. 1, 2, 3

(51) A-9, p. 7

to the attacking companies. However the sketch was accurate as to the information it did contain and was used constantly by all personnel. Upon arriving in the vicinity of building 98, which was on fire, the Battalion Commander and party contacted elements of G Company. They reported that fire from buildings 97, 96, and 95 was impeding their advance. The Battalion Commander proceeded to the north along a hedgerow where the south (right) flank of E Company was located at building 107. These men were digging in under cover of the smoke from building 98. Proceeding further to the north along the line held by E Company it was observed that men were digging in with little regard for the mortar fire which fell at regular intervals. Upon reaching the 1st Platoon position of E Company the Battalion Commander asked the platoon sergeant if he was pinned down. He replied, "Hell, no! But the tanks cannot go forward so we were ordered to hold up here."

The E Company Commander was found at the Company Observation Post located in building 33. This location had been erroneously reported to the Battalion Command Post as building 107. After orienting the Battalion Commander on his situation the E Company Commander recommended that the company defend in its present position for the reasons that the fields of fire were good and the initial objective (Objective 28) had been taken. He was informed that the battalion objective laid to the east of town and that was where the battalion would go.

(52) Commanders of all units were called to building 33 to receive an order for the continuation of the attack. No representative of G Company arrived because the Company Commander

(52) A-12, p. 9

was still partially paralyzed and the Executive Officer was busy conducting the company defense.

The attack order was brief. Actually it was intended to continue the original attack plans in a coordinated manner. No changes were made in supporting weapons. Smoke was to be placed on the ridge southeast of town. (53) All companies were to continue the attack at 1400 hours after a five minute artillery preparation. (54) E Company Commander requested that the attack be delayed until 1430 hours. This request was granted and all units informed. The Battalion Commander proceeded to building 25 where he issued the order to the G Company Commander. Upon returning to building 33 he was again requested by the E Company Commander to delay the attack until 1500 hours. This request was also granted and all units were notified.

During the remaining time prior to 1500 hours the Battalion Commander questioned the Tank Company Commander concerning his tank operations up until the present time. His excuse for the lack of support he had given was that the foot elements would not move forward ahead of the tanks. At this time all infantry elements were well ahead of the foremost tank. Upon learning that this was the first action for this company and that they had never received any infantry-tank training, the Battalion Commander explained the meaning of various arm and hand signals used in communicating with tanks. It was further explained that tank commanders should be alert for signals such as "all clear" or a "fire order" for the next house which the infantry expected to assault. Finally the Tank Company

(53) A-12, p. 10

(54) A-9, p. 10

was assigned fire support missions to assist in the resumption of the attack at 1500 hours. (55) Tank losses for the two committed platoons now totaled five tanks knocked out by fire or mines and one tank stuck in the snow.

At 1455 hours the artillery preparation began to fall and all companies resumed the attack at 1500 hours. (56) By 1630 hours F Company cleared buildings 34, 37, and 38. The advance continued toward buildings 35, 36, and 40. Casualties among key personnel continued. The mortar section leader and two more squad leaders were lost during this action.

E Company made little progress. The 1st Platoon Leader was wounded but reported his situation to the Battalion Observation Post prior to his evacuation. In spite of E Company's efforts to advance they were finally limited to their 1500 hour line of departure.

G Company met with more success on the south (right) flank of the battalion. By 1700 hours building 98 had been secured. All companies were ordered to hold in place at 1700 hours. By 1730 hours darkness had fallen. The Battalion Observation Post remained in building 33. Immediate steps were taken to reorganize the battalion, provide additional care for the wounded, and to prepare for a continuation of the attack in the morning.

A forward aid station was set up in building 19. Casualties which had not been evacuated were hauled to the aid station on sleds improvised from skis and stretchers. As men had fallen they sank below the level of the snow making it difficult to locate their position. However company aid

(55) A-12, p. 10

(56) A-9, p. 10

men had spotted most of the casualties which were impossible to recover during daylight hours and led litter teams to these locations under the cover of darkness.

A wire head had been maintained at the Battalion Observation Post throughout the entire day. Additional wire was now laid to each company. All installation was completed by 2330 hours. At 1700 hours the engineers declared that the main street had been cleared of mines up to building 19. An M-29 Carrier, commonly called a "weasel", had been assigned to the battalion for evacuation and supply. It was a full track vehicle about the size of a $\frac{1}{4}$ ton truck. During the night this vehicle became extremely valuable for these purposes. At about 1830 hours a tank retriever came forward to repair and/or evacuate damaged tanks but it was disabled by an anti-tank mine in the road near building 5. This mine was probably one of our own in as much as this location was near the original line of departure which had not been in enemy hands since December, 1944. As a result none of the damaged tanks were repaired during the night. The one tank which had been stuck in the sunken road was recovered. (57)

Plans and actions for the resumption of the attack on the morning of 31 January continued. Patrols were sent forward to breach the anti-tank mine fields. These fields were difficult to find under the deep snow. Assault platoons were reinforced by adding personnel from the various company headquarters. Both of H Company's heavy machine gun platoons were reinforced by reducing the size of the 81mm Mortar Platoon. Automatic weapons such as machine guns and BARS were thawed out by put-

(57) A-12, p. 11

ing them in a basement where some means of heating was available.

At 1800 hours the E Company Commander reported to the Battalion Commander at building 33 where he asked to be relieved of his command. He stated that he could not continue ordering men whom he had known for a long period of time to certain death or injury. He further stated that he was afraid this weakness would endanger the accomplishment of the battalion mission. He was relieved at once and the Executive Officer of E Company assumed command. The Battalion Commander commented that this officer's personal courage was beyond question. He had repeatedly exposed himself during the days action as he fought his company. In order to give the new E Company Commander time for a daylight reconnaissance on 31 January the Battalion Commander set the jump-off time at 0830 hours and then reported to the Regimental Command Post. (58)

The Regimental Commander was greatly disturbed by the fact that the 2d Battalion was the only unit in the division which had not secured its objectives on schedule. He ordered an aggressive all-out attack for 31 January. Plans had already been made by the 2d Battalion for such an attack. While intelligence reports at division had been accurate as to strengths no indications were made that may have revealed the enemys intention to make a determined stand in KESTERNICH. (59) It was now apparent that the enemy intended to defend this vital objective as long as it was possible to do so.

E Company shifted the 1st and 3d Platoons to the north, away from the open fields in which they had been located. The

(58) A-12, p. 11, 12; A-9, p. 14

(59) Personal knowledge

1st Platoon was to attack eastward on the south side of the main street as the 3d Platoon attacked in the same direction on the north side of the street. The 2d Platoon was to attack to the northeast, in conjunction with F Company, to seize Objective 27. (60)

THE SECOND DAY AND NIGHT IN KESTERNICH, 31 JANUARY (See Map F)

The Regimental Cannon Company was relieved from attachment to the 307th Field Artillery Battalion and displaced forward to SIMMERATH (2000 yards west of KESTERNICH) where it was ordered to render direct support to the 2d Battalion. Two forward observer parties remained with the 2d Battalion. (61) Twelve tanks were available. (62)

Prior to the jump-off at 0830 hours it was observed that the enemy had laid new anti-tank mine fields during the night. These fields were hasty in nature and could be easily observed because they were not buried in the snow. A deceptive artillery preparation was fired at 0600 hours. At 0825 hours ^{the} five minute artillery preparation began to fall and upon its completion all elements started forward in the attack.

On the extreme north flank of the battalion the 1st Platoon of F Company started across the open fields toward Objective 26. Heavy flanking fire was received from buildings 44 and 45 thereby making it impossible to advance through the various hedgerows which criss-crossed the area. The Company Commander ordered the platoon to withdraw to the shelter of a hedgerow. The platoon took up positions in the sunken road running north along the eastern edge of Objective 24 and along

(60) A-12, p. 13

(61) Personal knowledge

(62) A-10, p. 2

the road running north into the center of Objective 26. From these positions the platoon neutralized by fire the entire eastern portion of Objective 26. The 2d Platoon of F Company assaulted buildings 35, 36, and 40, which were captured after a brief fire fight. Meanwhile the 3d Platoon had captured building 41 and by 1130 hours both the 2d and 3d Platoons started an attack on buildings 43, 44, 45, and 51. These buildings were cleared after destroying six German machine guns and their crews; this marked the limit of F Company's advance for 31 January. (63) The tank platoon supporting F Company had been in firing positions only twice throughout the entire day while the tank destroyer section had not fired a shot. The sunken roads, excessively deep snow, lack of training, and buildings hampered the movement of these supporting weapons.

To the south G Company had also pushed off at 0830 hours. It took the entire morning to maneuver into position, register mortar fire, and reduce the enemy positions in and around buildings 91 and 92. By noon the weather turned warm enough to thaw some of the snow. This resulted in soft slippery ground which was still covered with several inches of snow. As G Company pushed to the east from their newly won positions in buildings 91 and 92 they came under fire from enemy positions to the southeast. The company reported that this enemy position consisted of a pill box protected by field fortifications containing at least two machine guns. A tank destroyer moved forward to assist in the reduction of this pill box but it became stuck while trying to maneuver into position. G Company then requested the assistance of one tank however the

(63) A-10, p. 2, 3, 4

tank reported that it was receiving direct fire from an anti-tank weapon and was unable to get into a firing position. (64)

E Company's attack developed into the main effort for the day. During the night the enemy had established a main line of resistance not more than 150 yards forward of E Company's positions and at the same time occupied the buildings forward of their MLR. After clearing building 90, E Company started a slow methodical advance through these defenses. Supported by three tanks which advanced through prepared gaps in the anti-tank mine fields, the 1st and 3d Platoons penetrated this MLR. Each building became a separate fight with a fixed routine. The tanks would fire at a building until the wall was breached. E Company troops would make a dash for this hole, enter the building, and mop it up room by room. In at least two instances the Germans fired machine guns by manipulating wires which ran from one building to another. They had also made small firing embrasures by removing a single foundation block. This type of firing slot was difficult to locate.

E Company's attack was pushed with considerable vigor throughout the entire day. The former Executive Officer, now commanding the company, constantly moved with his assault echelons. This aggressiveness seemed to permeate the entire company as exemplified by Sergeant Jonah Kelley, a squad leader in the 1st Platoon who became particularly adept at reducing buildings with the aid of his squad. He would establish a base of fire and under cover of this fire advance alone to the building being assaulted. He would then cover the advance of his squad. On one occasion his squad was held up by a machine gun

(64) A-12, p. 14

which could not be neutralized by using the supporting tanks or other means. In a bold frontal assault Sergeant Kelly was able to kill four and wound one of the Germans in the emplacement. This was accomplished after he had been hit and knocked to the ground where he died as a result of his wounds. Sergeant Kelly was awarded the Medal of Honor for this action which permitted his squad to advance.

At about 1400 hours a tank was hit by a Panzerfaust in the vicinity of building 89. All platoons of E Company were low in strength and it was necessary to reinforce the 3d Platoon with a squad from the 2d Platoon. This enabled an advance to building 60. The remaining tank left with E Company lost its commander due to sniper fire; a sergeant from the 2d Platoon, E Company took command of the tank and coordinated its fire through the remainder of the day. (65)

E Company continued to advance eastward from buildings 60 and 89. The large open area just forward of 60 presented some difficulty to this advance. Another tank was lost to an anti-tank mine between buildings 87 and 88. The Communication Sergeant became a casualty during the movement. Another main defensive line was breached at building 87. These advances coupled with G Company's previously described advance to buildings 91 and 92 resulted in the envelopment of several enemy positions which quickly surrendered when they received fire from the rear. A rapid questioning of these prisoners revealed the information that they had arrived as reinforcements at 0230 hours had been ordered to hold their positions at all costs until a counterattack could be launched. These reinforcements

(65) A-12, p. 15 & 16

had been hastily organized into an "Alarm" Company - the counterpart of our "temporary reserve" or "provisional" company. (66)

Again it was necessary to reinforce the 3d Platoon with another squad from the 2d Platoon. The advance continued to the east and buildings 64, 65, 66, and 67 were cleared. (67) By 1200 hours the triangle at the eastern end of the town had been reached where buildings 84 and 67 were secured. At this time the 3d Platoon on the north side of the main street observed some "American" soldiers in the vicinity of building 68. A squad was moved across the open field between buildings 67 and 68 to join this group. As the squad moved across the open field the "Americans" fired upon them, wounding three men and causing the immediate withdrawal of the squad. Later Prisoner of War interrogation revealed that this enemy personnel had previously fought in the "bulge" where they had secured American uniforms. They were to have been part of the German counterattacking force in KESTERNICH.

The Battalion Commander moved his Observation Post to building 85 and contacted the E Company Commander in the ruins of building 84. After hearing his report the Battalion Commander decided that the time had arrived to commit his reserve tank platoon and launch a coordinated assault to drive the enemy from the town. The Tank Company Commander objected strenuously to this action for the reason that "no tanks would be left in reserve." The tanks were committed. (68) This final attack by E Company was planned to begin at 1315 hours, preceded by a five minute artillery preparation. (69) This

(66) A-7
(67) A-10, p. 4
(68) A-12, p. 16 and 17
(69) A-10, p. 5

preparation was planned to cover the area bounded by buildings 81, 82, 68 and 72. As the 2d Battalion Artillery Liaison Officer was arranging for this preparation the Division Artillery Commander radioed that Corps 8" artillery was available if it was desired; these fires were requested. Troops were warned to take cover during the artillery preparation which was laid on just 150 yards ahead of E Company's leading elements.

As the Division Artillery Commander entered KESTERNICH to observe this firing he stopped to secure information from the Cannon Company Commander who was moving along the main street near buildings 22 and 23. A mortar concentration dispersed this group and wounded a driver. It appeared that German observation into the town was still effective. (70)

At 1310 hours the five minute preparation began to fall in the area planned. It consisted of Corps 8" guns, three battalions of 155 Howitzers, and nine battalions of 105 Howitzers. In order to penetrate into the cellars it was fired by battalion, three volleys, with delayed fuze. (71) The supporting 4.2 Chemical Mortar Platoon and the 2d Battalion 81 mm mortars maintained a smoke screen on the extreme eastern edge of the town. (72) As the reserve platoon of tanks fanned out on either side of the triangle they adopted a line of columns formation with the two tank section on the north and the three tank section on the south. With this formation only the lead tank in each section was able to fire to the front. E Company received a few casualties from short artillery rounds but prepared to move forward under the continued protection of the tank fire as the artillery preparation lifted.

(70) Personal knowledge
(71) A-12, p. 17
(72) A-10, p. 5

In spite of this heavy preparation enemy small arms fire opened up immediately after the preparation ceased. Self-propelled 88 fire rained in on the triangle and casualties began to mount as a result of the ricochet bursts. This fire was ineffective against the tanks since the enemy gunners were firing "blind" through the smoke screen. Enemy mortar and artillery fire continued to fall and it was immediately apparent that the attack would bog down and fail unless the tanks moved forward and opened fire on obvious targets of opportunity which were presenting themselves along the line. However the tanks did not start moving forward and remained "buttoned up". The Tank Company Commander reported that his communication had failed again and that he had no control over the platoon. At this time the Battalion Commander and E Company Commander each mounted a tank and secured the crew's attention by covering the vision slots and pounding on the turrets with helmets. (73) When the tanks unbuttoned they were directed forward and targets were designated. This fire support enabled the capture of buildings 83 and 82 on the south side of the triangle and buildings 68, 69, and 70 to the north. (74)

The second section of tank destroyers moved up the main street and stopped in column near building 85. Upon seeing these destroyers an excited E Company soldier ran to the Battalion Commander and reported that German tanks were attacking from the rear. One of the tankers also waved his arm to the rear and shouted "German Tanke". About this time a shell hit the building in which the battalion command group was located causing five casualties including the H Company Commander who

(73) A-8, Annex
(74) A-10, p. 7

was not evacuated. Upon checking with F and G Companies the Battalion Commander learned that neither company had observed enemy tanks in the rear of the battalion.

At 1600 hours the last buildings were being cleared by E Company which was working from south to north. The leading tank destroyer spotted some E Company men and fired one HE round into them, killing one man and wounding two others. The last tank in column on the south side of the triangle quickly spun his turret 180 degrees and fired one round at the tank destroyer at a range of 35 yards. Fortunately it was an HE round and did not harm the tank destroyer. It did prompt the TD commander to stand up, level his finger at the tank and shout "That son-of-a-bitch shot at me." Mistaken identity was given as the cause for both of these errors. Everyone now realized that German tanks had not approached from the rear and the scare was over. (75)

By 1630 hours buildings 71, 78, and 79 had been cleared. (76) During this action two platoon leaders were lost. A technical sergeant who had been leading his platoon forward for two days, and was credited with killing over 25 Germans, entered a building near 79 when a Panzerfaust exploded in the room with him, wounding four of his men. He went into hysteria-- laughing while tears ran down his face. It was necessary to evacuate him for deafness and shock. The 2d Platoon leader who had been attacking to the northeast with F Company started forward to report to the E Company Commander that he had captured buildings 41 and 54. He was caught in a mortar concentration which resulted in his evacuation because of deaf-

(75) A-12, p. 18

(76) A-10, p. 7

ness and shock.

As E Company had been moving to the east, G Company was in the process of reducing the pill box previously reported. At 1400 hours the G Company Executive Officer reported to the Battalion Commander at the Battalion Observation Post (Building 85) that the G Company Commander's paralysis had now reached the point where he could no longer move around to any great extent. He was evacuated after an examination by the Battalion Surgeon, although he objected to this action. (77)

With the former executive officer in Command, G Company proceeded to reduce the pill box. This was accomplished by placing smoke to the southeast of the pill box with 4.2 mortars, placing an 81mm mortar concentration on the objective, and moving in with marching fire. (78) Upon capture it was learned that this pill box consisted on nothing more than a stone ledge with positions dug in on and around it. G Company organized in place for the night. During the day of fighting the company had received casualties totaling fifteen wounded and evacuated plus an unknown number of men killed.

E Company outposted the last buildings captured but withdrew to a line between buildings 67 and 83 where they organized for the night. This withdrawal was necessary due to the presence of better fields of fire on this line and the lack of personnel in E Company. The enemy recovered building 78 by infiltration during the night.

K Company, 310th Infantry arrived in KESTERNICH and was attached to the 2d Battalion. By 1930 hours this company had relieved E Company which was assembled in battalion reserve

(77) A-12, p. 19

(78) A-10, p. 5

in buildings 56 to 60. E Company had lost all of its platoon leaders and platoon sergeants. Defensive positions were prepared to repel any counterattack from the northeast, the most likely avenue of approach. (79)

Cannon Company had fired several missions in support of the various actions during the day. However due to the close quarters in which most of the fighting was conducted, it was impossible to give the fire support needed due to the normal dispersion of the M-3 Howitzer which was used by the Cannon Company. The company displaced forward during the day which also disrupted the fire support. (80)

The battalion anti-tank platoon occupied positions in the eastern edge of the town during the night. The Battalion Command Post was located in building 85, the former Battalion Observation Post. Eight of the original fifteen supporting tanks remained operational for the next day's attack.

During the night the weather again turned bitter cold causing the water to freeze in foxholes. Trenchfoot and frostbite was prevalent however the Battalion Aid Station reported that only nine men were evacuated due to exposure. The hard fighting had welded the remaining men into a fighting unit with high esprit. Many of the men did not report the condition of their hands and feet, preferring to remain with their buddies on the line. (81)

THE LAST DAY OF THE ATTACK, 1 FEBRUARY (See Map F)

The final assault, preceded by a five minute artillery preparation, on enemy troops still defending KESTERNICH began

(79) A-12, p. 19

(80) Personal knowledge

(81) A-12, p. 21

at 1430 hours on 1 February. As a result of the previous day's operations the companies were disposed from north to south as follows: F Company; K Company, 310th Infantry; and G Company. E Company remained as the battalion reserve. (82)

F Company pushed forward into the last remaining buildings included in Objective 27 and prior to darkness organized for the defense along the northeastern edge of the town.

K Company cleared the remaining buildings along the main street to the east of the triangle. Although K Company reported that all enemy personnel had been cleared from their zone it was learned at a later date that this report was not entirely correct.

G Company had the most difficult assignment for the day. Their objective included buildings 80 and 81 located just south of Objective 30. Any approach from the northwest or west of these buildings could be met with grazing fire and direct anti-tank fire by the enemy. The final plan for the reduction of these buildings included the following. The objective was to be placed under fire from the portion of K Company's area in the vicinity of buildings 82 and 79. The 2d Platoon of G Company plus the 2d Platoon of heavy machine guns from H Company was to support the attack with overhead fire from the forward slope of Objective 543. However as this platoon of machine guns displaced forward it was caught in a 50 mm mortar concentration which wounded four men including one section leader and one squad leader. The remaining two platoons of G Company were to make a frontal assault on the objective. The area over which this assault was to traverse sloped downward

(82) A-16, p. 2

for approximately one-third of the distance. It then started upward with a gentle rise which included three hedgerows and over 50 yards of open field just before reaching the buildings.

At 1425 hours the artillery preparation began to fall. The Battalion Commander counted three direct hits on buildings 80 and 81 out of the first five rounds that landed. Suddenly twelve rounds landed in the vicinity of building 85 where the artillery forward observer was wounded. The Artillery Liaison Officer who was with the Battalion Commander immediately gave the order to "cease fire".

The 1st and 3d Platoon of G Company moved forward in the assault. A technical sergeant, the acting 1st Platoon Leader, led his men across open ground for more than 300 yards to the snow filled draw and then up the slope through the three hedgerows which each contained a wire fence. The final enemy positions included entrenched enemy dug in behind a hedgerow with concertina wire 25 yards to the front. The sergeant arrived on his portion of the objective with his platoon guide, one BAR man, and two other riflemen. His aggressive advance permitted the 3d Platoon to move forward with a minimum of casualties although 50mm and 150mm mortar concentrations continued to fall in the area.

The 2d Platoon of G Company had not been able to contact the 3d Battalion on the south side of the draw but the fight for KESTERNICH was over. (83)

This action and results thereof are summarized briefly as follows: Although the 2d Battalion, 311th Infantry failed to take its assigned objectives during the four hour period

(83) A-12, p. 20

as directed by higher headquarters it did accomplish its mission in spite of unforeseen difficulties and unexpected enemy resistance.

A final count indicated that approximately 184 men and 6 officers had been killed, wounded, or evacuated for exposure. These casualties were, for the most part, from the actual assault elements of the battalion such as the rifle platoons and supporting heavy weapons crews.

Graves Registration personnel recovered approximately 400 German dead of which it was estimated that 260 were a result of this attack; the balance remained from the previous action in the town during the 16th and 17th of December, 1944.

During four successive months of combat the 78th Infantry Division personnel earned one Medal of Honor and nine Distinguished Service Crosses. Of this total Sergeant Jonah Kelley, E Company, received the Medal of Honor while two of the Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded to members of the 2d Battalion for actions performed in KESTERNICH. For this action the 2d Battalion was awarded the Presidential Distinguished Unit Badge by General Order Number 11, War Department, dated 30 January 1946.

Cedric Foster, noted wartime radio news commentator, covered many of the events narrated in this monograph over his national network hook-up. In summing up the operation he dubbed KESTERNICH with the name "Little Aachen" by comparing the German resistance offered in this area to that of the well known defense of AACHEN. (84)

(84) Personal knowledge

1. INFANTRY-TANK COORDINATION

The most obvious deficiency which attracts our attention throughout this operation is the lack of adequate communication, understanding, and confidence between tanks and infantry. During the initial minutes of the attack tank communication with F Company failed, making it necessary for an infantry platoon leader to expose himself on a tank deck in order to gain their support. Again during the second day of the attack an identical situation developed when communication failed between the reserve platoon of tanks which had just been committed and E Company. In this case it was necessary for the 2d Battalion Commander and E Company Commander to mount the tanks and direct their fire support.

We should expect to have electrical means of communication fail during operations however it would have assisted all concerned if the tank commanders had unbuttoned and observed for arm and hand signals after their radios failed to function. This was not done. Such action would not have been fully effective for the reason that the tank crews did not know the meaning of the standard signals used until after the brief "course" they received from the Battalion Commander during the lull in operations on 29 January.

In general it appears that the infantry knew and executed their missions for an infantry-tank assault, which includes clearing lanes through anti-tank mine fields and silencing anti-tank weapons. A platoon leader of F Company placed a bangalore charge during the first day of the attack to clear

a lane for the tank platoon supporting his company. During the first night after the attack began, patrols were sent forward to clear and mark lanes through the anti-tank mine fields. Smoke was used to blind enemy observation thus rendering direct fire anti-tank weapons ineffective. However, the tanks failed in their mission -- the elimination of automatic weapons which cause infantry casualties but are ineffective against tanks. One tank commander reported that he was "unable" to find a firing position. An entire day of fighting resulted in the platoon of tanks attached to F Company offering fire support on two occasions only.

Written observations of the Commanding Officer, 311th Infantry Regiment concerning this important point were caustic and pointed. In part they read, "Failure of supporting tanks to come forward after the way was cleared by infantry resulted in one days delay. The enemy reinforced with anti-tank guns at night. When tank communication fails they should unbutton. * * * * A tank unit that is not aggressive is a detriment to the infantry." (85)

To prevent this analysis from developing into another bitter denunciation of tanks in general by an infantryman, it is necessary to ferret out the actual causes of the situation just described. The writer believes that criticism of this company should be tempered by the fact that this attack was the initial combat action for the tanks. This is not an excuse, however, for the Tank Company Commanders reticence to engage his tanks in any action where they might have been fired upon. For example his objections to committment of the

(85) A-8, Annex

reserve tank platoon. Additionally, a basic tactical error was made by the tanks on the second day of the attack when the reserve platoon adopted a line of sections formation to offer fire support for an infantry attack. Some formation allowing all tanks to fire frontally should have been used for this action.

After carefully examining all the factors noted above it appears that the lack of precombat training for the tank company caused most of the failures during this attack.

2. CONDUCT OF THE ATTACK

E Company was not committed early enough during the first morning of the attack. The forward momentum of both F and G Companies was lost while waiting for E Company to move into the line. Although some of this delay was due to heavy enemy mortar fire, the actual order for E Company to move forward could have been issued earlier. The Battalion Commander attributes this delay to the fact that he did not move forward far enough to observe the action but relied on radio reports from the companies. In some instances these reports were sketchy and inaccurate. In the words of the Battalion Commander, "this never happened again in the 2d Battalion". The value of this observation is further enhanced when it is compared to E Company's assault at the town triangle during the second day of the attack. Here the Battalion Commander and his command party were in a position to observe the progress of the attack. When it was apparent that the lack of participation by the tanks might jeopardize the success of the attack the Battalion Commander was in a position to take immediate

corrective action.

Another comparison can be made which clearly indicates how the conduct of an attack by different command techniques may produce varying degrees of success. During the first day of the attack E Company gained their initial objective where they took up a defensive position although their final objective was still to be secured. On the other hand, during the second day of the attack, E Company continued to plod through heavy enemy resistance which had been reinforced during the night. This can be attributed to the actions of the new E Company Commander, the former executive officer, who consistently moved with his assault platoons where he could make adjustments such as reinforcing the 1st Platoon when its strength became low.

Another benefit accrued to the commanders who physically conducted their attack on the ground. As the men saw their commanders around they gained confidence and pressed the attack with a vigor which may not have been present if these commanders had not made their presence known. It would be impossible to estimate the morale effect on the men of E Company as they saw their Battalion Commander moving along the line during the first day of the attack.

3. EFFECTS OF WEATHER

Many times small unit planners are prone to disregard the weather. This is particularly true when operating in the Temperate Zones where we do not expend to find extremes in weather conditions. The fallacy of such commissions is clearly demonstrated by this operation. Bitter cold weather and thaw-

ing weather was experienced by the 2d Battalion within the short span of 24 hours.

Many of the adverse effects of weather were foreseen and steps taken to adequately cope with them prior to the beginning of this operation. Snow suits were improvised and issued. Explosives were made available to all personnel to assist in digging field fortifications. It would have been impossible to dig into the frozen ground during the first day of the attack if ordinary tools had been used. The weasel was provided for supply and evacuation. The main supply road to the battalion was plowed free of snow.

The weather created other problems which were not foreseen and which affected the accomplishment of the battalion mission. The inability of the track laying vehicles, tanks and tank destroyers, to perform at maximum efficiency in the deep snow coupled with the inexperience of these units deprived the 2d Battalion of much needed fire support. The malfunction of small arms and crew served weapons, which was probably due to the coagulation of excessive oil, came as a surprise to the crews manning these weapons. The change from extremely cold to warm weather aggravated trench foot and exposure cases.

From the foregoing observations it can be deduced that weather may have marked effects on the operations of small units.

4. THE ENEMY CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE

Several valuable observations can be made through a study of the results obtained by the German defense of this town. Throughout the entire period of three days it is noted that at

no time did they give up more ground than was absolutely necessary. Their initial MLR was organized well forward and near the line of contact. If superior numbers and fire power forced them to give up one house they withdrew to an adjacent house. During the first night after the beginning of our attack they reinforced their positions and set up two definite lines of resistance while still occupying the houses forward of the first organized line. Their frequent and accurate use of mortar concentrations to break up our attacking formations resulted in numerous delays as well as casualties for the 2d Battalion. The use of machine guns fired by remote control wires and cunningly concealed firing embrasures all aided to confuse and surprise the attackers, thus making them more cautious and less aggressive in their advance.

The one factor missing from this defense which would probably have turned the fight in favor of the Germans was the counterattack. Although various groups of enemy personnel were organized for this mission at no time during the three days of this operation did the enemy launch such an attack against the 2d Battalion. It is not hard to visualize the success which an aggressive counterattacking force would have achieved if it had followed any one of the numerous heavy mortar concentrations laid on the attacking troops.

In spite of this lack of counterattacks the enemy was successful in delaying a battalion for three days when future plans of the attacking force were based on the premise that the town could be taken within five hours.

5. PRE-COMBAT TRAINING OF INFANTRY

The loss of leaders due to battle fatigue as well as losses

due to enemy action during this engagement focuses our attention on the thought that improved battle indoctrination is necessary along several lines.

The E Company Commander could not push himself to the extent necessary for a rifle company commander. Here is a man of unquestioned personal courage who broke down at a critical period during an operation. The need for realistic battle indoctrination is emphasized when we consider that this officer recovered from his initial shock and later became a successful military leader. The platoon sergeant who had led his platoon in an aggressive manner for two days broke down in a matter of seconds and without prior warning that he would do so. It is the writers opinion that the indoctrination given the 2d Battalion was not realistic. This may be said of battle indoctrination in general. There is a natural tendency to shun the distasteful eventualities of combat. It is absolutely necessary that men going into combat be prepared to see their friends killed and mutilated. Furthermore, they must be prepared to give orders which may result in loss of life or injury. This can be accomplished only if a realistic approach is taken to battle indoctrination.

The second factor which must be stressed during precombat training is that all personnel must be prepared mentally and professionally to take over the duties of their superiors at any time. Although no attempt has been made to account for all the casualties suffered by the 2d Battalion during this action there are enough known or recorded losses to indicate that two company commanders, eight platoon sergeants, three section leaders, eighteen squad leaders, and ten platoon lead-

ers became casualties. During training we very often have "fall out one" days when a platoon leader takes command of the company and so forth down the line. We also conduct crew served weapons drill in the same manner. In many cases this training is done in a perfunctory manner and the real need is never impressed on all personnel until they are faced with a situation such as described herein.

6. THE BATTALION PLAN

Although the Regimental Commander, 311th Infantry announced in his after action observations that the 2d Battalion's plan for the attack on KESTERNICH was faultless the writer believes that this plan could have been simplified in one respect. If the missions of E Company and G Company had been exchanged for the initial attack on 30 January it would have eliminated the necessity of a rather complicated passage of lines which was necessary during the first morning of the attack. During the confusion of battle, company size units should not be burdened with complicated maneuvers if it can be avoided. The more simple a plan becomes the easier it is to execute. While other contributing factors existed it is believed that the momentum of the 2d Battalion attack on the first morning would have been maintained if this exchange of missions had been effected. This change would have allowed both F and E Companies to attack eastward and eliminated the necessity of F Company's turn towards Objective 27 while in contact with the enemy. Such a turn deliberately exposes a flank to the enemy who may be quick to take advantage of such an error. It was impossible for the right platoon of F Com-

pany to cross to the north side of the street as planned until the other platoons had advanced enough to relieve the enemy pressure. Actually the turning action developed into a regrouping of F Company and a change in direction rather than a maneuver which maintained constant pressure on the enemy as visualized in the plan.

7. COORDINATION

The chain of events beginning with the tank destroyer firing into E Company troops as they cleared the last houses in the triangle on the eastern edge of town leads us to the important need for coordination on the battlefield. This event was immediately followed by a friendly tank firing on the tank destroyer. While the commanders concerned offered mistaken identity as the excuse for these actions the actual cause of these errors can be laid to the lack of communication between infantry, tanks, and tank destroyers. Three arms operating in one small town were not cognizant of the movements or exact location of each other.

LESSONS

1. Tanks and infantry MUST engage in combined precombat training in order to promote the mutual cooperation, understanding, and confidence necessary for an effective fighting team.

2. Commanders who move well forward during the attack secure the accurate information necessary for intelligent and timely decisions and at the same time instill confidence in the men whom they are leading.

3. Staff planners must consider the effects of weather on contemplated operations to insure that no unforeseen difficulties will arise as a result thereof.

4. Defensive action must include aggressive counterattacks in order to be completely successful.

5. a. The precombat training of infantrymen must include a realistic battle indoctrination course which will mentally condition all personnel for the forthcoming combat period.

b. All personnel must be trained professionally and conditioned mentally to immediately assume the duties and responsibilities of their superiors.

6. Complicated maneuvers while in close enemy contact should not be planned if other courses of action are open for adoption.

7. Coordination, to include positive means of communication, must be maintained between infantry and all supporting arms.