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THE OPERATIONS OF THE RECONNAISSANCE COMPANY 603
TANK DESTROYER BATTALION, COMBAT COMMAND A, 6th
ARMORED DIVISION, FROM NORMANDY TO BREST.
1 August to 12 August 1944
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: ARMOR IN THE EXPLOITATION PHASE.

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE RECONNAISSANCE COMPANY,
603 TD BATTALION, CCA, 6TH ARMORED IN THE
BRITTANY PENINSULA, NORTH FRANCE CAMPAIGN
12 AUGUST 1944
(Personal Experience of a Reconnaissance Company
Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the Reconnaissance Group, 603 TD Battalion, CCA 6th Armored, in the Brittany Peninsula from 1 - 12 August.

During these days this reconnaissance company served continuously as the eyes and ears for CCA, so this monograph might actually be termed a history of CCA. In this monograph I intend to describe the actions of an armored column making a successful exploitation move of 250 miles in a period of less than 2 weeks. General Grow has already written for the February 1947 Military Review, the history of this epic from a division standpoint. Major Hammond in his monograph last year provided additional research. For my part, I will attempt to portray the mistakes, short comings, failures, hardships, lack of leadership, that I saw during this operation. For the sake of briefness and continuity of my story, I will usually omit any reference to the big picture. As a consequence, the reader should consider this manuscript as a supplement to the stories already written on this subject. My mission will be to reveal what I was supposed to do, how I did it, always bearing in mind that in the fog of battle, so much and so many of the established doctrines of the war were violated. My story begins with a reference to the pre-combat days of the Company.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

In Normandy nobody knew or would tell us just what to expect in the way of combat plans. As a consequence, reconnaissance company was daily taken to the beaches at Cateret (West Normandy) for the purpose of familiarizing themselves with the handling of enemy mines. This proved valueless as very few mines were met with during 4,000 combat miles the reconnaissance unit later was destined to complete.

As an example of poor judgement, I can mention that in Normandy the company was forbidden to open the sealed maps that were carried across the

Channel. When the maps were finally available upon leaving Normandy, alas! They were for ground we moved over administratively. The maps we needed never became available. On the 31st of July, 1944, the first direct mission was given the reconnaissance company by the battalion commander. With apologies for the expected unpleasantness, the Colonel stated the road had to be cleared of debris to include all dead horses. At this time the battalion was with CCR, the leading echelon of the division. The next afternoon, 1st of August, I was ordered to report to the CCA Commander, General James Taylor. I took a road map along (1:250,000); the best I had of the area. There I received the following mission from General Taylor: He said, "Get going as fast as you can, I will direct you. How fast can you move out?" I replied, "I would like at least one hour to brief my platoon leaders to see what we have in the way of maps, to issue an order. For instance General, I have a 608 radio in my M8 armored car, you have a 508 in your tank. How will I tie in with you?" General Taylor retorted, "What do you suggest?" I answered, "I will get my battalion CO to give me another officer, I expect he will have a vehicle and he will keep behind your tank, giving you information as I pass it back. "Well General, I better get going." So began the organized chaos I was to be part of.

No sooner had I returned to the company CP than a relayed message came in, that the General wanted me to move immediately over the Pontaubault River Bridge, as CCA had only a limited time to clear the bridge. Thus ended my all too short briefing of the company. I was compelled to order the company to proceed just as in Louisiana maneuvers; in 3 columns, mission: Zone Reconnaissance. 1st Platoon take main axis - 2nd Platoon left roads - 3rd Platoon right parallel roads.

ENEMY INFORMATION AND TERRAIN

A study of history shows the following five German Divisions were in Brittany. 343, 265, 266, Infantry Divisions and 2nd and 5th Parachute Division. There was however, absolutely no enemy intelligence given to my company. After having gone a couple of miles, the left platoon ran

into two Tiger tanks, one being worked upon. These were reported and by-passed. The platoon on the right ran into an enemy scout car containing 16 Germans. This was quickly knocked out, several Germans killed, several prisoners taken; the remainder escaping through the high hedge-rows. The platoon on the main axis proceeded uninterrupted. That evening the combat command bivouacked in the vicinity of Antrain having gone about 15 miles. Fire fights were common all during the night as numerous Germans infiltrated through the reconnaissance company area. At daylight, August 2nd, numerous dead German paratroopers were found around the company perimeter, victims of our devastating machine gun fire. During the morning our column was strafed by German 109's. As the reconnaissance company moved through towns, it reduced numerous undefended roadblocks. At this time the French civilians were noticeably absent. In the evening about 6 o'clock, several German automobiles carrying officers and enlisted men were captured. A short time later enemy of an unknown strength was met. Rifles, burp guns, machine guns were firing from all directions. Later our own light artillery and mortar fire landed in our area. Our support, hearing the sound of German weapons, decided to give us fire support even though they did not know exactly where we were. When the resistance was finally overcome, the advanced guard commander ordered the reconnaissance company to move 2 to 3 miles forward where it would outpost the combat command position. By this time it was dark. As the company entered Meen it found a well prepared road block in front of the bridge, leading into town. The road block was fired upon by our 37mm and focal guns. The sound of German rifle fire could be heard. A French informer was found who said he had seen an hour earlier, an estimated 200 soldiers throughout the town. With this information, the reconnaissance company was ordered to fall back while their CO adjusted concentrations fired by the 231st FA Battalion. The reconnaissance company spent the night dismounted, probing through the town. On the morning of 3rd August, B Troop of the 86th Reconnaissance Squadron was given the mission of leading CCA. Reconnaissance company followed. This was the

first and only occasion the company did not serve as point for the column. As B Troop neared Mauron, they were engaged by approximately 250 enemy soldiers. Within minutes the company commander was killed, and the company lost two armored cars and one jeep. Although my company was in the rear, I was forward observing with this troop. General Grow in his account of this action condemns the troop for missing the westward road at Gael; thereby avoiding the costly delay at Mauron. However, rather than retrace its steps, the CCA Commander decided to overcome the resistance. This required the remainder of the day. As a result of this engagement, (I considered this the reason) the command bivouacked for the night. Actually the combat commander had received a new mission. I was never acquainted with this fact. However, at daybreak the company moved out as point. The command was "Head north." A reading of the history reveals that CCA was given the surprise mission of taking its artillery, tank destroyers, engineers and reconnaissance and linking up with CCR, proceed to Dinan, 44 miles to the north. At noon, as the company reached Broons, the mission was changed by General Patton who had visited the Division C.P. As the company was turning around, it spotted 2 German tanks, 2 armor cars and perhaps 30 soldiers. These were at a range of 3000 yards so they were not engaged. Later on, CCR was to engage these vehicles. While in Broons, 14 American airmen from a knocked down B-24 were found. These men, although hidden out for more than a year had no enemy information of value. In order to make up for this backtracking loss of time and distance, no halt was made the night of the 4th. Fortunately there was some moonlight. By 2400 the company had gone more than 100 miles, some kind of a record for armor on a day move. On the morning of the 5th, the reconnaissance company commander asked General Taylor for relief in order to take on gasoline, ammunition and to clean out the dirt in the muzzles of the guns. Up to this, the company had always had a mission, day or night. The General did secure from the division the use of D Troop, 86th Reconnaissance Squadron who had been on the south flank. Reconnaissance company pulled into a field to await gasoline trucks. The company commander acquainted the new point leader with the general situation as he knew it. It is an interesting point that this Cavalry Troop

could have no radio contact with CCA, instead their information would go to the Reconnaissance Company Squadron thence to the division, thereafter to CCA. While in the refueling area the Reconnaissance Company Commander learned the combat command desired to go north from Fauost, rather than west. As a consequence the refueling could not be totally completed and the company immediately moved to the point of the command once again. Upon learning that CCA did not intend to follow D Troop as planned, and as they could not be contacted by Reconnaissance Company 608 radio, the Reconnaissance Company Commander sent 2 motorcyclists to warn them of the route change. The motorcyclists reached D Troop as they were running into a dug-in parachutist unit of considerable strength. One motorcyclist was able to return with this information. The other was wounded and captured. (Later this man was found in a French hospital, thus indicating the Germans evacuated the wounded. In late afternoon the point reached Huelgoat. From highground the company commander could get his company into fire positions, the greater part of the enemy had taken off. However, the guns soon opened fire, killing about a dozen Germans, knocking out the six field pieces by direct hits and starting an ammunition dump burning and exploding. A short time later, General Grow came to see what the firing was about. He entered the town from another direction with CCR. He stayed to see the mopping up of the German's strong points. Thereafter Combat Command A moved another 10 miles. As the Reconnaissance Company entered the small town of Feuille the order was given to halt for the night. This necessitated Reconnaissance Company backing up about 300 yards in order to keep out of the town. This bottled up the roads and traffic as the advanced guard was closed up on the point at this time. It was nearly midnight when a CCA messenger came forward to say that General Taylor wanted to see the Reconnaissance Company Commander irrespective of the time. The CO at this time was in Feuille talking with the FFI. Here he learned that the Germans had prepared positions on the hills north of town. After much difficulty, the Reconnaissance Company Commander found the General, awoke him, received a new mission to move out at daylight.

This meeting is mentioned because of the security significance. There were no sentries on the road, no CP guides, no visible security measures. The only means of finding anyone was by sighting silhouetted vehicles and numbers. Upon returning to the Company area, the noise of horses and wagons and Germans could be heard very audibly. Lieutenant Jager, the Pioneer Platoon Leader, was contacted and he reported that they had been moving by since shortly after the company commander had gone to the Combat Command CP. Jager stated he had reported the enemy to the advanced guard commander but that he seemed disinterested and lethargic. Lieutenant Jager further stated that he had killed several Germans with his pistol, as they innocently walked near to the company headquarters. On the morning of the 6th, as the company started to leave the bivouac area, a rain of fire, (artillery and mortars) fell on the column. The company dismounted, proceeded as Infantry, advanced to the far corner of the town where there was a cemetery. Two enemy mortar positions were destroyed here. When the firing ceased, the company returned to their vehicles and divided into 3 march units, each with a mission of attempting to find a route to the north or west from the town. Although 3 routes appeared on the map, neither platoon was able to make any progress due to sniper fire and personal hesitation. As the General was dissatisfied with the progress made, the Reconnaissance Company Commander went to the right platoon with a determination to push through if at all possible. The Reconnaissance Company had made so little progress the entire command, although mounted for hours was not able to start out of the bivouac area. The column after having made several miles, called in to the General to report a route was now available. Minutes later, upon reaching the crown of a hill, several flares were fired over our heads. Soon mortars, burp guns and machine guns opened up on us. Unfortunately the lack of maintenance and time to clean weapons during this five day period almost brought destruction to the column. Machine guns were too dirty to fire. This left only the bazooka for fire power. This weapon, aimed high in the air, exploded upon impact; thus acting like a small mortar. Some hedgerows were noticed to be smoking as if on fire. Detonation on the dry leaves undoubtedly had started a sizeable fire.

The machine guns on the jeeps were unavailable, as small arms fire caused the scouts to abandon their vehicles. At this time the reconnaissance company had a platoon of light tanks attached to it. These came forward fast and were used to spray machine gun fire into the hedgerows. The firing of the Germans ceased. By reason of the slow progress made because of enemy harassment, the General decided to march all night. Unfortunately the night was very dark and progress was slow. At this time the movement was in charge of the executive officer, Lieutenant Niles, as the Company Commander had had almost no sleep for five days. In the morning, General Taylor was irritated because the company had only moved a few miles during the night. About 7 AM the Company Commander picked up a French guide who took him (literally cross country) via trails and open fields. The beauty of such travel was that there could be no fear of German ambush as the Germans never could expect us to follow such a poor route. However, the route was direct toward Brest, went through no towns of size, and permitted rapid progress until Kersaint was reached. Here two Nebelwerfers were discovered as well as machine positions. During the afternoon the leading vehicles of the company had been bombed by a single P 47 who dropped two estimated 250 pound bombs. One of which was short the other over. This bomb disturbed the morale of the company and caused them to abandon their previous initiative and aggressiveness. The combat Commander ordered two liaison aircraft to double check what reconnaissance company had reported. Unfortunately these planes were shot down a few minutes later. As a result, the company was dismounted, and advanced to knock out the gun positions. Before the company could be reassembled, mounted and readied to move forward, the advance guard upon orders of the General had pushed through causing reconnaissance company to fall in column behind the advanced guard. As night came a heavy fog fell over the area. Movement had stopped, so the company slept in its vehicles until 3 AM, at which time the company was led into a bivouac area. Instructions were given to the reconnaissance company to dig in by its Company Commander. No such instructions appeared to be given to the tankmen, the Infantry, the Engineers, and other miscellaneous groups in the area. The company was up at daylight cleaning weapons.

Shortly, the heaviest German barrage ever witnessed during the entire war by this company, fell on the entire advance guard position. Vehicles were hit by direct fire and accurately observed fire. Dozens of vehicles were burning. Many men without proper fox holes were hit. The yell for medics was continuous. At this time it was determined that we were on a hilltop, a flat plateau with no exit (cul de sac). The entrance was blocked by knocked out vehicles that had tried to flee during the barrage. Later it was determined from finding several duds that guns as large as 8 inch coastal guns had fired on this prominent terrain feature. About 60 vehicles were either knocked out or abandoned on this hill, while about 150 casualties were received by the personnel of the advance guard. Many of the vehicles were later regained, repaired, and made serviceable again. The men of the reconnaissance company were directed to hold their fox-holes until the shelling abated. This let-up occurred about two hours later, at which time the reconnaissance company commander rounded up many lost, wounded, and shell-shocked individuals and walked about four miles, arriving at the Division CP, the first unit it met. That evening the company, minus the six vehicles lost during the morning bivouacking, near Plabennec, had to follow 37 and 50 mm ammunition from the tank company. About 11 PM, the company received a mission to protect the left flank and rear of the 6th Armored during its attack upon Brest. The Company Commander went back to his Battalion CO to report his week's activities. The battalion had been with CCR. On the way back a field artillery unit was flushing several Germans out of the woods. As I was going to the division CP area, I consented to bring back General Carl Spang to the PW enclosure. Upon interrogation it was found he commanded the 266th Infantry Division, and that he was making his way to Brest. The Battalion CO was visited. The next day I learned Lt. Col. John Minniece was killed in the bivouac area by a soldier of an adjacent unit. This is pointed out in order to show the danger of night movement. In other words, countersigns and passwords did not always succeed with nervous soldiers. The morning of the 9th, the company jumped off in the direction of Brest, progressed about 3 miles, felt that contact was imminent when a liaison officer came up saying that the 6th Armored had been attacked in the rear and that

my mission would be to protect the division rear and right flank. The advance guard was to be the rear guard and vice versa. It is interesting that on this occasion, the artillery batteries were firing both north and south with alternate guns. With the help of strong air support of P 51's the division knocked out the 266th Infantry Division and advanced several miles. At this time with contact made, the reconnaissance company expected ~~to be relieved~~ ^{freedom} from action for the purpose of cleaning guns, maintaining vehicles, and tuning radios that had all bounced out of operation. The afternoon of the 10th, General Taylor told the Reconnaissance Company Commander that he would continue to mop up to the west of his present position, proceeding to the coast. For this mission, 1 platoon of TD's, 1 platoon of light tanks, 1 FO, and 1 battery of FA were attached. The reinforced company moved out several miles, then decided to set up an ambush for Germans trying to get to Brest. This proved to be successful as many PW's were taken. General Taylor then called the CO again, handing him a letter from General Grow, Commanding General, 6th Armored, calling upon the German coastal garrison to surrender. It was pointed out to General Taylor that the reconnaissance company had no German speaking individuals in it, an interpreter was borrowed from CCA Headquarters. After 12 hours of negotiating, the reconnaissance company CO arranged for the surrender of 600 German Officers and ~~EM~~. While the negotiations were going on, the German Coastal Batteries were shooting at a town several miles to the north. To my knowledge, there were no friendly troops in that vicinity. I still believe that the Germans were firing at their own troops, unless they were merely trying to destroy the town. Upon being led to the German position, it was necessary to pass through several mine fields. The position the Germans were to surrender could have been most difficult to conquer. The PW's were shuttled to reconnaissance CP where division picked up the prisoners the next day. Just as the last PW's were being brought in, the reconnaissance company received a mission of preceeding with CCB to Lorient, more than 100 miles away.

In summarizing, in this brief account of a small unit's action, one notices the versatility of reconnaissance units. In a report of limited

length, it is impossible to tell all the missions this company of 122 enlisted men and 6 officers performed. Many times it served as engineers, preparing routes for the combat command, removing mine fields, obstacles, repairing bridges; As Infantry, by fighting dismounted; As tanks, by using a shock action of 50 caliber machine guns and 37's. In covering these 250 miles there were no men killed, although several were captured, and about 15 wounded including 3 officers. The company worked day and night. On 2 occasions working 2 days and 1 night continuously. General Grow has written an interesting account of these adventurous days in an article entitled "Epic of Brittany." Major Hammond of the Officers Advanced Class of 1947 has further written on the same subject. General Patton, Colonel Allen, and others have referred to the Brittany Epic. I have read dozens of other articles concerning our unit and neighboring units. However, what I read helped me in no way. I have written as I would at the time of the events. Old letters, conversations with several members of the 603 TD Battalion have refreshed my memory. Although the accomplishment might be considered successful, I have tried to point out how there could have been better tactics used. I have ignored the strategy why we shouldn't have ever gone to Brest, would be a volume in itself. I merely tried to bring out that the division leaders were vehicle bound, everybody wanted other units in front of them. It is interesting that the division losses for this period were killed, 130; missing, 70; wounded, 398; combat vehicles lost, 50; other vehicles, 62; guns, 11; enemies captured, 4,000.

LESSONS

For lessons learned: Units should be given time to clean weapons, take on ammunition, gasoline and eat. Efficiency could have been greater if relieving units were available. That was a great problem. Support and main body was attacked by air but never by tanks or infantry. Resistance could not always be by-passed. Reconnaissance company could generally force penetration before advanced guard could deploy and come forward. Reconnaissance by-fire was common. A display of strength caused Germans to hide.

The attempt to perform zone reconnaissance rather than area reconnaissance was unsuccessful. Actually it was found that on a rapid advance no

flank protection is needed. However, the trains on a halt needed protection. The deployment of the advanced guard should have been automatic when the point was held up. Instead it was too cautious, deployed too far back, thus failing to reach the scene of action until the m     was over.

Another lesson: When hostile air attacked, the machine gunners fired at the airplanes, not where the planes would be by the time the bullet reached the area.

One of the most critical mistakes of this indoctrination to combat was that one combat command did not know where the other commands were. Besides this lack of ground coordination, there was little air coordination. Witness the bombing of the company by a friendly P 47. Perhaps much of this confusion was caused by a critical shortage of maps. On some occasions, there was but a single map for the entire company.

Air was helpful, mostly by their failure to destroy any bridges in Brittany. At no time were we delayed while engineers could build a bridge. As far as I know, the engineers had no missions while on this exploitation.

As for the Principles of War, we see principle of objective being overlooked. The reconnaissance company proceeded for 3 days before learning where they were to go (BREST). As for surprise, division made full use of it. However, my opinion is that Germans were trying to fall back to their coastal defenses such as at Brest and Lorient and that they didn't plan any delaying action.

As for simplicity, the Commanding General attempted to supervise the execution of orders, whereas the combat commander was complacent and thereby failed to check closely his subordinate leaders.

As for mass, the armored column would by-pass resistance if strong, if weak, use fire-power and advance.

Speed on the battlefield is a very important factor. I will often achieve success where other measures fail. Planning and preparation is often of more value than speed.

The most important contribution I can offer concerning this operation, was that all officers were not leaders. Success in battle comes from courage on the battlefield. Oftentimes a company will be stimulated to attain an

objective by the timely appearance of a general or colonel. Vigorous action, personnel courage is especially needed on a fluid front. A tribute must be paid to the medics on the road. Ambulances were rolling hospitals. The Germans were particularly careful to avoid firing upon vehicles carrying a Red Cross flag. Tribute must also be paid to the PFI. They handled all the PW's, furnished reconnaissance information, aided in the reduction of roadblocks.

As for armaments, the M8 armored car was impervious to German small arms. Our 50 caliber machine gun and 37mm cannon terrified the Germans.

As for logistical support - the army supply point was 205 miles to the rear as the column neared Brest. Considering that it takes 125,000 gallons of gas to fill all the fuel tanks of the division, we can see how bush the G-4 must have been.

Thus ended the first exploitation of a green division. During this two weeks of action, the division had 130 killed, 70 missing, and 398 wounded. Combat vehicles lost, 50, other vehicles 62, guns, 11, enemy captured 6,000, with an estimated 3,500 killed.

Such low ratio of losses to successes looks good on the record. However, to inject a note of discontent, many of the lives lost perhaps could have been saved if the planning had been more complete and handed down in time to be of value. I arrive at this final conclusion because I saw the 6th Armored Division become in later months a superb division. One of the main reasons for later successes was the living, sleeping, eating, fighting together of composite teams of infantry, tanks, artillery, engineers, and reconnaissance. In other words the division had had very little "team" training. When they got it, they were unbeatable.

BRITTANY

Enemy Order of Battle

"D" Day

77

265

266

275

343

353

3 Par

5 Par

1 Aug 44

(Elements)

343

265

266

2 Par.

5 Par.

Annex A

Composition of Troops

CCA

44 Armd Inf. Bn

68 TK Bn

Co A & Rcn Co 603TD Bn

Btry A 777 AAA Bn

Co B 25 Armd Engr Bn

Annex B

MISSION

"Get on the road and
get going."

Gen. Taylor

Annex C