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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 605TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION
(NINTH ARMY - XIII CORPS) IN THE CROSSING OF THE ROER
RIVER, 14 FEBRUARY-17 MARCH 1945 (RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal experience of a Battalion S-3)

Type of operation described: RIVER CROSSING AND EXPLOITATION

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 605TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION
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INTRODUCTION

On 14 February 1945, after a two day motor march through France, Belgium, and Holland, the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion arrived in the Siegfried Line town of Teveren, Germany. While the battalion settled itself in billets and began its motor and gun maintenance, the battalion commander, accompanied by his S-3 and one Liaison Officer, reported to Headquarters XIII Corps in Kerkrade, Holland. (1) (Tab A)

At Corps Headquarters they were oriented on the forthcoming Roer River crossing operation by the Corps Antitank officer. He explained that the Ninth Army had been placed in the line in the northern half of the Aachen sector in late October by absorbing the XIX Corps and its three veteran divisions in the line from First Army, and by receiving the XIII Corps with two Infantry Divisions all newly arrived in Europe. (2)

The initial mission at that time was to fight through the remaining five miles of the ten mile belt of Siegfried defenses, seize bridgeheads across the Roer River at Linnich and Julich, and be prepared to operate to the East toward the Rhine River. By early December the first of these missions had been accomplished, the Siegfried had been breached and the Ninth Army was in possession of the west bank of the Roer from Linnich through Julich and to the South. (3)

On 16 December the German launched his attack through the

(1) A-1, p.3 (2) A-4, p. 10 (3) A-11, p. 101

Ardennes and the Ninth Army turned its thoughts from the impending drive to the Rhine, assumed the defensive and devoted itself to supplying troops and supplies to First Army. (4) XIII Corps with two divisions occupied a front along the Roer of about 20 miles. The Ninth Army was placed under the operational control of 21st Army Group on 20 December. (5) In early January, with the successful liquidation of the "bulge" assured, the Ninth Army turned again to offensive planning. The Army was to remain under 21st Army Group, be built up to a strength of three Corps, and make the Main Effort of the Allied drive to the Rhine. (6)

With the reduction of the "bulge" the Roer River rose to Historical prominence. Captured German Engineer Documents indicated that by blowing the Roer Dams the water level could be raised nine feet flooding an area from 1,000 to 3,000 yards wide. The threat of this flood and the incident destruction of all crossing means and resultant isolation of any combat force across the Roer, was a constant deterrent to the planners. (7)

On 8 February the First Canadian Army launched its attack Southeast along the lower Rhine from the vicinity of Nijmegen. The thaw, flooding, and fanatical resistance of the German forced this attack to bog down, but by 12 February Cleve, the northern hinge of the Siegfried Line, had been captured. (8) First Army ordered an attack to capture the Roer Dams South of Duren. This attack caused the German to blow the discharge valves of the lower dam and release the water stored behind it. (9)

(4) A-11, p. 101 (5) A-11, p. 103 (6) A-5, p. 231 (7) A-11, p. 117 (8) A-5, p. 231 (9) A-2, p. 20.

The river overflowed its banks along the entire Ninth Army front. The water level rose over five feet in two days. The width increased to as much as 2,000 yards and the speed of current to six to twelve miles per hour. An unseasonable thaw had begun 31 January and the Roer became impassible for an estimated minimum of two weeks. Conditions of the banks and approaches were especially bad after the inundation. (10)

The only course open was an indefinite postponement of the assault pending recommendations of the Army Engineer on suitable speed of flow and recession of flooding. The delay gave time for additional Engineer - Infantry training, allowed time for build-up of additional supplies and troop strength, and made more time available for planning to all echelons. (11)

By mid February the Ninth Army was built up to strength of three Corps as follows: (12)

TROOP LIST

XIII Corps

84th Infantry Division

102nd Infantry Division

5th Armored Division

XVI Corps

35th Infantry Division

79th Infantry Division

8th Armored Division

XIX Corps

29th Infantry Division

30th Infantry Division

83rd Infantry Division

2nd Armored Division

Army Reserve

95th Infantry Division

The front line at this time was the river itself from the Army South boundary to a point North of Linnich. On the left the enemy still held the west bank and angled back to meet the

(10) A-6, p. 51 (11) A-3, p. 3 (12) A-2, p.23.

British West of Roermond. (13) (Tab A)

The general plan of the Army commander was to force two simultaneous assault crossings of the Roer River at Linnich and Julich when flooding subsided. Then turn to the Northeast, and in conjunction with the British and Canadian forces destroy the enemy between the Rhine and the Meuse, and seize the west bank of the Rhine between Neuss and Mors. The First Army was to attack with a strong corps on the left to protect the Army South flank as far as the Erft river. The XIII Corps crossing at Linnich with two Divisions abreast would seize Erklenz and Rheindahlen, bypass Munchen-Gladbach on the west, execute a right turn, capture Krefeld, and close on the Rhine in that vicinity. The XIX Corps was to cross at Julich, seize Harff securing the Army South boundary along the Erft River, capture Munchen-Gladbach, and close on the Rhine between Neuss and Uerdingen. The XVI Corps was to cross behind the XIII Corps, capture the Siegfried defenses from the rear, protect the Army North flank, and link up with the British and Canadian from the North. This operation was to be known as Operation "Grenade".
(14) (Tab A)

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

The Roer runs roughly parallel to the German Border and the Rhine River from the Meuse on the North to Duren. The Roer is 65-85 feet wide at mean water although it reaches a width of 200-265 feet in winter. It has a depth of 2-5 feet at low water and a depth of 12 feet at flood tide. The river is fordable at some points South of Linnich at low water. It flows through a wide swampy valley cut by many parallel streams and ditches, and under artificial flooding it reaches a width of

(13) A-2, p. 22 (14) A-2, p. 23

from 1,000 to 3,000 feet and is completely unfordable. (15)

The terrain between the Roer and the Rhine sloped generally from South to North. The dominant terrain feature in the area was the Linnich-Harff plateau, a low hill mass between the Roer and Erft Rivers, which permitted observation for about five miles west of the Roer. Observation from the west bank was good and covered the entire floor. However it was dominated by the plateau across the river. Once across the river barrier the offense was favored by the absence of any well defined ridge system. Large areas of open flat terrain were broken only by gently rolling ground and some wooded areas. Observation posts located in church steeples and on the roofs of buildings, dominated the approaches to all enemy held towns. (16)

Fields of fire throughout the entire zone were excellent. Even the wooded areas were clean and free from undergrowth and were cut by many roads and firelanes which afforded good fields of fire.

Routes of communication in the enemy zone were superior. The heavily populated Rhine-Cologne plain possessed an excellent road net. The roads in our area due to the heavy troop movements, supply build-up, and an early thaw were adequate but required an enormous amount of engineer maintenance.

The nearest cover on our side of Roer River was a slight rise four hundred yards from the River bank. The enemy could get some cover from behind the railroad embankment running almost parallel to the River in the Linnich sector. Except for the wooded areas near Waldniel the only cover and concealment to be found in this area was in the towns and cities. (17)

(15) A-4, p. 132 (16) A-3, p. 6 (17) A-4, p. 131

Beyond the Roer were well prepared obstacles ranging in depth back to the Rhine. The first of these was a double line of trenches running South through Erklenz to Linnich, thence East to the Erft Canal. Some five miles farther back was a second defense line covering the approaches to Munchen-Gladbach. These defenses included trenches, mines, and wire, and numerous heavily defended towns and villages, and they faced generally West and Southwest. Numerous canals and small rivers had been extended as anti-tank obstacles by the construction of anti-tank ditches. The unseasonably early thaw had made the terrain soggy, and restricted the use of armored vehicles in cross country operations. (Tab A)

All sights were unfavorable for daylight crossing. The west bank offered little cover and the enemy held the observation and fields of fire from the higher ground on the east. The Air Forces were prepared to assist the assault by "Saturation" bombing of the far shore. However, this operation would require setting H-hour at about noon to allow the planes to take off and return to base within daylight hours. H-hour was set at 0330 hours and the air effort was to be directed to a mammoth "Isolation of the Battlefield" program to be carried out on D-1. (18)

The Corps plan was to cross with the 84th and 102nd Divisions abreast. Secure a bridgehead and be prepared to operate to the North and Northeast on order.

The orientation by the Corps Anti-tank officer was concluded when he received word that his recommendation for employment of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion had been approved. The unit was placed under the operational control of the 102nd

(18) A-2, p. 22.

Infantry Division. (19)

ORGANIZATION OF THE TOWED TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

Before continuing with this narrative it is necessary to inform the reader of the organization of the Towed Tank Destroyer Battalion. The 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) was composed of a Headquarters and Headquarters Company, three identical Gun Companies, and a medical detachment. The Headquarters Company was made up of two Reconnaissance Platoons and the necessary administrative and supply sections. The Gun Companies contained three platoons of four guns each. Each platoon had its own security section for local protection. The primary weapon of the Battalion was the 3" Gun M-5, of which there were 36, towed by the armored Half-Track personnel carrier, M-3.

PRINCIPLES ILLUSTRATED

Throughout this monograph I wish to call the readers attention to the following illustrations of principle which are to be emphasized. The extreme flexibility of the Tank Destroyer Battalion in its transposition from primary role of Anti-Tank to secondary roles of reinforcing artillery and direct support of Infantry. Also the flexibility of the unit described in making rapid transfers from one location to another and from one attachment to another with the minimum loss of time and effort.

The soundness of the technique of major river crossing operations as taught in the service schools is illustrated by this operation. The advantages of night attack when carefully planned and executed with boldness, and the soundness of the American doctrine of the use of Armored Force in bypassing enemy strong points, encircling them and leaving them to be

mopped up later by troops especially equipped for mop-up operations are also emphasized. I wish to direct attention especially to the state of perfection reached by the Infantry-Tank-Artillery-Air Force Team in the accomplishment of this mission.

WITH THE 102ND INFANTRY DIVISION

Upon reporting to the 102nd Infantry Division the Battalion was placed under the Operational Control of the Division Artillery in which section the Division Anti-Tank officer functioned. The Division Artillery commander oriented the Commander 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion on the Division plan for the assault crossing of the Roer. The plan was, in conjunction with a simultaneous assault by the 84th Infantry Division on the North, to cross with two regiments abreast, one at Linnich and one at Roerdorf, seize the southern portion of the Linnich-Harff plateau, secure the right flank of the Corps bridgehead and be prepared to operate to the North and East on order. D-day was to be set at the earliest practicable date dependent upon improvement of flooding conditions and decreased speed of flow. (20)

Artillery ammunition was being hoarded for the preparation fires and all artillery firing within the Army was limited to ten rounds per gun per day. However, due to a recent modification in the Tank Destroyer Tables of Equipment which substituted 90 MM Guns for 3" Guns in many units, the amount of 3" ammunition available in the Army dumps was sufficient for an ambitious firing program. For this reason and because the Division assault plan called for the marking of the initial objective with Illuminating Shell, the only calibre of which,

(20) A-3, p. 1.

available in the theater, was 3" U. S. Navy Star Shell, the Division Artillery Commander ordered an early disposition for this Battalion.

One company was directed to occupy indirect firing positions in the vicinity of Freialdenhoven to replace one company of the 771st Tank Destroyer Battalion which was being withdrawn from the line to receive the new 90 MM Self Propelled Destroyer M-36. This company had the mission of firing harrassing and interditory missions and reinforcing the fires of one of the organic Artillery Battalions of the Division. It was also to fire the mission of marking the initial objective and giving direction and timing to the attack from H-hour to dawn by firing the Illuminating Shell. Two other companies were to be attached to the assault regiments for use as designated by the Regimental Commander. These units were to have a high priority of crossing on infantry support bridges to give initial anti-tank protection to the bridgehead during its early vulnerable hours. (21)

The Battalion Commander returned to the command post, conducted a brief staff conference at which he explained the situation to his assembled staff officers and received their recommendations while waiting for the Company Commanders to arrive. The Company Commanders were oriented on arrival by the Battalion S-3 and received their initial combat order verbally from the Commander.

"B" Company was ordered to relieve the company of the 771st Tank Destroyer Battalion in its positions near Freialdenhoven, occupy as many of their installations as possible, and establish liaison and communication with the supported Field Artillery Battalion. "A" Company, reinforced with the

First Reconnaissance Platoon, was attached for operations to the 405th Infantry. "C" Company, reinforced with the 2nd Reconnaissance Platoon, was attached for operations to the 407th Infantry. It was anticipated that the Reconnaissance Platoons would be of invaluable assistance to the Gun Companies in the assault crossings by making reconnaissances for gun positions, clearing and marking routes through mine fields, sweeping assembly areas and position areas for mines with their organic mine detectors, and by providing reconnaissance to the front and flanks of the gun positions. The Battalion Command Post, Medical Detachment, and Administrative and Supply sections of Headquarters Company were prepared to move to a new location in the vicinity of the Division Artillery Command Post. (22)

The remainder of the day was spent in establishing liaison with the supported units, reconnaissance for and selection of positions and assembly areas, preparation of reports, and movements to new areas. By 16 February all units were in their new locations. "A" and "C" Companies were in assembly areas in their regimental areas, and "B" Company was in its position area at Freialdenhoven. The Battalion Command Post and Rear Echelon occupied an abandoned brick Kiln near the Division Artillery Command Post. (Tab B)

The biggest problem encountered by the Battalion to date was in taking over the ammunition of "C" Company 771st Tank Destroyer Battalion on the position by "B" Company of the 605th. Due to the speed with which this turnover was accomplished during the hours of darkness, an accurate count of ammunition by round and type was not made, and consequently all

(22) Personal observation.

future accounts, expenditure reports, and requisitions could not be made to balance out. This was a source of much grief to the S-3 and S-4 who were required to submit daily reports to Corps on ammunition on hand, expended, received, and requisitioned.

On 16 February "B" Company registered each of its platoons from an observation post in the attic of the School in Linnich. On that night it fired its first harassing missions along enemy routes of communication across the Roer. During the next two days it perfected its communication with the reinforced artillery battalion and the operation of its Fire Direction Center by firing platoon and company concentrations on call. Ranges were generally six to nine thousand yards for the unobserved missions and two to four thousand yards on the observed fires. The volume of enemy counter-battery fire on these positions and its accuracy made the continuation of these fires inadvisable. Consequently the majority of harassing missions thereafter were fired from roving gun positions which were selected by the platoon leader during daylight and occupied by two guns per platoon under concealment of darkness for the "shoot" at night. This "shift" arrangement within the platoon gave the crews an opportunity to rest on alternate nights.

The area behind the river was so saturated with corps, division, and armored artillery of all calibres, tanks and tank destroyers in indirect fire positions, and anti aircraft artillery, that most positions selected were in or very near the position areas of these units. Counter battery directed against these guns shortly after they opened fire made these detachments most unpopular with the surrounding units.

On 20 February, "A" Company was ordered to initiate reconnaissance and select gun positions along the high ground South of Roerdorf from which it could support the 405th regiments crossing by direct fire on located enemy point targets. The high ground on the near bank was excellent for this in that it dominated the entire valley floor. However, it was in turn dominated by the still higher ground on the far side of the valley. Direct fire positions suitable for only one platoon were located; so the company commander recommended that the remainder of his company occupy indirect positions forward of Welz. This was approved. The positions were dug and occupied under concealment of darkness and by the morning of 21 February they were ready to open fire. Two observation posts were established to direct the fire of these guns. Enemy observation posts and machine gun positions were fired on and neutralized. One enemy fighter bomber attacked the indirect fire positions and a hundred pound bomb fell between the two platoons. Needless to say the battalion commander on his daily inspection of the company later that day, found no deficiencies in the units passive air defense measures. Foxholes and gun positions were dug to ample depth. (Tab B)

Company "C" moved forward to a position of readiness at Gereonsweiler and availed itself to the time for reconnaissance of crossing ^{sights} sights, road and route reconnaissance, observation of the enemy terrain from air photos and Liaison Aircraft, and orientation of all men as to their specific duties once the river was crossed. (Tab B)

The Battalion Commander and staff spent these days planning for the crossing and the follow up, concerning themselves with

priorities of crossing of units, traffic control, dispositions on the far shore, ammunition and gasoline resupply, etc. The Battalion Commander maintained personal liaison with the Division Artillery Commander and the commanders of the assault regiments by frequent visits to their command posts. He made frequent visits to the companies and talked with the men as much as possible. He found morale high and esprit de corps good mainly as a result of the similar high moral, esprit de corps, and state of training of the infantry troops and their apparent high regard for tank destroyer support. (23)

On 21 February the commanding general of the 102nd Infantry Division addressed the assembled officers and non commissioned officers of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Since the river crossing was to be this units first combat operation he wished to reassure them that he had confidence in them and their ability to accomplish the assigned mission. In so doing he allayed any extraordinary fears of the men and further improved morale and the feeling of "belonging" toward the 102nd Infantry Division.

D DAY MINUS 1

On 22 February the Battalion Commander was called to Division Artillery Command Post to receive the Division Field Order. He was accompanied by the S-3, and before departure he directed that all company commanders be assembled by his return. At the Division Artillery Command Post the written Division Field Order was issued along with the Field Artillery Annex. After the meeting of all unit commanders a conference was ordered by the Division Artillery Commander, to be attended (23) Personal Observation.

by the Division Anti-tank officer, the Commander of the Artillery Battalion whose fires "B" Company was reinforcing, and the Battalion Commander and S-3 of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion. At this conference final coordination was accomplished on the important mission of firing the 3" Illumination Shell to light the objective and give direction and timing to the attack. The Division Artillery Commander expressed some concern over the success of this plan and instructed all present that he considered this one of the most important single missions of the assault. The Commander of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion was also informed that as a result of the excess speed of the current in the Roer River it would be impossible to cross the two tank destroyer companies on the infantry support bridge as was planned and consequently our crossing priority was moved from first on the support bridge to third on the treadway. The anti-tank companies of the regiments would replace us on the support bridge, and we would follow the self propelled tank destroyers and the tanks over the treadway bridge on call.

Another change which was contemplated was that if enemy interference with the bridges was too great, and the assault troops advance was according to schedule other units of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion might revert to battalion control with a mission of protecting an exposed flank or repelling a hostile tank counter attack.

After a brief staff conference at his command post the Battalion Commander oriented all company commanders on the new plan, and issued an oral order. This order was later confirmed in writing with overlays. He reemphasized the importance of

the battalion missions and covered in detail the plans which would be followed when the companies reverted to battalion control for the crossing. Administrative details were checked and found satisfactory. A new forward command post location of Frialdenhoven was announced and the company commanders moved out. (Tab B)

The Forward Command post consisting of Commander, S-3, S-2, S-1, Reconnaissance officer, and company jeep messengers in three armored cars, M-20, and 8½ tons moved to its new location in Frialdenhoven. They occupied the evacuated billets of one of the assault battalions which had moved forward to its final assembly area. Wire was laid to "B" company's switchboard and the battalion was in wire communication with all other units in the battalion and division. Radios were silenced until H-hour.

D DAY

At 0245 23 February 1945 the artillery preparation began. "A" Company and "B" Company lent the fire power of their guns to the avalanche of steel which rained down on the enemy's located and suspected positions, routes of communication, reserves, and assembly areas. (24)

Two guns of "B" Company stood silent, however, until 0330 when the preparation was lifted to allow the assault troops to cross. At exactly 0330 the gunner of the 2nd platoon pulled the lanyard and signalled "on the way". At precisely every five minutes thereafter alternate guns which had been layed, sited, checked, and rechecked for direction and elevation, fired one round of 3" Illuminating Star shell with

(24) A-2, p. 20

fuse out to burn 20 seconds in the air, and the remainder of its 60 second burning time on the objective. Firing was supervised by the platoon leader, the company commander, the division anti-tank officer, and a representative of the Corps anti-tank officer. A wonder that these poor harassed gunners were able to perform at all.

Simultaneously with the firing of this first round of star shell the first assault boats of the two leading infantry regiments touched down on the far shore. Each of these units was accompanied by four men of the 605th Tank Destroyer reconnaissance platoons. These men were equipped with mine detectors and radios. They assisted the assault troops through the mine fields on the far shore and kept the battalion well informed of the advance of the infantry. They were also able to call for and adjust the direct and indirect fire of the supporting tank destroyer guns.

Dawn found the advance going according to schedule in all except one respect. The construction of foot, support, and treadway bridges, already difficult because of the swiftness of the river, was made impossible by the deadly accuracy of the enemy artillery falling continuously on the site. By dawn all enemy small arms fire and ground observed artillery fire was swept from the sites, but previously plotted and registered unobserved fire kept the bridges out periodically all day. (25)

The terrific pounding by our artillery preparation had cut much of the enemy's communications, and the speed of our advance behind this pounding allowed the infantry to move

(25) A-3, p. 15.

through the elaborate defenses with reasonably light casualties. By skillful use of fire and maneuver and excellent indirect fire support they were able to expand the bridgehead to a depth of approximately three and one half miles by nightfall.

The German was quick to recover from this attack, and just after dark on 23 February a strong counterattack of approximately battalion size supported by about 20 Mark IV and Mark V tanks was launched against the 405th Infantry right flank at Boslar. This attack was repulsed by infantrymen with individual anti-tank weapons, and a nine battalion artillery concentration. Four Mark IV tanks were knocked out. Counterattacks supported by tanks were tried all along the bridgehead that night. Some had local successes but the line held. (26)

Early the next morning the attack was joined by Self Propelled Tank Destroyers of the 771st Battalion, and Tanks of the 701st Tank Battalion. The advance was rapid but resulted in heavy casualties in men and tanks. Eight M-4 tanks being knocked out in one action. (27)

ACROSS THE ROER

By noon 24 February it was felt that a dangerous gap was forming on the division's right flank. Orders were received for "A" Company to revert to battalion control and for the battalion to cross on the treadway at Linnich and be ready to occupy positions on the right flank in vicinity of Tetz and Boslar to protect that flank from tank and infantry attack.

While enroute to the bridge at Linnich the bridge was put out of action by direct hits of heavy artillery, and by a near

(26) A-3, p. 17 (27) Personal observation.

miss by an aerial bomb. Therefore the column was rerouted via Roerdorf where that bridge had just been put back into operation. "A" and "C" Companies began to cross in one column at 1445. Due to the swampy condition on the far bank, and the mine fields before Tetz, it was necessary to turn left to the Linnich road to move inland toward Gevenich, thence toward Tetz on the Julich road.

A traffic jam resulted near this crossroads when a delayed action bomb exploded cratering the road, destroying several infantry vehicles and the personnel thereon. Engineer assistance was not available so all troops in the area pitched in to repair the crater so that vehicles could proceed. This work was hampered by the accurate interdiction fire that was placed on this road junction.

The commanding officer and S-3 were able to bypass this crater in a jeep over a hastily corduroyed bypass which deteriorated after about ten vehicles passed over it. The delay of the gun companies at this crater gave the commander and S-3 time for a hasty reconnaissance and selection of general area from which to defend, and time to contact the infantry battalion commanders on the ground. Positions facing Southeast running from the outskirts of Tetz in front of Boslar and to Hompech were selected for "A" Company. Though this sector was greater than 3,000 yards, it was strengthened by a low marshy stream running parallel to its front. "A" Company was able to move up, and occupy these positions just prior to darkness 24 February (D plus 2). (Tab B)

"C" Company crossed behind "A" and rejoined the 407th Regiment forward of Gevenich. The Company Commander of "C"

Company and one enlisted man were wounded during the crossing. "B" Company crossed the treadway bridge at Roerdorf under concealment of darkness 24 February, and was led into position between Hompech and Hottorf by the light of the burning tanks. The defense was coordinated with the infantry battalion on the ground and communication was established so that the tank destroyers could be notified when the infantry withdrew. 25 February was spent in locating forward infantry battalions and reconnaissance for new positions to best accomplish the mission of protecting the exposed right flank by leap-frogging one company over the other 2,000 yards behind the advancing infantry.

The Battalion was relieved of its initial responsibilities by Combat Command "B" of the 5th Armored Division which had crossed on D plus 2, 25 February, and moved into the Boslar area. On reconnaissance with S-3 for new positions for "A" Company the Lieutenant Executive of "A" Company, and driver were seriously wounded when caught in heavy artillery concentration. While "A" Company was preparing to move from its initial position it was struck by a local infantry counterattack. One officer, a platoon leader, was killed in the sharp fire fight.

Under concealment of darkness 25 February "A" Company occupied positions in depth in the Hottorf-Ralshoven area. This area, the main axis of advance of the 102nd Division, was subjected to heavy artillery preparations throughout the night. (Tab B)

THE BREAKOUT FROM THE BRIDGEHEAD

On 26 February the 5th Armored Division was committed from behind Lovenich in an attack to the North to cut off Erkelenz. The drying condition of the ground and continued good weather favored this plan. The attack was successful and the city of Erkelenz was entered 26 February. Company "C" of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion was relieved from the 407th Infantry, and attached to the 406th Infantry, and assisted this unit in the assault on the town by overhead direct fire, from positions on the high ground Southeast of the town. (Tab B) (27)

The rapid advance of this day required rapid displacement of "A" and "B" Companies in order to accomplish the mission of protecting the exposed right flank. Coordination was made at the Infantry Regimental Command Post in Erkelenz to be assured that no dangerous gaps existed.

During this period the Reconnaissance platoon performed Yeoman service in maintaining continuous contact with the XIX Corps units on the right flank. Through their motorized patrols the Battalion was informed of the locations and forward positions of the leading XIX Corps units. We were able to determine from these reports when the flank was covered. These reports were so current that this information when passed on to Regiment and Division was often the latest available at the higher headquarters.

The next major objective in the division zone was the city of Rhindahlen, hub of the vital road net of the Southern and Western approaches to the built up area of Munchen-Gladbach. (28) (Tab A)

(27) A-1, p. 4 (28) A-2, p. 25.

The battalion continued its leap-frogging of a minimum of one company per day in order to keep up with the continued advances of the assault regiments. The incomparable combination of the Infantry - Tank - Artillery - Air Force team was too much for the German who gave ground desperately under the force of this team.

By February the 102nd Division was securely in possession of Rheindahlen and was beginning its preparation of the turning movement to the East to close on the Rhine. Late in the afternoon "B" Company was displaced astride the main Rheindahlen Muchen-Gladbach road. At approximately 1800 hours the battalion was informed that a large enemy armored counter attack was building up in Muchen-Gladbach, and could be expected along this route at any moment. Having just completed a personal inspection of these positions the battalion commander was satisfied that his dispositions were adequate to deal with this attack. Companies were alerted to the possibility of this threat, and preparations were made by the Battalion Commander to personally supervise any action that occurred.

At this time, however, frantic radio messages from the battalion liaison officer at the Division Artillery Command Post directed that the commanding officer report to the Division Artillery Commander immediately in his headquarters at Erkelenz. The Commander and S-3 moved out, and arrived at Division Artillery Command Post by 2045 hours. Here the dispositions of the battalion were pointed out to the Division Artillery Commander who was satisfied that the organization in depth to stem the expected attack from the Northeast was adequate.

This difficulty arose because the Division Artillery Commander was not in possession of the latest information of the dispositions of the battalion. The overlay showing these dispositions was handed to the Division Anti-tank officer at the forward Division Artillery Command Post in Rheindahlen and communications between the forward and rear headquarters had not been established at that time. If a copy of this overlay had been sent to the Battalion Liaison Officer so that he would have been prepared to answer the General's queries, this four hour blackout trip might have been avoided.

All day 29-30 February the battalion maintained its alert against this expected attack. Reconnaissance platoons probed forward and maintained outposts to report location, strength, and direction of attacks. No attacks materialized, however.

On 1 March Munchen-Gladbach fell to a frontal assault by the 29th Infantry Division after being bypassed by the 2nd Armored Division on the East. The XIII and XIX Corps boundary was hereby sealed and the mission of protecting the open Corps and Division flank was completed. (29)

WITH THE 84TH INFANTRY DIVISION TO THE RHINE

On the morning of 2 March battalion received orders relieving it from the 102nd Infantry Division and attaching it for operations to the 84th Infantry Division on the Corps' left flank. The battalion executive was placed in command with instructions to assemble all elements of the battalion, and be prepared to move to a designated assembly area on order. (30)

The Battalion Commander and S-3 moved out to report to the Commanding General of the 84th Infantry Division at Waldneil.

(29) A-2, p. 25 (30) A-1, p. 4.

Upon arrival at the Division Command Command Post they were welcomed to the division by the Commanding General personally. The welcome was so hospitable that the Command Group including the battalion operations sergeant soon found itself having coffee and wheatcakes with the General in the General's mess.

The General oriented the Command Group on the actions of the 84th Division during the past week. The Division had crossed the Roer in a column of battalions, and by D plus 2 the whole Division was across. On the 26th of February (D plus 3) the German resistance was such that a breakthrough was contemplated and a Task Force was formed under the command of Assistant Division Commander. This Task Force "Church" was made up of the attached tank battalion with one company of infantry riding on tanks, two battalions of infantry motorized, a company of self propelled tank destroyers, engineers, and medics. On the morning of 27 February the task force attacked out of the bridgehead, and after an advance of five miles in one hour and half took Wegberg by 0830 hours. This force met surprised Germans everywhere. (Tab A)

The task force overran elements of two Volks Grenadier Divisions, and by nightfall was within 1500 yards of Waldneil. During this advance they captured a map of all the German dispositions on the Western Front in the abandoned headquarters of the 12th SS Corps. They overran German Corps and Army boundaries, and the demoralization was complete. The enemy's resistance at Waldneil was of a stiffer character being offered by units of the 8th Paratroop Army which had been withdrawn from as far north as Arnhem and Venlo. (Tab A)

Full credit for the first breakthrough in Germany was given

to the 84th in the entire American Press the next day. Most of the reports played up the fact that an infantry division rather than an armored division had slashed through first. The Associated Press said that "it was not even an armored spearhead that made the greatest gain of the day on the 9th Army Front, but an infantry column of the 84th Division".

Forward elements of the division were slowed up for over 48 hours by resistance which resembled in fanaticism the division's first experience with the German in the Siegfried Line. On 1 March Task Force Church was recommitted at 0130 hours in a night attack. The large scale use of armor in a night attack brought absolute surprise and resulted in one of the easiest and quickest victories in the division's experience. By nightfall the task force had bypassed Dulken, and was approaching Suchteln which represented an advance of twenty miles from Linnich. The remainder of the division, moving on foot, advanced rapidly and mopped up behind the task force. Dulken was captured 1 March, and Suchteln was taken almost without opposition in a night attack that night. The success of these night attacks set a pattern which the division was to follow for the remainder of its drive to the Rhine. (31)

At the conclusion of this orientation the battalion was attached for operations to the 11th Cavalry Group Mechanized. The battalion was to assemble in Dulken to be picked up there by a representative of the 11th Cavalry Group which was then engaged in screening the open left flank of the division and corps, which had been opened by the 84th Division's rapid advance. (32)

(31) A-4, p. 179 (32) A-1, p. 4.

The 11th Cavalry Group directed that one gun company, reinforced with a reconnaissance platoon, be attached to each of the two cavalry squadrons operating under its control. The Group was leap-frogging one squadron over the other protecting the exposed flank in a similar manner to that which the 605th had been doing on the right. "A" and "B" Companies were attached, and "C" Company was held in mobile reserve near the battalion command post. These Companies were especially desired by the cavalry because they possessed the high velocity, heavy calibre weapons to make the cavalry road blocks strong enough to stand against armored attack by the German. Command Liaison was maintained by establishment of the battalion command post in close proximity to the group command post. The battalion commander accompanied by his S-2 or S-3 made daily visits to the attached companies; so that he could assure himself that they were being properly employed or offer any recommendations for their employment that he deemed advisable.

The aggressiveness with which the cavalry accomplished its mission resulted in elements of the squadron's making limited objective attacks to capture road junctions and terrain from which to defend. The towed tank destroyers were not suitable for close support of these attacks, but were invaluable in strengthening the road blocks. After these objectives were secured, road blocks consisting of two tank destroyers and two or three cavalry armored cars were established on all vital roads on the corps flank from Dulken to the Rhine 2-5 March. (Tab A)

On 5 March the 9th Army closed on the West bank of the Rhine. The 605th Tank Destroyer battalion went into an assembly

area in the town of Huls where it spent four days in rest, maintenance, resupply, and reorganization. (Tab A)

WITH THE 411TH FIELD ARTILLERY GROUP

While it was in this location it was attached to the 411th Field Artillery Group. On 10 March the battalion commanding officer received orders from the commanding officer of the 411th Field Artillery Group to move to indirect fire positions in vicinity of the Luftwaffe Airdrome at Uerdingen, on the Rhine. (32)

The day of 10 March was spent in reconnaissance for position areas and selection of billets and command posts. On 11 March the battalion occupied the previously reconnoitered position areas and established communications. The primary means of communication of this unit was radio. However, companies had sufficient wire to provide communication for their secondary mission, indirect fire as artillery. Battalion had no wire, however, so it was necessary in this situation for companies to lay to battalion. The group laid a double line from its fire direction center to the battalion direction center. Each company established an observation post and was authorized to fire missions on targets of opportunity observed across the Rhine.

Time on Target or "Bingo" Missions were also fired. However, due to the inexperience of these tank destroyer fire direction centers it was found that more time must be allowed if the 36 tank destroyer guns were to be in on the TOT. A later modification in communications was accomplished where fire missions bypassed the battalion fire direction center, and were phoned direct to the companies by the group fire direction center. The battalion fired 3,403 rounds of 3" High

(32) A-1, p. 4.

Explosive at enemy positions and installations across the Rhine from these positions.

On 15 March an officer from the 9th Army's Engineer Camouflage Battalion entered the battalion command post, and informed the commanding officer that he desired his cooperation in implementing a deception scheme that he wished to accomplish. Civilians in the area were being evacuated up to five miles in rear of the river, and he desired us to leave dummy positions when we moved from the Uerdingen area. This was the first news that a move was expected for this unit. Later that day orders were received from Army directing a move back to Belgium to report to a British Armored Brigade for river crossing training. When we moved out at 0500 hours 18 March dummy tubes were left protruding from each camouflage net. The regular nets were not disturbed. Subsequent reports from this area indicate that this ruse was successful in that heavy artillery fire fell constantly on these positions until the Rhine was breached North of the Rhur.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing this operation it is seen that the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion was assigned missions well within its capabilities. The extreme flexibility of this unit is illustrated in that, the missions assigned required the battalion to function in its primary role of anti-tank as well as in its secondary roles as reinforcing artillery and direct fire support of attacking infantry and mechanized cavalry. During this one month, the unit's first in combat, the battalion operated under the command of two infantry divisions, a mechanized cavalry group, and a field artillery

group. The battalion's initial entry into combat was under ideal conditions. The front was stabilized and time was available for becoming acquainted with the units with which it was to work. The attitude of all the combat troops in the area gave the unit a sense of "belonging" and being wanted.

Enough preliminary preparation was allowed and enough shelling was received to take the "greenness" away from the troops so that by the time the river crossing operation was launched the battalion was considered a combat tested unit.

The soundness of the Army Ground Force Mobilization Training Program is illustrated by the ability of this unit, trained under this program, to accomplish the varied missions assigned during this operation. This pertains especially to the firing of indirect fire as artillery, a special action which requires detailed training of observers, battery executives, survey, fire direction center, and communication personnel, and gun crews.

The Tank Destroyer Battalion while protecting the Corps' right flank should have had all three companies under its control. The mission required generally a two company front. Leap-frogging one company over another required usually about 12 hours. The advance was so rapid that one company was usually displacing which left only one company in position to engage the enemy. On the other hand a three company battalion could have maintained two companies ready to fire while one company was displacing.

The Battalion Commander of the 605th Tank Destroyer Battalion is to be commended for the method he employed in maintaining personal liaison with the units with which the

companies were operating. Though companies were often detached from the battalion on special missions over which he had no command, he made it a point to visit them as often as possible. He talked with the commander of the units with whom they were working to assure himself they were being employed within their capabilities and to accomplish best the mission.

He is also to be commended for the use which he made of his staff, allowing each enough opportunity to exercise initiative, yet judiciously directing their actions in the direction he desired.

The liaison system of the battalion, which had functioned so ably up until this time by keeping an officer equipped with a powerful radio always in attendance at the attached units command post, broke down on the night of 28 February when a duplicate overlay of the Battalion Dispositions was not sent to the Liaison Officer with the Division Artillery Command Post in Erkelenz.

One unfavorable criticism must be directed at the commanding officer and S-3 for not keeping the Battalion Executive Officer at the rear command post properly informed of the tactical situation. Had the commander and S-3, who rode in the same vehicle, become casualties at the same time there might have been a long time lag before the Executive could have assumed command.

The practice of keeping the rear command post with the battalion trains is considered sound in that it allowed the battalion executive to supervise the S-4 and the Headquarters Commandant in their performance of the resupply of food,

ammunition, and gasoline to the forward companies. The resupply was complicated by the great distances which separated the companies when on independent missions.

The Battalion continued to resupply the companies even though they were attached to other units because their supply requirements of items such as 3" ammunition and gasoline were peculiar. The units to which they were attached were usually unable to supply these items or these quantities on short notice, and the duration of attachment was often so short as to make the securing of these items impracticable.

LESSONS

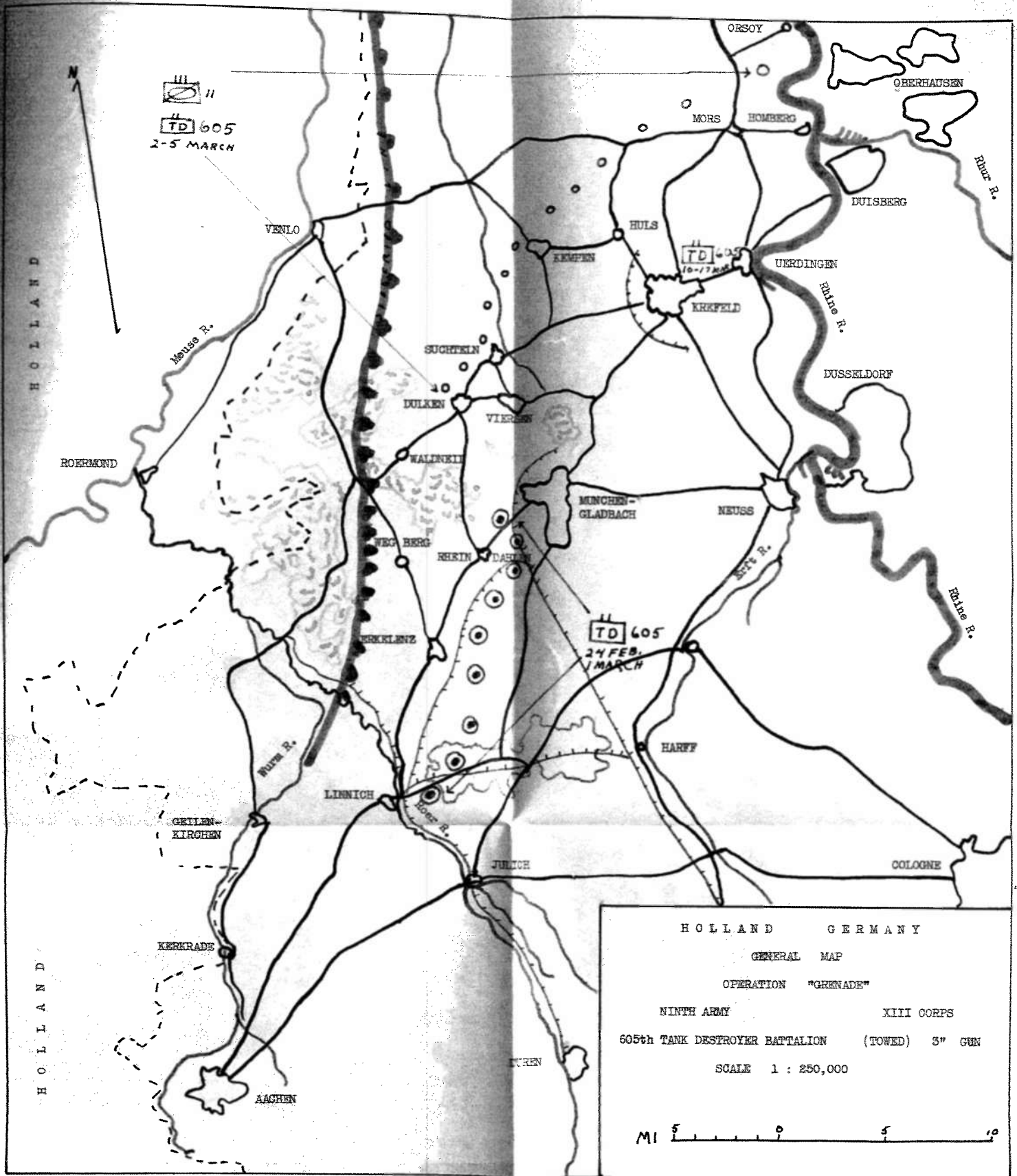
- (1) Towed anti-tank guns are not suitable for close direct fire support of attacking infantry and cavalry. They lack armor protection, and the difficulty of man handling the heavy guns under small arms fire makes their use in this role inadvisable.
- (2) Units new to combat should be allowed a short period of orientation and indoctrination under relatively quiet combat conditions before being committed in a major offensive. This gives the personnel confidence in themselves and their leaders and increases their worth to the effort when employed.
- (3) Units new in combat and/or operating on secondary missions should be allowed more time to prepare for and accomplish an assigned mission than would be expected of a combat experienced unit operating in its primary role.
- (4) Liaison officers at higher headquarters must be kept informed of latest tactical dispositions at all times.
- (5) Attached fire support units should be made to feel that they are part of the team.

(6) Illuminating shell can be fired to mark the objective and give direction and timing to a night attack.

(7) Missions once assigned to a subordinate unit should be left to them for accomplishment without an extraordinary amount of supervision or the unit should be relieved of the mission.

(8) When the cooperation of all units in an area is secured a well planned deception scheme can be effective in distracting the enemy's attention and causing him to expend ammunition on dummy positions.

(9) Flexibility must be maintained by non-divisional fire support units to allow them to be shifted where needed and employed in any manner within their capabilities to accomplish best the general mission.



GERMANY

OPERATION "GRENADE"

605th TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

23 February 1945

