

30 January 1945

OPERATIONS WITH 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION

20 Dec 44 - 1 Jan 45

On 20 Dec 44, "B" Co was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division, followed on 25 Dec 44 by the remainder of the battalion, less "C" Co. On 1 Jan 45 the battalion was attached to the 3rd Armored Division.

At the time of "B" Co's attachment the 82nd A/B Div was attempting to contain the German spearhead on a north and south line along the Salm River between Trois Ponts (P675988) and Salmchateau (P698869), and east and west along the main road between Salmchateau and Regne (P610857). This battalion was working with the 1st Infantry Division and was assembled in the vicinity of Sourbrodt, Belgium (K855095). The employment of the battalion, with special emphasis on the action of "B" Company, is told in the following narrative.

"B" Company left Sourbrodt at 0800 hours, 20 Dec 44, and arrived that afternoon at Werbomont (P540999), where it met guides from the 82nd A/B Div. The 1st Platoon was attached to the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the 2nd Platoon to the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and the 3rd Platoon to Division Headquarters, as Division Reserve.

- FIRST PLATOON -

The First Platoon commanded by Lieut Ball, moved immediately to the sector occupied by the 505th Para Inf Regt, the 2nd section, less one (1) destroyer, joining the 2nd Bn at Trois Ponts, the 1st section joining the 3rd Bn at Petite Halleux (P693935). As soon as the destroyers arrived at their destinations they immediately took up defensive positions covering approaches to the Salm River.

The 2nd section, at Trois Ponts, saw no action against the enemy armor, but on the afternoon of 22 December fired nine (9) rounds of HE direct-indirect at suspected enemy installations on the high ground across the river. The range was 3500 yards, and the results of the firing were unknown. The following day, the one operational gun of this section had to return to the rear in order to have the turret lock repaired, and on 24 December both guns of the section returned to find that the infantry had withdrawn from the low ground in Trois Ponts and had taken up new positions on the high ground in the vicinity of Brume (P660993), overlooking the river valley. This section was then moved into Regimental Reserve and took up positions on the high ground northwest of Basse Bodeux (P642973).

The 1st section, at Petite Halleux, moved into road block positions right in the town as soon as they had arrived, and remained there the rest of the night and the following two days. There was no attack on the town during that period, and Lieut. Ball had an opportunity to reconnoiter alternate positions on the high ground in rear of the town.

On the night of 22 Dec 44 the enemy attacked without armor, attempting to secure a bridgehead across the river, but the attack was stopped by the infantry, and the TD's did no firing. The battalion commander, after this engagement, decided to move the TD's further to the rear where they could have a greater field of fire overwatching the open ground east of the river, and Lieut. Ball moved his destroyers to alternate positions on the high ground behind the town.

On the morning of 23 Dec the Germans attacked again toward Petite Halleux in another attempt to establish a crossing, and this time they employed their armor. The first inclination that the TD's had of this was the movement of two well camouflaged SP guns out of the wooded high ground about 2000 yards across the river just southeast of Grand Halleux. These guns could have been taken under fire almost immediately, but the platoon leader held fire, hoping that more profitable targets might follow if the SP's were allowed to proceed. His surmise was correct, for, after the SP's had moved several hundred yards, three Mk V Tanks moved out into the open, cautiously following the SP's. Unfortunately, though, they followed too far behind, because before they moved into close enough range, the SP's had moved too far forward and could no longer be allowed to proceed. They were headed for a draw which would conceal them from the TD's and give them a chance to get too close to our front line infantry positions. Lieut Ball, therefore ordered his guns to fire on the SP's. Each TD picked his target, and fired almost simultaneously-one at a range of 1200 yards-one at 1400. Both SP's started to burn immediately, and the three Mk V's turned tail and disappeared back into the woods, before either TD could shift and bring them under fire.

The muzzle flashes of the TD's were evidently seen from the high ground held by the enemy across the valley for within two minutes after firing at the SP guns, the destroyers received HE direct fire. Three rounds were fired on their positions, and one of these rounds struck a tree about 30 yards from one destroyer, splattering it with shell fragments. The gunner of this destroyer, CPL Morrie, was struck in the neck by a shell fragment and instantly killed.

The attack did not continue after the tanks withdrew, and the TD's remained in position until the night of 24 December, when a general withdrawal was made to new defensive positions in the vicinity of Basse Bodeux.

When the infantry battalion was ready to withdraw the commander received word that the enemy had effected a crossing of the river between Petite Halleux and Trois Ponts, and had forces of unknown strength in the towns of St Jacques (P666960) and Bergeval (P671965), which were directly on the routes of withdrawal. The battalion commander, therefore, sent the TD's with the leading infantry elements, prepared to fight their way through these towns. The main force, however, passed through the towns, without drawing fire, but the rear guard drew scattered fire from the towns as they passed through them.

#### - SECOND PLATOON -

The Second Platoon, commanded by Lieut Roberts moved from Werbomont on 20 Dec 44 and joined the 504th Para Inf Regt a short distance outside of Cheneux (K636015). At this time the Germans had crossed the river just southeast of Stoumont (K642020), and were in the town of Cheneux. The 2nd Battalion of the 504th Para Inf Regt was preparing to attack the town that night, and, on arrival of the TD's immediately included them in their plans.

One section of this platoon constituted the entire available armor for this attack, there being no tanks attached to the regiment, and two TD's being deadlined for repairs.

The mission of the TD's in supporting this attack was to move along with the leading infantry elements, to make as much noise as possible, giving the impression of great strength, and to shoot at anything that moved in front of them. At the time of the attack it was so dark that visibility was limited to about 25 yards, and the destroyers could see very little as they moved toward the town.

As the infantry moved up just ahead of them, a 20mm Flak wagon opened up, pinning the infantry down, and stopping their advance. The destroyers were not in a position to take the 20mm under fire, and it was necessary to move further ahead before this could be accomplished. One destroyer moved up the road while the other remained in position covering its advance. As the leading destroyer moved forward, it all but ran into a German half-track on the right side of the road, and as the gunner swung the gun around, the tube struck the other vehicle. The driver immediately reversed the destroyer, and at the same time the crew of the half track began to abandon it. They were helped along considerably by a round of HE which completely destroyed the vehicle and crew. Then in rapid succession the destroyer knocked out the 20mm flak wagon and a tracked prime-mover.

With this resistance eliminated, the infantry pushed forward toward the center of the town until it was held up again by another flak wagon. This was hidden from the destroyer by a stone house, and the gunner had no way of maneuvering into a good shooting position. Therefore, the next best choice was made--to knock away the protection and then go after the vehicle. Using APCBDF ammunition the gunner fired directly at the building, blasting away the wall, and then destroyed the exposed flak wagon.

A few moments later, two half-tracks left their hiding positions behind buildings in front of the TD, and were destroyed as they attempted to retreat down the road.

This concluded the action of the destroyers for the balance of the night, and the infantry consolidated the gains they had made, up to that point.

Throughout 21 Dec, the infantry held their gains and prepared to attack again that night. The Germans were offering stiff resistance and it was evident that they had no intention giving up the remainder of the town without a struggle. The battalion commander, therefore, decided to send a force around the town and attack from the rear, supported by a frontal attack.

The TD's were given the mission of driving through the town, clearing out whatever they could find, until they met up with the flanking force. When the attack started one TD almost immediately knocked a 105mm gun and prime mover out of action, which blocked the road making it necessary for them to find an alternate route. Moving cautiously through farmyards and alleys the destroyers made their way through the town, and finally joined the flanking force. The infantry following behind mopped up pockets of resistance and by 2100 hours the town was cleared.

The section set up a road block on the east side of the town, overlooking the approaches from that direction, and later that night destroyed another flak wagon which had remained in concealment and was trying to escape across the river toward La Gluze (K658030).

The following morning the other two guns of the platoon arrived and joined the 1st section in providing A.T. defenses protecting the approaches to the town. That afternoon the platoon was ordered to BRA (P575935) as Division Reserve, and remained in that vicinity until 24 December, before any other missions were given it.

On 24 Dec, the Germans had succeeded in crossing the Salm River at Vielsam (P702890) and were forcing the infantry back. They were withdrawing to new defenses and the 2nd section of the 2nd Platoon moved to Goronne (P670895), setting up a road block to protect their withdrawal. This section did no firing and returned to bra as soon as the withdrawal was completed.

#### - THIRD PLATOON -

Although the 3rd Platoon, commanded by Lieut Silva, was originally designated as Division Reserve, it did not remain so very long. From Werbomont it moved to the vicinity of Lierneux,

where it remained until the following afternoon.

On 21 Dec due to possible threats from the south, the platoon was attached to the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment, and moved to the vicinity of Grand-Sart (P657877) and Sart (P655872), one section taking up positions in each village.

The Germans, having met resistance along the Salm River north of Salmchateux, tried to by-pass it by coming around from the south, and were successful in doing this. The right flank of the Division was in danger, and Lt Silva was ordered to move one section to Regne (P912858). The Germans had been reported to have taken possession of the main road junction just west of Regne, at K556852 and after reconnoitering for gun positions, Lt Silva, set up his destroyers covering the approaches to Regne from the south and west. Only one of these destroyers was operational, because the other had a frozen turret and could not traverse. Because of the need of having all available guns, this destroyer, nevertheless, was used, and set up so that it would cover a certain position of the road and would be able to fire at least one round at any target coming down the road.

This move was made on the afternoon of 22 Dec and the TD's remained in position until just before dawn. Just prior to daybreak Lt Silva moved his destroyers to the high ground just northeast of Regne, covering the same direction, but utilizing the higher ground for better fields of fire. The frozen gun was utilized in the same manner as it had been the night before.

On the morning of 23 Dec, a force of approximately 12 German tanks moved onto the main road at Hebronval (P646850), and proceeded toward Regne, where they were met by 57mm AT fire from units of the 82nd Airborne Division. An attack from this direction had not been expected, and the TD's could not take these tanks under fire from their positions.

As soon as the tanks were fired upon by the 57mm AT guns, they fanned out over the open ground and attacked the town en masse, rapidly cleaning out the infantry, the remainder of whom withdrew to the north beyond the TD's.

During this attack the destroyers could do nothing but stay in position and wait for a target to present itself, because the moment they moved to put fire on the tanks east of the town their positions would be disclosed. Some of the tanks were firing HE direct fire at the retreating infantry, and would be able to note any movement of the destroyers into new positions.

After the tanks had cleaned out the town, two Mk IV's moved out toward the west coming under observation of the TD's. The good destroyer knocked out the leading tank with the first round at a range of 800 yards, and fired three rounds at the second tank, which was trying to escape back into town. The third round destroyed that tank, and the remaining tanks remained under cover in the town.

In the afternoon, firendly forces, attacked the town with infantry and tanks, but were unable to dislodge them, and withdrew to the north, leaving the TD's again without any infantry support. Although Lt Silva had been promised infantry support, they did not show up, and he was forced to do without them. The positions of the destroyers was too vulnerable for a flanking movement from the east, and after dark the section moved back to alternate positions into the woods further back on the hill in order to be better protected on their left flank.

In this position the platoon could hear infantry behind them, and, on checking, located an outpost a few hundred yards behind their positions. Lt Silva established contact with this outpost, leaving a runner there to notify him if they moved out. During the night the infantry did move back, leaving the TD's entirely alone, and taking the initiative in his own hands, Lt Silva moved the section north to the outskirts of Lierneux, taking up new positions covering the route by which he had withdrawn.

On 23 December the section remained in that position for a short time covering a general withdrawal to the north, and later in the day moved to positions at R.J. (588938).

The section at Sart, which had seen no action during this time, withdrew to new positions at Vaux-Chevanne (P550911) and both sections remained on road blocks until the platoon was relieved the night of 25 December 1944 by the 3rd Platoon of "A" Company.

On 25 December the remainder of the battalion, less "C" Company joined the 82nd A/B Div, and a redistribution of platoons was immediately made to allow for stronger AT defense along the new defensive line between Manhay (P533902) and Trois Ponts. The 3rd platoon of "B" Company was attached to the 325th Glider Inf Regt, taking up positions near Vaux-Chevanne (P5491); the 3rd Platoon of "A" Co was attached to the 504th Para Inf Regt, taking up positions at RJ P588938; the 2nd platoon of "B" Company was attached to the 508th Para Inf Regt, one section moving to Erria (P6094), and one section to RJ (P627956); the 1st Platoon of "B" Company was attached to the 505th Para Inf Regt and took up positions in vicinity of Trois Ponts. Two platoons of "A" Company remained in Division Reserve, one at Habiermont (P5698) and one at Chauveheid (P5898).

From this period until 2 Jan 45, when the battalion rejoined the 3rd Armored Division there was, with one exception, no action other than reconnoitering the high ground behind the MLR for positions from which to place direct fire on enemy movement or suspected enemy positions across the valley.

One such position was used in the vicinity of P613964 on 31 Dec, when one gun of the 2nd Platoon of "B" Company fired ten (10) rounds of HE at a suspected OP in Noir Fontaine (P625944). Results were unobserved.

- PLATOON LEADERS COMMENTS -

All platoon leaders realized that, during this critical time it was necessary to employ the TD's in a manner whereby the best possible results could be accomplished, and due to the lack of armor throughout the extended division lines, the destroyers would have to cover a wide front.

Lieut Roberts knew the limitations of TD's when used as tanks and is of the opinion that, only as a last resort should TD's act as assault weapons.

Lieut Silva was forcibly reminded of the fact that TD's are extremely vulnerable without infantry support, and should always have at least some security to protect them, especially at night. He also feels that whenever possible, platoons should operate as units rather than be split up into sections, but that it is permissible to do so when covering as wide a front, and as many vulnerable approaches, as "B" Company did during their attachment to the 82nd Airborne Division.

Consolidation of enemy materiel destroyed by "B" Company during its attachment to the 82nd Airborne Division:

1st Platoon:	2--S.P. Guns.
2nd Platoon:	3--20mm AA guns on Half Tracks
	3--Half Track Personnel Carriers
	1--Full-track Prime Mover.
	1--105mm Gun and Prime Mover.

OFFICIAL:

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SWETT,  
S-2

SHOWALTER,  
Lt Col, Commanding.