

General Subjects Section
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE
1947 - 1948

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 358TH INFANTRY,
90TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN THE BATTLE OF FORET de MONT
CASTRE, FRANCE, 10 - 12 JULY 1944 (NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Report of Captain Paul R. Steckla)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

Captain Paul R. Steckla, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | <u>PAGE</u> |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Index | 1 |
| Bibliography | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| The General Situation | 5 |
| The Battalion Situation | 7 |
| The Battalion Attack | 8 |
| Analysis and Criticism | 14 |
| An Analogy | 17 |
| Lessons | 18 |
| Map A - Invasion of France | |
| Map B - General Situation | |
| Map C - Attack of Hill 122 | |

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 Invasion to Western Europe (Part 1, June to Dec 1944)
Department of Military Art and Engineering
US Military Academy, West Point, N.Y. 1946 (TIS Library)
- A-2 The Fighting Forces (Vol XXI, No. 3) Aug 1944
"Normandy: The First Phase"
Major E. W. Sheppard (TIS Library)
- A-3 Annex 1 & 2, Report of Operations
First US Army, 20 Oct 1943 to 1 Aug 1944 (TIS Library)
- A-4 Military Review (Sep 1944)
"Invasion of Normandy"
Colonel Conrad H. Lanza (TIS Library)
- A-5 Report of Operations
First US Army, 20 Oct 1943 to 1 Aug 1944 (TIS Library)
- A-6 Annex No. 2, Report of Operations
First US Army, 20 Oct 1943 to 1 Aug 1944 (TIS Library)
- A-7 Report by Supreme Commander to The Combined Chiefs of Staff
on The Operations in Europe
Allied Expeditionary Force, 6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945
(TIS Library)
- A-8 A History of the 90th Division in World War II
90th Infantry Division, 1946 (TIS Library)
- A-9 General Order No. 25, War Department, 7 Apr 1945
(TIS Library)
- A-10 After Action Report
358th Infantry, Aug 1944 (Personal possession of author)
- A-11 Review of Military Literature, Oct 1941
"The Sommauthe Woods Battle of the 118th Infantry on 23 May"
(TIS Library)
- A-12 Infantry Attacks
General Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, 1937 (TIS Library)

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 3RD BATTALION, 358TH INFANTRY,
90TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN THE BATTLE OF FORET de MONT
CASTRE, FRANCE, 10 - 12 JULY 1944 (NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

INTRODUCTION

The operations of the 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, 90th US Infantry Division, in the Battle of the Foret de Mont Castre, France, 10-12 July 1944, during the Normandy Campaign are considered herein. Those reflections pertaining to this monograph that are viewed to be objective in nature are the author's own and are not to be construed as authoritative teachings.

The combat significance of an infantry battalion's role in the execution of a strategic plan can be more fully appreciated only if the reader is provided with general data pertinent to that plan. It is intended that the following introductory comments, applicable to the invasion of France, will afford a keener insight to the small unit operations subsequently related, analyzed and reviewed.

Immediately upon the fall of France in 1940, the Germans, in anticipation of an invasion from the west, commenced construction of their western defense line - the once famous Atlantic Wall. For four years - primarily with slave labor - the Nazis toiled to make impregnable the areas most vulnerable to Allied attack. (1) Static troops were assigned to occupy those installations. Mobile reserves, poised to meet threats in vulnerable sectors, were strategically located. (2) Although the defense installations were not garrisoned by first line troops, it was apparent that the German General Staff placed great reliance on the defense capabilities of that fortified line. (3)

The primary mission of the Allied forces designated to assault the coast of France was to establish a beachhead in order that larger masses of troops could be employed in future operations against the Germans. The assault on the continent was merely the initial step of a strategic plan which was to be coordinated with attacks by Russia in the east and by other Allied forces

(1) A-1, p. 5; (2) A-1, p. 6; (3) A-2, p. 115.

in southern Europe. The absolute defeat of Germany was the ultimate mission.

(4) Allied military leaders foresaw that the enemy must be defeated by superior weapons and manpower. They indicated that the Western Wall was not to be breached by Napoleonic maneuvers. Initial tactical operations were to be predicated on the enemy's defenses. (5)

As a result of a long period of operational planning and evaluation of intelligence reports and photographs, all likely invasion sectors were discarded except the Caen - Cotentin Peninsula. This area was to be the initial battleground of the assaulting forces. (6) (See Map A)

The general plan of attack on the peninsula of France prescribed that the First US Army and the Second British Army would assault the selected beaches on 6 June 1944. The VII Corps, First US Army, was to assault Utah Beach near Varreville, France, establish a beachhead and drive north to capture Cherbourg. Consisting of the 4th and 90th Infantry Divisions, it was to be assisted initially by the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. The latter two units, by air assault, were to seize enemy strongpoints and communication centers in rear of the defenses along the sea. The V Corps was to land on Omaha Beach near St. Laurent-sur-Mer, establish a beachhead and advance to the south in conjunction with the British Second Army. The latter unit was directed to assault Juno Beach, several miles to the east of Omaha Beach. (7) (8) (9) (See Map A)

On 6 June 1944, the assault on the continent was made according to plan. After very severe fighting during the establishment and expansion of the beachhead, elements of the First US Army drove west from Utah Beach to sever the Cotentin Peninsula. Other elements of VII Corps moved rapidly north to capture the important port of Cherbourg. During the drive to the north, the remainder of the First US Army, greatly strengthened by the arrival of additional build-up troops, was primarily employed in maintaining defensive positions across the base of the Normandy Peninsula in order to prevent

(4) A-3, p. 13; (5) A-4, p. 15; (6) A-1, p. 8; (7) A-3, p. 102; (8) A-5, p. 26; (9) A-1, p. 6.

German units in the south from effecting the withdrawal of their beleaguered divisions isolated in the north. (10) (See Map A)

Although it had been originally planned to drive south immediately upon the capture of Cherbourg, the necessity of reorganizing and regrouping the Allied forces precluded such action. The attack was not ordered until early July. (11) (12)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The German strength in the east was evidenced by the continual counter-attacks against the British sector. When it became apparent to the enemy that the Cotentin Peninsula was lost, he immediately began a redistribution of his forces to the west. Additional reserves were brought forward to bolster the defense line against the anticipated First Army drive towards the interior of France. The latter unit faced rivers and inundated areas along a preponderant portion of its front. It was clear that the coming attack would be difficult and costly. (13)

The objective of the First Army attack, commencing on 3 July, was a line generally extending east to west from Coutances through St. Lo. The initial assault was to be launched by the VIII Corps. Other units were to attack on order. (See Map A)

The 79th Division on the right was to drive south to the west of La Haye-du-Puits; the 90th Division on the left to drive southwest, pinching out the 82nd Airborne Division which was to capture dominating terrain overlooking La Haye-du-Puits from the north. Concurrently, the VII Corps on the left was ordered to drive south to secure limited objectives. (See Map B)

The three attacking divisions crossed the line of departure in accordance with the corps plan. The drive moved steadily southward against heavy resistance. Within two days, the 82nd Airborne Division had successfully seized its assigned objectives north of La Haye-du-Puits, and assumed a defensive position until it was pinched out. On the third day after the commencement

(10) A-1, p. 31; (11) A-7, p. 33; (12) A-5, p. 82; (13) A-5, p. 84.

of the attack, the 90th Division had succeeded in closing in towards La Haye-du-Puits from the east. The 79th Division had pushed on to the western outskirts of the town. Repeated strong enemy counterattacks were successfully repulsed by both divisions on the 6 and 7 of July. They had found a determined enemy in force along their respective fronts. (14) The strong German positions among the hedgerows were manned by forces unwilling to relinquish their hold on easily won gains. The following day, the 79th Division's attack and subsequent capture of La Haye-du-Puits moved the corps front slightly forward. The newly arrived 8th Infantry Division was assigned a sector east of the town between the 79th and 90th Divisions. (See Map B) On 9 July, only an imperceptible advance occurred along the corps front. Resistance appeared to be increasing. The units on this front were involved in the severest type of hedgerow fighting. (15)

Cherbourg had been captured, the entire Cotentin Peninsula had been secured; but the enemy continued to supplant his plan to contain the Allies within their small area until he could gather sufficient reserves to launch a major counteroffensive. (16) It was readily apparent that the forces attacking to the south had encountered the German main line of resistance on the base of the Cotentin Peninsula - the main positions of the formidable Mahlman Line. (17) (See Map B)

On 10 July, the 90th Division was ordered to resume the attack against this obstacle. The plan called for a coordinated assault by the 358th and 359th Infantry Regiments, with the 359th Infantry on the right. (18)

The 358th Infantry (minus the 2nd Battalion) with the 2nd Battalion, 359th Infantry attached, was to attack with two battalions abreast, the 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, on the right and the 2nd Battalion, 359th Infantry, on the left. The objective was a line extending east and west through the village of Lastelle. The order directed the 1st Battalion, 358th Infantry,

(14) A-5, p. 85; (15) A-5, p. 86; (16) A-8, p. 10; (17) Personal knowledge; (18) A-8, p. 14.

to hold its present position on the left and support the advance of the assault battalions by fire. (19) (See Map C)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

Centrally located at the base of the Normandy peninsula is a large swamp called the Prairies Marecageuses de Gorges, with Carentan located to the east and La Haye-du-Puits to the west near the coast. The Prairies was a formidable barrier to military operations. The Germans utilized this natural feature by hinging their main defense, the Mahlman Line, to the western edge of the swamp. The enemy main line of resistance extended west across Hill 122, on whose southern slope was located the dense Forêt de Mont Castre, to the high ground south of La Haye-du-Puits, and thence to the western side of the peninsula. (20) (See Maps B and C)

Hill 122, core of the Mahlman Line, remained the commanding terrain feature of the entire Cotentin Peninsula. The enemy employed it to good advantage. Visibility was practically unlimited in all directions. (21) From this location the enemy had observed all troop movements since the assault on Utah Beach. His observers had little difficulty adjusting artillery fire on targets in the overflowing lodgement area. The ability to maneuver was lost to attacking forces until this feature was seized. (22) (See Map C)

The terrain in this area, as throughout Normandy, provided the defenders with an elaborate system of natural defense lines. The entire Bocage country was divided into small fields by hedgerows. Two to five feet high, three or four feet thick, these earthen embankments, crowned with heavy bushes and small trees, afforded the enemy perfect concealment and cover. Machine-gun emplacements and foxholes were dug into or behind succeeding rows. Entrenchments, with firing apertures dug through the embankments, provided the enemy soldier with an impregnable defense. Narrow, sunken lanes, roads and trails bordered by higher hedgerows afforded the Germans covered communication lines

(19) A-8, p. 11; (20) (21) Personal knowledge; (22) A-8, p. 9.

and secure positions for larger weapons such as mortars and machine-guns. The enemy utilized several successive hedgerows in depth when on the defense. The forward embankments generally were occupied by few troops armed with machine pistols and rifles. Wire lines were laid to mortar positions four or five fields to the rear. The forward elements usually absorbed the initial shock action of attacking units. The succeeding hedgerows were occupied by greater numbers of troops and more powerful weapons. By the time attacking forces moved forward through several fields, their effectiveness was greatly diminished and the main positions were yet to be encountered. It was only by determined and aggressive action that squads and platoons, by laying down a large volume of fire with all weapons, could advance from one field to another. (23) (24)

Hill 122 was defended by a battalion of parachute infantry and a company of parachute engineers, both of which were a part of the Elite 5th German Parachute Division. (25)

Aggressive and costly fighting was in store for an attacking unit. It was through this terrain, the center of Hill 122 and the Foret de Mont Castre, that the 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, was to attack. (26) (See Map C)

THE BATTALION ATTACK

On the morning of 10 July 1944, the 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, was occupying a defensive position on the northwestern slope of Hill 122. The Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bealke, received an order from the Regimental Commander directing that his battalion attack to the southeast from its position at 1400 and capture the village of Lastelle. (See Map C)

The Battalion Commander decided to attack with two companies abreast, Company I on the left and Company L on the right. Company K, in reserve, was to follow Company L by approximately 300 yards. Company M was to support the attack from positions on the northwest slope of Hill 122. The command group,

(23) A-5, p. 86; (24) Personal knowledge; (25) A-9, p. 1; (26) Personal knowledge.

consisting of the Battalion CO, the Heavy Weapons Company Commander and seven men, including messengers and communication personnel, were to follow 100 to 200 yards to the rear of the left platoon of Company L. Company I, on the left, was to guide initially on the firebreak that ran generally north and south within its zone, and thence on a trail leading to the southeast. Company L was to maintain its direction of attack by retaining contact with Company I. (See Map C) Supporting fires of Company M were to be available on call. There was to be no artillery preparation. (27)

Prior to the attack the Company Commanders' reconnaissances consisted of studying the open terrain on the north edge of the forest. Information pertinent to the interior of the woods could be gleaned only from a map study.

At 1400, the leading elements of the battalion crossed the line of departure in the prescribed formation. The assault advanced 600 yards prior to meeting enemy resistance. Companies I and L advanced abreast in formation of two platoons on line as skirmishers, with the weapons and third platoons in tactical column formation to the center rear of their respective companies. Only by advancing slowly in this manner were the forward elements of the battalion able to search their zone, locate and close with the Germans. Visibility was limited to 5 to 25 yards. Contact between platoons and companies was extremely difficult to maintain due to the dense undergrowth. (28)

At approximately 1500 the Battalion Commander ordered all units to halt in order that contact could be regained and to determine the exact location of the battalion in the woods. The platoons of Company I had been able to maintain contact with each other. Also, the left platoon of Company L was in contact with the right platoon of Company I. However, the two remaining rifle platoons and the weapons platoon of Company L were in unknown locations in the dense thicket to the right rear. Company K, to the rear of Company L, had also lost contact with the remainder of the battalion except by radio, SCR 300. The exact location of the battalion in the woods could not be determined immediately.

(27) A-10; (28) Personal knowledge.

Lieutenant Colonel Bealke, having ordered all units to regain contact, called the direct support artillery battalion via his wire line and requested that a purple smoke shell be fired on a concentration number he believed to be in the general vicinity. He then adjusted the fire until it was immediately to his front and requested the fire direction center to inform him of the coordinates of the last round fired. Due to the extremely limited visibility during the battalion's advance, it was only by this method that the Battalion Commander was able to determine his exact location to be at Point A. (See Map C)

Contact within the battalion having been regained, the advance was resumed. After a short movement forward, Company I was suddenly stopped by fire from positions located behind a large pile of rocks approximately 25 feet high located to its immediate front. (See Point B, Map C) The unit had been proceeding slowly through the brush when about 10 hand grenades were hurled over the thicket and landed in the vicinity of the assault platoons. Company I's light machine section, forward with the rifle squads, suffered heavy casualties. The Company Commander and another soldier seized one of the machine guns and attempted to advance towards the enemy positions. However, fire from several German machine guns sprayed the area and pinned down the entire company. Though the enemy position was at close proximity, the exact locations could not be determined as the denseness of the undergrowth restricted observation to several yards. As the enemy continued firing, a Company I rifleman crawled forward about 20 yards, climbed the rocky hill, and managed to fire several rounds of rifle ammunition into the enemy located behind the hill prior to being wounded. Another soldier then moved forward and threw several hand grenades over the rock pile. The machine-gun firing and grenade throwing suddenly ceased. The rifleman quickly returned to his platoon, shielded himself with a captured German, and returned to the hill. He directed the prisoner to call out to the enemy who remained behind the rock pile to surrender. In this manner, eight Germans, three of

whom were wounded, surrendered.. Nine dead were also found in the position area. (29)

Company I, by use of the rocky knoll, now had an observation post from which they were able to observe for the first time some distance in all directions. (See Point B, Map C) The open hedgerowed fields south of the forest were also visible. (30)

While Company I was thus engaged, Company L on the right had accosted heavy machine-gun and grenade fire. This unit was also involved with a determined enemy at close range. The Company Commander was wounded when he went forward and destroyed the crew of a machine gun which was holding up the advance of his unit. (See Point C, Map C)

At approximately 1600, and concurrently with the engagements of the assault companies, the battalion command group, which was about 100 yards to the rear of the left platoon of Company L, was attacked by an estimated squad of Germans employing machine pistols and grenades. The enemy squad had apparently infiltrated from the west behind the right assault platoon of Company L. After a sharp engagement, the enemy was driven off by the small arms fire of the command group. (See Point D, Map C) A short time later, the group was again counterattacked by a larger number of Germans, estimated to be a platoon. The second attack came from two directions, the west and the rear. The group attacking from the left threw hand grenades, principally of the concussion type, and moved into the bank behind which the command group was sheltered from direct fire weapons. (See Point D, Map C) The Germans to the rear employed machine pistols to fire along the embankment. This close range fire fight might have been disastrous had not a platoon from Company L returned and rendered additional support by assaulting the enemy on the west side of the embankment. This platoon's aggressive action netted six prisoners, several casualties, and forced the remainder of the enemy to withdraw to the west.

(29) A-10; (30) Personal knowledge.

The Battalion Commander ordered his unit to halt, regain lost contact, and reorganize. The CO directed the reserve company (K) to move forward from the rear in order that all around security could be provided. Heavy enemy mortar fire from the vicinity of the knoll to the right front (see Point Y, Map C) and occasional artillery fire had commenced to fall within the battalion area immediately after Company I had captured the rocky hill and after the command group had resisted the counterattack. (31)

During the reorganization the Battalion Executive Officer and S-1 guided a platoon of four tanks, ammunition vehicles and litter bearers to the battalion area. Ammunition was distributed to all units. Approximately fifteen litter cases and the walking wounded were evacuated. Wire communication to the battalion switchboard, which had been knocked out during the counterattack, was reestablished. (32)

At 1800 the Battalion Commander ordered the attack resumed. Company K, with the tank platoon attached, was ordered to pass through Company L on the right, and to debouch from the south edge of the forest into the open field toward Lastelle. (See Map C) Company L was deployed so as to protect the right flank of the battalion. Company I was similarly deployed along the battalion left flank.

The adjacent battalions on the right and left were approximately 500 yards to the rear of the advance elements of the 3rd Battalion. Large gaps existed between the units. Enemy infiltrations from the flanks and the rear were probable.

Company K moved into the attack with three tanks - the fourth remaining in the forest to provide additional support and security to the remainder of the battalion. As Company K advanced into the open fields it was met by heavy enemy fire from dug-in positions located to their front and right flank. Tanks 1 and 2 were knocked out immediately by a self-propelled gun firing from an orchard several hundred yards to the south. (See Map C) Tank 3 moved (31) A-10; (32) Personal knowledge.

out into the open field, bogged down in a marshy area and was immobilized. (See Map C) Notwithstanding the loss of the tanks, Company K moved forward and reached the hedgerows as indicated on Map C. Companies I and L, in the meantime, were still heavily engaged with the enemy on the battalion's right and left flank in the forest.

At 2000, Company K's advance was halted. Heavy fire from the front and flanks was inflicting heavy casualties. The Company Commander attempted to return to the forest to acquaint the Battalion Commander of the situation, but was severely wounded. (33) The Executive Officer, finding the company position untenable, also endeavored to reach the command group in order to request permission to withdraw his unit. He also became a casualty.

The entire battalion continued to be engaged with the enemy until dusk. At this time, Company B, 358th Infantry, was attached to the 3rd Battalion. This unit was deployed on the right flank to assist Company L in resisting the strong German pressure directed from the direction of Hill Y (see Map C). This enemy action, in addition to that on the left flank, prevented Companies I and L from advancing to the southeast towards the objective.

As darkness descended, Company K was forced to withdraw to the forest. The Battalion Commander deployed the depleted companies in a square formation for the night near the south edge of the forest. The adjacent battalions had not yet been able to advance to the line now held by the 3rd Battalion. (34) (See Map C)

From dusk to 0430, 10-11 July, the ammunition and pioneer platoon moved rations, water, and ammunition into the battalion area. Litter bearers evacuated the wounded throughout the night. At daylight additional casualties were found in the forest, and the total evacuated to the battalion aid station numbered eighty-five. An undetermined number of Company K's wounded had been evacuated by the Germans after the company's withdrawal. The Company Executive Officer was found and evacuated subsequent to the battalion's advance from the (33) Personal knowledge; (34) A-10

forest. He reported that he had been treated by German aid men. (35)

Prior to the attack on HILL 122 the rifle companies were approximately 20% understrength.
At dusk, 10 July, the strength of the rifle companies of the battalion

were as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| Company I | 2 officers | 64 enlisted men |
| Company K | 1 officer | 31 enlisted men |
| Company L | 1 officer | 48 enlisted men |

Late on 10 July the Battalion Commander was evacuated. The Battalion S-3 assumed command of the forward elements. The next day, the battalion was organized as one battle group. At 2000 hours, the group resumed the attack. The unit overran and destroyed eleven machine-gun nests and drove the enemy back to the village of Lastelle. The group reached a point 400 yards north of Lastelle after two hours of fighting, but withdrew 400 yards to make contact with the 1st Battalion, 359th Infantry, which had been committed on the left of the 3rd Battalion, 359th Infantry. Together with this battalion, the 3rd Battalion advanced at 2400 to the near edge of Lastelle, gaining the position with little opposition at 0200.

On the third day, namely 12 July, the German resistance was found to be broken. The enemy had withdrawn. The battalion, now consisting of but four officers and 126 men in the three rifle companies, drove through to its objective and continued the advance for approximately 2000 yards against slight resistance. The 3rd Battalion, its mission completed, was relieved shortly thereafter. (36)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing and criticising this action, let us initially consider the activities of the enemy. What prompted the Germans to select and locate their battle position on the reverse slope of Hill 122 - a position located well within the edge of the woods? Tactical principles of defense indicate that: (1) The primary prerequisites of a defensive position are observation,

(35) Personal knowledge; (36) A-10.

fields of fire, obstacles, and adequate cover and concealment. (2) The relative importance of these factors is dependent to a great degree upon the strength and type of troops, armament, mission, and, of course, the enemy capabilities. It is true that the Germans did not have troops to spare; however, his soldiers were battle hardened and well trained for individual and small unit combat as parachute infantry are required to be. He had superior observation from the north slope of Hill 122, his outpost location, until he was driven back to his battle position. The Hill itself, and the dense woods, vines, and thickets provided obstacles difficult to surmount by attacking forces. Perhaps not difficult to traverse on foot, but troublesome for attacking units to maintain control, to locate and determine his dispositions, and to bring effective fire upon him. Finally, the German had excellent concealment - concealment of individuals, weapons, and of his entire main line of resistance. The latter reason primarily dictated that he select his battle position deep in the woods and on the reverse slope of Hill 122. His defenses were well concealed - thus an attacker could not be certain that the plan of attack was sound. It was forced to attack blindly. Preparatory artillery and mortar fire would necessarily be fired blindly and ineffectually. The German concealed position on the reverse slope afforded him freedom of movement, troop control was simplified, and consequently morale was higher. Finally, the individual German soldier could not open fire until the attackers were well within effective range; his position was not prematurely disclosed; he was able to stop the attack with short, heavy volumes of fire time after time; and he grasped opportunities to surprise, ambush, and counterattack offensive elements. The German employed and exploited concealment, old as the art of war itself, to its fullest possibilities. In this connection, i. e., a battle position located in a woods, an extract from a German manual published in 1941 is quoted as follows: "In defending a position in woods, the following

should be observed: (1) The main line of resistance should either be a considerable distance outside the woods, or well within the woods. In the latter case, the outposts should be at the edge of the woods."

In considering the attack of the German position in the Foret de Mont Castre, we ask if it was necessary that the position be attacked frontally or whether it was required to be attacked at all. The position was the key to the ^{h/}Malman Line. It is obvious that possession of this feature was tantamount to further advances to the south. Since the defensive position was predominantly located on the hill, neither envelopment nor bypassing was feasible. The order to attack frontally was not an alternative means to an end - it was the only course of action available to higher commanders.

Penetration of the defensive battle position was being accomplished by the 3rd Battalion when initial counterattacks from both flanks and the rear were being executed by the Germans. At this moment the battalion was 500 yards in advance of the adjacent battalions. In order to continue the attack to the southeast, Company K, the reserve unit, was committed to the attack by passing through Companies I and L which were engaged with the enemy on their respective flanks. The consequent loss of mass in the assault echelon proved costly in time and personnel. Company K, after a substantial advance, found its position untenable and was forced to withdraw. It is felt that the employment of another battalion to exploit the 3rd Battalion penetration of the German main line of resistance could have been accomplished with outstanding results. Had this action been taken, Companies I and L, located in advantageous positions to concentrate their efforts on the shoulders of the penetration, would have been able to assist the adjacent battalions in overrunning the enemy battle positions. In this connection, the lack of reserves available for rapid utilization and concentration in the 3rd Battalion zone was cogently reflected by the heavy casualties sustained by the unit.

The very nature of the dense Foret de Mont Castre required a high degree of leadership in all echelons in order that aggressiveness of individuals and

units, particularly when those units' flanks were exposed, would be maintained. The personal example of the Battalion Commander was exemplary. The desirable effect, however, was made only on those troops in his immediate vicinity.

When the 3rd Battalion effected contact with the enemy, advances were made only by forceful assaults utilizing hand grenades, or by individuals creeping forward through the undergrowth in order to fire upon the enemy from extremely short ranges. Control by the battalion and company commanders was impossible. Consequently the fight developed into combat by small units and individuals. Thus the principles of aggressiveness, initiative, and personal courage were demonstrated by squads and individuals to be the integral components which finally resulted in the accomplishment of the battalion mission.

AN ANALOGY

A striking analogy between the attack of a German unit, the 2nd Battalion, 118th Infantry, on 23 May 1940 against a French defensive position in the Sommauthe Woods near La Besace, France, and the attack of the 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, in the Foret de Mont Castre can be made in order to elucidate further the difficulties of executing certain tactical principles in an attack through dense woods.

The German battalion was ordered to attack the French defensive positions on the N edge of the Sommauthe Woods and drive the enemy to the edge of the woods approximately 3000 yards to the south. The attacking battalion was an interior unit. Prior to the attack, reconnaissance revealed that the French held relatively weak positions near the north edge of the woods. Enemy dispositions further within the woods could not be determined.

Although the thick mass of trees and shrubs limited visibility to ten or fifteen yards, the German attack initially moved forward rapidly. Suddenly, the assault elements were met by heavy grenade and machine-gun fire. The German elements, using similar weapons, pushed forward relentlessly and aggressively in the face of heavy short-range fire from enemy located in

trees and camouflaged entrenchments. Contact between companies and adjacent battalions was broken. Companies became lost. The French, consisting of Senegalese troops, constantly counterattacked and attempted to encircle the Germans. Finally, after suffering heavy casualties, the battalion reorganized and resumed the attack. Upon its relief, the battalion had advanced some 3000 yards in approximately eight hours.

The similarity of the difficulties imposed on the attack of the 2nd Battalion, 118th Infantry, and the 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry, by the concealment afforded the defensive units strongly illustrates that the principles of control of units, the maintenance of contact, and the aggressiveness of individuals must necessarily be maintained during an attack through heavy woods. Only in this manner can success be achieved.

LESSONS

The principal military lessons illustrated by the Battle of the Foret de Mont Castre are:

1. Concealment is essential to a strong reverse slope defensive position. If located in a dense woods, the defender achieves surprise by withholding battle position defensive fires until the attacking force is within extremely short range.
2. It is imperative to institute security measures when flanks are exposed.
3. Responsibilities of leadership during fighting in dense woods is in part superseded and supplanted by the resourcefulness, aggressiveness, courage, and initiative of individuals and small groups.
4. Visibility limitations require the imposition of specific procedures in order to insure the maintenance of contact between units.
5. Exploitation of a battle position penetration must be planned and hastily executed in order to achieve absolute success.