

INFANTRY REGIMENTAL C.T. IN ATTACK

A Few Lessons in Tactics

HURTGEN FOREST TO THE ROER RIVER CAMPAIGN

I. 1. This campaign could have been a school problem except the usual "weather clear, roads good etc." was missing. The weather was wet, the roads boggy and heavily mined, the topless trees not conducive of high morale.

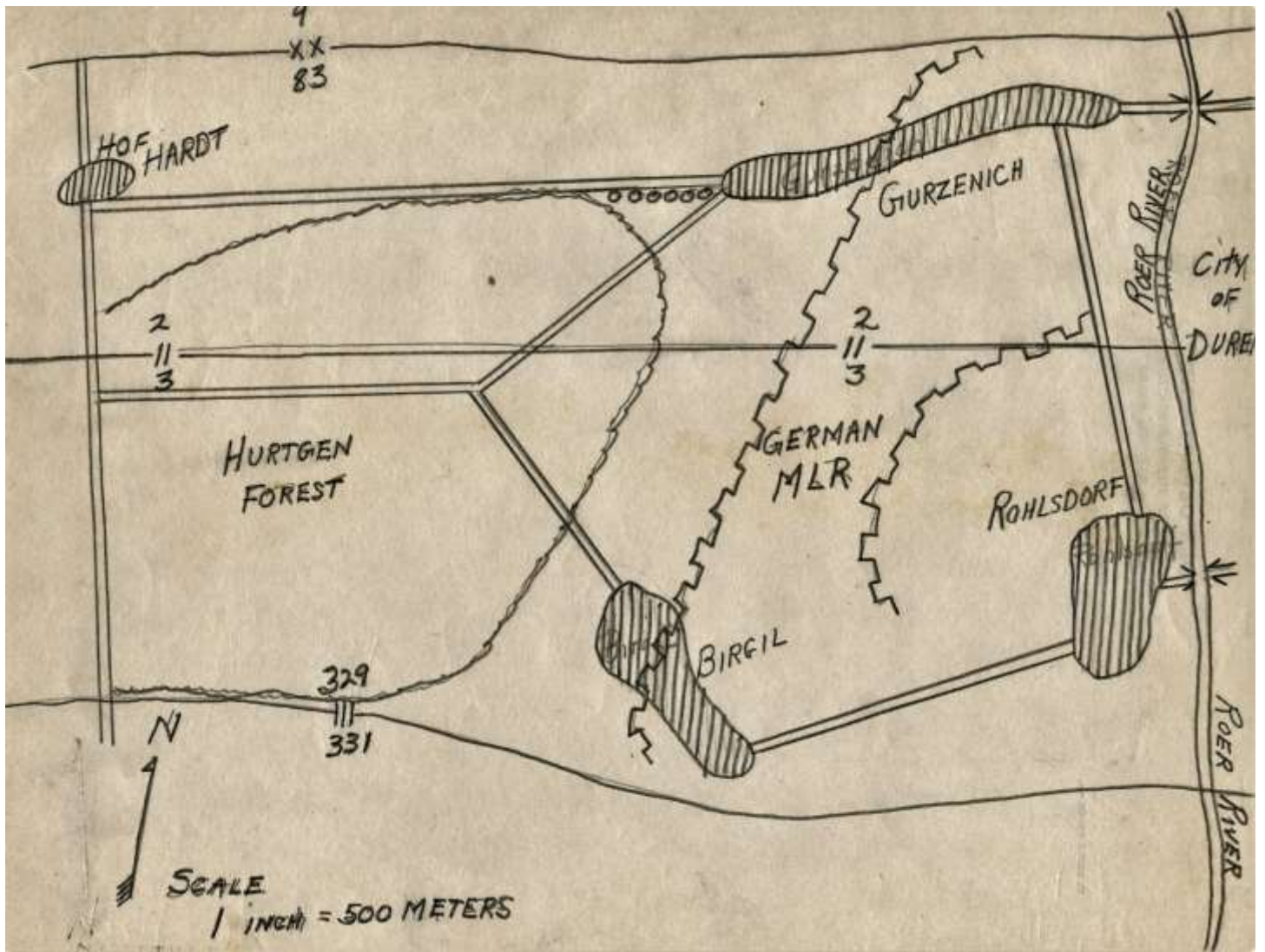
2. The 329th CT of the 83rd Division relieved the 8th CT of the 4th Division in the Hurtgen Forest on 10 December 1944. The 8th had had a tough time in the Hurtgen Forest from tree bursts. Their effective strength in most companies being less than a hundred men. The relief offered no difficulties as both the American and German troops were in dugouts.

LESSON NO. 1. Foxholes which are effective in open country will not give the same protection in woods due to tree bursts. Use overhead cover or dig foxholes near the bole of a large tree. The branches will give some protection.

3. The objective given the 329th CT was the West bank of the Roer River opposite Duren seven kilometers to the East.

II. 11 December 1944.

1. December 11th was spent in reconnaissance and planning. The problem broke naturally into two phases: (1) An attack to clear the forest and; (2) An attack from the edge of the forest to the river. The 329th CT was an interior regiment with the 9th Division on its left and the 331st CT of the 83rd Division on its right. The zone of action of the 329th CT was close forest; the other half open terrain containing three small towns; Gursenich, Birgil and Rohlsdorf. The enemy outpost was in the forest; his main position in and around the three towns.



III. 12 December 1944.

1. The attack to clear the forest was launched at 1000 on 12 December in the book formation of 1st and 2d Battalions in assault, 3rd Battalion in reserve. Resistance in the form of machine gun nests in dug-out positions was immediately encountered in both battalion sectors. Due to the density of the forest these positions would be encountered by the scouts at close range. Two methods were used to overcome them: (1) To drive the enemy underground with mortar fire and then rush the position with fire; (2) To outmaneuver the position and attack it from the rear. The first was more rapid; the second lost us fewer men. Each battalion had a platoon of tanks attached but the denseness of the forest, the mines and the ever present panzerfaust limited their use. By 1700 both assault battalions were on the objective, a North-South road through Hof-Hardt, an advance of about three kilometers.

LESSON NO. 2. In close forest due to reduced visibility enemy positions can usually be outmaneuvered.

2. Except for those of the enemy killed or captured the above operation had driven in the enemy outpost line. However between us and the Roer lay the enemy MLR consisting of fortified houses in Gurzenich, Birgil and Rohlsdorf and trenches between. Following the usual German custom the main force was in the trenches outside the towns.

3. Key to the whole position was the town of Gurzenich stretching for a mile along the West-East road from the edge of the forest to the Roer. Almost at right angles to the Gurzenich road was the road to Birgil. This road ran east through the forest for several kilometers, then turned Southeast and climbed a hill into Birgil, two kilometers from the road junction. The town of Rohlsdorf was South of Gurzenich on the Roer about equi distant from the other two villages.

(see map).

IV. 13 December 1944.

1. The plan for 13 December was to continue the attack to the edge of the forest and gain a foothold in Gurzenich. The latter job was given to Lt Colonel Granville Sharpes' 2d Battalion. Between the edge of the forest and Gurzenich was an open field that promised trouble. Along the road were scattered trees. Attacking in column of companies along the tree line following a heavy artillery bombardment the 2d Battalion gained a foothold in the town where it was to fight bitterly for three days.

LESSON NO. 3. It is much easier to get men to attack on a narrow covered route than with plenty of space in the open.

2. Meanwhile the 1st Battalion finished clearing the forest in its zone and by nightfall on 13 December the Hurtgen Forest in our area was clear. During the night of the 13 - 14 December the Engineers worked all night clearing the mass of mines from the roads so our tanks and TD's could join their Infantry Battalions.

V. 14 December 1944.

1. The plan for the 14th of December was for the 2d Battalion to continue its attack through Gurzenich while the 3rd Battalion under Lt Colonel John Speedie relieved the 1st Battalion with the mission of taking Birgil. An open area about five hundred yards wide sloping uphill lay between the forest and Birgil. It had to be crossed to reach the town. Preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment and smothering the town with smoke from the 81 mm Mortars, I and K companies moved out abreast with marching fire. Although a long distance for marching fire the execution was perfect and ten minutes after the jump-off the 3rd Battalion entered the town. House to house fighting immediately broke out but the impact of the assault carried the troops through the village and in less than an hour it had been taken. Company L which remained in the reserve in the forest received more casualties than either of the assault companies.

LESSON NO. 4. When open ground must be crossed marching fire is the best answer. It keeps the enemy down and the firing keeps up the offensive spirit of the attackers. Fire superiority must be obtained before starting.

2. The clearing of Gurzenich by the Second Battalion was a tough job. It was the key to the whole area and the Germans fought for every house. The fight was still going on at 1700 when the enemy launched a tank and Infantry counter attack against both Gurzenich and Birgil. The clearing of the roads the night before had allowed our tanks and TD's to be moved up into the towns and while they knocked off the enemy tanks and assault guns our Infantry stopped the German Infantry. Two major counter attacks were stopped in each town, the heaviest in Gurzenich.

LESSON NO. 5. When a town has been taken the mines on the friendly side should be immediately cleared and armor moved into the town. It probably will be needed. If outside of the town it is too far away to help repel counter attacks.

VI. 15 December 1944.

1. Positions in Gurzenich and Birgil were consolidated and the troops rested after three days and nights of fighting.

VII. 16 December 1944.

1. On this day Von Rundstedt began his historic attack across the Roer. The main blow fell South of our area but secondary attacks were made against both Gurzenich and Birgil. Continuous tank and Infantry attacks were made all morning, the outcome often being in doubt. In Birgil the most critical counter attack was finally stopped by Sergeant Ralph Neppel who commanded a machine gun squad. The rest of his crew were killed and he was blown back from the gun by tank fire. Both his legs being almost shot off, he crawled back to the gun on his elbows, righted it and stopped the Infantry accompanying the tanks. The tanks turned around and retreated.

LESSON NO. 6. The outcome of an attack may be decided by one heroic individual.

VIII. 17 December 1944.

1. During the night of December 16.- 17 the first battalion with a platoon of medium tanks had been moved into the Western part of Gurzenich. The main enemy force still occupied trenches in the open ground within the Gurzenich - Birgil - Rohlsdorf quadrangle. The trench area was subjected to a continuous pasting by our artillery but an attack across the open against the trenches promised trouble.

2. The plan for the 17th was as follows:

a. 2d Battalion to clear the East edge of Gurzenich and hold the line of the Roer River preventing any crossing by the enemy from Duren.

b. 1st Battalion (with one (1) platoon of medium tanks attached) to follow the 2d Battalion through Gurzenich to the East end of the town then attack to the South with their objective the town of Rohlsdorf.

c. 3rd Battalion to assist the 1st Battalion in the attack on Rohlsdorf by an attack from the South end of Birgil. Attacks to be coordinated by observation and radio (Birgil being on a hill commanded a view of both other villages). Movements of the 2d and 1st Battalions to be made under cover of darkness and attack of 1st Battalion to be made at dawn.

3. The execution of the plan came apparently as a complete surprise to the Germans who were expecting an attack on their trenches from Gurzenich or Birgil or both. Lt Colonel Tim Cook's 1st Battalion attacking with C Company astride the road to Rohlsdorf and with B Company riding on the tanks on their

right crossed the 3000 yard space between Gurzenich and Rohlsdorf before the defenders could reverse their position and took Roholdorf in a matter of minutes.

LESSON NO. 7. The principle of surprise applies to direction as well as time of attack.

4. The main enemy force still remained in the trenches in the open but they were in an untenable position. An attack out of Birgil by K Company and by B Company with their platoon of tanks out of Rohlsdorf was enough. When the Germans saw the tanks and Infantry advancing from their rear they came out with their hands up.

LESSON NO. 8. A continuous study of the terrain and enemy positions will often disclose a way of avoiding high casualty attacks against prepared positions.

IX. Completed Operation.

1. The complete operation from the relief of the 8th CT in the Hurtgen Forest to the clearing of the West bank of the river cost the 329th CT about 400 casualties. The number of Germans killed and wounded is not known but one thousand and fifty six prisoners were taken by the regiment in the seven days of battle.

2. Patrols were put across the Roer into Duren and although the resistance met was light, a crossing of the Roer at that time was not in the books. A relief was accomplished and the 83rd Division moved out to take part in the Battle of the Bulge.