

30th INFANTRY DIVISION
117th Infantry Regiment

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BREACHING THE SIEGFRIED LINE

(Company interview, "I" Company, 3d battalion, 117th Infantry Regiment, 24 October 1944. Participating:

Lt. George Thompson, Company Commander, I Company
S/Sgt. Arthur Gaddy, squad leader, 1st platoon of I Co.
Lt. Dewey J. Sandell, platoon leader, 2d platoon, I Co.
T/Sgt. Arthur Vest, platoon sergeant, 2d platoon, I Co.
S/Sgt. Ben Sorra, platoon guide, 2d platoon, I Co.
S/Sgt. Daniel Heffernan, platoon guide, 3d platoon, Co. I
Sgt. Ross Rainwater, squad leader, 3d platoon, Co. I

... Capt. Hechler

The plan of operation for breaching the Siegfried Line called for using the 3d battalion ^{on 2 October} as the support battalion, which would move forward on the second day of the operation. However, when the 119th Infantry was held up on the right (south) flank, the 1st battalion of the 117th had an exposed flank. "I" Company was suddenly called upon to move in and protect the right flank of the 1st battalion.

"I" Company received word at 1800 of its mission, and moved out at 1815 from positions in Scherpenseel. Lt. Thompson had reconnoitered the terrain and established the company CP in a brick house on the Marienberg-Rimbung road just west of the Wurm River, building his company up from the CP east to the pillboxes on the southern edge of Palenberg. At this point "I" tied in with B Company, on its left.

Moving into position, the company suffered five casualties as it was coming over the ridge west of the river when the enemy placed mortar fire right down the column. That night, considerable harassing small-arms fire was received from the 119th sector; this was especially bothersome to the 1st platoon, whose positions penetrated farthest to the south. Fire appeared to be coming from the castle and the woods east of the railroad track.

The following morning tanks from the 743d Tank Battalion were observed moving down the Palenberg road toward the Rimbung castle.

The tanks fired into the woods east of the Palenberg road, and over 100 prisoners filled out of the woods, one of them shouting in perfect centerfield bleacher accent: "Which way to Brooklyn?"

At 1100 on 3 October, I Company moved out to share the 3d battalion mission of cleaning out the town of Ubach. I tied onto the tail of the 3d battalion, which was passing through the 1st battalion in Palenberg. Platoons of the company advanced in column; the order was 2, 1, and 3. In Ubach, K and L companies remained forward, with I completing the goose-egg to the rear.

It had originally been planned to use the tall Ubach church on the western edge of town as an OP, but the Germans shelled it heavily and lopped off the steeple and riddled the church. Then I Company ~~on 3~~ ~~October~~ established its defenses around the schoolhouse and shell of the church, protecting the rear of the 3d battalion. Strong road blocks were set up on the roads leading into Ubach. In addition to the heavy artillery fire dropping all over Ubach, considerable small-arms fire was being received from the eastern edge of Palenberg on the left flank of I Company.

None of the counterattack on the early morning of 4 October hit I Company, but the shelling of Ubach continued and grew in intensity. While moving east through Ubach on 4 October, Lt. Shelton S. Turner was leading his weapons platoon down the street and four or five big shells dropped in the middle of the platoon, killing Lt. Turner and wiping out one squad; ten men were wounded by the shell fragments.

K and L Company were both in a weakened condition after the counterattacks and their strength was down to less than 100 men each, so on 4 October, I moved up into the line late in the day. On 5 October, I and L companies attacked abreast toward zu Ubach. The main road to Alsdorf

was the nominal boundary between companies, with L on the left and I on the right of the road. However, such intense small-arms fire was being received from the German barracks area, along with the continued artillery concentrations, that both companies utilized the banks of the road for protection and advanced practically single-file down the main road toward Alsdorf.

The 1st platoon of I Company was pinned down practically all day on 5 October. It was the leading platoon, and was more or less isolated when the tanks withdrew. 5 tanks of the 743d had been knocked out by direct fire weapons, ~~and~~ ^{and} their withdrawal of course left the infantry in a tight position. The enemy had very good observation, and the large numbers of 2d ^A ~~Armored~~ ^D ~~Division~~ tanks drew more and more artillery throughout the day on 5 October. Much of the machine gun fire was coming from second-story windows in the barracks and was whistling fifty feet over the heads of the troops, but there was also enough close to the ground to keep their heads down.

The worst problem on 5 October was trying to keep an OP long enough to direct artillery on the enemy strongpoints. Every time an observer mounted the second story of a house, the enemy would ^{shell} ~~shoot~~ the house with artillery. Finally Lt. Richard C. Timpe, platoon leader of the 1st platoon, situated in a house on the edge of Ubach, with a 536 radio, directed artillery on the barracks and ^{on} ~~at~~ zu Ubach.

On 6 October, the 3d battalion jumped off again in a coordinated attack with the 1st battalion on the right. L Company and I Company were astride the main Alsdorf road in the same positions. Tanks went along with the men, and the men doubled ^A ~~back~~ ^{timed} across the open ground to avoid the heavy artillery and mortar fire. Small-arms fire was not as intense, and the tank-infantry cooperation was working better because there were fewer dug-in tanks and anti-tank guns opposing the advance of the

*Progress
11/16/67* tanks.

On 7 October, the 3d battalion really opened up with a power drive into Alsdorf. The tanks working with I Company were a tremendous morale factor when they started to work crosscountry and spray the German foxholes with machine gun fire. The Germans were dug in in the beet fields northwest of Alsdorf, kept their heads down when the tanks were firing, and then surrendered in large numbers when the infantrymen came ~~up~~ up behind the tanks.

*Tempe or
Thompson
in command
of I?* Lt. Tempe and Lt. Gale Daugherty raced I against L Company to see who could reach Alsdorf first; everyone agrees it was a "tie."

Little opposition was met in Alsdorf, which surprised I Company because there had been so many German troops outside of the town. A little bazooka fire and a few anti-tank guns were met, but before noon the town had been captured. Sgt. Leroy Gurley found 12 German artillery observe: in a cellar and captured them along with 15 radio sets.

During the night of 7-8 October, a German half-track wandered into Alsdorf, not realizing that the town was in American hands. Tank destroyers fired on it, and then I Company machine gunners set it on fire as it was careening down the street. Lt. Sandell, who picked up a little German at Montana State, questioned a German officer in the half track and learned that the enemy had a mechanized force in Schaufenberg

At 0700 on 8 October, the 3d and 1st battalions moved out for an attack on Mariadorf, with the 3d battalion on the left, I Company proceeded in a column of platoons in the order 1st 3 and 2, with L Company on the left flank. The right flank boundary of I Company was the railroad running southeast from Kol. Kellersberg to Mariadorf.

Heavy anti-tank fire was encountered across the open fields, and difficulty was experienced keeping the tanks up with the infantry. Both I and L companies were pinned down by heavy machine gun fire after some

tanks had withdrawn. There was ^{resist ice} strong ~~force~~ centered around the slagpile at (911534). When Lt. Thompson got ^{close to} Mariadorf, the lead squad of the 1st platoon reported that they had spotted three enemy tanks and about a company of infantrymen sneaking around the left flank of the 3d battalion, heading west into Alsdorf ^{from Schaufenberg} toward the OP of the 3d battalion. (Lt. Thompson said: "If we had been held up initially in our advance toward Mariadorf, we would have caught this force before it slipped around behind us. Once they got through, I contacted Col. McDowell, the 3d battalion commander, at his OP, and asked him if I Co. should pull back to cover the town of Alsdorf. 'Hd l, no,' Col. McDowell replied, 'you go ahead and secure Mariadorf, ~~the~~ I can take care of this situation here.' " (At that time Lt. Thompson had with him one platoon of B Company, his own mortar section from the I Company weapons platoon, the heavy machine guns from D Company, his own CP group, and an artillery observer from the 118th Field Artillery Battalion. The tanks of the 743d operating with I and L companies knocked out two of the German tanks, and successfully machine-gunned a number of the Germans involved in the counterattack advancing across the open. The artillery observer adjusted some concentrations in the middle of the field, while the machine gunners took up effective sniping positions in the second-floor windows of the built-up portion of Kol. Kellersberg which extends toward Mariadorf.

Meanwhile, leading elements of I Company were struggling to advance into Mariadorf. The enemy had stationed machine guns at the railroad overpass at (907529) and practically wiped out the 1st platoon of I Company with their fire. Only 6 men from the 1st platoon returned that night; others were captured when enemy tanks cut them off across the railroad track.

Believing, apparently, that the Americans were about whipped, a German officer rose to his full height and with a sweeping gesture in the true Fort Benning "Follow Me" tradition waved his men onward in an open skirmish line. I Company held its fire for a few moments and then opened with every weapon, eliminating almost all of the "field manual" Germans.

When their frontal attack did not work, the Germans tried to bring up tanks on I Company's left flank. Bazooka and rifle grenade fire was ineffective on them, but the tanks withdrew temporarily either in fear of the bazookas and rifle grenades, or because a building suddenly caved in on the edge of Mariadorf. The building collapsed as a result of artillery fire which Lt. Sandell was able to adjust on the enemy positions. "There was so much confusion over the 536," says Lt. Sandell, "that nobody quite knew what or where the artillery was going to land, and the first concentration dropped behind our positions. I called the artillery observer to raise it 800 yards, and it was still short, so I said to raise it 800 again, and then started chasing around after some tanks and switched left and right so fast that the observer got pretty disgusted with me. But the artillery made the tanks retreat."

Effect? At the same time, a lone Sherman tank which had remained in position while the others withdrew called for fire on the enemy positions. They finally agreed on "Concentration 111" after many crossed wires, and delivered this concentration again and again.

Late in the day, some Germans with captured GI uniforms started moving stealthily in on I Company's left. This ruse caused some casualties and would have been even more effective had not some of I Co. spotted the standard yellow ^{German} ammunition boxes which the enemy ~~were~~ ^{was} carrying.

All day along the front, many Germans seemed more interested in capturing American prisoners than shooting to kill. One, Sgt. Arthur

"Preacher" Davis, was captured by a German who started to walk him back to the enemy lines. An I Company marksman caught the captor in the base of the skull with a well-placed M1 shot, but Sgt. Davis walked on unescorted until he had almost reached the German lines before he realized his mistake and dove into a foxhole.

As soon as dusk set in, I Company pulled back to better positions, cautiously withdrawing one-half ~~squad~~ squad at a time. It was impossible to pick up any of the wounded until after dark. On the night of 8 October, as a result of losses in Ubach and the fight for Mariadorf, I Company had remaining:

1st platoon-	6
2nd platoon-	12
3d platoon-	<u>15</u>

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Apparently a few got jumpy in the dark and did not return until the next days, and within several days the strength had risen to about 60, according to Lt. Thompson.

Comments by Capt. Hechler on Capt. Ferriss' questions:

p. 3: Result?

A.: Unknown; must check with I Company on this point

p. 4: Q.: Tempe or Thompson in command of I?

A.: Thompson commanded I, but Tempe was the platoon leader of the leading platoon thereof.

p. 5: Q.1- Where were inf. platoons of I Co.?

A.1- Thompson had with him only his immediate CP group; infantry platoons were up ahead struggling to get ahead into Mariadorf-- see bottom of p. 5.

Q.2- Which counterattacks?

A.2- It was all part of the same counterattack which advanced across the open field from Schaufenberg and slipped by the 3d and 1st battalions who were attacking at the same time in a southeasterly direction.

Q.3- Tempe?

A.3- Yes, the 1st platoon was his platoon.

p. 6: Q: Effects?

A.: This concentration effectively checked the enemy, but did not enable our forces to gain any additional ground.