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CAPTURE OF AACHEN

Capture of Aachen, Germany, 20-21 Oct 44,
by Lt Col D. M. Daniel, Inf. Command and
Staff College. 1946-47.

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COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

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School of Combined Arms

Regular Course

1946-1947

The Capture of Aachen

(Personal Experience of a Battalion Commander)

Type of Operation Described: Battalion in the
Attack of a Fortified City

Lt. Col. D. M. Daniel, Infantry

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INTRODUCTION

"Towns offer concealment for troops and weapons and protection from fire of weapons and mechanized attack. Consequently, they are often naturally strong defensive areas--". Par 854, FSR OPERATIONS.

The purpose of this monograph is to cover the operations of the 2d Battalion, 26th Infantry, 1st Division, in the reduction of the city of Aachen, Germany, from 10 to 21 October 1944.

To understand the operations at Aachen it is necessary to begin in the vicinity of Mons, Belgium. There remnants of the ~~First~~ ^{Fifteenth} German Army from the north coast of France were attempting to escape from the pocket caused by the rapid advances of the First American and the Second British Armies. By 2 September, at least five German divisions, under orders to pull out and beat the Americans to the Siegfried Line, were well on their way to the east when they ran into the flank of the American 3rd Armored Division. As they tried to push their way through, the 1st Infantry Division struck their south flank. During the next five days, when there were no front lines and all units of these two American divisions were actually fighting in all directions, over 22,000 prisoners were captured and a disproportionately high number of dead had been buried in the field. Map 1.

THE OPERATIONS AT AACHEN

On 7 September the 1st Division turned east from Mons and by 12 September had cleared through Namur and Liege, and had pushed into the Siegfried Line southwest of Aachen. Instead of driving directly into the city of Aachen in mid-September, the Division side-slipped the bulk of its forces to the east, to complete the penetration of the Siegfried Line east of Aachen and isolate the city prior to an attack on the city proper.

One recalls that about this time gasoline had become a very critical item, affecting operations of the First Army as well as that of the Third Army. Quite literally all action became "foot" action. By 10 October the encircling forces were as shown on Map 2. Although there was still a gap of about a mile and the city was not definitely "cut off", the VII Corps Commander ordered an ultimatum delivered to the city. This document promised complete destruction of the city if it was not surrendered unconditionally within 24 hours. No one was particularly surprised when no answer was received, although the German radio said it had been rejected. Unofficially, however, civilians indicated that word of the ultimatum had passed around by showing white flags at many points in the city.

No mention has been made of the bitter fighting encountered by the encircling troops in reaching the positions shown on 10 October, nor of the constant and violent counter-attacks which they had to beat off after that date in order to hold those positions. While those actions had quite a definite influence on the capture of the city they are not within the scope of this account. By 10 October, then, the stage had been set and the 26th Infantry Regiment was on the stage ready to begin the actual reduction (and as the ultimatum stated, the destruction) of the city.

Since before the Mons episode, the 26th Infantry had been fighting with only the 2d and 3rd Battalions, the 1st having been attached to the 3rd Armored Division. When the bulk of the 1st Division began sideslipping to the east around Aachen it became apparent to even the lowest ranking "GI" that the 26th was going to be charged with the actual reduction of the city. And when the 3rd Battalion of the 26th also was side-slipped away around to the east of the city on 11 October

it was clear to everyone in the 2d Battalion that they would have the honor of house-to-house fighting in the city proper. Many days before we had begun discussing this problem in the 2d Battalion and we could not help recalling with some apprehension all that we had heard about Cassino. Although we believed that the quality of troops garrisoning Aachen was not of the best, we were certain that even a poor soldier could be a formidable opponent in house-to-house and pillbox fighting, particularly when defending so prominent a city of the Fatherland.

Planning

In approaching the problem of clearing the city of Aachen the battalion commander considered it in three phases: Planning, deployment or organization for combat, and the assault of the town.

The general plan evolved was to use artillery and mortar fire across our front to isolate the sector, thus preventing Germans from entering (or for that matter, from leaving) the area under attack; then to use direct fire from tanks, tank destroyers, and machine guns to pin down the defenders and chase them into cellars; and then to move in with bayonets and hand grenades to destroy or capture the defenders. We continuously impressed upon all individuals the necessity for keeping up a continuous stream of fire with all available weapons. We coined a slogan, KNOCK 'EM ALL DOWN, which became a battle cry because the soldiers were quick to realize that the defenders could hardly deliver accurate fire with buildings falling about their ears. We practiced this with marked success by making platoon raids on houses known to be occupied by the enemy.

In our planning we foresaw several difficulties. Chief among them were the unusually large quantities of ammunition required, the coordination between and control of units in street fighting, the problem of civilians, and the use of tanks and TD's without undue exposure to AT weapons. To meet these problems we established a battalion ammunition dump, stocked with all types of ammunition for all weapons in the battalion and attached units. We planned to keep moving this dump so that units would always have ammunition immediately at hand. We worked out a system whereby all street intersections and all important buildings were numbered so that it would be easy to report exact locations accurately and quickly. Constant, positive liaison between units was required.

The problem of what to do with the thousands of civilians known to be still in the city was acute. If they were not evacuated as we overran their abodes the chances for German soldiers to masquerade as civilians behind our lines would be quite great. We decided therefore that the way to clean out an enemy city was to clear everyone, civilian and soldier, from each building before passing on to the next. We planned to search every building, every room, every closet, every cellar, even the manholes in the street, to be absolutely certain that no one was behind our front lines. We knew this would be a very slow process but the only alternative we could see was to be subjected to sniping from our rear.

Tanks and TD's in street fighting of course have to use the streets. We planned to place the tanks on side streets, have them nose around the corners firing all guns to aid the infantry to get forward. As soon as another side street was cleared we planned to smother all possible AT gun sites commanding the axial street, then rush the tanks

to the next side street and continue the above process.

Deployment and Organization for Combat

Each of the three rifle companies was made a small task force by attaching to it three tanks or TD's, two 57mm AT guns, two bazooka teams (in addition to their own), one flame thrower, and two heavy machine guns. Since Aachen had a pre-war population of 160,000, it was evident that all three companies would have to be used in the assault and any reserve forces would have to be furnished by higher headquarters.

The Assault of the City

When the ultimatum was delivered on 10 October the 2d Battalion, 26th Infantry, was still about one-half mile southeast of the limits of the city proper (Map2). When it expired on the 11th, the aerial and artillery bombardment commenced. On the 11th the 3rd Battalion left one company on our left flank and moved the remainder around east to Rothe-Erde to capture the high ground northeast of Aachen and to prepare to attack the factory district between that point and the city. On the 12th, one company of the 1st Battalion was released to the 26th Infantry to cover the south approaches to the city. This released the remaining company of the 3rd Battalion to assist in their attack. The 3rd Battalion then jumped off at 1100 on the 12th, quickly reached its objective and began mopping up. During this time the 2d Battalion moved forward to the railroad track on the southeast side of Aachen, clearing quite a built-up area with house-to-house fighting. Needless to say all the artillery with the Corps that could be brought to bear was continuously pounding the city. By dark on the 12th the situation was as shown on Map3.

At long last we were actually ready to enter the city proper. The railroad track marking the limits of the city was a raised embankment that was about 30 feet high on the left (west) of the battalion sector and sloping to about 15 feet on the right. The banks were steep and presented a formidable obstacle to any vehicular movement. There was one underpass in our zone but that had been destroyed and effectively blocked by the Germans. The regimental plan called for the 2d Battalion to drive to the north and the 3rd Battalion to attack west, the two meeting on the northeast border of the city. We had all three rifle companies in line: "F", "E", "G" in that order from east to west.

Now came the time for final check of all details and plans as affected by the conditions as we actually found them on the late evening of 12 October. All company commanders and platoon leaders assembled at the battalion CP. The most pressing problem was how to get tanks, tank destroyers, and antitank guns into town before the Germans could chase us out with their tanks. The engineer said it would take at least 24 hours to open the underpass. We had attached to the battalion a platoon of tanks, a platoon of tank destroyers, and a platoon of antitank guns from the regimental AT company, and we didn't want to be without these weapons any longer than necessary. The tank platoon leader was given a strong infantry patrol and he personally reconnoitered the embankment. He finally found a spot where he said he could get at least three tanks over before the low ground near the embankment became too cut up to move anything. "Of course", he said, "the far bank is so steep that I may turn over going down it but if I go fast enough maybe I'll make a complete somersault and be all right." We decided to risk it with two tanks and to wait for the underpass for the others. We also organized three bazooka

teams from each of the AT platoons and sent them right along with the rifle companies.

The detailed plan for the assault called for a long air and artillery bombardment on the morning of 13 October. The fighter bombers would bomb anywhere in the city except within 500 yards of the railroad tracks in our sector, the artillery would start on a line 100 yards from the tracks with the light guns and the mediums and heavies would cover from 300 yards to 500 yards from the tracks. Our own mortars would paste the area from the tracks to the artillery line 100 yards beyond. Jump-off was set for 0930 at which time all artillery would lift 200 yards and the air would stop except for targets marked by colored smoke. It sounded fairly good to us but we still were not satisfied since the most ticklish operation was to get the infantry across the railroad embankment, and that was where the least stuff would fall. So each infantryman was given a hand grenade which he was to throw over the embankment at exactly 0930.

After much checking of last minute details throughout the night, we waited for the show to begin on the morning of 13 October. The bombardment was most satisfactory, everyone was in position along the tracks, and at 0930 about 1000 grenades were heaved over the bank. Immediately "E" and "F" Companies scrambled across firing every weapon they had. It was actually about one-half hour later before any small arms fire was returned by the Germans. Almost immediately, however, we began to find civilians holed up in cellars and too frightened to talk at all. They were quickly rounded up and evacuated to regiment.

"F" Company had been instructed to stay clear of the built-up area, head north until they reached their zone and then turn west. "E" Company was to clear all the buildings

east of Adalbertsteinweg and north of the tracks. "F" found quite a built-up area in their zone northeast of the cemetery and this slowed them down considerably. By mid-afternoon "E" and "F" still had not reached the line that was to allow "G" to be committed. However, we had found that by knocking down doors and blowing out part of the walls of a station just to the west of the underpass that we could get all our vehicles under the embankment through the station. And since "G" had no desire to stay in their foxholes in the swampy ground along the embankment for another night when there were houses (however battered) just across it, they were allowed to cross during the afternoon and clear enough space so we could use the station to get the vehicles into town. We quickly learned that in street fighting strange to relate, one should stay out of the street. In Aachen most of the buildings abut against each other. We blew holes through the walls to avoid going into the street in getting from house to house. We used great quantities of dynamite, beehives, and bazooka ammunition in blowing these holes. By nightfall of 13 October we had reached the line shown on Map3.

14 October

Early on the 14th the attack again jumped off. We were now attacking to the west and since the artillery was emplaced south of town it was firing parallel to our front. This allowed the artillery to fire very close in front of us without danger from short rounds. We found that we could drop shells into the same block where we were working. With fuze delay the shells would penetrate one or more floors before exploding and the Germans simply would not stay in a building with that coming in and we could mow them down as they fled from the buildings.

At about 1200 "F" reached the point where it was to contact the 3rd Battalion. They reported that they could not go forward until the 3rd Battalion appeared because the Germans were trying to get around their right flank and they had to leave two platoons facing north until a juncture could be made. In the meantime "E" and "G" closed up to the line shown on Map 3. The situation was reported to regiment and we were told to hold where we were because there was a terrific battle going on for the hills east of town. We were also warned to be ready to defend to the east in case a breakthrough was made by the Germans attacking the 16th and 18th Regiments. Of course our sister regiments held their positions but it was not clear until late in the evening that they had repulsed the attack. In the meantime we went over to check the proposed juncture point and found that Germans were indeed just across the street instead of our 3rd Battalion, and that they had just destroyed one of our AT guns with bazooka fire. Since we had a cemetery on which to orient ourselves we were certain that we were at the correct point. This information was given to regiment. During the night the 3rd Battalion Commander personally checked his left company and found it several blocks north of the junction point. He directed that company to make the juncture, which was done early on the 15th and the attack then proceeded.

15 October

During the night of 14-15 October two German planes circled very low over the city and dropped many packages of food and cigarets as well as leaflets carrying greetings and exhortations to the gallant defenders of Aachen. The only slip-up was that most of these packages fell within our lines while the leaflets blew into the German lines. We were quite appreciative of the cigarets since that item was in as short supply as gasoline.

About this time "G" Company uncovered what appeared to be a colossal pillbox or blockhouse. After driving the defenders inside and sealing the two doors with machine gun fire, the company commander approached with his interpreter and demanded the surrender of the occupants. He got no reply, so he had a flame thrower brought up. The interpreter then yelled that if they did not immediately surrender the flame thrower would go into action. Still no reply, so the operator tried to get the flame thrower lit but did not succeed. By this time everyone was getting rather jumpy, not knowing when a burst from a "Burp" gun or a hand grenade from inside would end negotiations. However, the company commander took out a box of matches and after fumbling several got the flame thrower ignited and squirted a jet in a door which appeared to be closed by baffles only. There was immediate action inside so the flame was stopped. A German captain came out to discuss terms of surrender. He was told there could be no discussion, either he surrendered immediately or he would get fried. Immediately thereafter about 200 soldiers and over 1000 civilians began coming out. Inspection showed the structure to be a three storied air raid shelter with walls about 15 feet thick. We ran into two more of these shelters later but did not have to repeat the flame thrower routine on them to get a big haul of prisoners.

By late afternoon on the 15th we had reached the line shown on Map 3. At about dusk a counterattack was launched against "G" Company. This attack came down Hindenburgstrasse and penetrated a couple of blocks down Zollernstrasse. After about two hours of brisk fighting the penetration was sealed off and the line restored. We had lost one TD, one AT gun, and one heavy machine gun.

16-17 October

On the 16th we were again held up because of the critical

battle going on to the east of the city. However, late on the 16th patrols from the 30th Division made contact with the 18th Infantry and a short time later the gap was actually closed thus encircling Aachen completely. This was only six days after the delivery of the ultimatum.

A few days prior to the 16th, one 155mm SP gun had been attached to the battalion. At the time I was pointedly reminded that this was very valuable equipment and that no "accident" should befall it. Consequently we had kept it out of harm's way in the eastern part of town. During the enforced delay on the 16th we located what appeared to be a pill box near the theater on Hindenburgstrasse. We held the east side of Wilhelm Strasse. Zollernstrasse entered Wilhelm just south of Hindenburg. The houses along the east side of Wilhelm prevented our placing direct fire down Hindenburg without at the same time exposing the weapon to cross fire down Wilhelm. We moved a TD into a courtyard behind the house facing Hindenburg Strasse and knocked a hole in the brick walls. While this was going on we moved tanks up the streets on either flank to fire into the houses directly across from this point and then sent one infantry platoon across to clear the first house or two to prevent any bazooka from firing on the TD position. Up until this time the Germans had been running tanks back and forth across Hindenburg and all we could do was chase them with artillery and mortar fire. As soon as the hole was made the TD started firing at the cross streets down Hindenburg to discourage any tank from getting into position to fire back through our hole-in-the-wall. After about a half-hour of this we brought up the 155mm gun and had it fire some dozen rounds into the pill box, the theater, and cross streets in between. The firing was quite spectacular and satisfying from our viewpoint. We found later that

the pill box was a tank and that it was completely destroyed, and that one of our random shots into side streets had caught a tank just as it was nosing around a building to shoot in our direction. The German Commander of the city, after his capture, claimed that the use of such a gun at such close range was barbarous and should be outlawed.

The situation on the hills east of town was again restored by night of the 16th and we were allowed to proceed with the attack on the 17th. Our zone widened considerably to both the north and south as soon as we crossed Wilhelm Strasse. Also enemy resistance became even more fanatical. However, by night on the 17th we had reached the line shown on Map 3. During the 17th the 1106th Engineer Combat Group which had been covering the south approaches to town moved its right battalion about 1000 yards to the north to contact our left flank at Wilhelm Strasse underpass. This removed a considerable threat from that flank.

18-19 October

Early on the 18th "C" Company was attached to the battalion and was placed in the attack in the north part of our zone. About this time we were forcibly reminded that everything must be searched thoroughly. "G" Company began to get rifle shots from behind their lines. After about two hours of careful searching the source of the shots was located in a church steeple. Investigation revealed that the church had been looked into but that the tower had been neglected. Tanks and TD's fired at the tower but had little effect, so the 155mm gun was brought up again and blasted the tower apart with one shot. The tower was found to be a heavily concreted OP.

Since the engineers were not required to move to the west from the original point of contact at the underpass we had to protect our left flank by having "G" Company bend back

to that vicinity. By night of the 18th "G" became so extended that something had to be done. The 2d Battalion 110th Infantry, 28th Division, was attached to the 1st Division for a defensive role only. They were given the mission of holding ground captured by the 26th Infantry. They were placed on our south flank and relieved part of "G" Company during the night of 18-19 October. Thereafter they would periodically take over part of the ground cleared by "G", thus allowing "G" to concentrate for further advance. By nightfall on the 19th we had captured the Cathedral and our lines were about as shown on Map3.

The City Surrenders

At 0730 on the 20th the attack was continued. Resistance in the south was sporadic, but in the north it was quite strong, particularly in the vicinity of the Technical High School in "F" Company's Zone. By the end of the day we had reached the line shown on Map3.

Early on the 21st the attack was resumed. By about 1000 we had captured several hundred troops in the Technical High School and had closed up to the railroad tracks on the west edge of the city. We were then told to continue the attack for about 500 yards to the west of the tracks. We quickly laid on a show, to get across the embankment, that resembled somewhat the one we used to get into the city at the beginning of the assault. The commander of the battalion from the 28th Division, when he saw this attack across the embankment said, "Well I'll be damned, so that's the way it should be done." We cleared the area west of the embankment with little difficulty, picking up a few hundred more prisoners. In the meantime, the German Commander surrendered himself and 500 men at 1205. These were all the garrison that he knew about but we picked up over 1000 others before the day was over. In

all, over 5,600 soldiers were captured during the Aachen operations.

The total losses from all causes in the 2d Battalion and attached units throughout the entire Aachen operation were less than 100. The slow thorough methods employed and the constant stress laid upon use of all available fire power paid off in extremely low casualties for a tough grueling battle.

SUMMARY

The operations at Aachen were made considerably easier by the destruction at Mons of the bulk of the forces that the Germans had planned to use in manning that section of the Siegfried Line.

Surprise was achieved by containing the garrison in the city while the bulk of our forces encircled it. Also, when the actual assault on the city itself was made it came from the east. The German Commander stated that until we were well into the city from the east he still expected a full scale attack from the south--but by that time it was too late to effectively redispense his forces.

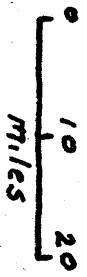
The operations in the city were halted several times because of the severity of the attacks on the encircling forces; thus the clearing of the city could have been completed several days earlier if these delays had not been necessary.

Operating only during daylight hours we were still able by the ruthless application of all available firepower every-time we moved and the thorough searching of all buildings to capture three to four times our own strength in prisoners and to suffer a very small number of casualties.

LESSONS LEARNED

If there are any lessons to be learned from this operation they are:

1. Once surrounded, any city can be reduced at the pleasure of the attacker.
2. Surprise is essential for successful assault.
3. Assaulting troops must clear the enemy from each building before proceeding.
4. Artillery so emplaced as to fire parallel to assaulting troops allows for much closer fire support in towns.
5. Keep out of streets as much as possible. Go from building to building, blasting holes if necessary.
6. Daylight operations in street fighting are necessary to take full advantage of maximum fire power.



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LAON

FRANCE

BELGIUM

LUX.

GERMANY

LILLE

MAUBEUGE

MONS

CHARLEROI

NAMUR

LIEGE

BRUSSELS

MAASTRICHT

HOLLAND

AACHEN

NETHERLANDS