

30th INFANTRY DIVISION
117th Infantry Regiment

BREACHING THE SIEGFRIED LINE

(Account of "A" Company's activities, from following sources:

1. Terrain walk with Capt. John E. Kent, Company Commander, A Co., and Lt. John M. Maloney, weapons platoon leader, A Company, 21 October 1944.
2. Terrain walk with Lt. Theodore Foote, platoon leader of 3d platoon, Company A; Pfc. Gus A. Pantazopoulos and Pfc. Howard E. King, 3d platoon, 22 October 1944.
3. Company interview attended by the following from A Company; 22 Oct:
Capt. John E. Kent, Company Commander
Lt. Theodore Foote, platoon leader of 3d platoon
Lt. John M. Maloney, weapons platoon leader
Pfc. Gus A. Pantazopoulos
Pfc. Howard E. King
S/Sgt. George Cap
S/Sgt. William Miller, Jr.
Pvt. Calvin Tripplett
Pfc. William I. Kelley
S/Sgt. Joseph B. Underwood
Pfc. George R. McGraw
Pfc. William C. Bosserman
Pvt. Paul Burress
Pvt. Raymond Gzymowski)
Pfc. Glen E. Fieffer)

..... Capt. Hechler

When the company made its assault on the Siegfried Line on 2 October, it was about 10-12 men short of T/O strength, but the boys were in good fighting trim, fully equipped and thoroughly trained for the operation. Lt. Maloney said that the men knew both the big and little picture so well that they conversed freely by number about the enemy pillboxes, and frequently showed in their arguments that they knew their flank units and regiments and their missions. (The training was particularly valuable, felt the men, because there were so many green men who had joined the company without any knowledge of assault tactics. It was felt that the training in use of demolitions was needed most, and appreciated the most by the assault detachment.

To Lt. Foote, two elements in the training paid off particularly. The first was simply the old principle that repeated practice makes an operation mechanical. "When I got the mission of taking pillbox #5, I didn't have to stop and explain how we were going to do it; everybody knew by heart what they had to do and they went ahead and did it."

The second thing was psychological: the drilling and training made most of the boys feel that few of them would come out of the day's operation in one piece-- and then they were surprised on D-Day at the ease and precision with which it proceeded. "After looking at those pillboxes and seeing the sandtable and hearing it explained, I thought sure we would have 75% casualties," said Pfc. Pantazopoulos, "but then it turned out to be so easy when we actually did it."

Shortly before 1300, A Company started to move out of its positions east of Scherpenseel and progressed about 100 yards up to the line of departure. The mission was to relieve, if necessary, whichever of the assault companies was held up or bogged down in cracking the line. By this time, German artillery was coming into the A Company area. Col. Frankland, 1st Battalion commander, had decided to hold A Company far in the rear and then rush it through to avoid artillery casualties which would have been suffered if A had followed close on the heels of C and B Companies. Nevertheless, five casualties were suffered from artillery fire before the company left the line of departure. In addition, Lt. Hurrin, platoon leader of the 1st platoon, was a non-battle casualty with an attack of acute appendicitis, and he had to crawl back to the aid station.

Capt. Kent started moving his company out in a very broad column of platoons, which extended from the 2d platoon area on the left-- fifty yards south of the main Marienberg-Palenberg road-- over to the 3d platoon area on the right-- 100 yards north of the barbed wire which constituted the international boundary. At the junction of a little north-south cow trail (the L.D.) cutting the main Marienberg road, a radio operator ran up to Capt. Kent and said: "They want you to take over C Company's mission." Capt. Kent contacted the battalion commander to determine how much of C Company's mission had been accomplished, and was told to "take

over the whole mission -- which was to advance abreast on the right of B Company to penetrate the Siegfried Line and seize an area in and east of Palenberg.

No bridges were carried by A Company, since it was planned to use the B Company crossing. The 2d platoon continued to lead a very rapid advance across the open beet fields toward Marienberg; the 3d platoon was echeloned to the right rear, followed ~~the~~ by the 1st Platoon. Artillery continued in sporadic doses until the 2d platoon reached an orchard area ~~at~~ south of Marienberg, where it came in heavier concentrations. Starting down the same draw which B Company had utilized northeast toward the Wurm River, the 2d platoon was apparently spotted and the enemy had the area zeroed in. Capt. Kent then made a quick switch and swung the 3d platoon due east through a clump of woods toward the river. The 2d platoon, which had been leading, then took a sharp turn to the right (south) and wheeled east to follow the 3d platoon; the weapons platoon and the 1st platoon followed in column in that order.

In switching the order of the 2d and 3d platoons, Capt. Kent had to make a quick decision which depended not only upon the artillery which was falling in the area of the draw where the 2d platoon was advancing. Tanks were proceeding down the same draw, adding to the confusion. Capt. Kent ordered Lt. Johnston, platoon leader of the 2d platoon to check the pillboxes in his area and push forward across the Wurm River and the railroad track to his objective. "I don't think I'm qualified to lead the platoon through that," replied Johnston and he was immediately relieved. The company commander describes Johnston as "a good man with a fair amount of guts, but he had been an air cadet, recently transferred to the infantry. In addition, he had leaned heavily on his platoon sergeant, T/Sgt. Abbey Revier, who was in effect the platoon leader. Sgt. Revier had been badly wounded by the artillery concentration which descended in the draw down

toward the river.

Capt. Kent then went to Lt. Foote, platoon leader of the 3d platoon, and said: "Just received word from Col. Frankland to take over C Company's mission, and your platoon will take pillboxes 5 and 6."

While swinging his platoon through the woods toward the river, Lt. Foote then took his squad leaders over to a high point where they could see pillboxes 5 and 6. Pillbox 5 is at (849590), while #6 is at (851592). Less than 10 minutes was spent in this explanation, for as Lt. Foote says: "I wanted to be sure that they could tell the men in advance precisely where they were going; as for telling them how, that was unnecessary-- we had practiced that until it ~~was~~ had become mechanical."

The company crossed the river at high speed. Through the woods they had a refreshing respite from artillery fire, for they advanced unobserved. But when the enemy saw the company coming out of the woods, artillery was concentrated on the woods-- but too late to do any damage to personnel. Some machine gun fire was received from the left from houses in Marienberg, but most of the men did not seem too disturbed about it. "It took me exactly three minutes to run across the open ground from the woods to the river," said Sgt. Underwood, "and I doubt if anybody took as long as that."

Between the river and the railroad track, A Company suffered most of its casualties. Across the open ground in this area, men dashed in small groups of three and four, hitting the ground only when small arms became too intense. They had crossed the river right near where the tanks were bogged down, at the point where B Company had previously crossed. The stuck tanks and tank-dozer were drawing so much fire in the area that many of the men, as soon as they crossed ^{the} river, ran south toward the area where C Company had crossed. There they found the remnants of C Company bogged down by the fire from the front and right,

much of which was coming from the castle and large house in the 119th sector on the south and southeast. Despite stiff resistance and casualties, it took no more than ten minutes for the 3d (assault) platoon to clear the Wurm River and fall, panting, in the well-protected positions on the west bank of the railroad track. Had they paused in these protected positions, the advance would have been checked, as the enemy got bolder with his defensive fires. But Lt. Foote's policy was to keep his men moving forward at top speed, firing frequently to prevent the enemy from rising up to fire back.

Lt. Foote's leadership played a large factor in the success of A Company's assault on the right side of the line. Foote does not look like a leader; he is a short, slimly built boy with a high voice. He sounds afraid of his shadow, and lacks all the bluster sometimes associated with those who hail from his area-- Gatesville, Texas, in the Camp Hood region. He is a young officer, only 11 months out of Fort Benning OCS. He leads his men by the simple principle of example.

"You know you can't push a string, you gotta pull it," said Foote.

So when the men reached the railroad track, Lt. Foote dashed across and took up a position in a little dip which was dead space into which pillbox No. 5 could not fire.

Pillbox No. 5 was the only pillbox which A Company actually assaulted; No. 6 had already been evacuated when the 3d platoon reached it. Fortunately, B Company had already cleaned out the pillboxes to the left, so A Company could concentrate on assaulting #5 without being bothered with too much fire from other sources.

At this crucial point, the operator of the flame-thrower said he had tested his weapon and it wouldn't work; somebody gave him a rifle and told him to come along anyhow. The two support detachments moved swiftly into position along the Palenberg-Rimbung road, which runs about

Underwood
pro
thirty yards west of pillbox No. 5. Sgt. Underwood built his squad of BAR and riflemen facing a clump of woods north of the pillbox. Another squad was placed facing the woods south of the pillbox. These men built up support fires for the assault detachment, which started initially from west of the road directly in front of the pillbox and then gradually worked its way across the road until it was just on the edge of the wooded patch which extends down to the road from the north of the pillbox.

road
Pfc. Piefer, firing from the right squad supporting on the road, trained his BAR mainly up and down the woods south of the pillbox. Most of the men with him did likewise, as there had been considerable fire coming from this area and the 119th had not yet advanced into the sector. Sgt. Underwood was firing his men on a German machine gun nest which was emplaced directly behind (east) overlooking the pillbox from high ground.

gl. ~~Pvt.~~ Tripplett of the left squad was rattling bullets in and around the embrasure. Pvt. Czymowski and another wire-cutter, along with two scouts were converted into riflemen and joined the support squads in keeping down fire from in and around the pillbox.

There were six men in the assault detachment which Lt. Foote led against the pillbox. Pvt. Marvin Sirokin was the demolitions man carrying the pole charge. Pfc. Howard King was with the assault detachment simply because, as Lt. Foote puts it: "No matter what job you assign King to do, he always ends up at the head of the column." Cpl. Russell Martin was in the group as an *amb. by van.* ammunition carrier. Pfc. Gus Pantazopoulos headed up a three-man bazooka team. *corrected it, Foote, Cpl. Russell*

Pantazopoulos takes his bazooka work very seriously; he also has a definite ideology about the war which he claims prompted him to crawl within twenty yards of the pillbox and pump in two rounds as his personal contribution toward cracking the Siegfried Line. "I was born in Sparta

and lived there fourteen years before Chicago. So you can see why I don't like so much these Germans. For all the money they spend on these pillboxes, what would it be if they had spent it on improving Germany?" Pantazopulos is 38 years old, and has had quite a rounded ^{Colorado,} army experience-- with the 71st Light Division at Camp Carson, jungle training near Camp Roberts, Calif., and a shift at Camp Hood with the tank destroyers. "That's where they showed me first the bazooka, and I'll take it any time as the greatest weapon the American army has. So when I joined this outfit and somebody asked who could fire one, I told them just what I thought of this weapon. You can't beat it."

With the support squads firing at top rate, the assault detachment went into action. The bombers had left a convenient crater in front of the pillbox, and Pantazopulos slid into position. Somebody yelled: "Put it low, Gus and create a disturbance." Two rounds were pumped in, one at the embrasure facing west, and the other glancing off the embrasure facing southwest; the first caused the most damage, since it hit at an angle closer to the perpendicular. "The shot sure caused a lot of commotion," says Pantazopulos, "and tore a hole three feet wide in the firing slit. I put in a second one, and the dust was still thick when Sirokin, getting up from beside me, ran right up to the pillbox and shoved a pole charge into the hole. That finished most of them."

"All except that one that right away tossed out a grenade and tore this piece off my cheek," corrected Lt. Foote. Cpl. Russell Martin, to the right of Pantazopulos, ran up and threw a couple of grenades into the pillbox. A few seconds later, with cries of "Go get 'em", and "Let's go, guys," both the assault and support detachments rushed forward to storm the pillbox. Pantazopulos threw in two more

hand grenades, but there were still a few live Germans in evidence on the outside in firing trenches behind the pillbox. One threw a grenade and then threw up his hands. "That got me so mad that I mowed him down with his hands up," said Pfc. King. King then accounted for another who was scrambling back with an ammunition box toward the machine gun behind the pillbox. King simply followed him up the trench and pulled the trigger when the gun was six inches from the German's head.

The blast of the grenade which caught Lt. Foote close to the pillbox felled him temporarily, and he directed Pfc. Pantazopoulos to tell T/Sgt. Francis Banner, the platoon sergeant, to take over the platoon and lead it against pillbox no. 8. While moving up the road toward the pillbox, the company became bunched up as a result of the arrival of the remnants of Company "C" and the supporting platoons of A Company. A barrage of mortars fell among the ~~platoon~~ company as they were moving up the road, and then a 20mm. gun opened up from a pillbox disguised as a brick barn, located on the west side of the Palenberg-Rimborg road southwest of the crossroads of the route toward Ubach. Two more bazooka rounds from Pfc. Pantazopoulos soon quieted this menace.

About dusk, A Company tied in with I Company on the hill south of the town of Palenberg. The 1st platoon was in the rear (north), 2d platoon on the left and 3d platoon on the right as one faces Rimborg. Capt. Kent had established his CP in a pillbox near the crossroads south of Palenberg, "but the enemy knew we were there because all night they were hitting the top of the pillbox with a depressed 20 or 40mm anti-aircraft gun. They were really raking the top, and now I know what it like to be inside of one of those things when shells are hitting it. Lots of times we were thrown out of our bunks by the concussion.

Knowing-- or suspecting-- that there may have been friendly troops over in the woods to our south, we did not call for artillery. Concentration 'M'-- that's the one I wanted to smear those woods with. But we were afraid to do it."

Machine gun fire came in sporadically during the night, but no dangerous thrust was made by the enemy until just after midnight. At that time two enemy Mark IV tanks and about twenty infantrymen started advancing from the southeast toward Sgt. Underwood's squad on the brow of the hill south of the crossroads. One tank, not observing that Sgt. Underwood's squad was dug in on the hill, pulled up and stopped two feet from the leading foxhole and started to fire shells into the town of Palenberg. From the rear foxholes, bazookamen and rifle grenadiers opened fire, and the leading tank was hit a glancing blow and backed up in a hurry.

The infantry personnel which had come up with the tanks immediately hit the ground, and there was a brisk fire fight for a few minutes. After the smoke had cleared, and the balance of the German infantrymen had withdrawn over the hill, seven of the enemy were left dead within twenty yards of the leading foxhole. One of the seven was a medic armed with a burp gun, and whose pockets were filled with grenades. The two tanks took up defiladed positions and fired their machine guns on the foxhole crew, but were finally discouraged by more bazooka and rifle grenade fire; they were not knocked out. A Company's losses included Pvt. Sirokin, who was killed; two men in the leading foxhole were also killed, and a third escaped the same fate by playing possum (this A Company man lay motionless while a disgusted enemy infantryman threw a beer bottle at him; the A Company man was later treated for glass cuts).

"The enemy must have seen us dig in," said Sgt. Underwood, "but apparently they were more interested in firing on Palenberg until we started giving them trouble." After this small counter-attack, there was only sporadic firing.

On 3 October, A Company held the same position on the ridge, which was being shelled and occasionally raked with machine gun fire. Capt. Kent was amused by the fact that when tanks rolled down the Rimburg road and placed a few rounds of HE into the woods, over 100 prisoners came out. "In our depleted condition, those men could have overrun us the night before if they had all attacked at once, with the support which they had in surrounding areas."

The men of A Company all testified that there was a 57 mm anti-tank gun firing over their heads at a pillbox located at (858590)-- which was 400-500 yards away from where the forward elements of A were situated. The effect of the gun on the pillbox was "no more than a pea shooter." (Note: This is clearly the same gun which Lt. Peters of the anti-tank platoon of the 3d battalion was firing at-- cf. report of 3d battalion's breaching of the Siegfried Line).

With friendly and enemy fire whistling over their heads, and while they were subjected to constant shelling, A Company devised a bucket brigade system on water and rations. Men had to stay in their foxholes, and empty canteens were tossed from foxhole to foxhole until they reached the "rear", and then went forward again along with the boxes of "K" rations in the same way.

A Company remained near Palenberg until late on 5 October, when they moved through Ubach to take up positions on the right of the 3d battalion, along with the rest of the 1st battalion. On 6 October, they recaptured four pillboxes which the enemy had previously

retaken from F Comp. of the 119th Infantry. The reduction of these pillboxes did not prove to be a complicated process, because when the 743d tanks approached, the occupants of the pillboxes either surrendered or tried to run away.

Lt. Foote describes the advance on 7 October to Alsdorf as "the best tank-infantry coordination my platoon has ever seen." The tanks moved cross-country in a southeasterly direction parallel and about 200-300 yards to the right of the main road to Alsdorf. The infantrymen followed closely behind the tanks, and captured over 100 prisoners who came out of their holes and surrendered when the tanks came close. One prisoner, in wide-eyed amazement, asked: "God, are those Churchills or Shermans?"

The advance into Alsdorf was a picnic for A Company, and total casualties for the day were one wounded man. "Alsdorf was a ghost town when we came in on 7 October," says Capt. John Kent, ~~and it was so damned quiet it scared you.~~ "and it was so damned quiet it scared you." The following day the company participated in the advance on Mariadorf, but suffered only five casualties in the process. From that point ^{on,} it was quiet for A Company until the day of the closing of the Aachen gap, 16 October (see account of interview with T/Sgt. Robert Fortune, for the activities of A Company on 16 October).

A COMPANY CASUALTY FIGURES, 2-8 October

Date	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Total
2 Oct	15	2	1	18
3 Oct	13	0	0	13
4 Oct	0	0	0	0
5 Oct	0	0	0	0
6 Oct	8	2	2	12
7 Oct	1	0	0	1
8 Oct	4	1	0	5

- 29-31 Oct. 1944