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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D PLATOON  
D COMPANY, 506 PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
(101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION)  
IN THE VICINITY OF CARENTAN, FRANCE  
11-13 JUNE 1944  
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Rifle Platoon Leader)

Type of Operation described: AIRBORNE INFANTRY  
PLATOON ATTACKING IN HEDGEROW COUNTRY

Captain Ronald C Speirs, Infantry  
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO.II

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 2D PLATOON, D COMPANY  
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Platoon, D Company, 506 Parachute Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, in the battle for Carentan, 11-13 June 1944, during the invasion of Normandy.

The Allied invasion of Northern Europe took place on 6 June 1944. The initial landings were made by 21st Army Group, commanded by General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery. VII Corps, commanded by Major General J. Lawton Collins, landed at Utah Beach and V Corps landed at Omaha Beach, both under the First US Army commanded by Lt General Omar N. Bradley. To the east of the Americans, the Second British Army landed, commanded by Lt General Miles C. Dempsey.

Three hours before dawn on 6 June 1944, the 101st Airborne Division landed by parachute on the Cotentin peninsula. <sup>Wane</sup> 432 C-47 type airplanes were used for the division, carrying 6600 paratroopers. Three hours later, 51 troop-carrier gliders came in and at dusk on D-day an additional 32 gliders landed. The Glider Regiment of the division came in with the seaborne forces and joined after the airborne-beachhead linkup. As was to be expected in an airborne assault of a heavily defended area, losses in men and equipment were heavy. (1) When the German resistance on the exits to the beaches was broken, the division turned and drove toward the city of Carentan. All along the beachheads the Americans, British and Canadians attacked on a 60-mile front. (2)

(1) A-2, p.14; (2) A-1, p.243.

### THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 11 June the 101st Airborne Division, after six days of bitter fighting against a determined enemy, had accomplished all its assigned objectives and was in a defensive position on the high ground north of the city of Carentan. The defensive line followed the Douve river and extended from Chef-du-Pont on the west to the east where the Douve river joins the Atlantic. (3) (Map A)

The 4th Division, 12 miles to the north on the right flank of the beachhead, was engaged in heavy fighting in their attempts to reach the high ground northeast of Montebourg. (4)

*POSITIONS OF 101st  
NOT SHOWN ON  
MAP*

The 82d Airborne Division to the northwest was in defensive positions along the line of the Merderet river, with a bridgehead established in the area of La Fiere. The 90th Infantry Division, coming up from the beach, attacked through the 82d Airborne on the 10th and 11th, and on the evening of the 11th had cleared Amfreville, but was meeting violent resistance in its efforts to capture Pont L'Abbe. (5)

To the east, Omaha Beach extended for a depth of <sup>not shown</sup> 12 miles. The 1st Infantry Division was preparing to attack toward Caumont, and the 2d Infantry and 29th Infantry Divisions were moving to the south of Cerisy Forest and the Elle river. (6) The 2d Armored Division was in the process of landing on the beachhead, and those units of the division which had landed were in Corps reserve. The 29th captured Isigny on the 9th, and on the 10th the 327 Glider Infantry made contact with Company K, 175th Infantry, 29th Division near Catz. (7) The main attacks of the 29th were to the south, keeping east of the Vire river, and the link-up between VII Corps and V Corps was not strong and solid as should be the case. (8)

(3) A-2, p.78; (4) A-2, p.108; (5) A-2, p.128; (6) A-12, p.150;  
(7) A-8, p. 5; (8) A-12, p. 157.

At this time the Corps boundary ran just to the east of Carentan along the line of the Douve river, but on the next day it was moved east to the Vire river. (9) This change was to affect the 101st Airborne, as it was directed by General Bradley to seize <sup>INDEFINITE</sup> this area. The original missions of the division had been accomplished with the capture of the three bridges north of Carentan. (10)

In the British sector to the east of Omaha Beach, the 6th Airborne Division was defending its bridgehead across the Orne river, secured in their initial airborne drop by glider and parachute. The Commandos were attacking toward Cabourg, but with no success. There was savage fighting in the Caen area, where the British infantry divisions were attempting to capture the city against strong enemy resistance. The Canadians and British armor and infantry were attacking in the Tilly-sur-Seulles area, with the British 7th Armored Division preparing to attack the next day in conjunction with the US 1st Division on its right. (11)

#### THE PLAN OF ATTACK

The plan of Corps and Army on the 11th of June was to effect a solid junction of the Omaha and Utah beachheads by capturing the city of Carentan. These orders had come directly from General Eisenhower. The mission was given to the 101st Airborne Division. At the same time, V Corps was to attack from Isigny toward Carentan. (12) *(See map A.)*

101st Airborne Division activated these plans on the 10th of June by sending the 3d Battalion, 502 Parachute Infantry across the bridges on the road from St Come-du-Mont, <sup>*(See map B.)*</sup> passing

(9) A-12, p.156; (10) A-2, Map No.II; (11) A-12, p.143;  
(12) A-2, p. 77; A-19, p. 26.

through the outposts of the 506 Parachute Infantry on the bridges. The battalion had a murderous fight to move 500 yards past the last bridge, and the 1st Battalion of the 502 Regiment was brought to assist. Neither battalion was able to advance, taking very heavy casualties because of the strong enemy resistance and good defensive positions. The flooded fields to either flank made it impossible to flank the defenders. Simultaneously the 327 Glider Infantry crossed the Douve river three miles to the east and, after heavy fighting on the 10th and 11th, was in possession of the bridges to the <sup>INDEFINITE</sup> south. The glider troops were unable to advance into the city because of the canals which barred their way and the heavy fire being encountered. (13)

The division plan on the evening of the 11th was a move to encircle the city with the 506 Parachute Infantry closing around from the west through the battered 502 Regiment while the 501 Parachute Infantry Regiment was to swing south, then west of the 327th. Both regiments were to join on the high ground south of the city. <sup>HILL 30?</sup> Concurrently, the 327 Glider Infantry was to attack from their present positions directly into the city. (Map B) The importance of the attack can be measured by the presence of Lt General Courtney H. Hodges while the division order was issued. Brigadier General McAuliffe was in command of the attacking force. (14)

Colonel R. F. Sink, commander of the 506 Infantry issued his order to the assembled company commanders and staff at 2200 hours. The 1st and 2d Battalions were to move out immediately in that order, while the 3d Battalion remained in position in division <sup>where?</sup> reserve. (15)

(13) A-2, p.78-89; (14) A-2, p. 89; (15) A-13, p.2.



### THE ENEMY SITUATION

The German High Command was well aware of the importance of Carentan to them, preventing as it did a junction between the American Omaha and Utah beachheads. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, Army Group Commander, personally stated that Carentan must be held. (16) The troops charged with this mission were the 6th Parachute Regiment, which had arrived in Normandy in June from the fighting in Russia. (17)

The platoon leader and his men were well aware of the German paratroopers fighting capabilities because the Germans had defended St Come-du-Mont and Vierville in the earlier fighting to the north. They attacked strongly when ordered, and were armed with a high percentage of automatic weapons. They wore special camouflage suits and paratroop helmets. Their morale seemed good. (18) This was possibly because fighting the Americans was preferable to fighting both Russians and cold weather. The German High Command did not share the American opinion of the 6th Parachute. Their War Diary for this period states, "The 6th Parachute Regiment has been fighting far better than expected."

The 17 SS Panzer Grenadier Division was being rushed up from the south of France. Elements of this division, along with the 6th Parachute Regiment, were the forces that struck Carentan on 12-13 June. The platoon leader and his men were also aware that there was armor in the vicinity of Carentan. While outposting a bridge on the St Come-du-Mont--Carentan road a few days previously, the platoon was fired upon by a German armored car

(16) A-12, p. 147 & 149; A-4, p.166; (17) A-12, p.112;  
(18) Personal knowledge.

coming from the direction of Carentan. One man of the platoon was killed. The car then withdrew to the city. (19)

The 17 SS Panzer Grenadier Division had been delayed and its tanks unloaded far behind the front lines because of the overwhelming Allied air attacks on the railroads and communications system. These delays had caused German Seventh Army to push an engineer battalion to Carentan, presumably to bolster the defenses by fighting as infantry. (20) The 17 SS Panzer Grenadiers <sup>DIV was</sup> ~~were~~ said to consist of good, tough troops, and had in addition to its organic artillery regiment, another battalion of artillery, a heavy howitzer battery, and another artillery group. (21)

#### THE TERRAIN

Carentan, a city with a population of 4000 people, is located 10 miles along the Douve river from where it enters the Atlantic. The city is connected with the Douve by a short stretch of canal. The buildings in the town are all very old and strongly built of stone. There is an excellent road and railroad net in the area, running directly through the city. Several paved highways intersect the city, including the main road to Cherbourg in the north. (22) The entire area, with the exception of the city, and to the southwest, was swampy and intersected with drainage ditches, streams, and canals. Nowhere does the terrain rise above 30 meters.

The drainage areas around the city, feeding into the rivers and canals, had been flooded, restricting movement to the roads, except to the southwest, where the terrain was dry and intersected with high Normandy hedgerows and deeply cut farm roads and paths.

(19) Personal knowledge; (20) A-12; p 148 & 149; (21) A-4, p.234 & 235; (22) A-4, p. 166; personal knowledge.

The highest point in this area is Hill 30, just outside the town to the south. (23)

#### THE PLATOON PRIOR TO THE ATTACK

The 2d Platoon of D Company, on the evening of 11 June, had been through six days of violent fighting, after a parachute drop which scattered the platoon over a large area. The platoon was very low in strength because of the many casualties suffered and the men missing from the parachute drop. (See Chart A) *Page 12*

The strength of the platoon at this time was one officer and 14 men. Each parachute infantry platoon was authorized two officers due to the expected casualty rate. My assistant platoon leader, Lt Watkins, was wounded by mortar fire a few days previously, and evacuated. He returned to the division later, and was killed in the fighting in Holland. (24)

The remainder of D Company was in bad shape also. The executive officer was killed on the parachute jump, and the company commander was killed by artillery fire a few days later. One entire planeload of men of the 1st Platoon was ditched in the English Channel, with the assistant platoon leader aboard. Lt McMillan, 1st Platoon Leader, took over the company, leaving no officers in his platoon. Both 3d Platoon officers were evacuated. The strength of the company was approximately 75 men. (25)

During the long night airplane flight into Normandy and the six days fighting which followed, the platoon had only one full night of sleep, and the men were physically and mentally affected. Our food consisted of K rations with which we had jumped, and a resupply of the same after contact with the beachhead was made.

(23) A-4, p.169; (24) Platoon rosters, casualty reports (Personal possession of the author); (25) Personal knowledge.

The Tables of Organization for an airborne unit at that time were different from the infantry. Some basic differences are the following:

- (a) Three identical rifle companies and a Battalion Headquarters Company in the battalion. In place of a Heavy Weapons Company were the 81 mm Mortar Platoon and Light Machine Gun Platoon in Battalion Headquarters Company.
- (b) D Company was a rifle company in the 2d Battalion, the others being E and F, and Battalion Headquarters Company. This point is emphasized because of the fact that D Company in the regular Infantry T/O is a heavy weapons company, while in the parachute troops it was a rifle company.
- (c) The rifle companies had three identical rifle platoons and a Company Headquarters, but no weapons platoon. Instead, each rifle platoon had only two rifle squads and a 60 mm mortar squad. Each 12-man rifle squad had a light machine gun team organic to it.

The 2d Platoon 60 mm mortar had been lost on the parachute jump, but no loss resulted because our depleted strength would not have allowed the platoon to operate it. Riflemen were needed much more than mortarmen. Only one light machine gun was carried because the platoon leader felt that riflemen were more valuable during the constant attacking in which we had been engaged. Our light machine guns during the Normandy Campaign were not provided with the bipod, but only a tripod, which was not satisfactory while attacking in hedgerow country. (26)

(26) Personal knowledge.

CHART A

PARACHUTE INFANTRY RIFLE PLATOON

Platoon Headquarters

Platoon Commander  
~~Asst Platoon Commander~~  
~~Platoon Sergeant~~  
Messenger  
~~Messenger~~  
~~Radio Operator~~

Rifle Squad

~~Squad Leader~~  
Assistant Squad Leader  
Machine Gunner, Justice  
~~Asst Machine Gunner~~  
~~Ammunition Bearer~~  
Scout  
Scout  
~~Rifleman~~  
Rifleman  
Rifleman  
Rifleman  
Rifleman

Rifle Squad

~~Squad Leader~~  
~~Asst Squad Leader~~  
Machine Gunner  
~~Asst Machine Gunner~~  
~~Ammunition Bearer~~  
~~Scout~~  
~~Scout~~  
~~Rifleman~~  
~~Rifleman~~  
~~Rifleman~~  
~~Rifleman~~  
~~Rifleman~~

60 mm Mortar Squad

~~Squad Leader~~  
~~Mortar Gunner~~  
Asst Mortar Gunner  
Ammunition Bearer  
~~Ammunition Bearer~~  
Ammunition Bearer

LEGEND

~~————~~ KIA  
~~————~~ Missing on Parachute Jump  
~~————~~ WIA During Previous Fighting

CHART A

### NIGHT MARCH TO HILL 30

<sup>2nd</sup>  
*when?* The battalion moved out in a column of companies with F Company leading, then E, Headquarters Company, and D. Previously, each company had been given a horse and cart to carry equipment and ammunition. Being airborne, we had no organic transportation. These carts were kept to the rear of the column to eliminate noise. (27) Headquarters Company was having trouble keeping up with the rest of the battalion because of their heavy loads of mortars, machine guns, and rocket launchers. A provisional anti-tank platoon in the company was armed with 2.36" rocket launchers.

The men moved slowly down the causeway in single file across the four bridges which span the river and canals. Up ahead, fires could be seen in Garentan, and the booming of the naval gunfire could be heard. The city was given a heavy shelling by the US Navy and other friendly weapons as we moved in. (28)

At the farmhouse where the 502 Parachute Infantry had the fierce battle with the German defenders during the day, the battalion left the road. The column moved across country keeping to the west of the town. The terrain began to rise gently and there were a great many fences to climb. At one gate there was a dead paratrooper, and every man in the long column stepped on him in the dark. The necessity for maintaining silence and keeping contact with the man ahead in the murk left no time for flank security. Headquarters Company ahead was having trouble with their loads, and D Company helped out. At this time the column was stopping and starting as the 1st Battalion up ahead probed their way through the dark, silent hedgerows. No enemy contact had been made as yet. (29)

(27) A-13, p. 1 & 2; (28) A-2, p. 89; (29) Personal knowledge.

Lt Winters, commanding E Company, upon reaching the front of his column found that contact had been lost with F Company ahead. He led his men on until reaching the railroad, and by sending scouts out was able to regain contact at 2400 hours. The two companies in the rear were the next to lose contact. Contact was regained and our slow uncertain progress resumed. Some firing was heard up ahead when the 1st Battalion struck a German outpost, but was able to push on. (30) The slow movement caused the tired men to doze off to sleep when the column stopped, and the officers in the companies had to wake men up and urge them forward. At 0100 hours the 1st Battalion reached Hill 30, the assigned objective, and the 2d Battalion stopped astride the Baupre road. (See Map B) D Company sent out security to the right and left along the road.

At 0230 hours the company commanders were called to the command post to receive the order for the attack for the next day. There was no sign of enemy activity, and the men slept where they dropped. There was much discussion at the battalion command post and the order was finally issued. The battalion S3, Capt Hester, gave out the order under a raincoat to the company commanders and staff. The 2d Battalion was to attack Carentan, while the 1st Battalion stayed at Hill 30. E Company was <sup>to be</sup> on the right and F Company on the left. The plan was to drive into town and join the glider troops attacking from the other side of town. D Company was to follow on the road to the right. (The nights were very short in Normandy at this time of year, but just before dawn F Company shot a 1st Battalion man who had strayed into their area. Dawn broke at 0400 hours.) At 0530 hours the

*more detail needed*  
*Significance?*

(30) A-13, p. 4.

company commanders were called back to the command post and given the time of attack, which was 0600 hours. As Lt Winters moved to the command post he was shot at twice by a sniper, without success. (31)

### THE MOVE INTO CARENTAN (See map 15)

The regimental command post group, during the night movement, had strayed too close to town, and at the time of the dawn attack was actually closer to town than either of the battalions. Their situation was not realized until daylight, when they were fired upon from the town. The 1st Battalion was ordered by radio to send one company toward the firing and extricate the command post from its predicament. This was very quickly done. (32) The desirability of getting into town quickly caused the <sup>2nd</sup> battalion to move straight down the main road in a column of companies. F Company was leading, E, Headquarters, and D following in that order. The battalion light machine gun platoon was given the mission of covering the open fields to the north of the roads to protect the flank of the battalion. F Company crossed the LD about 20 minutes late, but was able to move into town without too much trouble. E Company following, however, was caught at the main intersection just outside of town, and had 10 serious casualties from mortar and rifle grenade fire. There was quite a bit of long-range machine gun fire coming down the road also, and the E Company commander, Lt Winters, was struck in the leg. He was not evacuated, however, and in spite of a stiff and painful leg, stayed until the end of the campaign.

The battalion was now being fired on from the houses east of the road to Carentan. Major Horton, battalion executive officer, ordered E Company to clear this area. This was done by

(31) A-13, p.5; A-16, p.1; (32) A-4, p. 229.



moving into a house on the west side of the road and firing rifle grenades and a light machine gun from the upper floor. The rifle grenadier put a direct hit on the German machine gun and soon the enemy withdrew. The machine gun was fired at the retreating enemy from the same position. (33)

By 0830 hours the battalion sector was quiet, although firing could still be heard towards the center of Carentan. Shortly before, F Company had met the glidermen attacking through town from the opposite direction. D Company was ordered to move into the city and did so, stopping just across the railroad at the intersection of the two main roads from the northwest and southwest. Carentan had suffered heavily from the pre-attack shelling; whole blocks were ablaze, while many buildings were in ruins. (34)

The 501 Parachute Infantry had difficulty with the flooded area to the east, but was able to swing around the town. Their final assault up the <sup>what hill against what opposition?</sup> hill was aided by 4.2" mortars and artillery, enabling the two regiments to join forces at Hill 30. (35) (Map B)

#### ATTACK WEST FROM CARENTAN (See map C)

Orders were issued from 101st Airborne Division Headquarters that afternoon for the 501 and 506 Parachute Infantry to attack south and west from the town. The objective of the 506th was Baupre, and of the 501st was Sainteny. When Lt McMillan, D Company commander returned from a battalion meeting with this order, he was heard with amazement by the platoon leaders. He agreed that the plan, to say the least, was an ambitious one. Four phase lines had been designated, but the platoon leaders, Lt Speirs, S/Sgt Long, and Sgt Rice, felt the company would be fortunate to reach the first. But the attack was necessary.

(33) A-13, p. 9; (34) Personal knowledge; (35) A-4, p 232.

Otherwise, a German counterattack <sup>could</sup> would pin the Division in the city with the enemy in control of the high ground to the southwest. (36)

The 506 Parachute Infantry moved out with the 2d Battalion on the right of the Baupre road and the 1st Battalion on the left. The 2d Battalion was responsible for the road. The strength of the 1st Battalion at this time was 150 enlisted men. In the 2d Battalion the formation was D on the right from the flooded area to include the Le Hay du Puits railroad which ran due west along our advance. F Company was on the left and E Company in reserve. (37)

Within D Company the 2d Platoon was on the right, 3d on the left, and the 1st Platoon followed the 3d in support. The initial mission assigned the 2d Platoon was to clear the village of Pommenauque of enemy, while the 3d Platoon was to move astride the railroad embankment, keeping contact with F Company. (38)

As the company commander moved out with the left platoon, he met a lone French civilian coming from the direction of the enemy. Sgt Westphal, who had a smattering of French, interrogated the man, who said there were 1000 Germans back up the railroad. This was unhappy news to battered D Company but the company pressed on. (39)

The 2d Platoon found no enemy in the village; only a few frightened civilians. One Frenchman had been badly wounded by shellfire and the platoon leader advised him to go to the aid stations in Carentan. As the platoon moved out of the village to rejoin the company, it was brought under fire by long-range machine guns from the west. By infiltrating the men in rushes

(36) Personal knowledge; A-4, p.236; (37) A-16, p.1; Statement of Major K. H. Raudstein, 15 Dec 1948; (38) Personal knowledge; A-16, p. 1; (39) A-16, p.1

across the open fields, the platoon reached the shelter of the railroad embankment with no casualties. In the meantime, the 3d Platoon, about 500 yards down the railroad, had struck the enemy. A German machine gun, cleverly dug in between the railroad ties, opened up, killing the lead scout of the platoon. The 3d Platoon moved ahead by rushes until the volume of machine gun and rifle fire pinned them down. The terrain in the immediate area was extremely flat, with only small ditches and low hedgerows. To the left of the railroad were open fields to the woods, where the bursts of fire indicated F Company had met the enemy. The machine gun on the railroad continued to fire and was joined by other weapons. The 2d Platoon came up behind the 3d Platoon and extended the flank along the hedgerow to the flooded ground, but no progress was made. Lt McMillan was in touch with battalion by SCR 300 radio, and informed them of the situation. Battalion requested that he adjust fire for the airborne artillery pack howitzers with which they had contact. Lt McMillan could see this fire and he adjusted it on the woods and railroad to our front. Battalion called on the SCR 300 and ordered that the company was to hold in position and not attempt to advance. (40)

POSITION  
6-20-44  
1st Platoon

F Company, now at the village of Douville, was heavily engaged with the enemy. E Company stopped and dug in to strengthen the line to the rear. German rifle and machine gun fire was intense all along the line and the battalion was unable to advance in any part of the zone. The 1st Battalion, 506 Parachute Infantry, and the 501 Parachute Infantry, had struck the same enemy positions to the south and were unable to advance. 88 mm

(40)A-16, p.2; personal knowledge.

cannon fire was heard, and mortar fire began to strike our positions all along the line. Lt Winters saw that the gun crews of two attached 57 mm antitank guns were down in the ditches and making no attempt to set up. He ordered them to take the machine guns off their gun-towing  $\frac{1}{2}$ -ton trucks and start firing. This was done, but the firing was not accurate. (41)

The 81 mm mortar platoon of the Battalion moved into position at this time and began firing. The platoon was equipped with four mortars and was at about 75% strength. The platoon leader's order from the Headquarters Company commander was: "Set up anywhere and start firing!" Lt Heyliger set up on the forward slope of the hill behind the battalion command post. His guns were protected by the high hedgerow to the front, and were dug in. He commenced firing in 10 minutes and improved his positions later. The mortar platoon leader had his ammunition supply in horse-drawn carts, and these he sent to the rear along the road. The carts were 100 yards to the rear of the guns and also were protected by the hedgerows along the road. (42)

The machine gun platoon of the battalion was attached to the three rifle companies, one section per company. The platoon had suffered numerous casualties during the previous fighting and was able to man only six light machine guns. (43)

Just as it was growing dark, D Company had a call on the SCR 300 radio from battalion. The order was to pull back along the railroad and rejoin the battalion which had decided to consolidate for the night. This move brought D Company through E Company, and up on the right of F Company. The boundary between

(41) A-13, p.12; (42)(43) A-14, p.1.

companies was a deeply dug dirt road running back to the battalion command post. This area had very thick hedgerows with ditches on both sides and visibility was limited to the small fields between hedgerows. (44) E Company was in reserve at this time, 250 yards to the rear of D Company. (Map C) The firing had died down, F Company having withdrawn from Douville about 200 yards. Their positions were in an orchard to our left across the road. <sup>Position?</sup> Captain McMillan and the platoon leader made a reconnaissance of the D Company area. It was decided to put outposts at the junction of the hedgerows in the area as security for the night and allow the rest of the men to sleep. As the company commander and platoon leader checked the right flank of the night position, a squad of soldiers were seen running along the road at the <sup>northern south?</sup> ~~other~~ side of the orchard, toward the battalion. Night was creeping in and at first the platoon leader thought it was a friendly patrol, and waved at them from 100 yards distance. The last two soldiers stopped and looked toward the platoon leader, and he realized they were Germans passing our flank and headed for the battalion reserve line. The company commander ran to warn battalion, but before he could reach them the patrol struck near the battalion command post, which was in a stone house about 600 yards to the rear. The patrol was driven off by men of E Company and Headquarters. (45)

Lt McMillan arrived at the battalion command post and found that six light tanks were there to aid the battalion. The tank platoon leader had argued with Lt Col Strayer, the battalion commander, saying that it was getting too dark to move forward

(44) Personal knowledge; (45) Personal knowledge.

to D Company's positions, which the Colonel desired them to do. Lt McMillan was able to persuade the tank platoon leader that they could do some good out in the direction where the German patrol was seen. Lt McMillan took the seat of the bow gunner and the tank buttoned up and moved out. The other tanks stayed back and later did some firing which endangered E Company, forcing Lt Winters to run back and make them cease firing. The platoon leader's tank, guided by Lt McMillan, moved along the route of the German patrol, firing its 37 mm gun and spraying the hedge-rows with machine gun fire. The tank returned without seeing any enemy. (46)

The company commanders received their orders for the attack at 2300 hours. The attack towards Baupte was to be resumed at dawn on the next day, 13 June. D Company was to be on the right, F on the left, E in reserve. During the night contact patrols were to be sent out between companies. Lt McMillan decided that the first thing to be accomplished by the company at dawn was to capture the house on our right flank where the German patrol had been seen. This mission was given to the 2d Platoon. When it was accomplished, the 2d Platoon was to face to the <sup>indefinite</sup> left and place its right flank on the railroad. The 1st Platoon would then move out on the left of the 2d Platoon, keeping contact, followed by the 3d Platoon. Food and water <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ being issued at this time as Lt McMillan issued his order. The men filled the pockets of their combat suits with ammunition and grenades, and those who were not on outpost duty or contact patrol tried to get some sleep. All through the night machine-pistol firing could be heard, but very little artillery. The platoon leader briefed his men and tried to get some sleep without too much success, even though he was extremely tired. (47)

(46) A-13, p. 13; A-16, p. 2; (47) Personal knowledge.

### GERMAN COUNTERATTACK ON CARENTAN

Just before dawn <sup>13 June</sup> the 81 mm mortar platoon commenced firing at the house which the platoon was to attack. They fired a heavy concentration, causing the roof of the house to be set ablaze. The platoon leader lined his men along the hedgerow facing down a gentle slope. At the bottom of the slope, seen through the orchard, was the house. The platoon was the size of a large squad but had for automatic weapons both an automatic rifle and a light machine gun. The platoon looked anxiously toward the house as dawn began to break, but no enemy could be seen. (48)

The platoon crossed the hedgerow "as skirmishers" and moved down through the regularly spaced trees. At that moment a heavy mortar and artillery concentration landed in the area. One of the platoon riflemen was struck by this fire and lay moaning on the ground. Back at the road where the company commander was calling battalion and notifying them that the platoon had moved out, the same barrage killed the radio operator and wounded another man. (49)

The platoon reached the stone wall surrounding the house at the bottom of the hill, vaulted the wall, and found the courtyard empty. As the platoon leader crossed the waist-high wall, he looked back up the hill and saw German soldiers running along the hedgerow he had just left. (Map D)

The machine gun was quickly mounted, firing through a gate in the stone wall. The automatic rifle was placed on the wall and heavy fire was rained on this threat. Screams of pain were heard, and many casualties inflicted on this unit of the enemy. The enemy returned fire but the stone wall protected the platoon.

(48)(49) Personal knowledge.

The platoon leader sent four riflemen to the other portion of the wall which faced directly toward the enemy-held west. They faced an open field except at the left where the orchard joined a hedgerow. At this moment a shower of grenades was received from the west where the hedgerow blocked our observation. The automatic rifleman was killed and the platoon leader struck by small fragments. <sup>German</sup> A machine gun began firing from the hill at the machine gunner as he lay exposed behind the gate. The platoon machine gunner was killed and the machine gun rendered useless. (50)

Back up the road, Lt McMillan had called battalion and notified them that the 2d Platoon was cut off, and his other platoon was being fiercely pressed from the front. Major Horton, battalion executive officer, told the company commander to fall back. Lt McMillan could see a field piece being dragged up behind the next hedgerow by the enemy. (51) D Company slowly fell back, leaving the 2d Platoon isolated.

On the left of the battalion, F Company was thrown back by a savage tank-infantry attack, which drove them back to the battalion reserve line. Here E Company had deployed along the road which crossed the battalion area. The F Company line joined E Company at the battalion command post house, which was now on the front lines. It was converted to an aid station by the battalion surgeon, Captain Neville, who was doing a marvelous job with the casualties that were pouring in. The battalion command post moved back down the road about 40 yards into the ditch and stayed there throughout the action. (52)

The attack of the 506 Parachute Infantry at dawn exactly coincided with the attack of the 17 SS Panzer Grenadiers and the (50) Personal knowledge; (51) A-16, p.3; (52) Personal knowledge.



6th Parachute Regiment. The attack stopped the American regiment in its tracks. The German intention was to recapture Carentan. The Berlin radio boasted that evening to all of Europe that the attack was successful and Carentan was again in German hands. (53)

The 1st Battalion was being attacked heavily to our left, and the 3d Battalion of the Regiment which had been in Division reserve was moved up to strengthen the 1st Battalion line. The 501 Parachute Infantry to the south was heavily engaged, but losing no ground. (54)

To the front of the 2d Battalion, the 2d Platoon of D Company was running low on ammunition. It was not possible to replenish the supply because E Company was firing on the courtyard from the rear. There was good cover behind the stone walls from flat trajectory fire, but a few hand grenades began to strike inside the courtyard, coming from the Germans to our front. Most of these were the small egg grenade type which can be thrown for long distances. The burst of a grenade caught another rifleman squarely, stretching him kicking and screaming on the stones of the courtyard. The platoon leader was able to do nothing for him because at that moment a squad of enemy soldiers burst out of the trees to our direct front. They were paratroopers, recognized by their distinctive helmets and uniforms. They were about 25 yards away and firing as they came. The platoon from behind the wall cut them down with aimed rifle fire and killed them all before any reached the wall. Despite this successful defense, the platoon leader now decided to withdraw. There was no protection against grenades in the courtyard and the burning house was throwing out a suffocating heat and smoke. By moving down a ditch single file

(53) Personal knowledge. (54) A-4, p.237.

the platoon regained the battalion line, 400 yards to the rear. The wounded man was left for dead, but managed to crawl back later. (55)

In the battalion area, the situation had not improved. F Company had fallen back again to the high ground 100 yards in their rear. This was done without authority from the battalion commander. It was a serious move, exposing, as it did, the entire left flank <sup>of co D?</sup> of the battalion. D Company was now filling in the gap between E and F.

Our main difficulty at this point was getting the men out of the ditches and up into position on the hedgerow where they could fire at the enemy. Most of the men were frightened, but not panic-stricken. They just did not realize that in order to stop the enemy a continual wall of rifle and machine gun fire must be built up and maintained. There was plenty of ammunition in the line and no danger of running out. The Battalion S4, Lt Peacock, was running jeeploads of ammunition right up to the hedgerows by using the sunken roads. (56) The 81 mm mortar platoon continued to pour heavy concentrations on the hedgerows to the front of the battalion. German 88 mm guns were firing directly on the position at long ranges, but very accurately. (57) Several enemy tanks had been knocked out by the 57 mm antitank gunners and the rocket launchers of the battalion.

The regimental commander, Colonel R. F. Sink, was aware of the precarious situation of the battalion, and had asked Division for aid. The 2d Battalion of the 502 Parachute Infantry was rushed up to the area and was in position to the right of the 2d Battalion, 506 Parachute Infantry, by 1000 hours. (58)

(55) Personal knowledge; (56) A-13, and personal knowledge.  
(57) A-13, p 17; (58) A-4, p 237.

### RELIEF BY 2D ARMORED DIVISION

Unknown to the battalion, help was on the way. Combat Command A, of the 2d Armored Division, had been rushed to the area east of Carentan to meet an expected enemy thrust which did not materialize. They had driven from the Omaha Beach area where they were under the control of V Corps. General Taylor, Commanding General of 101st Airborne Division, hearing that they were close by, requested their help from Corps. This was granted and the armored units began to arrive at 1030 hours. (59)

The situation had eased in the battalion area and no more infantry small arms fire was heard. German tanks, however, continued to fire and small amounts of artillery still fell in the fields to the front and rear.

At 1400 hours the Sherman tanks of the 2d Armored Division rumbled through the battalion lines, accompanied by armored infantrymen. This was a beautiful sight to the battered 2d Battalion. The tanks were firing as they advanced and doing a wonderful job. The tank-infantry team was able to move forward all the way to Bauppte, the original objective of the 506 Parachute Infantry. (60) The 2d Battalion, along with the rest of the regiment, was relieved and moved into division reserve in Carentan.

During the day's action, the 81 mm mortar platoon had fired 1000 rounds of ammunition. Lt Heyliger reported that all the paint was burned off the barrels of his mortars. His platoon was down to 50% strength, about ten of his mortarmen being rushed into the line as riflemen to fill the gaps. The average range at which he had fired was from 300 to 500 yards. Most of his casualties were caused by rifle fire, but some from the direct fire of 88's.

(59) A-4, p 237. (60) A-2, p. 93.

He commented that if four of these 88 rounds had not been duds, he would have lost at least a section of men. (61)

D Company was down to a strength of 50 men, while E Company was reduced to 69 soldiers. (62) The men and officers who remained were physically and mentally exhausted. The amazing thing was that there were not more cases of combat exhaustion. Only a few of these were reported. The majority of the men fought bravely, even though the companies were forced to yield ground. The battalion had done its part in defending Carentan, and the men and officers were proud of their job.

The strategic importance of the action of the 101st Airborne Division in holding Carentan can best be summed up by quoting from the report of the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

"On the 12th Carentan fell. The Germans made desperate but fruitless efforts to recover the town and reestablish the wedge between our forces. Our initial lodgement area was now consolidated, and we held an unbroken stretch of the French coast from Quineville to the east bank of the Orne." (63)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Airborne troops are a strategic weapon. The present doctrine of their use visualizes employment in mass, and for short violent combat operations, using surprise as a vital factor. The 101st Airborne Division was in Normandy for one month, during which time many trained and expert parachutists were killed or evacuated because of sustained ground combat. The point in issue is not that the lives of parachutists are more valuable than

(61) A-14, p.1; (62) A-16, p.3; A-13, p.19; (63) A-19, p.26.

200 2-14-44  
the lives of infantry soldiers. That is not true. The point is that the mere presence of airborne troops in a theater of operations forces the enemy to constantly fear a sudden onslaught from the sky where and when he least desires it. The enemy commander must deploy more troops to guard his lines of communication and vital areas in the rear. The "vertical envelopment" which airborne forces have brought to the art of war has compelled caution by even the most aggressive enemy. But when the airborne forces are employed for long periods as infantry, the enemy can make his plans without fear of the airborne threat.

Sufficient artillery and armor support was lacking throughout the operation. This lack of sufficient organic supporting arms was a factor in the initial success of the German counter-attack on 13 June.

On 11 June, when the Carentan battle began, the 2d Platoon had eleven men less than each of the other two platoons of D Company. The company commander should have reassigned men from the other platoons to bring up the strength of the 2d Platoon. This problem does not arise in the infantry because of the arrival of replacements, but airborne units do not receive replacements in combat. When platoons are assigned identical missions in combat, the members of an understrength platoon are forced to fight more fiercely and are in greater danger of sudden death.

There were no decorations awarded to any member of the platoon for bravery in this action. The platoon leader is to be criticized for not submitting recommendations for awards for his men. However, seven of the men of the platoon were promoted to the rank of noncommissioned officer upon the arrival of replacements in base camp.

The T/O&E of airborne units during World War II was totally lacking in motor transport from the company level on down. The rifle platoon was weak in having only two rifle squads. The light machine gun was equipped with a tripod but no bipod. The separate tripod was almost useless when units were attacking in hedgerow country. The above inadequacies in the airborne T/O&E have since been corrected. They are mentioned to illustrate the difficulties under which the platoon fought.

*After finding out  
the opposite  
was coming  
in this way*  
During the night march to Hill 30 the platoon moved in single file and had no flank security out. The reasons for such a formation were the tired condition of the men and the blackness of the night. *risked taking* The (fatal results of) such carelessness are obvious. One enemy rifleman could have cut the entire battalion column.

All companies of the battalion at one time or another on the night march lost contact with the unit ahead or to the rear. A double file formation within the companies would have cut the length of the column in half and tightened control of it. Dispersion should have been maintained by connecting files between units down to platoons. These connecting files would be briefed in detail as to their duties, thus minimizing the possibility of loss of contact.

The security elements of D Company on the night of 12 June were far too weak. The night defensive positions of the 2d Platoon consisted of the men digging in along one hedgerow. A normal perimeter defense should have been set up around the four sides of the field. If a German night attack had been launched in strength, the battalion would undoubtedly have been overrun. The failure to set up a night defense was due to the fact that the platoon leader and his men were exhausted and did not realize the gravity of their situation.

*not previously  
mentioned*

The dawn attack of the platoon, coinciding as it did with the German tank-infantry assault, was doomed to failure. It seems certain that if the regiment had not moved from its positions, but had been in defense at dawn, that our casualties would have been much lighter and greater damage inflicted on the attackers. The battalion 81 mm mortar platoon had left their positions and were standing in the road ready to follow closely behind the assault companies when the Germans struck. Thus they could not immediately support with mortar fire. (64) Division G2 either was not aware of the coming German attack, or his knowledge was not acted upon.

The platoon leader is to be severely criticized for failing to carry the wounded man back as the platoon withdrew from the house on the 13th. His assumption that the man was dead does not excuse him. His expectation of another enemy assault and his fear that this would find the platoon with no ammunition were the factors causing this grave mistake.

The platoon did not make use of their hand grenades to full advantage. During the fight at the house, grenades should have been thrown into the wooded area to the left front. The casualties that would have resulted in the enemy grenade throwers would have aided the defense. The American hand grenade is a powerful weapon, but the writer feels that a light round grenade would be more valuable. It could be thrown for great distances. More grenades could be carried by the individual. This was the principle of the German egg grenade, which was a successful type.

The crucial point of the German attack on 13 June was just after the entire 2d Battalion had been thrown back to the battalion

(64) Personal knowledge; A-14, p.2.

reserve line. The men of the battalion did not realize that to prevent the Germans from assaulting a second time, a large volume of fire had to be built up on the enemy positions, even though no point targets appeared. The average soldier dislikes exposing himself to fire his weapon without a definite target in sight; however, area fire, and the self confidence gained by firing his own rifle are vital to the defense and the attack. This is the principle behind "marching fire".

The F Company commander was relieved of his command because of his unauthorized withdrawal to positions behind the battalion reserve line. The writer is not personally aware of the enemy situation in the F Company area, but the dangerous situation which this withdrawal created could easily have smashed the entire battalion position. The failure of F Company commander to inform battalion of the situation in his area and request permission to withdraw was a serious violation of tactical doctrine.

### LESSONS

The following lessons were brought out by the operation:

1. Strategic use of airborne troops is essential. The attrition of trained parachutists in extended ground combat operations as infantry is wasteful and should be avoided.
- ✓ 2. When assigning missions to lower units, the commander must consider the comparative strength of his units as reduced by previous casualties.
3. Bravery in combat must be recognized by decorations and awards. Morale is raised and incentive provided to perform well in future combat.
4. Tables of Organization and Equipment must be constantly revised to increase the fighting strength and capabilities of the unit.



✓ 5. Flank security during night movement is essential,  
regardless of the effect on speed and the physical condition  
of the men.

✓ 6. In night movement all men must be alert to keep con-  
tact both to the front and to the rear.

✓ 7. When in contact with the enemy at night, one-half of  
the unit must be alert and in position to repel attacks.

8. Intelligence agencies must keep commanders informed of  
the enemy indications. *more*  
*reference to*  
*wounded*  
*should*  
Commanders can then adjust their plans  
in accordance, avoiding the possibility of surprise by the enemy.

9. Wounded men <sup>should</sup> must be carried along when a unit is forced  
to withdraw, <sup>if the situation permits.</sup>  
*Quackin*  
*no written*

✓ 10. The hand grenade should be used to full advantage in  
close combat. The present hand grenade is too heavy for long  
throws, and, too, it cannot easily be carried in sufficient  
number for a sustained fight.

✓ 11. Soldiers must learn that an enemy assault is repelled  
by fire power alone. When individual targets cannot be located,  
continuous area fire must be used.

12. Units are forbidden to withdraw without orders however  
desperate the situation. Unit commanders must keep higher head-  
quarters informed of the amount of enemy pressure, and request  
authority to withdraw prior to movement.  
*removing*  
*needed*