

ARMORED FA ACROSS FRANCE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The article *On to Berlin* in the November, 1944, *Field Artillery Journal* attracted my attention. As the commanding officer of an armored field artillery battalion which took part in several of the outstanding armored actions in the campaign of Northern France, I have a number of observations which confirm and several which differ from the experiences or lessons outlined by Maj. Whitaker.

RECONNAISSANCE

That the results of special operations for which the armored field artillery battalions were designed were "mission accomplished, beautiful effect" is agreed. Our battalions, however, although under the new T/O and E, were without any of the excess personnel enjoyed by the battalions reported on by Maj. Whitaker.

Our movements were in general faster and covered more terrain than those he indicated. Our batteries were customarily on the road before reconnaissance was completed. Previous planning for reconnaissance was impossible, since usually the route of advance was not known even by commanders but was selected by the reconnaissance elements of the Combat Command at the head of the column. The only preparation possible was to provide flexibility and plenty of reconnaissance personnel.

The Battalion Commander necessarily rode well forward in the column, sometimes as far up as the point of the advance guard. Battery Commanders were at least as far forward as the head of the battalion column. The T/O Reconnaissance and Survey Officer cannot perform both functions, since they occur simultaneously; he therefore becomes the survey officer and should be in the immediate vicinity of the Battalion Commander. All Observers and Liaison Officers were expected and required to make continuous reconnaissance in addition to other duties. The AOP was used for reconnaissance ahead of the leading elements of the ground column. As soon as the forward elements of the command ran into difficulty a battalion area was selected by the Battalion Commander and survey instituted by the Survey Officer. The Battery Commanders were meanwhile called forward and their positions pointed out. Usually they had time to ride through their area and make a hasty reconnaissance, although in many instances it was necessary to so select the battalion area that the leading battery could turn into it without any delay whatsoever and answer emergency calls for fire from the forward elements. In this case the leading battery was sometimes firing within five minutes after the decision to emplace it.

The type of vehicle in which to perform reconnaissance has been a decided problem. It is necessary for the reconnaissance parties to pass elements of the columns of supported units while on the road. To do so in anything but the ¼-ton C&R was impossible, so this vehicle was used almost exclusively for the purpose. When, however, the reconnaissance is actually being made at the flank and near the point of a column of troops in enemy territory, a vehicle carrying more personnel and having some machine gun fire power is highly desirable.

OBSERVATION

Constant and aggressive observation and liaison are absolutely necessary. At no time has this unit found it possible to operate with less than 3 liaison officers: one with each supported battalion and one with the combat command. Normally 3 forward observers are out, one with each tank company together with its associated infantry company; but many times the exigencies of the situation have made it necessary to place observers with infantry companies as well and even with platoons with separate missions, so that as high as 9 observers have been out at one time! Added to this demand on officer personnel is the necessity of relieving observers.

We have found it almost mandatory to relieve forward observers after from three to four days in line. From an already insufficient T/O it has been extremely difficult to meet these requirements. It has made it necessary for the battalion to operate without an S-1 and without one or more battery commanders for long periods of time. The battalion AOP made a further demand for officers not provided for: it is necessary to furnish an observer for each pilot, as in combat it has been found impossible for the pilot to fly and to observe both ground and air.

SURVEY

Survey usually has been reduced to a position area survey sufficient to locate the batteries on the map and provide an orienting line. Direction was normally established by registering on a crossroad or some feature appearing on both map and ground. A grid intersection was frequently used for the base point. We have never yet found it necessary to use an observed fire chart. Very frequently, if the situation stabilized for a time, it was found advisable to use a grid sheet for the firing chart, transferring map data to the grid sheet by coordinates.

COMMUNICATION

It has been necessary to use radio almost exclusively for communication with observers and liaison officers. Our practice has been, however, to have each battery lay one wire to FDC. Usually wire communication to batteries is possible from 10 to 30 minutes after occupation of position. The wire section of the battalion, consisting of a corporal and 3 men supplemented by whatever personnel are available, starts immediately to lay wire to the CPs of the supported units. One of our greatest handicaps has been the lack of sufficient wire personnel. Radio channels are always overcrowded, are frequently jammed by the enemy, and normally overlap with one or more adjacent units. This condition makes the use of wire almost a necessity for really rapid and prompt delivery of effective fire.

SUPPLY

Supply of rations and fuel in these operations was one of the greatest problems encountered. It was necessary for supply personnel to travel many miles to the rear through territory still largely in enemy hands and to return only to find that the unit had moved. On one such occasion the sergeant in charge of the ration truck drove over 300 miles and followed the unit for three days through several changes in direction of advance before rejoining the battalion.

THE FIRING BATTERY

In these operations the firing batteries have used all types of positions possible to a SP howitzer battery, ranging from a "position" so called only because it was occupied as the nearest open field when fire was called for, to carefully selected, prepared, and camouflaged positions. In almost all cases, however, it was impossible to predetermine the final direction of fire. Since the command had penetrated into enemy territory, regardless of the direction of the initial resistance, profitable and sometimes mandatory targets were often found to the flanks and rear. The present SP howitzer is an extremely clumsy piece to handle in this case since a change in direction of the carriage involves sufficient displacement to require relaying the battery; it ruins all efforts at camouflage, not only by disturbing the camouflage of the piece but also by making new tracks. In all other respects our SP 105 howitzers have given a superior performance.