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THE OPERATIONS OF F COMPANY, 337TH INFANTRY  
(85TH DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON TERRACINA,  
(SOUTH OF ANZIO) ITALY, 23-24 MAY 1944  
(ROME-ARNO CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY ATTACKING A  
FORTIFIED POSITION

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THE OPERATIONS OF F COMPANY, 337TH INFANTRY  
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 337th Infantry, 85th US Division in the attack and subsequent capture of TERRACINA, ITALY, 23-24 MAY 1944.

To briefly orient the reader it is necessary to discuss some major events of the Italian Campaign leading up to this action.

In September 1943 the US Fifth Army made a successful landing at SALERNO and established a firm foothold. The British Eighth Army landed further south and also achieved success in establishing a beachhead. (See Map A) (1) On 22 January 1944 the Fifth Army established another beachhead at ANZIO.

The 85th Division landed in North Africa in early 1944 and underwent an extensive period of Amphibious training. On completion of this training the Division sailed from ORAN, NORTH AFRICA and landed in NAPLES, ITALY and were committed to action on the left flank of the Fifth Army sector. (2)

The Fifth Army was confronted with the heavily fortified and strongly defended GUSTAV LINE. (3) For over a month the Division was limited to active night patrolling in order to gain all possible information for the impending all out attack which was to take place 2300, 11 May 1944. The Germans facing the 85th Division at that time consisted primarily of the 95th Infantry Division.

- (1) A-1, p. 31
- (2) A-3
- (3) Personal knowledge

### THE GENERAL SITUATION

The plan of the Fifth Army relative to the impending all out attack on the GUSTAV LINE was divided into three phases. Phase One consisted of the 85th Division taking SAN MARTINO RIDGE concurrently with the 88th Division, the main effort being directed on SANTA MARIA INFANTE. Phase Two would begin on the completion of enemy resistance being neutralized at SANTA MARIA INFANTE, at which time the 88th Division would turn right and take MOUNT I CERRI and MOUNT ROTONDO with the next objective being SPIGNO. This action of the 88th Division was to be reinforced by the 85th Division with supporting fires. The third phase would become active when the 85th Division attacked and subsequently took CASTELLONRATO and MOUNT SCAURI.

When the 88th Division had completed taking SPIGNO the 36th Division would revert from Corps reserve, pass through the 88th Division and attack MOUNT SAINT ANGELO with the next objective of cutting the ITRI-PICO Road which would end phase three. (4)

The ground occupied by the enemy all along the Fifth Army front consisted of gentle slopes affording excellent fields of fire to towering and perpendicular mountains which gave almost unlimited observation. All roads and avenues of approaches were mined and covered with final protective lines of fire. (5)

At 2300, 11 May, the attack jumped off against strong and determined resistance all along the front. In the II Corps sector the 85th Division was on the extreme left with its left flank tied to the 88th Division with no physical gap existing between units.

(4) A-2, p. 56

(5) A-5, p. 2

After four days of bitter fighting the 88th Division finally succeeded in taking SANTA MARIA INFANTE. From this point on progress was made with a marked decrease in enemy resistance. On 19 May forward elements had overrun the town of ITRI and Phase Three was over without the 36th Division being committed. (6)

At this time it was noted that the enemy was becoming more stubborn and reluctant to be pushed back in his delaying action tactics. This was later understandable for essentially he was gaining time in order to fall back and reorganize along the HITLER LINE at TERRACINA. This line with its left flank anchored at TERRACINA extended east through the mountains to the LIRI VALLEY. (See Map B) (7)

The Fifth Army decided on a plan to strike immediately at TERRACINA and break the HITLER LINE. This move would open HIGHWAY 7 which would be another step toward joining forces at ANZIO and continuing the attack north. The 85th Division was to make the main effort assisted by the 509th Parachute Battalion which would drop in the AUSONI MOUNTAINS. The 36th Division would move by water to ANZIO and the 88th Division would continue moving forward on the II Corps right flank. (8)

The 85th Division had met with success on every assigned mission since the break of the GUSTAV LINE. Morale was exceptionally high. (9) The weather was dry and the nights fairly warm which added to combat efficiency. A relentless push was continuously executed against the enemy forces but the German High Command had been successful in delaying Allied forces for

- (6) A-2, p. 55
- (7) A-4, p. 423
- (8) A-2, p. 85
- (9) Personal knowledge

sufficient time in order to bring reinforcements from ROME to the already strongly fortified HITLER LINE. These forces consisted of the 15th and 71st Grenadier Regiments of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division. (10)

The terrain surrounding TERRACINA gave the German forces a marked advantage. (See Map C) The vegetation was small and gave no cover and little concealment. HIGHWAY 7, the only approach into TERRACINA, ran along a narrow strip of ground with a precipitous mountain on one side and the sea on the other. (See Map C) Therefore any mobile attack from the south would be canalized and offer an excellent target to the hostile defending forces. (11)

#### THE DIVISION PLAN

The 85th Division's plan to take TERRACINA was for the 337th Infantry to attack generally along HIGHWAY 7. The 338th Infantry was to move by water from GAETA and the 339th Infantry was to continue to move north on the right. The 338th Infantry did move by water but landed short of TERRACINA and were placed in Division reserve. (12)

#### DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 337TH INFANTRY

On 20 May, the 337th Infantry moved up HIGHWAY 7, with one Battalion motorized and heavily reinforced by a Tank Company, and one platoon of engineers, in order to take advantage of any breakthrough. Another followed closely behind astride the road while the other moved on the right flank. (13)

(10) A-2, p. 85

(11) A-2, p. 84

(12) A-3, p. 94

(13) Personal knowledge and statement of Captain Cecil Cates, then S-2, 3rd Battalion, 337th Infantry, 18 October 1949

### THE BATTALION SITUATION

After the fall of SCARIA and FORMIA on 20 May the 2nd Battalion was organized into a strong motorized patrol and advanced down HIGHWAY 7, however, at 0100 hours, 21 May, enemy forces forced the Battalion to dismount just south of ITRI and continue the advance on foot. By 1600 hours the town of FONDI had fallen to the 2nd Battalion and orders were received to halt the attack for the night. (14) On 21 May the advance was continued to MONTE CARBAUGIO where the enemy initiated a stubborn resistance but with two companies abreast and the assistance of a Tank Company the town fell to Allied hands at approximately 1400 hours. By 1600 hours the Battalion was a mile north of the town and in contact with enemy forces when the Battalion Commander ordered a halt for the night. (See Map B) The enemy counterattacked at dawn 22 May but were repelled after an hour's engagement. As the enemy withdrew north the 2nd Battalion moved forward in order to maintain contact. (15) At 1400 hours a message by radio was received for the Company to hold up in place in order for a unit of the 338th Infantry to pass through the Battalion and continue the attack. Once the relief had been effected the Battalion would move to a position across HIGHWAY 7 to an assembly area and await further orders. By 1800 hours the Battalion had eaten hot food, attended to the problem of resupply and were bedding down for the night.

### THE COMPANY SITUATION

At 2300 hours 22 May a foot messenger came down to the Company with a message for the Commanding Officer to report to

- (14) Personal knowledge
- (15) Personal knowledge

the Battalion Headquarters at once. The Commanding Officer returned around 2400 hours with the information that the Battalion would attack a town called TERRACINA which was reportedly held by light resistance. The concensus of opinion seemed to point toward merely attacking another lightly defended objective consisting of the usual delaying action tactics type.

However, in order to make the attack on TERRACINA more coherent and complete it is necessary to state here that the 1st Battalion, 337th Infantry, had been attacking the town for the previous 48 hours with unsuccessful results and had suffered heavy casualties for the entire duration of the period of engagement. Companies G and F would comprise the attacking forces and the order of march would be G, F, H, Headquarters, followed by E. The Company Commander planned for the 1st and 2nd platoons to constitute the attacking elements in the Company and for the 3rd Platoon to remain in support with the Weapons Platoon in their normal role of supporting by fire from rear positions when and if possible.

The Battalion moved out at Q130 hours 23 May and reached the foot of the reverse slope of MOUNT CROCE around 0430 hours. (See Map B<sup>c</sup>) (16) The approach leading up the slope to the summit consisted of a narrow trail which necessitated the use of a single file column. The trail, in addition to being narrow and treacherous, also contained boulders and rocks which were impossible to see in the inky black darkness. Consequently, many were inadvertently rolled off the precipitous and deep mountain side. Whenever this occurred they crashed to the bottom below with a noise that sounded like thunder. Apparently

(16) Personal knowledge

the audibility of the noise was more than supposition for the Germans began laying down a concentration on the reverse slope of MOUNT GROCE which resulted in F Company suffering three casualties. When the leading elements of each Company arrived at the summit, guides from the 1st Battalion directed each corresponding Company to its position on the line and by 0600 hours the relief was effected and the 1st Battalion had moved back down the trail. F Company occupied the right portion of the Battalion sector as had been previously planned and waited for orders to attack. In the grey hour of early dawn, a foggy mist had blanked the entire area but by 0730 hours had lifted and was fast disappearing over the sea coast on the left some few hundred yards away. (See Map C) Immediately the sun came out and from the position on MOUNT GROCE a low ridge could be seen at a distance of some 1500 yards to the front. It was also observed that a cemetery surrounded by a typically stone wall was located on the top and near the center of the ridge. It was at this time that the members of the Company learned that the attack would be launched at 0800 hours and the line of departure was the positions occupied at the present. Everything was quiet and peaceful at this point and it might be worthy to mention that no fire was received in the general area since the movement up MOUNT GROCE until after the crossing of the line of departure. (17)

#### NARRATION

##### THE ATTACK ON TERRACINA

Company F, led by Lieutenant William B. Loeding, crossed the line of departure at 0800 hours with two platoons abreast.

(17) Personal knowledge

There had been no supporting fires laid down on the objective prior to the jump off and as the attack progressed down the forward slopes of MOUNT CROCE the men began speculating on the possibility of taking TERRACINA with no enemy resistance being met. (See Map C) No signs of any enemy activity had been observed. Heretofore, the Germans had definitely been fighting a delaying type action, opening up at long range and continuing to fire as long as possible and then withdrawing to the next terrain feature which would be organized and fought in a similar manner. (18)

In light of the above it was logical to assume that the attacking forces were plainly visible to the enemy and since no fire was being received it was logical to believe the Germans had withdrawn.

When the leading elements of the two platoons reached the forward slopes of MOUNT CROCE just prior to moving up the reverse slope formed by the ridge on which the cemetery was located, the familiar report of many mortars could be heard firing from defiladed positions in rear of cemetery ridge.

(See Map C) While the mortar rounds were still in the air a machine gun began firing from the left of the Company sector. Simultaneously, machine guns opened up from the right of the Company sector and automatic and sniper fire was received from the cemetery. <sup>Riflemen</sup> Snipers, which were dispersed to the left and right of the cemetery walls, began firing rifle grenades in conjunction with their deadly sniper fire. (19)

(18) Personal knowledge  
(19) Personal knowledge

At this time all control resulted in confusion. The attack was definitely stopped by the enemy's interlocking wall of fire. Lieutenant Loeding, the Company Commander, was wounded in the initial barrage but was not evacuated for some two hours due to the enemy's intense and deadly wall of fire. Although Lieutenant Loeding called for counterbattery fire on the German positions it was 1030 hours when the enemy completely lifted his mortar fire. During the intervening time the two platoons of F Company had been subjected to a continuous enemy barrage. When the mortars lifted, it was found they were equally pinned down by machine gun and sniper fire. At this time Lieutenant Loeding, with the help of two aid men, was successful in being evacuated. Lieutenant Krug, the Executive Officer, had in the meantime managed to work himself down to the two platoons and assumed command. By this time confusion was paramount, all tactical unity in the two assault platoons were lost. Many were wounded or killed while others could not be accounted for.

The action in the fight for the cemetery was being observed from an OP on MOUNT GROCE by the Battalion and Regimental Commanders in conjunction with the Division Artillery Commander.  
(20)

It was decided that something more than the normal amount of supporting fire would have to be used if the attack on TERRACINA was ever to be successful. The plan decided on was for a 30 minute preparation of all Division artillery fire, in conjunction with a 4.2 mortar company, would be placed in the vicinity of the cemetery since obviously it constituted the

(20) A-3, p. 99

strongest resistance. When this fire lifted it would be the signal for a coordinated assault by the two forward platoons. A message to this effect was received by Lieutenant Krug, the Company Commander. The time now was 1130 hours and the supporting units were laying down their concentration. The Company Commander immediately attempted a reorganization under cover of the supporting fire. He found that through only a miracle could a successful assault on the cemetery be achieved when he realized the number of men available for the assault. He attempted to inform the Battalion Commander of the existing situation and found that communication on the 300 radio was out. He then tried to call the Support Platoon by 536 and this communication also was out. The supporting fires falling in the vicinity of and on the cemetery was meeting with favorable results. Parts of the wall around the cemetery was blown down and in other places large gapping holes appeared. Occasionally all observation on the cemetery was lost in black smoke, dirt and debris. Lieutenant Krug, taking into consideration the effect of the tremendous concentration, decided to assault the enemy positions, when the fire lifted, with two officers and approximately forty men. (21)

When the supporting fire lifted the group moved out toward the cemetery some two hundred yards to the front. The machine guns to the left and right of the Company Sector were silenced but immediately machine gun and sniper fire was received from the enemy in the cemetery and also sufficient mortars went into action in the rear of the cemetery ridge to make the assault a dismal failure. It was now 1230 hours and the status of the two assault platoons was hopeless.

(21) Personal knowledge

The support platoon leader, from his position of MOUNT GROCE, had tried vainly to contact the Company Commander by SCR 536 radio. From his position he fully realized the pounding the two platoons had endured and the casualties they must have suffered. Taking all this into consideration he decided to commit his platoon without coordination or cover of supporting fires. This action was observed by the Germans since he was plainly visible in his approach down the forward slopes of MOUNT GROCE. Immediately all the hostile mortar fire shifted from the small draw occupied by the Assault Platoon to the support platoon moving down the slopes. The effects of this commitment resulted in only a few members of the support platoon joining in the final assault with the other two platoons.

The men now began to wonder where were the tanks.<sup>?</sup> Everyone realized the futility of another assault on the cemetery without tanks. At 1300 hours a messenger from the Battalion worked himself down into the Company Area with the information that at 1400 hours another preparation of artillery and mortar fire would be placed on the cemetery and on possible enemy mortar positions on the reverse slope of the ridge at which time another coordinated attack would be initiated. The men who were left had by this time become discouraged. They had been subjected to intense and deadly enemy mortar and automatic fire for the past five hours. They had been repelled in two attacks and each failure had resulted in more casualties with fewer men available for the next attack. Sergeant Friefillo, the 1st Sergeant, who had recently made his appearance in the Company Area, began walking from man to man reassuring and instilling confidence. Lieutenant Higbee, whose 2nd Platoon

*What?*  
*7:00 AM*

had moved further than the 1st Platoon and whose Platoon Sergeant was killed in the second attempt to take the cemetery walked up right in the face of sniper fire and instilled confidence and determination in his men. At 1330 hours a forward observer worked himself down to the Company and informed the Company Commander that the supporting fire would be reinforced by Corps Artillery. Lieutenant Krug decided that since Lieutenant Higbee was the closest one to the cemetery, the forward observer could work with him in order to obtain the best results.

(22)

At 1400 hours the concentration commenced falling. Sergeant Galleo, Platoon Sergeant of the Weapons Platoon, moved his platoon down under cover of the supporting fire. He informed the Company Commander that the Weapons Platoon leader had been evacuated and that a number of his men had been killed, primarily from sniper fire. The Company Commander instructed Sergeant Galleo to have his men lay down their machine guns and mortars and obtain rifles from the wounded and dead in order that they could participate in the assault. This ran the total up to approximately 50 men.

When the supporting fire lifted after the completion of its preparation, the cemetery was almost completely demolished. Vaults had erupted, tombstones were blown to pieces, and the screams of the enemy wounded were plainly audible. Above all, the absence of mortar fire was noticed. With every man for himself the final assault was initiated on the cemetery. Two machine guns began firing from inside the walls but the effect

(22) Personal knowledge and statement of Lieutenant Higbee, then Platoon Leader, 2nd Battalion, 337th Infantry, 10 February 1950

of the Corps Artillery in conjunction with division support had apparently left the machine gunners in a daze or perhaps the determined savage ferocity of the assault troops unnerved or spoiled their air for no casualties were suffered in the final assault. The enemy machine gunners gave up when the troops stormed through the holes blown in the walls by friendly fire. German dead and wounded lay sprawled over the cemetery along with the dead blown from the vaults. Here also was discovered why the Germans so easily had survived the first tremendous concentration. A network of catacombs ran deeply into the solid rock far below the earth's surface. The enemy merely had to leave his gun positions and move into the catacombs to be safe from artillery and mortar fire. Once the concentration lifted he immediately came out of the bowels of the earth and assumed his firing position once more. Although the Germans suffered casualties each time it was kept to a minimum.

F Company hesitated in the cemetery only long enough to ascertain that all active enemy resistance was reduced and then moved out the north cemetery gate toward TERRACINA, some three hundred yards down the ridge. Here they met a hail of sniper fire that was coming from houses in the suburbs of the town. It was now 1530 hours and the Company was again pinned down by enemy fire.

While all this action had been going on throughout the day, the Engineers had been busily engaged in erecting a road over MOUNT CROCE to enable a platoon of the 760th Tank Battalion and elements of the 91st Reconnaissance Section to join in the

attack for TERRACINA. (23) This was necessary since HIGHWAY 7 was canalized along a forty foot ledge and was the only approach into TERRACINA. This approach was covered with German antitank weapons.

It began raining and although visibility was not too good there was sufficient light for a sniper to score a direct hit on one F Company man who was changing positions. Just as it looked as if the attack had bogged down again, a platoon of the 760th Tank Battalion moved up along Cemetery Ridge and upon the suggestion of a rifle platoon leader began systematically destroying houses that were believed occupied by snipers. The rain began falling faster which did not add to the comfort of the already tired and beaten men, however, once the snipers had been cleared out the attack was continued toward TERRACINA which could be seen down the hill along the sea coast.

German 88's began firing from positions on a hill 1500 yards to the right front. This necessitated that the friendly tanks move back behind Cemetery Ridge since top speed was only two or three miles an hour because of the rock formations. A few minutes after the friendly tanks withdrew, Lieutenant Higbee who had been out in front for eight hours, was hit by a German 88.

One hundred yards north of the cemetery F Company made physical contact with G Company, who was on the left for the first time since crossing the line of departure since 0800 hours. This reunion of friendly forces was met by enemy anti-aircraft guns firing parallel to the ground which sent men scattering in all directions. In a short while it began

(23) A-3, p. 99

growing dark. The Battalion Commander radioed G Company, who in turn informed F Company that the advance would halt for the night. The position held now was in the suburb of the town, consequently a house to house defense was established with one man standing in the door while the others obtained some much needed rest. The only entrance to be used into and out of the Company Sector would be the house occupied by the two remaining officers of F Company. The Communications Sergeant immediately set out to obtain a new 300 radio from Battalion.

During the night a heavy rain storm, with the assistance of German machine gun and mortar fire, kept the Company from getting as much sleep as perhaps they might have needed. At 0400 hours, 24 May, a message was received by radio that one officer and five men would move down into the city to determine if a thirty minute preparation of artillery was warranted prior to the attack. This patrol was organized and moved out under the first grey of dawn searching out houses as they went. At 0630 hours the patrol radioed from the center of town that it was empty. By 0800 hours the 337th Infantry in its entirety had moved into town and TERRACINA had officially fallen.

*24 May*  
A-3 says  
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During the attack of some twenty hours F Company lost three officers and sixty-nine enlisted men. (24)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. FAILURE TO INFORM MEN OF SITUATION

The fact that members of F Company was not fully informed of the existing situation relative to the stubborn resistance offered to the 1st Battalion of the 337th Infantry resulted in a

(24) Personal knowledge

loss of morale and determination. The information received by F Company pointed directly toward another easy objective and not toward one that contained surprise and bitter opposition that was to be reduced only through fierce fighting and cost of many lives.

2. INITIAL ATTACK WITH NO SUPPORTING FIRE

Since the 1st Battalion had faced the stubborn opposition of German defenders for the past forty-eight hours it should have been sufficient reason to precede the attack with a coordinated and effective concentration of supporting fire. This would have allowed the troops to have moved under the protection of the supporting fire well into close assaulting position and would have eliminated, to a great extent, the possibility of being caught in a hopeless position as they were.

3. FAILURE TO USE SMOKE

Failure to use smoke, in my opinion, constituted a great mistake. The use of smoke was greatly warranted in this attack on the fortified position at TERRACINA. The primary reason the German automatic and sniper fire was so devastatingly effective was due to excellent observation. Although his fields of fire were unusually good and his combat efficiency high, the use of smoke would have greatly aided the Company in moving unobserved on the objective and closing with the enemy and minimizing casualties.

4. THE NEED OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is a vital necessity in any type operation and particularly so in the attack when confusion remains paramount and control is difficult. The use of communication when

needed by the Company Commander to inform the Battalion Commander of the existing situation would have assured coordination in directing and in lifting the fire and would have given the Battalion Commander a clearer picture of what problems were facing the company.

5. THE USE OF TANKS

The use of tanks would have aided immeasurably the attack on the objective. Although the engineers did a magnificent job of building a road over MOUNT GROCE, since tanks were denied the use of HIGHWAY 7, the fact remains that it was some eight hours after the attack was launched that the tanks were able to join the assault forces. The absence of the tanks participation in the attack resulted in the loss of time and unnecessary casualties, however, it is difficult to see how matters could have been improved.

6. THE REACTION OF MEN WHEN TAKING AN OBVIOUS BEATING

Confusion in the attack is a factor that remains constant. No attack can be made without a certain amount of loss of control due to confusion. However, this can be greatly minimized by intelligent and practical training prior to combat. In order to obtain maximum success in any operation, it is necessary to instill determination, courage, and understanding, so that when each individual is on his own in the thick of battle he will respond to those factors that contribute toward winning in the ultimate end and without benefit of close leadership.

7. MEN WILL STRAY IN THE FACE OF FIRE

The desire to destroy the enemy and the law of self preservation are two factors ever present in the realm of combat. Pride is the magnetic force that retains numerous people in the face of occasional death. Yet the fact remains that on the second and third assault on the cemetery many of the men could not be accounted for. This can be contributed principally to the element of surprise and devastating effect of the enemy's accurate fire. When the entire Company participated in the final assault, only some fifty men were available but the number of casualties sustained, a total of sixty-nine, from a total of one hundred and eighty on the initial attack, furnished sufficient evidence that many men had found covered positions and refused to move or had some way worked themselves completely out of the area.

LESSONS

1. Men should always be fully informed of the situation in order to avoid surprise and built up false hope.
2. When the enemy knows an attacking force is present and <sup>by whom</sup> no surprise can possibly be achieved a well directed and effective concentration should precede the attack.
3. Smoke can be used intelligently and effectively to mask hostile observation and allow troops to move well into assaulting position.
4. Communication should always be present even to the extreme of carrying two radios in combat.
5. Tank and Infantry teams are the key to minimizing time and casualties.

6. Training prior to combat is the determining factor  
*avoiding* *gaining*  
relative to confusion and success.

7. Leadership and close supervision is vitally important  
when confronted with a hostile position over a prolonged period.