

THE BATTLE OF THE CAVES

On the swampy beachhead at Anzio, there was something constantly oppressive about the flat, open land that stretched as far as the eye could see. Used to fighting in the mountains, where one at least felt relatively secure behind a reverse slope, the openness of the terrain gave the troops the feeling that no matter where they went, they were in constant danger. In truth, such was actually the case, for there was no sector of the beach that escaped enemy shellings.

It was with a general feeling of relief that the regiment yielded the left coastal regions to the British the night of February 14 and moved into the central sector of the beachhead to a position astride the Albano-Anzio highway. The feeling was short lived, however, for here the regiment engaged in the bitterest battles of its history, battles that brought new fame to the 45th Division and glory to the American army as a whole. But it was the age-old struggle for survival, not glory or patriotic fervor, that spurred the men into holding the bitterly contested ground against numerically superior German forces for nine tortuous days.

On the moonlit night of February 15, the 2nd battalion moved into a position on the North-South highway, three kilometers in front of the huge overpass overlooking the level terrain which was to become one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the war. The battalion that night relieved elements of the 1st Infantry Division (British), the 504th Parachute Battalion, the 6th Gordon Highlanders and the Duke of Wellington Regiment, taking over the positions which those units had dug in during their stay in that sector. Lt Col. Laurence C. Brown, Syracuse, New York, battalion commander, placed Company E on the right of the battalion, alongside and straddling the shell-pocked macadam highway leading to Rome. Company G held the battalion's left flank while Company F occupied the area between Companies E and G.

It was evident immediately that the Germans had strong forces amassed within the regimental sector of operations and it was rather uneasily that the men moved into their second hand foxholes and slit trenches about one o'clock the morning of February 15. Company E, the advance element, relieved the British units, then holding the position, in the midst of a moonlight fire fight being waged between the paratroopers, who were awaiting the battalion's arrival, and German patrols. So extensive was the German night patrolling that Captain Felix L. Sparks of Miami, Arizona, E Company Commander was forced to place all three rifle platoons on the line to cover the company front.

Intermittently, through the early morning hours, the Germans shelled the battalion sector, but otherwise the troops encountered little opposition in moving into the area. Two platoons of Anti-Tank Company came forward and set up defenses in position behind Company E, which occupied the regions around the highway where a tank attack was most likely to develop. Seven tank destroyers operated in the sector, two of which were attached to Company E.

Ahead of the battalion stretched miles and miles of flat, open terrain, broken only by numerous draws and ditches barely deep enough to conceal a crawling soldier. Houses, occupied by enemy troops, and sparse wooded areas, cast a sharp outline against the sky and on the right lay the factory area, where the 179th Infantry had met bitter resistance a few days before, suffering heavy losses.

Behind, where the battalion command post was located, lay the labyrinth of man-made caves, which had been dug into a shale ridge and extended underground in all directions for thousands of yards. Almost impervious to enemy shellfire, the caves became headquarters for the battalion staff, the medical aid section and the field artillery radio crew. Trucks could drive within the tunnels so the caves became a supply point as well. In the action that was to follow, they became the battalion's last position of defense.

Tired from their night march and the constant stop and go that marks a frontline relief, the men settled back in their shallow slit trenches and relaxed as best they could. Dawn was approaching and occasionally enemy shells landed in the battalion sector, harassing the troops. There was silence for a brief period, then suddenly, from far away, came the gentle whine of rapidly approaching shells, the sound increasing to a scream, then a rumble and crash as the projectiles hit the ground, scattering deadly jagged shrapnel throughout the battalion area. The men huddled in their holes and waited tensely as shells in ever increasing numbers, soared into the sector in a withering mass. Over the noise of the explosions the troops could hear in the distance the hollow "bong bong" of enemy guns firing, pouring forth a full hour's concentration such as none of the men ever had undergone before. Heavy shells blew men out of their holes and the cry of the wounded, "Medics, Medics" pierced the air. To the cramped, nervous men crouched in their shallow damp holes, the barrage seemed never to end, but suddenly the shelling ceased and across the rocky flatland from the vicinity of the factory, rolled German light tanks, closely supported by charging infantrymen.

The full brunt of the enemy assault struck Company E head on. For miles around, one could hear the din of the battle as the lines of troops clashed. Riflemen and machine gunners cut down German infantry but three enemy tanks completely overran the left flank platoon of the company.

When the sudden attack first began, one tank destroyer driver had been sleeping beneath his heavy vehicle. He crawled out from underneath his TD, climbed inside and started the engine just as the enemy tanks swung in from the left. Fired upon by the German tanks, the TD started to move, its tracks picking up the driver's blankets, which had been beneath it, but it progressed only a few yards, then was knocked out by a direct hit.

The second Tank Destroyer fared far better and within a few moments after the initial breakthrough, it destroyed two of the enemy tanks with shellfire. The third tank withdrew, leaving the German infantry, which had broken through the center of the company area, to fight the battle alone. At about 25 yards range, the tankmen opened fire on the enemy foot troops with .50 caliber machine guns and tommy guns, mowing down scores of the attackers. To the crew of that one TD went the credit for breaking up the first assault but the tankmen had expended all their ammunition and withdrew their vehicle from the sector.

All morning long, the German infantry attacked, coming across the open field in waves to be cut down by rifle and machine gun fire. The E Company machine gun section, in charge of Sergeant Otto Miller of Lamar, Colorado, piled dead and wounded Germans one upon the other as the enemy troops came under withering crossfire. Hundreds of enemy soldiers died attempting to cross the field of fire of that one company, but the assault waves never ceased. The noise of exploding shells and crackling smallarms fire was deafening and hit men went down on every side. Gradually, the attacking Germans cut down

Company E, infiltrating behind the men and firing upon them from all directions. On the right, the 179th Infantry, also being attacked, pulled back, and on the left, enemy assaults forced the British to withdraw. Company E, the Allied advance unit, juttred out from the main line of resistance and came under fire from all sides as enemy troops infiltrated behind and threatened to cut the company off from the battalion.

Company G, on the left, in a line of platoons extending from the bluff above the caves, also was receiving heavy attacks by German tanks and infantry. Artillery fire destroyed the tanks before they reached the line but the infantry continued to advance, crawling forward through draws and ravines despite the withering machine gun, automatic rifle and mortar fire G Company laid down. Approximately 200 enemy soldiers closed in on the right flank to die under the hail of steel which they encountered, but on the left flank, a mass of German infantry overran one platoon in the wake of a heavy artillery barrage. Lt Joe Robertson, Longmont, Colorado, the company commander, urgently ordered friendly artillery fire placed on the platoon position and the concentration of screaming shells, though it brought G Company casualties, cut the exposed enemy to bits. Assaulting German troops plunged into foxholes to engage G Company men in hand-to-hand combat and under continual enemy pressure, the hard hit and weakened platoon was forced to withdraw, leaving the Germans in possession of the ground.

Through the morning, small groups of enemy continued to press their advantage, but riflemen and artillery kept the Germans dispersed. Gradually, however, the gray-clad troops worked around to the rear of the left flank platoon and began organization for a strong assault. Hastily, Lt Robertson sent back orders for an artillery concentration. When the barrage had ceased, only killed and dying Germans lay in the area.

Again in the afternoon, the German tanks attacked, assaulting the right platoon of Company E on the east side of the main highway, and over-running the position as German shells, screaming into the area in support of the advancing tanks, knocked out the two anti-tank guns which were operating in that sector. One of the anti-tank guns had been dug in at the corner of a house and when artillery struck the building, it caved outward and buried the gun and crew. Three anti-tank men, Corporals Eugene Teyssier, Cecil, Pennsylvania; Chester Roller, Clover, Virginia, and John Hirschfield, Sedgewick, Colorado, saved five of the crew by hastily digging through the debris with bare hands and helmets, undergoing enemy fire all the while. In that sector, such actions were commonplace.

With the anti-tank guns knocked out, the tanks moved directly into the foxholes of the valiantly fighting riflemen and at point blank range, wiped out one squad and killed the platoon leader. Defenseless against tanks, many of the men were forced to surrender.

Toward nighfall, the attack slowed but just at dark, an enemy tank came straight down the main highway and turned into Company E's CP. Bazooka fire, which missed, succeeded in driving the vehicle away.

Immediately after nightfall, Captain Sparks hastily moved one reserve squad into position to aid the few E Company troops which still remained, and a few moments later the Germans attacked again, charging forward out of the darkness in steady streams. They assaulted what remained of Company E with

an estimated strength of three companies, troops coming in on each flank. Enemy shells constantly pounded the dwindling group of tired, worn men and the suddenly blinding gun flashes cast an eerie glow over the landscape. Approximately a company of German infantry began infiltrating directly into the E Company position, taking advantage of the darkness to crawl forward through the draws and ditches on each side of the highway. The fire fight was all in favor of the numerically superior enemy, for the few men who held Company E's line were surrounded and almost out of ammunition. There was no hope for them that supplies could be carried forward to their positions.

Through the night, the Germans methodically and slowly wiped out Company E's forward troops, attacking from the rear and from the front. Before daylight, no one who had entered the fight with the left platoon remained and only a few of the men of the platoon which had battled so valiantly to protect the battalion right flank on the macadam highway, still held their ground.

Captain Sparks ordered the few remaining men on the forward position to withdraw to the company command post, but he could make no contact with his third platoon, last known to be holding the ground on the left of the highway.

"Send two men forward to the third platoon," he ordered a Lieutenant, "and have it withdraw to the CP."

Hastily, the officer relayed the order to Sergeant John "Doc" McDermott of Caddo, Colorado. "Doc," he yelled, "Take a man and see if you can bring back the third platoon."

"To hell with takin' a man," the big Irish sergeant shouted, "I'll go myself." He ran straight up the macadam highway and failed to return.

As reports of the heavy losses of men drifted back to the rear areas, troops there received orders to carry rifles at all times in the event of possible small scale attacks by infiltrating enemy. German shells, seeking out artillery pieces in counterbattery fire, continually landed short in regimental areas, providing a constant hazard to men who were loading rations and ammunition. Under guard, German prisoners marched in from the front, arrogantly confident that their forces soon would break through to the beach. Some refused to dig themselves slit trenches, but changed their minds when shells from their own artillery soared into the area.

Frequently the Luftwaffe attacked the beach in hasty daylight raids, dive bombing guns, installations and crossroads despite the intense ack-ack fire that greeted the enemy planes. A Focke-Wulf bombed the regimental CP, which already was being shelled heavily, and blew up a nearby house occupied by military police, radio men and other Headquarters company personnel. With communications entirely disrupted, the regimental staff set up new headquarters farther back and attempted to make contact with the hard hit 2nd battalion by radio.

The battle continued. A platoon of tanks moved forward to aid Company E and from the turrets the tankmen beat off constant attacks with machine guns. All that night, the Germans assaulted the positions in small groups, coming in from all directions, but the few scattered riflemen that remained, aided by the machine gunners in the tanks, held the enemy at bay. In a vain effort to assist Company E, two squads of Company G launched a counterattack, but

only a few of the men could break through the German force which had infiltrated between the two companies. Flares lighted up the sky to make daylight out of darkness and enemy night bombers, in a heavy raid, knocked out several of the battalion's 81mm mortars and a number of .30 and .50 caliber machine guns as well. Other German planes operated in the rear areas, released coils of tin foil to counteract the Radar used by anti-aircraft units, and dropped anti-personnel "Butterfly" bombs on artillery batteries, trucks, and supply and ammunition dumps. In time the off-beat throb of the bombers' engines and the staccato of exploding butterfly bombs became increasingly familiar and enemy pilots became known by such appropriate titles as "Bomber Bill," "Butterfly Charlie" and "Popcorn Pete."

Surrounded, and with only 14 men from his own company and four men from the H Company attachments under his command, Captain Sparks sent a runner to Col. Brown, the battalion commander, informing him that it was impossible to hold the position.

"Withdraw and set up on the battalion right flank on the highway," Col. Brown ordered.

Daylight the morning of February 17 was approaching as the 18 worn, shaken men and Captain Sparks began their withdrawal to a position approximately 400 yards down the constantly shelled macadam highway. The tall Captain ordered the tank commander, whose machine gunners had withstood the enemy assaults all that night, to allow the handful of tired infantrymen a few moments in which to move back, then to withdraw the tanks.

Just as the withdrawal began, a single German tank moved into the open not fifty yards away and started toward the company CP. Shells from the three Allied tanks in the area destroyed it almost immediately but four other enemy vehicles, deploying on the flanks, assaulted the position as the little group of infantrymen moved out. In the midst of a tank battle but under the protective cover of smoke and friendly artillery fire, the pale, haggard men retired to the new position, keeping well dispersed and making their way through draws and ditches. Two tanks also returned, but the German tankmen had knocked out the third one.

Not knowing from which direction an attack might come, the 18 weary men and the slender Arizona Captain began setting up their new defensive positions, facing east, but the Germans, alert to their opportunities, massed an assault on the battered group from the right rear. Almost out of ammunition, the men fought as best they could, but under the increasing pressure, they were forced to withdraw to a small hill 200 yards to the left of the highway. There they dug in, facing the highway, and waited, but the expected follow-up never came.

At daybreak, the Germans continued their full scale offensive, attacking on a wide front with tanks and infantry. This time the full brunt of the assaults hit Company G. German infantrymen swept through draws a few hundred yards away as machine gunners and automatic riflemen, in position on the high ground overlooking the charging enemy foot troops, mowed them down. Under the heavy concentration of fire, the Germans withdrew, leaving scattered groups of dead and wounded lying in the ravine. At one point, an odd-shaped "X" formed by dead German soldiers showed where machine gunners had laid down their crossfire.

The enemy artillery seemed never to cease and time and again it swept the battalion area, certain to cause casualties. Shaken and weary, the men held their ground under constant assault. In the G Company sector, a strong enemy combat patrol moved in through a ravine at the rear and attacked the company command post but mortar fire and rifle grenades drove it away.

Through the day the enemy infiltrated in groups of 20 to 30 men around the left flank of Company G as the German artillery loosed concentrations of fire on the hard-hit 2nd battalion troops. On the hill where the little group of E Company men held out, three men died under the pounding enemy shells, leaving only 15 anxious and weary soldiers defending the ground.

Contact patrols, attempting to locate the allied units on the left, battled their way through the infiltrating Germans but could find no friendly troops and had to fight their way back to the battalion sector. All day, enemy soldiers, tanks and self-propelled weapons advanced toward the overpass down the macadam highway in plain view of the scattered group of E Company men on the hill. "It looks like a parade." the men reported.

For hours on end, Regiment could not contact the 2nd battalion. Shrapnel from a lone shell landing fifty yards away from a wire frequently will cut it and under the continual barrages the 2nd battalion was receiving, communications constantly were disrupted. Repairing and splicing the wires was an endless task which doggedly determined wiremen undertook with little or no hope of success. Occasionally, Regiment reached the battalion by radio, but reception was not clear.

With the fall of darkness, the Germans in increasing numbers, infiltrated and closed in around the battalion's left flank. All night, the tense, waiting troops could hear the rustling sounds made by advancing, crawling enemy soldiers. Near the caves Pfc John Byrne of Henderson, Kentucky, heard a noise to his left.

"Halt!" he ordered.

His answer came in German and in a brief skirmish, Byrne killed one enemy soldier and captured another. A third ran away.

Assigned the task of clearing infiltrating enemy from a ravine to the left rear, a combat patrol from Company F engaged German troops in a brief fire fight, secured the position and remained there. It was fortunate that it did for on the following night the men ambushed a group of enemy, which had captured 12 soldiers from the battalion, and in the resultant skirmish they killed two Germans and took the others prisoner. The 12 ex-German captives returned to their companies and resumed the fight.

The nerve-wracking enemy artillery fire continued and the eerie sound of the incoming shells loosed by the German six-barrelled "screaming meemies" became more and more familiar. Again, under the cover of darkness, German planes raided the beach, dropping flares over troops and artillery guns, then following up with butterfly bombs.

All through the night the Germans pressed their advantage. Brief skirmishes broke out on all sides as infiltrating enemy attacked small groups of scattered battalion troops. Ammunition, though it was getting through,

was at a premium and the men were careful not to waste it. From several miles behind the lines one could hear the pounding of the enemy artillery barrages and the sky was aglow with gun flashes. British and American artillery pieces in support of the infantry troops ahead, fired constantly as the hard working crews stood shifts to keep the guns in operation. There were few who slept and no one, even in the rear areas, ventured from his slit trench or dugout without good reason. It was almost impossible to supply the weary troops with water, rations and ammunition because of the German forces surrounding the battalion. In the United States, where the battle was a banner line newspaper story, the 2nd battalion became known as the "Lost Battalion of World War II".

Through the daylight hours of February 18, the battle continued to rage. Enemy artillery poured into the battalion sectors without letup and British and American counterbattery fire was intense. German foot troops appeared on all sides and from the vicinity of the overpass came the sounds of battle being waged between the advancing Germans and 3rd battalion, which was holding the ground there.

Constantly, battalion medical aid men moved about the area, treating the wounded and carrying seriously injured men to the caves where the aid station operated. In one section of the caves lay many wounded men, drugged to relieve their pain and awaiting evacuation. Others not so seriously hurt begged Captain Peter Graffagnino, New Orleans, La., to allow them to return to their positions. "I gotta' go out there, Doc.," some moaned. "They need me out there."

Always, water was needed but the infiltrating Germans had cut off the supply routes and only occasionally could parties work their way forward to the caves. In a nearby draw trickled a stream in which lay scores of dead Germans. The water ran blood red, but many of the men filled their canteens, boiled and used it.

German prisoners also occupied one section of the caves. Some suffered from wounds, others had not been injured. Many simply rubbed their foreheads and asked for "Wasser." A captured German officer demanded that the enemy soldiers be given tea, but no one paid much attention to the demand.

Rations too, were running low, and each K-Ration had to be shared by three men. On one occasion an allied plane dropped a box of K-Rations by parachute into the battalion area, then flew into the German occupied sectors and in the same manner, dropped a TNT-loaded 10-in-1 Ration box. While the hungry battalion troops watched and cursed the pilot, Germans swarmed around the box as it landed. There was an explosion and when the dust and black smoke had subsided, a number of dead and wounded enemy soldiers lay stretched out on the ground.

There was no lack of air support during the daylight hours. Spitfires flew overhead at all times, patrolling the rear areas as protective cover for artillery pieces, and frequently venturing across the lines to dive bomb enemy strongpoints. Light and medium bombers drifted across the sky in waves, never breaking formation despite the heavy anti-aircraft fire they encountered over the enemy territory. Many of the planes never returned and on several occasions, troops could see bombers blow up in spectacular sheets of flame and falling debris. Often, under the tons of bombs, German ack-ack fire ceased entirely, leaving the enemy troops and installations on the ground completely unprotected.

Just at dusk the night of February 18, Sergeant Fortunato Garcia, Denver, Colorado, E Company communications sergeant, crawled through a draw to the command post and warned the battalion staff that approximately a company of enemy was approaching, moving in between Company F and the caves. For some time it had been quiet but suddenly into the mouth of the cave came machine pistol fire and one hand grenade, which killed a soldier and destroyed a 511 radio. Immediately the tunnels became a bedlam of activity. Soldiers within manned points of vantage and fired into the enemy occupied areas just ahead, encountering a withering return fire from enemy machine guns and machine pistols. Enemy soldiers lobbed grenades into the cave entrances as the G and H Company machine gunners, atop a small bluff overlooking the caves, laid down a vicious crossfire in a final protective line. Riflemen in the 1st and 2nd platoons of Company G loosed fire on the German flanks and lofted hand grenades over the bluff into the midst of the advancing enemy troops.

Inside the caves, Captain George Hubbert, Lubbock, Texas, battalion liaison officer from the 158th Field Artillery, radioed back for artillery fire to be placed directly on the battalion position and the caves. For one-half hour, supporting artillery batteries pounded the regions just ahead of the cave entrances, much of the fire landing on G Company. Chilling screams of dying and wounded Germans calling for help under the tremendous concentration of small arms and artillery fire, rent the air and the enemy attack stopped completely. For two hours allied artillery batteries swept the draws and ditches in which lay scores of exposed Germans pinned to the ground. Morning found the area strewn with dead, torn and riddled bodies of enemy soldiers. A few wounded, unable to move, lay in the draws moaning "Kamerad, Kamerad".

In the reserve position, Company F also came under assault as infiltrating enemy troops massed in attack. Through the night, riflemen, machine gunners and mortarmen fough off Germans as the enemy attempted to overrun the position. On a rear outpost, Sergeant Alvin Biggers, Mountain Home, Arkansas, requested the company commander, Captain William Spight, Fort Collins, Colo., to call for 60mm mortar fire directly on the position that Biggers and seven men occupied and which was being overrun. "We'll duck our heads," he informed the Captain over the Walkie-Talkie radio.

Infiltrating Germans were everywhere, moving about the sector singularly or in pairs. The 15 men of Company E on the little hill captured several enemy soldiers who walked into the position, not realizing that anyone was there. On every side, troops could hear the Germans calling to each other, some issuing orders, others shouting in English, "Don't shoot - I'm your friend." In the F Company sector a rifleman heard someone yell, "Where are you?"

"What d'ya want," he answered.

Immediately he was fired upon by a machine pistol but in a brief skirmish he drove the enemy soldier away.

A G Company officer heard a voice calling "I'm over here. Over this way." He started toward the sound and was riddled by enemy bullets.

Behind the lines, men battled to get supplies through to the surrounded troops. When the supply routes first had been cut off by the Germans,

Lieutenant Stanley Lemon, Chandler, Arizona, acting as battalion adjutant, reconnoitered the sector and determined the ground over which supply parties could operate. The night of February 18, he placed Companies F and D of the 6th Armored Infantry, at the rear of the battalion so that they could keep the enemy from infiltrating into the area and closing the new supply route. Company F moved into position to secure a road to the immediate rear of the battalion and in doing so it knocked out two German machine guns and released three American soldiers who had been prisoners of the enemy. Company D, meanwhile, moved into a draw behind and 1,000 yards south of the caves.

That night, with the route secured by the two companies, drivers and carrying parties hauled rations, water and ammunition into the caves and to ration dumps near company positions. Then, under fire, they successfully evacuated from 90 to 100 wounded from the sector. Gradually, however, the Germans closed in on the two 6th Armored Infantry companies and furious fire fights broke out directly in the rear of the 2nd battalion troops.

There was little let up through February 19th and the ever-infiltrating Germans strengthened their positions despite the opposition which they encountered. They suffered heavy casualties on all sides as the allied small arms fire, artillery and bombings took toll but in their all out drive to push the allied forces into the sea, they spared neither men nor equipment.

At the battalion rear where F and D companies of the 6th Armored Infantry fought off small scale attacks, the Germans slowly closed the supply route. Lt. Lemon moved Company D closer to the battalion, where it could more actively engage the enemy, but encircling Germans continued to apply pressure. The supply and evacuation party that went forward that night and on succeeding nights followed a fighting force which cleared the route of enemy personnel.

During the early morning hours of February 20, while the Germans infiltrated, a platoon from Company L, in position near the overpass, fought its way forward and reinforced Company E. Intermittent artillery and tank fire harassed the troops but the attacks by German infantry were less numerous. For the first time since they had moved into position, the worn troops of the weakened battalion had a chance to rest.

On the bluff above the caves an H Company machine gunner saw a wounded German crawling through a draw 300 yards away.

"There's a Heinie," he told a nearby rifleman. "Pick him off."

"I don't see him," replied the weary rifleman. "Where is he?"

"Gimme' your rifle and I'll show you," answered the machine gunner. The rifleman handed him the weapon and the gunner lined up the sights, drew a careful bead and fired.

"Now I see him!" suddenly exclaimed the rifleman. "He just moved."

"Yeah," replied the machine gunner casually. "I just moved him."

Through February 20, the 2nd battalion front remained generally quiet.

Only spasmodic artillery fire harassed the troops but from behind them in the vicinity of the overpass, where the 3rd battalion was holding the ground, came the sounds of constant shelling, the scream of the "Nebelwerfers" and the chatter of machine guns and small arms fire. The night was quiet and through a prisoner of war the battalion staff learned that the enemy was effecting the relief of the heavily-hit 145th Infantry, replacing it with the 1027th Panzer Grenadiers.

With fresh troops to continue their attacks, the Germans renewed the offensive on February 21st and throughout the day the battalion received heavy shellings. The men, in brief skirmishes, continually engaged enemy troops as they infiltrated around the left flank. The weary soldiers still were a match for an enemy force their size but they were outnumbered, out-flanked, always low on ammunition and the constant shellings they received were taking toll. They fought now with a glimmer of hope, however, since frontline rumors indicated that a British battalion would relieve them that night.

After dark a battalion of the Queen's Infantry of the 56th British Division began the march into the sector. From afar, the troops on the line could hear the off-beat drone of enemy bombers, see flares drop to light up the sky and hear the sputter of exploding butterfly bombs. An hour later, fire fights broke out in the rear areas, then finally came the word that the British battalion had arrived. But the British soldiers had been forced to fight their way in, had been bombed enroute, had suffered at least 70 casualties and in the bombings had lost their heavy weapons and ammunition.

In the midst of heavy infiltration and local fighting, British soldiers, during the early morning hours of February 22, relieved battalion riflemen, who had to battle their way through to the troop assembly point, the caves. A few machine gunners and mortarmen left their weapons emplaced for the use of the British soldiers, some of whom, during the relief, knocked out an enemy machine gun nest just 40 yards in front of the cave entrances. But because the British lacked weapons, most of the machine gun and mortar crews remained in position.

Through the day the Germans, with renewed vigor, continued their tactics of infiltration and attack from the rear, closing in on the British as for so many days they had closed in on the 2nd battalion. The sector was a bedlam of activity and the troops inside the caves, awaiting the orders to move to the rear. Knew they would have to fight their way back to friendly lines.

The infiltrating Germans had isolated a battalion observation post, consisting of approximately 15 men, a mortar section and artillery observers and at dark that night, a British platoon and a platoon from Company G assaulted the position in an attempt to relieve the OP group. But the attack failed.

By dark the Germans had assaulted the caves, had captured a platoon of F Company riflemen and had released a number of Germans who had been prisoner. The enemy also had captured the H Company 81mm mortar crews and the weapons as well.

The battalion planned to effect its withdrawal by using the route over which supplies had come each night, but the Germans, closing in on all sides, held the ground over which the battalion had to march. Three houses, occupied by enemy, overlooked the route and in an effort to secure them so that the main body of troops could leave the sector under covering fire, platoons from Company G assaulted the German strongpoints. They reached the draw below the houses, then charged up the hill to meet seething machine gun fire that covered the approaches. There was no hope that they could advance and one by one, the men withdrew and returned to the caves.

At midnight, Regiment ordered the battalion to move out by the best means possible and two hours later the withdrawal began, the walking wounded and soldiers suffering from rheumatism and trench foot bringing up the rear. In virtual sheets of small arms fire coming from all directions, the column moved away from the houses, followed a ravine west to a small bridge, then took the trail leading south toward friendly lines. In the caves remained Captain Graffagnino and his medical aid men, who refused to leave so long as wounded lay within the caverns.

From organized positions through a depth of 1,000 yards, German machine guns harassed the column, laying down deadly and prolonged crossfire in the draws and ditches through which the men attempted to make their way. A concentration of fire from the houses split the column in the middle and pinned the rear elements to the ground, while the men in the lead crawled through ditches on their bellies for from 400 to 500 yards before getting clear. One survivor of the perilous march to the rear was Captain George Kessler, Craig, Colorado, the battalion plans and training officer.

"At midnight we were ordered by Regiment to move the battalion out by the best means available," Captain Kessler reported. "At 0130 hours, the battalion left the CP, taking the route which had been used by the supply parties each night. We met no opposition until after we had cleared the battalion area and reached a designated point, supposedly secured by the Irish Guards.

"I was at the rear of the column at this time and German machine guns fired directly ahead of us. I started forward and found out that H Company which was at the rear of the column, had lost contact with the forward elements so I took Lieutenant John Stansell of Company F with me and tried to reach the leading troops. While looking for the rest of the battalion I met the major in command of the Irish Guards and learned that our route was not secured and that the German left flank occupied the ground with six machine guns and an estimated company of infantry. I sent Lt Stansell back to get Company H and continued my search for our forward troops and Col. Brown, who was leading them. That was the last I saw or heard of Company H.

"While working my way up the column I had found that machine gun fire had split it at about the head of Headquarters Company, which was following Company F. Company F and Company G apparently were ahead of enemy machine gun positions and evidently had continued on without too much trouble. Because of the openness of the terrain, I decided to move the remainder of the column into a deep draw to our left and to work the men out through it. I gave this information to the men and crawled off to the draw, which still was under heavy machine gun and rifle fire. The Germans also threw hand grenades into it frequently.

"On reaching the draw I found that only a few men had been able to follow me so I instructed Sergeant Robert Santerli, first sergeant of Company F, to send two runners back to bring the rest of the column into the draw. The runners did not return nor were we able to locate any more of the men.

"By this time daylight was approaching and I decided to move out with the men who were in the draw, since after daybreak the route would have been inaccessible. We started out with about 15 men and about 300 yards ahead, we ran into Captain Sparks, who also had about 15 men whom he had led into the draw. Captain Sparks and I decided the best thing we could do was to try to take the men we had into friendly positions through the draw.

"All during the march, we constantly encountered German outposts and came under sniper fire. Frequently, hand grenades were thrown into the draw.

"Just after daybreak, we reached friendly lines and continued on to the battalion rear CP. We found that Col. Brown, with G and F Companies, had reached the rear areas but we had no report of Companies E or H or the platoon of Company L. The troops had been instructed before we left the caves that in case of dispersion of the column, lost men should attempt to contact the British, so we had hopes that a few of the troops might yet return. Prior to the time I left Company H, we could hear German voices to our rear and on both flanks, and all evidence points to the fact that H Company probably was captured.

"We have had no information since of what happened to Company E or the platoon of Company L. The last I saw of them they were subject to extremely heavy fire at close range across open ground."

Only E Company man to accompany the battalion out of the sector was the Commanding Officer, Captain Sparks, who, for days, had gone without rest, had continually directed artillery firing and had coolly relayed information to the battalion CP as the enemy action progressed. But two days later a platoon sergeant, Technical Sergeant Leon "Doc" Siehr of Burlington, Colorado, returned after having battled side by side with the British for 48 hours. He was the only E Company enlisted man to undergo the entire siege and return safely.

"We were bringing up the rear of the column," Siehr reported, "and somebody ahead went to sleep. We all were pretty tired so we couldn't blame him much for that, but we lost contact with the troops ahead. We got the order to stay where we were while some officers moved forward and tried to reach the lead troops. We were catching a lot of machine gun fire and nobody ever came back so Sergeant Garcia took off to try to find a way out. He disappeared too.

"It was getting daylight so Sergeant Jack McCorkle and I told the men we were going to try to find a route into friendly lines. We wandered around for about an hour and finally reached a British company so we made ourselves known, then worked our way back to where we had left the men. We got within a couple of hundred yards of the position, then we saw the fellows marching across the field with their hands in the air. They were surrounded by Germans.

"We couldn't do anything so we returned to the British company, which also had seen our men. They were so far away, though, that the British thought

they were Germans and opened fire on them. We never found out whether they hit any of our boys or not.

"McCorkle and I stayed with the British a couple of days," Siehr added, "and McCorkle got killed up there. The British medics tried to save him, but he was hit too hard.

"Finally I told the British troops I was going back to my battalion so I took off and rejoined the outfit in the bivouac area."

Of the 713 enlisted men and 38 officers who had entered the engagement, only 162 enlisted men and 15 officers returned. Many of the survivors had to be evacuated immediately for nervous exhaustion. Where the men once had been, now there were Germans, gradually mopping up the British troops as they had done 2nd battalion. Germans also now occupied the caves, but the enemy had paid a high price to win them, so far as statistics were concerned, far higher in killed and wounded than had the 2nd battaion of the 157th Infantry.

By Pfc John E. Hallowell,
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