

81st Armored Reconnaissance Battalion

Battalion History - June 1944

The 1st of June, 1944 marked the fourth birthday of the Battalion and was spent in the line Northwest of Stazzione di Campoleone on the left flank of the 1st Armored Division sector. During the first three days of the month the Battalion minus "A" Company continued to maintain defensive positions along the line F840379 - F850382 - F838290 - F859396. CP's were established along the ridge F845302 to F854389 and liaison was maintained with the British on the left flank and the 45th Infantry Division on the right.

Patrols were constantly pushed out to determine enemy positions, but were met by machine gun, small arms, artillery and mortar fire at all points. On the 1st of June there eleven enlisted men wounded and evacuated and one enlisted man killed as a result of these operations; the next two days, none. The road from F846382 to F853387 was patrolled on the nights of June 2nd and 3rd, with several locations of enemy machine guns being picked up. The enemy obviously sent out squads at night in anticipation of our patrols and had his usual interlocking machine gun and small arms positions set up, with mortars in support displaced to the rear.

The assault guns of the Battalion fired missions on all three days, shooting various targets. Among these were: one anti-tank gun destroyed, one house with mortar and machine gun position demolished, two other houses, suspected of harboring enemy, partly demolished. Many smaller targets and infantry were fired upon with good results, and all enemy positions reported by our patrols were covered by concentrations.

On the 4th the Battalion was given the mission of protecting the Division left flank during the march on Rome, our route roughly paralleling the RR bed which had been the right flank for the past few days. Now however, the RR bed was to the left and remained on the left most of the way to Rome, as will be seen on the accompanying map. "B" Company was in the lead, followed closely by "C" and "D" Companies. At the outset of the operations the motorcycle platoon was still traveling with Battalion Headquarters. During this day's activities the 81st Reconnaissance Battalion was the only unit to encounter more than token resistance on the march to Rome, but this resistance to the Battalion advance, and the surmounting of it made June 4th one of the most memorable days in the history of the Battalion.

"B" Company moved out at 0500B and found a by-pass around a mine-field in the vicinity F862399. Taking a route to the Northeast of this cross-country the road was again reached at F862418. No resistance was met until 0930B when the company ran into a strong-point of about 100 infantry, (the 14th or A/T Company of the Lehr Regt, attached to the 362nd Division), and several mortars in the vicinity of F802513. Due to the quietness of the armored cars and the rapidity of the advance, several well-concealed anti-tank guns and machine gun positions were by-passed and the company found itself in the midst of the enemy.

An intense fire-fight developed immediately and, while "B" Company was extricating itself from this dangerous position, help began to arrive from "C" and "D" Companies which had been following close behind. With elements of "D" Company

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trying a flanking movement to the right, everything that could be mustered was poured into the strong-point. The assault guns from both reconnaissance companies lent very effective weight to the combined 37mm and 50 cal. fire. "B" Company suffered heavily, both in men and equipment. Two armored cars were destroyed by anti-tank fire vicinity F803501 and two more armored cars and one bantam at F795532, all by anti-tank fire. Four enlisted men were killed and two enlisted men and one officer, Lt. Zurkelen, were evacuated because of wounds. The enemy lost approximately 20 men killed and the same number wounded, 3 anti-tank guns destroyed, 5 trucks destroyed and 50 enemy surrendered to "B" Company.

Coming up to join "B" Company in the fire-fight, "C" Company attacked a position at F809497 and destroyed two anti-tank guns and a prime-mover. Infantry in and around houses F813486, F815484 and F808496 were engaged with heavy casualties in killed and wounded inflicted on the enemy. One enlisted man was killed during this action.

Later on in the day the company minus one platoon was given the mission of proceeding with possible speed to take and secure bridge at F886573 south of Rome. This bridge had been reported by an air OP as being still intact, and was considered of important tactical value by the 5th Army. The mission was accomplished at 2000B and the bridge was reported as partially damaged and capable of carrying only foot troops, but with 35 yards of planking and five hours of work by an engineer company it would again carry all Division loads. When this bridge was secured, one of the platoons was detached and went into Rome itself to guard a vital bridge over which the Division sent most of its traffic the next two days. During the day the company took 24 PW's.

Elements of "D" Company attempted to flank the fire-fight at F803501 by crossing under the RR to the Northwest but ran into heavy underbrush. While searching for a route to go forward, an enemy position in a house at F800511 was shot up with HE and AP with unknown results. Firing into some brushpiles, one of our tanks set off concealed enemy HE ammunition which exploded so violently and threw so many fragments around that the crews of the two closest tanks had to abandon their vehicles, thinking they had been hit by enemy anti-tank fire. The tanks were recovered later but the crews had to take cover until the "firing" had ceased.

Another platoon of the company engaged enemy infantry vicinity F800510, killed 10 of the enemy and wounded half a dozen more. During this action the Company was ordered to follow "C" Company around the west flank against an enemy column reported coming from the Southeast. This enemy column never materialized so after the mission was cancelled, "D" Company was held in reserve until given the job of protecting the movement of Battalion Headquarters and trains into Rome. Battalion Headquarters with part of "D" Company arrived in Rome, after 2330B, followed by trains and one platoon of "D" Company plus the motorcycle platoon at 0430B the following morning.

After the fire-fight the reorganized elements of "B" Company pushed on toward Rome with all possible speed, being fortunate in getting through the occasional small arms and anti-tank fire without further damage. The first platoon went forging ahead taking many prisoners completely unawares. Altogether 20PW's were taken in addition to those taken in the fire-fight earlier in the day. At 1815B on 4th June the platoon entered the streets of ROME and were definitely the first troops to enter the city from that direction.

The civilians were overjoyed; they threw flowers at the cars, offered the crews wine and sweets, embraced the crew members after stopping the vehicles and in general showed their happiness at being freed from the German rule. The city was by no means clear of the enemy, at least 30 or 40 additional Germans were taken inside Rome itself, some of them quite willingly. Before bedding down for the night the company set up machine guns and outposts as a precaution against possible enemy snipers.

On the 4th of June the motorcycle platoon received its first real mission. The platoon was to move from the vicinity of F812464 toward Rome along the left flank and come up toward Rome going due North while the rest of the Battalion moved on the route already described. The platoon left at 1130B and ran into a road-block in the berm of a blown bridge at F810465; it was easily by-passed. A little farther on, they realized they were in the British sector when they received small arms fire from a British reconnaissance unit at F790460. The British claimed never to have seen armored cars like ours before and mistook them for Germans.

Larger elements of the British 5th Division were encountered at F756492 where the platoon found a by-pass, for a blown bridge. As soon as the platoon had gone over the by-pass, British vehicles started streaming across in their own race for Rome.

The first enemy opposition was met at F754510 where there was a road-block protected by machine-guns and snipers. Dismounted action by the motorcyclists and fire-power from the armored cars scattered the enemy and the block was by-passed. Continuing on to the west an enemy strong-point was encountered at F748511. There was stiff fire-fight here and the enemy was forced to retreat. At one time during the fracas two Jerries came out of a ditch waving a white flag. As the fire in the immediate vicinity ceased, they both took off over the hill; one made it. Six PW's were taken but were turned over to the British for evacuation. After all resistance had ceased the mission was carried on until another British reconnaissance unit, this time from the British 1st Division, was encountered at F720513. The British opened up with tommy-guns and almost got two of our cyclists at point blank range before our uniforms were recognized.

Though some of the terrain was dangerous, nothing further happened until 1700B when another road-block stopped progress at F700528. The Jerry waited until the whole platoon was up close and then opened up with everything from a 50 mm anti-tank gun down to carbines. An estimated platoon of enemy infantry was guarding the road block and was able to pin down almost all the cyclists and force the two armored cars to seek defilade. Things became so hot after a while that three cycles had to be temporarily abandoned. One German tried to sneak up and take some of the personal effects from one of the cycles but the rider, a Mexican named Augustin Medina, noticed this. Being out of ammunition, he silently approached the looter and killed him with his case knife. When questioned about this, he said, "Hell, that was my musette bag full of souvenirs he was taking". Ammunition and gas began to run short so one cyclist was dispatched to Battalion Headquarters for more. It arrived about dark, and the platoon, having lost one man killed against at least three enemy killed and more wounded, withdrew and returned to Battalion Headquarters which it accompanied into Rome.

