

## The Battles at Kasserine and Sened

*(Editor's note: The following items are drawn from the unit records of the 19<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Regiment)*

HEADQUARTERS NINETEENTH ENGINEERS  
APO 302, U.S. ARMY

8 March 1943

### NOTES ON KASSERINE PASS DEFENSE

#### I. PURPOSE:

1. These notes are based on the experiences and observations of officers who were present at the defense of the pass. Their purpose is to point out the mistakes that should be avoided in future defensive positions.

#### II. SITUATION:

1. Tactical. The regiment (less 1 Co.) with one battalion 26<sup>th</sup> Inf., two batteries of 105 mms, 17 tank destroyers, 11 tanks, one AA battery, Signal and Medical Detachments attached, was ordered to defend Kasserine Pass. The order was issued about mid-night Tuesday, February 16. The last unit arrived on the position about 2100 February 17. Enemy fire, from tanks and artillery, was first received on the afternoon of Thursday, February 18. Artillery fire continued all the next day from about 0800. Infantry moved into the position that same day and penetrated the forward part of the MLR (main line of resistance). During the night of February 19-20, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry withdrew exposing the left flank of the regiment. Two companies (less 1 platoon) of the 39<sup>th</sup> Inf. were attached and were assigned one to each flank. In the afternoon of February 20, fire was being delivered from the flanks across the rear of the position, and hostile infantry had penetrated around the flanks. The regiment made an uncoordinated withdrawal.

2. Terrain. The position consisted of several hills on a forward slope. The rear of the position dropped steeply to a plain. It was divided by a deep wadi running through the position and avenues of approach ran through the position. The flanks rested on high hills that overlooked the position. The next terrain feature suitable for defense was about 20 miles to the rear, the intervening ground was a flat plain. The 19<sup>th</sup> Engineers occupied that part of the position south of the large wadi.

#### III. THE INDIVIDUAL:

1. No tactics can succeed without the "will to win". As far as is known, only Captain Mitzen had ever been under fire. In this first experience, enemy artillery fire had the morale shattering effect, which was its purpose. On the afternoon of the first day of fire a

considerable number of men left their positions and went to the rear. Some of these men were rounded up and returned to their posts. Others doubtless were not collected. These men left their posts because of fear and because they were not controlled by their officers and non-commissioned officers. Fear was engendered by the heavy fire and by rumors that had no basis in fact and were not investigated. Uncontrolled movement showed lack of discipline.

2. Discipline must be instilled off the battlefield. The habit of obedience to orders and response to the control of officers and NCOs has to be formed in the daily activities of each of us. Failure to demand unquestioning obedience at all times will result in lack of control when men are under stress.

3. The fear that everyone has—including the Germans and Italians—must be brought under control. The following measures will help to secure that control:

- a. Think of statistics—the percentage of casualties from artillery fire is small. Your chances of surviving are high.
- b. Act unafraid even if you are scared. Your example will strengthen others.
- c. Know how your enemy operates and teach your men, you, thus, diminish the chance of surprise.
- d. Keep busy and keep your men busy.
- e. Call the roll from time to time so that the men know they have company.
- f. Squash rumors.

#### IV. ELEMENTS OF DEFENSIVE POSITION:

1. The elements of a defensive position are:

- a. Observation
- b. Fields of Fire
- c. Cover and Concealment
- d. Obstacles
- e. Communications

2. Observation: The first requisite is to see without being seen. Observation posts were established by all units down to platoons, and operated effectively. More use should have been made of the individual soldier in the squad as an observer. He should be instructed to send back information of troop concentrations and gun positions so that fire can be brought down on them.

3. Fields of Fire: Machine guns are the frame work of the defense. They should be sited to cover approaches to the position and to give interlocking bands of fire across the front. Adjacent units must provide mutual support. The heavy guns must have fields of fire to their maximum range in the early stages, and then be withdrawn to positions for mid-range firing. The siting of machine guns was faulty in many instances. The major faults were failure to move guns from their long range positions to positions for close-in support, lack of mutual support between adjacent units, and lack of interlocking fire across the front.

4. Cover and Concealment: Men must learn to dig and dig deep, not only one slit trench but alternate trenches. During enemy bombardment men are safe in such shelters. They must learn to sit concealed, avoiding walking on the skyline, use every means to conceal the location of the elements of the position. Gun positions must not be in sight of enemy observation. In general, they should be on reverse slopes. Alternate and supplementary positions must be provided and occupied. Concealment of our position was compromised by unnecessary movement in the open. Guns were silenced because no alternate positions were available after the gun's initial location had been determined by the enemy. The construction of a defensive position is never completed. There is always more digging that can and must be done. Rock walls are inadequate. Men and guns must be dug in.

5. Obstacles: The enemy must be impeded by wire and booby traps. Each group should be completely surrounded by wire. Obstacles were practically non-existent except for the mine fields and they were no obstacles to foot troops. Even when wire was delivered on the site, little use was made of it. There is little time to rest on a defensive position.

6. Communications: Our position was weak in signal communications. We shall always be faced with that weakness. It can be overcome by an increased use of runners. They must be selected early and made acquainted with the location of all C.P.s. They must be able to be used as guides to any element in the position. The Communications Section did excellent work. Every effort should be made to bury wires. No use was made of visual signal men. There may be occasions when they can perform effectively. No communications trenches were dug in the position. Their utility is obvious.

## V. CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE:

1. A well conducted defense depends on the skillful manipulation of the following elements:

- a. Outpost
- b. Main garrison
- c. Supporting weapons
- d. Supports and reserves

2. Outposts. Its purpose is to prevent surprise. The combat outpost served its purpose. If, as in this case, the combat outposts are furnished by each company, contact between adjacent outguards by means of patrols is essential.

3. Main Garrison. The main garrison must be divided into combat groups with one or more automatic weapons as the nucleus of each. These garrisons must be well dug in and wired in, not only in one position but with alternate positions so that men can be shifted to oppose enemy advances from any direction toward the terrain feature the group defends. During artillery bombardment or heavy machine gun fire the men should be under cover, preferably on the reverse slope of a hill. The outposts and listening posts can warn of an impending infantry attack. Only two or three observers per combat group need be actively on duty at one time. Firing by riflemen and machine guns without a target does no good and betrays the position. Harassing fire is an artillery function. Each combat group must also maintain contact with units on each side. Each combat group must consider itself as defenders of a locality. If you do not, you may find the adjacent unit gone or overcome, when with help from you it might have stayed to protect your flank.

4. Supporting Weapons. The 50 cal. machine guns and 37mm AT guns should remain under the control of the company commander. Battalion commanders should see that they are sited to provide a framework of fire covering all units from enemy movement along the most likely avenues of approach. In a position such as that at Kasserine Pass about half the guns should have been on the crests for long range fire and then withdrawn. The guns along the MLR should have remained silent until hostile infantry was within 750 yards range. The long range guns after filling their primary mission should have moved into positions so sited that they could fire on infiltrations through the MLR. Anti-tank guns seem to have been well sited. Their limitations are known to all of us.

5. Supports and reserves.

a. Each company area should have had a support platoon. It was not necessary that this be kept mobile. Whether mobile or used to deepen the defense, it should have been available for flank protection, anti-aircraft protection and to deal with any hostile elements penetrating the MLR. They should have dug positions from which they could have covered the intervals between the forward squads. These support platoon leaders should have prepared plans for counterattack under various assumptions.

b. The battalion and regimental reserves were used to deepen the position (C Co.) and to extend the flank (Cos I and K, 39<sup>th</sup> Inf) after the withdrawal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. A prolonged defense can only hold against strong attack while it is flexible, i.e., by its own means throw out the enemy. The proper use of support and reserves, i.e., the timing of their attacks, depends on accurate and timely information. Information sent back to each higher headquarters must be evaluated and confirmed. The use of reserves will be effective only if all units are controlled rigidly.

## VI. Supply:

1. Ammunition is the most important item of supply. The following deficiencies were quite common:

- a. Only the basic load was taken into the position
- b. Replacement was not made at night.
- c. Dumps were not established by companies near their rear areas.
- d. Positions of weapons and riflemen not kept stacked with plenty of ammunition.

Alternate and supplementary positions should have been stacked.

2. Water has to be conserved. Water cans were sent up to companies from H&S company but were not returned. It is impossible now to replace them.

3. Mess vehicles should remain with the battalion or regimental train well in rear. Only food containers should be brought into the position

4. Individual Equipment: Bedding rolls and packs should be left with company trains. Only blankets and mess kits should be taken into position.

## VII. APPLICATION:

These notes are the result of your experience and the experience of others. We are out to win a war against a determined and skilled enemy. We must surpass his determination and skill. Lesson No. 1 revealed considerable weaknesses on our part. It also revealed some very heartening strength. Start now to correct the weakness. There is much to be done.

/s/ A.T.W. MOORE  
/t/ A.T.W. MOORE  
Colonel, 19<sup>th</sup> Engineers,  
Commanding

## DISTRIBUTION:

1 ea squad