

The Exploitation from the Dieulouard Bridgehead:

An Example of Maneuver Warfare that Applies Today

by Captain Donald E. Vandergriff

The exploitation from the Dieulouard bridgehead by Combat Command A (CCA) 4th Armored Division, 12-14 September 1944, offers valuable lessons if we are to adapt maneuver warfare as our Army's future doctrine. Employing the fundamentals of maneuver warfare, CCA achieved a difficult mission — exploitation to operational depth against a determined, well trained, equipped, and led enemy in rolling forested terrain inhabited by an unfriendly population.

CCA continually overcame complex problems because it possessed cohesion, solidified through two years of hard training, and a command climate that promoted mission tactics. Today's Army must take a hard look at aligning new doctrine (both operations and leadership) with the benefits produced by the new Intervehicular Information System (IVIS) in order to become as proficient as CCA 4th Armored Division.¹ The Army must encourage commanders to create a command climate that promotes mission tactics. The growing complexity, speed, and accuracy of weapons on today's battlefield, compounded by shrinking budgets that limit actual maneuver time, highlight the need to pursue better cohesion in tactical units.

With a vast array of potential and determined enemies to be fought on their home territory, the Army cannot afford to keep practicing the "break-the-glass-in-case-of-war" philosophy toward leadership that practices maneuver warfare.

The encirclement of Nancy, specifically the actions of CCA on 11-14 September 1944, provide many examples of rapid and decisive decision-making, from the individual to the combat command (brigade) level, that only an experienced, well trained, and maneuver warfare-oriented unit could accomplish.

The exploitation from the Dieulouard bridgehead demonstrated speed, "not just speed in movement, which is important, but speed in everything, called tempo."² Throughout the period, CCA, under Colonel Bruce C. Clarke, forced the Germans to react to the Americans' faster tempo. Examples of rapid decision-making, enabling units to act quickly, occurred throughout the exploitation. They included the flexibility of CCA as it changed its route from crossing the Moselle at Pont-a-Mousson to the bridgehead at Dieulouard, the actions of CPT Charles Trover and LTC Creighton Abrams along the route of march, their avoidance of strength at Chateau Salins, and COL Clarke's use of mission orders. This flexibility only came about because the unit and its leaders worked, trained, and knew one another for a long period of time.

The 3d Army plan called for an offensive across the width of the sector.³ General George S. Patton speculated that the Germans were still reeling from their defeats in Normandy. He ordered both the XX and XII Corps to seize Metz and Nancy, respectively, and prepare to continue the advance to the Rhine. Specifically, the XII Corps planned a double envelopment. The two prongs of the corps, led by CCA and CCB, 4th Armored Division, were to seize the high ground around Arracourt, and isolate the Germans defending Nancy.⁴ CCA was to conduct one of the war's first forward passages of lines, through 80th Infantry Division as it seized a planned crossing site of the Moselle River in the vicinity of Pont a



U.S. infantrymen haul an assault boat to the banks of the Moselle River. This unit was crossing near Metz, north of the Dieulouard bridgehead at about the same time the 80th Infantry Division seized the crossing exploited by CCA, 4th Armored Division.

Mousson. When the division was repulsed there, it changed its focus of effort further south, and with the assistance of careful deception and preparation, seized a bridgehead at Dieulouard.

Through 80th Division's rapid seizure of a crossing site at Dieulouard, CCA was able to demonstrate its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing situation.⁵ COL Clarke, upon hearing of the infantry crossing at a different crossing site than planned, quickly dispatched his reconnaissance troop, under CPT Trover, with the appropriate liaison officers, toward the bridgehead. As the troop approached the Moselle, it marked the route, thus facilitating the rapid movement of the brigade through the first of many difficult and complex missions of the exploitation.

COL Clarke and his subordinate commanders were able to make rapid decisions. As he foresaw and wargamed the upcoming mission, his staff quickly and efficiently dealt with current problems.⁶ The experience and teamwork within the CCA staff overcame the difficulty of the first part of the mission, getting hundreds of vehicles and personnel to the Dieulouard crossing point and conducting a forward passage of



General Patton, the Third Army commander, ordered his two corps to attack Metz and Nancy preparatory to a Rhine crossing. The crossing at Dieulouard and the sprint eastward toward Arracourt isolated the Germans in Nancy and led to control of the high ground farther east.

lines against an expectant enemy. Each staff officer understood his mission and, more importantly, received the latitude to make decisions in support of the commander's intent. CCA's focus of effort received total support and coordination through an experienced and confident cross-talking staff.

When CPT Trover and his troop arrived at the Dieulouard bridgehead, they found it under a German counterattack that threatened the very bridges CCA planned to use. After reporting the situation to CCA, and being delayed by a crossing control officer, CPT Trover led his troop across the river and immediately eliminated the threat to the bridges by destroying the attackers. As the troop moved away from the bridgehead, CPT Trover identified assault gun units too strong for his reconnaissance troop to handle. He halted, assumed a hasty defense, and reported his situation to CCA headquarters.⁷ During this first phase of the crossing, CPT Trover conducted an effective advance guard mission for CCA and enhanced its movement to, through, and out of the bridgehead.⁸

The actions of CPT Trover led to a decision-making conference attended by representatives of XII Corps, 80th Division, CCA, and the TF 37th Armor commander, LTC Creighton Abrams. Asked his opinion on a course of action, LTC Abrams pointed toward Germany and said, "That is the shortest way home."⁹

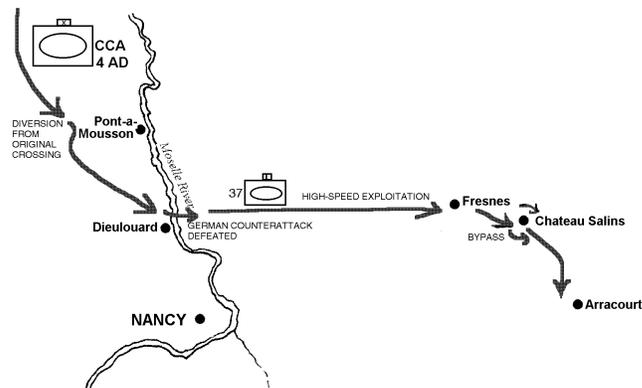
Immediately, COL Clarke backed his subordinate by ordering him to proceed with the next mission, conducting a forward passage of lines and penetrating the enemy defenses.

Both COL Clarke and LTC Abrams understood the situation created by

the rapidly moving column.¹¹ This phase of the operation, the exploitation, demonstrated the effective use of designating the main effort. COL Clarke chose his best subordinate to lead the attack through the German rear and supported him with everything else within CCA (a sharp contrast to what was occurring at the operational level). LTC Abrams took decisive action, and COL Clarke ruthlessly focused combat power at any enemy weakness that CCA encountered. COL Clarke made this decision based on his experience and strong character. He took risk in focusing on a single route, despite little

intelligence about the enemy. The follow-on units — the 53d Armored Infantry task force and an engineer column — provided their own security. COL Clarke and the leaders of CCA worried more about what they were going to do to the Germans than what the Germans could do to them.¹²

With speed and focus, CCA overcame any German unit it encountered as it moved to seize the high ground around Arracourt. Once the leaders made the decision to move faster than the Germans, subordinate units, time and time again, executed drills that destroyed the enemy and prevented the Germans from establishing a coherent defense. From Benicourt to Fresnes, Task Force Abrams expertly handled the advance guard mission for CCA. LTC Abrams, taking advantage of a surprised enemy, did not slow his unit to deploy as they ran into and around German units. Emphasizing shock, the task force minimized casualties through its ability to conduct its action drills, enhanced by indirect fire support, before a German unit could deploy. To execute such rapid drills with no fratricide, the unit practiced established SOPs repetitively.¹³



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As mentioned earlier, CPT Trover's troop and D Company provided the flank screen as CCA advanced deep into the German rear. Given their mission orders, these units confused the Germans because they provided the CCA commander with "multiple thrusts." These "multiple thrusts" generated more enemy confusion and served to disguise LTC Abrams' task force as the main effort. As long as the two units supported the main effort toward Arracourt, the company commanders made whatever decisions were necessary to accomplish their missions and thus support COL Clarke's intent.¹⁴

The next rapidly changing situation was reported by LTC Abrams' task force and observed by COL Clarke, who flew over the battlefield in his small airplane. As the CCA neared Chateau-Salins, increased artillery fire from the town fueled COL Clarke's suspicion that a larger German unit occupied the town. CCA did not want to fight Germans defending a built-up area. So, as September 13th drew to a close, CCA — following one of its accustomed drills at the close of a march — moved into a coil formation that provided a 360-degree defense. As units arrived in the laager, they immediately assumed an assigned place within the perimeter under the watchful eye of the CCA executive officer. Follow-on units of the CCA, under the charge of CCA staff, assumed the same formation. The field trains beat off German patrols with internal resources without weakening the main effort. CCA maintained tempo even as maneuver slowed in hours of limited visibility. To maintain relentless pressure on the Germans, three battalions of CCA artillery fired onto every suspected enemy attack position or assembly area.¹⁵

As the CCA trains closed up to and resupplied the main body on 14 September, increased artillery fire from Chateau-Salins confirmed a decision by 4th AD commander, General John "P" Wood, to bypass the town. Task Force Abrams left the main road, taking an indirect route through heavy forests to reach the CCA objective of Arracourt. The stress and strain of the previous two days continued to prevail over German units as Task Force Abrams overran more units, to include the headquarters of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division. Even blown bridges did not slow the tempo of the advance, as reconnaissance assets of the CCA simply found alternate crossing points. All these events occurred under the observation of COL Clarke without units having to ask his permission or halt to await decisions from "higher."

On 14 September, CCA seized its objective in and around the high ground at Arracourt. It did not settle down to await German efforts to regain the initiative. Units from the different task forces fanned out from Arracourt to continue harassing and paralyzing the German command, and affected a link-up with CCB, moving up from the south. These roaming units always made certain that CCA's artillery could effectively support them as they at-



A 37th Tank Battalion crew gets a few moments rest near Chateau Salins on September 26, 1944. This town had been bypassed in the drive toward Arracourt.

tacked German units, and did not go outside the artillery's range.¹⁶

To top off the training and the effective leadership that made the exploitation by CCA seem easy, it was the 4th Armored Division commander, MG Wood, who created CCA's climate of success. During all phases of the CCA advance, General Wood's command style of trust promoted rapid decisions, enabling the commanders at combat command and task force level to decide a course of action "up front," without awaiting permission. General Wood pressed his corps commander, General Manton S. Eddy, to employ the entire division in the exploitation. Failing this, he pushed both commands toward reuniting the division's combat power at Arracourt. During the operation, General Wood pushed reinforcements to further CCA's exploitation, and did not interfere with the decisions made "on the ground" by subordinate commanders.¹⁷

The commanders of both the division and combat command did not rest on the laurels won with the encirclement of Nancy. They immediately looked beyond Arracourt, proposed the seizure of Saarbrücken, and continued to focus on how to defeat and destroy the enemy.¹⁸ This was exactly what the Germans feared. No reserves were present to shore up their tattered front.

Unfortunately, the designated focus of effort stopped with 4th Armored Division and the tactical level of war. The

corps commander, General Eddy, needed to eliminate bypassed Germans and tidy up his flanks, so he stopped the forward movement of the armored division.¹⁹ Thus the Germans regained the initiative and did not give up until November. The fault cannot rest with General Eddy, for General Patton ordered attacks across the entire front of the 3d Army, and stretched its limited resources so no success could be exploited. Patton's 3d Army strategy reflected General Eisenhower's broad front policy — a policy that accepted no risk and took away scarce resources to feed the British army's lackluster advance into Belgium and Holland.²⁰

Several valuable lessons from this dramatic operation still apply. The advent of digital technology intensifies the need to practice maneuver warfare. Future conflict pits our smaller but more expensive forces against numerically larger but slower-reacting adversaries. We will likely be operating over vast distances. Maneuver-oriented operations, such as the exploitation from the Dieulouard bridgehead, must become commonplace in order to limit politically unacceptable casualties and end conflicts quickly. Units that find themselves fighting widely dispersed, to avoid strikes by enemy nuclear and chemical weapons, must be able to come together as D Troop, D/37 Armor, CCA, and CCB massed around Arracourt. They must be prepared to destroy high value enemy targets pinpointed by our vast intelligence-gather-



LTC Abrams, at left, with LTC Harold Cohen, CO of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion.

ing systems and relayed by digital technology, or move quickly to further exploit an enemy weakness. As units “fight to move,” commanders, through communications links, will have to make rapid decisions. Units will have to be well trained and capable of executing drills that will destroy enemy units surprised by our unexpected approach.²¹

Today, the Army practices antiquated warfare (e.g., the massed division wedges employed during DESERT STORM). We must change to bring tactical and operational doctrine in line with newly created technology.²² In order to achieve the kind of cohesion that laid the foundation for CCA’s teamwork, the Army must drastically change its personnel system and policies. We need to promote stability, instead of the constant turmoil and careerism that accompany frequent rotations. When officers are assigned in keeping with their talents and character traits, the result will be units such as CCA.²³

Given our “come-as-you-are-now” warfighting situation, the Army does not have two years to train units to be as proficient as Combat Command A.

Finally, to create maneuver tacticians, the Army must eliminate the zero defects mentality that leaders of weak character inflict on subordinates. The current system works against every value that sustained COL Clarke’s and LTC Abrams’ success in warfare. It is not likely that we will face as incompetent an opponent as we did in our last

conflict, and even less likely that next time we will have the time to “learn on the job.”

Notes

¹Major Dean A. Nowowiejski, “Achieving Digital Destruction: Challenges for the M1A2 Task Force,” *ARMOR*, Jan-Feb 1995, p. 21.

²William S. Lind, *The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare*, Presidio Press, 1993, p. 7.

³Dr. Christopher R. Gabel, *The Lorraine Campaign: An Overview, September-October 1944*, Combat Studies Institute, February 1985, p. 14.

⁴Gabel, pp. 16-17.

⁵Dr. Christopher R. Gabel, *The 4th Armored Division in the Encirclement of Nancy*, Combat Studies Institute, April 1986, pp. 13-14.

⁶Commanders and Staff of Combat Command A, 4th Armored Division, U.S. Army, *The Establishment and Defense of the Nancy Bridgehead*, Military History-Battle Analysis, Combat Studies Institute, 1994, p. Lsn 3-2-19.

⁷Gabel, *Encirclement of Nancy*, p. 14.

⁸Headquarters Department of the Army, Field Manual 71-2, p. 3-45.

⁹Gabel, *Encirclement of Nancy*, p. 14.

¹⁰Lind, p. 8.

¹¹Gabel, *Encirclement of Nancy*, p. 14.

¹²Lind, pp. 12-13.

¹³Commanders and Staff of CCA, p. Lsn 3-2-25.

¹⁴Lind, p. 14.

¹⁵Commanders and Staff of CCA, p. Lsn. 3-2-26.

¹⁶Gabel, *Encirclement of Nancy*, p. 16.

¹⁷Gabel, *Encirclement of Nancy*, pp. 5 and 15.

¹⁸Lind, p. 12.

¹⁹Gabel, p. 17.

²⁰Gabel, p. 33.

²¹Lieutenant Colonel Mark P. Hertling, “The Battle of Oom Chalouba, 17 June 2008,” *ARMOR*, Jan-Feb 1995, p. 34.

²²Hertling, p. 34.

²³Lind, p. 14.

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