



HIGHWAY NO. 5 WHICH RUNS NORTH AND SOUTH FROM the central Luzon plain to Aparri on the northern coast goes through a narrow valley separating heavily wooded, steep, razor-backed ridges. The narrowest portion of the valley is the Balete Pass sector of the upper Cagayan Valley. It would be hard to find terrain more admirably suited for defense and the Jap figured that if he could hold us there all would not be lost. We were the 25th Infantry Division.

Our tactics were to climb astride the north-south ridges flanking the highway, build our supply roads to the forward elements, and advance along the ridge. However, when the Japs located our troops and discovered our direction of attack they would mass all their strength along the ridge line in an effort to halt our progress. The ridges were not level along the top but were broken by a series of small knolls superimposed on the ridge tops. The Japs would defend these knolls until we kicked them off. Then they would drop into the steep ravines which flanked the saddles between knolls and harass our flanks as we passed through. However, once we gained possession of the high ground, it was much easier to fight downhill. We killed more Nips, too, in cleaning out the ravines. That way we could either seal up their caves or catch them out of their holes. Maneuver was extremely limited because of the steepness of the ravines extending from the ridge line. Almost invariably we were forced to attack in column on an extremely narrow front. Since the number of men we could use on our front was limited (usually we attacked with only one platoon on the whole battalion front) we had to mass a tremendous concentration of firepower in front of our spearheads. This we did with artillery, mortars, and tanks.

To escape our fire, the Japs put their living quarters on the reverse slopes of the knolls and in the precipitous ravines. They would dig caves extending into the sides and then curving to the right and left for complete protection. To meet our attack they would move out of the caves into firing positions on the knoll where they had previously prepared a system of pillboxes, bunkers, and spider holes mutually supporting and connected by a honeycomb of trenches. Rooting them out of these positions was a slow and painful business.

After a terrific fight the 3d Battalion of the 27th Infantry had advanced to a position just short of the highest knoll on what we called "Woody Ridge" and the Japs called "Myoki Yama." This knoll, the highest point in the entire sector, was such a small, insignificant looking piece of ground that we referred to it as the "Pimple." The Pimple, small as it was, was loaded with dynamite. If anyone attempted to stick his head over the crest he was greeted by a crescendo of machine-gun, rifle, 150mm., 90mm. and knoll mortar fire. Direct artillery fire from another ridge on our right made things even more miserable.

The opposing positions were within grenade range of each other and yet both were in defilade from each other. For protection our men constructed covered bunkers rivaling the long prepared earthworks of the Japs.

This then was the situation when my battalion, the 1st, was ordered to relieve the 3d, seize and secure the Pimple and continue to attack 500 yards to the north. The 2d Battalion was to follow the 1st along the ridge line for 300 yards, then cut northwest to what we thought was the commanding ridge of the whole area. Possession of that ridge

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would break the Japanese main line of resistance. Subsequently it turned out just that way. But before we got there we had a lot of fighting to do.

Bulldozer Cuts A Trail

To take the Pimple we knew we needed plenty of fire support. It had already been battered by aerial bombardment and artillery but we were too close in for either now, and besides, the artillery was needed for jobs farther forward. Therefore, we would have to depend upon our own mortars and M-4 medium tanks for support. But, as we knew only too well, tanks are sensitive to terrain. We had to build a road clear to the crest of the knoll and even then we were not sure the tanks could climb the steep hill. But it was certainly worth a try. We got an armored bulldozer and started working. It cut a trail through and we called in the tanks. We had three of them; two were to go up on the Pimple and one would stay in reserve until one of the three was disabled or out of ammunition. Company B was to follow the tanks and protect them from Jap suicide attacks with "plunger" mines.

The tanks labored forward up the narrow bulldozer road to the crest. The Japs knew that something was in the wind and dropped mortar fire; however, most of it passed harmlessly overhead and exploded in the draw behind the tanks. The first tank reached the end of the road almost at the crest of the knoll, but stalled when it reached a lip projecting from the crest. The lip wasn't more than a foot high, but it was enough to keep the tank from going over the top. The tracks started spinning in the soft dirt. It was evident that the tank couldn't make it over by itself.

The bulldozer crawled up behind the tank and pushed it over the top as both engines roared and sputtered. The tank maneuvered into position and fired its 75 and machine guns point-blank at the Jap positions on the Pimple. As fast as Japs crawled out of their foxholes to fire at the tank our BAR and rifles cut them down. The 75s not only knocked out the enemy's pillboxes, but also blasted away the undergrowth and camouflage in front so that they could be plainly seen. After the first tank was set the bulldozer pushed the next tank up. Together the two tanks and Company B's riflemen methodically plastered the area. Still some of the Japs were dug in deep enough to stay alive and hold their positions.

Foothold on the Pimple

The afternoon wore on. It became time to dig in for the night. Company B had a precarious foothold on the Pimple, and while we had killed plenty of Japs we had only advanced about 75 yards. Jap mortar fire dropped on Company B as it dug in. There were several casualties. Plainly our position was not too favorable. We knew from experience that it was better to hold the ground we had taken rather than withdraw and attack it again the next day. Accordingly, I ordered the company commander of Company B to hold this position at all costs. He held it.

Any normal force would have known what was coming the next day and would have withdrawn from the knoll. But the Japs are not normal in that respect and they stayed where they were, as we knew they would. Therefore, we passed Company A through Company B and used the same tactics as the day before.

We kept two tanks firing constantly from the hill all day. As soon as one tank fired all of its ammunition we replaced it with another. At the end of the day the knoll was secured. We had squeezed the Pimple.

The broken terrain and the steepness of the downgrade kept the tanks immobilized and so we sent an infantry platoon down the knoll. They met light resistance, cleaned out two pillboxes, killed eight Japs and finally dug in on the next small knoll to the north. We called this knoll the "Wart."

In two days we had gained only about 150 yards, but we had secured the highest point on Woody Ridge, killed 67 Japs including six officers, and had destroyed or captured 48 rifles, three machine guns plus a vast amount of small arms and knee mortar ammunition.

We sent out a patrol down the nose extending from the Wart. This patrol contacted the enemy. We sent another patrol to the east to attempt to reach our next objective, a small ridge we called the "Elbow." It also made contact. Another patrol in the saddle to the northeast made contact too. The enemy seemed to be everywhere. To add to our problems the Japs covered the Wart with unusually accurate (for the Japs) sniper fire, and occasionally dropped mortar fire on our positions. Then rain fell, turning the supply road into a muddy morass. We had been in action for thirty days in the roughest kind of mountains. We were short of men and those we had were tired—but not too tired to finish the job.

Infantry Takes Over

The engineers extended the road in spite of the mud, and we were again able to bring up the tanks. In addition to an M-4 we brought up a flame-throwing tank. But the tanks were not able to advance beyond the Wart and infantry had to clear the way without direct support from the tanks. Since we knew from our patrol reports that the enemy had all-around defense of Elbow Hill, we decided to attack directly across the saddle to the northeast. A platoon from Company B attacked with 60mm. and 81mm. mortar support. It was repulsed. Another platoon from Company B was sent to the east on the right of the saddle to envelop the enemy's left flank while the platoon on the saddle and a platoon of Company C on the left flank of Company B pushed forward in a holding attack. The platoon on the right had defilade part of the way to their objective, but their route was a tangled mass of fallen trees and undergrowth churned up by our mortar and artillery fire and progress was painfully slow. Three different approaches were tried and on the third the platoon knocked out the machine gun that was barring the way, advanced, and dug in on the reverse slope of the Elbow.

We immediately reinforced the platoon with the rest of Company B (each company had but two rifle platoons at the time), and all of Company A with the exception of a small holding force on the Wart. But the Elbow was far from secure. The Japs constantly harassed us with small arms and mortars while we were digging and they seemed determined to hold this portion of their main line of resistance.

The next day the fire from the Jap positions was heavier. The enemy must have reinforced his position and enemy documents captured later told us we were right. We sent a

patrol from Company C in a wide sweep to the east around the enemy's left flank, but this approach was impractical. It would have been extremely costly to attack the position frontally without tank support, and it was evident that it would be even more difficult than before to use tanks. First we would have to build a road to the forward positions in order to get the tanks into firing positions. The grade was considerably steeper than before and it would be more difficult to keep the dozer in defilade. After a preliminary reconnaissance, the engineer officer said that he didn't believe it could be done. We decided to try it anyway. The armored dozer was being repaired so we had to use one without an armored cab. On its first attempt to make a side cut it progressed about 25 yards along the east slope of the Wart when it drew sniper fire. We started again on another cut deeper into the ravine below the first cut and in better defilade. This time we had better luck. There was one small stretch of open ground through which we had to pass before reaching defilade again and we screened the movement of the dozer with white phosphorus smoke grenades. When the dozer got about two-thirds of the distance to the Elbow it stopped and the engineer officer reported that the path was blocked by two large trees. We found a way around them and finally, late in the afternoon, the road was completed to just short of the crest. The tank platoon commander inspected the road and said that he could make it the rest of the way. Once the tanks were up there, we thought our troubles would be over. We didn't realize how mistaken we were.

The plan for the following day was to have one platoon of Company A, supported by the first tank, attack directly to the northeast from their position at the end of the bulldozer road. The other platoon of A, following the second tank, would branch off the road in the saddle and move up the west slope of the Elbow. The attack was to be preceded by concentrations of 60mm. and 81mm. mortar fire on the reverse slope of the Elbow.

Japs Are Reinforced

We were confident the next morning that we would make short work of the Elbow. But somewhat at variance with this idea was the amount of Japanese fire that greeted us. They had evidently been reinforced again, because the volume of fire was greater than any we had heard since we had started the operation. Our troops were under cover, so the Japs could not see them or the tanks, but they fired by the sound of the tank motors. This fire, however, was inef-

fective. The first tank neared the top of the Elbow when we had our old trouble; the tracks started spinning and the tank shuddered to a halt. We called for the bulldozer again. The bulldozer operator didn't think much of the idea of sitting in an open cab pushing the tank up the crest in the face of the small-arms fire we were getting. We told him that the tank would protect him and that we would cover him with rifle fire, so he gave it a try. He pushed the tank up to where it could move under its own power and stopped. The tank moved up another twenty feet and belled up on a large rock. We pulled the tank back, brought up demolitions, and blasted the rock away. The tank then chugged its way to the very top of the crest. Here it was stopped by a tangle of fallen trees. This time the tank backed off and swept a path through by firing its 75 at the obstructions. Finally the tank roared over the top of the blasted logs and moved into position. Bullets ricocheted off the armor but she was finally at a place where she could give more than she took.

Our Objective Was Secured

Meanwhile, the second tank had reached the bottom of the west slope of the Elbow. There it struck a mine which blew off a track. It was still able to fire, however, and protected our left flank. We got five tanks up there during the course of the day. Another tank got stuck along the north side of the Elbow but there were no casualties. Toward the end of the afternoon we had fire superiority. The Jap fire slowed up and taking advantage of the lull the right platoon of Company A was ordered forward ahead of the tanks, which had been stopped by a large fallen tree. The platoon moved out, throwing white phosphorus grenades into the holes and sealing caves. Just before dark they had the area thoroughly cleared out and were digging in. Our objective was secured.

While the battle for the Elbow was going on, the Battalion cut back to the left of our positions on the "Wart" and knifed through to their ridge. The enemy offered little opposition. He had failed to occupy the most important terrain feature on the ridge. In neglecting this place he was continuing to reinforce his doomed forces on Woody Ridge. He had allowed himself to be feinted out of position. In extending our line of communications so far we had increased our supply problems but not insurmountably. Supplies were dropped from the air and carried by Filipino carrying parties. Our most difficult problem was that of evacuation. It took seven hours to evacuate casualties over the precipitous jungle choked, slippery mountain trail, but it was done. The enemy couldn't stop us now.



O, the Piping Days of Peace

I detest war. It spoils armies.—GRAND DUKE CONSTANTINE OF RUSSIA (1820).