

Howitzer Firing

—With Kentucky Windage

By Cpl. Raymond Carlson, FA*

THE SETTING

At 1100 hours on 7 February 1945, the 6th Infantry Division captured the little town of Munoz, in the Province of Nueva Ecija, Luzon, P. I., thereby ending a bitter seven-day attack against one of the toughest Japanese strongholds encountered by American forces on Luzon up to that time. Subsequent events in the Luzon campaign, which on 9 January 1945 began to reclaim the largest of the Philippine Islands, showed Munoz to be one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome.

Munoz was strategically important as a bastion of defense for Japanese lines of supply and communication on Highway 5 leading to San Jose and mountain regions to



A view of the battleground after the battle shows Jap tanks smoldering on the highway.

the north, and a safeguard on the escape route on the San Jose—Rizal Highway between Manila and the Cagayan Valley. With the thoroughness that characterizes him, the enemy transformed a sleepy barrio 1,200 yards in length and 500 in width into a defiant fortress, employing adroit defensive tactics and installations. Tanks with 37-mm and 47-mm turret guns, motor-drawn 47-mm AT and 75-mm and 105-mm guns were dug in and camouflaged to defy both ground and air observation, and were placed to give maximum effective fire and mutual support in defense of the stronghold. Utilizing the cover and the flat terrain, which was all to his advantage, the enemy installed machine guns and automatic weapons in such a way as to lay a blazing front of fire on attacking parties coming upon the town from any direction. With the stubbornness that also characterizes his actions, the enemy held firm for over a week despite the air, artillery, and mortar bombardment hurled upon him, and despite the constant infantry assault waves which attacked him. His losses in manpower and material were appalling.

For the defense of Munoz the enemy had committed the 365th Independent Infantry Battalion, 103d Division; 8th Battery, 2nd Mobile Artillery; Anti-Tank Battalion, 2nd Armored Division; 6th Tank Regiment (less 2nd Company); and one platoon, 2nd Armored Engineers. The seven-day battle of Munoz, with the spectacular artillery-tank battle on the Munoz—San Jose highway, resulted in 1,527 enemy dead of the 1,935 committed, and in the complete destruction of the following: 48 medium tanks (with either 37-mm or 47-mm guns), 4 light tanks, 4 armored cars, 2 tracked prime movers, 41 trucks, 1 American half-track, 15 sedans, 1 station wagon, 4 105-mm howitzers, and 16 47-mm AT guns.

The battle began at 0730 31 January when Company "E," 20th Infantry, after a brief artillery preparation, attacked northeast from a position astride the railroad (see Diagram No. 1) and moved forward 200 yards without opposition. There the advance was halted by blazing fire from automatic weapons. Other units of the 20th Infantry were committed 1 February. The deployment of these units during the next six days is shown in Diagram No. 1.

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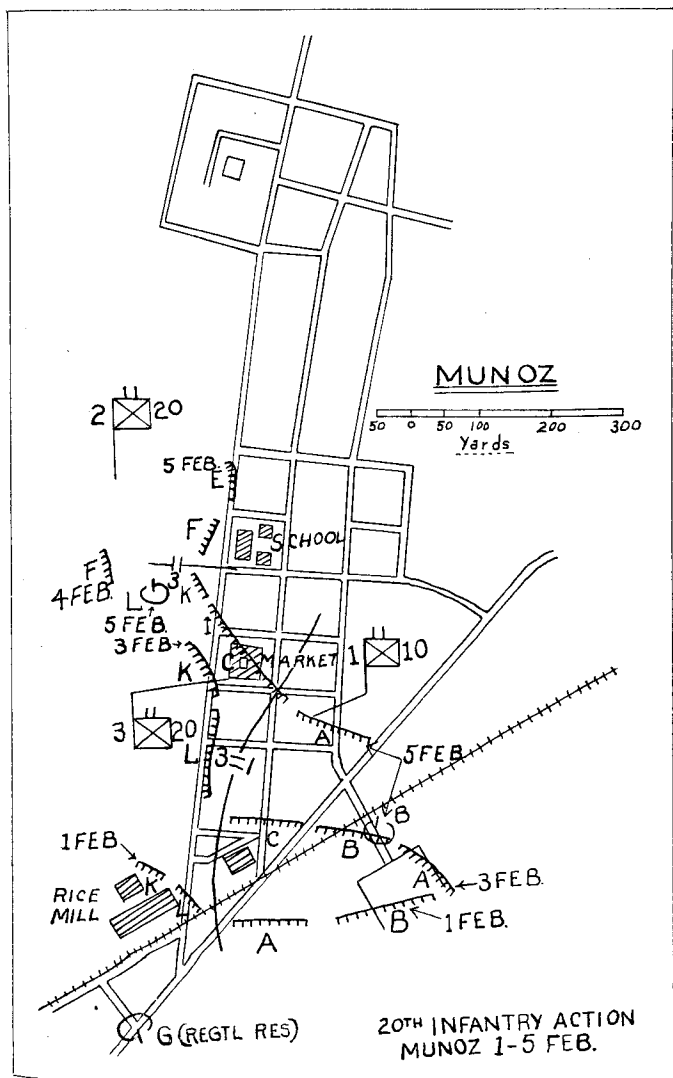


Diagram No. 1

While the 20th Infantry was moving against Munoz, elements of the 1st Infantry and the 63d Infantry were securing Highway 5 between Munoz and San Jose, their mission being the eventual seizure of San Jose.

The 51st Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm howitzer) was in direct support of the 20th Infantry at Munoz. The 53d Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm howitzer) was in direct support of the 63d Infantry. The 80th Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm howitzer) was in general support. The 191st Field Artillery Group was assigned by I Corps the mission of reinforcing the 6th Infantry Division, in operations against Munoz and San Jose.

The terrific pounding administered by the infantry, artillery, and mortar units on the enemy at Munoz gradually wore down his resistance. In an attempt to salvage what he could, he began a retreat at 0330 7 February on Highway 5 in the direction of San Jose.

The Japanese survivors of Munoz, in the next five hours after they began their retreat, were destroyed. Daybreak that morning saw the fleeing tank and armored column blown to shapeless smoking debris, littering Highway 5 for several miles between Munoz and San Jose. The battle that morning between the enemy tank column and two tractor-drawn field artillery battalions is a story in itself, and a fitting climax to the battle of Munoz.



After the tanks were repulsed, the artillerymen proceeded to destroy the attacking column.

DETAILS

When the enemy column withdrew from Munoz the 53d Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm tractor-drawn) and the 80th Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm tractor-drawn) were in position 3.5 miles from Munoz on Highway 5. These two battalions, in direct and general support of the 63d Infantry, had taken these positions in a flanking movement on 3 February to by-pass Munoz and attack San Jose. During this movement the field artillery battalions, following the infantry, had to push their way by bulldozer through most difficult terrain, including rice paddies, irrigation ditches, and swamps. Throughout the movement the battalions were frequently under enemy machine gun, mortar, and artillery fire, and were at all times subject to tank attack. In position, and continuing their missions, they continually fought off *kirikomi tai* (suicide penetration unit) attacks by Japanese infantry.

The 80th occupied a 400-yard front adjoining Highway 5; the battalion area extended approximately 200 yards in depth. Diagram No. 2 shows battery positions and machine guns on the perimeter. Service Battery of the 80th bordered

the highway on the Munoz side. Batteries "B" and "C" were also in position along the highway, with "A" in position behind "C." The howitzers of the 80th were laid in the direction of San Jose. Directly behind the 80th Field Artillery Battalion the 53d Field Artillery Battalion was in position between the barrio of Asta and Highway 5.

Both the 53d and the 80th Field Artillery Battalions maintained alert and aggressive perimeter defenses, adequately armed with .50-cal. machine guns, light machine guns, grenades, bazookas, and automatic weapons. Japanese infiltration patrols had since the beginning of the Luzon campaign been a constant threat to the security of the field artillery battalions of the 6th Infantry Division. Each battalion commander set up his own perimeter defense, maintaining adequate security of his unit behind his own weapons manned by artillery personnel. Night attacks

by small Japanese raiding parties were an old story to these battalions. The Maffin Bay and Sansapor campaigns in New Guinea, as well as the Luzon campaign, had demonstrated the need of each battalion to maintain its own security and be ready at all times for any eventuality. During the training period at Sansapor prior to the Luzon landings, Brig. Gen.

C. E. Hurdis (then Commanding General, 6th Division Artillery and now Maj. Gen. Hurdis, Commanding General, 6th Infantry Division) had inaugurated an intensive program to train all personnel from cooks to computers to be able to man machine guns, bazookas, grenades, and automatic weapons against these organized suicide attacks by the Nips. This program, carried out in meticulous detail by the battalion commanders, paid off in dividends many times during the Luzon campaign and particularly in the tank-artillery battle following the enemy's evacuation of Munoz.

At 070400 the perimeter of Battery "C," 53d Field, reported 20 Japs in the vicinity but out of firing range. This was probably a reconnaissance party which had left Munoz before the exodus of tanks and armored vehicles. A few minutes thereafter a field artillery observer with an infantry unit between Asta and Munoz notified the battalion of the approach of the tank column. The battalion was alerted.

While the 53d was being alerted, the perimeter of the 80th Field Artillery Battalion notified the battalion of the approach of unidentified tanks. This battalion was alerted. A few minutes later the leading tanks of the fleeing tank column passed the first perimeter posts on Highway 5. The first two tanks passed unmolested because identification was not certain. By the time the first two tanks reached

the Asta—Highway 5 intersection they were taken under fire by the perimeter posts operating .50-cal. MGs. The first tank cleared the battalion position, only to be destroyed further down the road by an infantry road block. So intense was the MG fire from the perimeter posts that the second tank burst into flames before reaching the San

Jose side of the perimeter. Destruction of this tank caused a road block, forcing following tanks to scurry for safety off and beside the road. One .50-cal. machine gun position was overrun by a tank and destroyed, but the crew dodged the tank, reoccupied their position, and continued their firing.

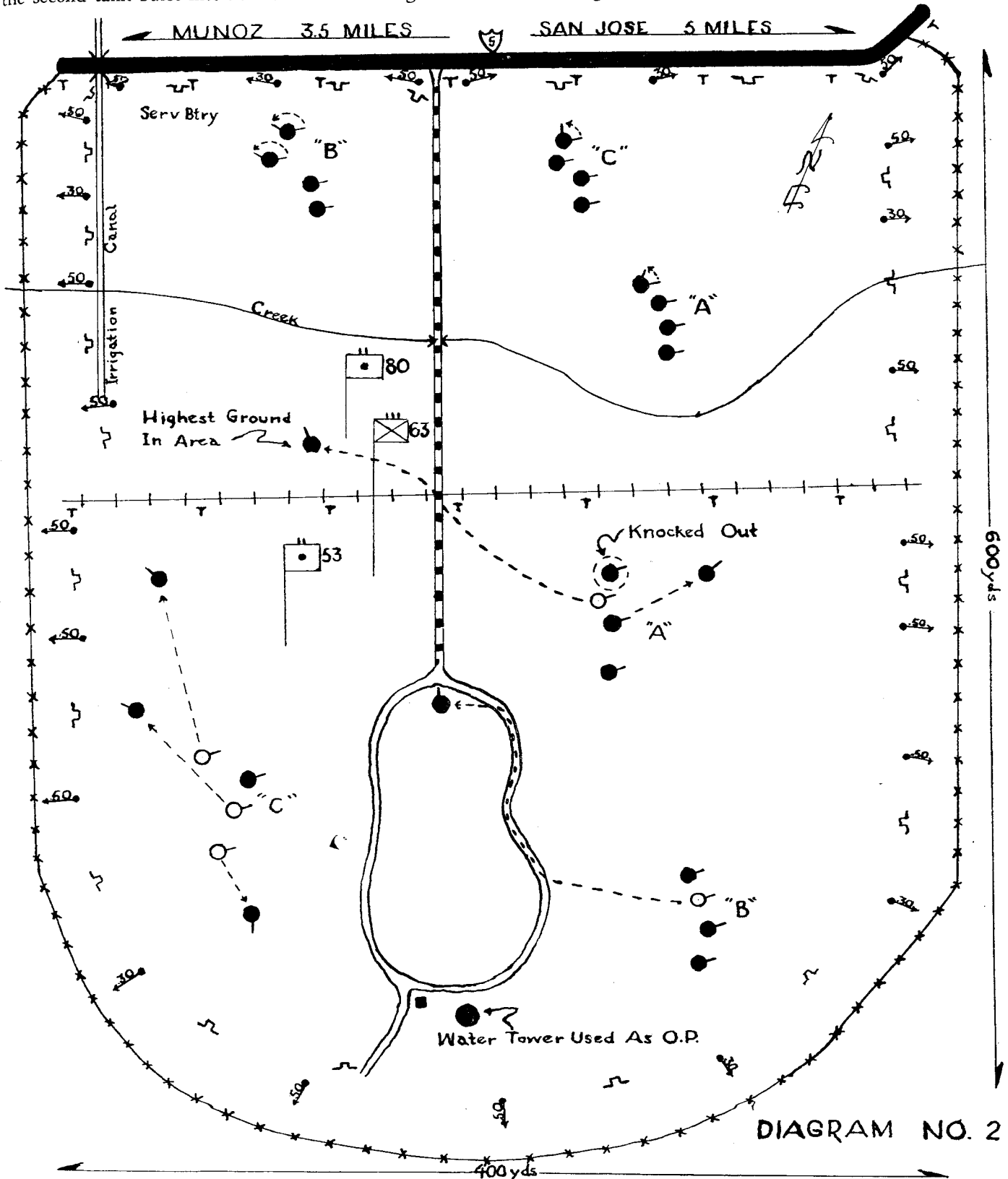


DIAGRAM NO. 2

* * * Single Strand Barb Wire, 6" Above Ground, 30' To Front Of MG's
 ~ 3 To 4 Man Perimeter Posts ~ Dusk To Daylight ~ Total No. Men, 75
 ~ MG's Manned 24 Hours ~ Total No. Men, 72

Enemy infantrymen who had been riding on the accompanying personnel carriers and on tanks dismounted and attacked the positions of the artillery battalions. These attacks were conducted vigorously and with determination. The enemy used machine guns, grenades, and small arms in concerted efforts to pierce the perimeter. Fire from these weapons swept the battalion positions, presenting a constant and hazardous threat to the lives and safety of the personnel and to the security of the howitzers. Neither the

so placed to take advantage of a slightly elevated mound, permitting it to fire over the positions.

While the 53d Field was moving howitzers to more advantageous positions, the 80th Field was doing the same. Two howitzers of Battery "B" were moved to fire on Highway 5 in the direction of Munoz, while one howitzer of Battery "A" was aimed directly at the highway east of the battalion position. Howitzers of Battery "C" did not have to be changed.



Another view of the cluttered road.

enemy's fire power nor his *banzai* attacks prevailed. The artillerymen, protecting their positions, drove the enemy back, nullified his fire power, and assumed the offensive by sending bazooka teams by infiltration to attack the enemy tanks. These bazooka teams scored direct hits on two tanks.

It became apparent to the commanders of the artillery battalions that when daylight heightened visibility, the firing power on the perimeter would not be strong enough to cope with the 47-mm turret guns and the 47-mm and 37-mm antitank guns that could be brought to bear on their positions. Accordingly, they ordered a shifting of their howitzers to be in position at daybreak to bring direct fire on the hostile armored units.

The 53d Field Artillery Battalion (see Diagram No. 2) moved one howitzer from Battery "A" across the battalion area to a position within the area of Headquarters Battery, 80th Field. This howitzer was pointed to fire on tanks along Highway 5 west of the 80th's position. Howitzers of Battery "C," 53d Field, originally laid to fire on San Jose, were turned to fire on the road west toward Munoz. This maneuver was designed to put direct howitzer fire on any tanks which might leave the highway and try encircling movements on the west side of the battalions. A howitzer from Battery "B," 53d Field, was moved to a position near the intersection of the railroad and the Asta—Highway 5 road, adjoining the CP of the 63d Infantry Regiment. This howitzer would protect the road, should the enemy tank column turn down it, and also would be in position to fire on the main highway. No. 2 howitzer of Battery "A," 53d Field, was moved to fire on the road on the eastern boundaries of the 80th Field. The howitzer of the 53d which was moved into the 80th Field's position was

talions was accomplished speedily, efficiently, and without mishap, in spite of the continuous small arms and machine gun fire being directed by the enemy into the battalion positions from outside the perimeter.

At first light of day the tanks opened fire on the battalion positions at point-blank ranges of 50 to 200 yards, with machine guns and turret-mounted 37-mm's and 47-mm's. This fire was intense and sustained. Shells and shell fragments screamed through the battalion positions, wrecking materiel, ripping tents, and causing several deaths and casualties. One howitzer of the 53d Field received a direct hit which resulted in the death of one man and the wounding of the entire gun crew as well as of the battery executive. Four others in the 53d Field were wounded by another shell burst.

Gun crews and personnel responsible for the protection and operation of the howitzers had little or no protection. Yet with courage and coolness, those who manned the howitzers of the two artillery battalions functioned efficiently and smoothly. Point-blank fire was met with point-blank fire. Bazookas, machine guns, and howitzers returned the force of the enemy fire, with the firing range less than 300 yards. At such short range it was necessary for the 80th Field to fire unfuzed projectiles. One of these clipped the turret off an enemy tank at a range of approximately 250 yards; the turret was hurled far off the highway into an adjoining rice paddy.

This was not howitzer firing with the sharp computing methods of a fire direction center. This was not howitzer firing with Cub liaison observation. This was not howitzer firing with forward observers reporting carefully and accurately the effect of each round fired.

This was howitzer firing fast, furious, and point-blank. This was howitzer firing at targets that required rapid and effective engagement because the targets themselves were dangerous armored fighting machines hurling broadsides of fire into the artillery positions. This was howitzer firing at targets that were powerful and well-protected instruments for inflicting death, damage and destruction. This was howitzer firing with Kentucky windage.

The battle lasted approximately an hour, during which there was neither faltering nor hesitation on the part of the men and officers of the two artillery battalions engaged in such close and mortal combat with the enemy. A battery commander of the 80th Field and four enlisted men were killed, while nine enlisted men were wounded. The 53d Field suffered one officer killed in action and seven enlisted men wounded.

When the last enemy gun was silenced it was found that the 53d and 80th Field Artillery Battalions had destroyed six enemy medium tanks, five light tanks, ten personnel carriers, and two towed 105-mm howitzers, with prime movers. 119 enemy dead were counted around the tanks, and an additional 120 who had been killed by rifle or machine

gun fire from the perimeters or by patrols cleaning up survivors around the battalion positions. Not a single tank escaped. This abortive attack and its repulsion by the two artillery battalions and other elements of the division eliminated the Japanese 2nd Armored Division as an effective fighting unit.

The loss to the enemy was incalculable. The loss of this part of the 2nd Japanese Armored Division at Munoz and in the tank-artillery battle the morning of 7 February was perhaps the greatest single loss he has suffered in men and materiel in so short a period in the Philippine Campaign. The loss of this strongly reinforced armored division greatly reduced his aggressiveness and practically ended his ability to protect the vital supply and communication lines between Manila and strong garrisons in northern Luzon.

Before noon, 7 February, while the tanks and vehicles of the vanquished enemy armored column were still smoldering by the wayside, the 53d and 80th Field Artillery Battalions were packed, bag and baggage, for displacement to vicinity of Rizal to continue their mission in direct and general support of advancing and attacking infantry elements of the 6th Infantry Division.

“NOW THEY CAN BE TOLD”

Maj. Edward A. Raymond has identified for us a number of units whose work has been recounted in earlier JOURNALS. These are all in addition to those published at page 431 of our issue for July, 1944.

Under Fire (page 891, December, 1943) dealt with the 58th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Lt. Col. McBride), the 62nd Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Lt. Col. R. E. Conder), and the 65th Armored Field Artillery Battalion.

Some Battle Lessons (page 104, February, 1944) were learned by the 175th Field Artillery Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. J. E. Kelly and a part of the 34th Infantry Division.

There were three phases to *As Skirmishers* (page 507, August, 1944). At Borjotoum, Battery A of the 175th Field Artillery Battalion was involved. The 58th Armored Field Artillery Battalion's work at Brolo was described. In the Sele-Calore phase the 158th Field Artillery Battalion (105s

commanded by Lt. Col. R. D. Funk) was engaged, as well as the previously-identified 155s of the 189th.

Under Lt. Col. W. E. Tardy the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion kept busy *Brassing Off Kraut* (page 694, October, 1944).

T.N.T. Wholesale was delivered by the 83d Chemical Battalion under Lt. Col. W. S. Hutchinson, Jr. (page 781, November, 1944).

The 158th Field Artillery Battalion fought in the *Caves of Anzio* (page 851, December, 1944).

A *Combination Mount for Dual .50s* (page 110, February, 1945) was developed by the 189th Field Artillery Battalion.

Both the 158th and 189th Field Artillery Battalions participated in *A Fight* (page 156, March, 1945).

Lt. Col. R. T. Nicholls and the 15th Field Artillery Observation Battalion performed admirably *With Carbine and Transit* (page 290, May, 1945).

DUAL-PURPOSE RANGES

In requesting approval of certain areas as firing ranges for his unit, a battalion commander in Germany recently wrote his DivArty commander:

“It is planned to practice Battery Test I on Range ‘A’ with the battery position west of the river. This involves firing over the village of Fleck but it is deemed that such firing will be conducive to maintaining the present satisfactory discipline of the German civilians. Also, my C.P. is in Fleck, so short rounds will be viewed with great disfavor.”

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