

PARKER'S CROSSROADS: The ALAMO DEFENSE

By Sergeant First Class (Ret.) Richard Raymond III

Although the following article was written about our battalion, and is factually true, I can assure you that the Alamo was never on anybody's mind at the time. "Surviving" is the name of the game. We had no idea what we were to face when the showdown came.

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The following appeared in the August 1993 issue of the magazine "Field Artillery". It was written by Sgt. First Class (retired) Richard Raymond III. He won 2nd Place in the US Field Artillery Association's 1993 History Writing Contest with this article. He's a 1954 graduate of the US Naval Academy at Annapolis and served in the Marine Corps, discharged as a 1st Lt. in 1960. Eight years later, Sgt. 1st Class Raymond served with the National Guard Field Artillery units in Connecticut, North Carolina & Virginia. His experience with Field Artillery includes serving as Fire Direction Center Chief, A Battery, 1st Battalion, 113 Field Artillery, Norfolk, Virginia. His last assignment was as Brigade Intelligence Sergeant, 2nd Brigade, 29th Infantry Division in Bowling Green, Va., before he retired from the Army in 1990. He has published military history articles in "Soldiers" and "Army" magazines and won the US Army Forces Command "Fourth Estate" Award for military journalism in 1983.

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By Sergeant First Class (Ret.) Richard Raymond III

The tactical situation may require a rigid defense of a fixed position. Such a defense, if voluntarily adopted, requires the highest degree of tactical skill and leadership.

U S Army Field Service Regulations, 1939

In the forested hills of eastern Belgium stands the tiny hamlet of Baraque de Fraiture at the intersection of two good highways. To see this little clutch of buildings, one would hardly think that the red tide of war had ever washed over them. Yet this now-peaceful crossroads was the scene of fierce combat, one of the most heroic that ever graced the annals of American arms.

For in the winter of 1944, a skeleton headquarters and a bob-tailed, three gun battery of light howitzers, the forlorn remnant of a once potent 589th Field Artillery Battalion,

chugged wearily up to the junction under the command of Major Arthur C. Parker III. The battalion's mission was to organize and defend the crossroads when a great wave of Nazi armor and infantry had cracked the Allied Front, reaching north-westward toward the crossings of the Meuse River and the vital port of Antwerp. A dangerous split between the British and American armies was a real possibility.

For three 105mm howitzers to hold the outpost line is not a conventional assignment for a divisional battery and deserves explanation. They represented all that was left of a 12 gun battalion in direct support to the 422nd Infantry Regiment of the 106th "Golden Lion" Infantry Division. Their misfortune was to have been at the point of a great enemy offensive less than one week after arriving from training camps in England.

The Golden Lions had moved directly into foxholes and trenches vacated by the veteran 2nd Infantry Division, "man for man and gun for gun," as the orders put it. The relief went smoothly enough, but the division commander, Major General Alan W. Jones, was concerned about the exposed positions of his regiments and the extreme length of the line they were to occupy - nearly 22 miles.

Higher headquarters had called it a "Ghost Front" with little or no enemy activity, but Jones and his staff at once set about making the lines more secure. He had hoped to have a period of gradual workouts against the formidable "West Wall" before serious operations began in the spring, But on 16 December, Hitler's tanks rolled, and the Battle of the Bulge was on.

In a three day nightmare, Jones division was swamped and broken by powerful armor and infantry thrusts, and two of his three line regiments were surrounded and forced to surrender. The remainder felt lucky to be able to pull back to more defensible lines around St. Vith.

During the withdrawal, the 589th Field Artillery was ambushed and cut off, and most of the battalion, including its commander was captured. Only a handful from Headquarters Battery and the first three howitzers of A Battery escaped.

These were the guns that Major Parker - formerly battalion S3 but then acting commander - led into position around Baraque de Fraiture. But he meant to make a fight of it - Parker had elected to conduct an "Alamo Defense."

ALAMO DEFENSE

The Alamo Defense deserves serious study as an option for the commander of a force facing a greatly superior enemy, given a vital defensive mission and meager resources to sustain it. Though the historical precedent is obvious, this tactic is defined here as the rigid defense of a key position carried out to the utter destruction of the command with the objective of forcing the enemy to expend significant amounts of men, material and especially time, thereby enabling other friendly forces to regroup and fight elsewhere to better advantage. It's an act of gritty self-sacrifice.

This defense requires the utmost in leadership and tactical skill. It also demands rare moral courage and dazzling salesmanship to persuade other units and individuals to stay and join an underdog team - qualities Major Parker had in abundance.

The classic example of the Alamo Defense is the heroic stand in 480 BC of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans against the Persian hosts. (In truth, the fight at the Alamo might, with perfect justice, be called "Thermopylae Defense," but here it seems more appropriate to relate to American military tradition.)

There are four critical elements in the Alamo Defense. First, the chosen terrain is one on which the enemy can't readily bypass or push through the defending force. Second, this type of defense is assumed voluntarily when less drastic courses of action are available. Next, combat is maintained to the bitter end - no breakout or fighting withdrawal (except, perhaps, for a few who escape during the final collapse). Last, the correctness of the decision to make the Alamo Defense is confirmed by the outcome: other friendly forces used the time well and fought on to victory. For only the mystic, sublime faith in the rightness of their cause and the hope that their deaths will not go un-avenged can infuse the most rational soldiers with the spirit to carry such a black business to its conclusion.

At Thermopylae, the Spartans held a narrow cliff-side road and were immovable by the huge masses of Persians. Only when a Greek traitor informed King Darius of the existence of a goat path around the little army did a flanking column succeed in getting behind them. Perfectly sure of their fate, Leonidas and his men permitted their allies to withdraw and then fought to the last man.

In contrast to the rough terrain at Thermopylae, the Texans little fortress at the Alamo represented a psychological roadblock. Santa Anna, who boasted of being the "Napoleon of the West," could not, for his very pride's sake, simply march around San Antonio and press on to his true objective, Sam Houston's ragged army.

Houston, coolly logical, had ordered Col. William Travis to abandon the Alamo and blow up the magazine. The post was militarily indefensible, and to allow a whole battalion of splendid fighters to be trapped and destroyed was folly. Travis ignored the order, answering Santa Anna's call to surrender with a cannon shot. His men stood defiant to the end, inflicting fearful losses on Santa Anna's best troops.

Houston gained two precious weeks to discipline and train his army, and when he faced the Mexican dictator at San Jacinto, the Alamo ghosts marched with him. Travis had been right after all, and at the sight of the vengeful Texans, waving knives and hatchets and shrieking "Remember the Alamo," the Mexican army dissolved into a mob of terror stricken fugitives.

PARKER'S CROSSROADS

Major Parker's little band was a mixed force. In addition to his own 589th Artillery, he found or was sent some half-tracks with .50 caliber quad mounts, a few Armored Field Artillery observers, a tank destroyer platoon, one parachute infantry rifle squad, a cavalry reconnaissance section and, later one glider borne rifle company - less than 300 soldiers.

He clearly realized (as his higher headquarters did not) that he stood on critical terrain. Baraque de Fraiture stands at the crossing of the main north-south road from Bastogne through Houffalize to Liege with a good paved road westward from Vielsalm through La Roche. Moreover the Liege road was the exact boundary between the flank divisions of two corps, neither one able to hold the road in strength. Loss of the junction would permit

the Germans to move in either of three directions to flank or penetrate the First Army line. It could mean disaster.

Thus, at about 1600 hours on 20 December, Parker's forces went into position following what he considered to be competent orders from a higher authority to organize a strong-point and fire on approaching enemy forces. Initial supplies of rations, fuel and ammunition had been drawn at Vielsalm. Parker's force was ready for action.

So far, so good. But after several successful fire missions, Parker was ordered to displace northward to Bra. (In all fairness, the junction's importance also was initially overlooked by both the 3rd Armored and 82nd Airborne Divisions sharing that boundary. Only later, after much action, did it gain its tactical title of "Parker's Crossroads.")

The Major's decision to ignore the order-or, more subtly, to delay until execution became impossible-lifts this action into the ranks of intrepidity, above and beyond the call of duty. He seems to have reached the decision alone. Captain Arthur C. Brown, third ranking officer at the scene and the only firing battery commander to have escaped the earlier battalion ambush, wrote, "Major Parker was ordered to withdraw from this untenable position, but he delayed doing so because he probably sensed the importance of holding up the enemy at this point. Further, he did not want to leave the people from other outfits there by themselves (he did not give me a vote!). It wasn't long before we reached the time of no return, as we became surrounded ("My Longest Week," unpublished).

Parker knew what a powerful enemy armored and mechanized infantry force lay four miles west at Samree, for he had laid observed fire on it that morning. More armored noises were approaching up the road from the south, and his supply route through Regne to Vielsalm, some 11 miles east, was bare of support traffic. They were at the end of a very long limb.

The terrain around the crossroads is deceptively flat, though it stands on one of the highest elevations in the Ardennes, with broad open fields of fire in almost all directions. But two large stands of evergreen woods afford easily infiltrated, concealed routes of approach nearly down to the junction. Once an enemy cut the road north to Manhay only four miles to the rear, the crossroads became a trap - escape on foot through snow would have been extremely difficult and by vehicle on the road an impossibility. Parker meant to stay.

On the other hand, the deep snow and trees tended to canalize enemy movements, and the howitzers were laid for direct fire down the three roads: the roads to Samree, Houffalize and Vielsalm. Captain Brown had rejoined the battalion at Vielsalm and was put in charge of the guns.

The perimeter was dug in, howitzers and machine guns emplaced, mines laid in the road and observers and outposts linked to battalion headquarters in a stone barn about 100 meters from the junction. Not satisfied with this, Parker had gone to Fraiture, another hamlet about a mile northeast, to request help from the glidermen holding the right (western) flank of the 82nd Airborne's thin line.

He was given one rifle company and none too soon. The enemy were already feeling out his position and were quite aware of its basic weakness. During the next two days, two

company sized attacks were repulsed with losses while the Germans built up their fuel and forces.

By sunrise on 23 December, parties of Volksgrenadiers had worked around both flanks and threatened the lifeline from Manhay. In the predawn darkness, an enemy patrol was hit by the quad-50's, its officer and an NCO taken prisoner. They were from the 2nd Panzer Division just coming up from Houffalize, scouting for an attack position. During the previous day's hasty attacks, Major Parker was wounded by mortar shell fragments, lost consciousness and was evacuated. Major Elliot Goldstein, the original battalion executive officer but actually junior to Parker, took command.

Goldstein proved himself as able in holding the position as Parker had been in selecting it. Until the final, coordinated attack of two rifle battalions supported by tanks and preceded by a fierce artillery preparation, the Germans never managed to breach the perimeter.

As the official Army history states, "Drastically outnumbered and unable to compensate for weakness by maneuver, the defenders of the Baraque de Fraiture crossroads had succumbed, like so many small forces at other crossroads in the Ardennes" (Hugh M. Cole, ARDENNES: BATTLE of the BULGE, US Army in World War II, European Theater of Operations, 1965).

The Alamo Defense had been a splendid success, holding firm for two days against elements of an armored division whose two mechanized infantry regiments had to make a deliberate attack on a weak patchwork force in a few stone buildings. The over-stretched 82nd Airborne Division stretched some more, swung back and covered the gap. The 3rd Armored Division was given time to form another tank-infantry delaying force just south of Manhay.

If more proof of the Alamo Defense's success is needed, it lies in the fact that, though German armor took Manhay crossroads after a bitter fight, they got no further north. "Although the 2nd SS Panzer Division still held Grandmenil and Manhay on the morning of 26 December, it had lost much of its bite and dash....the 4th Panzer Grenadiers had lost heavily, particularly in officers, during the fight for Baraque de Fraiture" (Cole). With elements of the 75th Infantry Division solidly in place before them, the frustrated Germans turned west again in a futile lunge for the Meuse crossings they never came close to reaching.

The 589th was effectively destroyed. A few officers and men fought or slipped through to friendly lines, but the guns, tank destroyers, armored cars and AAA half-tracks were lost. Of the 116 man glider rifle company, only 44 rejoined their parent unit. But in June 1945, the battered 106th Division was reconstituted, and Parker returned to command the new 589th.

CONCLUSION

To a professional readership, this account demands some conclusions. The fight at Parker's Crossroads seems to indicate several points.

First, that there will be more such actions in the future, and this one should be studied as a classic example. After the Nazi surrender, Allied interrogators learned from defeated commanders that the prime reason for the German armored mass failing to come forward

as planned was "...the initial American defense had been more tenacious than anticipated; complete and rapid rupture of the defensive positions had not been achieved" (Cole).

And the official history adds, "...not only did the German planners fail to comprehend the degree of initiative that training and tradition have placed in the hands of American corps and army commanders, they also misunderstood the American doctrine, largely unwritten but universally accepted, that major formations having no pre-battle relationship may, under fluid conditions, unite on the field after the battle is joined" (Cole). Nowhere is this principle more perfectly illustrated than at Parker's Crossroads, where small units instinctively coalesced into an effective fighting force under a superlative leader.

Second, the concept is current doctrine. FM 100-5 OPERATIONS (May 1986) states, "Whenever an unintentional encirclement occurs, the encircled commander must understand the mission and the higher commander's intent and concept of operation clearly....he must judge whether the next higher commander wants the force to break out or to defend the position....if it cannot break out, the senior commander must continue to defend, while planning for and assisting in linkup with a relieving force." Both Parker and Goldstein demonstrated a perfect understanding of these principles as laid down in Field Service Regulations.

Third, both senior and subordinate commanders, aware of the possibilities, should plan for the worst. The key issue is the voluntary assumption of a last-ditch stand, even against orders. Only the most urgent and vital considerations would justify this---if the junior commander survives, he might face court-martial and disgrace.

Nevertheless, having made the decision, the Alamo force commander must carry it through. He has committed himself and his men to victory or death---and probably the latter---and he must lead by personal example. A little band of strong men, resolved to die with sword in hand can be an extremely thorny twig to grasp, and an enemy trying to meet a tight schedule may well hesitate. All the better for the Alamo force---it's just what they want.

And the higher commander should prepare himself for the loss of valuable combat power, perhaps one third of his command, if his junior commander decides on an Alamo Defense. Both should ensure that no neglect or omission of support will suggest this desperate action and, with prudent foresight, avoid the necessity. But if it comes to the pinch, do it for the cause.

Fourth, it appears that Parker and his men went largely unrewarded for their valor. Parker received a Silver Star, Goldstein a Bronze Star with "V" device and several NCO's and soldiers got individual decorations. The French government granted the battalion a Croix de Guerre with Silver Gilt Star, but no unit decoration was authorized from their own government. For a Medal of Honor performance by Parker, that seems a bit thin. Lapse of time and current regulations prohibit any further mark of recognition for an action that may very well have saved two divisions.

Fifth, we may speculate that somewhere in today's Army walks another "Major Parker"--perhaps wearing lieutenant's bars or sergeant's stripes. If it were possible, the Army should find that man and cherish him, for one day it will need him very badly. Down some

cold, perilous road he will see a great adversity rolling towards him. Then he will become "Major Parker" and fight like a barn full of wildcats.

But now the Major's battle is over, and he sleeps among warriors. And in a grassy plot near the crossing of the two Belgian highways stands a carved granite boulder that proclaims it "Parker's Crossroads," where Major Arthur C. Parker III "breathed spirit" into his GI's, and all acquitted themselves most honorably against enormous odds.

Finally, one does think that, had Leonidas of Sparta had a "Major Parker" to hold that fatal footpath, the Persians never would have turned his flank at Thermopylae.

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