

# Team O'Hara

## History

### Historical Context

3rd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, had been ordered out of Bastogne at about the same time as the other two battalions of the Regiment, but the traffic jams within the town had prevented movement for some time, and it was not until noon that it started out, on Colonel Ewell's orders, to Mont, some 1500m distant from Neffe. Tank rounds from Neffe brought the advance to a halt, but the Battalion Commander, Colonel Griswold, ordered Company I to work through the woods west and north-west of Wardin. At 1:30 pm a report came back that there was no opposition in that direction. Company I was now ordered into Wardin, to make contact with a "friendly roadblock" reported to be there. This was to be a fateful order for Company I.

The "friendly roadblock" was in fact Team O'Hara of Combat Command B, 10th Armoured Division. Team O'Hara had taken up position on the night of the 18th-19th on the high ground 1km south of the village, and so far had not been engaged by the enemy. Until about 1000 they had been observing the streams of stragglers passing through Wardin on their way west toward Bastogne. Their task was not made easier by the swirling fog banks which at times reduced visibility to under 100m. By 1015 it had become clear that no more stragglers were coming through from the east, a sure sign that the Germans were not far off. A platoon patrol was sent out to ascertain the position to the east. At 11.40 contact was made. The German column encountered consisted of Panzer IVHs and Sdkfz 251s, opposition which could not be effectively countered by infantry, so the patrol withdrew, after calling down a few rounds of unobserved artillery fire from a 105mm howitzer battery.

At the time, on the road 400m north east of Wardin, another patrol (one jeep) made contact with another enemy column advancing on the village. Suffering a glancing hit from an anti-tank round, which ripped the bumper off the jeep but did not destroy it, the jeep hastily retired and reported that the village was now under German control.

With Wardin captured, the German tanks started to take up positions on the slopes behind the village, from where they could bring flanking fire upon Team O'Hara's main blocking position. When they opened fire, it came as a very unpleasant surprise to the Americans, who hitherto had felt that their position was eminently defensible against attacks from the west. The M4s were in hull-down positions behind the crest of high ground, but the the German tanks in the north, they were fully visible and presenting their side armor. As a fog bank lifted, 75mm AP rounds flew across the valley. Two M4s were knocked out in as many minutes (one being the unfortunate artillery observer's tank for the 420th Armoured Artillery Battalion that had just moved into position). At 1300 a German k<sup>ü</sup>belwagen appeared on the road, and the occupants, a mere 200m from the nearest Americans, proceeded to get out and attempt to remove the strings of anti-tank mines laid by Team O'Hara across the Wiltz-Bastogne road as a hasty minefield. A brisk fire was brought down upon the audacious enemy from no less than 5 M4s and the same number of M3s, which caused the Germans to give up their task and retreat, unharmed, to their own lines.

As the ineffective fire was brought down upon the Kübelwagen, an unsettling sight was witnessed in the rear of Team O'Hara's position. From the direction of Bastogne was coming an extended column of infantry, which looked, from their unfamiliar uniforms, to be German. O'Hara's men were on the point of firing when the strange soldiers were identified as American paratroops, Company I of the 501st, 3rd Battalion, had arrived. With the arrival of the paratroop company, Team O'Hara could now concentrate its forces, while the paratroops took over responsibility for Wardin and the left flank. Unfortunately, the two groups failed to communicate or support each other further, a mistake which was to cost Company I dear. Lt. Colonel O'Hara felt that the Germans would spearhead their attack, when it inevitably came, along the Wiltz-Bastogne road. In this he was entirely wrong. Instead, the enemy, well aware by now of the blocking position taken by Team O'hara, had bypassed it by going to the north, and west, on to Wardin, covered from direct observation by a deep gully which ran almost from the Wiltz-Bastogne road to Wardin itself. Calls for artillery fire to be brought down on this gully were answered with repeated refusal. The available guns were desperately occupied at that time with supporting the Noville position.

After a brief lull, the Germans began to put probing attacks forward from the the woods before, and on the right flank of, Team O'Hara's main position. Tank and machine-gun fire began to play along the crest line, fully occupying the defenders, who became convinced that a major assault was about to fall on them from the east. So preoccupied did Team O'Hara become with their real (or imagined) predicament, that no-one paid any attention to what was unfolding in Wardin.

Company I was not having a good time. The paratroops had gained about half of the village when they met strong opposition from the enemy. It did not take long to ascertain that the opposition was of quality, and in large numbers. Seven PzIVH and a battalion of armoured panzergrenadiers from Panzer Lehr were facing them. Though undoubtedly seasoned troops, 130 paratroopers were no match for a determined enemy in such numbers. Even so, four of the tanks were knocked out by bazookas. Orders arrived at about 1430 for the company to withdraw, but it was already too late. Company I was shattered. All of its officers and 45 men were lost, and it was so badly dispersed that not even a composite platoon could be put together for the rest of the day. Wardin was now conclusively in German hands.

By 1530, O'Hara was aware of the disaster that had befallen the paratroops on his left flank, survivors having entered his lines, telling stories which, for once on this day, were not exaggerated.

Realising that his position, already tenuous, was now impossible, with his left flank fully exposed to what was obviously a strong force in Wardin, and with the pressure to his front and right flank being maintained, he was faced with an uneviable situation. He radioed the news back, with a request to withdraw. The reply was that he should hold his position for the present and "contact friends on your left", the very troops his message had confirmed as having been routed by the Germans! Assuming that his superiors were therefore unaware of the gravity of his situation, he sent an aide back by jeep to Bastogne to explain in person. This was done, but it was not until 1715 that Team O'Hara was finally ordered to withdraw to the higher ground north of Marvie, the best defensive line in the immediate area. O'Hara ordered the bulk of his command back to the new position, where they immediately began digging in. The rearguard, comprising four M4s and an

armoured infantry platoon, fell back without attracting the enemy's attention, mainly due to the highly effective fire plans laid down by the 420th Armoured Field Artillery Battalion upon positions which the Germans had seen earlier.

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Some Sources:

Wargames Illustrated 109 & 110

To Save Bastogne by Robert F. Phillips

Bastogne: The First Eight Days by S.L.A. Marshall

Osprey Military Order of Battle #8 The Ardennes Offensive V Panzer Army by Bruce Quarrie