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THE OPERATIONS OF THE ANTITANK COMPANY (REINFORCED),
317TH INFANTRY (80TH INFANTRY DIVISION) NORTHEAST
OF ARGENTAN IN THE CLOSING OF THE ARGENTAN-FALAISE
GAP, 17-20 AUGUST, 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of the Company Commander)

Type of operation described: ANTITANK COMPANY (REIN-
FORCED) PROTECTING ATTACK OF INFANTRY REGIMENT

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. II

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- A-4 History of the 80th Infantry Division (TIS Library)
- A-5 Extracts, S-1 Journal, 317th Infantry (Appended hereto)
- A-6 Extracts, After Action Report (S-3) dated 3 September 1944, 317th Infantry (Appended hereto)
- A-7 "Top Secret" - Ralph Ingersoll (TIS Library)
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION (MAPS A, B)

This monograph covers the operations of the Antitank Company (Reinforced), 317th Infantry, 80th Infantry Division, in the fighting northeast of ARGENTAN during the final phases of the closing of the ARGENTAN - FALAISE Gap, NORTHERN FRANCE Campaign. This action occurred from 17-20 August, 1944.

A clear understanding of this action necessitates a recapitulation of the major tactical movements of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in FRANCE prior to its commencement.

On 6 June, 1944 General Dwight D. Eisenhower launched the Allied Expeditionary Forces across the English Channel to commence the Battle for Europe. The First US Army and the British Second Army assaulted the coast of FRANCE between LE HAVRE and THE COTENIN PENINSULA. The First US Army, landing on OMAHA and UTAH BEACHES secured a lodgement in the face of determined enemy resistance, while to its left the British Second Army moved ashore against less formidable enemy fire. During the days that followed both beachheads were expanded gradually against determined enemy opposition. The British Second Army was brought to a virtual standstill in front of the city of CAEN, while the First US Army progressed slowly through the confusing and tortuous hedgerow country of NORMANDY. (1)

The German high command in FRANCE had initially considered that the aforementioned Allied landings were merely a feint or a prelude to decisive landings which would be made later in the PAS DE CALAIS area of the Northern French coast. By various

(1) A-1, pgs. 23-25

deceptive moves General Eisenhower was careful to preserve this attitude in the minds of the German commanders. Consequently, the Germans held the mass of their 15th Army in the PAS DE CALAIS area and reinforced the German combat forces to the south with troops drawn from other parts of Western Europe. (2) The Germans further considered that of the two areas of conflict in NORMANDY the most to be feared was that of the British 2d Army, and accordingly massed the bulk of their available armor in the vicinity in and around CAEN. (3)

On 8 July the British 2d Army bludgeoned its way past CAEN and the Canadian 2 Corps advanced southward astride the road CAEN - FALAISE. (4) On the American side of the lodgement area the deadly hedgerow fighting came to a thunderous climax between 18 and 25 July at ST. LO, and there the First US Army effected its long hoped for breakthrough. (5)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

By 31 July American armored units in force had passed through AVRANCHES, and at 1200 1 August the 3rd US Army, under the command of Lieutenant General George S. Patton, became operational. General Patton hurried his armored columns through the narrow AVRANCHES corridor and fanned out in two main directions, west to overrun the BRITTANY PENINSULA and south and east with the eventual objective of swinging around the southern flank of the German forces in the NORMANDY area to reach the SEINE RIVER, south of PARIS. (6)

The main effort of Third Army at this moment was the capture of BREST and the other ports on the BRITTANY PENINSULA, vitally needed to supply the ever increasing Allied armies on

(2) A-1, pgs. 27, 28
(3) A-8, pgs. 114, 134
(4) A-1, p. 33, 38
(5) A-1, pgs. 34, 36
(6) A-1, pgs. 39, 40

the continent. However, at this time Adolph Hitler intervened in the German operations in FRANCE with a decision which was to alter radically the Allied grand tactics. Finally awakening to the dangerous potentialities inherent in the current Allied operations, the German high command had committed the bulk of the German 15th Army from the PAS DE CALAIS area to reinforce the German 7th Army and Panzer Group West. (7) Hitler now ordered that this mass of crack German infantry and armor be launched in a counterattack through the city of MORTAIN westward, with the objective of capturing AVRANCHES and sealing off the Third US Army from the supply lines pouring across the assault beaches and through CHERBOURG. The massed fury of the German 7th Army struck at MORTAIN, encountering there on 7 August the VII Corps of First Army. In one of the truly great combat actions of American history the 30th, 9th and 4th Infantry Divisions, the 3d and part of the 2d Armored Divisions slowed, and then abruptly halted this attack. At the insistence of Hitler the German 7th Army continued its fanatical assault in the hills around MORTAIN until 12 August, at which time the enemy determined that their position was untenable and that a withdrawal was imperative. (8) They had hesitated too long.

On 9 August XV Corps of Third Army had captured LE MANS, far to the south and east of the German spearheads bleeding themselves at MORTAIN, and the entire energies of the Allied Expeditionary Forces were now to be devoted to a gigantic double pincers to trap and destroy the German 7th Army. XV Corps wheeled and drove due north from LE MANS and by 12 August was in front of ARGENTAN with two armored and two infantry divisions. To the north the Canadian First Army was grinding slowly southward on

(7) A-1, pgs. 40, 42

(8) A-1, pgs. 42-43

the CAEN - FALAISE road. (9)

As will be developed later in this account, the final attacks which led to the closing of the gap did not commence until 17 August. That this elapsed time passed without coordinated offensive measures by Third Army units is apparently incomprehensible. Third Army was held in a passive role south of the EGOUCHE - ARGENTAN - CHAMBOIS line upon the orders of higher authority. It is not within the scope of this monograph to discuss the reasons for these orders, or their source; reference is made to this matter only so that the reader will not consider that essential information is omitted from this account. The reader who desires to further investigate this matter is referred to footnotes below.

The 80th Infantry Division had come across UTAH BEACH on 5 August. Untried in combat, the division was hurriedly shaken down and rushed southward through AVRANCHES during the critical days of the enemy effort at MORTAIN. (10) As soon as it became evident that the enemy would not succeed in endangering AVRANCHES the 80th Division moved by a series of marches and countermarches (not profitable to discuss here) until on 13 August the division received orders to concentrate in the vicinity of the small town of EVRON, south of MAYENNE. (11)

Events in the vicinity of ARGENTAN, to the north, had moved rapidly, and it had been determined that XV Corps would hold the

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- (9) A-1, p. 43
(10) A-4, pgs. 3-4
(11) A-2, p. 28

"Top Secret" - Ralph Ingersoll, pgs. 188-193

"Patton and His Third Army" - Brigadier General Brenton G. Wallace, pgs. 53-56

"War As I Knew It" - General George S. Patton, pgs. 104-110

"Lucky Forward" - Colonel Robert S. Allen, pgs. 107-113

"Crusade in Europe" - General Dwight D. Eisenhower, pgs. 277-279

"Normandy to the Baltic" - Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alemain, pgs. 160-171

southern jaw of the trap while the Canadian First Army closed it. On 15 August the 80th Infantry Division lost its 319th Combat Team which was attached to the 5th Infantry Division in the vicinity of ANGERS, engaged in screening the southern flank of Third Army. (12) The 80th Division(-) was then ordered north to become a part of the newly created Provisional XV Corps, which was also to include the 2d French Armored Division and the 90th Infantry Division under the command of the Chief of Staff, Third Army, Major General Hugh J. Gaffey. This provisional corps was formed in order to coordinate the activities of these three divisions in the vicinity of the line ECOUCHE - ARGENTAN - CHAMBOIS, while the remainder of XV Corps, along with other Third Army units, continued operations further to the east. On 16 August 80th Division(-) closed in behind the 2d French Armored Division and the 90th Infantry Division, which were on line battling continuously against German pressure at ARGENTAN and CHAMBOIS to keep the escape gap open for the doomed German 7th Army. (13)

In the meantime, First Army units had been pressing continuously eastward from MORTAIN until, for reasons of facility of control, the Provisional XV Corps was attached to the First US Army. The order of attachment was received on 17 August, and on 18 August V Corps of First Army assumed control. (14) On 17 August the Canadians had captured FALAISE. (15)

On 17 August CT 318 of 80th Infantry Division was given the mission of attacking north to cut the ARGENTAN - EXMES road and capture the high ground northeast of ARGENTAN. CT 317 was in V Corps Reserve in the vicinity of BOSSIE LE LAND. (16) (Map C)

The enemy forces facing the 80th Division(-) were a confused, heterogeneous mass of assorted troops, good and bad, who had been

(12) A-2, p. 10
(13) A-2, p. 33
(14) A-3, p. 184
(15) A-1, p. 43
(16) A-3, p. 184

very severely used by both Allied ground and air forces. The general tactics of the Germans had been to line the gap with infantry units reinforced with small amounts of armor while the remnants of the crack SS armored units, who had failed at MORTAIN, effected their retreat to the Seine River. The mass of the beaten German 7th Army and Panzer Group West had been cut to ribbons by Allied air attack during their retreat. The encircling Allied ground forces had placed their artillery close to the constantly contracting perimeter and had subjected the enemy to observed fire, which had wrought devastation among both transportation and personnel. Into the mouth of the pocket the enemy had now thrown the remains of several SS Panzer divisions in a desperate effort to hold the gap open. The enemy units identified in the immediate vicinity of ARGENTAN were the 728th Infantry Regiment and the 116th SS Panzer Division, initially estimated to number 2500. (17) Undoubtedly, the continuous terrific pounding to which the enemy had been subjected had so disrupted command and organization that elements of a dozen divisions were cornered in the ARGENTAN area. This is certainly true if the enemy troops encountered (as PW's and dead) by the author are indicative. They included SS troops, regular infantry, artillery, antiaircraft and Luftwaffe troops. In general, the enemy defense may be said to have lacked the control and homogeneity which characterized the usual trained German unit. (See Overlay 1)

NARRATIVE (MAPS C, D, E)

To further insure a thorough understanding of the combat action which is about to be described it is necessary to digress at this point and discuss numerous factors which will be seen to bear directly on the course of events which followed.

(17) A-4, p. 13; A-5, p. 5, Serial Number 19

(1) As aforementioned, the 80th Division was new to combat. During the bewildering moves leading up to the position in which we now find the division no serious enemy resistance had been encountered. There had been numerous platoon-sized actions, small-scale ambushes, blind night meeting engagements, and many defended roadblocks had been knocked out. However, the division could in no wise be said to be "veteran." (18)

(2) The Commanding Officer of CT 317, Colonel A. Donald Cameron, had in practice more or less delegated surveillance over antitank operations to the regimental Executive Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Henry G. Fisher, this officer having had considerable experience with antitank units since their inclusion in the tables of organization of the US Army. The author, commanding Antitank Company, 317th Infantry, had assumed command approximately one month prior to the departure of the division from the Zone of the Interior for the European Theater of Operations. Since the last month in the ZI and the three weeks spent in England had been devoted almost exclusively to preparation for overseas movement, with its consequent emphasis upon individual firing and problems of equipment and supply, CO Antitank Company had had no opportunity to command the company or, for that matter, any antitank unit, in the field or on maneuvers. Tactical antitank doctrine as practiced in CT 317 envisaged direct control by CO Antitank Company of all eighteen 57mm AT guns on the T/E of the infantry regiment. This doctrine was preached notwithstanding the fact that nine of these guns were organic to the battalions of the regiment in the form of antitank platoons in each battalion headquarters company. CO Antitank Company soon discovered that in practice, in order to preserve a satisfactory working relationship between the battalion commanders

(18) A-4, p. 17

and himself (despite the "carte blanche" given him by the regimental commander), the battalion guns were never detached from their parent unit. Tactical doctrine of the regiment was to use the 57's in close (300 yds.) support of attacking riflemen.

(3) Early in its brief combat experience the combat team had been reinforced by the attachment of a company of the 610th Tank Destroyer Battalion. (19) This battalion was equipped with the towed 3-inch TD gun. These heavy and unwieldy guns were laboriously drawn by the Halftrack M-3. Ever since the attachment of this organization, which was placed in its entirety under the direct command of CO Antitank Company, there had been constant friction with its company commander. This officer claimed that his unit was being incorrectly employed from a tactical standpoint. He stated that his guns must be employed by platoon in dug-in positions with minimum fields of fire of 1000 yards. CO Antitank Company, while agreeing from a theoretical viewpoint, was unfortunately unable to re-landscape the hedgerow-laced terrain of NORMANDY to make available such ideal conditions, and being faced with the hard necessity of providing antitank protection for a regimental perimeter had been constrained to employ these guns singly and at short range, in order to cover the many existing armored approaches. The resulting friction induced a lack of cooperation on the part of the TD officers which imposed a heavy load upon CO Antitank Company, in addition to his other difficulties, and served to effectively deny optimum use of the TD's excellent radio facilities and light armored reconnaissance elements.

(4) As will be developed later in this account, while OT 317 was in the process of deploying for its initial attack in the forthcoming action, an additional reinforcement was received

(19) A-4, p. 17

in the form of two platoons from "A" Company of the 893d TD Battalion. The equipment of this organization was the M-10 tank destroyer, which consisted of essentially the same 3-inch TD gun mounted in a massive, but lightly armored turret on an M-4 medium tank chassis with far less hull armor than that found on the M-4 medium tank. The two platoon leaders of this new attachment (also placed under direct command of CO Antitank Company) were finally located and briefly interviewed. These interviews left CO Antitank Company with the following general impressions:

a. The senior platoon leader was suffering from incipient combat fatigue, he and his platoon sergeant being the sole survivors of the original platoon, which had entered combat in the early days of the hedgerow fighting. This excessive loss apparently had been caused by numerous attachments to infantry organizations which had tended to use these TD's in the role of tanks and had sent them, unsupported by infantry, on missions for which they were not suited. Actually, owing to its light armor the M-10 was extremely vulnerable to antitank fire of as low a caliber as 20mm. This platoon leader displayed a profound distrust of all infantrymen, an extremely belligerent attitude, and appeared obsessed with the idea that all infantry organizations intended to use his platoon as tanks, and not in their proper role.

b. The junior platoon leader was a replacement officer entering his first combat and appeared to be extremely uncertain.

(5) A brief review of the characteristics of German armored vehicles is offered in the form of Appendix A to this monograph. During the stay of the division in England, Antitank Company had upon several occasions utilized a British Army anti-tank range for practice and to check and bersight its newly

received guns. The 57mm AT gun had been adopted by the US Army from the British Army, where it was known as the "6-pounder." The British Army had used this weapon since the North African Campaign, and British Army instructors and non-coms with whom the officers and men of Antitank Company had discussed the weapon were not very enthusiastic concerning its penetrating powers against the German medium and heavy (Mark V and VI) tanks. The British considered that the gun would penetrate the Mark VI, or Tiger tank, only when using special ammunition which only the British appeared to possess, and which was issued only for engaging this particular tank. They further considered that penetration of the Mark V was unlikely except at very close range, and then only on the sides and rear of the hull, owing to the skillful sloping which the German ordnance designers had given its armor.

OPERATIONS OF 18 AUGUST (MAPS C, F AND OVERLAY 1)

In accordance with the V Corps order, CT 318 attacked in a northwesterly direction with the mission of cutting the ARGENTAN - EXMES road and capturing the high ground northeast of ARGENTAN. Jump-off was at 0800 hours 18 August in column of battalions with its rightmost assault companies passing through the village of SAI. (20) This attack proceeded in an orderly fashion until the two lead battalions were deployed approximately 1000 yards across the ARGENTAN - EXMES road. At approximately 0830 hours the assault elements were taken under fire from German positions along the ARGENTAN - TRUN road and from the fringes of the FORET DE GOUFFERN. These German positions were in depth, well camouflaged, and utilized weapons which ran the gamut from small arms up to and including 150mm artillery and large caliber rocket projectors (Nebelwerfers). The most deadly fire received was

(20) A-4, p. 13

from a number of extremely well concealed 40mm dual-purpose AA-AT guns located in the heavy woods northwest of the ARGENTAN - TRUN highway. In addition, numerous self-propelled 20mm AA guns moved from place to place covered by a series of sunken roads and directed devastating direct fire at the advancing troops. Both 40mm and 20mm guns fired their supersensitive shells at the trees and hedgerows on the battlefield and achieved extremely effective tree-bursts. An ill-starred attempt to move tanks north of the ARGENTAN - EXMES road to assist the assault battalions resulted in the loss, within a matter of minutes, of five medium tanks, which were destroyed by almost as many rounds from heavy, concealed, high-velocity guns enfilading the ARGENTAN - EXMES road. (21) Caught in the open, the two lead assault battalions fought back desperately and their dead were later found as far forward as within a few hundred yards of the ARGENTAN - TRUN road, but their situation was hopeless. They dug in to the best of their ability in position and endured for the remainder of the day fires which cost them in the vicinity of 300 casualties. (22) CT 317 was released immediately to Commanding Officer, 80th Infantry Division(-) from Corps Reserve (23), and at 1935 hours 18 August Commanding Officer, CT 317 was ordered to bring up one battalion to cover the rear and flanks of CT 318 (24) and prepare to continue the attack the next day. One platoon of Antitank Company, CT 317, was attached to this battalion (the 2d) for the purpose of providing close-in antitank protection along the ARGENTAN - EXMES road. (25)

After it became evident that CT 318 was receiving an unmerciful pounding and would be unable to continue effective operations,

(21) Personal knowledge

(22) A-4, pgs. 13-14. Statement of casualties based on table found in A-4, Supplementary Data, p. 1c, and personal knowledge of author. A-5, p. 5, Serial No. 19

(23) A-3, p. 186

(24) A-6, p. 1

(25) Personal knowledge

Commanding Officer of CT 317 immediately initiated reconnaissance by battalion commanders and staffs and all company commanders into the zone of action of CT 318 in order to prepare for possible future commitments. This reconnaissance was conducted through the village of SAI and as far north and west as the village of UROU. In SAI the officers on reconnaissance encountered one of the companies of the reserve battalion of CT 318 still engaged in clearing the town of enemy snipers and were treated to their first taste of concentrated German artillery and Nebelwerfer fire. In UROU the backwash of the assault battalions of CT 318 were found thoroughly confused and demoralized. This reconnaissance, however, enabled all participating officers to gain an excellent appreciation of the terrain over which we were to operate. (26)

TERRAIN ANALYSIS (Map F)

In considering the terrain involved here a logical starting point may be taken at the village of SAI. This village fronts on the L'URE RIVER which flows to the west to a junction with a larger stream, the L'ORNE RIVER. The L'URE RIVER was approximately 20 feet wide, two to four feet in depth with moderately steep banks rising some six feet above water level. The bridges in the vicinity of SAI and leading into UROU had been destroyed by the retreating Germans. However, two fords had been located, shown on Map F at A and B. Ford A had been utilized by some of the vehicles of CT 318 but was insufficiently stable to withstand the passage of the tanks attached to this combat team, with a result that after the five mediums aforementioned had crossed, the ford had deteriorated into a muddy wallow, where presently engineers were engaged in extracting a bogged-down tank and attempting to fill it through the use of bulldozers so that it

(26) A-5, p. 5, Serial No. 21. Personal knowledge; statements of Major Karlton Warmbrod, Executive Officer of 2d Battalion, and Captain James Mullen, Commanding Officer of Company "E", 317th Infantry.

could be used again. The ford at B had apparently been neglected by CT 318 but was found upon personal inspection by the Recon Officer of Antitank Company, CT 317, to have a hard, gravelly bottom which apparently would sustain tanks and other heavy vehicles. The L'URE RIVER was everywhere fordable by foot troops.

Continuing north of SAI the next significant feature in terrain encountered was the ARGENTAN - EXMES road. This was a 3-lane, macadam road in excellent state of repair. Directly north of SAI was a small village named BORDEAUX, which actually consisted of the French equivalent of a grocery store and several neighboring farm buildings. Standing at the north edge of BORDEAUX and looking to the northwest, open, rolling terrain greeted the eye. This ground was all cultivated and apparently a hay or alfalfa crop had only recently been harvested, judging by the innumerable hay shecks which dotted the area. The ground rose gradually to a high point approximately 3,500 yards northwest of BORDEAUX, which was the division objective. This high ground was about 150 feet higher than BORDEAUX. Commencing at this high ground and running in a rough semi-circle to the east, and then southeast, was the heavy foliage of the FORET DE GOUFFERN. This forest consisted of large-trunked, deciduous trees, the majority of which were from 30 to 50 feet in height.

ARGENTAN is located on the fringe of the NORMANDY hedgerow country and, in common with that terrain, practically all roads and trails were bordered by uniform stands of poplar trees about 30 feet in height. Occasionally, true hedgerow conditions were encountered, but on a smaller scale than in the more eastern hedgerow country.

The ARGENTAN - TRUN road, which curved directly in front of the objective, was known to be a 2-lane, macadam highway.

The numerous roads and trails which traversed the battle area, as seen from the map, were not all visible from the ground, which indicated that many of them were sunken.

Looking directly north from BORDEAUX the terrain rose from the east to form a slight crest which ran north to CRENNES. This crest dropped off to the west into the floor of the valley generally north of the ARGENTAN - EXMES road.

In summation, the critical terrain feature of the area was the high ground northwest of BORDEAUX which, as might be expected, was the division objective. Possession of this small hill mass allowed interdiction of all routes leading north and East from ARGENTAN and afforded direct observation into the escape gap between ARGENTAN and FALAISE.

It should be noted that at this time of year in Northern FRANCE twilight lasts until about 2200.

ATTACK OF CT 317

Commanding Officer, CT 317 decided to attack in column of battalions in the order 2d, 1st, 3d. In addition to the primary mission of capturing the division objective, it was contemplated that one battalion of CT 317 might possibly be used in conjunction with CT 318 to attack east along the ARGENTAN - EXMES road and capture ARGENTAN itself. The 2d Battalion, CT 317, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Russell E. Murray, was ordered to attack "through the 318th." (27) Colonel Murray considered that to attack directly through the disorganized remnants of CT 318 would not only be extremely bad for the morale of his battalion, but would subject his assault elements to the same devastatingly accurate fires which had cost CT 318 so heavily. He therefore determined to satisfy the requirement of attacking "through the 318th" by passing his leftmost assault squad through the rightmost

(27) A-4, p. 15

squad of CT 318. (28) He planned, therefore, to use the ford at B and launch his attack with two companies abreast, crossing a line of departure on the ARGENTAN - EXMES road between C and D. As heretofore mentioned, the ground rises gently from this line of departure to reach a crest along a line running generally from the village of CRENNES to UROU. Troops moving on the east side of this slope are defiladed from direct fires from the entire German position.

ANTITANK PLAN

CO Antitank Company on the night 18-19 August made the following recommendations to Commanding Officer, CT 317:

(1) That the battalion antitank platoons remain with their parent units and that each of the three battalions be augmented by the attachment of one platoon from the regimental Antitank Company. Further, that coordination of the AT defenses of each battalion be the responsibility of the senior of the two AT platoon leaders. (In practice, this resulted in platoon leaders from Antitank Company having charge of the AT defensive dispositions of the 2d and 3d battalions while the battalion antitank platoon leader of the 1st Battalion had charge in his unit.) The antitank platoons were to support the assault elements from positions not to exceed 300 yards in rear of the leading assault riflemen.

(2) That the three 3-inch towed TD platoons be disposed generally in an arc centering on BORDEAUX and swinging back on the east to the vicinity of UROU, and on the west to a location slightly south of the ARGENTAN - EXMES road. These platoons were to be employed as units, dug in, with the flank platoons having the mission of protecting against armored counter-

(28) Statement of Lieutenant Colonel Russell E. Murray, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 317th Infantry.

attack from either the east or the west along the axis of the ARGENTAN - EXMES road, while the center platoon had the mission of protecting the assault elements from armored counterattack from the division objective and the general forefront of the battle position.

Commanding Officer, CT 317 approved these recommendations. The time for the attack was set for 1500 hours 19 August, 1944.

CONDUCT OF THE ATTACK

During the morning of 19 August plans were made to utilize the division artillery to the fullest extent possible. Heretofore this had been a combat team operation, with the result that each of the infantry regiments was supported by only one battalion of field artillery. Furthermore, for some unknown reason it had not been felt that the division would encounter sufficiently serious resistance to warrant massing the division artillery in support of the operation. Actually, aside from small preparatory fires on 18 August the bulk of the division artillery had been employed in firing on ARGENTAN. The attack by CT 317 had on call the full strength of the division artillery augmented by corps artillery in quantity. (29)

Late on the morning of 19 August CO Antitank Company was informed at the regimental CP that CT 317 had been further augmented through the attachment of two platoons of M-10 TD's from the 893rd TD Battalion. These platoons were to join the regiment early in the afternoon of the 19th in the vicinity of the southern end of the village of SAI. CO Antitank Company, however, had occasion to interview the two platoon leaders at the regimental CP with the results aforementioned. (See p. 9) CO Antitank Company recommended to the regimental commander that these two platoons be employed as a mobile antitank reserve to

(29) A-4, p. 14

follow the assault battalion by not to exceed 600 yards, operating against targets of opportunity attacking the assault elements, or on order of CO Antitank Company. This recommendation was approved and the two platoon leaders were oriented personally by CO Antitank Company on the forthcoming operation and the part which their platoons were to play therein.

Difficulty was encountered by the assault battalion in moving into position to cross the line of departure, owing mainly to the congestion on the roads in and around SAI, so that the attack was postponed until 1600 hours. At 1600 the 2d Battalion crossed the line of departure and the attack was on. It immediately became apparent that the change in time of attack had resulted in loss of the preparatory artillery fires. The lead companies of the 2d Battalion, "F" and "G", moved rapidly out and in a matter of minutes had crossed the slight crest, CRENNES - UROU. They were advancing aggressively toward the objective when they were taken under fire by all of the weapons previously described. They were pinned down along a line running roughly from position E to position F. As they reached this position the artillery preparatory fires finally landed, but they were short, and "F" Company of the 2d Battalion sustained approximately twenty casualties therefrom. While adjustments were being made to remedy this lamentable situation the commanding officer of the tank company attached to the division rushed two platoons of his medium tanks forward and, lining them in hull-down positions along the slight crest, CRENNES - UROU, commenced firing in support of the attacking riflemen.

CO Antitank Company had been proceeding to follow the assault battalion when he was contacted by the Commanding Officer of the 610th TD Battalion, whose company was attached to the regiment. This officer demanded that CO Antitank Company accompany

him to the presence of the regimental commander of the 317th to account for his past alleged mishandling of this towed TD company. (See p. 8) CO Antitank Company had been informed that the regimental commander was going forward with the assault battalion and suggested that the TD lieutenant colonel accompany him in search of Colonel Cameron, if he desired to press the issue. Said officer stated that he would wait along the ARGENTAN - EXMES road until Colonel Cameron returned, and with that CO Antitank Company departed along the trail of the 2d Battalion and never saw this officer again.

This conversation had lasted until after the artillery preparatory fires had fallen on our own troops, and now as CO Antitank Company approached the aforementioned crest the attached tanks were preparing to reorganize and withdraw from their firing positions. The crest and the entire area to the north and west of it were now being hit by enemy artillery and mortar fire. However, by moving in the orchard at position G, CO Antitank Company was able to work his way forward to position E. Upon his arrival there he found the three 57mm guns of his second platoon still coupled to their prime movers in a semi-defilade position, while the platoon leader reconnoitered for possible gun positions.

A single gun and prime mover from the 2d Battalion antitank platoon now attempted to dash from the orchard at G to join the line of assault elements, E - F, and was immediately knocked out by several direct hits from enemy high-velocity guns. Shortly after this occurred an enemy Mark-V tank moved out of the woods in the vicinity of position H and opened fire with both of its machine guns generally parallel to the line of assault troops. CO Antitank Company immediately ordered his nearest 57mm gun to go into position and engage this tank. The nearest firing position was across a small hedgerow embankment, perhaps two feet

high and crowned with young trees not more than ten feet high. The prime mover in low-low 6-wheel drive could easily have crossed this small obstacle, had not the driver in his confusion and the heat of combat attempted to back the gun through first. He promptly "jack-knifed" the prime mover and gun, and by the time the gun got in position the German tank was gone. At this time an incident occurred which was to be repeated several times in the course of this brief engagement. An officer of the 2d Battalion expressed great concern as to whether or not this tank was actually a German tank. Incidentally, one of the principal targets for the fire of this tank had been the Antitank Company platoon leader and a small reconnaissance group. This platoon leader, Lieutenant Otha E. Payne, who had had his trench coat riddled, was apprised on his return of the reasons why no fire had been directed at this tank. It is a matter of record that no driver in his platoon ever thereafter attempted to back a gun over an obstruction.

By now the afternoon was well along and it was approximately 2000 hours. CO Antitank Company noted that the M-10 TD's were conspicuous by their absence, and contacting the Recon Officer, Antitank Company (Lieutenant John Campbell) by radio he ordered him to locate the two platoons and bring them into position. The attack to the front had meanwhile bogged down, with small groups of riflemen slowly working their way forward in short rushes. Supporting artillery fire was now falling in quantity upon the enemy positions to our front. About thirty minutes later Lieutenant Campbell called CO Antitank Company and informed him that he had found the two M-10 platoons but that the senior platoon leader had refused to respect the orders of CO Antitank Company as delivered by the Recon Officer. CO Antitank Company immediately departed to remedy this situation. The senior M-10

platoon leader and his platoon were located in the orchard east of SAI. In the meantime, Lieutenant Campbell had located the other M-10 platoon halted several hundred yards east of this location along the ARGENTAN - EXMES road, the platoon leader apparently being confused as to his location owing to faulty map-reading. He readily followed Lieutenant Campbell, and after a short but spirited conversation the senior M-10 platoon leader also followed CO Antitank Company. In the rapidly gathering dusk these two platoons were now guided to a position in the vicinity of G, where they were disposed with the destroyers covering such fields of fire as could be located.

The situation with reference to the 2d Battalion had now become extremely obscure. Utilizing the cover of darkness the rifle companies had drifted southwest from the line E - F to an unknown position. There were no riflemen in the vicinity of E or G, and the 57mm crews and TD crews proceeded to set up small perimeters at these two locations. The senior TD platoon leader made dire predictions as to the results to be expected from enemy infiltration that night. CO Antitank Company now dispatched Lieutenant Payne with a small patrol to attempt to regain contact with the 2d Battalion and secure a platoon of riflemen from the reserve company to protect the guns and TD's. Lieutenant Payne disappeared into the darkness and was not heard from again the rest of the night. However, at about 2300 hours the 1st Battalion came up the road C - G in column of companies, and after contact was established with the battalion commander and the situation explained to him he agreed to furnish a platoon of riflemen for security, since he did not contemplate any further movement that night in view of the somewhat abrupt disappearance of the 2d Battalion and the general obscurity of the situation. (30) This obscurity was compounded by the fact

(30) Personal knowledge

that no one was able to locate the regimental commander, Colonel Cameron, and great difficulty was encountered in attempting to establish radio contact with the regimental CP. After one or two futile attempts all units established radio silence of their own accord.

ACTION ON THE NIGHT 19-20 AUGUST AND CAPTURE OF OBJECTIVE 20 AUGUST

Relative quiet had now settled over the battlefield. All night artillery and Nebelwerfer fire criss-crossed overhead, but none landed in the vicinity of the 1st Battalion, or where the 2d Battalion was supposed to be. CO Antitank Company made one attempt to locate the 2d Battalion on foot, but after proceeding about 400 yards to the west from position G suddenly felt extremely naked and returned forthwith to his perimeter.

At about 2400 hours the commander of the 2d Battalion had assembled his company commanders in the vicinity of position J and was on the point of issuing orders for a continuation of the attack at dawn on the morning of 20 August when the Chief of Staff, 80th Infantry Division, Colonel Max S. Johnson, with a small accompanying party materialized out of the darkness. Colonel Johnson conveyed the division commander's desires that the attack be continued at once and that the division objective be secured with the least practicable delay. (31)

There now occurred one of those incidents with which the history of warfare is replete. There is no logical explanation as to how such incidents occur and are brought to a successful conclusion, and it can only be assumed that the goddess of fortune takes a direct hand. The 2d Battalion, moving in column of twos, proceeded by a route which remains unknown to this day, but which must have been through a sunken road which was found to exist in the vicinity of position K, and commenced crossing

(31) Statements of Major Karlton Warmbrod and Captain James Mullen.

as that organization was attempting to dig in and make itself small at about position L. A lively fire fight immediately broke out with the tanks using their machine guns and the riflemen everything they had. The tanks were apparently out of HE ammunition, since they fired armor-piercing rounds only from the tank guns. E Company was unable to secure an effective hit on either, and they disappeared around the northwest edge of the woods in back of E Company's position headed in the general direction of SEVIGNY. (33) The column on the road was completely destroyed.

As if the ambush of the German column were the opening cue, fighting now broke out over much of the battle area. Some time prior to dawn the 1st Battalion had moved from its position along the road C - G and was now moving in a column of companies with its head approximately at position J. The head of this column was fired on from the vicinity of a long barn located at J and from the orchard area east of position K. The 1st Battalion deployed and attacked this resistance. In the meantime, the remainder of the 2d Battalion crossed the road and secured the objective.

Early on the morning of 20 August the 3d Battalion, 317th Infantry, received orders to attack west along the ARGENTAN - EXMES road and, in conjunction with the 318th Infantry, to secure ARGENTAN. The battalion retained its own antitank platoon and the third platoon of Antitank Company remained attached. By 1045 hours the advance elements of 3d Battalion and the 318th had secured ARGENTAN with no resistance, and by 1405 that afternoon had contacted the British 11th Armored Division. (34) The 3d Battalion thus passes out of the picture portrayed by this monograph.

(33) Statement of Captain James Mullen.

(34) A-5, p. 6, Serial No. 2, 20 August; p. 7, Serial No. 7

the battalion commander the 1st Battalion was completely engaged, and wounded and PW's were drifting back in a steady stream. One wounded officer stated almost hysterically that the troops were "being slaughtered by tanks in the orchard." The platoon leader of the 2d Battalion antitank platoon, finding himself unable to move to the support of his own battalion, had attempted to assist the 1st Battalion and had put his guns into action in the near edge of the orchard. His gun crews forthwith had been driven from their positions by small arms fire and the platoon leader was convinced that 57mm guns could not be operated successfully in the orchard.

At this same time a German PW of Polish extraction was being interrogated at the temporary battalion CP and was only too eager to give information concerning the German dispositions and plans. He stated that a German counterattack had been scheduled to move north up the ARGENTAN - TRUN road supported by tanks in an attempt to dislodge the Americans from their possession of the division objective. CO Antitank Company considered that the time had arrived to use the mobile reserve of M-10 TD's. Captain Smith's tanks had encountered German tanks in the northmost edge of the orchard, and one M-4 had already been knocked out. The tanks were now regrouping in the edge of the woods preparatory to trying to clear the orchard a second time.

CO Antitank Company moved by jeep at once to position E via position F and immediately summoned both of the M-10 platoon leaders. He ordered the junior platoon leader to move at once from his position at E to join the tanks in the edge of the orchard and to move in to clean out the German tanks in the northmost edge of the orchard. The senior platoon leader was ordered to follow CO Antitank Company to a position from which he could deal with the anticipated counterattack coming up from ARGENTAN.

CO Antitank Company had determined by personal reconnaissance that the two trails leading out of the orchard area and intersecting at position M were actually sunken roads, and at many places along their course where other small trails (not shown on map) intersected them, there were ideal hull-down positions for the destroyers. CO Antitank Company then led the senior platoon leader's destroyers down the road E - F rapidly, while the second platoon of TD's followed at about 200 yards.

As CO Antitank Company reached position F several shells exploded directly in front of his jeep in the branches of the poplar trees which lined the road. The senior platoon leader had not followed directly on the road but had moved on the south side of it in order to use the trees and semi-hedgerow banks on either side for cover and concealment. The first flight of shells was followed immediately by several others, and CO Antitank Company and his driver and bodyguard dived for the roadside ditch. The TD's halted, swung their guns to bear on the orchard and prepared to give battle. CO Antitank Company unslung his field glasses and attempted to pick up the source of these rounds. It rapidly became apparent that they had been fired by Captain Smith's tanks from their positions in the southeast edge of the orchard. These tanks now deployed and advanced, firing occasionally as they came. CO Antitank Company cautioned the TD's not to return the fire and ran out waving a colored recognition panel which, incidentally, saw its first use at this time. Captain Smith recognized CO Antitank Company and the M-10's and his tanks ceased firing. He moved up closer and informed CO Antitank Company that he had thought that the TD's were German tanks and had attempted to engage them with HEAT shell. Captain Smith was then told by CO Antitank Company that he should expect a reinforcement of one platoon of these TD's to bolster his fires

when he went after the German tanks in the orchard. CO Antitank Company then returned to the other platoon of TD's where he was confronted by the now thoroughly aroused TD platoon leader. This officer was convinced, apparently, that this outfit would not be satisfied with getting him shot up by the Germans, but if that were not possible they intended to shoot him up themselves. Notwithstanding this incident, the M-10 platoon was moved rapidly into the sunken road positions aforementioned.

At precisely the instant that Captain Smith's tanks opened fire on the TD's the promised German counterattack developed from ARGENTAN, and one Mark IV and four Mark-V German tanks were seen moving rapidly out of ARGENTAN in the direction of the objective and along the ARGENTAN - TRUN road. They were spotted immediately by the towed TD platoon which was dug in a few hundred yards west of position C along the ARGENTAN - EXMES road. This platoon instantly prepared to take them under fire. However, the Division Artillery Commander of the 80th Division, Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby, was at this gun position and ordered the platoon leader not to open fire, since he believed the tanks in question were British, and not German. The platoon leader protested that the tanks were in fact German, but General Searby would not believe this until he observed them through captured German high-power binoculars, which clearly showed the black crosses on the turrets. (36) This platoon immediately opened fire and in a matter, literally, of seconds had hit and halted all of the German tanks except one Mark-V, which got away past position I, heading to the northwest. In the general excitement of the engagement with Captain Smith's tanks this incident had gone unnoticed by both CO Antitank Company and the TD platoon leader,

(36) Statement of Captain (then Lieutenant) Edwin Donnelley, Platoon Leader, Antitank Company, 317th Infantry.

who were not aware of the presence of these tanks until they started toward position M and spotted the four burning hulls scattered along the road in back of M.

The second platoon of M-10's joined Captain Smith's tanks and, amply protected by infantry, they proceeded into the orchard. A short but sharp fight developed there with two German Mark-V's, which ended with both the German tanks and one more of Smith's destroyed. The 1st Battalion then mopped up the orchard area and made a junction with the 2d Battalion. By 1030 hours the division objective was considered taken and the 2d Battalion was dug in and amply supported by the tanks, TD's and AT guns which they had cried for so desperately earlier in the morning. This action was accomplished with a loss of approximately 75 casualties.

The 1st Battalion was called upon at about 1700 hours to move to the north up the ARGENTAN - TRUN road and knock out a final pocket of resistance. This action developed into such a confused melee that at this late date it is impossible to describe with any degree of certitude exactly what happened. Suffice it to say that early on the morning of the 21st the 1st Battalion accepted the surrender of approximately 700 Germans about one mile north of position K without incurring a single casualty.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In summary, it may be said that Antitank Company (Reinf.) accomplished its mission, i.e. - the 2d and 1st Battalions captured the division objectives without serious interference by, or casualties received from enemy tanks. In all, ten German tanks were encountered by the regiment of which at least two are believed to have been counted twice. (37) Out of this number six were destroyed.

(37) The two tanks which escaped from the ambush (see pgs. 22-23) passed around E Company and are believed to be the same two encountered in the orchard.

(1) The attack of the 318th Infantry had been halted largely through the devastating effect of the fire of the 40mm and 20mm antiaircraft guns. This was forcefully brought home to the author when on 18 August he spoke with several officers of the 318th Infantry who had experienced this fire that very day. When the objective was finally captured it was evident from the gun locations and the number of empty cartridge cases strewn in the vicinity of these emplacements that a heavy volume of this type of fire had been placed upon the attacking troops of the 318th Infantry.

(2) It is believed that the responsibility placed upon CO Antitank Company through giving him command of all the AT measures assigned to the regiment placed too heavy a control burden on him. This becomes most apparent when the organizations over which he had direct command are tabulated:

- (a) the 18 57mm guns of the 317th Infantry.
- (b) the 12 guns of the company of the 610th TD Battalion.
- (c) the 8 M-10's of the 893d TD Battalion.

It may thus be seen that CO Antitank Company had command of 38 guns. The personalities of the various subordinate commanders involved, plus the problems outlined on page 7, plus the necessity for diplomatic behavior by CO Antitank Company in his position between the regimental commander and executive officer, on one hand, and the three battalion commanders, on the other, add up to a sizeable command problem. Compound this command problem by the lack of common, efficient communications with which to control two of the three main components under his command and it is evident that inefficient operation was to be the inevitable result. It is considered that the results achieved were largely the result of "main strength and awkwardness" rather than efficient operation.

(3) From the opening phases of this action a series of incidents occurred which proves that at high, as well as at low levels of command within the 80th Division a very fundamental deficiency existed, i.e. - the inability to distinguish between friendly and enemy armored vehicles. This deficiency almost resulted in a lost opportunity to destroy enemy tanks at a critical moment of the engagement, and again almost resulted in two components of the American forces becoming involved in a private battle between themselves.

(4) All of the armored vehicles destroyed in this action were destroyed by the fire of the 3-inch guns of the TD's or the 75mm tank guns. The 57mm guns could not be moved into position physically to engage enemy armor. If they had been in position it is questionable whether they would have been able to penetrate the armor of the Mark-V tank. On the other hand, the fire of the 3-inch TD guns proved to be highly accurate and easily penetrated the hull armor of the Mark-V, even at the extreme range of approximately 2,200 yards, when the towed TD's destroyed the four German tanks on the ARGENTAN - TRUN road.

(5) The apparent lack of training displayed by the driver of the 57mm prime mover in attempting to back his gun over an obstacle may be partially excused on the grounds that the individual was participating in his first real battle. However, this deficiency points up a vital lesson, in that it is considered essential that crew-served weapons immediately be placed in firing position sited on the best available field of fire, whenever halted other than momentarily on a field of battle.

(6) CO Antitank Company was placed in the untenable position of commanding units with which he had not the slightest degree of familiarity. CO Antitank Company had never, during his entire service prior to the day the units were attached to

the 317th Infantry, seen either the towed 3-inch TD gun or the M-10 TD, other than in magazine illustrations. He had not the slightest knowledge of their capabilities and limitations, or their tactics and technique. Consequently, he was faced with the hard necessity of accepting entirely the recommendations of the respective unit commanders, and when these proved to be unrealistic when applied to particular terrain, relying on his own common sense and good judgment. When this situation was compounded, owing to the sour and uncooperative attitude of one of the unit commanders, which was induced through previous unsavory experiences at the hands of individuals who were ignorant of his unit's capabilities and limitations, a serious deficiency results.

(7) Tactics and technique are thoroughly laid down in Field Manuals and instruction given at Service Schools. The tactics and technique thus learned basically are refined during training and maneuvers. However, in combat, the situation, terrain, enemy, and the unusual mental stresses generated in individuals often tend to obscure, alter or modify the tactics and technique previously learned. The degree of modification may be said to vary proportionally to the personality and mental make-up of the individual involved, and the ever present factors of the situation, terrain and enemy. Leaders must therefore constantly be prepared to alter radically and rapidly their preconceived ideas concerning tactics and technique, once combat has been joined.

LESSONS LEARNED

- (1) Automatic small caliber antiaircraft cannon are very effective weapons when used against ground targets.
- (2) No commander should be given attachments in such numbers as to be beyond his scope of command and control.
- (3) It is essential that officers and men of all

should
ranks and grades be thoroughly trained in battlefield-type recognition of enemy and friendly vehicles and equipment. This is particularly essential in the case of enemy tanks and aircraft.

(4) Small caliber towed AT guns are not capable of coping with modern armored vehicles. Owing to their lack of battlefield mobility, there is reason to doubt seriously whether towed AT guns of any caliber are useful under modern tactical and technical conditions.

(5) Troops must be trained to place crew-served weapons in firing positions and site them on the best available field of fire whenever they are halted on an active battlefield.

(6) Units which are to fight together must train together in order to obtain a mutual understanding of each other's capabilities and limitations and develop teamwork and coordination. They must also possess common communications facilities.

(7) Leaders must approach each combat situation with an open mind, prepared to alter their preconceived ideas on tactics and technique immediately, depending on the situation, terrain, enemy and, above all, the personality and mental make-up of superior, subordinate and adjacent leaders.