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OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 120TH INFANTRY
(30TH INFANTRY DIVISION) AT MORTAIN, FRANCE,
6 - 12 AUGUST 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: ISOLATED INFANTRY BATTALION
DEFENDING A KEY TERRAIN FEATURE

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry Regiment, 30th Infantry Division, in the defense of MORTAIN, FRANCE, 6 - 12 August 1944, during the "Breakout".

To enable the reader to fully understand and appreciate this action, it will be necessary to review the major plans and preceding operations of higher headquarters.

In June 1944 the U. S. First Army and the British Second Army successfully invaded the NORMANDY coast of FRANCE. The mission was "to secure a lodgement area on the continent from which further offensive operations could be developed". (1)

The initial mission was accomplished and the Allies proceeded to expand their beachhead. The slow, costly, bitter battles of the hedgerows ensued. Finally on 25 July 1944 the Allies held an east-west line from CAEN through CAUMONT and ST. LO to the west coast. (See Map A)

From this line Operation "Cobra" was launched and a penetration was effected in the ST. LO area. First Army then raced south. On 6 August 1944 First Army had advanced as far south as MAYENNE and held the line shown on Map A. (2)

On 1 August 1944 General Patton, with his Third Army, re-

(1) A-1, p. 126
(2) A-2, Situation Map #1

ceived responsibility for the area on First Army's right. At this time the British secured the high ground between the VIRE and the ORNE RIVERS and continued to keep pressure on the enemy's right flank. Resistance on the enemy left flank crumbled and the long awaited breakout was achieved. (3)

The U. S. 30th Infantry Division landed in FRANCE during the period 13-14 June 1944 and launched its first attack on 15 June 1944. The division participated in the hedgerow battles and was one of the spearhead divisions in the ST. LO breakthrough, and was now a part of XIX Corps of First Army. (4)

GENERAL SITUATION AND PLANS

First Army planned to take advantage of this situation and inflict the greatest possible damage to the enemy. This was to be done by retaining power in the center of the sector and striking a crossblow at the enemy's crumbling left flank. In order to carry out this plan there were some shifts of Corps boundaries, and consequently a shifting of divisions between Corps was necessary.

On 5 August 1944 the U. S. 30th Infantry Division was shifted from XIX Corps to VII Corps. VII Corps now was composed of the 1st, 4th, 9th and 30th Infantry Divisions and the 3d Armored Division, and was deployed on the right flank of First Army. The advance of the entire First Army had slowed down appreciably; enemy resistance was stiffening. Apparently the enemy had bolstered his left flank and was concentrating power in the vicinity of MORTAIN. (5)

Elements of the 1st Division had reached MORTAIN, con-

(3) A-4, p. 274
(4) A-4, p. 16
(5) A-2, p. 4

solidated positions, and were aggressively patrolling to the front. These patrols met increasingly strong resistance and on several occasions encountered armor. This proved later to be a part of the armor Field Marshal von Kluge had massed for his ill-fated drive to AVRANCHES and the sea. (6)

The most critical terrain in the area lay in the vicinity of MORTAIN and extended west to the sea. The town of MORTAIN formed a road junction of north-south and east-west roads leading west to AVRANCHES. There were two main roads leading from MORTAIN to AVRANCHES. Between these two roads lay commanding ground, the highest point being HILL 314, control of this ground meant control of the roads. There were numerous secondary roads in the area, all of which would support heavy traffic. (7) (See Map B)

On 5 August 1944 the 30th U. S. Division passed to the control of VII Corps and was ordered to progressively relieve the 1st U. S. Division as soon as possible. Relief of the 1st Division would allow VII Corps to extend its line and to continue knifing into the enemy's flank and rear. (8)

ENEMY DISPOSITIONS -- 4 AUGUST 1944

On 4 August 1944 the bulk of the German 7th Army, minus XXV Corps, faced the U. S. First Army with II Parachute Corps on the northern flank. Extending south was LXXIV Corps and XLVII Panzer Corps, with LXXXI Corps protecting the southern flank. The XLVII Panzer Corps was comprised of the 116th Panzer Division, 275th Infantry Division, the 1st, 2d and 10th S.S. Panzer Divisions. These units were located to the east and

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- (6) A-3, p. 236
(7) Personal knowledge
(8) A-5, 6 August 44

southeast of MORTAIN. (9) (Approximate locations shown on Map A)

DISPOSITION OF THE 120TH INFANTRY

On 2 August 1944 the 30th Division as a whole passed into XIX Corps reserve. The 120th Infantry was given a well earned rest in the vicinity of TESSY-SUR-VIRE during the period 3 - 4 August 1944. Reorganize and rest was the order until 5 August 1944, when the regiment was alerted for movement. (10)

THE BATTALION SITUATION

On 2 August the 2nd Battalion was ordered into a rest area in the vicinity of TESSY-SUR-VIRE. The battalion welcomed this opportunity to rest and especially to reorganize. The fighting around TESSY had been fierce and casualties were heavy.

During this period replacements were received, the men were paid, given showers and clean clothes. The battalion was completely re-equipped. U.S.O. shows and Red Cross Coffee Wagons were nearby. Replacements had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the men, non-commissioned officers and platoon leaders of their respective platoons. This situation was rare indeed.

All was not play however. On company level previous combat lessons were taught to the replacements and, much to the disgust of all concerned, small unit tactical maneuvers were practiced and studied. Morale was extremely high. (11)

(9) A-2, p. 4

(10) A-10, p. 43

(11) Personal knowledge

MOVEMENT TO MORTAIN

At 052024 August the 120th RCT received the order to move by motor from the vicinity of TESSY-SUR-VIRE to the town of PERCY, where the convoy would be met by guides and conducted to MORTAIN. The mission was to relieve the 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division. Leading elements of the RCT crossed the I.P. at 060130 August. The move south to MORTAIN, a distance of approximately 45 miles, was uneventful and the regiment closed into its assembly area at about 061000 August.

The Regimental Commander, having received no information other than a movement order and his mission, preceded the regiment to MORTAIN. The information received from the 18th Infantry Commander regarding the enemy was favorable though sketchy. The area had been comparatively quiet and apparently there was no immediate threat. As a result the front line battalions went into line with only information gained from Battalion and Company Commanders of the 18th Infantry. A physical daylight relief was decided upon by the two Regimental Commanders. (12)

NARRATION

6 AUGUST: THE FIRST DAY AND NIGHT AT MORTAIN

The 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, with K Company attached and two platoons of Tank Destroyers and one platoon from the A. T. Company in support, were to relieve the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry and attachments on the high ground east of MORTAIN.

(12) A-10, p. 43

The 2d Battalion Commander and staff proceeded to the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry C.P. Guides were furnished from each company and the Company Commanders went on a reconnaissance of their respective areas. In the meantime the battalion was being moved forward on foot by the Battalion Executive Officer.

The order to move had been executed so rapidly, it had been impossible for regiment to secure maps of this area. However the 2d Battalion S-2 secured a few large scale maps from the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, scarcely enough for a company. In addition the Company Commanders of the 1st Battalion turned their maps over to the relieving companies. These had been in use for several days and were crumpled and badly marked.

To effect the fastest relief possible the exact positions of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, were taken over by the 2d Battalion, 120th, with the exception of the tanks of the 1st Battalion, 18th. The 2d Battalion had no tanks, either attached or in support at this time. As a consequence the 2d Battalion had no reserve. Wire nets were left in place, and the fire plan of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, was accepted by the 2d Battalion Commander until such time as he could formulate his own. The 2d Battalion completed the relief and accepted responsibility for the area at approximately 061350 August.

(13) (14) (See Map C)

It must be pointed out at this time that the positions prepared by the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, were for a hasty defense only and were never intended to contain a strong counter-attack. Although they were sufficient for a hasty defense they were far from satisfactory for a sustained defense. The line

(13) A-10, p. 46

(14) Personal knowledge

was of necessity extended and thinly held. The Battalion Command and Company Commanders were fully aware of this and planned to improve the position with fortifications, mines, etc., as soon as they became available. Unfortunately these intended improvements never came to pass.

The 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, had scarcely cleared the area when the first signs of enemy activity appeared. At approximately 1430 hours a lone enemy plane was sighted overhead. Shortly thereafter a group of five enemy planes were sighted and bombing could be heard well to the rear. All of the commanders were very much concerned over this since this was the first daylight air offensive the battalion had ever encountered. The battalion was alerted and continued to improve individual positions as much as possible. Digging was difficult, the ground was hard and rocky, and in some places solid rock was encountered eight inches below the surface. The artillery and cannon observers arrived and registered their protective fires. With the exception of the air activity, all had been quiet.

The kitchens had accompanied the battalion on the move south and at dusk a hot meal was served and two K ration units issued to each man for breakfast and dinner the following day. The area was extremely quiet and seemed much like the rest area of the day before.

Perhaps the battalion was suffering a false sense of security. If so, possibly the following factors contributed to it: a. There was no concrete information regarding the enemy; b. The move to MORTAIN had been made with no enemy contact.

The French civilians had lined the roads, cheering, throwing bouquets and offering drinks at every halt. One could easily feel that the Germans would not stop short of the RHINE. If such a feeling existed, it was quickly squelched. (15)

At approximately 070100 August the enemy launched his attack in force. Striking from the east and southeast he quickly overran the roadblock south of MORTAIN, and in a matter of minutes was in the outskirts of MORTAIN itself. Small groups succeeded in infiltrating into G Company's sector, screaming at the top of their voices "Heil Hitler"! The group's attack was vicious and made enough noise that one could easily believe an entire battalion was attacking. Their success was short-lived, however. At the first crack of dawn G Company annihilated them. (16)

At approximately 070200 August the enemy's attack hit the left flank of the battalion in the vicinity of ABBAYE BLANCHE. The roadblock held its position and inflicted severe casualties on the enemy. A number of the enemy bypassed the block, however, and entered MORTAIN from the north.

Since battalion had no reserve, regiment committed its reserve, Company C, with the mission of driving the enemy out of MORTAIN and reestablishing the southern roadblock. Company C was unable to accomplish this mission, and by dawn the enemy occupied MORTAIN with infantry and armor. Elements of the 2d Battalion on HILL 314 were completely surrounded. (17)

7 AUGUST: THE SECOND DAY AND NIGHT

The dawn was accompanied by a dense fog. So dense, in fact, that some of the units on the hill thought the enemy was

(15) Personal knowledge

(16) Personal knowledge

(17) A-10, p. 47

smoking the position. By 0800 hours the sun had burned through the mist and revealed columns of enemy armor and foot troops streaming from the east and southeast.

Whether the enemy was ignorant of the fact that the hill was occupied, or had simply chosen to ignore it, is not known and really doesn't matter. His closed formations made a beautiful target for our artillery. Corps artillery was called and the casualties and damage to vehicles was incredible. The undamaged vehicles quickly dispersed and withdrew. The artillery and cannon observers registered additional concentrations and now a solid ring of artillery fire could be fired on call.
(18)

If the enemy had not known before the hill was occupied, he certainly knew it now. Apparently they now realized the importance of controlling the hill. If they gained the hill, not only would they eliminate our artillery fire but would have excellent observation for miles on our positions.

At approximately 1000 hours the enemy dumped everything in the book in the line of artillery and mortar fire on our positions, and K and E Companies received a bombing and strafing attack. The enemy infantry, with some armor, followed the artillery preparation closely. Our own artillery was called on and was very effective in breaking up the attack. The main attack had been broken, but not before the enemy had made a penetration into E Company's area. A severe fire fight resulted, and finally the enemy was driven out and the lines reestablished. E Company paid a price for this small victory; casualties were high. (19)

(18) Personal knowledge

(19) Personal knowledge

Units on the hill had been out of contact with the Battalion Commander and the C.P. since the first attack started. The Battalion C.P. was located in the town of MORTAIN. By this time there were more enemy troops in the town than there were of our troops, and the Battalion Commander decided to join his units on the hill. He and his staff were forced into hiding and were captured the following day. The group included the Battalion Commander, Executive Officer, S-2, and S-3 and approximately 15 men from Battalion Headquarters Company. (20)

Since there was no communication with battalion, the senior officer, F Company Commander, assumed command temporarily. The bulk of F Company was in the town however, and isolated from the rest of the battalion. The defense of the hill was left to the initiative of the Rifle Company Commanders on the hill. Each company commander picked the strongest point in his area and set up individual perimeter defenses. (21)

At approximately 1400 hours the enemy attempted to take the hill from the west, that is, from the town of MORTAIN itself. G Company repulsed this attack in short order, but again the enemy succeeded in inflicting casualties. During the night the enemy sent patrols into the area. Although they were allowed to come up onto the hill they never got off. Each company formed patrols and ferreted them out.

The last of the K rations were consumed at noon, ammunition was dangerously low and the evacuation of dead and wounded was impossible. This was one of the most serious problems confronting the commanders. Communication with regiment was entirely by radio, and this contact was sporadic. Regiment was request-

(20) A-10, p. 48

(21) Personal knowledge

ed to supply by air food, ammunition, and medical supplies.

Although the enemy harassed the position all night with patrols, artillery and mortar fire, morale was fair at the end of this period. (22)

8 AUGUST: THE THIRD DAY AND NIGHT

The 8th of August was fairly quiet. The enemy made no serious attempts to take the position. He continued his attack, bypassing the hill. The observers on the hill had all around observation and made the most of it. The enemy supply lines and rear areas were constantly harassed by our artillery.

The serious problems of food, ammunition, and medical supplies still confronted the battalion. Radio batteries were rapidly weakening. In an effort to conserve the batteries, only one company turned on its radio at a time, with the exception of calling fire missions. Orders and information received from regiment was disseminated to the companies by patrols.

The wounded were collected in each company and placed in slit-trenches. They were made as comfortable as possible; however there was no medical aid available. Presence of the dead did not serve to raise morale. Since most of the dead were in exposed positions it was necessary to wait until dark to collect them. They too were placed in a central location in each company area, out of sight. Although the men knew the bodies had not been evacuated from the hill, they couldn't see them and the same purpose was served as if they had been evacuated.

Enemy combat patrols harassed the position all night and the battalion got little or no sleep. In spite of the adverse

(22) Personal knowledge

conditions, morale remained fair. (23)

9 AUGUST: SURRENDER ULTIMATUM

Attempts by regiment and the remainder of the division to relieve the battalion had failed. The first gnawing pains of hunger and thirst were appearing. The ammunition supply had dwindled to practically nothing. Several of the severely wounded died during the night. The bodies of the dead, both our own and the enemy, were deteriorating fast in the warm August sun and the stench on the hill was nauseating. The future looked anything but bright, and morale was on a rapid decline. (24)

In an effort to relieve the situation, supplies were loaded into two of division artillery liaison planes with the mission of supplying the battalion. Both of these planes were hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire as soon as they approached enemy lines. It was apparent that if the battalion was to be supplied by air it would have to be done by faster craft.

Division next tried to schedule a flight of C-47's for the supply mission. Finally, after four requests were made through slow moving channels, a flight was scheduled for 10 August. This information was relayed to the besieged men but, due to past unpleasant experiences with close supporting air there was some doubt of success in the minds of the men. (25)

The enemy had no doubt been monitoring our radio and knew the existing situation. At approximately 1300 hours a German officer approached E Company positions under a white flag. He was met by a platoon leader from E Company. The German stated he was an officer of the S.S. and was in a position to offer

(23) Personal knowledge
(24) Personal knowledge
(25) A-7, p. 67

honorable surrender to the Americans. He further stated that he personally had admired the stand made by the battalion. He was very careful to point out, however, that the situation was hopeless. Here he named several of the officers in the Battalion Command Group who were captured. He further pointed out that certainly it would be no disgrace to surrender under the circumstances, and promised that the men would be well cared for and the wounded given every possible aid. His last promise was that if his offer was not accepted by 2000 hours the battalion would be blown to bits. The platoon leader relayed the message to E Company Commander. Some sources quote E Company Commander as saying that he would not surrender until the last round of ammunition had been fired and the last bayonet broken in a German belly. Actually the reply wasn't quite so dramatic. It was short, to the point and very unprintable. (26) (27)

True to their promise the enemy launched a strong attack at approximately 2015 hours. The battalion ammunition supply was so low the enemy encountered little resistance other than our artillery. After the enemy had penetrated the position E Company Commander called artillery on his own position. This broke up the attack and the enemy took a severe beating. This success served as a "shot in the arm" to the sagging morale on the hill.

10 AUGUST: THE AIR DROP

Although the air drop had been scheduled for 10 August the men on the hill had little hope for success. The morning had been spent in comparative quiet. At approximately 1530 hours

(26) A-10, p. 49

(27) Personal knowledge

a group of our fighter planes appeared and dive bombed and strafed several enemy areas, starting fires and explosions. After they had accomplished their mission they circled and came in low over the battalion position. The men on the hill jumped for their holes, fearing that the fighters had mistaken our positions for that of the enemy. Their fears were false however. At 1600 hours the fighters returned, escorting a flight of C-47's. Possibly the most beautiful sight the men had ever seen was the multicolored parachutes lazily floating down. Approximately half of the drop landed far into the enemy lines, but at last the Battalion had food, ammunition and a limited amount of medical supplies. One of the most important items contained in the drop was radio batteries. A report was made to regiment of the drop and an attempt to schedule another drop was made, especially for medical supplies. (23)

In the meantime the S-3 of the 230th Field Artillery Battalion had an idea to relieve the situation. Ten rounds of M-84 (base ejection HC smoke) ammunition were opened and the smoke cannisters and base ejection charge removed. The rounds were then filled with medical supplies, bandages, dressings, sulfanilamide and morphine syrettes. The steel disc in the nose was replaced to prevent the fuze, when detonated, from ruining the contents. Four other shells were treated likewise and filled with sand to approximately the same weight. These rounds were to be used for adjustment. The S-3 then made his intentions known to the men on the hill and gave instructions for opening the projectiles. The adjustment was completed at ap-

(28) Personal knowledge

proximately 2130 hours and the medical rounds were then fired. None of these rounds were recovered due to ricochets and darkness. (29) (30)

Even though the medical supplies were badly needed, the presence of food and ammunition served to raise morale to a new high.

11 AUGUST: ENEMY WITHDRAWAL

As soon as the mist lifted on 11 August the artillery again attempted to fire in medical supplies. Six rounds were fired and all recovered. This operation was only partially successful, however, the concussion being too great for the containers of the morphine and plasma. (31)

Enemy traffic toward the east was increasing, with very little traffic toward our lines. Evidently the enemy was starting a withdrawal. With communications reestablished with regiment and the artillery, the battalion was able to inflict untold damage on the withdrawing columns. Air strikes were requested, and were carried out at what seemed the same moment. The Air Corps pounded the enemy columns unmercifully and the burning enemy columns could be seen for miles in all directions. This slaughter continued all day.

During the night the major enemy foot elements started their withdrawal. Our artillery plastered every available route of withdrawal and was very effective, as was evidenced by the screams and hysterical cries of the enemy. There was no doubt now that relief was certain, and the battalion rested and listened to the constant ring of outgoing artillery. (32)

(29) A-13, Extract p. 100-101

(30) A-6, p. 19

(31) Personal knowledge

(32) Personal knowledge

12 AUGUST: RELIEF

Elements of the 35th Division had been putting constant pressure on the enemy south of MORTAIN. They were aware of the battalion situation and had brought supplies along with their assault echelon. At approximately 1130 hours the leading elements of the 320th Infantry made contact with G Company. Even though they had undergone heavy fighting and had suffered severe casualties they quickly evacuated the wounded and distributed food. The 1st Battalion, 119th Infantry, came through the town and made contact with K Company. The 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, was completely relieved at 1300 hours, 12 August. The battalion had succeeded in fulfilling its mission, but at a bloody price. The battalion lost a total of 277 men killed, captured and missing in action. (33)

It would be impossible to record here the acts of self sacrifice and personal bravery displayed by the men and officers of the battalion during this period. They were magnificent. Some of these men were rewarded for their actions; some were not. Due to the fast-moving situation recommendations for awards were processed unusually slow, and some of the men were awarded decorations posthumously. Some of the awards were made as late as November.

This battalion had often been referred to in official and unofficial documents as the "Lost Battalion of World War II". This is a misnomer if ever there was one -- the battalion was isolated, but never lost.

(33) A-10, p. 264

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. INTELLIGENCE

In order for intelligence to be of any value it must be disseminated in time to be used. Throughout this entire operation the battalion source of information was by observation. Documents of higher headquarters indicate that this attack was expected at approximately the date and place it happened. This information was not passed down to the front line units. Had the front line units known of this impending attack, food and ammunition could have been dumped on position, adequate communications could have been arranged, and above all a different type of defense could have been planned. The same mission could have been accomplished at a much lighter cost in manpower and equipment.

2. CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE

This hill was successfully defended, but at a price we can ill afford to pay. The situation dictated that this relief be made as fast as possible. Commanders concerned allowed too little time to make the relief, and as a result some elements of the battalion had no idea where the rest of the battalion was located. Fires between companies were not properly coordinated. In occupying the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, positions, the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, found itself with no reserve whatsoever. This proved to be a very costly mistake. There must be depth to any defensive position. Supporting fires were not properly coordinated until after the enemy had bypassed the position.

3. SUPPORTING ARMS

Nothing but praise can be given to the supporting arms, mainly artillery and air. Had it not been for the artillery there can be little doubt the battalion would have been destroyed or captured. The lions share must go to the artillery for the successful defense of this hill. They accounted for numerous enemy vehicles and inflicted terrible losses to foot troops.

The air drop was the only supply the battalion had for its entire stay on the hill. They also literally "played Hell" with the enemy armored columns and assembly areas. They made his supply routes a dangerous road to travel.

4. COMMUNICATIONS

After the enemy launched his first attack, communications were entirely by radio. Security was poor, and no doubt the enemy was well informed on the situation of the battalion. This was evidenced by the timely request of the enemy to surrender.

5. EVACUATION

The presence of dead and wounded within the position was detrimental to morale. Rapid evacuation is most important where possible. In the event evacuation is impossible they must be removed from sight, and their positions carefully marked and reported. In this particular action this was not done. As a consequence several bodies have not been recovered to date.

6. LEADERSHIP

The leadership of the officers and NCO's of this battalion was superb. Knowing that the Battalion Commander and staff were captured, the company officers issued and carried out orders they felt ordinarily would have been issued. The NCO's were outstanding, many of them being called on to perform duties ordinarily expected of officers. They were very efficient and accepted their duties as a challenge. This was a situation where personal example and contact was of all importance. Some of these men displayed personal bravery that was amazing, and by their acts they certainly inspired their men and instilled the will to win in the heart of every man.

7. AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

The recommendations for awards to the men of this battalion were too slow. During the time from submission to final action many men had been killed. The bulk of the awards were made in late November. This is entirely too long, as the award loses much of its effect when delayed such a long time.

LESSONS

1. Detailed intelligence reports must be disseminated to the lowest unit as well as higher units.
2. Our present principles of defense are sound and must be adhered to. Under no circumstances should depth be omitted from a defensive plan. Supporting fires must be well coordinated with organic fires.
3. Radio security must be practiced at all times.

4. Dead and wounded must be evacuated as rapidly as possible.

5. Added responsibilities should be given to NCO's, especially in training.

6. Awards and decorations must be processed as rapidly as possible and appropriate presentation ceremonies held.

7. A determined isolated unit, supplied by air, can defend a position indefinitely.