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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 320TH INFANTRY (55TH
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON MORTAIN, FRANCE,
10-12 AUGUST 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION
ATTACKING AND DEFENDING IN HEDGEROWED TERRAIN IN
PERFORMING A RESCUE MISSION

Captain Carlton G. Thornblow, Infantry

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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 320TH INFANTRY (35TH
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK ON MORTAIN, FRANCE,
10-12 AUGUST 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Battalion, 320th Infantry, 35th U. S. Division in the battle of MORTAIN, FRANCE, 10-12 August 1944.

The following brief discussion of the preceding major events will enable the reader to more clearly visualize the action to be described.

On 6 June 1944, the American First Army and elements of the British Second and Canadian First Armies successfully invaded FRANCE in the CHERBOURG PENINSULA area. (See Map A) (1) From the five invasion beaches reinforcements and supplies served to assist in the rapid exploitations of the landings; and by 25 July 1944, the port of CHERBOURG and the key communication center of ST. LO had been captured and the enemy had been driven from all of the CHERBOURG PENINSULA. (See Map A) (2)

The First U. S. Army, after the breakthrough in the ST. LO area, was attacking along a front extending westward from VIRE; and by 6 August had made rapid advances in their right sector, which resulted in the capture of MORTAIN. (3)

On 1 August, the Third U. S. Army began a rapid armored advance from the right sector of the First U. S. Army toward the BATTANY PENINSULA; and by 8 August spearhead had reached

- (1) A-3, p. 38
(2) A-3, p. 275
(3) A-3, p. 273, 274

as far south as RENNES, LAVAL, and ST. MALO. (See Map A)

At the same time the British and Canadian armies were slowly but steadily advancing in the vicinity of CAEN against strong German resistance. (See Map A)

The rapid progress made by the First and Third Armies resulted in an irregular front which formed a corridor in the shape of a bottleneck, with AVRANCHES on the west side and MORTAIN on the east. (See Map A)

On the morning of 7 August 1944, the Germans threw all of their available forces (initially 1 Panzer Corps) into a counter-attack from the MORTAIN area westward in an all-out effort to sever the corridor and capture AVRANCHES - thus cutting off the assault elements of the First and Third Armies from the remainder of the Allied forces. By noon on the day of their counterattack the Germans had recaptured MORTAIN and had advanced three miles along the high ground toward AVRANCHES. (See Map B) (4)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The First and Third U. S. Armies now formed the 12th Army Group under the command of General Omar Bradley. General Bradley's plan for repelling the German counterattack was to employ as few divisions as possible against the enemy's advancing spearheads; then throw the bulk of his forces toward the south and east in an envelopment of the German lines and into his rear areas. (5)

VII Corps, to which the 35th Division was to be attached for this operation, held the right sector of the First U. S. Army front. The Corps had the duty of assisting in blocking

(4) A-2, p. 5

(5) A-3, p. 373

the German counterattack and assisting the Third Army in enveloping the German lines from the south. (6) The mission was divided into two phases: the blocking phase and the enveloping phases. The Corps plan was to use the 1st Infantry Division and the 3d Armored Division in the enveloping phase, and the 4th, 30th, 9th, and 35th Infantry Divisions plus Combat Command B of the 2d Armored Division for the blocking phase. (See Map B) (7)

At the time of the German counterattack the 35th U. S. Division was in an assembly area near ST. HILAIRE, south of AVRANCHES. The division was alerted on 7 August and was informed that it would be committed in the MORTAIN-LE TEILLEUL sector as part of VII Corps, First U. S. Army. (8) The division was further informed that it would occupy a position between the ~~30th~~ Infantry Division and Combat Command B of the 2d Armored Division, just south of the MORTAIN-BARENTON-ST. CYR HIGHWAY. (9)

The 35th Division's assigned mission was to clear the enemy from south of MORTAIN and seize the main MORTAIN ROAD (MORTAIN to BARENTON). (10) (See Map C) The Division planned to attack with two regimental combat teams abreast and one in reserve. Combat Teams 134 and 137 were to lead the attack; Combat Team 320 was to be the Division Reserve. (See Map C)

The terrain over which the division was to operate sloped gently upward to the vicinity of the MORTAIN-BARENTON HIGHWAY; then rose abruptly to a height of about 300 feet in the area east of MORTAIN. The gently sloping terrain was covered by

(6) A-2, Situation Map 1, and p. 4

(7) A-2, Situation Map 1, and p. 4

(8) A-4, Chapter IV

(9) A-1, Chapter IV

(10) A-5

small fields within a network of sunken roads and hedgerows. These hedgerows consisted of mounds of earth averaging from three to five feet in height and two to five feet in thickness, and were usually covered with small brush and other vegetation. Sunken roads are roads that are bordered on each side by hedgerows. (See Annex 1) These hedgerows offered excellent protection from enemy small arms fire and artillery bursts. However, in advancing over the hedgerows, the attacker was forced to expose himself to enemy automatic and small arms fire. The enemy occupied all of the commanding ground in the area. This, and his ability to defend from the hedgerows, gave him a definite advantage as far as terrain was concerned.

The 35th Division had been in combat in NORMANDY for a period of 26 days and though it had suffered heavy casualties in men and equipment, it had gained a wealth of knowledge about fighting the Germans and attacking over the hedgerows. Shortly before this operation the division had received enough replacements to bring the regiments almost to full strength in enlisted personnel, but many of the line companies needed officers. (11) The success that the division had made in previous operations plus the brief stay in the assembly area caused the morale of the troops to be excellent. In general, the logistical support was favorable and the flow of all supplies was normal with no outstanding shortages existing. (12) Enemy units opposing the division were forces of the DAS REICH Division reinforced by panzer (armored) units. These units were well supplied and equipped, their reserves were considered to be ample, and their morale was excellent. (13) Enemy positions

(11) Personal knowledge

(12) A-6

(13) A-6

of the two opposing forces was considered to be excellent and approximately equal. The weather was warm; the skies were clear; visibility above the height of the hedgerows was unlimited.

At 2030 on 7 August, the Division was ordered to occupy its assigned zone of action. (See Map C) Upon arrival in its zone, the division's two leading regimental combat teams began moving toward their objective against moderate resistance. By 9 August, after bitter fighting, the town of BARENTON had been captured and part of the MORTAIN-BARENTON HIGHWAY had been secured. Regimental Combat Team 320, commanded by Colonel B. A. Byrne, was in a reserve position in the vicinity of the town of MILLY. At 1535 hours on 9 August, its task force organization was dissolved. (14)

DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF THE 320TH INFANTRY (See Map B)

During the afternoon of 9 August, the 320th Infantry, was given the mission of capturing the town of MORTAIN and seizing HILL 317 just east of the town. The 2d and 3d Battalions were to lead the attack along the ST. HILLAIRE-MORTAIN HIGHWAY. The 3d Battalion was to attack along the left sector and capture the left portion of the regimental objective; the 2d Battalion was to attack on the right and seize the right half. (15) The 1st Battalion was to remain in reserve and secure the right flank of the regiment.

THE BATTALION SITUATION (See Map D)

On 10 August, the 1st Battalion was located in its reserve

(14) A-10, 9 August 1944

(15) Statement by Colonel B. A. Byrne, then Regimental Commander 320th Infantry, 22 February 1950

position in the vicinity of VILLECHIEU. (16) At this time word was received that told of the perilous condition of the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, of the 30th Infantry Division, which had been surrounded by the Germans on HILL 317 at MORTAIN since the morning of 7 August. (17) Despite continuous attacks against their positions from all directions and repeated demands from the Germans to surrender, the badly depleted battalion continued to hold HILL 317. They had no medical supplies with which to care for their wounded; they were out of food; and their ammunition was all but exhausted. Repeated attempts to resupply the battalion by air had met with little success - with most of the supplies landing in the areas held by the Germans. (18) The 30th Division Artillery fired in artillery shells containing medical supplies; however, this method of resupply met with little success, since only small quantities could be fired at one time and ~~much of the supplies~~ on impact was great. (19) Efforts to furnish relief to this besieged battalion by other units of the 30th Division had failed. (20)

The 1st Battalion, 520th Infantry, was later designated as the division reserve and was informed by division at 1200 hours, 10 August, that it was to be assigned the mission of contacting and relieving the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, on HILL 317 at MORTAIN. The battalion would be under division control until it crossed the line of departure, at which time control would revert to regiment. Preparations for the attack

(16) A-8

(17) A-8

(18) A-8

(19) A-8

(20) A-8

(20) A-8

Classified by Colonel G. A. Spina, then commanding of
1100P, 520th Infantry, 24 February 1950

were to be made as rapidly as possible. The route of the attack was to be along ROAD 4 (a sunken road), which ran diagonally across the zones of the 2d and 3d Battalions. (21) The battalion moved to an assembly area (of a sort) northeast of NOTRE-DAME DE TOUCHET, where it was joined by the 737th Tank Battalion. Task Force Gillis was formed (named for the Battalion Commander, Major William G. Gillis) consisting of the 1st Battalion and the attached 737th Tank Battalion. (22)

In the assembly area the troops were given two K rations and ammunition was issued. The Battalion Commander moved out for a brief reconnaissance of the area from which the attack was to be made. At 1420 company commanders were ordered to move immediately to the vicinity of the designated line of departure to receive the battalion attack order. At this time the battalion was about 90 percent strength in officers and enlisted personnel. C Company Commander was informed that no replacement officers would be available to fill the three officer vacancies that existed in his company.

The terrain in the battalion zone of action was essentially the same as was previously described in the General Situation. Enemy strength in the area was unknown. The weather was fair and clear.

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK (23)

The 1st Battalion plan for the forthcoming attack called for all troops of Company B, with one section of machine guns from D Company attached, and one platoon of Company C to ride the tanks of the leading tank company and spearhead the attack

(21) Statement by Colonel M. A. Lister, Battalion Commander

(22) A-10, 10 August 1954

northward up ROAD 4 to MORTAIN. The two remaining tank companies would carry no infantry and would advance at the rear of the tank-infantry column. Company C (-), with a section of heavy machine guns from Company D attached, and Company A would attack on the right and left side of the road respectively and would make every effort to keep up with and protect the flanks of the leading tank elements. One half of a squad would ride on each tank, with the exception of the lead tank, which would carry no personnel. No part of any unit was to be withheld as battalion reserve.

The time of the attack would be 1500 hours 10 August; the line of departure was to be the ST. JEAN-MILLY ROAD. (See Map D)

The attack was to move as rapidly as possible; all but strong enemy resistance was to be bypassed. The tanks were ordered to stay on ROAD 4 and advance at full cruising speed after crossing the line of departure.

The enemy could be heard registering artillery fire along the road over which the battalion was to attack. Intermittent harassing fire was falling in the stream beds and woods in the battalion zone and along the road which was to be the line of departure. Information had been received stating that the Germans were well dug-in along the high ground near MORTAIN. (24)

Company D was to support the attack by firing 81 mm mortar concentrations along the route of advance until its fires were masked by the attacking elements. The artillery was to fire a 10-minute preparation prior to the attack and fire smoke shells to mark targets. Division artillery was to fire at tar-

(24) A-C

sets of opportunity along the battalions route of advance. An air strike was to hit MORTAIN during the attack. (25)

Phase lines and check points were designated for control purposes.

Only SCR 300 radios and messengers were to be used as means of communication due to the rapid progress that was anticipated after the attack was launched. The battalion command group was to follow elements of Company A and maintain contact with the companies through the use of the SCR 300 radios. No direct radio communication was possible between the command group and the tank commanders. (26)

The battalion aid station was to remain mobile and advance in rear of the battalion command group until such time as it became necessary to establish an aid station location.

NARRATION

THE ATTACK UP ROAD 4

At 1500 hours 10 August, the head of the tank-infantry column crossed the line of departure with B Company and one platoon of C Company riding tanks and leading the attack. The remainder of C Company and A Company were on the right and left of the road respectively and were advancing at a rapid rate in an effort to keep up with the leading tanks. Only intermittent artillery fire was landing in the area at this time.

Shortly after crossing the line of departure the lead tank was disabled by a German 88mm anti-tank gun at a range of approximately 50 yards. (27) This gun had been dug into a hedge-

(25) Statement by Colonel B. A. [redacted] Infantry, 24 February 1950.

(26) Personal knowledge

(27) A. T. [redacted] IV

row and was cleverly camouflaged. The second tank quickly pulled along side of the damaged tank, and before the Germans could reload and fire, scored a direct hit on the anti-tank gun, knocking it out of action. (28)

As if this preliminary action had been a signal, an intense enemy barrage began falling on the column. This was followed by long range small arms fire which caused the tanks to close their hatches and infantrymen to dismount the tanks and seek cover. These enemy fires were of short duration and were ineffective, due to the cover afforded by the hedgerows, and therefore casualties were light.

This incident was the beginning of a period of about three hours in which confusion reigned. In succeeding instances the tank crews were unaware that the infantry had dismounted, since the tanks hatches were closed, and no way was provided to notify the tank crew when they were forced from the tanks. This lack of communication resulted in the tanks' continuing to move forward while the infantry was dismounted, forcing the infantry half squads to disregard tactical integrity and mount any of the succeeding crowded tanks individually or as best they could.

The tank column again began to move rapidly along ROAD 4, with Companies C (-) and A in their original formations, against light to moderate resistance. The men from Companies B and C that were riding tanks were forced to dismount frequently and seek cover from small arms fire and enemy artillery fragments. However, in many instances the men stayed on the tanks in spite of these fires. It took courage to stay perched on the tanks,

(33) Personal knowledge

for in doing so, the height of the tank placed the infantrymen above the protection of the hedgerows bordering the road and in full view of the enemy.

At approximately 1545 a tank at the head of the column was knocked out by concealed enemy anti-tank fire at close range, killing the tank crew. (29) This gun was taken under fire by the 75 mm guns of several tanks and by the infantrymen, and was quickly knocked out and the gun crew of three was killed. The advance continued and by 1600 hours the column had advanced one mile from the line of departure. (30)

Company A and Company C (-) were finding it extremely difficult to keep abreast of the rapidly advancing tank column; hence, resistance in their areas, other than enemy firing at close range, had to be by-passed. This caused the tank commanders a great deal of concern, for they feared that without flank protection they would be subjected to the fires of the powerful German panzerfaust.* To partially overcome this threat the tank machine gunners fired their guns at rapid rates, grazing the tops of the hedgerows on each side of the road. Literally thousands of rounds were being fired and the road was a mass of ammunition boxes and .30 calibre and 75 mm brass.

As the battalion continued to advance along ROAD 4 at approximately 1630, stronger enemy resistance was encountered. A series of well placed enemy anti-tank guns halted all but the leading five tanks by knocking out two tanks in rapid succession. At the same time, the Germans launched an attack on the column's right flank in C Company's sector. The remaining tanks in the column tried in vain to maneuver into positions from which they

(29) Personal knowledge
(30) A-1, Chapter IV
* German rocket launcher

could place fire on the enemy anti-tank guns. One tank, while making repeated attempts to burst through the hedgerows and maneuver so that it could fire at the attacking gun, was hit broadside by a round from another enemy gun and was set on fire. (31) At least six tanks, in spite of their inability to maneuver, began firing their 75 mm cannons and their machine guns into the enemy positions. The infantry accompanying the tanks engaged the enemy guns with all its available weapons. After a long and bitter battle, one of the enemy anti-tank guns was knocked out and its crew was killed; two other anti-tank guns were abandoned. (32) Four tankers and one infantryman were killed and four others were wounded. Two tankers escaped from the burning tank, but were badly burned. (33)

Meanwhile Company C (-) was still engaged on the right flank of the column. It was receiving heavy close range, small arms fire from an estimated platoon of attacking Germans. The company's 60 mm mortars rained shells into the path of the enemy's advance and succeeded in halting the attack, but did not force the enemy to withdraw. The company commander moved to ROAD 4 and secured the cannon fire of two of the Sherman tanks. This fire, along with the company's mortar and machine gun fire, forced the enemy to withdraw.

The five leading tanks that were not stopped by this action proceeded on up ROAD 4 toward MORTAIN.

Confusion was at its worst at this time in the column. Squads and platoons were intermingled; tanks were forcing their way past those that had been knocked out; and walking wounded were plodding back toward the battalion aid station. The lead-

- (31) Personal knowledge
- (32) Personal knowledge
- (33) Personal knowledge

ing tank company commander was anxious to get his tanks moving before the Germans could again reorganize. However, this point apparently already had been considered by B Company Commander, for the leading tanks again had started to move forward. The infantrymen again climbed upon the tanks and the attack continued against only moderate resistance. The wounded who were unable to walk were attended by aid men, and their positions reported to battalion.

As the column moved rapidly along the road a German tank, located on the right of the road, fired upon one of the tanks on which B Company was riding. However, the enemy tank missed its mark and was knocked out by the cannon of the Sherman tank. (34) Later two more tanks were knocked out by a German anti-tank gun firing at point blank range. After this firing, the Germans quickly abandoned their gun.

At approximately 1730 hours as the column neared the small village of LA MENNERIE, enemy artillery and small arms fire again forced the infantrymen to dismount from the tanks. (See Map E) After the artillery lifted, infantrymen and the tankers, firing all available weapons, attempted to knock out the German machine guns that were firing the small arms fire. These attempts were unsuccessful since they were long range fires that were coming from several directions. Meanwhile, two platoon leaders from Companies B and C were attempting to reorganize their platoons and build a line near the head of the column in anticipation of a German counterattack. This was done with considerable success, but no large scale attack was made on their positions. However, a force consisting of about two squads of Germans attacked the

(34) Statement of Capt. Henry G. Morgan, then a platoon leader in B Company, 26 February 1950.

Company B portion of the line and captured a heavy machine gun and three men from company D, who had gotten too far out on the flank. (35)

The Commander of Company A had previously informed the Battalion Commander of the difficulty that Companies A and C (-) were having keeping abreast of the tank column. As a result, an order was received from Major Gillis, the battalion commander, instructing Company C (-) and a platoon of Company A to get on the tanks in the column that were not carrying personnel and to start the column moving again. This was attempted, repeatedly; but each time the men would climb onto the tanks and into view of the enemy, small arms automatic fire would force them to dismount. Upon orders from battalion, Captain Malcolm Kullmer, Company Commander of A Company, and the only company commander who was a captain, took charge of the situation and directed the company commanders to quickly reorganize their scattered men and continue the attack on foot. This was done, and the column again started to move forward with the infantrymen advancing on and abreast of the road on which the tanks were moving. The long range automatic fires continued, but inflicted no casualties since the men were protected by the many hedgerows along the route of advance. It was now evident that the battalion was well behind the enemy's main defenses.

At approximately 1915 hours as the head of the tank column reached the vicinity of a small railroad station within 1400 yards of the objective, the tank company commander of the leading tank company ordered his tanks to halt. (See Map E) This action quickly brought the company commanders of A, B, and C

(35) Statement of Captain Henry C. Morgan, then a platoon leader in B Company 26 February 1950

Companies to the tank company commander's tank. The tank commander stated that he was going to move his tanks back to his Battalion assembly area since he had lost eight tanks and their crews, and the tanks were low on gasoline and ammunition. (36) His plan met with bitter opposition from the infantry company commanders and a heated argument ensued. It was pointed out to the tank commander that the tanks were under the command of Major Gillis, the 1st Battalion Commander; and that the tanks would continue to advance with the infantry as long as he ordered them to do so. To support this, a call was put in to Major Gillis on A Company's SCR 300 radio; but the battalion command group could not be contacted. Attempts were made by using the radios of B and C Companies, but likewise failed. This was probably due to the comparative short range of the SCR 300 radio in hedgerowed terrain. Communications and contact with the battalion command group had been completely lost. (37) On learning this, the tank company commander stated that he was unable to communicate with his battalion commander at this time also; but felt that if communication were possible, his battalion commander would instruct him to do just as he planned and was going to do. Refusing to accept complete defeat, the infantry commanders asked that the tank commander leave two (or even one) tanks with the infantry, since its ammunition supply was comparatively low and artillery or mortar support was impossible, since communications had been lost. Apparently the tank company commander was convinced that he should return to the rear, for this plea was denied. The tank commander turned his column toward the rear and the entire tank column disappeared down the

(36) Personal knowledge

(37) Personal knowledge

road. (35) Needless to say, it was here and now that Task Force Gillis was unofficially, but completely, dissolved.

The attack continued virtually unopposed in a column of companies in the order B, C and A until B Company had advanced to a point 300 yards beyond the junction of ROAD 4 and the MORTAIN - ST. JEAN HIGHWAY. (See Map F) Enemy tanks and vehicles could be heard clearly moving in the vicinity of HILL 317 and in MORTAIN. At this point Captain Kullmar halted the battalion and requested that Company Commanders of Companies B and C report to his position without delay. Upon arrival at his command post, Captain Kullmar pointed out that with darkness approaching, and since the battalion had no supporting fires, he felt that the companies should halt for the night and attempt to regain contact with the battalion command post. The Commanders of Companies B and C concurred, and the battalion pulled off the left side of the road to establish a defensive position for the night.

DEFENSIVE POSITION DURING THE NIGHT 10 - 11 AUGUST

A perimeter of defense was established by the battalion with Company B assigned the left (northwest) part of the front portion of the perimeter, Company C to the remaining front portion, and Company A assigned to the right and rear portions of the area. (See Map F)

The road which formed the front of the battalion perimeter was an "elevated sunken road". That is, it was elevated to a height of about six feet with three foot hedgerows bordering the road. In the left front portion of the perimeter this road

(35) Personal Knowledge; Statement by Captain Henry C. Morgan, then a platoon leader in Company B, 2d Battalion, 150th

turned north and rose rapidly in the direction of MORTAIN. High trees bordered this road, which blocked enemy observation into the position from HILL 317. B and C Companies put out security (road block parties armed with 2.36 inch rocket launchers) on the left and right of the perimeter, as well as to the front, in their respective zones. Machine guns were placed to cover all roads in the area, which were the only terrain features over which grazing fire could be placed. 60 mm mortars were placed in position with instructions to fire only upon order.

An abandoned Sherman tank was on ROAD 4 to the right of the battalion perimeter and there were two others that had been knocked out and were burning in B Company's sector. They undoubtedly were three of the five tanks that had been leading the tank column. (It was later learned that a Lieutenant from B Company and six men had ridden one of these tanks into MORTAIN, had literally "shot up the place," and upon leaving the town their tank was knocked out. All the occupants of this tank were either killed or captured). (39)

It was believed by most of the officers that, due to the battalion's moving into this area on foot and advancing by using the cover of the hedgerows, the enemy was not aware of the battalion's location. As a result, the men were instructed not to dig in, for the noise made would undoubtedly give away the unit's positions.

At 2000 hours Captain Kullman dispatched a combat patrol to contact the battalion commander. After having fought its way to the rear and back, the patrol returned with a written

message from the battalion commander which stated that

(39) Statement of Captain Henry C. Kullman, leader in Company B, 20 January 1945.

forces had occupied ROAD 4 to our rear, making it impossible for him to join the battalion at this time. He further directed Captain Kullmar to take command of the battalion until such time as he could rejoin the unit.

Later another patrol was dispatched from Company A with the mission of contacting the battalion commander. The men of this patrol returned shortly with information that strong enemy forces were disposed along the railroad to the rear, making it impossible for them to accomplish their mission.

Shortly after dark (at approximately 2145 hours) a $\frac{1}{2}$ ton truck was heard approaching the crossroads in Company C's area. The men at the road block had let the vehicle pass through after they had seen that it was an American jeep. As C Company Commander walked out on the road to meet the vehicle he heard its occupants speaking German. His call for "bazooks" brought that ~~and many other weapons into action -- FIRING FROM ALL DIRECTIONS.~~ The vehicle was immediately knocked out, set afire and its occupants killed. (40)

Shortly after this incident, three Germans were surprised as they unknowingly walked right into the left front of B Company's sector. All three were captured. A few minutes later three enemy soldiers attacked B Company's road block positions with machine pistols, but after a brief and violent fire fight, the three Germans were wounded and captured. No casualties were sustained by B Company.

At approximately 0100 hours 11 August, a German force of approximately two platoons attacked the perimeter in the area held by Company C and one platoon of B Company. The at-

(40) Personal knowledge

tackers were supported by mortars and artillery, firing high explosive and illuminating shells. Simultaneously, a German tank began firing as it approached the crossroads held by C Company. The tank was knocked out by a rocket launcher at a range of 75 yards. (41) Although the attack gained in intensity, the two companies continued to hold their positions. The hedgerows again were offering excellent protection from the attackers small arms fire. After a brief but violent fire fight, the attack was repulsed by small arms fire and rifle and hand grenades. The Germans withdrew, leaving four dead and one seriously wounded. C Company suffered four casualties. (42)

A Volkswagen* carrying seven Germans approached the left flank of Company B and upon seeing the Americans they began firing machine pistols wildly in all directions. Rifle and machine gun fires wounded four of the Germans and three of them were captured. Shortly after this action a German tank could be heard approaching Company B's roadblock. The men withheld their fire on order of their platoon leader, who further directed the rocket launcher gunner to fire only when the tank was within the launcher's range. As the tank neared the roadblock, the gunner fired the Company's only rocket shell at point blank range. He missed! The tank stopped, shifted into reverse and moved back up the road toward MORTAIN. (43)

Throughout the early morning hours attacks were made by small groups of enemy against the battalions front and flanks. Each of these attacks was repulsed, resulting in numerous enemy casualties. The men of the battalion fought stubbornly through each attack without losing any ground to the enemy. This was

(41) Personal knowledge; Statement by then 2nd Lt. James G. Goodwill, a platoon leader of Company C, 20 January 1950.
(42) Personal knowledge
Small German vehicles
(43) Statement by Captain Henry C. Morgan, then a platoon leader in Company B, 26 February 1950

platoons to the right flank of Company C to reinforce that portion of the perimeter.

All was quiet in the battalion area as daylight approached. At approximately 0800 hours all hell broke loose. A large force of German SS troops, supported by artillery and machine guns, assaulted the battalion's front and left flank in Company B's and C's sector. (44) This attack quickly overpowered Company B's security elements on the battalion's left flank, permitting the enemy to place two machine guns on the elevated road to the left and slightly to the rear of the battalion's front. These guns fired sustaining flanking, infilade fire into the hedgerow along the elevated road, directly into Company C's positions, killing approximately fourteen men and wounding six others. (45) A heavy machine gun's fires were trained quickly toward the enemy's guns. The battalion fought stubbornly and held its positions. At this moment enemy tanks appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, on the road in Company B's sector, having moved forward under the protection of the battle noises, and began firing at point blank range into the perimeter. This fire killed and wounded approximately eight men, including a leg wound suffered by B Company Commander. (46) The shock action of the enemy tanks and other devastating fires forced a disorderly withdrawal which began in Company B's area and spread throughout the entire battalion. Only a small group from Companies A and C remained temporarily, defending the crossroads. A 2.36 inch rocket launcher from Company C was literally exchanging shots with the leading enemy tank. Then this man

(44) Personal knowledge

(45) Statement by then 2nd Lt. James C. Goodfellow, a former leader of Company B, 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, 8th Army.

(46) Personal knowledge

was forced to withdraw, and in so doing, moved directly into a force of the enemy who were approaching the right rear of the perimeter. Approximately ten of these men were captured. (47)

The battalion had withdrawn approximately 300 yards when it was noticed with surprise that the enemy force had continued advancing along the road which formed the front of the battalion's original position, instead of turning south in pursuit of the badly disorganized battalion. It was never determined why the enemy chose this course of action, unless it could have been his belief that there were other American forces on the battalion's right flank.

THE PERIMETER IN A SUNKEN ROAD

Captain Kullmar was quick to direct a reorganization of the battalion and instructed the other company commanders to move what remained of their companies to a sunken road near the railroad, about 500 yards to the rear, where another battalion perimeter would be established. (See Map F) As units of Company A moved toward the sunken road they completely surprised an enemy force of about eight men who were moving along the railroad. All eight were killed by the company's rifle and machine gun fire. In the sunken road, the wounded were cared for, further reorganization was effected, and the position was established. Again efforts to contact any American forces on the one remaining SCR 300 radio were unsuccessful. Much thought was given to the fact that if a reserve had been withheld, it now could have been committed with tanks to establish contact with the surrounded companies in the sunken road. The ammunition

(47) Personal knowledge

supply throughout all three companies was all but exhausted. The one surviving medic was attempting to treat the twenty odd wounded with what medical supplies were left. The men had no food and little water.

With this situation in mind, at 1400 hours Captain Kullmar directed Companies B and C to send out three strong combat patrols to the rear in an effort to contact the battalion command post. These patrols were organized and led by officers, and were dispatched at approximately 1400, 1500, and 1700 hours respectively. As each of the patrols attempted to cross the railroad it was met by strong enemy machine gun and other small arms fire. The patrol members fought fiercely, supported by fires from the remainder of the companies, and eventually were able to cross the railroad. At least twenty enemy dead were left along the railroad tracks. (48)

After the patrols had been gone for approximately three hours, it was feared that they had been captured. Darkness was rapidly approaching; therefore plans were made to organize the remainder of the battalion into small groups, which were to attempt to infiltrate through the enemy to the rear. However, before these plans were completed, Major Gillis, the battalion commander, arrived with most of the patrol members of two of the three patrols that had been dispatched previously. They brought food, water, ammunition, and news. Yes, news that the battalion would attack HILL 317 the following morning. In spite of this news, however, the morale of the badly depleted battalion was comparatively high. All men knew that the men of the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry were on HILL 317 and such were
749) Statement by then 2nd Lt. James G. Goodrich, platoon leader of Company C, 50 January 1950.

off than they had been.

During the night enemy harrassing patrols were active near the battalion's area. At approximately 0200 hours German planes bombed the area, but no direct hits were scored on the battalion's positions.

THE ATTACK ON HILL 317 (See Map F)

On the morning of 12 August, after communications had been reestablished and fire support plans had been completed, the battalion jumped off in the attack on HILL 317 at 0645 hours. The formation was a column of companies, with Company A leading the attack. This attack was made with such speed and force that the surprised and disorganized enemy was able to offer only slight resistance. At approximately 0820 hours the battalion reached the top of HILL 317 and contact was established with the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry. This meeting was a joyous one for the battered men of that battalion, which had withstood continued German attacks for five and a half days and had repeatedly told the Germans to "go to hell" with their demands to surrender. Shortly after this contact was made, a 2½ ton truck escorted by three light tanks was on its way with supplies and water for the men of the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry. (49)

Summary of the results of this action: The 1st Battalion, 320th Infantry had made a daring attack through enemy lines against the toughest troops the Germans could put into the field. Throughout the period of attack the battalion was under continual attack by enemy forces, and for a period of twenty-six hours it was forced to attack and defend without the aid of

any kind of supporting weapons.

The 1st Battalion was successful in accomplishing its mission of contacting and furnishing relief to the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, on Hill 317. In addition, its rapid advance through the 2d and 3d Battalions' sectors assisted greatly in the accomplishment of their missions.

The price of victory was not cheap, however, for the battalion lost approximately one hundred and forty men either killed, captured or wounded in the attack. In addition, at least twenty-four tanks were knocked out of action and many of their crews killed or wounded. (50) While actual enemy losses are not known, it is believed that they equaled and perhaps exceeded our own.

General Orders Number 56, War Department, 1945, cited the 1st Battalion, 320th Infantry for extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty at MORTAIN; and under the provisions of Section IV, War Department Circular Number 335, 1945, the battalion was awarded the Distinguished Unit Badge.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. COMMUNICATIONS

The virtual lack of radio communications, as well as other means, was probably the most significant hinderance to the operation. This necessitated the battalion's having to operate for a period of about twenty six hours without the assistance of its commander and staff -- and probably more important, without any type of supporting fires. It was generally believed

(50) Statement by Colonel D. A. Quinn, then Commanding Officer, 320th Infantry, 24 February 1950.

that had supporting fires been available, the German counter-attack of the morning of 11 August, could have been repulsed, despite the precarious positions held by the companies. In furtherance of this thought, it is this writer's opinion that contact could have been made with the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry, in the evening of 10 August, had these fires been available. The SCR 300 radio lacked both the power and the range to make the needed radio contact available. Lack of communication with the battalion commander resulted in complete loss of tank support for the battalion. At the critical time when the tank company commander decided to move his tanks to the rear, a decision was needed from the battalion commander. Radio contact would have undoubtedly resulted in the tank's remaining forward with the 1st Battalion. This incident also could have been avoided had direct communication been possible between the tank company commanders and the battalion command group. During the attack up ROAD 4 much difficulty was incurred due to the infantrymen's inability to communicate with the crew of the tanks on which they were to ride. In instances when the infantrymen were forced to dismount the tanks, the tank driver, unaware that the infantry had dismounted, continued to move forward. This resulted in the disruption of tactical unity within the platoons and also caused a great amount of confusion. It is gratifying to note that all of the reasons for the communications difficulties experienced by the 1st Battalion were considered when current Tables of Equipment were prepared. The inclusion of tank radios in the command nets of the infantry in which they are supporting, the availability of more powerful utility radio sets to smaller units for such operations,

and the present external tank telephone provide sound and efficient means of communication.

2. COMMAND RELATIONSHIP

The lack of proper command relations played no small part in this operation. The failure to predesignate individuals in the order in which they would assume command in an emergency resulted in the battalion's losing complete tank support. In this case it seems logical that Captain Kullmar should have been one of those officers so designated, since he was the senior infantry officer with the companies and since the tank units were attached to the 1st Battalion. As the acting commander, Captain Kullmar could have taken positive action to see that at least a portion of the tank battalions remained forward with the rifle companies. At this point, it might be well to point out that the leading tank company commander cannot be completely condemned for his actions. He and his men had fought with courage and determination during the attack. It is believed by the writer that his actions were due to his supply difficulties and the absence of specific instructions in command relationships.

3. THE MANEUVERING OF TANKS IN HEDGE-GROWN TERRAIN

The inability of tanks to leave the road and maneuver through the hedgerows against the enemy antitank guns caused considerable casualties in men and tanks and delayed the advance up ROAD 4. When one of the leading tanks was destroyed, it was only with sheer determination and courage that the succeeding tank would pull along side the knocked out tank and engage the

enemy guns. Attempts to maneuver their tanks by trying to force them through the hedgerows were unsuccessful. It is difficult to understand why such problems were not anticipated prior to the invasion and the tanks provided with an attachment that would cut through the hedgerows. This was done later by some ingenious ordnance units by welding several short, inverted and pointed pieces of railroad railings of various lengths to the front of the tanks. With these attachments tanks could easily cut through the hedgerows.

4. LOSING CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY

After the battalion had advanced on foot from the vicinity of the railroad station to the MORTAIN-LE TEILLERON ROAD, it lost contact with the enemy and halted for the night. This advance had been made against negligible enemy resistance, which was evidence that the enemy had been disorganized by the battalion's initial assault. Hence, it is now believed that this attack should have continued toward HIL 317 until it was forced to stop, in spite of the lack of supporting fires. Such an attack would have taken advantage of the German's disorganized condition and well may have resulted in the accomplishment of the battalion's mission on 10 August. Failing to press forth the attack and maintain contact with the enemy resulted in his being able to regroup his forces for attacks on the battalions positions during the night of 10 August and the following morning. It was fortunate for the battalion that the enemy was guilty of this same error after his attack on the morning of 11 August, had forced the battalion from its perimeter of defense. His failure to maintain contact and to press his attack

permitted the battalion later to reorganize and attack again the following day.

5. ECONOMY OF FORCES

After the 1st Battalion had launched its attack, there was no unit left in battalion reserve. The battalion commander had chosen to commit all three rifle companies in the initial attack. It is this writer's opinion that two rifle companies attacking with two companies of tanks would have been sufficient, thus permitting one tank company and one rifle company to remain in battalion reserve. This force could have been used to regain contact with the advancing companies after they had lost contact with the command group. However, the nature of the objective certainly indicated that a large force would be necessary, and this must have been the reason why the battalion ~~committed all three rifle companies.~~ It happened that no more than two companies were actually needed throughout this operation; hence, a reserve company possibly would have been able to re-establish contact with the leading companies of the battalion, which would have permitted the attack on HILL 317 to continue at an earlier date.

6. SELECTION OF TERRAIN FOR A PERIMETER OF DEFENSE

The terrain on which the battalion established its defensive positions during the night 10-11 August was most difficult to defend. Men in positions along the elevated road, which formed the front of the battalion's perimeter, were vulnerable to flat trajectory fire from all directions except the front, and particularly from the left flank from which the

enemy machine gun fire was received on the morning 11 August. In addition, the roadnet near the perimeter permitted German armored vehicles to assault the perimeter with comparative ease. The reasons why the company commanders placed their companies in this position initially were quite obvious. It was a place to stop for the night until the attack could be continued the following morning; and the battalion had cut one of the main roads leading to MORTAIN. However, it is believed that upon hearing the Germans preparing for their attack in the early morning hours of 11 August, the battalion should have selected a defensive position away from the roads. Then a strong force to act as a roadblock could have held the road which formed the battalion's original front. It is my opinion that had this been done, casualties within the companies would have been considerably less when the Germans attacked on the morning of 11 August.

7. THE EFFECT OF SHOCK ACTION BY TANKS

During the attack on the battalion perimeter on the morning of 11 August, the Germans moved their tanks into position under the "cover" of battle noises caused by their small arms and artillery fire. This afforded them the opportunity to effect maximum surprise and be within point-blank range of the perimeter before being noticed. These facts, plus the lack of weapons to combat tanks, resulted in a disorderly withdrawal by the men of all three companies. Thus, the Germans had used the shock action of their tanks to a maximum advantage.

LESSONS

Units participating in operations requiring rapid and

distant movement must be provided with long range radios for communicating with their command posts and adequate facilities for communications between all participating units.

2. An attack order for a task force operation should designate certain officers of the task force as alternate commanders in the order in which they would assume command in case of emergency.

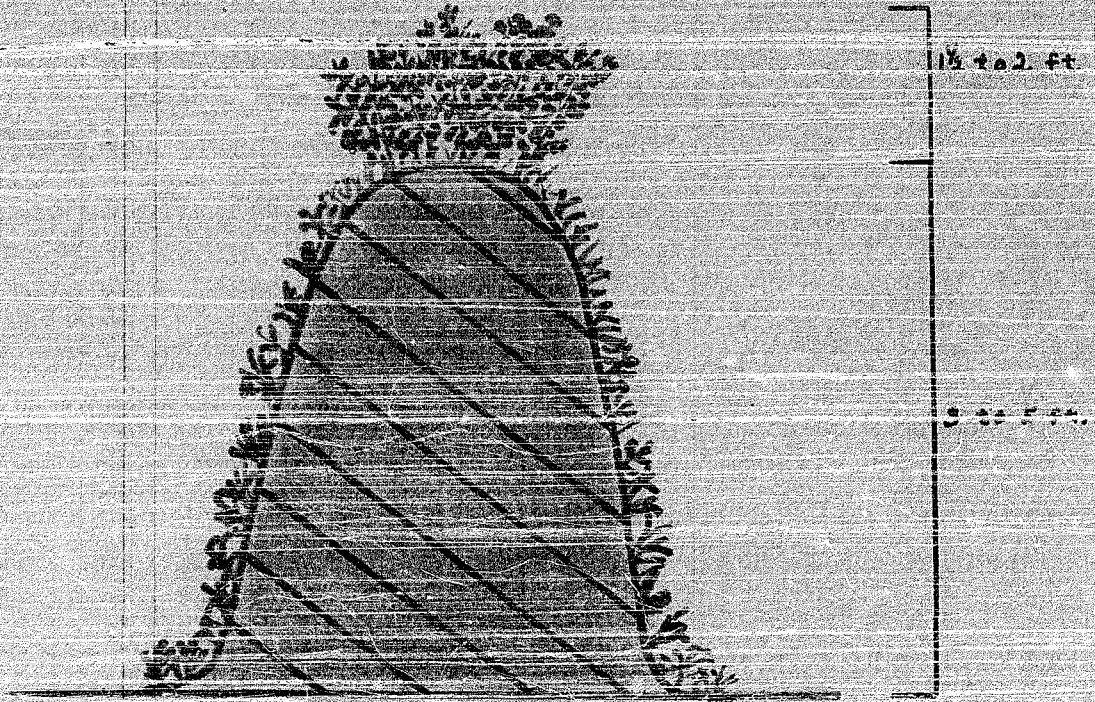
3. Tanks operating in hedgerowed terrain must be provided with an attachment which will permit them to cut through the hedgerows and maneuver against enemy positions.

4. Contact must be maintained and continual pressure applied on a disorganized enemy in order to exploit a penetration into his defenses.

5. Careful consideration must be given in selecting the minimum forces necessary to take an objective so that a reserve force can be withheld if at all possible.

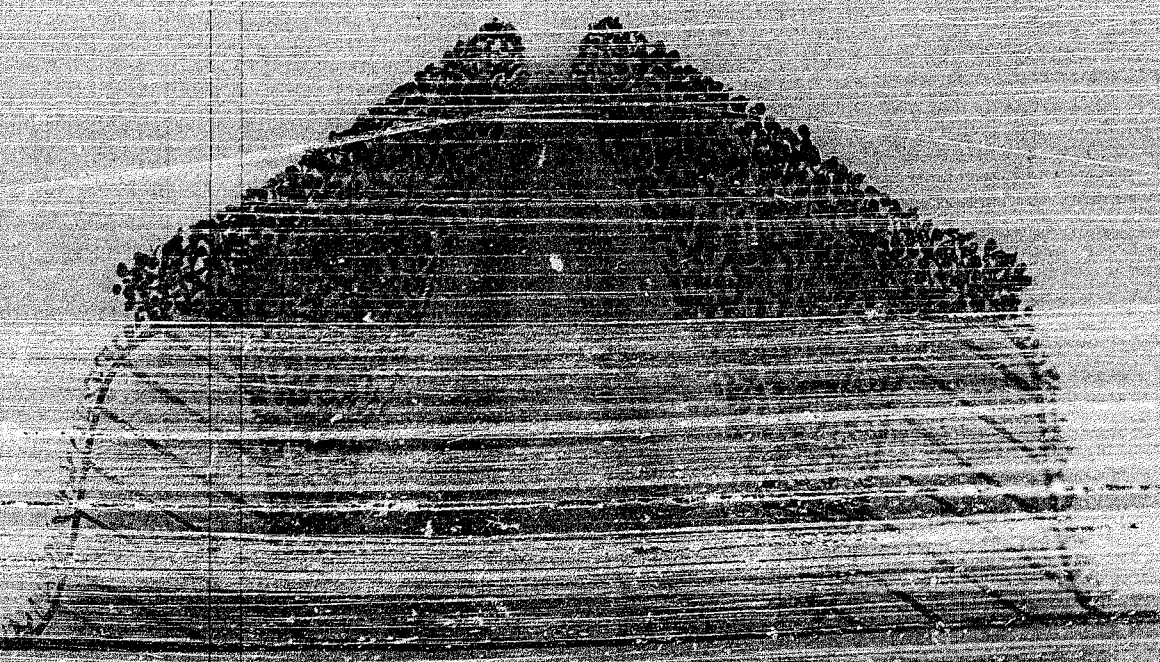
6. Factors to be considered in the selection of terrain for a defensive position must be governed by the existing situation.

7. To effect surprise and use the shock action of tanks to a maximum, the tanks must be moved to their assault positions under the "cover" of loud battle noises.



Cross-section of a Hedgerow

A Sunken Road



LONDON

E N G L A N D

STAMFORD

English Channel

DIEPPE

LA MANCHE

ST. LO

CAEN

COCHIN

THE

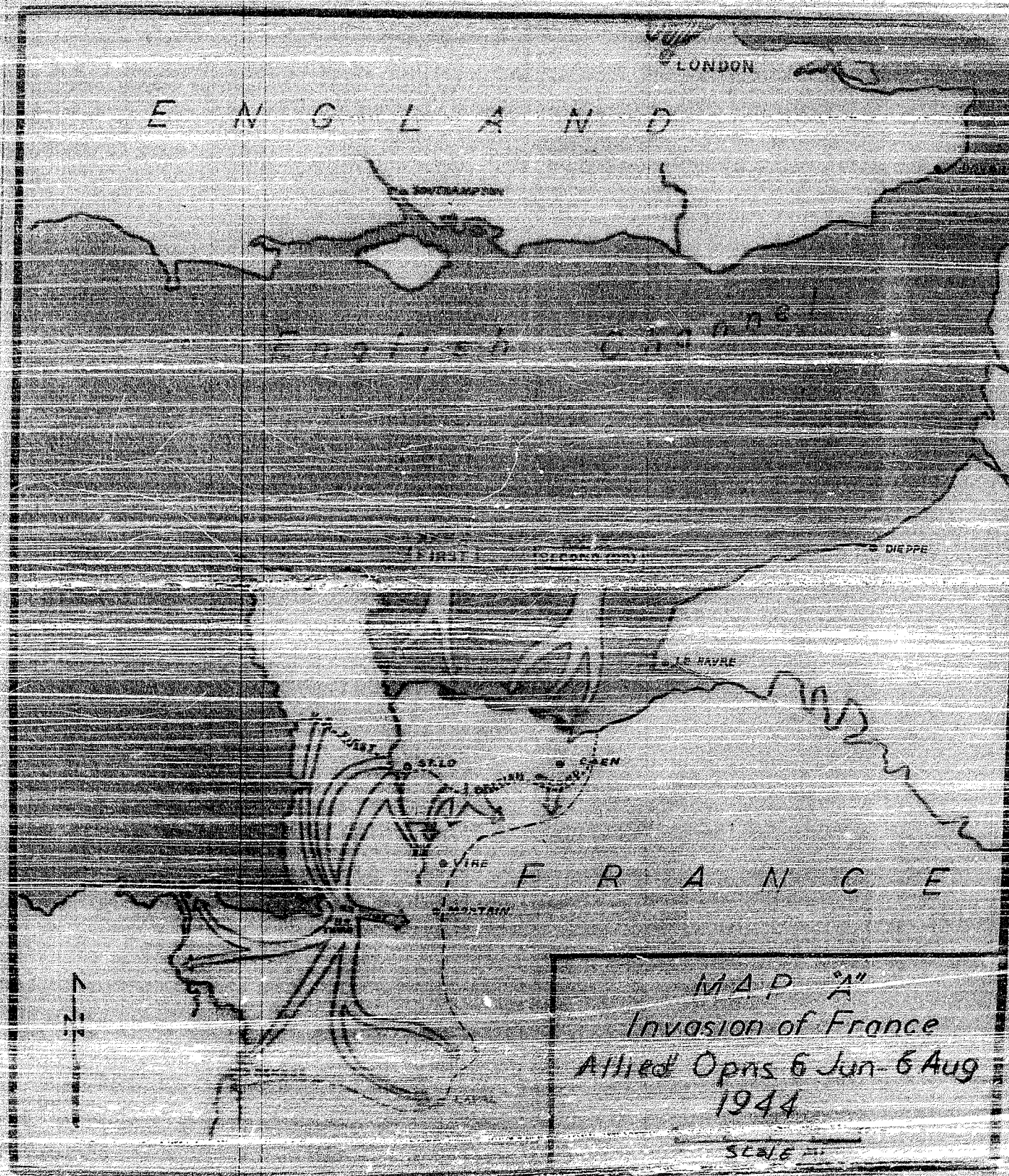
F R A N C E

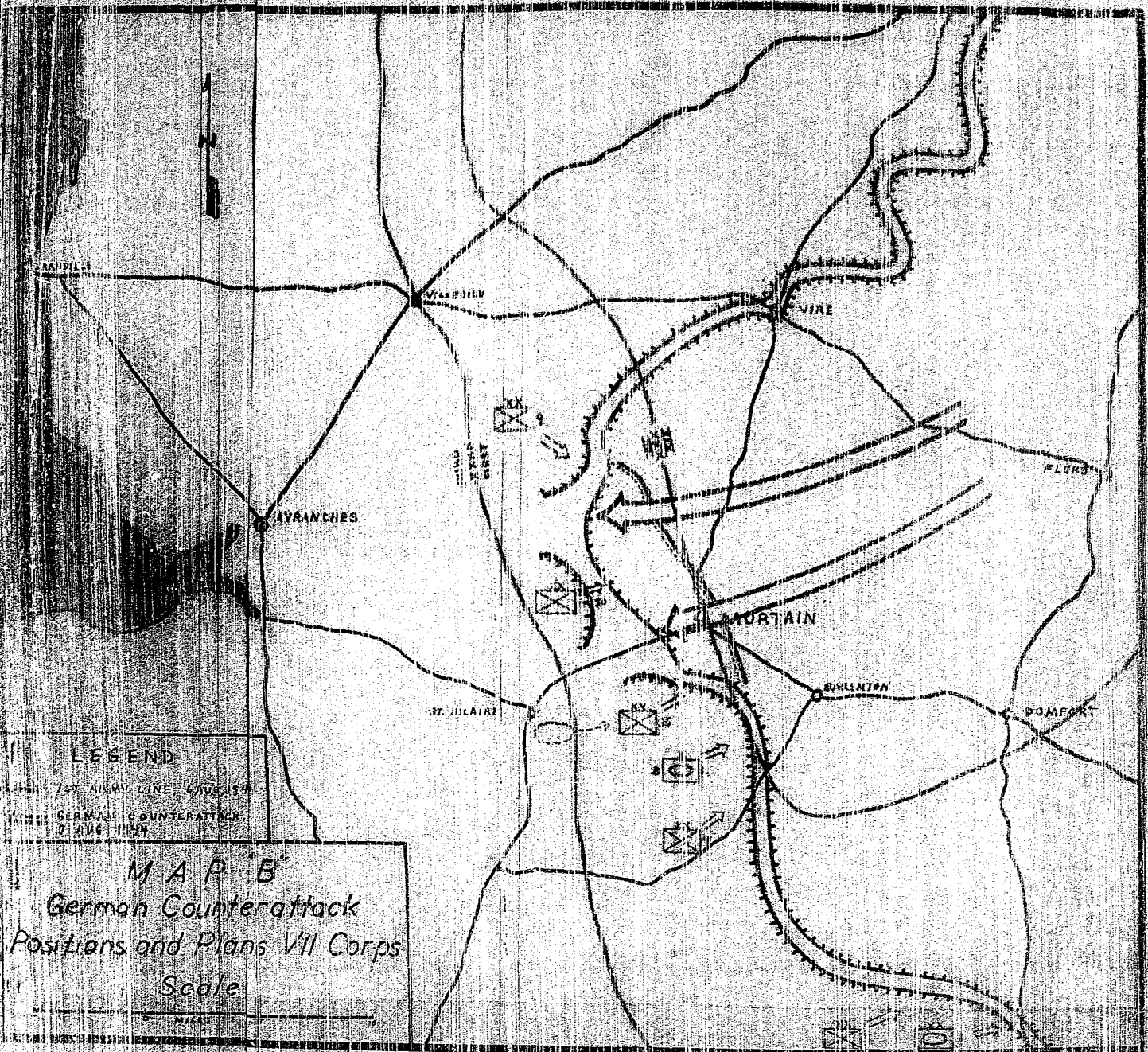
MASTIN



MAP "A"
Invasion of France
Allied Opns 6 Jun - 6 Aug
1944

SCALE





LEGEND

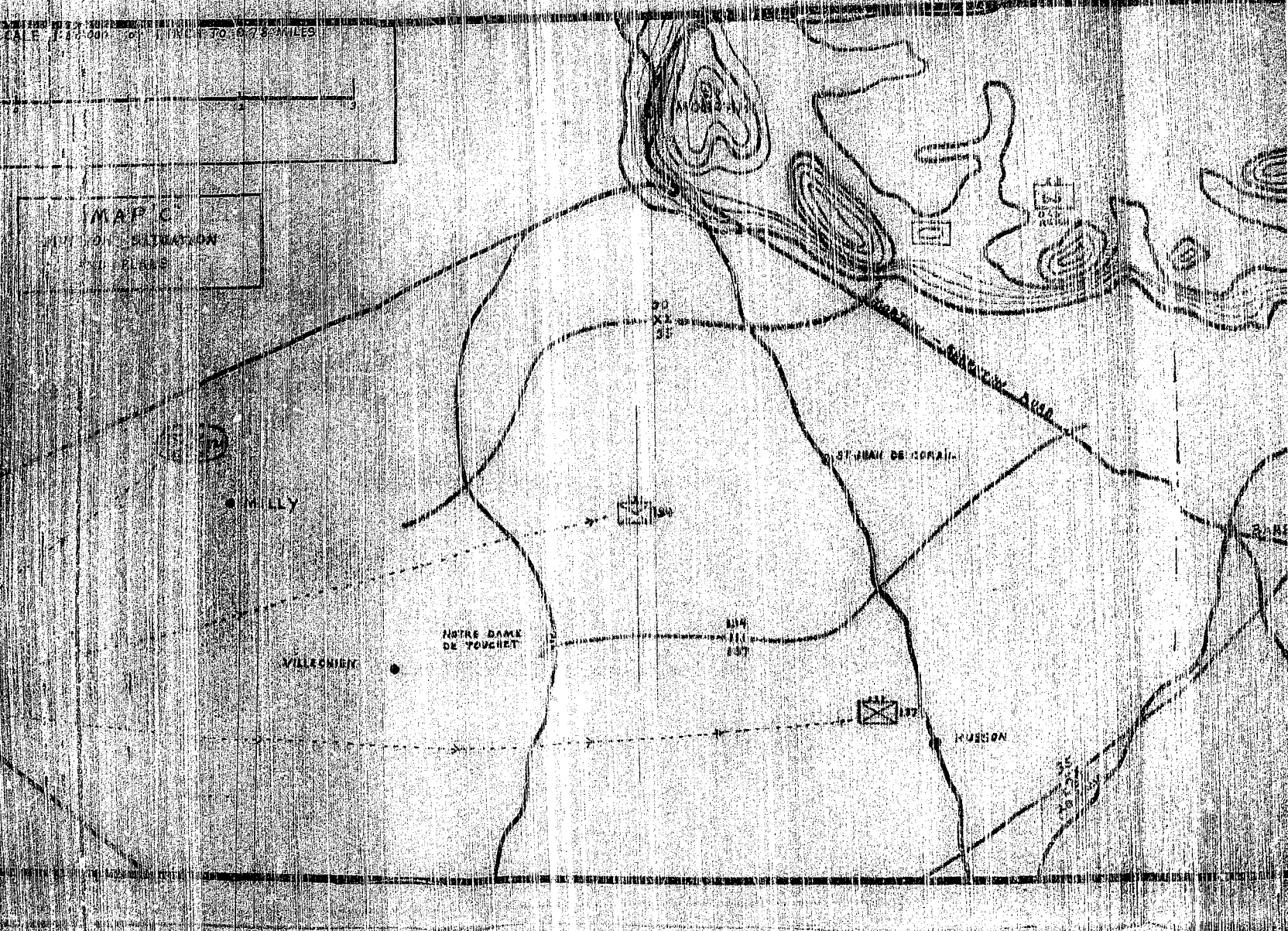
--- GERMAN COUNTERATTACK LINE
 2 AUG 1944

MAP B
 German Counterattack
 Positions and Plans VII Corps
 Scale



SCALE 1:10,000 (1 INCH TO 0.25 MILES)

MAP C
MONTIGNY-LEZ-TOURNAI
BELGIUM



Map E

The Attack up Road 4

V. 2003

MORTAIN

TANKS RETURN TO HEAD AT TUD FOUNT

LA MIGNONNE



MCPHAIN

317

ADJ. DIST.

ROAD

MAP F
Defensive Positions
Attack on Hill 317

Legend

- HEDGEROWS
- ADVANCES
- WITH DRAWALS

SCALE

