

The Counter-Attack Against the 120th Inf. at MORTAIN

The ABBAYE-BLANCHE roadblock.

Components of force holding the roadblock.

GL-347 (16)

1st Platoon of Co. "F", ~~2nd Bn~~, 120th Inf.

1st Platoon of Co. "A", 823rd TD.

1 platoon from AT Co.

1 mortar section and 1 machine gun section from Co. "F".

Interview in field with Lt. Tom F.H. Andrew, Co. "F", vic Domfront, Aug 18, 1944.  
Col. Hammond D. Birks, CO 120th Inf. " " "

(N.B. Some of this material was also obtained from Lt. Tuttle's 120th Inf. Historical Record)

The roadblock at the little village of Abbaye-Blanche, on the northern outskirts of Mortain, is regarded by Col. Hammond D. Birks, CO of the 120th Inf. as one of the most important factors in the 120th's successful <sup>repulse</sup> ~~repulsion~~ of the major enemy counter-attack of August 6-12<sup>1</sup>. In his opinion if that roadblock had not held, the whole position of the 120th would have been nullified and the resulting gap would have permitted the enemy to smash through the Mortain area of the 30th Division's line. In such a "touch-and go" battle, as the battle with that major enemy effort developed to be, the consequences of a German success in this regard might well have had disastrous implications.<sup>2</sup>

When, in addition, it is considered that the roadblock was held for 6 days under intensive enemy armored, infantry, and air attacks, with casualties of only 3 killed and 20 wounded, ~~Col. Birks' further comments~~ <sup>and according to Col. Birks,</sup> that these slight casualties were due to the roadblock force's perfect defensive positions, it is obvious that this important point was skilfully and soundly defended.<sup>3</sup>

The accompanying sketch shows the whole general area affected by the roadblock. In particular, the force at Abbaye-Blanche had to cover four roads; the main north-south road to Mortain which ran right through the roadblock positions, a parallel road from the north, which by a sharp left turn joined the main Mortain road just beyond the railroad bridge, and two roads from the northeast and southeast respectively which angled into Abbaye-Blanche. The control of these four roads

affected an entire network of minor roads and trails.

On the afternoon of August 6, Capt. Reynold C. Erickson, of Co. "F", 2nd Battalion, sent his First Platoon, commanded by Lt. Tom F.H. Andrew to secure and defend the Abbaye-Blanche roadblock. With Lt. Andrew's platoon from Co. "F", were the First Platoon of Co. "B", 823rd TD, under Lt. Tom Springfield, a platoon from the AT Co., under Lt. Sidney Eichler, and a mortar section and machine gun section from Co. "F". Lt. Andrew took command of the entire group and immediately took up dispositions for the northern end of the roadblock.<sup>4</sup>

Several problems confronted Lt. Andrew in drawing up his dispositions. The northern end of the roadblock had to ~~include~~ <sup>be placed north of</sup> the important bridge over the railroad, <sup>in order to preserve it for future Allied use, the doing so obviated</sup> thus obviating the chance to canalize an enemy penetration. The river ~~cut~~ on his right flank did not bother Lt. Andrew much, because he had good observation of the flat ground all around it. But the road coming in along the river from the northeast had to be covered. He had to spread his force rather thinly below the railroad bridge to counter any infiltration from the flanks, particularly among the houses and orchards along the main north-south road. He estimated that a company and a half of infantry would have really been a proper holding force for the Abbaye-Blanche roadblock. There were about 70 men at his disposal.<sup>5</sup>

The enemy had once occupied the ground around the railroad bridge and set-up defensive positions and these Lt. Andrew used, for the good reason that there were no alternative defensive positions. A 3" gun was placed on either side of the main road, with two 30 cal. machine guns on each side. A bazooka and BAR team and a half a squad of riflemen were placed in former enemy dug-in positions along a small hedgerow at the sharp left turn north of the railroad bridge. A 57mm AT gun was placed at the end of the road parallelling the main north-south road, covering not only any penetration down this road, but from an additional road to the left that curved into it. Two other 3" guns were placed north of the railroad bridge, one to cover the main road, the other facing southeast across the railroad to cover any enemy penetration along a straight stretch of the road coming in from the northeast. A 57mm AT gun also covered this road from a position at the road junction near the river in Abbaye-Blanche itself.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately south of the railroad bridge, in dug-in positions on either side of the road riflemen and bazooka teams were placed. The right flank was protected by 8 men and a .30 cal. machine gun at a big rock just off the road from the north-east and facing toward the river. A line running through a cleft in the rock furnished the communications with the mortar squad to the rear of this rock position.<sup>8</sup>

Along the important left flank, a squad of riflemen and two .30 cal. machine guns were placed in an orchard that covered tactically two road junctions, in addition to a short stretch of the north-south road. 6 riflemen and a .50 cal machine gun, manned by TD men, were placed in and among the houses between this orchard and the railroad bridge. Two belts of mines were laid near the bend of the road from the southeast, at the south end of the roadblock, and these were covered <sup>by</sup> a bazooka and BAR team.<sup>9</sup>

To sum up the defensive dispositions of the roadblock force, every man was used, German defense positions were adapted because they were the only good natural positions, 4 TD guns and 2 AT guns were posted to cover four important roads, with the main emphasis on the north-south road to Mortain, and these guns were protected and supported by riflemen and bazooka teams.<sup>10</sup>

On 7 August, Lt. Stewart with two squads of the 2nd Platoon of Co. "F" joined the Abbaye-Blanche roadblock. He had established a roadblock to the south, but had been forced to withdraw from his position. Upon joining the Abbaye-Blanche roadblock, he organized and defended the rear (south) end. From time to time during the next few days other men from different companies straggled into the roadblock, so that eventually Lt. Andrew had men from Cos. "D", "E", "H", "K", and "G", so that around 150 men were in the roadblock, but by far the greater number of these were battle exhaustion cases and had little part in the actual defense. They were concentrated in the south end of the roadblock. Lt. Stewart, holding the south end of the roadblock, himself knocked out one halftrack and one tank with bazooka fire.<sup>11</sup>

The first attack against the north end of the roadblock occurred at 0500 hours on 7 August when an enemy armored reconnaissance halftrack with 75mm assault gun was knocked out by an AT gun, manned by a squad directed by a non-commissioned

officer, Sgt. Rhyme. This halftrack was followed by another halftrack loaded with ammunition which was hit and exploded.

During August 7, the roadblock was not only shelled incessantly, but also attacked by the Luftwaffe twice, which strafed the little force with rocket guns. They were even hit by British planes with rocket guns, two TD men being wounded in this unfortunate and erroneous attack by friendly planes. However, as far as the roadblock force was concerned, the British were soon forgiven for Lt. Andrew is quick to testify that they did a wonderful job against the Germans on the front of the Abbaye-Blanche positions.

The defense of the roadblock fitted neatly into the whole pattern of the 120th's main defense. With observation from Hill 317, to the east of Mortain, spotting enemy armor and infantry concentrations and flashing the word to the American artillery emplacements to the west, these concentrations were broken up before they could attain full momentum and the elements that did spill through from the east were brought up short by the guns of the roadblock force. Repeatedly, the enemy attempted to knock the roadblock out---shelling it with 88s, rocket guns, 155s, "screaming minnies", and even with 240s. ~~through A's~~ to this last, Lt. Andrew's <sup>and</sup> ~~belief~~ <sup>in Lt. Andrew's opinion,</sup> ~~is not positive; he only knows~~ <sup>belief is based on the fact</sup> that some of the shells exploded about 400 yards away and he would feel the shrapnel. <sup>is</sup>

One bad feature to the use of the German dug-in defense positions was that the enemy had full knowledge of them and had them zeroed in. Consequently whenever the enemy artillery opened up our troops would abandon them and take shelter in the nearest house or barn. Upon cessation of the artillery they would return to their positions to find anything they had left there, such as gas masks and clothing, had been completely riddled. They never had any worry about leaving their positions, as from experience it had been learned that the enemy infantry did not follow the artillery, apparently having little faith in it. Consequently, the zeroed-in positions simply caused temporary abandonment by the roadblock infantry and neither knocked them out or kept them untenable for very long. <sup>th</sup>

With the important supply route from Le Neufbourg being kept open and protected

by Co. "F" of the 2nd Battalion, of the 117th Inf, the roadblock force was kept

fully supplied. The enemy attempting to jam armor down the north-south road lost

12 armored vehicles, <sup>in addition,</sup> although Lt. Andrew believes that others were knocked out by the

TDs, <sup>and were</sup> ~~that the enemy~~ <sup>by the enemy</sup> hauled away at night. The TDs with a <sup>visual</sup> range of 2000 <sup>from their position</sup> yards were

able to <sup>knock out enemy vehicles</sup> reach far up the road; and blast out the enemy columns advancing, often

<sup>hence, it was often impossible to</sup> before it could be fully ascertained <sup>just</sup> what the full damage was. <sup>17</sup> On the road

that paralleled the main road 9 enemy vehicles were known definitely to have been

knocked out and on the road coming in from the northeast 2, including 1 tank.

These were also exclusive of what the enemy may have dragged away or salvaged. <sup>18</sup>

At 1530 hours on 8 August, the enemy attacked the roadblock with a patrol using flamethrowers and concussion grenades. Four AT men were wounded in this attack,

but the enemy patrol itself was wiped out by machine gun fire. The enemy also ruined the road <sup>south</sup> to the rear of the roadblock and an American halftrack used as an

ambulance exploded these while proceeding to the rear. Two men were wounded. <sup>19</sup>

The double belt of mines that the roadblock force itself had laid stopped an enemy armored halftrack which paused before the mines. A German NCO got out to investigate them. "He should have known that a mine field is always covered by fire," said Lt. Andrew succinctly. BAR fire mowed him down and a bazooka took care of the halftrack. <sup>20</sup>

The section defending the right flank, around the big rock between the north-east road and the river, also saw some hot action against an attempt to infiltrate by enemy infantry. They had a machine gun at the rock, but no tripod, and an American rifleman fired it right from the crook of his arm. <sup>21</sup>

Lt. Andrew admits that his greatest worry was the possibility that enemy infantry would infiltrate on his left flank and he does not understand why they did not do it. His riflemen posted among the houses there did see some action, but the enemy never attempted infiltration tactics there on any appreciable or dangerous scale. <sup>22</sup>

Straight through to the 12th, the roadblock beat off armored attacks on four roads, engaged in hot actions with enemy patrols to the front and flanks, and

suffered

vigorous enemy shelling day after day. By the 12th when the enemy attempt all along the line to break through to Avranches had been thoroughly beaten back, the Abbaye-Blanche roadblock was still there. Col. Birks going there to investigate and expecting to find a great number of casualties discovered them still ready for action, with only the slight casualties of 3 killed and 20 wounded.

In checking over the amount of enemy vehicles knocked out, Lt. Andrew told Col. Birks he estimated 24. Col. Birks investigating one road discovered 24 on that road alone and believes the number was closer to 40. The road littered with knocked-out enemy armor testified to the accuracy and vigor of the roadblock's fire.

"And," said Col. Birks, "it was the best sight I had seen in the war."

Accompanying Sketch of Abbaye-Blanche roadblock based on Map of Mortain; 1:25,000; Sheet 34/10 N.E.

Sketch of ABBAYE-BLANCHE road block --  
Counterattack MORTAIN, 120th Regiment,  
30th Division, Aug 6-12, 1944. Based on  
MAP OF MORTAIN; 1:25,000; Sheet 34/10 N.E.

AMERICAN EMBLACEMENTS

ENEMY PENETRATIONS

3" TD GUN

AT's 57

