

REPULSE OF THE GERMAN COUNTERATTACK AIMED AT AVRANCHES 7-11 AUGUST 1944

(Comments of B. Gen. James M. Lewis, 30th Div. Arty. Officer on 25 August 1944)

The Germans had infiltrated through our front line defenses on Monday A.M. before any artillery fire was placed on them. They had not progressed much beyond St. Barthelmy however, before all 12 ½ F.A. Bn's. were massed to interdict the two main roads leading west from St. Barthelmy. This was the artillery's most important contribution to repelling the counter attack. The 12 ½ F.A. Bn's. consisted of the following: the 30th Div's own 4 Bns., (113th; 118th, 197th & 230th F.A. Bns.), two armored Bns.; the 42nd F.A. Bn , (4th Inf. Div.); 1 Bn of 155 SP's, and 1- 4.5 in. Chem. Bn.. These were augmented by 2 Bn's of 155's, 1 Bn of 8 in. and six 105's from the 743rd Tk. Bn. (These last were in direct support and under the control of 30th Div. Arty.) The concentrations of these Bn's just west of St. Barthelmy, had to be adjusted very carefully due to the presence of friendly troops in the vicinity of St. Barthelmy. On certain missions, some of the Bn's could not be used.

Our Air OP's did invaluable work. Because of the position of the sun from 1900 to 2000, the cub planes were able to identify more targets during those hours than at any other time. Most of this time was spent adjusting on the targets. Then, when the cub planes had to come down because of darkness, the batteries would complete the firing on the observed and adjusted targets. B. Gen. Lewis believes that a record was established on 9 August, when 30 observed counterbattery missions were fully adjusted between 2045 and 2145. A tremendous drop in the enemy's artillery fire the next day evidenced the effectiveness of these missions.

Without observation from the hill, (#314), east of Mortain, we would have been much in the dark. Not only did the arty observers with the 2/120 Inf. on the hill spot counterattacks forming up against the hill, they were able to locate a number of targets to the north.

After the effort to drop supplies to the 2/120 Inf. by cub planes failed on account of the heavy flak in the vic. of Mortain, (2 planes were shot up), the 230th F.A. Bn. successfully employed propaganda shells to shoot medical supplies to the isolated Battalion – (2/120 Inf. on Hill #314). The box score was as follows: 1st attempt- 6 shot, none recovered; 2nd attempt – 5 out of 6 recovered; 3rd attempt – 3 out of 3 recovered. Only the plasma arrived in unusable condition. Additional plasma was shot through 155's, but this was no better.

After the night of 7 August, Germans infiltrated into Romagny and vic., presumable from the NE. The forward observers had difficulty locating targets in Romagny because of the narrow streets and high walls, but a considerable concentration was laid down anyway. On the night of 7 August, hostile tanks and infantry got into the positions of the 197th FA Bn. The Bn fought as infantry all of the next morning and into the afternoon, before the threat was sufficiently contained, to enable the men to get on with their primary mission. In the process, they knocked out one tank with a bazooka.

The most spectacular achievement of artillery during the battle – from the point of view of the amount of enemy personnel and equipment destroyed over a short time – was the intense concentration laid down on a German column moving east on the Mortain-Ger road on 9 August. Ten FA Bn's massed on this column at about coordinates 606118, causing terrible destruction on this road.

The Germans fired a lot of rocket guns on the area west of St. Barthelmy and l'Abbaye Blanche. Our artillery counterfired on them every afternoon in the valley of la Cance River and the draw just west of the N-S grid line.

Maintaining communications was a very difficult problem on account of the extensive hostile tank infiltration. The wire crews worked practically around the clock to keep the ground lines open, and except for occasional resorting to radio, telephone communication was employed throughout. Not that the terrain was difficult from a wire communication viewpoint: it was necessary to open up new roads and cut down innumerable hedges in order to maintain wire communications and the flow of ammunition.

The foregoing are the artillery highlights of the battle, in B. Gen. Lewis' opinion.

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(The following comments concerning the part played by the artillery, were given by Lt. Col. F. C. Shepard , S-3 of 30th Div. Arty. on 25 August 1944)

The artillery support during this battle was by no means as effective as it might have been due to the fact that the 30th Div. had just moved into the area, and to the fact that a large scale counterattack was not anticipated. In the first place, the F.A. Bn's positions, which were taken over, btry for btry, from the 1st Div., because of our not having time to reconnoiter new positions, were no good as far as repelling a large scale counterattack. They were too close up. For example, we could not mass all of them on le Mesnil Tove, and then mass all of them on Mortain. In the second place, communications were the worst that the Div. Arty. has ever had. Most of the wire laid by the 1st Div. had to be duplicated, as it just would not work. Since no real fight was expected, no direct line to the FA. Bn's. were run, only one line through the switchboard per Bn. being installed. It was possible to get through to the Bn's all right, but it took time. In the third place, the CP of the Div. Arty. was 3 miles from the Division CP, and had to be moved next to the Div. CP for better coordination in the middle of the battle.

The night before the attack, the 26th F.A. Bn, which was with the 9th Div, and located to the north near le Mesnil Tove, kept reporting enemy tanks. But Div. G-2 said that these were friendly tanks, and thus they were permitted to work their way through the holes on our front line.

Lt. Col. Shepard did not realize until about the end of the 3rd day, that the Germans were making an all out effort to break through to Avranches. If anybody around 30th Div. Hq. was concerned about it, they did not say anything to him. VII Corps Hq., apparently, did not realize at the time how serious it was. On the 3rd or 4th day, they pulled out the 173rd F.A. Bn. for Ordnance inspection, and a Corps order was actually received directing the 188th F.A. Gp. to move out on another mission. Fortunately, very shortly after it arrived, Gen. Palmer, the VII Corps Artillery Officer arrived at the Div. Arty. Hq., and Col. Otto Ellis, Exec. Off. explained to Gen. Palmer how greatly this F.A. Gp. was needed, and got him to cancel the order.

Though the enemy fired on the C.P. of the 118th F.A. Bn. several times, no counterbattery fire to speak of was received by any of our other F.A. Bns.

The most important thing about having the 2/120 Inf. on the hill east of Mortain, was the observation, which our possession of the hill denied to the enemy.

Re the 30 observed missions in one hour which B. Gen. Lewis mentioned, the following day, 20 counterbattery missions were adjusted and/or fired during approximately 1 ½ hours. After the completion of these missions, we heard very little more from the German artillery. The chief credit should be given to our air OP's.

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(Comments of Maj. J. J. Parrish, Adjutant, given on 25 August, 1944)

Despite FUSA's limitations on expenditure of artillery ammunition, our artillery was not handicapped by any shortage of artillery ammunition during this battle. Liberal use of the "exception in the event of emergencies" clause was made.

In the case of the 197th F.A. Bn, the men – despite only limited training in infantry work – quietly and efficiently went about the job of defending their own area against ground attack. When the enemy had been forced back of an outpost line, the remaining artillerymen went right back to their primary mission without any to-do.

Ammunition trains were run into the batteries of the 118th F.A. Bn under small arms and mortar fire, and no trucks were lost.

Two artillery observers on the hill east of Mortain were 1st Lt. Robert Weiss and Lt. Chas. A Bartz, both of the 230th F.A. Bn. One of them kept a diary. (Weiss)

Bartz' radio was shot out on the 2nd day, but Weiss' still functioned. They were both good. One of them successfully called for artillery fire on a column of 14 tanks at about 2000, giving coordinates based on where his ear placed them.