

The Mountain Counterattack

The 2nd Platoon, Co. "A", 823rd TD, at Hill 285, Aug 6-12.

Interview in the field, vic Heerlebann, Holland, September 26, 1944.

Major Ashby L. Lohse, S-3, 823rd TD Bn.

Lt. Albert J. Kuster, EX O, Co. "A"

Lt. Francis J. Connors, Platoon Leader, 2nd Platoon, Co. "A".

GL-303 (5) B

At 1300 hours on 6 September, the 2nd Platoon of Co. "A" took over the positions formerly occupied by the 634th TD on Hill 285. These positions extended along the forward slope of the ridge line, through the barren stretch atop Hill 285, that was something on the order of a No Man's Land. Co. "A" of the 120th Infantry occupied positions to the right of the TD emplacements, while Co. "B" of the 120th Infantry held the left. The TD Platoon was commanded by Lt. Francis J. Connors.

The morning of 7 August was misty, especially toward dawn, when at 0500 the men manning the TD guns saw a tank moving from behind a house in a nearby field. A bazooka team, with an infantry lieutenant, was sent forward to locate and destroy this tank, but after progressing about 500 yards, the infantry lieutenant decided that the reconnaissance had extended far enough. Sgt. Ames Broussard, of the 2nd Platoon, requested permission to advance further, which permission was granted, and pushed on through the mist until he found the tank, A Mark IV. He succeeded in knocking it out, but by this time the enemy had infiltrated in the area all around him and he was unable to regain his unit for 1 1/2 hours.

The enemy attack picked up momentum around 0900 on 7 August when two more Mark IVs attacked the TD positions. In spite of the fact that the morning was so foggy, the No. 2 gun spotted both these tanks and knocked them out at a range of 150 yards. Later, a fourth enemy tank was located near the le Neufborg road, advancing on the Hill 285 positions. Due to good camouflage, the No. 1 gun was not detected by the advancing tank which had opened fire on the TD positions, and at a range of 50 yards the No. 1 gun stopped the advance of the tank and sent it "limping" and smoking away in retreat. It was afterwards found abandoned back near the le Neufborg road. In addition to these enemy tank casualties, the 2nd

Platoon on 7 August also knocked out two SPS and one armored car.

On that same day, the TD platoon was strafed by British planes. One TD man was killed. Fire was also received from friendly infantry and artillery. Friendly aircraft strafing the top of Hill 285 caused a brushfire to start and in the voluminous smoke which rolled across the top of the hill the 2nd Platoon had a hard time even to see their own guns or to hold to their positions. "We didn't have a friend in the world that day," commented Lt. Connors.

At 0430 on 8 August, the platoon received a counterattack from the northeast by enemy infantry that Lt. Connors estimated as ⁺greater than company strength. The infantry attack included two flamethrowers, one of which was captured. Lt. Connors used some scattered infantry, that he collected and formed into a group, to help him repulse the enemy attack. But Co. "A", on his right, fell back to the other side of the secondary road along the crest of the hill and left the TD platoon pretty much out in front by itself. It was Lt. Connors' belief that there was a strong pocket of enemy in an orchard to his front and he called for reinforcements and protection. ^{1st} Battalion Headquarters ^(120th INF) was inclined to the opinion that the enemy activities were a patrol action. At 0430 on 9 August another counterattack was received of approximately the same strength as before. Still insisting that the enemy pocket was far more than a patrol, Lt. Connors again ^(82nd TD Bn) requested support and this time the 2nd Recon Platoon ^A was attached to him. Later in the day enemy artillery raked his positions, knocking out one TD gun and causing Lt. Cunningham to become a casualty, and that night the TD force was again strongly counterattacked. Lt. Connors' force had followed the procedure of removing the breech cases of their guns at night and retiring to dug-in positions behind the ridge line ~~at night~~ where with small arms fire they repulsed these insistent counterattacks. During the day also the men frequently had to dive for their foxholes due to the heavy enemy artillery. On one day they were in their foxholes for 5 hours.

On the 9th, the 120th Inf, along with the attached battalion of the 117th

Infantry, the 2nd Battalion, attacked southeast toward Mortain in an effort to clear the enemy out of the town. This attack took all the infantry with it and left Lt. Connors' platoon holding its positions on Hill 285 with only the 2nd Recon Platoon for support. At 1600 on 9 August, Lt. Connors was ordered off the hill to positions along the le Neufborg road. This movement was made by infiltration. The 3rd Recon Platoon was added to his force as it took up these new positions. The le Neufborg road, of course, was extremely important as both a supply and communication axis, but leaving Hill 285 at this time was also accounted for, according to 823rd TD Battalion sources, as "nobody seemed to care much about that hill anyhow", and, too, to let the enemy attack again and this time not find anybody there." As it happened, the 629th TD had been sent to the top of the hill and was there for the ensuing attack on the 10th.

While holding along the le Neufborg road, Lt. Connors force did not encounter any fighting with the enemy, but underwent severe artillery shelling. The positions were held until 1515 on the 11th, when the entire 2nd Platoon, with the 2nd and 3rd Recon platoons attached, returned by infiltration to the top of Hill 285 again.

By this time it had been discovered that the enemy force in the pocket in the orchard ^{had been} ~~was~~ around 300 men, bearing out Lt. Connors' ~~own~~ contention that it was far more than a patrol force. During these operations from 6-11 August, Lt. Connors' force suffered 19 casualties in killed, wounded, and missing.

S/Sgt. David Garth

Interviews with: 1/Lt Leon Neel, 1st platoon, Co B, 823 TD Bn (Towed)
 Capt Francis Wilts, CO, Co B.

GL-347 (A)

The TDs in the St Barthelmy Battle, 7 Aug 44

Capt Wilts' Co B was attached to the 117th Inf. At 1430 of the 6th of Aug the Capt made a reconnaissance of the 117th's area and contacted units of the 635th TD which were with the 1st Div, to look over their positions. He also talked to Col Frankland of the 1st Bn, 117th Inf, who advised the Capt to wait till dusk to move his guns in because he thought the movement of guns and vehicles would draw fire. So, at 0200 of the 7th Lt George I Green moved his 3rd platoon into position, completing this in about an hour (see sketch for positions). He didn't move in earlier because of artillery fire.

The 2nd platoon was to follow the 3rd, by infiltration. Positions were checked at about 0300. The town was "as quiet as a graveyard" the Capt says. The 1st gun was therefore brought in, the half track driving off the street into the little yard where the gun was to be put into position. Before the gun could even be uncoupled, however, Jerry started throwing artillery and mortar fire. The crew of the gun scattered and the carrier and gun were both hit. The crew never did assemble again; only tow men returned, the gun commander and the driver.

When the tanks began to move up at about 0600 Lt Green sent his vehicles back--3 jeeps and an ammunition truck, for he saw that things were getting too hot. Visibility was very poor and the guns went into action firing at the tank gun flashes. Cpl Christenson knocked the turret off one tank and disabled a second. Pvts Antonio Barrias and George Schiler got another with 5 rounds from a bazooka. But tanks kept on coming and the guns were under heavy small arms fire.

2 TDs in the Mortar Attack

One by one these guns on the eastern edge of town were knocked out and the crews became casualties, many of them probably captured. Of this 3rd platoon only one full squad and these security corporal, of those who had seen action, got back to friendly lines, and these did so by working back by devious routes, as several did in A and C Companies.

The 1st platoon, had taken positions astride the road (as indicated) in support of the 3rd Bn on Sunday night. When the 3rd pl was knocked out, about 0930, Col Frankland contacted Lt Neel of the 1st platoon for additional help. Neel, via radio, asked and received permission to move up two guns immediately. Neel decided to move his two rear guns, one into town, just opposite the Bn CP, and one farther back, covering the bend in the road, although the 2nd came under fire and turned around to take a position at the trail (280).

The gun in town gave very effective aid for a while. Pvt Dunham killed a tank commander who was leading the tank afoot, and the crew then got the tank with the TD. The crew was under unusually heavy small arms fire. Two of the crew's NCOs were wounded by rifle grenades. A second tank approached the position, but no ammunition was at hand. Pvt T. L. Smith volunteered to cross the street to the half track to replenish the supply, which he did under MG fire. Two other men followed, but couldn't come back due to the heavy fire. When the ammunition was finally obtained the gun could not fire on the tank, for the gun was in such a position just to the side of the house that a post prevented firing on the tank. The gun could not be shifted readily enough and a Jerry tank knocked it out. Lt Neel consequently ordered his men to withdraw. Pvt Daly's conscience bothered him, cried "This ain't running away, is it, Lt? This ain't running away, is it?" The crew took off immediately to the gun along the road, joined its crew and brought it into firing position opposite

3 TDs in the Mortain Battle, 117th Inf 823rd TD

the Regimental C. and got another Tiger. Two more Jerry tanks approached shortly after, one of them entering a field to the right. The TD^{was} still concealed, but there was danger now of exposing themselves to the third tank while they waited for the 2nd to come within range. Lt Neel said they now "played cat and mouse for about 45 minutes," waiting to get the 2nd tank and "sweating out the 3rd". When the 2nd finally came within range Sgt Pesak, Capt J. J. Baum and Pvt Raymond Dautrieve opened fire on the 2nd tank, thus revealing themselves to the 3rd which opened fire on them immediately, wounding both Pesak and Dautrieve, and knocking out the gun. The 13 men left of the 2-gun section now did the next best thing, formed a defensive line at trail 280, to the right of the road, holding that line till 2100. All of the above action occurred before noon.

Col Frankland had much praise for the TD men. He felt they had rendered very effective aid.

The Co had suffered 42 EM and 1 Officer in casualties--- 35 of them from the 3rd platoon, 7 from the 2nd platoon. Most of them were probably taken prisoner.

Roland G Ruppenthal
Capt Inf