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30th Division  
120th Inf  
7-9 July 44

(18)

120th RCT ESTABLISHES A BRIDGEHEAD SOUTH OF VIRE & TAUTE CANAL

(The following is based on information to Capt. Ferriss on 7-23-44

by Lt. Col. Ward, Ex. Off. of 120th Inf, and Capt. Glazier, S-2.)

As part of a coordinated attack by the 30th Div to move south from the Vire and Taute Canal and seize the high ground west of St. Lo, the I and III Bns, 120th Inf, launched an attack across the Canal at 071345. The main effort of the 30th Div had struck that morning west across the Vire River in the vic of Aire.

The 120th's attack had been scheuled for early afternoon in the hope and expectation that the enemy's line immediately south of the Canal and thus facilitate the advance of the 120th.

Col. Birks' plan was to force crossings of the Canal both above and below the bridge over the Canal. He gave the III Bn the crossing on the right and the I Bn the crossing on the left. Both Bns ran into difficulties getting across. The 105 C. Engr Bn was supposed to throw a total of six foot bridges across the Canal in the III Bn's sector, but due to a miscalculation the bridges prepared were short. It was necessary to tie two bridges together in order to get one bridge long enough, and as a result only three bridges were constructed for the III Bn's crossing. Due to the resulting delays, the artillery preparation, which in any case was not plentiful, preceded the advance of the infantry by such a wide margin as to lose much of its effect. On the left, the I Bn was able to wade across the Canal, for the most part, and thus it avoided any bridge-crossing delays and followed right behind the artillery preparation. But the hostile fire directed against it was very considerably greater than that which was received by the III Bn. Casualties were numerous and only courageeous fighting enabled the battalion to get across. Though the enemy forces opposing the 120 Inf were estimated between 800 and 900 - as against twice that number of Americans - the enemy held the higher ground and had good observation of the attackers.

Once the bridgehead was established, the two battalions advanced south astride the road to St. Lo without meeting strong resistance. St. Jean was by-passed and later occupied with little difficulty. By nightfall the lines were well south of St. Jean. One Co. of medium tanks was attached, but they crossed the Canal too late to see much action.

On 8 July the III Bn attacked SW to reinforce the 113th Cav Gp in protecting the R flank of the Corps. During the day they fought a bitter battle for the high ground north of le Desert. Casualties were heavy, but by the end of the day the hill was in their hands. The I Bn advanced on the R of the road to St. Lo, advancing its lines as shown on the accompanying overlay.

The II/120th, having been relieved of its mission of containing the enemy on the Vire et Taute Canal by the II/134th, crossed the Canal and by the morning of the 9th, it had passed through the I Bn. With the I Bn following to its right rear, the II Bn made good progress during the morning. During the afternoon it held the ground gained despite (1) wild rumors of an enemy tank attack in force, which precipitated a frantic retreat northward on the St. Lo road by all kinds of vehicles, armored and otherwise, and (2) a genuine counterattack by an estimated 15 tanks of the Pioneer Bn of the 2d SS Div, Das Reich. The panic-stricken movement north on the St. Lo road had no direct effect on the front lines of the 120th Inf, but it did result in making this important supply route impassable. It was apparently precipitated by the leading tanks of CCB of the 3rd Armored Division taking the wrong turn when they debouched onto the St. Lo road south of the lines held by the 30th Division. They were supposed to turn south and proceed to Vents, Instead they turned north, ran into AAA batteries supporting the 30th Division, and a fire fight ensued, resulting in the two leading tanks being knocked out. The tragic mistake was discovered and the headlong retreat of the leaderless vehicles stopped soon afterwards, but all agree that it was "a terrific mess" for about 20 minutes.

The genuine tank counterattack came on the extreme right flank of the II/120th. The tanks got into the rear of the II Bn and cut off its communications for a while. The men did not panic, however, but buttoned up, established a perimeter defense, and with the invaluable assistance of a box barrage laid sown by the 230th FA they made things too hot for the black-shirted tankers, and the latter pulled out.