

CHAPTER III

THE LE MANS RUN: CHAMBOIS SHAMBLES



1 August, the 90th Division passed from the VIII Corps, First Army to the XV Corps, Third Army, and was alerted to move. The next day kitchens were returned to Service Battery. The division began a move that “outblitzed” anything ever done by an infantry division heretofore, and as far as the author knows, has yet to be surpassed. The Monnois, Lengronne, Gavray, le Loreur, La Haye-Pensel, Montviron, and Avranches. General Patton and Maj. Gen. Haislip, Corps Commander, and Brig. Gen. Devine inspected the column. Many officers in 90th Division Artillery found out that some things were somewhat different in the Third Army.

The next day we moved 6 miles to the vicinity Chasseguey. No activity except that more enemy planes were encountered than at any time since we entered combat. Battalion machine gunners, as well as Captain Lee and the boys from Undo Able, had learned early in Normandy not to fire on enemy planes at night unless first attacked by them. Undo Able was high on the list of people that we liked most to have around. It was late afternoon when the battalion made its move to Chasseguey. During this march the largest fleet of enemy planes witnessed to date, appeared. At first, a number of the men thought them to be P-51's. There were too many to be enemy. Then they attacked. Undo Able and other ack-ack outfits kept them away from our column but other installation's got a fair working over before friendly planes came and drove them away. Famous last words – keep going, those are P-51's.

4 August the XV Corps, 90th and 79th Divisions were ordered to move on Le Mans, 73 miles away. The 90th was first ordered to seize Mayenne, 45 miles away, and Task Force Weaver was originally the whole division, but the task force was reorganized to give the maximum of mobility with tremendous fire-power. For General “Wild Bill” Weaver's spearhead force, the 337 CT motorized, the 712th Tank Battalion and the 343rd Field Artillery Battalion were selected. This Task Force was further subdivided into Task Force Barth, and the main body of TFW to give even greater mobility. The main body of the TFW consisted of the 3rd battalion, 357th Infantry (Mason's Maulers), the 343rd and most of the 712th Tank Battalion.

Early morning of 5 August, the task force began to roll. Practically no resistance was met until just out of Mayenne where the motorized 357 CT and a part of the 712th Tank Battalion, the task force spearhead, ran into some trouble but soon had it under control. The decision was made to encircle the strongly defended town; first crossing the Mayenne River in three places. The 343rd was rushed up close enough so that medium range would clear the town. Going into position we passed a battalion of tanks, a tanker was heard to quip, “What in hell kind of a war is this when even the artillery medics pass up the tanks”. The stage for the attack was set, and the boys of Union took off. Union Red pushed straight toward the town but were stopped by two “88's” firing at them. Captain Ingram, our liaison officer to the 1st Battalion, called for fire. One of our first rounds scored a direct hit on one of the “88's”. The ensuing explosions caused a heavy smoke to blanket the bridge. Major Hamilton seized this opportunity and the Red Battalion rushed the bridge, capturing it intact, with aero-bombs wired to it ready for its destruction. A short time later White and Blue Battalions having crossed the river by raft and boat, flanked the town and the initial objective was secured.

6 August was spent in the same position, preparations were fired for the attack on Aron and several air missions for Lt. Hicks and Lt. Rhein, on SP guns and tanks. The following day at 0200 a preparation was fired so that the infantry could withdraw from Aron. The task force pulled back to Mayenne and headed south leaving the enemy in and around Aron to the 1st Division. Farther south the Red Battalion was having quite a scrap at Ste. Suzanne, and it was here that Captain J. A. Sheehan was killed in action by enemy artillery. Captain Sheehan was working with Captain Ingram, who, with his driver Cpl. Orville Lindstrom, was wounded at the same time.

The task force moved swiftly south and by 1420 August 7 we were in position on the outskirts of Vaiges. Batteries were leap-frogged into position; ready to fire. Artillery received a priority on roads and sped from position to position doubling the column, occasionally with MP's motorcycles as escorts. In fact, in one instance an overanxious MP led us too far and we came to a skidding halt alongside the "Recons". The infantry after another skirmish at Ste. Suzanne started down the Le Mans highway the following morning with the 343rd Cowboys, riding high and shooting from the hip. The air OP's were up from dawn to dusk directing fire on the fleeing enemy columns. Wreckage was everywhere. Tanks, towed-guns, personnel carriers, SP guns, every type of equipment, horses, and Krauts were lying on the roads, by the roads, in the fields and even hanging in the trees. Between the air force, the artillery and tanks practically nothing was escaping to fight again. Towed-guns with motors still running on the tractors were overtaken. "Super-men" came marching down the road, with hands on head, without guard escorts, just marching and waiting for someone to impound them. On and on the task force sped, twisting, weaving and shooting through towns and villages with the French lining the streets, heedless of danger. The French cheered, laughed and cried with elation. They brought gifts of foods, wines, "white lightning" and occasional kisses. Gallant, little old ladies, with white hair and wrinkles, smiled through their tears, stood on their toes trying to make themselves heard "Vive la Americain!" They were happy once again, the rule of tyranny was lifting, they would be free again. "Merci, Monsieur, Vive la Americain!"

It was all so strange! A few days ago we had been inching across Normandy trying to get from one hedgerow to the next. Now we were racing across France at a speed unheard of for an infantry division. Cavalry could do it, yes, but an infantry division, no. Never-the-less, the Tough Ombres were doing it and making the boys from the old school sit up and take notice. After it was over, the commanders, battalion and regimental, were called into 3rd Army Headquarters. Army wanted to know how an infantry division could do such a job as the 90th had done.

Lead elements entered Le Mans at 0300 August 9 coordinating with the 79th Division who entered the city from the southwest. Cheering crowds lined the streets, champagne, wine, cider, cognac and "buzz-bomb juice" flowed freely. This same procedure followed all through France. "Cigarette pour Papa?"

The Division occupied positions north of Le Mans. Task Force Weaver was dissolved but its historical dash of 146 miles in seven days will be remembered and read about for years to come. Countless numbers of enemy tanks, armored and other vehicles were captured or destroyed. 2054 prisoners were captured and hundreds killed, while our casualties were very light. The air OP's manned by Lts. Rhein and Hicks did a never-to-be-forgotten job. They did a marvelous task reporting the leading elements of the various parts of the task force and in maintaining unending surveillance of our front and flanks. To Lt. Colonel D. K. Reimers, our battalion commander, goes the highest praise. His leadership and thoroughness in reconnaissance and ability to keep one, and the majority of the time, two batteries in position firing, was one of the reasons for the success of this great maneuver. Every man who participated in this operation deserves high praise, because each one had to put out his utmost to make it a success. So fast was the movement that a man in the leading elements, even to eat a "K" ration, found himself in the rear echelon when finished. Armored escorts were necessary for supply trains.

12 August the battalion passed thru Alencon and was shelled intermittently along the route. A few minutes after midnight, and shortly after arriving in position northwest of Alencon, the Luftwaffe came out in considerable strength dropping flares and then bombing. Many bombs landed in and around

our positions but the first flares caught us unaware and lit up the area, like Christmas night in Harlem, but camouflage had been well handled and all personnel behaved like veterans.

As more troops were rushed up to plug the holes left behind the racing T-O boys, the 90th edged toward Chambois, driving and blocking until only one road remained that the battered German 7th Army could even hope to escape through. On 17 August, while moving to a position northwest of Nonant Le Pins, two P-38's circling overhead came down to strafe the column. The second came in too low, shearing the tops of four telephone poles and hitting Baker Battery's 4th gun section truck with its wing and propeller. Four men were killed and two injured during the strafing. The men killed were T/4 John Burkhart, Pfc. Henry Maul, Pfc. Fred D. Weyl, Jr., and Pvt. Tony A. Vigil. The plane crashed and burned about 250 yards from the road. The pilot was killed in the crash and burned beyond recognition, but his dog tags identified him as an American pilot. The next day Service Battery made a special trip to pick up engineer supplies, which turned out to be one "maul". In the course of getting these "supplies", the truck was strafed by British Spitfires and the driver was injured.

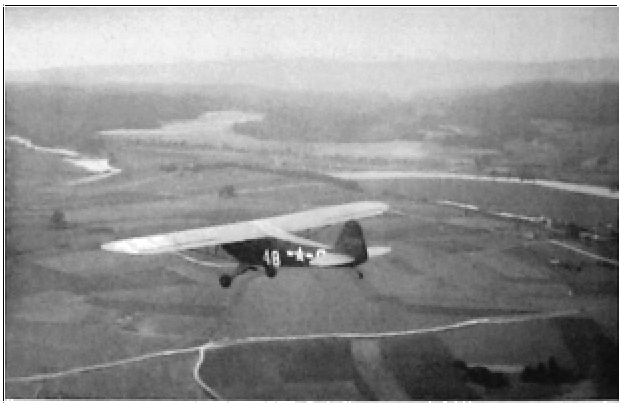
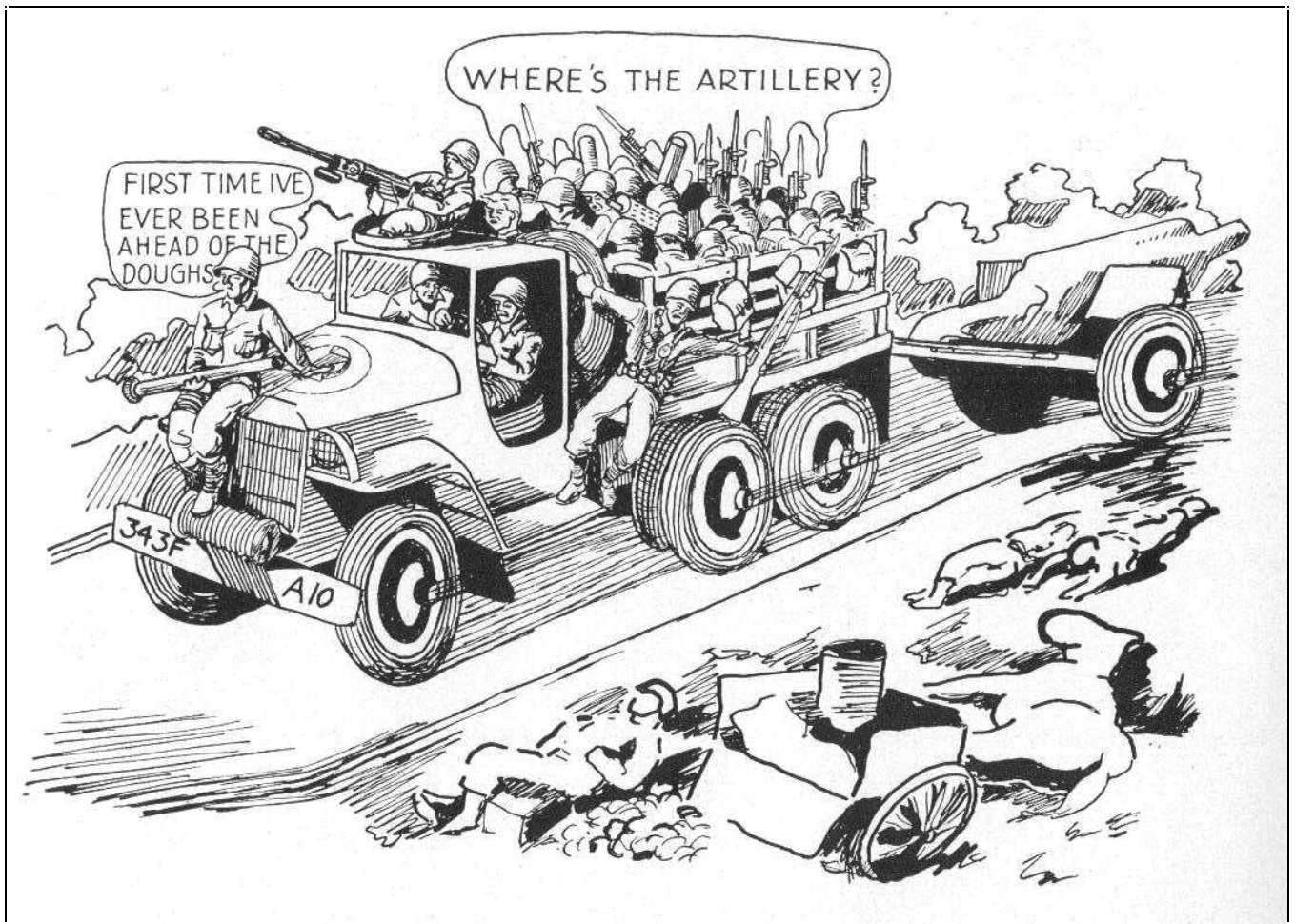
19 August Colonel John B. Daly, Division Artillery Executive, was killed. 20 August, the Battalion moved to new positions near Exmes, our last position in what was once the Falaise Gap and was now known as the "Chambois Shambles". The 90th occupied the high ground around Chambois, which was known as the "Balcony of Death". Infantry guns up front, and the artillery a little farther back poured hot steel in on the Germans, pausing now and then to permit some to surrender. In seven days, this division took 12,355 prisoners and killed nearly as many. Destroyed were 308 tanks, 248 SP guns, 164 artillery pieces, 3270 motor vehicles, 649 horsedrawn vehicles and 13 motorcycles.

The following, is a quote from Lt. Colonel D. L. Durfee who was with the 90th as an observer for the Army Ground Forces. He was with the division from Le Mans to near Metz. "It was really incredible", Durfee said, "This campaign which began with the advance north from Le Mans and terminated with the juncture of American and British forces north of Chambois, will forever be regarded as one of the most brilliant episodes in the Battle of France.

"The 90th Infantry Division initiating the campaign in a support role, subsequently became the motivating factor in the success of the scheme".

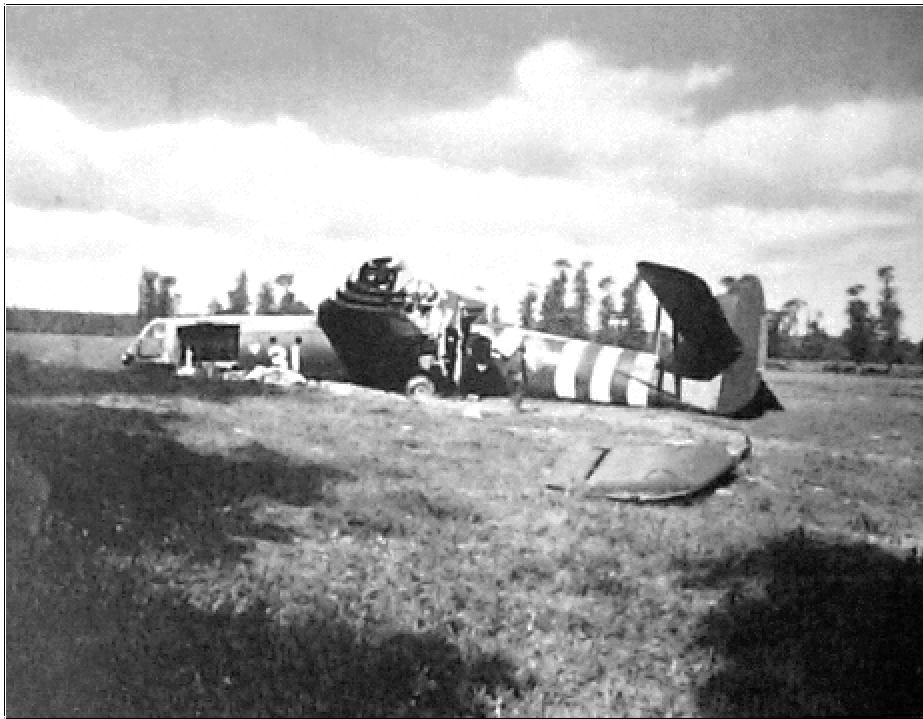
"The Nazi defeat there was plainly a rout. It was every man for himself. The roads were cluttered with all kinds of equipment, horses, tanks, artillery, foot soldiers and supplies, all mixed together and all being shot to pieces by the remarkable marksmanship of our artillery. It was the greatest ambush of the war".

On 17 August the 90th was transferred to V Corps control and on August 26 transferred again to XX Corps control. The time, 22 August to 26 August, was spent as a partial rest period. The Battalion moved back to the vicinity of Nonant le Pins but was in position ready to fire at any time. Physical inspections, movies and trips to Chambois for a view of the wreckage constituted the activities of the 343rd for the period. The first Red Cross Clubmobile visited the area; coffee, doughnuts, good music, and visits with American girls were enjoyed.











I CAN'T BREATHE!!

WHERE IS MY GAS MASK!!

I'M DEAD!!

AMOS

