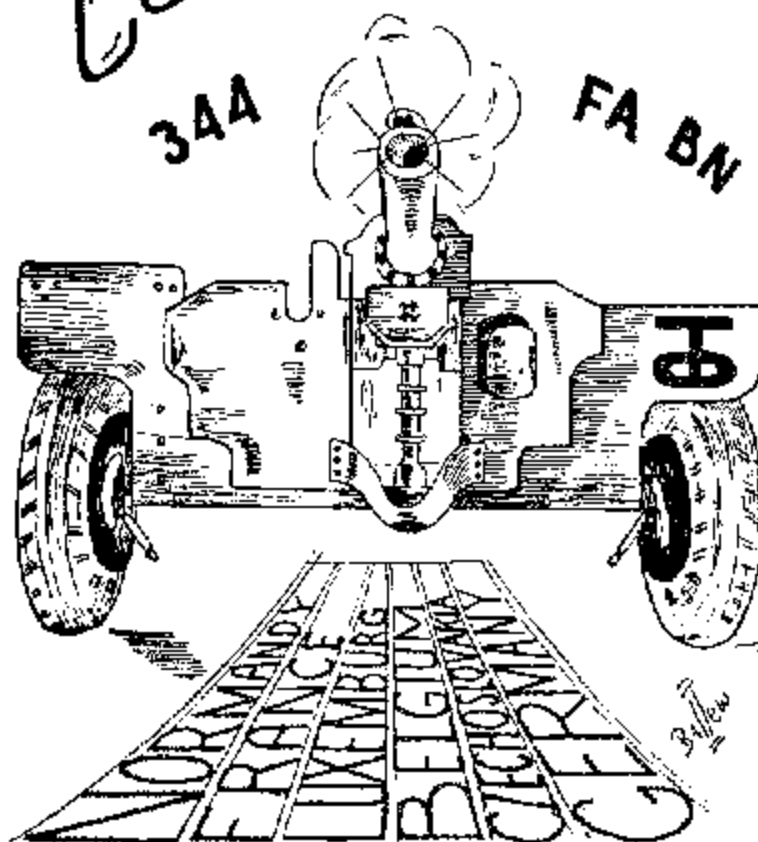


COMBAT HISTORY

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COMBAT HISTORY

OF THE

344th FIELD ARTILLERY BATTALION

FOREWORD BY EDITORS

The historian, amateur or expert, must write from fact; when, where, how and who. From these must be sifted the necessary ingredients to make our history accurate. To make history readable there is a need for imagination and a sense of time. In fixing a particular scene or event on paper we need facts and figures. In order to make the event one with many we need continuity. To one man the landing on the Normandy beach may be the most memorable event of the first month in France. To another some happening in July may be the high point; but there is a lapse of thirty days between the two dates – days equally important to a great number of men. That is our job; to fill the gap not only between dates but also to recall and record days and dates vital to this history. If there are omissions, remember that there were no recording machines carried in combat. Our memories are not infallible. Keep in step with us and you may recall things that you have forgotten. We realize that all have their own stories, own experiences to relate. To make this writing a personal record we would need a book encyclopedic in scope. If we can keep this work somewhere between the objective and the personal we shall accomplish our aim.

The Editors

CHAPTER I

The 344th Field Artillery Battalion, an organic unit of the 90th Division, having been demobilized after World War I, was reactivated on March 25, 1942, at Camp Barkeley, Texas, by a cadre of already trained men from the Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

From this point on an intensive training schedule was carried out through the summer and fall with numerous recruits and also some depletions. By Christmas the Battalion was up to fighting strength.

After the Christmas celebration was over there followed a month of field problems out on a range around Barkeley, and then we shoved off for Louisiana maneuvers, which were against the 77th Division. These maneuvers lasted all of February and March, and gave us a taste of what we were supposed to do in the real thing. We returned to Barkeley on April 4th and started polishing up the rough spots uncovered by those "games".

During the training period, when furloughs were also given, we went out on several service practices and also more field. In May we went to Brownwood, Texas, for our artillery GHQ test. This outfit did a grand job, and along with the other units of the 90th Division Artillery, we put a record down, that as yet, has been second to none.

Returning again to Barkeley we sweated through-out the summer months and then headed for Indio, California, where we spent four months of hard training in the desert. The desert taught us to respect the supply problem and also gave us our first acquaintance with Army field rations. During the time spent out there we maneuvered against the 93rd Division, a colored outfit.

Word came down to us in late December that we would shortly head east, where we would all get furloughs right away. The place that we were to go to was Fort Dix, N. J. then the rumors started "Boys this is it! We are heading out!" And many other such remarks. We left for Dix on the 2nd of January, arriving there on the 7th. Furloughs started at once and were completed by the end of February.

Now that furloughs were over with we were well on the way to being prepared for a POE. Many inspections and the big job of having everything in tip top shape was at hand, plus special classes in applying the finishing touches to our two years of training. We set out for camp Kilmer, N.J., on the 17th of March. Spent five days there and then boarded the S. S. John Erickson, formally known as the Swedish American liner Kungsholm, sister ship of the Gripsholm on the evening of March 22.

After much delay and confusion we finally set sale for the European Theater of Operations, landing in Liverpool, England, on the 9th of April, Easter Sunday, after an extremely quiet crossing.

At the docks we got our first taste of English friendliness, what with their band playing their welcoming themes and all the shouting back and forth. While embarking on the train for our new camp the Red Cross handed out coffee and doughnuts and gum to all the boys. When they were through the train gave a mighty shrill blast and off we lurched for our new camp, Davenport, near Wolverhampton.

While we were at Davenport we received all of our sectional equipment and everything that was not given to us at our POE. We went through a good physical conditioning. And after a month of this sort of training we headed for Sennybridge, South Wales, where we did some firing on the artillery range. During our stay we were in contact with many "Tommies" and learned a little more about them. At the end of the week of firing, out in that typical wet, raw weather that the United Kingdom is so well-known

for, we headed back to Davenport supposedly to resume our previous training. When we got back we were told to take only that equipment we would need right away for we would be moving out in a few days. 10 days later we moved through several towns on a long motor march down to what is known as a marshaling area, Cheptsow, a town close to Newport, on the Bristol Channel.

At once activity was stepped up to a lively pace. Our wanderings were limited and much paperwork had to be done. Amazingly enough our "Chow" improved greatly, accompanied by such cracks as "fattening for the kill" and many others. Extra classes on first aid, gas, and our own particular jobs were being held, and a few speeches from visiting firemen telling us that the "chips were down".

In the last few days of our stay at this place no one was allowed in or out of the camp. On the 28th of May the truck drivers took all the heavy equipment down to the docks and loaded them on the liberty ships that were to take us to our objective, and the battalion followed on the train, June 1st.

We stood off Newport for at least 48 hours while waiting for our convoy to be made up and then sailed down the channel and around Land's End into the English Channel.

On June 4th, a day of much excitement for all of us we were briefed by our officers. That caused plenty of talk among the boys for we knew that at last we were to get a crack at the much-hated enemy. We were to land in France behind the assault division. Two years of patient waiting and now the time had arrived for everyone to prove his mettle.

June 6th was a big day for everyone. At home the folks were all in church, while everybody was tense, expecting most anything to happen. Early in the evening the skipper of the boat called all hands aft to tell us that the beachhead landings and the airborne had all been initially successful, but also that the American Fifth Army had taken Rome. The big thing in everyone's mind now was, when were we going to land, for the land was not yet in sight and our planes were shuttling back and forth all day long across the channel, and our destroyers were doubly alert as they cut the water around us.

The morning of the seventh at approximately 0200 we were all alerted for submarine attack. One had been located in our vicinity and our "Greyhounds" were out after it. After a few moments, needless to say anxious ones, we were told to go back to bed. Later that night some planes flew over but no calling cards were dropped and so no alert was sounded. That morning, just as it was getting daylight some of us went up on deck to watch for the sight of land. Soon a faint dark line could be seen in the distance. We were approaching the shore of France. It was not very long after that when we began to hear the heavy guns shooting toward shore. When the ship hove in closer we saw that it was a big "Battlewagon" and later found it to be the USS Texas one of the ships so badly damaged at Pearl Harbor, showing the axis just what it was made of, and typifying the "Yankee spirit". This was D plus 2 and we were swinging anchor off of Utah Beach. Looking around gave us the biggest thrill and impression yet felt as to our future combat power. Boats of all descriptions as far as the eye could reach, accompanied by an umbrella of Air Corps, all before this tiny strip of land. As the sun came up the haze cleared up more and more.

The huge barrage balloons, like great sausages, swung from their cables, an ever present reminder that the forces of Hermann Goering may come at any time. Slowly our ship moved through channels, cleared of mines, to reach our anchorage in closer to the shore. Many were anchored permanently: here a destroyer down by the stern, there a landing craft's bow sticking out of the water like a shark's fin. From the flying bridge of the ship an airplane spotter, with powerful glasses, swept the skies continually. Naval guns fired tremendous salvos shoreward. The beach was littered with landing craft and knocked

out vehicles. An occasional German shell burst on the beach. Yet there was more than the strangeness. There was a lack of war. The sky was filled with aircraft – allied aircraft. The water was filled with fighting craft – Allied naval craft. We knew what it cost to take the beach, but we had not seen it taken. We knew that inshore a few yards, or perhaps a mile, thousands of men were fighting for a few feet, a yard of breathing space. The sun swung from east to west. A few planes slipped out of formation and crashed into the sea. A minesweeper, hunting for its deadly loot, blew up and sank within a minute. Suddenly a landing craft came alongside, vehicles and men were loaded – you move toward shore, this was it.

Those that went ashore the first night included most of the radio, wire and detail men from the various batteries. We learned that first night that the Luftwaffe did most of their work after dark. Those who witnessed the display of ack-ack fire over the beaches of Normandy shall not soon forget the drama and sudden shock of massed fire; nor shall they forget the slow drive along strange woods through a strange country, towards a strange and hazy destination.

The ninth of June the firing batteries came in, and Lt. Andrews, A battery, and Lt. Lasher, B Battery, forward observers, went up with the infantry. At 1045 we fired a 15 minute preparation on a road junction near Chef De Pont for the 82nd Airborne Division. Along with the support of the 345th Field Artillery Battalion this was the first firing done by the 90th Division Artillery. Fox hole digging was one of the important duties; no prodding was necessary.

June 10 and 11th was spent in position near St. Mere Eglise. The Luftwaffe made a call on the night of the 10th and the morning of the eleventh – a call of death. Four dead and 16 wounded. A false gas alarm was given during this attack. Numerous incidents relating to this alarm can be recalled by many, the 20 casualties had a sobering effect on all. From this position the battalion fired on the areas held by the enemy near the Merderet River. Strong enemy artillery fire was reported falling in this sector. Our mission was to neutralize that particular area. Made a lateral movement to Chef du Pont on the evening of the eleventh, where we continued to fire heavy concentrations in support of the infantry. There were paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne in our battalion area. These men were the remnants of the thousands dropped on D-Day. They had fought continually since landing, the casualties heavy. Their parachutes and wrecked gliders dotted the small fields of Normandy. The hedgerows were the traps from which they had fought and died. Heavily armed, and battlewise, they continued to fight along with the infantry of the various divisions whenever contact was made. Many the night their voices growled out of the darkness: "keep that damn noise down. Where the hell you think you are? Damn artillerymen."

June thirteenth – the battle for Etienville [Pont l'Abbe] and Piccaville was well underway. Here the Allies hit them with everything in the book. It was here that Lt. Andrews won his recommendation for the Silver Star. Lt. Andrews, an artilleryman, led a platoon of doughboys to the attack, after their officers had become casualties. Lt. Lasher was killed this day while driving through Piccaville by one of our own bombs. That night we fired a big concentration for a river crossing by the 82nd Airborne. It was a successful mission.

On the fifteenth of June we moved to Amfreville to support the 357th Infantry, which was between the 4th and 9th divisions, who later pinched us out. We remained there until the night of the eighteenth when we made a night move to the vicinity of Gourbesville. This was a night of slow movement and great suspense, as roving German planes flared the roads. The days in Normandy were long, the nights short; the men were tired and rest came in short doses; a night march increased attention and put the men on edge. As the flares turned our cloak of darkness into well lighted highways, the men huddled lower in the trucks. The ghostly light emphasized the fatigue lines around their mouths and gave their features

a harsh and distorted appearance. By dawn the batteries were all in position, camouflage nets in place, ready to fire.

It was here at Gourbesville that the 79th Infantry Division came up through us and continued the attack.

On the night of June 21 we moved to the south and joined up with 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions to take up an active defense of the lower part of the peninsula. In going to this area we had to pass through several small towns, one being Etienneville.

Up to this time we had been under VII Corps control but now we went into the VIII Corps. This area was to be occupied until the plans for large-scale attacks towards Periers had been completed. But Hill 122 and the Foret de Mont Castre were ahead. This was to be the most important battle in the Normandy Campaign.

When we were first in a new position very little firing was done, for we had been instructed to keep the amount of artillery as much a secret as possible. So for that reason the entire sector was very quiet until the end of June.

July first was a day very similar to the last few days, rain and sun, rain and sun. That day we fired better than 900 rounds, more than we had shot for several days. The Service Battery ammo train has had a rather ticklish job crossing the bridge at Cretteville. Apparently the "Hun" had it well bracketed at all times, much to the consternation of all travelers. The air activity, ours thank God, has been rather good, considering the weather. One can well imagine the thoughts that go through Jerry's mind when "Jabo" starts one of his screaming downward journeys. All the prisoners taken claim him as the most feared along with artillery, whose massing they couldn't fathom.

Though July 2nd was much the same as July 1st, there was much more activity around the battalion area, indicating the preparation of a big drive; heralding the ultimate doom of Germany. Liaison officers from various outfits that were to support us in the coming action arrived during the day to talk over plans. Our mission was to support the 358th Infantry in taking the high ground through the Foret de Mont Castre and then drive toward Periers. This drive included the 82nd, 79th and 90th Divisions. Attached to our combat team was part of the 712th Tank Battalion and one platoon of the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion.

July 3rd broke as a dark dreary day, with a very low ceiling, but the attack still went off on the designated time, 0515, with a terrific corps artillery "serenade", opening a pathway, or should we say a swath for those unbeatable "footsloggers". The final objective, Coutances and east looked a long way off, and a very costly one too. Immediately to our front was the highest point in the peninsula, Hill 122, whose approaches were covered by dense forest, and heavily guarded by the enemy.

On the first day of the attack our battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Merton E. Munson was wounded by mortar fire and had to be evacuated, leaving Major Charles Conn in command. Lt. Bovard and Andrews were also made casualties during the days hard fighting. Besides the tenacious quality of fighting by the enemy, rumored through P.W. channels to be paratroopers used as infantry. The doughboys had no air support because of the poor weather and their progress was slowed down by much swamp and marsh. After firing a great many rounds throughout the day we heavily interdicted the roads leading into the hill and behind it.

After snatching a few winks here and there the attack was resumed along with promise of good weather for at dawn it was clear, which meant that our planes would be out to pound away at the enemy too. The town of Leseey, right under the hill where every move could be seen by the ever watchful enemy, was our objective for the day. The objective was taken shortly after noon after we had poured out a big concentration around it.

One rather amusing incident at noon on the fourth. We were preparing a fire mission that was to include all the different colored smokes in our possession for a little surprise celebration of the fourth when all hell broke loose around us. Machine guns, rifles, pistols and all the sidearms known in our army opened up. We all ducked into our foxholes, grabbing our weapons as we did for we did not know what to expect. One minute the field was alive with men, the next minute there wasn't a soul in sight. Pretty soon the phone rang and someone could be seen cautiously making his way to it, making sure that he did not expose himself anymore than necessary. The call was to inform us that everyone could fire his side arm at noon to celebrate the fourth, by order of the Commanding General. We all guessed that everyone had been notified except us. What a relief to us, and amusing too, everybody had a different story to tell in connection with the outbreak. One person swore it was a plane, another thought a combat patrol had come upon us, and many other stories. That evening we fired smoke missions for the P-47s as they were out on the prowl. Though they did some good bombing they still did not silence the 88s that were coming this way. That job of silencing the 88s was a specialty of Lt. William Matthews and his observer. He would go up in his liaison plane and the shooting would cease at once. Also managed to knock out several guns in this manner. Our battalion executive Captain A. J. Danovsky liked to go up just before dusk with Lt. Matthews and look for guns and enemy fire. Thus giving the FDC plenty of targets to fire on. That day we fired well over 1900 rounds. Late that night we received word that Lt. Cantini and two members of the crew had been made casualties while up forward. Normandy seemed to be exacting a rather heavy toll of artillery forward parties.

July 5th was a clear day with an occasional thunderhead appearing. On this day we went over to support the 357th Infantry, our own infantry had been pulled back into reserve, after making their initial objectives, with heavy losses. In order to give good support we had to move in behind the main effort. Lt. Cross, C battery forward observer and his crew hit a mine while going up to relieve Captain Lippard, C Battery commander, and had to be evacuated. While all this was going on we were very active in firing until we moved. Our battalion fired around 1900 rounds that day. More and more as the days went by, we began to realize just what war was, and we can all say that we're glad to be in the artillery, instead of the infantry.

July 6th brought around several new experiences for this battalion. The first pertained to the worn out tube B battery had on one of the guns. They were immediately given a new tube. Another new experience was the white bread received at supper, the first since the United Kingdom. The third, and the most serious was that of firing not only interdiction during the dark hours, but also firing many rounds to prevent loss of already highly paid for gains. We had been rather quiet all day having been given a few interdiction targets, until shortly after dark. Around 2330 a liaison officer called up screaming for artillery along one side of Hill 122. Type of target: enemy movement and counterattack. We immediately alerted the batteries and a few moments steel was flying all over the desired area and we forced Heinie back into his hole. That kept up until somewhere close to 0300. Later in discussing what happened during the morning we came to the conclusion that this particular fight was about the bloodiest we had ever been a part of in all of Normandy.

July 7th the Heinies not only tried a few attacks during the day, but also brought some of their tanks into play; but they also dispersed. The colonel came back to the outfit today to resume his duties and also a

new outfit lent support to us, the 28th Field Artillery Battalion, medium outfit from the 8th Division. Between 1200 and 1500 we pushed back some more Heinie attacks.

The seventh saw our combat team come back into the fight, and so our mission was to go in direct support of them. 100 prisoners were brought in today and all seemed to say the same thing that the American artillery was too much for them. They also said that it had had terrible effect on their buddies. It was here that we discovered what we could really do with a fuse delay and a high charge, for they did not like our "time fire". The total ammo spent this day was 2700 rounds.

The eighth was moving day for the 344th, and though it was only a short distance, it was still to the front, and any move that way is always encouraging. Our move took us through Leseey and St. Georges, both very badly smashed, to a small group of farm buildings between Hill 122 and St. Georges. No sooner had the battalion set up for future missions when Heinie artillery started whizzing all around. To date 1448 prisoners had been taken.

On the ninth a remarkable trick was pulled with our artillery, through the quick thinking of Captain F. R. Jones, our Assistant S-3. The 3rd Battalion, 358th Infantry was lost in the Foret de Mont Castre, surrounded by enemy and wished to get away from there but did not know what direction to take. Colonel Bealke, the battalion commander of the 3rd, radioed into us to fire some kind of an orientation round so that he could find his location. Captain Jones told them we were going to register with green smoke so as not to endanger anyone. So with the colonel doing the adjusting we fired a regular registration overhead and when the rounds were bursting right over the 3rd Battalion's head we ceased firing and Captain Jones took the adjusted data from the computer and plotted it on the fire chart. Then he sent the adjusted coordinates to the colonel thus enabling him to lead his battalion out of trouble. To our knowledge this was the first time smoke was used in just such a manner.

For the last few days the weather had been most miserable and wet, causing our guns to slide around a great deal, and making it difficult for the cannoneers when big shifts were necessary. July tenth was no exception to the weather and little activity was reported, except for both our artillery and that of the enemy. Every once in a while a round would whine over us and head for the rear and we would sigh with relief. Unfortunately Captain Cruise and his men in Service Battery would have to sweat out those "overs".

On July twelfth we were informed that our combat team had made more progress than any other outfit, especially the 3rd Battalion, who had reached their objective on the other side of Hill 122 and were on the banks of the Seves. The cost had been heavy and to those boys who got through that engagement it will always stick in their minds as a living hell. In order to lend the best support to our now advancing infantry we had to move approximately 3 miles, one of our better moves in the Normandy campaign. In reaching our new position we had to pass through bitterly fought over territory. The forest was almost completely stripped of limbs and foliage, the grim testimony to the savage fight that took place there. Bodies, both Yankee and German were stacked like cordwood, a heavy pungent odor of death clinging to the area. Many bodies were still in foxholes, caught by time fire and tree burst. Many were killed by concussion.

While he was setting up in the new position Cpls. Mutaschink and Maines came across a wounded Heinie paratrooper, abandoned better than sixty hours before. He told his captors that his entire regiment, because of some difficulty with the high command had been thrown into the fight as regular ground troops and had only been in combat for a week. They had been ordered to withdraw to the east bank of the Seves and take up a defensive position. We were now just 1500 yards from the front,

within their mortar range, though none were used against us, for they had withdrawn their heavy equipment and were using their 88s.

And so ends another battle, bloody and costly to both sides, later to be known as the battle for Hill 122 in the Foret de Mont Castre. In winning this ground we gained one of the highest points in the Cherbourg Peninsula from which an observer could see the ocean on two sides when the atmosphere was clear.

Even though the battle for the most important piece of ground had been finished the Heinies were still throwing a few rounds our way. On the fourteenth artillery not only beautifully bracketed our CP but also managed to knock over one of A Battery's machine guns, fortunately the gunner heard the round coming and was in his hole when the shell landed. On this day our firing slowed down considerably, 1000 rounds in all. That afternoon we moved to Gorges, still hot from the short struggle that went on in the town. We were to take up an active defense in this area until the flanking outfits came abreast of us.

Apparently the Germans had a little artillery close by for on that night we received a good portion of their day's quota of ammo in and around the town. B Battery had one close call when after dark the left front wheel of their detail truck was knocked off by an 88. The battalion survey section upon waking in the morning found a number of perforations in the Hedgerow next to where their foxholes were located, ones that had not been there the night before. It is truly amazing what confidence one has in a foxhole.

The 358th Infantry was now pulled out of line for a rest, clean clothes and some good hot chow, so our mission though still a defensive one was in general support of other outfits on line. In this position we all had a big treat, through two of our boys, Sgt. J. A. Hathcoat and Corporal Arnold Standaford, who in their wanderings around the area came across a small flour mill. In looking further they found plenty of buckwheat and after tinkering around a bit they got the mill running. The result was that the next morning we had buckwheats for breakfast, our first hotcakes since the United Kingdom, and though they were a little gritty everyone enjoyed them.

Saturday nights always seem to be our "hottest". All had been quiet throughout the day, but shortly after dark a Jerry plane buzzed our area and dropped a bomb to close for comfort. Never knew that there were so many people in one building, especially the message center. They came pouring out of there like rats leaving a sinking ship, hysterics and all. Many were reluctant in going back for quite a while for fear the Jerry would return. But the rest of the night was quiet.

Sunday was, according to the word of our Lord, a day of rest and was very inactive and the boys took advantage of it by doing much washing of clothes and also themselves. In the afternoon, for those who wished both mass and Protestant services were held. That night it was a different story. Just before dark the air became filled with a high-pitched scream of "incoming mail" with Heinie artillery playing the part of the mailman. Rounds began to land all over town and pretty soon our position was well bracketed. The headquarters kitchen truck was hit in several places by shrapnel of close landing shells and over in another spot in the same area a boy was killed by a single stray piece of flying steel.

On the following morning headquarters moved to the outside of town and none too quickly, for no sooner had they moved when rounds came in covering the whole of the area just vacated. All the firing batteries also looked for alternate positions, but did not move.

Between the eighteenth and twenty-first nothing particular happened, though preparations were being made for another attack. This time it was a strip of ground referred to as the "Island", for it is bounded

by several small streams, and located between the towns of Seves and St. Germain Sur Seves. H-hour was to be on the 22nd.

The afternoon of the twenty-first there was quite a bit of excitement through the battalion area. C Battery received a large amount of artillery fire, 108 rounds in all. The peculiar thing was that 70 rounds were duds. Immediately we thought of the forced labor the Germans had, and came to the conclusion that some clever sabotage had not only been done, but also had taken good effect. Another part of the excitement was the story of the bomb attempt on Hitler's life, and the mass purge of all high-ranking German army officers. Also heard that there had been quite a shakeup in the Japanese home government, caused by repeated losses. Soon everyone was wondering who would throw in the towel first.

At 0600 the next morning the attack started with our combat team making the main effort. Lt. Saul Bauer and his crew from A Battery were with the 1st Battalion, Lts. Fishbein and Lisecki, were with the 2nd, and Lt. Coleman was with the 3rd. The day was one of pouring rain, and therefore observation was poor. The action started off in good fashion with the better part of two battalions getting onto the island after a long preparation delivered by all our artillery, but soon the Germans, who were well dug in opened up with everything they had, wheeling their tanks and SP's up to the front and inflicted heavy casualties. After 2200 we lost all contact with the 2nd Battalion. That evening after it cleared up a bit Captain Danovsky and Lt. Matthews, our impromptu "Artillery knockout team", went up in the plane and were soon playing hob with the enemy mortars and artillery. That night we set many fires burning in their gun positions, and things quieted down a little. Still no word from the 2nd Battalion, but we still had hopes of hearing from them before the night was up. Then we realized that not all was well up there. The 2nd Battalion was in real trouble and we could do nothing about it. Finally the next morning we heard what had happened. The 2nd upon reaching the island were immediately set upon by everything the Heinies could throw at them, cutting them off from all avenues of escape except one, back over the stream that had just crossed. The casualties had been heavy, but a few did manage to get back, long after dark. Even our liaison officer had been unable to get up to the 2nd because of the terrific enemy curtain of fire that have been laid down between the back areas and the island.

After this type of attack had failed the troops were pulled back and new plans were in the making; big ones for an all-out attack all the way to Periers, 10,000 yards away.

In preparation for this big attack the infantry were going to use a loudspeaker to see if the Heinies would surrender, thus stopping much loss of blood and life. The role we had in this little affair was to provide a smokescreen for those that wished to surrender. This was to prevent their own troops from "harassing" them. After much trouble with knocked out wires etc., the infantry delivered their message and we laid the smoke down. Immediately the German 120 mm mortars and artillery started dropping in on the screen that we had set up. Though the place was hot there were a few that managed to get through. The P. W.'s claimed that artillery had really raised hell with they're eating, for we had destroyed their field kitchens, denying them hot meals for several days.

On the twenty-fifth we witnessed the greatest all-out bombing that ever took place in our sector. There were over 3000 planes in the raid, and as we all stood around watching the attack, the ground shook as if a real earthquake was taking place. The target was the St. Lo-Periers highway, and territory on either side of the road. At the beginning of the raid there was much flak that went up to meet the planes, but towards the end of it, when the Thunderbolts and Mustangs started strafing, flak ceased filling the air with its deadly blossoms. Later we learned that due to a few short bombs General McNair had been killed, a loss that all regretted.

The VIII Corps was to jump off with the 79th, 8th, 90th and 83rd Divisions abreast, and were to move south of the V Corps, thus encircling and heading to the east.

A big fight was expected the following morning, but the enemy withdrew from the island on the night of the twenty-seventh and so when we fired a large concentration for the jump off, we fired at a bunch of empty foxholes. The afternoon of that day, the twenty-eighth, we moved to La Buisson, a small town to one side of the island. On our road march to this new position one could readily see why the artillery had little effect on the enemy. They dug their holes on the side opposite from where the shells were coming. Their system included what looked like a bunch of rabbit tunnels so that they could go from one place to another without exposing themselves. Shells would come in and just bounce off, exploding in the air, harmlessly. White phosphorus was the one shell that had effect for it would set things ablaze.

After setting up in this new place a few rounds came in, but other than making a few people jittery, there were no bad effects. The only casualty in this position was a boy from C Battery who managed to walk into a booby-trap. He was pretty well cut up, but not serious enough to be evacuated.

The twenty-eighth was rather an inactive day, except for a few fire missions, but a rather amusing incident occurred. Upon entering the courtyard of the Headquarters one was greeted with a terrific stench. A cow had been hit by a white phosphorus shell and the process of decay had already set in. Not knowing how long they were to be there, Sgt. Sutherland was detailed to remove the carcass. Cpl's Kirby, Brown and Repetto were tagged for the detail. They dragged it away with a Jeep and in the process of the digging a hole Brown and Kirby had to leave because of the odor, much to the amusement of Repetto, who not long after was seen frantically searching for a gas mask to finish the job.

That afternoon we march-ordered, passing through part of Periers, a very much smashed up town, where the Germans upon leaving had severely booby-trapped everything, thus denying any use of the town; and passed on to a small group of farm buildings to the east of the town. We noticed that the people seemed to be getting more and more friendly as we moved further inland. They were losing that bewildered and skeptical look that we have been running into formerly.

During the evening we learned that big things were happening out there in front of us, also that we were now part of the Third Army, having been attached to the First Army for the initial landings. Everyone started thinking that now things would be stepped up with Patton behind us. It was rumored that General Patton, after having sat back in the rear with all his armor idle for as long as he could stand it, bellowed at General Bradley to get his men aside and let some fighters through. A good thing that he was kidding for there would be a lot of mad men that he would have to account for.

From July twenty-ninth up to and including August first we had a training schedule, movies, and a few brisk hikes. The most important thing was the news that we were receiving the activities of the armor, General Patton's armor, that swift, hard punching super-blitz men, who had exploited a breakthrough and were swiftly streaking for Brittany, and also heart of France.

During the training we were visited by Captain William E. Hokle, our former S-3, who was later transferred to the Army Civil Affairs Corps.

So the 90th come to a halt, the first in two months, Patton's armor was moving to and through Coutances, Avranches, and beyond to cut off the Brittany Peninsula. The unbelievable had happened, we were moving out of the boxlike hedgerow country. Larger fields, better roads lie ahead. We could

stop and think a little. Behind us was a bloody hell called Normandy, with its dust choked roads, its gigantic cob-webbing of telephone lines, and that gray dust that covered the trees, grass, and fields with his dirty film. Before us was the promise of movement – there was no need to prove our ability to fight the Germans at close quarters, we had done that. Now the enemy had to prove how good he was out in the open. Patton's name was synonymous with power and drive. Here was the "blitz" come back to roost.



CHAPTER II

And so it goes. At 0130 on August second we started on the move that later developed into the eradication of the German 7th Army in the Falaise pocket.

The Battalion moved out with the 537th AAA, B Battery interspersed throughout the column for air raid security. The column moved along at a very slow pace during those dark hours of the early-morning, enabling us to see the damage done to the towns of Coutances and Avranches. Both towns not only had been visited by our bombers, but also the armor had done a good bit of smashing to pieces the buildings they fought their way through. We can distinctly remember the appearance of Coutances. At the crossroads of the town MP's were standing, guiding traffic through the rubble with their red lens flashlights, rubble that stood around like grim specters, telling what had happened when the "Yank" came through. In all, this scene was very eerie. After daylight we began to notice German armor absolutely crushed, strewn all along our route. People who were wide awake, began lining the streets waving flags of all descriptions and shouting, "Viva Les Americaine!" When the column would stop we would give out cigarettes and candy, in return for the cider and cognac that they continually pressed on us. Around 0802 two M.E. 109's flew over the column, apparently as surprised in seeing us as we were them, for they scooted away with a few fifty slugs in their tail feathers, never to return. The towns and villages that we started passing through at this point seemed to have missed most of the violence of war, testimony to the speed that Jerry was being driven back. Later that morning we drew off into a field and orchard where we set up, ready to fire on anything that showed any signs of resistance. Planes, Jerry at that, flew over all day, and the only firing down all day was at them, no artillery was asked for. That afternoon the 358th Infantry took St. Hilaire du Harcouet and Louvigne de Desert with no artillery fire.

The next two days were nothing but more moving, with no resistance met that the infantry could not handle. When we moved into La Touche we were greeted by a group of FW 190's but our ack-ack and a 90 mm outfit chased them away in good fashion.

During the dark hours of the night, before the last move, Captain Smith, a liaison officer, was around the infantry CP when a strange truck drew up to where he was standing. He and his radio operator went over to see what the trouble was and discovered a load of Heinies, all kinds of weapons, and ammunition aboard. The captain immediately forced them out of the truck, relieved them of all weapons, and turned him over to the MP's. This group of Germans, not realizing that the Americans were up this far had come through looking for their own outfit, illustrating how badly disorganized their outfit was becoming in this fast-moving fight.

The next night everyone was either sleeping or guarding those who slept, when Sgt. Berry, of headquarters maintenance crew, telephoned in from an outpost warning us that there were an untold number of Heinies in the area. Immediately everyone was alerted and squads were formed to cover the specified areas. Pretty soon some infantry, who were in the adjoining field, near an old rail line, opened up with rifle fire and grenades. Everything then quieted down, while we waited for daylight before investigating the area. The result of the shooting was the killing of one Jerry, and the capture of one officer. Later on in the day the total reached 34 captured. Larger numbers were captured by the "Doughs" who sent out a few men to flush out the countryside.

August fifth saw us move from the La Touche to St. Denis de Gastines, a long move during which time no rounds were fired. Before moving two Polish boys came into the area and Cpl. Leo Widzinski, Headquarters Battery machine gunner, took them in tow. Upon questioning the two we learned that they had been in a German forced labor battalion around Cherbourg, and had made their

escape when the German defenses had begun to crumble there. Now they were trying to locate someone who would send them home. These boys had been in the type of labor outfit that kept making defenses for their "masters" as the Germans had been driven back. After the questioning was over the Poles were loaded on the kitchen truck, to be carried as "Men of all work".

On the sixth of August we moved through the Foret de Mayenne finally arriving at Chalons du Maines, after dark. The night was very quiet, with the exception of "Bed Check Charlie" who still managed to pussyfoot over us in his washing machine powered plane, endeavoring to locate the "DAMN YANKEE" but to no avail. That night he stayed around too long, for as he was circling overhead a new sound, a savage snarling roar was heard coming from our rear. Next it was the stuttering of a group of machine guns, and several rounds of tracer snaking out of the dark, directly over Charlie's head and down he came, a flaming pyre, vivid proof of the deadliness of the stinging "Black Widow" our new night fighter.

That same night the boys in the rear echelon were caught by some enemy planes, who first flared the entire area, and then laid their eggs as the boys were just moving into position. Sgt. Pinky Pendegraft, Headquarter Battery clerk said that as the flares dropped the boys all got out of the truck and jumped for the hedgerows. The casualties were heavy, many wounded and killed.

At noon on the seventh we went into a rendezvous area close to Montsurs, and while waiting for the reconnaissance to be completed we were "buzzed" by about a dozen ME109's who had a few more holes in their wings when they left us. When we moved we went about 12 miles down the road to the vicinity of St. Suzanne, where there had been quite a scrap between the task force out in front of us and the enemy. We went into position just off a large fork in the road, massed, and alerted for a tank attack that was expected in our area.

The next morning we learned that the attack that was supposed to come off, and never did, had been intercepted by an infantry roadblock. With one bazooka round fired the enemy motor column surrendered, 70 prisoners were taken on that deal. Further to the west, the main part of the enemy column had been cut off and wiped out by Task Force Weaver, one of our pincer-like feelers that was out in front of us.

That day, in order to speed things up a bit we operated on a new system. We were to follow the infantry and only move into position when resistance that could not be handled by the infantry was met. Our recon would be at the head of our part of the column. Our route took us through Viviers, Bernay, and Suvre. The French people were really becoming more and more demonstrative as we moved through the various towns. Throwing apples and more flowers in our way, and whenever we stopped they would give Cognac and cider.

Around 0400 the next morning we dropped trails in the neighborhood of La Chavell well within range of Le Mans, one of our main goals. After daylight Charlie Battery had a little excitement. Captain Lippard found a La Salle in good condition, and so he added it to his column vehicles. Also there were a few prisoners taken in his battery area. When the recon party went out that morning Cpls. Snider, the colonel's driver and Jack Greene, radio operator, flushed and captured 5 krauts and turned them over to the infantry for processing. Back at the batteries we were doing very little, but we did manage to listen to the news broadcasts telling us of the drive that Von Kluge's 7th Army armor was making around Mortain desperately trying to cut us off from our sources of supply, but troops were rushed in and those German vehicles that managed to escape the deadly firing of our rocket firing planes

were cleaned up or driven off by the ground forces, and the threat was then eliminated, leaving a good chance for the allies to trap the whole 7th Army.

In the afternoon we went through Le Mans, our first large city. There were thousands of people lining the streets, apparently going mad with joy, almost hysterical, upon being liberated. They kept screaming "Les Americains, Viva Les Americains". About the time we were passing through the main part of town where the people were the thickest, several truckloads of Heinies were brought in, going back to the PW cages. The howls of rage, the jeers and hooting was almost frightening, something none of us had ever heard before. Some of the people we noticed had objects in their hands, threatening to throw them at the prisoners, but some members of the crowd managed to prevent such happenings. A maddened crowd is a terrifying sight.

After winding their way through that happy reception we went into position on the high ground to the east of town. Everyone thought that we were on the way to Paris, for we were across the main road leading to it, but events happened in the past few days that changed our plans. The 90th was given the job to close as fast as possible the newly formed trap that was at that time, encircling the German 7th. Many were the groans of disappointment when the fellows found they were not ready for Paris, as yet.

While waiting for final orders on just what was going to happen, the boys took advantage of the streams around there to clean up and go swimming. A mental bracing for all, after so many days of "eating dust" and always on the move.

The day before we were to take off, two liaison officers arrived from the outfit we were to follow: the French 2nd Armored Division. All that day the roads were choked with their tanks and other vehicles moving up for the jump off.

On the morning of the 11th we "jumped off" and headed for the territory where the Heinies were gradually being encircled. The French outfit was a hard-driving bunch, and a group that had no more regard for their own safety than anything else. They would run onto traps, but instead of backing off and handling them from a distance they just poured gas to their tank and crushed everything that stood in their way. They were "Hell on Wheels" and twice as hard on their own equipment. We passed through Doucelles, where on the twelfth Sgt. Lebak, Cpl. Whitlock and Pvt. Ray Clark came back to the outfit, after convalescing in England. The thirteenth saw us in Conde-Sur-Sarthe and again some more came back to the battalion; namely Lt. Raley, Cpl. Harkick and Pvt. Semone.

On the fifteenth we went through Alencon, a place well bombed, Forges, Sees, Marmouille, and came to rest at Nonant-le-Pin, where the battalion did its first firing in several days. We had our first accident in firing on the sixteenth, Charlie Battery had a muzzle burst and some of the boys were hurt, though none were evacuated.

Today we learned a little more about this trap that we were closing. Told that the next few days would be the most critical period in the Battle of France. That the enemy had been driven into a pocket, whose opening we were close, near Falaise (including Chambois, Le Bourg-St. Leonard, and Ste. Eugenie). We were on the southeast side of the trap while the British, Canadians and Polish were coming down from the northwest driving this large group of enemy troops in front of them.

On August 17th we moved into a dense forest in the vicinity of Le Pin-au-Haras, where we were greeted by a few mortar rounds, which had no effect. We fired well over 900 rounds that day, all directed at the enemy now falling into our trap.

On August 18 while the Colonel was up forward with the Regimental Commander, the enemy lobbed a few mortar rounds too close, and resulted in wounding his driver, Ed Snider. When they got him back to our aid station Captain Culp and Sgt. "Pappy Mills" did such a good job of patching him up that he did not need to be evacuated. Lt. Paul Raley and Pfc. Bill Thornley, Able Battery forward observers were also wounded. Thornley had to be taken to the rear, but Lt. Raley was not.

Late that afternoon we moved into position on the outer edge of the trap, from which we were to cause so much damage to the "Hun". The move was more to the side than it was forward, enabling us to fully block the last opening with our fire. That particular day we fired 1100 rounds. Targets were getting more numerous and observation was better. Though we fired a great deal that day we still had no idea that the "gap" was going to mean so much.

The Falaise Gap

The Falaise Pocket, or Gap, as the papers always managed to title it, was a valley bounded by high hills in dense forests, with the towns of Chambois and Le Bourg-St. Leonard on one side of it, and the other small settlements of Ste. Eugénie and Tournai-sur-Dives located on the small dry river that was really the only available outlet left. From our present position we covered that one outlet with a murderous fire. It was here that the 90th finally eradicated the German 7th from the High Command's list. It was here that the remnants of 20 German divisions were annihilated.

The picture of the final positions were as follows: the 358th Infantry was situated on the high ground facing north into the pocket, while the 359th Infantry was in and around the town of Chambois, facing northwest, thus forming a large "L", with the long axis running East-West. The center of the "L" was a valley bounded by high hills, behind which the artillery was in position, and in the valley were our victims. The hills around the valley afforded good OP's for the observers, and our communications were complete. Fort Sill set up only there was nothing "canned" about this particular problem. During the action, any targets missed by ground observers were picked up by the liaison pilots, our only air support during the whole engagement.

Besides our own division artillery which was at the disposal of this battalion, we had the 186th F.A., a 155 howitzer outfit, and a 240th F.A. a 155 gun outfit, and their respective groups. Also there were tanks, tank destroyers and infantry cannon companies, these three last groups were up in there firing direct.

The heavy part of the firing was between the 18th and the 20th of August, in which time there were an estimated 3000 German guns, staff cars, tanks, self-propelled guns, and horse-drawn vehicles destroyed, and every conceivable type of vehicle used to haul troops and their supplies.

During the entire time we were firing our radio net sounded like a big broadcast of a football game. Everyone who was not doing something was hanging around one of many 610 radios, including the doughboys, listening to the blow-by-blow accounts given by the liaison pilots who were continually flying over the valley where the enemy was.

The trap was now well set, the action that followed can be described in many ways, but a fair description, in our mind, is to take the report of all who participated, and combine it into one or two items.

The Germans, in complete disorder, were trying to escape through the gap, that little river at the eastern end of the valley, and as they came pouring into the trap from the West, heading east, they passed in front of our guns, which were silent at the time. As they got opposite us, all the artillery started pouring in broadside after broadside. This battalion remained in fire for effect for as long as three and four hours at a time, never letting the howitzers cool off. No one-gun adjustments, everything went at one time, for the targets were too many and too big to miss. Rounds would land in the middle of the column, and it would head for the woods. The woods were then shelled and the enemy would have to come back out into the open, and so it went for three days; back and forth, back and forth, until the valley floor looked like a tremendous junkyard. Because of the great chaos in the trap the enemy did not fight back too much, and soon all the hills were lined with spectators and extra observers. In one day this single battalion got credit for knocking out 34 tanks. The infantry situated as they were, had real occasion to rejoice, for instead of them doing the dirty jobs, this time the artillery and other heavy weapons were doing it all.

One United Press correspondent who was on hand for the whole thing described the following scene:

“I made my way through the dense forests to the heights beyond Ste. Eugénie, overlooking the German trap. The OP was situated on the sloping green that might well have been a picnic ground rather than a balcony of death.

“Through high-powered field glasses loaned to me by a 90th Division officer (Lt. Russell Johnson, Battery Commander of B Battery, 344th F.A.), I saw long columns of smoke ascending from multitudes of knocked out tanks, trucks and those long buses the Germans use for personnel carriers.

“Overhead whining shells, of pinpoint accurate artillery maintained a constant symphony of death for the trapped German 7th Army.”

In the pocket there were great many foot troops, but all were so confused that they put up no fight whatsoever. It wasn't until late in the second day that they showed any signs of wanting to surrender en masse. After that idea once entered their heads it was not an uncommon sight to see one doughboy ushering, or herding in as many as a hundred krauts alone. The PW upon being questioned all said the same thing. The artillery was driving them crazy, from both fear and noise. The 7th was through fighting. Artillery was too much for them. They could no longer take the terrific pounding.

The most able person to describe the happenings in the valley was Lt. William Matthews, liaison pilot for our battalion. For those three days he flew continually, coming down just long enough to refuel and grab something to eat, and then up in the air he would go. In one day he flew for 11 hours. To describe in full what he did would be a book in itself, so the extracts below are taken from his written account of what happened on the 19th of August.

"On the morning of the 19th I took off to register a battalion, just as I cleared the hills looking into the valley, I saw the roads alive with vehicles of every description. Immediately fire was brought down on the road crossing just to the north of Ste. Eugénie and the progress of the vehicles was stopped in that vicinity. Fire was falling in several places in the valley, however, several trucks pulled to the sides of the road and moved

around the stalled vehicles, then headed north towards Chambois and St. Lambert-Sur-Dives, which were under fire at the time. Every place where there were more than four vehicles grouped, artillery fire would drop. Those trucks that were still trying to escape through Chambois were piling up, caught our fire.”

“– The road east of Bailleul was blocked and the trapped vehicles began to move into the fields, the roads through Tournai-Sur-Dives were blocked also, and then the roads were forgotten. Vehicles flooded out into the fields and it looked like a stampede of cattle.”

“– A large body of vehicles, trucks, tanks, SP guns, grouped south of Tournai, numbering around 200 or more. It looked as if they wanted to give up, but then they started firing, and I called for artillery. After what seemed like hours, it was actually minutes, the group of vehicles turned into Tournai. The roads were blocked and they assembled in the woods just south of town. Artillery hammered the woods until the assembly area was a mass of burning vehicles. Black smoke obscured our vision and prevented further fire at this point. The enemy gathered his vehicles along hedgerows, under trees, or out in the open. No cover was too small, but it still was not enough. Continued pressure from the rear forced them to try and move.”

“– Moving out into the open, and in regular lines, were several regiments of horse drawn artillery, carts and wagons. They came forward as our first rounds landed right on them. The line wavered north of the fire and continued on. Several volleys landed right in the column and the line turned at right angles and headed north. It was a slaughter. Horses would fall and stop a wagon. Many were running away, some would turn right into the fire, others gathered in the shelter of an old rock quarry to escape but immediately artillery fire drove them out. They turned south into a crossroad just southeast of Tournai-Sur-Dives and the road was soon blocked by fire. More units piled up on top of them and soon it was impossible to turn the horses. Then it became a shambles. Horses loose and running everywhere. Some teams still hitched to caissons and wagons and one or more killed in the traces. All semblance of organization had ceased at this point.”

“– Vehicles were still headed northeast towards the once formed outlet, the creek, but none could be seen making their way past it. Very late in the day, another column of trucks and vehicles tried to make Tournai-Sur-Dives. They were already blocked and turned south into other stopped vehicles. Breaks were in the column as they tried to dodge the fire, but soon they came to a halt, and as it grew dark only occasional movement could be seen. Grouped vehicles in Villedieu Les Balleul were given as interdiction for the night.”

The above extracts were just a few brief samples of what our air liaison did during the whole engagement. Those targets that could not be adjusted from the ground were referred to him, and he took them over with devastating results.

Aside from the terrific firing that was continued over the period of three days, we had a little excitement on the morning of August 21. That morning as we were all going to breakfast we heard that familiar washing machine engine flying overhead. The ceiling was extremely low, therefore the plane was down to about 300 feet, apparently looking for German troops, though at the time we thought that perhaps he was looking for us. We all had the same question on our lips, "why in hell doesn't the ack-ack open up on him?" On his third circle every known gun, that is 40 mm and 50 calibers opened up as he made a sharp bank right over the batteries, and he immediately burst into flames crashing about two hedgerows away from us. Everyone broke into a dead run for the plane, more for souvenirs and to see

the plane than to help anyone who could've possibly escaped that blazing pyre. Of the five crew members we were able to "salvage" two. The other three were completely crushed, with their physical parts strewn all over the field. In crashing the Heinkel 111, for that was what the plane turned out to be, neatly cut through two hedgerows, several trees and knocked down a farmer's apple crop. Much to our surprise the plane was loaded with ammunition and other supplies and thus we deduced that he was looking for some of his trapped buddies. Once more Goering could chalk up another plane in the "Lost in Action" column.

On August 22 at noon we pulled away from the Gap and went into Corps reserve near a town called Mormouille. There we cleaned things up a bit, getting ready for our rush across the rest of France behind General Patton's powerful armor. After reaching our new positions some of the boys were sent back into the Gap to see what we had really done.

The destruction started as we neared Le Bourg-St. Leonard, where there were all sorts of knocked out vehicles, and wrecked houses. At a large intersection we were lumbering down the road with all their heavy equipment, headed back for their designated bivouacs.

After passing through quite a stretch of woods, we arrived at a Ste. Eugénie, a town that was badly shelled. There were all sorts of German wreckage around here, spreading all the way through "Death Valley". The wreckage was so great that the only way we could get around was on foot. One very good way of describing the scene that lay before us was that all we saw in front and around us was a gigantic junkyard, one that would put any junk collector to great shame. The utter destruction of an army was comparable to nothing before seen by any of us.

The next day or two brought in the official tabulation from G2. The following was chalked up by this battalion alone: 34 tanks, 10 self-propelled guns, 43 horse drawn artillery pieces, 612 motor vehicles, 321 horse-drawn vehicles, and all kinds of other equipment. This tabulation brought the 344th out in front of all the outfits participating in the Gap.

