CAMPAIGN OF NORMANDY

By the 4th of June, final preparations had been made. Most of the men had over two years of hard training under their belts, and were in the best physical condition that they had ever been in their lives. Everything that was humanly possible in the way of preparations had been done. It was all over but the fighting.

On this day, the battalions entrained, traveled 30 miles to Cardiff, Wales, and embarked on two ships, the "S. S. Explorer" and the "S. S. Bienville". At 0730 of the 5th, the ships sailed down the River Severn and dropped anchor in the Bristol Channel near Swansea, where the convoy assembled. By 0200 of the 6th, the convoy was underway toward France, following a route close to the coast of England. At this very moment, other men, many thousands of them, were "sweating out", the few remaining hours before they were to make the greatest assault landing in history.

During this short voyage across the English Channel the actions and conversations of the soldiers who were about to tackle the biggest job of their lives is deemed worthy of mention. The apparent necessity for absolute secrecy for security reasons prevented the disclosure to these men of what their first job was to be. They knew, however, that the future held no picnic and that in a very short time they would be engaged in this bloody business called combat. Most were not worried too much. Things like seeing that equipment was ready and testing life jackets for leaks were the important ones now. Some who were satisfied that everything was in readiness were reading, others just taking it easy. Here and there a few final hands of cards were being dealt out with the brand new French invasion money for stakes. Some of the men were already talking about what they were going to do when they got back home. These were good soldiers, as they should be, for they were some of the best Uncle Sam had.

The submarine alerts which were sounded several times during the day did not bring much of a stir from anyone except possibly the ship's Captain. As dawn of the 8th came and the world became real again, the sight which presented itself was indescribable. Many more vivid descriptions of D-Day and the days following have been written in other texts, but in a word it may be described as a show which is not presented very often. The price of a show of this type is too high. Ships and planes were everywhere. The big battle wagons were firing round after round into the coast, and the world's finest air force was operating at full capacity. So were some of the Luftwaffe. Burning ships could be seen in the distance and a flaming plane hitting the water was not an uncommon sight.

At 0930 of the 8th, the convoy dropped anchor off Utah beach on the Cotentin Peninsula. Debarkation into big LCI's began at 1200 and by 1245 the first elements of the Regiment, led by Colonel Ginder, were wading ashore. At this time, the Regimental Commander was notified that the prearranged transit area had not yet been secured by the 4th Division – which had made the initial D-Day assault landing – and that the Regiment would move instead into an area in the vicinity of Loutres.

The wearing of life jackets and belts undoubtedly saved many lives during the landing, as in some places the men, heavily laden with supplies and ammunition, had to go off the boats into water five and six feet deep. The most consoling thought at this time was the fact that the men working on the beach were Americans instead of Germans. The beach was still under fire and occasionally a barrage of 88's would come in. No time was lost here, however, for the men were assembled rapidly and the march inland began. The Regiment closed in its assembly area at 1900.

On the 9th, orders were received to pass through elements of the 82nd Airborne Division near Amfreville by daylight of the 10th and seize and secure crossings of the Douve River west of St. Columbe. As this movement was being executed, the Regiment received its first casualties in land action against the enemy from 88mm fire. The saying that first impressions are the greatest held true in this case, as this wicked weapon, employed so effectively by the enemy throughout the Normandy campaign, soon was familiar to everyone, and its name became almost a byword.

When daylight came, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions, from left to right, jumped off and met surprisingly little resistance. Signs of recent vicious combat between the Airborne men and the enemy were everywhere, and everyone felt in his bones it was just a matter of time until the show would start for the 357th. As the advance began, an officer in "L" Company was credited as being the first man in the Regiment to kill a German. They met face to face coming around the corner of a building.

At noon the enemy defense line was reached. Darkness found the Regiment still attacking in the face of withering enemy mortar and machine gun fire. It seemed that every German had an automatic weapon, and mortar shells seemed to follow the men right into their holes and ditches. Casualties were heavy and gains could be measured in yards.

World war II had begun in earnest for the new 357th Infantry. The day had been the longest the men had ever spent. The initial shock of seeing old friends struck down had been great and it was evident that much fierce fighting lay ahead. The hedgerow country of Normandy was nature's gift to the defenders. The countryside was divided into tiny fields, each bounded by a drainage ditch covered over with a high dense hedge. This offered an almost perfect defense system for the camouflage-wise Germans. It was all but impossible to see them and their cleverly constructed and camouflaged hedgerow positions. Snipers, dressed in camouflage suits, were most troublesome in the wooded areas and were responsible for many casualties behind the lines. It was days before many of the front line rifleman even saw a live German to shoot at.

The task was clear. The beachhead had to be expanded before any sizable forces could be landed and the battle of maneuver began. There was essentially one way that this could be done and that was by frontal assault by the infantry against prepared enemy positions. The enemy knew it and so did the men of the Regiment. Consequently, the days that followed brought one of the worst baptisms of fire ever undergone by an American infantry unit. To attack as long as there was daylight was the only order. To advance from one hedgerow to another, the distance of perhaps 100 to 200 yards, was a day's job and a costly one. The

Germans were putting up fanatical resistance. Expenditure of ammunition on both sides was tremendous. Every field was literally pocked with mortar and artillery shell holes, 88mm shells whined down every road.

By the end of the 13th, the Regiment in 4 days of combat had suffered a total of 703 casualties, including 133 dead. It was during this time that the value of a steady stream of good reinforcements was realized. Attacks were being launched toward Gourbesville against unrelenting enemy resistance. On the 13th, Colonel Sheehy re-assumed command of the Regiment.

On the 15th, the 3rd Battalion captured Gourbesville after overcoming fierce enemy resistance. During this operation, the Regiment lost its beloved commander who had so recently taken command of the unit which he had helped mold during training. Colonel Sheehy was killed when his vehicle was ambushed as he was proceeding to front line positions. On the following day, Colonel George B. Barth, former chief of staff of the 9th Infantry Division during action in Africa, assumed command of the Regiment.

At this time, the 9th Division had driven across the Cotentin Peninsula to the coast and the drive toward Cherbourg had begun. To prevent the Germans from leaving or entering the peninsula was the mission assignment to the Regiment on the 18th. Following a 15 mile motor movement, the battalions moved into position during the 18th and 19th. During this operation, 66 prisoners, including 5 officers, were taken as they were attempting to infiltrate to the south through the 3rd Battalion lines.

The enemy immediately exerted pressure from the south in an attempt to break through to the entrapped forces in the peninsula. Simultaneously, other large groups were attempting to break out from the north and escape the trap. Sharp encounters resulted from these enemy efforts which were often supported by armor, as well as heavy artillery and mortar fire. On the 21st, the 1st Battalion engaged a force of 160 Germans attempting to break out to the south, and succeeded in accounting for the entire force, capturing 125 prisoners.

The Regiment remained in this position, holding firm against all enemy attacks and patrolling aggressively to the south, until the 29th. By this time, the entire Cotentin Peninsula had been cleared and elements of the 79th Division, which had taken part in the siege of Cherbourg, moved to the south and relieved the Regiment from its positions. On the 30th, the Regiment closed into an assembly area near Houteville for a day of rest, the first since landing.

On the 3rd of July, the 90th Division attacked to the southwest with the 357th in Division reserve. Twelve additional battalions of field artillery were supporting the attacking elements, and the enemy was forced to give ground. On the 5th, the 357th was committed and began its advance on Beau Coudray, a small town whose capture was to develop into one of the toughest engagements to the entire war. It was located forward of strategic high ground which dominated the entire area and served as a excellent observation post for the crack German paratroop defenders. The ensuing six days saw the type of slugfest which is so costly to both sides. The Germans had mined and registered in with mortar and artillery fire all the approaches to the town. Any movement brought down pulverizing barrages, and any coordinated assault was

invariably followed by savage enemy counter-thrusts. Often the assaulting troops found themselves face to face with counterattacking enemy armor and infantry before they had had time to consolidate their gains and prepare any type of defense. During the 6th and 7th when the enemy launched a series of particularly heavy counterattacks which almost succeeded in carrying through to the rear areas, the mortar platoon of Company "M" alone fired over 6000 rounds of ammunition. Cooks, drivers, anti-tank and service personnel were organized into a provisional company and put into the line to plug up gaps between the seriously depleted battalions. By dark of the 7th, the combined remnants of companies "C" and "K" had repulsed a total of 14 counterattacks supported by tanks during the day. Hand to hand fighting was raging in the "I" and "L" Company areas. These companies were surrounded and cut off from the rear and were being attacked from all sides. Lack of ammunition finally forced the surrender of the major part of these units.

On the 11th, the 2nd Battalion launched a flanking attack to the southeast, breached the enemy defenses and drove ahead 500 yards. Pressure applied on three sides forced the enemy to withdraw completely during the night of the 11th. This engagement had so weakened the enemy that a withdrawal from ground which he could not afford to lose was necessitated. By the same measure, this was the most costly engagement of the war for the 357th. During the six bloody days a total of 851 casualties, including 166 dead, were sustained by the Regiment.

The Division advance to the south continued against scattered resistance, and by the 14th, the Regiment had reached the Seves River. Here the advance was held up temporarily by order. Further offensive action was to be resumed on order from Corps, at which time the entire VIII Corps was to jump off as part of a general offensive. The invasion of the continent was now in its 39th day and the Germans still had strong forces and effective defenses surrounding the entire perimeter of the Allied positions. A coordinated effort would be required to break out. Attacks ordered by Corps were repeatedly postponed as a result of continuing inclement weather. As it later developed, fair weather was most essential from the standpoint of the air activity which was to precede and support the attack.

In the meantime, the Regiment remained in its position north of the Seves River near Nay. Aggressive patrolling and the volume of enemy artillery and mortar fire received indicated that the enemy maintained strong forces and formidable defenses on the southern bank of the river. Savage artillery and mortar duels accounted for casualties on both sides.

CAMPAIGN OF NORTHERN FRANCE

On the 25th, the Regiment, relieved from its defensive position by the 358th, moved to the east and made preparations to attack through elements of the 329th Infantry, 83rd Division, the following morning. On this day, the largest bombing mission ever made in support of ground operations was carried out. Three thousand planes blasted a two mile path through the German defenses to the west in preparation for the general offensive which was to crack the German line wide open.

During the first day of the attack, the 26th, stiff opposition was met in the Regimental sector. When the attack was resumed on the following morning, however, the enemy had withdrawn, leaving all roads to the south mined. Picking their way through the mined areas, the battalions moved forward rapidly against no opposition. By nightfall, an advance of nearly 10 miles had been made. The Germans, realizing what was happening to their line to the west, were faced with a choice of withdrawing or being encircled. This was the first time in over 50 days of combat that the men of the Regiment had advanced such a distance into virgin enemy territory without having to fight for every foot of ground.

On the following day, the advance continued and it was learned that Coutances 10 miles to the south, was in Allied hands and that only isolated enemy groups would be encountered. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions were operating far to the south, slicing their way forward. The Regiment was now out of contact with the enemy. The war of pursuit was on.

The Regiment had figured predominantly in the slugfest in Normandy and was now to play an outstanding part in the pursuit and final annihilation of vaunted German Seventh Army. After a two day rest and training period, the Regiment boarded trucks and moved 60 miles south through Coutances and Avranches, thence southeast to the vicinity of St Hilaire du Harcouet. The mission was to provide security for this area in general, and block all important road nets. Armored spearheads had just sliced through the area, and many bypassed enemy troops were still at large. Large numbers of these were taken prisoner while attempting to infiltrate to the south and many more were captured as a result of their ignorance of the rapid advances made by the Americans. Several panzer divisions were known to be in the pocket being formed to the northeast and an attempt by these forces to break out to the south was not unexpected.

On 5th Aug., the 90th Division was ordered to attack to the south with the mission of seizing and securing a crossing of the Mayenne River at Mayenne. To accomplish this mission, a potent, mobile force was required that could slash through to Mayenne in record time. And so the famous "Weaver Task Force" was organized, consisting of the 357th (Motorized), 712th Tank Battalion, 90th Reconnaissance Troop, 343rd Field Artillery Battalion, Company "A" 315th Engineer Battalion, Company "A" 315th Medical Battalion, one company of the 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and one battery of the 537th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion. Under the able leadership of Brigadier Gen. William G. Weaver, Assistant Division Commander, this force moved to Mayenne and succeeded in seizing and securing the town, as well as a bridge which was stormed and taken intact before the surprised Germans could set off the charges they had placed on the bridge. Some stiff resistance was encountered but was quickly beaten down as the 1st Battalion surged into the town. Meanwhile, the 3rd and 2nd Battalions crossed the river to the south of town, using pneumatic boats. That this well planned, swift thrust had achieved complete surprise was evidenced by the number of enemy staff and troop laden vehicles which were destroyed as they unsuspectingly drove into Mayenne during the night

Immediately following this action the 357th was selected to spearhead the Division attack toward Le Mans. This attack was to form the southern arc of the giant pincers which was to close around the German Seventh Army. The city of le Mans was to form the pivot point for American forces which were to swing north and close the trap. Speed, therefore, was of paramount importance. Task Force Weaver was now split into two columns, one commanded by General Weaver and the other by Colonel Barth, Regimental Commander. These columns began their advance on le Mans on the 6th, using different routes so as to converge on the city from different directions. The advance of these forces through defended territory was almost phenomenal in that it was one of the fastest advances in military history. The manner in which opposition was battered down might be offered as an example of perfected coordination of all forces and weapons in reducing resistance with a minimum loss of time and personnel. Enemy obstacles which could not be neutralized by artillery were pounded from the air by P-47's which were available on call at all times. The 140 miles from Mayenne to le Mans were covered in less than three days, and scores of the enemy vehicles and guns were destroyed and more than 300 prisoners captured.

It was now time to swing north and snap the trap shut around a huge German force facing the British and American units to the north and northeast. On the 11th, the 90th Division followed by the 2nd French Armored Division, began its movement to the north. During the

ensuing days, the advance was steady against scattered resistance. The courage and fighting ability of the French soldiers using American equipment was superb. Burned out Sherman and enemy tanks found facing each other at close range gave mute evidence of the manner in which the French had gone in at close quarters with the enemy and destroyed him.

Making an already bad situation worse, air power was literally paralyzing the enemy. He did not enjoy the privilege of being able to the deploy his forces in such a manner as to halt the Allied onslaught which was cutting his supply lines and routes of retreat. Moreover, the state of his communications did not allow him the knowledge of where to deploy these forces.

By the 19th, the Regiment had reached a point near Exmes, west of Chambois, and taken up positions to conform with the mission of stopping the entrapped the Germans from breaking out. In fulfilling this mission, the battalions met with nothing but success. The enemy made repeated fanatical surges against the line in desperate attempts to escape, but his fate was already sealed. The end was the same – dead Germans and burning vehicles lined the roads and covered the fields. Artillery fire was particularly effective during this operation throwing precaution to the winds and motivated only by an hysterical desire to escape from the pocket of death, the Germans lined up their tanks and vehicles bumper to bumper on the roads, often 2 abreast. They were rapidly reduced to junk by prepared artillery concentrations.

By the 21st, the last sparks of resistance by the entrapped Germans were burning out. The Regiment, having completed its job here, was relieved by elements of the 11th British Armored Division. What had once been the proud German Seventh Army of over 150,000 men was now undergoing the last stages of a process of complete annihilation. During this 10-day operation, the 357th captured over 1200 prisoners, killed countless others, and destroyed scores of vehicles. During that period, the Regiment suffered a total of only 30 casualties, including 4 dead. Besides the American and French forces, elements of a Polish Armored Brigade, as well as the British 11th Armored Division, were operating in the immediate vicinity and had been contacted by the Regiment. This was truly an Allied operation. It was in this manner the huge and powerful Wehrmacht was whittled down by the Allies and finally defeated.

The German line west of the Seine River had completely collapsed. America armored columns were lunging eastward at unprecedented speed and Allied air power was hourly raking the wildly fleeing enemy. To some, imminent victory in the west seemed certain. It was now a race against time.

In view of this situation, the Corps now had the mission of proceeding to Fontainbleau, 167 miles to the east, and crossing and securing the Seine River at that point.

Following the completion of this mission on the 26th without encountering opposition, the XX Corps was assigned the famous city of Rheims as the next objective. The 7th Armored Division was to spearhead, with the 90th and 5th Infantry Divisions clearing the left and right flanks respectively. The 357th again was selected to spearhead the Division, and moved out on the 28th. This drive carried through territory which had been the scene of such bloody and costly battles during World War I. This time, however, the Germans did not see fit or, more likely, were not able to defend the beautiful defensive terrain.

On the 29th, the Regiment crossed of the Marne River at Chateau Thierry. Although the bridge across the stream at this point had been placed under artillery fire by the retreating Germans, French Forces of the Interior had remained at their posts around the bridge and had prevented the enemy from destroying it.

After completing its initial mission of seizing and securing crossings of two Rivers – the La Vesle at Fismes and Jonchery and the Aisne at Pontavert, the Regiment moved through Rheims on the 1st of September, covering the last 23 miles on foot.

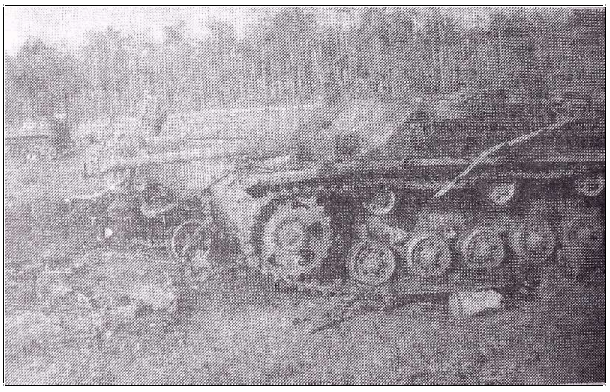
The gasoline shortage had now become acute and a delay in the advance was necessitated, a delay which many say was responsible for the lengthening of the war by several months. The supply lines had been stretched over hundreds of miles in the past few days.

The Regiment bivouacked four miles east of Rheims to await further orders and a supply of gasoline. The bivouac area showed the scars of the last war – shell holes 26 years old were still discernible.

On the 5th of September, the advance to the northeast was resumed, passing through Verdun and the southwestern section of the Argonne forest, where the 2nd Battalion rounded up 50 Germans. The mission of the Corps was to advance as far east as possible. The city of Frankfurt was set as the objective. The Division was following the 7th Armored Division on the left flank.

The first opposition was met in the towns of Avril and Briey, east of Verdun. After two days of stiff fighting, these towns were overrun and over 400 prisoners taken. Movement to the east was then continued against scattered resistance and by the 11th, 2nd Battalion patrols indicated that the area between the Regiment and the Moselle River was clear of the enemy. On the 12th, the 3rd Battalion occupied the city of Uckange, encountering heavy enemy artillery fire coming from the east bank of the Moselle. Plans were now made for an assault crossing of the river but before the operation was effected, the Regiment was ordered to withdraw to the south and relieve elements of the 7th Armored and 5th Infantry Divisions near Homecourt. These forces had encountered unusually stiff opposition from concrete fortifications. The Regiment now had the mission of attacking these fortified positions as part of the general drive for Metz which was developing at this time.

Common sight at Chambois – a disabled tank



More abandoned and disabled equipment at Chambois