

BATTLE OF NORMANDY

At 0530, 3 July the 712th Tankers stood ready to attack on the heels of a mammoth artillery barrage which had lasted 15 minutes. Untested tankers were teamed with veteran infantrymen to engage an enemy which had revived and reoriented after the initial shock of D-Day and in terrain which required the utmost in tank-infantry cooperation. The CHERBOURG campaign was nearly at an end, the port itself having fallen to VII Corps which was regrouping for an assault south out of the peninsula in conjunction with VIII Corps, which had now been assigned the task of pushing the Boche south and cracking his defenses so that American arms could break into Central France. The 79th Inf., 90th Inf., and 82nd Airborne were "divisions abreast" with the main effort on the left – the 90th's zone. B Co. and Hq. assault Guns moved out with the 90th's 359th Regt. toward ST. JORES on the Division's right. Co C. later joined by a platoon from D Co., worked with the 358th Regt. at STE. SUZANNE and toward the FORET DE MONT CASTRE on the Division's left. A Co., assigned to the 82nd Airborne on the right of the 90th, had two platoons in line supporting the 507th and 325th (Glider) Regts.

This was it. By the end of the day every component of the 712th had been called upon to perform and had responded. Maintenance men had retrieved and repaired crippled tanks; radio men had eliminated bugs; supply men had rushed forward with needed ammo, gas and oil; medics had tended the wounded. And at the end of the day the fighting men – already minus some who had paid the supreme sacrifice – knew that they had been tested and proved able. Ideas of tactics were radically altered in the face of hedgerows. The basic scheme of maneuvers and test problems – 1st section lay down a base of fire, 2nd section hook right – had been quickly discarded. What roads there were in agricultural Normandy were heavily mined and under cover of well entrenched and concealed artillery pieces – particularly the 88. And although tanks were at times forced to blast bravely forward on these roads, a great share of the fighting was done from field to field, each separated by ancient hedgerows in which strong and supple roots gave firm foundation to the 3 to 4 feet walls of earth. Time and again the tanks would smash into these walls, teeter, and be forced to back up and charge again, all the while perhaps in the very next field crouched the Boche, well dug in. The average range for the 75 mm and 37 mm cannons was 30 to 40 yards; belts of .30 cal. were fired by the co-ax and bog almost in complete strings. And the doughboys on the ground had to work in clock like harmony with the tanks. If either element forged too far ahead, the Boche could wipe it out.

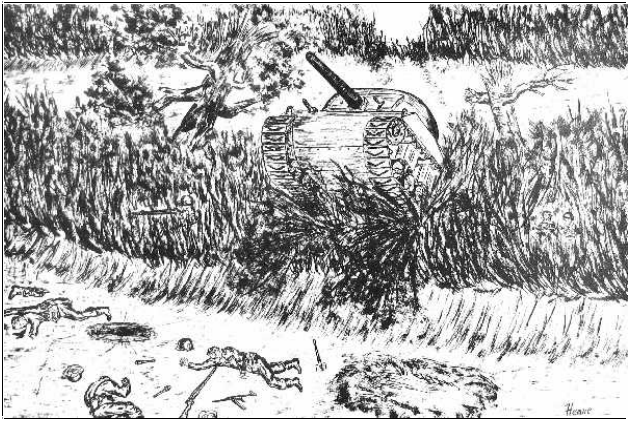
But proficiency, teamwork and guts had paid off. The Boche had been driven back some 1200 yards despite his evident and determined plan to contain the American forces in the small piece of the peninsula they had conquered. Captured enemy documents revealed that he intended to hold at any price the newly formed MAHLMAN LINE, which extended from BEAU COUDRAY on the east through the FORET to the west coast and was named for the Commander of the 353rd Inf. Div. which was in immediate opposition. From 4 July to 8 July this same intensive, bloody and unorthodox fighting waged day and night. A Co. with the 82nd was fighting savage resistance on the right flank, northeast of LA HAYE DE PUIITS. The 79th Inf. could make little headway. The 83rd Inf., operating with VII Corps, could count as gains only a few hedgerows. And B, C and D Cos. were assaulting the fanatically defended FORET, with 8 of the 9 infantry battalions of the 90th completely committed. The German defense had been well planned and was superbly executed. Capture of the FORET became essential – without it we had no observation; with it the Boche had too much. B Co. and Hq. 105s poured fire into its vital spots. C Co., besides offering the infantry close support, used its tanks in perilous efforts to take supplies to isolated units. D Co. fired approximately 750 rounds of 37 mm and 30,000 rounds of .30 cal. on one day – 7 July.

The Boche not only fought defensively; strengthened by the addition of various paratrooper units he made frequent and ferocious counterattacks. The 712th did not withdraw her tanks at night but held them out on the perimeters with the doughs, guards kept their bolts back and their safetys off. Foxholes were being subjected to both friendly and hostile shelling and frequently engaging in hand to hand fighting. On this same day B Co. drove to the SEVES RIVER. And on 13 and 14 July A Co. working with the 8th's 13th Regt. struck rapidly forward. Resistance was beginning to crumble although it had not yet been shattered as one platoon discovered when encouraged – by success – it pushed well out in front of the infantry and avoided encirclement only by speedy and skillful maneuvering.

The MAHLMAN LINE was broken. For 9 continuous days and nights the 712th had fought without respite against a determined and entrenched enemy and its wounds notwithstanding had emerged victorious, seasoned and high-spirited. The Americans were pouring men and equipment onto the peninsula, building up the momentum and power for Operation “Cobra” – the break-through. Already the 712th had made great contributions to the preliminaries. But the big picture meant little or nothing to the tanker. To him each field mirrored the entire battle area; each hedgerow gained had been a campaign in itself. He had learned to sleep in the tank half on the alert; to sleep when the chatter of a burp gun seemed only several hundred yards away. He had developed almost a 7th sense in detecting the approaching accuracy of Heine artillery. He had become familiar with death and mutilation. And slowly he was grasping a tank-infantry technique which in time functioned with a precision unparalleled in the ETO.

On 14 July the Battalion was reassigned to the 90th and spent the next seven days in maintenance, reorganization and briefing for the next onslaught. Despite enemy shells which continued to harass the area, for the first time the tankers had a real rest-time to read and write letters, take showers, change clothes, rehash experiences with members of other platoons. The dead horses and cows which littered the entire combat area were swept away and buried. The telephone lineman could finally rest assured that for several days their wires would not be clawed up by tank tracks. The few hardy Normans who had managed to survive the struggle emerged from their cellars to gaze aghast at the ruins which once formed a cozy home and to offer the various drinks they had distilled from the apples which grew in abundance everywhere in this area.

Early in the morning of 22 July the 90th launched its attack on the SEVES ISLAND, with A Co. supporting the assault troops of the 358th and B Co. and Hq. 105s firing indirect. The approaches to the ISLAND were barren and much depended on a rapid overrunning of this area. The Boche was well set for this move and blocked the advance of our troops with accurate and heavy fire of all types. For 5 days and nights the battle raged. At times footholds would be gained on the ISLAND, only to be lost again. A Co. attempted to cross the swamp and stream but was forced to withdraw. B Co., performing its own surveying and operating its own fire direction center, fired 5560 rounds of HE into vital spots. Every energy was directed toward reducing the unexpectedly strong position so that “Cobra” could be initiated. And finally the tankers and doughs slogged forward, immeasurably assisted by the more-than-welcome dive bombing P-47s. The pressure they exerted could not be withstood and the ISLAND was stormed and taken on 27 July. On that same day D Co., supporting 359, exploited the victory and overran the key town of PERIERS bumping into several Heine tanks which were quickly dispatched with the help of one platoon from B Co.



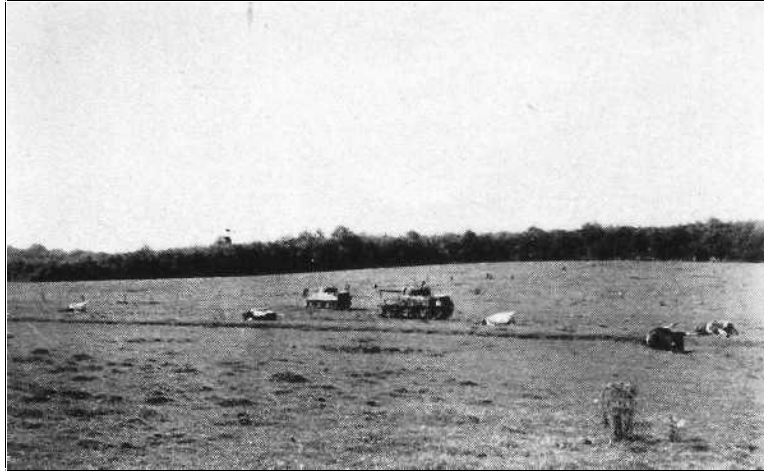
The 712th would eventually destroy over 100 Heinie tanks



The Team of Steel and Muscle at Work



Home, Sweet Home?



Bring up the Bull Dozers

BATTLE OF NORTHERN FRANCE

A great share of the peninsula had been taken over by American arms, and advance elements were stabbing toward the neck of NORMANDY. Field Marshall Montgomery further north was forcing the Boche to divert troops to contain the constant pressure he was exerting on positions around CAEN. The American zone was seething and boiling with troops and material ready to spring out in a mad rush across France. But the groundwork for this great operation had been a painful and bloody affair and the 712th Tankers, as they prepared their tanks and awaited the signal, could look back on 4 weeks of magnificent accomplishment. Sitting on their tanks they witnessed the tremendous aerial bombardment which preceded the ST. LO breakthrough. Thousands of bombers and escorting fighters blackened the sky, dropping their destructive cargoes not too far in front. The Luftwaffe did not even make an appearance but Heine ack-ack occasionally found its mark and the flaming fortress blossomed out with parachutes.

By 1 August a major breakthrough had developed and the Battalion was put under the aegis of Gen'l. Patton's 3rd Army, made operational that day. Three divisions were assigned to the XVth Corps with the 5th Armd. on the southern or right flank, the 79th Inf. in Corps center with LAVAL as the objective, and the 90th on the north headed towards MAYENNE, on the flanks of the 1st Army.

On 2 August the Division rolled, spearheaded by Task Force Randolph which consisted of D Co., Recon. Plat., Hq. 105s and 90th Recon. This highly mobile force moved forward quickly and after brushing aside light and disorganized resistance reached ST. HILAIRE DU HARCOUËT to find the main bridge still intact but well covered by high velocity weapons. The light tanks, in a daring and aggressive move, stormed the bridge, swept into the town and eliminated all nearby opposition. After reassembling, the Task Force pushed south and seized LOUVIGNE DU DESERT, thereby consolidating the advance of the 1st Inf., whose position until then was none too secure. On 2 August this Task Force took LANDIVY.

Meanwhile the rest of the Battalion, moving with the main body, finally obtained clearance on the overburdened roads which were choked to capacity by all the vehicles of the American Armies

which were commencing one of the most brilliant enveloping movements in the history of warfare. The column rolled steadily ahead, reaching AVRANCHES around midnight. Suddenly the black night was pierced by flares dropped by an attacking squadron of Luftwaffe bombers. The tankers crouched in their tanks and experienced all the fearful perils of a bombing as the Boche dumped his load. Personnel riding trucks, peeps and half-tracks rushed for the tanks and either ducked into one of the hatches or slid underneath. The Heine's accuracy was fortunately poor and he made a final effort by strafing the road. An ammo truck was hit and blazed mightily but the column was efficiently detoured around it and continued to progress forward.

On 5 August Task Force Weaver was organized to spearhead the Division. It consisted of Sub-Task Force Randolph as the point and the 712th, 357th (motorized) and a limited amount of artillery and communication as the main body. Sweeping forward toward the MAYENNE RIVER this force received information that the 1st Inf. had been held up at MORTAIN and was unable to reach the highly important town of MAYENNE. Task Force Weaver undertook to complete this mission and cutting through ERNEE reached the outskirts of MAYENNE early in the evening. There the light tanks engaged and reduced the surprised Kraut outposts and a platoon of B Co. forged into the town into the mouth of several 88s, crossed the bridge and seized important ground on the south side of the river. An enemy force had just reached the approaches to this bridge but B Co. forced them to retire. Later that night the rest of the Battalion moved across and was at once aware of concentrated Heine activity several miles south. A strong security was set up and the next morning found the Battalion faced by a determined counterattack to regain the MAYENNE bridge. After the bivouac area had been heavily shelled, A Co. tanks pressed forward and blunted the German effort in a bitter hedgerow struggle which lasted well into the night. Assembled in a huge field with the angry Boche only several hundred yards in front, the Battalion heard for the first time the awesome shrieks of the "screaming Mimi". Late that night and early the next morning the 1st Inf. effected a relief and Task Force Weaver was ordered to seize LE MANS by the most expeditious route.

The force split in two with two C Co. platoons and one from A Co. joining the flank column called Task Force Barth. The rest of the Battalion remained with the main body and pushing north slammed into a strong-point at STE. SUZANNE. Tanks from B and D Cos. made a forceful effort to crash through but discovered that an attack in strength would be necessary to dislodge the Boche. The decision was quickly made to reverse direction and take an alternative route – this was the war of movement with the objective being encirclement and then massive destruction. Striding rapidly forward both Task Forces – their progress accelerated, and eased by the accurate and damaging bombing of P-47s – reached LE MANS on 8 August several hours ahead of schedule. Here they ran into a cluster of Heine armor and artillery which began to deploy in an effort to prevent entrance into the town. D Co. tanks thrust forward quickly and catching the Panzers before they had time to take good positions forced them to flee. Co. C tanks, with Task Force Barth, meanwhile had moved up to take commanding positions overlooking the very road down which the Panzers fled and in an incredibly short time inflicted havoc and death. The A Co. platoon with the same force meanwhile struggled with and overcame other elements of this doomed band of Nazis.

The entire Battalion reassembled near LE MANS and bivouacked down for the night. They awoke the next morning to find that 12 Boche soldiers had shared the same hedgerows. They awoke also to find that the day could be spent on much needed maintenance and rest and an attempt to grasp what had been accomplished by American arms in the last 8 days – a task which probably overtaxed SHAEF, so fast and multi-pronged were the advances. In this phase in one day the tanks had moved many more miles than they had during the entire Normandy operation. Instead of an entrenched enemy defending each inch they now had a disorganized enemy attempting to group forces and dam the tide.

The Boche still had power and fighting strength as testified by the charred American vehicles at the outskirts of every town and in front of every strong-point. And the lightning advance of the 712th – as part, of what General Patton subsequently lauded as “the outstanding pursuit of World War II” – was made possible and effective only by other units whose mission was to hold the by-passed and half-encircled Heines who were pressing at all points to cut off the forward elements. The success of this racing drive was still uncertain and danger was present in the rear as much as in the front as evidenced by the march of the 712th Trains on the road from MAYENNE to LE MANS where they unwittingly passed some 1500 yards in front of the huge German force which several hours later cut the road and made the furious assault at MORTAIN in an effort to sever the American forces. The tankers had also shared in the joy of the celebrating and liberated French people who lined every road, bedecking the vehicles with flowers, heaving apples and tomatoes, offering champagne and wine, cheering and waving their gratefulness, and writing with chalk on the sides of the tanks: “Vive Les Americains!”; “Merci Beaucoup!”. Bivouac areas were no longer small fields laboriously gained and immediately burrowed into; they became mere resting places in which the tankers hurriedly assembled, gassed up, and while catching a few winks, listened to old “Bedcheck Charlie” as he droned overhead sounding more like a washing machine than a member of the once invincible Luftwaffe.

The 3rd Army’s VIIth Corps had cut the Brittany peninsula and was moving on BREST. The rest of the 3rd Army was racing east toward CHARTRES. The 712th was part of the extreme left flank of the 3rd Army, closely linked with the 1st Army which was now driving toward the British, Canadians and Poles who were pounding south with juncture as the objective. And the German 7th Army was desperately trying to avoid this trap, sounding out all thinly held Allied positions. It was in the process of being crushed in the FALAISE-ARGENTAN Gap and was now directing all energies toward running its units through the last escape route: the two highways extending northeast from ARGENTAN. One went to TRUN and one to LE BOURG ST. LEONARD, both angling off to join at CHAMBOIS from which two other main highways opened up to the north and east.

The campaign which began on 11 August with the advance north from LE MANS and culminated 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 Div. with its attached 712th commenced the action in a support role but later became a prime factor in its success. For 3 days they closely followed the 2nd French Armd., consolidating the French gains and sealing off all possible escape routes through ALENCON and SEES. After relieving the 5th Armd. northeast of the latter town, they took the initiative and pushed forward aggressively. Seizing LE BOURG they stood firm against repeated attempts by the Deutschland Regt. to break through and they beat that unit to its knees. Using LE BOURG as a pivot they swung quickly to the northwest, outflanking resistance on the LE BOURG-CHAMBOIS Road, captured CHAMBOIS and its surrounding high ground. From there they set the greatest ambush of the war and maintained that ambush against all counterattacks.

The 712th was in this decisive and climactic battle from start to finish, frequently playing a key, if not the main, role. 90th Div. Operational Reports understandably concerned with the exploits of its own glorious doughs pay unusual and generous tribute to the tankers. They may be quoted at random : – At LE BOURG: “A ... German attack threatened to envelop (our forces). Prompt and aggressive action, however, on the part of the supporting tanks ... neutralized the ... enveloping force.”; “At one time an attempted German envelopment temporarily cut off elements (of our forces) ... But effective work by the attached tanks ... eliminated this threat.” At CHAMBOIS: “Recognizing this serious threat to their line of retreat the Boche attacked ... from both flanks and forced the right ... backward ... Tanks were sent to assist this unit ... and the situation was restored.”; “(Our forces were) struck ... by a column of

tanks and infantry in half-tracks. It was ... a last desperate attempt to break Out ... A portion of this column did break through the murderous hail of fire leveled on it by tanks.

And each line Co. had materially assisted. D Co. did great work in mopping up the flanks as the column moved on LE BOURG, particularly in the FORET DE COUVES. A Co. was in the thick of things at LE BOURG, jockeying and feinting with Panzers around the corners of buildings and pouring 30 cal. into the Boche infantrymen at close ranges. At 0400 one morning a desperate stab by some Mark V's was whipped when an A Co. tank, waiting until the last minute, blocked the road by knocking out the lead tank some 15 yards away. B Co., in on the initial assault at LE BOURG, later moved up to CHAMBOIS and fought the infuriated Boche to a standstill. Later they, with C Co., which had blasted its way up on the left, found large forces in the valley and plastered them with an avalanche of 75 mm. and 30 cal. The Co. Comdr. of B Co. personally accepted the surrender of 1100 troops and one platoon of A Co. joined with advance elements of the Polish forces to round up many thousands more. The Gap was firmly shut and the German 7th Army beaten and pulverized. The destruction wrought by American arms had been staggering. The 712th and 90th alone accounted for some 8200 Boche vehicles and artillery pieces, 8000 German dead and 13000 prisoners.

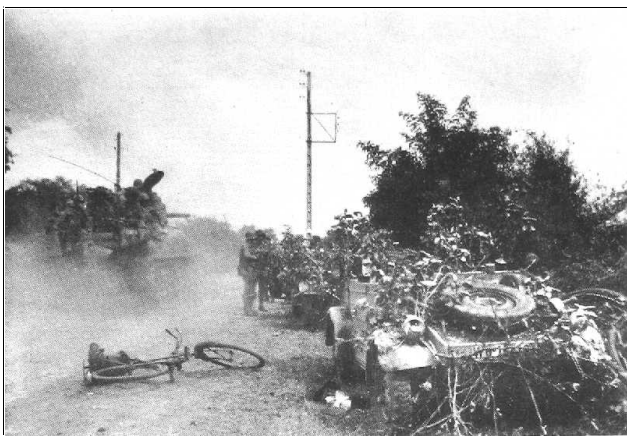
The Battalion bivouacked near NONANT-LE-PIN for a brief respite. The tankers assembled on sloping ground in an orchard and heard their beloved Battalion Comdr. speak in measured tones:

“The War has not yet been won. We've got the Nazis on the run but the time has not yet come when we can settle back and relax. We will still suffer. But we will still fight as nobly and as splendidly as we have to date. The tank-infantry team is beginning to function with real efficiency. We must make it better.” And he closed with deeply impressive and proud words: “There is no one I admire more than a man with courage. And that is why I so highly admire each one of you men.”

The Battalion at this time received its first big group of replacements and after reorganization of platoons and crews was once again at full operating strength. The 3rd Army was racing across France, reaching points east of PARIS, while the 1st Army, on the northern flank, was making a similar drive, ending in the liberation of that great city. The 712th tanks, loaded down with doughs, moved up to mop up in the wake of the 7th Armd. Now the pace was even faster as they sped across the broad flatlands of north Central France. The brief after action reports tell the story: 26 Aug. :, “Battalion moved to ... MONT MIRAIL. Distance 63.1 miles.”; 27 Aug.: “Battalion moved to ... MAISON ROUGE. Distance 127.1 miles.”; 28 Aug.: “Battalion moved to ... LA CHAPPELL. Distance 36.1 miles.”; 29 Aug.: “Battalion moved to ... HERMONVILLE. Distance 46 miles.” The prime concern now was maintenance and supply. All crew members were ever-alert to find and mend any mechanical deficiency; to watch the bogie wheels, track blocks and connectors. The Serv. Co. truck drivers were taxed to the limits of their endurance hauling gas and oil. The hot sun and the tar on the road combined to plague eyes and make sleep, whenever available, almost an impossibility; They crossed the SEINE near FONTAINBLEAU and by 1 Sept. reached a bivouac just outside REIMS, relieving the 5th Inf., which in turn relieved the 7th Armd., at historic VERDUN, allowing the latter unit to utilize its entire strength in an effort to expand its bridge heads across the MEUSE.

The RHEIMS bivouac area was the most pleasant and restful the Battalion had during its entire combat life. Warm, unhurried days with perhaps a little too much rain but with nights made, comfortable by the soft pine needles. Good movies – “Two Girls And A Sailor”. Good food – cooked at last by the Co. mess staffs. Good champagne – even without the long stemmed glasses. And everyone, was optimistic. The 1st Army and the British were surging through the Lowlands and all resistance seemed to have cracked, particularly since the 7th Army had stormed in at MARSEILLES.

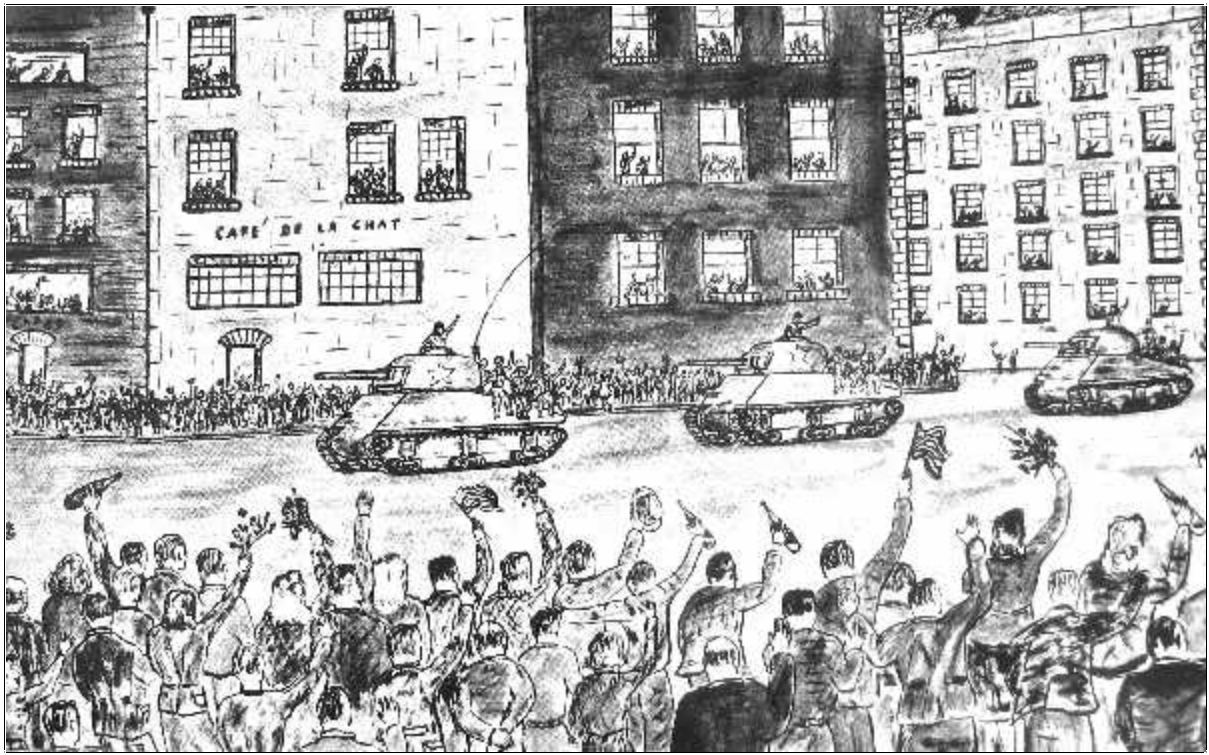
Home by Christmas 1944 seemed a real possibility. It seems foolish now in retrospect but then it was a very comforting and happy thought. And the stay here was prolonged as the 3rd Army became immobilized when the increasing gas shortage assumed critical proportions. Air supply alleviated the situation to some extent and by 6 Sept. full scale operations were resumed. The 3rd Army, with orders to secure crossings of the RHINE from MAINZ to KAHLSHUHE, advanced "Corps abreast". XII Corps on the right or southern flank had NANCY as its immediate objective. XX Corps on the left drove for METZ. The 712th and 90th, as part of the XXth, were to advance northeast of VERDUN and cross the MOSELLE at THIONVILLE, while the 5th Inf. Div. and the 7th Armd., further right, were to make straight for METZ. The Battalion rolled 95 miles through World War I sites – VERDUN and ARGONNE FOREST – and on 7 Sept. reached a bivouac area near MAIRY just as an ME 109 swooped in at tree-top level. All Cos. were within 1000 yards of each other and, still somewhat complacent, set up only light security outposts. At 0300 the Boche struck, hitting the 90th Div. Arty. CP which was outposted by a section of A Co. tanks. He struck with a full column and the A Co. tanks accepted the challenge. The resulting explosions and tracers alerted the whole area and no sooner had all men in the area jumped to readiness than 5 Mark V tanks, 1 half-track and a reconnaissance car broke through and came down the road between A and B Cos., neither being able to fire for fear of damaging the other. C Co. tanks were quickly dispatched to guard the 90th Div. CP, just adjacent to the Arty. CP. By daybreak all units in the area were ready to smash this Heine effort and, through the coordinated activities of tanks, doughs, artillery and TDs, did. C Co. and Hq. 105s inflicted particularly devastating blows, while A and B Cos. did their share of damage. Even an engineless Serv. Co. tank was manned and fired. (See Chart p. 27 for details of the engagement.) By the day's end the newly formed and equipped 106th Panzer Brigade was completely destroyed. Captured documents later revealed that its mission had been: "Annihilate armored spearhead of 90th Inf. Div." But the tables had been turned and the score showed: 30 tanks, 60 half-tracks, and over 100 miscellaneous vehicles captured or knocked out, and 764 prisoners taken. From this date on the 712th was known as the "Armored Fist of the 90th" and Lt. Gen'l. McLain had not overestimated the strength of his attached tanks when, in rejecting an offer to use a Combat Command of one of the Armd. Divisions, he had with conscious humor replied: "No, thank you. I have the 712th Armd. Division."

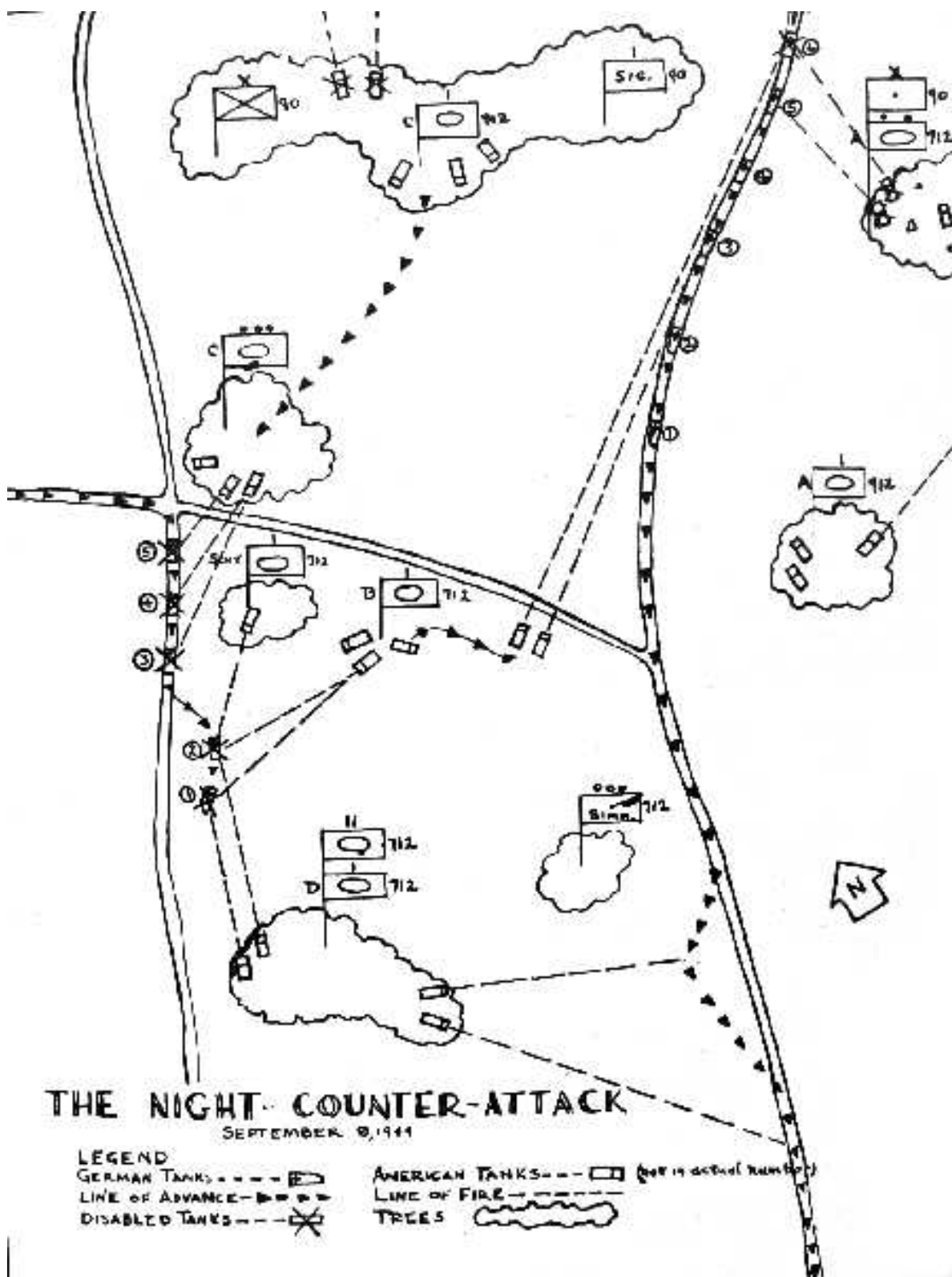


"They Parteed Beaucoup Quick"



The 712th Would Finally Travel 3,750 Miles in Combat





THE NIGHT COUNTER-ATTACK

SEPTEMBER 9, 1944

LEGEND

- | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----|--|----------------|-----|--|------------------------|
| GERMAN TANKS | --- | | AMERICAN TANKS | --- | | (see in actual number) |
| LINE OF ADVANCE | --- | | LINE OF FIRE | --- | | |
| DISABLED TANKS | --- | | TREES | --- | | |