

Jan, 31, 2001

Dear Chad:

This account starts with 7th July attack ~~and~~ and ends 19th July, 1944. I have an official War Dept. Study of these ¹² days prepared in 1946. It has its purpose as outlined by Gen. Eisenhower in the Foreword^{to} "To help the soldiers who took part in these operations a chance to see the ~~results~~ ^{Results} of orders they obeyed and of sacrifices which they and their comrades ~~made~~ made, in performance of missions that find their meaning in the outcome of a larger plan of battle."

A soldier serving on the front lines in battle, whether in defense or attack, knows what goes on in his sector and that's about all. Sometimes not all of that!

Here is a part of the big picture at the time of this attack. In June the 1st Army and British 2nd had won the beachheads. Now they needed the area around St-Jo to provide a jump-off position to end the Battle of the Hedys and break out of the Normandy Pocket with Tanks.

Our objective was along a line Coutances - Mesigny - St. Jo. The 30th Division was given a major role in this offensive. General Bradley placed us under XIX Corps.

Prisoners taken during the 3 week period we were preparing for the River Crossing were identified as elements of the 984 Infantry Battalion, the 352 Reconnaissance Battalion, and the 17th 55 Regiment. Other elements of the 7th German Army which we identified after we got going were 2nd 55 Panzer (DAS REICH). In all elements of 12 divisions under 2 Corps were in our path.

Riverlines are obstacles, not insurmountable barriers. The reason they are so difficult to assault is because in addition to the main problem of fighting and defeating the enemy there is another problem, that of physically making a way across the water; and the two problems affect each other. Combat infantry must do this while their supporting weapons and supplies are immobilized on the other side. The engineers, military police, and signal men making and maintaining a route for men, supplies, and communication must do so while they are the most important targets for the enemy.

A big problem after you get across is the counter attacks. The important thing is to get past the fixed defenses, have bridges put in and reinforcements and supplies coming up. The counter attacks coming when men are tired and the ranks depleted are often more dangerous than the assault itself.

We now had our attack orders down to company level and the men like me in the field. The 117th regiment of the 30th Division would jump off at 4:30 AM July 7, 1944. At 3:30 a.m. XIX Corps artillery would fire a heavy concentration on enemy lines using nine artillery Battalions. At 04:15 AM both Corps and 30th Division artillery with the 92nd Chemical Mortar Battalion would fire close to enemy front lines.

My regiment, 120th Infantry was scheduled to cross at 1:45 p.m. Under the cover of darkness we moved into positions back of the hedgerow along the bank of the canal. The day of the attack was foggy and overcast with intermittent showers. It was a long wait.

P3

Klomyon of the 3rd Battalion was picked to lead in the 120th sector.

I think I was the first man to cross in our sector. Instead of foot bridges prepared by our combat engineers, I was using the timbers I had placed on concrete piers where the ~~B~~ bridge was blown ~~by~~ the Germans. This worked to my advantage in some ways and a disadvantage in others. I was across before the enemy fire started soaking the canal but I got ahead of the others and did not know it until later.

When I crossed the hedge row and got down on the bank to go to my left to the bridge timbers I saw Sgt. Dickerson wounded in the edge of the water. He must have been coming back from a patrol. He was very pale but alert, he gave me a thumbs up signal and I kept going.

The 2nd squad was on my right when they planned to use a foot bridge. Charges were laid to blow a hole in the hedge. I'm not sure what happened. Either a German shell set it off ~~too soon~~ or the engineers goofed. It blew up before I left and threw ~~debris~~ dirt all over me. Kelling ~~and~~ Sgt. Jones and delaying that bridge going in. At least 2 of the squad were killed.

Our instructions were to keep up with our artillery which would fire a heavy barrage and move up 50 yards and move off again in a rolling barrage. The smoke was still drifting from craters and German bodies littered the ground. After I crossed I was aware that I only had about 1/2 a squad with me. I went on expecting them to catch up with me.

I guess we covered 200 yards before we encountered any opposition. We saw movement to our front on the right. We thought it was K Company when we first spotted them. However we changed our minds in a hurry when one of them popped out of a hole just in front of me. I shot from the hip and I'm sure my bullet cleared his head by a very few inches. He threw down his rifle and put his hands over his head. This was my first prisoner and a SS trooper at that! One of the men with me was a polack named Henry Walneck who could communicate with him. We searched him and I sent him back ~~to~~ with Walneck with instructions to turn him over to K Company and replace me. That's one of the mysteries of the war. Henry Walneck was never seen or heard from again in K Co. If he had been killed his name would show in the back of the 30th Division History. We had so many wounded they did not record them. He could have been wounded by artillery fire or overcome by the SS trooper if he got careless, and ended up a POW.

While this was going on, Sgt. Carlson of K Co. joined us with about 1/2 squad of men. We talked it over and decided we were too far ahead of K Company and needed to go back and get with them. Our plan of action was for him to cross to the other side of the bridge row with his men and for me to take my men back on my side. That way we were scattered out none if caught in artillery fire and we could protect our flanks. As soon as Sgt. Carlson crossed the bridge, several shots were fired (Both German & American by the sounds)

P5

I crossed and found Carlson shot in the neck, after he was wounded he had killed the German, I had man search the area for other Germans and set up a perimeter defense while I worked on Sgt. Carlson, In battle every soldier has a first aid kit on his ~~chest~~^{belt} with clips of ammunition for his rifle, I opened Carlson's and gave him a pill with water from his canteen. I used some gauze to wipe the blood away, glad it was just a steady bleeding instead of spurts like it would have been if an artery was cut. I took my knife and cut a strip off his shirt tail, dusted a qty. of saltpetre powder on the wound, covered it with a compress bandage which I secured by tying a strip of his shirt around his neck. I had one of his men carry his rifle and another support him and we started back to link up with K Company.

Before long we found our platoon leader Ft. Nash with part of the 3rd platoon, we found out why we had got so far ahead, Murphy's law was in effect (everything that could go wrong, did) The foot bridges were too short and ended in chest high water. In getting out of the water and up the bank ~~we~~ we had a lot of casualties from machine gun fire. Ft. Nash told me (the platoon Sgt (T Sgt. Davis) had been shot and Capt. Smith had promoted me to T Sgt. to replace Davis as second-in-command of the 3rd platoon,

The reason the rest of my squad who crossed the tinsels with Cpl. Houschild who had replaced Sgt. Helton when he got his foot blown off with a mine June 16th had suffered the same fate after crossing the canal. Cpt. Houschild was the best looking soldier in K Company and planned a career in the Pros playing Baseball, one Stegert he needed a career change.

one of our officers was shot in the leg. Capt. Smith said he saw him putting a bandage on and he didn't think he was hurt too bad. We were shocked to find out later that day that he died on the bank of the Canal. We don't know if he bled to death, suffamed shock, or was hit again.

Found out that two men from my old machine gun sector were killed in a artillery fire burst leaving the Canal. one was James George, who had gone swimming with me a Christmas day at Kinsley Lake while we were in Florida. The other was Floyd Houserly one of the (3) K company men from Ky. He was very quiet, a good soldier who never learned to dress like a soldier. He was from the mtns of Lewis County and had never been away from home before he was drafted. I was glad I talked him into going to London on a pass with me while we were at Alesbury, England. It was my first time to eat Chinese food and I loved it.

The ones I have written about are from memory. My resource books tell me of other casualties in that 12 day period. of the 12 company commanders who had led companies across the Canal, 8 of them were casualties by the end of the week. Co. C of the 120th had lost 3 Co. commanders in one four-hour stretch. The 30th Division suffered 3,937 casualties, almost 40% of its strength in that 11 day battle to St-Lo. The toll on front line platoons like I was in was even higher. Close to 75% according to one surviving officer.

New book to July 7 which was probably the longest day of the war for me ~~and~~ ^{with} July 11 my worst day.

Soon after we linked up with Kamfong we captured some of the High ground west of St. Jean de May and were ordered to prepare a ~~defensive~~ defense position for the night. We hadn't crossed the Canal until 1:45 pm and the time had gone by fast. St. Hubert in charge of the Weapons platoon (4th) was given the job by Battalion of taking a bazooka Team after dark to a curve in the road about 1 mile back of the Demer line. He asked me if I would go with him as 2nd in command. We were not allowed to take a radio nor any tools to dig with. We were not allowed to withdraw until a runner came from Bn. We were there in case Demer Tanks came up that road. I agreed to go knowing if a Tank came up that road and we gave our position away we had little chance to get back.

Just as it got dark we moved into position. St. Hubert took the right of the road with one man to fire, one to load, and another to carry extra rockets. I had the left with a three man team. We got to the designated curve and took our positions in the ditches by the road. About 1 hour after we were in place we spotted a Demer patrol of 7 men on foot moving towards us from the direction of the Canal. They were not on the road but were crossing a field on a course which looked like it would intersect the road just to the right of the curve we were in. It is impossible to describe my feelings as we watched them approach knowing what would happen if we were discovered. Just before they reached our position they turned to the left and joined some soldiers we had not noticed until

Then, this later turned out to be an artillery position with an alternate firing position and ammunition stored in the field we were in. They started firing about midnite and when the Americans counterfired they moved positions. They were now close enough for each flash from the guns to light up our ditch. We could hear them talking and the clink of the shells as they moved them from the storage area to the guns. We did not move around and about dawn a runner slipped into the ditch with us and we did not spot him approaching. This is hard to believe but that is the way it happened.

The thing I remember best about July 8th is how weary I was after fighting all day and watching for tanks back of the enemy line with out any sleep. Some boys I stayed up as we continued the attack. Explications set in. 5th Corps committed combat command B of the 3rd armored Div. and its long heavy columns crossed the Bridge just past in at aird to operate on the 30th left going the 30th out and cutting our telephone wire with its treads on the heavy tanks. I found out later that Tibby's brother Bigg Eversole was with them but we never saw either.

The sights, sounds, and smells of battle! One of our tanks came in a field where we were fighting. It was close to me when struck by an armor piercing shell and set on fire. I'll never forget the sight of tanks coming out of the upper turret with hair and clothes on fire and screaming with pain. Instead of rolling on the ground as they were supposed to do, they tried to ram making it worse. I only saw two get out, neither close enough for

by tackle. Both were dead by the time we reached them.

I thought about the week I spent in Scotland with one of our Tank outfits. They were rough to ride in, hot and smelted of gasoline and cordite. The infantry isn't the only branch of military service that has it hot in combat.

Arrangements were made for 3rd Armored Div. to be attached to the 30th Div. for the July 9th attack even though our General Hobbs had requested that we be allowed to attack without armor.

One of our officers writing the "after-action report" calls it the "Lesson of the day". The best way, even under favorable conditions, to completely immobilize troops in a small area is to put an armor outfit there too. People think of the infantry as a line on a map. Actually the infantry has all kinds of activities going on back of that line. Knifing, wire lines, motor positions, vehicles, etc. I don't recommend trying to keep field telephone lines in operation with Tanks all over the place.

Another complication was that the enemy had brought up the 2nd SS Panzer Div. (DAS REITH) to attack us on the high ground north of Le Resent and south west of St. Jean-de-Roye.

The panic of 30th Division's response to the counter attack particularly our ^{artillery} had hurt the enemy badly. This was the 3rd day of this attack and the third third day of intermittent rain. The 9th of July went down in 30th Division books as one of their worst days in France. I think July 11th was mine.

Statistics for July 9th reflect only in part the severity of the action. 30th Div. Casualties for that day alone were 267. Co. B of 743 took battalions lost 9 trucks, and one dozen destroyed and three more trucks damaged and abandoned. We don't know the extent of enemy casualties but we had 123 prisoners. The Corps Artillery had expended 5,000 rounds of 105-mm ammunition and 4,000 rounds of 155 mm. The 250th Field Artillery had fired 3,282 rounds.

At the end of the day July 10th we stopped in a apple orchard and top a Hill north of Le Desert. The 3rd platoon was given the job of setting up the perimeter defense around a company for that night. St. Pook and I set up 3 mm strong points on three sides with a stronger one on the road near the top of the hill, while they got time to dig in. St. Pook and I were busy. There was one of our Trucks with mechanical problem in our field near the road block. I told St. Pook I would be under that Truck or move it while he went back to the command post.

I checked with the Truck crew and told them of my plans. They had just heated some C rations and were about to have a meal. They said if they were going to have an over night guest they had better feed me. It was the first hot food I'd had in a long time. In an attack infantry has to carry its food so we are issued C rations which are more dehydrated. They also gave me a Thompson sub-machine gun and some ammunition.

After mid night Lt. Ross asked me to help him check the out post on the road. Thurs starts the day of July 11th. We were standing by the road block talking in low voices and we could hear the clank of armor and the sounds of men moving on the road. They were coming from the direction of I Co, and Bn, Hedgecoaters. Tom Robb one of our men on the road block stepped out to find out what was going on. He discovered it was Germans and stuck one in the shoulder with his bayonet about the time they discovered that they had walked right into us. A fire fight developed and Lt. Ross sent me to the CP to have Bazooka Teams and the machine gun to support us. Before I got back with them they hit again.

A flame throwing tank was spraying fire on our positions. Most of it was going over my head striking up to deeper in the orchard. It was a scary time. I'm sure some of our casualties were caused by shooting our own men. I did very little firing. My effort was getting the bazookas into action. We broke out a German armored car. Some of the riding party got as far as our Bn CP and captured some officers and men. However they didn't get out with them. Flanoy came to help us. Between the 2 rifle companies we captured 60 prisoners, broke out six enemy tanks and 4 armored cars, not bad for about 2 hours of action.

Capt. Smith our K Co, commander wanted me to show him and describe the action that had taken place on the road during that night, as we approached

a German in the woods who was on the ground said "Help me, I am wounded" in perfect English. It was the moon stuck up the bayonet. We had our first aid men put ^{him} on a stretcher to carry to a jeep which was taking some of our wounded out to the Bn. aid station, among them was our executive officer Lt. Col. Howard who had been so good for patrols. He was only wounded in the hand and joined us again in a few days.

Our orders were to attack Le Rocher, a little tower on the north west edge of a long ridge stretching south, parallel to the Vire river. The counter attack in the early hours of July 11 had left our men in poor condition for an attack. Just before we moved out I heard a loud passed for medals. Sgt. Frank ~~W~~ Welfia was shot in the foot. I suspected it was self-inflicted but I didn't try to pass judgment. He was a friend of mine and I rated him as one of the toughest sergeants in the Training Code that gave us basic training.

As we moved down the hill following a water ditch I had a close call from a sniper. I had just passed Lt. Hulbert who was tracing a telephone wire hunting for a break. We exchanged a few words in passing. Before I got ^{over} ~~the~~ I heard a shot and saw Lt. Hulbert grab his arm. He blived into a ditch. Before I could spot him he shot two of the men with me wounding Grigorovic and Coyia. When I spotted where the shots were coming from I ~~spotted~~ ^{spurred} a tree with the Thompson but machine gun the Jokers had given me and the sniper fell out. That's when I found out why the

Infantry did not carry sub machine guns. You can't carry enough ammunition when you fire an automatic. I left the Thompson with one of my wounded men and took his rifle. I had got behind K Company's advance while taking care of the sniper. When I caught up with them, I found out ^{a Sgt. who was a replacement} ~~Sgt. [unclear]~~ and Sgt. Browning had been killed. Later we found out Sgt. Browning was wounded and was being carried out by Lt. Fox and one of his men from I Company when ~~another~~ another shell came in and hit him again. The ^{2nd} artillery shell killed Lt. Fox and badly wounded the other I Co. men. Other wounded were Sgt. May and Tippit. (After the war I received a letter from Browning about this.)

We were down in the valley and the fields were larger between the hedgerows. Lt. Cook told me to take half of our men and cross the hedgerow in the field to our left so we could cover both our flanks. While I was in the other field about 500 yds from Tiger Tanks over ran my position. I got a call on my radio to return. I told him there were Tiger Tanks between us. He said to make my own way and go back to the hill where we had spent the night before. While I was rounding up my men and giving them our new instructions I was with John Colijony who had a bazooka. His loader who was a replacement I did not know had been killed. Another Tank came in the field and I loaded and he fired getting a mud and stopping the tank. About that time another Tank spotted our blood and fired at us getting a shell burst on a stump about 10 ft. high. John fell against me. I knew

he was hit bad, I couldn't find a pulse and thought he was dead so I left him. The ones of us left cut to the left hoping to get out of the Tank ones and then cut left again when we could see the hill where we had spent the night before. The next day when we got the wounded out, I found out I was wrong about John Caligony. He died at the Bn. aid station. That is what makes July 11, 1944 the worst day of the war for me as an individual. When we were attacking with left our wounded for the medics who were behind us. In a retreat we tried to take the wounded with us. Sometimes we couldn't do that.

"The Normandy Campaign" by Stephen Patrick lists July 11, 1944 as the day the famous Panzer Lehr Division ~~was~~ moved from its Reserve near St. Lo. and entered the battle. It lost 25% of its effective fighting strength in that days fighting.

We got back to the Hill without any more fighting. Thus ends July 11, 1944.

St. Nash stepped on a mine and blew part of his foot off. I took over as Acting Platoon leader. We spent the next few days in a defense position trying to regroup and fill our ranks with replacements. Capt. Smith told me he would rather move one of our replacements which had proved his self under fire to be my platoon Sgt. *

at mid-night July 15, 1944 General Bradley placed the control of 30th Div. under VII Corps to continue the attack on St. Lo and prepare for operation "Cobra" which would be the break out.

P 15

It was in this period of time when we had a "false" gas attack. all of us had been trained in the use of gas masks and issued one for personal use. Like most of the front line soldiers I had thrown mine away so I could use the bag to carry rifle grenades in.

Some one shouted "Gas" and men went wild. I never saw worse confusion, not knowing what to do I just stayed in place. The rumor got worse as it passed over rear echelon than it was at the front. Fifteen miles back they used a sound truck to advise that no gas attack had taken place or was expected.

at 7 p.m. July 19th, 1944 St. Lo was captured by 29th Infantry Division with the help of the 30th Division.

This is a good place to end this account. Events of July 19 will be in next letter.

Chad - I have a file of correspondence with some of the survivors of the things I wrote about in this letter. I will keep it to ~~substantiate~~ help show that what I have written was not made up but actually happened.

Your Grandfather, John