

An anti-tank platoon attached to the 120th Infantry Regiment sets up a roadblock near Hill 314 on August 8, 1944, in The Battle of Mortain, by Keith Rocco. Between their 57mm cannon and the bazookas of 2nd Battalion's infantrymen, the Carolinians claimed more than 40 German vehicles destroyed.



PAINTING BY KEITH ROCCO. COURTESY: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

↑ Grandson of  
Col. Hammond  
— Birks

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# Holding Out, They Said

It was rare tragedy and real triumph that the 120th Infantry Regiment found in France in the early weeks after the Normandy invasion.

By James Root

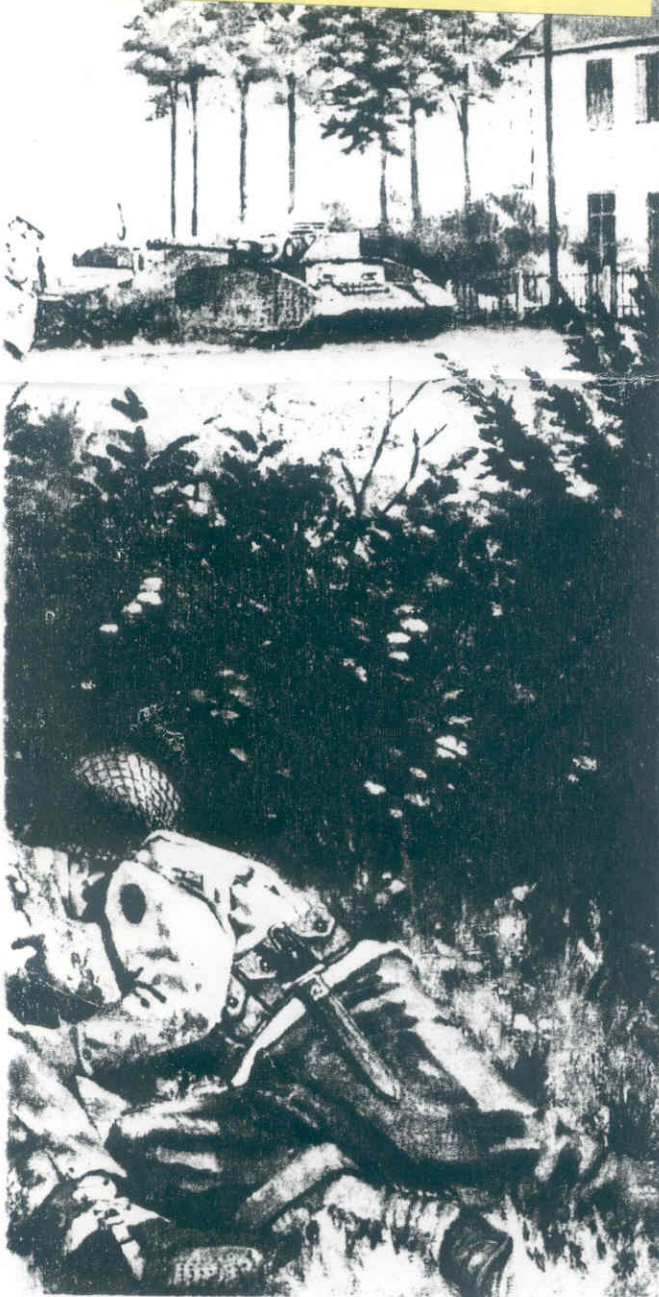
In June 1944 the U.S. Army's 120th Infantry Regiment landed on Omaha Beach to spend the next six weeks in heavy combat among the hedgerows of Normandy's Cotentin Peninsula. Then, in the ensuing three weeks, the regiment went through alternate experiences of tragedy and triumph.

But first...when the war in Europe broke out in 1939, Colonel Hammond D. Birks went looking for a command, any command. Few were available. Infantry regiments, in particular, were prized jewels to be guarded at all costs, and Birks was an infantry officer. At 18, he had been the youngest company commander in the American Expeditionary Forces of World War I. He had stayed in the Regular Army and endured the almost total demobilization of the armed forces. He served 10 years as a captain before he was finally promoted to major, the rank he expected to hold until retirement.

In the fall of 1940, however, the United States was mobilizing anew. The draft was instituted, and the National Guard was activated. Birks was given a regiment—the 120th Infantry Regiment, a National Guard outfit from the Carolinas.

Like many Guard units of the period, it was not ready for combat or even for extended active duty. In the fall of 1941, nearly a thousand soldiers went home at the end of their one-year enlistments. They were replaced by draftees. The regiment trained at Fort Jackson, S.C., as part of the 30th Infantry Division, which was reorganized, refitted and continuously stripped of trained soldiers. Three years after activation the division was shipped to Camp Blanding, Fla., and then to Tennessee for a corps-level "graduation" exercise before deploying overseas. In February 1944, the regiment landed in England as part of the buildup for the invasion of France.

The 120th Infantry Regiment and its division landed on Omaha Beach on June 10 and was immediately committed to the grinding fight for the Cotentin Peninsula. Casualties were heavy and replacements were numerous. Many men



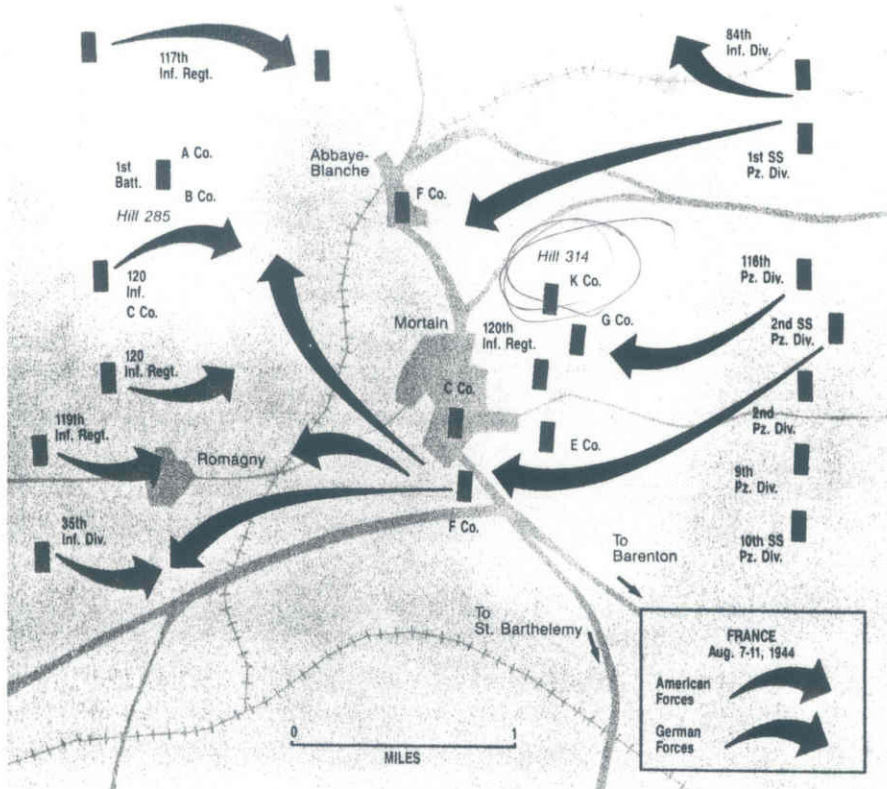


ILLUSTRATION: SUSAN COBBEN

Operation Lüttich was the name chosen by the Germans for the XLVII Panzer Corps' thrust to flank and cut off 11 American divisions extending south of Vire.

into the German flanks. The Germans finally withdrew on August 1, and the Third Army was launched through the gap. The 30th Division passed into reserve and later took up positions on the left flank of the penetration, relieving the 1st Infantry Division. Now was the time to refit and reorganize.

By August 2, almost 50 percent of the 3,000 men in the 120th who had landed in France 50 days earlier were either dead or wounded. The 120th's greatest ordeal, however, was less than a week away. Its survival and that of Patton's Third Army could hang in the balance.

When Patton surged out of Normandy, the German general staff saw quite clearly the impact that such a maneuver could have in the battle for France. It had to be stopped. To meet it head-on was one option, but that would require swinging forward divisions in a rearward arc in a complicated pattern designed to outrun the Third Army's lead elements. It was too dangerous, and German forces did not have the capability to carry it out. Another option was far simpler and substantially less risky—to knife through the flank of the American formation. That would not only cut off the Third Army from its support but would also fracture the First Army. Eleven American divisions were now beyond the point of the planned German penetration. They all could be defeated in detail at a later date.

joined the list of wounded and dead before their names even were known to their comrades.

With the fall of St. Lô, on July 18, the American forces took a quick breather while General George S. Patton's Third Army lined up for a major breakout. To open a hole, though, would require a major strike against the German line. Operation Cobra lined up four divisions to conduct the assault, among them the 30th. The 120th was placed at center front.

As a prelude to the assault, the Cobra plan called for a massive airstrike on the German positions directly in front of the 120th. After a week of delays, the planes made their first attack July 24, with a low ground fog covering the area. The aircrews, unable to see their intended target, missed it and bombed the 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry. Twenty-four soldiers were killed and another 128 wounded. It took 20 long minutes for the air attack to be called off.

The assault was rescheduled at 11 a.m. the next day. The planes came in again—and again made the same mistake, with even more disastrous results. The 119th Infantry Regiment, to the left of the 120th, lost 133 men, 40 of whom were hit at their regimental command post. The 92nd Chemical Battalion, on hand to supply smoke cover for the assault, was knocked out of action. The ill-starred 2nd Battalion of the 120th not only lost a lot of men but also nearly all of its radios. A visitor to the battalion, General Lesley McNair (Commanding General, Army Ground Forces) also was killed. The total losses within the strike zone were 111 killed and 490 wounded.

Despite the losses and the chaos, the 119th jumped off at 11:14 and the 120th at 11:30. It was a sloppy attack but functional, and the dazed men from the 120th pressed forward as ordered. By the end of the day, the assault force had suffered 64 killed, 374 wounded, 60 missing, and 164 cases of shell shock. The attack continued for five days of heavy fighting as the German line was pried open. On the 28th, the 2/120 bumped into the German 2nd Panzer Division and managed to hold it at bay long enough for other U.S. units to maneuver

can divisions were now beyond the point of the planned German penetration. They all could be defeated in detail at a later date.

For the assault, the Germans lined up four divisions: the 84th Infantry Division would attack in the north against the U.S. 9th Infantry Division; the 1st SS Panzer Division—supported by the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 2nd Panzer Division, and the 116th Panzer Division—would strike against the 30th Infantry Division. For the German armor forces, the east-west axis of their attack would converge on a 7-kilometer front between the towns of St. Barthelmy to the north and Mortain to the south. The main effort would be against Mortain, then held by the 120th Infantry Regiment.

The 120th moved into its positions around the town of Mortain on August 6 and settled in for a quiet night. By now the regiment contained only two of its three battalions. The 3rd Battalion had been attached to a task force from the 2nd Armored Division and given the mission to retake the town of Barenton. That left the 2nd Battalion immediately east of Mortain, on Hill 314, and the 1st Battalion about three kilometers to the rear, on Hill 285, west of the town.

Specifically, the dispositions of the 2nd Battalion were as follows: On Hill 314, three rifle companies manned the forward positions—Company K, on loan from the 3rd Battalion, was on the left flank; Company G, adjacent to K, was in the center; and Company E was a couple hundred meters away, across the road and occupying the southern knob of the hill that represented the battalion's right flank. Company H, the heavy weapons company, was split among the three rifle companies.

Company F was split into separate positions. The company headquarters with two platoons, supported by one anti-tank platoon from the 823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, manned roadblocks around the village of Abbaye-Blanche, just north of Mortain. A third platoon, supported by another anti-tank platoon, was positioned at a road block south of Mortain.

At 1:25 a.m., on August 7, the German assault struck the 2nd Battalion. The initial punch was terrific. Infiltrating

40 *I was wounded July 28<sup>th</sup> on a patrol - Shell in Hospital when Battle for Mortain began*

German infantry captured two squads from Company K and overran the Company E trains and the lone 57mm anti-tank gun guarding the road. Tank fire against Company G in the center struck the trees and showered the defenders with wood fragments. The company lost 112 men killed or wounded from this fire before the company commander, 1st Lt. Ronald Woody, was able to pull the 100 remaining soldiers and the wounded back about 100 meters to an open area and relative safety.

South of Mortain, the assault shattered Company F's roadblock force. Sixteen soldiers from the anti-tank platoon then worked their way north through Mortain and joined Company F's other roadblock force at Abbaye-Blanche. Others fought their way up Hill 314 to join Company E. One man managed to hide himself for five days. The rest were killed or captured.

Mortain was held by the 2nd Battalion Command Post (CP) and C Company. When the Company F commander, Captain Reynold Erichson, lost contact with his southern element at 3 a.m., he was given a platoon from Company C and directed to link up with Companies E and G on Hill 314. The rest of Company C was ordered to re-establish the roadblock south of Mortain and halt further German penetration into the town from that sector. While Erichson and his force worked their way east and up Hill 314, Company C headed south, only to be stopped about 400 meters from the 2nd Battalion CP.

With the Germans hammering against his 2nd Battalion from three sides, Lt. Col. Eads Hardaway, the commander, was hard pressed to maintain his battalion's position. When the Germans took the center of Hill 314, however, Lieutenant Woody led his G Company in a counterattack that threw them back out.

As Captain Erichson reported his linkup with Company E to the battalion CP, meanwhile, he was ordered first to attack north to assist the G Company effort, and then to move south to rejoin Company C in fighting Germans moving into Mortain. When it became clear that the southern roadblock was overrun, Regimental CO Birks, hoping to halt a German penetration into the division rear, ordered the regimental reconnaissance platoon to secure the village of Romagny on the road southwest of Mortain. Unfortunately, the Germans got there first and ambushed the platoon upon its arrival. Only a few men were able to slip out of the trap.

Elsewhere, other units were experiencing mixed success in meeting the German assault. The 117th Infantry Regiment, immediately to the north of the 120th, was intermixed with elements of the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Farther north, the 39th Infantry Regiment (9th Infantry Division) finally halted the penetration by the German 84th Infantry Division as a foggy dawn broke.

German units spilling around the edges of Hill 314 and Mortain slammed into the 1st Battalion on Hill 285, the battalion now consisting of Companies A and B and elements of the 823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion. As the lead German tanks arrived, Sergeant Ames Broussard of the 823rd crawled forward with a bazooka and nailed one. He was then cut off by the German assault and forced to hide for the next 14 hours.

Meanwhile, C Company was in Mortain and engaged in a valiant but futile battle to secure the southern flank of the town. Company F, with elements from the 823rd, continued to hold now-surrounded positions north of Mortain in Abbaye-Blanche. During the morning, the Americans at these road blocks knocked out nine vehicles, six of them armored personnel carriers loaded with German infantry.

As the fight for Mortain continued through the day, Company C was steadily beaten backward through the town. The 2nd Battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC) was overrun. Lieutenant Colonel Hardaway and 29 men attempted



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TOP: Members of the 120th Infantry Regiment rest in a taproom near Tessy-sur-Vire, south of St. Lô. ABOVE: A mortar team in action near Mortain. On August 7, 1944, the 120th found itself the center of hostile attention as the 2nd SS Panzer Division moved directly on Mortain and Hill 314.

to move toward the company positions on Hill 314 but were only able to travel about 400 meters before being forced into hiding. Badly fractured in the street fighting, Company C fell back to the regimental TOC for the final stand. There, they and the TOC staff grimly held on. At one point during the afternoon, a telephone switchboard operator, Pfc Joseph Shipley, left his post, picked up a bazooka and destroyed two German tanks, then a mere 250 meters away.

As ordered, Captain Erichson with his Company F command group and Company C platoon made their way off Hill 314 and back toward town. Mortain, though, was clearly in German hands, and it was foolish to continue. Erichson's force climbed back up the hill, joining Company G.

On Hill 314, the situation was desperate. With Germans now holding a knob behind and above Company E, its position became untenable. The company commander, 1st Lt. Ralph Kerley, shifted his men north, as did Company G and the assorted forces from C, F and the anti-tank

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On the crest skirts of Romfront - Aug 15, 1944  
 my platoon leader, Tom Keasford - a replacement officer was wounded and sent  
 to the rear. Again I was acting platoon leader for 3rd platoon of K company  
 120th Infantry. stunned down  
 a battlefield promotion  
 in the reorganization  
 of Mortain.  
 John W. Adams, Jr.



Groups of the 120th Infantry Regiment enter the town of Domfront on August 15. General George S. Patton, Jr., was prepared to commit three divisions to assist the 120th at Mortain, but thanks to the unit's successful defense of the area, only one, the 35th, was required.

company. There, they formed a perimeter and prepared to hold on.

The only thing that kept the German assault forces at bay was artillery. A forward observer team led by 1st Lt. Charles G. Bates and 2nd Lt. Robert Weiss had ordered the artillery to prepare defensive concentrations early in the attack; they maintained the steady ring of fire into the afternoon. Realizing the team was the key to their survival, the infantrymen found a small knoll affording all-around observation and positioned their artillerymen there.

As it turned out, the position afforded observation not only of the hill but also of the whole area around Mortain. With his team of forward observers, American artillery was able to maintain continuous and deadly fire against German forces throughout the sector. It was determined at the end of the battle that more German tanks were lost to artillery than to any other cause.

Not so well coordinated was the close air support, which had been called in early with fighters rapidly deployed across the front. Due to the close combat conditions and the twisted and chaotic front line, 2nd Battalion soldiers were strafed and under rocket fire 10 times during the day.

Elsewhere, the 2nd Battalion of the 117th Infantry Regiment, originally positioned adjacent to the 1st Battalion of the 120th, was given a company of tanks and sent to reinforce the 120th. Upon its arrival, Birks gave the reinforcing battalion two missions: seize Romagny (site of the recon platoon ambush) and link up with the forces on Hill 314.

A tank platoon was attached to one company and dispatched to Romagny, where the American attack failed.

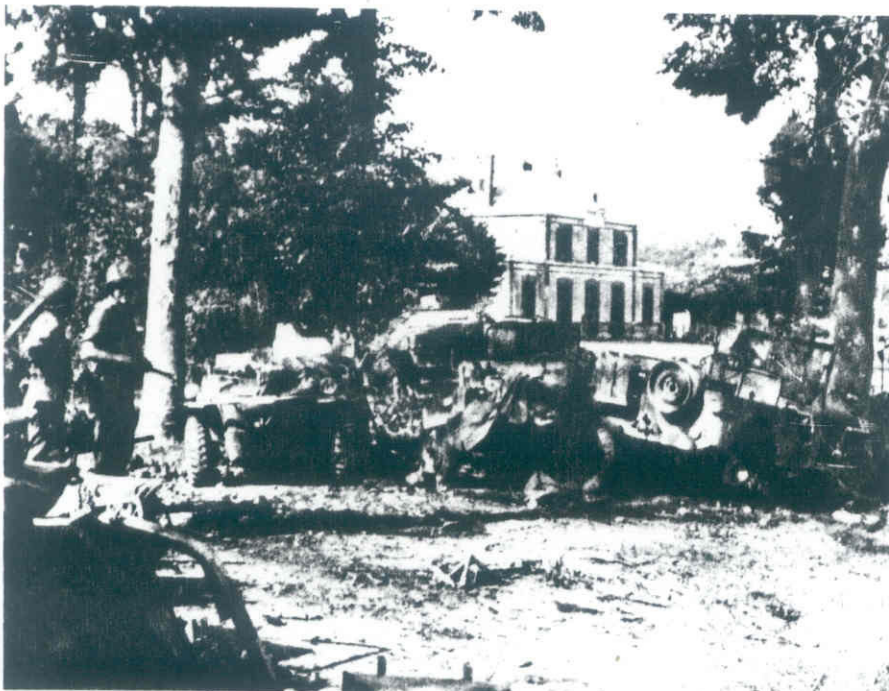
The remaining personnel of the 2/117 began fighting toward Mortain, with only mixed success. They picked up the remnants of a C Company platoon that had been unable to fall back to the regimental TOC and were able to reopen a supply route to the forces at Abbaye-Blanche. Still, they could not reach the battered soldiers defending Hill 314.

In the late afternoon, the 1st Battalion of the 119th Infantry Regiment, then in division reserve, was given to the 120th. Birks needed to close the corridor through Romagny—and fast. He had tried a platoon and later a company, and failed. The American attacks, however, had managed to blunt the German penetration. Birks then ordered the 1/119, supported by a tank company, to seize Romagny and then continue its attack to relieve the forces on Hill 314.

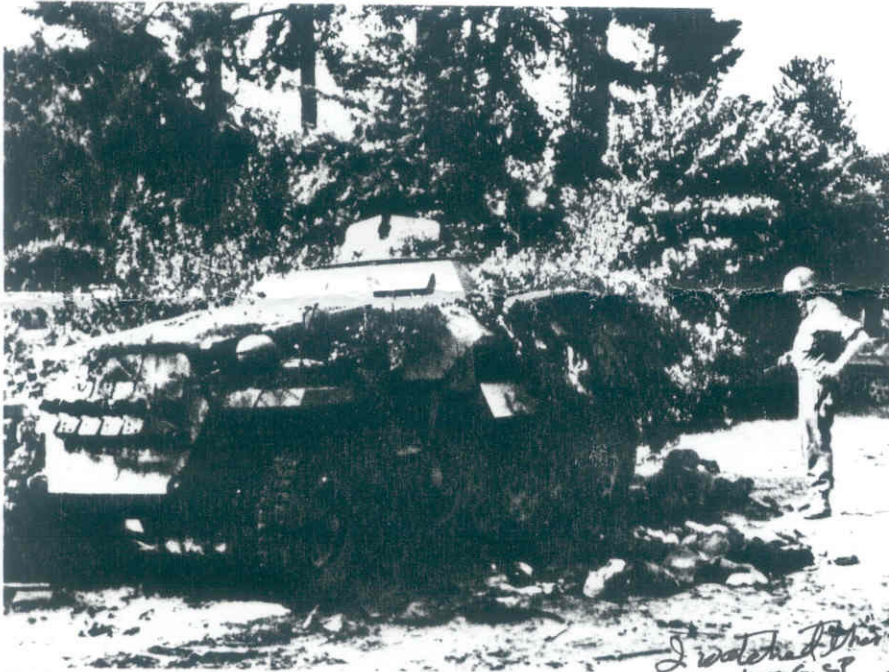
The 1/119 attacked west toward the town and quickly found itself in a major battle with the German defenders. At nightfall, both sides fell back to regroup, their withdrawals leaving the town unoccupied.

As dusk became night, the rest of the battlefield also fell relatively quiet. It was only a brief lull, though. At 1:30 a.m. on the 8th, the Germans made another run at the 1/120 on Hill 285. By 4:30 a.m., they had pushed Company A off the crest—they then spent the next four hours doing the same to Company B. Hill 314 was not ignored—three assaults during the night were driven back under heavy American artillery fire.

By dawn, heavy fighting was underway throughout the front. American reinforcements were arriving steadily and fed into the sector initially held by the 117th Infantry. There they



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TOP: Two soldiers of the 120th survey the carnage in Mortain; the damaged vehicles include a German Schwimmwagen (left) and a U.S. Army jeep (right). ABOVE: More victims of the spirited American defense: Dead Germans lie near their disabled Sd. Kfz. 251 halftrack, while a Kettenrad sits abandoned in the right background.

met German forces still attacking west. The fighting raged all day, with neither side making much headway.

By the end of the day, the 1/119 still had not taken Romagny. The 2/117 was stalled at the outskirts of Mortain, and the 1/120 was fighting for Hill 285; but the American roadblocks at Abbaye-Blanche were still in place. And most important, the remnants of the 2/120 were still hanging on atop Hill 314. Hardaway, his radio battery spent, had sent his final message to regiment at 9:30 that morning.

After a day of no significant gains, the issue was still in doubt. General Patton detached the 35th Infantry Division from his formation and sent it toward Mortain. In addition, a combat command (roughly equivalent to an armor brigade) from the 3rd Armored Division was sent to reinforce the

American positions north of Mortain. For their part, the Germans committed the balance of the 2nd SS Panzer Division and moved the 9th Panzer Division and the 10th SS Panzer Division into position for a follow-on assault against the south side of Mortain. The pivot point for the entire battle continued to be Mortain and, specifically, Hill 314.

Early on the 9th, the Germans managed to breach the Company E defenses in the south and open a path over the hill. A counterattack threw them back and closed the gap.

On the morning of the 9th, the Germans discovered the house containing Colonel Hardaway and his party. While they battered down the front door, Hardaway and 28 others fled out the back. The Germans, though, had surrounded the block, and only six Americans were able to escape. They hid in a wheat field initially, and then moved into a stable, where they were fed by a French stablehand. Later they moved into a loft above a hospital, where they were able to raid the pantry.

Resupplying Hill 314 was both dangerous and complicated. An airdrop of supplies was attempted on the 9th using two artillery spotter planes. Both were hit by German fire, and one of the pilots was captured.

At 6:30 p.m., a German officer approached the Company E lines. He told the Americans the Germans had them surrounded, that they had captured a "one star" and many others, and that if the Americans did not surrender by 8 p.m., they would be "blown to bits." The message was passed to Lieutenant Kerley. His reply is not recorded, but it was clear enough to send the German officer back to his lines. That night, a German tank assault was beaten back. German artillery, though, continued to pound the position incessantly.

A second airdrop was attempted late on the 10th, using Air Corps aircraft. This effort was partially successful, but half the bundles fell behind German lines. On the night of the 10th, the U.S. artillery tried its hand at resupply by using empty smoke shells, sometimes stuffed with propaganda leaflets. After some adjustments, this effort was moderately successful, although none of the blood plasma needed for the wounded reached the besieged area intact.

On the 11th, the 1/119 bypassed Romagny to the south and began advancing toward Mortain against stiff resistance. Farther south, on the right flank of the 1/119, the 320th Infantry (35th Infantry Division) also headed for Mortain. But it, too, was in a frustrating hedgerow-by-hedgerow fight.

By nightfall, both units were only on the southeastern edge of Mortain—to continue the attack into the town during the night would be dangerous at best. Try it? The decision had to come from the men on Hill 314. At 10:34 p.m., the men on the hill called back with a simple message: "We can hold out until tomorrow."



Medics tend to the wounded at an Advance Aid Station near Mortain, in a painting by Olin Dows. The fight for Hill 314 cost the 120th Infantry some 300 dead, wounded or missing, but the National Guardsmen had held their ground against enemy armor.

The situation on the hill remained grim. An airdrop had been attempted between 7:30 and 8 o'clock, but most of the bundles had fallen into German hands. Hill 314 was still surrounded by Germans, and U.S. losses had been heavy. Even so, the force on the hill maintained communications with the regiment, had seen the efforts to resupply them, and knew that help was on the way. They could steel themselves for one more night.

The same could be said for the roadblock troops manning the barricades at Abbaye-Blanche. They had weathered the storm for a week and had suffered 23 casualties while knocking out some 40 German vehicles—24 on one road alone. It was a remarkable achievement for two infantry platoons totaling 70 men, supported by a tank destroyer platoon.

With the German attack stalled, a major street fight already in progress, and American forces poised to cut off the southern avenue of retreat out of town, the Germans evacuated Mortain.

At dawn on the 12th, the 120th began attacking. As Colonel Birks passed a burning hospital, six men ran out and hugged him—they were all that remained of the 2nd Battalion headquarters staff.

The 320th and the 1/119 picked their way through the shattered town until the 320th finally linked up with the "lost battalion" on Hill 314. Shortly thereafter, Birks arrived with the balance of his regiment.

Of the 670 men who had held the hill, only 370 walked off it. Three hundred others were dead, wounded or missing.

It had been a rough three weeks for the men of the 120th. During that period, they had suffered major casualties from friendly fire, then immediately gone into a five-day attack that opened the gap for Patton's Third Army, and then held the flank in a week-long battle against three German armor divisions. That was an awful lot to ask of one weary infantry regiment. For them, at the bloody forward edge of the war, it had been a fight for survival. Even so, those thousand or so

exhausted men who had hung on at Mortain had won one of the pivotal engagements in the war for Western Europe.

Upon hearing of the fight at Mortain, General Patton had held up his attack and set aside three divisions, a third of his force, to react to the German assault. Had the Germans broken through, the entire Third Army would have had to turn to face them, and Patton's legendary run through France might never have occurred. The 120th held, though, and only one division was required. Patton was free to launch his drive into history.

At the same time, the British under General Bernard Montgomery were not idle. When the Germans began shifting divisions toward Mortain to break the stalemate there, they opened up an opportunity for Montgomery. In response, he sent his forces crunching around the Germans in a giant pincer movement that threatened to surround the bulk of the German Army on the Western Front in an area that became known as the Falaise Pocket. Montgomery was nearly successful, but he needed American help to close the ring. Ironically, the U.S. First Army commander, General Omar Bradley, hesitated, fearing another Mortain situation. As a result, a number of German units were able to break out before the pocket was closed—four of them armor divisions. Among them were the remnants of the 1st SS and the 2nd and the 116th Panzer divisions. The 2nd SS Panzer Division was finally trapped inside the pocket after holding the escape route open for three days.

By August 19, the Falaise Pocket was closed and the Third Army was on the move. The race across France had begun. □

*James Root is a major in the U.S. Army Reserve and a military analyst for a private firm. His interest in the 120th Infantry Regiment is more than simply professional, however. Colonel Hammond D. Birks, CO of the 120th, was his grandfather. Further reading: August 1944, by Robert A. Miller.*

# Operation Cobra

By early July 1944, British General Bernard Montgomery, the Allied ground commander in France, had two armies facing the Germans. The American First Army under General Omar Bradley was in the west, pushing up from the Cherbourg Peninsula. The British Second Army under General Miles Dempsey was in the east, focused on securing the port city of Caen.

The American sector was heavily compartmentalized into small marshy fields fenced off with thick walls of earth and shrubs. This network of hedgerows provided excellent defensive positions and broke up attacks into bloody platoon- and company-sized assaults. As long as the Americans were confined to this region, the Germans were able to bottle them up with two German corps.

The terrain in the British sector was more open, and to counter the greater threat of a breakthrough, four German corps and most of their armor were concentrated there.

To help the faltering American effort, Montgomery ordered an attack by Miles Dempsey's British Second Army toward Caen. To support Dempsey's attack, Montgomery launched the RAF in a 40-minute carpet bombing raid on a narrow segment of the German line. The effect on the Germans was devastating, but the damage was so great that it actually slowed the British advance.

While neither the British nor Americans had made much headway, Montgomery's carpet bombing had given Bradley an idea. A similar effort as the First Army reached the end of the hedgerow country might provide a base from which to spring his armor in general, and General George Patton's Third Army in particular.

Bradley decided to activate his plan, now called Operation Cobra, when the First Army reached the town of St. Lô. Once there, he planned to crack a hole in the German line and fight his way to some open ground. With that in mind, he sent 12 divisions clawing their way toward St. Lô.

When St. Lô finally fell to the Americans, the stage was set to activate Operation Cobra and its British counterpart, Operation Goodwood.

As planned, Operation Goodwood was launched first, on July 18. In three days of heavy combat, the British managed to capture Caen, but it cost them one-third of their tanks and 4,000 men. The attack finally ground to a halt in the face of heavy thunderstorms and stiffening German resistance.

Operation Cobra was scheduled to begin three days after Goodwood was launched but was postponed, also due to bad weather.

The weather became significantly clearer on July 25, and more than 2,000

bombers pounded the target area for three hours. While the bombing had the desired effect on the Germans—it virtually destroyed the Panzer Lehr Division—it also killed 111 Americans and wounded another 490. More critically, it left the German forces outside the target area largely unscathed. Even so, the 9th, 4th and 30th Infantry divisions from VII Corps went forward and pushed open the gate.

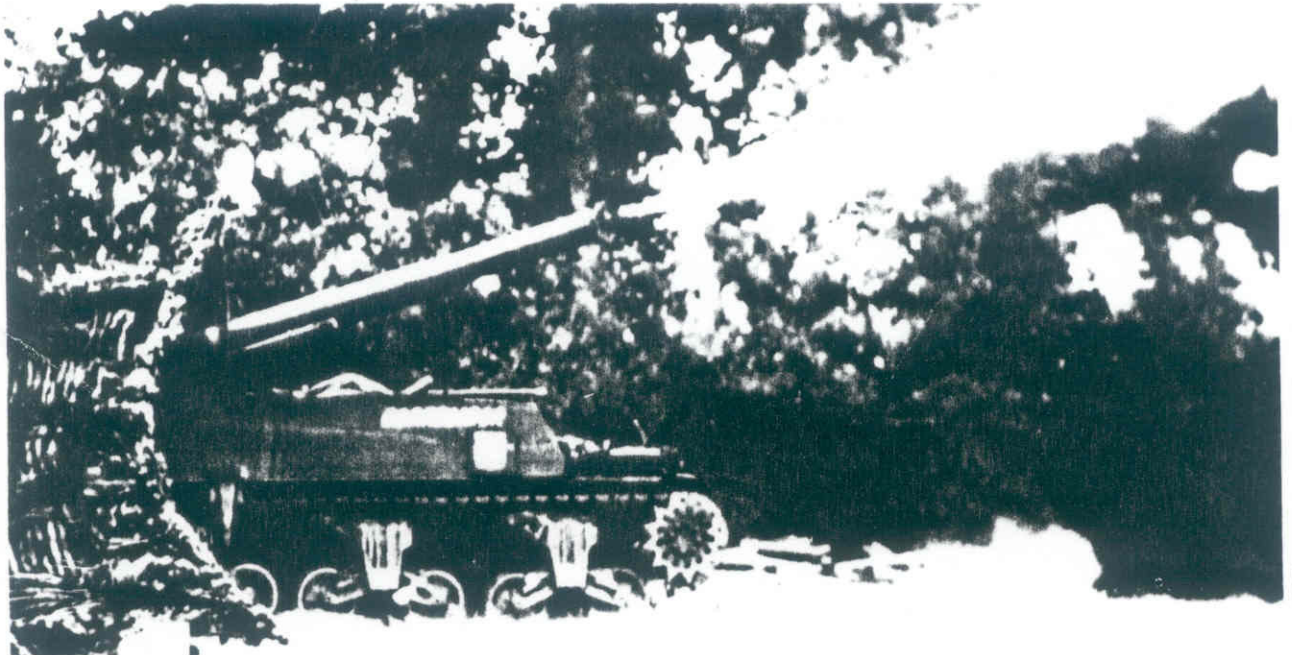
By the night of July 26, the Germans realized they were about to be cut off by VII Corps, now swinging in behind them, and pulled out.

On the evening of the 27th, Bradley sent the bulk of the First Army after the enemy, with the intent of cutting them off or destroying them. The balance of his force fanned out facing east to halt German reinforcements moving over from the British sector.

By August 1, VII Corps had advanced 30 miles. Meanwhile, VIII Corps infantry was sweeping down the coastal region, while its two armored divisions, the 4th and 6th, were racing the retreating Germans to the city of Avranches. The 4th Armored Division rolled into an undefended Avranches on July 29 and turned to face the approaching German forces.

At noon on August 1, the American Third Army under General George Patton became operational, after staging impatiently behind the First Army for a month. Bradley, now elevated to command the 12th U.S. Army Group, ordered the Third Army forward.

J.R.



A 155mm self-propelled gun fires into German defenses near St. Lô. After the town was occupied by the 29th Infantry Division on July 18, 1944, plans were made for Operation Cobra—the final breakout from the confines of the Cotentin Peninsula.