

May 25, 2001

Dear Chad:

My last letter was my account of the Battle at Mortain.

Here is what was happening in other areas while this was going on. Fighting a war is a terrible thing. Sometimes top commanders make hard decisions which gamble with the lives of men in the front lines. Gen. Bradley gambled that the 30th could hold at Mortain, and instead of sending available troops to aid us he sent Gen. Patton to link up with Gen. Montgomery's British and Canadian forces to the Trug Tross, German armies in the Falaise - Argentor Pocket behind Mortain. It was a cold-blooded ~~scheme~~ ^{scheme} ~~which~~ ^{which} a daring plan which ~~rested~~ depended upon the resolve and courage of troops who had already given more than any commander could expect. If the 30th Division could detain the Germans at Mortain for just a little longer the great opportunity which Gen. Bradley called the Chances of a life line would become a reality.

Gen. Bradley later acknowledged his debt to the old Hunton soldiers, whose courage provided him with "an opportunity that comes to a commander not more than once in a century". The 30th Division, he wrote, held nobly on the ridge with such doggedness, we called it The Rock of Mortain.

In 1984 the US Army command and General Staff College said "although not highly publicized, the stand made by Gen. Hobbs' 30th Infantry Division ranks as one of the more defensive actions of World War II. Holding the Germans on the first day of the attack proved to be

Catalyst of the Campaign in Northern France.

Now — to my personal involvement. The need to maintain pressure on the retreating Germans cut short the rest period we had earned at Mortain. We received replacements and supplies necessary to continue the attack on Sunday Aug. 13, 1944.

Early in the morning of Aug. 14 we were loaded on Trucks and hauled about 10 miles on the road to ^{Donfront} — I was the platoon Sgt. for 3rd platoon K Co, 120th Infantry, 30th Division.

Over half of K Company were replacements, including all the officers and platoon sgt. except me. It's hard to believe that we were going into battle with men we had received the day before that we still had to learn their names and what they were capable of.

The thing I remember best about the advance after we left the trucks was fear for the moment we made contact with the enemy. We knew it would be soon but we did not know when or where. We were spread out in a line of troops on each side of the road. We covered about 4 miles and ~~were~~ ^{were} on the high ground along the Varenne River near the Town of Donfront when we ^{were} hit by machine gun fire. Some of our men dropped wounded and killed in the first burst. Among them was our platoon leader, Lt. Bossard who was shot in the left shoulder. I took over and moved the men to the field left of the road. We put fire on the machine gun nest and sent flunkies around to hit them from behind. The

medics gave first aid to the wounded and had people carry them to the rear where they were loaded on jeeps for the trip to the Battalion aid station. We decided to consolidate our position and wait until the next day to take the town.

It was our first house to house fighting instead of Hedgerow to Hedgerow. We would put fire on a building while some would get close enough to a window to throw a grenade in, as soon as it went off we would rush the building. We found a lot of the Germans drunk but they could kill you as dead as a sober soldier. They were not of the quality we had been fighting. These were troops left behind by Germans who used what transport they had to get their best troops out of the Falaise - Argentan pocket. Our division history reports that the enemy offered no serious resistance, only rear guards were left to delay, and the principal difficulties were mines strewn in great profusion and demolition of the small bridge sites in the area. I guess it all depends on where you were at the time, with men being wounded and killed, it looked ~~to~~ different to me, from some one writing back at Division Hdq.

I'm reading Eric Phyle's war by James Tobin. I liked Eric Phyle as a war correspondent because he was right up front with us a lot of the time. He was with the 30th Div. the first day of bombing at ~~St~~ Saint-Jo and with the 4th Div. ^{now on the next day} the next day when Gen. McNamee was killed. This book contained a dispatch Eric Phyle wrote on street ~~to~~ ^{fighting}. I like it.

This is how Eric Thyle describes some Infantry he observed street fighting. It was not my outfit but it ~~is~~ could have been.

"The men didn't talk. They just went. They weren't heroic figures as they moved forward, one at a time, a few seconds apart. You think of attackers as being savage and bold. These men were hesitant and cautious. They were hunters but they looked like the hunted. There was confused excitement and anxiety in their faces.

They looked pathetic. They weren't warriors. They were American boys who by mere chance of fate wound up up with guns in their hands on a death-laden street in a strange and scattered city in a prissy hole in a driving rain. They were afraid, but were beyond their power to quit. They had no choice and even though they weren't warriors how to kill, they were their battles."

Getting back to our situation we cleared out Ronfront on the 15th and made a three mile gain. Aug 16, 1944 we reached a (no advance line) worked on our maps to prevent entry into the British zone. The 17th and 18th while we were pinched out by the ~~British~~ British and awaiting orders we used the time to work with our replacements on basic training.

On Aug 19, 1944 just 12 days after the enemy attacked us at Malain, six days after Patton reached Argentan, Gen. Montgomery closed the trap at Chambois fifteen miles south west of Falaise. More than 70,00 demoralized Germans were killed or captured in that pocket. The bulk of 19 German Divisions had been chewed up. Only mobile remnants

escaped and they slipped through in broken pieces.

Gen. Patton had reached Argentan early and told his troops to keep going and disregard the pre-determined phase line set to keep him out of British Territory, Gen. Eisenhower made him go back under protest. Gen. Montgomery was behind schedule which allowed the gap for many Germans to escape, on ~~120-mile~~ Aug. 19, 1944 we loaded trucks again for an 120-mile drive to an assemble area near Dref, just forty-two miles west of Paris.

For us this was a triumphal procession. Frenchmen from outlying districts practically lined the ~~route~~ ^{route} of our advance, in the country as well as in the towns. They were wild with joy and happiness. They threw flowers and fruit into our vehicles whenever a slight pause was made and offered wine and Calvados. As we passed through one small settlement, two small boys were struggling to hold aloft a huge sign which read, "Welcome to our Liberators" another read, "Vive l'Armee" when we stopped for any reason, men as well as women seized us and kissed our cheeks.

The entire 30th Division was motorized for this move so it was a long ~~road~~ ^{rocking} line of vehicles. We were led by the 113th Cavalry group and the 30th Reconnaissance group and used the trucks of six quartermaster companies. We left the trucks at Dref with instructions to protect our ~~rear~~ flanks from enemy attacks from any direction. Remnants of a German army were trying to escape across the Saale River where they expected to set up a rail

line of resistance. We launched an attack to the north at 8 am Aug, 20, 1944. We had little information on enemy strength and disposition, we ran into heavy resistance at the Ais River near the village of Noncourt on Aug. 20th. We were under heavy artillery fire and the Germans had placed machine guns and anti tank guns behind heavy log obstacles. We dug in for the night. We set up a road ~~block~~^{block}.

The company commander, Lt. Benson gave the assignment to the 3rd platoon of the perimeter defense of the company area. We set up a good one with 3 men outposts on each of our boundaries except the road where we expected the most trouble. We placed a couple of 30 caliber machine guns to cover the center of the road from each side with a bazooka team. Ahead of the road block we set up 3 rifle men on each side far enough on each fork to be out of line of fire from our machine guns. They had instructions to let any Germans that come up the road pass and hold their fire until the machine guns opened up.

I was there early the next morning when the Germans tried to come through. Here is a quote from "20th Regimental History" at 0415 on Aug. 21st "the road block which had been set up by Company K captured 40 prisoners. However an immediate counter attack accompanied by heavy artillery fire enabled all but eight of these prisoners to escape in the darkness." However I was there and that account does not describe what really happened.

The counterattack was not immediate, We had time to disarm the prisoners and collect their papers. We put them into a new by farm building with a guard on them. The road block was still in place and I had gone to the Company Command Post to give my report to Lt. Season when the counter attack set in. We rushed to the road block but it was all over. I saw one of the machine guns on its side badly shot up. I don't remember what replacement was on it but his fingers were in the dirt by the machine gun. I've seen worse sights but that one bothered me. Lt. Season made a command decision and gave me these instructions, 1st priority to remove the wounded, 2nd the men ready to continue the attack at daylight. Not to make any attempt to round up the escaped prisoners. He was going back to the CP where we had a field telephone hooked into the Battalion net.

Another event that stays in my mind happened after we moved out just before dawn. We had left the road on the high ground and were moving through a farm field where small grain was ~~stacked~~ ^{in baled} stacked in the valley. I saw a movement in a hay stack and fired at it. When we moved up we found the Helon officer we had captured earlier. He was unarmed and very dead. As we went on I could not keep from crying. I don't think any of my men noticed it because we were very busy and it was just dawn and not very light. I would have been glad to accept his capture. When I shot I didn't know what I was shooting at.

In a short time we reached the Demer Defense line. The enemy was attempting to defend a large airfield. We were able to push him back taking 35 prisoners and capturing non-combat. We stopped to set up a ~~strong~~ defense for the night at 2200. I was glad it was another platoon in charge of Klongong defense. I had a full day.

At 0900 Aug 22nd we jumped off in an attack on the Demer main line of resistance. With the help of our artillery we broke through and made good progress. Our regiment captured 6 or 7 small towns that day. I could find them never on a map but they wouldn't mean much to this report.

Aug. 23rd we made ^{another} ~~another~~ down attack. Our regiment captured 6 or 7 more small towns and captured 48 more prisoners. We were in Corps reserve Aug. 25 and remained in a static position. Aug 26th we took another truck ride to an assembly area at Montre Blomont. The next day we traveled 12 more miles to Porcheville. At ~~1330~~ 1330 Aug 27 we went back into attack and crossed the Seine River. We made good progress until we took the town of ~~Mont~~ Meudon where we ran into the Demer 6th Parachute Infantry. With help of our artillery we overcame this resistance and continued to cover a lot of ground the next two days.

Aug. 30, 1944 - another one of my bad days in the war. When the fighting changed from Hedgerow

To hedgerow and our advance was measured in miles per day instead of yards - ~~when~~ we issued an attack order our maps & aerial photos had a phase line marked on it. anything past the phase line was considered enemy territory. The maps were good and we had enough experience in reading them. The difficulty was that markers were not in the fields to show where you were at any point of time. It was easy to locate if the phase line was near a city, large river or some easy to recognize landmark.

Aug 30th as far as I know is the only time we passed our phase line and we did not know it then until we were already in trouble. We were fighting a small German Rear Guard action in another grain field which was bordered by steep ground wooded with trees. one of our tanks pulled into the field with us and an artillery shell landed in our area with casualties.

It was so accurate that I thought it had gone from an air field on the Hill above us and I told the 3rd platoon we were going to get that anti air coast gun before it got us. We started up the Hill as fast as we ~~you~~ could go. I noticed the Germans who had been exchanging fire with doing the same thing on the other side of a dry weather stream. A small rock tumbled with me and I damaged an ankle. The pain was very intense. When I got to my feet, loads of sweat had ~~for~~ spilled out on my forehead. I had to go on. Several artillery shells exploded in the valley below us. as we

Topped the hill and left the woods, we found out we were not alone. The Germans we had been exchanging fire with were there with their hands over their heads and their weapons on the ground. Another thing we discovered was the airfield was abandoned.

We searched the prisoners and designated two men to guard them. We would have to take them with us until we connected up with K Company.

We moved into a wooded area to the right of the ~~airfield~~ ^{airfield} to get us out of the zone. Then I used my radio to call the K Co. ~~Command~~ ^{Command} Post and report in to Lt. Reason. He advised me to go into a defensive position where I was and not try to come back to the company. He arranged for me to meet him at midnight on the road in front of the airfield.

That was one assignment I could not complete. I could hardly walk but I tried. Soon after I left my men I heard Germans in front of me. I circled trying to avoid them. Later I tried to correct my route. About 2 hrs. later, I ended up back where I started from. It's hard to believe I couldn't find the road in the dark but it happened.

Our casualties were from our own artillery when we got ahead of our phone line. The first shell hit the large radio being used by the forward artillery observer in the field with us. A fragment of the radio put out Lt. Sayre's left eye and damaged the radio to where he could hear but not send. He heard their call to fire for effect.

St. Sarge and I ended up in the same M.P. company when we got out of the hospital, worked "limited assignment".

Most of our casualties were replacements I did not know. One of the killed in action was Pvt. George Peterson, a mortar man, from the 4th Platoon, I was in while we were at Camp Blodine. He was a good soldier but had not been promoted because he would not accept responsibility.

We received replacements and started the next day for the nearby Belgian border. By the middle of that afternoon, Aug 31, 1944 I had to give up. My leg had swelled until I could not get my boot off. It was a dark color almost to my knee. A medic checked it and said I was in trouble and sent me to the hospital.

The next day, Sept. 1, 1944, the 30th Division was the first Infantry Division to enter Belgium. When they war Dept sent my medals they included The Belgium Fourragere which is my deploy case, another foreign award I qualified for was The French Croix De Guerre as a member of the 120th Infantry with service in the period 15 June 44 - 10 Sept. 44. I never did receive it because they were out of it and promised to send it later. It was limited to 120th regiment because 117 and 119 regiments were still in route when we entered the battle.

This is a good place to stop. I will start my next account with my 2nd hospital stay.

Tommy Godfather, John.