

STARS AND STRIPES

Cherbourg Edition

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With the 2nd Armored Division, Normandy, France

This is a special report filed from locations in the Calvados, Manche area of France, as part of actions during Operation COBRA, the breakout from Normandy.

Arrived in Graignes on 21 July and immediately began to set up camp under threatening skies. Tents were set up in a light rain which intensified during the night. It would be the first of a number of days with light rain. A memorial ceremony was performed at the ruins of the town church to commemorate those paratroopers who gave their lives in 1944 for the freedom of the town, one of the very first to be liberated on D-Day. Capt Mount and Sgt Dantzler placed a wreath at the base of the memorial plaque located in the remains of the old church. The ceremony was attended by squads of our 2nd Armored group under Sgt A Jones, as well as local citizens of the town.

Historical Note: The town had been liberated on 6 Jun 1944 by elements of the 82nd Airborne but after intense fighting, US forces ran out of ammunition they were cut off by enemy forces who re-occupied the town on 10 Jun. US re-enforcements later drove out the Germans and finally gained permanent control. About 1/3 of the town was destroyed and there were many casualties, including POW executions.

The next day we broke camp and proceeded south on route D89 to our next objective, the town of Amigny. The convoy consisted of a number of recon jeeps, two halftracks and two supply trucks. Our field kitchen crew also followed in their supply trucks and trailer. We encountered an enemy armored car along the way and had a brief fire fight. Approaching the town, a squad was sent along the left side of the road and another squad was sent along the right, climbing the hedgerow and getting into the adjoining field. This was our first real exposure to the hedgerows and bocage country with all the difficulties that entails. The hedgerows were as much as 10 feet in height and very steep. Combined with the rain and wet surface, the hedgerows were nearly impossible to climb without help. At the top, it is difficult to penetrate the dense trees and bushes that grow together. The Germans use them to great advantage, giving our troops hell and resulting in many casualties. Photos do not fully convey the difficulties of dealing with the effort it takes to advance on the enemy in these conditions.

They are the perfect defensive conditions and the Germans have perfected their tactics to take advantage of it.

When we reached the center of town there was a large battle at the traffic circle which involved our AT squad and troops, fighting a collection of German forces including a Stug, panzer Mk III, light skinned vehicles and many troops. The AT squad destroyed the Stug and many enemy forces were killed during a heated battle. Over thirty enemy dead were counted as well a number captured for interrogation.

Interview with S/Sgt Philip Reed; B Co, 41st AIB, HQ squad leader. There are 6-8 new recruits which make up a part of his squad. They came ashore during the second wave of units on D-Day. He has had experience fighting the Germans and feels they are a tough bunch, crafty, and if you are not at your best, they will make you suffer. During the battle for Amigny, they pushed into the center of town where they encountered German armor. They continued to maintain contact with the enemy, attacking to help the AT gun destroy German armor. One member of his squad was able to knock out a panzer with his bazooka. Sgt Reed will recommend him for a medal.

Interview with Pvt Gabe Hardin, Knoxville, Tenn. Pvt Hardin is part of the HQ squad under Sgt Reed. He was told to sit tight and hold his position. He was last on the scene of the battle and was carrying a bazooka. He held his fire until the German tank passed by and was able to hit it from behind and destroyed it. His sergeant has recommended him for a Bronze star for his personal initiative and aggressive actions and may also get a promotion. Pvt Hardin misses his family and hopes they will be going home soon.

From Amigny we continued on to the town of St Giles with our ultimate destination of Canisy, where we established our next camp on the grounds of Chateau Canisy, a large and impressive residence of the Baron of Canisy. This would be our home for the next two days and nights. Our field kitchen crew was already set up when we arrived and we were provided with some excellent meals each day. We could always depend on our dedicated crew to be at the right place at the right time with a hot meal. The weather continues to be cool and rainy but the hot meals keep us going. As we would be there for some time, the opportunity was taken to do some maintenance on the halftrack Czech Mate. We had to check the brakes as the pedal was getting soft. An inspection uncovered a small leak in the master cylinder. We topped up the reservoir and also went through the system and adjusted the front and rear shoes. After some test drives they worked a better. We also tightened the track adjustment to take out a bit of the slack in the tracks. Preventative maintenance is a behind the scene, constant and ongoing job to assure reliability of the vehicles. Too loose and you risk throwing a track, too tight and you put excess wear on the wheel bearings. Some of the troops went in the field for

some night time recon with just bedrolls and shelter halves. They will have to dig their foxholes and spend the night on alert for enemy probing actions.

The following day finally provided clear weather, a welcome change from the rain of the previous days. At the same time, there was a night skirmish against German forces and a few prisoners were brought into camp during the day, one of which required medical assistance for a leg wound. Sgt Heights applied a tourniquet. The German seemed to be in extreme pain but we could not provide any morphine. All the prisoners were provided water and some rations from our supplies since they seemed in need of such. Later a prisoner exchange was conducted to get back some of our men. Most of the troops were out on various missions and recon to locate and engage the enemy. Lt Jones provided the following after action report upon returning from his patrol.

1 LT Kelly Jones, from Frewsburg, NY, platoon leader of 1st platoon, B Co, 41st AIB. Their mission was to clean the adjacent woods of German forces, and moved into position to set up defensive positions, conduct recon patrols and to determine maneuvers on the enemy with cover and concealment. Took two squads south thru a cornfield and pasture and then moved across to a tree line. They surprised a German platoon, three of whom retreated, but capturing 14 POWs. A German Opel troop/supply truck was seen to leave the area. The patrol continued their movement while a German halftrack and truck moved into the area. An ambush was set along a section of road and they tried to capture a kublewagon but ran into a German ambush. They did manage to liberate two bottles of calvados while spending a night in the field, returning to camp at Canisy the next day.

Lt Jones said he is happy to be getting all the support from the family back home. He has been in France since landing on D+3, helping to support the 101st AB near Carantan in a counter attack.

Interview with Pvt Mark Bingham, 2nd squad rifleman, He said he had experienced some very tough fighting with the Germans after landing on Omaha Beach. A day ago, he had been pinned down by a German MG nest. They were low on supplies and ammunition and had to hold out for 7 hours when they finally got some reinforcements. He is looking forward to coming home in one piece when the fighting is done.

The following day some of the units proceeded east thru the area where there had been previous action and where we had driven the Germans from the abandoned farm house. It was decided to occupy this building and our troops would have a night inside out of the weather. Upon reaching the farm house, a booby trap was discovered at a gate, set by the enemy before they left the area. If someone had opened the gate, it would have gone off. Fortunately, it was discovered and disarmed before anyone got injured. Sleeping in a building was a welcome change after a few nights in fox holes or pup tents. The following morning, we loaded up the 'tracks and headed out, further south along road D 38 towards Dangy and Pont Brocard. By now, the weather had cleared and no further rain was expected.

At Pont Brocard, there was a large German force and an intense fire fight developed, which pitted our infantry against the full contingent of German forces, including a panzer, Stug and other heavy weapons. US forces approached from the west and ran into a heavy German defense. Our AT crew got set up along the road and managed to destroy a German halftrack along with some soft-skinned vehicles.

Historical Note; at Dangy, US forces came close to capturing General Fritz Bayerlein, CO of the Panzer Lehr group. Elements of the CCB burst into the town and he was forced to flee on foot. In the early morning of 28Jul, S/Sgt Jim Cermak of B/41st won the DCS at the battle for Pont Brocard, knocking out a line of German vehicles on road D52 with his 57mm ATG crew. A photo of that situation was re-created by our AT squad.

After the action at Pont Brocard, we proceeded south east to Moyon via Soulles. On Thursday evening, we reconnoitered the town in expectation of German defensive actions and developed a plan of attack. Friday morning our unit proceeded into the town where they encountered the enemy. A major fight developed in and around the center of the town, in front of the church. The AT squad came forward and engaged a German assault gun, knocking it out but sustaining some casualties. An armored car was also hit and destroyed as it drove up the hill to attack some of our infantry. There was a lot of heavy fighting in the square and it was uncertain how it would turn out when a panzer Mk III came forward to attack our troops. A bazooka squad came forward to engage and fired a well-placed round that hit the tank in the front corner, between the hull and the turret, above the driver's viewport. That put an end to it and the rest of the action was a mop-up of the German infantry, consisting of panzer grenadiers and paratroopers. All seemed under control until a lone German opened up with a machine gun from a second story window overlooking the square. He was quickly silenced and the remaining German were rounded up, ending the action.

Later in the afternoon, we took part in a memorial ceremony in front of the church to commemorate the sacrifices of our troops in liberating the town from German occupation. There were also memorials to those men of France that were lost in the First World War. Our ceremony included martial music from the local brass band as well as speeches from local dignitaries. A wreath for the 2nd Armored was placed at the foot of the memorial by our CO.

This was the last actions of our operation and everyone relaxed that evening with food and drink provided by the locals. We enjoyed a well-deserved street party, socializing with the German troops who had been our adversaries during the previous week. A great time was enjoyed and we made new friends during the week of battles.