

The Enemy Counterattack Against the 120th Inf. at Mortain.

1st Bn. Covered separately, Hill #285

2nd Bn. Covered separately, Hill #317 (Most commonly referred to as Hill #314)

3rd Bn. Barenton

Activities of 3rd Bn, 120th Inf. 30th Div. at Barenton, Aug 6 – 12.

Interview in the field with Lt. Edward M. Hill, S-3, 3rd Bn. (Aug. 25, 1944)

Lt. Charles R. Shaw, CO, Co. "I", (in vicinity of Huest)

The 3rd Battalion, of the 120th Inf. did not have a part directly in the enemy counterattack that struck the rest of the Regiment at Mortain. By Division order, it had been directed to proceed to Barenton, to relieve Task Force "X" of the 3rd Armored Division on 6 August. Commanded by Lt. Col. Paul McCollum, the 3rd Battalion prepared to execute this mission. At that time, the supposition was, that the Task Force "X" was holding Barenton.

The advance elements of the Battalion, commanded by Lt. Edward M. Hill, left its assembly area west of Mortain, and proceeded along the route through le Neufbourg on the afternoon of 6 August. These advance elements were composed of the 30th Reconnaissance Troop, and the I & R Platoon of the 120th Regiment, and Co. "I", all motorized. About three-quarters of a mile out of le Neufbourg, at 2030 hours, the column was strafed by enemy planes. Co. "I" suffered 47 casualties.

With the column augmented by Co. "B" of the 743rd Tank Battalion, Lt. Hill's group swung down the Mortain – le Teilleul road, because the direct road to Barenton was under enemy fire, reached the village of Notre Dame and cut East across country to the Barenton – le Teilleul road, arriving three-quarters of a mile outside of Barenton by 2300 hours. Task Force "X" was contacted on the road outside of Barenton, and it was then learned that the town was still in enemy hands. Task Force "X" itself, was down to

80 men and 10 tanks, and was occupying dug in positions fanned out from the road. It was later learned that a half hour before the 3rd Battalion's advance elements arrived before Barenton, there were no enemy in the town. If it had not been for the strafing on the road to le Neufbourg that had delayed the advance elements, the town could have been occupied immediately. The enemy force that had taken over the town, had just come down from Germany.

Lt. Col. McCollum, appraised of the situation by radio, came forward. A roadside conference was held to determine whether to attack Barenton that night, or to wait until the next day. It ended with the decision to reinforce the defensive positions of Task Force "X", and to jump-off the next day. The remainder of the Battalion had arrived, except for Co. "K", which had been left on Hill #317, (Hill #314 and Hill #317 are one and the same for all practical purposes), East of Mortain, with the 2nd Battalion. Co. "I" which had suffered heavy casualties from the strafing, was down to 79 men. Co. "L" had 134 men, and Co. "M" had 150 men, and Headquarters Co. had 124 men. In addition, the Medical unit and the kitchens were on hand. The inclusion of the kitchens turned out to be a particularly fortuitous circumstance, as the Battalion became entirely cut off from supplies, but with the kitchen along, it never lacked for food.

At 0300 on 7 August, Co. "L". commanded by Lt. Harold Kothenbeutle, jumped off, followed shortly by Co. "I", under Lt. Charles R. Shaw. Co. "I" was to establish a road-block on the East side of town, while Co. "L" was to do the same thing on the West side. Communications were maintained with the Battalion by 300 radios. It was pitch dark when the two companies moved off to the East and West, respectively. Both received small-arms fire as they worked their way around the edges of the town.

A Platoon of Co. "I", under Lt. Don Kuchenrither, hit a network of little trails down through a small valley, and inched itself forward against machine gun and burp-gun fire. As daylight came, quite a few dead Germans were discovered on a little trail directly in front of this Platoon, testifying to the closeness of contact in the early morning hours. Both Co. "I" and Co. "L" succeeded in establishing their assigned road-blocks. The rest of the Battalion jumped off at 0600, supported by a Battery of 81mm mortars, using the tanks along with the infantry, and sending scouts ahead to spot AT guns, bazooka teams, and mines. Task Force "X" remained outside the town during the attack, although some of its TD's were used in the road-blocks. Co. "L", at this time, 0600, was ordered to send one Platoon into the town from the South, supported by a Platoon of tanks, and drive right through, mopping up as it went. This maneuver was successful, for although there were many enemy snipers in the town, and enemy mortar fire coming from the West, the bulk of the enemy resistance had withdrawn to the North. The enemy strength had been estimated at 300 men and 8 tanks, comprising the 2nd Battalion of the 985th Regiment of the 275th Division. The town, (Barenton), was officially secure at 0940. At 1700, Combat Command B of the 3rd Armored Division, rolled in from the South.

The 3rd Battalion occupied the town until its relief by the 1st Battalion of the 137th Inf, of the 35th Division, at 1750 hours on 9 August. During this time, it remained cut off from the Regiment fighting at Mortain. At one time, an ambulance with two men seriously wounded and two slightly injured, was sent towards Mortain, along the Barenton-Mortain road, which had been held by the enemy. The ambulance was stopped, and every occupant taken from it. The German medic in charge, had been captured three

times previously by the Americans, and released on each occasion, and he gave a pass to the American medics to allow them to return to Barenton. The two slightly injured men, however, were taken as prisoners. The seriously wounded cases were returned to the ambulance and sent back to Barenton, both of these men dying en route.

Also during the time that the 3rd Battalion occupied Barenton, a member of the Barenton police force, named Barthoneuf, volunteered his services to the Battalion Commander, offering to fight the enemy, to act as a courier, or in any possible capacity. He was, he said, a former member of the French Foreign Legion. The commander of the 4th Cavalry Group, vouched for Barthoneuf, crediting him with laying 14 mines in the enemy rear, so his services were accepted. He became an avid hunter of Nazis, frequently reporting locations of groups of the enemy to the battalion, at one time even locating a group of 180 of them. Capt. Howard W. Greer, Executive Officer of the 3rd Battalion, and several other members of the battalion staff, took off in two jeeps, to do the job themselves. Unable to locate these enemy troops, the party returned and so informed Barthoneuf, who, witnesses testify, tore his hair with frustration. A subsequent expedition by the reconnaissance troop, located the enemy, who, incidentally, from a house near the road had watched Capt. Greer drive right by with his two jeep expedition. The entire group of 180 surrendered without a fight. Barthoneuf, besides obtaining other valuable information by his own methods of reconnaissance, also operated a group of runners in the Battalion service. To the amazement of the 3rd Battalion staff, these runners were capable of doing six (6) miles on foot in one hour.

Upon relief by the 1st Battalion of the 137th Inf., (35th Inf. Div.), the Battalion moved north along the road to Ger, to occupy Hill #263. Here several detachments of enemy armor were encountered in this vicinity, and the woods were frequently burning from being shelled with phosphorus. One encounter with 7 Mark IV's on August 11th, ended with all of the enemy armor being knocked out, and the tank crews leaping from their tanks and dashing for cover.

On the 11th, the 3rd Battalion swung back in the direction of Barenton, and set up a defense line from Hill #263 to the road junction of the Barenton-Domfront road, in the vicinity of St. Georges de Bovel. Co. "L" occupied the upper sector of this line, with Co. "I" holding the lower sector. They alternated in sending a motor patrol daily into St. Georges

On the 12th, the 3rd Battalion was relieved by the 4th Cavalry Group, and recalled to join the rest of the 120th Inf. Reg't. at Mortain.

Accompanying Overlay (Not available).