

"BREAKTHROUGH BY THE 120TH INFANTRY ON 25 JULY 1944"

The mission given the 120th Infantry under plan "Cobra" was to break through the enemy main line of resistance and seize St. Gilles and then permit Combat Command "A" of the 2nd Armored Division to pass through the Regiment. The line of advance was along the top of a low ridge for at least a mile beyond the enemy's MLR.

Col. Birks plan of attack was to deploy his troops astride the St. Jean de Daye - St. Gilles road and attack in column of battalions. The 2nd Bn was to spearhead the attack, followed by the 1st and 3rd Bns, in that order. In case the leading battalion got held up, Col. Birks intended to send the next Bn in line around the left flank. If this battalion were stopped, he would send the third battalion around its left flank. The same tactics were to be followed by companies and platoons.

H - hour for "Cobra" was originally set for 241300 July, and the air strike did commence on schedule at 241200. However, the attack was called off before 1300 by Lt. General Bradley because of poor visibility. The Regiment was severely bombed through the error of the USAAF, and many casualties were incurred.

On 25 July 1944, H- hour was 1100 and the bombing commenced at 1000. Although the Regiment had withdrawn from the vicinity of la Juglanniere to a safety line about 700 yards north, it was again bombed by our own planes, this time more severely than on the 24th. The bombing of the 2nd Bn was particularly disastrous to its radios. All of the radios in battalion Hq were knocked out, also some of the company radios. The 2nd Bn's casualties, on top of those of the day before, prompted Col. Birks to give serious thought to putting one of the other two battalions in the lead position, but he finally decided that it would cause too much confusion to try to do this in a matter of minutes. So Col. Birks and Lt. Col. Hardaway undertook a rapid reorganization of the 2nd Bn. The officers of the battalion, cognizant of the importance of the mission assigned to them, indicated their desire to go ahead with it, and the emen cooperated. The reorganization caused a delay of 30 minutes and at 1130 the attack was launched.

The initial objective of the 2nd Bn was the crossroads at 436655. The enemy had a strongpoint consisting of three Mark V tanks flanked by MG's and infantry directly in the line of advance (~~see overlay~~). When F Co. in the lead was stopped by this strongpoint, Lt. Col. Hardaway committed E Co. on its left, according to plan. When E Co. failed to advance, G Co. undertook the wider envelopment, attacking on E's left. In the meantime, Col. Birks ordered the first battalion forward and gave it the mission of skirting the 2nd Bn's left flank and proceeding across country to seize the crossroads at 434649. One platoon of light tanks from the 743rd Tank Bn was attached to it. Lt. Col. Cantey, CO of the 1st Bn, soon discovered that the line of advance assigned to him was already being used by the 119th Infantry. He reported this to Col. Birks. The latter decided that there was no other route available and that he must attempt to squeeze the 1st Bn through on this flank. His second battalion was still stopped cold north of the German strongpoint mentioned above. Unless it should unexpectedly crack this strongpoint, he was going to have to commit the 3rd Bn on the 2nd Bn's right. So he told Lt. Col. Cantey to keep to the right and force as much of his battalion through as he could. About 1800 Lt. Col. Cantey managed to slip most of his

battalion through E Company, one platoon at a time. Part of the Bn. became engaged with the enemy, part was slowed by the presence of troops of the 119th Infantry, and the attached platoon of light tanks was held up by AT guns. But B Company and most of C Company kept moving. As they approached the battalion's objective, they encountered heavy automatic fire from the sunken road which they were to secure. A determined attack was launched against the enemy's position with complete success. The enemy pulled out and no organized line was encountered again that night. In the meantime, Col. Birks had ordered the battalion to proceed on to the CR at 434645. As soon as the other elements of the battalion caught up and Lt. Col. Cantey had effected some reorganization, the battalion advanced towards its second objective. Little resistance was encountered, and by 260200 the CR at 434645 was secured.

While the 1st battalion was attacking on the east side of the St. Jean - St. Gilles road, the 3rd battalion was ordered to attack on the west side. It advanced in a column of companies and broke through the enemy line at about 438664, knocking out two MG's and capturing 29 PW's. The regimental I and R platoon established a road block at 433664 to protect the 3rd battalion's right flank, and the 3rd Bn proceeded southwest to the St. Lo - Perliers road. In that vicinity considerable resistance, including three tanks, was encountered. One of the tanks was knocked out by artillery fire and the other two retreated. The hostile infantry gave themselves up after an initial show of strong resistance. By dark the 3rd Bn had completely secured the west side of the St. Jean - St. Gilles road as far south as le Roque and as far west as the Terrette River.

While the 1st Bn on the left and the 3rd Bn on the right were making good progress, the 2nd Bn continued to assault the strongpoint blocking its progress. The fighting was bitter. The battalion S-3 had been killed and G Co. lost three commanders. Some of the 2nd battalion's men got into a house by the side of the road that was the axis of advance. Before they could be reinforced, the enemy overwhelmed them. Efforts to rout the enemy out with small arms fire failed. Col. Birks, knowing that some of his own wounded men remained in the house, was faced with the difficult decision of whether or not to level the house with artillery. Influenced by the heavy losses which the 2nd Bn had recently taken from friendly fire, he decided not to call for artillery. F Company finally managed to drive the enemy out after almost surrounding the house.

The breakthrough in the 2nd battalion's sector was finally achieved by maneuvering 5 medium tanks of 743rd Tank Bn against the 3 Mark V tanks that constituted the core of the enemy resistance. All 5 tanks attacked at one time. One of the Mark V's was knocked out on the spot. The other two were cornered by our tanks at la Paconderie, almost due west of RJ 86, and knocked out too.

This successful engagement turned the battle in our favor. The men of the 2nd Bn advanced with confidence, the enemy's resistance melted, and by nightfall the 2nd Bn was on its objective, CR 436655. The 120th Infantry had made a decisive penetration of the German main line of resistance.

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"BREAKTHROUGH BY THE 120TH INFANTRY ON 25 JULY 1944"

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(The following account was secured by Captain Ferriss on 5 August 1944, at a conference held at the CP of the 120th Inf. Present were: Colonel Hammond D. Birks, CO of the 120th Inf, Lt Col Peter O. Ward, Executive Officer of 120th Inf, Captain Ellis W. Williamson, S-3 of the 120th Inf, Lt Col Edas Hardaway, CO of the 2d Bn, and Lt Col Paul W. McCollum, CO of the 3d Bn. Lt Col Canty, CO of the 1st Bn at the time of the breakthrough, was subsequently wounded and evacuated. However, Capt Williamson was in a position to speak about the operations of the 1st Bn, as he had been with that battalion during the action).

The mission given the 120th Infantry under plan "Cobra" was to break through the enemy's MLR in its zone (see accompany overlay), seize St. Gilles, and then permit CCA of the 2d Armored Div to pass through the Regt. Insofar as the accomplishment of the initial objective was concerned, the terrain offered no obstacles other than the ever present hedgerows. The line of advance was along the top of a low ridge (about 80 meters) for at least a mile beyond the enemy's MLR.

Col Birks plan of attack was to deploy his troops astride the St. Jean de Days - St. Gilles road and attack in column of battalions. The 2d Bn was to spearhead the attack, followed by the 1st and 3d Bns, in that order. In case the leading battalion got held up, Col Birks intended to send the next battalion in line around the left flank of the lead battalion. If this battalion were stopped, he would send the third battalion around its left flank. The same tactics were to be followed by companies and platoons.

H-hour for "Cobra" was originally set for 241300 July, and the air strike did commence on schedule at 241200. After 20 minutes of bombing, however, Lt Gen Bradley called the attack off because of the poor visibility. In those 20 minutes, however, the 120th Inf was severely bombed through the error of the USAAF. The 2d Bn alone had 12 killed and 70 wounded (for further details, see report of the IG, 30th Inf Div). On 25 July 1944 H-hour was 1100, and the bombing commenced at 1000.

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Though the 120th Inf had withdrawn from the vicinity of la Juganniere to a safety line about 700 yards north (see accompany overlay), it was again bombed by our own planes, this time more severely than on the 24th. The bombing of the 2d Bn was particularly disastrous to its radios. All of the radios in battalion Hq were knocked out, also some of the company radios. The 2d Bn's casualties, on top of those of the day before, prompted Col Birks to give serious thought to putting one of the other two battalions in the lead position; but he finally decided that it would cause too much confusion to try to do this in a matter of minutes. So Col Birks and Lt Col Hardaway undertook a rapid reorganization of the 2d Bn. The officers of the battalion, cognizant of the importance of the mission assigned them, indicated their desire to go ahead with it, and the men cooperated. The reorganization caused a delay of 30 minutes and at 1130 the attack was launched.

The initial objective of the 2d Bn was the crossroads at 436655. The enemy had a strongpoint consisting of three Mark V tanks flanked by MG's and infantry directly in the line of advance (see overlay). When F Co in the lead was stopped by this strongpoint, Lt Col Hardaway committed E Co on its left, according to plan. When E Co failed to advance, G Co undertook a wider envelopment, attacking on E's left. In the meantime, Col Birks ordered the first battalion forward and gave it the mission of skirting the 2d Bn's left flank and proceeding across country to seize the crossroads at 434649. One platoon of light tanks (of comments of Lt Col Duncan) from the 743d Tank Bn was attached to it. Lt Col Canty, CO of the 1st Bn, soon discovered that the line of advance assigned to him was already being used by the 119th Inf. He reported this situation to Col Birks. The latter decided that there was no other route available and that he must attempt to squeeze the 1st Bn through on this flank. His second battalion was still stopped cold north of the German strongpoint mentioned above. Unless it should unexpectedly crack this strongpoint, he was going to have to commit the 3d Bn on the 2d Bn's right. ~~Therefore~~ So he told Lt Col Canty to keep to the right and force as much of his battalion through as he could. About 1800 Lt Col Canty managed to slip

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most of this battalion through E Company, one platoon at a time. Part of the Bn became engaged with the enemy, part was slowed by the presence of troops of the 119th Inf, \* and the attached platoon of light tanks was held up by AT guns. But B Company and most of C Company kept moving. As they approached the battalion's objective, they encountered heavy automatic fire from the sunken road which they were to secure. A determined attack was launched against the enemy's position with complete success. The enemy pulled out and no organized line was encountered again that night. In the meantime, Col Birks had ordered the battalion to proceed on to the CR at 434645. As soon as the other elements of the battalion caught up and Col ~~Hart~~<sup>Anty</sup> had effected some reorganization, the battalion advanced toward its second objective. Little resistance was encountered, and by 260200 the CR at 434645 was secured.

While the 1st battalion was attacking on the east side of the St. Jean - St. Gilles road, the 3d battalion was ordered to attack on the west side. It advanced in a column of companies and broke through the enemy line at about 438664, knocking out two MG's and capturing 29 PWs. The regimental I and R platoon established a road block at 433664 to protect the 3d battalion's right flank, and the 3d Bn proceeded southwest to the St. Lo - Perriers road. In that vicinity considerable resistance, including three tanks, was encountered. One of the tanks was knocked out by artillery fire and the other two retreated. The hostile infantry gave themselves up after an initial show of strong resistance. By dark the 3d Bn had completely secured the west side of the St. Jean - St. Gilles road as far south as <sup>Rogue</sup> ~~Rogue~~ and as far west as the Territte River.

While the 1st Bn on the left and the 3d Bn on the right were making good progress, the 2d Bn continued to assault the strongpoint blocking its progress. The fighting was bitter. The battalion S-3 <sup>had been</sup> was killed and G Co lost three commanders.

\* The 119th Inf and the 1st Bn of the 120th became so intermingled in the general vicinity of 438653 that the 1st Bn of the 120th had to establish a virtual MP station to direct the men to their respective objectives.

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Some of the 2d battalion's men got into a house by the side of the road that was the axis of advance. Before they could be reinforced, the enemy overwhelmed them. Efforts to rout the enemy out with small arms fire failed. Col Birks, knowing that some of his own wounded men remained in the house, was faced with the difficult decision of whether or not to level the house with artillery. Influenced by the heavy losses which the 2d Bn had recently taken from friendly fire, he decided not to call for artillery. F company finally managed to drive the enemy out after almost surrounding the house.

The breakthrough in the 2d battalion's sector was finally achieved by maneuvering five medium tanks of the 743d Tank Bn against the three Mark V tanks that constituted the core of the enemy's resistance. Colonel Birks, in proposing this plan to the CO of the Tank Bn, Lt Col *Wm. D.* Duncan, stated that three of the five tanks might be knocked out in the action, but that it was the only way to get through. Lt Col Duncan said he was willing to take the chance. All five tanks attacked at one time. Two of the Mark V's were knocked out on the spot. The third fled south, but the tankers of the 743d cornered it at La Tacanderie (438658) and knocked it out too. None of the five general sherman's was lost. *(cf Lt Col Duncan's comments in re this para.)*

This successful engagement turned the battle in our favor. The infantry of the 2d Bn advanced with confidence, the enemy's resistance ~~was not~~ <sup>melted</sup>, and by nightfall the 2d Bn was on its objective, CR 438655. The 120th Inf had made a decisive penetration of the German MLR.

At 260900 CCA of the 2d Armored Division began to pass through the 120th Inf. The tanks deployed on either side of the St. Jean - St. Gilles road at about 438657 and advanced directly south through the 120th's lines with virtually no resistance. Afterwards the 120th Inf marched southeast by secondary roads, encountering no resistance until it reached le Pt. Hain.

P. Ferriss, Capt., AUS

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30th Infantry Division.

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(The following comments on the account secured by Captain Ferriss were given to Captain Hechler on 11 September 1944, by Lt Col Duncan, CO of the 743d Tank Battalion.)

Colonel Duncan spent 25 July with A Company and with Colonel Birks in order to assure the best liaison between tanks and infantry. He said that he and Col Birks spent a great deal of their time "sitting behind a hedgerow" near the St. Gilles road. Col Duncan paid high tribute to the fearlessness of Lt Aas in making his feet reconnaissances in and around the buildings along the road in search of the dug-in and concealed Mark Vs. He said that he felt strongly that it was historically inaccurate to credit Col Birks with the suggestion that five mediums be maneuvered against the three Mark Vs. Col Duncan said that he remembers clearly that Lt Aas came up to the hedgerow where Col Birks and Col Duncan were sitting, reported the presence of the three tanks, and then proposed his plan of maneuver against them. "His judgment was sound because his reconnaissance had been bold", stated Col Duncan. "It was he and not Col Birks— with all due respect to Col Birks— who proposed the plan and we deferred to his judgment because he knew what he was talking about".

Colonel Duncan also checked and corroborated the following statement of Lt Aas, which disagrees with the account of the 120th Inf conference:

Only one of the three tanks— rather than two— was knocked out initially. The other two were cornered at La Facouderie and at 434656, almost due west of RJ 86.

Colonel Duncan read all of the accounts, checking both their accuracy and language. He said that there were two platoons of lights from D Company operating with the 120th, rather than one. One platoon, led by Lt Korrison, initially started down the St. Gilles Road. When it ran into resistance, it was withdrawn and "A" Company of mediums advanced followed by Lt Risk's platoon of lights. "C" Co started out down the same road, and when it had cleared off, Lt Korrison's platoon

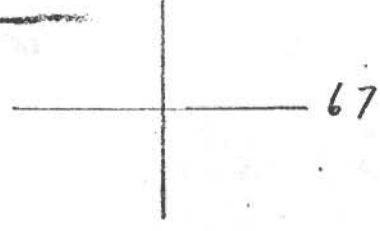
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acted as a rear guard for the "A" Co mediums. Neither of the two platoons of lights with the 120th, after the initial advance, figured very heavily in the fighting. The chief trouble, according to Col Duncan, was that their 37s were totally ineffective against the dug-in Mark Vs which could only be approached from the front and was too heavily armored on the front. Col Duncan remembers that Staff Sgt Carrol Hibness, 1st platoon Sgt, pumped three rounds of 37mm at one of the Mark Vs and a moment later his doleful voice came over the radio: "Good God, I fired three rounds and they all bounced off".

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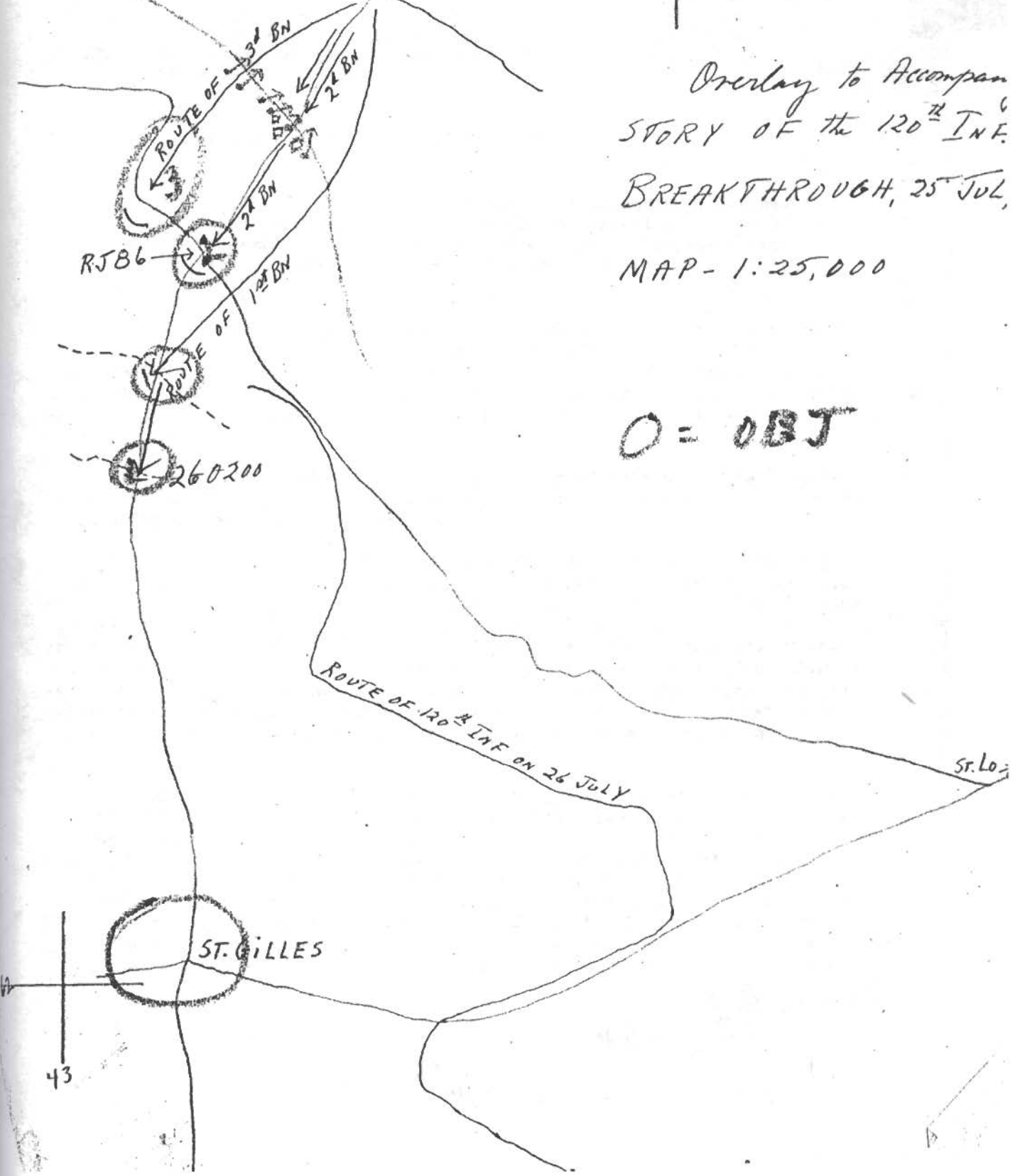
SAFETY LINE

MLR



Overlay to Accompany  
STORY OF the 120<sup>th</sup> INF.  
BREAKTHROUGH, 25 JUL,  
MAP - 1:25,000

O = OBJ



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ST. LO.