

BREAKTHROUGH AT HEBECREVEON BY 1st BN, 119th INFANTRY 02-86

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(Account of Maj. Robert H. Herlong, CO of 1/119th Inf, and Capt. Clayborn Wayne, Ex. Off. of 1/119th Inf, given to Capt Ferriss on 4 Sept. 44)

Col. Edwin M. Sutherland, CO of the 119th Inf, was given the little town of Hebecrevon, 5 kms northwest of St. Lo, as his initial regimental objective. The town was situated on high ground commanding the St. Jean de Daye-St. Gilles road, which was to be the axis of advance for CCA of the 2d Armd Division. Its taking was regarded by the VII Corps Commander as a prerequisite to a successful launching of CCA's power drive at this point in the enemy line.

Both east and west of Hebecrevon there are streams which flow north, join, and then flow east into the Vire River. Northeast of Hebecrevon, between the Vire River and the stream on the east of Hebecrevon, there is high ground, approximately as high as the hill on which Hebecrevon is situated. Finally, between Hebecrevon and St. Lo there is another hill of about the same height which enters into the tactical picture. All of the terrain in the locality is typical bocage.

For several days prior to July 25 the 119th Inf had held defensive positions north of the confluence of the two streams mentioned above. During this time a number of patrols had been sent south across the stream to feel out the enemy's defenses, and enough prisoners taken to enable the regiment to have a accurate idea of the German organization of the ground. This consisted of the usual exploitation of the hedgerows and farm building on an east-west line of the stream. (See attached overlay, "Cobra Breakthrough", for the approximate enemy MLR which the 1st and 3d Bns encountered; also captured document detailed emplacements, which was forwarded thru channels to G-2 FUSA).

Col. Sutherland's plan of attack was to start his regiment le Mesnil Durand-Hebecrevon road in a column of battalions, in the

The air strike at 251000 was very inaccurate. Though the hill on which Hebecrevon is located was hit hard, the hill to the northeast received only a few bombs. (When the 1st Bn took this latter hill, they found some scattered bomb craters, but the prisoners captured said that there had been no casualties among the defenders of the hill. They were shaken by the bombing, however.) The most unfortunate thing about the strike was the large number of casualties suffered by our own forces. The 119th Inf had about 20 killed and 113 wounded. (Note the unusually high percentage killed.) The 1st Bn suffered casualties of about 3 KIA and 8 WIA.

Despite these severe casualties in the 119th, the regiment commenced its advance south at H hour, 1100. Resistance was first encountered by the 3d Battalion, which was leading according to plan, as it approached the stream. The entire battalion deployed, and after sharp fighting, a considerable number of them got across the stream. To relieve the pressure on the 3d battalion, Col. Sutherland ordered the 1st battalion, A Company, to attack the high ground on the left of the 3d battalion. (A Company was on a separate mission with a company of the 743d Tank Bn. Together they were to move south on the Hts. Vents-St. Gilles road as far as RJ 86, then turn southeast, help clean out Hebecrevon, and spearhead the attack of the 1st Bn toward its final objective (see overlay).

Maj. Herlong had attached one platoon of MG's from D Company to each one of his rifle companies, while D Company's heavy mortars were kept in general support. Thus he had two rifle companies, ~~two~~ reinforced, with which to seize the high ground northeast of Hebecrevon. He placed them in column of companies, with B in front and C behind.

The 197th FA Bn was in direct support of the 1st Bn, 119th, and its fire was reinforced by fire from the 113th FA Bn and others. All this artillery support helped but of outstanding assistance were (1) the moving barrage laid down by the 197th FA Bn and the counterbattery fire which was placed in the draw on the other side of the objective. This latter was very effective.

B and C Com^{panies} jump^{ed} off at 1313 and continued in a column of companies until they got across the stream. Two or three fields south of the stream B Co. ran into what proved to be the enemy's MLR in his effort to hold the hill. The center of the line was a cluster of farm buildings, three large ones and three or four smaller ones. C and B Companies were deployed along the gully south of this strongpoint, and a hot fire fight ensued. Our forces worked up to within hand-grenade distance, and this developed into hand to hand fighting. The enemy's defense was so stubborn at this point, that Maj. Herlong, banking on what experience had taught him about German fear of being outflanked, decided to sideslip B Company to the left. (See overlay for B Company's route.) B Company found a relatively soft spot on the left and began to make progress. C Company was still held up, so Maj. Herlong ordered them to swing to the right and try to advance up a gully. The descent into the gully was so steep that the men had to go down one at a time, which caused the operation to move slowly. Once in the gully, however, the men made progress, thus threatening to outflank the enemy's strongpoint on both right and left flanks. The last platoon of C Company was able to cut through the farm buildings that had been holding up two companies all afternoon, a strong indication that the enemy, or at least a large part of them, had decided to withdraw. The two companies now made good progress, and by the time they reached the top of the hill they had reestablished physical contact with each other. They had also taken about 50 prisoners, including the CO of the 5th Company, which had been defending the sector. This German officer stated that he had been given orders to hold the hill at all costs.

Very shortly after the enemy resistance noticeably slackened, artillery and mortar fire from the high ground southeast of the 1st Bn position began to be received, to avoid this as much as possible, the 1st Bn moved down the slope of the hill and dug a defensive position facing south and southwest. The heavy mortars remained on the north slope of the hill and suffered a very heavy shelling, as did the 117th Inf, which was further behind.

Around 2130 Maj. Herlong received word from Col. Sutherland that he was to attack and seize Hebecrevon immediately and at all costs. The Major was in touch with A Company by radio and got the impression from the company commander that A Company and the attached company of tanks had not run into much resistance in reaching the position they then held(see overlay). So at about 2200 Maj. Herlong ordered this force to advance SE into Hebecrevon. He employed this force rather than B and C Companies because the enemy had been contesting B and C Companies advance all day and knew exactly where they were. In his mind it was a choice between using either B and C, on the one hand, or A and the tanks on the other. If both forces had been ordered to attack towards Hebecrevon at the same time, there would have been serious danger of the two forces firing at each other in the darkness.

A Company and the tanks jumped off shortly after 2200. For the first few minutes they met very heavy fire. Then suddenly this slackened to only intermittent fire. The force moved on into Hebecrevon, cleaned out the town, and secured it completely by 260200. Patrols were then sent out and contact established with B and C Companies on the left.

