

15 August 1944

Interviews with: Lt. Col. Walter M. Johnson, Actg. C.O. 117th Inf.
Maj. Warren C. Giles, S-2, 117th Inf.
Maj. Raymond Hill, S-3, 117th Inf.
Lt. Col. Robert E. Frankland, C.O. 1st Bn., 117th Inf.
Capt. David K. Easlick, S-3, 1st Bn. 117th Inf.
Lt. Quinton W. Robb, Cmdg. Wpns. Pl, C Co, (1st Bn)
Lt. Robert C. Spiker, Ex. O. B Co. (now C.O.)

Counterattack at Mortain, 7 August 1944 (1st Bn. 117 Inf.)

The 117th moved into the St. Barthelmy area at approximately noon, 6 Aug. '44, to relieve the 26th Inf. of the 1st Inf. Div. Lt. Col. Frankland says he was under the impression that they were going into an assembly area, and did not learn till a short time before arrival, that they were taking over this area to defend. So, he says, he decided to have the Bn take over the positions just as they were, which they did, practically man for man, fox hole for fox hole. As far as he could see, they were pretty good positions, and Col. Johnson said too that the 1st Inf. Div. had taken advantage of terrain as best they could, as far as he could see. Only objection was, says Lt. Col. Frankland, that he doesn't like to see roadblocks out so far, unconnected with the main positions. They all felt that they were taking over a pretty big sector to defend. The 1st Bn. practically held it alone, for the 2nd Bn. (-G Co.) was attached to the 120th to the South. The 3rd Bn. took up positions to the left rear, and kept patrols out to the north. The 1st Bn. was rather exposed, "sticking out like a long finger", for it had nothing on its right or to the Northwest. Positions were taken as indicated on the sketch, the main position being the defense of St. Barthelmy, with A Company on the North side of town and C Company to the Southwest, and road blocks as indicated. B Company held positions to the Northwest, astride the Cross-Road at le Fantay.

Lt. Col. Frankland had his Bn. take over the 26th's positions, then he said that if they had time, they'd improve them. They had no information about the enemy, except what the 1st Inf. Div. knew of them – i.e. that there were about 50 or 60 Germans to the front, on the high ground at la Bougamiere, from the 116th Panzer's. There were no other identifications.

There was no extraordinary activity Sunday night, except for the noise of tanks in the distance. At least, no one sensed the coming storm. There was some artillery fire, and before it grew dark, the road block group to the north saw 3 enemy tracked cycles around the curve at coordinates 575154. Our men fired on them and they turned around and went back. Between 11 and 12 infantrymen also appeared approaching the position and the group fired on them. The road block was manned by ½ platoon of B Company, an AT gun and 2 bazookas from Hq. Co. and a HMG section from D Company. At about midnight, from 2 to 4 tanks advanced on the road block, and knocked out the AT gun, wounding 2 men and driving the rest of the group back. The group did not withdraw entirely, however, and took up a position a few hundred yards to the South, and the enemy did not follow up this attack, for we placed artillery fire on their position. The rest of the night there was no unusual activity except for the noise of the tanks, and the artillery. Two road blocks had also been established at la Sablonniere (A Co.) and Gde la Dainie, (C Co.) to the Southeast and South. But they were not as strong as the one to the North.

The Bn. C.P. was only a few hundred yards from the Regimental C.P. at la

Rossaye. But Lt. Col. Frankland had his command group, (Capt. David Easlick, S-3; Lt. Harold Powe, Communications Officer; Lt. John Cowden, S-2; and some radio men, plus 6 Infantrymen) with him at his OP in the house in St. Barthelmy.

About 0600 came the attack --- on all sides, it seemed. German tanks descended upon them from at least 3 roads, as indicated. First they hit A Co's roadblock at la Sablonniere and over-ran it. The Col. immediately notified Regiment and called for artillery fire, but Jerry's planes had begun to strafe the rear areas, so that the Bn. could not get all of the fire that it wanted. When A Co's block was hit, the AT guns were pulled over to fire in that area. Six TD's had been brought up after dark and placed astride the roads as indicated. Even after A Co's roadblock was knocked out, the Col. says they weren't concerned with the seriousness of the attack. Shortly after C Co's block to the South was broken through or by-passed, a column of tanks began to approach the town, right up the road. By 0700 at least 8 tanks had passed through C Co's position and were in town. Lt. Col. Frankland was well aware of the activity by this time, and had informed Regiment, and had asked for help, but they had nothing to send. The Col. Still had good communications with the companies, which had informed him of the approaching tanks. It was very foggy, however, and it was difficult to see them until they were practically upon them. Lt. Col. Frankland had instructed the Infantry to stay in place, let the tanks break through, and get the German infantry which followed. A and C Companies did hold, and they took a heavy toll of the German infantry, but suffered severe losses themselves. Lt. Col. Frankland says if he'd realized the strength of the attack, he'd have withdrawn and fought a delaying action until they could have

counterattacked or held with a greater force. He admits it was a mistake trying to hold with 2 Companies, but he was under the impression at first that there were no other Germans in the area except those reported the previous afternoon. The tanks made short work of our AT and TD guns astride the Cross-road, although our guns and bazookas got many of them. But there were so many German tanks, they soon drove right into town and unknowingly surrounded the advance CP where the Col. and his command group were located.

Capt. Easlick looked out of the window and saw a tank stop right in front of the door. Noises were heard to the rear of the house. The Col. went to the back to investigate, and he got there just as two of his radiomen were being forced out the back door with their hands up. The Col. followed them out and shot the two Germans confronting him, and the command group immediately escaped out the window and headed for Co. A, to get men with bazookas and grenades to get the tanks. The German tanker was standing in the turret directing the infantry to the rear. Two other tanks were to the rear. Capt. Easlick got Capt. Hendrickson of B Company to swing his platoon around to fire to the East, talked with the Regimental CP, and told them the situation, then began working back to the Bn. CP. The Col. followed closely behind, but first he went to A Company. Their communications were out, so he immediately made his way back to Co. B, where he contacted the Regiment to tell them of the situation and where he made arrangements to have the Bn. vehicles moved back. All were saved but two. By this time, communications with A and C were dead. By this time, tanks were also coming down from the North, (on the road where B Co. originally had a roadblock) and bazookas were shifted to the orchard at le Fantay, where they accounted for at least one tank. The Col.

realized the futility of holding this position and hoped to extricate what was left to a better line, reorganize, and hold. He now had B Co. to withdraw and he started back to the rear CP. The rest of the staff was already on the way back, having attempted to contact A and C Companies by radio from B Company.

A and C Companies had been overrun by the tanks, but had held to fight the German infantry which followed. Both Companies were suffering heavy casualties. Tanks went right past the C Co's position. The company's command group was in a dugout in the orchard as indicated, consisting of the Co. commander, the Ex. O, 1st Sgt.; Section Sgt. of the mortars and Lt. Robb, the Wpns. Pl. Ldr. Lt. Robb counted 18 tanks go by. One stopped at the orchard and looked right down on the CP. Lt. Robb says, "about that time, I was ready to leave", and he did soon after. The enemy infantry now came up, worked on the hedgerows, particularly one man with a burp gun. "About that time", Lt. Robb said, "I took a bite of mother earth", and a minute later he took off, for he knew he'd been seen by the enemy. He hopped the hedge, hit for the sunken trail and lined up the Co. Hq. group along the hedges. Then he went for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd platoons, but only found the 1st, which he lined up on the sunken trail or road; and which held. One Platoon of B Company had been sent down to support C Co. during the night, and had built up in the sunken road, facing South, (see later interview for details). What was left of the Platoon and of C Co., held this position for about 45 minutes, knocked out 35 Jerries, and then pulled out. Lt. Robb got word that the Bn. and Regimental CP's were pulling out, (actually, they weren't), and decided to pull out to the Southwest, then North to the main road. This he did, with the help of Sgt. J.A.W. Parks, who commanded the Platoon from B Co. Bazooka teams of the 2nd and 3rd Platoons got 2 tanks on their

withdrawal. Parks did a wonderful job of orderly withdrawal, keeping his men down, withdrawing slowly, keeping them from running and being spotted. P-47's and then Typhoons of the RAF, firing rockets, began to hit the area, but Lt. Robb got panels out and managed to keep the RAF from hitting them. This was while the Co. was still in position. The Co. finally got back into the vicinity of the Regimental CP at about 1400.

Meanwhile, at about 1000, allied planes began to hit the tank columns and between the planes, TD's and bazooka's, 30 Jerry tanks were knocked out, many of them piling up on the curve in the road, forming an effective road block. This road block was effective in stopping the initial thrust of the counterattack by the tanks. Companies A and C primarily, stopped the German infantry. A and C Co's suffered severely. About 25 men of A Co. worked their way back to the line finally established that afternoon. About 55 men of C Co, plus the battered platoon of B Co. reached the new position. And after reaching that line, the Bn. got the heaviest concentration of artillery they had ever experienced. The Germans fired everything from 88's to 170's, and included the Regimental CP in their targets. The latter was later dubbed, "Chateau de la Nebelwerfer" Every square yard around the Chateau seemed to be hit, but the Chateau was untouched. The location of the regimental CP remained unchanged throughout the counterattack, although the site was less than 400 yards from the enemy lines. But once the attack was under way, Col. Johnson wouldn't change the CP location for fear of the effect on the men.

That night, the Bn. held the line established the preceding afternoon. B Co. held the North side of the road, and what was left of A and C Co's, the other 3 sides.. Co B

pushed ahead one hedgerow that afternoon in order to give the Bn's defense slightly more depth. The Bn then held for the night.

The following morning, before the fog had lifted, Jerry attacked again, this time with infantry only. Right over the hedgerows they came, into the positions held by B Co. to the North of the road. They had American M-1's, trench knives, even field jackets, (a few days later, they were seen wearing our helmets), and a close fight followed for about 30 minutes. There was hand-to-hand fighting, even fist fights. One Jerry jumped over the hedge and into a foxhole with an American aid man, and he asked him if he were a medic, and when he saw that the medic had been wounded, he apologized, got out of the hole and went about his business of finding some other dough boy. Sgt. Grady Workman of the 2nd Platoon, got 4 or 5 Jerries with his Tommy Gun as they came around a hedge. The Co. held; the attack failed.

The morning of the 9th, the 3rd Bn, (12th Inf - 4th Inf. Div.), was brought up on the right, to the right of the road. Then we attacked, using the trail at 280 as our LD, with the 1st and 2nd Platoons of B Co. in line, mortar and FA support, and the 3rd Bn, 12th Inf. on the right. We also had 6 tanks attached now, and 4 TD's, (SP), from the 629th TD Bn (A Co), (9th Inf. Div.). The 1st and 2nd Platoons of B Co. reached the 3rd hedgerow. (Capt. Hendrickson was commanding B Co. until that afternoon when he became a casualty.) But, L Co. (12th Inf), to the right of the road, hadn't kept abreast of us, so we decided to pull back to the 1st hedgerow and hold.

For the next three days the fight continued, winning a hedgerow a day. Our objective was the trail junction North of le Fantay, which commanded the approach from the East. To our North, was a steep hill looking down on to the East-West road; on the

South was a swampy creek bed, preventing the use of tanks. There was no support on our left flank, and from that hill was coming fire, mainly Nebelwerfer from the vicinity of la Maugerie and la Graverie. There were no more tank attacks, but the enemy infiltrated every day, usually from the Southeast. The Regimental I & R Platoon cut off many of these.

Saturday, we finally began to move. Patrols reached the Cross Road at le Fantay and found the enemy withdrawing. B Co. now had I Co supporting it, and the two could now move along the forward slope of le Fantay hill. The 3rd Bn. of the 12th Inf., also moved and took up defensive positions at St. Barthelmy. On Sunday, B Co. was situated to the Northwest of town, G Co. in town, I Co. on le Fantay hill, A Co. held la Saumeri. The 3rd Bn., 12th Inf. reverted to the 12th Inf, after having taken CR #278.

Elements of the 119th were in Gde Bove, Abbaye Blanche and to our North.

B. Gen. Harrison, (Ass't. Div. C.O.), states that the 1st Bn. took the brunt of the counterattack, and that it had saved the Division by holding the German tanks at le Fantay and the infantry at St. Barthelmy. The Germans were soon identified as the 2nd Regiment of the 1st SS (Adolph Hitler Panzer Div.) It was estimated that 50 tanks were used. Approximately 30 were knocked out in the 1st Bn's sector, about half by the Bn. (using bazookas & TD's), and half by the Air Forces.

1 Incl---Sketch of St. Barthelmy area, showing disposition of 1st Bn's units and guns, also those of the TD Bn.

Map references are to France: 1/25,000, 34/10, N.E .

Roland G. Ruppenthal
Capt. Inf.

Note: Sketch and map are missing from this document. F.W.T.

16 Aug. '44

Interview: Capt. Clifford W. Freeman, Hq. Co. 1st Bn, 117th Inf.

Statistics of Counterattack at Mortain, 7 Aug '44

On 6 Aug the Bn. strength was as follows:

800 EM, which included 190 Replacements, received on Thursday and Saturday of that week.

28 O's, (T/O strength - 35), These 28 included two new O's in C Company.

Casualties: 352 Enlisted Men
7 Officers
25 EM returned via straggler line, following our artillery back, i.e. going back in the direction of the sound of our artillery.
These 25 men were from Co. C

Casualties broken down:

A Co,	2 Officers, (leaving 1-O and 12 EM)
B Co.	1 " (leaving 3-O's and 120 EM)
C Co..	3 " (leaving 1 O and 33 EM)
D Co.	1 " (leaving 5 O's and 145 EM)
Hq. Co.	0 (leaving 3 O's and 90 EM)

The road block to the North was manned by:	3 AT Guns	Note: See interview w/Lt. Cushman
	½ Platoon of B Co.	
	1 Sect. HMG's	
	1 Bazooka team	

Those to the South and Southeast, manned by:	1 Bazooka team
	1 Squad of Inf.
	<u>NO</u> Guns

Roland G. Ruppenthal
Capt. Inf.

17 Aug. '44

Interviews with: T/Sgt. Irving Katzman, 3rd squad, 1st Plat, C Co, 117th Inf.
S/Sgt. Joseph H. Klebba, 2nd squad, 3rd Plat, C Co. 117th Inf.
1st Lt. Clinton W. Robb, Ex. O C Co, 117th Inf.

Action of C Co., (117th Inf.), Counterattack at Mortain 7 Aug '44

Co. C took positions as indicated on the sketch, Sunday afternoon. The 2nd and 3rd Platoons had positions to the East of the road, the 1st to the left and Southwest of the town. A rather poorly manned road block was established to the South, at the junction of the 4 roads and two trails, (a poor arrangement for so important intersection and route of approach, it seems to me). A good part of the 1st Platoon seems to have manned outposts on the high ground just South of the town. The OP on the trail to la Sablonniere covered mines laid on the trail. A LMG Section covered the road from the 2nd Platoon's area.

The German attack overran the road block immediately to the South, and tanks advancing up the main highway and up the trail from la Sablonniere soon surrounded the 2nd and 3rd Platoons to the right of the road, as they also did elements of A Co. Most of the men in these Platoons were captured after a short fight, and communications with the Co. were immediately cut. Just as in A Co's area, however, a group of 13 men under Sgts. Arther, (2nd Plat. squad ldr) and S/Sgt. Klebba, (2nd squad), managed to escape after encirclement. Some of them were hesitant, but under the NCO's urging, 13 got out of their holes in the 2nd Platoon area and made a dash for some brush along the trail to la Sablonniere. Pinned down at various times by tank MG fire, by German rifle fire, by artillery, and also by our own planes, these men finally reached the Regimental CP on Wednesday morning, having circled to the East and South and then to the North to la Rossaye. All individual exploits of the men of these Platoons, will never be recorded, but

the accomplishments of Pvt. Pete Preslipski, from the 3rd Platoon, should certainly be told. Preslipski manned an OP West of Vauvillette, from which he was driven when the enemy onslaught started. Finding that his own bazooka wouldn't work, he began to work his way back, picked up a bazooka and 2 rounds and accounted for 2 tanks along the road while withdrawing.

Meanwhile, the 1st Platoon, also one to the West of the highway, was also hit, although some tanks had by-passed their position originally. Sgt. Katzman believes that the Germans had prior knowledge of their positions, for they went directly towards their positions. Sgt. Norman Willis's 3rd squad outpost was hit first, by two tanks and 16 men, who appeared to be drunk. The Sgt. himself shot one who charged him with a bayonet, as Sgt. Willis was going out to pull in his OP group. The group pulled back a few hedges. Sgt. Berg did the same with his 2nd squad, losing the Ass't squad ldr. as he did so.

The Co. CP seemed paralyzed. Sgt. Katzman still had communication with the CP in the dugout, from his position with the platoon, and heard Lt. Robb urge the CP to move back. Lt. Robb had gone to the Bn. CP and asked Col. Frankland for an additional platoon to reinforce C Co. When he returned to the Co. CP dugout, he learned that a platoon from B Co, (the 1st), was being sent down. He wanted to meet it and put it in position on the sunken trail. The Co. Commander, Capt. Walter L. Schoener, told him that he had already sent a guide for the platoon and told him to stay in the CP. Lt. Robb was worried, for he knew the Co. was split, he could count tanks passing by on the road, probably cutting them off. He wanted to move the CP and also the remaining Platoon back. Communications with Bn were now cut. He waited, counting the tanks go by on

the road. German infantry had been going by for 10 minutes. Finally one tank turned to fire in the direction of our dugout. Lt. Robb decided he had been there long enough, and when a German infantryman came into the orchard and fired over the dugout, Lt. Robb told the group that he was leaving, for he felt that the enemy had located them. Lt. Robb took off, hopped some hedgerows and went on down to get the Platoon of B Co into position, forming a line along the sunken trail. While he did this, he ordered Sgt. Katzman to pull in his OP units still farther to the new line. Only a few minutes after Lt. Robb left the dugout, the CP was captured. Capt. Schoener, Lt. Robert Alday, Ex. O., 1st Sgt. A.C.D. Milner, a radioman and runners all were captured. It was 0800.

Lt. Robb, with the remnants of the 1st Platoon of B Co, and the 1st Platoon of C Co, held the position for almost 2 hours. But the position was untenable as Allied planes began to bomb the area, and, Lt. Robb says, the men were pretty jittery. A messenger was sent to Regiment for orders, but he was not heard from again. At about 1030 Lt. Robb started the two Platoons back in 4 columns, cross country to the Regimental CP. Pvt. Carmelo Stillittano kept knocking out MG's, (with his bazooka), which the Germans kept bringing up. A line was built up to the right of the road, just North of the Regimental CP. (Sgt. Katzman had taken over the Platoon during this action, when the Platoon Sgt, T/Sgt. Dewey Lapin was killed).

Roland Ruppenthal

Capt. Inf.