

74-405 (3)

30<sup>th</sup> Division

The Crossing of the Vire by the 117th Inf., 7 July 1944

Interviews with Major Ben T. Ammons, Executive of 2nd Bn, 117th Inf. ,3 August  
Captain George H. Sibbald, Co. "F", 2nd Bn, 117th Inf. 3 August  
Captain Lester D. Royalty, Adj. 117th Inf, 24 July.

On 7 July 1944, the 30th Division which had been holding positions along the Vire River and the Vire et Taute Canal for over three weeks was ordered to make a two-pronged attack which entailed crossings of both the River and the Canal.

The two crossings were not to be made simultaneously. (Cf. FO #3, 30th Div). The plan of attack called for the 117th Infantry Regiment to spearhead the crossing of the Vire River at 0430, while the 120th Infantry Regiment was to cross the Canal at 1330. The 119th Infantry Regiment was to support the crossing of the Vire, then follow the 117th across. The crux of the movement of the 30th Division on 7 July therefore lay in the 117th's effort to cross the river, as the further development of the plan depended a great deal on the degree of success attending this spearhead attack. The 2nd Battalion of the 117th, commanded by Lt.Col. Arthur H. Fuller, was ordered to lead the movement of the 117th.

Intensive groundwork had been laid for this attempt. By order of Col. Kelly, commanding the 117th, a sandtable 20 feet square, which included all details of the crossing up to and including the first phase line, was set up a week ahead of the date of attack. Every officer and non-commissioned officer studied the details of the plan on this sandtable. Every squad was indoctrinated with the procedure to be followed, so that each man knew exactly what he had to do and where he was to go. In addition to this sandtable study, two practice exercises in river crossings were held at the Isigny River, in an effort to familiarize the troops with all possible details of this specialized and often difficult military operation.

The plan of the 117th called for the 2nd Battalion to cross at 0430, 7 July, with Co. "E" and Co. "F" leading, crossing the river abreast, "E" on the right and

"F" on the left, Co. "G" to support on the left and cross at a ten minute interval after "F". 16 assault boats, along with engineer guides, for each of the leading companies were provided by the 105th Engineer Combat Battalion. Scaling ladders, with hooks at the ends, were specially designed by the engineers also as a means of egress from the river up the steep banks, which on both sides of the Vire were around eight feet high. It was calculated that the 16 assault boats per company represented 14 men to a boat, on a basis of allowing 150 pounds for each man. However, in the practice exercises this weight allowance was found to be insufficient, so the actual boatload was cut down to 12 men. The boatloads were pre-assigned.

As before mentioned, 0430 was H-hour. 7 July was foggy and overcast, with spasmodic rain. The leading companies of the 2nd Battalion moved out of their assembly area at 0300, one mile from the river. At 0330, nine artillery battalions opened up a heavy concentration on the enemy area across the river, a searching counter-battery fire. At 0415, the terrific artillery concentration was augmented by the 4.2 mortars of the 92nd Chemical Battalion.

At the last hedgerow, 400 yards across open fields from the river bank, the leading companies met their engineer guides and picked up their assault boats. With each boatload carrying its own boat, the troops arrived at the river bank promptly at 0430. The crossing was scheduled to take place just around the bend of the river from St. Frommond, as this bend would shield the crossing from enemy machine guns at the bridge below the bend. According to plan, the two leading companies crossed on a 400 yard front, 32 boats abreast, at a spot where the river was 60 feet wide.

Some trouble was experienced in launching the boats from the steep banks. The bows shipped water immediately due to the sharp angle from which they were launched. One boatload was fortunate in finding a cow wallow down to the river which permitted them to get their boat into the water in a normal way. But the mortar squad of Co. "F", in particular, discovered that with their equipment aboard any

additional weight might swamp the boat, so the men paddled across the river beside the boat. With the scaling ladders provided, the troops had no difficulty in scaling the opposite banks. As soon as the boats were empty, the engineer guides paddled them back across the river for the next contingents. Until this time, there had been only small enemy artillery fire, but five minutes after the crossing enemy 88 shells started to fall upon the river and upon the far bank.

Immediately upon scaling the banks, the leading companies deployed to left and right, each squad off to follow its route to the first phase line. As on the other side of the river, here, too, were 400 yards of open fields before the first hedgerow. A house in the middle of these fields marked the boundary line between companies, until the first hedgerow was reached, whereupon a regular hedgerow boundary had been determined which prevailed straight to the road from Airel, which thereupon was to be the boundary to the first phase line and thereafter

The men got away from the river bank fast. They were in their first action, had been thoroughly trained for this attack, and were highly enthusiastic. To get the men clear of the river bank was a prime element in the plan of attack, both to make way for the next companies and to close quickly with the enemy. "When you cross a river you have to move fast," Capt. George H. Sibbald, of Co. "F", explained axiomatically.

The plan had gone off exactly as scheduled and it so continued. Ineffective small arms and machine gun fire was being encountered, as the leading elements of the 2nd Battalion closed quickly, "E" deploying to the right, and "F" to the left, two squad columns abreast on each company front. A LMG section with the left platoon covered "F's" left flank, while another LMG section with "E's" right platoon covered that company's right flank. They moved across the open fields, advanced across the hedgerow, keeping a pattern of steady advance, one squad leapfrogging, or bypassing, another that might be momentarily held up by enemy resistance. At the river, the artillery delivered a rolling ~~hax~~ barrage, moving it back 100 yards every 5 minutes. But it was impossible to follow the barrage fast

enough in that hedgerow country. It was difficult to tell which was barrage and which was concentration, also. The interval of ten minutes between the river crossing of "F" and "G" was found to be too short, as "G" caught up with the rear elements of Co. "F".

Co. "G"'s plan of maneuver was not simple. This company, after crossing the river and clearing the banks, pivoted sharply to the left and drove against the village of St. Frommond. Heavily equipped with rifle grenades and bazookas, Co. "G" had a job of close infighting in taking St. Frommond, but they succeeded in cleaning up the town and then again pivoted, this time to the right, advancing to protect the battalion's left flank.

Co. "E" hit the first phase line at 0800. This was regarded as excellent time and as the code word, "Zeke", announcing this was received the Battalion CP radioed back for confirmation. It was soon ascertained that Co. "E" had indeed reached the phase line.

Co. "F" was later in reaching it. Shortly after breaking across the open fields and pushing into the hedgerows, one of Co. "F"'s platoons crossed too far to the left, and Capt. Sibbald, following up with a command group of 14, consisting of radio men and observers, came over a hedgerow and instead of finding himself behind his platoon ran into a group of the enemy that had been flushed from the west by the third platoon. In the next moment, Capt. Sibbald and the command group found themselves closed in a stiff fight with an estimated group of 25 or 30 of the enemy. With rifles and grenades the Americans carried on a running fight with the enemy from behind hedgerows and a stone wall. The American fragmentation grenade "made them squeal", reported Capt. Sibbald, while the enemy concussion grenade was found to be comparatively useless. This impromptu fight was ended as the third platoon came in and mopped up. Co. "F" also ran in to enemy machine gun fire in the vicinity of Pont Frommond at 0700 and was pinned down. Lt. Col. Fuller, the battalion commander, pressing forward through considerable



artillery and mortar fire, found the forward elements stalled before the fire of an enemy machine gun emplacement in a hedgerow. Pre-planned and intense automatic small arms fire was making it hot for the forward elements, but they could not seem to get moving from that dangerous spot. Lt. Cd. Fuller called for volunteers from the men hugging the ground and four of them responded. Armed with a pistol, the battalion commander led them forward personally against the machine gun emplacement. They succeeded in knocking out the machine gun, killing one German and capturing four. Co. "F" "popped up" and resumed the advance, not to be halted the rest of the day.

Capt. Sibbald kept a watchful eye upon his left flank. Although he received reports that various enemy strongpoints had been cleared he sent patrols to check on these points. At the church in Pont de St. Frommond, reported to have been cleared, his men flushed 14 Germans and took them prisoners. All day long, Co. "F" found it wise to check on the houses along the way. With the single exception of the chateau near St. Frommond, small groups of the enemy were mopped up in spots that were reported to have been cleared.

At 0830, Co. "F" reached the first phase line and flashed the code word, "Zeke", to the Battalion CP. Meanwhile Co. "H" had also crossed the Vire and split into two platoons, one following up Co. "E" on the right flank, the other following Co. "F" on the left. The advance of the companies on either side of the Airel road was resumed, Co. "G" in support on the left flank.

The 105th Engineer Combat Battalion was at work preparing further crossings for infantry and vehicles over the Vire. With the assault waves across, these engineers began the construction of a footbridge in the same area. Enemy artillery damaged the footbridge twice before the infantry could use it, but each time the engineers repaired it immediately, suffering twenty casualties in the course of this construction.

The bridge across the Vire at St. Frommond had been only partially destroyed by the enemy artillery, and, as it afforded the quickest means of transporting artillery and vehicles across to support the infantry advance, it was decided to span the gaps with treadway bridging. At 0830 one officer and six enlisted men of the 247th Engineer Combat Battalion, aided by two brockway trucks, began this operation under enemy mortar and artillery fire, plus ~~some~~ enemy snipers, and under these harassing conditions made the bridge ready for use by 0930.

Additional bridges, to speed the American strength across the Vire in the wake of the assault waves, were constructed early in the attack. A floating treadway in the vicinity of St. Frommond, south of the existing bridge, was constructed by a company of the 247th Combat Engineer Battalion. The enemy did not direct any fire upon this operation and it was completed in four hours. An infantry support bridge to the north of the existing bridge was constructed by the equipage platoon of the 503rd Light Pontoon Company and one platoon of the 247th Engineer Combat Battalion. Artillery fire was directed upon this construction, but no damage resulted and the work was completed in one hour. During these construction operations the Corps Engineer troops suffered 15 casualties.

The 2nd Battalion was moving steadily up along the Airel road toward the crossroads below St. Jean-de-Daye, attacking through the fields between the hedgerows in squad columns. These columns were "staggered" for effective dispersion and mutual cover, and as they neared the hedgerows each squad would send its men over two by two and continue the advance. But the enemy artillery and mortar fire was getting heavier and several times, as far as Co. "F" was concerned, Capt. Sibbald had to boot his men forward as the artillery began falling around them. "It's safer to be in the front hedgerow of the advance units when that enemy artillery starts," Capt. Sibbald stated. "And anything is better than just standing still."

At 0430, in the face of stiffening enemy resistance, the 2nd Battalion had pushed along the Airel road to within 400 yards of the crossroads and was receiving

more and more artillery fire. In addition, "we were bleeding out like a sore thumb", as Major Ben T. Ammons, 2nd Battalion Executive Officer put it, and the enemy was all about the leading companies. In fact, Co. "G", in its advance up the left flank had pulled too far to the left and had to fight its way in to close the gap. The battalion, therefore, dug itself in at 1430, and the battalion CP was set up 500 yards behind the leading elements, on the Aird road. That night, the CP was attacked by 5 enemy tanks and enemy infantry with machine guns and burp-guns, firing tracers. The CP, aided by the A and P platoon and by a platoon of Co. "G" that was pulled in, fought off this enemy attack.

Besides the successful river crossing that paved the way for the 30th Division's advance, the complicated maneuver of Co. "G" in executing two different changes of direction in strange terrain and the 2500 yard advance of Cos. "E" and "F" stood out. This advance secured a good portion of the Aird road between the bridge at St. Fromond and the crossroads below St. Jean-de-Day. As Major Ammons expressed it, "it was the most successful operation we have carried out to date (3 August) and it was done with the fewest casualties."

In Major Ammons' opinion, the answer lies in the thorough groundwork and training in the plan to be followed that the 117th was able to give its troops, which procedure, Major Ammons admits, unfortunately cannot be followed on every occasion.

2 Accompanying overlays.

*S/Sgt. David Garth*