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Tank Drive in France

The battalion was weary but it slugged one of the holes in the German lines that opened up the way for the push into Brittany.

By Sgt. WALTER PETERS
YANK Staff Correspondent

Tarp covers tank destroyer's 57-mm gun to protect it from light rain. Enemy are in clearing 100 yards ahead.

This fancy front-line switchboard is nerve center of communication for dug-in combat infantryman in France.

American infantrymen, unshaven but alert, rest with their supplies along the the roadway in a combat zone

WITH THE 2D ARMORED DIVISION IN FRANCE [By Cable]—It was the morning of the beginning of the biggest drive since the Allies had invaded the shores of Normandy. The immediate objective of Combat Command A was to advance and capture certain key heights. Nobody dreamed our tanks would be sweeping across Brittany and through the streets of Brest 10 days later.

Four men were sitting in a half-track that served as the CP for the battalion commanded by Lt. Col. Amzi R. Quillian. The battalion had made an all-night trek from the bivouac area far to the rear, up to the present position before the jump-off line on the St. Lo-Periers road. The faces of the men were brown with dust, their eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Dirt clung heavily to their eyebrows and eyelashes.

One of the men looked at his watch. "1040," he drawled. The drive had begun at 0900 hours. Our medium and light tanks, led by Col. Quillian, were far up front, and the men in the combat-command half-track were awaiting word.

At last the word came over the radio. The colonel's voice was calm and serious. "We've made contact with the enemy and have taken a few prisoners," he reported.

"You've waited a long time," another voice replied. "Get in there. Get punching. Get hitting."

"That's the general, all right," said Pfc. Jack Giels of Cleveland, Ohio. "He's a bug on slogans."

"We're moving ahead," another voice said on the air. Our long column of jeeps, supply vehicles and ambulances as well as half-tracks began to wobble through breaks in the hedges and over orchard paths that had been cut up by the tanks up ahead.

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We were cutting right through the enemy lines. On either side of us were reserve tanks and infantrymen riding in trucks driven by Negro soldiers of a QM truck battalion. The tanks charged to the front through hedges that they sprayed with machine-gun fire. When the tanks were held up by enemy pockets, the infantrymen jumped off to mop them up.

The CP radio was busy with conversation. "I am held up at a sunken road 50 yards south of Phaseline Orange," Col. Quillian reported. The whole column stopped.

The colonel kept on talking. "Doing everything I can to get across. Using bulldozers."

"Fine, fine," replied another voice, obviously the general's. "You can have anything I've got. Let's get slugging into them."

While the column was stopped, the mortar-platoon sergeant came to the half-track and asked if anybody had an extra helmet. A sniper's bullet had gone right through the top of his, making it unserviceable.

"Maybe the medics have one," Giels said. The sergeant walked back to the medic half-track to see.

The tanks got over the sunken road and we moved on again. For more than a mile, the terrain resembled freshly plowed farmland. Everywhere the earth had been blasted by heavy artillery shells hurled into it early that morning. There were huge craters in the earth, too, from bombs that our planes had dropped the day before. There were also burning German tanks, destroyed by the tanks ahead of us.

"It would cost Hollywood a cool 10 million to shoot a scene like this," one of the soldiers said. The whole area trembled from the fire of our artillery. Overhead the sky was full of "grasshoppers" (artillery spotter planes) directing the shellfire. Lying all over the orchards and on the roads between them were dead cows and horses —so many you no longer paid much attention.

At one point there were about 25 young pigs running back and forth, frightened and squealing. A soldier jumped out of a jeep and took one in his arms: "You'll be okay, little piggy," the soldier said, stroking its back. "You'll be all right. It's just those Heinie swine we're after."

One of the men picked up a German songbook. "This is the song of the *Panzers*," he said. "It says there that when this war is over and the Germans all get back to the Fatherland, they're going to raise kids to be *Panzers* like their daddies."

At about 1500 hours we got on the north road leading into a town. Then the column halted again. The enemy was lobbing mortars and 75- and 88-mm shells into the road. Twenty-five yards behind us, a half-track belonging to the heavy-weapons platoon was hit. Three men were killed and a couple of others were wounded.

In the field to our right were a number of M10s. Mortar shells were falling all around and the men with the M10s buried their faces in the earth. One of the shells landed directly on a trailer attached to an M10. Huge flames began to spout from the vehicle. Then the M10 crew ran toward the trailer and began to unload it.

"There's ammunition in that trailer," the man in the jeep behind us yelled. The crew kept on unloading. The fire was beyond control and the rear of the M10 became enveloped in flames.

One of the men took a fire extinguisher and doused another man—a Sgt. Thomas Green—who ran through the blaze and disconnected the trailer from the M10. Then a third man drove the M10 away safely. Suddenly there was a terrific explosion and ammunition began popping.

The medic jeep drove by and the man behind the wheel jumped out and ran toward the trailer. Then there was another explosion, and I didn't see the medic again. Two minutes later I learned he had been caught in the explosion; both his legs were blown off and his body was hurled onto the M10.

The column started rolling along the road to the town. About 300 yards farther on we were forced to stop again. Enemy mortars were still firing from somewhere up ahead. Everyone took cover alongside the road as best he could. Then the firing subsided, and we got back into the vehicles and went forward again.

Three men were walking toward us. One of

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them was crying. He'd lost a buddy only a few minutes before. His body was shaking and he was being helped along by a wounded man and another soldier who appeared to be okay.

When the column stopped again, a sergeant walked over to his lieutenant and said: "I think we lost Morte." The lieutenant called over to 1st Sgt. William Trinen of Letcher, S. Dak.: "I'd like you to go over and make sure the body belongs to Morte." Trinen said: "Yessir."

A few minutes later our half-track pulled into the orchard and the men stretched out on the grass to get some rest. After a while the top kick came back. He didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then he looked at Giels and T/Sgt. Russell E. Sands of Warren, Minn.

"His scalp was ripped wide open," the first sergeant said slowly. "He didn't have a chance."

There was a long pause. None of the men said anything. "He wasn't even 20 and he didn't give a damn about anything," the first sergeant said. "He was such a clean-cut kid, too." Then there was silence again for a moment.

"There ain't any of them boys bad when they're dead," said Sgt. Sands. Giels looked up. "No," he said. "Nobody's got a bad heart when he's dead." The first sergeant walked away.

WORD came to us that the most advanced tanks were already passing through the town. I hitched a ride in an ambulance half-track that was going there to pick up the wounded.

The road was jammed with our tanks, rolling into town. The dust was so thick you couldn't see more than 20 feet ahead. Infantrymen on the tanks held their hands over their eyes to keep out the dust. The hot sun beat down on their backs and their clothing was damp with sweat. Gullies beside the road were filled with burning and smoking German tanks and vehicles.

The town itself was like the inside of a furnace. Everything that wasn't stone was on fire, and smoke choked our throats; the heat made it almost impossible to go ahead. When we reached the other end of town, the ambulance stopped.

Here we found an American soldier who, although wounded himself, was giving water from his canteen to a man whose right heel had been cut off squarely by shell fragments and whose chest and face were also bleeding.

Lying beside the road were three other Americans who appeared to be dead. Cpl. Carl Lindberry of Chicago, Ill., surgical technician on the ambulance, felt the pulse of the first man. "There's still a slight beat in him," Lindberry said. "Let's take him in first."

Pfc. Willis Wacker of Denhoff, N. Dak., and Pvt. Robert Jee of Danville, Va., the aid men, unfolded the blanket on a stretcher and placed the man on it. Lindberry walked over to the second man, felt his pulse and shook his head.

The third man was lying on his back, his mouth wide open and the teeth protruding. His skin was the color of death. Beside him lay a little dog, a deep cut across its head and its bowels splattered over the ground. Lindberry felt the man's pulse. "There's still a chance," he said.

Next the man with the cut heel was lifted into the ambulance and then the soldier who had given him water walked to it unaided.

I got back to the OP just as word came over the radio from the forward tankers that there was only enough gas left for three more hours.

"Keep on slugging," the general's voice said. The tanks did, and at about 2200 hours Col. Quillian's battalion reached its objective.

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