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The 823d at Mortain: Heroes All

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Force comparisons usually result in "beancounts" of men and weapons. However, one important factor, courage, usually cannot be quantified by the models used to compare forces. But bravery counts, and at Mortain, France, in 1944 it overcame both technology and numbers when Americans stopped an enemy attempt to salvage German fortunes on the Western front. (Note 1)

At Mortain, the "beancount" was particularly bad for US forces. The 25,500 attacking Germans outnumbered the 6,000 men in the regiments of the defending 30th Infantry Division, and XLVII Panzer Corps had about four times as many tanks. (Note 2) Further, American units were at a distinct technological disadvantage because neither the infantry's organic anti-tank weapons nor the guns of attached tank and tank destroyer (TD) battalions could penetrate the front of the German Panther's hull. (Note 3)

For nearly six weeks following D-Day, the Germans had confined the allies to a narrow lodgement area and grinding attrition warfare. But on 25 July, the Americans broke out at St. Lo. (Note 4) For the Germans, the situation was disastrous. In static defense, the Germans were able to hold their own. Largely horse-drawn and with their movements exposed to allied air supremacy, the German Army could not compete in mobile warfare. To restore the situation, the Germans desperately assembled forces to counterattack toward Avranches and cut the American's only supply route. German field commanders hoped to reach Avranches and establish a defense along the See River, cutting off the forces exploiting to the south, while Hitler optimistically dreamed of sweeping the Americans into the sea.

THE BATTLE OF MORTAIN

For the attack, the Germans assembled four Panzer divisions: 1st SS Panzer, 2nd SS Panzer, 2nd Panzer, and 116th Panzer. Altogether, these divisions had 120 to 190 tanks, about half of them Panthers. Leading the main attack, 2nd Panzer was to attack along the Barthelemy-Juigny road, followed by the 1st SS, which would exploit and capture Avranches. The 116th Panzer was to cover the northern flank, while 2nd SS protected the south and captured Hill 314, tactically vital because it offered observation of all American forces south of Avranches (Figure 1) At H-hour, midnight of 6 August, only the 30th Infantry Division and its attached tank destroyer battalion, the 823rd, stood in the way. (Note 5)

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On the morning of 6 August, the 30th Infantry moved south to relieve the 1st Infantry Division at Mortain. Hampered by traffic snarls, it took the division all day to move into position, not closing until 2000, only four hours before the attack was to begin. The 117th regiment protected St. Barthelemy, the 120th occupied Mortain and Hill 314, while the 119th stayed in reserve. Lack of time forced a hasty occupation of the 1st ID's positions, intended only for protection during a temporary halt. Later, the 30th ID concluded that the inability to prepare its own defensive positions was its major difficulty in defending Mortain. (Note 6)

Delayed by their own traffic snarls, the Germans were not able to get their attack underway until about 0600. (Note 7) In the south, the 2nd SS launched a two-pronged drive around Hill 314. The southern drive overran the American defenders, captured Mortain, and penetrated about five miles to the southwest, but the roadblock at L'Abbaye-Blanche stopped the northern thrust dead in its tracks. Second Panzer, by-passing resistance at St Barthelemy, managed to advance as far as le Mesnil Adelee. But the main attack bogged down by noon of 7 August, more than ten miles from its objective (Fig. 1) Overall, the German attack at Mortain was a harbinger of the later offensive at the Ardennes; the main attack went nowhere, while secondary efforts made frightenly deep advances, but in operationally pointless directions.

Even though Mortain and St. Barthelemy fell, the 30th Infantry Division, with heavy losses, stopped the advance down the Juvigny road and held Hill 314. (Note 8). In their writings after the war, German authors were loath to give any credit to the tactical skill or courage of the American soldiers when they explain their reverses on the battlefield, usually ascribing defeat to Allied air power and lavish expenditure of materiel. Writing about Mortain, one German author described it as the "first attack stopped totally by air power. (Note 9) But this description does not explain why the Germans' main attack bogged down by noon on the first day, before the fog lifted and air could play a role. The explanation of the defeat of the German attack is found in the actions of the defenders. This account focuses on the men of the 823rd TD battalion.

THE FIGHT OF THE 823d

One of these men, Lieutenant George Greene, Third Platoon leader, B Co., arrived at St. Barthelemy just before sunset on 6 August (Note 10) (Fig. 2) Directed by the infantry to occupy former positions of the self-propelled tank destroyers supporting the 1st ID, Greene found the sites to be very poor ones for his towed guns, but in the dark he had no opportunity to find new ones. Further, there was no opportunity to coordinate with the infantry; Greene had no idea where they were deployed. Dense fog began settling over the Mortain area during the night. At about 0500, German artillery fire began in earnest but did little damage to the defenders of St. Barthelemy. Recognizing the barrage as a prelude to an attack, the Americans were now fully alert. When the barrage lifted at about 0615, the men of the 3rd Platoon stood to their guns.

Soon, the tank destroyer men heard shouts and German voices "jabbering like monkeys". The Germans were from 1st SS Panzer, who expected that St. Barthelemy had been cleared by 2nd Panzer, and a panther led their advance. Apparently alerted to the unexpected presence of Americans, the tank advanced slowly while spraying the sides of the road with its hull mounted machine gun. Crouched behind the thin shield of gun number one, Platoon Sergeant Martin waited tensely while listening to the unmistakable metallic squeal and clank of tank tracks approaching. Finally, he could see muzzle flashes from the machine gun. He ordered his gunner to aim at the muzzle flashes and fire. The gun's muzzle blast broke the fog and revealed that one 3-inch round at less than 50 yards range had set the tank on fire and caused it to slew sideways, blocking the road. (Note 11). Protected by the fog, the Germans struggled for nearly an hour to clear the road while pouring small arms fire at the Americans. Finally clearing the Panther from the road, the Germans sent another one on its way. At a range of about 30 yards, Sergeant Martin repeated his earlier performance and another Panther burned. For the time being, the German advance up the road from Mortain was stalled.

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Meanwhile, the Germans were attacking St. Barthelemy from several directions, and fighting was becoming intense. By 0800, the fog was becoming patchy, rising and falling like a curtain. Elements of 2nd Panzer attacked from the northeast, and 3rd Platoon's number three gun killed one of its tanks at 50 yards. At about the same time, the crew of gun number two to the south spotted a Panther trying to cross the field to the southeast less than 100 yards away. Two AP rounds into the side of the tank stopped it.

Fighting in St. Barthelemy was becoming more bitter and confused as Germans continued to assault the out-numbered American infantry and filtrate through the town. During the next couple of hours the situation deteriorated as Americans were killed or driven from their positions and small arms fire cracked around Greene's men. By about 1000, higher headquarters was convinced that St. Barthelemy had been overrun. During this period, it would have been easy for lesser men than those of the 3rd Platoon to convince themselves that they had done enough and should withdraw. But courage prevailed in this small unit; the men stayed at their guns.

About 1000, the lifting fog revealed another tank to the crew of number three gun about 100 yards away. Two quick AP rounds destroyed it. Shortly afterward, the Germans eliminated the troublesome gun. Similarly, to the south the lifting fog exposed the number one gun to a German tank, which destroyed it. To replace the gun, Greene decided to reposition number four, which had not fired all morning because of bad fields of fire. In addition, German half-tracks and infantry, protected by a hedgerow, were beginning to move up a sunken trail southwest of gun two. Under a hail of small arms fire, Greene tried two different positions for number four, even digging a gap in the hedge in the last effort, but the gun could not be depressed enough to engage the half-tracks. Ultimately, the crew had to pull the firing pin and abandon the gun.

About the same time, between 1030 and 1100, the last remaining gun, number two, spotted a Panther moving up the Mortain road through a gap in the hedgerow that prevented the gun from hitting the tanks engaged earlier by Sergeant Martin. The tank destroyer men put a round into the side of the tank, but it continued to roll into town where it stopped and began to burn. Shortly afterward, another German tank spotted the gun and hit it with a round of HE, injuring some of the crew and forcing them to abandon the now useless gun.

By this time it was clear to Greene that it was time to get what was left of his platoon out of St. Barthelemy. Before he could act, an infantry sergeant ran into his CP begging for a machine gun to prevent his unit from being overrun. Taking a machine gun from one of the half-tracks Greene and the sergeant set off for the infantry's position. A Panther put a round into the hedgerow next to them, killing the infantryman. Greene sprayed the hedgerows to keep the Germans at bay until he ran out of ammunition. (Note 12) Unarmed, he ran into a German and had no choice but to surrender. Most of his men met the same fate or were killed; only a few made it back to the battalion.

In hindsight, the action was a tactical defeat for the 3rd Platoon, but it was part of a larger victory. The stout defense of St. Barthelemy by men of the 30th ID and the 823d cost the Germans over six hours at a place they had expected to move through quickly. If either the infantrymen or TD crews had abandoned their positions when it became obvious they were outmatched, certainly by about 0900, the Germans might have had a chance to cover the 10 miles to Avranches while still protected by fog. By the time they could begin moving through the town, the fog was gone. Allied fighters filled the sky and ruthlessly strafed and rocked any German trying to move down the Juvigny road. For his part, Greene received no decorations for his actions. Instead, he was rewarded with eight months as a POW, including a grueling mid-winter march through Germany that should have killed him. Before Greene's platoon succumbed, the infantry had already begun to reinforce St. Barthelemy. At about 0900, the commander of the 117th Infantry ordered Lt. L. Lawson Neel, 1st Platoon leader, B Co., to move to St. Barthelemy to reinforce the beleaguered defenders. (Note 13) Reconnoitering for a gun position, Neel reached the town and found Germans everywhere, and he assumed the infantry had been overrun. (Note 14). By 0930, he had returned to the town with a gun (Fig. 2). The crew had barely finished emplacing the gun when a Panther, accompanied by infantry, emerged

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from behind a house. The tank commander spotted the gun, and Neel, from only 20 yards away, could hear the tank commander barking fire commands. "Damn it, shoot," yelled Neel, and a 3-inch round slammed through the side of the tank. Its crew bailed out, and the German advance halted. Almost immediately, small arms fire from the German infantry began hitting the gun shield "like water from a hose", and the Germans were close enough to try rolling grenades under the shield. After removing the firing pin, the crew abandoned the gun and half-track. One of the men asked Neel if this meant they were running; the lieutenant assured him they were only relocating. As Neel walked down the road to his platoon's position, he encountered a jeep carrying an unknown senior officer. This man, seeing what must have appeared to be an officer fleeing the battle, angrily demanded, "Where are you going, Lieutenant?" Neel responded tersely, "To get another gun." The officer drove away. Nobody ordered Neel to return to the fight. In the tradition of other brave soldiers, Neel rearmed himself and marched to the sound of the guns. By 1100, Neel and another gun crew found another position about 800 yards west of St. Barthelemy along the road to Juvigny. The west side of a hedgerow that ran perpendicular to the road offered concealment from the advancing Germans. About noon, the crew could see the muzzle brake of a Panther emerging around the hedgerow, bouncing up and down as the tank crept forward fitfully. "After a thousand forevers", the gun tube and then the tank finally appeared 50 yards in front of the tensely waiting gun crew. Neel's gun sent a round into its flank. After the crew bailed out, Neel spurred their flight with a round of HE. An overwatching German tank fired a round of explosive into the hedgerow, spraying the crew with dirt and hot fragments. Abandoning the gun, the TD men joined infantry defending the next hedgerow to the west. The abandoned Panther blocked the road to Juvigny and became the high water mark of the Germans' main attack. Again, American ground forces had effectively stopped a German advance before air power entered the equation.

South of St. Barthelemy, the defenders of L'Abbaye Blanche were also contributing to the Germans' defeat. During the afternoon of 6 August, infantrymen from the 30th Division and a TD platoon began establishing a perimeter around the village. (Note 15) The infantry unit was a platoon from the 120th Infantry Regiment, reinforced by the regimental antitank company. But defense against tanks depended chiefly on Lt. Tom Springfield's platoon from A Company, 823d. In contrast to Greene's experience, the two lieutenants, with Springfield in command, established a coordinated defense to cover the northern approaches to Mortain.

When he arrived at L'Abbaye Blanche at about 1700 on the 6th, Springfield had orders to occupy the 1st Infantry's former positions. Like Greene, he judged the positions to be thoroughly unsuitable, but in his case he had time to find better positions on a ridge about 200 yards to the north. (Fig. 3) He emplaced two guns behind a hedgerow where they could cover Highway 3, about 400 yards to the east. He positioned the other two guns on each side of Highway 2 to protect that avenue of advance. By the time darkness fell, the crews had dug in their guns. During the night, soldiers of 2nd SS Panzer division advanced to launch a two-pronged attack around Hill 314. South of Mortain, the Germans struck at about 0100, quickly overrunning the American roadblocks and entering the town. The northern attack did not begin until about 0500. A reconnaissance unit with an armored car made first contact as it advanced down a trail toward an infantry roadblock. At close range, the Americans knocked out the armored car with a 57-mm gun. Machine gun fire took care of the other vehicles and killed most of the Germans.

As it became light, the crews of Springfield's one and two guns could see, through patchy fog, German vehicles moving north on Highway 3. The highway climbed a hill in front of the guns, which forced the vehicles to slow down and provided easy targets. Opening fire, they quickly destroyed a tank, three half-tracks, and an ammunition truck--the latter identified by a gratifying secondary explosion.

An hour later, about 0600, the Germans attacked down Highway 2 toward guns three and four. Infantry accompanied by two half-tracks, one mounting a 75-mm gun, made the attack. The two 3-inch guns quickly killed the half-tracks, and infantrymen drove off the remaining Germans. Except for heavy and continuous German artillery fire, most of which overshot the ridge line, this 15-minute skirmish was to be the last attack on the L'Abbaye Blanche roadblock on 7 August. But the defenders had more than artillery to keep them busy.

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Inexplicably, or perhaps just stupidity, the Germans kept trying to push vehicles up Highway 3 towards St. Barthelemy all day on the 7th and 8th of August. As the vehicles slowed to climb the road, they provided a shooting gallery for the crews on guns one and two. As Springfield later recalled, "For two days, we fired all day." Not bothering to keep score at the time, he later estimated that his guns killed about 30 vehicles during the battle, including at least 10 tanks.

During the night of 7-8 August, the Germans pounded the roadblock with heavy Nebelwerfer rockets, wounding about four defenders. At dawn, the SS renewed their attack on the roadblock. About 0500, the German infantry sallied from the orchard northwest of guns three and four, but the Americans drove them off. Simultaneously, a patrol attacked the outpost at Villeneuve, and infantry defeated this attack also. Soon after, the Germans struck the two guns with tanks and infantry. The gun crews quickly killed two tanks and four half-tracks, but the German infantry, reinforced by a flame-thrower, continued the attack dismounted. Led by Springfield, a "strike squad" repulsed the attack, dispatching the flame-thrower in a ball of fire.

During the following days, pressure decreased on the roadblock as heavy American reinforcements moved into the Mortain area and shifted to the offensive. On the 10th, the Germans launched a final attack on the roadblock, but the defenders repulsed them with heavy losses. That night, as a fitting end to the battle, a lost and confused German half-track loaded with wounded rolled up to Springfield's CP. Looking from a second story window, he announced to the Germans that they were now prisoners of war. The battle of Mortain was over. On the 12th, the 30th Infantry Division and the 823d joined the massive Allied pursuit toward Germany. The stories of these three platoons are, of course, an incomplete account of the Battle of Mortain. But their experience illustrates the courage and competence that American soldiers brought to the battlefields of Northwest Europe during World War II. Numbers would have amounted to little without their devotion and skill. And, in passing, it should be noted that none of the three platoon leaders was a professional soldier. These men were citizens answering their country's call in wartime. America will need to have men such as these in the future.

As a more practical lesson for today's soldiers, the value of coordination between units is demonstrated by these actions. Although the odds against Greene were probably too heavy for a successful defense of his position, the contrast between the chaos at St. Barthelemy and the successful defense of L'Abbaye Blanche is illustrative.

NOTES are listed on next page.

NOTES

1. Authors' note. This article is made possible by a study sponsored by the U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency and conducted by Science Applications International Corporation. Other members of the SAIC research team were: Victoria Young, Albert McJoynt, and Joyce Boykin. The team conducted intensive research into unit records at the National Archives and available materials at the Infantry and Armor Schools, uncovering data that has not been published previously. But most important, interviews with the three platoon leaders described in this article, L. Lawson Neel, Thomas Springfield, and George Greene, uncovered information that had remained untapped by historians.
2. Figures for American units are from G-1 Journal and File, 30th Infantry Division, August 1944, Record Group 407, National Archives, Suitland, MD. The 117th Regiment had 2,534 men, and the 120th had 3,008. Approximately 300 men from the tank destroyer battalion reinforced the regiments. The total was rounded up to account for other attachments. German figures are from Bersdorff, General Freiherr von, "The Campaign in Northern France, Vol IV, Chap. 4, "The German Counterattack Against Avranches", unpublished manuscript, MS 8-725, Foreign Military Studies, National Archives, Washington, D. C.
3. In July 1944, First Army conducted tests against captured Panthers to determine the effectiveness of U.S. weapons. The results were discouraging. Neither the organic antitank weapons of the infantry division, the 57-mm antitank gun and 2.36-inch rocket launcher (Bazooka), or the 3-inch gun of reinforcing tank destroyer battalions could penetrate the front of the Panther's sturdy hull at any range. At close range, 200 yards, the 3-inch gun only had a chance of penetrating the turret's front. But identifying the problem did not rectify it. Later arrival of more powerful 88-mm guns only partly alleviated the problem. For a more complete account of the effectiveness of American antitank weapons see Charles M. Gaily, "Faint Praise: American Tanks and Tank Destroyers in World War II", (Hamden, Conn., Shoe String Press, 1963) pp. 106-110. The results of the First Army test are in the Records of the Armored Fighting Vehicles and Weapons Section, European Theater of Operations, Record Group 338, National Archives, Suitland, MD.
4. The general account of the battle is compiled from several sources but the most important were: Martin Blumenson, "Breakout and Pursuit", (Washington, D.C., OCMII, 1984) and Robert L. Hewitt, "Workhorse of the Western Front - The Story of the 30th Infantry Division", (Washington, D.C., Infantry Journal Press, 1946).
5. The 823d was a towed battalion, each of its three gun companies had 12 guns and used half-tracks as prime movers. About half the TD battalions in the theater were towed. The others were self-propelled and equipped with M-10s (3-inch gun) or M-18s (76-mm gun). The more effective M-36 (90-mm gun) did not begin to arrive in the theater until September.
6. G-3 Journal and File, 30th Infantry Division, 6-7 August 1944, Record Group 407, National Archives, Suitland, MD, and Hewitt, "Workhorse", pp. 56-77.
7. Stoeber, Hans, "Die Sturmflut und das Ende" (Dsnabruck, Mumin Verlag GMBH, 1976), p 243 (informal translation).
8. G-1 Journal and File, 30th Infantry Division; 117th-317, 119th-23, and 120th-217. After Action Report, 823d TD Battalion, Record Group 407, National Archives reports 109 men lost.
9. Stoeber, "Die Sturmflut", p 245.
10. The detailed account of the action relies primarily on four sources: (1) "30th Infantry Division, Mortain", Folder 96 ETO "Combat Interviews", Record Group 407, National Archives, Suitland, MD. (hereafter cited as "Combat Interviews"; this collection is a series of interviews conducted by ETO's Historical Section shortly after the battle, and this folder has detailed map overlays of units down to squad level.) 2. After Action Report, 823d TD Battalion, Record Group 407. 3. Committee 24, Officer's Advance Course, The Armored School, "Employment of Four Tank Destroyer Battalions in the ETO, (Fort Knox, KY, May 1950; and 4. Interview of George Greene, 25 January 1990, McLean, VA.
11. Greene interview.
12. Greene interview, and the 823d AAR reports that Greene was last seen firing a 30-caliber machine gun from the hip.
13. "Combat Interviews", and interview with Mr. L. Lawson Neel, 1 December 1989, Thomasville, GA
14. Figure is from map overlay in "Combat Interviews". The account is primarily based on Neel interview.
15. "Combat Interview" and interview with Thomas Springfield, 24 January 1990, McLean, VA

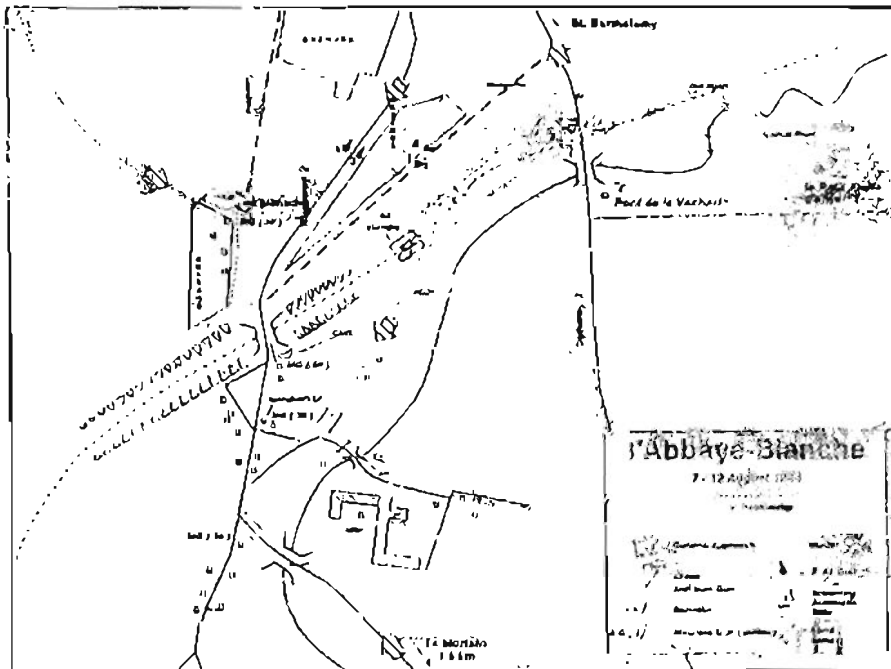


Figure 3.

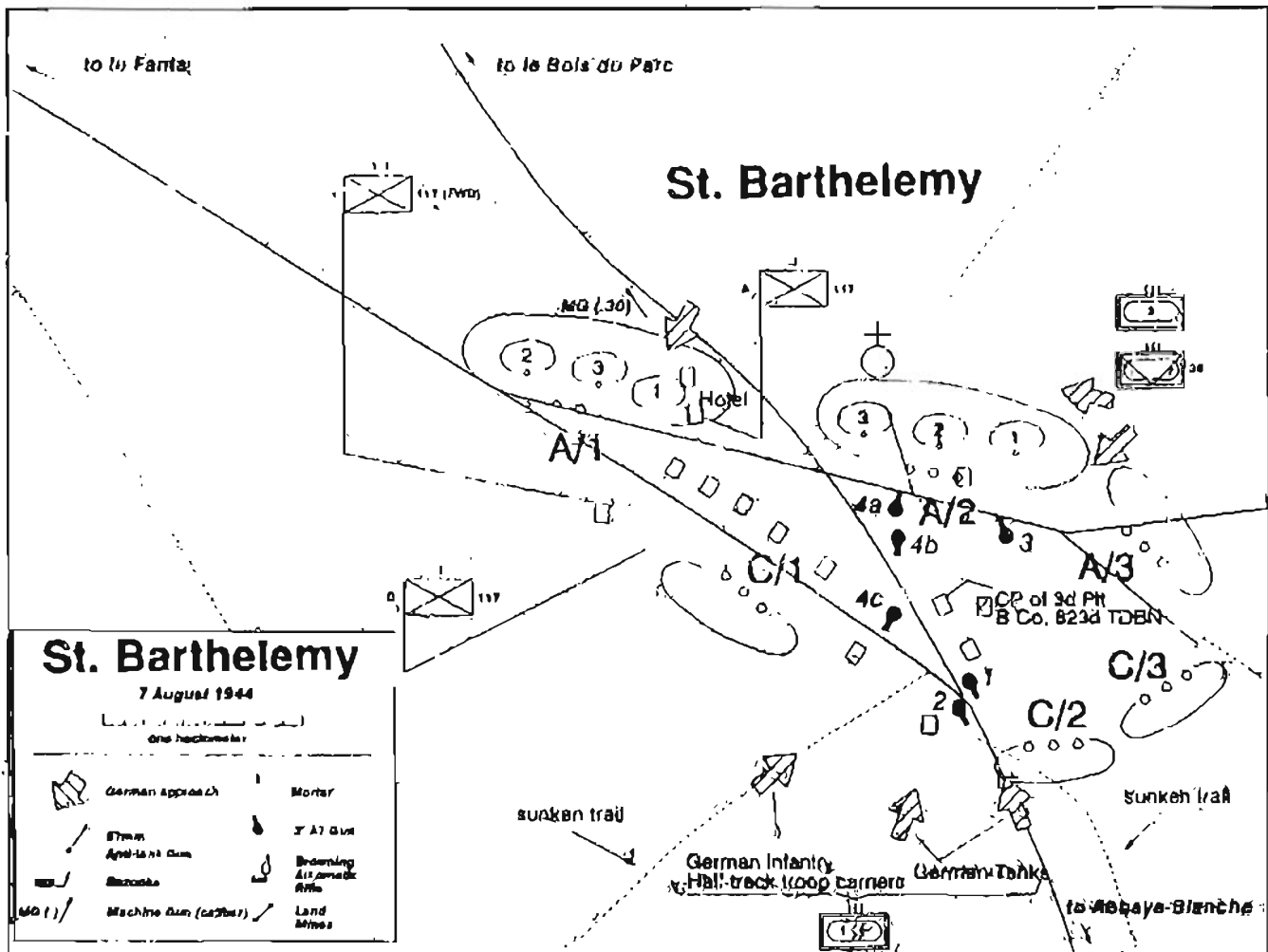


Figure 4.