

FRIENDLY FIRE

On the morning of 9 July Brigadier General Bohn, the CCB commander, attempted to pass his trailing task force in column through his leading elements. The always difficult maneuver was further complicated by the heavy hedgerow terrain and extremely muddy conditions caused by several days of heavy rain. The advance of the armored forces was soon bogged down and also stymied the attempts of 30th Division units to move forward. Dissatisfied with CCB's slow progress, General Hobbs pressed General Bohn, telling him to take his objective by 1700 or surrender command of his unit. In an effort to give his impatient superior some sign of progress, Bohn ordered one of his tank companies to strike ahead without pause, cross the St. Jean de Daye-Pont Hebert highway, and move southwestward to Hill 91. The company of eight Sherman tanks soon moved off toward Hauts-Vents spraying the ditches and hedgerows with machine gun fire.

Meanwhile Bohn attempted to get the remainder of his mired combat command underway and the various elements of the 30th infantry Division braced themselves against expected counterattacks by the 2. SS Panzer Division from the west and the Panzer Lehr Division from the east. As the day wore on the 30th Division's infantry and attached armor (743d Tank Battalion) came under increasing German pressure. Although the division generally stood firm in the face of the German counterattack, isolated units withdrew precipitately after learning of the virtual destruction of the 743d Tank Battalion in a German ambush on the division right flank.

The 823d Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) was attached to the 30th Infantry Division in April 1944 and landed at OMAHA Beach on 24 June 1944. Equipped with thirty-six 3-inch or 76-mm towed antitank guns, the 823d was considered a well-trained unit with high morale even though on 9 July it was still in its shakedown period. Later the battalion would hold the US Army record for tanks destroyed by a tank destroyer battalion for the period 6 June 1944 — 8 May 1945 on the Continent, having knocked out 111 enemy tanks and other armored vehicles.

Company C, 823d Tank Destroyer Battalion, had crossed the Vire River on 7 July and had supported the 30th Infantry Division's abortive attempts to continue the attack out of the bridgehead on 8 July. Its main role, however, had been to counter the German counterattacks that mounted in intensity on 9 July. By late afternoon on the ninth the company was in defensive direct-fire positions south of the St. Jean de Daye crossroads astride and east of the main highway to St. Lo. Shortly after 1635 1st Lt. Ellis W. McInnis's 1st Platoon shifted positions slightly in anticipation of an expected German armored counterattack north up the St. Lo highway. By about 1715 1st Platoon's guns were in position covered by the bazookas and small arms of the 1st Reconnaissance Platoon, 823d TD Battalion, led by 1st Lt. Thompson L. Raney.

While Lieutenant McInnis's platoon moved into position, stragglers from the 117th Infantry Regiment streamed northward along the St. Lo highway reporting that the German armor was not far behind. Air

bursts from unidentified artillery over the tank destroyer positions lent credence to the imminence of a German assault. About 1800 Lieutenant McInnis spotted a tank about 1,000 yards to his front which moved back and forth several times to look over the hilltop in hull defilade. He immediately radioed the Company C commander to ascertain whether there were any friendly tanks in the area and received the reply that "what you are looking for is in front of you."

Almost immediately the tank moved north along the highway spraying the hedgerows, ditches, and 1st Platoon positions with .30-caliber machine gun fire. It was soon joined by several other tanks which also fired their machine guns and 75-mm tank guns. Unable to visually identify the advancing tanks because of the drizzle and fog which had restricted visibility all day, Lieutenant McInnis could only conclude that the tanks firing on his position constituted the long-awaited German counterattack and gave the order to his platoon to open fire.

Sergeant Malery Nunn, who had already received a graze on the face from one of the tank machine gun bullets, issued the fire commands for his gun to engage the lead tank at an estimated range of 500-600 yards. The gunner, Corporal Clement, scored a dead center hit with the first round, and the lead tank stopped as smoke poured from it. Two additional rounds were fired, but their effect could not be observed because of smoke. The other tanks continued to advance firing, and Sergeant Nunn's gun was hit, and Corporal Clement was wounded in the leg. Sergeant Nunn assumed the gunner's position and Lieutenant McInnis loaded. Three more rounds were fired, but no hits were observed, and the remaining tanks continued to roll forward.

As the tanks closed, the tank destroyer personnel were forced to take cover in the ditches where they were pinned down by the machine gun fire from the tanks. When the tanks were about 400 yards away, Sergeant Nunn recognized them as friendly mediums, called for a cease-fire, and stood up waving at the tanks in an attempt to halt their firing. His brave attempt had no effect, and the 1st Platoon hugged the ground as several tanks, only three of which were not firing, passed through the position and continued out of sight to the north, all attempts by the tank destroyer personnel to identify themselves having failed.

Sgt. Carl Hanna, Private First Class Hardin, and Pfc. Ernie Jacobs of Lieutenant Raney's recon platoon were in the process of establishing a bazooka position in a ditch when the tanks appeared. They were pinned down by fire from the tanks, and when it became unbearably heavy, Sergeant Hanna ordered his men to take cover in the ditch on the other side of the hedgerow. As they attempted to do so, Private First Class Jacobs was hit in the head by a 75-mm tank round, which killed him instantly and knocked out Sergeant Hanna, who was hit in the back of the head by fragments of Jacob's skull.

Company C's 2d Platoon, led by 1st Lt. Francis J. Connors, also fell victim to the tankers' fire. A tank rolled up to within fifteen yards of Connor's uncamouflaged halftrack, which could scarcely have been mistaken for anything other than a US vehicle, and fired point-blank, severely wounding the halftrack's assistant driver in the

chest. Lieutenant Connors identified the tank as a 3d Armored Division tank (No. 25) and Sgt. Joseph A. Chustz, the 2d Platoon Security Sergeant, identified another by the name on its hull, BE-BACK.

During the course of the fray Lieutenants McInnis and Raney and several of their men took cover on the north side of a stone building. One of the tanks fired an HE round into the building from twenty feet away and five feet from where the party was standing. The next tank in column turned its turret toward the group but did not fire when Lieutenant McInnis waved his arms and shouted. Shortly after the offending tanks had rolled northward out of the Company C area, 1st Lt. Neil P. Curry of the 30th Reconnaissance Troop arrived from the north and reported that the tanks had also fired on his M-8 halftrack and showed the hole in the turret ring mount.

The results of the twenty-five-minute engagement were serious but not catastrophic. Two US medium tanks were destroyed, and one 3-inch antitank gun was damaged by machine gun fire striking the recoil mechanism but was returned to service within twenty-four hours. The 823d TD Battalion suffered casualties of one man killed and three wounded (two seriously); the tankers lost six men. In his daily report for 9 July the 823d TD Battalion S-3, Maj. Ashby I. Loshe, reported the unit's combat efficiency as "satisfactory but mad as hell" and added that the unit

took two prisoners which were its first, suffered its first fatal casualties, was shot up by its own Infantry and Armored Force and in turn shot up our own Infantry and Armored Force but under all circumstances came through their first critical engagement in fairly good shape and without too serious losses.

On 10 July Major Lohse was appointed a board of one officer to investigate the incident. He identified the offending tanks as belonging to the 3d Armored Division and concluded that the US tanks were fired upon because:

- (1) enemy tanks were reported both by Higher Headquarters and withdrawing Infantry to be in the immediate front of the 3" guns,
- (2) poor visibility prevented recognition of type and nationality of tank,
- (3) no friendly tanks were known to be in that area,
- (4) because tanks were firing upon gun positions and friendly positions generally and,
- (5) because tanks were moving north while the direction of attack was south.

Despite the poor visibility and obvious stress of being under heavy fire, the tank destroyer personnel did recognize the tanks as

friendly and ceased firing when the tanks were about 400 yards away. They then attempted, often at very personal risk, to identify themselves. Under the circumstances the continued firing by the tankers is difficult to excuse. Every effort was made by the tank destroyer personnel to identify themselves, but whether out of confusion, fear, or simply lack of discipline, the tanks moved through the friendly position and well to the rear, firing continuously.

As the reader has probably already surmised, the offending tanks were the company from OCB, 3d Armored Division (probably a company of the 33d Armored Regiment), earlier dispatched by Brigadier General Bohn to proceed expeditiously to Hauts-Vents. Apparently the tank company commander either misunderstood his instructions or became confused. In any event, upon reaching the north-south St. Lo highway he turned right (north) rather than left (south) and blundered into the 823d TD Battalion position. The commander personally suffered the consequences of his error. His tank was the one knocked out at the beginning of the engagement by Sergeant Nunn's gun. Just at the moment the lead tank was hit, General Bohn was attempting to contact his wayward unit by radio and over the open radio channel heard the tank company commander's cry of pain and anguished statement, "I am in dreadful agony."

After their pass through the 823d's position, the remaining six tanks reversed direction and proceeded to the objective, Hill 91 at Hauts-Vents, which they somehow managed to reach shortly before dark. Ironically, the six tanks reached the objective just in time to be hit by an American strafing attack requested earlier but delayed by bad weather. Fortunately, there were no casualties and the remnants of the tank company spent the night on Hill 91 only to be withdrawn the following morning (10 July) when it proved impossible to reinforce them. The Hauts-Vents objective was finally secured by OCB on the afternoon of 11 July.

ANALYSIS

This incident of "amicicide" was primarily the result of the company commander's misorientation. Prearranged emergency signals may have helped; in any case, both units were lucky enough to have received as little damage as they did.