Affair at Hill 30
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Affair at Hill 30

By Col S. L. A. Marshall

OF ALL OUR AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN EUROPEAN Theater, no one chapter is more instructive than the experience of 3d Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry, during the Normandy invasion. For with that unit, all went well in the beginning, yet in the end fortune's smile turned to a frown, and the aggressive and frequently inspired efforts of the battalion's leaders were thwarted of any great achievement. It is therefore a case study of the trial and adversity which are peculiar to airborne combat.

The general mission of 508th was to gain control of the strategic ground in the angle where the Merderet and Douve Rivers joined. The Douve bridge at Etienville was to be destroyed as a defensive measure, while offensively the regiment was to seize the causeway crossings of the lower Merderet, thus to serve the main body of VII Corps in its advance westward from Utah Beach to cut the Cotentin Peninsula and isolate Cherbourg.

There were two Merderet crossings, approximately two miles apart, the northern one being at La Fiere, the southern at Chef du Pont. The latter was the main crossing, providing ingress to a much wider and more decisive area. It was therefore the principal concern of the regiment.

Accordingly, it was planned that the 508th, being dropped west of the Merderet and north of the Douve, would rendezvous on Hill 30, a steeply rising and orchard-crowned hill which commanded the Chef du Pont causeway at a distance of about one mile.

This plan was frustrated by the conditions of the drop two hours past midnight. The carrier formation became scattered, in part because of the cloudy night, in part because many of the planes, disregarding orders, took evasive action to avoid a moderately heavy flak. In

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Help appeared to come at the most propitious moment; a glider dropped out of the night onto the field. Instead of reinforcements or heavy weapons they found only a pilot and a baby bulldozer.

consequence, most of the regiment was dropped on the wrong side of the river, and northward of the north crossing. The regimental commander, Col Leroy Lindquist, thereon set himself to the task of collecting a part of his scattered force from out of the marshes which abound the Merderet, and proceeding to his nearest objective—La Fiere.

By strange irony this undid the careful work of the only part of the carrier formation which had served the regiment well. The serial carrying the 3d Battalion had missed the cloudbank and ignored the ground fire. It flew undeviatingly on toward the drop zone, just northward of the village of Picauville, and its sticks unloaded at about the proper second. So doing, they dropped into ground where, despite their best effort, they were to remain isolated during the four decisive days when the airborne forces were laying a carpet for VII Corps into the heart of Cotentin.

But the battalion's people were still unoriented when they came to earth. Its commander, a youthful West Pointer, LtCol J. B. Shanley, had noted during his descent that the bundle light had dropped with the speed of a rock. He knew that its chute had failed to open. Still feeling his disappointment as he shook loose from his harness, he looked about him and saw the light gleaming in the distance. Making his way to it, he found that everything else in the bundle had been smashed to bits, but by some miracle the light had survived the fall undamaged. Eight of his men were already gathered around it when he got there. It was decided that the ground was too low to be conspicuous. The party moved out looking for a hill, and when they found it, Shanley affixed the beacon to the top limb of the tallest tree, and then tied flashlights to other branches, until it began to glow like a Christmas tree.

Now about thirty men had come to the light. Shanley took his original party and organized them into an all-around defense of two fields, covered only by their hand

Part I: The 3d Battalion dropped where, despite their best efforts, they were to be isolated for four days. All went well in the beginning, yet in the end, their aggressive and sometimes inspired leadership seemed to be thwarted

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Although *The Affair at Hill 30* is Col S. L. A. Marshall's first contribution to a Marine Corps publication, the Colonel has had certain tenuous and intermittent connections with the Corps over a period of thirty years — these connections having been staged in such diverse locales as France, Central America, and the Central Pacific.

Presently editorial writer and military critic for the DETROIT NEWS, S. L. A. Marshall has been in, around, or writing about war during much of his adult life. Concerning this, he say:

"I personally cringe at any mention of decorations in a biographical sketch and I would prefer that this kind of detail be skipped. However, it has some relevance that in the two wars I have participated in twelve major operations, and under such circumstances that I was working at battalion command posts or forward thereof. It is usually assumed that an historian works from a billet at Army Headquarters, but that was not my role, inasmuch as combat coverage was my chief personal interest.

"It may also be pertinent that, as a war correspondent, I was in Spain during the Civil War, in Nicaragua during the Sandino period, and in Mexico during three minor revolutions."

More specifically, Col Marshall enlisted for World War I at the age of 17; as an infantry lieutenant, he was overseas for two years, participated in Soissons, St Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne, and Ypres-Lys campaigns, and served with the Army of Occupation. Re-entering the military service in the summer of 1942, he was first a civilian consultant to the Secretary of War, then, three months later, commissioned major and assigned as Chief of Orientation for AUS. As such, he wrote the basic national policy concerning Americans of Japanese blood. In August, 1943, he was transferred to the newly-formed Historical Section, War Department General Staff, where his first job was to organize the secret operational narrative of Doolittle's Tokyo raid. In October of the same year, he was sent to the Central Pacific with the mission of developing methods of battlefield research which were to become standing operating procedure for all Army historical personnel in all theaters. In pursuit of this mission, he landed with the 27th Division at Makin and accompanied the 7th Division in the Kwajalein operation.

At the time of the Normandy invasion, Col Marshall was transferred to the European Theater, and from Normandy forward undertook personal coverage of all airborne campaigns. Late in 1944, he was named Deputy Theater Historian, and in April of the following year became Theater Historian. In the ETO, he participated in the following campaigns and battles: Normandy, Brittany, Siege of Brest, Arnhem, the Ardennes, the Ruhr encirclement, and Eastern Germany.

In December, 1945, Col Marshall returned to the United States, and was released from active duty the following May. He still serves, however, as a member of the War Department's Historical Advisory Commission.

For many years, there has been a close connection between the Colonel and the dean of British military authors, MajGen J. F. C. Fuller (whose important article on future warfare will appear in the March GAZETTE.) Regarded as Gen Fuller's chief interpreter in this country, Col Marshall devoted most of his early technical writing to armor and defense against armor, and, he says, simply built on Gen Fuller's ideas. The prophetic qualities of Gen Fuller's (*and* Col Marshall's) ideas about armor were graphically demonstrated in World War II: while both Fuller and Marshall had been largely discounted in their own countries, the Germans and Russians had received their sermons on armor with considerable interest, and, when the war came, put many of these to practical test.

Col Marshall's published books are *Blitzkrieg, Armies on Wheels, Island Victory, Command, Bastogne, Makin,* and *Men Against Fire.* His *Normandy Airborne* is in the mill. Additionally, he has written several military manuals for the Army (*Short Guide to North Africa, Short Guide to New Caledonia, Short Guide to Burma,* etc.) and many articles for various military and professional journals.

He feels that the system of comprehensive tactical interrogation of the enemy high commanders and general staff, which he instituted in Europe, will "in the long run, probably pay bigger dividends than any of the small contributions which I have made to the growth of knowledge about operations."

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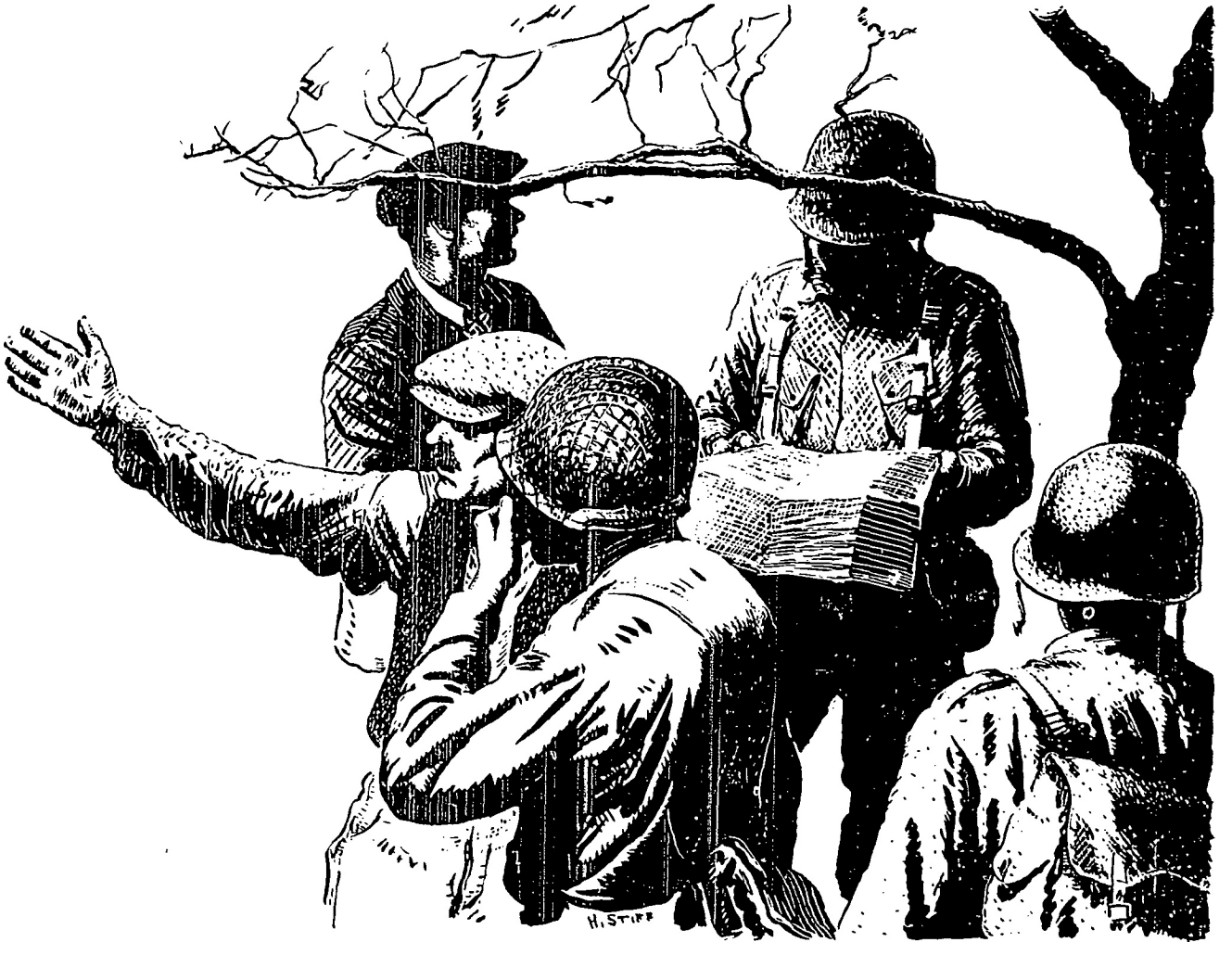
weapons. The remainder of his force he divided into five patrols and sent them forth to round up additional men. Each party was sent out on an azimuth or toward a specific hill or cluster of farm buildings with instructions that it would return to the position at a designated hour. As additional men were brought into the ground, they were distributed around the bordering hedgerows.

Of heavier weapons, the patrols were able to retrieve only one machine gun. But help appeared to come to them at the most propitious moment; a glider appeared out of the night and came to rest in one of the two fields. They had watched its descent breathlessly after the C-47 which had it in tow had exploded directly over their heads. Now they rushed to it, hoping that it would contain either heavy weapons or reinforcements. But inside it were only the pilot and his cargo—a baby bulldozer, than which Shanley needed nothing less. The pilot picked up a carbine and joined the defense.

One patrol got back with word that it had reconnoitered the fringes of a nearby village which it took to be Picauville. Shanley, still uncertain of his position in relation to the drop zone, went the way the patrol had gone, took a bearing on a church steeple, and satisfied himself that he was standing on just about the right ground. On his return to the position, he happened upon two bundles, one of which supplied him with a bazooka and the other with an SCR 300.

During all of this time, there was a German force of three infantry companies, one battery of artillery, and four tanks within Picauville. They were alert to what was occurring. In fact, they had already killed outright a number of paratroopers who had dropped right into the bivouac area, and a few others had scrambled out of their clutches to safety. But while the dark lasted, they made not the slightest move against the forces assembling without, reacting as if they were paralyzed by fear. This was not unusual. In fact, there is not a single

Patrols cut all the wires in the vicinity and learned from Frenchmen that the Germans had at least a battalion of men at Picauville and a stronger force in dug in positions covering Etienville.



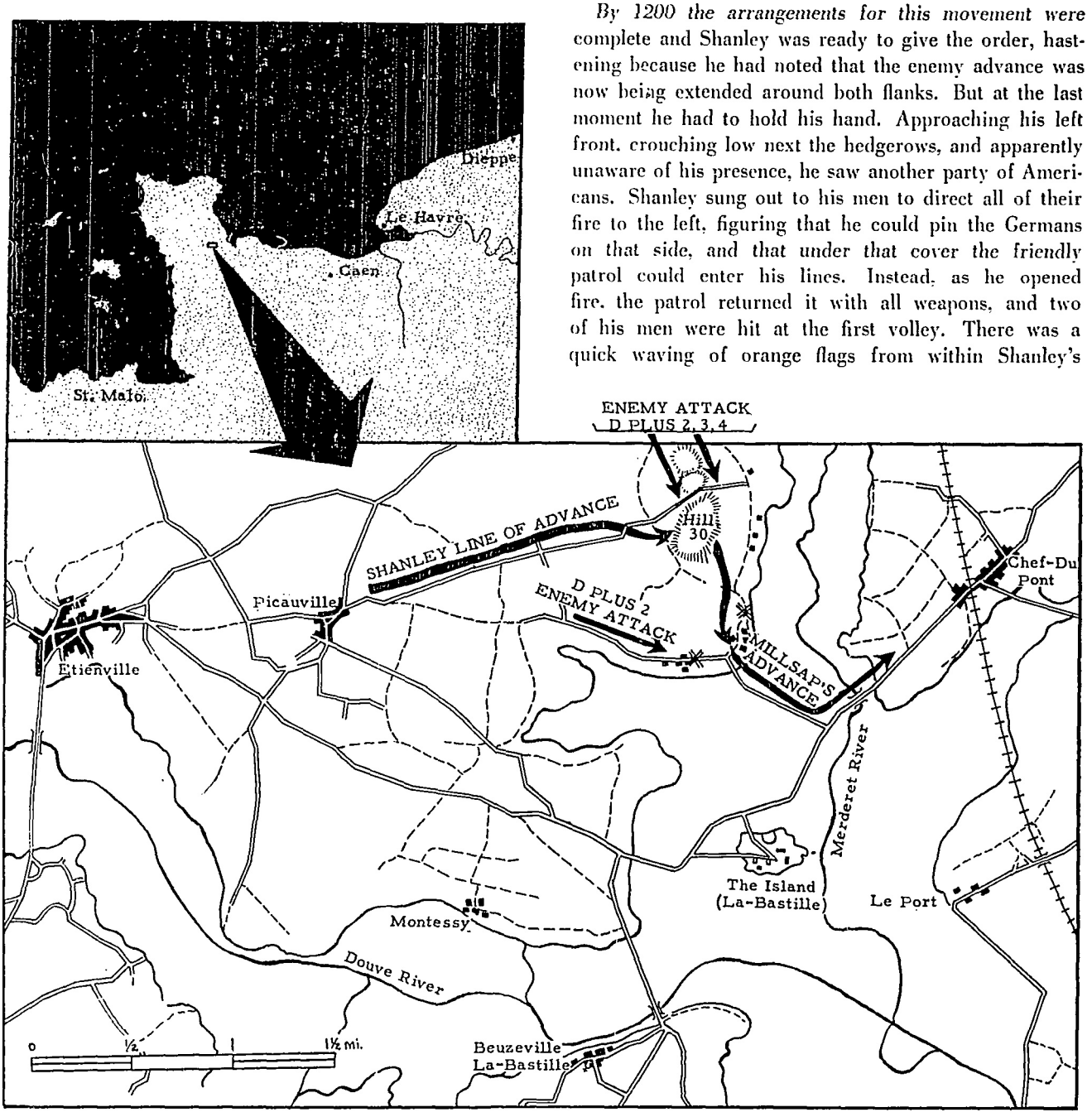
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example of German troops acting counteroffensively against our airborne forces that first night, though opportunities were numerous.

As first light began to break, the position drew a scattering small arms fire from the southward. It appeared to Shanley that this first contact came of enemy patrols punching in to feel his location. He judged that their nearest men were two fields away but he couldn't get a clear idea of what was going on. So in the interest of conserving his scant ammunition supply, he ordered his men to fire only when they saw a live target, which was seldom. In this desultory manner, the action wore on for several hours, the enemy failing to press his advantage, and Shanley waiting and hoping to raise more strength before risking a full engagement.

Around mid-morning, the enemy skirmishers began to press down along the hedgerows and a well-directed fire fell on the American dug-in positions from well over on the left flank. At about this same time a friendly voice came over the SCR 300. Lt Norman McVicar had assembled about sixty men in a field approximately one mile northeast of Shanley. One of Shanley's patrols had strayed into McVicar's position, and McVicar at once set about raising Shanley on his own set. Shanley told McVicar to hold where he was, and that he—Shanley—would forthwith move to him.

By 1200 the arrangements for this movement were complete and Shanley was ready to give the order, hastening because he had noted that the enemy advance was now being extended around both flanks. But at the last moment he had to hold his hand. Approaching his left front, crouching low next the hedgerows, and apparently unaware of his presence, he saw another party of Americans. Shanley sung out to his men to direct all of their fire to the left, figuring that he could pin the Germans on that side, and that under that cover the friendly patrol could enter his lines. Instead, as he opened fire, the patrol returned it with all weapons, and two of his men were hit at the first volley. There was a quick waving of orange flags from within Shanley's



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lines, and the patrol, getting the friendly signal, came into the field at a run. It had been sent out on a general scouting mission by yet a third group of 508th men under command of Maj Shields Warren, Jr., which was in motion not far from McVicar.

The concentration of fire toward the left in order to cover the patrol had had the unanticipated effect of cooling the advance along that flank and Shanley decided on the spur of the moment to make his withdrawal in that direction. That would pull him away from his assigned task—the blowing of the Douve bridge at Etienville—but his force was small and he hoped that by joining the McVicar and Warren groups, he might pick up heavy weapons and explosives.

So the force started on its way, leaving behind ten of its number and one medical officer, all of whom had been either crippled in the jump or wounded during the action. They were dead weight and would have encumbered the party; the doctor was left behind to surrender them to the enemy.

Not until the moment of their stepping out was it seen that the glider, on settling to earth during the night, had blocked their only rearward exit from the two fields. Elsewhere on the left and rear boundaries the hedgerows and embankments rose solidly. The growth was much too thick for there to be any thought of going through it. The glider was far too heavy to be moved. Shanley saw that the only escape was through the glider. One man at a time, they would have to run for it, climb into the door on one side, work around the bulldozer, and exit on the other side. It entailed a terrible delay at the very time it was necessary to move fast. The minutes dragged out. The force was halfway through this weird defile before the enemy discovered what was happening and concentrated fire on the glider. Then the trickle of men stopped and Shanley went back through the glider to see what was the cause. He found that the remaining men had formed a fire line inside the hedgerow and had abandoned all idea of trying to make the glider passage. He booted them hard and told them that they had to go.

SEVERAL OF THEM STARTED, the rest showed signs of following, and so he went along. But a few of the men from this hesitant rear guard were never seen again, and whether they quit in the field or were shot going through the glider could not be learned. The enemy made no further attempt to rush the withdrawal. The column moved along under cover of the hedgerows to a point about 800 yards east of Picauville. There it was stopped short by the spectacle of 200 paratroopers sitting together in an open field doing absolutely nothing. No one had taken command. No orders had been given. So this considerable body of men had merely marked time for many hours waiting for someone to happen along and tell them how to get started. Shanley now divided his total force into three platoons, moved it to a promising hilltop and set up an all-around defense. He figured he now had enough man-power, but for the rest of it, he had added a caliber .50 and three caliber .30 machine guns to his strength, and still lacked explosives.

The time had come when he had to know what he would be up against if he pushed eastward to the Douve bridge. Four patrols were sent out, two to cut all wires in the vicinity, the others to round up Frenchmen for information. They got what they went after. The Frenchmen said that there was "at least a battalion" of the enemy deployed around Picauville and a "much stronger" force in dug-in positions covering Etienville. It was still early evening and Shanley's own force was continuing to build up. The Warren and McVicar groups had found one another, and after a brief brush with enemy skirmishers, had entered Shanley's lines. Even so, he doubted that he was strong enough to move eastward. He had not made radio contact with either the regiment or the other battalions and from the shreds of information supplied by the men he concluded that the drop had scattered the regiment far and wide and that there were no American forces to west of Etienville. This, as all subsequent information proved, was a wholly correct estimate and it prompted an ineluctable decision—that he should proceed toward the only mission encharged 508th which remained within his means, advancing to the high ground overlooking the Merderet and the Chef du Pont causeway.

> *"Sixty per cent of the art of command is the ability to anticipate. Forty per cent of the art of command is the ability to improvise, to reject the preconceived idea that has been tested and proved wrong in the crucible of operations, and to rule by action instead of acting by rules."*
>
> —Col S. L. A. Marshall

At 2100 he organized his force into two companies, with Warren leading one and himself the other. In a two-hour march they got to Hill 30 without incident. It was ground that looked fairly promising on the map. From the hillcrest there should have been a commanding view of the valley, the causeways and the town of Chef du Pont on the far side. But the reality of the terrain belied the promise of the map. Hill 30 was criss-crossed by hedgerows of a particularly obtrusive sort. They were high banked and thickly sown with tall shade trees. The road which wound to the top of the hill was a deep-rutted track of mud between steep banks. From the top of Hill 30, one had no sense of being on elevated ground because it was almost impossible to see beyond the first fences. It was a favorable place for rendezvous,

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for it was plainly marked and had sufficient cover. But when the trees were in leaf, it commanded nothing.

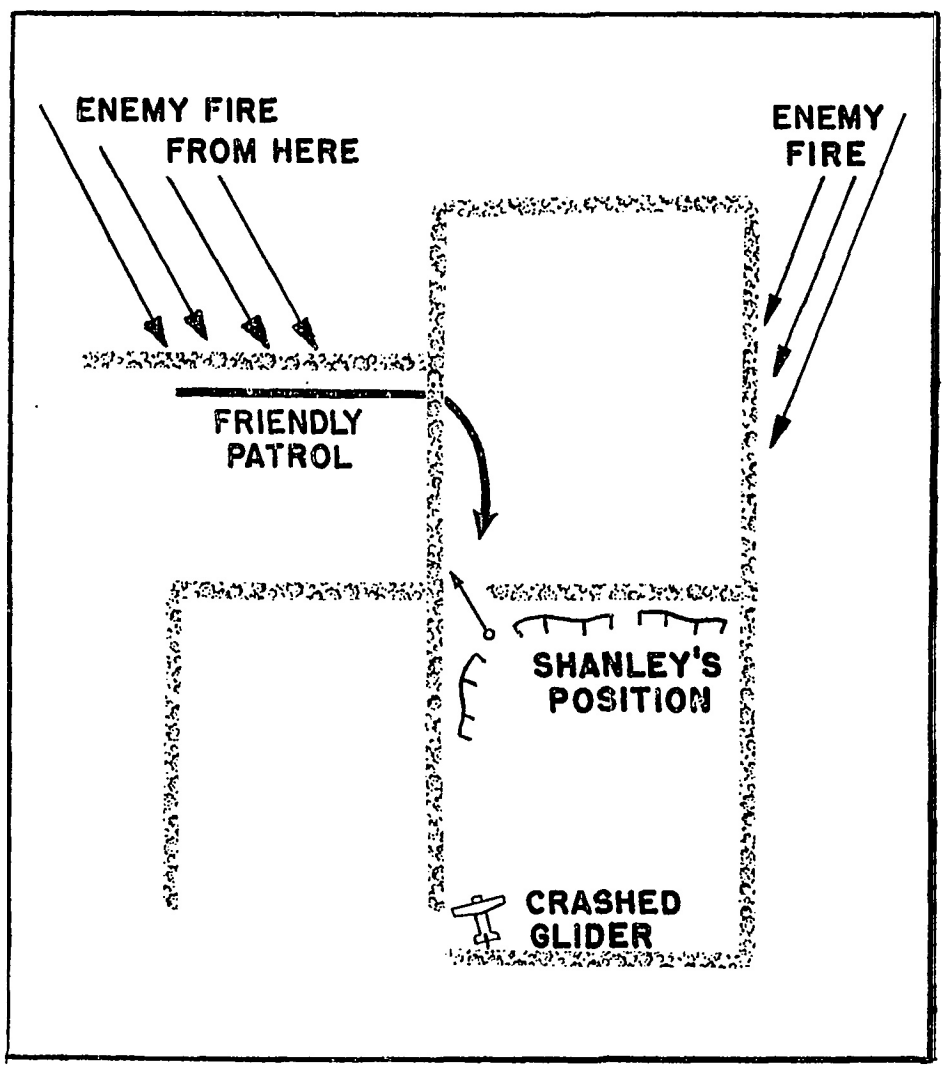
That night Shanley roughly shaped a position which he proceeded to fully coordinate on the following morning. His own company was formed in a crescent around the northern slope of Hill 30 and Warren's was deployed so as to cover the approaches from the south. Thus disposed, Shanley's line was facing toward La Fiere and Ste Mere Eglise where only a few miles distant the battle crises of the 82d Airborne Division were at this time occurring. Yet of this fighting he could hear no sound, and his efforts to raise any higher headquarters by radio were vain. For all the battalion knew, it had become a beleaguered outpost of an invasion which had failed. Yet this sense of isolation had not begun to depress unduly the spirits of the men. Their own affairs had gone reasonably well and they had suffered no real hardship.

The night was uneventful. On the second morning patrols were sent out to look for supply bundles and to clear the immediate area of any enemy forces. Another group of strays from the battalion came into the position, bringing three machine guns. This augmentation of strength encouraged him to think of fresh enterprises, the opportunity for which was already at hand. By radio, he had heard that a friendly group on the far side of the Merderet had brought the Chef du Pont end of the causeway under control. All that he knew was that it was an American force of unknown size; more than that could not be put on the air. But as aid to them, and as additional protection for himself, he decided to throw a roadblock across the highway running parallel to the Douve south of Hill 30. The block would face both ways, opposing enemy forces attempting to move east across the mile-long causeway, or coming against Hill 30 from either direction.

For it is to be noted that even after the block was put into position that evening, 82d Division still did not have command of the southern bridgehead. Halfway across the marsh the causeway from Chef du Pont branched, its lower arm extending south into enemy territory around Beuzeville la Bastille and Montessy, on both sides of the Douve River. There was enough tree cover along the causeway that enemy skirmishers from these areas could still move back and forth from the solid ground to the trunk of the upper causeway which the Americans were attacking from both ends. The balance of forces was such that neither side was strong enough to dislodge the other, thereby bringing the causeway under control.

That one consequence of this unique deadlock was to confuse American thinking as to whether the attitude toward the crossing should be offensive or defensive was perhaps natural enough. Shanley, sitting on the west bank, had already made up his mind. He was camped on the far side of a decisive bridgehead, and there he had

LtCol Shanley's position at the initial assembly and withdrawal.



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Heavy mortar fire doused the top of Hill 30 while skirmishers harassed the outpost with small arms.



to stay, since if he advanced to the high side, the ground might not be re-won again. While acting defensively, he was thinking offensively; to cut the crossing would defeat the prime purpose of his force. On the other hand, the forces on the east bank, having been badly mauled by the enemy on the first day, wanted now to blow the Merderet bridge to keep the Germans from surging back. There was one exception. A member of the battalion, 2dLt Francis J. Bolger, having been dropped on the wrong side of the river, had joined the force at Chef du Pont. Hearing a Division staff officer give the order to blow the bridge, Bolger decided on his own that the order was wrong and immediately called Shanley by radio.

Because of Shanley's vehement protest, the order was suspended, then later cancelled. By that margin—a second lieutenant's willingness to dispute higher authority—the bridge was saved and was ultimately used to get the 90th Infantry Division and other Corps troops across the Merderet barrier.

Even so, Shanley was taking a shot in the dark. He was still without knowledge of the general situation and had made no contact with higher headquarters. In these circumstances, it might be a fair question whether his firmness about keeping the bridge open came of a self-generated optimism or more correctly from a reluctance to see destroyed the only link between himself and the one American party from which he had heard.

The considerations were, in fact, joined. At this time, though he did not know it, his was the only American force being employed tactically to the west of the Merderet. Elsewhere, except for a few isolated and immobilized groups which were simply awaiting rescue, the American forces had failed and the enemy was in solid possession of the countryside. By instinctively camping on the objective, he was in fact fighting the Corps' battle, but it was a close question whether, in the circumstances, he could hold out long enough to do the Corps any good.

That night, the regimental commander came to Chef du Pont and talked to Shanley. Lindquist agreed with everything he had done and told him to continue to defend on Hill 30. It was easy to say but hard to do. The force was short of ammunition and food, and almost wholly without medical supply. Casualties were mounting. The top of Hill 30 was getting a heavy dousing of mortar fire from an attack which the enemy was pressing against the northern side of the perimeter. Groups of skirmishers were closing in along the hedgerows and harassing the outpost line.

The situation called for a quick toss of a lifeline from the east.

to be continued

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