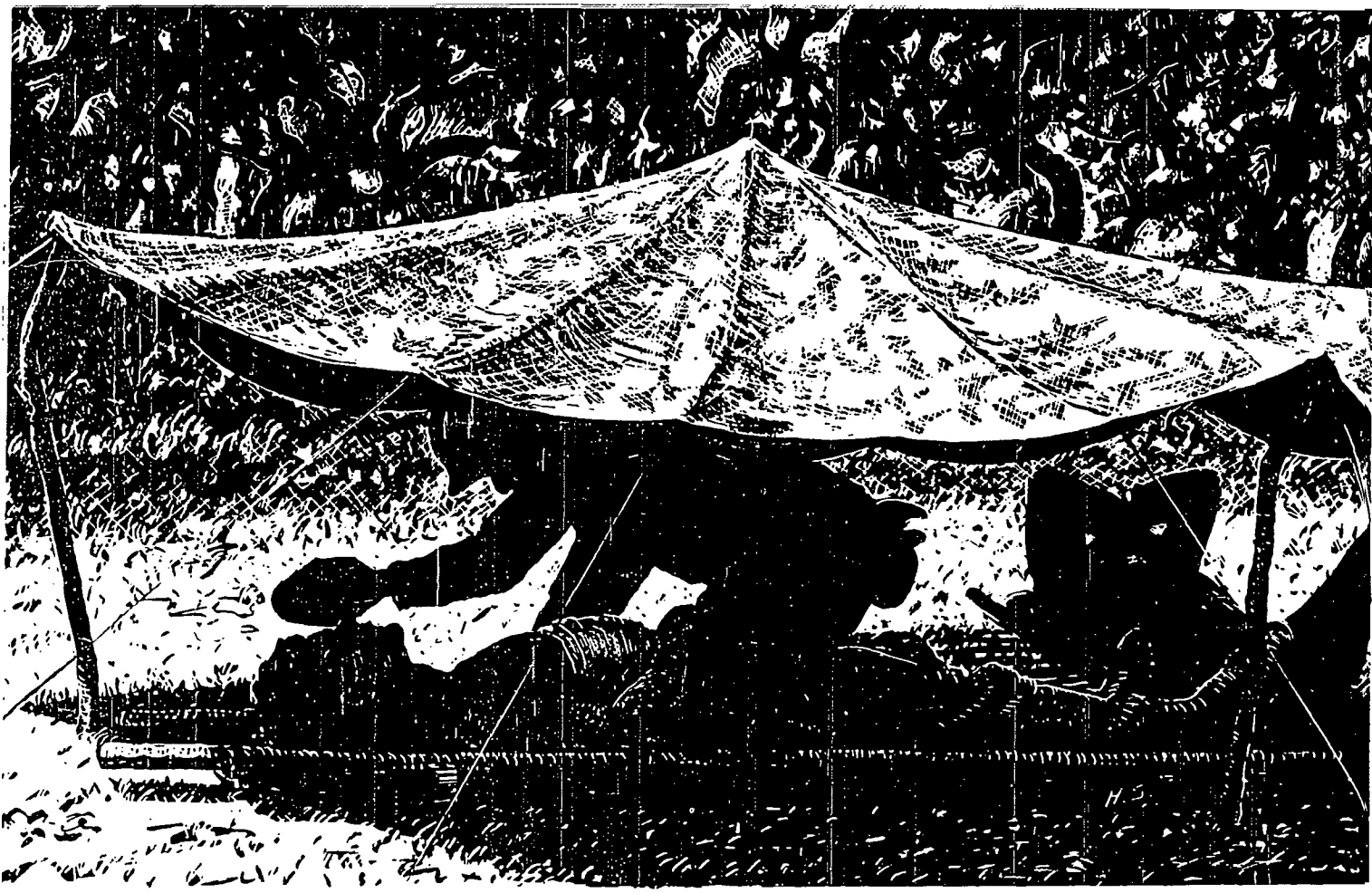
Affair at Hill 30
L A Marshall
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Affair at Hill 30

By Col S. L. A. Marshall

ON THE THIRD MORNING—D PLUS TWO—A PATROL from the force in Chef du Pont came over the causeway, found it relatively free of resistance, and reported to LtCol J. B. Shanley's position on Hill 30. But the event which should have cheered him, instead raised his wrath. For the patrol had come through Shanley's own roadblocks without being challenged.

He ran down the Hill to the highway to see what was wrong, and at once found that his instructions as to the organization of the position had been ignored. About 50 men had been assigned to this task of protecting the base of Hill 30 and stopping the east-west movement of German forces along the main highway. He had told them to set up two minefields (they had found some enemy mines) so as to cover the approaches to the causeway from both sides of Hill 30. The force was then to be disposed on the most suitable central ground between the two blocks, acting as an "island of resistance" from which automatic fire could cover the blocks in both directions.

Instead, they were wide-scattered and without mutual support or central organization. Such were the dispositions that a German force coming from the causeway would have knifed the position in half and taken both halves in rear. Shanley therefore set about reorganizing the position and he gave detailed instructions on how to move the men and establish the fire power on the central ground. After seeing them well started, he walked back up the hill. While he was still climbing, and before the roadblock group could dig in along the new ground, an enemy attack mounted by approximately one infantry company came down the hedgerows paralleling the road from the west. The fire caught the roadblock crews just at the moment of dissolution, the heavy weapons being on the move from the old positions to the new. Shanley heard the sounds of the fight just as he reached Hill 30's defensive perimeter and he realized that because of the orders which he had just given the roadblock group was

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Part II: The Germans caught the Americans in the act of reorganizing their roadblocks. Heavy mortar fire ranged all over their position and forced the men to return to the main body. The Germans pressed their advantage with new vigor

probably caught flat-footed. He called to Warren and they rallied a platoon on the hilltop and charged southward down the hill, figuring that they would move in on the left of the advancing enemy line.

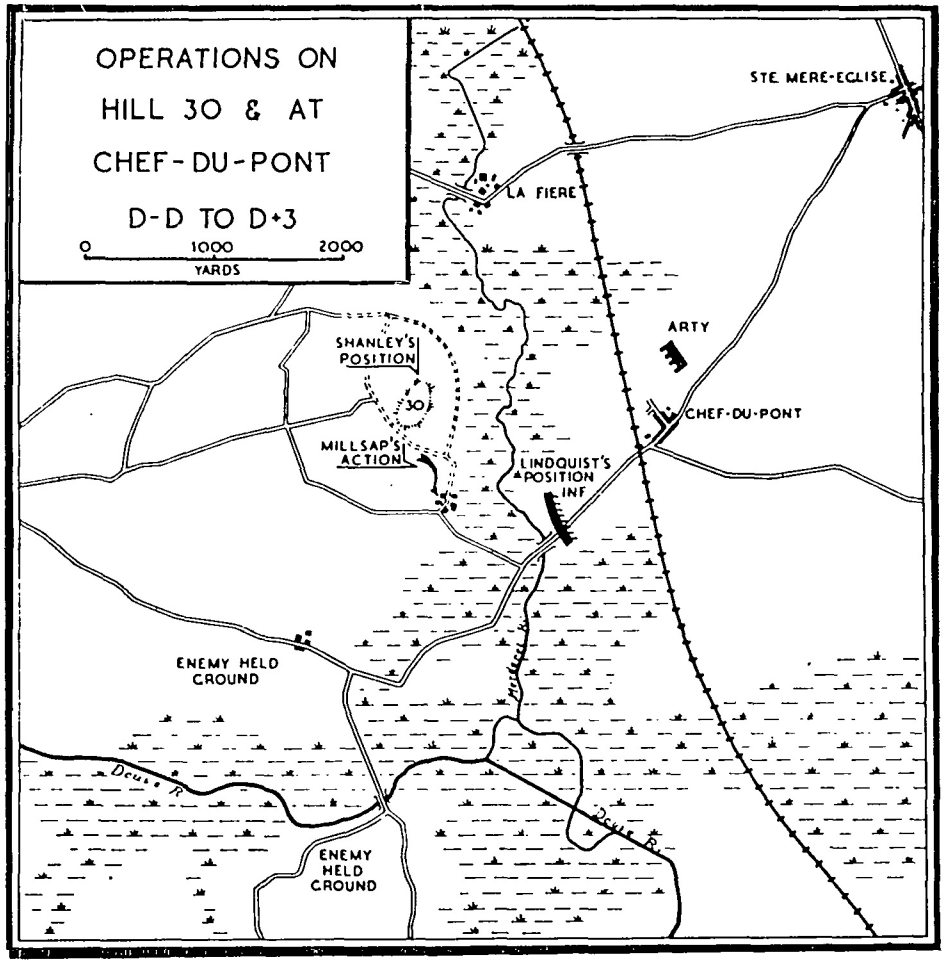
So it was done. But no sooner had this enfilade begun to sway the enemy attack and bend it backward than Shanley's men heard the familiar sound of American rifle and machine gun fire grazing the ground on which they were fighting. There was a gap of about 300 yards between the roadblock men and the flanking platoon. The former couldn't see what was happening and Shanley had failed to advise them by runner of his intentions. They were firing toward the sounds of the fire.

Taking one man with him, Shanley crawled back along the hedgerows to the roadblock group, thinking that with a slight change in the direction of their fire, he could still get the best of it. But that chance had already passed. The men were huddled against the embankments. Heavy mortar fires were ranging all over the position from batteries located somewhere on the peninsula of solid ground about Montessy, thus taking in flank an untrenched position already under fire from the front. A number of men were hit while he considered his situation. He ordered the roadblock platoon to withdraw to Hill 30. He then worked west along the hedgerows again, intending to lift the flanking platoon from its predicament. It was in his mind that the hill position was strong enough that he would still be able to counterattack these enemy forces if the right hour arrived. He saw no advantage in wasting men's lives to defend ground which tactically meant very little at the time.

But he could not find the platoon which he had left with Warren and without wasting time in search for them, he returned to Hill 30 and the main body. There he found that Warren had already brought the platoon back. Warren's estimate of the situation had coincided with Shanley's and had been further stimulated by the fact that the mortar fire had begun to fall among his men.

The Germans moved in and occupied the ground around the farm at the base of the hill. There was nothing that Shanley could do about that for the time being. All along he had searched for mortars, and had failed to find even one tube. With mortars he could have made the lower ground untenable. His bullet-firing weapons were invalidated by the surrounding hedgerows.

TACTICALLY, THE SITUATION on the hill was now quite simple. The position was wholly surrounded and in a state of siege. Pressure against the OPLR had mounted throughout the day and the attack was pressed with especial vigor from out of the northwest, following



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the enemy success against the roadblock to the southeast. The ridge line of which Hill 30 is a part extends in that direction and the enemy mortar batteries were working from a level almost as high as the hill. The worst execution by this fire was among men who had already been removed to the first-aid station for lesser wounds. The men on the outpost line could see groups of the enemy, as many as a platoon in a group, moving not more than a field beyond their own lines and trying steadily to advance their own fire positions along the cover of the hedgerows. But while the line took a beating, and the losses from close-up small arms fire rose until every fifth man was either dead or nursing a wound, the line did not bend. Giving partial encouragement to it, seven 75mm M3 guns from the 319th Field Artillery Battalion were providing it periodic support from Chef du Pont on the other side of the river.

Otherwise the situation was fully desperate. The position had neither food nor medicines, save such as are provided in a first-aid kit. What hurt worst was the lack of plasma. Men were dying whose lives could have been saved. The other men knew it and that demoralized them more than all else. They begged the commanders to do something about it. But Shanley reckoned that the time for sending out search patrols was past and that he had no choice now but to wait it out. His own discomfiture, and the morale of the defenders, were made the worse by the fact that three-fourths of the men on the hill were strangers who had just happened into his command because of the bad drop. His own men were taking it in stride but he sensed that the majority was emotionally beaten.

That night Lindquist radioed Shanley that he was sending a convoy across the causeway to relieve Hill 30. However, first there was the detail of Shanley eliminating the Germans who held the position at the base of the hill. Lt Woodrow Millsaps volunteered for the task, saying that he would be glad to leave the hill. That afternoon Millsaps had been working among the wounded and had heard them cry for water. Among them were a number of men suffering from chest wounds and others who had been hit in the stomach. Shanley had ordered that under no circumstances should they be given water; he thought that the effect might be fatal. But their crying got Millsaps down, and while no one was watching, he divided what water was left in his canteen among the men who seemed to be suffering worst, consoling himself with the thought that they were going to die anyway. Whether the act had pricked his conscience, or he was sweating emotionally because of the inaction, there is at least his own explanation that he wanted to fight his way out because he was convinced that the Hill 30 force was spent and that the only chance for it was to open a line of communications to the east bank.

But he stuck on one point. He said to Warren: "I want my own men. I know by now that I can't control strangers." The argument was lost when a survey showed there weren't enough men from Company B present with

The 319th Field Artillery Battalion gave the besieged troops encouragement with periodic fire. Shown here is the causeway from Chef Du Pont side. Arrows indicate Merderet Bridge and Hill 30.



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weapons and ammunition to compose a squad. So he started out with a scratch force of 23 men picked up from around the perimeter, 2dLt Lloyd L. Polette, Jr., second in command.

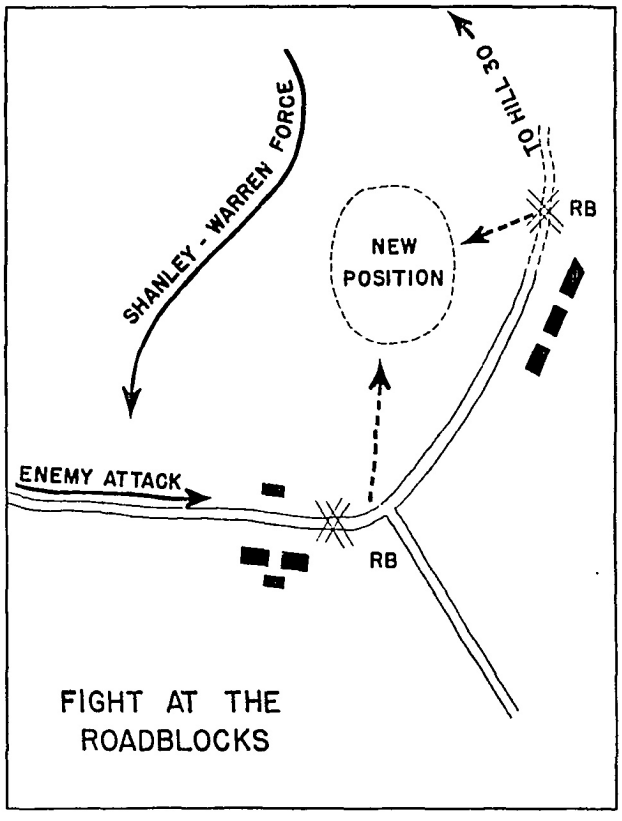
IT WAS ABOUT MIDNIGHT when they left the hill. The arrangements were that they would proceed slowly and carefully toward the position at the base. At 0230 they were supposed to be closed up on it. The seven guns in Chef du Pont would drop 24 rounds on it. When the last round was fired, they would take it in a rush.

At 0230 the patrol was set and waiting. Three rounds of artillery fell squarely on the German position. Then the fire suddenly lifted and switched to the island in the center of the marsh. This unexpected transfer nonplussed Millsaps. He waited for the fire to switch back. Nothing happened. Meanwhile the men were growing restive. When at last the fire against the island died, Millsaps realized that the artillery was through for the night. So he moved on down the road with his men, Polette leading, and himself about two-thirds way back in the column. He knew that if he ordered them to rush now, the enemy would be set and his own men wouldn't respond.

They had gone perhaps 50 yards when a machine gun opened fire on them from directly ahead along the road. The front half of the column broke and "ran like dogs." Millsaps saw them coming. He made a flying reach for one man and nailed him. He was a sergeant. Millsaps said to him: "Goddamit, what are you doing?" and the man replied: "We're getting away from that fire." Millsaps said: "Goddamit, you've got a job to do even if there is fire. Go and collect those men!" He grabbed other men and yelled at them: "Goddamit, stop!" The sergeant had steadied and was now helping Millsaps check the flight. As for Polette, he had stood firm on the forward ground, and the three men closest to him were sticking also. These four now came on back to assist Millsaps in getting the stragglers rounded up and started again.

There had been some scattering rifle fire and a showing of flares from the ground ahead. The road along which the patrol had come from Hill 30 branched right and left where the ground flattened out. The fire had come at them from the lefthand road. In the fork of the road —the immediate foreground—there was an apple orchard to a depth of about 150 feet, and beyond the orchard, a solid cluster of French farmhouses.

Millsaps decided to move his men around to the right and advance through the orchard toward the houses. There was a solid bank of earth running around the orchard, but no hedgerow. It took him about 30 minutes to swing the men around to the right, where they formed a semi-circular line, conforming to the shape of the em-

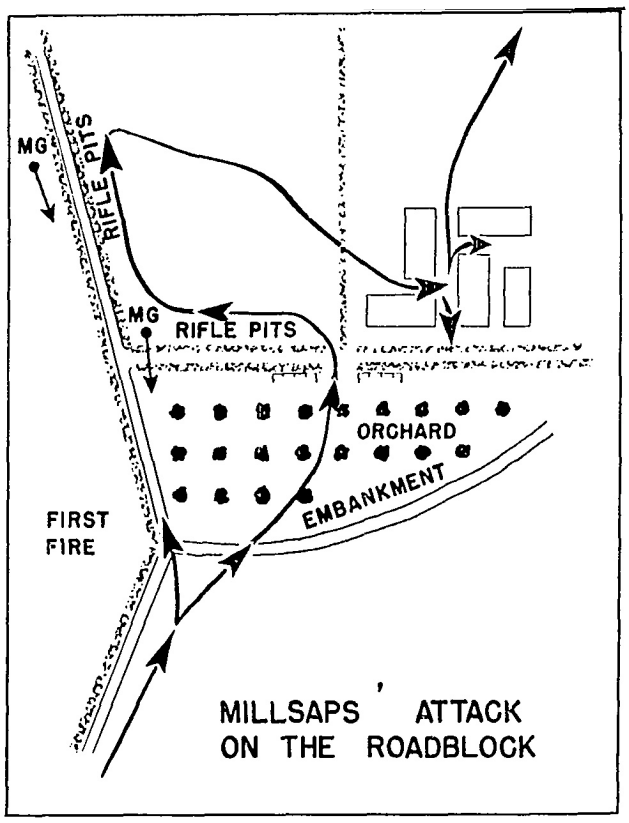


bankment. During this time, the enemy fire had increased. There were now three machine guns and they were all firing a great deal of tracer. Also, they had increased the use of flares and the whole scene was continuously illuminated. The enemy positions did not seem to be organized around any central base of fire but were scattered rather loosely along the hedgerows separating the houses from the orchard and covering a little side path which ran between them. Such was the light and such the noise that Millsaps could see that the conditions were working on the nerves of his men, most of whom were engaging in a close-up fire fight for the first time.

Millsaps passed the word down the line: "Keep moving till we close on them. Hold your fire till I give the word." They went on through the orchard, moving right along until they reached the boundary hedgerow on the far side. This part of the approach caught the enemy unaware. The men were at the hedgerow embankment before a voice, not 20 yards in front of Millsaps, shouted a challenge in German. He fired at the sound with his M1. His men had hit the ground immediately and were firing forward with all weapons. Several were carrying tommy guns. To Millsaps it seemed that the volume of fire built up in a flash second was tremendous. But getting the men to rise and go forward was another matter. They hugged earth. No matter how Millsaps cursed and begged them, they wouldn't budge.

He was acutely aware that if he could not get his

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men back on their feet he was lost. The enemy would come forward and build up fire frontally along the next hedgerow, or perhaps cut his line of retreat. Already he was drawing machine pistol fire from his left rear. So he arose, and walking forward a few yards through a gap in the hedge, yelled for the others to follow. They stayed right where they were. He crawled back to them, going from man to man and saying: "Goddamit, what's the matter with you? Are you afraid." Not a man would admit he was afraid, but each offered some excuse or another: he had been reloading his weapon, or bandaging a wounded man or doing something else that tied him to the ground. Millsaps knew they were lying, because he felt great fear himself. Then Polette came to his aid and the younger man seemed to get better results. Together they bullied and prodded the men for 20 minutes. Then suddenly the dam broke.

The men were all up at once and going through the hedgerow gap at a bound. Such of the enemy as had come up to the next hedgerow either fled or were killed on the spot. Ignoring the buildings on the right, Millsaps' men swung left and back to the road. Flares made the scene bright as day. Enemy riflemen jumped from their fox holes alongside the hedgerows and tried to flee. They were tommy-gunned in their tracks. After emptying a Schmeisser into their ranks, Millsaps picked up an M1 from a sergeant who had suddenly gone limp in front of him, and continued to fire.

A few of the enemy had held their ground. Concussion and white phosphorus grenades fell among the attackers. Some were killed. Others were wounded. But those who remained on their feet seemed oblivious to all danger. They paid no heed to the men who went down. Millsaps was knocked down three times by grenades exploding next to him. But he remained unwounded and the concussion didn't jar him. He saw some of his men stop long enough to shake phosphorus pellets from their clothing and then run on again. When the last German along the road was dead, they swung back to the houses. A thin line of rifle and machine pistol men was still defending there from behind the hedgerow. Millsaps' men charged through the gaps in the row, killing all who still held their ground. Then they went on through the barns where they killed the sheep and cattle. It seemed to Millsaps that they had all become victims of mass hypnosis and that they were acting like men under a spell.

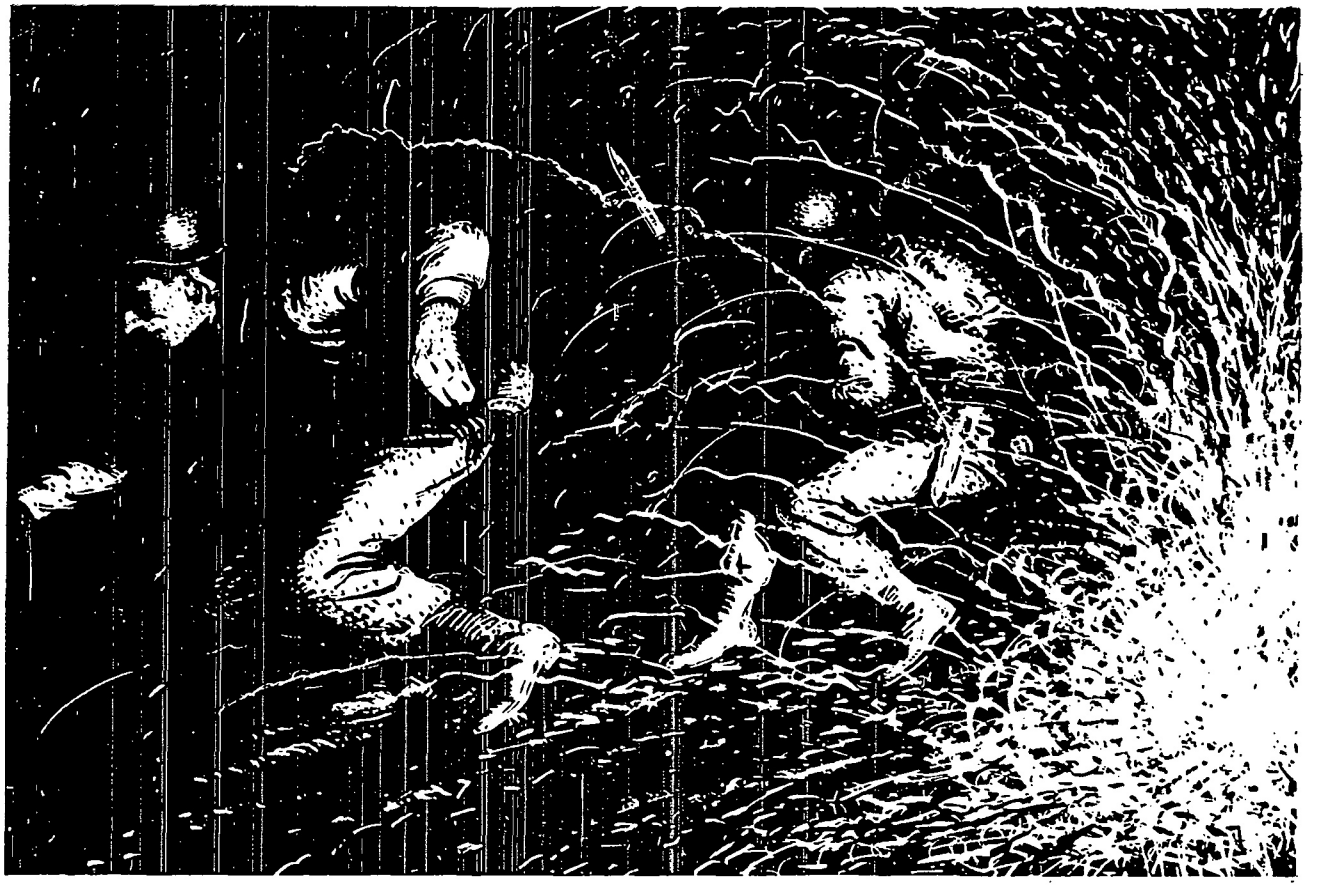
The firing died when there was nothing left to kill. Millsaps outposted the farm area; he thought there was a chance that other enemy forces might press in from the west. By this time his force was cut in half and he needed every hand. One badly wounded man was ordered to help outpost the road. He said: "I can't, lieutenant. I'm dying." Millsaps said: "I know you're dying, but Goddamit, I'm dying, too. Go cover the road!" He knew he was becoming hysterical because he found it difficult to think and talk clearly. The other men were equally over-wrought. They could see numerous dead lying about, but in the bad light they could not tell which were their own and which the enemy. Nor did they try to find out.

Telling Polette to stay and hold the position even if it cost the last man, Millsaps asked for volunteers to cross the causeway with him. Only one man responded. He asked again, but the men remained silent. So he started with his own man, Sgt William Kleinfelter of Company B. A few hundred yards down the causeway, they blundered into a German. Millsaps bayoneted him. Twice more they met enemy soldiers. Millsaps killed them. He felt that he could not afford to encumber himself with prisoners.

During these killings, Kleinfelter had lagged behind, and Millsaps resented it. Finally he said to him: "What's wrong with you? Can't you keep up?" Kleinfelter said: "I think I'm shot." Millsaps removed Kleinfelter's jump jacket then and looked him over. There were six bullet holes through his left arm and shoulder. By the time he had completed his examination Kleinfelter was so weak that he could scarcely rise. Millsaps had to carry most of his weight till they got to the American outpost line on the far side of the Merderet, where he dropped the wounded man, and then went on, looking for Lindquist.

During this passage the causeway had been getting a

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The Germans dropped concussion and white phosphorous grenades among the attackers. Some were killed, some wounded. The others stopped long enough to shake off the pellets and ran on.

considerable mortar and artillery fire from south of the Douve. The commander on the east bank, taking a dim view of this resistance, decided that it would be too costly to send a truck column across the causeway, and so advised Shanley. As dawn neared, Shanley decided to withdraw Polette and the men who were holding the west end of the road. Again his decision was based on the principle that it would probably save the lives of a certain number of men. The recall had taken effect at just about the time Millsaps reached the opposite shore. His description of the desperate condition of the Hill 30 force and of his easy experience in crossing the causeway so persuaded the Chef du Pont commander that he called Shanley by radio and told him that he was readying the convoy to move west. But Polette's men had already moved up the hill, and with the light well up, Shanley was afraid that if he tried to advance in force toward the farmhouses again, he would bring on a fresh engagement. He asked that the convoy not be sent. A little later he sent a patrol to Chef du Pont. Wading the marsh to north of the causeway, it returned with a supply of blood plasma, thus easing the main problem of Hill 30 prior to the arrival of the relieving force. This exploit showed that the enemy was no longer in position to interdict the valley with small arms fire.

On the following day, Lindquist put another battalion of 508th across the river and established it in Shanley's right, thus relieving the position. Thereon the enemy forces which had been crowding Hill 30 faded back. The whole situation along the Merderet had changed by this time. With both the Chef du Pont and La Fiere crossings passing into American hands, the Germans on the west bank between these two bridgeheads came into full jeopardy. They took it on the run, abandoning four infantry howitzers with their prime movers, and 12 machine guns among other weapons, along the ground where they had confronted Shanley just to the north of Hill 30.

In the beginning, it was said that the battalion achieved nothing great. That was the view taken of its contribution at the time, largely because it had become isolated, because it couldn't join up with the others and because its relief became their problem.

But in view of the large strategic consequence of its effort and of the clear decisions of the commander which never deviated from the line most likely to produce the grand result, it would seem to be a fair question: Was it not a lodestar pulling the larger bodies on? US MC

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