

Spearhead – Advance and Defend - By Harold Harris and Mark Graham

SPEARHEAD
Advance and Defend

A World War II Soldier Remembers

BY
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SAMPLE CHAPTER

FROM ST. LO TO PARIS

June 29, 1944 – August 23, 1944

You always had some thought in mind as to whether or not you were going to survive. Men were dying all around you. They were being wounded and carted off on stretchers, some of them moaning from the pain, others half dead. You went days without sleep, eating bad food, and listening to gunfire all around you. It was hell.

Activity once we were on shore ran at a fever pitch. After two and a half years of preparation, we were finally days away from engaging the enemy, an enemy that a lot of people thought were better equipped than we were and more war hardened. The latter was certainly true. I could hear the sounds of war in the distance, and I realized no amount of training could prepare you for it.

There was an improvised airstrip a stone's throw away from where the 1st Battalion assembled, and fighter planes were roaring down the runway ever other minute. This wasn't practice. The 1st Battalion hit the ground under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Elwyn Blanchard. We found out fast that Blanchard was a front line guy. He gave the orders, and then he went out and carried them out right along side you.

Our platoon spent 24 hours in a crowded assembly area de-waterproofing our half-tracks, stocking them with .81mm bombs, and running through final maintenance checks. Suddenly, it hit you that this was the vehicle you were going to have to count on to get you into the action and to get you out of trouble. We stored our mortar behind the driver's

seat. The .50 caliber machine gun looked out over the open turret. Our packs were stocked with K-rations, rain gear, and one or two reminders of home. Some guys carried letters from their girlfriends or pictures of their wives; one guy in Battalion carried a lucky key chain, another carried a Zippo lighter, and a third had a seashell he'd brought all the way from California.

I checked over my rifle and pistol for probably the thousandth time. I checked and doubled checked the radios in all three vehicles, and then I went from man-to-man and said whatever I thought I needed to say. In the end, it all amounted to 'kill the other guy before he kills you,' though I never used those exact words.

Eventually, orders were issued.

Every unit and every platoon was supplied with recon and topographical maps. The very small world of the 1st Platoon revolved around those maps and the orders that came with them; you hoped someone had done their job well. We were twenty or so guys in a task force of 2,000 men. The logistics were overwhelming. Some confusion in the ranks was unavoidable; still we had to trust that the men in charge had a plan that made sense. The problem was, it didn't always make sense and questioning orders was not an option. Then again, sometimes following orders was the only thing that made sense.

'Kill or be killed' wasn't just a slogan invented by some newspaperman from Stars and Stripes; it was a fact of life. We were about to find that out. That was war. One day you were running track at your high school and flirting with the girls, your future something to be reckoned with down the road, and the next day you were lobbing .81mm mortar shells at men with rifles and bazookas and wondering how it came to this.

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We were told that the objective was a place called Villiers-Fossard, where the Germans were holding a tract of ground 3,000 yards deep just east of the Vire River. Combat Command A's orders were to take and hold the town. Elements of the 32nd Armored Regiment, including our platoon, took the point. With us was an infantry regiment, a battalion of tank destroyers, recon, a team of engineers, and a squad of tank dozers. We swept into a stretch of flat, heavily forested ground protected by tall hedgerows that separated the fields and farms of Normandy. The hedgerows were nothing short of vicious. They were taller by several feet than a man, which meant we didn't know who or what was behind them. We only knew that the Germans had most of them staked out with infantry and artillery, and we found out quickly that the enemy had every crossroad and every highway targeted. Along the hedgerows it was like playing hide and seek, a very dangerous game of hide and seek.

We also found out that the tanks in our unit were no match for the hedgerows, so the tank dozers – which were really just ordinary tanks fitted out with bulldozer blades – were called up. The mortar patrols and the artillery gave the tank dozers cover, but they were still under intense pressure from artillery and anti-tank fire. Once they had hacked a path through the hedgerows, we broke through. It was my first close encounter with German gunfire, and it all sort of ran together: the shriek of 'incoming mail,' as we called German artillery; the crack and thunder of an .88 millimeter bomb exploding nearby; the spit and crack of small arms fire; even the sound of men screaming. Suddenly, we were facing an enemy who had been at war for years. It was a fearful experience wading into a stream of rifle fire or the silent hail of mortar fire. I felt fear like I had never felt before, but I also felt supercharged with adrenaline. And then there was

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the awful sense that this was what we were supposed to be there for. You knew that you were going to be shot at. Every man worried about that first encounter with potential death, seeing death first hand, and knowing full well it could be you. All you could do was react and hope the fear didn't immobilize you. I got the guys moving, which got me moving. We set up our own weapons and more or less neutralized some of their fire. That was all that could be done.

No one told me or the other guys in my unit that that the odds were about fifty-fifty that an infantryman doing what we were doing would be killed or wounded during the course of the war. That revelation would come eventually, but I was glad I didn't know it at the time. Outside the town, we set up firing positions for three weapons. We waited for the fighter-bombers to make their pass and then a wave of artillery. The noise was overpowering. The stench of cordite and gun powder and trees bursting into flames was enough to make a man sick. Then we cleared our targets and pressed on. I knew that this was only a taste of what was to come. Everywhere you turned, black smoke and gray dust filled the air. Fire from German Mausers split the air, and the ominous crack of mortars exploding rocked the ground. Artillery flashes lit the surrounding trees, and the brittle scent of anti-tank guns carried on the wind.

While the taking of Villiers-Fossard turned out to be a lesser battle compared to those we were soon to wage, frontal attacks against the hedgerows were suicidal nonetheless, and the battle took a heavy toll. We lost 31 tanks, 18 officers, and over three hundred enlisted men. It was the veteran German soldier against Americans so green and raw that we ducked from the sound of our own outgoing artillery.

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After we had taken the town, we were relieved by the 29th Infantry Division. This would prove to be a typical pattern: take the town and leave it to the infantry to mop up. We had 12 hours to think about what we had just been through. We had 12 hours to refuel our half-tracks, restock our armament, and eat a hot meal. Then the rains came, buckets and buckets that drenched the French countryside and turned the roads to quagmires of mud.

New orders came down from Regimental Headquarters on July 7th. Combat Command 'A' crossed back over the Vire River and turned west toward the tiny town of St. Jean de Daye. We discovered the Germans strongly entrenched. We were less than a mile from the town when we encountered enemy paratroopers and absolutely fierce artillery fire. Their infantry was dug in along the outskirts of the town, and machine gun fire strafed the ground from bunkers set on the high ground, protecting their flanks.

The Germans, I began to realize, intended to fight for the territory they had won over the last four years. By this time in the European Theater of Operations, ETO as it was called, a third of every one of their soldiers had been wounded in combat. Combat was second nature to them. Not so for the 3rd Armored Division. We had no option but to learn fast. You either learned on the fly or you didn't learn at all. And it showed in the casualty rate. By the 17th of July, 19 days after we landed on Omaha Beach, the Division had lost nearly 800 men and 80 tanks, which amounted to nearly a tenth of our men and 20% of our tanks. I would have never thought it possible. All told, we had traveled 20 miles. And it was right about then that the first chemical gas scare surfaced. The news traveled fast and caused widespread alarm from one end of Normandy to the other. Interestingly, one alarm after another proved false. But we were no different than any

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other soldier who had come before us or who would come after, we had to learn the sights and smells of battle, and the smells more than anything would find a permanent place in my memory. Gun smoke, singed metal, explosives, smoldering ash, flaming trees, even decaying flesh.

After St. Jean de Daye, the rain and heavy clouds brought our advance to a slow grind. As we would do every time there was a lull in the action, we used the delay to retool. Every man would check and recheck his equipment. We replenished our packs, filled the tanks of the half-tracks, and restocked our armament. Mostly, we tried to stay dry, because it rained for days on end.

Next came the industrial city of St. Lo and the dug-in German forces that controlled the area west and south of the city. The St. Lo Breakthrough was to be the greatest coordinated air and ground attack in history; that was what the newspapers would call it. Later, the same newspapers would call it a ‘turning point in history.’ Before St. Lo, it was the German Army that wielded the upper hand; but for the first time since 1940, opposing forces made up of American, British, and French troops would steal that initiative.

I didn’t see it that way, and neither did the guys in my platoon. What we saw was a hedgerow that might be hiding a German Tiger tank or the flash of a sniper’s Mauser. Our reality was the German machine gun nest a hundred yards away from us or a crossroads guarded by an enemy tank or one of their mortar patrols. That was what we saw. In our minds, there was no grand scheme or master plan. When someone was aiming a weapon with a good mile range and a firing capacity of 1,000 rounds a minute at you or a tank was tracking your team with a 90mm rocket capable of demolishing a nine-ton half-track with one shot, you didn’t think about turning points in history.

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One thing I did know from the maps we were carrying was that the ‘breakthrough’ measured a piece of ground no bigger than Manhattan Island, from the towns of Marigny and St. Benoit to St. Gilles and the city of St. Lo. The push came on the morning of July 26th when the clouds finally parted and the rain stopped. Clear skies meant the return of the fighters, hundreds of them. Following on their heels came wave after wave after wave of Fortress and Liberator bombers. It was a sight like nothing I could have imagined in my most vivid dreams. Their numbers were so great that you could have mistaken them for storm clouds rolling across the sky. The roar of their engines was like an endless roll of thunder.