



NO BETTER PLACE TO DIE THAN THIS

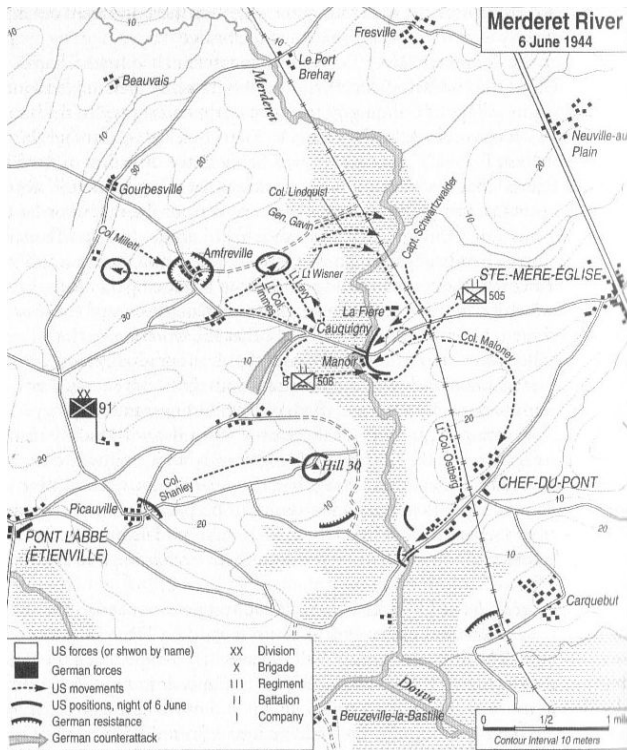


A / 505 P.I.R. / 82nd AIRBORNE
La Fiere Bridge, June 6th – 8th, 1944

By
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At 2300h, June 5th, 1944, 13,000 Paratroopers headed for Normandy, France, the vanguard of the Allied invasion forces intent on the liberation of Europe. 147 of those men comprised Company A of the 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. Their sole mission was to seize and hold the bridge over the Merderet River West of Ste. Mere-Eglise denying its use to German forces moving towards the Utah Beachhead.

Company A/505 Parachute Infantry Regiment, lead by 1st Lt. John “Red Dog” Dolan, jumped into France at 0151h, June 6th. It was possibly the best jump of the deployment. By about 0400h, Lt. Dolan had 98% of his company assembled and headed for their objective.



As the Company approached to within 600 yards of the bridge, Lt. Donald Coxon, Commander of the 3rd Platoon, led his scouts forward along a hedgerow. A German MG42 opened up on them killing Coxon and two of his scouts. So began Company A's three day battle for the La Fiere Bridge.

While 1st Lt. George Presnell led the 2nd Platoon on a flanking maneuver Lt. Dolan and Major James McGinity, 1st Battalion 2IC, moved the rest of A Company forward. A German ambush killed McGinity instantly and a sharp firefight broke out for the possession of the La Fiere Manor buildings. By 0930h, Company A had won possession of the La Fiere Manor and set up defensive positions adjacent to the bridge. Lt. John Otto, Commander of the Company A weapons platoon, deployed his mortars and machine guns to support the infantry platoons. Also, it was about this time that Lt. David Connally, Jr. arrived with his 3rd Platoon of Company B, 307th Parachute Engineers. He brought along with him a 57mm anti-tank gun from C Battery of the 80th AAA Battalion.

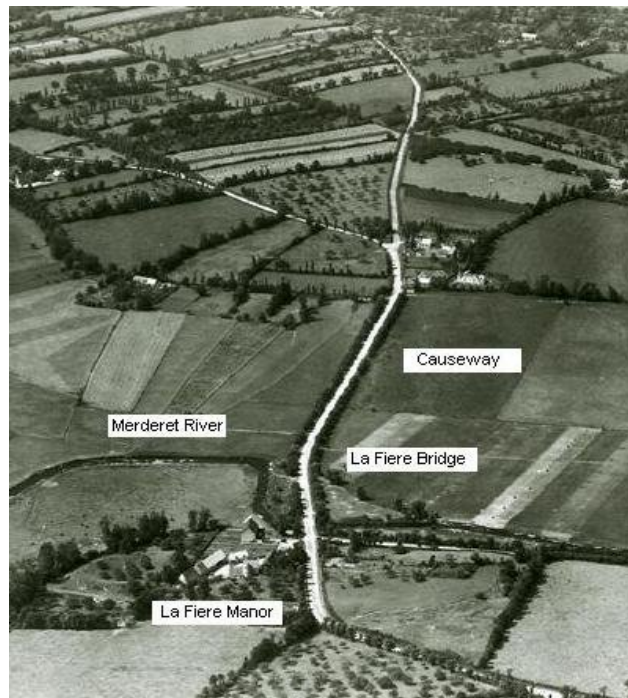
At 1600h in the afternoon of June 6th, preceded by a heavy preparatory bombardment by mortars and artillery, the German forces launched a counter-attack to recapture the bridge. Elements of the 1057th Grenadier Regiment and 100th Panzer Replacement Battalion of the 91st Air Landing Division moved up the causeway towards the bridge. When the 3 tanks and 200 German infantry were about 40 yards from the bridge, Company A opened up with every thing they had. Two Company A bazooka teams engaged the tanks at short range. Bazooka gunner Pvt. Lenold Peterson with

assistant gunner Pvt. Marcus Heim, Jr. and bazooka gunner Pvt. John Bolderson with assistant gunner Gordon Payne broke cover to engage the tanks. Amidst heavy small arms fire, both teams loaded and fired. After several hits the first tank was set ablaze. Bolderson's bazooka was put out of action when it was holed by enemy fire. Peterson continued to engage the second enemy tank and scored seven hits before it burst into flames. The 57mm anti-tank gun engaged and destroyed the third enemy tank. With their armored support destroyed the German infantry withdrew leaving a large number of dead and wounded behind. All four men of the bazooka teams miraculously survived and were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for this action. Peterson was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor, but the request went unanswered. It was also during this fight that the 505 P.I.R. 1st Battalion Commander, Major Frederick Kellam, was killed by a mortar burst while gathering ammunition for the defending troopers. Command of the Battalion passed to 1st Lt. Dolan as senior officer on site.

The Germans continued to bombard the position throughout the night. At 0130h, June 7th a second 57mm anti-tank gun arrived and was put into the defense. Company A had suffered over 25% casualties during its first day of the invasion and ammunition supplies were beginning to run short. The men of Company A had no way of knowing that the worst was yet to come.

Daybreak of June 7th brought another heavy mortar and artillery bombardment. The German 91st Division had massed its forces during the night and was determined to breakthrough Company A's position and move to counter-attack U.S. forces landing at Utah Beach. The German attack began at 1000h, four tanks along with 200 to 300 infantry advanced along the causeway which was already littered with the dead and wrecked vehicles from the previous days attack. Just like the previous day, the bazooka teams and the 57mm guns met the attack head on. The first two German tanks made it no further than those of the first attack, but the remaining two penetrated the defenses and moved onto the bridge before being destroyed. These wrecked vehicles provided the Germans with an improvised barricade to fight behind. The two forces became locked in a deadly firefight at a range of less than 40 yards.

When 1st Platoon Commander, Lt. William Oakley, was killed, the leadership of what was left of 1st Platoon was passed on to Squad Leader Sgt. Bill Owens. Sgt. Owens stood in the open and rallied his men by his own fearless example. He found a B.A.R. and fired it until out of ammunition. He then took over a LMG whose crew had been killed and fired off its remaining rounds. The crisis point had arrived. The issue would be decided on the ground held by the 1st Platoon. If they withdrew the whole position would go. With his men at the breaking point, Sgt. Owens sent a runner to Lt. Dolan to ask what he should do. Lt. Dolan replied with a short written note "I don't know a better place than this to die" and added verbally "Stay where you are". It was in these mad moments that Company A met and overcame their crisis. A few minutes after Lt. Dolan's note reached Sgt. Owens, the Germans withdrew and asked for a cease fire to remove their wounded. This request was gladly granted. After the cease fire ended the Germans resumed their bombardment of the position, but did not attack again that day. Lt. Dolan recommended Sgt. Owens for the Distinguished Service Cross for this action, but the request went unanswered.



Mid-morning of June 8th, D+2, Company A was relieved by the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment along with elements of the 507th P.I.R. and a Platoon of Sherman Tanks from the 746th Tank Battalion. As Company A prepared to move from its positions at La Fiere Bridge, 1st Sgt. William Matteson said "If people don't think men get killed in war, they should look at this company." Of the 147 men that jumped with A Company, 66 were killed or suffered serious wounds and another 20 wounded stood in formation. By their courage and sacrifice, the bridge at La Fiere was held.

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