

Numbers, Figures, Statistics, Lives

Even today we read news accounts of war in far-away places and we look for the numbers, the figures, the statistics. We consider combat to be a grim business, mostly carried out by people we don't know in places we haven't been. We fail to comprehend the overwhelming violence of combat; fail to comprehend that the numbers marching across the page represent lives changed by the squeeze of a trigger or the yank of a lanyard. We see the casualty figures but often miss that each number represents a life.

In the aftermath of D-Day, American forces ashore in France faced the grim challenge of rooting German defenders from the Norman country-side, a checkerboard region characterized by tall, thick hedgerows which seemed to border every farmer's field and pasture—and which provided ideal cover and concealment for the defenders. The only way to displace the entrenched, veteran Germans was through bloody attrition.

The summer of 1944 found Earle Watson Blackmon of Hickory Grove, South Carolina far away from home and a member of the American Army battling to liberate France from four years of occupation by Germany. Watson graduated from Hickory Grove High School and enrolled at Clemson College as a member of the Class of 1943 majoring in engineering. He apparently attended Clemson only for a year before accepting employment in Columbia. Blackmon was inducted into the Army on October 23, 1943. Seventeen months later, as a member of the 329th Infantry Regiment of the 83rd Division, he sailed for England.

By late June, General Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group had established a secure beachhead in Normandy. Men, tanks, trucks, food, fuel, ammunition and other war materiel were being stockpiled in anticipation of puncturing the German lines and driving across France to the Rhine. The 329th was one of the units waiting its turn to join the battle.

By July 2, Blackmon and his unit, M Company, 3rd Battalion of the 329th Infantry Regiment, were bivouacked two and a half miles west of Carentan, near the base of the Contentin Peninsula. M Company's daily log recorded that, although not yet committed to combat, it had been harassed by enemy artillery fire. 158 officers and enlisted men were marked present for duty.

The regiment's first contact with the enemy came on Independence Day, when two companies from 2nd Battalion collided with dug-in German positions. E and F Companies suffered heavy casualties, their strength reduced to approximately 50% by those killed, wounded and missing.

At 0900 the following morning, 3rd Battalion was committed to the action, attacking toward Coulot. At 1100, "strong enemy forces" delayed the attack. The Germans effectively employed heavy machine guns, mortars and 88 mm guns to thwart the American advance. Thirty



**E. W. Blackmon
To Be Buried
At York Friday**



minutes later, the battalion encountered and then cleared a minefield. By late afternoon, the battalion had captured its objective—but the battle wasn't over. In the dying light of the long summer day, the Germans launched a counterattack on 3rd Battalion's left flank. This brought forth a desperate call for ammunition, medical supplies and artillery support. By the time the exhausted combatants beat off the attack after two days of fighting, the battalion had suffered 10% casualties—including Staff Sergeant Blackmon.

We often forget the stunning cost in lives of World War II. We forget that the liberation of France was achieved not by the brilliant campaigns of the famous generals, but by the selfless sacrifice of the men who fought on the ground, on the sea and in the air—men like Earle Watson Blackmon.

