







BUSTING THE *BOCAGE* (PP. 68–69)

By mid-July 1944, several units in the First US Army were developing new techniques to permit tanks to cut through the hedgerow. While this could be accomplished using dozer tanks, at most there were four of these tanks per battalion. The 747th Tank Battalion (1), attached to the 29th Division, worked with Lt. Col. Robert Ploger's 121st Engineer Combat Battalion to develop ways to rapidly breach the *bocage*. During an attack on June 24, 1944, the engineers placed a pair of 24-pound charges 8ft apart at the base of a hedge. This did blow a gap large enough for a tank to pass through, but the engineers decided that a charge double the size was really needed. Ploger began a more careful study of the problem. A tank company, penetrating 1½ miles through *bocage* country, would on average encounter 34 separate hedgerows. This would require 17 tons of explosive per company or about 60 tons per battalion. This was clearly beyond the resources of any engineer battalion. Ploger and the tankers continued to experiment with explosive breaching, and found that a much smaller charge could be used if it could be buried deep within

the base of the hedge. However, digging holes in the hedge while under fire was both time-consuming and dangerous. One of the tankers came up with the idea of fitting a pair of timber prongs on the front of each tank, called a "salad fork" (2). When a breach in the *bocage* was needed, a tank would charge across the field and embed the prongs in the base of the hedge. When the tank backed out, it would pull out the timber prong, leaving small tunnels (3). The engineers pre-packaged 15 pounds of explosive in the fiber-board containers used to transport 105mm artillery ammunition (4). Two of these improvised demolition charges could create a gap wide enough for a tank and the accompanying infantry. Small M29 Weasel tracked utility vehicles would follow the tank-engineer team, bringing along extra explosives, as seen here (5). The use of these tactics in combat in mid-July had very mixed results with some units feeling that they were too elaborate and time consuming. Neighboring units took the salad fork idea one step further and developed the "Rhino" hedge-cutter that permitted a tank to breach a hedgerow without the need for explosives.



The attack on the Martinville Ridge on July 15–16 by the 29th Division was supported by specially modified tanks of the 747th Tank Battalion, fitted with two timber prongs on the bow to create cavities in the base of hedgerows. After impaling the timber prongs into the hedgerow, the tank withdrew and accompanying engineers filled the cavities with prepared explosive charges to blow gaps into the hedgerows.

outpost line was especially well defended as well as being heavily mined. After a slow start, the 116th Infantry attack began to pick up momentum, and the 2/116th Infantry began to reach its objective to the east of Martinville by afternoon. The pace of the advance was good enough that by mid-afternoon, Gen. Gebhardt encouraged the 116th Infantry to try to reach St Lô itself. Even after the 175th Infantry was sent to reinforce the advance, the objective was beyond its grasp. The advance of the 116th Infantry was assisted by the fighting in the neighboring 2nd Infantry Division sector, especially the success of the 23rd Infantry around Hill 192 as described below.

In contrast to the steady progress by the 116th Infantry, the neighboring 115th Infantry had a very hard time and was unable to take its objectives, the small villages of La Luzerne and Belle-Fontaine. In spite of the lack of progress, German casualties continued to mount, in no small measure due to the heavy American divisional artillery support that totaled 13,000 rounds that day alone.



A paratrooper armed with one of the rare FG 42 automatic rifles with its distinctive side magazine. These were built in very small numbers, around 7,000, and it probably identifies him as serving in one of the *Sturmtruppen* of Fallschirm-Aufklarungs-Abteilung 12, the corps-level reconnaissance battalion of II Fallschirmjäger-Korps that was equipped with this weapon.