

The Attack on the Maisy Battery

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Photographs by Gary Sterne

On the morning of D+3, June 9, 1944, A, C and F of the 5th Rangers, still under Major Sullivan, were detached from the 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry. In its advance to the south, the 116th Infantry had encountered severe resistance from German strongpoints at La Martiniere, 3/4 of a mile, SSW of Maisy and Les Perruques, 1/2 mile SW of Maisy. La Martiniere is located at artillery registration point "16" and Les Perruques at point "5". Together these two connected positions were called "The Maisy Battery". The 116th's objective was Isigny not Maisy, so the 116th Infantry, after calling in some naval gunfire, bypassed these German positions leaving them for the 5th Rangers.

There was a third artillery battery position in the Maisy complex. It's target number was 16A. It was located. It contained 150-mm field howitzers. It was destroyed on June 8th by the USS Shoebrick, a destroyer, using an artillery spotter airplane and high register fire. It seems the position was located on the back slope of a hill and low register fire fell short into the hill or long into the valley beyond. This battery played no part in the battle on June 9, 1944.



The Maisy battery was quite a formidable fortification. It consisted of three batteries of artillery, extensive minefields, a major communications center and a large medical complex. There were, of course, many troops to defend such an important fortification. These troops included Army, SS and Luftwaffe personnel.

Les Perruques was home to a six gun battery of 155-mm Schneider World War I howitzers. Four of these guns were in concrete pits and two were in open emplacements. Since the howitzers had a maximum range of a little more than 12,000 yards, about a half mile short of the D-1 or Vierville Exit, the howitzers appear to have had a principal mission of defending the Vire River valley from amphibious assault rather than defending Omaha Beach. In all probability, the Maisy 155-mm howitzers were used against the 2nd Rangers on Pointe du Hoc and against



Metcalf's relief force for Pointe du Hoc as it attacked through St. Pierre du Mont on D+1. La Martiniere had four 10-cm Skoda Field Howitzers. These guns had been rebored to the standard German 105-mm caliber to simplify ammunition resupply logistics. Three of these guns were in casemates and one was in an open pit with the casemate for it under construction.



The German defensive positions from Grandcamp and Maisy westward along the coast and up the Vire valley showed a genuine fear that an Allied attack could come up the valley. From Grandcamp westward there were 20 Widerstandsnester (WNs), small resistance points manned by a squad or more, plus supporting minefields. On the western side of the valley in the VIIth Corps area there were an additional six such WNs, blocking entry into the Vire valley from the Utah Beach side as well.

Les Perruques, WN 83 and La Martiniere, WN 84 were two of the more gigantic resistance points, gigantic because they contained artillery and other facilities as well as Infantry fighting positions.

The minefields protecting the Maisy complex were extensive. While the position itself was about 1200 yards by 500 yards, the minefields were 1200 yards by over 1000 yards. The mines outside the perimeter of the Maisy fortifications were oriented to block an attack from the northwest, the Vire River Valley. Most of the mines were anti-personnel, "Bouncing Bettys". In the area where A Company would attack, these mines were connected together in sets of about ten. When one mine of the ten was tripped the others would also detonate. And that happened when Pfc John Bellows of A Company tripped a mine. Zipkac, Siemens, Baptist and Burke were

wounded. (Burke)

The anti-tank mines needed to complete the minefield had not been delivered by D-Day. The entire area was clearly marked with “Achtung Minen” signs.



5th Ranger Lee Brown

As he approached the fortifications, Major Sullivan had three 5th Ranger Companies, two 75-mm gun half-tracks from the 2nd Ranger Battalion, and Company B, 81st Chemical Weapons Battalion. The latter unit was armed with 4.2-inch mortars. Major Sullivan made his headquarters in one of the 2nd Rangers’ half-tracks. During the approach march, I was at the rear end of the column with a small headquarters element. Crossing through the hedgerows and fields we were taken under long range machine gun fire several times. However, we were beyond tracer burn-out and the Germans were never able to adjust their fire well enough to even bother us.

Because of the extensive mine fields protecting the German strongpoint at Maisy, Major Sullivan decided to approach the position from the north, initially in a column of companies with F Company in the lead followed by A Company with C Company in reserve. Sullivan had an artillery liaison officer with him and put him to good work. The 58th Armored Field Artillery Battalion bombarded the Maisy positions in preparation for the 5th Ranger advance. Support during the attack was provided by the 81st’s 4.2-inch mortars, the two 75-mm cannon mounted on the 2nd Ranger’s halftracks and the four 81-mm mortars of C Company of the 5th Rangers.

Company F moved down the dirt road just north of gridline 92. At about 0800 hours, the company came under fire at about. The company deployed, took cover and began an exchange of scattered rifle with neither side accomplishing much.

A Company then passed by F Company on its right in its approach to its line of departure for an attack on La Martiniere. The area to the left of the path A Company was on was quite swampy, and in this swampy area, A Company came across some dead American paratroopers who had been dropped miles from their intended drop zones. Some had drowned, some had been caught up in the trees and gunned down by the German defenders. (Parker).

Four paratroopers had been captured by the Germans early on D-Day between Maisy and Gefosse-Fontenay and brought to Maisy. Seventeen additional paratroopers were captured in later on D-Day actions. These paratroopers were placed in one of the hospitals on the south edge of La Martiniere and later evacuated before the A Co attack. (Sterne)

When opposite La Martiniere, A Company heard heavy firing as F Company began its attack on Les Perruques. A Company took this as a signal to begin its attack on La Martiniere. Captain Parker ordered the company to “Fix Bayonets!” The company immediately wheeled to the left and attacked across a boggy area. The company’s initial attack bogged down in deep water as it crossed a flooded area, and it was necessary to pull back and move more to the west for a second attack. A Company’s second attack progressed well, penetrating the La Martiniere position, with some of the German defenders laying down their weapons and surrendering. However, some German officers, possibly SS, began shouting threats and shooting some of their own men in the back. From there on, the defense stiffened and nobody dared surrender. (Parker)

Abandoning the fire fight it had been in, F Company crossed the boggy area and began an attack straight down the line of outer fortifications. This outer line consisted of seven tobruks, or machine gun pill boxes spaced about 200 yards apart. Lieut. Reville’s platoon would smother the tobruk with small arms fire. Then move several Rangers close enough to throw grenades and satchel charges into the open top pit. Three tobruks were reduced this way by which time the enemy was demoralized. (Reville)

Meanwhile other things were happening. A Company began to receive heavy rifle and machine gun fire from the south and east. It’s attack was slowed as it had to slug its way through the position. Dr. Petrick was with A Company during this attack.. He set up an aid station right behind the attacking forces and impressed a German doctor he found to assist in treating the wounded of both sides.

C Company and the cannon platoon had turned down the southerly road from Maisy and swinging to the right, C Company attacked Les Perruques from the south east. C Co's mortars were left in position near that same point. The self-propelled guns supported C Co's attack with direct fire on targets of opportunity. During this attack, Major Sullivan dismounted from his halftrack to get closer control over the battle. He was wounded, though not seriously when a nearby mine detonated. As C Company and F Company began to interfere with each other's operations, Sullivan ordered C Company to withdraw and after moving south west, C Company turned to its right and attacked northeast from through the forces giving A Company so much resistance (Sterne)

Despite the mine fields and stubborn resistance, the Maisy Battery was successfully captured in a 5 hour battle by this three pronged attack. A fairly large number of D Company Rangers were involved in the attack on Maisy, scattered throughout the attacking companies. As the medic attached to A Company, Jack Burke, put it, "at that point we were often bundled together by anyone - especially if people couldn't find the exact location of their own unit."

After the battle, the two half tracks were sent back to the beach with the wounded. La Martiniere contained three ten centimeter howitzers, (the fourth gun was probably destroyed by bombing and/or naval gunfire), large stocks of ammunition and other supplies and about 90 defenders who became POWs. (AAR, 5th RIB)

The Les Perruques position contained six 155-mm Schneider howitzers, a major headquarters complex and about 50 prisoners. The guns in the 16A position had been destroyed by naval gunfire before the attack began. The POWs and the position were turned over to elements of the 29th division. (Sterne)

180 tons of ammunition were removed from the Maisy site by Engineer units after the battle. (Sterne)

Ace Parker, the A Company Commander, later told me that, as far as he was concerned, the fight at Maisy was far worse than the Omaha Beach landings of four days earlier.



*5th Ranger veterans
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