

NORMANDIE 1944 MAGAZINE #6
 Cover Story: Selected Article:
 "August 1944 The Vise Tightens"



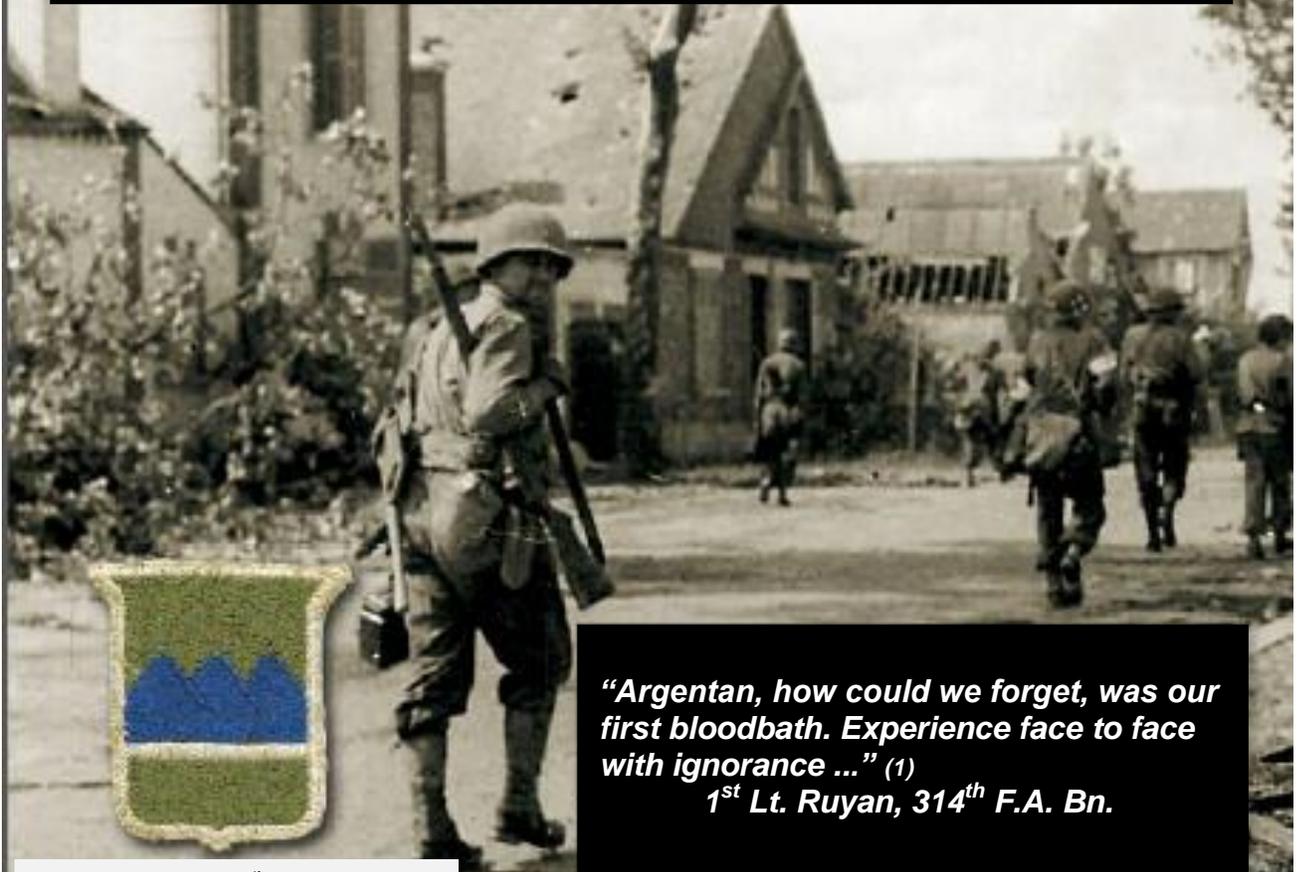
Selected Article:
 "Baptism By Fire in
 Argentan: The First
 Engagement of
 August 18-19, 1944"
 by Tristan Rondeau

English translation
 by Dennis Adams
 March 2013

Battle: The 80th Infantry Division at Argentan

Baptism by fire in Argentan: The first engagement of August 18-19, 1944

The fighting to take Argentan, led by the soldiers of the 80th U.S. Infantry Division, was undoubtedly one of the rare episodes of the Trun-Chambois Pocket never to have been the subject of any rigorous or precise study. From August 17-21 of 1944, however, this freshly debarked unit underwent a baptism by fire: it was at the cost of heavy losses that the G.I.s finally succeeded in surrounding the town.



“Argentan, how could we forget, was our first bloodbath. Experience face to face with ignorance ...” (1)

1st Lt. Ruyan, 314th F.A. Bn.

The insignia of the 80th Division, adopted in 1918. The three blue peaks symbolize the Blue Ridge Mountain chain, which stretches across the three states of Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia, from which the division's recruits during World War I originated. (Collection of the author.)

At right: This photograph was taken by a German soldier in Argentan, in the courtyard of the Joan of Arc Institute. The ruins upon which this Flak-Regiment 159 soldier is leaning were caused by the terrible aerial bombardment on the night of June 6. (Private collection)



by Tristan Rondeau

The 80th Infantry Division (1)



In 1944, Argentan is a quiet locality of the Orne, a town of 7,000 inhabitants. On the night of June 5-6, the town is shaken by the horror of the war when it is hit by the first aerial bombardment in a long, murderous series. Argentan has been in Allied hands since August 13, but the 5th and 2nd Armored Divisions, after having unsuccessfully attempted to break through on that day, receive the order to stop just outside the town and to advance no further. After recalling the 5th Armored Division, the American command decides to expedite another unit to capture Argentan: the 80th Infantry Division.



Brigadier General Horace L. McBride (1894-1962). A graduate of the West Point military academy and World War I veteran, he commands the 80th Division from 1943 until the end of the conflict. Afterwards, he continues his service in the US Army until his retirement in 1954. (NARA.)

A veteran unit of the First World War, this division rolled out onto French soil a second time upon landing on Utah Beach on August 3, 1944. It moved quickly toward Avranches, then toward Mayenne. On August 17, the unit received abrupt orders: it must reach Argentan at once in order to attack on the following day. Owing to this haste, a third of the troops of the unit (including the 319th Infantry Regiment) cannot leave the Angers sector and do not participate in the Argentan action.

Objectives: Argentan and Hill 213

Consequently on August 17, the 318th Infantry Regiment leaves its positions in Mayenne at 4:20 a.m. and reaches Mortrée, about ten kilometers to the southeast of Argentan around 9:45 a.m. There the regiment spends the afternoon, organizing and joining other units of the 80th Division. Then at 6:00 p.m., the regiment moves toward Aunou-le-Faucon. **Two hours later**, the troops are in position around the village, where Colonel Harry D. McHugh, regiment commander, has established his command post. The other infantry regiment of the division, the 317th Infantry, as well as the division's remaining units, arrive in the Argentan sector around **10:00 p.m.** Some considerations regarding the battlefield: the attempts at frontal attacks having proven futile and costly in human lives, the 80th Division's battle plan is not to attack Argentan frontally but to surround it on the east and to take it from the rear.

The principal objective of the division is to capture the heights to the north of the town, at the edge of Gouffern Forest and near the road to Trun, in particular Hills 213

In the background: A column of foot soldiers of the 318th Infantry Regiment, whose machine gunners and medics break through to Argentan on August 20, on Victor Hugo Boulevard. The dead body of a German soldier lies in front of the nursery school, **At right.** The cameraman used the sempiternal symbol of the road sign to embody the taking of the town. (NARA.)





Above: This photo was taken from the left bank of the Ure on August 20, to the south of Urou. The "Vaugon" farm is visible in the background. Note that ahead of the walking cameraman the American engineers have set up a crossing over the ford. Some soldiers cross forward over the ford, while others have are positioned around a mortar. The tree trunk in the foreground is the doing of the men of the 305th Engineering Battalion, who cut down trees and tore grills from the farm to reinforce the ford bed on August 18, after the crossing of the tanks. (NARA.)



Above: The ford and the farm as they are today. (Photo by the author.)

and 244, in the proximity of the village of Sévigny. Generally speaking, the 80th Division wants to secure possession of the southern edge of Gouffern Forest, which dominates what is soon to be the battlefield. With the key positions in hand, the Americans anticipate seizing Argentan in order finally to break their way into the village while still driving northward (toward Trun) and eastward into the woods. The Germans have kept a stronghold on the town for a week and guard the entry points, thereby preventing any direct assault. The G2 (reconnaissance service) of the 80th Division estimates that just before the outbreak of hostilities there are 2,500 German soldiers in and around Argentan, with about 20 support tanks, as well as a good number of cannons and automatic weapons scattered on the heights along the edge of Gouffern Forest, in particular 40-75 mm Paks and Sd.Kfz. 7/2 37 mm Flak 37. (2) The defense of "Festung" Argentan has effectively been entrusted to *Kampfgruppe* Scholtz, principally comprising elements of the 9th and 116th *Panzerdivisionen*. Even if these divisions have been diminished in the course of their previous engagements, they avail themselves of two elements sadly lacking in the 80th Division: a good knowledge of the terrain (inasmuch as they have had the time to fortify their positions over the course of several days) and real fighting experience.

Major-General Horace McBride, the division commander, sends out his orders by evening time: it falls upon the 318th Infantry Regiment to start the attack. The men have received the order to progress along a northeasterly axis, securing first the route to Paris, N24-A, then the route to Trun-Chambois, and lastly the heights that slope down to Argentan. The 317th Infantry Regiment is held in reserve. As for the artillery, it also takes advantage of nightfall to move into position south of Argentan: around 1:15 a.m., the 313th Field Artillery Battalion deploys near Saint-Loyer-des-Champs; the 314th Field Artillery Battalion at the "La Maladrerie" crossroads; and the 315th to the north of Vrigny. In addition to the organized units, an armored battalion -- the 702nd Tank battalion equipped Sherman tanks -- comes into the picture, along with an antitank group, the 610th Tank Destroyer Battalion, equipped with 76 mm M5 cannons.

August 18: The assault begins at dawn

At 6:00 a.m., the American artillery begins its shelling of the German positions beyond the national highway (N24-A) in the direction of Crennes and Gouffern Forest. At the same time, the foot soldiers of the 318th Infantry Regiment leave their positions between Aunou-le-Faucon and Juvigny-sur-Orne, and march toward Urou. A half hour later, they are in the proximity of the village. They run into their first obstacle, however: the Ure. This tributary of the Orne had been identified beforehand by reconnaissance of the 318th Infantry Regiment: the Ure can be crossed on foot at any point. But whereas the current is shallow, it is very steep-sloped and its sheer banks form a natural antitank trench. Because the Germans have blown up all the bridges (3), it is imperative to find a ford through which the vehicles can pass. The Americans find a passage, just south of the village of Urou, near the locality of "le Marais" ("the Marsh"). This fording place -- which still exists today -- is locally known as the "Vaugon" crossing.

Between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m., the G.I.s of the first attack wave cross the Ure through this ford, which becomes the actual passageway for the American assaults. They soon deploy in the pastures and in the village of Urou, which they occupy without encountering much resistance.



The 1st Battalion leads the assault: after fording the river, the unit turns eastward, towards the hamlet of "Bordeaux," to the north of Sai. At 9:05 a.m., elements of the 1st Battalion reach their goal, but sustained gunfire from the Germans slow the American attack down.

Urou and "Bordeaux" in American hands

The 1st Battalion resists and succeeds nonetheless in moving several hundred meters beyond Route N24-A, toward the northwest. Their right flank and then their left are successively exposed to violent artillery fire that forces the whole battalion to fall back to "Bordeaux" to regroup. It is the same story in Urou, where the 2nd Battalion has received orders to move westward in the direction of Argentan, parallel to the route. After having surrounded the village around 8:00 a.m., the soldiers quickly reach the National Highway, where they are forced lie low while trying to advance. The Germans, positioned in the houses and clusters of farms close to the road, such as "Clos-Fleuri" and the locality of "Cayenne," offer fierce resistance to the G.I.s. In the American ranks, the officers – like the troops – do not succeed in determining the direction from which the shots are coming: in addition to the terrible shock of this first combat experience, the trauma is worsened by the faceless and mechanical character of the death raining upon them. The 2nd Battalion is in turn forced to fall back to Urou in order to regroup.

Lt. Col. Daniel J. Minahan, commander of the 314th F.A. Battalion, remembers how this first day of combat around Argentan began:

"Things didn't happen as perfectly or easily as the short After Action Report would lead you to believe. (...) After the 314th had fired its opening shots (...), I went forward to see how the attack was going. [...] While heading to the front, I came across elements of the 2nd Battalion 318th near the village of Urou. They had tried to cross the road in order to achieve their objective. Losses were heavy, inflicted by enemy machineguns and 40 mm mobile antiaircraft cannons whose position nobody had been able to fix. Unlike maneuvers, it was now a matter of real deaths and wounded personnel (...). Many were commanding officers or men necessary to keeping the companies going. Everywhere the unit leaders were pitching fits, because their radios weren't working the way they'd have liked." (4)

Four Sherman tanks destroyed at Urou

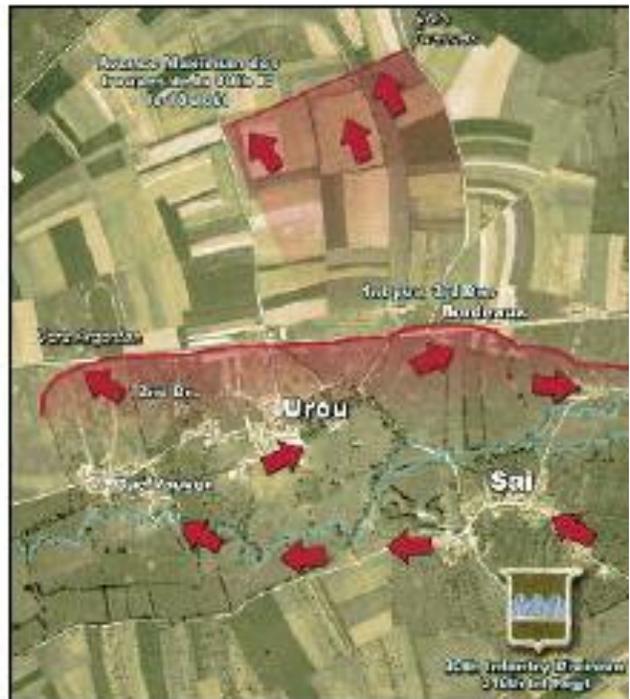
Since the advance command post of the 318th Infantry Regiment, established in a farm at Urou, the division commander, Major General McBride

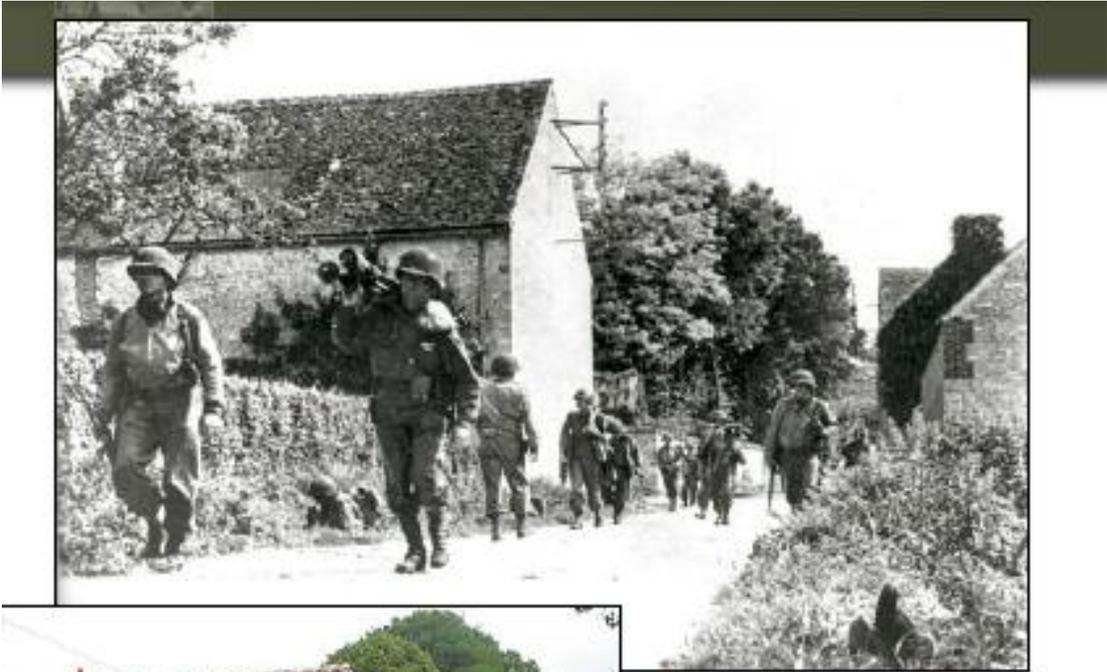


Above: Heavy cover of an American M1 helmet found near the ford, after the battle. (Private Collection.)

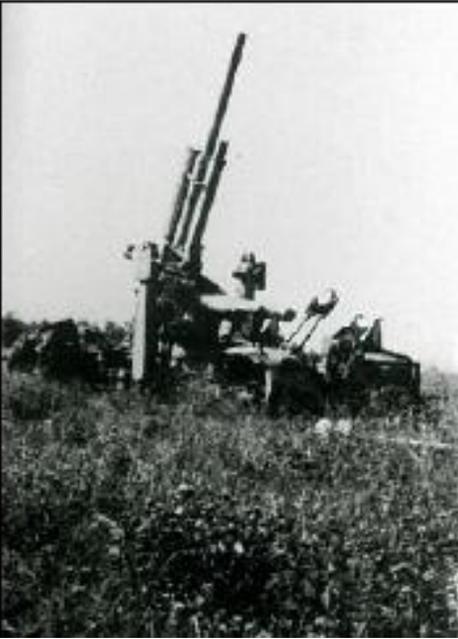
Background: Hill 213 as the soldiers of the 318th Infantry Regiment saw it, when launching their attacks of August 18-19. From their highly elevated positions, the Germans dominated the battlefield. (Photo by the author.)

Below: The assault of the 318th Infantry Regiment on August 18. (Map by F. Deprun/ T.Rondeau.)





In reality, only four tanks broke onto the field, because the fifth Sherman tank, commanded by Sergeant Frank L. Ream, was not able to participate in the attack. There are differing versions about what happened: according to certain accounts, the tank was bogged down when it tried to cross the Ure. But according to the loader of this Sherman tank, Stover's driver Tom McCabe leapt onto the tank while the vehicle was on route and gave the tank



Top of page: At the western exit of the village of Urou, in front of the "Besnouin" farm – rented to Mr. Lefeuve in 1944 – heavily armed and equipped men of the 318th Infantry Regiment head toward Argentan. (NARA.)

Above: The buildings have remained intact to this day. Only an entranceway has been cut into the perimeter fence of the farm a few years ago. (Photo by the author.)

Opposite: A German 88 mm cannon photographed in 1946 flanking Argentan: this could well be the weapon that, from the location of "Cayenne," destroyed the four Sherman tanks. (Leclerc. Memorial Collection.)

witnessed the double defeat of the 1st and 2nd Battalions. In an attempt to better the situation, he decides to send in the tanks. Their role is to destroy the Germans' fortified positions, in order to enable the foot soldiers to resume their assault. B Company of the 702nd tank Battalion is the support armored unit for the 318th Infantry Regiment. Richard E. Stover, who commands this company, decides to send the 3rd Platoon into combat. This platoon, under the orders of Lieutenant William B. Miller (nicknamed "Bull" by his men), has yet to experience enemy fire: the inexperience of the tank operators will have tragic consequences. McBride commits the error of sending the tanks in alone, without infantry protection. Around **10:00 a.m.**, the five Sherman tanks get under way: from their position to the west of Sai, they cut across the field and enter the "Vaugon" ford, which their heavy tracks transform into a veritable mire of mud. Once across, the armored vehicles roll forth into the courtyard of the farm and regain the road. They fork off to the right, roll eastward and then turn immediately left, penetrating i the field via an opening made into the hedgerow.



(the wreckage of the tanks remained in the field for several years before their removal). General McBride (ironically nicknamed "Horace the Bald" by some of his men) witnessed the destruction of the tanks from his advance command post in Urou. He decides to continue the attack and orders Captain Stover to send in a new platoon. But Stover refuses to carry out the order. According to him, to send new tanks without infantry protection – and totally exposed on top of that -- means suicide. He advises advance reconnaissance to determine the direction from which the volleys are coming. This disagreement has consequences: Stover is obstinate and, in the face of his refusals to obey, McBride places him under arrest. Stover is taken away by M.P.s. (5) The command of B Company falls on Lieutenant Harsen but, before Harsen receives even the slightest order, McBride leaves Urou in order to return to his G.Q. in Almenêches. Due caution is thenceforth *de rigueur* for the use of armored vehicles.



Opposite; Photograph taken in September 1944 of Captain Richard Stover, commander of B Company of the 702nd Tank Battalion. Following the catastrophic destruction of the four tanks at Urou, he refused to obey McBride, which resulted in his court martial. (Collection of Terry Janes.)

The Artillery comes to the rescue

The repeated failures during the morning to go beyond Highway N24-A, which more and more resembles a terrible No Man's, force the officers of the 318th Infantry Regiment to request the support of the artillery. Lt. Col. Minahan of the 314th F.A. Battalion has also just witnessed the fiasco of the tanks and recounts what he sees then, from his position in Urou:

leader, Sergeant Ream, a misleading direction. In fact, the tank would find itself isolated accordingly from the rest of the section.

At the same time, the four tanks of the 3rd Platoon continues forward: over the open field, they advanced perpendicularly to Route N24-A, in the direction of the road. The four Sherman tanks ride alongside a dense hedgerow to their left, which renders them invisible and protects their flank. Rather imprudently, the four armored vehicles head toward a small crossroads. But just before coming out onto the National Highway, their left flank is exposed, because the hedgerow does not extend to the end of the road. It is then that one – if not indeed two—88 mm cannons positioned at "Cayenne" several hundred yards to the west of the tanks open fire on the section. While the lead tank (that of Lt. Miller) is about to come out onto the highway, a shell strikes it on the left side. The tank is immobilized on the spot. Then the tank to the rear, that of Sergeant Thomas, is also destroyed by two direct hits. Both other tanks are therefore trapped without any way to escape: the second Sherman tank (Sergeant William Royce) is hit twice, then the third vehicle (Sergeant Mariotti) is destroyed in its turn. In several minutes, the four tanks have been destroyed and are in flames. The crews escape as best they can from the blazing and exploding wreckage. As the survivors run to escape German gunfire, Sergeant Royce realizes that his pilot, Sam Kellet, is trapped within the wreckage of the vehicle. He goes straight back to the tank while bullets literally rain around him, freeing Kellet from the tank. Royce received the Bronze Star for his act of bravery. The 3rd Platoon's attack was catastrophic: three men were killed or reported missing, twelve others wounded. An *posteriori* examination of the tanks showed that all the volleys came from the west flank, and it seems that the white stars painted on the sides of the vehicles – uncamouflaged – had served as targets for the German artillerymen. Likewise, the reports indicated that the banners hung on the tanks' antennas had undoubtedly warned the artillery personnel of the presence of the armored section

"Through the groves, I could see a large castle [sic] to the west of Argentan. No gunfire came from it, but that had to be the enemy's observation post, serving to direct the incessant fire on the 318th's left flank. I chose it for my first combat mission. I order to have a better view, I climbed up into the granary of an adjacent barn, I lifted up several roof tiles and shouted my orders to fire to Overstreet [his driver, AUTHOR'S NOTE], who had stayed below and who was busy at the radio in the jeep. When I had adjusted the fire correctly, I requested a Time On Target from the divisional artillery (6), who reduced the castle to ruins. (We had great difficulty in finding this castle during our visit to Argentan in 1984.)" (7)



Portrait of Lieutenant William Miller in 1943. Nicknamed "Bull" by his men, he is the officer who led the armored section that was decimated at Urou on August 18. (Collection of T. Janes.)



Above: This photo was taken near Sai on August 19. The crew of the fifth tank of the 3rd Platoon of B Company of the 702nd Tank Battalion poses in front of its objective. This is the crew whose tank was bogged down during the previous day's assault. Front row, from left to right: T/4 John Licar; Private Tony Farber. Second row: Staff Sergeant Frank L. Ream, called "Pappy;" Corporal Floyd Steward; Private First Class Jack Weaver. (Collection of T. Janes.)

Below: The itinerary of the four Sherman tanks on August 18. (Map by F. Deprun/T.Rondeau.)



In reality, Minahan did not direct fire onto a "castle," but onto the Lescot quarter, barracks of the mobile gendarmes, which was undoubtedly a German position during the fighting (during construction work in the Lescot quarter in 2007, vestiges of the battle were uncovered).

Minahan's account bears comparison with that made by Argentan historian Xavier Rousseau in 1946, based on the recollections of inhabitants of Urou during the battle:

"Mr. Lefevre, having gone into his farm [a farm at the exit of the village that he rented from the Besnouin family, AUTHOR'S NOTE], saw some soldiers in khaki. A cameraman asks him for a ladder from which to film, atop a sheet-iron hangar, the upcoming terrain of battle. Then comes another soldier, speaking good French, whose mission it was to seek out the cannons that destroyed the four tanks. Mr. Lefevre climbs up with him but bullets begin to whiz past his ears; the men go back down and find a

well-secured observatory after removing roof tiles from the nearby building. The farmer points out the emplacement of the three D.C.A. cannons (...) he also points out the usual parking spot for the tank (...) The friendly soldier is equipped with a field radio and immediately relays the information that he has just gathered." (8)

Memories of baptism by fire

The attack resumes early in the afternoon: the 2nd Battalion, from Urou, continues its assaults toward Argentan but draws back because of the losses sustained. As for the 3rd Battalion, up to this point held in reserve, it achieves a certain success. It had been sent out to Sai in the morning, that is to say on the right in the American attack plan, to sweep the village, which objective it completed around 3:30 p.m. Once this first task was accomplished, it receives the order to move on to "Bordeaux" in order to relieve the elements of the 1st Battalion and resume the attack. It is about 5:00 p.m. While 1st Battalion falls back to Sai to regroup, 3rd Battalion attempts in vain to free the National Highway: progress is laborious over several hundreds of yards and soldiers barely attain the road linking Argentan and Crennes, without ever managing to hold their ground. Exposed in the open ground, the G.I.s are at the mercy of German fire.

Sergeant Robert Murrell, heading a section of air-cooled machineguns in M Company, participates in the assault of 3rd Battalion in the afternoon toward Crennes:

"I remember Argentan very well, because that August 18 was our baptism by fire. Ahead of us stretched a vast field that fell and then rose again toward a wooded area on a hill. There was also a tarmac road coming from the left. I ordered one of my sergeants to use his grenade launcher against an armored vehicle that was approaching on this road. We were lucky that this was enough to destroy the tank. Next we tried to advance. I found myself caught up in some barbed wire and tried to free myself with my wire cutter while machinegun fire whistled over my head. I recall having seen a dismembered foot fly into the air and fall to the ground with a thud after a boy had jumped onto a mine. The Germans assailed us from the woods overlooking us: they had camouflaged their weapons well, which prevented us from knowing where the gunfire was coming from. We were displaced to a secondary route to the left, where the machineguns were put in position on the embankment and opened fire on the edge of the forest in front of us. The battalion's mortars were in position in the courtyard of a farm behind us. I particularly remember this day, because – God only knows why – I was very lucky: a bullet went through my helmet without hitting me and my munitions belt was cut by machine-gun fire. But I wasn't wounded; while several yards away from me I saw three men die: Lt. Stoddard, partly of American Indian origin and the commander of the Second Platoon upon which I depended; and also Sergeant Vargo, who came from Indiana and was a professional football player. It was he who destroyed the armored vehicle with his grenade launcher. Finally and above all, there was Joe Pemberton, who came to me on that day to say that he was going to surrender. I tried to talk to him, but he was at that moment headed toward the enemy line, with his hands behind his head. Later I learned he had been shot down after having tried to escape." (9)

Colonel John Snowden, commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 318th Infantry Regiment, consigned his impressions and memories of the first fighting for Argentan to writing,



It is through this opening in a hedgerow where the four tanks forked off, after having crossed the ford. The foliage to the left provided cover until they came out of the field onto the National Highway, where they were destroyed. (Photo by the author.)

assisted by the statements of Captains Marion Chitwood (S-2) and John Bier (S-3):

"At the moment when we began the attack, K Company was on the left and L Company on the right. We had crossed a road and ahead of us lay an immense field of clover that sloped down for 500 yards and then rose up again for another 500 yards toward the edge of the forest. When our troops launched their assault toward the edge, the Germans opened fire with everything they had: mortars, artillery, machineguns and rifles. We were totally exposed, with almost no place to hide (if only behind haystacks); in fact, we found ourselves exposed to German gunfire from the high point in front of us. The Germans shot down our men, one after the other. Captain Chitwood was beside his radio operator when that man was quickly shot, and afterwards his replacement was wounded several minutes later. We heard, then saw numerous enemy tanks coming in to our



Above: Part of an American haversack found in 2012 in Urou-et-Crennes. As the markings indicate, the owner was Technical Sergeant Lynn D. Newcomb of F Company, 318th Infantry Regiment. (Collection of Frederick Normand.)

rear, supported by the infantry. This happened along the route that we had previously crossed. Chitwood crawled along, attempting to recover the radio, but a burst of fire barely missed him, causing him to go back to the rear. The tanks deployed at our rear and the infantry came out onto the field, killing or capturing our men. As Chitwood fell back, two tanks appeared close by him, and the vehicle to his left began to pivot its turret in his direction: he managed to get out of its range of fire, because the road followed a slope at this point. The memory of this wild chase struck him hard: while he was heading for the rear, he saw a G.I. who had lost both legs and was begging someone to kill him. Captain Chitwood sought out Colonel Snowden, who informed him that our antitank units had been bogged down and so were in no condition to back up our assault. He likewise informed him that John Bier, in the company of Captain Wilkerson, found himself trapped in a shell crater, surrounded by Germans for several hours on end: to defend themselves, they had never stopped calling for the artillery to shell their position. [...] This engagement was our first true battle; and that changed our lives forever. No more games, fun, or swaggering. We knew from that moment on that this was war." (10)

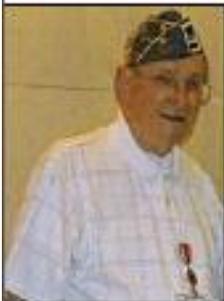
Below: A soldier from the 80th Division examines a map in front of a Panther from the II./Panzer-Regiment 33 of the 9. Panzer Division. With the II./33, the I./Panzer-Regiment 24 (116. Panzer-Division) is the other Panther tank division to defend Argentan. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)



Battle: The 80th Infantry Division at Argentan



Robert Murrell, of M Company, 318th Infantry Regiment, on maneuvers before leaving for Europe in 1943. (Collection of Robert Murrell.)



Robert Murrell today. Now 96 years old, he was born on May 19, 1916. After the war, he worked in the printing business and retired at age 83. He has since written historical works about his old division. (80th Division Association.)

Below: The Besnouin farm, in the locality of "Le Marais" ("The Marsh") from which Lt. Col. Minahan identified targets and prompted his first Time on Target for the 314th F.A. Battalion. (Photo by the author.)

Before their baptism by fire in Argentan, several soldiers of the 80th Division (the divisional insignia is clearly visible on the sleeve of one of them) gather around a priest during a service. (NARA.)



A heavy toll

For the 318th Infantry Regiment, this first day of combat was harsh: on their biggest move forward, the soldiers gained the Argentan –Crennes route with difficulty, each time forced to withdraw southward to National Highway. The losses were severe: in the 1st Battalion alone, 54 officers and men are out of the fray at day's end.

Among them was Lt. Col. Gustof A. Lindell, commander of the battalion, killed in the fighting, as was S2 officer Major Norris, which only aggravated the confusion rampant in the American ranks. On this day of August 18, B Company of the 315th Medical Battalion, moved to the 318th Infantry Regiment, for which a temporary aid station had been set up near the "Vaugon" ford, reports having treated 195 wounded men, only three of whom could return to combat, the others requiring evacuation to the rear for treatment. A number of other G.I.s were also captured. (11) Nevertheless, the artillery lent vital support to the foot soldiers: from its positions at Saint-Loyer-des-Champs, the 313th F. A. Battalion was called in fifteen times to back up the assault and reinforce the volleys of the 314th F.A. Battalion, the 314th having set up its batteries in proximity to the village of Juvigny-sur-Orne around 2:00 p.m.:

Orne around 2:30 p.m.: the battalion's command post is located in an orchard south of the locality. The artillery reports clearly indicate that it is expressly forbidden to direct their fire beyond the northern edge of Gouffern Forest, in order to avoid firing on the Canadians and Poles who are drawing every day closer.

In the evening, after the assaults had stopped, the 1st Battalion resumes its positions at "Bordeaux," the 2nd Battalion. in Urou and the 3rd in Sai.

Shortly before, around 4:00 p.m., some American officers advised the civilians who had stayed behind in Urou to depart: thereupon, a number left to take refuge in the rear, especially in Juvigny. The 317th Infantry Regiment had been kept in reserve throughout the day. The regimental G.Q. is established around 11:15 a.m. in Boissei-la-Lande. The unit did not participate in the day's fighting, but is limited to carrying out patrols in liaison with 2nd D.B. troops near Mauvaisville and with soldiers of the 318th Infantry Regiment near the "Port of Ariou."

Later that afternoon, officers of the 327th, particularly the battalion and company commanders, completed a reconnaissance operation of the battlefield. The officers first reached Sai, where they met a company of the 318th Infantry Regiment, left in reserve to conduct a final sweep of the village but subjected to terrible German cannon and *Nebelwerfer* fire.



After having pushed beyond Sai, the officers discovered a new ford over the Ure, to the west of the village: then they came back to Urou, after crossing the "Vaugon" ford. It was then that they encountered the remnants of the 2nd Battalion of the 318th Infantry Regiment, which had withdrawn, all disorganized and demoralized. This reconnaissance is of capital importance, for it permits the officers to have a deeper knowledge of the terrain upon which they will be led to battle. At 7:36 p.m., the 317th is put on alert and must prepare to launch the assault. The 2nd Battalion receives the order to join the right-rear flank of the 318th Infantry Regiment, near Hill 171 (south of Argentan).

Second day of battle

After a relatively calm night, marked by several sporadic artillery barrages, the attack is about to start once again. The attack plan has been slightly modified: the 2nd Battalion, in the lead, will advance due west, in the direction of town, while it falls to the 3rd Battalion to proceed northward from "Bordeaux," for a better approach to the heights.

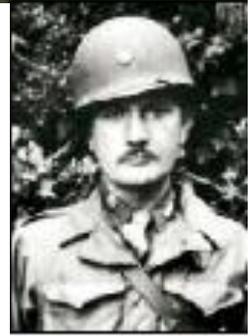
This attack is preceded by an important pre-dawn artillery shelling, completed between **4:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m.** by seven groups: the 313th, 314th, 315th, 76th and 974th F.A. Battalions, as well as the batteries of the 404th F.A. Group. At dawn, the 318th Infantry Regiment rushes once again toward Hill 213. The 2nd Battalion attacks around 6:45 a.m.: E Company on the left flank, F Company on the right and G Company kept in reserve. H Company supports the other groups. As on the day before, the Americans hug the ground while progressing only several hundred yards toward Urou. The 3rd Battalion launches its attack at **7:00 a.m.** sharp: a veritable rain of fire falls down upon them. From Sai, progress is arduous. The power of German fire prevents any considerable advance and, from around 2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m., the battalion withdraws to "Bordeaux" in order to regroup. As for the 1st Battalion, it is kept in reserve in consideration of losses suffered on the previous day. The assault of the 318th Infantry Regiment is supported by the antitank cannons of A and B Companies, 610th T.D. Battalion. In the morning, the cannons experience problems crossing the Ure at the "Vaugon" ford. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. William L. Herold, leaves his advanced command post on Hill 171 and shows up in person at the ford to organize the crossing of his troops. It is then that the area becomes a target of enemy artillery fire: Herold and four other officers and subordinates are wounded and evacuated. Herold, taken to the aid station, died from his wounds on August 20 at 1:30 a.m. The assaults of the 318th Infantry Regiment resume with a limited progression and increasing numbers of dead and wounded. Despite the disastrous results, General McBride awards the division's first Silver Star to Col. McHugh for his leadership outside Argentan, at an improvised ceremony near Sai at the beginning of the afternoon.

The 317th Infantry Regiment takes the relief

In view of the 318th's inability to move forward, the 317th Infantry Regiment receives the order to replace it and to attack in its turn. Placed on alert the night before, the regiment had moved out during the night: the 2nd Battalion of the 317th was, since 1:30 a.m., already in position on Hill 171, ready to attack. It furnishes support fire for the 3rd Battalion, 318th, throughout the morning. The officers of the 317th Infantry Regiment take the whole day to prepare for the oncoming assault. It is also decided that the antitank cannons of C Company of the 610th T.D. Battalion would

stay in position north of "Bordeaux" as well as west of Urou to cover the assault of the 317th Infantry Regiment. These cannons will be supported by several M10 tanks of A Company, 893rd T.D. Battalion, in position southeast of Sai, which has just been moved to the division. The 1st Battalion of the 318th Infantry Regiment from Urou, is also to provide cover fire for the 317th Infantry Regiment. The assault is expected to begin at 3:00 p.m. At the beginning of the afternoon, Colonel Donald Cameron, commander of the 317th Infantry Regiment, summons his officers to his C.P. for a final meeting. Some obstructions occur in the roads around Sai, however, preventing the troops from getting into place on time. The attack is moved forward to **4:00 p.m.** The foot soldiers cross the Ure over another ford, about 200 yards east of Sai. It has been decided that the three battalions attack in the following order: the 2nd Battalion is to lead the assault, supported by the 1st, while the 3rd remains in reserve. Lt. Col. Russell E. Murray, commander of the 2nd Battalion, has misinterpreted the order to attack, passing literally "right through" the positions of the 318th Infantry Regiment. The officer rejects this order: in the first place because he knows that the effect on morale will be disastrous if his men encounter the harassed and discouraged soldiers of the 318th Infantry Regiment, who have just suffered another setback, and above all because he does not want his unit to run headlong into this corridor, between Argentan and Crennes, within which the 318th has seen so many casualties for being too exposed to German fire. Murray decides to surround the eastern flank of the battlefield, while moving along the forest.

At 4:00 p.m., the assault begins: F and G Companies quickly cross over the rolling crest that stretches from



Portrait of Lt. Col. William Herold, commander of the 610th T.D. Battalion. He dies on August 20 from wounds received the day before at the "Vaugon" ford. On the first day of the battle of Argentan, this former West Point Cadet declared to his unit surgeon, "Doc, I want you to keep track of who among us die, because once the war is over, I will personally visit each family to tell them what a hero their son was." Sadly, he did not live long enough to keep his vow. (West Point Archives.)



Battle: The 80th Infantry Division at Argentan



1. Near Argentan, General McBride gives his instructions to an antitank cannon crew, which could be one of those commanded by Captain William Koob, of the 317th Infantry Regiment's antitank company: Koob left very precise eyewitness accounts of his regiments engagements in Argentan. (NARA.)

2. Photograph taken in Argentan in 1945 at the wrecked equipment depot near the train station: the young Jean Décourt poses with a G.I. in front of a wrecked *Panzer IV*, number 711, of the 7. *Kompanie* of the *SS-Panzer Regiment 1* of the *1 SS-Panzer-Div.* This German armored vehicle was undoubtedly abandoned near Argentan while making its retreat. (Collection of Jean Décourt.)

3. The Argentan-Crennes route, with the village of Crennes and the forest in the background: on August 19, it is along this road that the men of the 2nd Battalion of the 317th Infantry Regiment were stopped by German gunfire. (Photo of the author.)

4. Present-day photo of the orchard south of Crennes, in which Captain Koob positioned his 57 mm cannons and the two sections of the M10 Tank Destroyers of the 893rd T.D. Battalion. During the night of August 19 – 20, some foot soldiers came to reinforce the position in the orchard, the Americans fearing infiltrations of Germans in the darkness. (Photo of the author.)



Urou to Crennes, then drive toward the northeast. A new firestorm hits them: the one-hour delay has effectively reduced the element of surprise and, above all, the morning's advance artillery shelling has had only a limited impact. The rapid progression of the companies is stopped along the Argentan-Crennes road. The American artillery opens a new round of fire: but this barrage is too short and falls in part on F Company's positions, killing or wounding around twenty men. It is at this moment that Medic Hoyt T. Rowell earned the division's first Distinguished Service Cross: as the Allied volleys fall too close to the lines of 2nd Battalion of the 317th Infantry Regiment, he crosses without cover over the space separating him from the forward observer of the artillery, signaling to direct the fire farther away. Then he returns to the front to treat the wounded. The American artillery then redirects its fire. Shortly afterwards, the antitank company of the 317th Infantry Regiment, commanded by Captain William J. Koob, Jr., has rejoined some Sherman tanks of the 702nd Tank Battalion's A Company and all open fire on the German positions to help the foot soldiers of 2nd Battalion. After this support barrage, the German artillery takes aim on the positions of the armored and antitank troops. The tanks withdraw to regroup, while Koob decides to move his cannons forward.

The orchard near Crennes

Koob succeeds in reaching an orchard, situated to the south of Crennes, from which he has a good view over the battlefield: it is an ideal position from which to help the foot soldiers. Three other M1 57 mm cannons were already in position in the orchard when Koob arrives. It is then around **8:00 p.m.**: the foot soldiers of the 2nd Battalion of the 317th Infantry Regiment are still blocked in their position on the Argentan-Crennes road but, in spite of the supporting fire, they do not succeed in taking out the German positions, while at the same time other soldiers haven't taken possession of Crennes. Around 9:00 p.m., at sunset, as the dull roar of the cannons and the dry sputtering of rifle fire begin to fade, the men of the 2nd Battalion of the 317th are in position along the Argentan-Crennes road, at the foot of Hill 213. In Crennes all positions are precarious: some sections are established in the village, while in the orchard the men under Koob's command reinforce their positions and keep on their guard, fearing nighttime assaults on the part of the Germans. These soldiers prepare to spend a restless night before attacking for a third time at dawn, in order – or so they hope -- to deliver the final blow to the German defenses and take Argentan at last. The engagements that take place on the night of August 19-20, the subsequent liberation of the town on the following day and the sporadic encounters up to August 21 will be the subject of the second part of our study, coming in the next issue. ■

(To be continued.)

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Robert Murrell, veteran of M Company of the 318th Infantry Regiment; thanks also to Terry Janes (www.thetroubleshooters.com), Andy Adkins, Mr. Pegulu de Rovin (Leclerc Memorial – Moulin Museum), Mr. Décourt., Mrs. Lemaitre, Mr. Renaudin (Town of Urou-et-Crennes), Adrien Besnoux, Frédéric Normand, Frédéric Deprun, Baptiste Flotté and Tyler Alberts.



Bibliography and sources:

- Archives of the 80th Infantry Division.
- Various authors. *La Bataille de Normandie au Pays d'Argentan*. Editions du Pays d'Argentan, 1995. 63 pp.
- Dean, Dominique. *The Attack Will Go On: The 317th Infantry Regiment in WWII*. Louisiana State University, 2003. 107 pp.
- Koob, William. *The Operations of the Antitank Company, 317th Infantry in the Closing of the Falaise Gap*. Infantry School of Fort Benning, 1949. 32 pp.



Notes:

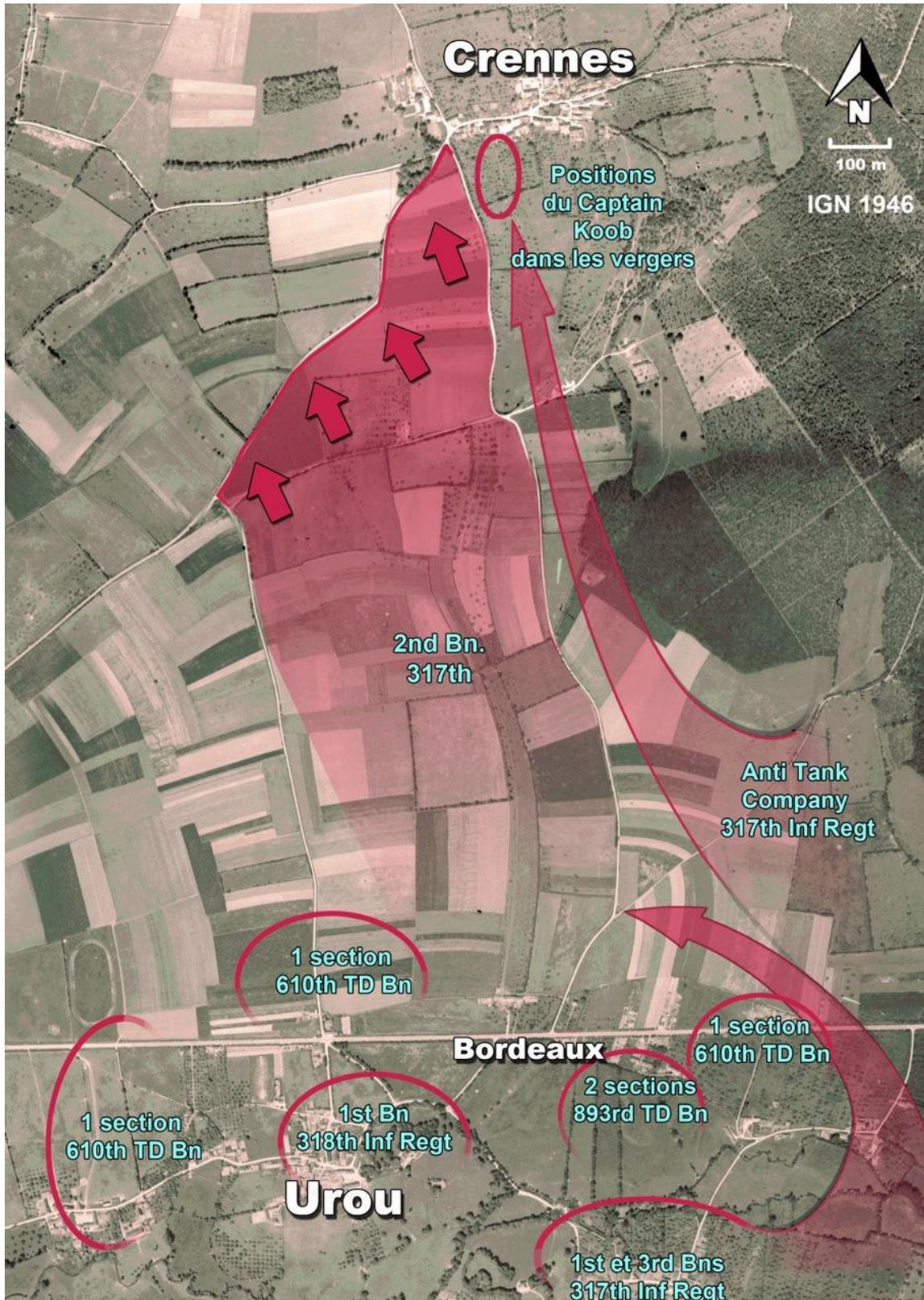
- (1) Various authors. *The 314th FA Battalion in the ETO*. 1998. p.10.
- (2) 80th Division G2 After Action Report, August 1944.
- (3) According to the memories of civilians, the bridges of "Fligny," on the routes to Almanêches and Argentan, blew up on the night of August 14-15 and the bridge of "Moulin Vert" ("Green Mill") on August 15-16.
- (4) *The 314th FA*, op. cit., p. 11.
- (5) Stover was later court-martialed and found guilty of having disobeyed a direct order of a superior officer in action with the enemy. General Dwight Eisenhower, however, reexamined his case and reduced the sentence. So Stover remained in the 80th Division until the end of the war, but without assuming any position of command.
- (6) Artillery technique consisting of firing a short but powerful barrage with all available cannons, simultaneously on a single target.
- (7) *The 314th FA*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
- (8) *La Bataille de Normandie au Pays d'Argentan*, 1994, pp. 41-42.
- (9) Private correspondence between R. Murrell and the author, April-November 2012.
- (10) Journal of J. Snowden, private archives.
- (11) We will revisit the fortunes of the prisoners of the 80th Division in our second article.

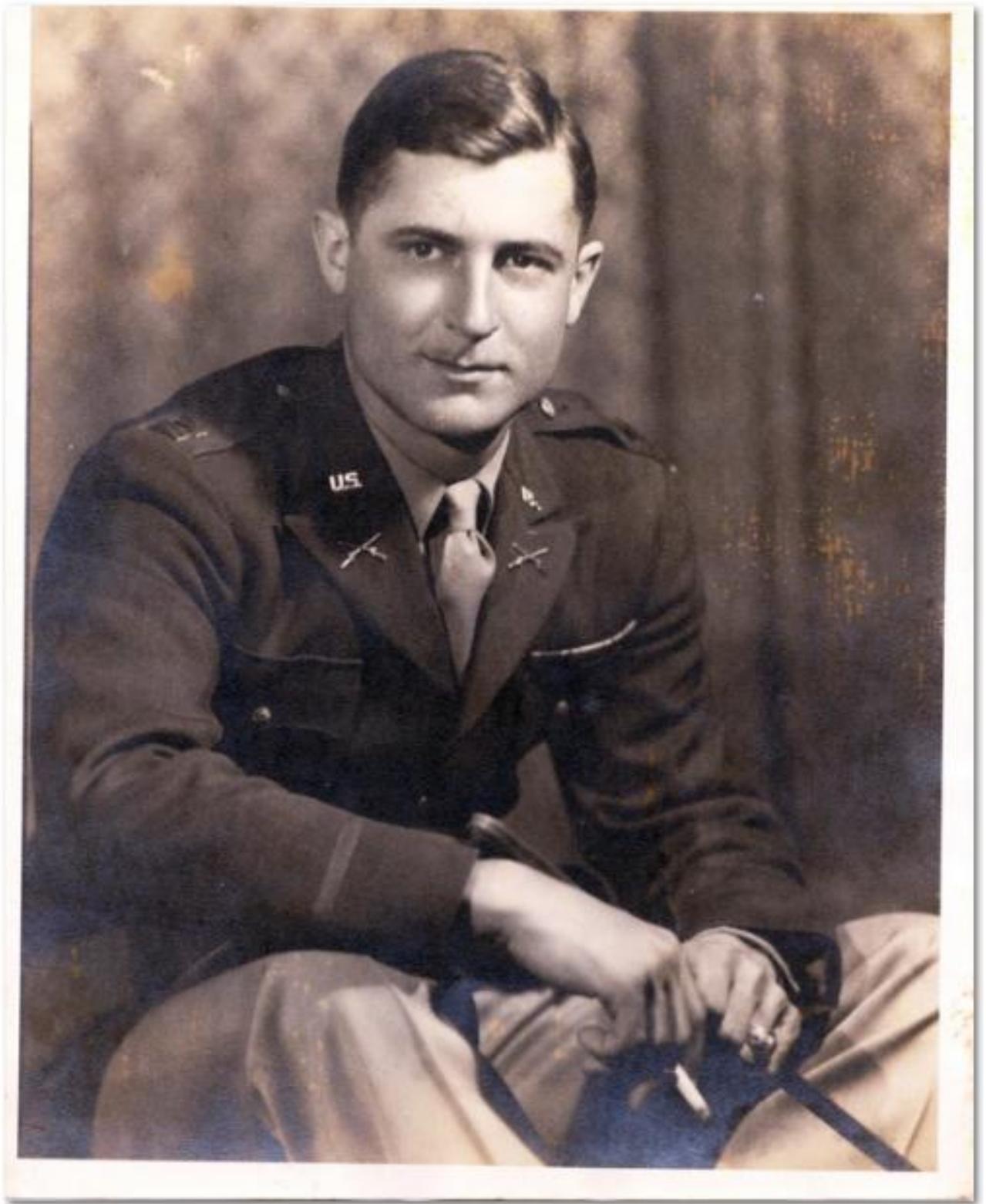


This aerial view, taken after the battle, shows the scope of destruction and the state of demolition of Argentan after the fighting. The fires visible in the photograph were caused by barrages on the previous day. (USAF.)

Positions of Capt. Koob in the Orchards

Red Oval Below "Crennes"





Captain William J. Koob. Jr., USA