

Baptism of Fire at Argentan: The first engagement of August 19-21, 1944

by Tristan Rondeau

In our previous article, we had presented the situation of the 80th Infantry Division before the attack on Argentan, then we had endeavored to describe the first engagements and the first setbacks that the division experienced on August 18 and 19. The conclusion of this first operation prompted relief by the 318th Regiment by 317th at the end of the afternoon on August 18, 1944.



Colonel Donald A. Cameron, commander of the 317th Infantry, His regiment was charged with relief and advancing to take Hill 233, For unexplained reasons, he was for the most part incommunicado during the battle, (NARA)



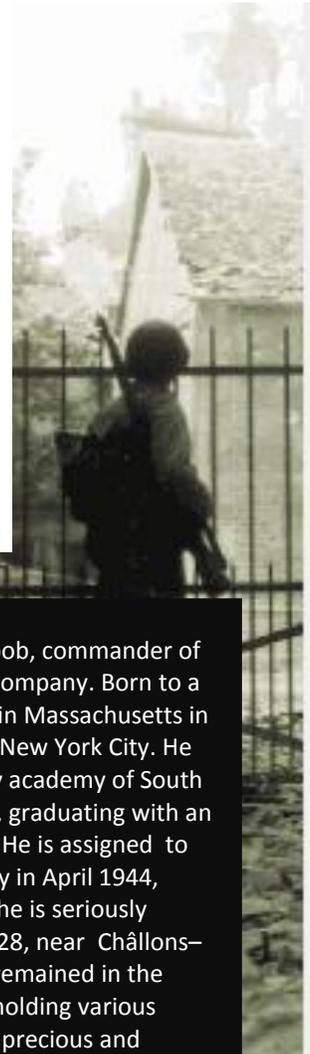
The Situation by Late Evening, August 19

Around 8:00 p.m., the men of the “Blue Ridge” division faces the following situation: the 2nd Battalion, 317th Infantry was first engaged in the afternoon and is preparing to spend the night along the Argentan-Crennes Road, where it has been brought to a halt by fire coming from the Germans. More eastward, several sections of foot soldiers from the same unit have taken a position in the village of Crennes; slightly to the south, in a orchard that we have already described (cf.: *Normandie 44 Magazine*, no. 6) Captain William Koob, commander of the 317th Antitank Infantry, has deployed his battery of 57mm cannons at his disposal, in support of the foot soldiers.

In Urou, the troops of the 318th Infantry (hardened by the first two days of combat) keep their position, backed up by the armored vehicles as well as heavy antitank cannons of the 610th Tank Division. The two other battalions of the 317th Infantry lie in wait at “Bordeaux,” ready to intervene, for the fighting is far from over. For its part, the artillery changes position multiple times: the 313th Field Artillery leaves Saint-Loyer-des-Champs for the area surrounding the place known as “Le Port-d’Aunou”; it arrives around 6:15 p.m.



Captain William L. Koob, commander of the 317th's antitank company. Born to a working-class family in Massachusetts in 1919, he grew up in New York City. He enrolls in the military academy of South Carolina, The Citadel, graduating with an engineering degree. He is assigned to the antitank company in April 1944, commanding it until he is seriously wounded on August 28, near Châlons-en-Champagne. He remained in the Army after the war, holding various commands. He left a precious and precise witness of his actions in Argentan in August 1944. After his retirement, the military man became an enthusiastic scholar of archeology. He died on March 26, 1998. (Koob Family Collection)

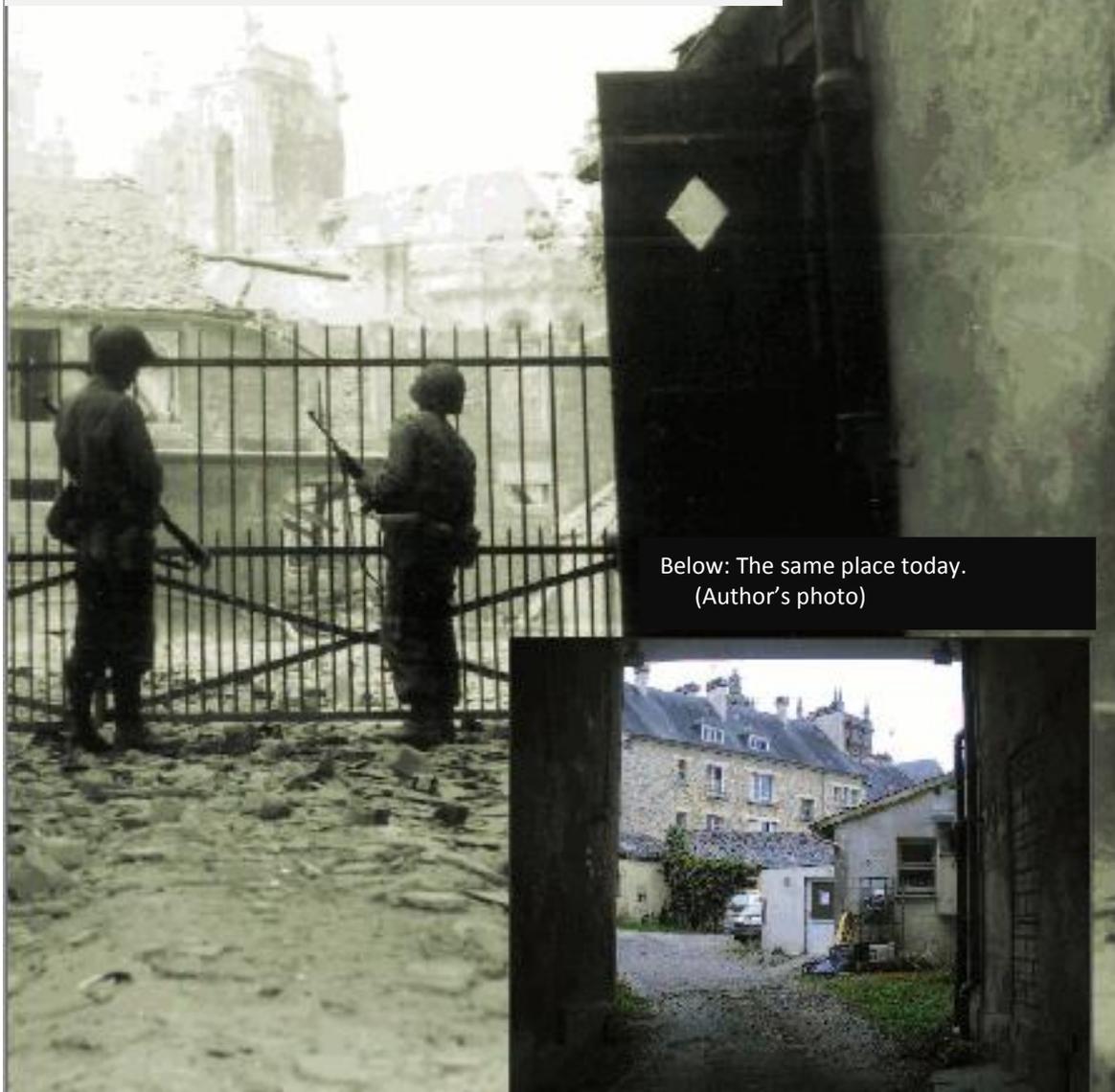




In the background: On August 20, three soldiers from the 318th Infantry inspect a porch in the town hall square in newly-liberated Argentan. It took several hours for the soldiers to clean the village completely. Behind the soldiers, the outline of the ruined Saint-Germain stands out. (NARA)

The 80th Infantry Division (2)

7:25 p.m. Its role is still to support the 314th and 315th Field Artillery Battalions. Finally, A Company of the 702nd Tank Battalion, after difficulties in engaging the enemy as well as supporting the 317th Infantry during its assault (several tanks bog down during the crossing of the Ure), spends the night in position near "Bordeaux".



Below: The same place today.
(Author's photo)

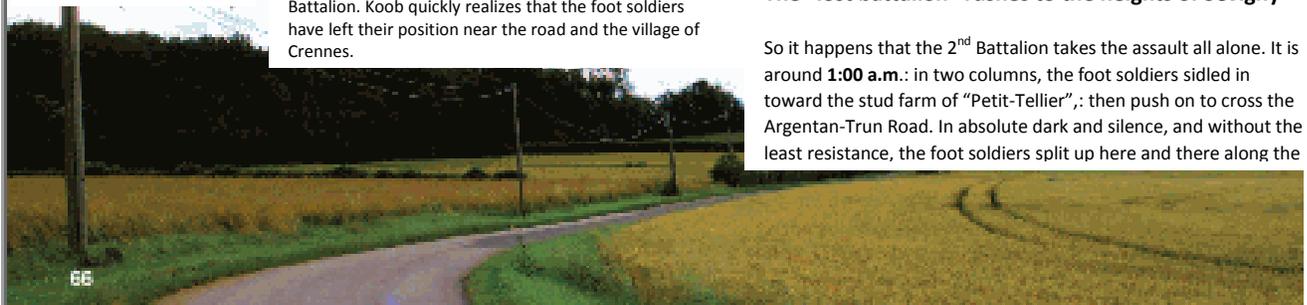


Battle: The 80th Infantry Division at Argentan



Hand-drawn map accompanying the eyewitness report of Capt. W. Koob. Each place mentioned by the officer corresponds to a letter on the map. This archival document was of invaluable help in our work, (Infantry School of Fort Benning Archives)

The road connecting "Bordeaux" to Cennes. It is by this route that the 1st Battalion 317th arrived late on August 19 to reinforce Koob's men and replace 2nd Battalion. (Author's photo.)



It seems that, feeling himself too exposed, Lt. Col. Murray, the battalion commander, ordered his troops to start moving along the road in the direction of Argentan, as far as the northernmost area of the horse track.

The situation then becomes extremely precarious for the M10s and antitank cannons near Crennes, deprived of all infantry protections. Therefore, Capt. Koob, impatient to learn the whereabouts of the Allied units and anxious to obtain a section of foot soldiers to protect his troops, sends a small group of men to restore contact with the 2nd Battalion, then known as the "lost battalion" (1). Payne and his men rush into the density of the night but get lost along the way.

At approximately 11:00 p.m., 1st Battalion, 317th Infantry goes on the march: it enters the road leading from "Bordeaux" to Crennes, its companies moving forward in a column. The battalion commander agrees to provide Koob with several foot soldiers to protect his cannons: and he orders the rest of his unit to establish a defensive perimeter around Crennes: given the brutal and inexplicable disappearance of the 2nd Battalion, he wants to take no risks and decides not to authorize auxiliary movement in nighttime.

The situation is all the more muddled because the 3rd Battalion, still in reserve, has received no orders and stays on standby. Above all, the commander of the 317th Infantry, Col. Cameron, is incommunicado: he moved his command post in the afternoon from Boissei-la-Lande to Sai, but no communication can be established. After several failed attempts, the decision is made to maintain the positions for the night and radio silence is imposed on all units.

An uneasy calm reigns over the battlefield. The volleys of the German artillery fall far in the distance and are directed at mistaken targets. On his own initiative, Capt. Koob goes to locate 2nd Battalion, but thinks better of the decision after heading out 300 meters west of the orchard and turns back, fearing capture by the Germans should he go any farther.

Near the horse track, Lt. Col. Murray, commander of the 2nd Battalion, at midnight, assembles his company commanders in his command post, which has been set up in a barn along the Argentan-Crennes Road (the building was destroyed after the war). Murray is about to issue his orders in pursuit of the attack on the following morning when Col. Max S. Johnson, commander of the 80th Division headquarters, breaks into the barn, accompanied by several soldiers. On the spot, Johnson delivers the orders of General McBride (division commander), which stipulate that the assault be begun immediately and that the objective – namely Hill 213 – be captured as quickly as possible (2).

The "lost battalion" rushes to the heights of Sévigny

So it happens that the 2nd Battalion takes the assault all alone. It is around 1:00 a.m.: in two columns, the foot soldiers sidled in toward the stud farm of "Petit-Tellier"; then push on to cross the Argentan-Trun Road. In absolute dark and silence, and without the least resistance, the foot soldiers split up here and there along the

road, a part of them (especially E Company and HQ Company, 2nd Battalion) taking position near the summit of Hill 213. Aware of the precariousness of their situation, the troops have been ordered to hide and await reinforcements.

From their positions, the men of 2nd Battalion, 317th Infantry have a front-row seat for the apocalyptic spectacle of Argentan. In fact, in order to crush the German defenses once and for all, the 80th Infantry Division headquarters decided on a general Time on Target at midnight: every cannon of the seven artillery battalions composing the division or attached to it fires five salvos onto the town. At the very least, 105mm and 155mm shells hit Argentan in a matter of minutes. The town is reduced almost completely to ruins, fires start burning again, and the few civilians (around fifty) who have not yet evacuated Argentan are stricken with fear during this nightmarish moment, as Maurice Hommey wrote (in his eyewitness report, published in December 1945):

"The night of August 20 was horrible. The artillery, closer than on previous nights, fired incessantly, the roofs blew away around us, including our rooftop, huge stones fell heavily, shells exploded with great impact on the street pavement: a terrible night during which death seemed to hover above us. Oh, how long it seemed to us!" (3)

However, this concentration of artillery was absolutely unnecessary: as a matter of fact, the Germans had already initiated their retreat and a large part of the troops still remaining in Argentan were beating a permanent retreat toward the east, across La Dives Valley.

For all that, the Germans continue to mount a solid defense against the Americans, especially with efficient



Colonel Max S. Johnson, commander of the divisional headquarters. He personally delivered the order to begin the attack with the men of 2nd Battalion when the battlefield had settled for the night. (NARA.)

anti-battery fire: Anthony DiPangrazio, artillery observer in the 314th Field Artillery Battalion recalls a tragic scene that unfolds during the night, near the church in Crennes:

"Our liaison team reported to a briefing of the infantry battalion commanders, held in a small cemetery somewhere (...) to the east of the town (Argentan, N.D.A.). The zone was soon chosen as a target for intense enemy artillery fire, forcing us to make use of what cover that the tombstones and the cemetery wall provided us (...). I do not remember whether we suffered any losses, but there was some substantial damage done to the tombstones and, to tell the truth, several gravesites had even been destroyed and laid open by the explosions. I am sure that this meeting seemed to last longer than in reality. I can see myself now, crouching



Sergeant Ralph Freeman and 1st Lt. A. Z. Adkins Jr. (at right), from H Company, 317th Infantry, photographed near Argentan, in front of Gouffern Forest, in August 1944. They brandish several German war trophies: revolvers, automatic pistols, binoculars, etc. In the age of industrial warfare, GIs did not gather trophies to reuse them, but as symbols of their victory: showing weapons taken from the enemy was the same as showing the vanquished enemy. (Collection of A. Adkins III.)



between two tombstones, that if we did not get the hell out of there we would be joining the permanent residents.” (4)

Morning Ambush

The men of 2nd Battalion, 317th, in position in every corner along the Argentan-Trun Road, are alerted by the noise of vehicles around 5:00 a.m.: from Argentan, a major German column is evacuating the town and is on its way toward them, suspecting no visible presence of the GIs on this position of the road. While the night is ebbing like the sea, the first glimmers of dawn permit the American soldiers to make out the vehicles emerging from the morning fog: some Panther tanks, several SdKtz 251s full of foot soldiers, several armored command vehicles as well as some trucks. At the same moment, the 2nd Battalion is put on alert and the men prepare for the ambush. Lt. Cox, of H Company, shoots down the lead motorcyclist passing his position: the American troops fire in full force on the vehicle column. The SdKtz 251s are hit by bazooka fire and antitank weapons.

Private Benjamin Alvarado, of G Company, describes the ambush:

‘A road near Argentan, in the morning, it is raining and there is some fog ... Our squad of twelve men, the last in the section, as we were trying to join up with another Allied division, stops as a convoy is approaching. Impossible to know whether these are Allies or enemies. Thinking that we were dealing with Americans, we stood up along a hedgerow that separated us from the road. We saw a motorcyclist pass by first, then a command vehicle and after that three trucks loaded with foot soldiers ... ‘Those are Germans!’ We jumped into the trench. The lead motorcyclist turns into an opening in the hedgerow and then discovered who we were and shouted out an alarm. Our lieutenant got up and shot him down.(...) We were stupefied and taken off guard. We withdrew about 50 meters, as far as a trench two meters deep. Confusion reigned within the German convoy and the soldiers got down from their trucks. I climbed up the hill and saw a group of ten Germans coming in our direction. I could also see our sergeant bent over the radio and our squad awaiting orders. I was like a crazy man! I yelled, ‘They are coming, you gotta commence fire!’ My sergeant tried to calm me down. He shouted my name: ‘Alvado!’ I ignored him and got into position. He crawled beside me, his rifle in hand.
-- ‘Are they Germans, Sarge?,’ I asked.
-- ‘Yes,’ he answered.”

It is in this valley zone that the 2nd Battalion 317th get up on the night of August 19-20 to take the “Petit-Tellier” sector. (Photo by the author, taken from the former German positions.)

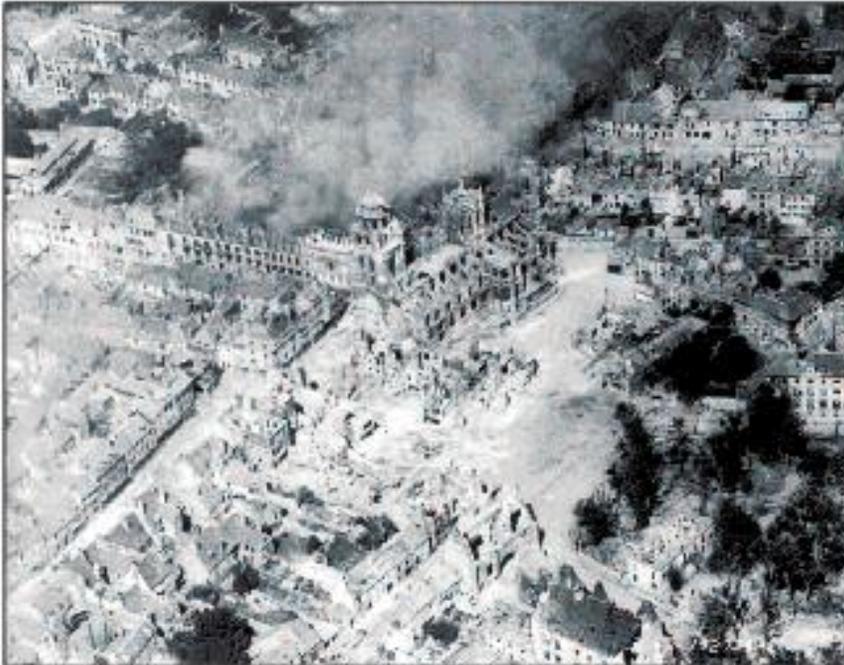


"Now without a doubt in my mind, I commenced fire and hit my target: a German, holding a defensive grenade, who was running toward us, ready to throw it! Then everyone else joined in. While the battle was raging, my sergeant told me, 'Alvarado, I am going to recommend you for the Infantry Combat Badge!' Every time since, I think back to that episode ... and I see myself, a boy of 18, responding in a frenzy to a tough situation, not really 100% ready to make an important decision and waiting for proof that it really was the enemy we were facing.

"Their tanks started pushing the vehicles ahead of them so they could get to us. A tank got as close as fifty meters ahead of us before its track was destroyed by a bazooka rocket and it stopped. They opened fire with their machine guns and 88mm cannons but couldn't raise them high enough to hit us. (...) Then another German tank approached. Our radio operator called for reinforcements. A single American tank was available. We could see it behind us. (...) When the two tanks took aim on each other,



they turned their cannons toward their targets. The German tank opened fire (...) while our tank moved around: the shell ricocheted. Still moving, our tank fired two shots and hit the German tank. A spectator to this duel a few meters away, I was totally terrified by their awesome firepower and by the fact that they were, with so much tenaciousness, in a fight to the death. The German tank was destroyed and



Top of the page: The church in Crennes, where the American officers met on the night of August 19, when it sustained German artillery fire. (Photo by the author.)

Above: This aerial photograph of downtown Argentan, taken on August 24, shows the extent of the damage caused by the Time On Target of August 20: Saint-Germain church is in ruins, as is Saint-Nicolas chapel (in the foreground) and the rest of the Place du Marché. In the background, the Jeanne-d'Arc Institute is still burning. (Collection of the author.)

Opposite: In ruined Argentan on August 20, some of the inhabitants give information to civilian affairs information officers of the 80th Division. Between the typical Norman peasant cap and the pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses of the American officer, it is a matter of culture shock.





Above: One of the *Panzer* tanks of the 9th *Panzer-Division* that managed to escape from Argentan and which was undoubtedly abandoned in a sector of Hill 213: it is clear that the tank was hit at the top of the gun mantlet, but it is apparently for all that in good condition: the branches covering the ground must have served as camouflage.



At left: It is on this part of the Argentan-Trun Road (D916) that the ambush of the morning of August 20 was staged: scattered along the roadway, the American troops opened fire on the German troops and vehicles. (Photo of the author.)



Below: A patrol of the 316th Infantry advances on Saint-Germain Street on August 20, sweeping the buildings for the last Germans. (NARA.)

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This engagement is described in a confused and relatively divergent manner by the different witnesses who passed their memories along to us: it seems that all the vehicles except the tanks were destroyed. As for the tanks, with regard to their position to the rear of the column, everything indicates that most were able to get away by cutting overland, towards Sévigny. One, perhaps two, tanks were destroyed during the engagement. Ultimately, the Argentan-Trun Road is heaped with German vehicles and bodies: the 2nd Battalion 317th Infantry profits from the situation to take numerous prisoners. During this ambush, not far from there, the 1st Battalion 317th Infantry leaves its positions along the road between "Bordeaux" and Crennes and follows the path taken up by the 2nd Battalion to the horse track sector and the "Petit-Tellier": afterwards it deployed on either side of the stud farm.

Final fighting around- Argentan

At the break of dawn, the situation of the 1st and 2nd Battalions scattered along the Argentan-Trun Road could hardly have been more confused: on this **20th of August**, at around **6:00 a.m.**, the entire 2nd Battalion undertakes the crossing of the Argentan-Trun Road and head toward the top of Hill 213, and at **8:00 a.m.**, Division Headquarters receives a message reporting that the battalion is occupying Hill 213. But some German motorized troops continue their escape from the town and are going back to Sévigny. Because his unit is experiencing heavy pressure from the enemy, the 2nd Battalion commander requests some antitank cannons and armored vehicles the attempted German maneuvers. The soldiers of the battalion received instructions to secure and fortify the position, while sending out reconnaissance patrols.

Regarding the 1st Battalion, which follows the footsteps of the 2nd Battalion, it repels initial gunfire while in position at "Petit-

started to burn. (...) While the battle raged, a German medical vehicle arrived, marked with a red cross. We ceased fire ... it was an incredible moment. The doctors examined the tank and, since there was nothing more that could be done, they took off again. The other German armored vehicles pulled back close to the trenches, using them for protection and making themselves as scarce as possible. Our tank continued to advance toward the Germans,, with our squad right behind it. We had come out again from each side of the road, emptying our rifle clips on the fleeing Germans in their rout." (5)



Present-day view of the former "Petit-Tellier" grove, in which the foot soldier of the 1st Battalion, 317th Infantry and the tanks of the 702nd Tank Battalion were locked in combat with the Germans on the morning of August 20. The photo was taken from the American side; opposite, slightly raised, the former German positions along Route D916. (Photo by the author.)

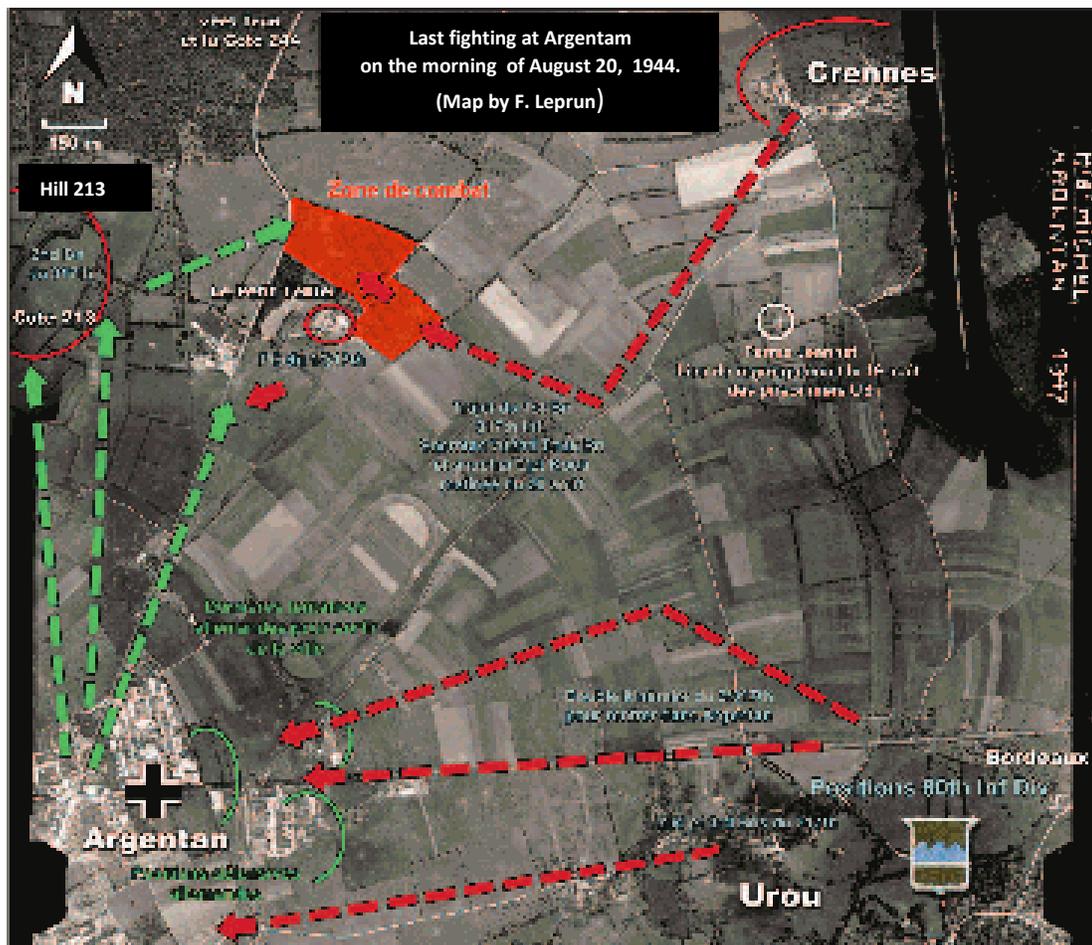
Tellier." The Germans with whom the soldiers are colliding are among the troops who have continued to evacuate Argentan and who have infiltrated the positions of the 2nd and 1st Battalions of the 317th Infantry. The 1st is supported by the Sherman tanks of A Company, 702nd Tank Battalion, but the tanks arrive late on the set schedule and are not a large enough force to prevail over German firepower.

Captain Koob of the 317th Infantry's antitank company, from his positions in the grove above Crennes, has tried all night to no avail to organize the 317th front. After having given orders to the antitank troops to be ready to back up the foot soldiers and, above all, to reinforce the 2nd Battalion, then isolated from the rest of the American troops. Koob reports to the regimental command post to obtain information: but the top commander is still incommunicado, and his second in command has no more details about the situation than Koob himself. Back in Crennes, Koob decides to accompany the advance of the 1st Battalion.

The fighting rages in a grove adjacent to the "Petit-Tellier" stud farm along the road from Trun, where Germans and Americans are facing off. Koob wants to talk with the commander of 1st Battalion, but the chaos of the battle is at its peak: the number of wounded on the American side and prisoners among the Germans do not cease to rise. Koob

runs into a wounded American officer who, hysterical, claims that the soldiers are "getting massacred in the orchard." (6) A number of 57mm cannons are position on the south edge of the orchard: they were supposed to have joined the positions of the 2nd Battalion but have been hindered by German resistance. The gunfire is so dense that the cannon crews have been forced to leave their pieces, especially because they are having great difficulty in maneuvering their cannons. All forces in the vicinity rush into the battle to try to repulse the Germans: the foot soldiers launch continual assaults to clear the orchard and retake the road, eventually to establish a link with their counterparts in the 2nd Battalion.

Among the prisoners taken in the orchard, a Polish man, interrogated in the temporary battalion command post (set up in the stud farm buildings) declares that the Germans are preparing a major counterattack with the goal of retaking Hill 213, Alongside the foot soldiers and the Sherman tanks of the 702nd Tank Battalion also enter the fray: they have once before cleared the orchard, but the presence of German tanks on the road forced them to beat a retreat in order to regroup, Capt. Smith's A Company sustains losses in the orchard: a German antitank cannon destroys Sgt. Yagle's tank. Yagle is killed along with two crewmen, with the two other crew members





The street today, photographed from the same angle. (Photograph of the author.)

Above: In this unpublished photograph, taken by 2nd Lt. David J. Hindlemann of divisional artillery, depicts a soldier of 305th Engineers Battalion who is at work mine sweeping on Aristide-Briand Street. The disarmed explosive devices, such as shells and landmines, caused a long-term problem in Argentan in the period following Liberation. (Hindlemann family collection.)

wounded. Soon afterwards, Sgt. Jones' tank takes out the German antitank gun.

Confronting the get precariousness of the situation at "Petit-Tellier", Capt. Koob next decides to take a jeep back to Crennes, where he orders other 57mm cannons and above all two sections of M10s from the 893rd Tank Battalion, which had up to then been held in reserve, in order to support the 1st Battalion. One section receives order to proceed directly to the orchard in order to help the Sherman tanks, while the other is sent to take a position slightly more to the south, to thwart any possible German counterattack coming from Argentan.

The M10s take to the road: Capt. Koob, in his jeep, rides ahead, leading the first section, while the second follows them, around 200 meters behind. But the jeep quickly becomes a target: Koob and his escort leave the vehicle to take cover in the ditch. Soon the armored vehicles (which moved not over the road but the adjoining field, using the hedgerow and bank for protection) stop, pivot their turrets and open fire. Koob grabs his binoculars to get a fix on the direction of fire: he discovers that it was the Sherman tanks of Captain Smith that have fired. The disorder is total. Koob halts the M10 fire and deploys aviation reconnaissance signs to have the Sherman tanks do the same. Capt. Smith recognizes Koob and the Sherman tanks cease fire. Smith explains to Koob that he was convinced that it had been a question of German tanks that wanted to attack them from the rear. The first of the M10 sections meets up with the troops of Battalion, near the orchard where the fighting is still raging.

The arrival of the Tank Destroyers gives new impetus to the assault: the American foot soldiers and armored vehicles, providing mutual protection, succeed in taking the orchard and crossing the road. While heading toward Hill 213, two more German tanks are engaged and destroyed, while the Americans lose another Sherman tank. The Sherman tank was the vehicle of Sgt. M. Szymanski of A Company, 702nd Tank Battalion, which was nicknamed "Lady Luck": the crew escapes miraculously without harm from the blazing tank. Next, the foot soldiers manage to join up with their comrades of the 2nd Battalion at the top of Hill 231. The high point has been secured for good, because armored vehicles and antitank cannons have joined forces with the soldiers. At **10:30 a.m.**, the objective is considered to have been effectively taken. The chaotic engagement of the 1st and 2nd Battalions costs 75 men, two tanks and at least one 57mm cannon.

During the night and morning when the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 317th Infantry are engaged on the level of the Argentan-Trun Road, other combat units of the 80th Infantry have maintained their positions from Urou to Crennes, providing support fire for the foot soldiers and blocking any advance of the Germans from Argentan. For example, around **7:00 a.m.**, an antitank section of the 610th Tank Battalion, in position near "Bordeaux", encounters a group of five German armored vehicles that are coming out of the town while coming onto the Argentan-Trun Road. The section prepares to open fire on them when Brigadier General Edmund W. Searby,



This photo, taken by a civilian after the battle, shows the carcass of a Sherman tank destroyed christened "Lady Luck" in white paint on its side, which identifies it as the tank of Sgt. Szymanski of A Company, 702nd Tank Battalion, destroyed on the morning of August 20 near "Petit-Tellier". Beside it is a Panzer tank with turret removed, probably belonging to the 9. Pz-Div. (Collection of André Fournié, via Josselin Lioust.)

commander of divisional artillery, who was on the scene, suspends the order: in fact, he believes he has recognized British tanks and not enemy vehicles. This anecdote gives an idea of the confusion that reigned on the battlefield, not excluding the superior officers, who supposedly have a relatively good and clear idea of how the frontlines are developing. Faced with the protestations of the section chief, Searby observes the tanks more attentively through his binoculars: when he discovers the tactical marks on the turrets, all doubt leaves him and gives the order to fire at will (it seems that four of the five vehicles were destroyed, even if it is implausible that it was a question here of tanks as such, but rather simple armored vehicles, as Koob's report leads one to suppose).

Taking the town

From the early morning on, it is the troops held in reserve until that point who come into play: at **8:45 a.m.**, the 3rd Battalion, 317th Infantry (the only infantry battalion not to have fought up to then) receives the order to enter Argentan from the northeast and advances toward the town. It is accompanied by the 2nd Battalion, 318th Infantry, which leaves its positions at Urou to enter this city of the Auge-Ornais region from the east and southeast. In turn, the 2nd Battalion is followed by the 3rd Battalion, 318th Infantry. These units enter Argentan on National Route 24A, the Trois-Crois crossroads, by the Champ de Foire (fairgrounds) and also by the Alençon Road via Coulandron. The GIs go into a silent, ravaged town, where certain buildings – like the Jean d'Arc Institution – are finally burning out. There is only the dull and muffled noise of their steps in the rubble to break the silence. At **10:33 a.m.**, the commander of the 3rd Battalion, 317th Infantry sends a message reporting that his men have penetrated to the heart of Argentan. The foot soldiers are accompanied by units of 893rd TD Battalion. Although the GIs have entered the town, Argentan has not yet been swept clean and secured: a jeep from the 1st Reconnaissance Platoon of this antitank unit is attacked by the Germans while attempting to come into Argentan. Generally speaking, the soldiers move forward with caution, checking out each building trying to flush out any possible elite marksmen: they are above all surprised still to find civilians in town. In fact, delivered from the ordeal of the battle, the few remaining residents come out sporadically from their

shelters: here is how Maurice Hommey ends his account of Liberation:

"At daybreak, we could make out, with desolation, that the town had suffered new and heavy damage and that the fires had spread. (...) And then that silence ... Then at 11:30 a.m., we hear the footsteps of men marching cautiously. Someone knocks on the door. These are the first American scouts, who, surprised to find an inhabited house in this deserted and destroyed town, gather around and talk with a lady in our group who knows English, offering small packets of sugar, coffee, cookies and cigarettes, in exchange for which they were delighted to drink a glass of wine." (7)

At **3:00 p.m.**, the 318th infantry claims to have definitively swept the town clean. A flag-raising ceremony takes place between Americans and the town's mayor, Yves Silvestre. (8)

Epilogue

Although the town is taken and secure, fighting still breaks out in the surrounding areas. 1st Battalion, 318th receives the order at **11:35 a.m.** to leave Urou for Crennes and make a final clean sweep of the village and the surrounding woods. Additionally, the unit sends patrols with the goal of establishing links with the 358th Infantry of 90th Division Infantry. Once this



At the west exit from Argentan, Lt. Col. Brian G. Horrocks, commander of the 30th British Corps, behind the wheel of his vehicle, is greeted by sentinels of the 80th Infantry Division. (IWM.)

At Villedieu-lès-Bailleil (between Trun and Argentan), before the monument to the World War I dead (visible in the background), soldiers of the 80th Division greet their British counterparts of the 13th Field Squadron, Engineering Division of the 11th Armored Division, come to replace them. A symbolic handshake illustrates the joining of the different units in the Falaise-Chambois Gap. (IWM.)



task is completed, the soldiers of the 318th do not stop there but inspect the road network around the village for landmines and explosive snares left by the Germans. They meet up with the Engineer Unit, 305th Engineer Battalion, which has a big job ahead to clean the zone: the report of this unit underscores the friendly attitude of the civilians toward the American Engineers: a townsman shows them on a map the precise emplacement of eleven German mines.

On its end, 3rd Battalion, 317th has established a defensive position to the west of Argentan, at the level of the crossroads of the routes from Putanges and Falaise. At **2:05 p.m.**, the 11th Armored Division enters with force into Argentan, with orders to relieve the Americans.

But farther north, while the English are arriving, the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 317th Infantry continue to widen their defensive perimeter around Hill 213: nearly a day will pass as the units wage battle in this sector, from which the last Germans attempt to flee. The 2nd Battalion drives toward the west, and take Sévigny and then "Chiffreville" in the afternoon and evening, after having met sporadic resistance. 1st Battalion reports having attacked at **5:00 p.m.** at "Petit-Tellier" to the north in the direction of Hill 244, in Gouffern Woods. There it encounters a stronger enemy resistance, the last remnants of the German army.

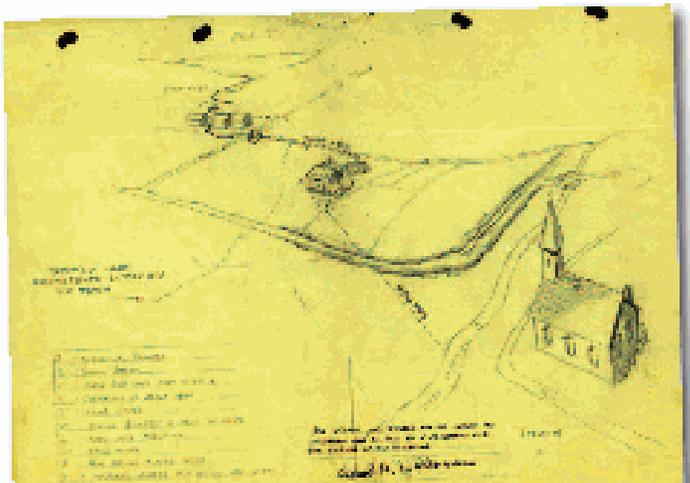
The GIs gradually catch up with the German forces on Hill 244 before advancing into the woods, in the direction of Trun. The assault is blocked at **11:00 p.m.**

Prisoners of the Germans

In the course of these three days after fighting, due to their inexperience, numerous soldiers of the 80th Infantry Division were taken prisoners by the Germans. Their account of their captivity requires a historical analepsis: the first prisoners are captured as early as **August 18**. All belong to the 318th Infantry. But the situation is even worse **the next day**, notably for L Company, 3rd Battalion, 318th Infantry. It participates, like the rest of its battalion, in the morning's assault: from **7:00 a.m.** on, it hastens from "Bordeaux". After having crossed National Route 24A, it is advancing northward when suddenly caught under German fire. The enemy, specifically those positioned in a farm situated several hundred meters from the Americans, keep the GIs plastered to the ground.

Sgt. Helmut H. Wildermann of the 3rd Platoon, L Company, tells what happens next: "*L Company was advancing over the field toward the north. In a wheat field, very much exposed, three sections were immobilized by the volleys of a German anti-aircraft and automatic gunfire coming from the farm ahead of us. (...) We stayed in that wheat field from approximately 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Then some German tanks, coming in from Argentan, took a road and cut us from our rear guard. It was then that we were captured by the Germans, who led us right away behind the farm, and put us next in a stone quarry. There were 84 of us American soldiers. They kept us around an hour in that quarry.*" (9) From there, Wildermann and his comrades are taken into Argentan by the Germans. Having arrived at the Falaise crossroads, the column of American prisoners and their guards encounter American artillery fire. The situation is now extremely disorderly: certain American soldiers are killed or wounded, while others are able to break away from German custody. Among the wounded soldiers are Privates Roy Hillman and Walter Brush. Owing to the seriousness of their wounds, they are abandoned by the Germans in an orchard between the slaughter houses and Petits-Fossés Street. (10) The other prisoners are taken away by the Germans by way of the road from Trun, in Gouffern Forest, near Sévigny. They spend the night there without mistreatment, but

This drawing was made by Sgt. H. Wildermann in May 1945: it represents the route taken by L Company on August 19, before and after its capture. Note in the front to the background: the church in Sai, the Ure, National Route 24A, the plain of Crennes, the farm where they were gathered together by the Germans, the outskirts northeast of Argentan, then the heights of Gouffern Forest, near Sévigny, in the direction of Trun. (NARA, via Jed Henry.)



having nothing more to eat than plants and roots. The Germans left the prisoners of the 80th Infantry in peace until they launch their breach on the following morning of August 20. It is then that they take the prisoners with them: several groups are formed, each one with its share of American prisoners. The most important group tried to proceed with force near Chambois during the afternoon: when they arrive near the village – held by the Americans of the 359th Infantry – the Germans forced their prisoners to get into their vehicles to serve as human shields. In the tumult of battle, the GIs of the 359th Infantry cannot recognize their comrades of the 80th Division and open fire. Once the attack has been stopped, around 3:00 p.m., about thirty of former prisoners of the 80th Division are welcomed at Chambois. It appears that several of them were killed during the attempted breach. In a general fashion, more or less throughout the Falaise Chambois Gap, American soldiers are freed. For example, the soldier C. J. Cotten of L Company succeeds with two other soldiers in escaping from their guards: he is rescued by the Polish soldiers of the 1st Armored Division, near Moissy. A little farther, on the same day, in Saint-Lambert-sur-Dives, the Canadian soldiers of South Alberta Regiment discover, among the German prisoners, twelve American soldiers, whom they free and quickly furnish with arms and munitions, so that they can join them in battle. (11) Finally, 1st Lt. John R. Singleton, also from L Company, is freed several days later by British troops. None the less, of the hundred or so captured GIs whom we have been able to trace, a certain number among them were taken away to prison camps in Germany.



At the Trois-Croix crossroads on August 20, GIs of the 318th Infantry evacuate the town, watched by the British of the 11th Armored Division.

Dénouement

On the following day, August 21, the different units of the 80th Division, to the north and east of Argentan, continue to sweep the last German occupants from Gouffern Woods. A munitions depot is discovered to the east of “Petit-Tellier”, containing 27,000 tons of materiel, as well as headquarters maps and series of reconnaissance photos. Numerous prisoners were taken: 1st Battalion, 317th in particular, takes 700 prisoners all at once near Sévigny. On that same day at the evening's end, 80th Division is fully relieved by the British troops and is sent to rest to the southeast of Argentan, at first around Aunou and then in a sector of Médavy-Almenêches (where General McBride set up his command post throughout the battle), which he leaves one and for all on **August 25**. It is the end of the battle for this unit.

In our third and last article, we shall describe the conclusion and the consequences of the battle, from a physical as well as moral point of view, with regard to the soldiers of the 80th Division as well as the townspeople of Argentan. We shall also attempt a

micro-historical approach of the first combat experience and, above all, the problem of the *mémoire* of liberation of Argentan.

(To be continued.)

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Notes:

(1) William Koob. *The Operations of the Antitank Company, 317th Infantry in the Falaise Gap*, Infantry School of Fort Benning, 1949, p. 20.

(2) Koob. *The Operations of ... op cit.*, p. 21.

(3) Various. *Le Pays d'Argentan: La Bataille de Normandie au Pays d'Argentan (The Argentan Region: The Battle of Normandy in the Argentan Region)*, 1994, p. 15.

(4) Various. *Tales of Henpeck: Folklore of the 314th FA Bn.*, p. 5.

(5) Reminiscences of B. Alvarado, untitled, private typed manuscript, 2001, pp. 13-14.

(6) *The Operations of ... op cit.*, p.25.

(7) *The Region of Argentan ... op. cit.* pp. 15-16.

(8) We shall revisit this ceremony, amply documented, in our last article.

(9) Letter of H. Wildermann, May 8, 1945, incorporated in the personal files of Walter Brush, NARA.

(10) Brush and Hillman died on the spot from their wounds some time afterwards. They were found – not even covered by sheets – by Messieurs Secretin and Lolivrel of Argentan a day later. They were buried in the garden of Mr. Buisson by other GIs around August 25. Although their tombs bore their names, it took the U.S. Army two years to locate them. They were exhumed in 1947 to receive a military funeral. They now lie at rest in the United States.

(11) *War Diary, 29th Canadian Armd. Rec.Rgt.*, August 1944, p. 18.

Erratum: Contrary to what we wrote at the beginning of the preceding article, the first major aerial bombardment hit Argentan on the night of June 6 and 7, 1944, and not on that of the 5th and 6th.

At left: The farm called “Jeannet”, between Urou and Crennes, from which place the Germans fired upon the Americans on August 19 and where the prisoners of the 80th Infantry were taken before being held in a stone quarry several hundred meters away. (Photo of the author.)

