

### III

#### Argentan-The Baptism of Fire

On Aug. 18, the 314th FA moved first to a firing position in an area about 4 miles south of Argentan, then displaced to Juvigny-sur-Orne and occupied firing positions to support the Division's first major engagement -- the Battle of Argentan. Gun positions were just south of the village and the CP was in a nearby apple orchard. The Battalion remained at this location until Aug. 26.

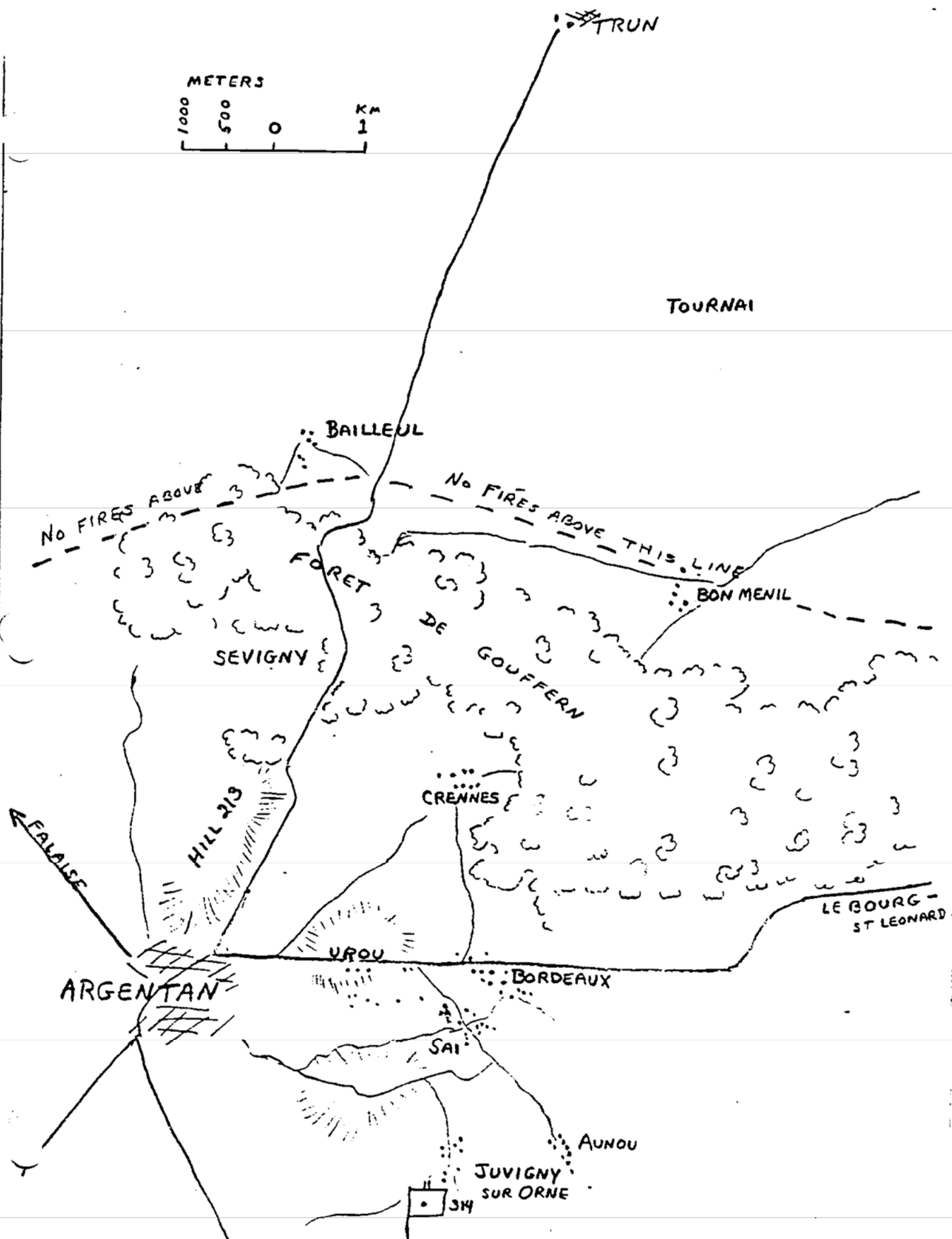
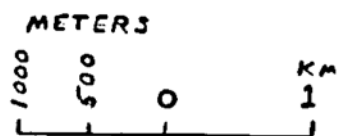
Russell Litchfield remembers that: "On Aug. 18, 'Sv' Btry was about six miles south of Argentan and had delivered six loads of ammunition to the firing batteries in preparation for the 318th's attack. Sgts. (Altice) Nicholson, (Jack) McCombs, (Arnold) Sneed and I, with a jeep and six trucks, set out for the Third Army ammo depot near Le Mans. Getting there by daylight posed no problems, but after we loaded the trucks it began to get dark. As we traveled back through a wooded area night fell. This was for 26 men our first experience being on our own in such a small convoy. Among other things I recalled those stories of throat slitting piano wire being strung across lonely roads at night. I told my jeep driver (Carl) Wilson, to stop so we could put up the windshield. Carl said he wouldn't be able to see with it up. I told him we'd not see daylight if we hit a wire. Not ten minutes later we hit the first of three wires we encountered that night. We had wire cutters mounted on all Bn. jeep bumpers the next day."

Although more than 40 years have passed, John Ruyan recalled and very concisely summed up the emotional stress many, if not all, of us experienced as we faced our first major encounter with the enemy:

"Argentan, how could we forget, truly our initial blood bath. Experience versus inexperience, combatting a veteran enemy, facing enemy fire for the first time, seeing our friends and comrades wounded and killed, and, in my case, my first real encounter with my inner self. My struggle with the emotion, fear, came to the fore and my ability to cope with it was one of the most gratifying experiences of my lifetime."

The Battle of the Argentan-Falaise Gap, which saw the virtual destruction of the German Seventh Army and was later described by military historians as a "killing ground," was recorded very succinctly in the Division and Battalion After Action Reports, neither of which give any indication of the ferocity of the fighting nor of the magnitude of the destruction of enemy personnel and materiel. A slightly edited version of these Reports outlines the plan and tactics of the battle.

Pursuant to a directive from V Corps of the First Army (to which the 80th was assigned for this battle), the Division ordered an attack at 0800, Aug. 18 to seize the high ground (Hill 213) north of Argentan. Combat Team 318 (CT 318) was to by-pass Argentan, seize the objective, then attack Argentan from the northeast with one battalion and then be prepared to continue to attack northward in the direction of Trun.



The 318th Inf. crossed the Line of Departure at 0800. By 0905 elements of the 1st Bn. were fighting in Bordeaux. Stiffening resistance finally forced it to halt its forward movement in that vicinity. The 2nd Bn. moved west along the Argentan-Le Bourg-St. Leonard road until it too was held up by heavy fire from Argentan to the west and the high ground northeast of its position. The 3rd Bn. moved to clean out enemy resistance in the vicinity of Sai, which it occupied at 1530. The 3rd then moved to occupy Bordeaux and continued the attack at 1700, relieving elements of the 1st Bn. which reorganized. After the attack was stopped, the 318th adjusted positions.

But as Col. Minahan remembers that first day at Argentan, "Things did not go as neatly and smoothly as that laconic After Action Report implies. On Aug. 18 after the 314th had fired the artillery preparation and the 318th Inf. had crossed their Line of Departure east of Argentan, I went forward to see how the attack was progressing.

"At the 318th Forward CP I was talking to Lt. Col. Roy Herte (Regt. Exec.) when we heard a loud explosion and saw a geyser of dirt rise beside a jeep in a field off to the left. Fearing the jeep had run into a minefield, no one ventured near it. To me, it was not a logical site for a minefield, so I told my driver, Manly Overstreet, to wait on the road while I walked over to investigate. I saw my first battle casualties. The driver was dead. The passenger, whom I recognized as Capt. Robert Hall, S-2, 313th FA, was unconscious and still breathing, but the top of his head was sliced open. There was a fresh mortar shell crater beside the jeep. (Remember how mortar shells came in silently compared to artillery shells?) I signaled to some medics to come over. They took Capt. Hall to an aid station. I later learned he died there.

"Continuing forward, I met elements of the 2nd Bn., 318th Inf. near the town of Urou. They had been trying to cross the East-West highway leading from Argentan in order to attack their objective, the high ground northeast of Argentan. Casualties were mounting from enemy machine guns and mobile 40mm anti-aircraft guns that could not be located. Unlike in maneuvers, these were real casualties, not guys wearing tags pinned on by umpires. Many were unit commanders and other key personnel. Everywhere company and platoon commanders were raging in frustration, because radios were not working as expected. Then two tanks of the 702nd Tank Bn. were ordered forward to locate and silence some machine guns. They had gone about 40 yards past me when, off to the left, I heard the piercing crack of high velocity guns and ahead the clanking thud of metal on metal. Both tanks had been knocked out. Just before they burst into flames, the surviving crew members jumped out and ran back past me, covered with blood. I remembered an old army saying, 'No amount of training or maneuvers will prepare you for the first day of combat.'

"Through some orchard trees I could see a big chateau east of Argentan. No gun fire was coming from it, but this had to be the enemy's OP for directing enfilading fire on the 318th Inf. left flank. I chose it as my first combat fire mission. To get better observation, I climbed to the loft of a nearby barn, poked a hole through the roof tiles, and yelled fire commands down to Overstreet who was operating the jeep radio. When I had a good bracket on the target, I requested a Div Arty TOT which made a shambles

of the chateau. (We had difficulty locating the remnants when we visited Argentan in 1984.)

"About noon I went looking for the 318th CP and Col. McHugh (Command Officer -- 318th Inf.) to learn the overall situation and find out how the 314th FA could best help. Enroute on my radio I overheard Lt. Bob Whiting, FO 'C' Btry, conducting a fire mission on counterattacking enemy tanks. His voice was calm and clear. Suddenly there was silence. I thought he was having radio trouble. About an hour later, I learned that he had kept on adjusting fire until his position was overrun and he was gunned down. Bob was our first 314th FA combat casualty. A very brave man and a truly fine person, he was awarded the Silver Star posthumously.

"By the end of the day CT 318 was recovering from shock and getting 'battlefield smarts' -- the ability to identify sounds and sights, to distinguish between the high cyclic scream of the German 'Burp Gun' and the lower tone clatter of our 'Grease Gun,' to recognize the low slung Panzer Mark IV silhouette from that of the too-tall Sherman Tank, to anticipate enemy counter actions, and to make full use of cover and defilade."

The 314th fired five missions on enemy tanks and machine gun emplacements, then displaced to Juvigny-sur-Orne at noon, re-registered and continued fire support at 1430.

During the fighting that first day, Ln. O. Frederick Maxted was wounded. As he tells the story: "When the infantry battalion I was with came under heavy artillery fire, everyone was diving for cover. I dove head first into a ditch just as a shell exploded near me. Some small pieces of shell fragments hit me in the rear. Later I was having a medic fix it when a doctor took a look and sent me back to a hospital. I sure got a lot of kidding later when I returned to the Battalion."

Both Hubert Kenyon and Arthur Lindberg (Aerial Observer) mentioned how they adjusted fire on the city of Argentan and how the data was used the next morning (Aug. 19) for a TOT (Time on Target) by all the artillery battalions that were in position. "As we were in the air at the time, we got to see first hand the devastating effect such massed artillery had upon a target."

Arthur also notes that: "I was with 'Gerry' Rebensdorf flying near Argentan at what, I suppose, was the Field Artillery School's recommended height for aerial observation -- which was quite low -- about 750 feet. At any rate, we both heard something hit our plane. Upon looking down at the floor I noticed a hole and another one which was in the canopy. Evidently a German infantryman or sniper had taken a shot at us. They knew what these artillery observer plans were doing. Anyway, this shot had gone between my legs and exited through the top near my head. From that time on we always flew at a much higher altitude."

Early on the 19th, the 2nd Bn. attacked in the direction of Argentan, but again was halted by hostile fire, primarily from Tiger tanks and 88mm guns. The 3rd Bn. launched an attack on the Division Objective (Hill 213). It too

met heavy enemy resistance from tanks and infantry and was forced to reorganize in the vicinity of Urou.

The 317th then passed through the 318th in column of battalions and launched an attack on Hill 213 at 1735. Progress was very slow due to heavy fire from Hill 213 and from the west edge of the Forêt de Gouffern off to the right. By 2040, the advance had progressed to the southeast edge of the objective on the southern slope of the hill. The 317th was then ordered to dig in and resume the attack the next morning.

"About 1300 on Aug. 19, the Bn. CP area came under artillery fire for the first time," recalls Col. Minahan. "Casualties were limited to injuries to two members of the attached anti-aircraft platoon. I asked Paul Bassett, then Bn. Survey O., to do a shellrep from which we back plotted the approximate location of the source of the incoming artillery. It was south of Falaise. To our consternation, however, the shell fragments were from British 25 pounders. Evidently, our noble ally to the north had not been given the NO FIRE LINE we had on our firing chart and thus had misidentified us as German artillery through their sound and flash units. Contrary to rumors you may have heard, we did not retaliate."

That shelling is well recalled by Bill Wilkinson who says: "I had a close call at Argentan when a shell burst in our area. I made a dive for a foxhole and went in at the same time as a shell fragment which hit me on the neck. Just enough to burn the skin, but not break it. No Purple Heart."

Thomas Haynie (B Btry) recalls: "We were in a gun position outside of Argentan when we heard artillery fire in the distance in front of us. Lt. Ruyan remarked, 'That is your enemy firing at you.' In a few seconds rounds landed in front of our battery. This was the first time were fired on."

During the course of the battle, and I believe it was on the second day, Col. Minahan called on the radio and told me (John Ruyan) to turn the Btry Exec. duties over to Lt. Abraham Botnick and to report to the First Battalion Headquarters of the 318th Infantry Regiment. I found Major Tosi (Commanding Officer) in a courtyard of a large chateau east of Argentan and not too far from Juvigny-sur-Orne. I revealed that I was with the artillery and would be the eyes for supporting fire. As we were conversing, a lieutenant from one of the companies approached and requested that I come with him and fire on several tanks to his front. We departed the CP and proceeded through apple orchards and gardens to a position where we would be able to observe the tanks. When we reached the area, the tanks had disappeared among trees opposite our position. I was not about to let the opportunity to fire on tanks pass, so I questioned a couple of GI's for the exact position of the last sightings of the tanks on the edge of the woods and promptly fired my first fire mission into the woods on an unobserved enemy. Capt. Richard Wilmer (Assistant S-3) questioned me about the success of the fire mission and I replied, 'two tanks down.' In reality, I just wanted to impress the infantry that they had support and impress the Germans we were there to fight."

Col. Minahan relates how on the second day of the battle, he was watching the progress of the attack from a farm yard near Urou. General McBride was in

another farm yard on the opposite side of a road from the Colonel. A German machine gun, several hundred yards up the road with a clear field of fire opened up on anyone trying to cross or come up the road. There were casualties to prove it. The General signaled for the Colonel to join him. Our CO had no choice, in spite of what discretion dictated. Spotting a small haystack in the yard on the General's side of the road, the Colonel selected a lane of approach, dashed across the road, and dove into the haystack. Normally this would have been "the approved solution" to the problem. But what the Colonel didn't know was that the haystack was partially submerged in a pool of liquid cow manure. After the loud splash, General McBride laughed so much he forgot what he wanted to tell the Colonel.

"Later that day," says Anthony DiPangrazio (Hq Btry), "somewhere in the vicinity of Bordeaux or Sai, General McBride caught up with Colonel McHugh and awarded him the Silver Star. While this informal and impromptu ceremony was taking place an artillery shell hit an adjacent stone wall and its fragments sheared off the compass attached to the dashboard of the 314th liaison crew's jeep which was parked nearby. William Whiteside (Hq Btry) and I were sitting in the vehicle at the time, but neither of us were injured."

William Dorsch recalls: "At one point we had the Fire Direction Center out in the open and there was a rumor that there was a sniper in the nearby town. While we were in that location, I heard the unmistakable crack of a rifle that I had heard many times while marking targets in the pits on the rifle range. Shortly thereafter we saw a German with no helmet and no apparent weapons walking across a nearby field. Major (Richard) Schalliol (S-2) borrowed my carbine and went after him. I don't remember if he got him."

Bill also remembers that: "We were ordered to conserve 'ammo' for a TOT that was being planned. With Division Corps and Army artillery participating, I think there would have been about 76 pieces firing at one time."

At midnight (Aug. 19-20) seven battalions of artillery including the 314th, fired five volleys on Argentan. This was extremely effective, destroying many remaining enemy strong points and setting more fires in the already burning town.

That TOT is well remembered by Frank Lankford who says: "It was one night during the Argentan seige that several batteries of 'Long Toms' moved up into position in back of the 'Sv' Btry bivouac area without our knowing it. About midnight, they all (about 12) let go at the same time. The ground shook us out of our sacks. We never heard such noise."

"We did a lot of night firing into Argentan. The gun tube got so hot, I (Francis Neighly) had to run down to a little stream nearby, get water, soak burlap in it, then throw the burlap over the tube. It was so hot it would sizzle. From our position we could see the flames from the burning buildings in the town."

On the 20th, the 2nd Bn. 318th attacked and seized Argentan in conjunction with the 3rd Bn 317th. The 3rd Bn. 318th followed the 2nd Bn. in trace, then moved through Argentan and occupied positions west of the town.

The 1st Bn. 318th moved to protect the Division's right flank. It then seized Crennes and sent out patrols to establish contact with elements of the 90th Division on our right.

As liason with 318th Hq, John Beard says: "As soon as Argentan had been seized, Col. McHugh sent word back to his CP to have the Civil Affairs Officer and the Mayor of Argentan join him immediately in the town square, because the Canadians were approaching from the north and were not too far off. Shortly thereafter, the group assembled in the rubble filled square in front of the badly damaged Hotel de Ville (City Hall) and the Colonel presented an American flag to the Mayor as was the custom in towns which the Division had liberated. The Mayor gave a brief speech and some pictures were taken."

That afternoon, the 318th was ordered to complete the mopping up of Argentan, clean out the woods south of Crennes to the Division boundary, and to clear the mines and booby traps from the East-West highway running across the Division sector into Argentan.

During the three day period of battle Aug. (18-20) the 314th fired a total of 2,227 rounds. Among other targets it was credited with knocking out four half-tracks mounting 20mm AA guns, one truck, one 88mm gun, and repelling two tank attacks. The 314th was also credited with an achievement normally not associated with artillery. In the vicinity of Bon Menil, two hundred Germans surrendered to the Battalion's liason plane flown by S/Sgt. Gerald H. Rebensdorf with 2nd Lt. Arthur J. Lindberg as observer. Lt. Lindberg dropped messages directing them to allied troops who took them into custody.

The Battle of Argentan left the scars of war upon the 314th. In addition to 1st Lt. Robert D. Whiting (FO C Btry) and Capt. Frederick J. Maxted (Ln. O.), Cpl. George A. Shaffer (Instrument Operator B Btry) was wounded in action on Aug. 19 and, on Aug. 20 the Bn. Exec., Major Bailey G. Carnahan, and the "Hq" BC, Capt. Arnold H. Holt, were killed when their jeep struck a German anti-tank mine. In the same vehicle were T/Sgt. Ivan D. Hatcher, Communications Chief, and T/5 John J. Rossano, driver, both of whom were seriously wounded.

The Battle likewise left a variety of incidents and observations imprinted in the memories of the 314th. For example, Bruce Dunsha (Hq Btry) says: "The Headquarters Battery kitchen was located in an orchard close to a road and a small stream where there was a bridge. 1st Sgt. Thomas Pullin instructed the kitchen crew to defend that road around the clock. The small crew took turns standing guard as well as performing their kitchen duties and as a result were mean and grumpy from lack of sleep."

Bruce also remembers that he was impressed by the large number of all white cattle in the Argentan area. Charolais, he believes they were called, and after the war the breed was introduced into the U.S. While there may not be a connection, it is curious that Simeon Hutcheson also recalls that: "One night while we (A Btry) were at Argentan someone opened up with his carbine, claiming he had seen a white horse being ridden through the area."



Unfortunately, no one admitted whether "A" Btry had steaks the next day while everyone else enjoyed their "C's".

Paul McAndrew (Hq Btry) recalls: "There were lots of casualties among the cow population around Argentan. Bruce Duncha, our Mess Sgt., tried salvaging some for steaks, but they sure made tough eating."

A very disconcerting incident at Argentan still looms clear in Bill Dorsch's memory. "I had been having the GI's, so about midnight I took my other pair of shorts and went down to the Orne River, which was only a creek at that point. After I bathed, I walked out of the water up onto the bank and felt something squish up through my toes. Then I remembered that there had been cows drinking there all day. I was in worse shape then than I was when I started down to the creek."

Another unsettling experience prompts Elbert Custer to note that while many people go through life hating alarm clocks, since Argentan, he prefers them to certain alternatives. It seems that on the last night of the battle, just before daylight, he was awakened by someone shoving him. He looked up to see a German soldier towering over him. While his life was flashing before his eyes, the soldier made it know to him that he just wanted to surrender.



Whose Kitchen Crew, "Hq" or "A"?



One of the Forward Observers mentioned how the smoke in the battle area was so thick and pungent you could hardly see for more than a short distance. He then commented that: "Even under the desperate circumstances of the time, you could not help being reminded of the same sight and smell in the city park just after the 4th of July fireworks finale."

Somewhere between Bordeaux and Urou, John Beard says he was approached by a limping infantryman who asked for directions to an aid station. Upon examining the infantryman's leg, he found what appeared to be a 50 caliber bullet protruding from his knee cap. He was not only amazed that the man was able to walk, but that the wound was not bleeding.

The aftermath of the battle left singularly identical memories for those men in the Battalion who later drove through or flew over the battle zone and the area where the Germans, trying to escape through the closing pincer, were caught and killed by artillery fire or the fighters and light bombers of the 9th Tactical Air Force.

"After the battle, I (Elvis Mitchell) went through the battle area. That was my first impression of what war was really like. It was a frightening and gruesome sight."

Bill Dorsch recalls: "Sgt. (Eugene) Killen (Hq Btry) and I took a hike into the battle area. The devastation was unbelievable. Countless dead bodies and wrecked material of all types were everywhere. One van-type truck had about 75 holes in the back alone."

"The closing of the Argentan-Falaise Gap resulted in undescrivable carnage. Maj. Richard Schalliol (S-3) and I (John Ruyan) ventured into the battle area. We were shocked by the scene of death and destruction surrounding us. Our time spent there was brief, but the scene was imprinted forever."

"I (John Beard) wish I could adequately and clearly describe the scene of death and destruction as I recall it. Destroyed or partially destroyed vehicles and guns of all types, men and parts of men, dead and wounded horses, and countless items of military and personal equipment so completely covered the ground that you could hardly walk without stepping on someone or something. I particularly remember the vast number of wounded horses, some wandering around dazed, many still harnessed to destroyed, even still burning, wagons. But most of all, I recall the stench. The smell of dead and burning human and animal flesh. An overwhelming smell of death. The smell of victory was not sweet."

"You could smell the horrible stench of the battle area at two thousand feet in the air," says Hubert Kenyon. "I landed my Cub on a road near the center of the area and walked through part of it. Along the tree lines there were many dead Germans with their guns to their shoulders and hands on their guns as if they were aiming at something."

On Aug. 21, the 80th, having completed its mission, was relieved in the Argentan area by the British 50th Infantry Division. After mopping up remnants of enemy resistance in the Bois de Guffern, the Division moved to a concentration area south of the Argentan-Exmes road. This move was completed about noon the following day. For the next few days, the Division engaged in infantry-tank and anti-tank training. The 314th remained at Juvigny-sur-Orne in general support of the Division, but was not called upon for fire missions.

Path of the 314th FA Bn  
August 26 - 31, 1944

NOT TO SCALE  
LOCATIONS RELATIVE ONLY

