

Baptism of Fire at Argentan: The first engagement of

After having described and explained the fighting waged by the Americans, which led to the liberation of Argentan, this third and final part of our study is an opportunity to approach the baptism of fire of the 80th Infantry Division from new angles: the political slant of the liberation, the outcome of the battle, the shock of the first combat experience, the lessons drawn from combat and the various reminiscences. All of these historical and historiographical aspects too often eclipsed by the simple recounting of military facts.

In the background: It would have been difficult to write our study without publishing this photograph, so celebrated and so fitting an illustration of the American victory in Argentan. Taken from the perspective of Aristide and Briand Streets from the Poterie (that is, “pottery workshop”), we see about fifteen boys with jubilant faces, posing in front of the former office for recruitment of the Obligatory Work Service^a. [Translator’s note: Refer to page 13 for explanations of items with Greek-letter tags.] Above is the apartment of the mayor at that time, Y. Silvestre. Paradoxically, despite its popularity, no exact caption with correct identifications has ever been proposed. The soldiers belong to the 3rd Battalion, 318th Infantry, one of the three American infantry battalions who liberate Argentan on August 20th, the date when this image was captured. It is possible that the soldier in the middle, with the accordion (picked up from the ruins?) is H. C. Medley and the man at far right is Jackson R. Thomas of I Company. Beyond these few considerations, this photograph perfectly illustrates the concept of the primary group. (NARA.)





by Tristan Rondeau

The 80th Infantry Division (3)



During the August 20th ceremony on the town square, close-up of the cameraman on Colonel Harry D. McHugh, commander of the 318th Infantry and first in his division to receive the Silver Star. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)

Another liberation

As we had established in our previous article (cf. *Normandie 44 Magazine*, No. 7) Argentine was finally liberated from all German presence on the afternoon of August 20, 1944, after the soldiers of the 318th Infantry Regiment had entered the town during the morning. Without a doubt, the principal role of the American troops was *materially* to assure the lasting capture and security of the town, but they also had to guarantee the transition and the dissemination of power with the local authorities in response to the most pressing needs of the liberated populations, especially provisions.



Colonel Ralph E. Pearson, Civil Affairs Officer of the 318th Infantry left a detailed and enlightening eyewitness account of his own role in the relations between the military and civilian authorities during the liberation of Argentan:

"Friday, August 18: At 9:50 a.m., I realized that I had met the mayor of Argentan in his temporary office in Aunou (Since the bombardments of June 6, 1944, town hall as well as numerous public services – post office, court, etc. – took refuge in Aunou-le-Faucon; the 318th Infantry had its command post in the same village, Author's note.) Mr. Yves Silvestre (1) was mayor for around 20 years. He told me that on the previous August 14, the Germans had ordered 'all civilians must leave Argentan,' arguing that those who stayed behind would



A view of the state in which the Americans surrounding Argentan found it. Here on Town Hall Street, the houses are partially demolished and enveloped in flames. At right, the childhood home of the Cubist painter Fernand Léger remains intact. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)



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

Opposite: General view of the town 18th square as the American flag is being hung on the façade, on August 20th. The mayor, in civilian dress, and a cameraman are recognizable among soldiers of the 318th Infantry – including two medics strolling in the square or resting along the building. Most of the destruction has been caused from August 13th-20th. (NARA.)



Below: The same square in our days. The old town hall was razed and rebuilt. (Author.)



be considered the same as terrorists and shot. In fact, most of the inhabitants had taken refuge in the farms and villages surrounding the town (for example, 450 refugees were found in Aunou during the battle. Author's note.). Supplies and food did not pose a problem. At 10:20 a.m., I introduced Captain McMillen, Commander in Chief, to Mr. Silvestre.. Then, at 3:00 p.m., the Colonel in his turn met the mayor and brought him with him to see the new prefect in Alençon. As for me, I met the new sub-prefect of Argentan at 5:45 p.m. He gave me two postcards from the region and asked me for a pass. (...).

"Saturday, August 19: I introduced the sub-prefect, Mr.Foulquis,

Below: The flag presentation ceremony filmed from two different angles. Yves Silvestre, in civilian dress, shakes Colonel McHugh's hand, then addresses the assembly in English. Colonel Pearson is visible between them. INARA/Tyler Alberts.)





As well as a friend who, by my account, could furnish some important tactical information, to the Commander in Chief and the Military Intelligence Interpreter. [...] These officers had anticipated seeing the mayors of Argentan and Aunou [Mr. Marais. Author's note.] later. [...] I also expected take the mayor of Argentan into town to organize an official flag presentation the opportune moment." [...]

At Aunou-le-Faucom, Colonel Pearson interrogates with the rest of the CIC Detachment, the S2 of the 318th Regiment and the divisional G2, the captured German prisoners to get information that would clarify the situation of the enemy forces in Argentan. But the G2 service also interrogates the civilian authorities: on August 19th, he conducts an interrogation of the mayors of Argentan and Urou as well as the sub-prefect. These officials point out precisely on a map the German positions that they can find and the strategic points inside the town.

Pearson continues his account: "**Sunday, August 20:** At 10:20 a.m., I provided a pass (...) to Major Ball for the sub-prefect of Argentan and introduced Mr. Charles Néron, inspector of telecommunications, to Lt. Delaney. At 11:15 a.m., Major Ball discussed bread distribution with the sub-prefect and mayor of Aunou. I also issued a pass to Doctor Picot [a physician from Argentan. Author's note.] . [...] Later, I received a call from Colonel Harry McHugh, regiment commander, all excited, telling me to bring the mayor into town. We left in a jeep, driven by Eddie, the mayor seated on our equipment in the rear of the vehicle. There were still some elite German marksmen in town, fires had begun to burn out, and at any moment people could step on a landmine or be hit by a shell. The Colonel's orders were to get to town with the mayor and, above all, that the flag presentation ceremony be held 'before the English arrived: that's just what we did. We found the Colonel there and left Eddie and the jeep in order to go ahead on foot to the ruined town hall. The mayor took my hand and followed me. He assured me that he was a courageous man, a veteran of another war ...but I cannot fault him for having been a little prudent when we were trying to find an open passage in the debris of the town. [...] The Colonel officially presented

the flag to the mayor, who received it and delivered a short address in English, which he had composed and learned for the occasion: a speech in which he thanked the Americans for all they had done. The flag was hung on the ruins of the town hall. Photographers and cameramen immortalized the moment. [...] Later in the day, the American and British detachments assigned to civilian affairs moved into 15 Pierre-Ozenne Street. We had received the order to leave control of the town to the British: consequently, our troops pulled out gradually. As for me, I headed for Crennes. [...] After the war, I continued to correspond with the mayor of Aunou-le-Faucon



The American and French flags are hoisted by two GIs on the façade of the town hall. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)



Opposite: S/Sgt. A. L. Mozell of 166th Signal Corps Company, films the destroyed buildings in front of town hall on August 20th. In the foreground, some trees have been shattered by shells. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)



Above: The celebrated *Panzer* of the 9. Pz.-Div. lies in ruins in downtown Argentan. Fires are still visible as the Allies have just forced their way into the city. (IWM.)



as well as with Yves Silvestre. He had written a theatrical play inspired by the period of Occupation in Argentan.” (2)

Flag presentation ceremony

The testimony of Colonel Pearson informs us of the context in which the well-known films and photographs of liberated Argentan were made: it is a matter of pride, honor and almost politics for these men who were anxious that their first feat in battle should be immortalized and recognized. In fact, on the same day, the BBC broadcast this announcement: *“Today British troops entered Argentan.”* An assertion that raised the ire of many soldiers and officers of the 80th Infantry (*“Our soldiers were happy that this difficult battle was over, but the BBC news bulletin had angered them quite a bit,”* declared Colonel Pearson) and which made the obligation to organize the presentation before the British troops came all the more urgent. Indeed, as we showed in the previous article, the British of the 11th Armored Division really did enter Argentan on that date of August 20th, but they came to bring about the relief of the Americans, and not to liberate the town.

It is a tradition of the American army for a division to offer a “Star Spangled Banner” (nickname for the American flag) to the first town that it liberates. The 80th Division does not violate the rule. We should note that it is not the division commander, McBride, but McHugh, 318th Infantry (the regiment paid the heaviest price to take Argentan) and the first recipient of the Silver Star in the division, who presides over the ceremony, in the company of other officers (including Pearson) and soldiers of his regiment. If Yves Silvestre was the only French representative, it is because virtually all the townspeople of Argentan remained as refugees in nearby villages. Nevertheless, a French flag was immediately hung at the town hall next to the American colors. In light of this particular context and this combination of circumstances, we understand better how this event is the best illustrated in what concerns the battle of Argentan, because a team from the 166th Signal Corps (made up of two photographers and three





The same Panzer tank, after removal to the town square. (Author's collection.)

cameramen, Lt. Hoorn, Sgt. C. B. Smith and Sgt. A. L. Mozell) was sent specifically to cover this celebration. After all, this was really a question of a ceremony less of improvisation than communication.

In an extraordinary session of the Argentan town council on September 25th, 1944, the mayor "*recalle(d) as proudly as ever that on Sunday, August 20th the Town was finally liberated by the 1st U.S. Army and that the American and French flags were raised on the ruins of the town hall by American hands in the presence of their comrades in arms, the Mayor and the American colonel in command of the troops lending a hand in front of the Army photographers and film cameramen for screening in London and New York.*" (3)

Right after liberation, the Allied officers assigned to civilian affairs (Americans of the 80th Division, followed by the British after August 25th) who have moved into their offices on Pierre-Ozenne Street, worked together with the town government on a daily basis on the various kinds of problems facing the ruined towns, particularly in matters of provisions and lodging. One of the top concerns was to clear the ruins by all means in order to make the streets and roads passable and to secure houses.

Therefore, beginning on August 20th, the Allies began to clear the streets and roads with bulldozers and excavators to allow the passage of their convoys. From the 23rd on, it is the civilians themselves who begin the clearing with the means at their disposal: many rummage through what remains of their houses to rescue keepsakes or last possessions. Clearing also entails the removal of human and animal cadavers that had been buried in the ruins, as well as securing and neutralizing explosive vehicles and devices (landmines, shells, etc.) still unexploded and posing a present danger to the population. A clear example, attested by extensive photographic proof, is the German Panzer tank of the *II./Pz.-Rgt. 33, 9. Pz.-Div.*, abandoned up Poterie Street, which was quickly removed to the town hall square. Farther away, on the market square, a German reconnaissance automobile was pushed into a bomb crater. A number of live munitions are unearthed rubble before they were neutralized. Notwithstanding all these difficulties, Argentan comes steadily back to life. At the time, a French journalist wrote in his article:



Above: A segment of the Argentan-Trun Road closed on August 20th, in the rain. Part of the debris of the different German columns destroyed on this road in the August 20th ambush are visible on the shoulders. (IWM.)

Below: Hatch cover of a Panzer tank found alongside the Argentan-Trun Road. This piece comes from one of the German tanks destroyed in the morning ambush of August 20th: this is the hatch cover of the Panzer whose turret was blown away (belonging either to the 9. SS Pz.-Div. or the I/24 of the 116. Pz.-Div.) of which we provided photograph in our previous article. [Triangle Normand Association.]



Battle: The 80th Infantry Division at Argentan



Above: This photograph, also issued in the series taken by the Signal Corps team on August 20th, shows a soldier of the 318th Infantry advancing circumspectly (surely for the needs of the photographer) along Saint-Germain Church, Town Hall Street. It seems that no German marksman was found by the American patrols. (NARA.)

Opposite: View of the entrance to Victor-Hugo Nursery School, situated on the boulevard of the same name, on the town limits of Argentan. It stands on the side of one of the routes taken by the men of the 80th Division to capture the town. The body of a German soldier lies in front of the door (note the camouflaged helmet cover). (NARA.)

Below: Three foot soldiers of the 80th Infantry have improvised a lunch on Town Hall Street in front of a heap of debris. The divisional insignia is clearly visible on the M41 blouse sleeve of the kneeling soldier. Taking time to savor a meal worthy of the name while reusing real furniture to boot (here a table) is a way for these soldiers to celebrate and consecrate a victory so dearly won. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)

"In vain, within the ashes would you seek despair ... Argentan is reborn from a common fervor." (4)





Human and material consequences of the battle

Precisely establishing the list of losses sustained by the 80th Infantry Division at Argentan is a difficult task, since the sums obtained in compiling the data of the Morning Reports (reports on the company or battalion level), the After Action Reports (reports on the battalion or regiment level) and the data of the official reports of the divisional headquarters all disagree. These differing sums are derived from different, mutually-contradictory sources, for they are based on a temporality that varies according to the type of report (daily, weekly, by “combat period”, etc.). This works well for the combat units. However, according to the report of the 305th Medical Battalion, based in Marcei, 432 men passed through its aid station during the battle of Argentan. But this report does not account the killed, prisoners and missing,

So, in reconciling the various available sources, comparing them and discussing them, we can affirm that between 500 and 650 American soldiers were killed, wounded or captured from August 18th to 21st in Argentan. (5) It is not surprising that the 318th Infantry Regiment paid the heaviest price, with around 300 losses to that unit alone. Around six Sherman tanks, if not seven (6), from the 702nd Tank Battalion, as well as several American antitank cannons were also destroyed during the fighting. Losses were particularly heavy among the officers: for example, on August 18th, Captain Robert S. Hall, S2 officer of the 313th Field Artillery Battalion, and his chauffeur were killed by a 88mm volley while riding from Aunou to Sai: on the same day, another 88mm shell mortally wounded Lt. Col. Gustof Lindell, commander of the 1st Battalion, 318th, KIA, as well as Major Norris, S2 officer of the 318th, while both were taking shelter behind a haystack near Urou.

In Argentan, the Americans took 1,141 German prisoners. Most were handed over to PWI (interrogation (Prisoner of War Interrogation) teams: the captives belonged primarily to the 116.9 and 2. Pz.-Divisionen, the 10. SS Pz.-Div. “Fruntsberg”, the 353. Inf. Div. and various Luftwaffe units. The daily interrogations are rich in information for the Americans: on August 19th, for example, a German soldier of the 98. Leichte Flak-Abteilung is interrogated and tells that his unit, commanded by *Hauptmann Schueler*, has been positioned in Argentan since August 13th. He gives the count and the allocation of 20mm and 37mm cannons, as well as their positions: three cannons and two tanks are found in the vicinity of Trois-Croix: another section is found east of Argentan. He also details the placement of the German forces inside the town and the location of the minefields, especially on the edges of Argentan.

Once captured and interrogated, the 180th Divison’s German prisoners were evacuated to a collection point situated close to the cemetery in Almenèches. (7) Furthermore, the American division claimed the destruction of about fifteen tanks (a *Panzer* was even captured intact near “Chiffreville” on August 21st) and the same number of various armored vehicles (an outcome important to qualify, since the destruction of a single tank or armored vehicle is often claimed several times), Thanks to reports produced by the divisional artillery recently discovered in American archives, we can at last give a more precise account of the vehicle destroyed along the Argentan-Trun Road during the morning ambush staged by 2nd Battalion, 317th Infantry in the early hours of August 20: three tanks destroyed and one captured (principally *Panzers*) and twenty or so armored and light vehicles (including several *Sd. Kfz. 251*). The division also seized a depot of 27,000 tons of munitions



(situated between Crennes and “Le Tellier”) as well as numerous German headquarter maps and documents, particularly in Aunou-le-Faucon. (8) In consideration of the great heterogeneity and disparity of the German units, it is relatively difficult to establish a precise inventory of their losses around Argentan.

Finally, the residents of Argentan were not spared by the battle: around one hundred civilians and refugees were killed between June 6th and August 20th, 1944: the town is damaged by up to 90% (the count was 796 total destructions, 564 partial and only 21 houses remained intact).

Lessons for the future

The Americans quickly came to understand the necessity of analyzing what happened in Argentan to draw some lessons: from August 21st on, the divisional artillery, after having established their command post in an old farm of “La Grand’Cour” in Aunou. Initiate the writing of a special report citing the eyewitness accounts and clues about the progress of the battle.

Ultimately, this baptism of fire for the 80th Division was particularly terrible. A totally inexperienced division had to face a war-seasoned, veteran and

A lone American crosses the fairgrounds. This viewpoint permits us to see the damage that the Allied artillery fire caused to the southwest façade of the town hall as well as the former theater. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.) The same place photographed from an identical angle today. (Photo of the author.)

[SOURCE: (9) Photo of the author.]



Soldiers of the 318th Infantry as well as an officer, probably from the CIC Detachment, talk with Argentan residents in order to obtain possible information about the situation of the German troops in retreat to the northeast of Argentan (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)

determined enemy. Although diminished and partially disorganized. The American officers and soldiers, too accustomed to large-scale maneuvers on vast, flat spaces, had not carefully scrutinized the specificity of the Norman battlefield, moreover disadvantageous from a topographical viewpoint, for as we showed in our first article (cf. *Normandie Magazine* no. 6), the GIs rushed from Urou to Crennes out in the open, over a space offering little shelter, while the Germans occupied dominant and well-camouflaged positions along the edge of Gouffern Forest. This explains the fact that the soldiers retreated numerous times, running ad hoc et *ab hac* to cover in order to regroup before heading back into combat. Especially as it seems that the enemy force was underestimated by the division information services. The German forces' defense plan and strategy, pragmatic and efficient, posed manifold difficulties to the Americans.

The calculations of the Americans in the preparation of their assaults (difficulty in finding a ford, the systematic bogging down of many vehicles and cannons on the Ure, too little reconnaissance of the enemy positions being led, etc.) are so many complicating factors in the problems encountered by the 80th Infantry Division. It is nevertheless necessary to add to that an evident lack of rigor and coordination among the infantry, armor and the infantry, as well as the tactical errors and negligence, if not the incompetence, of certain officers in their role of commander (like the fact that armored vehicles were sent without infantry cover or preparatory reconnaissance, as was the case on August 18th in Urou.).

At the end of his report on the deployment of his antitank company in Argentan, Captain William Koob is emphatic in his remarks and critiques regarding the way in which the operations were carried out: he decries for example the fact that he alone had to command 38 antitank weapons (the eighteen 57mm cannons of his company, the twelve heavy cannons of the 610th TD Battalion and the eight M-10s of the 893rd TD Battalion), at the same time comporting himself "diplomatically" with the officers of each antitank unit, when he had been charged with pursuing the orders he had received from his own hierarchy. The substantial size and the dividing out of this antitank force are all the more cumbersome for the almost nonexistent and inefficient communications between the different components because of the lack of appropriate facilities and materiel. Koob also insists on the fact that he had never encountered or manipulated heavy antitank cannons or M-10s, except in military manuals or publications: nor was he up to speed on the specific techniques for these weapons. Therefore, he had to rely on the

recommendations of the subordinate officers concerning the strategy to adopt. Finally, he singles out certain divisional officers who are in his opinion the cause of numerous incidents that hindered combat at Argentan, due to their incompetence (hesitation in identifying a vehicle as Allied or enemy), their lack of training (certain cannons were brought too slowly or poorly placed into firing position) and their blind and overly rigorous application of military techniques that sometimes need to be adapted to the reality of the battlefield.

Let us add that the American artillery played a more than salutary role in Argentan, since apart from some "friendly fire" which seem at any rate inherent to the U.S. Army in the field, it lent decisive support in crushing enemy positions and permit the GIs to advance and win the day.

Consequences of the baptism of fire

The considerations of Captain W. Koob call for reflection on the immediate consequences of the baptism of fire on the theretofore inexperienced young officers and soldiers: the shock of the combat experience. In Argentan, the majority of the men of the 80th Division were confronted for the first time with warfare at its cruelest and most terrible. It is difficult to know the horizon of expectations of the American soldiers (i.e., according to history professor Reinhart Koselleck, the way by which, in the present, we maintain a connection with the future and the possible. But thrust into the anonymity of the battlefield, they had to face a bewildering eschatological situation, marked by violence (inflicted or received), the loss of comrades and by sentiments, perplexing, morbid impressions. This first experience was for many a terrible event, often with grave consequences (as in the case of L Company, 318th Infantry, whose men, petrified with fear from German fire in the assault of August 19th, were finally surrounded and captured).

Major James B. Hayes, S2 officer of the 317th Infantry, described in these words the effects of combat unleashed on the men: *"In Argentan, we immediately realized that the flux of adrenaline provoked by combat transformed the body in a strange way. Some men were euphoric (I was), while others simply collapsed with fear. Some were victims of "shell shock" more euphemistically called "traumatic psychosis." Whatever the reactions, things did not work out as well as during maneuvers. Some officers had to be relieved because they could not cope. Communications could not be established, since artillery fire and tank movements destroyed the lines."* (9) It is evident that the stress of combat as well as the warning symptoms of post-traumatic stress began to show up in the soldiers who had survived the fighting in Argentan. A phenomenon difficult to quantify in the very short term, even if the reports indicate the evacuation of several soldiers suffering from "battle fatigue," a form of combat stress. These psychic and psychiatric wounds sometimes took years to heal, if they could.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that, among the eyewitness accounts, reports and veteran's written accounts that we have consulted during the drafting of this study (about forty) the place conferred to violence is reduced. Int is even disembodied, in the sense that the enemy in Argentan is often reduced to "a tank" or "a machine gun position." Never is the enemy perceived in his individuality.



This photographic quadriptych permits us to focus on the different actors and witnesses of the battle of Argentan:

1. This image taken shortly after the end of fighting around Argentan shows a German prisoner, face despondent and exhausted at the time of his capture. The guerre stopped for him in Normandy. (IWM.)
2. Close-up of a sniper of 318th Infantry while he rests smoking a cigarette in Argentan. His features visibly drawn and weary, the soldier could savor some days of rest before heading off farther east with the rest of his division. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)
3. This portrait, captured by a British reporter, makes for a terrible image. The little Norman girl's family had taken refuge at a farm outside Argentan. Her face reflects the anguish and distress of a child caught up in the torment of war, (IWM.)
4. Mgr. Rattier, with Melle Florence, gives his account of the battle to English journalists. The cleric stayed in Argentan throughout the battle, comforting his flock and visiting Saint-Gernain Church daily in order to limit the damages. He was wounded by falling rocks in his church on August 14th, which explains the bandage, (Private collection.)

Likewise, the stamp of death is diminished: the veterans evoke death as they endured it, when their comrades are killed, rather than when they themselves inflict it. So the enemy most often meets death after "an artillery barrage" or "a round of tank fire." The temporality of the writing has no effect on the observations. Accordingly, the eyewitness account of B. Alvarado – published in our previous article – is one of the rare examples to describe how he takes an enemy life during the ambush on the road from Trun on the morning of August 20th.

From this point of view, the personal account of 2nd Lieutenant Andy Adkins Jr., who led a mortar section in H Company, 2nd Battalion, 317th Infantry, is equally interesting: "This first combat experience had deeply shaken me, but I came out of it intact. As soon as I could, I wrote a letter to my mother and father. This I did on August 24th, 1944: 'Dear Mom and Dad,'

I began, 'just now I was in combat for a bit and participated in an important battle. You will probably learn about it in the newspapers. I got out without a scratch. I got my "baptism" of fire, and from now on I know all the tricks. That means that there is absolutely no reason to worry, I am a good soldier who loves and believes in God and my family; so I will back home before long. All that you need to do is pray for me and all will be well.' What I did not tell them is that I had killed my first German. Although I am certain that the mortar shells I launched had hit enemy troops multiple times, killing and wounding a certain number among them, this was the first time I took a life with my rifle. Thinking back on this, it hardly mattered. When had been trained to think of the German soldiers as "the enemy" who killed men, women and innocent children while going from conquest to conquest. To tell the truth, they told us lots of horrible stories to dehumanize the enemy. Likewise, the Germans did not balk at killing American soldiers, I was in the process of going across the woods with a squad of foot soldiers





Above: Unpublished photograph of the southeastern façade of Saint-Martin Church. Although less damaged than Saint-Germain, this building's roof was pierced in multiple places and its stained-glass windows blown out by Allied cannons. (Author's collection.)

Below: Soldiers chat and smile at a smoking break, in front of the photographer's subject, right after securing the town. The man sitting cross-legged at left is the same as the one visible in the photograph on the previous page. (NARA.)



But coming out of the battle of Argentan, the men of the 80th Division are finally war-hardened and have acquired experience: an experience of probity that will be useful to them in the upcoming engagements, in Moselle, a month later. Also, they have developed an "esprit de corps" among themselves. An esprit de corps that can be clarified by the formation of what American psychologists have called the "primary group," namely a restricted group (at the level of a company and even more often within a section), composed of about ten or fifteen men, inside of which the close bonds of solidarity and camaraderie are forged. The photographs taken in Argentan showing the men of the 80th Division who are celebrating their victory together, singing and eating, perfectly illustrate what these primary groups were.

Before concluding, let us give the floor to 1st Lieutenant Ruyan of the 314th F. A. who, nearly 40 years after the battle of Argentan, summed up his first engagement in these terms: "Argentan, how can we forget, was truly our first baptism of fire. Experience confronting ignorance. Fighting a war-hardened enemy, experiencing fire for the very first time, seeing our comrades being killed and wounded. And in my case, I confronted as well my ipseity for the first time. My struggle between emotion and fear came to a head and my ability to cope with this was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life." (11)

So, in the light of these various considerations, we find our three articles in an approach alternating between micro-history and local history: micro-history because it is a matter of describing and analyzing the case of a unit in particular confronting its first combat experience, in order to draw general conclusions by induction: local history because it is a question of recounting and clarifying the fighting in the Argentan region.

From one memory, another one

To conclude our study, a reflection on the *memory* of is necessary: *memory* can be defined as the way by which societies, groups and individuals interpret the past. To study this phenomenon best, it is necessary to seek inspiration from cultural creations and memorial practices, from the ways by which the past in its totality or a person, or a specific event are conceived or imagined. At no point do we intend to pass judgment on conduct and practices, but instead to endeavor to understand and analyze them.

Throughout Normandy, plaques, memorial stones and monuments have flourished in the course of the years, sometimes to honor the military, at others the civilians, all actors and victims of the fighting for Liberation. Oddly, the battle for Argentan occupies a place of only small importance in the collective memory of the 80th Division: although we are dealing with their baptism of fire, their first combat victory and even though their losses were relatively heavy, it seems that no official delegation of veterans has ever gathered at Argentan since the end of the war (to be sure, certain veterans have come back as private individuals, with their families, but their exact number is unknown). Argentan is not completely concealed in memory of the 80th Division: in conducting our research, we found that numerous veterans and historians remember and know of the fighting in Argentan, which have been studied in detail in a number of works published in the United States (the absence of any serious historiographical work in French on this specific battle is deplorable, with the

possible exception of the rigorous and cursory works of Xavier Rousseau, an erudite local, and Eddy Florentin, author of the compendium *Stalingrad in Normandy*). The feeble memorial importance from the American point of view comes from several factors: let us recall first of all that only two tiers of the division were engaged; next, the fighting in the area developed relatively fast (four days, *stricto sensu*) and so the losses were much less important than those that the division suffered the following month in the east of France. Therefore, after the war, the veterans and their families concentrated on the sectors where the soldiers had fought the most and they often came to France in autumn time, when the commemorations take place in this other part of France, without participating therefore in the ceremonies in Normandy. Furthermore, visiting Argentan amounted to a sort of detour in their memorial itinerary to the former European battlefields, since it was a question of their only engagement in the west of France.

The insignificant place assigned to the liberation of Argentan in the *memory* of the 80th Division begs comparison with that in the collective *memory* of the Argentan townspeople themselves. In effect, there does not exist in Argentan any monument commemorating the capture and the liberation of the town by the Americans. The only places of remembrance in town are dedicated to the memory of the 2nd French Armored Division (General Leclerc Square, Avenue of the 2nd D. B., plaque on Victor Hugo Avenue, etc.) and the Resistance fighters (an imposing monument in Leclerc Square, a number of plaques placed downtown, streets christened after those who were shot or deported, etc.). It is evident that after the war the memorial importance of the Resistance movement eclipsed and displaced. So the 20th of August, date of the actual liberation of the town, was celebrated for several years after 1945 before ceasing progressively to be observed. This can be explained not only by the particular prestige enjoyed by Leclerc's ⁶ men in the eyes of the Norman population, but also by the fact that a number of civilians were convinced that Argentan could have been liberated as early as August 13th had the American officers given the 2nd D.B, the means to do so: for many residents of Argentan, the town needlessly suffered a week of destruction and back-up bombardment that contributed somewhat more to its annihilation. Let us add to this that scarcely a hundred or so civilians actually met the American liberators in Argentan and that the 80th Division was already on the move when the majority of the population came back to town. Therefore it is difficult, if not impossible, to consider Argentan and its surroundings as a true *lieu de mémoire* ("place of memory") of the Battle of Normandy, according to the famous definition formulated by the historian Pierre Nora. (12).

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Notes:

- (1) Yves Silvestre was elected mayor of Argentan in 1925. Member of the S.F.I.O. ⁸, professor of philosophy at the Collège Mézeray, he was a man of letters and a pacifist. Although his town council voted a motion of confidence for the Vichy government and infiltrated the RNP ⁵ in 1941m he was exonerated by the *chambre civique* ⁹ of the Orne on account of his attitude under the Occupation. He resigned from his position on September 29th 1944, visibly exhausted and discouraged by the situation in which his town found itself at the close of the war.
- (2) Ralph E. Pearson. *En route to the Redoubt*. Volume I, Adams Printing Service, 1957, pp. 37-41 (88 pp.).
- (3) Official report of the town council, Argentan Municipal Archives.
- (4) Cited by X. Rousseau in "Le dernier siege d'Argentan" ("The last siege of Argentan"), in *La Bataille de Normandie au Pays d'Argentan (The Battle of Normandy in the Argentan Region)*.



(5) This figure takes into account the organized units of the division as well as the units attached to it for the duration of fighting.

(6) The fate of a Sherman tank engaged during the fighting remains uncertain. Likewise, certain reports show that an American tank was destroyed near the Trois-Croix crossroads by a German 88mm on the morning of August 18th, but we have found no trace of the loss of this armored vehicle.

(7) 80th I.D. G-1 Reports, August 1944.

(8) 80th I.D. G-1 Reports, August 1944.

(9) James B. Hayes. *The Valiant Die Once*, private publication (manuscript.).(10) A.S. Adkins and Andrew Z, Adkins, III, *You Can't Get Much Closer Than This*, Casemate, 2005, pp. 18-19 (258 pp.).

(11) Various, *The 314th FA Battalion in the ETO*, 1988, p. 10.(12) Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoires (Places of Memory)*, Volume. I, Gallimard, 2008, 1642 pp.

We invite the reader to refer to the notes and bibliographical citations furnished in the previous articles if he wishes to have a more complete idea of the different sources and works consulted.

Above: On August 20th, other foot soldiers of the 318th broke into Argentan, taking present-day 104th RI Street. To their right, the fairgrounds. The destruction to the crossroads in the background are particularly impressive. (NARA/Tyler Alberts.)

Below: A group of Argentan townsfolk have "requisitioned" a *Kettenkrad* tracked vehicle abandoned by German soldiers to get wood in Gouffern Forest during the winter of 1944-1945. (Collection of G. Geslain.)

Bottom: Still today, the echymoses of the battle remain visible on the age-old stones of Saint-Germain Church. (Author.)



TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

^α **Service de Travail Obligatoire (S.T.O.):** During the Nazi Occupation, the Obligatory Work Service sent hundreds of thousands of French citizens into Germany for forced labor in munitions plants and other production facilities, frequently under Gestapo supervision. By conservative estimate, from 25,000 to 25,000 S.T.O. workers died in Germany.

^β **"Obusite"** – the word used for English "shell shock" in the original French text – means literally "shell-itis."

^γ **Soldbücher:** Paybooks.

^δ **Jacques-Philippe Leclerc (1902-1947):** The French general in command of the division that liberated Paris in 1944.

^ε **S. F. L. O. (La Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière):** The French Branch of the Workers' International) was a socialist political party, existing under this name in France from 1905 to 1969. In 1969, it became simply the *Parti Socialiste*.

^ζ **R.N.P. (Rassemblement National Populaire):** The National Popular Assembly was a French fascist political party during World War II. It was one of the three major collaborationist groups in France, with the *Parti Populaire Français* (P.P.F.) and the *Parti Franciste*.

^η **Chambres civiques:** Justice tribunals created in 1944 after Liberation, for the purging of collaborators, without possibility of appeal.

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