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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 359TH INFANTRY
(90TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN CLOSING THE FALAISE-
ARGENTAN GAP AND DEFENSE OF LE BOURG ST. LEONARD,
14-19 AUGUST 1944
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion S-3)

Type of operation described:
INFANTRY BATTALION IN DEFENDING A VILLAGE

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- A-5 After Action Report 90th Infantry Division, August 1944 U.S. Army (TIS Library)
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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

The invasion of Europe began on 6 June '44 with the allies landing on the coast of Normandy. After bitter hedgerow fighting the First U.S. Army succeeded in capturing the port of Cherbourg on the 27 June '44. The buildup on the beaches continued until late in July.¹ sufficient troops and equipment were now assembled for a major offensive.

The 90th Infantry Division was first exposed to enemy fire in World War II by landing one RCT as the reserve of the Fourth Infantry Division on Utah Beach on D Day. By the end of July it had 53 days of hedgerow fighting to its credit.²

Brigadier General Raymond S. McLain took command of the 90th, and Brigadier General William G. Weaver joined as Assistant Division Commander. These two general officers by their examples of leadership and requiring high standards of their subordinate commanders, gave the 90th Infantry Division the added Esprit de Corp that makes a good unit into a self-confident efficient fighting force. The T-O patch of the division, which had been acquired in World War I because the men were from Texas and Oklahoma, now took a new meaning. The "tough hombres" title was born.³

GENERAL SITUATION

The First Army began a general offensive to the south on 25 July '44. Fifteen hundred heavy bombers and hundreds of other aircraft bombed enemy positions on a very narrow front near St. Lo. The First Army succeeded in penetrating the enemy positions, and the newly arrived a Third Army which was heaving in armor thrust to the south and east.⁴

On 31 July the 90th was assigned to the XV Corps, Third Army, together with the 79th Infantry Division and the 5th Armored Division.⁵

As part of the XV Corps, the 90th began a series of operations on 1 August which would cover 140 miles in 10 days. (See Map A)⁶ the first of these was the mission of seizing the bridges over the Selune River at St.Hilaire Du Harcouët. This was accomplished on 3 August 1944. By dark on 5 August Task Force Weaver of the 90th had captured and secured the bridge over the Mayenne River at Mayenne, and

(1) A-1, p. 65

(2) A-2, p.5

(3) Personal knowledge

(4) (A-1), p. 67

(5) A-3, p. 1

(6) A-3

by 8 August with the assistance of the 79th Division, had captured Le Mans.⁷ Other spearheads of the Third Army meanwhile cut the Brittany Peninsula on 6 August '44 and thrust to the west toward Brest. The First Army during this period was kept busy repulsing German attempts to cut off the encircling

Third Army by attacking Mortain in an effort to drive through to Avranches. The British drove south from Caen toward Falaise.⁸ The 90th's success in combat during the first 10 days in August, together with being able to 'take ground' at the speed of 20 mph from the back of a truck, raised morale to new heights after the weeks of yard by yard hedgerow fighting.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITUATION

Le Mans having been captured, the XV Corps on 10 August '44 changed direction and moved to the north toward Alencon. (See Map B) The 2nd French Armored Division and the 80th Infantry Division were attached to XV Corps on this date.⁹

In moving to the north, the XV Corps was the southern jaw of the giant pincers encircling the German 7th Army and part of the German 5th Panzer Army. The XV Corps began to move to the north with the 2nd French Armored on the left of and 5th Armored on the right. The 90th with one RCT motorized followed the 2nd French Armored, and the 79th with one RCT motorized followed the 5th Armored Division. The 80th Infantry Division secured the bridgehead over the La Sarthe River at Le Mans, and was to protect the Corps' left flank and rear.¹⁰

Moving to the north the 5th U.S. Armored Division engaged in several sharp tank battles with the German Panzers who were protecting the German's southern flank. Sees was taken by the 5th Armored Division at 1000 on 12 August, and by 1630 had taken Montree. The Second French Armored engaged in a brisk fight between Alencon and Carroughs. The 90th occupied Alencon on 12 August '44.

On 13 August the 5th Armored was given the mission of blocking the roads east of Argentan to Gace, to deny their use to the Germans.¹¹

XV CORPS CHANGE OF PLAN

Late afternoon on 14 August the XV Corps was ordered to change direction to the east and move on Dreux, a center the Third Army commander felt was necessary to control as soon as possible.¹² The 2nd French Armored was directed to relieve elements of the 5th Armored Division in the Ecouche-Argentan area, and the 90th Infantry Division to relieve elements of the 5th Armored east of Argentan. The 90th Infantry Division and the 2nd French Armored were to be left to hold the road network in the Argentan area with four battalions of Corps artillery in support.¹³ The 359th Infantry of the 90th Infantry Division was given the mission of relieving the 5th Armored Division in the area of Le Bourg St. Leonard on the east to Croisilles-Le Merlerault on the west. (See Map C) The 357th RCT 90th Division was to protect the Alencon bridgehead from the north and northwest. The 358th RCT to protect Division C.P. at Sees by occupying Choilloue, north of Sees. 2nd Battalion 358th was ordered to Alemeneches. The 1st Battalion portion on the 359th front was the road net including Le Bourg St.

(7) A-3

(8) A-1, p. 67

(9) A-3, p. 5

(10) A-3, p. 5-7

(11) A-4, p. 108

(12) A-4, p. 108

(13) A-3, p. 7

Leonard on the west, to include Exmes on the east. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 359th Infantry to extend the line on to Le Merlerault.¹⁴

RELIEF OF THE 5TH ARMORED

The 1st Battalion commanded by Lt. Col. Leroy "Fireball" Pond was in the highest of spirits on 14 August when the order was received to relieve the 5th Armored Division in Le Bourg St. Leonard and Exmes.

The Battalion Commander made a map reconnaissance and decided initially to have Company A relieve the 5th Armored elements in Le Bourg St. Leonard and Company C to relieve the 5th Armored elements in Exmes. The mission:- to secure the road junctions and deny the Germans use of them from the north and west. Company B to be in reserve and organize for defense the road junction just east of Le Haras Du Pin.¹⁵

The attachments which had become SOP during the breakthrough operation remained unchanged. They consisted of one platoon of Company C 712th Tank Battalion, one platoon of Company C 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion (T) and a platoon of engineers from Company C 315th Combat Engineer Battalion. The combat team artillery of the 359th RCT the 915th Field Artillery Battalion was in support, but spread by battery to cover the regimental front. The 607th TD Battalion was equipped with 3" towed guns.¹⁶

The Battalion moved by a truck to the areas indicated on the morning of 15 August '44. Upon arrival they found that the 5th Armored elements in both St. Leonard and Exmes were not in contact with the Germans, and had not been since occupying that position. The 1st Battalion then set about preparing vital road centers for defense.¹⁷

BATTALION PLAN OF DEFENSE

The road leading into St. Leonard from the west (from Argentan) was very straight for about 3000 meters. (See Map D) Observation from the west side of town was good for that distance along the road, observation to the north was equally good, as Le Bourg St. Leonard sat on a ridge line which dropped sharply away to the north. The next hill in that direction was some 4000 m. From positions along the St. Leonard-Exmes Road one could see as far north as Chambois, some 4000 m away.

Between the road to the north (Chambois) and the road to the west (Argentan) was large dense wood, the Foret De Gouffern. The Battalion Commander considered this to be the main threat to Company A's position, and directed Company A commander to maintain patrols deep into the woods 24 hours a day.¹⁸

In Exmes Company C had even better observation. The town was on the top of the highest ground in that immediate area. Observation in all directions could be obtained from atop the buildings. One good road led into Exmes from the West (from St. Leonard). A fair road joined this road from the north about 500 meters to the east of town. (City Map D) Company C was directed to establish and maintain contact with Company A by jeep patrols.

(14) A-5, p. 3

(15) Personal Knowledge

(16) Personal Knowledge

(17) Personal Knowledge

(18) Personal Knowledge

Company B, near Le Haras Du Pin, had excellent fields of fire down the roads in all directions. Observation, however, was poor except down the roads, because of the many wooded areas and orchards that surrounded this area.

The Tank platoon was divided, one section attached to Company A in St. Leonard, One Section to Company C in Exmes. The platoon from the 607th T.D. Battalion was likewise attached to Companies A and C by sections. The Battalion antitank platoon was attached to Company B. Because of the distance between companies the 81 mm mortar platoon was divided, three mortars going to Company A and three to Company C. Artillery defensive fires were planned by Captain Bill Beck, the artillery liaison officer. The Engineer platoon was ordered to an assembly area near the Battalion C.P. at Le Haras Du Pin.¹⁹

NARRATION

THE BATTLE BEGINS

The weather was warm and bright and not a single enemy soldier or any evidence of the enemy had been seen in that area. Kitchens were in their company locations, feeding the troops hot meals. During 15 August the 1st Battalion relaxed except for the outposts and patrols, and began to think that the war was not so bad after all. Positions were inspected the morning of 16 August. No enemy information had yet been received from higher headquarters.²⁰ After having completed inspection in Company A area on the 16th, the Battalion Commander and S-3 jeeped over to inspect Company C at Exmes. The company commander of Company C reported that the night had been quiet and without incident. An observation post at this time reported a German halftrack armored car approaching from the north on the road leading into Exmes from that direction. The out-guard on the road was alerted. In the German vehicle was a young German Lieutenant standing in the car commander's position, apparently reading a letter. When the vehicle entered the outpost, a well-placed bazooka shot destroyed it, killing all occupants. Very little information could be obtained, except the unit to which the vehicle and crew belonged, the 2nd SS Panzer Division.²¹ The battalion commander and S-3 then continued their inspection, completing Company B just before noon. They then returned to the Battalion C.P., which had been set up in a small hotel in Le Haras Du Pin. Right after completing a hot dinner, a column of French civilians pushing hand carts full of their belongings, were observed passing through Le Haras Du Pin, heading south. An interpreter was sent out by the S-2 to determine where these people were coming from and where they were going. It was learned that they were citizens of St. Leonard. They were very fearful, stating that the Germans were coming. A quick telephone check with Company A could not substantiate the French civilian's story, as the observation posts and patrols had not seen or heard a single German. Still no information of the enemy from higher headquarters. The phone was just hung up when Company A called back and stated that they had just heard some small arms firing to the northwest in Foret De Gouffern, and that it could be their patrol, which was in that area at the time.

(19) Personal Knowledge

(20) Personal Knowledge

(21) Personal Knowledge

The Battalion Commander dispatched the S-3 by jeep to St. Leonard to determine the cause of the firing. Upon arrival in St. Leonard he learned that the patrol had clashed with a strong group of Germans in attack formation coming through the woods. The lieutenant who had been in charge of the patrol was wounded in the hand and was at the Company C. P. at the time. The men of Company A had been alerted right after the firing started and now occupied their defensive positions on the west and north sides of town.²² Heavy concentrations of German artillery began falling on the town. These concentrations seemed to be of all calibers of artillery used in the Wehrmacht. Small arms fire grew in intensity until it was a steady roar. Normal barrage from our 915th artillery was called for and immediately came down. The 3 mortars from the 81 mm platoon added their bit. Battalion S-3 attempted to call the battalion commander by telephone, but both the lines to Company A C.P. and the battalion observation post had been cut by the shelling. Company A SCR 300 would not communicate with battalion. As small arms bullets began singing up and down the streets, the battalion commander roared into town in his jeep. At Company A C.P. he was quickly briefed on the situation by the S-3, whom he then ordered to return to the battalion C.P. and notify Regiment of what was going on; also to alert Company B to be prepared to move to St. Leonard on order. German tanks had appeared on the road from Argentan, and were taken under fire by the 3" gun in the middle of town. The German artillery concentrations now began moving to the east and southeast along the St. Leonard- Le Haras Du Pin road. The S-3 in his jeep raced back to the battalion C.P., running the gauntlet of the German fire. Upon arrival, the jeep driver had become a combat fatigue case. The German attack had been well coordinated, as immediately after their artillery fire was shifted deeper into our zone, the German Infantry (Panzer Grenadiers from 2nd SS Panzer Division) supported by tanks, had engaged our line in a firefight. An enveloping force was seen moving across the Argentan road to the south to begin an envelopment of Company A's left flank. (Overlay 1 Map D) The 81 mm section on the south side of town was struck by this enveloping force a short while later, but managed to hold them at bay with carbines. The battalion commander group in the same area added their rifle, pistol and carbine strength to that of the 81 mm section until a shift of force could be accomplished.²³

The tree burst of the heavy German artillery concentrations had a devastating effect on Company A's right platoon (north), forcing them out of their uncovered foxholes and back into the buildings on the edge of town. The cover of the buildings neutralized this air burst effect and the first platoon stood fast.

One of the 3" TD's had been placed at the road junction to the east of St. Leonard with its primary direction of fire to the west down through the center of town. Company A's 60 mm mortars were in the orchard immediately to the south.

The wire jeep had come forward to the break in the wire line, and from there laid a new wire into St. Leonard along the back trail into town. (See Map press D.) The wire men had to fight through, as this trail was under fire from the German force that had enveloped Company A's left flank now in contact with 81 mm platoon. The radio jeep (in communication with Regiment) was also brought into town.²⁴

Upon reestablishing communications, Company B was ordered to march immediately to St. Leonard, entering the town along the back trail down which the wire line had been laid. (See overlay 2

(22) Personal Knowledge

(23) Personal Knowledge

(24) A-6

Map D) Company B commander was warned that he may have to fight to get into town. The engineer platoon that was attached to the battalion was ordered to the road junction just east of St. Leonard to be used as infantry in that area and to protect the 3" TD.²⁵ By 1515 hours Company A had stopped the German attack from the West and Northwest, with the situation on both right and left flanks extremely fluid. The engineers arrived at the road junction and went into position without incident, except for a few casualties and route from German artillery fire.

Company B arrived at the junction of the back trail and Le Haras Du Pin road about 1630. Upon approach they were fired on from the woods from the left. A platoon of tanks sent to the assistance of 1st Battalion arrived and were immediately attached to Company B for their entrée into town.²⁶ Company B deployed, with a platoon on each side of the back trail, and launched an attack which carried it into St. Leonard. Company A was then ordered to slide to the right, taking the north side of town, with Company B defending the west and south part of town. During this shift the Germans made another concentrated attack, only to be cut down as fast as they came.²⁷ (See overlay three Map D)

The reinforcement of St. Leonard by Company B stabilized the situation somewhat, but German artillery had not let up either on the Le Haras Du Pin road or in the town itself. Upon taking stock of the situation it was found that several German tanks had been knocked out and German dead and wounded littered the approaches to the position. Germans held some houses in the west end of town and woods to the north, west, and south of St. Leonard, leaving only the back trail to the Le Haras Du Pin road and the main road to the east toward Exmes in American hands. These two roads were kept open, largely because the battalion Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon and the battalion wire teams had been making numerous trips in and out of town by the use of these routes. The Company A commander had been wounded in the leg and captured, leaving only one officer with the company.

The 3" T.D. at the road junction, east of St. Leonard, and its engineer platoon retained control of that point, and the main St. Leonard-Exmes road from the town to that point. Colonel Bacon, Regimental Commander, came forward to observe the action and to inform the battalion commander of how important that particular road junction was.²⁸

The situation seemingly had stabilized by nightfall. The battalion commander was ordered to return to Le Haras Du Pin to the battalion C.P., as the Division Commander was there and wished to see him. The battalion commander decided to leave the S-2 and S-3 in St. Leonard to man the battalion O.P. The S-3 had been wounded about mid-afternoon and had not yet been to an aid station, therefore, the S-2 was left that O.P. as the only officer with the normal command group of radio operators, runners, and wire team. Upon arrival at the battalion C.P. the battalion commander stated that he believed the Germans had already begun to infiltrate behind our positions.²⁹

After the conference between battalion commander and General McLain, the battalion commander called the O.P. in St. Leonard and found very little enemy activity. He decided to stay at the C.P. in Le Haras Du Pin and get as much sleep as possible.

(25) Personal Knowledge

(26) A-5, p. 4 & Personal Knowledge

(27) Personal Knowledge

(28) Personal knowledge

(29) A-6

SECOND DAY OF DEFENSE

An attack had been launched by the Germans at dawn without artillery preparation, on the south flank (Company B sector) and around the right flank (Company A sector). (See overlay 4 Map D) The attack on the left had been stopped cold, apparently the Germans did not realize that the town had been reinforced with a full rifle company. SS Troops lay dead in the formations in which they had approached the position. Company B commander had been killed, leaving two officers with that company. The attack on the right met with more success against the lines of the decimated Company A. The north flank was enveloped and Company A gave ground and a few buildings, but managed to stay together under the command of its one remaining officer, Lt. Schroeder. The Germans now commanded the main east-west road up to the center of town and beyond that point by fire.³⁰ The road was very straight and open so that two machine guns could easily keep anyone from crossing between Companies A and B. American and German tanks stocked each other in the streets and alleys of town. The German unit making the attack was by now determined to be three battalions of the Deutschland Regiment of the Second SS Panzer Division.³¹ The defending troops were so outnumbered that the attack had easily encircled the town from the south, extending to just short of the Le Haras Du Pin road, and physically occupying the back trail down which all supplies were taken into the town, and the wounded were evacuated down.

The morning of 17 August the battalion commander had been up early heading for St. Leonard by jeep. As he reached the junction of the back trail and main road, he was fired on by German machine gun, forcing him to make a rapid about-face and departure. Upon his arrival at the C.P. he called Company C and ordered their section of tanks to move immediately to the Le Haras Du Pin battalion C.P. A short time later, when the tanks had arrived, the battalion commander with the Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon and the two tanks, returned to the junction of the back trail. An attack down the back trail was launched with this group, the battalion commander on the back of the leading tank, firing the 50 caliber AA gun. This once again opened the back trail for the use by the supply men. On the north, or right flank, the attack had carried around to the road junction defended by the 3" TD and a platoon of engineers. The attackers apparently were surprised to find such strength at this road junction and had stopped after exchanging some small arms fire. The 3" gun crew was forced to remove the firing mechanism and leave their gun while this skirmish lasted, but upon the cessation of fire, resumed their post and replaced the firing mechanism.³²

After the battalion commanders succeeded in reopening the back trail supply route, he ordered the A and P Platoon to return to the C.P. and begin replacing and ammunition used by the companies that morning.

General Weaver went into St. Leonard by jeep, accompanied by his aide, and assembled the officers that could be spared for a talk. During this talk, a wall of the room in which the officers were assembled was blown in by German artillery, wounding two of the officers, including the general's aide. General Weaver suggested that the assembly be moved to the next room to finish. Upon completion of

(30) Personal knowledge

(31) A-5, p. 9

(32) Personal knowledge

the talk, it was discovered that the general's jeep had received a direct hit, rendering it useless. General Weaver then checked the battle lines, and starting to the rear along company A's right flank, which was bent back along the St. Leonard-Exmes Road, he ran across a lone American soldier peering through the hedge to the north, occasionally taking a shot. The general asked this soldier what his job was, and

without looking around, the soldier replied "Hell, I'm protecting Company's right flank." The general said, "By God, I wish that I could stay here and help you."³³

The battalion commander ordered Company C to move to Le Haras Du Pin when relieved by 2nd Battalion, 357th, and be prepared to march to St. Leonard by the same route that Company B used.

About noon another attack was launched by the Panzer Grenadiers supported by tanks, this time the main effort against Company A's position. Company C was ordered to move into the woods, just east of the junction of the back trail, which was again being denied to the First Battalion by fire. The S-3 would meet them at that point with orders from the battalion commander. Meanwhile in the town the fighting became a fierce room to room, man to man struggle. Bayonet and grenade duels by individuals in the Company A sector was the rule. A German tank with its turret hatch open came near a house that was occupied on a first floor by the Germans. The second floor, however, was still held by the Americans. A fragmentation grenade was dropped down the turret of the tank, causing a series of explosions and destruction of the tank.³⁴ A bazooka team knocked out four Mark VI German tanks with five shots.³⁵ BAR's were waiting to cut down members of the crew who managed to escape the burning tanks. There were as many as fourteen German tanks in St. Leonard at this time.

Meanwhile, at the junction of the back trail and the main road, the S3 had arrived and while waiting for Company C, noticed a couple of men coming down the road from St. Leonard. The two men were from company A, stating that they had separated and believed themselves to be the only ones to get out alive. They were ordered off into the edge of the woods by the S-3 to await the arrival of company C. Soon, however, other small groups of three or four men came down the road with the same story. The small groups continued to arrive until they numbered about 20 men. Lieutenant Schroeder, the one remaining officer with Company A, arrived with the last group and reported that he did not know how many of his men had managed to get out or whether or not some were still fighting in the town. The latest attack against Company A had been in such overwhelming strength that Company A had simply been engulfed, Germans having gone around both flanks and broken through the line in many places. Lieutenant Schroeder was informed of the 20 men from his company now assembled in the woods off the road, and instructed to reorganize them and return to his section of town, if he could possibly do so. They were resupplied with ammunition from a small arms dump established at that point by the A and P platoon.³⁶

A reconnaissance party from Regimental Anti-Tank Company, dismounting from their jeep about 200 yards south of the road junction east of St. Leonard, started up the road on foot. When they had gotten about 150 yards from the jeep, German gunfire from the woods east of the road forced the driver from the jeep. The captured jeep had a 30 caliber MG mounted, which the Germans promptly turned on the antitank company commander and his party. The embarrassed antitank commander gathered up a

(33) Personal knowledge

(36) Personal knowledge

(34) Personal knowledge

(35) A-7, p. 6 & Personal knowledge

few men from the engineer platoon and led an attack to recapture his jeep. This was successful and it was concluded that the enemy force must've been a combat patrol. This meant also that the Germans were east of town.³⁷

Company C arrived at the road junction and had received about 35 casualties from artillery fire in moving up the Le Haras Du Pin road to its junction of the back trail. (See overlay 5 Map D) Battalion commander's orders were to move into St. Leonard astride the back trail on a two platoon front, to clear that area once again and to move up behind Company B's right rear. At the time these instructions were given the S-3, the situation in Company A was known by the battalion commander. The S-3 also briefed Company C commander on the previous experience with men from Company A so that he would not expect much help from that quarter.

The S-3 returned to St. Leonard, exchanging shots several times with Germans enroute. A report was made to the battalion commander who was carrying his SCR 300 radio under his arm, having lost his radio operator.³⁸

The communications section had lost five men in attempting to keep the wire lines in. The battalion communications officer came forward on the line to the break, establishing a relay from the battalion O.P. to his SCR 300, then by wire to battalion C.P.³⁹

The battalion commanders said that he had had no communications with Company A since about noon, and ordered the S-3 to go to Company A, take command and counterattack to regain the positions originally held, and establish contact with Company B.

The main east-west road was still denied to the First Battalion by German fire, so the S-3 with two bandoliers of ammunition for his M1, moved back to the road junction east of town near the 3" gun, then north and west down the steep incline. A small but hot fight was going on about 500 yards to the north, and more firing could be heard in the Company A sector of town. Upon reaching town, the S-3 found five men who were defending the northeast edge of town from the Germans on the north-south road leading into St. Leonard from Chambois. The sergeant in charge reported that as far as he knew he was the Company A commander and that these four men were Company A. The S-3 then made hasty estimate of the situation and took over the command of Company A, instructing the sergeant that they would attack, securing the two houses and orchards immediately to the west of their present position and astride of the Chambois Road. After distributing the 12 clips of ammunition in the two band layers between the five men, a base of fire was established with three men, the S3 and the other two being used as a maneuvering force. An attack was launched and a surprise was achieved by the maneuvering force on a German machine gun. After the machine gun had been eliminated by bayonet, other Germans in the vicinity apparently had had enough, and began a rather disorganized withdrawal, the result being that the German position was broken.⁴⁰

The machine gun platoon leader from Company D, with one machine gun, appeared to lend his gun and its one remaining belt of ammunition to the fight. He had been separated, as the others had been, but managed to hold his position with one three-man gun crew remaining of his platoon of four guns. More groups of two and three men began joining Company A from areas which had been behind the German lines.

(37) Personal knowledge

(38) Personal knowledge

(39) A-6

(40) Personal knowledge

Company C had been successful in moving into St. Leonard and had managed to get a platoon across the main east-west road to connect up with the reforming Company A. In another limited objective attack, Company A and the platoon from Company C succeeded in regaining their original position held at the beginning of the battle. The last hard surface road out of the trap was securely in American hands. The battalion commander received word that the First Battalion would be relieved that night by Second Battalion, 359th Infantry. It was with pride that he handed over the town and the defensive positions that had originally been held.⁴¹

1ST BATTALION MOVEMENTS ON 18-19 AUGUST

The relief of the first Battalion in St. Leonard was completed the early morning of the 18 August by the 2nd Battalion, 359th infantry. The St. Leonard- Exmes Road was used as a line of departure for that day's operation as ordered by the regimental commander. Second Battalion on the 180800 August attacked, with a mission of seizing and securing Chambois, and to block important road junctions in that town. After several bitter struggles, similar to the one described, Chambois was taken and held.

The morning of the 19th of August found the 359th Infantry dispositions as follows: 3rd Battalion in Chambois, 2nd Battalion on the slight rise south and west of Chambois, and the 1st Battalion, after having rested all the 18th, moving through Fougy to occupy the edge of the woods west of town, facing to the north.⁴² The German Seventh Army and the elements of the Fifth Panzer Army apparently had received a march order dependent on the O.P.'s in the St. Leonard and Chambois areas being cleared, as all day on the 19th artillery observers from Chambois and the high ground at the edge of the woods west of Fougy (1st Battalion area), observed long columns moving east down the valley between those two positions. All day long the artillery men fired two concentrations, numbers 305 and 306. As a German unit was destroyed, another marched into the area of these two concentrations. Horses, men and vehicles were blasted into great masses of intermingled debris.

The Falaise-Argentan trap was closed the next day, 20 August, when a Canadian unit made contact with the 3rd Battalion, 359th Infantry in Chambois.⁴³

The 90th Division, together with its supporting artillery and tanks, had rolled up the following score:⁴⁴

Prisoners of war	13,000
Enemy killed	8,000
Horses killed	1,800
Enemy tanks the story	220
Enemy self-propelled artillery destroyed or captured.....	160
Artillery pieces destroyed or captured	700
And the aircraft artillery pieces destroyed or captured	130
Motor vehicles destroyed or captured.....	5,000
Wagons destroyed or captured.....	2,000

(41) Personal knowledge

(44) A-8

(42) Personal knowledge

(43) Personal knowledge

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

INITIAL DISPOSITION

The area initially assigned to the 1st Battalion was much too wide for an infantry battalion. The distance of 4 km between each company would have been disastrous if the Germans had known our dispositions prior to their attack. The 5th Armored elements were nothing more than a reconnaissance screen, but mobile enough to concentrate a larger force in a short length of time at a critical point. An infantry unit required a full hour to march 4 kilometers.

CONDUCT OF THE DEFENSE

There had been no contact with enemy, and no information of his dispositions or intentions had been received from higher headquarters. This caused the men of the first Battalion to relax the vigilance somewhat. The Battalion Commander, however, analyzed the problem at St. Leonard correctly, and made certain that the proper security was maintained. Adequate warning that the Germans were approaching enabled Company A to fully man their defensive positions and thereby to stop the German attack which was superior in men, tanks and artillery support to that of the defenders. An error was made initially in not utilizing the houses in St. Leonard to strengthen the position. During the preceding two weeks the first Battalion had been stopping overnight near French villages, only to move on the next day, never having to defend these overnight stops from a major attack. After having left many of those villages, the populace had presented claims for damaged property. Therefore, an effort was made to keep the men out of houses occupied by French civilians.

The defenders were successful in halting the German initial attack because of a well-organized fire plan, but were too few in number to keep the Germans from encircling the town.

Each time aid was sent to Company A, it increased the confidence in the commanders because they knew that every type of support available was being given to them. The result of this confidence was shown by their refusal to be driven from the town.

Company B moved into town quickly and efficiently as was evidenced by their ability to stop the German attack while Company A was being shifted to the right.

In defending the town of St. Leonard, Company B and A fire's were so effective that the disorganized Germans could not consolidate their gains and in many cases could not even hold what they had taken. Local counterattacks by small groups of Americans were able to drive larger disorganized groups of the enemy from their hard-earned positions. The battalion commander throughout the battle displayed his superior leadership in being at critical points at the right time and setting a personal example of courage and fearlessness. The men felt they could not let this commander down by not accomplishing their assigned mission.

Company C's late arrival in the action was because its mission was to secure the Exmes road junction from the north. This caused the full combat effectiveness of the Battalion not to be utilized until late on the second day, after the critical point of the battle

The platoon of tanks sent to reinforce the defenders of St. Leonard aided materially in both firepower and morale. Each time assistance arrived, the defenders would gain new courage.

COMMUNICATIONS

The wire communications were excellent before the battle. Two lines were laid into St. Leonard one to Company A C.P. and one to Battalion O.P. The radios were not checked to see if they could communicate until after the battle started and the wire lines destroyed by shell fire. All means of communications, wire, radio and runner, should have been test operated to determine that each means would satisfactorily work prior to their anticipated use

German artillery was laid down in such quantity that all wires were cut in many places. The wire teams found that they could reestablish communications more quickly by laying new wire from the first break, rather than to attempt to repair the old wire.

SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

The hard surface road from Le Haras Du Pin to St. Leonard and the back trail were both in excellent condition. This enabled jeeps to be used when those routes could be cleared of the enemy. As there was no pioneer work to be done, the A and P platoon was utilized in resupply the Battalion with ammunition throughout the action. This worked out very well because the platoon had been trained to fight as well as to handle their A and P duties. Every trip into the town by this platoon was harassed or blocked by German fire. The delivery of ammunition to the company positions was accomplished in spite of enemy action. Forward battalion dumps were impractical due to the fluid situation around both flanks and to the rear of the main battle position. Company A transportation was either destroyed or captured by the enemy early in the action, therefore they had no means of returning to the Battalion supply point for ammunition. It was felt that the delivery system would be much better for the reason that combat patrols had to accompany the deliveries, the rifle elements could not spare men at those critical times when resupply was necessary. Litter bearers coming from town were escorted by the A and P platoon on their return trip.

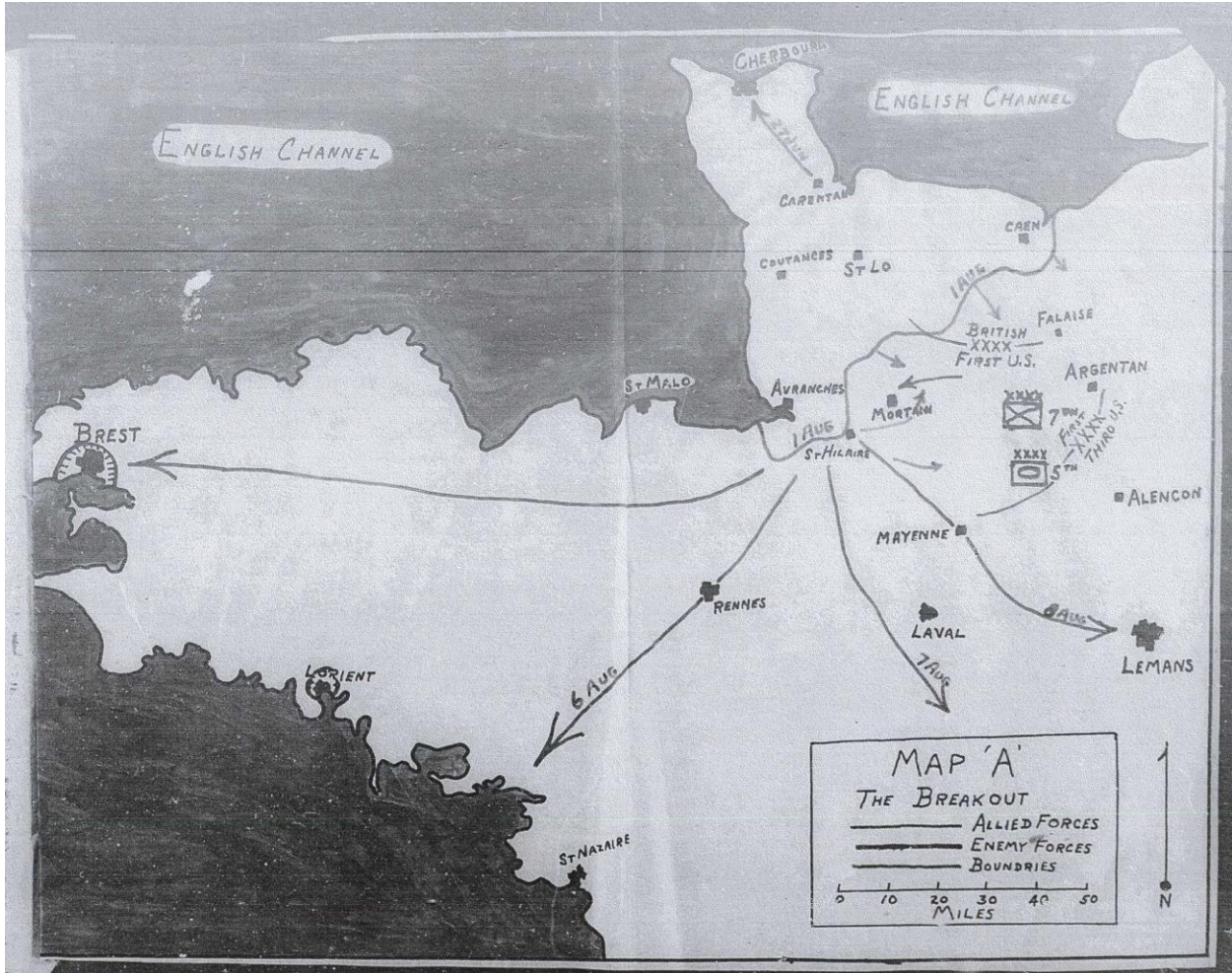
Jeeps could be used up through the junction of the back trail all during the battle for bringing forward ammunition and to evacuate wounded. From that point into town it was sometimes necessary to hand-carry the needed supplies and the wounded on return. Full advantage was taken of the reinforcing units clearing the supply route by sending in two or three jeep loads with each of them.

LESSONS

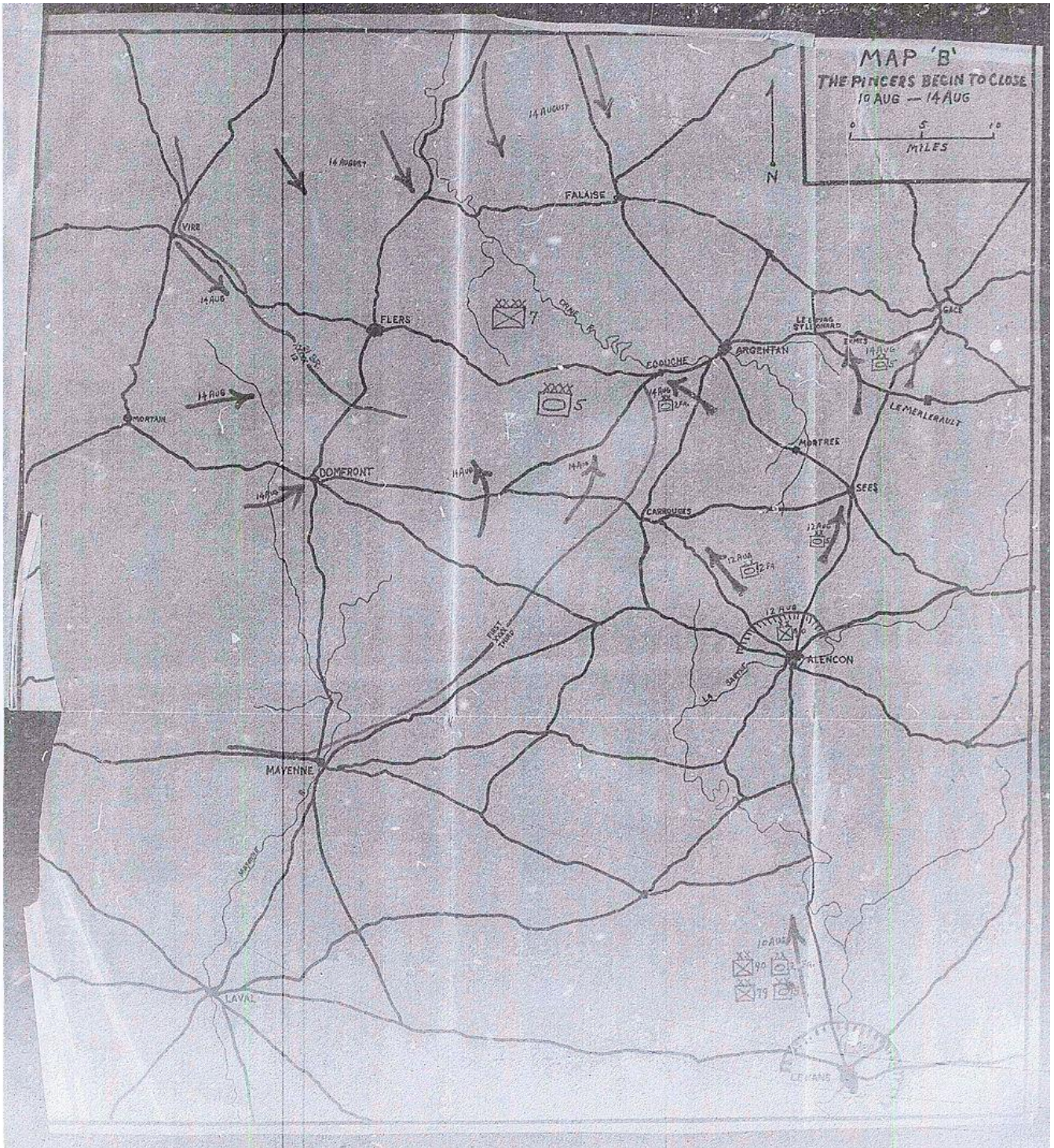
1. Security must be maintained at all times even when contact has not been established and when it does not seem imminent.
2. Full use of houses and buildings should be made to strengthen a defensive position without regard to whether or not buildings are those of friend or enemy.
3. Any aid, even though very small, sent to a unit that is surrounded or been hard-pressed by the enemy is decidedly worthwhile, and its effect on morale may be decisive.
4. Enemy tanks may be put out of action by many means other than the regular antitank weapons.
5. Friendly artillery is very effective against enemy troops assaulting your position when that position has the overhead cover afforded by buildings.

6. Local counterattacks even though by small forces can be successful against a numerically superior enemy that is in a disorganized state, following an attack.
7. After heavy shelling has caused breaks in wire lines, it is more expeditious to lay new lines rather than attempt to repair the old ones.

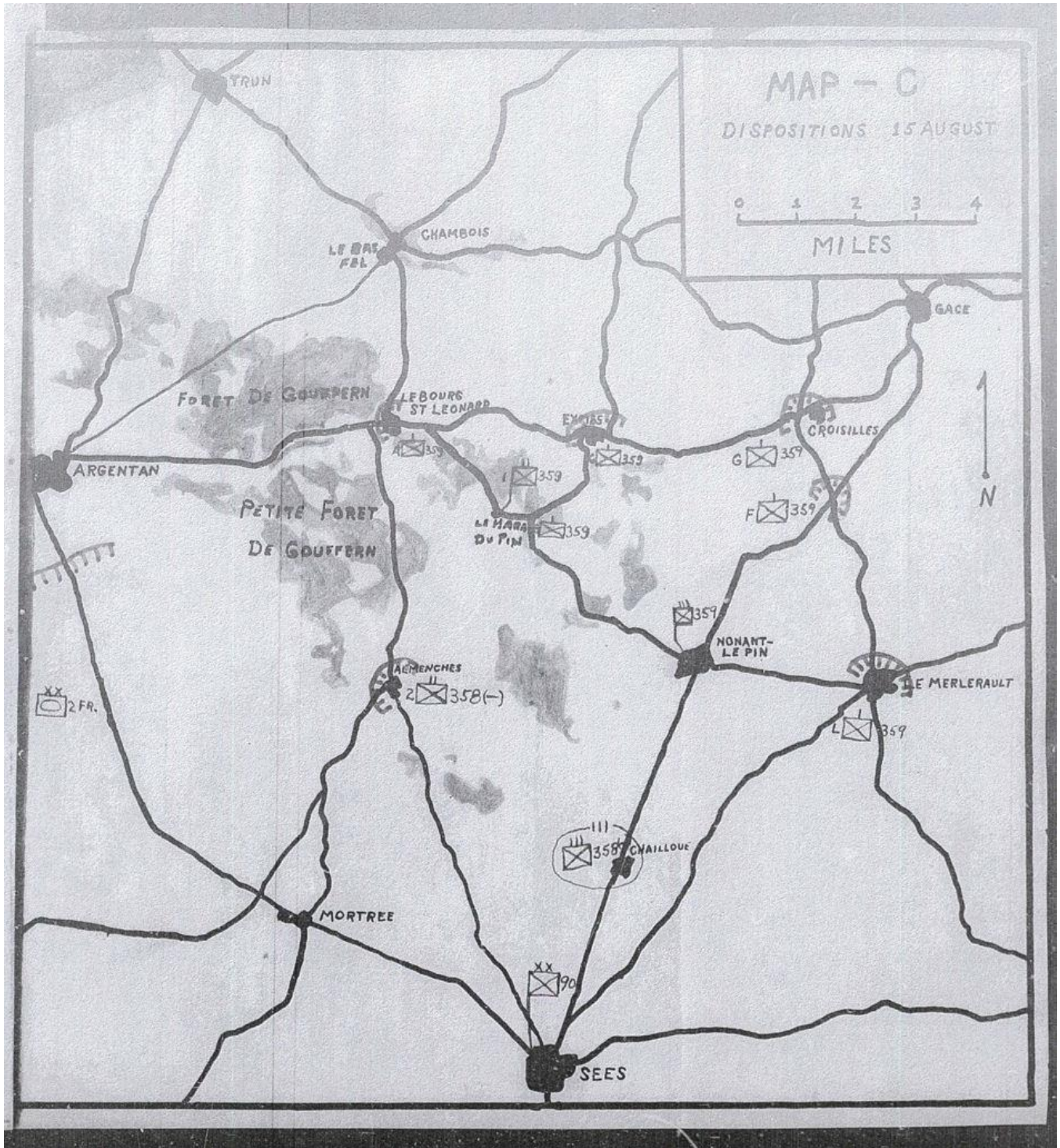
MAP A



MAP B



MAP C



MAP D

