VERTICAL ENVELOPMENT

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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In many respects, vertical envelopment as executed by the airborne division is the modern counterpart of the light cavalry as conceived and used so skillfully by Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great some five hundred years before Christ. The difficulties they experienced with the mass of the infantry Phalanx locked with the enemy in a prolonged and often indecisive struggle led them to seek a means of gaining a speedier decision. Interestingly enough, their difficulties, manpower and materiel resources have continuedto be a thorn to military powers despite new inventions and weapons for beyond the wildest imaginings of an Alexander. Alexander's solution was found in the mobility of the horse and the envelopment and shock action of large numbers of mounted warriors.

In our most recent war, the armored division and the airborne division were successfully employed in many instances to speed the decision, yet, the still numerous examples of prolonged engagements of large masses of land forces herald an even greater effort in the future to use this mobility to prevent a potentially disastrous attrition of manpower.

Of the two modern types of cavalry, perhaps the airborne division and the parachute infantry regiment of the airborne division are the least known and understood. The characteristics of employment and the planning for an operation by a parachute

regiment are best illustrated by historical example and it will be the aim here to present the problems encountered by a regimental staff in an actual operation along with the solutions therefor.

The operation which will be described is that of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division in the D day operations of 6 June 1944 in Normandy. During this operation, the author was Regimental S-3. This operation was chosen due to its significance as the first successful airborne operation of such magnitude and its many peculiarities resulting from the numerous combat and service elements involved.

The regiment was activated in December 1942 with a cadre of officers and non-commissioned officers from many different branches. The bulk of the men were newly inducted selectees and the actual training began in January 1943. Eighteen months later the regiment was in England ready for operations, having completed the normal cycle of training including two months in the Tennessee Maneuver area. Each man had had an average of about fifteen jumps, approximately one-third of which were night jumps. Insofar as it is possible to estimate such things, it could be concluded that the unit was physically, psychologically and technically prepared for combat.

At that time the parachute infantry regiment was organized very much like the normal infantry regiment with the exception

that it was about one third smaller in size and was equipped with a higher proportion of automatic weapons and miscellaneous items peculiar to an airborne unit.

Before going into the details of planning and execution of the mission, some of the background is needed. The staff began working on the operation at approximately D-60, however, the shifting of enemy units required a change in the plan of employment of the division as of D-14. Thus, although the staff had been familiar with the area of the operation and had been working on the operation and had been working on the logistical plan for two months, it was then faced with a comparatively short period in which to prepare a complete revision of the tactical plan.

The 101st Airborne Division and the 82nd Airborne Division were assigned the mission of landing on the Cotentin Peninsula of France in rear of Utah Beach area to seize certain key areas and generally facilitate the landing of the assault divisions of the First United Army. In addition to the mission of seizing certain causeways on Utah Beach, the 101st Division was assigned the mission of seizing the locks on the DOUVE RIVER at LA BARQUETTE and the destruction of two bridges across the DOUVE RIVER at CARENTAN. The latter part of the mission was in turn assigned to 501st Parachute Regiment less 3rd Battalion in Division Reserve. (See Map 1 and 2) Normal channels of supply were to be operative to points on Utah Beach on the afternoon of D day.

Included in the Regimental mission were the following instructions:

(a) Drop zone in vicinity of BASE ADDEVILLE.

(b) Drop time - 0130 D day or H-4½.

(c) Flight pattern - (see map 1)

(d) Attachments: (1) 907 Glider Field Artillery landing H-I vicinity HIESVILLE.

(2) One Naval Fire Control Party with priority on fires of U.S. Cruiser Quincy and the U.S. Battleship Nevada

(e) Regiment prepared upon relief by ground units to assemble vicinity HIESVILLE with 101st Division preparatory to seizure of CARENTAN.

The mission as stated was clear enough and with these facts the staff began the planning of the operation.

TERRAIN

The area of operations of the regiment including the drop zone is a basin like area formed by the DOUVE RIVER and its locks at LA BARQUETTE. The basin is approximately one mile wide throughout and is cut by numerous canals four to five feet in width and five to ten feet in depth, the canals serving the purpose of containing the tide as it rises in the mouth of the DOUVE RIVER. The only high ground in the area is the area of ST COME DU MONT some one thousand yards north of the objectives. This area is broken with numerous buildings and small patches of woods.

The road net in the area consists of the main highway from CHERBOURG to CARENTAN, a secondary road from vicinity of Utah Beach to ST COME DU MONT, and a net of wagon trails throughout the area.

The high ground at ST COME DU MONT commands the entire area. Observation and fields of fire are excellent, while cover and concealment are poor.

ENEMY

The enemy was known to have elements of two divisions in the general area of the operation and was also known to be very conscious of an airborne threat. Daily air photo coverage indicated continuous construction of anti-glider poles and gun implacements in the entire area. Since the operations area was some five thousand yards in rear of the Atlantic Wall, it was estimated that the target area was the area of the enemy's local reserves and local artillery for support of the beach defenses. Insofar as the regimental area was concerned, the best capability of the enemy was that of opposing the operation in regimental strength within an hour after the drop.

LOGISTICAL PLANNING

Although the purpose here is to discuss tactical planning, a brief resume of the logistical problem may be advisable.

The entire supply problem centered around the fact that the aircraft could carry only one hundred tons of supplies in addition to the personnel. It suffices to say that much detailed planning

was required since this tonnage is very small for a regiment even for only twelve hours. This is particularly true when considering the fact that this figure included all types of supplies and the situation indicated that only a fifty per cent recovery could be expected.

The most important result of the logistical planning was the decision to carry everything possible on the individual. Leg bags were designed to hold all crew served weapons and radios except the SCR 284. In addition, each individual carried extra ammunition, mines, and explosives.

In this way the primary objective of the logistical plan was obtained. The regiment could fight after landing without the immediate necessity of searching for equipment bundles.

ANALYSIS

The significance of the two bridges across the DOUVE RIVER was obvious. They afforded the enemy access to the beachhead area. If the locks on the Douve River actually controlled the water level in the basin area, they too were an important objective. About this latter point, higher headquarters were not certain.

The terrain offered little alternative as to the tactical plan. The objectives could not be taken if the enemy held and was free to maneuver on the high ground at ST COME DU MONT. At the same time, the buildings, woods, and the highways through

ST COME DU MONT made it inadvisable to jump directly on the high ground. The only solution then lay in dropping near the high ground and thereafter attacking it and the objectives at the same time.

The enemy situation and terrain plus previous experiences with dispersion on night jumps indicated that there was a good probability that the initial stages of the action would be a battle royal. The fact that the drop was to be at night also greatly increased the problem of planning the assembly.

In spite of these disadvantages, the regiment could expect to have in its favor, surprise, confusion, and the knowledge that prior to H-1 hour all vehicles would be enemy vehicles.

There was little choice in the matter of selecting the drop zone and assembly area. As already mentioned above, higher headquarters had specified that the drop be in the vicinity of the town of BASE ADDEVILLE. This fact plus the fact that the tactical plan demanded an area near ST COME DU MONT led to the selection of the area east of and adjacent to BASE ADDEVILLE.

For the assembly, every possible aid was devised. Area assignments, unit sounds (bugles, whistles, etc), unit lights, and the use of radios, were carefully planned.

The objectives of the regiment were assigned, giving the 1st Battalion the mission of seizing the objectives assigned by division and the 2nd Battalion the mission of seizing the high ground at ST COME DU MONT. Battalions were to move out immediately after assembly without further orders.

The final consideration in the tactical plan was given to the problem which would arise in the event of a scattered drop or inability to assemble due to enemy activity. It was decided that every individual be throughly instructed on the nature of the entire mission and that in case assembly was impossible they were to proceed to their unit objectives individually. This instruction was stressed throughout briefing.

EXECUTION (see maps 3 and 4)

As the formation of aircraft transporting the regiment approached the area of the drop, numerous clouds were encountered. The result was a dispersion far greater than the most pessimistic staff member had imagined. Approximately forty per cent of the regiment landed on or within two thousand yards of the intented drop zone. The remaining sixty per cent landed from five to twenty miles away in every direction. This fact plus the intense enemy fire received made the planned assembly impossible. In addition, the 1st Battalion was handicapped considerably by the loss of its entire staff, the battalion commander, executive officer, and four company commanders, all either killed wounded or captured.

In spite of these difficulties, groups began to form as the result of the movement of individuals toward the objectives. By daylight, the regimental commander was still without communication to any unit, but he had captured the locks on the DOUVE RIVER with forty men. The second battalion commander was attacking ST COME DU MONT from the northeast with about three hundred men and a staff officer was attacking ST COME DU MONT from the east with about three hundred fifty men. The two bridges across the DOUVE RIVER were held by about twenty men each, but they were unable to destroy the bridges because sufficient explosives were not available.

About one hour after daylight, the regimental commander was in contact with existing units. It was then that the enemy began a coordinated attack to eliminate the two large groups pressing ST COME DU MONT. Through the use of relayed messages, it was possible to bring the full weight of the naval fire support against the attack and the attack was broken up.

By noon of D day tank and artillery support from the beachhead arrived and the emergency had passed. Before the regimental commander could execute a plan to destroy the two bridges, the enemy blew them from remote locations.

Thus, with approximately one-half of the actual strength of the force, the missions were accomplished.

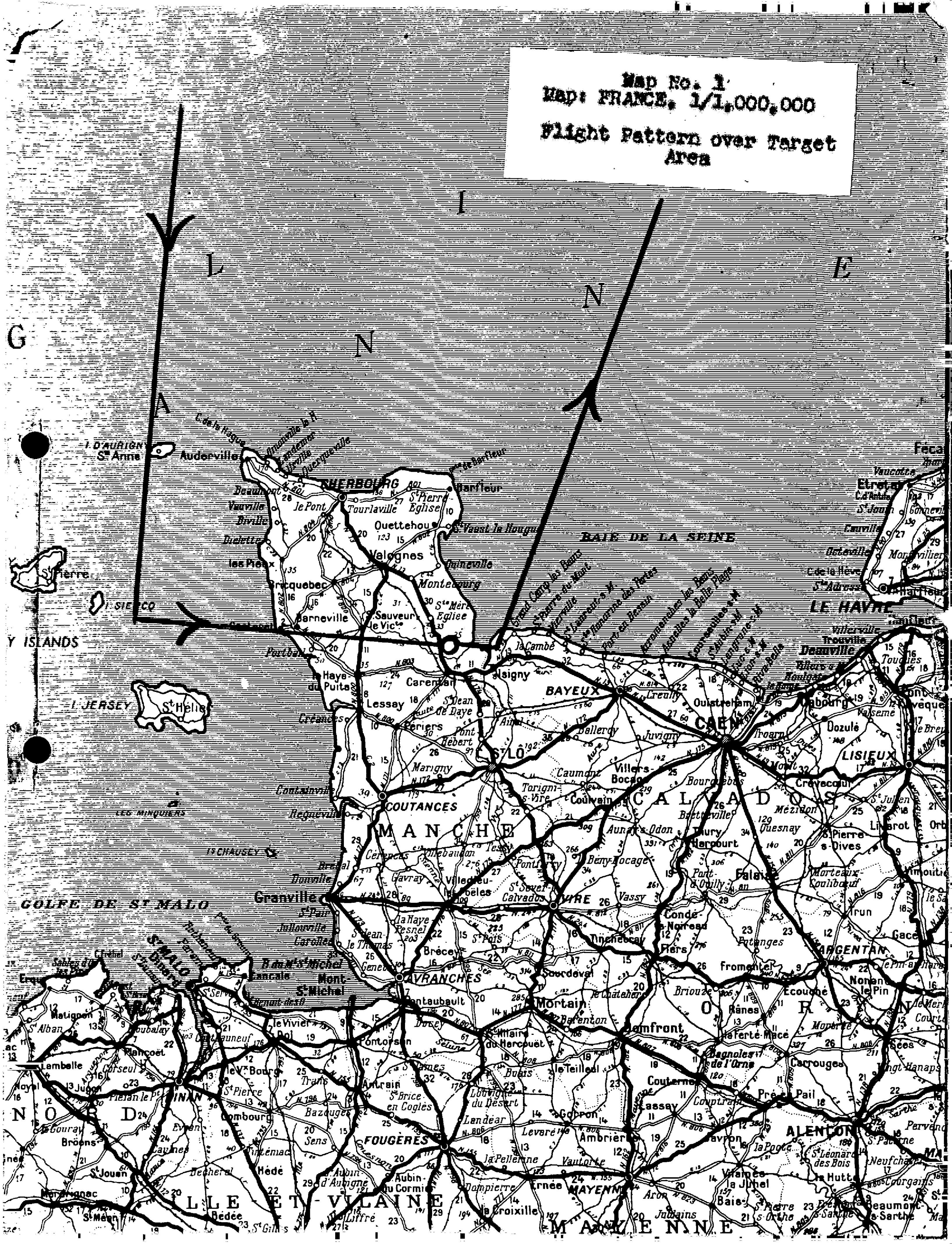
SUMMARY

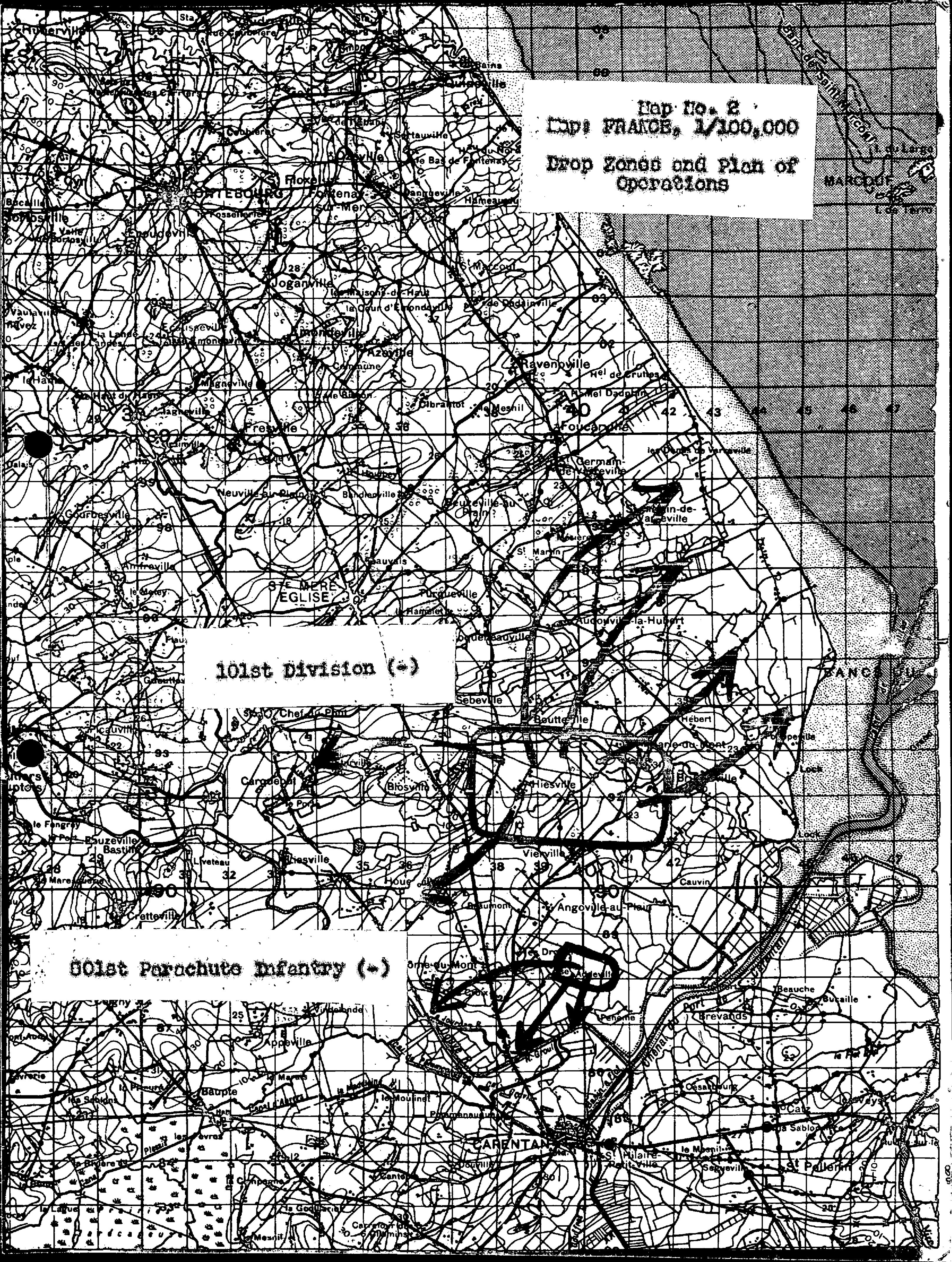
No single operation can be pointed out as an example which will provide an inflexible rule for future use, however, it is believed that this operation is at least indicative of the fact that vertical envelopment can be successful under the most adverse conditions.

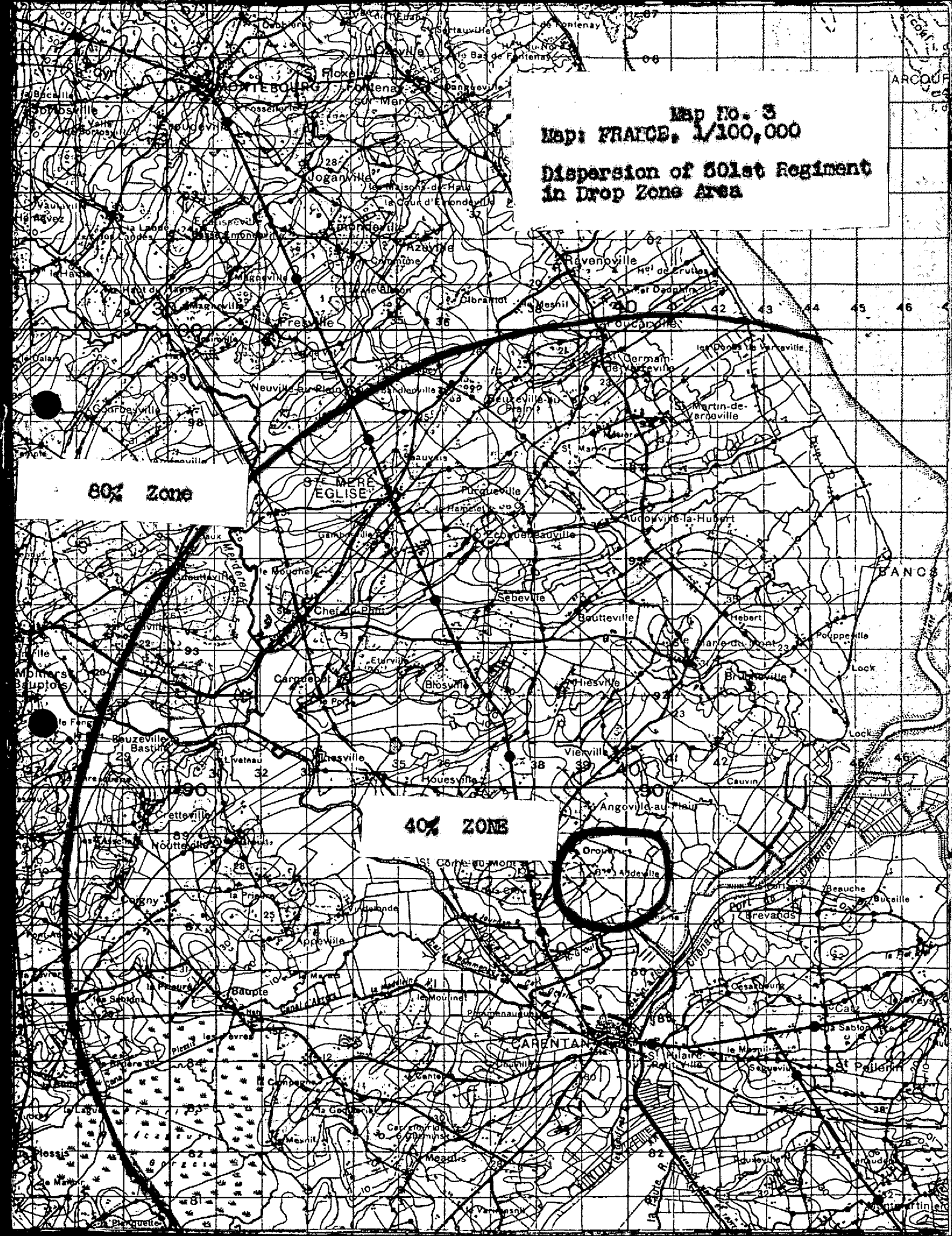
The continued study and planning for such operations is of vital concern to all tacticians today, not only for the opportunities they themselves offer but also for the valuable lessons to be learned for use in anti-airborne defense.

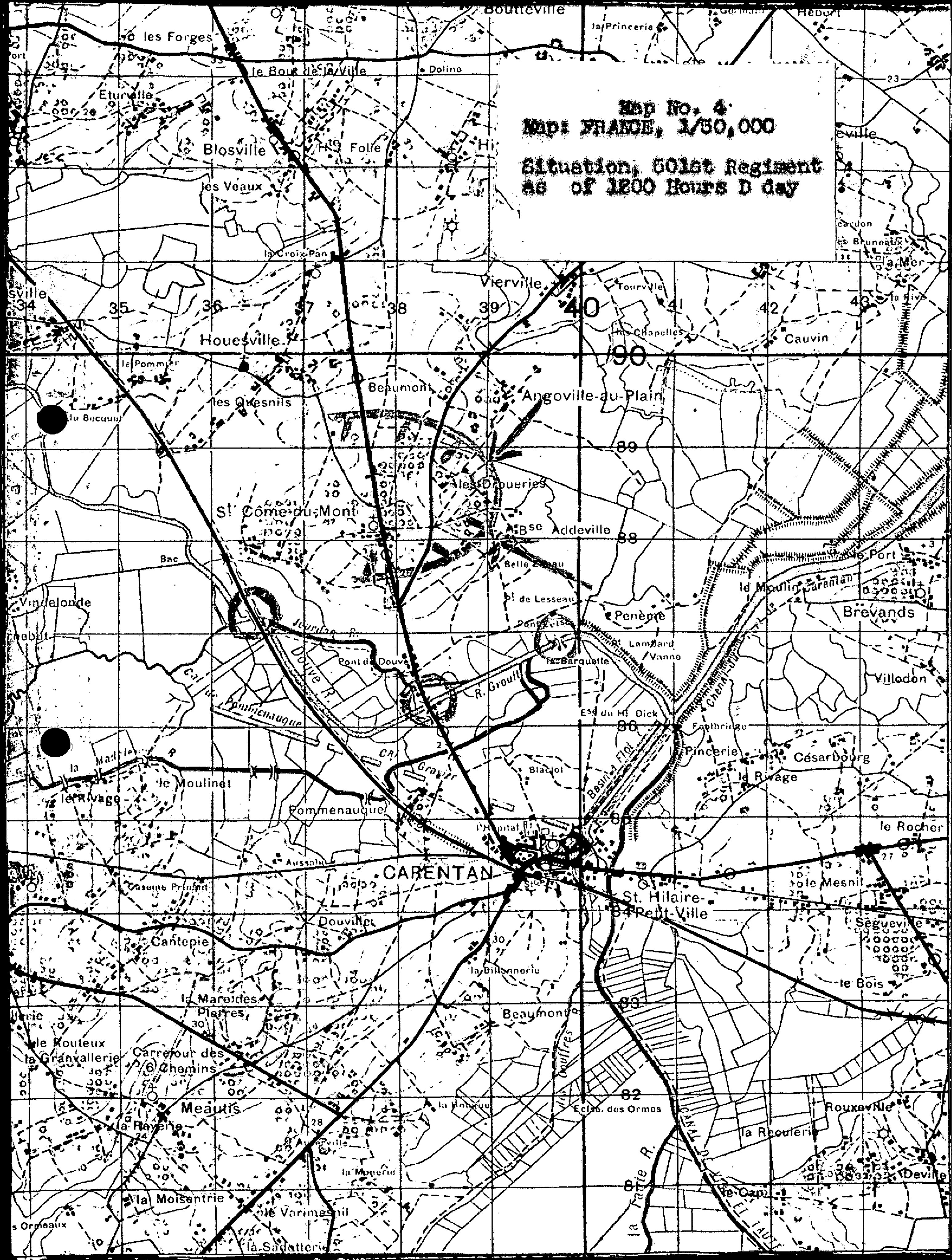
Map No. 1
Map: FRANCE. 1/1.000.000

Flight Pattern over Target Area




Map No. 2
Map: FRANCE, 1/100,000
Drop Zones and Plan of Operations
101st Division (-)
501st Parachute Infantry (-)
STE MERE EGLISE
CARENTAN
MONTEBOURG
Ravenoville
Foucarville
Hiesville
Vierville
Angoville-au-Plain
Brevands
St Pellerin
Baupte
Appeville
Fresville
Neuville-au-Plain
Turqueville
Audouville-la-Hubert
Sebeville
Blosville
Beaumont
Cretteville
Azeville
Joganville
St Marcouf
MARCOUF


Map No. 3
Map: FRANCE, 1/100,000
Dispersion of 501st Regiment in Drop Zone Area
80% Zone
40% ZONE
STE MERE EGLISE
MONTEBOURG
CARENTAN



Map No. 4
Map: FRANCE, 1/50,000

Situation, 501st Regiment as of 1200 Hours D day