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TITLE : The French Armored Forces of the FIRST French ARMY
in E.T.O.

SCOPE : Organization and composition of the First French Army
The 1st and 5th Armored Divisions
Outline of the actions of the 1st and 5th Armored Div.
in France and in Germany .

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THE FRENCH ARMORED FORCES
OF THE FIRST FRENCH ARMY
IN E.T.O.

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The purpose of this short conference is to give an outline of the composition and of the actions of the French Armored Forces in E.T.O. during the last war .

From my talks with many American Officers I know that everybody is well acquainted with the 2nd French Armored Division which always operated in U.S. Army Corps in the Third Army and the Seventh Army . On the other hand I realize that very few know the two other French Armored Divisions , the 1st and the 5th , which operated in the First French Army .

THE FIRST FRENCH ARMY

Before speaking of these two Divisions I will give some details about the First French Army .

Entirely equipped with American materiel , this Army was formed in French North Africa from May 1943 to August 1944 . Its composition was :

An Army H.Q. , with normal Army Services
2 Army Corps H.Q. , each with an organic Reconnaissance Battalion and a Corps Artillery .

5 Infantry Divisions :

1st Division Francaise Libre
2nd Division d'Infanterie Marocaine
3rd Division d'Infanterie Algerienne
4th Division Marocaine de Montagne
9th Division d'Infanterie Coloniale

Each of these Div. had organically a
Rcn. Bn and a Tank Destroyers Bn.

2 Armored Divisions : the 1st and 5th .

a Tactical Air Force : French personnel on American planes (P47 and P38)

Various Infantry units like the Moroccan Tabors.
and Commandos

I only mention that later four Infantry Divisions were attached to the First French Army . They were rather poorly equipped with an old french armament and British vehicles and never took any active part in the operations .

THE COMPOSITION OF THE FRENCH ARMORED DIVISIONS

The two Armd. Div. were formed exactly on the light type according to the U.S. T/O & E. This organization is well known . Briefly it was :

- a Div. H.Q.
- a Div. Artillery H.Q.
- 3 Combat Command H.Q.

- a Ren. Bn
- a Tank Destroyers Bn
- 3 Medium Tanks Bn
- 3 Armd. Inf. Bn
- 3 Field Artillery Bn (105) and an A.A. Bn
- an Engineer Bn

- an Ordnance Bn
- a Medical Bn
- a Q.M. Bn
- a Signal Co

The materiel :

- Light Armd Car M8 , Assault Gun M8
- Light Tank M5
- Medium Tank M4 (75mm. gun)
- Tank Destroyer M10 (3 inch. gun)
- 105 How. M7
- Half Track , Truck 2.5 T. , Jeep etc.

To facilitate the identification of the six Combat Commands each was given a number from I to 6 .

The 1st Armd Div. had : C.C.1
C.C.2
C.C.3

The 5th Armd Div. had : C.C.4
C.C.5
C.C.6

THE OPERATIONS

The First French Army under command of General DE LATTRE DE TASSIGNY became operational with the landing on the South coast of France on the 15th August 1944 .

For this operation it was a part of the Seventh U.S. Army and was designated "Army B" . It was directly under order of General PATCH , Seventh Army Commander .

Later on , in September 1944 , a reorganization of the command gave two distinct and independant Armies : the Seventh U.S. Army and the First French Army . Both formed the Sixth Army Group under Command of General JACOB D. DEVERS .

To facilitate the presentation the operations may be divided into three different phases .

- 1/ Landing and Pursuite (15th August-15th Sept.)
- 2/ The Vosges mountains and the "Colmar pocket" .
(1st Oct.-Febr.1945)
- 3/ Germany .(1st April-8th May 1945)

Let us consider briefly the role of the 1st and 5th Armd Div. during each of these three phases .

1/ LANDING AND PURSUITE

The 1st Armd Div. only was engaged during this period. Due to the shortage of shipping it was initially reduced to two C.C.'s , C.C.1 and C.C.2 . But it was reenforced with a Corps Rcn Bn .

Immediately after the landing the 1st Armd Div. received the mission of capturing TOULON and MARSEILLES . It was of vital importance to seize as soon as possible these two ports which should become later the supply bases of the Sixth Army Group .

MARSEILLES was taken in five days from the 23rd to the 28th August after bitter street fighting .

TOULON was taken in six days from the 19th to the 25th August by a French Infantry Div. supported by some Tank units of C.C.2 .

During these operations the Rcn elements had reached the RHONE river in TARASCON and AVIGNON and were covering to the N.W.

Then the French Forces received the mission of crossing the RHONE river and of pursuing the retreating enemy on the West bank of the river in liaison with the Sixth U.S. Corps progressing on the East bank .

The crossing of the RHONE in two points was completed by the 31st August and the 1st Armd Div. sped to the North towards LYON preceded by the Corps Rcn Bn . Only this unit had some brief engagements between AVIGNON and LYON . On the 1st September , by reaching this point , the Armd Div. let an Infantry Div. enter and mop up the city and continued without stopping its pursuite , harassing the enemy columns giving some violent fights and capturing thousands of prisoners and an important materiel .

The main engagements were :

VILLEFRANCHE/Saone	3rd Sept.
GIVRY , CHALON/Saone	5th "
BEAUNE	7th "
DIJON	10th & 11th Sept.
LANGRES	13th Sept.

On the 14th and the 15th September multiple contacts were made with elements of the Third Army in the vicinity of CHAUMONT . The liaison had been realized with the Allied Forces coming from NORMANDY , and the pursuit had virtually ended .

I think that it is not necessary to dwell any further on the character of the fighting during this period . Those of you who were in Armored Divisions rolling from NORMANDY to North Eastern France had the same experience .

All the French Officers who were in that part of the campaign agree that their main worry was not the enemy but the too friendly population . We had there a difficult problem of leadership which was not always successfully solved.

2/ THE VOSGES MOUNTAINS AND THE "COLMAR POCKET"

At the end of the pursuit the overextended lines of communications of the Sixth Army Group necessitated a pause in the operations . A reorganization took place ; the First French Army and the Seventh U.S. Army exchanged their respective zone of action , the Seventh going North to make its liaison with the Third Army and The First French taking a sector to the South of the Allied line between the Seventh and the Swiss border .

The contact was finally reestablished with the German XIX Army firmly organized on a defensive position covering the BELFORT GAP .

At the end of October the Commanding General of the First Army decided to try a breakthrough and reach the ALSACE plain , enveloping the VOSGES mountains .

The two French Armored Divisions were assigned a zone of attack : the First between BELFORT and the Swiss border was in charge of the main effort ; the 5th recently arrived from North-Africa prolonging the action on the left .

The attack jumped off on the 19th November and progressed successfully at the beginning . The 1st Armd Div. penetrated deeply , seized MULHOUSE , and reached the RHINE on the 22nd November (24 hours before the 2nd French Armd Div. which captured STRASBOURG in a very spectacular way on the 23rd) . But the 5th was stopped North of BELFORT and a dangerous gap existing between the two divisions favoured a German counterattack on the line of communications of the 1st Armd and prevented any exploitation in the ALSACE plain towards COLMAR .

Until February 1945 all efforts to reduce the COLMAR pocket failed . The 1st Armd was stopped a few miles of MULHOUSE . The 5th attempted vainly to attack COLMAR from the N.W. , debouching from the VOSGES passes conquered by our Infantry . The 2nd Armd Div. , attached for a short time to the First French Army , also unsuccessfully tried to progress to the South from STRASBOURG . This period was certainly the darkest and weariest of the campaign . Bitter fighting took place everywhere on the front line and our losses were the heaviest of the whole campaign .

Finally S.H.A.E.F. having decided to reduce the "COLMAR Pocket" the First French Army was reinforced with the XXIst U.S. Corps and a concentric attack was launched, spearheaded by three Armored Divisions:

The 1st French from the South

The 5th " from the N.W.

The 12th U.S. from the North

COLMAR was taken on the 12th February and in a few days the Germans were pushed across the RHINE with heavy losses in personnel and materiel.

I wish now to say a word on the role of my unit, Corps Reconnaissance Battalion, during this period, which is characteristic of the employment of a Rcn unit on a stabilized front. Like many other Rcn units, most of the time my Bn, reinforced by F.F.I.; (about a Bn) was assigned a sector in the Vosges mountains. Being used as an economy force in difficult terrain allowed the bulk of our forces to be engaged in more favourable sector, like the ALSACE plain. I shall always remember Christmas 1944 and New Year, 4000 feet high in the mountains, three feet deep in the snow, 10 deg. below zero, holding a line with my Light Tank Company reinforced with two F.F.I. Companies.

3/ THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN

After the harsh fighting of the winter 44-45, the two Armored Divisions were allowed to rest and to receive the necessary replacements in personnel and materiel.

Two Combat Commands of the 5th Armd Div. took part in the breaking of the Maginot line and the Siegfried line in the WISSEMBOURG area and on the 30th March the situation was the following:

The 5th Armd Div. was in an assembly area immediately South of WISSEMBOURG, ready to cross the RHINE river.

The 1st Armd Div. was in the vicinity of SERSBOURG in reserve.

On the 31st March our Infantry succeeded in establishing a bridgehead on the East bank of the RHINE near GERMERSHEIM and on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th April the C.C.4 had passed across, soon followed by the rest of the 5th Armd Div. reinforced by a Corps Recn. Bn and a T.D. Bn.

The enemy resistance collapsing in the bridgehead the 5th Armd Div. received the mission to exploit towards KARLSRUHE and PFORZHEIM and if possible towards STUTTGART.

Here begins one of the finest operations executed by a French Armd Div. during the campaign. It may be divided in three periods:

a/ In a first movement (4th to 10th April), C.C.4 exploited to KARLSRUHE which was taken on the 4th April. Meanwhile C.C.5 and C.C.6 pushed to the NECKAR and PFORZHEIM, which was reached on the 8th April, but were stopped on the ENZ river by a strong and obstinate enemy resistance. The liaison was established on the NECKAR with the Seventh U.S. Army.

b/ Its front attack being stopped and no space being available on the left flank (7th Army zone), the Cdt Gen. 5th Armd Div. decided to maneuver by his right wing and to envelop STUTTGART passing through the BLACK FOREST mountains . This maneuver was successful and is a good illustration of the employment of an Armd Div. attacking in an unexpected direction and through an unexpected terrain . The Germans , too confident in the tactical value of these mountains as an obstacle , were unable to stop the infiltration and penetration of the three C.C.'s which after some sharp fighting broke the enemy lines and by the 17 April were together in the triangle NAGOLD ? FREUDENSTADT , ALTENSTEIG .

c/ From that triangle each C.C. received the following mission :

C.C.5 , seize TUBINGEN and establish a bridge-head on the NECKAR river .

C.C.6 , reach the area South of STUTTGART and block any attempt of the enemy to escape the encirclement by occupying the bridges in the NECKAR loop . Establish the liaison with the Seventh Army , so closing the trap on the German forces .

C.C.4 , while keeping a close liaison with C.C.6 on the right attack STUTTGART directly from the South .

This maneuver was brilliantly executed and led to the fall of STUTTGART on the 21st of April and the capture of more than twelve thousand prisoners .

During this operation my Reconnaissance Bn , attached to the 5th Div. , had the mission to maintain the liaison between C.C.4 and C.C.6 and had some fierce engagements between NAGOLD and the NECKAR loop with enemy columns hurriedly retreating towards the S.E. With my Light Tank Co I had particularly to rescue the C.C.6 H.Q. attacked and surrounded in a village by an A.A. German unit using its 20mm. A.A. machineguns as assault weapons .

Meanwhile the 1st Armd Div. was not inactive .

On the 5th April C.C.2 relieved C.C.4 in the KARLSRUHE area and received the mission to push Southwards in support of an Infantry Div. to clear the East bank of the river . On the 15th April after stiff enemy resistance it succeeded in mopping up the BADEN plain from KARLSRUHE to OBERKIRCH , putting at last STRASBOURG out of range of the enemy artillery .

Then from the BADEN-BADEN area the entire 1st Armd Div. pushed to FREUDENSTADT which had just been taken by the 5th Div. From there , on the 19th April , it received the mission to seize the DANUBE crossings between TUTTLINGEN and SIGMARINGEN and afterwards to push a C.C. to ULM and an element to CONSTANCE , enveloping the enemy units still in the South part of the BLACK FOREST.

On the 21st the Div. reached and crossed the DANUBE river at TUTTLINGEN . Then C.C.1 and C.C.2 pushed immediately towards ULM respectively on the North and South bank of the river whereas a Task Force (a Corps Rec. Bn , a T.D. Bn , & motorized Inf. Bn) was progressing towards CONSTANCE .

C.C.I met elements of the 10th U.S. Armd Div. ten miles S.W. of ULM along the DANUBE and without stopping continued its drive and on the 24th April entered this town, 140 years after the Napoleon's Army, while the 44th U.S. Infantry Div. was entering it from the North.

Let us go back now to the 5th Armd div. which we left on the 21st in STUTTGART. After mopping up the city, on the 23rd the Div. resumed its progression to the South and on the 24th reached also the DANUBE and crossed it from TUTTLINGEN to SIGMARINGEN. The whole Division was then assembled in the triangle SIGMARINGEN, TUTTLINGEN, STOKACH, covered towards the S.E. by the Corps Rcn. Bn which seized UBERLINGEN on the 25th April after a brief but violent engagement.

On the 25th April the 1st Armd Div. was also assembled in the BIBERACH area 20 miles South of ULM. Then began the last act of the German campaign. The two Armd Divisions, widely deployed on a 40 miles front, started for a last drive which led them to the Austrian border. The 1st Armd Div. seized IMMENSTADT on the 30th April. The 5th Armd Div. seized BREGENZ on the 1st May and C.C.5, supported by Inf. elements, entered AUSTRIA and pushed to the ARLBERG Pass and St ANTON which was reached on the 8th May, Armistice Day.

CONCLUSION

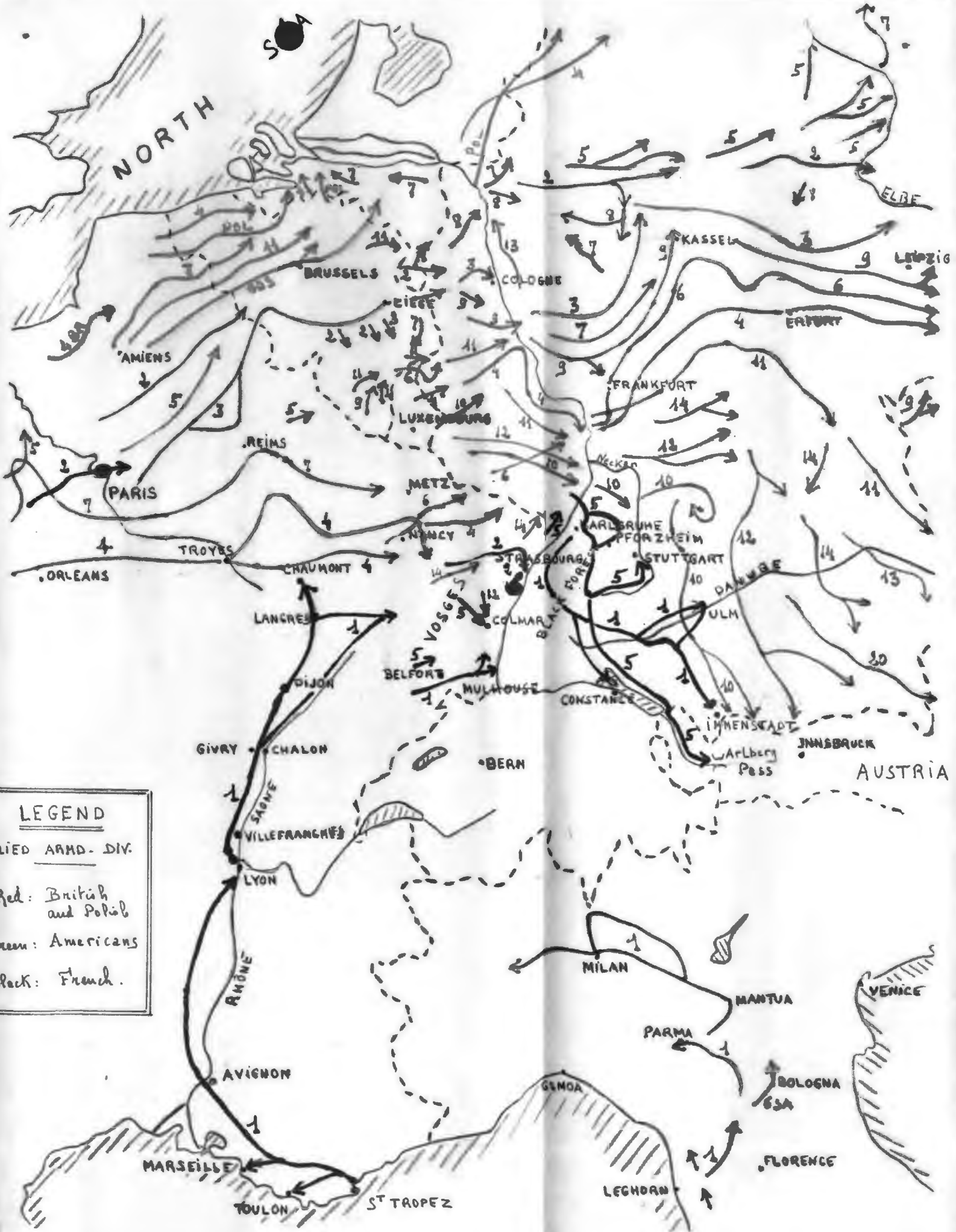
I realize that this conference lacks greatly of details and accurate informations. I wish I could give some figures on the total strength of the First French Army, the losses in men and materiel, the number of captured P.O.W. But despite many requests I have not been able to secure them.

However I have only the ambition of giving a general idea of what was the contribution of the French Armored Forces in E.T.O. Allow me to say, in conclusion, that all of those who belonged to these Armored Forces will never forget what they owe to the generosity of the UNITED STATES who provided the indispensable armament and equipment.

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Period 15th March to 8th May 1945
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LEGEND

ALLIED ARMD. DIV.

Red: British and Polish

Green: Americans

Black: French.