

41-91

THE ARMORED SCHOOL
Fort Knox, Kentucky

ADVANCED OFFICERS CLASS NO. 1

1 May 1948

MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: The Tank Battalion in Operation "Cobra".

SCOPE: The organization, missions, tactics used and results achieved
by the 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment, 2d Armored Division,
in the historic St. Lo Breakthrough in July, 1944.

Prepared by: HERBERT S. LONG, JR.
Major, Cavalry

41-91

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

It is desired to acknowledge the very valuable assistance given the author by Lt Colonel Lindsay C. Herkness, Jr. in the gathering of data for the preparation of this article. Lt Colonel Herkness commanded the 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment, during and after the St. Lo Breakthrough.

It is desired also to acknowledge the indirect aid of Lt Colonel Hugh M. Exton, whose article The 2d Armored Division in Operation "Cobra" was used as an excellent source for background information as well as to corroborate certain facts and to correlate other facts.

R E S T R I C T E D

THE TANK BATTALION IN OPERATION "COBRA"

Introduction

To the student of military history, Operation "Cobra", the break-out of the First U. S. Army from its positions in the Normandy beach-head, provides a classic example of the transition from static defense to mobile warfare, however, most authors have elected to discuss the operation from the Army, Corps, or Division viewpoint, and little concerning this justly famous offensive has been written from the vantage point of the spearheading tank battalion. This article will not endeavor to present new or radical concepts of the role played by armor in an operation of this type; to the contrary, most of the doctrine herein to be presented may be found by the interested researcher in appropriate service publications. It is the purpose of this document to offer in easily readable form an historical example of the successful employment of the tank battalion, reinforced, in a penetration of defensive lines, the subsequent exploitation of successes gained, and the securing and consolidation of vital terrain objectives, concluded by a discussion of the lessons learned and conclusions which may logically be drawn.

General Situation

Operation "Cobra" was the apt title for the plan of First Army to strike the enemy line with great power on a narrow front, thus smashing a gap through which two armored divisions and one motorized

R E S T R I C T E D

infantry division would drive to exploit the successes gained.

The operation was to be preceded by a gigantic air offensive which was calculated to "soften" the front lines of the enemy and facilitate the attack by the ground elements. The plan called for the main effort to be made by VII Corps in the center, in conjunction with the attacks of VIII Corps on the right, west, flank and XIX and V Corps on the left, east, flank. The mission assigned VII Corps was to effect a rapid penetration of the enemy's front lines between St. Gilles and Marigny, seize and hold the line Coutances - Marigny so as to cut off enemy forces facing the VIII Corps and assist in the destruction of these forces; to block along the line Cerenees - Tessy Sur Vire - St. Lo, preventing any enemy reinforcements from the south or east from interfering with the operation. To implement this considerable mission, the VII Corps was assigned six reinforced divisions, namely the 1st, 4th, 9th and 30th Infantry Divisions, and the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions. In brief, the missions of these divisions were:

1. 4th, 9th and 30th Infantry Divisions: To attack at H-hour on D-Day, seize objectives shown on Map No. 1, clear traffic from routes within their respective zones to facilitate the rapid passage of the exploiting armored and infantry forces. In addition, the 4th Infantry Division was to protect the Marigny - St. Gilles gap from attack from the south, the 9th Infantry Division was to protect the right flank of the Corps penetration, and the 30th Infantry Division was directed to protect the left flank of the Corps salient, continue the attack to seize crossings over the Vire River, and prevent enemy reinforce-

R E S T R I C T E D

ments from the east from crossing the Vire River between St. Lo and Gd Val de Vire, both inclusive.

2. The 1st Infantry Division, with combat Command "B" of the 3rd Armored Division attached, was to drive through the gap cleared by the 9th Infantry Division, turn rapidly to the south-west, block and assist in destroying enemy forces on the front of VIII Corps between Coutances and Fontenay, both inclusive.

3. The 3rd Armored Division, less Combat Command "B", was to drive through the gap created by the 4th Infantry Division, move rapidly to the south-west to secure the southern exits of Coutances and secure the south flank of the 1st Infantry Division between Hymouville and Cerisy la Salle, both inclusive.

4. The 2nd Armored Division*, with the 22nd Regimental Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division attached, was to rapidly move the division, less one combat command, through the gap cleared by the 30th Infantry Division to seize initially the area Hill 183 - Le Mesnil Herman - St. Samson de Bon Fosse in order to cover the movement of the 1st Infantry Division and the 3rd Armored Division through the Marigny - St. Gilles gap. One combat Command was to be pushed south-west via the St. Gilles - Canisy road prepared on orders of the CG, VII Corps, to move as follows:

*It must be noted here that the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions were so called "heavy" divisions, organized under the TO&E of Jan 1942. The principal combat elements consisted of two Armored Regiments of one light and two medium tank battalions, one Armored Infantry Regiment of three battalions of Armored Infantry, three Armored Field Artillery Battalions (105mm How, SP) one Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, and one Armored Engineer Battalion.

R E S T R I C T E D

a. To seize objectives within its zone of action between Cerenees and St Denis le Gast and prevent enemy reinforcements moving to the north through this area.

b. To move on Coutances to reinforce the 3rd Armored Division.

c. To move south-east to reinforce the remainder of the 2nd Armored Division in the accomplishment of its assigned missions.

At this time, let us turn our attention to Combat Command "A"* of the 2nd Armored Division, which was given the task of seizing the division objective, and then examine the missions given the 2nd Battalion 66th Armored Regiment, the unit selected to spearhead the advance of the combat command. The organization for combat of Combat Command "A" was as follows:

HQ, Combat Command "A"

66th Armored Regiment**

22nd RCT, 4th Infantry Division (with normal attachments)

14th Armored Field Artillery Battalion

Companies "A" & "C", 17th Armored Engineer Battalion

702nd Tank Destroyer Battalion (--Co "B") (SP)

Co "A", 48th Armored Medical Battalion

*Commanded by the late Major General (then Brigadier General) Maurice Rose, killed in action near Paderborn, Germany, while in command of the 3rd Armored Division.

**Commanded by Brigadier General (then Colonel) John H. Collier.

~~RESTRICTED~~

Detachment, (2nd Armored) Mt Battalion

Battery "D", 195th AAA (AW) Battalion (SP)

The plan of Combat Command "A" for the accomplishment of its mission was, in substance, as follows:

1. On orders, assemble the command in attack positions in the vicinity of Pont Hebert.
2. On orders, pass through the lines of the 30th Infantry Division and attack south astride the Pont Hebert road, the initial formation to be two strongly reinforced tank battalions attacking abreast on a very narrow front. The 3rd Battalion*, 66th Armored Regiment, reinforced, on the left, east, flank of the axis was to attack south and southeast, by-pass St. Gilles and Canisy, and seize St. Ebremond de Bon Fosse and St. Samson de Bon Fosse. The 2nd Battalion**, 66th Armored Regiment, reinforced, on the right, west, flank of the axis was to seize in order, St. Gilles, Canisy, Le Mesnil Herman, and Hill 183. The 1st Battalion***, 66th Armored Regiment, reinforced, initially in combat command reserve, was to follow the 3rd Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment.
3. Upon securing of the final objectives, both assault battalions were to block any movement of the enemy from the south, southeast

*Commanded by the late Lt Colonel Amzi R. Quillian, seriously wounded in action near St. Samson de Bon Fosse on 27 July 1944. Lt Colonel Quillian later died as the result of these wounds.

**Commanded by Lt Colonel Lindsay C. Herkness, Jr.

***Commanded by Lt Colonel Carl O. Parker.

~~RESTRICTED~~

R E S T R I C T E D

or southwest, thus covering the movements of the 1st Infantry Division and the 3rd Armored Division through the Marigny - St Gilles corridor.

4. Be prepared, on orders, to continue the attack to the south, southeast or southwest.

The Enemy Situation

Intelligence reports indicated the enemy was known to have the following units on the VII Corps front: 2nd SS Panzer Division, Panzer "Lehr" Division, 3rd and 5th Parachute Divisions and the 265th Infantry Division. All of these units were known to be under strength; particularly the Panzer units, which could muster no more than an estimated fifty tanks. Enemy reserves which were capable of influencing the action included two Panzer and three Infantry Divisions, all of which would require a minimum of three days to reach the Corps front.

The Corps operation order specified that any enemy forces encountered by the exploiting forces were to be contained and by-passed until initial objectives had been gained.

Planning Phase

When plans for the impending Operation "Cobra" were made known, the 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, was attached to and joined the 2nd Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment in its assembly area near La Mine, France. Here, preparations were immediately begun to effect the integration of the tank and infantry elements. The first step taken was to "marry-up" one infantry company and one tank company in a common bivouac area where maximum personal contact between

R E S T R I C T E D

tanker and doughboy was physically possible and highly encouraged. Infantrymen were quickly familiarized with as many characteristics and capabilities of the tanks as the limited training time permitted. Among the means used to orient the attached infantry were scheduled, supervised practice rides on the back decks of the tanks, tank performance demonstrations, and conferences at which company and platoon level tank-infantry tactics were stressed. At the end of the planning phase, each infantryman knew the name of his tank commander and knew the name of the tank upon which he was to ride and give his support in the ensuing action, as well as what he could expect in the way of support, and just how the team was to function.

During this period, one tank per platoon was fitted with a "hedgerow cutter", a device much like a giant spading fork welded on the front plate of the tank which would enable the tank in one lunge to gouge its way through the tree-tangled hedgerows.

Many and perplexing were the problems which arose during the few days allotted to the unification of armor and infantry, and among the most difficult of solution was the age-old military problem of communications. Since the ANVRC-3 radio and the tank external telephones were not in use within the division, the vital problem of communications between the tanks and the infantry was partially, but not satisfactorily solved by the expedient of having the infantry company commander ride on the back of the tank company commander's tank, the infantry platoon leader ride the tank platoon leader's tank and similarly, as far as

R E S T R I C T E D

possible, to include the squad leaders and the individual tank commanders. When it became necessary to dismount, limited communications were to be carried on by means of modified or improvised arm and hand signals.

In order to insure the highest degree of reliability in radio communications within the tank battalion, the battalion commander made the very wise decision to carry in his command tank the battalion communications warrant officer and to have the company commanders carry in their tanks the company communications sergeants. These specialists displaced the regularly assigned radio tenders in as far as crew space was concerned and, of necessity, were required to perform a portion of the radio tending necessary to each command tank. Their primary mission was not, however, one of radio tending, but of being physically present at the point where they were most needed to restore radio communications wherever they were disrupted by mechanical failure of equipment or by enemy action. This practice was followed with excellent results for the duration of the Normandy campaign.

The problem of command at the reinforced company and platoon level was felt to be incumbent on the tankers by virtue of their excellent system of radio communication organic at all levels of command. Communications insure control and control is the greatest single factor in winning a skirmish, a major engagement, or a war.

Another problem presented itself in the form of what to do with the infantry battalion special weapons which could not feasibly be carried on

R E S T R I C T E D

the backs of the tanks. There are more than enough supporting weapons available within the tank battalion, and what was really needed for this operation was an infantry force consisting of three rifle companies composed of three platoons of three to five squads each. The problem of the infantry special weapons was temporarily resolved by the decision to place these elements in a position in the column in rear of the tank infantry teams, the reasoning being that when needed for a defensive role they could be brought forward and placed in the proper positions.

In anticipation of hedgerow fighting, the basic ammunition load of all medium tanks was increased from eight to thirteen thousand rounds, the additional boxes being carried on the turret floor.

One platoon of Co "A", 702nd Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP), and one platoon of Co A, 17th Armored Engineer Battalion were attached and joined. Forward observers from the 14th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105mm Howitzer, SP) were attached to the elements which would lead the attack.

An air liaison officer from the 9th Tactical Air Command joined and was assigned a position in a tank which had installed a very high frequency radio set (VHF No. 522). This radio provided the link between the ground forces and the four P47 fighter-bombers which were to fly continuous column cover for each combat command, and enabled the air liaison officer to contact each flight as it took its place over the column and to relay instructions to the pilots for strafing and bombing attacks desired by the ground assault forces.

The battalion attack order, based on verbal and written orders of

[REDACTED]

the Commanding General, Combat Command "A", was issued verbally by the Battalion Commander in the assembly area near La Mine, as soon as security restrictions permitted. The order was substantially as follows:

"This battalion, reinforced, on orders will pass through the lines now held by the 30th Infantry Division and attack south along the axis of the Pont Herbert-Le Mesnil Herman road to seize and secure Le Mesnil Herman and Hill 183. Upon seizure of objective, block to south and southeast and be prepared to continue the attack to the south or southeast.

Co E, 66th Armored Regiment (with Co "A" 22d Infantry attached) attacks on order to seize objective shown (see map No. 2). Axis of advance: Battalion axis.

Co "D", 66th Armored Regiment (with Co "B", 22d Infantry attached) initially follow Co E, 66th Armored Regiment, prepared to pass through on order and seize objective shown (see map No. 2).

Forward Battalion CP follows Co "D", 66th Armored Regiment.

Platoon, Co "A" 17th Armored Engineer Battalion follow Bn CP, prepared to execute engineer missions on call.

Battalion Assault Gun Platoon; Follow Platoon Co "A" 17th Armored Engineer Battalion, go into initial positions near line of departure, furnish direct support to assault elements. Displace forward on my order

[REDACTED]

Platoon leader, Assault Gun Platoon, accompany me.*

Battalion Mortar Platoon: Follow Assault Gun Platoon, go into position near line of departure, furnish direct support to assault elements, displace forward when the advance masks your fire.

Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon: Assist in passage of infantry lines, thereafter protect battalion trains.

Co "A" 66th Armored Regiment (with Co C, 22d Infantry attached) follow Battalion Mortar Platoon initially, be prepared to take alternate route shown (see map No. 2) protect right flank of battalion, seize and secure Hill 183, block to south and south and southwest.

Combat trains follow Co "A".

Current SOI in effect.

I will be with the leading company.

Following the issuance of the battalion attack order, daily briefings were held to incorporate changes, to impart information of friendly and enemy activities, and to further coordinate details of supply and communications. Aerial photographs, particularly of the railroad overpass north of Canisy, were procured in stereopticon pairs and all officers, especially platoon leaders, spent many profitable hours studying them and planning approach routes and by-passes for

*The Assault Gun Platoon Leader of 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment was mounted in a light tank, M5, drawn from A Company, 66th Armored Regiment, and habitually acted as Forward Observer for his platoon. The AG Platoon was in turn, habitually employed in an indirect fire support role thus giving the battalion a half-battery of artillery.

[REDACTED]

all suspected obstacles.

A detailed artillery fire plan was received which included many division artillery and corps artillery concentrations which by the use of code names or numbers could be brought down on call of the assault elements.

Separate orders were issued for the tactical march from the assembly area to the attack positions 1200 yards southwest of Pont Herbert. The route to be used was: La Mine southwest to Cateaubraye--Cerisy la Foret--Le Maulin le' Eveque--St. Clair Sur L'Elle--La Meauffe--La Creterie--Pont Herbert--southwest to the attack positions. Instructions were issued to the effect that Reconnaissance Company, 66th Armored Regiment, would mark the route and would also assist in the passage of the infantry lines. On 24 July the battalion was placed on a 2 hour alert and due to changes in the overall plans for the offensive, was several times released from alert status and then re-alerted.

On the morning of 25 July the gigantic air offensive began, with a twenty minute assault of a narrow strip of ground along the St Lo--Periers road by 350 fighter-bombers followed by one hour of bombardment by 1500 heavy bombers of an area 2500 yards deep and 6000 yards long on the front of VII Corps. This assault was followed by 20 minutes of bombardment by 350 fighter bombers along the original narrow strip of ground and concluded by 45 minutes of bombing on the southern half of the principal bombing area by 396 medium bombers. Though it was later learned that during this carpet bombing some bombs fell short and

~~RESTRICTED~~

caused considerable number of casualties among the 30th Infantry Division, the air preparation had the effect of imparting high spirits to the tank-infantry teams waiting at La Mine.

Following the air and artillery preparation, the 4th, 9th, and 30th Infantry Divisions began the attack toward their assigned objectives.

The remainder of the day was spent by the 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment, reinforced, in completing final details of coordination and in the thorough briefing of all tank crews and attached infantry, so that all personnel would know the general situation and the specific missions assigned the units to which they belonged.

At 252300 July, the movement orders were received and the battalion departed the La Mine area, marched eighteen miles via the designated route, and by 260430 July had closed in the attack position. Contact was made with the Reconnaissance Company of the regiment and arrangements made for passage of the infantry lines.

The Penetration

At 260945 July the attack rolled forward and the now historic St. Lo breakthrough was under way. Our infantry lines were passed and the leading company deployed in attack formation. Scattered resistance was met soon after crossing the line of departure, however this was soon eliminated by the tanks of Co "E" and the attack proceeded as rapidly as possible. The many hedgerows to be traversed and the innumerable bomb craters left by the air attack caused the attack to move

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

at a much slower rate of speed than would have been possible over good tank country. Between the LD and St. Gilles, the battalion was under constant light artillery and mortar fire which, though it caused no casualties among the tanks, was a cause of steady attrition among the accompanying infantry troops. When at 1500 hours the advance elements reached a point 800 yards north of St. Gilles, resistance was met in the form of a road block defended by tanks and infantry. The leading company commander* called for an air strike, which was relayed through the air liaison officer to the column cover aircraft, and with no appreciable delay the P47 fighter-bombers came in on a strafing run, following which several 500 lb bombs were dropped with gratifying accuracy on the crossroads obstacle. The tanks executed a flanking movement and entered the town from the northwest where, after a brisk fire-fight, two German tanks were destroyed. Numerous casualties were effected among the enemy infantry and one Mark IV tank was destroyed as a result of the employment of the supporting fighter-bombers. The momentum was quickly regained and the advance continued toward Canisy.

Exploitation Phase

Enemy resistance between St Gilles and Canisy consisted chiefly of artillery fire, which increased in accuracy and intensity as the battalion approached and occupied the high ground 1400 yards north of Canisy. Reconnaissance showed the railroad overpass north of town had been bombed,

*Capt John R. Werts

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

so accordingly Co "E" began an enveloping movement to the west of the town while Co "D" overwatched from the high ground. The town was successfully flanked at 1900 hours and the column began moving through Canisy. While the combat elements were passing through the town, two planes dive-bombed the main thoroughfare of the town, which was heavily laden with vehicles, with the result that one light tank was destroyed and many personnel casualties were caused, among them one platoon leader killed* and one wounded. The advance continued against light and completely disorganized resistance.

During the 25th and 26th of July, enemy communications had taken a severe and disjuncting blow, and it became increasingly evident that few echelons of the German forces were cognizant of the depth to which our armor had penetrated. Numerous enemy vehicles blundered into the column and at one point a staff car loaded with German officers attempted to by-pass a column of tanks from Co "D", apparently in the mistaken belief that the tanks were German-owned and operated. Several half-tracks and armored cars were destroyed south of Canisy and at a point three thousand yards southeast of the town a Mark V tank exposed its flank, was fired upon and set in flames. What seemed, at the moment, to be fine shooting actually resulted in positioning at the junction of a sunken road and a stream crossing an improvised but extremely effective road block. This stroke of misfortune caused a delay of more than two hours while reconnaissance for a by-pass route was made and while a tank dozer worked to clear a passage around the burning and exploding vehicle.

*1st Lt John M. Mauney, winner in North Africa of the DSC

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

At this point, the battalion commander, who was supervising the efforts to clear the blocked road, was wounded in the left side by a German, who in the darkness suddenly sprang from the cover of the roadside ditch, fired his pistol once, and escaped despite the quickly returned fire of the battalion commander. Although painfully wounded, the battalion commander refused to be evacuated even long enough to have his wound dressed, but instead continued on with the operation. A path having been cleared around the obstacle, the advance was again resumed and at an increased pace, for by this time it was 2300 hours and the objective was still some two miles distant. At 270200 July, after an advance of almost nine miles beyond the enemy lines as they were constituted at H-hour, the crossroads northeast of Le Mesnil Herman were seized and secured. In attempting to secure the crossroads at Le Mesnil Herman proper, Co "D" encountered resistance from enemy infantry and had the leading tank knocked out by the action of an anti-tank rocket. The burning tank embodied another effective road block, and since the position already secured controlled the most critical road net, it was decided to delay the attack until daylight. The remainder of the night was spent in organizing the objective and in refueling the tanks. It is interesting to note that while consolidating the objective, several Germans, including a dispatch rider, reported in to the temporary battalion CP and did not realize their mistake until their status was suddenly altered to that of prisoner of war. As of this time, the battalion had captured over three hundred prisoners of war, destroyed

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

five enemy tanks, one self-propelled gun, six towed anti-tank guns and eight other vehicles to include half-tracks and armored cars.

The battalion commander received orders from the Commanding General, CCA, to the effect that the town of Le Mesnil Herman would be secured, and plans were immediately formulated for the accomplishment of this mission.

Consolidation Phase

With the arrival of first light, the enemy proved extremely sensitive to the loss of the network of roads leading through Le Mesnil Herman, and his reaction took the form of heavy artillery and mortar concentrations as well as small infantry counterattacks. Tanks of "E" Company were brought into play and liberally "hosed" the hedgerows with caliber .30 machine gun fire, which was very effective in causing the enemy to withdraw to the west. Enemy OP's on the high ground five thousand yards to the south continued throughout the day to adjust accurate artillery fire on our positions. At 0800 hours, plans were completed for the attack on Le Mesnil Herman and at 0900 the attack moved out with Co "D" and attached infantry, advancing to the north of the road toward the objective (see Map No. 2). During this action, the battalion surgeon* went forward on call to aid the wounded crew members of a knocked-out tank, and while doing so his half-track received a direct hit from an enemy artillery or mortar projectile, which killed two of the aid men, wounded the surgeon, and

*Capt Mario T. De Felice

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

burned his vehicle. Disregarding his wound, the surgeon continued forward, dismounted, and under continuous artillery fire attended the wounded tankers, even though the incoming fire was sufficiently close to kill two of the wounded tankmen. For his heroic actions, the battalion surgeon later was awarded the DSC.

The town proper was taken at 271200 July, after a loss of three tanks by action of German anti-tank rockets, and the road center secured to the south and southeast.

At 1500 hours, Hill 183 was secured by Co "A", 66th Armored Regiment, and CC "A" was in complete control of the division objective.

At 2000 hours, a message was received from combat command S-2 stating that the 2d Panzer Division was being moved from the British sector to the VII Corps front, where the nearest probable approach would be the ford at Tessy Sur Vire. This piece of information was not received with overwhelming joy, and at 2100 hours when a second message, relayed from Division G-3 Air, indicated that friendly air had reported a heavy concentration of enemy armor on the Le Mesnil Herman - Villebaudon road, it became very apparent that the exploitation phase was over and that the command was facing the real mission of the operation; the interception and neutralization of enemy reserves. These indications were further confirmed on the morning of 28 July, when at 0845 hours reconnaissance elements of CC "A" reported the capture of a prisoner of war from the Reconnaissance Battalion of the 2d Panzer Division. Interrogation disclosed the fact that his reconnaissance unit had the pre-

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

ceding day come from the Caen area.

Effective at 1200 hours 28 July, CC "A" was detached from VII Corps and attached, in place, to XIX Corps. The combat command was at that time given the mission of seizing the corps objective, which was the town of Percy and the high ground extending northeast and east of the town as far as St. Marie on the Vire River. The attack was to be launched in three columns, all composed of tank-infantry teams, with the right, west, flank force the strongest of the columns and the center and left, east, flank forces of approximately equal strength. The 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment (reinforced) was directed to furnish the center force, consisting of Co. E, 66th Armored Regiment and its attached infantry, reinforced by a platoon of Co. "A", 17th Armored Engineer Battalion, one platoon of Co. "A", 17th Armored Engineer Battalion, one platoon of Co. "A", 702d Tank Destroyer Battalion, and one platoon of Reconnaissance Company, 66th Armored Regiment.

The 3d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment furnished the west flank force and the 1st Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment furnished the east force.

The center force (see map no. 3) moved out at 281400 July and attacked south along the Le Mesnil Herman--Chevry road with the mission of seizing Beaucoudray and cutting the Villebaudon-Tessy Sur Vire road. The advance met with light resistance at a point one thousand yards southeast of the line of departure, and as the attack continued the column was dive-bombed by five Messersmitt 109's, causing some casual-

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

ties. The force advanced to the high ground due north of Moyen and advance elements of the tank-infantry team entered the edge of town, where one tank was lost in an enemy mine belt. In the town itself, fierce resistance was encountered in the form of two battalions of panzer grenadiers, supported by numerous Mark V tanks, all of the 116th Panzer Division. Two tanks and two self-propelled guns were destroyed at a loss of three of the tanks of the center force. The attacking force consolidated for the night on the high ground north of town and the next morning again attacked the town. Due to overwhelming enemy superiority, the attack was stalemated and, accordingly, new plans were made for an encircling movement. In accordance with these plans, the center force was relieved at dark on the 29th by elements of the 29th Infantry Division and rejoined the remainder of the battalion. Meanwhile, the east column fought its way against strong resistance to a point within one half mile northeast of Moyen where it became apparent, through identifications, that both the 2d Panzer and the 116th Panzer Divisions were disposed in considerable strength south of the east-west course of the Marcron River. The west column attacking south through La Denisiere, captured Villebaudon and next day continued the drive to capture, after bitter fighting, a portion of the high ground three thousand yards northeast of Percy. This force was completely cut off by the 116th Panzer Division which moved in behind their advance but, despite this situation, the town of Percy was captured by 302000 July.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

The 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment, reinforced, was ordered to by-pass La Denisiere to the west, pass through Villebaudon (see map no. 3) and attack toward Tessy Sur Vire, thus out-flanking the enemy positions on the high ground south of Moyen. The crossroads at Villebaudon were reached at approximately 301200 July, where the encircling movement was disrupted by an enemy counterattack employing tanks and infantry.

Several counterattacks were repulsed, among them a particularly violent one which was preceded by heavy artillery fire and employed forty tanks with supporting infantry. The action continued for nearly thirteen hours before the last counterattack was beaten off and the crossroads secured. During the afternoon, several enemy tanks were destroyed by the defending tanks and tank destroyers and 180 enemy killed and 120 captured.

The XIX Corps objective lay south of the line Percy--Tessy Sur Vire, but the Commanding General, CC "A", believing that the entire combat elements of his command would be cut off if he reinforced the tank force at Percy requested and received permission to concentrate all his efforts on the capture of Tessy Sur Vire.

On 31 August limited advances along the Tessy Sur Vire road were made by the 1st and 2d Battalions, 66th Armored Regiment, and early on 1 August the 3d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment attacked from the direction of Villebaudon with the mission of capturing Tessy Sur Vire. The attack was pushed to the outskirts of the town and two tanks actually entered the town but were destroyed by a superior number of German tanks. The 3d

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

Battalion was then isolated by enemy counterattacks until relieved by the remainder of the combat command.

At 1500 hours the 1st and 2d Battalions, 66th Armored Regiment, with attached infantry from the 22d Infantry, attacked astride the Villebaudon--Tessy Sur Vire road with the mission of taking Tessy Sur Vire. The enemy offered strong resistance with artillery and tanks in an attempt to keep open the crossings of the Vire River. The 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment attacked on the north of the axis with Co "E" leading, Co "D" echeloned to the left and rear and Co "A", supported by the attached tank destroyer platoon, moving on the main road. In this attack the infantry was of invaluable assistance to the tanks in traversing the thickly wooded areas and particularly in locating and reporting enemy tanks. Due to the effective team work of infantry and tanks and to the aggressive action of the tank companies and tank destroyers, the battalion accounted for three Mark V and four Mark IV tanks destroyed at a loss of only one light tank disabled. Approximately one hundred prisoners were taken and at nightfall the battalion was occupying positions scarcely a mile west of Tessy Sur Vire. The bulk of the enemy troops had been forced to withdraw east of the Vire River where they were in no position to influence the action being fought by other elements of the First U. S. Army to the north and west.

Later that night, the 30th Infantry Division occupied Tessy Sur Vire and the gap between Tessy Sur Vire and the 1st and 2d Battalions, 66th Armored Regiment, thus terminating the action which had gained the

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

last objective of the breakthrough phase of Operation "Cobra".

Conclusion

The role played by the tank battalion, reinforced, in an operation of the type described above has been given added importance by the campaigns of many armored units in action in the European Theater of Operations during World War II. Many lessons were learned and were subsequently correlated and integrated into our service journals, but among these lessons none are of more importance to the armored commander than the following:

1. Communications within the reinforced battalion: Without an adequate system of communications, the unification of associated arms cannot be achieved. Communications personnel should be well forward at all times in order to make repairs and replacements where and when they are most needed, namely, at the height of the action. Successful communications means control and control is the most important element in the winning of battles.

2. Coordination of all elements of the reinforced battalion: Sufficient time must be allowed by commanders to permit the careful and thorough integration of combat elements and supporting services into a cohesive whole. This phase of any operation demands the utmost in command supervision and intra-staff cooperation.

3. Planning and orientation: Commanders and staff must make every effort to plan for every possible turn of events, and to insure

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

that all personnel are completely oriented on the part they must play in the operation. Security restrictions permitting, orientation by use of enlarged maps, terrain tables, or terrain walks should be carried to the level of tank crew members and the last lonely rifleman.

4. Aggressiveness in training and in action: Where time permits the combined arms team should engage in realistic pre-combat training to develop teamwork and mutual understanding of branch or unit problems. In combat, there is no substitute for trained aggressiveness which can be controlled and directed by the commander to the successful achievement of the mission.

In closing, it must again be emphasized that the mission of the 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment during Operation "Cobra" was not to gain ground, as such, but to hold off enemy reinforcements, particularly armor, coming from the east. The aggressive, battering, offensive tactics of the battalion had cost it better than fifty percent of its medium tank strength, but by these tactics it had kept strong elements of both the 2d Panzer Division and the 116th Panzer Division completely occupied and had made a major contribution toward preventing the Germans from launching a coordinated counter-offensive which would have affected the entire course of the war. The capture of Tessy Sur Vire and the withdrawal of the enemy to the east flank of the Vire River completely ended the German capabilities of interfering with the operations which by that time were nearing the Brittany Peninsula.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Exton, H. M., Lt Colonel, FA, "The 2nd Armored Division in Operation Cobra."

The Military Review, Vol. XXVII, No. 5, pp. 11-19 (August 1947)

Hewitt, Robert L. Work Horse of the Western Front. Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1946.

Eisenhower, Dwight D., General of the Armies.

Eisenhower's Own Story of the War. New York: ARCO Publishing Co. 1946.

Report of Operations, First United States Army. Dates covered:

20 Oct 43 - 1 Aug 44.

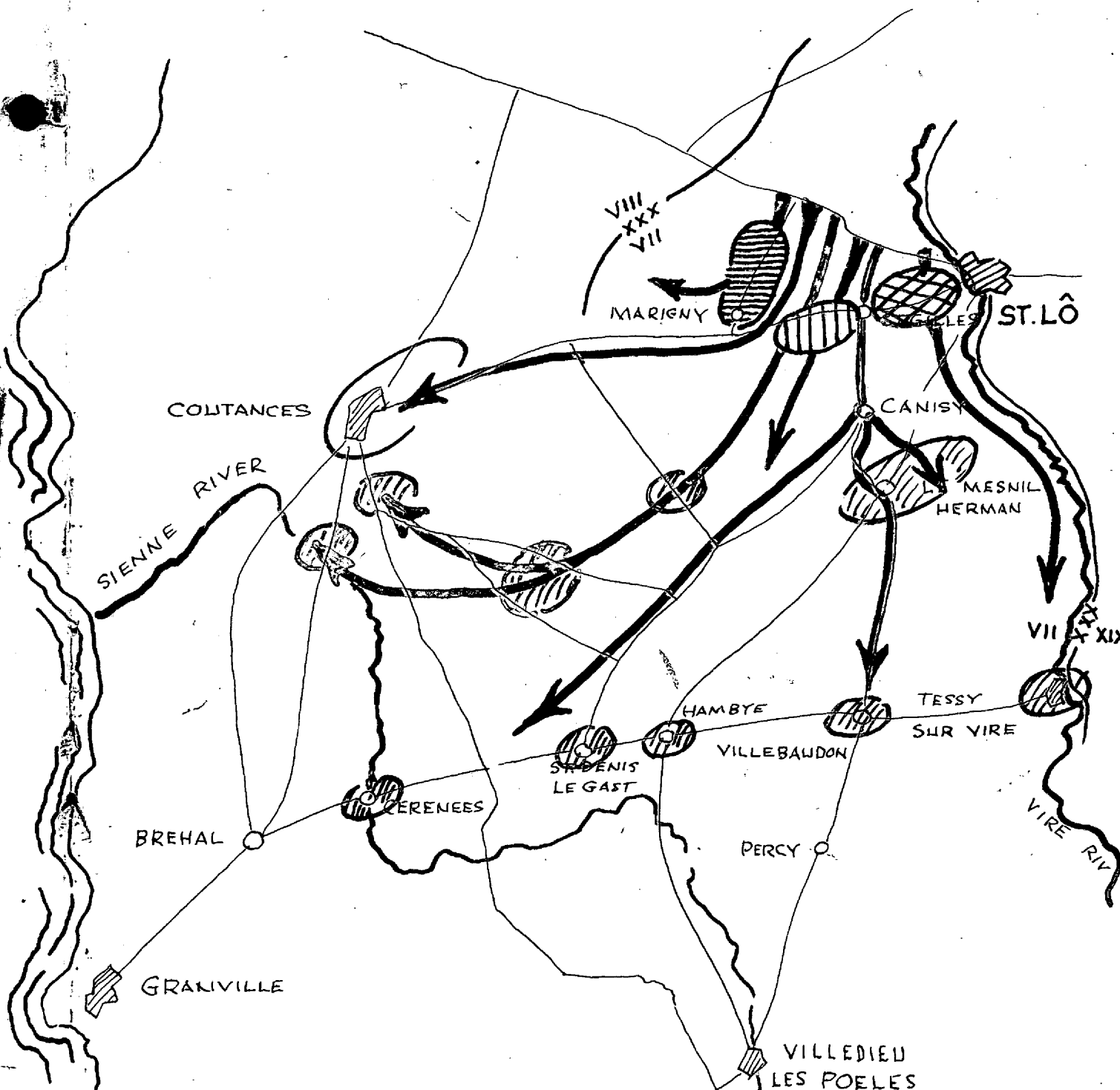
A History of the 2nd U. S. Armored Division.

Editor: Lt Colonel E. A. Trahan, GSC. Atlanta: Albert Love Enterprises.

Extracts from Operational History, 2nd Armored Division. Dates covered:

26 Jul 44 - 31 Jul 44.

~~RESTRICTED~~









MAP NO. 1

FRANCE

SCALE : 1" = 5 MILES

DIVISIONS:

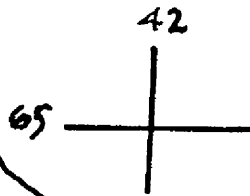
-  = 2 Δ
-  = 9 INF
-  = 1 INF
-  = 4 INF
-  = 30 INF
-  = 3 Δ

TANK BATTALION EXPLOITATION

OPN "COBRA"

MAPS: 1:50,000
TORIGNY-SUR-VIRE
& ST. LÔ SHEETS
(FRANCE)

SCALE - 1" = .79 MILES



RESISTANCE FROM INF.
MORTARS & ARTILLERY
BAZOOKAS & A.T. GUNS

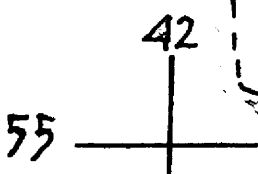
ST GILLES

DUG IN TKS, BARRICADES,
ANTI-TANK GUNS & INFANTRY

CANISY

GERMAN HALF TRACKS,
ARMORED CARS, GUNS
& INFANTRY

LEGEND:
ROUTE OF 2ND BN
66TH A.R. (REIN):
ROUTE OF CO "A"
66TH A.R. (REIN):



CO "A"

AMMO
TRUCK

MARK
TRUCK

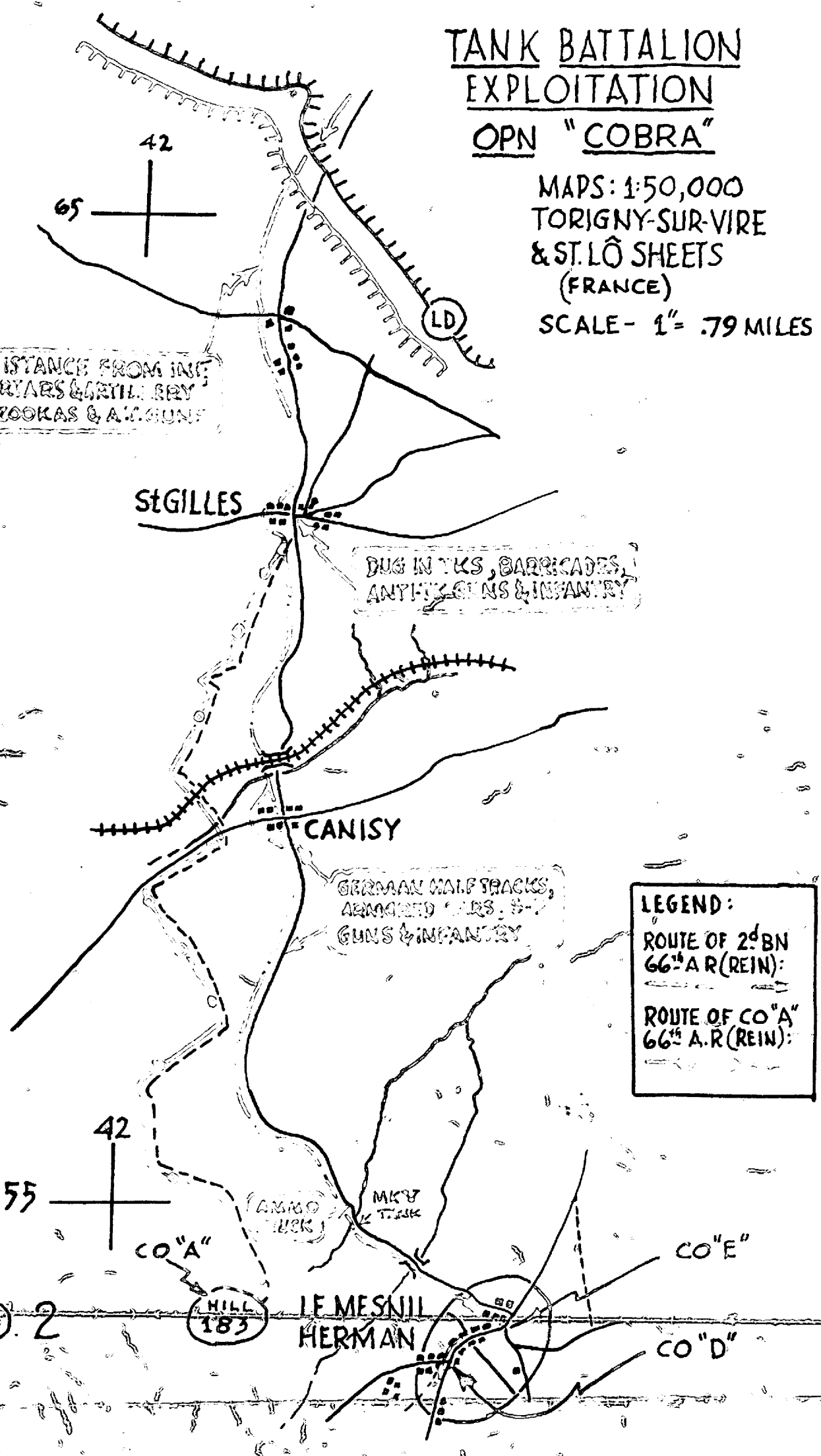
HILL
183

LE MESNIL
HERMAN

CO "E"

CO "D"

MAP NO. 2



LE MESNIL
HERMAN

43

52



MOYEN

MARCRON R.

LA DENISIERE

49

49

VIRE R.

SOLLE R.

VILLEBAUDON

BEAUCOUDRAY

TESSY-SUR-VIRE

LEGEND:

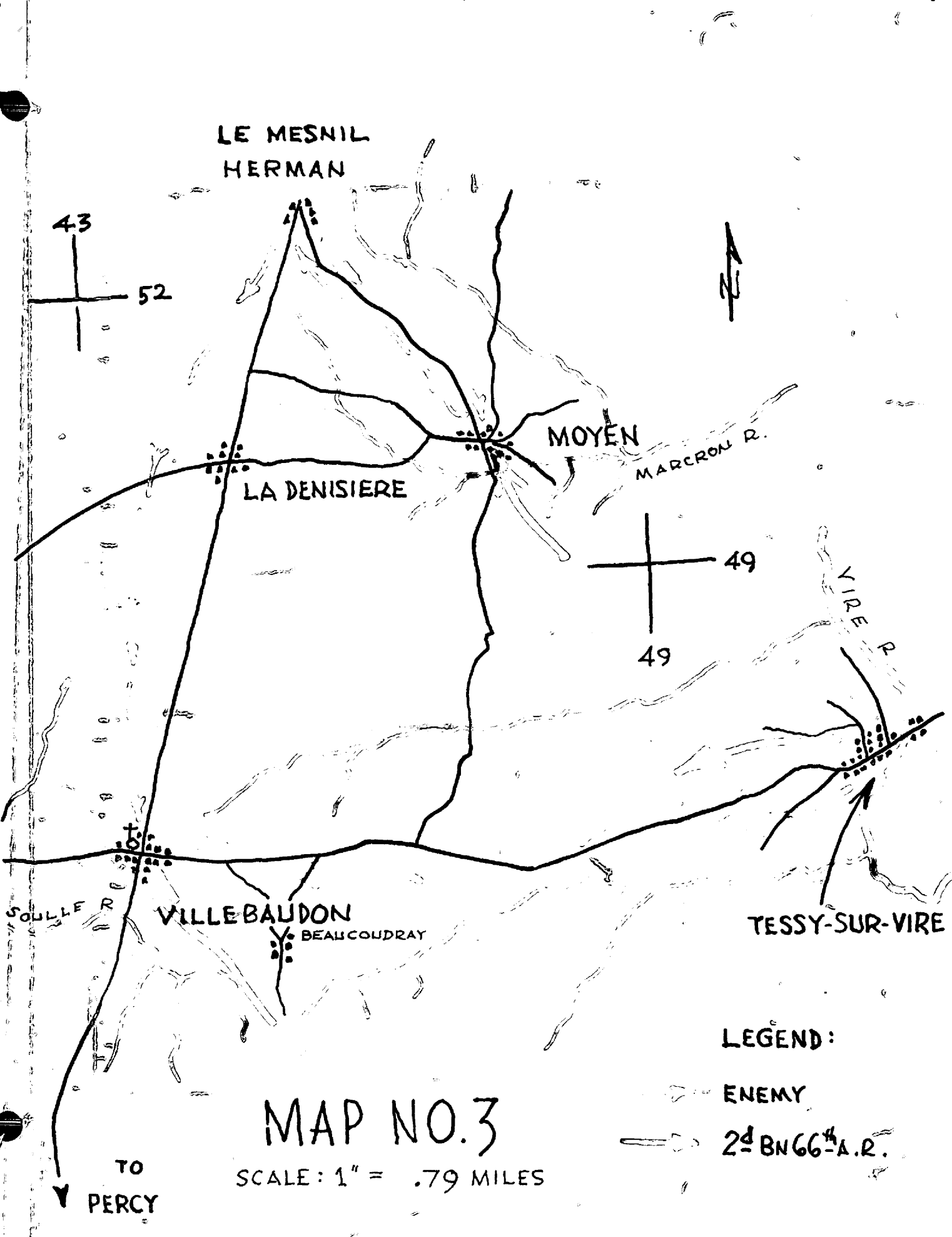
ENEMY

2^d BN 66th A.R.

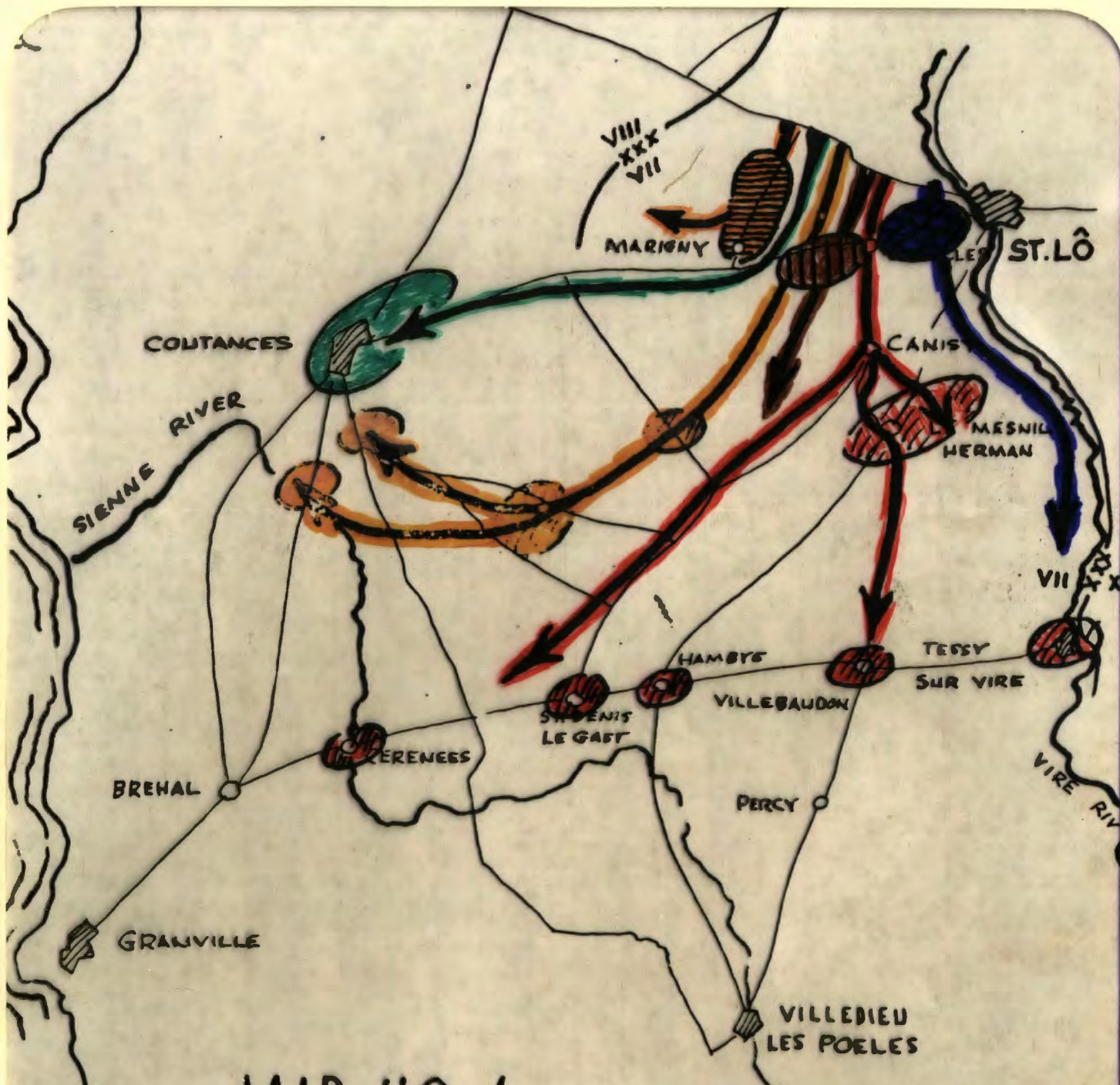
MAP NO. 3

SCALE: 1" = .79 MILES

TO
PERCY









41.91



MAP NO. 1
FRANCE
SCALE: 1" = 5 MILES

DIVISIONS:

	=	2 Δ
	=	9 INF
	=	1 INF
	=	4 INF
	=	30 INF
	=	3 Δ

& ST. LO SHEETS
(FRANCE)
SCALE - 1" = .79 MILES

RESISTANCE FROM INF,
MORTARS & ARTILLERY,
BAZOOKAS & A.T. GUNS

ST GILLES

DUG IN TKS, BARRICADES,
ANTI-TK GUNS & INFANTRY

CANISY

GERMAN HALFTRACKS,
ARMORED CARS, S-P
GUNS & INFANTRY

LEGEND:
ROUTE OF 2ND BN
66TH A.R. (REIN):
ROUTE OF CO 'A'
66TH A.R. (REIN):

42
55
CO 'A'

AMMO TRUCK

TKY TRUCK

LE MESNIL
HERMAN

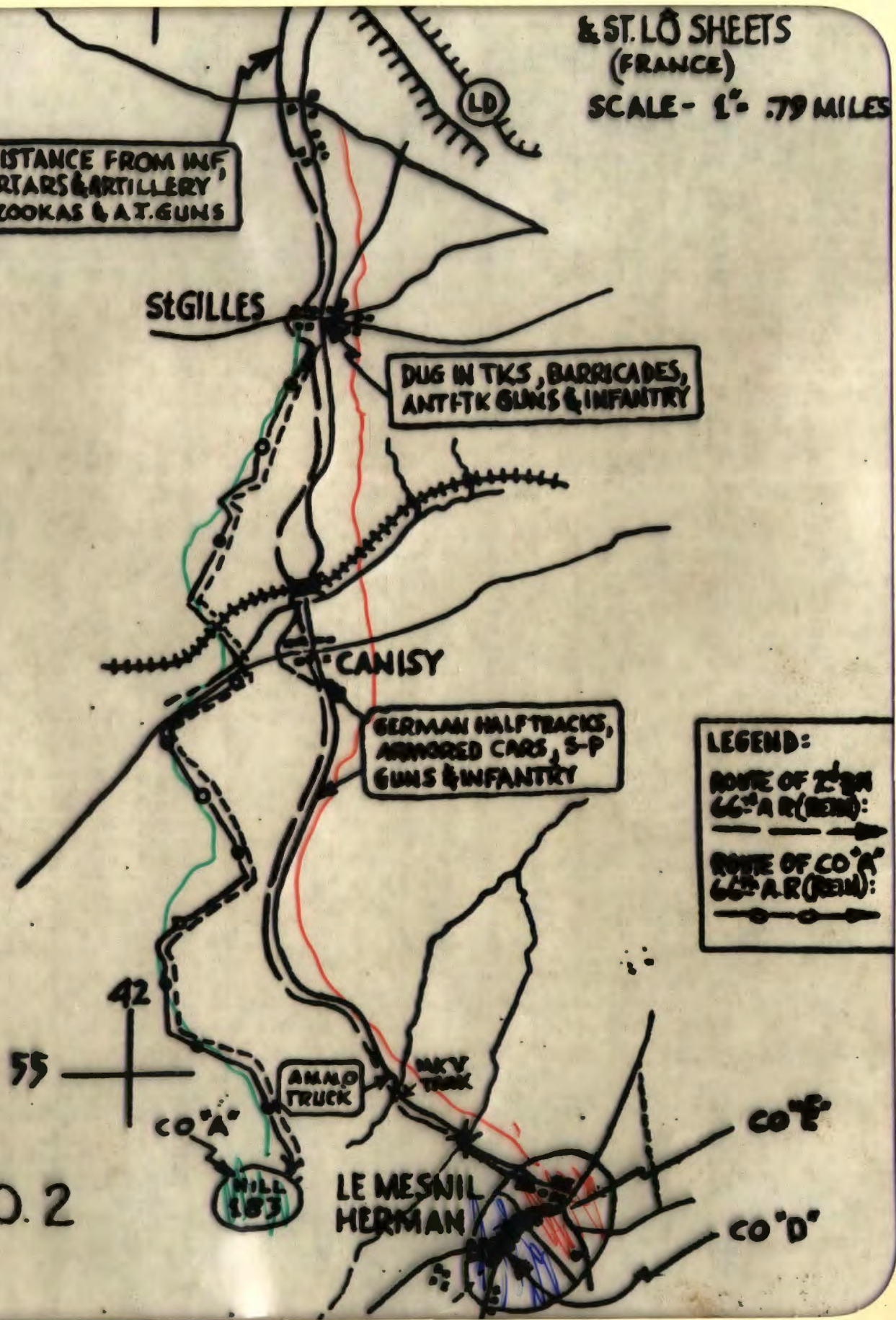
CO 'B'

CO 'D'

MAP NO. 2

HILL
183

41-91
2



41-91

3

