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Operations of the 3d Bn, 66th Armored
Regiment, in the St Lo breakthrough, by
Lt Col H. Zeien, Inf. Command and Staff
College. 1946-47.

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A-2 History of 2nd US Armored Division

A-3 AFTER/AFTER ACTION REPORT
2nd Armored Division - July and August 1944

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The purpose of this monograph is to cover the operations of the Third Battalion of the 66th Armored Regiment, 2nd Armored Division from the 25th of July to the 1st of August 1944 in Operation COBRA, The St Lo Breakthru.

The 2nd Armored Division was one of the heavy armored divisions hence this battalion consisted of two medium and one light tank companies.

This battalion left the States in December of 1942 and went to North Africa. It did no fighting in Africa but participated in the D-Day operations of the invasion of Sicily. Here it fired its first shots in anger and participated in one battle which we then thought was quite a battle. In retrospect we realize we had hardly gotten our nose bloody.

From there we went to England and started training for the invasion of Normandy. This training proved invaluable in the future operations. All told we had about eighteen months to polish up on our technique after we left the States. The result was perfect teamwork when the chips were down.

G E O G R A P H I C A L F E A T U R E S

The terrain in Normandy is rolling but is what is generally referred to as hedgerow terrain. For those of you that were there this is ample explanation, but a few words of description for those that were not there. The fields are divided into small plots 75 to 300 yards in length and breadth. These plots are bounded by trees and brush into which dirt has blown for hundreds of years forming banks from three to ten feet high with trees and brush growing out of the top. Many of the trails were sunken roads with high hedgerows on each side of them.

This combination formed a criss-cross of compartments and corridors limiting the fields of fire and restricting observation. Ground observed artillery fire was usually limited to the next field.

The hedgerows and sunken roads formed definite tank obstacles that had to be reduced.

We landed in France on the 10th of June. We had no real offensive operations until the St Lo break thru. I would like to read to you the citation we got for that action, I quote:

"The 3rd Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment, is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy during the period 26 July and 1 August 1944, inclusive, in France. For this seven day period the 3rd Battalion constantly spearheaded the advance of Combat Command "A", 2nd Armored Division, which had been assigned the mission of protecting the entire left flank of Operation COBRA. The Battalion boldly and energetically carried the fight to the enemy, pushed deep into the German defensive positions west of the VIRE River, and effectively forestalled enemy attempts to reinforce elements engaged against troops exploiting the breakthrough. From the beginning of the operation the terrain offered almost insurmountable obstacles; sunken roads, thick, high hedgerows and heavy vegetation proved ideal for the defenders and often impassable for armored vehicles. The Battalion overcame every terrain difficulty by energy, resourcefulness and use of field expedients on the part of every tank crew. For seven consecutive days the Battalion was in constant contact with the enemy, advancing 33 miles and inflicting losses on the enemy estimated at twice its own strength in killed, wounded and missing. Its own casualties were extremely heavy: 105% in medium tanks, its greatest striking force; 73% in tank officers and 43% in enlisted personnel of tank crews. Despite these losses, the Battalion carried out every mission it was assigned with the utmost dispatch and vigor. In the last four days of the period, the entire German 2nd Panzer Division was unmercifully mauled and driven back over the VIRE Reiver and the left flank of the breakthrough secured. The success of the operation was due in a large measure to the determination, esprit de corps and cold courage of the officer and men of the 3rd Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment."

end of quote.

Now I am going to tell you what really happened and try to point out the mistakes we made to get all of those casualties.

By now you are probably wondering what part I played in this operation. For the last five days I was battalion Executive. Before that time Company Commander of Headquarters Company of the battalion.

Operation "COBRA" started 25 July preceded by the much discussed Saturation bombing of which quite a bit landed on our own troops.

On 26 July 0012 we left the bivouac at La Mine off of this chart to the Northeast about twenty miles and arrived in an assembly area $5\frac{1}{2}$ miles Northwest of St Lo. Moved out in the attack with a battalion of Infantry attached, which I will hereafter refer to as "our Infantry", at 0945 toward Canisy through the hole opened by the Infantry. There were still a few Krouts looking through that hole.

This battalion was the leading element of Combat Command "A" and by 1510 that afternoon we had reached St Giles and by 2100 it had reached Canisy. Here the 2d Battalion was committed on its right. The 3rd Battalion on this road and the 2nd on this one. The attack continued that night and by morning of the 27th both battalions had reached the vicinity of Le Mesnil Herman. The tanks were refueled here and a little rest taken. At 1600 that afternoon we received orders to conduct a reconnaissance in Force toward Villebaudon. We met light resistance and by dark the attack had reached a point a little over a mile North of Villebaudon about here on the chart.

On the 28th of July we were ordered to continue the attack toward Villebaudon. The other two battalions of Combat Command "A" were committed on our left rear to take Tessy Sur Vire and the other an objective on this road here.

We took Villebaudon by noon and were given another objective way South off of this chart. By night of the 28th we had reached this point $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles South of Villebaudon. The center Battalion had gotten to Moyen and the left Battalion to Le mesnil OPAC.

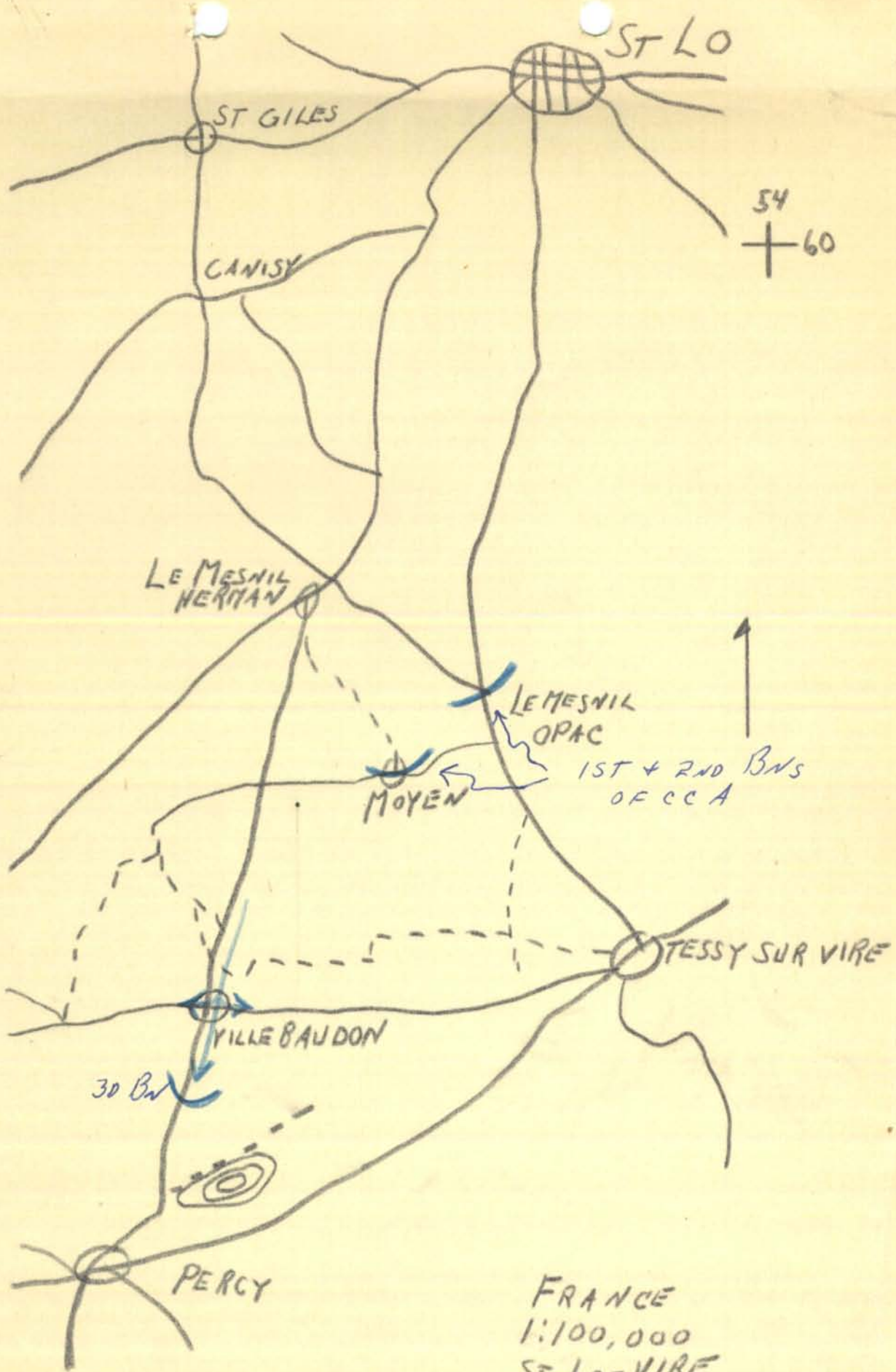


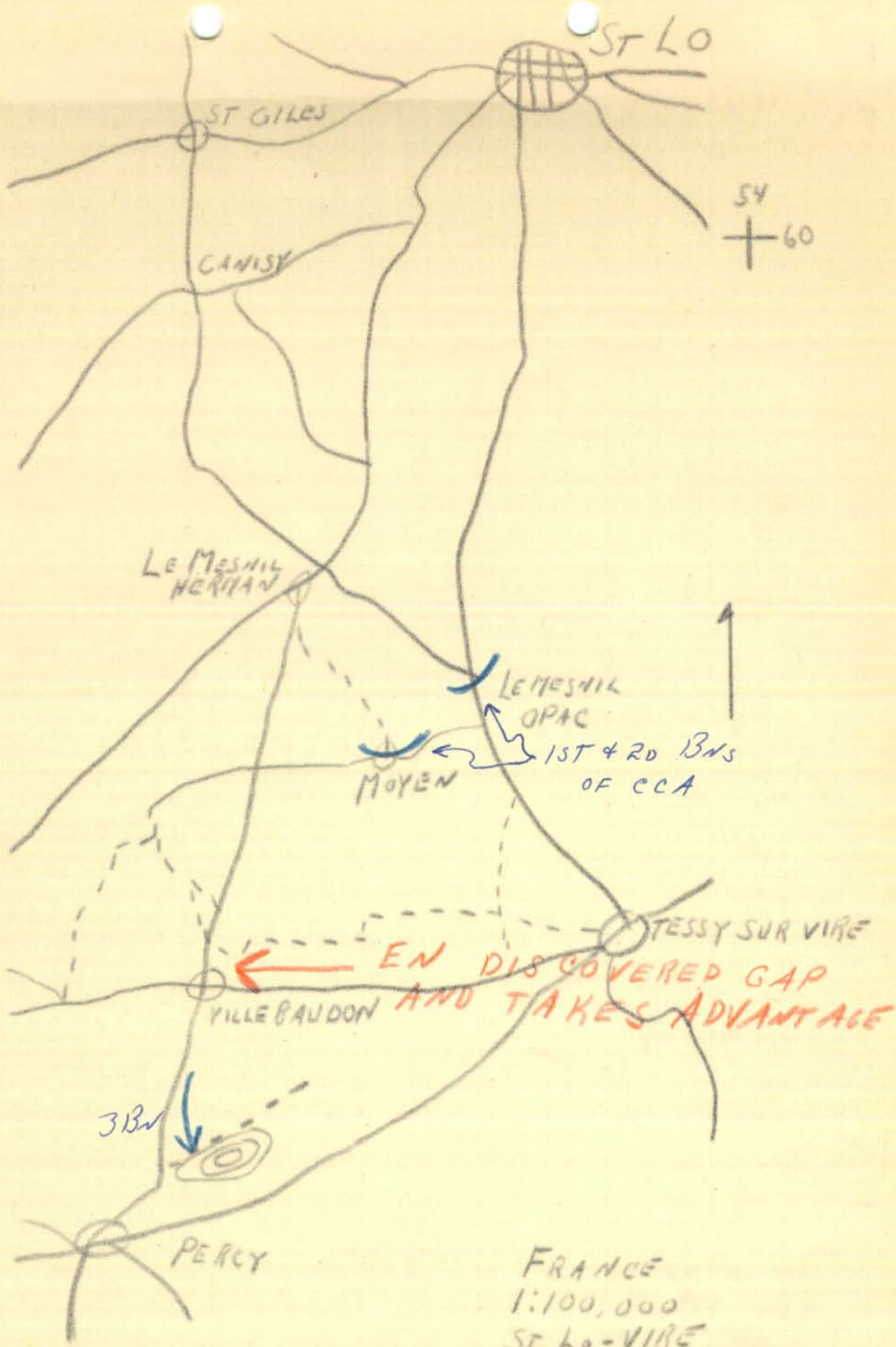
CHART I ATK 28 JULY 44

The picture now is us away out here on a limb with the remainder of the Combat Command back here. The Germans took advantage of the fact and knocked off our supply vehicles as they went back for gas.

The next morning 29 July we were told to push on to Percy. In true Armored fashion we put our tanks on the road and started out. The lead vehicle got to RJ210 and was knocked out from fire down this sunken road. The Krouts had five tanks on this road. So we said we better take this hill on our left first. Lined up our attack and called for a concentration on the hill. The answer we got was "Sorry our Cavalry is up there we can't fire there". That Cavalry seemed rather hostile to us. We started the attack using our mortars and assault guns for artillery. Later on that day we convinced higher headquarters that the only Cavalry that was up there was German and we got our artillery to fire for us. Our Infantry tried all day to make the top of the hill but couldn't make it.

About 1600 Ground Infantry was sent to relieve us. To place this Ground Infantry unit in a favorable position our Infantry Commander decided to sweep the top of the hill with a platoon of our Infantry and they (the Ground Infantry) were to follow. They didn't follow. They set-up a line behind our Infantry and reported that they were in position. We were ordered to withdraw and reorganize. This we did under protest but were unable to get one platoon of our Infantry out. We didn't actually get this platoon out until the next day. It proved to be a good thing that we left them too, because that night the Ground Infantry came running off of the hill. My 1st Sgt told me they were coming and I got in a peep and went down the road to meet them. When I asked them what the trouble was they told me they were being counter-attacked. I asked "Where?" Everything seemed quiet in that sector. We finally got them back up on the reverse slope position behind this platoon of ours.

The next day, 30 July, the Germans attacked through this Gap here and shot us up in our assembly area from the East. While we were holding off this attack we got orders to Bypass Percy on the West. This was still hedgerow country so that was quite a job. We had one tank dozer attached to the battalion so I got in that and bulldozed a pathway through to here, one mile North of Percy on the right West side of the Main Road.



FRANCE
 1:100,000
 ST LO-VIRE
 SHEET 6-F

CHART II ATK 29 JULY 44

We had 50 patients in our Battalion Aid Station and couldn't get them out on the road to the rear. We knew that as soon as we moved out the enemy would move in. Combat Command "A" said to move out anyway and we did turning our back on the Germans. We left the doctor and some medical supplies there. We got those patients out later that night.

But to get back to the attack. As I stated I was in the tank dozer busting open these hedgerows. When I thought that I was about up to the front line I yelled down to some Infantry on the ground and said "How far to the front line?" The answer I got was "This is it". To my surprise I had been working right under the noses of the enemy without knowing it.

We brought our tanks up and lined them up for the attack. While we had the Tank Commanders on the ground briefing them we got a nice mortar concentration.

The attack jumped off about 1900. They were waiting for us and it cost us plenty. This attack bogged down after about 300 yards. About 2100 we were ordered to withdraw and we did a few tanks at a time. The entire effort was wasted because the Ground Infantry failed to follow and as we moved back the Germans moved in to the original front line. The action cost us 7 tanks and 19 casualties.

When we withdrew our forces we went into an assembly area one mile North and were informed that we would have 48 hours for reorganization. This was not realized because late on the 31st we were alerted for an attack on Tessy Sur Vire.

On the 30th the 2nd Battalion had tried to take Tessy down the main road from Villebaudon.

On the 31st the 1st Battalion tried it on the North side of the road.

Neither of these attacks got more than a mile East of Villebaudon. We had been further down that road than they when we came through there on the 28th of July.

We were ordered to make it down this secondary road that roughly parallels the main road to Tessy Sur Vire about one mile to the North.

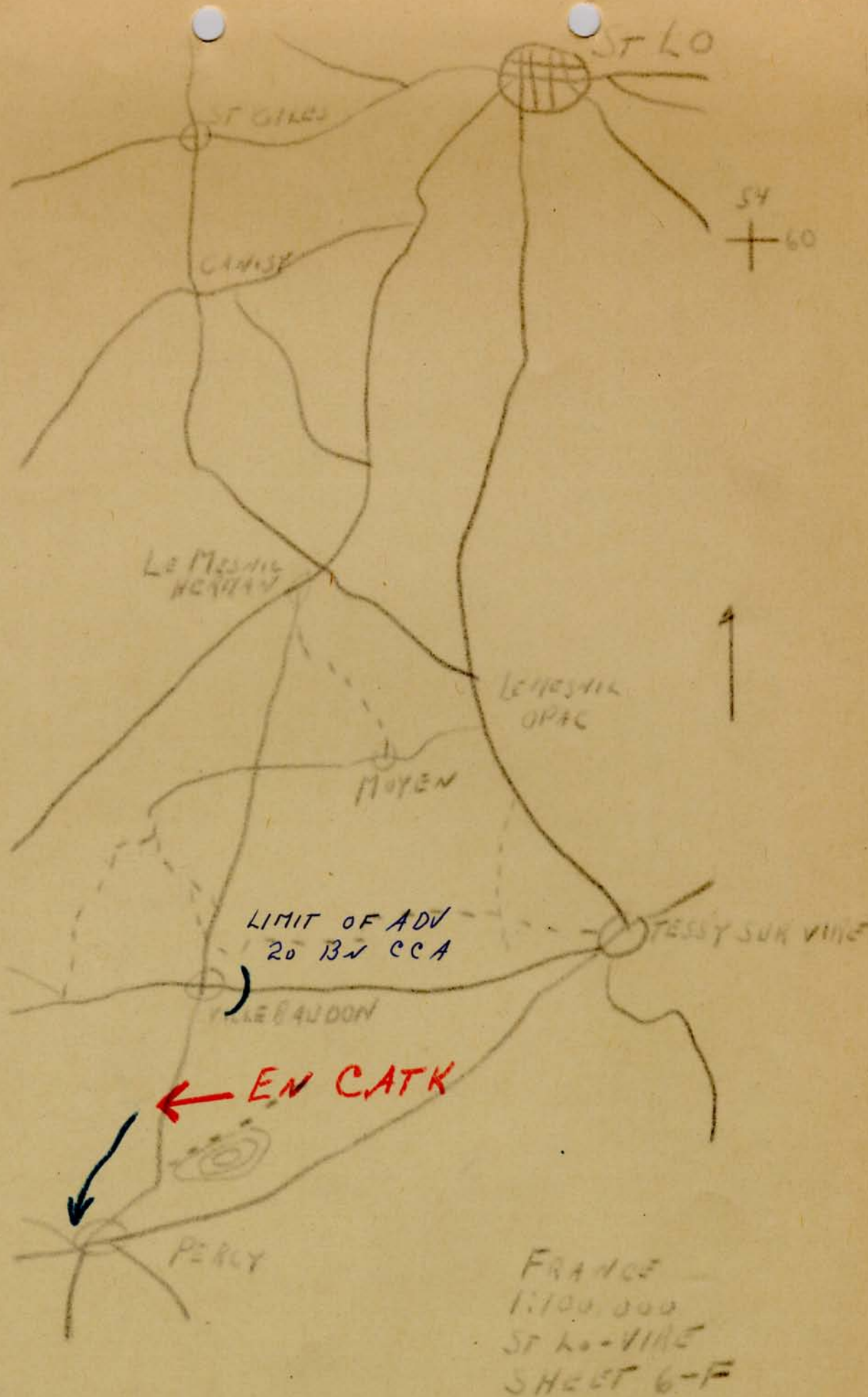
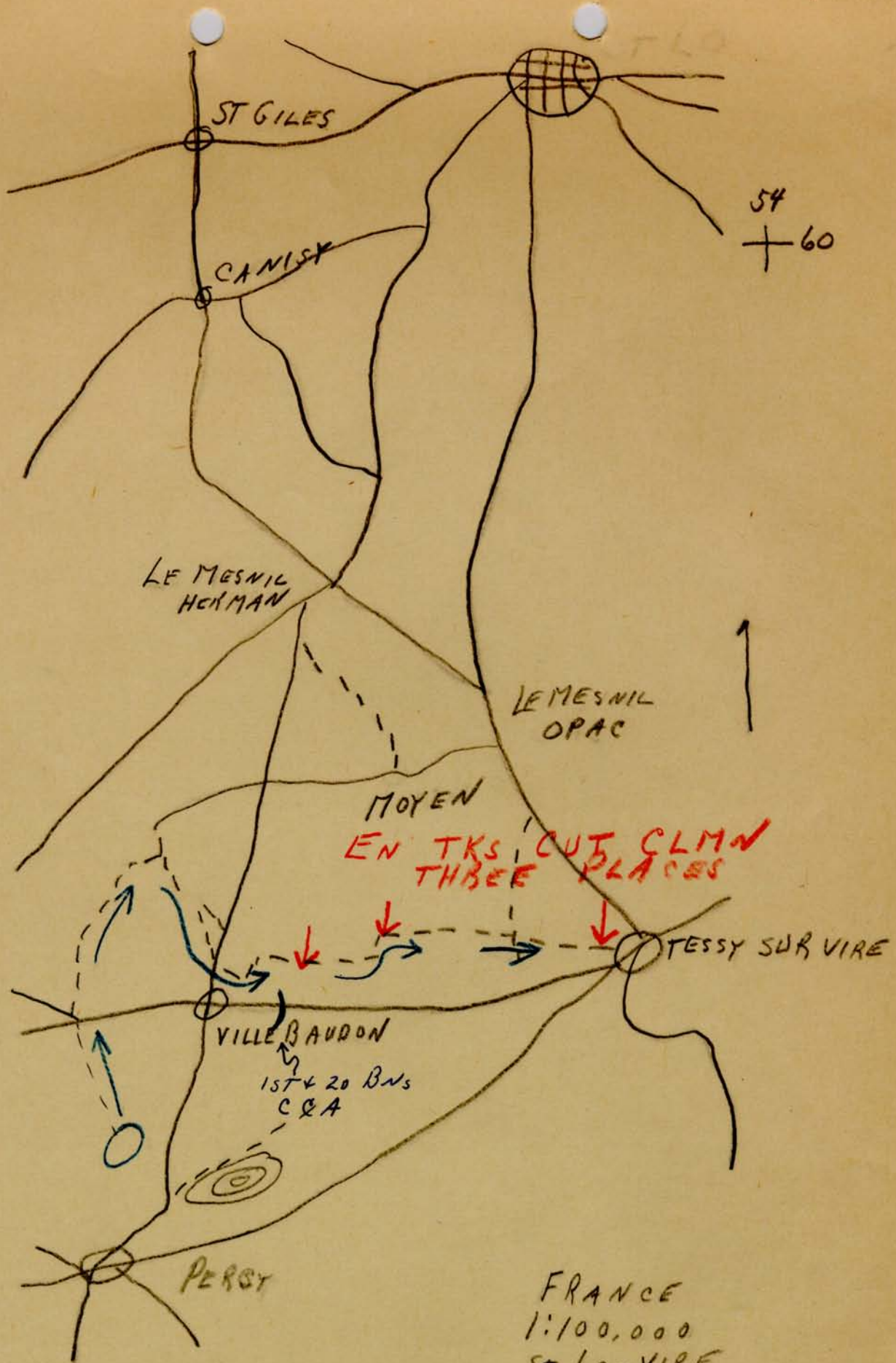


CHART III ATK 30 JULY 44



EN TRS CUT CLMN
THREE PLACES

FRANCE
1:100,000
ST LO-VIRE
SHEET 6-F

CHART IV

ATK 1 AUG 44

We crossed this main North and South road North of Villebaudon about 0600 with our Infantry loaded on tanks. We could not locate the Ground Infantry, but decided it was about time to meet the enemy when we got to the first woods. It was very foggy that morning and visibility was almost nil.

We couldn't find any enemy so we loaded our Infantry back up again and took off down the road.

We met a few enemy motorcycles and wheeled vehicles but shot them up on the run.

We planned to stop short of the hill one mile West of Tessy Sur Vire and launch a coordinated attack on the town.

I never could find out why, but the two lead tanks failed to stop and were knocked out in the edge of town.

The next thing I heard from the Battalion Commander that our column had been cut by enemy tanks two more placed behind. He was in the center section.

We finally knocked out one and drove off the other enemy tanks and got our tail tucked in. We lost four tanks back there.

We lined up our attack with one medium tank company on each side of the road.

We had telegraphed our punch again by those two tanks of ours that got away.

Our attack jumped off and on the South side of the road we lost them all but one.

On the left we got through better to the North West edge of town. From there we sent out road blocks consisting of Tanks, Tank Destroyers and Infantry to the exits of Tessy Sur Vire and our mission was accomplished.

At 1500 that day the remainder of the Combat Command started their attack toward Tessy Sur Vire and got there the next morning astride the main road.

The Ground Infantry came in that night and relieved us and we were pulled out the next morning.

C O N C L U S I O N S

In making a study of this operation it will be noted that Combat Command "A" got their battalions out of mutually supporting distance and there was no convergence of effort as far as the three battalions were concerned on the 28th, 29th and 30th. This wide separation allowed the enemy to harrass our rear. It was an expensive proposition. We lost 35 tanks and only knocked out 4 German tanks.

The actions subject to criticism are:

1. We made little or no reconnaissance at any time.
2. Poor coordination with Ground Infantry.
3. Poor command control when those two tanks got away.
4. No information about the enemy or our own troops. Enemy information consisted of a statement over the radio, "There is nothing out there".
5. Proding by higher commanders that did not know what the situation was, caused us to put on too much pressure.
6. Not enough troops to hold the ground we had taken.

L E S S O N S

The lessons that I learned from this operation are:

1. Dual command on the battle field does not work.
2. Time must be taken regardless of orders for proper reconnaissance and coordination and orientation. To explain what I mean, one day I told one of my Company Commanders to tell his lead platoon to cross the Line of Departure at the time ordered and then stop. Then I can report that we have crossed it and we will line this up the way we want it.
3. Continual butting up against stiff opposition is too costly. Give the enemy time to back up and the going is much less expensive.
4. Stalling is in order at times to allow units on your flank to catch up.
5. Commander must protect his own flanks and rear.