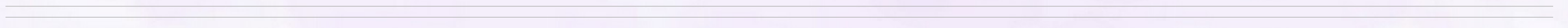




- **WHY THIS BATTLE.**
- THE PHANTOM COLUMN.
- FANTASIES ABOUT PANZERS.
- THE REFUGE OF JOHN (JOURNAL).
- THE MYSTERIOUS VIETNAMESE GUY.



There is no historical example of an ill-supplied army winning a war.

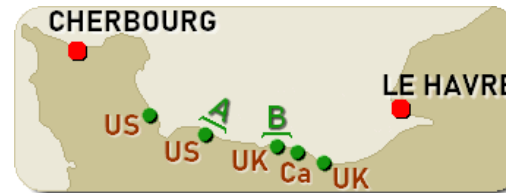
D. Eisenhower.

The Allies prepare to land in Normandy* although its deep-sea ports, the only ones adapted to the big cargo ships required by the logistics of the front (26,000 tons/day), have been judged impregnable by sea.

June 7, 1944

Two artificial ports, designed in secret in England, are towed in, then assembled and anchored offshore after the success of this landing.

The fierce fighting makes a rapid overland assault of the nearby deep-sea ports impossible, Cherbourg and Le Havre.



June 18-21

A raging sea dislocates one artificial port and deteriorates the other: the fate of the combatants is at the mercy of another big storm!

The deep-sea ports of Provence are part of the alternatives...

June 26

The garrison of Cherbourg yields. The port, clogged by scuttled ships, has been ransacked. Its access is mined. The U.S. Engineers, active day and night, will reopen it partly on July 16 and fully in November.



* ...and in Provence the same day, but the lack of barges and the delays in Italy will exclude that.



The 11th Panzerdivision has been based near Bordeaux since May 1944. Its heavy losses during the Russian campaign are slowly compensated. It hunts down the regional Resistance and commits several war crimes.

Mid-July

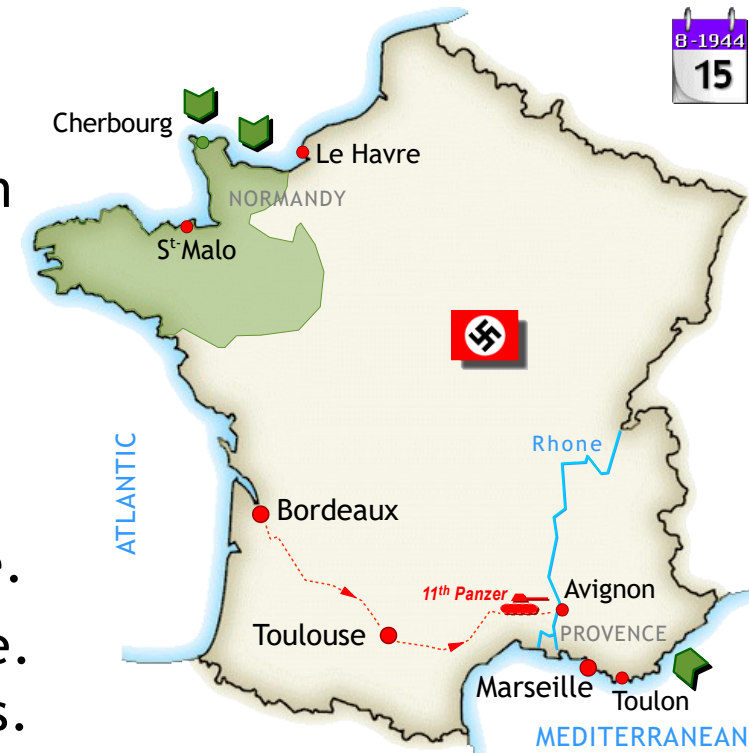
The German headquarters fears a landing in southern France, but via the Atlantic or the Mediterranean ? The division is relocated midway, by Toulouse. It promptly resumes its manhunts in this area.

August 15*

- The Allies have landed in Provence. The easy inland expansion amazes them after more than two months of fierce fighting to get out of Normandy.
- The 11th Panzerdivision is approaching Avignon...

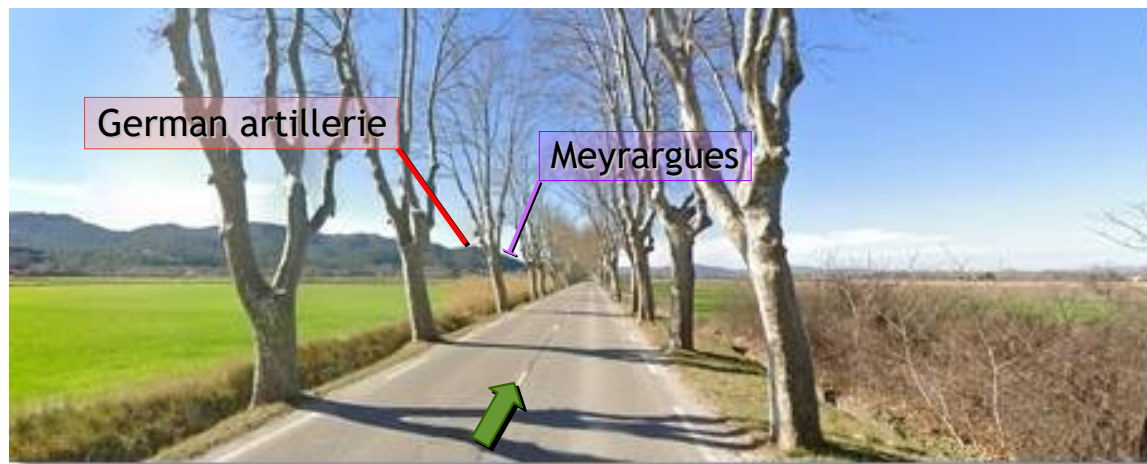
August 17

- Hitler reluctantly orders the Occupiers to leave the southern part of France.
 - 1) They will have to go up the Rhone valley where bitter battles are foreseeable. Allied planes and the Resistance are already hitting its bridges and railroads.
 - 2) The 11th Panzerdivision will have to slow down at best the landed forces.
 - 3) The garrisons of Marseille and of Toulon will have to raze the port facilities, then will fight to the death...
- The garrison of Saint-Malo surrenders. The Allied bombing has made the deep-sea port irreparable.



* It is the worst day of his life according to Hitler.





The shortest way from the landing beaches to the Rhone Valley crosses 2 miles of open plain between the villages of Peyrolles and of Meyrargues.

August 19

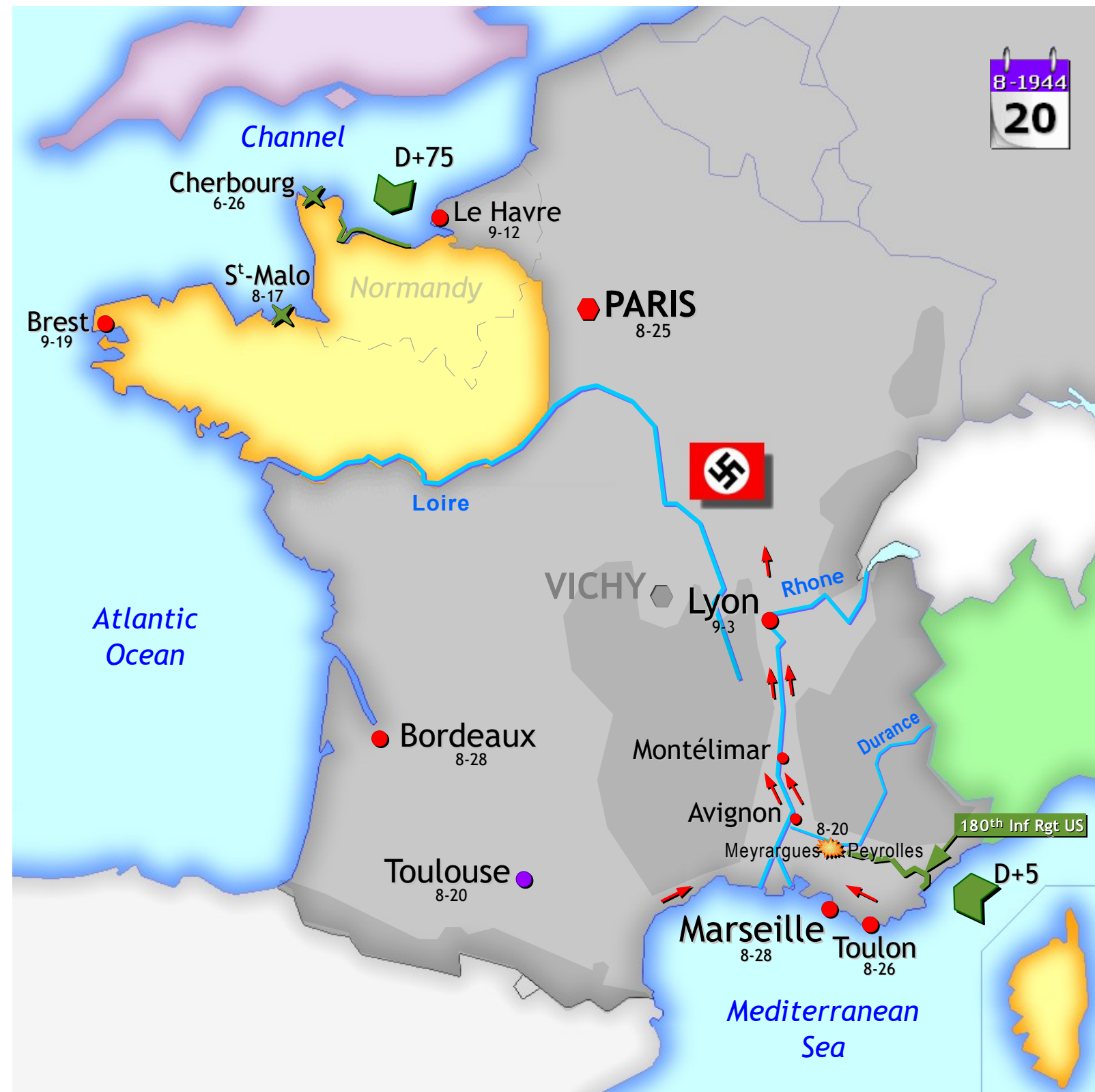
A detachment of the 11th Panzer Division moves into Meyrargues at night to ambush the Allies.

They wait for them hidden under lime trees to avoid aerial detection.

August 20

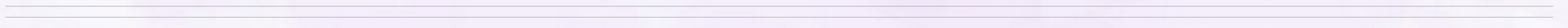
A shower of projectiles greets the 180th U.S. Infantry Regiment in the plain.

A battle of twenty three hours begins...





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I have no German reports. Those from the American artillery and tanks are of little help. The infantry report is problematic:

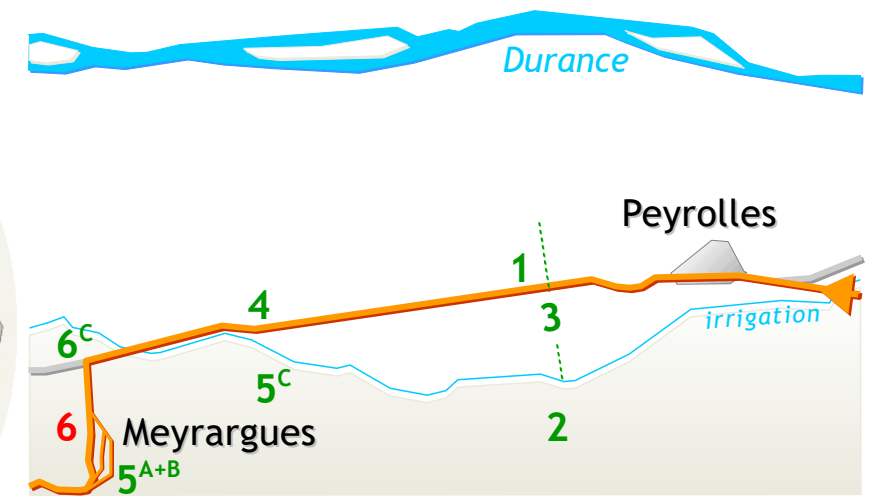
- 10:40 Peyrolles was cleared and the attack was continued to the west with the village of Meyrargues as the objective (*). One thousand yards **east of the town (1)**, advance elements encountered enemy anti-tank, artillery, tank, mortar, and small arms fire. Company C was unable to advance against this opposition. While they were being held up, Companies A and B moved across country to the high ground **north of the town (2)**.
- 14:21 The enemy launched a counterattack supported by tanks from Meyrargues. Our artillery, tanks, and TDs engaged the enemy and after a fierce engagement, the attack was repelled **(3)**.
- 18:58 The road into town was cleared **(4)**.
- 20:47 Companies A and B reached **the south edge** of town without resistance **(5^{A+B})**, while Company C was held up at the base of **the hill east** of Meyrargues **(5^C)**.
- 21:46 Enemy infantry and **two Mark VI tanks (6)** were between Company C **(6^C)** and Companies A and B **(5^{A+B})** in the town. Etc...

1 No. Based in Peyrolles, the officer is confused. Read "west of the town".

2 No. Read "south of the town".

5 OK. The officer no longer sees the front line. He gets exact directions.

6 No. They are Mark V, Panther (see the next chapter).



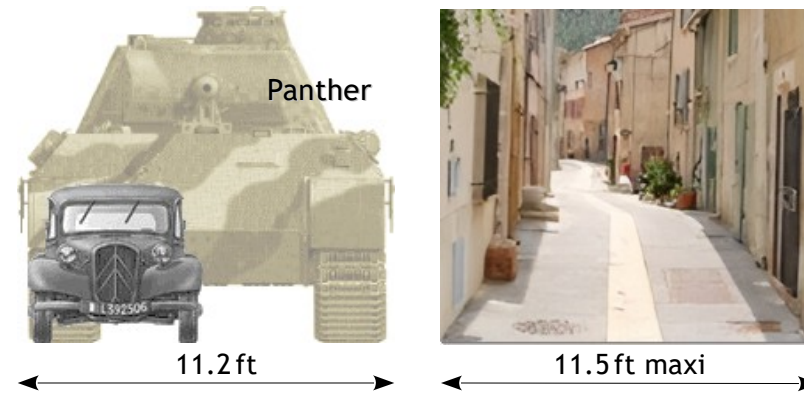
* Two alleys next to the road linking Marseille to the Alps ↗



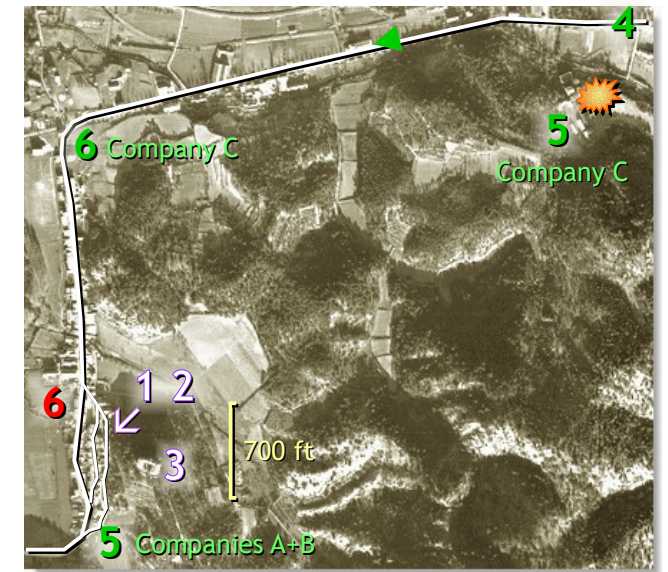
FIVE MYSTERIES

- 1 The two narrow alleys in Meyrargues limit the size of vehicles.

Why these big, unsuitable tanks (6)?



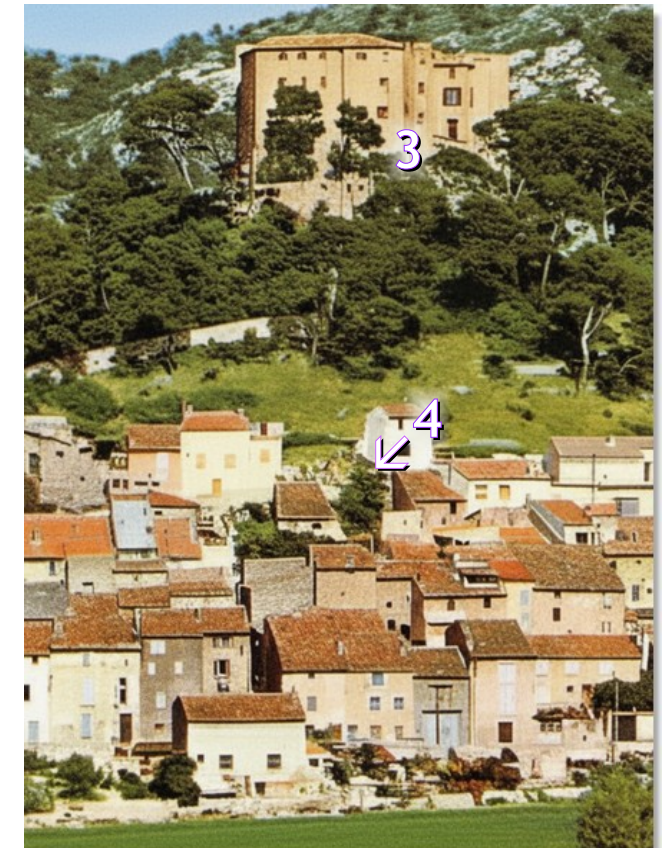
- 2 Item (6^c) implies that before 9:46 p.m., the enemy and Companies A and B were in the village. *Why does the report not mention combats (5^{A+B})?*



Villagers who remained on the spot revealed two intriguing facts to me:

- 3 an U.S. tank was spotting the enemy from the castle! *How did it get there?*
- 4 a few shells landed in a garden. Hills hid the village from view of the U.S. artillery posted at Peyrolles. The tank was parked too high up. *Who fired?*

- 5 Two U.S. mortar shell holders have been unearthed since that time at “Le Pas de l'Étroit”. *Why does the report not quote this spot?*



The omission of the routes followed after Peyrolles (5) suggests that all the infantry crossed the plain... A rereading of the report including points 3, 4, 5, resolves 1, 2, and reveals that this was not the case.

SCENARIO

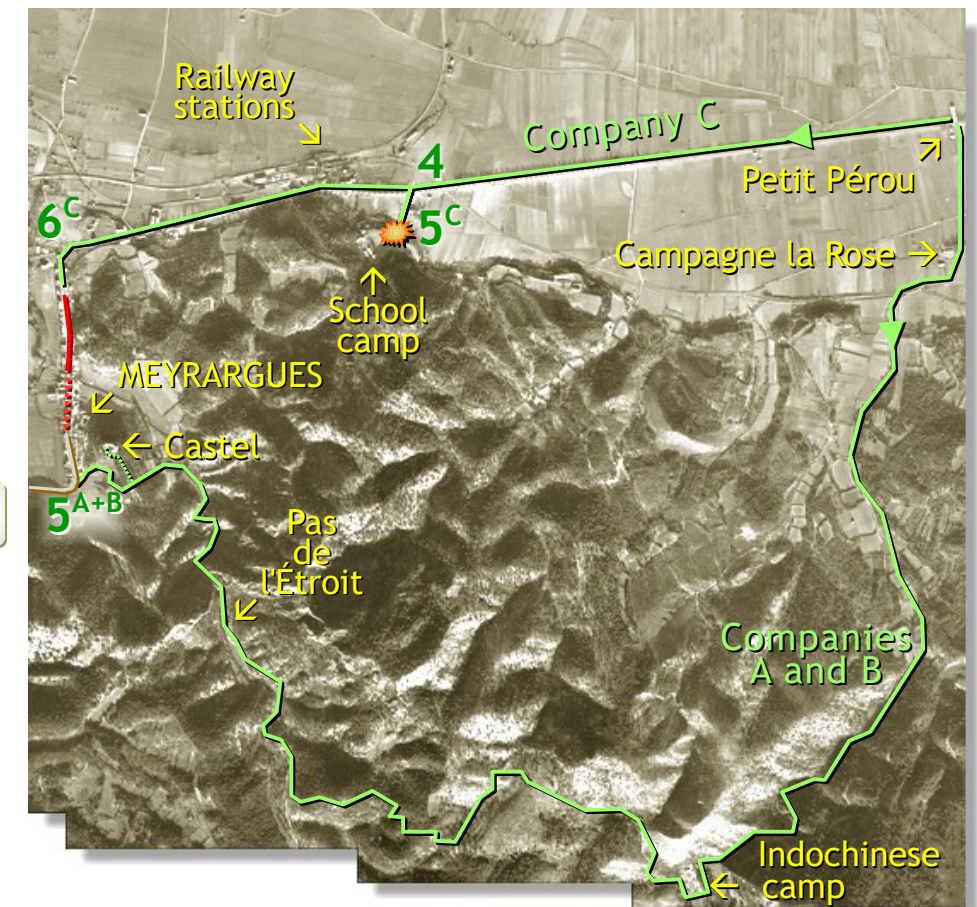
18h00 While the counter-attack of Company C monopolizes the enemy, Companies A and B, a light tank as well as jeeps carrying weapons and ammunition slip away over the tracks of the hills*.

4.1mi Break at “Le pas de l'Étroit”. Servants install their mortar. The tank joins the castle which overlooks Meyrargues 3:

- the crew sees targets including, on the road axis, two tanks resupplying (gas, shells) or in reserve 1.
- they direct the mortar fire by radio 4, 5.
- they recommend a discreet descent of companies A and B.

20h47 They reach the south edge of the village without resistance (5^{A+B}), and remain hidden: the Germans do not watch their backs 2!

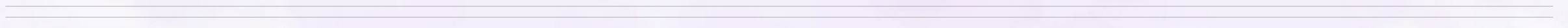
21h46 Company C gets to its northern edge (6^C), etc...



▲ ▼ * *A hasty dictation of the report could explain the absence of that ploy that changed everything...*



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The trailer of the trucks that brought the tanks on the eve to Meyrargues had a small tower in a corner.

This witness refers to the cabin from which the rear wheels of German tank transporters were steered for better maneuvering...

U.S. reports, but not those from armors, mention Mark VI tanks (Tiger 1), the most powerful at the time. *That is impossible.*

1) The major German armored forces in southern France rallied to Normandy in June 1944, excluding the 11th Panzerdivision. Its biggest tanks were Mark V (Panther).



General W. von Wietersheim, its commander, prisoner of the Americans, wrote from memory at their request in 1946 “The 11th Panzerdivision in Southern France (15 August - 14 September 1944)”. Excerpt:

The first contact with armored reconnaissance patrols of the enemy took place about the 20 august east of Aix and at Peyrolles, etc...

2) Another witness unwittingly depicted this division's badge to me (seen cautiously from afar):



A white circle adorned the sleeves of the black uniform of the crews.



3) The “Typhoon” pilots could destroy any type of armored vehicle with a rocket fire since 1944.
I have not found any photos of an abandoned Tiger tank, intact or not, in southern France...





TIGER 1: 0.48 mpg on-road*, range 80 mi.
57 tonnes, 1,354 specimens produced.



PANTHER: 0.84 mpg on-road*, range 150 mi.
46 tonnes, 5,508 specimens produced.

Nazi propaganda proclaimed the invincibility of the Tiger tank. A psychosis spread not only to civilians, but also to the military, who saw a Tiger tank in every big tank.

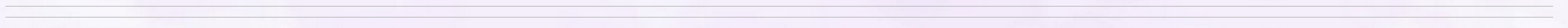
These fighters had been intoxicated...

* Half as much in combat.





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John W. ERWIN (1921-2003) was a foot soldier seriously wounded in the first seconds of this now forgotten battle.

His daughter Judy was in search of information in an Internet forum where are exchanged pictures and document related to his Infantry Division.

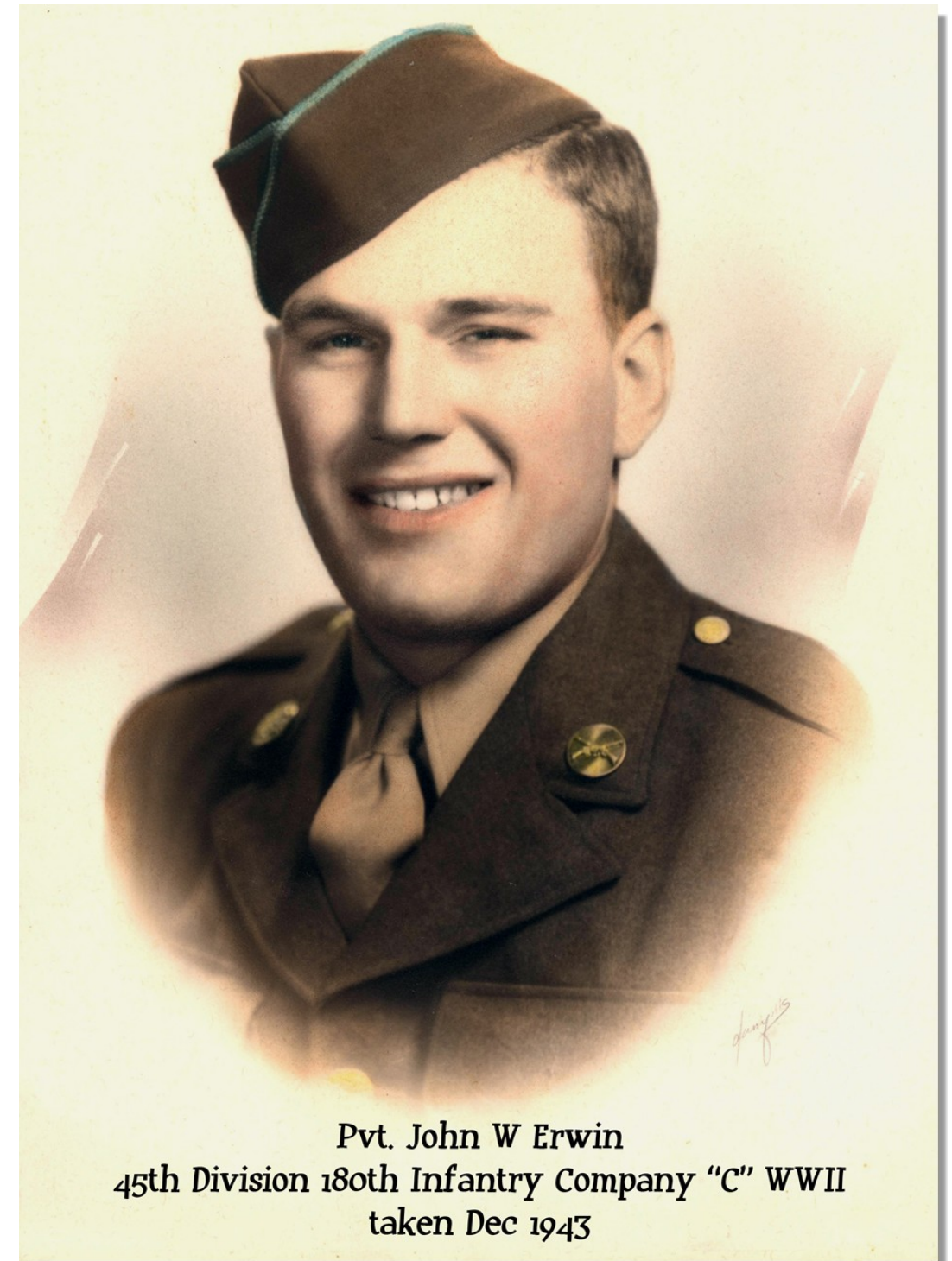
Eight months without answers prompted these investigations.

The archives of the nearby villages, of Aix-en-Provence, of the diocese and of the department (in Marseille) consulted, the numerous public libraries visited, as well as the joined associations did not have any data about this event.

Published from the 23rd onwards, the regional newspaper did not report it: the regiment was already far away in the Alps!

A webpage in French reports a simple tank duel. It is silent on those in German and in English (2013)...

This account is mainly based on declassified U.S. Army reports, on interviews with eyewitnesses, and on written testimonials from the time entrusted by families.



THE ACCOUNT OF JOHN

2013: Judy knew little about the fate of her father during this battle. Her older sister confided in her what he had once told her when she knew a Frenchman was going to investigate:

My Company was leading the way across the plain. The first German shelling killed all the men next to me. Mortar shrapnel wounded me in one shoulder and one leg.

I crawled for a long time across the plain...

I kicked a Vietnamese guy out of the only place under a bridge. I wasn't told about an Asian victim.

I spent the day lying in the water. I thought I would die.

John, hospitalized for one month in Italy, will join his unit in the Vosges. Injured again October 18th, 1944, sent back to Italy, disabled, he will return in Germany, then later to Lille France in a Quartermaster company as a non-combatant.

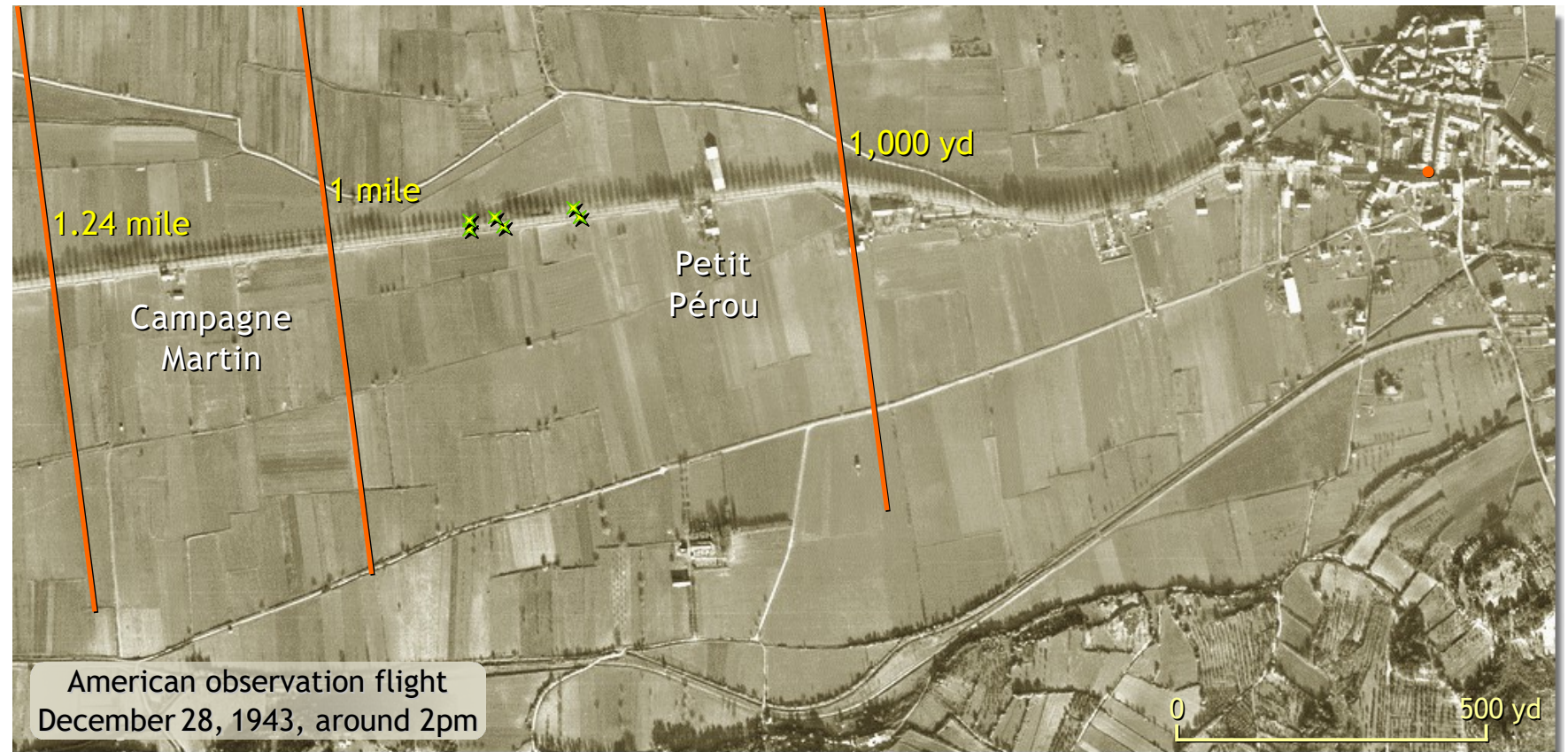


THE LOCATION OF THE FIRST GERMAN PROJECTILES

It would help situate Company C (of John) when he was injured.

I have got three estimates:

- 1.24 mi (2 km) according to the school principal's notes depicting the liberation of Peyrolles.
- 1 mile according to the report of the tanks Destroyer.
- 1,000 yards according to the report of the Infantry.



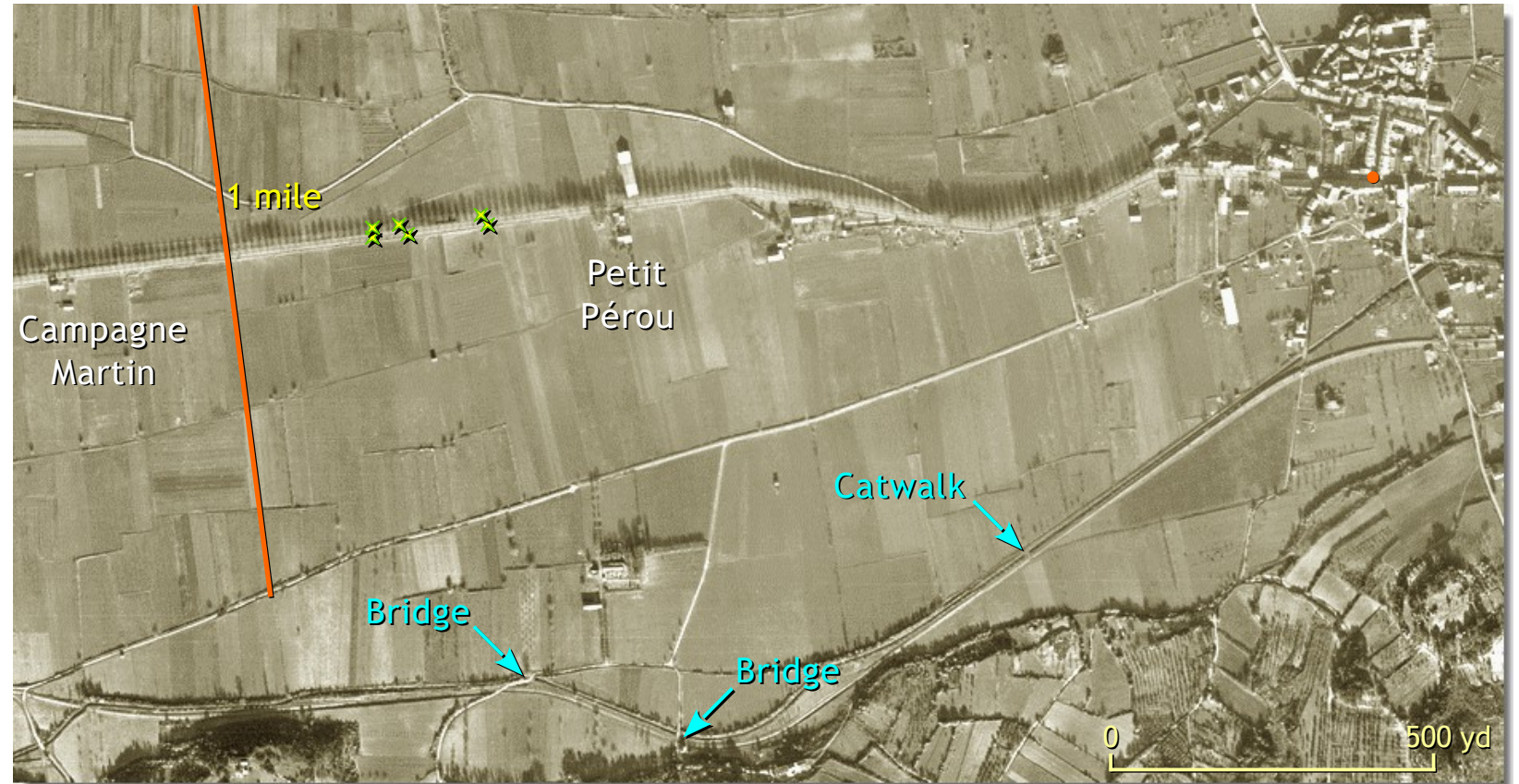
An American report lists the material losses of the first few seconds. A witness, aged 14 at the time, located them for me between “Campagne Martin” and “Petit Pérou”.

The owner of “Petit Pérou” told me that a burning tank set fire to a roadside tree in the west. It was not replaced. Others trees are unfortunately missing in this area (X).



THE LOCATION OF JOHN'S REFUGE

- North of the road, a small network of irrigation canals, appearing to be as it was in 1944, is operated.
I didn't see a bridge or where to hide.
- South of the road, a thick carpet of dead leaves precedes the crops.
No trace of an old irrigation system is visible. But to my mind, this side looked like the north in 1944.
Currently, large mobile chassis water the south of the plain in the summer.



According to an American report, Companies A and B reached the hills to the south after the first shells were fired. They had to use two bridges and a catwalk over the main irrigation canal.

John might have crawled to the bridge west as he saw his pals crossing it. But the site is unlike his telling. And injured, weakening, his drowning would have been likely (28" deep in situ in August 2014)...





North of the road



The bridge to the west



2017: the book “The Story of the 180th Infantry Regiment” by George A. Fisher (1947) allows the location of the first bombed line. It is written:

Company C, leading the advance, was unable to gain against the opposition. Because of the intense German fire, it was ordered to withdraw 200 yards behind some houses and there set up defensive positions.

Only one area of the plain matched this text.

- North of the road:
 - “la Marinière” (house + barn).
 - a long shed.
- South of the road:
 - “Petit Pérou” (house + barn + shed).
 - “Campagne la Rose” (house + dovecote + shed).
 - a house next to a railway line.



Two trees are missing at 200 yd, including likely the one burnt by the tank. *Company C is located.*



2020: I have looked for a forgotten clue in my exchanges with Judy. And indeed, a late e-Mail stated that John had said:



The ground shook as the Panzers rolled down the road.

46 tons for the biggest that day...

I returned. The upkeep of the sides of this road was ending : mowing the grass, collecting the litter thrown from the vehicles and of the dead leaves whose accumulation on the south side masked a ditch.

I followed it with a GPS to the west of “le Petit Pérou”.

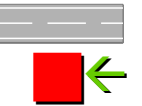
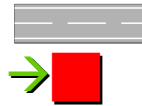
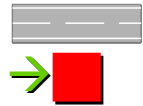
Two rusty guillotine doors ■ 126 yd, ■ 177 yd, and remains scattered in the grass effectively revealed past irrigation.

Seven culverts spanned the continuation of this ditch:

- four are too tight for one man ■ 58 yd, ■ 318 yd, ■ 453 yd, ■ 527 yd.
- three could shelter one person ■ 540 yd, ■ 552 yd, and ■ 279 yd.

John's refuge is located 76 years later.







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The book “Immigrés de force, les travailleurs indochinois en France* (1939-1952)” depicts the lives of 20,000 Vietnamese sent to France during the “phony war”, then shamefully exploited.

They were young men, essentially rural, and indifferent to the European conflict. They wanted nothing more than to return home and drive out the colonizers.

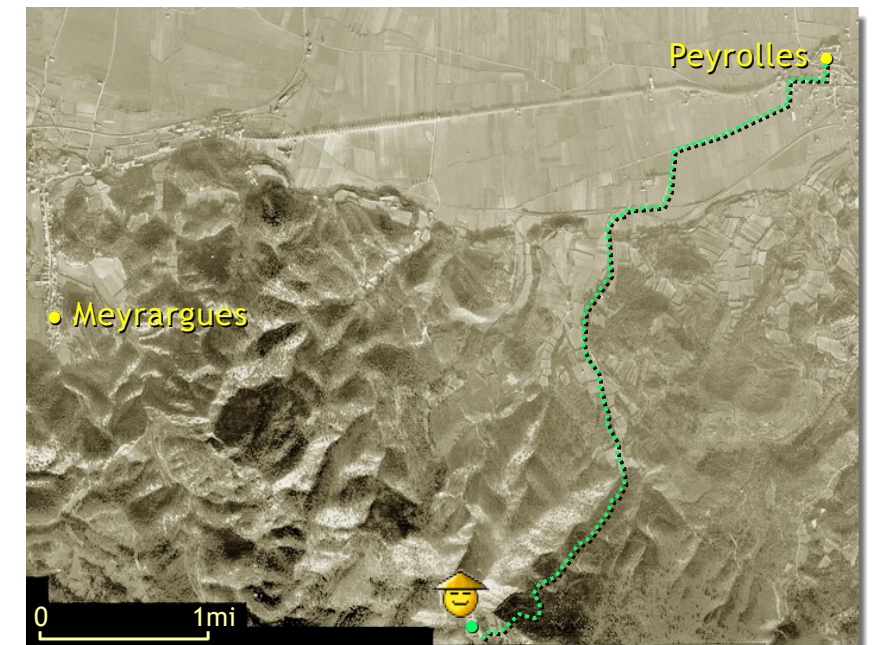
Those who spoke even basic French were promoted to interpreters. Vietminh partisans and Trotskyists were rivals.

The hills south of the plain housed one of their camps.

The din to free Peyrolles must have been heard in it:

- the infantry report cites a skirmish at the eastern edge of the village, then the progress under sporadic heavy and light artillery fire.
- the notes by the school principal add : crossfire with German shooters posted behind low walls, portal pillars, and at the windows, as well as a Sherman tank firing with its gun.

Then, the enemies fled and calm was restored...



* Pierre Daum: Forceful immigrants, the Indochinese workers in France.

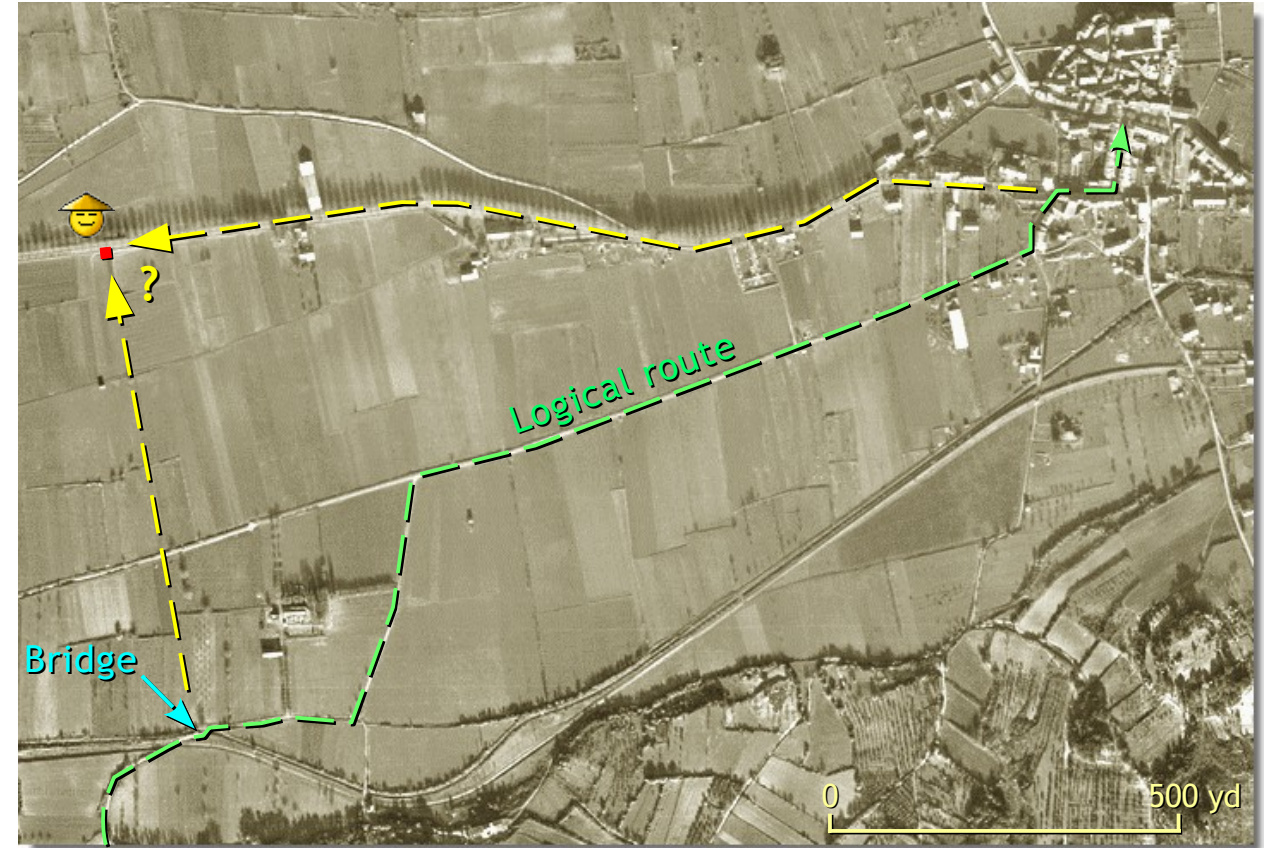


Wary of the 3 miles of plain that had to be crossed in the open, the Americans moved forward deployed...

On the eve, most of the people had joined the hills to the south. The plain stayed deserted, except for:

- a farmer (la Campagne Martin)!
Rumors of looting prompted him to return home. The shell that will ravage his farm will spare him.
- a Vietnamese guy !
If he was near the culvert when the shelling began:
 - either he had left Peyrolles with Company C.
 - or he had cut from the bridge to the road with the deployed U.S. force approaching on his right.

Both of these alternatives are unrealistic!



SCENARIO

The camp interpreter is sent to get news once Peyrolles calms down. Upon reaching the bridge, he inexplicably cuts toward the road. *In search of food in the abandoned farms?*

When he is nearby, he suddenly sees hundreds of soldiers and dozens of tanks heading towards him: the Americans leave Peyrolles... He hides in panic under the culvert.

So, before the battle!





Hunger drove the Vietnamese to go and dig up potatoes at night in the fields and devour them raw on the spot.

Local testimony.

In 1944, few Westerners knew about the existence of the French colonies in the Far East...

How did John become convinced that he had expelled a Vietnamese?

SCENARIO

1944: John thinks he has chased away a Chinese guy.

1963: the U.S. intervention begins in Vietnam. News and reports are on TV.

John thus learned:

- that this country had been a French colony.
- that rural people and almost all urban dwellers wore conical hats.

...like the Asian he had once expelled.

In France (Camargue) around 1942.



In Vietnam (Dong Phong) in 1972.



A HISTORY OF COLONIAL DENIAL

In 1939, the M.O.I.* conscripted 20,000 Vietnamese young men. Because of their ancestral expertise in rice cultivation, 500 of them were sent to the Camargue region, where the poor quality of the local grain was fit only for livestock and soil desalination.

Despite living in dire conditions, they introduced manual transplanting and rigorous selection methods. The industry was radically transformed: this rice became a vital resource for feeding occupied France.



In 2004, a local exhibition ignored the role of the Vietnamese in favor of a purely homegrown narrative. This sparked public protests involving the children of these workers (from mixed-race unions) and the last remaining survivors. They demanded a revision of the presented facts.

Street interviews filmed at the time by Pierre Daum illustrate the persistence of local amnesia: almost all passersby categorically denied the contribution of the "Chinese". The report ends with three elderly Camargue locals sitting on a low wall. When shown a 1942 photograph of a rice warehouse, they claim it was taken "in China". A wide shot then reveals that the building is actually located right next to them.

The broadcast of this report triggered intense debates over colonial memory. This media and historical pressure eventually forced the official recognition of the "Linh Thô" (conscripted workers), who are now integrated into the historical heritage of the Camargue.

* Indigenous Labor Service.





END

Claude Mesnil

Aix-en-Provence

2013 - 2020

