



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



"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 fury of the fighting blocks a quick capture of the nearby deep-sea ports, Cherbourg and Le Havre, by land.

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

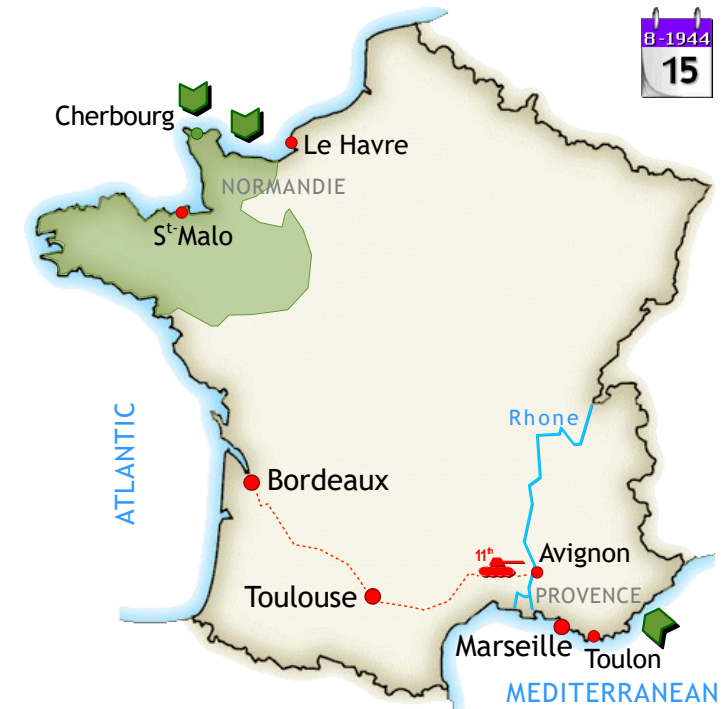
The German headquarters fears a landing in southern France, but via the Atlantic or the Mediterranean ? The 11th Panzerdivision is transferred midway, to Toulouse. It promptly resumes its manhunts in this area.

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 Meyrargue.

August 19

Fearing an aerial sighting, a detachment of the 11th Panzerdivision arrives at Meyrargues before dawn and remains hidden under trees.

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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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 informations in an Internet forum where are exchanged pictures and documents related to his Infantry Division.

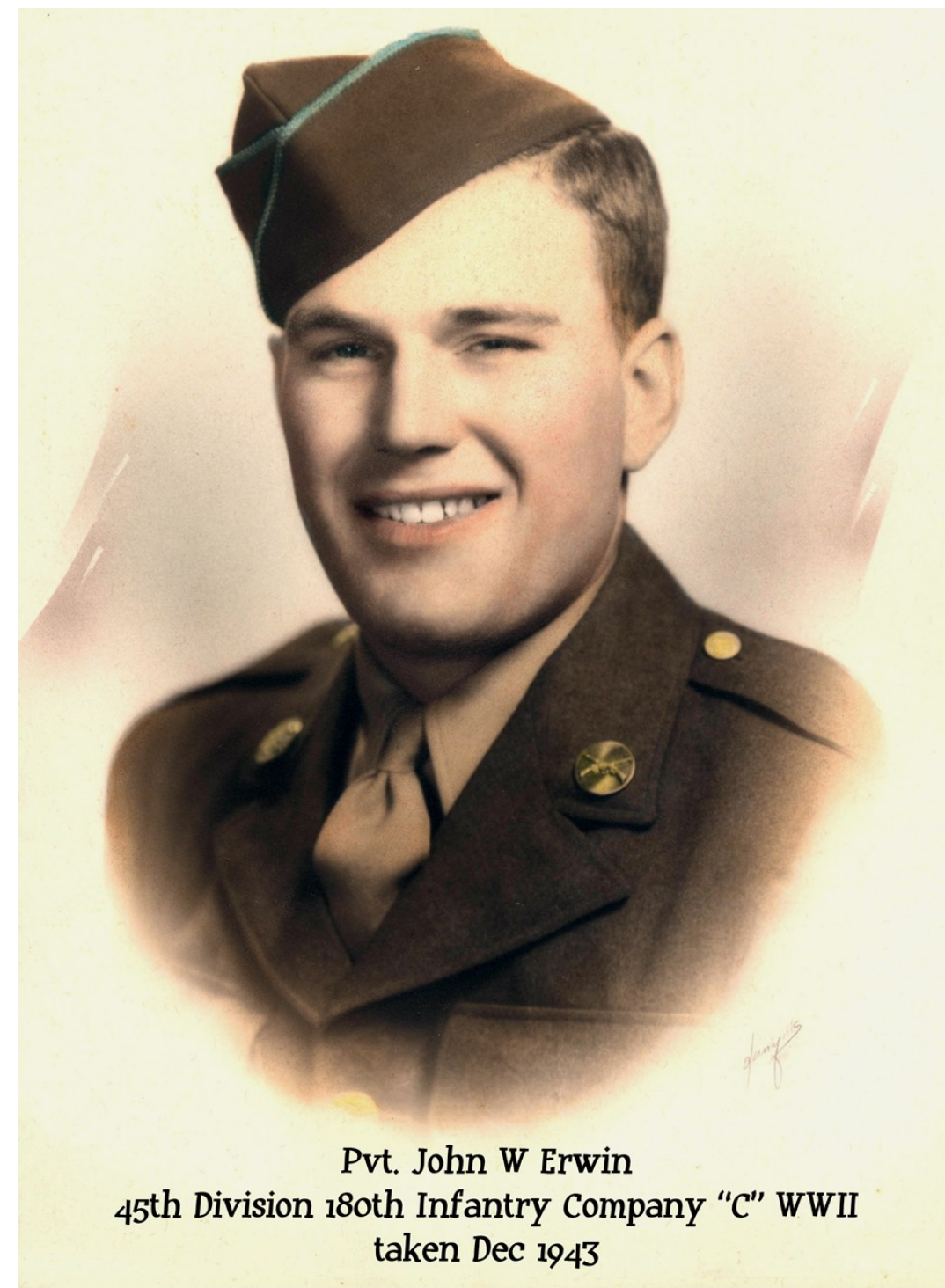
Eight months without answers prompted these investigations.

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.

The first regional newspaper, appeared six days later, did not mention it: its fighters were already 160 miles further north!

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 out a Vietnamese guy from the only place under a bridge.*

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

* I have not heard of an Asian being killed.

John, hospitalized for one month in Italy, will join his unit in the Vosges. Injured again, sent back to Italy, disabled, he will return in Germany as a non-combatant.

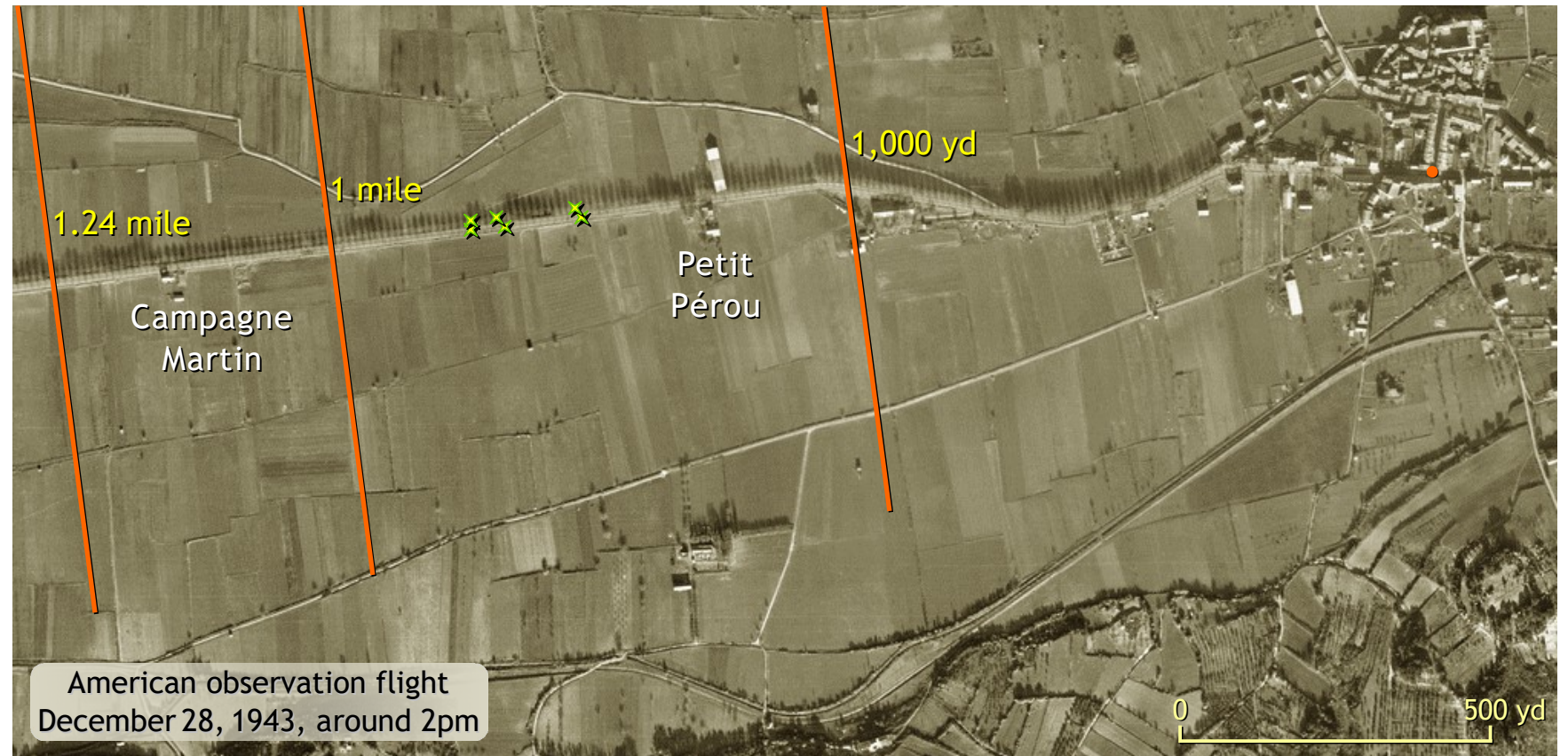


THE LOCATION OF THE FIRST GERMAN PROJECTILES

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.



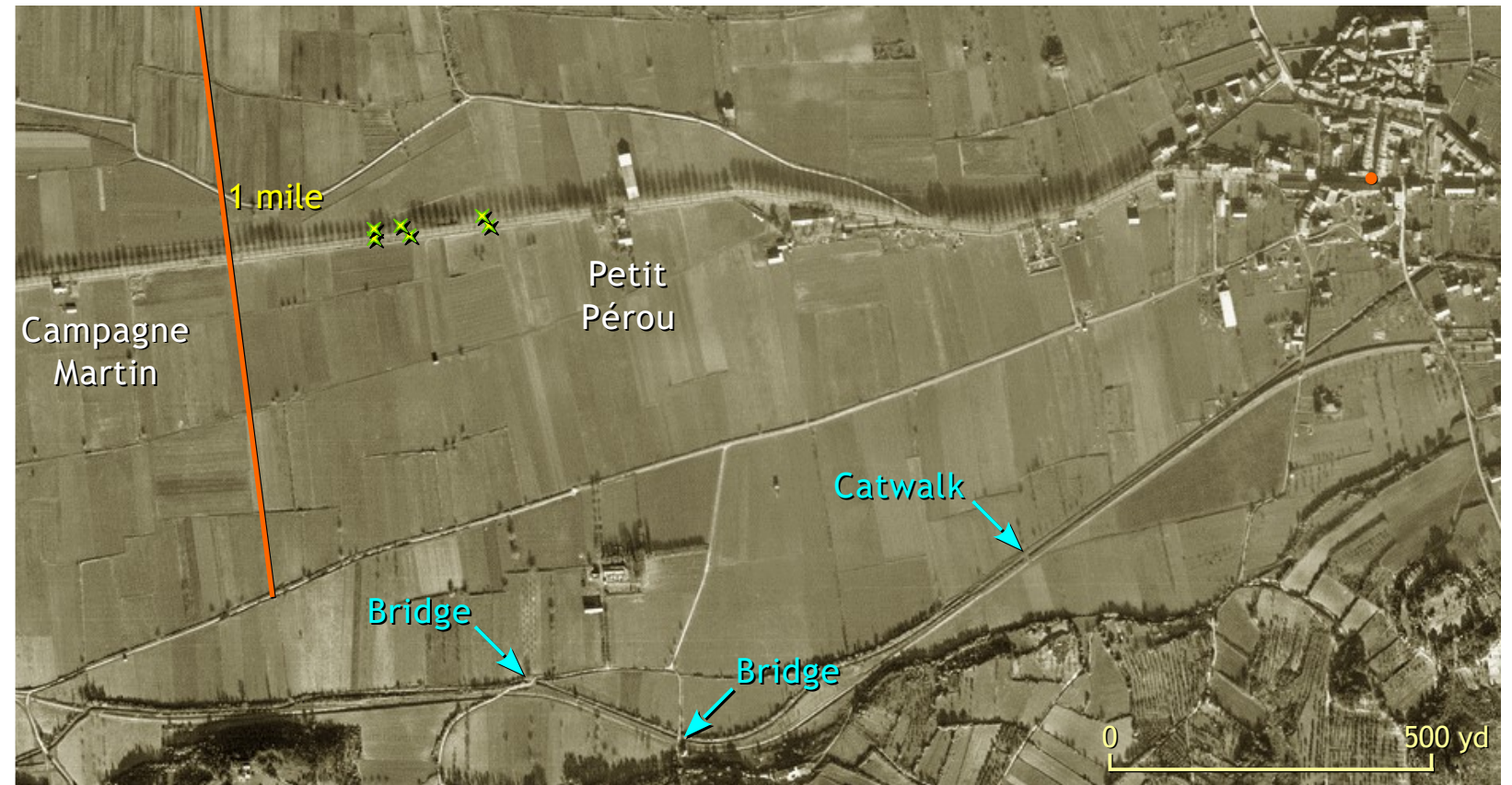
An American report lists the material losses of the first few seconds. A witness, aged 14 at the time, located them for me between “Campagne Martin” and “Petit Pérou”.

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



THE LOCATION OF JOHN'S HIDEOUT

- North of the road, a small network of irrigation canals, appearing to be as it was in 1944, is operated.
I don'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.
Now, 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

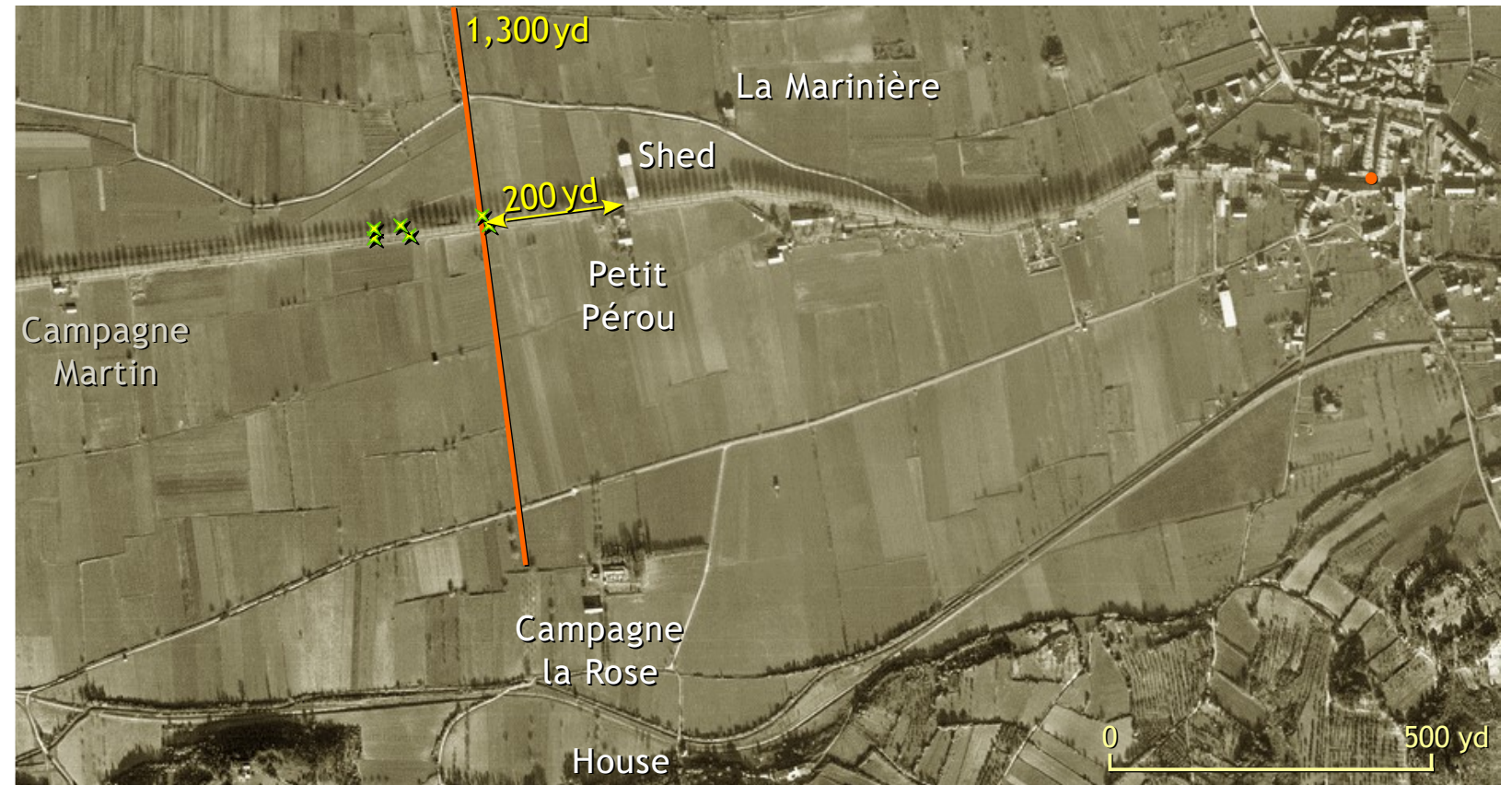


2017: the book “The Story of the 180th Infantry Regiment” by George A. Fisher (1947) allows the location of the first bombed line. It is written:

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. It consisted of :

- 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 when enemy tanks moved along 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 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 hiding place is located 76 years later.







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

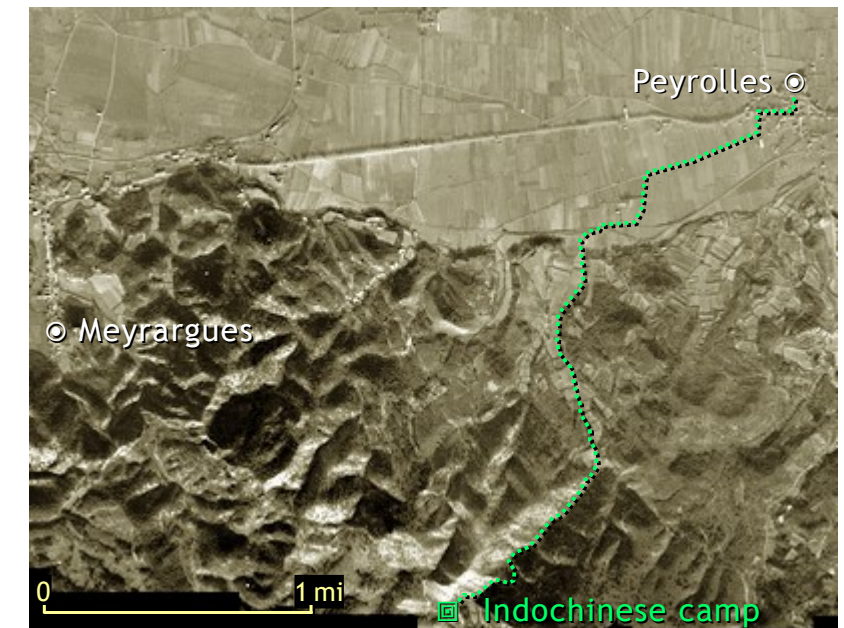
These young men, recruited from the rural areas, were indifferent to the European conflict. They only aspired to return to their country to drive out its colonizers. Those who spoke even little French were promoted to interpreters. Trotskyists and supporters of Ho Chi Minh were rivals.

The fighters were unaware of the existence of one of their camps in the hills south of the plain.

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 Germans fled and calm was restored...



* Forceful immigrants, the Indochinese workers in France.

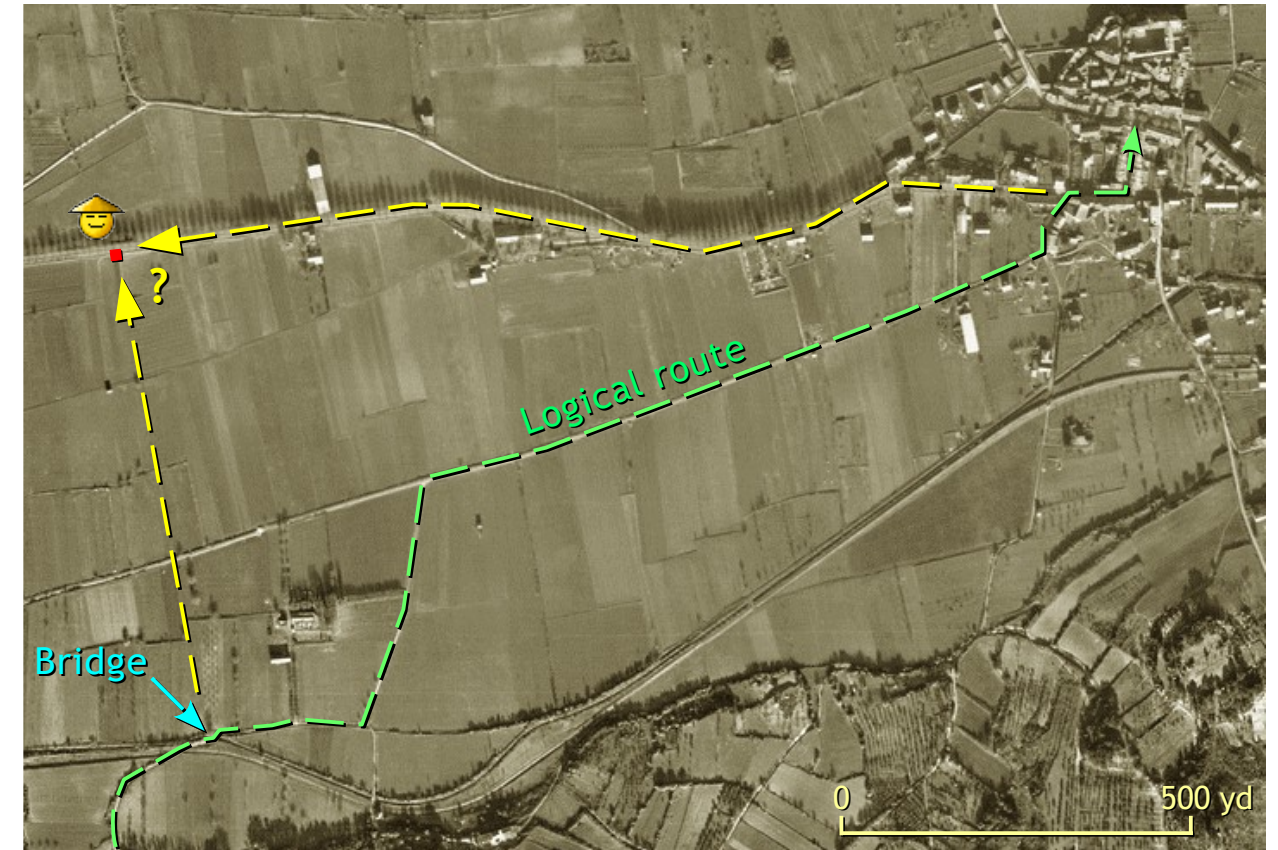


According to reports, these Americans had followed roads from the beaches. The vast plain, which they had to cross in the open, must have made them wary... They moved forward deployed for the first time.

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, the only one able to speak to the French, is sent to get news once calm is restored in Peyrolles. Arrived at the bridge, he cuts towards the road for an unknown reason.

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, and the following years too.

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.





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The U.S. infantry and artillery reports (but not those of armor vehicles...) for this battle reveal the presence of Mark VI tanks (Tiger 1), the most powerful ones existing by then. This is very surprising:

- according to historians, the major German armored formations in the south of France joined Normandy in June 1944, except for 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 armoured reconnaissance patrols were in contact with the enemy east of Aix and in Peyrolles around August 20, etc...* Therefore Panther tanks.

- a young boy from Meyrargues had spotted about fifteen tanks hidden under trees, close to the cemetery: “Some of them were very big. The sleeves of the black uniforms of the crews bore a white circle (the logo of this division seen from afar)”. Therefore Panther tanks.
- since 1944, the “Typhoon” pilots could destroy any type of tank with rockets fire. There is no photo of a Tiger tank hit or abandoned in southern France to my knowledge...



* Not a patrol, but a detachment. Semi-trailers had been seen early the day before in Meyrargues bringing tanks, and 7 guns were later found. Mistake in the translation of the German text?





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 were among the intoxicated despite the different appearance of the two models...

* Half as much in combat.





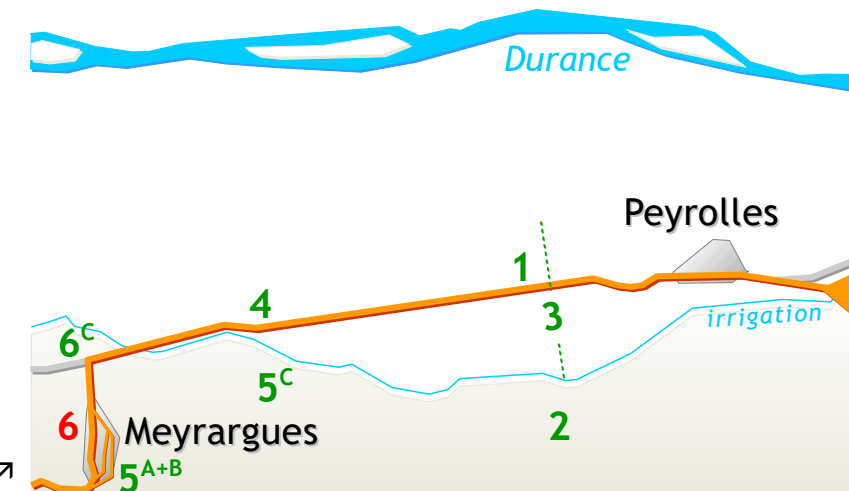
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I have no German reports. Those of the American artillery and tanks are of little help. The only useful official document is that of the infantry. Very brief, it contains ambiguities and errors. Excerpt:

- 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 Wrong! The officer, based in Peyrolles, inverts the orientation of what he sees: it should read "**west of the town (1)**", then "**south of the town (2)**".
- 5 The officer no longer sees the front line: he now gets exact orientations.
- 6 Wrong! They are Mark V (Panther).

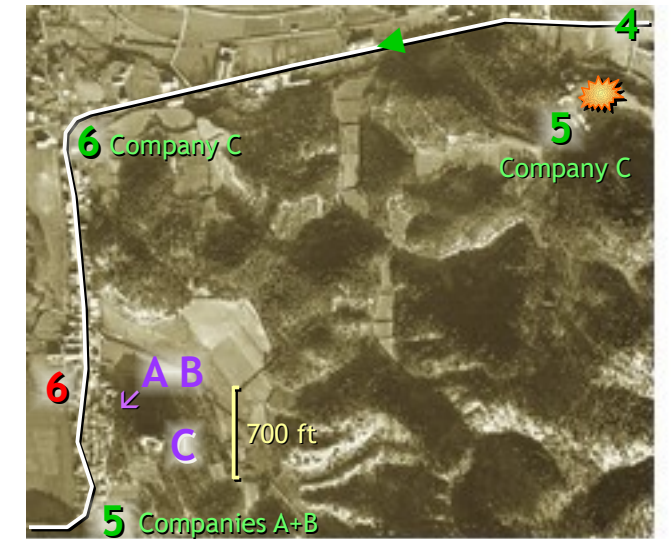


* Two alleys next to the road linking Marseille to the Alps ↗



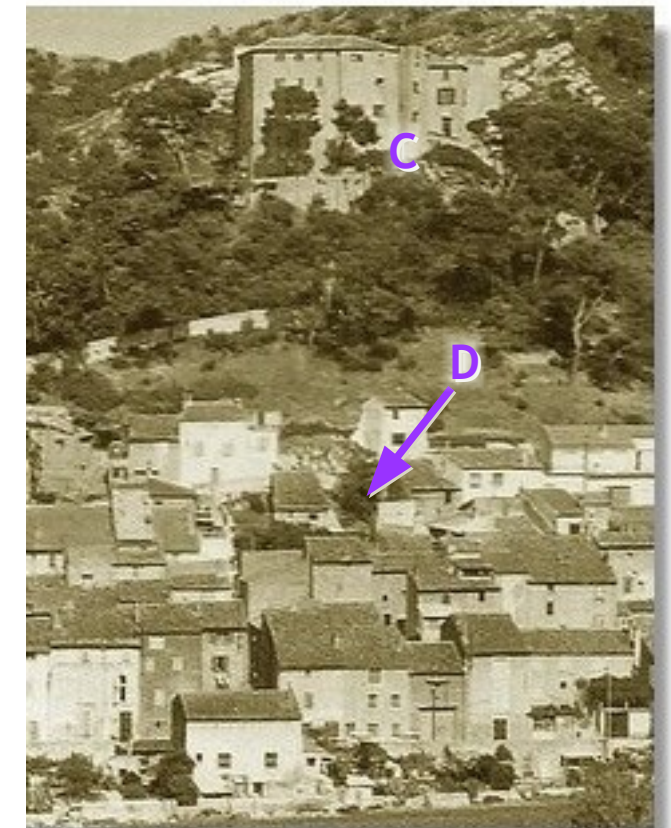
FIVE MYSTERIES

- A) Item (6^c) implies that before 21:46, the Germans and Companies A and B were already in Meyrargues where however no confrontation is noted (5)!
- B) Why these big tanks (6)? The narrowness of the alleys forbids them to enter the village without destroying it.



Lone civilians in Meyrargues revealed to me two intriguing facts. That evening:

- C) An U.S. tank was next to the castle.
- D) A few shells hit a garden*.



* Hills hid the village to the U.S. artillery that was posted near Peyrolles.

SCENARIO (in accordance with the infantry report and the local testimonies).

The omission of the routes followed after Peyrolles (4) (5) may suggest, wrongly, that all the U.S. infantry has crossed the plain.

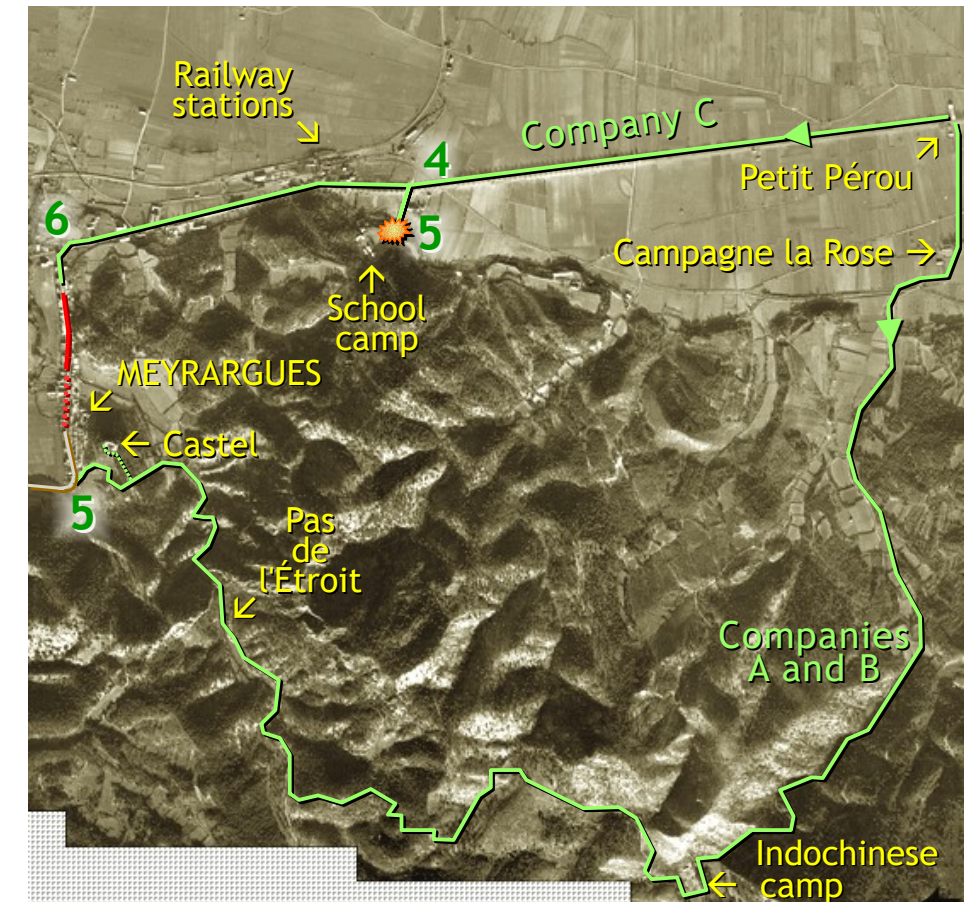
18h00 While the counter-attack of Company C monopolizes the enemy, Companies A and B, a light tank and jeeps carrying weapons and ammunition slip away over the tracks of the hills*.

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

- the crew sees targets including, on the road axis, two tanks resupplying (gas, shells) or in reserve (B).
- they direct the mortar fire by radio (D), (E).
- they give the okay to a discreet descent of the Companies.

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

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



* Did a too fast dictation make skip in the report this departure?



END

Claude Mesnil

Aix-en-Provence

2013 - 2020

