

Due to the fact that we did not know who were and who were not collaborators, we tried to stay away from houses as much as possible. It was broad daylight and we were skirting one farm house when a frenchman popped out at us from around some outbuildings. We had not seen him and he had not seen us until we were almost on top of one another. We pointed our guns at him and in his fright he threw a "tray" of cabbage leaves or something that looked like cabbage leaves, into the air. We soon learned he was on his way to feed his rabbits. He was a World War I veteran and was very happy to see us after the initial fright.

Whenever we met frenchman or women (and they saw us) we would have Mentone, who could speak Italian, or said he could, talk with them. However most of the times he spoke the french would appear peeved. After a few of these attempts Charpentier volunteered to talk with them. I finally discovered he spoke "Louisiana Bayou" french. From that time forward he became my right arm on almost everything we did behind the lines.

There was one spot on our way where we had to cross a road right next to a house. We purposely let the occupants know we were there so they might be afraid to report us. They served us a rural drink (their equivalent of drinking water), la Ced (sp), a sour apple cider. After they talked with us for awhile they discovered we were Americans, they served us cognac. They had thought we were British soldiers. Many French felt the British had let them down when they escaped at Dunkirk.

We reached the marsh and were preparing to cross it, as the priest had instructed me, when a wiry frenchman about 5'4" stepped out of the underbrush and identified himself. We figured the priest must have been with or in communication with the underground. Our guides name was Jacques Capiten. He had been imprisoned by the Germans and showed us scar marks on his back where the Germans had beat him in hopes of extracting information. He led us to his farm and found us a good place to hide at the south end of the marsh. I use the word marsh to signify wet ground. Actually the "marsh" we were hiding near was a large flooded field. We had a hedgerow at our back and bull rushes (part of the flooded area was marshland) leading out into the water. North of our hiding place was open water for about a mile. That area was laced with irrigation ditches, some were one to two feet across and a foot or two deep, others might be twenty feet across and over our heads.

While in this situation we thought we should do something for the war effort. We hid our men in Capiten's barn and Charpentier, Capiten and I planned an early morning raid on the village of Sainteny east of us. We understood German munitions were stored in a house on one edge of town. Our plan was to have certain of our men cut the telephone wires and any other wires leading in and out of town. A machine gun was to be placed at a strategic place and we would toss a british Hawkins mine to which we had taped a

grenade through the window of the house. We were all in place when all of a sudden German troops were moving through the town in trucks going north. They may have been part of Major von der Heydte's troops. We cancelled our operation. It was probably fortunate that we did as our position was untenable if we had been discovered.

Every morning and every evening ten or twelve members of Capiten's underground compatriots would meet with us. They would shake hands with each of us on arrival and also when they departed. Charpentier dressed in civilian clothes and went with Capiten to learn as much as he could about German gun positions and any other military information he could come upon. Capiten cautioned him not to talk as his dialect was entirely different from that of Norman French. They came upon one gun position manned by Austrians. Capiten asked a Lt what they were going to do when the Americans came. The Austrian officer stated, "What could they do but run." Charpentier and I and one or two others would patrol to make sure no one was sneaking up on us and for other purposes.

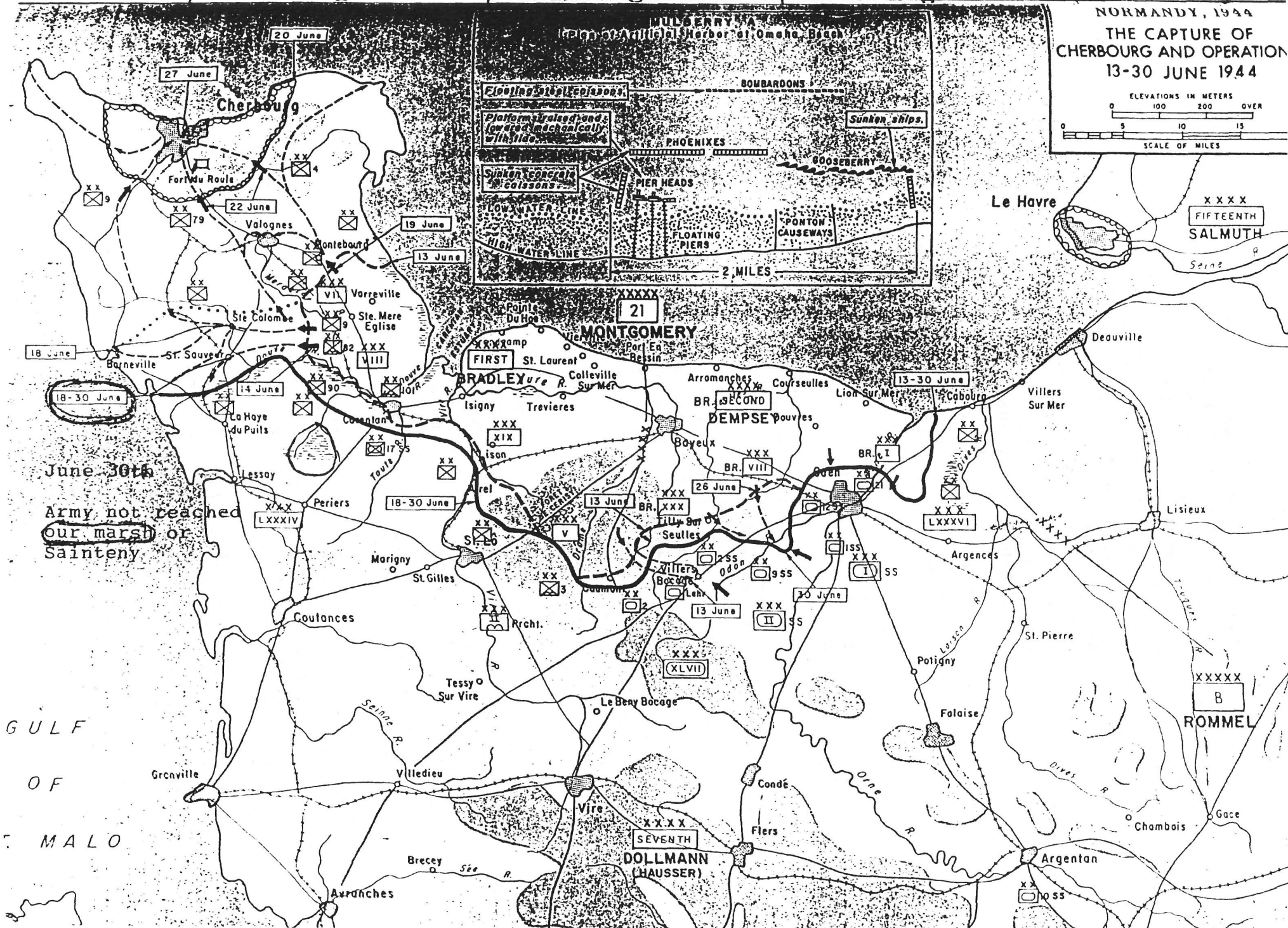
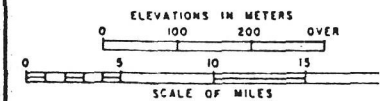
One day we came upon an area where there had been a small fire and we noted olive drab gum wrappers so we knew they were either Paratroopers or enemy who had found some of our equipment bundles. We followed the trail and came upon about 19 troopers from our third battalion. We chewed them out for leaving a trail. We had been very scrupulous in that regard. We brought them back to our hide-a-way. One of their sergeants had made us wish we had never seen them. He was cleaning his "grease gun", an automatic weapon that was made rather cheaply or at least looked cheap compared to a Thompson sub machine gun. I believe we also called them machine pistols. At any rate he was pushing a short ramrod down the barrel and still had an ammo clip in the gun and his finger on the trigger when two shots rang out, just missing me. I was very angry with him for almost getting me killed but especially because his random shots could have raised the curiosity of the enemy.

In one of our patrols we came upon Lt Seale and his three men, one of whom was Oliver Burgess, our Company Supply Sgt, a good friend of mine then and still a very good friend. With these four we now totaled 33 men.

The French risked their lives to bring us food. I had all the milk I wanted to drink and plenty of potatoes, stew, and also potato pancakes. We ate very well most of the time we were back there.

*x at a paratroop reunion (501st) Sgt Nyland's daughter (Anchorage) attended. I learned that we had brought him & his men in with us. (We didn't rescue them - It was natural to link up when isolated)*

NORMANDY, 1944  
THE CAPTURE OF  
CHERBOURG AND OPERATION  
13-30 JUNE 1944



Our sole means of communication with the outside world was a "walkie talkie" about 14"x3"x3". We were out of range of any friendly troops and had no desire to communicate with the enemy so we used the radio sparingly to listen to the BBC news broadcast at night. We did not try to go north to join our units as we had this body of open water to cross, then a dry area, and then the Douve River. We figured if we got an especially dark night we could safely cross the open water. What we worried about was swimming the Douve River and coming up on the bank to be fired on by either the enemy or our own troops. We were waiting for word that our forces had captured Carentan so we would not have to swim the Douve. We were told by the underground that an SS unit would be moving into our area that night. We listened to the BBC and were heartened to hear that Carentan had been captured. Now all we had to do was wait for darkness.

While we were waiting the SS unit moved in and some of them were on the other side of the hedgerow. Charpentier and I took the first guard duty at a break in the hedgerow where some one might move through into our hide out. We could hear some of the Germans talking on the other side of the hedgerow and not too far from where we were. We had decided that if someone came into our position they would not be expecting to be attacked. Charpentier stood on one side of the opening and I on the other with knives poised. We were to be relieved by either "Bugs" Baughner or Tony Gazia. At any rate it was at this precarious time they started arguing (in English of course) about whose turn it was to go on guard. I slipped over to them as quietly as possible to tell them to shut up as not only could I hear them but also the Krauts". We survived that tense moment and were ready to start out across the water even though it was not as dark as we would have liked. We had bidden Capiten an appreciative goodbye before the Germans had arrived. He could not move out of his house after that. January 18, 1990 Jacques Capiten wrote me "For 45 years we have not met or written, I sincerely regret it. Your courage when confronting during the war, help us to definitely choose freedom and progress...you were good friends and courageous men." from Village Hotel, Maurice, Hebecrevon, 50180 Agneaux, France his place of retirement. (#8 "Normandy Activity Map")

Capiten had shown us earlier where a farm track (not quite a road) had led through the "marsh" before the Germans had flooded the area. The road was under about a foot of water. He had also warned us about all the little and not so little irrigation ditches. I instructed the men to carry their guns at port but about head high and not to lift their feet out of the water but to feel along the bottom with them and not splash unduly. Wilson & I led the motley crew of 33 across our own "Red Sea".

If you have ever had to wade through foot deep water in the dark, not knowing when you were going to step in a hole or in our case, a ditch of unknown width and depth with an enemy not only within earshot but more unnerving in easy gun shot and with no place to hide if discovered, then you would appreciate our predicament. Every now and then either Wilson or I or both stumbled and tried to fall quietly and unsloshingly-if there is such a word. We were in a closed up double file so the men could pass the information back by hand signal where the ditches were. We were proceeding quite well when we came to the big ditch. Of course we did not know it was "the" big ditch, but dogpaddled, and tried to stand and sank several times till we finally reached the other side of the ditch. The men immediately behind Wilson and me had waited while we sloshed our sinking way across. Wilson waited on our side and I moved forward feeling for the next ditch surprise. Several men had crossed the ditch when word reached me we had a problem at the ditch. I went back and learned that several of the third Bn men could not swim. I had mistakenly thought that all paratroopers were required to know how to swim and if they did not know how that it would have become apparent when we crossed ponds in swamps on maneuvers. One of our men remembered there was a wooden farm gate back near our point of departure and two men went back to get it. In the meantime we got the rest of the men across except for those who were to "tow" the non swimmers. I gathered our wet bedraggled crew along a brushy hedgerow to dry out some while Charpentier and I scouted the surrounding area.

We came upon a farm and quietly entered the farm house. We were not about to knock in case the house was occupied by german soldiers. We surprised the farmer and his wife in bed. It may have been about 3:00a.m.. We apologized. Both of them got up. The wife made the first cup of Café au lait I had ever had. We explained we were looking for American troops. The farmer was surprised we were looking. He said there are American tanks just about a mile down (north) the road. We did not tell him we had just crossed the flooded field although he probably figured that out as we were all wet. I had Charpentier go back and get our men. By this time it must have been about 4:00a.m. as it was light out. We did not want to be led into a trap so we asked the farmer if he would lead us to the tanks. He would and did.

It was almost like some kind of surrealistic victory march, the farmer in the lead with Wilson beside him and the rest of our wet bedraggled crew in an approach march on both sides of the road. I was especially glad Wilson was in the lead as all the elderly (40 was elderly for me at that time) women rushed out to kiss him. The daughters must have been hidden as I did not see any beautiful girls rushing forth to kiss me. Of course by then it must have been about 5:00a.m., a time all beautiful girls should be asleep in their beds.

From about a block and a half away I could see an American tank, which was easily identified, even at that distance by the big star on its side. Wilson and I and several others took the yellow identification cloths out of our helmets and started waving them so that hopefully we would not be fired upon. When we were abreast of the tank an armored lieutenant with a big smile on his face said, "you sure wanted us to see you, waving those rags like that". I informed him they were identification panels. His response was "Oh". We knew what they were but no one in our army had bothered to notify units we might meet.

We found where the 501st was located and stopped enroute to be debriefed by an intelligence unit. We informed them on what we had learned of military significance and told them of Jacques Capiten's underground group. They already had Capiten's name on some list. We then split off to our various units. I bid a fond farewell to "Charpy" Charpentier and joined Headquarters Company and was assigned to the depleted Machine Gun Platoon. The 501st was located between Baupre and Carentan # 5 Map "Normandy Activity"

During the approximately ten days we operated on our own we generally cussed our pilot for the messed up drop. When we found out what happened to the other sticks we were most happy with the pilots error. At least all the men in our plane were still alive up to that time. I sought out "Poochy Weagley, "The Bear" Hathaway, "Little Beavaer" Maitland, Garver and others. Too many were missing. Bill Love, a very happy go-lucky-guy was killed attacking a machine gun nest in the first days. He had been a great morale factor in our platoon. He was a husky kid who held on to his civilian status no matter how hard the army tried to change him. We had another fellow we called "Godfrey" for obvious reasons. He probably never should have been in the paratroops but he tried harder than anyone else. In a stroke of brilliance one time on maneuvers I made Love a Pfc and assigned "Godfrey" to him. When I needed a runner or some chore done and it was about Godfrey's turn, I'd call out "Love, send me a man". Love would act very officious and bark at Godfrey to report to me at once. Both Love & Godfrey enjoyed the game as did most of the platoon.

Godfrey hero worshipped Love. After Love was killed the heart went out of Godfrey. Poochy told me that Godfrey had been in a perpetual daze ever since. One day after I re-joined the platoon a shell lit on top of the hedgerow Godfrey had dug his foxhole partially under. Godfrey received no wounds but was out on his feet. Someone took him back to the aide station and they sent him to the field hospital that had been set up in Carentan. The hospital sent him back up to us and said he had nothing wrong with him. He still was not with it so we sent him back and the hospital started him back to us again. Finally the medics concluded something was wrong when Godfrey was found wandering around Carentan with his pants over his arm. We never did see "Our man Godfrey" again and he was missed by all of us.