

OSS MISSION TO THE BURGUNDIAN MAQUIS

Leonard C. Courier

There are two brief entries in the diary I kept in 1944 while serving with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Field Detachment attached to General Patton's Third US Army in France:

13 September 1944: "Debrief agent. Has important item of information about the Fifth Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Sent back with him to region via Troyes/Tonnerre. Pass night in farm at Fulvy. First American in region. Towns held by FFI. Germans in woods."

14 September 1944. "Go to Les Laumes. FFI had destroyed documents. Question German prisoners. Get confirmation of existence of German Panzer Regt. Pick up various documents. Back area by evening. Congratulated on success of mission."

On 13 September 1944, Third Army Headquarters was bivouacked in a field near Courtisols, a small village about 12 kilometers east of Chalons sur Marne. On 11 September I had returned from Paris where I had been on a mission to obtain a set of plans of the Maginot Line.* Our OSS Field Detachment had retrieved almost all the SUSSEX agent teams which had been parachuted into France before the Normandy invasion. It appeared to us, watching the swift advance of the Allied armies, and what seemed to be the disintegration of the German armies, that our work was nearly completed. Third Army's armored divisions had reached the Moselle River; US Seventh Army, which had landed in the south of France on 15 August, was rapidly moving north up the Rhone Valley; the remnants of the German First and Nineteenth Armies, which had defended the Mediterranean coast and the Bordeaux area, were striving to escape to Germany. On 11 September elements of US Third Army and the US Seventh Army's VIth Corps had made contact west of Dijon. There was no continuous front line. Retreating German troops were using every secondary road in the area between Dijon and Troyes in a frantic effort to reach the Moselle River; they were hiding in the wooded areas during daylight hours and traveling at night because of the complete Allied mastery of the air. Our situation maps at Third Army showed a totally fluid situation, and it was difficult to ascertain where our reconnaissance units or the Germans were located.

Early in the morning of 13 September, I observed a battered dark car approaching our Field Detachment tents. Bullet holes ran the length of the French Hotchkiss four-door sedan as if neatly stitched in a straight line, obviously the work of an Allied fighter plane. Two men stepped out. The driver, a

* See "The OSS and the Maginot and Siegfried Lines" by Leonard C. Courier, *Studies in Intelligence*, Summer 1984, Volume 28, Number 2.

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SOURCE METHODS EXEMPTION 3028
NAZI WAR CRIMES DISCLOSURE ACT
DATE 2007

small man in his mid-twenties, wore a tattered Lacoste shirt, white shorts, and sneakers. His huge companion, wearing bedraggled peasant work clothes, had difficulty extricating himself from the car. He wore a German cartridge belt and carried a captured Mauser rifle. The driver introduced himself as Lieutenant Henri of the French Army and his companion as Georges of the Forces Francaises de l'Interieur (FFI). Lieutenant Henri was one of our agents, until then unaccounted for, who had been parachuted in the Dijon area. After congratulating them on their safe arrival and feeding them breakfast, Colonel Vanderblue, our Field Detachment commander, instructed me to debrief them.

Henri had an interesting story to relate. After successfully completing his OSS/Special Operations Executive (SOE) mission, he had joined a group of the FFI in the Dijon area. The FFI, which was General de Gaulle's guerrilla army, had about 1,200 men in the two departments of Yonne and Cote d'Or, and they had been ambushing retreating German forces. A few days earlier an FFI unit had attacked a convoy of German trucks, killing most of the Germans. The trucks were found to be loaded with documents from a German Headquarters unit. Henri had spotted among the documents a reference to the Fifth Panzer Grenadier Regiment, a crack armored unit, whose whereabouts were unknown to Third Army G-2. The trucks and their contents, Henri added, were located in Venarey-Les Laumes in Burgundy, about 70 kilometers by road northwest of Dijon, and about 200 kilometers from Chalons sur Marne.

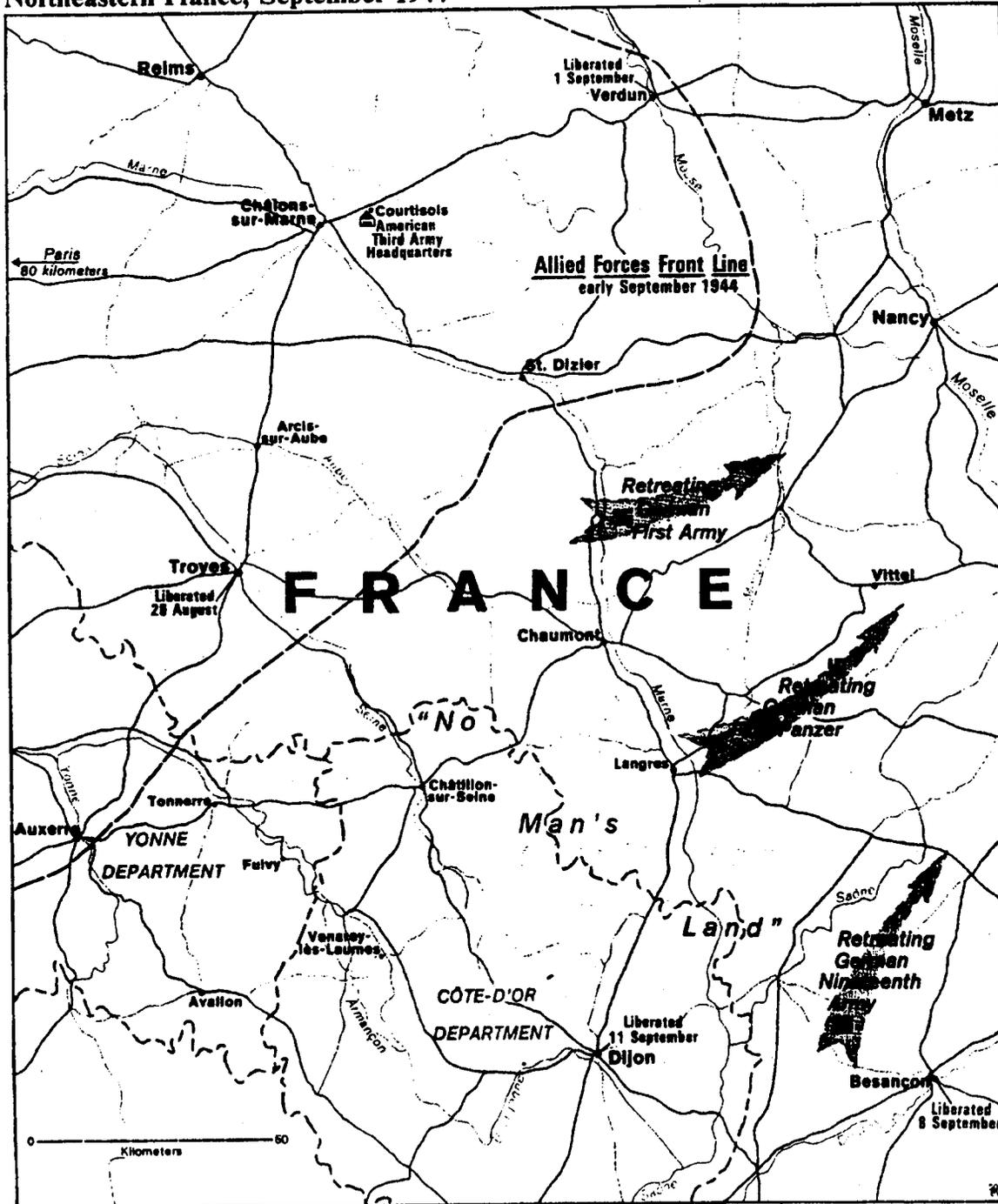
I told Colonel Vanderblue what Henri had said about the captured German documents and the Fifth Panzer Grenadier Regiment. I could tell he was intrigued by the possibility of securing the documents with their intelligence value. He said, "Why don't you go to Les Laumes with Lieutenant Henri in his car? He knows the country well and you are more likely to get through that way unnoticed by the retreating Germans than if we send a motorized reconnaissance unit."

An hour later, we were on our way, a rather incongruous trio in our decrepit conveyance with Henri driving. Georges had crammed his bulky body and artillery in the back seat. I sat in front wearing my combat uniform and steel helmet and armed with my M-1 carbine, .45-caliber Colt automatic, and combat knife. We drove rapidly south the 79 kilometers through the Champagne region to the city of Troyes using the main road. We passed through Arcis sur Aube, where scattered monuments commemorated the site of Napoleon's last battle in 1814 before his first abdication. Troyes, a city of about 60 thousand people, dominated by its fine cathedral of St. Pierre and St. Paul, had been undamaged. Liberated by the US Fourth Armored Division on 26 August, Troyes was garrisoned by some quartermaster units from whom we obtained gas for our car and some spare jerry cans. We were informed that once we headed south from Troyes we were entering no man's land and were on our own, and to watch out not only for German units but also for prowling Allied fighter planes.*

* Most French civilian cars carried a large charcoal-burning apparatus which was visible from the air. German military vehicles were not so equipped; neither was ours.

Mission

Northeastern France, September 1944



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Perils of Pauline

About 5 kilometers south of the city we spotted by the roadside a young woman sitting forlornly on a suitcase. My gallant lieutenant stopped the car and asked her what she was doing there. She explained that she had been in Paris at the time of the liberation and that she was trying to get to Venarey where her mother was living. She had managed to hitchhike from Paris to Troyes with various US convoys, but now had reached the end of the line and was desperate. Could we help her?

She was very attractive, blonde and blue-eyed, wearing a chic summer dress. We informed her that we were going south on a military mission and that we would be traveling through areas which might still be occupied by German troops, and that if we were caught she would probably be considered a member of the Maquis and summarily executed. "I'll take my chances," she replied, "Can I come with you?" We could hardly refuse to rescue a damsel in distress, and she squeezed in back with her suitcase, next to a delighted Georges.

For the next few hours we continued south on side roads for about 70 kilometers toward the town of Tonnerre in the Yonne department. Our main worry was Allied aircraft. Georges, the girl, Pauline, and I kept our heads out of the windows scanning the skies. Georges kept hitting me accidentally on the head with the barrel of his Mauser, until I persuaded him to stick the barrel out of his window. Like most veterans of the Normandy campaign, I had a deeply ingrained fear of our air force; it had caused consistently heavy casualties to our ground forces. (A month before at St. Ouen des Toits, near Laval, we had been asleep in a ditch when at dawn the sound of an approaching aircraft awakened me. I looked up and saw on the horizon a plane banking toward us. I recognized the painted stripes on the wings, which had been put on all Allied aircraft before the Normandy invasion, and relaxed. A few moments later the P-47 Thunderbolt roared in at tree-top level opening up on our unit with eight machine guns, the bullets whizzing inches over us and by some miracle hitting no one.)

It was getting progressively darker as we neared Tonnerre, a town of about 4,500 inhabitants. We had now less to fear from aircraft, but more from Germans, who concealed themselves in the wooded areas and the rolling hills of Burgundy during daylight and emerged at dusk. Occasionally we could hear small-arms fire. Henri, who knew the area well, would stop at farmhouses to ask about the location of German units. On one occasion a farmer sent his 15-year old son with us to act as guide as we drove cautiously through fields and dirt roads to bypass German troops. The boy, too, would squeeze into the back seat when he was not walking ahead of us.

It was pitch dark by the time we had skirted Tonnerre, and we still had more than 50 kilometers to cover to reach Les Laumes. Henri said he knew of a farmer in Fulvy who would probably hide us for the night. We arrived at the farm around midnight. It appeared deserted and showed no lights. Henri got out of the car and knocked on the door. Georges and I covered him from behind the bushes. Finally the door opened a crack and we heard a whispered conversation. Henri beckoned us over. As I approached the door, the farmer

Mission

spotted me, froze in horror, and jumped back. He had taken me for a German. My steel helmet, dark green field jacket, and combat boots in the dark could easily be confused for a German uniform. Our farmer, a *poilu* in World War I, had assumed that American soldiers still wore khaki, round helmets, and puttees. As soon as his fears were assuaged he embraced me, tears running down his cheeks. His wife, who had joined us, wept. He invited us all into the kitchen, disappeared briefly, and returned with an old cobwebbed bottle of that most exquisite of French liqueurs, Marc de Bourgogne. He had saved it for the day of liberation from the hated Germans. Our long day on the road and the effects of the marc soon made us sleepy. The old farmer and his wife insisted that I should sleep in their bed. I demurred just enough to accept gracefully. To them I was the representative of the United States, their liberator. I slept like a log in that magnificent feather bed in which one sank and disappeared, covered by quilts.

At dawn we were up and ready to continue our journey. The old farmer had assembled the people of his small village of Fulvy to see me. I was embraced and touched by them as if I had been the Messiah. It was a unique and moving experience.

We arrived in Les Laumes, a town of about 2,400 inhabitants in the Cote d'Or department, that morning without incident. The town was under the control of the FFI forces. We dropped off Pauline, our hitchhiker, at her mother's home, promising to come back later. Henri drove to the town hall where the FFI had their headquarters. As I got out of the car people noticed my strange uniform. A crowd gathered, and once again I was the hero of the hour. Henri got the chief of the FFI unit to come out and meet me. He was a surly, brutish looking individual. Henri whispered to me that he was the local butcher and a dedicated communist. He shook my hand perfunctorily and I could easily imagine that if I had worn a Soviet uniform I might have received a much warmer welcome. I congratulated him on his capture of the German convoy with the priceless documents. He glowered when I asked him what he had done with the truck contents. He responded by using a scatological expression to describe the German documents, adding that outside of killing a few Germans and capturing their trucks, it had been a useless victory because the trucks contained no arms or ammunition. "Where are the documents?" I insisted. "Where they belong," he replied with a guffaw, "in the town garbage dump!"

Tin Cans and Irony

I was stunned. Henri and Georges looked embarrassed and disgusted. Turning my back on this oafish character, I asked Henri to take us to the dump. Georges left us at this point to return to his home and family. The dump was located on the outskirts of town and adjoined the Armancon River. It was an evil smelling place, a haunt of rats, the home of all the offal from the region: decaying vegetable matter, rusty tin cans, dead cats. Whatever you can think of that is utterly objectionable and nauseating was there in the dump. The thrifty French throw nothing away unless it is totally putrid and useless. The German material had been flung in the middle some days before, and it was now covered by layers of stinking garbage.

Henri and I floundered in this unappetizing mess, slipping and falling. We dug in with shovels and came up with bits and pieces of documents, rapidly deteriorating from the moisture and rainfall. After a couple of hours we gave up, exhausted and filthy, having recovered a minimal amount of barely legible material.

We returned, totally frustrated, to the town hall. On the way back, Henri remembered that the FFI in ambushing the convoy had captured a few German prisoners, and we decided to try to interrogate them. Henri located the FFI commander, who disclosed that he had three prisoners. He was considering liquidating them.

The prisoners were kept in the cellar of a house near the town hall. At our request they were brought out: three terrified youngsters, barely eighteen years of age, in dirty field gray uniforms. When they saw me, they ran toward me obviously thinking that the US Army had occupied the town, and that they were now safe from the FFI. They bubbled over with joy and relief. What irony! These Germans seemed as happy to see me as the French had been to welcome their one-man "US Liberation Army."

In limited German, I reassured the prisoners that they would be safe if they helped me and answered a few questions. Their cooperation was total. They revealed that they had been clerks in the headquarters of the German 189th Infantry Division, which had retreated from the Mediterranean area toward Dijon. The 189th was formed in 1940, had served on the Russian front, and been sent to France to recuperate. The prisoners said they had been drafted only a few months before. They knew of the existence of the Fifth Panzer Grenadier Regiment and where it had been located. We now had the information we had come for, and our frustrations at the dump had become less galling.

I informed the Germans that US troops would be moving into the town, but that meanwhile they would have to remain in the custody of the FFI. They clung to me, pleading that I take them with me. As this was impossible under the circumstances, Lieutenant Henri and I, who knew of the charming FFI commander's intentions, decided to summon the three most prominent citizens of the town: the priest, the mayor, and the schoolmaster. When they arrived we explained to them the predicament of the three young Germans and said that we expected the US Army's VI Corps as well as the French I and II Corps would arrive in the area within hours. Meanwhile we were asking them to protect the prisoners under the rules of the Geneva Convention. All three assured us that they would guarantee their safety to the best of their ability as Frenchmen and men of honor. We shook hands and departed.

Henri and I drove to Pauline's house to make our farewells as promised. She promptly answered the door bell. She was delighted to see us, but recoiled when she saw—and smelled—the condition we were in after our sojourn in the town dump. We explained what had happened, and she asked what she could do to help. We settled for a bath and a chance to clean our clothes.

An hour later we headed north to return to Third Army Headquarters. We drove non-stop at maximum speed and with no misadventures. The old Hotchkiss never let us down and we were back in Courtisols by evening.

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Mission

Lieutenant Henri left us a few days later to join the French Army. I hope this man of great personal courage and dedication survived the war. Parachuted into France before the Normandy invasion, he had spent months behind enemy lines. Reaching freedom at last, he had agreed without hesitation to return to Les Laumes and place himself in jeopardy once again. During our short mission he was cheerful, resourceful, and unflappable. He deserved well of France.

I have had no knowledge of Georges or Pauline since that mid-September day over 40 years ago, and I can only hope that those three young Germans eventually made it back to the fatherland. I shall never again visit the dump at Les Laumes.