

The Liberation of CDF

(Chateauneuf-du-Faou, Brittany, France, Aug. 5, 1944)

The story of CDF has intrigued me since I was a child. My grandfather, Jean Cleren, was a key leader of the FFI from 1941 until the town's liberation on August 5th, 1944, after which he served as reconstruction Mayor for a year. My mother, Paulette Cleren, was 14 years old in 1944. She seems to be the only person left at this time with recollection and original photos of the August 5th events.

My father, Marcel Diraison, also from CDF and active with FFI, was later employed with Air France in the U.S. after emigrating here in 1950. His employment made it possible for our family to make bi-annual visits to CDF. Those visits afforded me audience to the many discussions held in my grandfather's presence about "la guerre". Other men dropped in and recounted their stories.

Being American, it bothered me endlessly to hear of the 12 U.S. soldiers killed in that town. The story I heard was they had all been killed after either failing to heed or not understanding a warning to avoid the likely location of an ambush.

The war was very real to me. Across the canal, the pink *Chateau de Trevarez*, used for R&R and other purposes by the Germans and Japanese during the war, had not been repaired since the RAF bombed it on August 4th, 1944, at Jean Cleren's consent.

I heard what it was like for my mother as a young teen to witness Nazis searching the family home brandishing their bayonets, in search of her father and brother. In Long Island, NY, where we resided in the mid-to late 1950's, school air raid drills had an impact on me not felt by other students. I often thought they were real.

After many years my mother, a naturalized U.S. citizen, retired back to Brittany to assist her aging parents. In 2003 she sent me a picture of the monument erected in CDF in memory of the 12 fallen U.S. soldiers. A letter from the then-town mayor, Christian Menard, addressed to Mr. Charles Barbour at the Sixth Armored Division Assn. in Orlando, FL accompanied the photo. I wanted to make some inquiries but was forced to delay.

Finally, in 2016 I began to investigate. It seems the correspondence to Florida may have been mislaid or lost, but upon verifying the address I was led to the current email group. From Bruce Frederick I learned the CDF monument had not been on his route two years previously when he retraced the steps of the Supersixth through that region.

Several things have come clear. ***Some events that don't happen never become news simply because they never happened.*** This is the case of CDF. It *had not* been

known that the Germans planned to massacre the town's entire population on the day after the ill-fated 86th Recon. Squadron wandered into it apparently by accident. The population of the town was approximately 3,500 at the time. A substantial pit had been prepared in the field behind a garage to accommodate the impending carnage. The Division was not aware of this plan, and could not have been, since FFI did not discover proof of it until after other events in this narrative had taken place.

As I learned, CDF was not on the Division's (CCA's) planned route. My puzzle has been to reconstruct why the 86th Recon. wound up there, despite conflicts in the existing records. I believe I have made some sense of it, and certainly added the "why it matters" element to the loss of 12 soldiers in effect saving the entire town. I hope more details will surface to further clarify the story.

The maps and record indicate there were three separate Commands marching towards the port of Brest, CCA (Taylor), CCB (Read) and Res Comm (Hanson). They were moving towards the town of Carhaix after engaging in other events northeast towards Dinan. CCA and CCB followed different routes, with Res Comm coming in third or behind one or the other.

As the three Commands were to converge on Carhaix, CCA and CCB were ordered to go around the town to bypass the fierce resistance at that location. The Germans had added 2000 paratroopers and had also blown all the bridges.

The next main goal on the way to Brest was Huelgoat (pronounced "Hooelgwat"), followed by Morlaix.

CCB was ordered to go around to the north/northwest, and CCA towards the south/southwest via Gourin. CCA's goal was to head north from Gourin to Landeleau, from there to Plouye, and then to Huelgoat, where they were to converge with CCB and Res. Comm.

CDF was off course to the west.

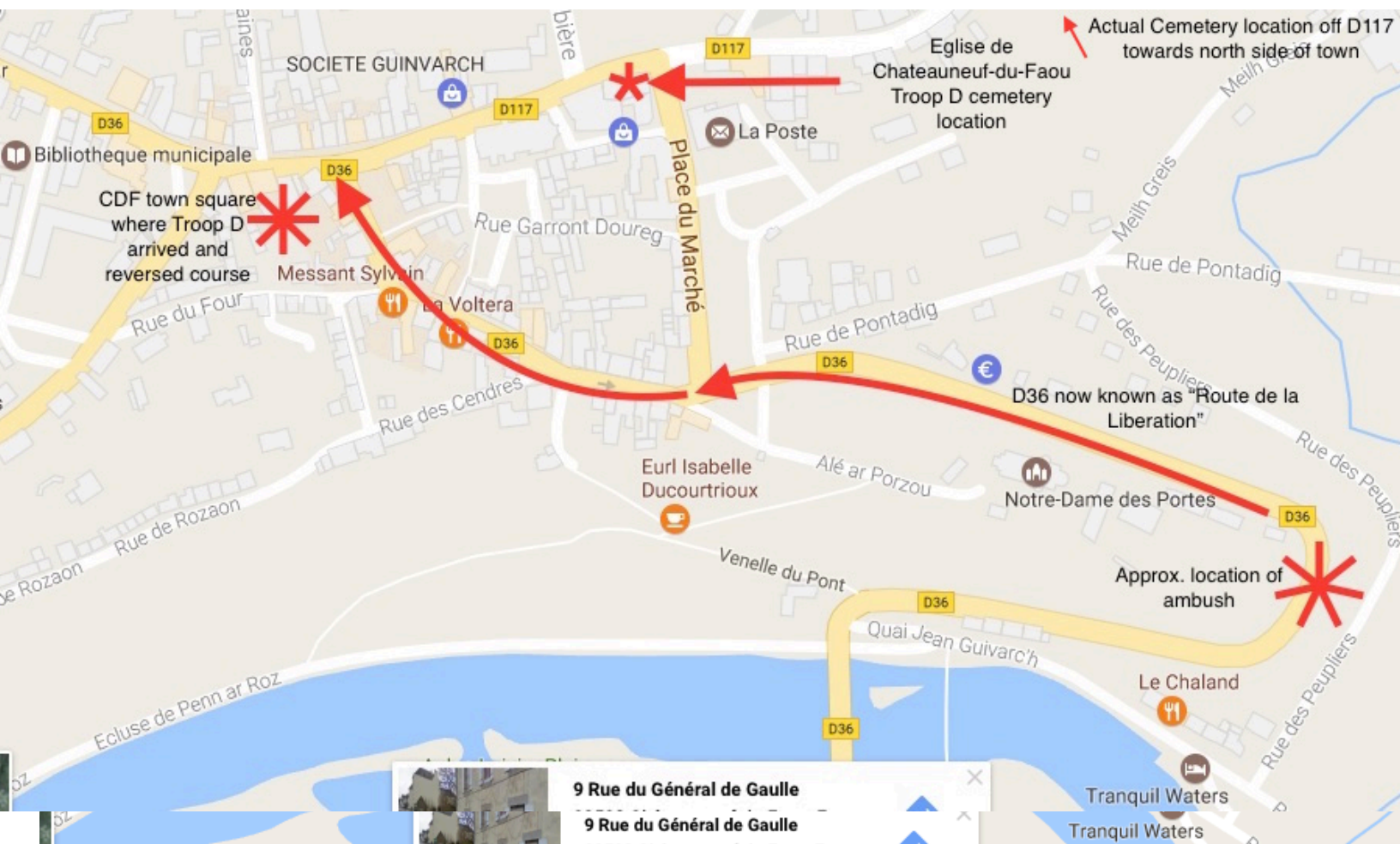
Please note that this territory is "hedgerow country" just like Normandy and very difficult to traverse. I'd refer interested parties to a recent article published on the "*We Are the Mighty*" site by Logan Nye dated March 9, 2017, which details the difficulties. It is titled: "*This is how hedgerows made the invasion of Normandy a living hell.*" The hedges also make it difficult to identify roadways. It was a revelation to me from the article that the hedgerows were in fact built by the Romans 2,000 years ago as a long-range alternative to fencing. Worked very well. The author of the article did not mention the infestation of vipers typical in those hedgerows; known mostly to the locals. I've endeavored to verify road locations from 1944 to the present; it seems they have not changed except for improvements.

The most direct route from Gourin to Landeleau is north on D301, which becomes D17 and crosses N164 which would normally have been the direct east-west route from Carhaix. The distances here are not long. It is 9.7 miles from Gourin to Landeleau, and from Gourin to Huelgoat 20.3. From Gourin to CDF is 15 miles by the common route. At 7.3 miles north of Gourin, road **D117** (easy to confuse with D17) branches left towards Spezet, Saint-Goazec, the customary route to CDF, and then across the Aulne Canal bridge.



The local history matches this trajectory as the 86th Squadron showed up on the town square *on the afternoon of August 5th*. They had come up from the canal via the main bridge. They were greeted vigorously by the townspeople, but surprised to learn they were in the wrong place. Perhaps they thought they had arrived in Landeleau. Jean Cleren and others warned them about an ambush, but with only one person speaking broken English, it's possible it was not understood.

The ambush occurred at the dangerous U-turn on the steep hill coming down towards the canal, below the cathedral. The attackers were up on the hill above them.



The “Combat Record/Brittany Campaign” first indicates on pp. 15-16 that CCA passed via Gourin on the morning of August 5th, which would be correct. It is on August 5th, in broad daylight (not at night as the Combat Record indicates) that the fighting erupted in CDF. On the previous night of August 4th, citizens of CDF could hear fighting to the east/northeast of CDF. They definitely heard fighting in the direction of Landeleau on the night of the 5th, after the CDF conflict.

[Another odd discrepancy in the Brittany Campaign Combat Record, on page 15, indicates CCB on a march “west of Carhaix” halted at Le Moustoire, which as Map #3 shows is *east* of the town and not west; there was in fact another location, just a small chapel, bearing the name “Moistoire” a few miles west of Spezet, but this cannot be the one referred to in the record.]

On page 17, reporting on August 6th, after CCA had *already passed* Landeleau, Plouye and Huelgoat, 20.3 miles north of Gourin, the second paragraph repeats a conflict occurring in CDF on that day, which doesn’t fit. It also mentions there being “no vehicular casualties or stragglers, when in fact at least 4 vehicles were blown up in CDF, besides the 12 men killed in ambush. The townspeople have no report of other soldiers having been in the town other than the 12 who they saw. My uncle was hiding around the canal area and never reported other Allied personnel in the vicinity, other than those killed, before or after the ambush. FFI fighters were also killed in the conflict, including my uncle’s two best friends.

The Daniels report, which jives with none of the locals’ history, says, “*It puzzled me why the bridge was not blown.*” In fact the Germans might have done so, after abandoning Trevarez, but it was still intact thanks to two young Germans negotiating for their lives with FFI by offering to defuse the explosives, which they did. Sadly, two local hotheads took it upon themselves to execute the two Germans after the bridge was cleared. As my mother says, “After 4 years of occupation, the people went crazy.”

The “Advance on Brest” map is not to scale and difficult to follow, but following newer maps which retain the same basic road letterings (note: the Germans were routinely swapping and changing signs to cause confusion, and so was FFI in order to confuse the Germans), the one I’ve included indicates how CCA, the subject of the CDF conflict, would have headed northwards out of Gourin towards Landeleau. I cannot pinpoint how CCB might have plotted its course.

The histories conflict.

The [Daniel] report (page 10) relates a fierce engagement from which most were able to escape, whereas the township’s story indicates there were only 12 who showed up and none escaped. In fact NO ONE else ever showed up afterwards either. Daniels does clarify that 11 members of Troop D and one from Troop E were killed.

All remaining Germans fled the entire area *immediately* after the ambush and that is why they left no one around to carry out the next day's planned massacre.

Daniel also says the bridge was blown, trapping them (who?). The bridge was never blown. There were two bridges at the canal, a very old one not capable of carrying the payload of military vehicles (still there northeast of the main bridge), and the newer, second one, both of which are intact to this day. If there was an explosion, it had to be something else.

There is a conflicting reference on the www.super6th.org/86th_cav/brittany.htm site which mentions a severe conflict 5 miles "west" of CDF. That reference mentions a loss of 21 men and 2 officers from Troop D. However by the FFI's CDF account only 12 were present and recovered in CDF. There was no indication the squadron had passed through CDF twice. If the separate incident is true, it may coincide with another report of conflict at the village of Langelet, located *northwest* of CDF across N164, halfway between Landeleau and Pleyben. This last reference mentions alleged survivors (?) of the CDF conflict exiting southward through Gourin. That makes no sense as with the bridge standing there would have been no reason to return to the morning's start point instead of rejoining D17 the way they came, especially with Landeleau the goal. If anyone can straighten this out, it would be most interesting. I am led to wonder if the squadron had split and gone different directions at some point, accounting for only 12 being in CDF (?).

Page 19 of the Brittany Campaign Combat Record, states on August 7th that by the time it was approaching Brest, the Division was suffering from a gasoline pinch and asking for help. They had moved far ahead of Corps and Army units so that "evacuation of wounded and prisoners became impossible. Wounded were carried forward in ambulance."

Given the necessity for the Commands to converge at Huelgoat on the 6th, then Morlaix and Brest, and assuming communications between FFI and CCA, it must have been agreed that the locals planned to take care of the problem in CDF.

The townspeople of CDF carried out a respectful and religious funeral for the victims. My mother was one of those carrying flowers. She does not know how long afterwards the U.S. Army was able to reclaim the victims. Without the unplanned sacrifice of these soldiers, the entire town's population would have been shortly executed. I don't believe in accidents in situations like this. I see the hand of Providence sparing thousands of civilians, who unbeknownst to the Sixth Division, would have been dead the next day, almost right under their noses, just a few kilometers to the west of their passage. The sacrifices were not in vain. I would not be here without them, or tens of thousands of others descended from those saved.

In advance of the Sixth Division's approach, the *Chateau de Trevarez*, used as an Axis base, was ordered bombed on August 4th. My grandfather, Jean Cleren, gave his consent; he also *declined* consent to bombing two in-town structures which the Germans used for their day-to-day combat operations, where later the plans were likely discovered for the town's massacre. My father communicated instructions to the pilots.



Note daylight showing through the roof on photo #2, where officers were known to assemble.

Following are pictures from the Cleren/Diraison family archives.

Arrival of 86th Reconnaissance Squadron of the 6th U.S. Armoured Division

August 5th, 1944



















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Dedication of the CDF Memorial in 2003:

Killed in combat on August 5th, 1944

Troop D: Cpl. Martin J. Clark
 Cpl. Edward J. Powers
 T5 Ruby A. McKinney
 T5 Donald D. Roehm
 Cpl. Dwight L. Neff
 Cpl. Harold R. Yoder
 T5 Anthony J. Pilipaic
 T5 Paul D. Shaver
 Stanley L. Turner
 Pvt. Chester Galloway
 Pvt. John N. Hall
Troop E: Pvt. Hoyt A. Cannon



Jean-Paul Cornec (Supersixth Historian) visiting with Paulette Cleren in front of CDF monument on December 18th, 2016.

Paulette Cleren, daughter of Jean Cleren, FFI leader who met the incoming squadron and was post-war Mayor of CDF during reconstruction.



Reference Map #3 (current road map) Roads like N164 are now considered major highways. D17 and D117 are much improved over their condition in 1944. The extension of D117 which shortcuts into CDF by a few miles north of the Saint-Gouazec direction is not the one used by the 86th Squadron and may not have existed. I have no information on whether that upper bridge existed or was blown.

