

Touch of History



The battle of Villers-Bocage



The context

On June 6, 1944, shortly after midnight, a gigantic operation of the Allied forces began on the Normandy coast in the Bay of Seine, between the mouth of the Orne and the east coast of Cotentin. The resources are considerable: over more than 80 kilometers, around 150,000 men landed, by air and by sea, to pierce the German defenses of the Atlantic Wall.

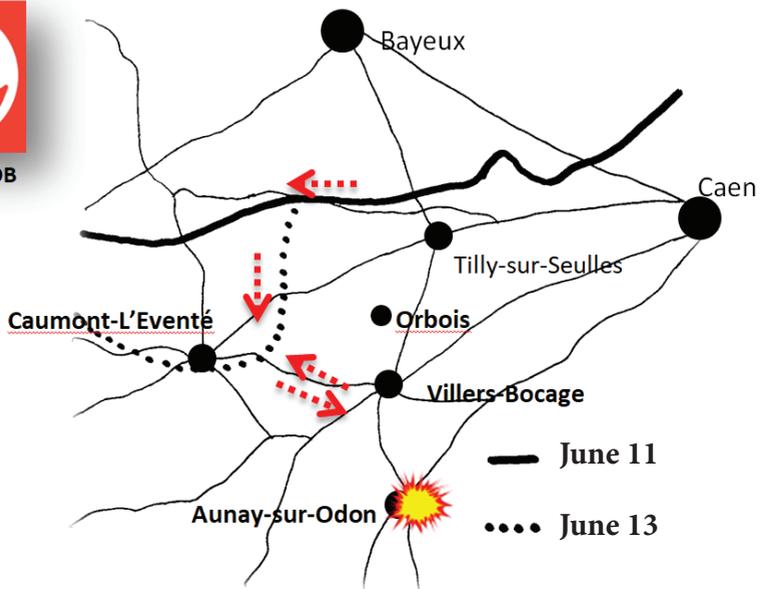
In 5 days, the beachheads of the various landing beaches expanded to form a freed area in one piece. Between Caen and Saint-Lô, the American troops of the 1st Infantry Division have advanced further than the others and are approaching Caumont-l'Éventé.

Start of operations

They must now capitalize on this rapid advance and immediately strike another blow against the German forces. On June 12, General Montgomery launched an attack between Tilly-sur-Seulles and Caumont-L'éventé towards Villers-Bocage. Aunay-sur-Odon was heavily bombed by the British air force to prevent the arrival of German reinforcements.



Insigne 7^e DB



Attack and withdrawal of the 7th Armored Division on June 13, 1944



British forces

The 7th British Armored Division is commanded by Major General Georges Erskine. It is equipped with Cromwell and Sherman tanks.

Cromwell Tank



Sherman Tank



Enemy forces

The Panzer Lehr Division commanded by General Bayerlein is located in the Tilly-sur-Seulles sector, it is equipped with Panzer IV Panther tanks. The 2nd Kompanie of SS heavy tank battalion No. 101 commanded by Michael Wittmann, stationed at Elbeufen-Bray near Beauvais, was sent on June 6 west of Caen. Equipped with 14 armored vehicles, after 200km, there are only 6 Tiger tanks left. During the night of June 12th to 13th, it heads towards the RN 175. Wittmann hides his tanks at a place called Les Hauts Vents.



The battle of Villers-Bocage : June 13, 1944

The first British elements (4th County of London Yeomanry / 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade) arrived around 8:00 am by the road to Caumont'Eventé. They cross Villers-Bocage without fighting and reach hill 213 without making any reconnaissance beforehand. It is a long line of vehicles that stretches for more than 2km. The inhabitants greet the soldiers with enthusiasm.

Michael Wittmann sees this long procession arrive from his command post. At around 9:00 am, he launches the attack. In the Tiger 222 tank, he heads left towards the main road, while other tanks head right to isolate the British on Hill 213.

Wittmann, parallel to the road, destroys one by one all the vehicles squeezed behind each other and unable to maneuver. Up to the crossroads, a long column of vehicles is in flames. Wittmann enters rue Georges Clemenceau, where four Cromwell tanks, HQ of 4th CLY, are stationed. They are destroyed. The Tiger with its 88mm gun easily pierces the armor of Allied tanks.

In contrast, the Tiger's approximately 10 cm armor resists the British shell. The Tiger goes to rue Pasteur. Further down, in Joan of Arc Square, Sergeant Stan Lockwood in the lead with his Sherman Firefly sends him two shells but neither pierces the armor.

Wittmann turns around, he is hit by an anti-tank gun on a caterpillar in front of the Huet-Godefroy store (now above the town hall in front of Cocci Market). We do not know where the anti-tank gun was placed. Wittmann runs away and walks 7km. He goes to the Orbois Castle, headquarters of the Panzer Lehr Division.

During this time, the British, surrounded on hill 213, are taken prisoner. Lieutenant-Colonel Cranley, who commands the 4th CLY, surrenders and orders his men to set fire to the devices still in combat condition.

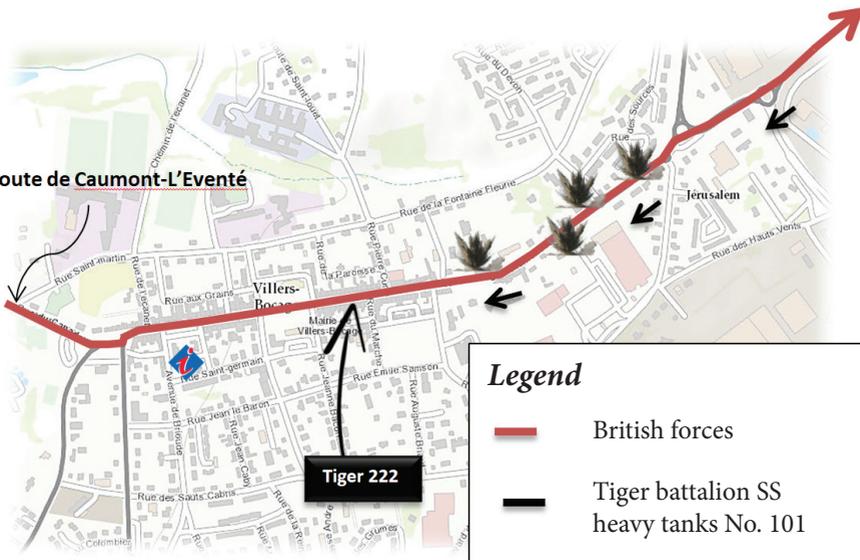


Destroyed Tiger 222 tank
© Bundesarchiv



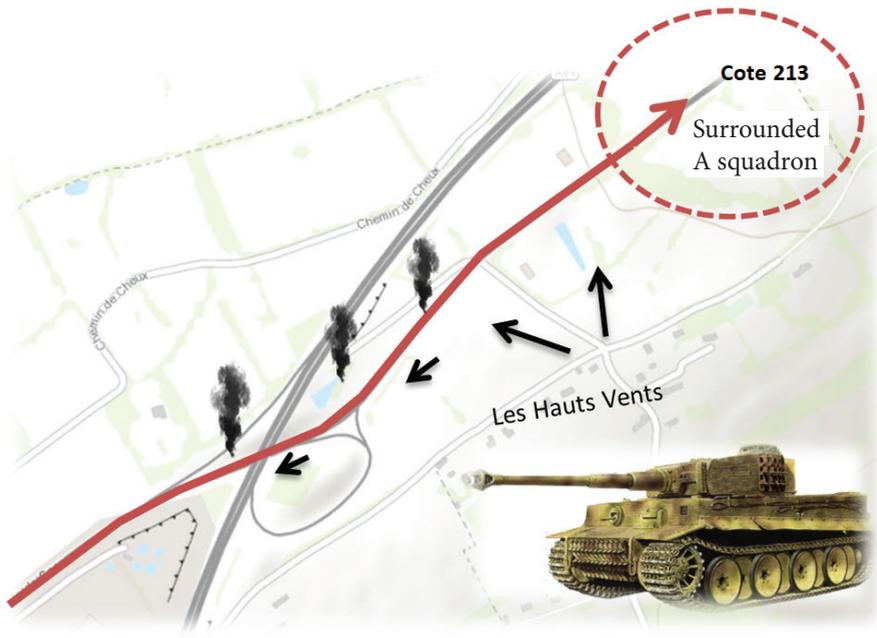
British armored column on hill 213
© Bundesarchiv

Route de Caumont-L'Eventé



Legend

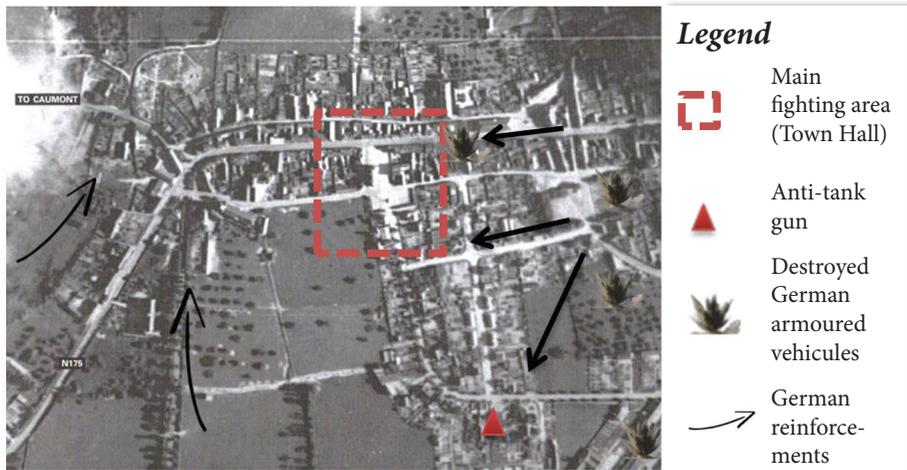
-  British forces
-  Tiger battalion SS heavy tanks No. 101
-  Destroyed allied armored vehicles



Second step of the battle

British troops prepare for a second attack around the Town Hall. The infantry moves into the basements and cellars, and at the windows, with machine guns and PIATs. The armored vehicles set up in the narrow streets where the Tigers cannot maneuver.

In the beginning of the afternoon, Wittman returns with reinforcements from the Panzer Lehr Division, descending Hill 213 through the grasslands parallel to the main road cluttered with destroyed vehicles. Others arrive from the station side.



Aerial photo of Villers-Bocage

The British trap works, the Germans lose a total of 6 Tiger tanks and 2 Panzer IV. The problem is that the German reinforcements are coming from all sides. Allied soldiers are scattered throughout the city. Two grenadier battalions of the 2nd Panzer Division attack the road to Aunay and Vire.

The situation became critical, with the enemy attacking the rest of the division that remained in reserve on the road between Caumont-L'Éventé and Amayé-sur-Seulles. The staff decides to withdraw. The retreat is covered by an artillery barrage.



The bombing of Villers-Bocage : June 30, 1944

Starting at 5:00 am, as part of Operation Epsom, a terrible bombardment by the Royal Air Force (250 bombers) aiming at destroying the 2nd and 7th Panzer Divisions, destroys a large part of the city.

At Montgomery's request, to ensure that the German tanks will be completely unable to move, 270 more bombers drop more than 1,100 tons of bombs and bring the city to nothing.

The castle is then transformed into a hospital. It shelters more than 150 people, treats the wounded and sick, and accommodates the civilians passing through before the exodus. This is one of the only buildings that will be saved.

The liberation of the town : August 4, 1944

The 50th Northumbrian Division liberates a city in ruins at the start of Operation Bluecoat, which will lead them to Mont Pinçon and up to Vire (see our discovery tour on the Second War at Mont Pinçon).



Worth seeing

- The model of Villers-Bocage before bombings, in the town hall, under the stairs when entering on the left - Free access during the opening hours of the Town Hall.
- The memorial monument to the British 7th Armored Division, at the roundabout at the top of the main street.



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