

Ernie Gatten's amazing story about a nine-man patrol that was sent out on the night of June 30, 1944 to see if there was a practical way across a very large swamp for the 83rd Division. An examination of maps of this area show that the 83rd was in a very tough position from which to advance against the German defenders, and the top brass of the division were looking for a way to carry out their mission over horrible terrain.

The After Action Report of the 83rd Recon Troop for June 1944 reads as follows:

First action against the enemy by elements of the 83d Reconnaissance Troop was of patrol nature on the night of 30 June 1944. 2nd Lt. Lawrence E. Burton led a patrol of 9 men, by boat, from Auvers to Le Hommet and shore line to the North. Type and extent of German defenses studied. Patrol returned night of 1 July 1944. One man missing.

The true story of what happened on that patrol was recalled by Ernie Gatten. Ernie was in the 83rd Recon Troop and he was one of the members of that patrol. What follows here is Ernie's recollection of those days. It is a revealing report from a number of aspects. First, it reveals that the 83rd top brass knew they had been placed in a lousy spot on the front lines of Normandy, and they were desperately trying to find a good route south through the swamps and hedgerows. The truth of the matter was that there was no way through the swamps or around the hedgerows. Secondly, Ernie's recollections show that the 83rd Recon Troop was a tough bunch of soldiers. It is amazing to look at a map of this area of Normandy and realize how big the swamp was. Ernie and his patrol actually traversed the Prairies Marecageuses de Gorges. Ernie does not exaggerate about the swamp--It is easily visible on maps of Normandy, and the area that Ernie and the patrol crossed on the evening of June 30, 1944 is a good two and a half miles in length. The patrol would have been a challenge for Navy Seals, but the Recon Troop managed to pull off the mission with only one loss! It's an incredible tale., which follows here:

During the last days of June 1944, the 83rd Infantry began relieving the survivors of the 101st Airborne Division, who had dropped on D-Day. The 'front' in that area was nearly stationary. Some patrol action from both sides, and a daily exchange of artillery fire. The Recon Troop was bivouacked in a little apple orchard. There were literally hundreds of little orchards in Normandy, all surrounded by a hedgerow, ranging from 8 to 15 ft. in height. Several foxholes were already dug. I never learned if they were dug by the advancing Paratroopers or the retreating Germans. I claimed a very deep foxhole beside our parked armored car. No one challenged my possession. In the evening of June 30, someone walked through our bivouac area, calling out names, including 'Gatten.' Report now to CO tent! In the tent was our Troop CO, Capt. Drum, our platoon leader, Lt. Burton, and seven others from his platoon. The Captain briefed us. 'Division is preparing for a major attack, they want to know if there are any possible pathways through the swamp on which the Infantry might advance in their attack. Lt. Burton then briefed us. 'No ID, no jewelry, no cigarettes!' (he was a heavy smoker!) 'Meet here at 2300 hours' I gave my wallet and ring to a buddy who was staying in bivouac. I went to my foxhole for an hour of prayer and rest, no sleep. I dropped the heart-shield testament my parents had given me in a shirt pocket, a bar of concentrated chocolate in the other. I fastened two hand grenades on my front shoulder straps. I was ready!

We walked the short distance to the edge of the swamp. In a narrow, shallow canal were three black rubber boats, with paddles, tied with ropes, waiting for us. A full moon in a clear sky worried us. Too much light for a night patrol! We were committed, so three in each boat, we pushed off. Hey! We had no boat training, this is for the Navy! We soon learned the swamp was a series of small canals, criss-crossed with no definite pattern. We paddled for some distance, then to stay on course, we had to walk on soggy ground until we came to another canal where we could launch our boats and paddle again. This went on for some time. Many times we slogged through ankle-deep water until we came to another canal where we could use the boats again. Years later, I read the book written by the official historian, Martin Blumenson, 'Duel for France, 1944' I copied excerpts from this description of the swamp--'Numerous streams and springs, mudholes and stagnant pools, a network of canals and ditches, some intended for drainage, others originally primitive transportation routes keep the earth moist and soft. Crossing the swamps on foot is hazardous, passage by vehicles impossible.'

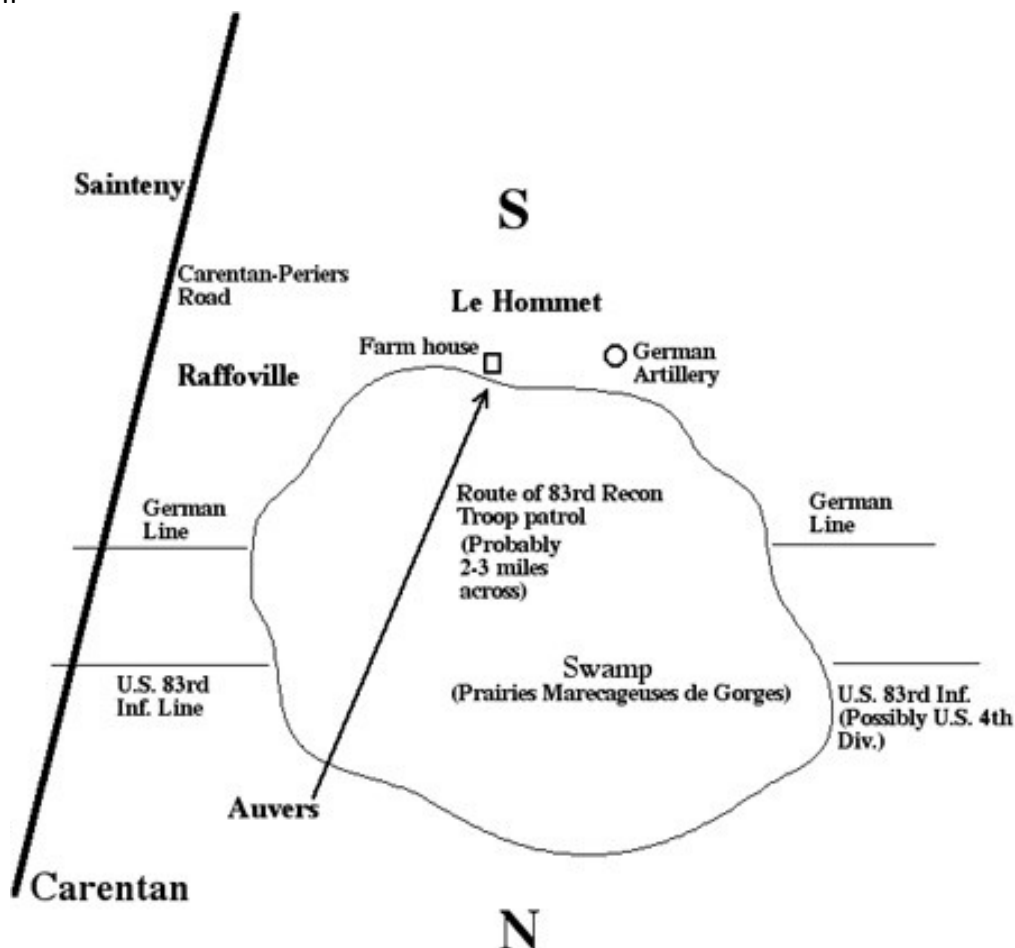
Around 0400 hours, clouds hid the moon, a light rain began to fall. As we paused for a brief rest and check of our course, Lt. Burton gave a horse laugh and said, 'What the hell is the U.S. Cavalry doing in a place like this?' The original plan called for us to cross the swamp, the Lt. Burton and five men would go into hiding, to observe enemy activity during the day. I was assigned to be one of the three 'boat people.' We were expected to return to our lines, then return the next night to pick up the six 'observers.' When we finally reached solid ground the sky was lighting for a new day. So that called for a drastic change of plans. Where we landed our boats was near the rear of an old farm house. It appeared to me that there had once been a room or porch built on the rear of the fairly large house. This addition had long been neglected and had deteriorated to rubble. A thick and tall growth of weeds had taken over the site. Lt. Burton ordered us to crawl into that patch of weeds and stay until he returned. He took off with his tommy gun and grenades. As we lay there in the semi-darkness of dawn, I heard a 'clip-clop, clip-clop' down from the front of the house. I was raised on a Pennsylvania farm, so I recognized the walking of a farm horse. I was certain the horse had stopped in front of the house. A few moments later I heard voices, male and female. I didn't know which language was used. I assumed it was a mixture of French and German. Then the horse moved on, out of my hearing. I was certain it was a German soldier, buying milk or eggs from a French house- wife.

From their brief exchange of words, I assumed she had been expecting him to stop at her door. Time passed, the sun came out, warming our wet bodies. Very difficult to keep from dozing off.

I could hear occasional artillery fire. It sounded fairly close. As combat was a new experience to me, it took several minutes to realize the different sounds of war. There was no whistling sound or loud explosion. Then came the terrible realization. This was out-going artillery. A near-by German gun was firing what they called harassing fire across the swamp into the American zone! Long after this event, the thought came to my mind. Our artillery was much superior in number to the Germans.

Why wasn't our artillery answering these harassing shots? Was it because the word had been passed that an American patrol was out there in the swamp? It was much later before the full and frightening realization came to me. We were so far behind the enemy lines as to be a few yards away from an artillery piece. Many times since, I have tried to put that situation in perspective. This is what I assume:

MAP OF SWAMP



The German defense line was probably solid up to both edges of the swamp. They apparently didn't consider anyone would attempt such a stupid move as trying to cross the swamp.

So, we waited what seemed like hours, probably only two, for Lt. Burton to return. He did return, puffing with words, 'Get out of here quick!' So we didn't hesitate, we ran for the boats and began rowing furiously in the canal. We probably rowed 200 or so yards when a machine gun opened up behind us. Our instant reaction was to tip the boats side-ways and be spilled into the water, which was nearly neck deep. I had been rowing, my carbine laid in the bottom of the boat. It slid to the bottom of the canal. It is probably there yet. I righted the boat, began pushing it in front of me as I tried to walk in the water. I sensed that the others were doing the same. We kept walking in the deep water until we were exhausted. We climbed the bank onto solid ground. Fortunately, the grass was waist high. Back from the direction we had come was the black smoke of an exploding mortar shell. A few seconds later came another, then another. Each one coming ever closer to us. 'Walking' our mortar men called it. Each shell in a straight line, each one coming nearer. The last was about a hundred yards short of where we lay, then the shelling stopped. Apparently the Germans couldn't see us, and we had traveled farther than they realized. We lay scattered in the high grass for probably half an hour. We started walking, widely spaced apart, dragging our boats behind us. A few minutes later, a machine gun opened on us from the side. It was a long distance from us, but still could be fatal. so we hit the ground and lay quietly for several minutes. As we tried again, it was a repeat performance. This deadly cat and mouse game went on for probably an hour or more, take a few steps, then hit the ground again as the machine gun fired.

It was probably midafternoon when we realized friendly eyes were also watching us. We heard an artillery blast. Burton said it was direct fire, probably from one of our tanks. One round was all, and it silenced that pesky machine gun. Now we could walk freely. From the time we left the canal we kept distance between each other as we had been trained to do. So we stayed walking several yards apart. We had walked probably an hour or longer before anyone noticed one of our men was missing. No one could remember when or where he dropped out. It was too late to return to find him. Little 'Smitty,' the smallest member of the patrol. We walked steadily, through the tall grass, we were able to avoid the canals. An hour before sundown we reached an outpost of the 83rd Infantry. The sentries didn't challenge us. They seemed both surprised and pleased to see us. One of them led us back to a large stone farm house. This was the Headquarters of one of the regiments. I had never seen so much brass; colonels and majors in one group. The GIs gave us greatly appreciated rations and cigarettes, the first in nearly 24 hours. Lt. Burton was taken to another room for an hour long briefing with those high ranking officers. They seemed to have a great interest to learn what he had observed that morning. While this was happening the Germans opened up a violent artillery barrage. Some of the enlisted aides advised the officers to lie down on the floor. They did. It was amusing to me that some of them cursed like 'drunken sailors' because the Germans interrupted their meeting. Darkness came. An infantryman loaded us into a small truck, drove us back to our bivouac area. I dove into my foxhole, slept like a baby until I saw morning sunlight again.

That morning I retrieved my personal items. Then I found the supply truck. I asked for a carbine. Question--'What happened to the one you had?' Answer--'I dropped it in the swamp.' No more questions, nothing to sign, he handed me a carbine. The enclosed copy of after action report for June 1944 reads Lt. Burton led a patrol of nine men. The nine included Burton, three men in three boats. Three was the boat capacity. One man missing. I mentioned on a previous page--In July 2004, I visited the American St. Laurent Cemetery on the flat land above Omaha Beach. I found and photographed the grave of our buddy, missing on our first patrol. I copy the words exactly as inscribed on his headstone:

BERTON L. SMITH
TEC 5 83 RCN TRP 83 DIV
VIRGINIA JULY 4 1944

I said to the cemetery attendant. 'He died earlier than that.' (June 30 or July 1.) He replied, 'That is probably the day his body was found.'