



**This story is dedicated to the 24 Men who flew
in aircraft number 42-23638 on June 6, 1944**



Brian N. Siddall

Over and Out

The fog of war was an apt phrase to describe the situation in First Lieutenant William E. Hitzaler's aircraft. Soon after 0220 hours 6 June 1944 Hitzaler's aircraft became separated from his formation after running into low cloud cover shortly after passing over Ponte du Rozel on the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula.¹ First Lieutenant Berlin Middlebrooks, Hitzaler's wing man last, saw the Hitzaler climbing above the cloud cover. Within a few minutes, 18 paratroopers would be dropped 6 miles northwest of their Drop Zone and Hitzaler and his crew would be on the ground, as well.

The aircraft was from the 14th Troop Carrier Squadron, 61st Troop Carrier Group flying out of the Barkston Heath Airfield in eastern England. They were one of 818 C-47s loaded with paratroopers that made up the air armada for the invasion of Normandy. Their cargo was a stick of 19 Paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment Company F. The aircraft was Chalk 31 out of the 36 planes in serial number 24, their tail number 42-23638.

It was an uneventful flight until passing over the Guernsey Islands where the aircraft was hit by flak. Paratrooper Private Donn Cummings yelled out "my eyes I, can't see" after one of the windows shattered.² In the next few minutes, the red light came on for them to stand up and hook up. They came under ground fire from machine guns, wounding troopers Private Charles "Slim" Stout.³ First Lieutenant Walter "Chris" Heisler describes what happened next "I unhooked to take a look at Stout, who in an earlier night exercise refused to jump. I wanted to make sure that this wasn't the case now. After determining that, he was indeed wounded Stout had to be unhooked due to the severity of his wounds".⁴

In the cockpit, they heard the paratroopers yelling someone was hit and shortly after that Hitzaler and the Co-Pilot Second Lieutenant Stanley Edwards Jr. each spotted a river in the distance. In Hitzaler's account given at the end of June 1944 and Edwards book which came out 60 years they both make mention of this fact. They said they had been told that the troopers had to be dropped before crossing the river. Unfortunately for the paratroopers this was the wrong river. Their Drop Zone T was just before the Merderet River 7 miles to the east. The river that Hitzaler and Edwards both saw was the Douve. The pilot Hitzaler looked out of his window on the left and noticed a large fire in the distance just after spotting the river. The order was given to give the green light, ordering the paratroopers to jump.⁵

In a strange twist of fate, the only break the paratroopers had this night occurred because of the wounding of Stout. Since Heisler was the jumpmaster, it was his job to lead the stick out. He was unhooked and checking on Stout when the light came on. He had to get back to his feet and get back to the door of the plane and hook up. That delay meant he ended up missing the river and the flooded area around it. It also meant the rest of the stick would at least land on the east side of the river. Heisler led his stick out of the aircraft leaving behind Private Stout who was slumped on the seat. Donn Cummings, who had been wounded in the eyes, jumped, as well.

After dropping the paratroopers, Hitzaler turned the aircraft northeast towards England. He was under the impression that he was just northwest of St. Mere Eglise when in fact he was northwest of the village of Orglandes 5 ½ miles west of, St. Mere Eglise. Hitzaler realized that the rudder control was jammed, and the plane was slowly heading over to the left. The plane ended up doing a complete u-turn and circled back over the peninsula. Hitzaler's narrative given on 22 June 1944 he talks of the possibility of a water landing but decides against it due to the fact he feels that some of his crew can't swim, and the life rafts in the back of the plane probably suffered damage from the earlier machine gun fire. At this point, there is the wounded paratrooper in the back of the plane and the 5 man crew. At this point Hitzaler's narrative, he thinks they are coming back over the coast when picked up by spotlights when they are really approaching Valognes 8 miles inland.

After evading the searchlights of Valognes by climbing into the clouds, the aircraft could not escape the flak. The aircraft was fatally wounded by the 5th Battery of the 191st Artillery Regiment located in La Jardinerie just to the west of St. Joseph. The control panel was shot away by a light flak burst that also severely wounded the Radio Operator Staff Sergeant Orlo Montgomery. The Navigator Second Lieutenant John H. Hendry was

standing between the two pilot's seats with the Montgomery behind him when the aircraft was hit. Here is Hendry's account "I was standing between the pilot and co-pilot, who were at the controls, and Staff Sergeant Montgomery was standing directly behind me facing aft. As he fell he turned and wrapped his arms around my legs. I assumed he was seriously injured by the amount of blood loss. He passed into unconsciousness very soon after. His position in the plane when I left was in the aisle in the forward end of the ship."

The first men to bail out were Technical Sergeant Alvin F. Vezina the crew chief and the co-pilot Edwards. They came down near the town of St. Joseph. Edwards sprained his ankle while landing and both he and Vezina were captured and taken to the POW enclosure outside of Montebourg. The next man out was Lieutenant Hendry, once again he gives his account "The paratrooper was up and going after a chute at the time I bailed out. Whether he made it or not, I don't know. He was directly behind the bulkhead when I last saw him."⁶

This left the pilot Hitztaler and the two wounded men the paratrooper Stout and the critically wounded Montgomery. Here is Hitztaler's narrative account "one of the crew had been wounded, but I was the last to leave the aircraft, and at that time no one was left in the crew compartment. All other members went out the rear door. I did not have sufficient time left to check the rear area. I hooked, on my chest pack and went out the escape hatch."⁷ The fact was Stout, and Montgomery was both alive in the back of the aircraft. Montgomery was severely wounded and Stout was wounded in the legs.⁸ Hitztaler and Hendry would both work their way back to American lines after evading the Germans.

The aircraft crashed just northwest of Rouville, France with both men still aboard. The crash occurred on Monsieur Lecoquierre's land called Le Clos Neuf northeast of the village of Rocheville.⁹ In the morning, Monsieurs Pigol and Lemarotel recovered two bodies from the wreckage and buried them together 50 meters from the crash site. Later that same day Monsieur Lefillatre searched the crash site and recovered Lieutenant Hendry's cap with his name and ID which he later turned over to the American authorities.¹⁰

Lieutenant Chris Heisler was first out and first down, the only thing he saw was a farmhouse about 200 yards distant.¹¹ He said "I had a soft landing, with my toes just touching the ground, as the chute had snagged a tree. After cutting myself loose, I spent the day looking for the rest of my stick with no success." He took a position overlooking a major road and tried to keep track of the vehicles and German troops passing by. He tried to commandeer a German vehicle and describes the attempt here "I ambushed one German truck, not sure of the extent of the damage I'd inflicted. The Germans in the back of the truck took exception to being fired upon and shot back! I tossed a few grenades in their direction and decided discretion was the better part of valor."¹²

On 7 June, I decided that traveling by night would be the wisest course of action. Using my compass, I tried to follow the path of where I thought the plane had gone. While sleeping during the day, my position was discovered by a lone member of the Wehrmacht whom I disposed of with my rifle." Amazing enough Heisler got back to within visual distance of the American lines but never knew it. On the third day, he reached the village of Gourbesville less than two miles away from where his Battalion was encircled in what became to be known as Timmes Orchard. He describes his capture "after locating what I thought was a safe hiding spot later in the day, I was discovered by a group of German soldiers".¹³ Heisler was stripped naked in the village square and then after dressing taken into a building and interrogated.¹⁴

Radio Operator Emmet was captured and taken to the POW enclosure outside of Montebourg, then north to Cherbourg. While in the Temporary POW Camp he spoke with Company F Sergeant Al Mazurkewitz and the crew Chief Vezina.¹⁵ Emmet and Sergeant Mazurkewitz both escaped from the Germans on 11 June during a strafing of their POW column. Emmet later gave a report to Company F Captain Paul Smith about his experience on the aircraft.¹⁶ Emmet was killed in action on 3 July 1944 in the attack on La Fauverie.

Private Stout's remains were recovered along with Staff Sergeant Montgomery's remains at the crash site.¹⁷ He was first interred in the Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2 American Cemetery, then re-interred in the Normandy American Cemetery Plot B Row 7 Grave 19. Stout was a College Junior All-American before enlisting in the service, and was a starter on the 507th Spiders Basketball team in Alliance Nebraska.

Corporal Joe Romas managed to evade capture for three days as he wandered the hedgerow country of Normandy. On the third day, he joined up with 10 other paratroopers. Soon after their initial meeting, they were involved in a firefight where Romas was wounded. Romas was taken prisoner on 9 June. Corporal Romas spent the remainder of the war in Stalag 4B Muhlberg.¹⁸

Private Robert R. Taylor and Sergeant Carl Letson were each captured alone soon after hitting the ground. They were both taken to the POW enclosure outside of Montebourg, and then transferred to Cherbourg. Taylor said “I heard a man towards the middle of the plane yell out that he was hit when we crossed of the French coast. A few minutes later “Slim” Stout was wounded and slumped to a seat. Lieutenant Heisler unhooked and checked Stout out. He laid Stout on the seats and returned his position by the door and hooked up to the static line. I heard him shout ‘you can call me Chris, Snake, Heisler, whatever you want when we hit the ground.’ He then said let’s go and out he went”.¹⁹

Private First Class George Hitchcock and Private Bernard Ely were wounded and captured on 6 June and taken to the German Field Hospital outside of Orglandes. Ely was shot twice, one in the leg and once across his back. While transporting Ely on a stretcher, they had to stop and cut a hole in it to drain the large amount of blood lost by Ely.²⁰ The German Hospital was a large Chateau just north of Orglandes, on whose grounds they had erected a wooden structure that would eventually house 153 American POWs. Hitchcock was liberated on 16 June when the field hospital was taken by the advancing American forces and sent back to the states. Ely was transferred to the main German Naval Hospital in Cherbourg on 15 June and liberated on 27 June.

Private Ricardo Alvarez said “As we came over the coast one of the windows was hit by flak and exploded. One of the troopers by me screamed “my eyes; I can’t see”. Minutes later the order to jump was given and out the door I went. After my chute opened I look up and saw that the plane was on fire.”

“After hitting the ground I shucked the chute, climbed into a hedgerow and was loading my weapon when a squad of Germans opened fire. I was hit in the thigh and the hip. When the Germans came over I thought they were going to bayonet me as I lay there. I was shocked when a German officer, in flawless English asked me ‘where are you hurt soldier?’ I then showed the Officer where I was wounded and offered him the contents of my pockets. They were filled with cigarettes and other items, and I hoped it would keep the Germans from killing me.”

“The officer whistled for an ambulance that was going down the road to come over. I was placed aboard and within minutes arrived at the German Field Hospital (Orglandes). I was placed on a straw mattress and awaited medical aid. Before sunrise more wounded Americans arrived. In the morning, we were taken outside and put in order by the severity of our wounds. I was moved to the front because the blood from my leg wounds had saturated the area around my stomach. When the Doctor opened my jump suit and saw I wasn’t gut shot, he had me put in the back of the triage line.”

“I repeatedly vomited from the pain. A German soldier finally helped me to my feet so I could vomit away from my bedding. Later that morning I saw a truck load of POWs go by. I was transferred a week later to the Naval Hospital in Cherbourg, as the POWs were separated by those who were ambulatory and those who were not. Those who couldn’t walk on their own were taken to Cherbourg.”

“Near the end, German staff moved us to the basement as the area around the hospital was being shelled. I was liberated from Cherbourg on 27 June, taken by ambulance back to the beach, then set on a LST for the trip back to England. While in England, I received 5 surgeries on my damaged leg, and was then sent home to the states.”²¹

Private First Class Blair Terryberry was the only trooper from his stick that wasn’t captured. After landing he passed through a small village, avoiding a German soldier who was walking through the village. He later realized he was headed in the wrong direction. Terryberry then retraced his steps, and while passing through the same village was spotted by a soldier. He shot the man dead from his hip and continued on his way, rejoining his unit a few days later. Terryberry would be severely wounded during the Battle of the Bulge and sent home to the States.²²

Private First Class Robert Hurley and Privates John Hollman, Oliver Lindberg and Weldon Truett were captured and spent the remainder of the war in POW camps in Germany. The stories of their individual captures are not known. Private First Class John Wagner was involved in a firefight with a few other troopers and was wounded in the shoulder and ankle and spent the rest of the war as a POW.²³

Private Cummings jumped in spite of the wounds he'd sustained from flack. His body was recovered from an isolated grave late in June. Cummings was buried on the battlefield with Corporal E. Quentin Siddall, a paratrooper from B Company of the 82nd Airborne's 307th Engineers.²⁴ Siddall's stick had been dropped between St. Sauveur-le-Vicomte and Etienville. Cummings and Siddall were re-interred side by side in the Blosville Cemetery as they had been found on the battlefield.

Sergeant Harry LaChance was killed in action on 6 June. His body was recovered from the village of Hautville-Bocage outside of Orglandes. The German Graves Registration Unit from the 91st LuftLanding Division sent a report via the Red Cross of his death and burial location.²⁵ What was especially interesting was the German Graves Registration unit returned Sgt. LaChance's personal effects via the Red Cross.

Private John Ponder was wounded on 6 June and died soon after when the German Aid Station he was at was bombed by Allied aircraft. Ponder's body was found in an isolated grave the second week of July north of La Haye-du-Puits,²⁴ and was interred in the Blosville Cemetery on July 15, 1944.²⁶

Private Glenn Ball's story is the last to be told. Ball was captured after the jump and ended up in Cherbourg. On 11 June, a large group of American POW's departed via rail from Cherbourg. This group was composed of a large number of 507th Company C and Company F men and Company B men of the 505th PIR, as well as a mix of 101st men mis-dropped in the Valonges/Montebourg area. When the train reached Bricquebec, they had to get off and march, as the tracks had been damaged by Allied bombing.²⁷ The column of approximately 150-200 men snaked its way down the roads of the central and western parts of the peninsula on their way to St. Lo.

Private First Class Joe Plis gave his account of the strafing, "While passing through the village of Besneville four American P-47's came from the west. One of the POW's in the front of the column waved an orange recognition panel to the approaching aircraft. The lead aircraft then waggled its wings signifying recognition but then strafed the entire POW column. We all tried to find cover along the road and in ditches."²⁸

Private Robert Taylor picks up the story "One of the troopers wounded during this strafing was my bunkmate from Alliance Private Glenn Ball. He suffered three .50 caliber wounds, one in the head and two that angled down from his shoulder into his body. His wounds were tended by me, John Hollman from his stick, as well as another Company F man Private First Class Joe Plis. Hollman and Ball were best friends from the beginning."

"We finally managed to finally get Ball's bleeding stopped late in the evening of the 11th. Ball was a large man who kept trying to get up during the night. At one point, early the next morning in a brief moment that Ball was left unattended, he managed to stand briefly which started the bleeding again. He died a short time later from the wounds sustained the previous day."²⁹

Plis takes up the story again, "during the night Ball kept asking who was going to take care of his wife and daughter. It was Ball's only concern. For 61 years, I lived with this memory. I was finally able to speak with Glenn Ball's daughter Glenda. She was only two when her father was killed."³⁰ Joe Plis was able to relay that her father's last thoughts were only of his family.

There were other 507th men involved in this strafing from this stick. Carl Letson said that the only reason he survived the strafing was that Ball fell on top of him, and protected him from the bullets.³¹ Some of the other 507th were Company C men Sergeant Jack Kestler, Privates First Class Kenneth Mershon and Clyde Inman. Sergeant Kestler led the burial detail the next day.³² According to Kestler, 19 men were killed outright, and 23 were wounded. During the night, 4 more died of their wounds. The 23 men were buried in the Churchyard at Besneville in a mass grave. Their bodies were disinterred at the end of June by Graves Registration personnel and re-interred in the Blosville Cemetery on 30 June. Four Company C men were killed in that strafing, Corporal Clement Sparks, Privates First Class Billie North, Fred Whiteford and Eugene Wilcox.

There are several glaring omissions here. They had a Navigator and were lost from their formation yet the navigator never mentions that he is trying to determine their position. The next is the mention by both pilots of the river they had to drop before. None of the other pilots mentions having to drop before the river. They were briefed the first river was a landmark. Time and distance were used for the Neptune mission. In this case, neither time nor distance is mentioned by any of the aircrew. They dropped the paratroopers three minutes early and six miles short. If they had just waited three more minutes, they were headed directly for the Drop Zone.

The greatest error had not yet occurred. I contacted the former Mrs. Montgomery late in 2009 about the fate of her husband. The Army had notified her that her husband had died in the crash of his plane. However, she did not believe this account as shortly after the war was over William Hitztaler the pilot of this plane had lunch with Mrs. Bernadine Montgomery. She related part of the conversation that concerned Orlo's death. She said that Hitztaler stated unequivocally that he had seen her husband leave the plane without his parachute.³³ Why Hitztaler told her this fact will never be known. Even if he didn't realize Montgomery was lying behind him within a few feet severely wounded, Montgomery did not jump out of the plane without a chute. This has to be one of the cruelest things ever a family has been told about their loved one. Now that Orlo Montgomery's family has been located DNA comparisons can be done. It is now going on six years and the Army will not perform a DNA test on Orlo's remains in the Normandy American Cemetery in France even knowing these facts.

Today

A monument to the paratroopers and aircrew sits on the site of the crash. This simple, yet elegant monument was put in place to remember the sacrifices that these men made in the liberation of France. A yearly ceremony is held to commemorate the 6 June crash of stick #31. 61 years later Chris Heisler still returns to remember what was lost, and what eventually was gained, by the sacrifices made by these seven men of Chalk #31.

¹ MACR 6139 Middlebrooks Statement

² MACR 6139 Mazurkewitz Statement

³ Ibid

⁴ Author Interview w/Chris Heisler

⁵ MACR 6139 Hitztaler Statement

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ MACR 6139 H.A. Schaefer Report

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Author Interview w/Chris Heisler

¹² Ibid

¹³ Heisler Book In Their Own Words pg 156

¹⁴ Ibid pg 171

¹⁵ MACR 6139 Mazurkewitz Statement

¹⁶ MACR 6139 Smith Statement

¹⁷ MACR 6139 H.A. Schaefer Report

¹⁸ Bryan Romas Report pg 2

¹⁹ Author Interview w/Robert Taylor

²⁰ Author Interview w/Ivan Ely

²¹ Author Interview w/Ricardo Alvarez

²² Author Interview w/Ed Norment

²³ Author Interview w/Eileen DeTray

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- ²⁴ Siddall and Cummings GR Form 1
 - ²⁵ German Graves Registration Form
 - ²⁶ Ponder GR Form 1
 - ²⁷ Hanson POW Statement to VA
 - ²⁸ Author Interview w/Joe Plis
 - ²⁹ Author Interview w/Robert Taylor
 - ³⁰ Author Interview w/Glenda Shobe
 - ³¹ Author Interview w/Robert Donnelly
 - ³² Author Interview w/Jack Kestler
 - ³³ Author Interview with Bernadine Montgomery Dillon

Paratroopers

<i>Drop Order</i>	<i>Army Serial #</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Full Name</i>	<i>Company</i>
1	0-1295712	1st Lt	Heisler, Walter C.	Co F
2	20904872	T/5	Emmet, William P.	Co F
3	15114250	Pvt	Stout, Charles G.	Co F
4	12073642	Cpl	Romas, Joseph E.	Co F
5	37506031	Pfc	Taylor, Robert R.	Co F
6	6907291	Pfc	Hitchcock, George R.	Co F
7	12080559	Pfc	Terryberry, Blair W.	Co F
8	12073199	Sgt	Letson, Carl R.	Co F
9	12073323	Pfc	Hurley, Robert T.	Co F
10	38450695	Pfc	Hollman, John E.	Co F
11	35557626	Pfc	Wagner, John C.	Co F
12	17150861	Pvt	Cummings, Donn W.	Co F
13	35629657	Pfc	Ball, Glenn	Co F
14	39233735	Pvt	Ponder, John L.	Co F
15	38441081	Pvt	Alvarez, Ricardo R.	Co F
16	36185914	Pvt	Lindberg, Oliver	Co F
17	34121996	Pvt	Truett, Weldon F.	Co F
18	35623444	Pvt	Ely, Bernard D.	Co F
19	11998049	Sgt	LaChance, Harry E., Jr.	Co F

Aircrew

<i>Army Serial #</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Full Name</i>	<i>Position</i>
0-524956	1st Lt.	Hitztaler, William E.	Pilot
0-701914	2nd Lt.	Edwards, Stanley E., Jr.	Co-Pilot
0-698627	2nd Lt.	Hendry, John H.	Navigator
39678075	T/Sgt.	Vezina, Alvin F.	Crew Chief
17089122	S/Sgt.	Montgomery, Orlo A.	Radio Operator

Bundles

<i>Rack #</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Gross Weight (lbs.)</i>	<i>Chute Color</i>
1	60mm Mortar (1) & 60mm Ammo	197	
2	LMG Ammo	219	
3	LMG (1) & LMG Ammo	243	

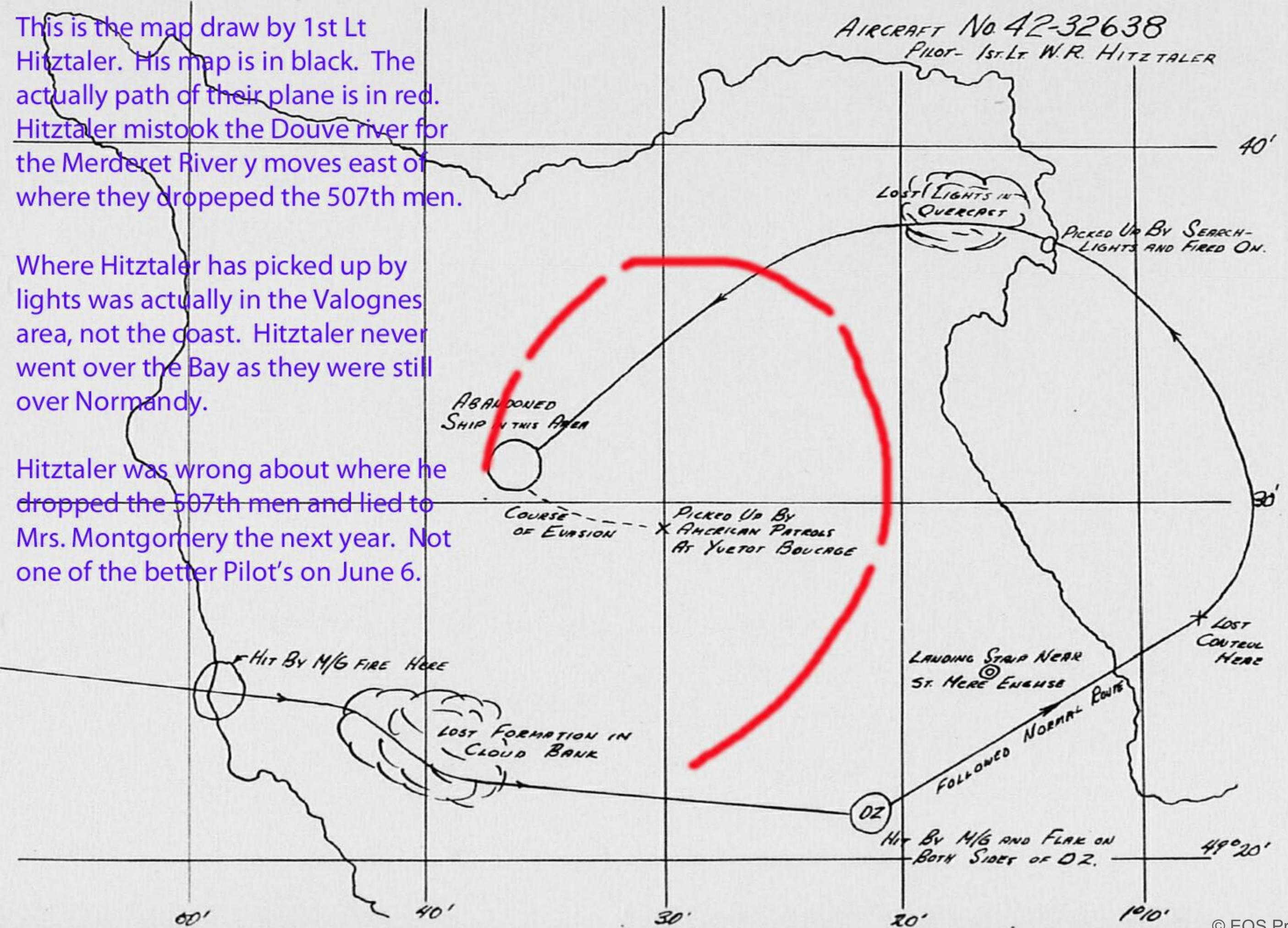
AIRCRAFT No 42-32638

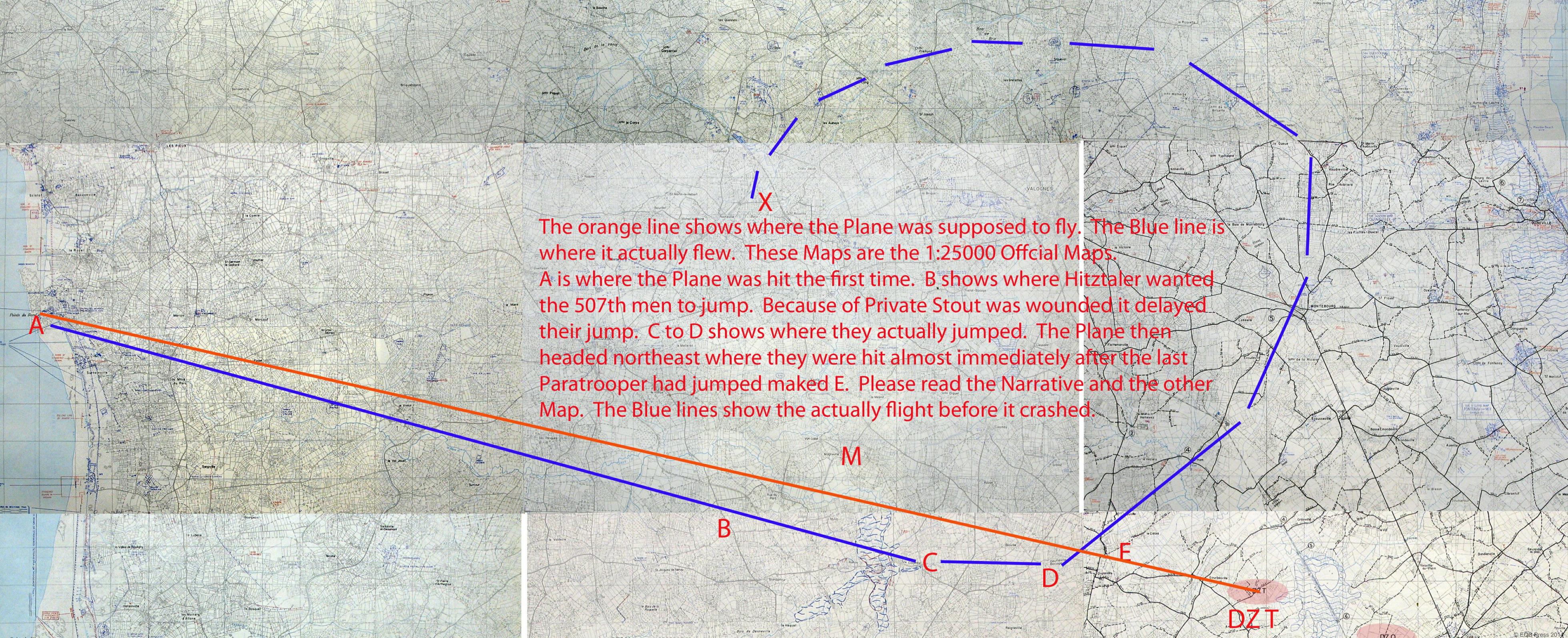
PILOT - 1st Lt W.R. HITZTALER

This is the map draw by 1st Lt Hitztaler. His map is in black. The actually path of their plane is in red. Hitztaler mistook the Douve river for the Merderet River y moves east of where they dropeped the 507th men.

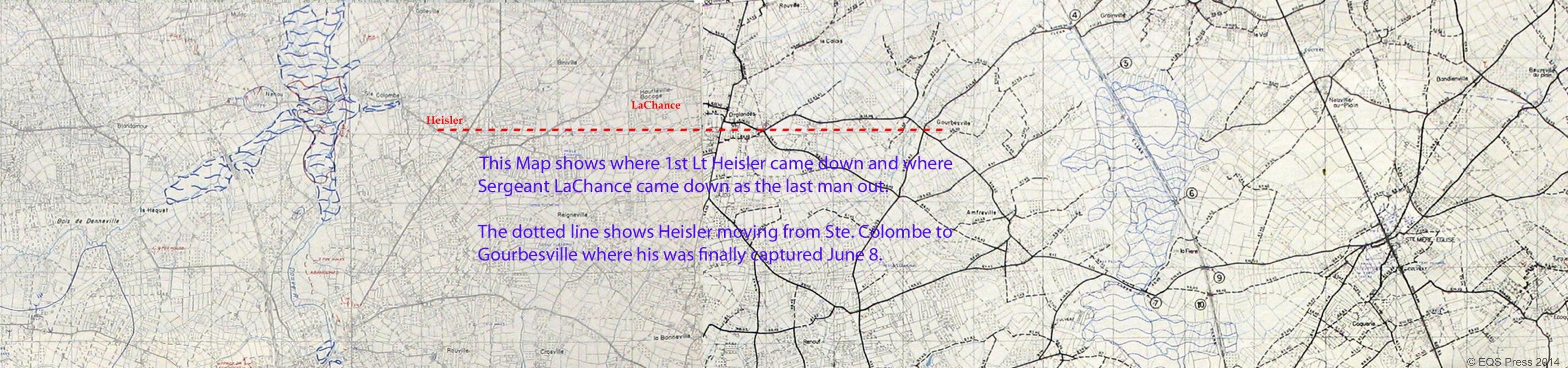
Where Hitztaler has picked up by lights was actually in the Valognes area, not the coast. Hitztaler never went over the Bay as they were still over Normandy.

Hitztaler was wrong about where he dropped the 507th men and lied to Mrs. Montgomery the next year. Not one of the better Pilot's on June 6.





The orange line shows where the Plane was supposed to fly. The Blue line is where it actually flew. These Maps are the 1:25000 Official Maps. A is where the Plane was hit the first time. B shows where Hitztaler wanted the 507th men to jump. Because of Private Stout was wounded it delayed their jump. C to D shows where they actually jumped. The Plane then headed northeast where they were hit almost immediately after the last Paratrooper had jumped marked E. Please read the Narrative and the other Map. The Blue lines show the actually flight before it crashed.



Heisler

LaChance

This Map shows where 1st Lt Heisler came down and where Sergeant LaChance came down as the last man out.

The dotted line shows Heisler moving from Ste. Colombe to Gourbesville where he was finally captured June 8.