



KNOCKED-OUT AMERICAN TANKS OUTSIDE AVRANCHES

Coutances. Near St. Sauveur-Lendelin a dense mine field held up progress. Reconnaissance troops vainly searched side roads for alternate routes, tank dozers came forward to construct bypasses, and the main body remained in place for three hours until engineers swept and demined the main road. Under way again, CCB met scant opposition. The armor found no VII Corps troops at Monthuchon and continued to the outskirts of Coutances during the afternoon. When armored infantry dismounted and, accompanied by light tanks, entered the city on foot, German rear-guard troops fought back with artillery, mortar, and small arms fire. A sharp skirmish ensued. Supported by an artillery battalion that threaded its way forward through the stationary armored column, the armored infantry by evening had cleared Coutances of its

scattered defenders. German artillery on high ground several miles east of the city gave brief and half-hearted interdictory fire.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of 28 July, VIII Corps at last held Coutances, the objective that had lured the corps forward for almost a month. COBRA had accomplished what the battle of the hedgerows had not, but Coutances in the process had lost its value. More important, General Middleton had two armored divisions at the head of his troops, almost in position to pursue a withdrawing enemy—almost in position, but not quite, for although the

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<sup>23</sup> 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl, 28 Jul; VIII Corps G-3 Per Rpt 44, 29 Jul; see Abbé Georges Cadel, "Au Pays de Coutances," in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, I, 166-87. General Wood received the DSC for his inspiring leadership at Coutances during the engagement.

spearheads were in place, the columns were strung out and backed up through the countryside. The armor would require another day to wriggle through the infantry.

From a study of the terrain, it seemed that the Germans might try to anchor their right on Tessy-sur-Vire and withdraw their left. On this basis, the Germans might try to consolidate defenses and hold on one of three possible lines: Tessy-Coutances; Tessy-Granville; or Tessy-Villedieu-les-Poëles-Avranches.

By the end of 28 July, however, the Germans had lost Coutances and appeared incapable of stabilizing the front in the Cotentin. There was little indication of defensive preparations. The Germans seemed "completely disorganized with no sign of co-ordinated resistance." Air reconnaissance disclosed no movement of reinforcements toward the area roughly bounded by Coutances, Avranches, and Percy. On the contrary, German vehicular columns were cluttering the roads below Bréhal, Gavray, and Percy as they hurried south under punishment administered by American tactical aircraft. Destroyed and burning vehicles lined almost every main road. Trees along a 200-yard line in Coutances had been notched for felling across the highway, but were still standing when American troops arrived, clear evidence of the haste of the German withdrawal. Mines were scattered along roads and at intersections rather than in disciplined patterns. Defenders of the few isolated roadblocks that existed fought half-heartedly. Bridges were sometimes demolished, sometimes not. A small amount of light-caliber artillery fire harassed the American advance, but

the bulk of the German artillery was en route south.<sup>24</sup>

Convinced that German reinforcements must be on their way to the Cotentin from Brittany and from sectors east of the Vire River, American commanders hoped to overrun the potential defensive lines that remained in the Cotentin before the reinforcements could arrive. General Middleton consequently raised his immediate sights to Avranches.<sup>25</sup>

On a picturesque bluff 200 feet high, Avranches overlooks the bay of Mont St. Michel and the famous rock clearly visible eight miles away. Avranches fascinated the Americans, not because of the sights that have interested tourists for so long but because it is at the base of the Cotentin. For practical-minded Americans in July 1944, Avranches was the symbol of egress from the Cotentin and entrance into Brittany.

Avranches lies between two rivers, the Sée and the Sélune, which flow westward to the bay about four miles apart. The city snuggles against the Sée where two highway bridges funnel traffic from five highways arriving from the north and the east—two from Granville, one each from Coutances, Villedieu-les-Poëles, and Brécey. Below Avranches the roads are compressed into one main highway leading due south and across the Sélune River near Pontaubault, where the highway splits, the roads diverging and affording access to the east, south, and west. A bottleneck in the north-south road network, protected by water on

<sup>24</sup> VIII Corps G-2 Per Rpt 44, 28 Jul; FUSA Air Sec Msgs, 1800 and 2201, 28 Jul, 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl File, and G-2 Per Rpt 49, 29 Jul.

<sup>25</sup> VIII Corps Msg, 0030, 29 Jul, 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl and File.

three sides, situated on commanding terrain, Avranches in the summer of 1944 was a prize beyond compare.

On the evening of 28 July, armored spearheads of the VIII Corps were more than thirty miles from Avranches, but separated from the city, General Middleton believed, only by scattered opposition. He ordered the 6th Armored Division to strike swiftly through Granville to Avranches while the 4th Armored Division took Cérences, then moved southeastward to secure a crossing of the Sée River at Tirepied, several miles east of Avranches. The capture of Avranches and of crossing sites over the Sée and Sélune Rivers would make possible the commitment of the Third Army into Brittany, and to this end the 4th Armored Division was to hold open the natural bottleneck at the base of the Cotentin and block German forces that might threaten the slender corridor from the east. Attaching forty Quartermaster trucks to the 79th and 8th Divisions, Middleton instructed each of these infantry division commanders to motorize a regimental combat team. The teams were to be ready to assist the 6th and 4th Armored Divisions, respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after daybreak, 29 July, the leading units of the 6th Armored Division moved southwest of Coutances to the Sienne River. At the destroyed bridge of Pont-de-la-Roque, small arms fire from the south bank stopped the advance. When reconnaissance revealed no other river crossing site in the division zone, CCA prepared a full-scale assault. The arrangements consumed most of the day. After a five-minute artillery preparation reinforced by tank

<sup>26</sup> VIII Corps Msg, 2355, 28 Jul, VIII Corps G-3 Jnl and File.

and tank destroyer fire, armored infantrymen crossed the river early in the evening against light mortar and small arms fire and dispersed the few defenders. Engineers began to construct a bridge and prepare a ford.

The ground gained was disappointing, and the loss of 3 killed and 10 wounded as against only 39 prisoners taken seemed to indicate that the division had been less than aggressive in its initial action. General Patton noted this pointedly to the division commander, as did General Middleton, who tersely commanded General Grow to "put on the heat."<sup>27</sup>

On the left, the 4th Armored Division was making better progress. General Wood saw that his axis of advance, the Coutances-Hyenville-Cérences highway, crossed the Sienne River in three places. Anticipating that the Germans would have destroyed the bridges, he requested permission to use, in addition, the parallel highway—the Coutances-Lengronne road—two miles to the east. Unfortunately, the road was in the VII Corps sector. After a conference at corps and army echelons and despite recognition that VII Corps troops driving westward from Montpinchon would probably overflow the highway and cause confusion and delay, the road was reassigned to the VIII Corps. General Wood then ordered CCB to use both main highways, a course of action the tankers had already initiated.<sup>28</sup>

Brig. Gen. Holmes E. Dager's CCB

<sup>27</sup> George S. Patton, Jr., *War as I Knew It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), pp. 96-97; Ltr, Grow to OCMH, 29 Mar 56.

<sup>28</sup> VIII Corps G-3 Jnl, entry 0250, 29 Jul; VII Corps Ops Memo 51, 29 Jul (confirming oral orders 28 Jul); 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl, entry 0040, 29 Jul, and Overlay (Routes of CCB, 4th Armd

had worked through the night of 28 July to clear the scattered enemy troops in Coutances and just south of the city. At daybreak, 29 July, when two armored columns departed, only a few armed Germans and a profusion of mines remained in Coutances.<sup>29</sup> A damaged bridge immediately south of the city was quickly repaired.<sup>30</sup> Then, as fighter-bombers provided air cover, the armor drove forward on two routes, meeting sporadic resistance so disorganized that deployment was usually not necessary in order to overrun and eliminate it. Interference from VII Corps tanks that overflowed from the adjacent corps zone was more serious, though not fatal. The CCB columns encountered and destroyed several German tanks late in the afternoon and rolled on to the Sienne River at Cérences and south of Lengronne. There, destroyed bridges brought the advance to a halt.

In gaining about ten miles on 29 July, CCB had sustained little more than 30 casualties and had taken 125 prisoners. The problem of handling surrendering enemy threatened throughout the day to consume more time and energy than did the terrain, traffic, and spotty resistance. "Send them to the rear disarmed without guards" became a standing operating procedure.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Div, East and West Elements), 1230, 29 Jul, 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl; Interv by author with Gen Collins, Washington D.C., 2 Sep 55.

<sup>30</sup> 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl, 29 Jul, and CCB S-3 Jnl, entry 0614, 29 Jul; VIII Corps G-3 Jnl, 29 Jul. Col. Louis J. Storck, the CCR commander, was killed when a mine destroyed his jeep in Coutances.

<sup>31</sup> Capt. William F. Pieri, who deactivated a row of mines blocking the bridge and enabled the armor to continue, was posthumously awarded the DSC.

<sup>32</sup> 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl, 1825, 29 Jul, and CCB S-3 Jnl, entries 0730, 1033, and 1430, 29 Jul.

By the end of 29 July, the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions were sufficiently forward to give promise of rapid thrusts to the south on the following day. Nothing the enemy seemed capable of doing appeared strong enough to block the advance. The "disorderly withdrawal of the enemy throughout the period continued, showing no signs of slackening." German vehicular movement southward still clogged the roads south of Bréhal and Cérences. Sporadic fire from isolated self-propelled guns harassed American bridging parties along the Sienne River, but other than that the leading units of VIII Corps were out of contact with organized German defenses. To the rear of the armor, the infantry divisions had held in place and collected about a hundred prisoners. The 79th and 8th Divisions each had a motorized regimental combat team ready to reinforce the armored divisions. The corps artillery had fired only registration missions, had reconnoitered forward areas, and had displaced to the south as rapidly as possible. All seemed in readiness for a decisive thrust to Avranches.<sup>32</sup>

To General Middleton, the 4th Armored Division instead of the 6th now seemed in a better position to secure Avranches. The 4th was also manifesting the superiority over untested units that experienced troops generally display. Earlier in the month, to the horror of some armored experts who had protested that an armored division should not be used to hold a static front,

<sup>32</sup> FUSA Sitrep 108, 30 Jul, G-2 Per Rpt 50, 30 Jul, and Msg, 0320, 30 Jul, 83d G-2, G-3 Jnl and File; VIII Corps G-2 Weekly Rpt 6, 29 Jul, and G-3 Per Rpt 45, 30 Jul.

General Middleton had assigned the 4th a portion of the defensive line on the Carentan-Périers isthmus. There, during the week before COBRA, the division had learned enough of actual combat to acquire a confidence that was evident in its operations of 28 and 29 July. To take advantage of these factors, Middleton gave Avranches, the corps objective, to General Wood. The 6th Armored Division was to capture Bréhal and Granville.<sup>33</sup>

Dissatisfied with the progress of CCA, General Grow wished to get CCB (Col. George W. Read, Jr.) into action. He therefore passed CCB through the 6th Armored Division forces holding the bridgehead at Pont-de-la-Roche. Anticipating little resistance at Bréhal, Grow expected CCB, after driving through the town, to bypass Granville on the east and encircle it from the south.<sup>34</sup>

As expected, little besides small arms fire along the main road opposed the approach to Bréhal. CCB leapfrogged forward, firing high-explosive shells and canister into wooded areas along the road, and reached the outskirts of town, where a log roadblock with a rolling steel gate barred the way. After a flight of four P-47's made several unsuccessful passes at the obstacle, the lead tank in the column simply rammed the block, knocked down the logs, and opened a passage into the main street of Bréhal. After several random shots, a few bedraggled Germans were herded into the town square.

South of Bréhal, CCB passed a pre-

pared but undefended roadblock and drove through light artillery fire intercepting the highway to Granville. General Grow halted the advance short of the city to consolidate his gain. The division had moved about twelve miles, had taken more than 200 prisoners against 2 men killed and 10 wounded, and was demonstrating that it, too, was capable of aggressive and assured action.

Meanwhile, the 4th Armored Division was carrying the main effort of VIII Corps. As soon as General Wood had learned that he was to take Avranches, he notified the CCB commander: "Present mission cancelled—using any roads [in zone] . . . move on Avranches . . . to capture it and secure crossings east thereof."<sup>35</sup> For all the urgency implied in this order, the destroyed Sienne River bridges at Cérences and south of Lengronne continued to thwart advance until the afternoon of 30 July, when engineers bridged the stream. Only then could both columns of CCB cross the river and proceed to the south.

The eastern column ran into an ambush almost at once and after losing six half-tracks spent the rest of the day eradicating the resistance. Dismounted infantry, with support from artillery and a flight of fighter-bombers, attacked German positions on high ground obstructing the advance, while antitank gunners engaged and destroyed two German tanks. At the approach of darkness the Germans retired, then shelled the high ground they had vacated, apparently on the premise that American infantrymen had occupied it. But the Americans had abandoned the hill to outpost the

<sup>33</sup> VIII Corps Msg, 29 Jul, 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl and File.

<sup>34</sup> 6th Armd Div FO 3, 0300, 30 Jul.

<sup>35</sup> 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl, entry 2130, 29 Jul.

tanks on the road during the night. When the skirmish ended, CCB had incurred 43 casualties and lost eight half-tracks.

The western column, under the personal command of General Dager, had better luck. Tanks moved rapidly for about ten miles through la Haye-Pesnel and Sartilly against virtually no resistance. Three and a half miles north of Avranches, the troops unknowingly passed within several hundred yards of the *Seventh Army* advance command post. General Haussler, Generalmajor Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr Gersdorff, and other general staff officers made their way to safety through the meticulously regular intervals of the column serials. On foot at first, later in commandeered vehicles, the German officers fled eastward through Brécey toward Mortain.<sup>36</sup>

The CCB column continued to the Sée River just north of Avranches and discovered that both highway bridges were intact. Early in the evening troops entered Avranches, an undefended city for all its prize aspects. After outposting the southern and eastern outskirts quickly, General Dager sent a small force eastward along the north bank of the Sée to secure the bridge at Tirepied, five miles away.<sup>37</sup>

The situation as it was known at VIII Corps headquarters on the evening of 30 July was obscure, even to the achieve-

ment at Avranches.<sup>38</sup> Abundant evidence indicated the complete absence of organized resistance in the corps zone. Airplane pilots reported having seen Frenchmen from Granville to Villedieu-les-Poëles "waving the Tri-Color," which obviously meant that the Germans had withdrawn south of that line. Civilians reported Germans asking the road to Mayenne, twenty-five miles to the south. Prisoners, numbering 1,200 on 30 July, consistently affirmed that German units were completely out of contact with each other and with higher headquarters.<sup>39</sup> Yet the experience of the 6th Armored Division in the coastal sector and the ambush of the 4th Armored Division eastern column pointed to the presence of hard-fighting enemy units. At the same time the whereabouts of the column in Avranches was unknown. If, as was rumored, troops of the 4th Armored Division's CCB had entered Avranches, then the VIII Corps left flank from Gavray to Avranches, a distance of ten miles, was wide open since the adjacent VII Corps on the evening of 30 July was crossing the Sienne River at Gavray.<sup>40</sup>

Unable to believe that German disorganization was as great as represented, General Middleton was hopefully cautious until he learned definitely that American troops were in Avranches. Then, late on the evening of 30 July, Middleton acted with dispatch. He ordered Wood to push through Avran-

<sup>36</sup> James B. Hodgson, Report of Interview [on Avranches] With General von Gersdorff, 1954, MS R-40, OCMH.

<sup>37</sup> Armor in the Exploitation or the 4th Armored Division Across France to the Moselle River (Ft. Knox, Ky., May, 1949), a research report prepared by Committee 13, Officers Advanced Course, p. 20; Koyen, *Fourth Armored Division*, pp. 25, 26.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, VIII Corps Msg. 2030, 30 Jul, 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl and File.

<sup>39</sup> FUSA G-2 Per Rpt 51, 31 Jul; VIII Corps G-2 Jnl, 30 Jul, and Tel Msg. 1000, 30 Jul, VIII Corps G-3 Jnl.

<sup>40</sup> VIII Corps G-2 Jnl, 30 Jul; see above, p. 307.

ches and across the Sélune River and attached to the 4th Armored Division the motorized regimental combat team of the 8th Division that was ready to move. To prevent intermingling of the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions on the restricted road net, Middleton told Grow to take Granville and move only as far toward Avranches as the Sartilly-la Haye-Pesnel line.<sup>41</sup>

Appreciating the necessity for speed and on-the-spot co-ordination, General Wood delegated control of all the 4th Armored Division forces in the vicinity of Avranches to General Dager by attaching to CCB not only the infantry regiment of the 8th Division but also CCA (Col. Bruce C. Clarke), which he had already dispatched to Avranches.<sup>42</sup>

Taking Avranches was not enough. The narrow coastal corridor, consisting of the single main highway from Avranches to the Sélune River crossing near Pontaubault, four miles to the south, had to be made secure to allow the Third Army to pass into Brittany. The troops thus needed to hold Avranches and at the same time to seize and hold essential adjacent objectives: river crossings south and southeast of Avranches and high ground east and southeast. Part of the high ground between the Sée and Sélune Rivers—rugged terrain where several reservoirs and dams were located—was an eventual objective of the VII Corps, but responsibility for the portion south of the Sélune near the village of Ducey belonged, as did the

other tasks around Avranches, to General Dager's CCB.<sup>43</sup>

General Dager learned at 0200, 31 July, that he was soon to receive additional forces to help him hold Avranches, establish Sélune River crossing sites, and take Ducey. The news was opportune, less in terms of seizing the other objectives than in holding the one he had taken with such ease the afternoon before. The fact was that trouble had developed at Avranches.<sup>44</sup>

First indications that Avranches might not be as easy to hold as it had at first appeared had developed about two hours before midnight of 30 July. At the Sée River bridge on the main highway from Granville, men of a CCB tank company detected the approach of a large German vehicular column along the coastal road from Granville. Because the vehicles were marked with red crosses, the tankers assumed they were evacuating German wounded. They allowed the first few to pass and cross the bridge into Avranches. But when Germans in several of the trucks opened fire with rifles, the tankers returned the fire and destroyed a few vehicles, thus blocking the road. With the column halted, German soldiers piled out of their vehicles and came toward the bridge, hands high in surrender. The tank company took several hundred prisoners. Examination revealed that the vehicles were loaded with ammunition and other nonmedical supplies.

Learning from their prisoners that

<sup>41</sup> VIII Corps G-3 Jnl, 30 Jul.

<sup>42</sup> 4th Armd Div G-3 and CCB G-3 Jnls, 30 Jul; Halas, VIII Corps Ops, pp. 79-82; Ltr, Wood to OCMH, 24 Mar 54, OCMH Files.

<sup>43</sup> See VII Corps AAR, Jul.

<sup>44</sup> VIII Corps Msg, 0200, 31 Jul, 4th Armd Div G-3 Jnl and File; 4th Armd Div CCB S-3 Jnl, 30 and 31 Jul; see Jean Séguin, "Remous de la Lutte autour d'Avranches," in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, I. 208-31.

another, more heavily armed German column was also approaching down the coastal road from Granville, the men of the tank company became jittery. Small arms fire shortly after midnight announced the arrival of the second column. When an enemy shell struck an ammunition truck and set it ablaze, the tank company commander reached a quick decision. His position illuminated, lacking infantry protection for his tanks, and outnumbered by his prisoners, he ordered withdrawal. Without having lost a man or a tank, the company abandoned several hundred prisoners and the Granville road bridge to move eastward to the Sée River bridge on the Villedieu-les-Poëles road.

Over the unguarded bridge the Germans, before daylight on 31 July, entered Avranches in considerable numbers. Some emplaced several artillery pieces on the northwest edge of the Avranches bluff to dominate the bridge and the Granville road. Others in a column of trucks, horse-drawn wagons, and tracked vehicles turned eastward and disappeared into the darkness, headed toward Mortain. Still others moved toward the southern exits of Avranches, where they bumped into armored infantrymen of CCB, who were outposting the southern approaches to the city. Surprised, both American and Germans opened fire. In the confused fight, the action of one machine gunner, Pvt. William H. Whitson, was a deciding factor. Before he was killed, he destroyed nearly 50 Germans and more than 20 light vehicles with his .30-caliber gun.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Pvt. Whitson was posthumously awarded the DSC.

The Germans turned back, but only to reorganize for a second attack that came after daylight. The CCB infantrymen were ready. Using white phosphorus mortar shells effectively and supported by the providential appearance of a flight of P-47's, they held their ground. When the attack collapsed, several hundred Germans surrendered.

Meanwhile, General Dager had discovered the abandonment of the bridge on the Granville road and ordered the tank company commander to return. The company reached its former positions on 31 July, about the same time that advance units of CCA were arriving on the scene. When the German artillery pieces on the bluff opened fire on CCA, tankers engaged them while armored infantrymen crossed the river, mounted the bluff, and captured the pieces.

By the afternoon of 31 July General Dager was sure that the Germans at Avranches had actually been seeking an escape route and not attempting to recapture Avranches. Dager considered the town secure.<sup>46</sup> He directed CCA to move on to the other task—seizing the main bridge across the Sélune at Pontaubault, a secondary bridge at Ducey, and two dams several miles southeast of Avranches. While the bridges were of prime importance, the dams were hardly less so. If the Germans destroyed the water gates and flooded the Sélune, an immediate advance would be out of the question.

The CCA commander, Colonel Clarke, divided his troops into four task forces. He directed each to one of the

<sup>46</sup> For his leadership, General Dager was awarded the DSC.



ABANDONED GERMAN EQUIPMENT LITTERS A ROAD TO AVRANCHES

four objectives, which were to be secured before nightfall that day, 31 July, and ordered the forces to bypass resistance. There was no information about the enemy, nor was there time to reconnoiter. With speed the important element, the task forces planned no special tactical dispositions to provide advance or flank security. Since there was no time to obtain air support liaison parties for the individual task forces, fighter-bomber pilots without direct communication to the tankers found their own targets and kept track of progress on the ground by the bright cerise panels on the rear decks and the white painted stars on the tops of the tanks.

One task force took Ducey after several short skirmishes and outposted the bridge there. Another secured its

dam objective after overcoming minor resistance. A third was well on its way to taking the other dam after plunging through a series of small roadblocks, knocking over several German motorcyclists, destroying a few enemy tanks, running a gantlet of exploding shells in a destroyed ammunition dump, and finally capturing a company of German infantrymen who walked into the task force outposts on the assumption they were German positions.

It seemed illogical to expect the Pontaubault bridge, four miles due south of Avranches, to be captured intact. If the bridges at Avranches still stood through German oversight, it was unlikely that the same mistake would be made again. American reconnaissance pilots nevertheless had reported on 30



DESTROYED ENEMY VEHICLES CLUTTERING A STREET IN AVRANCHES

July that the Pontaubault bridge was apparently in good condition and unguarded. As late as the afternoon of 31 July, pilots still failed to detect any German troops near the bridge.<sup>47</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Germans were trying to get into position to contest the Pontaubault bridge. They were too late. As a task force of the 4th Division's CCA swept across the bridge in the late afternoon of 31 July and outposted the important road intersections immediately south of it, enemy vehicles approached from the west. Tank and artillery fire quickly dispersed them.

The action completed by the 4th Armored Division by the morning of 1 August gave VIII Corps three crossing

sites over the Sée River (two bridges at Avranches and one at Tirepied, five miles to the east) and four over the Sélune—easily enough routes to enter Brittany. With the division in position to continue south, General Middleton ordered the 6th Armored Division, which had cleared Granville of scattered resistance and moved to the la Haye-Pensel-Sartilly line, to relieve the 4th at Avranches and Pontaubault. He also dispatched another regimental combat team of the 8th Division to the vicinity of Avranches and sent artillery and anti-aircraft units to guard the critical roads and bridges.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> VIII Corps G-3 Jnl, entries 1525 and 1935, 31 Jul; see Charles de la Morandiére, "L'Angoisse de Granville," and Mme. Paule Mortgat-Lhommer, "Les Alliés aux Portes d'Avranches," in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, I, 188–200, 201–07.

<sup>48</sup> VIII Corps G-3 Jnl, entries 1330 and 1430, 31 Jul.