

officers. As the American riflemen began to fall back in confusion, a tank destroyer officer, 1st Lt. Jack G. Hubbard, who was nearby, quickly assumed command and held the men in place until another infantry company came forward and dispersed the Germans.⁵⁴ Rain on 13 July nullified air support, and the two regiments again registered inconclusive gains.

When the 330th Infantry of the 83d Division crossed the Tribehou causeway over the Taute River to Vincenterie and was attached to the 9th Division at noon, 14 July, General Eddy set his sights on the Périers-St. Lô highway. He lined the four infantry regiments abreast along an east-west line between Vincenterie and le Désert with the intention of driving quickly across the four miles to the objective. As the attack began, the major problems became evident: an excessively broad front, terrain that canalized offensive action, an infinite number of hedgerows, and an enemy who infiltrated in stubborn groups. All three battalions of the 60th Infantry fought through the night of 14 July against enemy troops that cut wire communications between the battalions and the regimental headquarters. A German company with captured Sherman tanks boldly approached a 47th Infantry roadblock and shot up the outpost. Mines, earth and log obstructions, wrecked vehicles, and debris impeded the division attack. The Germans blew craters in roadbeds and felled trees across the narrow country lanes. While the engineers devoted the bulk of their efforts to keeping the channels of communication and advance open, opera-

tions became "a succession of difficult frontal attacks from hedgerow to hedgerow." By the end of 15 July, after six days of combat, even the seasoned and battle-trained 9th Division had advanced scarcely six miles.⁵⁵

The situation was somewhat similar for the 30th Division. While the infantry had met the *Panzer Lehr* attack, the attached CCB had secured Hill 91 at Hauts-Vents and organized defensive positions about a thousand yards to the south. CCB was to have been released from attachment after capturing Hauts-Vents, but for four days the armor held the most advanced point of the 30th Division line, sitting "on a hot spot" and receiving artillery fire from front and flanks, plus occasional strafing and bombing from American planes. Formerly anxious to be rid of the combat command, General Hobbs now argued to keep it because, as he said, he feared the armor in pulling out might "mix up the roads" and because his own attached tank battalion was a 60 percent loss.⁵⁶ The simple truth was that General Hobbs needed the combat command to insure retention of Hauts-Vents.

By the end of 11 July, its fifth day of battle, the 30th Division had sustained 1,300 casualties, and the men who remained were "dead on their feet." Tankers who fought all day long and serviced their vehicles a good part of the night frequently reported, "Tanks need maintenance, men need rest." Four

⁵⁴ 9th Div G-3 Jnl, 0415, 15 Jul, and AAR, Jul; 15th Engr C Bn Opns Rpts 25 and 26, 14 and 15 Jul; VII Corps AAR, Jul.

⁵⁵ Hobbs Telecons, 1657 and 1853, 15 Jul, Collins and Hobbs, 1250, 16 Jul, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File; see 30th Div G-3 Jnl, 13 Jul.

⁵⁴ 899th TD Bn Opn Rpt, Jan-Dec 44.

days later, after fighting to come abreast of the combat command, the 30th Division had taken even heavier losses, almost another 2,000.⁵⁷

In coming virtually abreast of the combat command at Hauts-Vents by 14 July, the 30th Division was in advance of units on its flanks and found itself compressed into a narrow zone. Hauts-Vents is at the northern tip of a narrow ridge leading directly to the Périers-St. Lô highway. Scarcely two miles wide and rising between the Vire River on the east and the Terrette River on the west, this ground sharply defined the 30th Division's zone of advance. The division positions represented a kind of peninsula in an enemy sea that had to be defended as much on the flanks as at the tip. Because the narrow ridge denied maneuver room, the troops had no choice but to operate on the exposed eastern and western slopes. The men on the faces of the ridges presented good targets to German enfilading fire from the flanks. German artillery pieces emplaced across the Vire River in defense of St. Lô inflicted 90 percent of the casualties incurred by the 119th Infantry on the division left flank. For effective counterbattery fire, the 30th Division on at least one occasion directed missions fired by U.S. artillery battalions east of the Vire. The division suddenly became highly conscious of the importance of camouflage, though meas-

ures undertaken seemed to improve the situation but little.⁵⁸

Although the Vire River was an effective barrier to enemy infiltration on the left flank, the Terrette was not large enough to deny movement. The primary requirement on the right thus was a closely tied-in series of defensive strongpoints. Compressed into a narrow zone, the 30th Division could do little but hold doggedly to its positions, concentrate on preserving its defensive integrity, hope fervently that the adjacent units would soon come abreast, and advance whenever possible in the slow, tedious process of moving frontally from one hedgerow to the next.

On 14 July, in conjunction with an attack launched on the east bank of the Vire River, the 30th Division, after several days of effort, finally secured the bridge at Pont-Hébert. Possession of the bridge plus the presence of the combat command at Hauts-Vents constituted a threat to St. Lô from the west. Although the Germans defending St. Lô were by this time fighting off an attack by the XIX Corps directly toward the city, they were sufficiently concerned with the indirect threat to increase their artillery fire against the 30th Division. They became very much aware of the fact that continued American progress in the Taute and Vire sector would outflank the entire *LXXXIV Corps*.⁵⁹

Delayed by both the *Panzer Lehr* counterattack and a combination of enemy and terrain, the 9th and 30th Divisions still were short of fulfilling their

⁵⁷ Telecon, Corlett and Hobbs, 1507, 11 Jul; 3d Armd Div CCB S-3 Rpt 1, 11 Jul; 743d Tk Bn Unit Rpts 7 and 8, 10 and 11 Jul. All in 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File. FUSA Daily Estimated Loss Rpt, Jul. Capt. John S. Milligan, Jr., of the 197th Field Artillery Battalion was awarded the DSC.

⁵⁸ 35th Div Arty Unit Rpt 4, 35th Div Arty AAR, Jul; 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File, 11-14 Jul.

⁵⁹ Est of Situation, 12 Jul, *Seventh Army KTB*.

missions when a new factor emerged to modify General Bradley's earlier split of the Taute and Vire River area. As his new plan to get out of the Cotentin approached maturity, the ground near the Périers-St. Lô highway became a vital necessity. To make possible a joint effort by the 9th and 30th Divisions toward the new objective—the Périers-St. Lô highway—General Bradley shifted the corps boundaries again. At midnight on 15 July, General Collins' VII Corps relinquished the Carentan-Périers isthmus to the VIII Corps and assumed control of the area between the Taute and the Vire.

When General Collins surveyed his new VII Corps sector on 16 July, he saw a discouraging prospect. The divisions, although excellent, battle-proved units, were making no more than painfully slow progress toward the Périers-St. Lô highway. On the right, sudden and repeated incursions by small groups of enemy troops on the flanks and in the rear of the 9th Division were disturbing. On the left, the 30th Division's advance along a narrow ridge line with its flanks exposed to fire and infiltration looked less than comforting. Although both divisions had combat commands of armor attached and could have used them, developing plans for the new First Army attack required that the combat commands be withdrawn and reunited under parental control. General Collins detached the armor on 16 July, though he retained two tank companies with the 30th Division and three with the 9th.⁶⁰

The attack then continued as before. Believing that the 9th Division had made

a minor breakthrough on 16 July, General Eddy optimistically hoped to be astride the objective by dusk that day.⁶¹ The hope was premature. The soft terrain of the Terrette River valley and the ubiquitous hedgerows virtually stultified maneuver. The 30th Division was reluctant to abandon the high ground of its ridge sector to clear the valley of the Terrette, while the 9th Division was occupied all along its front and unable for a time to make a special effort on its left flank.

Not until 17 July, when the 330th Infantry finally gained positions close to the Périers-St. Lô road and thereby insured the 9th Division a secure right flank, could General Eddy begin a systematic sweep of the river valley. While the 330th Infantry reverted to its parent 83d Division, the organic regiments of the 9th Division took up the new assignment. At the same time, the 30th Division captured two small bridges and eliminated the possibility of enemy infiltration on the division's right flank.

Four days after the VII Corps assumed control of the sector, the 9th and 30th Divisions reached ground that overlooked the Périers-St. Lô highway between the Taute River and the Vire. The Germans continued to deny the road itself. Although "resistance remained undiminished," the VII Corps attack ceased.⁶² The troops held a line adequate, General Bradley believed, for initiating the new First Army operation.

In moving eight miles from the Vire et Taute Canal to the Périers-St. Lô highway, the 30th Division between 7

⁶⁰ FUSA Msg, 2015, 16 Jul, XIX Corps G-3 Jnl and File.

⁶² 9th Div AAR, Jul.

⁶⁰ 9th and 30th Div AAR's, Jul.

and 20 July lost over 3,000 men; the 9th Division between 10 and 20 July sustained about 2,500 casualties.⁶³ Although the divisions were several hundred yards short of the highway, they

dominated the road by fire. The VII Corps was abreast of the positions attained several days earlier by the VIII Corps, which dominated the same highway between Lessay and Périers.

In the meantime, the First Army offensive had again been broadened, this time by an attack east of the Vire River, where the XIX Corps was trying to take St. Lô.

⁶³ FUSA Daily Estimated Loss Rpts, Jul; 30th Div G-3 Jnl, 1935, 15 Jul, 2335, 17 Jul; Telecon, Collins and Hobbs, 1600, 17 Jul, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.

CHAPTER VIII

The Battle for St. Lô

The Objective

Before the summer of 1944 the provincial city of St. Lô—primarily a market town but also a political and administrative capital—enjoyed a prosperity common to most agricultural centers and reflected a touch of more than rural elegance imparted by the society of officialdom. By the middle of June 1944 this once “charming and serene little city” had become “no more than a heap of smoking rubble.” On the day the Allies invaded the Continent, 6 June, Allied planes had bombed the power plant and railroad station and then made concentrated and repeated attacks that seemed to the inhabitants to have been motivated by the sole intention of destroying the city. Almost 800 civilians lay dead under the ruins by the morning of 7 June, and Allied bombers returned every day for a week to increase the devastation.¹

Although German propaganda pointed to St. Lô as an example of how the Allies were liberating France, the inhabitants apparently harbored less resentment than the Allies had expected. The French exhibited a “pathetic eagerness” to understand why the Allies had

selected St. Lô as an air force target long before the ground troops were near the town. There were several reasons: hope of hindering German troop movements by making a roadblock of the town itself, “a choke-point”; desire to destroy the *LXXXIV Corps* headquarters, located in a suburb until 16 June; and plans to take St. Lô nine days after the invasion.²

The Americans’ unsuccessful efforts to capture St. Lô in June only stimulated desire for it. Although destroyed, the city at the beginning of July remained a place of vital interest both to the Americans who had helped demolish it and to the Germans who still held it. St. Lô had prestige value, and its continued retention by the Germans or its seizure by the Americans would have a strong effect on the morale of the opposing forces. The capital of the De-

¹ Robert Patry, *St.-Lô*, pp. 15–16 (English translation); see also J. de Saint-Jorre, “Saint-Lô sous les Bombes,” and A. Legoy, “Exode de Saint-Lô,” in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, I, 85–101, 102–04.

² XIX Corps AAR, Jul; FUSA Psychological Warfare Div Ltr, Bombing of St. Lô, 4 Jul, FUSA G–3 Jnl; Rpt of the Supreme Commander, p. 7; *Seventh Army KTB, Anlagen, Lagenkarten*, 6.VI.–30. VI.44. Cities bombed on 6 and 7 June to produce “choke-points” were Caen, Villers-Bocage, St. Lô, Pontaubault, Coutances, Thury-Harcourt, Lisieux, Falaise, Vire, and Argentan. General Omar N. Bradley and Air Effects Committee, 12th Army Group, *Effect of Air Power on Military Operations in Western Europe* (Wiesbaden, Germany, 1945) (hereafter cited as Bradley, *Effect of Air Power*), p. 28; *Sunday Punch in Normandy: the Tactical Use of Heavy Bombardment in the Normandy Invasion*, Wings at War Series, No. 2 (Washington, 1945), p. 19.



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partment of the Manche, St. Lô was politically and psychologically important to the French. A Norman road center rivaling Caen, St. Lô would give the Allies additional lateral communications and routes to the south. The Americans felt that their possession of St. Lô would correspondingly deny the Germans the ability to move troops and supplies easily from one side of the Vire River to the other immediately behind the front.

By mid-July, the prestige factor and the value of the city as an access point to roads leading south gave way to a more important reason. Because of its location at the apex of the Coutances-St. Lô-Lessay road triangle, the city was specifically important to General Bradley's emerging plan for achieving more rapid advance in the Cotentin. A premise of the new plan was American possession of St. Lô, a need that by mid-July imparted a sense of urgency to the battle for the city.³

The Germans had anchored their positions on the hills north and northeast of St. Lô, advantageous terrain for defense. At first they fought not so much to hold St. Lô as to maintain their line. The city was useless to them for lateral communications because it was within range of U.S. artillery, and their troop and supply movements were taking place far to the south. But in July, just before the Americans opened their attack toward the city, the Germans captured an American field order. With St. Lô revealed as a major U.S. objective, the Germans reappraised its worth and

determined to challenge the effort to the extent of their strength.⁴

German strength appeared adequate. St. Lô was the responsibility of the *II Parachute Corps*, which held the sector between the Vire and the Drôme Rivers. On the left (west) were three kampfgruppen—one each from the *353d*, the *266th*, and the *352d Divisions*—under the operational control of the *352d* headquarters. On the right was the *3d Parachute Division*. In support was the *12th Assault Gun Brigade*. Although the troops in the line were spread thin across a wide front, they were veterans. The corps commander, Meindl, though concerned with what amounted to a manpower shortage for his wide front, felt certain that the defensive skill of his troops and the excellent positions would offset to a great extent the rather sparse dispositions. He was confident he could keep the Americans out of St. Lô.⁵

The old part of the city of St. Lô occupied a rock bluff that was crowned by ancient ramparts, a tower, and the graceful double spires of a fifteenth century church. Surrounding the bluff, modern St. Lô spreads across the lowlands and up the slopes of encircling hills. The Vire River, flowing generally northward, enters the city from the southwest, executes a horseshoe loop, and leaves to the northwest. The greater part of the city lies east of the river and outside the horseshoe. (*Map III*)

The western suburb of St. Lô, inside

³ Answers by Gens Smith and Bull to questions, 14-15 Sep 45.

⁴ *Seventh Army KTB* (Draft), 11 Jul.

⁵ *Seventh Army KTB* (Draft), 11 Jul; Telecons, Pemsel to Hauser, 1220, 11 Jul, and Pemsel to Tempelhoff, 1245, 11 Jul, *Seventh Army Tel Msgs; OB WEST KTB*, 11 Jul; MS # B-401 (Meindl).

the horseshoe loop, is on the high ground that extends westward to Coutances. The northern part of St. Lô rises steeply toward the plateau-like top of Hill 122. On the east, the city spreads toward the base of the Martinville ridge, an eminence that ascends in a gentle slope for four miles to Hill 192. The southern portion climbs very briefly toward high ground that dominates the southern approaches.

Two main highways intersect at St. Lô, and five blacktop roads converge on the city. On the west, the highway from Coutances and the road from Lessay and Périers merge inside the river loop before crossing the stream into town. From the north two routes arrive, one the highway from Carentan through Pont-Hébert and along the western slope of Hill 122, the other the road from Isigny along the eastern edge of the hill. From the east, the road from Caumont merges with the highway from Bayeux and Caen at the Bérigny fork (seven miles from St. Lô) and the resultant single large highway runs along the south face of the Martinville ridge and into town. From the south one highway and two roads enter the city.

At the time of the invasion, St. Lô had been in the V Corps zone. Commanded by Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow, who had directed the landings on OMAHA Beach and the drive to Caumont, the V Corps in June had anchored the American left flank firmly on Caumont and in mid-June had surrendered the St. Lô region to the XIX Corps, under General Corlett. Yet the configuration of the terrain—specifically, the location of Hill 192—is such that both corps had

to participate in the direct attack toward the city.⁶ Hill 192 is the culminating point of the high ground that straddles the Bérigny-St. Lô road four miles northeast of St. Lô. In the V Corps zone of operations, Hill 192 gave the Germans observation not only of the V Corps sector as far to the rear as the invasion beaches but also of all the approaches to St. Lô. Capture of the height thus was a prerequisite to the XIX Corps attack on the city. The XIX and V Corps consequently planned co-ordinated action for simultaneous attacks east of the Vire River on 11 July.⁷

Hill 192

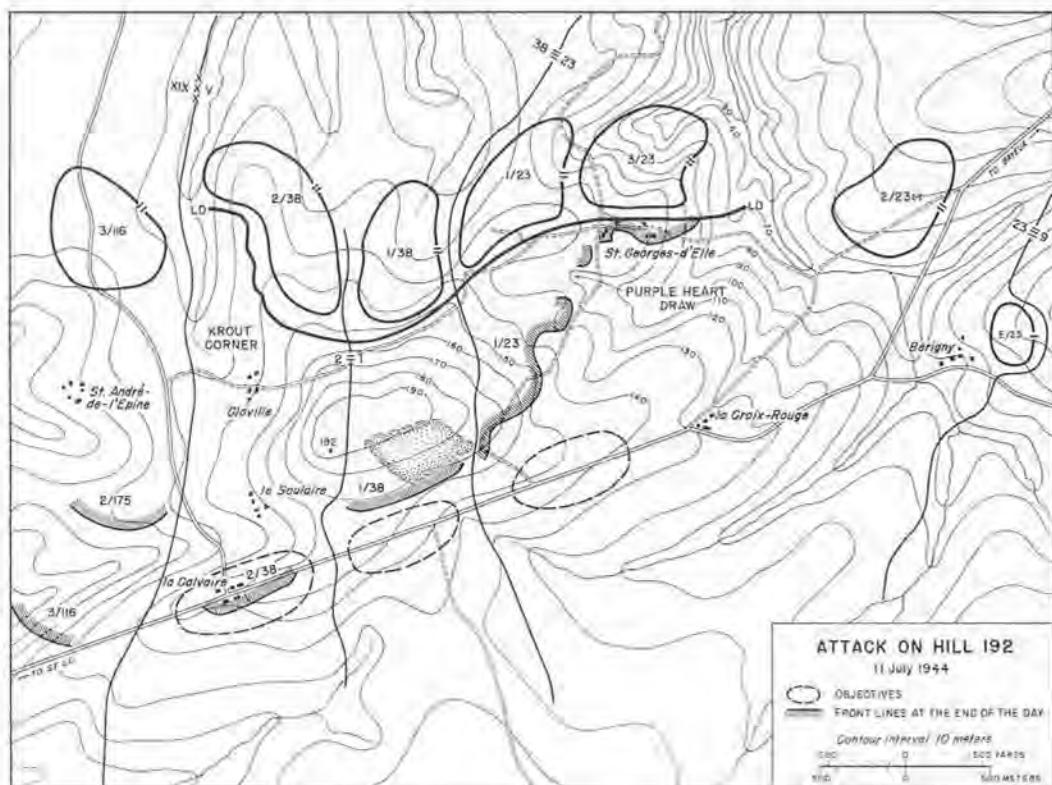
As the offensive east of the Vire began, the focal point of the operations initially developed on Hill 192 and involved the right (west) flank unit of the V Corps. While the 2d Armored and the 1st Infantry Divisions on the left (east) of the V Corps sector defended Caumont and held the pivot point of the projected First Army wheeling movement, the 2d Infantry Division attacked on the right to secure Hill 192 in conjunction with the XIX Corps attack toward St. Lô.⁸ (*Map 8*)

Under Maj. Gen. Walter M. Robertson, division commander since 1942, the 2d Division had arrived in Normandy

⁶ FUSA Ltr, Timing of Attack as Set Forth in FO 1, rev as of 1 Jul, 2 Jul, FUSA G-3 Jnl File.

⁷ XIX Corps Memo, 7 Jul, XIX Corps G-3 Jnl; Air Plan for Support of the 29th Div and Ltr of Instr, 10 Jul, 30th Div G-3 Jnl.

⁸ *V Corps Operations in the ETO, 6 Jan. 1942-9 May 1945* (G-3 Historical Sub-Section; n.p., n.d.), pp. 101ff. This is an excellent source containing a narrative account, reproductions of important documents, and annexes detailing the activities of the supporting services.



MAP 8

the day after the invasion and had participated in the early drive from OMAHA Beach. Considered a good unit, the division had no illusions about taking Hill 192 easily, for an attempt in June had cost over 1,200 casualties within three days.⁹ The division awaited the inevitable order to attack the hill again; and while in physical contact with the enemy at distances varying from several yards to a few hedgerowed fields, the division shelled the hill thoroughly, drew up elaborate plans of attack, and conducted training specifically designed for

the assault. The training emphasized tank-infantry-engineer proficiency in applying the tactics of demolition, fire power, and speed in the hedgerow terrain. To achieve speed in the attack, troops scooped holes, large enough for tanks to drive through, in the hedgerow embankments that served as the line of departure—holes that left a thin shell of earth on the side facing the enemy; when the attack order came, the tanks would be able to crash through under their own power. Bursting through the hollowed-out hedgerows, the tankers hoped to be upon the Germans in the next row before antitank weapons could be brought to bear.

⁹ See Ltr, Eisenhower to Marshall, 5 Jul, Pogue Files.

Hill 192 had been "so pounded by artillery that aerial photographs showed it as a moth-eaten white blanket."¹⁰ Yet it was a strong position. The slopes of the hill rise gradually to a rather flat top, and the small fields bordered by hedgerows and the scattered woods that surface the slopes provided concealment for the defenders. Hedgerows presented natural defensive lines in depth. Sunken lanes provided excellent lines of communication easily protected by a few carefully sited weapons. Several hamlets and occasional farmhouses offered shelter for crew-served weapons and centers of resistance. A tower concealed in a diamond-shaped patch of woods, earlier destroyed by U.S. artillery fire but rebuilt by the Germans, gave the defenders a good observation post. A battalion of the *3d Parachute Division* occupied the hill and had fortified it with an intricate system of mutually supporting positions.

The Germans maintained a tight counterreconnaissance screen, made maximum use of sunken roads and hedges, and employed roadblocks, wire entanglements, and mine fields. Although the main defensive positions were judged shallow—perhaps only two or three hedgerows in depth—the Americans expected the Germans to defend with determination and vigor and to employ local counterattacks to retain their positions. There seemed to be few if any German tanks in the area, and intelligence officers estimated that the *II Parachute Corps* did not have an impressive amount of artillery. The Americans were sure, however, that prior registration would enable the Germans to cover

the approaches to St. Lô and also the slopes of Hill 192 with precision fire.

The "top of the hill is the big thing," General Gerow said, but to make it secure the 2d Division had to advance beyond it and occupy a two and a half mile stretch of the Bérigny highway between the Calvaire road and the Bérigny fork. The other corps units were to make a strong demonstration; air support was arranged; the corps artillery and four artillery battalions of the other divisions in the corps sector were to reinforce the 2d Division fires.¹¹

The 38th Infantry (Col. Ralph W. Zwicker), on the right (west) and less than a thousand yards north of the crest of Hill 192, was to make the main assault with three tank companies and two heavy mortar companies attached. The 23d Infantry (Lt. Col. Jay B. Loveless), in the center, was to send one battalion across the eastern slope of the objective. The 9th Infantry (Col. Chester J. Hirschfelder), in position east of the Bérigny fork, was to support the division attack with fire.

Since a haze limited visibility on the morning of 11 July, the planned air support was canceled. The artillery fired a heavy preparation for twenty minutes, and shortly after 0600 the division jumped off.¹²

The preceding night Colonel Zwicker's 38th Infantry had withdrawn several hundred yards for safety during the anticipated air strike, and when the regiment jumped off the troops immediately

¹⁰ 2d Div G-3 Jnl, 0925, 11 Jul, FO 5, 6 Jul, and G-3 Per Rpt 33, 12 Jul; V Corps FO 10, 4 Jul.

¹² [Garth], *St.-Lô*, pp. 58-60. This American Forces in Action booklet contains an excellent detailed account of the battle for St. Lô with emphasis on small unit action.

¹⁰ Sylvan Diary, 11 Jul.