

junction with the 30th Division attack on the other side of the river, gave the 35th a favored position. With a foothold on the ridge road, the Americans held an excellent approach to St. Lô from the northwest. Having outflanked the German strongpoint at Carillon, they also threatened Hill 122. Though the 320th Infantry, which was echeloned to the left rear for two miles, could do little more than exert unavailing pressure against Carillon, the 137th had fashioned an enveloping pincer against the Carillon-Hill 122 complex from the west. A similar pincer from the east would form a double envelopment of Carillon and Hill 122. Because the 29th Division, with the bulk of its forces on the Martinville ridge, did not have enough troops in position to assault Hill 122 from the northeast, Corlett shifted the division boundary to the east, to the Isigny-St. Lô highway, giving the 35th Division more maneuver space and Hill 122 as an objective. Corlett released the 134th Infantry from the corps reserve and directed Baade to take the height. In preparation for the attack, the 134th on 14 July replaced two battalions of the 115th Infantry that were west of the Isigny-St. Lô highway, thereby getting into position to strike for Hill 122 while at the same time bringing relief to the overextended 29th Division.³⁵

General Baade's intention was to attack with both flank regiments. While the 320th contained the Germans at Carillon, the 137th, on the right, was to advance across the Pont-Hébert-St. Lô ridge road. The 134th, on the left, was to move forward in direct assault

against Hill 122. Success on the flanks would neutralize the Carillon position, eliminate Hill 122, and open the way for an easy advance to the final division objective, the stretch of the Vire River between the loop and the bend.

A need to diverge from this plan became obvious on 15 July soon after the 137th Infantry attacked on the right to cross the Pont-Hébert-St. Lô ridge road. Artillery and mortar fire directed from Hill 122 inflicted 117 casualties and stopped the regiment cold. The 137th could not advance, General Baade deduced, until the 134th Infantry took Hill 122.

Colonel Miltonberger's 134th Infantry also had attacked early on 15 July. The axis of advance was a country road, dirt-surfaced and narrow, from Villiers-Fossard through Emélie to the hardly discernible flat top of the hill. The road parallels the Isigny-St. Lô highway, a mile to the east, and rises slightly for almost three miles as it mounts the gentle northern incline of Hill 122, then drops down the precipitous descent into the northern edge of St. Lô. On both sides of the road typical *bocage* terrain offered advantages to the defenders—impressive hedgerows and sunken lanes that are veritable caves.

The 134th Infantry moved toward the cluster of farm buildings at Emélie behind a rolling artillery barrage. Almost immediately the men became enmeshed in a tangle of hedgerowed lanes and a shower of enemy fire. The threat of confusion hovered over the battlefield as small units fought for individual fields. Although the regiment suffered high casualties in severe splinter actions, it had the hamlet of Emélie by noon.

³⁵ 35th Div AAR, Jul.

Encouraged by this success, General Baade told Brig. Gen. Edmund B. Sebree, the assistant division commander, to form a task force and lead it in the remaining thrust to the crest of Hill 122. Uniting the 134th with two companies of the 737th Tank Battalion, a company of the 60th Engineer Battalion, and a platoon of the 654th Tank Destroyer Battalion, General Sebree completed his preparations by evening.³⁶ At 2030, after planes bombed German positions around St. Lô and as the 29th Division attacked in its sector, the task force of the 35th Division jumped off.

In the deceptive illumination of twilight, the task force moved swiftly. Advancing up the north slope of Hill 122, General Sebree called on direct fire support from one artillery battalion, parts of two others, and the entire 82d Chemical Battalion. It was a mile to the crest of the hill, and the task force was there by midnight. While the infantrymen dug in, engineers hauled sandbags, wire, and mines up the incline to bolster defensive positions against counterattacks that were sure to follow. The Germans still had sufficient maneuver room north of St. Lô to launch counterattacks, but the integrity of the German strongpoint had been at least temporarily cracked.

The expected counterthrust came in the early hours of 16 July and drove the infantry back slightly until a newly committed reserve battalion helped restore the line.³⁷ Later that day the Germans launched another attack, supported by heavy mortar and artillery fire. This

time American infantrymen gave way in sizable numbers—some stragglers fled back to Emélie—but a counterassault picked up momentum and troops of the 35th Division crossed the crest of Hill 122 despite heavy artillery fire.³⁸ As German artillery and mortar shells continued to fall on the hill, American troops had an astonishingly clear view of St. Lô, barely a mile away.

Capture of Hill 122 foreshadowed the end of the battle. With this bastion lost, the German defenses around St. Lô began to crumble. On 17 July, the 137th Infantry on the division right was finally able to break across the Pont-Hébert–St. Lô ridge road. Driving south toward the Vire River, the regiment encountered diminishing resistance. Meanwhile, the 320th Infantry prepared to mop up the Carillon area, which the Germans had virtually abandoned.³⁹

“Come Hell or High Water”

Although the end of the battle for St. Lô could be foreseen on 17 July, capture of the city had not seemed imminent on 14 July when the 29th Division had paused to reorganize and prepare to renew the attack. Though the city was but 3,000 yards away, it remained in many respects almost as elusive as it had through the first three days of the battle.

Narrowing the 29th Division front to

³⁸ XIX Corps Msg, 1720, 16 Jul, FUSA G-3 Jnl; 35th Div Rpt of Situation, 0930, 17 Jul, XIX Corps G-3 Jnl and File. T. Sgt. Joseph P. Fuller and Pfc. Buster E. Brown received the DSC for heroic action.

³⁹ S. Sgt. Carl J. Frantz, T. Sgt. Irvin F. Conley, and T. Sgt. Harold D. Snyder were awarded the DSC for actions on 11, 13, and 17 July, respectively.

³⁶ Memo, 15 Jul, 35th Div G-3 Jnl.

³⁷ 35th Div G-3 Jnl, 1145, 16 Jul. 1st Lt. Vernon W. Pickett was awarded the DSC for his defensive action.

exclude Hill 122 had provided the troops a fresh hope when they resumed the attack on 15 July. After a day of reorganization and rest, the 115th Infantry moved out along the Isigny-St. Lô road, the 116th made the main effort along the crest of the Martinville ridge on a 600-yard front, and the 175th Infantry gave fire support from positions echeloned to the left rear along the Bérigny road.

For all the expectations, the attack on 15 July began to show signs of dismal failure. The 116th immediately lost seven medium tanks to enfilading enemy fire from the south. Despite diversionary attacks launched by the 175th Infantry and air strikes by the IX Tactical Air Command, the main effort did not get rolling.⁴⁰ On the division right, the 115th lost several hundred yards as the result of confusion. Intermingling battalions and misplaced tanks disrupted regimental control. Lack of proper coordination with the 35th Division caused misunderstanding and an exchange of fire among U.S. troops. The firm action of an artillery liaison officer, who took command of an infantry company and restored order and discipline, prevented a panicky withdrawal. A tank platoon nearby might have helped the regiment to regain the lost ground, but the tank commander could not locate a key infantry officer. While the tankers waited for instructions, the tanks remained idle.⁴¹

The division commander, General Gerhardt, was at first cautiously optimistic. "Looks like we are maybe going to roll," he said. His optimism later

changed to stubborn determination. "We're going to keep at this now," he announced, "come hell or high water." Since the day passed with little more than an exchange of counterbattery fires and reorganization of some units, General Gerhardt planned a night attack. "We might do it tonight," he said. Several hours later he admitted, "We . . . did not make the grade."⁴² The 115th and 175th Regiments had made no appreciable gain, while the 116th Infantry, commanded now by Col. Philip R. Dwyer, had made what looked like no more than a minor initial advance.⁴³

Unknown to the division commander at the time, an event had taken place during the night that was to exercise a significant and fortunate influence on the battle of St. Lô. Two assault battalions of the 116th Infantry had been making good progress along the Martinville ridge when the division headquarters, evidently lacking accurate knowledge of the situation and fearing an overextension of lines, had ordered a halt. One battalion stopped and consolidated a gain of about 500 yards. The other continued to move, for the battalion commander, Maj. Sidney V. Bingham, Jr., had received the order to halt while he was checking his supply lines in the rear. Lacking communication at that particular moment with his advance units, Bingham went forward to stop the advance. When he reached

⁴⁰ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1130, 15 Jul.

⁴¹ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 0920, 15 Jul.

⁴² 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1357, 2055, and 2225, 15 Jul; 29th Div Msg, 1201, 15 Jul, XIX Corps G-3 Jnl and File.

⁴³ Colonel Dwyer replaced Colonel Canham, who was promoted to brigadier general and transferred to the 8th Division as the assistant division commander.

his leading troops, he found that they were more than 1,000 yards beyond the regimental front and were organizing positions astride the Bérigny highway. Having met little opposition, they had angled down across the face of the Martinville ridge to a point less than 1,000 yards from the eastern edge of St. Lô.

German artillery and mortar fire directed at the main body of the 116th Infantry fell behind and isolated Bingham's comparatively small unit. Lacking half a rifle company, a squad of the heavy weapons company, the 81-mm. mortars, and the battalion staff—all of which were with the bulk of the regiment—the battalion formed a defensive perimeter. Reporting the gain to the regimental commander, Major Bingham said he thought he could hold even though he had little ammunition.

Separating the isolated force from the 116th and 175th Regiments were gaps of 1,000 and 700 yards, respectively. So strong was enemy fire from artillery, mortars, and automatic weapons that attempts by both regiments to reach the isolated battalion were blocked. So vulnerable was the position that some thought the entire battalion would be annihilated. On the other hand, the battalion's position constituted the closest American approach to St. Lô. Eventually, the latter condition was to prove a significant indication to Germans and Americans alike that the city's defenses were in reality disintegrating.

That this was the case seemed far from plausible at midnight, 15 July, when General Corlett turned over to the VII Corps his sector west of the Vire River and devoted his entire attention



AFTER SECURING HILL 122, 17 July.

to the situation east of the Vire. The situation at St. Lô was hardly encouraging. On the right, the 35th Division was halted before the Pont-Hébert-St. Lô ridge road and had then only a precarious hold on Hill 122. On the left, the 29th Division was in even worse straits: one regiment unable to advance down the Isigny-St. Lô highway and the other two stopped on the Martinville ridge, apparently incapable either of driving the short distance into the city or of establishing physical contact with an isolated battalion. Yet more than ever the Americans needed St. Lô. General Bradley needed to control the Vire River crossing site at St. Lô in order to block German threats against the flank of his new operation. It was vital to bring the battle of St. Lô swiftly to an end, yet there seemed little alternative

to the slow costly pattern of yard-by-yard advances already so familiar.

There was little improvement on 16 July. While the 35th Division fought to retain Hill 122, the 29th Division seemed virtually paralyzed. The 115th Infantry advanced about 300 yards down the Isigny-St. Lô highway and came abreast of the 35th Division forces on Hill 122, but the regiments on the Martinville ridge could not relieve the isolated battalion.

Six days of fighting had brought the 29th close to its goal, but with considerably weakened forces. Two days earlier, 125 replacements had restored one battalion of the 116th Infantry to only 60 percent of its authorized strength; during the night of 16-17 July another battalion received 250 enlisted replacements, bringing its total strength to 420. On 16 July a battalion of the 115th had only a platoon of riflemen remaining in each rifle company. On 17 July 200 men comprised the three rifle companies of a battalion of the 175th, and most of the commissioned and non-commissioned officers had been killed or wounded. Although these were extreme cases, the other infantry battalions were also seriously depleted.⁴⁴

For the final assault on St. Lô at the opportune moment, General Gerhardt turned to the supporting arms. He instructed Brig. Gen. Norman D. Cota, the assistant division commander, to form a task force of tank, reconnaissance, tank destroyer, and engineer troops. They were to be assembled in the division rear area at a location that would enable them to attack toward St. Lô from either

the northeast—by way of the Isigny-St. Lô highway—or the east—down the Martinville ridge. Because Hill 122 was not yet entirely secure, General Gerhardt still expected to make his climactic drive into St. Lô from the east, but he wanted to be ready to drive from the northeast should capture of Hill 122 prove in reality to be the decisive factor in the battle for St. Lô.

A Legend is Born

On 17 July, the seventh day of attack, the 29th Division struck before dawn. Maj. Thomas D. Howie, commanding the 3d Battalion, 116th Infantry, led his men in a column of companies in a silent march toward Major Bingham's isolated unit. Suspicious Germans increased their artillery and mortar fire and played grazing machine gun fire across the slope of the Martinville ridge. Howie's men resisted the impulse to return this fire and crept forward through an early morning mist, still undetected. Several hours after daybreak, they reached Bingham's isolated force.

The regimental commander, Colonel Dwyer, had hoped that the two battalions together would be able to enter the city, but Bingham's men were exhausted. Howie informed Dwyer by telephone that they were incapable of further effort. When Dwyer asked whether Howie could move his battalion alone to the eastern edge of town, Howie replied, "Will do." Several minutes later an enemy shell killed him.

Taking command of Howie's battalion, Capt. William H. Puntenny tried to mount the attack on St. Lô along the Bérigny highway, but the Germans

⁴⁴ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1335, 16 Jul, and 1256, 17 Jul.

threw up such a heavy curtain of mortar fire that the men could not move. All through the day the German fire denied an advance. Late that afternoon a counterattack with tank support started from St. Lô to eliminate the Bingham-Puntenny force. Only the fortuitous presence of American dive bombers saved the day. While the planes strafed and bombed the German column, the division artillery placed a protective screen of fire about the American positions.⁴⁵ Disorganized, the Germans withdrew their assault force, but now two American battalions were isolated.

All efforts of the 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry, to open a route to Bingham and Puntenny on 17 July and to bring forward ammunition, food, and medical supplies failed. Half-tracks and tank destroyers, escorted by quadruple .50-caliber machine guns, found the sunken roads about Martinville so clogged with debris, dead horses, and wrecked German vehicles that an advance under continuing enemy artillery fire was impossible. The 175th Infantry also attempted to reach the isolated men by attacking down the Bérigny highway, but the regiment sustained severe losses and made little advance. The only relief was that brought by light planes of the division artillery, which dropped sufficient blood plasma for 35 wounded men.

On the night of 17 July a carrying party of about forty men of the 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry, finally reached the isolated units. The next morning, 18 July, a rifle company—which had

been reduced to 23 veterans but replenished with 85 replacements—opened a supply route to Bingham and Puntenny across the thousand-yard gap. Advancing in two columns along the axial hedgerows one field apart, maintaining visual contact between columns, and leaving four men in each field to hold the supply line open, the company met only light rifle fire. Supplies were brought forward and the wounded were evacuated. The few Germans, in small and disorganized groups, who blundered into the supply route during the day were either killed or captured.

By the time contact was firmly established with the two isolated battalions, the Martinville ridge had lost importance in the battle of St. Lô. The explanation had its basis in the condition that for seven long days had plagued the attacks along the ridge.

In full view of the Germans south of the Bérigny highway, every American movement along the south face of the Martinville ridge had brought deadly fire. Though the two regiments on the ridge had constituted a threat to the town, they had been unable to make the threat good. Attempts to impress the troops with the fact that the German positions were worse than their own had not succeeded. "Tell them that Jerry is in a wedge," the division G-3 had ordered a liaison officer. "Jerry doesn't seem to realize it," had come the reply.⁴⁶ So it seemed, for in spite of the wedge exerting pressure from the north—Hill 122—and from the east—the Martinville ridge—the Germans had obstinately refused to release their hold on the city. With the passage of time it had become

⁴⁵ [Lt. Col. Robert H. George], Ninth Air Force, April to November 1944, USAF Hist Study 36 (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, Air University, 1945), p. 118.

⁴⁶ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1216, 17 Jul.

a matter of increasing certainty that the forces on the ridge lacked the strength to make the final drive to the objective.

On the afternoon of 17 July, after the 35th Division had firmly established its control over Hill 122, General Gerhardt concluded that the 115th Infantry and not the regiments on the Martinville ridge really held the key to St. Lô. To insert the key, General Gerhardt had somehow to get the regiment to the gates of the city. He therefore directed Colonel Ordway to advance the 115th to the northeast outskirts of St. Lô. The advance depended almost wholly upon the battalion in the regimental center. "Expend the whole battalion if necessary," General Gerhardt ordered, "but it's got to get there." An hour later he repeated the same order.⁴⁷ By nightfall of 17 July the troops of the entire 115th Infantry were near the northeastern fringe of the city, but getting there had brought them to the point of almost complete exhaustion.

Convinced beyond doubt that the only feasible point of entry to St. Lô was the northeastern gate, General Gerhardt changed his week-long scheme of maneuver. For operations on 18 July, he ordered the two regiments on the left—those on the Martinville ridge—to hold in place while the 115th made the main effort into the city.⁴⁸

Early on 18 July, General Gerhardt phoned to ask General Baade what he was planning to have the 35th Division do that day. General Baade replied that he would "probably sit tight." As

an afterthought he asked, "Are you going in?"

"I'm going to try," General Gerhardt answered.

"In that case," General Baade said, "so will I."

"You can help on your left," General Gerhardt suggested.

General Baade promised he would "look into it."

Three minutes later General Gerhardt was telling the corps commander that he thought the 35th Division should be ordered to attack to aid the 29th and not be allowed to attack "just because someone else [the 29th] is doing it."

General Corlett's reaction was sharp: "You had better just take on what I said in your order." Apparently realizing Gerhardt's fatigue, he added, "Just take St. Lô and secure it."⁴⁹

If these conversations revealed a tension among American commanders, those occurring among German officers disclosed even greater concern. *Seventh Army* had called *Army Group B* in the midafternoon of 17 July, and Hausser requested not only permission to withdraw in the St. Lô sector but also an answer by 1800 that day. There was some double talk about withdrawing to a line north of St. Lô, but this was not feasible in terms of the terrain. A withdrawal meant retirement to the heights just south of the city, though combat outposts could be retained north of St. Lô.⁵⁰

The request was rather surprising because under Hitler's standing order to hold fast, permission to withdraw was

⁴⁷ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1456 and 1545, 17 Jul.

⁴⁸ XIX Corps Msg 2245, 17 Jul, XIX Corps G-3 Jnl and File; Ltr of Instr, 2300, 17 Jul.

⁴⁹ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 0638 and 0641, 18 Jul.

⁵⁰ Telecon, Pemsel to Tempelhoff, 1520, 17 Jul, *AGp B KTB*.

a prerogative of OKW. Yet more surprising was the army group reply to the *Seventh Army*. The operations officer of *Army Group B* stated that, after discussion, the staff had decided that forwarding Hausser's request to *OB WEST* for further transmittal to OKW was not practical. "You take whatever measures you think are necessary," the operations officer advised; "if you have to withdraw, go ahead; just report to us afterwards that the enemy penetrated your main line of resistance in several places and that you barely succeeded in re-establishing a new line to the rear."⁵¹

Several reasons made a withdrawal necessary. American capture of Hill 122 and the attrition of the German troops in that sector exposed St. Lô from the north. The shortage of troops along the entire St. Lô front made it impossible for the *II Parachute Corps* to re-establish a defensive line north of the city. Underscoring the difficult, even hopeless, situation at St. Lô were the events that had occurred on the other side of the Vire: the 30th Division advance through Pont-Hébert to Rampan, the failure of the abortive *Panzer Lehr* counterattack on 15 July that did no more than delay the 30th Division advance, and the mistaken notion that U.S. troops had crossed the river at Rampan to infiltrate the rear of the *352d Division*. All added up to the uncomfortable threat of American encirclement of St. Lô from the west.

As though this was not bad enough, Rommel, the *Army Group B* commander, while driving forward to visit the front on the afternoon of 17 July,

incurred a severe skull fracture in an automobile accident brought on by strafing from an Allied plane. That evening, when the news became known to the Germans, the *OB WEST* commander, Kluge, assumed command of *Army Group B* as well.

By this time, *Army Group B* had passed Hausser's withdrawal request to *OB WEST*, which informed Jodl at OKW that troops were pulling back to hills north of St. Lô. Kluge tried to avert a complete withdrawal, but though he ordered Hausser to keep the Americans out of the city, he could find no reserves to reinforce the St. Lô sector.⁵² The *5th Parachute Division*, which had arrived from Brittany several days earlier, was already committed to reinforce *Panzer Lehr*. The *275th Division*, which was following the paratroopers, would not arrive in the St. Lô region for another day. *Panzer Group West*, which might have furnished troops, was expecting a strong British attack in the Caen area, and Kluge dared not disturb Eberbach's dispositions. Reluctantly, Kluge permitted Hausser to withdraw.⁵³ Undetected by the Americans, the main forces retired that night leaving strong combat outposts north of St. Lô.

On the American side, General Gerhardt completed his preparations for assault on the morning of 18 July. Though the 115th Infantry had made the drive possible, Gerhardt replaced the regimental commander. "You did your best," Gerhardt told him. Colonel

⁵¹ Telecon, Tempelhoff to Pemsel, 1750, 17 Jul, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs, and 1755, *AGp B KTB*.

⁵² Telecon, Speidel to Pemsel, 2155, 17 Jul, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs; Hodgson, R-54.

⁵³ Telecons, Kluge and Rommel, 2040, 16 Jul, *OB WEST KTB*, and Speidel to Pemsel, 2200, 17 Jul, *AGp B KTB*.



INFANTRYMEN HIT THE GROUND ON A STREET IN ST. LÔ

Ednie, who had come from the 30th Division to understudy the assistant division commander, took his place. Ednie's mission was to open the north-east entrance to the city for the passage of General Cota's task force. Unaware of the German withdrawal, General Gerhardt was cautious. "We may go into St. Lô," he informed the corps commander, "but we don't want anyone to get cut off in there."⁵⁴

After an artillery preparation, the 115th Infantry attacked. Since Hill 122 was no longer a point of embarrassment, the regiment made good progress. At noon Colonel Ednie was hammering on

the gate. "I believe this is the time to alert that Task Force," he advised General Gerhardt. The division commander no longer doubted. "Everything's shaping up now," he informed General Cota, "so I think you'd better get moving."⁵⁵

Forty minutes later General Gerhardt transmitted another order to General Cota. He wanted the body of Major Howie to accompany the first U.S. troops into town.⁵⁶ The act was to be not only a gesture of honor and respect to the fallen but also a visible reminder to the members of the task force of all their comrades who had given their lives in a

⁵⁴ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 0725 and 0901, 18 Jul.

⁵⁵ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1147 and 1149, 18 Jul.

⁵⁶ 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 1236, 18 Jul.



RUINS OF ST. LÔ

task not yet completed. The choice of Major Howie's body was particularly apt, for Howie, who had taken command of a battalion only three days before his death, represented the qualities of courage and sacrifice that had made the drive to the gates of St. Lô possible. The triumph belonged to the dead as well as to the living, and through Major Howie the fallen were to participate in the culmination of the effort.

At 1500, 18 July, General Cota's Task Force C departed its assembly area near the division left boundary, crossed the division zone, and began to roll down the Isigny-St. Lô highway. Like a left halfback making a wide run around right end, the task force picked up its

interference as it approached the line of scrimmage—the 1st Battalion, 115th Infantry, which was closest to the goal. Silencing an antitank gun just outside the town, passing through harassing artillery and scattered rifle fire, and breaking through a roadblock, the task force entered the northeast portion of St. Lô at 1800 of the eighth day of the battle. Quickly seizing a square near the cemetery and organizing it as a base of operations, Task Force C moved rapidly through the rubble-choked streets to points of importance. Small groups occupied key road junctions, squares, and bridges. One hour after the task force entered the town it was apparent that only scattered German