



155-MM. HOWITZER, north of *Périers-St. Lô* highway, blasts German lines.

IX TAC, dispatched a telegram of indignant protest on the direction of the heavy-bomber approach (his fighter-bombers had made a lateral approach). Quesada demanded whether "another plan" had actually been employed.¹⁹ Obviously, something was wrong. Perhaps something was inexcusably wrong, since COBRA had been conceived and planned, not hastily, but thoroughly over a period of almost two weeks.

At the conference between General Bradley and air representatives on 19 July, when the COBRA air arrangements

were being worked out, the direction of the bombing approach had "evoked considerable discussion." General Bradley had insisted on his parallel plan, while all the Air Forces representatives had argued that perpendicular runs were more suitable.²⁰ At the end of the conference the question had not been settled formally, though General Bradley must have assumed that his recommendation for lateral bomb runs would be accepted. The Air Forces representatives had understood that General Bradley "was aware of the possibility of gross [bombing] errors causing casualties"

¹⁹ Red Line Msg, Quesada to Brereton, 24 Jul, Rpts of Bombing Errors Made on 25 Jul, 8 Aug, USAF Hist Sec Files.

²⁰ Eighth AF Spec Rpt on Ops 24 and 25 Jul, n.d., USAF Hist Sec Files; Halas Notes, ML-2244.

among his troops, and they thought he had said "that he was prepared to accept such casualties no matter which way the planes approached."²¹ Unaware of this conception, General Bradley had considered the conference "very satisfactory." Even though Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory had had to "rush off" before its conclusion, General Quesada had remained throughout.²² The result of what in reality had been an unsatisfactory conference was an absence of firm understanding and mutual agreement.

The approach route was not the only difficulty. General Bradley recalled after the war that he had gained the impression that the air forces would use bombs no heavier than 100 pounds and was surprised when larger bombs were dropped.²³ Yet during Bradley's conference at the First Army command post on 12 July, General Collins had asked, "Do we get heavy or medium bombs or both?" and Bradley had replied, "Both." The 260-pound bomb in Bradley's estimation did not "make too big a crater." Collins, who wanted to take a chance on the cratering, had voted for "bigger and better bombs," even 500-pound bombs, while General Quesada had suggested that 260-pound bombs would be large enough. The discussion had not cleared up the matter, and when the conference ended the question was still not settled.²⁴

²¹ Eighth AF Draft Ltr, Summary of Plng and Execution of Missions 24 and 25 Jul, n.d., Rpts of Bombing Errors Made on 25 Jul, 8 Aug, USAF Hist Sec Files.

²² Ltrs, Leigh-Mallory to Bradley, 19 Jul, and Bradley to Leigh-Mallory, 23 Jul, OCMH Files.

²³ Bradley, *Soldier's Story*, p. 341.

²⁴ FUSA Conf Notes, 12 Jul, FUSA G-3 Misc File; Halas Notes, ML-2244.

Despite the absence of agreement, the basic planning documents of the air strike plainly indicated that 450 fighter-bombers and medium bombers were each to carry two 500-pound general purpose bombs as well as 260-pound general purpose and fragmentation bombs.²⁵ Although 70 percent of the heavy bombers were to carry 100-pound general purpose bombs, the remaining 30 percent were to use 260-pound fragmentation bombs to the extent of their availability and heavier bombs when no more 260-pound bombs could be had.²⁶

There was no time for recrimination on 24 July, for an immediate decision had to be made. Should General Bradley agree to another bombardment under the same terms and thereby indirectly condone the possibility of additional American casualties? Or should he insist on changing the pattern of air attack, which would mean postponing COBRA for several days at least? With higher headquarters anxious for action, General Bradley had little choice. The ground attack on the afternoon of 24 July had re-established the necessary COBRA conditions. Prospects for good weather on 25 July were improving. The question whether the premature bombing had lost the Americans tactical surprise was to be resolved at once: the Allies would launch COBRA again at 1100, 25 July.

For the second COBRA bombardment several alterations were made in an attempt to avoid a repetition of the bombing errors. Air bombardment targets north of the Périers-St. Lô highway—

²⁵ IX TAC Ops Order 88, 19 Jul; [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 124.

²⁶ Eighth AF FO's 913 and 917, 23 and 24 Jul, Eighth AF Spec Rpt on Ops 24 and 25, n.d., USAF Hist Sec Files.



WAITING FOR THE COBRA BOMBARDMENT, 8th Infantrymen look skyward.

six in all—were relegated to the artillery.²⁷ A special weather reconnaissance plane was to enter the assault area early in the morning to obtain exact atmospheric data and find out if there was adequate visibility for the bombardment. The heavy bombers were to fly as low as safety would permit, and, if possible, bomb visually.²⁸

Again on the morning of 25 July the planes came. Flying in groups of twelve, over 1,500 B-17's and B-24's dropped more than 3,300 tons of bombs

in the COBRA area, and more than 380 medium bombers dropped over 650 tons of high explosives and fragmentation bombs. In groups of four, over 550 fighter-bombers dropped more than 200 tons of bombs and a large amount of napalm.²⁹ The earth shook.

Bombing heights had been fixed around 15,000 feet, but the presence of clouds forced readjustment in flight. Most bombardiers had to recompute their figures en route. Some planes

²⁷ Lt. Col. Orlando C. Troxel, Jr., Telecon, 2257, 24 Jul, and VII Corps Msg, 0155, 25 Jul, 30th Div G-3 Jnl.

²⁸ AAF III, 232.

²⁹ AAF III, 232-33; Eighth AF Tactical Mission Rpt Opn 494, 25 Jul, USAF Hist Sec Files; Leigh-Mallory, "Despatch," Fourth Supplement to the *London Gazette* of December 31, 1946, p. 65; Sylvan Diary, 25 Jul.



AFTER THE COBRA BOMBARDMENT men dig out from the short bombings.

bombed from the relatively low altitude of 12,000 feet, which brought them closer to the enemy antiaircraft fire and thus added to pilot strain, loosened flight formations, and increased the hazards of crowded air over the target. Artillery smoke markers proved of little value because they were not visible until the smoke drifted to high altitudes, and by that time the wind had dispersed and displaced it. Once the attack began, great clouds of dust and smoke obscured not only markers but terrain features as well. Furthermore, the red smoke of artillery markers could hardly be distinguished from shell and bomb bursts and from muzzle flashes of American

and German artillery. Because it was impossible to keep bomb formations tight and because the crew members had been impressed with the necessity of avoiding short bombing, a good portion of the bombs landed south of the target area or west and east of it. Some bombs, however, again fell north of the Périers-St. Lô highway and on American positions.³⁰

The bombs fell north of the highway because of human error. The lead bombardier of one heavy bomber forma-

³⁰ AAF III, 232-34; First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 121.

tion had trouble with his bombsight and released visually with bad results. Another failed to identify landmarks properly. The lead pilot of a third formation prematurely ordered bombs away, and all the planes in his unit released their loads. Fragmentation bombs and high explosives from 35 heavy bombers and the bombs of 42 medium bombers dropped within American lines.³¹

This relatively light bombardment north of the road killed 111 of the American troops and wounded 490.³² In addition some spectators, official observers, and newspaper reporters were hit. Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair, commanding general of the Army Ground Forces and *pro tem* commander of the 1st U.S. Army Group, was killed. General McNair had been placed in command of the army group in order to give continuing verisimilitude to the Allied deception maintained by Operation FORTITUDE. Because the news of General McNair's death might compromise FORTITUDE, he was buried secretly, with only senior officers in attendance. The news was suppressed until Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt reached the theater to become

nominal commander of the fictitious army group.³³

As news of the second short bombing spread across the battle area on 25 July, the sense of elated anticipation that had come with the appearance of the COBRA bombardment fleet vanished. Resentment that the air force "had done it again" and grimness over the prospects of successful ground action spread throughout American ranks.³⁴ Dismayed and dejected over the nearly 900 U.S. casualties sustained from the bombings in the two days, General Eisenhower resolved that he would never again use heavy bombers in a tactical role.³⁵

Near the vicinity where the short bombs had fallen, troops were disorganized and in some cases attack plans were disrupted. The entire command group of the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, had been destroyed with the exception of the battalion commander; 30 men were killed or wounded, and the unit had to

³¹ AAF III, 232-34. On the problems of direct support bombing, see Roswell Wing's pertinent Comment on the Medium Bombardment Effort to Support the 30th Division's West Wall Assault, MacDonald Files, OCMH, and Harris, *Bomber Offensive*, p. 213.

³² USSTAF In Europe, Report of Investigation, 14 Aug, USAF Hist Sec Files, lists the following casualties: 47th Infantry, 9th Division: 14 killed, 33 wounded; 15th Engineer Battalion: 15 killed, 23 wounded; 60th Field Artillery Battalion: 4 wounded; 84th Field Artillery Battalion: 1 killed, 2 wounded; 4th Division: 10 killed, 27 wounded; 30th Division: 61 killed, 374 wounded. In addition, the 39th Infantry of the 9th Division lost 16 wounded, and the 957th Field Artillery Battalion lost 10

killed and 11 wounded. (See 9th Div G-3 Jnl, 25 Jul.) General Collins in his Talk agreed with the figures of 111 killed and 490 wounded. AAF III, page 234, states that a total of 102 were killed and 380 were wounded. Eighth Air Force Special Report on Operations 24 and 25 July, USAF Hist Sec Files, gives a very complete report including plans, maps, photos, bomb damage assessment, and prisoner of war interrogations on the effect of the bombing. [Ackerman], Employment of Strategic Bombers in a Tactical Role, pp. 89ff, does not give a particularly good account.

³³ Bradley, *Soldier's Story*, p. 349; Brereton, *Diaries*, pp. 313-15; Ltrs, Eisenhower to Marshall, 26 and 27 Jul, Pogue Files; ETOUSA Ltr, Assignment of Comd, 21 Jul, AG 322/011 MPM, and SHAEF Ltr, Orders, 9 Aug, AG 211-3 (Generals), SHAEF AG File 322-3 (FUSAG).

³⁴ AAF III, 234.

³⁵ Bradley, *Soldier's Story*, p. 349. He later changed his mind.



9TH DIVISION TROOPS ADVANCE, IGNORING DUST kicked up by the *Cobra* bombardment, 25 July.

be replaced in the assault. The fire direction center of the 957th Field Artillery Battalion was obliterated. The communications wire between the 9th Division Artillery command post and the firing battalions was cut, and initial preparations had to be controlled by radio. All four assault companies of the 8th Infantry were bombed. Because of extremely high casualties in the 119th and 120th Infantry Regiments, the commanders were as much concerned about securing ambulances for their wounded as about starting the attack. Many individuals who suffered no visible physical injuries sustained concussion and shock. The 30th Division, for example, reported 164 cases of combat exhaustion attributable to the short bombing on 25 July.³⁶ "The dive bombers came in

beautifully," a company commander related afterward,

and dropped their bombs right . . . where they belonged. Then the first group of heavies dropped them in the draw several hundred yards in front of us. . . . The next wave came in closer, the next one . . . still closer. The dust cloud was drifting back toward us. Then they came right on top of us. . . . We put on all the orange smoke we had but I don't think it did any good, they could not have seen it through the dust. . . . The shock was awful. A lot of the men were sitting around after the bombing in a complete daze. . . . I called battalion and told them I was in no condition to move, that everything was completely disorganized and it would take me some time to get my men back together, and asked for a delay. But battalion said no, push off. Jump off immediately.³⁷

The feeling of profound discouragement temporarily overshadowed questions of more immediate importance.

³⁶ 30th Div AAR, Jul; University of Oklahoma Research Institute, Technical Memo, ORO-T-202, Disaster in Battle, 25 Aug 52, *passim*.

³⁷ Interv with CO, Co B, 8th Inf Cl 30 (4th Div).

Had the bombardment neutralized the German defenses in the COBRA area? Had the bomb errors paralyzed American mobility on the ground by demoralizing the assault troops? The answers were soon to be revealed. Short bombing or not, COBRA had been launched; for better or for worse, the ground attack had to go on.

Effect on the Enemy

Not only the main bombardment on 25 July but also the premature bombing on 24 July terrified the Germans and civilians on the other side of the Périers-St. Lô highway. Around noon of 24 July, it must have seemed that the motors of the approaching COBRA armada were like an orchestra of bass violins tuning up. The crash of bombs announced the overture, the premature bombardment. Even the relatively few bombs that were released were enough to create an awesome effect. At least one person believed that the end of the world had come. Others thought that the Allies had developed a new weapon of overwhelming power.³⁸

To Bayerlein, commander of *Panzer Lehr*, the bombardment on 24 July obviously signaled the beginning of a major American ground attack. Yet Bayerlein was able to influence the battle little.

³⁸ Toussaint, *La Percée Américaine à l'Ouest de Saint-Lô*, p.77n. "The bombardment of 24 July," Toussaint, who observed it, later wrote, "was hardly noted in the official reports. However, if its volume did not equal the infernal agitation of the following day, it was nevertheless terrifying." See also J. de Saint-Jorre, "Journal d'un Saint-Louis pendant la Bataille de Normandie," *Mémoires de la Société d'Archéologie de la Manche*, LV, 47, and Saint-Jorre, "Saint-Lô sous les Bombes," in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, I, 85ff.

The disruption of his communications to forward units and the confusion that resulted made it difficult to organize a co-ordinated defense against the ground attack that followed the bombing. Consequently, Bayerlein was more than gratified by the situation at the end of the day. Ignorant of the fact that Allied plans had gone awry and that the Americans had mounted only a limited objective attack, Bayerlein congratulated himself on the achievement of his troops. They had apparently repelled a major American effort and prevented the troops from crossing the Périers-St. Lô highway. *Panzer Lehr* had flinched under the weight of the bombardment, but it had not given way; the front line remained intact and neither corps nor army reserves had been committed. However, losses from the bombing and the ground attack numbered about 350 men and perhaps 10 tanks and tank destroyers. Ammunition had been expended liberally, and stocks at firing batteries were rather low. Expecting a renewed attack on the following day, Bayerlein requested and received 200 replacements from the regiments of the 275th Division assembled behind him. He also withdrew the bulk of his outpost line to locations south of the Périers-St. Lô highway, leaving only very lightly manned positions north of the road, where he anticipated strong American artillery fire.³⁹

The premature bombing and the limited objective attack on 24 July had thus had the effect of a ruse. They nourished German self-confidence; Bay-

³⁹ Telecon, Tempelhoff and Helmdach, 1320, 24 July, AGp B KTB; James B. Hodgson, Thrust-Counterthrust, the Battle of France, R-58.

erlein had no reason to believe that his division could not repeat its performance and turn the Americans back again. For the real COBRA bombardment that was to come on 25 July, *Panzer Lehr* was deployed substantially as on the preceding day. The only difference was advantageous to the Americans: Bayerlein had thinned his outpost line north of the highway and moved more troops directly into the area scheduled for saturation bombing.

Bayerlein's self-confidence was shared by Hausser, the *Seventh Army* commander, but not by Kluge. When Kluge learned the Allies had bombed front-line positions, he thought immediately the strike must have occurred in the *Panzer Group West* sector, for that was the area he considered of primary importance to the integrity of the entire Normandy front. He lost no time in telephoning Eberbach and asking in alarm what had happened. Nothing new, Eberbach replied; everything very quiet.⁴⁰

Discovering that it was *Panzer Lehr* in the *Seventh Army* sector that had been bombed, Kluge telephoned Hausser and asked for "a quick run-down on the situation."

Hausser complied. He began a calm recital of facts. "Strong fire and patrol activity on the right wing; artillery fire on the Vire bridges; reorganization of the [American] army front."

"Reorganization for what?" Kluge interrupted.

"To insert another corps," Hausser explained. Then after waiting a moment, he continued. "On the left flank

very strong air activity; attacks in the form of bomb carpets three kilometers behind the MLR. Attack against the middle of the left sector. Only limited attacks; no concerted assault recognizable."

"In other words," Kluge pressed for an interpretation, "as weather improves we can expect increasingly severe fighting around St. Lô and westward. Isn't that about it?"

Hausser agreed. "On the extreme left wing also," he added.

"I'd like to ask you again," Kluge insisted, "do you get the impression that you're heading for heavy fighting?"

"We've got to expect it somewhere," Hausser allowed. He revealed little concern or worry.

"Have you created appropriate reserves?" Kluge asked.

Hausser reminded him that the *353d Division* had been pulled out of the line.

But Kluge seemed already to be thinking of something else. "Without any doubt," he said, as though talking to himself, "there's something new in all this air activity. We have got to expect a heavy enemy offensive somewhere."⁴¹

Kluge's hunch was right, but his guess was wrong. Still assuming that the Allies would make their main effort against the eastern sector, Kluge spent the following day, 25 July, inspecting the forward positions of *Panzer Group West*.⁴² He was on hand to witness the reaction to an attack near Tilly launched

⁴⁰ Telecon, Kluge and Eberbach, 1800, 24 Jul, OB WEST KTB, Anlage 829.

⁴² AGp B KTB, Anlagen, Fall, 40-X.44, Annex 40.

⁴⁰ Telecon, Kluge and Eberbach, 1800, 24 Jul, OB WEST KTB, Anlage 828.

by the 2d Canadian Corps. The Canadians gained a mile or two until the 9th SS *Panzer Division* was committed to stop the advance.⁴³ But there was no real cause for concern on the *Panzer Group West* front. The dangerous sector was across the Vire in the *Seventh Army* area, where COBRA had struck again.

If the previous day's commotion had seemed like Armageddon, the bombardment of 25 July was even worse.⁴⁴ Bombs buried men and equipment, overturned tanks, cut telephone wires, broke radio antennas, sent messengers fleeing for foxholes or the nearest crater. Communications with forward echelons were completely disrupted. The bombardment transformed the main line of resistance from a familiar pastoral *paysage* into a frightening landscape of the moon. Several hours after the bombing, the village priest of la Chapelle-en-Juger, near the center of the target area, walked through the fields and thought he was in a strange world.⁴⁵

No less than a thousand men must have perished in the COBRA bombardment. About one third of the total number of combat effectives manning the main line of defense and assembled on the immediate reserve line were probably killed or wounded, the survivors dazed. Perhaps only a dozen tanks or tank destroyers remained in operation. Three battalion command posts

⁴³ 21 AGP Msg, 25 Jul, FUSA G-3 Jnl; Telecons, Speidel to Zimmerman and Zimmerman to Friedel, 2315 and 2335, 25 Jul, OB WEST KTB, *Anlage 849*.

⁴⁴ An observer called it "the most imposing aerial parade I have seen since the beginning of this long war." Saint-Jorre, "Saint-Lô sous les Bombes," in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, I, 97.

⁴⁵ MS # A-902 (Bayerlein); Toussaint, *La Percée Américaine à l'Ouest de Saint-Lô*, p. 144.

of *Panzer Lehr* were demolished. The attached parachute regiment virtually vanished. Only local and feeble resistance was possible against attacking American infantrymen.⁴⁶

Kampfgruppe Heinz on the *Panzer Lehr* right was the sole unit larger than a battalion that was capable of effective combat. By the end of 25 July that *kampfgruppe* no longer existed—it had apparently been annihilated in ground action near Hébécrevon. The *II Parachute Corps*, trying to re-establish contact with *Panzer Lehr* that evening, dispatched an infantry battalion to the sector previously occupied by the *kampfgruppe*. The battalion found only Americans.

Continued Allied air activity in *Panzer Lehr* rear areas during the afternoon of 25 July thwarted efforts to reorganize and build up a new line of defense. One regiment of the 275th Division, ordered to move up from Marigny and counterattack through la Chapelle-en-Juger, lost all semblance of organization and counted only 200 survivors at the end of the day.

"As of this moment," Kluge reported that evening, "the front has . . . burst." The Americans had made a penetration three miles in width and from one to three miles in depth. Not yet sealed off, the hole was inhabited by isolated units, by bewildered individuals, and by departed souls. The 353d Division and the remainder of the 275th Division had been committed, but it was highly questionable whether they could restore the front or even re-establish a defensive line. Kluge nevertheless felt there was

⁴⁶ Seventh Army KTB, 25 Jul; Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 489-90; Pz Lehr Div Ib KTB, Annex 247; MS # B-489 (Ziegelmann).

still hope of stopping the Americans. Although "we must fight for every yard on the right wing [Panzer Group West sector]," Kluge stated, he had freedom of movement and of withdrawal on the left, west of the Vire. If he could decrease the length of his line west of St. Lô by withdrawal and thereby extricate the 2d SS Panzer Division and use it as a mobile reserve, he might salvage something from the discouraging situation, but he needed "a free hand in his decisions about *Seventh Army*." Would Hitler give him a free hand? Shortly after midnight, Hitler said he would.⁴⁷

Ground Attack

Hopeful that the COBRA bombardment on the morning of 25 July had caused widespread devastation on the German main line of resistance but not at all sure that it had, infantrymen of the VII Corps moved out in attack at 1100. Despite the disorganization that the bombing errors had prompted, only two units, a regiment of the 9th Division and a battalion of the 30th Division, were unable to attack on the hour, and these jumped off after only a slight delay.⁴⁸

The infantry units initiating the COBRA ground attack were to create a protected corridor for those troops scheduled to follow and exploit a breakthrough. The infantry, therefore, had the mission of securing specific geographical objectives as rapidly as possible. Critical terrain features such as high ground and crossroads that meant

control of the corridor had been carefully assigned to each small unit participating in the attack, and the assault troops were to drive to their objectives without regard to the rate of advance of adjacent units. They were to bypass enemy strongpoints, leaving their reduction to others who would come later. Engineers were to assist forward movement by hastily repairing the roads and removing obstacles. All unnecessary traffic was to stay off the roads in the assault area. The attacking units had been stripped of nonessential equipment to reduce column time lengths. The troops carried extra rations to keep supply traffic to a minimum. They were to hold wounded men and prisoners in place whenever possible. They had been issued enough ammunition to last until the exploiting armor passed through them. Commanders or responsible staff officers were to be at unit radios at all times and tuned to the command net for word that the mobile columns were about to begin their exploitation. When that was announced, the infantry was to clear the main roads and allow the exploitation to get under way without impediment.⁴⁹ (*Map V*)

The towns of Marigny and St. Gilles were the main infantry objectives. Their capture would signify a penetration of three miles in depth, and their retention would give the VII Corps control of the road network needed for the exploitation. If the air bombardment had destroyed the German defenses, the

⁴⁷ Telecons, Speidel to Zimmerman, Zimmerman to Friedel, Friedel to Zimmerman, 2315, 2335, 25 Jul, and 0045, 26 Jul, *OB WEST KTB, Anlage 849.*

⁴⁸ VII Corps Sitrep 98, 25 Jul.

⁴⁹ VII Corps Opns Memo 43, 20 Jul; 9th Div FO 10, 20 Jul; 4th Div FO 11, 20 Jul; 30th Div FO 13, 20 Jul; 117th Inf FO 10, 20 Jul; 119th Inf FO 5, n.d.; 120th Inf FO 12, 20 Jul; 30th Div Administrative Order 20, 23 Jul; 105th Engr C Bn FO 3, 21 Jul; Misc Notes, n.d., 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.