remnants shared their fate. Only a few men escaped during the stormy night.[43]

The *326th Division* received its order to break out during the night of 19 August. The division was to assemble at nightfall, 20 August, near St. Lambert, from there to make its way to Coudehard. Learning that an improvised group of infantry and tanks of the *1st* and *10th SS Panzer Divisions* had crossed successfully at St. Lambert during the afternoon of 20 August, the *326th Division* arranged with elements of the *116th Panzer Division* to make a concerted break that night. The plan worked well. The armor crossed the St. Lambert bridge, miraculously still intact despite the continuous and heavy shelling, and the infantry went over an emergency footbridge nearby. From the river the men marched in a seemingly endless single file column on azimuth toward Coudehard. Despite some inevitable confusion and an occasional burst of fire from Allied outposts, the column reached a road near Coudehard, where the tanks were waiting. Closing behind the tanks, the infantry resumed its advance and, bypassing Coudehard, reached the positions of the *2d SS Panzer Division* at dawn.[44]

The other two divisions under *LXXIV Corps,* the *84th* and *363d,* had been assembled in the Bois de Feuillet ready to follow the *LXXXIV Corps* across the Dives. The *84th Division* commander, Generalleutnant Irwin Menny, was captured; elements of at least one regiment apparently escaped through St. Lambert on 20 August.[45]

The *363d Division* had had its mission changed early on 20 August by what turned out to be its last order from *LXXIV Corps.* Instead of following the *LXXXIV Corps* across the Dives, the *363d* was to occupy and hold a line from Bailleul to Bon-Ménil, north of the Forêt de Gouffern. Generalleutnant Augustus Dettling, the commander, carried out the order but, subjected to heavy Allied pressure during the day, was forced to give up some ground. With no instructions from corps, Dettling decided to break out at nightfall. Organized into three kampfgruppen, the division was across the Dives at St. Lambert by 2200, then moved on azimuth toward Coudehard. It sustained considerable losses in killed, wounded, and captured; it lost the bulk of its heavy weapons, all of its artillery, and most of its vehicles. About 2,500 men reached Champosoult and safety the next morning.[46]

The commander of the *LXXIV Corps,* Straube, and part of his staff crossed the Dives during the afternoon of 20 August at St. Lambert, where Straube met Luettwitz, who commanded the *2d Panzer Division.* Together, they worked out measures for holding the crossing site open and organized the men of all arms converging on St. Lambert into kampfgruppen for the completion of the breakout. In the evening Straube departed with one such group of several hundred men and a few tanks. He reached Meindl's command post near Coudehard around midnight, then completed his breakout with the paratroopers.[47]

[43] MS # B-326 (Badiński).
[44] MS # P-179 (Nettmann)
[45] Information is scanty; see MS # P-169 (Fiebig).
[46] MS # B-163 (Dettling).
[47] MS # B-824 (Straube).

While the battle had raged around the Poles on Mt. Ormel, the Polish and American troops in Chambois were also subjected to considerable pressure. Desperate German efforts launched against Chambois on 20 August to open an escape route through the town made the situation so tense that there were moments when Poles and Americans wondered whether they could retain possession of the town.

For the Polish armored group, it was the second day of heavy action without resupply. That evening American supplies came forward, and the Poles received a share of the ammunition, gasoline, and rations.[48]

On that day the 90th Division Artillery was operating with observation later described as an "artilleryman's dream." Five battalions pulverized columns driving toward the Dives. American soldiers cheered when German horses, carts, trucks, volkswagens, tanks, vehicles, and weapons went flying into the air, disintegrating in flashes of fire and puffs of smoke.[49]

Near Chambois several German tanks and perhaps a company of infantrymen would have escaped but for Sgt. John D. Hawk of the 359th Infantry, who manned a light machine gun. A tank shell disabled Hawk's gun and wounded him, but he secured a bazooka and with a companion kept the tanks in a small wood until two American tank destroyers arrived. Their shelling was ineffective until Hawk climbed to an exposed position to act as a human aiming stake. The subsequent fire of the tank destroyers knocked out two German tanks and forced the remaining Germans into the open to surrender.[50]

The heavy rain that set in around midnight of 20 August helped thousands of Germans to escape to safety. At 0230, 21 August, Meindl began to wake up the men around him near Coudehard. It took some time to get a man on his feet and make him understand what was going on. By 0345, Meindl's troops were assembled along the road in march formation, and the head of the column started to move eastward in the drenching rain. Meindl himself, with two tanks and a small group as the rear guard, departed around 0500. Two hours afterwards, they were within the lines of the *2d SS Panzer Division* near Champosoult.

Later that day Meindl learned that some of his paratroopers had escaped by a route southeast of Coudehard, that a tank unit had brought the seriously wounded *Seventh Army* commander, Hausser, safely out of the pocket, and that he, Meindl, was to move his *II Parachute Corps* to the Seine River south of Rouen. He estimated that between 2,500 and 3,500 paratroopers had escaped; their combat strength did not exceed 600. Of the two regiments of the *353d Division* that broke out at St. Lambert, only remnants of one later rejoined

[48] 90th Div G–3 Per Rpt, 21 Aug. According to the Polish narrative: "The fraternity of arms displayed by the Americans during our common battle deserves special recognition. The Americans shared with us their rations, ammunition, gasoline, and were very generous with their cigarettes. It will be difficult to forget the supply officer of the American regiment, Major Miller, who, being short of working hands, helped personally to load ammunition boxes on our trucks." *1st Polish Armored Division*, pp. 104–05.

[49] *V Corps Operations in the ETO*, p. 190; Interv with Capt M. H. Smith, Hosp Intervs, Vol. III, GL–93 (249); [Alpert], Notes.

[50] Hawk was awarded the Medal of Honor.

TRUCKLOADS OF PRISONERS HEADED FOR PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS

the division, the rear-guard regiment having been completely lost.

Only small isolated groups were able to slip across the Dives during the early morning hours of 21 August. Fighting along the river subsided gradually, and by noon, with all of St. Lambert firmly in Canadian hands, the escape route was closed. Rounding up the remnants of the *Seventh Army* trapped west of the Dives began. Allied troops accepted German surrenders, in mass and in small groups, and gathered up stragglers "who had been living in holes in the ground in the forest since separating from their units." It was not uncommon for an Allied division to collect prisoners from as many as twenty divisional units in a single day. "We very much enjoyed going into the woods," a regimental commander later recalled. "One of my lieutenants and I got nineteen [prisoners] on one trip." [51]

Meanwhile, a sizable number of men and vehicles, the tail end of the forces that had succeeded in getting across the Dives during the night, were still moving toward the Mt. Ormel ridge on the

[51] Quotes are from VII Corps AAR, Aug, and McHugh Interv, Stockton's Hosp Intervs, III, GL-93 (235); see also V Corps G-2 Est of Enemy Situation 7, 2400, 23 Aug.

morning of 21 August. Shortly before noon the Poles on Hill 262 had their hands full repelling German attacks on the southwestern part of their perimeter, that part closest to the Chambois–Vimoutiers road. The culmination came around noon with a suicidal attack of German infantry straight up the hill from the area around the Coudehard church. The massed fires of Polish machine guns smashed it.

Canadian troops advanced and finally made contact with the Polish perimeter that afternoon. Supplies arrived about 1400; evacuation of the wounded and the prisoners began. About that time enemy activity ceased, and what the Poles called the Battle of Maczuga came to an end. Having captured approximately 1,000 Germans, the Poles had lost about 350 men; 11 tanks were damaged or destroyed.[52]

Beyond Mt. Ormel, German soldiers, singly and in groups, had continued to pass through the lines of the *II SS Panzer Corps* throughout the morning of 21 August. The movement thinned out in the afternoon and by 1600 ceased altogether. At dusk the corps moved back its two divisions to an assembly area near Orbec, thirteen miles northeast of Vimoutiers.

Army Group B praised the action of the *II SS Panzer Corps* in the highest terms, for it considered the corps had been a major factor making possible the escape of much of the *Seventh Army*.[53] In reality, the corps contribution to the breakout operation, though noteworthy considering its skeleton forces, was not so spectacular as the army group believed. The *II SS Panzer Corps* had accomplished three things: it tied up elements of Canadian and Polish armor on the outer edge of the encircling ring; it helped to open the Coudehard–Champosoult road; and it provided a rallying position for troops that were able to escape the pocket. The major factor deciding the outcome of the breakout operation was the determination and the will to fight of the units inside the pocket.

The Results

How many Germans escaped? No one knew. At the end of 20 August *Army Group B* reported that "approximately from 40 to 50 percent of the encircled units succeeded in breaking out and joining hands with the II SS Panzer Corps." This was an optimistic assessment. By the end of the following day, the strength of six of seven armored divisions that had escaped the pocket totaled, as reported at that time, no more than 2,000 men, 62 tanks, and 26 artillery pieces.[54]

Later estimates of the total number of Germans escaping varied between 20,000 and 40,000 men, but combat troops formed by far the smaller proportion of these troops. The average combat strength of divisions was no more than a few hundred men, even

[52] *Maczuga* is the Polish word for cudgel, which seemed to match the shape of the Mt. Ormel ridge. See *1st Polish Armored Division*, pp. 116–17.

[53] *AGp B Tagesmeldung*, 21 Aug, dated 0100, 22 Aug.

[54] *AGp B Tagesmeldungen*, 20 Aug, dated 0155, 21 Aug, and 21 Aug, dated 2000, 21 Aug, *AGp B KTB*. Hitler on 23 August ordered *OB WEST* to submit a report on strengths and losses pertaining both to the divisions that had escaped from the pocket and to those that had not been involved, but this report, if submitted, has not been located. *AGp B KTB, Anlagen*, 21–23 Aug, p. 1626.

THE POCKET DESERTED

though the over-all strength of some divisions came close to 3,000. The explanation lay in the fact that a partial exodus had begun at least two or three days before the breakout attack—when shortages of ammunition, gasoline, and other supplies had already become acute.[55]

Some divisions acting on their own initiative, others with the approval of corps, had started to send to the rear, in some instances as far east as the Seine River, all nonessential personnel and vehicles, as well as artillery pieces that could not be supplied with ammunition. Ironically, on 18 August, the day after the *271st Division* ceased to exist as a fighting unit, the division commander, Generalleutnant Paul Danhauser, discovered large stocks of artillery ammunition of all calibers in the Bois de Feuillet, stocks that had been forgotten, overlooked, or simply abandoned. "The shock of this discovery," Danhauser later wrote, "brought tears to the eyes of the commander of the artillery regiment whose batteries had expended their last rounds some days ago." [56]

The few batteries sent out of the pocket before the final few days were saved. The rest of the artillery, heavy weapons, and other equipment remaining inside the pocket was almost completely lost—destroyed by Allied fire, by the Germans themselves, or abandoned. One commander estimated, probably with some exaggeration, that not many more than 50 artillery pieces and perhaps that many tanks reached safety. Radios, vehicles, trains, supplies were lost; "even the number of rescued machine guns was insignificant." [57] "The losses in material are very high," *Army Group B* reported, ". . . set on fire by enemy fighter-bombers . . . and by

[55] See MS # B-526 (Badinski); MS # P-179 (Nettmann)

[56] MS # P-177 (Danhauser).

[57] MS # A-922 (Eberbach).

massed fires of heavy artillery. All radio stations were silenced, and the army was deprived of its means of command. Yet the performance of the men who fought the breakout battle in the face of overwhelming odds merits the highest praise." [58]

The severe ordeal to which the Germans were subjected for many days—constant air and artillery pounding, exhausting night marches on clogged roads after a day's fighting, shortages of ammunition and supplies—could not be endured indefinitely without affecting troop morale. Many "unpretty pictures" were witnessed by German commanders—incredible disorder on the roads where often the right of the strongest prevailed (tankers and paratroopers being the chief offenders); the panic, men with hands up surrendering in droves; at least one case of outright mutiny when a sergeant shot and killed his commanding officer because the commander refused to consent to surrender.

But the units that were under the firm control of their commanders fought to the limit of their physical and moral endurance and thereby made the escape of a sizable part of the encircled troops possible. One such unit, a paratroop outfit, made quite an impression on men of an SS panzer division when, emerging from the pocket, the paratroopers passed through the tankers smartly, in road formation, singing.[59]

Behind the men who had fought their way out of the pocket lay an inferno of destruction.

The carnage wrought during the final days as the artillery of two Allied armies and the massed air forces pounded the ever-shrinking pocket was perhaps the greatest of the war. The roads and fields were littered with thousands of enemy dead and wounded, wrecked and burning vehicles, smashed artillery pieces, carts laden with the loot of France overturned and smoldering, dead horses and cattle swelling in the summer's heat.[60]

Of the higher staffs, only the *LXXXIV Corps* headquarters was missing. Most of the higher commanders, including Hausser, were wounded. When Hausser was evacuated, Funck, the *XLVII Panzer Corps* commander, took temporary command of the *Seventh Army*, which was subordinated to the *Fifth Panzer Army*.[61]

The Allies did not know exactly how many prisoners they took. From 13 through 17 August it was possible to count them accurately—British and Canadians reported daily figures in excess of a total of 6,000, the First U.S. Army 2,500 for 15 August alone. After 17 August the figures were approximate—for example, the First Army estimated more than 9,000 on 21 August.[62] All together, the Americans probably took about 25,000 prisoners, British and Canadians an equal number. Among the captives were three general officers. In addition to the 50,000 men captured,

[58] *AGp B Tagesmeldung*, 20 Aug, *AGp B KTB*.

[59] MS # P–159 (Stueckler); MS # B–526 (Badinski); MS # P–179 (Nettmann).

[60] First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 18; see *V Corps Operations in the ETO*, p. 188, and 90th Div AAR, Aug. Guingand, *Operation Victory*, page 410, has a vivid description of the destruction.

[61] Telecons, 1335 and 1355, 21 Aug, *AGp B KTB*. Dietrich remained in command of the *Fifth Panzer Army* and apparently Eberbach several days later took command of the *Seventh Army*. See *AGp B Tagesmeldung*, 31 Aug.

[62] FUSA G–2 Telecon, 1730, 18 Aug, FUSA G–2 Jnl and File, and AAR, Aug.

approximately 10,000 dead were found on the field.[63]

As examples of the extent of German losses, the 2d French Armored Division captured 8,800 prisoners and claimed the destruction or capture of more than 100 tanks, over 100 artillery pieces, and 700 vehicles. The 90th Division in four days took over 13,000 prisoners and 1,000 horses; an incomplete inventory of destruction revealed that in addition to 1,800 horses that were dead, 220 tanks, 160 self-propelled artillery pieces, 700 towed artillery pieces, 130 antiaircraft guns, 130 half-track vehicles, 5,000 motor vehicles, and 2,000 wagons had been destroyed or damaged; high-power radio and cryptographic sets, mobile ordnance shops, medical laboratories, and surgical installations had been abandoned.[64]

An officer who had observed the destruction of the Aisne–Marne, St. Mihiel, and Meuse–Argonne battlefields in World War I and had seen the destruction in London and at St. Lô in World War II, wrote:

> None of these compared in the effect upon the imagination with what I saw yesterday southwest of Trun. . . . The grass and trees were vividly green as in all Normandy and a surprising number of houses [were] . . . untouched. That rather peaceful setting framed a picture of destruction so great that it cannot be described. It was as if an avenging angel had swept the area bent on destroying all things German. . . .
>
> I stood on a lane, surrounded by 20 or 30 dead horses or parts of horses, most of them still hitched to their wagons and carts. . . . As far as my eye could reach (about 200 yards) on every line of sight, there were . . . vehicles, wagons, tanks, guns, prime movers, sedans, rolling kitchens, etc., in various stages of destruction. . . .
>
> I stepped over hundreds of rifles in the mud and saw hundreds more stacked along sheds. . . . I walked through a mile or more of lanes where the vehicles had been caught closely packed. . . . I saw probably 300 field pieces and tanks, mounting large caliber guns, that were apparently undamaged.
>
> I saw no foxholes or any other type of shelter or field fortifications. The Germans were trying to run and had no place to run. They were probably too exhausted to dig. . . . They were probably too tired even to surrender.
>
> I left this area rather regretting I'd seen it. . . . Under such conditions there are no supermen—all men become rabbits looking for a hole.[65]

Despite the devastating defeat the Germans had suffered, a surprising number of troops had escaped the pocket. Yet those who had escaped had still to reckon with another crisis—this one at the Seine.

[63] V Corps G–2 Est of Enemy Situation 7, 23 Aug; FUSA AAR, Aug; B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy, The Indirect Approach,* p. 317; Sylvan Diary, 20 Aug.

[64] 2d French Armd Div G–3 Rpt, Opns; 90th Div AAR, Aug.

[65] 12th AGp WD Observers Bd Ltr, AGF Bd Rpt, ETO, No. 208, Visit to Falaise Pocket, 31 Aug.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Drive to the Seine

While the XV Corps left part of its forces at Argentan and started the wider envelopment to the Seine on 15 August, other components of the Third Army farther to the south were also driving to the Seine, sweeping clear the vast area north of the Loire River. The advance to the Seine fulfilled a prophecy made a week earlier—that "the battle of Normandy is rapidly developing into the Battle of Western France." [1]

South to the Loire

The drive to the Seine had actually begun on 3 August, when General Bradley instructed General Patton to secure the north–south line of the Mayenne River, clear the area west of the Mayenne River as far south as the Loire, and protect the 12th Army Group south flank with minimum forces.[2] Since the VIII Corps was driving southwest toward Rennes and the XV Corps was about to move southeast toward Mayenne, Patton oriented the XX Corps south toward Nantes and Angers. As the main American effort veered eastward in accordance with the modified OVERLORD plan and the XV Corps drove toward Laval and le Mans, Patton ordered the XX Corps to cross the Mayenne River in a parallel drive to protect the XV Corps south flank.[3]

Bradley approved Patton's eastward orientation and even furthered it by designating the Paris–Orléans gap as the ultimate Third Army objective. Yet he specified once more the additional mission of protecting the south flank along the Loire River to guard against possible German incursion from the south. Angers and Nantes would therefore have to be captured.[4] (*See Maps 12 and 17.*)

The demands of this dual mission became the responsibility of Maj. Gen. Walton H. Walker, a West Pointer who had served in France during World War I, who had been an infantryman and artilleryman before turning to armor, and who had commanded the IV Armored Corps, later redesignated the XX Corps, in training.

Early plans for XX Corps to control the 2d French Armored and the 5th and 35th Infantry Divisions went awry when the 35th became involved in the Mortain counterattack and when the French division, after a brief alert for possible action at Mortain, joined the XV Corps. The 5th Division thus remained the sole instrument available for the XX Corps initial commitment.

[1] 30th Div G–2 Notes for Unit Comdrs, 8 Aug.
[2] 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 2, 3 Aug.
[3] TUSA Dir, 5 Aug (confirming fragmentary orders, 4 Aug).
[4] 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 3, 6 Aug; 21 AGp Operational Situation and Dir, M–517, 6 Aug.

11TH INFANTRYMEN *meet resistance in the drive to Angers.*

Having fought with the V Corps before being pinched out on the First Army left flank near Vire, General Irwin's 5th Division received instructions an hour before dawn on 4 August to join the XX Corps by moving immediately through Villedieu and Avranches to an assembly area near Vitré, forty miles south of Avranches. The suddenness of the call precluded advance planning, and General Irwin felt handicapped by a lack of definite knowledge of his next combat mission and the terrain in which he would fight. With no inkling that this manner of operating would soon be normal, General Irwin began at once to march from one American flank to the other.[5]

On the road for three days in a march hampered by traffic congestion, the 5th Division reached Vitré on 7 August. On that day Patton orally instructed Walker to move a regiment of the 5th Division to seize Angers, fifty-five miles southeast of Vitré; an infantry battalion

[5] General Irwin's Official Diary of the Div Comdr; XV Corps G–3 Memo, Conflict with XX Corps, 5 Aug, XV Corps G–3 Jnl and File. The quotations in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from General Irwin's diary.

to capture Nantes, sixty-five miles southwest of Vitré; and the rest of the division to Segré, twenty-two miles northwest of Angers. Gaffey, Third Army chief of staff, arrived at Irwin's command post at noon that day to transmit the mission for quick compliance. Though tired from their long hours on the road, the 5th was to move at once. Perhaps Gaffey was not explicit, perhaps Irwin misinterpreted. In any event, Irwin felt that the fifty-mile distance between Nantes and Angers, as well as the distance of both towns from Vitré, made it impractical for him to take both objectives at the same time. The development of the major operations to the east and Patton's instructions for Walker to reach the Mayenne River south of Château-Gontier seemed to give Angers priority over Nantes.[6]

Information on the enemy in the area south and east of Vitré was scant, but "a general withdrawal by the Germans, extent and destination not yet clear," was presumed. Actually, there were scarcely any Germans between Vitré and the Loire River. The *First Army* in southwest France had been charged on 2 August with protecting the crossing sites along the Loire River, its northern boundary. Two days later the *LXXX Corps* artillery commander brought a measure of unified leadership to the troops along the river line from St. Nazaire to Saumur—security formations, naval personnel, antiaircraft units, and the like. On 8 August, the *16th Division* (formed by consolidating the *158th Reserve Division*—which was intended originally to furnish replacements to the units committed in Normandy—and the *16th Luftwaffe Field Division*) assumed responsibility for defending the Loire along a front that eventually extended from Nantes to Orléans. The *16th Division* was short of equipment but was well trained and well led.[7] Part of this force, with some few elements that had come from Normandy, met the 5th U.S. Division at Angers, a city of 95,000 inhabitants located just south of the point where the Mayenne and Sarthe merge to become the Maine River. The Maine, only six miles long, flows through Angers before joining the Loire. Three miles south of Angers, a highway bridge crosses the Loire at les Ponts-de-Cé.

From Vitré, General Irwin dispatched Col. Charles W. Yuill's 11th Infantry through Candé in a direct approach to Angers from the west. He sent a company-sized task force on a more devious route to cross the Mayenne and Sarthe Rivers, outflank Angers on the east, cut the main highway south of the city, and capture the bridge across the Loire.[8] The small task force soon discovered that all bridges across the Sarthe and Mayenne in the division zone were demolished and that few Germans were between Château-Gontier and the Loire. The force then retraced its steps and rejoined the division, which in the meantime had displaced to Angers behind the 11th Infantry. The 11th had encountered no serious resistance until reaching a point two miles west of Angers on the evening of 7 August. General Irwin

[6] TUSA AAR, I, p. 22; 5th Div AAR, Aug.

[7] MS # B-245 (Haeckel); MS # B-034 (Schramm).

[8] See *The Fifth Division in France* (Metz, France: Imprimerie du Journal de Lorraine, 1944), pp. 9–13; *The Fifth Infantry Division in the ETO* (Atlanta, Georgia: Albert Love Enterprises, 1945), no pagination.