

a noteworthy accomplishment; supply hazardous.

To gain the greatest shock effect commensurate with his constricted zone, General Macon decided to commit two regiments abreast in columns of battalions. To advance down the Carentan-Périers road, the 331st Infantry (Col. Martin D. Barndollar, Jr.) was to attack along the right of the highway, while the 330th Infantry (Col. Ernest L. McLendon) attacked on the left. Col. Edwin B. Crabill's 329th Infantry (minus one battalion) was to constitute the division reserve. One battalion of the 329th was to clear a small area on the right flank at the edge of the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges. Division fire power was to be augmented by the 9th Division Artillery, the 746th Tank and the 802d Tank Destroyer Battalions, the 4.2-inch mortars of two companies of the 87th Chemical Battalion, and the quadruple .50-caliber machine guns of the 453d Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion. Eager to prove its competence and nervous about its impending trial in battle, the 83d Division celebrated the Fourth of July by firing a ten-minute artillery preparation and then jumping off at daybreak.⁹

Mishaps plagued the division from the start. Tanks in close support immediately "messed up" wires, and General Macon lost touch with his assault formations soon after they crossed the line of departure. Two hours later, the commander of the 331st, Colonel Barn-dollar, was dead with a bullet below his

⁹The following account is taken from official unit records. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the valuable record of telephone conversations in the division G-2, G-3 Journal.

heart. Soon afterwards, engineers attempting to clear paths through enemy mine fields were being picked off by enemy rifle fire. At midmorning, enemy infantrymen on the division right flank temporarily surrounded several tanks that were trying to advance over soft and muddy marshland. The division moved but a short distance toward Sain-teny, 200 yards at most, before German mortar and machine gun fire, from hedgerows and from log pillboxes reinforced by sandbags, halted the attack.

Following the action of the division from his corps command post, General Collins in midmorning became impatient with the slow progress. He had assured General Macon that he would not interfere with the conduct of operations, but when one infantry battalion waited for others to come abreast, Collins phoned the division headquarters and informed the chief of staff, "That's exactly what I don't want." What he did want was the battalion in the lead to cut behind the Germans who would then be forced to withdraw. "Don't ever let me hear of that again," General Collins warned, "and get that down to the regimental and battalion commanders and tell Macon about it." But telephonic exhortation, no matter how pertinent, could not blow down the defended hedgerows—nor, apparently, could the personal endeavors of General Macon and his assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Claude B. Ferenbaugh, who had gone down to the regiments to press the attack.

On the division right flank the battalion of the 329th Infantry attempting to clear the small area near the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges had managed to advance about 1,000 yards. Two

rifle companies had crossed a stream swollen by rain and overflowing its banks. The adjacent terrain had become virtual swamp, with some mud-holes waist deep. When the battalion commander tried to get his heavy weapons company across the stream just before noon, enemy mortars and machine gun fire forced the men to hug the ground. Commitment of the reserve rifle company produced no effect since the riflemen could do no better than the machine gunners of the weapons company in the face of the enemy fire. Taking heavy casualties, unable to maneuver in the swampy terrain, and fearing attack from the rear by the same infiltrating Germans who had earlier isolated several tanks, the battalion commander ordered a withdrawal. The men moved back to their original line of departure. Upon reorganization, the battalion discovered that one rifle company was almost a total loss; another could muster only one third of its strength.¹⁰ Large numbers of stragglers intensified the impression of extreme losses. About fifty men of the battalion entered the division artillery positions during the afternoon and caused short-lived consternation by claiming to be the only survivors. Having lost most of its equipment in the swamp, the battalion remained on its line of departure to protect the division right flank. That evening it arranged a truce with the enemy, without authorization from higher headquarters, to collect its dead and wounded.

Impatient over the division's lack of

progress, General Collins was infuriated when he learned of the battalion withdrawal on the division right. "Tell the CG," he informed the division chief of staff by telephone, "that I want the withdrawal investigated." Why make it necessary, he demanded, to lose more lives in forcing a crossing of the stream a second time? And when, he wanted to know, was the division going to launch a co-ordinated attack down the corridor?

For all the strenuous efforts of the division and assistant division commanders, the regiments were not ready for a concerted attack until late afternoon. After two postponements, General Macon finally got it started. The division artillery fired a preparation, and the two regiments attacked again down the Carentan-Périers road. They had made only minor advances before heavy artillery fire forced one regiment to pull back; a counterattack just before dark pushed back the other.

The terrain and stubborn resistance had soured the Fourth of July celebration and had thwarted the 83d Division in its attempt to advance beyond its outpost lines. "If the going is good, and it should be," General Macon had said, "we will have them rocked back, and will go right on." The going had not been good. Prepared defenses, active mortar fire, and extensive use of automatic weapons had been too effective. Only six German prisoners had been taken.

A count of personnel in the front-line positions of the 331st Infantry revealed only 300 men. The commander of the German parachute regiment in opposition, Col. Friedrich A. Freiherr von der

¹⁰ 2d Battalion, 329th Infantry, *Combat Digest* (Germany, n.d.), p. 15.

Heydte, returned medical personnel his forces had captured, with a note stating that he thought General Macon needed them.¹¹ He was right. In its first day of combat the 83d Division had lost almost 1,400 men. An accurate breakdown of casualty figures was impossible. One regiment reported a total of 867 casualties without attempting further classification. On the basis of such incomplete information, the division arbitrarily categorized the total casualties and reported 47 killed, 815 wounded, and a surprising 530 missing in action. Many of the missing were stragglers and isolated troops who were later to rejoin the division, but at the end of the first day the division had suffered a more than 10 percent loss.¹²

Although the 83d Division had failed to achieve its mission of allowing the VII Corps to commit a second division in the isthmus after the first day's action, General Collins had no alternative but to keep pushing. He ordered the attack to secure Sainteny to continue on 5 July. General Macon changed his dispositions but slightly. The 331st Infantry, now commanded by Lt. Col. William E. Long, was to try again on the right of the Carentan-Périers road. Colonel McLendon's 330th Infantry, which had

¹¹ With caution, von der Heydte added that if the situation were ever reversed in the future, he hoped that General Macon would return the favor. Ltr, Ferenbaugh to OCMH, 20 May 53; MS # B-839 (Heydte).

¹² By 7 July the consolidated figure of those missing in action declined to 243 (83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl). Casualty figures in the sources available (FUSA Daily Estimated Loss Rpts, Jul; the 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl; the 83d Div G-4 Daily Rpts, G-4 Jnl; and the 83d Div G-1 AAR, Jul) are constantly at variance. Figures chosen for the text represent an estimate compiled from all sources. Discussions recorded in the telephone journal are valuable contemporary estimates.

sustained the highest number of casualties, was to relinquish part of its zone to two battalions of Colonel Crabill's 329th Infantry. The third battalion of the 329th would remain on the division's extreme right as flank protection.

The attack on 5 July began on a disheartening, if exaggerated, note. During the ten-minute artillery preparation, the executive officer of one of the regiments phoned division headquarters that the division artillery was "slaughtering our 3d Battalion." In reality, the regiment had received only a few short rounds.

The division jumped off on schedule. Unfortunately, the attack that morning repeated the unsuccessful pattern of the previous day. The troops made little progress.

Restless and impatient in a situation that denied use of available strength, General Collins ordered General Macon to make room "or else." Since there was no place to go except forward, Macon had to insist on continuation of a costly frontal attack. That afternoon he began to apply more pressure on his subordinate commanders. "You tell him," General Macon ordered, "that he must take that objective and go right on down regardless of his flank; pay attention to nothing, not even communication." An hour later he instructed a regimental commander, "Never mind about the gap; keep that leading battalion going."

When a battalion commander protested that he had only about 400 men, General Macon assured him, "That is just what I need, 400 men; keep driving." In midafternoon a regimental commander reported infiltrating enemy. "They won't hurt you any," Macon promised. "They shoot us," the regi-

mental commander explained. When he protested that one of his battalions consisted of only one and a half rifle companies and the heavy weapons company, or about 300 men, the general sent the assistant division commander and two platoons of tanks to help the regiment clear the area.

When another battalion commander reported what looked like a counter-attack, the general ordered, "Do not pay any attention to it; you must go on down [in attack]." To a third battalion commander's protest that he had no reserve left, General Macon answered, "You go on down there and they [the enemy] will have to get out of your way."

By evening the general was shouting. "To hell with the [enemy] fire, to hell with what's on your flank, get down there and take the area. You don't need any recon. You have got to go ahead. You have got to take that objective if you have to go all night."

All seemed in vain when General Collins telephoned that evening. "What has been the trouble?" he asked. "[You] haven't moved an inch." The trouble was the same: mud, canalized routes of advance, and strong resistance.

Just before dark the division did succeed in reaching a hamlet half way to Sainteny, but the Germans would permit no celebration of the achievement. When accurate mortar and artillery fire battered the troops after dark, each of the two regiments lost contact with one of its battalions for several hours. When finally located during the early morning hours of 6 July, the battalions needed water, food, ammunition, litters, ambulances, and reinforcements. Nev-

ertheless, the troops held on to their hard-won gains.

In two days the 83d Division had displayed almost all the weaknesses and made virtually all the mistakes of a unit new to combat. Poor reports from subordinate units, incorrect map locations, and weak communications made accurate artillery support almost impossible and effective aid from the few tactical planes in the air on the second day difficult. Lax command control and discipline resulted in an inordinately large number of stragglers. Regimental and battalion commanders did not seem able to coordinate their attached units, institute reconnaissance in time, or press their attacks with vigor. Tank-infantry co-operation was especially bad, and mutual complaint and recrimination resulted. Infantrymen accused tankers of refusing to work at night and of disobeying orders with the excuse that they were only attached units, and at least one infantry commander threatened to shoot a tank officer for declining to advance in support. On the other hand, the tankers had little confidence in the ability of the infantry to protect them from close-range counterattack, and at least one tank commander threatened to shoot infantrymen who seemed on the verge of running to the rear and abandoning the tanks. The inexperience of the division was apparent on all echelons. When General Macon remarked that the commander of another division used his antiaircraft guns to mow down the hedges facing him, the artillery commander of the 83d Division asked, "How does he get them into position?" "I don't know," General Macon answered.

Despite its deficiencies, the division

had managed by sheer persistence to advance over a mile down the Carentan-Périers road. As a result, the division was at the southern end of the narrow neck and was ready to debouch into wider terrain just north of Sainteny. But in making the advance, it had suffered an additional 750 casualties. With these losses, many among key personnel, the future effectiveness of the division had been seriously impaired.

Although the advance of the 83d still did not permit commitment of a second division, General Collins, already delayed one day, decided to wait no longer. The depletion and exhaustion of the 83d must have been a factor in his decision. He ordered General Macon to confine his efforts to the left of the Carentan-Périers road and to shift his direction from the southwest toward Périers to the south toward the bank of the Taute River. Collins then instructed the 4th Division commander to take temporary control of the battered and depleted 331st Infantry on the right of the Carentan-Périers road, commit one of his own regiments through it, and drive toward Périers. Responsibility for the isthmus on the right of the road passed to the 4th Division.

The 4th Division was an experienced unit. It had taken part in the D-Day invasion of the Continent and had participated effectively in the Cherbourg operation. In the process, however, the division had lost about 5,400 men. Only five of the rifle company commanders who had made the D-Day landing were with the division three weeks later. Though many key individuals remained to steady the 4,400 replacements who partially refilled the division's

ranks, Maj. Gen. Raymond O. Barton, who had commanded the unit since 1942, remarked with regret, "We no longer have the division we brought ashore."¹⁸

General Barton planned to commit the 12th Infantry (Col. James S. Luckett), with a company each of the 87th Chemical, the 70th Tank, and the 801st Tank Destroyer Battalions, and a platoon of the 377th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion. To support the attack, Barton regained control of his division artillery and an additional battalion of medium field artillery, which for three days had been operating with the 90th Division. At the same time that the 12th Infantry moved into position to make the main division effort toward Périers, elements of Col. James S. Rodwell's 8th Infantry were to relieve the battalion of the 329th Infantry still on the extreme right flank of the corps.

Early on 6 July the 12th Infantry began to relieve the 331st. It was a difficult relief since strong enemy fire and local counterattack harassed the troops. When the 12th Infantry had finally passed through and attacked to gain a favorable line of departure for the coordinated effort planned with the 83d Division, the regiment met firm resistance that halted the advance at once. Further attack for that day was canceled.

In the meantime, the enemy maintained heavy fire on the 83d Division and launched minor counterattacks, inflicting about 700 additional casualties. Under

¹⁸ CI 30 (4th Div).

punishing pressure, the division nevertheless held its positions.

The lack of success during the third day of action along the Carentan-Périers axis, this time involving a veteran unit, must have confirmed General Collins' suspicions that the inexperience of the 83d Division had not been the principal factor in holding back its advance. He concluded that the cost of bulldozing through the lowlands with conventional tactics was too high and turned to an ally, the IX Tactical Air Command. During the previous few days, as the weather had permitted, fighter-bombers of the IX TAC had attacked targets of opportunity and struck enemy positions located by ground observers. General Collins now asked for more. He wanted a mass dive-bombing effort by more than a hundred planes to pummel the enemy in front of the 4th and 83d Divisions for forty-five minutes before renewal of the ground attack on 7 July.¹⁴ With this assistance and a co-ordinated attack by the two divisions, General Collins hoped that the 83d Division would reach Sainteny by dark on 7 July and that the 4th Division would move far enough forward toward Périers to allow the 9th Division to be committed. Expecting this to be fulfilled, General Collins alerted the 9th Division for a move to an assembly area near Carentan.¹⁵

Two events marred the beginning of the attack on 7 July. The first occurred after General Barton had decided to obliterate the resistance in the small area on the right near the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges. The area had

bothered the 83d Division, which had made an unsuccessful effort to clear it on the first day of its attack. The main obstacle to success was the stream, which was difficult to cross. Deciding that it could best be crossed during darkness, General Barton had instructed the commander of the 8th Infantry to make a surprise move during the night of 6 July. By sending two battalions over the stream at night, the units would be in position to clear the area at daylight, 7 July, thus eradicating a potential nuisance to the division rear that might hold up the advance should the division break through to Périers.

Though the regimental commander complied with instructions, one of his battalions could not cross the stream even at night because of enemy fire. The other battalion, after having picked its way through the marsh during the night and made the crossing, found itself in an untenable position at daybreak and was forced to withdraw after taking more than a hundred casualties.¹⁶

The second disappointment was a drizzling rain on the morning of 7 July that resulted in cancellation of the strong air support. "Disappointing news," General Collins reported to the divisions prepared to jump off. "But go right ahead with your attack."

General Macon attempted to swing his 83d Division gradually southward to the bank of the Taute River. His new axis of advance was the secondary road that crossed the Carentan-Périers isthmus laterally and led to the causeway over the flooded Taute. Despite the

¹⁴ VII Corps Ops Memo 30, 6 Jul.

¹⁵ [VII Corps] Notes for the Cofs, 7 Jul, VII Corps G-3 Jnl and File.

¹⁶ 4th Div and VII Corps AAR's, Jul; Telecon Seventh Army to AGp B, 1050, 7 Jul, AGp B KTB.

new direction of advance, the right flank elements of the division were still to take Sainteny. As the division endeavored to move forward during the morning of 7 July, it repelled five counterattacks, local in nature but fierce in intensity. Strong fire from the division artillery, effective use of bazooka teams, and direct fire from tanks and tank destroyers finally defeated the enemy efforts, though one battalion, isolated by German infiltrators, had to hold out until jeeps escorted by light tanks brought ammunition and food and restored communications. In the late afternoon Colonel McLendon's 330th Infantry made effective use of the division artillery, chiseled a narrow penetration through the enemy positions, and gained several hundred yards on the east flank. The achievement was hailed as substantial, raising hopes that the enemy defense was deteriorating, but the enemy quickly recovered as the reconnaissance battalion of the SS panzer grenadiers sealed off the penetration.¹⁷ The 83d Division captured only seventeen prisoners that day. The German paratroopers and SS soldiers fought stubbornly, refusing to surrender when outnumbered and overpowered and giving ground only with desperate reluctance. The 83d Division failed to reach either Sainteny or the bank of the Taute River during the day.

The 12th Infantry of General Barton's 4th Division had even less success. Improved weather conditions during the afternoon permitted several fighter-bombers to operate over the VII Corps front, where they bombed enemy positions opposing the regiment. The 4th

Division Artillery followed the bombardment with a preparation, and the regiment jumped off once more. Unfortunately, the strenuous efforts resulted in hardly any gain.

In their attack on 7 July the two committed regiments of the 4th Division sustained almost 600 casualties. The 12th Infantry moved forward but slightly; the 8th, on the right flank, advanced not at all. Even for an experienced division, the stubborn and skillful resistance of the Germans in the Cotentin was proving too much. The swamps and the mud were themselves formidable enemies, but the most important obstacle insofar as the 4th Division was concerned was the old problem of the hedgerows. To take an average-size field required an entire infantry company, for there was no way of telling along which row or on which side of the hedge the Germans would be, and therefore there was no way of knowing the best approach.¹⁸

As the 4th Division rediscovered the problems of waging offensive warfare in Normandy, the 83d Division began to show signs of improvement. The men who had survived the early fighting began to feel like veterans and to act as such. Command control tightened, communications improved, and the division began to utilize its attached units with confidence. When requesting replacements for the 83d Division from the First Army on 7 July, General Collins remarked that the division was coming along pretty well.

The improvement was a bright spot in an otherwise bleak situation. Although the 83d Division was beginning to gain experience, each of its regiments was ap-

¹⁷ *Seventh Army KTB (Draft)*, 7 Jul.

¹⁸ CI 30 (4th Div).

proximately 600 men understrength, and the men remaining were exhausted after four days of combat. While the 4th Division had not sustained such high casualties, it was not fully committed. Nor was it possible yet for General Collins to employ the 4th Division in full force. Early commitment of the 9th Division appeared unlikely. The VII Corps had failed to move even to Sainteny, an advance of only two and a half miles. The combination of German resistance and the Cotentin marshes and hedgerows had stymied the Americans, at least for the moment in the Carentan-Périers isthmus. Continuation of the attack meant costly frontal effort with little promise of rapid success.

Unknown to the Americans, their offensive action was more successful than the results seemed to indicate. The aggressive defense of the Germans—tactics to seal off local penetrations by counterattack and to encircle American spearheads—was unable to function properly under effective artillery fire and fighter-bomber attack. Despite skillful ground defense, the Germans were gradually being forced back, their reserves were being used up, and their defensive line was dangerously stretched. With the two regiments on the isthmus being increasingly depleted, the SS panzer grenadier division committed in defense of Périers part of its regiment that had been east of the Taute River.¹⁹

Despite the impact of the VII Corps thrust, the *Seventh Army* looked upon it as it had done when judging the adjacent VIII Corps attack on the previous day—as merely a reconnaissance in force. Although depreciating the American in-

tention, the *Seventh Army* urgently called for help. With two U.S. Corps exerting pressure, the Germans began to be concerned over their relatively meager forces in reserve.²⁰ Anticipating by 5 July that the Americans might break through to Périers and cut off the *LXXXIV Corps* forces in the la Haye-du-Puits sector, Hausser, the *Seventh Army* commander, had demanded additional reserves. The *2d SS Panzer Division* had been moved westward from the *II Parachute Corps* sector to meet the American attack, and by 7 July its troops were strung across the Cotentin and battling both VIII Corps at la Haye-du-Puits and VII Corps on the Carentan-Périers isthmus.²¹

The VII Corps attack had thus robbed the German sectors on both sides of the corridor; it had prevented the Germans from employing all their available armor at la Haye-du-Puits; it also had weakened the St. Lô sector just to the east. Instead of massing the armored division for a strong counterattack, the Germans had had to meet American pressure by committing the armored unit piecemeal in defense. The panzer division's striking power was thus dissipated across the active front. To meet the need for still more reserves, Rommel and Kluge prevailed upon OKW and Hitler to release the *5th Parachute Division* from its station in Brittany, and on 7 July the paratroopers began to move toward the Cotentin battlefield.²²

If General Bradley surmised these

¹⁹ *Seventh Army KTB*, 4 Jul; Telecon, *Seventh Army* to *AGp B*, 1300, 4 Jul, *AGp B KTB*.

²⁰ *Seventh Army KTB* (Draft), 5 Jul; Telecon *Seventh Army* to *AGp B*, 1610, 7 Jul, *AGp B KTB*.

²² Telecons Hausser to Rommel, 1930, 7 Jul, and Rommel to Kluge, 2020, 7 Jul, *AGp B KTB*.

¹⁹ *Seventh Army* and *AGp B KTB*'s 5–7 Jul.

developments, he could not have been entirely dismayed by the fact that the VII Corps attack on the isthmus had been halted at the same time as that of the VIII Corps. Also, on the same day, 7 July, operations immediately to the east, in the XIX Corps zone, seemed to show an opportunity for rapid success. Shifting his hopes eastward, General Bradley looked to the region between the Taute and the Vire Rivers, where additional American pressure seemed to promise a swift penetration of the enemy defenses.

The Vire and Taute Bridgehead

The XIX Corps held positions straddling the Vire River, which split the corps zone into equal parts of dissimilar terrain—Cotentin lowland on the west and rolling country on the east. The difference was accentuated by the fact that the troops on the left (east) were along a front that was several miles in advance of the line on the right. (*Map 5*)

The corps portion of the First Army objective lay astride the Vire River along the Coutances-St. Lô-Bayeux highway—between the villages of St. Gilles and St. André-de-l'Epine, about four miles southwest and northeast of St. Lô, respectively. The objective included not only the high ground adjacent to the highway but also the city of St. Lô.

In compliance with the dictates of the terrain, the corps attack was to take place in two steps—first west of the Vire River, the second east of it. The initial effort (on 7 July) was to get troops across the Vire et Taute Canal and the Vire River and push the corps

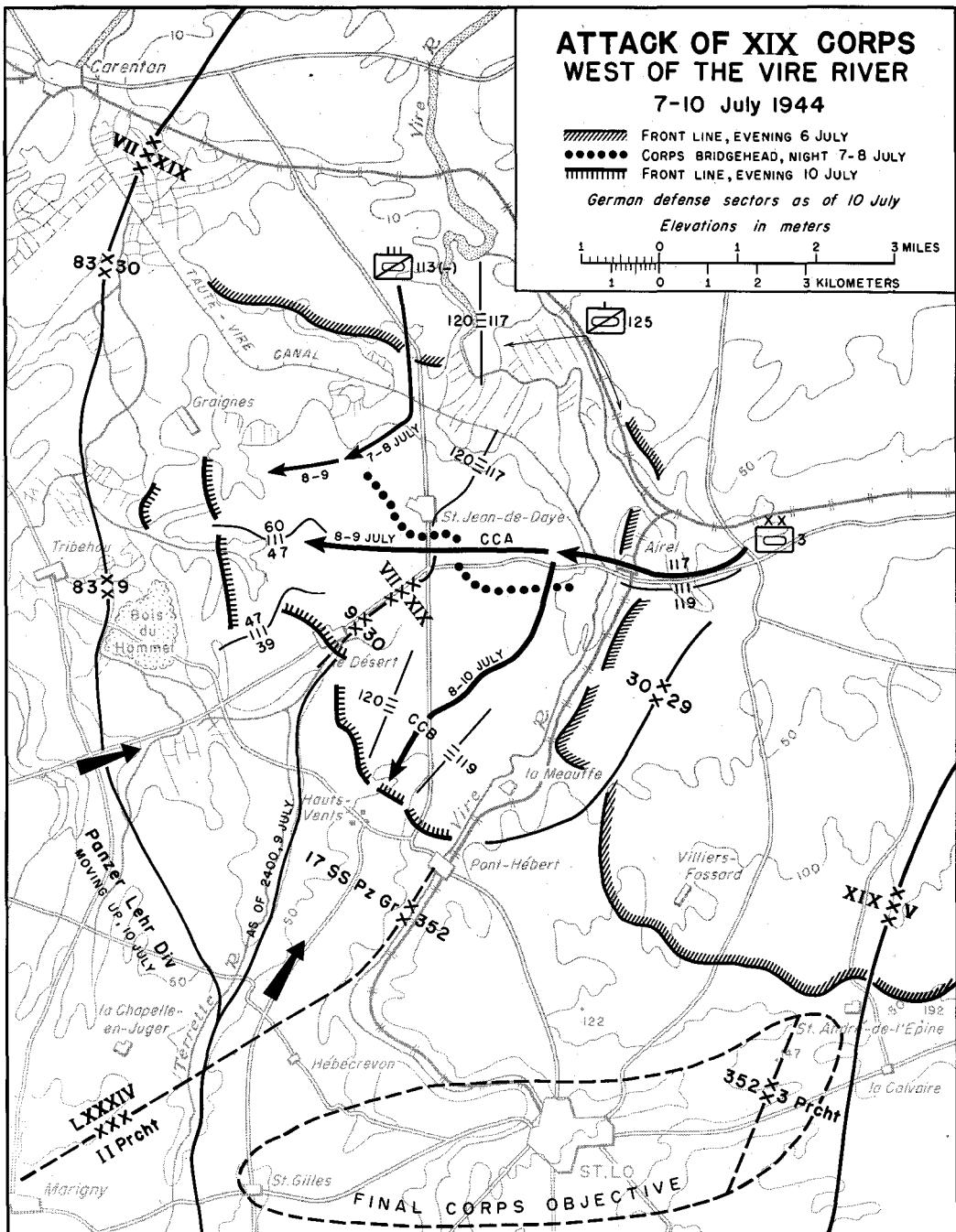
right flank to that part of the objective west of the Vire. Such action would protect the lateral coastal highway between Carentan and Isigny, which was still under occasional hostile fire; but more to the point, it would place troops on the high ground along the Périers-St. Lô highway, which was part of the First Army's Coutances-Caumont objective line. U.S. forces there would outflank St. Lô on the west and threaten the city from that direction. Reaching Pont-Hébert, about half way to the objective, would be enough to indicate this menace to the Germans, and at that point the troops on the corps left were to launch their attack east of the Vire.²³

The XIX Corps was commanded by Maj. Gen. Charles H. Corlett. A West Pointer whose quiet manner inspired confidence and who had a knack of getting the most from sometimes difficult subordinates, General Corlett had participated in operations on Attu and had led the 7th Division in the successful Marshall Islands campaign in the Pacific. Sent to the European theater as an expert in amphibious warfare, he had brought the XIX Corps from England to France in June.²⁴

General Corlett controlled two divisions: the 30th Infantry on the corps right was to make the attack on 7 July to seize the high ground immediately west of St. Lô; the 29th Infantry was to attack later east of the Vire and directly toward St. Lô. The 35th Infantry Divi-

²³ Ltr, Corlett to OCMH, 19 Jan 54; XIX Corps FO 4, 2 Jul (rescinding FO 4, 28 Jun).

²⁴ Ltr, Corlett to OCMH, 2 Sep 53; see Philip A. Crowl and Edmund G. Love, *Seizure of the Gilberts and Marshalls, UNITED STATES ARMY IN WORLD WAR II* (Washington, 1955).



MAP 5