

Bradley gave General Collins the 35th Division, recently released from the V Corps to join the XX Corps of the Third Army in the Fougères-Vitré area. While still under XX Corps control and with some understandable confusion of orders and plans, the 35th Division, having planned to attack south with the Third Army, advanced that evening northeast toward St. Hilaire with the eventual objective the Mortain-Barenton road south of Hill 317.³⁶

Thus, less than twenty-four hours after the Germans attacked, the VII Corps had a strength of seven divisions—five infantry and two armored (less one combat command).³⁷ Still another was alerted for possible shift from the Third Army should the Germans effect a more serious penetration.

Meanwhile, the 30th Division was battling desperately at some disadvantage. Before coming to Mortain, the 30th was to have become part of the V Corps, and plans and reconnaissance had been made toward that end. When the division was abruptly shifted into the VII Corps sector, there was no time for real reconnaissance. With little knowledge of where neighboring units were located and practically no information on enemy dispositions, the 30th hastily took over the positions held by the 1st Division. Shallow foxholes and field artillery emplacements far forward in offensive formation were adequate to accommodate a unit pausing temporarily

³⁶ 35th Div AAR, Aug, and FO 13, 2000, 7 Aug (issued verbally 1845, 7 Aug); Notes for General Hobbs, 1249, 7 Aug, and Telecon, Collins and Hobbs, 1550, 7 Aug, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.

³⁷ The 35th Division remained officially under XX Corps control until midnight, 8 August, but tactically its action was an integral part of the VII Corps operation.

but were less suitable for defense. Large-scale maps showing the terrain in detail did not become generally available until several days later, and for the most part the lower echelons used crumpled maps that 1st Division men had pulled out of their pockets and off their map boards and passed along before departing. The 30th took over the telephone wire nets left in place and found it so difficult to repair breaks in the unfamiliar system that the division eventually laid its own wire. Although the defensive positions could have been better, the main drawback was that the division had not had sufficient time to become properly oriented. Nor was the division at full strength in meeting the counterattack. Nearly eight hundred replacements, which had joined only a few days before, were hardly assimilated. Two of the nine infantry battalions were absent: one had been dispatched to Barenton on the evening of 6 August, the other had been attached to the 2d Armored Division near Vire. The men of the remaining seven battalions were tired after their march from Tessy to Mortain on 6 August and soon reached a condition "of extreme battle weariness."³⁸

General Hobbs at first tended to minimize the importance of what seemed to him to be only a German demonstration. He was concerned somewhat about a possible breakthrough southwest of Mortain to St. Hilaire, but the corps commander, who was making arrangements to block the gap there, directed Hobbs to the more immediate problem in the Juvigny area. Collins ordered Hobbs to

³⁸ Telecon, Hobbs, Stephens, and Col Robert G. McKee, 1805, 9 Aug; Hewitt, *Story of 30th Division*, pp. 54-55; Ruppenthal Notes, ML-2185.

furnish four medium tanks to protect the corps wire teams so that telephone lines could remain operative and the corps be kept informed of developments as they occurred. He instructed Hobbs to report hourly on the situation at Juvigny, by radio if other communications were not functioning.

Apparently feeling that Hobbs did not fully appreciate the implications of the attack, Collins told him to take the counterattack seriously. Hobbs protested that he already had committed all his infantry and engineers and was without a reserve, surely indication enough that he was serious. Yet when Collins attached a regiment of the 4th Division to the 30th, Hobbs said he didn't think he needed it, everything was going fine. Surprised, Collins decided to "play it safe" and give Hobbs the regiment "anyway" as an immediate reserve.³⁹

By noon of 7 August, intelligence officers estimated that the German forces behind American lines consisted of five battalions of infantry, four of artillery, and two or three of tanks. There seemed no question but that the Germans had "launched a major counterattack to separate First and Third Armies."⁴⁰ Stopping the attack depended substantially on the 30th Division.

Hobbs had three main problems: cutting off the penetration northwest of Mortain, blocking the thrust southwest

³⁹ Telecons and Msgs, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File, 7 Aug, in particular Hobbs and Lewis, 0900, Collins, and Hobbs, 1140, 1150, 1550, 1600; 105th Engr C Bn S-3 Rpt, 7 Aug; VII Corps Msg (signed Lt Col Bergin V. Dickey), 7 Aug, VII Corps G-3 Jnl and File.

⁴⁰ FUSA G-2 Per Rpt 59, 8 Aug; Collins to Huebner, 1745, 7 Aug, VII Corps G-3 Jnl and File.

of Mortain toward St. Hilaire, and recapturing Mortain to re-establish contact with the isolated and surrounded battalion. Against the penetration north and northwest of Mortain, Hobbs ordered Col. Truman E. Boudinot's CCB of the 3d Armored Division (attached to the 30th Division) and Col. Edwin M. Sutherland's 119 Infantry to drive northeast and northwest from Reffuveille and Juvigny, respectively, toward le Mesnil-Adelée. He instructed the 117th Infantry to take St. Barthélémy then drive northwest to le Mesnil-Tôve. The two infantry regiments and the combat command, working closely together, established a cohesive front on 7 August and commenced attacking generally north toward the Sée River. To close off the opening that led to St. Hilaire, Hobbs could do little except hope that the 35th Division would arrive quickly. The 120th Infantry launched repeated company attacks in efforts to regain Romagny and cut the roads leading southwest, but the Germans were unwilling to relinquish their positions. Until the 35th Division exerted additional force and drove the Germans from the southwestern outskirts of Mortain, the isolated battalion on Hill 317 would remain encircled.

Meanwhile, the battle raged in the 30th Division sector. The most serious factor was the disorganization and isolation of small units. Communication throughout the division zone was precarious; wires were cut or shot out, and infiltrating German troops and enemy raiding parties menaced messengers and command posts. The 823d Tank Destroyer Battalion destroyed 14 enemy tanks, 2 trucks, a half-track, 3 full-tracked vehicles, 2 motorcycles, a staff car, and a

machine gun position before being overrun by enemy infantry and losing 13 wounded, 3 killed, 91 missing, and 11 of its 3-inch guns and prime movers. "There were many heroes today," the battalion commander reported, "both living and dead." One battalion of the 117th Infantry lost 350 men on 7 August, and enemy infiltrators were behind the regimental lines "at several different points." But at the end of the day, even though the troops were "very fatigued, supply problems not solved, defensive sector penetrated," the regimental commander could state: "however key terrain feature still held."⁴¹ The 30th Division lost more than 600 men and much equipment on 7 August, but after the initial shock of the counterattack, the troops held firm.

The situation was similar throughout the corps zone. The 4th Division reacted effectively with artillery fire, destroying during the afternoon of 7 August a German column that tried to move across its front. The division, besides releasing a regiment for attachment to the 30th Division, moved a second regiment to Chérencé in support of the 39th Infantry, which had been split in two by the initial penetration. Despite the precarious situation of the 39th Infantry, Colonel Bond in the early afternoon of 7 August moved those elements that were south of the German thrust around and through the 4th Division sector to rejoin the infantry battalions on the north bank of the Sée. The regimental line at the

⁴¹ 823d TD Bn Unit Rpt, 7 Aug; 117th Inf Unit Rpt, 7 Aug. Lt. Col. Robert E. Frankland, commander of a battalion that destroyed more than fifteen German tanks, was awarded the DSC. A soldier of that battalion, Pvt. Peter Preslipsky, also received the DSC for destroying two tanks by bazooka fire.

end of the day was generally the same as on 6 August. A few miles to the north-east, the other two regiments of the 9th Division failed to make contact with the 39th, but they gained excellent hilltop positions to assure the integrity of the corps left. That evening General Collins attached the 39th Infantry to the 4th Division, which was in contact with the regiment and able to support it.⁴²

American artillery had responded to the attack with liberal expenditures of ammunition, operating on the premise that it was better to waste shells than miss a possible target. The weather was excellent throughout the day, and in addition to the artillery observation planes that pinpointed targets, fighter-bombers roamed the area at will, destroying enemy matériel and morale. Ten squadrons of Typhoons of the RAF 2d Tactical Air Force operating from airfields in France flew 294 sorties in the Mortain area. Of seventy enemy tanks estimated to have made the original penetration, only thirty were judged to be in operation at the close of the day. On the morning of 8 August, the estimate was reduced to twenty-five still remaining behind American lines. Prisoners taken by the corps on 7 August numbered 350.⁴³

Chance had played an important role in the American reaction. The German decision to make the main effort north of Mortain rather than south of it was vital. The 4th Division was in the right place from which to bring flanking fire

⁴² 39th Inf, 9th Div, and 4th Div AAR's, Aug.

⁴³ Telecon, Hobbs, and Lewis, 1715, 7 Aug; 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File; FUSA Sitrep 127, 8 Aug; 39th Inf, 30th Div, VII Corps AAR's, Aug; Leigh-Mallory, "Despatch," Fourth Supplement to the *London Gazette* of December 31, 1946, p. 66.

on the main effort. CCB of the 3d Armored Division, assembled near Ruffyville, a few miles from the deepest point of the penetration, was able to attack the German spearheads immediately. The accidental appearance of the 2d Armored Division near Chérencé brought comfort to the 39th Infantry, and the fact that the armor was not needed elsewhere and could therefore be inserted into the battle was a happy circumstance. The location of the 35th Division was another lucky break. The capricious factor of weather also was favorable for the Allies. It was fortunate, finally, that officers of good judgment had seen to it that American troops occupied Hill 317, "the key to the whole area."

There was more than chance involved.

The reaction to the counterattack demonstrated a flexibility and a rapidity of reflex that was most clearly illustrated by the fact that British planes operated effectively on the American front.

The forward motion of the Mortain counterattack had come to a halt soon after daylight on 7 August, when the Germans drove their tanks off the roads into the fields and hastily threw camouflage nets over them to escape detection from the ground and air. Although the Germans failed that day to regain the momentum that had enabled them to make a serious penetration of the American lines, they held stubbornly to their forward positions and awaited reinforcement for a renewed thrust toward Avranches. Meanwhile, the battle at Mortain continued.

PART SIX

ENCIRCLEMENT AND THE DRIVE TO THE SEINE

CHAPTER XXV

Encirclement

Envelopment from the North

Twenty-four hours after the Germans counterattacked toward Avranches, the First Canadian Army, from positions three miles south of Caen, launched a massive attack southeast toward Falaise. The timing was accidental, but it could hardly have been more fortunate.

The Canadian attack had been in preparation for almost a week, its object at the least to wear down enemy units, at the most to unhinge the German withdrawal to the Seine that General Montgomery expected.¹ The German thrust toward Avranches, changing the situation, widened Montgomery's perspective on the role of the Canadian effort. The Canadian attack now became his main instrument of destruction.

The Canadians were to "break through the German positions astride the road Caen-Falaise," and advance toward Falaise, twenty-one miles southeast of Caen.² For the first fifteen miles the

road was "arrow-straight," rising "gradually, sometimes almost imperceptibly, but steadily," from little more than sea level to more than six hundred feet in height. "Up this long, smooth, dangerous slope the Canadians were to fight," across acres of waving wheat broken by an occasional village, a patch of woods, an occasional orchard—through an area where only an infrequent hedgerow or belt of trees lined the side roads.³

The ground was good for employing armor, but solidly built villages and the woods provided defenders excellent natural centers of resistance. Three German divisions—the 272d and 89th Infantry and the 12th SS Panzer—manned two defensive lines in depth. Fifty 88-mm. antiaircraft pieces, sited for antitank action, supplemented about sixty dug-in tanks and self-propelled guns.

To overcome these strong defenses, General Crerar decided to combine overwhelming air support with ground penetration under the cover of darkness. After a strike by heavy bombers, tanks were to lead the attack. Infantrymen riding in armored personnel carriers (self-propelled gun carriages specially converted for troop transport by Lt. Gen. G. G. Simonds, the corps commander, and later called Kangaroos), were to follow the tanks and detruck at appropriate points to mop up.

¹ 21 AGp Operational Situation and Dir, M-516, 4 Aug; see above, Ch. XXII.

² British Army of the Rhine, *Battlefield Tour: Operation TOTALIZE, 2 Canadian Corps Operations Astride the Road Caen-Falaise: 7-8 August 1944* (Germany: Printing and Stationery Service, Control Commission for Germany, 1947) (hereafter cited as British Army of the Rhine, *Operation TOTALIZE*), p. 9. The following account, except as otherwise noted, is taken from this source, which gives a detailed report of plans, preparations, intelligence, and execution, and includes excellent maps; see also Stacey, *Canadian Army*, pp. 188ff.; and Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, pp. 154ff.

³ Stacey, *Canadian Army*, p. 188.

An hour before midnight, 7 August, more than a thousand RAF planes were ready to blast bomb zones flanking the projected ground assault area, and fighter-bombers were prepared to loose more than 5,000 tons of bombs on the assault area. Even though darkness, weather, smoke, and dust made visibility so poor that only two thirds of the planes dropped their loads, the bombardment was more effective than that in Operation Goodwood, less than three weeks earlier.⁴ On the ground, 720 artillery pieces were available to shell the enemy and light the battlefield with flares. While Bofors fired tracer bullets to mark the direction of the attack and searchlights provided "artificial moonlight," two divisions moved out shortly before midnight. Preceded by tanks with flailing mechanisms to detonate enemy mines and by engineers who were to establish routes through German mine fields, eight columns of armor (each with four vehicles abreast) moved toward Falaise.

Dense clouds of dust mixed with ground mist obscured vision. Although the assault troops crawled in low gear at one hundred yards a minute, collisions occurred and units lost their way. Yet the confusion that enveloped the attackers was less than that covering the defenders. By dawn of 8 August the Canadians had gained their first objectives; they had penetrated the German lines for a distance of three miles.

Off to a good start, the attack bogged down as the Canadians struck a solid line of defense, a "lay-back position."⁵ To

⁴ AAF III, p. 252; Telecon, Kluge and Eberbach, 2200, 8 Aug, *Fifth Panzer Army KTB*; Leigh-Mallory, "Despatch," Fourth Supplement to the *London Gazette* of December 31, 1946.

⁵ Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, p. 157.

break through, the Canadians committed two fresh but inexperienced armored divisions, one of which was the 1st Polish Armored Division.⁶ At that point everything seemed to go wrong. The new divisions displayed the usual shortcomings of green units. An air attack, delivered by bombers flying across the front and moving progressively forward like a creeping barrage, killed 25 men and wounded 131 (including a division commander), mostly Polish troops. Although the ground attack continued through 8 and 9 August for a gain of five more miles, momentum then ceased. The attack had carried the Canadian Army eight miles forward, but the same distance still separated it from Falaise.⁷

Meanwhile, the Second British Army, attacking since 30 June from positions south of Caumont, continued to exert pressure while turning between Thury-Harcourt and Vire southeastward toward Falaise and Flers. The original idea of the offensive was to pivot the line in order to keep pace with the Americans; later the purpose was changed to deny the enemy time to organize a withdrawal to the Seine; and finally, after the Mortain counterattack, to crush the German forces that were trying to hold the north flank of the counterattack toward Avranches.

⁶ Many Poles had been equipped and trained in England with British aid. They were troops that had escaped Poland after the defeat in 1939 and had reached England by way of Norway, Hungary, France, and other lands, or volunteer units (formed in France and the Middle East), which after the French surrender in 1940 escaped to England in a variety of ways. See F. C. Anstruther, *Poland's Part in the War* (Glasgow: The Polish Library, 1944), a pamphlet, 39 pp.

⁷ AAF III, pp. 250-51; [Ackerman], Employment of Strategic Bombers in a Tactical Role, pp. 86-88; Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe*, pp. 41off.

Despite the changing purpose of the offensive, the attack itself continued relentlessly, grinding down the *LXXIV Corps* and making necessary its reinforcement by elements of the *II SS Panzer Corps*. British forces pushed through a region not particularly suited for offense, an area of rough terrain devoid of good roads. It was a slow, hard advance, destitute of glamor and newspaper headlines, but it was inexorable, and it increased German concern over the way the situation was developing.⁸

The German Dilemma

The aerial bombardment on the night of 7 August and the estimate that six hundred Canadian tanks were attacking toward Falaise alarmed the German command in Normandy:

"We didn't expect this to come so soon," Kluge told Eberbach, "but I can imagine that it was no surprise to you."

"No," Eberbach said, "I have always awaited it and looked toward the morrow with a heavy heart."⁹

The moment was particularly dark because Kluge, in compliance with Hitler's order for a second and stronger attack toward Avranches, had started to move three armored divisions out of the *Fifth Panzer Army* sector toward the Mortain area. The *10th SS Panzer Division* was

already on the move, but orders for the *9th SS* and *12th SS Panzer Divisions* were canceled. The latter remained south of Caen to help stop the Canadians. Units of the newly arriving *85th Division*, instead of being assembled at Tinchebray for eventual commitment near Brécey, were diverted immediately to the Falaise sector. The Panther tank battalion of the *9th Panzer Division* and a rocket brigade, also scheduled to participate in the attack toward Avranches, joined the defenses north of Falaise.¹⁰

The second attack toward Avranches was scheduled for the evening of 9 August but, on the basis of the Canadian threat, Kluge that afternoon postponed it. Developments on the American front contributed to Kluge's decision. Attacks on 8 August by the V and XIX Corps between Vire and Sourdeval had strained the *II Parachute* and *LXXXIV Corps* and had ripped the *363d Division* to such an extent that the *Seventh Army* was trying to accelerate the arrival of the *331st Division* into the line. Perhaps worse, U.S. pressure had compelled the *XLVII Panzer Corps* during the night of 8 August to pull back slightly the *2d Panzer Division*'s most advanced wedge of the counterattack forces near le Mesnil-Tôve and Chérancé. Even more threatening was the attack of the *2d Armored Division* against the deep southern flank of the *2d SS Panzer Division* at Barenton. Finally, the capture of le Mans and the possibility of an American attack northward to Alençon tied down the *LXXXI Corps* and prevented the *9th Panzer Division* from

⁸ Second British Army Ops, 21 Jul-9 Sep 44, a chronological recd submitted to Hist Sec USFET by Maj. D. P. Draycott, G (Ops) Rcds, Hq BAOR, 2 Nov 45, and Info furnished Hist Sec USFET by 21 AGp, 9 Aug 45. ML-2251; MS # B-840 (Eberbach).

⁹ Telecon, Kluge and Eberbach, 2100, 8 Aug, *Fifth Pz A KTB*; see also, Account by Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer, Commander, *12th SS Panzer Division*, in British Army of the Rhine, *Operation TOTALIZE*, p. 101.

¹⁰ OB WEST, AGp B, and *Fifth Pz A KTB*'s, 8 and 9 Aug.