

## CHAPTER XV

# Exploiting the Breach

Strictly considered, Operation COBRA lasted only three days. By evening of 27 July, the situation had so evolved that General Bradley could conclude that a successful penetration of the enemy defenses had been achieved. He consequently issued oral instructions that were embodied in a field order distributed on the following day.<sup>1</sup> While the 2d Armored Division (less CCA) completed its COBRA mission in action that continued through 30 July, the other units of the First Army carried out the new orders to exploit the COBRA results.

The forces east of the Vire River that were to have assignments in the exploitation had performed a subsidiary role in COBRA. Their activity, essentially an act of diversion, had influenced General Bradley's decision on how to direct the offensive growing out of the COBRA breakthrough.

### *The COBRA Diversion*

The diversion east of the Vire River was predicated upon a desire to pin down enemy troops and prevent their dispatch westward across the river against the main forces in Operation COBRA. Exactly how this was to be accomplished General Bradley had left rather vague

while awaiting developments in the main attack. Thus the commanders of the two corps east of the Vire, Generals Corlett and Gerow, had to plan their operations on the basis of several contingencies and in the face of a number of question marks.

General Corlett was to be prepared either to displace his XIX Corps to the west bank of the Vire and assume a portion of the VII Corps zone for a drive south or to remain east of the Vire for a drive south along that side of the river. Until Bradley decided which move was to be made, the XIX Corps was to give fire support to the VII Corps.<sup>2</sup>

The future of General Gerow's V Corps was even less definite. Though V Corps was to attack on 26 July, General Bradley had designated no objectives. Nor could General Gerow count on a firm commitment from the forces on his flanks. If XIX Corps, on his right, displaced to a new zone west of the Vire, Gerow would have to extend his responsibility westward to the river. If the British, who were to his left and whose intentions were uncertain, did not advance, V Corps, by attacking, might expose its own left flank. (*See Map V.*)

The V Corps front formed a curved line about fifteen miles long, with the

<sup>1</sup> FUSA FO 2, 28 Jul; see FUSA Msg, 1100, 28 Jul, FUSA G-3 Jnl.

<sup>2</sup> XIX Corps Ltr of Instr 3, 20 Jul.

right flank on Hill 192, the center at Bérigny, and the left near Caumont. Early V Corps planning for COBRA had projected an advance of about ten miles across the entire front, but in final planning General Gerow directed instead a limited objective attack. Designed to move the corps forward about three miles, the attack was to tie down Germans east of the Vire; retain a measure of flexibility necessary for adjusting to the developing COBRA operation; and eliminate a German salient between St. Lô and Caumont that threatened American possession of St. Lô, denied desirable lateral routes of communications (particularly the St. Lô–Caumont highway), and lengthened the V Corps front.<sup>3</sup>

In the *bocage* east of the Vire River, irregular hills covered by hedgerowed fields formed broken ridge lines and raised barriers against an advance toward the south. In this terrain south of the St. Lô–Bérigny highway and west of the Bérigny–Caumont road, the Germans had excellent defensive positions on commanding ground. On the first ridge south of St. Lô—commonly called Hill 101—the Germans had kept XIX Corps from moving beyond St. Lô; in fact a strong counterreconnaissance screen had denied accurate knowledge of German strength and dispositions. On the second ridge—higher ground between the villages of Ste. Suzanne-sur-Vire and St.

Jean-des-Baisants—the enemy had excellent observation and supplementary defensive positions.

The goal of General Gerow's limited objective attack was the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge. Its capture would threaten to encircle the Germans on Hill 101 and thereby remove an obstacle hampering the XIX Corps. Once in possession of the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge, General Gerow could either continue his attack to the south or take advantage of the terrain compartment and move southwest along the ridge line to Ste. Suzanne-sur-Vire and the Vire River. The latter maneuver would encircle the Germans on Hill 101.

General Gerow wanted to drive down the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge. The maneuver he hoped to execute resembled, in miniature, the main COBRA operation west of the Vire. In the same way that the VII Corps veered to the Cotentin west coast, the V Corps would attack southwestward to the Vire River. Like the VIII Corps, the XIX Corps would act as a holding force. In the same manner that a successful VII Corps envelopment might block subsequent VIII Corps progress along the west coast of the Cotentin, a V Corps drive to the Vire would obstruct an immediate XIX Corps advance. If COBRA west of the Vire made possible an exploitation along the west bank of the Vire, the V Corps envelopment to the Vire would pinch out the XIX Corps and permit its displacement to make the main exploitation. The logic appeared unimpeachable, the opportunity tempting. The boundary between the XIX and the V Corps, tentatively drawn, ran southwest to the Vire River, indicating that the

<sup>3</sup> V Corps FO's 12 and 13, 16 and 21 Jul; *V Corps Operations in the ETO*, pp. 113ff; see S. Sgt. Jose M. Topete, Maj. Franklin Ferriss, and Lt. Hollis Alpert, *Operations of V Corps, 26 July–15 August* (hereafter cited Topete *et al.*, *Ops of V Corps*), a preliminary MS, Hist Div, USFET, 1946, OCMH Files.

XIX Corps was to be pinched out near Ste. Suzanne-sur-Vire.<sup>4</sup>

General Gerow controlled two infantry divisions. On the right he had an experienced division, the 2d, under General Robertson. The 5th Division on the left, commanded by Maj. Gen. S. LeRoy Irwin, had recently arrived in Normandy and had freed the 1st Division for the main COBRA attack. Together, the divisions on the V Corps front easily outnumbered the Germans they faced. Twenty battalions of artillery were in support, and two tank destroyer battalions were tied in with the corps fire direction center. The relative inactivity of the V Corps before the start of COBRA had enabled adequate stockpiling of ammunition.<sup>5</sup>

Several days before COBRA, in compliance with arrangements made by Generals Montgomery and Bradley, the boundary separating the V Corps and the Second British Army was moved to the west, giving the British responsibility for Caumont and reducing the 5th Division zone to regimental frontage. General Gerow planned to attack with the four regiments already on line, the three of the 2d Division and one of the 5th. Because the corps zone was divided into almost equal sectors by wooded and swampy lowland that separated the interior regiments, Gerow projected two simultaneous two-regiment efforts that would converge on the St. Jean-des-

Baisants ridge. He expected to be in possession of the crest of the ridge in two days, after which he planned to send the 5th Division southwest to the Vire River, to St. Suzanne-sur-Vire.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after dawn on 26 July, 192 American and 44 British guns fired a twenty-minute artillery preparation to open the attack east of the Vire River. This was the precursor of a heavy artillery effort that by the end of the first day was to consume half the ammunition allocated to the V Corps for a five-day period.<sup>7</sup>

Concerned that two weeks of relative inactivity in this sector had enabled the enemy to prepare extensive defensive positions in considerable depth, the 2d Division commander, General Robertson, had developed novel tactics for his attack. Tanks equipped with hedgecutters and protected by time-fuzed artillery fire advanced buttoned up and without infantry support for several hundred yards to breach a few hedgerows in depth across the front. Achieving surprise and taking no losses from enemy fire, the tankers returned after twenty minutes to the line of departure to pick up infantry support. Together the tanks and infantry moved quickly through the gaps in the hedgerows before the Germans could re-establish their positions.<sup>8</sup>

With the help of these tactics, two of the 2d Division's three regiments made

<sup>4</sup> V Corps AAR, Jul, Ltr of Instrs to the 5th Div, 24 Jul, FO 13, 21 Jul, Ltr of Instrs supplementing FO 12, 24 Jul, and G-3 Situation Map, 2030, 25 Jul; Memo, Maj Gen S. LeRoy Irwin to Gen Gerow, 23 Jul, V Corps G-3 Jnl.

<sup>5</sup> FUSA Ltr, Relief of 1st Div by 5th Inf Div, 11 Jul, and Msgs, FUSA G-3 Jnl, 12-14 Jul; V Corps History, p. 124; Gen Bd Arty Rpt, App. C; V Corps Ord Sec Rpt, V Corps AAR, Jul.

<sup>6</sup> Observations of the Div Comdr During Jul, 2d Div AAR, Jul; 2d Div FO 6, 19 Jul; 5th Div FO 2, 17 Jul, and FO 3, 22 Jul; V Corps Ltr of Instrs to 5th Div, 24 Jul.

<sup>7</sup> V Corps History, p. 121; Gen Bd Arty Rpt, App. C; V Corps Ord Sec Rpt, V Corps AAR, Jul.

<sup>8</sup> 9th Inf AAR, Jul; Observations of the Div Comdr During Jul, 2d Div AAR, Jul; 741st Tk Bn AAR, Jul.

notable advances. On the division left, the 9th Infantry used twenty-five .50-caliber machine guns previously emplaced on high ground to deliver flanking fire across the regimental front and advanced steadily for almost two miles. Against artillery, mortar, and slight small-arms fire, the regiment nearly reached the St. Lô-Caumont highway. Comprising one half of the corps right flank pincer force, the 23d Infantry gained almost a mile and reached a lateral country road. There, German artillery and high-velocity weapons placed flanking fire on the road and prevented a crossing in strength. The fire also made it difficult to evacuate casualties and bring up supplies. On the division right, where the 38th Infantry composed the other half of the pincer force, a comparable advance was made except on the extreme right. Stanch resistance and an increasingly exposed right flank forced a halt.<sup>9</sup>

Employing artillery fire to good advantage, the only regiment of the 5th Division to attack, the 2d Infantry, also made a quick initial gain of about a thousand yards. It was making a flanking approach to the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge when intense and accurate German fire caused considerable disorganization. Nevertheless, by committing all three battalions judiciously, the regimental commander, Col. A. Worrell Roffe, was able to keep the attack going

another 1,500 yards. Cutting the St. Lô-Caumont highway, the regiment made a total advance of two miles.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the first day, the units of the V Corps had taken about 300 prisoners and advanced half way to the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge. The drive cost nearly a thousand casualties, chiefly from artillery fire.<sup>11</sup> The assault troops had broken through the crust of the German defenses, though they had been unable to exploit local penetrations because of the terrain, the wide frontages, and, in the case of the 2d Infantry Regiment, a certain amount of disorganization within the battalions.<sup>12</sup> The V Corps clearly appeared to be accomplishing its main mission of containing some of the German forces and preventing them from bringing their strength to bear on the main development of COBRA west of the Vire River.

Resuming the attack on 27 July, V Corps advanced but did not reach its objective. The two regiments of the 2d Division, comprising the right arm of the corps pincer movement, gained about a thousand yards against resistance that was appreciably less deter-

<sup>10</sup> The intensity of the combat may be judged from the fact that five soldiers of the 5th Division were awarded the DSC, two posthumously: Pfc. Milo J. Flynn, Pfc. Amijan O. Lazar, Pvt. Jack Gill, S. Sgt. Richard F. Heinzelman, and T. Sgt. Lloyd N. Peterson.

<sup>11</sup> V Corps G-2 Per Rpts, 26 and 27 Jul. Losses for the 2d Infantry were officially placed at 147, a low figure produced in compliance with a First Army order that estimates of men missing in action were to be "no higher than absolutely necessary." (5th Div G-1 Jnl, 26 Jul.) To equate its reported figures and its actual losses, the division reported higher losses during the succeeding days. General Irwin, *Personal Diary*; see also Topete *et al.*, *Opns of V Corps*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Observations of the Div Comdr During Jul, 2d Div AAR, Jul; Comments, 5th Div AAR, Jul.

<sup>9</sup> S. Sgt. Edward V. Maloney of the 38th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, who though mortally wounded continued to fire the guns of his tank to cover the defensive preparations of his unit, was posthumously awarded the DSC. Pfc. Clifford L. Curry of the same unit walked through fire on the battlefield to rescue a wounded soldier. All fire "ceased in salute" as he carried the wounded man back to safety. He was awarded the DSC.

mined than on 26 July. The regiments on the left were hampered by continuing disorganization and nervousness among 5th Division units, still new in battle. Neither regiment advanced. At the end of the day, V Corps was still more than a mile short of the crest of the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge. The real achievement was the contact made by the two interior regiments on the corps front. After bypassing the wooded swampy lowland that separated them, the regiments had turned inward and eliminated what had been the Bérigny salient.<sup>13</sup>

Denied the ridge he wanted, General Gerow changed his plans around midday, 27 July. Dividing the corps zone equally between the 2d and 5th Divisions, he alerted both to the possibility that either or both might be designated to make the attack southwestward to the Vire.<sup>14</sup> The reapportionment of frontage acknowledged the strong resistance in terrain favorable for defense. It also was a precautionary measure predicated upon readying the corps to absorb another division, the 35th.

A possibility that the 35th Division soon might pass to V Corps had become strong on the morning of 27 July when indications developed that the XIX Corps might displace west of the Vire River. Since the 35th was the only division of XIX Corps actually in the line, it might be left behind when the corps moved.

Earlier, the XIX Corps had executed its COBRA mission by placing strong artillery fire on the ridges south of St. Lô.

On 27 July the commander of the 35th Division, General Baade, came to the conclusion that the Germans were withdrawing primarily because of American gains west of the Vire. Deciding that an advance was in order, Baade secured the corps commander's permission to attack during the afternoon to secure Hill 101, the ridge immediately south of St. Lô. As events developed, the attack was well timed. The Germans had begun to withdraw during the morning, and the 35th Division took Hill 101 against no more than light resistance. Several Vire River bridge sites southwest of St. Lô fell in the process.<sup>15</sup>

On the evening of 27 July, a telephone call from First Army headquarters to General Corlett acknowledged the changing situation brought about by COBRA. General Bradley had decided to displace the XIX Corps west of the Vire River. As Gerow had anticipated, Bradley attached the 35th Division to the V Corps and extended Gerow's responsibility westward to the Vire.

COBRA had ended, and a new operation was about to begin.

### *The Post-COBRA Plan*

In the COBRA plan, General Bradley had not tried to forecast how the operation might end. Instead, he was prepared to choose his course of action from the actual COBRA results. He could halt the offensive and consolidate his forces or continue his attack to exploit a breakthrough. By the evening of 27 July it

<sup>13</sup> 2d Div G-3 Jnl, 27 Jul, and G-3 Per Rpt, 27 Jul; V Corps G-2 Per Rpt, 27 Jul.

<sup>14</sup> V Corps FO 14, 27 Jul; Gerow Memo, 27 Jul, V Corps G-3 Jnl.

<sup>15</sup> 35th Div AAR, Jul, FO 8, 27 Jul, G-3 Jnl, 27 Jul, G-3 Per Rpt, 27 Jul; XIX Corps Ltr of Instr 3, 20 Jul.

was apparent that the success of COBRA warranted a continuation of the attack, and Bradley decided to exploit his gains and broaden and extend his effort.

Specifically, the enemy withdrawal along the west coast of the Cotentin on 27 July—later judged the decisive consequence of COBRA—seemed to offer an opportunity to hasten the withdrawal and turn it into a rout.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the opposition east of Coutances was so strong appeared particularly significant—the forces there were obviously trying “to hold open the door of retreat for the *LXXXIV Corps*.” Even the Luftwaffe put in an appearance—a total of thirty planes made eight daylight and sixteen night raids.<sup>17</sup> The Germans had realized the danger of becoming isolated on the Cotentin west coast and had attempted to escape encirclement by withdrawing. “To say that . . . [we are] riding high tonight is putting it mildly,” General Bradley wrote General Eisenhower. “Things on our front really look good.”<sup>18</sup>

As judged by American intelligence officers—whose gratification over the COBRA results led to some optimistic exaggeration—the Germans in the Cotentin were in flight by 27 July. The only hope the Germans could have of stemming their retreat was to gain refuge behind the Sée River at Avranches. The “bits and pieces,” the “shattered remnants,” and the “battered portions” of the units in the Cotentin were hardly in shape to make a stand unless fresh troops came forward to reinforce them, and no fresh troops seemed available.

Thus the German course of action would probably be an attempt to erect a hasty defensive line between Avranches and the town of Vire, a line along the south bank of the Sée River and the high ground south of Villedieu-les-Poëles and St. Sever-Calvados. The possibility was also present that the Germans might counterattack from the east with two panzer divisions, but this hardly seemed likely at the moment. The significant conclusion was that “destruction of *LXXXIV Corps* is believed at hand, and the destruction of *II Parachute Corps* is an immediate possibility.”<sup>19</sup>

To give the enemy “no time to regroup and reorganize his forces,” General Bradley ordered his subordinate commanders to “maintain unrelenting pressure” on the Germans.<sup>20</sup> His great reliance on the judgment of his corps commanders, as well as the fluidity of the situation, led him to formulate his instructions in rather general terms.<sup>21</sup>

There was no need for specifics. Two immediate tasks lay ahead. The German forces still north of Coutances had to be destroyed, those retreating to the south had to be pursued. Difficulties were apparent.

On the Cotentin west coast, where German disorganization seemed greatest, the VII and VIII Corps still had to complete their COBRA mission of eliminating the German forces trapped near Coutances. At the same time, the VII Corps, which had veered westward toward the coast, now had to turn south. Furthermore, VII Corps threatened to cause confusion by intermingling with VIII

<sup>16</sup> First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 102.

<sup>17</sup> FUSA G-2 Per Rpt 48, 28 Jul.

<sup>18</sup> Ltr, Bradley to Eisenhower, 28 Jul, Pogue Files.

<sup>19</sup> FUSA G-2 Est 12, 28 Jul.

<sup>20</sup> FUSA FO 2, 28 Jul.

<sup>21</sup> First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 104-06.

Corps units. The VIII Corps, in addition to concern over the approach of the VII Corps toward its zone of advance, faced mines and wrecked vehicles, obstacles that were serious hindrances to a rapid advance in the restricted coastal road net. Time would be needed to regroup both corps and clear the roads, minimum prerequisites, it seemed, for effective exploitation south toward Avranches.

East of the Vire River, where only the V Corps remained, General Gerow's offensive was inevitably tied to British efforts on his left flank.

Only the XIX Corps received precise instructions from General Bradley. General Corlett was to displace the XIX Corps west of the Vire River and assume responsibility for what had been part of the VII Corps zone. Corlett was to "attack aggressively" in a drive south along the west bank of the Vire to a "goose egg" Bradley had drawn on a map. The "goose-egg" objective was about twenty miles south of le Mesnil-Herman and encompassed the Forêt de St. Sever and the town of Vire.

If XIX Corps could secure its objective, it would be into and partially through the highest terrain in Normandy—a hill mass extending from Avranches through Vire to Falaise—and would be able to deny the Germans use of the ground as the basis of a new defensive line. Vire, an important road center less than twenty miles from the base of the Cotentin, would provide the First Army an excellent pivot for the wheeling movement projected a month earlier—the turn to the east that would allow other American forces to enter Brittany.

To take the step into Brittany, General Patton's Third Army headquarters was ready to become operational. When the Third Army became actively involved in operations on the Continent, the projected new U.S. command structure was to go into effect: General Bradley would take command of the 12th Army Group and Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges, the Deputy Commander, First Army, would replace him as the First Army commander. It seemed as though the moment for the change might coincide with the end of the exploitation growing out of COBRA.

So that the U.S. forces could slip neatly into the new command organization at the conclusion of the exploitation, General Bradley made a special arrangement. He asked General Hodges "to keep close track of" the three corps on the left. He informally appointed General Patton a second deputy commander and assigned him the mission of supervising the activities of the VIII Corps on the right. The VIII Corps, scheduled to come under control of the Third Army, was to act as a bridge to link the post-COBRA exploitation and the entrance of U.S. troops into Brittany. The Third Army was expected to be committed and pass into Brittany about 1 August.<sup>22</sup>

In the meantime, although COBRA and its consequences were an American responsibility, General Montgomery, as the Allied ground commander, was vitally concerned to promote progress on the American front. To create a diversion for COBRA, he had directed General Crerar to launch a holding attack on the Canadian front from Caen

<sup>22</sup> TUSA AAR, I, Ch. 2; Ltr, Bradley to Eisenhower, 28 Jul, Pogue Files.

toward Falaise. In compliance, the 2d Canadian Corps had attacked on the morning of 25 July, at the same time that COBRA jumped off. The Canadian attack met such resistance, and set off such strong German counterattacks east of the Orne by two panzer divisions, that Montgomery halted the attack at the end of the first day. Enemy strength in the Caen sector was obviously too great for anything less than an all-out offensive effort, which Montgomery was unwilling or unable to mount. On the other hand, the presence of formidable enemy forces near Caen made it necessary for the British to exercise caution. Montgomery still considered holding Caen, the pivot of the entire Allied front in Normandy, his principal task, and to that end he set in motion deception measures and air and artillery activity to keep the enemy off balance and prevent him from making a serious threat against Caen. It was this that had brought Kluge to the Caen front on 27 July at the height of the COBRA action.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his preoccupation with Caen, Montgomery endeavored to assist COBRA. Looking elsewhere along the eastern portion of the Allied front, he discovered that there seemed to be little if any German armor in the Caumont sector. He decided that an attack south from Caumont along the British-American boundary by the Second British Army would

take advantage of German weakness and be of value. Not only would it help COBRA by preventing the Germans from dispatching forces westward across the Vire River against the Americans, it would also ameliorate the situation at Caen by drawing German armored reserves away from that sector. With the former intention his avowed purpose, Montgomery ordered General Dempsey to attack south from Caumont on 30 July in an operation code-named BLUECOAT.

Like GOODWOOD, the attempted breakthrough effort south of Caen earlier in July, which had raised doubts concerning Montgomery's primary and secondary motives, BLUECOAT had its ambiguous aspects. If the original intention was to hold German forces in place, thus keeping them from crossing the Vire and interfering with COBRA, BLUECOAT came too late to influence the panzer division that Kluge was moving from the Caumont region toward the American front. Yet because of the American success, it seemed likely that the Germans would make a general withdrawal in the Cotentin and try to swing their entire left flank back to Avranches. To do so they needed a firmly held pivot point. A dominating hill complex culminating in Mont Pinçon—five to eight miles south of the Caumont-Villers-Bocage line—in the British zone of advance seemed suitable for this purpose. If the British denied the Germans the potential pivot point and got behind those German forces trying to swing west to face the Americans, the German withdrawal might disintegrate. This became the final purpose of BLUECOAT. With the object of moving from Caumont through the Forêt

<sup>23</sup> Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, p. 139; British Army of the Rhine, *Battlefield Tour, Operation BLUECOAT, 8 Corps Operations South of Caumont, 30-31 July 44* (Germany: Printing and Stationery Service, Control Commission for Germany, 1947) (hereafter cited as *Operation BLUECOAT*), p. 1; FUSA G-2 Per Rpt 48, 28 Jul; Stacey, *The Canadian Army*, pp. 190-93.



l'Evêque to the town of Vire, the British were to attack on 30 July.<sup>24</sup>

Out of Operation COBRA thus emerged a plan of exploitation, a plan that sought to intensify German disorganization by relentless pressure on the American front and by a quick thrust south from Caumont on the British front. If the plan succeeded, the Allied turning movement toward the southeast would become a reality, and American troops would be able to enter Brittany. For the plan to succeed, the V and XIX Corps of the First Army and the right flank corps of the Second British Army first had to secure a firm pivot point at the town of Vire.

#### *East of the Vire River*

While the British were preparing to join the offensive east of the Vire, the V Corps resumed the attack. Assuming responsibility for all the American-held territory east of the Vire on 28 July by taking control of the 35th Division, General Gerow had free rein to push the V Corps to the south in the general direction of the town of Vire. Though General Bradley had assigned him no specific objectives, Bradley had asked him to keep the army headquarters informed on his intentions and progress. To his three divisions—the 2d, 5th, and 35th—General Gerow stated his mission as he understood it: “We *must* keep going to maintain contact, and not give the Boche a chance to dig in. See that all understand this.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> British Army of the Rhine, *Operation BLUE-COAT*, p. 1; Conf Notes, 1100, 28 Jul, and 1645, 28 Jul, FUSA G-3 Misc File.

<sup>25</sup> V Corps Memo, FUSA FO 2, 28 Jul, and penciled note, V Corps G-3 Jnl.

As the opposing *II Parachute Corps* pulled back in the hope of establishing defenses that could be tied in with the line the German units west of the Vire were trying to form, the V Corps on 28 July secured its COBRA objective, the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge from Ste. Suzanne-sur-Vire to Vidouville. All three divisions advanced against light resistance and captured few prisoners. Although the enemy seemed much weaker as a result of the three-day attack and thus made prospects of a virtually unlimited advance seem possible for the V Corps, General Gerow was reluctant to initiate an unrestrained attack because of the terrain and his left flank. (See *Map VI*.)

The Souloevre-Vire river line, eleven miles beyond the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge, appeared the obvious V Corps objective. Although the water alone constituted an obstacle to vehicular movement, the river runs through a ridge mass more than two miles in depth that presented an even more serious barrier to military advance. Steep-walled hills from 600 to 900 feet high would provide the Germans dominant observation, cover and concealment, fields of fire, and a good communications network. Hoping to secure the area before the Germans could organize it for defense, General Gerow nevertheless felt that the intervening terrain precluded a rapid advance. In the heart of the *bocage* country, the corps sector east of the Vire was a region of small irregular hills, small winding roads, and small hedgerowed fields. Combat there was sure to resemble the earlier battle of the hedgerows in the Cotentin.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> V Corps G-2 Sec Tactical Study of the Terrain, 30 Jul; XIX Corps G-2 Est of Bocage, 25 Jul.

The second factor working against an unchecked V Corps advance was General Gerow's concern over his left flank. Until the British attacked south from Caumont on 30 July (prevented until then by difficulties of regrouping and deployment) and covered the flank, a headlong advance by V Corps would expose an increasingly vulnerable side to the enemy.

General Gerow's solution for his two problems was to set limits on his advance in order to keep tight control.<sup>27</sup>

The Germans facilitated the V Corps advance when the *II Parachute Corps*, with permission, pulled back again.<sup>28</sup> Moving to the first limit of advance with very little difficulty, V Corps by noon 29 July held a line from Condé-sur-Vire to the British positions near Caumont. When the corps commander ordered the attack continued, troops pushed forward again for several thousand yards against sporadic resistance.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the absence of an organized German defensive line, the V Corps divisions did not have an easy time. The terrain inhibited rapid advance, and ambush lurked around every twist in the road. The *bocage* hills were populated by German rear-guard parties who used artillery, mortars, and small arms fire effectively. One American regimental commander, apparently near exhaustion, reported, "Things are not going very well," and said he "would like to be relieved of command." The division commander was not sympathetic. "I

will relieve you when I get ready to do so," he snapped, but later sought to soothe him: "Do not get discouraged," he said, "this is hedgerow fighting. It is tough."<sup>30</sup>

Receiving word that the Germans were withdrawing all along the First Army front and learning that the British were planning to attack on the following day, General Gerow on 29 July ordered his division commanders into an all-out advance. Instead of merely preventing disengagement, the corps was to "drive strong and hard" in "a relentless pursuit."<sup>31</sup> As translated by General Robertson, the troops were to "by-pass everything. Never mind these little pockets of resistance. . . . Let's get down and take a bath in the Vire."<sup>32</sup> (*Map VII*)

The instructions came too late. Though army headquarters claimed that only some "tired old Austrians" were in opposition, the troops had moved into contact with a defensive line covering an important road net centering on Torigni-sur-Vire. As the 35th Division on 30 July tried to take Torigni and the 2d and 5th Division to occupy high ground east of the village, the Germans inflicted close to 1,000 casualties, halted the ad-

<sup>27</sup> V Corps FO, 29 Jul, and G-3 Situation Map, 2030, 28 Jul; 5th Div Outline Plan, 0230, 27 Jul.

<sup>28</sup> Msg, Kluge to Hausser, 28 Jul, *AGP B Op. Befehle*, p. 195; Telecon, Tempelhoff and Pemsel, 0935, 28 Jul, *AGP B KTB*.

<sup>29</sup> V Corps G-3 Jnl, 29 Jul.

<sup>30</sup> Telecon, Robertson and Hirschfelder, 1930, 29 Jul, 2d Div G-3 Jnl. On the previous day, Colonel Hirschfelder, the 9th Infantry commander, had inspired his assault troops by turning his back to enemy fire and, in full view of the Germans, had removed his helmet, placed his hands on his hips, and asked his men what was holding them up. This display of courage and of psychological inspiration provided the spark for continued attack. Colonel Hirschfelder was awarded the DSC.

<sup>31</sup> V Corps FO 16, 29 Jul, Ltr of Instrs, 29 Jul, and Memos for the Record by the CofS, 1120 and 1250, 29 Jul.

<sup>32</sup> Telecon, Robertson and Hirschfelder, 0920, 30 Jul, 2d Div G-3 Jnl.