

severely reduced, were still combat effective.¹¹

At H Hour-2200, 6 August-Hausser received a phone call from Funck, the *XLVII Panzer Corps* commander, who wanted the attack postponed. Two factors, Funck felt, made this necessary. First, the advance elements of the *1st SS Panzer Division* (the exploiting force) were only beginning to reach Tinchebray, even though the division commander had promised to be ready to cross the line of departure in strength a good six miles farther west around 2300. Obviously, the division would not be able to reach its assigned position in time. Nor would it be able to detach an armored battalion in time to reinforce the *2d Panzer Division* as planned. The reasons for the delay in arrival were several: the *89th Division* had been slow in relieving the *1st SS* on the *Fifth Panzer Army* front; traffic congestion and Allied air attacks had harassed the approach march; and finally, a piece of pure bad luck, the panzer battalion hurrying toward the *2d Panzer Division* had been moving through a defile in close formation when a crashing Allied fighter-bomber fell on the lead tank, blocked the entire battalion, and forced the tanks to back up and turn around in constricted space.

The second factor that Funck brought to Hausser's attention was the attitude of the commander of the *116th Panzer Division*, Generalleutnant Gerhard Graf von Schwerin, who had not dispatched the tank battalion he was supposed to furnish the *2d Panzer Division*. This was not the first time, Funck explained,

that the commander of the *116th* had failed to comply with orders. He requested that Schwerin be relieved.

Hausser was inclined to agree with Funck that the news of both incidents was serious, but he was unwilling to postpone the attack. Hausser's only concession was to delay the jump-off until midnight to give the *1st SS Panzer Division* two more hours to come forward. He did nothing about Schwerin.¹²

The attack started shortly after midnight without an artillery preparation. The *2d SS Panzer Division* on the left attacked in two columns, overran Mortain from both sides and captured the town, then advanced toward high ground west of Mortain and to the southwest toward St. Hilaire. There was no significant American opposition, and by noon of 7 August *2d SS Panzer* troops held blocking positions about half way between Mortain and St. Hilaire, thereby protecting the southern flank of the attack. A thrust to St. Hilaire and a direct threat to Avranches from the southeast seemed simple except for the *2d Battalion*, *120th Infantry*, ensconced and encircled on Hill 317 immediately east of Mortain. This contingent, with unexcelled observation of the *2d SS Panzer* zone south and west of Mortain, called for artillery fire on the division and thus pinned the troops down, preventing further advance.¹³

The *2d Panzer Division*, making the

¹¹ Telecon, Gersdorff and Lt Col Guenther von Kluge, 2100, 6 Aug, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs.

¹² Telecons, Wisch and Gersdorff, 1630, 6 Aug, and Funck and Hausser, 2200, 6 Aug, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs; MS # B-017 (Voigtsberger); MS # A-918 (Gersdorff).

¹³ Telecon, Gersdorff and Speidel, 1515, 7 Aug, and Gersdorff Telecon, 1200, 7 Aug, *AGP B KTB*; MS # P-159 (Sueckler); see Jules and Gilles Buisson, *Mortain et sa Bataille*, pp. 74ff.

main effort in the center, got only half of its troops off during the early hours of 7 August, the column on the right moving along the south bank of the Sée. Despite the failure of a tank battalion of the *116th Panzer Division* to appear for attachment, the armored column moved off, achieved surprise, and rolled through le Mesnil-Tôve to le Mesnil-Adelée. There, some elements turned north to protect the flank against a possible thrust from Chérencé, while the main body continued west toward the Brécey-St. Hilaire road. Shortly after daybreak, 7 August, just west of le Mesnil-Adelée and three miles short of the initial objective, the column encountered resistance that forced a halt.

The left column of the *2d Panzer Division* delayed attacking until dawn of 7 August, when the panzer battalion of the *1st SS* finally joined and completed the assault formation. The column then advanced easily through Bellefontaine. Strong antitank fire at St. Barthélemy made an organized effort necessary in order to reduce the opposition. The advance then continued almost to Juvigny before being stopped.

With the *2d Panzer Division* bogged down short of the initial objective, Funck committed the *1st SS Panzer Division* through the *2d Panzer* units in mid-morning, hoping thereby at least to gain Juvigny. The restricted road net, limited maneuver room, and American resistance on the ground and in the air balked further progress. With tank losses skyrocketing, Funck halted the attack around noon and instructed the troops to dig in.

Because both columns of the *2d Panzer Division* and the reinforcing column of the *1st SS Panzer Division* had

attacked on exceedingly narrow fronts, their spearhead wedges in unfavorable positions at le Mesnil-Adelée and east of Juvigny were especially vulnerable to counterattack. American artillery and antitank pieces located north and south of the Sée River struck the points of the German columns and kept the units immobile for the rest of the day.¹⁴

The north flank along the Sée was open, and it gave the German command particular cause for concern because the *116th Panzer Division* had failed to attack. Schwerin had been threatened with encirclement by American attacks toward Gathemo and Chérencé, and he had simply withheld the attack order from his subordinates. He had no confidence in the ability of the *84th Division*, which was relieving him, to hold against the American pressure, and consequently felt that he could neither detach a tank battalion to the *2d Panzer Division* nor launch the attack toward Avranches. Also, Schwerin had apparently lost hope for victory. Involved in the conspiracy of July 20th, he was one of the field commanders who were to have negotiated with the Allies for an armistice. No matter whether tactical or political factors were more important to Schwerin, his failure to participate in the Avranches counterattack was a flagrant case of disobedience. At 1600, 7 August, Hausser and Funck relieved him of command and replaced him with Funck's chief of staff, Col. Walter Reinhard. Thirty minutes later the division

¹⁴ Telecons, Ziegelmann and Lt Col Guenther von Kluge, 0430, 7 Aug, Gersdorff Telecon, 0915, 7 Aug, and Gersdorff and Speidel, 1515, 7 Aug, *AGP B KTB*; MS # A-904 (Luettwitz); MS # A-918 (Gersdorff)

finally jumped off. The troops made no progress.¹⁵

Instead of a well-massed, co-ordinated effort, only three of the six assault columns—the *2d SS Panzer Division* and one column of the *2d Panzer Division*—had jumped off on time. The attack had achieved surprise, and the armored troops had rolled forward about six miles. When the day dawned clear, without the anticipated fog, the ground troops, who were experienced in Normandy and knew what to expect from Allied air superiority, began to dig in. At that moment the advance came to a halt, and the commitment of the *1st SS Panzer Division* availed nothing. Heavy American artillery fires indicated that surprise was already gone. When Allied planes came out in force to bomb and strafe the armored columns, the troops were already under cover, their vehicles under camouflage, but British Hurricanes and Typhoons firing rockets nevertheless struck awe into the German formations. As for the mighty German air effort promised, the fighter planes that got off the ground near Paris did not get much beyond their airfields. Allied squadrons engaged them at once, and not a single German plane reached Mortain that day.¹⁶

By late afternoon, 7 August, it appeared to Hitler that Kluge had displayed poor judgment in allowing the

commitment of the *1st SS Panzer Division* north of Mortain rather than southwest toward St. Hilaire, where American opposition had been absent. It also seemed to him that the attack had been launched prematurely, hastily, and carelessly. If Kluge had waited until the *9th SS*, *10th SS*, and *9th Panzer Divisions* had been assembled for a truly massive effort, Hitler felt, the attack more than likely would have brought better results. Deciding that he could no longer entirely rely upon Kluge, he took a more direct role in the operations.

Still under the impression that the situation offered him a unique opportunity for disrupting the Allied breakout and eventually destroying the Allied beachhead, Hitler determined to continue the attack to Avranches. "I command the attack be prosecuted daringly and recklessly to the sea," he wrote that afternoon. He ordered that, "regardless of the risk," the *II SS Panzer Corps* (with the *9th SS* and the *10th SS Panzer Divisions* and either the *12th SS* or *21st Panzer Division*) be withdrawn from the *Fifth Panzer Army* line and committed in the Avranches sector "to bring about the collapse of the Normandy front by a thrust into the deep flank and rear of the enemy facing Seventh Army." To consummate what to him had become the master stroke of the western campaign, "Greatest daring, determination, imagination must give wings to all echelons of command. Each and every man must believe in victory. Cleaning up in rear areas and in Brittany can wait until later."¹⁷

¹⁵ Telecons, Funck and Hausser, 2200, 6 Aug, Gersdorff and Reinhard, 1800, 7 Aug, Gersdorff and Hausser, 1540, 7 Aug, Gersdorff and Speidel, 1940, 7 Aug, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs; Gersdorff and Speidel, 1515, 7 Aug, Kluge and Hausser, 2150, 7 Aug, *AGp B KTB*; MS # B-017 (Voigtsberger); ETHINT 17 (interview with Schwerin); MS # C-017 (Speidel); MS # B-721 (Speidel).

¹⁶ Telecon, Blumentritt and Gersdorff, 1940, 7 Aug, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs; MS # P-169 (Stueckler); see Pogue, *Supreme Command*, p. 208, n. 43.

¹⁷ Quoted in Msg, *AGp B* to *Fifth Pz A*, 7 Aug, *Fifth Pz A KTB*, *Anlage* 275; *Der Westen* (Schramm), p. 83; *OB WEST KTB*, 7 Aug, and *Anlage* 1176; see also MS # A-918 (Gersdorff).

Kluge had already concluded that the attack had failed. His judgment was as much influenced by developments on the northern and southern flanks of the *Seventh Army* as by the progress of the attack itself. American pressure had not ceased, and renewed threats from the north at Gathemo and from the south at Barenton posed unpleasant thoughts that the *Seventh Army* spearheads directed toward Avranches might be encircled and destroyed. The wiser course of action, he began to think, might be to withdraw.¹⁸

A call from Eberbach on the afternoon of 7 August added to Kluge's concern. It also reinforced his feeling that withdrawal from Mortain might be in order. Eberbach was troubled by the weakness of his thinned-out defense—lines covering the approaches to Falaise—and asked for reinforcement. Kluge diverted the incoming *331st Division* toward the *Fifth Panzer Army* front and was considering sending units from the *Seventh Army* when Hitler's order arrived to announce that the effort toward Avranches was to continue. Kluge virtually apologized when he phoned Eberbach to tell him that Eberbach not only would get no additional strength but would lose two panzer divisions at once and a third armored division eventually. "I foresee that the failure of this [continued] attack [to Avranches]," he told Eberbach, "can lead to collapse of the entire Normandy front, but the order [from Hitler] is so unequivocal that it must be obeyed."¹⁹

¹⁸ See, for example, Telecon, Kluge and Kuntzen, 0730, 7 Aug. LXXXI KTB.

¹⁹ Telecon, Kluge and Eberbach, 2140, 7 Aug. *Fifth Panzer Army KTB*; *AGp B Forward CP Tel Log* (entry 2000, 7 Aug), *AGp B KTB*.

Transmitting Hitler's order to Hausser, Kluge informed him that the *10th SS* and *12th SS Panzer Divisions* were to arrive in the *Seventh Army* sector on 8 August and be committed soon afterwards toward Avranches under the *LVIII Panzer Corps* headquarters, which had recently come up from southern France. As soon as the corps assembled its two SS panzer divisions, the *Seventh Army* would continue the attack without regard to the northern and southern flanks. Until the new attack was ready, the positions reached by the forward elements were to be held. The last remaining elements of the *1st SS Panzer Division* (including twenty-five assault guns), which had become available for use that evening, moved into a line that had suddenly, if only temporarily, changed from offense to defense.

Hausser, too, admitted failure on 7 August. He ascribed the causes to the Allied air superiority, the immobility of the *116th Panzer Division*, and a stronger than expected American resistance. Although additional striking forces augmented the chances of regaining Avranches, continuing threats to the army's flanks increased the chances of disaster. But since Hitler felt that the outcome of the war depended on another attack toward Avranches, there was no choice.²⁰

The American Reaction

To the Americans who felt the force of the counterattack toward Avranches, there was little impression that the Germans had been clumsy in launching

²⁰ *Seventh Army Tel Jnl*, entry 2200, 7 Aug; see *OB WEST KTB*, 7 Aug, and *Anlage 1184*.

their effort. Accompanied by surprise, the attack raised the specter of catastrophe. Loss of Mortain was a serious blow.

A town of 1,600 inhabitants, Mortain is at the foot of a rocky hill rising just to the east—Hill 317. The hill is the southern spur of wooded highland, convulsed and broken terrain around Sourdeval called by tourist bureaus “la Suisse normande” (Norman Switzerland). Near the juncture of the ancient provinces of Normandy, Brittany, and Maine, Hill 317 provides a magnificent view of the flat tableland to the south and west—the Sélune River plain, which is crossed by ribbons of road and stream. Domfront, fifteen miles eastward, and the bay of Mont St. Michel, twenty miles to the west, are visible on clear days. After the 1st Division had entered Mortain without difficulty on 3 August, the VII Corps commander, General Collins, inspected the positions and pointed to the high ground east of Mortain.

“Ralph,” he told the 1st Division commander, “be sure to get Hill 317.” “Joe,” General Huebner replied, “I already have it.”²¹

On 6 August the 30th Division occupied Mortain to free the 1st Division and its attached CCA of the 3d Armored Division for displacement south to Mayenne and exploitation east toward Alençon. Although the 1st Division was then rather far from VII Corps supply dumps (too long a run, General Collins thought, for effective supply),

Collins, who like the entire Allied command at the time was thinking in terms of the offensive, expected to move the corps beyond Mortain in short order. While the 4th Division remained in corps reserve near St. Pois, the 9th Division was to attack through Gathemo and Sourdeval, and the 30th Division was to push east toward Barenton and Domfront. There was no intimation that a German counterattack would upset these plans.²²

Questions had been raised a week earlier—“Will the enemy counterattack against the VII Corps south of the Sée River? . . . Will the enemy counterattack against the left flank of the Corps? . . . Where and in what strength will the VII Corps encounter organized resistance?” But the answers were as anticlimactic as they appeared obvious. The corps G-2 estimated 5,400 combat effectives in opposition; a parachute division and an infantry division, each with 1,000 combat effectives, were the strongest units he believed to be on the corps front.²³ The Germans could hardly offer serious resistance. The stubborn opposition in the Villedieu-les-Poëles and Gathemo sectors during the first days of August was apparently nothing more than rear-guard action covering a general withdrawal.

The 30th Division, because of traffic snarls, did not reach Mortain until six or seven hours after the planned time, and General Hobbs took responsibility for the sector at 2000, 6 August, four hours before the German counterattack started. His primary mission was to de-

²¹ Collins' Talk at the Armored School, 19 Jan 48. The last German in Mortain trying to escape was killed by a French policeman armed with a nineteenth century rifle and one bullet. Jules and Gilles Buisson, “Les Combats de Mortain,” in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, 1. 229.

²² VII Corps Notes for CofS, 6 Aug, Opns Memo 59, 7 Aug (confirming oral orders, 6 Aug), and G-2 Summary, 1800, 6 Aug.

²³ VII Corps FO 7, 1 Aug, and Incl 3.

fend the front from St. Barthélemy through Mortain to Barenton. Since the first two villages were in American hands, he set out to take the third. Because a small task force (attached tanks from CCA of the 3d Armored Division) of the 1st Division was to have taken Barenton that evening, Hobbs sent an infantry battalion (less one company but augmented by a company of medium tanks and a reconnaissance platoon) to relieve the armor at Barenton. Soon after this force departed Mortain, enemy aircraft strafed the column, destroyed several trucks, caused twenty-five casualties, and delayed the advance for an hour. Being attacked by German planes was a rather rare occurrence, but it did not necessarily signal portentous events; the column continued. When the men of the 30th Division made contact with CCA near Barenton, they learned that the armored troops had held the village but briefly before being expelled. Joining forces, the two units prepared to attack Barenton on the following morning, the 7th.²⁴

General Hobbs was also to attack toward Domfront, and he planned to send a reinforced infantry regiment there on 7 August. His G-2 also raised questions: Would the Germans defend high ground north of Barenton, high ground east and north of Domfront, or the road to Domfront? Would the Germans counterattack between Chérencé-le-Rousset and Mortain? ²⁵ The questions came somewhat late.

Around midnight of 6 August, the

VII Corps disseminated a warning that the Germans might counterattack near Mortain within the next twelve hours. Pilots had seen concentrations of German armor north and east of Sourdeval, forces thought to belong to the *1st SS*, *2d*, and *116th Panzer Divisions*. If these units made a westward thrust to Avranches, they would cut the communications of those American forces operating south of the Sélune River. Until the threat either developed or vanished, the 30th Division was to postpone sending a regiment to Domfront; Hobbs was to move a battalion south of the Sélune to protect communications with the 1st Division; he was also to reinforce his troops on Hill 317 east of Mortain.²⁶ This, too, came too late.

Activity on 7 August opened in the 1st Division zone near Mayenne during the early minutes of the day. Reconnaissance troops of the *9th Panzer Division* launched an attack that seemed for a few hours as though it might develop into something serious. Though Americans later connected this with the Mortain counterattack, the action around Mayenne was local in nature and unrelated, except perhaps most tenuously, to the major effort around Mortain.

The German forces attacking at Mortain entered the 1st Division sector southeast of Barenton four and a half hours afterwards, about 0430, when six tanks and supporting infantry of the *2d SS Panzer Division* broke through a screen maintained by the 4th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron attached to

²⁴ 30th Div G-3 Per Rpt 54, 0200, 7 Aug; see Hewitt, *Story of 30th Division*, pp. 56-57; Sylvan Diary, 6 Aug.

²⁵ 30th Div FO 2, 0030, 7 Aug, and Intel Summary, 0400, 7 Aug.

²⁶ Telecon, Collins with Huebner and Hobbs, 0038, 7 Aug; see VII Corps AAR, Aug; Hewitt, *Story of 30th Division*, p. 54.



NORTH OF MORTAIN. *Enemy vehicles wrecked during the German counter-attack to Avranches.*

the 1st Division. The consequences were not important. The cavalry withdrew several miles, consolidated forces, and established new lines.

Throughout the rest of the day the 1st Division, outside the critical German attack zone, remained in spotty contact with the enemy. Extensive patrolling to protect Mayenne and the corps lines of communication established a pattern of activity that was to be characteristic for several days. Meanwhile, the division waited for "orders to continue

the exploitation" eastward toward Alençon.²⁷

It was Lt. Col. Van H. Bond's 39th Infantry, 9th Division, that was first seriously threatened near the Sée River during the early hours of the German attack. Separated from the main body

²⁷ 1st Div AAR, Aug, and G-3 Per Rpts 63 and 64, 7 and 8 Aug; 4th Cav Recon Sq S-3 Rpt 1, 2400, 7 Aug; 3d Armd Div G-3 Per Rpt 44, 7 Aug. 2d Lt. Joseph Gorniak, Jr., of the 1st Medical Battalion was awarded the DSC for his heroic leadership of medical personnel during a chance encounter with a German patrol.

of the division, the regiment was attacking northeastward from Chérencé to make contact with the 47th and 60th Regiments pushing southeastward in the Gathemo area. At midnight, 6 August, the Germans still held the intervening ground about Perriers-en-Beauficel.

Shortly after midnight a forward observer of the 26th Field Artillery Battalion, which was supporting the 39th Infantry, heard tanks moving westward along the road between St. Barthélemy and Chérencé. The tank motors did not sound like Shermans. After establishing the fact that no American tanks were operating there, the artillery battalion, upon data furnished by the observer, began to fire at a range of five thousand yards but soon reduced it to only a thousand. By 0150, 7 August, not only the artillery battalion but also the infantry regiment was sure that a German armored column was moving west toward le Mesnil-Tôve.

A platoon of the regimental cannon company in le Mesnil-Tôve concluded that the Germans were already too close for effective defense. Dismantling their guns and disabling their vehicles, the troops abandoned the village and rejoined the infantry. So that German activity might be reported accurately, the platoon leader stayed behind. After verifying the fact that at least twenty enemy tracked vehicles were moving westward, he reported thirty-five more vehicles in the vicinity, including personnel carriers from which infantrymen were unloading. At the same time, word came from the regimental switchboard at le Mesnil-Tôve that the village was under machine gun fire, that all American troops had departed, and that

field trains and ammunition dumps nearby had been overrun and set afire.

The regimental commander had taken his first action at 0250, 7 August, when he instructed one of the infantry battalions to switch its antitank defenses toward the south to protect the rear. Thirty minutes later he directed his reserve (an infantry company and several tank destroyers) to attack south from Chérencé to le Mesnil-Tôve in order to cut behind the German spearhead. When the attack made no headway out of Chérencé, it became apparent that the Germans had cut directly across the regimental axis of communication. All three infantry battalions were north of the German penetration. The regimental command post, the cannon company (less one platoon), the antitank company (less two gun platoons), and the firing batteries of the 26th Field Artillery Battalion were south of the German column.²⁸

The German attack struck the 30th Division more directly. The *2d SS Panzer Division* surged through Mortain, knocked out roadblocks manned by Col. Hammond D. Birks's 120th Infantry north and south of the village, overran the 2d Battalion command post in Mortain and drove the staff into hiding, and isolated the rifle battalion on Hill 317. The battalion, reinforced by a company of the 3d Battalion, had split a rifle company three ways to establish two roadblocks north of Mortain and one south of the village. One roadblock north of Mortain, augmented by a few antitank guns, remained in action and accounted for over forty enemy vehicles and tanks

²⁸ 39th Inf and 9th Div AAR's, Aug; Hewitt, *Story of 30th Division*, p. 57.

during the next few days. Two road-blocks were destroyed at once, the survivors making their way to the surrounded hilltop to join the three rifle companies, the heavy weapons company, and the several antitank pieces that occupied the most important terrain in the Mortain sector.

Near St. Barthélemy, the Germans overran two companies of Lt. Col. Walter M. Johnson's 117th Infantry, surrounded a battalion headquarters, and threatened the regimental command post four hundred yards away. A patrol checking the outpost defenses of the regimental headquarters had suddenly been confronted by about fifty Germans. T. Sgt. Harold V. Sterling engaged the enemy while four companions maneuvered to safety. Then all five men conducted a fire fight for one hour until reinforcement arrived and the German group withdrew. In the belief that moving the regimental headquarters might have an adverse effect on morale, Colonel Johnson stayed to direct the battle in his sector, although he was virtually encircled.²⁹

Despite these initial blows, the 30th Division made no report to higher headquarters of the counterattack until 0315, 7 August, when German tanks were already in possession of Mortain and had reached a point four miles west of St. Barthélemy near le Mesnil-Tôve. Still the division G-3 was "not yet greatly concerned," even though he admitted that the Germans had cut behind the 39th Infantry in the Chérencé-Gathemo

sector, penetrated four miles behind the 30th Division front, threatened to drive uncontested to Avranches, and might attain St. Hilaire and Ducey without interference. Unperturbed an hour and a half later, he promised that the penetration would be cleaned up at the first light of day. Passing these reports to the First Army, a staff officer at the VII Corps headquarters added that the penetrations appeared to have been made by "uncoordinated units attempting to escape rather than aggressive action." Everyone on the lower echelons, it appeared, was confident that the attacks "would be rapidly taken care of." The army headquarters was under the impression that the disturbance was a local infantry counterattack that was repulsed without difficulty. Not until the coming of dawn was it obvious that the German effort was serious, "heavier than was first thought, but . . . under control."³⁰

At daybreak on 7 August, Generals Hodges and Collins were highly conscious of the fact that the German counterattack at the least threatened the VII Corps, at the most menaced the entire bridgehead south of the Sélune. If the German forces north of Mortain thrust northward across the Sée River, they might run riot through the corps rear area, destroying supply installations and nullifying in great part the exploitation of COBRA.³¹

Fortunately the 4th Division, in corps reserve and anticipating several days of rest and recreation, had reacted in a positive manner during the early morn-

²⁹ CI 96 (30th Div, 6-12 Aug). Sergeant Sterling received the DSC, as did Pfc. Clifford W. Buzzard and Pvt. Frank D. Joseph, Jr., who destroyed two enemy tanks with a bazooka and two rounds of ammunition.

³⁰ 30th Div Msgs, VII Corps G-3 Jnl and File; Telecons, 0400, 0520, and 0700, 7 Aug, FUSA G-2 Jnl and File; Sylvan Diary, 6 Aug.

³¹ VII Corps AAR, Aug.

ing hours. The 4th Division Artillery was placing a large volume of fire on German movements south of the Sée, and General Barton had assembled his troops for immediate commitment. By 0530 Barton was able to assure the corps commander that the Germans did not seem to be trying to go north of the Sée and that if they did, the 4th Division was ready.³²

Though reassured about the situation along the Sée River, General Collins was far from satisfied with the southern portion of the corps zone, that part along the Sélune River. There was little to arrest German movement between St. Hilaire and Barenton, and the enemy was already established in that area. Only two men of the 120th Infantry Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon had returned from an ambush near Romagny, just southwest of Mortain. If Collins recalled the 1st Division from Mayenne to close the St. Hilaire gap, he would create a similar opening at Mayenne. In quest of additional forces to plug the hole, which was inviting the Germans to drive to Ducey and wrest the vital Pontaubault bridgehead from American control, he called upon CCB of the 3d Armored Division (relieved the previous afternoon from attachment to the 4th Division and assembled south of the Sée River in the 30th Division rear). He attached the combat command to the 30th Division and told General Hobbs "to handle the situation S W of Mortain with it."³³ The more immediate necessity of meeting the German main effort north of Mortain and along the south bank of the Sée, however,

forced Hobbs to commit CCB in that area.

By chance, an extra unit seemed to materialize out of thin air. The 2d Armored Division (less CCA, which remained near Vire) had departed the XIX Corps sector shortly after midnight, 6 August, leaving St. Sever-Calvados and moving to Villedieu-les-Poëles, then south through St. Pois toward Chérencé-le-Roussel and Mayenne with the intention of supporting or accompanying the 1st Division in an advance toward Alençon. As the leading units of the armored column approached Chérencé on the morning of 7 August, they began to receive artillery fire from across the Sée. The column stopped, but not for long, for General Collins seized upon the troops to plug the hole on the corps right.³⁴ Meanwhile, the armor had provided temporary stability for the 39th Infantry of the 9th Division at the Sée River.

Backtracking from Chérencé, the armored column moved west several miles to get out of range of the enemy shelling, crossed the Sée, marched to St. Hilaire, and that night took positions near Barenton. So that "one man would be in command of everything at Barenton," General Brooks, the 2d Armored Division commander, assumed control over the troops of the 30th Division and of the 3d Armored Division's CCA, which had unsuccessfully tried to secure the village that day.³⁵

Because the 2d Armored Division could not alone close the gap, General

³² 4th Div AAR, Aug.

³³ Telecon, Collins and Hobbs, 0755, 7 Aug, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.

³⁴ Msg, Collins to Hobbs, 0042, 7 Aug, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File; FUSA Sitrep 125, 7 Aug.

³⁵ Telecons, Collins and Hobbs, 1720, 7 Aug, Collins and Brooks, 2125, 7 Aug, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.