

CHAPTER IV

The Offensive Launched

The Preparations

Designated to lead off in the U.S. First Army offensive to the south, VIII Corps was to advance twenty miles along the Cotentin west coast, secure high ground near Coutances, and form the western shoulder of a new army line extending to Caumont. The line was to be gained after VII, XIX, and V Corps attacked in turn in their respective zones. A quick thrust by VIII Corps promised to facilitate the entire army advance. By threatening the flank of enemy units opposing U.S. forces in the center, the corps would help its neighbors across the water obstacles and the mire of the Cotentin. At the conclusion of the offensive action across the army front, the Americans would be out of the swampland and on the dry ground of Normandy *bocage*.

The VIII Corps held a fifteen-mile front in a shallow arc facing a complex of hills around the important crossroads town of la Haye-du-Puits. Athwart the Cherbourg-Coutances highway and dominating the surrounding countryside, these hills formed a natural defensive position on which the Germans anchored the western flank of their Normandy front. Just to the south of the hill mass, the firm ground in the corps zone narrowed to seven miles between the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges and

the tidal flats of the Ay River. This ground was the VIII Corps' initial objective. (*Map 3*)

Charged with the task of unhinging the German line at its western end was Maj. Gen. Troy H. Middleton, a soldier with a distinguished and extensive combat career. He had enlisted in the Regular Army in 1910 and had risen during World War I to regimental command and the rank of colonel. He had demonstrated his competence in World War II as a division commander in Sicily and Italy. Several months before the invasion of western Europe he had assumed command of the VIII Corps, and nine days after the continental landing the corps headquarters had become operational in France with the mission of protecting the rear of the forces driving on Cherbourg. The terrain that had been of great assistance to the VIII Corps in June now inversely became an aid to the enemy.

Looking south across hedgerowed lowland toward la Haye-du-Puits, General Middleton faced high ground between sea and marsh, heights that shield the town on three sides. On the southwest, Hill 84 is the high point of the Montgardon ridge, an eminence stretching almost to the sea. On the north, twin hills, 121 and 131 meters in height, and the triplet hills of the Poterie ridge rise abruptly. To the east, Mont Castre lifts

westward extension of the *marécage* narrowed the corps zone south of la Haye-du-Puits. To replace the airborne troops, the 8th Division was to join the corps upon its arrival in France. Expecting to use the 8th Division beyond the initial objective, staff officers at corps headquarters tentatively scheduled its commitment to secure the final objective, Coutances.

Thus the VIII Corps was to make its attack with three divisions abreast. Each was to secure a portion of the heights forming a horseshoe around la Haye-du-Puits: the 79th was to seize the Montgardon ridge on the west and Hill 121; the 82d Airborne was to capture Hill 131 and the triplet hills of the Poterie ridge in the center; and the 90th, making the main effort, was to take Mont Castre on the east. With the commanding ground about la Haye-du-Puits in hand, the 79th Division was to push south to Lessay. There, where the tidal flats of the Ay River extend four miles inland and provide an effective barrier to continuing military operations southward, the 79th was to halt temporarily while the 90th continued with the newly arrived 8th.¹

Two problems confronted VIII Corps at the start of the attack: the hedgerow terrain north of la Haye-du-Puits and the German observation points on the commanding ground around the town. To overcome them, General Middleton placed great reliance on his nine battalions of medium and heavy artillery, which included two battalions of 240-mm. howitzers; he also had the temporary assistance of four battalions of

the VII Corps Artillery. Only on the afternoon before the attack did he learn that he was also to have extensive air support. In accordance with routine procedure, the air liaison officer at corps headquarters had forwarded a list of five targets considered suitable for air bombardment—suspected supply dumps and troop concentration areas deep in the enemy rear. A telephone call from First Army headquarters disclosed that General Eisenhower had made available a large number of aircraft for employment in the VIII Corps zone. When assured “You can get all you want,” the corps commander submitted an enlarged request that listed targets immediately in front of the combat troops.²

Allied intelligence was not altogether in agreement on the probable German reaction to the American offensive. Expecting a major German counterattack momentarily, higher headquarters anticipated strong resistance.³ On the other hand, the VIII Corps G-2, Col. Andrew R. Reeves, thought either a counter-attack or a strong defense most unlikely. Because of the inability or reluctance of the Germans to reinforce the Cherbourg garrison, because of their apparent shortage of artillery ammunition and their lack of air support, and because of the

¹ VIII Corps G-3 Jnl File, 2 Jul. Requests for air support usually came from the G-3 Air Section of a division and were funneled through the corps and army G-3 Air Sections to the IX TAC, which fulfilled the requests according to the availability of planes. For a detailed study of air-ground liaison, see Kent Roberts Greenfield, Army Ground Forces and the Air-Ground Battle Team Including Organic Light Aviation, AGF Study 35 (Hist Sec, AGF, 1948), particularly pp. 69ff.

² 21 AGp Dir, M-505, 30 Jun, Pogue Files; FUSA G-2 Est 7, 29 Jun.

³ VIII Corps AAR, Jul.



LA HAYE-DU-PUITS. Road at top leads south to Périers and Coutances.

probable low morale of their soldiers, he considered an immediate counterattack improbable. Nevertheless, he recognized that if the Germans were to keep the Allies from expanding their bridgehead, they would eventually have to counter-attack. Until they could, it was logical that they try to keep the Allied beach-head shallow by defending where they stood. Colonel Reeves believed, however, that they lacked the strength to remain where they were. He expected that as soon as they were driven from their main line of resistance near la

Haye-du-Puits, they would withdraw through a series of delaying positions to the high ground near Coutances.⁴

That VIII Corps would drive the enemy back was a matter of little doubt, since it was generally believed on the lower levels that the corps had "assembled a force overwhelmingly superior in all arms. . . ." ⁵ Below the army echelon, intelligence reports exaggerated the

⁴ VIII Corps G-2 Est 2, 28 Jun.

⁵ 82d Abn Div G-2 Est, 1 Jul. The G-2 reports of the 82d are typical of those published by the other divisions of VIII Corps.

fragmentary nature of German units and underestimated German organizational efficiency and flexibility. The First Army G-2 cautiously estimated that the German infantry divisions in Normandy averaged 75 percent of authorized strength and lacked much equipment. But the VIII Corps G-2 judged that among the enemy forces on his immediate front "the German divisional unit as such . . . has apparently ceased to exist."⁶ Perhaps true in the last week of June, the latter statement was not accurate by the first week in July.

For all the optimism, combat patrols noted that the Germans had set up an exceptionally strong outpost screen, replenished their supplies, reorganized their forces, and resumed active reconnaissance and patrolling. It was therefore reasonable to assume that the enemy had strengthened his main line of resistance and rear areas. Morale had undoubtedly improved. On the other hand, intelligence officers judged that enemy morale and combat efficiency had risen only from poor to fair. Germans still lacked aggressiveness when patrolling; critical shortages of mines and wire existed; and artillery fired but sporadically, indicating that the Germans were undoubtedly conserving their meager ammunition supplies to cover delaying action as they withdrew.⁷

Confidence and assurance gained in the Cherbourg campaign led most Americans to expect no serious interruption in the offensive to the south. A schedule of artillery ammunition expenditures

allotted for the attack revealed temporary removal of restrictions and a new system of self-imposed unit rationing. Although ammunition stocks on the Continent were not copious, they appeared to be more than adequate. Even though officers at First Army warned that unreasonable expenditures would result in a return to strict controls, the implicit premise underlying the relaxation of controls for the attack was the belief that each corps would have to make a strong or major effort for only two days. Two days of heavy artillery fire by each corps was considered adequate to propel the army to the Coutances-Caumont line.⁸

In the two days immediately preceding the attack, U.S. units on the VIII Corps front noted a marked change in enemy behavior. German artillery became more active; several tanks and assault guns made brief appearances; small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire increased in volume; infantrymen seemed more alert. American patrols began to have difficulty moving into hostile territory. Only in the corps center could reconnaissance patrols move more freely into areas formerly denied them. From these indications, corps concluded that the enemy was preparing to make a show of resistance before withdrawing.⁹

Commanders and troops making last-minute preparations for the jump-off watched in some dismay a few minutes after midnight, 2 July, as a drizzling rain began to fall. The early morning attack hour was fast approaching when the rain became a downpour. It was

⁶ FUSA G-2 Est 7, 29 Jun; VIII Corps G-2 Est 2, 28 Jun.

⁷ 82d Abn Div Rev Intel Annex to FO 7 (Rev), 28 Jun, and G-2 Est, 1 Jul.

⁸ FUSA Ltr, Fld Arty Ammo Expenditures, 2 Jul, VIII Corps G-3 Jnl File; 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl and File, 2 and 3 Jul.

⁹ VIII Corps Weekly Per Rpt, 1 Jul.

obvious that the heavy air program promised in support of the offensive would have to be canceled.¹⁰ As events developed, not even the small observation planes, invaluable for locating artillery targets in the hedgerow country, were able to get off the ground.

Despite this early disappointment, the attack otherwise began as scheduled. American troops plodded through the darkness and the mud toward the line of departure. At 0515, 3 July, the artillery started a 15-minute preparation.

The Defenses

The Germans had no intention of falling back. From the high ground near la Haye-du-Puits, so dominating that observers on the crests could watch Allied shipping off the invasion beaches, Germans studied the preparations for the attack they had been expecting for almost two weeks. They were ready. Yet despite their readiness, they were almost taken by surprise. The state of affairs harked back to the development of the *LXXXIV Corps* defenses west of the *Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges*.

In June, just before American troops had cut the Cherbourg peninsula and isolated the port, Rundstedt, Rommel, Dollman, and Fahrmbacher had decided to divide the *LXXXIV Corps* forces into two groups—one in the north to defend Cherbourg, the other to block American movement south. Their intention had been to leave weak forces in defense of

Cherbourg and to build a strong line across the Cotentin from Portbail to the *Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges*.¹¹ By insisting on compliance with original plans for a forceful defense of Cherbourg, however, Hitler had disrupted the German commanders' plan. As a result, the troops in the south were weaker than had been hoped. The designated chief of the forces in the south (Generalleutnant Heinz Hellmich of the *243d Division*) was killed in action on 17 June, and Col. Eugen Koenig (the acting commander of the *91st Infantry Division*, whose general had died on 6 June) became the local commander responsible for erecting a defense to halt the expected drive to the south.

Koenig had had available a total of about 3,500 combat effective soldiers of several units: remnants of the *91st* and *243d Divisions*, a *kampfgruppe* of the *265th Division* (from Brittany), and miscellaneous elements including *Osttruppen*, non-German volunteers from eastern Europe. Together, the troops composed about half the effective combat strength of a fresh infantry division. With these few forces, but with adequate artillery in support, Koenig had fashioned a line that utilized marshland as a defensive barrier.

When Choltitz had taken command of the *LXXXIV Corps*, he had soon come to the conclusion that he could not depend on Koenig to hold for long. American paratroopers of the 82d Airborne Division had actually penetrated the marsh line as early as 12 June.¹² Koenig's forces were too weak to

¹⁰ FUSA G-3 Jnl, 0340, 3 Jul. Note: The hours of the day in this volume are British Double Time when used in connection with Allied activities, one hour earlier for the Germans—so that 1300 for the Allies is the same as 1200 (noon) for the Germans.

¹¹ Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, pp. 413ff; Hodgson, R-24, R-34, and R-49.

¹² Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, p. 402.

eliminate the penetration or to hold the positions already seriously threatened. The *Osttruppen* were not always reliable.¹³ Besides, Choltitz felt that the high ground near la Haye-du-Puits was better defensive terrain. He therefore had his reserve units—the *353d Division*, which had just arrived from Brittany, and remnants of the *77th Division*—establish positions on the Montgardon ridge and on Mont Castre. The ridge defenses, sometimes called the Mahlmann Line after the commander of the *353d*, were hastily organized because of anxiety that the Americans might attack at any moment. When the positions were established, Choltitz regarded them as his main line of resistance. Thinking of Koenig's troops as manning an outpost line, he expected them to resist as long as possible and eventually to fall back to the ridge line.

In contrast with Choltitz's idea, Rundstedt had recommended that the main line of resistance be established even farther back—at the water line formed by the Ay and Sèves Rivers. Although Choltitz did not place troops there, he considered the water line a convenient rally point in case withdrawal from the la Haye-du-Puits positions became necessary.¹⁴ Hitler, who disapproved of all defensive lines behind the front because he feared they invited withdrawal, wanted Koenig's positions to be held firmly. To inculcate the idea of holding fast, he had Koenig's defenses designated the main line of resistance. With

Koenig's marsh line marked on maps as the main defenses in the area, the fresh troops of the *353d Division* seemed unoccupied. In order to use them, OKW ordered Hausser to have Choltitz move the *353d* to replace the panzer grenadiers in the eastern portion of the corps sector. The panzer grenadiers were to disengage and become a mobile reserve for the *Seventh Army*. With the *353d* scheduled to depart the high ground around la Haye-du-Puits, Choltitz had to reduce the Mahlmann Line to the reality of a rally line manned entirely by the *kampfgruppe* of the *77th*.

By 3 July the *77th Division* troops had moved to the eastern part of Mont Castre, while the *353d* was moving from ridge positions to assembly near Périers. The VIII Corps attack thus occurred at a time of flux. Members of the *LXXXIV Corps* staff had correctly assumed, from the noise of tank motors they heard during the night of 2 July, that an American attack was in the making, and they had laid interdiction fires on probable assembly areas. But judging that the rain would delay the jump-off—on the basis that bad weather neutralized American air power—the *Seventh Army* staff mistakenly labeled the VIII Corps offensive only a reconnaissance in force with tank support. The real American intention soon became apparent to both headquarters, however, and Hausser and Choltitz recalled the *353d Division* from Périers and repositioned the men on the high ground about la Haye-du-Puits.¹⁵ Hitler's desires notwithstanding, these positions became the main line of resistance.

¹³ Telecon, Choltitz to Hausser, 30 Jun, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs.

¹⁴ Pz Lehr Div Ib KTB, *Allg. Anlagen*, Annex 241; see MS # B-418 (Choltitz) for an account of *LXXXIV Corps* activity, 18 Jun to 15 Jul. Choltitz, *Soldat unter Soldaten*, p. 187 is rather confused.

¹⁵ *Seventh Army* and AGp B KTB's, 3 Jul; *Tagesmeldungen*, OB WEST KTB, Anlage 433.

As a result of the last-minute changes that occurred on 3 July, the Germans opposing VIII Corps were able to defend from positions in depth. Fanned out in front was *Group Koenig*, with parts of the *91st*, the *265th*, and the *243d Divisions* on the flanks, and east European volunteers (including a large contingent of Russians) generally holding the center. Artillery support was more than adequate—the entire division artillery of the *243d*, plus two cannon companies, five antitank companies, a complete tank destroyer battalion, and an assortment of miscellaneous howitzers, rocket launchers, antiaircraft batteries, captured Russian guns, and several old French light tanks. Behind *Group Koenig*, the *353d* and a *kampfgruppe* of the *77th* were to defend the high ground of the Montgardon ridge and Mont Castre. The *2d SS Panzer Division*, assembling well south of St. Lô in *Seventh Army* reserve, was able to move, if needed, to meet a serious threat near la Haye-du-Puits.¹⁶ Even closer, in the center of the *LXXXIV Corps* sector, south of Périers, was one regiment (the *15th*) of the *5th Parachute Division* (still in Brittany). Although under OKW control, it could probably be used in an emergency to augment the la Haye-du-Puits defenses. All together, the German forces were far from being a pushover.

Poterie Ridge

In the VIII Corps attack, the 82d Airborne Division had the relatively modest role of securing a limited objective be-

fore departing the Continent for England. Having fought on French soil since D Day, the airborne division had lost about half its combat strength. Yet it still was an effective fighting unit, with three parachute infantry regiments and one glider infantry regiment forming the principal division components.

The troops had been carefully selected for airborne training only after meeting special physical and mental standards. The division had participated in World War II longer than most units in the European theater, and its members regarded with pride their achievements in Sicily and Italy. To an *esprit de corps* that sometimes irritated others by its suggestion of superiority, the aggressive veterans added a justifiable respect and admiration for their leaders. Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, the division commander, displayed an uncanny ability for appearing at the right place at the right time. His inspiring presence, as well as that of the assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. James M. Gavin, was responsible in no small degree for the efficiency of the unit.¹⁷

In the center of the VIII Corps sector, the 82d Airborne Division held a line across the tip of a "peninsula" of dry ground. In order to commit a maximum number of troops at once, General Ridgway planned to sweep his sector by attacking westward—between marshland on the north and the la Haye-du-Puits–Carentan road on the south—to take the hills just east of the St. Sauveur-le-Vicomte–la Haye-du-Puits road, which separated the airborne division's zone

¹⁶ *AGp B Id Memo*, 4 Jul, *AGp B Ia Op. Befehle*.

¹⁷ The division journals and other records give ample evidence of the high regard the men had for their leaders.

from that of the 79th Division. The terrain was hedgerowed lowland, with half a dozen tiny settlements and many farmhouses scattered throughout the countryside; there were no main roads, only rural routes and sunken lanes.

In the early hours of 3 July, even before the artillery preparation that signaled the start of the First Army offensive, a combat patrol made a surprise thrust. Guided by a young Frenchman who had served similarly in the past, a reinforced company of the 505th Parachute Infantry (Lt. Col. William Ekman) slipped silently along the edge of the swamp and outflanked German positions on the north slope of Hill 131. At daybreak the company was in the midst of a German outpost manned by *Osttruppen*. Startled, the outpost withdrew. The main body of the regiment arrived by midmorning and gained the north and east slopes of the hill. Four hours later the 505th was at the St. Sauveur-le-Vicomte-la Haye-du-Puits road and in possession of the northern portion of the division objective. The regiment had taken 146 prisoners and had lost 4 dead, 25 wounded, and 5 missing.¹⁸

The 508th Parachute Infantry (Col. Roy E. Lindquist) had similar success in gaining the southeast face of Hill 131, and a battalion of the 507th Parachute Infantry (Col. Edson D. Raff) cleared its assigned sector. The leading units moved so rapidly that they bypassed enemy troops who were unaware that an attack was in progress. Though the U.S. follow-up forces had the un-

expected and nasty task of clearing small isolated groups, the leading units were at the base of the objective by noon and several hours later were ensconced on the slope. Casualties were few.

On the left the story was different. Making the main division effort, the 325th Glider Infantry (Col. Harry L. Lewis) was to move west to the base of the Poterie ridge, then up and down across each of the triplet hills. After a slow start caused by enemy mines, the regiment moved rapidly for a mile. At this point the advance stopped—two miles short of the eastern slope of the Poterie ridge. One supporting tank had hit a mine, three others were floundering in mudholes, and German fire rained down from the slopes of Mont Castre, off the left flank.

It did not take long for General Ridgway to recognize the reason for easy success of the regiments on the right and the difficulty of the 325th. While the parachute regiments on the right were rolling up the German outpost line, the glider men had struck the forward edge of the German main line of resistance. At the same time, they were exposed to observed enfilading fire from Mont Castre.

To deal with this situation, Ridgway directed the 325th commander to advance to the eastern edge of the Poterie ridge. Using this position as a pivot, the other regiments of the division were to wheel southward from their earlier objectives and hit the triplet hills from the north in frontal attacks.

Colonel Lewis renewed the attack during the evening of 3 July, and although the glider men advanced over a mile and a half, they were still 600 yards short of

¹⁸ The account of operations is taken from the official records of the division and the regiments.