

positions, the 30th Division had stood its ground and fought as hard as any unit was to fight in the European theater. "It isn't very easy," a staff officer wrote, "to tell the man in the front lines that the battle is going well when he's still up against that old combination of machine guns, burp guns, mortars, 88s, artillery, tanks—and terrain. . . . [But] the battle is going well; [and] it's worth saying."⁴⁴

The battle had indeed gone well, not only at Mortain but elsewhere on the First Army front. On the VII Corps left, XIX Corps, after having attacked in the Sourdeval-Gathemo area (with the 28th and 29th Divisions and CCA of the 2d Armored Division) and having sustained more than 1,200 casualties in three days of heavy fighting, finally moved forward with relative ease on 11 August, and on the following day made contact with the 30th Division north of Mortain and pinched out the 4th and 9th Divisions. On the First Army left the V Corps, which had held on firmly to the town of Vire with the 2d Infantry Division while exerting pressure toward the southeast, noted diminishing German pressure on 12 August.⁴⁵

By that date, the Allies were maneuvering to trap the Germans who had plunged unsuccessfully toward Avranches.

Concepts of Encirclement

As early as 8 August, General Bradley was confident that the reinforced VII Corps would hold at Mortain. He felt

⁴⁴ 30th Div G-2 Notes for Co Comdrs, 10 Aug, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.

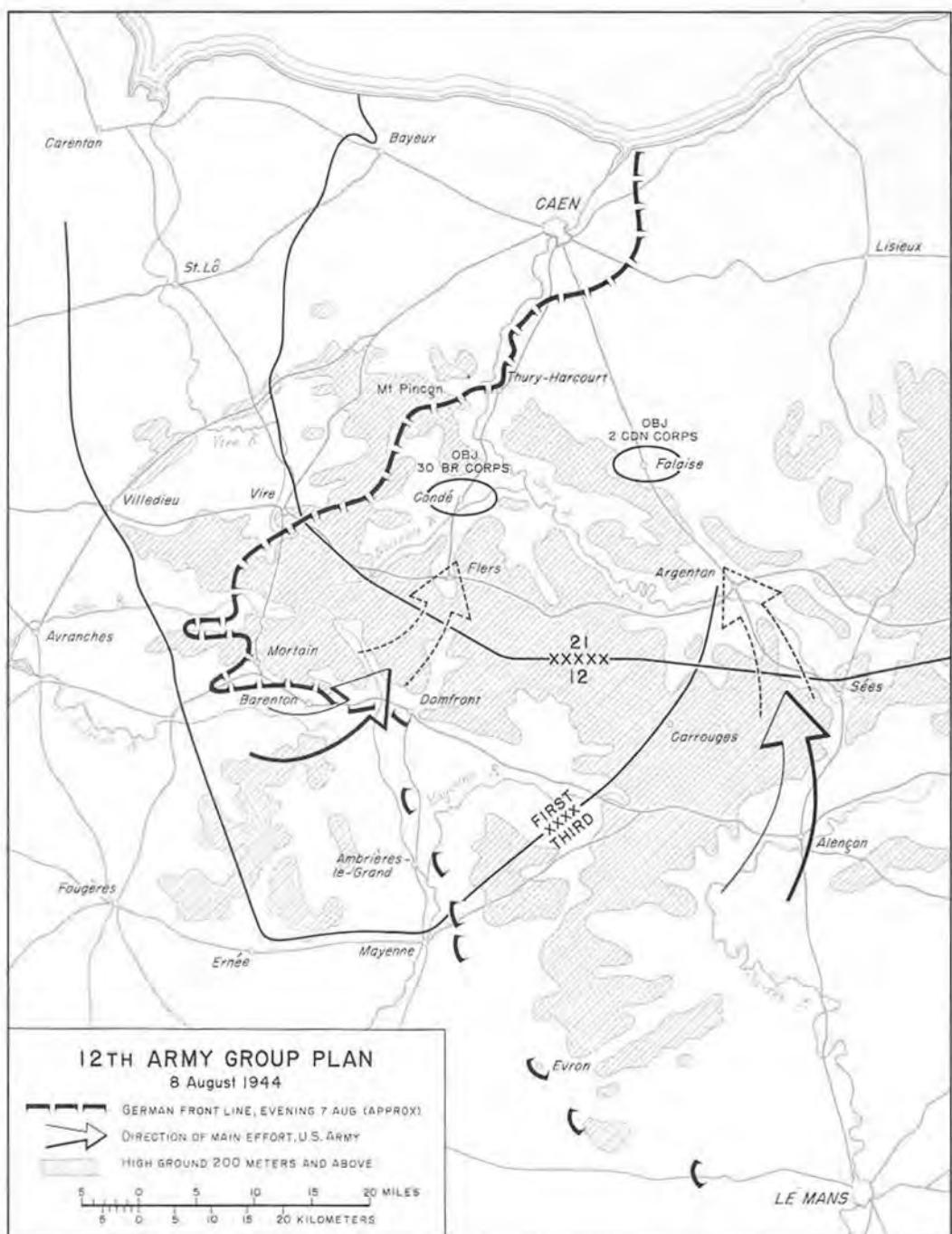
⁴⁵ *V Corps Operations in the ETO*, pp. 163ff.; CI 85 (the Battle for Vire); [Ferriss], Notes.

that the Mortain counterattack had "apparently been contained." As he studied the situation, he came to the further conclusion that the Germans by attacking had "incurred the risk of encirclement from the South and North," and he acted at once to capitalize on the opportunity.⁴⁶

In the presence of General Eisenhower who was visiting his headquarters on 8 August, General Bradley telephoned General Montgomery and secured approval for a bold course of action designed to encircle the German forces west of Argentan and Falaise.⁴⁷ What he proposed was a radical change—a 90-degree turn—in the 12th Army Group offensive axis. Instead of driving eastward toward the Seine, the First and Third Armies would wheel to the north and attack toward the army group boundary, specifically toward the towns of Flers and Argentan. (*Map 14*) Since the towns were within the 21 Army Group zone, the American armies would advance only to the boundary, the east-west line generally from Mortain through Domfront and Carrouges to Sées. There, the American forces would be in a position to act as the southern jaw of a vise. Approaching the same line from the north, the British and Canadian forces between Tinchebray and Falaise would, in effect, form the other jaw. Closing the jaws on the

⁴⁶ 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 4, 8 Aug.

⁴⁷ Bradley, *Soldier's Story*, pp. 372, 374-75; Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, p. 158; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 275; Butcher, *My Three Years With Eisenhower*, p. 636. For an interesting speculative account of the command decisions at Mortain, see O. G. Haywood, Jr., "Military Decision and Game Theory," *Journal of the Operations Research Society of America*, II, No. 4 (November, 1954), 371-85.



MAP 14

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army group boundary would entrap and crush the Germans in between.

Specifically, General Bradley ordered General Patton to "advance on the axis Alençon-Sées to the line Sées-Carrouges prepared for further action against the enemy flank and rear in the direction of Argentan." This meant turning the XV Corps north from le Mans, and for this purpose Bradley gave Patton another armored division. He also ordered the 35th Division, involved in the battle around Mortain, to revert to the Third Army "without delay," but the division was still needed by the VII Corps, and Bradley soon revoked this part of this order.

General Bradley instructed General Hodges to pivot on Mortain, advance to the Barenton-Domfront line, and be ready to take further action northeast in the direction of Flers. Hodges was also to eliminate the German salient in the Vire-Mortain-Ger area.⁴⁸

General Hodges issued his order the day after Bradley's instructions. To eliminate the German salient around Mortain, Hodges set up a converging attack by the VII and XIX Corps. VII Corps, attacking generally eastward along an axis through Mortain (south of a new temporary boundary with XIX Corps), was eventually to be pinched out by the advance of XIX Corps, which was attacking to the south through Sourdeval and Ger. This would wipe out the German salient. XIX Corps was then to assume control over its original zone and some of the forces of VII Corps and continue the attack east and northeast toward Flers. VII Corps was to concentrate its strength in the area south

and southeast of Domfront and, together with its forces near Mayenne, it was to launch an attack northeast in the direction of Argentan. Meanwhile, V Corps was to attack from the Vire area southeastward to Tinchebray. The effect of these moves would be to push the German forces opposing First Army to the army group boundary. According to the erroneous interpretation of enemy intentions by the First Army G-2, who was two days ahead of events, the Germans by 9 August were already "pulling back to avoid entrapment."⁴⁹

As for the Third Army, General Patton felt that since the "purpose of the operation is to surround and destroy the German army west of the Seine," he had first to surround the Germans so that their destruction would be inescapable. He envisioned forces cutting through the German rear on a relatively narrow front and encircling the enemy by making contact with the Canadians on the opposite Allied flank. This was the task he gave XV Corps.⁵⁰

On 11 August—a day after XV Corps attacked north from le Mans, the same day that Kluge decided the Mortain salient had to be reduced, and a day before the First Army began its new attack—General Montgomery made known his concept of encirclement. He based his concept on the estimate that the bulk of the enemy forces were west of a north-south line passing from Caen through Falaise, Argentan, and Alençon to le Mans. As the Canadians attacked

⁴⁸ FUSA FO 6 and G-2 Est 14, 9 Aug.

⁵⁰ Memo, Patton for Gaffey, 8 Aug, VIII Corps G-3 Jnl and File; TUSA Ltr of Instrs, Patton to Haislip, 8 Aug, XV Corps G-3 Jnl and File, and Dir, 10 Aug (confirming fragmentary orders, 8 Aug).

⁴⁸ 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 4, 8 Aug.

toward Falaise and the XV U.S. Corps attacked toward Alençon, the gap, through which must come all German supplies and reinforcement from the east, would narrow. "Obviously," General Montgomery stated, "if we can close the gap completely, we shall have put the enemy in the most awkward predicament." (*Map 15*)

As the gap narrowed, the enemy was likely to react in one of two ways. He might bring up additional divisions from the east; or, more probably, he would try to move his armored and mobile forces eastward through the gap toward ammunition and gasoline supplies. If the Germans chose the latter course of action, they would probably operate in the general Domfront, Argentan, Alençon area in order "to have the benefit of the difficult 'bocage' country." Their purpose would be to hold off the Americans and withdraw on the Falaise-Vire line.

Expecting the Germans to mass stronger forces in defense of Alençon than of Falaise, Montgomery concluded that it would be easier for the Canadians to reach Argentan from the north than it would be for the Americans to get there from the south. He therefore ordered the First Canadian Army to continue its effort to capture Falaise, stating that it was "vital that it should be done quickly." The Canadians were then to drive south from Falaise to take Argentan. On the Canadian right, the Second British Army, turning to the left, was also to drive toward Falaise by pushing forward its left wing. At the conclusion of the advance, the British would occupy a north-south line between Falaise and Argentan, the right bound-

ary of the Canadian army sector. Meanwhile, the XV U.S. Corps was to advance north from le Mans through Alençon to the army group boundary, which was several miles south of Argentan along a line between Carrouges and Sées.

The projected result would be a meeting of Canadian and American forces just south of Argentan to encircle the Germans who had concentrated the bulk of their forces west of the Orne and a sweeping advance by the British to herd the Germans into the Canadian and American lines. The First U.S. Army, inferentially, would drive the Germans in its zone into the path of the British advance. "It begins to look," General Montgomery wrote, "as if the enemy intends to fight it out between the Seine and the Loire. This will suit us very well. . . . Clearly our intention must be to destroy the enemy forces between the Seine and the Loire." Yet Montgomery did not overlook the possibility that the enemy might successfully evade encirclement at Argentan. In that case, the Allies were to be ready to institute the wider encirclement earlier projected to the Seine.⁵¹

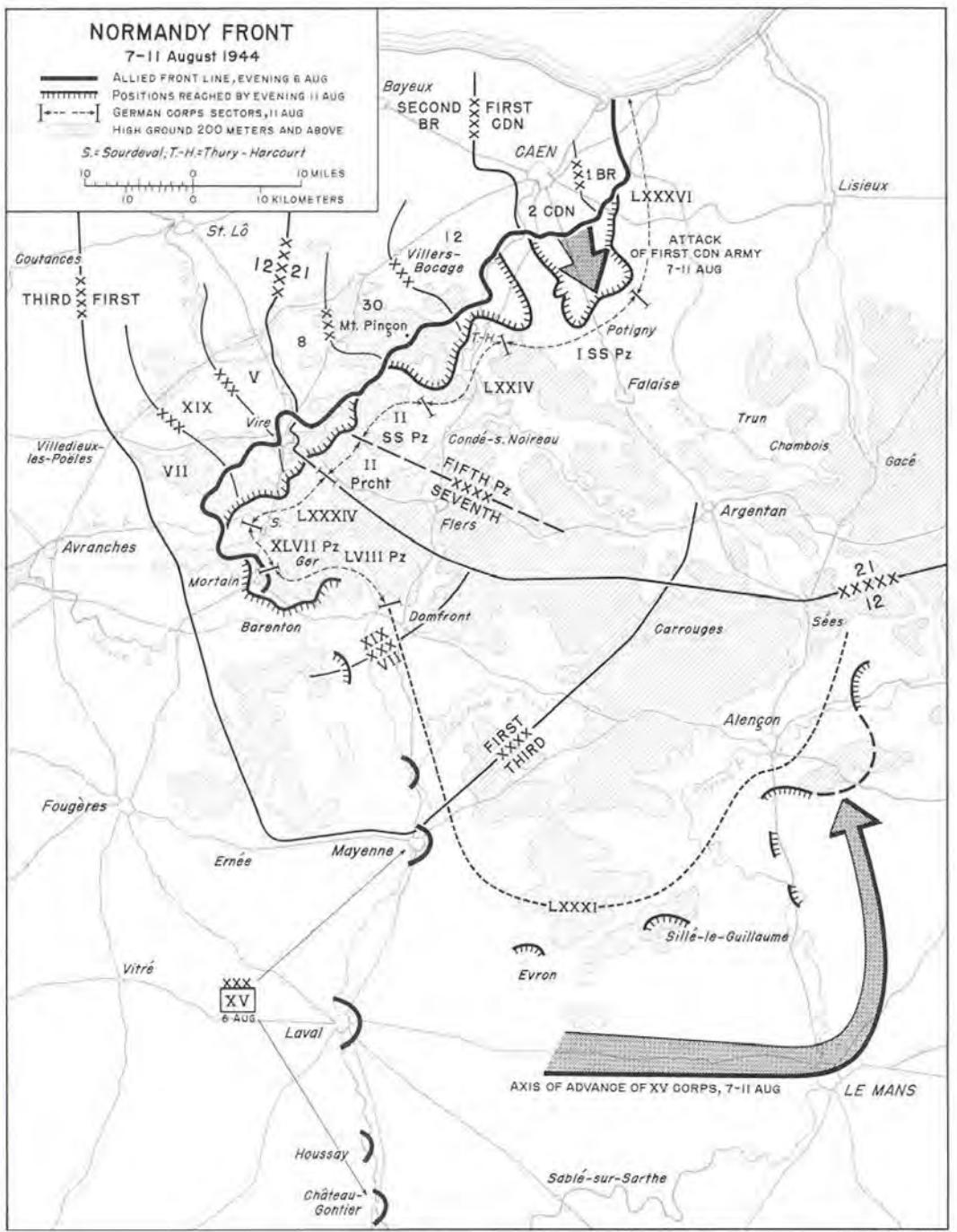
What seemed perfectly apparent to all was that Allied occupation of Falaise and Alençon would narrow to thirty-five miles the gap between the two flanks of the German defensive positions. Since the bulk of the German forces were west of the gap and facing complete encirclement, capture of the two towns would cut two of the three main east-west roads still in German hands and force the Germans to escape eastward, if they

⁵¹ 21 AGp Gen Operational Situation and Dir, M-518, 11 Aug.

NORMANDY FRONT

7-11 August 1944

— ALLIED FRONT LINE, EVENING 6 AUG
 - - - POSITIONS REACHED BY EVENING 11 AUG
 GERMAN CORPS SECTORS, 11 AUG
 HIGH GROUND 200 METERS AND ABOVE
 S. = Sourdeval, T-H = Thury-Harcourt
 10 MILES
 10 KILOMETERS



D. Holmes, Jr.

MAP 15

could, along the axis of the Vire–Flers–Argentan highway.⁵²

It seemed not altogether unlikely that the opinion General Montgomery had ventured in mid-June—that the Allies might defeat the Germans between the Seine and the Loire—was about to be realized.⁵³

Envelopment from the South

General Haislip's XV Corps had taken le Mans on 8 August with the 5th Armored and the 79th and 90th Infantry Divisions, and soon afterwards it was ready to drive north. The initial corps objective, thirty miles north of le Mans, was the town of Alençon—the great cross-roads of the Rouen–Bordeaux and Rennes–Paris highways. The final objective was eleven miles beyond Alençon, a fifteen-mile stretch of the east–west road connecting the towns of Carrouges and Sées.

In driving north along the le Mans–Alençon–Argentan axis, XV Corps would have both flanks open. On the right, elements of the 106th Cavalry Group during the following few days would roam almost at will and meet only the slightest resistance. On the left, a gap of about twenty-five miles would separate the corps from the closest American units at Mayenne.⁵⁴ (*Map 16*)

To increase the striking power of the XV Corps, Patton gave Haislip the 2d

⁵² 30th Div G–2 Notes for Co Comdrs, 11 Aug. 30th Div G–3 Jnl and File.

⁵³ 21 AGp Dir, M–502, 18 Jun.

⁵⁴ XV Corps FO 3, 9 Aug; TUSA Ltr of Instrs, Patton to Haislip, 8 Aug; 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 4, 8 Aug; XV Corps Outline Narrative, 1–14 Aug; see Xavier Rousseau, ed., *La Bataille de Normandie au Pays d'Argentan* (Argentan, 1945–47) (hereafter cited as Rousseau, *Bataille de Normandie*), p. 19.

French Armored Division and ordered Haislip to lead with his armor, which would mean the 5th U.S. and the 2d French Armored Divisions. Much was expected of the French troops, for they were experienced in combat and eager to liberate their country. Commanded by Maj. Gen. Jacques Philippe Leclerc, the division had fought in Africa before being brought to England in the spring of 1944 expressly to represent French forces in Operation OVERLORD. Re-equipped with American matériel, the division arrived on the Continent and assembled just south of Avranches during the early days of August. It had been alerted briefly for possible employment at Mortain before being ordered to le Mans where, on 9 August, it was attached to the XV Corps.⁵⁵

To protect the XV Corps deep left and rear, General Patton drew upon the 80th Division, newly arrived on the Continent and under the command of Maj. Gen. Horace L. McBride. The 80th Division was to clear the Evron area, where General Weaver's 90th Division task force had uncovered considerable resistance while driving on le Mans. Few Germans remained, and the 80th carried out its assignment without much trouble. The few difficulties came mainly from the fluid situation prevailing on that part of the front. For several days the divi-

⁵⁵ Principal sources for the operational activity of the French division are Capitaine Even, "La 2e D.B. de son Débarquement en Normandie à la Libération de Paris," *Revue Historique de l'Armée*, I (March 1952) (hereafter cited as Even, *La 2e D.B.*), 107–32; and 2d French Armd Div G–3 Rpt, Opérations de la 2ème D.B. Depuis le Jour 'J' Jusqu'à la Prise de Strasbourg, ML–1051. See Cole, *Lorraine Campaign*, p. 187 and n. 4, same page. Leclerc was the *nom de guerre* of Philippe François Marie de Hautecloque.

sion oscillated between attachment to the XX and to the XV Corps, and such matters as corps control, boundaries, and objectives were rather vague.⁵⁶

The road net between le Mans and Argentan determined the XV Corps zone of attack. Haislip committed the 2d French Armored Division, followed by the 90th Division, on the left and directed the two units to move along an axis through Alençon to Carrouges; the 5th Armored Division, followed by the 79th, was to move through Mamers to Sées. No cohesive front faced the corps. Intelligence was lacking.⁵⁷

While the French force was entering the corps zone on 9 August, the 5th Armored Division in compliance with Haislip's orders, was securing the line of departure for the attack to the north and clearing initial assembly areas for the French. The corps engineers were constructing two bridges over the Sarthe near le Mans to facilitate entry of the French troops into their zone of advance. Early on 10 August all was in readiness for the attack.

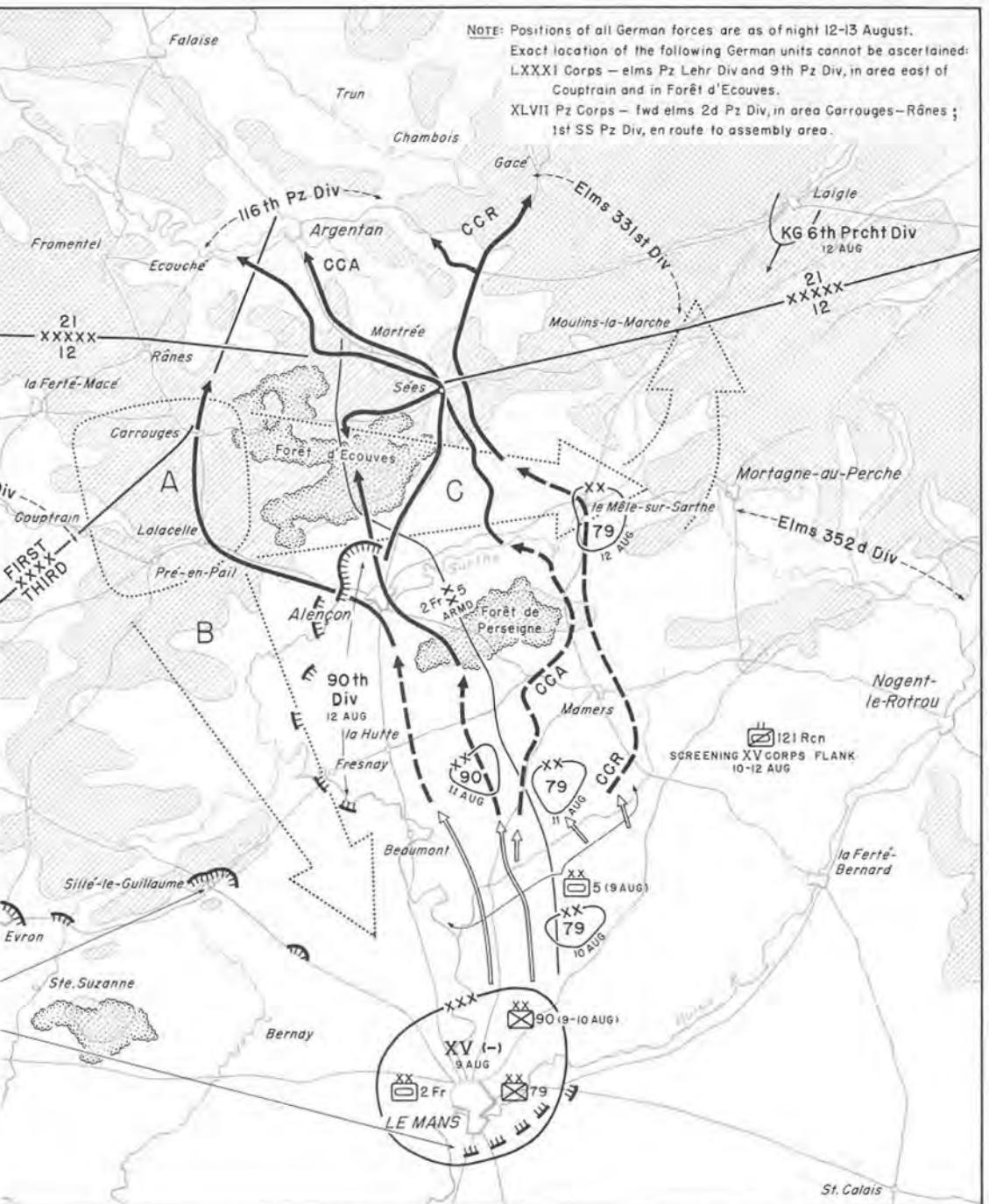
The German decision to commit *Panzer Group Eberbach* in the Alençon area was not to be made for another day, and thus on 10 August the *LXXXI Corps* was defending the le Mans-Alençon axis. The corps had two divisions in the line: the 708th, with most of its strength west of the Sarthe River (where it had been badly hurt by the 90th Division), seemed "doomed to failure" by its poor fighting quality; the 9th Panzer (less its Panther battalion, diverted to the Falaise defenses) deployed its well-trained troops

⁵⁶ Interv with Col Harry D. McHugh, Stockton's Hosp Intervs, Vol. III, GL-93 (235).

⁵⁷ XV Corps AAR, Aug., and G-2 Per Rpt 8, 0300, 11 Aug.



MAP 16



F. Temple

more directly in the path of the American advance but had some elements committed west of the Sarthe and was to have difficulty concentrating for employment as an entity. On the east flank, the corps commander felt "there were no units worth mentioning." Backing up the line were remnants of *Panzer Lehr*, consisting almost entirely of supply forces and thus of "negligible combat strength," and remnants of the *352d Division*, which had been pulled out of the *Seventh Army* line for wholesale reconstitution. The corps was about to acquire a regimental-sized kampfgruppe of the *6th Parachute Division*, moving west from central France, but the unit could not reach the sector in time to meet the initial American thrust.⁵⁸

The two armored divisions of XV Corps jumped off abreast for a day of action characterized by sharp tank skirmishes, harassing enemy artillery fire, and traffic congestion. Taking relatively light casualties (though the *9th Panzer* and *352d Divisions* together claimed to have knocked out thirty-six tanks), the Americans outflanked the *9th Panzer Division* and moved forward about fifteen miles, or about halfway to Alençon. The command posts of the *9th Panzer* and *Panzer Lehr Divisions* at Fresnay-sur-Sarthe came under fire. Both units withdrew to the north.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The basic German sources are MS # B-807 (Kuntzen); MS # B-445 (Krueger); MS # B-725 (Gersdorff); MS # B-179 (Hausser); MS # A-922 (Eberbach).

⁵⁹ Lt. Col. William A. Hamberg of the 10th Tank Battalion got his tank across a bridge raked by enemy fire that had already destroyed two American tanks. Reaching an infantry company disorganized by the death of the company commander, Colonel Hamberg dismounted and organized a tank-infantry attack. He was awarded the DSC.

The Forêt de Perseigne, a densely wooded area extending almost ten miles across the corps front between Alençon and Mamers, had seemed to SHAEF to offer excellent concealment for at least two German divisions and extensive supply installations, and intelligence officers warned the XV Corps of this possibility. More frequent roadblocks, utilizing tanks rather than antitank guns, and concentrated artillery fire encountered by the corps on 11 August appeared to bear out this concern, prompting Haislip to order his armored divisions to bypass the forest on both sides.⁶⁰ To cover the resultant separation of his columns, Haislip ordered three artillery battalions to interdict the exits from the forest and requested an air strike on the forest with incendiary oil bombs to burn and smoke out enemy forces. As it turned out, the Germans had evacuated the woods. French and American armor bypassed the area without undue interference.⁶¹

On 11 August the Germans were coming to their decision to have *Panzer Group Eberbach* launch a massive counterattack against the XV Corps left flank with armored divisions pulled out of the Mortain salient. The *LXXXI Corps*, its main forces the *9th Panzer* and *708th Divisions*, was to protect the assembly area for the projected attack. Eberbach

⁶⁰ When Pfc. Charles P. McGuire of the 47th Armored Infantry, who was driving the leading vehicle of a motorized column, was halted by enemy fire, he dismounted and advanced alone to destroy the hostile machine gun position. He then returned to his vehicle to lead the column again until he was killed by an 88-mm. shell. He was posthumously awarded the DSC.

⁶¹ Principal sources for American action are the XV Corps and 5th Armd Div AAR's, Aug; see Telecon, Oliver and Menoher, 1540, 11 Aug, XV Corps CofS Jnl and File.



MAMERS, where American forces met little resistance.

visited Alençon that afternoon and found the sector in confusion. The *LXXXI Corps* command post was threatened by the American advance. Rear area service troops were fleeing northward to the accompaniment of nearby blasts from the guns of American tanks. Burning vehicles, knocked out by Allied planes and tanks, littered the countryside. The *9th Panzer Division* had been reduced to the point where Eberbach estimated it consisted of only a battalion of infantry, a battalion of artillery, and perhaps a dozen tanks. A bakery company was taking defensive positions at Sées.

The splinter units of the *LXXXI Corps* directly in the path of the XV Corps advance were evidently incapable of stopping the XV U.S. Corps. If the

116th Panzer Division, the first to be pulled out of the line near Mortain, arrived near Argentan in time to stop the Americans, Eberbach's armored attack could perhaps be launched. Meanwhile, Eberbach ordered antiaircraft batteries at Argentan to prepare immediately for defensive ground action.

French and American troops took advantage of German confusion to press forward. Even though the terrain impeded armored mobility, General Leclerc reminded his units that speed, maneuver, and daring must mark their operations. In an audacious thrust that night, a French task force drove to the Sarthe River at Alençon and early on 12 August captured the bridges there intact. The town was not defended.⁶² That same morning, after having bypassed Alençon on the east and rushed through Mamers against slight resistance, General Oliver's 5th Armored Division secured the town of Sées.

Patton's instructions to Haislip on 8 August had directed the XV Corps to drive to the Carrouges-Sées line and prepare for a further advance northward. On the basis of the "further advance" inferentially authorized, General Haislip, on the evening of 11 August, established Argentan as the new corps objective. While the 5th Armored Division turned to the northwest from Sées to secure Argentan, the 2d French Armored Division was to take Carrouges, close on a line between Carrouges and Argentan, and face generally northwest. If the Canadians reached Argentan as instructed, the Germans west of the Falaise-Argentan-Alençon line would be

⁶² See Commandant Richard Mouton, "Libération d'Alençon," in Herval, *Bataille de Normandie*, II, 9-14.