

to fill the depleted ranks would total about 12 percent of the losses.²⁹

To Choltitz, who commanded the *LXXXIV Corps*, it seemed that the battle of the hedgerows was "a monstrous blood-bath," the like of which he had not seen in eleven years of war.³⁰ Yet there seemed to be no way of stopping it except to commit units arriving from quiet sectors in the west to reinforce the sagging Normandy defense. The suggestion by Eberbach, who commanded *Panzer Group West*, that it was time to close most military specialist schools and send the students to the battlefield at once bespoke an impending bankruptcy of manpower resources.³¹

To Kluge, the *OB WEST* commander, the Normandy front was on the verge

of developing into an *ungeheures Klad-deradatsch*—an awful mess—and he wondered whether OKW appreciated "the tremendous consumption of forces on big battle days." In view of the heavy losses, he told Jodl, Hitler's order for inflexible defense necessitated an expenditure of troops the Germans could no longer afford. Because Kluge believed that the infantry would not hold much longer, he wanted tanks, more tanks, "to act as corset stays behind the troops." He also wanted Hitler to know that the Normandy situation was "very serious." "If a hole breaks open, I have to patch it," he said. "Tell this to Hitler."³²

Whether Jodl told Hitler or not, Allied leaders were conceiving an operation that would soon make strikingly evident exactly how serious the situation in Normandy actually was.

²⁹ *OB WEST KTB*, 11 and 17 Jul.

³⁰ Telecon, Choltitz to Pemsel, 2350, 15 Jul, *Seventh Army* Tel Msgs.

³¹ Telecon, Eberbach and Rommel, 1225, 11 Jul, *AGp B KTB*.

³² Telecon, Kluge and Jodl, 1828, 13 Jul, *OB WEST KTB*, *Anlage 615*.

PART THREE

BREAKTHROUGH

CHAPTER X

The Breakthrough Idea

In Search of a Panacea

The dramatic divergence between the phase lines projected by the OVERLORD plan for certain dates and the actual extent of the OVERLORD beachhead on those dates led to inevitable discussion in the Allied camp on how to dissolve the apparent stalemate.¹ Having considered even before the invasion the possibility that the Germans might contain the OVERLORD forces, SHAEF planners had formulated various proposals on how to break out of a stabilized front. In mid-July ideas of this nature became extremely pertinent. Attaining maneuver room and the Breton ports remained objectives as valid as they were elusive.

An obvious solution for dissolving the stalemate was to launch a subsidiary amphibious operation outside the OVERLORD beachhead area either by seaborne or by air-transported troops. Yet neither impressed the planners with prospects of success. If the original OVERLORD assault failed to achieve the desired results, how could a smaller force—four divisions was the maximum force im-

mediately available—do better?² The necessity of heavy naval involvement (including the use of carriers), difficult and long naval approaches, strong coastal defenses, and the improbability of achieving tactical surprise also discouraged recommendations for amphibious assaults outside the OVERLORD beachhead.³

The same was true of plans for airborne operations to dissolve an OVERLORD stalemate. The airborne divisions, committed on the Continent in June, had been delayed in their return to the United Kingdom, and their dispersed locations there, which made unit training difficult, plus a lack of suitable training areas, hindered preparations for immediate commitment. The demands on troop carrier units for air supply prevented effective troop carrier exercises. The need at the end of July to divert almost 400 transport aircraft to the Mediterranean for the invasion of southern France (scheduled for 15 August) made a large-scale airborne operation in support of OVERLORD impossible before late August or early September. Finally, airborne troops dropped outside a sta-

¹ Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p. 397. Maps showing the planned phase lines for certain dates and the actual beachhead established are to be found on pages 358 and 391. General Bradley was not in favor of dating phase lines, a British custom. Interv by author with Gen Collins, Washington, 30 Mar 56.

² SHAEF/17100/40/Ops (Third Draft), Strategic Reserves for OVERLORD, 17 May 44, SHAEF Air Staff File.

³ PS SHAEF (44), 21 (Final), 10 Jun 44, NEPTUNE, Stabilization of the NEPTUNE Area, and App. A, SGS SHAEF File 381, Post-OVERLORD Plng.

no sideshow investment promised a reasonable profit.

Although planning for subsidiary operations did not cease, two events indicated that a final decision had been made against them: the movement of a division from England to the Continent and the publication of a new plan of action. The 28th Division, trained for amphibious operations and originally scheduled for the OVERLORD assault, had remained in England in SHAEF reserve, ready to execute a subsidiary amphibious operation if necessary. The only amphibiously trained force still uncommitted twenty days after the invasion, the 28th Division was released by SHAEF to the 1st U.S. Army Group on 26 June with the condition that it be used only in an amphibious assault. On 13 July SHAEF withdrew the restriction, and ten days later the division moved to the Continent to augment the land forces already committed.¹¹

The release of the 28th Division coincided with the appearance of a new operational plan presented by General Bradley and enthusiastically received by General Eisenhower. Bradley proposed to break out of the German containment and obtain maneuver room and eventually the Breton ports through a ground offensive supported by massive air power. A project that would concentrate on the main OVERLORD operation, Bradley's plan followed the advice of SHAEF

planners, who had concluded long before that the best way to break a stalemate was by marshaling air power in support of a land offensive mounted from within the stabilized beachhead.¹²

Having searched for a new idea since the second week in July, when the First Army had begun to display definite signs of bogging down in the Cotentin, General Bradley had begun to envision an operation that combined concentrated land power and an overwhelming bombardment from the air. By 11 July General Bradley had conceived the idea; two days later the idea became the First Army's plan. It was called COBRA.¹³

The outstanding feature of COBRA (a name eventually applied to the operation as well as the plan) was the use of a heavy air bombardment to destroy an enemy defensive position of tactical significance. An unusual employment of air power, it was not novel. General Montgomery had used heavy bombers on 7 July in his attack against Caen. Although the bombardment had helped the British gain several miles of ground and part of Caen, the results of the attack had not been particularly spectacular or sufficiently decisive to warrant the expectation that a similar operation, such as COBRA, might achieve more than a limited advance.

That COBRA stirred hope of more than a limited advance—indeed, of a dissolution of the stabilized condition of OVERLORD—was attributable to the planners' belief that they could eliminate two fac-

¹¹ SHAEF/17100/44/Ops, Strategic Reserves for OVERLORD, 6 Jun, and SHAEF/17100/44/Ops (A), SHAEF G-3 Div, Release of 28th Inf Div, 26 Jun and 13 Jul, both in SHAEF File GCT 322-12/Ops (A), SHAEF Reserve; Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support*, I, 457.

¹² PS SHAEF (44) 21 (Final), 10 Jun, NEPTUNE, Stabilization of the NEPTUNE Area, SGS SHAEF File 381, Post-OVERLORD Plng.

¹³ FUSA Outline Plan Opn COBRA, 13 Jul.



GENERAL DEMPSEY

tors that had hampered the Caen operation: the obstructions that bomb craters and debris had placed in the path of ground troops and the long time interval between the air bombardment and the ground jump-off.

Optimistically assessed, if COBRA could co-ordinate the blast effect of a heavy air bombardment with an overwhelming ground attack, the Americans might smash the German ring of containment. Even if COBRA achieved only limited success, the ground gained would give the Allies additional maneuver room. The operation seemed worth a trial. It at least offered a prospect of relief from the painful type of advance that characterized the battle of the hedgerows.

In Search of a Breakthrough:
GOODWOOD

As a hush fell over the American front after the capture of St. Lô, intense activity began in the British sector. The Second Army launched a strong attack (GOODWOOD) that promised the Allies an excellent chance of achieving a breakthrough. Had it succeeded, COBRA would probably have been unnecessary.

GOODWOOD had grown indirectly out of the situation on the American front. At a conference on 10 July General Bradley had admitted to General Montgomery that he was discouraged about the offensive in the Cotentin and that he was thinking of the new COBRA idea, not yet completely formulated. General Montgomery had advised him to "take all the time he needed" in the Cotentin. To assist, the British would continue the basic Montgomery pattern of action: attempt to draw the German strength away from the American sector, hold the eastern part of the front firmly, keep the enemy forces opposite the British engaged and off balance by limited objective attacks. Immediately after the conference General Dempsey, the commander of the Second British Army, suggested that the British might take a more positive role in the campaign and launch a strong attack of their own. Montgomery's first reaction was negative, but on reflection he ordered planning started that same day. He alerted Dempsey to hold a corps of three armored divisions in reserve for a "massive stroke" east of the Orne River from Caen to Falaise. By 13 July three ar-

mored divisions were ready under control of the British 8 Corps.¹⁴

Loath to abandon the idea that the eastern flank was "a bastion" on which not only the U.S. main effort but also the whole future of the European campaign depended, General Montgomery directed Dempsey to maintain balance and a firm base by continuing to exert pressure and destroying German equipment and personnel.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Montgomery found the idea of a British breakthrough attempt increasingly intriguing. He began to think in terms of possibly making a double breakthrough effort—attacks by both British and American troops. By launching GOODWOOD, the British would throw a left hook at the Germans; by following quickly with COBRA, the Americans would strike with a right cross. Whether the primary intention of GOODWOOD was to aid COBRA by forcing the Germans to engage their mobile reserves and the secondary intention to achieve a breakthrough, or whether the reverse was true—though perhaps unimportant in the final analysis and perhaps even unknown to General Montgomery at the time—later became a matter of doubt and controversy.¹⁶

¹⁴ 21 AGp Dir, M-510, 10 Jul; Pogue Interv with Gen Bradley, Washington, 14 Oct 46, Pogue Files; "The Aims of Operation 'Goodwood,'" a draft extract from B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (a history of the Royal Tank Regiment and its predecessors, parts of which have appeared in *The Tank*, the journal of the Royal Tank Regiment).

¹⁵ 21 AGp CinC Notes, 15 Jul, Pogue Files.

¹⁶ Dept of the Scientific Adviser to the Army Council, Mil Operational Research Unit, Rpt 23, Battle Study Opn Goodwood, Oct 46; Pogue Interv with Gen Bradley, Washington, 14 Oct 46, and Ltrs, Montgomery to Eisenhower, 12 and 13 Jul, Pogue Files; Montgomery, *Normandy to the Bal-*

Like COBRA, GOODWOOD was to have heavy air support. Because the air forces could not support the two attacks simultaneously in the strength desired, GOODWOOD and COBRA were to take place two days apart. Though General Bradley had originally set 18 July as the COBRA target date, the slow advance in the Cotentin caused him to postpone it one day. General Montgomery selected 17 July for GOODWOOD, but adverse weather conditions and the need for extensive regrouping forced a delay. As finally decided, GOODWOOD was to take place on 18 July, COBRA three days later.

The two major deficiencies of the air bombardment launched earlier at Caen were to be corrected for GOODWOOD. Only fighter-bombers were to attack in the zone where armored divisions were to make the main effort, and thus the extensive cratering that had slowed armor at Caen would be avoided. The ground troops were to attack immediately after the air strike in order to capitalize on the paralyzing effect of the bombardment on the Germans.

The ground attack was to involve three corps. On the left (east), from a small bridgehead east of the Orne and northeast of Caen, the 8 Corps was to send three armored divisions in the direction of Falaise in the main effort. In the center, the Canadian 2d Corps was to secure the southern half of Caen (that part of the city beyond the Orne River) and nearby high ground. The British 12 Corps on the right was to launch preliminary attacks several days ahead of

tic, p. 130; Bradley, *Soldier's Story*, p. 343; Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, "The Aims of Operation 'Goodwood.'"

While British naval units fired from the Seine Bay in support, bombers in the largest concentration yet utilized in direct support of a single ground attack loosed their explosives near Caen at daylight, 18 July. Almost 1,700 planes of the RAF Bomber Command and the U.S. Eighth Air Force, plus almost 400 medium and fighter-bombers of the U.S. Ninth Air Force, dropped more than 8,000 tons of bombs to open a path for British ground forces.¹⁹

Before the bombers came, a quiet had pervaded most of the *Panzer Group West* front since 9 July. Under the control of four corps, eight divisions had manned the 70-mile defensive line, and five divisions had been in reserve. Of the thirteen divisions that comprised *Panzer Group West*, a single division had held twenty miles of marshy coast land on the east flank; two divisions had guarded fifteen miles of *bocage* on the west flank; and ten divisions—five in the line and five in reserve—had covered the critical Caen sector of about thirty-five miles in the center.

To protect the open country around Caen, Eberbach, the commander of *Panzer Group West*, had established a zone defense composed of infantry positions echeloned in depth and covered by antitank fire. The main battle positions,

about 1,200 yards deep, consisted of three lines, while local reserves had organized another defensive line about a mile to the rear. Dual-purpose 88-mm. guns of the *III Flak Corps*, ample artillery pieces, and a rocket launcher brigade in each corps sector supported the infantry positions. Behind the support weapons, four of the reserve divisions had been assembled from two to seven miles in the rear; the fifth reserve division, the *12th SS Panzer*, was undergoing rehabilitation farther to the rear.²⁰

Principally from prisoner of war interrogations, Eberbach had learned that Montgomery was planning a three-pronged attack from Caen.²¹ Accepting Eberbach's expectation as valid and respecting Montgomery's large number of divisions in reserve, Kluge had dared not weaken the *Panzer Group West* defenses. No further withdrawal from the Caen region seemed possible without inviting disaster.

Although Kluge had not wished to disturb Eberbach's zone defense around Caen, Hitler was not so reluctant. Signs and portents, the Allied deception plan, and weather conditions had convinced the Fuehrer that the Allies were about to make another continental landing near the Seine Bay. The presence of Allied vessels to support Goodwood by naval fire added to the conviction. Despite agreement by Kluge and Rommel that they had not seen anything to justify suspicion of another Allied landing and despite their "discomfort" with the Coutances-St. Lô sector, they were forced

to Montgomery, 13 Jul, Pogue Files; Ltr, Tedder to Montgomery, 13 Jul, SGS SHAEF File 381, OVERLORD, I (a).

¹⁹ Leigh-Mallory, Despatch, Fourth Supplement to the *London Gazette* of December 31, 1946, pp. 64-65; Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, pp. 130-31; FUSA Sitrep 86, 19 Jul; Harris, *Bomber Offensive*, p. 212; [Ackerman], *Employment of Strategic Bombers in a Tactical Role, 1941-1951*, p. 87; Battle Study Opn Goodwood. The figures on the number of tons of bombs dropped differ slightly from source to source.

²⁰ James B. Hodgson, *The Eve of Defeat*, OCMH MS R-57.

²¹ Telecon, Kluge and Eberbach, 2158, 17 Jul, OB WEST KTB Anlage 694.