

CHAPTER VI

The Attempt To Exploit

The comparative ease with which the bridgehead between the Taute and the Vire Rivers was established on 7 July indicated to Americans and Germans alike the existence of a soft spot in the German defenses. With only *Kampfgruppe Heinz* and a small part of the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division* defending the area, the Americans were close to achieving a breakthrough. Hausser, the *Seventh Army* commander, shifted a mobile (bicycle) brigade of light infantry and a reconnaissance battalion westward across the Vire River out of the *II Parachute Corps* sector. This could be only an expedient, a stopgap measure, for obviously the troops were not strong enough, nor the defensive attitude that their commitment implied sufficient, to stop expansion of the bridgehead. What the Germans needed was a counterattack by strong forces to demolish the bridgehead and restore the positions along the canal and the river.

Panzer Lehr, an armored division recently in defensive positions near Caen, seemed to Kluge and Rommel an obvious choice. Having just been replaced by a newly arrived infantry division, *Panzer Lehr* was scheduled to go into the *Panzer Group West* reserve and strengthen Eberbach's zone defense. The division was the only strong force available for transfer to the *Seventh Army* front to counterattack the American bridgehead.

Since shifting the division across the front from the vicinity of Caen to the area west of St. Lô would take several days, the Germans had to preserve the conditions that still made a counterattack feasible. They had to find strong forces that were closer to the threatened area and available for immediate commitment. They settled on the *2d SS Panzer Division*, most of which already was battling the VII and VIII Corps. Although Kluge realized that drawing part of the SS armored division away from the *Seventh Army* left might weaken the west flank defenses beyond repair, Rommel pointed out that the Taute and Vire situation was much more critical. American success between the two rivers had created a minor penetration that, if exploited, might well invalidate the German policy of holding fast. Kluge reluctantly agreed. He approved the plan to send part of the *2d SS Panzer Division* eastward across the Taute to hold until the *Panzer Lehr Division*, moving westward across the Vire, could arrive to counterattack and demolish the bridgehead.¹

The Americans, for their part, having judged the probable German course correctly, hastened to exploit their success

¹ Telecons, 1610, 1910, 1930, 2005, and 2020, 7 Jul. AGP B KTB; *Seventh Army KTB* (Draft), 7 Jul.



GERMAN BICYCLE BRIGADE

before the enemy could act.² Hopeful that the First Army offensive was at last about to move with dispatch, but also looking to the lesser goal of shoring up the bridgehead against counterattack, General Bradley gave XIX Corps the 3d Armored Division, which had been in the army reserve.³ Unwilling to dictate the details of commitment, General Bradley simply instructed General Cor-

lett to support the 30th Division with the armored division.

General Corlett had definite ideas of his own. He wanted to get the 3d Armored Division across the Vire, pass it through the 30th Division, and advance rapidly to the south to seize and hold the high ground west of St. Lô. Unfortunately, it was difficult to translate the desire into action, for General Corlett was severely ill and confined to bed at his command post for several days. He telephoned the armored division commander, Maj. Gen. Leroy H. Watson, in the late afternoon of 7 July and instructed him to cross the Vire River as soon as he could and then drive south. "How far do you want me to go?" General Watson asked. "The Germans have little or nothing over there," the corps commander replied, "just keep going."

² See, for example, the 3d Armd Div CCB G-2 Daily Narrative, 7-16 Jul.

³ The official records of the units involved have been supplemented by letters to OCMH from General of the Army Omar N. Bradley, 16 Mar 54; Maj Gen Charles H. Corlett (Ret.), 19 Jan 54; Maj Gen Leroy H. Watson (Ret.) (CG, 3d Armd Div), 22 Feb 54; Maj Gen Leland S. Hobbs (Ret.), 5 Mar 54; and Brig Gen John J. Bohn (Ret.) (CG, CCB, 3d Armd Div), 14 Jan 54. All in OCMH Files. [Garth], *St.-Lô*, presents an excellent narrative of the events described below.

Thus, at the beginning of the new phase of action between the Taute and the Vire, clarity of aims was lacking. The army commander envisioned a build-up of the bridgehead forces with armor; the corps commander foresaw a limited exploitation to the ridge west of St. Lô; the armored division commander understood that he was to make an unlimited drive to the south. The incompatibility of intent led to some confusion that was the beginning of increasing disorder.

Although General Corlett had known for some time that the armored division might be attached to his corps, illness prevented him from personally directing its commitment. To help him with the operation, Maj. Gen. Walton H. Walker, commander of the XX Corps, which had not yet been committed to action, temporarily acted as Corlett's representative.

General Watson was surprised by the sudden news of his impending commitment. He had not been informed beforehand of the corps objectives and plans, nor had he discussed with Generals Corlett and Hobbs such arrangements as co-ordinating artillery fires, constructing additional bridges, facilitating the entry of the division into the bridgehead, providing passage through the 30th Division, or determining routes of advance. Guessing that General Corlett intended to commit the entire armored division, which happened actually to be the case, Watson decided to send one combat command across the river first.

General Watson's force was one of the two "old-type" armored divisions in the European theater. Both had been in England preparing for the invasion

when a new table of organization, effective September 1943, had triangularized the armored division and reduced its size to make it less cumbersome and more maneuverable. Because reorganizing the two divisions in England might have delayed their battle readiness, they had retained their original organization. In contrast with the new and smaller armored divisions, the 3d Armored Division possessed two combat commands instead of three, 232 medium tanks instead of 168, and with its attached units numbered over 16,000 men instead of 12,000. Powerful, if somewhat unwieldy, the 3d Armored Division was subdivided into twin combat commands, each a strong force easily detached from the whole. Neither Bradley nor Corlett had specified the size of the armored force to be committed west of the Vire River on 7 July, but Watson's decision to commit one combat command as a start was normal.

The armored division had arrived in Normandy late in June. Early plans for July had caused the division to be tentatively alerted for an attack in the VII Corps sector; but because of increasing danger that the Germans might counterattack the army left, east of the Vire River, the division remained in army reserve. Since Combat Command A (CCA) had taken part in a limited objective attack at the end of June, General Watson decided to give Combat Command B (CCB), headed by Brig. Gen. John J. Bohn, the first mission between the Taute and the Vire. In an assembly area east of the Vire River, CCB had been prepared to execute several potential plans of action, among them one based on the assumption that

it would attack south after the 30th Division seized St. Jean-de-Daye—exactly the situation the unit was called upon to implement.⁴ (*See Map 5.*)

Having been alerted for movement at 1615, 7 July, and having received the march order at 1830, General Bohn led his column toward the Airel bridge. Although he had asked permission to phone General Hobbs to co-ordinate his river crossing with the infantry—wire had been laid to the 30th Division headquarters in anticipation of this kind of emergency—the 3d Armored Division chief of staff assured him that the division staff would take care of all such details. Bohn was to perform under 3d Armored Division control.

General Bohn had quite a task. He had to get 6,000 men in 800 vehicles and 300 trailers, a column over 20 miles long, across a single bridge that was under enemy fire, enter, partially during the hours of darkness, a bridgehead that belonged to another division, and attack a distant objective in strange territory with inexperienced troops.⁵

Since the time length of a combat

command column was normally estimated at four hours, and since the Airel crossing site was but five miles from the combat command assembly area, the unit under normal conditions should have been across the Vire River shortly after midnight, 7 July.⁶ Conditions on the night of 7–8 July were far from normal. The combat command could use only one road to approach the river, a road that was narrow, rain-soaked, and heavily burdened with other traffic. Maintaining radio silence, the armored force proceeded slowly toward an area that was receiving intermittent enemy artillery fire and becoming increasingly congested with vehicles. The 30th Division alone, attempting to reinforce, supply, and stabilize the bridgehead, was having difficulty maintaining a continuous flow of traffic across the river. Of the three vehicular bridges constructed near Airel, the ponton structure had been knocked out during the afternoon by enemy shells. Of the two remaining—the permanent stone bridge and the floating treadway—one had to carry traffic moving east from the bridgehead. A single bridge was all that was available for CCB, and even that had to be shared with the 30th Division, which was in the process of moving an additional infantry battalion into the bridgehead. With vehicles of both organizations intermingling, the enemy fire falling near Airel further retarding the flow of traffic, and blackout discipline increasing

⁴ Plan 5 of an undated draft ltr, Bohn to Watson, in compliance with 3d Armd Div FO 2, 2 Jul, 3d Armd Div CCB S-3 Jnl File. Subsequent letters omitted Plan 5. See 3d Armd Div Opn Plan 1, 6 Jul.

⁵ CCB consisted of a reconnaissance company and three tank battalions of the 33d Armored Regiment; one battalion and the headquarters of the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment; the 54th and 391st Armored Field Artillery Battalions, each with an attached battery of antiaircraft artillery; a company each of the 83d Reconnaissance Battalion, the 23d Armored Engineer Battalion, the 703d Tank Destroyer Battalion, the 45th Armored Medical Battalion, and the division Maintenance Battalion; and an additional battery of antiaircraft artillery. 3d Armd Div FO 3, 7 Jul; 3d Armd Div CCB AAR, 7–16 Jul.

⁶ This was an estimate given by CCA of the 3d Armored Division on 10 July, based on a speed of 8 miles per hour at night and 12 miles per hour, but with a longer interval between vehicles, during the day. 9th Div G-3 Jnl, 10 Jul; see also CCB March Table, 29 Jul, 3d Armd Div CCB S-3 Jnl File.

the difficulties, the combat command did not get its last vehicle across the bridge until long after daybreak on 8 July.

Across the river, the combat command had to find lodgment in a small area crowded with 30th Division troops and closely hemmed in by an active enemy. A tank battalion received enemy small arms and mortar fire as it moved into assembly just south of the Airel-St. Jean-de-Daye road. A reconnaissance company scouting several hundred yards south of the same road ran into a roadblock guarded by enemy infantrymen with machine guns. During the night, minor enemy forces attacked and drove one small armored unit back to the main road. As the men sought places where they could park their tanks and other vehicles west of the Vire, they were harassed by enemy mortar and artillery fire.⁷

To pass one major element through another is always a delicate procedure. Passing the combat command through the 30th Division was to be a frustrating experience. Without reconnaissance on the part of the armored unit and without co-ordination between the combat command and the infantry division, misunderstanding was inevitable.

On the night of 7-8 July the 30th Division had the bulk of its combat troops west of the Vire. One battalion of the 119th Infantry held the left flank, which rested on the Vire River, and another battalion of that regiment was moving into the bridgehead. The three battalions of the 117th Infantry, in the center, occupied positions just short of the

St. Jean-de-Daye crossroads. Two battalions of the 120th Infantry were echeloned to the right along the road between St. Jean-de-Daye and the canal. West of that road as far as the Taute River, about four miles away, the area still had to be cleared by the 113th Cavalry Group, which had followed the 120th Infantry across the canal.

As soon as General Hobbs had learned that the combat command was to enter the bridgehead, he had ordered his troops to clear the main road west of Airel of all unnecessary traffic and give the armor priority of movement. He envisioned the advance of the combat command to the St. Jean-de-Daye road intersection, where the armor would turn left and drive rapidly south along the good highway toward the corps objective, the high ground west of St. Lô. The first part of this action, the advance to the crossroad, would secure the bridgehead objective, which the 30th Division had not taken. The second part, the drive to the south, would provide the infantry division with an armored spearhead. But General Hobbs did not have operational control of Combat Command B.

General Watson, the armored division commander, gave some consideration to this course of action but decided against it. An advance along the Pont-Hébert highway would present an open flank to the enemy between the highway and the Taute, and taking the crossroads and establishing adequate flank protection would involve the armored unit in a task that might delay the movement southward. General Watson therefore directed General Bohn to turn left immediately after crossing the Airel bridge,

⁷ Msgs, 2337 and 2338, 7 Jul, 3d Armd Div CCB S-3 Jnl and File.

move southwest over a network of unimproved roads and trails, and reach the main highway leading south at a point three miles below the St. Jean-de-Daye crossroads. The division field order and overlay subsequently showed a short arrow pointing generally southwest from the Airel bridge.

There was nothing unusual in sending armor over secondary roads or cross-country to outflank or bypass resistance before resuming an advance along the main axis, and General Watson did not think that the combat command would be unduly delayed. The distance to the main highway was between four and six miles. Although the combat command had not made a prior reconnaissance, the ground was believed lightly held by the enemy. The risk of getting the tanks involved in hedgerow tactics of fighting from one field to the next seemed slight, and the potential complications of pointing the command diagonally across the zones of two regiments of the 30th Division seemed minor.

Another factor that contributed to General Watson's decision on the route of advance was the framework of reference that governed the employment of armor in the Cotentin at this time. The knowledge that German antitank guns were superior to American armor plate produced among American troops an unwholesome respect of all enemy antitank weapons. Perhaps the most effective was the German 88-mm. anti-aircraft gun, which was used also against ground targets. Just as Americans tended to confuse assault guns with tanks, it became general practice to refer to all German antitank guns as 88's—the 75's

as well as the lighter weapons, whether towed or self-propelled. The experience of CCA of the 3d Armored Division at the end of June had specifically indicated that tanks could escape the deadly enemy antitank fire by avoiding the roads and trails and advancing cross-country. Directives and memoranda from higher headquarters endorsed the view. The 3d Armored Division training had stressed the techniques of field-to-field movement; rapid advance along the narrow and restricted highways of the hedgerow country and under the sights of well-sited zeroed-in enemy weapons was considered rash, reckless, and ill advised.⁸

General Bohn had divided his command into three task forces—each formed around a reinforced tank battalion—and an administrative element. They were to deploy in column on a thousand-yard front and attack in normal armored manner, the leading task force advancing in two columns along parallel routes. Shortly after daybreak, 8 July, even before all the combat command's units were across the Vire, the leading task force commenced the attack. Without artillery preparation, men and tanks began to move southwest in an area traversed by country roads and hedgerowed lanes.

Almost at once the task force met and destroyed five Mark IV tanks attached to *Kampfgruppe Heinz*. In the exchange of fire the task force lost one tank. Through this auspicious beginning augured well, the task force soon

⁸ See, for example, XIX Corps Ltr, Notes on Combat Experience, 5 Jul, 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File. Unless otherwise noted, the documents cited in this chapter are in the 30th Div G-3 Jnl and File.



CONGESTION AT AIREL BRIDGE

became involved in the kind of tortuous advance that had become typical of offensive action in the hedgerow country. The armor overflowed the narrow trails and entered the fields, making it necessary for demolition teams and engineer bulldozers to breach the hedgerows. Though the task force received two additional dozers and encountered only light resistance, the day's gain totaled only about a mile and a half.⁹

The limited advance was disappointing, particularly since only minor units had come to the aid of *Kampfgruppe Heinz* during the day. General Watson informed General Bohn that the prog-

ress of the combat command was unsatisfactory. Pointing out the "great opportunity" that faced the command and the "good chance of a break through," he urged Bohn to fit his method of advance to the situation. If he found it impossible to go ahead on the roads, he was to move cross-country; if his tanks bogged down in the fields, he was to dispel among his subordinate commanders the "inflexible idea that cross-country progress is essential."¹⁰ Although there was no real difference between methods of advance in this area, General Bohn had emphasized to his

⁹ 3d Armd Div CCB S-3 Jnl and File, entries 1100 and 1128, 8 Jul.

¹⁰ On General Watson's lack of clarity over the advantages of cross-country versus road advance, see 12th AGP Immed Rpt 24, 9 Aug.

task force commander the need for speed and had insisted that he use the roads wherever possible. The task force commander had been reluctant or perhaps simply unable to move his men and vehicles out of the fields.

Meanwhile, in the rear areas of the bridgehead there was a disheartening spectacle of confusion, a confusion throttling an orderly development of the bridgehead and the attack. Seven infantry battalions, one tank battalion, and an artillery battalion of the 30th Division; one infantry battalion, three tank battalions, and two artillery battalions of CCB; plus an almost equal number of supporting troops of both units jammed an area of hedgerowed labyrinths scarcely four miles wide and less than three miles deep. To the tankers the fields seemed full of riflemen; to the infantrymen the terrain appeared covered with armor. In this overpopulated morass of mud, tank treads chewed up wire and destroyed communications, while unemployed combat units jostled supply personnel attempting to carry out their functions. Infantrymen ignorant of the armored commitment were surprised by the appearance of tanks, while tankers were indignant when they found infantrymen occupying fields useful as armored assembly areas. Experienced troops might have surmounted the difficulties engendered by restricted space, but both infantrymen and tankers were novices. Nervous soldiers of both units aggravated conditions by firing their weapons wildly in rear areas and on the flanks. Each organization accused the other of stifling the advance.

By striking southwest immediately

after crossing the Vire, the combat command had impinged on the sector of the 119th Infantry. Only after moving forward several miles would the armored unit have created a zone for itself between the 119th and the 117th Regiments. Agreement on this procedure was reached by representatives of armor and infantry at a special conference for co-ordination during the afternoon of 8 July. At the same time, the artillery commanders of the 3d Armored and 30th Divisions were meeting to keep the artillery of one from firing on the troops of the other.¹¹

General Hobbs complained bitterly of the presence of the combat command in the bridgehead. He protested that the armor was cluttering up his sector and bogging down his advance. The presence of tanks in his regimental rear areas, he was sure, was preventing artillery, supplies, and men from reaching his forward areas quickly. Promiscuous tank fire, he reported, had caused sixteen casualties in his division. It was impossible, he contended, to protect his troops with artillery fire for fear of striking armored elements. So incensed was he that he ordered his artillery to give the infantry the fire requested "wherever they are, irrespective of armor or anything else." He felt that either the combat command or the infantry division had to be halted, for both could not operate in the restricted area. He was convinced that the 30th Division without CCB would reach the corps objective rapidly, but that CCB without the 30th Division would "never get any-

¹¹ Memo by Brig Gen William K. Harrison, jr., Coordination CCB, 117th, 119th Inf, 8 Jul, 3d Armd Div CCB S-3 Jnl File.

place." The armored force commander had been "sitting on his fanny all day, doing nothing" and had not "turned a track in 95% of his vehicles all day long." The 3d Armored Division commander had "only a hazy idea" of what was happening. And there were "too many people in the party," too many commanders giving un-co-ordinated orders.¹²

In hope of resolving the situation and introducing unity of command, General Corlett placed the responsibility of the bridgehead operations on General Hobbs. Attaching CCB to the 30th Division on the evening of 8 July, Corlett directed Hobbs to get the armor and the infantry to make a co-ordinated effort to the south. By this time, Hobbs did not want the combat command. He had his own attached tank battalion and tank destroyers, he asserted, and with them he could exploit the breakthrough his infantry had achieved. When Corlett advised that he would have to keep the combat command because it "could not go any place else," Hobbs agreed to let the armor "just trail along."¹³

The combat command was not entirely at fault. While it had not displayed the daring and dash expected of armor, the principal reason for the failure was the hasty, ill-planned, and un-co-ordinated commitment into a bridgehead of inadequate size. Its route of access into the bridgehead had been sharply restricted, its operational space was small, its routes of advance were poorly surfaced and narrow. The road network was deficient, the hedgerows pre-

sented successive, seemingly endless obstacles, and the swampy Cotentin lowland had become even more treacherous and soft because of rain. Operating in a zone that seemed to belong to another unit, men and commanders of the combat command felt like intruders. When they called for fire support from their organic artillery, they had to wait for clearance from the 30th Division Artillery. Attacking on a narrow front, the combat command held the bulk of its strength, useless, in the rear. Separated from its parent headquarters, the armored force received little guidance and encouragement.

Concern over the minor advance and the disorder in the bridgehead had not detracted from another potential hazard. General Corlett had apparently supposed that crossing the Vire et Taute Canal and taking St. Jean-de-Daye would compel the Germans on the east bank of the Taute to withdraw. Counting on light delaying resistance, the corps commander had given Colonel Biddle's 113th Cavalry Group the mission of clearing the area between the 30th Division right flank and the Taute, but opposition on 8 July was so determined that the cavalry troops had had to dismount from their light tanks and armored cars and fight through the hedgerows like infantrymen.¹⁴ Although elements of the 30th Division secured the St. Jean-de-Daye crossroads on 8 July, they did not take le Désert, a few miles to the west. Anticipating the possibility of a counterattack from the Taute River area, General Corlett directed General Watson to send CCA into the bridgehead to protect the right flank. Specifi-

¹² Hobbs Telecons, 2045, 2100, and 2112, 8 Jul.

¹³ Telecons, Corlett and Hobbs, 2207 and 2210, 8 Jul.

¹⁴ See [Garth], *St.-Lô*, pp. 19-20, for the details.

cally, the combat command was to reinforce the calvalry group.

On the afternoon of 8 July, Brig. Gen. Doyle O. Hickey's Combat Command A crossed the Vire and moved west along the main road toward the Taute. Its passage through the bridgehead intensified the congestion. To add to the confusion, the last battalion of the 120th Infantry entered the bridgehead after being replaced along the north bank of the Vire et Taute Canal by a suddenly available battalion of the arriving 35th Division. The battalion of the 120th moved south through St. Jean-de-Daye. When the infantry met and crossed the CCA column, which was moving west, inevitable delays occurred. "Every road is blocked by armor," Hobbs complained.¹⁵

Although General Hobbs had said he would let CCB trail along after the 30th Division in his attack south on 9 July, General Corlett insisted that he use the armor to spearhead his advance. The objective was no longer the high ground west of St. Lô, which General Corlett felt could not be attained by a quick armored thrust, but instead Hill 91 at Hauts-Vents, a little more than three miles ahead of the combat command.

About 300 feet above sea level and aptly named for the high winds that sweep across it, Hauts-Vents overlooks the Cotentin lowlands as far north as Carentan. It dominates the St. Jean-de-Daye-Pont-Hébert road and commands the Vire River crossing to the east that leads to St. Lô. It would serve as a compromise objective. If CCB

gained Hauts-Vents quickly, General Corlett thought he might then attack St. Lô from the northwest, or perhaps drive farther south to the original corps objective. With these intentions of the corps commander in mind, General Hobbs ordered General Bohn to resume his attack on 9 July, continuing southwest across the St. Jean-de-Daye-Pont-Hébert highway to Hauts-Vents and Hill 91.

On the second day of the attack, 9 July, General Bohn passed his second task force in column through the first. Passage was difficult because of the terrain, but by midmorning the task force was making slow progress across muddy fields and along narrow roads and trails. Only occasional harassing artillery fire came in. The opposition seemed slight. This prompted Hobbs to order Bohn to get the task force out of the fields and on to the roads.

In part, the order was virtually meaningless. The roads in the area were little better than trails—narrow, sunken in many places, and frequently blocked by trees and overhanging hedges. Movement along these country lanes was not much different from cross-country advance, and possibly worse. A fallen tree or a wrecked vehicle could easily immobilize an entire column. Floundering in the mud, fighting the terrain rather than the enemy, the tankers could not advance with true armored rapidity.

The meaning of the order lay not in General Hobbs' directive to get onto the roads but rather in his judgment that the combat command was not acting aggressively enough to get out of the repressive terrain. Although General

¹⁵ Telecons, Hobbs and Walker, 1615, 8 Jul, Corlett and Hobbs, 2210, 8 Jul; XIX Corps G-3 Per Rpt 32, 9 Jul.