

become a minor prize worth the expense of only one corps. "I have turned only one American Corps westward into Brittany," General Montgomery stated on the following day, "as I feel that will be enough."⁴⁰ Had logistical planners not insisted that the ports were still needed, even fewer forces might have been committed there.⁴¹ Several days later, when heavy resistance had been discovered at the port cities, Montgomery resisted "considerable pressure" to send more troops "into the peninsula to get the ports cleaned up quickly," for he felt that "the main business lies to the East."⁴²

The new broad Allied strategy that had emerged concentrated on the possibility of swinging the Allied right flank around toward Paris. The sweeping turn would force the Germans back against the lower reaches of the Seine River, where all the bridges had been destroyed by air bombardment. Pushed against the river and unable to cross with sufficient speed to escape, the Germans west of the Seine would face potential destruction.⁴³

Because the XV Corps was already around the German left and oriented generally eastward, General Haislip drew the assignment of initiating the sweep of the Allied right flank. The remaining problem was to resolve from somewhat conflicting orders the exact

direction in which Haislip was to move—south, southeast, or east.⁴⁴

"Don't Be Surprised"

Exclusive of Brittany, the mission outlined for the Third Army by General Bradley on 3 August had both offensive and defensive implications. General Patton was to secure a sixty-mile stretch of the north-south Mayenne River between Mayenne and Château-Gontier and to seize bridgeheads across the river. He also was to protect his right flank along the Loire River west of Angers, part of the southern flank of the OVERLORD lodgment area.⁴⁵

Because this task was too great for the XV Corps alone, General Patton brought in the XX Corps to secure the Mayenne River south of Château-Gontier and to protect the Loire River flank. While the XV Corps was to drive about thirty miles southeast to the water line between Mayenne and Château-Gontier, the XX Corps was to move south toward the Loire. Although Patton assigned no further objectives, he was thinking of an eventual Third Army advance forty-five miles beyond Laval to le Mans—to the east. When, by which unit, and how this was to be done he did not say, but the obvious presumption that the XV Corps would continue eastward beyond the Mayenne River was not necessarily correct. "Don't be sur-

⁴⁰ Unnumbered Telg, Montgomery to CIGS (Brooke), 4 Aug, in Answers by British Historical Office to Questions by Pogue, Pogue Files.

⁴¹ Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support, II*, 7.

⁴² Telg, M-84, Montgomery to CIGS, 9 Aug, Pogue Files.

⁴³ 21 AGp Gen Operational Situation and Dir, M-516, 4 Aug.

⁴⁴ Compare the objectives enumerated in *Ibid*; 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 2, 3 Aug; TUSA FO 1, 4 Aug (confirming verbal orders, 1 Aug), Ltr, Confirmation of Verbal Orders Issued 2 Aug, 4 Aug, and Ltr, Dir, 5 Aug (confirming fragmentary orders issued 4 Aug).

⁴⁵ 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 2, 3 Aug.

prised," Patton told Haislip, if orders were issued for movement to the northeast or even to the north.⁴⁶ The implication was clear. Patton had sniffed the opportunity to encircle the Germans west of the Seine River, and he apparently liked what he smelled.

General Haislip planned to use the 106th Cavalry Group to screen the advance of the 90th Division from St. Hilaire to Mayenne and that of the 79th Division from Fougères to Laval. While the infantry divisions secured bridgeheads across the Mayenne River, the 5th Armored Division was to move south and southeast from Avranches and extend the corps front to Château-Gontier. French Resistance groups near Mayenne and Laval, numbering about 2,500 organized members, were to help by harassing the German garrisons. If the American troops met pockets of resistance, they were to go around them. "Don't stop," Patton ordered.

Sweeping through enemy territory for thirty miles and crossing a river that was a serious military obstacle was an ambitious program. The Mayenne was a steep-banked stream about one hundred feet wide and five feet deep. All the bridges except one at the town of Mayenne had been destroyed. Enemy interference was conjectural. "Nobody knows anything about the enemy," the corps G-2 stated, "because nothing can be found out about them."⁴⁷

Air reconnaissance helped little. The

reports of air reconnaissance missions filtered down to corps level too late to be of assistance. "Each day we would get a thick book from the air force," General Haislip recalled long afterwards, "and we would have to try to figure out what if anything in it applied to our little spot on the map. By the time we could figure it out, we were far away from there."⁴⁸

Nothing could be found out about the Germans because there were hardly any Germans left. Only weak rear-echelon guard and supply detachments garrisoned Mayenne and Laval. Even though a captured American field order led the German command to expect the main American thrust to be made westward into Brittany, not eastward toward Laval and le Mans, the Germans considered that the lack of combat troops in the Laval-le Mans region still had to be remedied. The *LXXXI Corps* headquarters was moving from the Seine-Somme sector to assume responsibility for Laval and le Mans, and the *708th Infantry* and the *9th Panzer Divisions* were moving north from southern France. Because neither the corps headquarters nor the divisions had yet arrived (the leading units of the *708th* were across the Loire near Angers on 3 August), the *Seventh Army* operations officer was dispatched to the army rear command post at le Mans to organize a defense of the Mayenne-Loire area and to accelerate the movement of the arriving forces. Laval in particular was important, for its loss would threaten le Mans and Alençon, where vital German communications and supply centers were located. The army operations officer collected

⁴⁶ TUSA Ltr, Dir, 5 Aug (confirming fragmentary orders, 4 Aug); XV Corps Plng Paper, 2400, 4 Aug, XV Corps G-3 Jnl and File. Unless otherwise noted, all documentary sources cited in this section are from this file.

⁴⁷ XV Corps FO 1, 4 Aug, and Conf Notes, 1130, 5 Aug.

⁴⁸ Panel Conf Min, OCMH, 9 May 56.

the troops he could find—remnants, stragglers, supply personnel—and as his first measure reinforced a two-battalion security regiment performing guard duty and a flak battalion with 88-mm. guns emplaced at Laval. Despite the fact that Laval could then be considered relatively strongly held, alarming reports of troop instability and the increasing possibility of an American thrust to the east led to frantic but generally unsuccessful efforts to speed up the commitment of the incoming divisions in the Mayenne-Alençon area.⁴⁹ These forces were not in position when the XV U.S. Corps launched its attack on 5 August.

On the XV Corps left, General McLain entrusted the 90th Division advance to Mayenne to a task force under the assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. William G. Weaver.⁵⁰ Proving that facile capture of St. Hilaire had been no fluke, Weaver's force reduced several roadblocks, overran or bypassed pockets of resistance, and covered the thirty miles to the west bank of the Mayenne River in less than half a day, before noon of 5 August. Finding the highway bridge leading into the town of Mayenne still intact, but discovering also that the arrival of American troops had stirred up frenzied defensive activity, Weaver dispatched two infantry battalions to outflank the town on the

south. No sooner had he done so than he became impatient and ordered the remainder of his task force to make a frontal assault by way of the bridge. The frontal attack succeeded, and even before the outflanking force had arrived in position, Mayenne had fallen. Although the Germans had mined the bridge, the 90th Division attack had forestalled demolition. While Task Force Weaver occupied Mayenne, the remainder of the division moved forward from St. Hilaire on a broader front to the Mayenne River, where engineers constructed additional bridges.⁵¹

To capture Laval, General Wyche built a 79th Division task force around Colonel Wood's motorized 313th Infantry and sent it along the main Fougères-Laval highway, which had previously been reconnoitered by a squadron of the 106th Cavalry Group.⁵² Half way to Laval, a strong roadblock halted progress for about two hours while the leading units reduced the resistance and captured about fifty prisoners and several field guns. Additional roadblocks held up the task force briefly, and it was midnight of 5 August before American troops reached a point about two miles northwest of Laval. During the night of 5-6 August, while the remainder of the 79th Division moved forward from Fougères, patrols discovered that the German garrison had thoroughly destroyed the Mayenne River bridges but had evacuated Laval. On the following

⁴⁹ Telecon, Kluge and Hausser, 2130, 1 Aug. *OB WEST KTB, Anlage 1016*; MS # B-807 (Kuntzen); MS # A-918 (Gersdorff); MS # B-725 (Gersdorff); MS # B-179 (Hausser).

⁵⁰ Task Force Weaver consisted of the 90th Reconnaissance Troop, the 712th Tank Battalion, the 357th Infantry (motorized), the 343d Field Artillery Battalion, a company each of the 315th Engineer Combat Battalion and the 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion, a battery of antiaircraft artillery, and signal and military police detachments.

⁵¹ 90th Div AAR, Aug; see 12th AGp Immed Rpt 76, Aggressive Pursuit by a Task Force, 10 Oct.

⁵² Attached to the infantry regiment were the division reconnaissance troop, the 310th and 312th Field Artillery Battalions, the 749th Tank Battalion, a company each of the tank destroyer, engineer, and medical battalions, and the division air support party.

morning, against no opposition, the division crossed the river and entered Laval in force—one infantry battalion being led across a dam by French policemen, two battalions crossing the river on an engineer footbridge, another paddling across on rafts and in boats found along the west bank, and two battalions being ferried across by engineers who had rushed up assault boats. A treadway bridge spanned the river shortly after midnight, and a floating Bailey bridge was opened to traffic at noon, 7 August.⁵³

Even before the capture of Laval, it had become obvious that only insignificant and disorganized forces opposed the XV Corps.⁵⁴ As soon as Mayenne fell on 5 August, Patton received permission to send the corps on to le Mans. The corps axis of advance thus changed from the southeast to the east.⁵⁵ Emphasizing that action during the next few days might be decisive for the entire campaign in western Europe, Haislip urged his commanders "to push all personnel to the limit of human endurance."⁵⁶ This was not idle talk, for the corps had a large order to fill. To take le Mans the corps, with both flanks open, would have to advance across forty-five miles of highly defensible terrain, cross a major military obstacle in the form of the Sarthe River, and capture a city of 75,000 population that the Germans presumably not only intended to defend but also had had ample time to fortify.⁵⁷

The presumption was not altogether

wrong. By this time the reconnaissance battalion of the *9th Panzer Division* and parts of the leading regiment of the *708th Infantry Division* had reached the vicinity of le Mans. Instead of holding these units and allowing the remaining portions of both divisions to assemble, the *LXXXI Corps* committed the small forces at once. The premature and, in the opinion of the Germans, disgraceful capitulation at Laval made necessary the immediate evacuation of administrative personnel from le Mans, long the location of the *Seventh Army* headquarters. With Laval lost, the Germans had to expect an American thrust along the Laval-le Mans highway and a subsequent threat to *Seventh Army* and *Army Group B* rear installations and supply dumps. Hastily trying to build up a front to deny the important center of le Mans, the *LXXXI Corps* dispatched units of the *708th Division* (arriving on foot and with horse-drawn vehicles) and the *9th Panzer Division* reconnaissance battalion west toward the Mayenne River line as soon as they arrived. These advance components were to collide with American columns near Aron and Evron in true meeting engagements.⁵⁸

Since the *79th Division* was still in the process of seizing Laval, the task of initiating the XV Corps attack to le Mans devolved upon the *90th*. Accorded use of the main Laval-le Mans highway, General McLain planned to move the bulk of the division southeast from Mayenne to the highway, then eastward to le Mans behind Task Force Weaver, which was to drive along a

⁵³ 79th Div AAR, Aug.

⁵⁴ See XV Corps Rpt, 1800, 5 Aug.

⁵⁵ TUSA Dir, 5 Aug (confirming tel orders, 1640, 5 Aug); 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 3, 6 Aug.

⁵⁶ XV Corps Dir to Div Comdrs, 1045, 6 Aug.

⁵⁷ XV Corps AAR, Aug.

⁵⁸ MS # B-807 (Kuntzen); MS # B-725 (Gersdorff).

more direct route southeast from Mayenne to the objective.⁵⁹ General Weaver, again in command of the division spearhead, divided his force into two columns for an advance over parallel roads. One column, under his personal command, was to proceed on the left through the towns of Aron and Evron.⁶⁰ The other column, commanded by Colonel Barth, was to move through Montsûrs, Ste. Suzanne, and Bernay.⁶¹

Barth's column on the right encountered only slight opposition on 6 August in moving southeast from Mayenne about twelve miles to Montsûrs, then turning east and proceeding ten miles farther to the hamlet of Ste. Suzanne. There, that evening, the column struck determined opposition and halted.

In contrast with the excellent advance of Barth's force, Weaver's column had hardly departed Mayenne before meeting a strong German armored and infantry force at Aron. Engaging the enemy in a fire fight that lasted all day, Weaver's troops were unable to advance.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the 90th Division was approaching or crossing the Mayenne River in two regimental columns—the 358th (Colonel Clarke) on the left and the 359th (under Col. Robert L. Bacon) on the right.

Checked at Aron, Weaver on the morning of 7 August left contingents of the 106th Cavalry Group to contain the

enemy in the Aron–Evron sector and to protect the division and corps left flank, reversed the direction of his column, and followed Barth's route of the previous day as far as Montsûrs. Instead of turning eastward at Montsûrs, Weaver continued to the south. Clarke's 358th Infantry, approaching Montsûrs in column from the west, waited for Weaver to clear the village before proceeding eastward toward Ste. Suzanne in support of Barth.

Weaver, moving south, reached the village of Vaiges on the main Laval–le Mans highway. There he intended to turn east to parallel Barth's movement, not on Barth's left as originally planned, but on his right. Weaver had to change his plan when he discovered that Bacon's 359th Infantry had already entered Vaiges from the west and was proceeding along the Laval–le Mans highway toward the division objective, clearing opposition that had formed around roadblocks.

Refusing to be shut out of the action, but unwilling to risk traffic congestion likely if his and Bacon's troops became intermingled, Weaver led his column northeast from Vaiges, aiming to insert his column between Barth's and Clarke's on the north and Bacon's on the south. He would thus add a third column to the eastward drive toward le Mans. Several miles northeast of Vaiges, however, at the hamlet of Chammes between Vaiges and Ste. Suzanne, Weaver again was thwarted, this time by the same enemy force opposing Barth at Ste. Suzanne.

Barth, in the meantime, had sustained and repelled a tank-supported counter-attack launched from St. Suzanne. American artillery fire effectively stopped

⁵⁹ 90th Div Mission Order, 1030, 6 Aug.

⁶⁰ This column consisted of the Reconnaissance Troop (less a platoon), a platoon of medium tanks, a battalion of the motorized 357th Infantry, and an artillery battalion.

⁶¹ Colonel Barth's column included the motorized 357th Infantry (less a battalion), two medium tank platoons, a reconnaissance platoon, two artillery battalions, a tank destroyer company, a platoon of antiaircraft automatic weapons, and, as rear guard, a battalion of the 359th Infantry.

the Germans, but in wooded terrain south of the Ste. Suzanne-Bernay road the enemy continued to resist. Soon after Weaver's arrival, however, the opposition slackened.

As enemy fires diminished and American artillery shelled the Germans, Barth rushed his motorized column past the wooded area southeast of Ste. Suzanne, passed through Bernay that night without stopping, and on the morning of 8 August struck an enemy defensive position only a few miles west of le Mans. Weaver left a small containing force at Chammes, moved south to the Laval-le Mans highway, turned east, passed through Bacon's troops, and slammed down the road, reducing small road-blocks at virtually every hamlet. Early on 8 August, Weaver, too, was only a few miles from le Mans.

As Barth and Weaver swept by the German forces in the forest southeast of Ste. Suzanne, Clarke on the north and Bacon on the south mopped up demoralized remnants and stragglers. Although the Americans had judged that only minor enemy forces had been present in the Evron area, the 90th Division took 1,200 prisoners and destroyed in large part the reconnaissance battalion of the *9th Panzer Division* and a regiment of the *708th Division*. The success of the approach march to le Mans was attributable in great measure to the aggressive persistence of General Weaver, who had not permitted his troops to be pinned down by opposition. The result left no doubt that the same 90th Division that had stumbled in the Cotentin was now a hard-hitting outfit.⁶²

⁶² For his part in transforming the division and inspiring the troops during the above action, Gen-

With both columns several miles west of le Mans by 8 August, General McLain halted the advance, terminated the task force organization, and prepared to attack the city. That night Clarke's 358th Infantry crossed the Sarthe River north of le Mans to cut the northern exits of the city. On the morning of 9 August, after shelling a German force observed escaping to the east and capturing fifty prisoners, the troops moved into the northern outskirts of the city. Barth's 357th Infantry also crossed the river during the night of 8 August, entering le Mans on the following morning.⁶³ Troops of the 90th Division made contact with part of the 79th Division, which had secured its portion of le Mans on the previous afternoon.

The 79th Division had started its drive east from Laval on the morning of 7 August as 106th Cavalry troops and Colonel Wood's motorized and reinforced 313th Infantry moved through the area immediately south of the main Laval-le Mans highway. Clearing small groups of Germans, the task force advanced more than half the distance to the objective. To give the attack added impetus on 8 August, General Wyche motorized Lt. Col. John A. McAleer's 315th Infantry and passed it through the 313th. The new spearhead unit surged forward, dispersing sporadic resistance, and the leading troops detrucked on the southwest outskirts of le Mans that afternoon. Concluding an outstanding exploitation effort, troops of the 79th Divi-

eral McLain was awarded the Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster to the DSC. General Eisenhower later credited General McLain with making the 90th a first-class fighting outfit. Eisenhower to Marshall, 25 Aug, cited in Cole, *Lorraine Campaign*, p. 278.

⁶³ 90th Div AAR, Aug; 12th AGP Immed Rpt 76, *Aggressive Pursuit by a Task Force*, 10 Oct.

sion crossed the Sarthe River and reached the center of le Mans, by 1700 on 8 August.⁶⁴ The *Seventh Army* headquarters troops were gone.

The 5th Armored Division had also had a hand in the advance. Commanded by Maj. Gen. Lunsford E. Oliver, the 5th Armored Division on 6 August had moved south against light resistance past Avranches and through Fougères and Vitré. At the village of Craon, opposition at a destroyed bridge temporarily halted a combat command, but quick deployment dispersed the Germans and aggressive reconnaissance secured a bypass crossing site. By evening the division was at the Mayenne River at Château-Gontier on the corps right flank. There, the division faced the serious problem of how to cross the river in the face of an acute shortage of gasoline.

Several days earlier, on 4 August, General Haislip, the corps commander, had directed the 5th Armored Division to unload fuel and lubricants from a hundred of its organic trucks so that the trucks might be used to motorize the two infantry divisions. Although Haislip had intended to return the vehicles before committing the armor, he had been compelled instead to replace them with a corps Quartermaster truck company on the night of 5 August. The division commander, General Oliver, instructed the truck company to draw gasoline at any army Class III truckhead north of Avranches and to join the armored division south of Avranches on the following morning. When the trucks failed to appear, Oliver sent an officer back to locate them. The officer

found the Quartermaster company and had the trucks loaded, but traffic congestion prevented the vehicles from getting to the division that day. Not until the early morning hours of 7 August did they arrive. Uncertain whether the Third Army could establish and maintain supply points at reasonable distances behind armored forces in deep exploitation and unwilling to risk a recurrence of the gasoline shortage, Oliver provided the division with an operational fuel reserve by attaching a platoon of the Quartermaster company to each combat command.

General Oliver need not have worried. The organic trucks of the division were released by the infantry and returned to the 5th Armored area early on 7 August. At the same time, the Third Army moved 100,000 gallons of gasoline to Cossé-le-Vivien, several miles south of Laval, whence 5th Armored Division trucks transported it across the Mayenne River to Villiers-Charlemagne. Here the division quartermaster established a Class III dump. A platoon of the division Engineer battalion protected the supply point until the division civil affairs section obtained sufficient numbers of the FFI for guard duty.

Gassed up on the morning of 7 August, the 5th Armored Division crossed the Mayenne River after eliminating the Château-Gontier garrison (about a company strong), repairing the damaged bridge there, and constructing several bridges south of Château-Gontier. General Haislip had instructed General Oliver to advance on le Mans echeloned to the right rear of the 79th Division, but had also authorized him to use all possible routes in the corps zone, providing he did not interfere with the in-

⁶⁴ 79th Div AAR, Aug.

fantry divisions. If the infantry encountered opposition strong enough to retard progress seriously, the armor was to move to the head of the corps attack. This was not necessary. The 5th Armored Division reached the Sarthe River south of le Mans on the evening of 7 August and crossed during the night. Sweeping through some opposition on 8 August, the armor bypassed le Mans on the south, swung in a wide arc, and moved around the eastern outskirts of the city. By midnight of 8 August, the converging attacks of the three divisions had closed all exits from le Mans and infantrymen were clearing the streets of the city.⁶⁵

In four days, from 5 to 9 August, General Haislip's XV Corps had moved about seventy-five miles—from the St. Hilaire-Fougères line to le Mans—an extraordinarily aggressive advance at little cost. Extremely light casualties contrasted well with a total of several thousand prisoners.⁶⁶ The immediately apparent achievement of Haislip's exploitation was that the XV Corps had frustrated German plans to organize strong defenses at Laval and le Mans. But soon an even more spectacular result would become obvious.

During the first week of August the Third Army headquarters had been serving two bodies with one head. Two distinct fronts had been advancing in opposite directions, moving ever farther

apart. By 8 August more than two hundred miles separated the 6th Armored Division of the VIII Corps at the gates of Brest and the XV Corps at le Mans.

Less than one hundred miles east of le Mans lay the final 12th Army Group objective designated by the OVERLORD plan, the eastern edge of the OVERLORD lodgment area, an area roughly between Paris and Orléans. With le Mans occupied so easily there seemed to be few German forces to restrain further Third Army advance toward its part of the objective, the Paris-Orléans gap. Yet, this advance was not to be, for the moment at least; a new goal appeared more desirable.

The XV Corps advance to le Mans had in one week moved an enveloping right flank eighty-five air miles southeast of Avranches and was well on its way to outflanking the German armies west of the Seine River, or had already done so. If the basic purpose of military operations was to close on advantageous terms with the enemy and destroy him, and if a favorable moment for a move of this kind appeared, purely geographical objectives receded in importance. The opportunity for a decisive victory seemed doubly propitious, for the Germans in making a bid to regain the initiative in the battle of France had played into American hands.

General Bradley was ready to act, and in his new decision the XV Corps had an important role. "Don't be surprised," Patton had earlier warned Haislip. Instead of going farther east from le Mans, the XV Corps turned north toward Alençon.

⁶⁵ 5th Armd Div AAR, Aug.

⁶⁶ The 90th Division, for example, sustained less than 300 casualties during the first ten days of August and took more than 1,500 prisoners. 90th Div AAR, Aug.

CHAPTER XXIII

Opportunities and Intentions

In contrast with the Third Army's spectacular gains during the first week of August, the First Army seemed to be standing still. The difference between the rates of progress of the two armies was easily explained. Whereas Patton's units were slashing through areas held by few German defenders, the First Army was meeting organized, stubborn resistance. Because the Third Army's achievements were more impressive, they became the side of the coin usually displayed, but the accomplishments of Hodges' First Army were no less important in determining the course of the campaign in western Europe.

The American Task

The primary intention of the Allies on 1 August was to sustain the momentum developed by COBRA. The objectives remained the same as those enunciated at the beginning of July. While the Third Army slid into Brittany, the First Army was to swing left to a north-south line facing eastward and prepare to drive to the Seine in conjunction with the British and Canadians.

The NEPTUNE planners had envisioned a rather wide wheeling movement beginning at the base of the Cotentin and clearing the OVERLORD lodgment area as far south as the Loire River. In keeping with this concept, the boundary be-

tween the First Army and the British and Canadians extended from the invasion coast southeast more than fifty miles through Bayeux and Flers, then east through Alençon and Dreux to the Eure River just short of Paris. This split the lodgment area (exclusive of Brittany) roughly into equal parts and postulated a twin drive by the 21 Army Group toward the lower Seine River (between Paris and the sea) and the 12th Army Group toward the upper Seine north of the Loire River (between Paris and Orléans). The pivot for the American turn was at a point just west of Alençon, almost sixty miles from the invasion coast.¹

Three weeks after the invasion it had seemed obvious that pivoting on Alençon was an optimistic improbability. Also, General Montgomery preferred to anchor the British forces on the small foothold secured by the end of June rather than attempt to enlarge the space that would determine the eventual wheeling maneuver. Montgomery had therefore instructed General Bradley to secure the American left on Caumont, less than twenty miles inland, and make a shallower turning movement, describ-

¹ PS SHAEF (44) 13 (Final), Post-NEPTUNE Plng Forecast No. 1, 27 May, and Map "MA" attached, SGS SHAEF Post-OVERLORD Plng File, 381; SHAEF/17100/35/Ops, NEPTUNE, Summary of Revised Jt Opns Plan—US Forces for Phase II of Opn OVERLORD, 20 May, EUCOM Files, Box 3.

ing an arc through Fougères, about seventy miles north of the Loire River. This, the First Army had been unable to accomplish.

During the COBRA operation, the American left flank forces had been anchored on St. Lô. The success of COBRA and of the post-COBRA exploitation had enabled the forces on the right to sweep through the successive objectives of Laval and le Mans, about fifty miles north of the Loire. At the same time, the American pivot shifted south to the town of Vire. At the beginning of August, American and British troops were both driving to secure Vire as the point of the wheeling movement that had already started.²

Earlier, the Allies had believed that, before troops could move from Avranches into Brittany, it would be necessary to erect a barrier against interference from the east. This requirement partially explained Allied preoccupation with the road centers of Vire, Mortain, and Fougères. Yet before these could be seized, even as the American left remained heavily engaged near Villedieu-les-Poêles, Percy, and Tessy, the entrance into Brittany had been made. Vire, Mortain, and Fougères remained important nevertheless, for with German strength in Brittany drained to reinforce the Normandy front, a strong German threat could only come from the east or the southeast. When the Third Army assumed responsibility for taking Fougères, General Hodges concentrated upon capturing Vire and Mortain.³

Succeeding to the command of the First Army after having served as deputy commander, General Hodges was in demeanor and habit much like his predecessor, General Bradley. Quiet and modest, "unostentatious and retiring," General Hodges performed his duties in a workmanlike manner without fanfare. He was opposed to what he termed the "uncertain business" of "tricky maneuver." Too many units, he felt, tried to flank and skirt instead of meeting the enemy straight on, and he believed that it was "safer, sounder, and in the end quicker to keep smashing ahead."⁴

General Hodges had enlisted in the Regular Army as a private, had served in Pershing's Punitive Expedition into Mexico as an officer, and had fought in France during World War I as a battalion and a regimental commander. Commandant of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1940, Hodges had become in rapid succession Chief of Infantry, head of the Replacement and School Command of the Army Ground Forces, and Commanding General, X Corps. A lieutenant general by 1944, he assumed command of the First Army on 1 August and took control of three corps, the VII, the XIX, and the V.

By seizing Vire and Mortain, General Hodges would provide protection for the Avranches corridor while beginning the First Army turning maneuver.⁵ Prospects of attaining his goals seemed favorable. The Germans were trying to stabilize their left flank, but despite counterattacks "and the belated shifting

² See 21 AGp Ltr, M-512, Montgomery to Bradley, Dempsey, Patton, and Crerar, 21 Jul; see above, Ch. III.

³ 12th AGp Dir for Current Opns, 2 Aug.

⁴ Bradley, *Soldier's Story*, pp. 226, 358-59; Sylvan Diary, 30 Jul.

⁵ 12th AGp Ltr of Instrs 1, 29 Jul; see Msg, Eisenhower to Montgomery, FWD-12505, 31 Jul, SGS SHAEF File 381, OVERLORD, I (a).