



BOMBING OF ILE DE CÉZEMBRE, OFF ST. MALO

with the ground action on the mainland.⁶⁶

The thirty-five planes diverted to Cézembre from the attack on the Citadel on 17 August created huge columns of smoke with their napalm bombs.⁶⁷ Hoping that fires started by the bombardment would intensify the adverse effect Aulock's capitulation was sure to have on the garrison, and expecting that both factors would enlist a readiness to quit Cézembre, General Macon authorized Maj. Joseph M. Alexander and two enlisted men, as well as an accredited civilian motion picture cameraman, to demand that the Germans relinquish the island. On 18 August the party rowed across the St. Malo bay. At Cézembre, a noncommissioned officer met the boat and conducted Alexander and his interpreter to the fortress commander, a lieutenant colonel who did not give his

name. Neither arrogant nor boastful, the German commander stated that the last order he had received from higher headquarters instructed him to maintain his defense. Until he received a countermanding order, he would continue to do just that. Informed that the mainland was completely under American control, he declared that he did not understand how that changed his situation. Reminded that Aulock had surrendered the day before, he countered that he had not exhausted his ammunition on Cézembre. After a courteous conversation lasting fifteen minutes, the Americans were escorted back to the beach and helped to launch their boat for the return trip.⁶⁸

According to Alexander's observations, Cézembre was a shambles. Shelling and bombardment had demolished or badly damaged the few houses and buildings, destroyed a narrow-gauge railway designed to carry ammunition from the

⁶⁶ 83d Div G-2, G-3 Jnl, entries 1841 and 2035, 6 Aug, and 0930, 9 Aug; [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 220.

⁶⁷ 83d Div G-3 Per Rpt 45, 1600, 17 Aug; [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 174.

⁶⁸ Ltr, Alexander to Macon, Rpt of Parley on Isle de Cézembre, 18 Aug.

beach to gun positions, created large craters, and exploded an ammunition dump, scattering shells and debris throughout the island. About three hundred men comprised the garrison. From tunnels dug into rock, the men manned those coastal guns that still functioned.⁶⁹

No further effort was made immediately against Cézembre. A week later, when preparations were being completed for a strong attack against Brest, higher headquarters decided to eliminate the nuisance of Cézembre. The 330th Infantry headquarters returned to St. Malo to direct training for an amphibious operation. Arrangements were made for assault boats and special equipment. Softening up operations commenced on 30 August when two groups of planes bombed the island. On 31 August twenty-four P-38's dropped napalm and three hundred heavy bombers struck with high explosive. Several 8-inch howitzers and guns shelled the island "day and night" with particular effort to destroy water tanks. Another parley with the island commander disclosed "that he will fight to the last drop of water."⁷⁰

Faced with this attitude, the Allies increased their pressure on 1 September. Medium bombers of both the IX Bomber Command and the RAF Bomber Command opened an aerial assault that ended with thirty-three P-38's dropping napalm. A British warship, H.M.S. *Warspite*, fired salvos of 15-inch armor-piercing projectiles. Field artillery from the mainland fired 155-mm.,

8-inch, and 240-mm. shells at embrasures, portholes, and tunnel entrances. After this display of power, another demand for surrender was transmitted to the garrison. Again the German commander replied that he lacked permission to surrender.⁷¹

On the following day, 2 September, as the 330th Infantry prepared to make an amphibious assault on Cézembre, the garrison raised a white flag. The landing craft immediately conducted troops to the island and evacuated 1 German officer, 320 men, and 2 Italian officers. Although the fortifications had been severely damaged, the reason for the capitulation was a shortage of water—the distilling plant had been destroyed.⁷²

So ended the battle of St. Malo, a battle that had been unexpected in its inception, in its difficulty, and in its duration. German troops, although isolated, had demonstrated convincingly the value of military discipline in carrying out the Fuehrer's will. An action of local significance by mid-August, a rear area operation more than a hundred miles behind the front, the combat nevertheless fulfilled Hitler's strategic design.

From the American point of view, the results of the Brittany campaign produced mixed reactions. August had come in like a whirlwind, gone out in a calm. The 4th Armored Division had seized Rennes by 4 August, had con-

⁶⁹ See 330th Inf AAR (2 Sep).

⁷⁰ Memo, Lt Col Frederick G. Cain for Col Evans, 31 Aug.

⁷¹ 330th Inf AAR's Aug and Sep, 44; [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 174; Msg, ANCXF to SHAEF, 2215, 28 Aug, SGS SHAEF File 381, Post-OVERLORD Plng; 12th AGp Memos for Gen Kibler, 29 Aug, 12th AGp File 371.3, Mil Objectives, I.

⁷² 330th Inf AAR, Sep; [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 221; 12th AGp Immed Rpt 49, Organization and Effect of Heavy Arty, 9 Sep.



ST. MALO PRISONERS MARCHING OFF TO INTERNMENT

tained 11,000 Germans in Lorient by 9 August, and had captured Nantes on 13 August. The 6th Armored Division had driven more than 200 miles down the center of the peninsula, had penned some 30,000 Germans into the fortress of Brest and had destroyed part of a German division. Task Force A had swept the northern shore of Brittany to secure the Brest-Rennes railroad and to secure the beach of St. Michel-en-Grève. In contrast with these swift exploiting thrusts, the 83d Division had besieged the fortress of St. Malo, and only after a "slugging match had slowly hammered down pillboxes, barricades, and fortified areas" was the mainland stronghold re-

duced by 17 August, the Ile de Cézembre two weeks later, by 2 September.⁷³

The Brittany peninsula had been completely cut off, and a sizable segment of France, the ancient province of Brittany, had been liberated with dispatch. No organized resistance remained in the interior, for the Germans who remained in Brittany had been herded into Lorient, St. Nazaire, and Brest, where they could only escape by sea or await American siege operations.⁷⁴

Despite these achievements, the Brittany campaign had not secured the basic strategic objectives that had motivated

⁷³ VIII Corps AAR, Aug.

⁷⁴ VIII Corps G-2 Est 6, 1800, 15 Aug.

it. The major ports of Brittany could not be used. St. Malo was destroyed beyond hope of immediate repair. Nantes was demolished. Brest, Lorient, and St. Nazaire were occupied by enemy forces in naturally good defensive positions bolstered by extensive fortifications. Construction of a harbor at Quiberon Bay could not be started. The logistical fruits of the action were the minor harbors of Cancale and St. Michel-en-Grève and the railway from Rennes to Morlaix. Although the VIII Corps gathered its forces for a mighty

effort at Brest at the end of August, logistical planners were by then looking elsewhere for major ports of entry.

Failure to have attained the strategic goals of the operation did not appear terribly important in mid-August. Events occurring farther to the east had long since relegated the action in Brittany to secondary status. The eastern development of the breakout was overflowing Normandy into the ancient provinces of Anjou and Maine and promising to bring the campaign in western France to a climax.

PART FIVE

BREAKOUT TO THE EAST

CHAPTER XXII

Week of Decision

As operations had begun in Brittany during the early days of August, Allied and German commanders were making decisions that markedly altered the development of the campaign. The immediate consequence of the decisions on both sides decreased the importance of Brittany. Normandy remained the stage for continuing action that would soon become vital.

The German Decision

The seriousness of the German situation at the time of the American breakthrough to Avranches was not lost on Hitler.¹ The Balkans and Finland were about to be lost, and there were indications that Turkey might soon enter the war against Germany. Hitler considered these events as a kind of external defection over which he had little control. The *Putsch* of July 20th, on the other hand, was an internal defection that threatened him personally, and he was increasingly uneasy over the feeling that disloyalty had permeated the entire

German military organization even to the highest levels. Soviet advances sent his Eastern Front reeling, but because construction had been started in July on a new defense line stretching from East Prussia to the Carpathians, Hitler hoped that his forces would somehow hold. His main concern lay in the west, for he had long considered the west the vital sector of what had become, at least for the moment, a defensive war.

The breakthrough on the Western Front posed the ominous possibility that the Germans might have to withdraw from France. With France lost, the threat of Allied penetration of the German homeland would become immediate.

The Seine River, with its deep bends and twists, was difficult to defend and could be no more than a temporary rallying position, but between the Seine and the Rhine were a number of historic water obstacles where the Germans could hope to stop the Allies short of the German border. To utilize the water barriers, Jodl sketched a major defensive belt across Belgium and France (and into northern Italy) that consisted of two lines: the Somme-Marne-Saône River line, and the Albert Canal-Meuse River line, both anchored on the Vosges Mountains.

Behind these lines were the permanent fortifications of the West Wall

¹ The following is from: *OKW Besprechung des Fuehrers mit Generaloberst Jodl am 31.7.1944. in der Wolfschanze; Der Westen* (Schramm); Memo for Rcd, Warlimont to Eberbach, 3 Aug, *Fifth Panzer Army KTB*, Annex 248; MS # C-099c (Warlimont); Jodl Diary; *OB WEST, a Study in Command*, pp. 46-47; Bauer, *Organization of the German Defenses in the West in the Fall of 1944* (1936-44), MS R-20.

(Siegfried Line), protecting the approaches to the German border. Although neglected for four years and partially dismantled, the West Wall in the summer of 1944 was not a negligible defensive factor. Late in July Jodl ordered the West Wall repaired and re-armed and the river lines in France prepared for defense. The Todt Organization was to cease work on the Atlantic Wall and commence construction of defensive positions along the newly projected lines inland. Authority was granted to impress civilians for work on roads and defenses in Belgium and France.

In addition to the erection of defensive positions, Hitler enunciated on the last day of July a two-point policy directed against Allied logistics. He ordered his forces to deny the Allies ports of entry on the Continent and, if a withdrawal from France became necessary, to destroy the transportation system there by demolishing railroads, bridges, and communications.

Though withdrawal from France was extremely undesirable, Hitler foresaw the possible necessity of it. He indicated as much by ordering the movement of some units out of the Balkans and Italy for defense of the homeland, thereby accepting the probability of losing the Balkans immediately and the calculated risk of having to withdraw in Italy to the Alps. Hitler also quickened preparations for raising a reserve force within Germany.

Stabilizing the Normandy front appeared the only alternative to withdrawal from France. On the credit side, a front line in Normandy would be the shortest and most economical of any

possible in the west. On the debit side, failure to stabilize the front in Normandy would—because of Allied air superiority—involve the German forces in mobile warfare under unfavorable conditions.

Reluctant to accept the hazards of mobile warfare in these circumstances and needing time to prepare rearward defenses, Hitler decided to take the risks and continue to fight in Normandy. Since the war in western Europe had reached a critical stage, he took responsibility for the battle upon himself. Creating a small staff taken from members of the OKW planning section (*WFSt*) to help him, Hitler sought to recreate the conditions of static warfare while at the same time preparing to withdraw in the event of failure. By this move, Hitler in effect assumed the functions of theater commander and filled the virtual vacuum in the chain of command that had existed since Rommel's incapacitation and Kluge's assumption of dual command of *Army Group B* and *OB WEST*. Ordering Kluge to close the gap in the left portion of the German defenses and to anchor the front on Avranches, Hitler forbade the commanders in the field to look backward toward defensive lines in the rear.

As seen by the staff of *OB WEST*, the situation in Normandy at the beginning of August, while critical, could have been worse.² The recent appearance on the Continent of Canadian units and other formations that had been thought to belong to Patton's army group, and the commitment in Normandy of ever-growing numbers of close-support planes indicated that a second large-scale Allied

² *OB WEST*, a Study in Command, pp. 55ff; *OB WEST KTB*, 30 Jul, and *Anlage 943*.

strategic landing in western Europe was no longer likely. Also, the Allied breakout from the limited continental lodgment and the development of mobile warfare underscored the fact that the Allies no longer needed to make another landing. The knowledge that the Germans in Normandy already faced the bulk of the Allied forces in western Europe was somewhat of a relief.

Two possibilities seemed in order. The first was the more cautious: to break off the battle in Normandy and withdraw behind delaying action to the Seine while *Army Group G* evacuated southern France. This would have the virtue of saving the main body of German troops, though admittedly at the expense of heavy losses, especially in matériel. Eberbach later claimed that, when Warlimont visited the front about 1 August, he, Eberbach, suggested an immediate withdrawal to the Seine, a recommendation Warlimont rejected as being "politically unbearable and tactically impractical."³

OB WEST could understand OKW's reluctance to withdraw, for pulling back to the Seine would more than likely be the first step toward retirement behind the West Wall. If the Germans did not succeed in holding the relatively short front in Normandy, then only at the West Wall—another relatively short defensive line that could be reinforced—was there a prospect of success. The consequences of such a decision would be hard to accept—surrender of France with all the political and economic implications of it, loss of long-range projectile bases along the Pas-de-Calais, unfavor-

able reaction in Italy that might lead to the loss of a region valuable to the German war economy, withdrawals on other fronts to project the homeland.

The other alternative was to stabilize the front in Normandy. To do so, the breach at Avranches would have to be closed, a step that appeared tactically feasible at the beginning of August. If the gap were not closed, there would be an unavoidable crisis on the front, for the likelihood of being able to pull back across the Seine at that late date would be slim.

As events developed, Hitler left *OB WEST* no choice. He ordered the forces in the west to continue fighting in Normandy even as Kluge was already trying to remedy the situation at Avranches.

Although all of Kluge's available forces in Normandy were committed by the first day of August, one armored and six infantry divisions were on the way to reinforce the front. The *84th* and *85th Divisions* were moving from the Pas-de-Calais toward Falaise. The *89th Division* had just crossed the Seine River, and the *331st Division* was in the process of being ferried across. Parts of the *363d Division* were already in the *Seventh Army* rear and were being committed in the *LXXXIV Corps* sector. From southern France came the *708th Division*, which was crossing the Loire River near Angers, and the *9th Panzer Division*, which was moving toward the Loire for eventual assembly near Alençon. Whether all would get to the front in time to be of use before the situation in the Avranches sector deteriorated completely was the vital question. It appeared that at least three divisions, the *363d*, the *84th*, and the *89th*, would be

³ MS # A-922 (Eberbach)