units had made a constant effort to overrun German outposts before they could relay information on American progress. The hedgerow cutter, developed to give armor mobility in the hedgerow country, was of little tactical value in the breakout, except possibly as a morale factor to the troops, since the tanks advanced on the roads, not cross-country.

Taking light casualties, U.S. troops felt their morale soar as the opposition melted. The sight of German prisoners in large numbers, "so happy to be captured that all they could do was giggle," dimmed unhappy memories of the battle of the hedgerows.[26] The absence of an established enemy line and the replacement of the formerly well-prepared defensive positions with hastily dug trenches and ill-constructed emplacements brought exultation to American troops. The abandoned, wrecked, and disabled enemy vehicles that littered the roads were much less troublesome obstacles than well-manned strongpoints or villages and towns that had been both objectives and obstacles.[27] The 15,000 engineers who had participated in COBRA had performed with distinction their primary effort of keeping the main routes open, thereby enabling over 100,000 combat troops to pour through a gap not more than five miles wide.[28] The resulting situation had become so fluid that it had often been difficult for headquarters to transmit their orders to subordinate units or to receive new instructions from higher headquarters.[29]

Artillery had played a comparatively minor role. Only the armored batteries accompanying the advance units had been called upon to eliminate the occasional resistance that small German groups had hurriedly organized. Artillerymen had fired their machine guns more often than their howitzers. The question of adequate artillery ammunition supplies had vanished, and even though rationing had remained in effect throughout the month, it had no effect on the small expenditures that had been necessary.[30]

Although the method of supplying the forward troops changed somewhat, General Collins later recalled "no real supply difficulties that hampered the actual operation." [31] Combat units carried more than their regular allowances of gasoline, usually double the amount. With kitchens left in the rear in increasing numbers, the combat troops for the most part ate cold K rations or heated their own 10-in-1 rations. Distances between depots and the front-line units increased. Sometimes tanks or armored cars escorted supply columns to assure their safety. Facilities for handling prisoners had suddenly become overburdened, and the First Army established two "holding enclosures" several miles behind the front as temporary prisoner installations until Communica-

[26] 83d Div G–2 Per Rpts 30 and 32, 27 and 28 Jul.

[27] 3d Armd Div CCB AAR, Jul. By 2 August, the First Army Ordnance Section possessed, in part, the following captured matériel: 75 Mark IV, 25 Mark V, and 27 Mark VI tanks; 22 77-mm., 20 76-mm., and 9 88-mm. assault guns. FUSA Ord Office, Consolidated Rpt of Captured Tanks and Assault Guns, 2 Aug, FUSA G–2 Jnl and File.

[28] CI 344–A (Engrs in the Breakthrough of VII Corps).

[29] See, for example, 1st Div G–3 Jnl, entry 2300, 28 Jul.

[30] Gen Bd USFET Rpt on Ammo Supply for FA, Study 58, File 471/1; Gen Bd Arty Rpt, App. C; VIII Corps AAR, Jul; Koyen, *Fourth Armored Division*, p. 25.

[31] Ltr, Collins to Hechler, 7 Dec 45, as cited in Hechler, VII Corps in Operation COBRA, p. 16.

tion Zone guards could march the captives to the invasion beaches for transfer to England.[32]

The wretched weather that earlier had hampered operations in Normandy had vanished. With the launching of COBRA, "the weather turned fair, and the last days of July were characterized by brilliant sunshine and warm temperatures." [33] This, perhaps as much as anything, had insured the success of the breakout, for it had permitted a most heartening development in the close and effective co-operation between the pilots of the fighter-bombers and the tankers leading the ground forces.

From 26 July through the end of the month, over 400 support missions were flown over First Army spearheads. In the VII Corps sector alone, fighter-bomber pilots claimed to have destroyed 362 tanks and self-propelled guns, damaged 216; and to have destroyed 1,337 other vehicles and damaged 380. In addition, they attacked horse-drawn wagons, gun positions, trains, warehouses, road junctions, railroad and highway bridges, troop concentrations, enemy aircraft, and one ammunition dump. In one day alone, the critical day of 26 July, fighter-bomber pilots claimed to have destroyed or damaged 85 tanks and 97 motor vehicles and to have attacked 22 gun positions. Pilots also had sought to hamper the night movement of enemy troops by dropping during the day near important crossroads—particularly near Coutances and Gavray—delayed-action bombs timed to explode during the night.[34]

From 25 through 31 July, the IX Tactical Air Command flew 9,185 sorties and dropped 2,281 tons of bombs, in addition to making 655 reconnaissance sorties. The air command's planned distribution of its resources on 28 July was representative of the distribution for the period: 7 percent of available aircraft were to provide assault area cover, 7 percent to perform offensive fighter sweeps, 7 percent to execute armed reconnaissance beyond the forward troops, 7 percent to be held in reserve to fulfill air request missions coming directly from the corps, 14 percent to attack targets as directed by the Ninth Air Force, 14 percent to fulfill close support missions requested by the First Army, 22 percent to escort medium bombers on attack missions, and 22 percent to perform armored column cover. It was later computed that from 25 through 28 July, 2,926 aircraft had dropped 5,961 tons of bombs, and 1,964 artillery pieces of all caliber (exclusive of tank guns) had fired 4,089 tons of shells on the First Army front.[35]

Armored column cover, begun on 26 July, had been a vital—and perhaps essential—factor in the American success at the end of the month. Relays of four fighter-bombers armed with bombs or rockets had flown in half-hour shifts over the head of each armored column.

[32] First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 93–96.

[33] VIII Corps AAR, Aug.

[34] First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 106; [George], Ninth Air Force, pp. 125, 135; Bradley, *Effect of Air Power*, p. 103; VII Corps AAR, Jul; Results of Armed Column Cover and Armed Recon in Connection with COBRA on 26 Jul, Air Opns Summary, VIII Corps G–3 Jnl and File.

[35] [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 129; FUSA and IX TAC Air Opns Summary for 28 Jul, 30th Div G–3 Jnl and File; SHAEF to Mil Mission, Moscow, S–79098, 14 Feb 45, SGS SHAEF File 380.01/1, Vol. II, Exchange of Info Between Allies and Russia.

Air support personnel riding in the forward tanks of the column maintained liaison with the pilots by means of very high frequency (VHF) radio sets installed in the tanks. The planes thus were able to act as the eyes of the ground forces, to give advance warning of impending threats and detailed information of the enemy's dispositions. They were also able to attack targets far ahead of the tank columns. The results obtained "by the employment of the tank-air team in mobile fast moving situations," commanders later recognized, had been "an outstanding achievement in air-ground cooperation and represent[ed] the development of an unbeatable combination." [36]

Careful and detailed planning for air-ground co-operation had been necessary. Tank markings were repainted. Army liaison officers at airfields briefed pilots on air support missions to familiarize them with the situation on the ground and interrogated them upon their return from missions to secure information valuable to the ground components. An important factor that had served to bring about the "closest possible coordination" between the First Army and IX TAC staffs was that the air staff and the air representatives of the army staff were lodged under the same roof.[37]

The heart of the operation, however, lay in the radio dialogue between the pilots and the tankers. "I am receiving fire from an enemy tank nearby," a tanker would report; "can you get him?" "I'll make a try," the pilot would reply. After making a pass, the pilot would call, "I found him. But you're too close for me to bomb safely. Back up a short distance, and I will go after him." It was simple; it was effective. The phrase "thanks a lot" frequently sounded over the radio channels.[38]

July had been a month of opposites in combat experience. Until 25 July foot troops had made slow, costly advances against stubborn hedgerow defenses; casualties had been high, and gains had been measured in yards. After 25 July armored formations had made rapid advances against a defeated, disorganized, and demoralized enemy; casualties had been light, resistance sporadic. The inception of COBRA had marked the change.

Several days after the commencement of the COBRA attack, General Marshall had requested General Eisenhower to send him information on General Bradley's offensive, which he had learned about from an unexplained radio reference to COBRA, "whatever that was." [39] By the end of July there was little question of what COBRA was or what it had done. After one week of action, U.S. troops held a line from Pontaubault eastward through Brécey and St. Pois to a point several miles north of the town of Vire. To be sure, the front line was held only by advance spearheads; the bulk of the First Army was still concentrated fifteen to twenty miles to the north. Nevertheless, the Allied forces

[36] First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 121; [George], Ninth Air Force, p. 129.

[37] First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations*, I, 106, 119–20; [George], Ninth Air Force, pp. 130ff.

[38] 12th AGp Immed Rpt 38, Air Support of Ground Force Opns, 25 Aug; see 3d Armd Div CCB AAR, Action 26 Jul–31 Jul.

[39] Ltr, Marshall to Eisenhower, 31 Jul, Pogue Files.

had definitely seized the initiative, and there seemed to be no reason why they should relinquish it, particularly since the enemy disorganization was still unresolved. Brittany was at hand and Paris and the Seine had come within reach. The prospects for the future were unlimited.[40]

[40] Ltr, Eisenhower to Marshall, FWD–12493, 30 Jul, Pogue Files; First U.S. Army, *Report of Operations,* I, 112.

PART FOUR

BREAKOUT INTO BRITTANY

CHAPTER XVIII

Plans, Personalities, and Problems

"From all reports," General Eisenhower wrote General Montgomery on the last day of July, "your plan continues to develop beautifully. I learn that you have a column in Avranches. This is great news and Bradley must quickly make our position there impregnable. Bradley has plenty of Infantry units to rush into forward areas to consolidate all gains and permit armor to continue thrusting. . . ." Two days later Eisenhower wrote Montgomery, "If my latest reports are correct, the enemy resistance seems to have disintegrated very materially in the Avranches region. Our armored and mobile columns will want to operate boldly against the enemy. . . ." [1]

As General Eisenhower anticipated, the bold thrust of armored columns was to characterize Allied operations during August.

In contrast with Allied optimism, the picture appeared bleak from the German side.

German Plans

Meeting on the last day of July with Jodl in the *Wolfschanze,* the Fuehrer's command post in East Prussia, Hitler faced a depressing situation. In Italy, he felt, German forces were usefully tying down numerically superior Allied troops, but elsewhere Hitler found little consolation. As he put it, his principal worry was defection in the Balkan area; his most anxious concern was the potential capitulation of Hungary; his most pressing military need was stability on the Eastern Front in the Baltic and Polish regions; his immediate problem was the situation in France.

Over all the situation reports and staff studies that Hitler consulted hovered the shadow of the plot that on 20 July had come close to destroying his life. Despite vigorous measures to uproot the conspiracy, he could not be sure of its extent. He suspected considerable defection within the ranks of the German generals and general staff and was certain that disloyalty to his person existed on subordinate echelons as well. Tormented by a lack of confidence in the military, Hitler decided to direct the war increasingly from his own headquarters. He himself would plan a withdrawal from France. He would have OKW issue only fragmentary orders at the proper time to insure compliance with his master plan. In that way he would not reveal the plan in its entirety to someone who might compromise its success.

Hitler's basic plan to meet the American breakout at the end of July was to secure a temporary stabilization of the

[1] Ltrs, Eisenhower to Montgomery, 31 Jul and 2 Aug, SGS SHAEF File 381, OVERLORD, 1 (a).

front while intermediate rally lines and new defensive positions were being organized in the rear. To organize new defenses in protection of Germany and to await the fruition of new production and troop training schedules, Hitler needed six weeks at the least, ten weeks at the most. To gain the time he needed, he struck two blows at the Allied logistical apparatus. He ordered all withdrawing troops to destroy transportation facilities in France—locomotives, railway lines, marshaling yards, machine shops, and bridges—a plan already abetted by Allied bombardment. And he ordered his fortress policy into effect to deny the Allies the major ports they needed and to retain for the German Navy bases for submarine warfare against Allied shipping.[2]

In 1943 OKW had designated as fortresses all the Atlantic harbors that had been extensively fortified. To each was assigned an especially dependable commander who took an oath to defend his fortress to the death. Among the fortresses were the port cities Dunkerque, Calais, Boulogne, Le Havre, Cherbourg, St. Malo, Brest, Lorient, and St. Nazaire.[3] Of these, Cherbourg had fallen in June, and at the end of July, as American troops seized Avranches and Pontaubault at the base of the Cotentin, the principal ports of Brittany—St. Malo, Brest, Lorient, and St. Nazaire—were threatened. (*See Maps I, VIII, XII.*)

Having been vexed by the failure of the Cherbourg garrison to hold out as long as he expected, Hitler tried to make certain that his fortress commanders in Brittany and in the Pas-de-Calais would not similarly disappoint him. Hoping to deny the Allies the ports he recognized as vital to the success not only of OVERLORD but also of the entire Allied campaign in western Europe, Hitler specifically ordered the fortresses held "to the last man, to the last cartridge." Although this Hitlerian phrase was later to become trite and even farcical, it was a serious manifesto. Hitler's argument was that, since the forces guarding the fortresses were static troops, they could not be employed effectively in the war of movement the Americans were certain to initiate in August. Since they could not conduct mobile operations, they were to fight to the finish within the ports, destroying the harbors in the process. The garrison forces would thus not only destroy the base of the logistical machinery—ports of entry—that the Allies had to erect in order to wage effective war, they would also tie down Allied forces that might otherwise be used in the decisive battle inevitably to be fought on the western approaches to Germany.

At *OB WEST*, this policy was markedly unpopular. Feeling that Hitler's implementation of the fortress policy meant the inevitable loss of from 180,000 to 280,000 men and their equipment, the *OB WEST* staff believed that the static troops in the Pas-de-Calais area at least—assuming that the groups in Brittany were already lost for future operations—could be used to better advantage

[2] Hitler Conf, *"Besprechung des Fuehrers mit Generaloberst Jodl am 31.7.1944,"* in captured German documents; Jodl diary, 31 Jul; *Der Westen* (Schramm); MS # – 731 (Fahrmbacher); Pogue, *Supreme Command*, pp. 201–03; Blumenson and Hodgson, "Hitler Versus his Generals in the West," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (December, 1956). Hitler enunciated his fortress policy in Hitler Directive # 40, 23 March 1942, translated in Appendix C to Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, pp. 459–63.

[3] *OB WEST, a Study in Command*, I, 22.

in reinforcing the new defensive positions to be erected in the rear of the Normandy front. But since Kluge was in command of *Army Group B* as well as of *OB WEST* and since he was in actuality giving most of his attention to tactical affairs at the army group level and below, *OB WEST* exerted no vital influence on operations. For all practical purposes it had become a message center that transmitted orders and reports up and down the chain of command. More to the point, whatever *OB WEST*'s recommendations, Hitler had already made his decision. He told Kluge to pay no attention to the U.S. forces entering Brittany.[4] Instead, Kluge was to devote his efforts to stemming the American threat eastward toward the Seine.

During the early hours of 1 August, Kluge had asked Hitler's permission to bring the *2d Parachute Division* eastward from Brest and the *319th Infantry Division* from the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey to the mainland to deny the Americans entry into Brittany. Hitler refused to evacuate the Channel Islands but granted permission for Kluge to use the *2d Parachute Division*. Although the paratroopers started to move eastward, it soon became apparent that they would be too late to affect developments in Brittany. Threatened with isolation from Brest by a U.S. armored division, the paratroopers slipped back into the port city.[5]

By midmorning of 1 August, the Germans learned that U.S. forces were moving freely south of Pontaubault. By noon they had reports that Americans were in Pontorson and Dol-de-Bretagne and that two batteries of a German assault gun brigade committed against the armored spearheads had been destroyed, principally, they thought, by fighter-bombers.[6] By evening there was no hope of stopping the influx of American troops into Brittany.

Although Kluge was aware of the meaning of these events, Hausser, the *Seventh Army* commander, tried to minimize the gravity of the situation by maintaining that "only armored elements have broken through [and that] so far there has been no exploitation of the breakthrough with massed forces." He admitted that several columns of American tanks, with sixty tanks in each column, had been reported near Villedieu-les-Poëles, and that "they must be somewhere in the area south of Avranches." Despite this, he still felt that he could stabilize his part of a front between Avranches and Caen.

Kluge evaluated the situation more realistically. Although he was talking to Hausser, he seemed to be speaking more to himself: "We have got to stop the flow [of American forces] from Avranches southward." This was his principal concern. Figuring that the *2d Parachute Division* would have to fight in Brittany and could not therefore be used to bolster the front in Normandy, Kluge turned his attention to the problem of securing additional Ger-

[4] *OB WEST KTB*, 1 Aug, *Anlage 1050; Der Westen* (Schramm), p. 79; *OB WEST, a Study in Command*, I, 1, 118ff.

[5] Kluge Telecon, 0230, 1 Aug, *AGp B KTB*; H. B. Ramcke, *Fallschirmjaeger, Damals und Danach* (Frankfurt: Lorch-Verlag, c. 1951), pp. 30–46; Hodgson, R–58; see below, Ch. XX.

[6] Telecons, Speidel and Gersdorff, 1020, 1 Aug, *AGp B KTB*, and Tempelhoff and Zimmerman, 1155, 1 Aug, *OB WEST KTB, Anlage 999*.