

and *353d Infantry Divisions*, the *15th Parachute Regiment*, and lesser units. The pressure exerted by the goth Division alone had forced *LXXXIV Corps* to commit all its reserve, *Seventh Army* to commit certain reserves, and OKW to release control of the parachute regiment, its only reserve in the theater. Wresting part of Mont Castre from the enemy had been no mean achievement. Though fumbling and ineptitude had marked the opening days of the July offensive, the division had displayed workmanship and stamina in the fight for Mont Castre.

To commanders at higher echelons, possession of undeniably precarious positions on Mont Castre and failure to have forced the Beaucoudray corridor seemed clear indications that the goth Division still had to learn how to make a skillful application of tactical principles to hedgerow terrain. The division had demonstrated continuing deficiencies, hangovers from its June performance. Some subordinate commanders still lacked the power of vigorous direction. Too many officers were overly wary of counterattack. On the surface, at least, the division appeared to have faltered in July as it had in June. The conclusive evidence that impressed higher commanders was not necessarily the failure to secure the initial objectives south of la Haye-du-Puits in five days, but the fact that by 8 July the division seemed to have come to a halt.

Montgardon Ridge

While the goth Division had been attacking Mont Castre and probing the corridor leading toward Périers, the 79th

Division, on the VIII Corps right, had made its effort along the west coast of the Cotentin. On the basis of the attack on Cherbourg in June, the 79th was considered a good combat unit.⁴⁰ Imbued with high morale and commanded by the officer who had directed its training and baptism of fire, Maj. Gen. Ira T. Wyche, the division was in far better shape for the July assignment than was the goth.

During the first phase of the VIII Corps drive to Coutances, General Wyche was expected to clear his zone as far south as the Ay River estuary, seven miles away. He anticipated little difficulty.⁴¹ To reach his objective, he had first to secure the high ground in his path near la Haye-du-Puits—the Montgardon ridge and its high point, the flat top of Hill 84. Capture of the height would give General Wyche positions dominating la Haye-du-Puits and the ground descending southward to the Ay, would make la Haye-du-Puits untenable for the Germans, and would permit the 79th to meet the goth approaching from the corps left.

To take the Montgardon ridge, the 79th Division had to cross six miles of hedgerowed lowland defended by remnants of the *243d Division* and under the eyes of a battalion of the *353d Division* entrenched on the ridge. Only a frontal assault was possible. The division was also to seize the incidental objective of Hill 121, a mound near the left boundary that provided good observation toward la Haye-du-Puits and

⁴⁰ Ltr, Eisenhower to Marshall, 5 Jul, Pogue Files.

⁴¹ 79th Div Intel Annex 2 to FO 5, 1 Jul.

Montgardon. General Wyche planned to send the 314th Infantry against Hill 121 on the left while the 315th moved toward the Montgardon ridge on the right.

Attempting to outflank Hill 121, the 314th Infantry (Col. Warren A. Robinson) drove toward la Haye-du-Puits on the rainy morning of 3 July with a rifle company on each side of the main road.⁴² Machine gun and mortar fire from a railway embankment parallel to the road stopped the leading units after a half-mile advance, but the heroic action of a single soldier, Pfc. William Thurston, got the attack moving again. Charging the embankment and eliminating the enemy machine gunners in one position with rifle fire, Thurston penetrated the German line and unhinged it.⁴³ His companions quickly exploited the breach, and by the end of the afternoon they had gained about three miles. There, the leading battalion halted and set up blocking positions to protect a separate advance on Hill 121. Another battalion that had followed was to turn left and approach the hill in a flanking maneuver from the southwest.

A large bare mound, Hill 121 was adorned by a small ruined stone house reputed to be of Roman times, a romanesque chapel, and a water tower.

Also visible were German fortifications of sandbagged logs. Spearheaded by a twelve-man patrol, the battalion started toward the base of the hill at dusk. As the men disappeared into the hedgerows, the regimental commander lost communications with the command party. At 2300, when General Wyche instructed his regiments to halt for the night, no acknowledgment came from the men moving on Hill 121. Not until 0230, 4 July, when an artillery liaison officer who apparently possessed the only working radio in the command reported the battalion closing on the objective did any word emerge. An hour later the same officer provided the encouraging news that the battalion was on the hill.

Upon receipt of the first message, Colonel Robinson, the commander of the 314th, had immediately dispatched his reserve battalion to assist. At daybreak both forces were clearing the slopes of Hill 121. The Germans had held the hill with only small outposts. By midmorning of 4 July Hill 121 was secure. The division artillery had an excellent observation post for the battle of the Montgardon ridge and la Haye-du-Puits. On 4 July the 314th Infantry moved to within two miles of la Haye-du-Puits and that evening established contact with the 82d Airborne Division on the left. Because heavy German fire denied the regiment entry into la Haye-du-Puits, the infantry dug in and left the artillery to duel with the enemy.

The artillery would be needed on the Montgardon ridge because the 315th Infantry (Col. Bernard B. McMahon) still had a long way to go toward that objective, despite encouraging progress

⁴² Records of the 79th Division are sketchy. The After Action Report is in reality a daily summary of each regimental effort. The G-3 Journal is thin. Combat Interviews 153 contains only fragmentary material. The unofficial history of the 314th Infantry, *Through Combat*, is helpful, and General Wyche has kindly made available his personal journal.

⁴³ Thurston was awarded the DSC.

during the morning of 3 July. With two battalions abreast and in columns of companies, the third echeloned to the right rear, and a company of tanks in close support, the regiment at first advanced slowly but steadily; self-assurance and optimism vanished just before noon when three concealed and bypassed German armored vehicles on the coastal flank opened fire. The loss of several tanks promoted panic, and infantrymen streamed to the rear in confusion.

Because artillery and antitank weapons reacted effectively, the disruption to the attack proved only temporary, although not until midafternoon were tanks and infantry sufficiently reorganized to resume the attack. By nightfall the 315th had advanced a little over a mile.

Movement through the hedgerows toward Montgardon was slow again on the second day of the attack until the observation provided by the 314th Infantry's conquest of Hill 121 began to show effect. Such good progress had been made by afternoon that the division artillery displaced its battalions forward.

Not until evening, when the infantry was two miles short of Hill 84 and taking a rest, did the Germans react with other than passive defense. Enemy infantry supported by armored vehicles suddenly emerged from the hedgerows. Two rifle companies that had halted along a sunken road were temporarily surrounded, but 50 men and 4 officers held firm to provide a bulwark around which the dispersed troops could be reorganized. As the division artillery went into action with heavy fire, the regiment built up a solid defensive perimeter. The Germans had counterattacked to cover

a withdrawal of the 243d to the main line of defense on the Montgardon ridge. During the action the Germans took 64 prisoners.⁴⁴

Temporarily checked in the drive on the Montgardon ridge, General Wyche ordered the 314th Infantry to enter la Haye-du-Puits the next morning, 5 July, in the hope of outflanking the German positions on the high ground. Moving down mined and cratered roads to the northeastern outskirts of town, one company formed a base of fire while another slipped into the railroad yard. The success was short-lived, for enemy artillery and mortar fire soon drove the company back.

By midmorning of 5 July General Wyche had decided on a new, bold move, which he hoped might explode the division out of its slow hedgerow-by-hedgerow advance and perhaps trap a sizable number of Germans north of the Ay River. He committed his reserve, the 313th Infantry (Col. Sterling A. Wood), in a wide envelopment to the right, to pass across the western end of the Montgardon ridge and drive rapidly downhill to the Ay.

Starting at noon on 5 July, the 313th Infantry moved toward the ridge with a two-company tank-infantry task force in the lead. Marshy terrain and lack of adequate roads slowed the movement. By late afternoon the task force was still several hundred yards short of the ridge. As the troops reached a water-filled ditch running through the center of a flat grassy meadow, they came under such a volume of artillery fire that the

⁴⁴ *Seventh Army KTB*, 5 Jul; MS # A-983 (Mahlmann).

advance stalled. Just before dark the enemy counterattacked twice and drove the task force and the rest of the regiment several miles back in confusion. Before daybreak, 6 July, few would have attested either to the location or the integrity of the regiment. Mercifully, the Germans did not exploit their success. The regiment found time to regroup.

Disappointed in the results of the 313th Infantry advance even before the counterattack, General Wyche late on 5 July had again sent the 315th, supported by tanks and tank destroyers, directly against Hill 84. This time the regiment reached the north slope of the hill. The 79th Division at last had a toehold on the highest part of the Montgardon ridge.

To reinforce this success and prepare for final conquest of the ridge, General Wyche on 6 July jockeyed his other two regiments. He ordered the 314th to swing its right around la Haye-du-Puits and gain a foothold on the eastern slope. The regiment accomplished its mission during the morning. He turned the 313th eastward from its location on the division right rear to positions in support of the troops on Hill 84. By noon of 6 July, the fourth day of the attack, the 314th and 315th Regiments were on the northern and eastern slopes of Montgardon, while the 313th was echeloned to the right rear at the base of the ridge.

In ordering all three regiments to attack during the afternoon to carry the crest, General Wyche bowed to the compartmentalizing effect of the hedgerow terrain and told each commander to attack alone when ready. The technique worked. Although the 313th Infantry on the right gained no ground against

strong positions protected by wire and mines, the 315th in the center overran Hill 84, and the 314th on the left completed occupation of the eastern portion of the main ridge. By daybreak of 7 July the 79th Division could note that la Haye-du-Puits was outflanked, that the Germans ought now to abandon the town, and that as soon as earlier advances were extended to cover the entire ridge, the division might head south toward the Ay River.

It did not take long on 7 July for General Wyche and his subordinate commanders to realize that this kind of thinking was premature. The Germans held doggedly to the rest of the high ground. They also stayed in la Haye-du-Puits; an American patrol accompanied by a German prisoner who was recruited to talk the garrison into surrender could not even get past the first houses. The Germans not only refused to budge from the high ground and the town, they prepared to attack. Having hurriedly reinforced the la Haye-du-Puits sector with a small portion of the *2d SS Panzer Division*, Choltitz launched his counterattack on the afternoon of 7 July as armored contingents in about two-battalion strength assaulted the Montgardon ridge.⁴⁵

The German armored troops struck with such violence and behind such a volume of supporting fire that the first blow almost pushed the 79th Division off the ridge. In an attempt to achieve better co-ordination between the two regiments on the main ridge, General Wyche placed both under one com-

⁴⁵ *Seventh Army KTB*, 7 Jul.

mander. The expedient worked. Soon the infantry, artillery, tanks, and tank destroyers began to execute a co-ordinated defense. Destruction of three German tanks appeared to extinguish the spark of the German drive.⁴⁶ By nightfall the Germans were stopped, but gone was the optimistic belief that a quick drive to the Ay would be possible.

In five days of hedgerow fighting, the 79th Division had attained the crest of the Montgardon ridge but was still short of the intermediate objective. Though the division casualties in the hedgerows had not been consistently high, the fighting on the high ground on 7 July alone resulted in over 1,000 killed, wounded, and missing. The cumulative total for five days of battle was over 2,000.⁴⁷ Seriously depleted in numbers, its remaining troops badly in need of rest, and some units close to demoralization in the face of seemingly incessant German shelling, the 79th Division was no longer the effective force that had marched to Cherbourg the preceding month. For the moment the 79th seemed no more capable of effective offensive combat than did the 90th.

Initiating the First Army offensive, the VIII Corps had failed to achieve the success anticipated. The Germans had indicated that they were prepared and determined to resist. They had given up little ground, defended stubbornly, and utilized the hedgerows and observation points with skill. They had employed their weapons on a scale not expected by the Americans and had in-

flicted a large number of casualties. Although the VIII Corps took 543 prisoners on 3 July, 314 on 4 July, 422 on 5 July, and 203 on 6 July, they were inferior troops for the most part, non-Germanic eastern Europeans, and the corps could look forward to no sudden enemy collapse.

The rain had been a severe handicap to the Americans. Although limited visibility gave the troops some measure of concealment and protection from the German fire, the weather had denied the corps the full use of its available resources in fire power and mobility. Not until the third day of the offensive had tactical air been able to undertake close support missions, and two days later recurring poor weather conditions again had forced cancellation of extensive air support. Operations of the small artillery observation planes were also limited by weather conditions. Finally, the rain had transformed the moist fields of the Cotentin into ponds of mud that immobilized in great part the motorized striking force of the American tracked and wheeled vehicles.

The 82d Airborne Division had swept across an area for the most part lightly defended and had displayed a high degree of flexibility and effectiveness in meeting the problems of hedgerow warfare. If the 79th and 90th Divisions seemed less adaptable and less professional than the airborne troops, they had met enemy forces at least numerically equal in strength who occupied excellent defenses. The two infantry divisions had nevertheless by the end of 7 July breached the German main line of defense. By then, replacements untested by battle comprised about 40 percent of

⁴⁶ FUSA G-3 Jnl, 7 Jul.

⁴⁷ FUSA Daily Estimated Loss Rpt, Jul.

their infantry units. With both the 79th and the 90th Division needing rest and the aggressive 82d Airborne Division about to depart the Continent, its place to be taken by the inexperienced

8th Division, VIII Corps could expect no sudden success. On the other hand, the Germans could anticipate no respite, for to the east the U.S. VII Corps in its turn had taken up the battle.

CHAPTER V

The Offensive Broadened

The Carentan – Périers Isthmus

In keeping with the desire of Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery to get the American offensive to the south under way, General Bradley had lost no time in redeploying the VII Corps from Cherbourg. As the Cherbourg operation was ending on the last day of June, Bradley ordered the VII Corps headquarters to move to Carentan immediately to assume responsibility for an area on the left (east) of the VIII Corps.¹

The new VII Corps sector, between the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges and the flooded Taute River, covered the shallowest part of the Allied beachhead. Through Carentan passed the only highway linking the U.S. troops in the Cotentin with the Allied forces east of the Taute River. The area was considered the weakest and most sensitive part of the entire First Army front. (*Map 4*)

A road center and small seaport, Carentan was extremely vulnerable to German attack. The VII Corps positions, facing southwest toward Périers, were only three and a half miles from the center of Carentan. A German

counterattack in mid-June had come to within 500 yards of retaking the town, and German field artillery continued to interdict the town and the highway bridge across the Taute River.² The First Army staff did not rule out the possibility that a determined German attack might overrun Carentan, cut the Allied beachhead in two, and deny the Allies lateral communication by land.³ Advancing the front line south of Carentan would eliminate these dangers and the nuisance of German shelling.

More important than these defensive considerations was the offensive motivation. The VII Corps objective was a portion of the Coutances–St. Lô highway. To reach the objective the corps had to pass through a narrow and well-defined corridor constricted by adjacent marshes. Resembling an isthmus two to three miles wide, the corridor between Carentan and Périers severely limited the amount of strength that corps could bring to bear. Only after reaching the Périers–St. Lô highway would VII Corps have adequate room for deploying its forces, and there, south of the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges, the VII Corps

¹ Upon the request of the VII Corps commander, the corps rear area at Carentan was enlarged to give his artillery and other supporting troops necessary movement space and sufficient roadways. Sylvan Diary, 27 Jun.

² [Ruppenthal], *Utah Beach to Cherbourg*, pp. 90–93.

³ German action would also threaten to bring unloading operations to a halt at Isigny, a minor port receiving supplies seven miles east of Carentan. FUSA G-2 Est 7, 29 Jun.

would be at a juncture with the VIII Corps. Continuing south, the two corps would come abreast at the Coutances–St. Lô highway, the final army objective. Should resistance disintegrate before the final objective was reached, General Bradley could use an armored division that he had in the army reserve to exploit the American success.⁴

General Bradley had thought of launching the VII Corps attack on 3 July, at the same time the VIII Corps jumped off, but he had decided to help VIII Corps on its first day of operations by giving it temporary control of the VII Corps Artillery. He therefore postponed the VII Corps effort until 4 July, when VII Corps was to regain control of its own artillery support. A battalion of 8-inch howitzers and several battalions of medium artillery from army were to reinforce the fires of the corps pieces.⁵

The VII Corps commander was Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins, who as a lieutenant colonel three years earlier had been the corps chief of staff. In the Pacific he had commanded the 25th Division on Guadalcanal and New Georgia. The division code name, *LIGHTNING*, seemed to describe General Collins' method of operation. As VII Corps commander, his direction of the invasion landings on UTAH Beach and his vigorous prosecution of the Cherbourg campaign had reinforced the suitability of his nickname, "Lightning Joe." Flushed with success and generating unbounded confidence, General Collins and his staff enthusiastically accepted the challenge presented by the new task assigned to the VII Corps.

The first problem that General Collins faced was how to use to best advantage in the constricted corps zone the three infantry divisions available to him. Retaining the 4th and 9th Infantry Divisions, which had participated in the Cherbourg operation, Collins on 2 July took control of the 83d Infantry Division, which was manning the Carentan sector. Little more than three miles from Carentan, one fourth of the way to Périers, the 83d Division held defensive positions across the narrow isthmus. Directing the 83d to advance a little over two miles to Sainteny, which was half way to Périers, Collins set the stage for committing at least part of another division. Hoping that the 83d Division would reach Sainteny in one day, he planned to have elements of the 4th Division go on to Périers on the second day. If on reaching Sainteny the 83d did not make contact with the VIII Corps attacking along the western edge of the Prairies Marécageuses de Gorges, surely the 4th Division would meet the VIII Corps near Périers. At that point, if the 83d Division made a similar advance, crossed the Taute River, and gained its assigned portion of the Périers–St. Lô highway, enough terrain would be available to employ the 9th Division.

Though General Collins wanted the 83d Division to reach Sainteny in a day, he nevertheless recognized that the width of the Carentan–Périers isthmus might enable comparatively few enemy troops to hold up forces of superior numbers. To reach Sainteny, the 83d Division had to squeeze through the narrowest part, a neck scarcely two miles wide. Hedgerows restricted mechanized units to well-defined channels and gave

⁴ [2d Lt. David Garth], *St.-Lô*, AFA Series (Washington, 1946), p. 5.

⁵ VII Corps AAR, Jul; 83d Div AAR, Jul.

the enemy ideal cover and concealment for delaying action. Except for the tarred highway to Périers and a lateral route between causeways, the roads on the isthmus were little better than wagon trails. American observers had detected neither antitank ditches nor permanent fortifications, but they felt sure that the Germans had organized their positions to a depth of several miles and were covering all road junctions with machine guns.⁶

The Germans in the Périers sector, comprising part of the right (east) wing of the *LXXXIV Corps*, were under the local operational control of the headquarters of the *17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division*, a tough, well-trained unit. The division had one of its two regiments holding positions below Carentan. Attached to it was the separate *6th Parachute Regiment*, a veteran though somewhat depleted unit. The leadership of these forces was especially strong and experienced.⁷

Aware of the German units that faced the 83d Division, General Collins did not underestimate their fighting ability. He also realized that early morning marsh mist and the promise of continuing rain would reduce the effectiveness of artillery support and diminish the help offered by tactical air. But he had no alternative to striking the Germans frontally—terrain, unit boundaries, and the First Army plan made a frontal attack by the 83d Division inevitable.

Though the primary aim was a short advance to allow the commitment of a second division, Collins, with characteristic confidence, ordered the 83d to maintain the momentum of its attack; if the division destroyed the German defenses at once, it was to advance as far as the Taute River in the left (east) portion of the corps zone.

The 83d Division had arrived in Normandy in the latter part of June and under VIII Corps control had relieved the 101st Airborne Division (Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor) at Carentan. The airborne troops had moved into the army reserve to prepare for their return to England, but not before boasting of their accomplishments and exaggerating the toughness of the Germans to the novice infantrymen who replaced them. Some members of the new division became jittery.⁸ Highly conscious of the division's inexperience, General Collins was to supervise its activities closely.

The 83d Division commander, Maj. Gen. Robert C. Macon, who had commanded a regiment in North Africa, had the problem of advancing units in terrain that could hardly have been less favorable for offensive action. The almost incessant rain of the previous weeks had soaked the isthmus beyond saturation. As the drainage ditches swelled into streams and the swamps turned into ponds, the surface of the fields became a potential sheet of mud. Progress for foot troops would be difficult; cross-country movement by vehicles virtually impossible; movement of armor in close support most difficult; good direct fire support by tanks and tank destroyers

⁶ VII Corps AAR, Jul, and FO 4, 3 Jul, with Intel Annex, 2 Jul.

⁷ OKH *Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen*, *Zustandberichte, SS Divisionen*, Jun 43–Jul 44; MS # B-839 (von der Heydte); Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, pp. 356–65.

⁸ Lt Col Henry Neilson, Hosp Intervs, III, GL-93 (238).