

provisional battalion of fifty-seven machine guns, twelve tank destroyers, and eight 40-mm. Bofors guns to provide security for the artillery group and to engage targets of opportunity in and around Brest.<sup>32</sup>

The success of Task Force B led to the formation of a similar unit for action on the right flank. Known as Task Force S and commanded by Col. Leroy H. Watson, the assistant commander of the 29th Division, the regimental-sized force was to clear the tip of Brittany, specifically the coastal area between Brest and le Conquet.<sup>33</sup> Cutting the Brest-le Conquet highway on 27 August, the troops moved westward to the coast, captured the small fort at Pointe de Corsen (an important radar station) and isolated le Conquet and the nearby important artillery batteries at Lochrist (dual-purpose 88-mm. guns and four 280-mm. pieces in open pits). Siege action against the defenses of le Conquet and Lochrist came to an end on 9 September after a four-man patrol led by 1st Lt. Robert Edlin entered the main position of the Lochrist fort and burst into the commandant's office. Pulling the pin of a hand grenade he carried, Edlin called for surrender or death. The commandant surrendered his forts and more

than a thousand men.<sup>34</sup> Task Force S was then dissolved.

After several postponements because of the difficulties of securing ammunition and of co-ordinating air, naval, and ground forces, General Middleton set the date of the main attack against Brest for the afternoon of 25 August. He planned to attack the city with three infantry divisions abreast, the 29th Division on the right, the 8th Division in the center (the main effort), and the 2d Division on the left. By then the divisions were in contact with the forward edge of the German defense perimeter, which formed a rough semicircle four to six miles around the mouth of the Penfeld River. In that area were two defense belts. The outer line consisted of field fortifications developed in depth and reinforced with antitank obstacles, concrete works, and emplacements, most of which were built during the few previous months. The inner belt, about four miles wide but only 3,000 yards deep, strongly fortified throughout with field works and permanent-type defenses, had been built long before the Allied landings in Normandy for close-in protection of the naval base. Because of the shallowness of the defense area, the outer belt was the main battle ground on which the Germans had to fight the battle of Brest. (*See Map XIV.*)

Middleton arranged to have heavy and medium bombers attack targets in the city as well as on the peninsulas of the Brest complex and obtained enough fighter-bombers (some with 5-inch rockets, some with jellied gasoline bombs)

<sup>32</sup> 12th AGp Immed Rpt 69, Supporting Fires at Brest, 28 Aug; Ltr, Zwicker to OCMH, 14 Mar 56.

<sup>33</sup> Task Force S had a variable composition but in general consisted of a battalion of the 116th Infantry, the 2d and 5th Ranger Battalions, the 224th Field Artillery Battalion, parts of the 86th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, the 29th Division Reconnaissance Troop, and a company each of engineers, antiaircraft artillery, and 4.2-inch mortars. The task force was aided by two hundred Russians who had deserted the German Army. See Ninth U.S. Army Opns, I, Brest-Crozon, and Vulliez, *Brest au Combat*, pp. 206-08.

<sup>34</sup> Edlin received the DSC.

for a constant four-plane air alert in support of each division. In addition, Middleton secured the assistance of the British battleship H.M.S. *Warspite* for a 15-inch-gun bombardment of the heavy coastal batteries, particularly those near le Conquet.<sup>35</sup>

Part of the bombing program had to be canceled because of adverse weather conditions, but seven groups of medium bombers and 150 Flying Fortresses struck Brest and started a large fire in Recouvrance, west of the Penfeld River. The *Warspite* hurled some three hundred shells into the coastal batteries near le Conquet and after scoring several direct hits shifted to forts in Recouvrance. Fifteen medium and heavy battalions of the corps artillery were also active. Fighter-bombers strafed and bombed, and sank several ships in the harbor near the Crozon peninsula.<sup>36</sup> Despite this heavy volume of preparatory fire, the well-co-ordinated ground attack of the three divisions made little progress.

Attempting to soften the will to resist, RAF heavy bombers struck Brest around midnight of 25 August, and on the following morning American and RAF heavies blasted targets again. The resumption of the ground attack on 26 August, however, brought little change. The German garrison remained firm.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> SHAEF Msg, 25 Aug, SGS SHAEF File 381, Post-OVERLORD Plng; Bradley to Middleton and Middleton to Bradley, 24 Aug; 12th AGp Immed Rpt 44, Air Ground Ops in Attack on Brest, 31 Aug; VIII Corps FO 11, 22 Aug. Vulliez, *Brest au Combat*, pp. 225ff., gives an interesting account of the battle from the point of view of the civilian population.

<sup>36</sup> Bradley, *Effect of Air Power*, pp. 128ff.

<sup>37</sup> 2d Lt. Earl O. Hall of the 13th Infantry, who participated in vicious fighting for trenches and concrete emplacements until killed by artillery fire, was posthumously awarded the DSC.

The attack on 26 August displayed the kind of combat that was to predominate during the siege of Brest. Because ammunition stocks were low, the artillery reduced its activity to direct support missions. As the Americans came to a full realization of the strength of the German opposition, and as the pattern of the enemy defense system emerged, commanders on all echelons saw the necessity of changing their own tactics. The units turned to more detailed study of their tactical problems with the purpose of reaching intermediate objectives. The nature of the battle changed from a simultaneous grand effort to a large-scale nibbling—a series of actions dictated by the local problems of each sector commander.<sup>38</sup>

The divisions began to probe to locate and systematically destroy pillboxes, emplacements, fortifications, and weapons, moving ahead where weak spots were found, overwhelming pillboxes with flame throwers and demolitions after patient maneuver and fire. Small sneak attacks, the repulse of surprise counter-attacks, mine field clearance, and the use of smoke characterized the slow squeeze of American pressure. Fog, rain, and wind squalls during the remainder of August restricted air support, while continued shortages of ammunition curtailed the artillery. Yet on 28 August, a regiment of the 29th Division bounded toward Brest on the le Conquet highway for almost two miles against virtually no resistance. On the following day, the 8th Division gained on one front, but the Germans cut off two leading companies

<sup>38</sup> 2d Div FO 10, 23 Aug, and Ltr of Instrs, 2030, 26 Aug; MS # B-731 (Fahrmbacher); Brest Fortress Comdr Rpt, 12 Aug, OB WEST KTB, *Anlage 1330*.

of infantry and marched them into Brest as prisoners. In the 2d Division sector, the troops were in the midst of dogged fighting to reduce strong positions. Typical of the fighting was the action of Lt. Col. H. K. Wesson of the 9th Infantry, who reorganized a rifle company reduced to forty-six men, then led the unit in an assault across hedgerowed terrain, destroyed a machine gun position, and took fourteen German paratroopers prisoner.<sup>39</sup>

On 1 September, the expected completion date of the siege, as ammunition prospects seemed momentarily improved and with the divisions in the main German defenses, General Middleton again launched a co-ordinated attack after a strike by medium bombers and a forty-five-minute preparation by the division artillery pieces and nine corps artillery battalions. Although the VIII Corps Artillery fired 750 missions, including 136 counterbattery, in twenty-four hours, and although single pieces, batteries, and sometimes battalions kept known enemy gun positions under continuous fire, the only apparent result of the attack was a gain of several hundred yards by the 8th Division. Even this small gain was almost immediately lost to counterattack.<sup>40</sup>

Discouraged, General Middleton wrote "a rather pessimistic letter" to General Bradley. He reported that his troops were "none too good," that replacement arrivals were behind schedule, that ammunition supply was poor though improving, and that air support "left much to be desired." The Germans had "no intention to fold up right away,

<sup>39</sup> Colonel Wesson was posthumously awarded the DSC.

<sup>40</sup> See TUSA AAR, Sep.

having shown no signs of weakening." Middleton requested more 4.2-inch mortars, more artillery, and more and better air support. General Bradley talked to Maj. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the commander of the Ninth Air Force, in an attempt to improve the air support, and several days later General Eisenhower authorized Vandenberg to "utilize maximum number of aircraft which can be effectively employed in support of this operation."<sup>41</sup>

Middleton's letter was like the darkness before dawn. The first real break occurred on 2 September when the 2d Division captured Hill 105 southwest of Guipavas. A month earlier the 6th Armored Division commander, General Grow, had recognized the hill as a key terrain feature in the defense of Brest, one of two hills dominating the eastern approaches to the city. As the Germans fell back from Hill 105 several hundred yards in the center of the corps zone, the 8th Division advanced and took another of the fortified hills in the outer defense ring. Yet the 29th Division, facing Hill 103 east of the village of Plouzané, had no such success.

For five more days the divisions continued their individual efforts. While medium and heavy bombers attacked Brest every day save one, local ground attacks inched the front toward the port. By the end of the first week in Septem-

<sup>41</sup> Memo, Kibler for Swift, Brest, 2 Sep, ML-205; Leigh-Mallory to Vandenberg, Smith to Vandenberg, and Eisenhower to Vandenberg 4, 6, and 7 Sep, SGS SHAEF File 381. General Middleton also sought landing craft for local amphibious operations against Brest, but his request was denied by naval authorities on the ground that no plan had been developed for such action. SHAEF to ANCXF, FWD-13554, 2 Sep, SGS SHAEF File 381, Post-OVERLORD Plng.



**2D DIVISION TROOPS move through a devastated area near Brest.**

ber, the grip around the Brest garrison had tightened. The 2d Division was within reach of Hill 92 (the second hill dominating the northeastern approaches); the 8th Division was on the approaches to the village of Lambézellec (the gateway to Brest from the north); and the 29th Division, still denied Hill 103 ("we're on it, but so are the Jerries"), stood before Fort de Mengant, five miles west of the Penfeld River.<sup>42</sup> By then the besieged area was so small that heavy bombers could no longer attack without endangering the American ground troops.

On 7 September Middleton judged that he had enough ammunition on hand (and assurance of more to come) to sus-

tain another effort on the whole front. Securing six planes per division for constant air alert, he launched a co-ordinated attack on 8 September after a strong artillery preparation. The weight of all three divisions carried a number of positions that previously had been denied. The 2d Division captured strongly fortified Hill 92; the 8th Division—to a great extent because of the actions of Pfc. Ernest W. Prussman, who was virtually the leading man in the attack—advanced two regiments several hundred yards toward Lambézellec and Hill 82; and the 29th Division finally took an important strongpoint at Kergonant, just north of the village of Penfeld.<sup>43</sup> Prisoners totaled close to one

<sup>42</sup> 29th Div G-3 Jnl, 30 Aug.

<sup>43</sup> See S. L. A. Marshall and John Westover, Capture of Kergonant Strong Point During the Brest



GUN CREW FIRING *into the German-held section of the port of Brest.*

thousand men; American casualties numbered two hundred and fifty.

With that achievement on 8 September and the arrival of eight LST's and two trainloads of ammunition that night, the corps commander was optimistic for the first time since the beginning of the operation. Furnished at last with adequate artillery support on the following day, the 2d Division reached the streets of Brest, the 8th Division, after securing Lambézellec, launched a two-regiment attack and entered the city also, and the

29th Division secured the village of Penfeld. Prisoners that day totaled more than 2,500.

As the numbers of prisoners rose, hopes of victory quickened. The battle for Brest entered its final but most painful stage. The 2d and 8th Division became involved in street fighting against troops who seemed to contest every street, every building, every square. Machine gun and antitank fire from well-concealed positions made advances along the thoroughfares suicidal, and attackers had to move from house to house by blasting holes in the building walls, clearing the adjacent houses, and repeating the process to the end of the street. Squads, and in some instances platoons, fought little battles characterized by General Robertson, the 2d Division com-

Campaign (hereafter cited as Marshall and Westover, Kergonant Strong Point), ETOUSA Hist Sec, Br and Small Unit Study 3, n.d. Pfc. Prussman was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. S. Sgt. George T. Scanlon of the 121st Infantry, who led an assault on enemy dugouts, was awarded the DSC.



TROOPS FIGHTING THEIR WAY THROUGH THE STREETS OF BREST

mander, as "a corporal's war."<sup>44</sup> A typical obstruction was a concrete reinforced dugout no higher than ten inches above ground, which was built on a street corner with an opening for a heavy machine gun at street level. Eight men (with two flame throwers, a bazooka, and two BAR's) made a wide detour, neutralized several small nests of resistance, came up behind the pillbox, and flamed the position until thirteen Germans surrendered.<sup>45</sup>

Because the 2d Division had a larger section of the city to reduce before reaching the old wall, the 8th Division completed its street fighting and arrived at

the fortified city wall first, at Fort Bougen on 10 September. An infantry assault, preceded by an artillery preparation, failed to breach the wall, which was 25 to 35 feet high and behind a dry moat 15 to 25 feet deep. General Stroh prepared an attack for the following day, but after direct fire from heavy-caliber corps artillery pieces tore gaps in the upper portion of the wall without effect on the lower sections, it was obvious that an infantry assault would be costly and of doubtful success. Since the converging movement on the city compressed the division fronts and deprived the divisions of sufficient maneuver room, General Middleton decided to withdraw the 8th Division. This took place in several stages. Two battalions assumed part of the 29th Division front

<sup>44</sup> VIII Corps AAR, Sep; see *Story of Ninth Army*, pp. 32ff.

<sup>45</sup> CI 15 (2d Div).



REMAINS OF FORT KERANROUX

west of the Penfeld around midnight, 10 September. On the following night the 2d Division relieved the 8th Division east of the Penfeld. Two days later the advance of the 29th Division pinched out the two battalions still in line, and the 8th Division, no longer in contact with the enemy, began to move to Crozon to secure the peninsula, to eliminate the guns there that fired on the troops attacking Brest, and to prevent escape of the Brest garrison across the harbor.<sup>46</sup>

The change proved beneficial. Gen-

eral Gerhardt attacked at midnight, 11 September (in part to cover the displacement of the 8th). Crossing an antitank ditch near the village of St. Pierre, men of the 29th on 12 September advanced toward Hill 97 from the north and west and toward two old French fortifications, Forts Keranroux and Montbarey. While the 2d Division still was involved in vicious street fighting, the 29th Division faced the necessity of reducing these and other forts.

Hoping that the Germans might be ready to surrender, General Middleton sent a proposal to Ramcke while guns remained silent on the morning of 13 September. When Ramcke declined, Middleton published the letters of parley

<sup>46</sup> Story of Ninth Army, pp. 32-33; 8th Div AAR, Sep.



FORT MONTBAREY

for distribution to his troops. "Take the Germans apart," he told his men.<sup>47</sup>

Fort Keranroux was the first objective on the 29th Division's list. A battalion of the 175th Infantry, which for three days had been denied a close approach because of strong outer works, attacked again on the afternoon of 13 September. Staff Sgt. Sherwood H. Hallman leaped over a hedgerow and eliminated a German machine gun emplacement by grenades and rifle fire that killed several men and forced the surrender of twelve others. About seventy-five nearby Germans, who had until then defended the

approaches, followed suit.<sup>48</sup> The entire battalion advanced two thousand yards to Fort Keranroux, which was under bombardment from planes and artillery and covered by smoke shells. Two infantry companies, crossing the open ground immediately in front of the fort, lost but ten men and gained the entrance in fifteen minutes. A hundred Germans surrendered. The fort had been so blasted by bombs and shells that the original outlines of the main emplacements were no longer recognizable.

Fort Montbarey was more difficult. An old French casemated fort with earth-filled masonry walls some twenty-five

<sup>47</sup> VIII Corps G-3 Jnl and File, 13 Sep; Captured German Documents, Brest (Middleton-Ramcke correspondence), OCMH Files.

<sup>48</sup> Hallman received the Medal of Honor.



**GENERALMAJOR HANS VON DER MOSEL  
and other German officers surrender  
at Brest.**

feet thick, surrounded by a dry moat fifty feet in width, and garrisoned by about a hundred and fifty men, Montbarey was protected by outlying positions that included riflemen and 20-mm. guns covering a mine field of 300-pound naval shells equipped with pressure igniters. Even the preliminary task of approaching the fort seemed impossible. The VIII Corps engineer, Colonel Winslow, had early recognized the difficulties posed by the forts and had requested a detachment of flame-throwing tanks. The aid came in the form of a squadron of the 141st Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps, which was attached to the 116th Infantry, the regiment charged with capturing Montbarey. The British unit had fifteen Crocodiles—a Churchill tank mounting a flame gun in place of a machine gun and towing a trailer with flame-throwing fuel. Their function

was to scorch the firing positions of the outer wall of the fort and cover engineers who were to place charges to breach the wall in advance of an infantry assault.

On 14 September, after men of the 121st Engineer Combat Battalion cleared a path through the mine fields under the cover of artillery high-explosive and smoke shells, four Crocodiles advanced in file toward the fort. When two tanks wandered from the path and struck mines and another was destroyed by enemy fire, the attack was suspended. For the rest of the day and the next, artillery, tank destroyers, and mortars pounded the fort. Although eight fighter-bombers assigned to work with the 29th Division were grounded by weather, they were able to give support when the infantry resumed the attack on the following day.

Meanwhile, Engineer troops, working at night, improved the path through the heavily mined and shell-pitted fields. At dawn on 16 September, the Crocodiles advanced to within eighty-five yards of the fort. After an intensive artillery preparation, smoke shells were placed to cover the outer wall. Concealed by the smoke, three Crocodiles advanced, reached the moat surrounding the wall, and flamed the apertures. At the same time, engineers placed 2,500 pounds of explosive at the base of the wall and tank destroyers and a 105-mm. howitzer of the regimental cannon company hurled shells against the main gate from a distance of two hundred yards. A breach was torn in the main gate, and the engineer demolition charge opened a hole in the fortress wall large enough for infantry assault. Battered by almost constant fire from the ground and the



GENERAL RAMCKE after his capture at Brest.

air for several days, and dazed by the shock of the explosion, the surviving eighty members of the German garrison surrendered. The assault battalion of infantry had sustained about eighty casualties during the preparatory stage of the attack but took none in the final assault.<sup>49</sup>

With Fort Montbarey in friendly hands, the main Recouvrance defenses were open. Before dark on 16 September, combat patrols were over the wall and in the old city. Resistance disintegrated. Over a ten-day period the 5th Ranger Battalion, in a series of actions that came to be known as the battle of the forts, had captured the fort at Pointe du Petit Minou and Forts de Mengant

<sup>49</sup> 12th AGp Immed Rpt 46, Employment of Crocodile (Flame Throwing) Tanks Near Brest, 27 Sep; Action at Fort Montbarey, ETOUSA Hist Sec, Bn and Small Unit Study 2, n.d.

and de Dellec and thereby cleared the western shoreline of the harbor of Brest.<sup>50</sup> By the end of 17 September only the submarine pens and Fort du Portzic remained in enemy hands. The groups holding these capitulated on the following morning.

Meanwhile, the 2d Division had fought through the streets of Brest to reach the city wall on 16 September. After a strongpoint near the railroad station was eliminated, and after a patrol exploited an unguarded railroad tunnel through the wall into the inner city, troops climbed the wall and swept the remaining half mile to the water's edge.

As the battle for Brest had been fought in two sectors separated by the Penfeld River, so the German capitulation occurred in two parts, both on 18 September. Von der Mosel surrendered all the troops in Recouvrance to the 29th Division; Col. Erich Pietzonka of the 7th Parachute Regiment surrendered the eastern portion of the city to the 2d Division, appropriately enough in President Wilson Square. Nearly ten thousand prisoners, who had prepared for capitulation by shaving, washing, donning clean uniforms, and packing suitcases, presented a strange contrast to the dirty, tired, unkempt, but victorious American troops.<sup>51</sup> Ramcke, however, escaped across the harbor to the Crozon peninsula.

A cavalry squadron of Task Force A had cut the base of the Crozon peninsula on 27 August and patrolled there until Task Force B completed the Daoulas operation. Task Force A then moved onto Crozon. General Earnest took Hill

<sup>50</sup> For a detailed account, see CI 88 (29th Div).

<sup>51</sup> 29th Div AAR, Sep; CI 14 (2d Div); Ninth U.S. Army Ops, Brest-Crozon.