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THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST U. S. ARMY
IN THE ST. LO "BREAKTHROUGH"
25 JULY - 1 AUGUST 1944.
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: ARMY IN THE BREAKTHROUGH

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST U. S. ARMY IN THE
ST. LO "BREAKTHROUGH" 25 JULY - 1 AUGUST 1944
(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the First United States Army under command of General (then Lieutenant General) Omar N. Bradley, 25 July - 1 August 1944.

To orient the reader to the St. Lo "Breakthrough", several international decisions, and the military action resulting therefrom will be briefly discussed.

As early as December, 1941, shortly after the United States of America was in a state of war, it was decided that this country and England would combine their military efforts under a single strategic command, known as The Combined Chiefs of Staff, and, that the resources of the two nations would first be concentrated towards the destruction of Germany, and then Japan. (1)

In April, 1942, the two nations agreed that the final blow against Germany must be made across the English Channel, then eastward through the plains of Western Europe. (2)

The appointment of Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, which would "enter the continent of Europe and undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces", and the decision that France must be invaded in 1944, were made at the Sextant Conference at Cairo, Egypt, in December, 1943, by the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of England and The Combined Chiefs of Staff. (3)

(1) (2) A-1, p. 8; (3) A-1, p. 27.

The Allied strategic plan to accomplish this task had been developed by The Combined Chiefs of Staff. This plan, known as Operation "Overlord" contemplated an all-out air attack to gain air superiority over Germany and reduce her ability to continue the war by the destruction of her industrial war potential, and an invasion of the Normandy coast of France from which the Allies could drive eastward into Germany. (4)

The air phase of the plan was put into operation early in 1944, and continued in increasing intensity from that time on. (5)

While the initial phase of the air plan was being conducted, the final invasion plan, Operation "Neptune", was completed by the joint American-British staff of the 21st Army Group under command of Field Marshal G. B. Montgomery. Simultaneously, the Allies were assembling an invasion force in England, consisting of the Canadian First Army (2 Corps) under Lieutenant General H. D. G. Crerar under Lieutenant General (then Major General) Sir M. C. Dempsey, the British airborne troops under Lieutenant General F. A. M. Browning, and the First United States Army under General (then Lieutenant General) Omar N. Bradley. At this time the First United States Army consisted of the V, VII, VIII and XIX Corps and the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions. (6)

On 6 June, 1944, preceded by a massive air and naval bombardment of the invasion coast, the Allied seaborne forces fought their way onto the beaches of Normandy, France. The beachheads were secure the next morning after bitter fighting. (7)

Intense resistance continued through the days that followed, but by 11 June the beachheads were made continuous with the capture

(4) A-2, p. 1; (5) A-2, p. 9; (6) A-2, p. 6; (7) A-2, p. 19.

of Carentan which closed the gap between the American V and VII Corps. (8)

The lodgement area was slowly expanded against the enemy in the close "bocage" countryside of fields, divided by high treetopped hedgerow embankments, and woods which made the terrain extremely favorable for defense. (9)

The American XIX Corps crossed the English Channel and became operational 14 June, taking over the 29th Division between V Corps and VII Corps. The following day the VIII Corps arrived in France, and was assigned the mission of protecting the southern flank of VII Corps. (10)

Capture of the port of Cherbourg on 26 June, by the VII Corps completed the major initial mission of the First United States Army. (11)

Even with Cherbourg, the Allies still needed additional ports through which the offensive could be supplied. There also remained the possibility that the enemy might force the Allies into fighting a defensive action by reinforcing his Normandy forces. Early in July, General Eisenhower, Field Marshal Montgomery and General Bradley agreed that the next offensive would be to break through the German defenses which encircled the lodgement area and capture additional ports, particularly those in Brittany. The strategy to be employed envisaged drawing the enemy away from the First United States Army sector by a diversionary British attack, and then making the breakthrough with the First United States Army. (12)

(8) A-2, p. 26; (9) A-2, p. 31; (10) A-3, p. 72, 80; (11) A-2, p. 32; A-3, p. 56; (12) A-2, p. 35.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

(See Map A)

The general topography of the area in which the breakthrough was to be made is characterized by rough, hilly terrain, criss-crossed by hedgerows and low sunken roads. The principal ridge line runs generally east from Coutances towards St. Lo. A secondary ridge runs generally northeast between St. Lo and Vire. Further to the douyh of these ridges, the main ridge system extends across the base of the Cherbourg Peninsula from Villedieu eastward to Flers.

The principal rivers in the area are the Vire, See, Sienne, Selune, Ay and Taute, forming two draining systems, one to the west and the other to the north. The Vire River is the principal natural obstacle in the area because of its size and steep banks.

A good road net connects the principal towns of St. Lo, Periers, Lessay, Coutances, Granville, Avranches, Villedieu and Vire. A single track railroad connects St. Lo, Coutances, Lessay and Granville. A double track railroad runs east and south from Granville connecting the port city with Avranches and Vire.

Critical terrain features:

- a. The ridge from Coutances to St. Lo.
- b. The town of Coutances which controls the roads to the south from Lessay.
- c. The coastal communication center of Granville.
- d. The important town of Avranches through which passes the main roads to the south, east and west.
- e. The ridge system running east-west across the neck of the Cherbourg Peninsula.
- f. The Sienne River dam between Ducey and St. Hilaire.

- g. The town of Villedieu which controls the central road net.
- h. The town of Vire, a rail and communication center. (13)

PLANNING PHASE - OPERATION "COBRA"

To accomplish the First United States Army's breakthrough mission, the Army Staff developed Operation "Cobra" in which utilizing the combined strength of a coordinated air-infantry-armored force. (14)

Map 2

The basic plan was to pierce the German line on a narrow front along the Lessay-Periers-St. Lo road by infantry following an intense air and artillery bombardment of the breakthrough strip. The infantry, after advancing through the enemy position, would fan out and block off the flanks and an armored and motorized infantry force would drive through the opening made by the initial infantry thrust and exploit this success to the south and southwest in the direction of Coutances. (15)

First Army's plan was to make the main effort with the VII Corps, in the center, and pivot the entire front from the VIII Corps, on the right, through XIX Corps, on the left center, on V Corps which was located on the left flank of the Army sector. (16)

To build up the desired weight of the main effort, First Army transferred the 1st Infantry Division and the 2d Armored Division to VII Corps. (17)

It was planned that the above mentioned Corps would be composed of the following divisions for the operation:

V Corps

2d Infantry Division

5th Infantry Division

(13) A-6, p. 121; (14) (15) A-3, p. 96; (16) (17) A-3, p. 97.

VII Corps

1st Infantry Division
4th Infantry Division
9th Infantry Division
30th Infantry Division
2d Armored Division
3d Armored Division

VIII Corps

8th Infantry Division
79th Infantry Division
83d Infantry Division
90th Infantry Division
4th Armored Division

XIX Corps

29th Infantry Division
35th Infantry Division (18)

To systematically conduct the breakthrough, First Army divided Operation "Cobra" into the following three specific phases: (19)

Phase One - Breakthrough

VII Corps would attack with the 9th and 30th Infantry Divisions, abreast, across the narrow breakthrough strip, 2500 yards deep and 6000 yards wide, along the Lessay-Perriers-St. Lo road following an intense air bombardment by heavy, medium and fighter bombers, of the Eighth Air Force and IX Tactical Air Command. The two divisions would then fan out-

(18) A-3, p. 84; (19) A-3, p. 96.

wards blocking off the flanks of the breakthrough area as far south as the towns of Marigny and St. Gilles. To protect the left flank of the breakthrough, secondary objectives were assigned to include the more southerly crossings of the Vire River.

Phase Two - Exploitation

VII Corps would exploit the breakthrough by moving two armored divisions and a motorized infantry division through the gaps made during the initial infantry attack. The armored columns, each containing motorized infantry, would use two separate routes of advance. The right armored division was to pass through Marigny, striking south to Cerisy-la-Salle, then west and seize Coutances and the high ground to the west of the town. The left armored division was to block all movement of enemy reinforcements to the north by passing through St. Gilles, turning southwest at Le Mesnil-Herman, pass through Hambye, seize the high ground northwest of Gavray on the eastern bank of the Sienne River, and capture the town of Brehal on the Granville-Coutances road. The main body of the motorized infantry division would initially follow the left armored column, then swing southwest at Canisy, take up positions near Notre Dame-de-Cenilly and be prepared to move either southwest, south, or southeast to support the armored units.

During this phase, V, VIII and XIX Corps would prevent the enemy from disengaging by exerting strong pressure along their fronts and harass any withdrawal the enemy might attempt.

Phase Three - Consolidation

In this phase the Army would consolidate the positions gained and the V, VII and XIX Corps would increase the pressure against the enemy "forcing him to withdraw and exploiting every advantage gained from his state of disorganization."

To provide maximum support for the infantry and armored attack, full use was to be made of the artillery and air force.

The artillery plan was to mass the fires of all Corps in coordination with the air bombardment and the VII Corps Artillery preparation. Limitations on the V and XIX Corps Artillery were to be prescribed by VII Corps. Special missions included counterflak fires, use of smoke to mask the enemy's observation, the marking of the bomb line and targets for the final fighter-bomber attack with red smoke.

(20)

Air support plan prepared by the staffs of the First Army and IX Tactical Air Command included the following missions: (21)

1. Reconnaissance Missions (IX TAC)

New basic photography coverage would be made of the entire army front with special interpretations of the photography for known or suspected enemy anti-aircraft positions from which a counterflak plan could be prepared and coordinated with VII Corps.

In addition, ten missions were to be provided for artillery fire adjustment and hourly reconnaissance of the main roads into the breakthrough, plus twenty on-call missions.

2. Fighter Bomber Missions (IX TAC)

An initial strike would be made along the narrow front

(20) A-8, p. 182; (21) A-3, p. 88, 99, 120; A-5, p. 104; A-8, p. 182.

of Periers-St. Lo road from H-75 minutes to H-60 minutes. A second strike of the original strip would be made from H-Hour to H plus 15 minutes. Three hundred and fifty fighter-bombers would participate in both strikes.

3. Heavy Bomber Missions (Eighth Air Force)

Bombardment of bomb zone following the initial fighter strike with approximately fifteen hundred heavy bombers participating from H-Hour to H plus 15 minutes.

4. Medium Bomber Missions (IX TAC)

Bombardment of southern half of bomb zone by approximately four hundred medium bombers from H plus 30 to H plus 75 minutes. On-call missions would support attack as it progressed.

5. Bridges along the Vire and Seine Rivers, and their tributaries, were included as additional targets to the initial bomb zone.

6. Bomb line of initial bomb zone as previously stated, was the Periers-St. Lo road. Bomb lines for additional air support were to be prescribed as advance progressed.

7. Codes were established and arrangements made by which additional medium bomber support could be called for by all division commanders of VII Corps.

8. Identification procedures established included marking of friendly front lines with fluorescent panels, the enemy's position by red smoke, repainting Allied white-star insignia on all breakthrough vehicles and displaying cerise panels on our tanks and armored vehicles.

9. Air-ground communication between the combat commands of the 2d and 3d Armored Division and close supporting aircraft

was to be accomplished by installing VHF radios in tanks and armored vehicles and assigning fighter bomber pilots to these vehicles.

Following the approval of the "Cobra" plan by General Bradley on 13 July, several changes were made to insure the successful completion of the operation. The first of the changes narrowed the First Army front, by shifting the boundary of the British Second Army to include a portion of the V Corps front. The second change directed the VII Corps to attack with three infantry divisions abreast instead of the original two. This latter change was made when it appeared that the enemy was moving additional armor into the proposed breakthrough sector. (22)

The VII Corps Field Order to carry out its important mission for this operation assigned the following tasks to its units: (23)

9th, 4th and 30th Infantry Divisions would attack abreast, following the air bombardment, and seize initial objectives within their zones.

9th Infantry Division, less 22d RCT, in the center would attack at H-Hour, seize initial objectives at the south end of the penetration area, and clear a gap for the 3d Armored Division.

4th Infantry Division, (less 22nd RCT) in the center, would attack and clear a gap for the 3d Armored Division by securing its initial objective at the south end of the initial penetration area.

30th Infantry Division, on the east, would attack at H-Hour, seize initial objectives, and clear a gap for the 2d Armored

Division. The Division would also secure the crossing of the Vire River as far south as Tessy and protect the left flank of the initial penetration.

2d Armored Division with the 22d RCT (motorized) of the 4th Infantry Division would prepare to move through the gap cleared by the 30th Infantry Division on two routes with the dual mission of initially seizing the line Le Mesnil-Herman-St. Samsen-de-Bon-Fosse-Hill 183 to cover the movement of the 1st Infantry Division and the 3d Armored Division through the Marigny-St. Gilles gap, and moving one combat command via Pont Hebert-St. Gilles-Canisy road prepared to seize objectives between Coutances and St. Dennis-le-Gast, or move on Coutances to reinforce the 3d Armored Division or move to the southeast to reinforce the remainder of the division.

3d Armored Division, less Combat Command B with one Battalion Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division attached, would drive through the gap cleared by the 4th Infantry Division, move to the southwest and secure the southern exits of Coutances securing the southern flank of the 1st Infantry Division between Hyenville and Cerisy-la-Salle.

1st Infantry Division (motorized) less one Battalion Combat Team with Combat Command B, 3d Armored Division, attached, would drive through the gap made by the 9th Infantry Division, turn to the southwest and block the enemy in front of VII Corps between Coutances and Fontenay.

During 17-18 July the British launched the div⁶isionary attack, (24) and the 29th Division of the XIX Corps captured St. Lo. (25)

(24) A-4, p. 102; (25) A-2, p. 34.

First Army was now ready to start Operation "Cobra". The weather changed, grounded the air force, and it was decided to postpone the attack. Finally, on 24 July, the weather broke and the attack was ordered, but as the bombers arrived over the target area, the weather closed, and the attack was again postponed. (26)

ENEMY SITUATION 25 JULY

(Map B)

Although the enemy had suffered heavy losses in personnel, tanks and vehicles since the initial Allied landing in Normandy, he continued to fight with determination and courage. (27)

The results of Allied air superiority and continual bombing of communication centers, transportation facilities, fuel dumps, strong points, air fields and troop concentrations were taking effect both in destruction and morale. (28)

Reinforcements were slow in arriving and when they did, they were generally committed in piecemeal fashion. The other armies in France, except the Fifteenth German Army were being slowly bled in an effort to stop the Allies. (29)

The enemy had committed himself heavily in armor and infantry in the Caen sector to hold the Seine Basin, through which he was moving supplies and reinforcements into Normandy. Moreover, he feared an Allied thrust toward Paris which would cut off his forces to the west. (30)

During the action in Normandy, the enemy had continued to believe that landings there were only a feint and that the main attack would be directed at the V-1 sites in the Pas-de-Calais area. For this reason

(26) A-4, p. 106; (27) A-3, p. 112, 113; (28) A-2, p. 28, 30;
(29) A-3, p. 113; (30) A-2, p. 30.

not shown in map

he continued to hold his Fifteenth Army in that area and finally, when he grudgingly sent reinforcements from his Fifteenth Army to Normandy, the breakthrough had been effected and they were wasted. (31)

The composition of the German Armies in France were as follows: (32)

First German Army (Atlantic Coast from Nantes
to Spanish Frontiers) - 9 Divisions.

Fifteenth German Army (North of the River Seine)
18 Divisions

Nineteenth German Army (Mediterranean Coast)
9 Divisions

Brittany Peninsula - 2 Divisions.

Opposing the First United States Army on 25 July was the Seventh Army, composed of the II Parachute Corps and the 84th Infantry Corps and thirteen known divisions.

In a vain attempt to contain the breakthrough, the enemy committed a total of twenty-nine divisions during the period 25 July and 1 August.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

(See Map C)

On 25 July the weather cleared, and General Bradley ordered operation "Cobra" to commence. (33)

The VII Corps front line troops of the 4th, 9th and 30th Infantry Divisions withdrew to a position 1200 yards north of the near edge of the bomb zone. (34)

At 0940 hours the initial waves of the fighter bombers, preceded by the counterflak fires of the artillery, commenced bombing the narrow 300 yard strip along the Periers-St. Lo road. (35)

(31) (32) A-3, p. 113; (33) (34) A-3, p. 99; (35) A-5, p. 103.

In successive waves approximately 1500 heavy bombers and 400 medium bombers continued to cover the breakthrough area by saturation bombing. (36)

Counterflak fires were readjusted on the enemy anti-aircraft positions which had moved during the night 24 - 25 July as a result of the fires layed on their positions preceding the attempted bombing on 24 July and all but the first four flights of heavy bombers met little or no flak. (37)

During the air strike misdirected bombs caused severe casualties to the leading battalions of the 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, 120th Infantry, 30th Infantry Division, and the 743d Tank Battalion, attached to the 30th Division, and several of the artillery units. Rear battalions were ordered forward to reinforce each of the infantry regiments most severely hit. (38)

Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, one of the United States Army's outstanding soldiers, was killed by the bombs while watching the air strikes at a forward observation post. (39)

At 1100 hours the infantry attack was launched.

Gradually the attack gained momentum as the 9th, 4th and 30th Infantry Divisions fought their way forward against stubborn enemy resistance. By the end of the day the First Army front had been moved forward to a line running from La Butte-La Chapelle-en-Juger-Hebecrevan, an advance of approximately two miles. (40)

The first phase of the operation had been successful, and the enemy's line was pierced. (41)

Although the air forces had employed "carpet bombing" on the

(36) A-5, p. 103; (37) A-8, p. 182; A-5, p. 103; (38) A-3, p. 99; (39) A-2, p. 37; (40) (41) A-3, p. 99.

narrow breakthrough strip, the intense and heavy concentration of bombs had failed to produce the maximum results. Prisoners captured by the advancing infantry reported that the casualties caused by the bombing had not been excessive, but that they had produced a terrific shock effect. This was the first and last time "carpet bombing" was used by the American Air Force in direct support of a ground offensive. (42)

THE EXPLOITATION

On 26 July, the exploitation phase of Operation "Cobra" was put into effect when VII Corps ordered the 1st Infantry Division and the 2d and 3d Armored Divisions through the gaps cleared by the initial infantry attack to exploit the penetration while the VIII Corps and V Corps attacked in their respective zones. (43)

VII Corps' action for the day included the 1st Division, with the 745th Tank Battalion attached, passing through a gap uncovered by the 9th Division to capture Marigny while Combat Command B, 3d Armored Division moved through another gap in the 9th Division sector to positions west and southwest of Marigny. The 2d Armored Division passed through the 30th Infantry Division and after capturing St. Gilles, pushed through Canisy to the south. The 30th Infantry Division continued forward, advancing the Corps front to the Canisy-St. Lo railway. (44)

To prevent the enemy from swinging eastward to block the VII Corps advance, the VIII Corps attacked south during the early morning hours of 26 July and by nightfall had secured a bridgehead across the Seves River and captured the town of Longuet. This attack was made

(42) A-5, p. 103; (43) A-3, p. 100; (44) A-3, p. 100.

by the 83d, 8th and 90th Infantry Division. (45)

At 0600 hours on 26 July, V Corps' long-awaited attack jumped off following a twenty-minute preparation by British and American artillery. The attack was made by the 5th and 2d Infantry Divisions towards the town of Vidouville. The advancing units progressed slowly southward throughout the day against a well emplaced enemy who had to be driven from one prepared hedgerow position to another. By nightfall the 5th Division had advanced approximately 3000 yards and the 2d Division had moved forward about 2000 yards to the Rouzeville-Vidouville road south of Pierre-le-Cenilly. (46)

On 27 July, two days after First Army had launched the operation, the action that was to make the breakthrough a success took place. The enemy, realizing that his forces from the west of the penetration area to the coast of the Cotentin Peninsula might be cut off, withdrew along the entire VIII Corps front. The withdrawal was covered by mortar and artillery fire, and as the enemy moved south, he demolished bridges, layed extensive road and personnel mines, and set numerous booby traps. (47)

During the day VIII Corps continued to exert pressure on the withdrawal by pushing forward after rebuilding the bridges and clearing the mines. By 2200 hours, 27 July, VIII Corps units had entered the town of Lessay, captured Periers and the 83rd Division with patrolling across the Taute River. (48)

VII Corps aggressively continued the exploitation throughout the day with the 1st Infantry Division and Combat Command B, 3rd Armored Division, driving west on the St. Lo-Coutances road to less

(45) A-3, p. 100; (46) A-7, p. 121; (47) (48) A-3, p. 102.

than two miles from Coutances before being stopped by a determined enemy force which had been committed to hold the corridor along the coast open for the withdrawing German LXXXIV Corps. Other elements of the 1st Division had advanced to Campround. (49)

XIX Corps captured St. Thomas-de St. Lo and Hill 101 south of St. Lo with the 35th Division pushing the attack. (50)

In V Corps sector a slight advance was made by 2nd Division's capture of Notre Dame d'Elle, thus improving the Division's position along the Rouxville-Vidouxville road. During the day V Corps issued Field Order 14 directing 2nd Division to continue the attack to secure St. Jean d'Baisants. (51)

The IX Tactical Air Force continued to give close support to the ground action by flying armed reconnaissance missions to the west, south, and east of the breakthrough area. The air support was very effective in hampering the enemy from moving in reserves and blocking his attempts to withdraw. (52)

First Army's Field Order No. 2 shifted the boundaries between the V and XIX Corps and directed XIX Corps to assume responsibility for part of the areas to the west of the Vire River effective 1200 hours 27 July. The enlargement of the XIX Corps' Zone, the 30th Infantry Division and Combat Command A, 2nd Armored Division were detached from VII Corps and attached to XIX Corps. (53)

On 28 July, VIII Corps using the same tactics as VII Corps had to exploit the initial penetration, pushed the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions through its attacking Infantry Divisions and continued to drive south to Coutances. The 4th Armored Division drove

(49) (50) A-3, p. 102; (51) A-7, p. 122; (52) A-5, p. 103;
(53) A-3, p. 102 and A-7, p. 122.

south through Monthuchon, and by 1700 hours captured Coutances and continued its advance to a point about a kilometer beyond the town, sealing up the enemy's escape corridors. 6th Armored Division, with the 79th Division mopping up behind it, advanced against resistance to about halfway between Lessay and Coutances by noon, and by nightfall had driven southwest of Coutances. As the two armored columns bore down upon Coutances, the 102nd Cavalry Group, which was protecting the right flank of the corps area, moved south to the Seine River. (54) (See Map D)

The enemy continued to fight vigorously to keep the corridor from Coutances west to the coast open for his troop retreating south in front of the VIII Corps' drive. His forces north of Coutances at this time were comprised of the 2nd SS Panzer and the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division; elements of the 77th, 243rd, and 353rd Infantry Divisions and battle groups of the 265th, 266th and 275th Infantry Divisions. Every attempt was made to extricate the SS Units through the gap first. (55) Fighter bombers of IX TAC inflicted heavy losses of personnel and vehicles upon the enemy columns as they withdrew southward towards Coutances. (56)

While VIII Corps was driving south to Coutances, VII Corps' 3rd Armored Division with one Battalion Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division converged upon the city from the east. Elsewhere in the VII Corps area the 2nd Armored Division's Combat Commands A and B continued their drives to the Towns of Villebaudon and St. Denis-le-Gast, and 4th Infantry Division reached Notre Dame-de Cenilly. The 9th Infantry Division met light resistance during the swing to the southwest, but continued to mop up the enemy as the advance progressed. (57)

(54) A-3, p. 104; (55) A-2, p. 38; (56) A-3, p. 104; (57) A-3, p. 104.

XIX Corps zone was advanced south along the west bank of the Vire River by the 30th Division and CCA, 2nd Armored Division. (58)

V Corps, east of the Vire River, attacked south of Foret-de-Cerisy against vigorous resistance by the German 3rd Parachute Division, and only slight gains were made in this sector. (59)

PW reports confirmed the commitment of the German 2nd Panzer Division to the First Army front. Other reports indicated that the 363d Infantry Division had shifted from the German Fifteenth Army in the Pas-de-Calais area to reinforce the defense against the breakthrough. (60)

Indicative of the Allies air superiority, only 25 raids by enemy aircraft were reported between 25 July and sunrise 29 July. (61)

The intensity, skill and aggressiveness of the coordinated infantry-air-armored attack by First Army's V, VII, and VIII and XIX Corps and the IX TAC had severely crippled and disorganized the enemy from the Vire River west to Coutances. (62)

The enemy's failure to contain, or even slow down, the attack in the western section of First Army's Front and his tremendous losses in personnel and equipment broke his will to continue the fight in this sector. The roads leading south from Coutances were clogged with his retreating vehicles and tanks. Fighter bombers continued to hit these columns and reported over 1000 vehicles damaged or destroyed. (63) ?

The breakthrough was a success.

CONSOLIDATION AND EXPLOITATION

(See Map D)

The early capture of Coutances enabled General Bradley to con-

(58) A-3, p. 104; (59) A-2, p. 38; (60) (61) (62) A-3, p. 104;
(63) A-3, p. 104 and A-5, p. 103.

tinue the exploitation to the south with two extremely mobile corps. Desiring to continue the success, the Army Commander readjusted the original "Cobra" plan, and on 28 July issued an order directing the following: (64)

All Corps would prevent the Germans from regrouping by continuing to exert unrelenting pressure against the enemy.

V Corps would continue its attack.

VII Corps was ordered to continue the isolation of the enemy north of Coutances while continuing to exploit the success by pushing rapidly to the south.

VIII Corps was ordered to eliminate the enemy isolated by VII Corps in and around Coutances and also exploit the success by driving southward along the coast.

XIX Corps was to attack south toward more distant objectives with its three infantry divisions and two armored combat commands.

On 29 July VIII Corps spearheaded its drive to the south with two armored divisions abreast supported by two motorized infantry combat teams. 6th Armored Division with a motorized combat team of the 79th Infantry Division crossed the Seine River west of Coutances, drove down a narrow corridor as far south as Crences. 4th Armored Division with a motorized combat team of the 8th Division advanced south in the left sectors of the Corps front. (65)

In the VII Corps sector 1st Division moved west to Courday to block off and enclose the enemy encircled by the advance, then turned south and joined with the 3rd Armored Division in a drive to-

(64) A-3, p. 104; (65) A-3, p. 107.

ward Garvray. The 4th Division continued to mop up the enemy in the Notre Dam-de Cenilly area. (66)

CCB, 2nd Armored Division, fought throughout the day to protect the road blocks from St. Denis-le Gast to the Siemne River and prevented two contained enemy divisions from escaping to the south. (67)

During the day, the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions trapped a withdrawing enemy unit on the road between Roncey and St. Denis-le Gast. The enemy column was cut to ribbons by fighter bombers, artillery and tanks of the two armored divisions resulting in the destruction of 66 enemy tanks, 204 vehicles, 11 artillery guns, and damage to an additional 56 tanks and 55 vehicles. (68)

XIX Corps, attempting to pin the 2nd Panzer Division against the Vire River, attacked south toward Tessy. Stubborn enemy resistance in the Corps' eastern sector stopped the attack on the north bank of the Marcron River, but in the western sector the corps advanced toward Percy making contact with the left flank units of VII Corps. (69)

V Corps resumed its southward drive by attacking with three divisions abreast, the 35th Division in the direction of Torigny-sur-Vire, the 2nd Division toward the high ground east of La Chappelle du Fest, and the 5th Division toward the high ground south of Le Brevil. (70)

During the day First Army had completely destroyed many of the enemy's trapped units as they attempted to escape from the encirclements, and air attacks added to the heavy toll by bombing and strafing the clogged roads which were littered with damaged vehicles of

(66) (67) (68) (69) A-3, p. 107; (70) A-7, p. 145.

all types. (71)

Several reports of the enemy's contemplated action filtered through to First Army indicating that the enemy realized the vulnerability of his position and might plan to use all his forces in Brittany to block the breakthrough, and then reinforce these troops from his First, Nineteenth and Fifteenth Armies. (72)

On 30 July, First Army continued its advance to the south and by 2000 hours CCB, 4th Armored Division, of the VIII Corps had entered Avranches and secured two bridges across the See River. Also in VIII Corps zone, CCA, 6th Armored Division, pushing forward of the 79th Division captured Brehal and continued toward Granville. (73)
(See Map E)

VII Corps continued to carry out its dual mission by mopping up enemy pockets north of St. Martin-de Genilly, and attacking south with a two-pronged thrust of the 1st Division and the 3rd Armored Division. 3rd Armored Division forced a crossing of the Sienne River after seizing Gavray, but was slowed down until engineer units reconstructed the demolished bridge. Other elements of the division approached Villedieu-Les-Poeles. (74)

On the eastern Army sector, stiff resistance and a major enemy counterattack stopped XIX Corps' 30th and 29th Division attack against Tessy. V Corps met heavy resistance too, which held the 2nd Division to a 1300-yard advance. The 5th Division fought its way forward against a stubborn enemy and crossed the Torigny-Caumont road. 116th Panzer Division, which had arrived from the German Fifteenth Army, was committed against the V Corps in the vicinity of Pontoise. (75)

(71) (72) A-3, p. 107; (73) (74) (75) A-3, p. 110.

On 31 July VIII Corps continued its attack to the south with its two armored divisions. 4th Armored Division seized the crossing of the Selune River north of Pontaubault after meeting slight resistance. The 6th Armored Division captured Granville and advanced along the coast almost to Avranches. (76)

VII Corps continued the attack with the 4th Infantry Division and CCB, 3rd Armored Division, moving south of Villedieu-Les-Poeles. (77)

1st Division and CCA, 3rd Armored Division, exploited the enemy's withdrawal from the Gavray area by advancing in three columns south of Brecey after securing a crossing of the See River. (78)

XIX Corps again attacked toward Tessy, but was unable to break through the heavy resistance. 30th Division captured Troisgots at 1025 hours 31 July, but could not advance beyond this point. (79)

V Corps, after being held up by stiff enemy resistance for several days met only light resistance during its advance forward. 35th Division seized Torigny, which had been bitterly defended, and moved south almost 2000 yards. 5th Division and the British 11th Armored Division coordinated an attack, straddling the boundary between the First United States Army and the Second British Army against the Foret-L'Eveque area. 5th Division moved forward approximately two miles. (80) (81)

On 1 August VIII Corps continued the exploitation to the south with the 6th and 4th Armored Divisions, capturing the Selune River dam, Ducey, Montgauthier and moved south of Marcilley. (82)

VII Corps was able to press southward in its western sector,

(76) (77) (78) (79) A-3, p. 110; (80) A-7, p. 148; (81) A-3, p. 112; (82) A-3, p. 112.

but met stiff resistance in front of the 4th Division on the left. 1st Division motorized its units and with CCA, 3rd Armored Division continued to push southward. (83)

XIX Corps made slight advances, but could not overcome the stubborn forces defending Tassy. (84)

V Corps' coordinated attack advanced the American - British front south of Foret-L'Eveque and the British were approaching the Beny Bocage. (85)

The breakthrough of the First United States Army had succeeded in making possible the conquest of Brittany and an advance south to Paris.

The German Seventh Army had suffered tremendous losses in personnel, tanks and vehicles and the overwhelming superiority of the American forces had cleared the path through which the attack upon the German homeland could be made.

On 1 August, General Omar N. Bradley assumed command of the 12th Army Group; Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges took over First United States Army and Third Army became operational under Lieutenant General George S. Patton. (86)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. In analyzing the "St. Lo Breakthrough" conducted by the First United States Army, during the period 25 July - 1 August 1944, it is apparent that the success of the operation was attained through sound military planning, excellent cooperation between the air and ground forces and the proper utilization of the fighting power available to the Commander.

(83) (84) (85) A-3, p. 112; (86) A-7, p. 154.

2. In the writer's opinion the "Cobra" plan developed by the First Army included all of the desirous aspects necessary to accomplish the mission. The main effort was of sufficient mass to pierce the enemy's position and the diversionary attacks along the army front limited the enemy from assembling a counterattacking force large enough to stop the breakthrough. In addition, the highly mobile, armored and motorized infantry exploitation force was ideally located to carry out this phase in any direction. It should be noted that the enemy was not permitted to recover from the initial penetration before the exploitation was committed.

3. The close and continuous air support of the infantry and armored elements, achieved through coordinating all efforts toward the common goal, was highly effective and successful. This coordination was accomplished by the joint-planning of the air and ground staffs of First Army and IX Tactical Air Force. The installation of VHF radios in the command vehicles of 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions and the assignment of fighter pilots to these vehicles permitted the ground commanders to communicate directly with supporting fighter bombers, effectively blending together these two elements into a powerful striking force. The perfection of the identification procedures from air-to-ground and ground-to-air is considered an important step in achieving the coordinated attack.

4. The employment of the armored units as part of the exploitation force gained the full use of its speed, mobility and fire power by pushing it forward rapidly over the best avenues of advance and allowing it to by-pass pockets of resistance which the follow-up infantry units mopped up. This action continued to keep the enemy off

balance and disorganized, thus making it possible for First Army to continue its rapid advance throughout the operation.

5. Motorized infantry units added to the effectiveness of the armored drive by being sufficiently mobile to render close-in support to the tanks as the action progressed.

In analyzing the St. Lo "Breakthrough" operation, it is evident that "The Nine Principles of War" were effectively applied throughout the operation as indicated below:

a. The principle of Mass - The concentration of armor and infantry in superior strength at a decisive point to pierce the enemy's positions on a narrow front.

b. The principle of Objective - To "breakthrough" the enemy defenses which encircled the lodgement area from which further operations could be conducted to capture additional ports.

c. The principle of Surprise - The decision to make a diversionary attack by the British Second Army, then launching the "breakthrough" effort by the First United States Army.

d. The principle of Security - The V, VIII and XIX Corps exerted strong pressure along their fronts preventing the enemy from disengaging and assembling a counterattack force which he could employ against the main effort made by the VII Corps.

e. The principle of Cooperation - The efforts of the two Allied armies were blended together toward a common objective. The full and complete cooperation by the air forces supported the ground offensive throughout the entire operation.

f. The principle of the Offensive - The exploitation by the armored and motorized infantry force of the initial infantry penetration.

g. The principle of Movement - On 28 July, this principle was advantageously employed when the Army Commander ordered the movement of all corps forward and directed VIII Corps to exploit the success by driving southward along the coast.

h. The principle of Economy of Force - In the original plan and during the initial phases, the Army Commander utilized one-fourth of his force withholding the remainder to commit at an opportune time.

i. The principle of Simplicity. The simplicity of the basic plan enabled the Army Commander to control the operation by logically developing the action.

CRITICISM

1. The casualties suffered by the infantry assault troops from the misdirected bombs might have been avoided if an adequate ground-air communications system had been established to control the heavy and medium bomber formations.

2. The combined training of infantry-tank units was insufficient and many infantry commanders did not know how to employ the tanks in support of their units.

3. Some units allowed the enemy to disengage from the action thereby losing contact. This indicates a lack of aggressiveness.

LESSONS

1. Sound military planning by the commander and proper utilization of all of the available forces at his disposal is a basic re-

quirement in the successful accomplishment of his mission.

2. The element of surprise is necessary in an operation of this nature to afford the assault troops every possible advantage.

3. Flexibility in planning is essential to rapidly take advantage of the initial success gained in a breakthrough operation.

4. The ground offensive can be effectively supported from the air through coordinated planning and an adequate means of communication.

5. The aggressive conduct of the infantry mission to pierce the enemy's position is essential in a breakthrough operation.

6. The infantry attack must closely follow the air bombardment to obtain the best results.

7. The employment of armored divisions to exploit a breakthrough takes full advantage of the armored capabilities of speed, mobility, fire power and ^{shock} ~~slack~~ action.

8. Combined infantry-armored training must be continuous to insure that the team can successfully function by ^{IN} combining and blending the capabilities of each.

9. Artillery fire must be coordinated with the air attack to cover the infantry advance from the line of departure to the assault position.

10. The use of air operations materially increased the effectiveness of the artillery fire.

11. The technique of high-angle bombing must be improved before it can be successfully employed in close-support of an infantry attack.

12. Well emplaced infantry can survive a concentrated air bombardment.