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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 6TH ARMORED DIVISION
IN THE BRITTANY PENINSULA (NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)
1-12 AUGUST 1944
(Personal experience of an Armored Infantry Company Commander)

Type of operation described: ARMORED DIVISION IN THE
EXPLOITATION OF A BREAKTHROUGH

Major Homer H. Hammond, Infantry

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During the action covered by this monograph, the author commanded an Armored Infantry Company which was variously assigned to Combat Command A, Combat Command B, and Division Reserve Command for certain phases of the operation. In order to provide the reader with a logical sequence of the campaign, the entire action of all three commands is being recorded.

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 6TH ARMORED DIVISION
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INTRODUCTION*

This monograph covers the operation of the 6th Armored Division in the Brittany Peninsula from 1 to 12 August 1944.

The author has a definite purpose in selecting the above-mentioned campaign for treatment in a monograph. During the period covered by this operation, the attention of the world was focused on Mortain, Falais Gap, and the dash toward Paris. Never before had any army so thoroughly routed the enemy as U. S. and British forces were defeating the Wehrmacht at this time. Because of these factors, little notice was given to the isolated exploits of one division. This narrative deals with such an operation, and it is felt that because this is a classic example of a single armored division in an exploitation mission, it merits careful scrutiny by any student of military history.

For the purpose of orientation, it will be necessary for the reader to consider the situation confronting the First U. S. Army from 25 to 31 July 1944.

Subsequent to the landing of the Allied forces in Normandy on 6 June 1944, the First U. S. Army was successful in clearing the Cotentin Peninsula to the north. Our forces were meeting heavy resistance in their drive south at the base of the peninsula, and progress was slow. This, coupled with the close hedgerow terrain, typical of Normandy, canalized the operation of the First Army into an infantry effort with little use for armor. (1)

However, on 25 July, a breakthrough became imminent in the Coutances-St. Lo area, and the 6th Armored Division, a reserve element of the VIII Corps, First Army, was alerted for movement on order from its assembly area in the Les Mesnil area to exploit the success. (2)

*See Map A; (1, 2) A-1, p. 1-2.

On 27 July the division was ordered to pass through the 79th Infantry Division at Lessay, advance south along the Lessay-Coutances Highway, and seize the VIII Corps objective on the high ground northwest of Coutances. This mission was accomplished on 28 July with little opposition except from disorganized enemy in small groups and many mines and boobytraps. (3)

The success of the breakthrough at St. Lo and Coutances, and the rapid disintegration of the German defenses in this area, caused VIII Corps to order the advance to continue with two armored divisions abreast. The general corps plan was to employ the 6th Armored Division on the west, followed by the 79th Infantry Division, to capture Granville, thence to resume the attack to the south. The 4th Armored Division, followed by the 8th Infantry Division, was to capture Avranches. (4)

Reconnaissance reports indicated that all bridges over the Seine River in the division zone of advance had been destroyed, and that the enemy held the high ground south of the river in force. (5)

On 29 July, dismounted armored infantry elements of the division launched a coordinated attack and were successful in forcing a river crossing and capturing the enemy position on the commanding ground to the south. Immediately following the seizure of this bridgehead, the division engineers began construction of a bridge and ford across the river. By early morning 30 July, the powerful armored column was again moving rapidly toward the objective at Granville. (6)

The advance of the division on 30 July was characterized by light enemy resistance except at Brehal. There a pitched battle was fought against a reinforced German battalion which was determined to hold the highway leading into Granville. (7)

By nightfall, 30 July, the division had overcome opposition and was in position for the contemplated attack on Granville. However, during the night, orders were received from corps headquarters to continue the advance

(3) A-1, p. 2; (4) A-1, p. 4; (5) A-1, p. 4 and personal knowledge, self;
(6) A-1, p. 4 and personal knowledge, self; (7) A-1, p. 5.

at 0600 31 July, proceed directly to Le Point Gilbert, remain disposed in depth, and await further orders. (8)

It is interesting to note at this point that although no coordinated attack could be made on Granville because of the latest orders from the Corps Commander, the division G-3 with one platoon of light tanks dashed into Granville at noon on 31 July and accepted the surrender of the town and the German garrison without encountering resistance. (9)

By 2100 31 July the division was in position, with forward elements at Le Pont Gilbert, at which time orders were received to relieve the 4th Armored Division and the 13th Infantry Regiment at Avranches and to secure bridges to the northwest and at Pontaubault to the south. (10)

Until this time, the directives received by the division contemplated no immediate advance beyond Avranches. On the strength of these directives, the division reserve was sent through to the south to hold the bridgehead at Pontaubault. During the night of 31 July - 1 August enemy air was very active, strafing the armored columns and bombing the bridges. This air activity, together with the indescribable mountains of battle rubble in Avranches, slowed the advance of Reserve Command which, of necessity had to follow one main route through the town. (11)

At midnight 31 July the Third U. S. Army became operational in France and took over the VIII Corps. Before the relief of the 4th Armored Division was complete and before the division reserve had established its bridgehead at Pontaubault, orders from the Third Army through VIII Corps completely changed the mission of the division. (12)

The order received by the 6th Armored Division at 0400 1 August 1944 was a classic in simplicity: the mission of the VIII Corps was to capture the Brittany Peninsula. The plan called for the 6th Armored Division to proceed west through the center of the peninsula in two or more columns and capture Brest with all possible speed. The 79th Infantry Division was

(8) A-1, p. 6 and personal knowledge, self; (9) A-1, p. 7 and personal knowledge, self; (10) A-1, p. 6; (11) A-1, p. 7-8 and personal experience, self; (12) A-7; A-1, p. 7; A-3, p. 3.

designated to follow the 6th Armored Division, and later this was changed to place the 83d Infantry Division in the infantry support role. Despite these orders, neither of these units ever caught up with the division, and on 4 August, the Division Commander was informed by the Army Commander that he would have no infantry support for the operation. (13)

Thus it is seen that the 6th Armored Division was completely unfettered in an isolated area of approximately eleven thousand square miles, left to its own devices to accomplish the mission of marching over two hundred miles to capture a fortress port.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

The Brittany Peninsula, over which the 6th Armored Division was to operate, does not contain those geographical characteristics which are generally considered favorable for an armored maneuver. All of Brittany is a hedgerow country, and in the west the hedges become very formidable. The earth embankments often reach a height of over six feet and are surmounted by shrubs and trees, rendering observation extremely limited. (14)

The peninsula comprises two distinct zones, a maritime zone and an inland zone. In the center of the inland zone there are two plateaus, partly covered with landes, unproductive moorland. The southern plateau is continued by the Montagnes Noires and the northern is dominated by the Monts d'Arree. The inland waterways are torrent-like, and most rivers are unfordable because of their steep banks and rapid current. (15)

The maritime zone consists of a rocky, indented coast, lined with reefs and islets. The mouths of the rivers form deep estuaries, making several excellent seaports. (16)

In general, the terrain can be described as close country, to a degree sufficient to restrict the maneuver of an armored unit. (17)

(13) A-3, p. 4-5; (14) A-4, Brittany, and personal experience, self; (15, 16) A-4, Brittany; (17) Personal knowledge, self.

THE MARCH TO BREST*

First Day

When orders were received from VIII Corps at 0400 1 August for the 6th Armored Division to move through the Brittany Peninsula and capture Brest, the Reserve Command was in the process of relieving the 4th Armored Division and securing a bridgehead at Pontaubault. The remainder of the division was disposed in an assembly area immediately north of Avranches. (18)

Speed was the essential factor, as specified by the corps order. Two routes were prescribed as guides for the division to follow on its march to Brest, but the directive stated that major centers of resistance were to be avoided. (19)

The division policy at this time was to employ the Reserve Command Headquarters to control combat troops temporarily held in division reserve, and to carry out defensive missions which did not require the complex command organization provided by a combat command headquarters. Notwithstanding this policy, there were many times when it was necessary for the Reserve Command to undertake offensive action. This was the first time. (20)

There was a bottleneck through Avranches and at Pontaubault Bridge to the south. Only one route was available to the division until Pontaubault was passed and the turn to the west negotiated. This route was occupied by the Reserve Command. Therefore, the command was directed to advance southwest at the head of the division and secure a bridgehead at Pontorson, thereby enabling the remainder of the division to clear the bottleneck and develop on a broad front. (21)

The Reserve Command moved out and met sharp resistance at Bree, a small village approximately ten miles short of the objective Pontorson. After a well camouflaged enemy let the entire advance guard pass through the village, he opened fire on the leading battery of self-propelled artillery

*See Map A; (18) A-1, p. 6 and personal experience, self; (19) A-1, p. 8; (20) A-1, p. 7; (21) A-1, p. 8 and personal experience, self.

which was marching at the head of the main body. Three of the guns were destroyed by enemy fire before the flying armored column could deploy. After a three-hour battle, the strong point was reduced with a loss to the enemy of an unknown number killed, 90 prisoners taken, and 3 batteries of horse-drawn artillery and one 88mm gun destroyed. Upon reaching Pontorson, Reserve Command established the bridgehead without incident, although it experienced some difficulty in clearing the town of snipers who were firmly entrenched in the buildings. The mopping up was completed by dark and the command was ordered to halt for the night. (22)

In the meantime, the remainder of the division, which had been north of Avranches early in the morning, was slowly moving through the bottleneck. Combat Command A passed through Pontaubault early in the afternoon, swung wide to the south, and made an uncontested crossing of the Le Couesnon River south of the Reserve Command's bridgehead over the same river at Pontorson. That meant two good routes west were under the division's control. (23)

Combat Command B cleared Avranches in the evening and closed in bivouac just east of Pontorson shortly after midnight, under cover of the Reserve Command. (24)

Second Day

Orders were issued by the Division Commander to continue the march at daylight 2 August. The general plan envisioned the two combat commands marching abreast on parallel routes; CCA was to move the southern route to be known hereafter as route "B"; CCB would take the northern route "A". The Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron Mechanized was ordered to cover the front. Division Reserve Command, organized with the same proportion of tank, engineer, infantry, and artillery units as the combat commands, was to follow on whichever route seemed more feasible. Division Trains, composed of the organic service elements of the division plus three non-organic

(22) A-1, p. 10 and personal experience, self; (23) A-3, p. 4; (24) A-1, p. 10.

Quartermaster Truck Companies and an Engineer Treadway Bridge Company, was given the mission of following the division closely and supplying the fuel and ammunition so vital to the existence of an armored division. In addition to this, Division Trains were to perform their normal service functions of maintenance and evacuation. For the protection of these service elements, Division Trains were reinforced with one company of tanks, one company of armored infantry, two batteries of field artillery, and AAA and tank destroyer units. (25)

Sunrise, 2 August, found the entire division "in the open", entirely unrestricted by highways congested with hordes of troops and material as had been the case just twenty-four hours previously. There were no longer road priorities, boundaries, and inadequate assembly areas to confine the division. At this time the 6th Armored Division could be likened to a powerful serpent constricted and tense, ready to strike out at its prey. (26)

On this day the advance toward the west began in earnest. CCB passed through Division Reserve Command at dawn, as ordered, and encountered only minor resistance from small groups of enemy who were obviously surprised to find that they were being overrun by an American armored division. Enemy tanks were known to be in the area, since the column had been following their tracks for some time, but enemy infantry prevented reconnaissance patrols from definitely locating them. By mid-morning the advanced elements of the combat command reached the outskirts of Dinan and became engaged with the enemy personnel manning the outer defenses of that city. Strong and determined enemy reaction to probing patrols substantiated earlier reports from G-2 and French underground personnel that Dinan was strongly held. When it became apparent during the morning that the city could not be taken without a major engagement, the Division Commander gave instructions for the combat command to disengage the German force and bypass Dinan to the south. Since some units of the command were committed in an attack of the

(25) A-1, p. 9 and statement of CO Division Trains to author; (26) personal experience, self.

outposts, the Combat Commander felt that it would be less costly to continue the attack and capture the immediate objective, than to break off contact in the middle of the attack. The objective was taken at approximately 1500. During the reorganization and preparation for movement, friendly planes bombed and strafed Dinan, and artillery fire was delivered on the city in order to deceive the enemy as to the future plans of the command. All of CCB moved out at approximately 1800 covered by a rear guard. Two enemy tanks attacked the left (north) flank of the column soon after the march began, but friendly air and one M7 tank destroyer took them under fire, destroying one and causing the other to withdraw without inflicting any damage to the column. The combat command bivouacked near Becherel for the night, closing at 2200. (27)

CCA, moving on route "B", met no organized resistance as it marched west. After covering approximately thirty miles the command closed in bivouac for the night between Medreac and Quedillac. (28)

Because of the threat to route "A" from the strong enemy concentration in Dinan to the north, Reserve Command switched to route "B", following CCA. The only action encountered by Reserve Command on this day was that of a rescue party sent out at the request of a naval officer to extricate fifty sailors and several news correspondents who had been incarcerated by the Germans when they attempted to enter St. Malo. These unfortunates had become confused as to the position of the American forces, and did not realize that this city was still held by the enemy. After a short fight, one platoon of light tanks and one platoon of engineers were successful in rescuing this party at the town of Dol, just southeast of St. Malo. (29)

Third Day

All elements of the division had been on the move since commitment on 27 July without any rest whatever. Because troops were fatigued, the Division Commander ordered the advance on 3 August to begin at noon.

(27) A-1, p. 11-12; (28) A-1, p. 11; (29) A-1, p. 12-13 and personal experience, self.

Accordingly, CCA moved out at this time, and after approximately one hour's march failed to make a proper turn at the town of Gael, thereby getting off their route. The command continued south on the wrong route for five miles to Mauron where it encountered a well organized enemy battalion whose resistance caused considerable deployment. The Combat Commander decided that it would be more practical to defeat the enemy and regain his route by passing through Mauron, than to withdraw his troops already engaged and bypass the place. The subsequent attack was accomplished successfully and the command went into bivouac in the vicinity of Gael for the night. (30)

Combat Command B continued the advance to Brest on the north route, meeting minor resistance at Broons where the advance guard ran into an enemy force apparently attempting to escape to the south. This enemy was quickly disposed of and CCB proceeded west at a rapid rate. Because of the delay to CCA in the south, this combat command had gone some twenty miles west of CCA. On order of the Division Commander, CCB halted at 1900, eight miles east of Loudeac. (31)

Because of the fight on route "B", and since the road net favored the maneuver, Reserve Command switched from the south to the north route and followed CCB. (32)

While observing the attack of CCA at 1600, the Division Commander received an order by officer courier written in long hand on scratch paper by the Corps Commander. This order directed all westward movement of the division to halt at once, and that a force be dispatched to capture Dinan (which had been bypassed by CCB the previous day). This involved a rearward movement of considerable distance, as the division was well past Dinan. It was not until 1900 that orders from the Division Commander reached CCB directing them to halt in place, thereby creating a wide gap between elements of the division. (33)

A plan was immediately made to comply with the Corps Commander's order.

(30) A-1, p. 13-14; (31) A-1, p. 14; (32) A-1, p. 14 and personal experience, self; (33) A-3, p. 6 and A-1, p. 13.

The Commander of Combat Command A was directed to leave his tanks and infantry in place in the vicinity of Gael. Taking his own artillery, he was to proceed northward, pick up the troops of Reserve Command which were between him and Dinan, and move on Dinan from the southwest on 4 August. An unsuccessful attempt was made to coordinate the attack on Dinan with a force known as "Task Force 'A'", commanded by Brigadier General Earnest, believed to be operating somewhere east of Dinan at this time. (34)

Fourth Day

Combat Command A, leaving all its troops with the exception of artillery in an assembly area in the vicinity of Gael, moved north to comply with VIII Corps orders for the attack on Dinan. The command picked up units of Division Reserve Command according to plan, and was proceeding northeast on its assigned mission when it was halted by division order. The reason for this was that the Army Commander had arrived at the Division CP shortly before, ordering the attack on Dinan abandoned and the advance on Brest resumed at once. CCA, returning the proper units to Division Reserve Command, was reconstituted with its original troops and continued the movement toward Brest on route "B". (35)

CCB resumed its march, but was delayed by a blown bridge and mined fords at Loudeac. At 1800, crossings of the river at Loudeac were opened and the command continued west. (36)

Reserve Command followed CCB on the northern route without incident. (37)

Simultaneous with the Army Commander's visit to the division, similar orders were received from VIII Corps cancelling the attack on Dinan. This double change in orders necessitated the entire afternoon of 4 August to be spent in reestablishment of commands. Altogether there was a loss of twenty-four hours, during which time the division made no westward movement. This delay of one day was to have great influence on later action, as it permitted German reinforcements, including a new commander, to reach Brest.

(34) A-1, p. 13; (35) A-1, p. 14-15 and personal experience, self; (36) A-1, p. 15; (37) A-1, p. 15 and personal experience, self.

The reason for the changes in orders was never made known to the Division Commander. (38)

Attempting to regain lost time, all elements of the division marched all night 4-5 August, halting only to refuel. Little opposition was encountered. Each combat command was delayed for a short time by one blown bridge on its route. The weather was clear, and the moon was bright and full, making it possible to move at night. The Army Commander had expressed a desire to have the 6th Armored Division at Brest Saturday night, and every effort was being exerted to comply with his wishes. (39)

Fifth Day

During the first days of the division's operation in the Brittany Peninsula, the FFI (French Forces of the Interior) had kept discreetly under cover. Gradually they caught the spirit of the rapid maneuver. At first they timidly waved; by Thursday, 4 August, they appeared in the streets with arms as soon as the armored column reached them; by now, 5 August, FFI road guides and guards were actually posted ahead of the division along the routes of advance. Until this time there was no definite information of the enemy. Resistance was where you found it. Now, these French underground forces began to furnish much valuable enemy information. Of course, as is the case with all material gathered from any intelligence sources, these reports had to be carefully evaluated, but for the most part they were very accurate. (40)

Based on information received from the French, it was learned that the town of Carhaix was strongly held by the German 2d Paratroop Division which had destroyed all bridges in the vicinity and were prepared to defend themselves in the city. The Division Commander ordered the town bypassed by CCB to the north and CCA to the south. (41)

Combat Command A circled Carhaix as directed, and headed for Huelgoat via Landelau and Plouye in order to regain its designated route.

(38) A-3, p. 6; (39) A-1, p. 15; A-3, p. 7; and personal experience, self;
(40) A-1, p. 15 and personal experience, self; (41) A-1, p. 15.

Reconnaissance elements ahead of the combat command passed through Huelgoat after a short skirmish with a few enemy in the town. The Reconnaissance Troop then turned west, getting back on the correct route, and after continuing for a short distance was stopped by an enemy position consisting of infantry and artillery. In the meantime, after the Reconnaissance Troop cleared Huelgoat and before the advance guard of CCA reached the town, a large German force moved into town from the northeast. A stiff fight ensued with tanks, infantry, and artillery used to overcome the resistance. The enemy with which CCA was engaged at this time was the same enemy that had been driven into Huelgoat from the northeast by Reserve Command. This action which exerted pressure on the enemy from opposite directions was initially uncoordinated. Neither command had knowledge of the other's location or of the attack. However, radio communication was established between the Division Commander, who was with CCA, and the Division G-3, who was with Reserve Command, resulting in coordination of effort and a successful attack. During the evening CCA passed through Huelgoat and halted for the night in the vicinity of Kerbrau. (42)

CCB bypassed Carhaix to the north and encountered an enemy force east of Le Cloitre. The opposition was overcome without difficulty, and the movement of the command continued westward. Information obtained from prisoners taken in this action indicated that they were the leading elements of the 851st Infantry Regiment, 343d Infantry Division (German), marching to St. Brienc, a coastal city approximately fifty miles east. The advance guard made contact with the enemy again when it reached Le Cloitre, receiving light artillery and heavy mortar fire. Since resistance could not be cleared before dark, the command went into bivouac for the night in an area east of the town. (43)

Reserve Command was ordered to switch to route "B", via Poullaouen, Plouye, and Huelgoat. The objective of this maneuver was to bypass Carhaix without having to swing as far to the north as CCB, thereby avoiding the

(42) A-1, p. 15-16; (43) A-1, p. 16.

resistance which was developing on the northern detour. At 1405 this command moved out, and almost three hours later made contact with the enemy in the vicinity of Poullaouen. The resistance was quickly overcome and the march continued toward Huelgoat. Approaching this town, the column ran headlong into a deep defile in the woods east of Huelgoat. Heavy small arms and artillery fire was received, but the column could not leave the road because of the steep banks on either side. Armored infantry dismounted from their halftracks and deployed in the woods to the right of the highway. With artillery supporting them, the infantry was able to force the enemy to withdraw into Huelgoat, thus eliminating the damaging fire which was falling on the armored vehicles caught in the defile. At this time coordination was made with CCA, whose action with the same enemy at the same time has been described. Reserve Command was ordered to reverse its direction of march, get out of the defile, and set up a perimeter defense on the high ground near Poullaouen. It is easy to say that a long armored column on a narrow road in a deep defile will reverse its direction, but it is in fact a tremendous task. The orders were complied with, and the Reserve Command had no more contact with the enemy this day. (44)

Sixth Day

The first pinch for gasoline was felt by the division. Quartermaster Truck Companies, reinforced by tanks, infantry, and artillery, had the task of traveling round trips of up to four hundred miles through enemy-held territory in order to supply the division. Army had pushed a Class V supply point as far west as Pontivy, but this was only about one-half way through the peninsula. For other supplies it was necessary for trucks to go all the way to Avranches. Division Trains installations were subject to sporadic attacks, and personnel from the division band and the Engineer Treadway Bridge Company were required to guard supply dumps and fight off

(44) A-1, p. 16-17 and personal experience, self.

these attacks. Enemy aircraft was active against the trains, but this had been foreseen and provided for by the attachment of two batteries of anti-aircraft artillery. This AAA protected convoys enroute to army supply points, and guarded Division Trains marching with the main armored column, rendering our losses negligible and accounting for many enemy planes shot down. (45)

Evacuation of wounded and prisoners of war was almost impossible. The division had thirty-nine ambulances attached for this operation, which were supplemented by 2½-ton trucks for the evacuation of casualties. These vehicles traveled their 18 to 20 hour trips to the rear through enemy-held sections with only the protection of their Red Crosses of the Medical Corps which were always respected by the Germans during this campaign. The problem of evacuating the prisoners of war was solved by turning them over to the FFI which seemed only too glad to accept the responsibility for their care. (46)

Information from French forces that Morlaix and Landivisiau were strongly held by the Germans substantiated intelligence to the same effect already in the possession of the division. In order to avoid these strong points, both columns were directed to turn north and pass between these two cities, then out back to the west, striking Brest from the north. (47)

CCA followed a very poor route over country roads which were not shown on the maps which were being used. This caused many short stops for route reconnaissance, and at 1900, while on one of these halts, several casualties were suffered from enemy artillery fire. However, no vehicles were lost, and the command pushed on toward Brest. The Reconnaissance Troop, while attempting to locate routes ahead of the column, became engaged with a superior force at Chateauneuf, and after a severe fight, withdrew to bypass that town. (48)

(45) A-3, p. 7, A-1, p. 46, A-2, p. 46; (46) A-1, p. 46 and personal experience, self; (47) A-1, p. 17 and personal experience, self; (48) A-1, p. 18.

CCB found that enemy encountered at Le Cloitre the afternoon before had evacuated the town under cover of darkness. The march was resumed as directed by division headquarters via a route designed to bypass Morlaix to the south and Pleyber Christ to the east. At 1015 a strongly defended roadblock was encountered in a defile six miles south of Morlaix. Three small enemy tanks attacked the column but were destroyed by friendly fire. Enemy personnel, from emplacements on the high ground on both sides of the defile, placed small arms fire and threw grenades on the advance guard, inflicting several casualties. A new advance guard was constituted, a route through Pleyber Christ cleared, and the march continued to the north. On reaching highway GC19 near Pennhoat the column turned west on the road to Lesneven where enemy resistance was again encountered. An ultimatum demanding their surrender was sent to the German force by a French volunteer. No reply was received, so the town was attacked and the enemy driven out by 2200. (49)

Reserve Command, which on the previous day had switched from route "A" to get behind CCA on route "B", was shifted back to the northern route again. The reason for this move was to avoid the poor roads and extremely slow progress encountered by Combat Command A this day. (50)

Seventh Day

Plans were formulated by the division for closing in on Brest during this last day of the long march. The city was known to be strongly fortified and garrisoned by a large number of men, but it was thought that by striking swiftly from an unexpected direction, complete surprise could be attained. Provided the enemy could be caught off balance, it was likely that the momentum of the division, hitting with three armored columns simultaneously, would carry it into Brest with little opposition, thus forcing a quick, successful conclusion to the maneuver. It was decided that greatest success would be achieved by an approach in three columns

(49) A-1, p. 18; (50) A-1, p. 17 and personal experience, self.

from the northwest, north, and northeast. CCB, the right (west) column, was to attack southeast from Bourg-Blanc. Reserve Command, in the center, would break off from CCA's column and approach south from Plouvien. CCA was to come in through St. Thonan and Guipavas, attacking southwest. (51)

Combat Command A bypassed Landivisiau to the north, continuing the march in a westerly direction. During the day hostile resistance increased, and the column received light artillery fire south of St. Thonan. Heavier artillery fire was encountered west of Kersaint. Because of bad road conditions and enemy resistance, the command halted some distance north of its assigned position, making no more movement this day. (52)

Combat Command B resumed its march at 0100 following a successful engagement at Lesneven. Upon leaving this town, more intense enemy activity was encountered, causing the commander to cease all movement until dawn. An assembly area east of Lesneven was occupied for the remainder of the night, and the column moved out once again at 0800. Considerable small arms fire was received south of Lesneven. Plabennec was bypassed by circling it to the north and west. An enemy force was cleared from the town of Plouvien, which it was necessary to control in order to secure Reserve Command's route south into the city of Brest. The remainder of CCA's movement was uneventful until the intersection with highway GC26 was reached west of Bourg-Blanc. Elements of the advance guard were allowed to pass this crossroad and proceed to a point just east of Milizac before encountering strong resistance in the form of artillery, mortar, and small arms fire. A large antiaircraft warning system and observation post were discovered in the vicinity of the intersection at highway GC26, and upon the reduction of that installation, enemy fire ceased and was not resumed in the area. Forward elements of the combat command moved south, coming in view of an observation post directing fire from the vicinity of Brest. These units were withdrawn and the shelling ceased. (53)

(51) A-1, p. 18-19; A-3, p. 6; and personal knowledge, self; (52) A-1, p. 19; (53) A-1, p. 19-20.

Reserve Command followed CCB's route as far as Plouvien, where it turned south and proceeded to an assembly position and halted on order. (54)

It was impossible for the three columns of the division to strike Brest on 7 August as had been hoped, because of Combat Command A's failure to come up on the left to its assigned position in time for the final assault to take place. A study of the situation was made during the night of 7-8 August and it was determined that a coordinated attack, employing the entire power of the division, would be necessary to take Brest, and that this attack would have to be made quickly or even more force would be required. (55)

THE BATTLE AT BREST*

Plans were made for a coordinated attack on Brest, and orders issued early 8 August for the attack to be made at dawn 9 August. In the meantime, during the early morning of 8 August, the Division G-2 and an interpreter entered the city in a quarter-ton truck draped with a white flag to present the German Commander with the demand for the surrender of Brest: (56)

HEADQUARTERS, 6TH ARMORED DIVISION
Office of the Commanding General

APO 256, US ARMY
8 August 1944

MEMORANDUM:

TO : Officer Commanding German Forces in Brest

1. The United States Army, Naval, and Air Force troops are in position to destroy the garrison of Brest.
2. This memorandum constitutes an opportunity for you to surrender in the face of these overwhelming forces to representatives of the United States Government and avoid the unnecessary sacrifice of lives.
3. I shall be very glad to receive your formal surrender and make the detailed arrangements any time prior to 1500 this date.

(55) A-1, p. 20 and personal knowledge, self; *See Map B; (56) A-1, p. 20, A-3, p. 3.

The officer who brings this memorandum will be glad to guide you and necessary members of your staff, not exceeding six, to my headquarters.

R. W. GROW
Major General, USA
Commanding

Unfortunately the command of Brest had passed on the previous day to the Commanding General of a German Paratroop Division who, with his division, had managed to reach the city from the south just in time to substantially reinforce the defense. The German general was polite but refused to consider surrender. (57)

The tired troops prepared for the assault on the following morning. Many changes in the assignments of troops to combat commands were necessary. Reserve Command had fought only two battles of any consequence (Bree, 1 August, and Huelgoat, 5 August) since the march began; therefore, the Commander of CCB was assigned those troops for the attack, and the units that had been assigned to CCB were redesignated Division Reserve. All artillery (5 battalions) was gathered under centralized control and occupied positions to support the attack. (58)

The division plan of attack called for Combat Command A to attack in a southwesterly direction through Guipavas; Combat Command B was to attack in the same direction and on the right of CCA; Reserve Command would follow CCA. (59)

All day long units were shifted to attack positions, resulting in heavy enemy artillery fire being placed on troops whenever they moved or when they came under observation of the Germans. Many vehicular and personnel casualties were sustained, particularly in Combat Command A. Division Trains were attacked from the north when they moved into an assembly area near Plouvien. Protective units with the trains beat off this attack, and the command proceeded to its bivouac area. As the day grew later, small arms and artillery fire in increasing amounts was coming

(57) A-1, p. 20; A-3, p. 3; (58) A-3, p. 7-8 and personal experience, self;
(59) A-3, p. 8.

in from the rear (north). (60)

In the early evening the situation confronting the division was as follows: CCB, newly organized with troops formerly in Reserve Command, was in position for the attack; CCA, which had suffered severe casualties from enemy artillery, was not in position and probably would be unable to be in position to attack by daylight; the cavalry was covering the division rear, but it was evident that a serious threat was building up in the north. The absence of the artillery observation aircraft, all of which had been lost, made it impossible to determine just what was pressing from the rear. However, this mystery was cleared up at 2230 hours when the Commanding General of the 266th Infantry Division (German) drove his car into the rear of one of the 6th Armored Division's artillery positions by accident and was taken prisoner. The entire 266th Division was attempting to fight their way into Brest. This was the unit that the 6th Armored Division had bypassed at Morlaix. (61)

The Division Commander immediately cancelled the attack order and directed the combat commands and Reserve Command, which had not yet moved from the west flank, to reverse their directions, leaving only a covering force to face Brest. All three commands were to move north at daylight to attack and destroy the German 266th Division which was now located in the vicinity of Plouvien and Bourg-Blanc. All night small arms fire burst from every hedgerow around the division. Activity around the division CP and PW enclosure was particularly heavy because of efforts by the Germans to liberate their captured Lieutenant General. (62)

During the ensuing battle on 9 August, the German division was completely destroyed in what was described by the Commanding General of the 6th Armored Division as a massacre. CCB hit the main body consisting of three German regiments in the Besquelen area, while casualty depleted CCA and Reserve Command completed the debacle by striking at the enemy's flanks

(60) A-1, p. 20; A-3, p. 8; and personal experience, self; (61) A-1, p. 20-21; A-3, p. 8; and personal experience, self; (62) A-3, p. 8 and personal experience, self.

at Plouvien and Bourg-Blanc, respectively. Artillery units of the division had the unique experience of having some batteries firing north, while others were firing south against Brest. Fighter - bombers supported the attack on this day by strafing enemy columns to the north which had not had sufficient time to gain cover or properly dispose for combat. Friendly aircraft completely wiped out a column of enemy trains and artillery on the Plouvien-Lesneven Road. In the meantime, units of the division which were covering Brest were being hard-pressed from the south by German troops from Brest attempting unsuccessfully to come to the aid of the beleaguered 266th Division. The 6th Armored Division gas dump was raided by German paratroops who were able to burn 5000 gallons of fuel, but who were soon driven off by members of the division band serving as guards for the dump. (63)

During the afternoon of 9 August the first infantry reinforcements reached the division. One battalion of the 28th Infantry, 8th Division, arrived from the Rennes area. This unit was given the mission of securing the commanding ground near Guipavas to cover the renewal of the interrupted attack on Brest. Task Force "A" (previously referred to in this monograph on the third day of the march to Brest) also reached the vicinity of Lesneven the same day, but was unable to assist the division in the attack on Brest because of other commitments. However, this force was of great assistance in the protection of the division rear. (64)

Following the attack on the German 266th Division, the 6th Armored Division went into an assembly area near Plouvien out of range of observed artillery fire, and for the first time since 27 July had an opportunity to rest and reservice. The Division Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron established screen to the south and flanks, while the attached battalion of the 28th Infantry Regiment was assigned the task of securing the line Gousencou-Guipavas in force to cover positions from which artillery could reach the center of Brest. (65)

(63) A-1, p. 22, 23, 24; A-3, p. 8; personal experience, self; (64) A-3, p. 8-9; (65) A-1, p. 24; personal experience, self.

Plans were again made for an attack on Brest. Careful intelligence studies were made by G-2 and distributed to all units for further study by all commanders and staffs. Combat Command A was given the mission of seizing a strong jump-off position in the vicinity of Guipavas. The purpose of this operation was to secure a line of departure for the attack against what seemed to be the weakest defenses of the city, and from which position the entire operation could be supported without displacement of artillery. (66)

On 10, 11, and 12 August, small forces were dispatched to small coast defense towns to the north and northwest where the surrender of many Germans was effected. Dispersed elements of the 266th Division were rounded up on these days as well as a large number of troops which had been stationed in the local villages surrounding Brest. (67)

Delays incident to reorganization and redistribution of troops precluded a coordinated attack by CCA to accomplish its assigned mission until 12 August. This attack began at 0800 and after a very hard day's fight the command consolidated its position 200 yards short of the Gousenou-Guipavas highway. At this time, the command was given a change of mission to contain the enemy troops in Brest. (68)

Before readjustments in the division for the coming assault on Brest had been completed, orders were received at 1900, 12 August, for the 6th Armored Division to leave one combat command to contain the fortress city, and proceed to Lorient on another mission. Further attempts to capture Brest were not destined for the 6th Armored Division. VIII Corps was on its way up the peninsula with three infantry divisions (2d, 8th and 29th) and Corps Troops to undertake the assault on Brest. (69)

Combat Command A, already committed in a limited objective attack to seize a line of departure, was designated as the combat command to remain in the containing mission. CCB and Reserve Command made preparations to move out on their new missions on 13 August, thus terminating the first campaign for the 6th Armored Division. (70)

(66) A-1, p. 24, 25; (67) A-1, p. 25; personal experience, self; (68) A-1, p. 27-28; (69) A-3, p. 9; A-1, p. 28; (70) A-1, p. 28.

As a sequel to this narrative, it is interesting to note that the VIII Corps arrived in position to attack Brest on 18 August, assuming command of CCA, 6th Armored Division, at that time. Brest fell five weeks later after the combined efforts of three infantry divisions and other corps troops had been brought to bear upon it in a long siege. At that time forty thousand German troops were taken as prisoners from the city, to say nothing of the untold numbers killed in the stubborn defense of the fortress. (71)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing this operation, one must not be blinded by the spectacular achievements of the 6th Armored Division in its drive up the Brittany Peninsula. The fact that the division failed to accomplish its principal mission, that of capturing Brest, cannot be overlooked. It is with this fact in mind that a study of the campaign is undertaken.

In the first place, it is worthwhile to consider the reasons for the mission as it was assigned to the 6th Armored Division. Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR, says in "My Three Years with Eisenhower" that even before the invasion of Normandy the planning staff for Operation Overlord had decided on the operation: "Our plan is to get sufficient ports in Normandy and Brittany to supply forces of proper size to continue the drive into Germany." Therefore, the strategic importance of Brest, second largest seaport in France, to the overall allied campaign on the European Continent justified this expenditure of effort. Had it not been felt that the port was needed in order to support the allied armies, the Brittany Peninsula could have been blocked off at its base, thus isolating and rendering ineffective the enemy troops within. If the plan of cutting off the peninsula had been adopted, it would have required far less troops than were needed to capture and physically occupy the area. There is one more factor that may have been taken into consideration by the planning staff in arriving at the decision to capture the Brittany Peninsula and its ports.

(71) A-1, p. 28; A-7, September Operations.

It was at these coastal cities that the Germans maintained their submarine bases from which U-boats constantly menaced trans-Atlantic shipping. With these bases eliminated, troop ships and supply convoys could ply the North Atlantic in comparative safety.

Presented with such a strategically important mission, the 6th Armored Division was charged with a great responsibility. Never before had an armored division been given such a wide open field for exploitation. The corps order stated, in effect, that the division was to get to Brest as best it could, bypassing major centers of resistance enroute. Speed was essential, as it was thought that only by striking swiftly could the Germans be caught off balance and the city taken without a long siege.

The march to Brest was brilliantly executed. Flying armored columns hit resistance, bounced, detoured the strong points, and sped on. Speed of movement and evasive tactics prevented the enemy from having knowledge of the exact location of the columns and consolidating his defenses to meet the onslaught. In many cases German units occupying towns in Brittany were bypassed and cut off before they realized that the Americans were upon them. Only in the coast cities did the enemy offer well organized and coordinated defense. The attitude of the Germans was altogether defensive, and it was obvious that they were desperately trying to withdraw to Brest in order to mass their strength before the arrival of the 6th Armored Division.

In dealing with an armored division in an exploitation, logistics cannot be disregarded. As an example of the magnitude of this problem, the gasoline required to fill the fuel tanks of all vehicles in an armored division amounts to 122,948 gallons. To meet these problems, supply and service personnel accompanied the combat elements of the division throughout the operation. When the division reached Brest, the distance to the nearest army supply point was 205 miles, most of which was through territory occupied by enemy pockets of resistance which had been bypassed. The fact that the division was never without food, fuel or ammunition is a tribute to the

resourcefulness of Division Trains. In addition to the tasks of supplying and servicing combat units of the division, the trains personnel were required to protect themselves and their installations from frequent enemy attack from both the air and the ground.

The 6th Armored Division arrived at Brest with negligible casualties, complete unity, and in good condition to fight. But the mission of capturing Brest was not accomplished. Any reasons given as explanation for the failure of the mission are pure conjecture by the author. However, these possible reasons are enumerated below for consideration:

1st: On the third day of the march to Brest, Combat Command A missed their proper route, which resulted in their becoming engaged with an enemy strong point at Mauron. Rather than extricate his already engaged troops, bypass the resistance, and regain the correct route, the commander decided to launch a coordinated attack on the position and defeat the enemy. The delay caused by this deployment and subsequent reorganization lost an estimated ten hours time during which the south column could have been moving west.

2d: On the same day, 3 August, orders were received from the Corps Commander directing the division's westward movement to halt. The order further directed that a force would be dispatched to capture Dinan, which had been bypassed the previous day. Reorganization of commands was necessary for compliance with these instructions. Having accomplished the reorganization by morning 4 August, the division proceeded on the new mission, but before this could be accomplished, the Army Commander arrived on the scene, cancelled the attack on Dinan, and ordered the resumption of the march to Brest immediately. The resultant delay caused by these two changes of orders was at least twenty-four hours.

3d: Reserve Command was ambushed in a defile on 5 August, the fifth day of the march, and had to countermarch in order to extricate itself from this untenable position. This reverse in direction caused a delay of approximately six hours.

4th: All three combat commands were ordered to be in position to assault Brest on 7 August. Because of poor routes and slight enemy resistance, CGA failed to accomplish this, while CCB and Reserve Command, having traveled longer routes against stronger enemy resistance, hit the outer defenses of the city as scheduled. It was proved later that the weakest defenses of Brest were along the entrances from the northeast, the route designated for CGA to follow. Conversely, the approaches used by CCB and Reserve Command from the northwest and north, respectively, were the most strongly defended. Because of CGA's failure to reach its assigned position on 7 August, it was impossible for the division to be ready to launch a coordinated attack on Brest before 9 August, thereby allowing the Germans sufficient time to alert their defending troops.

5th: The total of the delays in the 6th Armored Division's arrival at Brest enumerated above is estimated conservatively at forty-eight hours. Whether or not these delays were justified is a question beyond the scope of this analysis. However, if the division had been able to strike the port city from three directions simultaneously two days earlier than it did, there is a strong possibility that the operation might have had a different outcome. It must be remembered that in a mission of this type an armored division must rely on speed, mass, and shock action to catch the enemy off balance and defeat him before he has an opportunity to recover from his initial surprise. It is definitely known that at least one German division was able to get into Brest to reinforce their defenses during the twenty-four hours preceding the arrival of the 6th Armored. Inspection of the fortifications surrounding the city disclosed the fact that they were being constructed up until the moment of the arrival of U. S. forces. Forty-eight hours might have made a difference.

6th: Finally, the division was in position to attack Brest at daylight 9 August, when the arrival of the German 266th Division forced the 6th Armored Division to reverse its direction 180 degrees, attack, and destroy the German force which was pressing in from the rear. Before reorganization

was completed and the attack on Brest resumed, orders were received from VIII Corps assigning a completely new mission to the division.

In summary, it can be said that the 6th Armored Division performed excellently that part of its mission to which armored divisions are well suited: that of exploitation deep in enemy rear areas, disrupting lines of communications, isolating enemy units, creating confusion, and demoralizing the enemy. On the other hand, the division found it difficult to accomplish those missions which are not considered suitable for armor: attacks on well fortified positions and strongly defended cities. The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this summary is that the present principles of employment of armored divisions as taught by the United States Army are sound.

During the period covered by this operation the division losses were: 130 killed; 398 wounded; 70 missing in action; 50 combat vehicles destroyed; 62 other types of vehicles destroyed; 11 guns destroyed. Enemy losses are impossible to estimate, since the enemy dead could not be counted during the rapid movement of the division, and because so many German prisoners of war were turned over to the FFI by the capturing units. However, the prisoners that were processed by the Division Provost Marshal for the period numbered 3,715.

LESSONS

The lessons which can be extracted from this operation are not new. They are enumerated herein for emphasis:

1. The objective must be kept in mind at all times. A commander must allow nothing to divert him from his assigned mission.
2. Surprise is essential to the success of an armored maneuver deep in enemy-held territory.
3. An armored unit in an exploitation mission must continually provide for all around security since it is vulnerable to attack from any direction. However, the rapid advance of an armored column against a less

mobile enemy is automatic flank protection, and only when the column halts must additional security to the flanks be provided.

4. The principle of simplicity is especially applicable to orders given to an armored commander when he is assigned a mission of exploitation. Higher commanders are rarely, if ever, able to supervise the execution of the orders, and because of this the order should be a mission type, allowing the armored commander great latitude in the accomplishment of the mission.

5. Rapid and aggressive movement is essential to the accomplishment of a mission of exploitation. Unnecessary delays before reaching the objective lessen the chances for success.

6. A highly mobile armored column, operating against a less mobile enemy, is only playing into the hands of the enemy if it allows itself to be slowed down each time it comes to an enemy strong point. In most cases enemy resistance evaporates when bypassed.

7. When an armored column is stopped short of the objective by enemy resistance, deployment must be automatic. Everyone must be trained to work together as a team to reduce the obstacle without the necessity for commands and instructions.

8. It is absolutely necessary that all personnel of an armored division know how to fight, for the elements are just as vulnerable to enemy action as combat units, especially when the division is engaged in an exploitation.

9. To march an armored column into a defile without prior reconnaissance is to invite disaster.