

NORTHERN FRANCE



The U.S. Army Campaigns
of World War II

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by David W. Hogan. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

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General, United States Army
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Northern France

25 July–14 September 1944

As July 1944 entered its final week, Allied forces in Normandy faced, at least on the surface, a most discouraging situation. In the east, near Caen, the British and Canadians were making little progress against fierce German resistance. In the west, American troops were bogged down in the Norman hedgerows. These massive, square walls of earth, five feet high and topped by hedges, had been used by local farmers over the centuries to divide their fields and protect their crops and cattle from strong ocean winds. The Germans had turned these embankments into fortresses, canalizing the American advance into narrow channels, which were easily covered by antitank weapons and machine guns. The stubborn defenders were also aided by some of the worst weather seen in Normandy since the turn of the century, as incessant downpours turned country lanes into rivers of mud. By 25 July, the size of the Allied beachhead had not even come close to the dimensions that pre-D-day planners had anticipated, and the slow progress revived fears in the Allied camp of a return to the static warfare of World War I. Few would have believed that, in the space of a month and a half, Allied armies would stand triumphant at the German border.

Strategic Setting

The Allied assault on the German-held Continent had begun a month and a half earlier with the D-day landings on the Normandy beaches. Under the direction of General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery's 21 Army Group, British and Canadian troops had consolidated their beachhead west of the Orne River, while First U.S. Army's V and VII Corps linked up at the small port of Carentan. Both forces then prepared to meet the anticipated German effort to drive the invaders into the sea. Fortunately for the Allies, the Germans still expected a second landing near Calais, so they held back reserves for a major counterattack in that sector. Moreover, the few troops that the *German High Command* sent to Normandy were hampered by air and partisan raids on the French transportation system. Once the beachhead was secure, columns of infantry, tanks, and paratroopers under the U.S. VII Corps sealed the base of the Cotentin Peninsula and then turned north toward Cherbourg, where the Allies hoped to seize docks, warehouses, and




other port facilities critical to the buildup of their forces. Cherbourg fell on 26 June, but the Germans had carried out such a thorough demolition of harbor installations that many months would pass before the port could contribute much to the Allied effort.

Relying on the invasion beaches and a few minor coastal ports for the buildup of manpower and supplies, the Allies slowly expanded their lodgment southward during July. The British finally took Caen on 9 July, but Operation GOODWOOD, their much-anticipated attempt to break out into the tank country to the south, fell short of its goal. Meanwhile, Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley's First Army, after a reorganization following the fall of Cherbourg, had begun a slow advance south through the marshes and hedgerows across the base of the Cotentin. In the west, Maj. Gen. Troy H. Middleton's VIII Corps made scant headway moving south through the marshes along the coast, while, further inland, VII Corps could do little better despite the exhortations of its vigorous chief, Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins. To the east, Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow's V Corps held the Caumont sector, next to the British, while, between V and VII Corps, Maj. Gen. Charles H. Corlett's XIX Corps converged on St. Lo, a key transportation center and site of a German corps headquarters. Little more than rubble remained of St. Lo by 18 July, the day the 29th Infantry Division entered the city and placed the flag-draped body of Maj. Thomas D. Howie, who had been killed in the attack, at the debris-choked entrance to a church in memory of those who had fallen during the struggle. For all the sacrifices of Major Howie and 40,000 fallen comrades, twelve American divisions had advanced only seven miles during the previous seventeen days of combat.

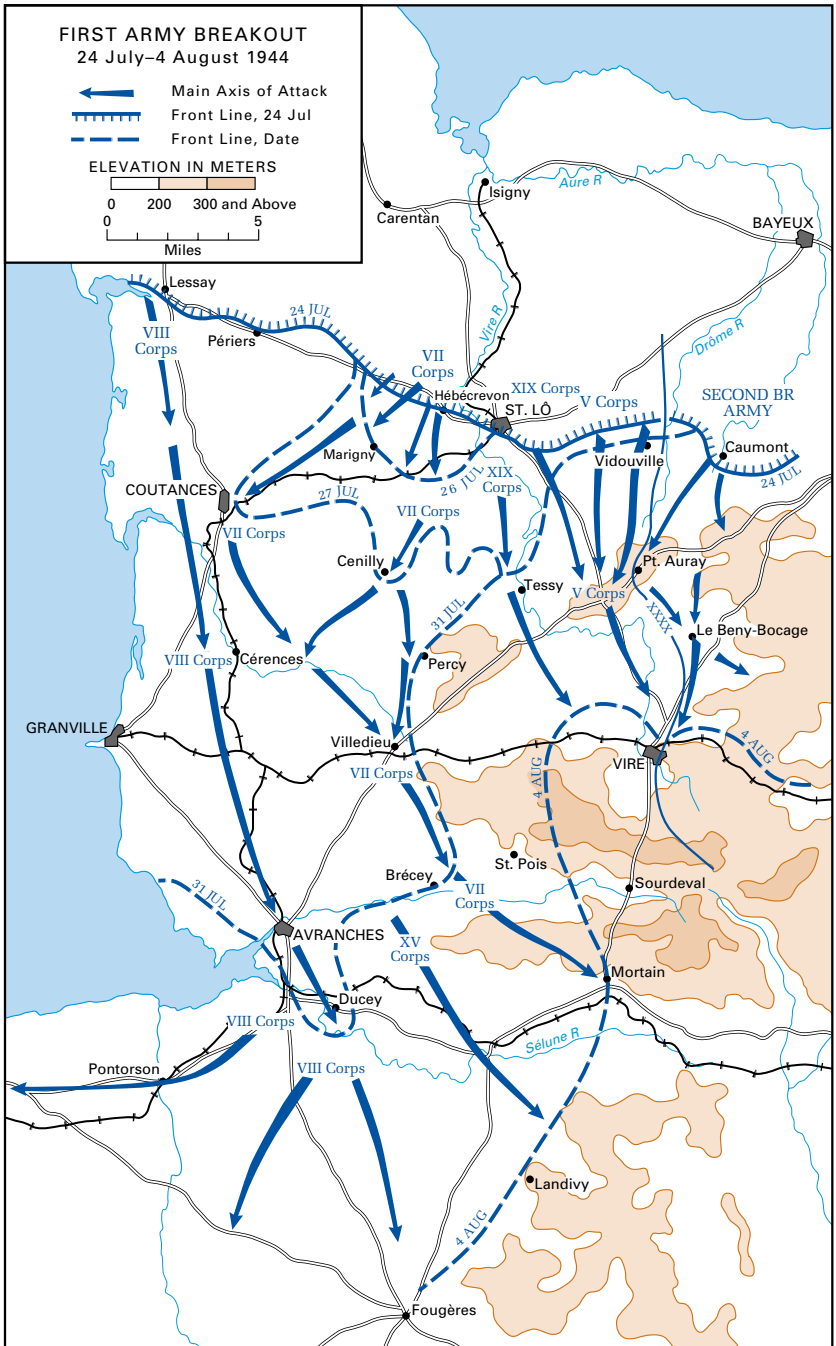
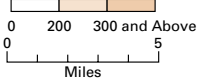
By 20 July, Bradley's First Army had reached a line running roughly from Lessay on the western coast of the Cotentin Peninsula east along the Periers–St. Lo road to Caumont, a distance of about forty miles. South of the road, First Army faced more of the hedgerows and small woods which had already hindered its advance, but the terrain rose in a series of east-west ridges to a more open, rolling plateau of dry ground, pastoral hillsides, and better, more plentiful roads. If Bradley's forces could break through the crust of the German defenses, they would reach terrain suitable for the kind of mobile warfare which the Americans preferred.

Under the OVERLORD plan, the Allies had hoped to hold all of Normandy west of the Seine and Brittany within ninety days of the invasion, but, as of 25 July, they were well short of that goal. Given the condition of Cherbourg and the lack of other major ports in the beach-head, possession of the Breton ports appeared critical to the ongoing

FIRST ARMY BREAKOUT
24 July-4 August 1944

-  Main Axis of Attack
-  Front Line, 24 Jul
-  Front Line, Date

ELEVATION IN METERS



buildup. Although the capacity of the invasion beaches had exceeded expectations, a major storm had wreaked havoc on ship-to-shore operations in late June, underlining the risk of relying on over-the-beach supply for too long. Within the relatively narrow lodgment, the one million American troops—including thirteen infantry and four armored divisions with their equipment and supplies—were encountering severe problems of congestion, and a serious shortage of artillery ammunition existed. Nevertheless, enemy resistance showed no signs of weakening on the battlefield.

Actually, the enemy situation was deteriorating, as the top Allied commanders knew from ULTRA intercepts of German radio traffic. Since D-day, the Germans had lost 250 tanks, 200 assault and antitank guns, and over 200,000 men in Normandy. Few of the lost men and equipment could be replaced quickly. Nor could the Germans match the Allied buildup in gasoline, ammunition, and other materiel, and the *German Air Force*, the famed *Luftwaffe*, had become almost invisible. Finally, unrest had shaken the *German High Command*. Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the able theater commander, had already resigned, and the charismatic Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, head of *Army Group B*, had been seriously injured when his staff car was strafed by an Allied plane. Having narrowly survived a coup attempt on 20 July, Adolf Hitler directed Rundstedt's successor, Field Marshal Guenther von Kluge, to stand firm, and Kluge had done his best to strengthen his lines, especially in the Caen area. Hitler wanted to continue to take advantage of the favorable defensive terrain in Normandy and avoid a disheartening retreat across an area with few defensible positions. Yet, as Kluge well knew, his troops would face a serious predicament in the event of a breakthrough, for they could not match Allied mobility. He and his chief subordinates—General Heinrich Eberbach, whose *Panzer Group West* faced the British, and General Paul Hausser, whose *Seventh Army* opposed the Americans—could only hope that the Allied will would finally begin to weaken in the face of the stubborn German defense.

Operations

In the command truck and an adjacent tent at First Army headquarters, Generals Bradley and Collins drew boundaries, set objectives, allotted troops, and otherwise prepared a plan to break through the German defenses. The Allies had already considered airborne or amphibious landings in Brittany but had rejected the notion as too



U.S. tanks pass through the wrecked streets of Coutances. (National Archives)

risky and a distraction from the main effort. Instead, Bradley turned to Operation COBRA, a major thrust south by Collins' VII Corps in the American center immediately following a heavy air bombardment to destroy the German defenses. Using the Periers–St. Lo road as a starting point, the 83d and 9th Infantry Divisions in the west, the 4th Infantry Division in the center, and the 30th Infantry Division in the east would seal the flanks of the penetration. After that, the motorized 1st Infantry Division, with an attached combat command from the 3d Armored Division, would then drive four miles south through the penetration to Marigny and then turn west ten miles to Coutances, cutting off most of the German *LXXXIV Corps*. The 3d Armored would guard the southern flank of this drive, while the 2d Armored Division, after exploiting through the gap, would establish more blocking positions to the southeast. Further east, XIX Corps, under Corlett, and V Corps, under Gerow, would launch smaller offensives to tie down German forces in their areas and prevent them from interfering with the main thrust.

First Army would rely heavily on preliminary strikes by the heavy and medium bombers of the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces to destroy defenses, disrupt communications and reserves, and reduce the enemy's will to fight. Although the "heavies" usually did not perform in a tactical role, Bradley wanted the overwhelming force which they could provide, and on 19 July he flew to Great Britain to work out the details with the air chiefs. To provide a margin of safety, the assembled generals agreed that the ground troops, just before the air strikes, would withdraw about 1,200 yards from their positions along the

Periers–St. Lo road, which would represent a dividing line between friend and foe. They disagreed, however, over the attack route that the aircraft would use. The air chiefs wanted a perpendicular approach, less exposed to antiaircraft fire and better able to hit simultaneously all the objectives in the target area. Bradley, however, favored a parallel approach to minimize the danger of bombs accidentally hitting his troops. Both parties apparently thought the other had accepted their views—a misunderstanding that would have dire consequences.

While the generals conferred, their subordinates were making their own preparations for the coming attack. After over a month in the hedgerows, American troops had become more aggressive, combat-wise, and skillful in their use of combined arms. One cavalry sergeant, using steel from German beach obstacles, welded prongs onto the nose of a tank, enabling the “rhinoceros” tank to plow straight through a hedgerow rather than climb the embankment and thereby expose its underbelly to German antitank weapons. An impressed Bradley directed the installment of the device on as many tanks as possible before COBRA. American soldiers and airmen were also working to improve coordination and communication among infantry, tanks, and planes. Maj. Gen. Elwood R. Quesada, the affable chief of IX Tactical Air Command, which provided close air support to First Army, had taken a personal interest in air support of ground troops. He encouraged close cooperation between his staff and Bradley’s, experimented with heavier bombloads for his fighter-bombers, and positioned airfields as close as 400 yards behind the front lines. At Quesada’s suggestion, First Army had its armored units install high-frequency Air Forces radios in selected tanks, enabling direct contact between tank teams and planes flying overhead.

Despite the general progress, air-ground cooperation at the start of Operation COBRA proved tragically inadequate. After a week-long wait for the weather to clear, six groups of fighter-bombers and three bombardment divisions of heavies took off from bases in Great Britain on the morning of 24 July. Thick clouds over the target area caused the Allied air commander, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, to call off the attack, but word did not reach the heavy B–17s and B–24s. Approaching perpendicular to the front, over 300 planes dropped about 700 tons of bombs. Some of the bombs landed on the 30th Infantry Division when a faulty release mechanism caused a bomber to drop its load prematurely. The resulting 150 casualties shocked and angered Bradley and his generals, but, not wishing to give the alerted Germans any time to respond, they approved an attack for the next day with only a few changes in procedures. Once again,

disaster struck. The 1,500 heavy bombers, 380 medium bombers, and 550 fighter-bombers could barely see the Periers–St. Lo road due to dust, and bombardiers again experienced difficulty in spotting targets and judging release points. “Short bombings” killed 111 American soldiers, including the visiting chief of Army Ground Forces, Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair, who had done so much to organize and train the Army prior to its deployment overseas.

Stunned by the short bombings, American troops made little initial progress. The westernmost unit in the attack, the 330th Infantry of the 83d Infantry Division, encountered fierce opposition from German paratroopers dug into the hedgerows. In the center, despite the saturation bombing, scattered groups of enemy soldiers fought hard against the 9th Infantry Division, and the lead regiment of the 4th Infantry Division found its advance delayed by German defenders in an orchard. To the east, the 30th Infantry Division recovered enough from the short bombing to advance one mile to the town of Hebecrevon. Still, overall progress toward the close of the first day was disappointing, with many ground commanders believing that the air strikes had done as much damage to their own soldiers as to the enemy. At VII Corps headquarters, Collins faced a decision whether or not to commit his exploitation force. If a penetration existed, he would not want to give the Germans time to recover. If the German line remained unbroken, however, commitment of his armor and motorized infantry would be premature, create congestion and confusion, and leave the Americans open for a counterblow. Noting an absence of coordination in the German defense, he decided to gamble. On the afternoon of 25 July, Collins directed his mechanized reserves to attack the following morning.

He had made the right decision. As American infantry and armor advanced on the morning of 26 July, the extent of damage to the Germans became clear. The air strikes had thoroughly demoralized several units and so disrupted communications that the *German High Command* lacked a clear picture of the situation. At the center of the penetration, the *Panzer Lehr Division* had virtually ceased to exist as a fighting force. While the 330th Infantry was still encountering stiff resistance, the 9th, 4th, and 30th Infantry Divisions reported impressive gains through the morning of the 26th, and American armor had moved through the gap and headed south. At Marigny, the 1st Infantry Division had a tough fight with the *353d Infantry Division*. By the afternoon of 27 July, though, 1st Division had cleared the town and, along with Combat Command B of the 3d Armored Division, driven five miles west toward Coutances in an effort to trap the German *LXXXIV Corps* along the west coast of the Cotentin. The rest of the 3d

Armored managed to push south and west through bomb craters, wrecked vehicles, and traffic to cover the flank of the 1st Division's drive, while, on VII Corps' eastern flank, the 2d Armored Division advanced through weak opposition to reach its COBRA objectives by the morning of 28 July. Despite VIII Corps' efforts to pin down the Germans in the western Cotentin, most of *LXXXIV Corps* escaped the closing trap, but it left behind a vast store of equipment.

Notwithstanding the escape by *LXXXIV Corps*, the magnitude of First Army's breakthrough created opportunities unforeseen in the original COBRA plan—opportunities which Bradley moved quickly to exploit. On the evening of 27 July, he turned the attack to the south in the direction of Avranches, the gateway to Brittany. He ordered his corps chiefs to maintain unrelenting pressure, allowing the enemy no time to regroup his forces. Given the rapid pace of operations, Bradley phrased his orders in rather general terms, specifying only that Corlett's XIX Corps take Vire, an old, fortified town and critical transportation center slightly over twenty miles southeast of St. Lo.

Corlett would require ten days of hard fighting to take Vire, but the tough battle waged by his XIX Corps freed VII and VIII Corps to exploit the breakthrough. Moving west of the Vire River and then heading south toward Vire, XIX Corps ran into two *panzer* divisions which Kluge had rushed into the breach as the nucleus of a counterattack force. For the next four days, the two sides battled around the small crossroads town of Tessy-sur-Vire, which finally fell to Combat Command A of the 2d Armored on 1 August. Although the XIX Corps had not yet reached Vire, it had blocked German efforts to reestablish a defensive line. Freed from concern for its flank, the VII Corps continued its drive south, while the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions of VIII Corps rolled down the coastal road into Coutances on 28 July and then to the picturesque, seaside city of Avranches on 30 July. The capture of Avranches opened the way for an advance west to the critical Breton ports.

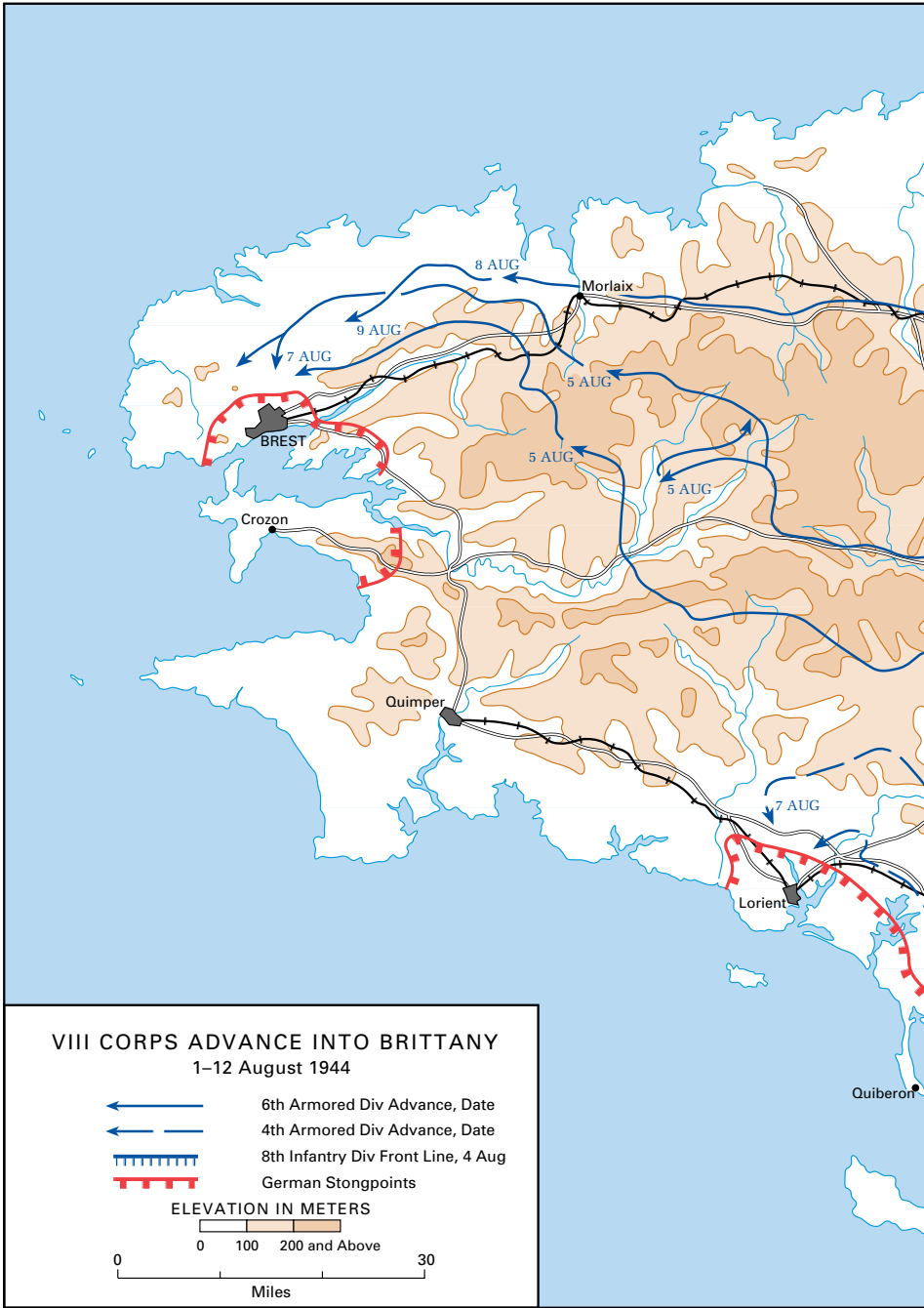
As July turned to August, changes in the American command structure brought a dynamic new figure to the stage. Overbearing, often profane, yet also sensitive and deeply religious, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., had already earned a reputation as an outstanding field general, as well as a frequently difficult subordinate, in North Africa and Sicily. Few, if any, commanders in World War II could match his talent for mobile warfare, his ability to grasp an opportunity in a rapidly changing situation, and his relentless, ruthless drive in the pursuit. The buildup and expansion of the Allied lodgment had now reached the point where Bradley could bring the Third Army head-

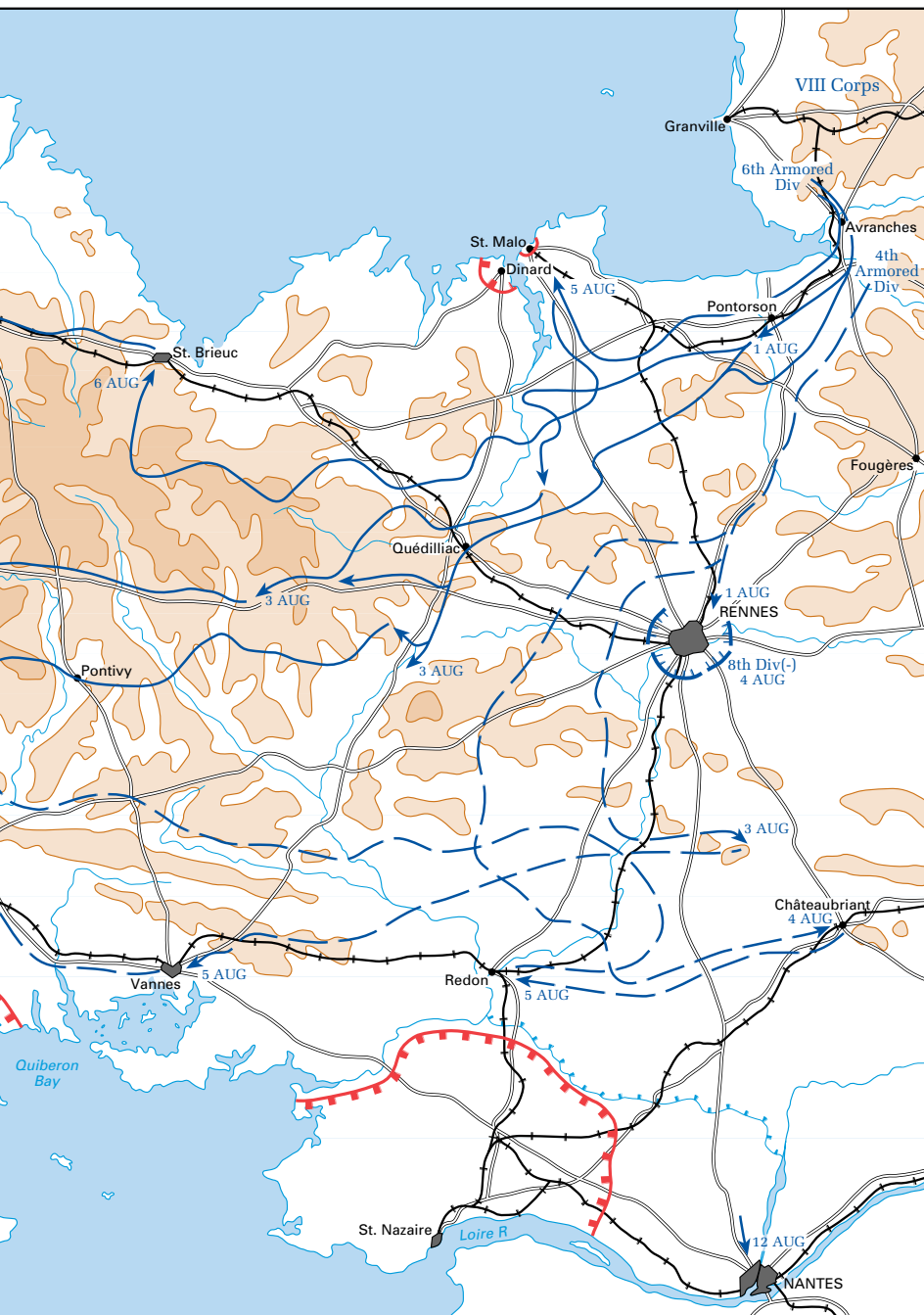


Abandoned German equipment litters a road to Avranches. (DA photograph)

quarters and its flamboyant leader into the field. He himself assumed command of the new 12th Army Group, and Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges, a modest and competent professional, took his place at First Army. Third Army would command VIII Corps and the new XV, XX, and XII Corps, while First Army retained control of the V, XIX, and VII Corps. Although introduction of an American army group was supposed to be followed by the assumption of overall command in the field by the Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower deferred this step until he could physically establish his headquarters on the Continent. In the meantime, he allowed Montgomery to coordinate both army groups in the field.

Turning the corner at Avranches, Patton's Third Army raced west into Brittany. Hitler had ordered his troops to hold the ports "to the last man," tying down American units and keeping the ports out of Allied hands as long as possible. However, German disarray enabled the Allies to send only VIII Corps into Brittany, rather than the entire Third Army as earlier planned. At Patton's direction, Middleton flung the 4th Armored Division toward Quiberon Bay to cut off the peninsula at its base, while the 6th Armored Division drove from Avranches west toward Brest at the extreme tip of Brittany, bypassing strong-points along the coast in an effort to seize the port before the Germans







General Montgomery and Field Marshal Kluge (left, National Archives; right, DA Photograph)

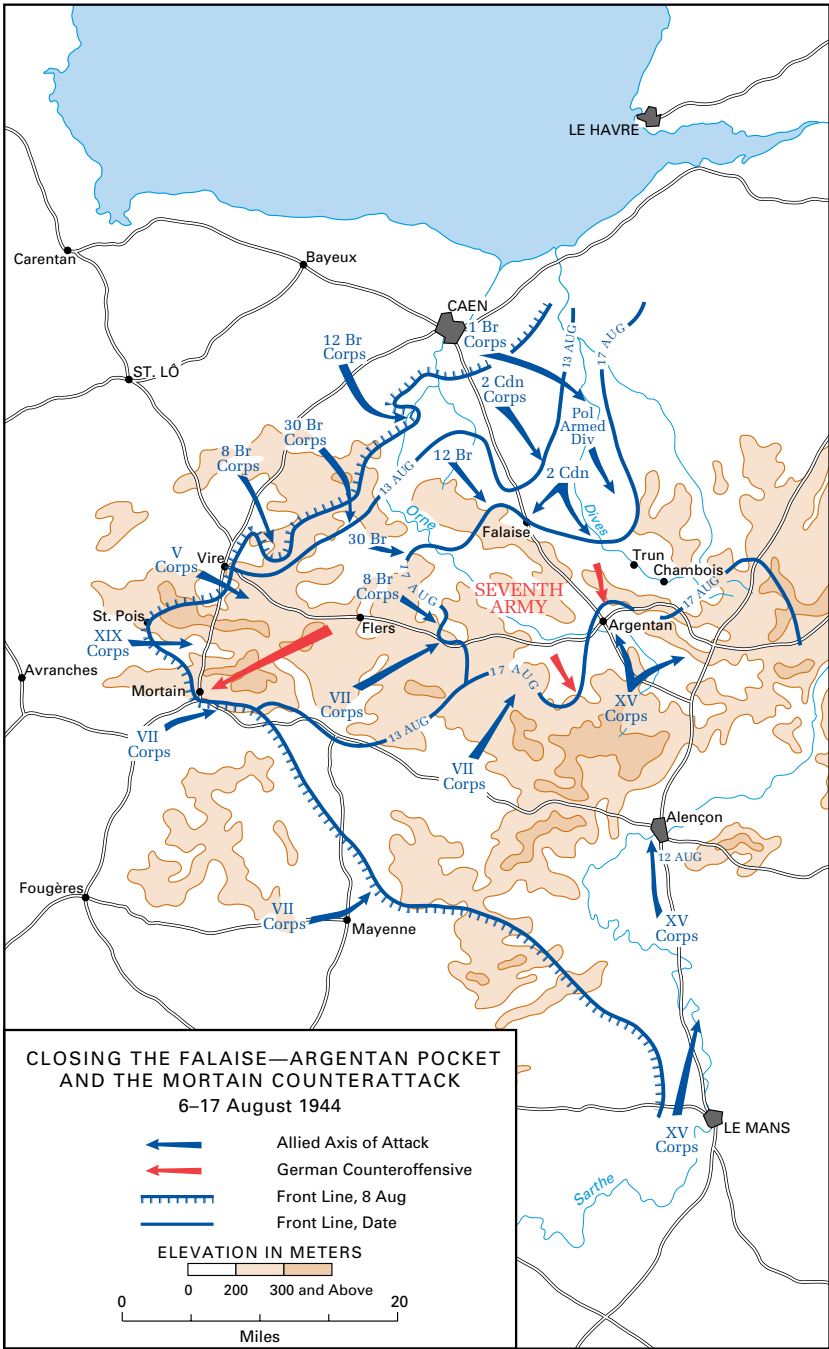
could react. Eager to finish its work and join the main drive farther east, the 4th Armored seized Rennes and encircled Lorient, on the southern coast of Brittany. The 6th Armored covered the 200 miles to Brest in five days, but the tankers found the city's defenses too strong to take by a quick thrust. Not until 18 September did VIII Corps units finally batter their way into Brest and force the garrison's surrender. To the east, it took a rugged, house-by-house fight by the 83d Infantry Division to occupy the ancient Breton port of St. Malo. By the time the Breton harbors came under Allied control, demolitions had rendered them useless, but events to the east had already reduced them to minor importance.

The Allies had moved quickly to take advantage of the dangling German flank east of Avranches. By 3 August, Montgomery and Bradley had decided to send just one corps into Brittany and turn the rest of 12th Army Group east in an effort to destroy the German *Seventh Army* west of the Seine. Under Patton's Third Army, Maj. Gen. Wade H. Haislip's XV Corps, which had been acting as a shield for the VIII Corps' move into Brittany, drove east to Mayenne, Fougeres, and Laval, scattering the few German units in its path. To the north, Hodges' First Army ran into tougher opposition, particularly

on the V Corps and XIX Corps fronts, where Gerow and Corlett were encountering stubborn resistance in their advance toward Vire. Collins' VII Corps enjoyed easier going on First Army's right, capturing the key road center of Mortain and racing south to link up with the XV Corps at Mayenne. American troops were moving rapidly, but Bradley viewed with great unease the narrow Mortain-Avranches corridor which connected his far-flung units.

Bradley's unease was well founded. Faced with a choice between attempting to reconstruct a defensive line in Normandy and withdrawing, Hitler opted for the former alternative. On 2 August, he directed Kluge to counterattack from the Vire area west to the sea, cutting off Third Army and restoring the German front. As so often happened in the Normandy Campaign, German efforts to prepare the blow were marked by a lack of coordination and communication, a problem only enhanced by the mutual distrust between Hitler and his generals following the July coup attempt. Confronted with a desperate situation, Kluge lacked the time to prepare the massive stroke that Hitler had in mind, and his buildup was hurried and disjointed. By the time the Germans launched their attack in the early morning darkness of 7 August, Kluge had been able to assemble only three *panzer* divisions with a fourth *panzer* division ready for exploitation, a far cry from the full *panzer* army that Hitler had envisioned.

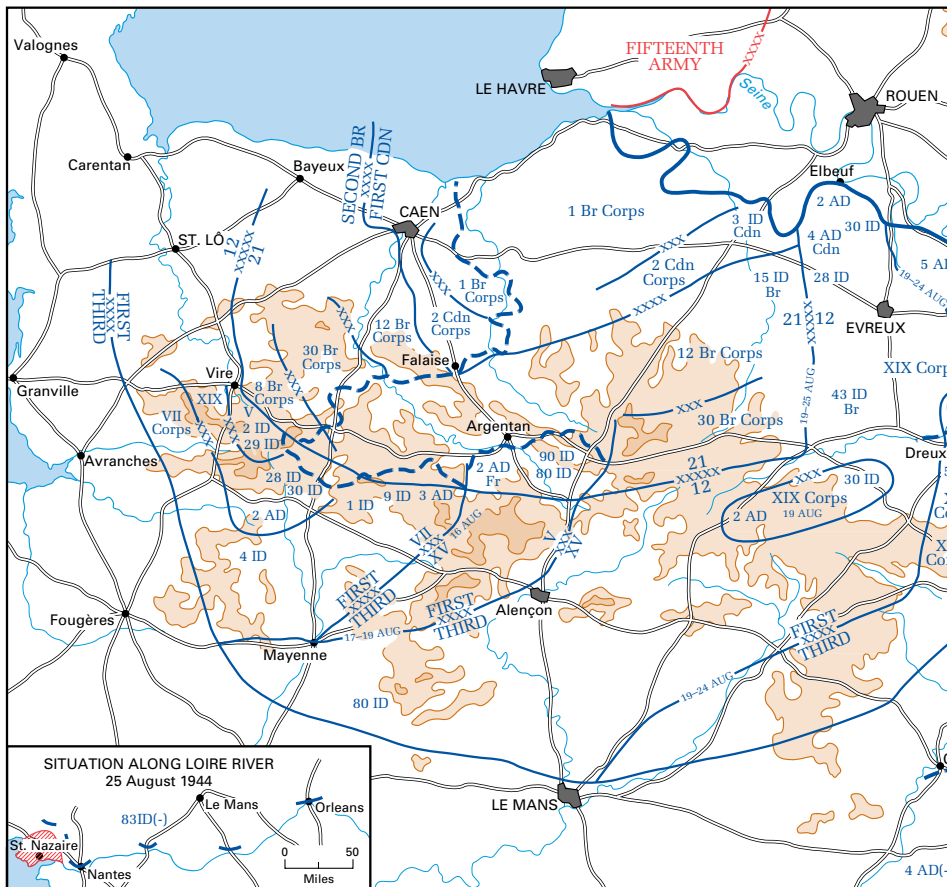
Nevertheless, the attack gave the Americans plenty of trouble. Achieving surprise, the Germans drove as much as six miles into the American front, particularly in the Mortain area where the *2d SS Panzer Division* overran positions that had only just been occupied by the 30th Infantry Division. By daylight, however, the German thrust was already faltering. Disorganized in the attack, the *2d SS Panzer Division* in the center had been able to employ only a single column in the early stages, and the *116th Panzer Division* in the north had not attacked at all. On the *2d SS Panzer Division's* front, a battalion of the 30th Division dominated the battle area from Hill 317 just outside Mortain, beating off every attack sent against it. Supplied by air drops, the unit held for four days until its relief, calling down artillery fire on German formations in the surrounding area and earning for its division the title "Rock of Mortain." Meanwhile, as Allied aircraft pummeled the Germans, Bradley, Hodges, and Collins sent the 4th Infantry Division into the northern flank of the penetration while the 2d Armored and 35th Infantry Divisions struck from the south. By late afternoon, Kluge was convinced that the offensive had failed, but at Hitler's direction he continued to press the attack.



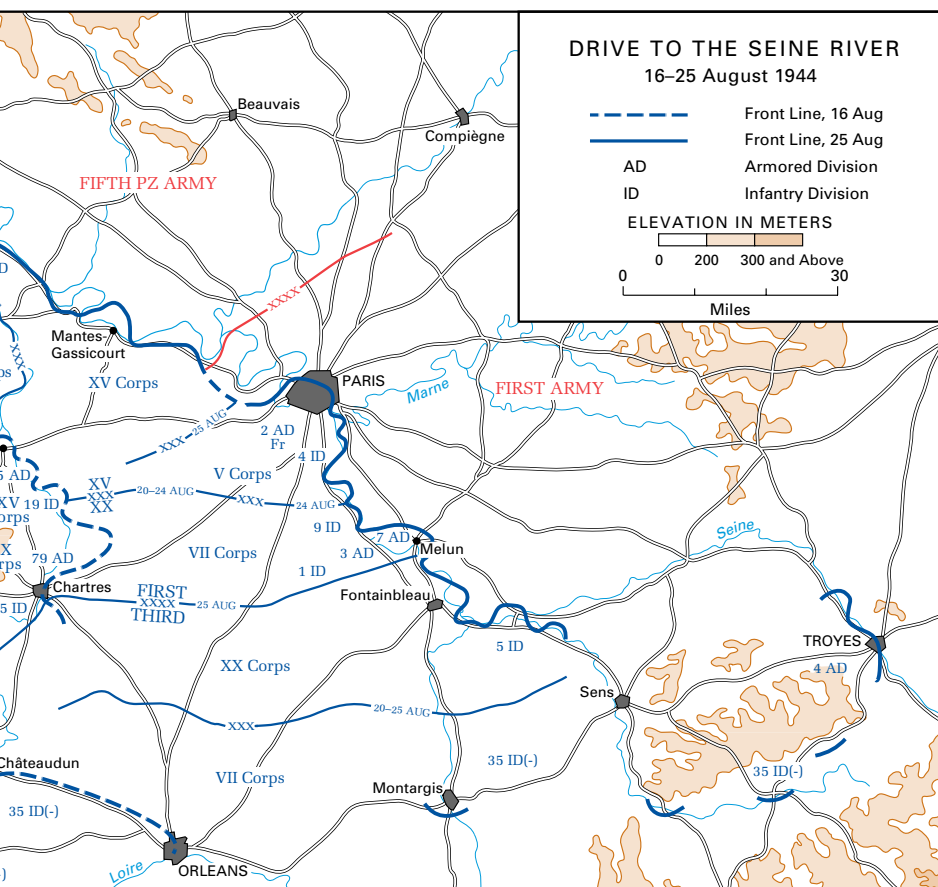
Hitler's obstinacy created a golden opportunity for the Allies. Assured by Hodges that First Army could hold at Mortain, Bradley presented Montgomery with a proposal on 8 August. From the eastern end of the crescent, which represented the Allied front, First Canadian Army had started an offensive toward Falaise, and Bradley now proposed that Patton's Third Army, on the extreme southwest, drive across the German rear to link up with the Canadians and trap the Germans in a gigantic pocket. While Montgomery had set his eye on an even deeper envelopment to the Seine, he accepted Bradley's plan and issued orders providing for a linkup between the Canadians and the Americans just south of the town of Argentan. From Le Mans, which it had reached on 8 August, Haislip's XV Corps drove toward Argentan. A 25-mile gap lay between Haislip's forces and VII Corps' flank at Mayenne, but the Germans were too widely dispersed to take advantage of XV Corps' exposed position. On 12 August, XV Corps troops seized Alençon, about twenty-five miles south of Argentan, and Patton authorized a drive north toward Argentan and Falaise to meet the Canadians, who, slowed by fierce opposition and command inexperience, were still far north of Falaise.

At this point, Bradley halted Third Army short of Argentan, despite Patton's vigorous protests and jovial offers to "drive the British into the sea for another Dunkirk." The order remains the subject of considerable controversy, with many arguing that Bradley should have crossed the army group boundary line and completed the encirclement. Bradley himself later criticized Montgomery for failing to act more vigorously to close the gap, although he had never recommended to Montgomery an adjustment of the army group boundary to permit the Americans to advance farther north. The American commander later recalled his concern about the potential for misunderstanding as Canadian and American units approached one another, but he also admitted that the army groups could have designated a landmark or tried to form a strong double shoulder to minimize accidents. A more probable consideration in Bradley's decision was his anxiety, possibly based on secret ULTRA intercepts, that American forces were becoming overextended and vulnerable to an attack by the German divisions believed to be fleeing through the gap. In his memoirs, Bradley stated he was willing to settle for a "solid shoulder" at Argentan in place of a "broken neck" at Falaise.

Actually, as of 13 August, few German units had left the pocket. Kluge wanted to form a protective line on each salient shoulder to cover the withdrawal of his forces to the Seine, but Hitler, still planning a drive to the sea, refused to approve it. On 11 August, the



Fuehrer had authorized a withdrawal from the Mortain area to counter the growing threat to *Seventh Army's* rear, but only as a temporary measure prior to a renewal of the offensive to the west. The troops in the pocket, however, were unable to mount a major, coordinated blow in any direction. Lacking resources, especially fuel and ammunition, and under pressure from the repeated Allied blows, they could do little more than fight a series of delaying actions around the fringes of their perimeter. On 15 August, Kluge's staff car was strafed by Allied planes, and the field marshal was left stranded for twenty-four hours, arousing Hitler's suspicions that he was trying to broker a deal with the Allies. When Kluge finally reappeared, he recommended an immediate withdrawal from the pocket. A sullen Hitler agreed but replaced



Kluge with Field Marshal Walther Model, whose loyalties were beyond question. During his return to Germany, the despondent Kluge committed suicide.

Behind him, Kluge left a *Seventh Army* that, for all practical purposes, had ceased to exist as a fighting force. Under constant pounding from Allied air and artillery, lacking ammunition and supplies, and exhausted from endless marches on clogged roads, some German units panicked or mutinied, but others managed to maintain discipline and fought grimly to keep escape routes open through the narrowing gap. Observing the area after the battle, an American officer saw “a picture of destruction so great that it cannot be described. It was as if an avenging angel had swept the area bent on destroying all things

German . . . As far as my eye could reach (about 200 yards) on every line of sight, there were . . . vehicles, wagons, tanks, guns, prime movers, sedans, rolling kitchens, etc., in various stages of destruction.” Despite Allied efforts, a surprising number of German troops had escaped by the time the Americans, Canadians, and Polish armor serving with the Canadians finally sealed the pocket on 19 August. They had left behind, though, most of their artillery, tanks, and heavy equipment as well as 50,000 comrades.

By then, the Allies had already turned their columns east to catch German formations trying to escape over the Seine. Still believing that most of *Seventh Army* had already escaped the pocket, Bradley on 14 August directed Haislip’s freewheeling XV Corps to head east for the river. Encountering little resistance, Haislip’s columns quickly covered the sixty miles to the city of Dreux and then turned northeast to establish a Seine bridgehead at Mantes Gassicourt on the night of 19–20 August. To fill the gap between XV Corps and V Corps, which had taken over the sector at Argentan, Bradley and Hodges moved Corlett’s XIX Corps from the tip of the Falaise pocket, where it had been pinched out by the British advance, to the gap. They directed Corlett to strike northeast for Elbeuf on the Seine, cutting off the retreat of German forces resisting the British and Canadian advance to the river. Starting its attack on 20 August, the XIX Corps moved rapidly, scattering or capturing German units in its path. On 25 August it battered its way into Elbeuf, leaving only a narrow, exposed sector near the mouth of the Seine for the Germans to use as an escape route.

Farther south, Third Army was encountering even less opposition in its drive through the open plains north of the Loire Valley. Whether exhorting his troops at the front or scanning maps at his command post, alternately exultant in victory and raging over delays, Patton relentlessly pressed his advance to the Seine. He left only scattered detachments, reconnaissance aircraft, and French partisans to watch his long flank along the Loire. On the left, Maj. Gen. Walton H. Walker’s XX Corps, with the 7th Armored Division in the lead, reached the ancient city of Chartres, with its famous cathedral, on 18 August, while on the right the XII Corps, initially under Maj. Gen. Gilbert R. Cook and later under Maj. Gen. Manton S. Eddy, occupied Orleans on 16 August, dashing German hopes for a defense of the Paris-Orleans gap. Bradley had initially planned to halt Third Army at those two points to permit his logistics to catch up with his advance, but, at Patton’s urging, he agreed to a further advance to the upper Seine. Walker’s XX Corps advanced through Fontainebleau to establish a bridgehead on the Seine at Melun, while the XII Corps seized a



U.S. troops advance toward Fontainebleau en route to Paris. (National Archives)

bridgehead farther upstream at Sens. By 25 August, Third Army possessed four footholds on the upper Seine.

As American columns rolled through French towns during those hot, dusty days in August, they were met by a jubilant populace aware that their arrival signified the end of German occupation. In some cases, appreciative French audiences watched GIs fight their way into a town, refusing to take cover even as bullets spattered the pavement around them. Most American arrivals were not so dramatic. The Germans often departed before American troops made their appearance, as their lines of retreat were threatened by the rapid advance. This withdrawal contributed to the impression in some quarters that the Resistance, not the Allies, had liberated France. In most cases, the arrival of the Americans consisted of a few reconnaissance vehicles being met by a delegation on the outskirts of town. Then the celebrations would begin as church bells rang and townspeople cheered, sang, danced, and produced bottles of wine hoarded for the occasion. The American liberators were serenaded, hugged, kissed, and showered with food and drink. Not surprisingly, it was a reception that most would remember with great fondness.

The celebration most anticipated by American soldiers, and by the Allies in general, was the one expected to follow the liberation of Paris. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had told Eisenhower before D-day that, if the Allies could free “beautiful Paris” by winter, he would consider it the greatest victory of modern times. As Allied columns neared the French capital in late August, however,

Eisenhower appeared in no great haste to enter the city. Allied planners feared that their troops would bog down in street fighting, which would cause considerable destruction. They also were leery of becoming involved in French political disputes, which would inevitably follow liberation of the capital. Furthermore, Eisenhower's headquarters was not eager to assume the burden of feeding the millions of people in Paris. Despite the pleadings of French officers under them, Eisenhower and Bradley much preferred to bypass the city and use the supply tonnage saved to maintain the advance to the German border.

Events and French pressure soon changed Eisenhower's mind. To Frenchmen, Paris represented not just the political but also the spiritual capital of France, a symbol which must be redeemed from the occupier at the earliest possible moment. General Charles de Gaulle, head of the French Committee of National Liberation, needed Paris to solidify his position for the postwar French political struggle. Within the capital, Gaullists, Communists, and other political factions were already jockeying for position, clashing with each other and with the German garrison, which was under orders from Hitler to destroy the city before letting it fall to the Allies. Matters came to a head on 19 August, when the Resistance seized government and newspaper buildings and the city hall. The partisans lacked enough strength to expel the Germans from Paris on their own, so they agreed to a truce which would permit the garrison to use sectors of Paris in return for a German promise to release political prisoners and to treat some areas of the city as safe havens for the urban maquis. On 22 August, Resistance emissaries informed the Allied high command that the end of the truce was imminent and pleaded for help. Under pressure from de Gaulle and assured by the emissaries that the Germans were only waiting for the arrival of Allied troops to surrender, Eisenhower reconsidered his decision to bypass Paris. He now agreed to send a relief force, in part as a reward for partisan assistance during the campaign.

To spearhead the drive into Paris, Eisenhower and Bradley had earlier decided to use the 2d French Armored Division, a free French unit whose commander, Maj. Gen. Jacques P. LeClerc, had been agitating for permission to liberate Paris. According to the plan prepared by Gerow's V Corps, the French would go into Paris from the west, while the American 4th Infantry Division attacked from the south. When the French began their drive on the morning of 23 August, however, they made little initial progress. The Germans were fighting hard along the roads leading into the capital, and Americans wryly noted delays caused by crowds of Frenchmen who lined the roads bestowing

flowers, kisses, and wine on their heroes. Not realizing the extent of German opposition, the American generals perceived that LeClerc's division was "dancing its way into Paris," and Bradley directed Hodges and Gerow to spur on the 4th Division. Irked by the prospect of the Americans beating him into Paris, LeClerc sent a special detachment of tanks into the city by back routes. By midnight of 24 August, the tankers had fought their way into the heart of the capital, and on the following day LeClerc took the surrender of the German commander in the name of the Provisional Government of France.

Paris went wild with joy. Although several pockets of German soldiers still held out in various parts of the city, including 2,600 troops in the Bois de Boulogne, cheering crowds welcomed the French and American troops pouring into the capital. Entering Paris unannounced on 25 August, de Gaulle the next day made his official entry from the Place de l'Etoile to the Place de la Concorde amid thunderous acclaim, despite scattered shots from snipers. From the viewpoint of many Americans, the French were too busy celebrating to play their full part in the considerable fighting that remained in the city and its suburbs, while others believed that the French had forgotten all too quickly who had played the major role in their liberation. Gerow and his subordinates repeatedly clashed with de Gaulle and his officers over jurisdiction and the use of the 2d French Armored Division to mop the Germans still in the city. Eisenhower remained serene above the fray, telling one associate, "We shouldn't blame them [the French] for being a bit hysterical." He did, however, parade the 28th Infantry Division through Paris on 29 August. Eisenhower did this partly to get the division through the city quickly and to provide de Gaulle with a show of support but also to drive home to Parisians that their city had been liberated not by the Resistance but by Allied arms.

Whatever the importance of coalition relations in Paris, Eisenhower's attention was diverted by other issues, including one of the major strategic disputes of the war. The Supreme Commander had already decided to continue the advance east and maintain the pressure on the retreating Germans, rather than stop at the Seine and build up his logistics as called for in the original OVERLORD plan. The question lay in how to carry out this advance east in such a way as to ensure the quickest possible termination of the war. Montgomery wanted to make the main effort in the north, using a massive drive by 21 Army Group and most of 12th Army Group into Belgium and the Netherlands and, thence, east to the Ruhr. Bradley favored a dual thrust, with 21 Army Group driving through the Low Countries on its own, while 12th Army Group, except for a single corps, attacked east to Metz and the Saar.

Aware of the supply problems involved, Eisenhower viewed Montgomery's more extravagant arguments of the advantages of a single thrust with skepticism. He could not deny, however, the benefits of such an advance, which would utilize the best invasion terrain and the most direct route to the key German industrial area of the Ruhr. The advance would also open critical channel ports and overrun launch sites of German V-1 and V-2 missiles. For the moment, he opted for the single thrust, but he would repeatedly qualify this commitment in the weeks ahead.

Eisenhower's changing decisions on strategy permitted Bradley to allot enough resources to maintain Patton's drive on Metz. The old fortress city, a critical point in past wars, had long held a special fascination for Third Army's commander. To reach Metz, Patton's troops had to pass a series of river barriers made famous by World War I, including the Marne, Vesle, Aisne, Meuse, and Moselle Rivers. Fortunately for Third Army's troops, the scattered Germans in their path lacked the strength to do much more than buy time through a series of rearguard actions. For the Americans, the ensuing pursuit in the last days of August thus proved an exhilarating experience. Reconnaissance units and cavalry fanned out over wide areas to locate river crossings and capture isolated parties of Germans, most of whom were only trying to return to the Reich as quickly as possible. Crossing the Marne, the XII Corps seized Chalons on 29 August and raced to establish a bridgehead over the Meuse on 31 August. On the left, the XX Corps passed the old World War I battlefields at Verdun and the Argonne before crossing the Meuse on 1 September. Once at the Meuse, Third Army halted temporarily to bring up supplies.

To the north, advancing on the flank of 21 Army Group, Hodges' First Army was encountering more, but still relatively unsubstantial, opposition. When the Normandy front had collapsed in late July, Hitler had realized that he might need to make a stand between the Seine and the German frontier, and he had, accordingly, ordered the construction of field works along the Somme and Marne Rivers. By the time the jumbled remnants of his western armies reached the Somme line in late August, however, they were too exhausted, disorganized, and demoralized to hold the position. First Army soon cracked the defenses, forcing the Germans to withdraw to the West Wall, a system of fortifications along the German border. As fragments of German formations passed across First Army's front, Bradley saw a chance to cut off their retreat, and he ordered Hodges to turn his direction of advance from northeast to north. Near Mons, in a pocket formed by its three corps, First Army bagged 25,000 prisoners, demol-

ishing what little remained of the German *Seventh Army*. The coup at Mons cleared the way to the West Wall, and a jubilant Hodges told his staff on 6 September that, with ten more days of good weather, the war would be over.

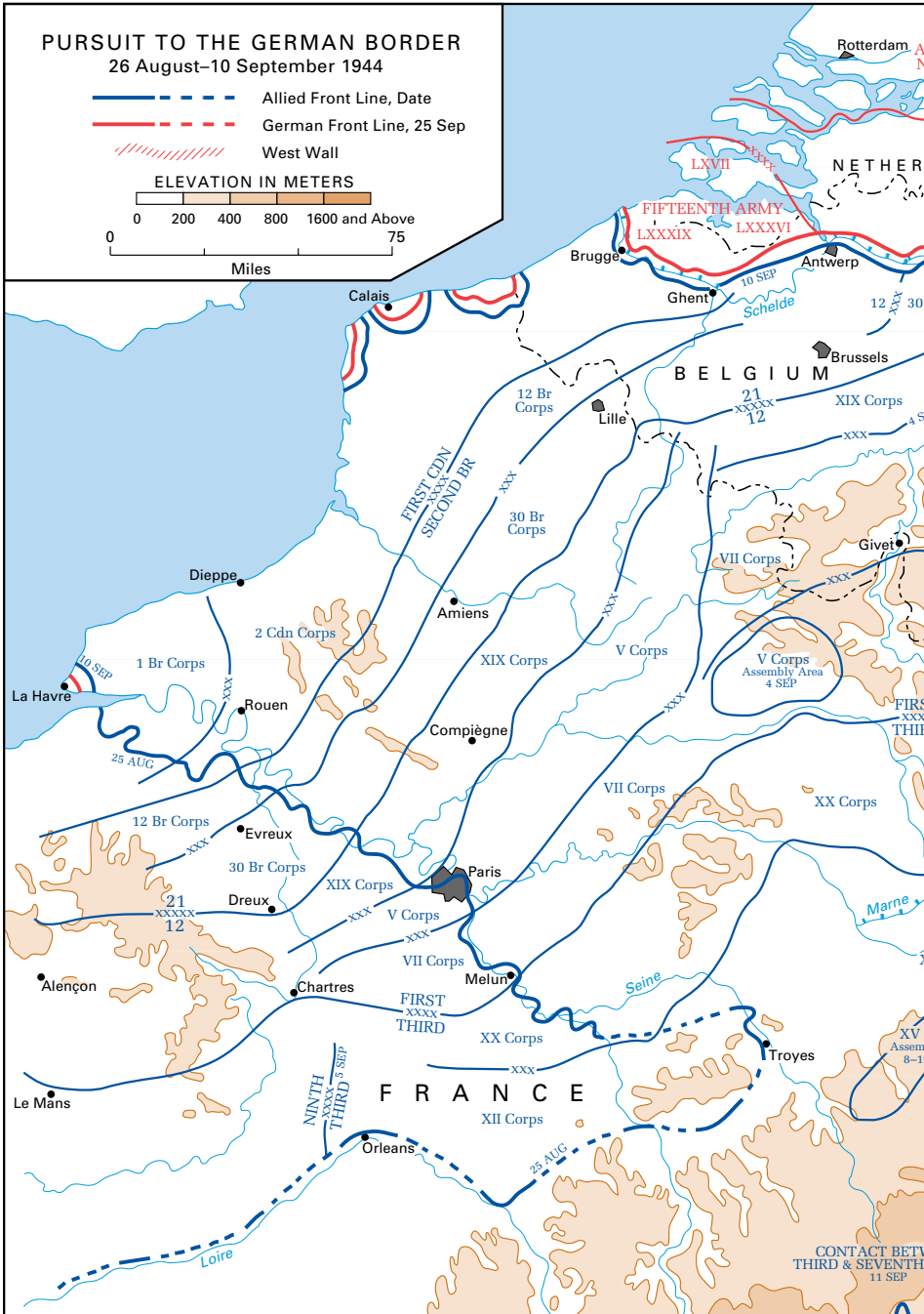
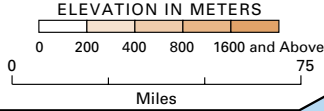
At this point, the supply crisis, which had been looming on the horizon for weeks, reached critical proportions. Eager to maintain pressure on the Germans, the Allies had repeatedly disregarded long-term logistical considerations for immediate combat benefits, and they were beginning to pay the price. By the end of August, neither First nor Third Army had any appreciable ration or ammunition reserves. Equipment and vehicles were wearing out, and gasoline stocks were being consumed as soon as they arrived. Although the Allies still lacked port capacity, the problem lay less in the amount of supplies on the Continent than in their transportation to the front. West of the Seine, the railroads had been ruined by pre-D-day bombing and sabotage, forcing the Allies to rely heavily on scarce trucks, which themselves consumed large quantities of petroleum. Furthermore, the unanticipated speed of the advance had left supply planners with little time to develop a system of intermediate depots to cover the 300 miles from the beaches to the front. Consequently, Allied logisticians had to resort to considerable improvisation, such as pressing chemical warfare and artillery trucks into service to haul supplies, using air transport and captured stocks, and instituting the Red Ball Express, two one-way truck routes to bring critical supplies forward as quickly as possible. In some places, supply officers hijacked convoys meant for other units.

As supply shortages slowed the Allied advance, the Germans rushed to build up their defenses along the West Wall, which stretched from the Dutch border near Kleve to Switzerland. Begun in 1938, this line of pillboxes, troop shelters, command posts, and concrete antitank obstacles known as “dragon’s teeth” had never been completed and had fallen into disrepair over the years. Nevertheless, it at least gave the Germans a point on which to rally for the final battle for Germany. In response to the crisis, the *German High Command* directed the transfer of divisions from Italy and the Balkans to the West, the conversion of fortress units into replacement battalions for the front, and the organization and training of additional *panzer* brigades, *Volksgrenadier* divisions, and shadow divisions of convalescents recalled from hospitals. It also conscripted local labor to improve existing defenses, which had fallen into disrepair, and to construct new ones. As German commanders struggled to create order from chaos among the units assembling along the West Wall, Hitler brought back the veteran Rundstedt to replace Model as Commander-in-Chief, West. The return of the old

PURSUIT TO THE GERMAN BORDER

26 August–10 September 1944

- Allied Front Line, Date
- - - German Front Line, 25 Sep
- //// West Wall



CONTACT BETWEEN
THIRD & SEVENTH
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campaigner boosted the morale of his dispirited troops, but he would need all of his considerable skills and, above all, time to achieve what the Germans later called the “Miracle of the West.”

In the end, he would have time. As the Americans approached the West Wall and the German border, the pace of their advance was slowing and, in some cases, stopping due to the lack of gasoline. To the north, First Army’s XIX Corps paused for a few days to replenish its stocks of gasoline before continuing its advance across Belgium to the Albert Canal. To the south, First Army’s VII and V Corps crossed the German border and penetrated part of the West Wall south of Aachen before Hodges, on 10 September, halted their drive to bring up more artillery ammunition. Farther south, Patton’s Third Army had resumed the offensive on 5 September but was encountering tough resistance in its attempts to establish bridgeheads near Metz and Nancy.

Logistical shortages, rugged terrain, and stiffened German resistance at the border were taking a toll on the Allied advance. Although optimism still reigned supreme in Allied councils, to the point that Bradley designated objectives on the Rhine, the heady days of the pursuit were over. Hard fighting lay ahead for the Allies in their efforts to enter the “heart of Germany” and complete the destruction of Hitler’s Third Reich.

Analysis

After the war, German generals found it fashionable to blame Allied numerical and materiel superiority, as well as Hitler’s questionable conduct of the battle, for their crushing defeat in northern France. As with many such apologias, their argument is overstated but contains a grain of truth. Thanks in large part to Allied air power, partisan warfare, and their own miscalculations, due largely to skillful Allied deception plans, the Germans by late July were losing the battle of the buildup in Normandy. While they could still muster fourteen divisions to face fourteen British divisions near Caen, only a hodgepodge of nine German divisions opposed seventeen American divisions in the hedgerows. In numbers of tanks, guns, aircraft, and materiel, the Germans were operating under a greater disadvantage. The debate over the comparative quality of German and American troops remains a heated one. By late July, however, several formerly green American divisions had acquired considerable combat experience, while the German armies, which contained a sizable proportion of static divisions and non-German elements, had suffered heavy losses. Under Montgomery’s skillful, if methodical, direction, the Allies had ground

down the German defense to such an extent that, by late July, it represented only a thin cordon liable to be broken at some point.

Once they made the breakthrough near St. Lo, the oft-maligned American units proved much superior to their German counterparts in mobile warfare. Chester Wilmot's comments on the natural affinity of Americans for machines and mobility may seem overly romanticized, but the speed with which the U.S. Army rolled across France in August 1944 did, indeed, inspire admiration among the other combatants. American doctrine emphasized mobility and relentless pursuit, principles which American generals, eager to avoid a return to static warfare, closely followed. Their units contained a relatively high proportion of trucks, and their tanks, while inferior in firepower and armor to comparable German models, proved more maneuverable and reliable over long distances. Thanks largely to the rapport between ground and air commanders, American aircraft worked closely with armor throughout the campaign; indeed, given the chronic shortage of artillery ammunition, air power consistently proved to be the American ace in the hole. To be sure, the U.S. Army did not solve many of the problems of logistics and command involved in mobile warfare, but the Army proved adept at improvisation. Against this highly mobile array, the largely horse-drawn *Wehrmacht* operated at a distinct disadvantage. Under such circumstances, Hitler's opposition to a retreat across the open terrain north of the Loire and his efforts to restore a front in rugged Normandy become more understandable, even if they led to disaster in the Falaise pocket.

Ever since Bradley's order of 13 August, the Allied failure to close the Argentan-Falaise gap has been the source of controversy. Bradley's later account of the action, taking full responsibility for the decision to halt XV Corps but criticizing Montgomery for not doing more to seal the gap, indicates the passions aroused by the affair. Yet despite the presence of an obsolete boundary, Bradley was under no real restriction which prevented him from sending XV Corps north toward Falaise. Of the reasons which he gave for halting Haislip, the only one that rings true was his concern that an advance toward Falaise would leave XV Corps' flank exposed to a massive thrust by German troops within the pocket. This vulnerability may well have been reported by ULTRA and was decreasing by the hour with VII Corps' advance northeast from Mayenne. While one can be understanding of Bradley's decision, given the "fog of war" in the rapidly evolving situation, the attractive option of a long envelopment toward the Seine, and the fact that it was the Canadians who were supposed to meet the Americans at Argentan, he can be chided for overcaution.



"St. Lo after the breakthrough," by Ogden Pleissner. (Army Art Collection)

Bradley himself later indicated his true feelings on the subject when, facing another opportunity for an envelopment later in the war, he indicated to an aide that he would not make the same mistake twice.

At least in part, the failure to close the Argentan-Falaise gap can be blamed on lack of communication that resulted from growing jealousies within the coalition. In Normandy, the Montgomery-Bradley relationship had been characterized by mutual respect and deference, but friction between the two staffs had increased with Bradley's rise to army group command and the corresponding growth in stature of the American effort within the Allied command structure. Given their successes, the Americans were less willing to accept a role subordinate to a British officer, especially one they viewed as arrogant and overly cautious. Montgomery had to defer to this growing independence while continuing to exercise responsibility for coordinating Allied movements until Eisenhower formally assumed command on the Continent. To complicate matters further, the French were already showing a dismaying tendency to go their own way on matters they

considered vital to their national interest. In the cases of the Falaise gap, the liberation of Paris, the long envelopment to the Seine, establishment of boundaries, and debate over the single versus broad front, it is not surprising that coalition politics hampered the efficient exercise of command. Eisenhower's political skills as supreme commander have often been taken for granted, but they were certainly tested during the campaign for northern France.

For all the recent interest in the ULTRA secret, it does not appear that Allied access to high-level German radio traffic played a decisive role in the Northern France Campaign. When British Group Capt. F. W. Winterbotham first revealed to an astonished world in 1974 that the British had broken the German ENIGMA code early in the war and that Allied commanders had regular access to deciphered German radio intercepts, many observers called for a revision of the history of World War II. At least with regard to the campaign in northern France, this does not appear to be necessary. In the case of the German attack at Mortain, Winterbotham and Ronald Lewin have claimed that ULTRA alerted Bradley four days prior to the attack. However, in a more recent work which cites directly from the documents, Ralph Bennett argues convincingly that the Allies did not receive word from ULTRA until practically the eve of the attack. The evidence on ULTRA's role during the action at the Falaise gap is more inconclusive, but it does appear that ULTRA, at the least, provided much useful data and, at the most, may well have caused Bradley to halt XV Corps near Argentan. In general, ULTRA appears now to have been a valuable tool, particularly in confirming data from other sources, but it did not win the campaign in northern France.

For the U.S. Army, the campaign represented one of its most memorable moments during World War II. The pursuit across France showed the Army at its slashing, driving best, using its mobility to the fullest to encircle German formations and precluding any German defensive stand short of their own frontier. American troops would long cherish memories of triumphant passages through towns, basking in the cheers of a grateful, adoring populace. More informed observers would point to D-day as the point at which German defeat became inevitable, but the Northern France Campaign drove home to almost all that Germany had lost the war. While Hitler could still hope that secret weapons or a surprise counteroffensive would retrieve his fortunes, and while destruction of the Nazi regime would in the end take a longer, harder fight than seemed likely to jubilant Allied troops in mid-September, the Allies in northern France had taken a giant step toward ultimate victory.

NORTHERN FRANCE 1944

Further Readings

The primary work on the U.S. Army's campaign in northern France during the late summer of 1944 remains Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit* (1961) from the Army's official series, U.S. Army in World War II. From the same series, Forrest C. Pogue, *The Supreme Command* (1954) and volume 1 of Roland G. Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support of the Armies* (1953), cover respectively grand strategy and logistical problems. General studies which cover the campaign include Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany, 1944–1945* (1981); Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (1983); Nigel Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield: Monty's War Years, 1942-1944* (1983); and Chester Wilmot's classic and controversial *The Struggle for Europe* (1952). See also Martin Blumenson's, *The Battle of the Generals* (1993) and *The Duel for France* (1963), Eddy Florentin, *The Battle of the Falaise Gap* (1967), David Mason, *Breakout: Drive to the Seine* (1968), James Lucas and James Barker, *The Battle of Normandy: The Falaise Gap* (1978), and Richard Rohmer's polemical *Patton's Gap* (1981). Focusing on the controversial order to halt Third Army short of Argentan is Martin Blumenson, "General Bradley's Decision at Argentan (13 August 1944)," in Kent R. Greenfield, ed., *Command Decisions* (1959). For more on ULTRA, see Ralph Bennett, *ULTRA in the West: The Normandy Campaign of 1944–1945* (1979), and Ronald Lewin, *ULTRA Goes to War* (1978). Some of the more prominent reminiscences of American generals associated with the campaign include Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (1951), Martin Blumenson, ed., *The Patton Papers* (1974), and J. Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe* (1979). For more on the short bombing preceding COBRA, see John J. Sullivan, "The Botched Air Support of Operation COBRA," *Parameters* 18 (March 1988): 97–110. A popular work on the liberation of Paris is Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Is Paris Burning?* (1965).

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Cover: *The Arc de Triomphe forms a backdrop for U.S. troops on parade in Paris.* (National Archives)