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MORTAIN :

Defensive, Deliberate Defense
30th Infantry Division
9-13 August 1944.

by

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On 7 August 1944, the German Army launched a counteroffensive to seize the town of Avranches and cut the communications of US Third Army. The attack struck elements of US VIII Corps near the town of Mortain. By 9 August the American defenses had stabilized along a 14 mile front, and on 13 August US troops reoccupied Mortain, ending the battle. The German defeat at Mortain allowed the Allies to trap and destroy much of the German Seventh Army near Falaise, which in turn set up the Allied pursuit across France. (cont'd)

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SECTION I

1. Define the Subject

In the early morning hour of 7 August 1944, the German Army launched a counteroffensive to seize the town of Avranches and cut the line of communications for Patton's Army operating in the southwestern part of France. The attack began along a line stretching from Vire to Domfront. Into a narrow breech of 8 miles the German High Command with Hitler's prodding committed a force composed of the elements of 4 armored divisions. Their objective, Avranches, was only 30 kilometers away. It would be the largest enemy counterattack since D-day. The attack hit the VII Corps' 30th Infantry Division which had recently occupied the high ground north and slightly east of the town of Mortain. Other divisions from VII Corps and the 35th Infantry Division from the XX Corps soon joined the battle, generally stemming the German advance by 9 August along a 14 mile front. By 12 August Field Marshal von Kluge, the German field commander, recognized the dangerous position that his limited counterattack had placed the German 7th Army and he began to pull back his units. By 13 August, American forces reoccupied Mortain and the battle was over.

In the strategical, operational and tactical analysis of the battle of Mortain, several important factors emerged which will receive emphasis in our discussion. On the stratigic level, the flexibility of the allied high command and their cooperation was a definite advantage in the fluid type of warfare which characterized the battle. The Germans, meanwhile, displayed a rigidity and unrealistic attitude toward their strategy. Adolf Hitler, who by now personally directed operations, was largely to blame for this development. On the operational level, Ultra and the influence of allied air power would play an important role. German commanders, proved unable to concentrate sufficient combat power to accomplish a mission in which none of them believed in. Tactically, the courage of individual soldiers and the dominent influence of key terrain played a vital role as they have for hundreds of years.

The Mortain counterattack is generally a well-documented battle. Numerous secondary sources are available. The most recent examples include John Keegan's Six Armies in Normandy, Russell Weigley's Eisenhower's Lieutenants and Martin Blumenson's Breakout and Pursuit. In addition, the memoirs of famous leaders on both sides provide considerable insight into the motives of the battlefield commanders. Generals Omar Bradley, Dwight Eisenhower and George Patton have written detailed memoirs on the allied side. On the part of the Germans, we posses substantial documents as well. Liddell Hart's The German Generals Talk gives us a brief but skewed look at the Nazi war-machine. After the war some German leaders placed the blame for their operational failures on Hitler often unfairly. The most accurate German accounts of the planning and fighting can be gleaned from the official debriefs conducted immediately after the war. The most important

of these was the account by General Rudolf-Christoph Von Gersdorff entitled, "The German Counterattack Against Avranches". Gersdorff, the chief of staff of the 7th army, provided an excellent insight into command decisions and major difficulties of the attacking German forces.

On the operational level, the American side of the battle was well described in several after-action reports by the divisions, corps and armies which participated. The most valuable were the staff reports of the 30th Infantry Division which bore the brunt of the fighting. Several unit histories are also available. The most important belonged to the 30th Infantry Division and its three regiments. These documents give us a flavor of the battlefield but are primarily useful at the tactical rather than operational level of analysis. Surprisingly, adequate documentation exists to analyze the battle from the German field commanders' perspective. General Hauser, commander of the 7th Army; General Luttwitz, commander of the 2nd Panzar Div. and General von Schwerin of the 116th Panzar Division were debriefed after the war providing us of an accurate picture of the attacking forces' dispositions and intentions.

Tactically, our sources were heavily weighted on the American side. The History of the 120th Regiment for example, presents a glowing account of the heroism of the beleagured American infantry on HILL 317. The unit histories of the 117th and 119th Regiments also provide excellent pictures of the fighting at the platoon level. But we do not have a detailed description of the Nazi forces which relentlessly assaulted the Americans in the face of massive artillery and air bombardment. The uneven picture of the soldier "in the trenches" is important because there is tendency to equate a German unit to a comparable American unit. In fact, while American infantry divisions were remarkably similar in structure, equipment and soldier quality; the German units differed widely. Attritted panzer divisions often amounted to only 25 tanks while infantry divisions were commonly composed of over-age and underequipped territorial forces.

Overall, a sufficient amount of material is available to present an accurate analysis of the Mortain counterattack. Important material to include the U.S. after-action reports and interviews with German commanders after the war were obtained through the generous assistance of the Command and General Staff Colleges classified library section. The library purchased significant material fom the National Archives in Washington D.C. which were very helpful in the analysis of the battle, particularly the German participation.

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II SECTION 2 -- "The Strategic Setting"

BACKGROUND

The Battle of Mortain represented a desperate attempt by Hitler to split the Allied forces in Normandy and destroy the lodgement. The successful establishment of the beachhead following the D-day invasion presented the German high command with a crisis. The build-up of forces and logistics in this area would continue until the Allies broke out and began the march to Germany. The Allied attack through the Avranches bottleneck in late July '44 offered Hitler the opportunity he sought for a decisive blow to destroy the Allied invasion.[1]

BASIS FOR OPERATIONS

The Allied effort in Normandy was predicted upon specific agreements accepted by the "Big Three" in final form at the Tehran-Cairo conferences. The strategic objective was based upon an universally accepted policy of unconditional surrender. Beyond this policy, the elements of the highly successful coalition strategy were articulated by a series of strategic decisions for future plans and actions. Those decisions which had specific application to the Normandy campaign included:[2]

1 - a "Germany first" strategy which would direct Allied resources toward the destruction of the German forces, while containing the Japanese in the Pacific

2 - the strategic bombing program accepted at Casablanca in January 1943.

3 - the decision for an Allied invasion across the English channel with the occupation of Germany as their final objective.

With these decisions as a backdrop, the Allies plunged into the monumental task of forming a planning staff to prosecute the war and to draw up the specific plans for the invasion of Europe. The Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) finally approved the OVERLORD plans which called for a massive cross-channel invasion, build-up of the lodgement area and, finally, breakout and pursuit of the German forces. An important aspect of the plan was the provision for a deception depicting an invasion force ("Patton's Third Army") situated across the narrow channel from the Pas de Calais area. This plan, codenamed FORTITUDE, ultimately prevented a large portion of the XV German Army from participation in the early phase of the Normandy campaign.

An important consideration for the Allies, apart from the massive logistical requirements, was the effect of their air and naval superiority on the successful execution of the invasion. With the strategic bombing

program building to a crescendo and the relatively unimpeded movement of supplies into the beachhead, the ultimate breakout of the forces from the lodgement was seemingly guaranteed.

This is not to say, however, that the establishment and build-up of the lodgement was devoid of setbacks. Some serious deficiencies with the OVERLORD concept were evident almost imm diately. The most serious of these, from the Allied perspective, was the failure to sustain the anticipated schedule for deployment. This caused considerable congestion in the beachhead area and restricted necessary maneuver space to position the combat forces. The continued occupation of Caen, a D-day objective, by German forces precluded the full implementation of the OVERLORD directive.[3]

From the German perspective, the events of the summer of '44 outlined a series of setbacks which ultimately resulted in a defensive posture on all three fronts. As the dire consequences of the Allied invasion became evident and the Soviet advance in the East continued, Hitler became personally involved in "directing the war."[4] Command and politics became inextricaby intertwined. Commanders came under the personal scrutiny of Hitler, but surprisingly they were not provided control of the naval or air components in their area of operations.[5]

In their confrontation with the Allies in Normandy, the German commanders were at a marked disadvantage. When the Allies landed, the Germans had no clearly defined defense strategy. Marshals von Rundestedt and Rommel disagreed about the proper defensive strategy in a classic clash between the mobile verses the static defense. "Hitler never made a final decision on which mode of defense he preferred. Consequently, neither method was adopted as a distinct course of action."[6] The options, from the perspective of the German high command for future operations included either the withdrawal from Normandy with a delay to construct a new defense line behind the Seine River or the continuation of the fight in Normandy with the ultimate objective of driving the beachhead forces back into the sea. The consequences of the first course of action would be heavy German losses because of Allied superiority in personnel, materiel and air power and, the political/economic results of the loss of France and the loss of V-rocket weapon sites along the Channel coast. Alternatively, the decision to fight in Normandy avoided the decisive disadvantages of a general withdrawal but offered extreme risk in the event of failure.[7]

Beyond these considerable concerns, the German high command was reeling from the effects of the aborted conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on 20 July. Some of the most reknowned German generals, including Rommel, were subsequently implicated in this plot and removed from active command. The failure of this scheme aside, the extent of the conspiracy at the highest levels of the German command, and the complicity by scores of other officers, indicated an increasingly discontented command structure. Hitler

became understandably suspicious of the intentions of his field commanders after the 20 July plot, especially in view of their increasingly pessimistic appraisal of German prospects.

In addition to meeting the invasion forces, the German command was convinced that a considerable invasion force was being readied for a landing near Pas de Calais. In response to this "threat", the Germans retained the XV German Army in this area for several weeks after the D-day landings. Indeed, the Germans had expected the bulk of the initial landings in this area due to the direct route this provided to the interior of Germany. Additionally, the machinations of FORTITUDE provided credible indications of the feasibility of this course of action.

For the Allies, the invasion of Europe culminated in a monumental mobilization of men, equipment and resources focused upon the prosecution of an unlimited war. The bulk of the Allied forces would center around the American Army which had been raised from a standing start specifically for this mission. Although the invasion represented a logistical achievement of the highest proportions, its success hinged upon the American soldier's ability to defeat the German forces which had efficiently demolished several European armies. Despite the concerns of Eisenhower's staff the forces which the Allies met in western Europe were not the equal of the German Army of 1941. "Exhausted by almost five years of war, its Navy powerless, its Air Force reduced to impotence, and able to offer serious resistance only on the ground, Germany seemed on the verge of defeat."[8]

THE AVRANCHES BOTTLENECK -- AN OPPORTUNITY

Subsequent to the successful American attack to secure St Lo, the Allied commanders displayed their flexibility. Although the OVERLORD plan had mandated a plodding, setpiece approach for the expansion of the lodgement, specifically a large-scale clearing of the Brittany peninsula, the successess of the forces on the right flank offered a unique opportunity. Bradley (fearful of overextending a vulnerable flank) at first balked at Montgomery's suggestion to significantly reduce the forces committed to Brittany. Montgomery's initial failure to expand the beachhead had brought considerable criticism upon him, especially in the American press. Notwithstanding Bradley's initial skepticism a modification to OVERLORD was quickly approved and the prospect of a double envelopment of the German forces aqainst the Seine River became an implied objective.

Considerable relocation of forces was necessary to accomodate this new approach. Patton assisted this movement by aggressively "hastening as many as seven divisions through the Avranches-Pontaubault bottleneck in only seventy-two hours."[9] Recent revelations concerning the intelligence capabilities of ULTRA underscore Bradley's concern for the vulnerability of forces in this area and the "basis for his repeated warnings to his comanders to beware of a German counterattack."[10] If the rewards inherent into turning the enemy's southern flank were exceptional, so too were the risks.

From the German perspective, the Avranches campaign represented the decisive blow to defeat the invasion forces. Up to this point, a static war of attrition had dominated the battlefield, keeping the Allies bottled in the difficult hedgerow terrain of Normandy. The breakout of the Allies through Avranches threatened to upset the stalemate. The immediate objective of the Germans was to reestablish a defensive line, as Hitler explained, " . . . The C in C West has a unique opportunity, which will never return, to drive into an extremely exposed enemy area and thereby to change the situation completely."[11] General Bradley later commented,

> "Hitler peremptarily ordered von Kluge to stand his ground in Normandy and counterattack through the hinge with the objective of reestablishing his line at Avranches. That decision, more than any other was to cost the enemy the Battle for France.[12]

However, the immediate crisis of the Allied buildup of forces in Normandy was not the only problem facing the Germans. Hitler grew more despondent as the realization of the imminent collapse of the western defense set in. After a high-level conference on 29 June in Berchestgaden, Hitler removed Rundstedt from command and replaced him with von Kluge. This change was brought on by Rundstedt's tart reply to the high command's request for operational suggestions. "End the war!," Runstedt had

answered, "what else can you do?"[13] Within thirty days the situation went from bad to worse. In addition to the conspiracy attempt, Rommel was seriously injured in a air strike on 17 July. Hitler reacted by taking the unusual step of placing Field Marshal von Kluge in charge of both Army Group "B" and Commander-in-Chief "West."[14] The command problems associated with such an organization further debilitated the effectiveness of the Mortain counterattack. Therefore, the decisive action of the campaign would be conducted without the senior commanders, Rundstedt and Rommel, who had been charged with the responsibility for defending the West.

THE GERMAN COUNTERATTACK

In addition to the problems already mentioned, the counterattack plan was hindered by other considerable factors. As the situation developed, it became clear that Hitler and von Kluge had different intentions for both the strategic and the immediate objectives of the action. "Kluge intended only to regain Avranches and restore the defensive line, while Hitler evidently thought in terms of a big offensive to be launched by several corps. . ."[15] Such a disconnect of intent underscored the patchwork command structure which Hitler had put together. Even more serious was the failure to plan this effort with all of the actors involved. As Blumentritt, von Kluge's Chief of staff, observed, . . . All this planning had been done from largescale maps and the advice of the generals in France was not asked for, nor was it encouraged.[16]

Beyond this, the forces earmarked for the counterattack were assembled "in great haste at night, and with great difficulty."[17] These included the 116th, 2nd, 2nd SS and 1st SS Panzer Divisions. At the last minute, however, Hitler called von Kluge and suggested a delay of the counterattack, because four additional divisions, the 9th, 11th, 9th SS and 10th SS had not yet been able to close into the assembly areas for what Hitler believed to be an invincible armoured thrust. Kluge's position was now critical. "American spearheads were driving towards Le Mans, far to his south; . . . the British were pressing so hard at Callmont, west of Caen, that any disingagement of 9th and 10th SS was unthinkable."[18] Additionally, his assembled forces offered a very lucrative target for the Allied air forces, especially while waiting for the movement of four more divisions into the same area. Kluge could not wait any longer. . . "hurried by news of the difficulties of assembly - the detachment of 1st SS, enroute from Cain since August 3d, had lost 30 percent of its strenght, the 116th Panzer Division had failed to detach a promised tank battalion to 2d Panzer - he allowed his subordinates to postpone H-hour to midnight of August 6th but insisted that that deadline was final."[19]

The counterattack, when finally struck, was in smaller strength than desired and in a piecemeal fashion and its a piecemealed effort whose limited success was due largely to tactical surprise. Interestingly, the commander of the 116th Panzer Division, General Schwirin, failed to attack,

thereby leaving open the flank of the entire force. He was implicated in the 20 July conspiracy and apparently felt that there was no hope for the success of the action. He was relieved shortly after his failure, but his division never significantly contributed to the counterattack.[20]

The final factor which influenced the failure of this action was the air superiority of the Allies throughout the period. "Three hundred German fighters had been assembled from all areas to give air cover for this attack; but not one of them appeared over the German units spearheading the attack. They had been involved in air battles as they took off and were destroyed."[21] Indeed, in discussing the increased importance of Allied air superiority during the war, General von Mellethin observed:

> . . . the enemy's air forces grew with terrifying strength. It was the beginning of a process which was to alter the whole balance of the war, and which reached its culmination in the annihilating battles of Mortain and Falaise.[22]

Even with these deficiencies, Hitler remained convinced of his judgment and suspicious of his field commanders. To ensure that his orders would be fulfilled, he sent the chief of the OKW Army staff, General Buhle, to the West to ensure compliance with his directives.[23] Finally, upon hearing of the failure of his "master stroke" to regain Avranches, Hitler remarked that "the attack failed because Kluge wanted it to fail."[24]

The Allied approach to the Mortain counterattack was to view it as an opportunity rather than a threat. This opportunity was significantly assisted by ULTRA, which provided forwarning of German intentions. Specifically, ULTRA intercepts of 3 August revealed that "Hitler was directing Field Marshal von Kluge to counterattack with at least four panzer divisions against the Avranches bottleneck, still only thirty kilometers wide."[25] While this information was critical to Bradley's dispositions, it also offered him his "most critical decision;"[26] specifically, whether to stand and defend or to continue to turn the flank. Ultimately, he decided to continue to push Patton's army to the east while slowing two divisions (the 2d and 4th) sufficiently to reinforce in the area if required.

Inevitably, the cumulative effect of the German command and difficulties, the dramatic Allied air superiority and, the data provided by ULTRA were more than the Germans could overcome. Additionally, however, the valorous stand of the as yet relatively untested American forces, most especially the 30th Infantry Division at Mortain, insured Allied success.

The Avranches campaign ended, at Mortain without the achievement of neither the limited nor grand objectives of the German commanders. The decisiveness and flexibility of the Allied decisionmakers attained not only victory at Mortain but a devastating opportunity at Falaise which ended the Battle of France.

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SECTION 3

THE TACTICAL SITUATION

The Area of Operations

"This Goddam Country"

Mortain, a small town in western France, located on the southwestern fringe of the hedgerow region, was the starting point and a focal point for the German counterattack to regain Avranches. Dominating terrain just east of Mortain stands guard over the eastern approaches to the village, and the western corridor leading to Avranches and the sea some 20 miles away. A force attacking through or near Mortain must occupy the dominating terrain to sustain the attack through the difficult hedgerow. The Germans understood that imperative; the U.S. 30th Division (Old Hickory) did too.

A general description of the hedgrow region will be provided before the Mortain region is further detailed. American soldiers, satisfied with simple but evocative phrases, termed the hedgerow region "this goddamn country".[1] That epithet, while irreverent, was appropriate. The hedegrows created a highly-compartmentalized terrain which offered advantages for a defender and liabilities for an attacker. The dense hedgerows increased the likelihood for meeting the enemy at close ranges, unaware of his presence until contact or action.

The hedgerow is a man-made feature, cultivated over centuries by Norman farmers who inclosed each plot of arable land, pasture or orchard, regardless of size, to proclaim ownership and provide protection from the Atlantic winds. The hedgerow is a fence of half-earth and half-hedge. At the base of the hedgerow is a wall formed by a dirt parapet that varies in thickness from one to four feet, and in height from three to twelve feet. Hawthorn, brambles, vines, and small trees grow out of the wall to form a hedge from one to three feet thick. The hedgerows divide the terrain into numerous walled inclosures. The hedgerows themselves are innumerable since most of the walled plots are about 200 by 400 yards in size. The plots are irregular shapes, creating wooded canals that criss-cross the region in random fashion, complicating military movement. In some places, the tops of high hedgerows overarch to filter out the sunlight and form a damp maze of country lanes.[2]

Each walled plot was a terrain compartment which had to be viewed with a tactical perspective. Natural defensive positions were formed by adjoining fields. The dense vegetation provided camouflage, obstructed observation, degraded adjustment of indirect fires, and canalized armor.[3]

Weather

The summer season in the hedgerow country of the Atlantic Plian provides a favorable period for the conduct of military operations. While the climate is variable, some general observations about the region can be made. Low ceilings, which adversely affect tactical air support, are the least prevalent in summer, but most frequent in the winter. Visibilities are characteristically poor in the area, especially so in the winter. The lowest visibilities occur during the morning hours. Conditions improve during the late morning and early afternoon hours. Synoptic studies in 1944, based on observations of at least eleven years, indicated that the greatest frequency of days in August with bad visibility in the morning (less than 1¼ miles at 0700) was five days at Cherbourg, nine days at Le Havre, and eleven days at Tours. Mortain probably experienced about nine-ten days of comparable visibility. The average frequency of bad visibility in the morning during August was one day at Cherbourg, four days at Le Havre, and four days at Tours. Mortain probably experienced three-four days on the average. The observation tables for fog (at any time of day) in August forecasted two days for Cherbourg, five days for Le Havre, and three days for Tours. Mortain did not experience a high incidence of fog in August. The Germans forecasted fog for the morning of their attack, and needed it to hide their columns from artillery and aircraft. The fog that appeared did not last very long, and this was a factor that worked against the German panzers.[4]

Flying conditions in the region are the best in summer, and the poorest in winter and spring. The lowest velocities of surface winds occur during the summer. The most favorable period for cross-country mechanized movement is April through September. This is due to the lesser amounts of summer rainfall. When it does rain, the moisture aggravates trafficability of the region's fine-textured soil. Temperatures in summer do exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit, but generally hover in the 70-80 degree range. A 1944 U.S. Army Air Force weather study characterized the region as "comfortable" from June through September, and "uncomfortably cool" for the remainder of the year.[5]

"La Suisse Normande"

The broken and convulsed terrain in the Sourdeval-Mortain region was coined "la Suisse normande" (Norman Switzerland) in the tourist pamphlets of the era.[6] Mortain, a small town of less than 3,000 inhabitants, was militarily important. Seven main roads radiated from it, and the town occupied a commanding bluff above the Cance, a tributary of the Selune River, at midpoint between the See River and the Selune.[7]

The See River is about 8,000 meters north of Mortain; the Selune River less than 8,000 meters south. The valleys of the See and the Selune create an isthmus, a narrow corridor binding the rocky hill country to the coastland. Hill 317, a rocky bluff just east of Mortain, had a 1,030-feet

peak and a commanding view of the region. On a clear day, personnel on the hill could see the Domfront valley twenty-five kilometers to the east, and the Bay of Mont St. Michel beyond Avranches thirty-two kilometers to the west.[8]

Several parallel roads ran, in relatively straight lines, the length of the corridor to Avranches, providing several channels for an attack in columns. The various features of the area combined to give the Germans good, though constricted, avenues of approach to the sea. General von Gersdorff, chief of staff of the German 7th Army during the Mortain counterattack, described the terrain in the following manner:

> "The See sector formed an antitank obstacle, which offered natural protection for the north flank of the counterattack. The attack terrain itself was the usual hedgerow of Normandy, with its restricted possibilities for deployment. South of the See, however, it was higher and offered a better opportunity for observation by the artillery and heavy weapons both in the direction of attack and to the north. In addition, the main roads of Juvigny-Le Tertre-Avranches and Mortain-Montgothier-Avranches were favorable for conducting an attack and for the supply. Then again, on the south flank, the Selune sector provided a natural flank protection and foothold. Therefore, the Army had already decided on 31 July to conduct the counterattack on the isthmus between the See and the Selune, and, for that reason, assemble the attack forces in the area of Sourdevel-Mortain. The assembly area was favorable for moving into position for the attack, because it offered cover and also possibilities for a covered approach in the area to the east. <u>It is important that Mortain itself and the dominant heights east of it remained in our hands</u>, particularly since great difficulties were to be expected for an attack in this deeply intersected terrain near Mortain." (underlining added)[9]

With Hill 317 in American hands, the Germans knew they could not use the roads during daylight with any degree of security. The use of the narrow gauntlet chosen for the attack rested on the seizure of the decisive terrain of Hill 317. A wide variety of factors thwarted the German attack. One such factor was the retention of Hill 317 by the Americans. Another factor was the long summer days: only five hours of darkness separated the daylight hours, allowing Allied aircraft to hunt their quarry along the hedgerow-narrow roads late into the evening hours.

Combat Effectiveness

The Opposing Forces

Elements of the U.S. First Army, commanded by LTG Courtney Hodges, and elements of the German 7th Army, commanded by General Paul Hausser, squared off for the fight in the Suisse-Normande. The U.S. VII Corps, commanded by "Lightning Joe" Collins, was arrayed to react to the attack, but the 30th Division bore the onslaught of General von Funck's XLVII Panzer Corps along the Sourdeval-Mortain line. Before examining these particular opponents, some information about the larger formations may prove beneficial.

Prior to, and during the counterattack, units on both sides were transferred between corps with an agility, which, while espoused in present-day doctrine, would be difficult to duplicate without experience comparable to the crucible of Normandy. For example, on 6 August 1944 the U.S. VII Corps consisted of four infantry divisions and the two combat commands of the 3rd Armored Division. Twenty-four hours after the German attack in the early morning hours of 7 August, VII Corps could call on the services of five infantry divisions and two armored divisions (less one combat command).[10]

The following diagrams trace the changing composition of the German 7th Army from 1 to 6 August 1944, and the composition of the U.S. First Army from 6 to 11 August 1944.

GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE[11]

Seventh Army - 1 August

II Parachute Corps
- 3d Parachute Div (+)

XLVII Panzer Corps
- 2d Panzer (Pz) Div
- 2d SS Pz Div
- Kampfgruppe (KG), 17th SS Pz Gren. Div
- KG, 352d Div
- KG, 275th Div
- Remnants, Pz Lehr Div

LXXXIV Corps
- KG, 353d Div
- KG, 243d Div
- 363d Div(-)
- 116th Pz Div
- Elements, 5th Para Div
- Elements, 13th Flak Divs
- Remnants, 77th and 91st Divs

1st SS Pz Div (under Pz Gp West in I SS Pz Corps)

Hq, LXXXI Corps (in Fifteenth Army)
84th Div (in Fifteenth Army)

9th Pz Div and 708th Div (both in LVIII Pz Corps under Army Gp G)

Seventh Army - 6 August

II Parachute Corps
- 3d Parachute Div
- 363d Div
- Elements, 10th SS Pz Div

LXXXIV Corps
- KG, 353d Div
- KG, 243d Div
- KG, 275th Div
- 84th Div

XLVII Panzer Corps
- 116th Pz Div
- 2d Pz Div
- 2d SS Pz Div
- 1st SS Pz Div
- KG, 17th SS Pz Gren. Div

LXXXI Corps
- 9th Pz Div(-)
- 708th Div(-)
- Elements, 5th Para Div
- Elements, 13th Flak Div

U.S. ORDER OF BATTLE[12]

First Army - 6 August

V Corps
- 2d Infantry Div(ID)

XIX Corps
- 28th ID
- 29th ID
- 2d Armored Div(AD)

VII Corps
- 1st ID (+ CCA, 3d AD)
- 4th ID (+CCB, 3d AD)
- 9th ID
- 30th ID

First Army - 7 to 11 August

V Corps
- 2d ID

XIX Corps
- 28th ID
- 29th ID
- CCA, 2d AD

VII Corps
- 1st ID (+ CCA, 3d AD)
- 4th ID
- 9th ID
- 30th ID (+ CCB, 3d AD)
- 35th ID
- 2d AD (- CCA)

Full TOE strength of a U.S. infantry division in 1944 was 14,253.[13] At the end of July 1944, the 30th Division was about 1,900 men under strength. Between 3 and 5 August 1944, the Division received 780 replacements, but even counting these the 30th lacked about a battalion and a half in fighting strength. Two battalions were on detached missions and absent from the Division when the German attack was launched against Mortain. The 2d Battalion, 119th Infantry had linked up with CCA, 2d Armored Battalion in Vire on 4 August. The 3d Battalion, 120th Infantry was dispatched to Barenton on 6 August to assist an armor task force of the 2d Armored Division. Seven battalions remained to be stretched along a 7-mile front in the vicinity of Mortain.[14]

Assessments of the strength of von Funck's panzer divisions vary between sources. The panzer divisions that were to lead the attack were virtually always in contact with American forces with losses occurring on a regular basis, thus complicating final assembly for the attack, and complicating the production of reliable strength estimates. A brief survey of some of the source material statements about the panzer strenght and condition will highlight the difficulty of producing an accurate assessment.

A 2 August message from 7th Army to OKW rated the 2d Panzer Division and 116th Panzer Division as highly combat effective, yet the 116th was shown as only having 62 tanks (Mark IV and V), and none were listed for the 2d.[15] A U.S. VII Corps G2 reports of 1 August assessed the 2d SS Panzer Division as up to strength, and rated combat effectiveness as good, but not superior. The 116th Panzer Division was estimated to be up to strength, and staffed with a mixture of seasoned and inexperienced troops. No firm strength figure was given for the 2d Panzer Division. It was considered to be of moderate quality since most of its enlisted men had been recruited in Austria.[16] General Heinrich von Luttwitz, and his troopers would raise that assessment among the soldiers of the 9th Division's 39th Regiment and the 30th Division's 117th Infantry Regiment.

Another U.S. postwar study rated the 116th Panzer Division as "relatively fresh", the 2d Panzer Division and 2d SS Panzer Division at 50-60% of full strength, and one panzer grenadier regiment and one tank battalion of the 1st SS Panzer Division, the exploiting force, at 50% strength.[17] Another author has characterized the 116th Panzer Division as "ridiculously below strength".[18]

Estimates of armor available for the attack range from 185[19] to 250[20]. General Gersdorff has written that about 180 tanks were available for the first attack. The 116th Panzer Division had 20-25; the 2d Panzer Division 80-100; the 2d SS Panzer Division 20-25; and the 1st SS Panzer Division 30.[21] The full armor complement for an SS Panzer Division was 209; for a Panzer Division 136.[22] Yet, actual strengths varied markedly between divisions, and most were understrength at this stage in the war.

The grouping of four panzer divisions for Operation Luttich sounded impressive, but the aggregate armor strength was less than a normal SS panzer division.

Technology

German-produced equipment was technically superior, in some respects, to American equipment. The German Panzer tanks had larger, higher-velocity main guns, and better off-road trafficability. But, the rubber-block tracks of the American Sherman tank had longer life than the Panther's steel track. The mechanical turret crank on the Sherman also gave the Americans a decided advantage over the hand crank on the Panther.[23] Other specialized German weapons, such as the 88mm, the nebelwerfer multi-barrelled rocket projector, and the MP40 submachine gun demanded a cautious respect from those who faced them. This qualitative superiority was somewhat offset by the poor mobility of German units, still highly dependent on horses for many hauling chores. Few doubted the excellence of the German army, but that excellence rested on training and motivation more than technology.[24]

The Americans could partially attribute their success, at this time, to the great arsenal of industrialized America which provided a large quantity of equipment and allowed U.S. generals to prosecute the war in the tradition of U.S. Grant. But technology was not a panacea for American soldiers either. More important factors like unit cohesion, guts, and the desire to survive colored the events at Mortain. The recipes for these ingredients, if recipes exist, are particularly relevant to the U.S. Army today, for human factors provide a combat multiplier out of proportion to numerical strength.

Logistical Support

After-action reports dealing with logistical issues are sketchy, and do not address Mortain specifically. However, some general observations can be made.

The U.S. 30th Division experienced some resupply problems, but generally received satisfactory support. Class II and class III items became somewhat critical in August, largely due to the fact that the servicing truckhead was too far to the rear.[25] Coordinating resupply of the isolated 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry on Hill 317 proved to be a problem due to unresponsiveness by VII Corps. From 8 to 10 August the Division contacted the Corps by TWX, messenger, and telephone requesting resupply. The first aerial drop was not made until the 10th.[26]

The Germans experienced logistical problems on a much broader scale than the Americans. Priority of effort was to the Eastern Front. New materiel was rarely shipped to the west. Resupply was dependent on horse-drawn vehicles and rail, and this led to delays.[27]

During the Mortain operation, supply problems were initially minimal. This was due to the presence of the well-stocked supply base at Alencon. Isolated shortages of ammunition occurred, but this was due to production shortages in Germany, not to field resupply operations. Allied air took its toll on German resupply efforts, and restricted supply movements to the hours of darkness.[28]

Command, Control, and Communications (C3)

The C3 aspects of the Mortain operation on the American side will be examined from two distinct and unrelated perspectives. The C3 system at high Allied levels will be mentioned briefly as it directly impacted on the battle of Falaise, which occurred as a result of the Mortain batle. Tactical C3 considerations relating to the 30th Division , as it closed into Mortain, will also be discussed.

Weigley characterized the Allied command system at high levels as "almost good enough". Eisenhower would not dictate operational and tactical methods of execution as long as Montgomery remained the Allied ground commander. The erratic Allied closing of the Falaise gap indicated the need for an acceleration of Eisenhower's assumption of his role as ground commander. The cautious communication between Bradley and Montgomery gave rise to potentially serious misunderstandings. Yet, the system was good enough against an enemy in disarray.[29] These defects did not come to the fore during the Mortain counterattack, which was primarily an American show directed under Bradley's quiet, competent management, and Collins's vigor.

"Lightning Joe" was a apt nickname for General Lawton J. Collins. His style of command was highly personal, close to the front, moving from one unit to another to solve problems head-on.[30] He got the job done, but his irrepressible energy did not directly affect the 30th Division's stout performance at Mortain.

The process of achieving efficient C3 results from proper planning and execution at several levels of command. When the 30th Division was ordered to relieve the 1st Division at Mortain, this process was never completed before the Germans intervened.

The plan for the operation called for Old Hickory's units to relieve the 1st Division in place. While this may have streamlined the relief, it caused the 30th Division problems in the future. Even telephone lines laid by the 1st Division wiremen were left intact. Many of these circuits were to develop trouble during the battle, and had to be duplicated. The 1st Division laid no lines from Division Artillery to the artillery battalions, yet these lines were urgently needed during the attack. Large-scale maps of the area were not received in the Division until 2300 hours on 6 August. The 30th Division fought initially with maps pulled off the mapboards and out of the pockets of departing 1st Division troopers. Artillery positions

had been sited too far forward, denying the opportunity to mass fires on the northern and southern portions of the front.[31] As a result of these factors C^3 was sporadic and difficult to maintain. It is to the credit of Old Hickory's troopers that C^3 did not disintegrate, but was maintained under difficult circumstances.

In contrast to the flexible and decentralized American command and control system, the Germans forces were controlled at the highest levels - by Hitler himself. Hitler, enamored of his own operational talent, directed day-to-day operations at low levels (down to division) through the teleprinters and radios at OKW.[32] Hitler gave the order to assemble armor and counterattack to regain Avranches. General von Kluge, commander of Army Group "B", believed the operation's purpose to be too ambitious, and felt the frontline should be restored only temporarily to gain time for a defensive build-up along the German border. But von Kluge could not discuss any plan with Hitler that smacked of retreat. Since the 20 July assasination attempt against Hitler, any such intimation by a commander would bring swift retribution from the Nazi leader. Von Kluge was also implicated in the conspiracy and had to consider self-survival.[33]

Leadership

It is almost axiomatic that a discussion of leadership focuses on senior commanders. This section will not depart from that practice, but will also mention junior leadership that played an important role in the action.

The U.S. VII Corps commander, Major General Lawton J. Collins, came to corps command after commanding the 25th Division in the Pacific. The 25th relieved the 1st Marine Division on Guadacanal in early 1943. Led by Collins, the 25th amply filled the shoes of the Marines.[34] Collins's vigorous leadership style was characterized by frequent trips to the front, and an impatient intolerance for those not completely committed to success.[35] He was a hard taskmaster, but an able tactician.

Major General Leland Hobbs, the 30th Division commander, a 1915 West Point Graduate, was another able but impatient commander. His skillful handling of his hard-pressed division during the attack would proved decisive.

American leadership at low levels also proved to be competent. The 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry would be isolated on Hill 317 for five days after the initial attack and would not fall to the Germans. The staunch defense of this dominant terrain would create problems for the Germans. The defense was orchestrated by company commanders, and executed by enlisted men. In a sense, it echoed Weigley's reflection (about the Germans) that high command mattered less than good company officers and good company soldiers.

On the German side, a great resevoir of combat experience rested in the 7th Army, as many commanders had seen action on the Eastern Front. General Paul Hausser, the 7th Army commander, had led the II SS Panzer Corps to the west before succeeding General Dollman as the Army commander. The 116th Panzer Division was an exceptionally good division. It was commanded by General Graf von Schwerin. Von Schwerin was involved in the 20 July plot against Hitler and his erratic actions during the attack would weaken the German plan. The 2d SS Panzer Division was commanded by General Heinrich von Luttwitz, a veteran cavalryman. General von Kluge, the Army Group "B" commander, was an able tactician. Even with his disaffection with Hitler's policies, he was to display tactical proficiency at Mortain under trying circumstances.

Intelligence

> "The decision in the Battle of France depends on the success of Luttich. . .The C-in-C West has a unique opportunity, which will never return, to drive into an extremely exposed enemy area and thereby to change the situation completely[36]. . .The armored divisions which have up to now been employed on that front must be released and moved complete to the left wing. The enemy's armored force which have pressed forward to the east, south-east and south will be annihilated by an attack which these armored formations - numbering at least four - will make, and contact will be restored with the west coast of the Cotentin at Avranches - or north of that - without regard to Brittany. . .[37]

And so went what Anthony Cave Brown has termed "the most decisive cryptanalitical revelation of the campaign in France".[38] ULTRA, the highly-sensitive British program for intercepting and decoding German radio transmissions had intercepted, on 2 August, Hitler's order to mount Operation Luttich. During the next several days, ULTRA provided evidence of von Kluge's protestations to Hitler. Wintherbotham writes that "in his last signal he (Kluge) pulled no punches and boldly stated that it could only end in disaster. . .one could get a glimmer of his utter hoplessness from his signals".[39]

Most writers agree on the significance of the first intercept, but there is still debate on how conclusively the intercepts predicted an attack. Weigley states that "even the interception of explicit enemy communiques did not offer evidence conclusive enough for Bradley to make outright predictions of a counterattack".[40] It is possible that the intercepts alone were not enough. Other little known factors must be addressed also. German stay-behind agents in France, specifically "George" at Cherbourg, and his sub-agent at Avranches, "Mr. Desire", were ordered to report on the state of various bridges that the German force would have to cross to get to Avranches. Yet, these agents were controlled by the Allies through the

elaborate British double-cross system. It is probable that Allied intelligence could deduce the time-table for the attack by carefully analyzing the questions the agents received from their German masters.[41]

The Allied command and Bradley may have had foreknowledge of German intentions, and even details of the pending attack. Yet, when General Hobbs assumed responsibility for Mortain at 2000 hours on the 6th, none of this intelligence was filtered to him. He knew very little about friendly dispositions - much less enemy dispositions. The 30th Division G2, in his after-action report for August 1944, stated that "on 7 August at 0038, warning came from VII Corps that an enemy counterattack was expected in the vicinity of Mortain from the east and north within the next 12 hours. . .At 0130, the enemy attack struck Mortain. . .[42]

ULTRA security consideration precluded direct knowledge of ULTRA at division level but significant intelligence was usually sanitized and filtered down in innocuous form like the VII Corps warning. While Old Hickory's soldiers were not forewarned, Bradley certainly was. ULTRA allowed him to prepare for Mortain, and allowed him to mount a deception operation to keep the Germans engaged at Mortain while he positioned his forces to encircle the German army.[43] German intelligence regarding the Americans was cursory. Key figures in the German strategic intelligence system were active against Hitler and, as a result, reporting was often deliberately skewed. Tactical intelligence was not of much better quality. On 6 August General Gersdorff reported that "the enemy tactical situation seemed still favorable, because until then, only elements of the 3 US Armored division and 30 US Infantry Division have been observed."[44]

One other point should be made to illustrate the somewhat bizarre circumstances surrounding German intelligence in general, and the Mortain affair in particular. Prior to the counterattack the 116th Panzer Division simply did not appear in the right place at the right time. The division commander, General von Schwerin, was involved in the plot against Hitler, and did not have his heart in the war. He may have been more concerned about protecting his troops from what he believed to be a fruitless operation. This is the same von Schwerin who had been in London in 1939 on behalf of Admiral Canaris, the German intelligence chief. Schwerin's secret mission for Canaris was to warn British authorities of Hitler's invasion plans for Poland, and ask that Britain conduct a show of force to restrain Hitler. The Brits, while cordial, did not act on Schwerin's proposals.[45]

Doctrine and Tactics

The American Army relied primarily on infantry with attached tank, to provide the firepower to overpower the Germans. Armored division usually were assigned to exploit a penetration by the infantry.[46] The infantry division would shoulder most of the responsibility for antitank defense.

Organic antitank guns and bazookas were deemed sufficient to turn back limited amounts of armor. Tank destroyer battalions could be called on if enemy armor attacked in mass.[47]

Tactics reflected the devastation caused by firepower witnessed in 1914-1918. Fire and maneuver became the watchword: fire was used to neutralize the enemy and cover advancing infantrymen. Fire and movement became inseparable partners. The Germans, on the defense, employed tactics appropriate to the hedgerow. They gave ground grudgingly employing a mobile defense in the difficult terrain. Panzer divisions, still the heart of the army, wre used to attack at decisive points to gain the initiative.[48]

Military Objectives

The German objective for Luttich was Avranches. After reaching this area, they intended to establish a connected front line towards the north, anchored on the south bank of the See river, and establish a bridgehead at Avranches, and cover it on the south near the Selune River.[49]

As mentioned previously, von Kluge disagreed with the ultimate intent of Hitler's plan. But Hitler called the shots. The operation had been named Luttich (Liege) to echo the place where, in 1914, Ludendorff had opened the way for an encirclement of the French Army.[50] Luttich represented another way for Hitler to display his operational talent to the German generals.

END NOTES

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5. Ibid., pp. 32, 36, 45, 48.

6. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 466.

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9. Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff, "The German Counterattack against Avranches", Historical Division, Headquarters, U.S. Army Europe, MS-B725: Allendorf, Germany, September 1945, pp. 6-7. Hereafter cited as MS#B725.

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12. U.S. Army, Armor School, The Armored Division in the Double Envelopment (2d Armored division in the Mortain Counterattack), a report prepared by committee 6, Officer Advanced Course, The Armored School (Fort Knox, KY., May 1947) (Hereafter cited as The Armored Division.) p. i-ii.

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14. Robert L. Hewitt, Workhorse of the Western Front: The Story of the 30th Infantry Division (Infantry Journal Press: Washington, DC, 1946) p. 55. (Hereafter cited as Workhorse)

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16. U.S. Army, "VII Corps Field Order 7", August 1944, unpaged.

17. The Armored Division, xxiv.

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21. MS #B-725, p. 38

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23. Richard H. Barnes, 'Arracourt -- September 1944' (MMAS thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College: Leavenworth KS., 1982) pp. 23, 27.

24. Keegan, Six Armies in Normandy, p. 242.

25. 30th Infantry Division, Quartermaster, "After Operation Report of Action Against the Enemy", September 1944, unpaged.

26. 30th Infantry Division, "After Action Report, G-4 Section, 5 September 1944, unpaged.

27. Barnes, Arracourt -- September 1944, p. 23.

28. MS #B-725, p. 39.

29. Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants, p. 216.

30. Ibid., p. 99.

31. Hewitt, Workhorse, p. 55.

32. Keegan, Six Armies in Normandy, p. 243.

33. Ibid., p. 244.

34. Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants, p. 100.

35. Ibid., p. 124.

36. Anthony Cave Brown, Bodyguard of Lies (New York, 1976) p. 784.

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44. MS #B-725, p. 35.

45. Brown, Bodyguard of Lies, p. 174.

46. Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants, p. 19.

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49. MS #B-725, p. 23.

50. Keegan, Six Armies in Normandy, p. 245.

Section IV Description of the Action

From its initial conception, Operation Luttich was shaped by the strategic and tactical disposition of military forces. Orginally the plan envisioned eight panzer divisions attacking on a narrow front. This was intended to generate sufficient combat power to allow a speedy breakthrough to the coastal town of Avranches and the subsequent defense of the new shortened battle front.

In order to provide the necessary armor forces, panzer units already committed against the Americans had to be withdrawn from the fight. In some cases this could be accomplished by replacing the panzers with reserve infantry units made available from other parts of the theater. In other cases the line of defense had to be shortened and thinned in order to free the required forces. In either case, the German forces, which were already dangerously weak, were further weakened where the strongest and most mobile formations were withdrawn to form the counterattack force. Field Marshall von Kluge visited the 7th Army command post CP at Mortain on 31 July. They agreed on a plan which called for the 7th Army to attack with the 2nd Panzer, 116th Panzer and 2nd SS Panzer divisions. With the exception of the negligable remnants of the Panzer Lehr Division, these represented the total armor forces available to 7th Army. Von Kluge realized that inadequate armor forces were available. He, therefore promised to disengage all possible armor divisions from the I and II SS Panzer Corps (5th Panzer Army sector) and provide them to 7th Army. In addition, the 7th Army was to be reinforced with 9th Panzer Division and 708th Infantry Division with the Headquarters of LVIII Panzer Corps - all from Army Group G. Two or three infantry divisions (84th, 331th and 363d) were promised from the Fifteenth Army, along with additional divisions later.

The intention was to conduct the attack with a strong panzer formation with infantry divisions to protect the flanks. The additional infantry divisions were allocated to Seventh Army to provide replacement forces for the panzer divisions which were to be pulled out of the line. They began arriving during the first week of August. On 6 August, the eve of the attack, the 331st Infantry Division was still enroute to Seventh Army. Its leading elements were near Briouze, about 40 kilometers west of Mortain.[2] The German plan required disengaging the 2d Panzer Div., 116th Panzer Div. and 2d SS Panzer Div. Seventh Army considered that for the plan to succeed, the defense line of the Army must be maintained without withdrawing across the line of Vire-Champ du Boult-St. Pois.[3] The assembly areas at Mortain in addition had to be retained.

Pressure all along the Seventh Army front necessitated modification of the plan. Originally the attack was to be conducted by the 2d Panzer, 2d SS Panzer and 116th Panzer attacking between the La See and Le Selune rivers.

The 1st Panzer was to follow the 2d Panzer in exploitation. The 708th Infantry was to protect the southern flank of the attack. The 9th Panzer and additional panzer divisions from Fifth Panzer Army were, upon arrival, to reinforce the exploiting force and assist in securing the captured ground.[4]

On 1 August Seventh Army received the LXXXI Corps staff and subordinated to it the 9th Panzer Division and the 708th Panzer Division which were arriving from the south. The 9th Panzer was a largely reconstituted division and the 708th Infantry was composed of over-age regional soldiers who lacked mobility. These units never reached the attack area. They were committed piecemeal as they arrived in an attempt to stabilize the very fluid situation on the Army's southern flank. The 9th Panzer was located north at Barenton on the southern flank of the attack, but its forces were committed and could not be withdrawn because relief forces were not available. The 708th Infantry, which should have relieved the 9th Panzer, was in turn committed as far south as Mayenne and Laval. Prior to the arrival of the 708th Infantry only screening ("security and alarm") forces were in this sector.[5]

Starting on 1 August a limited withdrawal was conducted to shorten the defensive line, and, at the same time, corps sectors were adjusted. In conjunction with this, the 84th and 363d Infantry Divisions were to be brought up to free the attacking divisions. These operations were complicated by strong pressure from the US VII Corps, by the difficulties in transporting the 84th and 363d from Fifteenth Army and from LXXXIV Corps respectively. The allied air forces meanwhile, prohibited movement causing large formations and trains to travel at night.

The low quality of the 84th Infantry a green, untested division; and the inherent risk of defending with a severely thinned a force further complicated the German operation. The 116 Panzer was disengaged and assembled in the vicinity of Gathemo, but heavy American pressure necessitated recommitment of the division north of the See.[6] The 363d Infantry was committed piecemeal as the line withdrew. Leading elements of the 84th Infantry were similarly committed, and, by the evening of 3-4 August the main body of the 2d Panzer Division and additional elements of the 2d SS Panzer Division had been relieved from the main lines.[7] On 3 August the main body of the 84th division reached the Sourdeval-Clement area. This is the northern portion of the Corps assembly area for the counterattack. The 84th remained in this location to secure it until sufficient forces could arrive from LXVII Panzer Corps. This resulted in a further delay of the relief of the 116 Panzer Division. By 5 August the relief of the 2d SS Panzer and 2d Panzer was complete, but these units had to fight their way out of the line. XLVII Corps had assumed responsibility for the Sourdeval area. The remnants of Panzer Lehr and the 394th Assault Gun Brigade had to be left in the front line to bolster the weak defense.[8] This commitment was made at the expense of weakening the attack.

The line of defense was shortened to Vire-Champ du Boult-Cherence. More importantly, it would no longer be possible to concentrate the 116th Panzer Division for employment south of the See. Forces for its replacement were simply not available. While the 116th Panzer had been tasked in the original plan to guard the right flank of the attack which was to be anchored on the See, that mission could no longer be accomplished. The concept was changed, putting the 116th Panzer north of the See, this course was chosen to speed concentration of the division. the Seventh Army chief of staff cites the modification as the first major reduction of the combat power of the main effort.[9] In order to reduce the impact of its failure to deploy, the 116th Panzer was ordered to dispatch one and a half tank battalions and one half anti-tank battalion to the 2d Panzer Division which was making the main attack. The remainder of the 116th Panzer was to be relieved by the 84th Infantry Division. The 116th Panzer would then concentrate and attack through its former front lines. Because of the low combat effectiveness of the inexperienced 84th Infantry, the 116th Panzer was continually recalled to counter local American penetrations. Elements of this division were forced to fight their way to their assembly areas and there was no break between the concentration of forces and the commencement of the attack.[10]

The arrival of the 1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandorte Adolf Hitler" was delayed because of its commitment at Caen. Disengagement started on 3-4 August and the division was expected to arrive on 6 August. One regiment, one tank battalion, one engineer battalion and the reconassiance battalion were to arrive on the evening of 6 August and the main body of the division was to be assembled by midnight. One regiment and one tank battalion of "Leibstandarte,"both with heavy losses, were to remain with Fifth Panzer Army.[11]

The II SS Panzer Corps (the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions) were originally slated to follow the attacking forces and add sufficient combat power to hold the ground gained. These divisions had been disengaged from the north of the Fifth Panzer Army sector and sent south. They had, however, been diverted to restore the chaotic situation at the boundry of the Fifth Panzer Army and the Seventh Army east of Vire. No forces were available to relieve the II SS Panzer Corps from this engagement and Seventh Army could not count on this force arriving in time to participate in the attack.[12]

The 2d Panzer Division succeeded in establishing security for its assembly area south of the See in the Cherence area. In the south, however, Mortain and the important hills around it had been lost. In general, the counterattack which had been conceived when the Germans were 3 kilometers from Avranches would be executed when they were 33 kilometers from it. The assembly of forces was conducted in close promimity to the enemy

complicating camouflage, movement and preparation. The attack not only went deeper to regain the lost ground, but, it had started over rough and easily defended terrain.

The following units took part in the attack in the evening of 6 August:

116th Panzer Division

2d Panzer Division

2d SS Panzer Division
with a Kampfgruppe from 17 SS Panzer Grenadier Division

1st SS Panzer Division (less one Panzer Grenadier Regiment and one Panzer Battalion remaining with Fifth Panzer Army)

The 2d Panzer Division and 2d SS Panzer Division were at 50 to 60% strength as a result of recent heavy losses. The 116th Panzer was relatively fresh. The 1st SS Panzer had one panzer grenadier regiment and one tank battalion at 50% of their combat strength.[13]

The following is a recapitulation of the armor strength of the attacking forces:

116 Panzer Division 20-25 tanks (excluding detachments)

2d Panzer Division 80-100 tanks (including attachments)

2d SS Panzer division 20-25 tanks

1st SS Panzer Division 30 tanks (excluding attachments)[14]

The 2d Panzer division was to conduct the main attack in the zone immediately south of the See along the St Barthelemy-Reffuveille road. It would flow past St Barthelemy and open the road from Juvigny La Tertre to Avranches. The formation was as follows: on the right or north flank, the 304th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and one tank detachment each from the 2d Panzer Division and the 116 Panzer Division; on the left or south flank, elements of th 2d Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the tanks detached from 1st SS Panzer Division.[15]

The 116th Panzer Division, meanwhile, was to attack on a parallel axis on the north side of the See echeloned to protect the right flank of the attack. The 2d SS Panzer Division would attack on the south flank. This division was to attack on both sides of Mortain and to protect the south flank of the attack by echeloning to the left. The remnants of Panzer Lehr were ordered to screen the left flank of the Corps.[16]

The 1st SS Panzer Division as the strongest unit was to follow the 2d Panzer Division in the initial phrase of the attack. This division was to exploit the success of 1st SS Panzer by passing through once the road from Juvigny la Tertre was cleared. It would then press on to seize Avranches and cut the line of communications for Patton's army.[17]

Disposition of Forces at the Beginning of the Action. See Map A and Chart E.

The 30th Division had been in the front lines for a month. It had participated in the hedgerow operations after Normandy, had helped make the capture of St. Lo possible, had participated in the breakthrough operation, and had fought in hard action at Tessy-sur-Vire.[18]

During the period 2-5 August, the 30th Infantry Division was used as a reserve for th XIX Corps with an additional mission to defend the Corps left flank and to consolidate and improve defensive positions. On the 2nd and 3rd of August, the Infantry Regiments of the 30th Division were generally lightly engaged and deservedly so after seeing 30 days of particularly intense combat. An indication of at least one Regiment's break in the action was that in the 117th, "some were able to get hot showers, and a USO troupe showed up to entertain us."[20] An indication, however, of the 30th's proximity to battle is that "Red Cross clubmobiles also appeared and though there was no time to make coffee, there were doughnuts and girls."[21]

At 031200B, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 119th Infantry were attached for operations to the 2nd Armored division. At 032235B, the 2nd Battalion departed to join Combat Command A of the 2nd Armor Division, and 3rd Battalion was alerted to join CCA on the following morning. However, at 031845B, the 30th Infantry Division was released from attachment to XIX Corps and was attached to V Corps; 3rd Battalion of the 119th was, therefore, released from the attachment to CCA of the 2nd Armored Division.[22]

From 3-5 August, the 30th made plans and reconnaissance for a move to assembly areas in the V Corps area of operations in the vicinity of Campeaux. This move was to commence at 051100B; thirty seven minutes prior to SP time, however, and after only a day and a half of being part of V Corps, the 30th Division ws attached to VII Corps effective 052130B.[23] The Division had been attached to three different corps in a period of three days, hardly a stabilizing factor for a unit which had been in heavy combat for the previous month!

After attachment to the VII Corps, the 30th Division was ordered immediately to move one Regimental Combat Team to the vicinity of Percy, and to follow with another RCT and the remainder of the Division on the night of 5-6 August in order to relieve elements of th 1st Infantry Division at Mortain. The order to move the initial RCT was received at 052030 with movement expected that night.[24] Subsequent orders for deployment of the

remainder of the Division to Mortain were received in person by Brigadier General Harrison, the Assistant division Commander during a visit to VII Corps headquaters somewhere around midnight.[25] The mission of the division was". . . to take over from the 1st Division near Mortain as soon as possible. VII Corps, intent on exploitation, was stretching southward as fast as it could. Arrival of the 30th would permit the 1st Division to continue to extend the American line, now curling into the German rear."[26]

The Division began its move with the 120th Infantry Regiment at 060130 hours, the 117th Regiment at 0545 hours, and the 119th Regiment shortly thereafter. The 120th closed into assembly areas in the vicinity of Mortain at 06100 hours, after a congested road march of approximately forty-six miles.[27] "Most of the trip was more like a celebration than a move into battle. August 6 was a warm bright Sunday, and the local citizenry thronged the roads to wave, throw flowers and offer drinks to the passing soldiers.[28] Since the town of Mortain was "running full blast" with all normal functions existing--even the hotels were open--and since the combat area was basically quiet, the Regimental commander had decided to conduct a daylight relief in place of the 1st Division's 18th Infantry regiment.[29] The 117th, arriving at 061230 after a similarly pleasant road march, occupied the 26 Infantry (1st Division) positions in St. Barthelemy, several miles north of Mortain. The Division Artillery took over positions previously occupied by the 1st Infantry Division Artillery, and the 119th Infantry, initially Division reserve, occupied assembly areas about three miles west of Juvigny. Major General Hobbs officially assumed responsibility for the sector at 062000 hours.[31]

The 120th and the 117th Infantry regiments were to settle into defensive positions previously occupied by elements of th 1st Infantry Division. With the exception of local offensive action, these regiments were to assume a defense in sector role thereby releasing the 1st Division for southward movement as a part of the VII Corps' extension of its right flank.

The 119th Infantry Regiment, less its 2nd Battalion which had joined CCA of the 2nd Armor Division, initially acted as the Division reserve. The regiment was then to develop plans for a move eastward and subsequent establishment of a bridgehead in the vicintiy of Domfront.[32]

<u>Locations and deployments of 30th Division elements</u>. See Map A.

119th Infantry Regiment: The Regiment, less its 2nd Battalion, was located in an assembly area approximately three miles west of Juvigny. since the Regiment was initially Division reserve, its battalions were not deployed.

117th Infantry regiment: After relieving the 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, the 117 organized and prepared defensive positions with its 1st Battalion north of St. Barthelemy, 2nd Battalion in the vicinity of La Rivere, and the 3rd Battalion south of La Belle Fontaine.[33]

120th infantry Regiment: After relieving the 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, the 120th Infantry organized and prepared defensive positions in and around the town of Mortain. The 1st Battalion occupied positions northeast of Mortain on Hill 285, the second most commanding piece of terrain in the area. 2nd Battalion occupied positions on high ground due east of Mortain, and 3rd Battalion, initially in reserve, occupied positions on the high ground west of Mortain in the vicinity of the regimental CP. However, at 061545 hours, while the division was still trying to assume control of the sector, 3rd Battalion of the 120th, less Company K, was tasked to move south to Barenton, where Task Force "X" of the 3rd Armored Division was having difficulty holding the town.[34] Company K of the 3rd Battalion joined 2nd Battalion on the high ground east of Mortain.

The Division Artillery assumed the firing positions of the 1st Division Artillery. The attached 188th FA Group and the 142nd Field Artillery Group were in position to provide general support for the Division.

823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion: Company A occupied platoon direct fire positions in the division sector with one platoon attached to the 120th Infantry. Company B occupied similar platoon positions with a platoon in direct support of the 117th Infantry. At 061900, Company C was attached to the 119th Infantry, the regimental reserve.[35]

531st Anti-Aircraft Battalion: Battery B was attached to protect Division Artillery positions. Batteries A, C, and D were in the general vicinity of Mortain.[36]

743rd Tank Battalion: Initially located in the vicinity of Les Mesnil Rainfray. Company B departed in support of th 3rd Battalion 120th's move to Barenton at 062000 hours.[37]

General comments on 30th Division's tactical deployment:

(a) The 30th Division assumed control of the sector less than four hours prior to the German attack. the positions accepted from the 1st Infantry Division were acceptable for an offensive pause, but hardly suitable for a strong defense. "The 30th Division's positions had been prepared by the 1st Division merely as forward posts from which to launch further attacks, not for stout defense."[38]

(b) Maps were generally not available. The maps the 30th did obtain

were received from 1st Division soldiers as the positions changed hands. Large scale maps did not arrive at the Division until 062300, three hours after the 30th assumed responsibility for the sector.[39]

(c) Since the 1st Infantry did not intend to defend from these positions, telephone nets and wire lines were appropriate only for a short pause in the offense. They were not suitable for supporting a cohesive defense.

(d) Field Artillery positions, as might be expected for the support of the 1st ID's planned offensive action, were well forward. Although appropriate for the offense, these positions were potentially devastating to a defense bacause they limited the 30th Division Artillery from massing firepower to the north and south in many cases.[40] Little time for reconnaissance prior to assuming these forward positions would cause problems later.

(e) The 30th Division received little intelligence from either VII Corps or the 1st Infantry division regarding actual enemy dispositions in the sector. The lack of current intelligence further lessened the 30th Division's chance of a successful defense.

(f) The men of the 30th Infantry Division were exhausted. After more than 30 days of hard fighting and a difficult night move to Mortain, they would be expected to prepare a defense where none previously existed and would, unbeknownst to them, have to fight for their lives in less than twelve hours.

Missions of Key Units

A. 119th Infantry Regiment-division reserve and prepare plans for an attack to seize a bridgehead at Domfront.

B. 117th Infantry Regiment-occupy and improve defensive positions vicinity St. Barthelemy.

C. 120th Infantry Regiment-occupy and improve defensive positions vicinity Mortain. Release 3rd Battalion (less Company K) to Barenton to assist Task Force X (3rd Armored Division) in controlling the town.

D. 30th Division-occupy defensive positions previously held by 1st Infantry Division, thereby releasing that division for deployment further south in the VII Corps plan. Initially, plan to send one regiment east to seize Domfront and establish a bridgehead.

Combat Power of U.S. Forces

A. The normal divisional strenght, including attachments, was approximately 16,000 men. Of this strenght, 9,000 were divided among the three infantry regiments.[41]

B. At the end of July, the Division was approximately 1900 men understrength. At the time that it was attached to VII Corps and moved into the 1st Division sector, the 30th had received 780 replacements. Since these men had little or no time to be absorbed into fighting units, their value was questionable. However, even counting the 780 men, the division was still short more than 1000 men or almost two rifle battalions. In addition, the loss of 2nd Battalion of the 119th and 3rd Battalion of the 120th to attachments left only 7 of the original 9 battalions available for action.[42] Whether one considers this situation as seven understrength battalions or five full-strength battalions is a moot point; regardless, the U.S. was faced with superior numbers.

C. The U.S. 30th Division had attached the 743 Tank Battalion which put a maximum of 77 tanks and assault guns at the division's disposal.[43]

Description of The Action (6-7 August)

The German Attack. See Map B.

The German plan involved an attack of at least four Panzer Divisions, with: 116th Panzer Division in the north attacking without any prior assembly along the north bank of the See River toward Cherence; the 2d Panzer division making the main effort in the center with an attack along the south bank of the See using the St. Barthelemy-Reffuveille Road as an axis; the 2d SS Panzer Division making a two-pronged attack in the south, with one axis on either side of Mortain; and the 1st SS Panzer Division following in the second echelon to exploit success in the drive toward Avranches.[44] Each of the three first-echelon divisions was to attack in two columns making a total of six armored spearheads thrusting into the 30th Division sector.

Several key factors precluded the Germans from beginning the atack under the desired circumstances:

(a) Assembly of the forces required for the counterattack had to be done mostly at night, and often while units were still in contact with allied units.

(b) The 116th Panzer Division, commanded by General von Schwerin, was tasked to provide one tank battalion to the 2d Panzer Division making the main effort in the center. Similarly, the 1st SS Panzer Division, being replaced on the Fifth Panzer Army front by the 89th Division so it could act as an exploitation force for the counterattack, was tasked to provide a tank battalion to the 2d Panzer.

(1) Von Schwerin ". . . had no confidence in the ability of the 84th Division, which was relieving him to hold against the American pressure, and consequently felt that he could. . .(not) detach a tank battalion to the 2d Panzer Division. . . ."[45]

(2) The panzer battalion from the 1st SS Panzer Division, although released from the parent command to join 2d Panzer Division in the attack, was unable to arrive in time because the lead tank was hit by a crashing allied aircraft stalling the entire column for a lengthy period.

(c) The hasty concentration was in many cases conducted without pause before the attack. Many units were already in contact when assembly for the counterattack took place and casualties were high. "In some instances German units had to fight their way to assembly points while in danger of being encircled."[46] In comparison with a daily estimated casualty rate of 3% of units in contact, German casualty reports for 6 August were as high as 40%. The attack, thus, began with already exhausted and seriously depleted forces.[47]

(d) Although weather forecasters predicted that the morning of 7 August would be extremely foggy, the day was bright and clear. A key advantage for the attacker was lost due to an unexpected change in the weather.

At approximately 2200 hours, Funck, the XLVII Panzer Corps Commander, requested that the attack be delayed because of the failure of the two tank battalions (from 116th Panzer and 1st SS Panzer Divisions) to arrive and reinforce the 2d Panzer in the main effort. Late arrival of the 1st SS Panzer to exploit toward Avranches was another consideration. Also, he informed Hausser (the Seventh Army Commander) that he was concerned about von Schwerin's participation in the action, because it appeared that the 116th Panzer's commander was unlikely to follow orders.[48] Hausser aware of the fact that guidance for the timing of the attack came directly through von Kluge from Hitler, granted only a 2 hour postponement unitl 2400 hours.

At 2400 hours or shortly thereafter, the attack commenced.

(a) In the north (right), the 116th Panzer did not attack. Von Schwerin, fearful of the vulnerability of his right flank and suspicious of the likelihood of the success of the entire operation, elected to disobey orders and remain on the defense.

(b) In the center, only one column of the 2d Panzer Division launched its attack on time. The column on the right, minus the tank battalion which never arrived from the 116th Panzer, moved along the south bank of the See River, achieved a considerable degree of surprise, and passed through Le Mesnil-Tove to Le-Mesnil Adelec. There, some elements turned toward the north to protect against possible attacks from the U.S. 39th Infantry sector near Cherence Le Roussel while the remainder of the column continued toward the Brecey-St. Hilaire road. Shortly after daybreak and after progress of six miles, the column encountered stiff resistance and halted west of Le Mesnil-Adelee, only three miles short of its initial objectives.[49] The second (left) column of 2d Panzer waited until it received the tank battalion from 1st Panzer, therefore delaying its attack until dawn on 7 August. This column experienced success similar although the loss of surprise created by the delay in attacking made it possible for a stiffer U.S. defense, particularly in the vicinity of St. Barthelemy. The column finally stopped in the face of stiff resistance just east of Juvigny.

(c) In the south, the 2d SS Panzer division attacked on schedule in two columns, one on either side of Mortain. Gaining total surprise and taking advantage of the lack of preparedness of the U.S. 30th Infantry Division, both columns enjoyed great success. The town was overrun without significant opposition, and the two columns proceeded past Mortain to establish blocking positions about half way between Mortain and St. Hilaire to the southwest.[50] These positions protected the southern flank of the attack and provided the basis for a direct threat on Avranches.

By afternoon on the 7th, the German attack had for all purposes stopped.

(a) In the north, the 116th Panzer still had not attacked by mid afternoon. Von Schwerin's disobedience finally was his downfall, and Hausserand Funck relieved him at 1600 hours. Von Schwerin was replaced by his Chief of Staff, Colonel Reinhard, who subsequently led the 116th Panze in a half-hearted attack at 1630; the attack failed because the Germans had lost the key element of surprise.[51]

(b) In the center, the main effort proceeded in two columns as previously described. Funck, seeing that both columns of the 2d Panzer Division were halted short of initial objectives (Juvigny) committed a part of his exploitation force, 1st Panzer SS Division. "A restricted road net, limited maneuver room, and American resistance on the ground and in the air blocked progress. With German tank losses skyrocketing, Funck halted the attack and ordered the troops to dig in. They had already done so."[52]

(c) In the south, the 2d SS Panzer Division had moved to blocking positions as stated, and was prepared for continued advance except for a small problem: the American unit occupying Hill 317 east of Mortain continued to deliever deadly accurate fire upon the advancing columns and could, because of the dominance of the terrain, direct air and artillery strikes almost at will.

(d) Instead of a massed and coordinated attack in six columns, the Germans had initially attacked with three. Two additional columns attacked later after surprise had been lost, and one column never mounted an effective attack. The German attack generally achieved surprise and was able to penetrate a substantial distance into the Allied rear without difficulty. Success was limited, however, by three factors:

(1) More than 300 German aircraft which were to have been available for the atack did not show up.

(2) The Germans had underestimated the will and courage of the Americans particularly the battalion on Hill 317 in Mortain.

(3) The Allies, because of fair weather, good terrain, and the absence of German aircraft, were able to stop the attack predominantly by air and artillery. "By late afternoon, 7 August, it appeared to Hitler that von Kluge had displayed poor judgement in allowing the commitment of the 1st SS Panzer Division north of Mortain rather than southwest toward St. Hilaire, where American opposition had been absent."[53] He still desired the attack to drive to the sea, and made preparations to provide von Kluge with enough forces to do so. In the meantime, the Germans would have to defend the ground gained on 7 August.

The 30th Division Commander, General Hobbs, was faced with a serious problem on 7 August. The Germans had made a penetration in the left of his sector, had made significant progress south and west of Mortain, and had surrounded and isolated a battalion on Hill 317 east of Mortain. As an astute recorder for the 30th Division Artillery observed:

> ". . .it became apparent that the division had once again found itself squarely centered before a major breakthrough attempt by an enemy in force, with the division standing between the enemy and the vital supply lines of the 3rd United States Army and the channel waters."[54]
>
> Hobbs had three problems: eliminating the penetration northwest of Mortain, blocking the thrust southwest of Mortain, and recapturing Mortain itself to re-establish contact with the surrounded battalion on Hill 314.[55] See Map C.

In addition to the fighting which took place in the 30th Division zone, the American reaction to the Mortain counterattack involved units from the 9th Infantry Division to the north and the 1st Infantry Division to the south at Barenton. Certainly, the action of these two divisions influenced the American reaction to the 7 August counterattack. However, because the 30th Division's actions significantly affected the course of the German attack and thwarted Hitler's plan, that portion of the battle will be emphasized in the analysis.

In the northern portion of the 30th Division zone, quick action had to be taken to stop the German penetration and to regain contact with the 9th Division's 39th Infantry to the north. The 119th Infantry Regiment, less its 2d battalion which was committed at Barenton, was initially in Division Reserve. At 0300, the 119th was ordered to commit one company to cut behind the Germans, who had advanced as far as Le Mesnil Adelee and to establish a roadblock. A second company was to turn west from La Preventerie and attack into the rear of the german salient. Company B was given the roadblock mission, and both companies were tasked with attacking into the rear of the German column. Company B arrived between 0530 and 0630 on the 7th but, in the face of superior firepower and numbers, was forced to pull back after limited engagement. Company I experienced even more difficulty:

> Early in the afternoon some planes were sighted, but, since they were identified as American P 47's and British Typhoons, neither I Comapny nor the tanks took cover. The planes, however, dived on the unit, firing rockets, machine guns and dropping bombs.

> I Company and its tanks had not yet reorganized from the strafing and bombing when a large force of enemy tanks and infantry moved out of Le Mesnil Adelee to capture a part of the unit.[56]

"At 0300B, 3d Battalion reinforced with one company of medium tanks. 743 Tank Battalion was ordered to attack north from Juvigny and seize Le Mesnil Tove to cut off enemy penetration between 117th Infantry and 39th Infantry."[57] This battalion faced superior forces and as a result made little progress.

> The rest of the 3d Battalion, attacking northward from Juvigny toward LeMesnil Tove, was no match for the German force either, especially since it was being harrassed on its right (east) flank. However, it massed fires on the German withdrawal with sufficient effect to drive it north of Le Mesnil Tove, and to permit a junction with the 3d Armored tankers near Tove.[58]

At 0730, Combat Command B, 3d Armored Division was attached to the division, and committed one team in support of the 119th's actions in the north. At 1430, this team passed through Comapny B of the 119th, which had failed in its attempt to establish the roadblock at Le Mesnil Adelee and ". . .mopped up large enemy forces that made the penetration between the 39th Infantry and 117th Infantry."[59] As a result of the success of CCB, ". . .30th Division's forces were not yet in contact with the 8th Infantry, which had withdrawn north toward Cherence-le-Roussel, but the most threatening of the German thrusts was now reduced to a tough cleanup problem."[60]

At 0545 on 7 Augsut, 1st Battalion of the 119th was pulled from its brief mission of providing defense for the Division headquarters and was attached to the 2d Battalion, 120th Infantry at Mortain. The 2d Battalion of the 119th was to return from its mission at Barenton during the evening of the 7th and was to assist in the 3rd Battalion's attack toward Le Mesnil Tove.

> The 2d Battalion, in returning to the Regiment without maps, became scattered and arrived in small groups during the night and early morning of the eigth. Instead of being sent to help the third Battalion to take Le Mesnil Tove as previously planned, it went into Division Reserve to rest and reorganize.[61]

Thus the 119th Infantry, given the mission of reducing the German penetration in the north and regaining contact with the 39th Infantry,

actually had only one of its battalions and, later, a team from Combat Command B to do so. Considering the relative strength of the attacking German forces, it was a big assignment.

The 117th Infantry, occupying defensive positions in the vicinity of St. Barthelemy, received a heavy attack in the early daylight hours. Companies A and C were overrun after particularly heavy fighting, and the 1st Battalion command post became surrounded. "Company B was flung into the line along with clerks, messengers, and drivers of headquarters company."[62] In what developed into a series of small battles, the 1st Battalion saw some particularly bloody action over the next several days. At 1800 hours. 3d Battalion of the 12th Infantry Regiment, which the division had received in attachment at 1430, was attached to the 117th.[63]

> The infantry casualties at the St. Barthelemy were heavy. The 1st Battalion, 117th Infantry, lost 350 men during the day but was crippled even more than this high figure indicates by disorganization and isolation of its small units. Some men of the battalion fought and hid in isolated bands for two days before they succeeded in reforming their companies. The battalion, its fighting capacity something like 50% of normal, fell back about a thousand yards during the morning and grouped itself on the hill overlooking St. Barthelmy, now strewn with dead Germans tanks and soldiers. By noon, however, the battalion appeared to have won the battle of survivial. Harried by air and ground resistance, the enemy push came to a halt.[64]

At 0130 hours, the enemy attacked on both sides of Mortain, where the 120th Infantry (less 3d Battalion, attached to CCB, 2d Armored Division at Barenton) was in defensive positions in and around the town of Mortain. Critical terrain was held by 2d Battalion (plus Company K of 3d Battalion) on Hill 314 east of Mortain.[65]

> East-west roads lie to both the north and south of Hill 314. These roads lead to the sea. With Hill 314 in American hands, the enemy could not use the roads during daylight which meant that these routes were virtually denied him because less than five hours of darkness separated the long summer days.[66]

First battalion, less Company C, occupied defensive positions on Hill 275, the second most prominent terrain in the area. C Company was tasked to defend the Regimental CP on the high ground south of Hill 285 and due west of Mortain.

> The 1st Battalion was in full scale fight on Hill 285 about a half-mile west of Abbaye Blanche. The south flank, originally defended by the 3d Battalion before its dispatch to Barenton, and then by C Company, was now almost denuded of troops.[67]

During the 0130 attack, roadblocks established by 2d Battalion of the 120th in Mortain began to feel pressure.

> The battalion had split a rifle company three ways to establish roadblocks augmented by antitank guns. Two roadblocks were overrun at once. The third remained in place and in action and eventually accounted for the impressive score of more than forty of the enemy's vehicles and tanks.[68]

The early situation, then, for the 120th Infantry Regiment showed the town of Mortain entered from both north and south, Hill 285 under heavy direct attack, and 2d Battalion on Hill 317 encircled and cut off from the rest of the regiment. At 0250 the Regimental Commander, Colonel Birks, committed Company C of the 1st Battalion--the only real reserve available to the Regiment--to try to reestablish contact with 2d Battalion headquarters, which was surrounded in the town of Mortain. The company accomplished the task, but was unable to reform a roadblock at the south end of town. Lieutenant Colonel Hardaway, 2d Battalion Commander, and his staff spent the next several days trying to rejoin remnants of the battalion on Hill 317, but were finally captured.

At approximately 0900 hours, the Regimental Commander finally received 2d Battalion of the 117th, which had been enroute since being attached by Division at 0315 hours.[69]

> The 2d Battalion of the 117th Infantry, less Company "G" finally reached the vicinity of the regimental CP. . . . At the time of their arrival, the enemy was attacking and penetrating the south flank of the Regiment, as well as occupying the town of Mortain. Although the need for support on our right flank was great, Colonel Birks decided to send this battalion, less companies, "F" and "G", to Mortain in relief of the 2d Battalion. Since eight tanks had arrived to aid us in throwing back the enemy, four were attached to this group under command of LTC. Lockett, and they were committed at 2300. Company "F" of the 117th Infantry was given the other four tanks and sent out on our right flank with the mission of attacking the enemy along the Heufbourg-Romagny Road and seizing the town of Romagny.[70]

This attempt to relieve the battalion stranded on Hill 317 was unsuccessful, but it acheived an important secondary benefit: ". . . by fighting its way to the outskirts of the town, the 117th Infantry group

secured the supply route to the Abbaye Blanche block, and picked up remnants of the Company C platoon still in town.[71] The F Company attack toward Romagny was stopped by a vastly superior enemy.

At 0545, the 1st Battalion of the 119th Infantry, up to this time performing a security mission for the division headquarters, was attached to the 120th Infantry, and was given a mission to attack east to seize Romagny and continue to Mortain to relieve the pressure on Hill 317.[72] The task force penetrated to within a kilometer of Romagny but was faced with strong opposition and decided to wait until the following day to press the attack. "By this time, night was falling. Romagny itself was a little too hot for comfort and both sides backed off for the night."[73]

The 30th Division received additional help from the corps commander, although too late to be of any help on 7 August. The 35th Infantry Division was tasked to attack toward Mortain from the southwest. 12th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division and the 629th Tank Destroyer Battalion, a self-propelled gun unit, were attached to the 30th Division. On Hill 317, the 2d Battalion continued to resist enemy efforts to drive them off the hill and in the process had a devastating effect on the entire 2d SS Panzer Division attack. On the hill were Company K (3d Battalion), Company E, parts of F and G Companies, and elements of H Company (heavy weapons). At times, these companies were cut off from one another on the hilltop and had to use patrols to maintain communications between units.[74] While rugged individual and small group efforts held the elite German units at bay, artillery observers on the hill were able to bring fire on the German columns as far away as Romagny. The enemy succeeded in sweeping around E Company's right flank, and in doing so seized 19 of the 21 quarter ton trucks parked there.[75] Throughout the day and night of 7 August, 2d Battalion repulsed all attempts by the enemy to drive them off the hill.

8 AUGUST. See Map D.

On 8 August, both the U.S. and the Germans attacked. Although the fighting was particularly bloody, the lines achieved on 7 August remained relatively unchanged.

In the north, the 117th continued to attack to the north and east to retake the town of St. Barthelemy. With the 3d Battalion 12th Infantry and two tank destroyer companies attached, the 117th attacked at 0800 to regain lost ground. "Advance was slow against fire from dug-in tanks, artillery, mortar, and automatic weapons."[76] By the end of the day, the Regiment had nearly reached its objectives and was prepared to continue the attack on 9 August.

The 119th Infantry's 3d Battalion and Task Force 1 of 3d Armored Division's CCB continued the attack to the east and north to seize Le Mesnil Tove. Task Force 2 of CCB was given the mission to attack to the northeast to cut the road between Le Mesnil Tove and Grand Dove, thereby closing the gap between 3d Battalion 119th Infantry at Le Mesnil Tove and the left-most unit of the 117th Infantry at St. Barthelemy. By the end of 8 August, these units had generally achieved their objectives.

The remainder of the 12th Regimental Combat Team attacked at 1315 with an initial objective of crossroads 278 north of Mortain and, subsequently, the town. By day's end, the 12th Infantry was still a third of a mile from its initial objective but was prepared to resume the attack toward Mortain on 9 August.77

> In the south, the 1st Battalion of the 119th Infantry spent most of the day extending to its left to strengthen the link with the 117th Infantry's Company F, having established patrol contact at 1:25 A.M. At 3:00 P.M. it attacked eastward and picked up 400 yards before being forced to halt to reorganize. . . .The attack was resumed at 7:30 but again was stopped by dark.

This left Romagny in American hands but did little to relieve the pressure on Hill 317 in Mortain.

In the 120th Infantry's sector, the enemy continued the attack. The 1st Battalion on Hill 285 was attacked at 0130 by a combination of tanks and infantry. Comapny A was forced to withdraw to the rear of a road at the crest of the hill when attacked by a reinforced enemy company. The Germans used flame throweres to prevent A Company from using their tank destroyers, so these crews were forced to fight as infantry.[79] "At 0500, word was received that our artillery was hitting the enemy solidly in this area, and by 0615 the enemy attack had been brought to a standstill and his remaining tanks were attempting to move back."[80] Shortly thereafter, B Company to the south was attacked with flame throwers and tanks; the Americans were able to repulse this assault also.

For the 2d Battalion on Hill 317, the 8th was a duplication of the 7th. During the period". . .the enemy had hammered away with every weapon in his armory. . . .The enemy pounded the American positions incessantly. When an organized attack was not being made, the enemy filled in with combat patrols, so that the depleted American units had to constantly rotate in position to get any rest at all."[81] Countless instances of individual heroism kept the Germans at bay while men of the 2d Battalion scrounged for the means to survive.

By 9 August Operation Luttich was doomed. Only the High Command and Hitler believed that the counterattack had any chance for success. Through orders and the actions of his emmissary, General Buhle, Hitler pressed for continuation. "The OB West has the unique opportunity to seize the initiative. Avranches is to be recaptured. The thrust has to be carried out with all available forces and through preparation,"[82] read Hitler's letter of 9 August. This was followed by a visit from General Buhle who demanded personal assurances from the Seventh Army Commander General Hauser that he was dedicated to Luttich and confident of its success.[83]

A new command structure was created to breathe life into the operation. General Eberbach, commander of the Fifth Panzer Army was appointed commander of the newly created "Panzer Group Eberbach" which was subordinate to Seventh Army. The LVIII Panzer Corps was used to control the 2d and 10th SS Panzer Divisions on the left. The LXVII Corps retained control of the 116th Panzer, the 2d Panzer and 1st SS Panzer Divisions.[84] The immediate object of these forces was to hold the necessary concentration areas and wait for the assembly of fresh additional forces for a renewal of the attack.[85] Except for the area around Mortain held by 2d SS Panzer-the German forces had lost their early gains. They were now fighting to retain the ground from which the original attack had been launched. Thus while the American forces were attacking to restore their original positions, the German forces were struggling to retain their footholds for further offensive action. It is the German intention to continue the attack which explains their failure to withdraw when the attack had clearly failed.

On 9 August the 2d Battalion 120th Infantry still held Hill 314. They wre surrounded by the 2d SS Panzer Division but were able to maintain their position because of the supporting artillery fires. From this dominant terrain they were able to call devastating fires on the German columns. Artillery fire was observed during the day and at night protective fires and fires on sound detected targets were conducted.[86] At 1830 on 9 August an officer from the 2d SS Panzer Division contacted the surrounded unit to demand its surrender. The demand was emphatically dismissed.[87]

The Germans continued a pattern of probing attacks, combat patrols and heavy artillery fires. The Americans were short of all classes of supply - most importantly food, ammunition and medical supplies. The depleted units were rotated in position to provide rest. Positions were improved as much as possible to provide cover from indirect fires. Wounded were accommodated in slit trenches and, in the absence of a medical officer and supplies, were provided temporary treatment by the battalion aidmen.[88]

During this period attempts were made to resupply the "Lost Battalion" while ground forces were fighting to link up with it. Before the landing at Normandy bundles had been prepared for resupply of surrounded units should the necessity arise.[89] Not until 10 August, however, was the first

attempt made to drop supplies. The food and ammunition landed 800 yards from the American positions and had to be retrieved over open terrain covered by direct and indirect fire. A second attempt on 11 August failed when all supplies fell into German hands.[90] A final attempt was made by the 230th Artillery (at the direction of division artillery) to provide medical supplies to the surrounded battalion. The smoke canisters were removed from base ejecting artillery smoke shells. The cavities were filled with medical supplies and the rounds were balanced for balistic stability. The rounds were then fired to (at) the 2-120 Infantry. Some medical supplies were provided in this manner although none of the badly needed plasma could be delivered this way.[91]

The morale of the isolated battalion was bolstered by the resupply attempts and by the knowledge that two American columns were fighting forward to link up. The 1st Battalion 119 Infantry was advancing by way of Romagny against stiff German resistance. The 320th Infantry was advancing by way of Barenton. The 320th Infantry made the first contact and immediately began the evacuation of the wounded and resupply of food and water.[92]

Two key events, or rather one event and one non-event had a critical impact on the counterattack at Mortain. The first of these was the inability of the Germans to satisfactorally assemble their forces for the operation. This is closely related to the deteriorating situations on the flanks of Seventh Army, especially in the south. The Germans were never able to generate sufficient forces to replace the panzer units which had to be withdrawn from the line. Neither were they able to properly secure the flanks and assembly areas of the counterattack. The decision to leave the 116th Panzer Division north of the See deprived the main effort of sufficient force to obtain the objective. The corps was spread over too wide an area and was compelled to dissipate too much of its power in concentrating forces for the attack. The 116th Panzer was opposed by strong forces and never contributed materially to the attack.

The role of air power was crucial especially since the weather was clear during the critical phase of the operation. The failure of the Luftwaffe to provide the 300 fighter aircraft promised in support left the panzer formations vulnerable to continuous attack by allied air. They were introduced to the deadly accuracy by the new rockets fired by Typhons. The first effect of this was to stop the successful drive of the 2d Panzer Division when daylight exposed them. Further air interdiction prohibited resupply or commitment of additional forces. This enabled the Americans to bolster the defenses in front of the German main effort while the attack was stalled. The loss of time, loss of mobility and combat casualties imposed by allied air doomed the attack.

THE OUTCOME

The battle at Mortain was clearly a victory for the Allies. In addition to winning a decisive tactical vistory in the hills around Mortain, the Allies further benefitted by the entrapment of the major portion of Germany's two western field armies in what would later be called the Falaise Gap. Clearly, the Germans received some minor benefit from the counterattack; the fact that the U.S. VII Corps' exploitation was temporarily halted while the counterattack was contained was a small victory. However, the fact that Germany was faced with the loss of a sizeable force and would be forced onto the strategic defensive, strikingly offset any advantage they gained from the counterattack.

The U.S. forces were victorious in defending against the Mortain counterattack for a number of reasons. Although certainly not an all-inclusive list, the following reasons were key factors in the American success.

(1) Terrain. the U.S. was fortunate (or wise) enough to be holding the key piece of terrain in the entire counterattack zone. The advantage offered by the occupation of Hill 317, and especially when combined with the subsequent use of air and artillery, made the difference for the Americans. When the 1st Infantry Division first occupied Mortain, MG Collins (VII Corps CG) told MG Huebner (1st Inf CG), "Ralph, be sure to get Hill 314."[93] He could not have known at that time how critical that statement would be to the 30th Division and, therefore, to the successful defense of the entire VII Corps.

(2) Air Power. The defense of Mortain would not have succeeded without overwhelming U.S. air superiority. The German commander had been promised 300 aircraft in support of the counterattack; he received only a fraction of that number. "As for the mighty German air effort promised, the fighter planes that got off the ground near Paris did not get much beyond their airfields. Allied squadrons engaged them at once, and not a single German plane reached Mortain that day."[94] The Allies, however, made maximum use of airpower. "Ten squadrons of Typhoons of the RAF Tactical Air Force operating from airfields in France flew 294 sorties in the Mortain area."[95] The Allied aircraft were able to operate almost without interference; ". . .P-47s and RAF rocket-firing Typhoons slugged at the enemy tank waves, often inadvertently hitting friendly positions. The 120th was hit by aircraft ten times during the (7th). . . ."[96] Such was the proximity of the antagonists and the confusion of battle. The German attack had little chance of success in the face of the overwhelming superiority of the Allied fighter-bombers.

(3) Artillery. The entire Mortain defense, and particularly the survival of the 2d Battalion 120th Infantry on Hill 317, owed its success in large measure to the use of artillery. By virtue of domination of the

terrain on Hill 317 and domination of the skies for light artillery observation aircraft, the Americans were able to bring effective observed fire on the entire 30th Division zone. "This battle was an artilleryman's dream come true the like of which had not previously been seen by the unit. The enemy in his withdrawal provided even more lucrative (sic) targets than in his attack."[97] To give proper credit to the infantryman, the artillery could not have been so effective without them. "Much of the reason why artillery and air were so effective came from the fact that the soldier on the ground had immobilized the German striking force and turned them into sitting ducks."[98]

(4) Leadership and bravery. In the face of some of the fiercest fighting experienced by the 30th Division, and in the face of overwhelming odds increased even more by the factor of surprise, the 30th held. The entire defense would have folded without significant displays of individual courage and leadership. The unit histories and citations for bravery are replete with example after example of how soldiers and their leaders, faced with the most abysmal of circumstances, performed miraculous feats in holding the defense together.

(5) Luck. Several very fortunate circumstances contributed to the successful American defense against the German counterattack.

(a) The weather should have been foggy on 7 August, thereby precluding the devastating effects of the U.S. air and artillery. However, the day was clear and air power became a key factor.

(b) The 116th Panzer Division (two columns) and one column of the 2d SS Panzer Division did not attack on schedule. The addition of these three columns would have more than doubled the German effort, and would have had a significant effect on the American ability to react.

(c) For unknown reasons, the Germans elected to make their main effort north of Mortain rather than to the south. The commitment of the 1st SS Panzer Division, a second echelon force, into the center rather than into the more weakly defended south was a stroke of good luck for the Americans. If the Germans had attacked in more strength in the south, they would, in all probability have reached Avranches on the first day.

(d) The U.S. VII Corps managed to have a force available in the area of almost every threatened sector during the battle.

The 4th Division was positioned to bring flanking fire on the main effort. CCB of the 3rd Armored Division, assembled near Reffuveolle, a few miles from the deepest point of the penetration, was able to attack the German spearheads immediately. The accidental appearance of th 2d Armored Division near Cherence brought comfort to the infantry, and the fact that the armor was not needed elsewhere and

could therefore be inserted into battle was a happy circumstance. The location of the 35th Division was another lucky break.[99]

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64. Hewitt, Workhorse., p. 60.

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91. 30th Inf Div., "After-Action Report, Artillery," June 1944-April 1945, pp. 44 and History of the 120th, pp. 49-50.

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93. Blumenson, "Mortain Counteratack," p. 32.

94. Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 464.

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96. Hewitt, Workhorse., p. 59.

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98. Blumenson, "Mortain Counterattack," p. 37.

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Section V

Assess the Significance of the Action

The Mortain counterattack had far more impact than the size of the operation merited. The German armored thrust, after all, amounted to only 180 panzars, hardly a major force. General Bradley was able to contain, attrite and eventuallly defeat the counterattack without major changes in the deployment of his forces. The critical southeastern dash by his XV Corps continued and would play an important role in future battles. Hitler's Mortain operation would have a profound effect on the course of the war from a strategic, operational and tactical perspective.

Strategically, the Germans lost the opportunity, however slight, to bottle the western allies in the difficult bocage country of northern France. Germany would now continue to fight a three front war: in France, in Italy and in the Soviet Union. More importantly on the western front, they would be forced to conduct a mobile fluid battle without the benefit of natural or man-made obstacles until the West Wall on the borders of the Reich. Such a fast-moving war favored the Allies with their armor and motorized formations complemented with strong air cover.

On the operational level, the counterattack sealed the fate of the 7th Army. The attack's western thrust, although gaining only 15 kilometers, shifted the center of gravity of the German forces to the west. This facilitated the Allied envelopment taking place in their rear at the Falaise-Argentum area. Although the 7th Army escaped across the Seine River, it lost most of its equipment, ammunition and cohesion in the mad scramble to avoid the pincers of the Canadian and American armies. General Bradley deserves a great deal of credit for the generalship he displayed during the battle. He refused to overact to the German attack and kept his perspective concerning the scope of the Mortain operation without alarming his superiors.

The bravery of the American infantry in the face of the German counterattack raised the morale of the American soldier and further attritted the fighting capability of his Nazi counterpart. The Americans, frustrated by the staunch German defense in the hedgerows of Normandy, had now defeated a sizeable panzar force. The dogged defense of the 30th Infantry Division served to raise the fighting spirit of Bradly's Army Group. The heroism displayed on Hill 317 meanwhile, gave Americans an increased respect for the effects of artillery and air support. The German soldier, on the other hand, had little to show for his efforts. His panzar units were further eroded. His fear of American air power and heavy artillery fire increased and, his retreat to the frontiers of Germany only accelerated. In retrospect, we can still marvel at their fighting capability during the winter months of 1944-1945.

Several lessons were learned or 'relearned' during the Mortain opereation. Flexibility at all levels of command again proved decisive. American commanders, such as Generals Bradly, Patton and Collins displayed a willingness to adapt to a new situation. The fact that Field Marshal Montgomery, their superior, gave them a relatively free hand worked to the Allied advantage. The Americans benefitted from both British and U.S. air support, for example, shortly after the battle began. The Germans were not as fortunate. Adolf Hitler, isolated from the battle field in East Prussia, rigidly controlled the movements of his corps and even divisions. His field commanders had little choice except to follow his orders. They further lacked the resources of good communications and accurate intelligence. Von Kluge's commitment of the 'exploitation' panzer divisions to the north of Mortain rather than to the south, where American resistance was weak typifies an operational mistake indicating a poor "feel of the battle".

A great deal of ink has been spilled over the effect of ULTRA on operations in the Western front. In the case of the Mortain counterattack, we can conclude that its influence was not decisive. Certainly General Bradly was warned of th German attack and made tentative arrangements to contain it. The 30th Division, however, received only an hour's notice and was unable to change its dispositions. In short, ULTRA prepared the Allied high command for the attack, but this intelligence did not lead to any major realignment of forces.

Finally, mention must be made of Allied air and artillery support. The heavy air and artillery bombardment played a major role in stemming the German advance. The artillery support was far more accurate and timely than the air support. This was due to the forward observers who generally enjoyed excellent observation from Hill 317 and satisfactory communications. The air support was not as well coordinated. Allied air forces battered the Germans with 294 sorties on 7 August, for example, but they also hit U.S. units. The 30th Infantry Division suffered as many as 10 aerial attacks per day. The mishaps occurred because there was no forward air liaison units with the infantry regiments. Allied planes 'went hunting' in certain sectors without close coordination of committed ground units.

The most important "lesson learned" which impacts on modern European combat operations is the criticality of holding key terrain, even when bypassed. American forces in Central Europe face strong armored Soviet armies. The American experience on Hill 317 demonstrated the advantages of the retention of a vital hill or communications center. Defending forces in the possession of key terrain can call for indirect fire, provide intelligence and deny logistical and communication facilities to the attacker. American forces must be prepared psychologically and logistically to hold key terrain and allow enemy forces to flow around them. The courage and determination of bypassed units will influence furture battles just as the heroic stand of the 2nd Battalion, 120th Regiment stemmed the Nazi attack in August 1944.

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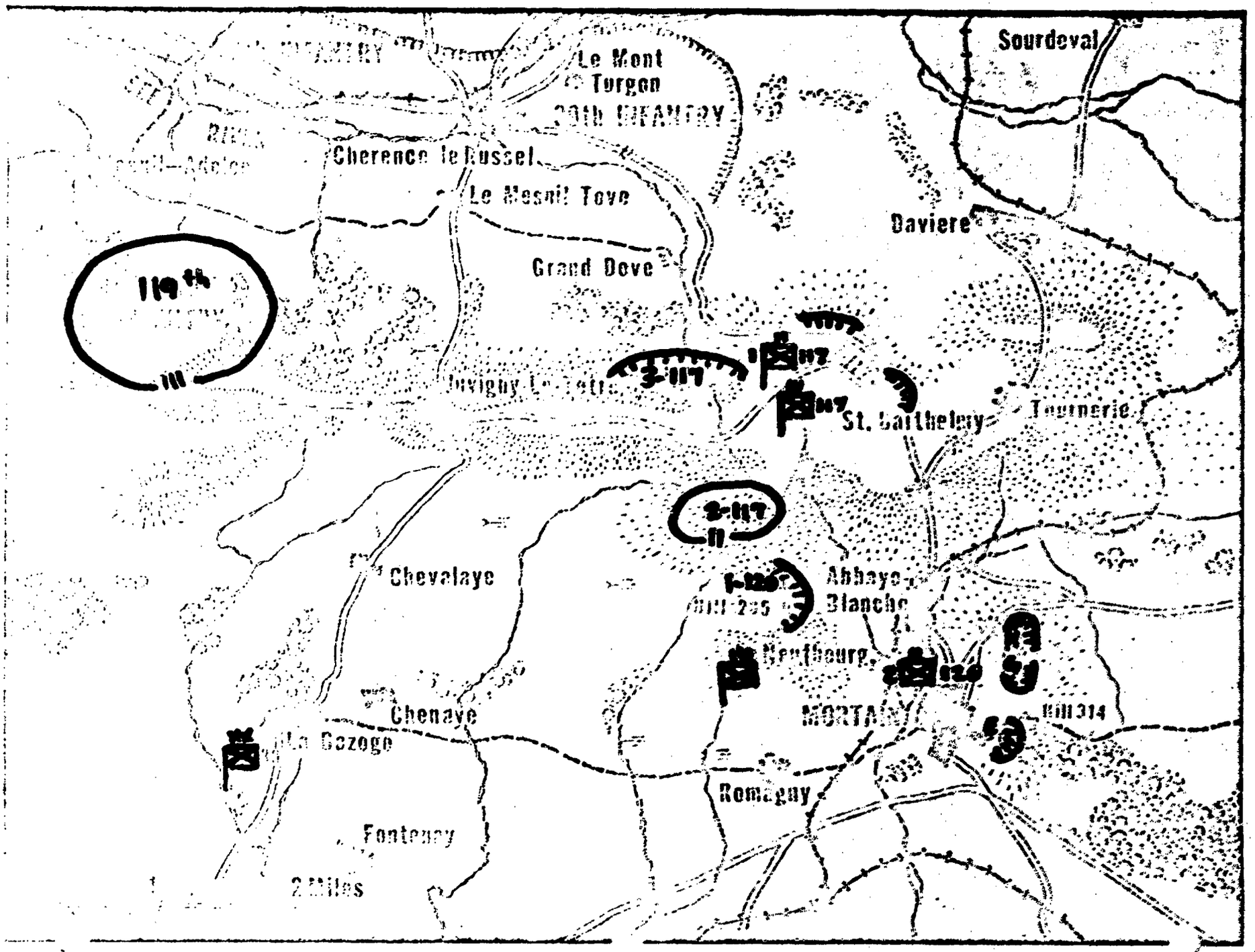
MAP A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MAP B

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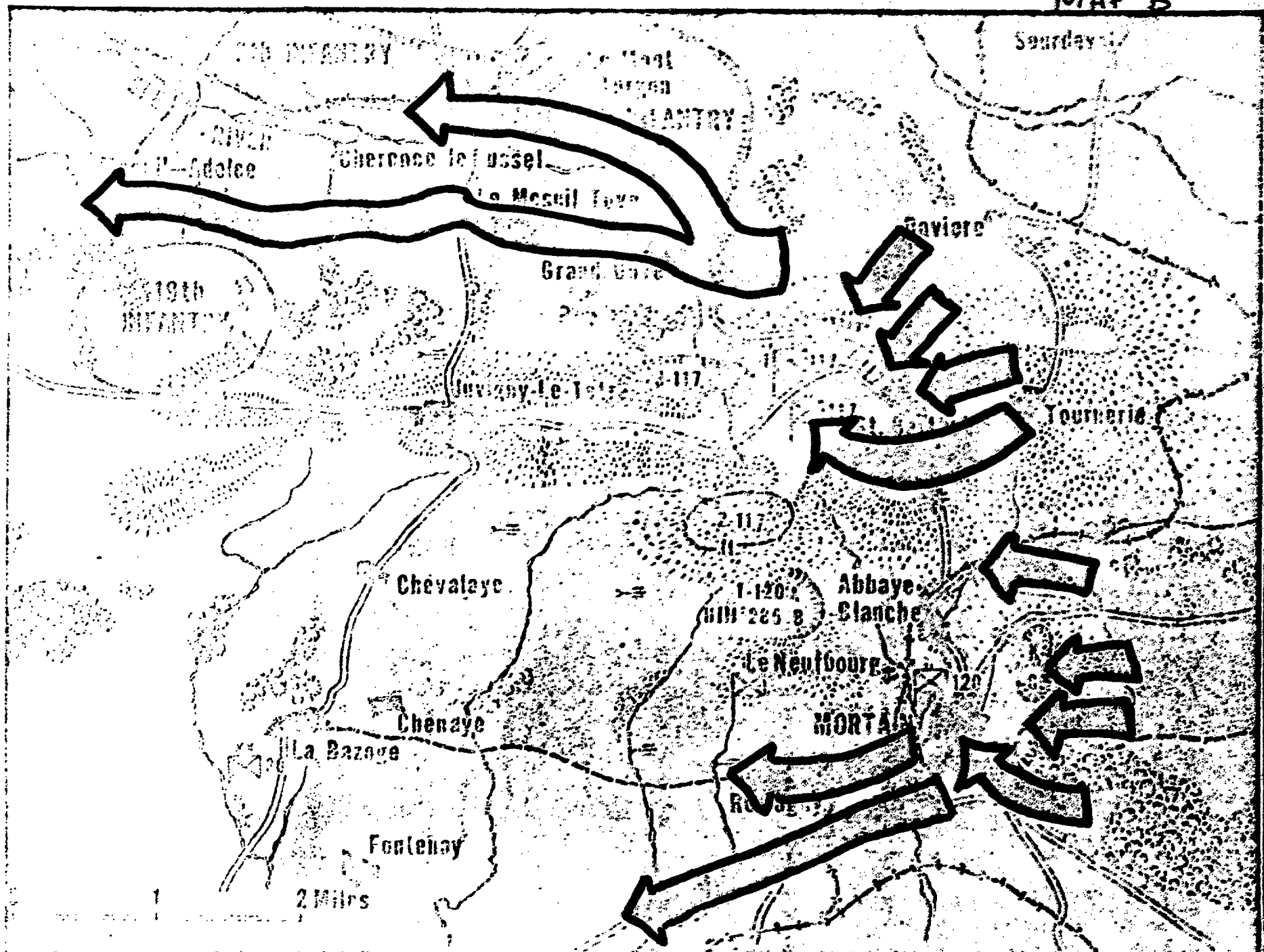

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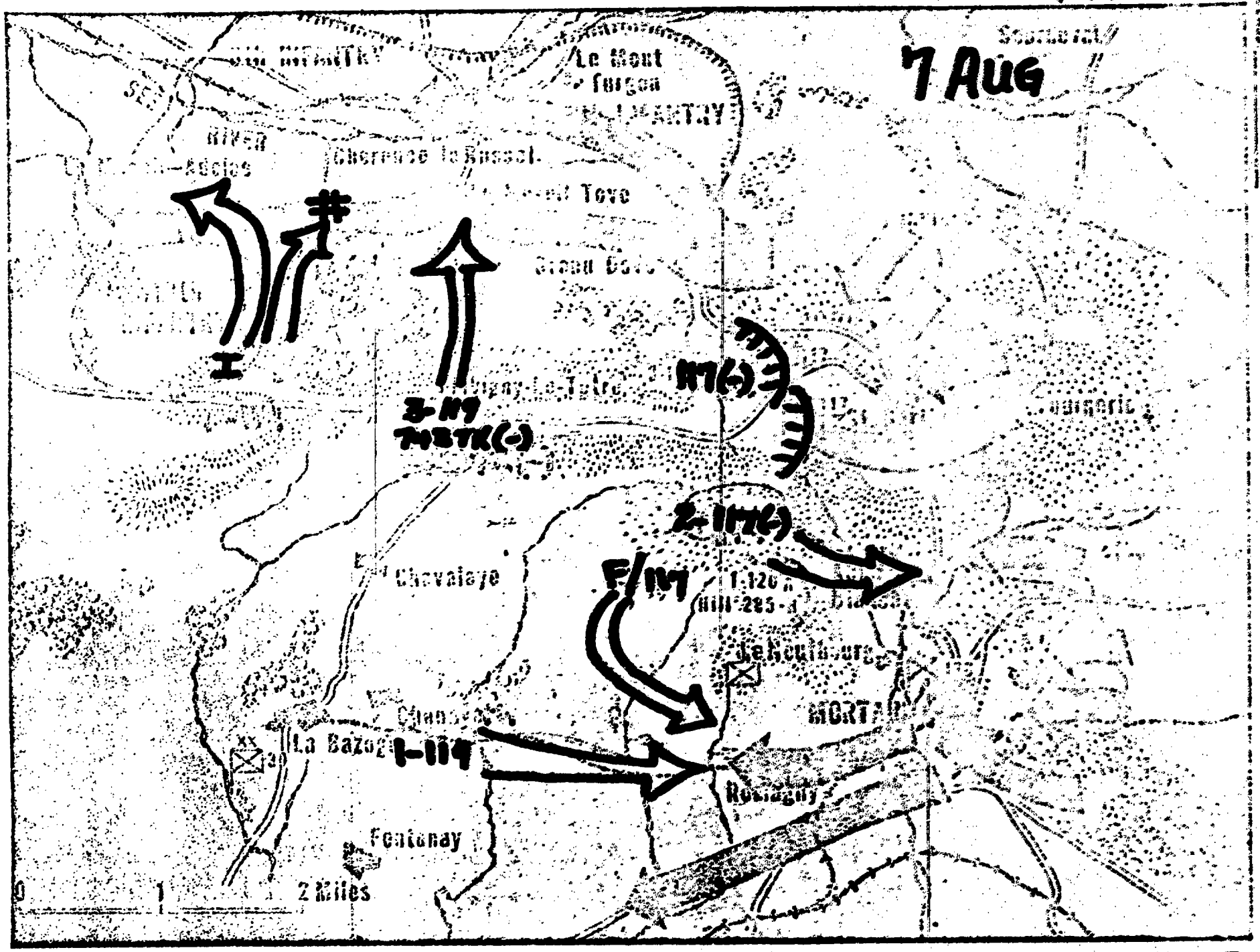

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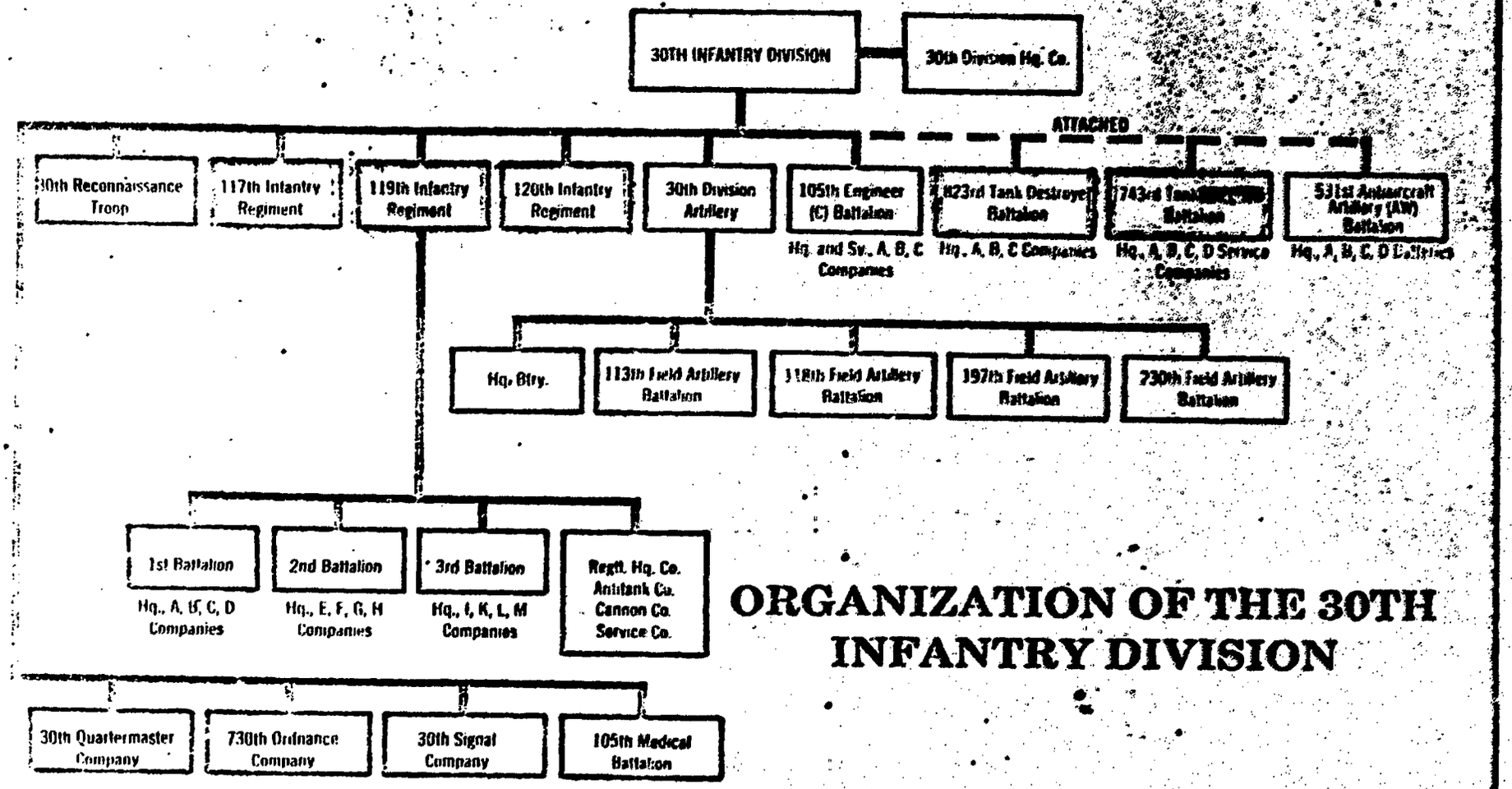

ORGANIZATION OF THE 30TH INFANTRY DIVISION

CHART E