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OVERLORD

U ntil November 1943 Hitler refused to concede to his generals or associates that the Greater Reich was threatened by the opening of a Second Front in the west. Although from the first weeks of Barbarossa Stalin had pinned his hopes on Britain's rescuing the Soviet Union from defeat and, after December 1941, on an Anglo-American counter-invasion of western Europe, Hitler would have none of it. In June 1942 he told the staff of the army's western headquarters that, having thrown the British out of the continent once, he no longer feared them, while he relished the opportunity, should it arise, of teaching the Americans a lesson. Moreover, on 19 August a major Allied reconnaissance-in-force raided the port of Dieppe in northern France, and only 2500 of the 6000 largely Canadian troops committed managed to return to Britain. This defeat reinforced Hitler's confidence. Although the raid had been planned as an experiment to test how difficult it would be to seize a harbour for the opening of a Second Front, Hitler understandably chose to believe he had inflicted a severe blow that would deter the British and Americans from staging a full-scale invasion. In September, during the course of a three-hour speech to Goering, Albert Speer, his Armaments Minister, and Rundstedt, the Commander-in-Chief West (*Oberbefehlshaber West* – OB West), he told them that, if an invasion could be delayed beyond the spring of 1943, when the Atlantic Wall would be complete, 'nothing can happen to us any longer'. He went on: 'We have got over the worst of our foodstuffs shortage. By increased production of anti-aircraft guns and ammunition the home base will be protected against air raids. In the spring we shall march with our finest divisions down into Mesopotamia [Iraq] and then one day we shall force our enemies to make peace where and as we want.'

By November 1943 the bloom had gone off the apple. The dismissiveness expressed in 1942 had been rooted in reality. Then the British army was indeed still reeling from the shock of the defeat of 1940; the Americans were not yet hardened to the rigours of warfare against the Wehrmacht. His skilful penetration of the weak spots in an adversary's position rightly convinced him, even in the absence of objective evidence, that there would be no Second Front in 1942 and probably not in 1943 either. However, by the autumn of that year, his blithe minimisation of Germany's difficulties no longer held good. The Anglo-

American air offensive against the homeland was growing in weight. The German armies had been driven not only far from the approaches to Iraq but also out of the richest food-producing areas of western Russia (Kiev, capital of the 'black earth' region, fell to the Red Army on 6 November 1943). The British had regained and the Americans won their self-confidence as combat soldiers. Worst of all, the Atlantic Wall had not been completed, in many sectors not even built.

On 3 November 1943, therefore, Hitler issued Führer Directive No. 51, one of the half-dozen most important of his instructions to the Wehrmacht of the whole war.

The hard and costly struggle against Bolshevism has demanded extreme exertions. . . . The danger in the east remains, but a greater danger now appears in the west: an Anglo-Saxon landing. The vast extent of territory in the east makes it possible for us to lose ground, even on a large scale, without a fatal blow being struck to the nervous system of Germany. It is very different in the west. Should the enemy succeed in breaching our defences on a wide front here the immediate consequences would be unpredictable. Everything indicates that the enemy will launch an offensive against the Western Front of Europe, at the latest in the spring, perhaps even earlier. I can therefore no longer take responsibility for further weakening the west, in favour of other theatres of war. I have therefore decided to reinforce its defences, particularly those places from which long-range bombardment of England [with pilotless missiles] will begin.

Führer Directive No. 51 went on to specify the particular measures for strengthening OB West's forces. They included the reinforcing of Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions in his zone of operations and a guarantee that no formation would be withdrawn from it except with Hitler's personal approval. In November 1943 OB West (Rundstedt) commanded all German ground forces in Belgium and France, organised into the Fifteenth and Seventh Armies (Army Group B) and the First and Nineteenth Armies (Army Group G), from his headquarters at Saint-Germain near Paris. The boundary between the army groups ran west-east along the Loire, with the First Army defending the Biscay and the Nineteenth the Mediterranean coast, the Fifteenth Army in Belgium and northern France and the Seventh in Normandy. Unbeknown to all in Germany, it was in Normandy that the Allied stroke was destined to fall.

Rundstedt's divisional strength stood at forty-six, soon to be raised to sixty, including ten Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions. Six of the armoured divisions were north of the Loire, four south. That was entirely appropriate. Jodl, Hitler's operations officer, warned an assembly of the Nazi Party's Gauleiters at the time Directive No. 51 was issued that 'along a front of 2600 kilometres it is impossible to reinforce the coastal front with a system of fortification in depth at all points. . . . Hence it is essential to have strong mobile and specially well-equipped reserves in the west for the purpose of forming *Schwerpunkt* [centres of mili-

tary effort]. Strategic analysis revealed that the Allies' own *Schwerpunkte* against the *Westheer*, even if reinforced by another in the Mediterranean, must be formed by forces assembling in Britain and lie on the Channel coast. Hence the Panzer concentration north of the Loire.

The Panzer concentration was critical because the rest of OB West's divisions were barely mobile. The two parachute divisions stationed in Brittany and the army divisions with numbers in the 271–278 and 349–367 series were of high and adequate quality respectively, though lacking mechanised transport. The rest were not only of average to low quality but were wholly dependent on the French railway system if they were to leave their permanent bases for the invasion front. Their artillery and supply units were horse-drawn; their infantry units, except for bicycle reconnaissance companies, manoeuvred by marching at a speed no faster than Napoleon's or, indeed, Charlemagne's. Moreover, they would have to move under the threat of Allied airpower, which, he had already conceded on 29 September 1942, would be absolutely supreme. Railway and even road movement would be severely inhibited. It was therefore vital that the Panzer divisions, which alone had the capability for rapid, off-road movement, should be positioned close to the invasion zone, to hold a line until the infantry reinforcements arrived. The coast itself would be garrisoned by 'ground-holding' (*bodenständige*) divisions, unable to manoeuvre but protected from Allied air and naval bombardment by concrete fortifications. The beaches that their positions overlooked were to be mined, wired and entangled with obstacles; much of this defensive material was to be stripped from the Belgian fortified zone and the Maginot Line which had survived the onslaught of the Wehrmacht in 1940.

The Atlantic Wall scheme was excellent in theory. When complete it would go far to offset the feebleness in the west of the Luftwaffe, which at the end of 1943 deployed only 300 fighters in France (to hold in check Allied air forces whose strength would total 12,000 aircraft of all types on the day of the



Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, C-in-C West, inspecting a coastal sector of the defences of France before the invasion. Rundstedt and his subordinate, Rommel, disagreed about how the coast was to be best defended. Rundstedt had little faith in coastal defences, seeing them as the means of breaking the cohesion and momentum of an amphibious assault while counterblows were prepared in the rear coastal areas by mobile reserves held back specifically for the purpose.

invasion); but on the day that Führer Directive No. 51 was issued the Atlantic Wall had still far to go before completion. During the two years when Hitler had discountenanced the invasion danger, the *Westheer* had led a bucolic life. Its commander, Gerd von Rundstedt, was not a firebrand. After his removal from the Eastern Front in December 1941 he had settled into a comfortable routine at Saint-Germain reading detective stories and allowing his staff officers to practise English conversation, a mark of the 'aristocratic' style that Wehrmacht traditionalists cultivated to differentiate themselves from the 'Nazi' generals Hitler favoured in the *Ostheer*. The lower ranks behaved accordingly. Life in France was agreeable. Live and let live characterised relations with the population, which, if not actively collaborationist, lent little support to the embryo resistance movement. Forced labour (*service du travail obligatoire*), introduced in 1942, was unpopular because it conscripted young Frenchmen to factories in Germany, to join the million French prisoners of war still held there in 1943; so, too, was *la Milice*, Vichy's paramilitary police force, which punished the contempt of fellow countrymen by exceeding its powers. The cost of occupation rankled; the German levy on the French treasury, exacted at a 50 per cent overvaluation of the mark, not only forced France to pay for the indignity of having a German army in its territory but allowed the Reichsbank to make a profit on the transaction. However, these were aspects of defeat which did not affect the French people at large. Most accepted the presence of the ('very correct') German soldiers with resignation; the Germans, more than content to be posted to the only easy billet in the Wehrmacht's zone of operations, gathered roses while they might, ate butter and cream, and worked no harder than their officers drove them.

The cosy life ended with the arrival of Rommel in December 1943, first to inspect the defences, then to take command of Army Group B. Since his invaliding from Tunisia in March he had held an undemanding post in northern Italy, but on the promulgation of Directive No. 51 he was selected by Hitler to put fire and steel into the western defences. According to his biographer, Desmond Young, 'to the snug staffs of the coastal sectors [he] blew in like an icy and unwelcome wind off the North Sea.' Rommel found that since 1941 only 1.7 million mines had been laid – he reminded his staff that the British had laid a million in two months during his campaign against them in North Africa – though explosive held in France was sufficient to manufacture 11 million. Within weeks of his arrival, mine-laying had increased from a rate of 40,000 to over a million a month and by 20 May over 4 million were in place. Between November and 11 May half a million obstacles were laid on the beaches and likely airborne landing-grounds, and he had ordered the delivery of an additional 2 million mines a month from Germany. On 5 May he dictated to his secretary: 'I am more confident than ever before. If the British give us just two more weeks, I won't have any more doubt about it.'

The defence of the French coast could not, however, be assured by the Atlantic Wall alone. Rommel, a master of mobile warfare but also a respectful veteran of campaigns fought under conditions of Western Allied air superiority, knew that he would have to get

tanks to the water's edge at the moment the Allies disembarked if they were to be defeated. To do so he must solve two problems: the first was to identify where they would land; the second was to establish the shortest possible chain of command between himself and his armoured units. The problems were interconnected. To justify taking personal command of the Panzer divisions under OB West he must be able to show that he knew where they could be best used; but he could not credibly lay claim to the divisions as long as the Allies wreathed their intentions in a mist of misinformation and deception.

— The war of mirrors —

The Allied deception plan for Operation Overlord, as the invasion of north-west Europe was codenamed at the Washington Trident Conference in May 1943, was deliberately conceived to persuade the enemy that the landing would fall in the Pas de Calais, where the Channel is narrowest, rather than in Normandy or Brittany (though Hitler's fears of a descent on Norway, to which he was acutely sensitive, were also kept alive, with the profitable result of fixing eleven German divisions there throughout 1944–5). A Pas de Calais landing made military sense: it entailed a quick crossing to level and sandy beaches, which were not closed off from the hinterland by high cliffs, whence the exploitation route into the Low Countries and Germany was short. Operation Fortitude, as the deception plan was codenamed, centred on the implantation in the consciousness of German intelligence – the Wehrmacht's Abwehr and the army's Foreign Armies West section – of the existence, wholly fictitious, of a First US Army Group (FUSAG), located opposite the Pas de Calais in Kent and Sussex. False radio transmissions from FUSAG were sent over the air; false references were made to it in bona-fide messages. General Patton, whose reputation as a hard-driving army leader was known to the Germans, was mentioned as its commander. Moreover, to reinforce the notion that FUSAG would debark on the short route to the Reich, the Allied air forces in their programme of bombardment preparatory to Overlord dropped three times the tonnage east of the Seine as they did to the west. By 9 January 1944 the deception had borne fruit: an Ultra intercept referred to FUSAG on that day and others followed. It was the proof the Fortitude operators needed that their plan was working. They could not, of course, expect to distract the attention of the Germans from Normandy, the chosen landing site, for good; but they hoped to minimise German anticipation of a Normandy landing until it was actually mounted, and thereafter keep alive the anxiety that the 'real' invasion would follow in the Pas de Calais at a later stage.

Hitler was only partially deluded. On 4 and 20 March and 6 April he alluded to the likelihood of a Normandy landing. 'I am for bringing all our strength in here,' he said on 6 April, and on 6 May he had Jodl telephone Günther Blumentritt, Rundstedt's chief of staff, to warn that he 'attached particular importance to Normandy'. However, apart from allocating Panzer Lehr and 116th Panzer Divisions to Normandy in the early spring, he

made no decisive alteration of OB West's dispositions; indeed until he allowed divisions to cross the Seine into Normandy from the Pas de Calais at the very end of July, he himself remained prisoner to the delusion of a 'second' invasion throughout the crucial weeks of the Overlord battle.

His concern to back both horses nevertheless compromised Rommel's urge to disperse the mist of deception by direct assault. Rommel's argument was that it was better to have some armour on the right beach, even if the rest was wrongly disposed, than to keep armour in central reserve and then fail to move it when Allied airpower descended. At the end of January 1944 he was translated from the post of inspector of the Atlantic Wall to commander of Army Group B (Seventh and Fifteenth Armies), as Rundstedt's direct subordinate for defence of the invasion zone. Almost at once he fell into dispute with his chief. Rundstedt had never experienced a battle in which the Luftwaffe was not dominant. He therefore believed that there would be time, even after the enemy landing craft had arrived, to make a deliberate assessment of the military situation and then commit reserves to a counter-attack. Rommel knew that an unhurried counter-attack would be destroyed by enemy aircraft. From personal experience in Egypt and Tunisia he knew how great was the power of the Allied air forces and was convinced that only by holding armour 'forward' and committing it immediately could the invasion be met and defeated.

The Rommel-Rundstedt dispute, in which personal experience favoured one general, conventional military wisdom the other, eventually reached the ears of Hitler. He resolved it on his own terms, to neither subordinate's liking, when the two visited him at Berchtesgaden on 19 March 1944. Panzer Group West, which oversaw the six armoured divisions of Army Group B, was split; three of its divisions were allocated to Rommel, three to Rundstedt – but with the proviso that Rundstedt's divisions (21st, 116th and 2nd) were not to be committed without the direct approval of Hitler's operations staff at OKW, with the attendant risk of even greater delay than Rommel had feared in the first place.

As the 21st Panzer Division was the only armoured division close to the beaches chosen by the Overlord planners, Rommel's intention to launch a quick counter-attack was thus compromised from the start. Montgomery, his old desert opponent, had warned on 15 May in his pre-invasion assessment:

[Rommel] will do his level best to 'Dunkirk' us – not to fight the armoured battle on ground of his choosing but to avoid it altogether and prevent our tanks landing by using his own tanks well forward. On D-Day he will try (a) to force us from the beaches; (b) to secure Caen, Bayeux, Carentan. . . . We must blast our way onshore and get a good lodgement before he can bring up sufficient reserves to turn us out. . . . While we are engaged in doing this, the air must hold the ring and must make very difficult the movement of enemy reserves by train or road towards the lodgement areas.

Had Montgomery known, at the time he wrote this assessment, how grievously the Rommel–Rundstedt–Hitler dispute on armoured deployment had harmed the *Westheer's* prospect of defeating the landing force, his fears for the successful outcome of D-Day would have been greatly relieved.

Montgomery was appointed to the command of the landing force only on 2 January 1944. Until the Stalin–Roosevelt–Churchill conference at Tehran in November 1943 no commander for Overlord had been nominated at all. Both the American and British chiefs of staff, General George Marshall and General Sir Alan Brooke, had been promised the appointment by their heads of government, though since August Brooke had known that for reasons of international politics it must go to an American. However, it was only at Tehran that the issue of nomination had been brought to a head. Stalin had there made it the test of Anglo-American dedication to the alliance's Second Front. 'Do the British really believe in "Overlord",' he had asked, 'or are they only saying so to reassure the Soviet Union?' In the face of Churchill's protestations of commitment, he demanded that a commander be nominated not later than one week after the conference ended. Churchill acquiesced and Roosevelt agreed to make the choice. On 5 December, however, at the end of the time limit, Roosevelt recognised that he could not spare his helpmate, Marshall, from Washington, and told him so; the Supreme Command of the Allied Expeditionary Force would therefore go to Eisenhower. Because Eisenhower's talents were strategic rather than tactical, however, operational authority would be vested in a ground commander, Montgomery, until the 'foothold' on the soil of France had been consolidated into a 'lodgement' from which the Wehrmacht could not displace the Allied liberation army.

Montgomery, arriving in England direct from Italy where he had been commanding the Eighth Army, threw himself into the rationalisation of the Overlord plan with an energy, familiar to his staff in the Mediterranean, that left the COSSAC headquarters breathless. General Sir Frederick Morgan, Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (Designate), had been putting together a scheme for a landing in north-west Europe since the Churchill–Roosevelt meeting at Casablanca in January 1943. COSSAC's proceedings had not been dilatory; but they had been deliberate. Morgan had set himself the task of presenting the Supreme Commander, when nominated, with a flawless military appreciation. His Anglo-American staff, proceeding from first principles, had first of all identified where landings would be possible. The operational radius of a Spitfire, the most numerous Allied fighter, was used to delimit the zone in which the Allies would enjoy unchallenged air superiority. It reached from the Pas de Calais to the Cotentin peninsula in Normandy; the coast east and west of those places could be eliminated. Within the zone, however, long stretches of coastline were topographically unsuitable: the chalk cliffs of the Pays de Caux were too steep, the mouth of the Seine estuary was too indented, the Cotentin itself was too easily sealed off at its base. By reduction, therefore, only two coastal stretches recommended themselves: the Pas de Calais, with its gently shelving, sandy beaches, and the

Normandy coast between the Seine and the Cotentin. The Pas de Calais had the attraction of proximity both to the English coast and to the 'short route' into Germany; but for those reasons it could be judged the sector where the Germans would expect to be attacked and would defend most heavily. COSSAC therefore plumped for Normandy.

Because the chosen stretch of Normandy had no ports, but also because the Germans could be counted on to fight to deny nearby Cherbourg and Le Havre to the enemy, it was decided to construct two artificial floating harbours ('Mulberries') and tow them to the beaches once they had been seized. The initial landing would be made by three divisions, disembarked from landing craft under heavy air and naval bombardment; airborne troops would be dropped at either end of the chosen bridgehead to secure 'blocking positions' on the flanks. As soon as the bridgehead was consolidated, seaborne reinforcements would be poured in to transform it into a 'lodgement area' from which a break-out into Brittany and then the west of France would be mounted. Eventually a hundred divisions would pass through Normandy; the main strength of the American army, which would supply the majority of divisions, would be shipped directly from the United States.

Success depended, however, on minimising the strength the Germans could oppose to the landing. Although an intelligence blackout over the invasion fleet itself could be guaranteed, and German air and naval interference be discounted, COSSAC agreed it was vital that near Caen, the *Schwerpunkt* of the invasion zone, there should be 'no more than three [German divisions] on D-Day, five by D plus 2 and nine by D plus 8'. The first week of the landings, in short, would be a race between the Allied and German armies' capacity to build up forces in and against the bridgehead. The Germans could not prevent the Allied build-up; the Allies could, by contrast, prevent the German. A crucial element of the invasion effort, therefore, would be the bringing to bear of Allied airpower against the roads, railways and bridges by which Rundstedt's sixty divisions would march to the battlefield. The greater the devastation Allied airpower could inflict on the infrastructure of the French transport system – at whatever subsequent cost to the Allies' own capacity to supply its armies in mainland France – the more certainly would the seaborne divisions survive the landing and the shock of initial combat in the lodgement area.

Montgomery, on his arrival in London in January 1944, dissented from none of COSSAC's broad criteria. However, he and Eisenhower, who was eventually to succeed him in command on the ground, had both briefly seen the operational plan when en route to England via Marrakesh (where Churchill was recovering from pneumonia), and they jointly judged that the attack would have to be launched 'in greater weight and on a broader front'. In brief, they wanted the American landing to be separated from the British, both to be made in heavier weight, and the airborne contribution to be much increased. Montgomery warned that, as things stood, '[German] reserve formations might succeed in containing us within a shallow covering position with our beaches under continual covering fire.' He remembered Salerno, where a well-planned assault had almost come to naught because of the rapidity of the German reaction.

By 21 January, therefore, he had proposed a major amplification of the landing. It was to be mounted by five seaborne divisions abreast, two American to the west, two British and a Canadian to the east; the original 'two airborne brigades' were to be increased to two American airborne divisions, dropped astride the river Vire at the base of Cotentin peninsula, and the British 6th Airborne Division, dropped astride the river Orne between Caen and the sea. The creation of airheads on the Vire and the Orne would prevent the Germans from 'rolling up' the amphibious bridgehead in between; within it the five seaborne divisions, reinforced by two others pre-loaded in landing craft, would win ground for the post-invasion reinforcements to be landed and deployed. Specialist armour, including 'swimming' Sherman tanks, would accompany the assault infantry to their debarkation; the 79th (British) Armoured Division, composed of obstacle-clearing tanks, would open the way out of the beaches for the assault battalions to move inland.

Eisenhower, as Supreme Commander, at once endorsed these proposals. The only difficulty that remained was how to accumulate the craft necessary for the enlarged landing. Admiral King, Chief of (US) Naval Operations, both an Anglophobe and a devotee of the amphibious war in the Pacific, directly controlled the lion's share of Allied landing-craft production, since the vast majority were launched from American yards (82,000 were built in the USA throughout the war). A near-doubling of the D-Day assault divisions required a proportionate accretion of vessels in which to deliver and support them. These included the Landing Ship Tank (LST), Landing Craft Tank (LCT), Landing Craft Infantry (LCI), Landing Craft Mechanised (LCM) and Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel (LCVP) as well as the versatile amphibious truck (DUKW or 'Duck'). King had a surplus of such vessels, particularly the crucial Landing Ship Tank, in the Pacific, but proved unwilling either to transfer any from one ocean to the other or to make available craft no longer needed in the Mediterranean. As a result SHAEF, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (as COSSAC was renamed after Eisenhower's nomination), was obliged to accept a postponement of Overlord from May to June, while its staff scrambled to find landing craft where they could. In addition, Operation Anvil, the landing in the south of France originally scheduled to coincide with Overlord, was set back a month further.

Subsequent investigation has revealed that the shortage of landing craft was illusory rather than objective. By 1943 the output of LSTs from British yards alone already sufficed to land the D-Day divisions; American LSTs were a bonus. The COSSAC staff had convinced itself that the US Navy's anti-Japanese imperative was depriving it of its just allocation; but the truth seems to be that the shortage was the result of faulty allocation in Europe, not of deliberate starvation by SHAEF's Pacific rivals. The postponement of Anvil, moreover, though undoubtedly caused by the lack of landing craft, may actually have helped rather than hindered the success of Overlord. Although it was initially conceived as the answering blow to the northern operation (hence 'Anvil') which would crush the *Westheer* by concentric action, the force dedicated to Anvil – four French and three American divisions – was not strong enough to mount a major attack on the rear of the *Westheer* and,

because of the conflicting demands of the Italian campaign, could not have been increased, however many landing craft might have been assembled in the Mediterranean. Anvil's real value proved to be diversionary; as we shall see, the mere menace of a 'third' landing, like that of a 'second' in the Pas de Calais, succeeded in retaining German divisions in Provence throughout the weeks when they were desperately needed for the north to fight the real landing in Normandy.

— *Allied strength, German weakness* —

To the invasion army assembling in southern England during the spring of 1944, the notion that it might lack for anything would have defied all appearances. The great natural anchorages in which the Channel coast abounds – Chichester, Portsmouth, Southampton, Poole, Portland, Plymouth, Falmouth – were filling with warships and transports. So vast was the gathering armada – which could only have been assembled off Normandy where the Channel is widest – that two of the seven seaborne forces into which it was divided had to be harboured as far away as South Wales and East Anglia. These, Forces B and L, were to sail the day before invasion and join the other five under cover of darkness on the night of D-Day in the mid-Channel 'Area Z' from which, through channels cleared by a vanguard of minesweepers, they were to proceed in parallel columns to the five beaches on which the assaulting infantry and swimming tanks would debark; the beaches were codenamed from west to east Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. Operation Neptune, the Naval plan, provided for 6483 vessels to make the voyage, including 4000 landing craft, hundreds of 'attack transports', and a bombardment force of 7 battleships, 2 monitors, 23 cruisers and 104 destroyers. Their role was to engage and destroy the coastal batteries of the Atlantic Wall. Close fire support was to be provided by squadrons of rocket-firing landing craft, while others embarked self-propelled artillery which would 'shoot itself in' against the German shore positions before rolling up the beach to follow the seaborne infantry. Behind the bombardment and amphibious squadrons sailed the craft bringing the infrastructure required by the assault waves – the 'beach parties' which would set up traffic control and signal stations, organise obstacle clearance and evacuate casualties. Assault engineers, manning amphibious bulldozers, demolition tanks and fabric road layers, were also to follow the assault waves at close interval. And in the very forefront would land forward air controllers, to call in rocket, bomb and machine-gun strikes from the fighters and ground-attack aircraft among the 12,000-strong British and American air forces that were to support the landings.

Of these 12,000, over 5000 were fighters; to oppose them General Hugo Sperrle's Third Air Fleet had only 169 available on the Channel coast on 6 June 1944. A thousand Dakotas were to fly the parachute battalions of the three airborne divisions to their destinations, and hundreds of other transport aircraft were to tow gliders filled with airlanding infantry, artillery and engineers. The mightiest element of the air forces,

however, was provided by RAF Bomber Command and the US Eighth Air Force, temporarily diverted from the strategic campaign against Germany to prepare and support the invasion. In the weeks beforehand the 'heavies' – Lancasters and Fortresses – with the medium bombers of the British Second and US Ninth Air Forces had largely destroyed the French northern railway system. On the night and morning of D-Day, Bomber Command and Eighth Air Force, each dropping the unprecedented weight of 5000 tons of bombs – the short haul allowed them to substitute bombs for fuel – were targeted against German defences in the immediate vicinity of the beaches.

The Allies' overwhelming air superiority guaranteed not only fire support at the moment of assault but security from surveillance beforehand. In the first six months of 1944 only thirty-two Luftwaffe daytime flights over England were recorded; there was only one in the first week of June – on 7 June, a day too late – and this at a time when Allied intrusions into French air space were as common as the flight of swallows. Ultra was meanwhile monitoring the movement of units to and within France on an hourly basis, while the Abwehr had no access whatsoever to the meaning of Allied signals; the volume of such signals, however, was carefully controlled to disguise the presence of the invasion army in the west of England and enhance belief in the fictitious existence of FUSAG in Kent. The Abwehr could, in compensation, draw on the reports of its network of agents in Britain, and these were eagerly assessed for indications of the strength, timing and above all objectives of the invasion. However, since every single one of the agents apparently at liberty had in fact been 'turned' by British counter-espionage (the 'Double-Cross System'), their reports were not only valueless but actively misleading. The British entertained fears that agents outside their control in Lisbon and Ankara might succeed in hitting on the truth by speculation, but none did so; the only serious leak of secrets, sold to the Abwehr out of the ambassador's safe in Ankara by his Turkish valet, contained references to an 'Operation Overlord' but was bereft of details (this was the much misunderstood and over-inflated 'Cicero' affair).

The *Westheer*, OKW and Hitler were thus denied any useful foreknowledge of Overlord in the weeks before its launching; last-minute intelligence was distorted by the jamming of selected German coastal radar stations and the simulation of a bogus invasion fleet and air armada in the Channel narrows opposite the Pas de Calais during the night of 5/6 June itself. In the weeks before D-Day, however, Hitler and the *Westheer* did succeed in materially reinforcing the anti-invasion forces, including those in Normandy. Between April and June the excellent Panzer Lehr Division was returned from Hungary to Chartres, only a day's drive from the beaches, and the 21st Panzer Division was brought from Brittany to Caen; while the 352nd and 91st Infantry Divisions, both of good quality, were put in coastal positions, the 352nd above Omaha beach, where it would inflict heavy casualties on the American 1st Division on D-Day. When these relocations were complete, the chosen beaches were defended by three instead of two infantry divisions, with another in close support; four instead of three Panzer divisions stood at close hand,



one almost directly behind the British beaches themselves. It was prudence, not prescience, that dictated these new deployments, but the effect was to strengthen the Westheer's capacity to resist at the key point, precisely as if correct intelligence had guided their new location.

By the first week of June, however, there was no more SHAEF could do to soften enemy resistance until the commitment of the invading troops. Throughout that week they were confined to camp, isolated from civilian contact and entertained by cinema shows and record concerts. The belief was that D-Day casualties would be high – the troops' commanders believed very high indeed. Most of the Americans and some of the British had no battle experience and contemplated the coming ordeal with sang-froid; those British divisions which had been brought home from three years of fighting in the desert and Italy were altogether less insouciant. They knew the ferocity with which the Wehrmacht fought and did not relish meeting it in the defence of the approaches to the Reich. Lieutenant Edwin Bramall, a new subaltern with the veteran 2nd King's Royal Rifle Corps (and a future British chief of staff), thought the battalion 'worn out': 'They had shot their bolt. Everybody who was any good had been promoted or become a casualty.' By contrast, Eisenhower's naval aide found the young American officers who had not seen action 'as green as growing corn', and asked himself, 'How will they act in battle and how will they look in three months' time?' Commander Butcher's and Lieutenant Bramall's anxieties were to prove equally unfounded. Most British troops, however battle-weary, rose to the challenge of Normandy; the Americans grew into it almost overnight, once again demonstrating that three minutes of combat exceeds in value three years of training in making a soldier. No military formation, moreover, was to win a more ferocious reputation in Normandy than the 12th SS Panzer Division 'Hitler Jugend', whose soldiers had been recruited direct from the Nazi youth movement at the age of sixteen in 1943.

Sea and sky turned stormy in the Channel at the end of the first week of June. The good weather on which Eisenhower and Montgomery had counted to coincide with favourable mid-month tides failed them; 4 June, the day chosen to launch the invasion, produced winds and waves which made landing by sea or air impossible. The airborne divisions stood down, the seaborne divisions which had sailed from the further ports turned back, the main armada kept to harbour. It was not until the evening of 5 June that the weather was judged to have abated enough for D-Day to be set for the following morning.

When it dawned, the spectacle that confronted those embarked – and those ashore – was perhaps more dramatic than any soldiers, sailors or airmen had ever seen at the beginning of any battle. On the Normandy coast the sea from east to west and as far north as the seaward horizon was filled with ships, literally by the thousand; the sky thundered

Above: A German view of the Allied assault on the Normandy beaches. **Below:** Commandos wade ashore on D-Day, 6 June 1944.

with the passage of aircraft; and the coastline had begun to disappear in gouts of smoke and dust as the bombardment bit into it. 'The villages of La Breche and Lion-sur-Mer', reported Captain Henry Bruce of the Royal Artillery, 'are smothered with bursts, and enormous dirty clouds of smoke and brick dust rise from the target area and drift out to sea, completely obscuring our target for a time.' Under these angry clouds the British, Canadian and American infantry were debarking from their landing craft, picking their way between the shore obstacles, diving to cover from enemy fire and struggling to reach the shelter of the cliffs and dunes at the head of the beaches.

The time (H-Hour), depending on the set of the tide from beach to beach, was between 6.00 and 7.30, and the early minutes of the landing, for all except the Americans doomed to the agony of Omaha beach, were the worst. However, the wet and frightened infantrymen struggling through the surf along sixty miles of Normandy coastline were not the first Allied soldiers to have landed in France that day. In the darkness of the early morning the parachute units of the three airborne divisions, spearheads of the glider battalions that were to follow, had already dropped across the lower reaches of the two rivers, Vire and Orne, that demarcated the bridgehead's outer flanks. The British 6th Airborne Division, compactly released by experienced pilots on to open pasture, had made a good drop, rallied quickly and moved rapidly to their objectives. These were the bridges of the Orne and its eastward neighbour, the Dives, which were to be respectively held and blown, in the latter case to prevent German armour 'rolling up' the British seaborne bridgehead by a drive along the coast. The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions had been less lucky. Their pilots were inexperienced, the narrow neck of the Cotentin peninsula was easy to overshoot and the valley of the Vire was heavily flooded by deliberate defensive inundation. Some American parachutists fell into the sea, many drowned in the floods, many others, scattered by bad navigation and fear of flak, dropped miles from their objectives; the 101st Division's 'spread' was 'twenty-five miles by fifteen, with stray "sticks" even further afield'. Twenty-four hours later only 3000 men of the 'Screaming Eagles' had rallied, and some were to roam for days behind enemy lines, refusing to surrender while rations and ammunition lasted.

— *Confusion in the German camp* —

The scattering of the American parachutists was thought a calamity at the time, most of all by their tidy-minded commanders. In retrospect it can be seen materially to have added to the confusion and disorientation the invasion was inflicting on their German opposite numbers. The general commanding 91st Division, for example, was ambushed and killed by wandering American parachutists while returning from an anti-invasion conference in the early hours of 6 June, before he had even grasped that the event had begun. Elsewhere it sometimes took hours for German commanders to comprehend that the reports they were receiving from units actually under attack by Overlord forces were different from the

bombardments and commando raids that had disturbed their occupation of France during the previous three years. On the day before, Luftwaffe meteorologists had discounted the possibility of an imminent invasion because of bad weather forecasts. By ill luck, Rommel was temporarily absent in Germany on leave, Rundstedt was sleeping the sleep of the old campaigner at Saint-Germain (he had been chief of staff of one of the divisions sent to invade France in 1914 and had a thick skin for alarms and excursions), while Hitler was preparing for bed at his holiday house at Berchtesgaden on the Obersalzberg and would not be presented with the firm evidence that the invasion had begun until his noon conference six hours after the assault waves had touched down.

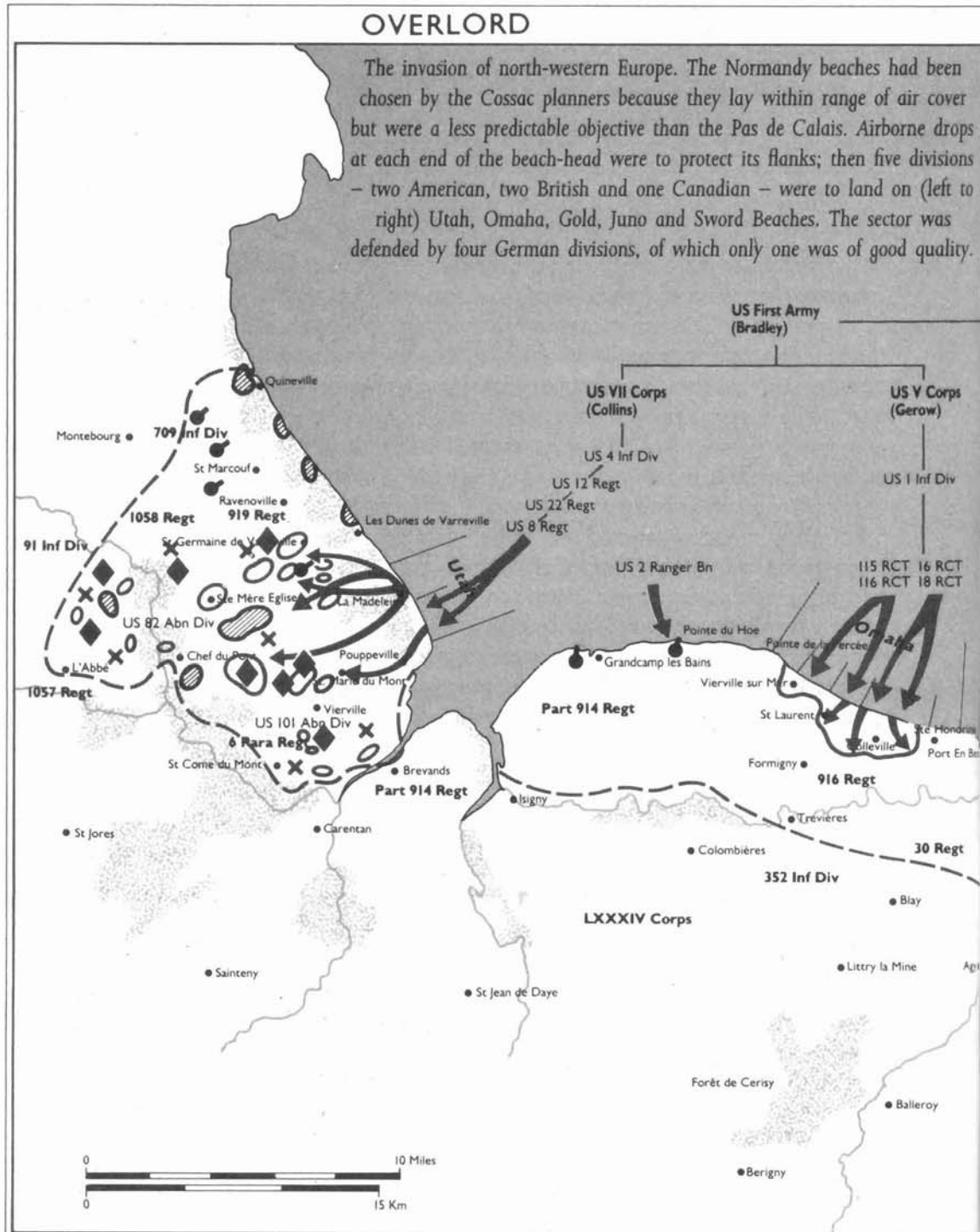
Local commanders nevertheless made such reactions as their authority allowed when they got firm indication that a landing had begun. Such indications were too soon to arrive. Because only eighteen out of ninety-two radar stations were working – those the Allied electronic-warfare teams had left unjammed in the Pas de Calais region – the pitifully small number of German night-fighters available (most were permanently defending the Reich) were scrambled to deal with the bogus air armada approaching from the Channel narrows. The real parachute fly-in was not attacked at all, since it was out of range of any working radar stations. And the seaborne armada was eventually detected by sound at two in the morning, twelve miles off the Cotentin. At 4 am Blumentritt telephoned Jodl at Berchtesgaden for permission to move Panzer Lehr Division towards the beaches but was told to wait until daylight reconnaissance clarified the situation. As late at 6 am, when the naval bombardment was already devastating the beaches, LXXXIV Corps, which commanded the threatened sector, reported to the Seventh Army that it 'appears to be a covering action in conjunction with attacks to be made at other points later'.

Three German divisions, the 709th, 352nd and 716th, were thus to undergo attack by eight Allied divisions without any immediate support from their higher headquarters. The 709th and 716th Divisions found themselves in particularly desperate straits. Neither was of good quality and both lacked any means of manoeuvre. The first was defending the area on which the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were dropping as well as Utah beach, where the US 4th Division was assaulting from the sea. It was an almost impossible mission. The US 4th Division was an excellent formation which put nine good infantry battalions on to the beach in the first wave. The 82nd and 101st were the cream of the American army, trained to a knife-edge and prepared for battle; their eighteen battalions, though scattered, were the equal of an ordinary force twice their size. The 709th Division was very ordinary indeed; its six battalions, finding themselves surrounded and outnumbered, put up scarcely any resistance. The three battalions on the beach surrendered after firing a few shots. Allied casualties at Utah numbered 197, the lowest of D-Day, and insignificant when set against the total of 23,000 men landed on that beach.

The 716th Division, confronting the British 50th, Canadian 3rd and British 3rd Divisions on Gold, Juno and Sword beaches at the eastern end of the bridgehead, was of no better quality than 709th and was also disorientated by the descent of the 6th Airborne

OVERLORD

The invasion of north-western Europe. The Normandy beaches had been chosen by the Cossac planners because they lay within range of air cover but were a less predictable objective than the Pas de Calais. Airborne drops at each end of the beach-head were to protect its flanks; then five divisions – two American, two British and one Canadian – were to land on (left to right) Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword Beaches. The sector was defended by four German divisions, of which only one was of good quality.



Division in its rear area. The British had additionally brought two commando brigades to the landing and three brigades of assault armour; their swimming Sherman tanks were briefed to leave their landing craft as close to the beaches as possible, so that the infantry would have covering fire from the moment of touchdown. The effect of launching such large numbers of well-supported infantry against the scattered German defenders was notable. At Sword and Juno the British and Canadians got ashore with little loss and quickly pressed inland; the British 3rd Division joined up with the 6th Airborne later that morning. On Gold the 50th Division had mixed fortunes: one of its two landing brigades debarked in front of dunes and crossed with little difficulty; the other was confronted by a fortified beach village which the naval bombardment had spared. By bad luck its swimming Shermans were late arriving, and in the meantime the two leading battalions, the 1st Hampshires and 1st Dorsets (which 185 years earlier had been the first British regiment to set foot in India), suffered heavy casualties.

One of the brigade's supporting artillerymen, Gunner Charles Wilson, supplies a picture of the extraordinary confusion of the last moments of 'run-in' and first moments of 'touchdown' which, in its mixture of dreadful fatality and hair's breadth survival at a few yards' distance, holds good for the incidents of D-Day from one end of the bridgehead to the other. His Landing Craft Tank (LCT) was carrying four self-propelled 25-pounder guns which were firing at targets ashore throughout the approach:

We hit two mines going in – bottle mines on stakes. They didn't stop us, although our ramp was damaged and an officer standing on it was killed. We grounded on a sandbank. The first man off was a commando sergeant in full kit. He disappeared like a stone in six feet of water. We grasped the ropes of the net over which the guns were to drive ashore and plunged down the ramp into icy water. The net was quite unmanageable in the rough water and dragged us away towards some mines. We let go the ropes and scrambled ashore. I lost my shoes and vest in the struggle and had only my shorts. Somebody offered cigarettes but they were soaking wet. George in the bren carrier was first vehicle off the LCT. It floated for a moment, drifted on to a mine and sank. George dived overboard and swam ashore. The battery command-post half-track got off with one running behind. The beach was strewn with wreckage, a blazing tank, bundles of blankets and kit, bodies and bits of bodies. One bloke near me was blown in half by a shell and his lower part collapsed in a bloody heap in the sand. The half-track stopped and I managed to struggle into my clothes.

The 50th Division overcame its initial difficulties by mid-morning and by nightfall had advanced almost to the outskirts of Bayeux, closer to its prescribed objectives than any other Allied formation on D-Day. Closer by far than the US 1st Infantry Division, which on Omaha beach had undergone the worst of the invasion ordeals, one nearly as costly in lives as the planners had feared would be the lot of all divisions landing on the morning of

the invasion. The 1st Division had been opposed by the 352nd, the best German formation in coastal positions on 6 June. Moreover, it defended beaches backed in places by steep shingle banks and overlooked at either end by steep cliffs. Exit from the beaches was difficult, while the cliffs provided commanding positions from which fire was directed on to the seaborne infantry below as the landing craft neared the shore and even as they touched ground. Their swimming Shermans, launched too far from shore in rough seas, had foundered. They had no direct fire support. The results were lamentable. The ordeal of the 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry Division, conveys the experience:

Within ten minutes of the ramps being lowered, [the leading] company had become inert, leaderless and almost incapable of action. Every officer and sergeant had been killed or wounded. . . . It had become a struggle for survival and rescue. The men in the water pushed wounded men ashore ahead of them, and those who had reached the sands crawled back into the water pulling others to land to save them from drowning. Within 20 minutes of striking the beach A Company had ceased to be an assault company and had become a forlorn little rescue party bent upon survival and the saving of lives.

Had all the German defenders of Normandy been as well trained and resolute as those of the 352nd Division and had accident overtaken more of the swimming Shermans, the débâcle at Omaha might have been repeated up and down all five beaches, with catastrophic results. Luckily, the fate of the 1st/116th Infantry was extreme. The Omaha landing as a whole was costly. Most of the 4649 casualties suffered by the American army on D-Day occurred there. Yet some of the Omaha battalions got ashore unscathed and even those worst afflicted eventually gathered their survivors and got away from the water's edge. By the end of D-Day all chosen landing places were in Allied hands, even if the bridgehead was in places less than a mile deep. The question which loomed as evening drew in was whether the separate footholds could be united and in what strength the Germans would counter-attack.

— The battle of the build-up —

Because of the immobility of all the German infantry divisions, it was the handling of the Panzer divisions by Army Group B and OKW which alone threatened the invaders with riposte. Of the four within or close to the invasion area, only the 21st Panzer Division, positioned near Caen on the eastern flank of the British Sword beach and 'airborne bridgehead', was close enough to the scene of action to exert a decisive effect. Its commander, like Rommel, was absent on the morning of D-Day (Rommel, by furious driving from Ulm, would arrive at Army Group B headquarters at 10.30 in the evening). Rommel's chief of staff, Hans Speidel, succeeded in extracting permission from OKW for

the 21st Panzer Division to intervene at 6.45 am, but it was two hours before General Erich Marcks, next in the chain of command, passed on an operational order. That order required the tanks to probe into the gap between Sword and Juno beaches, to halt the British advance on Caen, which was only eight miles from the sea, and 'roll up' the bridgehead.

Advancing on Caen from Sword beach was a brigade of British infantry led by the 2nd Battalion of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. It should have been accompanied by the tanks of the Staffordshire Yeomanry but they were trapped in a giant traffic jam on the beach. The Shropshires had therefore to take each German defensive position as they came to it by orthodox fire and movement. Progress was slow. In the afternoon the tanks caught them up, but at six o'clock the column ran into the vanguards of the 21st Panzer Division, which had been delayed by one time-wasting mission after another on its way to the front. Its guns at once forced the Shropshires to go to ground, three miles short of Caen, and its 22nd Panzer Regiment moved forward to attack the bridgehead. 'If you don't succeed in throwing the British into the sea', Marcks warned the regimental commander with all too exact foresight, 'we shall have lost the war.' However, its Mark IV tanks ran into the Staffordshire Yeomanry's anti-tank Fireflies (Shermans armed with the long 17-pounder) and suffered heavy losses. A few made contact with the infantry of the 716th Division still holding out at Lion-sur-Mer; but, when they were overflown by the 250 gliders of 6th Airborne Division bringing reinforcements to the parachutists across the Orne, they concluded that they risked being cut off and withdrew. By nightfall, though Caen remained in German hands, the Sword bridgehead perimeter was intact and the crisis of D-Day had passed.

Though the Germans could not know it – Marcks's gloomy prognosis was an inspired guess – their opportunity to extinguish the invasion at its outset had now passed. On 7 and 8 June the next nearest Panzer division, the 12th SS (Hitler Youth), came forward to assault the Canadians in their bridgehead west of Caen and inflicted heavy losses on them, but the Hitler Youth failed to break through to the sea; a Germany army officer reported seeing some 'crying with frustration'. Meanwhile the invaders were linking hands across the gaps that separated Sword from Juno and Gold and the British from the American beaches (the British were joined to Omaha on 10 June, Omaha to Utah by 13 June), as their navies simultaneously outstripped the enemy in the race to bring reinforcements to the battlefield. The explanation of the Allies' success in 'the battle of the build-up' is simple. The Channel was a broad highway, wholly under Allied control; only a few ships were lost to mines and E-boat attack; and, although some of the new 'schnorkel' submarines succeeded in reaching the Channel from Brittany, they suffered heavy losses, so the general effect was trifling. By contrast, not only was the carrying capacity of the French roads and railways grossly inferior to that of the Allied transport fleet, but the whole interior of northern France lay under the eye of the Allied air forces, which, from 6 June onwards, redoubled their pre-invasion efforts to destroy the transport infrastructure

and shot at anything that moved in daylight. Rommel himself was to be severely wounded in a ground attack by a British fighter while driving in his staff car on 17 July.

Even if Hitler had allowed reinforcements for the Seventh Army to be drawn wholesale from the Fifteenth, First and Nineteenth, they would have found great difficulty in reaching the battlefield at any rapid pace. As it was, he forbade the transfer of units from the Fifteenth, the nearest army, until the end of July, lest the 'second invasion' materialise in the Pas de Calais, and he only grudgingly released others from the First and Nineteenth. The Panzer divisions moved first; the 9th and 10th SS Panzer, returning from a counter-offensive mission in Poland, took four days to cross Germany but a further eleven days to reach Normandy from the French frontier, entirely as a result of air attack. The march of the unmechanised divisions was even more laborious. The 275th Division, for example, took three days to cover thirty miles from Brittany to Normandy (6–8 June) and then another three days to reach its battle positions. Allied reinforcement divisions were meanwhile moving from southern England to Normandy in less than twenty-four hours. The first month of the Normandy battle therefore resolved itself into a struggle between arriving Allied formations that were attempting to seize ground deemed essential to the development of a successful offensive and break-out, and German mobile divisions seeking to nail and wear them down. The essential ground for which the Americans struggled, the Cotentin and the port of Cherbourg, lay within the bridgehead (they reached the Atlantic coast of the peninsula on 18 June); for the British the essential ground was Caen and its environs, from which they could plunge into the open plains that led directly to Paris a hundred miles away.

Montgomery had hoped to take Caen on 6 June; when the effort failed, he launched three separate attacks to take the city. A local offensive by the Canadians was contained by the 12th SS Panzer Division on 7–8 June; an armoured attack west of Caen on 13 June was largely defeated by one of the few Tiger tank battalions in Normandy; finally a large offensive by the 15th Scottish Division (26 June to 1 July), codenamed Epsom, was blunted by the recently arrived 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions. At its last gasp, Operation Epsom secured ground across the river Odon, a tributary of the Orne which joined it at Caen. The most advanced position, the village of Gavrus, was taken and held by the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (the 'thin red line' of Balaclava), which had been forced to surrender at Saint-Valery four years earlier and been reconstituted in Britain since. However, an attempt by the supporting tanks of the 11th Armoured Division to break out into the open country south of the Odon failed and after five days of costly fighting – 4020 men had been killed or wounded – Epsom was called off.

— The fight in the bocage —

The Americans meanwhile were overcoming the German defenders of the Cotentin, the 243rd, 709th, 91st and 77th Divisions. Two of these, the 77th and 91st, were good-quality

formations; the attacking American formations, the 4th, 9th, 29th and 90th Divisions, were inexperienced and unprepared for the difficulty of the terrain. The hedgerows, backbone of the soon to be infamous *bocage* country, were field boundaries planted by the Celtic farmers 2000 years earlier. Over two millennia their entangled roots had collected earth to form banks as much as ten feet thick. 'Although there had been some talk in the UK before D-Day,' wrote General James Gavin of the 82nd Airborne Division, 'none of us had really anticipated how difficult they would be.' Later in the campaign, the Americans fitted their Shermans with 'hedgedozers', but in June 1944 each hedgerow was impenetrable to tanks, as well as to fire and view. To the Germans they offered almost impregnable defensive lines at intervals of 100 or 200 yards. To the attacking American infantry they were death traps. Before them the green American infantry lost heart, forcing Bradley, the First Army commander, to call too often on the overtired parachutists to lead the assault. The 'All American' and 'Screaming Eagles' never flinched from the task; but the cumulative effect of losses in their ranks threatened these superb formations with dissolution. Lieutenant Sidney Eichen, of the incoming 30th Division, encountering a group of paratroopers in the Cotentin asked, "'Where are your officers?'" and they answered: "All dead." He asked, "Who's in charge, then?"; and some sergeant said, "I am". I looked at the unshaven, red-eyed GIs, the dirty clothes and the droop in their walk, and I wondered: is this how we are going to look after a few days of combat?

Step by step, however, the Germans were forced back into the perimeter of Cherbourg. Hitler planned to hold the French ports as fortresses – as he had done in the Crimea and was to do in the Baltic states – so as to deny them to the enemy, whatever ground was lost in the hinterland. On 21 June he signalled to General Karl Wilhelm von Schlieben, the port commander, 'I expect you to fight this battle as Gneisenau once fought in the defence of Colberg' (one of the epics of Prussia's resistance against Napoleon in 1807). Five days later Cherbourg fell; the commander of the citadel requested the Americans to fire artillery at the main gate, to give him a pretext for surrender. Immediately afterwards he and all his men marched out under the white flag. On 26 June Hitler demanded that Rundstedt inaugurate court-martial investigations against all who could be held responsible. General Friedrich Dollmann, commander of the Seventh Army, whose headquarters directed the Normandy battle, took poison the same night. There had been many suicides in the Red Army in 1941 but few so far in the Wehrmacht; as the shades drew in around the Reich the number would grow.

Mid-June 1944 was a time of desperate crisis for Hitler, the worst he had faced since the surrender of Stalingrad seventeen months earlier. Although on 12 June he had at last opened his secret-weapons campaign against Britain, the launch rate of the V-1s was much lower than hoped, about eighty a day, of which only half reached London, and there were many misfires. One rogue flying-bomb crashed directly on to Hitler's command bunker at Margival on 17 June during the course of the only visit he made to France throughout the Normandy battle. Moreover, although the danger in the west was great, a crisis on the

Eastern Front now suddenly compounded his strategic difficulties. On 22 June, the third anniversary of Barbarossa, the Red Army had opened Operation Bagration, which, in six weeks of relentless armoured attack, destroyed Army Group Centre and carried the Russian line 300 miles westward from White Russia to the banks of the Vistula outside Warsaw; thirty divisions, 350,000 German soldiers, were killed, wounded or captured in the catastrophe.

During those terrible weeks of Bagration, the *Westheer* in Normandy continued to lose men in thousands but eventually succeeded in holding a line of defence. This illusory stability on the Normandy front after the fall of Cherbourg therefore brought a welcome sense of relief to Hitler's twice-daily situation conferences at Rastenburg. In early July, despite a continuing erosion of the Seventh Army's infantry strength, which was being ground away by incessant attrition in the hedgerow fighting, the perimeter of the bridgehead seemed to have been 'nailed down'. Montgomery had committed himself to the capture of Caen; having failed to capture it on 6 June, he now conceived the scheme of using it as a focal point for successive blows which would destroy the German mobile forces while the Allies accumulated reserves for the break-out. On 19–21 June reinforcement of the bridgehead was interrupted by a great Channel gale, which wrecked the American and damaged the British Mulberry harbours. Improvisation, however, soon made good the capacity, so that by 26 June there were already twenty-five Allied divisions ashore, with another fifteen in Britain on their way, to oppose fourteen German. That represented not only a quarter of the *Westheer* but two-thirds, eight out of twelve, of its Panzer divisions. Hitler may have been able to convince himself that the invasion had been brought under control. Rundstedt could not; on 5 July he advised Hitler to 'make peace' and was at once relieved as OB West by Kluge. Montgomery, daily informed by Ultra intelligence of the rising losses suffered by the *Westheer*, stuck resolutely to his scheme of making Caen 'the crucible' of the Normandy battle.

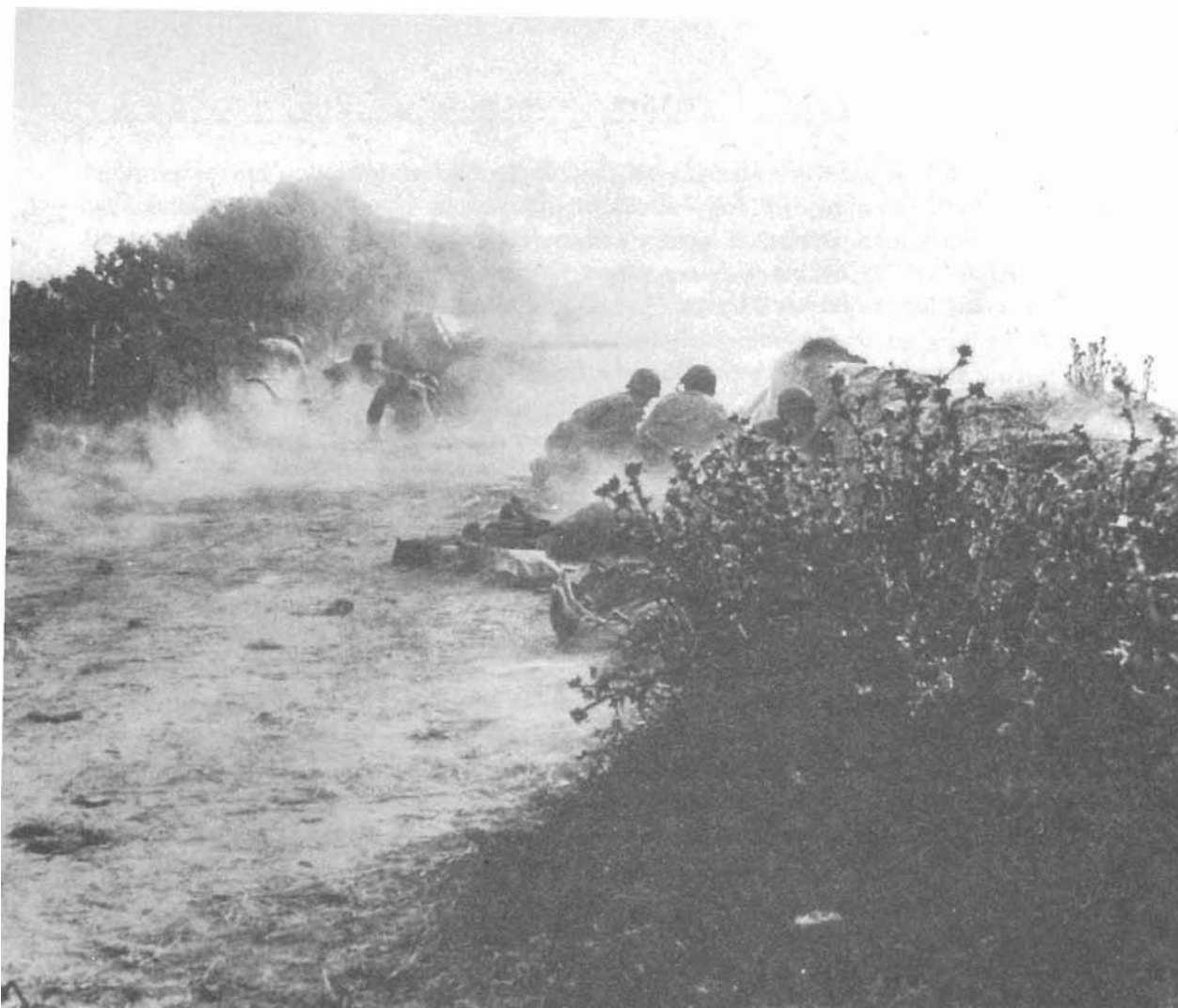
On 7 July, after the RAF dropped 2500 tons of bombs on Caen, virtually completing the destruction of William the Conqueror's ancient capital, the British 3rd and 59th and Canadian 3rd Divisions advanced on the city. They failed to take the centre but occupied all its outskirts. This operation, codenamed Charnwood, almost isolated Caen from the rest of the German positions in Normandy. There was evidence too that continuing American pressure was also drawing enemy armour away towards the base of the Cotentin, where it was planned that the ultimate break-out should erupt. Montgomery therefore decided that one more blow would bring on the climactic struggle with the Panzers that he sought and clear the way into the open country that led towards Paris. This new offensive was to be called Goodwood and would be mounted from the 'airborne bridgehead' east of the Orne into the corridor between that river and the Dives. Only one stretch of high ground, the Bourguébus ridge, closed the exit from that corridor to the high road towards Paris.

Goodwood, involving all three British armoured divisions in Normandy, the Guards,

7th and 11th, began on 18 July. It was preceded by the heaviest aerial 'carpet' bombardment yet staged in the campaign, took the defenders completely by surprise, and left the survivors trembling with shock. German tanks were overturned by the concussions and prisoners collected in the early stages of the advance stumbled to the rear as if drunk. By mid-morning the British tanks were halfway to their objectives and success seemed certain. Then the German army's extraordinary qualities of resilience and improvisation were asserted: Hans von Luck, a regimental commander of the 21st Panzer Division, arrived on the battlefield straight from leave in Paris to find pockets of artillery and armour which had escaped the bombardment and hastily co-ordinated a defence. While the gunners, including those of a Luftwaffe anti-aircraft battery, began to engage and slow the advancing British tanks, the engineer battalions of the 1st SS Panzer Division – German engineers (*Pioniere*) were used to acting as infantry in an emergency – hastily dug in on the crest of Bourguébus ridge, while the tanks of both the 1st SS and the 12th SS Panzer Divisions were hurried forward to form an anti-tank screen. By the time the British 11th Armoured Division had forced its way through to the foot of the ridge it was mid-afternoon; and, as the British tanks began to deploy to climb it, they were caught by salvos of 75-mm and 88-mm fire from the high ground above. The leading squadron of the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry went up in flames on the spot. The 23rd Hussars, coming to their rescue, were hit as hard. 'Everywhere wounded and burning figures ran and struggled painfully for cover,' the regimental history recorded, 'while a remorseless rain of armour-piercing shot riddled the already helpless Shermans. All too clearly we were not going to "break through" that day. . . . Out of the great array of armour that had moved forward to battle that morning, one hundred and six tanks now lay crippled or out of action in the cornfields.'

The correct figure was 126 from 11th Armoured alone, more than half its strength; the Guards Armoured Division had lost another sixty in its first battle. Goodwood was close to being a disaster. Montgomery's post-battle protestations that it had not really been expected to produce a break-out were treated with impatience by both Churchill and Eisenhower. Churchill's patience in any case had been wearing thin at the slow pace of the advance inland. It was D + 43 on 20 July, the day the Goodwood fighting finally spluttered out, and the 'phase lines' drawn on the planners' maps before D-Day had forecast that the Allies should be halfway to the Loire by that date. As it was they had not yet even reached the projected line for D + 17. Montgomery had to argue at length to Churchill to persuade him that his grand design retained its logic and that a result would not now be long delayed.

Compulsively self-justifying though he was, Montgomery was right both to put the disappointment of Goodwood behind him and to argue that it had served a purpose. For it had indeed pulled Army Group B's armoured reserves back towards the British front at the moment when they had been concentrating to meet what growing evidence indicated was a great American offensive in the making. During July the Americans had been fighting



American 75-mm anti-tank guns in action in the Normandy bocage country during the fighting to break out into Brittany in July 1944.

a horrible and costly battle in the *bocage* south of the Cotentin. Between 18 and 20 July the 29th and 35th Divisions had lost respectively 2000 and 3000 men in the battle for Saint-Lô – five times the number of casualties suffered by the British armoured divisions in the same period east of Caen. German losses were even worse: the 352nd Division, the Americans' principal opponent, still in action after its stubborn defence of Omaha beach, almost ceased to exist after Saint-Lô. Its casualties went to swell the total of 116,000 suffered by the Seventh Army since 6 June, for which only 10,000 replacements had come from the *Ersatzheer* (Replacement Army) in Germany. Material losses had been equally severe: against 2313 tanks produced in German factories in May–July, 1730 had been destroyed, one-third of them in France, but by the end of June only seventeen replacements had arrived. The strength of the perimeter drawn around the Allied bridgehead was stretched close to

breaking-point; and it was about to be subjected to a powerful blow at its weakest point.

On the morning of 25 July – after a false start when American aircraft bombed their own infantry – four American infantry and two armoured divisions moved to the assault west of Saint-Lô behind a heavy carpet bombardment. They belonged to General 'Lightning Joe' Collins's VII Corps. He had a reputation for hard driving of subordinates which the day's events justified. General Fritz Bayerlein, commanding Panzer Lehr in VII Corps's path, testified to the weight of the attack: 'After an hour I had no communication with anybody, even by radio. By noon nothing was visible but dust and smoke. My front lines looked like the face of the moon and at least 70 per cent of my troops were knocked out – dead, wounded, crazed or numbed.' The next day opened with another carpet bombardment. Progress, less than a mile the day before, increased to three and the American 2nd Armoured Division reached positions from which it stood poised to break out. Kluge, OB West and also the new commander of Army Group B, 'sent word', Bayerlein recalled, 'that the line along the Saint-Lô-Périers road must be held at all costs, but it was already broken.' He promised reinforcement by an SS tank battalion with sixty Tigers; it arrived with five. 'That night', Bayerlein went on, 'I assembled the remnants of my division south-west of Canisy. I had fourteen tanks in all. We could do nothing but retreat.' Panzer Lehr had once been perhaps the best and certainly the strongest armoured division in the German army. Its condition was an index of the state to which the *Westheer* had been reduced by six weeks of fighting in Normandy. Hitler was nevertheless adamant that the crumbling front must be restored and the situation reversed.

— The July bomb plot —

Five days before Cobra, as the American breakthrough operation was codenamed, a group of army officers had made an attempt to assassinate Hitler in his headquarters. On 20 July, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, a disabled veteran who held a staff appointment with the *Ersatzheer*, placed a bomb under the conference table at Rastenburg and then escaped to fly to Berlin and direct a conspiracy designed to replace the Nazi leadership throughout Germany with military appointees. By a succession of mischances the conspiracy miscarried. The bomb wounded but did not kill Hitler. An early misapprehension that the explosion was an act of sabotage was corrected. The signals officer who belonged to the conspiracy was accordingly prevented from interrupting outward communication from Rastenburg. Goebbels was thus able to mobilise soldiers loyal to Hitler in a military reaction against the conspiracy in Berlin. The conspirators were quickly arrested, and several of them, including Stauffenberg, were shot the same evening. By nightfall the danger of a coup had been averted and Hitler, even though isolated in his Rastenburg fortress, was once again secured in power. However, the 20 July Plot understandably reinforced every one of his deep-laid prejudices against the higher ranks of the army of which Stauffenberg was the epitome. An aristocrat, a devout Christian, a cavalryman –

Hitler hated not only the church and the nobility but also horses, riding, equestrian apparel and everything they represented – Stauffenberg had been drawn into the anti-Hitler conspiracy because he recognised the mortal danger of defeat into which the Führer had led the fatherland and anticipated the disgrace and punishment that the iniquity of Nazism would bring to his countrymen in its wake. Stauffenberg's motives, in short, were patriotic rather than moralistic, though his moral sense was deeply engaged by the conspiracy. For both his patriotism and his morality Hitler had only hatred and contempt, feelings which he automatically transferred to all he identified as belonging to Stauffenberg's social class and professional caste. Far too many of them, he believed, officered the *Westheer*. General Heinrich Graf von Stülpnagel, the military governor of France, was certainly in the plot; so too, Hitler believed, was Rommel, even though he came from outside the 'old' officer class and since 17 July had been lying seriously injured in hospital. He had also a suspicion, though not proof, of the complicity of Kluge, since 4 July the linchpin of the battle against the 'Anglo-Saxons' as both OB West and direct commander of Army Group B. Only a resolute – and successful – riposte to the American breakthrough at Saint-Lô would convince him that his suspicions were misfounded and restore his belief in the dedication of the *Westheer* to the National Socialist revolution.

The test of the *Westheer*'s loyalty – also designed to produce a strategic reversal of the military situation in the west – was to be a counter-attack with all available armour into the flank of the American spearhead which was driving south from Saint-Lô between the *bocage* country and the sea towards the interior of Brittany. On 2 August an emissary from Rastenburg, Walter Warlimont, deputy chief of OKW's operations staff, reached Kluge's headquarters at La Roche-Guyon, believing he was to discuss with the field marshal the question of withdrawing to a defensive position deeper within France. On his arrival, however, he discovered that Hitler had meanwhile sent in orders to begin a counter-offensive as soon as possible, to start from Mortain and drive to the sea, and that he expected its results – as Warlimont discovered when he returned to Rastenburg on 8 August – to lead to a 'rolling up of the entire Allied position in Normandy'.

The Mortain counter-attack began on 7 August. It involved, immediately, four Panzer divisions, the 116th, 2nd, 1st SS and 2nd SS, and was intended to draw in four more, the 11th and 9th from the south of France, which Hitler had already promised to Kluge on 27 July, and the 9th and 10th SS from the Caen sector. Together these eight divisions, deploying 1400 tanks, would lead the *Westheer*, in an operation codenamed *Lüttich* (Liège), towards a great counter-encirclement of the invaders, the consequences of which would match Ludendorff's breakthrough into the rear of the French armies at Liège exactly thirty years earlier to the day. As Hitler had told Warlimont on the eve of his mission to Kluge, 'The object remains to keep the enemy confined to his bridgehead and there to inflict serious losses upon him in order to wear him down and finally destroy him.'