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TANK BATTLE

FALAISE

The battle of which Operation Lüttich marked the opening stage was to develop into the largest clash of armour in any of the campaigns fought on the Western Front, if not the largest of the war. Only the Battle of Kursk, fought the previous July, had assembled a larger number of German Panzer divisions – twelve, against ten in Normandy; but at Kursk the German offensive had been defeated by minefields and anti-tank guns rather than by mobile riposte. The Battle of the Falaise Gap, by contrast, took the form of a gigantic manoeuvre of twenty armoured divisions (ten German, ten Allied), tank against tank, over 800 square miles of countryside and extending through the two weeks of frenzied movement and violent combat.

By the summer of 1944 the mystique of *Blitzkrieg* had been long overlaid. In the summer of 1940 Kleist and Guderian had been able to count on the mere appearance – or even rumour – of tanks to panic infantry into flight or surrender. Now commanders could no longer have such expectations. Green or shaken infantry would, of course, still run at the approach of tanks, and had done so on numerous occasions in Normandy; but experienced infantrymen had learned for themselves, as they had been taught, that flight was even more dangerous than keeping to their positions in the face of armoured attack. For by 1944 tanks did not operate, as they had in their palmy days, as independent spearheads; they advanced only in close concert with specialist infantry of their own, the Panzergrenadiers, and under the protective bombardment of supporting artillery. Defending infantry who left their trenches to make for safety thus exposed themselves to several sorts of fire: that of the tanks themselves, that of the tanks' foot soldiers and that of their associated gunners. In the face of this most terrifying of all assaults, therefore, the defenders struggled to hold their ground, counting on their own anti-tank weapons to hold the attackers at bay while calling for their own artillery support and air strike – if that were available – and hoping that friendly tanks would come forward to do battle with

those of the enemy. In short, by 1944 the tank had ceased to be an autonomous instrument of strategy but had taken its place in an elaborate machinery of tactical attrition, which achieved its effects by a cumulative wearing-down of resistance rather than by a rapier-like penetration of the enemy's front.

The dethronement of the tank from the status of revolutionary 'war-winning' weapon to that of workaday tool of tactics followed a pattern long established in the history of armaments. The ironclad, the torpedo and the machine-gun had each at first appearance been hailed as making defence, even war itself, 'impossible'; to each, in turn, an antidote had been found and the 'revolutionary' weapon subsumed within a slightly altered and more complex system of war-making than had prevailed before. However, although the tank had undergone a similar displacement, its autonomy had been doubted from the outset and disputed energetically between the two great theorists whose names will always be associated with its development. Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, who had masterminded the first great tank offensive at Cambrai in 1917, saw no future place for any but the tank arm on the battlefield; Basil Liddell Hart, his friendly rival in their paper debates of the 1920s and 1930s, argued that the tank would not win battles single-handed and that all arms, including infantry and artillery, would in future be mechanised, to produce armies which would resemble fleets of larger and smaller armoured and mobile 'land ships'.

Liddell Hart looked too far into the future; not until forty years after the end of the Second World War would even the most advanced states command the wealth and industrial resources to mechanise their field armies completely. It was nevertheless he, not Fuller, who saw the future true. Already by 1944 'land fleets' existed in embryo. It was with a land fleet of Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions that OB West had striven to defeat the Allied invasion; and it was with a land fleet of armoured and mechanised divisions that Montgomery and Bradley would achieve the encirclement and destruction of Army Group B. Allied tanks were to play the leading part in blunting the German attack which initiated the Battle of the Falaise Gap and then in making the advances which drew the line of encirclement around the enemy; but the ground they won was consolidated and held by their accompanying infantry and the work of destruction within the Falaise pocket was completed by their supporting artillery and air squadrons. Falaise was an all-arms battle, and its nature exactly depicts the extent to which armoured tactics had been rationalised since the early days of the war, when the Panzer generals had acted as if invincible.

The diminution of the tank can in fact be traced to an early date in the war's development. Gamelin, for all his ineptitude of decision, correctly perceived the proper riposte to the Panzer thrust immediately after the crossing of the Meuse on 13 May 1940; it was to aim armoured counter-thrusts at the neck joining tank spearhead to infantry shaft. Two such counter-thrusts were mounted by de Gaulle's 4th Armoured Division at Laon on 18 May and by Frankforce at Arras on 21 May. Unco-ordinated in time, however, and unsupported by large resources of infantry and artillery, both counter-strokes failed. It was

the Germans rather than the Allies who profited by the experience of these engagements. At Arras, Rommel, commanding the 7th Panzer Division, rescued himself from over-exposure by calling into service the heavy (88-mm) anti-aircraft guns of his flak battalion to halt and turn back the charge of the Royal Tank Regiment into his divisional centre after it had evaded his armoured screen. The eighty-eights stopped the heavy British tanks – which his lightly gunned Panzers had failed to do – and saved him from a defeat which might have extinguished his career then and there.

Arras emphasised to the Germans that the most effective means of waging armoured warfare against an equal enemy was to use a combination of tanks and anti-tank weapons; and they were to learn in their desert war against the British that these tactics worked in offence as well as defence. At the First Battle of Tobruk in April 1941 the Afrikakorps broke the perimeter of the fortified port with its tanks, but many of these were quickly lost to Australian tank-hunting parties because the defenders closed the gaps behind the intruders and prevented the German infantry from following in support. These tactics of divide-and-win were shortly to be used by Rommel against the British desert army itself. In the open desert battles of Sidi Rezegh and Gazala, from November 1941 to June 1942, Rommel perfected a method whereby he engaged British tanks with his own, retreated to draw the enemy on to a screen of anti-tank guns and then advanced when the losses inflicted had robbed the British of the means to conduct a mobile defence. Motorised infantry and self-propelled artillery accompanied his advancing tanks, thus ensuring that British positions overrun could be held and consolidated.

It was a positive advantage to Rommel in his adoption of these tactics that, for extraneous reasons, the number of tanks in German Panzer divisions had been halved since 1940. Hitler's purpose in reducing divisional tank strengths in late 1940 was to accumulate a surplus on which new Panzer divisions could be built; the number of divisions was in fact doubled between the fall of France and the opening of Barbarossa. The indirect effect of this bisection was to force German commanders to make better use of the non-tank elements of their Panzer divisions, particularly the mechanised infantry (Panzergrenadiers) and self-propelled artillery. Out of this necessity was born a true doctrine of tank-infantry-artillery co-operation which the Panzer divisions brought to a high level of practicality in 1943-4, as they found themselves progressively outnumbered by the enemy, particularly on the Russian front. Even when divisional tank strengths fell below 200 (from the 400 that had been standard in 1940), German Panzer divisions proved themselves equal or superior to much stronger Allied formations – as, for example, the 10th Panzer Division demonstrated when it routed the US 1st Armoured Division at Kasserine in Tunisia in February 1943. British and American armoured divisions followed the German pattern of organisation from mid-war onwards, shedding tank battalions and acquiring larger complements of motorised infantry and self-propelled anti-tank artillery to achieve a better balance of arms. The Americans, out of their large automotive capacity, were actually able to put their 'armoured infantry' into tracked carriers, with a notable

improvement in mobility. Even so, the best German Panzer formations – those of the privileged SS and such favoured divisions as the army's Lehr and the Luftwaffe's Hermann Goering – remained superior to their Allied counterparts until, after the battles of Normandy and White Russia, the relentless effects of attrition, imposed at the front by combat and at the rear by aerial bombardment, began to depress their strengths below the level at which losses of men and equipment could be made good from the Replacement Army and the tank factories.

— *The technology of armoured warfare* —

Superior organisation and experience alone, however, did not explain Germany's ability to wage armoured warfare on equal terms against a coalition of industrially superior powers from early 1942 until late 1944. The quality of German armour also counted significantly in the balance. German armoured vehicles were, with only one or two exceptions, better than their equivalents in the opposing armies. British armour in particular was lamentably inferior to the German products. Though the British had invented the tank, first deployed it in action in September 1916, and largely conceived the theoretical basis of armoured warfare, they did not succeed in building an effective tank in the Second World War. That crucial balance between firepower, protection and mobility which underlies successful tank design eluded them. Their Infantry Tank Mark I, which at Arras Rommel found he could penetrate only with his eighty-eights, was strong but almost immobile. The Churchill was equally tough but scarcely faster. Only the Cromwell, which appeared in 1944 to equip the reconnaissance battalions of British armoured divisions, had speed and protection; its gun remained inadequate. As a result the British divisions of 1944 were dependent on the American Sherman for their main tank strength, but the Sherman too had defects: though fast, reliable and easy to maintain, it burnt readily and lacked gunpower. Britain's most successful contribution to Anglo-American armoured capability was to fit its fearsome 17-pounder anti-tank gun to specially adapted Shermans, called Fireflies, which provided British armoured divisions with their principal if not only antidote to heavy German armour in 1944–5. The great merit of the Sherman, and a tribute to America's industrial power, was that it could be manufactured in quantity. In 1943–4 the USA produced 47,000 tanks, almost all Shermans, while Germany produced 29,600 tanks and assault guns. Britain, in 1944, produced only 5000 tanks.

It was Russia, alone among Germany's enemies, which matched its output of tanks in quality and quantity. In 1944 Soviet tank production totalled 29,000, most of which comprised the remarkable T-34. This tank owed much of its technology to the independent American designer, Walter Christie, from whom the Soviet Union bought prototypes at a time when fiscal stringency kept the US Army on a shoestring budget. To Christie's chassis and suspension the Russians added an all-weather engine and sloped armour, as well as an effective gun, thus producing such a well-balanced design that in



CLASH OF ARMOUR

Above: Tiger II heavy battle tanks, often called Royal Tigers, in a tank park. Introduced into service in the autumn of 1944, the Royal Tiger was the heaviest, best protected and most powerfully armed tank to go into production in the Second World War. But its battlefield superiority was purchased at the price of manoeuvrability and reliability. However, its long, powerful 88-mm gun could outrange and outshoot nearly all Allied tanks, and this enabled the Tiger II to stand off and engage targets as it chose. Only 485 were built before the end of the war.

Right: The business end of a Mark IV Panzer of the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend west of Caen in June 1944. The Division took part in some of the most bitter fighting in Normandy.





Left: A Sherman of a British armoured division rumbles down a French lane, deadly country for armoured ambush. The British were heavily dependent on the American Sherman, counting on its reliability in action, ease of maintenance, and sheer weight of numbers, to offset its inferiority to German Tigers and Panthers. The US Army's rule of thumb was that it took five Shermans to knock out one Panther.

1942, when Albert Speer succeeded Dr Fritz Todt as head of the German armaments industry, the German army actually considered copying it wholesale as a successor to the ageing Panzer Mark IV. That humiliating concession of technical inferiority was ultimately avoided by the production of the Mark V Panther. Although the new tank failed at Kursk – as late as January 1944 Hitler was calling it ‘the crawling Heinkel 177’ in an allusion to a disappointing bomber – it eventually justified the effort put into its development in Normandy, where it equipped many of the Panzer battalions of the SS divisions. Even in 1944, however, the Mark IV remained the Panzer arm’s mainstay. It had originated before 1939 as the final series in a ladder of designs, each larger than the one before. The Mark IV in particular had proved remarkably adaptable and had been progressively improved; finally, when equipped with a ‘long’ 75-mm gun as its main armament, it became almost a match for the T-34 itself.

Its predecessors, notably the Panzer Mark III, had also been readily adaptable as self-propelled anti-tank and ‘assault’ guns, and from February 1943 onwards, when the tank pioneer Heinz Guderian became Inspector-General of Panzer Troops, it was incorporated with the tanks into a new ‘Panzer arm’. Such weapons suffered from the disadvantage that their guns fired only in the direction that the vehicle itself was pointing; but, because they lacked complex turret machinery, they were cheap to produce, and their low profile made them difficult to detect when deployed in well-chosen defensive positions on the battlefield. Their design was rational enough to be widely imitated by the Russians as well as the Americans and British, and they largely provided the mobile firepower of the Panzergrenadier divisions like the 17th SS, which the Allies found such formidable opponents in France. The German army itself distinguished little between tanks and assault guns. Indeed, Guderian’s main difficulty in reorganising the Panzer arm in 1943 lay in overcoming the reluctance of the artillery to relinquish control of its assault guns, which, according to its senior officers, provided gunners with their sole opportunity to win the Knight’s Cross, the Wehrmacht’s ultimate decoration for bravery.

The only instrument of armoured warfare which German commanders regarded as qualitatively different from the rest was the Mark VI Tiger, which was not allotted to divisions but organized in independent battalions, kept under central control and committed to crucial offensive and counter-offensive missions. The Tiger had defects – its enormous weight was symptomatic of creeping ‘gigantism’ in German tank design which robbed it of speed while its turret traversed with ponderous deliberation: but, with its 88-mm gun and 100-mm-thick armour, it proved consistently superior, in static if not mobile operations, to every other tank of the war. The cough of the Tiger’s engine starting up in the distance was something all Allied soldiers remembered with respect.

Tigers, Panthers, Mark IVs and assault guns were all to play their part in the great armoured battle in Normandy which, culminating in the holocaust of the Falaise Gap, was about to begin at Mortain on the night of 6–7 August. Hitler, inspired as so often at the map table by a pictorial glimpse of opportunity, had decided that the outpouring of the

American armies from Normandy into the narrow corridor between Mortain and the sea laid them open to a decisive counter-stroke. 'We must strike like lightning,' he had announced to his OKW operations staff on 2 August. 'When we reach the sea the American spearheads will be cut off. . . . We might even be able to cut off their entire beachhead. We must not get bogged down in cutting off the Americans who have broken through. Their turn will come later. We must wheel north like lightning and turn the entire enemy front from the rear.'

It was this decision which had brought the 116th, 2nd, 1st SS and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions to stand shoulder to shoulder at Mortain, only twenty miles from the Atlantic, on the flank of General Omar Bradley's US First Army which was streaming southwards into Brittany. Disastrously for them, for the *Westheer* and for Hitler, however, the signals which had directed their deployment had been monitored by the Ultra decryption service since 5 August; their objectives, Brécey and Montigny, were passed to Montgomery's headquarters and four American divisions, the 3rd Armoured, 30th and 4th, with the 2nd Armoured in support, were directed to block their path down the valley of the river Sée which Hitler had designated as their avenue to the ocean.

— The *Westheer's* ordeal —

Some 200 German tanks (in first line), attacking without artillery preparation to assist surprise, advanced in two columns either side of the Sée during the night of 6–7 August. The southern column overran the outposts of the 30th Division but was stopped when the American infantry coolly dug in on high ground, called forward the divisional tank-destroyer battalion equipped with assault-gun-type weapons, which destroyed fourteen tanks, and waited for daylight and better weather conditions to bring out the tactical aircraft which would wreak even greater damage. Thus did a quite average American infantry division deal with the vanguard of the 2nd SS Panzer Division, almost invincible sword of the Panzer arm.

On the north bank the 2nd Panzer and 1st SS Panzer (the Adolf Hitler Division, which had never failed the Führer) were stopped even more easily by the infantry of the US 9th Division; the commander of the 116th Panzer Division declined to intervene and was relieved of command. At daybreak the US 2nd Armoured Division counter-attacked; it 'appeared to materialise out of thin air', noted the official historian, writing at a time when the Ultra secret was still jealously guarded. The 2nd Armoured Division and rocket-firing Typhoons of the Second British Tactical Air Force, which flew 294 sorties on 7 August, reduced the 2nd Panzer Division's tank strength to thirty that day. From Rastenburg Hitler demanded that the attack 'be prosecuted daringly and recklessly. . . . Each and every man must believe in victory.' As dusk fell on the Mortain battlefield, however, defeat confronted each unit which had been committed to Operation Lüttich.

Other events of 7 August increased the *Westheer's* ordeal. On that day Montgomery

had launched a new drive into the German lines at the opposite end of the bridgehead, aimed towards Falaise. It followed two recent but aborted thrusts, by the Canadians down the track of the Goodwood offensive on 25 July and by the British towards Caumont (Operation Bluecoat) on 2 August. Operation Totalise, mounted on 7 August, was not the outright success Montgomery hoped it would be, even though preceded by a carpet bombardment as heavy as that before the Americans' Cobra two weeks before. It was again mounted by the Canadians, who met heavy resistance from their sworn enemy, the 12th SS Panzer (after a massacre of Canadian prisoners by the Hitler Youth Division early in the campaign, few of its soldiers survived capture at Canadian hands). However, the Canadians were now stronger than at any stage of the campaign; they had recently been joined by their own 4th Armoured Division and also by the émigré 1st Polish Armoured Division, which had a particular quarrel to settle with the Germans, made all the more bitter by the Poles' awareness of the battle currently raging in Warsaw between Bor-Komorowski's Home Army and the security troops of the German occupation force. Operation Totalise did not reach its objectives; but it thrust these two armoured divisions forward into positions from which they menaced the rear of the whole German Panzer concentration engaged in Normandy.

That concentration (less the 12th SS, which still stood on the British front) now numbered ten divisions and was grouped at the far western end of the bridgehead – in various states of disarray. Panzer Lehr, originally the German army's 'demonstration' division and before 6 June the strongest in its Panzer arm, was a shadow; all four SS Panzer divisions, the 1st, 2nd, 9th and 10th, had been grievously damaged in close combat since late June; the 17th SS Panzergrenadier, weak in armour to begin with, was a cripple; the 2nd, 21st and 116th Panzer had all suffered heavy tank losses, the last in the Mortain battle; only the 9th Panzer, which had arrived in Normandy from the south of France in August, remained largely intact. Even the 9th Panzer did not have its full complement of 176 tanks (half Mark IV, half Panther); average tank strengths were half the figure, and Panzer Lehr had almost no tanks at all.

The divisions, moreover, were in the wrong place. The surviving German infantry divisions, terribly reduced in numbers, were bunched into three groups, one group of seven standing in the path of the British and Canadians advancing on Falaise, one group of five scattered about in the path of the American break-out into Brittany, the remaining nineteen still clinging to the collapsing perimeter of the bridgehead they had defended so stoutly since 6 June. All were in imminent peril of encirclement, as the British-Canadian 21st Army Group drove south to cut off their line of retreat to the Seine, while the American 12th Army Group swung eastward to meet it behind their backs. But the Panzer divisions of what had recently been designated the Fifth Panzer Army were at the extremity of danger. Hitler's maniac dream of decapitating the American break-out at Mortain had carried them to the furthest end of the Normandy front, from which they could battle their way to safety from between the closing jaws of the Allied encirclement only at the cost of mortal combat.

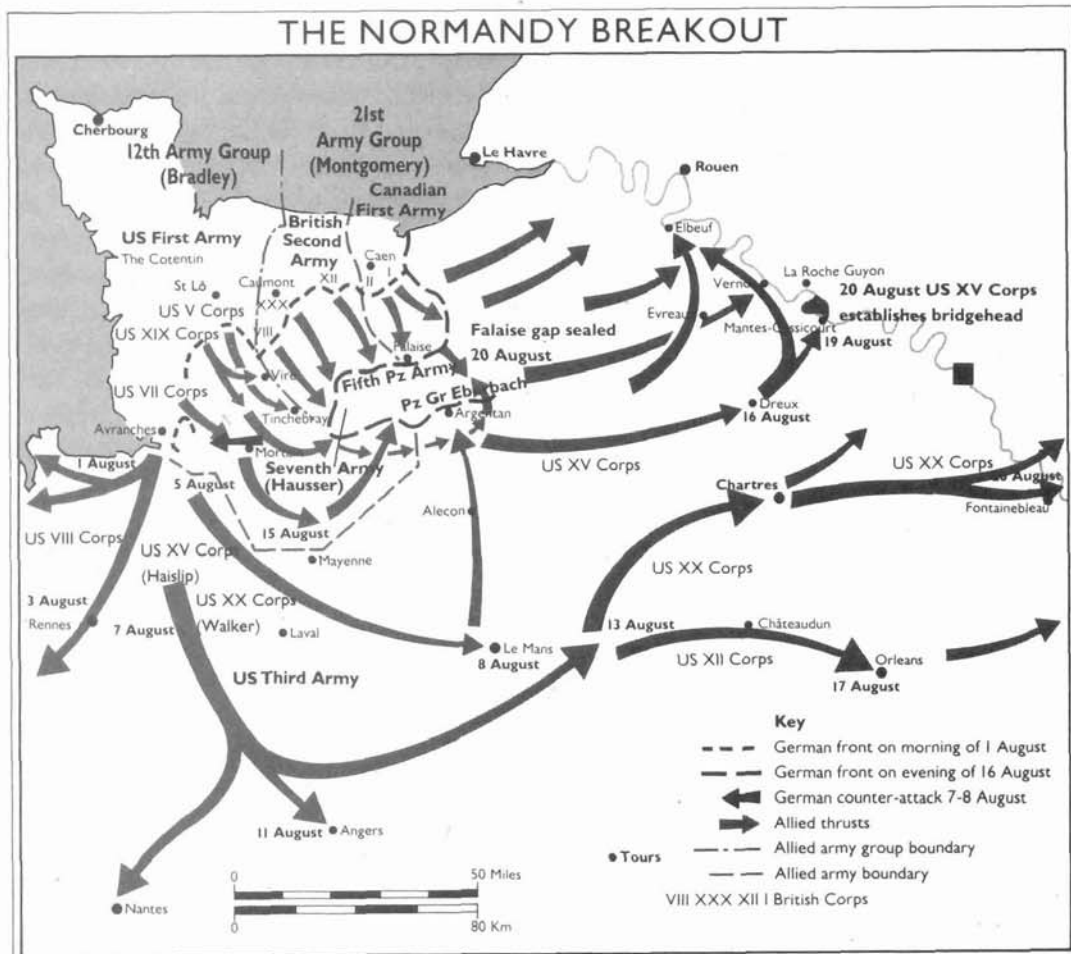
How great that cost was becoming the 12th SS Panzer had learnt in Totalise, where the three Canadian infantry battalions of the 4th Armoured Division, mounted for the first time in the campaign in armoured carriers, had suffered only seven fatal casualties during their assault; so dense was the strength of their accompanying armour that it had simultaneously succeeded in bringing an end to the career of Michael Wittmann, the Wehrmacht's most renowned tank commander. He had destroyed 117 Russian tanks before arriving in Normandy; there he had been largely responsible for blunting the British attack at Villers-Bocage on 13 June. On 7 August he was cornered in his Tiger by five Shermans which destroyed it with a concerted salvo of gunfire. Given the opposed effects of Allied reinforcement of the bridgehead and German losses within it, such disparities of strength were now standard and would determine the final outcome of the Normandy battle with mathematical inevitability.

Inevitability had been hurried forward by a telephone conference held between Bradley (with Eisenhower at his side) and Montgomery on 8 August. The Americans had suggested that, since the Seventh Army and the Fifth Panzer Army were clearly no longer able to manoeuvre as a result of the blows rained on them in the recent Goodwood, Cobra and Totalise operations, strategic sense spoke for abandoning the plan, conceived before D-Day, for a 'wide' envelopment of the Wehrmacht in Normandy reaching as far south as the Loire. They proposed instead that a 'short hook' be staged by the Americans, designed to achieve rapid formations with the British and Canadians near Falaise. Montgomery agreed that 'the prospective prize was great' and left Bradley to issue the necessary orders to his subordinate, George Patton, who commanded the formations which the plans for a 'short hook' would bring into play.

Patton, the phantom with whom the authors of the D-Day deception scheme had deluded the Abwehr during the spring of 1944, was now a figure of substance and power on the Normandy scene. It was his Third Army which had assumed responsibility for the Saint-Lô breakthrough and his dynamism which had driven it through the defended zone and out into open country. 'The passage



An uncharacteristically genial exchange between Patton (left) and Montgomery. Relations between them were frequently strained. Patton and Montgomery were instinctive showmen, as evidenced by the former's famous pearl-handled Colt revolvers and the latter's cap badges. Standing between them, General Bradley assumes a more sober style of command.



The Allied break-out in northern France. In 1940 the German army had conquered France in four weeks. In 1944 it took six months to lose it, at irreparable cost.

of Third Army through the corridor at Avranches', he wrote later, 'was an impossible operation. Two roads entered Avranches; only one left it over the bridge. We passed through this corridor 2 infantry and 2 armoured divisions in less than 24 hours. There was no plan because it was impossible to make a plan.' Patton characteristically exaggerated his achievements. The logistics of the Avranches manoeuvre were chaotic, and the tactical success of Operation Cobra owed more to the personal leadership of his VII Corps commander, Collins, than to his own generalship. Nevertheless, without Patton's relentless demand for action, the Third Army's *Blitzkrieg* would not have occurred.

Blitzkrieg was what Third Army's breakthrough amounted to; it was the first – and, as it would turn out, the last – true exercise in that operational form achieved by a Western

army in the Second World War. *Blitzkrieg* proper entailed not merely the sudden and brutal penetration of the enemy's front by concentrated armoured force and the rapid exploitation of that success; it also required that the enemy forces lying beyond the point of break-in should be encircled and destroyed. That was the pattern of operations that the Wehrmacht had achieved in France in 1940 and in western Russia in June to October 1941. Thereafter it had fallen outside every combatant army's grasp. The Wehrmacht's great advances into southern Russia in spring and summer 1942 had not achieved encirclements on the scale which had brought the Red Army to the verge of destruction the year before, while the great eastern battles of 1943 and early 1944 had been struggles of attrition, as at Kursk, or bludgeoning Russian frontal offensives. The lightning dashes along the coast of North Africa by Rommel and his British adversaries in 1941-3 more resembled old-fashioned cavalry raids than campaigns of decision; had the Anglo-American Torch army not arrived in Algeria in November 1942, who can say how long the game might have been protracted? In Italy, where the terrain precluded breakthrough, none of the fighting had been touched by the electricity of *Blitzkrieg*; while Montgomery's efforts in the early stages of the Normandy campaign to unleash the lightning of armoured penetration against the Germans had all foundered because of their system of fixed defences and rapid counter-attack. Bagration, by which the Red Army had brought about the destruction of Army Group Centre in June 1944, was the only operation in the preceding three years of combat which replicated in its form and effects the spectacular German triumphs of Sickle Stroke and Barbarossa.

— The biter bit —

There was an excellent reason why *Blitzkrieg* had lapsed after the Kiev encirclement of September 1941 and why the chance to revive its form reappeared in France in August 1944: *Blitzkrieg* depended for its effect on the co-operation or, at the very least, the acquiescence of the enemy. In France in 1940 the Allies had both acquiesced and co-operated. By failing to provide their front in the Ardennes with adequate anti-tank defences – obstacles, anti-armour weapons, tank counter-attack forces – they had invited the German armoured offensive at that point; by their simultaneous advance into Belgium which carried the best of their mobile divisions eastward past the shoulder of the German Panzer divisions at the precise moment when those were hurrying westward, they actively co-operated in their isolation and ultimate encirclement.

The penalty for acquiescence and co-operation in the opponent's *Blitzkrieg* plans were quickly learned, by Germany's enemies at least. Indeed, as we have seen, both the French and the British correctly identified during the first week of the German *Blitzkrieg* of May 1940 that the right response was to attack into the flank of the armoured column as it drove towards its objective. The Russians too eventually learned the same lesson and at Kursk, a sector in which they had been given time to prepare the ground, they not only

amputated the German spearheads but then ground the attacking forces to pieces in the dense minefields and network of fire positions in which they had become engulfed. Kursk may be regarded as the first battle in which the anti-tank gun, with which infantry had been equipped as early as 1918, actually performed the role intended for it – to deflect and if possible destroy attacking enemy tanks without recourse to supporting armour.

By 1944 each British and American infantry division had 60–100 anti-tank guns, as well as several hundred hand-held anti-tank missile projectors; the latter were weapons of last resort, but the former were genuine tank-destroyers. The enhanced effectiveness of the anti-tank gun derived not only from the growth in its distribution but also from the greatly increased calibre of those on issue to the infantry by mid-war – 57-mm was standard, 75-mm common and the heavier 80-mm and 90-mm available in specialist units. It is a rule of thumb that armour is penetrable by rounds equal in diameter to its thickness, and only the thickest tank armour exceeded 100 mm. Therefore, as the German armoured divisions engaged in Operation Lüttich found in their attack on the American 30th Division at Mortain, infantry could now hold their positions and inflict losses on the enemy under the weight of concentrated armoured attack.

The precariousness of the Fifth Panzer Army's position, confronted by superior enemy tank concentrations and by genuinely self-defending infantry formations, was now extreme. Its best hope was to form protective flanks along both southern and northern edges of the salient occupied by the Seventh Army behind which the battered German infantry divisions in Normandy could begin to make their withdrawal to the Seine. If Kluge, commanding both the Fifth Panzer and the Seventh Armies, as well as Army Group B, had enjoyed the freedom to make strategic decisions, there seems little doubt that he would have ordered exactly that disposition of his force. But freedom of decision was not what Hitler would concede him. On the contrary, on 10 August he sent orders to Kluge that Operation Lüttich was to be resumed the following day: 'The [Panzer] attack failed because it was launched prematurely and was thus too weak, and under weather conditions favouring the enemy. It is to be repeated elsewhere with powerful forces.' Six Panzer divisions were to engage in a more south-westerly direction under the command of General Hans Eberbach.

To attack south-westward was to commit the Panzer divisions into the pocket which Eisenhower's 'short hook' was now drawing around the Seventh Army. Hitler, the impresario of *Blitzkrieg*, was thus orchestrating exactly the manoeuvre best calculated to deliver his armoured striking force to its destruction. For all the evidence its enemies had given the Wehrmacht of the dangers of acquiescence and co-operation in *Blitzkrieg*, Hitler was now bent on tactics which more closely co-operated in a hostile *Blitzkrieg* than any employed by their enemies. Kluge, his immediate subordinate in the west, was aware of the 'incredibility of a large military force of twenty divisions blissfully planning an attack while far behind it an enemy is busily forming a noose with which to strangle it'. However, he was inhibited, even more than most German generals in the wake of the 20 July bomb

plot, by the knowledge that his own complicity was suspected by the SS and Gestapo, and that their suspicions had substance. Kluge had known that a plot was in the making, since many of the plotters had previously served on his staff in Russia, but he had neither dissociated himself from it nor, when invited to join, shown loyalty by refusing: 'Yes, if the pig was dead' were the words he had used on the evening of 20 July. He now recognised that he could rescue himself from suspicion only by accepting the right of 'a command ignorant of front-line conditions', as the Seventh Army's chief of staff put it, 'to judge the situation from East Prussia'. His two immediate subordinates, General Paul Hausser of the Seventh and General Sepp Dietrich of the Fifth Panzer Armies, both SS officers recently nominated by Hitler to replace army generals, were currently taking advantage of a loophole in his orders for the renewal of the attack to draw their divisions eastward and so away from the tightening clasp of the American 'hook'. Kluge accepted the military logic of their redeployments but felt driven, none the less, to go through the motions of reviving the offensive as Hitler directed. On 15 August he set off on a tour of the pocket in which both his armies were now confined, with the object of persuading Hitler that he was carrying out his orders. The events of the day, ironically, were to produce exactly the opposite impression. Attacked in his staff car, exactly as Rommel had been twenty-nine days earlier, he spent most of the day skulking in ditches and reached the Seventh Army's headquarters only at midnight. During the hours he had remained incommunicado Hitler – for whom 15 August was 'the worst day of my life' – had convinced himself that Army Group B's commander was planning 'to lead the whole of the Western Army into capitulation'. Late in the evening he decided to relieve Kluge of command, sent for Walther Model, 'the Führer's fireman', to replace him and ordered the disgraced field marshal to return to Germany. Kluge, who rightly divined that he was to be met on arrival by the Gestapo, took poison on the homeward flight.

Kluge's suicide could not expiate the mistakes which had led Army Group B into its present predicament. Nor could Model, for all his proven expertise in reconstructing broken fronts, rescue it. Hitler's co-operation in the American *Blitzkrieg* had carried it too far into danger for anything but a pell-mell retreat to save its remnants from annihilation. And remnants were what the divisions of Army Group B now amounted to; though some 300,000 German soldiers were entrapped in the Falaise pocket, eight of the twenty surrounded divisions had disintegrated, while the tank strength of the best Panzer divisions – 1st SS, 2nd, 9th and 116th – had fallen to thirty, twenty-five, fifteen and twelve respectively. The renewal of Operation Lüttich was out of the question. Fortunately for the survivors, Hitler, in changing commanders, had also changed his tune. Model arrived in France on 17 August with orders to re-form the line on the Seine, holding enough ground to sustain the V-weapons attack on Britain and protect the frontiers of Germany from direct assault.

His mission was overtaken by events. On 19 August Patton's spearhead reached the Seine north-west of Paris at Mantes. This extension of Eisenhower's hook, ordered by

Bradley on 14 August, conceded the trapped Germans a temporary breathing space, since after that date the American concentration at Argentan, forming one shoulder of the gap through which Army Group B had to escape, did not move further northwards to meet the Anglo-Canadian concentration at Falaise. The thrust to Mantes nevertheless nullified any hope the Germans had of sustaining a defensive line on the Seine, which thereafter became merely the barrier that Army Group B must cross to make good its escape out of Normandy. Meanwhile the Germans within the pocket, from which all anti-aircraft units had been evacuated in the hope of using them later elsewhere, were being devastated by constant air attack, while the British and Canadians were bearing down from Falaise to Argentan to put the stopper in the bottleneck. In the bottleneck itself a newly arrived Allied formation, the 1st Polish Armoured Division, representative in the west of the large Polish army in exile still sustaining its war effort against the Germans, took and held the commanding heights of Chambois between Falaise and Argentan in three days of desperate battle from 18 to 21 August. Its tank crews and infantrymen launched a succession of assaults against the road below where Army Group B streamed to the Seine bridges and ferries; but a defence against them was made by the equally resolute 12th SS Panzer (Hitler Youth) Division, which there performed the last of its many crucial operational missions in Normandy.

— The liberation of Paris —

The Hitler Youth Division's success in holding open the neck of the Falaise pocket until 21 August allowed some 300,000 soldiers to escape and, more surprisingly, 25,000 vehicles to cross floating bridges and ferries operated by German army engineers under cover of darkness between 19 and 29 August. Behind them, however, the fugitives left 200,000 prisoners, 50,000 dead and the wreck of two armies' equipment. Constant air attack into the clogged roads and fields of the pocket had left it choked with burnt and broken tanks, trucks and artillery pieces. Over 1300 tanks were lost in Normandy; of the Panzer divisions which escaped in some semblance of order none brought more than fifteen tanks out of the holocaust. Two Panzer divisions, Lehr and 9th, existed only in name; fifteen of the fifty-six infantry divisions which had fought west of the Seine had disappeared altogether.

Hitler directed some of the fugitive divisions to enter and hold the Channel coast ports as fortresses. He had already garrisoned the Atlantic ports of Lorient, Saint-Nazaire and La Rochelle, but the point of holding these ports had been nullified as soon as Bradley had decided on 3 August to curtail his drive southward along the Atlantic coast in favour of an encirclement of Army Group B from the west. The decision to occupy the Channel ports, by contrast, was one of the highest strategic importance. It lay in the pattern of his earlier insistence on holding Baltic and Black Sea ports even after their hinterland had fallen to the Red Army, but in this case was far more strongly justified by logistic reality; for, while the Red Army depended scarcely at all upon seaborne supply, the Anglo-

American armies did so almost completely. The denial to them of the Channel ports of Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk gravely impeded their ability to provision their advancing forces and was to have a critical impact on the development of the campaign of liberation throughout the coming autumn and winter.

Hitler's Channel ports decision demonstrated once again his uncanny ability, even at moments of desperate crisis, to avoid the worst consequences of his acts of operational folly. It could not compensate for his wilful and egotistic co-operation in the unfolding of Patton's *Blitzkrieg*, which had culminated in the devastation of the *Westheer* within the Falaise pocket. It could certainly not compensate for the irreplaceable loss of tanks and trained soldiers which the closing of the pocket had inflicted on the German army. However, it would mitigate the immediate consequences and help to ensure that when he came to mount his next – the last – great armoured offensive of the Second World War in the west he would do so on more equal terms than expected from the outcome of the battle of Normandy in August 1944.

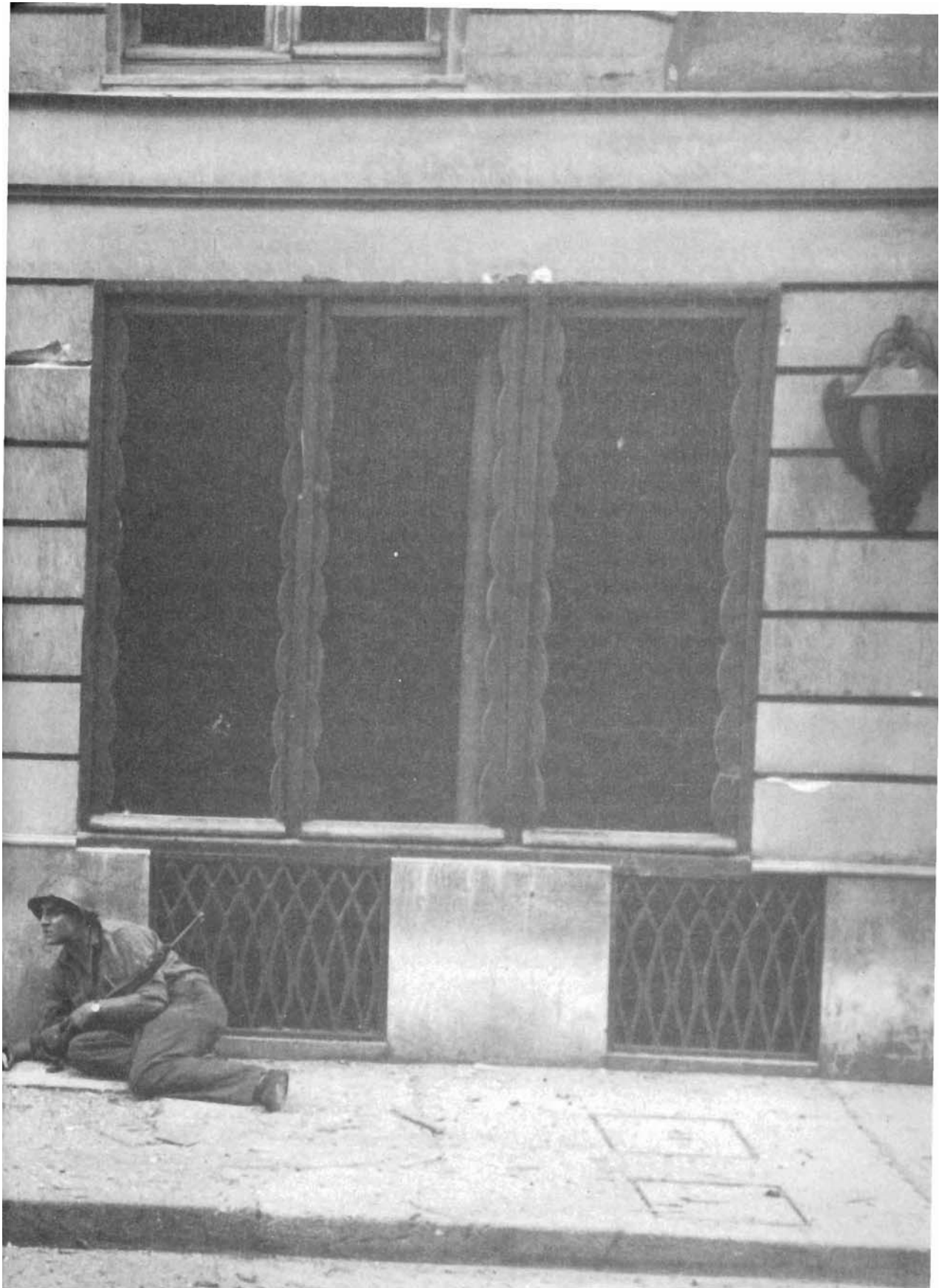
While the Channel ports were filling up with their garrisons of stay-behinds from the Fifteenth Army and its remaining units were joining the fugitives of the Seventh and Fifth Panzer Armies in the flight to the West Wall, the final act in the drama of the liberation epic was being played out in Paris. As the Normandy battle swelled to its climax, Hitler had conceived a plan to transform the French capital into a great defended bridgehead through which the Seventh Army could make an orderly retreat to the line of the Somme and Marne rivers and then to use the city itself as a battleground on which crippling losses might be inflicted on the Allied pursuers, even at the cost of turning it 'into a field of ruins'.

Two developments worked to allay this outcome. The first was the arrival in France on 15 August of a second Allied invasion army, not, as long anticipated, on the 'short route' to Germany from the Pas de Calais, but in the distant south, between Nice and Marseille. The Seventh Army, the instrument of Operation Anvil, mounted by three American and five French divisions, briskly overcame the resistance of General Wiese's Nineteenth Army and by 22 August had raced up the Rhône valley to reach Grenoble. Its appearance, and its peremptory unseating of the only effective manoeuvre formation remaining to General Johannes Blaskowitz's Army Group G, the 11th Panzer Division, not only threatened an attack against the West Wall from a hitherto unexpected direction, through Alsace-Lorraine. It also made nonsense of any hope of holding Paris when a new Allied thrust menaced the rearward communications of the capital with Germany from the south.

The second development was domestic to Paris itself. Its population was not overtly resistant. In March it had welcomed Pétain with tumultuous popular demonstrations; as late as 13 August, Laval had returned to the city in the hope of reconvening the Chamber of Deputies to accord him powers as legitimate head of government who might treat on

Overleaf: *Members of the French resistance take cover from a German sniper during the liberation of Paris.*





sovereign terms with the liberating armies. Nevertheless a spirit of resistance to German occupation smouldered, and as soon as it became clear that the days of the occupying force were numbered armed resistance broke out in the streets. On 18 August the Paris police force had, literally, raised the standard of revolt over the prefecture on the Ile de la Cité; as soon as it did so the covert resistance, of which the left-wing Franc-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP) was the most numerous, rallied to the flag. By 20 August the German garrison found itself under such pressure to maintain control of the streets that the Commander of Greater Paris, Dietrich von Choltitz, offered and succeeded in negotiating a truce. The scale the fighting had reached, however, now worked to alter Allied plans for the city's liberation. While Hitler was ordering that the city be turned into a western Stalingrad, Eisenhower and Montgomery had set their faces against allowing their troops to penetrate its perimeter 'until it is a sound military proposition to do so'. As soon as it became clear that the city was struggling to liberate itself, however, the Allied leaders found themselves obliged to go to the insurgents' assistance. The appropriate means of intervention lay to hand. Since 1 August the French 2nd Armoured Division, which owed allegiance to General de Gaulle, had been in Normandy. On 20 August the general himself, whose title to the leadership of France the Allies would not yet admit, had also arrived – uninvited, unannounced and by a circuitous route. On 22 August Bradley transmitted orders from Eisenhower that the French 2nd Armoured Division under General Leclerc was to direct itself on Paris. De Gaulle, who had installed himself in the French President's country seat at Rambouillet, endorsed the order and prepared to travel in its wake.

23 August was spent traversing the 120 miles which separated the 2nd Armoured Division's positions from the outskirts of the city. Detained on the approaches by stiffening German resistance, Leclerc despaired of entering the capital that day. Then, stung by American allegations that the French were 'dancing to Paris' (there had been outbreaks of fête between episodes of fighting), he launched an infiltration by a small tank–infantry force along back routes into the centre of the city. At 9.30 on the evening of 23 August three tanks of the French 2nd Armoured Division, Montmirail, Champaubert and Romilly, named from Napoleonic victories of 1814, stood under the walls of the Hôtel de Ville. Next day they would be joined by the bulk of the division which would fight its way into the historic heart of the city against last-ditch German resistance, and the day after by de Gaulle himself. No one more than he, the French army's apostle of armoured warfare, would grasp how appropriate it was that the capital of the country first overwhelmed by *Blitzkrieg* should be liberated by the tanks of its own renascent army.