

PARTIAL HISTORY

XII US ARMY CORPS

1 FEB 1944 TO 1 JULY 1944

CHAPTER I

Preparation for D-Day



The initial directive for VII Corps participation in the assault on Normandy was issued by Headquarters First U. S. Army on 1 February 1944, based on the Anglo-American "Initial Joint Plan". The operation was outlined sufficiently to permit initial estimates of troops, supplies, and shipping requirements to be made. VII Corps was to assault a beach on the eastern coast of the Cotentin Peninsula, secure a beachhead, and capture the port of Cherbourg, while V Corps and British and Canadian units made landings farther east in the area north of Bayeux. The 4th Infantry Division, newly arrived from the United States, was designated to make the assault on the VII Corps beach, aided by airborne landings of the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions. Naval and Air Force units would support the attack by bombardment of enemy defenses and communications, and Service of Supply organizations would mount and supply the operation.

On 14 February 1944, Major General J. Lawton Collins, the original VII Corps Chief of Staff, returned to take command of the Corps. As a division and corps commander in the Pacific theater he had already conducted several successful campaigns against the Japanese, and with an experienced and masterful hand he now took over the guidance of the biggest military operation of his career.

Corps Headquarters fairly teemed with activity. Plans were developed, each increasingly more detailed than the last, providing against every need and every emergency. Training was even more intensified as individuals learned and rehearsed the particular tasks each was to do, physically hardening themselves to meet the rigors of combat. Supplies and equipment accumulated in English bases. To facilitate coordination of details of the planning with the naval force which was to provide the lift, escort, and support for the operation, a planning group from the Corps staff established planning headquarters adjacent to the offices of U.S. Naval Force "U" in Plymouth. Air support plans of the Ninth U. S. Army Air Force were integrated with plans for naval bombardment, and both fitted into the overall plan for the operation.

As the preparations advanced, joint training exercises for small units of the Army, Navy, and Air Force were held. The most critical events expected in the Normandy invasion were carefully rehearsed as larger units were brought into the problems. Precise details of coordination were arranged and rehearsed, such as how contact would be established between the two airborne divisions and the seaborne assault troops and what aerial bombardment and naval gunfire would be brought on the known enemy defenses. Timing was worked out, routes of advance and contact points were selected, and every conceivable aspect of the coming battle was gone over time and again.

New information on the enemy situation was being received almost daily. So was information on new developments in our own techniques and equipment. Several details of the plans had to be changed as the result of this added knowledge, but everybody put forth his best effort and the adjustments were made rapidly. The spirit with which the troops accepted these changes and put their whole-hearted application into each improvement was a good indication of the full confidence they had in their leaders.

Training exercises increased successively in scope, culminating in the full scale dress rehearsal held in April on the Devonshire coast. Conditions were set up as nearly as possible like those to be encountered on the French coast and every detail of the operation was conducted just as it would be in France. This was our last “dry run”. The next time would be for keeps.

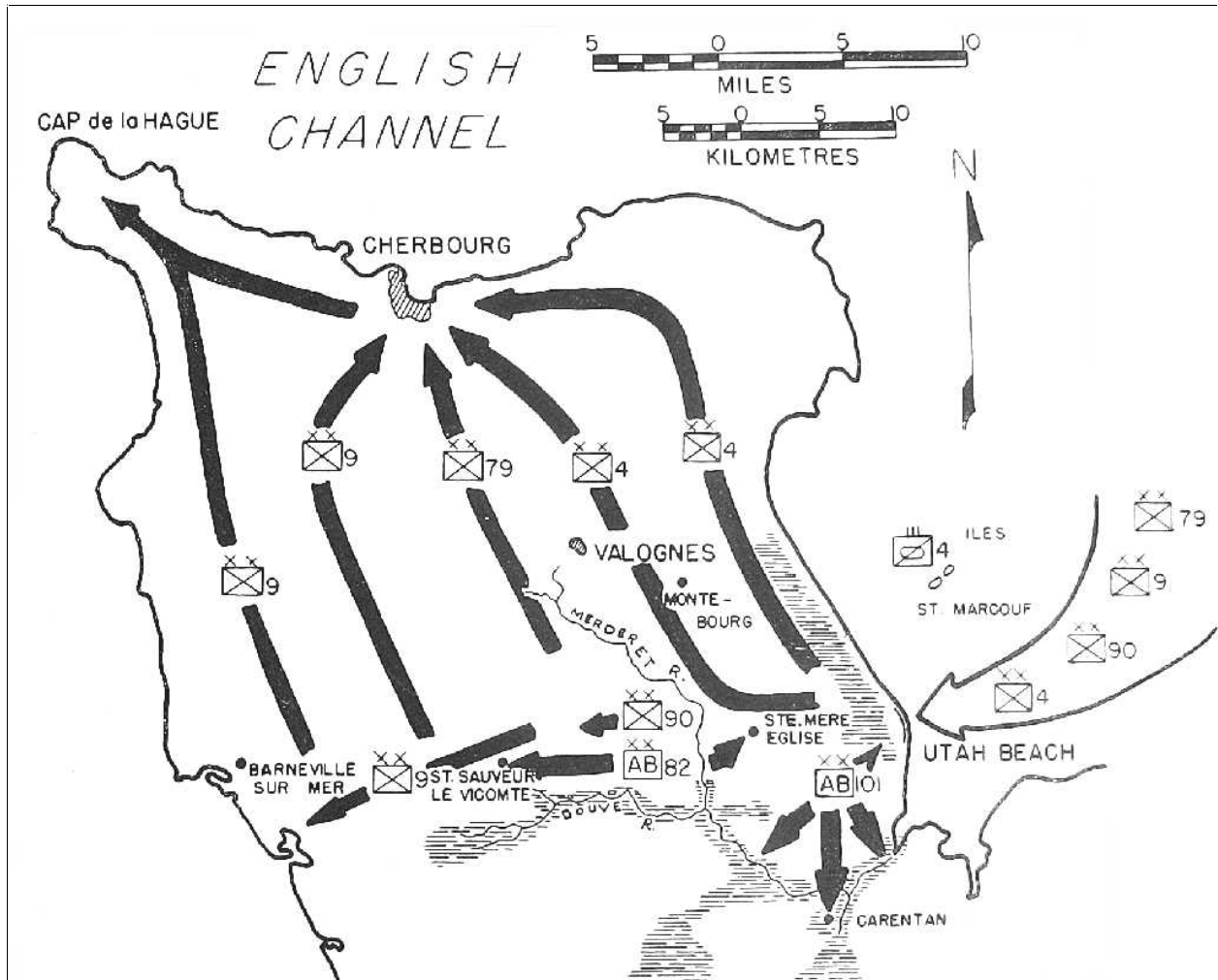
Final revisions and corrections followed, last minute details were decided. Then, in the latter part of May, the largest military force ever to sail into action began to assemble in the marshaling camps along the south coast of England. Our reinforced VII Corps, known during the assault phase of the operation as Assault Force “U”, loaded its 30,000 troops and 3,500 vehicles on 4 troop transport ships and over 200 large landing craft at Plymouth, Brixham, Torquay, and Dartmouth, and there awaited orders to sail.

D-Day had been set as June 5th, but the forecast of unfavorable weather for the landing on that date resulted in the decision to postpone the attack one day. Beginning on June 4th, and following carefully arranged Naval plans, the great armada made up of the several assault forces of the Western Naval Task Force sailed out into the English Channel, slowest convoys first, fastest ships last. All were escorted, protected on the sea by units of the American and British Navies and in the air by a cover of Allied aircraft. Apparently either the German command was caught off guard or the German air and naval forces in France were so battered by the incessant Allied aerial bombardment that they were unable to oppose the crossing, and in the darkness of the short summer night these thousands of ships and boats assembled unmolested in their designated areas just off the French coast. Then, at the appointed hour, the naval crews went quietly about their well-rehearsed task of transferring the first waves of troops and equipment to the small, speedy landing craft which would carry them to the beaches.



Aerial view of a beach on the coast of France at low tide shows the Obstacles that the enemy hoped would stop the Allied landing craft

The Cherbourg Campaign



CHAPTER II

Invasion



For months the world had awaited the news that was to flash to every corner of the civilized world on the morning of 6 June 1944. The aerial assault of Europe had begun in 1942, and an ever increasing avalanche of high explosive and incendiary bombs was dropping on German factories, railroad centers, and key cities. The "rocket coast" of France, from which flying bombs were planned to be launched against London, was pounded daily by a constant shuttle of bombers from England. Fighter planes swept across France, attacking enemy planes and transportation on the ground and literally driving enemy fighters from the sky. Then, during the darkness of the early morning of June 6th, a new aerial blow was struck.

Beginning at 0130 hours, over 800 transport planes dropped the parachute elements of the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions on the Cotentin Peninsula, just north of Carentan and inland from the beach where in a few hours troops of Assault Force "U" would land. The invasion had begun!

Meanwhile, the vast armada carrying the seaborne elements was assembling some eight miles off shore, undetected by the enemy. The numerous rehearsals of unloading the troops from transports to landing craft now proved their value, and the task was accomplished in the darkness without accident. With a hum of motors, the craft bearing the leading waves of assault troops circled, then churned off to the west, leaving white wakes on the dark sea. Wave upon wave followed, amphibious tanks, LCV's, LCM's, LCT's, LST's, each bearing a chosen group of men and equipment specially selected for a specific task. The guns of naval ships flashed and roared, big guns of such vessels as the battleships USS Nevada and Arkansas and the heavy cruisers USS Tuscaloosa and Quincy, smaller rifles of the numerous destroyers, all carrying out a carefully scheduled plan of fires. Rockets fired from specially fitted landing craft screamed onto the beach. The earth, the sky, and sea seemed to tremble with the roar of tons of explosives, each projectile directed at some target which might be a threat to the success of the landing. And out of all this din and tremendous mass of activity, the situation studied and planned for so long began to take shape.

The Iles St. Marcouf are two small islands lying about four miles east of the Cotentin Peninsula. Their importance to the assault lay in their position, since all the landing craft headed for Utah Beach must pass just south of them. If the enemy defenses included guns on St. Marcouf, they must be silenced quickly, so at 0430 hours on June 6th a specially trained assault unit of the 4th Cavalry Group landed there. Once ashore, the troops found both islands undefended except by mines and a few booby traps, and both Army and Navy staff officers

breathed a sigh of relief to know that one more possibility of enemy interference with our landing plans had been removed.

The hour for the assault landing had been carefully selected for the most favorable conditions of tide and light, and at 0630 hours the first wave of LCVP's touched down and disgorged their cargoes on Utah Beach. Resistance was light. The beach defenders were quickly driven from their pillboxes and strong-points, and in a very few minutes fighting units of the 4th Infantry Division had assembled and were advancing inland across the inundated areas just off the beach.



Mobile Army post Office like this kept the boys happy with prompt delivery of letters from home.
This one was set up in a field near Cherbourg.

Engineers began to clear the mines and obstacles in the shallow water, on the beach, and inland along the roads. More and more troops poured ashore with a seeming disregard of the coastal batteries that continued to shell the beach and craft nearing the shore.

Before daylight, the paratroopers of Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor's 101st Airborne Division had seized the western exits of the beach to prevent enemy reinforcements from

hindering the landing. All initial objectives of both this division and the assaulting 4th were quickly reached, and contact between the two forces was established in almost precisely the same manner as was planned and rehearsed back in England. By nightfall, it was apparent that the initial hold on the peninsula was about 4,000 yards wide and up to 10,000 yards deep, and that our troops were securely ashore.

On the following day, firm contact was established with elements of the 82d Airborne Division at Ste. Mère-Eglise. Enemy guns located north and south of the beachhead fired intermittently to harass operations on the beach. In spite of a heavy counterattack by the enemy, our troops continued to expand and consolidate their holdings, and by the end of their second day on the continent they had securely established their beachhead, thus completing the first step in the liberation of France and Europe.

Reinforcements continued to flow ashore, and soon the 90th and 9th Infantry Divisions joined the battle. The enemy had retired west of the Merderet River, but not without making our gains as costly as possible. He persistently launched small counterattacks late every evening in a series of attempts to regain ground lost during the day, but every one was decisively beaten off. He still held Carentan, preventing the juncture of VII Corps with V Corps. His defense in the fixed fortifications along the coast was tenacious, and our advance was slow.



This aerial view of part of the beach area shows an artificial breakwater made of sunken ships. Other craft, "dried out" by the receding tide will float again when the water rises.

On June 10th, Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway's 82d Airborne Division pushed across the Merderet River in one of the most daring attacks of the campaign and succeeded in contacting elements of the division which had been isolated in that area since D-Day. Two days later the 101st Airborne Division captured Carentan, lost it in the face of a strong enemy counterattack, then retook it and established contact with troops of the V Corps east of that city.

In the face of overwhelming Allied air superiority, the German Air Force was unable to operate except in small nuisance flights, chiefly at night.

Interrogation of prisoners revealed that troops arriving to reinforce the three enemy divisions initially contacted by units of the VII Corps had had great difficulty in transit. Attacks of Ninth Air Force fighter-bombers had decimated whole units moving by rail or motor, and heavy and medium bombers had heavily and repeatedly bombed key railroad yards and road centers. French patriots added to the confusion behind the German lines by sabotaging communications and transportation, cutting telephone lines, blowing up bridges on roads and railways, ambushing convoys, and destroying precious fuel.

To prevent the arrival of additional reinforcements for the Cherbourg defenders and to forestall any orderly withdrawal of troops from the Cherbourg area, the VII Corps attacked west across the base of the peninsula. The 90th Infantry Division met stubborn resistance as it led off this attack, but the drive gained momentum with the commitment of the 82d Airborne and 9th Infantry Divisions. On the evening of June 17th, the troops of Maj. Gen. Marton S. Eddy's 9th Division reached the west coast near Barneville sur Mer, isolating the enemy forces on the Cotentin Peninsula.



Anti-aircraft guns like this 40 mm Bofors protected the Corps in England and on the continent.



Aerial bombardment disrupted German rail schedules and prevented rapid movement of their reserves.

As the VII Corps pushed West and then north, responsibility for holding the defensive fronts to the south passed to VIII Corps. Successively, the 101st Airborne, the 82d Airborne, and the 90th Infantry Divisions were transferred to that command.

Now our Corps Commander could turn his full attention to the capture of Cherbourg, important to the Allied cause as a seaport to supply the forces ashore. With the 4th, 79th, and 9th Infantry Divisions and the 4th Cavalry Group, the Corps attacked north. The brunt of the German resistance was borne by Maj. Gen. Raymond O. Barton's 4th Division, while the 79th and 9th Divisions, attacking farther west, met much lighter opposition. Soon the defenses of Cherbourg were ringed by the attacking divisions.

When an ultimatum calling for the surrender of the German forces defending Cherbourg was ignored, the assault on the fortifications was renewed with attacks by hundreds of medium and fighter bombers and the methodical reduction of the defenses by the ground troops. Naval gunfire joined field artillery fires and air attacks in supporting the advance into the city itself, and on June 27th the last resistance was eliminated.

Then turning its attention to the northwest, the 9th Infantry Division pushed the only remaining enemy forces into the Cap de la Hague area, where long range enemy guns were still firing. Resistance was stubborn, but it was a hopeless battle for the isolated enemy, and on July 1st the campaign ended with their surrender.

Thus closed the first campaign of the VII Corps, a campaign studded with success, in which a beachhead had been secured, a vital port had been seized, and practically the entire garrison of a key enemy coastal bastion had been captured or destroyed. A total of over 39,000 prisoners were taken by VII Corps units in this operation, against the cost of 2,800 Americans killed, 13,500 wounded, and 5,700 captured or missing. Most important of all, the way was now clear for an unlimited drive into the enemy's vital inland areas.