

HEADQUARTERS VIII CORPS

APO 308, U.S. Army
10 August 1944

SUBJECT : Report After Action against Enemy
TO : The Adjutant General, United States Army, Washington, DC
THRU : Commanding General, First United States Army, APO 230.

1. In compliance with letter Headquarters First United States Army, File No. 319.1/401 (C), Subject: Action Against Enemy, Reports After/After Action Reports, dated 13 July 44, and Par. 10 (C3) AR 345-105, the attached report covering the action of the VIII Corps against forces of the German Army on the Cotentin Peninsula, Normandy, France, is submitted. The report covers the period 1-31 July 44.

2. Map references are to GS, GS 4250, France, scale 1:50,000 and GS, GS 4249, France, scale 1:100,000. Maps A and B refer to the report for the period 15-30 June 44, and were submitted with that report. Maps C, D and E are attached hereto. Time is indicated in British Double Summer Time.

TROY H. MIDDLETON,
Major General, US Army,
Commanding.

HEADQUARTERS VIII CORPS

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REPORT OF THE VIII CORPS AFTER ACTION AGAINST ENEMY FORCES ON THE
COTENTIN PENINSULA, NORMANDY, FRANCE, FOR THE PERIOD IN 1-31 JULY, 1944.

During the period 15-30 June, 1944, the VIII Corps gradually expanded the line across the Cotentin Peninsula from Carentan to Port Bail on the West Coast, with the mission of protecting the southern flank of the VII Corps, while the latter advanced north and captured Cherbourg. The extension of the VIII Corps line was accomplished by the successive acquisition of the 101st Airborne Division, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the 90th and 79th Infantry Divisions. These divisions were disposed generally along the areas inundated by the Germans who, in the preparations of their defenses against the Allied landings, opened the locks of the Douve, Merderet and Taute rivers and permitted the sea to flood the river basins. Small bridgeheads across the inundated areas were established to facilitate the jump-off for an attack south, which was scheduled for the first day of July. Toward the end of June, the forces available to the Corps were grouped for the attack, and the artillery support built up to nine battalions of medium and heavy artillery, including two 240-mm howitzer battalions. In addition, four battalions of the VII Corps Artillery were made available to the VIII Corps for initial support of the projected attack.

On the first day of July, the Corps consisted of the 79th Infantry division, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the 90th Infantry Division. The disposition of these divisions is shown on Map "C". The 83rd Division, which had been attached to the VIII Corps a few days before, was transferred at 012400 to the VII Corps on the east, and the left boundary of the Corps was adjusted accordingly. The 8th Infantry Division, which was due to complete its landing on 3 July, was to go into Corps Reserve in the vicinity of Montebourg.

The attack by the Corps, which was part of a piecemeal attack by First Army with four Corps abreast, was not launched until 3 July. On that day, the attack jumped off at 0530 in a downpour of rain. The jump-off was preceded by a 15-minute artillery preparation, but this was unobserved generally, as the C-47 planes could not leave the ground. The foul weather also prevented any air support, and no advantage could be taken of the large amount of aircraft made available by the Theater Commander for this operation.

The general scheme of the operation was to attack south with three divisions abreast. The 79th and the 90th Divisions were to pinch out the 82nd Airborne after the latter had obtained its objective. The flank divisions were then to join forces in the vicinity of La Haye du Puits and to proceed south and capture Coutances.

The Germans, with their masterful technique of Hedgerow defensive tactics, stubbornly resisted the advance of the infantry divisions, and the forward movement was measured by the number of fields or orchards taken. The only division to attain its first day's objective was the 82nd Airborne. This unit, led by Major Gen. Matthew Ridgway, attacked with its characteristic vigor and outstanding courage. Even though their ranks were badly depleted by casualties from the landings and the subsequent fighting on the peninsula, they were on their initial objectives on Hill 131 by 0920, and took the Hill itself by 1445. The courage and fighting ability of these troops may well stand as a distinguished example to all soldiers.

The 79th Division advanced against Hill 121 from the West and took it with the 2nd Battalion, 314th Infantry, at 040830, the second day of the attack. The 82nd Division captured Hill 95 during the evening of the second day, thus completing the occupation of the three dominant Hill features on the immediate front of the Corps. To the east, the 90th Division reached St. Jores by 030845, and the 358th Infantry was advancing against heavy resistance some 2000 yards west of St. Jores by the close of the second day.

On 3 July, the 82nd Airborne captured a marked map, which indicated a German MLR generally along the line: Le Plesis (2782) -- Foret de Mont Castre (2383) -- just south of La Haye du Puits (1882) -- St. Germain-Sur-Aye (1478). Subsequent operations of the Corps confirmed the authenticity of this map. At the beginning of the offensive on 3 July, on the Corps front: the 77th, 91st, 243rd, 253rd and 265th, plus a number of OST battalions. On 7 July, prisoners from the 2nd SS Panzer Division (Das Reich) were captured, as well as from the 15th Paratroop Regiment on the left of the Corps.

On 5 July, the 79th Infantry progressed to the south of Bolleville and the 3rd Battalion, 314th Infantry captured the railroad station north of the town of La Haye du Puits at 051000. Efforts on the part of this division to secure the town of La Haye du Puits were thwarted by strong German resistance and the town itself did not fall until the 9th. The 90th Division, on the 5th July, succeeded in placing the 3rd Battalion, 359th Infantry, on the forward slope of the Foret de Mont Castre, a portion of the German MLR, while the 357th Infantry drove south along the road leading from St. Jores to Les Plesis. The

82nd Airborne completed the occupation of all portions of its sector and organized for the defensive. On the 6-7 July, the 8th Division was moved to position southeast and west of St. Sauveur Le Vicompte [Vicomte], to place it in a more favorable position for future employment.

The 79th Division at 071130 July passed the 313th Infantry through the 315th, while the 314th Infantry continued its attack on La Haye du Puits. The 90th Division sustained counter-attacks against the position of the 359th in the Foret de Mont Castre, and against the 357th Infantry west of Les Plesis, bringing the division to a standstill.

It was evident by the evening of the 7th July that the attack was slowing down to such an extent that there was danger that it might come to a standstill. The 79th Division was tiring after nearly a month of continuous Hedgerow fighting and its ranks were filled with about 40% replacements. The 82nd had already accomplished more than its intended tasks and it was so depleted that little more could be expected of it. On the east, the 90th Division's attack was virtually stopped by tough resistance on the part of the Germans. That night, decision was made to employ the Corps reserve to give impetus to the attack and consequently, it was passed through the 82nd Airborne and the 79th Infantry Divisions. Its mission was to secure a jump-off line through La Haye du Puits and the Foret de Mont Castre and attack south, making the main effort of the Corps. This operation was intended to subsequently pinch out the 90th Division.

The 8th Division had been rated as one of the best trained divisions prior to coming into this theater. Unfortunately, its initial performance did not reflect this. The division made exceedingly slow progress from the beginning. The 121st Infantry on the left of the division attacked from the Hill line held by the 82nd Airborne and attempted to advance to the West nose of the Foret de Mont Castre and relieve elements of the 90th Division, which were holding in this high ground. Much confusion and loss of control was experienced by this regiment and it failed to advance. On the right of the division front, the 28th Infantry attempted to advance, but its attack soon bogged down. While this regiment failed to make any progress, at least some semblance of control was maintained. On the 9th of July, the Assistant Division Commander, Brig. Gen. Nelson M. Walker was killed while attempting to organize the leading elements of Company E, 121st Infantry, and the Chief of Staff, VIII Corps, Colonel Cyrus H. Searcy was sent down to take his place. The regimental commanders of the 28th and 121st Infantry Regiments were relieved and, as the command of the divisions failed to improve, the division commander was relieved on the 12th July. His place was taken by Brig. Gen. Donald A. Stroh.

The next few days saw slow progress along the entire Corps front. The 79th Division punched its way down west of La Haye du Puis and captured the high ground in the vicinity of Montegardon. The 8th Division captured Hill 92 and on the 13th July, this division advanced to about 2000 yards southeast of Vesly. The 90th Division cleared the southern part of the Foret de Mont Castre of German forces on the 11th and the remainder of its sector by the 14th. On the 14th, the Corps was occupying a line generally along the north bank of the Ay River, where it held up its advance on First Army order. See Map "D".

The 82nd Airborne Division was passed to the defensive after completing its mission on 5 July. Through the period of 5 July to 10 July, it remained in position, continuing active patrolling to its front and flanks, and rendering invaluable service as a badly needed Corps reserve during the time when the Corps center was highly vulnerable. At 111145, the division was released from Corps and moved to an assembly area to the north, preparatory to its return to the United Kingdom.

Air effort in support of the Corps, during the first days of this period was characterized by

attacks on known strong points of the German invasion defense scheme. While these strong points were constructed primarily as defenses to repel an amphibious operation, they were adapted for all around fire. Since the strong points were in depth from the coast, they presented considerable obstacles to the advance of our troops. Due to the inclemency of the weather, the result of these attacks were largely interdictory in nature. There were no close support missions flown in the initial phase of the attack.

During the later phases of the period, air effort was directed at gun positions, supply installations, munition dumps and lines of communication directly in rear of the enemy. The targets were located from information gained during the attack. These missions were largely successful when weather was favorable. In many cases, dive bombing attacks were made by P-47's when the cloud base did not allow the planes to make an accurate bomb run.

The heaviest air operation occurred on 11 July. Twenty-two targets located north of the Lessay-Periers Road in an area 3000 by 2000 meters in size were attacked in the evening. This attack had been held up for two days on account of weather. Approximately 200 sorties were flown from the United Kingdom in execution of this mission. A part of this effort failed to locate the target and bombed 100 yards in front of the 79th Infantry Division troops. Fortunately, no casualties resulted to our troops and they were able to take advantage of this close support to continue their advance.

During the entire operation, the Corps Artillery rendered effective support to the attack with counter-battery, interdiction, neutralization and supporting fires. The 12th Observation Battalion extended survey control into forward areas locating targets by flash and enemy batteries by sound and flash. During this period, the development and use of the P-51 fighter aircraft for observation was continued and excellent results obtained for long-range adjustments of fire. Reports of prisoners and civilians indicate that our artillery fire was most effective in the destruction of material, personnel, and morale. Harassing interdiction fires were delivered daily and counter-battery fire was reported effective.

The 106th Cavalry Group, consisting of the 106th and the 121st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadrons, performed reconnaissance and surveillance missions in the rear areas of the divisions reducing pockets of enemy resistance, and protected the flanks of the Corps.

The period of 15 July to 25 July was one of consolidation and regrouping of the First United States Army forces in preparation for execution of the plan "Cobra". This attack was to be initiated by the VII Corps and it was decided to effect a penetration of the enemy front followed with an armored exploitation to the south and west in the direction of Coutances. The point of penetration selected was a narrow front to the west of St. Lo and it was intended to open up a gap between Marigny and St. Gilles, to permit the passage of the armored forces. This attack was to be preceded by a "saturation" bombing intended to paralyze the enemy front and initiate the breakthrough. The VII Corps was given the 1st, 4th, 9th and 30th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions. VIII Corps was to attack the enemy from the north, delaying its attack long enough to permit the effect of the VII Corps action to be felt, but not long enough to permit enemy withdrawal.

The attack was originally set for 21 July but bad weather set in and forced a series of postponements until 25 July 1944.

During the interim, VIII Corps consolidated its positions generally along the north bank of the Ay River, and regrouped its forces. Vigorous patrolling was carried out, as well as harassing artillery fire. On 15 July ten battalions of artillery participated in a "serenade" fired against a concentration of enemy artillery and trucks, with devastating effect.

On 16 July, the 4th and 83rd Infantry Divisions were attached to VIII Corps, and at 161830, the 4th Armored Division was attached. The 4th Armored took over the sector of the 4th Infantry Division, completing its relief at 172300. The 4th Infantry Division was released to the VII Corps and moved over into that area.

The 83rd Division launched a limited objective attack on 17 July, designed to secure a foothold on the La Varde "Peninsula" in its front. The attack was resisted vigorously from the beginning, and the attacking elements suffered heavily from mortar and artillery fire. On 19 July, the 3rd Battalion, 331st Infantry, effected a lodgment on La Varde, but were forced off by a heavy counter-attack.

The 90th Division was ordered to clean up the St. Germain-Sur-Seves "Island" in its immediate front, and attacked with a 1st and 2nd Battalions, 358th Infantry at 220630. Resistance was extremely heavy. By mid-afternoon, most of the 1st Battalion was on the island, and a portion of one company of the 2nd Battalion. The position on the island was not a secure one, as few antitank weapons, other than bazookas were sent over. During the night, men began to drift back from their defensive positions to fields near the river, in spite of efforts on the part of officers to keep them up. At first light, the enemy attacked, using infantry and three or four tanks. The 1st Battalion was squeezed into two fields near the river where some portion, including the battalion commander, surrendered. The remnants of the battalion escaped back across the stream where the regiment was reorganized and put into a defensive position. The effort for the island was then discontinued by order of Corps.

On the 25th July, the weather turned favorable for air operations and the VII Corps launched its attack to carry out the "Cobra" plan. The attack was preceded by an intensive saturation bombardment by both heavy and fighter-bombers on the area over which the two assault divisions attacked. The attack of the assault divisions, the 9th and 30th was successful and these were quickly followed by the 1st and 4th infantry divisions and the 2nd and 3rd Armored.

The 330th Infantry of the 83rd Division, on the extreme left of the VIII Corps, attacked at 1100 in conjunction with the 9th Division. The initial progress of this regiment was fairly rapid, but enemy small arms and mortar fire became increasingly heavy, halting the advance at about 2000 yards. The remainder of the VIII Corps continued preparations for the attack on the morning of 26 July.

By the plan of the VIII Corps, the 8th Division was to attack south of St. Patrice de Claidis, followed closely by the 79th Division which was to pinch out Lessay. The 90th planned to encircle the island of St. Germain-Sur-Seves from both flanks, while the 83rd advanced Southwest. The 4th Armored Division was to hold its present position and support the attack of adjacent units by fire.

The VIII Corps attacked at 260530 July, after artillery preparation. The enemy reacted immediately with heavy fire from artillery, mortars, and automatic weapons along the entire front. In the 8th Division sector, enemy strong points near Battiere were reduced early in the afternoon and the division continued its advance to the high ground about 1000 yards further south. The 79th Division attempted to move in behind the 8th and cut to the right flank, but experienced heavy enemy fire and had not reached the flank position by daylight 27 July.

The 90th Division established a bridgehead across the Seves Emperor on its right. Five German counter-attacks were repulsed, and four enemy tanks were knocked out, three by bazookas, and one by artillery. On the left, the division made very little progress due to heavy fire, and extensive mines. The 83rd Division jumped off at 0530. Initial progress was difficult but it succeeded in cutting

the St. Lo-Periers highway before dark.

The Corps resumed the attack early on 27 July. Extensive mines and booby-traps were encountered, causing annoying delays, but the tempo of the advance increased rapidly as the day wore on. It became increasingly evident that the effects of the VII Corps attack were being felt on the enemy in front of the VIII Corps.

In the zone of the VII Corps, the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions were able to exploit the breakthrough effected by the infantry, and penetrated deep into the enemy rear. By nightfall armored units were east of Coutances and within 5 miles of the city, while the infantry held the high ground dominating the terrain to the north and west of that town.

In the zone of the VIII Corps, the 8th Division cut the Lessay-Periers highway by 1600 and at nightfall was about 1000 yards southwest of Periers. The 79th crossed the Ay River in the zone of the 8th Division and push to the right flank, capturing Lessay at 272130. The 90th Division occupied Periers about 271500, as well as the island of St. Germain-Sur-Seves in the division center. It continued to advance to align generally east of the positions held by the leading elements on the 8th Division, south of Periers. The 83rd Division advanced to limited objectives south of the Taute River, the principal opposition being enemy mine fields. The 330th Infantry on the extreme left was the only Corps unit in contact with the enemy at nightfall on 27 July.

Since it appeared that the enemy was making a general withdrawal in the Corps sector, it was decided to employ the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions to spearhead a rapid drive to the south. In the evening of 27 July, the 6th Armored Division reconnoitered routes of advance in the western half of the Corps zone, while the Corps engineers worked through the night constructing bridges across the Ay and the Seves.

28 July was a day of marked advance for all units of the Corps, principal delays being caused by extensive and well prepared mine fields, the widespread use of anti-personnel mines, and booby-traps. Active resistance was limited to delaying tactics, usually by small groups of rifleman who had become separated or lost from their units during the withdrawal action. Only a few prisoners were captured by VIII Corps units, but the PW's were from the 77th, 91st, 243rd, 265th, 353rd, and SS "Das Reich" divisions, previously known to have elements only Corps front, as well as from the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division and the 5th Paratroop Division.

Combat Command "B" of the 4th Armored Division advanced down the Periers-Coutances highway through St. Sauveur Lendelin, and captured Coutances at about 281700 July. They established contact on their left with elements of the 3rd Armored Division, and at dark were approximately one kilometer south of Coutances.

Combat Command "A" of the 6th Armored Division crossed the Ay River at Lessay where they were held up until 1340 by extensive mines along the approaches to the bridge and through the town. Free at last, they advanced down the highway toward Coutances against light resistance. Their first enemy contact being at 1910. They reached a point about 1500 yards northwest of Coutances by dark.

The 79th Division advanced the 314th and 315th Regiments in column of battalions, without opposition, through areas thick with anti-personnel mines, to positions generally along the lateral road from Coutances north west to Gouville-Sur-Mer, on a line with, and to the right of, Combat Command

"A" of the 6th Armored Division.

The 8th Division advanced approximately seven miles against no opposition, to division objectives just north of Coutances to the left of the 6th Armored Division. It, too, was delayed by mines.

The 90th Division advanced south and established contact with 1st Division elements to their front, along the road from St. Lo to Coutances. Very little small arms fire was encountered, but there were extensive minefields. At the close of the day, the 90th was completely pinched out by the 1st Division on their front and the 8th Division on the right. They organized their positions and dug in for defense. Likewise the 83rd Division advanced until they were pinched out by the 1st Division to their front. Resistance was very light.

The Corps right flank was protected by the 121st Cavalry Squadron of the 106th Group, which advanced down the coast line to the mouth of the Sienne River west of Coutances. The 106th Squadron remained attached to the 83rd Division.

Corps engineers bridged the Ay River at Lessay and worked to remove mines in Lessay to clear a gap for the advance of the 6th Armored Division. Lessay was one of the most completely mined and booby-trapped cities ever encountered by VIII Corps forces.

The VII Corps continued its advance, having turned to the south and many prisoners were taken. Fighter-bombers operating to the South bombed and strafed German columns of armor and artillery.

Early 29 July, the VIII Corps resumed its advance to the south with the 6th and the 4th Armored Divisions abreast. One combat team each of the 79th and 8th Infantry Divisions was motorized, to follow the advance of the armored units. The advance elements of both armored columns ran into almost immediate trouble in the form of blown bridges, covered by enemy fire, just south of Coutances. However, Combat Command "B", 4th Armored Division, overcame its resistance and advanced on to La Jourdanerie. At 301430 it had reached La Haye Pesnel, southeast of Granville and at 1900 of 30 July was in the outskirts of Avranches. The 13th Infantry was motorized and moved down to La Jourdanerie early 30 July.

Combat Command "A" of the 6th Armored Division established its bridgehead over the Sienne River against no resistance, and advanced down the highway to Brehal. The 79th Division advanced across the Sienne, behind the Combat Command "B" of the 6th, and on to Lingreville, about 5000 yards north of Brehal, by the evening on 30 July.

The morning of 31 July saw both Armored divisions of the Corps continuing their advance, although the extremely narrow Corps front made traffic a tremendous problem. A motorized combat team of infantry was attached to each of the armored divisions.

The VIII Corps moved its CP on 30 July to the vicinity of Geffosses northwest of Coutances. Both the 83rd and 90th Divisions continued regrouping and reorganizing, preparatory to being taken over by the XV Corps.

By nightfall, 31 July, the 4th Armored Division had captured Avranches, including the bridge over the See River, and had pushed on South, secured the crossing over the Salune River, above

Pontaubault and occupied Ducey to the southeast of Avranches.

The 6th Armored Division captured Granville, and advanced to southeast toward Avranches.

The positions occupied by units of the VIII Corps at the end of July are shown on Map "E".

July, for the VIII Corps, had been a month of extreme opposites in fighting experiences. The attack from 3 July to 15 July was characterized by slow, costly, advance of foot troops against stubborn hedgerow defense. Casualties were high and gains were measured in thousands of yards. The period of 25 July to 31 July was one of extremely rapid advance of armor against a defeated, disorganized and demoralized enemy. Casualties were very light, resistance was sporadic and advances were limited more by traffic problems arising from the fact that it was necessary to advance to armored divisions and two infantry divisions down a narrow corridor, with never more than two class "A" roads available.

During the period 17 July until after the breakthrough, the VIII Corps was severely hampered by an extremely low ration on the artillery and mortar ammunition imposed by Army. Even on "D" Day, 26 July, the allowance for most calibers was approximately one-fifth of a unit of fire, dropping to one-sixth for the days following. After the breakthrough was accomplished very little artillery ammunition was expended and the effects of a ration were not felt, even though it extended until the close of the month.

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