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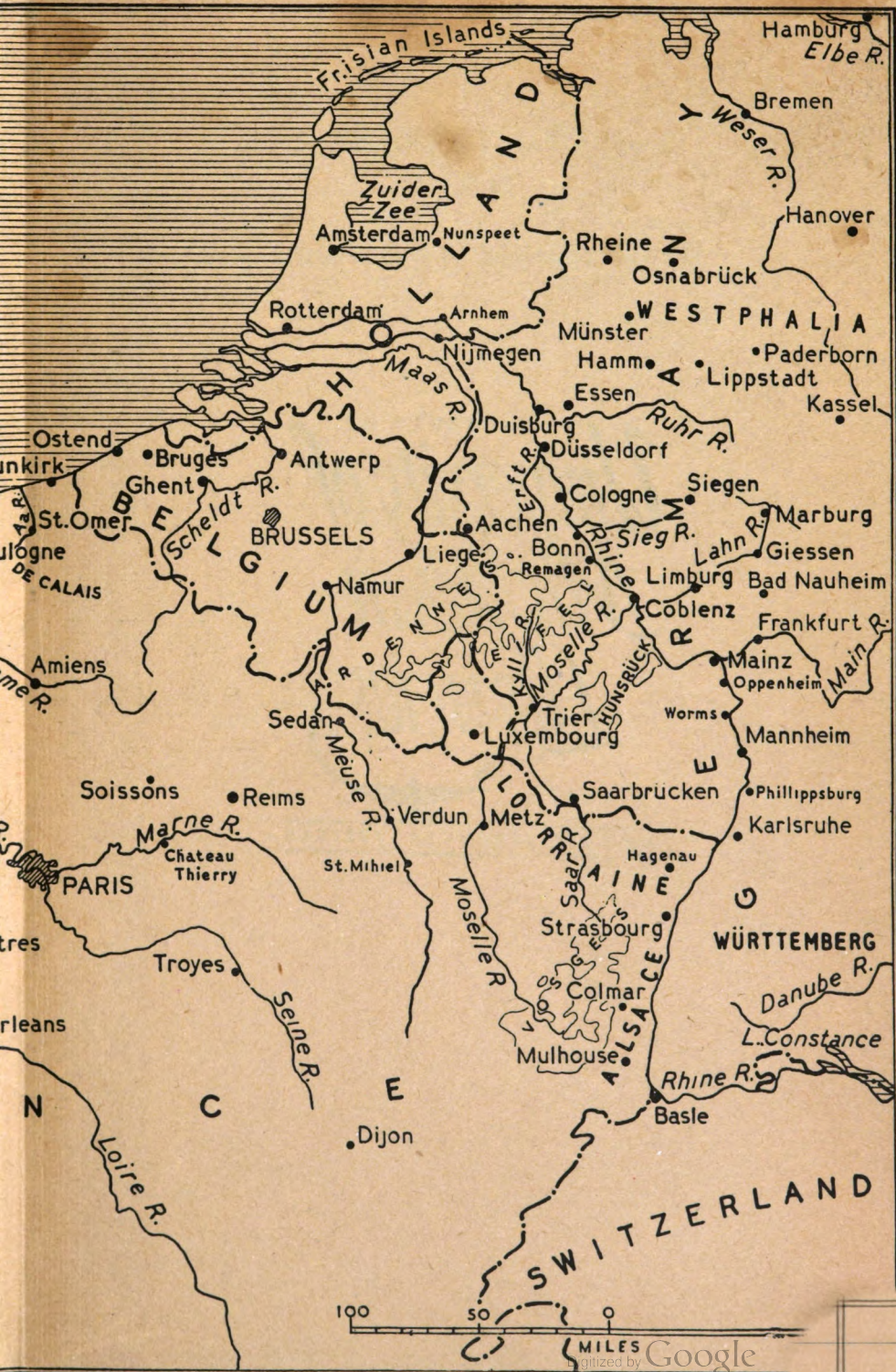
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**1944-5**

*The Achievement of 21st Army Group*

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21st ARMY GROUP*

by JOHN NORTH

LONDON  
HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE  
1953



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'What thoughts at heart have you and I,  
I cannot stop to tell;  
But, dead or living, drunk or dry,  
Soldier, I wish you well.'



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*'Twas on a summer's day—the sixth of June:  
I like to be particular in dates,  
Not only of the age, and year, but moon;  
They are a sort of post-house, where the Fates  
Change horses, making History change its tune,  
Then spur away o'er empires and o'er states . . .*

—Byron, *Don Juan*, canto I

*I have been told to capture a hill three  
miles away by noon to-morrow.*

—A British Infantry Officer,  
*Normandy*, August 20th, 1944

# I

## APPROACH

THIS narrative seeks to present, dispassionately and without heroics, the broad picture of the Allied invasion of Europe in the summer—that was no summer at all—of 1944; it seeks to apportion, within the framework of that Allied picture, the particular contribution of the 21st (British) Army Group, which comprised the Canadian First Army, the British Second Army, British airborne troops, and various Allied contingents; it will describe, in some detail, those operations of this army group that may be claimed to have exerted a major influence on the course of the Allied campaign. 'It is difficult,' writes the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'even for a professional soldier to appreciate the tremendous power that was achieved on the battlefields and in the skies of western Europe by the concerted efforts of the Allied nations'; and it is because of the magnitude and the complexity of the campaign as a whole that it is proposed to approach it in these three stages: the Allied picture; the status of the 21st Army Group within that picture; and the picture within the army group itself.

The other and often paramount problem in the survey of any large-scale campaign—that of perspective—presents less difficulty than might be anticipated because the Supreme Commander pursued an overall strategy that was based on two fundamental aims of policy. The first, the destruction of Germany's armed forces; the second, the maintenance of an advance on a broad front from Normandy to the Rhine with the main effort constantly on the left—or north—flank; that is to say, that sector of the Allied front for which the 21st Army Group—or, to employ its alternative official designation, the Northern Group of Armies—was responsible. Between December 19th, 1944, and April 4th, 1945, the United States Ninth Army fought under the operational control of the Group.

It is proposed to examine forthwith the Supreme Commander's two aims of policy in some detail, since they were adopted a month before the actual invasion, and thereafter formally prescribed the conduct of the campaign with no variation whatsoever—until the month preceding its victorious conclusion on May 7th, 1945.



'You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.' Such was the 'task' paragraph of the directive issued to the Supreme Commander by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on February 12th, 1944. The Combined Chiefs of Staff, under the direction of the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Great Britain, were charged with the formulation and execution of policies and plans to ensure full collaboration of the United States and Great Britain and other members of the United Nations in the strategic conduct of the war. The British Chiefs of Staff, headquartered in London, were represented in Washington by a British Joint Staff Mission. Until his death in November, 1944—when he was succeeded by Field Marshal Sir Henry Maitland Wilson (afterwards Baron Wilson of Libya)—the head of this Mission was Field Marshal Sir John Dill; he maintained direct liaison with the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, General of the Army George C. Marshall.

Thus the Combined Chiefs of Staff were the 'top military authority of the war'; and it was to this body that the Supreme Commander was answerable, although he maintained direct liaison with the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff and with the British Chiefs of Staff. Shortly after D-Day, the members of this august body met in London 'in order to be immediately available should an emergency arise requiring a prompt decision on some matter beyond General Eisenhower's jurisdiction as Supreme Commander'.

It should now begin to be apparent why one of the preliminary pages to this volume carries a quotation from the diary of an infantry officer—as a salutary reminder, while this narrative moves on a somewhat rarefied level, that decisions taken in the highest quarters must ultimately be resolved into those minor actions of war which, in the aggregate, are termed 'a campaign'. 'The clearing of every single house,' writes this same officer, 'is a separate military operation requiring a special reconnaissance, plan, and execution'; and it can hardly be doubted that, as he reposed in a Normandy slit-trench that day in August of 1944 and pondered the problem of how to 'capture a hill three miles away by noon to-morrow', he would have had some difficulty in conceiving a decision of so dazzling an eminence as to be beyond the Supreme Commander's competence. Nevertheless, the chain of command is a vital ingredient in the broad picture of the Allied invasion of Europe; and the topic will recur in this narrative.

'Operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.' These simple words were to become a chief motif

in the Supreme Commander's own report on his operations; and certainly no commander in military history can have more faithfully and more literally adhered to his original instructions, or more resolutely have refused to be lured from his intended path by any alternative strategy which, while offering the possibility of a quicker termination of the war, might have left intact a considerable proportion of Germany's armed forces.

In Paris, on March 27th, 1945, he clearly presented the alternative strategies that had been available to him. He recalled how, after the break-out from the Normandy beachhead and the Allied landings in southern France on August 15th, 1944, 'immediately there became two possibilities that could be pursued: one, to allow the Germans to hold the line of the Siegfried except in a chosen point of penetration, say the north. The other plan was to join our converging armies to defeat the Germans west of the Rhine as an essential preliminary to the second phase; that is, what you hope to be the final phase of the operation against Germany on the Western Front.' The first of these two possibilities has reference to that sector of the front in which the 21st Army Group was operating.

'If concentration and speed were the only things to be considered,' continued the Supreme Commander, 'possibly the idea of allowing the German to remain where he pleased west of the Rhine would have been a good one. But there was this to remember: as long as you allowed a German to remain west of the Rhine you always had the threat of his counter-attack against your line of communication. Moreover, you had this knowledge: if you could not whip the German west of the Rhine, how would you whip him behind that great obstacle? And finally, if you penetrated his forces west of the Rhine only at one point and from there attempted to drive straight on into the heart of his country, you would give him advance notice of where you were going and he could concentrate all the forces he still had to defeat that thrust. Consequently, I held from the beginning an opinion that was shared by many but opposed by some that the first thing we must do is to defeat the German decisively west of the Rhine.'

Thus it was that the Supreme Commander, with the utmost deliberation, in the light of his reading of the situation on the western front, resolutely rejected the age-old principle of concentrating your force at the decisive point of the battlefield. This strategic decision is touched on at this early point of the narrative because it was vitally to affect the fortunes of the 21st Army Group, and because it propounds the only strategic query on the main course of the campaign. Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, Commander-in-Chief of

the 21st Army Group, himself summarizes the alternative strategy in the single sentence: 'The speed of our advance through the Pas de Calais and into Belgium convinced me that if the Allies could concentrate sufficient strength for the task, one powerful and full-blooded thrust deep into Germany would overwhelm the enemy and carry with it decisive results.' He adds that the best axis along which such a thrust could have been developed was the route north of the Ruhr leading to the plains of northern Germany. In the result, the Supreme Commander was to follow the 'favoured line of action' in the 'visualization' of the forthcoming campaign prepared for him by his planning staff in May, 1944. It may be summarized as an advance on a broad front from the lodgement area in Normandy to the heart of Germany, with the 'main effort' on that northern flank on which the armies of Field Marshal Montgomery were operating.

This 'broad front' strategy to which the Supreme Commander adhered throughout the campaign was one that consciously took no count of political considerations. Of the situation in March, 1945, he writes: 'Berlin, I was now certain, no longer represented a military objective of major importance. The Russian advance and the Allied bombing had largely destroyed its usefulness, and even the governmental departments were understood to be in process of evacuation. Military factors, when the enemy was on the brink of final defeat, were more important in my eyes than the political considerations involved in an Allied capture of the capital. The function of our forces must be to crush the German armies rather than to dissipate our strength in the occupation of empty and ruined cities.' Thus, although Russian tanks were not to reach the centre of Berlin until the end of the month, the main Allied forces, at the end of the second week of April, were halted on the lines of the Elbe and Mulde rivers and the Erz Gebirge. Nearly two weeks were to elapse before the Russians reached the Elbe at Torgau—on April 25th. They had taken 'their own sweet time' to cover the seventy-five miles from the Oder. Allied forces on the Czech border were voluntarily halted for the same period of time during the latter half of April—although Russian forces were not to enter Prague until the end of the first week in May.

'The function of our forces must be to crush the German armies': again the clarion note of the Supreme Commander's strategical view of the Allied campaign. It is outside the compass of this narrative to discuss whether a commander may suitably dismiss political considerations from the overall picture of a series of military operations involving the forces of several nations; and, in any event, political direction was the responsibility of the heads of governments. On this

particular occasion—as the President's Chief of Staff, Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, records—General Eisenhower was authorized by the President of the United States, Mr. Harry S. Truman, to take a military decision in the field whether or not to occupy Berlin: nor is it on record that the subject was formally discussed by the Combined Chiefs. General Marshall, in a cable to General Eisenhower, declared that 'such psychological and political advantages as would result from the possible capture of Berlin ahead of the Russians should not override the imperative military consideration which, in our opinion, is the destruction and dismemberment of the German armed forces'. It should further be noted that the Supreme Commander was seriously concerned to avoid any 'entangling' of his forces with the Russians; that he considered his supply organization to be already strained to an 'unprecedented degree'; and that he was aware that, when German resistance ceased, he would not be able to hold a line beyond the Elbe. The President and the Prime Minister had already agreed that the British and American occupation zones should be limited in the east by a north-south line two hundred miles west of Berlin; and the Elbe-Mulde line had been temporarily accepted by the Russians as a 'general junction line' between the two forces although it ran approximately ninety miles inside the western border of their prospective zone of occupation. The north-south line had been fixed by the European Advisory Commission, sitting in London, between February and July of 1944. It ran from the vicinity of Lübeck, at the eastern base of the Danish peninsula, generally southward to the town of Eisenach, near the east bank of the Weser, and continued southward to the Austrian border.

On this whole topic it may be argued that, no matter who got to Berlin first—or Prague, or Vienna—the Russian armies, in their march of destiny, could never have been kept out of these cities except by force. In any event, at the time, General Eisenhower's simple object was to join up with the Russians by the shortest possible route and thus split the German forces; and the decision he took was based on purely military considerations. He writes: 'The future division of Germany did not influence our plans for the conquest of Germany'.

Certainly General Eisenhower's singleness of purpose—animated, it should be observed, by a desire to end the war 'as quickly and economically in lives as possible'—was to move to a triumphant conclusion. 'On May 5th, 1945,' he is able to write, 'the principal objectives of the Allies had been achieved in every sector, and the war in Europe was virtually at an end. Nowhere on the Continent was there still in existence a German army capable of continuing the fight. . . . The German war machine which had sought to dominate

the world lay overwhelmed and crushed to a degree never before experienced in the history of modern armies.'

What, then, was the contribution of the 21st Army Group to this victorious advance along the whole of the Allied front into the heart of Germany? What is the precise significance of the Supreme Commander's intention that, once the Allied forces were sufficiently powerful to erupt from the lodgement area in Normandy, this advance on a broad front should be pressed with the 'main effort in the north'?

Alongside this main effort, the Supreme Commander's favoured line of action contemplated a secondary thrust towards Metz and the Saar. It was to pass north and south of Paris, if the Germans planned to hold that city as a fortress; and it was to cut off south-west France by effecting a junction with those Allied forces who were scheduled to land in southern France and advance up the Rhône valley. This eastward thrust in the centre of the Allied line was to be undertaken by the 12th (United States) Army Group—or Central Group of Armies—under command of General Omar N. Bradley. The thrust from the south was to be undertaken by the 6th (United States) Army Group under command of General Jacob L. Devers. General Bradley's Army Group comprised the First, Third, and Ninth Armies. General Devers' Army Group comprised the United States Seventh Army and the French First Army.

The general Allied advance was to lead up to the penetration of the Siegfried Line—'still with the main effort in the north'—and the elimination of the German forces west of the Rhine, 'with particular emphasis on the area Cologne-Bonn to the sea'. This anticipated development in the campaign foreshadows a major offensive of the 21st Army Group initiated on February 8th, 1945. It comprised the operations known as 'Veritable' and 'Grenade'—this latter operation being undertaken by the United States Ninth Army, then under operational control of the 21st Army Group—and their successful conclusion lined up the Army Group on the Rhine as far south as Düsseldorf.

The 'visualization' next contemplates a 'power-crossing of the Rhine north of the Ruhr'. It is to be the 'main effort' in the launching of the 'great assault' across the river; it presages the 21st Army Group's operation 'Plunder'. This sector of the Rhine gave direct access to Germany's vitals, and it was to be expected that the Germans would show the maximum resistance of which they were capable; for although the Rhine frontier, between Basle and Arnhem, covers nearly five hundred miles, the direct strategic approach to Germany is to be found only within that hundred-mile stretch lying

between Arnhem and Aachen. The Upper Rhine gives no access to any strategic objective; the valley of the Saar is hardly less remote from the heart of Germany; and the northern Ardennes, while being vulnerable to penetration from the east, do not form a good jumping-off ground for operations directed from the west.

Operation 'Plunder', launched on the night of March 23rd, 1945, involved the use of three Allied armies under 21st Army Group command—the British Second Army, the United States Ninth Army, and the Allied Airborne Army. Although it constituted the main effort of the assault, it did not achieve the first crossing of the river. The United States First Army, under Lieutenant-General (afterwards General) Courtney H. Hodges, had already crossed it at Remagen, south of Bonn, on March 7th; and the United States Third Army under Lieutenant-General (afterwards General) George S. Patton, Jr., had ferried across elements of a division from the small farming village of Oppenheim, south of Mainz, on the night of March 22nd.

Operation 'Plunder' was to precede the fulfilment of the Army Group's major or 'eventual mission'—the isolation of the Ruhr—as laid down by the Supreme Commander as far back as the previous September; and this 'power-crossing' of the Rhine north of the Ruhr was to be coupled with a 'secondary effort' via the Frankfurt 'corridor', the two thrusts to join in the general area of Kassel, encircling the Ruhr. Frankfurt, too, was the centre of an industrial zone. But the 21st Army Group was never to achieve its 'eventual mission'. The encirclement of the Ruhr was actually to be accomplished by the United States First and Ninth Armies: Field Marshal Montgomery would have preferred to see the American forces close to the Rhine only as far south as Cologne, thereby permitting a concentration of British and American strength for his drive north of the Ruhr. In the result, the United States First and Ninth Armies made contact near Lippstadt, twenty miles west of Paderborn, on April 1st, 1945—thereby sealing off three hundred and twenty-five thousand German soldiers from any further part in the war. The 'secondary effort' foreshadowed in the original 'visualization' was actually undertaken by the United States Third Army on the axis Mainz-Frankfurt-Kassel, and had been preceded by a major offensive—operation 'Undertone'—south of the Moselle. By March 29th Frankfurt was cleared, and Kassel itself on April 4th. The arrival of Third Army troops at Kassel—some forty-five miles south-east of Paderborn—virtually achieved a double envelopment of the Ruhr.

Thus far General Eisenhower's 'visualization' of the campaign. His original 'scheme of manœuvre' had been accomplished, and the end

of the war was now no more than a month off. It was at this phase of the campaign that he switched the main attack from the north to the centre of the Allied front. General Bradley was instructed to launch an offensive with the Central Group of Armies from the Kassel area, where he now stood, towards Leipzig, and to establish the right flank of his advance on the line Bayreuth–Erz Gebirge. It was to assist the First and Third Armies in executing this thrust that the Ninth Army reverted to the 12th (United States) Army Group. During this period the 6th (United States) Army Group undertook responsibility for the protection of the right flank of the 12th Army Group advance as far east as Bayreuth: meanwhile it was to prepare for a later thrust of its own along the axis Nuremberg-Regensburg-Linz to prevent any concentration of German resistance in the so-called 'National Redoubt' in the Alps, centred on Berchtesgaden.

To the 21st Army Group—when this central thrust had achieved its object—was allotted the 'principal task' remaining—an advance to the Baltic and the cleaning out of the whole northern area from Kiel and Lübeck westward to the Elbe by the British Second Army. Meanwhile, the Canadian First Army was to open up a supply route through Arnhem and then operate to clear north-east Holland, the coastal belt eastward to the Weser, and west Holland.

Thus only the drama of the overrunning of Germany now remained to be played out: Germany's fate had already been sealed; it had, indeed, been sealed before the actual crossing of the Rhine, to the west of which the German armies had of necessity—if disastrously—elected to stand and fight; for the Rhine together with its canal system was the vital link between the Ruhr and the war industries of the rest of Germany now that rail communication was virtually under constant air attack. A single 2,000-ton barge carries a load equivalent to that of four trains; and Germany had taken the precaution of providing herself with a vast number of these 'huge brutes': a special broadcasting service for the barge-masters enabled them to adjust their loads according to the changes in water-level in relation to bridge clearances. Thus, as at the Seine barrier in Normandy, the German armies had refused to admit tactical defeat, and had fought all out rather than conduct a series of planned withdrawals. 'The élan of the Allied armies,' writes the Supreme Commander, 'had sealed Germany's fate in the operations that had preceded the crossing of the Rhine, and now they were pouring over the river with the same victorious impetus to the innermost parts of the country.' The policy of battling one's way to the borders of Germany was now to be superseded by one based on speed and violence—with the emphasis on speed and violence rather than direction.

Here, then, in the broadest outline, is a first glimpse of the Allied picture and a first indication of the status of the 21st Army Group within that picture; but, since this narrative has yet to deal with the detail of battles fought and won, it may be pertinent to remark now that the descriptive phrase for the earlier policy—'battling one's way'—is not used lightly. The Allied armies reached the Rhine the hard way—in the main by frontal fighting. Nor, again, should it be assumed that the campaign in north-west Europe achieved drama only in the last month of the war. Something of the intensity of the drama of the 'power-crossing' of the Rhine may be apprehended from the fact that the final preparations by the 21st Army Group were hidden by the creation of a dense and continuous smoke screen along a front of fifty miles; that just under fifty thousand tons of bombs were dropped by the Allied Air Force as a prelude to the assault; and that sixty thousand tons of ammunition had been delivered to the roadhead to assist that assault. Not without justice General Eisenhower remarks of Field Marshal Montgomery that he was 'always a believer in the power concept'.

Nevertheless the element of drama in the final stages of the war in the west must not be allowed to obscure a more tremendous consideration—that the real crisis of the war in north-west Europe had long since past. It was a crisis of decision that dated back to the last days of August and the early days of September of the preceding year; it arose from the conflicting strategical view-points of the Supreme Commander and the British commander of the 21st Army Group whom he designated as tactical commander of the early land battles, in operational control of all land forces, including the United States First and Third Armies, until the growing build-up of the American forces made desirable the establishment of an independent army group.



## II

# ANTECEDENTS

### i. *FROM PLAN TO PLAN, 1941-4*

FOR better for worse, for richer for poorer, the plan to end the war in Europe by a frontal attack against the German armies in the west was basically British in conception and American by adoption—as indeed it was to be preponderantly American in execution. Its prime American protagonist was General of the Army George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army. The President of the United States, Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt—commander-in-chief of his country's land, sea, and air forces—was at times inclined to be 'leery' of a trans-Channel frontal attack; and, under the influence of the British Prime Minister, Mr. Winston S. (afterwards Sir Winston) Churchill, wavered in his support of General Marshall's determination 'to invade Europe from the British base at the earliest practicable moment'. Sir Winston himself has since written: 'I was not convinced that this was the only way of winning the war.'

The grand design for the invasion of western Europe as an essential part of a strategy aimed at the destruction of Germany's military power may be said, in one sense, to have been conceived at Dunkirk. From that day onwards a direct offensive against the enemy from the nearest Allied base became the ultimate goal of all those whose responsibility it was to rebuild and re-equip the British Army, and to plan the eventual course of military operations against Germany. But, for more than a year after Dunkirk, the patent disparity between the British Army's resources in men and material compared with those of the enemy made the study of offensive operations against the Continent little more than an academic exercise. Apart from defensive needs at home, means had to be found over the period 1940-1 for sustaining the Middle East campaign, and for the conduct of operations in East Africa, Greece, Syria, Iraq, Malaya, and Burma. Nevertheless, at the Atlantic conference held at Placentia

Bay, in Newfoundland, in August, 1941, between the President and the Prime Minister and their chiefs of staffs, the British delegation were already able to acquaint the Americans with a project—though ‘extremely tentative and remote’—for the re-entry into north-west Europe in 1943. The plan rejected the need for ‘vast forces’. Small forces, chiefly armoured, with their power of hard hitting, were to be relied on ‘quickly to win a decisive victory’. Although this forecast was too optimistic, here is the seed of the plan that was to achieve a spectacular fulfilment in operation ‘Overlord’—the final code name for the cross-Channel invasion.

By the end of 1941, the British Joint Planning Staff had produced an outline plan for an assault on occupied Europe—‘in the final phase’—called ‘Round-up’. It was conceived before the United States came into the war, and, therefore, contemplated a purely British effort. But with the entry of the United States into the war, and the planned expansion of the United States Army, there came potentially into being an Allied strategic reserve—on the basis of which it was possible to begin planning in earnest for a western European campaign; and on January 3rd, 1942, the Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, then General Sir Bernard Paget, was charged by the British Chiefs of Staff with the task of working out, in consultation with the chiefs of Fighter Command and of Combined Operations, plans for operations designed to draw off German forces from the eastern front, and eventually to re-create for Germany the threat that the German Supreme Command had always dreaded—the two-front war.

In January, 1942, a body known as the Combined Commanders was formed to prepare an outline plan for operations on the Continent in the final phase of the war and to make proposals for the preparations that should be put in hand—for example, the provision of landing-craft, beach organization and equipment, organization of airfields and of ports, and much more of the complex detail associated with the successful transportation of an immense assault force across the uncertain waters of the English Channel. This body was almost exclusively British in its constitution. It was eventually composed of the Commanders-in-Chief Home Forces, Portsmouth, and Fighter Command, together with the Chief of Combined Operations—at that time Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten (afterwards Earl Mountbatten of Burma)—and the Commanding General, European Theatre of Operations, United States Army. The first of its meetings was held on May 15th, 1942. Within little more than a month—on June 24th—its United States member was to be the future Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower.

General Marshall, in July, 1942, when the President—as the result of ‘a lingering predilection for the Mediterranean’—failed to back up his project for a ‘beachhead’ invasion of France in the autumn of that year, ‘offered most strongly the alternative plan for major American operations in the south-west Pacific’. It was a proposal that abruptly departed from the agreed overall strategy of Allied concentration on the war in the west—a policy formally adopted at the first Washington Conference (‘Arcadia’), in December, 1941, when, on ‘Grand Strategy’, the staffs agreed that ‘only the minimum forces necessary for the safeguarding of vital interests in other theatres should be diverted from operations against Germany’. Sir Winston records that no one had more to do with obtaining this cardinal decision than General Marshall.

But the British, in this summer of 1942, were excusably preoccupied with their fortunes in the Middle East, where Tobruk had fallen on June 19th; and General Marshall’s proposal that the Allies should attempt to seize Brest or Cherbourg, ‘preferably the latter or even both’, during the autumn of 1942, predicated an operation almost entirely British. They would have been called upon to provide the naval element, the air, two-thirds of the troops, and such landing-craft as were available. The American contribution could have comprised only two or three ‘very newly raised divisions’; and it was not until 1943 that the United States Army Air Force was to succeed in dropping its first bomb on Germany. It was, nevertheless, the precursor of the American contribution towards those two million seven hundred thousand tons of Allied bombs which, according to *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, were to have ‘the last word’ on the war in Europe.

The code-name for General Marshall’s plan for an attack on Brest or Cherbourg in 1942 was ‘Sledgehammer’. Sir Winston remarks: ‘I did not have to argue against “Sledgehammer” myself. It fell of its own weakness.’ Any such beachhead on the Cherbourg peninsula would have been ‘subjected to the full fury of the Luftwaffe for months on end’; it would hardly have represented a sufficiently strong threat to have drawn a significant number of German troops away from the Russian front; and, had it failed, England, ‘sitting twenty miles across the English Channel right under the Nazi guns’, would again have stood in peril of a counter-invasion.

If General Marshall’s preoccupation with ‘Sledgehammer’ was largely dictated by a desire to ease the weight of the German armies on Russia, let it also be remembered that ‘Overlord’ was launched—and the subsequent campaign fought out—at a time when the Russians were engaging nearly two-thirds of the entire German Army. ‘The

furnace in which the defeat of the German armies was forged', writes Major Milton Shulman in *Defeat in the West*, 'was the vast Russian theatre. There, two-thirds of the total German armed strength was constantly engaged and systematically destroyed.' Within little more than a fortnight of the launching of 'Overlord', the Russians, on June 22nd, attacked at the centre of the eastern front. They reached the Vistula, and came within striking distance of Warsaw. The Germans, along the whole of the front, lost some twenty-five divisions. At the height of the Normandy battle—in mid-July—almost all the available German reinforcements were being rushed east—not west. In the German view, the west was still the secondary theatre.

The question of an alternative strategy to a frontal assault on what the Germans grandiloquently called 'Festung Europa'—an already forgotten term but one that serves to illuminate the true nature of the formidable task facing a trans-Channel attack—will briefly be touched on in a later section; but some mention should be made now of differing strategical viewpoints within the general framework of the 'Overlord' plan. The first of these concerned 'Gymnast'—a plan for operations in French North Africa which, under the later code-name of 'Torch', fructified in the Allied North Africa landings. Even before the United States came into the war, the British had been planning the invasion of north-west Africa; and, during his first war-time voyage to the United States for the 'Arcadia' Conference, the first of three papers on strategy Mr. Churchill prepared for the consideration of the Combined Chiefs of Staff called for the occupation of North Africa in 1942. Although, in December, 1941, the British Isles were themselves under the threat of invasion, even at this early stage the British Prime Minister was taking a long-term view of the war; for the second of the three papers on strategy stressed the need of an aircraft-carrier building programme to regain command of the Pacific, and the third set 1943 as the date for an invasion of German-occupied Europe.

At the second Washington Conference, in June, 1942, when the President and the Prime Minister together with the Combined Chiefs discussed future strategy, Mr. Churchill reached the half-way point in his successful advocacy of the north-west African project. It was agreed to plan for operations both for north-west Africa in 1942 and for operations on the Continent—in 1943. In the following month the Prime Minister received a visit from Mr. Harry L. Hopkins, President Roosevelt's unofficial chief of staff, and the United States Chiefs of Staff. They pressed the view that 'Gymnast' would postpone the invasion of western Europe until 1944. Mr. Churchill thereupon

'gave assurances' of the British intention to proceed with it; but it was rather vaguely agreed that, 'under certain conditions', the invasion of Europe might be postponed until 1944. A definite decision was then taken that the directive for the invasion of north-west Africa should be issued to General Eisenhower—now Commanding General, European Theatre of Operations, United States Army.

This was still the high summer of 1942, and not many weeks had elapsed since the visit of the Russian Foreign Minister, M. V. Molotov, to London and the publication of an Allied communiqué—on June 11th—on the subject of establishing a Second Front. That communiqué read: 'In the course of the conversations full understanding was reached with regard to the urgent tasks of creating a Second Front in Europe in 1942'. This communiqué may be said to have had some propaganda justification in that it kept the Germans apprehensive and was likely to persuade them to hold as many of their troops in the west as possible; and on the score of keeping faith with the Russians it should be pointed out that it was accompanied by an *aide-mémoire* which was handed personally to M. Molotov by Mr. Churchill. It stated that preparations were being made for a landing on the Continent in August or September, 1942, but that the main limiting factor to the size of the landing force was the availability of special landing-craft. It concluded with the italicized phrase, '*We can therefore give no promise in the matter*'.

Mr. Churchill was to have recourse to this proviso on more than one occasion during his visit to Marshal Stalin in August of that same year; but, as a result of his powerful advocacy, 'Torch', in the upshot, received the Marshal's approval—and received it in the language of the west: 'May God prosper this undertaking!' It was to bring diversionary aid to the Russians several months earlier than a 1943 'Overlord'—had the attempt been made to mount it; and German casualties in North Africa were to reach the neighbourhood of half a million men. On this whole topic Sir Winston himself can go down to history with a clear conscience—whatever the Russian history books may have to say. At a meeting of his own chiefs of staff, in November, 1942, he stated that he had promised 'Round-up' in 1943 during his visit to Moscow, and was unwilling to give up the project unless it was physically impossible. He had to yield to the arguments presented to him, in his capacity as Minister of Defence, by his Service advisers.

Two key factors dictated the 'physical' possibility of undertaking an invasion of the mainland of Europe in 1943. The Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, Air Chief Marshal Sir

Trafford Leigh-Mallory, in his official dispatch submitted to the Supreme Allied Commander in November, 1944, writes: 'Air superiority was the principal prerequisite for the successful assault of Europe from the west'. The winning of air superiority was therefore the cardinal point of all air planning during the months preceding the invasion; and he adds that the necessary degree of air ascendancy had been gained 'some time before D-Day'—but certainly never in 1943. General Eisenhower concurs. He writes: 'I am convinced that without the brilliant preparatory work of our joint air forces—a belief in the effectiveness of which was the very cornerstone of the original invasion conception—the venture could never logically have been undertaken'.

A second key factor concerned the build-up of forces and material once the invasion was launched: and—as Sir Winston records—not until June, 1943, did the Atlantic convoys begin to come through intact. Again, looking at the picture as it was presented to him in June, 1942, General Eisenhower would appear to have the last word. He remarks that production limitations alone ruled out any possibility of a full-scale invasion in 1942 or early 1943, and adds: 'Indeed, it soon became clear that unless practically all American and British production could be concentrated on the single purpose of supporting the invasion of Europe, that operation could not take place until early 1944'. In this context, production limitations may be taken to have special reference to the provision of landing-craft.

Thus it was not until April 26th, 1943—when the North African campaign had little more than a fortnight to run—that the Combined Chiefs of Staff issued their directive for the planning of 'Overlord'. It was addressed to Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Morgan as the officer nominated to become Chief of Staff to a Supreme Allied Commander ('Cossac') who was yet to be appointed. The object of the operation to be planned was defined to be 'to defeat the German fighting forces in north-west Europe'. This bleakness of statement of the object of what was to be operation 'Overlord' was—as we have seen—to be echoed in the directive issued to the Supreme Commander very nearly a year later. General Morgan himself comments that it is desirable, before opening a campaign, that the openers should have some reasonably clear idea how it is intended to shape international policy when victory has been won; and he adds: 'In this present instance we tried, but tried in vain, to obtain some statement of a long-term political object. There are those who are still striving to obtain this information.'

The last of the meetings of the Combined Commanders was held on March 1st, 1943; a few weeks later General Morgan inherited

what he calls their 'vast bibliography'; and, seeing that the Combined Commanders had devoted most of their time to the consideration of an operational plan that closely resembled the final plan for 'Overlord', it may fairly be contended that the torch they handed on to 'Cossac' already had a gleam to its point. If he was forced to depart from their plan, it was largely because of the limitations imposed on troops and landing-craft. Landing-craft, indeed, were the key to the entire invasion problem.

On behalf of the Americans, General Bradley records high praise for the work done by the British members of General Morgan's intelligence staff. Before recommending that the assault be made against the Calvados coast of Normandy, 'Morgan's planners', General Bradley remarks, 'had scrutinized the shore line of Europe from the Netherlands to Biarritz; and from their intelligence archives had culled volumes of patient research on subsoils, bridges, moorings, wharfage, rivers, and the thousand of intricate details that went into this appraisal of the "Overlord" plan'.

He quotes in particular the answer brought to him in reply to an inquiry on the subsoil of 'Omaha' beach—where, on a 'thin five-mile sliver of beach', the United States V Corps was to fall critically short of its D-Day objectives: on the following morning of June 7th, 'German artillery still pounded the beaches where traffic had congealed in the wreckage'. The reply was brought to him by 'a lean and reticent British naval lieutenant' who pulled from his pocket a thick glass tube. He proceeded to explain that, two nights before, he had taken a submarine through the minefields off the coast of France, had paddled ashore in a rubber boat—under, incidentally, 'the Germans' big, casemated guns'—and had drilled a core in the shingle at a point designated on the map. 'You can see by this core', he explained dryly, 'there is no evidence of silt. The shingle is firmly bedded upon rock. There is little danger of your trucks bogging down.'

Mention has been made of differing strategical viewpoints within the general framework of the 'Overlord' plan. Although American military opinion was unattracted to 'Torch' since it involved no direct attack on German land power or production centres, the British Prime Minister was to win the argument—with the generous backing of the President of the United States. In London, on the night of July 25th, 1942, the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that an Anglo-American occupation of French Morocco, Algeria, and possibly Tunisia should take place within four months. Again, as will shortly be seen, it was under the restless surveillance of the United States Chiefs of Staff that Mr. Churchill was to triumph in his advocacy of

an extension of the North African campaign to Sicily and Italy. On the other hand, he was to fail in his efforts to stop the invasion of southern France—operation 'Dragoon'—by those American and French forces that were to form the 6th (United States) Army Group: another of General Marshall's favoured projects, and, indeed, an Anglo-American commitment given to the Russians. The military aspect apart, the project reflected the traditional sympathy of the Americans for the French, since it would enable the French Army to stage a landing in its own country. Furthermore, the decision to go forward with it almost automatically committed the Supreme Commander to a 'broad front' policy: he would come under a compelling urge to reach down from his Normandy concentration in order to link hands with the Allied forces advancing up the Rhône valley.

Originally designed as an assault 'practically simultaneous' with General Eisenhower's invasion of northern France and invested with the mission of drawing off enemy forces, operation 'Dragoon' was launched six weeks late—again chiefly as a result of the shortage of landing-craft—by which time its diversionary value was lost: the enemy forces had largely been drawn off. 'Dragoon' was actually launched on August 15th, 1944. Until August 10th, Mr. Churchill persisted in an argument with General Eisenhower that the forces detailed for it should be switched either to north-west Europe, or 'even might better be used in the prosecution of the Italian campaign with the eventual purpose of invading the Balkans via the head of the Adriatic'. However, the Supreme Commander's requirements for additional port capacity in the south for the ultimate deployment of additional United States divisions were to prove a determining factor in going forward with the 'Dragoon' plan to capture Toulon and Marseille.

General Eisenhower's reference to talk of 'invading the Balkans' should not suggest that Mr. Churchill had in contemplation a full-scale Balkan campaign involving British and American troops. A year earlier, before the invasion of Italy, he had pointed out to Washington the void the Germans would have to fill in the Balkans if Italy were eliminated, and the advantage to the Allies of access to the Adriatic in supplying Balkan resistance movements; but added: 'We should not have the troops to engage in operations there, and His Majesty's Government does not contemplate or desire the provision of any organized force for the Balkan theatre, either this year or in any period with which we are concerned'. Later, in October, 1943, he wrote to Mr. Roosevelt: 'I have never wished to send an army into the Balkans, but only by agents, supplies, and commandos to stimulate the intense guerrilla prevailing there'.



And perhaps we should drop a tear for Mr. Churchill's own particular ewe-lamb 'Jupiter'—the code name for projected operations in northern Norway. The Allies, with their 'right claw' on French North Africa, were to 'tear' with their left at North Cape, and wait a year without 'risking their teeth' upon the fortified front across the Channel. But in July, 1942, he writes: 'At every point except one the plans I cherished were adopted. "Jupiter" alone I could not carry, although its merits were not disputed. I did not give up this plan yet, but in the end I failed to establish it. For months past I had sought "No 'Sledgehammer'", but instead the North African invasion and "Jupiter". "Jupiter" fell by the way. But I had enough to be thankful for.'

At the 'Quadrant' Conference held at Quebec in August, 1943, a 'target date' of May 1st, 1944, was 'reaffirmed' for 'Overlord': a reaffirmation in that a similar resolve had been recorded at the 'Trident' Conference held in Washington two months earlier. Sir Winston himself records that he now 'strongly favoured "Overlord" in 1944'—though its success 'depended on certain conditions being fulfilled in regard to relative strength'; and still at 'Quadrant'—as Mr. Robert E. Sherwood records in *The White House Papers*—he advanced his usual and always powerful warnings of the appalling casualties that might be suffered. 'He pointed again and again to the map of France, showing the tremendous logistical advantages enjoyed by the Germans, the quantity of supply lines running east and west, the roads and railroads built by the French in their own defensive plan to supply and reinforce the Belgian frontier and the Maginot Line from the Channel ports.' However, it was to be the paramount mission of the Allied air forces—in the combined offensive that was felicitously given the code-name of 'Pointblank'—to disrupt this whole system of supply and fatally restrict the German capacity for manœuvre. By D-Day all railway bridges over the Seine between Paris and the sea were impassable, together with those on the lower sections of the Loire; and all the main road bridges had been either destroyed or damaged.

The die for the long-argued and long-postponed 'Second Front in Europe'—that is, western Europe—was not finally cast until the three war leaders met at Teheran in November, 1943. The conference bore the 'exultant' code-name of 'Eureka', and was preceded by a meeting in Cairo of President Roosevelt, Mr. Churchill, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Mr. Sherwood records that Mr. Churchill, at this conference—known as 'Sextant' in prosaic continuation of the series—'gave a lengthy resumé of the general situation, reviewing the

long series of Allied successes in the Mediterranean, which, in recent weeks, had turned into a succession of disappointments on the Italian front north of Naples and in the Dodecanese Islands'. Mr. Churchill urged that, despite heavy German reinforcements that had been sent to Italy, the Allied campaign there should be pushed more vigorously than ever with a view to capturing Rome at the earliest possible date—for 'whoever holds Rome holds the title deeds of Italy'. He mentioned as another possibility the capture of the island of Rhodes—which had been the ultimate object of the recent ill-fated Dodecanese campaign—with an eye to bringing Turkey into the war. He added that when the Allies had reached the Pisa-Rimini line north of Rome, decisions could be taken whether the next move should be to the left—toward southern France; or to the right—into the Balkans. Mr. Sherwood comments that the United States Chiefs of Staffs had no doubt in their own minds 'what all this signified'. Whenever the persistent Prime Minister started talking about Rhodes, or veering towards the 'right' from northern Italy, they felt certain that he was resuming the advocacy of strategic diversions into south-eastern Europe and away from northern France, and prepared themselves for battles at Teheran in which the Americans and the Russians would form a united front.

Their anxiety would appear to have been misdirected. Only a month before, as we have seen, in a letter to President Roosevelt, Mr. Churchill had reiterated his earlier assurance that he had no thought of sending an organized force into the Balkans; and, at Teheran, he informed Marshal Stalin, in reply to a direct question, that the 'continuation of operations in and from Italy' would not be allowed 'in any way to affect' the thirty-five divisions already ear-marked for 'Overlord'. The Italian theatre was, indeed, to be depleted to make up that number. After the war he was to write of this period: 'No such idea'—of getting 'entangled' in the Balkans—'had crossed my mind'. The attitude of the United States Chiefs of Staff reflected that phobia of the Balkans which was characteristic of American military thought.

At Teheran it was a civilian, Mr. Roosevelt, who—according to *The White House Papers*—shocked them by putting forward a suggestion for 'an operation across the Adriatic for a drive, aided by Tito's partisans, north-eastward into Rumania to effect a junction with the Red Army advancing southward from the region of Odessa'. Sir Winston, in the fifth volume of his war memoirs, refers to this 'alternative suggestion' under the more restrained description of 'a right-handed move from Italy by Istria and Trieste, with ultimate designs for reaching Vienna through the Ljubljana Gap', and lightly

remarks that he was attracted to it, 'although all this lay five or six months ahead'. Any such operation would certainly have demanded a full-scale army of specialized mountain troops rather than 'agents, supplies, and commandos'; Vienna is three hundred and forty miles from Trieste; and, in its context, the comment cannot be said to advocate a 'Balkan strategy'. Mr. Churchill, at the time, was concerned to 'save' the Italian campaign. He writes that the 'great Anglo-American army in action in Italy' needed to be nourished to achieve the capture of Rome and the airfields north of the capital, 'from which the air attack on southern Germany became possible'. Marshal Stalin, at any rate, and not surprisingly, took the view that it would be unwise to 'scatter forces' in the manner proposed.

His military fortunes were now in the ascendant. A little more than two years earlier—in September, 1941, when more than half of the Ukraine was lost and the Germans were at the gates of Leningrad—in a letter to Mr. Churchill he had actually asked for 'a Second Front somewhere in the Balkans or France', and Mr. Churchill had replied: 'There is no chance whatever of a Second Front being formed in the Balkans without the help of Turkey'—help that was never forthcoming. On the first day of the Teheran Conference—November 28th, 1943—he pressed for concentration against north-west Europe; and two days later was informed that 'Overlord' would definitely take place in May, 1944.

Thus there was to be no going back—although the target date was to be postponed a month in order to secure landing-craft for a five-divisional rather than a three-divisional frontage of assault. On February 12th, 1944, General Eisenhower was officially designated Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force.

## ii. *ITALY AND THE WEST*

THE Allied attack on Italy lay outside the general framework of the 'Overlord' plan; but it would be ungenerous not to acknowledge the contribution it made to victory in north-west Europe. The measure of that contribution in relation to the result achieved, in terms of human life and endeavour, of war material, and of war's destruction, must for ever remain a matter of opinion.

In the November of 1942, the British Prime Minister, in his capacity as Minister of Defence, wrote that the paramount task facing the Allies was, first, to conquer the African shores of the Mediterranean and to set up the necessary naval and air installations to open an effective passage through it for military traffic; and, secondly, using these bases, 'to strike at the under-belly of the Axis in effective strength and in the shortest time'. In Moscow, during the previous August, Marshal Stalin had joyously accepted the Prime Minister's analogy of attacking the 'soft belly of the crocodile as we attacked his hard snout'; President Roosevelt, on the other hand, together with his Chiefs of Staff, refused to be entranced by it. At the 'Trident' Conference, in the following May, Mr. Churchill failed to secure from the Combined Chiefs of Staff a definite recommendation that the conquest of Sicily—an operation due to be launched in July of that year—should be succeeded by the invasion of Italy. The discussions of the Combined Chiefs were continued at General Eisenhower's villa in Algiers at the end of the month; and Sir Winston writes: 'I was determined to obtain before leaving Africa the decision to invade Italy should Sicily be taken'; he 'very passionately wanted to see Italy out of the way and Rome in our possession'. He was to have Rome—though at long last.

In the early morning darkness of September 3rd, 1943, the British Eighth Army 'slipped' two divisions across the Strait of Messina against no resistance and the Allied invasion of the continent of Europe was an accomplished fact; but, thereafter, from the time of the first landings until the April of 1945, the Allied armies were faced with a seemingly unending succession of difficulties of terrain; they were called upon to fight with resources always inadequate to their tasks; and they experienced a 'savage versatility' of climate without any

parallel in the war—Russia not excepted. Victory never lay even remotely ahead of the inching advance of the Allied troops. Even the valley of the Po—an alleged ‘tank paradise’—was known to be criss-crossed with a multitude of waterways. In the words of the British Prime Minister, there was ‘always something else’; and because the axis of any advance northward invariably lay across natural obstacles of rivers or mountains, and because German demolitions were so efficient and effective, a small rearguard could always put up a fierce battle while the main body went back at its leisure. By way of tribute to a distinguished British invention, it may be said that, whatever the valour of the fighting troops, without the ‘Bailey’ to bridge these rivers and ravines, the campaign in Italy would have been abortive from the outset.

Again, if the Allied resources in Italy were always inadequate, ‘Overlord’ supplies the answer. At the time of the opening of ‘Overlord’, there were twenty-four front-line German divisions in Italy and Sardinia with three more in course of arrival; a year earlier—in June, 1943—there had been only two and a half. The Germans, indeed, kept on increasing their strength in Italy until the latter stages of the campaign. Nevertheless, no hesitation was ever shown in switching Allied divisions to the decisive theatre of war at whatever cost to the campaign in Italy itself. Seven divisions—four American and three British—were removed before D-Day; another seven—four French and three American—together with forty per cent of the Allied air strength, for the Allied landings in southern France; and in February, 1945, under a decision of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the Canadian I Corps, consisting of two divisions and an armoured brigade, began its withdrawal from the line for service in north-west Europe. Thus Bologna, guardian city of the Po valley, which must otherwise have fallen to the Allies in the late summer of 1944, was to remain a German bastion until the following April.

During the last battle in Italy—with the United States Fifth Army bitterly fighting its way through the mountains to Bologna and the British Eighth Army circumnavigating the waterways of the Adriatic sector—the number of Allied combat troops committed numbered hardly more than seventy thousand. Facing them, at that time, were twenty-six German and six Italian Fascist divisions. On May 2nd, 1945, after the victorious conclusion of this last battle, nearly a million German soldiers in Italy and western Austria laid down their arms unconditionally to Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander (afterwards Earl Alexander of Tunis), Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theatre of Operations. Not till victory was won did the British Prime Minister reveal that the Allied chiefs never had any



*Canadian Army Photo*

**COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, 21ST ARMY GROUP**



*Imperial War Museum*

**GENERALS MONTGOMERY, EISENHOWER, BRADLEY**

compunction about cutting down the Allied armies in Italy to the absolute minimum because it had been assumed that no final attack could be successfully mounted on this front.

But the Italian campaign not merely drew German divisions to Italy; the threat it represented—and the backing given to Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia—drew very nearly as many to the Balkans. By July, 1944, they numbered twenty-two divisions—as against eight and a half in June of the previous year. Thus, during the course of the year preceding D-Day, the number of German front-line troops on the Italian front had been increased ten-fold; on the Balkan front they had very nearly been trebled. In France and the Low Countries, over this same period of time, German front-line strength was little more than doubled—from twenty-eight divisions in June, 1943, to fifty-nine in June, 1944.

Before the invasion, General Eisenhower could count on thirty-seven Allied divisions with which to establish himself firmly on the Continent. It is a matter for speculation whether the fortunes of 'Overlord' could have been seriously imperilled had some of the forty-nine German front-line divisions stationed in Italy, Sardinia, and the Balkans been available for action on D-Day; but it is a fact of history that, in the high summer of 1944, the German Supreme Command was forced to divert eight divisions to this secondary theatre of war. At that time, when the value of the strategic contribution of the Allied troops in Italy was at its greatest, forty-nine German divisions were tied down in the Mediterranean by the threat, actual or potential, they presented.

For one day only—the day before D-Day in the west—the campaign in Italy was to capture the world's headlines with the entry into Rome. The next day the eyes of the world were switched back to the west—on the publication of the first communiqué from Supreme Headquarters: 'Under the command of General Eisenhower, Allied naval forces, supported by strong air forces, began landing Allied armies this morning on the northern coast of France.' 'Particularly after the Allied invasion of France,' writes General Clark, 'we were a "forgotten front".' The surrender of nearly a million Germans on the Italian front on May 2nd, 1945, was followed, within forty-eight hours, by the surrender to the Commander-in-Chief, 21st Army Group, of all German armed forces, numbering two million men, in Holland, in north-west Germany, and in Denmark; and again Italy vanished from the world's headlines. At a conference of the Mediterranean commanders held at Tunis on Christmas Day, 1943, Mr. Churchill—with an eye on Rome still six months distant—had occasion

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to refer to the 'half-finished task' of the Allied troops in Italy. Though at a late hour, they duly reached Rome, and, after an infinity of toil, were to drive across the Po to the borders of Switzerland and of Yugoslavia. In the ultimate view, the Allied soldiers in Italy were fighting alongside the Allied soldiers in the west, and, without Italy, north-west Europe must inevitably have proved a more desperate enterprise.

The threat to the Balkans—and to southern Germany—represented a major alternative strategy to 'Overlord'; it was never exploited. General Mark Clark—who, from November, 1944, to the end of the Italian campaign, commanded the United States Fifth Army and the British Eighth Army, which together formed the 15th Army Group—is unique among American war leaders in that, without qualification, he supports a full-blooded Balkan strategy. After claiming that his army group fulfilled its primary 'mission'—that of 'blocking' the enemy forces that might have made a tremendous difference to the Red Army's advance from the east and General Eisenhower's drive across France into Germany—he writes: 'Save for a high-level blunder that turned us away from the Balkan States and permitted them to fall under Red Army control, the Mediterranean campaign might have been the most decisive of all in post-war history'. Equally he deplors the 'weakening' of the campaign in Italy in order to invade southern France.

In the late autumn of 1944, Field Marshal Alexander, now Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean, specifically informed General Mark Clark that it was the intention of the Supreme Allied Command in Italy to occupy the Dalmatian ports of Split, Sibenik, and Zara with commandos and other light forces, should they be evacuated by the enemy under threat of a Russian advance through Hungary; and, in conjunction with the Partisans, to gain control of the roads running inland over the mountains. 'As soon as these preparations are sufficiently advanced, our main bodies will be brought in as quickly and secretly as possible for an advance on Ljubljana and Fiume.'

These projected operations based on the 'Balkan springboard'—though it should be noted that they would have left most of the Balkans untouched—were in themselves an echo of a proposal already discussed by his predecessor as Supreme Allied Commander, General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson: a proposal to 'continue the offensive in Italy past the Pisa-Rimini line and to combine it with an amphibious assault on the Istrian peninsula, thence to exploit to the Ljubljana Gap and into Hungary'. In his *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Southern France*, he quotes the

opinions he advanced in June, 1944—that a ‘threat to the vital Danube area might materialize rapidly enough to cause German withdrawals from France’, and that, on the assumption that there was to be no switch of the main effort, a ‘continuation of General Alexander’s land advance to the Po valley and the Ljubljana Gap held out hope of achieving a decisive strategic threat to southern Germany before the end of the year’. He records that this opinion was shared by General Alexander, by Admiral Sir John Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, and by Lieutenant-General Ira C. Eaker, the American Air Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean; he adds that the plan submitted had the backing of the British Chiefs of Staff. But the ‘consistent Balkan-phobia policy of the United States’ ruled out the possibility of any such happy consummation to the long drawn-out agony of the campaign in Italy; and the ‘logistic planners’ considered that maintenance difficulties might retard the rate of advance and prevent a major decision before winter. It may be salutary to recall that Trieste—the ‘springboard’ for the Ljubljana Gap—was not to come under Allied occupation until the last week of the war in north-west Europe. And, indeed, easy talk about ‘exploiting through the Balkans’ made little sense to those senior commanders who were fighting the Germans in the Apennines and would have been called upon to repeat the ‘dreary, bloody business’ in a yet more mountainous terrain with difficulties of supply that would have made the sea-supported Italian campaign look like a picnic.

### iii. *THE ENEMY*

THE 'Cossac' plan for 'Overlord' selected as the most suitable sector for the invasion the Normandy beaches between the Cherbourg peninsula and the mouth of the Orne river—on which stands the rail and road communication centre of Caen. These beaches offered a better shelter for shipping than other possible areas along the French coast; they were less heavily defended than those in the Pas de Calais in the Channel itself; and they were just within range of the home bases from which the air forces could provide essential cover. Under the final plan, on the night before D-Day, airborne landings with the bulk of three divisions would protect the flanks of the assaulting divisions: three British (one Canadian) and two United States, together with two Commando brigades and two Ranger battalions—the American counterpart of the British Commandos. Two follow-up divisions were to land on D-Day and D plus 1. By D plus 35, fifteen British and fifteen United States divisions were scheduled to be ashore. Over four thousand landing-craft were now available to join the naval armada of a thousand-odd vessels; and over ten thousand aircraft of all types were in readiness to assist the naval and ground forces in their task of breaking through Germany's own version of the Maginot Line—the over-glorified Atlantic Wall. What prospect awaited them?

At D-Day, fifty-nine German divisions were stationed in France and the Low Countries—about one-quarter of the total strength of the German Army. Rather more than half the total were coast-defence or training divisions; of the twenty-seven field divisions, ten were armoured. They formed two army groups, under the command of Field Marshal Karl Gerd von Rundstedt, who carried the title of Commander-in-Chief West. One of these two army groups was responsible for covering the Biscay coast and the Riviera; the other—Army Group B—consisted of Seventh Army (Normandy and Brittany), Fifteenth Army (Pas de Calais and Flanders), and a corps of occupation troops in Holland. Five infantry divisions guarded the Cherbourg peninsula and those Normandy beaches whose names were shortly to make history. In immediate reserve were two Panzer divisions. The greater number of the field divisions in Field Marshal von Rundstedt's whole command were concentrated in the Pas de

Calais area. In February, 1944, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was appointed to the command of Army Group B at the direct instance of the Führer who, in the previous November, had dispatched him on a special mission to the west to inspect the coastal defences from the Skagerrak to the Spanish frontier, and to report on their readiness—or rather their unreadiness—to resist invasion.

A third headquarters in France known as Panzer Group West, under General Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, had army group status. It came under Field Marshal von Rundstedt's direct command and was responsible for the administration and training of those Panzer formations operationally under command of other army groups: a system of organization that inevitably led to some confusion in the handling of the enemy armour. Panzer Group West not unnaturally favoured the concentration of its armoured forces; whereas Field Marshal Rommel, under the conditions obtaining in France, favoured their distribution. But there was a further conflict of opinion between Field Marshal Rommel and his commander-in-chief on the manner in which the invading forces should be tackled. The once triumphant field marshal from the Western Desert favoured a plan for the total repulse of the invader on the beaches; he advocated thickening up the beach defences, and the positioning of all available reserves near the coast. 'We must stop the enemy in the water,' he is reported to have said, 'and destroy his equipment while it is still afloat.' Field Marshal von Rundstedt, on the other hand, favoured what Field Marshal Montgomery describes as the 'crust-cushion-hammer' plan: a plan that connoted a 'crust' of infantry manning the coast line, with a 'cushion' of infantry divisions in tactical reserve close in rear, and a 'hammer' of armoured forces in strategic reserve further inland. The 'cushion' was designed to contain enemy forces that penetrated the 'crust', and the 'hammer' was available for launching decisive counter-attacks as required. A compromise resulted from this conflict of opinion. The majority of the infantry divisions was committed to strengthening the 'crust'; and, in the absence of the 'cushion', the Panzer formations were forced to engage the invading forces prematurely and were never able to concentrate to deliver a co-ordinated blow; they were compelled to indulge in what Field Marshal Montgomery calls 'wet hen' tactics—'rushing to and fro to stem our thrusts and plug the holes in his line'.

The Commander-in-Chief West, on this topic, found himself in conflict not merely with the commander of Army Group B, but with the Führer himself, who backed the plan that the beaches must be the main line of resistance; furthermore, 'against Hitler's intuition and Rommel's judgment', he persisted in 'the orthodox staff view

that the main landing would come in the Pas de Calais, the nearest point to England and the direct road to the Ruhr'. In parenthesis it should be noted that, once the Normandy battle opened, the Führer was equally persistent in his refusal to switch divisions from the Fifteenth Army to assist the hard-pressed Seventh. Nineteen badly needed infantry divisions of the Fifteenth Army were idle in the Pas de Calais area for six weeks after the Allied landings. An elaborate cover plan assisted the delusion that a second major assault—under General Patton—was to be expected in that area. Dummy landing ships appeared in the Thames and along the Dover coast; and deserted tented cities in East Anglia which might have contained thousands of troops were given some semblance of life by a handful of men who kept the fires burning for German reconnaissance pilots to photograph. It was not until the last week in July that the Germans began to thin out from the Pas de Calais. They found transportation no easy problem. In the second week of August, one infantry division showed up in Normandy on bicycles.

The German generals in captivity, under interrogation, appear to have been pretty unanimous in agreeing that the German Army owed its defeat to the military incompetence of the Führer. However, it should begin to be apparent that the conflicting points of view of his field commanders may have been even more responsible than his 'interference' for the failure of German arms. As Captain Liddell Hart has pointed out in *The Other Side of the Hill*, he recognized the potentialities of mobile armoured forces sooner than his General Staff, and his backing of the exponents of this new instrument—in particular, Colonel-General Heinz Guderian—proved the most decisive factor in Germany's opening victories. And if his famous 'intuition' did not mislead him in his forecast of the actual invasion area, equally—though the point can now never be proved either way—he may not have been misguided in supporting Field Marshal Rommel's belief that the beaches must be the main line of resistance. He is reported to have told his personal liaison officer and deputy chief of the operations staff of the Wehrmacht, General Walter Warlimont: 'If we do not stop the invasion and do not drive the enemy back into the sea, the war will be lost'. Each step back would have meant a broadening of the front in France; and he had no strategic reserve. Thus he could hardly be expected to countenance strategic retreats that, at best, could result only in stalemate.

The immediate object of 'Overlord' was 'to secure a lodgement on the Continent from which further offensive operations can be developed'. Once that lodgement was secured, Allied superiority in

man-power and material—and mobility—could result only in the ultimate defeat of the German armies in the west. When, at the end of June, Field Marshal Rommel proposed that the Seventh Army should fight a rearguard action back to the Seine, and that the German troops in southern France should be withdrawn to help to form a new line along the Seine and across to Switzerland, the Führer prophetically retorted: 'We must not allow mobile warfare to develop, since the enemy surpasses us by far in mobility. Therefore everything depends on our confining him to his bridgehead, by building up a front to block him off, and then on fighting a war of attrition to wear him down and force him back.' Five or six years later General Bradley was to write that the 'secret' weapon of the United States Army was its mobility. The Führer would appear to have been ahead of his generals—for all their reliance on 'fact' and 'logic'.

From a normal military standpoint, the Führer must always stand condemned for his insistence that his armies in Normandy, in the Ardennes, and in the Rhineland should continue to fight beyond the useful military limit; but the whole idea of 'retreat' was so foreign to his make-up that the criticism must largely spend itself on thin air. As the captured log of the Seventh Army headquarters reveals, there were times when he directed the movement of individual battalions and the defence of particular villages—doubtless because of his conviction that his generals would retreat with alacrity rather than obey his standard instruction to 'Hold! Hold! Hold!' When General Warlimont left Berchtesgaden for Normandy on the last day of July, he sped him on his gloomy mission with the acid comment: 'Whenever a line of defence is built behind the front line, my generals think of nothing but going back to that line'.

In a letter written in the last hours of his life, and addressed to Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the Wehrmacht Supreme Command, he was to comment: 'The Army General Staff cannot be compared with the General Staff in the First World War. Its achievements were far behind those of the fighting front'; and, indeed, it would seem not unreasonable to suggest that the Führer had a better sense than some of his generals of what the German soldier could accomplish. Nor did he demand in vain blind faith in his judgment and devotion to his leadership. His direct call was answered by those German soldiers who, on the island of Walcheren, at the entrance to the Scheldt estuary, lived up to their oath: 'I am pledged to hold this fortified sector to the last, even to the sacrifice of my own life'. This example of the Führer's 'mania for having men die where they stood' imposed a two months' delay on Allied operations in north-west Europe. Again, there was certainly 'nothing very crazy' in the

way the Reich set about defending its borders in its 'extreme hour' by launching the Ardennes counter-offensive of December, 1944; and it was the Führer who created that 'flashing sword of retaliation'. Field Marshal von Rundstedt—who commanded this offensive, though with considerable detachment—contrived to put forward nine factors that contributed to the 'thwarting of Hitler's ambitions for a march to Antwerp'. He agreeably concludes: 'It must be remembered that the Ardennes offensive was planned in all its details, including formations involved, time schedules, objectives, and so on, by the Führer and his staff. All counter-proposals were rejected. In such circumstances, there could be little faith in its success.' Even more agreeably he complains that he received but few reports from the commander of the Sixth SS Panzer Army—the spearhead of the whole offensive—and that what he did receive was 'generally a pack of lies'.

The field marshal would appear to have entered on the battle of Normandy with equal pessimism. He informed his interrogators that he knew all along that the German position in France was hopeless and that eventually the war would be lost, and that he had planned to fight a slow retiring action that would exact a heavy toll for each bit of ground given up. But, he plaintively adds, 'as commander-in-chief in the west my only authority was to change the guard in front of my gate'. Again, when the battle was thoroughly joined and he had arrived at the conclusion that the only advisable course was to swing his forces back and take up a line along the Seine—a point of view shared by Field Marshal Rommel—the Führer, at a personal interview at Soissons in mid-June, flatly rejected the advice. 'I could have stood on my head', remarks the field marshal of this period of his command, 'but I still would not have been able to budge a division if Hitler disagreed with my judgment.' However, when discussing the situation at Cherbourg—which was to fall on June 26th—during this same week in June, he rather disconcertingly records that six days earlier 'Hitler had frantically ordered reinforcements to be sent to the northern part of the Peninsula to defend the port. Instead of trying to pull the troops out of a hopeless trap, Hitler wanted to send more men into it. Of course, we paid no attention to the order.'

However, in fairness to the German generals—whose lack of co-operation would appear to have been matched only by an equal lack of co-operation between the three Services—it should be said that the Führer had systematically set out to undermine their authority, and had introduced a method of command under which no general could have been expected to give of his best. On January 21st, 1945, Field Marshal von Rundstedt was compelled to issue a quite remarkable order. It made the commanders of armies, corps, and divisions

personally responsible for ensuring that certain types of decisions or intentions should reach the Führer early enough to enable him to exercise his influence on such decisions. This instruction covered any decision involving an operational movement, any projected attack of divisional size or larger not covered by general orders issued by Supreme Headquarters, or any projected movement of withdrawal or contemplated abandonment of a fortified position. Away back in the November of 1942—at the end of the second week of the Alamein battle—the Führer had told the German people that in him the Allies had found an adversary who did not even think of the word ‘capitulation’; and that their enemies might rest assured that while the Germany of 1918 had ‘laid down its arms at a quarter to twelve, I on principle have never finished before five minutes past twelve’. Small wonder that, at Nuremberg, Colonel-General Alfred Jodl, the Führer’s principal adviser on planning and strategy, remarked: ‘We did not discuss a general surrender until after Hitler’s death’.

In any discussion on German leadership, it is well to remember that there are still the troops: any depreciation of that leadership must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the German Army fought on gallantly and long when ‘all’ was demonstrably ‘lost’ in the view of their senior commanders. The Supreme Commander’s chief of staff has pointed out that the mass surrender of German troops during the later stages of the war should not be misinterpreted. They surrendered only when Allied forces got behind them and their ‘higher commanders—of divisions, corps, and armies—had either run away or given themselves up’. ‘Long live our Germany and our beloved Führer!’ declaims Field Marshal Walther Model, Field Marshal Rommel’s successor to the command of Army Group B, in an order of the day issued when the German armies in the west were preparing to man the Siegfried Line. And they never failed to respond—either out of ‘blind faith and devotion to a leader’, or because they were just good soldiers; and they responded whether they were the élite of the German Army or the ‘final scrapings of the German manpower barrel’: the Magen or ‘stomach’ battalions, or the Ohren or ‘ear’ battalions, admission to either of which was based on disabilities that, in this grim hour for Germany, counted as qualifications. From October onwards, German prisoners arriving in the Allied prisoner-of-war cages often looked, by Allied standards, rather tattered specimens of humanity—and even more pitiable when they stood in front of their incredibly sordid personal possessions. More often than not they would have been existing on two poor meals a day without any of the amenities provided by the luxurious

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appendages to the Allied armies : young and old—with few in the years between. Nevertheless, according to the evidence of their captors, they would have been 'fighting like devils' up to the very last moment of surrender. These then were 'the enemy'—or some of them—and any depreciation of their fighting quality could only detract from the performance of the Allied armies.

Nor should it be forgotten that the German armies fought the battle of Normandy and the battle for Germany virtually without air support. The Allied armies enjoyed a quite overwhelming superiority in numbers in the air: always overhead were the ever-sheltering wings. Field Marshal Montgomery, in some notes on the conduct of war, remarks: 'It is necessary to win the air battle before embarking on the land or sea battle. It is not possible to conduct successful offensive operations on land against an enemy with a superior air force, other things being equal.' This statement in itself gives the measure of the indebtedness of the Allied armies to the combined air forces that gave them air cover throughout the campaign, and direct air support at many of its most critical moments. Although a few German aircraft flew over the coast at nightfall—only to be destroyed by a squadron of Spitfires—not one single attack was carried out by the German Air Force on the assault forces during the sea passage to Normandy or at any time on the beaches during D-Day; and Field Marshal Günther von Kluge—who succeeded Field Marshal von Runstedt as Commander-in-Chief West—in a letter to the Führer dated July 21st, at the height of the Normandy battle, wrote: 'I herewith forward a report from Field Marshal Rommel, which he gave me before his accident. I have now been here fourteen days and, after long discussion with the responsible commanders, I have come to the conclusion that the field marshal was, unfortunately, right. There is absolutely no way in which we can do battle with the all-powerful enemy air force without being forced to surrender territory. The psychological effect on the fighting forces, especially the infantry, of such a mass of bombs raining down on them with all the force of elemental nature is a factor that must be seriously considered. It is not in the least important whether such a carpet of bombs is laid on good or bad troops. They are more or less annihilated by it and, above all, their equipment is destroyed. It only needs this to happen a few times and the power of resistance is paralysed.' Here, at any rate, is one expression of opinion from a German commander that can be accepted without reservation; and although the Allied troops may have found the German power of resistance less 'paralysed' than the distracted field marshal suggests—and it may not be irrelevant to note that within a month he had been superseded and was dead by

his own hand—there can be no doubt that, without air superiority, and air interdiction of communications, the Allied ground forces would never have got beyond the Normandy beaches—if as far.

And behind the generals and the troops is that still elusive entity—‘the war’. In this narrative there has been much easy talk of divisions; and it is well to remember that divisions are men. Since there will be more talk of divisions, it will also be wise to keep in mind a memorandum written by Mr. Churchill in the March of 1943: ‘The word division is becoming a stumbling-block, and is no longer any form of yard-stick for measuring between the different countries. It seems to me that it will be necessary to state numbers of men, combatant and gross, as well as divisions.’

At the time of the German surrender, General Eisenhower had under his command ninety Allied divisions; and the United States divisions had been maintained at a strength of seventeen thousand men: the war establishment of a British infantry division is this same figure. Thus Mr. Churchill’s note of warning should, for example, be heeded when, for the final 1945 advance from the west, Marshal Stalin promises in the east a ‘great four-pronged offensive, involving from one hundred and fifty to one hundred and sixty Red Army divisions’. In conversation with the Supreme Commander during his visit to Russia just after the end of the war, Marshal Zhukov informed him that he tried to maintain his divisions at about eight thousand men, but that ‘frequently, in long campaigns, some would be depleted to a strength of between three and four thousand’. But again, in a Russian division the ratio of ‘combatant’ troops to ‘gross’ numbers was much higher than in the average Allied division; it had very little divisional artillery, whereas in a British division the artillery take over three thousand of the overall strength; and there was considerable dependence on civil supplies and transport.

In this context it may also be noted that an SS (Schutzstaffel) division of the Waffen (Armed) SS might sometimes—as in the Ardennes counter-offensive—be more than half as strong again in equipment and personnel as a German Army Panzer division—the normal strength of which was fourteen thousand officers and men as against twelve thousand for an infantry division. On the other hand, during the last months of the war, a German infantry division in the west, on the average, numbered no more than five thousand men—less than a third of the average Allied division at that time.

‘Divisions are men’—the men, far out in front, fighting the war this book is about. We are catching up with them. The hour for ‘Overlord’ is about to strike.

### III

## THE NORMANDY 'GATE'

#### i. 'A SUMMER'S DAY—THE SIXTH OF JUNE'

NOT many hours before D-Day, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, addressing a body of British troops due to sail for France, remarked: 'You are about to embark on the greatest military hazard of all time'. General Eisenhower, in a message to the soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, wrote: 'Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well-trained, well-equipped, and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.' The commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group, in a personal message to be read to all troops, slightly misquoted—to their possible advantage—the lines written by James Graham, Marquis of Montrose, on the window of his jail the night before his execution in the year 1650. General Sir Bernard Montgomery wrote:

*He either fears his fate too much,  
Or his deserts are small,  
Who dare not put it to the touch,  
To win or lose it all.*

If only because success speedily dimmed the inherent danger of the enterprise, it is well to record that no military operation in history has faced such unpredictable hazards as those that attended the opening of a Second Front in Europe.

The commander of any land operation, of whatever magnitude, is able to calculate his risks with a precision that is directly related to his powers of foresight; he is able to offset them by the skill of his planning and the excellence of his staff work; weeks or months ahead of the actual launching of the operation he can select his particular D-Day in the knowledge that, short of a convulsion of nature, the attack will go forward on the selected date. By contrast, the commander of a seaborne assault is entirely at the mercy of unforeseeable

circumstances beyond all human control; and whereas no land operation planned with reasonable care can meet with immediate disaster, the commander of a seaborne operation, as the result of a few hours of bad weather at a critical juncture, may find himself without an army to fight the battle even before it is joined.

Weather, in this context, is largely a matter of wind; and wind, in naval parlance, is measured in terms of Forces. Thus a wind of Force 3, coming from any direction, will not prohibit unloading operations; nor will a wind of Force 4 coming offshore. But a wind of Force 4 onshore will render—theoretically—all unloading operations impracticable. In the Normandy landing, at six o'clock on the morning of D-Day, the wind was WNW—that is, already onshore—with a Force 3-4, representing 'a strong breeze with a nasty short sea'. By six o'clock that evening it was NW, with a Force 4-5; and unloading operations were, on paper, rendered out of the question. These figures demonstrate not merely the difficulties facing the assault on the Normandy coast but give a precise estimate of the success achieved in spite of them.

Again, the choice of D-Day must always be dependent on an acceptable H-Hour—that is, the time when the first flight of landing-craft at any one beach is timed to hit that beach. Primarily, the choice of H-Hour will depend on the tidal factor—a predictable quantity; but it will nevertheless be a compromise based on conflicting considerations. Thus a steep gradient is to be preferred for the safe beaching of landing-craft—that is, conditions of high water; and the further advantage of making H-Hour as near as possible to the time of high water is that the first flight of troops will have a shorter length of exposed beach to traverse. The disadvantage is that beach obstacles will have been most effectively placed between high and low watermarks; and the safest approach for landing-craft will be at the moment when the waterline reaches the base of the lowest row of obstacles, and when any rocks at the bottom of the beach will be exposed to view. In Normandy, the beach obstacles included steel 'hedgehogs' and concrete tetrahedra, and curved rails and ramps, furnished with mines and explosive charges and designed to cripple and impede landing-craft. The compromise reached between the conflicting claims of the infantry and of the crews manning the landing-craft resulted in H-Hour being fixed at approximately three hours before high water—that is, at half tide.

A further complication is provided by the fact that the state of the tide varies with each beach. Thus each beach must have its own H-Hour. In Normandy, the coast was divided into five assault areas—three British and two American—each of which comprised several

beaches; and an interval of more than an hour divided the British and Canadian landings at the eastern end of the frontage of assault from the American landings to the west. Under normal conditions the later beaches might have been expected to have received warning of an impending attack; but the decision to launch the assault at a time when the weather was so unsettled achieved surprise all along the sixty-mile frontage of assault.

On this question of the tidal factor it must be remembered that the tide is fifty minutes later each day, and that H-Hour must be adjusted accordingly. Thus, if D-Day itself is postponed, any such postponement must involve the time factor from the point of view of darkness and light: and the decision whether to attack in darkness or light is one that must be taken long before the launching of the assault because training itself must be based on it. In Normandy, the selection of H-Hour for the various beaches was based on the assumption that a period from nautical twilight—the first sign of morning light—to forty minutes later would be time enough for the effective engagement of shore targets by the naval guns and for delivery of the bomb loads of the air formations.

Again, if airborne troops—as in Normandy—are to be used in the operation, the moon factor must be brought into consideration, although any forecast of moon conditions will be invalidated by an unexpected and unpredictable overcast—as actually happened in the Normandy airborne operation. The further consideration that moonlight will render the naval invasion more susceptible to enemy attack is again a matter for compromise. Yet another consideration in Normandy was the desire of the Royal Air Force Bomber Command to get its aircraft back to base before daylight. The one thing certain is that the conditions of light, tide, and moon—which together go to form the ideal D-Day—can arise only once a month; as regards light and tide, acceptable conditions are fulfilled on about three days in each fortnight. Thus, if, after the choice of D-Day, bad weather coincides with these three possible days, a fortnight's postponement will be necessary.

But landing-craft will have been loaded, and troops taken on board, in advance of the first possible D-Day; and the troops will have been living under crowded and confined conditions that are unlikely to have assisted their morale when D-Day at last dawns. In particular, crews for the vehicles in tank-landing and other craft will, for lack of space, have virtually been condemned to live inside their vehicles. Again, with every day that passes the problems of feeding and watering will become more acute. Quite obviously, in the event of a postponement from one possible period to the next—that is, a





minimum of a fortnight—the troops will have to be released from their confinement: though only for a further period of confinement ashore, in wire cages; for at this stage a sufficient number of them will have been briefed with the details of the operation as to render contact with the outside world entirely out of the question. Thus even a fortnight's delay would provide a new set of problems which, although they can be foreseen—as indeed they were in the planning of the Normandy operation—are intrinsically incapable of satisfactory solution. The assault troops bound for Normandy numbered more than one hundred and forty thousand men.

In the light of the foregoing considerations it seems fair to suggest that when General Eisenhower 'pressed the button' he took one of the most fateful decisions in history. 'Overlord', originally scheduled for the 'favourable period of the May moon', had been postponed to a 'favourable period in June'. In that month the 'acceptable' days were June 5th, 6th, and 7th; and on May 17th General Eisenhower 'red-lined' June 5th as D-Day. The westernmost convoys had already sailed when, on the drizzly afternoon of June 4th, they were turned back to port: D-Day had been postponed to June 6th. At Portsmouth, on the Sunday evening of June 4th, General Eisenhower, after discussing the weather reports with his commanders—which 'did no more than encourage a flicker of hope'—said: 'I'm quite positive we must give the order. I don't like it, but there it is. I don't see how we can possibly do anything else'. June 7th would have been within the 'acceptable' period, but the westernmost convoys had already weighed anchor on a second start, and, had they again been recalled, they would have been forced to put into port for refuelling. It was a decision taken in the knowledge that the outcome must remain on the knees of the gods. The whole vast armada of 'Overlord', despite all care in planning, all lavishness of preparation and training, became on that instant a hostage to fortune.

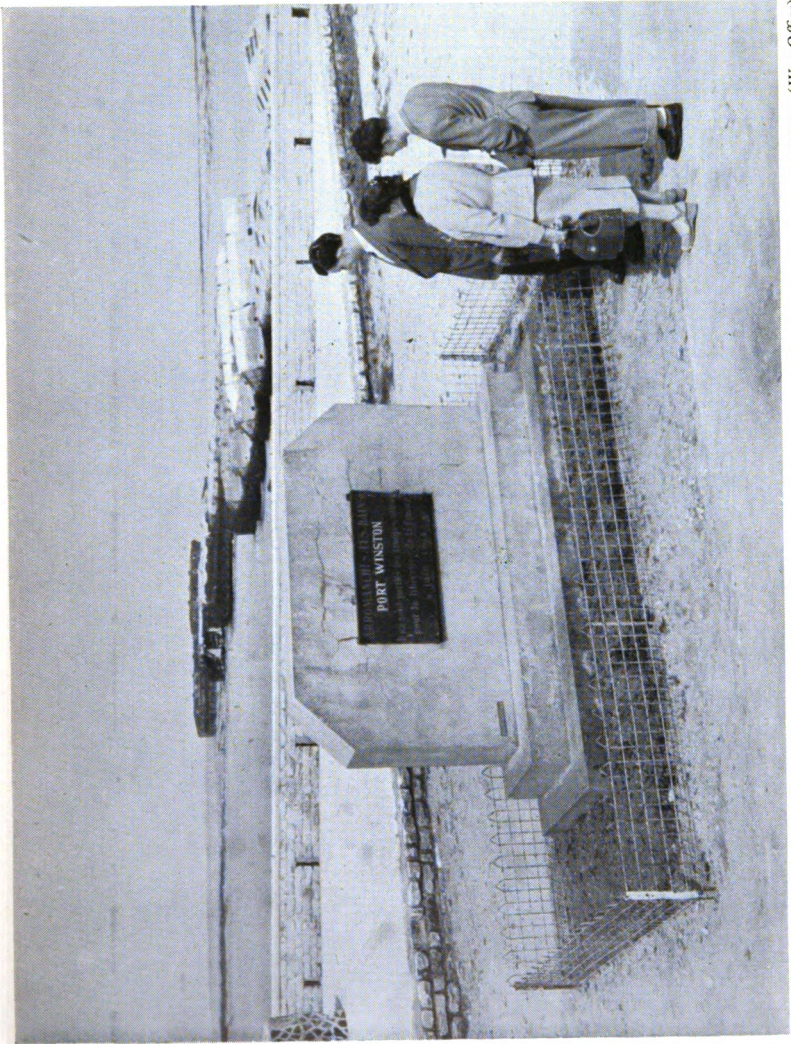
The degree to which triumph crowned that decision is to be measured by the fact that the meteorological forecast for D-Day proved to be accurate in its prediction of high winds and rough seas that same evening, and had not advantage been taken of what was at best 'a hazardous break' in the bad weather, the expedition must of necessity have been postponed to the next 'acceptable' period. When that period arrived, the wind—on D plus 13—was blowing north easterly and blowing a gale—of which no warning had been received. It created more havoc than did all the German guns on D-Day. In the face of this gale the Supreme Commander would have had no choice but to delay the invasion another two weeks until the favourable period of the July moon; and—as General Bradley records—it



would have been August before the Allied armies could have counted on quantity tonnage through Cherbourg, and September before they could have hoped to break out from the bridgehead; and 'instead of wintering on the Siegfried Line, we would have been lucky to reach the Seine. And France rather than the Rhineland would have been ravaged during the winter campaign.'

'Gold', 'Juno', and 'Sword'—so were named, with a flourish of words, the beach areas allotted to the three assaulting divisions of the 21st Army Group. The British landings from the sea were to be made along a sixteen-mile stretch of coast west of the river Orne, between Ouistreham and Arramanches—the site of the British 'Mulberry', one of the two prefabricated harbours that were towed to France, in sections. Today it rejoices in the name of 'Port Winston'. It was to be the mission of a British airborne division to secure the left flank of these beachheads. Some ten miles inland, on the eastern flank ('Sword') lay Caen, the seventh port of France; on the western flank, some five miles inland, the ancient town of Bayeux. The American beaches—'Utah' and 'Omaha'—lay to the west. A rocky belt in the coast-line imposed a ten-mile gap between the American and the British landings. 'Utah', on the shoulder of the Cherbourg peninsula, was separated from 'Omaha' to the east by the Carentan estuary; thus the forces landed on these beaches could not be mutually supporting till a link-up was made farther inland. Only a few causeways crossed the marshy mile-wide strip behind the landing area at 'Utah'. The Germans had flooded the area; and it was to be the mission of two United States airborne divisions to seize the roadheads and engage the defenders while the assault forces were driving inland.

The assault astride the Carentan estuary on the 'Utah' and 'Omaha' beach areas was the responsibility of the United States First Army, under the command of Lieutenant-General (afterwards General of the Army) Omar N. Bradley. Its initial tasks were to capture Cherbourg as quickly as possible and to develop operations southwards towards St. Lô in conformity with the advance of the British Second Army. It was the initial task of the Second Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General M. C. (afterwards General Sir Miles) Dempsey, to develop the bridgehead south of the line St. Lô—Caen to south-east of Caen, in order to secure airfield sites and to protect the eastern flank of the United States First Army while it captured Cherbourg and the Brittany ports. Cherbourg, to be opened as a major supply port for further operations, was scheduled to be taken by D plus 15; it surrendered on June 26th. The objectives for D-Day



SOLDIER (War Office)

PORT WINSTON



*Imperial War Museum*

**'BOCAGE'**

of the British Second Army included Bayeux, Caen, and Cabourg—some four or five miles east of the Orne. But the British and Canadian troops who very nearly reached the city during the invasion assault on D-Day were not to stage their final attack on the city until rather more than a month later—on July 8th. Yet another month was to elapse before the Caen 'hinge' was to snap.

Nevertheless, the battle for Normandy conformed to the broad pattern set by the commander of the ground forces, General Sir Bernard Montgomery, as he expounded it, in London, on April 7th, 1944, to the general officers of the field armies that were to undertake the operation. Once the Allied armies were firmly established ashore, his intention was to threaten to break out on the eastern flank—that is, from the Caen sector. He anticipated that the enemy would be very sensitive to thrusts made in the Caen neighbourhood, for it afforded the shortest route to the Seine ports and Paris—only one hundred and thirty miles away—and was the obvious line of approach to the best airfield country. Thus the enemy's main reserves were likely to be drawn to that flank, where it would be the function of the British and Canadian armies to hold them and wear them down. The whole front was to be pivoted on Caen—thereby creating an opportunity for the break out to be made on the opposite flank by the United States First Army. The plan worked. At the end of D-Day, the German Seventh Army decided that the landings near the Orne constituted the main threat, and took steps to commit its strongest and most readily available reserves in that sector.

But before the critical testing moment of 'touch-down', when the ramp of the tank or infantry landing-craft is lowered to the sea-swept beach—before the H-Hour of D-Day actually strikes—let us give a thought to the assault soldier who is about to be called upon to 'dare or lose it all'.

'Beach intelligence' will largely contribute to success or failure for the assaulting troops as the moment of 'touch-down' approaches. Two years went to the study of the beaches of France, and, in the final result, apart from conventional naval information concerning the rise and fall of tides, moonrise and moonset, prevailing winds, details of minefields, and so on, the most exact information was available regarding those beaches along the French coast that presented possibilities of successful exploitation; and it should be noted that the exploitation of a beachhead is—as happened in Normandy—a far bigger problem than the establishment of it. The actual conformation of those beaches was known in the minutest detail: their

gradients, their underwater contours, their nature—whether sand or shingle—their extent, their suitability for the landing of armoured forces, and the height of the surf under varying wind conditions: this last point having relevance to the waterproofing of vehicles. Without this information, the moment before 'touch-down' may be the precursor of disastrous and irremediable confusion.

Again, if he is given a rifle, any stout-hearted citizen who has learned to shoot will be of some use in battle, however rudimentary his training; but this same soldier will be no better than an encumbrance to his comrades if he is called upon to take part in an attempted landing on a defended coast-line. Man is a land animal: even a sailor, who may be happy enough to find himself at sea, is haunted by the thought of one day finding himself in it; and the assault soldier will need to have received a highly specialized training. Not merely must he have accustomed himself to the experience of wading ashore with heavy equipment and under heavy fire, and over a distance of anything up to forty or fifty yards: he must be prepared to put forth this effort after a prolonged period of confinement in a landing-craft, when his physical and mental powers are likely to be at their lowest ebb. If he is not engaged in a 'shore-to-shore' assault—in which he travels the whole way in a landing-craft—his transfer from an infantry landing-ship to an infantry landing-craft in a 'ship-to-shore' assault normally takes place some miles from the beach. He is then at the mercy of that one physical condition that cannot be controlled by an effort of will; and it has been grimly observed that the eighty-mile crossing to France by Allied troops witnessed the greatest incidence of mass sickness in the history of the world.

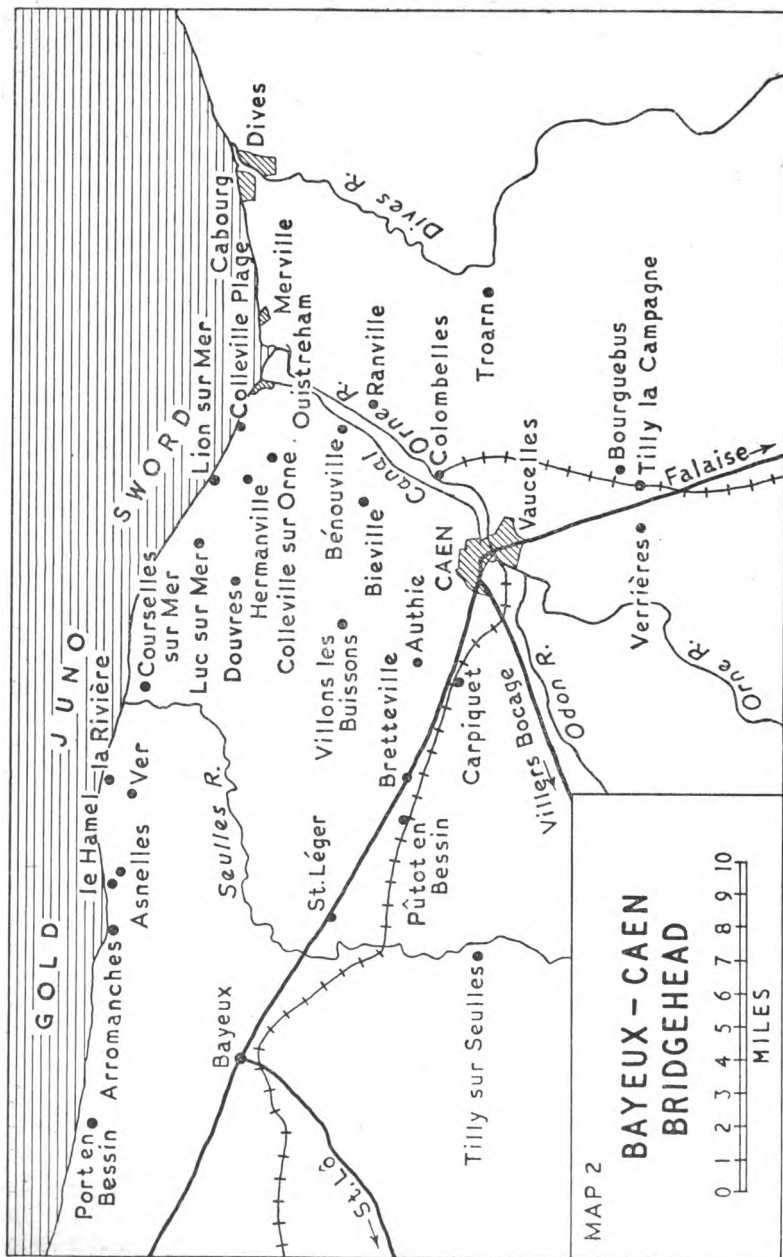
The moments after 'touch-down' will as certainly witness equal confusion if the assault soldier does not know, in the most precise terms, what is his allotted job. For there is still the beach itself. In Normandy, the enemy defensive system—the 'Atlantic Wall'—consisted of a strong crust of concrete and field defence works designed to bring the maximum fire power to bear upon those beaches suitable for landing operations, and at the same time to offer to the defender the maximum protection from aerial and sea bombardment. Gaps between strongpoints in the Wall itself were wired, mined, and swept by fire. Heavy naval and air bombardments, timed to continue on the beach frontages to within ten minutes of H-Hour, could not provide a complete answer to the problem of overcoming even initial German resistance.

And beyond the beach is still the battle; and beyond the open, rolling landscape of the coastal plain was the 'bocage' terrain of

Normandy proper—countryside dotted with fields and orchards, with its fields divided by massive, banked-up hedgerows. Each embankment was in itself a formidable anti-tank obstacle; and an infantry advance from one hedgerow to the next could only be achieved under the harassing fire of innumerable snipers and concealed machine-gun posts. No great defence in depth had been developed—on the assumption that any attacking force would be so weakened by the fire power of the coastal defences that it would be speedily mopped up by mobile armoured reserves located in rear of the beaches. This assumption was to prove false. The Normandy sector of the famed Atlantic Wall was to 'crumble almost at the first push'.

But outside the immediate perimeter of the beaches, main battle zone defences were speedily to be laid out to a depth of ten miles; men, tanks, and guns were soon to be so thoroughly dug in that fragmentation bombs could do little or no damage; heavy bombs formed craters that merely served to impede the tanks and vehicles of the invaders; and the superior speed and manœuvrability of Allied tanks were unable to offset the greater fire power of the heavier German models under conditions that approximated to those of static warfare. Villages booby-trapped from one end to the other; minefields covering the approaches to these villages—these minefields being themselves covered by skilfully concealed 88-millimetre guns; trip wires in every likely or unlikely hedge: no easy passage lay ahead of those assault soldiers whose first task it was, in the unpropitious dawn of a June morning, to lift the curtain and set the stage for what their Supreme Commander, in his special order of the day, called 'The Great Crusade'.

Six hours and ten minutes before the first seaborne troops set foot upon the soil of France—that is, at twenty minutes after midnight—the air transport commands of the British and United States air forces had begun to drop the airborne assault forces on either flank of the invasion zone. The commander of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, viewed with the gravest apprehension the proposed use of the two United States airborne divisions in an attack in the neighbourhood of 'Utah', because of the combination of unsuitable landing-grounds and anticipated enemy resistance; and in the last week before the invasion he put in a last protest to the Supreme Commander against what he termed the 'futile slaughter' of two fine divisions. This apprehension on the part of so experienced and courageous a commander is in itself indicative of the high success that attended the operation.



Some six thousand five hundred officers and men of the United States 82nd Airborne Division, under the command of Major-General (afterwards General) Matthew B. Ridgway, landed in roughly the planned area, and captured and held Ste. Mère Eglise. Today a stone post marked zero—the first of a series that stretches across France—commemorates the march of the United States armies across France into Germany. The United States 101st Airborne Division, under the command of Major-General (afterwards Lieutenant-General) Maxwell D. Taylor, scheduled to be dropped alongside the 82nd to the south-east, was less fortunate. The six thousand five hundred parachute elements of the division were scattered over an area twenty-five miles by fifteen miles in extent, and in consequence lost sixty per cent of their equipment. Nevertheless, with great gallantry, the division held the exits from 'Utah' beach and struck southward in the direction of Carentan, while the 82nd Division, despite heavy shelling in the Ste. Mère Eglise area, also established contact with the assault troops pushing inland from the beach in the early morning following D-Day. Despite all difficulties of navigation due to the cloud and atmospheric conditions generally, and despite heavy casualties suffered by the gliders flown in during the first day, the airborne troops had accomplished all their tasks.

In the British sector, as a result of the very accurate work of the Pathfinders of the Royal Air Force, the majority of the gliderborne troops of the British 6th Airborne Division, under the command of Major-General R. N. (afterwards General Sir Richard) Gale, were dropped in the appointed areas east of the Orne river without being excessively 'scattered': the parachute troops were less fortunate. The party charged with the mission of securing the Bénouville bridges over the Orne and the Caen canal that runs alongside it performed a particularly incisive exploit. The bridges were about six hundred yards apart. Landing exactly as planned, in a compact area of just over one square kilometre, the troops carried by five gliders went into action immediately and secured both bridges intact. Near Merville, the spectacular silencing of a coastal battery—whose guns had been sited to sweep the immediate sea approaches—by a small party of the 9th Parachute Battalion vitally assisted the seaborne landings. Only one hundred and fifty officers and men were able to assemble to fight their way through the wire and the minefields that protected the approaches to the steel doors of the concrete casemates: nearly half the battalion—including those gliderborne troops whose mission it was to crash-land on the battery—had dropped several miles to the east among the swamps of the river Dives. Three bridges were destroyed over the Dives—just outside the



lodgement area—to minimize the danger to the left flank of the invasion, and a limited bridgehead—that fell short of Cabourg—was formed across the Orne, with the assistance of the 1st Commando Brigade. By nightfall of D-Day the division had been fully re-supplied and was in possession of all its heavy equipment.

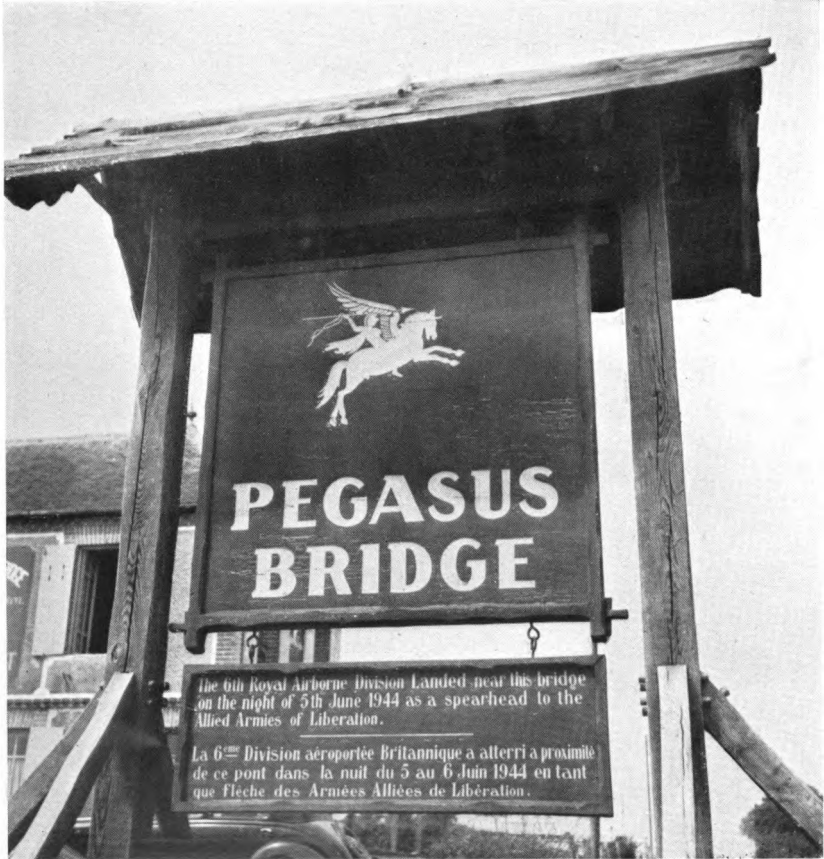
Thus it was that the British 6th Airborne Division mounted guard on the left flank of the whole invasion front, held it in face of severe and continuous enemy pressure while the Allied lodgement area was in process of consolidation, and continued to hold it firmly until the breakout eastward across France two months later. Just east of the Orne, five miles inland, dwells the small community of Ranville. A brick wall at the cross-roads carries a plaque bearing the inscription: 'Ranville, the first village of France to be liberated, was wrested from the Germans at 2.30 a.m. on June 6th, 1944, by the 13th (Lancashire) Parachute Battalion'. A little more than a mile away the bridge over the ship canal carries the equally proud inscription 'Pegasus Bridge', in airborne maroon and blue, and the winged-horse sign of the British airborne forces. These memorials—together with the war graves in the immediate neighbourhood—serve to commemorate a vital task resolutely performed by the British 6th Airborne Division.

The invasion picture begins to unfold. At 'Utah', against light resistance, the United States 4th Division led the assault of the United States VII Corps, under the command of Major-General (afterwards General) J. Lawton Collins. Supported by twenty-eight amphibious tanks launched five thousand yards offshore—all but one of which touched down safely—the assault soldiers made a good landing. By nightfall they had destroyed all the enemy along a four-thousand-yard stretch of beach and at one point had penetrated nearly ten thousand yards inland, where they linked up with the 101st Airborne Division. At 'Omaha', on the other hand, the story was one of near disaster. A high sea was running off the beach; several craft were swamped; of the thirty-two amphibious tanks launched, all but five foundered; and, of these five, one was knocked out immediately on reaching shore. Thus the 1st and 29th Divisions of the United States V Corps, under the command of Major-General (afterwards Lieutenant-General) Leonard T. Gerow, their craft flung out of formation by the high sea, came in on 'Omaha' with hardly any armour support. Moreover, owing to poor visibility, the air bombing in this sector had been largely ineffective; the beach itself was unscarred by bombardment; and the naval guns were hampered by the configuration of the ground which made observation difficult. The American troops were, in fact, fated to run into an enemy division deployed



SOLDIER (*War Office*)

RANVILLE



SOLDIER (*War Office*)

## PEGASUS BRIDGE

for action—the coastal defence troops in the area having recently been augmented by a German field formation that was holding a stand-to exercise on the coast and manning the defences as the attack opened. By hard fighting, after a day of crisis—in the early afternoon the local German divisional commander reported to his headquarters that the American assault had been thrown back into the Channel—V Corps, at nightfall, was holding a beachhead little more than a mile deep.

Not until two days later did the corps and the British Second Army meet at their boundary in the Port-en-Bessin area, north of Bayeux; and another three days were to pass before the troops at 'Omaha' had won the ground essential for the security of their beachhead. By that time the Germans were defending every hedgerow on the slopes that led south to St. Lô with a vigour that indicated their determination to protect their main lateral communications from Caen through St. Lô to Avranches on the west coast of the Cherbourg peninsula.

The British Second Army assaulted in the right sector ('Gold') with the 50th (Northumbrian) Division of XXX Corps; in the centre sector ('Juno') with the Canadian 3rd Division of I Corps; in the left sector ('Sword') with the British 3rd Division, also of I Corps, under the command of Lieutenant-General J. T. (afterwards General Sir John) Crocker. The D-Day objectives of the 50th Division were the town of Bayeux and the high ground in the area of St. Léger astride the main road from Bayeux to Caen about seven miles inland. The initial task of the two divisions of I Corps was to secure, east of St. Léger, a covering position along the railway beyond the main road to Caen and beyond Caen to the Orne river and the sea. Thus the role of the Canadians was to push forward through the gap between Bayeux and Caen, while the British divisions on their flanks took both these towns. Each assault division was accompanied by an armoured brigade that included amphibious regiments, and by assault teams with the specialized armour of the British 79th Armoured Division—of which more will be heard in this narrative. The 47th Royal Marine Commando, scheduled to land in 'Gold' sector, was to move along the coastal cliffs to seize the small fishing harbour of Port-en-Bessin on the boundary line between the British and the American sectors: a heavy commitment it was not to accomplish until D plus 2. The 4th Commando Brigade was to clear up the area between 'Juno' and 'Sword'. In 'Sword' sector, the 1st Commando Brigade was made responsible for capturing enemy posts on the left flank of the sector and the port of Ouistreham. Afterwards it

was to join the 6th Airborne Division east of the Orne and continue to clear up enemy posts along the coast as far as Cabourg. Thus the British and Canadian objectives for D-Day included Port-en-Bessin to the west, Cabourg to the east, and, within an arc based on these coastal points, Bayeux and Caen.

The enemy was not to prove slow to recover from the stunning effects of the aerial and naval bombardments, and all landings were to take place under a storm of machine-gun and mortar fire; but none of the beach battles, however fiercely contested, was to prevent an inland advance of up to six or seven miles over a frontage of attack of about twelve miles before the close of D-Day. The discarded apparatus of the actual invasion assault was to bear dramatic witness to the already historic fact that the famed Atlantic Wall had gone the way of the Maginot Line. Nevertheless, not one of the D-Day objectives was to be reached by the infantry; and the ultimate object of the actual landing operation—the securing of a firm base for the initial task of developing the bridgehead south of the line St. Lô—Caen to south-east of Caen—was not to be attained until a month later, after some of the bitterest fighting of the war.

The historian of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division writes of the morning after D-Day: 'The great trial had come, and the perils were past'. But although the 50th Division, this same morning after D-Day, was to complete its D-Day task of capturing Bayeux and of crossing the Bayeux—Caen road, the beach obstacles and the beach defences it had surmounted were among the lesser perils of the invasion task; it was to take two months instead of two or three days to reach its next objective. The historian of the British 3rd Division remarks that the officers and men of the division had been carried overnight across the Channel with half a gale blowing 'from an idyllic life in sunlit woods and warm Hampshire lanes' to disprove, in one day, 'the Teutonic theory of the Atlantic Wall and to form a bridgehead from which, by nightfall, they were in no immediate danger of being dislodged'. He adds: 'That was the achievement'. The achievement was considerable; but, unhappily, it was not enough. The division was hardly more than half-way to its main objective—Caen. The Canadian official historian, writing of the Canadian 3rd Division, comments: 'The Normandy landing was an extraordinary military performance. The legendary line upon which a most ingenious and painstaking enemy had lavished so much art during the years of his occupation of France was broken and reduced to nullity in the short hours of a summer morning'. But, yet again, the division was to finish the day even farther than the British from the main objective of I Corps—Caen. As the event was to show, the capture of these

D-Day objectives, on time, was vital to quick success in the opening stage of the whole Normandy operation; but an advance of about ten miles inland was beyond the capacity of the troops. The men of the British 3rd Division, at the end of D-Day, in the light of 'the mental as well as the material hazards' they had faced, may understandably have 'chuckled together at the thought of the look on Jerry's face as they gave him the surprise of his life that morning'. Nevertheless, for many weeks to come, the Allied forces in Normandy were to have little cause for exhilaration—until, at the last, the tremendous Allied surge from the hard-won bridgehead was to recoup at a stroke the loss on the time schedule.

The 50th Division assaulted on a two-brigade front between the strongly fortified villages of le Hamel and la Rivière at twenty-five minutes past seven on the morning of June 6th, 1944. Asnelles-sur-Mer—a mile east of le Hamel—proclaims itself 'the first beach and port of the landing'; but the main opposition came from le Hamel which, as a result of the uncertain light, had escaped the initial air bombardment. The leading infantry were pinned down at the head of the beach by mortar fire and by machine-gun fire from pillboxes and 88-millimetre guns sited farther inland; and, although the enemy position was gradually by-passed and the troops started to push inland, Asnelles was not taken until midday and le Hamel itself not until five o'clock in the evening.

The brigade that landed at the other end of the long beach found that the bombardment had been more effective—although the pre-H-Hour bombardment had missed a fifty-yard strip extending the length of the village. At the western end of the sea wall an 88-millimetre casemated gun position, supported by machine-guns, had a field of fire straight along the beach. Here the fighting was to take on an almost medieval pattern. The troops who were compelled to shelter under the sea wall came under a further bombardment of hand grenades pitched over the top. A German battery had been established about a mile and a half inland from la Rivière at Ver-sur-Mer, where the road leads down to the beach; and it is Ver-sur-Mer, on the face of a monument erected at the entrance to the road, that challengingly proclaims itself 'the most important beach of the landing'.

The brigade shortly began moving inland to its objective on the Bayeux-Caen road—the high ground in the area of St. Léger; and, as the historian of the division remarks, 'while the fighting went on in field and village, successive waves of troops and vehicles and equipment were discharged over the beaches and sent to their

appointed places in the expeditionary force that was rapidly coming to life on the soil of France'. The brigade had registered an inland advance of some five miles, and at its farthest point of advance was little more than a mile and a half short of its objective. The stout-hearted Northumbrian division, in first-rate fashion, had indeed—as yet a third notice board, in English and in French, proclaims—'started its victorious advance to liberate the towns and the villages of France, Belgium, and Holland'. It further states that the division was 'the first British infantry to penetrate into Germany'. 'La Commune d'Asnelles-le Hamel' which sponsors this notice may be pardoned a slight historical inaccuracy that so obviously springs from warmth of feeling for its liberators.

The two leading brigades of the Canadian 3rd Division assaulted astride Courseulles-sur-Mer, at the mouth of the river Seulles, at eight o'clock in the morning. Courseulles, too, has its particular claim to fame in the invasion picture in that it was 'the first French port to be liberated'. The sea was rough; many of the enemy strongpoints had survived the previous night's bombing; and the beach exits were cleared only after a costly process of infiltration and assault. When the inland advance began, it was the intention that the brigade on the right should drive straight on to the final objectives around Pûtot-en-Bessin and Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, on the main road to Caen. The brigade on the left, nearer to Caen, was to halt on an intermediate objective some five miles north of the city; when the reserve brigade would pass through and occupy the left half of the final divisional objective, the high ground west of Caen.

In the result, the brigade on the right got no farther than half-way to its objective: the two troops of supporting armour that actually reached Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, after inflicting casualties on enemy infantry, withdrew to the main divisional line through Villons-les-Buissons. The brigade on the left 'encountered trouble in the inland villages', and the reserve brigade did not begin to pass through until late in the afternoon. When it moved southward, the advanced guard was 'delayed by stubborn machine-gun positions'. It halted for the night some four miles north of Caen. At last light, the main divisional line still ran through Villons-les-Buissons—nearly four miles equidistant from Bretteville and from the centre of Caen. The battle of the beaches had been won; the first battle for Caen was already half lost.

The sea approach between 'Juno' and 'Sword' beaches is covered by a long and wide belt of rocks, and the British 3rd Division was to land some seven miles to the east of the Canadian beaches—



*Imperial War Museum*

AUNAY-SUR-ODON





*Imperial War Museum*

CAEN

though at the same hour—at the seaside resort of Colleville-Plage, a mile and a half east of Lion-sur-Mer. It has since re-christened itself Colleville-Montgomery-Plage. The division's specific task was to advance on Caen and to link up with the 6th Airborne Division on the bridges over the Caen canal and the Orne at Bénouville—which had already been captured by the gliderborne troops.

The assault troops were quickly off the beaches once they had gained a foothold. Amid the 'general confusion and din all round', the mayor of Colleville—at considerable personal risk, one must surmise—put in an appearance to welcome the invaders. He had judged it 'a suitable occasion to wear a gleaming fireman's helmet, not unlike an inverted brass coal-scuttle'; and one need hardly doubt that the division once commanded by Field Marshal Montgomery at Dunkirk accorded him the full ceremonial honours his gesture merited. The leading brigade was soon a mile inland, attacking Hermanville, Colleville-sur-Orne, and battery positions in the southern outskirts of Ouistreham. The follow-up brigade moving southwards encountered considerable opposition from strongpoints protected by concrete and minefields. By early evening it had reached Bieville, four miles from the centre of Caen, and was on the high ground leading towards the city—the key D-Day objective, not merely of I Corps, but of the Second Army.

It was at this stage in the British advance that the one German Panzer division in the whole invasion area immediately available for counter-attack came into action: the 21st Panzer Division, stationed south-east of Caen. Orders from Army Group B forbade it to launch a counter-attack without the permission of Field Marshal Rommel; and, on the day of the invasion, the field marshal was in Germany, on his way to attend a conference with the Führer. In default of orders from Army Group B, the commander of the 21st Panzer Division, on his own initiative, at half-past six in the morning, decided to send a battle group, with tanks, against the British airborne forces that had landed east of the Orne; and his leading troops were already attacking the British position at Ranville when, around ten o'clock in the morning, he received an order from his corps commander to turn west and check the more dangerous advance on the west side of the river.

About fifty tanks and a battalion of Panzer Grenadiers attacked from Caen in the direction of Lion-sur-Mer; and at seven o'clock that evening half a dozen tanks and a company of infantry got through to the coast at Luc-sur-Mer—at the boundary between the British and the Canadian sectors—where the German defences were still intact. But the massive arrival of the 6th Airlanding Brigade of the

6th Airborne Division, which doubled the strength of the division 'at one stroke', also served to persuade the Panzer troops that they had been singled out for an 'overhead counter-stroke', and they broke off their preparations to develop a wedge between the British and the Canadian beachheads. Nevertheless they had helped to sustain a strong and dangerous enemy salient at the fortified radar station west of Douvres-la-Délivrande which had already brought about a diversion in the advance of the reserve brigade of the British 3rd Division. The position, under attack by the 4th Commando Brigade, was to hold out until June 17th; and those leading troops of the 3rd Division that had been pushing forward against comparatively light opposition to Caen had to be content to take up positions on the line Bieville-Bénouville, with the Canadian 3rd Division on their right and in contact with the 6th Airborne on their left.

D-Day operations had thus gained a foothold on the continent of Europe, but no more than a foothold. The D-Day operational plan as a whole had collapsed: it was now something to be 'proceeded with', and 'every yard gained had to be fought for and then grimly defended'. The scene was set for the long drawn-out battle for the many-spired city of Caen—doomed to be stricken to the ground before it fell, on July 9th, to the assault of four hundred and sixty bombers of the Royal Air Force and the combined efforts of the Canadian 3rd Division and the British 3rd and 59th Divisions. At the city approaches, the British and Canadian troops were to come upon their own dead of a month earlier, still unburied.

## ii. *FIRST OF THE 'HINGE' BATTLES—CAEN*

WHEN Herr Hitler, on June 6th, received word of the invasion, he was about to appear at a reception at Klessheim castle, near Salzburg, for the new Hungarian Prime Minister. The Führer came into the meeting with a 'radiant' face and announced: 'It's begun at last'. He expressed confidence that all measures were being taken to meet the crisis, and that, within a week, counter-attacks would wipe out any beachheads.

His confidence was to prove unfounded; but not without, as the Canadian official historian remarks, 'some very hard sledding for the British and Canadians'. For seventy days after D-Day, the unspectacular role of pounding against the strongest defences encountered in northern France fell to the British and Canadian armies—in pursuance of the policy laid down and precisely followed by the commander of the Allied ground forces. On June 30th, in a directive to his British and United States army commanders, General Montgomery reiterated his earlier exposition of the plan of campaign, and wrote: 'My broad policy, once we had secured a firm lodgement area, has always been to draw the main enemy forces into the battle on our eastern flank, and to fight them there, so that our affairs on the western flank could proceed the easier'. He went on to explain the plan of future operations as being to 'hold the maximum number of enemy divisions on our eastern flank between Caen and Villers-Bocage, and to swing the western or right flank of the Army Group southwards and eastwards in a wide sweep so as to threaten the line of withdrawal of such enemy divisions to the south of Paris'. It was precisely in this manner that events developed six weeks later.

Villers-Bocage lies twenty miles inland, on fairly high ground, on the main road from Caen to the west. As the junction of five important roads, its retention by the enemy was vital if the Allied bridgehead was to be contained. Under the original plan of attack an armoured column was to make an immediate drive from the 'Gold' sector to Villers-Bocage, in order to cut this main road. But this drive was slow to get going, although, according to the German account, in this sector, on the first day, only one scout battalion was responsible for ten miles of front; and when within a week of the invasion the British 7th Armoured Division entered the town, it was compelled to withdraw after a bitter street engagement with tanks

of the 2nd Panzer Division—freshly arrived from Amiens *en route* for the American sector farther west. At the beginning of August, the 50th Division was still having to fight its way towards Villers-Bocage. A mighty clash of arms now awaited the British and United States forces in Normandy after the comparatively quick success of the first landings; and the invasion flail was desperately to smite the Norman countryside. At a cross-roads five miles south of Villers-Bocage, by the river Odon, a tributary of the Orne, there was to be found till long after the war a heap of rubble—and a notice-board. The inscription read: 'Here was Aunay-sur-Odon'.

On the day following the landings, the British 50th Division moved on Bayeux; on this same day the Canadian 3rd Division also reached its planned D-Day objective—the Bayeux–Caen railway just beyond Bretteville; and one of its brigades advanced south from Villons-les-Buissons towards Authie, a village on the high ground a couple of miles north-west of Caen. At Authie the Canadian infantry and armour met head-on a large-scale counter-attack by the 12th SS Panzer Division. This formation of fanatical young Nazis (Hitlerjugend), twenty-one thousand strong, had been in reserve south of Rouen and, like the 21st Panzer Division, had begun to move before authority arrived from the Supreme Command. It came into action after a night march—with orders to 'throw the English back into the sea'. At the end of a hard-fought battle—in which both sides lost heavily—the Canadians were pressed back two miles to their starting point—Villons-les-Buissons; and the SS Panzer division retired to dig in north of Caen. This 'hinge of the Normandy gate' it was ordered to hold at all cost; and over a month was to pass before Canadian troops again entered Authie. On this same day, the British 3rd Division, to the left of the Canadians, closed a little nearer to Caen. The British 6th Airborne Division continued to hold the Orne bridgehead and repulsed all enemy attempts at infiltration.

During this interregnum that preceded the 'dog-fight' for Caen, the United States VII and V Corps thoroughly secured their bridgeheads. By June 9th, VII Corps had penetrated inland to a depth of ten miles; and this same day the 29th Division of V Corps captured Isigny—another D-Day objective—on the road to Carentan and to Cherbourg. Its streets were still aflame from the naval bombardment. On June 10th the two corps linked up east of the town. The town itself fell to the 101st Airborne Division two days later. Meanwhile the United States 1st Division—America's famous 'Big Red One'—had advanced from the left of V Corps bridgehead and contacted the British 50th Division to the west of Bayeux. On June 14th it captured

Caumont—nineteen miles inland from 'Omaha' beach. Here United States V Corps and British XXX Corps joined hands. Thus, by the middle of June, within little more than a week of the first landings, the United States First Army and the British Second Army held a continuous front in Normandy.

At a Press conference in London on August 31st, General Eisenhower remarked: 'Every foot of ground the enemy lost at Caen was like losing ten miles anywhere else'. Thus it was that the main battle fought out in Normandy during the period of the establishment of the lodgement area, following the success of the initial assault, took the form of a hard 'slugging' match on the British sector of the front, with the city of Caen as its focal point. The Caen battle was the 'hinge' battle of victory in the west. It served to throw the German Army off balance; and that army was never again to recover its balance until it reached the confines of Germany. Here, on the British Second Army front, the enemy concentrated the bulk of his strength, while the men of the United States First Army fought their way up the Cherbourg peninsula to capture the port itself, subsequently regrouping and consolidating their position to the south in preparation for what was to prove the decisive break-through at the end of July. Because of bad weather—and above all because of the four-day gale of June 19th that scattered and destroyed the 'Mulberry' at St. Laurent on the 'Omaha' beachhead and put the British Second Army five days behind in its planned build-up—the main effort of the Second Army could not be launched until June 25th: and, by the last week in June, seven Panzer divisions, with elements of an eighth—two-thirds of the enemy armour in France—were concentrated on the Second Army's twenty-mile front. The majority of these Panzer divisions joined the fighting line with very nearly their full establishment of armoured fighting vehicles; but it should be stated that the enemy never at any given moment employed more than a small proportion of them in a mobile role. Even at this early stage of the struggle in north-west Europe, the peril of petrol shortage was looming up before the German armour commanders—a shadow which was in itself a projection of the wings of the Allied Air Force.

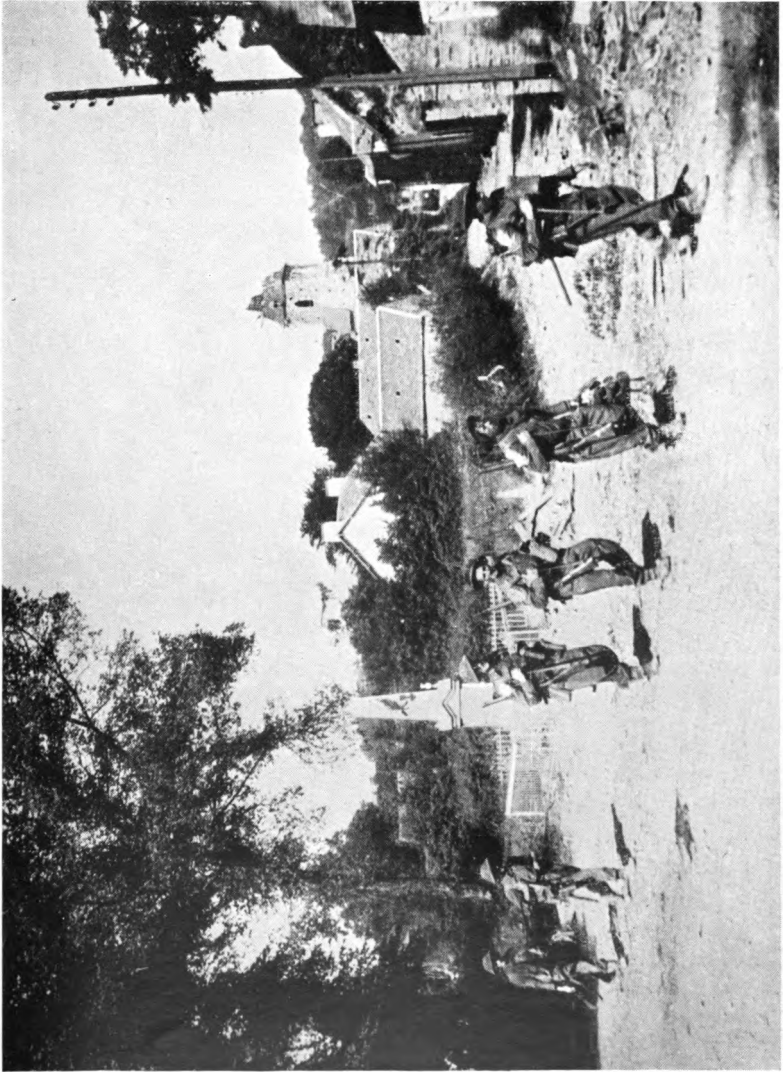
The general pattern and purpose of the prolonged fighting around Caen was to take the city by means of a pincer movement. The right hand of the pincer was to swing south-east from Tilly-sur-Seulles—a hamlet some six or seven miles north of Villers-Bocage. It lay on the axis of advance of that armoured column scheduled under the

original plan of attack to make an immediate drive from 'Gold' sector to Villers-Bocage. This right arm was to swing across the Odon and Orne rivers, and so reach the east bank of the Orne south of Caen. The left arm of the pincer was to come in on the town from the north.

In June, the British Second Army front from right to left was held by XXX, VIII, and I Corps; and it was to XXX Corps—with the British 49th (West Riding) Division now in the line alongside the 50th—that Tilly-sur-Seulles fell on June 18th, after violent fighting—much of it hand-to-hand in the close 'bocage' country. When, a week later, the three battalions of the 49th Division crossed their start-line in an attack to assist the main effort by VIII Corps they had to contend, not merely with enemy mortar fire, but with mist augmented by artificial smoke. 'Small parties of men,' it is recorded, 'moved forward holding on to one another, and it was only possible to distinguish a man by peering closely into his face.' Left of XXX Corps, VIII Corps attacked towards the Odon, south-west of Caen; and here the 15th (Scottish) Division won a bridgehead over the river, which the 11th Armoured Division proceeded to expand. The enemy reacted immediately to these valuable gains by the right-arm pincer: here was the ten-mile front—between Tilly and Caen—where he assembled his eight Panzer divisions. He was not to find the Odon bridgehead an attractive sector to fight in: 'every field was littered with dead men and burnt-out tanks from both sides; and dead cows stank in the summer sun'. Nor was he able at any time to launch a properly organized counter-stroke. From June 26th, VIII Corps, under the command of Lieutenant-General (afterwards General) Sir Richard O'Connor, put in a series of heavy attacks that 'left the enemy no option but to resist with everything available, and one by one the Panzer divisions were flung in'.

Here is an example of the 'wet-hen' tactics already discussed. Three days later the commander of Panzer Group West—now reconstituted with two SS Panzer corps and one Panzer corps—put forward a proposal for 'a concentrated attack with all available strength'. The proposal was rejected by Field Marshal Rommel. This master of armoured warfare had now lost all faith in the possibility of mounting a successful attack against the Allied bridgehead; and, as that other master of armoured warfare, Colonel-General Guderian, comments: 'What armoured strength did remain was in fact squandered in frontal attacks with limited objectives made under fire of the enemy's naval guns'.

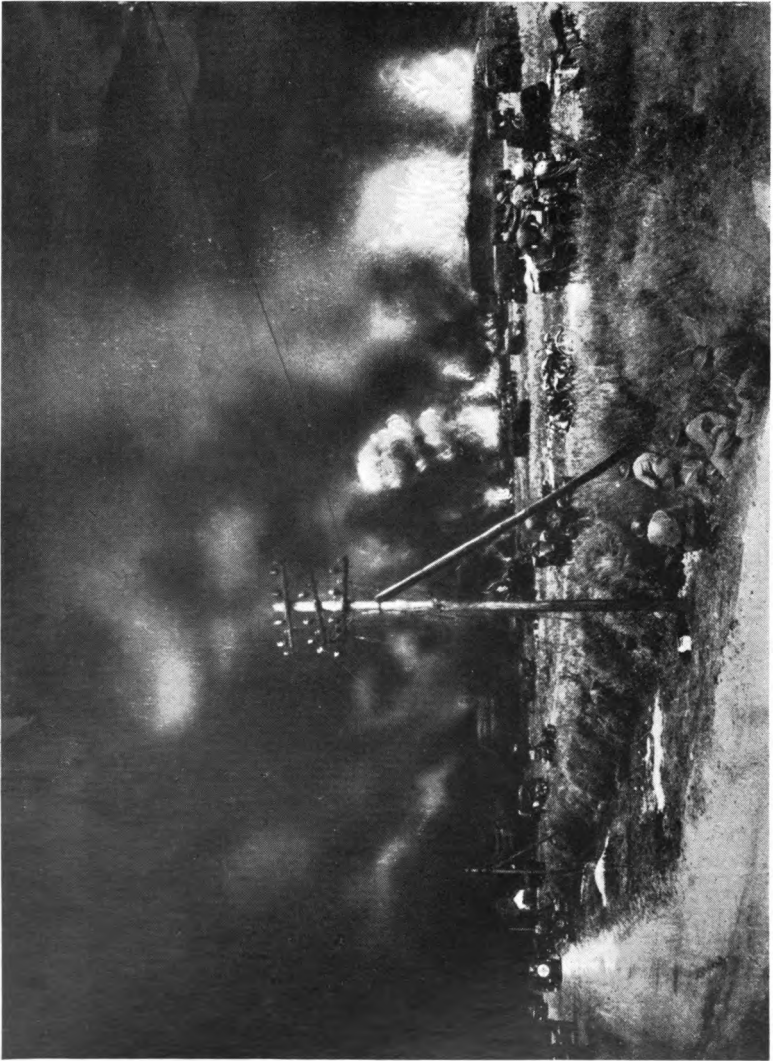
The left arm of the pincer was represented by I Corps, which continued to hammer the enemy north of Caen. Meanwhile, plans went



*Imperial War Museum*

**VILLERS-BOCAGE**





FALAISE ROAD

forward to capture the city by direct assault. As a preliminary, on July 4th, the Canadian 3rd Division attacked Carpiquet, a village and airfield three miles west of Caen. A tremendous weight of artillery, including the 16-inch guns of H.M.S. *Rodney*, prepared the way for the attack; but so fierce was enemy resistance that the airfield area was not finally cleared until the day after the city itself had been captured. At half-past four on the morning of July 8th, I Corps launched the 'main effort' of the British Second Army. It employed three divisions—the Canadian 3rd and the British 3rd and 59th (Staffordshire)—with two armoured brigades in immediate support and a third readily available.

The Canadian division was on the right wing, and in the first phase of the battle had the satisfaction of driving a stubborn enemy from that village of Authie where it had sustained a stiff reverse at the hands of the 12th SS Panzer Division a month before. By nightfall, Canadian tanks and armoured cars were on the western outskirts of Caen; the 59th Division was closing in from the north; and the British 3rd Division was breaking into the north-east corner of the city. Next morning, the 3rd Division reached the dock area and met troops from the Canadian 3rd Division who had entered the town from the west. Although mopping up was to continue until July 10th, and although the enemy remained in occupation of the suburb of Vaucelles on the east bank of the Orne, it could at last be said that Caen had fallen. Two thousand three hundred tons of air bombs had heralded the approach of the city's conquerors; and it is some consolation to record that the two great abbeys—*aux Hommes* and *aux Dames*—of another Conqueror, William I, still stood up 'proud and austere' above the rubble of the city. It is equally pleasant to record of this community of fifty-four thousand people that, as their liberators fought their way through the streets in the face of enemy snipers, 'every lull in the firing brought Frenchmen out of the cellars with smiles and roses and wine'.

When the battle for Caen was approaching its climax, General Montgomery, in the directive addressed to his army commanders on June 30th, was able to write: 'Cherbourg has fallen without any interference from enemy reserves brought in from other areas; the US First Army is proceeding with its reorganization and regrouping, undisturbed by the enemy; the western flank is quiet . . . By forcing the enemy to place the bulk of his strength in front of the Second Army, we have made easier the acquisition of territory on the western flank.' General Eisenhower himself records that it was his intention that General Bradley's forces should strike south as soon as

Cherbourg had fallen, but that the need to reorganize and regroup imposed a week's delay.

In retrospect, it is interesting to recall that it was during this period that the British Second Army suffered general reproach for its alleged 'slowness'. 'As the days wore on after the initial landing', writes General Eisenhower, 'the particular dissatisfaction of the Press was directed toward the lack of progress on our left.' He adds that he and all of his service commanders and staff were greatly concerned about this static situation around Caen; that every possible means of breaking the deadlock was considered; that he 'repeatedly urged Montgomery to speed up and intensify his efforts to the limit'; and he duly records that 'Montgomery threw in attack after attack, gallantly conducted and heavily supported by artillery and air'. It is a minor irony of history that, in this same directive, General Montgomery's orders to the United States First Army emphasized the need for speed in starting its drive to the south.

In fact, all the contemporary evidence—as recorded in the diary of the Supreme Commander's naval aide, Captain Harry C. Butcher—suggests that neither General Eisenhower nor his deputy, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder (afterwards Marshal of the Royal Air Force Baron Tedder of Glenguin), ever fully apprehended 'Montgomery's deliberate plan of unbalancing the enemy front and then breaking out with a "single, annihilating stroke"'. His seeming hesitation would appear to have induced in them both an unbalancing sense of frustration. The Supreme Commander's deputy had failed to secure priority for the capture of the Caen airfield sites; the Supreme Commander, according to his own chief of staff, could 'see an all-out co-ordinated attack by the entire Allied line which would at last put our forces in decisive motion', and he went 'up and down the line like a football coach, exhorting everyone to aggressive action'. The problem of breaking the deadlock had resolved itself into a choice between this method of approach and that of a battle of manœuvre.

Equally it may be doubted whether the American commanders, with their preference for 'the direct approach and the straight punch', had any appreciation of General Montgomery's newly propounded first principle of war—that of 'balance'. It so happens that, in this same order of June 30th to his army commanders, he perfectly illustrates the principle: 'We must retain such balance and poise in our dispositions that there is never any need to react to enemy moves or thrusts; the enemy can do what he likes; we will proceed with our plan'. The field marshal's other favourite maxim on the subject of 'winning the air battle first' hardly qualifies as a principle since it has

reference only to a certain phase of warfare and must therefore lack universality.

Immediate American operations, as a preliminary to the main assault to the south, were designed to secure the general line of the Périers—St. Lô road. Périers lies to the west at the junction of the road from Carentan; St. Lô is built on a rocky hill dominating the valley of the Vire. These operations were launched on July 3rd in face of numerous water obstacles and the standard difficulties of the 'bocage' country. When Caen fell the United States corps responsible for the advance on St. Lô was still four miles short of its objective. Eleven days of hard going lay ahead of the Americans before they captured the shattered remains of this old fortress town: a rate of advance that works out at little more than a mile in three days. The appearance of the 2nd SS Panzer and Panzer Lehr Divisions—switched from the Odon sector—on this front provided a clear indication that the enemy was now becoming increasingly anxious about his western flank; whereupon the British Second Army was called upon to 'redouble its efforts' to prevent the switching of additional armoured forces against it.

Along the entire front attacks were now carried out in order to get the Allied armies in position for the battle of the break-out. Since D-Day—a little more than a month earlier—nearly a million Allied soldiers had been transported to Normandy; and the Allied bridge-head was sixty miles long and from ten to thirty miles deep. The United States First Army pressed south—to gain possession of the ground they needed west of the river Vire—for the mounting of their major assault operation; and during the period July 10th–18th, the British Second Army delivered a series of thrusts with the primary object of making progress southwards towards Thury-Harcourt, a small community alongside the Orne: little more than ten miles to the south, but in terms of this 'dogfight' phase of the Normandy battle a thousand miles away.

On the British XXX Corps front—with the 50th, 49th, and 59th Divisions forward—fierce engagements continued in the neighbourhood of those earliest names in the invasion story—Tilly-sur-Seulles and Villers-Bocage. In all sectors the enemy reacted sharply, and was 'still succeeding in plugging the holes': no more than a three-mile advance west of Tilly was registered as a result of the whole operation. On the Odon front, XII Corps, under the command of Lieutenant-General N. M. (afterwards General Sir Neil) Ritchie—with the 53rd (Welsh), 15th (Scottish), and 43rd (Wessex) Divisions forward—took over from VIII Corps and continued its predecessor's

efforts to extend the bridgehead. In this attack, which began on July 15th, 'artificial moonlight', or the employment of searchlights directed to reflect from clouds, was used for the first time in battle. The Canadian II Corps had now become operational under Lieutenant-General G. G. Simonds and, assuming command of the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions, it took over the Caen sector and thus came into line between British I and XII Corps. On I Corps front, the 51st (Highland) Division attacked the factory area in the suburb of Colombelles—south of the Orne and immediately east of Caen; but it was to discover that the enemy still showed no sign of relinquishing his counter-attacks. During this period, while in reserve, VIII Corps was built up into three armoured divisions, in readiness for a big armoured thrust in the forthcoming battle, which was to take the form of a large-scale British Second Army attack on the extreme left of the Allied front—that is, east of the Orne—to be followed, a day later, by an even heavier thrust by the United States First Army.

The Canadian end of this all-out attempt to break out of the original bridgehead was launched on July 18th. The Canadian Corps crossed the Orne and cleaned up the factory and built-up areas that had been focal points of resistance since the capture of Caen; in particular, the chimneys of the steel and cement factories of Colombelles—smoking to the last—had provided unhindered observation for the defenders. The Canadians then proceeded to press up the east bank. But enemy resistance soon stiffened; the weather broke; and the advance was carried on through seas of mud. Hardly more than four miles south of Caen stands a kidney-shaped eminence—the ridge of Verrières: an outlying foothill of the higher hill-mass lying south on the main road to Falaise: a name soon to figure ominously in the annals of Canada's military forces. There was to be desperate fighting for a fortnight to come for this natural outpost of the new German line: 'and on it and about much Canadian blood was to be poured out'. The regiment that reached its objective on the central portion of the ridge was struck by enemy tanks and cut to pieces before it could consolidate: 'the remnants rolled back down the slope'. Here is a glimpse of but one incident that might be paralleled again and again, not merely on the Orne front but on all fronts in Normandy, during this 'dogfight' phase. War, indeed, in this July of 1944 often bore a remarkably old-fashioned look.

While the Canadian infantry were thus occupied, British VIII Corps—consisting now of the 11th, Guards, and 7th Armoured Divisions—also crossed the Orne farther north. In blinding dust they passed over the newly built bridges in the I Corps bridgehead—

whence the 3rd Division was shortly to launch a supporting attack against the villages and woods lying south-east towards Troarn—and struck southwards. High expectation attended the launching of this largest concentration of armoured power yet achieved in the Normandy battle. It was an expectation which Field Marshal Montgomery, in his own narrative of the campaign, categorically deprecates. He points out that the battle was one for position: designed, first, to bring into play the full effect on the enemy of a direct and powerful threat to Falaise and the open country to the east of the town; and, secondly, to secure ground on which major forces could be poised ready to strike out to the south and south-east, when the United States break-out forces thrust eastwards to meet them. The fact that the forthcoming battle was never designed to achieve an armoured break-through to Falaise and was no more than a prelude to a clean break-through by the Americans on the western flank could not, for obvious reasons, be made clear at the time. Contemporary orders to VIII Corps clearly state that the eastern flank was the bastion on which the whole future of the campaign in north-west Europe depended; and that it must remain a firm bastion since, 'if it were to become unstable, the operations on the western flank would cease'. Unhappily the Supreme Commander's own Report, in discussing this operation, talks of exploitation 'in the direction of the Seine basin and Paris'—thereby reinforcing contemporary misconceptions.

The general intention of the operation—called 'Goodwood' with a courageous gaiety of spirit that the event was speedily to dissipate—was to seize the high ground south of Caen on either side of the main road 'running straight as a rifle-barrel' to Falaise; the specific mission of the corps was to establish an armoured division in each of three areas in the immediate neighbourhood of the Falaise road at an average distance of nine or ten miles from its start-line. The three divisions were to dominate these areas, 'and fight the enemy armour that would come to oppose them'. The offensive was majestically preceded by what Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory describes in his dispatch as 'the heaviest and most concentrated air attack in support of ground forces ever attempted'.

The morning of July 18th dawned bright and still; and, beginning at half-past five—two-and-a-quarter hours before the artillery programme started and the leading tanks moved forward—over two thousand heavy and medium bombers of the Allied Air Force dropped seven thousand seven hundred tons of bombs on the imminent battlefield. After the barrage had ceased—as the 11th Armoured Divisional history records—there lay ahead five miles of

utter devastation: the trees blasted, the buildings shattered, the air foul with the death-stench of cattle and horses: 'and yet beyond and beside these fated acres the enemy waited beside his guns, and even with the dead land itself he began to emerge blinkingly from his foxholes ready to sell his life dearly to our advancing troops'.

Once the initial shock of the air bombardment had worn off, the German reaction to this advance of 'solid' armour showed that it had lost nothing of its customary violence. Some four or five miles south of Caen, in the area of the village of Bourguebus, east of the Falaise road, the forward tanks ran into a formidable screen of well-sited and well-concealed anti-tank artillery, located beyond the limits of the barrage. Here the 11th Armoured Division, under the command of Major-General G. P. B. Roberts, alone lost over a hundred tanks during the day—although, as might be expected from its proud *insigne* of 'Taurus Pursuant', it remained full of fight to the last; and it was in the immediate neighbourhood of Bourguebus and of the high ground beyond it that the whole advance virtually came to a standstill. Only secondary gains were made by the armour thereafter. On the third day, heavy rain began to turn the battlefield, previously inches deep in dust, into a sea of mud. Despite all the apparatus of the modern battlefield, with its tanks, guns, half-tracks, carriers, and other weapons of assault, any soldier of the 1914–18 war would have felt an affinity for this latest version of the Flanders 'boue'. At the end of the offensive, the 7th Armoured Division—with the 11th Armoured and the Guards on either flank—was based on a defensive position running along the reverse slope of a ridge little more than four thousand yards south of the suburbs of Caen. Nevertheless, as a result of the Second Army's operations, the eastern suburbs of Caen had been cleared; the Orne bridgehead had more than doubled its size; in the centre, VIII Corps had achieved a maximum advance of ten thousand yards; and, above all, what Field Marshal Montgomery significantly calls 'the threat to Falaise' had been mounted. Finally, that day was brought a little nearer when the name of Caen would cease to exercise a certain hypnosis over the operational narrative of these events.

The break-out attempt of the United States First Army south of the Périers–St. Lô road had been scheduled to begin the day after the opening of the Second Army offensive; but bad weather—which must have ruled out air co-operation—held it up. The men of the United States First Army were compelled to huddle in their foxholes under dripping hedges, with the enemy, similarly entrenched behind the natural defences of the country, alert to every movement. Such

was this summer of 1944—that was no summer at all. It was not until after six days of waiting—'more miserable to the American troops,' writes General Eisenhower, 'than any others in the campaign'—that the opportunity for action came on July 25th. An area five miles long and one mile wide to the west of St. Lô was blasted by nearly two thousand heavy and medium bombers. Short bombing hit two of the American divisions a punishing blow; but VII Corps—of the original landing at 'Utah'—'sloughed afoot' toward the 'bomb-pitted carpet at St. Lô', and by nightfall its three divisions had advanced a couple of miles south of the Périers—St. Lô road against fierce resistance. In the St. Lô sector, on the left of VII Corps, V Corps—of the original landing at 'Omaha'—advanced two to three thousand yards east of the town. Next day, in the coastal sector, VIII Corps, with four infantry divisions and one armoured division, pushed out mobile columns to the south. Périers was occupied on the following day; and the enemy began to withdraw along the entire front. After as tough going as anything on the Caen front, the Americans—the great majority of them new to war—had at last succeeded in inching their way through the Carentan marshlands and the St. Lô hedgerows. During the last twelve days of the advance on St. Lô they had suffered a casualty rate of nearly a thousand a day—as nearly as possible the casualty rate suffered by the British and the Canadians during the first three weeks of their advance from the Normandy beaches—though Caen itself still remained to be captured at the end of it. The Périers—St. Lô road gave the Americans their first firm base; and, by July 30th, VIII Corps had reached Avranches, on the coastal road at the base of the Cherbourg peninsula. The road to Brittany lay open.

On August 1st, the twenty-one divisions of the United States First Army were split up to form the United States First and Third Armies. The headquarters of the 12th (United States) Army Group also became operational, under the command of Lieutenant-General Bradley, in order to control the two United States armies. The new army group remained under the operational control of the 21st (British) Army Group: that is to say, it reported to the Supreme Commander through General Montgomery's command. The Supreme Commander's own operational headquarters was at this time in process of moving to the Continent, and General Eisenhower defines General Montgomery's function as being 'to act as my representative, with authority, under my supervision, over the entire operation as coordinator of activities'. Lieutenant-General Patton assumed command of the newly formed Third Army. His first task was to overrun



Brittany and capture the Brittany ports—Brest, Lorient, and Dinard-St. Malo. The peninsula was cleared within a week; but, long before the ports were captured, General Patton, with his armoured columns, had set out on his second mission—that of blocking the enemy's main escape route through the Paris-Orléans gap. History records that he 'disappeared in a cloud of dust' in the direction of the Loire.

In order to help the Americans forward in their break-out attempt of July 25th—or, as General Montgomery remarked in his Army Group orders of July 21st, 'so that our affairs on the western flank can proceed with greater speed'—Canadian II Corps was again called upon to attack south of Caen on the day that offensive opened; meanwhile, the British Second Army switched its main weight to the Caumont sector—that sector of the front lying between Caen and St. Lô. Once again the Canadian Corps was called upon to attack the high ground astride the Falaise road; and on this occasion it had under command the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions and the British 7th and Guards Armoured Divisions. The attack gained some ground until it ran up against the German main positions in the open country south and south-east of Caen between the Orne and the Dives. There were now, in fact, six enemy armoured divisions in or closely in rear of the comparatively short sector east of the Orne: the 'hinge' south of Caen was still firmly seated. Fierce engagements took place among the cornfields and the villages—particularly in the area of Tilly-la-Campagne, which itself changed hands repeatedly; and it was evident from the outset of the operation that the Normandy battle was to be a 'dogfight' to the last. Nevertheless, this 'holding' attack served to conceal from the enemy, 'on this all-essential day', the direction of the main Allied thrust; and it assisted the delivery of a heavy blow on the right flank of the Second Army a few days later—on July 30th: the day that American armour reached Avranches.

Pivoting on XII Corps on the left, the main weight of the attack was to be developed by VIII and XXX Corps on a narrow front, and preceded by another thousand-odd bomber onslaught: the weight of metal and explosive required to blast the Germans out of Normandy is in itself a measure of the tenacity of the defence. XXX Corps was to wheel south-east, initially to a line based on those old names in the Normandy story—Villers-Bocage and Aunay-sur-Odon; VIII Corps, in a wider sweep on its right, was to swing down to a name new to it—le Bénvy-Bocage. Operations were then to be developed eastwards to the Orne. Canadian II Corps was again asked to maintain pressure east of the Orne; and it resumed operations in the area of Tilly-la-Campagne. They provoked the customary violent

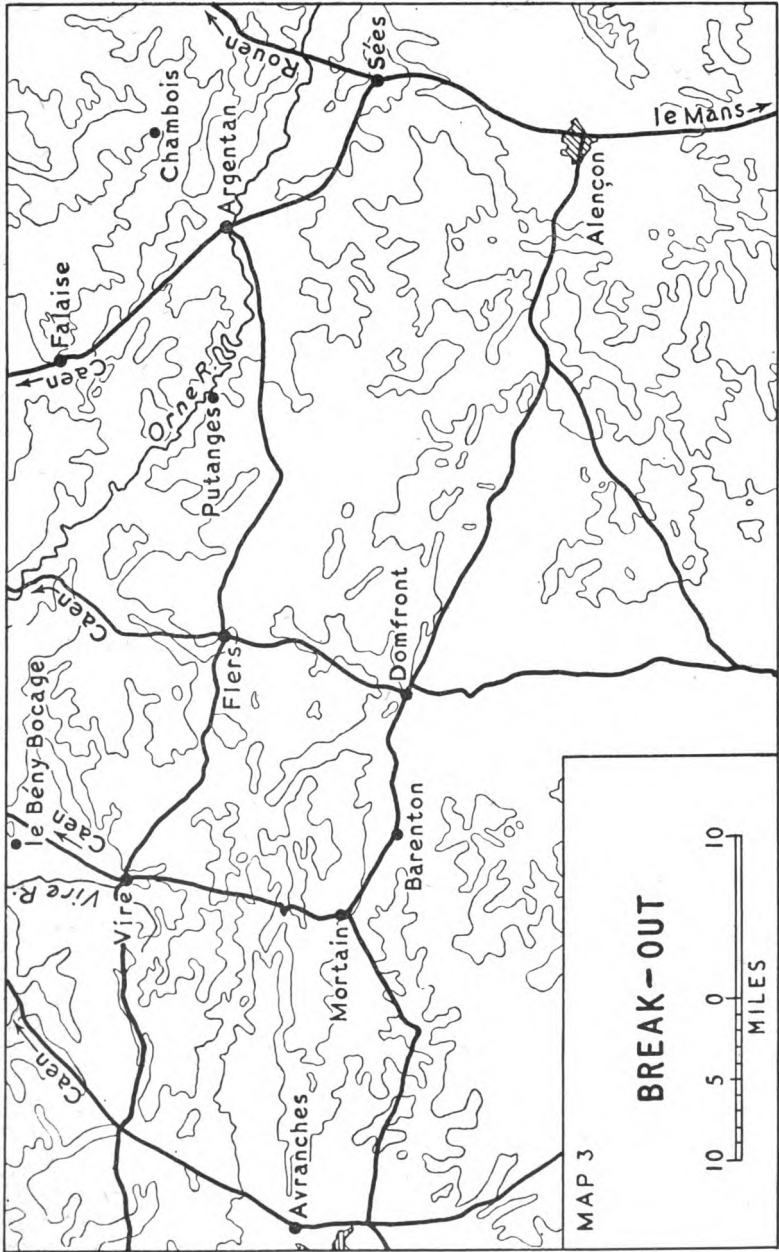
infantry and tank counter-attack. Nevertheless, improbable as the event may have seemed to the troops at the time, within less than a week General Montgomery was to issue his orders for the advance to the Seine.

The country facing the two British corps was typical Norman bocage; its principal feature was formed by a series of hills—some of them over a thousand feet high—running south-east between Aunay-sur-Odon and le Bénv-Bocage; they included, in particular, the Mont Pinçon massif, lying some eighteen miles south-west of Caen, between the Odon and the Orne rivers. At the outset of the attack, VIII Corps on the right, with the Guards Armoured and the 15th Divisions, made considerable progress towards the hill country; the 11th Armoured Division—also of VIII Corps—struck south in the direction of Vire, where it was ultimately to link up with the United States V Corps; XXX Corps, in the centre, drove forward with the 7th Armoured and 43rd and 50th Divisions; XII Corps, in the Odon-Orne area, with the 53rd and 59th Divisions, kept up pressure east of Villers-Bocage to prevent the withdrawal of enemy forces in its sector. Here, indeed, was the British Second Army in action, in almost full panoply; and within less than a week it had knocked out from the Normandy 'gate' a 'key rivet' at Caumont and another on the Orne. The 7th Armoured Division at last entered Aunay-sur-Odon; the 43rd (Wessex) Division secured Mont Pinçon—yet another 'key rivet' in the 'gate'; the 59th Division was swinging down on Thury-Harcourt from the north-west and was shortly to cross the Orne; and, thankfully, the name of Villers-Bocage was to vanish from the Normandy narrative with the entry of the 50th Division.

The high ground south of Villers-Bocage was the British equivalent of the Falaise road; and, at this climax of the Normandy battle, Mont Pinçon had fallen on August 6th, after twenty-four hours of the bitterest fighting, to 'a brilliant attack by exhausted men'. Six tanks of the 13th/18th Royal Hussars made victory possible. As the new corps commander—Lieutenant-General B. G. (afterwards Sir Brian) Horrocks—relates, they made a wild dash into the enemy, got up on top of the hill, and stayed there fighting in the middle of the Germans. They sent a message: 'We are lonely but we're all right'. The infantry were the 4th Battalion, the Wiltshire Regiment. The day before they had fought 'a savage battle', and had already marched seven miles to a reserve area, under shell-fire, when they were recalled and told to 'get to the crest with all speed'.

And now, new and significant names are to appear in the Normandy narrative. On August 4th, General Montgomery issued orders for the Canadian First Army—now operational under

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Lieutenant-General (afterwards General) H. D. G. Crerar—to deliver a major attack towards Falaise, in order to get behind the enemy forces facing the Second Army. The subsequent operations of that army were to be developed towards Argentan, lying on the main road running south from Falaise. These orders also provided that the northern flank of the 12th (United States) Army Group should operate on the axis Domfront-Alençon. Here already are the new names that are going to matter in the Normandy story. First among them is Falaise.

Falaise stands twenty-one miles south-east of Caen. For a good fifteen miles from the city, 'the ground along this arrow-straight road rises gradually, sometimes almost imperceptibly, but steadily' until, five miles short of Falaise, the hills flanking the road reach an elevation of more than six hundred feet. 'Up this long, smooth, dangerous slope', writes the Canadian official historian, 'the Canadians were to fight their way for weeks to come.' The first attempt to advance up it was—as we have seen—launched on July 18th; subsequent attempts had come to a halt in the 'blood-stained hamlets or rather their pathetic ruins' of the area around Tilly-la-Campagne. This latest major attack by Canadian II Corps began at eleven o'clock on the evening of August 7th, when a thousand heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force softened up enemy concentrations along the main road. Half an hour later the Canadian 2nd Division and the 51st (Highland) Division, each assisted by an armoured brigade, moved forward. Eight columns of armour, preceded by assault engineers and flail tanks following up hard behind a creeping artillery barrage, breached the enemy defences in the darkness of the night and 'a dense dust-haze weirdly lit by burning tanks and haystacks'. The infantry were transported in self-propelled guns, from which the weapons had been removed, and armoured half-tracks.

Thus at first light the next morning the infantry were able to ride through the enemy lines and dismount almost on top of their objectives. By the next afternoon Tilly-la-Campagne belonged to past history. The arrival on the scene of the armoured divisions—the Canadian 4th and the Polish—was heralded by nearly five hundred Flying Fortresses; but neither of the divisions was able to make much headway against the enemy's remaining tanks and the very numerous 88-millimetre guns that appeared to be disposed in every wood and copse. On the night of August 10th–11th, the Canadian 3rd Division put in an attack that 'netted nothing but heavy casualties'; and the Canadian, British, and Polish infantry and armour

were still only half way to Falaise. On August 11th, General Montgomery formally ordered the Canadian First Army to capture Falaise. 'This is first priority', he wrote, 'and it is vital that it should be done quickly.' After taking Falaise, the Army would secure Argentan. The British Second Army would also fight its way into the Falaise area.

There was reason for his urgency. On the night of August 6th-7th, five German armoured divisions had heavily assailed the United States First Army on a front between Mortain and Vire. It was an armoured thrust obviously aimed at splitting the Allied front by cutting through the corridor at Avranches—some thirty miles off—at a time when twelve United States divisions had already passed through it. American spearheads of the First Army were in the area of Alençon; the XV Corps of the Third Army was approaching le Mans to the south. The counter-attack—launched under the personal orders of the Führer—had it succeeded, would, at a stroke, have cut off the United States forces in Brittany and southern Normandy from their bases in the Cherbourg peninsula. But the First Army held the attack; and, in fine weather, Allied air power—to which, on the first day, nearly three hundred sorties flown by rocket-firing Typhoons of the Royal Air Force made a dramatic contribution—reduced the crowded German armour to a state of 'chaos and carnage'. Nevertheless, the Germans, with an obstinacy that distinguished all their operations from D-Day onwards, continued to attack the corridor until August 12th: thereby, if unwittingly, drawing the noose now being fashioned for the German Seventh Army—and elements of the Fifteenth—now in Normandy. For the decision that cleared north-west France of the enemy had already been taken. The United States XV Corps—which entered le Mans on August 9th—was to swing up to Alençon and then continue north towards Argentan—fifteen miles from Falaise. Here, then, was the famous Falaise-Argentan gap in the making: hence, too, the peremptory nature of General Montgomery's directive to the Canadian First Army. 'Obviously, if we can close the gap completely', he drily commented, 'we shall have put the enemy in the most awkward predicament.'

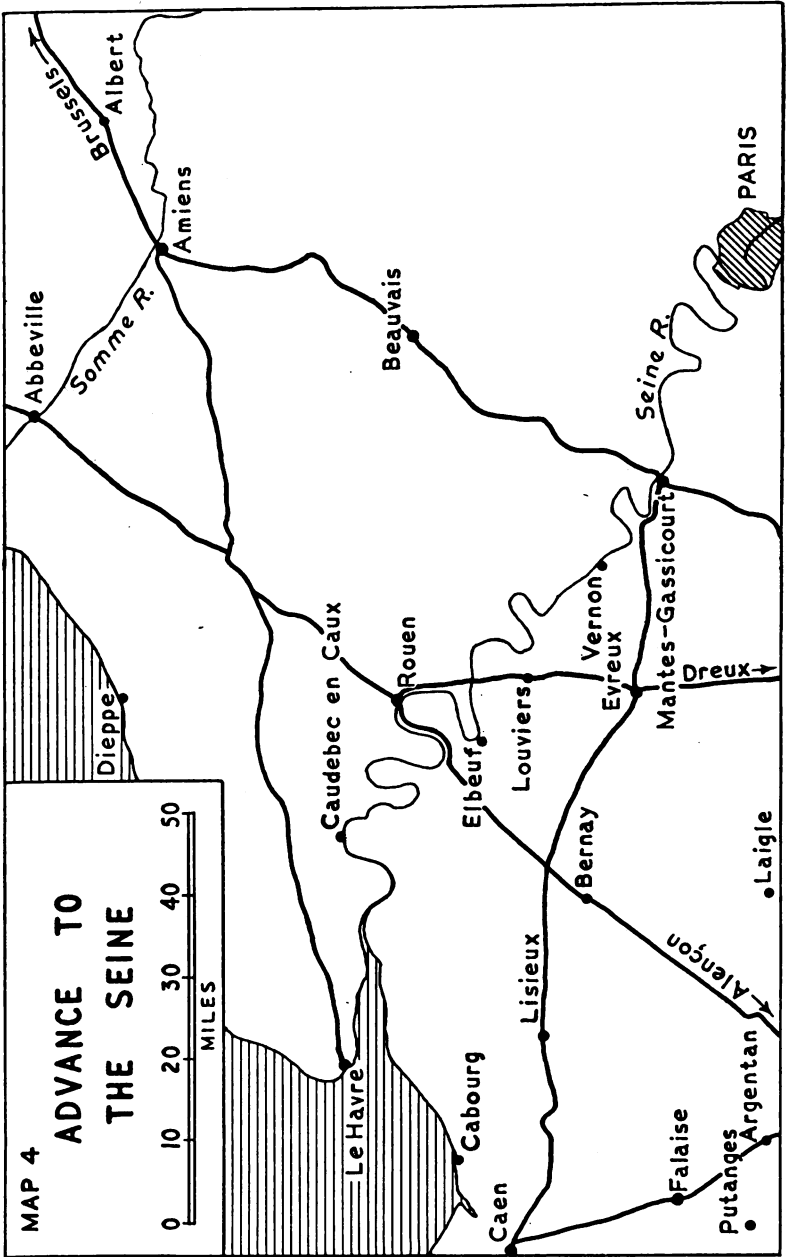
The final great attack to break through to Falaise was delivered by the Canadian 3rd Division and the Canadian 4th Armoured Division, together with the Canadian 2nd Armoured Brigade, on August 14th. On this occasion the Canadians attacked in daylight, under the cover of smoke-screens laid by the artillery. Dust—'like I've never seen before,' wrote a unit commander—supplemented the smoke. Into this Wagnerian maelstrom leapt the infantry from their improvised armoured carriers; other infantry, carried in lorries, were

in readiness to push forward and hold the ground won by the blinded tanks. Several of the later waves of heavy bombers went astray, and for considerably over an hour dropped their bombs within the Canadian lines far in rear. Nevertheless, by evening, the troops had fought their way to the northern spurs of the heights above Falaise, and the leading elements were now less than four miles from the town. 'It was an evening', writes a Canadian officer, 'silent as death—only the crackling noise of flaming tanks and buildings.' On the afternoon of August 16th, troops of the Canadian 2nd Division, pushing in from the north-west, finally entered Falaise. For twenty-four hours enemy rearguards and snipers 'fought savagely among the tragic ruins'. The centre of the town had been even 'more universally' ruined than Caen by the bombs and shells poured upon it. When the bulldozer men were called in to clear passages for the incoming vehicles, it was not always easy to determine just where the roadways had once run.

In his report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the Supreme Commander, after noting that Falaise was finally occupied on August 17th, writes: 'From our landings in June until that day, the enemy resistance in this sector had exacted more Allied bloodshed for the ground yielded than in any other part of the campaign. Without the great sacrifices made here by the Anglo-Canadian armies in the series of brutal, slugging battles, first for Caen and then for Falaise, the spectacular advances made elsewhere by the Allied forces could never have come about.'

The tribute is not one to be overlooked; for it is not unreasonable to claim—and important to remember—that it was hard fighting—fighting as hard as any known in war—by the 21st Army Group that successfully inaugurated the invasion of north-west Europe. Thereafter the importance of its role dimmed by comparison with that of the great American spearheads that fanned out across the European mainland. By the end of the third week ashore, Britain had already committed almost three-quarters of all the troops she could spare for the European campaign; by the end of August she had committed all her available divisions; and United States strength was eventually to exceed three times that of the British and Canadian combined. Nevertheless, the seeds of the ultimate destruction of the German Army in the west were sown in Normandy; and Caen and Falaise were the heart of that battle.

An engaging degree of uncertainty attaches to the decision that inaugurated the Falaise-Argentan gap and lost the enemy his last



hope of holding a line in France. General Eisenhower has written: 'Concerning the origination of plans and decisions: it is my conviction that no commander could normally take oath that a particular plan or conception originated within his own mind'. Nevertheless one would like to know precisely how the decision was taken that sealed the final destruction of the German armies in Normandy—and, indeed, in north-west Europe.

Field Marshal Montgomery jauntily writes that he had not reckoned on Hitler's fling at generalship, and 'when it was realized that the Germans were concentrating against Avranches, I ordered an inner envelopment through Falaise and Argentan'. Nor would General Bradley appear to be afflicted by any sort of doubt in this matter. He remarks that, 'in betting his life' on the success of the armoured thrust at Mortain, 'Hitler had exposed his whole broad flank to attack and encirclement from the south'. He points out that a plunge eastward in force while the enemy attacked at Mortain, followed by a swing north, would result in a pincer movement calculated to cut off the German forces. He adds: 'I resolved to take the plunge and strike for annihilation of the German Army in the west'. Lieutenant-General (afterwards General) Walter Bedell Smith, the Supreme Commander's Chief of Staff, lends substance to this version.

According to his narrative, the decision was taken, on August 10th, 1944, 'under the apple trees of a Norman orchard'. On August 10th, General Eisenhower was in England, reviewing the United States 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, then refitting: the actual date—and the difference here makes all the difference—was, as will shortly be seen, August 8th. Under the apple trees, it would appear, Generals Eisenhower and Bradley were studying the map. Below Avranches, 'long curving lines had begun to trace the rampaging spearheads of General Patton's tanks'; east of Avranches, the map still showed a strong movement of German armour around Mortain. The decision itself, on the part of General Eisenhower, 'comprised little more than a nod of the head, a go-ahead sign to his brilliant lieutenant, who had already sketched out in his own mind a plan to take advantage of the glowing opportunity then opening before us'. The capture of the Brittany ports as a primary objective could be ruled out; and the Allied tactical plan would be changed to take advantage of the new situation. 'General Patton's spearhead reaching through le Mans would be cocked at Argentan, far to the north. Within this outer encirclement, the United States First Army could be turned eastward in a swift movement toward the same town, meeting the British forces descending on Falaise and closing giant pincers around the whole of the German Seventh Army.'



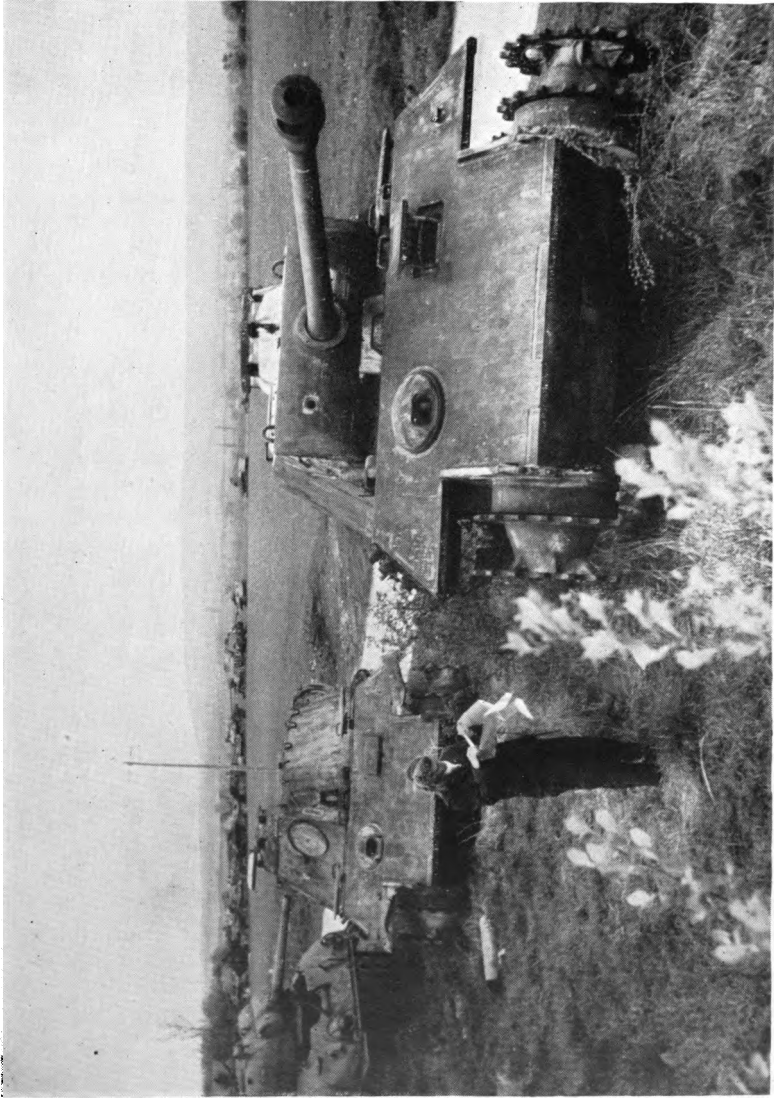
According to General Eisenhower's personal narrative—and his office diary—he was at the headquarters of the 12th (United States) Army Group on August 8th when General Bradley 'called Montgomery on the telephone to explain his plan, and although the latter expressed a degree of concern about the Mortain position, he agreed that the prospective prize was great and left the entire responsibility for the matter in Bradley's hands. Montgomery quickly issued orders requiring the whole force to conform to this plan.' On this same day of decision—the day of the 'short hook' signal—General Eisenhower visited the commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group at his tactical headquarters—then in the Forêt de Cérisy, between St. Lô and Bayeux. The next day—August 9th—in a message to General Marshall, General Eisenhower reported General Bradley's plan to 'throw every unit he could spare elsewhere directly at the rear of the German forces still in place between Caen and the vicinity of Avranches. In effect, he hoped to encircle the enemy forces, which were still compelled to face generally northward against the Canadians and the British.' Writing of these same events in his capacity as Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower reports: 'By August 10th, following a conference at General Bradley's headquarters, it was decided to seize the opportunity for encirclement offered by the enemy tactics. XV Corps had pushed eastwards to capture le Mans on August 9th and had thence turned north according to plan to threaten the rear of the armoured forces battling at Mortain.' On August 11th, the two army group commanders, together with the commander of the British Second Army, met to co-ordinate action.

Before detailing the actual orders issued during this highly interesting and critical period, it should be recalled that General Montgomery had already—on August 6th—issued his orders for the advance to the Seine. He instructed Canadian First Army to make every effort to reach Falaise in the forthcoming attack; in its subsequent advance to the Seine, the main Canadian axis was to be the road Lisieux-Rouen. The British Second Army was to advance with its right directed on Argentan and Laigle, whence it was to reach the Seine below Mantes-Gassicourt. The 12th (United States) Army Group was to approach the Seine on a wide front with its main weight on the right flank, which was to swing up towards Paris. As the eastward move progressed, flank protection along the line of the river Loire was to be provided, particularly at the main crossing places of Saumur, Tours, Blois, and Orléans. In the event, the actual advance generally conformed to this pattern.

The battle—or, rather, the shambles—of the 'Falaise pocket' was

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SOLDIER (War Office)

LAST OF 'THE GAP'



SOLDIER (*War Office*)

**'CLUB ROUTE'**

thus never part of the main design. As Field Marshal Montgomery has since commented, 'The battle should never have taken place; it was not meant to take place'. It could never have taken place had not the Germans, on August 7th, launched their desperate counter-attack at Mortain. On August 4th—as we have seen—General Montgomery had ordered the British Second Army to develop operations towards Argentan after the capture of Falaise; and he had provided that the northern flank of the 12th (United States) Army Group should operate on the axis Domfront-Alençon. In the event, General Patton's XV Corps from the southern flank was to be switched north to Alençon and on to Argentan—at a time when the VII Corps of the United States First Army had still not reached Domfront on the axis of its advance to Alençon. It was this switch that represented a departure from the main design—that of making a wide enveloping movement from the southern American flank to the Seine above Paris, and at the same time to drive the centre and the northern sectors of the Allied line straight for the river. The Mortain counter-attack made it possible to attempt concurrently a shorter envelopment with the object of bottling up the bulk of the German forces deployed between Falaise and Mortain.

Thus it was that, on August 8th, General Montgomery ordered the 12th Army Group to swing its right flank due north to Alençon 'at full strength and with all speed'; and urged all possible speed on the Canadian First and British Second Armies in the movements that were converging on Falaise. In a personal message to London on that same day, General Montgomery said quite simply that he was trying to get Falaise and Alençon as a first step towards closing the ring behind the enemy. In its turn, the 12th Army Group instructed the United States First Army to continue to reduce the enemy salient at Mortain, and, pivoting on Mortain, to advance to the line Domfront—Barenton and prepare for further action against the enemy flank and rear in the direction of Flers—some twenty-odd miles due west of Argentan; the United States Third Army was to advance on the axis Alençon—Sées—Sées being roughly mid-way to Argentan—and prepare for further action against the enemy flank and rear in the direction of Argentan.

Such were the movements that set the stage for the battle of the 'Falaise pocket'. The decision that inaugurated them was splendidly bold and swift. The five Panzer and SS divisions that formed the 'hammerhead' of the Mortain counter-attack represented the first large-scale German offensive to be mounted in France; it was to have only one successor—that of the Ardennes, in the following December. Twelve United States divisions would have been

'marooned' south of the Avranches corridor and entirely dependent on air supply had that corridor 'caved-in'. General Montgomery's headquarters in the Forêt de Cérisy were comparatively remote from the battle that was being bitterly fought out by the United States First Army at the very time the decision to 'shoot the works and rush east' was taken; and understandably it was for General Bradley to shoulder the 'responsibility'—as General Montgomery would appear to have required—of deciding whether or not the United States First Army could be counted on to withstand the German onslaught.

The United States XV Corps—now consisting of a United States and a French armoured division under the command of Major-General Jacques Leclerc, and three United States infantry divisions—attacked north on August 10th; and, after overcoming desperate resistance south of Alençon, forward elements of the corps were converging on Argentan two days later. At that time—as we have seen—Canadian, British, and Polish infantry and armour was still only half-way to Falaise. One can hardly be surprised that General Patton has recorded his conviction that he could 'easily' have entered Falaise and closed the fifteen-mile gap without more ado. It was, indeed, to remain open for another week; and the trapped Germans were to make good use of the respite. The Führer had given permission for the German Seventh Army to withdraw on this same day—August 12th—'and already the vanguard of Panzer and SS troops were sluicing back through it toward the Seine'. General Patton's tanks had already started to cross the gap when he was compelled to recall them—'allegedly because the British had sown the area with a large number of time bombs'.

General Bradley—who states that he had already halted him without reference to higher authority—has a less fanciful reason: 'to have driven pell-mell into Montgomery's line of advance could easily have resulted in a disastrous error in recognition'. He further points out that General Patton, with four divisions, was already blocking three principal escape routes through Alençon, Sées, and Argentan. Had that line been stretched to include Falaise, the roadblock would have been extended to a distance of forty miles; and the nineteen German divisions who were now stampeding to escape the trap must certainly have broken through it. Two days later, two of the XV Corps divisions on the Argentan 'shoulder' were, at General Patton's request, transferred to the V Corps of the United States First Army, which was to face north—three corps abreast—along the southern flank of the pocket; and General Patton found release from his frustration by again driving eastwards. His XV Corps struck for

Dreux, forty miles this side of Paris; another, in the centre, was directed on Chartres; the third headed south for Orléans. From Dreux, XV Corps would turn north-east towards Mantes-Gassicourt and there force the Seine, thirty-five miles west of Paris.

Meanwhile the battle of the pocket continued. The Second British Army was attacking hard from the north-west, had cleared Flers by August 15th, established contact with the United States VII Corps, and then turned east on Argentan, gradually pinching out the United States formations. In the western sector of the pocket, resistance was crumbling under sustained pressure from British XII and XXX Corps. The Canadian First Army, after entering Falaise, directed its advance towards Chambois. Chambois is fifteen miles south-east of Falaise. When the commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group suggested that the 12th Army Group should extend its pincer from Argentan north-east to Chambois, General Bradley at once agreed that he ought to go north-east, and added gaily, 'In fact, I've just sent two divisions north-east—north-east to the Seine'. Mantes-Gassicourt is seventy miles east of Chambois. It was here, at Chambois, on August 19th, that the neck of the pocket was finally closed, when United States V Corps from the south linked up with the Polish Armoured Division.

During the battle, 'Phantom' patrols of the British G.H.Q. Liaison Regiment had moved ceaselessly, backwards and forwards, between the jaws of the gap, and among the British, Canadian, and United States divisions engaged in the pocket. A 'Phantom' patrol might consist of no more than a single armoured car, manned by an officer and six men, and carrying highly specialized wireless equipment; and it would flit on its ghost-like mission through the enemy lines as well as its own. At a time when the German command, on its own admission, had 'no knowledge of what was happening', 'Phantom' was passing to the Allied Command precise details of troop positions and locations of German tanks. At one period a 'Phantom' patrol was operating directly between two portions of the same German regiment; and, fortunately enough, it was another patrol that found itself at the first point of junction of the Allied forces on the high ground over Falaise on August 18th, and was able to get through the message: 'Contact established between British 11th Armoured Division and United States 1st Division at approximately 1100 hours'. Three hours later the commanders of British XXX Corps and United States VII Corps were in conference.

Here, in the Chambois area, formations of the British and Canadian armies fought their last set battle in Normandy. But the enemy now

was no more than a 'medley of German battle groups frantically trying to escape'; all cohesion had been lost; 'batch after batch of prisoners contained members of a dozen different divisions'. The 'arrogant' 12th SS Panzer Division which had swept into action against the Canadians at Authie on the morning of June 7th, twenty-one thousand strong, emerged from its 'final agony at Falaise' with 'just sixty soldiers'. Enemy transport, packed bumper to bumper and rendered immobile by the road congestion, presented to the Allied Air Force 'unparalleled' targets; and the wreckage of transport and equipment littered the countryside. Pounded alike from the air and by Allied artillery, the battlefield at Falaise became, as General Eisenhower writes, 'unquestionably one of the greatest "killing grounds" of any of the war areas'. He adds that roads, highways, and fields were so choked with destroyed equipment and dead men and animals that passage through the area was extremely difficult; and that it was literally possible to walk for hundreds of yards at a time, stepping on nothing but dead and decaying flesh. On August 21st, General Montgomery was able to announce: 'The German Seventh Army is decisively defeated west of the Seine'; and, as the historian of the G.H.Q. Liaison Regiment remarks: 'With the stench of the Falaise Gap in his nostrils, every man faced east'.

Field Marshal von Rundstedt had been relieved of his command as Commander-in-Chief West on July 2nd. He was succeeded by Field Marshal von Kluge who, as we have seen, at the height of the Normandy battle, on July 21st, had addressed an unfortunate letter to the Führer on the subject of Allied air attacks. His efforts to extricate his troops from the Falaise pocket were reaching a foredoomed conclusion when, on August 17th, Field Marshal Model arrived from Russia to relieve him of his dolorous command. 'The nervous strain of fighting both Eisenhower and Hitler, and the humiliation of this new blow were too much for von Kluge.' Once he had enjoyed the title of 'the apostle of victorious defence'; now, on the road to Metz, he swallowed one of the poison capsules he had made a practice of carrying when serving on the Russian front. In a farewell letter to the Führer he wrote: 'In my covering letter to Field Marshal Rommel's memorandum which I sent you, I pointed out the possible outcome of the situation'. He just lived to see it. He had visited the Caen front on August 12th, when that 'hinge' of the Normandy 'gate' was fast coming loose. The journey had not proved easy; he had been compelled to spend a good many hours 'lying in ditches while Allied airplanes strafed the roads'. On the day he died—a week later—that gate was wide open.

### iii. '—TO THE GREEN FIELDS BEYOND'

'THROUGH mud and blood to the green fields beyond'—so ran the old Tank Corps refrain of an earlier war; and it happens to be one that not inaptly sums up the operational story of the Royal Armoured Corps—and of the infantry—in this later war before and during the period of pursuit in the second half of August, 1944. Speed was essential for two reasons: in order to block the withdrawal of enemy survivors across the Seine; and to drive quickly across the Pas de Calais. Here were the ports needed for maintenance requirements, and the launching sites of the 'V' weapons—the first of which had fallen on London within six days of D-Day. The scourge—from this source—was now shortly to be eliminated. Here and there isolated enemy groups might be expected to stand and fight; but armour could by-pass them, leaving the infantry to mop up. The high drama of the fighting war in the first phase of the campaign in north-west Europe was to be succeeded by a war of movement—with the emphasis on petrol. It is recorded of one platoon of a petrol company of the Royal Army Service Corps working with the Guards Armoured Division that, between August 29th and September 4th, between the neighbourhood of Falaise and the outskirts of Brussels—a distance by road of nearly three hundred miles—it covered over two thousand five hundred miles in the 'mad backwards and forwards rush which the platoon, together with the rest of the company, were to do daily throughout the gallop, bringing up petrol for the division'. This particular platoon may well be excused for having described the whole advance as the 'Petrol Stakes'.

The Germans had no plan for an orderly fighting withdrawal from France; they had no troops available to man either the Seine or the Somme; and, after the Seine crossing, the Allied armies were to cut through the country with little opposition. Nevertheless, the clearing of the Channel ports by the Canadian First Army—with the British I Corps under command—involved operations that continued throughout the whole of September, although Brussels had been entered by the Guards Armoured Division on the third of the month. Brest, too, in the Brittany peninsula, was to hold on until September 19th. General Günther Blumentritt, who acted as chief of staff to three successive Commanders-in-Chief West, under interrogation mournfully commented on these earlier days of September: 'During



all this chaos, the only instructions that came through from Berlin were "Hold! Hold! Hold!" Since it was impossible to carry out this order, we advised units to report any retreat they were forced to make in the following words: "Thrown back or fought back. Counter-steps are being taken". Doubtless it was in the spirit of this order that a German soldier wrote home: 'We are gaining ground rapidly but in the wrong direction'.

It is General Blumentritt's interrogator, Major Milton Shulman, who lists those place-names from the First World War which, flashing across the world's headlines in panoramic succession—even as the Allied armoured divisions themselves 'weaved a pattern of iron and fire amongst the slow-moving marching and horse-driven enemy units'—were to have freedom restored to them by the end of the first week in September: Dieppe, Abbeville, Amiens, Albert, Bapaume, Arras, Tournai, Lille, Soissons, Château-Thierry, Charleroi, Mons, Cambrai, Valenciennes, St. Quentin, Sedan, Reims, Verdun, St. Mihiel. Here truly was a roll-call of warrior names for the soldiers of a succeeding generation; and any of the dead keeping vigil among the ranked headstones of the unscarred temple-cemeteries of that old war must surely have stared a little wild-eyed at the procession of Allied armour pounding its way from the Seine to the Scheldt.

In his orders of August 20th, General Montgomery gave first priority to clearing up the Falaise pocket. Thereafter the 21st Army Group was to form up facing east in order to drive with all possible speed to the Seine. The Canadian First Army was to swing back to the north—to undertake its mission of clearing the Channel ports. Two axes of advance to the Seine were made available to the British Second Army: one, Falaise-Bernay-Louviers; the other, to the right, Argentan-Evieux-Vernon.

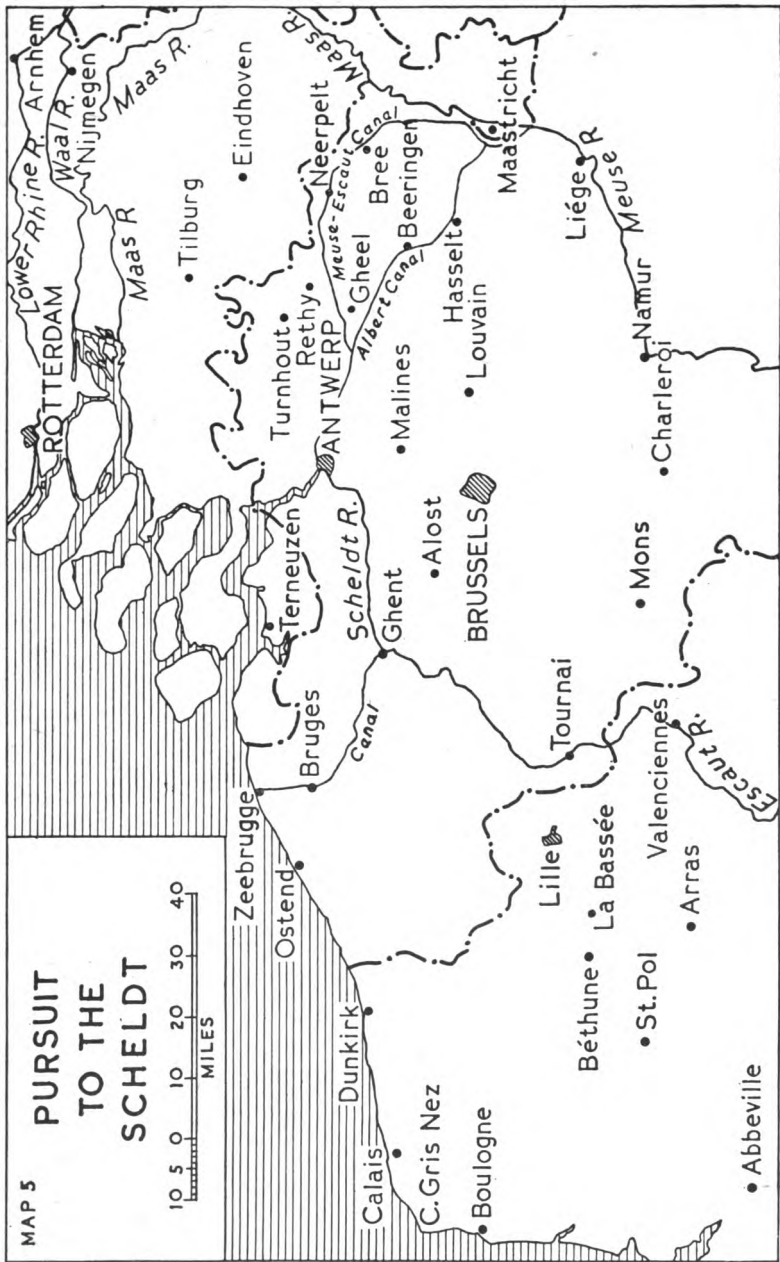
At this time the 12th (United States) Army Group was already standing astride its latest objective—the line Orléans-Mantes-Gassicourt; by August 21st it had forced the Seine both north and south of Paris; and, rather than miss an opportunity for a second encirclement of the enemy scrambling to escape west of the Seine, General Bradley headed four United States divisions—eighty thousand men—down the south bank of the river across the British line of advance. By August 25th they had driven thirty-five miles to the neighbourhood of Rouen. The Seine thus being closed off between Mantes-Gassicourt and Rouen, the Germans were forced back towards the mouth of the river. Here the enemy columns jammed up behind the ferry crossings, and—as General Bradley records—not

merely did the Allied air rush in to bomb and strafe them, but for two days American artillery fired on these concentrations ‘until the crossings were marked by pyres of smoke that darkened the summer sky’. The British Second Army was thus able to take over its sector of the Seine front with almost negligible resistance; and the eighty thousand Americans, having completed their mission, forthwith headed south again across the new British front—‘now heavily trafficked with east-west supply’. The two armies—British Second and United States First—agreed to a system of two-hour clearances on all cross-roads until the forces were unravelled. Here, at any rate, was war in a big way—and a handsome way.

By August 26th, the 21st Army Group had fought its way forward to line up with those United States forces that had already won a bridgehead over the Seine at Mantes-Gassicourt: the Canadian 3rd Division and the 4th Armoured were crossing, or preparing to cross, in the vicinity of Elbeuf, some ten miles upstream from Rouen; the 15th Division of XXX Corps was across at Louviers; and the 43rd Division of the same corps was across in the Vernon area, downstream from Mantes-Gassicourt. Two days earlier—August 24th—the French 2nd Armoured Division had entered Paris; and the United States First and Third Armies were driving hard and far to the east of the city. Planning had provided for a crossing of the Seine on D plus 90. Despite the fact that the capture of Caen was rather more than a month behind schedule, the first crossing of the Seine had beaten the schedule by a fortnight.

Last to approach the river in force was the British I Corps, in the coastal belt. Although it reached the Seine on a broad front on August 27th—with the 7th Armoured Division on its right—as the last of the Germans were slipping across, it was still faced with the task of clearing the densely wooded area south of Caudebec-en-Caux, and it was not until August 30th that the 49th and 51st Divisions were able to push patrols across the river. Only in the I Corps sector had the Germans, their right flank protected by the sea and aided by several deep river valleys, been able to fight a coherent rearguard action. For a fortnight of continual retreat they had followed a set routine whereby small rearguards, with anti-tank guns, would hold the road network while the main body reached the next defence line, blew the bridges, and mined their approaches. Each night, at each river-line, the British troops would make a crossing to cover the overnight construction of a bridge.

Meanwhile the British 6th Airborne Division, with the Belgian and Royal Netherlands Brigades under command, had worked along the



coast. On August 16th, the 49th Division had crossed the Dives—one of the old D-Day objectives. Cabourg, lying at the mouth of the river—and yet another D-Day objective—was still holding out to its old contestants, the 6th Airborne Division. Here, certainly, was no war of movement; but the troops were getting there, and were to be rewarded, on nearing the Seine, by the sight of fields full of abandoned war material—'cars, trucks, tanks, guns, nebelwerfers, horse-wagons, horses'—many of the vehicles not even having been immobilized, let alone wrecked. It is on record that one German formation of this flanking corps lost about fifteen hundred horses in trying to swim to the east bank. However, its losses in men had been even more considerable. By the time it was across the river, the fighting strength of this division amounted to three hundred men.

On August 26th, General Montgomery issued his last orders in his capacity as 'tactical commander' or 'co-ordinator' of the British and United States army groups: the Supreme Commander's operational headquarters were to be opened officially on the Continent on September 1st—and, incidentally, a few days later General Montgomery was to become Field Marshal. The orders related to the conduct of the advance north of the Seine. 12th (United States) Army Group was to operate on the right flank—the United States First Army being directed along the axis Paris-Brussels with the object of getting established in the general area Brussels-Maastricht-Liège-Namur-Charleroi. The boundary between the two army groups ran on the line Mantes-Beauvais-Tournai-Alost-Antwerp—all inclusive to the British Second Army. In passing, it is pleasant to record that the United States VII Corps of 'Utah' memories was to fight quite a battle—to the extent of collecting twenty-five thousand prisoners—in the neighbourhood of the old British battlefield of Mons.

The immediate tasks confronting the 21st Army Group—which now disposed fourteen divisions and seven armoured brigades—were the destruction of the enemy in north-east France, the clearance of the Pas de Calais, the capture of airfields in Belgium, and the opening of the port of Antwerp—the second largest port in Europe. At that time supplies were still being unloaded on to the Normandy beaches—and within a fortnight the Allied spearheads were to be nearly four hundred miles distant. The Second Army was to cross the Seine with all possible speed and advance to the area Arras-Amiens-St. Pol, irrespective of the progress of the armies on its flanks. From that area, it was to be prepared to drive forward through the industrial area of north-east France and into Belgium. The task of the Canadian First

Army was to operate along the coastal belt—initially as far north as Bruges. As first priority, Dieppe was to be seized and a corps swung into the Havre peninsula to destroy the enemy forces in that area and secure the port; the Canadian First Army was, furthermore, to operate with its main weight on the right flank, dealing with the enemy centres of resistance by 'right hooks'. By now the German garrison of the Pas de Calais had been reduced to three divisions, while there was only one division in Flanders and one in the Somme-Seine sector.

These all-embracing orders, curiously enough, made no mention of the United States Third Army, although it was still part of General Montgomery's operational command. However, one may presume that General Patton had been given up for 'lost'. The British were still not across the Seine; and his armour was already in the neighbourhood of Troyes—eighty miles from Paris and only one hundred and fifty miles from the Reich frontier. On September 11th, to the west of Dijon, the United States Third Army joined forces with the United States Seventh Army after its advance up the Rhône valley—an advance that had been accomplished in twenty-seven days. Truly General Patton had lived up to his own battle creed—'to attack rapidly, ruthlessly, viciously—and without rest'. His great wheeling thrusts had achieved the very apotheosis of armour; and this narrative—from which any detailed mention of his movements must henceforth be excluded—regretfully takes provisional farewell of a great fighting soldier.

For the advance of the British Second Army—the last unchequered advance it was to enjoy for some time to come—XII Corps had under its command the 7th Armoured, the 15th, and the 53rd Divisions, together with an armoured brigade; XXX Corps—soon to be famous for its sign of the rampant boar and for 'Club Route', the axis of advance it was triumphantly to pursue to Lüneburg Heath, the scene of the German surrender—had under command the Guards Armoured, the 11th Armoured, the 50th, and 43rd Divisions, together with an armoured brigade. These were the divisions whose members were to cross on wheels and tracks the battlefields their fathers had foot-slogged before them.

XXX Corps advanced from its bridgehead on August 29th, with the Guards Armoured Division on the right and 11th Armoured Division on the left. On the 30th, the 11th Armoured made an all-night advance on Amiens—fifty-five miles on as the crow flies. There were no roses; the rain was torrential. The story has it that the leading tank bumped into a German staff car and damaged its wings; whereupon the occupants jumped out and proceeded to swear at the

tank—until they realized it was British. Amiens was ‘liberated’ the next morning, and the Somme crossed by a bridge that had been captured intact with the assistance of the local Resistance Movement—whose services, indeed, were a constant source of assurance to the troops as they pressed on with the advance. The Guards Armoured Division, to the east, was astride the Albert–Amiens road; and a brigade group of the 50th Division had also reached Amiens. The war—and XXX Corps—had now progressed eighty miles while in continual contact with enemy groups. XII Corps, on the left, had moved out of its Seine bridgehead a day later—August 30th; but the 7th Armoured Division was already not more than fifteen to twenty miles short of the Somme. Behind the armour followed the 53rd Division, ‘clearing the islands of enemy resistance which the tanks had skirted’.

For the next three days the pace quickened. The Guards Armoured Division, now with the Belgian Brigade felicitously under command, crossed the Belgian frontier at half-past one in the afternoon of September 3rd. It drove ‘full tilt’ on Brussels. History records that the tank men ‘ploughed through ecstatic crowds’, alternately drinking toasts in champagne and firing at any odd groups of Germans that intruded on the festivities. On this same day the 11th Armoured Division had by-passed Lille to the south and concentrated a few miles east of Alost—about fifteen miles north-west of Brussels—by night-fall. The 50th Division—whose task it was to follow closely the armoured spearheads—entered the town the next morning. On September 4th the 11th Armoured Division reached Antwerp—and not merely its elegant boulevards but the docks. The Germans were liquidated before any damage was done; and the floral adornments on the tanks of the Guards and the 11th Armoured had hardly faded before XXX Corps was well established in the area Antwerp–Malines–Brussels–Louvain.

XII Corps in the course of its advance had run into two fresh enemy divisions in the La Bassée–Béthune area. They had been moved in to provide protection for the Channel ports; a third division, only recently arrived from Germany, had also been encountered to the west of Béthune and north of St. Pol. While the 53rd Division and the armoured brigade supporting it dealt with this sudden intrusion of the war, the 7th Armoured Division swung east before Lille in order to by-pass resistance and, shortly diverging from the path of the 11th Armoured, moved on to Ghent—thirty-five miles south-west of Antwerp. The division entered the city on the evening of August 5th. Two days later XII Corps relieved XXX Corps in Alost and Antwerp and assumed responsibility for the northern flank of the Second

three hundred and forty guns, set about the task of reducing the great concrete forts. The attack came under the fire of the heavy coastal batteries at Cap Gris Nez, ten miles to the north; but the town itself—though not all the forts—was cleared by September 20th. The last fort to surrender, on September 22nd, produced the last of the ten thousand prisoners—and the garrison commander.

The attack on Calais followed three days later. It was launched—after a heavy air bombardment which, on this occasion, preceded the evacuation of the civilians—west of the town, because of extensive flooding to the east, south, and south-west. The twenty-four hour truce arranged for the civilian evacuation—after the garrison commander had very coolly requested that Calais should be declared an 'open city'—played into the hands of the attackers. After it, the Germans had no stomach to resume fighting. The citadel fell on September 27th; the Cap Gris Nez position, some twelve miles farther west of Calais, was overrun on the 29th; and Calais itself was entirely in Canadian hands by the morning of October 1st. Thus it was that, thanks to the operations of the Canadian 3rd Division, southern England ceased to be scourged by the flying bomb—though, in modified form, the campaign was to open up again from improvised sites in Holland where, indeed, during these events, the war had more than regained its old form. No longer were there floral adornments for the tanks on 'Club Route'.

At the beginning of September the British Second Army front stretched along a general line between Hasselt—east of Louvain and rather more than half way to the Meuse—and Antwerp; immediately ahead lay a number of water obstacles and, in particular, the Albert and the Meuse-Escaut canals. Remotely, beyond the Meuse—or, as it is known in Holland, the Maas—lay the Rhine. After the crossing of the Seine, the operations of the 21st Army Group had been 'managed'—to quote its commander-in-chief—with the one object of 'bouncing' a crossing over the Rhine with the utmost speed before the enemy could reorganize. The Second Army was to resume its advance with a minimum of delay, with XXX Corps in the lead and XII Corps deployed to guard its left flank. The immediate obstacles facing it were the two canals—and a revival of the fighting spirit in the German Army. As a first stage in the advance to the Rhine, it was planned to position the Guards Armoured Division in the Eindhoven area—that is, well into Holland—and the 11th Armoured Division in the area Turnhout-Tilburg to the west of Eindhoven. The going was to be hard for both tanks and infantry, and all the Albert Canal bridges had been blown.

It was on the morning of September 7th that the two armoured divisions set out on their appointed tasks. The 11th Armoured, after vainly attempting to cross the minor canals north of Antwerp against considerable opposition, began to search for weaker spots to the east. Four days later it had completed an entire switch from the western to the eastern flank; but it was still not across the second of the two canals. On the second day of the advance, the Guards Armoured Division had got across the Albert Canal at Beeringen. By nightfall on the same day, the 50th Division also had secured a small bridgehead over the canal south-west of Gheel—to the west. The advance was now directed north-east with the immediate object of seizing the De Groot bridge over the Meuse-Escaut canal near Neerpelt. But now the enemy were putting in a number of well-staged counter-attacks, and it was not until September 10th that the Guards Armoured broke through to the perimeter defences of the bridge. That night tanks and infantry began crossing; but the bridgehead hardly extended into Holland—the frontier of which passed within a few miles of the bridge; and there were still fifteen miles to go to Eindhoven. On September 13th, the 15th Division of XII Corps, which had relieved the 50th Division at the Gheel bridgehead, succeeded in pushing back a now lively enemy to the Meuse-Escaut canal, and that same night secured a bridgehead over it near the Gheel-Rethy crossing—but no more than a bridgehead. Far away to the north were Turnhout and Tilburg—the appointed line of march for the 11th Armoured Division: now equally far away to the east and engaged in the contemplation of the unpleasing banks of the Meuse-Escaut canal in the ill-favoured neighbourhood of Bree. British I Corps, under command of Canadian First Army, had relieved XII Corps in the Antwerp area and on September 24th the 49th Division was to reach Turnhout. A small bridgehead over the Antwerp-Turnhout canal registered the virtual limit of its advance.

For the moment, at any rate, the Second Army had shot its bolt. The answer was to lay a carpet of airborne troops across the waterways that lay between it and the Lower Rhine—and across the Rhine itself. The answer, indeed, was 'Arnhem'.



## IV

# 'TO BOUNCE THE RHINE'

### i. 'ABOUT IT AND ABOUT'

DURING these early days of September it was still the intention of Field Marshal Montgomery—to quote his own words—to threaten the western face of the Ruhr frontally, to jump the river north of the Ruhr and, subsequently, to by-pass that region round its northern face; and, at the same time, to make preparations to swing forces from the Rhine bridgehead into southern Holland, directed on the ports of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Under this plan, the Supreme Commander had instructed the United States First Army to move forward in conjunction with the 21st Army Group, directing its left flank to the Rhine between Bonn and Cologne. There was to be no change in the task of the Canadian First Army, which was to clear the coastal belt up to Bruges and, subsequently, develop operations for the clearance of the Scheldt estuary. Instructions embodying this plan were issued to the 21st Army Group on September 3rd. To meet in some measure the problem of supplying two corps advancing up to forty miles a day, VIII Corps had been grounded and all its second-line transport, together with half its first-line transport, switched to the maintenance of XII and XXX Corps. But the plan—though certainly through no lack of advocacy and effort on the part of the commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group—was to remain an autumn mirage.

The responsibilities—and the purview—of a supreme allied commander must far outrange those of an army group commander; and it is without any sort of invidiousness that one puts on record the fact that the British commander, when he assumed operational command of the invasion force, planned his campaign in the conviction that it should be possible to knock out Germany within a matter of months. During an address given to the senior officers of the Allied

armies precisely two months before the invasion of Normandy—on April 7th, 1944—he stated: 'If we do our stuff properly and no mistakes are made, then I believe that Germany will be out of the war this year'. It may be of interest to note that he committed himself to another prophecy which, to the contemporary ear, must have appeared to verge on the delirium of optimism: 'And Japan will be finished within six months after we have put Germany out'.

In its context, the comment on Germany is severely restricted to the military plane. Nevertheless it may well have been inspired by a consciousness of the political necessity for a quick termination of the war in Europe—if Europe was to survive liberation without too perilous an aftermath as the result of war's destruction. It should be borne in mind that the air offensive did not attain major significance until the spring of 1944. Of the total tonnage dropped in the European war by the Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Force, 83 per cent was dropped after January 1st, 1944. Of the tonnage dropped on Germany proper, in the neighbourhood of 85 per cent was dropped after January 1st, 1944. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that of all the tonnage dropped on Germany, 72 per cent was dropped after July 1st, 1944—some three weeks after D-Day. The figures are quoted from *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, which comments: 'If the bombing of Germany had little effect on production prior to July, 1944, it is not only because she had idle resources upon which to draw, but because the major weight of the air offensive against her had not been brought to bear'.

Again, quite properly, the expression of the field marshal's determination to think in terms of a quick ending of the war in Europe takes no count of possible political complications—which were certainly present in the mind of the Supreme Commander—had the thirty United States divisions massing and training in the United States of America, and those in transit across the Atlantic, suddenly found, like Othello, their occupation gone. At a meeting with the British commander-in-chief on August 23rd, General Eisenhower had stated that it was 'politically impossible' to halt the United States Third Army now that 'Patton was in full cry' and confine it to the defensive role of flank protection during the advance of the British Second Army and the United States First Army: 'the American public would never stand for it'. The field marshal's optimism, in retrospect, must seem the more remarkable when one reflects that this was the commander who was notorious—certainly in the United States—for his 'caution'. Nevertheless, it was this same commander who, alleged to have no real belief in 'mobility', proposed, in his own words, to 'stick our neck out in a single deep thrust into

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enemy territory'—by urging that a northern thrust towards the Ruhr should have absolute priority.

The evidence against his point of view is formidable. The Supreme Commander, in retrospect, with reference to a message from the field marshal dated September 4th, describes as 'fantastic' the field marshal's proposition that 'if we would support his 21st Army Group with all supply facilities available, he could rush right on into Berlin and end the war'. Field Marshal—then General—Montgomery, in a telegram to the War Office dated as early as August 18th, 1944, had presented his view that, after crossing the Seine, the 12th and 21st Army Groups should keep together as a solid mass of some forty divisions—'so strong as to fear nothing'—the right flank of the American armies to be on the Ardennes. Perhaps one should note that the field marshal's message of September 4th refers to a really powerful and full-blooded thrust *towards* Berlin as being likely to win victory and end the German war; and that he was now thinking in terms of twenty divisions—six at least of them armoured. Doubtless the mention of Berlin was unfortunate. In his own account of these operations, the field marshal confines himself to a less specific mention of 'the plains of northern Germany' or—on one occasion only—'the heart of Germany'; and it may be stated categorically that any approach to Berlin would have been, not direct, but from the north-west by way of Mecklenburg.

General Bradley was equally unimpressed, doubtless because his gaze was fixed east—to the Saar and Frankfurt: and not inexcusably so, for, on September 4th, when the Supreme Commander had established his operational headquarters at Granville, on the Normandy coastline, the following order was issued: '12th Army Group (American) will capture the Saar and the Frankfurt area. 21st Army Group (British and Canadian) will capture the Ruhr and Antwerp.' A winter of grim fighting—and a large-scale German counter-offensive in the Ardennes—was actually to divide Granville and these desirable objectives. In fairness to the Supreme Commander it should be stated that, during early September, he was absent from his headquarters and carrying a plaster cast on one leg as the result of an aircraft mishap.

Field Marshal Montgomery—now no longer the over-all operational commander—may nevertheless be excused for feeling that Supreme Headquarters was a little out of touch with the march of events. On this same day, in his telegram of September 4th to the Supreme Commander, he had maintained that the choice was between a thrust north via the Ruhr or a thrust east via Metz and the Saar because the resources were not available for two full-blooded

thrusts; that the northern thrust would give the quicker results; that the selected thrust must have without qualification all the maintenance resources it needed; that time was vital and that the decision would need to be made instantly; and that a compromise solution that entailed splitting maintenance resources would ensure that neither thrust was full-blooded and would prolong the war. On this same day—September 4th—Field Marshal Model informed the Führer that 'the unequal struggle cannot long continue,' and added that the Allies could not be prevented from driving into the Reich.

At a meeting at Brussels airfield on September 10th, Field Marshal Montgomery's basic argument still failed to move the Supreme Commander—who held to his view that the Allies should push up to the Rhine 'all along the front'—and he resigned it, for the time being, and continued preparations for the 'large-scale operation by Second Army and the airborne army northwards to the Meuse and Rhine' that was to come down to history as 'Arnhem'. Without priority, he lacked transport to get forward his maintenance and bridging; and in a message dated September 11th he struck a warning-note that the delay would give the enemy time to organize better defensive arrangements and that heavier resistance and slower progress must be expected. Doubtless he may be forgiven for having received with surprise a letter from the Supreme Commander a few days later—on September 15th—that blithely expressed the opinion that 'we shall soon have captured the Ruhr and the Saar and the Frankfurt area, and I would like your views as to what we should do next'.

With truth the field marshal had written 'time is vital'; for, by the middle of September, German resistance had begun to harden, and operation 'Market-Garden' to the Meuse and the Rhine was to be launched on September 17th with only a limited priority in supplies—and too late. Enemy power of recuperation would appear to have been under-estimated. The British Second Army had 'galloped' across France; the Canadian First Army, advancing up the Channel coast from the beginning of September, was to run through a relatively tremendous strength of perfectly good German fighting soldiers—thirty thousand of whom surrendered at a cost of fewer than fifteen hundred British and Canadian casualties; the United States First Army, beyond Paris, had 'rounded up hordes of Germans who offered virtually no opposition'. In the north, however, the defeated rabble of an army, largely as the result of spectacular activity on the part of Field Marshal Model, suddenly turned back on its tracks to fight. In the 'Market-Garden' area, within a week, the strength of the German force was doubled.

In order to avoid the charge of captious criticism, it should be observed that the Supreme Commander's point of view was shared by at least one of the field marshal's senior subordinates. His chief of staff, Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, writes: 'My conclusion is, therefore, that Eisenhower was right in August when he decided that he could not concentrate sufficient administrative resources to allow one strong thrust deep into Germany north of the Ruhr with the hope of decisive success'. He adds that 'the carry from the Normandy beaches would have been enormous'. However, there was never a professional soldier more conscious than the field marshal of the part played by administration in the conduct of a battle.

At the very moment in time and space that the grand argument moved to its climax, he wrote: 'In any operation the administrative aspect must be considered before the tactical plan is firm'; and one must surmise that he found himself in agreement with his chief administrative officer, Major-General Sir Miles Graham, who has since recorded his opinion that, 'based as we were on the Channel ports, it would have been possible to carry out successfully the operation which Field Marshal Montgomery desired'. The port of Dieppe was opened as early as September 5th and Ostend on the 28th. Boulogne and Calais—though not yet working—were both in Allied occupation by the end of the month. Nevertheless the statement 'based as we were on the Channel ports' would appear to be an overstatement—although it valuably illustrates an attitude of mind; and an attitude of mind can often rise superior to the logic of a situation. When the Americans lost their artificial harbour, they proceeded to unload over open beaches and achieved a rate of discharge double that of the remaining 'Mulberry'.

One last observation remains to be made on the phrase 'the plains of northern Germany' that will occur like a refrain in the narrative of these events. The field marshal himself remarks of the final advance that 'the area between the Rhine and the Elbe was intersected by innumerable waterways . . . Over five hundred bridges had to be constructed in the course of the advance.' The Supreme Commander, in considering the switch in the main attack at the beginning of the following April from the north to the centre of the Allied front, puts forward the view that, 'despite appearances on the map, the north German plain does not in reality afford such favourable terrain for a rapid advance as does the central sector. Between Kassel and Leipzig we should be moving over a plateau with no major river obstacles, whereas the northern area is intersected with waterways and the ground was in a condition to make heavy going.' But it is

important to remember that here the month under discussion is not late summer but early April; and that bridge destruction by the enemy is dependent on an army's tempo of advance. Whether or not the German Army in the north was sufficiently off balance at the beginning of the previous September to have ensured a speedy advance across the 'north German plain' must remain a matter of opinion. The intelligence summary put out on September 9th at Allied Supreme Headquarters estimated that a total of twenty divisions might 'struggle' into position along the West Wall in the course of the month, and added: 'The West Wall cannot be held with this number even when supplemented by many oddments and large amounts of "flak"'. At the end of the month—according to General Blumentritt, Field Marshal von Rundstedt's chief of staff—the command in the west could not muster more than five hundred tanks and assault guns along the entire front.

The evidence of the enemy on this whole question can only be quoted with the greatest reserve. The defeated German generals appear to have been unanimous on two topics only. First, that the war was lost through the military incompetence of their Führer; and, second—as Captain Liddell Hart reports in *The Other Side of the Hill*—that the Allied Supreme Command missed a great opportunity of ending the war in the autumn of 1944. This second expression of opinion would appear to be less motivated by considerations of personal pique, and is reputedly endorsed by Lieutenant-General Dr. Hans Speidel, the chief of staff to Army Group B until the beginning of September. In his book *We Defended Normandy*, he writes: 'Then something unexpected occurred, a German version of that "miracle of the Marne" which saved the French in 1914: the furious advance of the Allies suddenly faded away. There could be no serious supply difficulties with such secure lines of communication. Nor was the "decreasing strength of the attack" the reason, as new or rested formations were continuously brought up. The method of the Allied Supreme Command was the reason. Perhaps the imaginary prestige of the name "West Wall" still impressed the enemy. He opened out and made preparations to overcome this so-called fortified line. Had the Allies held on grimly to the retreating Germans they could have harassed the breath of every man and beast and ended the war half a year earlier. There were no German ground forces of any importance that could be thrown in, and next to nothing in the air. The battles in East Prussia and Hungary were at their climax and absorbed all available forces.'

This point of view is—one may reasonably surmise—objectively reinforced by General Siegfried Westphal, who became chief of staff to

the Commander-in-Chief West when, during the first week of this critical month of September, Field Marshal von Rundstedt resumed that appointment. In his book *The German Army in the West*, he asserts that the emplacements of the West Wall, built in great haste, were by no means tactically sound even at the time of construction, and that the German troops, having only a limited faith in these famed fortifications, preferred to get out of the numerous 'bunkers' and take their chance in the open country. He also comments that the 'possibilities of ending the war several months earlier'—by a concentration of strength in a selected sector—'were not exploited by the Allied command, presumably because they overestimated the German defensive strength. Certainly the permanent fortifications along the west German frontier must have contributed to this judgment, but if the enemy had known their true condition he would hardly have treated them with such respect . . . and have thrust strongly across the Rhine and into the heart of Germany.' The heart of Germany! Again that siren note—with its dying fall.

The field marshal upheld the rightness of his judgment long after hope was lost. His warning to the Supreme Commander in his message of September 11th on the danger of delay had specific reference to 'Market-Garden'. In that message he stated that the operation could not take place before September 21st at the earliest—possibly September 26th. The warning brought 'electrical' results. The following day he received a visit from the Supreme Commander's chief of staff. The outcome of this visit he summarized in a further telegram of a most exhilarating hue. 'Ike' had given way; the Saar thrust was to be stopped; three United States divisions were to be grounded and their transport used to give extra maintenance to the 21st Army Group; the whole maintenance of the 12th (United States) Army Group was to be given to the United States First Army, and that army was to co-operate closely on the right of the 21st Army Group; and, finally, 'Market-Garden' was to be brought forward to the following Sunday—September 17th. He hoped that the war could now be won 'reasonably quickly'.

But all was to be vanity. Nine days later—on September 21st—during the latter period of 'Market-Garden', when that operation was moving to its floundering finale, the field marshal sends a last despairing letter to General Eisenhower. 'I have said stop the right flank and go on with the left'—so he assails heaven and the Supreme Commander—'but the right has been allowed to go so far that it has out-stripped its maintenance and we have lost flexibility.' He proceeds: 'In your letter you still want to go further with your right.

I would say that the right flank of the 12th Army Group should be given a very distinct order to halt, and that, if this order is not obeyed, we shall get into greater difficulties. The net result of the matter in my opinion is that if you want to get the Ruhr you will have to put every single thing into a left hook and stop everything else. It is my opinion that if it is not done, then you will not get the Ruhr.' Here, then, was the field marshal's last word, last fling, and last appeal.

And it brought a characteristically generous response at the conference of army group commanders held at Versailles the following day. The Supreme Commander granted the British commander-in-chief—who was represented by his chief of staff—'overriding logistical support on a British advance toward the Ruhr'. The British Second Army was to make the main effort and be supported by the United States First Army on its right: the United States Third Army was to 'sit down on the Moselle'. But the hour had long since past when an order for 'overriding logistical support on a British advance toward the Ruhr' could take on a real significance. General Patton's Third Army had not yet reached the Moselle; and the Allied forces in north-west Europe were about to face a six weeks' 'famine in supply'. The Scheldt was not to be opened until November 9th; the first Allied convoy was not to be unloaded in Antwerp until nineteen days later. And the war was to go on a long time yet.

Any reader who temerarily proposes to pass judgment on the point under discussion should remind himself that the contestants in the great argument inevitably viewed it from different angles. The Supreme Commander was—and needed to be—a superlative military-statesman; the field marshal took his stand as a professional soldier: and that's saying a lot. It connotes absolute dedication to the art and practice of war; and, in the field, clarity and tidiness of mind.

This attitude of mind, and this quality of mind, alike shine in the field marshal's personal story. In 1938 he was in Palestine, in command of a division; in the summer of 1939 he was on his way back to England, a sick man, with a spot on the lung. A month after the outbreak of war he was again in command of a division in France. After Dunkirk he very nearly returned with the division by way of Cherbourg; but France fell before it could embark. He was given command of a corps and continued to preach the gospel of morale and leadership according to Montgomery, with a fire and an intensity that derived from Moses, Cromwell, and Napoleon in triumphant combination; in 1942 he succeeded to the command of the South-Eastern Army, in England, with the rank of lieutenant-general. In August of that same year, destiny called this 'compacted hank of



steel wire' (to borrow Mr. Bernard Shaw's descriptive phrase) to the Eighth Army—and victory in Africa; and thence to the 21st (British) Army Group—and victory in north-west Europe.

There is a revered military maxim termed 'maintenance of the objective'. No soldier can ever have more firmly lived up to it. Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery set out to restore the idea of personal leadership in the field. He restored it. He set out to achieve an intellectual or—as it has been described—a 'surgical approach to war'. He achieved it. His peculiar abhorrences—untidiness of mind and method ('muckage'), worry ('belly-aching'), and indecisiveness—these he banished from his environment. At his tactical headquarters—a highly mobile encampment of motorized caravans and vehicles some miles nearer the battle than main headquarters—that environment was one of monastic remoteness and cathedral-like calm. Here the fortunate visitor would find a peace and holy quiet beyond a poet's imagining. He emerged into the noisy world of war and movement with three abiding impressions: of orderliness, serenity, purposefulness—in themselves the projection of the field marshal's personality.

Away back in this narrative we cast a commiserating glance at a British infantry officer reposing in a slit-trench in Normandy on an August day in the summer of 1944, and addressing himself to the problem of how to 'capture a hill three miles away by noon tomorrow'. Most battles, at close quarters, are pretty messy affairs, and evidence of 'clear and tidy thinking' at the top is not likely to be conspicuous. It may therefore be interesting—if not surprising—to note that, at the very moment this infantry officer's eyes were rather disconsolately fixed on an indeterminate Norman hill, in the telegram to the War Office already quoted, dated two days earlier—August 18th—the gaze of his commander-in-chief had already roved to Antwerp, Brussels, Aachen, and Cologne—and the promised land of the Ruhr beyond. However, this junior infantry officer shared his ignorance of these divagations with the Supreme Commander himself.

'Success', writes the field marshal, 'does not happen: it is planned'; and, if the observation be dismissed as trite, one must be permitted to comment that but few campaigns in history have vindicated it so completely as that fought by the Allied armies in north-west Europe. Again, if the operations undertaken by the formations under the operational control of the 21st Army Group would appear to have attained an almost unnatural precision, it should be remembered that they were conducted by a commander whose outstanding

characteristic—as General Eisenhower remarks—was his tactical ability in the ‘prepared’ battle. However, as will have been apparent from earlier passages in this narrative, there were certain high moments when his vision extended beyond the immediate battlefield. Unhappily it was incapable of fulfilment without an exclusive call on United States divisions who would have outnumbered his own by three to one; and, on occasion, war, not unlike politics, is the art of the possible. And, last, had the field marshal been granted the opportunity of thrusting out to the promised land of the Ruhr at this early stage, and had that attempt failed, anything might have happened to the war in north-west Europe.

ii. *THE ATTACK ON HOLLAND:*  
*'MARKET-GARDEN'*

LAUNCHED under a summer sky, on the morning of Sunday, September 17th, 1944, for its drama as an imaginative stroke of war, for its intensity of human effort, for its splendid promise of victory, for its bitterness in defeat, 'Arnhem' was the Gallipoli of the Second World War. Failure at 'Arnhem'—as in Gallipoli—almost certainly prolonged the war. Like Gallipoli, the story of 'Arnhem' was to take on a legendary glamour, and those that fought in the battle were to be invested with a peculiar heroism when their story was told. 'Arnhem', as a name of destiny, here appears in quotation marks because it is no true description of the whole operation, in which two United States airborne divisions, alongside a British airborne division, fought their individual battles.

It is the commander of one of these two United States divisions, Major-General James M. Gavin, commanding the United States 82nd Airborne Division, who, with an American directness of diction, writes: 'The invasion of Holland was the Sunday punch. If it struck through, the war was won in 1944.' Not surprisingly, therefore, one of his 'glider drivers' appears to be a little disconcerted by the post-war comment from the lips of the Supreme Commander that the operation was 'merely an incident and extension of our eastward rush to the line we needed for our temporary security'. The reference to 'security' is in itself a little curious in that, at this moment in history, the once mighty German Army had just completed an inglorious scamper across half Europe in order to shelter itself behind the Siegfried Line. At the time General Eisenhower informed General Bradley that he thought the plan 'a fair gamble', and in his contemporary Report describes it as representing 'an attempt to thrust into the heart of Germany before the enemy could consolidate his defences along the Rhine'. Anyway, this particular pilot bluntly remarks: 'But just before the operation, we of the attacking force had the idea we were trying to win the war in '44'.

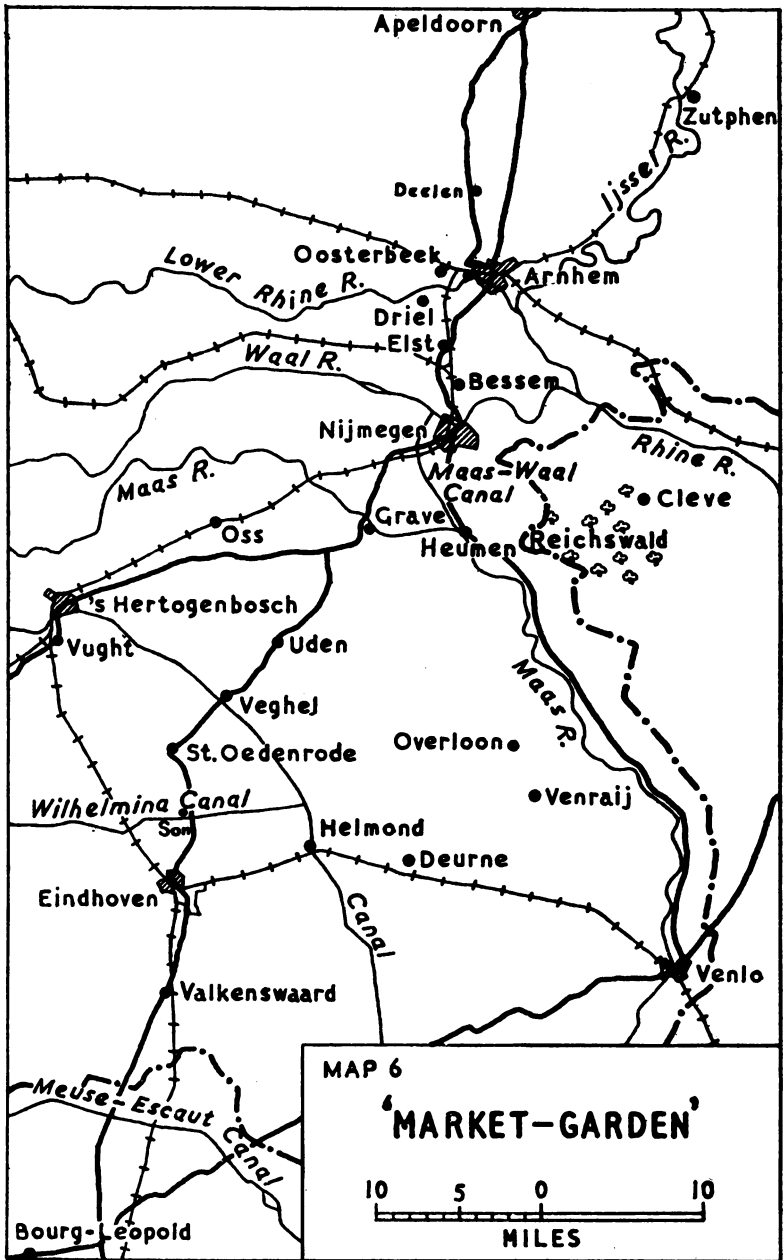
And that, even at so late an hour, was precisely the idea behind Field Marshal Montgomery's plan that called for—in General Bradley's words—'a 60-mile salient to be driven up a side-alley route to the Reich'. If the comment should indicate a certain impatience with this particular example of the strategy of indirect approach,

General Bradley is to be excused: by wheeling to the north, the field marshal would open a gap on the left flank of the United States First Army, already committed to a three-corps offensive toward the Ruhr. General Eisenhower, however, was not prepared to reject a plan that offered possibilities of outflanking the Siegfried Line and of snatching a bridgehead over the Rhine; and General Bradley handsomely concedes that it was one of the most imaginative of the war.

The daring adventure—as General Bradley describes it—proposed by Field Marshal Montgomery, was to bear the code name ‘Market-Garden’: ‘Market’ for the airborne phase, and ‘Garden’ for the follow-through by the British ground forces. At the end of it all, those who landed with ‘Market’ were to see ‘Garden’ ‘wither like a melon on a vine’. Until the last days of the war, the entrance up this ‘side-alley route to the Reich’ was to remain barred by the tree-lined heights behind Arnhem: at that time a quiet spa-like Dutch town of nearly a hundred thousand people. It lies on the northern bank of the Lower Rhine—which is here about one hundred and fifty yards wide, with a fast-flowing current.

Direct east of the line Antwerp–Turnhout–Eindhoven—these last two places being on the original line of march of the British 11th and Guards Armoured Divisions we last saw sitting on the banks of the Meuse–Escaut canal—lies the northern rim of the Ruhr beyond the Rhine, and, this side of the river, the concrete fortifications of the Siegfried Line. The line of advance of the United States First Army ran parallel with the British Second Army’s possible line of advance leading directly to the northern rim of the Ruhr; and, on the afternoon of September 13th, tanks of the United States VII Corps—of ‘Utah’ beach—broke across the German border through a soft spot in the Siegfried Line just south of Aachen, one of the gateways into Germany. The Americans were to enter the city a month later; but, in this area, the Siegfried was a double line—and the United States forces were to remain halted by its dragon’s teeth for months to come.

By wheeling to the north, Field Marshal Montgomery would outflank the main fortifications of the Siegfried Line—but have two rivers to cross. East of Nijmegen, where the Rhine swings west and crosses into Holland, the river splits into two branches. The northern branch, the Lower Rhine—or Neder Rijn—flows through Arnhem; the southern branch, the Waal, flows through Nijmegen. To the south flows the Maas, with bridges at Grave and Heuman. The bridge at Arnhem—a steel-girdered structure, with a half-circle steel span,



protected by strongposts at either end and with two twin light anti-aircraft guns posted to the south with a field of fire straight down the bridge—was a last barrier to the lightly fortified German frontier lying only twenty miles to the east. Ten miles to the south is the bridge at Nijmegen, a five-span structure of steel and concrete, nearly eight hundred yards long. At Nijmegen and Arnhem there were both road and rail bridges, and all were known to be intact. Nijmegen itself was little more than two miles from the nearest point of the then German frontier. Small wonder that, during the action at the bridge, the defenders were adjured that it was the 'gateway to the Fatherland'. In the absence of main Siegfried fortifications, the Germans would appear to have calculated that these three rivers—and two canals north of Eindhoven—would adequately protect their frontier in this sector.

The general idea behind 'Market-Garden' was to drop three airborne divisions and a parachute brigade—nearly thirty-five thousand troops—to capture the bridges and the roads. The British 1st Airborne Division, reinforced by the Polish Parachute Brigade, was to capture the bridge at Arnhem, and the United States 82nd Airborne Division was to capture the bridge over the Waal at Nijmegen and the bridges over the Maas at Grave and Heuman. At the same time, the United States 101st Airborne would drop to the south and open the main road connecting the 1st and 82nd Airborne Divisions with the striking force of the British Second Army—then on the line of the Meuse-Escaut canal on the Belgian-Dutch frontier. With the route to the north open all the way to the Lower Rhine, the British ground forces—as the American glider pilot light-heartedly has it—'could highball right into Arnhem, then be in a position to swing east and outflank the Ruhr'.

The British Second Army, organized as the force for 'Market-Garden', had under command four army corps, one of which, an airborne corps of the Allied Airborne Army under the command of Lieutenant-General Lewis H. Brereton, consisted of the British 1st Airborne Division, the United States 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, the British 52nd (Lowland) Division—which had light mountain equipment and was therefore air portable—and the Polish Parachute Brigade. The 52nd Division waiting in the wings—and awaiting wings—was to have been flown in north of Arnhem could airstrips have been prepared for it. The Allied Airborne Corps was under the command of Lieutenant-General F. A. M. (afterwards Sir Frederick) Browning. He arrived at Nijmegen with his staff by glider on the first afternoon, and directed the battle from various woods and copses, and, later, from a house on the outskirts of the

town; but, through lack of communication, he was not able to influence the battle to the north: the 1st Airborne, for example, failed to get through a warning message that the high ground north-west of Arnhem selected as a supply-dropping zone had not been captured—with the result that the Royal Air Force 'flew straight into a flaming hell' and delivered the greater part of its 're-supply' to the enemy. In the event, operation 'Garden' was mainly to devolve upon the British XXX Corps—of 'Club Route'. It was composed of the Guards Armoured Division and the 43rd and 50th Divisions. The 43rd Division had under command the 8th Armoured Brigade and the Royal Netherlands Brigade Group. The rather romantic role of the group was to 'raise the population against the enemy'.

The operation—unlike the highly successful landing of the British 6th Airborne Division in Normandy—was, with ineffably fateful consequences it would be profitless to discuss, carried out in broad daylight. For years the British had preached and practised the doctrine of night landing for parachutists and glider pilots: the surprise and confusion caused by night attack, with the opportunities it provided for the dropping of dummy parachutists and other diversionary tactics, were accepted as 'vital factors in the successful employment of airborne assault'; but, through lack of suitable British aircraft, it was necessary to seek American help to provide the lift for the British parachute troops. The experience of the American pilots, unused to night flying, in the Normandy—and the Sicilian—airborne operation had been less unchequered than had been the lot of the British; and they could agree to help only if the flying were carried out in daylight.

Nevertheless, if, as General Eisenhower believed, the plan was 'a fair gamble', the biggest gamble of all was the weather. Field Marshal Montgomery's chief of staff, Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, as we have seen, did not share his commander-in-chief's earlier roseate views about the feasibility of attempting a 'thrust north via the Ruhr'; he would appear to have been equally pessimistic about 'Market-Garden'. He writes: 'We might have held our bridgehead over the Neder Rijn (Lower Rhine) if we had experienced really good weather. But I wouldn't like to bet on it.' However, it may be pertinent to record that sickness compelled him to be absent from his headquarters on reaching Amiens, and again for a more prolonged spell on reaching Belgium.

Here, then, in the broadest outline, was the plan for the air-land attack on Holland: but only the first phase. For it was not proposed that British XXX Corps, with VIII and XII Corps in close attendance on the flanks of the main thrust, should do no more than

march up the corridor established by the airborne troops and thereafter linger in the newly established Arnhem bridgehead: rather it was to develop operations to establish a northern flank on the Zuider Zee in the area of Nunspeet, some thirty miles to the north—thereby isolating the Germans in western Holland—and an eastern flank on the River IJssel. Preparations were then to be made to advance east on the general axis Rheine-Osnabrück-Münster-Hamm, with the main weight on the right flank directed on Hamm; whence a thrust would be made along the eastern face of the Ruhr. The Canadian First Army, after taking over the Antwerp sector from the British Second Army, was to direct its main drive on the port of Rotterdam, and afterwards operate on the northern flank of the Second Army in the direction of Hamburg and Bremen. Months were to elapse before these names were to take on any actuality in the story of the 21st Army Group; but a mention of them is enough to indicate what was the promise of 'Arnhem' had performance been able to match conception.

At the outset of operation 'Market-Garden', there was no hint of the nightmarish quality the whole story of it was to assume. On that Sunday morning, in favourable weather, over fifteen hundred aircraft and nearly five hundred gliders, carrying a total of twenty thousand men—about half of three divisions—moved off from England to Holland in two great sky trains. The United States 101st Airborne Division came in to their dropping and landing zones over Bourg-Leopold, where considerable bridging resources had been assembled and organized in columns of pre-arranged composition in readiness to be called forward. The parachute troops were quickly established at Son, between Eindhoven and St. Oedenrode, though the bridge itself over the Wilhelmina Canal was blown when the attackers were within a few hundred yards of it; but, rather more than ten miles to the north, they secured intact the bridge over the second canal, at Veghel—shortly to be a name of ill-omen on 'Club Route'. By the next afternoon, after launching south and meeting heavy opposition a mile north of the city, the 101st Airborne Division had entered Eindhoven after making a wide envelopment to the east. Two hours later—at five o'clock in the afternoon—some armoured cars of the Guards Armoured Division, under the command of Major-General Sir Allan Adair, spearheading XXX Corps' advance up the corridor, finally broke enemy resistance in the town. North of Eindhoven, the American airborne troops organized their hold on the key points astride the axis up to Grave, where they joined up with the United States 82nd Airborne. Thus, on the second day, the 'airborne carpet'

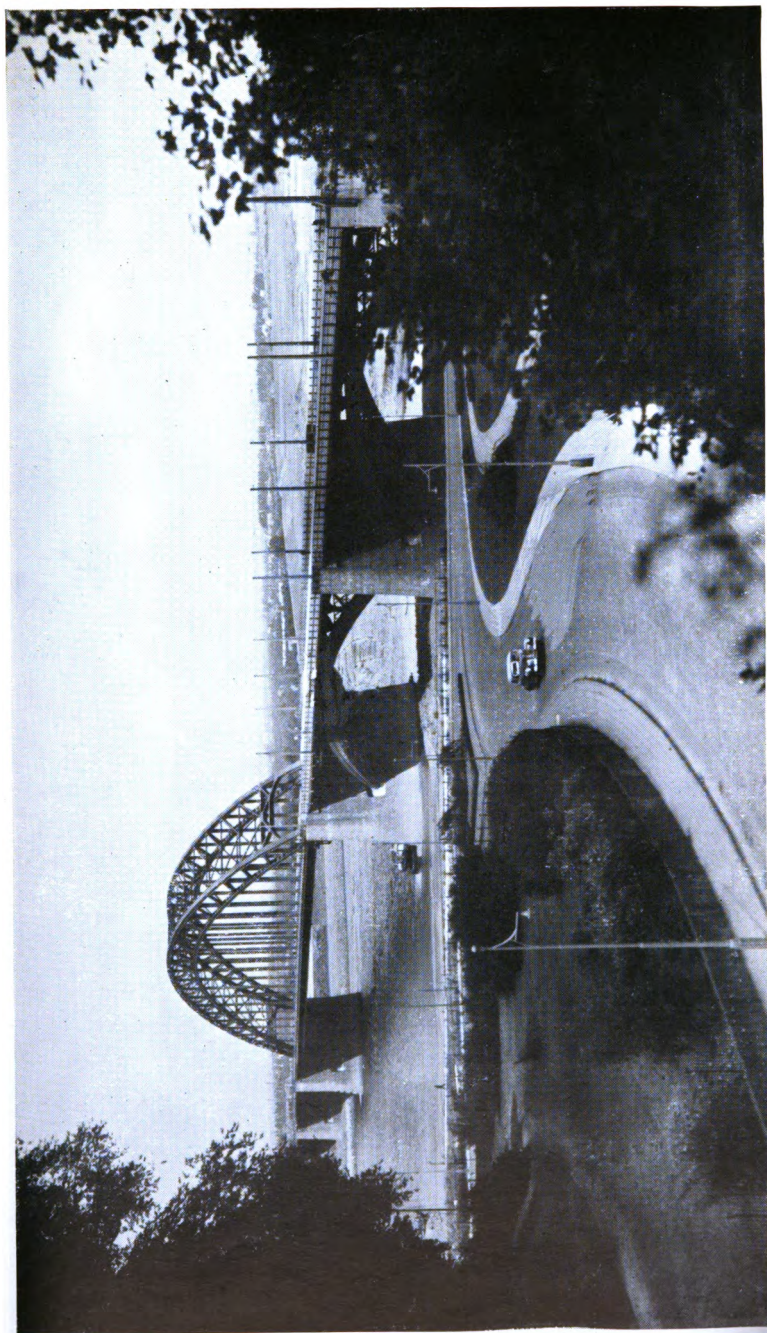


had reached a point less than ten miles south of the bridge at Nijmegen, 'the gateway to the Fatherland'—and ten miles from Arnhem.

The Grave bridge had been captured the first afternoon—together with the Maas-Waal canal bridge at Heuman—by the United States 82nd Airborne Division, which had indeed landed 'according to plan' between the two rivers. The night after the first landings, a German train from Amsterdam 'steamed smack into the 82nd headquarters area', and 'slipped on into Germany without ever being fired on'. A rail-block greeted the next train that tried to get through; and it is on record that 'the crash when it hit the barricade was most satisfying to the troops nearby'. Early efforts to rush the bridge at Nijmegen were unsuccessful. It had been mined, but the fuses were cut some moments before the bridge was scheduled to be blown.

On the following day, German reinforcements were already staging counter-attacks. But bridging was now going forward at Son; and early next morning the Guards Armoured Division started to cross the Wilhelmina Canal. By nine o'clock—on this the third day of the attack—its leading elements had advanced twenty-five miles and linked up with the 82nd Airborne Division at the Grave bridge. That same afternoon, armoured cars of the Guards Armoured Division reached the banks of the Waal, and the armoured brigade was concentrated about three miles south of Nijmegen, where the German reinforcements had continued to resist the vigorous attempts of the 82nd Airborne Division to capture the bridge. On the afternoon of September 19th, the tanks of the British 8th Armoured Brigade joined with the American airborne troops in a renewed attack on it. The approaches were covered by a number of self-propelled guns and concrete pill-boxes; and the attack, in face of concentrated small arms and anti-tank fire, stuck within four hundred yards of the bridge. It was to fall next day—the 20th—to a frontal attack by the Guards Armoured, combined with an assault crossing west of the bridge by American parachute troops, in one of the most gallant actions of the war.

During the morning, tanks of the Guards Armoured and members of an American parachute regiment cleared the town up to the southern approaches to the bridge after bitter fighting with newly arrived SS troops. Meanwhile, the American infantry had been receiving some rapid instruction in the use of British assault boats—preference being given to those who had 'at least rowed a boat'; and heavy fighting continued on the south bank where the enemy launched a whole series of counter-attacks. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the Americans—under cover of all the available artillery—started their assault across the Waal, about a mile west of the bridge, in full



*Em. de Hond, Oosterbeek*

NIJMEGEN BRIDGE



*Em. de Hond, Oosterbeek*

**ARNHEM BRIDGE**

view of the enemy. As soon as the assault parties neared the opposite bank they came under concentrated fire; and the survivors—who were few in the earliest crossings, some having swum the river—were then called upon to break out from their tiny bridgehead and cross several hundred yards of flat open country. The attack then swung in on the northern exits of the main road and railway bridges. Shortly before seven o'clock the northern end of the railway bridge was secured, and the northern end of the vital road bridge less than an hour later. Tanks of the Guards Armoured, after heavy fighting, had now reached the southern approaches of the two bridges; and the sight of the United States flag on the farther bank was the signal for the Guards' tanks to launch a head-on attack on the road bridge that enabled them to link up with the Americans. The fighting was not yet over—even on the bridge itself, where Germans were firing from the girders and hiding in the stone piers; but 'by the display of superb courage and initiative one of the most important bridges in Europe had been captured intact'.

The capture of the bridge at Nijmegen at the end of the fourth day completed the specific task of the United States 82nd Airborne Division. Meanwhile, the 101st, although it had completed its specific mission on the second day—by opening the main road between Grave and the Second Army—had not been out of the war. The first of a long series of counter-attacks against the Eindhoven-Nijmegen axis had developed by the third day; and the division had seen considerable fighting in the Helmond area, east of Eindhoven. The 82nd, too, was to be called upon to improve its positions east and south of Nijmegen, in the neighbourhood of the Reichswald Forest where the Germans were building up considerable forces. The Reichswald was less than ten miles east of Nijmegen but, nearly five months later, it was to be the scene of a battle which, in intensity and fierceness, equalled any fought by British and Canadian troops during the whole campaign. 'Arnhem' was indeed to have an aftermath.

Thus, by the end of the fourth day, there were still ten miles to go to Arnhem. But the British infantry division—the 43rd—immediately following in the wake of the Guards Armoured, had still not reached Nijmegen; and when, the next day—the 21st—the tanks resumed their northward march, they were to be effectively halted by a strong anti-tank gun screen south of Bessem: less than three miles north of the Nijmegen bridge. Now the discovery was made that it was 'almost impossible to manœuvre armoured forces off the roads, which generally ran about six feet above the surrounding country and had deep ditches on both sides'. Nor could the tanks deflect their guns sufficiently to hit the German batteries dug in behind the dykes.

We are now at the fifth day—and from the third day onwards the British 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem had been anticipating the imminent arrival of the Second Army. The airborne troops had gone into action in the belief that two days and nights were judged to be the maximum period during which they would be called upon to fight without the aid of tanks and heavy artillery. But the weather had been generally bad: and it should be remembered that it availed nothing if the weather was good in Holland and bad in England. On the second day, the 4th Parachute Brigade arrived over four hours late, at a time when every hour counted: and, after dropping even farther west than its predecessor, it moved to occupy the high ground north-west of Arnhem. On this same day, supplies failed to get through owing to poor visibility. On the third day they got through—only to fall into enemy hands. On later days Royal Air Force transport aircraft continued to fly 'straight into a flaming hell'; but less than a seventh of the fourteen hundred odd tons of supplies they carried reached the 1st Airborne. Only about twenty-five per cent of the re-supply tonnage reached the United States 82nd Airborne Division, and the balance was never flown; and the glider lift for the 101st was only two-thirds effective. Nor had it proved possible—until this fifth day—for the Polish Parachute Brigade, scheduled to land on the third day, to take off from its bases: and then not more than two-thirds—and only to land too far west. Here, then, is something of the background to the story of Arnhem itself.

That story starts quietly. Colonel-General Kurt Student, the victor of Crete in May, 1941, and now commanding a scratch force of mixed troops 'imposingly' named the First Parachute Army, was staying at Vught, only eight miles west of the southernmost American dropping-zone, on that Sunday in September, 1944. The previous evening he had sent in his usual daily report to Field Marshal Model at Army Group B. The field marshal had taken over only temporarily from the late Field Marshal von Kluge, as Commander-in-Chief West, until the return of Field Marshal von Rundstedt to the western front on September 4th. In that report Colonel-General Student had talked of increased motor transport activity and 'armoured preparations' that confirmed his earlier appreciation that a heavy attack on Holland was to be expected; but he made no mention of any airborne threat. Later, under interrogation, he was to say: 'The Allied airborne action completely surprised us. On our side, nobody anticipated such an operation. About noon I was disturbed at my desk by a roaring in the air of such mounting intensity that I left my study and went on to the balcony. Wherever I looked I saw aircraft:

troop-transport and large aircraft towing gliders. An immense stream passed low over the house.'

That day Field Marshal Model's headquarters was at Oosterbeek—a small town three miles west of Arnhem and soon to be famous in the Arnhem story. He doubtless shared General Student's surprise because the first parachute troops were already coming down when he 'drove post-haste into Arnhem' and called in reinforcements from the 9th SS Panzer Division. During the first day only fifteen German fighters were encountered—some fifty miles away on the Rhine, at Wesel; and not one British troop-carrying aircraft or glider was lost by enemy action. 'On the first vital afternoon, when the airborne forces were most vulnerable, the Luftwaffe could not intervene'—although two days later it was able to put five hundred fighters in the air over Holland.

Again, Field Marshal Model would not appear to be the only German soldier to have been stirred into activity. Not long after the war, Mr. Chester Wilmot, one of the war correspondents who accompanied the Second Army in its advance through Holland during the Arnhem operation, returned to Arnhem and interviewed members of the Dutch constabulary who were on duty in the town on the critical day. According to the evidence—which there is no reason to doubt—of Constable van Kuijk, who was on duty near the bridge that Sunday afternoon, before the landings there were no troops at the bridge except the usual guards. These twenty or twenty-five men were garrison troops—men of forty-five to fifty years of age—who had only just been called up. During the afternoon—presumably as a result of the fearful apparition in the skies—they fled; and at half past seven in the evening, when the constable walked across the bridge, 'there was not a single man in the defences'.

Meanwhile, members of the 2nd Parachute Battalion of the 1st Parachute Brigade, after dropping west of the town at a quarter to two, and following the lower of two roads that led to the Rhine, had been engaged in a protracted and occasionally eventful six-hour six-mile march—diversified by the Dutch inhabitants, 'who turned out in force, everyone wearing some garment or part of a garment coloured orange, some with favours, and some with orange arm-bands.' This agreeable episode is delightfully featured in 'Theirs is the Glory', the film record of the battle of Arnhem; and one must not be unmindful of the inevitable excitement and the corporate gaiety of spirit in that 'liberating' hour. Was not the British expeditionary force itself labelled 'The British Liberation Army'? The Dutch people were to date the dawn of their liberation—however false that dawn—from that September afternoon when a new portent

in the skies over Arnhem brought the first thrilling hope of deliverance. Nor should one be unmindful that sixteen airborne operations had been laid on during the course of the campaign—only to be cancelled at the last minute because of the swift advance of the Allied armies. Indeed, the sixteenth of these operations—operation 'Comet'—was to have been an 'Arnhem' in miniature. Early in September the division had been briefed for the crossings of the Maas, the Waal, and the Lower Rhine—a brigade to each crossing. Aircraft and gliders had been loaded, and Dutch guilders distributed; but—on this occasion because of the slow advance of the Second Army across the Albert Canal—the 'stand-to' was followed by the now customary cancellation. Hope so constantly defeated may understandably have resulted in a certain nonchalance in the planning of this last in the series; and, anyway, 'liberation' rather than war was the catchword of the hour.

The task of the 2nd Parachute Battalion was to move as quickly as possible to seize the road bridge at Arnhem, and, later, to hold the western sector of a small half-circle defensive position running through the town. This position was to be established by the 1st Parachute Brigade; its ends were to be firmly based to east and west on the Lower Rhine. The battalion was dropped with 'perfect accuracy', and moved off an hour later. At the rendezvous three German motor patrols had driven up at different times and been captured; and no opposition was encountered by the battalion until it had covered about two miles, when it came under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. The enemy withdrew in face of a platoon attack. As the battalion moved east, further opposition was encountered at the railway bridge crossing the road between Oosterbeek and Arnhem. The sentries caused only a short delay; and, on the farther side of the bridge, an armoured car withdrew after inflicting a few casualties. Opposition at the next road junction—at a mid-way point between Oosterbeek and the bridge—was circumvented by 'going round it through the houses'.

The battalion had now been split, 'C' Company having been dropped off to carry out its task of seizing the railway bridge over the Lower Rhine and of sending one platoon over the south bank. The leading members of the company suffered the mortification of seeing the bridge 'curl back' on them as the Germans blew it. On resuming its advance towards the bridge, the company was cut off and surrounded, and no more was heard of it. 'B' Company had also been detached, in order to occupy some high ground to the north overlooking the battalion line of advance. Here it met considerable

opposition and suffered some casualties; but shortly moved on to its objective, the pontoon bridge—half a mile west of the road bridge—only to find that it had already been burned. 'B' Company were next ordered to find boats or barges with which to attempt a crossing of the river. Their search was unsuccessful and, having 'lost one platoon complete', the remnants of the company made their way east to join up with 'A' Company—the company that led the advance and the first and only company to reach the bridge.

'A' Company, after eluding several small parties of the enemy and capturing some forty prisoners, reached the bridge—'their eyes straining through the September dusk'—at quarter to eight. Some SS troops had also arrived—a quarter of an hour earlier. One platoon tried to rush the bridge by mixing up with some enemy horsed-transport that was crossing the river from south to north; but it was spotted, and the attempt failed in face of the two twin light anti-aircraft guns and a German armoured car firing straight down the bridge. Thereafter the Arnhem story begins to take on its nightmarish quality.

The officer commanding this company—he succeeded to the command of the battalion when the commanding officer took over the detachment—was one of two officer survivors of the battalion to return to England in the autumn of 1944. After being wounded and taken prisoner, he escaped from a field dressing station, paraded with the local Dutch when the Germans took the decision to evacuate the entire civilian population in the Arnhem area, and ultimately crossed the Rhine. On reaching the War Office he put on record the story of the battalion's march to the bridge. It would appear that the 'six-hour six-mile march' undertaken by his own company might have been expedited—despite the cups of tea 'pressed' on it by the 'very friendly Dutch'—had not the maps supplied 'showed few of the roads that actually existed'; and the somewhat confused nature of the whole advance is demonstrated by the fact that he found 'bugle calls were a very satisfactory way to rally the men and did not seem to give any indication to the Germans of the route we were taking.' Nevertheless 'A' Company reached its objective; and the fact that it was able to hold the bridge through four days—with, until the last hours, the most extraordinary sang-froid, however great the pressure—provides yet another ironic twist in the Arnhem story.

On the first night, a German attack across the bridge was driven back with heavy casualties. The blazing vehicles of the enemy conveniently lit up the whole area and 'made the occupation of the



position an easier proposition'; and on the second night the defenders deliberately set fire to a building in order to be able to detect—and therefore prevent—any attempt by the enemy to blow the bridge: no demolition charges had been laid before the airborne attack. The position at first light on the first morning was 'very satisfactory'. The defenders had formed a small perimeter round the northern end of the bridge, and had distributed themselves among the houses and buildings within the perimeter. A very heavy bombardment of artillery and mortars had little effect 'beyond making us evacuate the attics'. This mortaring was to continue without pause throughout the next three days; but the defenders 'paid little heed to it'—although shelling was 'a different kettle of fish'. At nightfall—on this second day—the position was 'still satisfactory'.

Throughout September 19th—the third day—the Germans continued to attack with increasing vigour; but there was no material change in the position until the evening. Ammunition was at last beginning to run out; and on the east side of the perimeter enemy tanks were able to approach within thirty yards of the houses and pump shells into them. 'There was nothing for it,' blandly records 'A' Company's former commander—he had taken over command of the battalion on the first night—'but to evacuate these houses temporarily—which meant, of course, that German infantry occupied them. Then, when the tanks had withdrawn, we had to counter-attack to re-establish ourselves in the houses we had vacated.'

That evening several 'key' houses for the defence of the perimeter were set on fire by German phosphorus bombs; and 'a Tiger tank drove down the street in front of battalion headquarters, firing three rounds into every house'. The defenders were now without water; and, on the 20th—and last—day, the Germans began using many more tanks and self-propelled guns, and their attacks mounted in intensity. They smashed the houses by concentrated shell-fire at almost point-blank range, and then set fire to them with phosphorus bombs. By mid-day the defenders had no positions east of the bridge, since all the houses were either burning or still too hot to be occupied. 'A very fierce battle then raged round the end of the bridge'—fought by this handful of men, shall any doubt that it was a spectacle for the gods?—with the result that most of the houses close to the river on the west side were also set alight. A minimum number of men stayed in the houses directly overlooking the bridge to prevent infiltration, while the rest now dug in among the small gardens behind the houses. Just before dark these also caught fire—including the house with the wounded in the cellars. Now only one house remained

standing; and the wounded were already being transferred to it when it, too, broke into a blaze.

The defenders, now without any protection whatsoever for the wounded, then called for a cessation of fire in order to surrender them. Under cover of this evacuation, the Germans infiltrated large numbers of infantry into every sector of the airborne position; and it at last became completely untenable. Although the defenders indomitably put into operation a plan to move to a large warehouse still standing outside the perimeter, the building was soon surrounded, and it became obvious—even to the defenders—that it would soon suffer the fate of the other houses. A decision was therefore taken to divide the remaining one hundred odd men into two parties, with instructions to concentrate at first light the next day in the old positions covering the bridge.

This decision—taken, one must assume, in the spirit of a challenge to the spectators on high Olympus—could never be translated into action, 'since every street was well covered by machine-gun fire, and almost every building in the neighbourhood seemed to be held by the enemy'. The little force 'became very split up', and its members decided—doubtless with a pang which, even at this distance in time, may communicate itself to the reader—that they were 'no longer a fighting force'. Orders were therefore given by the detachment commander to 'hide in small parties in the ruins of the houses, in the hope that some of us, anyway, would remain undetected until the arrival of the land forces'. The last of these hiding places was not discovered until mid-day on September 22nd—'when there was still no sign of the land forces'. So concluded the action at the bridge at Arnhem—on which, until the cessation of the fighting on the night of September 20th, the whole operational story of 'Garden' is centred.

The bridge at Arnhem was not to be 'liberated' until April 14th, 1945, by the 49th Division, under command of Canadian I Corps. It was quite a performance getting there. The Royal Engineers built a bridge at Nijmegen; the Royal Navy pushed it along various waterways to the point of assault; it was swung into position across the river Ijssel; 'and the first intimation of its existence was the arrival of our tanks in Arnhem'—by that time a 'ghost city': the greater part of it entirely empty of civilians, and 'the doors of many houses standing open'.

However, the history of war is a history of missed chances; and the temptation should be resisted of blowing up any one 'missed chance' into global proportions: or even a chance doubly missed. In

the official account, *By Air to Battle*, of the British 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions, it is stated that 'to make assurance surer, most of the Airlanding Reconnaissance Squadron were to attempt a *coup de main* against the bridge'. There is no evident reason why it might not have succeeded—had not 'nearly all their transport failed to arrive'. However, had that transport arrived—had the 2nd Parachute Battalion, while marching to the bridge, been less concerned with ambushing German vehicles and chasing Germans in a wood and 'getting somewhat involved fighting among the houses on several occasions'—there might have been no 'heroic legend' of Arnhem: and be it remembered that it was the men of 'A' Company who, with other members of the battalion, created that legend by fighting for their positions on and underneath the buildings at the end of the bridge until 'the very ground on which the defenders stood or crouched was constantly seared by flames from the burning houses about it, and no man could remain there and live'.

There are matters of chance outside a commander's control; and it was by chance—or mischance—that Field Marshal Model should have selected the Arnhem-Apeldoorn area—Apeldoorn lying fifteen miles directly north of Arnhem—for refitting formations badly mauled in the Normandy battle. The German Army had taken over in that area many Dutch barracks and training camps. North of Apeldoorn was the chief training ground in the west for Tiger tank battalions: and Tiger tanks were to be in action at Arnhem on the second day. These activities were not unknown to British intelligence, 'though it was not known (but suspected) that the principal formations reorganizing near Arnhem were the 9th SS and 10th SS Panzer Divisions of the II SS Panzer Corps'. British troops during the battle captured the actual order for the movement of the 10th SS Panzer Division to Apeldoorn; it was dated September 8th—two days before the Supreme Commander gave his approval to operation 'Market-Garden'. These experienced troops, utilizing the tanks salvaged from the battle of Normandy, and reinforced by all the available German man-power in eastern Holland, could hardly have been more excellently situated to launch a counter-attack on the British airborne troops who materialized unscathed out of the skies over Arnhem.

That first day, 'C' Company of the 3rd Parachute Battalion—which set off for Arnhem by the upper road leading to the Rhine, against the main body of the German opposition—received orders to make its own way to the bridge. After leaving the main road the platoons became separated. One platoon 'fought an action against a

captured British jeep filled with Germans'; the other two platoons attacked an ammunition lorry and blew it up. Whether or not as a result of these violent actions of war, it was dusk when these three platoons—less those members who had strayed farther afield—reached the railway station at Arnhem and moved on towards the bridge—'through a town deserted', writes one of the serjeants engaged in the operation, 'save for two Dutch policemen'. A private of 'C' Company records that, in the hope of finding food, he entered a butcher's shop, the owner of which, having no meat, gave him bread, wine, and cheese. There followed a delightful interview with the butcher's young daughter—who had one line of English: 'Many happy returns after your long stay away'. Meanwhile, the two other companies of the battalion bivouacked near the cross-roads a mile from Oosterbeek until two hours before dawn.

The 1st Parachute Battalion—whose orders were to remain with brigade headquarters in immediate reserve—was last to leave the dropping zone. It had not moved more than a mile or so down the railway line leading east to Arnhem before it had to engage fiercely the German reinforcements who had closed in behind the 2nd Battalion. There were now snipers in the woods on both sides of the railway and 'in practically every house'; spasmodic but fierce fighting continued all that evening and at intervals throughout the night; and it proved impossible to make any headway. The next morning both battalions began a hard fight to reach the 2nd Battalion now at the bridge; but Arnhem—'deserted save for two Dutch policemen' the previous evening—was now held in strength by a garrison that included tanks and self-propelled guns. Only one small group from the 3rd Battalion succeeded in getting through to the bridge: though other members of these two battalions got near enough to respond to the old Tunisian battle cry of the defenders—'Ho, Mohammed!'

Overnight the picture had changed. The battle was not to be one to capture the bridge at Arnhem, but to relieve the five hundred and fifty parachutists who, at its northern end, were 'marooned' in the buildings which enemy tanks and artillery were preparing to reduce to rubble. In turn, the relieving force, after failing desperately to break through, was itself to be 'marooned' west of the town; and all the efforts of the British Second Army to succour it were finally to be resolved on the ninth night, in ferrying from the northern to the southern bank of the Lower Rhine, under cover of darkness and rain, some two thousand survivors of those ten thousand men of the 1st Airborne Division who—apart from some members of the 4th Parachute Brigade who were wounded in the air on the second day—had descended from the skies over Arnhem without a single casualty.

'A six-hour six-mile march': these six words hint at the fundamental mischance—and yet another 'ineffably fateful consequence it would be profitless to discuss'—of the whole Arnhem operation. The dropping zone farthest to the west was eight miles from the bridge; and the resulting gap in time and space was almost certain to lead to a fight to reach the bridge even before any attempt could be made to achieve its capture—the whole object of the expedition. In the light of later knowledge—and a sight of the actual ground—there can be little doubt that the landing and dropping zones for the earliest arrivals of the 1st Airborne Division should have been selected in the open ground immediately south and east of the bridge—the area it was proposed to use for the landing of the Polish Parachute Brigade on the third day.

The country to the north, for the most part, is well wooded, and the choice of zones was limited to a small number of fields. On the other hand, contemporary reports on the terrain between the Waal and the Lower Rhine, 'including the opinion of Dutchmen living there', pointed to the conclusion that the area, because of the dykes, was 'basically unsuitable' for landing or dropping zones. Moreover, the anti-aircraft defences at Arnhem and in the neighbourhood of the Deelen airfield—six miles to the north and equidistant from Oosterbeek and Arnhem—were another limiting factor. In the event, when the twelve Stirlings that constituted the Marker Force flew in north of the river, only one of them was fired at. Thus, ill-advisedly—or so it would appear—the decision was taken to land the 1st Parachute and the 1st Airlanding Brigades—together with about half the available gunners and sappers and other divisional troops—five to eight miles west of Arnhem, on the Arnhem side of the Lower Rhine, on the first halcyon day. Speculation apart, the fact remains that the value of the surprise achieved in the original landings was completely lost—because of the gap in time and space. Even today, under skies of peace, the visitor to the selected dropping zones will find that the bridge at Arnhem seems far more remote in time and space than the actual distance would suggest; and one can well understand why, in the view of the survivors, the six-hour trip to the bridge represented 'a cracking good march'.

Preceded by a rolling barrage astride the Eindhoven road, in conjunction with rocket-firing Typhoons working on the 'cab rank' system, British XXX Corps started its projected sixty-mile march from the Meuse-Escaut canal bridgeheads in the early afternoon of September 17th. The advance was spearheaded by the Guards Armoured Division, which moved off shortly after half-past two, as

the first airborne echelons came into view. To the British 50th Division fell the task of mopping up behind the armoured spearhead. From the outset the Guards encountered strong opposition from parachute infantry dug in along the road-side and supported by self-propelled guns; and this first day it advanced no more than six miles. That night the division harboured at Valkenswaard—half way to Eindhoven. As we have seen, its armoured cars assisted in the capture of the town the following afternoon; the division itself crossed the newly built bridge at Son early the next morning; and, after a twenty-five mile advance in rather less than three hours, linked up with the 82nd Airborne Division. The day following—the 20th and fourth day—it reached Nijmegen, where its tanks took part in the Anglo-American assault on the bridge already described. On the fifth day, on the final ten-mile lap to Arnhem, it was to find itself halted by the strong anti-tank gun screen south of Bessem. Silhouetted on roads built up over the waterlogged delta, the tanks offered admirable targets to the German gunners.

Bessem was to be the virtual limit of the storming advance of the Guards Armoured: an advance that was to fall short of its objective by seven miles, and to fade out lugubriously and ingloriously under the greyest and wettest of skies. The rain poured down, or drizzled down; 'during the eight vital days of battle', writes Field Marshal Montgomery, 'there were only two on which the weather permitted a reasonable scale of offensive air support and air transportation'; and 'mud and cold began to dominate the scene'. The Guards Armoured had been called upon to fight almost every mile of that fifty-three mile advance, through a narrow corridor of its own making. In Eindhoven, on the third evening, its second-line transport had been caught in an air attack by about thirty JU 88s. The column was split; several of the vehicles burned fiercely; others were endangered by burning buildings; and it became a first priority job to move the unharmed vehicles to safety before the ammunition loads started to explode. It was not until the early hours of the following morning that the tail of the column cleared the town. Nevertheless, by midnight it was crossing the bridge over the Maas at Grave; and, the next day, drawing petrol from an enemy dump at Oss, just south of the river to the west.

Here, at any rate, a touch of light comedy was to relieve a situation that was growing as tense as the corridor itself was tenuous. When the column of British vehicles arrived on the scene they discovered that the Germans were already drawing from the dump, and it was necessary for an armoured escort to evict them before the British vehicles could proceed to draw two days' supply for the division. The

Dutchman in charge expressed some bewilderment how he was to account for issues to both 'sides' during the course of the same afternoon. The armoured drive is the petrol battle; and the capture of the petrol helped out a situation that was fast becoming critical.

The division had now been 'living on its hump' for four days; supplies were down to one day; and ammunition was low as a result of the hard fighting around Nijmegen. The supply problem was the more serious because the division now had on its hands fifteen to sixteen hundred prisoners. Moreover, units of the division had to be sent back to deal with enemy astride the lines of communication, and ammunition and petrol supply vehicles had to be despatched on a ten-hour journey through this battle area for replenishment at the forward maintenance centres away back at Bourg-Leopold, ten miles across the Belgian frontier and mid-way between the frontier and the Albert Canal. Let no one talk lightly of an 'armoured advance'!

The discovery of food depots—again in the neighbourhood of Oss—helped out the supply situation a second time. Oss was not yet 'liberated': area headquarters of the German Army was still at 's Hertogenbosch, ten miles to the south-west. After preliminary reconnaissance, the divisional supply echelon, with an armoured escort, went in to draw from the German depots. The telephone line to German headquarters was still in order, and the Germans had, in fact, drawn their daily supplies that morning. As dusk fell, the supply echelon left with a substantial portion of two days' rations for the whole of the Guards Armoured Division. The next day—after evicting the Germans from the dump—the total figure was brought up to four days' supply. It can at least be confidently stated that the basic reason for the failure of the Guards Armoured Division to reach the British 1st Airborne Division fighting beyond the Lower Rhine was not one of supply but of the entire unsuitability of the country for armoured operations on that last ten-mile stretch; and all the available evidence suggests that the Guards Armoured, when they set out from Nijmegen, had no premonition of the disaster immediately ahead. Nor would one expect them to reflect in these terms.

One last point needs to be touched on before the Guards with their pride of armour entrust their defeated mission to the waiting infantry: the road to Eindhoven behind them on their long march was at many points no more than a salient forty yards wide, and had been not merely under constant and heavy attack by land and air and frequently cut, but on two occasions cut for more than twenty-four hours on end. Between Uden and Veghel—now a ruin—it had been cut around mid-day on September 22nd until the following

afternoon ; and it was again cut, south of Veghel, on the 24th. After a day-long battle with enemy infantry and armour, it was not reopened until the 26th. The corps commander himself was one of those thus rendered prisoner behind their own lines, and unable to control the battle from his headquarters. Not, perhaps, that there was much to control. On the right of the salient, VIII Corps, and, on the left, XII Corps, were making only slow progress ; and at the end of the battle had still not been able to advance beyond the immediate neighbourhood of Eindhoven : which was, in effect, no more than the kicking-off point for the whole operation. So it was that, for hours and days at a time, the lifeline of 'Club Route' was lifeless, and 'the vehicles that might have brought life to Arnhem were drawn up useless and stationary on the road'.

As the shadows close round the story of the Guards Armoured drive—as their tanks turn south again and put behind them the hideous maremma between their farthest point of advance and the Lower Rhine—it is the moment to hint at a psychological condition that may have influenced the course of the battle south of the river. It should be remembered that a 'war is won' attitude of mind had prevailed among all ranks when the German armies fled to their own frontiers ; the troops had been based on Belgium, where the 'war is over' attitude of mind had been almost an order of the day ; and, understandably enough, it was no easy matter to resume the rhythm of war within the space of a fortnight—and of a war more trying to the nerves than any fought out behind a conventional 'line'.

Mr. Chester Wilmot has put on record the intimidating effect of a solitary warning against mines erected by 'some over-conscientious sapper' south of Eindhoven : 'there were ample grass verges, but whenever convoys were halted to let more urgent columns through, the drivers clung to the concrete, creating a succession of traffic blocks which took hours to clear'. Alternative routes were barred because of the priority given to bridging material—which was to remain undisturbed at Bourg-Leopold. Again, Mr. Alan Moorehead was one of the war correspondents who got beyond Veghel during the action and was himself cut off ; he was conspicuous for his ability to get the 'feel' of a battle ; and in his book *Eclipse* he remarks on a fundamental lack of a sense of urgency in the rear areas ; and adds that as soon as the Germans began firing on the road there was a general disposition to say, 'Oh, well. It's hopeless trying to get through. We shall have to wait for the tanks to clear it up.' The answer he invites to this 'criticism' may well be that a slow realization was spreading abroad that the war was, indeed, far from being won. Whatever the explanation, any stranger to the



battle who went up the Eindhoven–Nijmegen road not long after it was over must have been a little astonished to find a succession of notices stuck on the road-side trees: 'The troops in front are hungry. Hurry!'

But how burned the battle flame at Arnhem itself—and how lonely that battle!—The operational narrative of it—as seen from army group headquarters—is a succession of phrases about the news from the British 1st Airborne Division being scarce, reports from the Arnhem area still being scanty, the situation at Arnhem still being obscure—until, on September 20th, that situation becomes 'acute'. It was on this night that the remnants of the detachment at the bridge, after living through three days of continuous fire and flame, and now fighting in and underneath the ruins of the buildings at the bridge approaches, after surrendering two hundred of their wounded the day before, could finally fight no more.

When the last stand was made, underneath the bridge, of the original five hundred and fifty men—including nearly two hundred from brigade headquarters and some eighty engineers—about one hundred and ten men and five or six officers were still capable of helping in the defence. That night of September 20th, 'there was no more ammunition, there had been no food for a long time, and hardly a man but was wounded'. To the last the defenders had fought in good heart; for news had been received the previous night that tanks of the Second Army would attack the southern end of the bridge the next day: an item of news confirmed in a further message from the divisional general that XXX Corps would actually attack at five o'clock in the evening. Unhappily, when the first message passed, the Second Army had not yet got across the bridge at Nijmegen. But this second intimation from headquarters, like the first, may have been no more than the expression of a pious hope; for division, on September 19th, had already informed the bridge detachment that 'so far from division coming to their aid', the few hundred men at the bridge 'might be asked' to go to the aid of the division itself—numbering several thousand men—as they were having a very sticky time on the western outskirts of Arnhem'. The message passed direct from the lips of the divisional general to the detachment commander, and can hardly have been very reassuring. But it should be recorded that the divisional commander had been completely cut off from his headquarters from dusk of the first day to the early morning of the third day—the 19th. Together with the commander of the 1st Parachute Brigade—which he was visiting—he had been compelled to take cover on the outskirts of Oosterbeek from relentless mortar fire.

Throughout the second night—the brigade commander now having become a casualty—he was incarcerated in the loft of a house: most inconsiderately, a self-propelled gun ‘came along the road and parked itself in front of our door’. The previous afternoon, however, he had enjoyed the satisfaction—not usually vouchsafed a divisional commander in modern war—of dispatching with a revolver a German whose face intruded at the window of the house in which he had sought temporary asylum.

The task of the 1st Parachute Brigade in the first vital forty-eight hours had been to form a defensive perimeter round the bridge. Despite all the efforts of its three battalions, that perimeter had never been formed. Only three hundred men of the 2nd Battalion together with some remnants of the 3rd had actually reached the bridge. The fighting strength of the two other battalions had been expended in a forlorn attempt to reinforce and rescue it; they had ‘disintegrated in the streets of Arnhem’. As a last irony, the perimeter of defence actually set up was to contain the remainder of the division. It was established, in the shape of a horse-shoe, to the west of Oosterbeek—on the day that the fighting at the bridge ceased; it was to hold out for five nights and four days—until the night of September 25th. Oosterbeek is about a mile from the Lower Rhine; and it is here, within the perimeter, and across the stretch of ground leading to the steep muddy banks of the river, that the nightmarish quality of the Arnhem story moves to its climax. Mr. Stanley Maxted, the Canadian war correspondent, after returning with survivors from the battle, wrote: ‘Now that the shambles is over, there is a spot I know and could show you where a fitting memorial to their deeds might arise—the deeds of those filthy, grimy, wonderful gentlemen who dropped from the clouds to fight where they stood’. And they fought on till Field Marshal Montgomery ordered their withdrawal. Only the day before, their divisional commander, Major-General R. E. Urquhart, had sent a message to the Allied Airborne Corps commander in Nijmegen: ‘Resistance will be continued and we will do our best’.

The ‘waiting infantry’ to whom the Guards Armoured Division handed over its mission of rescue was the 43rd Division, under the command of Major-General G. I. (afterwards General Sir Ivor) Thomas. It had come into the Nijmegen bridgehead on September 21st—the day that the Guards faded out of the Arnhem picture. On the two following days it attempted to resume the advance, but could get no farther than the village of Elst—between five and six miles from Arnhem. Elst was quite an ordinary village—though soon to be

a mass of wreckage—with a main road winding through its centre; it rejoiced in no strongpoints or any sort of fortifications; but the tanks and the infantry were never to succeed in breaking through it in time. The tanks could not get off the winding road; and a handful of anti-tank guns made it a death-trap. The infantry division itself—although it may have shared or been the victim of the prevailing lack of a sense of urgency—by the time it reached the tip of the salient, was 'pretty nearly all-in': the brigade that ultimately reached the Rhine arrived 'with only five rounds per 25-pounder in the locker'. Here at Elst—so small, so ordinary a village, so unknown to fame, and now cut off from the new section of the main road by a huge defensive embankment—the battle for the bridge at Arnhem was finally lost. Its garrison was estimated to have amounted to no more than two battalions of SS infantry and twenty tanks. When the battle on the other side of the river closed down, remote British battalions, not far beyond its ruins, were to take up their wintry station in contemplation of the misty tree-lined heights behind Arnhem. There was just nothing else to look at. 'Garden' had indeed withered 'like a melon on a vine'.

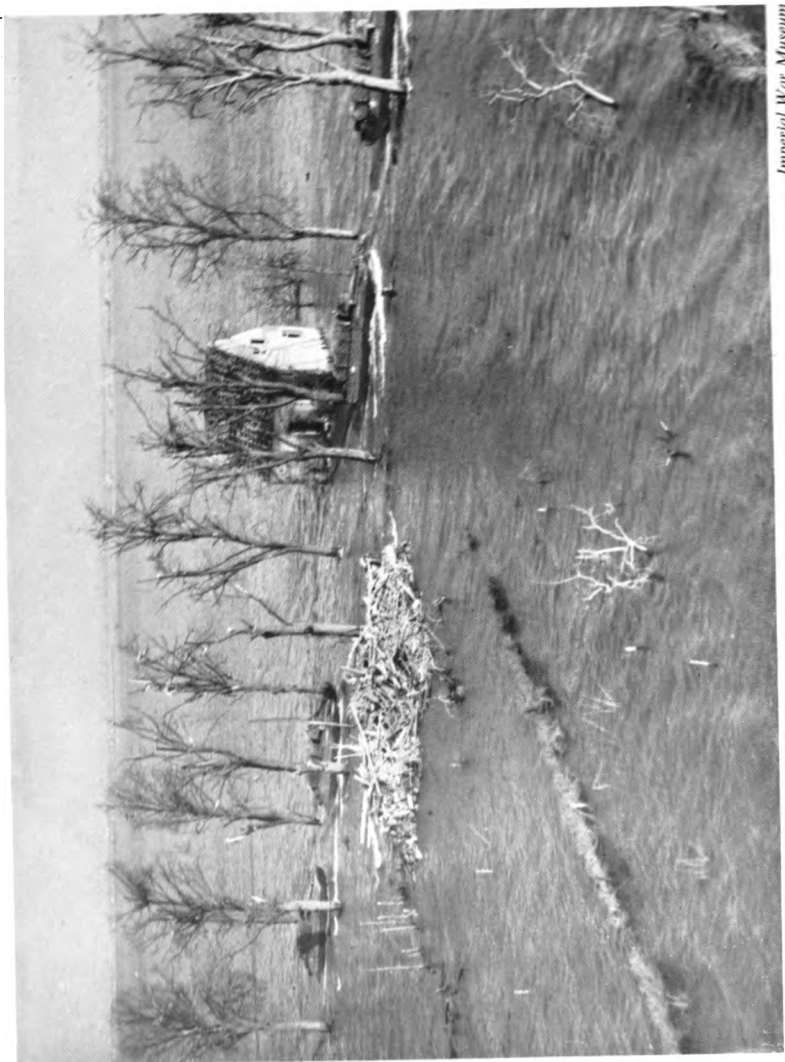
Already, by the night of September 19th, the third day of the battle, the 1st Airborne Division would appear to have given up hope of accomplishing its mission—as is apparent from the divisional commander's message, already quoted, to the commander of the detachment at the bridge. That same evening orders were given for a general withdrawal on Oosterbeek. The division had certainly lost no time in determining to establish its ever-shrinking 'horse-shoe' perimeter of defence, since 'for most of the division's troops'—according to the contemporary War Office account—the first night had been 'reasonably quiet'. But thereafter the background of the battle had been one of 'unceasing danger, utter lack of sleep, and slow torment from hunger and thirst'; they had been 'mortared and shelled, machine-gunned and sniped from all round'. Now that the detachment at the bridge had dispersed, the perimeter contained the whole of the remnants of the division: that is, elements of five parachute battalions, the independent parachute company that had formed the Marker Force, the reconnaissance squadron, the airlanding troops, glider-pilot detachments, members of the various technical corps, together with some Poles. All were now called upon to fight as infantry—apart from those gunners who manned 'such artillery as remained'.

It was to be the destiny of two British infantry battalions of the 43rd Division, assisted by a squadron of tanks of the 4th/7th Dragoon



*Em. de Hond, Oosterbeek*

**LOWER RHINE AND ARNHEM RAIL BRIDGE**



*Imperial War Museum*

**'WATER ON THE WESTERN FRONT'**  
Nijmegen-Cleve Road

Guards and by three Canadian field companies with the Second Army, to act the prologue to the last scene of all in the Arnhem story. The scene itself was played beyond Elst on the night of Monday, September 25th—the ninth night—and played to the ‘music’ of the guns of XXX Corps which, since the previous Thursday, had been giving artillery support to the troops inside the perimeter. ‘We got on the corps artillery net’, wrote a survivor, ‘and directed their fire. It was amazing how accurate they were, even at extreme range, when firing solely from the map. They broke up concentrations of armour and infantry before an attack, put down fire when the attack was coming in, and harried it when we had beaten it back.’

Of the two battalions to reach the southern bank, the first to arrive was the 5th Battalion of the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry. On the evening of September 22nd, led by a squadron of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, and mounted on tanks, carriers, anti-tank guns, and other vehicles, the battalion, ignoring the dangers of mines and ambushes, and moving at great speed, reached the village of Driel, on the southern bank of the Lower Rhine, and almost opposite Oosterbeek. The journey of ten miles—from north-east of Nijmegen—had been completed in under thirty minutes in fading light: five Tiger tanks, coming up in rear from the direction of Elst, were put out of action by mines and bombs—two of them being almost literally ‘liquidated’ in a ditch. Very bitter fighting had now developed along the dyke roads and in the villages and woods of this inhospitable fenland between the two great rivers; and, by thus crashing through all opposition, the battalion speeded up the relief operation north of Elst and brought almost to the river’s perilous edge the first tangible evidence of help in the shape of two amphibious vehicles (DUKWs) loaded with ammunition and medical stores. The next morning the column was joined on its right by the other infantry battalion to reach the Lower Rhine—the 4th Battalion of the Dorsetshire Regiment. The battalion was to fight the last gallant action of the whole battle.

On the night of September 24th, two hundred and fifty men of the battalion crossed the bullet-swept river in assault boats. Their mission—unequalled for its forlornness, one would imagine, in the whole history of war—was to extend the shrinking airborne bridge-head by fighting their way through the woods to the left flank, and make contact with and strengthen the airborne pocket itself. To reach the river, the twenty assault boats—some of them ‘rickety’—had to be carried some six hundred yards through orchards and loose ground; they were launched, under mortar and small-arms fire, at half-past one in the morning. Two of the assault boats were knocked

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out by mortar fire during the launching; others were in immediate difficulty owing to the strong current running at the time; the farther bank was illuminated by the blaze of a burning factory; the troops who succeeded in making the crossing arrived with no supporting arms—'just infantry weapons'; and the Germans were lining the woods that came down almost to the river's edge. To gain their objective—the high ground through the woods skirting the river—the troops would have to fight their way up a sixty-degree slope. Here, in these woods, in small groups, these men of the Dorsetshire were to pursue their allotted impossible task—'to extend and hold the bridgehead for the Airborne'. Nevertheless, in some measure, they achieved it—by helping to cover the withdrawal of the airborne survivors across the river. Of the force that succeeded in crossing the first night, few got back on the night of the evacuation—which had been ordered without their knowledge. Some fifty men got back during the next two days by swimming or by floating on logs across the fast flowing river. One hundred and fifty-one men and ten officers, including the commanding officer of the battalion, did not return.

At ten o'clock on the night of September 25th the men of the Airborne—there were now hardly more than two thousand of them—were told to fold their tents and silently steal away; that is to say, their orders were to make as little noise as possible and follow a path through the woods to reach the river bank in the general direction of Oosterbeek, where Canadian engineers with assault boats would be waiting to ferry them across. They were told to muffle their boots with bits of blanket. At two minutes past ten they clambered out of their slit trenches 'in an absolute din of bombardment—a great deal of it our own'—and formed up for the march to the river in single file. A path through the woods had been reconnoitred earlier; and at every turn of the way there was posted a serjeant glider pilot 'who stepped out like a shadow and then stepped back into deeper shadow again'. In the column were some of the two hundred and fifty men of the Polish Parachute Brigade—about a third of those who had landed south of the river on the fifth day. They had been ferried across the previous night, these men of the sky, and in pelting rain and flashes of darkness were now slithering through the mudflats that bordered this obscene extrusion of the glamorous River Rhine. Here, at any rate, it staged a second *Götterdämmerung*. Not to finish on a note of tragedy, let it be recorded that, at the collecting point on the south bank, fine staff work produced blankets, dry clothes, rum, cigarettes, and a jeep and 'duck' taxi service to Nijmegen.

It may be argued that the air-land attack on Holland was ninety per cent successful. Unhappily it was the remaining ten per cent that made all the difference between success and failure for the operation as a whole. Lieutenant-General Lewis H. Brereton, commander of the Allied Airborne Army, has pointed out that 'every objective in "Market" was captured and held longer than the prescribed time'. The statement is unexceptionable. Major-General James M. Gavin, commanding the United States 82nd Airborne Division, writes defiantly: 'There was no failure at Arnhem. If, historically, there remains an implication of failure, it was the failure of the ground forces to arrive in time to exploit the initial gains'. Again, the statement is unexceptionable. However, 'Now a' is done that men can do, And a' is done in vain', any attempt to apportion praise or blame must be more than ordinarily invidious.

By the end of the month, after VIII Corps on the right and XII Corps on the left had filled out the flanks, the corridor had broadened, although, south of Grave, it was still only twenty miles wide; and the area between Nijmegen and Arnhem became known as 'the island'. This narrow salient constituted a threat to the enemy's flank if he chose to fight this side of the Rhine; and if he chose to fight beyond the Rhine, it gave the 21st Army Group a foothold beyond the main stream from which it could launch an assault across the lesser branch—the Lower Rhine—to turn the German position. However, the Germans were taking no risks. On December 2nd, 1944, three weeks after the Canadian II Corps had taken over the salient from the British Second Army, the Germans cut the dykes on the south side of the Lower Rhine west of Arnhem with the intention of flooding the Canadians out of the island. They very nearly succeeded. Almost overnight the island became a lake; and, although enough ground was retained to cover the Waal bridges at Nijmegen, the garrison had to withdraw as far as the railway line running west from the wretchedness of the village of Elst. For a last touch of irony in the Arnhem story, German parachute troops made a fierce attack on what remained of the island on December 4th; and it is something of a relief to be able to record that they were 'seen off' by the British 49th Division with heavy losses. For thereafter the Arnhem gateway to the promised land of the Ruhr was to stay closed. The waters were to inherit the earth. In this sector, future land operations that developed into the battle of the Rhineland—now a mere preliminary to the battle of the Rhine itself—were only nominally 'land' operations; in the main they were water-borne. 'Arnhem' had indeed reached its ultimate aftermath. Now only the legend was to linger on.



### iii. *SEQUEL IN THE SCHELDT ESTUARY*

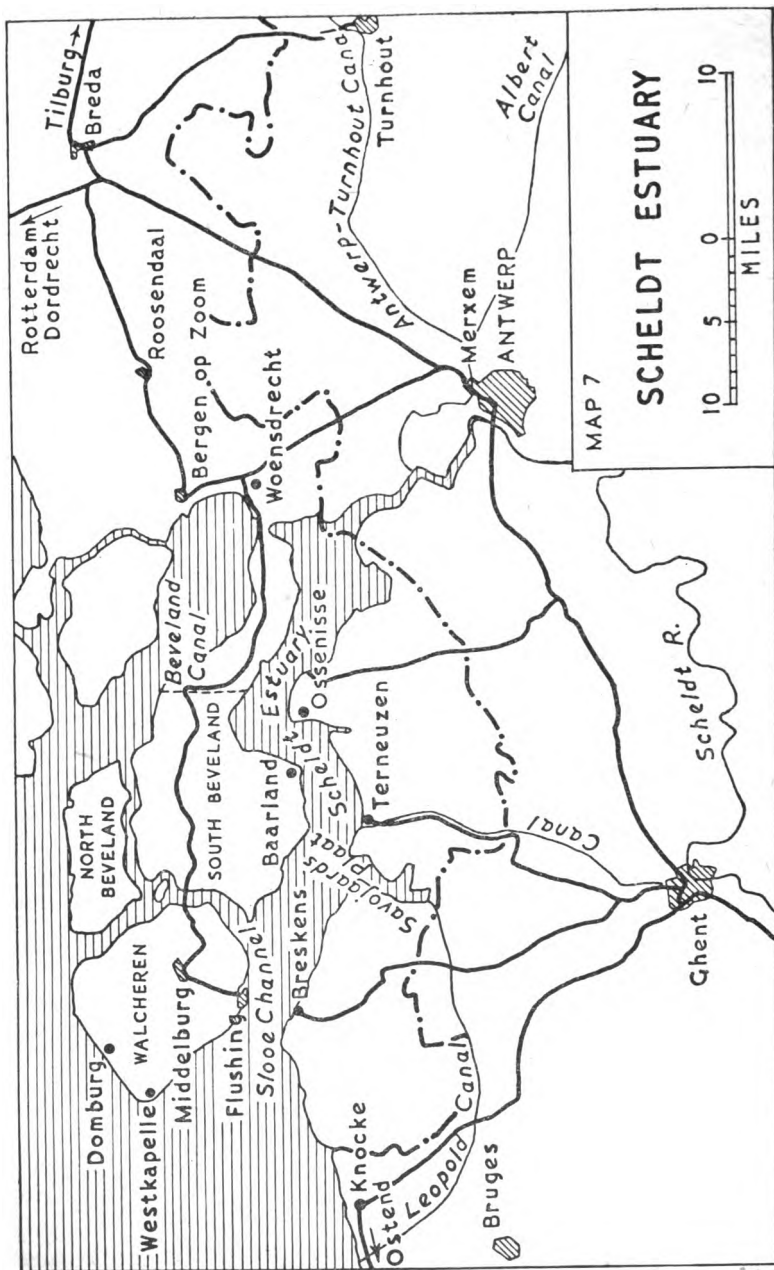
THE mid-September attempt to 'stampede the war to a finish' had failed; the bright promise kindled in the sky by the great sky-trains over Holland was already a memory—to be extinguished in the dreariest of winter chores. During those last days of September that saw the widening and the strengthening of the Nijmegen salient, Field Marshal Montgomery was still examining the possibility of launching the battle of the Rhineland 'about October 10'; but by the end of the first week in October he was compelled to inform the Supreme Commander that it was necessary to postpone the projected attack. Ten days later—on October 16th—he issued orders shutting down all offensive operations in the 21st Army Group with the exception of those concerned with the opening of the Scheldt estuary—the specific mission and, as already stated, the late destiny of the Canadian First Army. The British Second Army was instructed to carry out immediate regrouping to 'bring its weight to bear on the west'.

Two days after Field Marshal Montgomery gave orders—with, it may be presumed, an infinite reluctance—that his armies should turn their gaze west, he and General Bradley conferred with the Supreme Commander in Brussels. After Arnhem, the field marshal still held to the view that, for the 21st Army Group, 'the prize still remained the Ruhr'. At this latest and not very exhilarating conference—on October 18th—the decision was taken that General Bradley's 12th Army Group would be 'responsible for commanding the operations to capture the Ruhr', and that the 21st Army Group would 'examine the possibility of thrusting northwards over the Neder Rijn towards the Zuider Zee'. In particular, the 21st Army Group was to 'continue its operations to open the port of Antwerp as quickly as possible'. Subsequently the British Second Army would launch an attack south-eastwards from the Nijmegen bridgehead towards Krefeld—a German town facing the western face of the Ruhr at its mid-way point. The United States Ninth Army—which had recently become operational under the command of Lieutenant-General William H. Simpson—was to advance on the left flank of the United States First Army during the advance of that army to the Rhine 'about Cologne', in order to 'gain a bridgehead over the river' and subsequently attack northwards between the Rhine and the Meuse, to meet the Second Army offensive driving southwards. Thus, in sum, it was agreed that

the battle of the Rhineland should consist of two converging offensives: one by the 21st Army Group from the Nijmegen bridgehead southwards; the other from the left flank of the 12th Army Group northwards. In his note on this conference, Field Marshal Montgomery characteristically concludes: 'The basic essential now was to deliver these thrusts in overwhelming strength in order to write off the German forces in the northern sector of the Rhineland and to burst across the Rhine north of the Ruhr'. And it was to be precisely so—in six months' time—although the 'prize of the Ruhr' was, at the last, to elude his army group. Meanwhile, there was Antwerp—dolorous Antwerp.

Antwerp was the only port in Europe adequately equipped to sustain a fighting force of over two million men—and, by the time the Rhine was reached, the Anglo-American-French armies were to total about four million. The British and the Canadian armies, and the United States First Army in the Aachen sector, were still compelled, in the main, to rely for supplies on the wearing road-haul of over five hundred miles from the ports of Normandy: whereas Antwerp lay within eighty miles of Aachen and within the same distance of those British forces already east of Nijmegen on the Maas front. The port had been captured with its harbour facilities intact; but the estuary that gave access to it was sown with sea-mines; enemy craft, from E-boats—a small speedy type of surface torpedo boat—to midget submarines, patrolled its waters; German troops lined both its banks; and heavy coastal batteries commanded the narrow three-mile entrance. Until the estuary was cleared, the port of Antwerp would be useless. The task of clearing it was to provide one of the grimmest pictures in the whole invasion panorama.

The acceptance of the fact that the task had to be undertaken was in itself an admission that there would now be a long winter of war; and there can be little doubt that Field Marshal Montgomery avoided the task until the last possible moment. At an earlier conference in Brussels on September 10th, the commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group had been authorized to defer the freeing of the Antwerp approaches in an effort to seize a Rhine bridgehead in the Arnhem area. Of the subsequent conference at Versailles on September 22nd—at which the field marshal was represented by his chief of staff—General Bradley remarks that, although the field marshal had captured the port of Antwerp seventeen days before, little progress had been made in clearing its seaward passage through the Scheldt, and bitterly comments that, although the Supreme Commander had termed a deep-water port 'an indispensable pre-requisite for the final



MAP 7

SCHELDT ESTUARY



drive deep into Germany', he still refrained from directing the field marshal to clear the port before undertaking any further offensive. General Bradley writes: 'Of all the might-have-beens in the European campaign, none was more agonizing than this failure of Monty to open Antwerp'. Nevertheless it may be argued that had the port of Antwerp been cleared before the capture of a Rhine bridgehead was attempted, such would appear to have been the German power of recuperation that the 21st Army Group might not have secured even its second-best bridgehead at Nijmegen without an autumn battle exceeding in intensity the operation it was about to undertake. Certainly one cannot question American opinion that the Supreme Commander 'leaned over backwards' in his efforts to fall in with the British commander-in-chief's point of view—though never to the extent of concentrating everything on the 'left hook'. By the end of September there were fifty-four United States divisions in the field, with six staging through the United Kingdom; and only three of them were 'immobilized' as the result of any diversion of supplies for operation 'Market-Garden'. Nor were these 'grounded' divisions in the line at the time. They had only just arrived in Normandy.

By the end of September, after the fall of Boulogne and Calais, the Canadian First Army was 'free to concentrate all its energies on the clearance of the Scheldt', and on September 27th Field Marshal Montgomery ordered General Crerar to 'proceed with all speed'. On October 1st, the Canadian 2nd Division, after crossing the Antwerp-Turnhout canal at a point some fifteen miles north-east of Antwerp, retraced its steps on the farther side of the canal to Merxem, a northern suburb of the city, and began its push towards the Beveland isthmus, a narrow neck of land that links the mainland with South Beveland, the long thin peninsula that forms the north bank of the estuary. During the first week of the advance, resistance was not particularly fierce—merely 'some trouble in the wooded country on the right of their axis'; but near the isthmus four battalions of German parachute troops, fighting as infantry, barred further progress. They were securely dug in on the farther slopes of the dykes about the village of Woensdrecht and the embankment that carries the railway across the isthmus. Here they 'waited coolly for successive Canadian attacks across the open, flooded fields before them'. On October 10th, the Canadians—'often fighting waist-deep in water'—at last got a footing on the embankment on the isthmus west of Woensdrecht; but the village itself was not captured until the 16th. Nor, until the whole area was under secure control, was it feasible to attempt an advance across the isthmus.

It was at this juncture that the commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group issued the new instructions to his army commanders that gave to the opening of the port of Antwerp 'complete priority over all other offensive operations in 21st Army Group without any qualification whatsoever'. In order to shorten the Canadian line, the British Second Army was to take over its right sector. At that time British VIII Corps—which had continued to hold the eastern side of the Nijmegen salient—was conducting an offensive towards the Maas, upstream from Grave and in the direction of Venraij and Venlo—lying on the east bank of the river itself. This offensive had already become water-logged in the neighbourhood of Venraij, some fifteen miles short of the river. After the entry into Venraij of an armoured division—the 7th—of the United States First Army on October 17th, the offensive was called off: Venlo, indeed, was not to be entered until March 1st, 1945. Instead, in order to assist the Scheldt operation, the British Second Army was to launch a drive designed to clear the Germans out of the area south of the Maas from 's Hertogenbosch—lying some twenty miles west of Grave—westwards.

Here, then, was farewell—and a long one—to Field Marshal Montgomery's post-Arnheim 'idea that, as we progressed along the west bank of the Rhine, we should take any opportunity afforded us of jumping the river'. The gallant Canadians fighting waist-deep in water below the embankment on the Beveland isthmus proclaimed the shape of things to come. At this point in his personal narrative of the campaign, the field marshal, with justice, writes: 'The Allied drive to the Rhine had now virtually come to a halt'. He adds, with force, and looking along the whole of the Allied line: 'We had nowhere been strong enough to secure decisive results quickly'.

Between September 4th, when the British 11th Armoured Division entered the city, and September 22nd, when, after severe fighting, a bridgehead was secured over the Albert Canal immediately east of Antwerp—a bridgehead that might have been seized without serious opposition within a few hours of the Allied entry into the city—no serious attempt had been made to cover the twenty-mile stretch between Antwerp and the base of the Beveland isthmus. Any such move would have deprived the German Fifteenth Army of its only reasonable escape route into Holland: the alternative route was a corridor no more than thirty miles wide between the Lower Rhine and the Zuider Zee. This army, from the Pas de Calais—apart from those garrisons that had been detailed for the defence of the Channel ports—had been evacuated across the Scheldt estuary through the

'island' of Breskens on the south bank to the port of Flushing on Walcheren—the island adjoining South Beveland. Despite Allied air attack, two large Dutch civilian ships, three rafts capable of holding eighteen vehicles each, and sixteen small Rhine boats with a capacity of about two hundred and fifty men each, succeeded in evacuating the remnants of nine shattered German infantry divisions in sixteen days: in all, some sixty-five thousand men, together with some hundreds of guns, trucks, wagons, and horses. Two of these divisions took up positions north and south of the sea lane leading to Antwerp; two others were stationed in the country between Antwerp and Bergen-op-Zoom, thus guarding the approaches to the South Beveland isthmus from the east. By September 21st the task was completed, and the bulk of the German Fifteenth Army had been rescued from encirclement. If the Beveland isthmus had been cut, the alternative escape route would have entailed a twelve-hour sea voyage through the Dutch islands to Dordrecht and Rotterdam—as against the three-quarters of an hour needed to cross from Breskens to Flushing. These, then, were the troops the British and the Canadian armies were shortly to find themselves fighting north of the estuary and south of the Maas.

It is fair to record that almost a week elapsed before dock fighting ceased in the port of Antwerp; that the British armoured spearheads had done a mighty trek from the Seine; and that, during this early period, Canadian First Army was still based on the line Bruges—Ghent. But if it still be asked why no earlier effort was made to seal off this isthmus escape route, the answer may well be that the directing minds of the war were momentarily thrown off balance when this huge port fell—'beyond the dreams of the most optimistic of planners'—like 'a rich, ripe plum' into Allied hands; or it may be that their attention had wandered north of Antwerp—where rumour was already concocting an altogether fictitious Allied advance to Breda, some thirty miles on and only ten miles south of the Maas. The Polish Armoured Division was actually to enter the town two months later. Again, as we have seen, the day that Antwerp was captured, Allied Supreme Headquarters, away at Granville, on the Normandy coast, issued orders for the capture of the Saar, the Frankfurt area, the Ruhr, and Antwerp: in that order, and all in twenty-four words. Some little time was to elapse before the hardening of the German front registered itself at Supreme Headquarters.

In so far as the opening of the port of Antwerp was the responsibility of the 21st Army Group—and the fact is inescapable—it must be stated, with the utmost sympathy, that the gaze of its commander-in-chief, at that time, for the best reasons in the world, was steadily

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averted to the east—to Eindhoven, Grave, Nijmegen, Arnhem. Now, on this October 16th, in his orders to his army commanders, it is turned west; and 'the northern rim of the Ruhr', be it his personal mirage or not, fades across the eastern horizon. A whole succession of plodding desolate battles north and south of the seventy-mile estuary—and again south and west of the Maas—was to be the price of the failure to free the Scheldt at a time when the German troops were 'so unnerved by the tales of what had happened in France' that they disappeared 'without bothering to blow up' this most valuable prize of the campaign—Antwerp, third largest port in the world, and, with its twenty-six miles of dock frontage, one of the main gateways leading into the heart of Europe.

The task, then, of clearing the Scheldt estuary was to involve a succession of concentrated attacks by Canadian troops on the heavily fortified and stoutly defended Breskens 'island' south of the Scheldt. It was to involve a succession of amphibious operations by British troops and Royal Marine commandos on the island of Walcheren—'one of the strongest areas in the world', whose coastal batteries commanded the entrance to the north; and an amphibious operation by British troops of this same division—the 52nd (Lowland)—on the hardly less treacherous 'island' of South Beveland. It was to involve a large-scale operation by British and Canadian troops to cut direct road and rail communication—on the line Bergen-op-Zoom—Roosendaal—Breda—Tilburg—between these outpost islands and the main body of the German Fifteenth Army based on the 's Hertogenbosch 'hinge' south of the Maas: an attack that might be expected to help to clear up the Antwerp situation since it would develop a threat to the main escape routes to the north for the Germans fighting on the Canadian front. It was to involve a succession of frontal assaults by Canadian troops along the narrow isthmus dividing the 'island' of South Beveland from the mainland: to be followed by the crossing of an artificial causeway, on the other side of the 'island', giving access to Walcheren: a dead flat causeway over half a mile long and less than a hundred yards wide, destitute of cover, and necessitating a frontal assault in face of every type of weapon. It was to involve the employment of a considerable air-striking force with the primary mission of engulfing still more land in the general waste of water. The complementary operation to the clearing of the Scheldt—the drive south of the Maas—was to involve the British 15th, 49th, and 51st Divisions, together with the British 7th Armoured Division, the Canadian 4th Armoured Division, the Polish Armoured Division, and a United States infantry division. It should begin to be apparent

that, at this late hour, the opening of the port of Antwerp was to demand a quite considerable effort.

But there is more to the picture. Almost everywhere these battles were to be waged in conditions in which the forward infantry, in close-quarter combat, were compelled to fight their way through fire and mud and water; where tanks on the road embankments running through the flooded countryside could operate only in small numbers and but rarely as independent spearheads in the attack; where a few well-sited 88-millimetre guns and two or three Spandaus could hold up a whole brigade; where the mine, the sniper, and the blown river or canal bridge could speedily provide delaying obstacles between every phase of the hard-fought Allied advance. Thus the total picture is not one of a massed offensive—which could never have been mounted under these conditions of terrain—but of a slow and ordered retreat by German rearguards fighting bitterly under relentless pressure, with every advantage of ground and weather. Not until the last of the 'suicide' garrisons on the Scheldt islands had been laboriously mopped up was the battle for Antwerp finally won. 'Once the enemy succeeds in overrunning the Scheldt fortifications', said the general who commanded the batteries at the river's mouth, 'he will be able to strike a mortal blow at north Germany and Berlin itself.' In much the same vein, a Luftwaffe intelligence report, produced in this same month of October, asserted that, had 'Market-Garden' succeeded, the Germans would have 'found it extremely difficult to prevent the Allies from breaking out into the north German plain'. The general may have been right, and the intelligence report may have been dead right; but, for the time being, the 'mortal blow' was very much one in reserve. For the 21st Army Group was to be called upon to continue to wage the kind of war now being fought in the Scheldt estuary and south-west Holland between the Maas and the Waal and between the Maas and the Rhine: it was the kind of war that would continue to be waged until water ceased to be the dominating factor in the conduct of operations and 'flood control specialists' ceased to take precedence over generals. For more than six months, in this fashion, Germany was to hold back the invader from her western frontier. Here, at any rate—if a trifle damp—is the Supreme Commander's 'broad front' strategy in action: here is the background to the picture he presents of 'whipping the German west of the Rhine'.

But for the moment we are moving away from the Rhine: we are back to beach defences on the best Normandy model—the same underwater obstacles, wire, mines, and, behind them, among the dykes and dunes, the same infantry strongpoints interspersed with gun



batteries'. It was to be a strange kind of war 'where you needed web-feet and a waterproof skin'.

Once the estuary was freed, not merely would the route from the base port be reduced from a two-day journey to one of a couple of hours: the British line between Grave and Breskens would be reduced from one of something like one hundred and fifty miles to one of thirty-five miles—between Grave and the mouth of the Maas. A high reward—the Rhine apart—therefore awaited success in the whole operation; but the cost, too, was high: nearly thirty thousand casualties—more than in the capture of Sicily, with an enemy garrison that outnumbered the Scheldt garrison by six to one. 'Market-Garden', by giving the Allies a key bridge over the Maas at Grave and a bridgehead over the Waal at Nijmegen, had—though quite inadvertently—ensured the security of the port of Antwerp: the winning of a bridgehead over the Lower Rhine itself, while the going was good, would have served to 'suck' the Germans out of Holland—and there would have been no 'sequel in the Scheldt estuary'.

The series of operations, by the Canadian II Corps, that achieved victory in the Scheldt estuary—operations so arduous and dismal that some survivors described the Normandy invasion as 'a picnic by comparison'—were at least enlivened by their code names. Operation 'Switchback', undertaken by the Canadian 3rd Division, involved the clearance of the 'great slice of flat land' that forms the south bank of the Scheldt from Antwerp almost to Knocke-sur-Mer. It has been described as a 'dreary aggregation of minor canals and ditches, open fields without cover, a few roads carried on raised dykes, and only church spires as features'. Here the Germans were to stage an admirable example of defensive fighting. The troops belonged to a newly constituted division, one of a group of formations 'hastily assembled in Germany and rushed to France to help patch the deteriorating western front following the break-through in Normandy'. The bulk of its members were veterans of the Russian, Italian, or Norwegian theatres who happened to be on leave in Germany during the latter part of July, 1944. Such were the troops whom the Canadians were to find well dug in behind the Leopold Canal—the southern boundary of the Breskens 'island'.

Operation 'Vitality I', undertaken by the Canadian 2nd Division, involved the bitter advance along the Beveland isthmus—where the steel of a man's mind was to count more than the manufactured article. Operation 'Vitality II' comprised the seaborne part of the attack on South Beveland itself, and was undertaken by two brigades

of the 52nd (Lowland) Division, by small craft of the Royal Navy, and by the 'Buffaloes'—tracked amphibious assault vehicles to carry about thirty men—and DD (dual-drive) tanks—floating tanks—of the British 79th Armoured Division. Under the command of Major-General Sir Percy Hobart, this specialist division—which operated between fifteen and sixteen hundred tracked vehicles and numbered over twenty-two thousand officers and men at the time of the Rhine crossing—leased out with their crews the highly ingenious equipments that earned for it the title of 'The Funnies' and enabled the Army to devise a new technique in the infantry assault. It supplied teams of selected equipments for every major operation undertaken by the 21st Army Group from D-Day onwards: the drive on Brussels and Arnhem alone excepted.

Three battalions from the 52nd Division together with a Royal Marine commando, supported by 'Buffaloes' and DD tanks, were employed for operation 'Infatuate I': the attack on Walcheren, at Flushing—direct across the Scheldt from the small port of Breskens. For operation 'Infatuate II', the 4th Commando Brigade—less the commando engaged at Flushing—was to sail from Ostend and make an assault landing at Westkapelle, the most westerly point of the island. Its mission was to join up with the Flushing attack and drive along the sand dunes to the north to capture Domburg and the coastal batteries.

Apart from the code names, the only light relief in an operational picture as grey as the waters that fill it is supplied by the fact that the British infantry division, in action for the first time, and committed to an adventure of the 'highest military importance and the most desperate nature', was the 52nd (Lowland) Division: a division which, having trained over the years 1941-4 for mountain warfare with an eye to operation 'Jupiter' in Norway, in July, 1944, was labelled 'air portable' and later ear-marked for the operation at Arnhem. However, as the historian of this division, Mr. George Blake, feelingly remarks: 'The joke that a Mountain Division was to be launched into battle below sea-level begins to wear a trifle thin, and it is always an equally good joke that a part of it assaulted an island that had been sunk beforehand'.

Operation 'Switchback', fought by the Canadian 3rd Division, supported by an infantry battalion, a field regiment, and the reconnaissance regiment of the British 52nd (Lowland) Division, and launched on October 6th, 1944, inaugurated this whole series of complex manœuvres. The Canadians, after moving up from the Channel area where, as we have seen, they had been engaged in

cleaning up Boulogne and Calais and the heavy coastal batteries at Cap Gris Nez, were now to turn, as the Canadian official historian remarks, 'to the dirty and onerous business of "polder" fighting'. They were, indeed, confronted by the Leopold Canal; an enemy well dug in and determined to make them pay dearly for every yard of advance; and the dreariest expanse of dank 'polder' land soon to be the resting-place of unburied German dead: those corpses it was dangerous to touch because here the Canadians were to encounter the 'Boche technique of booby-trapping at its filthiest pitch of ingenuity'.

Under the 'searing bombardment' of 'Wasp' flame throwers, two battalions got across in assault boats on the first day, and a third battalion the following day; but four days were to elapse before the bridgehead could be sufficiently enlarged for the bridges to be built. On October 9th, a brigade of the division loaded into 'Buffaloes'—which had 'swum' twenty miles down the canal from Ghent—and did a five-mile voyage from Terneuzen in the heavily mined Scheldt before landing at the north-eastern tip of the Breskens 'island'. Complete surprise was obtained and at first opposition was negligible; but shortly heavy shells began to arrive from the Breskens and Flushing batteries, and vigorous German counter-attacks followed in quick succession. Here twentieth-century mechanized warfare was to take on something of the guise of the nineteenth-century picture book: 'the enemy dashed along the ditches, bouncing out here and there over the culverts, greatcoats flapping, and wearing full equipment'.

The third brigade of the division, originally scheduled to reinforce the Leopold Canal bridgehead, now landed across the Savojaards Plaat—the eastern water frontier of the Breskens 'island'—in the wake of the preceding brigade, and, pushing on south, managed to open up a land route into the southern end of the 'island'. Hard fighting, from dyke to dyke, was to continue until October 19th, when the eastern force linked up with troops of the 52nd Division now in the Leopold Canal bridgehead. After nearly a fortnight's sustained effort, the pocket had been reduced by not more than a half; and Breskens itself was not to fall until October 19th, after prolonged air and artillery bombardment. Certainly the Germans of this 'leave' division had learned how to fight.

The enemy's last refuge was the heavily waterlogged area around the sea end of the Leopold Canal. Here, near Knocke-sur-Mer, on November 3rd, the last resistance on the 'island' ceased. A hard-hitting German division had been entirely liquidated, and over twelve thousand prisoners taken since the first crossing of the Leopold. 'The enemy had been cleared from the last corner of Belgium—the first occupied nation of western Europe to be completely liberated; and

the south shore of the Scheldt was free.' Thus, with justifiable pride, comments the Canadian official historian on a clear-cut unclean infantry job of work pushed through to its resolute end in defiance of all the malignancy of nature in the shape of mud and water and in face of the animosity of man in the shape of a highly trained veteran German division. History cannot relate what the non-commissioned officer of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps might have said had he been told—after reconnoitring ahead of his trucks in a row-boat,—that he was engaged in operation 'Switchback'.

The Canadian forces engaged to the north of the estuary had two main objects: first, to maintain a protective screen covering the approaches to Antwerp; second, to eject the enemy from the South Beveland peninsula and Walcheren island. The first preliminary phase—already noted—was the advance of the Canadian 2nd Division from Merxem to Woensdrecht—a distance of about fifteen miles; but now there could no longer be any doubt that the German Army had recovered from the Normandy *débâcle*. As the advance continued enemy resistance stiffened; and more than a fortnight was to pass before the neck of the isthmus was finally sealed at Woensdrecht. A week later—by October 23rd—the arrival of the Canadian 4th Armoured Division, coming up on the right of the infantry, in the direction of Bergen-op-Zoom, made it possible to swing troops into the isthmus with a secure flank to the north and the north-east for the opening of the second and main phase—operation 'Vitality I'.

It began on October 24th—and at once the Canadian 2nd Division was faced with a formidable infantry task of the first order. The main road and the one secondary road had been cratered and mined, and the ground off the roads was flooded; and the isthmus itself, towards the 'island', was cut by the Beveland canal. But the Canadians, often, and as usual, waist deep in water, forced their way westwards, and by the evening of the third day—the 26th—they were only six miles short of the Beveland canal. The next night the faithful assault boats crossed the canal and bridgeheads were established at two points.

Meanwhile, operation 'Vitality II', scheduled to start on October 26th, introduced the third phase of the operation with a nicely timed diversion in the form of a true 'pincer' movement. Two brigades of the 52nd Division assembled in the small Dutch port of Terneuzen, and, to the east, in the even smaller port of Ossensisse. Their objectives were two beaches at the south-eastern corner of Beveland; and, after establishing the customary bridgehead, their task was to push north-westwards as rapidly as possible in order to cut the escape route of the enemy garrison on Walcheren. The 'Buffaloes' that

carried the assaulting troops were called upon to undertake a river crossing of up to nine miles, and they 'swam' it unconcernedly: the DD tanks that accompanied them were doomed to take an ungainly quietus in the mud flats and the dykes of the peninsula. The mixed flotillas were guided to the opposite shore by red leading lights set up on the beach between Terneuzen and Ossensisse, due south of the nearer landing beach; and Bofors guns obligingly fired tracer across the farther landing beach to prevent craft bound for it from going too far north. Both landings were in the neighbourhood of Baarland, at the south-eastern corner of the peninsula. Although the leading units suffered some casualties, resistance by the enemy was nowhere serious; and, within an hour or so of the landings, the troops were already fanning out from the beaches.

Dawn brought with it 'the familiar Dutch pattern of flat, green fields, isolated farmhouses, windmills and church towers, and much water'. The bridgehead steadily expanded, and the assaulting brigade was rapidly reinforced; but, although infantry vehicles could negotiate the mud of the beaches and the high protecting dykes—sometimes with the assistance of bull-dozers—the division's three field regiments of Royal Artillery discreetly refrained from making the attempt and withdrew to do a round trip to South Beveland by way of Antwerp—a journey of about eighty miles. However, petrol was really no object at that time in north-west Europe, thanks doubtless to pipe-line-under-the-ocean 'Pluto'—although it would seem to have been short with 'gotta-have-gas' General Patton, if only for the first four days of September. At least one of these field regiments of the 52nd Division reached the neighbourhood of Brussels as early as September 9th with as much fuel in hand as it had possessed on leaving Normandy a couple of days earlier: it had been agreeably surprised to find that jerricans of petrol were 'proliferating' over this whole corner of Europe. The drivers were Scots.

On October 29th a brigade of the Canadian 2nd Division, working south from the main road crossing the peninsula from the isthmus, linked up with the right-hand brigade of the Lowland Division; the other Lowland brigade, striking across the peninsula in a north-westerly direction, was shortly to join up with those Canadians who, the next day, reached the east end of the artificial causeway carrying the road and railway across to Walcheren island. South Beveland had been effectively straddled by the joint forces, and the technique of 'Switchback' repeated, with a like success, in reverse: on Breskens the approach from the sea had come in from the east.

South Beveland was now clear of the enemy; a reconnaissance squadron speedily improvised the capture of North Beveland; and the

moment had arrived for the 'Infatuate' operation—the capture of Walcheren: an island which, after the precision bombing of the dykes at four key points by Bomber Command, was left with little more than a dry rim—with Middelburg at its centre—to indicate its position on the map. Nevertheless, enough of it remained for the Germans to give expression to their 'idea of impregnability'. The dykes were honey-combed with defensive positions, under 'concrete fourteen feet deep, so that heavy shells merely dented it'; and, in Flushing, even the manholes in the streets had been converted into strongpoints by the fitting of tank turrets. To the east of the island was the causeway from South Beveland; to the south was the large harbour of Flushing—operation 'Infatuate I'—with a perimeter defence system and a double line of anti-tank ditches; to the west was a series of heavy coastal batteries built into the dykes along the coast and generally housed in concrete emplacements. Here was Westkapelle—operation 'Infatuate II'—and the major Westkapelle Dyke, three hundred and thirty feet wide at its base and about thirty feet high above the low watermark. It was in this dyke that the Royal Air Force, during a general attack on the whole dyke system, breached a gap three hundred and eighty yards wide, through which flowed the resurgent waters of the North Sea to regain a lost kingdom.

The only land approach was the straight and narrow causeway from South Beveland—'an artificial creation of the Dutch in their eternal battle with the sea'—and with considerable restraint the Canadian official historian describes the prospect it offered as 'singularly uninviting'; for it was to be the responsibility of the Canadian 2nd Division to liquidate the German pocket at the causeway's end and then to attack along the causeway itself: a causeway with 'a brick-paved road, very badly cratered, three or four feet above the surrounding tidal flats, a single-line railway track two or three feet higher, the inevitable Dutch bicycle path, and a row of telegraph poles—that was the causeway'. A last irony revealed itself when it was reported that, in this land of water, there was not enough, even at high tide, to permit of an assault on the island itself in assault boats; that the flats were too saturated to permit movement on foot; and that there were too many runnels to allow 'Weasels' to operate. These were tracked vehicles originally designed to move over snow, and had been developed for use in Norway. They were now to find themselves in a land where there was no snow and where water somehow or other was not water.

The advance of the Canadian 2nd Division along the causeway—under conditions that have been described as 'an infantryman's nightmare'—rejoices in no code name; therefore let it be said at once

that, after the Royal Regiment of Canada, on October 31st, had liquidated the small German pocket at the causeway's eastern end, the Canadian Black Watch then attacked along the causeway itself and reached a point only seventy-five yards from the western end. That night the Calgary Highlanders passed through and contrived to establish a shallow bridgehead. The next evening a sudden violent counter-attack hurled them back some distance along the causeway; whereupon Le Régiment de Maisonneuve took over and re-established the bridgehead under murderous conditions. On the morning of November 2nd the foothold was handed over to the 52nd Division. The Canadian 2nd Division, after being continuously engaged since leaving Dieppe and, as Field Marshal Montgomery remarks, after four weeks' fighting 'as fierce as any we had yet experienced in north-west Europe', was withdrawn to rest.

The Glasgow Highlanders of the 52nd Division had made their first attempt to cross the causeway the day before—the opening day of the 'Infatuate' operations—but 'they could do nothing but relieve the French-Canadians and hang on like grim death to that length of the causeway which remained in our hands'. It was at six o'clock the next morning that—as the historian of the 52nd Division remarks with a fine particularity—'No. 10 platoon of B Company of the 1st Battalion of the Glasgow Highlanders started to lead the battalion into hell'. Nor is it perhaps without significance that he confers a majuscule on the causeway. For the Germans, indeed, had every inch of it completely 'taped and plastered'; the whole of the embankment, sides and surface, was pockmarked with craters and swathed in the smoke and fury of continual explosions. But the Glasgow Highlanders held on throughout the day and the night and the following day and, during the first day, withstood two German counter-attacks at dusk and midnight. On November 3rd, rocket attacks by Typhoon aircraft on the concrete emplacements at the western end of the causeway considerably distracted the enemy. An even more considerable distraction was to be provided by a particularly neat crossing of the Slooe Channel two miles south. The causeway was to be side-stepped.

In the dark of the night of November 1st, two sappers of the division had reconnoitred the island to find a path among the creeks of the Channel that would lead to firm ground; the next night, one of them returned with a party of three sappers to tape it; and on the Beveland side a 'particularly thick and vicious' minefield was cleared at the proposed point of embarkation. The leading elements of the 6th Battalion of the Cameronians had already left for the other side in their assault boats before the taping party returned. The landing

took the Germans completely by surprise; and, before long, German prisoners, 'working with a right good will', were rolling lengths of chestnut paling down a greasy bank to the slime and the waiting assault boats. Strong wind and a falling tide shortly destroyed the portable assault bridge that had been erected: whereupon the prisoners proceeded to run out great lengths of chestnut paling to make some sort of roadway across the mud.

The first crossings had been made in the early morning of November 3rd—many of the later troops having to wade 'waist-deep in mud for three quarters of a mile'—and, as the wind rose from the south-west, folding boats had to be substituted for the assault craft. After a day's shelling and mortaring, the fall of darkness at last allowed supplies and reinforcements to flow more freely over the hard-won crossing; and, at dawn the next morning, the defenders moved over to the attack. By that evening—November 4th—the bridgeheads on the Slooe Channel and at the end of the causeway had linked up, constituting a single bridgehead on Walcheren from South Beveland two thousand yards deep and two miles wide. This side-stepping of the causeway was again an operation without a name; but, as the historian of the division that achieved it remarks, it was 'one of those operations that are as pleasant to consider in retrospect as a good picture or a perfect lyric poem'.

Now for Walcheren, the island itself, with its garrison that included some ten thousand men of the 'stomach' battalions, awaiting the impending Allied attack with their attention 'nervously divided between the threat of enemy action and the reality of their own internal disorders'. The plan for the occupation of the island was that the assault across the causeway should be co-ordinated with sea-borne attacks on Flushing and Westkapelle—operations 'Infatuate'. They were launched, from Breskens and Ostend, on November 1st, the day that the attack on the causeway opened. The attack on Flushing—'Infatuate I'—represented yet another 'pincer' movement in the general pattern of the whole campaign; the attack on Westkapelle—'Infatuate II'—provided a classic example of the Royal Marines operating in their traditional role. The assault was a military operation with a naval object—the clearance of the approaches to Antwerp.

Two brigades of the Lowland Division were now committed in South Beveland; the third, together with five commandos—three of them belonging to the 4th Commando Brigade and a fourth an I. A. (inter-Allied) unit—was about to cross for the double assault, with No. 4 Commando Battalion under command. The general officer commanding



the 52nd (Lowland) Division, Major-General E. Hakewill Smith, was charged with the command of all land forces. The naval support programme included bombardment by a squadron of warships and by various types of close-support craft—many of them no more than converted landing-craft and destined to suffer greater casualties than the assault troops themselves. Because of bad weather, no bombers were available to give air support as the assault troops were about to land; but the Royal Air Force, having already dropped nearly five thousand tons of bombs on the island, contributed its now standard rocket-firing Typhoon 'cab-rank' service. In the Breskens 'island', the heavy guns of three artillery groups stood ready to provide support for the assaulting troops from the south. In 1809, during the Napoleonic wars, a British force had bitten the dust—or the mud—of the fever-stricken island in a dreadfully disastrous manner. The British were now on the way back, in a really big way.

'Infatuate I' started auspiciously. No. 4 Commando from Breskens was quickly ashore at Flushing, and speedily reinforced by the 4th Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers—who were doubtless well fortified for the operation after having spent the previous night in an abandoned biscuit factory. Together with the commando, they proceeded to clear the sea front and the central area of the town. On the second day, suicide squads of snipers on gantries in the dock area provided 'something like a rook shoot' for 3·7-inch guns that had been towed across the Scheldt in parts and reassembled on the upper floors of adjoining buildings. Meanwhile, in the town, street fighting continued in a fashion that lived up to the liveliest conceptions of any infantry training establishment. The troops, in pursuance of the 'dirty job of fighting through Flushing', 'slinked' along the walls of buildings, 'mouse-holed' through the partitions between them, 'crawled' over roofs as occasion demanded, and 'dashed', or 'wriggled', or 'waded' through the well-regulated back-gardens of methodically minded and highly estimable Dutch citizens. Behind the town swirled the tidal waters the bombers had let loose. 'Liberation' had indeed come to Walcheren—also in a big way; and it is agreeable to be able to record that many of the divisional engineers remained behind when the main body left the island, helping to rescue marooned communities, destroy enemy works, and generally to clear up the battlefield.

But Flushing was not to fall until an action had been fought that epitomizes the bizarre nature of the whole Walcheren story. The headquarters of the Flushing garrison was established in the Hotel Britannia on the far side of the town to the west of the dock area;

and the 7th/9th Battalion of the Royal Scots, after assisting in the clearing up of the town throughout the daylight hours of November 2nd, was entrusted with the formidable task of attacking this headquarters in the early hours of the following morning. For the hotel was now something of a fortress: bounded by the North Sea, a flooded gap in the sea dyke, and a series of pill-boxes, with a snipers' tower thrown in for good measure: and 'the waters were deep and running strongly'. The start-line for the operation was fixed at a distance of some three hundred yards from the back of the hotel, in a boulevard three feet deep in water. Thus the officers and men of these three companies of the Royal Scots set forth to war each carrying a life-belt and plunging into ever-deepening water, with the tide running at five knots. Three 'Weasels' loaded with assault boats brought up the rear.

When the leading man of the forward company found himself up to his shoulders in water, not surprisingly another axis of advance was sought. A deviation shortly brought the human chain—for now the men were clinging to one another in order to breast the floods—to within seventy-five yards of the first objective, a pill-box located under a steep bank below the hotel. Its capture—at a quarter-past four in the morning—brought the 'enemy garrison in and about the hotel to life with a vengeance'; firing broke out from trenches, bunkers, pill-boxes, and the roof of the hotel. A frontal assault on the main entrance to the hotel gained admittance for three platoons—who forthwith contributed to the 'mad state of chaos' inside it. Nevertheless, shooting was not to die down until the remainder of the battalion had scaled the embankment on which the hotel stood and captured the strongly held trench along the top. The building was now on fire; and the Germans packing the underground shelter, 'faced with the choice between death by shooting and death by burning', chose surrender. The German command post for Flushing, located below the hotel in large dugouts of concrete fourteen feet thick, followed their example.

On the fifth day of the attack on Walcheren, the task of leading the advance along the Middelburg canal fell to the 4th Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers. Its built-up banks were among the few features that showed above the floods encircling the town. But this 'narrow, water-lapped axis'—which carried the only 'road' to the town—was not to be another Causeway. Middelburg was to be almost hilariously 'captured' by a company of the 7th/9th Royal Scots that made a perilous eight-mile trip across the mined and flooded central part of the island in a fleet of 'Buffaloes'. As

the vehicles 'climbed, dripping, out of the floods into the streets' of this ancient and exquisite town, the Germans imagined that they were tanks: whereupon the major in charge of the party, through his Norwegian interpreter, informed the garrison commander—also commanding on Walcheren itself—that a British armoured column would shortly be arriving to 'make mincemeat' of any opposition. The German, putting forth his 'best efforts towards the maintenance of a correct Prussian dignity', insisted that he could surrender only to an officer of an equivalent rank. The German happened to be a lieutenant-general; and the British major, borrowing a subaltern's 'pips' to add to the crown on his shoulder, contented himself—and the German commander—by arrogating to himself a no more exalted rank than that of 'local and temporary colonel'. Whereupon two thousand Germans assembled in the main square of the town lined up to surrender to two hundred Royal Scots. A night of 'saturnalia' was followed by the arrival of the 5th and 6th Battalions of the Highland Light Infantry from the Slooe Channel crossing; and, after a few final skirmishes on the eastern side of the island, 'Infatuate I' triumphantly reached its Ruritanian conclusion. The German soldier on Walcheren—as already noted—had taken an oath to hold it to the last—'even to the sacrifice of my own life'. In Middelburg, however, two thousand Germans lost no time at all in exchanging a rifle for the 'inevitable fibre suitcase'.

The last of those 'dispersed elements of the attack' to drop prettily into place into 'the pattern of victory as planned' was 'Infatuate II': and Westkapelle was to be a combined operation of considerable magnitude. The batteries on this part of the coast were less vulnerable to air and naval bombardment than those on the Breskens shore; and every known enemy battery in the assault area came into action as the flotillas approached. But the rocket-firing Typhoons arrived on time and 'dosed' the defenders as the first commandos landed. One commando quickly seized the major strongpoints to the east of the breach in the Westkapelle Dyke, and by evening had advanced two miles in the direction of Flushing. It was to link up with the force engaged there the next day—November 2nd. On the left, another commando negotiated the gap in the dyke, dismounted from its 'Buffaloes', entered Westkapelle itself, and, later in the day, began its planned advance towards the dunes and the woods and the mines and the wire north-east of Domburg. Ultimately it was to join up with Lowlanders from the causeway bridgehead. The third commando to land ran into heavy fire at the gap and was temporarily held up south of it. But with Flushing captured on the second day of

the whole operation, the problem of Walcheren was mainly to be one of mopping up. One by one the batteries in the island were reduced—the supply side being assisted by Dakotas; and, by November 8th, the pattern of victory was complete.

Thus, in the main, in the story of Walcheren, the 'great tale of gallantry, wreckage, blood, drowning, and triumph' had been played out at sea by the Royal Navy and by the Royal Marines. Walcheren had proved to be a much tougher—if smaller—task than D-Day itself. Of the twenty-five close-support craft engaged in 'Infatuate II', nine were sunk and eight damaged, and casualties among the crews amounted to nearly four hundred: doubtless a small number against the near thirty thousand casualties suffered in the whole Scheldt operation. But it needs to be remembered that the crews of these comparatively frail vessels were called upon to invite almost certain destruction from the still immune German batteries as they stood close inshore, in broad daylight, and engaged them point-blank. Of the twenty tanks due to land at Westkapelle, only two survived.

But the Royal Navy paused not to consider its losses. On November 4th—four days before resistance on Walcheren finally collapsed—the first minesweepers had reached Antwerp: the precursors of those hundred or more craft that were employed to sweep the seventy-mile channel, and sweep it sixteen times before the Scheldt was not merely open but safe. On November 26th, three coasters reached the port. Two days later eighteen big ships started to unload. On December 1st, over ten thousand tons of stores were put ashore. A fortnight later the German counter-offensive in the Ardennes was to cost the Allies 'a fortune in supplies'—mainly of oil and petrol. Antwerp—the greatest, the second, or the third port of Europe, according to the authority consulted—had been opened just in time.

The whole story of the operations for freeing the Scheldt remains an object lesson in combined operations of the widest kind. On the military side, there was Canadian and British infantry and the specialized armoured equipments of the British 79th Armoured Division. Without these equipments—known collectively, for an obvious reason, as 'The Zoo'—the landings would hardly have been feasible. The equipments included DD tanks, 'Crocodiles'—flame-throwing tanks—mine-clearing flail tanks, and armoured bull-dozers for the Westkapelle landing; and 'Buffaloes' and their crews for the assault on Flushing. The 'Kangaroos'—those armoured troop carriers whose prototypes have already appeared in this narrative on the Falaise road—were missing from the party.

Alongside these formations were the Special Service troops—the commandos of the Royal Marines—engineers, pioneers, and the attendant services, all working in co-ordination in the tasks for which they were fitted. At sea, the Royal Navy, as always, gave complete and essential support; in the air, the Royal Air Force prepared a path for the assault with its heavy bombers and assisted the assault itself with its rocket-firing Typhoons. Nor, perhaps, should one omit mention of the assistance received from the Belgian White Army of Liberation at Merxem and in the dock area of Antwerp; nor of the assistance received from members of the Dutch Underground: a tribute, indeed, that has the widest application to all the operations undertaken by the British and the Canadian armies in Holland.

Last, the cost, in terms of men alone. Allied casualties, almost entirely Canadian and British, were hardly fewer than those of the enemy—about thirty thousand. For not more than double this casualty figure, a firm Allied base had been secured in 'Fortress Europe' itself: Allied casualties to the end of June had totalled sixty thousand; and the British and the Canadians had fought the entire battle of Normandy to the Seine with a casualty list that barely totalled eighty thousand. In all three 'islands', twenty-two thousand prisoners were secured—a third of the number of those sixty-five thousand men of the German Fifteenth Army who, apart from Allied air attack, had enjoyed an uninterrupted passage from Breskens to Flushing during the first three weeks of September. 'Antwerp' was the price—the first account rendered—of the 'heroic legend' of Arnhem. One can say only, 'But yet the pity of it, the pity of it', and the effort and the waste of it, and the pain.

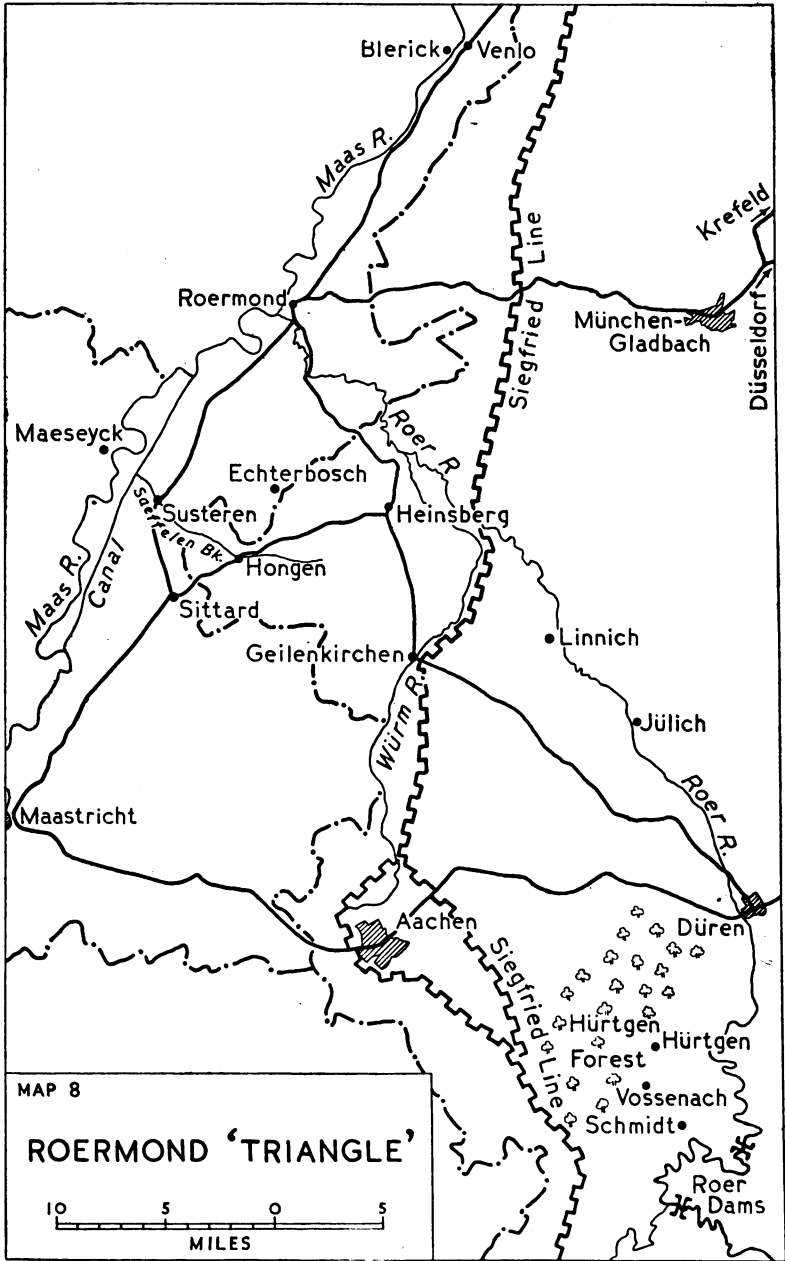
## V

# WATER ON THE WESTERN FRONT

### i. *OVERTURE TO RHINELAND BATTLE*

A winter of war now lay ahead; a winter of water. The basic operational problems were not to concern men, and tanks, and guns—or even river-crossings—but water. The British and the Canadian armies were already across the Waal and the Maas: across the Maas at Grave, across the Waal at Nijmegen; but the great defended state forest of the Reichswald running down to the right bank of the Maas barred progress to the east upstream from Grave; and the greater part of the area north of the Reichswald, between Nijmegen and the Rhine, was shortly to become a lake. The almost dainty request from Supreme Headquarters on October 18th that the 21st Army Group should ‘examine the possibility of thrusting northwards’—that is, from the Nijmegen bridgehead—‘over the Neder Rijn towards the Zuider Zee’ lost all touch with reality when the area between Nijmegen and Arnhem became a Zuider Zee in miniature.

But if, for the time being, Nijmegen was useless as a jumping-off point to anywhere that mattered to the war, its ‘gauge’ was to control the destiny of armies. The movement and height of water over the whole vast area of operations west and north-west of Cologne were directly related to that gauge; although this knowledge could not of itself indicate the practicability of bridging operations. Temperatures in this area can vary between sixteen degrees and one degree below freezing within the space of twenty-four hours; and, under icing conditions, great quantities of floating ice would have been a menace to all bridging operations. Equally, and for the same reason, an ice-crossing, feasible on one day, might easily be a death-trap the next. Thus it was that the British and the Canadian armies could hope to fight only between rivers. Even so, before long the only piece of land left for these armies to fight over was to be the Reichswald Forest



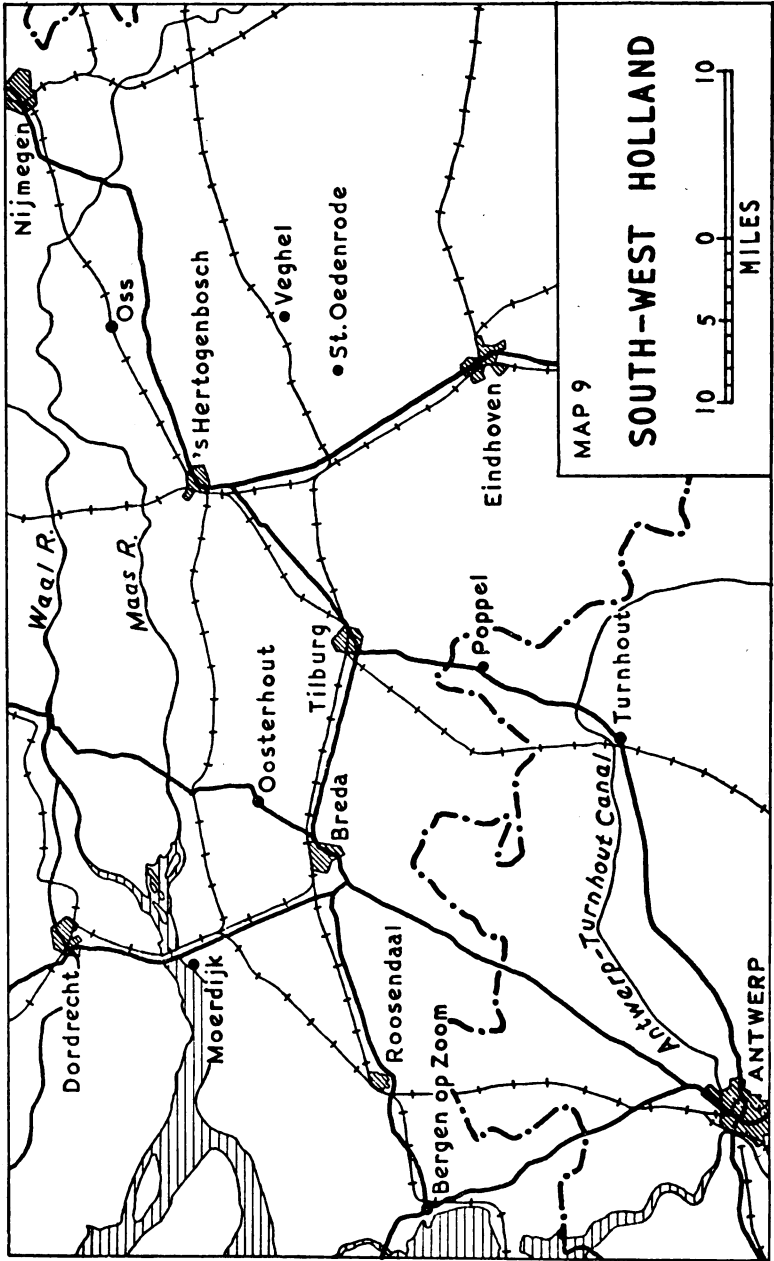
area south-east of Nijmegen—a fourteen-mile stretch of country lying between the Maas and the Rhine. The rest was largely water—or mud. Such land operations as were conducted among the broken dykes outside it were water-borne.

The whole region is, in fact, no more than the underground delta of the Rhine. Although the ground has a clay surface, it rests on a porous bed that is saturated at all seasons of the year with water from the main channel of the river. Thus, when they flooded this countryside, the Germans were aware that, under these abnormal conditions, the ground would take even longer than usual to dry out; and that such roads as existed would be thoroughly ruined as the result of their prolonged immersion. Certainly the Rhine provided a wider defensive barrier than its own banks suggested; and it had, indeed, already afforded a considerable contribution to its own defence. The sand and gravel from its river-bed, beautifully clean and already graded by nature, supplied the aggregate for the concrete fortifications of the Siegfried defence zone—which the Allied armies had yet to pierce—at a minimum cost in terms of labour and transportation.

‘Between the Maas and the Waal and between the Maas and the Rhine’: the refrain is to linger on—and, indeed, to be reinforced. For the Rhine is not the only barrier to the Ruhr. There is yet another river, a tributary of the Maas, which it joins at Roermond—the Roer. During the winter of 1944–5, the formations of three Allied armies were to fight their way, not to the Rhine, but to that stretch of water that lies between Düren—thirty-five miles to the south-east—and Roermond; and on reaching it they had to pause. For the Roer—defensive outpost to the Cologne plain—could not be crossed until the Schmidt dams at its head, ten miles south of Düren, had been captured.

Seven dams controlled the flow of one hundred and sixty million cubic metres of water—according to the flood control specialists: more than enough, at any rate, to provide a complete water barrier along the front covering the approaches to the Cologne plain. The two largest dams supplied water-power for the huge hydro-electric plant at Heimbach, which provided current for large areas of the Rhineland. This civilian consideration apart, the Germans, in the last emergency, by undertaking a thorough demolition job, were in a position to introduce an entirely new weapon of war—a calamitous flood cascading into the ravine-confined Roer down to Roermond. The narrower the channel, it may be noted, the greater will be the effect of flooding. Between Düren and Roermond miles of low-lying ground would be inundated; and, beyond Roermond, the floods





would extend as far north as Nijmegen in a channel from three to six miles wide. It was in this fashion that the blowing of the dams would create a complete water-barrier along the front covering the approaches to the Cologne plain.

Any such large-scale inundation must inevitably have destroyed the German towns and industries that lay in its orbit, and it was to be expected that the German military command would not lightly release these millions of gallons of water. But an alternative method was open to the Germans, and one that would not seriously inconvenience the local population, while effectively preventing any attempt by the Allied forces to cross the river when they reached it. At, say, six hourly intervals they could release a miniature tidal wave that would sweep away every pontoon bridge in its path. Alternatively, they could allow a not too considerable force of Allied troops to cross the river with comparative impunity, and then proceed to destroy the bridges by which they had crossed; and to continue with these tactics for as long as they controlled the head-waters of the river. Thus, as at Arnhem, so in the Cologne plain, the German military command was able to close both these 'gateways to the Fatherland', not by force of arms, but by flooding, or the threat of flooding.

'Between the Maas and the Waal and between the Maas and the Rhine and between the Roer and the Rhine': it was, then, to this refrain that the British Second and the Canadian First Armies and the United States First and Ninth Armies were to fight the battle of the Rhineland. The battle for the dams alone was to last for nearly three months. While troops of the British Second Army and of the United States Ninth Army fought for the possession of the Roermond 'triangle'—formed by the rivers Roer and Maas, with its apex at Roermond—the United States First Army, in an effort to reach the dams on foot by way of the Hürtgen Forest, east of Aachen, waged in 'abominable' weather a ten-week infantry battle which, for the intensity of the fighting against stubborn resistance in the thickness of the forest, the three divisions engaged 'placed at the top of the list'. The village of Hürtgen changed hands fourteen times; the forest itself eighteen times; and the village of Vossenach no fewer than twenty-eight times. Not until the second week of February, 1945, was the last German soldier cleared from the left bank of the Roer, and the largest of the dams, the 180-foot high Schwammenauel, forming a lake covering 590 acres, brought under control—though not before the width of the river at Düren had increased from one hundred and twenty-five to four hundred yards in the space of twenty-four hours. And away back on November 2nd, 1944, the 28th Division of the United States First Army had come 'within a hair's

breadth' of 'grabbing' the sites of the Roer dams. Almost in the moment of success, the division was counter-attacked and thrown out of the town of Schmidt.

And still some twenty-five miles beyond the Roer was the Rhine itself—the crossing of which, in the words of the Supreme Commander, was expected to demand 'the largest and most difficult amphibious operation undertaken since the landings on the coast of Normandy'. Not without foresight, the Germans had ensured that the latest cross-sections of the bed of the Rhine to appear in print were dated 1873. Such was the way ahead.

As we have seen, while the Canadian First Army was freeing the banks of the Scheldt, the British Second Army was ordered to launch a drive designed to clear the Germans out of the area south of the Maas from 's Hertogenbosch westwards; and the offensive of the British VIII Corps upstream from Grave towards the Maas at Venlo was called off after the capture of Venraij on October 17th.

Ten days later, when the operations west of the salient against 's Hertogenbosch were developing, three German divisions—one of them a parachute formation already in the sector—launched a sharp and determined counter-attack on the VIII Corps front. An initial penetration of several miles south of Venraij along the road to Helmond was not sealed off until the arrival of the 15th (Scottish) Division from the western sector of the salient—where, on October 22nd, XII Corps had launched the British Second Army's westward drive. Not until October 30th was the position on the VIII Corps front stabilized.

Eighteen days had elapsed since, in high expectation, the attack on Venraij had been launched by the British 3rd Division; the capture of Venraij—by the United States 7th Armoured Division moving in from Deurne to the west—represented hardly more than a five-mile advance from the area immediately north of Overloon—the start-line of the whole operation on October 12th; and the original intention of passing the British 11th Armoured Division through Venraij to Venlo had remained no more than an intention. Of the few British tanks that moved on Venraij itself, half were bogged on the road from Overloon. The ultimate intention—that an armoured thrust should be directed from the west to the Maas in order to assault Roermond—evaporated in face of 'an enemy who seemed to possess unlimited quantities of mines and was determined to fight every yard of ground'.

And all this not even 'between the Maas and the Waal' or 'between the Maas and the Rhine', but still west of the Maas. Precisely four

months were to elapse before the United States Ninth Army entered Roermond—to find the town abandoned. For the 21st Army Group, at the far northern end of the long Allied line, the last promise had faded from the eastern sky; and the winter of war and water was already beginning in dead earnest. Before the end of the year that long Allied line—manned by sixty-three divisions, forty of them United States and fifteen British and Canadian—would be confronted by a German field force of some seventy divisions—thrice the number of those that had fled north-east across France to the German frontier in late August. In reforming their front, the German rate of build-up had outpaced that of the Allies; and the borders of the Reich were still virtually intact.

The British Second Army's westward drive—though, according to plan, it was in quite the wrong direction—was at least to progress. Initially Second Army was to thrust westwards while the Canadian First Army transferred its weight also to the west, in order to accelerate its operations in South Beveland and against Walcheren; its right flank was to thrust northwards from the Antwerp–Turnhout canal towards Breda–Roosendaal–Bergen-op-Zoom. The British Second Army's objective was the general line Moerdijk–Breda–Poppel; it was to develop its maximum offensive power in a strong thrust on the general axis 's Hertogenbosch–Breda, with its right flank on the Maas; and the road Turnhout–Tilburg was now to lie within its boundary.

The attack that was to clear south-west Holland was launched by British I Corps—still under Canadian First Army command—on October 20th, with the Polish Armoured Division on the right, the British 49th Division in the centre, and the Canadian 4th Armoured Division on the left. The United States 104th Division was afterwards to come into the line between the Polish Armoured and the British 49th Divisions. The right and centre attacked due north. The 49th Division, as we have seen, had reached the neighbourhood of Turnhout on September 24th, and thus been in a position to protect the right flank of the Canadian II Corps during its operations north of Antwerp. Again, as we have seen, the Canadian 4th Armoured Division was directed on Bergen-op-Zoom, where its arrival, on October 23rd, made it possible to swing troops into the isthmus connecting South Beveland with the mainland.

The British Second Army's westward thrust was launched by XII Corps on October 22nd west of the general line Oss–Veghel–St. Oedenrode, and was initially directed on 's Hertogenbosch and Tilburg. The advance on 's Hertogenbosch was led by the British

7th Armoured and 53rd Divisions, which were to be followed by the 51st Highland. On the left, the 15th (Scottish) Division was to clear the area to the south and capture Tilburg.

This plan to clear south-west Holland to the line of the Maas resulted in a series of limited operations so destitute of glamour that the pipes of the Highland Division among the plantations in the 's Hertogenbosch sector must have taken on an unearthly beauty even to the ear of the uninitiate. For here again were dykes and waterways so numerous as to be unending; the woods and trees dropped imperceptibly into polder; the roads—few and poor—were always liable to collapse under the weight of armoured vehicles; the minefields were widespread; the moisture in the soil found its counterpart in the sky; and the place-names on the line of march were as outlandish as the places themselves in relation to the basic features of the original strategic plan for the liberation of Europe.

's Hertogenbosch was duly cleared by the 53rd Division on October 27th; Tilburg was occupied next day by the 15th Division; and two days later the 49th Division was to enter Roosendaal. The main lateral road between 's Hertogenbosch and Tilburg thus having been secured, the British 7th Armoured Division was able to deploy and strike west, to clear the country towards Oosterhout, and, on October 30th, to establish contact with the Polish Armoured Division thrusting up from the south. Breda—which, two months earlier, had figured too optimistically in the news of an altogether fictitious Allied advance north of Antwerp—had fallen to the Poles the day before. The scattered remnants of some seven German divisions originally based south of the Maas fought back to the last to cover their escape routes across the bridges of the lower river; but by November 5th XII Corps had completed its task when the 51st Division crossed the last canal this side of the river—and was then switched to VIII Corps front where, as we have already seen, the position had only recently been stabilized.

British I Corps to the west completed its own task four days later, when it cleared up the last German 'pocket' in the neighbourhood of the huge Moerdijk bridges at the confluence of the Maas and the Waal. The Germans then incontinently destroyed them—leaving the Allied armies to enjoy what amenities they could contrive in the waterlogged desolation south of the river.

Comparatively few tanks had been able to operate successfully in the whole series of operations south of the Maas. In the main, the

battle had been fought out by the infantry from their holes—which were usually within grenade-throwing distance of the Germans in theirs. An artillery concentration would be called for and put down, and the platoon commander would lead his men in a dash for the next hole—or perhaps to direct an attack on some troublesome 88-millimetre gun, or on a vagrant German tank that had somehow materialized out of the morning mist. ‘You’ve got to hand it to the infantry’, remarked a young tank officer of an armoured brigade that had put in a long spell of work with the 51st Division. ‘They are the chaps who’ve really been “fighting” the war.’ For again—as during the July fighting in Normandy—the war had borne a remarkably old-fashioned look. However, it was now possible to drive down former Boche-occupied territory and blissfully contemplate the blissless landscape without wondering whether a few Germans might not hop out of a ditch and scupper the whole party.

But if conditions south of the Maas had been pretty damp for the fighting troops, by comparison with those on the VIII Corps front—upstream from Grave in the Maas ‘pocket’—they were positively dry-shod. Here was the ‘Peel’ country: possibly the worst tank ‘going’ in Europe. All the land was ‘reclaimed’, and flooded even in a normal winter; each field was surrounded by a deep dyke. As the historian of an armoured regiment—the 23rd Hussars—with the 11th Armoured Division records, the built-up embankment roads were incapable of standing up to heavy traffic, and the utmost ingenuity had to be exercised in order to keep supplies going, even in static warfare. White posts, driven into the ground at intervals along the roadside, marked out the road above the floundering water. No tank could leave the track, and a single cleverly placed minefield was enough to disrupt to a considerable degree a whole day’s operations; and any tank was virtually certain to meet a mine or an 88-millimetre gun sooner or later, with no chance of avoiding either. Nor was it possible to live anywhere except underground or in a muddy hole underneath one’s tank, ‘or in a room on the right side of a very thick house with a tank drawn up to the window’. For six o’clock in the evening usually saw the start of the German artillery ‘variety programme’, and ‘every type of missile one could expect was employed’—the most original of which was an incendiary mortar pleasantly filled with oil. Surveying the whole scene with the extreme distaste, this historian mournfully concludes: ‘The country was flatter than one could have thought possible, and a rise of five feet was enough to earn the designation of “high ground”’; and members of the Regiment cannot be blamed for striking the Peel country off the list of places in Europe they wish to revisit’.

The Germans in this sector were largely parachute troops fighting as infantry; and they richly earned the reputation they acquired as masters in the art of cunning defence. When the United States 7th Armoured Division—the division that intervened to capture Venraij—arrived in this area at the beginning of October under command of VIII Corps it had yet to experience positional fighting, having landed in Europe only in time to assist the ‘gallop’ across France. Its answer to every situation appeared to be to ‘turn on the heat’: a procedure that took the form of launching its escorting Thunderbolts on to anything that held it up. The first village it had to take was Overloon—immediately south of the start-line of the VIII Corps offensive on October 12th—and the heat was turned on with ‘great regularity’. Unhappily, no amount of heat or artillery succeeded in dislodging the defenders, or even in removing the big belts of trees that guard Overloon from the north. The performance was repeated on two successive days, and at the end of the second day ‘the United States 7th Armoured remained exactly where it had started with Overloon still untaken’. Whereupon, ‘even more fury was unleashed on the battered little village and the woods around it—but to no avail’. Infantry—the British 3rd Division, assisted by the 6th Guards Armoured Brigade equipped with Churchill tanks—took over on the start of the VIII Corps offensive, and Overloon was captured after hard fighting by the evening of the first day: the infantry, on this occasion, ‘turning on the heat’.

Thus the fighting south and west of the Maas was an infantryman’s war; and it would be unfair to suggest that conditions in the Peel country could not be matched in the Canadian sector. A Canadian infantry officer, broadcasting in the last week of November, asked his listeners: ‘Do *you* know what it’s like? Of course you don’t. You have never slept in a hole in the ground which you have dug while someone tried to kill you. It is an open grave—and yet graves don’t fill up with water. They don’t harbour wasps or mosquitoes, and you don’t feel the cold, clammy wet that goes into your marrow. At night the infantryman gets some boards, or tin, or an old door, and puts it over one end of his slit trench; then he shovels on top of it as much dirt as he can scrape up near by. He sleeps with his head under this, not to keep out the rain, but to protect his head and chest from airbursts. In the daytime he chain-smokes, curses, or prays—all of this lying on his belly with his hands under his chest to lessen the pain from the blast. If it is at night, smoking is taboo. If there are two in a trench they sit at each end with their heads between their knees and make inane remarks . . . such as, “Guess that one landed in 12 Platoon.”’

Away back in this narrative it was remarked that the Allied armies 'battled their way' to the borders of Germany: that they were to reach the Rhine the hard way, and, in the main, by frontal fighting. This interregnum of the infantryman's war that lay between two phases—the 'gallop' through France and the Rhine advance with that *élan* of which the Supreme Commander makes mention—should not be lost in the drama of a war of movement. However, it is not unlikely that the average imperturbable infantryman at the time was less concerned about his immediate afflictions than subsequent reflection would suggest. Only a comparatively small proportion of even the fighting troops would be called upon to suffer the maximum of danger and discomfort; it was the really forward infantry in the 'front-line' ditches and mud-holes who had to take the strain. A couple of thousand yards to the rear their comrades would be brewing tea and hanging out their washing as unconcernedly as if the war were in another hemisphere; and its only intrusion would take the form of an occasional enemy mortar, desultory shell-fire, or the crack of a Spandau.

In the desire, therefore, not to over-dramatize the infantryman, let us take leave of the subject with a glance at a certain military policeman—a symbolic presence of normality—who, one morning on the Maas front, was directing the traffic along a badly flooded stretch and standing just off the road amid the swirling waters on a 'rough and ready rostrum made from a pile of cable-drums'. His gaiters were still smartly blanched; his trousers were conspicuously dry; and his gestures would have adorned the traffic orchestra of London's Strand. When asked how he had contrived the miracle, he gravely replied that he had been conveyed by boat.

On November 9th, Canadian II Corps from the Scheldt area took over the Nijmegen salient from British XXX Corps: and it should be noted that both the United States airborne divisions that had taken part in the air-land attack directed on Arnhem nearly two months earlier had remained in the salient and made a quite vital contribution to its defensive strength during the ensuing battles, and were now to come under Canadian First Army command. The German bridge-head west of the Maas, while it was maintained—and the Germans had already given every evidence of their determination to maintain it—constituted a constant embarrassment; and so long as the threat remained it was clearly unsound to launch the British Second Army into the battle of the Rhineland. It was equally obvious that operations on a considerable scale would need to be undertaken in order to push the enemy east of the river.



British XII Corps was therefore pulled out of south-west Holland and brought into line south, and on the right of, British VIII Corps—still looking east to that as yet unattainable objective of Venlo. The destiny of XII Corps thus lay towards Roermond. To complete the British line-up for the drive to the Maas, XXX Corps was moved to the extreme south of the Second Army's front: between Maeseck, on the west bank of the Maas, and the United States Ninth Army, with which it linked up along the river Würm—a tributary of the Roer—south of Geilenkirchen: a new and refreshingly euphonious name in the battle narrative of the 21st Army Group. At the opposite end of the army group front, British I Corps was made responsible for the line of the Maas from about Oss to the sea and as far west as Walcheren. The greatest cities of the Netherlands, lying north of the Maas, were now off the line of march of the Allied armies; and were to suffer starvation and misery until April of the following year when, fresh from Italy, Canadian I Corps began to undertake the 'methodical' clearing of western Holland. Finally, the United States divisions serving in the British and Canadian sectors were to be returned to the 12th Army Group—now operating on a two hundred and thirty-mile front; and the 21st Army Group undertook to develop offensive operations on the immediate flank of that army group in order to assist its operations towards the Rhine on the Aachen-Cologne axis and against the Saar.

Meanwhile, the future had begun to take shape: for in his orders on November 2nd, Field Marshal Montgomery provided that, 'when the time came', the Canadian First Army would be responsible for launching the northern offensive of the battle of the Rhineland, and that, subsequently, the British Second Army would undertake the forcing of the Rhine. Thus were foreshadowed, beyond the misty purlieus of the provincial-sounding names of Venlo and Roermond, those ampler operations that have come down to history under the sonorous code-names of 'Veritable' and 'Plunder'.

The dreary business of attempting to 'line up along the Maas' was resumed on November 14th. In the whole area of the Second Army's operations there were only three roads of any consequence—all converging on Venlo—and, as we have already seen, were made capable of carrying military traffic only by the expenditure of considerable engineer resources. British VIII Corps pushed on towards the river through mud and minefields; XII Corps attacked east towards Roermond and north-east towards Venlo, with troops of the 51st and 53rd Divisions and the British 7th Armoured Division. This division, now under the command of Major-General L. O. Lyne—

after three times fighting its way across the sands of Libya, and back again, and continuing into the mountains of Tunisia, onwards through Sicily into the mountains of Italy, thence to Normandy, and thereafter through France and Belgium into Holland—was now engaged in the prodigious business of capturing lock-gates. By November 22nd, XII Corps had completed the clearance of the west bank of the Maas opposite Roermond; and by the end of the month the last enemy bridgehead west of the river in the VIII and XII Corps sectors was at Blerick—facing Venlo on the farther bank.

On December 3rd, a 'set-piece attack' was developed against the strongly developed defences of the bridgehead at Blerick in the best manner of the period. The British 79th Armoured Division supplied the 'flail' tanks and the A.V.R.E.s—Assault Vehicles, Royal Engineers, designed to assist in engineer tasks such as the breaching of fortifications and mine clearing. The A.V.R.E.s went into action with the 15th (Scottish) Division. Their function was to breach a 600-yard defence belt composed of outer wire obstacles, mines, an anti-tank ditch, a thick minefield, and a trench system. The 'flails' were first to go in, cutting six lanes through the wire protecting the anti-tank ditch. When they reached it, the A.V.R.E.s advanced and, after unloading the bridges they carried, moved on again through the main minefield, with the infantry following in 'Kangaroos' to deal with the enemy garrison within the defences. By nightfall the infantry—at a cost of only fifty casualties—had completed the brilliant work of 'The Funnies'. The war at Blerick, at any rate, wore a decidedly new-fashioned look. Blerick itself is a 'most confusing place of tortuous streets'; and thereafter parties who lost their way to emerge unexpectedly on the waterfront were to find themselves in 'embarrassing proximity to the Germans'.

On British XXX Corps front, on November 18th, between the rivers Würm and Maas, an attack was launched in the Geilenkirchen sector in conjunction with the United States Ninth Army's operations on the flank of the main American thrust to Cologne. With the British 43rd Division on the right and the Guards Armoured on the left, together with the United States 84th Division from Ninth Army under command, XXX Corps set out on an advance with the intention of capturing Geilenkirchen and working north along the valley of the Würm towards the ever elusive Roer. The town itself was taken on November 20th by the 43rd Division, and the United States infantry division advanced north of it; but a few days later heavy rain made the ground almost impassable to both tracked and wheeled vehicles. The line of advance was now running along—not through—the Siegfried Line, on the farther side of the Roer; and, when the

enemy made strong counter-attacks with two fresh divisions, it became dolorously obvious that there was just no future to the war in this sector of the majestic Allied 'broad front'.

Down south, the 12th (United States) Army Group had also discovered that the Germans were equally in possession of a 'broad front'. The 12th (United States) Army Group attack on the general axis Aachen-Cologne began on November 16th; by the end of the month, the Germans had committed no fewer than eleven infantry and five Panzer divisions on the Roer valley front covering the Cologne plain; in addition, in reserve between the Roer and the Rhine, they had formed up the newly constituted Sixth SS Panzer Army in an arc covering Cologne itself; and any American advance to the Roer and beyond it could—as we have seen—be made only under the ever-present threat offered by the still distant Schmidt dams. General Bradley also was shortly to conclude that there was no future to the war in this particular sector. By the end of November the United States Ninth Army had reached the Roer between Jülich and Linnich, and by the middle of December the United States First Army was to close up to the river opposite Düren. Thus, after a month's bitter and expensive fighting, General Bradley's armies were not more than seven to eight miles deeper into Germany.

Farther south, the United States Third Army had begun its offensive towards the Saar on November 8th. The offensive was undertaken at the expense of the United States First Army's drive for Cologne, and, by helping to drag the whole Allied campaign south, diverted it from its strategic axis which, now that the alternative 'gateway' to the Ruhr was beyond the reach of the British Second Army, could only be Aachen-Cologne: the Saar area in itself could hardly rank as a strategic objective. By the end of the month the United States Third Army had captured the formidable defences of Metz and reached the line of the Moselle; but weeks of steady rain had 'swollen the river to a record 50-year flood stage, and the torrent washed out Patton's bridges'; and his engineers may be forgiven for 'sitting down in the mud and bawling like babies—the whole damn company'—as General Patton records—when a pontoon bridge with which they had struggled for two days snaked and tumbled off downstream because a tank destroyer veered off the steel planking and snapped the cable anchoring the bridge to the shore.

In the extreme south, the 6th (United States) Army Group had advanced into Alsace-Lorraine: the United States Seventh Army, under the command of Lieutenant-General Alexander M. Patch, having captured Strasbourg and turned northwards towards Karlsruhe; and the French First Army, under the command of General Jean de Lattre

de Tassigny, having reached the Rhine between the Swiss frontier and Mulhouse. Neither of these advances could be said to have made a strategic contribution to the progress of the war. In the Colmar area, facing the Vosges south of Strasbourg, the Germans continued to hold a substantial bridgehead west of the Rhine: yet another secondary result of General Patton's concentration on the Saar, since both corps of the Seventh Army had now turned north to his support.

And, indeed, the general offensive along the entire Allied front had now resulted in a general bogging-down. In a letter to the Supreme Commander dated November 30th, Field Marshal Montgomery declared that the Allies had suffered a 'strategic reverse', that none of the objectives discussed at the Brussels Conference of October 18th had been achieved, and that they now had 'no hope of doing so'. He asked for the abandonment of the policy of 'attacking in so many places at once', and suggested that the concentration necessary for success could be assured 'only by the appointment of a single commander to command the land battle'—a logical development of his earlier suggestion that a single commander should be appointed to control the contemplated 'single thrust' against the Ruhr during the previous September. General Eisenhower sublimely—though not surprisingly—denied that the Allies had suffered a strategic reverse.

On the other hand, the commander-in-chief of the 21st Army Group remained unperturbed about his own portion of the front. 'On the Allied front north of the Ardennes', he was able to write, 'we were now "tidy" along the rivers Roer and Maas except for an enemy salient in the Heinsberg area'—in the Roermond 'triangle'—'and virtually the only commitment remaining as a preliminary to major operations between the Rhine and the Maas was the elimination of this pocket'. He had a further cause for congratulation. At a meeting with the Supreme Commander at Maastricht on December 7th, the plans and intentions of the Brussels Conference were reaffirmed; although the Supreme Commander rejected the field marshal's proposal that the Allies should husband their resources and undertake no large-scale operations before January 12th—now the target date for that double thrust, south and north, towards Krefeld agreed at the Brussels Conference. 'My basic decision', he records, 'was to continue the offensive to the extreme limit of our ability'—and General Patton was duly authorized to make yet another effort to capture the Saar before Christmas. In actual fact, the Siegfried defences in the Saar were to elude General Patton to the last: they withstood direct assault until they were outflanked and taken from the rear.

The field marshal forthwith proceeded with regrouping for the Rhineland battle. It had been agreed that the United States Ninth

Army should accept the commitment of the Heinsberg salient and the British XXX Corps sector; and plans were drawn up for concentrating headquarters XXX Corps, Guards Armoured, and the British 15th, 43rd, and 53rd Divisions in the Nijmegen bridgehead, in preparation for an assault against the Reichswald Forest and the British and Canadian thrust towards Krefeld. By December 16th, advance parties were on the move to their concentration areas in the north, where they were to come under command of the Canadian First Army. Meanwhile the British Second Army was to undertake the 'study of the Rhine crossing'. No arrangements could have been 'tidier'.

The field marshal, indeed, was now optimistic, not merely about his own front, but the Allied front as a whole. In a directive published at the 21st Army Group headquarters on December 16th, he wrote: 'The enemy is at present fighting a defensive campaign on all fronts; his situation is such that he cannot stage major offensive operations'. This same morning—when Second Army advance parties were already moving north to Nijmegen—the Germans, in the 'cold stillness of the wooded Ardennes', had launched a counter-offensive of 'stunning proportions', in what Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief West, in an order of the day, described as an 'all-out gamble'—*es geht ums Ganze* ('the whole thing is at stake').

Field Marshal Montgomery erred in prophecy in distinguished company; and General Bradley concedes that he would not have changed a word of the field marshal's 'appraisal'. The intelligence staff of the United States First Army—which was to bear the initial brunt of this mighty counter-offensive—certainly issued a report six days before it was launched which may be read to indicate that, in the light of the concentration of infantry and armour behind the Siegfried Line, an all-out counter-attack—the 'application of every weapon at the focal point'—was being prepared by the Germans between the Roer and the Erft rivers: the Erft being a tributary of the Rhine just south of Düsseldorf. The day before the Ardennes offensive opened, First Army intelligence switched to a 'limited scale offensive'; and thus the estimate availed nothing on that grim morning of December 16th, 1944, against the 'rumble' of German guns, the 'clatter' of German trucks and engines, and the ever oncoming roar of battle. The battle opened at half-past five, in darkness and fog, with the heaviest artillery barrage fired by the Germans in the whole campaign, the dropping of parachutists to delay reinforcements, and the infiltration of saboteurs in civilian clothes and American uniforms. Before the day was out, the broad Allied front had already ceased to look 'tidy'; and, overnight, on this vital sector, a war of slow attrition, almost in the 1914–18 manner, had become one of drama and movement.

## ii. ARDENNES 'ALL-OUT GAMBLE'

THE battle of the Ardennes was an American battle; it cost the United States Army seventy-seven thousand casualties. The British soldiers engaged in it, when the crisis was already over, were in the proportion of something like one in forty. The three British divisions actively concerned—apart from the 6th Airborne, which had been hurriedly summoned from the United Kingdom—saw little of the enemy. No casualties resulted from the solitary contact made by British troops—the 3rd Royal Tanks of the 29th Armoured Brigade—during the crisis period; but they put up a good show, and should not be reproached for having expansively—and doubtless in all sincerity—told a war correspondent that they 'ripped' into the enemy and 'tore him apart'. The war correspondent, over the radio, added the comment: 'That was no boasting, no exaggeration, because the tussle that began on the banks of the Meuse developed with a ferocity that equalled anything in war'. This description of the battle for the Meuse crossings may be allowed to pass if it is taken to have reference to the action fought by the United States 2nd Armoured Division composed of fourteen thousand men, three thousand vehicles of all types, and four hundred and fifty tanks—rather more than half of the total enemy tank strength on the whole of the Ardennes front. On the road, with vehicles separated by the regulation fifty yards, this armoured division formed a column more than one hundred miles long.

Thus, so long as it is clearly understood that the battle—as Field Marshal Montgomery himself records—was 'won primarily by the staunch fighting qualities of the American soldier', one can claim, with less constraint, that the British did indeed make a quite inestimable contribution—in the direction of the battle. On the fourth day the Supreme Commander had handed over to the British commander-in-chief the command of the United States First and Ninth Armies. In this moment of crisis, when four Allied armies looked to be in peril of being cut off from their bases, General Eisenhower took no count of the susceptibilities of his American generals—nor of American public opinion—and steadfastly supported the British field marshal in his policy of gradually yielding ground as against one of rigid defence, whatever its unpopularity with the senior American commanders actually fighting the battle.

The commander who emerges from it with the least credit is the German Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt. At the time, the German counter-attack in the Ardennes was known to the world as 'the Rundstedt offensive'; in actual fact, on two occasions, he sent Field Marshal Model, commanding Army Group B, to face the smouldering eyes of the Führer in Berlin and argue against it, and washed his hands of the whole enterprise—except to get out of it—from the moment of its inception. After the war he remarked: 'The morale of the troops was astonishingly high at the start of the offensive; they really believed victory was possible'. The higher commanders, at any rate, 'who knew the facts', lacked that fighting faith of their soldiers which, in war, has often been known to achieve the theoretically impossible. Quite obviously Field Marshal von Rundstedt was unfitted to lend impetus to what he was afterwards to describe as a 'nonsensical operation': according to General Geyr von Schweppenburg, whom we have already met commanding Panzer Group West in the Normandy battle, he was an ageing man—sixty-nine years of age—who suffered from ill-health and had sunk into a state of lethargy as the result of 'psychic resignation'. Nevertheless, the fact that the Führer allowed him to survive as Commander-in-Chief West until mid-March, 1945—when he was asked to give up his command for the second time—may be accepted as a tribute to some quality in the field marshal as a man.

Along with the other German commanders involved, he offered a counter-proposal to the Ardennes plan—that an attack should be launched in the Aachen sector to 'restore the Siegfried Line'. It was 'baited' with the suggestion that, if the opposition appeared to be 'collapsing', success might be exploited in the direction of Antwerp—the strategic objective laid down under the original plan. The field marshal's proposal was curtly rejected; he was told by Colonel-General Jodl that 'the operation is unalterable in every detail'. Apparently he had still to learn that the Führer was as little interested in 'restoring lines' as in 'strategic retreats'.

The Führer himself arrived at the field marshal's headquarters at Ziegenberg, near Bad Nauheim, north of Frankfurt, on December 12th—four days before the offensive opened—to give a 'special briefing'. Lieutenant-General Fritz Bayerlein, formerly Field Marshal Rommel's chief of staff in North Africa and now commanding the Panzer Lehr Division—which we shall meet outside Bastogne—records that, before the conference, the visiting generals were stripped of their weapons and briefcases, loaded into buses, and then driven about the countryside for about an hour. Thus they were unaware that the conference was actually taking place in that other 'Eagle's

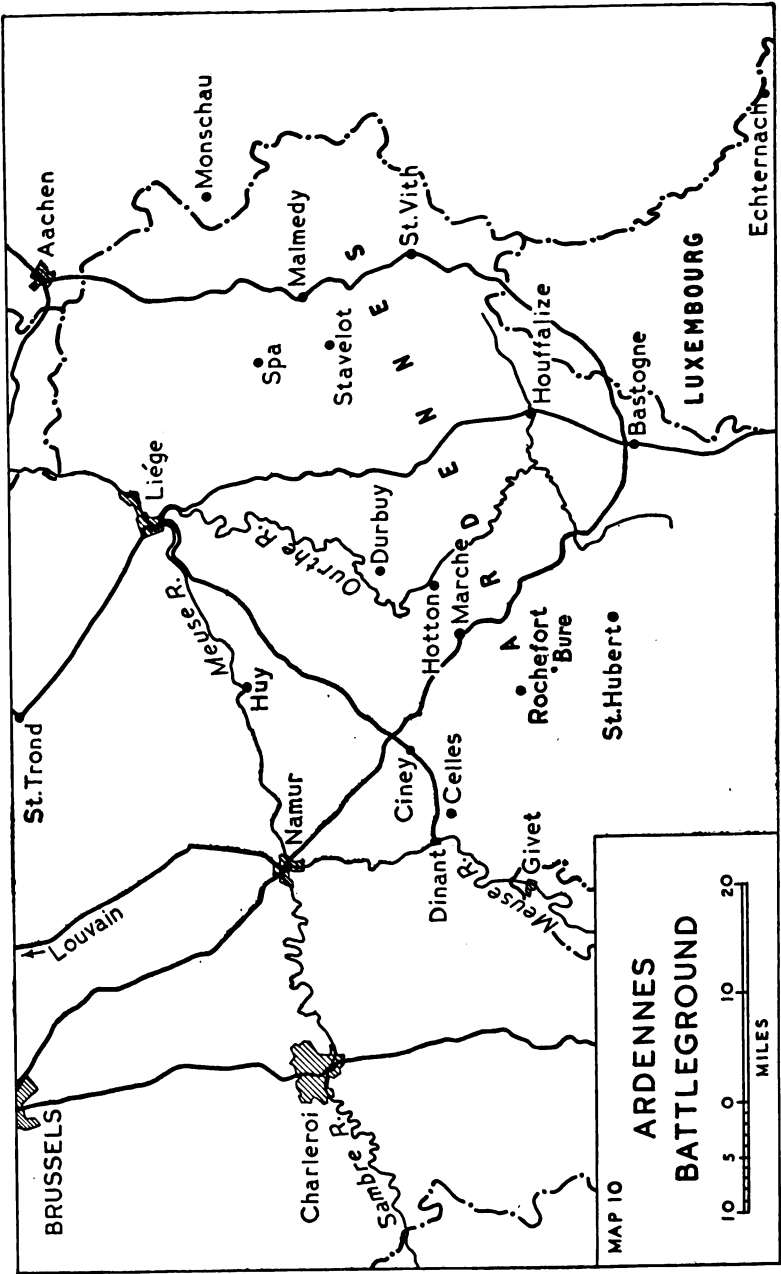
Nest' which had been constructed for the Führer in the victory year of 1940. Now he looked old and broken and 'his hand shook as he read from a long, prepared manuscript'. This last touch may be picturesque invention because the stenographers present insist that there was no manuscript; but General Bayerlein's further remark—that the suspicious looks of the abounding SS guards made him afraid even to reach into his pocket for a handkerchief—serves to explain and excuse Field Marshal von Rundstedt's final protestations of loyalty to the Führer 'on behalf of the generals' and the hollowness of his assurance that 'this time' they would not fail him.

The commander of the Sixth SS Panzer Army—the spearhead of the offensive and the repository of the Führer's fondest hopes—was singular among those present in that he had an unarguably good reason for disliking the whole idea of the imminent offensive: his complaint was to be that it should have taken place 'at Christmas time'. He was Colonel-General 'Sepp' Dietrich—'a rolling-stone in various business jobs until he caught the Führer's fancy'. This former butcher now enjoyed the distinction of being commandant of the Führer's 'Leibstandarte' (Bodyguard). The other senior commander in the operation, General Hasso von Manteuffel, of the Fifth Panzer Army, having learned nothing from General Patton—who never worried about them—was already in a 'state of extreme anxiety about his flanks'.

On the whole it may be deduced that the auguries for the Ardennes counter-offensive, on the highest level, were not particularly encouraging. The German plan was, essentially, a 1940 'blitz' model, but, in 1944, the German Army no longer had its 1940 leaders. Moreover, in the light of these 'glimpses of the mind' of some of its senior commanders, one can hardly be surprised that, in the offensive itself, the junior leaders would appear to have lacked those qualities of initiative and personal drive that were a distinguishing feature of that army in its prime. Indeed, on the German side, the only commander to emerge with credit is the Führer himself.

The first tentative directive for the Ardennes counter-offensive was issued by the German Supreme Command on the day that the first German city came under direct attack—on October 12th, when the United States First Army 'pushed into the shattered northern outskirts of Aachen'. At the time of its launching, the plan—a 'Führer order' of the Führer's own devising and endorsed in his own handwriting 'NOT TO BE ALTERED'—was regarded as the boldest and most imaginative of the war. As will be seen, in two vital sectors of the Ardennes front, the situation was saved—to quote Field Marshal Montgomery—only 'in the nick of time'; or, quite literally, by a





matter of a few hours. Over a period of days the Allied world shuddered under its impact. Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force was impelled to issue an order of the day expressing 'unshakable faith in the cause for which we fight'. Ten days after the offensive began, the chief of staff at Supreme Headquarters was still prophesying that the Germans would be 'across the Meuse in forty-eight hours'—that is, within less than an hour's motor run of Brussels.

In the end, despite the demoniac projection of the Führer's will that the armies he had created from the dust of disaster should snatch victory from defeat, the offensive failed. One reason at least would appear to be that his generals—as he often told them to their alabastine faces—were thoroughly defeatist by his own standards, and, indeed, by the standards of the soldiers they led into the battle. That battle won, the Allied world speedily arrived at the comforting conclusion that the German counter-offensive carried to the extreme of absurdity the military belief that 'attack is the best form of defence'; and, with one exception, every senior German general who survived the war has bountifully denounced his now thoroughly discarded Führer for having led him—and his unfortunate Fatherland—into this final disaster. Only the ever faithful Colonel-General Jodl had the decency to remark, long before he was aware that he would meet his death in an underground chamber at Nuremberg: 'I fully agreed with Hitler that the Antwerp undertaking was an operation of the most extreme daring. But we were in a desperate situation, and the only way to save it was by a desperate decision. By remaining on the defensive, we could not expect to escape the evil fate hanging over us. By fighting, rather than waiting, we might save something.' Let us now look at this battle.

General von Manteuffel was exceptional in that, in his conversations with the Führer, he contrived to 'get under the surface that terrified or mesmerized other generals'. He was one of the few field commanders to whom the Führer would listen—conceivably because, unlike the majority of his colleagues, he had been able to 'get into the mind of the fighting troops under the new conditions of warfare'; and, of course, as a tank leader, and a 'dynamic' exponent of new methods, he was not for ever advocating strategic retreats. He has left on record the plan for the Ardennes counter-offensive, as seen through the eyes of the Führer.

The object defined was to achieve a decisive victory in the west by throwing in two Panzer armies: the Sixth SS under Colonel-General 'Sepp' Dietrich, the Fifth—formerly designated Panzer Group

West—under General von Manteuffel. Each of these armies included four Panzer divisions, equipped to the scale of about a hundred tanks each—about half strength. The attack, under the tactical command of Army Group B, was to be launched into Belgium between Monschau and Echternach: that is, along a seventy-mile stretch between the Aachen sector and the area north-west of Trier. The Sixth SS Panzer Army was allotted the main role and the main strength; but it was not directed—as might have been expected—to the central Ardennes, ‘where the roads were better and the defences weaker’. In order to achieve surprise, it was to lie concealed in the Eifel—the mountainous woodland on the German side of the Luxembourg border—till three days before the operation, and for this reason could be committed only on the northern wing. On a narrow front of barely fifteen miles, on the axis Malmedy-Liége, it was to strike north-west, cross the Meuse between Liège and Huy, and drive for Antwerp. On the left, the Fifth Panzer Army, operating on a front of some thirty miles, was to advance on the axis Marche-Namur, cross the Meuse between Namur and Dinant, and push towards Brussels. On the southern flank, the German Seventh Army—‘a numeral risen from the ashes of its Normandy destruction’—now consisting of no more than four divisions and destitute of armour, was to guard a flank stretching from the Moselle across Luxembourg to Dinant on the Meuse. The three armies concentrated for the assault totalled twenty-four divisions, with their supporting troops.

On the third or fourth day the German Fifteenth Army—whose headquarters had been transferred from Holland to the Roer sector—using a specially reinforced SS Corps, was to make a converging thrust from the north-east towards the Meuse (or Maas) at Maas-tricht, in order to assist the Sixth SS Panzer Army’s drive on Antwerp: the Ardennes counter-offensive might by then have ‘drawn off a large part of the reserves to the help of the Americans, so that this secondary stroke, although lighter, should have a chance of success’. For the final phase of the offensive, another attack was being prepared to drive southwards from occupied Holland; it was to take the form of a thrust from the neighbourhood of Utrecht across the Maas and directed on Antwerp.

Although there was no truth in the contemporary claim that the German tank concentration was the most powerful ever seen in the war, the mounting of the offensive represented a considerable achievement on the part of the German Supreme Command. It necessitated the ‘daily arrival in December, 1944, of a hundred railway-trains with troops and supplies’ in the area of concentration in the Cologne sector; and Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, on

behalf of the Luftwaffe, reported to the Führer that three thousand fighters would be available for the offensive. The Führer forthwith halved this figure; and, in fact, only nine hundred were actually serviceable on the day. However, because of the weather, no air operations were feasible on either side during the first week of the battle. From Christmas onwards, with little or no protection from their own aircraft, the Germans were called upon to withstand, day in and day out, the 'furious onslaught of Allied air power'.

According to General von Manteuffel, the aim of the offensive was to cut off the British army from its bases of supply and so force it to evacuate the Continent; and Field Marshal von Rundstedt probably had some excuse for being 'staggered' when the plan was unfolded to him by his chief of staff, General Westphal, who had been summoned to the Führer's field headquarters at Rastenburg in East Prussia on October 24th. Nevertheless, at the outset of the offensive—as stated in *The White House Papers*—'it seemed that a large part of the triumphant American and British forces in Holland, Belgium, and northern France might be pushed into another Dunkirk'.

The ninety-mile front of the United States First Army in the Ardennes was held by VIII Corps. It consisted of four divisions. Two of these divisions had together suffered nine thousand casualties in the Hürtgen Forest fighting; the third had been in the line only four days; the fourth—an armoured division—was 'comparatively inexperienced'. In the north, in the critical area of Monschau, United States V Corps—of 'Omaha'—was attacking towards the Roer dams at the moment the German counter-offensive began. Indeed, the 12th (United States) Army Group was already fully committed along the whole of its front, without a single division in army group reserve. The only strategic reserve at Supreme Headquarters consisted of two United States airborne divisions of the XVIII Airborne Corps, under the command of Major-General Ridgway—the 82nd and the 101st, both of which had been assembled at Reims for refitting after their two-months' tour of duty in Holland.

The Supreme Commander himself—and handsomely—shoulders the responsibility for maintaining only four divisions on the Ardennes front and for running the risk of a large German penetration in that area: the Allied armies, in order to remain on the offensive in accordance with the pattern he had 'personally prescribed', had weakened themselves where necessary to maintain those offensives. General Bradley, as the army group commander directly responsible—his army group now consisted of thirty-one divisions—'rationalizes' the whole affair as a 'calculated risk'.

Under its festival-loving commander the SS Oberstgruppenführer Joseph 'Sepp' Dietrich, the Sixth SS Panzer Army, whose broken Panzer divisions from Normandy had hurriedly been reformed and re-equipped, whose staff was exclusively composed of SS officers but whose staff work was inferior to that of the unloved German Army regular officer, this apple of the Führer's eye, was fated to fail him in Germany's 'extreme hour'. It put in a double-handed punch. The right-hand punch was blocked early by the tough defence of Monschau by the United States 2nd Division of V Corps—the other infantry division engaged having been rapidly forced back in confusion. During the first three days of the German offensive, this division fought one of the hardest and most brilliant actions of the war in north-west Europe. The attack caught the division while it was advancing towards the Roer dams; and it had to turn round, select a line on which it could conduct an effective defence, occupy that line while under pressure, and hold it in face of repeated assaults from an entire Panzer corps.

Nearly twenty miles south of Monschau, at St. Vith—scheduled to be captured on the first day—the United States 7th Armoured Division from First Army, also coming down from the north, although semi-isolated, held this important point on the road net of the area in which the German spearheads belonging to the left-hand punch were attempting to push to the west. This left-hand punch, after being compelled to by-pass Malmedy—to the north of St. Vith—had reached Stavelot, five miles west of Malmedy, on the third day of the offensive. The advance represented a penetration of about twenty miles. Two days later—on December 20th—a concentrated attack by several German divisions drove the United States 7th Armoured Division out of St. Vith, together with the remnants of two infantry divisions of VIII Corps: they had been overrun at the outset of the offensive but had afterwards joined in the battle. The following day 7th Armoured was ordered to withdraw to the Allied line that was now being built up by United States VII Corps—of 'Utah'—on the north flank of the German salient.

Under the prevailing conditions of ice, and snow, and fog, the tank 'going' had proved to be slow and heavy over the 'miserable' roads leading from the German Eifel; the control and deployment of the large forces engaged had proved to be beyond the capacity of their commanders; and in the neighbourhood of Stavelot the left-hand punch of the Sixth SS Panzer Army had been finally checked in a narrow defile. Nevertheless, it was the fierce fighting valour of the American divisions engaged that held firm the vitally important Monschau 'shoulder'.

The main thrust of the whole Ardennes counter-offensive by these picked troops of the three corps of the Sixth SS Panzer Army had thus 'fizzled out': every road was blocked to them. They had been summarily halted at Monschau; blocked at Malmedy; and the prolonged action at St. Vith had disrupted the whole time-table. They were never to look upon Liège—the approach to the administrative pipe-line of the United States First and Ninth Armies—with its 'vast quantities of every kind of vital supplies, including fuel and food'. The offensive had been started in the knowledge that shortage of petrol might bring it to a standstill. On the evening of the second day, the infantry of the right-hand corps had missed a three-million gallon oil and petrol dump between Stavelot and Spa by about three miles.

For days to come the northern shoulder of the salient was to remain in peril. The Sixth SS Panzer Army continued to fight hard to break through it; for a whole week, as fast as United States First Army divisions were pulled out of the Roer sector they were committed piecemeal to the battle. The fiercest fury of the I SS Panzer Corps was launched against the American line in the Malmedy-Stavelot sector in an attempt to crush it. When it finally failed in a frontal attack delivered on December 22nd, the waiting II SS Panzer Corps, under the Führer's order, was thrown in to 'reinforce failure': instead of being used to reinforce the limited success achieved—as we shall see—by the Fifth Panzer Army. By thus favouring his SS troops, 'for the sake of Nazi prestige', at the expense of the regular army, the Führer directly contributed to the ruin of an operation on which he had lavished a maximum effort of mind and will.

The drama of the battle was now to be fought out to the south—by the Fifth Panzer Army. That way lay Bastogne. On the evening of December 18th, the United States 101st Airborne Division had reached this vital road junction 'after a wild truck ride from Reims' while the 82nd had continued north to help to block the German advance between Malmedy and St. Vith. West of Bastogne there was little or nothing—actually two American battalions of engineers and some light patrols of mechanized cavalry—to prevent the Germans from 'bouncing' the Meuse at Namur and advancing on Brussels. But the whole operation had been planned on the basis that the Fifth Panzer Army should 'await success' of the preferred Sixth SS Panzer. It was to await success too long. Its left corps was to be held by the ankle at Bastogne; and, although the town was by-passed, the Fifth Panzer Army—without reinforcements, despite the protests of its commander—remained under the necessity, in the tactical sense,

of constantly glancing over its shoulder. An operation planned as an 'all-out gamble' was not fought as such. We shall shortly take the road to Bastogne.

The first vital operational decisions were taken on December 19th—though it should be recorded that the United States XVIII Airborne Corps was released to General Bradley on the second day of the offensive; and that General Bradley, as early as the afternoon of the first day, telephoned General Patton from Versailles and ordered him to get his 10th Armoured Division on the road to Luxembourg and report to VIII Corps for orders. General Patton, growling mightily, characteristically regarded the German move in the Ardennes as a spoiling attack designed to throw the Third Army off balance and make him stop his Saar offensive. Not less characteristically—as he records—he ensured that his 4th Armoured Division should forthwith get engaged 'lest it too might be moved north by higher authority'. But the 10th Armoured duly moved; and within three days was to be followed by the bulk of the United States Third Army in one of the most spectacular marches of the war. When that army moved—as might be expected of its commander—it moved to some purpose. Within less than a week, with its guns, supply, and equipment, it had switched fifty to seventy miles north into the new offensive—and relieved Bastogne. More than one hundred and thirty-three thousand tanks and trucks, in double-banked columns, joined the 'round-the-clock trek' over the icy roads: the troops in heavy great coats still caked with the mud of the Saar 'huddled against the wintry cold that knifed through their canvas-topped trucks': the tank commanders, their faces wrapped in woollen scarves, huddled in the turrets of their Shermans. Day and night these columns rattled over the cobbles of the old city of Luxembourg 'until on December 21st a new carpet of snow muffled their passage and they glided through like ghosts'. General Patton's forces had provided a demonstration of American mobility in war that must have exceeded the most pessimistic calculations of the German Supreme Command—the Führer possibly excepted.

On December 19th the Supreme Commander ordered the United States Seventh Army to side-step to the north in order to release the Third Army for its northward march against the southern flank of the enemy penetration. This same day—the day that General Patton received orders to switch the Third Army north—Field Marshal Montgomery definitely abandoned the move of British XXX Corps to the Canadian First Army sector and ordered it to assemble in the area of Louvain and St. Trond—that is, between Brussels and Maastricht.

XXX Corps now consisted of the Guards Armoured, the 43rd, 51st, and 53rd Divisions, together with three armoured brigades; and patrols went forward along the western bank of the Meuse between Dinant and Liège. Thus XXX Corps was echeloned behind the front and out of the fighting zone; but it was suitably placed to prevent the enemy from crossing the river and could cover the routes from the south-east leading to Brussels and Antwerp—and cover Liège itself. For the Germans, 'the days of opportunity' had already passed. According to plan, Bastogne was to have been entered on the second day; whereas it was not reached until the third, and not by-passed until the sixth.

Thus British XXX Corps was to provide a stop line for the VII Corps of the United States First Army: until, on January 4th, when the Germans were in retreat, two of its divisions, the 53rd and the 6th Airborne—which had relieved the 43rd—went into the attack on the right of that army. The 6th Airborne—now under the command of Major-General E. Bols—had been summoned from Bulford Camp on Salisbury Plain with six or seven hours' notice: the galaxy of turkeys it had laid on was to find another destiny. It was to fight a 'tough little battle' for the small village of Bure, on the road from Givet, in co-operation with the 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry of the 11th Armoured Division and the 23rd Hussars of the 29th Armoured Brigade. However, as the historian of the 23rd Hussars remarks, 'tanks were not made to fight blindly, in fog, up icy mountain tracks'. Afterwards the 51st Division was brought in to take the lead from the 53rd; but both divisions were 'pinched out' by the United States First and Third Armies when, moving south and north, they made contact and reduced the salient to a bulge.

If it be asked—and General Bradley is at pains to point out that 'Montgomery did not commit more than a *single* brigade of British troops against the Bulge offensive'—why the British commander-in-chief, as will be seen, used the United States VII Corps to fight the battle within the salient itself, the answer must be that, in this time of crisis, he quite superbly continued to live up to that revered military maxim already quoted: 'maintenance of the objective'. On December 31st he was to receive from General Eisenhower an outline plan to cover operations to reach the Rhine 'all along the front from Bonn to the northward'. The strategic mission of the 21st Army Group—crisis or no crisis—was still to clear the area between the Maas and the Rhine, and to cross the Rhine; and he was not to be diverted from it even though the Fifth Panzer Army threatened to be across the Meuse at Namur or Dinant at any moment: and Namur is just under forty miles from Brussels. Immediately 'the battle of the



Bulge' closed down, he withdrew all British troops from the Ardennes with the greatest possible speed and set about regrouping for the battle of the Rhineland: operation 'Veritable'. And on this somewhat unheroic note—and with this explanation—British XXX Corps vanishes from the cast of the Ardennes story. On the other hand, the British field marshal is about to make a dramatic personal appearance.

The United States 101st Airborne Division—as we have seen—reached Bastogne during the night of December 18th. Between Bastogne and Malmedy—thirty-five miles apart—'only three mediocre roads meandered westward towards the Meuse'. If Bastogne held—as Malmedy was to hold—the enemy would be forced to 'funnel his strength' through this thirty-five mile gap west into the Ardennes, where the terrain might be expected to 'sponge it up'. Bastogne was to prove to be the rock on which the Fifth Panzer Army split.

That same evening of the 18th, two Panzer divisions of the Fifth Panzer Army—the 2nd Panzer and the Panzer Lehr Divisions—had come within three miles of its many road junctions. The commander of the Panzer Lehr Division, Lieutenant-General Bayerlein, has recorded that he started out for Bastogne at ten o'clock in the evening with a force consisting of a battalion of infantry, fifteen tanks, and some guns. The road was narrow, and deep in mud; and the force took almost three hours to cover less than a kilometre. Two kilometres from the town itself he was informed by a Belgian civilian that a group of fifty American tanks and forty other armoured vehicles had gone east about midnight. It was then two in the morning, and the possibility of so large an enemy force in his rear made him 'uneasy' about going forward in the night. After having taken steps to protect his rear, he set off again at half-past five in the morning. Road mines imposed another hour's delay; and, when the forward infantry were 'almost in sight of Bastogne', they found themselves engaged in a skirmish with a reconnaissance element of the 101st Airborne. The Americans had arrived at Bastogne after their 'wild truck ride'—if not precisely 'in the nick of time'—with a margin of only a few hours of darkness. The 2nd Panzer Division bypassed Bastogne and proceeded west with all speed. As we shall see, it was also to miss its destiny—at the Meuse—by a matter of minutes rather than hours.

In Bastogne itself, its north and south exits thus cut, the Americans firmly entrenched themselves and prepared to 'sit it out' under the fretful attentions of the Panzer Lehr and two other divisions. A

surrender demand presented on December 22nd to the acting commander, Brigadier-General Anthony C. McAuliffe, conveyed the somewhat obvious intimation that the town was now encircled, and granted him two hours in which to meditate on the prospect of 'annihilation' by the artillery of a whole German corps and, for full measure, six heavy anti-aircraft battalions. Nevertheless the tone of the demand was very correct. An 'explosive' reply in the American idiom was delivered by word of mouth. When, still very correct, the German major, flanked by a captain, two other ranks, and 'a large white flag', requested a formal answer, Brigadier-General McAuliffe obligingly had it written out: 'To the German Commander: NUTS. Signed, The American Commander'.

The 101st Airborne Division inside Bastogne was joined by two armoured combat commands—that is, by the equivalent of about two-thirds of an armoured division in terms of tanks, infantry, and artillery; and, on the fourth day of the siege, when the fog had cleared, Thunderbolts provided air support. They were controlled from the ground by an air support officer who—as Brigadier-General McAuliffe records—'really knew his stuff and ran a great circus'. He called himself Maestro and had a fine gift of salty language, 'and when he was telling those airplanes what to do there was always a big crowd of soldiers standing around just listening to him talk. Finally it got so bad we had to rope him off.' Troop Carrier Command did an equally 'great job on the supply end'. When the supply aircraft came over, the troops dived into cellars and air-raid shelters: 'if you were out in the street, in the middle of the town, a bag might easily hit you on the head'.

Major-General Maxwell Taylor—who had commanded the division in the air attack on Holland and was in America when the Ardennes offensive opened—rejoined his troops the day after their relief by the 4th Armoured Division of the United States Third Army. He was told by its acting commander: 'We're in fine shape; we're ready to take the offensive'. American tanks and tank destroyers had been so disposed on each of the seven roads leading out of the town that German tanks got into the outskirts on one occasion only. At the height of the battle, over a period of eight days and seven nights, nearly one hundred and fifty tanks—about a fifth of the entire Panzer force in the Ardennes offensive and comprising the latest types of Panther and Tiger—were either destroyed or driven off at a cost of just under three thousand American casualties.

Bastogne was relieved on December 26th—though only in the sense that a small column had penetrated the town by 'a narrow neck'

that gave a precarious connexion with the garrison. It was in this area that the Germans had concentrated their troops, and 'the road to Bastogne' was a narrow dirt-track 'pock-marked yard by yard with shell-holes', and the adjoining fields and ditches were 'littered with personal equipment and with battered and burned-out vehicles, both German and American'. Belgian civilians wandered about their shattered farm-buildings, 'dazed and made uncertain by the speed and fury of the fighting'. Thus the bitterest phase of the battle was to follow the 'relief' of the garrison; and the Germans hardly ceased their assaults in this area until January 5th—two days after the Allied line to the north had begun to counter-attack. Brigadier-General McAuliffe offered his final comment on the whole episode over the Allied radio: 'We weren't worried about our own position at all. The fact is we were thinking what a tough time the Kraut was having'.

One may have to agree that the resources of the German Army were inadequate to meet the demands made on it in the Ardennes counter-offensive; but perhaps one may be permitted to speculate whether any resources whatsoever would have been adequate to cope with an enemy whose sympathies could move into reverse in so charmingly illogical a fashion. Great care and skill—as Field Marshal Montgomery records—had gone into the planning of the Ardennes operation. Bastogne itself is no more than a dot on a map; little more than a sprawling huddle of buildings—with, today, a commemorative American tank upraised in the midst of them at the town's centre. It is exposed to every wind that blows across the rolling plain; and a not very serious obstacle, one would have surmised, to the passage of a fleet of Panthers and Tigers. If the American garrison and its commander—like the German generals, according to their Führer—had chosen to think in terms of getting into a line of defence somewhere to the rear, it is as certain as anything can be in war that the Fifth Panzer Army would have been across the Meuse and at the gates of Brussels, with quite incalculable consequences in the political as well as in the military field, before a single British soldier had moved south. On December 19th and 20th that army would have had a clear run to Dinant and Namur—and beyond. Thus the Führer, in his capacity as commander-in-chief, may not have been quite so incompetent as, with one voice, his generals have proclaimed to the world: the somewhat pathetic Colonel-General Jodl alone excepted.

On the day that Bastogne was relieved, the Bulge reached its high water-mark in the area of Ciney and Celles. Ciney is the focal point

of the road network between Marche and the Meuse; and Celles is rather less than five miles from Dinant. It was west of Celles, on Christmas Eve, that the 3rd Royal Tanks of the British 29th Armoured Brigade made—as we have seen—the only direct and unequivocal British contact with the enemy during the German advance. The brigade had left Ypres on the morning of December 20th; the next day it took over responsibility for the bridges at Namur, Dinant, and Givet.

The war had not yet arrived at Givet, though it was known that the Germans had broken through the American front and were moving towards the Meuse. When the 23rd Hussars reached the town, they found that an American reinforcement holding unit was setting a good example to the panicky civilians by queuing up for the local cinema. 'Georgie Patton was somewhere away to the south, so it was bound to be all right.' One squadron went forward daily across the bridge to a spot where it would have done great execution on any German vehicles trying to approach it. Another squadron stayed in Givet, charged with the defence of the bridge and 'reading "Horatius" for hints on how to do it'. The third squadron remained in reserve west of the river. On Christmas Day the regiment moved across the Meuse and from dusk to dawn on four successive days lay in wait for an enemy that never showed up. The situation at Namur continued to be equally uneventful.

Nor did the enemy contact established by the 3rd Royal Tanks on Christmas Eve last long. First contact was established at a quarter past eight in the morning, when the forward squadron knocked out a Mark IV tank. During the next hour it accounted for another Mark IV and a Panther before withdrawing to rejoin the other squadrons on the high ground about four miles east of Dinant. Here the 3rd Royal Tanks stood their ground. Some more German tanks were knocked out during the day, 'and the Panzer Grenadiers as they appeared in their semi-tracked carriers were suitably dealt with by concentrated Browning fire'. The enemy had now been identified as a battle group of the 2nd Panzer Division and during this first day of action it suffered heavy casualties—without the loss of a man to the defenders. That night the regiment was ordered to pull back to a 'tight little bridgehead' round Dinant. One squadron was left out on the high ground; but the night was uneventful, and when, on Christmas morning, they began to push forward they 'found themselves unable to advance farther owing to the fact that a combat team of the United States 2nd Armoured Division had appeared as from nowhere and was advancing from the north across their front'. This combat team heralded the approach of the fourteen thousand

men, the three thousand vehicles, and the four hundred and fifty tanks of the United States 2nd Armoured Division we have already seen on the road. Not unnaturally, the day after Boxing Day they rather took over the war in this sector, and the 29th Armoured Brigade—as we have seen—moved into the Bure area.

Nevertheless the 3rd Royal Tanks have one flattering reliquary to place upon the altar of memory. The Panzer division of the Fifth Panzer Army with which they had established contact, however tenuous, was one of the three original Panzer divisions formed in 1935—the 2nd: which, in May 1940, was one of the two divisions halted by the Führer's order when 'within sight of Dunkirk'; in December, 1941, had penetrated deep enough on the Moscow front to get a glimpse of the towers of the Kremlin; and now, three years later, was the only Panzer division of the two powerful Panzer armies in action on the Ardennes front to come within sight of the Meuse. On that Christmas morning its advanced guard had been waiting for reinforcements and petrol for thirty-six hours. Today, at the Celles cross-roads, above the wooded slopes that fall away to Dinant and the river's edge, a sign erected at a small café-restaurant called the 'Pavilion d'Ardennaise' carries an inscription, in French, Flemish, and English: 'The Rundstedt offensive (Battle of the Bulge) was stopped here on December 24th, 1944'.

The United States 2nd Armoured Division—from the United States Ninth Army on the Roer front—was the division which, as we have seen earlier on, actually blunted the now finely tapered spear-head of the Fifth Panzer Army. It broke into Celles, after hard fighting, on Christmas evening. On December 27th the division 'threw in everything it had', and by nightfall had brought to a complete standstill the greatest German advance since D-Day. The last engagement of the battle was fought out in the area between Celles and Marche with elements of the 9th Panzer Division—which had come to the aid of the 2nd Panzer—from early light until darkness. The Dinant column, which had now become a 'pocket', was thus liquidated; and the German offensive sealed off within the general line Monschau-Malmedy-Marche-St. Hubert—fifteen miles due south of Marche—and Bastogne. But a week was to pass before the Allied armies would have completed preparations to launch their counter-attack.

From noon on December 20th, Field Marshal Montgomery had commanded the two American armies—the First and the Ninth—north of the salient. The depth of the German penetration had put

these formations remote from the axis of the 12th (United States) Army Group, and it seemed not improbable that General Bradley's communications with the two American army commanders might 'go out'. General Bradley was thus left with only one army, General Patton's Third, which was about to attack north towards Bastogne. General Bradley claims that the break-through had been arrested during the first four critical days 'before Montgomery had entered the picture'; and, as we have seen, he had indeed set the Third Army into motion to some purpose. On the other hand, the First Army had been compelled to 'roll' with the German advance—although its regrouping while under attack must rank alongside the Third Army's own performance. On the second day of the offensive, it put sixty thousand men and eleven thousand vehicles in motion; and during the first nine days it cleared one hundred and ninety-six convoys of forty-eight thousand vehicles, and as nearly as no matter a quarter of a million troops.

The United States First Army headquarters had been 'chased' out of its command post at Spa when an enemy column arrived within two thousand yards of the city on the fourth day of the offensive—though not before First Army had removed more than a million gallons of motor fuel from the enemy's reach, and another one hundred and twenty-four thousand gallons had been ignited. A third dump of two million two hundred and twenty-five thousand gallons was 'in the process of being removed to the rear'. In face of the figures—and of what they represent in terms of mobility—it is worth remembering that the German Army was still a 'marching' army; that the infantry were still largely dependent upon horse-drawn artillery and transport; and that its armoured formations were less lavishly equipped than those of the Allies. Nevertheless, the Germans had contrived to land up almost on the doorstep of General Hodges's headquarters; and when Field Marshal Montgomery visited him at one o'clock in the afternoon of December 20th, it is easy to understand why his supremely cheerful and confident manner—as his chief of staff remarks—must have contrasted violently with the general mood of the moment.

He had the further advantage of knowing more about the battle the First Army was fighting than its own headquarters; it had, in fact, on its own showing, 'no detailed information about the situation': whereas, an hour earlier, the field marshal's personal liaison officers had reported to him direct after a two-day tour of every front-line sector—St. Vith alone excepted. The field marshal, with four armies now under his command, was not proposing to command in the dark. His peculiar 'abhorrences' already mentioned

—untidiness of mind and method, worry, and indecisiveness—were certainly ‘banished from his environment’ that afternoon. He knew what he wanted; and the necessary regrouping had already taken shape in his mind.

On the front of the Sixth SS Panzer Army, the German advance had reached Stavelot; on the front of the Fifth Panzer Army, enemy armour had penetrated as far as Hotton and Marche; and the gap in the Allied line appeared to extend from Durbuy—just east of the Ourthe, a tributary of the Meuse, which it joins at Liège—to Bastogne. Clearly the first requirement was to halt the enemy advance in the First Army area by opposing it with a firm and ‘tidy’ front, in conjunction with the 12th (United States) Army Group to the south: or, rather, its remnant—General Patton’s Third Army. While the necessary regrouping took place, British XXX Corps would be in a position to hold the line of the Meuse: the field marshal, as we know, had already moved it before he was awakened on the night of December 19th with news of his new command.

The next requirement was to create a reserve corps in the United States First Army for a counter-stroke; and he decided that Major-General Collins’s VII Corps should be withdrawn gradually to serve this purpose and positioned between Durbuy and Ciney. This corps, at that time, was fighting a ‘touch-and-go’ battle with the I SS Panzer Corps in the Malmedy-Stavelot sector—with the II SS Panzer Corps coming in from the east, a few days later, and threatening to outflank it in the Hotton-Marche area: the lunge of this corps to the west actually represented a desperate attempt to break through to Liège from the south via Durbuy. As the field marshal comments, ‘the process was obviously going to take a little time’. Furthermore, it ran counter to the point of view of the American commanders fighting the battle—including Major-General Ridgway, whose old division, the United States 82nd Airborne, had ‘never before withdrawn in its combat history’—since it involved the surrender of ground; and they never wholeheartedly accepted it. Within forty-eight hours General Bradley was ‘begging’ the Supreme Commander to ‘prod’ the field marshal in an effort to ‘speed up that counter-attack’. ‘But Montgomery would not be hurried’, he comments. ‘Rather than pinch off the enemy at the middle as Patton and I were eager to do, Monty preferred to halt him by denting the nose of his advance.’

To this decision—a decision characterized as much by its patience as by its subtlety—the field marshal was to hold firm. The problem was to ‘connect a series of individual actions into a coherent battle

fought in accordance with a clear plan'; and not until the field marshal had achieved balance and was certain that the enemy had exhausted himself did he propose to 'plunge for the kill'. An earlier counter-attack might have expended the 'meagre offensive capacity then available to First Army' to no purpose—or worse. The actual closing of the gap between the Malmedy-Stavelot sector and Bastogne could wait so long as the Germans were not advancing towards the Liège-Namur sector of the Meuse, across which lay the direct route to Antwerp.

Thus this first decision taken by the British commander-in-chief was vital to the whole future of the battle—and, by inference, to the course of the war in the west. Although three divisions in the forward areas had now been overrun, and although the German advance was still unchecked—nor likely to be checked for several days to come—he at once began to withdraw troops from carefully selected sectors of the First Army front, even at a time when they were actually engaging the enemy. These troops were withdrawn from those sectors where it might be deduced that the German attacks represented a pinning-down operation rather than a determined effort to achieve an advance; and were skilfully edged out of the battle zone, with the intention that they should ultimately join forces with those troops of British XXX Corps who were already moving south.

A reserve was thus brought into existence even while the battle was moving to its climax—its function being to hold off the enemy thrust to the Meuse, to blunt it, and ultimately drive it back. A clear decision was also required precisely where to place this reserve. It needed to be placed far enough back to ensure that it should not get committed at too early a stage in the battle; though, again, it needed to be near enough to the battle to be in a position to assume a defensive role if the general situation should get out of hand. For these reasons it was placed between the Meuse and the Ourthe. The key contribution it made to the subsequent course of the battle is evidenced by the fact that it was twice sucked into it, in the Hotton-Marche area, before its counter-offensive purpose could be realized. Twice it was reformed. Its third intervention occurred at an equally critical moment—when, as we have seen, the 'waiting' II SS Panzer Corps was trying to form a new start-line in the Malmedy-Stavelot sector for a resumption of the Sixth SS Panzer Army's offensive.

The Belgian farming village of Stavelot is only twenty-two miles south-east of Liège; and it is hardly surprising that, at a 21st Army Group Press conference at the end of the first week in January, the field marshal was reported to have remarked that the battle was 'possibly one of the most interesting and tricky battles I have ever



handled'. The 'ruckus' that succeeded it on the subject of its command may be allowed to pass at this time of day; but any British student of these events may perhaps be forgiven for taking the view that the battle provided as perfect a demonstration of the 'surgical' or 'intellectual' approach to war—as contrasted with the 'cut 'em off and chew 'em up' approach—as is likely to be available in an imperfect world.

Two corps—the VII and XVIII Airborne—of the United States First Army counter-attacked from the north on January 3rd. British XXX Corps—as we have seen—conformed and attacked on the west flank, until it was 'pinched out'. The counter-attack was aimed at Houffalize, at the centre of the salient and ten miles north of Bastogne. On January 9th the United States Third Army—with which the British 6th Airborne Division was to establish contact at St. Hubert two days later—after maintaining strong pressure in the Bastogne area, launched a fresh attack also directed on Houffalize; and it was here, at Houffalize, on January 16th, after a month's tribulation, the two armies joined hands.

A single intersection—as General Bradley records—broke through the parallel row of stone cottages that hugged the Liège road. To plug that intersection and deny the enemy its east-west road, heavy bombers had demolished the town; and Third Army bulldozers 'forcing their way north to make juncture with First Army swept the charred rubble of Houffalize into the gaping bomb craters left there by Allied air power'. Both armies then turned their full strength eastwards: although it was not until the beginning of February that they found themselves back where they had begun—up against the Siegfried Line.

The curtain had come down on the drama of 'The Battle of the Bulge'; and the Allied world breathed again. It was now possible to take the view that the Germans had paid an impossible price for their initial success. Supreme Headquarters estimated German casualties at two hundred and twenty thousand; 12th (United States) Army Group 'in excess of two hundred and fifty thousand', together with six hundred tanks—that is, about three-quarters of the total attacking force. The Supreme Commander, in his book, puts the figure at one hundred and twenty thousand, with a mention of unspecified German sources that suggest ninety thousand. General Westphal, Field Marshal von Rundstedt's chief of staff—and he would appear to be utterly detached in his comments—blandly remarks that the American casualties certainly outnumbered the German casualties—which

'amounted to twenty-five thousand men, of whom one quarter were killed'. The reader may take his choice—in the light of a further comment from General Eisenhower that the advance of the First and Third Armies to Houffalize was so slow and so intensely opposed that 'most of the enemy troops to the westward of the closing gap had succeeded in getting away'. Under the authority of the Führer, the withdrawal of German armour west of Houffalize had begun on January 8th; and, indeed, the Sixth SS Panzer Army had received orders to assemble at its entraining stations for the Hungarian front by the end of the third week in January.

The German all-out gamble had failed. Whether it should ever have been tried must remain a matter of opinion; but there can be no argument that the price paid by Germany—the drain on her mobile reserves—was the certainty of defeat in north-west Europe. For the United States and Great Britain, the heaviest price paid was probably in the political field. On January 7th the British Prime Minister cabled Marshal Stalin that the position in the west was 'very anxious' and asked whether the western Allies could count on a 'major Russian offensive on the Vistula front or elsewhere during January'. The next day Marshal Stalin replied that 'our Supreme Command has decided, in view of the position of our Allies, to complete preparations at a forced pace'. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had been informed that the operations would start not later than January 15th; in actual fact, they started on January 12th. Five days after the launching of this 'gigantic offensive'—to quote General Eisenhower—Mr. Churchill wrote to Marshal Stalin to thank him from the bottom of his heart.

Mr. Churchill's request to Marshal Stalin had been made at a moment in time when the Allied line in north-west Europe was not merely under a grave threat but farther back and less stabilized than it had been in the previous November; and at a time when, as the result of a German attack launched on New Year's Day on the 6th (United States) Army Group front—with the object of regaining northern Alsace and of drawing American forces from the Ardennes front—Supreme Headquarters had ordered a general withdrawal of VI Corps of the United States Seventh Army to the Vosges. Both corps of this army—as we have seen—were now facing north towards the Saar. This withdrawal would have entailed the evacuation of Strasbourg; and the plan was modified at the beginning of January only as the result of the emphatic political representations of General Charles de Gaulle.

When Marshal Konev's army group opened the Russian offensive on the Upper Vistula between Cracow and Sandomir, at the points

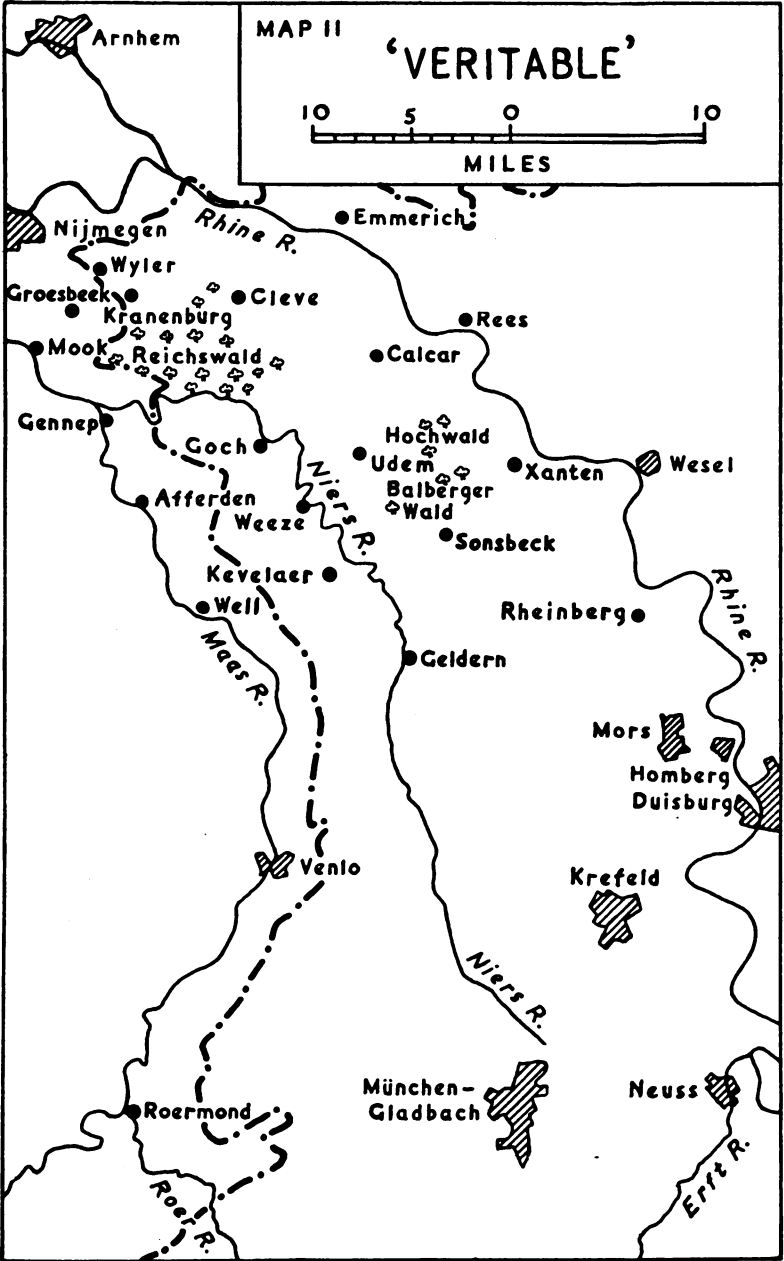
where the Russian Army chose to strike 'its superiority in men and armour was not threefold but sixfold'. One hundred and sixty Russian divisions—in combatant strength the equivalent of about ninety Allied divisions—facing a rather smaller number of weak German divisions, had been assembled on a 600-mile front. Warsaw fell to Marshal Zhukov's army group on the sixth day. To the immediate north, Marshal Rokossovsky's army group drove north-west to reach the Gulf of Danzig. Still farther north, Marshal Cherniakovsky's army group overran the East Prussian defences by a direct assault. Twenty-five German divisions in East Prussia were now out of the war. On the western front, twenty-four had sufficed to send a shudder through the Allied world. Meanwhile, Marshal Konev's army group had taken the road for Breslau and broken into Upper Silesia—'the only corner of Hitler's industrial domain on which Allied bombers had not set their stamp'.

The Führer, who had established his field headquarters at Rastenburg for the greater part of the war, returned to Berlin from Ziegenberg when the Russian offensive opened. There, from his command post in the Reich Chancellery—that 'vast mausoleum which he had built to house his pride and awe his tributary kings'—he directed the final battle for the defence of the Reich. Mad or not, fifty feet below ground, from within a narrow space enclosed by three air-tight, water-tight bulkheads, surrounded above ground by a labyrinth of ruin and a wall of flame, he still exercised command and exacted obedience.

Within a week of his arrival in the Führerbunker that was to be his tomb, Russian armour had advanced nearly a hundred miles along the entire eastern front. Less than a week later, Marshal Zhukov's army group—operating between the army groups of Marshals Rokossovsky and Konev—had advanced over two hundred miles through central Poland astride the road that runs from Warsaw to Berlin, and was now across the frontier and less than a hundred miles from Berlin. During the last half of 1944, seventeen German divisions had been transferred to the western front. Now, sixteen German divisions—the majority of them of high quality—and a large part of the German artillery were being switched back to the eastern front.

When the Yalta Conference opened on February 4th, 1945, Marshal Zhukov, having reached the Oder at Kuestrin, was less than forty miles from the eastern suburbs of Berlin. On this same day the United States First Army captured the first of the seven Roer dams—which had now been in the news for nearly three months; and the British and the Canadian armies—the British having just completed a three-divisional attack between the Maas and the Roer in the Roermond

'triangle'—were preparing to resume their autumn battles between the Maas and the Rhine. With the Russians within striking distance of the gates of Berlin, the British Second and the Canadian First Armies, and the United States First and Ninth Armies, on the only immediately vulnerable sector of German's western frontier, were still marching to the old autumnal refrain of 'Between the Maas and the Waal and between the Maas and the Roer and between the Roer and the Rhine'. Apart from the gap in its dragon's teeth in the Aachen sector, the Siegfried Line was still intact. During that autumn, Bucharest, Sofia, Belgrade—and now Warsaw—had come under the occupation of the Red Army; by the beginning of December Budapest was encircled. Such, then, was the military background to the political discussions at Yalta; and, from the point of view of the western Allies, the political price of the Ardennes.



### iii. *SECOND OF THE 'HINGE' BATTLES— 'VERITABLE'*

'ONCE the northern Rhineland was in Allied hands, we could force our way across the Rhine and begin the isolation of the Ruhr.' Thus Field Marshal Montgomery, writing of the period immediately after the close of the Ardennes battle; and he adds, with a dying fall to the old refrain—for now it stops short of Berlin: 'We should also gain the starting position necessary for mobile operations in the plains of northern Germany'.

On December 31st, as we have seen, he had received from General Eisenhower an outline plan to cover operations to reach the Rhine 'all along the front from Bonn to the northward'. The broad pattern of Allied strategy remained unchanged. The main effort in the Allied operations west of the Rhine was to be in the northern sector; and all other operations along the Allied front were to be designed primarily to assist this northern operation, in order to 'gain secure flanks so as to permit of the heaviest concentration with which to force a crossing in the north'.

Thus the old pre-Ardennes plan was reinstated: a plan, indeed, that dated back to the Brussels Conference of October 18th, since it was designed to clear up the area between the Maas and the Rhine from Düsseldorf to Nijmegen and establish a bridgehead north of the Ruhr. At that conference it had been agreed that the United States Ninth Army should come under Field Marshal Montgomery's control during the later stage of the battle. That army, which had come under his operational command during the Ardennes battle, was now to remain under his command for the forthcoming battle and be made up to twelve divisions. In actual fact, it was to remain under his command until the last month of the war.

And there were still to be converging attacks—from the Reichswald by the Canadian First Army, and from the Jülich-Linnich area in the Roer sector by the United States Ninth Army. But Krefeld—that German town facing the western face of the Ruhr—vanishes as the focal point in the operational picture. The two offensives were now to converge on the Rhine at one of its widest stretches—opposite Wesel. Here American engineers were to build within less than eleven days after the capture of the site by the 1st Commando Brigade the

first semi-permanent railway bridge across the Rhine; and it was in this sector that the 21st Army Group was to cross to the 'promised land'—if no longer the Ruhr—of the northern plains. But the road to Wesel—about thirty-five miles from Nijmegen as the crow flies—lay through the northern extension of the Siegfried Line, which continued south over the high ground of the Reichswald Forest to the eastern bank of the Roer. A grim journey lay ahead of the Canadian First Army; and before the United States Ninth could follow the road north to Wesel, the United States First Army had to undertake something more than a 'study' of the Roer dams.

Last, there remained the task of clearing up the enemy salient in the Heinsberg area—the Roermond 'triangle'; for the southern arm of the combined offensive was to be launched across the Roer itself. Bad weather had brought to a halt the operations of British XXX Corps in this area in the last days of November, and this 'commitment', as we have seen, was to have been taken over by the United States Ninth Army; but the Ardennes battle had intervened, and the task of clearing the salient now reverted to the British Second Army—to XII Corps.

The base line of the Roermond 'triangle'—formed by the Maas and the Roer, with Roermond at its apex—was the start-line for the attack launched in the early morning of January 16th, 1945, 'in fog, darkness, and bitter cold'. Stated simply, the whole object of the operation—which was far from being simple—was to bring the Allied line up to that portion of the Roer which was still enemy-occupied on a front of approximately twelve miles. Two German divisions of good quality were still holding the area bound by the two large rivers and the Wülm—tributary of the Roer. The operation was to consist of a series of 'limited pincer movements', and to be launched by the British 7th Armoured Division in an advance up the western flank; the division was to take the Roermond road, through Susteren. For the first phase it had under its command the 8th Armoured Brigade—that brigade which had co-operated with the Guards Armoured Division in the attack on the bridge at Nijmegen—together with a brigade from the 52nd (Lowland) Division, which was responsible for launching the assault in the centre sector in order to link up with the armoured columns that would swing in a left hook to get behind the enemy. Later, the 43rd (Wessex) Division, acting in conjunction with the left-hand division of the United States Ninth Army operating on the eastern bank of the Wülm, was to help in rolling up the enemy throughout the area.

Three defence belts ran east and west across the 'triangle'—the

middle one forming part of the Siegfried defences. The area itself was a 'sea of mines' and studded with villages, each of them, in varying degree, a strongpoint; of the numerous water obstacles, the Saeffelen Beck ranked as a miniature Rhine in relation to the size of the area and the scale of the operation—which, alas, in the mighty panorama of the western front, cannot qualify for a more laudatory description than that of a 'large-scale methodical mopping-up operation carried out under the most difficult conditions'.

Nevertheless, for this—officially—minor enterprise or 'small commitment', there was assembled quite a panoply of war, apart from the three divisions engaged. Mine-clearing 'flail' tanks, flame-throwing 'Crocodiles', troop-carrying 'Kangaroos', and a concentration of guns 'up to the mammoth super-heavies, wheel to wheel', were on location to support the infantry in their drive on Heinsberg: once a town of five thousand people—now 'flat' as the result of heavy bombing—and, as the last important position in the 'triangle', provided with very strong defences. 'The Zoo' itself had been reinforced by the arrival of the 1st Rocket Unit of the Royal Canadian Artillery—a newly developed device for scattering the King's enemies which had already made a first dramatic appearance on the British front in the action at Blerick. The unit was equipped with twelve rocket projectors, each of thirty-two barrels. The battery fired its ripple salvo at ranges between five and seven thousand yards; and each salvo was capable of depositing over three hundred and fifty rockets simultaneously into an area two hundred yards square. The Unit was to intervene providentially at the crossing of the Saeffelen Beck.

This stream, twenty feet wide, with a high bank on the farther side and marshy patches along its course now in the throes of a temporary thaw, sufficed to bog down the mechanized panoply of war—'even the stout little "Weasels" the foot soldiers had proved in the Highlands so long ago'. On the first day, the 4th/5th Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, after crossing a wide, thickly-sown minefield and negotiating the wire, got one assault bridge across the Beck, not without casualties. The three tanks that also contrived to make the passage promptly got bogged down; and the Fusiliers pressed on to their objective—a nearby hamlet—alone: 'not a single vehicle, tracked or otherwise, could follow them'. It was during this initial phase that the Canadian rocket battery was brought into action, with results that the historian of the Lowland Division describes as devastating. The Germans, on coming out of their cellars to surrender, were so dazed and shocked that they 'walked blindly into walls'. It should be recorded that the 6th Battalion, the Cameronians, still



without mechanized support, moved up to the support of the Fusiliers. They faced the mortaring, the shelling, the high bank on the northern side of the stream, the wire and the mire—a thousand yards of it—and then set out on the first of many stages on the road to Heinsberg. ‘The armour might be bogged down before the Beck, but the P.B.I. must slog on.’

Heinsberg fell to the 7th/9th Royal Scots and the 4th Battalion, the King’s Own Scottish Borderers on the morning of January 24th—after an infantry night march of up to thirteen miles ‘amid the clamour, overhead and round-about, of the artillery barrage and the movement of armour’. Under the light of a chill moon they were guided to their objective by directional fire from tracer shells. Tanks of the 8th Armoured Brigade accompanied them on this stage of their march; and they enjoyed the comforting presence of the fearsome and trusty flame-belching ‘Crocodiles’ of the British 79th Armoured Division. By January 26th, XII Corps had completed its task; on the last day of the month the enemy blew up the last remaining bridge over the Roer.

Although throughout the operation the 7th Armoured Division had ‘hammered away on the north towards the east’ and the 43rd Division had pressed up from the south—if against less spirited resistance—the ‘big hole’ in the extreme arc of the salient had been punched—and punched without the use of armour—by the Lowland Division. It is therefore not inappropriate that the division should inadvertently have achieved the distinction of being the first British division to set up its headquarters on German soil—at Hongen, on the main Sittard–Heinsberg road, a mile or so this side of the Saeffelen Beck. It achieved the further distinction of being expressly credited in the Russian communiqué of the day with the capture of fifty ‘inhabited places’ during an operation that had thus reached a triumphant conclusion through ten days of every possible vagary of wild weather ranging from white frosts and snowstorms to fogs and thaws. Under such conditions anything can happen; and one cannot be surprised that one company of the 5th Battalion, the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, in capturing a village otherwise unknown to fame called Echterbosch, found itself attacking from Germany into Holland.

Thus was the Roermond ‘triangle’ resolved into a line—along the river Roer. The irresistible if quite irrational code-name borne by the highly intensive operation fought within its borders was ‘Blackcock’: ‘the very name’, as the Lowland divisional historian remarks, with a catch in his throat, ‘a haunting memory of the old days among the hills of home’. Its wings were to flutter for the last

time after its official closure. On Sunday, January 28th, the divisional commander, his four brigadiers, and some twenty other senior officers of the division were heavily and accurately bombed with five hundred pounders by their own aircraft. The first to rise to his feet was the officer commanding the machine-gun battalion. 'Ah!' he was heard to remark, as his eye critically inspected the prone figures around him. 'I now seem to be commanding the division.'

Operation 'Blackcock' was actually fought out between the rivers Würm and Maas; but one should doubtless, in deference to the 'broad front' strategy already touched on, resist the temptation—were it not irresistible—to revise the 'old autumnal refrain' on the lines of 'Between the Maas and the Waal and between the Maas and the Rhine and between the Maas and the Rhine and between the Maas and the Roer and between the Roer and the Rhine'. And, anyway, we are now on the threshold of 'Veritable': that slogging offensive in which the whole available strength of the 21st Army Group was employed to turn the 'famed' fortifications of the Siegfried Line in the second of the 'hinge' battles of the campaign in north-west Europe.

In February, 1945, eighty-five German divisions were committed west of the Rhine, as against precisely the same number of Allied divisions; and the Supreme Commander, at long last, was now in sight of achieving a primary aim of his whole strategic plan—that of defeating the Germans decisively west of the Rhine. His operational schedule contemplated three major assaults: the first—as we have seen—by the 21st Army Group at the northern end of the Allied line; the second, by the 12th (United States) Army Group in the centre; the third, a converging attack by the United States Third and Seventh Armies designed to eliminate the enemy forces in the Moselle-Saar-Rhine 'triangle'. The 21st Army Group—with the United States Ninth Army under command—would clear up the west bank of the Rhine between Nijmegen and Düsseldorf; the 12th Army Group would secure the west bank from Düsseldorf to Coblenz; and United States Third and Seventh Armies would also move up to the Rhine in the Mainz-Karlsruhe sector. Thereafter the plan envisaged two thrusts: a northern thrust by the 21st Army Group and the United States First and Ninth Armies to envelop the Ruhr; and a secondary thrust by the United States Third Army in the Mainz-Frankfurt area. Of the eighty-five divisions at the disposal of the Supreme Commander, thirty-five or thirty-six were 'tentatively' allocated to the northern thrust—eighteen of them from 21st Army Group; the secondary thrust,

in its initial stage, was to be limited to 'approximately twelve divisions'. The remainder of the Allied divisions were to dig in on the west bank of the Rhine. The plan also envisaged, by inference, a 'double envelopment' of the Ruhr: a first envelopment by the United States First Army coming up from the south to meet Ninth Army coming down from the 21st Army Group sector; and a second—or, rather, partial—envelopment by the United States Third Army moving on the Mainz-Frankfurt-Kassel axis.

In the view of the British Chiefs of Staff, the plan achieved no more than a 'planned dispersion' of the Allied forces; and it was represented to the Supreme Commander that the Allies would never have strength enough to mount more than one full-blooded attack across the Rhine. If the main effort was to be in the north—as was already the Supreme Commander's intention—then all other parts of the line should 'pass to the defensive'. The British Chiefs also pressed for the appointment of a single ground commander for the whole front north of Luxembourg. Their obvious choice was Field Marshal Montgomery; and their proposal amounted to a request that he should be given operational control—under the Supreme Commander—of the 12th (United States) Army Group: a reversion to the chain of command obtaining in the previous August.

Thus were old controversies revived—though against a somewhat different background. The Supreme Commander's objection to a full-blooded thrust across the Rhine on the score of the threat of a 'counter-attack against your line of communication', whether or not it had force in the previous September, was certainly self-evident in this February of 1945. He now proposed to pursue a policy of threatening the enemy at a number of points along the line in order to force him to disperse his defending forces, and thus make easier 'the task of our troops invading the Reich at the selected points for our attack'. Again, General Bradley, who had urged that the 'main effort' should be carried out in the centre and not the north, could not reasonably be expected after the Ardennes 'ruckus' to accept Field Marshal Montgomery as the overall ground commander for the new offensive that was to take the Allied armies across the Rhine.

Before the next meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, at Malta, on January 30th, 1945, General Marshall and the Supreme Commander met in secret session at Marseille. At the meeting of the Combined Chiefs, the British Chiefs challenged, in particular, the Supreme Commander's plan for a 'double envelopment' of the Ruhr; but they would appear to have been mollified when the Supreme Commander's chief of staff—in the absence of General Eisenhower—was able to convey an assurance that the 21st Army

Group would be allowed to cross the Rhine without being called upon to wait for the United States armies in the south to move up to the river.

In the event, as we have seen, both the First and Third Armies achieved a Rhine crossing before the 21st Army Group; and though the First Army's crossing at Remagen was entirely fortuitous, as we shall discover, and though Third Army's at Oppenheim was virtually unopposed—it cost a total of no more than thirty dead and wounded—their commanders should be accorded their moment of exaltation. According to General Bradley, Field Marshal Montgomery—his September dream, though dimmed, still unappeased—had cast a predatory eye on the United States First Army; and the 'double envelopment' of the Ruhr—the project so frowned on by the British Chiefs of Staff—was not to go forward until after 'the most contentious tactical dispute of the war'. It was intimated to the field marshal that if he must insist on 'borrowing' ten divisions from First Army, General Bradley would accompany them—and also resume command of his errant Ninth Army. No more was heard of the suggestion; the war contrived to continue; and Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke (afterwards Viscount Alanbrooke), the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, on the banks of the Rhine itself as together they watched the passage of the 21st Army Group, was able to remark to the Supreme Commander how groundless had been his fear of the 'dispersed effort'.

As in the Ardennes, so at the Rhine, the Supreme Commander had imposed his will; his plan, as he had devised it, stood firm. It was to continue to stand firm, against whatever wind that blew, from whatever quarter, British or American, all the way to Berlin—or not to Berlin. He had become, in deed and in truth, the Supreme Commander. Behind him there stood also, rock-like, backing him through thick and thin, whether in Washington, or Marseille, or Malta, or any other place or port visited by the eye of heaven, that tower of strength to the total Allied war effort, the United States Army Chief of Staff, General of the Army George C. Marshall.

The specific task of the Canadian First Army in 'the battle of the Rhineland' was to attack south-eastwards from Nijmegen through the Reichswald Forest—the western and the south-western edge of which forms the German-Dutch frontier—to the general line Geldern-Xanten. Once a firm flank had been established, plans would be made for bridging the river at Emmerich. Here, then, with a target date of February 8th, 1945, was operation 'Veritable'. The complementary offensive by the United States Ninth Army—under 21st

Army Group command—was to be launched north-eastwards from the Jülich-Linnich sector of the Roer towards the Rhine between Düsseldorf and Mors—about fifteen miles south of Wesel. The United States First Army in the Cologne sector would protect the right flank of the operation up the river Erft—that tributary of the Rhine just south of Düsseldorf, which would subsequently form the Ninth Army flank. Here, then, was operation 'Grenade'. It was to be undertaken by ten divisions—not twelve as originally planned. The target date was fixed for 'as soon as possible after February 8th'; the actual date would be dependent on First Army's fortunes in its new attack on the Roer dams. That army already carried 'the wounds of two previous assaults'.

During the north Rhineland battle, as has been stated, the British Second Army was to continue its 'study' of the Rhine crossing, and, in particular, to start planning for forcing the river at Xanten, Rees, and Rheinberg—this last crossing to become an American responsibility. But this 'study' was no more than a headquarters task. In actual fact, the whole offensive strength of the 21st Army Group was to be employed in 'Veritable'. The majority of the divisions normally allotted to the Second Army were handed over to Canadian command; the remainder were to hold a firm front, facing east, along the Maas—now flooded to about a thousand yards on either bank—and to 'assist the Canadian operations by every means possible'. Thus the Canadian First Army command, during February, was to consist of thirteen divisions, nine of which were British.

Furthermore, it was considered desirable that a single corps should control the whole front of the attack during the first phase. The corps selected was the British XXX Corps; and for this first phase, the attack on the Reichswald Forest and its immediate neighbourhood, it was to consist of no fewer than seven divisions—one of them armoured—and three armoured brigades and eleven regiments equipped with the specialized armour from the British 79th Armoured Division. The total strength of the corps thus amounted to over two hundred thousand men. A tremendous weight of artillery, of well over a thousand guns, together with a comprehensive interdiction programme by the Allied Air Force, were to support the break-in operation. Three German towns vital to the enemy's defences—Cleve, Goch, and Emmerich—were shortly to become 'disgusting heaps of ruins'.

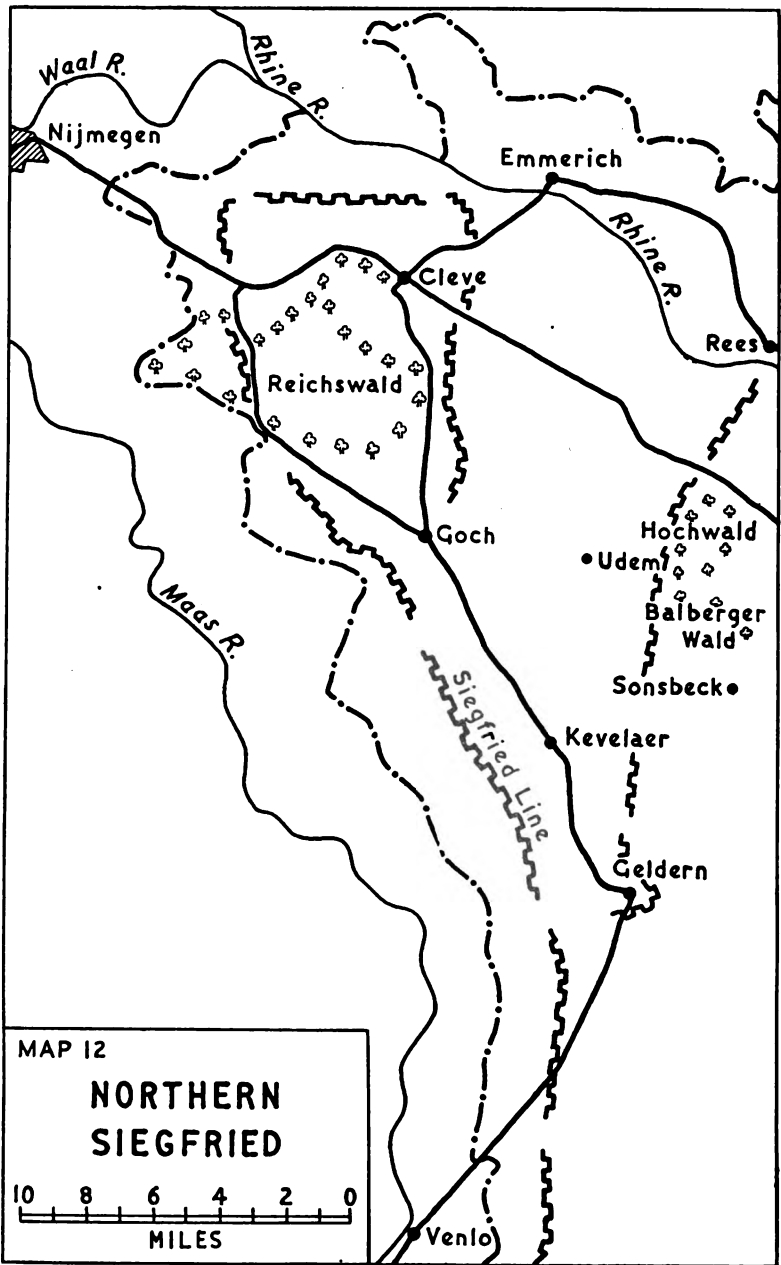
The initial assault was to be undertaken by four infantry divisions: the Canadian 2nd and the 15th (Scottish), the 53rd (Welsh), and the 51st (Highland), from north to south. In addition, the Canadian 3rd Division was to attack on the extreme northern flank—that is,

immediately south of the Waal and the Rhine. The task of breaking through the Siegfried defences at the northern tip of the Reichswald near Kranenburg, and of opening the road to the high ground due east towards Cleve, fell to the 15th Division: it was to force its way through these defences in a combat at ten yards range.

The northern extension of the Siegfried in the Reichswald consisted of isolated bunkers and trench systems organized in great depth rather than the deep concrete shelters of the Siegfried Line proper—which finished near the junction of the Belgian, Dutch, and German borders at München-Gladbach, on the Ninth Army's projected front of advance. Nevertheless there were a number of large concrete fortifications in the Goch area—the centre of German communications between the Maas and the Rhine; the anti-tank ditches running across the Reichswald were 'anchored' to these rivers; and the Canadian First Army, together with the English, Scottish, and Welsh infantry divisions fighting under its command, in 'turning' the Siegfried Line as a whole, was called upon to put forth a considerable feat of arms, and to fight the main battle on a front that stretched every yard of the way from Düsseldorf to Nijmegen. Into that main battle—the toughest and bloodiest the Coldstream Guards have ever known—the enemy reserves were to be drawn; and more than a month was to elapse before the Germans finally relinquished their Wesel bridgehead.

There were no big towns to capture; but few square miles to occupy; and the attack itself went across—for the most part—a sparsely populated waterlogged desolation. Just before it was launched the Germans flooded a large area south of the Waal that embraced the main road from Nijmegen to Cleve; and this new flooding was to penetrate as far east as the Siegfried defences. Again, cold weather conditions would have assisted operations; and it had been hoped that the ground would be hard enough for the maximum use to be made of armoured formations. In the event, mud and widespread flooding prevented the normal movement of wheeled and tracked vehicles on the roads; and the roads and tracks themselves, which were few enough in number, were soon broken up. Only by the use of large numbers of the latest types of amphibious vehicles was it possible to maintain pressure on a highly tenacious and resourceful enemy. By the end of the first week, this waterlogged desolation was defended by four parachute and three infantry divisions and one Panzer and a Panzer Grenadier division—motorized infantry and artillery; a few days later they were joined by the Panzer Lehr Division and another infantry division—thus bringing up to eleven the number of enemy formations engaged.

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The parachute troops of the First Parachute Army fighting in the Reichswald enjoyed the title only as a courtesy; neither the time nor the aircraft had been available to teach them how to jump. Nor was the petrol available: in the air, as on the ground, the now sustained Allied air offensive against fuel-producing plants was killing German mobility. Nevertheless these 'parachute' troops were the best—and last remaining—specimens of German youth: 'young, indoctrinated Nazis, fresh from a Luftwaffe that had ceased to exist', with a still lively faith in their Führer and a cause for which they were prepared to die. Fanatically they 'hung on to the last man', in their determination to hold the 'hinge' position of this gateway to Germany. For 'Veritable', fought out in the most vital sector of the entire enemy front, ranks as the second of the 'hinge' battles of the Allied campaign in north-west Europe.

In this fashion, then, the Siegfried Line was 'turned': and, it may be added, almost soundlessly in the ears of the contemporary world. Here was no spectacular armoured advance to hit the world's headlines. Of the bitter struggle in the 'hinterland' of the Siegfried, on the road to Xanten, the historian of the British 11th Armoured Division, which entered the battle with the Canadian II Corps at the end of the first week, writes: 'We had been fighting our way through country where no armoured division could have been expected for one moment to fulfil a natural role. We had been confronted by impenetrable forests, impassable bogs, numerous craters, roadblocks, mines, and every form of demolition. Except as morale-stiffeners for the infantry, the tanks had proved practically useless, although they had struggled on most determinedly.' Of a divisional advance of about six miles in that same neighbourhood, he roundly remarks: 'The presentation at this point of a day-to-day chronicle of the advance from Udem to Sonsbeck would effectively dissuade any who have read so far from reading farther. Not only would a narrative of that painful and depressing struggle be itself painful and depressing, but it would be literally impossible to follow. It was like an attack of the First World War. Every hundred yards was important to the men who gained them.'

The easy phrase about 'closing up to the Rhine' may easily obscure the real nature of an operation which, fought over a battlefield 'more systematically laid waste' than any the British and Canadian armies had previously encountered, can only be painfully and depressingly described as 'slow, miserable, and costly'. Although the Third Reich—built to last 'a thousand years'—had now less than two months to run, the volume of fire from enemy weapons was the heaviest of the



whole campaign. Nevertheless the operation was pushed through to its remorseless conclusion; it finished, indeed, on a note in music. Where the Siegfried ends, the Canadians put up a notice to mark the spot. Alongside it they hung out a line of washing, 'also duly signposted'.

The first day of the offensive prospered. The battle opened at five o'clock on the morning of February 8th with an artillery programme that lasted five hours. At ten o'clock the 'barrage proper' started; and the infantry went forward half an hour later. The British divisions moved simultaneously on a six-mile front between the Nijmegen-Cleve road and the Maas. The 51st set out to capture the high ground at the south-west corner of the Reichswald; the 53rd the high ground at its north-west corner; the 15th advanced through minefields and mud a mile or so beyond Kranenburg. Here, on the northern fringe of the Reichswald, it was to find itself among the Siegfried defences at their farthest point north. These last two divisions, it may be noted, before they crossed into Germany *en route* for the battle, had covered the open ground east of Groesbeek which was still 'strewn with skeletons of innumerable gliders' from the airborne attack of the previous September.

To the left rear of the 15th Division, the Canadian 2nd Division was to secure Wyler, in order to dominate the Nijmegen-Cleve road. In this area, with quite beautiful cunning, the enemy had interspersed schu-mines—small, box-like 'anti-personnel' mines—on top of the ground with others underneath the surface, and 'in attempting to avoid the more obvious ones the men were caught on those that were hidden'. On the extreme left, the Canadian 3rd Division was to advance at six o'clock in the evening to clear the flooded area between the Nijmegen-Cleve road and the Waal; it attacked across the floods in 'Buffaloes' and 'Weasels', floating over the anti-tank ditches, the wire, and the mines, and capturing one 'island' village after another.

By the end of the first day, 'the outpost screen had been broken'; and General Crerar was able to report that six of the seven enemy battalions in occupation of the strong positions some six or seven thousand yards in advance of the Siegfried Line had been 'decimated' and driven back from the line which they had held all winter forward of the Reichswald. But the Siegfried defences themselves were still inviolate; and reinforcements were already moving northwards across the line Geldern-Wesel to the aid of the solitary German division that had been controlling the Reichswald sector of the Siegfried.

Again, the roads were breaking up; the minor roads and tracks were already almost unusable; and, in particular, the Nijmegen-Cleve

road north of the Reichswald—the main axis of the whole advance—was rapidly becoming submerged. Between one o'clock in the afternoon of this the first day of the offensive and the early fall of winter darkness, the flood-level in the area north of the road had risen eighteen inches. Within less than forty-eight hours, five of the fifteen miles of disintegrating road surface between Nijmegen and Cleve were under more than two feet of water. South of the Reichswald, deep in the heart of the Siegfried defences, a good road ran from Gennep to Goch—a town of ten thousand inhabitants on the river Niers, a tributary of the Maas; but here the enemy continued in force in well-sited positions. Meanwhile, the battle in the pine woods of the Reichswald itself was to grow daily in violence and foulness.

On the second day the 43rd (Wessex) Division was brought forward, and, on this same night of February 9th, it joined in the battle the 15th (Scottish) was fighting around Cleve. Nearly fourteen hundred tons of high explosives had been dropped on the town—instead of the incendiaries requested—with the result that the 43rd Division, which had been called up to exploit a possible break-through, became 'inextricably entangled' with the Scottish Division that had been held up after being set on by 'newly arrived parachute troops full of fight' in the westerly suburbs of the town. Meanwhile, on the right of the line, the 51st Division had fought its way through the southern fringe of the Reichswald and cut the main road from Mook to the south. In the early hours of February 11th, after a night assault across the Niers, it entered Gennep, on the Maas. Its capture represented an important gain, in that the river could now be bridged at this point in order to relieve the hitherto unavoidable bottleneck at the Grave bridge. The 53rd Division, too, was now getting clear of the forest and fighting off a succession of savage counter-attacks at its south-east corner; and the 43rd was rolling up the German positions along its eastern face. By February 13th, the fifth day of the offensive, the forest was cleared—and the original main axis of advance was under four feet of water. The day before, the 15th Division had succeeded in mopping up Cleve and had handed it over to the Canadian 3rd Division. The first phase of the operation had thus been completed. The Canadian official historian, with customary precision of statement, notes that the Canadians were to find that the Allied Air Force had 'left very little of the town from which Henry VIII got his fourth wife'.

It was a brigade of the Canadian 3rd Division which, in a purely physical sense, actually 'turned' the Siegfried Line. On February 10th it had attained the northernmost tip of the Line, north of Cleve, in a

fleet of 'Buffaloes'. On the way up it fought off—presumably in a somewhat naval fashion—a vicious paratroop attack; and it fought a second and not less vicious action with the occupants of the pill-boxes and the fortified houses that graced this Ultima Thule.

The second phase of the battle began two days later—on February 15th. The front was now wide enough for two corps to operate abreast, and Canadian II Corps—to which the British 11th Armoured Division had now been allocated—came into the line in the left sector; and the 52nd (Lowland) Division came in on the extreme right of British XXX Corps. Moving down from Gennepe, it captured Afferden, two miles due south—on the eastern bank of the Maas and the extreme 'hinge' of the German left flank stretching from the Rhine; but a wide anti-tank ditch anchored to the Siegfried defences, a Dutch frontier castle or 'peel', and a German parachute regiment were to bring the Lowlanders to a dead halt. For some days, these parachute troops, in 'a frenzy of fantastic defence', were to hold them on the line of the anti-tank ditch with intense and accurate gun and mortar fire and—as their historian aggrievedly comments—'with an almost admirably stubborn refusal to move from the Kasteel'. Aquatically-minded Germans were believed to reinforce the small garrison by floating planks across the anti-tank ditch in the hours of darkness; and the garrison itself must be allowed the distinction, unique in the whole record of the war in north-west Europe, of having advised the attacking platoons—whose uninterrupted lines of communication now stretched across Europe to the South Pacific—to give up the hopeless attempt and surrender. However, the last word was to rest with the Lowlanders, at the last German bridgehead on the western bank of the Rhine—at Wesel.

Nor was Goch to fall until three British divisions had closed in on it: the 51st from the south-west, the 53rd from the north, and the 43rd from the north-east. The capture of the high ground above Goch by the Wessex Division, 'after desperate in-fighting and short advances as the division gradually broke the enemy's will to continue', is regarded by the division as the high water-mark of its performance in a battle that was generally conspicuous for the fierceness and the costliness of the fighting. On February 18th, the 15th Division also moved down from the north, to lead the assault on the town's formidable defences. The next day Goch officially surrendered; but it was to take the two Scottish divisions two days to clear it. At Goch the Siegfried did not belie its reputation. The embrasures in the pill-boxes were of four-inch steel, mounted in concrete two feet thick and approached only through mines and trip-wires; and the British 79th

Armoured Division was called upon to apply its now standard technique.

A pill-box would be isolated with the help of smoke; if a Churchill tank failed to make an impression on the embrasures, an A.V.R.E. would use its petard—a special bomb-throwing mortar—to blast open the entrance; and a 'Crocodile' would spray the interior with flame. The mere 'whoof' of a flame-belching 'Crocodile' is calculated to strike worse consternation than ordinary shell fire or air bombardment; and it is not surprising that the Canadian official historian gently comments that, confronted with this technique of assault, 'the remaining defenders of the Siegfried Line lost heart'. The war as fought by Britain's 79th Armoured Division when supporting an infantry assault was the ultimate in mechanized fire power, and the conception and its execution had been British throughout. It would appear that, by this stage of the war, the German Army, in the pure technique of land warfare, had hopelessly lost its boasted pre-eminence. It may also be remarked that the last of Goch was the last of the Siegfried in its northern sector.

British XXX Corps operations were now directed on two axes: Gennep-Venlo and Goch-Geldern. The first drive on Venlo by the British Second Army had been called off in the previous October; this new attempt, in which the 1st Commando Brigade was to cooperate, fared as we have seen, a little farther, but not farther than Well—about seven miles south of the refractory Afferden and another of the sites selected for bridging operations. On the other hand, the capture of Goch had put British XXX Corps on the road to Geldern. On March 3rd, the 53rd (Welsh) Division, after an infinitely weary pilgrimage through Weeze and Kevelaer, reached the northern outskirts of the town. It is here, at Geldern, that we shall shortly meet the United States XVI Corps, operating on the left flank of Ninth Army during its advance from the south. On its way up it had diverted minor spearheads towards Roermond and Venlo, and by the beginning of March had thankfully precluded the possibility of their making a further appearance in this narrative.

The capture of Goch and the progress made on either flank registered the fact that the British and the Canadians were now through two of the three main defensive belts the Germans had organized between the two rivers; for, while British XXX Corps was capturing Goch, Canadian II Corps was fighting a stiff battle south-east of Cleve, with the assistance of a brigade from the 15th (Scottish) Division. Its immediate destination was Calcar, on the road to Xanten. The battle ranged from the main road from Goch to Calcar

—with the Canadian 2nd Division in action—to a narrow strip of forest midway between Cleve and Calcar—with the Canadian 3rd Division in action. The last of the German reinforcements already mentioned—the Panzer Lehr Division and an infantry division—were now holding both these localities in force; and the fighting was ‘just as bad as anything encountered in Normandy’. A strong screen of anti-tank defences and 88-millimetre guns lined the Goch–Calcar road; and beyond Calcar, on the road to Xanten—the objective of Canadian II Corps—lay the third of the defensive belts, and yet another formidable forest, the Hochwald. Again, the Goch–Calcar road covered the approach to the spur between Calcar and Udem—five miles due east of Goch—a ridge that was an essential feature of the Hochwald defensive system. We have already met the British 11th Armoured Division—now under Canadian First Army command—in the neighbourhood of Udem, on the road to Sonsbeck.

This third defensive belt—the Hochwald ‘layback’—ran from the west bank of the Rhine, near Rees, past the ‘boomerang-shaped ridge’ on which stood two forests, the Hochwald and the Balberger Wald, and continued due south through Geldern down to the east bank of the Roer to Düren—and beyond. The United States Ninth Army was now about to clean up this defensive belt in the south; and General Crerar’s plan for Canadian First Army’s drive to the Rhine took the form of ‘a deliberate assault across the plateau between Calcar and Udem’. He called the operation, with a desperation doubtless born of hope, ‘Blockbuster’. This new phase of the grand offensive was launched on February 26th; but not until March 4th were the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions to clear the Hochwald and the Balberger Wald—by driving a wedge between them—of a fanatic, vicious, and powerful enemy.

British XXX Corps was now turning east towards Wesel, where the last of the enemy this side of the Rhine was confined in a fast shrinking bridgehead. The key of the perimeter was Xanten, with its highly unnegotiable anti-tank ditch, its minefields, its elaborately dug-in emplacements, and its ‘daredevil paratroopers’. The British 43rd Division, operating north of the Hochwald and east of Calcar, had now cleared an area that extended as far as the Rhine; to the south, the Canadian 3rd Division had secured Sonsbeck as a base for a new armoured drive to the east. The mission was carried out by the Canadian 4th Armoured Division; and the Guards Armoured Division—having come across from Tilburg where, since the beginning of the offensive, it had been waiting at one hour’s notice—followed a more or less parallel course a few miles to the south. In its wake was the British 3rd Division; hard on its heels, the 15th



*Imperial War Museum*

**ARDENNES**



*Imperial War Museum*

**WESEL BRIDGE**

(Scottish); and, last, on the southern flank of the whole offensive, the 52nd and the 53rd Divisions, with the Lowlanders leading the way.

The paratroop defenders of Xanten bowed to the coming storm before it finally broke over them: the town fell to the combined efforts of the Canadian 2nd and the 43rd (Wessex) Divisions. The men of Wessex had attacked from the north-west over open ground subject to observation from the east bank of the Rhine; but they were hidden from the German artillery by a 'beamed' screen of oil smoke more than three miles long. The Canadians who seized the western edge of the town and the high ground to the south of it were less fortunate. Some of them were pinned down by enemy fire for hours on end, 'up to their necks in icy water'. One of them afterwards remarked that 'it was just like battle courses in England'—with the difference that the bullets were aimed at your head and not over it. The town was actually entered by the 43rd Division on March 8th; but bitter and sporadic fighting continued till the evening of March 10th. That night a series of dull booms across the broad river proclaimed to the 'weary armies between which it flowed' that the great steel and concrete railway bridge at Wesel had not gone the way of that other bridge at Remagen which the United States First Army had captured intact three days earlier. The last service performed by the Wesel bridge was to enable the First Parachute Army to withdraw the bulk of its divisions—though greatly depleted—across the river in good order.

In the last days of January the target date for 'Grenade' had been fixed for February 10th; but it was not until this same day that United States V Corps—of 'Omaha' and First Army—captured the last of the Roer dams. Before quitting them the enemy dynamited their floodgates; and a 'torrent of water sluiced down the Roer valley' until the river washed three feet above its muddy banks. The unseasonable thaw in the Canadian sector of the north Rhineland front had extended south to the deep snows of the Eifel; and 'a score of rushing streams' reinforced the river flood. A rate of flow of between six and eight miles an hour ruled out boating and bridging operations; and both United States armies—the First and the Ninth—could do no more than wait for it to slow down. When the southern offensive at last went forward—on February 23rd—the river was still eighty yards wide and its current up to five miles an hour.

Between Düren and Jüllich Ninth Army had drawn up three corps, totalling ten divisions—three of them armoured—for the Roer crossing. To the right, First Army had massed fourteen divisions, facing the Cologne sector of the Rhine. Its VII Corps—of 'Utah' and



now of the Ardennes—was to assault the Roer immediately south of Düren simultaneously with Ninth Army; it was to be followed, in quick succession, by two other corps. Thus First Army was to make its first and deepest penetration in the Cologne-Düsseldorf sector, where its VII Corps shielded Ninth Army's flank; while that army, as we have seen, turned north to hit the Rhine in the Düsseldorf-Mors sector.

By noon of the first day of the Ninth Army's assault, the initial pontoon bridge was in position; by the end of it, four divisions were across the river; and Jülich was clear of the enemy and the lateral road to the north for some eight miles was in American hands. Within five days—on February 28th—Ninth Army had broken out of its bridgehead—preceded by bull-dozers to shovel a path through the heaps of rubble of the city that was Jülich.

Thereafter operations were developed on two main thrust lines: one, along the left bank of the Erft to Neuss; the other, west of München-Gladbach to Krefeld and Mors. The third corps operating on the left flank of this rapid advance was, as we know, to make contact with the British 53rd Division in the northern outskirts of Geldern—on March 3rd. Neuss, on the Rhine itself, had been cleared a day earlier, and the advance had continued to Homberg—also on the Rhine. By March 5th, the corps operating in the centre had reached Mors; and this same day the Americans closed up to the Rhine from Neuss to Homberg. XVI Corps—from Geldern—swinging south of the Venlo-Wesel road, moved towards the river at Rheinberg: that 'American responsibility' mentioned at an earlier point in this narrative. 'Nice work', as Field Marshal Montgomery's staff were prone to remark, on the part of the Canadian First Army. When, on March 10th, the Wesel bridge performed its last service, the 21st Army Group, with the United States Ninth Army under command, was lined up on the west bank of the Rhine from Düsseldorf to Nijmegen.

During the pause in the launching of the southern offensive imposed by the Roer flood, the bulk of the enemy reserves from the Cologne plain—comprising at least ten divisions, three of them armoured—had been drawn into the month-old battle in the north: a battle fought out in an area which, on the first day, had been in the occupation of a solitary German division. During the first fortnight, against mounting opposition, the British and the Canadians had only been able to register an advance of less than twenty miles. When the United States Ninth Army struck, rather more than a fortnight after the opening of the offensive, only four weak German divisions were

patrolling the Roer front. In ten days, against diminishing opposition, Ninth Army reached the Rhine; and, on the First Army front, VII Corps, on March 7th, entered that portion of Cologne west of the river. Over the whole north Rhineland front, American casualties were rather less than half of those suffered by the Canadian and British forces.

Thus the pattern of this last of the battles between the Maas and the Rhine proved, in the upshot, and quite fortuitously, a replica of the even more protracted battle for Caen. On each occasion the Germans—of necessity or otherwise—chose to regard the British and Canadian sector as the 'hinge' of the Allied front, and, with wisdom or unwisdom, allowed their reserves to be sucked into what were to be merely defensive actions. On each occasion American armour and infantry were afforded the opportunity brilliantly to exploit the openings provided in the weaker sector of the German front. The enforced interval between the two attacks—an interval imposed by the Germans themselves—had served to put their army off balance and, in the result, to throw open the gateway to the Cologne plain.

During these events, the new commander of the First Parachute Army, General Alfred Schlemm, had received a succession of orders 'radiating straight from the Führer himself'. The first of these orders reached him after the fall of Krefeld on March 3rd. In no circumstances, it stated, was any bridge over the Rhine to fall into Allied hands. If a bridge was captured intact, the commander of the First Parachute Army would answer for it with his head: no excuses or explanations of any kind would be accepted. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that supplies and reinforcements should reach the troops in the bridgehead, and to assist the evacuation of industrial machinery to the east bank of the Rhine, bridges were only to be blown at the very last moment. General Schlemm was afterwards to remark to his interrogator, Major Milton Shulman, of the Canadian Army: 'Since I had nine bridges in my army sector, I could see my hopes for a long life rapidly dwindling'. The first of the bridges to be menaced was the road bridge at Homberg; and, when the Americans were dangerously close, he gave orders over the wireless from his headquarters at Rheinberg for the bridge to be blown. The colonel in charge protested that he was under the orders of Field Marshal Model, and refused to blow it: whereupon the general intimated that, if it was not destroyed forthwith, he would personally come down to the bridge and shoot not only the colonel but anyone else he found near it.

The second order insisted that not a single man or a single piece of equipment was to be evacuated across the Rhine without the special

permission of the Führer himself. Now that American artillery was already able to dominate Rhine shipping, the original justification for continuing the battle west of the Rhine no longer held: the special broadcasting service for the barge-masters had lost its audience. Moreover, away back in January, Field Marshal von Rundstedt had protested to the Führer that 'staying too long west of the river would increase the danger of the enemy's following closely on the heels of the German troops'. The Führer—'never at a loss for an answer'—replied, with an Olympian detachment and finality, that he saw no point in 'merely transferring the catastrophe from one place to another'. But now the Wesel bridgehead was cluttered up with 'abandoned junk and useless personnel'; and General Schlemm thereupon sought, not unsuccessfully, the intervention of his army group commander, Colonel-General Johannes Blaskowitz. Within less than two months, it may be noted in parenthesis, the commander of Canadian I Corps, Lieutenant-General C. Foulkes, was to hand to Colonel-General Blaskowitz the terms of surrender for the German Twenty-Fifth Army in north-west Holland. General Schlemm shortly received permission to evacuate 'a specific limited list of personnel and equipment west of the Rhine': but, in order to ensure that no man still capable of bearing arms was sent east of the Rhine, 'each commander had to sign a certificate stating that the men they were sending back were too weak to continue fighting'.

By March 8th the German bridgehead at Wesel covered about fifteen square miles, and contained elements of nine divisions, three corps headquarters, and an army headquarters. Again as the result of the personal intervention of Colonel-General Blaskowitz, on the morning of March 9th General Schlemm received a visit from a lieutenant-colonel attached to the Führer's headquarters. He took steps to ensure that this officer should experience a highly intensive bombardment in a very forward position—to the great detriment of his 'fresh and crinkly new uniform'. The next night, by permission, the troops withdrew across the Rhine.

Unluckily, during the last days of operation 'Veritable'—of which this narrative now takes a most respectful farewell—the weather was unsuitable for flying. Otherwise the bridge itself, instead of being merely hit, might have been destroyed; and the Führer's adamant policy never to retreat might have lost Germany the last of her experienced troops in the north Rhine sector.

By the third week in March, the Allied armies had closed to the Rhine throughout its length. The manner of their arrival had been laborious, protracted, and, on occasion, not a little untidy, but they

had arrived; and the Supreme Commander's 'broad front' policy—as has already been remarked—was about to move to its triumphant and, indeed, shattering conclusion. Once the Allied armies were across the Rhine, the German Army—as Field Marshal Montgomery writes—would no longer have the 'tanks, transport, or fuel necessary to compete with the Allied forces in battle'. Ironically enough, in the last stage of the war, at any rate, as commander-in-chief of the German Army—and, for that matter, of the Wehrmacht itself—it was the Führer who ensured the success of the 'broad front' policy. On the last night of his life he was to produce his 'political testament' and therein write: 'In future may it be a point of honour with German Army officers, as it already is in our Navy, that the surrender of towns and territory is impossible, and that, above all else, commanders must set a shining example of faithful devotion to duty until death'. Here, again, is an echo of the Führer's standard instruction to 'Hold! Hold! Hold!'; and it can hardly be doubted that the 'broad front' policy would have moved to a less triumphant conclusion had not the German Supreme Commander demanded adherence to so old-fashioned a philosophy of military command.

## VI

# 'EVENTUAL MISSION'

### i. '21 ARMY GROUP WILL NOW CROSS THE RHINE'

Now it is for the last time. On March 9th—the day that General Schlemm entertained his visitor from Berlin—Field Marshal Montgomery issued his orders for crossing the Rhine north of the Ruhr, with the intention of securing a bridgehead 'prior to developing operations to isolate the Ruhr and to thrust into the northern plains of Germany'. So far back as August 26th of the previous year, in his orders to the 21st Army Group, he had clearly stated that his ultimate aim was the isolation of the Ruhr. In his orders of September 14th—three days before 'Market-Garden'—he had, as we have seen, visualized that autumn a 'thrust along the eastern face of the Ruhr'. After that operation, still 'the prize remained the Ruhr'; and he had continued to work on the 'problem of how best to thrust towards that area'. At the Brussels Conference of October 18th, the 'main effort' was still to be in the north; but the development of 'mobile warfare into the heart of Germany across the north German plain' had now become a task that 'remained in the spring'. And, as has been said, it was to be precisely so; but, during the six months that had passed between September and March, the face of the war in the west had been transformed. The thrust along the eastern face of the Ruhr visualized by the British commander-in-chief in the previous September would have been primarily a 21st Army Group mission. Now, in this March of 1945, British resources were declining; in particular, the problem of reinforcements had become acute.

The weary but unflagging 50th (Northumbrian) Division—after plugging through North Africa and Sicily to 'Gold' beach and the 'island' at Arnhem—had left for home at the end of the previous November to become a training division; and the 59th Division had

vanished from the war after Normandy. The British commander-in-chief was therefore faced with the necessity of narrowing his commitments. Although Canadian I Corps—consisting of the Canadian 5th Armoured Division, the Canadian 1st Division, and the Canadian 1st Armoured Brigade—had now arrived from Italy, it was already earmarked for operations in north-west Holland, north of the Maas, with the British 49th Division under command. The only direct reinforcement to the Second Army was the British 5th Division—also from Italy—in April. The total strength of the British and Canadian armies might be just under a million officers and men, apart from Allied contingents; but the Americans now outnumbered the British and the Canadians by more than three to one: by the end of the campaign, American dead, at one hundred and sixty thousand, were to outnumber British and Canadian dead by just under four to one. At the last, General Patton's Third Army, with its eighteen divisions, precisely equalled the number of divisions available to the 21st Army Group: although it should be cheerfully noted that the British 79th Armoured Division, in terms of equipment and personnel—it operated between fifteen and sixteen hundred tracked vehicles and numbered over twenty-two thousand officers and men—was a small army in itself, and, in action, though it never fought as a division, was the equivalent of two or three normal divisions.

Wars cannot be won by intellect alone; and it should now be apparent why, having collected the ten divisions of the United States Ninth Army, Field Marshal Montgomery displayed an invincible reluctance to part with them: and why, indeed, he was attracted to the notion of 'borrowing' ten divisions from the United States First Army as a 'follow-up force in reserve'. If it be asked why no more than ten, the answer would appear to be that the remaining four First Army divisions already across the Rhine in the Remagen bridgehead were doubtless lost to him beyond recall. However, the 21st Army Group was yet to celebrate—in the eyes of the world, at any rate—its moment of glory. It was to undertake what may be called the official crossing of the Rhine.

During the last days of the Rhineland battle, the second of the major assaults under the Supreme Commander's operational schedule for clearing the west bank of the Rhine had been launched by the 12th (United States) Army Group in operation 'Lumberjack'. The mission of the United States First Army was to seize the high ground east of the Erft, north-west of Cologne, and close up to the Rhine. This part of the operation was, as we have seen, successfully accomplished before the conclusion of 'Veritable'. American armour crossed the

Erft on March 6th; and United States VII Corps of First Army, having performed its function of shielding Ninth Army's right flank, struck south for Cologne and entered the city on the following day.

During February, Third Army had launched an offensive against the Siegfried fortifications north of the Moselle and now stood on the river Kyll—a tributary of the Moselle, which it joins at Trier. Its new mission was to establish bridgeheads across the Kyll, and then drive hard eastwards to seize the Coblenz area and complete the clearance of the enemy from the west bank of the Rhine from the Moselle north to First Army's sector. It moved—with First Army—on March 6th; and, yet again, moved to some purpose. Its 4th Armoured Division—which we have already met at Bastogne—'streaked' through the wooded Eifel, driving a salient 'no wider than the road it travelled' thirty-five miles into the enemy's rear. A second armoured division operated to the left and abreast of it; and, by March 7th, as the result of the 'boldest and most insolent armoured blitz of the western war', these two armoured columns had converged a few miles west of the Rhine near Coblenz. Here a bridgehead was established over the Moselle south-west of the city.

On this same day First Army had reached the Rhine at Remagen, about twelve miles south of Bonn. The city itself fell on March 9th; the following day, south of Remagen, the First and Third Armies linked up along the Rhine; and the way of escape across the river had been cut for all Germans north of the Moselle. The comment has been offered that the Siegfried Line was turned 'almost soundlessly in the ears of the world'. Here, at any rate, were the spectacular armoured advances to hit the world's headlines. The west bank of the Rhine was now clear from Düsseldorf almost to Coblenz. This same day the last Germans crossed the bridge at Wesel. By March 10th, then, the west bank was clear to Nijmegen; and the second phase of the Supreme Commander's operational schedule had perfectly conformed to plan.

First Army's equally swift break-through to the Rhine directly reflected the month-old battle fought out in the north Rhineland. Six of Germany's Panzer divisions in the west had now been drawn north of Cologne to protect the Ruhr; and it is therefore the less surprising that a small armoured spearhead of the United States 9th Armoured Division should have been able to reach the Rhine, at Remagen, the day after the launching of the whole operation. Nevertheless its arrival during the early afternoon of March 7th was to drive Field Marshal Kesselring—whom we shall shortly meet—into

the comment that 'never was there more concentrated bad luck at one place than at Remagen'.

The American spearhead, on reaching the crest of a hill overlooking the Rhine, was astonished to see below it, still standing and apparently undamaged, still spanning the Rhine, the lofty Ludendorff railway bridge. Traffic was crossing the road section as a platoon raced east down the hill. As the platoon reached the bridge the first demolition charge blew a crater in the western approach, and a second explosion knocked out one of the principal diagonal supports; but still 'the Americans raced on'. Fire from Sherman tanks had hit some of the ignition cables; and American engineers quickly cut the main cable controlling all demolition charges. The special engineer regiment—composed of Volkssturm ('Home Guard') sappers, according to General Westphal—responsible 'under pain of death' for seeing that the bridge was blown had been taken by surprise. The charges actually used were improvised; the correct charges were 'not to hand'. Ten days later—when pontoon and trestle bridges were in position to meet all traffic needs—the centre span, weakened by artillery fire, collapsed into the river, carrying with it some of the indomitable American engineers who had continued to work through the shelling and the bombing which the Germans kept up to the last.

Elements of nearly ten divisions, including three Panzer divisions, had now been thrown against the expanding bridgehead, a bridgehead achieved against the difficulties of terrain presented by a 'forested plateau that levelled out beyond the steep eastern bank'. On the day that the 21st Army Group crossed the Rhine, the area held by First Army at Remagen was twenty miles long and ten miles deep; three United States army corps occupied it. Field Marshal von Rundstedt survived by three days the capture of the bridge. The Führer had expressed dissatisfaction with the 'lax discipline' in his command; the field marshal's successor would appear to have been content to regard the episode as a piece of bad luck. He was Field Marshal Albert Kesselring: until this March 10th, 1945, Commander-in-Chief South—that is, for present purposes, Italy.

There remained the third phase of the Supreme Commander's operational schedule for clearing the west bank of the Rhine: a converging attack by the United States Third and Seventh Armies designed to eliminate the enemy forces in the Moselle-Saar-Rhine 'triangle'. Here is the 'major offensive south of the Moselle' foreshadowed at the beginning of this narrative; and the third in the series of three vast converging movements of armies. Its object was to destroy the enemy west of the Rhine from Coblenz southwards,



and to obtain crossing sites for the establishment of bridgeheads in the Mainz-Mannheim sector. Third Army was to strike south-east across the Moselle and through the wooded heights of the Hunsrück; a reinforced corps was to advance south of Trier and 'roll down behind the concrete casemates of the Siegfried Line'. Here, at last, was that outflanking attack which was to set General Patton's mind to rest on the subject of the Siegfried defences in the Saar. The United States Seventh Army—which was certainly about to justify its existence—assisted by French forces, was to attack across the Saar between Saarbrücken and Hagenau, breach the double line of the Siegfried, and close on the Rhine. French First Army was to protect its right flank and 'conduct an aggressive defence along the Rhine in the neighbourhood of Karlsruhe'. With unusual delicacy of statement, the operation was called 'Undertone'.

General Bradley had warned the Third Army commander to seize a bridgehead before the field marshal up north 'raided' his divisions, and by March 12th his army had closed up to the Moselle between Coblenz and Trier. Three nights later, nine Third Army divisions crossed the Moselle for a quick thrust into the Saar. The attack was again headed by the United States 4th Armoured Division. It plunged through the wooded and hilly country 'before the enemy could collect his wits'. The German command had assumed that Third Army would break out across the Rhine from Remagen, and was caught completely off-guard under this assault of armour. Twenty-odd German divisions were out of the war within ten days. Among them were newly formed Volksgrenadier divisions—Germany's last call on her remaining manhood—that might have been expected to enjoy the protection afforded by the bunkers of the Siegfried. Coblenz had now been occupied; and on March 22nd all resistance ceased in Mainz. This same day, Third Army, under cover of darkness, at Oppenheim, 'made it before Monty got across'. By March 25th, Third and Seventh Armies had closed to the Rhine from Coblenz to Karlsruhe.

By the second week in February, the French First Army, assisted by a United States corps, had cleared up the strong German position in the Colmar area. Thus it was that, by this March 25th, the Allied armies had closed to the Rhine throughout its length: north of the Ruhr they were across it. On March 23rd, with all pride, pomp, and circumstance, the 21st Army Group had achieved the first—and only—assault crossing of the river. But, significantly, First Army was now 'poised' in the Remagen bridgehead; and Third Army, between Mannheim and Mainz, faced a 'broad, reasonably flat strip of terrain' that leads up from the Rhine directly towards Frankfurt.

Here was the Frankfurt 'corridor'—always a possible alternative to the single northern thrust as an axis of advance but, in deference to the 'broad front' policy, never exploited: pointing, in its turn, to that other name of destiny—Kassel.

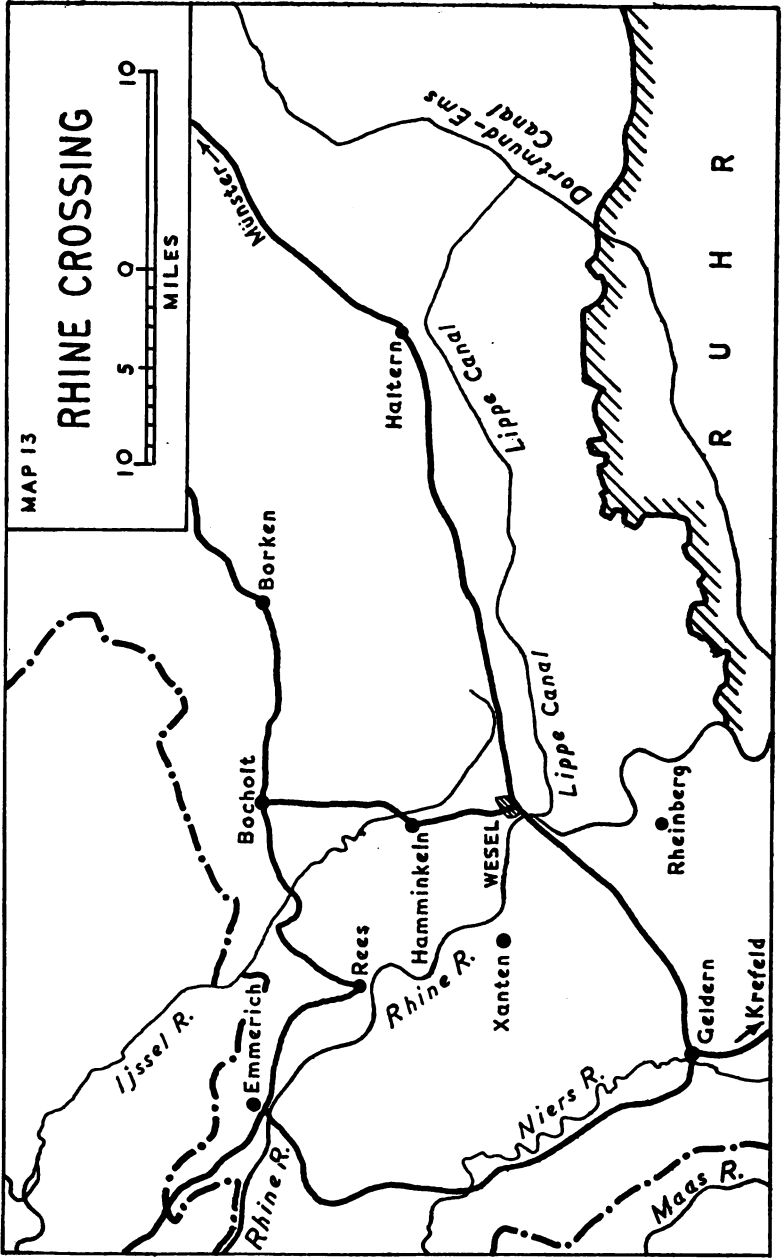
'Pride, pomp, and circumstance': nevertheless this narrative is about to cross the Rhine with the profoundest regret. The Allied campaign in Europe is about to lose its closely knit pattern. The Allied approach to the Rhine may have been, as already suggested, laborious, protracted, and, on occasion, not a little untidy; but it had shape. Again, as has been suggested, the Allies approached the Rhine the hard way, and, in the main, by frontal fighting; but, even so, this frontal fighting may be regarded as incidental to the wide converging offensives that formed part of the whole pattern of advance. Now, through the lack of a clear-cut framework, subordinate commanders are to be allowed exceptional initiative; the war is to sprawl across the face of north-west and central Europe; and—seen possibly in the light of later wisdom—to lose something of its point and purpose.

On February 22nd, nearly nine thousand aircraft, from bases in England, France, Holland, Belgium, and Italy, took part in 'one gigantic blow against Germany's transportation system'. A literary expert would now appear to have been at work on Allied code-names and the operation was called 'Clarion'. The German transportation system was already disintegrating, and the operation, covering 'almost every critical area in Germany', may well, in the long run, have represented a contribution to Allied transportation problems out of all proportion to the immediate results achieved. Again, after the north Rhine crossing, the Allied Air Force, in 'sealing off the battlefield', obligingly put down three times the tonnage of bombs requested; and, on the British Second Army's line of march, the rubble in the towns was to provide a more effective hindrance to an armoured advance than the German rearguards.

On March 19th the Führer himself had issued an edict ordering the destruction of 'everything' of immediate or future use to the enemy for the continuation of the fight. The list comprised industrial plants, electrical facilities, waterworks, gasworks, food and clothing stores, bridges, railway installations, the postal system, waterways, ships, freight cars, locomotives. The Führer would appear to have been dissatisfied with the results of 'Clarion'. He may have been better pleased with the destruction of Dresden a little more than a month earlier. About two thousand five hundred bombers, in three

MAP 13

# RHINE CROSSING



raids within a dozen hours, deluged the city with incendiaries and explosives. It was on the front of Marshal Konev's advance through Silesia. At the time he was seventy miles east of the city. He had still not reached it when the war ended. Fortunately for the Allies, the Führer's 'destruction order' was modified as the result of the courageous intervention of his brilliant war production minister, that Carnot *manqué*, Herr Albert Speer. He was to receive the backing of Field Marshal Kesselring—who also disregarded the orders of Field Marshal Keitel that every town and village should be defended. Instead, positions were to be taken up outside their boundaries.

'But that's not it . . . but there's not it'—as Cleopatra remarks to Antony in quite another context. Fortune had delayed too long her gift of glory for the 21st Army Group. When, after nearly ten months of hard fighting and high endeavour, the army group crossed the Rhine, the United States First Army, as we know, was poised ready to strike at Remagen, and, within twenty-four hours, between Bonn and Coblenz the river was bridged 'in a dozen places'; south of Mainz, Third Army had extended its initial foothold in the Oppenheim area, and by March 24th its bridgehead was nine miles long and six miles deep. Now it only remained for the 21st Army Group to achieve its north Rhine crossing before the main effort, for the first time in the whole course of the campaign, was transferred to the American front.

The operation for the Rhine crossing had for a code-name 'Plunder': a somewhat less classic choice than 'Veritable'. It was launched on a twenty-five mile front between the inland port of Emmerich and Rheinberg, in an area held by four parachute divisions and three infantry divisions, with two depleted Panzer divisions—one of them a Panzer Grenadier—in reserve. The threat represented by the Remagen crossing and the American irruption into the Saar had now drawn German reserves south again. The sector from near Krefeld to just west of Emmerich was the responsibility of the First Parachute Army; farther west, the German Twenty-Fifth Army was disposed across north-west Holland to the sea. These two armies together formed Army Group H, under the command of Colonel-General Blaskowitz, with whom we already have some acquaintance. On the whole of the Ninth Army front—less XVI Corps, which was to protect the British right flank in the initial stage of the coming assault—there were four infantry divisions along the river between Cologne and Essen. The enemy defences—prepared since the end of the Rhineland battle—had little depth and were, in the main, simple earthworks. The anti-aircraft artillery defences of the Ruhr were still formidable;

but it was anticipated that they would be submerged under the weight of that portion of the fifty thousand tons of explosives they were due to receive under the Allied Air Force bombing programme.

Nor was the First Parachute Army any longer the army of the Reichswald—if only because of deficiencies in its leadership. Two days before the assault, General Schlemm's headquarters had been hit by fighter-bombers, and General Blumentritt—now commanding the Twenty-Fifth Army—took over the First Parachute Army on General Schlemm's departure to hospital. At the opening of the battle—as the Canadian official historian records—the enemy's paratroops were still fighting 'in the manner to which we had become accustomed; our infantry reported that houses had to be cleared at the point of the bayonet and single Germans made suicidal attempts to break up our attacks'. Less than a week later, on March 28th, when General Blumentritt arrived, he found that his headquarters was dependent for its information on the course of the war from purely civilian sources: 'if it heard that white flags had been hung out in a certain town, it would phone the town's burgomaster and ask if the Allies had taken it'. The reader may recall the comment of the Supreme Commander's chief of staff on the subject of the 'higher commanders' who either ran away or gave themselves up.

At an earlier point in this narrative some indication has been given of the scale of preparation for the assault: the dense and continuous smoke screen on a front of fifty miles; the fifty thousand tons of air bombs; the sixty thousand tons of ammunition—to serve thirteen hundred guns on Second Army front alone. United States XVI Corps—the corps that joined up with British XXX Corps at Geldern—was supported by over six hundred guns. A last picturesque touch was provided by a flotilla of craft supplied by the Royal Navy. It was transported—with a flutter of naval personnel on the top decks—across Belgium and southern Holland to supplement the army's amphibious vehicles. However, let the question be put, if this orgy of preparation saved the life of a single soldier, was it not worth while?

And the British commander-in-chief? Although he was not proposing to waste time—he remarks that the 'all important factor was to follow up the enemy as quickly as possible'—he was acutely conscious that the Rhine was the greatest water obstacle in western Europe. At the crossing sites the river was still five hundred yards wide. Operation 'Plunder' had been planned in the expectation that opposition would be severe, and the intensity of the 'Veritable' fighting had coloured that expectation. He therefore set about accumulating a 'fat reserve of stores'—a quarter of a million tons, and, in particular, bridging equipment; he would live up to the description

conferred on him, at this period, by the Supreme Commander: 'a master in the methodical preparation of forces for a formal, set-piece attack'; and, as in Africa, according to the German commanders, he would plod, plod, plod—to certain success. His brilliant—and diplomatically indispensable—chief of staff, in his book on the field marshal's campaigns in Africa and north-west Europe, gives two-and-a-half lines to 'Plunder': 'Our attack across the Rhine, supported by a very large-scale airborne operation, was an outstanding success'.

A German prisoner of war, on the banks of the Rhine, in the company of the general officer commanding Britain's 'zoological' division, looked up at the sky on the first morning of the assault. The coming of the airborne divisions had been heralded by a great weight of artillery from the west bank; now, a few minutes before ten o'clock, the first of the aircraft were overhead—many of them at no more than five hundred feet. Over seventeen hundred aircraft and thirteen hundred gliders were to deliver some fourteen thousand troops in the battle area over the space of three hours. Meanwhile, nine hundred fighters maintained an air umbrella. 'Propaganda', murmured the German officer to the divisional commander. The night before at Rees, Xanten, and Wesel, the 'Buffaloes' had crossed the Rhine unscathed: the only bullets flying around were tracer fired from the west bank to guide them to the water's edge on the farther bank.

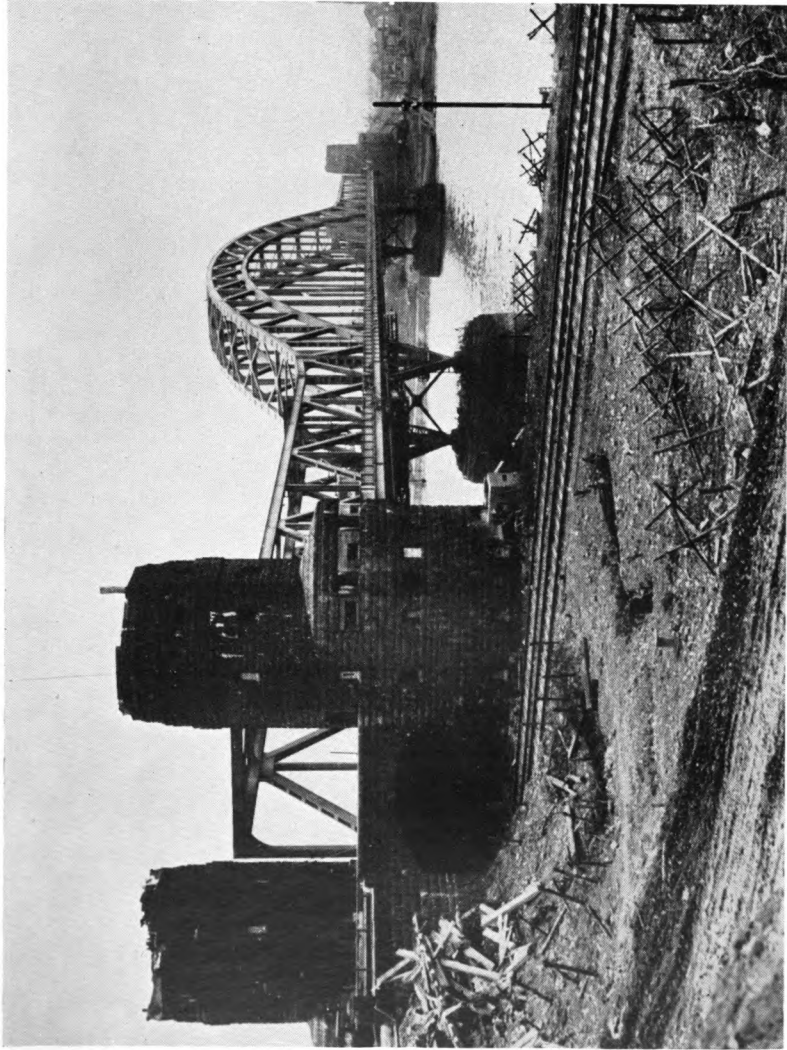
The comment quoted may at least serve to explain something of the impatience of the Ninth Army's own commander during the preceding days. He now had twelve divisions, and had been 'sitting on the Rhine' for a fortnight opposite the Ruhr between Düsseldorf and Duisburg—which, on the right bank, is hardly more than ten miles from Essen. But again, it must be stated that the Supreme Commander himself took the view that Ninth Army ought not to get caught up in street fighting in the 'industrial wilderness' of the Ruhr.

It should now begin to be the more apparent why this narrative crosses the Rhine with a pang. Something of the glory of the 21st Army Group has already departed; and the field marshal's 'September dream', no more than dimmed at the beginning of March, is now about to be utterly extinguished; the last spark is to flicker into nothingness. When the Rhine assault was launched, the 'organic strength' of the 21st Army Group amounted to fifteen divisions. Together with the twelve divisions of Ninth Army—three of them armoured—and a British and a United States airborne division, it amounted to twenty-nine. Within a week of the crossing the United States Ninth Army had joined hands with the First; three days later it reverted to General Bradley's 12th Army Group. The field marshal

—the airborne divisions apart—had lost nearly half his command to the central thrust; and lost it in the grand finale of the whole north-west European campaign.

The total force concentrated for the crossing consisted of twenty-six divisions, five armoured brigades, and an independent infantry and a commando brigade. The eight infantry divisions of Second Army were supported by the specialized armour of the British 79th Armoured Division. The plan was to cross the river on a front of two armies, with the United States Ninth Army on the right and the British Second Army on the left. The principal initial objective was Wesel—normally an important communications centre but shortly to be bombed into a hundred per cent maze of rubble. Here a bridgehead was to be established to provide room 'to form up major forces' for the drive to the east and the north-east. To the north the bridgehead was to be extended to include bridging sites at Emmerich. British XXX Corps took up its position between Emmerich and Rees; XII Corps took over the Xanten sector—between Rees and Wesel. The Second Army was to cross at Wesel, Xanten, and Rees; Ninth Army in the Rheinberg area. The bridging of the Rhine at Emmerich was to be the responsibility of Canadian II Corps; and Canadian 3rd Division was to come in over the Rees bridges after the initial assault. Thirty-seven thousand Royal Engineers and Pioneers were employed in the operation. The semi-permanent railway bridge at Wesel was to be the responsibility of American engineers. There were twenty-two thousand of them in the battle. Here, at Wesel, was the semi-permanent bridge they built in under eleven days.

The task of the United States XVIII Airborne Corps—composed of the British 6th and the United States 17th Airborne Divisions—was to disrupt the enemy defences north of Wesel, to deepen the bridgehead, and to facilitate the link-up of the two armies once they were across the river. The corps was not to be dropped until after the assaulting troops were across. The 'lesson' of 'Market' was to be duly observed: this air-landing was to be tactical. The airborne forces were to be dropped, not merely in daylight, in order that the ground forces should not forfeit artillery preparation, but within range of their own artillery and close enough to the ground troops to effect a link-up on the first day. Thus was the airborne 'drop'—though still expensive in men's lives—to be the most successful of the war. At the end of the first day, of the mighty Allied armada, only forty-six aircraft were listed as missing. The Allied fighters had 'held the Luftwaffe at arm's length': fewer than a hundred enemy aircraft had been sighted.



*Imperial War Museum*

**REMAGEN BRIDGE**





*Imperial War Museum*

**WISMAR**

The British 6th Airborne Division was to drop in the neighbourhood of Hamminkeln—behind Xanten and Rees—at ten o'clock on the first morning, and seize the bridges over the river Ijssel, which runs north-west into the Zuider Zee. The United States 17th Airborne Division was to land to the immediate south. The dropping zones were thus only a few miles east of the Rhine. The operation, for a reason that defies exegesis, was called 'Varsity'.

Last, the 51st (Highland) Division, of XXX Corps, was to lead the assault at the Rees crossing; the 15th (Scottish) Division, of XII Corps, at Xanten; and the 1st Commando Brigade, also of XII Corps, at Wesel. The Highlanders were to begin to cross at nine in the evening; the 1st Commando Brigade an hour later; the Scottish division at two o'clock in the morning; and two divisions of United States XVI Corps were to cross south of the Lippe canal at the same hour. The intricate task of assembling and dispatching the troops and vehicles demanded the services of an organization hardly less intricate known as the 'Bank Control Group'.

On the eve of the assault, Field Marshal Montgomery issued a personal message to the troops. The concluding paragraphs carried the heading: '21 Army Group will now cross the Rhine'. They also expressed the bright hope that, 'having crossed the Rhine, we will crack about the plains of northern Germany, chasing the enemy from pillar to post'. At half-past three in the afternoon of March 23rd he gave orders to launch the operation, 'as the weather was good': it was to be 'a fine, still night, quietly moonlit'.

And if ever an operation went precisely according to plan, this operation achieved that too readily awarded distinction. The two United States divisions suffered a total of only thirty-one casualties during the actual crossing. The first assault wave of the four battalions of the Highland division was across the river in seven minutes: the intense preceding barrage had quenched opposition. The 1st Commando Brigade landed about two miles west of Wesel and half an hour later was formed up just outside the town—where it waited fifteen minutes while two hundred Lancasters of Bomber Command dropped one thousand tons of bombs on the defences. Not many minutes later a commando voice came over the wireless to headquarters: 'Noisy blighters, aren't they? We have taken the position, and have met no trouble'. The brigade established its command post in a cellar about fifty yards from that of the commander of the Wesel garrison—'with unhappy results for the German commander'. The leading waves of the 15th (Scottish) division got across

H



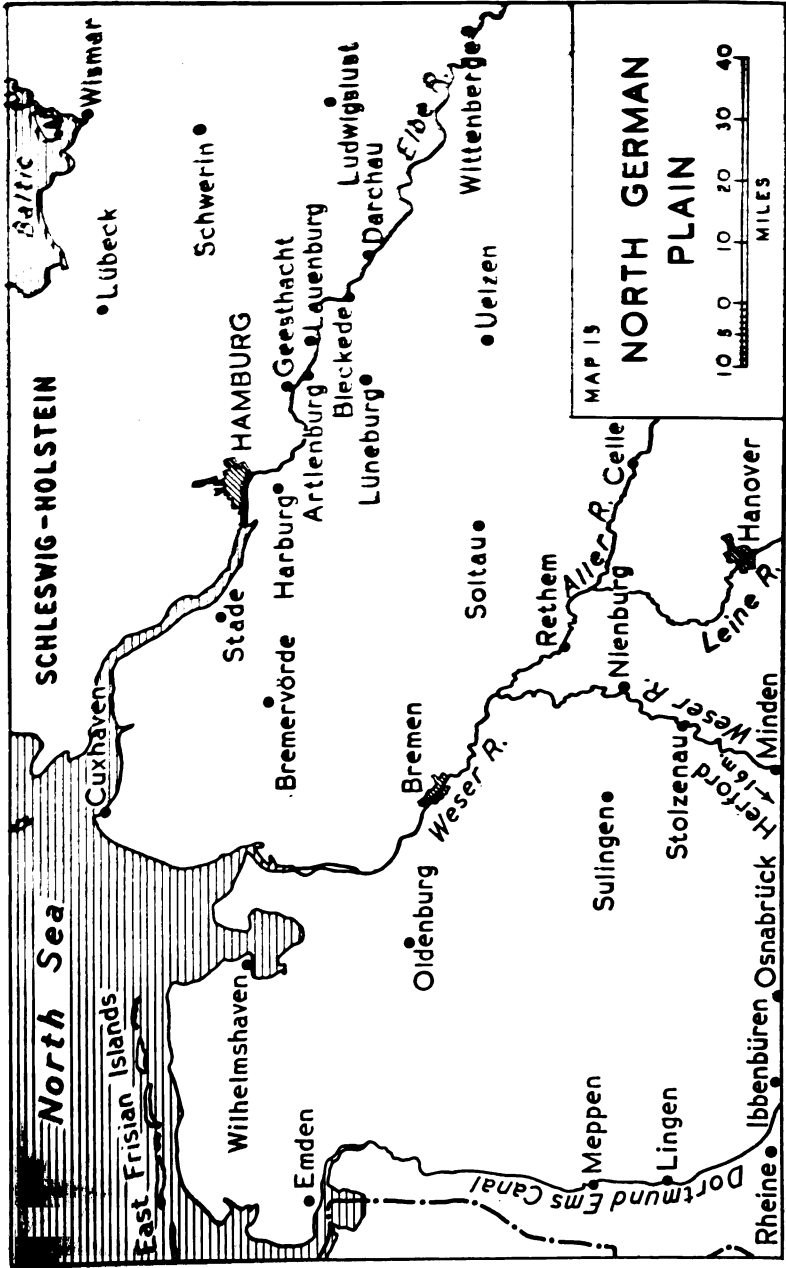
'untouched'; and they 'jumped out on the firelit river meadow to the skirl of the pipes'.

In the early hours of the next morning—the 24th—when the assaulting troops began to push forward to link up with the airborne, the thinly disposed Germans along the river bank had recovered sufficiently to put in a few counter-attacks—particularly at Rees, where the enemy parachute troops were fighting true to form. Rees, indeed, was not to be finally cleared, by the Canadian 3rd Division, until the morning of March 26th. Nor was the Wesel garrison to succumb without a fight—though at a cost to the commandos of not more than thirty-six casualties; and Emmerich itself was not cleared by the Canadians till March 30th. But by now the follow-up formations were being ferried across the river in unbroken succession; and the floating tanks of the 79th Armoured Division had climbed out of the river in readiness to assist the infantry.

By ten o'clock on the morning of March 25th, the 'link between the airborne forces and the Second Army on the ground was strong and unbreakable'. The airborne success had not been lightly earned: on the first day, about a thousand of eight thousand men of the 6th Airborne had become casualties by sundown. In this sector of the river, for the dead as for the living, *Die Wacht am Rhein* had become a British responsibility.

By the evening of March 28th, the bridgehead was thirty-five miles wide and had an average depth of twenty miles; and, apart from the left sector, in which the First Parachute Army was still operating, enemy opposition had largely disintegrated. That evening, United States 17th Airborne troops, working in conjunction with the 6th Guards Armoured Brigade, made a sortie up the valley of the Lippe as far as Haltern—nearly twenty-five miles east of Wesel—without meeting serious resistance; and the new front line of the two armies now ran from Emmerich, through Haltern, and south-west to Duisburg. The Canadian 3rd Division was at Emmerich; the British 43rd, the 51st (Highland), the British 3rd, the 15th (Scottish), and the 52nd (Lowland) Divisions were now lined up on or near the Ijssel, from north to south, in that order; and the 53rd (Welsh), together with the 4th Armoured Brigade, was five miles beyond it, at Bocholt. The British 7th Armoured Division, together with a brigade of the 52nd Division, had reached Borken, between Bocholt and Haltern. Here was the Allied north Rhine bridgehead—to which months of planning had been devoted.

By the end of the first week, two thousand tanks and self-propelled guns were assembled on the east bank of the river; and the chief



impediment to their march was 'the difficulty of negotiating passages through towns that had been bombed with unnecessary severity'. Field Marshal Montgomery contents himself with the observation that the 21st Army Group was now in possession of a springboard on the east bank of the Rhine from which to launch major operations 'into Germany'. He adds—after noting that the mighty Russian Army was pressing on from the east—with the only touch of emotion or rhetoric in an otherwise coldly dispassionate narrative that 'Hitler's Germany was now faced with disaster'.

He now proceeded to make plans for the advance of the 21st Army Group, together with the United States Ninth Army, to the Elbe, with the object of establishing Ninth Army on the river from Magdeburg to Wittenberge; Second Army from Wittenberge to Hamburg. The Canadian First Army was to open up a supply route to the north through Arnhem, clear the Dutch and German coast as far as the Weser, and clear western Holland—in that order. In the course of its advance north of the Ruhr, Ninth Army would divert a column to make contact, to the east of the Ruhr, with the United States First Army pushing up north from the Remagen bridgehead.

In his dispatch on the operations in north-west Europe, the field marshal writes, of the month of September, 1944: 'As a result of discussions between the Supreme Commander and myself, from now the eventual mission of 21 Army Group became the isolation of the Ruhr'. Now in this month of April, 1945, the United States First and Ninth Armies were about to encircle it and cut off its garrison from the German forces in the east. In the last month of the war, the 'prize of the Ruhr' was to elude his grasp; and the 21st Army Group was to be diverted to the northern fringe of the European battlefield. The long-anticipated and long-awaited 'mobile operations in the plains of northern Germany' were to be resolved into a not very glamorous—if arduous and highly necessary—drive on Bremen and Hamburg, together with a Pyrrhic glimpse of the south-western tip of the Baltic, at Wismar, some thirty-five miles within the Russian zone of occupation as finally agreed at Yalta. At this grand climacteric of the north-west European campaign, the only specific mission of the 21st Army Group was to reduce the ports of Bremen and Hamburg, and, in Holland, to conduct what was in essence a vast cleaning up and eleemosynary operation. This narrative, less than a month back, expressed a sense of relief at the departure of the provincial-sounding names of Venlo and Roermond from the operational story of the 21st Army Group. Now one can feel a measure of fondness for them, if only because, while they were current, the future still burgeoned with uncertainty.

## ii. *END OF THE ROAD*

ON its march to the Elbe, for the first time for a long time, and for the last time, the British Second Army advanced on a three-corps front. British VIII Corps, now under the command of Lieutenant-General E. H. (afterwards General Sir Evelyn) Barker, which had been in reserve, was now activated. It consisted of the 11th Armoured Division—now equipped with Comets, the latest type cruiser tanks—the 6th Airborne Division, the 6th Guards Armoured Brigade, and the 1st Commando Brigade. The corps came up on the right of Second Army, and was directed on Osnabrück, Celle, and Uelzen. Osnabrück, it may be recalled, made its first appearance in this narrative before 'Market-Garden'. During that September of 1944, VIII Corps, on the right of the Nijmegen salient, had hoped to advance on Osnabrück, and there turn south for Münster and Hamm for the thrust along the eastern face of the Ruhr. Now, rather more than six months later, it was to enter Osnabrück—the town fell to the 6th Airborne on April 3rd—and thereafter continue east and north-east, with its back to the Ruhr. In the centre of the Second Army front, XII Corps, moving from the Rhine bridgehead it had helped to establish, was directed on Rheine, Nienburg, and Lüneburg: yet another name of destiny, Lüneburg is an old and attractive town of about the size of Salisbury, and, 'from the German view-point, its character is much the same'. The struggle for the airfields in the Rheine area was to continue for several days; but Nienburg, on the Weser, was to receive the 53rd (Welsh) Division without opposition: 'the burgomaster was not prepared to shovel his town into the Wagnerian furnace of defeated Germany'. On the left, XXX Corps, also from the Rhine bridgehead, was directed on Enschede, just inside the Dutch frontier, on Lingen, along the Dortmund-Ems canal, and on Bremen and Hamburg. The break-out was to begin on March 28th.

General disorganization had now set in among the German forces; no battles in the grand manner now lay ahead of the British divisions on their march from Normandy to the Baltic; more often than not, the opposition they met took the form of hastily assembled flying columns consisting of a few tanks, some self-propelled guns, and lorry loads of Panzer Grenadiers. In under four weeks the Second

Army was to advance nearly two hundred miles from the Rhine bridgehead to the Elbe. Nevertheless, the Dortmund-Ems canal was to prove a bitter water obstacle on XII Corps front; and beyond it, between Rheine and Osnabrück, ran the barrier of the Teutoburger Wald, which had halted the great Charlemagne himself. Hamburg was to fall without a fight; but Bremen engaged the attention of three infantry divisions. The 'Crocs' of the 79th Armoured Division with their belching 'whoof' were to lead the infantry into the city, with the A.V.R.E.s blasting the roadblocks with their petards and armoured bull-dozers clearing a path through the debris: and again the 'Crocs', following through to shoot up the backs of the houses with their main armament while infantry cleaned up each side of the street, to the accompaniment of a fury of sound and flame: all of which is war, though hardly in the grand manner. And, indeed, if, as the Canadian official historian remarks, Germany was disintegrating before the eyes of the commanders of her armed forces, the process of dissolution was hardly less apparent to the invader. But German skill and thoroughness in using demolitions to impede the pursuit was 'as marked as ever'; and it was during this period that Second Army engineers were called upon to build the five hundred bridges already mentioned over the 'innumerable' waterways of the north German plain. Like the valley of the Po, the north German plain was no more than an alleged 'tank paradise'. Meanwhile, at the outset of the whole advance, the Ruhr had become a vast military compound for the German defenders of Normandy—Field Marshal Model's Army Group B.

On the United States Ninth Army front, enemy resistance was 'scattered and ineffective'. The left-hand corps reached the line of the Weser, north-east of Herford, by April 3rd; two days later, the British 6th Airborne and 11th Armoured Divisions also reached the Weser at Minden and Stolzenau, on VIII Corps front. But already, almost as an incident in the march of events, the Ruhr had been enveloped. As soon as the United States Ninth Army moved out of its bridgehead, its 2nd Armoured Division—that division which the 3rd Royal Tanks had memorably encountered in the neighbourhood of the Celles cross-roads on Christmas morning—was 'thrown' across the northern rim of the Ruhr; and, during the afternoon of April 1st, it joined forces with Lieutenant-General Collins's VII Corps, of United States First Army from the Remagen bridgehead, near the village of Lippstadt, between Hamm and Paderborn—the 'sacred' training ground of the German Panzer divisions. Within the area encircled by the link-up, Field Marshal Model had gathered the



remnants of his army group—still 'a force larger than that which Paulus surrendered to Zhukov at Stalingrad'.

The area encircled was about eighty miles in diameter; it contained the remnants of three German armies, which comprised the major elements of twenty-one divisions, together with a hundred thousand anti-aircraft troops whose guns had menaced the airborne landings at the Rhine crossing. Twice this garrison, numbering nearly three hundred and fifty thousand men, attempted to break through the encircling ring—at Hamm in the north, at Siegen in the south; twice it was thrown back by the eighteen United States divisions that now held the ring. For eighteen days the enemy hung out as these divisions made their way 'through the forlorn cities that crowded the basin'. By April 18th, when resistance ended, three hundred and twenty-five thousand prisoners had been taken. Three days later Field Marshal Model shot himself in a wood near Duisburg, in the presence of his senior intelligence officer—one Colonel 'M' in Rhine Army records—who buried him in a grave unknown.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Commander, at a late hour, had taken the decision that switched the main effort from the north to the centre of the Allied front. He had now firmly rejected—with the full backing of General Marshall—the suggestion put forward at the end of March by the British Prime Minister, in concert with the British Chiefs of Staffs, 'to throw Montgomery forward'—with American assistance—'to capture Berlin before the Russians could do so'. The Prime Minister had referred back to the strategic plan approved by the Combined Chiefs of Staffs at Malta that provided for the 'main effort' to be made in the north. That plan, however, stopped short at the Ruhr: thereafter the Supreme Commander was uncommitted.

In his original 'visualization' of the campaign, he had contemplated a 'secondary effort' via the Frankfurt 'corridor' to join up with the northern thrust in 'the general area of Kassel'. For Kassel one can now read Lippstadt; and in a cable to General Marshall on March 30th he stated: 'I have always insisted that the northern attack would be the principal effort in that phase of our operations that involves the isolation of the Ruhr; but from the very beginning, extending back before D-Day, my plan has been to link up the primary and secondary efforts in the Kassel area and then make one great thrust to the eastward'. This part of the grand design was now in sight of fulfilment. The decision he took was that the Central Group of Armies—General Bradley's—should launch an offensive to the line of the Elbe, through Erfurt, in the Leipzig-Dresden area. Leipzig is some ninety miles south of Berlin.

Anxiety on the score of his supply organization—strained, according to his own account, to an ‘unprecedented degree’—would not appear to have been a determining factor in arriving at this decision. There were now ‘huge stocks of petrol and stores well forward of the Rhine, and ample transport to move them eastward in the wake of his armies’; and the Wesel railway bridge, due to be completed by the first week in April, by agreement with the British commander-in-chief was to be at the sole disposal of the American forces. But the British Prime Minister’s first intrusion of political considerations concerning the post-war balance of power in Europe into the purely military scene found no favour with either the Supreme Commander or with General Marshall. It may not be without significance that in the typescript summary of the campaign prepared for the Supreme Commander by his staff in the July of 1945—a few days before Supreme Headquarters went out of existence—there appears an emendation of the phrase ‘as our forces moved rapidly eastward to establish contact with the advancing Russian armies at the Elbe’. Into this phrase the Supreme Commander, in his own hand, firmly inserts after ‘eastward’—‘with the main effort in the centre’.

Unhappily the firmness of the decision was not reflected in the action based on it: there was never to be ‘one great thrust to the eastward’. General Bradley, having retrieved the Ninth Army, now had forty-five divisions under his command: that is, his army group, in terms of divisions, outnumbered the British Second Army by nearly four to one. By the second week of April, when the Second Army was advancing in a normally coherent fashion between the Weser and the Elbe, the divisions of the 12th (United States) Army Group were spread over a front of two hundred miles. Eight Ninth Army divisions had proceeded north of the Harz mountains on the direct road to Berlin to force an Elbe bridgehead south of Magdeburg ‘in order to distract the enemy from Berlin’. South of the Harz, United States First Army was moving towards the Elbe on the axis Kassel-Leipzig. United States Third Army was moving, by way of Eisenach and Erfurt, towards Chemnitz, just north of the Czech frontier; and, in association with the United States Seventh Army, which had forced the Rhine near Worms on March 26th, was to swing south-east towards the valley of the Danube and that last triumph of Nazi mythology—the rugged Alpine area of western Austria and southern Bavaria centred on Berchtesgaden and known as the National Redoubt.

It should now begin to be apparent why a comment has been offered on the subject of the war’s ‘point and purpose’. Already it has begun to sprawl across the face of north-west and central Europe;

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and the Führer's wine-cellar at Berchtesgaden—a bomb-proof concrete room about thirty feet by fifty, ten feet high, and filled to the ceiling with metal bottle racks and the bottles filled with every brand and blend in the world—stands in the gravest peril. 'Perched delicately' on the side of the Kehlstein mountain, the Führer's half-way house, the Berghof, was to escape the blockbusters of the Royal Air Force; although the victorious Allies, 'clutching glistening bottles to their breasts', were to find the woods around full of craters and shattered trees. They were also to find that the 'SS—"Leibstandarte" Adolf-Hitler' had obligingly helped to blow up their own barracks.

Fortune had vouchsafed the 21st Army Group one golden opportunity of making a direct, an unequivocal, an individual, and an altogether spectacular contribution towards the winning of the war in Europe. That opportunity was 'Arnhem'. Arnhem was a key moment in history; and, like all such moments, poised on the razor-edge of time. Victory at Arnhem would have written an imperishable page in the English story, with enduring results as brilliantly incalculable in the political as in the military field. That opportunity—for reasons that no longer have relevance—was to be lost; and it was never to recur.

When, at the end of March, in communications to the Supreme Commander and to General Marshall, the British Prime Minister urged that the main effort should continue to be made on the 21st Army Group front, the request connoted a demand—and the demand was formally put forward—as in the previous September, for the assistance of United States divisions. In this April of 1945, the 49th (West Riding) Division was under Canadian First Army command; it was, indeed, preparing for the attack on Arnhem already mentioned, across the River Ijssel, in an operation that bore the code-name—doubtless for some reason in reverse—of 'Quick Anger'. Thus the British commander-in-chief was left with precisely twelve divisions in Second Army; and it must regretfully be recorded that on the huge battle map at Supreme Headquarters they appeared as little more than a small bunch of arrow-heads tucked away in the distant north. The United States First Army from the Remagen bridgehead numbered as many; and no power of persuasion could have been expected to switch any of them the way of the Ninth. The 'lucky' capture of the Ludendorff bridge had ensured that the main effort in the launching of the final offensive would be on the central front. Field Marshal Montgomery remarks of Remagen, in standard British Army terminology, that 'the importance of this bridgehead to

our subsequent operations cannot be overestimated'. In actual fact, its existence decreed that the 21st Army Group should never be presented with a second opportunity to form the spearhead of attack in the final assault on Germany.

The counter-attack on the Remagen bridgehead finally collapsed by March 26th, when the Germans were compelled to withdraw over the Sieg river that flows due west to join the Rhine at Bonn. This same day, in a rapid thrust by United States First Army, Limburg was overrun and the advance continued towards the Main. Meanwhile, Third Army, from its bridgehead in the Oppenheim area, was tightening its grip on a small and severely contested bridgehead north of the Main. Again there were converging thrusts by the First and Third Armies, from the west and the south, and on March 28th these armies joined forces near Giessen, on the Rhine tributary of the Lahn, some thirty miles north of Frankfurt. The city itself was finally cleared the following day; and the Frankfurt 'corridor' was about to become an American highway. The Germans, for the second time, had allowed the existence of the Remagen bridgehead to dominate their estimate of American intentions. When their forces were still intact south of the Moselle, they had assumed that Third Army would move north to break out across the Rhine from Remagen; instead, it crossed the Moselle with nine divisions for a quick thrust into the Saar. Again, they had assumed that First Army would strike north from Remagen to the Ruhr; instead, it took the autobahn south-east to Limburg, on the road to Frankfurt. Between seventy and eighty miles to the north lay Kassel. Lieutenant-General Collins's VII Corps was already at Marburg—for its appointment at Lippstadt on April 1st. Three days later Third Army had cleared Kassel; and the 'double envelopment' of the Ruhr was an accomplished fact of history.

In the second week of April, as the Supreme Commander notes, 'the main Allied advances to the east were begun': to the Elbe—and the National Redoubt. The majority of the thirty-one United States divisions south of the Harz swung south-east. Third Army struck for the Danube—with the intention of cutting off a German retreat into the Redoubt; Seventh Army was to take the direct route Mannheim—Munich—Salzburg: a half-hour's run from Berchtesgaden. The French First Army—which, on April 1st, had forced a crossing of the Rhine at Philippsburg, north of Karlsruhe—was also to take the road to the Redoubt, by way of Lake Constance. General Bradley remarks that 'if Eisenhower were to divert one of our armies to Monty as Churchill proposed . . . we should have been forced to write off this Danube offensive; and should the enemy fall back into the Redoubt,

we argued, he could greatly prolong the war'. Again, and quite incidentally, Third Army would have been called upon not, certainly, to 'sit down on the Moselle'—to echo General Patton's lament of the previous September—but, and quite unthinkably, to halt between Erfurt and Dresden.

The particular lament of this narrative, at the time of the Rhine crossing, that 'the Allied campaign in Europe is about to lose its closely knit pattern' would not appear to be without some justification; but it is still not suggested that this general bedevilment of Allied strategy is the fault—though it may have been the responsibility—of any one commander. None of the war leaders can be said to have been utterly reasonable or unreasonable: they were caught up by the march of events and by the conflict of personalities and of view-points. Not for the first time in history, the bringing of a war to a satisfactory conclusion was to prove to be a far more difficult operation than fighting it. And here the last word may well rest with the Supreme Commander who, at a time when the respective roles of the 12th and 21st Army Groups were under discussion, remarked to the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff: 'I have not devised any plan on the basis of what individual or what nation gets the glory, for I must tell you in my opinion there is no glory in battle worth the blood it costs'.

Meanwhile, the British Second Army was still on the line of the Weser; and the operations of the Canadian First Army had yet to begin. When the Supreme Commander finally switched the main effort to the centre of the Allied line, Field Marshal Montgomery, faced with the necessity of 'watching for the security' of the southern flank of the Second Army, decided in his directive of April 5th to establish an intermediate phase in its advance to the Elbe on the line of the Weser, Aller, and Leine rivers. The Canadian First Army—as we have seen—was to proceed with its mission of opening a supply route through Arnhem, of clearing the Dutch and the German coast as far as the Weser—that is, for all warlike purposes, the Emden-Wilhelmshaven peninsula—and thereafter western Holland. The drive across the River Ijssel—operation 'Quick Anger'—was to be the responsibility of Canadian I Corps. The northern drive would be undertaken by Canadian II Corps.

On April 7th, VIII Corps broke out of the bridgeheads it had established over the Weser at Minden and Stolzenau. The next town on the main axis of advance was Celle, on the Aller river. It was entered by the 15th (Scottish) Division—which had now taken over the lead from the 6th Airborne—five days later. Seven miles down-

stream from Celle was the concentration camp of Belsen. Next on the axis of advance, and rather more than half way to the Elbe, was Uelzen. It was defended by troops from Denmark, 'newly arrived and unbroken by defeat'. Resistance was not to cease until after four days' hard fighting, when the town was encircled and most of it on fire. In the northern outskirts the 9th Cameronians had the satisfaction of liberating a prisoner of war camp that contained some of the members of the original 51st (Highland) Division taken at St. Valéry. That same afternoon—April 18th—the 11th Armoured Division, coming up from the south-west, occupied Lüneburg, twenty miles due north of Uelzen and about ten miles from the banks of the Elbe. It was here, at Lüneburg, as the last point of call on 'Club Route', after the surrender, that British XXX Corps was one day to erect its own monument to glory, with 'its boar no longer rampant, but resting at last'. The 11th Armoured Division—inevitably oblivious of the service it had just rendered to history—crossed 'the fatal heath' to reach the Elbe, opposite Lauenburg, the next day, April 19th.

By April 24th the west bank of the river had been cleared throughout VIII Corps sector. The 11th Armoured had still to undertake its final assignment at Lübeck—the ultimate objective of VIII Corps; but first the Elbe demanded a bridgehead operation of quite considerable magnitude. Next to the Rhine, it is the most important river in Germany; and in the Second Army sector the intended crossing-places were between three and four hundred yards wide—as against the five hundred of the Rhine crossings. Nor had the Luftwaffe entirely vanished from the sky. Its jet aircraft were 'much in evidence', and in performance—though comparatively few in number—were far ahead of anything in the repertory of the Allied Air Force. However, the Elbe was the last river to cross; and, during the pause imposed by the preparations for the assault, one brigade of the 15th Scottish acquired an unusual addition to the amenities so lavishly provided by the Army's welfare services. It had captured, in full working order, a travelling circus; and the management was 'prevailed on' to give two performances 'to the great satisfaction of the troops'.

On British XII Corps front, the task of securing the main axis of advance devolved on the 52nd (Lowland) Division and the 7th Armoured Division. Together they provided a perfect demonstration of infantry and tank co-operation: 'as the armour advanced, the infantry battalions leap-frogged each other day by day, securing the key-points en route and clearing up such small pockets of resistance as might have been left behind'. By the afternoon of April 1st, the

leading elements of this dual advance had covered some seventy miles in six days, and were now confronted by the Ems river and the even more formidable line of the Dortmund-Ems canal beyond. The first key of the German positions was the town of Rheine—the centre of the ring of airfields already mentioned—and the defence of the whole area was in the hands of some of the 'most loyal, desperate, and skilled troops left to the German Army'. They were Panzer Grenadiers, infantry, and officer cadets from a training establishment near Hanover; and the historian of the Lowland Division records that the 'bitter, close, set-piece battle' it fought beyond the Dortmund-Ems canal was, for these mountain troops, 'quite the sharpest and most intimate action of their long trek from Walcheren to Bremen'.

The 7th Armoured Division had swung away to the right before Rheine, in search of a possible canal crossing; and a bridge was found, still intact. The bridge had been secured by 11th Armoured, and the armour of two corps crossed by it. But beyond this latest bridgehead were still the wooded ridges of the Teutoburger Wald, with Ibbenbüren as the most important centre—'a comic, contorted little place in the Walt Disney tradition' and 'lying cosily' between two spurs of the main ridge, rather more than ten miles west of Osnabrück. The attack on it lasted over three days. On the first day—April 3rd—in trying to break through into the town, tanks of the 5th Dragoon Guards, grouped with the 9th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry, burnt down the houses occupied by the 'fanatical officer cadets'; but 'the enemy remained in the blazing ruins, firing to the last, before being themselves burnt in the holocaust'. The final word on the battle may well be left to the commander of the 7th/9th Battalion, the Royal Scots, of the Lowland brigade that was responsible for the main attack on the ridge. On being relieved he announced to his successor: 'This is one hell of a place. We've been driven off here once already; we've been counter-attacked all day; and I expect you'll be counter-attacked all night. Good luck and goodbye'. After the Lowlanders had 'settled the issue', the 53rd (Welsh) passed through the division to enjoy the superior hospitality of the burgomaster of Nienburg. But, if its crossing of the Weser was uneventful, at Rethem, on the Aller, the 53rd was to find the river held by a brave and determined, if unskilful, marine division from Hamburg.

The 7th Armoured had also crossed the Weser uneventfully. On the road to Nienburg, it had warned the burgomaster of Sulingen, over the civil telephone, that 'resistance would be the worse for him and his village'. The burgomaster replied that he was 'all for surrender', but that his plans were hampered by the presence of a

tank, whose location he obligingly imparted. The tank was accordingly 'brewed', and the advance continued. East of Nienburg, 7th Armoured handed over its sector to the 3rd Division, of XXX Corps; and beyond Soltau switched from the main axis of advance to make a wide sweep to the north to cut the Bremen-Hamburg autobahn about fifteen miles short of Hamburg. Harburg, on the left bank of the Elbe opposite the port, was entered on April 23rd; and XII Corps closed to the river alongside VIII Corps.

On XXX Corps front, as on XII Corps, SS and paratroops put up fierce resistance along the line of the Dortmund-Ems canal; and the general advance did not get going until April 6th, when the 3rd Division cleared Lingen—on 'Club Route'. The 'prize city' of Bremen—seventy miles on—was to provide the last battle but one for the 21st Army Group. The defence was considerably assisted by demolitions and widespread inundations; and the plan for the capture of the city was to involve two corps in a two-fold assault from front and rear simultaneously. While a frontal holding attack against that part of the city on the left bank of the Weser was made by the 3rd Division of XXX Corps, the 43rd (Wessex)—of XXX Corps—and the 52nd (Lowland) of XII Corps, after crossing the river farther upstream, delivered a right hook from the east.

The role of the 43rd Division was to protect the exposed flank of the Lowlanders; and the city actually fell to the 52nd Division—now also under command of XXX Corps. We have already caught a glimpse of the street fighting in Bremen; and, yet again, during the final stages of the assault, the 'chief impediment to progress lay in the debris created by our own bombing'. By April 26th, with the redoubtable assistance of the 'Crows', the last pockets of resistance had been mopped up. The city had refused a surrender demand, which had been followed up by 'hundreds of Lancasters'; and 'a central area of the city, some four miles by one, had ceased to exist'. XXX Corps now continued its operations beyond the Weser. The Guards Armoured Division drove through Bremervörde to reach the Elbe estuary, below Hamburg, at Stade; and the 51st was directed north to the naval base at Cuxhaven, in order to complete the clearance of the peninsula between the Elbe and the Weser.

All three corps of the Second Army were now lined up on the Elbe between Wittenberge and Hamburg and its immediate mission had been accomplished. The main object of the operation—the sealing off of Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark—would have been achieved when the 11th Armoured Division had completed its particular mission, at Lübeck; and, incidentally, the mass of fugitives—'every branch of Hitler's army . . . Marines, Panzers, Gunners, and even the



once redoubtable SS'—that were pouring westward out of Mecklenburg before the Soviet Army would be effectively intercepted.

The advance to the Elbe had been spearheaded by armour: the 11th Armoured with VIII Corps, the 7th with XII Corps, the Guards Armoured with XXX Corps; but they were subject to continual 'route trouble' because of demolitions and broken roads. Moreover, the only good roads led directly from one town to the next; and the lavish use of armour for an assault on a defended town would have represented the last negation of its true role of mobility. Thus, again, the immediate follow-up of the 'infantry had proved to be the decisive factor. Although there had been an 'agreeable modicum of swanning'—a picturesque use of the word that should explain itself—the advance to the Elbe, with open flanks and always the chance of an ambush, midst a sullen, unregarding populace that seemed lamentably unable to appreciate 'the British code of humour', had been successfully accomplished only as the result of the most dexterous handling of Second Army's 'standard' infantry divisions. The 3rd, the 15th, 43rd, 51st, 52nd, and the 53rd had been 'the pistons of the complicated battering-ram: now one, then another, leaping forward while its neighbour rested'. The miracle must always be that the British Second Army, with resources so limited, was able to accomplish so much.

During the earlier part of this month of April, the advance of British XXX Corps on the left of Second Army had been carried out in conjunction with Canadian II Corps, now operating to the north of the Emmerich bridgehead. The mission of the corps was to clear the Dutch and German coast-line as far as the Weser; and, incidentally, to outflank Arnhem. The corps was composed of the Canadian 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions, and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division.

Striking directly northwards, the 3rd Division reached Zutphen on April 6th. Something of the spirit of the Elizabethan Sir Philip Sidney would appear to have animated the 'paratroopers ensconced behind its old water defences'; and the fight for the town lasted two days. The 4th Armoured Division was directed north-east to the Dortmund-Ems canal at Meppen and to Oldenburg—fifteen miles due west of Bremen. Progress was steady, but opposed, and the town was not to fall until May 3rd. In the centre, the Canadian 2nd Division pushed on to the north to capture Groningen, the most important city in northern Holland, on April 6th: whereupon it proceeded with the task of clearing the area up to the North Sea. On the left, Canadian 3rd Division reached Deventer, north of Zutphen, on April 10th, and

then held the line of the IJssel, facing west. Subsequently it moved north to the sea. Its advance was assisted by the dropping of Special Air Service troops behind the enemy lines, in the Meppel area, east of the Zuider Zee. They comprised French, British, and Belgian contingents, and fulfilled their customary mission of seizing bridges and airfields and generally spreading confusion. The Canadian 5th Armoured Division—from Canadian I Corps—and the Polish Armoured Division now joined the 3rd Division in the task of clearing north-east Holland. By April 20th the task was completed, except for a small area on the western side of the Ems estuary.

After the fall of Bremen, Canadian II Corps continued with its mission of seizing the Emden–Wilhelmshaven peninsula. The Canadians were now fighting across the north German plain—another of the key phrases in the operational story of the 21st Army Group of which this narrative now takes a grateful farewell without possibility of recall. Here it was an extension of the lowlands of Holland, and ‘just as flat and wet’; and the Canadian 4th Armoured Division was called upon to advance on ‘a single axis in the heart of a peat bog that permitted no deviation from the straight and narrow’. It is therefore possibly with justice that the Supreme Commander—as already quoted in another context—remarks that ‘despite appearances on the map, the north German plain does not in reality afford such favourable terrain for a rapid advance as does the central sector at this time of year’. The brunt of the fighting had again to be borne by the infantry; and the ‘enemy parachutists still fought with their accustomed fanaticism and skill at arms’.

The German pocket west of the Ems estuary collapsed on May 2nd: thus northern Holland was cleared of the enemy just three days before the end of the war. Oldenburg, as we have seen, fell on May 3rd; but operations in the Emden–Wilhelmshaven peninsula were still in progress when the final surrender came. The last assignment of the Canadian II Corps had not proved the least difficult of the long series of assignments for Canadian soldiers in ‘eleven months of hard and bloody campaigning’. In his directive for clearing the Dutch and German coastline, Field Marshal Montgomery had written: ‘This may take some time; it will proceed methodically’. It had taken some time. On the other hand, the operation had proceeded in a manner that should have gratified that master of method.

Meanwhile, Canadian I Corps, from the Nijmegen area, had embarked on the task of opening the route through Arnhem. By April 5th, the ‘island’ was an island no more: the whole area between Nijmegen and the Lower Rhine was in Canadian hands. But, on this

occasion, no frontal assault was to be attempted across the river; the town was to be seized by a 'right hook'. While the Canadian 5th Armoured Division and the 1st Armoured Brigade 'occupied' the enemy's attention south of the river, the British 49th Division—and, as we have already seen, almost in naval fashion—made a surprise crossing of the Lower Rhine near its confluence with the IJssel on April 12th, and drove west to take Arnhem in rear two days later. Canadian 5th Armoured Division then crossed that now twice legendary river and struck north to seize the high ground south of the Zuider Zee. Apeldoorn—about ten miles west of Deventer—was taken by the Canadian 1st Division, temporarily under command of Canadian II Corps, on April 17th. The paratroops defended it in a manner not unbefitting a countryside already dedicated as the Valhalla of the British 1st Airborne.

During its advance north, the Canadian armoured division had cut the Apeldoorn—Amsterdam main road and railway. Apeldoorn: 'lying fifteen miles directly north of Arnhem . . . the chief training ground in the west for Tiger tank battalions'; Amsterdam: 'the night after the first landings, a German train from Amsterdam "steamed smack into the 82nd headquarters area . . . and slipped on into Germany without ever being fired on"'. Words and voices from the past—and a future still bright with uncertainty! Assuredly the war is growing old.

On April 18th Canadian forces reached the Amersfoort area on the Zuider Zee; and all German forces still north of the Maas were now isolated—behind a formidable barrier of artificial floods. Colonel-General Blaskowitz's Twenty-Fifth Army numbered about one hundred and twenty thousand men; but, because of the switch of divisions to Canadian II Corps in its still continuing struggle, Canadian I Corps now consisted of only two divisions—the Canadian 1st and the 49th (West Riding). On April 22nd, Field Marshal Montgomery issued a directive that 'in western Holland, the army will not for the present operate farther westwards than the general line now held east of Amersfoort'. Six days later a virtual truce came into operation on I Corps front; and the Canadian First Army and the Allied Air Force, by agreement with the Reichskommissar for the Netherlands, Dr. Artur Seyss-Inquart, got down to the job of feeding western Holland. On April 29th, Allied bombers dropped over five hundred tons of food. From May 2nd, the Canadian I Corps became responsible for sending a thousand tons a day—together with the necessary lorries and fuel for its distribution by the Dutch civil authorities. The war was over for western Holland; and, it would seem, not a

moment too soon. In the big towns, starvation had sent up the death-rate to so high a point that the dead went unburied. Corpses were wrapped in paper and stacked in the churches.

For its advance to the Baltic, after a week's pause on the Elbe, the 21st Army Group was to receive the assistance of the United States XVIII Airborne Corps—still under the command of Major-General Ridgway. It was to consist of the United States 7th Armoured Division—the division that had been under command of British VIII Corps in the previous October and had captured Venraj—*the* United States 8th Division, and the United States 82nd and British 6th Airborne Divisions. It was to be the function of this corps to protect the right flank of the Second Army's bridgehead across the Elbe; it was also to secure a line from Darchau on the Elbe to Wismar on the Baltic.

The Second Army bridgehead across the Elbe was to be seized by British VIII Corps—which we last saw lined up on the river in the neighbourhood of Lauenburg; and the bridgehead was to be fifteen miles wide by eight miles deep. Once it was established, the corps was to break out to the north and seize Lübeck; while XII Corps, following through the VIII Corps bridgehead, was to swing west to mask Hamburg. The United States 82nd Airborne Division was to make a simultaneous crossing to the south at Bleckede. To the 15th (Scottish) Division fell the honour of spearheading the VIII Corps assault, with the 1st Commando Brigade under command. The division's historian, Lieutenant-General H. G. Martin, resoundingly comments: 'To its assaults across Seine and Rhine, the 15th Scottish Division would thus add a third great crossing—that of the Elbe. It was a unique honour, since no other division would have been in the forefront of all three of these historic crossings'. VIII Corps was to launch its assault in the early hours of April 29th; XVIII Airborne Corps would make its crossing twenty-four hours later. Such was the plan for 'Enterprise'—the last large-scale operation to be undertaken by the 21st Army Group in north-west Europe.

The crossing was a modified 'Plunder' in miniature. The system of flood-dykes on the south bank was very similar to that on the Rhine; and only two roads would take 'Buffaloes' and heavy bridging lorries. On the other hand, the north bank rises steeply from the water's edge 'in a hundred-foot bound so sheer as to amount almost to a cliff'. On the right front of the assaulting division, the cliff on the far bank was crowned by the houses of Lauenburg; on the division's left front opposite Artlenburg—the actual site of the crossing on the south bank—the cliff was clothed by a dense pine forest. Beyond the cliff there stretched 'a medley of hill and valley, effectually screened

from view to the south'. Because of dense overcast, there could be no air support for the operation; but the artillery bombardment was 'awe-inspiring': onlookers could watch, on the farther bank of the river—here over three hundred yards wide—a bleak cliff as high as the cliff at Rottingdean' being pulverized before their eyes. 'For the last time in this war, the waiting infantry watched the flashes of the bursting shells of a great bombardment and the crimson glow of many kindled fires.'

Just before two o'clock in the morning of April 29th, the 'Buffaloes', loaded with infantry, emerged one by one out of the main street of Artlenburg. They turned, 'immense and black', alternately right and left in the shadow. On reaching their appointed crossing places, they turned again, and lumbered down the grassy bank towards the river, and took to the water. The floating DD tanks would shortly follow them. It had been estimated that the division would have to reckon with a mixed bunch of about eight or nine enemy battalions and about a hundred guns, mostly anti-aircraft. This volume of opposition was officially termed 'light'—whatever the troops on the ground may have had to say about it.

The bridgehead was established in accordance with the now normal drill; and the division spent the first day expanding it against crumbling resistance. By the evening, reconnaissance elements were already some seven miles east of the Elbe; there were 'unmistakable signs that the enemy was throwing in his hand'; and fighter cover for the pontoon bridges was now available. The United States 82nd Airborne Division attacked astride Bleckede in assault boats later in the day in face of 'very light opposition'—a description which, for once in a way, those present are unlikely to query. The British 6th Airborne Division crossed by the newly constructed bridge at Artlenburg; the United States 7th Armoured by another at Darchau. The British 5th Division—from Italy—on the right, and the 11th Armoured Division on the left, led the advance from VIII Corps bridgehead. It was directed on Lübeck; it began at first light on May 1st.

The sands of the war were now running out fast. This same day, the 15th Division, following the north bank of the river, was only sixteen miles short of Hamburg, at Geestacht. The following day, the 2nd Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, confronted by a roadblock manned by naval cadets, suffered acute social embarrassment when it discovered that 'some senior German officers by ones and twos were clambering over this roadblock eager to discuss terms'. Apparently the Führer was dead and there was 'little more to fight for'. These emissaries were blindfolded and packed off to brigade headquarters. Not long afterwards, 'no less a personage'

than General Blumentritt took the road for VIII Corps headquarters with the divisional commander, Major-General C. M. Barber, to discuss preliminaries of surrender.

XII Corps formations were now passing through the VIII Corps bridgehead with the task of capturing Hamburg. The commander of the garrison, Major-General Wolz—he condescended to append only his surname to his correspondence—saved them the trouble. Three days earlier, on April 29th, he had received a final surrender demand from the commander of the 7th Armoured Division—then at Harburg—that had contained an ominous mention of ‘artillery and air support’. The civilian that conveyed it to him—the manager of the somewhat British-sounding Phoenix Rubber Works, who seemed to be primarily interested in securing immunity for his own factory—had been sent back as ‘a last hope’: the two officers who accompanied him had contrived to blow themselves up on one of their own minefields. In a letter dated May 1st, Major-General Wolz thanked the commander of the 7th Armoured Division for giving ‘so lucid expression to his thoughts’, and followed it up with a personal visit. On the evening of May 2nd, on the orders of Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht, he surrendered the city to Major-General Lyne. The next day the 7th Armoured Division crossed the Elbe at Geestacht by courtesy of the 15th (Scottish) Division. The honour of capturing Hamburg, the second largest city in Germany, may therefore be equally shared by the two army corps whose combined efforts neatly gripped it in an ineluctable embrace.

Nevertheless the true destiny of VIII Corps was at Lübeck—rather more than sixty miles from Artlenburg. The 11th Armoured Division, with the 5th Division on its right, covered the distance within two days; and, in the afternoon sunshine of May 2nd, the 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, carrying the infantry of the 1st Battalion, the Cheshire Regiment, entered the town without opposition. Bomber Command had not visited it during the past two years, and its two ‘slender spires’ still rose to the sky. But Lübeck, despite its docks, is still not the Baltic. The United States divisions with the XVIII Airborne Corps were now operating to the east; and the United States 7th Armoured Division had captured Ludwigslust. On its left was the British 6th Airborne Division. On this same day—May 2nd—it made a forty miles advance against no opposition. At Schwerin—actually on the line of advance of the United States 8th Division—it made first contact with the Russians. Later in the day the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion occupied Wismar, on the Baltic coast.

Here, then, at Wismar, was the end of the road for the 21st Army Group, whose first port of call from the skies is to be discovered at the minuscule cross-roads in the Norman village of Ranville—'the first village of France to be liberated'. Between the church and the British military cemetery, alongside a rough quadrangle of grass, a blue-and-white enamel plate carries the inscription: Place des 'Airbornes'. At the cross-roads, a second blue-and-white enamel plate carries the inscription: Place de Juin 6, 1944; and yet another: Caen, 12. Between seven and eight miles to Caen—and more than a month to cover them. Now, eleven months later—and still the 'Airbornes'—Wismar and the Baltic: as the crow flies some six hundred miles on—and the end of the road.

### iii. 'LÜNEBURGER HEIDE'

FIRST WITCH: *Where the place?*

SECOND WITCH: *Upon the heath.*

AT eight o'clock on the morning of May 3rd, Major-General Wolz brought into the lines of the 7th Armoured Division at Harburg an emissary of Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz who, as the new President of the Reich and Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht, had 'assumed the ragged mantle of German leadership'. The emissary was General Admiral Hans Georg von Friedeburg, successor to Grand Admiral Doenitz as commander-in-chief of the German Navy. He was accompanied by General of Infantry E. Kinzel—'in a magnificent field grey coat with scarlet lapels', and wearing an eye-glass—and other high-ranking officers of the German Supreme Command. General Kinzel was chief of staff to Field Marshal Ernst Busch, Commander-in-Chief North-West; as a 'typical Prussian general staff officer', he provides a refreshing change from 'Hitler's generals'. The proposed visit to Second Army headquarters of that other 'personage', General Blumentritt, was now never to take place. Grand Admiral Doenitz, at Flensburg, just south of the Danish border, had already taken his decision to send a delegation to Field Marshal Montgomery to discuss the surrender of all German forces in the north.

The delegation was received at Second Army headquarters, and arrangements were made for the dispatch of its members to 21st Army Group 'Tac'. Major-General Wolz did not have the good fortune to attend the forthcoming conference: otherwise he might have been granted another opportunity of hearing a British commander give 'so lucid expression to his thoughts'—and not only on the subject of 'artillery and air support'. Instead, he stayed behind formally to sign the local surrender of Hamburg to the Second Army. The original orders he had received from Field Marshal Keitel had actually derived from the new Führer.

The British commander-in-chief had established his tactical headquarters on a singularly inhospitable and wild and wind-swept tract of countryside known to its British visitants as Lüneburg Heath. The site of the field marshal's personal encampment was a small hillock, afterwards to be christened 'Victory Hill': a monument that marks the spot will doubtless before long have gone the way of the tomb of



Cyrus. Included among the vehicles was the caravan captured from General Bergonzoli when the army of Marshal Graziani was routed in Cyrenaica in February, 1941. It was now to become a 'souvenir' of the last as well as the first of the British victories in the Second World War. Here the British commander-in-chief received the leader of the German delegation.

General Admiral von Friedeburg explained that he wished to surrender the German forces in the north, including those withdrawing through Mecklenburg before the Russian advance; he also requested permission for civilian refugees to pass through the British lines into Schleswig-Holstein. In reply, the field marshal stated that the surrender of German forces facing the Russians could be negotiated only with the Russians; and that the only question he was prepared to discuss was the unconditional surrender of all forces—land, sea, and air—still resisting in Holland, the Frisian Islands, Heligoland, Schleswig-Holstein, Denmark, and those parts of Germany west of the Elbe still in German possession. When General Admiral von Friedeburg was conducted to the commander-in-chief's map lorry and shown the battle map, he 'finally broke down and burst into tears'. General Admiral von Friedeburg and General Kinzel thereupon left by car to recommend the acceptance of the proposed terms by Field Marshal Keitel.

The following afternoon the 11th Hussars of the 7th Armoured Division met the two delegates on the Flensburg road north-west of Hamburg, and arranged for their escort to Lüneburg Heath. The field marshal privately received General Admiral von Friedeburg in his caravan at six o'clock, and told him that he was interested only to hear whether he had brought back an answer 'yes' or 'no'. The answer was 'yes', and a full meeting was at once convened in a tent—'an ordinary camouflaged army tent'—among the trees surrounding the encampment. It was in readiness for the signing of the instrument of surrender—to the extent of 'an ordinary army table covered with rough army blankets'.

The four other delegates now emerged from underneath the camouflage netting screen where they had congregated. Ten yards away a Union Jack had been hoisted. In the traditional fashion of Union Jacks, it was—according to the contemporary B.B.C. report—'flying in the breeze'. All five members of the delegation now marched to the tent. The field marshal, carrying the typescript of the instrument of surrender, brought up the rear. He entered the tent, the delegation saluted, and he sat down. He then proceeded to read out the terms of the instrument. The 'German Command' agreed that all the forces under its control in Holland, north-west Germany

—including the Frisian Islands, Heligoland, and all other islands—Schleswig-Holstein, and Denmark would lay down their arms and surrender unconditionally. All hostilities on land, on sea, or in the air by German forces in these areas was to cease at eight o'clock the following morning—May 5th. The German command would then carry out at once, 'and without argument or comment', all further orders that might be issued by the Allied powers on any subject—the decision of these powers to be final were any question of interpretation to arise. It was understood that the instrument was to be superseded by any general instrument of surrender subsequently to be imposed by the Allied powers and applicable to Germany and the German armed forces as a whole.

The field marshal had begun: 'Now we're assembled here today to accept the surrender terms'. He concluded: 'The German delegation will now sign this paper and they will sign in order of seniority. General Admiral von Friedeburg will sign first . . . General Kinzel will sign next . . . Rear-Admiral Wagner will sign next . . . Colonel Politz will sign next . . . and Major Friedl will sign now. Now I will sign the instrument on behalf of the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower. That concludes the formal surrender.'

The time was half-past six in the evening of May 4th, 1945. The signing of the instrument had taken ten minutes; it sealed the fate of upwards of two million men of the Wehrmacht on the northern flank of the Allied battlefront. In adding his own signature, the field marshal fluffed the date. At an earlier point in this narrative it was remarked that the operations undertaken by the formations under the operational control of the 21st Army Group might 'appear to have attained an almost unnatural precision'. The evidence for this expression of opinion has been dispassionately marshalled; and one may now add that, in the field of action, the only occasion when the field marshal demonstrably and manifestly slipped up was in this tent at Lüneburg.

The terms, ironically enough, were exclusive of Dunkirk, which was still theoretically on the 21st Army Group front but somewhat remote from it. On May 24th, 1940, the late Führer, ten days before the final evacuation, had ordered General Guderian's XIX Army Corps—two of its Panzer divisions, the 1st and the 2nd, were heading for the port, twenty miles distant—to halt on the line of the Aa running through St. Omer to the sea. At the particular instance of its commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Goering, Dunkirk was to be 'left to the Luftwaffe'. Two days later, renewed orders to halt arrived when the corps—as Colonel-General Guderian relates—was within

sight of Dunkirk. 'We watched the Luftwaffe attack. We saw also the armada of great and little ships, by means of which the British were evacuating their forces.' Now, in this first week of May, five years later, Dunkirk was to be left to the Czech Armoured Brigade—which we last saw in the first week of September, 1944, preparing to sit out the war with a laudable degree of impatience. A portion of the brigade secured release to take part in the advance across the Czech border, and actually reached Prague—'only to be pulled back hastily before the Russians arrived'.



*Imperial War Museum*

**'LÜNEBURGER HEIDE'**

Instrument of Surrender

of

All German armed forces in HOLLAND, in  
northwest Germany including all islands,  
and in DENMARK.

1. The German Command agrees to the surrender of all German armed forces in HOLLAND, in northwest GERMANY including the FRISIAN ISLANDS and HELIGOLAND and all other islands, in SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN, and in DENMARK, to the C.-in-C. 21 Army Group. This to include all naval ships in these areas. These forces to lay down their arms and to surrender unconditionally.
2. All hostilities on land, on sea, or in the air by German forces in the above areas to cease at 0200 hrs. British Double Summer Time on Saturday 5 May 1945.
3. The German command to carry out at once, and without argument or comment, all further orders that will be issued by the Allied Powers on any subject.
4. Disobedience of orders, or failure to comply with them, will be regarded as a breach of these surrender terms and will be dealt with by the Allied Powers in accordance with the accepted laws and usages of war.
5. This instrument of surrender is independent of, without prejudice to, and will be superseded by any general instrument of surrender imposed by or on behalf of the Allied Powers and applicable to Germany and the German armed forces as a whole.
6. This instrument of surrender is written in English and in German. The English version is the authentic text.
7. The decision of the Allied Powers will be final if any doubt or dispute arises as to the meaning or interpretation of the surrender terms.

B. L. Montgomery  
Field-Marshal

4 May 1945  
1830 hrs.

*(Handwritten signatures and initials)*  
v. Weidling  
Lingel  
A. Meyer  
Dewitz  
Muhl

Imperial War Museum

## VII

# ROLL CALL

THE moment has come for the great captains to recede from the stage of this narrative into the wings of history. Field Marshal Montgomery has finished his discussions with the German plenipotentiaries. They are now moving through the trees to spend the night at the visitors' camp. The field marshal himself has 'walked briskly across the grass square in front of his caravan, entered, and closed the door behind him'. As he passes out of sight, let us salute him with the words of that French chronicler of war and chivalry, Jean Froissart, writing of the Black Prince at Poitiers: 'and, sir, methink ye ought to rejoice, though the journey be not as ye would have had it, for this day ye have won the high renown of prowess and have passed this day in valiantness all other of your party'. '*. . . though the journey be not as ye would have had it*'. Nevertheless who shall know—had it been otherwise?

Tomorrow General Admiral von Friedeburg reports to the Supreme Commander's headquarters at Reims. Colonel-General Jodl, who is about to cease to be chief of the operations staff of the Wehrmacht, arrives there to join him. In a schoolroom at Reims he will sign the second instrument of surrender in the early hours of the morning of May 7th. It becomes effective at midnight, May 8th–9th. On May 9th, Field Marshal Keitel signs the formal ratification of surrender in Berlin. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder signs on behalf of the Supreme Commander. Marshal Zhukov signs on behalf of the Soviet Supreme Command.

At this point, inasmuch as the German commanders are now on the way out, let us spare a glance for the only one of them that warrants a word of farewell—if only because his intervention saved the British Army at Dunkirk. On the day of ratification in Berlin, Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering is housed, under American guard, in a former workers' settlement on the outskirts of Augsburg. The previous day, at Zell am See, he has been briefly entertained

in a manner befitting his sixteenth-century conception of princely grandeur. But, in the end, someone is to say, 'Now sign', and he signs, at Nuremberg; and, be it said—since this narrative cannot be charged with softness towards the German leaders—he 'signs', on the last day, in the dock, with a princely grace of gesture.

General Bradley, during these episodes, is on a visit to the picturesque medieval town of Torgau, on the left bank of the Elbe, some seventy-five miles from Berlin. Here, on April 25th, patrols of the United States V Corps have met elements of a burly Guards division of the Red Army. Let us salute V Corps of First Army—and of 'Omaha'. Its commander, Major-General Gerow, has recently left it to take command of the United States Fifteenth Army—an army responsible for military government in rear of the advancing troops. His was the first tactical command to arrive in Britain in the summer of 1943; and, of all the American commanders, he was the 'most schooled' in the plan for 'Overlord'. After leading his corps from Normandy to the Rhine, on the day the war finishes he is 'in bed with a cold near Bonn'. We are getting back to normal. In conjunction with V Corps, let us salute VII Corps, also of First Army—and of 'Utah': still under the command of Lieutenant-General Collins, one day to be United States Army Chief of Staff. On April 14th it had almost reached the Elbe at Dessau, just south of the confluence of the Elbe and Mulde rivers—the temporary line of demarcation already accepted by the Russians. Both these corps, once part of the 21st Army Group, have had a part to play at not infrequent intervals in the story of the development of 21st Army Group operations; they were both of them in at the death with the British and the Canadians in the battle of the Falaise pocket; and, as General Eisenhower remarks, it seems eminently fitting that troops of one of them should be first to make contact with the Red Army and 'accomplish the final severance of the German nation'.

At the moment, in Torgau, 'everyone is happy'. A Russian lieutenant is sitting on a wall and playing an accordion, 'and the Doughboys join in'; and Maestro Jascha Heifetz is about to be flown in from Special Services in Paris for the entertainment of Marshal Konev. He is introduced as 'just one of our American soldiers': Marshal Konev, a few days earlier, having introduced a ballet troupe from Moscow as 'just a few girls from the Red Army'. Let us, here and now, before the dream dissolves, salute General Bradley, and his commanders, and the troops that marched with him. Together they had fought a big war in a big way—no matter the decisions, which came from the top, anyhow.

And General Patton? A South African serjeant who, with his fellow prisoners of war, had been made to march for forty-three days, averaging twelve miles a day, as the Russians approached Breslau, ultimately reached a prisoner-of-war camp at Ziegenhain, in western Germany. The party—a contingent of the sixty-thousand prisoners of war marching west—had left Breslau ‘twelve degrees below’, in two feet of snow. They reached their destination after ‘a trail of thieving and hunger and grim physical effort’. At the new camp—as the South African serjeant tells us—they were visited by a Scottish padre from a neighbouring Oflag. When he arrived, with every manner of rumour in the air, he was asked: ‘What’s it going to be, sir? Which is it going to be first? Is it going to be Parcels, Patton, or Peace?’ The answer was ‘Patton’. That was the way of General Patton’s contemporary reputation; and it will take care of itself.

General Patton is now at Pilsen, forty miles inside the Czech border—and undoubtedly ready to cover the fifty-odd miles to Wenzel Square in the heart of Prague within twenty-four hours. He has now been on the Czech border for nearly a fortnight. On May 1st, the Supreme Commander informed the Soviet Supreme Command that he proposed to halt the Third Army on the line Pilsen–Carlsbad. The proposal was agreed. When the cry of revolt rose in the city, the Supreme Commander, in a second telegram, notified the Russian command that his troops would move on to Prague ‘if the situation required’. The Russian command replied that the troops ‘should not advance’ beyond the line already agreed.

The troops thus halted were again V Corps—which General Patton had received as a reinforcement from First Army. For the main body of Third Army has now advanced down the Danube by way of Regensburg, and on May 5th receives the surrender of Linz. Another column has reached the neighbourhood of Salzburg: although the United States Seventh Army is actually to enter the city, and, on the morning of May 4th, join up with the United States Fifth Army from Italy, at Vipiteno, on the Italian side of the Brenner Pass.

This same evening of May 4th, General Patton is ‘whooping’ to General Bradley: ‘On to Czechoslovakia!’ V Corps reaches Pilsen on May 6th; and at Pilsen—and no farther east—the war finishes for General Patton. A great English naval captain once stated that ‘moderation in war is imbecility’. General Patton believed in being ‘bloody, bold, and resolute’; he needed no Lady Macbeth at his elbow; and he won his battles—and quickly, and, in the end, cheaply. His ideas on the theory of war may not have been elaborate; but commanders, not theories, win battles; and General Patton was such a commander.



And, last but not one: General de Lattre de Tassigny. He is about to depart for Berlin to attend the ratification ceremony of the instrument of unconditional surrender as the somewhat inhibited representative of the French Government. His French First Army has just earned the title of 'Rhin et Danube': French I Corps having crossed the Danube into Bavaria—somewhat circuitously by way of Lake Constance—in order to help to block a German retreat into the National Redoubt. The corps penetrates the western end of the Redoubt to join up with the United States Seventh Army as the enemy capitulates. An equal disappointment had awaited the corps on its way south. On the Swiss frontier, between Basle and Lake Constance, it had expected to pick up the German Twenty-Fourth Army: that army was found to consist of six thousand Customs frontier guards.

General de Lattre de Tassigny has put up a long fight against orders that entailed *le gauchissement de toute notre manœuvre*: his army had even been threatened with the task of clearing up the Channel ports—at a time when he impatiently awaited an opportunity to secure quickly a springboard for the invasion of Germany itself. When that opportunity presented itself, after the Rhine crossing, his I Corps operated swiftly in Württemberg, and freed Strasbourg from its long bombardment. His army has now entered Germany—and the Redoubt: or, rather, that area of Germany so described.

For the National Redoubt, as the locale of large-scale defensive preparations for a 'last-ditch stand' among the mountains of the Bavarian Alps, existed only in the imagination of the intelligence staff at Supreme Headquarters. It is a fact that Dr. Willi Messerschmitt was manufacturing jet aircraft in the Passion Play village of Oberammergau on the fringe of the Bavarian Alps; but no further evidence of long-term warlike activity has ever come to light. The Supreme Commander's chief of staff remarks: 'The mystery of the National Redoubt deepened when several German general-officer prisoners swore that they had never heard of any organized large-scale defence positions in the Alps'. Some had heard rumours, 'but could only shake their heads and agree that nothing was beyond Himmler and Hitler'. Lieutenant-General Kurt Dittmar, the German radio commentator known as the 'voice of the Wehrmacht', had poled himself across the Elbe to surrender to the Ninth Army at Magdeburg. When questioned at 12th (United States) Army Group about the Redoubt, he 'scoffed' at the idea and stated that he had first 'read about it in a Swiss newspaper'. It must surely be among the major ironies of history that this 'phantom', Germany's most successful propaganda myth, did not derive from that master of propaganda, Dr. Joseph Goebbels.

Last, if first in honour, the Supreme Commander. He is sitting in the war room at Supreme Headquarters, 'lined with the battle maps that charted Germany's defeat'. Not long ago in this narrative mention was made of those arrow-heads—the 'long red attack-arrows' that, according to the Supreme Commander's chief of staff, brought 'tears to the eyes' of General Admiral von Friedeburg during the surrender preliminaries. We have already seen General Admiral von Friedeburg in a precisely similar situation: on this occasion he calls for whisky, and gets it. The new Führer would appear to have been no more fortunate in his generals than the old. But possibly an opinion may reasonably be advanced that these arrow-heads had a far more serious impact in the realm of strategy: that the desire to achieve for them a certain geometrical harmony of design may in part account for the 'sprawling' of the war in Europe.

The Supreme Commander is awaiting the arrival of Colonel-General Jodl. At Claridge's Hotel, in London, on July 26th, 1942, General Marshall appointed the future supreme commander to be the Allied commander-in-chief for the invasion of north-west Africa. Now, General Marshall, in Washington, awaits news from a pupil who has fulfilled his highest expectations. He is about to receive from him a cable addressed to the Combined Chiefs of Staffs: 'The mission of this Allied force was fulfilled at 0241 local time, May 7, 1945'. In his book, General Eisenhower approvingly quotes: 'We must not accept the 'co-ordination' concept under which Foch was compelled to work. We must insist on individual and single responsibility—leaders will have to learn how to overcome nationalistic considerations in the conduct of campaigns. One man who can do it is Marshall—he is close to being a genius'.

This narrative has already paid tribute to General Marshall's rock-like character—and to his rock-like convictions; and, as has been seen, for all purposes in the conduct of the war in north-west Europe the United States Army Chief of Staff and the Supreme Commander were as one body and spoke with one voice. 'There was nothing throughout the war', writes General Eisenhower, as the final words of his Report, 'so morally sustaining as the knowledge that General Marshall concurred in the plans I was adopting and the means I was taking to put them into effect'. This narrative cannot be acquitted of a certain lack of sympathy in its examination of the strategy of the campaign; and, without any desire to set up in judgment, it is proposed to add only the straightforward observation that all the available evidence moves to one conclusion: that neither of these great leaders—to use an Army word—'understood' the art of war in the Montgomery sense of that term.

The name of one British field marshal has yet to appear in the roll call. At this moment in time, when the Allied armies in Europe are halted in their victorious stride, he is in London, England—where from the November of 1941 onwards to this hour of triumph, as executive head of the British Army, he has steered that army and its commanders through the rough years of frustration to the ordered completion of their tasks in North Africa, in Italy, in Burma—and now in north-west Europe. Through all these years he has maintained station at the right arm of Britain's Prime Minister, in all weathers, in every ordeal by conference, in every crisis of decision. Always at the forefront of the stage but no more than a vague presence to a world-audience—and never vocal to that world, then or thereafter—he is Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Now that victory is won he is about to depart the stage, to the accompaniment of that hushed pause at the fall of the curtain by which the informed spectator sometimes registers his awareness of 'some far-off touch of greatness' in the performance he has witnessed.

The great captains were inevitably remote from the battle. Nevertheless, in making the decisions, they bore the heaviest of all burdens—the burden of responsibility. Now, the stage they occupied is left to the officers and the men who were called upon to carry out those decisions, and, because of them, or in despite of them, to win through. The battlefields of a war that is dead are their inheritance. We are back where we started—with that infantry officer who, on a day in August of the invasion year, was told to 'capture a hill three miles away by noon to-morrow'.

The battlefields of north-west Europe, in varying degree, are still marked with war's destruction; but the destruction no longer suggests war; it is merely destruction. At Putanges, on the Orne, south of Falaise, a solitary telegraph pylon by the roadside still carries the roughly daubed three-lobed emblem of 'Club Route', with a vertical arrowhead beneath it. Not so long ago it pointed the way ahead for Britain's legionaries on their march to victory. Now it blindly stares into a stupendous vacancy. On the ground itself, old battles can be recalled only by an effort of will and by the almost deliberate exercise of the imagination. If so recalled, and successfully, they recreate themselves only through the ghostly resurrection of the men, dead and living, who took part in them. The substantial pageant is faded; the battles they fought have left not a rack behind: Normandy, perhaps, and appropriately so, alone excepted.

For the spiritual nexus of the 21st Army Group, if it is to be found anywhere, is rooted in Normandy. Here the 21st Army Group fought

the first crucial battle, the main battle, of the whole campaign. Victory in that battle made ultimate victory certain—however long the road, however wide the war, however more numerous the armies engaged. The battle of Normandy remains the particular glory of the 21st Army Group; in Normandy, with the war in the west still young, it achieved the flower and essence of its performance.

Here, in Normandy, are to be discovered a cluster of war cemeteries of the paraded dead; here, on the invasion coast, the landing-beaches bear their commemorative tablets; here, the monstrous shattered fragments of the Atlantic Wall lie in drunken disarray; at sea, the surviving components of the remaining 'Mulberry' at Arromanches still rise and fall with the tide. On May 30th, 1942, the Prime Minister addressed a memorandum to the then Chief of Combined Operations, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. It began: 'Piers for use on beaches: They must float up and down with the tide . . .' A little more than two years later they were to be in position, and to provide more than seven miles of roadstead; and today they are still floating up and down with the tide. The narrow river at Dives-sur-Mer is still spanned by two sturdy little 'Baileys', within a few hundred yards of the 'Hostellerie de Guillaume le Conquérant' where, depending from the wall beside the entrance, a fully accoutred Norman warrior looks out across the English Channel in the eternal wake of a conqueror whose own invasion, a thousand years back, because it is history, seems more actual than this other invasion that is still at the half-way house between history and memory. Another 'Bailey' across the Orne at Thury-Harcourt calls up no picture from the past. One can only gaze at the guileless-looking stream and marvel that the crossing of it should have demanded a greater effort than the Rhine: so was the face of the war to change during the intervening months.

In the whole of the invasion area, precisely two British Army notices—memorials of its preparedness and of its always charming hospitality—have survived the passage of the years. Both are at Arromanches: which today watches with a touristic solicitude the surviving components of the 'Mulberry' and has rechristened itself Arromanches-les-Bains. One notice, a red daub on a cottage wall, reads 'Fire Alarm'; the other, in black paint, with the inevitable arrow-head, at a street corner on the waterfront, reads 'Visitors'. As relics they serve to evoke the past more effectively than the tomb-like structure that carries the title 'Port Winston' and, on the landward side, the inscription 'The Key to the Liberation of France'. More than a million British and Canadian soldiers passed this way.

Inland, apart from the 'killing ground' of Chambois, where 'tanks of three nationalities still strew the fields', the war has vanished from

—or been swallowed up by—the dense green of the landscape: there might never have been an invasion flail. But the journey by the gradually ascending road that leads, twenty miles south, to the open country beyond Villers-Bocage none the less eloquently brings illumination to the stock operational phrases—‘the establishment of the initial bridgehead’, ‘the initial development of the bridgehead’, ‘extending the bridgehead’, ‘the launching of the break-out’. Each of these operations was a major battle by comparison with which the actual landings in France were hardly a problem. Now, as then, the visible way ahead for the traveller extends no farther than the next wood or hedgerow; and again he must marvel at the courage and the determination of those infantry and armoured divisions that pressed on relentlessly against an enemy assisted by claustrophobic conditions of terrain that must weigh down even a peacetime *revenant*.

And here is Villers-Bocage—earliest of names in the Normandy story. Its quick capture was vital to the Second Army plan for ‘Overlord’; its actual capture was just under two months behind schedule. When the Northumbrian division entered it, burned-out tanks, both British and German, still littered the roads—relics of the head-on collision, at the end of the first week of the invasion, between Britain’s armoured division from the desert and that wide-ranging German Panzer division of Dunkirk, of Moscow, and of Celles; and ‘but few people were prepared for the scenes of stark devastation that met their gaze when they picked their way through the shattered streets on that warm, sunny morning’. Today there is not a house in it that is not rebuilt, with bright new bricks and stone from Caen; but as a name it still carries with it the ring of history. At the last, the cities of Germany were to fall to the Allied armies almost as casually as the leaves in Vallombrosa. Here, in Normandy, under conditions of intensive warfare, the capture of a hamlet could represent a major victory. Villers-Bocage numbers now, as then, no more than twelve hundred souls.

But Second Army was not the only front in the Normandy main battle: there is still the twenty-one mile arrow-straight road to Falaise—that ‘long, smooth, dangerous slope’ leading up from Caen to the birthplace of the Conqueror which the Canadian First Army was to take more than a month to cover. After a three-weeks’ hold-up, it was ‘formally ordered’ to capture Falaise: ‘this is first priority and it is vital that it should be done ‘quickly’. Today the traveller who makes the journey in reverse, with an uninterrupted view of the level country on either side of the road, and, ahead, the Caen plain, and the city of Caen, and the fiercely smoking factory chimneys of Colombelles, will understand why the journey for the Canadians was



SOLDIER (*War Office*)

END OF 'CLUB ROUTE'



SOLDIER (*War Office*)

## LAST SALUTE

bloody, painful, prolonged—and late. East, too, of the road his eye will search out for the wooded area of the village of Bourguebus across a stretch of open country with a field of fire obstructed only by an occasional clump of trees; and he will understand why a screen of well-sited and well-concealed anti-tank artillery, outside the range of the Allied barrage, could bring to a somewhat inglorious halt the assembled might of three British armoured divisions.

He may also reflect that the margin for success in the Normandy battle was perilously narrow. The invasion of 'Festung Europa', in its initial phase, was sternly contested and successfully contained, despite the conflict of opinion, on the German side, over the defensive plan; and if German armour, instead of pursuing a policy of 'plugging the holes', had contrived to deliver a co-ordinated blow at the Allied bridgehead before that front was not merely continuous but secure, the story of the invasion might easily have reached a less favourable conclusion. 'The pledging of the Panzer divisions in a defensive role', writes Field Marshal Montgomery, 'signified the failure of the "hammer": and with it all hopes of ever driving the Allies out of France.' The 'hammer' blow, indeed, was never delivered; and, despite the contribution of Allied air power and naval gun power, the failure must largely be attributed to the pressure maintained by the Allied ground forces: 'the last word' was still with them. Moreover, German tactics apart, the issue in Normandy, on the Allied side, depended less on the decisions of the higher commanders than on the fighting endurance of the individual soldier; and this narrative, having rendered homage to them, now extends to him a last salute.



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