CHAPTER 20

Operation Goodwood

What I had in mind was to seize all the crossings of the Orne from Caen to Argentan.

Lieutenant General Sir Miles Dempsey

Lieutenant General Sir Miles Dempsey, personally knighted in a Normandy field by King George VI, found himself in an unhappy position. Although he bore the title of GOC, Second British Army, he had good reason to wonder what his true role really was. Having served Montgomery since shortly after Alamein he well knew his chief's penchant for immersing himself in the business of running an army. But in Normandy Montgomery was an army group commander and the Allied ground C-in-C. Yet little had changed; Montgomery thought of himself as an army group commander but, as Sir Edgar Williams has observed, he acted more like an army commander. He still involved himself closely in the affairs of the Second Army, dictating precisely what was to be accomplished and leaving precious little initiative to his army commander, with the result that Dempsey was treated more like a corps commander than an army commander. 1 The role thus given to Dempsey was one Montgomery himself would never have accepted but it was a measure of Dempsey's loyalty that he served in this diminished capacity without protest.

Some senior officers have questioned whether Dempsey was little more than a colourless figurehead commander deliberately put there by Montgomery - an impression undoubtedly heightened by his frequent habit of bypassing Dempsey to give orders directly to his own subordinate commanders. O'Connor, for example, recalled how Montgomery would frequently visit him to ask: 'What's the form? Can you do this or that in the future?' Sometimes new orders would come at once and on other occa-
sions they would be issued to Dempsey. 2 While this practice was not altogether unusual in the British Army, it did mean that Dempsey had to formulate a role for himself. His assiduous avoidance of publicity of any sort didn't help, and even though occasional newspaper articles appeared about him in the British press, they tended to be lost in the flood of publicity which attended Montgomery. Eventually Dempsey became so frustrated that he would deliberately sit up as high as possible in his staff car so that his troops would recognize him. 3

Few knew Dempsey well and to ask about the man is to generally draw a blank response even from those in fairly senior positions who saw a good deal of him. One of his senior staff officers, Selwyn Lloyd, later wrote of Dempsey that 'Wherever he went he inspired confidence and was a most welcome visitor to any harassed commander of a subordinate formation. Time and again he realized the tactical opportunity and saw it was exploited... I have never known anyone who got to the point quicker.' 4 General Richardson has called him a 'thinker' and the most intellectual general then serving in the field; 5 Brigadier Pyman, who served him as his Chief-of-Staff later in the campaign, provides an example of the cryptic manner in which Dempsey went about the business of commanding an army. In early September 1944 he sent the following order to 30 Corps:

Dear Horrocks - You will capture (a) Antwerp (b) Brussels. Signed M. C. Dempsey. 6

Dempsey has left few personal papers, but from what is available to the historian a far stronger personality can be deduced than that suggested by his public image. He was an exceptionally loyal subordinate and neither by word nor deed ever took issue with the decisions made by Montgomery, but one can sense in several of his unpublished interviews his deepening sense of frustration at the stagnating situation the Second Army had encountered during the first month after D-Day. The need to gain an adequate foothold and the limited options open for offensive action left him with little flexibility as long as Mont-

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1. Interview with Sir Edgar Williams, 8 April 1983.
2. Interview with Sir Edgar Williams, 8 April 1983.
3. The Times, 10 June 1949.
5. Pyman, Call to Arms, op.cit., p. 74. Horrocks replaced Bucknall on 4 August 1944.
gomery was planning the Second Army’s battles. Too bright and able to continue as a figurehead, it was not surprising that by mid-July 1944 Dempsey decided that the time had come to assert his authority with Montgomery, whose tactics had not been particularly productive. Dempsey wanted to propose a viable alternative, and the means by which he chose to do so took the form of Operation GOODWOOD.

He recognized that there was little he could do about Montgomery’s dictum that his main mission was to continue pinning the main German panzer force to the Caen sector, but it was not necessary to carry out his new orders by means of the tactics of limited operations which had promised so much, and had, so far, failed. Dempsey’s personal notes reveal his acute awareness that the desperately needed early breakthrough would not be met by a renewal of infantry attacks. At last a ready-made opportunity existed to employ the under-used armoured divisions to deliver a killing blow on the eastern flank and, at a single stroke, crush the German hold on Caen.

By mounting a powerful armoured stroke directly into the good tank country of the Caen-Falaise Plain, the British, for the first time in Normandy, would be permitted to make effective use of their burgeoning armoured forces. The bridgehead now contained three armoured divisions (the 7th, the 11th and the Guards) as well as five independent armoured brigades and three independent tank brigades – a massive force totalling approximately 2,250 medium and 400 light tanks. As Broadhurst has revealed, Dempsey had been deeply impressed by the effects of the bomber attack on Caen preceding CHARNWOOD and, like Bradley, had concluded that another operation by Bomber Command on German strong-points, blocking the approaches to the Caen-Falaise Plain, could pave the way for efforts by his armoured divisions to exploit any temporary advantage. Indeed, there was no longer any justification for this tank force not to be employed in the open country southeast of Caen.

Dempsey also wanted to limit the mounting casualties to his infantry. Daily statistics kept by his staff were not encouraging, nor was he reassured by the visit of General Adam, the Adjutant General, who came to Normandy specifically to warn Dempsey of the War Office’s inability to replace infantry losses beyond the end of July. Faced with the unpleasant prospect of cannibalizing one or more of his infantry divisions to generate reinforcements, Dempsey determined to devise a new offensive which would, temporarily at least, delay the moment when such action would be necessary. He declared that: ‘By contrast, our strength in tanks was increasing all the time – tank reinforcements were pouring into Normandy faster than the rate of tank casualties. So we could well afford, and it was desirable, to plan an operation in which we could utilize that surplus of tanks and economise infantry.’

All previous operations by the Second Army had been master-minded by Montgomery but GOODWOOD was the brainchild of Dempsey, who not only conceived the idea of an all-armoured stroke but eventually sold the idea to his C-in-C. Given the previously unsatisfactory performance of British armour in North Africa and the constraints now imposed by the terrain of Normandy, the prospect of employing an armoured corps did not please Montgomery. Before Alamein he had faced a near-mutiny, as his authorized biographer has noted, when General Lumshon, the commander of his corps de chasse, had baulked at using his armour to make the breakout from the Eighth Army positions around Miteiriya Ridge. In the end, Montgomery so mistrusted his own armoured commanders that he withdrew the corps de chasse, leaving his infantry divisions and armoured brigades to break Rommel’s Afrika Korps and win the battle of Alamein.

Soon after taking over 21st Army Group Montgomery had assembled his senior staff officers to outline his philosophy of command. Mindful of his previous unhappy experience with armour, he had this to say:

1 ‘Operation Goodwood’, Liddell Hart Papers, loc.cit. In 1952, Liddell Hart persuaded Dempsey to talk at length with him about GOODWOOD. He put together a set of notes which were amended by Dempsey with the comment: ‘In general, your notes do most faithfully record what I tried to convey ... but I would like them back one day because they put it all so clearly.’ When the Cabinet Office Historical Section learned that Dempsey had spoken with Liddell Hart, they sent one of the official historians to interview him about GOODWOOD. None of what Dempsey had to say was used in the official history and the transcript (CAB 106/5061) remains closed to researchers.
2 Nigel Hamilton, Monty, Part Five, Chapter 12, op.cit.

1 Ellis, op.cit., Appendix IV.
The battle fighting comes under two heads: (1) fighting (2) friggling around...you must keep the initiative to win; it is the easiest thing in the world to lose in battle...The grouping of forces is a battle winning factor. However, it cannot be done until the plan has been laid and you have decided how you want to fight. There are no such things as permanent armies or corps; only the division is set. Divisions are grouped according to this employment in the plan. I will never employ an armoured corps.\(^1\)

Although Montgomery’s tactics in Normandy tended to dismay the Americans and alarm his critics, it should be understood that they were rooted in his North African experience. His lack of confidence in both his *corps de chasse* and his mistrust of exploitation with such a force had coloured Montgomery’s thinking from the beginning. One of his strongest virtues – one never appreciated by the American generals – was that he was, above all else, a realist. He knew what his troops could do and what they could not. British and Canadian troops were rock solid in the defence but, as we have seen, were less dependable in the offensive and disinclined to take advantage of opportunities – a tendency fostered by the harsh bocage of Normandy. By this stage Montgomery seemed finally to have learned that if he did not exercise caution when attacking the Germans they were very dangerous and capable of inflicting serious reverses upon his troops. The use of phase lines was a graphic manifestation of his distrust of exploitation as much as it was of his recognition that his men functioned best with specific goals laid out for them. It was all the more distressing that his plans for Normandy had gone awry in the early days and now necessitated the employment of tactics he preferred to avoid. Exploitation by his armoured forces in the period immediately following the invasion was one thing; the employment of a *corps de chasse* under present conditions was quite another.

Yet the plan outlined to him by Dempsey on 10 July was not based on these principles; instead it was a plan to employ massed armour around which a course of action was then determined. Despite his long-standing disdain of utilizing such a force, Montgomery acceded to Dempsey’s proposal, doubtless feeling that it was the best option open to him. It was certainly a measure of the unacceptability of his present situation that Montgomery consented to the use of an all-armoured force but, as Dempsey reminds us: ‘Prior to Goodwood, our position on the left flank remained dangerous, for the ground we had gained east of the Orne on D-Day gave us a very shallow bridgehead there. It barely sufficed to prevent the enemy having our beaches under observation. From the high ground near Bréville, just inside our front, the whole stretch of the beaches west of the Orne could be clearly seen. The Germans, rather surprisingly, never made a serious attack here to gain the commanding ground, but it always remained a risk until we expanded the bridgehead.’\(^1\)

On 12 July Dempsey recorded in his diary: ‘1630, saw C-in-C at my HQ and told him of the plan I had formed for the use of 8 Corps next week. He approved.’\(^2\) The plan that Dempsey had developed called for the combined resources of four corps to be employed. The three armoured divisions were to be regrouped under the command of 8 Corps and assembled east of the Orne in the small bridgehead being held by the 6th Airborne Division and 51st Highland Divisions – the same place from which Montgomery had wanted to launch EPSOM. After a thorough saturation bombing, this massed armoured force of some 750 tanks would rapidly tear open a hole in the German defensive line and outflank Caen from the east. It was expected that the shock of this blow would so shred German defences that the force could gain the heights of Bourguébus Ridge overlooking Caen and then exploit their success in the good tank country beyond.

At the same time, Crocker’s 1 Corps and Lieutenant General Neil Ritchie’s recently arrived 12 Corps could launch subsidiary infantry attacks, supported by armour, along the flanks, while Lieutenant General Guy Simonds’s 2 Canadian Corps would attack directly south from their present positions in Caen to secure the southern half of the city – Faubourg de Vaucelles – and protect the rear of 8 Corps. Preliminary operations would begin on 15 July with diversionary attacks from the Odon sector by 12 Corps to gain a firm base and with a view to a subsequent advance towards Aunay sur Odon or Thury-Harcourt ‘as the situation may indicate’. 30 Corps was meanwhile to secure the Noyers area and be prepared to exploit to the high ground

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\(^1\) ‘Operation Goodwood’, loc.cit.
\(^2\) Dempsey Papers, PRO (WO 285/9).
north-east of Villers-Bocage 'if a favourable opportunity presents itself'.

Shortly before the attack the air forces would commence a huge aerial bombardment along the lines of CHARNWOOD. The object was twofold: to clear the way for the armour to make a rapid penetration and to neutralize German positions farther to the rear. In an attempt not to repeat the mistake made during CHARNWOOD, when the bombing had preceded the ground attack by about five hours, the aerial attack in support of GOODWOOD was to be launched less than two hours prior to the movement of the lead armour. As with EPSOM, additional support was to come from over 700 guns plus naval gunfire. Plans for aerial support called for the use of both tactical aircraft and strategic bombers, making it the largest operation of its kind ever attempted in direct support of a ground operation. Originally planned to commence on 17 July, but later changed to the 18th, GOODWOOD was timed to precede COBRA by two days.

In conformance with Montgomery's directive that the Second Army continue to pin down Rommel's panzers in order to leave Bradley unhindered for COBRA, Dempsey devised his plan to ensure that there would be no sudden German inclination to shift these divisions:

The primary consideration in the 'Goodwood' plan was the necessity of hitting hard, attracting the enemy's armour to the eastern flank; and wearing down his strength there so as to weaken his capacity to resist a renewed break-out effort on the western flank. But another consideration was the need to expand the bridgehead, which was becoming overcrowded as reinforcements and supplies were pouring in all the time. To gain more room it was necessary to capture Caen, which blocked our expansion and was an awkward wedge in our flank. Its capture would loosen the enemy's hinge, and provide us with a firm hinge ('Get a firm hinge was a term I constantly used to impress the point.) There was also an increasing need for new airfields, and the best area for these was around Caen—particularly on the Bourguébus plateau. To gain that airfield area had been a feature of our planning before D-Day. By striking first on one side of the Orne and then on the other, we should force him to bring divisions across, and be able to hit them with our air force in the process of crossing, when they were particularly vulnerable. I called this 'tennis over the Orne'.

While Dempsey had conceived GOODWOOD as such a powerful armoured threat that the Germans must move their reserves to meet it or run the risk of a complete breakthrough, he had also chosen a sector fraught with potential difficulties.

Firstly, the area chosen for 8 Corps to assemble was not suitable for surprising the Germans. One of the drawbacks was the Colombelles steelworks in the eastern suburbs of Caen; from as far away as the Odon battlefield nearly ten miles to the southwest, its enormous towers were clearly visible like massive fingers pointing at the sky. The Germans still controlled Colombelles and thus possessed the priceless advantage of unhindered observation from the towers of the entire Caen area. Any attempt to move the three armoured divisions— all of which were then located well to the west of the city—to their start-line east of the Orne would be detected at once, and so any such movement was impossible until immediately prior to the operation.

The terrain stretching south and southeast of Caen is open, rolling agricultural land, consisting mostly of cornfields punctuated by an occasional copse. The fields slope gently up towards the heights of Bourguébus Ridge. Though this high ground is a mere hundred yards above sea level, it nevertheless provides a defender with a virtually unobstructed view back over Caen and its suburbs to the south and east. Nearby, the Caen-Falaise road runs in a straight line to Falaise, twenty-one miles to the southeast, while about three miles east of this highway run the two main rail lines linking Caen with the rest of France. The entire area between Caen and Falaise is honeycombed with small, nondescript farming hamlets, most of which had been converted into fortified German strongpoints.

GOODWOOD's success was in large part dependent upon the air force neutralizing the guns sited on Bourguébus Ridge and in the nearby villages of Bras, Soliers, and Hubert Folie, all of which provided excellent fields of fire directly into the proposed British route of advance. The two railway embankments were also natural barriers and would be dangerous obstacles for approaching tanks: while they offered momentary protection

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1 Ellis, op.cit., p. 334.
2 Ibid, p. 335.

1 'Operation Goodwood', loc.cit.
they could be breached only through small road tunnels which were obvious targets for the German gunners.

Still, the most serious problem facing the British was how to retain the element of surprise. The plan was bold but for boldness to succeed the armour must move nearly 12,000 yards from their start-line to gain Bourguebus Ridge. As long as the eastern and southern sections of Caen remained in German hands, the necessity of having to initiate GOODWOOD from the east bank of the Orne was a severe complication. How then to prevent detection of a huge armoured force approaching within sight of the German observers in the towers of Colombelles? O’Connor’s solution was to order his three armoured divisions to proceed by blackout night movement under the cover of friendly artillery fire. While this might not eliminate detection, O’Connor hoped by this means to reduce that possibility. Once near the west bank of the Orne only the leading division – the 11th Armoured – was to be permitted to cross the river on the night of 17-18 July. The Guards and the 7th Armoured were to be held back there until the start of the operation. 8 Corps was presented with a traffic problem of monumental proportions, for there were only six available crossing sites over the Orne. A British armoured division in 1944 consisted of 286 tanks, 261 scout cars, 100 armoured cars, and 2,098 lorries of assorted sizes: a total of 2,745 vehicles; thus for the three divisions, the total came to well over 8,000 vehicles.

If there was any real key to success Montgomery and Dempsey considered it to be the preliminary bombing, especially since there were problems in providing adequate artillery support after the first few hours: there was a shortage of 25-pounder ammunition but, more importantly, the area chosen for GOODWOOD was totally unsuited for the constant artillery support required to keep the Germans off-balance. To put the artillery within supporting range meant moving the guns into the narrow salient east of the Orne and this could be accomplished only after the tanks had cleared the area. Moreover, if all went according to plan the leading elements would soon be out of range, so the solution lay in heavy air support, which would minimize the need for artillery by taking out enemy strongpoints, guns and tanks.

Having decided on a need for full air support, Montgomery and Dempsey next faced the problem of how to ensure that it would be approved without the protest and procrastination which had occurred in the past. Montgomery was well aware of the prolonged and often vicious infighting over the use of strategic bombers to attack railway targets in France prior to the invasion. ‘Bomber’ Harris had never made a secret of his opposition to using Bomber Command in support of ground operations, and despite their previous employment only days before, Montgomery suspected that the idea of diverting large numbers of strategic aircraft in support of GOODWOOD would be accepted only if he could convince Harris and the other air chiefs of the benefits to be derived from their support.

Montgomery had written to Eisenhower on 12 July: ‘Grateful if you will issue orders that the whole weight of the airpower is to be available on that day to support my land battle... My whole eastern flank will burst into flames on Saturday. The operation on Monday may have far-reaching results...’ To emphasize the importance of the operation, Montgomery asked Eisenhower to keep all visitors away from his TAC HQ for the time being. The same thing had been said prior to CHARNWOOD, but despite his growing misgivings about Montgomery, Eisenhower took the bait and replied with an equally exaggerated letter: ‘I am confident that it will reap a harvest from all the sowing you have been doing during the past weeks. With our whole front acting aggressively against the enemy so that he is pinned to the ground, O’Connor’s plunge into his vitals will be decisive. I am not discounting the difficulties, nor the initial losses, but in this case I am viewing the prospects with the most tremendous optimism and enthusiasm. I would not be at all surprised to see you gaining a victory that will make some of the “old classics” look like a skirmish between patrols.’ Eisenhower added that Bradley would ‘keep his troops fighting like the very devil, twenty-four hours a day, to provide the opportunity your Armoured Corps will need, and to make the victory complete.’

Eisenhower’s enthusiasm for GOODWOOD and his high expectations quickly infected even the sceptical Tedder, who wrote to assure Montgomery: ‘All the Air Forces will be full out to support your far-reaching and decisive plan to the utmost of their

1 Quoted in Pogue, The Supreme Command, op.cit., p. 188.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
ability.\textsuperscript{1} As recorded by his PA, Wing Commander Scarman, Tedder’s diary for 14 July records that both he and Eisenhower were ‘immeasurably happier at this turn of events. Chief [Tedder] anxious to move Army to action, even if weather makes full air support impossible. Monty seems to have accepted this view.’\textsuperscript{2}

Not only was GOODWOOD seen as a major step away from what SHAEF viewed as Montgomery’s excessive caution and defence-mindedness, but it also seemed to create a new mood of goodwill and confidence after the disappointments over the rate of advance. Sadly, this mood soon degenerated into the exact opposite and relations worsened beyond repair throughout the remainder of the war in Europe. However, all that was in the future; for the moment SHAEF’s optimism was intensified by the receipt of Dempse’s operational order on 13 July, which assigned the following tasks to 8 Corps:

On 18 July will cross R. Orne North of Caen, attack southwards and establish an Arm. Div. in each of the following areas:

- BRETEVILLE-SUR-LAIZE — VIMONT — ARGENCES — FALAISE.\textsuperscript{3}

The mention of Falaise ignited the imagination of Eisenhower and Tedder. If Montgomery intended to drive that far, GOODWOOD would certainly not be another of the by now familiar battles for position. The Second Army plan signalled only one thing: breakthrough!

Montgomery lost no time in pressing his request for full air support, presenting it to Coningham, who passed it to the air commanders at the daily AEF conference at Stanmore on 15 July. According to Leigh-Mallory: ‘Coningham has changed his attitude. At this morning’s conference he laid before me in detail exactly what the Army wanted, and then left it to me to take the necessary steps. Tedder listened and said nothing. I think he has been told by Ike to leave things to me.’\textsuperscript{4} The trouble was that Leigh-Mallory could not be forceful enough, with the result that while there were no objections from the other air chiefs neither was there any firm decision. These discussions continued the following morning; the AEF historical record suggests that there was some concern about the weather and the possibility that it might force a delay. There certainly seemed to have been agreement in principle to support GOODWOOD but the cumbersome command structure of the air forces was never more clearly evident than in this plethora of talk and complete absence of decision.

Montgomery was committed to postponing GOODWOOD unless he received a guarantee of support by the strategic air forces, and with less than forty-eight hours left he needed a firm decision at once. Understandably apprehensive, he ordered his BGS Plans, Brigadier Richardson, to England on 16 July with the assignment of breaking the impasse at Stanmore before it was too late. Richardson was well equipped for this task, having previously represented 21st Army Group there. The experience left him with vivid memories:

I was invited to speak at the conference, and so I said what General Montgomery wanted, and this thing was kicked around and no decision of any sort was arrived at. At the end of it I went up to Tedder and said I’ve got to get a decision on this, either it’s on or not. What do I do next? And he said, ‘You’d better go and see Air Marshal Harris.’\textsuperscript{5}

Tedder played a curiously detached and minor role in this affair. As the coordinator for all major air operations in support of SHAEF, a responsibility he had usurped from Leigh-Mallory, he was the one person capable of breaking the logjam of procrastination by exerting pressure on Harris and on Spaatz, whose 8th US Air Force would also be involved. Instead, he left the problem to a junior army officer to resolve. His earlier promise to Montgomery was now showing itself to be rather hollow.

Several hours later Richardson was ushered into Harris’s office in the massive underground complex at Bomber Command HQ outside High Wycombe. Harris’s first words were: ‘Richardson, what do you want?’ After listening to the army requirements, Harris pressed a bell and said: ‘Send me Air Vice Marshal Bennett — the Pathfinder!’\textsuperscript{6} With Bennett present, Harris demanded: ‘Tell Bennett!’ And for the third time that day Richardson repeated his story; when he finished Harris turned and said

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\item[1] Quoted in Pogue, The Supreme Command, op.cit., p. 188.
\item[2] Tedder Diary, 14 July 1944.
\item[4] Leigh-Mallory Diary, 15 July 1944.
\item[5] Richardson interview, loc. cit.
\item[6] Air Vice Marshal D. C. T. Bennett, AOC, the Pathfinder Force of Bomber Command.
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‘Bennett, can you do it?’ Bennett replied, ‘Yes, sir,’ and Harris announced: ‘It’s on! Richardson, you go and fix up the details with Bennett.’

While the question of air support was being resolved, Montgomery was making crucial and unexpected alterations to the GOODWOOD plan. Dempsey’s original operational order had been published on 13 July, but by the 15th Montgomery had doubts about Dempsey’s intent to drive on Falaise. Apparently worried that his two subordinate commanders might have misinterpreted their mandate, he went to O’Connor’s HQ at noon where, in their presence, he sat down and wrote out a revised directive. Dempsey describes how Montgomery said to him: ‘Let’s be quite clear about this’ – and wrote out a personal directive for me, headed “Notes on Second Army Operations”. It was the first time, and the last, that he gave such a written directive.

These ‘Notes’ radically changed the 8 Corps mission to that of establishing all three armoured divisions in the area, Bourguébus – Vimont – Bretteville-sur-Laize. The only mention of Falaise was that armoured cars should push far to the south in the direction of Falaise, spread alarm and despondency and, as Montgomery put it, discover ‘the form’. Little was said about future operations other than a vague comment of ‘cracking about’ as the situation permitted.

Two things now happened which were to prove a later source of trouble. First, knowledge of Montgomery’s new directive to the Second Army was confined to those involved, and not even Main HQ, 21st Army Group was aware that there had been a change in the plan. Second, a revised operational order was issued by the Second Army on 17 July but the copy destined for SHAEF never arrived. Thus, as the date for GOODWOOD drew near, SHAEF still believed that the main object of the operation was to capture Falaise.

Various explanations have been offered for Montgomery’s

action. The official history argues that he feared that COBRA would probably not follow immediately after GOODWOOD, so it might prove necessary for the German armour to be held there for some days until Bradley could launch his attack: ‘The first and most important task therefore was to win a stronger position from which to fight the German armour on the Caen flank.’ This argument is suspect on several counts. Even though Montgomery was suggesting breakthrough to SHAEF, there had never been any misunderstanding between Montgomery and Dempsey over what the Second Army commander was to accomplish, nor did Dempsey need reminding that it would be impossible to establish an armoured division in the Falaise area without first capturing Bourguébus Ridge. Furthermore, it would have been impossible for the Germans to detach their armour and move it clear across the Allied front in time to hinder Bradley: to have done so would have been suicidal and left the way open for the British to breakout to the east – the Seventh Army, defending in the Cotentin, would then have faced the choice of possible encirclement from the east or withdrawal to the south.

ULTRA was providing unmistakable evidence that the German High Command was expecting major attacks in both the Caen and Cotentin sectors. Of particular concern was an expected drive by the British on the Caen-Lisieux-Evreux axis, combined with an expected landing between the Somme and the Seine by the First US Army Group, the non-existent force in England ‘created’ by FORTITUDE. Thus to argue that the Germans would even consider moving their armour away from Caen is absurd.

None of this was any concern to the harried O’Connor, whose problems were more immediate as he and his staff struggled with the problem of how to mount an extremely complex operation on short notice in an unfamiliar area. O’Connor had argued that Crocker was far better qualified to direct GOODWOOD and knew the terrain intimately but Dempsey would not change his mind. An example of the extraordinary problems faced by 8 Corps took place on 16 July when it was discovered that a British minefield which lay directly across the initial axis of advance could not be cleared before H-Hour without sacrificing secrecy. This minefield had been hastily laid some days earlier by

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1 Richardson interview, loc.cit.
2 Harris is portrayed as difficult and stubborn when it came to the support of ground forces, but in this instance he willingly acceded to Montgomery’s request. Richardson got quicker action from Harris in a few minutes than all the talk at Stenmore had produced in two days. The removal of this final obstacle came none too soon, for there were barely forty hours left before H-Hour.
3 ‘Operation Goodwood’, loc.cit.
4 Ellis, op.cit., p. 110.
5 Bennett, Ultra in the West, op.cit., pp. 92-3.
the 51st Division and had not been properly charted. Now the entire minefield was overgrown with corn and the best that could be done was to clear a few narrow lanes through which it would be necessary to funnel the three armoured divisions.1

Post-war accounts differ about how much Montgomery and Dempsey confided in O'Connor over the aims of GOODWOOD. Dempsey said he did not discuss his idea of GOODWOOD as an exploitation. The idea of such an exploitation was in my mind but I did not discuss it with, or disclose it to, my subordinates. In framing the plan, I confined it and the orders to the opening phase - of securing the high ground south of Bourguébus - in strict accordance with Montgomery's instructions.2 O'Connor did not remember Dempsey ever mentioning GOODWOOD as an exploitation and in his orders to his division commanders he did not specify anything other than the initial objectives.3 Nevertheless, another account reveals that: 'The divisional commanders were told that it was hoped that Falaise would be reached, and this objective was provisionally assigned to the 11th Armoured Division. Major General Roberts related that "We had discussed in conference with Dick O'Connor what should be done after we were firmly established on the high ground beyond Bourguébus and I am quite sure that Falaise was in everyone's mind as a point to be aimed for." When [Major General] Hobart went up to 8th Corps HQ before the battle, O'Connor consulted him as to "the best formation in which the three armoured divisions should move once they had broken through into open country"."4

In spite of Montgomery's more conservative orders, Demp-

1 Extracted from Engineer Report by Major Geoffrey Gallwey, CRE, 51st Div, Liddell Hart Papers.
2 Up to three days before GOODWOOD the 51st Division had been told to hold defensively against a possible German armoured attack. The mines had been laid over a ten-day period; now suddenly the division was ordered to lift them all in two days by night to avoid German detection. The task involved both anti-personnel and anti-tank mines; the area had been heavily shelled, resulting in some being detonated, burried or displaced; recording had not been accurate due to the hasty laying, enemy interference and bad weather. The Highland engineers did the best they could in the two nights given them but it was futile; the best that could be done was to clear fourteen gaps the width of a tank plus ten yards on either side, with three more being added at the last moment. After GOODWOOD, when the task could be done by day, it took three companies of Royal Engineers five days to clear this minefield.
3 'Operation Goodwood', loc.cit.
4 O'Connor interview, loc.cit.

sey remained optimistic that a breakthrough was possible. On the eve of GOODWOOD he moved his TAC HQ up to 8 Corps:

I said to myself: 'As it's more than possible the Huns will break, I will move my TAC HQ up to 8th Corps' HQ. By 1200 hours we may get a report from the leading armour that there are no more enemy in sight - and then what are we going to do? I must be prepared for that.' I felt that the decision couldn't be left to the Corps Commander - I must be up forward myself, so that I could take over and direct the exploitation. What I had in mind was to seize all the crossings of the Orne from Caen to Argentan - the nearer ones with the Canadians, and the further ones with the armour - thus shutting off the enemy's main force, which lay west of the Orne. The air, too, would have been concentrated on the crossings. I had these all marked. What would the Germans have done? First, probably they would have tried to strike eastward over the Orne. If blocked there, as was probable, they would have had to retreat southwards - the only course left open to them. I felt fairly confident of being able to check any eastward attack on their part, once I had secured the crossings.1

It was not until nearly 0200 hours the morning of 18 July that the operation was finally confirmed for the coming dawn. Expectations were varied: Dempsey evidently foresaw the opportunity for a complete breakthrough; Montgomery had refused to commit himself beyond the capture of Bourguébus Ridge; and SHAEF was confidently expecting big results. What none of them had grasped was the strength and depth of the German defences in the GOODWOOD sector. Despite the night movement of the armour the Germans had long since detected this shift and were expecting a major attack. In the days prior to GOODWOOD the Second Army's daily intelligence summaries, while admitting some uncertainties about the location of several of the German panzer divisions, provided no evidence that they were aware of a strong defensive buildup across the Orne. The final summary issued on 17 July contained an ominous hint that the enemy might have as many as 230 tanks east of the Orne, but inexplicably dismissed this possibility by suggesting that the attacking force would probably not encounter more than three divisions, totalling 120 tanks.2

1 'Operation Goodwood', loc.cit.
2 Second Army Intelligence Summary No. 43, 17 July 1944, Dempsey Papers, PRO (WO 285/1).
This intelligence lapse unfortunately coincided with a definite lull in the interception of German signals by ULTRA. In the week prior to GOODWOOD few intercepted signals emanated from Bletchley Park to Allied intelligence officers, and those that did provided no warning of what was occurring on 'the other side of the hill'. Nevertheless, ULTRA did suggest that the Germans were not in the dark about Allied intentions. Shortly after midnight on 15–16 July ULTRA intercepted a signal from Field Marshal Hugo Sperrle, commander of Luftflotte 3, forecasting a largescale attack that would be "decisive for the course of the war to take place south eastwards from Caen about the night of 17–18th".

[Author's italics.] By midday — that is, thirty-six hours before GOODWOOD was launched — this forecast was in the hands of those who were at that moment putting the finishing touches to the plan of attack. This was the best ULTRA could provide and it was evidently insufficient to shake the confidence or cause undue alarm within 21st Army Group. As they would discover, it would have been wise to question whether tactical surprise could be attained.

What the British did not know was that the Germans, under the direction of the new commander of Panzer Group West, General Heinrich Eberbach, had prepared the strongest defensive line yet mounted in Normandy to counter this new threat. The next day was to demonstrate yet again the seemingly endless habit of the Allies to underestimate the tenacity of their opponent.

17 July was a day of misfortune for the German Army. Early that evening Rommel's staff car was attacked by two RAF Spitfires near the village of St Foy de Montgomery as he was returning from the front to his Army Group B headquarters at La Roche-Guyon; his open-topped Horch crashed into a tree, spewing its three occupants onto the road. Rommel was taken to a nearby hospital unconscious and with grave head injuries, so serious in fact that there was no question of his returning to Army Group B. He was later invalided home to Germany, his last battle

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1 Bennett, op.cit., p. 108.
3 On 17 July Dempsey recorded in his diary: '1430 hours — Saw Commander 8 Corps at his Headquarters. I gave him the enemy dispositions as known to us this morning. 'They are at present very favourable to tomorrow's operation.' Dempsey Diary, PRO (WO 285/9).
Above left: Lieutenant General Patton checking the disposition of German forces during the drive towards the Seine in August (left, Major General Gaffey).

Above right: Lieutenant General Dempsey, GOC British Second Army (centre) with Montgomery and Bradley.

Below: American infantry moving up to Mortain in August. The fights for Mortain and Hill 317 nearby were two of the outstanding Allied small-unit actions of the Second World War.

Part of the carnage of the Falaise Gap, where what had been the most modern army in the world was largely reduced to using horse-drawn transport in an attempt to escape the Allied trap.
fought. It was ironic that Rommel's removal from the war should come near a village bearing the name of the general who kept his picture displayed in a prominent place in his mobile office. Rommel had done his best to defend Normandy against the overwhelming forces of the Allies but his task had been hopeless from the beginning. His quarrels with von Rundstedt and von Schweppenburg over strategy, and the implacability of Hitler, doomed his task to one of futility. Within months he would die by his own hand as a result of his involvement in the 20 July plot against Hitler. In one of the more perfidious actions of his rule, Hitler personally ordered an elaborate State funeral for the hero of the Reich he had murdered.¹

Dawn comes early in the high summer of Europe and on the morning of 18 July it was evident that this would be an exceptionally clear day over the battlefields. Three armoured divisions were poised on both banks of the Orne, and the infantry of three corps anxiously awaited the coming of the bombers: in the distance, from the direction of the Bay of the Seine, could now be heard the unmistakable sound of massed aircraft. Bomber Harris was about to make good his promise of all-out support for Montgomery. The great showdown on the eastern flank was about to begin.

¹ Rommel's involvement in the anti-Hitler plot was never more than indirect, but there were too many links from the plotters to the Field Marshal, including his own Chief-of-Staff, Speidel, who was an active conspirator and was arrested by Gestapo. As was his custom, Hitler left his dirty work to others, and on 14 October 1944 two senior Army officers from Berlin visited Rommel at his home near Ulm. He was given the choice of returning with them to Berlin to face one of Hitler's kangaroo 'People's Courts' or to commit suicide by swallowing a poison capsule. In the ultimate act of perfidy, Hitler had arranged for von Rundstedt to deliver the funeral oration and the old field marshal did so in the belief that Rommel had died of his wounds from Normandy, which had been the 'official' version.
CHAPTER 21

Into the Cauldron

The attack we put in on July 18th was not a very good operation of war tactically, but strategically it was a great success, even though we did get a bloody nose. I didn’t mind about that. I was prepared to lose a couple of hundred tanks. So long as I didn’t lose men.

Lieutenant General Sir Miles Dempsey

At 0530 hours on the morning of 18 July Panzer Group West found itself the target of one of the most awesome air attacks ever launched against ground troops. The first wave alone dropped six thousand tons of bombs on German positions along the Orne from Colombelles to Manneville, on Cagny and in the area from Touffreville to Émiéville. A preliminary analysis compiled by the AEF shortly afterwards reported that the entire drop had been approximately 6,000 one-thousand-pound bombs and 9,600 five-hundred-pound bombs on the three target areas.¹ A second bombing attack began at 0700 by medium bombers of the Eighth and Ninth US Air Forces, but by this time there were thick clouds of smoke and dust over the battlefield that many aircraft could not find their targets and had to return to base without dropping their bombs. At 0830 more bombers of the Eighth Air Force completed the task by dropping nearly 13,000 hundred-pound and over 76,000 twenty-pound fragmentation bombs in the area of Bourguébus Ridge. Before the day ended more than 4,500 Allied tactical and strategic aircraft had been in action against the Germans east of the Orne. As with EPSOM three weeks earlier, the Bomber Command attack had been followed up by the massed artillery fire of three corps, supported by naval gunfire, which together hurled nearly a quarter of a million rounds on to the GOODWOOD battlefield. De Guingand was one of those to witness the attack:

I drove out with Air Marshal Coningham to see the bombers attack. It was a perfect opal summer morning. We climbed up into a haystack from which we could see the factory area of Caen [Colombelles] and waited for things to happen. Before long we could hear a drone, and almost immediately the northern and eastern skies were full of aircraft. It looked just like a swarm of bees homing upon their hive. I thought how terrible it must be to suffer under the Harris technique in a German town... One appreciated the great bravery of those pilots and crews as they flew straight into the most ghastly looking flak. Every now and then an aircraft would burst into flames and usually shortly afterwards a few parachutes could be seen making their way to earth.¹

Theoretically everything and everyone in the target areas should have been destroyed but in fact the bombing was not completely successful. Lt-Commd Freiherr von Rosen, the acting commander of 3rd Company, 503rd Heavy Tank Battalion, was positioned with his unit in the orchards outside Émiéville when the bombing began. This sector was pounded for nearly two and a half hours, first by the heavies of Bomber Command and later by medium bombers and artillery fire. The noise was so deafening that all he could remember saying to himself was ‘Will there never be an end to these explosions?’ Suddenl,y the bombardment stopped and there was an eerie silence across the battlefield. When von Rosen emerged from his tank he found that where the bombing had been accurate the devastation was nearly total; some of his Tiger tanks had been literally buried and others turned upside down as if their 58-ton weight had been no more than playing cards. Some of the men who had survived were dazed and demoralized, others were crazed from the incessant bombing and shelling, describing the experience as a vision of hell.²

Somewhere, though, the bombardment had failed to knock out all of the anti-tank guns and tanks situated in and around the hamlets of Cagny, Émiéville and Bourguébus, which covered the British avenues of approach down the corridor from the Orne

¹ De Guingand, Operation Victory, op.cit., p. 401.
bridgehead. The artillery behind Bourguébus Ridge was untouched and a battery of four German 88s survived unscathed in Cagny. Moreover, the bombing had once again caused severe cratering in some sectors, rendering many roads impassable and leaving an enormous cloud of dust over the battlefield.1

As was to be expected, there was great congestion at the six crossings over the Orne where, as far as the eye could see, the roads were choked with slowly moving vehicles and dust. Despite the monumental task facing the traffic controllers the movement was orderly as units patiently waited their turn to cross the Canal de Caen and the river. The most serious problem was still the minefield: the need to funnel all vehicles and tanks through the narrow passages in the ‘friendly’ minefield made movement deliberate and difficult, and greatly hindered the deployment of the Guards and 7th Armoured Divisions. Dempsey had anticipated the problems O’Connor would face in deploying his armour at the last minute and when he gave the 8 Corps Commander a copy of Montgomery’s 15 July ‘Notes’ his guidance was: ‘What we want over there are tanks. It doesn’t matter about anything else... Don’t worry about your infantry or your sappers or field ambulances or any of your [administrative] tail. Just get the tanks and the motor battalions over.’2

Despite the immense obstacles the ground attack was launched promptly at 0730 hours as the lead armour of the 11th Armoured Division – the 29th Armoured Brigade – began its dash into the narrow corridor of the GOODWOOD battlefield. After a rapid advance, which brought leading units to the vicinity of Cagny, the attack began to slow noticeably at about 1100 hours. German 88s and Tigers which should have been knocked out by the air attack suddenly and unexpectedly came into action and began engaging British tanks, many of which were caught like sitting ducks in the open.

Commanded by the highly regarded Major General G. P. B. ‘Pip’ Roberts, the 11th Armoured was generally considered the best British armoured division to fight in Northwest Europe. Roberts was a veteran of the Eighth Army where his 22nd Armoured Brigade had played a pivotal role in the battle of Alam Halfa. Later, he had briefly commanded the 7th Armoured Division as a brigadier and the 56th Armoured Brigade of the 6th Armoured Division, before assuming command of the 11th Armoured in 1943. In 1944, at the age of thirty-seven, he was the youngest divisional commander in the British Army. The 11th Armoured had previously been commanded in England by the legendary ‘Hobo’ Hobart, and, as Roberts has related, the division had been trained exceptionally well in fundamentals – communications, wireless discipline and drills for movement.3 O’Connor considered Roberts the best armoured division commander in the theatre, and years later recalled that no one had ever had a bad word to say about him. ‘He was quite first class.’4

One of the missions assigned to Roberts by O’Connor was the capture of the villages of Cuverville and Demouville, both of which were directly along the route of the 11th Armoured advance. Roberts was not happy with this task, believing that their capture would divert too much of his infantry from the more important responsibility of supporting the rapid advance of the 29th Armoured Brigade before the Germans could recover from the shock of the bombing. Before the operation began he remonstrated with O’Connor that this mission ought to be assigned to the 51st Highland Division, who were to support the left flank of the Canadian advance down the east bank of the Orne during their attack to capture the Faubourg de Vaucelles. As Roberts later recounted the story, ‘It meant that half the division was engaged on the front lines... I not only spoke to Dick O’Connor about it but I wrote to him and said that this is a grave disadvantage to my division, and I was told that if I didn’t like the plan because of my experience and so forth, then one of the other divisions could lead.’5 At the time Roberts never understood what he considered to be O’Connor’s excessive caution, and it

1 Interview with Major General G. P. B. Roberts, 9 January 1980.
2 Interview with General Sir Richard O’Connor, 11 August 1979. The men of the 11th Armoured have never forgotten their exceptional commander. In 1979, while the author was touring the Normandy battlefields during the anniversary of the D-Day landings, a group of former 11th Armoured troopers were overheard to comment on the quality and inspiration of their general and how sorry they were that he had been unable to make the reunion that year.
3 Roberts interview, loc. cit.
was only after the battle that he learned of Montgomery's 'Notes', which he believes was the reason. In his instruction to O'Connor and Dempsey, Montgomery had written that 'The eastern flank is a bastion on which the whole future of the campaign in N.W. Europe depends; it must remain a firm bastion; if it became unstable the operations on the western flank would cease.' According to General Roberts:

I never knew the reason until I saw the 'Notes' by Monty which said that this must be a bastion and therefore, the existing front troops (i.e., the 51st Division) were held there in case anything went wrong with the breakout... It was still carrying that instruction too far because with the Canadians attacking on our right, with the 3d [Br.] Division attacking on our left, and with us in the middle, it would have been impossible for the Germans to have laid on a counter attack if the people sitting in the trenches had moved forward two miles. It was an absurd idea. But it was necessary for them to remain in their trenches until somebody else had taken Cuverville and Demouville.²

O'Connor refused to budge and the best that Roberts could accomplish before GOODWOOD was to strike a compromise with the corps commander. Another of Roberts's tasks was to capture the fortified hamlet of Cagny on the division's left flank near the Caen-Vimont railway line. Inasmuch as he already had responsibility for Cuverville and Demouville, Roberts asked O'Connor to be relieved of this task. 'It was agreed that I would go to take Cuverville and Demouville but that I would only mask Cagny until the Guards [Armoured Division] came forward; and that was a very unfortunate decision because there was nothing in Cagny except four 88s... and those four 88s knocked out our sixteen tanks which were masking Cagny until the Guards arrived. Knocked them all out in a matter of minutes. So I quite wrongly but perhaps understandably advised the Guards when they arrived that Cagny was strongly held. It took the Guards until 4 P.M. to enter the place.'³

1. Roberts interview, loc. cit.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. Roberts relates that Tiger tanks and anti-tank guns had moved in to help defend Cagny from the north as well as the battery of 88s, but believes that the hamlet was relatively undefended from the south and might have been captured far more easily from this direction. Another reason for the long delay occurred because the leading elements of the Guards had been ordered not to attempt to take Cagny if it was strongly held but instead to bypass it and drive on Vimont. This strategy caused untold problems as Cagny held and the Guards' advance stalled.

The German 88s in Cagny were part of the 16th Luftwaffe Field Division and had miraculously escaped the bombardment. Oberst Hans von Luck was the commander of the 21st Panzer Division's 125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the senior German army officer responsible for that area of the front. He had returned only that morning from a three-day rest in Paris, arriving at his headquarters just after the bombing had ceased. In an attempt to pull together the pieces of his shattered defences, von Luck journeyed to Cagny, where the first thing he observed were some fifty to sixty British tanks advancing toward the railway embankment and the heights of Bourguebus Ridge beyond. To his surprise he also found the four Luftwaffe 88mm guns still intact, along with a Tiger and an 88mm anti-tank gun. The Luftwaffe guns were still pointing skywards but von Luck had a more important task in mind and promptly ordered the Luftwaffe officer in charge to move them to the northwest corner of Cagny, to ignore the tanks round the Caen-Vimont railway line and to fire instead at the British tanks following from the northeast down the corridor. The officer refused, stating that his mission was air defence, not shooting at tanks. Von Luck had no time for debate; he drew his pistol, calmly asking the officer 'if he would like to be killed immediately or cooperate. He decided the latter.'⁴ The tanks von Luck had first observed near the railway were those of the leading armour of the 29th Armoured Brigade, the 3rd Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, which had been ordered to move at full speed toward Bourguebus. It was the unit following, the 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, the one ordered by Roberts to mask Cagny, which caught the full brunt of von Luck's brilliant gambit. Not only did the lethal fire take an immediate toll of some sixteen British tanks but, more importantly, it held up the advance of the units following the 3rd Tanks and the advance of the Guards Armoured. It had been at this point that the Guardsmen were to have pivoted slightly to their left and driven through the orchard and hedgerow country to Vimont and the Caen-Falaise Plain beyond; the plan that O'Connor had fashioned was designed to enable a breakthrough to take place either on the left flank, by the Guards Armoured shredding the German defences round Vimont, or by the combined weight

⁴ Quoted in film 'Operation GOODWOOD'.

1 Quoted in film 'Operation GOODWOOD'.
the 7th Armoured and 11th Armoured through Bourguébus Ridge.

General Roberts had assigned the clearing of Cuverville and Demouville to the 159th Infantry Brigade, which spent most of the morning at this task, and as a result they were unable to provide badly needed infantry support to the 29th Armoured Brigade. The armour was forced to carry on with only the infantry of their support battalion (the 8th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade) towards Bourguébus and the villages of Verrières and Rocquancourt to the east of the Caen-Falaise highway. Not only were the guns of Cagny proving to be a deadly threat but now anti-tank guns and Tigers east of Cagny also came into action and began taking a toll of British tanks attempting to converge on the Caen-Vimont railway embankment; these advancing beyond the embankment toward Bourguébus became excellent targets for the German guns and tanks which had escaped the bombardment.

The 11th Armoured had experienced little difficulty in breaching the Highland minefield but the Guards Armoured and 7th Armoured were less fortunate. A monumental traffic jam built up at both ends of the minefield as units of both divisions attempted to follow the 11th Armoured into the corridor. The axis of advance was much too narrow for effective fire and manoeuvre by three armoured divisions competing for the space that, in normal circumstances, would have been allocated to a single armoured brigade. By midday, when the Germans had begun to react with growing intensity, the 7th Armoured Division was nowhere to be seen. Their mission had been to follow 11th Armoured, to provide security to their left flank and capture Bourguébus Heights, but the congestion round the start line prevented their commitment until late in the afternoon when an armoured regiment was finally brought into action.

What 8 Corps was running into late that morning was really topclass German defence. The inadequacy of British intelligence about German strength east of the Orne was unhappily demonstrated by the presence of perhaps the best defensive structure they had yet been able to prepare in Normandy. Other than Sperrle’s warning of 15 July, which had failed to shake British complacency, ULTRA had been of little help to the Allies during the period leading up to GOODWOOD. “The last few days of June and the first three weeks of July turned out to be one of the few relatively lean periods for ULTRA in the west. The volume of traffic dropped when the front became temporarily stabilized soon after the fall of Cherbourg, and was slow to pick up again until Cobra brought about a resumption of mobile warfare a month later...” Under Eberbach, Panzer Group West had anticipated the GOODWOOD offensive and had disposed the forces of 1 SS Panzer Corps and LXXXVI Corps in four defensive belts nearly ten miles deep, with a fifth as the reserve. Within the axis of the GOODWOOD advance were two infantry divisions in the first belt and two panzer grenadier regiments of the 21st Panzer Division in the second. The third belt was a series of villages heavily fortified with anti-tank guns and infantry and some 270 Nebelwerfers – the six-barrelled heavy mortar known as the ‘Moaning Minnie’ – whose fire was used to support the second belt. The fourth belt was the area running from Bourguébus Ridge in the west to Troarn in the east. Finally, there was the armoured reserve of the fifth belt, well out of range of the British guns, consisting of a battalion of Panther tanks of the 1st SS Panzer Division and two battle groups of infantry and Tigers of the 12th SS Panzer. All told, Eberbach held some sixty to eighty tanks as his mobile reserve.

The advance of the 29th Armoured Brigade, without the support of either the 7th Armoured Division or the infantry of 159th Brigade, slowed to a crawl about noon, having advanced nearly 12,000 yards. With the leading elements of Major General A. H. S. Adair’s Guards Armoured Division pinned down by 88mm fire from Cagny and the nearby Tigers, the British lost the initiative. This fact was not lost on O’Connor, who understood that the ultimate success of GOODWOOD lay in the speed and shock which the mass of his armour would have on the demoralized Germans. What neither O’Connor nor any of the other British commanders knew was that the Germans had so effectively anticipated the new offensive. A German intelligence summary of 15 July had warned of an impending attack east of the Orne:

According to information derived from photographic reconnaissance of the lodgement area, the enemy command is planning to start a major operation across the Orne towards the

Bennett, op cit., p. 100.
southeast from about 17 July onwards. It is worthy of note that
this date coincides with the period most favourable for new
landing operations.1

This prediction was followed on 17 July by a similar warning
from Army Group B that the Second British Army was expected
'to push forward across the Orne in the direction of Paris'.2 The
commander of 1 SS Panzer Corps, SS General Dietrich, claimed
to have known of the concentration of British armour east of the
Orne by lying down and pressing his ear to the ground, which
carried the sound of tracked vehicles moving, an expedient he
had learned on the Eastern Front.3

As strong as the German defences turned out to be, they were
nevertheless a mere fragment of what they might have been had
the battle-weary divisions been reinforced with fresh men and
equipment. By 16 July German casualties in Normandy had
climbed to over 100,000, including 2,360 officers.4 When Diet-
rich was interned after the war, he told his Allied interrogators
that during the GOODWOOD battle the only factor that had
enabled the 1st SS and 12th SS Panzer Divisions to keep their
armour in the battle had been the excellence of the German tank
workshops located in the nearby Fôret de Cinglais, where,
de spite primitive conditions, skilled mechanics had made exten-
sive repairs in as little as three to four days. So important was
their work that Dietrich went there to decorate these men
personally with the Iron Cross (Second Class), an honour not
given lightly in the German Army.5

With the advance of the 11th Armoured stalled on the slopes
of Bourguebus Ridge, the critical moment in the battle had
arrived. It was essential that the initiative should not be lost but
there was little O'Connor could do, with most of the 7th
Armoured stuck back at their start-line and the 159th Infantry
Brigade fully occupied in Cuverville and Demouville awaiting
relief. O'Connor's first option was to request another saturation
bombing of Bourguebus in the hope that it would knock out the
remaining 88s and artillery. An urgent request was sent to the
Second Army for another bombing that afternoon, with percus-
sion bombs to avoid cratering. According to O'Connor, his
request was promptly denied. Though he was never told why it
may be concluded that the Allies would have found it impossible
to mount another operation on such short notice.1

The situation had become very sticky for Roberts and his
men. In the early afternoon Dietrich committed part of his
reserves when it became clear that the main British attack was
aimed at Bourguebus: the Panther battalion of the 1st SS was
moved there where it at once launched a series of counterattacks
against the 29th Armoured Brigade. The German commander
had not intended to commit the Panthers quite so soon, but once
they had reached Bourguebus and made sudden contact with the
advancing British armour it proved impossible to disengage. The
remainer of the afternoon and evening of 18 July turned into the
biggest tank battle of the entire campaign, a virtual shootout
between the outnumbered but superior German Tigers and
Panthers and the massed but more vulnerable British Shermans
and Cromwells. Had it not been for repeated attacks by rocket-
firing RAF Typhoons, matters would have gone worse for the
British than they did.

With another major air strike ruled out, O'Connor recog-
nized that his one final hope of renewing the advance lay in
getting at least part of the 7th Armoured forward to assist the
sorely pressed 29th Armoured Brigade. At 1350 hours O'Connor
met Roberts and Erskine, and between them they devised a joint
plan which called for a two-pronged attack against Hubert Folie
and Bourguebus, with Roberts's armour on the right and
Erskine's 22nd Armoured Brigade on the left. The only unit of the
22nd Armoured Brigade to get clear of the mess around the Orne
had been the 5th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment and O'Connor
ordered this unit to move out at once, without waiting for the rest
of the brigade. But, despite the repeated exhortations of 8 Corps
during the afternoon, it became evident to the frustrated O'Con-
nor that his gamble was not going to work: by 1500 hours the 5th
Tanks had only reached the Caen-Troarn highway, and when the
regiment arrived at Grentheville, at about 1700 hours, they were

1 Quoted in Ellis, op.cit., p. 333.
2 Ibid, pp. 333-4. Both warnings were contained in written intelligence summaries and thus not detectable by ULTRA.
3 Interrogation of Colonel General Joseph 'Sepp' Dietrich, Liddell Hart Papers.
4 Bennett, op.cit., p. 163. The German casualty figures were established through ULTRA.
5 Dietrich interrogation, loc.cit.
too late to be of much help to the 29th Armoured Brigade. The remainder of the 7th Armoured was strung out back to the Orne bridges; the 131st Infantry Brigade did not begin crossing until after 2000 hours that night.

There seems to have been a good deal of dismay at 8 Corps that the 7th Armoured had been needlessly slow in closing up on 18 July; it was felt to be one more example of their poor performance in Normandy. However, there really does not seem to have been much that could be done to speed up their movement.\(^1\) Not only was the congestion too great but there was a good deal of German interference with units running the gauntlet of the corridor, as some of the recovered Tigers operating in the area of Emiéville initiated counterattacks. By the time the 22nd Armoured Brigade had finally assembled, at about 1800 hours, and begun the thrust toward La Hogue that O'Connor had directed early that afternoon, they were indeed too late, as the Germans continued to stiffen and repulse any further advance against Bourguébus Ridge. Furthermore, the 29th Armoured Brigade was by this time too spent to begin a new drive: nearly half its tanks had been lost - two of its three regiments each had only about twenty tanks still operational. One hundred and twenty-six tanks of the 11th Armoured were put out of action that day, nearly ninety of them from enemy fire. Some were disabled, recovered and put back into service, only to be knocked out again, while many others were destroyed outright, although a good many crews escaped and also returned to fight another day.

\(^1\) Goodwood is one of the best documented battles ever fought. In addition to the unit war diaries, there is a detailed unpublished account prepared after the war by the British Army of the Rhine, which for a number of years conducted annual battlefield tours. Shortly after the operation concluded, O'Connor wrote an appreciation of Goodwood and several years ago several of the key participants, including General Roberts and Oberst von Luck, were brought together to participate in the film about Goodwood, which is still used as an historical example in discussions of current military doctrine. See, for example, the RUSI Journal, March 1982.

\(*\) After discussing Goodwood with General Hobart in 1944, Liddell Hart came to the conclusion that Erskine did display undue caution, in no small part as a psychological consequence of the Italian campaign which had left its mark on the 7th Armoured. In Italy the division had frequently run into German traps during its advance, and since Villers-Bocage had proved so disastrous, this tendency had perhaps increased. The success of the main thrust of Goodwood depended upon rapid reinforcement by the 'Desert Rats' for the initial gains made by the 11th Armoured. It was Liddell Hart's opinion that the only way to overcome Erskine's caution would have been to have O'Connor alongside him to spur him on. 'Notes for History, Talk with General Hobart, 19.8.47', Liddell Hart Papers, King's College, London.

On the left flank the Guards Armoured Division lost sixty tanks, most of them around Cagny and Emiéville.

Thus ended any possibility that day of securing Bourguébus Ridge or of breaking through to the Caen-Falaise Plain beyond. Had the Guards succeeded in driving through to Vimont, the German positions around Bourguébus would have been vulnerable to a flank attack; but with both divisions at a virtual standstill the turning point in the Goodwood battle had passed without the British being able to press their advantage. Since about 1100 hours that morning the 11th Armoured had been unable to capture any new ground. Now that the initiative was lost it would never be regained.

This fact was understood by Dempsey who undoubtedly conveyed it to Montgomery when the two commanders met at Second Army HQ at 1800 hours on the evening of 18 July.\(^1\) Nevertheless, less than two hours earlier Montgomery had elected to send Brooke a grossly misleading signal that suggested the exact opposite. 'Operations this morning a complete success,' wrote Montgomery. 'The effect of the air bombing was decisive and the spectacle terrific . . . situation very promising and it is difficult to see what the enemy can do just at present. Few enemy tanks met so far and no (repeat) no mines.'\(^2\)

In truth, not only had the air strikes failed to dent the anti-tank defences of Bourguébus, but a similar failure on the left flank had missed Touffreville and created extensive cratering south of the village: as a result, the 3rd Division had not made much headway. Why Montgomery elected to send such a wildly overoptimistic evaluation is a mystery, but it was the first of several blunders he committed during Goodwood that were to damage his credibility. Whatever his motive Montgomery could not claim ignorance, for reports had been flowing in throughout the day. While it is true that there had been a good deal of misleading information put forth during the early hours of the battle, when the situation was still very confused, by late afternoon on the 18th it was sufficiently clear for Montgomery not to

\(^1\) Dempsey Diary, 18 July 1944, PRO (WO 28/59).
\(^2\) Quoted in Ellis, pp. 144-5.
\(^*\) Montgomery also told the GIGS that the Guards Armoured Division had passed Cagny and were in Vimont, and that 11th Armoured had reached Tilly-la-Campagne. Neither village ever came close to being captured during the entire operation.
have misunderstood it. A Second Army sitrep for the period from 0001 to 1200 hours that day had, for example, given a false impression that the main enemy defences had been broken, but this was well before the true extent of problems facing 8 Corps could have filtered back. Dempsey, however, was in close touch with 8 Corps throughout the day and he grasped what was happening round Cagny and Bourguébus. Moreover, barely ten minutes after Montgomery had cabled the CIGS, Dempsey had met de Guingand, although his diary does not reveal the extent of their discussion.

This was not Alamein, where Montgomery could keep hammering away at the Germans until they cracked, but a very delicate operation where timing and speed were of the essence. Despite what appeared to be significant gains, GOODWOOD could not be termed a complete success until Bourguébus fell and as of the evening of 18 July this was still far from a certainty, as Montgomery himself would soon discover. It was bad enough for him to have misled Brooke but he foolishly compounded the mistake by reading a communiqué for the BBC implying similar gains which had not in fact taken place.

While false hopes were being raised at SHAEF and in London, Dempsey seems to have been the only senior commander to sense that the battle was far from decided and that the fleeting opportunity for a breakthrough had vanished. Too much crucial time had been needlessly lost while Robert's infantry struggled to clear villages which ought to have been bypassed and left for followup units to deal with; and the strongpoint of Cagny had held out for long enough to blunt the advance of the Guards Armoured Division. By the night of 18 July most of Caen, except for the still contested Colombelles, was under Canadian control but, important as this was, it had little to do with the main object of GOODWOOD, which was to drive a wedge deep enough to gain access to the German strongpoints blocking further movement on to the Caen-Falaise Plain. Instead of three armoured divisions placing intolerable pressure on these defences, the 11th Armoured had been forced to carry the burden alone. The other grave mishap to befall the British on 18 July was the inability of the 7th Armoured to get forward in time to influence the action. Any doubt about the meaning of what transpired on 18 July was later put in perspective by Dempsey, who said:

Once it was evident that the armour were not going to breakthrough, the operation became an infantry battle – and it was no part of the GOODWOOD plan to get drawn into a costly struggle of that kind. So I really lost interest (only to the extent that I saw there was no chance of it developing into that enthralling battle which I had thought possible) in the operation by evening, and was ready to call it off – except for trying to get onto the initial objectives, which were necessary if we were to obtain a satisfactory tactical position.

During the night of 18 July the Germans moved swiftly to reinforce the Bourguébus sector with fresh troops and tanks of the 1st SS Panzer Division and by the next morning the villages forming the bulwark of their defence – Bourguébus, La Hogue, Four, Soliers, Hubert Folie and Bras – were all strongly defended. The 11th SS was also ordered forward to plug the German right flank between Frépont and Émiéville but did not arrive until the daylight hours of 19 July, leaving a gap in the defences south of Cagny which might have been exploited had the British commanders known of it.

In addition to the loss of nearly two hundred British tanks, casualties for the first day of GOODWOOD numbered approximately fifteen hundred for the 1st, 8th and 2 Canadian Corps. During the final two days, 19 and 20 July, the struggle continued with tank losses and casualties mounting on both sides. The British could claim to have taken only one of the objectives assigned in the revised directive of 17 July, and even that was a near run thing. The 7th Armoured and the 1st SS Panzer shared Bourguébus Ridge, while the Guards Armoured had succeeded only in penetrating a few hundred yards south of Frépont – nearly two miles short of Vimont. The third objective, the area of Bretteville sur Laize, lay nearly four miles south of St Martin de Fontenay, where the 2nd Canadian Division was halted on 20 July.

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1 Operation GOODWOOD, loc.cit.
2 Ellis, op.cit., p. 145. 8 Corps losses were 121 killed and wounded – the heaviest were to the 11th Armoured (246) and the lowest to the 7th Armoured (48). Throughout GOODWOOD tank losses became difficult to document accurately.
As Dempsey had suspected, regaining the initiative was impossible. O'Connor's task was made more difficult by a lack of artillery and air support. Nearly all the artillery was still west of the Orne and what few supporting aircraft were standing by were grounded by heavy rains which swept across Normandy on 20 July. Most of the Allied aircraft were now diverted to support of COBRA, which had been due to commence that day but was itself postponed because of bad weather. With the battlefield a quagmire, further offensive action seemed futile. Montgomery recognized that there was little to be gained by continuing GOODWOOD and officially terminated the offensive that had, for all practical purposes, ended the day it had begun.

One of Dempsey's objectives had been to minimize his infantry losses, and even in this he was not completely successful. From 18 to 22 July (when the figures were complete) casualties within the four corps directly involved were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corps</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Corps</td>
<td>1,656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Corps</td>
<td>1,818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Corps</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Canadian Corps</td>
<td>1,614</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,537</strong></td>
</tr>
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Losses within 30 Corps, which played no direct role in GOODWOOD, were 631 for the same period. The Second Army casualties since D-Day now stood at 45,795, of which 6,168 occurred during the period 18–22 July, or nearly 14% of the total British losses since 6 June. On the surface, therefore, there did not appear to be much to show for GOODWOOD, which one account later aptly termed 'the death ride of the armoured divisions' On the map, the results looked unimpressive. After three days of battle, the British had just reached the edge of parts of Bourguebus Ridge to which they were clinging precariously. South and east of Caen, the great offensive had penetrated nowhere more than seven miles and this on a very narrow front. To achieve

1 War Diary, 21st Army Group, 'A' Branch, PRO (WO 171/139). Figures are for killed, wounded and missing between 0600 hours 18 July and 0600 hours 22 July.
2 Ibid.
Rommel himself lay close to death in a French hospital, leaving von Kluge to inherit command of Army Group B in addition to his post of C-in-C, OB West. Though stretched nearly to breaking point, they had once more staved off defeat in Normandy, but it was clear to the German commanders that they simply could not continue to absorb punishment of this magnitude.

GOODWOOD typified the German genius for defence. Despite the heaviest tactical bombardment of the war and open countryside which was not particularly suited for defensive operations against a powerful enemy who controlled the air, Panzer Group West had not only prevented a British breakthrough but had turned the battlefield into a massive scrapyard of broken and burnt-out British armour. As one British officer described it in his diary: ‘It was a scene of utter desolation. I have never seen such bomb craters. Trees were uprooted, roads were impassable. There were bodies in half; crumpled men. A tank lay upside down, another was still burning with a row of feet sticking out from underneath. In one crater a man’s head and shoulders appeared sticking out from the side. The place stank.’

Dempsey’s reaction was ambivalent:

The attack we put in on July 18th was not a very good operation of war tactically, but strategically it was a great success, even though we did get a bloody nose. I didn’t mind about that. I was prepared to lose a couple of hundred tanks. So long as I didn’t lose men. We could afford the tanks because they had begun to pile up in the bridgehead. Our tank losses were severe but our casualties in men were very light. If I had tried to achieve the same result with a conventional infantry attack I hate to think what the casualties would have been.

Montgomery would doubtless have agreed, for not only had he belatedly obtained strategically important new ground but could claim to have firmly tied down four corps of panzers and infantry during the moment when Bradley was about to launch COBRA, although it must still be noted that had the Germans elected to move away any of their main forces, GOODWOOD would probably have succeeded as Dempsey had originally envisioned. Still, serious flaws in the plan had prevented what might have been far more rewarding results. Had Montgomery, for example, not

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1 Belfield and Essame, op.cit., p. 145.
2 Quoted in film, ‘Operation GOODWOOD’.
tampered with the plan by placing such stringent restrictions upon 8 Corps in his 15 July directive, O'Connor might have been disposed to take greater risks on 18 July.

The boldness originally suggested in the GOODWOOD plan seems to have been needlessly sacrificed by an overemphasis on security. Montgomery's mandate that O'Connor should give first priority to the security of his flanks was inconsistent with the premise that the three armoured divisions must strike quickly after the bombardment while the Germans were still disorganized. As General Roberts has pointed out, it was completely unrealistic to imagine that the Germans could have mounted any sort of counterstroke after the awesome bombing and against the combined might of three attacking corps. Was it a lack of confidence by Montgomery in his armoured units, bred by his previous experience in the western desert, or was it a healthy respect for his enemy? The answer is not clear, but certainly Montgomery seemed to have displayed excessive caution which was not justified and which, in turn, was most forcefully brought home to O'Connor.

The casualty figures do not bear out Dempsey's contention that his casualties were low. Most of the 6,100 losses were again to the infantry, who had been given the unenviable task of rooting out German resistance in the suburbs of Caen and in the fortified villages east of the Orne. Losses in 1 Corps, whose task it was to protect the left flank of 8 Corps, were equal to those of the Canadians and only slightly lower than for 8 Corps itself.

Neither Montgomery nor Dempsey seemed to have grasped the conflicting position in which they had placed O'Connor: on the one hand, security was overemphasized and on the other, O'Connor was told to get his armour forward quickly. Perhaps too much was anticipated from the bombardment, but O'Connor was forced to employ unsound tactics in an effort to accomplish a Herculean task. How different the outcome might have been had Dempsey ordered a combined tank-infantry thrust down the corridor to Bourguébus, where there would have been sufficient infantry available to deal with problems such as Cagny. What the British Army terms 'thrustfulness' had been absolutely essential on 18 July, and the spearhead of the 11th Armoured Division under the command of the most battle-experienced divisional commander in 21st Army Group was the perfect instrument to accomplish this, provided the tanks and infantry were permitted to work in unison instead of being forced to accomplish entirely separate tasks.

Roberts more than fulfilled the requirement for thrustfulness and it was absurd to have expected him to sustain the advance with his main infantry force tied down miles to the rear in Cuverville and Demouville. Here was the first real instance of the infantry shortage directly influencing the tactical thinking of both Montgomery and Dempsey - by deliberately attempting to mould his tactics to a pre-conceived organization of his forces, Dempsey was defeating his plan beyond salvage. Of the many flaws inherent in the GOODWOOD plan, it was this one which did more than anything else to ensure that the offensive would eventually bog down. It was a mistake the Germans would not have made in similar circumstances.

O'Connor's failure was to ensure that the confusion around Cagny was cleared up when his 'masking' instruction showed obvious signs of creating serious problems for both Roberts and for Adair's Guards Armoured Division. It was one of the few occasions in the battle where he possessed the ability to influence the outcome. Thirty-five years later he was able vividly to recall the dilemma he faced then. In many ways, O'Connor was a general far ahead of his time. For example, before GOODWOOD began he had anticipated the need for the infantry to keep up with the tanks (his disagreement with Roberts notwithstanding) and at the same time be protected from small-arms fire which made movement by lorry unsatisfactory. O'Connor found a solution by ordering that a number of the self-propelled gun-carriers of the artillery be turned over to the infantry for use as armoured personnel carriers. There were predictable howls of outrage at this temerity to violate the hidebound organizational structure of the army, and the order was soon countermanded by Dempsey, who was not convinced of its merit. 1 O'Connor's protests to Dempsey fell on deaf ears but in his postmortem on GOODWOOD, the resolute little general again made his point by insisting: 'The difficulty experienced by the infantry was in keeping up with the tanks, which was due to the lack of a suitable armoured vehicle in which they could be carried forward. The introduction of some

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1 O'Connor interview, loc. cit. In 1979 O'Connor still had regrets that he had not pursued the matter more forcefully with Dempsey.
such vehicle, it is felt, is of the utmost importance. The postwar evolution of infantry tactics, of course, saw exactly what O’Connor had envisioned in 1944, when such an idea was clearly considered revolutionary.

The rain and heavy cloud cover that had settled over Normandy on 20 July had forced a postponement of COBRA, and the day when the air forces would again demonstrate their awesome powers remained uncertain. While Bradley and the American commanders anxiously awaited a break in the weather, a storm of another sort was building within the Allied High Command. Its target was Bernard Montgomery.

CHAPTER 22
The Furore Over Goodwood

Ike said yesterday that with 7,000 tons of bombs dropped in the most elaborate bombing of enemy front line positions ever accomplished only seven miles were gained – can we afford a thousand tons of bombs per mile?

Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher

Eisenhower was described as ‘blue as indigo’ over what he considered a lost opportunity; he was also angry at Montgomery’s deception. But the angriest and most frustrated were the air chiefs, over what they believed was Montgomery’s duplicity in promising decisive results and then failing to press his advantage. Unaware of the problems encountered by 8 Corps, they viewed GOODWOOD as the clearest example yet of Montgomery’s unwillingness to take risks.

The air chiefs could be forgiven their distress over this latest turn of events for they had, in fact, been entirely misled by Montgomery. In addition to promising conclusive results from GOODWOOD when he requested air support, he had not bothered to inform SHAEF of his change of orders to O’Connor on 15 July. His revision of the original Second Army operational order was written in only two copies: one was given to Dempsey, who passed it to O’Connor; the other Montgomery retained himself. When the revised Second Army instruction went astray, SHAEF was left in ignorance of Montgomery’s intentions, as was his own headquarters. Montgomery’s message to Brooke during the afternoon of 18 July had been similarly misleading; so was a press conference he gave that evening, during which he read an optimistic communiqué suggesting that 8 Corps had achieved a

1 PRO (CAB 106/1085).

1 Butcher, Three Years With Eisenhower, op.cit., p. 531.
breakthrough. Brigadier Williams later commented: ‘Monty built up 8 Corps under Dick O’Connor trying to break through. Then had a terrible press conference. Talked to them like children. Bloody stupid communiqué he read to them. We hadn’t advanced an inch. That night Dietrich smashed a bunch of our tanks.’

In 1952 Tedder was to comment: ‘There is no question to my mind but that we in SHAEF were quite clear that the intention of that Operation was to push right through to the South. We did in particular welcome the fact that O’Connor was to be given command of all the armour in view of his magnificent courage and leadership when he drove through to Beda Fomm and cleaned up the Italians in the Western Desert. Moreover a drive through to Falaise would at long last have begun to give us the airfield country south of Caen, which had been one of the original objectives.' Even General Belchem was later forced to admit that Montgomery had overstated his case for GOODWOOD, but he blames Eisenhower for misinterpreting his chief. ‘When the plans were announced to Eisenhower, there arose a complete misunderstanding between him and Montgomery. Eisenhower announced that both the British and American armies were about to make a break-through and that the British offensive was to be exploited towards Paris.’ After Montgomery’s 15 July written directive Belchem admitted that ‘Montgomery took no steps to correct Eisenhower’s misunderstanding, lest the massive air support even for the limited attack were denied him.’ Still later, Belchem asserted that Montgomery did not so out of fear that the strategic air forces would be denied him for a relatively “local” operation which amounted to a battle for position. Privately, however, he told Dr Pogue that ‘Monty shouldn’t talk to the press. He tries to do the proper thing, always gets it mixed up and is misquoted. He felt he had to give the interview because there was a view in Britain and the United States that the British and Canadians were doing nothing while the U.S. were doing everything.’

In his Memoirs Montgomery replied to his critics by admitting that: ‘This was partly my own fault, for I was too exultant at the Press conference I gave during the GOODWOOD battle. I realise that now — in fact, I realised it pretty quickly afterwards. Basically the trouble was this — both Bradley and I agreed that we could not possibly tell the Press the true strategy which formed the basis of all our plans. As Bradley said, “We must grin and bear it.” It became increasingly difficult to grin.’ What Montgomery consistently neglected to mention was that there was nothing to stop him from telling the press ‘off the record’ of his intentions: not only were all press despatches censored but the men of the fourth estate had an excellent record of not betraying secrets harmful to the war effort. That Montgomery chose not to talk to them can only have been deliberate. Moreover, nothing precluded Montgomery from being candid with Eisenhower except the mistaken belief that the Supreme Commander had never grasped his intentions in Normandy. The cost of his failure to be frank with his superior was further to strain not only his relations with Eisenhower but his credibility with the air chiefs, who now mistrusted him more than ever. To make matters worse, Montgomery, whose tact was never one of his virtues, foolishly sent a private signal to Eisenhower on the night of 19 July, rejoicing over his alleged gains east of the Orne.

Excerpts from Tedder’s diary illustrate the extent of the concern of the air commanders. Wing Commander Scarman, who maintained his diary, observed:

19 July: It is now clear the Germans have succeeded in holding our attempt to break through. Chief very concerned. . . [More on Montgomery and air commanders] Montgomery will not

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1 Reports being passed to SHAEF were also highly misleading. The afternoon of 19 July a SHAEF G-2 intelligence summary was still proclaiming GOODWOOD a surprise; ‘Our breakthrough into plain south and southwest of Caen has taken enemy by surprise.’ SHAEF Cable Log, 19 July 1944, 1718 hours, Eisenhower Papers.
2 Pogue interview with Brigadier Williams, loc.cit.
3 Tedder, letter to Liddell Hart, 28 April 1952, Liddell Hart Papers. In this letter Tedder stated that his conclusions were made only after consultation with several colleagues who were knowledgeable about GOODWOOD.
4 Belchem, All in the Day’s March, op.cit., p. 204.
5 Ibid.
6 Interview with Dr Pogue, 20 February 1947.

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1 Montgomery, Memoirs, op.cit., p. 257.
2 Bradley knew very little about GOODWOOD and now has made an admittedly speculative assessment by claiming that Montgomery oversold the operation to SHAEF in order to take advantage of a possible breakout and claim full credit for winning the battle of Normandy. Such a spectacular victory, asserted Bradley, would enable him to retain his post as Allied ground C-in-C and stem the mounting criticism. A General’s Life, p. 273. There is no evidence whatsoever to support Bradley’s interpretation.
deal with Conginham, but only with L-M [Leigh-Mallory]. This entails Broadhurst, Coningham’s subordinate, dealing direct with L-M... L-M has even moved his own personal caravan... with Monty. L-M seems to be cashing in on the discomfiture of his own subordinate.

20 July: CAS [Portal] most concerned about the Army failure, the Chief regards Monty as the cause.

21 July: [At a high-level SHAHF meeting Tedder remarked]: ‘Unless we get the Pas de Calais quickly, southern England will have a bad time.’ [A reference to the V-1 weapon menace.] When Bedell [Smith] replied we would not get there at all soon, Chief said ‘Then we must change our leaders for men who will get us there.’

According to Eisenhower’s biographer, he was ‘livid’ over GOODWOOD. ‘He thundered that it had taken more than seven thousand tons of bombs to gain seven miles and that the Allies could hardly hope to go through France paying a price of a thousand tons of bombs per mile.’ There was also talk, unfounded as it turned out, that Eisenhower was considering Montgomery’s replacement. Butcher recorded in his diary: ‘Anyway Ike is like a blind dog in a meat house – he can smell it but he can’t find it. How he will handle the situation remains the principal suspended interest of the diary, at the moment.’ Tedder was deeply concerned that Eisenhower was not prepared to deal firmly with Montgomery and was on the verge of taking independent action on his own. According to his diary, ‘Eisenhower agreed and is preparing a paper to dispatch to Monty. Chief intends, if SAC will not act, to put his views in writing to British Chiefs of Staff. Chief also told Eisenhower frankly “Your own people are thinking you have sold them to the British if you continue to support Montgomery without protest”.

Despite Churchill’s offer that he was free to relieve any British commander who did not measure up – including Montgomery – Eisenhower showed no intention of asking for the 21st Army Group Commander’s removal. He did, however, realize that he must take some action, and on the afternoon of 20 July Mont-
gomery and Eisenhower met privately at 21st Army Group. Nothing has ever been revealed about what transpired during their conversation, but the following day Eisenhower chose to formalize his feelings in one of the many interminable letters the two generals exchanged during the campaign.

Eisenhower’s letter of 21 July had as its stated purpose: ‘to assure myself that we see eye to eye on the big problems’. However, its real purpose was clearly to convey his dissatisfaction to Montgomery. Of GOODWOOD he wrote: ‘Then, a few days ago, when Armored Divisions of Second Army, assisted by tremendous air attack, broke through the enemy’s forward lines, I was extremely hopeful and optimistic. I thought that at last we had him and were going to roll him up. That did not come about.’ Tactfully, but quite firmly, Eisenhower reminded Montgomery that ‘the recent advances near Caen have partially eliminated the necessity for a defensive attitude, so I feel that you should insist that Dempsey keep up the strength of his attack. Right now we have the ground and air strength and the stores to support major assaults by both armies simultaneously... The enemy has no immediately available major reserves. We do not need to fear, at this moment, a great counter offensive.’ The letter concluded with a sharp admonition that ‘eventually the American ground strength will necessarily be much greater than the British. But while we have equality in size we must go forward shoulder to shoulder, with honors and sacrifices equally shared.’

This was the sternest rebuke of Montgomery by Eisenhower during the Normandy campaign, but it did not satisfy Tedder, who complained of not seeing the letter before its despatch. It was ‘not strong enough. Montgomery can evade it. It contains no order.’ As far as Tedder was concerned Eisenhower was irresolute, and Montgomery’s reply of 22 July telling of plans for a new offensive and a new directive to his army commanders did nothing to reassure him that Montgomery appreciated the vital importance of time which had been emphasized in the Supreme Commander’s letter.

Tedder has been accused of a personal vendetta against

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1 Tedder Diary.
2 Quoted in Ambrose, The Supreme Commander, op.cit., p. 419.
3 Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher, 20 July 1944, Eisenhower Presidential Papers.
4 Tedder Diary, 21 July 1944.

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2 Ibid.
3 Tedder Diary, 21 July 1944.
4 Tedder, With Prejudice, op.cit., p. 568.
Montgomery, based mainly on his failure to capture airfield sites on the Caen-Falaise Plain. However, this is a misrepresentation of Tedder’s motives—the truth was that he honestly believed that Montgomery was not aggressive enough and must either be persuaded to change his tactics or be replaced by someone who would. Tedder’s distrust and dislike of Montgomery are well known, but it is a disservice to assert that he would wreck the Allied command structure for personal reasons—he was far above such personal vanity.

GOODWOOD caused endless controversy in 1944 and is still being debated. Several years ago the Directorate of Army Training produced a two-hour film about GOODWOOD. One of the major conclusions drawn from the film was: ‘It is felt that General Montgomery did not plan GOODWOOD as the breakout but that he hoped that a breakthrough might result. This enthusiasm permeated to General Dempsey who, misled by overtly optimistic intelligence, was more confident than circumstances warranted.’

This conclusion seems inaccurate. From its first conception, Montgomery was sceptical of GOODWOOD and what it might accomplish. More probably he considered Dempsey’s optimism fanciful and decided on 15 July that the time had come to ensure that both Dempsey and O’Connor understood exactly where their priorities were to be directed. Certainly he was quite prepared to turn 8 Corps loose in an exploitation, but the experience of six weeks of intense combat against the resourceful and determined German Army must have convinced him that a breakthrough was doubtful. Yet Montgomery was guilty of conveying to his superior the same false optimism he had taken steps to curb in his own army commander, a fact not lost on his critics, who suspected that he was protecting himself against any eventualty.

As if his troubles with GOODWOOD were not enough, Montgomery had another, even more pressing problem to solve: how to pacify a very angry Winston Churchill. The Prime Minister was irate over what he believed to be a deliberate snub by Montgomery to his proposed trip to the Normandy battlefield.

Montgomery had asked Eisenhower to keep all visitors away during GOODWOOD and, inasmuch as Churchill had been contemplating another visit to Normandy at about this time, the Prime Minister interpreted this as a wilful attempt to keep him at home. A perplexed Brooke was summoned to Churchill’s bedside on the night of 19 July; he found him in a rage. ‘What was Monty doing dictating to him? he had every right to visit France when he wanted? Who was Monty to stop him?’ So incensed had Churchill become over the matter that the same day he had sent Eisenhower a petulant letter defending his decision. ‘I have no intention of visiting General Montgomery’s Headquarters, and he should not concern himself about me in any way, except that he should provide a Staff Officer who could show me about... If however, General Montgomery disputes about it in any way, the matter will be taken up officially, because I have both a right and a duty to acquaint myself with the facts on the spot.’

The next day a worried Brooke flew to Normandy and instructed Montgomery to write a note to the Prime Minister stating that he had been unaware of his desire to visit Normandy, and extending an invitation to do so. Shortly after Brooke’s return to London the same night Churchill rang him to express delight, and ‘felt rather ashamed of himself for all he had said!! And well he might feel ashamed of himself! What a storm in a china cup! All for nothing!’ As he later described the episode in his ‘Notes on My Life’, Brooke related that ‘Winston had never been very fond of Monty; when things went well he put up with him, when they did not he at once became “your Monty”’. Throughout their long relationship, both during and after the war, Montgomery was careful not to place himself on the wrong side of Churchill—or, for that matter, of Mrs Churchill. On more than one occasion Clementine Churchill had firmly reprimanded Montgomery when he misbehaved. The first known example of her displeasure with him occurred when Montgomery flew to Marrakesh on 31 December 1943 to discuss OVERLORD with the Prime Minister, accompanied by his aide, Captain Noel Chev-

3 Alanbrooke Diary, 20 July 1944, loc.cit.
4 Bryant, Triumph in the West, op.cit., p. 215.
asse. Churchill was still bedridden with pneumonia and shortly after their arrival Lady Churchill said to the two officers: ‘Well, it’s time we all dressed for dinner. Why don’t you go and change, Captain Chevasse?’ Montgomery interrupted to reply, ‘That won’t be necessary; I never have my ADCs dine with me.’ Lady Churchill bristled: ‘Who are you to tell me whom I entertain in my house! Captain Chevasse is my guest and will dine with us!’ Although Montgomery was later more careful to avoid incurring her wrath, this was not the only occasion when Mrs Churchill put him firmly in his place for his sometimes loutish behaviour in the Churchill household.

At one a.m. on 25 July Eisenhower was awakened by a telephone call from Churchill. Butcher summoned the Supreme Commander to the phone and he responded ‘with a lusty “God damn”’. Eisenhower was heard to say to the Prime Minister, ‘What do your people think about the slowness of the situation over there?’ ‘This morning Ike said he had talked more than a half hour to the P.M. and that during the P.M.’s recent trip Monty obviously had sold Winston a “bill of goods”. The P.M. was supremely happy with the situation. Then de Guingand phoned Ike, to assure him that Monty had “fattened up” the attack, and that one was on today in the British sector, as well as in the American. Ike said he had started to be alarmed at Monty’s hesitance 10 days ago, had confided in Tedder his fears, and now Tedder is just reaching the phase of irritation in which Ike found himself several days ago.”

Both Brooke and Montgomery were extremely angry at Eisenhower’s comments to Churchill. Brooke’s irritation was confided to his diary: ‘My God, what psychological complications war leads to... I am tired to death with and by humanity and all its pettiness. Will we ever learn to “love our Allies as ourselves”?!! I doubt it... it is equally clear that Ike knows nothing about strategy and is quite unsuited to the post of Supreme Commander as far as any of the strategy of the war is concerned!’ Montgomery was stung by Eisenhower’s remarks and never forgave him. In his Memoirs he took his revenge by

castigating Eisenhower for failing to understand the situation in July.1

Quite clearly, the nerves of those concerned with winning the battle of Normandy were stretched thin after the disappointment of Goodwood, and no one was reassured by the news coming out of Germany on 20 July, the date of the abortive attempt on Hitler’s life by a group of German Army plotters led by Colonel Count von Stauffenberg, who had planted a bomb in a briefcase placed under the table of the Führer’s war conference room at Rastenberg, East Prussia – the ‘Wolf’s Lair’.2 When the news reached the Allies the following day, there was concern at SHAEF that Goodwood had lost a momentous opportunity to exploit the obvious disarray within the German High Command. What no one knew was that the many weeks of frustration and concern since D-Day were about to come to an end with Cobra.

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2 Hitler’s life was saved when one of the officers sitting at the heavy oak table moved the offending briefcase to the far side of the table support – away from where Hitler was standing – moments before it exploded. Hitler was wounded but survived and extracted sweeping reprisals on anyone connected with or even suspected of being a part of the plot.

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2 Butcher Diary, 25 July 1944, loc.cit.
3 Alanbrooke Diary, 27 July 1944, loc.cit.
CHAPTER 23

Cobra

It’s a madhouse here. . . You can’t imagine what it’s like.

Field Marshal von Kluge

The same miserable weather that had terminated GOODWOOD had prevented COBRA from being launched on 20 July. After savage fighting the long-sought prize of St Lô fell to Corlett’s XIX Corps on 18–19 July and subsequent preliminary operations had been successful in establishing VII Corps north of the St Lô–Périers road, where three infantry divisions were poised to push wide the shoulders of the gap to be blown open by the bombers of Eighth and Ninth US Air Forces. Several miles to the rear was the exploitation force of two armoured divisions and a motorized infantry division. Defending against the Americans was Hauser’s Seventh Army, consisting of LXXXIV Corps in the COBRA sector, and II Parachute Corps, whose zone extended east to the vicinity of Caumont — nearly 30,000 German troops, considerably more than the Americans estimated. Bradley’s anxiety was noted by Chester Hansen, who recorded in his diary for 23 July: ‘No chance of Cobra today, the weather was misty and the sky grey. General looked at the sky with a mildly profane “Dammit”. Said, “I’m going to have to court-martial the chaplain if we have much more weather like this.”’

Since COBRA was dependent upon the support of the air forces the final decision was left to Leigh-Mallory, who rescheduled the operation for the afternoon of 24 July, when it appeared that the skies would finally clear. ‘We tried to lay on a battle for the 24th, for the Met. said there was more than a 50/50 chance of it coming off. The Commander of the 8th American Air Force [Spaatz] agreed with ill grace, but at the very last moment the weather died on us . . .’

Operations for 24 July were cancelled but not before some 1,600 bombers had taken off. They were hastily recalled but too late to prevent nearly seven hundred tons of bombs from being dropped on the target area. A bombing error killed 25 and wounded 131 soldiers of the US 30th Division. Bradley was dismayed, not only by the accident but by the fact that the bombers had not made their bomb run parallel to the St Lô–Périers road but at right angles, which was contrary to his understanding of what had been agreed with the air force. Bradley regarded this as a serious breach of good faith in planning by the air forces but was unable to talk the air chiefs into making their bombing runs parallel to the road. Faced with the unpleasant choice either of cancelling COBRA or postponing its start indefinitely he concurred, and the operation was rescheduled for the next morning — 25 July.

Although far from ideal the weather improved sufficiently, and COBRA commenced as a virtual repeat of GOODWOOD: wave after wave of American Ninth Air Force fighter-bombers attacked the target area, followed immediately by 1,500 heavies of the Eighth Air Force, disgorging some 3,400 tons of bombs. Sadly, COBRA was again off to a calamitous beginning; there was another ‘short’ bombing which again struck the hapless 30th Division and a unit of the 9th Division. Casualties were severe and included the highest ranking Allied officer killed in Northwest Europe — Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, Commander of Army Ground Forces, who had gone up to the front lines to observe the bombing, despite warnings that he ought to remain further back.

For the American troops on the ground this was a dreadful and frightening experience as thousands of bombs rained indis-

1 Leigh-Mallory Diary, 22–3 July 1944.
2 Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, op. cit., pp. 347–8. The air force claimed that they were unable to funnel down the St Lô–Périers road in less than two and a half hours and, inasmuch as only a few hours remained before the bomber crews were briefed, it was too late to plan such a major alteration.
3 Casualties numbered 111 killed and 492 wounded by the American bombing error. McNair had been designated the commander of the phantom army group in England to replace Patton, whose presence in Normandy could not be kept a secret much longer. McNair was buried in the strictest secrecy, attended only by general officers, in order to avoid any compromise of FORTITUDE.
cimately upon American and German alike. Soon afterwards Hansen recorded the reaction of the commanders on the scene: ‘General Hobbs [CG, 30th Division] said afterwards it was horrible. The ground belched, shook and spewed dirt to the sky. Scores of our troops were hit, their bodies flung from the slit trenches. Dazed and frightened our troops especially since yesterday’s operation where shorts were serious. [Major General Clarence] Huebner [CG, 1st Division] who is an old front line campaigner said it was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen. Remote feeling of helplessness when you see bombs falling. Doughboys were quivering in their holes.’ Bradley’s reaction was pure anguish: ‘“Oh Christ,” I cried, “not another short drop?”’

Panzer Lehr Division was dug in along the edge of the target area and General Bayerlein’s account of the bombing was all too familiar:

It was hell... The planes kept coming overhead like a conveyor belt, and the bomb carpets came down, now ahead, now on the right, now on the left. The fields were burning and smoldering. The bomb carpets unrolled in great rectangles... My front lines looked like a landscape on the moon, and at least seventy percent of my personnel were out of action – dead, wounded, crazed or numbed. All my front line tanks were knocked out. Late in the afternoon, the American ground troops began filtering in. I had organized my last reserves to meet them – not over fifteen tanks, most of them from repair shops. The roads were practically impassable. Then next morning the bombing began all over again. We could do nothing but retreat. Marshal von Kluge sent word at six that afternoon that the line along the St. Lô-Périers road must be held at all costs. It was already broken. But a new SS tank battalion was coming in with sixty tanks to drive to the Vire River and cut off the Americans. They arrived – five tanks, not sixty.”

The Air Force refused to accept responsibility for the tragic ‘short’ bombings on 24 and 25 July. Their investigation con-cluded that no agreement was ever made to bomb parallel to the St Lô-Périers road, and that ‘The bombs which fell outside the target area during the 25 July operation were within the normal expectancy of errors.’ Moreover, they argued that the necessity to concentrate 1,500 heavy bombers in a narrow target area in a minimum of time further complicated the problem. ‘This resulted in a great deal of maneuvering on the bombing run and the rapid sequence of the attacking waves did not permit smoke and dust from bomb bursts to clear, thereby complicating the problem of target identification for following units.’

Thus, COBRA began in depressing circumstances and the rapid penetration Bradley had envisioned did not occur – the advance on 25 July was less than two miles. As acute as Bayerlein’s situation was, the 30th Division found Panzer Lehr ‘doing business at the same old stand with the same old merchandise – dug-in tanks and infantry’. Indeed, German artillery fire was in some instances untouched by the bombing and able to rain heavy fire in front of the advancing American troops.

What no one was able to comprehend at the end of the first day of COBRA was that what appeared to be continued stiff German resistance was in fact a brittle façade which would soon crack under renewed pressure by VII Corps. The pessimism within the US Command was observed by Hansen: ‘We talked of the lesson to be learned from it. Apparently heavy bombers cannot be used in tactical support. Cassino seemed to substantiate that. Yet airmen were enthusiastic about this. Leigh-Mallory and others in it.’ Eisenhower was quoted as saying: ‘I look upon heavies as an instrument for strategic attack on rear installations. I don’t believe they can be used in support of ground troops. That’s a job for artillery. I gave them a green light on this show but this is the last one.’

The following day was indecisive with excellent progress in some sectors and negligible gains in others. VIII Corps initiated

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1 Hansen Diary, 25 July 1944. The front-line troops were positioned only 1,200 yards outside the target area.
2 Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, op.cit., p. 148.
3 Post-war interrogation of General Leutnant Fritz Bayerlein, n.d., Liddell Hart Papers. Bayerlein was highly respected on both sides. After the war he cooperated willingly and energetically in the preparation of the US Army’s ‘European Report Series’ which was a detailed collection of accounts of German military actions in Northwest Europe.
4 According to Bradley the Air Force report was little more than a whitewash, ‘The Air Force brass simply lied,’ A General’s Life, p. 279.
5 Quoted in Weigley, Eisenhower’s Lieutenants, op.cit., p. 154.
6 Hansen Diary, 25 July 1944.
its offensive on the right of VII Corps and ran into a stone wall of resistance, but by 27 July it became evident that German opposition was crumbling fast. What spelled the difference was a daring gamble by General Collins to deepen his penetration in the target area by committing two of his mobile armoured columns before the time was ripe for an exploitation. The possibility existed that the armour might cause congestion on the front, but his decision proved to be a correct one. On the left flank the 2nd Armored Division broke through the German lines at the important crossroads town of St Gilles in what turned out to be the beginning of the exploitation phase of COBRA. VIII Corps suddenly found their progress virtually unimpeded. Bradley recognized that with this sudden turn of fortune it was time to turn Patton loose. The Third Army was to become operational on 1 August but in the interim Patton was given immediate control of VIII Corps.

For weeks Patton had been anxiously waiting in the wings for an opportunity to redeem himself after the humiliation of his relief in Sicily; he was determined not to bungle whatever chance he got. Bradley was not pleased to have him as a subordinate. The campaign in Sicily, where Bradley had been Patton’s subordinate, had highlighted the strong differences in their characters and their approach to command. The volatile Patton was given to sudden fits of anger; his profane manner was often his undoing and a source of embarrassment to both Eisenhower and Bradley, as it was to Marshall. Bradley was repelled by Patton’s tendency to swear at his troops and could never understand his need for crudeness. More importantly, Bradley felt Patton had not been sufficiently familiar with the planning details for HUSKY, that he had left far too much to his deputy commander, and had not involved himself deeply enough in the logistics and enemy situations. He viewed Patton’s insistence on capturing Messina before Montgomery as an ego trip at the expense of his troops. Though he remained a loyal subordinate, Bradley had nevertheless grown more and more disenchanted with Patton, and found serving under him a great strain, so that by the time he was appointed by Eisenhower to command the First Army for the invasion Bradley was delighted to be out from under. ‘I disliked the way he worked, upset technical plans, interfered in my orders. His stubbornness on amphibious operations and his parade plans into Messina sickened me and soured me on Patton.’1 Above all else, two events that did most to sour Bradley on Patton occurred on 3 August 1943 and again on 10 August, when the furious Seventh Army Commander slapped a soldier thought to be malingering in separate incidents at two field hospitals. For a disgusted Bradley, this was the last straw.

COBRA admittedly made an awkward situation for both men, with the one-time superior now the subordinate, but although their journey together to the end of the war was not always without difficulty, Bradley was soon to have ample reason to be pleased with Patton’s presence in Normandy. Patton had already told Bradley: ‘I must get in and do something spectacularly successful if I am to make good.’2 Just how spectacularly successful Patton would be, even he could not perceive at that moment.

On 28 July Bradley began to visualize more sweeping results from COBRA and stated privately that he would not be surprised if his forces were in Rennes within two weeks. ‘We shall continue attacking, never give him a chance to rest, never give him a chance to dig in... We shall never stop until the (German) army is beaten and until the army knows it is beaten. I shall never discuss terms. I shall insist on an unconditional surrender immediately.’

That same day Bradley wrote to Eisenhower: ‘To say that personnel of the First Army Headquarters is riding high tonight is putting it mildly. Things on our front look really good. I told Middleton to continue tomorrow morning [with VIII Corps] toward Avranches and go as far as resistance will permit. As you can see we are feeling pretty cocky.’

By 29 July there was a frenzy of movement across the south Cotentin as four armoured divisions began to pour south of Coutances. The gains had been spectacular and threatened com-

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2 Hansen Diary, 27 July 1944.
3 Hansen Diary, 28 July 1944.
plete dismemberment of the German left flank in Normandy. But it was by no means a simple task; the advancing armour and infantry fought a series of bloody battles with the retreating Germans. One particularly bloody engagement took place near St Denis-le-Gast between a force of the 2nd SS Panzer and 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Divisions and the 2nd Armored Division. After the battle one American officer described the carnage as 'the most Godless sight I have ever witnessed on any battlefield.'

The long-standing dream of mobile warfare was now a reality; what had been planned as a penetration followed by an envelopment had turned into exploitation, supported superbly by Quesada's IX Tactical Air Force. 'From the beginning of COBRA to the end of July, fighter-bombers in the VII Corps zone alone claimed 362 enemy tanks and assault guns destroyed and 216 damaged, 1,337 other vehicles destroyed and 280 damaged. The number of burned-out vehicles along the roads confirmed that these claims suffered relatively slightly from the airmen's usual vice of exaggeration.'

By 30 July the 4th Armored Division, the VIII Corps spearhead, had driven clear to Avranches and, finding two bridges intact over the River Sée, had entered the city unopposed. Situated at the base of the Cotentin between the Rivers Sée and Sélune, Avranches was the gateway to an Allied advance into Brittany and southern Normandy and 'in the summer of 1944 was a prize beyond compare.' However, to ensure that this corridor to the south and west was held open, it was vital that the town of Pontaubault, four miles south of Avranches, should be captured as well. At Pontaubault the road network led south, east and west. American good fortune held during the afternoon of 31 July when the Pontaubault bridge over the Sélune was also captured intact by Combat Command A of the 4th Armored Division.

Six days earlier COBRA had begun as an attempted breakthrough in an atmosphere of despair, but what had been a faint hope of a breakout turned into reality when the last barrier at Avranches-Pontaubault fell. For the first time since 6 June the German defences had not only been bent but broken by an Allied attack. Now, with the combined forces of VII and VIII Corps descending upon Avranches like a torrent, the moment was at hand for an offensive into the Brittany Peninsula and a pursuit of the remnants of a shattered Seventh Army.

German desperation on the western flank was reflected in this anguished exchange between a stunned von Kluge and his OB West Chief-of-Staff, General Gunther Blumentritt, on 31 July:

'It's a madhouse here... You can't imagine what it's like... So far, it appears that only the spearheads of various [American] mobile units are through to Avranches. But it is perfectly clear that everything else will follow. Unless I can get infantry and anti-tank weapons there, the [left] wing cannot hold... Someone has to tell the Führer that if the Americans get through at Avranches they will be out of the woods and they'll be able to do what they want... It's a crazy situation.'

A German attempt to secure the Pontaubault bridge before the 4th Armored arrived was unsuccessful. What von Kluge has described as a *Riesenauf* – 'one hell of a mess' – was about to turn into a nightmare as the Allied general the Germans most feared, George Patton, moved in to fulfil his destiny.

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2 Weigley, op. cit., pp. 165–6. The reader interested in a detailed account of combat operations during COBRA is advised to consult Martin Blumenson's *Breakout and Pursuit* and *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*.