

XIII

IN THE DISTANCE THE EIFFEL TOWER

Argentan to the Seine

15 August—29 August

LIFE EBBED from the German Seventh Army as the iron grip of the Allied Forces began to tighten around the Argentan-Falaise escape corridor. Closing off the final few miles of this gap was a slow sledgehammer operation that would be completed on 20 August. The Fifth Armored was capable of waging such an offensive, as it would ably demonstrate later in the Hurtgen Forest, but this type of fighting was not its specialty. The division was a rapier rather than a saber. It did its best work with quick piercing strokes that cut to the heart of the enemy's defenses.

It was just such a swift paralyzing thrust that the Fifth Armored again was called upon to perform. The Germans who had managed to squeeze out of the Normandy trap were falling back hurriedly to the Eure River, about 80 miles to the east of Argentan. At this water barrier they intended to establish a new defense line with strong points at Dreux and Chartres. If they were successful, to dislodge them would take a major assault, with great losses in men and equipment. The Fifth Armored, therefore, was instructed to race to Dreux and wrest the town and its river crossings from the Germans before they could solidly entrench themselves. It was also ordered to continue beyond Dreux to the Seine and seize crossings over the river between Meulan and Vernon.

Fifth Armored men were still exhausted from the 58-mile dash up from Le Mans and the skirmishes along the Argentan-Gacé Line. But on 15 August the division turned over its positions along the southern edge of the escape corridor to the 90th Infantry Division and by four that afternoon its tanks and half-tracks were on the road grinding east toward the Eure. It was

reported that elements of the 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions were in the vicinity of Dreux and that the 17th GAF* Division having just come down from Holland, was moving across the Seine into the Eure area.

As the division sped through the August night, it was led by CC R on the left and CC B on the right. In reserve was CC A following CC R, while the remainder of the division was behind CC B's column.

CC R's route to Dreux passed through Courtomer, St. Martin, Armentieres and Brezolles. It advanced in two parallel columns with Task Force Hamberg, the 95th Artillery Bn. and C Co., 628th Tank Destroyer Bn. (minus one platoon) on the north and Task Force Boyer, Headquarters CC R, the 47th Artillery Bn. and a platoon of C Co., 628th T. D. Bn., on the south.

After stopping about 3 in the morning to refuel at St. Martin, Task Force Boyer was edging up to the western outskirts of Dreux by noon of the following day, 16 August. But then its advance guard was stopped here by fire from four 88s. The powerful enemy shells destroyed one light tank and killed the platoon leader, Lt. James J. O'Connor. Also the German artillery observers, with the advantage of their position on the Dreux Heights, were able to put down accurate fire on the mobile artillery pieces of the 47th Artillery Bn., forcing Lt. Col. Rosenzweig to move his battalion to a new location.

Racing along on the exposed northern flank, Task Force Hamberg ran into enemy resistance near Crulai. The left flank of the 95th Artillery Bn.'s column was attacked by a platoon of Mark IV tanks that were backed up by infantry and mortars. The artillerymen lost one of their M7s, one halftrack and two other vehicles. Then they leveled their big guns at the advancing Germans and, firing over open sights, smashed three of the attacking tanks and forced the others to retire. Because of this engagement Task Force Hamberg did not come within sight of Dreux until four o'clock on the afternoon of the 16th. By this time CC B had already started to attack the city, so CC R was ordered to block any enemy re-inforcements from moving toward

*German Air Force.

the city from the north and to secure crossings over the Eure from Dreux to Tury.

After their all-night rapid movement from Sees, along the poplar lined highway, CC B's two task forces and the 71st Artillery Bn. arrived in the vicinity of Dreux the morning of 16 August. While Task Force Giorlando, which had led CC B's column in its drive east, assembled just north of Fonville, Task Force Anderson went directly to the river and before noon had captured the bridge across the Eure at Villemeux, south of Dreux. The enemy, completely surprised to find American troops this far east, stumbled about in confusion. To take advantage of this disorganization, General Oliver ordered CC B to attack Dreux without delay.

The Mission fell to Task Force Giorlando. The plan called for the offensive to bear down on the town from the wooded approaches to the south; it would straddle the main highway, with the 15th Infantry Bn.'s A Co. on the right and C Co. on the left. Each company would be supported by a light tank platoon from D Co., 81st Tank Bn. (C Company and the two light tank platoons had been added to the task force's married A Companies to aid in this mission). The attacking companies would also be supported by fire from the field pieces of the 71st Artillery Bn. and by the Assault Gun Platoon advancing along the highway.

Defending the town was a battalion of German infantrymen. They were well concealed along the edge of the woods on the south side of the town. They also had two antitank guns in position with the barrels pointed straight down the main highway.

These Wehrmacht soldiers lay quietly and made no move as the line of A and C Company doughs trudged slowly and cautiously toward the town. Then when the attack wave had approached to within a few hundred yards of the trees the forest suddenly erupted in an outpouring of marching gun, rifle and antitank fire. Stunned by this surprise blow, the dazed GI's were thrown back and two halftracks of the Assault Gun Platoon were destroyed.

Lieutenants Polim and Isaacs quickly reorganized their platoons and then with supporting fire from the tanks, artillery, and assault guns, both companies again rushed the woods. This time

they rolled over the enemy's defenses. With direct fire Lt. Melvin Abbott's Assault Gun Platoon knocked out the two antitank guns.

As the attack pushed through the woods and continued on toward the town, a German soldier, who was a member of the medical corps, came forward and offered to surrender 500 Germans in the town. Colonel Cole told the man he would be given a half hour to bring the garrison out of Dreux. Then the task force held its fire and waited, but after the half hour ticked away and no Germans emerged from the town, the attack was resumed. When the GI's reached the built-up sections of Dreux they found that the cagey Germans had withdrawn to a cemetery and were shelling the houses with mortars and artillery. But this final opposition was soon overcome and by 5:15 p.m. the town was in the hands of the Task Force. The happy inhabitants of Dreux then came out of their basements and other places of shelter and gave the Fifth Armored troops a loud and joyous welcome.

This quick capture of Dreux and the Eure crossings on 16 August made it unnecessary for the Allies to launch a large-scale airborne operation to take bridgeheads on the east bank of the river between Dreux and Chartres. It had been scheduled to begin on 18 August.

The morning after Dreux fell CC A arrived about 8 at Blainville, which completed the assembly of the entire division in the Dreux area. At Marville, where Division Headquarters were bivouacked, a lone enemy plane was shot down when it attempted to strafe the Command Post. Meanwhile CC R's Task Force Boyer had moved out early that morning was pushing north of Dreux toward the Avre River, which flowed in from the west and joined the Eure. The task force's right flank was protected by the Eure but the high ground across the river gave the enemy excellent observation of the moving column. By 9 A.M. the lead elements were receiving rifle, machine gun and mortar fire near Muzy. Some prisoners picked up by Task Force Boyer said they were members of the 17th GAF Division and that they had just come down from Holland to stop the Allied drive to the Seine.

Task Force Hamberg, which has been moving forward paral-

lel and to the left of Task Force Boyer, reached the Avre and secured river crossings west of Muzy.

About 5 that afternoon Task Force Boyer attempted to enter Muzy and Motel but the column was repulsed by heavy artillery and anti-tank fire. Later it was learned that these two towns were occupied by the Antitank Battalion of the 17th GAF Division. At the end of the days operation CC R was firmly in control of all the territory north of Dreux to the Avre and west from the Eure to the railroad.

The Fifth Armored now became concerned with a very important triangle which was known as the Eure-Seine pocket. The base of this triangle was a line that extended from Dreux at the left and to Paris, about 44 miles almost directly east, at the right end. The Triangle's right sloping side was formed by the Seine River which flowed northwest from Paris, while the left side of the triangle was formed by the Eure River which flowed almost directly north from Dreux and joined the Seine a few miles south of Rouen.

This triangle, particularly its upper half, jutted deep into the wide escape path which the enemy soldiers, who had eluded the Falaise encirclement, were using to fall back toward Germany. The area, therefore, was filled with these Wehrmacht troops who were determined not only to get across the Seine themselves but also to keep its bridges open so that those behind them might also get across.

On the morning of 18 August detailed orders came down from higher headquarters which outlined the course the division was to follow in plunging into the Eure-Seine pocket. It was not instructed to proceed along the base of the triangle directly east to Paris, as every man had hoped and would have preferred. Instead, the division was ordered to bisect the triangle, to push from Dreux across the middle of the pocket and hit the Seine River near Mantes, about 31 miles northwest of Paris. It was to occupy the area west of Mantes-Gaissicourt, blocking all roads and protecting the XV Corps' left flank.

This mission was accomplished with lightning speed. While CC R remained in Dreux to protect the bridgehead area, CC A and CC B pulled out of the town by noon on the same day the

order was received. Ten hours later both combat commands had arrived at the west bank of the Seine south of Bonnières. In this race across the triangle they overran several groups of enemy infantry and destroyed one 150 mm. howitzer, two half-tracks and numerous trucks.

That night an unusual scrap occurred at one of the road blocks which had been hastily set up. A Mark V tank, rumbling through the darkness, rammed head on into a tank from C Co., 81st Tank Bn. The Sherman's 75 mm. gun immediately belched out a round of armor-piercing ammunition which struck the gun mantle on the Mark V and was deflected down through the hatch, killing the German crew members. At Gilles the same night the 993rd Engineer Treadway Bridge Co. lost two air compressors and five 2½ ton trucks.

Many prisoners were taken by the roadblocks the next day as several scattered and disorganized enemy groups decided to give up the fight. Without losing a single man, Troop B, 85th Cavalry Sq., captured 142 members of the 116th Panzer Division. But enemy tanks were still active in the upper part of the triangle. To prevent the Germans from floating barges loaded with oil and other supplies down the Seine, Capt. Rolf E. Michelson's B. Co., 22nd Engineer Bn., damaged the locks near Port Villez. Also during the day's operations, Fifth Armored men discovered that SS troops were trying to make their escape in ambulances.

On the Breuilpont-Bonnières highway the division's tanks were met by an overjoyed American pilot; he had been shot down the previous March and since that time had lived in disguise as a French civilian. To the airman's thrill at being liberated was soon added the happy surprise of a reunion with his brother, Lt. Harry G. Eberhardt of the 46th Infantry Bn.

After it was reported late in the afternoon by reconnaissance observers that enemy activity was increasing in the vicinity of Pacy sur Eure, the 47th Artillery Bn. put down on the town a barrage which destroyed some Wehrmacht vehicles. Then early in the evening a force of about 18 or 20 enemy tanks came charging down from the north into CC A and CC B's positions. The attacking armor, however, ran up against a bristling wall of tank, artillery, and aircraft fire, and six of the Panthers were

demolished. When a platoon of Mark Vs tried to move into an assembly area with B Co., 81st Tank Bn., one tank was knocked out and the others fled to the northwest.

After turning the Dreux bridgehead area over to the Seventh Armored Division on the same day, CC R had started moving north along the east bank of the Eure to protect the Corp's left flank. Enemy planes soared in over the column and one was shot down by an anti-aircraft unit. In the path of the combat command's advance lay Anet, which was about 12 miles northeast of Dreux. Prisoners, captured along the route, said the town was occupied by the German 47th Infantry Regiment. The combat command's long reconnaissance arms, which reached out like antennae from CC R's main body, contacted the enemy troops in Anet by 4 in the afternoon and discovered one Mark IV tank and 12 other vehicles in the town. The patrols found, too, that 13 supply trucks from the U. S. 79th Infantry Division were trapped in the woods west of Anet.

CC R rescued the supply trucks and then moved to high ground which dominated the town and its surrounding area. The Germans, realizing they had been put in an exposed position by this American maneuver, launched an artillery-supported infantry attack to dislodge CC R from the commanding heights. The green-clad Wehrmacht soldiers came across the Eure between Anet and Ivry. But CC R poured down heavy fire on the attackers and thinned their ranks before the assault could gain any momentum. Then in quick retaliation Task Force Boyer charged down on Ivry.

Before darkness settled over the battlefield that summer evening the superstructure of the Eiffel Tower was visible in the distance to the Victory Division troops occupying the high ground near the Seine. As they looked upon this old landmark, which heralded the presence of the famous beautiful city reclining at its base, these tired soldiers wished they would now be ordered to move southeast along the Seine to liberate Paris. They wanted the coveted privilege of driving the enemy from this prize city, the recapture of which would be celebrated around the world. And they knew that Parisians, overjoyed at being relieved of the German oppression, would receive their liberators tumultuously.