

Operation on the Crozon Peninsula

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IN my old student days at Leavenworth, while chewing the end of my pencil in the usual fog of perplexity on the upper floor of Grant Hall, I used to wonder why the faculty insisted on presenting problems dealing with the independent division. I had come to believe then that such an operation in future war would be extremely unlikely, and that divisions would habitually operate as parts of much larger masses. The war in Europe disclosed the fallacy of such a belief, and the wisdom of instruction in the operations of the independent division. On many occasions units of this size found themselves completely on their own as far as tactical dispositions were concerned. The operations of the 8th Infantry Division on the Crozon Peninsula, Brittany, in September 1944, were an interesting example.

This was one of the few campaigns in my experience for which ample time was afforded for plans, orders, and reconnaissance; when the various troop units moved into position methodically and without interference; which was amply supported with the necessary means; and which worked out almost exactly as originally planned.

The 8th Infantry Division, with normal attachments of medium tanks, tank destroyers, and anti-aircraft artillery, arrived in the Brest area on 18 August 1944, relieving elements of the 6th Armored Division which had been containing a large German garrison in that fortress. Thereafter, as part of the VIII Corps (2d, 8th, and 29th Infantry Divisions) the division advanced slowly from the north for the capture of Brest. By 10 September the corps attack had progressed so successfully that the 8th Infantry Division was pinched out by the converging advances of the two divisions on its flanks. The Corps Commander directed that the division make a move of some fifty miles and reduce the German defenses on the Crozon Peninsula commencing on 15 September.

The Crozon Peninsula was estimated to contain from 1,500 to 3,500 German defenders

who had the advantage of formidable permanent fortifications and large amounts of artillery. This force had been contained for some weeks by an improvised American unit known as Task Force "A," consisting largely of mechanized cavalry, combat engineers, tank destroyers, light tanks, and armored light artillery. Task Force "A" with commendable aggressiveness had driven west along the peninsula until it held the line

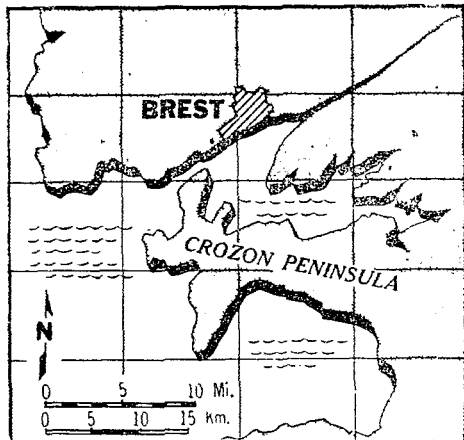


Figure 1.

shown as AA in Figure 2. Beyond this point it had been unable to advance because of strong enemy resistance.

The Crozon Peninsula completely dominates the water approaches to the port of Brest, as is evident from Figure 1. It bristled with seacoast defenses. Until these could be reduced, the use of the port would be completely denied to the Americans even after they were in possession.

The peninsula itself is shaped like a forearm, wrist, and a hand of three fingers and a thumb. The principal town, Crozon, lies at the wrist. The thumb is represented by Ile Longue; and the fingers by Pointe des Espagnols, the Camaret Peninsula, and Cap de la Chèvre.

The forearm and wrist are bisected almost exactly by the Rau de Kerlock, flowing from

east to west. This stream constitutes a definite obstacle to north and south movement north and northwest of Crozon. Another stream of importance in the operation is L'Aber Rau, subject to flooding from the sea for some 2,000 yards inland from its mouth. Paralleling the Rau de Kerlock to the north and south are two distinct ridges, generally covered with the vegetation and hedgerows common to this portion of Brittany. The northern ridge reaches a height of about one hundred meters just west of Kerborel, where a heavily defended airfield was located, and in the vicinity of Crozon. The entire north coast was under observation from Pointe des Espagnols, and the entire southern coast from Cap de la Chèvre, both of which were in German hands. On the other hand, the large hill masses east of the line held by Task Force "A" afforded us excellent observation over the entire peninsula.

Excellent overprinted maps of the known German defenses were available and proved exceedingly accurate. As was to be expected, most of these defenses were sited to fire out to sea. Those along the twin ridges along the forearm and wrist of the peninsula were sited to fire respectively north and south. Those on the thumb and fingers covered all the water approaches to Brest. In addition to the sea coast defenses, however, the Germans had constructed formidable land defenses, generally facing east. Included therein were several old but strong French forts. One of particular interest was situated just northwest of Crozon, and another dominated the narrow approach leading to the Pointe des Espagnols near Quelern. The latter was further strengthened by a high stone wall and redoubts extending entirely across the narrow neck at this point, except for a break near the eastern end, a few yards wide, through which a road passed.

After a complete study of the topography and German defenses it was decided to attack initially with two regiments in assault, each to operate from east to west along one of the forearm ridges, thus taking advantage of the high ground which these ridges

afforded, to take the bulk of the German defenses in flank. The flat, wide valley between the ridges would be mopped up by the light elements of Task Force "A," advancing abreast of the assault regiments and maintaining contact between them. The initial attack of the assault regiments was to continue until the westernmost extremities of the parallel ridges had been captured in the vicinity of the wrist. The left (south) assault regiment would then halt and consolidate its positions while Task Force "A" would push to the southwest and clean up the German defenders in the Cap de la Chèvre, where heavy resistance was not expected. Simultaneously the right (north) assault regiment would resume its advance for the capture of the Camaret Peninsula.

Strongest resistance was expected in the Pointe des Espagnols where the most formidable defenses were located, and where the German garrison of the peninsula was expected to retire for its final stand. The reduction of this finger was to be the job of the remaining regiment of the division, kept in reserve for that purpose, and committed when the right assault regiment had closed into the Camaret Peninsula.

As the division was relieved by echelon from in front of Brest it was moved to assembly areas east of the line held by Task Force "A." Task Force "A" itself passed to the control of the division approximately forty-eight hours before the attack started. Other reinforcements were strong and ample, bringing the strength of the division to approximately 25,000 men. Reinforcements included the following:

709th Tank Battalion (medium tanks) (less Companies A and D).

644th Tank Destroyer Battalion (less Company A).

Companies B and D, 86th Chemical Battalion.

455th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion.

2d Ranger Battalion.

Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 34th Field Artillery Brigade.

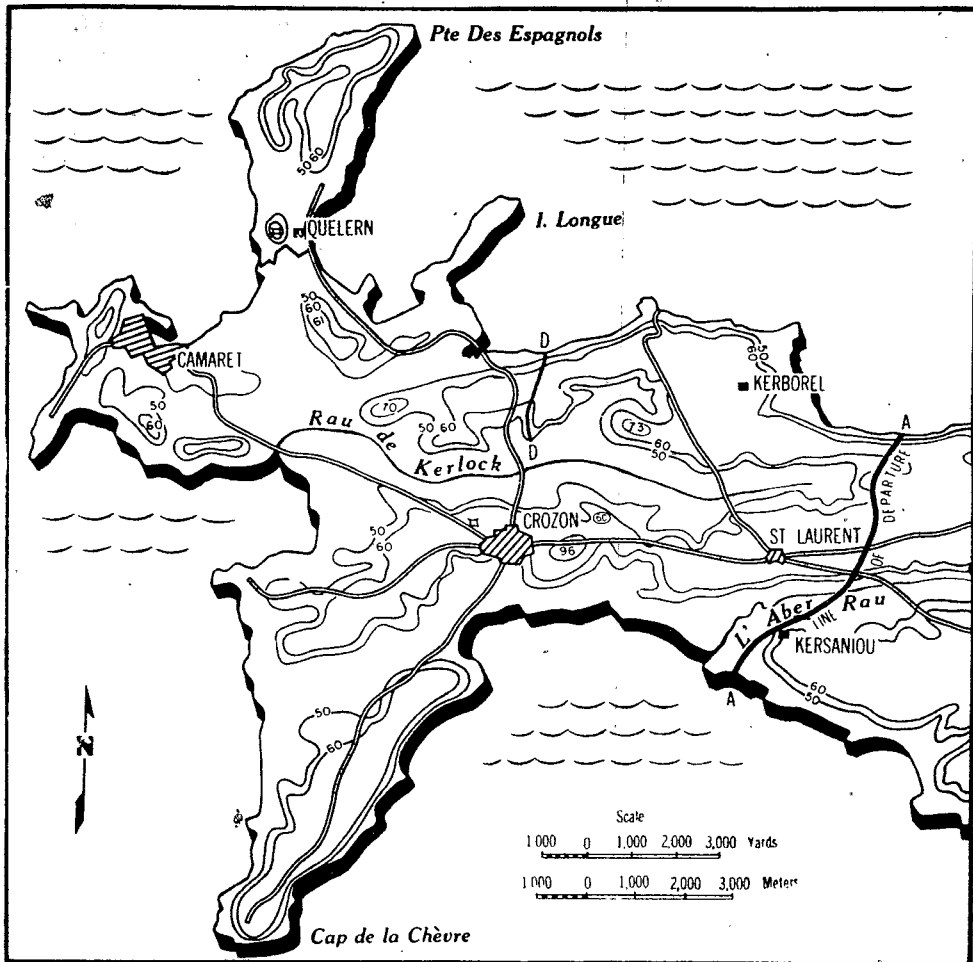


Figure 2.

Headquarters and Headquarters Battery,
402d Field Artillery Group.

265th Field Artillery Battalion (240 howitzers) (less Battery C).

256th Field Artillery Battalion (8-inch guns) (less Battery C).

740th Field Artillery Battalion (8-inch howitzers) (less Battery B).

770th Field Artillery Battalion (4.5-inch guns).

969th Field Artillery Battalion (155 howitzers).

687th Field Artillery Battalion (105 howitzers).

83d Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105 howitzers).

Battery C, 16th Observation Battalion.

All attached medium and heavy artillery operated under the 34th Field Artillery Brigade. All other attached artillery operated directly under Headquarters, Division Artillery. In the latter phases of operation the division also received effective support from American artillery from the Plougastel

Peninsula, several thousand yards to the north.

The division was also authorized to call direct on Thunderbolts operated by the aggressive pilots of the 378th Fighter Bomber Squadron, 362d Fighter Group, based at Rennes.

All elements of the reinforced division were in position by 14 September except the 13th Infantry (division reserve), which arrived on the 15th. All plans had been perfected, orders issued, and ground and air reconnaissance completed by dark on the 14th. Task Force "A" had been relieved from its covering position on the night of 13-14 September by one battalion of each of the assault regiments, and assembled in reserve in the vicinity of Argol [approximately four miles east of St. Laurent].

The 28th Infantry, Colonel Merritt E. Olmstead, attacking in the north zone, started its assault at 0800, 15 September. It attacked with the 1st and 3d Battalions, right to left in assault, and the 2d Battalion in reserve. The regiment was reinforced by Company C, 709th Tank Battalion; Company B, 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion; and Company D, 86th Chemical Battalion.

The 121st Infantry, Colonel John R. Jeter, attacking in the south zone, also employed two battalions, the 1st and 2d, in assault. Its 3d Battalion occupied excellent firing positions on the high ground in the vicinity of Kersaniou, from which it supported by fire the attack of the remainder of the regiment. No attempt was made in this portion of the zone to advance because of the difficulty of crossing L'Aber Rau. The regiment was reinforced by Company B, 709th Tank Battalion; Company C, 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion; and (after the 16th) Company A, 86th Chemical Battalion.

The first day's fight was a typical hammer-and-tongs affair through hedgerow country with which the division had become thoroughly acquainted during its operations in Normandy and the attack on Brest. By dark both regiments had advanced on an average of 800 yards against stiffening resistance

and believed themselves in contact with the German main line of resistance.

The 28th Infantry renewed the attack at 0700 on 16 September and progressed slowly but steadily throughout the day, registering a gain of about 1,100 yards by dark. The 121st Infantry, renewing the attack at 0800 on the 16th, succeeded during the day in capturing an enemy strongpoint at St. Laurent, and in making an appreciable breach in the hostile main line of resistance in the southern portion of the regimental zone. The Germans reacted vigorously against the 1st Battalion on the right during the afternoon, launching three successive counterattacks, all of which were repulsed. Both regiments were now abreast and in a position to exploit the success the following day.

Progress on 17 September in both regimental zones was rapid. On the right, the 28th Infantry, still attacking with the 1st and 3d Battalions abreast, and aided by an early-morning ground fog, quickly overran the airfield near Kerborel, continued to sweep along the northern ridge, and by dark had seized a position nearly 5,00 yards west of its jump-off in the early hours of the morning. Its 3d Battalion moved forward by bounds in rear of the assault battalions cleaning up bypassed pockets of resistance. The 121st Infantry, likewise without change of formation, made even more rapid progress on this date and by dark had seized its regimental objectives in and around Crozon, an advance of about 7,000 yards during the day.

Task Force "A" was having difficulty keeping contact between the rapidly advancing assault regiments, due primarily to the lack of suitable east and west roads through the valley of the Rau de Kerlock. Most of its vehicles were forced to use the ridge roads in the rear of the assault regiments, sending patrols to the north and south therefrom across the valley. As darkness (1900) approached it was evident that Task Force "A" would be unable to advance beyond the road running north from Crozon, although an advance as far as Hill 70 would have been desirable.

At dark the division was buttoned up with the 121st Infantry disposed with one battalion in the vicinity of the fort northwest of Crozon, one battalion on the high ground about 1,000 yards southwest of the town, and one battalion on Hill 96. The 28th Infantry had the 1st and 3d Battalions abreast along line DD, with its 2d Battalion on Hill 73. Task Force "A" was in contact with the interior flanks of both regiments. The 13th Infantry, still in division reserve, had been moved forward by bounds during the day and was at dark disposed with its leading battalion on Hill 60. The 8th Reconnaissance Troop was ordered from division reserve and attached to the 28th Infantry at 2015 on the 17th, for the purpose of assisting that regiment in its operations of the 18th.

The operations of 17 September had witnessed the complete collapse of the German defenses as far west as the wrist of the Peninsula. The withdrawal had assumed the proportions of a rout. Nearly 1,500 prisoners were captured, including thirty officers. One of these unfortunates had in his possession the German field order for the occupation of new positions during the night 17-18 September, complete with the location of command posts, assembly areas, and lines of resistance. This order was promptly transmitted to the artillery of the division, which proceeded to take full advantage of it during the succeeding hours of darkness. It was a field artilleryman's dream. Guns of all calibers pounded the new German areas mercilessly throughout the night, doubtless adding to their already serious confusion and disorder, and paving the way for a continuation of the American advance on 18 September.

The stage was now set for the beginning of Phase 2 of the operation. Prior to daylight on 18 September one battalion of the 13th Infantry was to advance and seize Hill 70 and protect the advance of the 28th Infantry to the west against interference from the southwest. The 28th Infantry was to continue its advance to the west, seize Hill 61 and continue its attack into the Camaret Peninsula. The 2d Ranger Battalion,

attached to the division on 17 September, was to move in rear of the 28th Infantry, swing to the north as soon as uncovered, and reduce the defenses in Ile Longue. The 121st Infantry was to hold its positions in the vicinity of Crozon and to cover the debouchment of Task Force "A" into Cap de la Chèvre.

Operations on 18 September progressed most satisfactorily. Hill 70 was occupied by one battalion 13th Infantry prior to daylight. Under its protection the 28th Infantry swept forward, captured Hill 61, and occupied the entire Camaret Peninsula before dark.

As soon as the 28th Infantry had passed Hill 61 on its way to the west, the 13th Infantry occupied this hill and advanced with the patrols of one battalion as far as the wall across the neck of the Pointe des Espagnols.

The 2d Ranger Battalion had no difficulty in occupying Ile Longue, where it released several hundred American prisoners of war previously captured during the Brest campaign.

It had been planned previously that Task Force "A" would use routes southeast of Crozon in moving into the Cap de la Chèvre. This was found unnecessary due to the feeble hostile reaction and the stout defense maintained by the 121st Infantry on the high ground in the vicinity of the town. All day the numerous mechanized and motorized vehicles of Task Force "A" streamed through Crozon on their way to the southwest. Given elbow room, this highly mobile force rapidly spread out over the entire cape. This proved to be a cavalryman's holiday. By dark, advanced elements of the force had reached the tip of the cape, and gathered in several hundred bewildered German prisoners, including Lieutenant General von Rauche, Commander of the 353d German Division.

This officer had had a busy three months previously. His division had been cut to pieces by the advance of the 9th Infantry Division, whence he had led the remnants to Brest and thence to the Crozon Peninsula, only to be finally hunted down and captured at last.

With the forearm, wrist, thumb, and two of the three fingers of the Peninsula in American hands by dark on 18 September, it remained only to raise the curtain on the last act of the drama on the 19th. It was estimated that reduction of the Pointe des Espagnols would not be child's play. The old but formidable French fort and the wall across the neck were so strong that tentative plans were made to bypass them by a small amphibious operation in which the 2d Ranger Battalion and at least one battalion of the 13th Infantry would participate. Naval landing craft were available but naval authorities would not authorize their use because of the lack of suitable landing beaches along the shore of the Pointe. Numerous small French fishing craft in the vicinity were earmarked for the task if it proved necessary. During the night 18-19 September the bulk of the artillery with the division was moved to the west to be within easy support range of the attack on the following day. Brest had already fallen to the 2d and 29th Infantry Divisions. Arrangements were made with American artillery based on the peninsula north of Crozon to add its weight to the other fires. The 378th Fighter-Bomber Squadron was to participate, with planes in the air at all times. The 13th Infantry, Colonel Robert A. Griffin, fresh and eager, was in position ready for the jump-off in the vicinity of Hill 61. Company B, 709th Tank Battalion, and Company C, 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion, were relieved from attachment to the 121st Infantry and attached to the 13th Infantry on the afternoon of the 18th.

All night, and until 1100 on 19 September, artillery of all calibers battered at the wall and at the fort, but were unable to effect a breach. Accordingly, at that time the 3d and 2d Battalions, 13th Infantry, attacked abreast. These troops, with magnificent élan, scaled the wall, overran the fort, and con-

tinued their advance to the north. The men advanced with parade-ground precision following closely behind successive concentrations put down by the overwhelming American artillery and closely supported by the dive-bombers of the Air Force, which strafed and dropped their bombs repeatedly only a few hundred yards ahead of the advancing infantry. Strongpoint after strongpoint fell, and by dark the victorious troops had reached the northern point. The intrepid young pilots of the 378th were still longing for a fight and were disappointed when, at about 1800, they were told that there were no more targets and that the final objective had been reached.

Near the tip of the point, in a dugout seventy-five feet deep, the men of Company I, 13th Infantry, captured Lieutenant General Ramke, surrounded by the last remnants of his 2d Paratroop Division. Ramke had led the German invasion of Crete in 1941, and was the commander of the fortress of Brest before he escaped therefrom by water in the last days of the siege of that city to make a last ditch stand on Crozon.

Crozon Peninsula, consisting of approximately fifty square miles of as heavily organized an area as any that existed in France, had been cleared in five days of a whirlwind campaign. A total of 225 officers, including two lieutenant generals, 895 non-commissioned officers, and 6,316 privates were captured. This number represented more than twice the estimated maximum of German defenders. In addition, some hundreds were killed. Careful planning; time for orders, reconnaissance, and movement; the necessary means to accomplish the job; maximum coordination between artillery and infantry, and between ground and air forces; and finally, the irresistible aggressiveness of the American soldier paid dividends.

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