

An Epic of Brittany

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Brigadier General R. W. Grow, *United States Army*

IN the bright early morning sunshine of 8 August 1944, a quarter ton draped with a white sheet and flying a white flag sped south through the village of Gouesnou to the high ground overlooking the blue estuary and the city of Brest. The German outpost stopped the truck, blindfolded the occupants and drove it to German headquarters in the city. Here Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Mitchell, Division G-2, with his interpreter presented the demand for the surrender of Brest:

Just a week before, Tuesday the first of August, the long thin column had pushed its way through the debris of the Avranches bottleneck and "turned the corner" toward the west. The 4th Armored had captured Avranches, we had taken Granville and the coast line to the south and southeast. The 79th, 83d and other divisions were closing in. All had to form single column from Avranches to Pontaubault. During the evening of 31 July we had sent our reserve through to hold the

HEADQUARTERS 6TH ARMORED DIVISION Office of the Commanding General

APO 256, US Army
8 August 1944

MEMORANDUM:

TO : Officer Commanding German Forces in Brest

1. The United States Army, Naval and Air Force troops are in position to destroy the garrison of Brest.

2. This memorandum constitutes an opportunity for you to surrender in the face of these overwhelming forces to representatives of the United States Government and avoid the unnecessary sacrifice of lives.

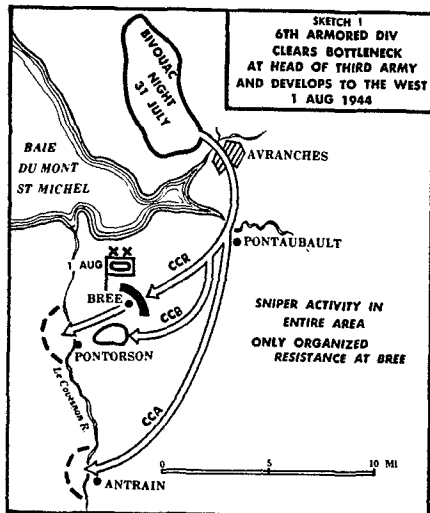
3. I shall be very glad to receive your formal surrender and make the detailed arrangements any time prior to 1500 this date. The officer who brings this memorandum will be glad to guide you and necessary members of your staff, not exceeding six to my headquarters.

R. W. GROW
Major General, USA
Commanding

Unfortunately for us the command of Brest had passed on the previous day to General Ramcke of the German 2d Paratroop Division who had slipped in from the south while we approached from the north. He politely but firmly refused, and Colonel Mitchell was escorted to the outpost and released. The tired troops prepared to attack.

bridgehead at Pontaubault, relieving part of the 4th Armored. At dark that Monday evening no plan for an advance beyond the bridgehead had reached the division. German air was active but it was the rubble strewn road that slowed the Reserve Combat Command (CCR) not the bombs.

Third Army became operational at mid-



night and by 0400 on 1 August we realized what that meant. Corps orders were simple: Not to stop at the Pontaubault bridgehead, push west up the center line of the peninsula in two or more columns, bypass determined resistance, capture Brest. The Corps Commander's visit to the Division CP during the morning was the last we saw of him until Corps headquarters reached Lesneven, near Brest, eighteen days later. The MP's of the 6th Armored Division took over control of the bottleneck road and every bulldozer we could locate worked on the wreckage while all that day and through the night the steel column pushed on, the trains clearing by daylight. The Reserve Command that was to form a bridgehead at Pontaubault continued in the lead with a new mission of a bridgehead at Pontorson. This command bumped into real trouble at Bree where the well camouflaged enemy let the advance guard through, then opened surprise fire on the leading artillery battery. Three of our SP guns were knocked out by accurate 88-mm fire before the column could deploy. In a three hour battle the

strong point was wiped out and a bridgehead secured at Pontorson with a loss to us of seventy casualties while the enemy lost an 88, three batteries of horse-drawn artillery and some ninety prisoners.

In the meantime the cavalry reconnaissance squadron following CCR through Avranches, deployed to both flanks of the main road and paralleled the advance. Combat Command "A" (CCA) next in column, passed through Pontaubault in midafternoon and took the south route, paralleling that of CCR. The hedges were full of snipers who proved more of a nuisance than a menace. Many were killed and some captured but seldom was movement held up. After a week of action, snipers had become an old story, the men made short shrift of them.

Combat Command A made an uncontested crossing of Le Couesnon River south of Pontorson so that by midnight we had two bridgeheads controlling two good routes west.

Combat Command B (CCB), next in column, was to be the right column in the advance. Passing through Avranches early in the evening it advanced by a center route with the division artillery and bivouaced shortly after midnight east of Pontorson, prepared to pass through CCR at daylight.

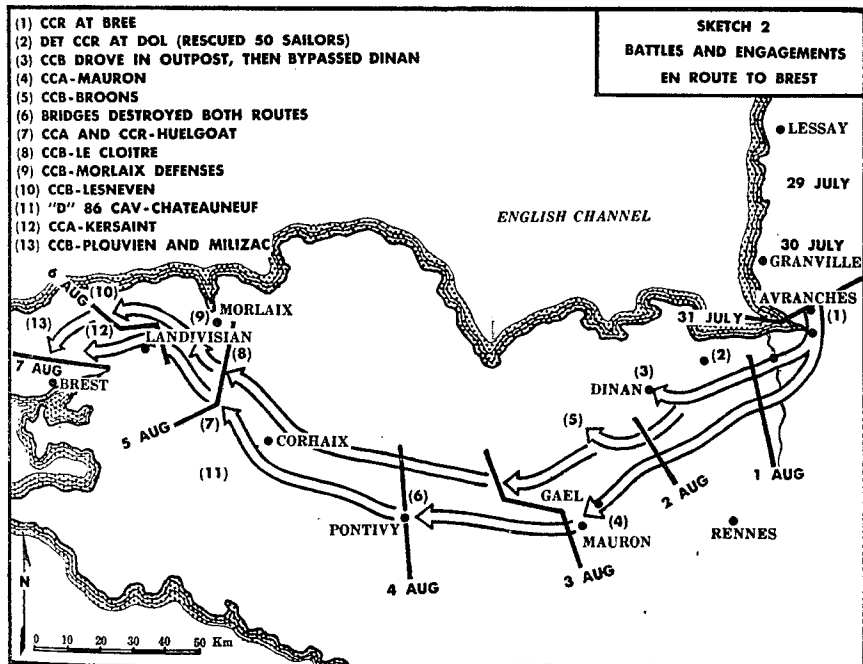
The Division CP set up in wheatfields near Bree where we had a grandstand seat for the great "fireworks" display at Avranches. All night the enemy fighter bombers strafed and bombed the bottleneck. Our divisional anti-aircraft artillery accounted for six enemy planes together with other friendly ack-ack rendered the balance ineffective. Our trains suffered no losses other than shattered nerves, and sunrise found the entire division clear and "in the open" with no division boundaries to worry about, no definite enemy information, in fact nothing but a map of Brittany and the knowledge that resistance was where you found it. Here was

as wide open a field for exploitation as was ever presented to one division operating alone, with only one string attached, "capture Brest." We thought the 79th Division would be right behind us, then we heard it was to be the 83d, but finally on 4 August the Army Commander said we would have no supporting troops. Task Force "A," working along the north coast, would get up as soon as possible. (This force actually reached Lesneven 9 August but was prevented by other missions from approaching closer to Brest.) Our left (south) flank would be secured for a portion of the way by the 4th Armored Division, which followed us, as soon as it could come up. However our later movements were so rapid

that actually during the entire operation and until arrival of VIII Corps on 18 August we had nothing on our flanks but Germans and no supporting troops within a day's motor march after Wednesday, 2 August.

On this day, a new world seemed to open up to the division. We had elbow room, we could stretch. It began to dawn on us that we actually owned *all* roads in Brittany, that the constriction of two to four divisions on a single road was over. The cavalry spread far and wide. The columns sped, hit, bounced, detoured and were off again.

The French caught the spirit of it. On Wednesday they rather timidly waved, by



Thursday evening groups of FFI were on the street with weapons as soon as we appeared, by Friday night, on the long night march, armed FFI road guides were posted ahead of us, and information was actually coming in from the front. By Saturday the country was rising in arms, crudely organized but willing and enthusiastic, particularly eager to accept the German prisoners that were too numerous for us to manage. It was amazing to see and feel a whole population rising to the surface on the appearance of the dirt begrimed American soldiers.

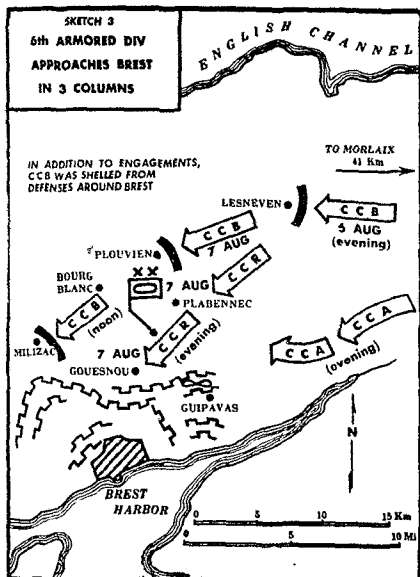
Most of the German inland garrisons "retired" as fast as they could to the sea-coast fortresses. But surprise and speed overtook them and there were daily fights by the cavalry and both columns, as shown on the sketch, and attested by the figures. On 2 August we had thirty-four casualties, captured 150 and destroyed six aircraft guns and an 88. On 3 August we had twenty-one casualties, captured 318, destroyed seven guns and two planes. On the 4th and 5th we lost about 100 men but destroyed seven guns and inflicted double casualties. On the 6th we lost forty-four men, killed and captured over 100 and destroyed a German armored car, five guns, and three "beetle tanks." On the 7th our losses were again over forty while we destroyed a big anti-aircraft warning system outside of Brest, knocked out three guns and inflicted many enemy casualties. This was all preparatory to the major engagements at Brest.

History records that we did not capture Brest. Why? It is interesting to ponder briefly over the "ifs."

In midafternoon Thursday, 3 August, CCA on the left failed to turn west at Gael, continuing southwest on Mauron where it ran into an enemy battalion whose resistance forced a considerable deployment, and the subsequent attack and reassembly delayed CCA until late evening. In the meantime CCB, to the north, had struck

only small resistance at Broon and by late afternoon had sped to the west some twenty miles beyond CCA. While observing CCA's attack at 1600 the Division Commander received by officer courier a long-hand order written on scratch paper directing the advance to the west to halt in place; a force to be dispatched to capture Dinan (which CCB had hit the day before, driving in the outpost; then, confronted by a strong defense and an impassable river gorge, had by-passed). We never learned the reason for the order. The following day (4 August) the order was revoked at noon, but CCA had already moved out toward Dinan to its right rear and it was evening before the advance could be resumed. This loss of twenty-four hours allowed enemy reinforcements to reach Brest including a new commander.

The second "if" was a tactical incident. In order to avoid large towns which were known to be garrisoned and to approach Brest by routes where no terrain obstacles existed, both columns cut northwest from the Carhaix area, crossed the main north coast highway between Morlaix and Landivisian, turned west and struck Brest from the north and northeast. Due to terrain difficulties and some resistance CCA on the left was behind on 7 August when CCB in spite of greater distance and considerable opposition, hit the outer defenses of the city northwest of Gouesnou. As it proved later, CCB hit the strongest enemy position while the "gate" was relatively open to the northeast on that day. If CCA could have hit on the 7th the surprise would have been complete, and there is a strong possibility that it could have forced its way in along the route by which the 2d Division eventually became the first unit to get into the city over six weeks later. Before the entire division could be in position for a coordinated attack on the 9th, the Germans had "closed the door" and the 266th German Division from



three miles southwest of Plabennec. For two days we had carried our wounded forward because it was too far and too unsafe to send them to the rear. Army had pushed gas up to Pontivy, but for many supplies we had to go to the Avranches area. Corps was completely out of contact. We had lost all of our cub planes, mostly from poor landing fields. Even the band had been engaged in a fire fight defending a gas dump successfully. Messengers were lost, killed or captured on the long line of "communications."

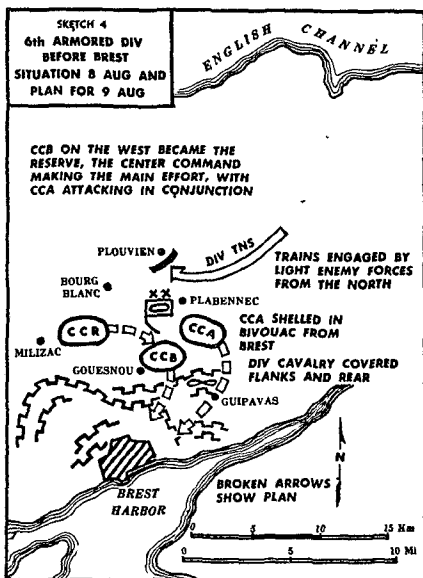
Yet on Tuesday the 8th, one week after Avranches, the tired troops prepared for the assault on Brest in the morning.

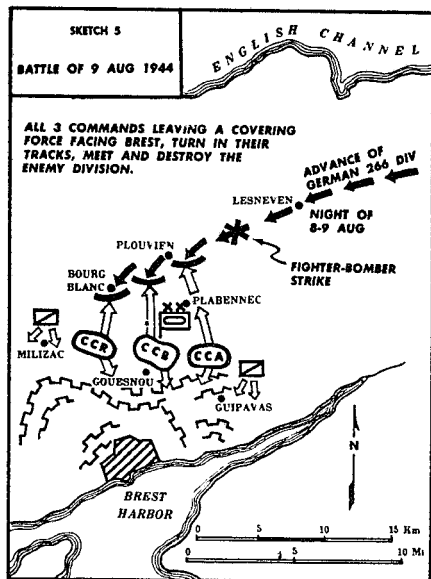
CCB on the right was to become reserve and shift to the rear of the center in the morning. The commander of CCB took over the center column which had had only one battle since Bree on 1 August, and was to attack through Gouesnou. CCA was

Morlaix was behind us as will be told later. The opportunity for a sudden seizure of the great Brittany port city was gone.

Never had a maneuver enjoyed better weather than our operations since the breakthrough. In addition, the bright full moon of the first week in August made it possible to operate in strange country at night. We would have advanced every night if it had not been for the exhaustion of the troops. As it was we marched all night 4-5 August after the delay caused by the order of the previous day, trying to make up time and get to Brest "by Saturday night" as General Patton wished. The German 2d Paratroop Division at Carhaix blocked that ambition by forcing both columns to detour that city, and both had stiff fights on 5 and 6 August.

The Division CP had marched 229 miles in seven days, when just before dark it set up in the high hedge bordered fields





ALL 3 COMMANDS LEAVING A COVERING FORCE FACING BREST, TURN IN THEIR TRACKS, MEET AND DESTROY THE ENEMY DIVISION.

Morlaix was marching towards us from the rear trying to get to Brest! All through the night small-arms fire burst from every hedgerow around the division CP, the PW cage and all along the rear.

That proved to be the final "if" in our failure to capture Brest. Orders were issued during the night for all commands to leave a screen facing Brest, to reverse their directions, attack north in the morning, destroy the enemy in our rear and secure and assemble in the Plouvien area.

The battle of 9 August was a massacre. CCB in the center, led by 15th Tank Battalion and the 9th Infantry hit the enemy main body (896th, 897th, and 898th Infantry) killed over 200 and captured 1000. CCR on the west (now the left) flank struck an enemy column at Bourg Blanc where the 50th Infantry with some of the 69th's tanks destroyed the heavy weapons company of the German 851st Infantry, other mortars, machine guns, and an 88. CCA on the other (east) flank with the 68th's Tanks and the casualty-depleted 44th Infantry caught part of the enemy at Plouvien and completed the debacle. A group of our fighter bombers joined in the action and completely wiped out a column of enemy trains and artillery on the Plouvien—Lesneven Road.

The remnants of the German division were gathered in during the ensuing two days. Our artillery enjoyed the unique experience of having some batteries firing south against Brest, and some north at the same time. The cavalry which had covered the division rear during the all-night skirmishing pulled to the flanks and extended the cordon about Brest preventing the Germans from entering or leaving the city.

On the afternoon of 9 August a battalion of the 28th Infantry, 8th Division, arrived by truck from Rennes and was given the mission of securing commanding ground near Guipavas to cover our projected re-

to attack through Guipavas. The artillery, a total of five battalions, was posted to support all guns being able to reach the city.

One battalion of CCA suffered losses from artillery during the afternoon, and the artillery received counterbattery as it registered in the evening. In the meantime the cavalry was covering the flanks and rear. Intermittent small-arms fire to the north and northeast was heard during the day. The trains moving into Plouvien were fired upon by small arms and artillery from the rear! Something was building up in the north. The absence of cub planes and the presence of the highest hedges we ever encountered made visual observation extremely difficult. About dark—2230 hours—the mystery was solved by the capture of Lt. General Spang, Commander of the 266th Division, who drove his car into an artillery position from the rear. His division which we bypassed at

newal of the interrupted attack on Brest. The same day Task Force "A," of VIII Corps reached Lesneven, and although unable to assist in the Brest operation, was a great protection to our rear and covered the debarkation of supplies at the now enemy-evacuated Morlaix. But further attack on Brest was not destined for the 6th Armored. Before readjustments had been completed, orders arrived 12 August to merely contain the fortress with a single Combat Command and move the balance of the division to Lorient.

The speed, determination and skill of the units of the 6th Armored Division in its advance on Brest 1-7 August 1944 were unexcelled, particularly when it is realized that every man knew we were completely on our own, surrounded by an enemy vastly superior in numbers, albeit of inferior mobility. To this is added that amazing battle of 9 August when the division, in position for an attack at daylight, was reversed 180° and attacked to the rear at the same hour and completely annihilated a less mobile enemy division.

The division losses for the period of this narrative: killed: 130, wounded: 398, missing: 70. Combat vehicles lost: 50, other vehicles: 62, guns: 11. Enemy captured: 3,715.

Some conclusions which we drew from this campaign as applicable to a highly mobile unit operating against a less mobile enemy are:

A rapid advance is automatic flank protection. Only when you halt must you specially protect flanks.

Deployment must be automatic when the head is stopped, it must be fast, wide and bold.

If you are more mobile than the enemy, never waste your time butting into stone walls.

Everybody must know how to fight. Our bridge company at the rear of the trains captured many prisoners by skillful, stealthy foot-work and use of individual arms. Our band leader manned a tank and drove off an enemy raiding party. All elements of Division Headquarters were in repeated fights.

Fire is terrifying, but when coupled with movement it is doubly so. That is why mounted action with guns blazing is so effective.

Falaise Gap, Mortain and the dash toward Paris held the spotlight during this period so that the isolated exploits of a single division were little noted. However the operations of the 6th Armored Division in Brittany can well be considered a classic example of a separate division in exploitation. The lessons learned were put to good use eight months later when the same battalions planted their flags 800 miles east "as the crow flies" on the Saxony hills beyond Chemnitz.

It is in time of peace that this Nation must preserve a balanced, adequate measure of our land, sea and air power lest we lose the peace we have so dearly bought.

General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower