

FOR THOSE WHO CAN REMEMBER

THE HEDGEROWS:
BREAKOUT FROM NORMANDY

July 3, 1944.

"That's just what I need,
four hundred men. . . ."

The fighting in Normandy in June had given the British and Americans a toehold on the European continent, but it was no more than a toehold. Allied forces were piling up on the peninsula, but determined German opposition held them back from the necessary breakthrough into the French plains. A massive force had to be mounted to smash through toward Paris.

This was murderous country to fight in.

Peering out from their foxholes, the infantry men could make out a clutter of low ridges, narrow valleys, marshes, ditches and hedgerows.

The hedgerows were the things that made this ground murderous. The Norman farmers liked to enclose their small plots of land with walls of dirt. They had been doing this for hundreds of years, and each little wall now boasted a thicket of brambles, vines and trees. There were no straight roads, no level ground. Behind each hedgerow--and there were hundreds of them--the Germans were dug in.

This was July, 1944. The landings on the Normandy beaches in June had been rough. The Americans and British had withstood all German efforts to drive them back. But they were

still penned up on the Normandy peninsula. The main objective was the whole of France. Every soldier knew that. But the front-line soldiers knew that before they could break through to level ground, they would have to fight their way through the hedgerows, and it would be brutal.

Back at headquarters, no one felt too good about it either. There were arguments among the generals, as there frequently are on a big operation. General Bernard Montgomery of Great Britain was in charge of the ground forces. Had he moved too slowly and cautiously in getting away from the Normandy beaches? Some of the American generals thought so, and even complained about it to the supreme commander, General Eisenhower. Eisenhower was working day and night to come up with the plan that would give the Allies the breakthrough they needed.

Things were no better in the German headquarters. Hitler wanted to know why the Americans and English had not been thrust back into the sea. No excuse would satisfy him. The senior German general, Field Marshal Gern von Rundstedt, had gotten so discouraged by the Fuehrer's rantings that he had asked to be replaced. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox" of Afrika Korps fame, also disagreed with Hitler about what should be done. Could he pull out, like Von Rundstedt? Well, everything Rommel was, he owed to the Fuehrer. He would have to stay and fight. But Rommel began to hear vague whispers about a plot to overthrow the Fuehrer. . . . even kill him. The Field Marshal was not altogether uninterested in these whispers.

Panzer General Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg had no better opinion of Hitler's policy of holding every last inch

of ground. Von Schweppenburg put his criticisms in writing. He had the nerve to point the finger of blame at Hitler himself. Von Schweppenburg's paper passed up through the chain of command and finally reached Hitler's desk. The next step was inevitable: the general was removed from command and sent home on "extended leave."

The new commanding general was Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge. At this point Von Kluge agreed wholeheartedly with Hitler's policy of "unconditional holding of the present defense line." When Von Kluge arrived at the spot and got a good look at the Allied forces flooding into Normandy, the job looked pretty difficult. But after all, Hitler knew what he was doing.

The German policy was to hold. The Allies had to break through. It was up to them to make the first move. So, hedgerows or no hedgerows, Eisenhower ordered General Bradley's 1st Army to smash through the maze of marshes, brambles and flooded ditches before them.

July 3 was chosen as the date of attack. That morning a drizzling rain made the ground even worse. But the American soldiers left their positions and moved forward toward the unseen Germans. But the attack slogged to a halt.

July 4 was no holiday for the American infantry. In particular, it was not a day of rest for the 83rd Division, which jumped off at daybreak toward the German line. By the end of day, the 83rd had gained 200 yards and taken six German prisoners. It had lost almost 1400 men.

That night the German commander sent back, under a flag of truce, the American medics he had captured. He explained that

he thought the Americans might need the medics more than he did. The German general cautiously added that he hoped that, if the reverse situation ever came up, the Americans would return the compliment.

The commander of the 83rd Division, Major General Robert C. Macon, was not in a good mood. His own bosses were on the phone constantly, asking why his division was not moving faster. Macon himself was trying to keep in communication with his battalion commanders.

"General, we have a gap in the line. We can't move until we close it up."

"Never mind about the gap. Keep that leading battalion going."

"I have only four hundred men left out of twenty-five hundred."

"That's just what I need, four hundred men. Keep driving."

"Germans are infiltrating on my flanks."

"Keep going. They won't hurt you any."

"They shoot us."

"Do not pay any attention to it. You must go on down and attack."

"But I have no reserve left."

"You go on down there and the Germans will have to get out of your way."

This went on. By nightfall Macon was beside himself. "to hell with the enemy fire, to hell with what is on your flank. Get down there and take that area. You have got to go ahead. You have got to take that objective if you have to go all night."

But still, later that evening, Macon did not have much of an answer when his corps commander telephoned to ask, "What has been the trouble? You haven't moved an inch."

The soldiers knew what the trouble was. Mostly it was the ground--mud and hedgerows, from which the Germans maintained a withering fire. Also it was confusion and inexperience. They had never run into anything like this before. Then again, the tanks weren't able to move through this ground. It was not surprising that the men in the tanks were reluctant to get too far ahead. They lacked confidence in the infantry's ability to protect them.

The attack bogged down. The Americans dug in again. The weather was rotten, the mud was awful. The soldiers were increasingly jumpy. Adding to their nervousness was the rumor that the Germans were moving heavy armored columns up to their front lines to attack.

This rumor was not false. The German commander had decided that this was the time to counterattack, and he knew just where to get the unit that would spearhead his strike. The massive Panzer Lehr Division, a crack tank unit of the German army, was moving into position. Panzer Lehr had the latest equipment and plenty of it. Its men were experienced, hard-bitten and cocky. They were aching for a shot at the Americans. After fighting against the Russians on the Eastern Front, the men of Panzer Lehr figured that the Yanks would be easy.

In response to the rumor, American tank destroyer companies were brought up to the front. One such group had placed its three-inch guns along a main road. The soldiers grew more and

more tense as stragglers passed through with the news that the German armor was coming. "They're just over the hill." The American soldiers groped around the tank destroyer guns and waited for the telltale sound of tank engines.

They strained their eyes into the gloom. At last, coming into sight about a thousand yards away, they saw what they were waiting for. A tank, moving slowly, nosed into view. Then came another, and another. The tanks were spraying machine-gun fire into the fields around them.

"Here they come!" The anti-tank company opened fire and the first round scored a direct hit on the lead tank.

At the same moment the commander of an American tank brigade was trying to make radio contact with the leader of one of his tank companies which had moved on ahead. Suddenly he heard the voice of the tank commander. When men are wounded, they often say things that sound stilted and artificial. What the brigade commander heard was, "I am in dreadful agony."

For, while Panzer Lehr was coming, it had not come yet. The American anti-tank gunners had opened up on their own tanks.

The tanks reversed direction and rumbled away from this danger. On the way, they were strafed by American planes. The confusion was finally cleared up, and the tank brigade commander was removed. But two of the U.S. tanks had been knocked out.

The next time tanks appeared, they were Germans. The Panzer Lehr Division had begun its attack.

Just before dawn on July 11, General Fritz Bayerlein led Panzer Lehr into the American positions. Arrogantly the Germans talked to each other on their radios with out any attempt at

secrecy. This, they thought, might scare the inexperienced Americans.

The Americans were nervous but they were not scared. There was confused and bitter fighting in the hedgerows, but as the day wore on, Bayerlein realized he was not going to break through. Panzer Lehr, not quite as cocky as it had been before, retired into defensive positions. It had lost about a quarter of its strength.

Now it was the Americans' turn to attack. After desperate fighting they were approaching the city of St. Lo, the gateway to a breakout from the Normandy peninsula. Before dawn on July 17, a U.S. battalion led by Major Thomas D. Howie was closest to the town. Howie was asked if he could take his troops into St. Lo itself, and his reply was, "Will do." A few minutes later Major Howie was killed by an enemy shell.

But the Americans had enough momentum to take St. Lo. On the afternoon of July 18, a U.S. task force smashed through German roadblocks and entered the northeast part of the city. Major Howie's flag-draped body was carried on a jeep as an emblem of battle. Years later, travelers to St. Lo passed a roadside sign that read, "This martyred city was liberated. . .by Major Howie, killed at the head of his troops."

St. Lo was taken, and Field Marshal Rommel was unconscious in a hospital after an Allied plane had machine-gunned his car. But there was still no breakthrough. Allied losses had been heavy, and a feeling of despair was setting in.

It wasn't just the hedgerows. In another part of the line, General Macon's 83rd Division had an opportunity to attack across

flat ground toward the town of La Varde. La Varde did not contain many Germans, and the ground was smooth. Too smooth. It was like attacking "across a billiard table." Without cover, American infantrymen were mowed down by the German machine guns, which had a clear field of fire. Again there was no breakthrough. Again the Allies were stopped.

It was at this point that Operation Cobra came into being. The American commanders concluded that heavy bombing from the air was the only way to blast a hole through the German line. The plan included high-altitude bombing by big planes.

Heavy bomber support of ground troops has always been a tricky business. Infantry commanders protested when they heard that B-17's and B-24's were to be used in the attack. The weather was unusually bad. How would the bombers, from high altitudes, be able to pinpoint their bombs so as not to hit American positions?

This question was kicked around at great length between ground and air force commanders. The ground generals insisted that the planes make their bombing runs across the German lines and not across the American lines at all. This was too tough, the air force commanders said. The bombers would be under fire for too long a period and would be unable to get satisfactory results.

Eventually the air force commanders won this point. They would not make parallel bombing runs across the German lines. They would come up toward the German positions from behind their own lines. To cut down the possibility that bombs would be released early on American troops, the troops were pulled back