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Hist - 1st Tank Dest Bde (Task Force "A")

24 Nov 42 - 31 Dec 44



OPERATIONS OF TASK FORCE "A", 1 AUGUST - 24 SEPTEMBER 1944

As a result of the Third United States Army breakthrough north of AVRANCHES, tremendous possibilities of exploitation were opened. The Third United States Army, supported by the 19th Tactical Air Command, continued its pursuit of enemy elements to the south and west. The VIII Corps was assigned the mission of advancing to the west and southwest at 0600, 2 August to clear the BRITTANY PENINSULA and to capture the important port of BREST.

Divisions assigned to the VIII Corps were given missions as outlined in F.O. #10, Headquarters, VIII Corps, dated 2 August 1944.

In confirmation of verbal orders issued 31 July, F.O. #10, Headquarters, VIII Corps, 2 August 1944, set up Task Force "A" with troops attached: Headquarters, 1st Tank Destroyer Brigade, 15th Cavalry Group consisting of the 15th and 17th Cavalry Squadrons, Headquarters, 6th Tank Destroyer Group, 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 159th Engineer Combat Battalion, and 509th Engineer Light Ponton Company. Task Force "A"'s mission was to advance on BREST, secure and hold vital bridges of the important double track railroad from BREST to RENNES.

Terrain of the north coastal strip of the BRITTANY PENINSULA favored the employment of a lightly armored, fully mobile unit of the type of Task Force "A", but suggested possibilities of enemy defense outside its capabilities that would call for infantry assault.

The principal coastal highway (Route "A") proceeds from the major port of BREST (9599), east through MORLAIX (4516), GUINGAMP (9510), ST. BRIEUC (2304), DINAN (7694), to PONTORSON (1703). This highway generally lies several miles from the coast, but near the head of the estuaries, the road passes very close to the coast.

This East-West road is <sup>crossed</sup> ~~crossed~~ throughout its length by a network of trans-peninsula paved roads, generally well maintained. There is a double track East-West main line ~~road~~ <sup>railroad</sup> running from BREST to MORLAIX, GUINGAMP, ST. BRIEUC, LAMBALLE (4298), to RENNES (0154). A main line double track route also runs from ST. MALO (7915) to RENNES, via DOL (9803).

The many sharp river banks which cross all routes through BRITTANY greatly favor defensive action by the enemy. The defensive possibilities are further enhanced by the observation advantages held by the enemy. Use of armor is restricted greatly. Seizure of the central plateau will reduce the enemy defense to isolated pockets along the coast.

The G2 estimate of the enemy strength and identification of enemy units was incomplete. German units known to be located in the BREST peninsula included the 343rd Infantry Division, composed of the 851st and 852nd Infantry Regiments plus organic artillery and divisional units - 8500 men; the 896th Infantry Regiment of the 265th Infantry Division - 2000 men; the 10th Paratroop Regiment of the 2nd Paratroop Division - 2000 men; naval troops; conservatively estimated at 10,000 men; Todt workers, estimated at 10,000 men; OST battalions, estimated at 10,000 men, for a total of 42,500 men.

Thus the enemy had available for commitment in BRITTANY 12,500 infantry troops, plus the personnel stationed in the BREST garrison, composed of marines and coastal defense troops variously estimated in strength from 20,000 to 50,000, plus miscellaneous labor battalions of foreign personnel.



Brigadier General Herbert L. Earnest, Commander of the First Tank Destroyer Brigade, was given command of Task Force "A".

General Earnest, on 1 August, visited Third Army, VIII Corps, and 6th Armored Division Headquarters. He requested detail of infantry support of TFA's mission in view of the number of enemy troops in the northern part of the BRITTANY peninsula and the probability that they could establish a line of strong points astride his route which his forces would be unable either to breach or bypass. VIII Corps' decision was not to grant infantry support at this time. On 2 August 1944, VIII Corps issued F.O. #10 establishing Task Force "A" and setting forth its mission. It also set forth the plans of the VIII Corps in clearing the BRITTANY PENINSULA as shown below:

HQ VIII CORPS  
APO 308, U.S. Army,  
022100B August 1944  
Vic SARTILLY

FO #10.

Maps: Special Map B, Scale 1/500,000.

1. a. See G-2 Estimate No. 5, 1 Aug 1944. Two additional combat teams, estimated one each from 319th and 343d Inf Divs have appeared on 6th Armd Div front. Civilian reports indicate extensive demolitions in ST MALO HARBOR, night 1 August.  
b. THIRD U.S. ARMY supported by XIX TAC continues pursuit to S and W. XV Corps advances on L of VIII Corps.
2. a. VIII CORPS advances to the W and SW at 020600B August 1944 to clear the BRITTANY PENINSULA and capture BREST.  
b. (1) Formation: Armd Divs abreast, followed by Inf Divs.  
(2) Routes of adv - Special Map "B".
3. a. 6 ARMD DIV:  
Atchd: 603 TD Bn  
777 AAA (AW) Bn  
83 Armd FA Bn  
174 FA Bn (155 G)(SP)  
Advances at 020600B August 1944 on Routes B and C to capture BREST.  
b. 4 ARMD DIV:  
Atchd: 2d Cav Gp  
5 Armd FA Gp (695 FA Bn & 696 FA Bn)  
489 AAA (AW) Bn  
704 TD Bn (SP)  
969 FA Bn (155 H)  
Advances at 020600B August 1944 to capture RENNES and block enemy entrance or exit in BREST PENINSULA between RENNES and QUIBERON.  
c. 83 INF DIV:  
Atchd: 453 AAA (AW) Bn  
802 TD Bn (T)  
Btry B, 12 FA Obsn Bn  
174 FA Gp (177 FA Bn, 559 FA Bn & 965 FA Bn).  
Advances by stages on Routes "B" and "C" in close support of 6 ARMD DIV.



d. 8 INF DIV:

Atchd: 445 AAA (AW) Bn  
644 TD Bn (SP)  
Cos B & D, 86 Cml Bn  
709 Tk Bn (M)  
Btry A, 12 FA Obsn Bn  
687 FA Bn (105 H)  
333 FA Gp (333 FA Bn & 783 FA Bn)

Advance by stages along Route "D" in close support of 4th Armd Div  
Relieve 4 Armd Div of guards on bridges and critical RJs on Route "D".

e. 79 INF DIV:

Atchd: 463 AAA (AW) Bn  
749 Tk Bn  
813 TD Bn  
202 FA Gp (204 FA Bn & 561 FA Bn )

Move and occupy FOUGERES before dark 2 August. It will make contact with the 90 INF DIV at LOUVIGNE DU DESERT.

f. TASK FORCE "A":

Atchd: Hq 1st TD Brig  
15 Cav Gp  
705 TD Bn (SP)  
Hq 6th TD Gp  
509 Engr L Pon Co  
159 Engr C Bn

Advance on BREST and secure railroad bridges on flanks of Route "A"

g. ARTY:

(1) DIV ARTY:

4 Armd Div: Atchd 5 Armd FA Gp (695 FA Bn and 696 FA Bn) and 969 FA Bn.  
6 Armd Div: Btry C, 965 FA Bn relvd from attachment. Atchd 83 Armd FA Bn and 174 FA Bn.  
8 Inf Div: Atchd, Btry "A", 12th FA Obsn Bn, 687 FA Bn, 333 FA Gp (333 FA Bn and 733 FA Bn).  
79 Inf Div: Btry "B", 12th FA Obsn Bn and 965 FA Bn relvd from attachment. Atchd 202 FA Gp (204 FA Bn and 561 FA Bn).  
83 Inf Div: Atchd Btry "B", 12th FA Obsn Bn and 174 FA Gp (177 FA Bn, 559 FA Bn and 965 FA Bn).

(2) CORPS ARTY:

196 FA Gp  
578 FA Bn (8" H)  
General Support.

h. AAA:

- (1) 489 AAA (AW) Bn (SP) atchd to 4 ARMD DIV.
- (2) 777 AAA (AW) Bn (SP) atchd to 6 ARMD DIV.
- (3) 445 AAA (AW) Bn atchd to 8 INF DIV.
- (4) 453 AAA (AW) Bn atchd to 83 INF DIV.
- (5) 463 AAA (AW) Bn atchd to 79 INF DIV.
- (6) 455 AAA (AW) Bn provide AA defense of 174 FA Gp, 202 FA Gp, 333 FA Gp, and 687 FA Bn.
- (7) 473 AAA (AW) Bn provide AA defense of 196 FA Gp and such bridges and dams as designated.
- (8) 635 AAA (AW) Bn provide AA defense of installations, bridges, and dams in CORPS Z.



(9) 119 AAA gun Bn reinforce fires of CORPS ARTY and provide protection of the bridges N and S of AVRANCHES and the dam at (T 366039).

i. CAVALRY:

- (1) 106 CAV GP: Secure L flank of VIII Corps.
- (2) 2 CAV GP : Atchd to 4 Armd Div.

j. CWS:

86 Cml Bn (- Cos B & D): Await orders in present location.  
Cos B and D, 86 CML BN, atchd 8 INF DIV.

k. ENGR: (less Engr Tr) - Support Opns.

l. TANKS:

- (1) 709 TK BN atchd 8 INF DIV.
- (2) 749 TK BN atchd 79 INF DIV.

m. TDS:

- (1) 644 TD BN (SP) atchd 8 INF DIV.
- (2) 813 TD BN (SP) atchd 79 INF DIV.
- (3) 802 TD BN (T) atchd 83 INF DIV.

x. BOMB LINE: To be announced later.

MIDDLETON  
Maj Gen

OFFICIAL:

/s/ EVANS  
EVANS  
G-3

1 Incl; - Special Map "B".

In its first Field Order, at 0200, 2 August, the advance of Task Force "A" on BREST in the zone astride Route A to secure key railroad bridges was ordered.

HQ TASK FORCE A  
APO 403, U. S. Army  
020200 August 1944

FO #1

Maps: Special Map A, scale 1/500,000.

- 1. b. VIII Corps continues advance to the W and SW 2 Aug 44 to clear the N half of the BRITTANY Peninsula and capture BREST. The 6th Armd Div advances on rts B and C to capture BREST. 8th Inf Div follows 6th Armd Div. XIX Tactical Air Comd furnishes air support.
- 2. a. Task Force A advances on BREST in zone astride rt A, to secure key railroad bridges on the rt.
- b. Formation: Gps with attachments in column, 15th Cav Gp leading. Rts, zones, phase lines and objectives: Special Map A.



Troops

1st TD Brig, Prov Task Force Hq  
 15th Cav Gp (less tns)  
 Atchd: Co "B", 159th Engr (C) Bn (less tns)  
           Co "C", 705th TD Bn (SP) (less tns)

6th TD Gp (less tns)  
 Atchd: 705th TD Bn (-) (less tns)  
           159th Engr (c) Bn (-) (less tns)  
           509th Light Ponton Co (less tns)  
           Task Force Tns  
           TUSA Information Serv Det

3. a. 15th Cav Gp with attachments will move on order by rt indicated to AVRANCHES, thereafter astride rt A in its Z to prevent destruction of and secure railroad bridges on the railroad paralleling rt A as indicated thereon.
  - b. 6th TD Gp with attachments will follow 15th Cav Gp along rt A and be prepared to reinf 15th Cav Gp, to take over and hold bridges on intermediate objective, and to install bridging as required. 6th TD Gp is responsible for rear guard.
  - c. Gps responsible for flank security and maintaining contact with adjacent units.
  - d. <sup>TRAINS</sup> The pass to control of 6th TD Gp Comdr on receipt of movement warning order.
  - x. Report arrival of advance elements at phase lines and cross without further order. By-pass resistance except at bridges. All available colored iridescent panels will be displayed on vehicles. All groups of vehicles will contain vehicles so marked. Bombing of installations in proximity of railroad bridges to be secured or highway bridges will not be ordered. Strafing and air rcn will be used to maximum extent. Report initial contact with enemy, strength, flanks, and composition; location of mine fields and obstacles. Detailed reports on condition of bridges to be submitted immediately when reached.
4. b. All units will be supplied with the following for this operation: Rations for six (6) days; fuel for a minimum of 250 miles operation; maximum water supply; basic ammunition load which can be carried; water chlorination tablets.

EARNEST  
 TF Comd

OFFICIAL:

CADENHEAD  
 S-3

In a meeting of unit commanders on the afternoon of 1 August at Task Force "A" headquarters, a summation of the mission, resistance, and tactics to be used was given by General Earnest.



- "From all indications, as far as we are concerned, this operation is a race to the sea, (we hope)," General Earnest said. "The 6th Armored Division right now has reached a point just South of AVRANCHES. The 4th Armored Div is within 15 miles of RENNES. The 6th Armored expects to cross this bottleneck and get their two columns placed tonight. The 79th Infantry Division is moving on their right now, and the 90th Infantry Division is to start at 0300 in the morning, and we are scheduled to follow the 90th. Our general plan is to move down this north road, secure as many railway bridges as possible and aid in the capture of BREST. In going down there, we're by-passing resistance."

"..... I am going to designate certain phase lines along here, Colonel Reybold. But don't let's hold up on account of phase lines unless we are in a fight."

- ".....The trains of the Cavalry Group are to be under control of Colonel Berry. If I am going to fight, I don't want to be hampered with a bunch of trains. We need the trains -- yes, but we have to keep them back."

"A little message from the Army Commander: The only thing he has in mind is getting to BREST and he wants to get there fast."

"It's not going to be a picnic. Another angle I want to warn you about. The 'B' <sup>(70)</sup> are strafing, and the men who are manning the AA guns are to stand by and give it to them. If it is a strong attack, the rest of the men should get out of the vehicles and hit the side of the road."

"..... You've got to be bold in your reconnaissance, but be thorough about it."

"..... I want to impress upon you that we are to push and push fast. Use your guns. Don't overly expose them to anti-tank fire. You've got to use cover. Be bold in the employment of them. Their silhouette is low enough so that they can go beyond hedgerows and blow hell out of them."

"It is known that there are approximately 40,000 to 50,000 naval troops. I don't think we are going to run into them because we are not going to stick our noses at them. Now, ST. MALO, we are going to bypass that without even looking at them," he concluded.

Movement orders were received from the VIII Corps at 2100, 2 August, and General Earnest and Lieutenant Colonel Cadenhead, S3, departed with the advance elements of Task Force A from the bivouac area ( $\frac{1}{2}$  mile north of Equilly (T 274341)). At 0200, 3 August, Task Force "A" left the bivouac.

The 15th Cavalry Group, with Company B, 159th Engineer Combat Battalion, and Company C, 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion SP, attached led during the march to AVRANCHES and thereafter astride Route A. The 6th Tank Destroyer Group with attached troops: 705th TD Battalion (-), 159th Engineer Combat Battalion (-), 509th Engineer Light Ponton Company, the Task Force Trains, and TUSA Third United States Army Information Service Detachment followed along Route A, prepared to reinforce the 15th Cavalry Group, to take over and hold bridges or intermediate objectives, and to install bridging as required. All units were made responsible for flank security and maintaining contact with adjacent units, while the 6th Tank Destroyer Group was charged with the responsibility for the rear guard.



Air support from the 19th Tactical Air Command was arranged for, and Captain Mischelow, with nine men, arrived at 1330 on 1 August as the air support party. Their mission was to supply air coverage for the column and provide bombing and strafing missions on request. If the column became isolated from contact with friendly elements, which appeared highly probable, in view of the rapid drive planned and the large number of enemy held points to be bypassed or pushed through, supply and liaison services were to be maintained by air.

The only hostile air activity of the entire operation occurred during the night of 3 August while the column was on the road from AVRANCHES to PONTORSON (1602), when strafing by enemy planes and bombing delayed the column three hours at the critical bridge north of PONTAUBAULT (282102). Approximately 12 enemy planes, operating in groups of three, slowed the column at this critical road point.