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Note to: MS # A-894

By: Kenneth W. Hechler
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I believe that this was the first manuscript which General von Gersdorff prepared for the historical Section, shortly after his arrival at Oberursel. General von Gersdorff had an opportunity to talk with a few other German officers who may have assisted him in the preparation of this account. I do not have a complete list of such officers, but I recall that at the time General Warlimont and General Schwerin were also at Oberursel, and they may have assisted General von Gersdorff in his account. In any event, he had no German documents or German maps, but had to rely exclusively upon a 12th Army Group G-2 map which was rather large in scale.

Attached to the file are the original questions in German which were presented to General von Gersdorff. These questions were presented in substantially the same form to General Hausser (MS # A 907). These questions were initially submitted by the "Operation Cobra" section of the ETO Historical Section in St Germain. They were subsequently translated into German and used whenever an opportunity presented itself. It is evident that there were originally 20 questions, and I eliminated the first question when I presented these to General von Gersdorff. I have no recollection as to why I eliminated this first question, or what the first question actually was.

I am fairly sure that the translation of Manuscript A-894 was done by M/Sgt. Kiralfy.

After General von Gersdorff submitted his manuscript, no effort was made to have him clarify particular points in his answer. Occasionally, members of the Cobra Section would engage General von Gersdorff in conversation, after we had brought him to St Germain, but no revision was made in the initial manuscript which he had prepared during his confinement at Oberursel.

17 pages

Hans von Greiffenberg
General der Infanterie a. D.

Koenigstein/Ts., den 3. 1. 1950

I N D E X F U E R

M S # A-894.

(N O R M A N D Y , C O B R A A N D M O R T A I N)

v. Greiffenberg

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NORMANDY, COBRA and MORTAIN

Answers to questions submitted October 1945 to General Major Freiherr V. Gersdorff, Chief of Staff, 7 Army.

(Note by Maj Hechler: These answers were written by Gen von Gersdorff in response to my questions, during his confinement at Oberursel, Germany.)

I was appointed Chief of Staff of the 7 Army on 29 Jul. Therefore, I can answer only part of the submitted questions. My predecessor, General Pemsel (last appointed as Commander of 6 Mountain Division), was relieved when Hq of the Army, after the American breakthrough in the area of ST.Lo, independently decided to make a breakthrough toward the southeast. This decision was contrary to the decisions and instructions of Heeresgruppe B and the Ob West, who wanted to prevent at all coast a loss of contact with the west coast of the COTENTIN. On 28 Jul 44, I was at the Hq of Heeresgruppe B at LA ROCHE GUYON, where I had come on orders of Field Marshal von Kluge. I was at the time Chief of Staff of LXXXII Army Corps (AIRE s. LYS / PAS DE CALAIS). I was to be at FM von Klyge's disposal as re;acement for the Chief of Staff of 7 Army. When, in the evening, 7 Army announced its decision, Field Marshal von Kluge lost his temper, called up the Commander-in-Chief, Oberstgruppenfuehrer Hausser, and ordered him to revoke orders immediately and to keep close contact between the left wing of the army and the west coast. The communication was bad, and the Commander-in-Chief observed that it might be too late for counter orders. Upon that, Field Marshal von Kluge ordered

me to relieve the Chief of Staff of the Army, and to do everything to prevent a break in the extreme west wing of the invasion front. The Field Marshal disapproved of my suggestion to leave immediately, in order to reach the advanced command post during the night. He and General Speidel, Chief of Staff of the Army Group, believed that a ride during the night and close behind the front could not promise to be successful, especially on account of the confused situation and the strong activity of the French resistance. Therefore I left on 29 Jul, very early in the morning, accompanied by the newly appointed Commanding General of LXXXIV Army Corps, Lt Gen Elfeldt. On orders of the Army Group we passed LE MANS, main command post of the army. Delayed by strong low-flying activity in the area between MAYENNE and AVRANCHES, I did not reach the advanced command post until the afternoon of 29 Jul. It was situated in a ravine near CHAVOY, 5 km northeast of AVRANCHES. The Hq of the army were not very well acquainted with the situation because all the telephone communications were interrupted and the communications with the Corps had to be made by radio or messengers. Moreover, the advanced command post had hardly any radion stations. I made a report to the Commander-in-Chief on the instructions of Hq Army Group, and tried to find out which forces could be made available for the reinforcement of the front north of AVRANCHES.

As we had presumed, the counter orders given during the night from 28-29 Jul had no effect. On the contrary, the strongest units, such as parts of the 2 SS Pz Div "Das Reich" and of Panzer Lehr Div, had advanced when making the breakthrough, farther east than ordered, and only the

rest of the 90 Airlanding Div and the 1 Pioneer Bn were fighting on a wide front in the sector between the west wing and the coast. The fighting strength of these elements was extremely low. Therefore Hq of the Army gave the order to form armored groups and to bring them up to the west front in order to reinforce this wing. Besides, orders were given to organize a delaying position at AVRANCHES with elements from behind the lines, and to bring up all available alarm units. A battery of an approaching assault brigade was brought up as support for the weak front in the area north of AVRANCHES. The orders were given by radio or delivered by officers of the General Staff. The carrying out of the orders was almost entirely prevented by the low-flying attacks. For the first time I witnessed that the enemy air activity succeeded in preventing every tactical movement on the battlefield during the day. At least the movements were so much delayed that the orders could not be carried out in time to prevent a further breakthrough of the American armored forces. It was no longer possible to form a continuous line of resistance in the area north of AVRANCHES, and counterattacks against the flank of the American breakthrough wedge had no more effect, being screened by the American air forces. I want to insist on the fact that the cooperation between the American air and ground forces was exemplary. I had the occasion to observe them from a very short distance.

The counterattack of XXXXVII Pz Corps could not have any effect at that time because omly the advanced elements of 116 Pz Div had arrived. Field Marshal von Kluge, when he was at the command post of the army, had given orders to commit XXXXVII Pz Corps. Though the telephone communication

was temporarily re-established, the Hq of the Army had only a limited freedom of action. Therefore strong elements of 116 Pz Div were still concentrated in the area of PERCY, while the Hq of the Army wanted to bring the division into the area north of VILLEDIEU in order to break through into the area of AVRANCHES. The Hq understood that the breakthrough was accomplished and decided as early at that time to assemble all the available armored units and to commit them for the counterattack against AVRANCHES, as the keypoint of the battle for France.

The 116 Pz Div, strong elements of which were fighting, had to be relieved after the withdrawal of the front of XXXXVII Pz Corps. The units committed in the direction southeast (2d SS Pz and Pz Lehr Div), continued to push southeast, because all the rearward parts were committed in the same direction. That was the reason why in the next place the breakthrough at AVRANCHES was widened more and more. The parts of 116 Pz Div which arrived farther south were immediately engaged in heavy fighting because of the strong flank peotection of the American breakthrough north of the SEE sector. The relief of the other parts was delayed. Therefore the widened gap of the front could only be reduced in the area of St.POIS.

I was witness of only the last phase of the American breakthrough, that had begun on 25 Jul. Consequently I was there during a period when the breakthrough was practically accomplished and when local resistance could only delay the American advance. The activity of the American air force is the reason why the orders could be only partially carried out. The officer of the General Staff, Lt Col Hoffmann, for instance, whom I sent to AVRANCHES to build up a delaying position, has been missing since

that time. The fact is that there was no more time for any effective defense in the sector of AVRANCHES. In the evening of 29 Jul American tanks passed at a distance of about 100m from the command post of the Army, which was shifted to MORTAIN during the night of 29-30 Jul at 2400 hours. No contact existed with the Army Group nor with LE MANS, where Field Marshal von Kluge had been since the evening. A withdrawal of the command post toward the south was no longer possible.

To Questions Nos 1 and 2:

I cannot answer them.

To Question No 3:

Before the invasion I met Field Marshal Rommel rather often, when he visited LXXXII Army Corps at PAS DE CALAIS.

His theory on the conduct of the defensive combat on the coast was the following: Exploiting the weakest point of the attacking forces, all available arms had to be used against the enemy at the moment of the landing, in order to smash the bulk of a landing attempt on the water or when reaching the coast. He therefore requested - contrary to the deep-echeloned defense of a land front - a linear defense formation along the coast. The heavy weapons and artillery of all local and tactical reserves were to be committed in full strength in the fire fight on the coast. He even made the request that parts of the armored divisions be emplaced so near to the coast that the tanks could participate in the defensive combat on the coast. His thought was to support this active defense of the massed forces with the commitment of all available forces

by a very strong passive defense. Besides the completion of the Atlantic-Wall and anti-aircraft defense for the massed forces on the beach he attached a particular importance to the accelerated construction of the coastal zone obstacles which he had invented. Every minute had to be used for the reinforcement of the field of combat of the coast. He did not even allow any training service. During the last month before the invasion he concentrated his interest almost entirely upon the technical completion of the different obstacles (tetrahedrons, mines, post obstacles, hedgehogs, bogis trailers, etc.). The obstacles were to be built as far as possible into the low-tide line, in order to be effective even in case of a landing during low-tide. Along the coast a fortified field or combat with a sea-and-land front - according to the terrain, 3-5 km deep - with scattered fortified strongpoints was to be built up. All the open spots were to be secured by minefields and airborne obstacles (Rommel's asparagus-bed obstacle pattern). Thus the organized fortification, the main effort of which was directed toward the sea had to be strong enough in the event of airborne landings to resist until operative reserves could be brought up to destroy the invading enemy. At all costs the gaining of a bridgehead by stronger enemy forces or the junction of ground and airborne troops had to be prevented. He did not see any danger in paratroop landings because they could be easily destroyed in the fortified zone. The command posts of the divisions were installed in the fortified field of combat.

Rommel succeeded in carrying out his theory in the sector of 15 Army, to which my Corps belonged. From reports, maps and statements I

found out that his orders were not executed with the same speed nor to the same extent in the sector of the 7 Army. I believe that the reason for it was that Rommel had certain restraints in front of Gen Dollmann, who was much older. Rommel repeated several times in my presence that he expected the invasion in the sector SOMME-SEINE and in the SEINE bay, though the Navy judged a landing in the SEINE bay as impracticable, because of the conditions of the coast. Rommel also believed that a landing in the PAS DE CALAIS or a simultaneous landing in both sectors might be possible. The fact is, however, that the orders of Field Marshal Rommel in the sector of 7 Army were never carried out.

I give the following examples:

1. While in the PAS DE CALAIS the strongpoints were at a distance of not more than 200m. In the SEINE bay they were at a distance of 3-4 km, so that considerable sections were not covered by fire, and therefore a landing without fighting could not be prevented. As a matter of fact the local and tactical reserves were stronger and more echeloned in depth. But the invasion has taught us that Rommel's ideas were right because these reserves could never oppose a connected resistance and had only small shock power because of the enemy air superiority.

2. In order to prevent the destruction of ammunition and supply stocks by the expected bombing attacks, the OKW had ordered that only part of it was to be stored near the coast. The fact is that this order was executed by 7 Army, but not by 15 Army. A commander of a task forde told me that the entire artillery east of the mouth of the VIRE had to watch the American landing at the east coast of the COTENTIN at the most favorable range, without having any ammunition at their disposal.

As far as I know, Rommel had requested the bringing up of 21 Pz Div which, however, was refused by higher headquarters. I am convinced that the invasion would have turned out quite differently if Rommel's theories had been carried out to their whole extent, and if he would have had more time to activate with his own energy the slow completion of the Atlantic Wall and to concentrate the main efforts at the points that he considered as important. Besides, Rommel believed that the enemy, realizing his coatal zone obstacles, postponed the date of the invasion.

I only heard of Rommel's plan to withdraw to the border of the Reich in connection with the attempted assassination of Hitler on 20 Jul 44.

To Question Nos 4-9:

I cannot answer these questions.

To Question No 10:

As far as Iknow the difficulties of the supply during the whole battle for France were caused exclusively by the effect of the enemy air-force. The fact that all movements of supply were forced to be carried out during the night and the bombing of all means of communication lead to almost insupportable delays and lack of supplies. During the combat up to the battle of FALAISE, the main trouble of the command was the supply of ammunition and fuel.

However, the main factor that has such an unfavorable influence on the battle of Normandy for the German troops was the obstinacy and lack of understanding of the highest command that gave neither the Army Group nor

the armies the possibility of the elastic conduct which was required by the situation.

The second reason was the absolute enemy air superiority that reduced the already limited mobility of the German troops and succeeded in eliminating tactical movements in the field of combat during the day. The orders of the command were carried out late or not al all. Principles of action that used to be matter of course had to be overthrown. The best example of this fact is the German counterattack from MORTAIN in direction of AVRANCHES of 7 Aug. The attack was carried out after preparation with superior armored forces and with the best divisions. Nevertheless, the attack was stopped in the initial phase by the intervention of the enemy air force, while the German fighter escort was immobilized over the jump-off positions by the enemy fighter escort.

Question No 11:

I cannot answer this question.

Question No 12:

As far as I heard later, 7 Army continually asked for reinforcement and requested the evacuation of the CHANNEL islands. These requests were refused.

Before the invasion the opinion was widespread that attempts of landing would be made at different points and that the main effort would show later during the development of the situation. As I mentioned already, it was expected in the first line in the sector SOMME - mouth of the SEINE, because from there would be the shortest way to PARIS and to

PAS DE CALAIS, which was the bases for the V-1 weapons. Messages of our agents up to the last minute before the invasion reporting that the invasion would take place on the Belgian-Dutch coast were taken into consideration, but were looked on as deliberate imposition. I do not know whether special measures were taken with regard to these messages. After the invasion the German command presumed that the Allies could repeat the same landing attempt with the same amount of forces at another point. I think that this is the reason why the divisions of 15 Army were not brought up earlier to the invasion front. When at last the divisions were brought up they were much delayed because the air raids made the crossing of the SEINE very difficult. Without doubt it would have been better to react more rapidly and to reinforce the invasion front by all means, at least as long as it was still intended to eliminate the bridgehead in Normandy, because the forces concentrated there were not strong enough for this task.

To Questions 13-15:

I cannot answer these questions.

To Question No 16:

As already mentioned, the first attempt to fill the gap in the front with the available mobile forces, failed because the offensive flank protection of the American breakthrough in connection with the air activity could not be overcome. But the breakthrough north of the SEE sector, where the enemy pressure was the strongest, could be blocked. (I refer to the report of General Graf von Schwerin, Commander of 116 Pz Div.)

South of the SEE sector, where only weak enemy forces (parts of the 3d Armored Div) had turned east, the cutting off was secured by weak forces and alarm units only. When the counterattack, executed on the move, had failed, the Hq of the Army decided to make a planned counterattack of the attacking forces south of the SEE sector in the direction of AVRANCHES after combat preparation. The Army, deliberately weakening the defense front north of the SEE sector, extracted 2 Pz Div, 2SS Pz Div and parts of Pz Lehr Div and requested further parts of 5 Pz Army; 1 SS Pz and 10 Pz Divs. The intention to shift 116 Pz Div toward the south could not be carried out because of the lack of infantry divisions that could not be brought up because unfavorable crossing conditions made it impossible. Therefore the Hq of the Army decided that the attack with the main effort be launched south of the SEE sector past JUVIGNY, and that the 116 Pz Div, echeloned to the rear and to the right, accompany the attack north of the sector.

To Question No 17:

See Answer to Question No 16.

The decision to launch the attack south of the SEE sector and to leave 116 Pz Div at the right attacking wing north of the sector was based on the enemy situation. While north of the sector relatively strong American forces for the offensive flank protection of the breakthrough had been located, we had the impression that south of the sector only weak forces had turned in the direction of MORTAIN. (Parts of the 3d American Armd Div.) Therefore the Hq of the Army believed that a counterattack

with the main effort from the area on both sides of MORTAIN would be more successful because it was necessary to re-establish the situation by making a rapid surprise attack. Besides, we expected that the American command would exploit the accomplished breakthrough more rapidly. As already mentioned, the weak cutting off south of the SEE sector could not be considered as very effective. A counterattack north of the SEE sector would have encountered a flank that would have too deep. The Hq of the Army Group had even ordered to attack southwest past ST. HILAIRE and then turn northwest in the direction AVRANCHES. But the Hq of the Army had refused to carry out this order because soon they found out that for the present time only one American armored division (4th?) had penetrated the gap. Therefore the Hq of the Army decided to recapture the keypoint AVRANCHES immediately. Also the condition of the terrain had a certain influence on the decision. The SEE sector was to a certain extent secure against mechanized attack and thus represented a natural north flank protection. The road MORTAIN-JUVIGNY-AVRANCHES was relatively favorable in the terrain of Normandy that was not qualified for tanks.

When in the evening before the counterattack (6 Aug) five of the best German armored divisions (116, 2 Pz Div, 1 SS Pz, 2 SS and 10 SS) reinforced by two mortar brigades were ready for the attack the Hq of the Army estimated the situation as quite favorable. This was particularly true because we still had the impression that south of the SEE sector the enemy forces were still weak. Above all, General of the Air Forces Bulowius had promised 300 German fighter planes for the support of the attack. However, this supoort never arrived in the operation area because

the fighter planes were chased away by the Allied air force. Thus the attack ended in the initial phase. Only 2 Pz Div could win 6-8 km. But this success could not be exploited because neither 116 Pz Div nor the 1 SS Pz Div could advance. As the rapid surprise attack had failed and an improvement of the air situation could not be expected, the repetition and the organization of the attack as ordered by the OKW was a mistake, and was, even before it started, condemned to be a failure. Later, reproaches were made to the Hq of the Army that the attack was launched rashly, without having expected the assembly of all the forces that were at their disposal. The Hq of the Army, however, though unwillingly, had to make this rash decision. Army was convinced that the attack, if launched immediately, would be more surprising and thus be more successful. Even today, I am still convinced that the decision was right. That it turned out a failure is exclusively due to the air situation.

To Question No 19:

I don't know any more the exact strength of personnel and materiel of the forces broken through from thepocket of FALAISE. The main losses, however, especially the material losses, were not made during the breakthrough, but before on 18-19 Aug. The Allied air offense on 18 Aug and the particularly heavy artillery fire on 19 Aug destroyed the bulk of the army vehicles, so that for the breakthrough itself "only men" were present. Most of the artillery was destroyed before the breakthrough.

After the breakthrough, during which I commanded personally a fighting group, formed "ad hoc," that made the break at St.LAMBERT, 5 Pz Army

took the command. My Army Staff could no more be committed, having lost most of their officers. During the night from 18-19 Aug only of the section command two officers were killed and seven wounded. At that time, the command post was in a quarry near VILLEDIEU. The Commander-in-Chief was seriously, I was slightly wounded. Therefore I got the order to reorganize the Army Staff in LYONS LA FORET and re-equip the assembling units. The mass of the forces that had broken through succeeded in crossing the SEINE in the sector ROUEN-ELBEAUF-LES ANDELYS. The crossing was carried out of ferries, that had been employed there before by 15 Army. I remember that the infantry divisions that had made the breakthrough were of a strength of aproximately 2,000-3,000 men each. As almost all the artillery guns were destroyed there were only few batteries left. Also the number of anti-tank guns, assault guns and combat vehicles was very low. The trains, if there were some, had been outside the pocket before the encirclement.

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