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SOUTHERN FRANCE

Signed: ALFRED TOPPE

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General P e t e r s e n

of the Infantry

Allendorf, June 1946
A-890 Trans.

The events depicted in the following pages have been set down entirely from memory, there being no written data of any kind at the disposal of the writer. They cannot, therefore, make the claim of being exact in every detail with regard to dates, names, strengths, etc.

Southern France - 1 July 1943 - March 1944

1. Corps Headquarters of the IV Luftwaffe Field Corps was set up in the winter of 1942. Composition corresponded to that of a corps headquarters of the Army (Heer). A headquarters company and a cycle company were assigned to H.Q., and as Corps Formation a headquarters signal and communication battalion. It was intended at the time that Corps Headquarters should function as a superior commanding authority in control of the Luftwaffe Field Divisions formed in the winter of 1942 but it was finally not used in this capacity as the majority of the Luftwaffe Field Divisions were ultimately placed under the command of Army Headquarters.

In July of 1943 the headquarters of the IV Luftwaffe Field Corps was placed under the tactical control of the Commander in Chief in the West. He transferred it to southern France and placed it under Nineteenth Army. At the end of 1944, the Corps was renamed "The LXXXX Army Corps".

Commander in Chief: General Petersen of the airforce (later of Infantry)

His G-3.....: Col. Haring of the General Staff; from 21 Oct 44 - Col. Frank of the General Staff

Corps Headquarters: Montpellier

2. In July 43 the following divisions were subordinated:

a. The 326 Inf Div Cdr. Maj. Gen. von Drabich-Wächter

Div HQ..... N a r b o n n e

In control from the Spanish frontier to Agde.

- b. 338 Inf Div... Cdr Maj Gen Felltmann; from Dec 43, Maj Gen von Courbière

Div HQ..... Near Arles

In control from Adge to Port de Beuc (Gulf of Fos).

In this region a small coastal strip of approximately 20 to 25 kms. in depth was declared an operational section. The regions to the rear were under the command of the Military Commander in France. The coast itself was the main line of resistance.

c. Portions of the cadre fortress troops and the Army Coastal Artillery.

d. At the beginning of 1944 one Eastern Battalion was allotted to each division.

3. The corps was assigned the following missions:

a. The defense of the Mediterranean Coast in the sector assigned to it. It was to prepare itself for this task, particularly by the creation of field fortifications. The Fortress Sapper & Engineering Staffs were responsible for supervision of the fortress fortifications; they were not under the command of the Corps HQ.

b. In the event of an attack on the coast the line was to be held at all costs.

c. In the event of an invasion by the Allies, preparations were to be made for the withdrawal of certain formations and their conveyance to other positions.

11 March 1944 to June 1944

1. In March 1944 a new distribution of forces in the defensive

sector was ordered. The 272 and the 277 Divisions were handed over to Corps HQ according to the new arrangement.

After the 326 Inf Div had been withdrawn and the 338 Inf Div transferred, the formations mentioned above were employed as follows:

(See sketch "1")

The 272 Inf Div... from the Spanish frontier (including as far as from the Perpignan - Figueras road approximately to Chack).

Div HQ..... near Perpignan

The 277 Inf Div... Cdr Maj Gen Fraun

Div HQ..... northwest of Narbonne

The 271 Inf Div... Cdr Maj Gen Danhauser

Div HQ..... near Montpellier

Corps Headquarters were transferred during April to Capendu (25 kms. west of Narbonne).

2. The operational situation.

The assembly of allied troops in the spring of 1944 in North Africa made it appear likely that an Allied landing in Southern France was to be reckoned with.

In the coastal defense of the Corps Headquarters the following operational moves on the Allied side were deemed possible:

a. An attack on the Mediterranean Coast on both sides of Narbonne in cooperation with another on both sides of the mouth of the river Gironde, aiming at a rupture of communication between Germany and Spain and at establishing a connection with the terrorist bands in Southern France, so as to bring about a general uprising in that region.

b. An attack on the delta of the Rhone with the aim of gaining

access to the Rhone Valley and pushing forward into the depth of the country, assisted by the terrorists, in the direction of Lyons and in this way cut off the troops located in French territory - all this in cooperation with an attack on Northern France.

c. The entry of Spain into the war on the Allied side and a landing of allied forces on the Iberian Peninsula as a basis for further operations. This possibility was not taken very seriously, as there were no special signs that this was intended.

11 June 1944 to 15 August 1944

1. The effect of the invasion in Normandy on the coastal defense sector under the command of the Corps Headquarters.

During the month of June the following formations were withdrawn from the coastal defense sector: the 277, 272, and 271 Inf Divs.

As replacements, the 198 Inf Div in course of reconstitution (under Brig Gen Richter) and the 716 Inf Div (under Maj Gen Richter) were brought up. The latter division had suffered defeat in Normandy. Thereafter it was ordered that all antitank companies be given up.

2. The condition and an estimate of the value of the troops subordinated to Corps Headquarters.

a. The 716 Inf Div had borne the main weight of the allied attack on Northern France and had been completely defeated. Of the divisional troops on the Staff, portions of the signal battalion, one battery, together with parts of the supply units, were capable of employment. The division had no fighting troops which could be used. While it was possible to fill up the division fairly quickly with personnel replacement and leave battalions

as well as untrained troops, its equipment could not proceed so speedily owing to shortages in production at home and supply difficulties in the field; by the eighteenth of August it was in no wise complete.

b. The 198 Inf Div was withdrawn from the control sector of the Corps after the landing by the Allies on the Riviera Coast and ordered to the eastern bank of the Rhone (see sketch "2").

c. The 189 Res Div, under Maj Gen von Schwerin, was ordered on 15 August to take the place of the 198 Inf Div. This was a training division handling recruits receiving a very short training - insufficiently armed - with only a light artillery battalion and only partially mobile.

d. The Army Coastal Artillery was completely immobile, and had only a core of some 30 percent of German troops; the remainder consisted of Italian troops who had volunteered to go on fighting on the side of Germany after the unconditional surrender of their own country. Their fighting value was of the lowest. The naval artillery was manned by troops elderly in age.

e. The so-called Eastern Battalion (White Russians - Ukrainians - Cossacks) were made up of good human material but in the opinion of their own commanders were not up to facing the arduous calls which large-scale fighting would make on them and in addition were not entirely to be depended on.

3. The state and condition of the defense positions.

The coastal defense sector of a division was divided up into sub-sectors, in turn divided again into supporting groups, consisting of individual strongpoints. The whole of the strongpoints were arranged for circular defense, and were fitted out with combat posts provided with machine guns, shell-mortars, antitank guns, and land defense weapons.

They were located in such a manner that the fire of each swept round in a circle cutting the circle formed by the fire of the next strongpoint. In most cases these strongpoints were only built up as field fortifications; it was only at especially dangerous points that they were strengthened by concrete pillboxes, and while on the whole it can be said that the former were completed the same cannot be asserted regarding the latter. A large portion of the Army and Navy coastal batteries were located in ferro-concrete bunkers with firing embrasures in the walls, and observation and command posts were also protected by ferroconcrete. The main centers of gravity were at Port-Vendres, Agde, and Sets. All strongpoints were provided with food and water for twenty-one days and with a quadruple issue of ammunition.

4. Estimate of the situation on 15 August.

As a result of the fact that the coastal defense had been weakened by the departure of the 277, 272, 271, and 198 Inf Divs and the antitank units, and their replacement by the 716 Inf Div and the 189 Res Div, insufficiently equipped, without enough artillery, and without any reserve force, and expected as they were to defend a sector 180 kms. in width - the Corps Headquarters Staff were compelled to come to the following conclusions: The strength of the coastal defense strip did not correspond to that of a main line of resistance, but had no more than the value of a weak security line. It announced its opinion to the High Command of the Army on 15 August.

15 August to 15 September 1944

On the evening of 17 Aug 1944 the G-3 of Army Group "G" passed through Capendu on his way from Toulouse. He reported to the headquarters of the Commanding General and brought with him an order from the High Command in

the West that France was to be given up as far as the fortress works immediately. He himself was en route to the HQ of the 19 Army.

On 18 Aug an order from the Army came in late in the afternoon, the contents of which were approximately as follows:

1. The fight was to be broken off by the Army on the southern coast of France.
2. The Army was to move back in sections to Dijon, leaving behind defense forces as ordered east of the Rhone.
3. The IV Luftwaffe Field Corps, with the 716 Inf Div and the 189 Res Div was to proceed to west of the river Rhone.
4. All troops and command posts of the Military Commander in Southern France, of the Navy, the Luftwaffe, all Wehrmacht formations - including railroad personnel and members of the Todt Organization - were to be integrated into the marching groups and were to be tactically subordinated for this purpose.
5. The retreat was to begin from the first line of defense on the height above Avignon on 21 Aug, in the evening. There followed details concerning the point of rendering the retreating formations mobile - what equipment and gear were to be thrown overboard, etc.

On the 18th of Aug 1944 the assembled divisional commanders and field commandants of Perpignan and Montpellier, and those commanders of the Luftwaffe and Navy who could be reached, were handed the following order from the Corps (I go by memory):

1. The order contained first of all a brief summary of the general position.
2. The IV Luftwaffe Field Corps will proceed along the western bank of the Rhone back to Lyons.

3. For this, three separate marching groups were to be formed.

(See sketch "2").

Group A. The 189 Res Div - all portions of the 338 Inf Div then on the west bank of the Rhone - all portions of the Army Coastal Artillery units located in the sector of the 189 and 338 Divs, all cadre fortress troops, all naval units, all Luftwaffe personnel, all troops and staffs of the Military Commander in Southern France, all Wehrmacht, railroad, and Todt units.

The route to be followed: Remoulin - Pont St. Esprit-valley of the Rhone, western road.

Group B. The 716 Inf Div - as March Group A.

The route to be followed: Bezieres-Montpellier-Nimes-Uzès-Barjac-Vallen.

Group C. All motorized portions of the Fliers' Training Regiment at Carcassone and the motorized portions of the units under the Military Commander in Southern France in the area of Toulouse-Narbonne.

The route to be followed: Narbonne Gexel) - Montpellier (North) - Ales.

4. Beginning of the retreat.

Group B and C were to start off when darkness fell on 19 Aug, and Group A - on 20 Aug. the tail end of the marching groups - those capable of putting up a fight - would have crossed the first line of resistance to the North early in the morning of 21 Aug (on the heights above Avignon - see sketch "2"). Orders would subsequently be imparted for the further march rearward; it would take place from one resistance line to the next, each being held for one day.

5. Corps Headquarters. As of 00.00 hrs on 19 Aug - Montpellier.

As of 00.00 hrs on 20 Aug - Remoulins.

There followed instructions for making the formations mobile so far as was possible, and the carrying along or casting aside of gear and equipment, ammunition, and food. Barely twelve hours were allowed the marching groups for the preparation and carrying through of the movement. The groups furthestest away had distances of up to 180 kms. to cover. Nevertheless, they all reached their destinations.

Particularly difficult was the problem of rendering the formations mobile - especially the artillery (see 111, "2") - and owing to this the greater part of the heavy artillery, as well as parts of the light artillery - had to be blown up. And only meager quantities of artillery ammunition could be taken along. The superfluous gear, equipment, and documents were destroyed. Sufficient food for ten days could be taken along.

21 August. As darkness fell all groups started off in accordance with orders. As a result of engagements with terrorist groups Marching Group C was forced off the road; later on its elements were divided between Groups A and B.

The difficulties of the terrain and the action of terrorists forced the Corps to order Group B to turn off at Vallen (the destruction of the bridges had a strong influence on this decision) and take the western road in the Rhone valley. This meant that all the units subordinated to HQ IV Luftwaffe Field Corps were moving along the same road. And only about 20 percent of the troops on the move were composed of fighting units. The remainder was composed of naval and Luftwaffe personnel, old men, and members of the Todt Organization, railroad squads, lightly wounded and sick men from the hospitals in Southern France, medical personnel, girls employed in signal communications, and nursing sisters.

In Tournen we succeeded in assembling a goods train in the undestroyed station and brought it as far as Lyons with the assistance of railroad personnel. In this way, we were able to transfer some of the wounded and sick.

The particularly fierce attacks of the enemy fighter-bombers, the destruction of individual railroad bridges by terrorists and single ambushes by the latter were able to delay the progress of the marching groups but could not bring them to a halt.

29 August. The forward elements of the movement reached the region of Vienne - an average marching speed of 40 kms. daily. There, the order of the Army came in for the transfer of both of the most forward battalions to the eastern bank of the Rhone in order to strengthen the bridgehead formed around Lyons.

The divisions of the Corps marched past west of Lyons without any considerable casualties from enemy attacks.

After the LXXXV Army Corps had passed through Lyons the two battalions assisting in the defense of the bridgehead around Lyons were also withdrawn and followed on the heels of the Corps as rearward over through Anse in the direction of Chalons sur Saone. The last battalion was pounced upon northwest of Lyons - by an enemy coming from the west supported by tanks attacking us in our flanks and was wiped out.

On 3 September the greater part of the Corps reached Chalons sur Saone. At this place Rear Admiral Schulte-Moenting was ordered to collect all marine personnel and send them as independent marching groups through Dole to Belfort. The 716 Div was ordered:

a. To remain behind in Chalons sur Saone with a strong fighting group, and in conjunction with the troops in the bridgehead at Dijon in the neighborhood of Autun to prevent a frontal push by the enemy.

b. In the event of a strengthened enemy attack this group was to be withdrawn to the line Beaune - Verdun sur le Doubs with the mission of defending this line until the rearward marching groups of the LXIV Army Corps had been absorbed into the bridgehead. (The Corps had come from southwest France.)

4 September. Corps HQ was located at Beaune. Here, the Army ordered it to dissolve the command post of the LXXXV Army Corps in Auxonne. The two divisions, which had been subordinated to the Corps (the 159 Res Div and the 716 Inf Div) were to be subordinated to the LXIV Army Corps.

In Auxonne IV L. W. Corps Headquarters took over control of the 338 and 198 Inf Divs which had been employed on the northern bank of the Doubs on both sides of Dole to defend this sector. (For insight into the sector see reconstruction in Sketch 3.) The Allied troops had only followed up the 19 Army with weak forces frontally; the bulk of the enemy forces attempted a pursuit along the Swiss border with the aim of reaching the Burgundy Door.

Heavy fighting developed around Besancon and Beaune les Dames and the southern part of Besancon was lost. In face of the successful establishment of a bridgehead on both sides of Besancon on 7 Sept and the encirclement of the city from both sides on 8 Sept, leading to the destruction of the main body of the 159 Inf Div, the Corps was ordered on that day to vacate the position it had held up till then on both sides of Dole on 9 Sept and, assisted by the 198 and 338 Inf Divs, to attack the bridgehead at Besancon in the flank and throw the enemy forces located there over the Doubs southward.

The attack of both divisions led to nothing more than the tying

down of enemy forces around Besancon owing to the poor degree of artillery support from our own side (only one battery) and the strong outflanking of them by the enemy forces from the southern bank of the Doubs. An enemy attack northward, which would inevitably have led to the cutting off the last remaining road leading eastward, was thus delayed for another day, which was of vital assistance to the portions of the LXIV Army Corps still considerably further westward. After breaking off the attack the Corps led both its divisions over the Ognon river in the night of 10 Sept and moved to a line running west of Vesul - Villersexel (excl), protected all the time by the 159 Inf Div, defending its flanks.

In spite of the poverty of the arming, equipment, and fighting strength the Corps had been able to prevent and bring to naught the attempt of the enemy to thrust forward to Lure through Vesul - after the failure of his attack on l'Isle sur le Doubs and St. Hippolyte.

s/ PETERSEN

General of the Infantry