

MS# B-017

VOIGTSBERGER

3.6.1946

General Major

Moving, Commitment and Fighting of the 116 Panzer Div.

In France, 6 Jun - 12 Aug 44.

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

As commander of the 60 Pz Gren Regt of the 116 Pz Div I witnessed the commitment of this Div during the invasion of, and the withdrawal from, France. The Div was commanded by Generalleutnant Graf V. Schwerin.

As the commander of a smaller subordinate unit, I merely received orders to march, deploy, attack, defend, withdraw, etc, in most cases without information about the strategic purpose, the large scale aims; the ratio of subordination to Corps and Army groups. Due to the constant alternating between moving and commitment, I cannot make absolutely correct statements concerning time and place, as I have no documents by which to go.

Therefore I shall try to describe events from memory, and with the aid of maps.

Section I. Situation and commitment, 6 June - 15 June '44

When the first news about the short and the location of the enemy invasion, expected since the middle of May, arrived at the Div Cp at La Bouille-Bermonville (northwest of Gisors) in the small hours of 6 June, the formation and degree of readiness of the 116 Pz Div was this:

The Div was strategic reserve to the Heeresgruppe and was echeloned in width and depth along the north bank of the Seine in the area Buchy (northeast of Rouen) - outside of Rouen- Les Andelys- Vernon-Gisors-Gournay.

The troops of the Div were in formation so that they were continually in readiness against enemy airborne landings within their billeting areas. The combat troops were constantly quartered out in the open, and resting on woods or any other type of cover provided by the terrain, and was always in combat and weapons training with units that were not at an immediate shape of readiness. A high shape of alertness and readiness to move was always ordered and present.

All roads, rivercrossings and bridges in every direction of departure had been reconnoitered. All the Seine crossings in the Divisional sector had been supplied with building materials in case of destruction by the enemy air forces. Until the 15 June the 116 Pz Div remained in this area at a high shape of alertness and readiness to move.

## Section II. The Move to the Gamaches-Blangy area (East of Dieppe)

The High Command reckoned with another enemy sea and airborne landing on the north-west coast of France. However, no one was definite about the area in which to expect this. Basing the judgement purely on the nature of the terrain, it lacked as if it would be the coastal sector on both sides of the mouth of the Somme. Experience in the invasion area so far had shown that with the prevailing enemy air superiority, reserves sent in readiness too far to the rear arrived too late, and had many losses and casualties on the way to the combat zone. As, I presume, it was in this case believed that the present enemy landings and bridgeheads in Normandy could be pushed together and eliminated by the forces available there, the decision was taken in higher quarters to move the strategic reserves nearer to the coastal sectors where it was reckoned further landings would be made.

As a result of these deliberations, the 116 Pz Div on 14 Jun received orders to move to the Gamaches-Blangy area by night marches, and there to regroup in such a manner that, (a) enemy airborne landings in the area could be wiped out immediately, (b) airborne landings to the rear of the area could be attacked while the columns were still on the move, and (c) the enemy, who had landed in the St. Valery sur Somme-Dieppe coastal sector and penetrated into the coastal fortifications and into the main combat area of the coastal division, could be dispersed and thrown back into the sea.

At dusk on 15 June the Div started to move, and by early morning had reached the assigned area, having moved in march groups and on various roads. In the above mentioned area it regrouped in such a manner that, on both sides of La Bresle brook, the foremost elements-the two Panzer Gren Regts-adjointed the rear edge of the command posts of the coastal divisions fighting there. The armored elements were ordered at readiness in the area north and east of Gamaches, and the crossings of La Bresle brook were strengthened so that they could cope with the added weight of the armor.

This formation was retained by the 116 Pz Div until it left the area on 14 July 1946 (21c).

Section III. Move to the Invasion Front southeast of Caen.

On 14 July the 116 Pz Div received orders to move to the invasion front. This move was initiated during the night of 14 July. Three march groups were formed:

- a.) 60 Pz Gren Regt and elements of the 146 Pz Arty Regt, to move viz En-Dieppe-Toles to Caudebec - Duclair s. Seine.
- b.) 156 Pz Gren Regt and elements of the 146 Pz Arty Regt, to move via Londireres - St. Saens to the Seine bridges at Rouen and the Seinsbend west of Rouen.
- c.) An armored group, containing the 116 Pz Regt, IV Bn, 146 Pz Arty Regt and elements of the anti-tank Bn, to move to the Amiens area by railroad, in order to be transported from there to the invasion front by railroad via Paris.

The main consideration in transporting armored units by rail was the saving of gasoline and wear and tear on caterpillar tracks and engines. Apart from this, moving the heavy armored vehicles across the Seine by ferry would have considerably influenced and delayed the speedy and smooth crossing of other troops.

However, difficulties in loading, and disruption of the tracks by enemy fighter bombers in the Amiens loading area made it necessary for the armored march group also to travel by road and to cross the Seine at between Caudebec and Rouen. We had to put up with losing two days.

For reasons of camouflage, and because of the heavy enemy air activity in the lower Seine area, marches were only made at night. The days were used for resting and for servicing the vehicles. The Engr. Bn. was detached to the ferry crossings in advance in order to regulate traffic and help with the ferrying.

After crossing the Seine the 116 Pz Div reached the area east of the Caen-Falaise road on 20 July without any casualties, and was committed in a supporting position along the Canteloup - St. Silvain line on the sector of la Mance brook. The mission was to block any enemy pushes in a southeasterly direction and to throw them back. As the forces in the MLR repelled all enemy attacks despite terrific artillery barrages, the 116 Pz Div was not involved in combat. The Div remained in this position until 30 July.

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Section IV. Move to the Vire - St. Sever - St. Poiré area.

Successful enemy attacks in the St. Lo-Contances and the intention of breaking through on Avranches which seemed to be coupled with them made it desirable to save all combat units that could be spared from the Caise sector still farther to the West.

On 30 July the 116 Pz Div received orders to withdraw from its present supporting position southeast of Caen. That same day it started off south of Falaise, by-passed it and reached the area south of Sever the same night, having travelled by two roads.

On 31 July the Div reassembled. The Pz Recon Bn. was already carrying out reconnaissance in the northwesterly direction of Percy. The march to the St. Sever area was not disturbed by the enemy air force.

On 1 Aug the Div was moved up to the area north of St. Sever and put in readiness in the line Tessy-Percy for an attack in the direction of Coubances.

Mission: To cut off from their rear communications the enemy forces pushing south from Coubances.

Objective: The Coubances-Avranches road.

Stubborn engagements with superior enemy forces took place already when the units were moved up. Without any artillery support, the Pz Recon Bn attacked and took the heights northeast of Percy which were important for the assembling. The heights were lost to an enemy attack preceded by heavy artillery and fighter-bomber preparation, and were retaken again. Stubborn fighting went on near Villedieu. The attack had to be ceased, as any movement of tanks was prevented by continuous enemy fighter-bomber activity and the complete absence of our own Luftwaffe.

2 Aug 44. Enemy thrusts on Vire from the North threaten to cut off the forces northwest of Vire. 116 Pz Div received orders to disengage from the enemy during the night of 2 Aug and to be moved to the area west of the St. Sever via the line Villedieu - St. Sever.

3-5 Aug 44. Defensive battles and reconnaissance skirmishes on the general line of Villedieu and Brecey. Heavy enemy air activity.

6 Aug 44. Withdrawal to the line western edge of the St. Sever Forest - St. Poiré - Le Mesnil Gilbert.

7 Aug 44. Defensive fighting west and north of St. Pois and on the western edge of the St. Sever Forest.

8 Aug 44. Withdrawal to the line Champ du Bault-Montjoire Lingard.

9 Aug 44. Heavy, fluctuating defensive fighting in this line. Enemy pressing from the North and the northwest via Vire and succeeded in making several territorial gains in the sector of the right neighbor (363 Inf Div). Vire was taken by the enemy.

10 Aug 44. Continued pressure on the 116 Pz Div's flank from Vire necessitated a further withdrawal to the line Gathemo-Perrieres-Cherence (adjoining 2 Pz Div there). Heavy infantry and tank fighting took place in the whole of the area before the Div, and near Gathemo. A temporary crisis west of Perrieres, where the enemy had made a gap after taking St. Pois, but this could be closed by the timely commitment of weak reserves

The 116 Pz Div never had a chance to take part in the counter attack on Avranches, as it was involved in heavy defensive fighting alone, its whole front with its left resting on La See brook near Aevence, and had had critical losses both of men and equipment. The enemy, vastly superior in artillery, tanks and heavy infantry weapons, continuously watched every move with artillery spotters and fighter-bombers, and duly fired at them, whereas during all that time, and in the coming days and months, not one German plane was seen over the combat or marching areas. Despite these unequal conditions the troops fought downy and bravely, and were completely under the control of their officers.

11 Aug 44. Enemy pressure from Vire, in the neighboring sector, in a southerly direction, increased. The right wing of the Div, fighting at Gathemo, occasionally had to help out the right neighbour with small combat groups, as the neighbour did not dispose of any tanks. Perrieres, on the left wing, was held. On that day the enemy dropped a particularly heavy barrage on the valley road from Sourdeval to Cherence by sporadic fire from several batteries shooting with the help of spotter planes.

12 Aug 44. During the early hours of 12 Aug 44, the 116 Div received orders to withdraw from the front after being relieved by the 84 Inf Div and the 331 Inf Div sector by sector, and to assemble in the area south of Sourdeval at a fairly high degree of readiness to move. Meanwhile Gen Max Keller, from the officers reserve of the OKH,

took over command of the Div for Gen Lt Graef v. Sowerin, who had temporarily been attached to the officers reserve of Heeresgruppe west. On this day the 116 Pz Div left the units fighting in the sector of the front from Vire to Avranches. During the night of 12 Aug the Div speedily assembled for a move to the Sees-Alencon sector with orders to get in the way of the enemy forces advancing on Argentan from the South through Alencon.

This move, and the later fighting of the 116 Pz Div in the Sees and Argentan areas, are described in an account written by Gen. Maj. Mueller.