

Searching For Competence: The Initial Combat Experience Of Untested U.S. Army Divisions In World War II – A Case Study Of The 90th Infantry Division, June-July 1944.

CSC 2005

Subject Area History

***SEARCHING FOR COMPETENCE: THE INITIAL COMBAT EXPERIENCE OF
UNTESTED U.S. ARMY DIVISIONS IN WORLD WAR II – A CASE STUDY OF THE 90TH
INFANTRY DIVISION, JUNE-JULY 1944.***

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJOR BENJAMIN L. BRADLEY, USAF

AY 04-05

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Searching For Competence: The Initial Combat Experience Of Untested U.S. Army Divisions In World War II ? A Case Study Of The 90th Infantry Division, June-July 1944.				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 69	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Searching for Competence: The Initial Combat Experience of Untested U.S. Army Divisions in World War II – A Case Study of the 90th Infantry Division, June - July 1944.

Author: Major Benjamin L. Bradley, United States Air Force

Thesis: The initial combat experience of the 90th Infantry Division in World War II demonstrates the leadership and training problems faced by many new divisions throughout the war.

Discussion: Like all newly activated World War II Divisions, the 90th had a turbulent two-year training period fraught with problems of resources and personnel. During the interwar years, the Army's readiness was allowed to stagnate below such an acceptable level that when crisis called there was little to build upon. Consequently, the larger priority of rapidly fielding 90 divisions outweighed considerations for how well those divisions were trained. Thus, the 90th Division was forced into combat by the exigencies of war with many factors working against it: untested officers, unfamiliar doctrine, limited training on advanced combat skills, and the detrimental effects of constant personnel turnover, including commanders.

As the 90th went ashore on Normandy, a period of ineffectiveness ensued as soldiers were forced to learn the lessons of training under fire and unsuccessful leaders were replaced. Furthermore, the 90th Division's period of ineffectiveness seemed extraordinary because it occurred under the spotlight of the Normandy invasion where insufficient planning for the difficulties of hedgerow combat severely slowed the expected pace of advance. Undoubtedly, the performance of the 90th Division's senior leadership was abysmal, but its uncoordinated attacks were the product of training deficiencies experienced by all new divisions. Additionally, critical evaluation reveals the 90th's early contribution much higher than historically credited and far from the total failure some have labeled it.

Unfortunately, the high casualty rate of combat on Normandy and the negative impact of replacements on operational effectiveness was more than the division could endure. Despite the need to rest and reset after its bloody battle for Monte Castre, the 90th Division was tasked to eradicate a salient centered in the town of St. Germain. The result was disastrous and forever marked the division as a less well-trained and lead outfit than any other. However, the experience of many other divisions shows the 90th was not the only one that endured the failures of training and leadership on the battlefield.

Conclusions: The plight of the 90th Division is illustrative of the multitude of problems overcome by newly formed American divisions and the entire U.S. Army during World War II. The division was not significantly different than many others who also stumbled in their initial actions. Circumstances on Normandy never allowed adequate time for the division to reset from its normal initial failings. The experience of the 90th Division illuminates much about the importance of training continuity and the difficulties of rapidly expanding the military in times of national crisis. Furthermore, it highlights the need to maintain and continue to develop a highly trained corps of regular, reserve, and national guard officers—even in times of peace.

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PREFACE

I commenced this research in an effort to learn more about my grandfather's experiences during World War II. William J. "Duck" Bradley, Jr., or Pop Pop as I called him, was a voluble man, but he rarely discussed his wartime experiences. Unfortunately, the time to ask questions ended with his passing in 1998 and the answers offered by official military personnel records were lost in a fire at the National Archives in St. Louis. What little I know about his time in the U.S. Army was gleaned from faded separation papers found after his death. Pop Pop joined F Company, 359th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division as a replacement soldier in January 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge. He was wounded shortly thereafter (receiving a Purple Heart), recovered, and returned to duty. He went on to participate in the Rhineland and Central Europe campaigns before ending his 22 months of service with the army of occupation. Armed with this minimal knowledge, I set out hoping to find an appropriate research topic and unknowingly stumbled on the most controversial American division of the war.

In his 1951 memoirs, General Omar Bradley, Commander of the U.S. First Army—later 12th Army Group—saddled the 90th Infantry Division with a dubious label. He wrote, "Almost from the moment of its starting attack . . . the 90th Division became a '*problem*' division."¹ Years later, in his other work, *A General's Life*, he remarked that the 90th Division was the, "worst-trained to arrive in the ETO [European Theater of Operations]."² Indeed, on the surface, the facts appear to support Bradley's statements. During its first 60 days of combat, the 90th Division failed to seize three of its first four objectives, causing him to relieve two division

¹ General Omar N. Bradley, USA, *A Soldiers Story* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), 297.

² General Omar N. Bradley, USA and Clay Blair, *A General's Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 262.

commanders, an assistant division commander, and two regimental commanders. The First Army staff found the division's performance so exasperating they recommended breaking it up as replacement troops for other divisions. Instead, Bradley opted for a third commander and provided him with the authority to replace an unlimited number of division personnel with anyone of his choosing. This, coupled with a transfer to Lieutenant General George S. Patton's Third Army and the breakout from the Norman hedgerows, produced a series of victories in the rapid advance across France. Morale among the troops soared and eventually, as Bradley recalled, the division developed into one of the "finest . . . in combat on the Allied front."³

Many historians have harshly critiqued the effectiveness of the 90th Division's early performance without a thorough evaluation of the facts or comparison to other *green*, i.e. inexperienced, divisions. Generally, the division's early actions are characterized as a total collapse—worse than any in Europe—and the result of exceptionally poor leadership and training.⁴ The British journalist and historian Max Hastings offered a typical critique in his book *Overlord*. He called the division *disastrously unsatisfactory, accident-prone, and one of the least effective formations of the Allied Armies in Normandy*.⁵

Undoubtedly, the 90th Division, in particular its leadership, stumbled during the first two months of combat. However, this was not an unusual phenomenon for inexperienced World War II divisions. Most American units went through a period of relative ineffectiveness as they struggled to overcome the initial fears of combat, the inadequacies of training, and the

³ Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 296-297.

⁴ Martin Blumenson, "Re-Assessing a Reputation," *Military Affairs* 22, no. 2 (Summer, 1958): 95-96. URL:<<http://www.jstor.org>>, Accessed 14 September 2004. Cited hereafter as Blumenson, "Re-Assessing a Reputation."

⁵ Italicized words are three separate descriptions of the 90th Division by Max Hastings, in *Overlord: D-Day and The Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984), 160, 244, 314.

shortcomings of many non-effective combat leaders. Furthermore, in terms of the 90th, critical evaluation reveals that during its initial break-in period the division actually achieved highly destructive effects against the strongest portions of the German's defense. Unfortunately, the high numbers of casualties endured were more than an inexperienced division could withstand and its combat effectiveness deteriorated well below a mission ready status. This resulted in a disastrous engagement at St. Germain that sealed its reputation thereafter.

A case study of the 90th Division is actually a reflection of the larger leadership and training issues surrounding the mobilization and transformation of the pre-World War II U.S. Army. *The dilapidated state of the interwar Army combined with the rapid expansion from five to ninety-one divisions caused tremendous problems that manifested themselves on the battlefields of North Africa and Europe. The experience of the 90th Division is one example of these problems and demonstrates a similar pattern exhibited by many new divisions as well as the Army in total.* The causes of this pattern are well documented in the Army's official history—a disastrously prepared corps of interwar officers, a lack of training resources, and a fallible troop replacement system. These conditions conspired to hamper the development of all new divisions and create significant obstacles to achieving combat effectiveness. Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. captured the essence of this experience in a 1942 letter from North Africa stating, “I guess nations going to war must go through a stumbling period before they purge the incompetents.”⁶ Only the blood and courage of the typical American soldier carried the Army through its initial stumbling period while effective leaders rose to the top. There is no better example of this process than the 90th Division.

⁶ Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War In North Africa, 1942-1943* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 403.

Unfortunately, my research did not uncover any direct insights regarding the combat experience of my grandfather. In fact, this study focuses on the time period prior to his arrival in theater. This became beneficial from the standpoint that it allowed me to maintain objectivity. Nevertheless, through this research, I have gained a greater appreciation for the hardships and sacrifices of my grandfather and other grandfathers like him. I only wish he was still around today to discuss them in person—but I suspect he still wouldn't say much.

Others deserve thanks for helping me complete this paper. My advisors, Dr. Don Bittner and Lieutenant Colonel William Bennett, provided the required prodding when the work bogged down and the editing to help make my thoughts more coherent. Additionally, and most importantly, I want to say thanks to my wife, Darlene, who took more than her fair share of turns attending to our newborn daughter while I struggled to write one more page. Thanks for the help sweetheart!



Figure 1. The 90th Division Patch

Source: 90th Division Association Website, <URL:<http://www.90thdivisionassoc.org>>, Accessed 18 February 2005.

PRELUDE TO NORMANDY: RAISING A DIVISION

While obstacles were to be expected in any enterprise as full of imponderables as the training of a large force in a short time, the difficulties encountered were sufficiently great and persistent to imperil the combat effectiveness of the infantry divisions produced by the Army Ground Forces.

*Bell I. Wiley, U.S. Army Historian*⁷

The 90th Infantry Division was originally activated as a reserve division in 1917 and served with distinction during World War I in the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives. Originally named for the states where its soldiers were recruited, the “Texas-Oklahoma” Division was also informally known as the Alamo Division. It was demobilized after World War I and then recalled to active service on 25 March 1942 at Camp Barkley near Abilene, Texas. This time, the division contained recruits from across the nation and eventually the blood red “T” and “O” on the division patch gave rise to a new handle—the “Tough ‘Ombres.”⁸

The 1942 version of the 90th was organized in the Army’s new triangular structure adopted in 1939 in place of the older World War I square division design. The triangular structure provided nearly all echelons of command three maneuver elements as well as a means of fire support. Thus, below division, the combat power was composed of three infantry regiments and a brigade of division artillery that could either be consolidated or distributed among the regiments to create regimental combat teams. Each regiment contained three battalions, each of which possessed three rifle companies and heavy weapons company. Rifle

⁷ Bell I. Wiley, “The Building and Training of Infantry Divisions,” in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1948), 456.

⁸ Fact Sheet on the 90th Infantry Division, part of a collection of National Archives papers on microfilm at the Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Microfilm no. M-N-1091-A, Roll 1 of *90th Infantry Division Monthly Narratives and Supporting Papers for Staff Section, Selected Dates From 1942-1945*.

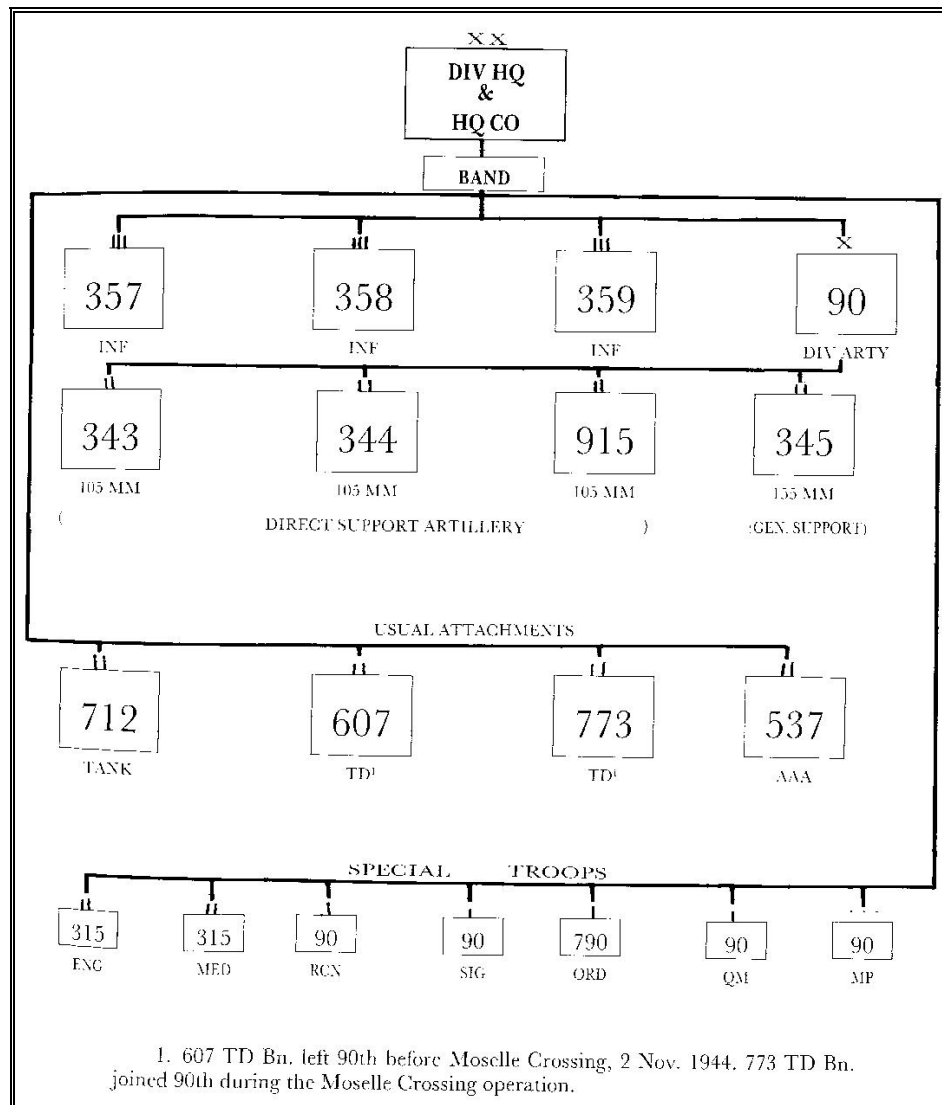


Figure 2. Organization Chart, 90th Infantry Division in WWII

Source: John Colby, *War from the Ground Up: The 90th Division in WWII* (Austin, TX: Nortex Press, 1991), 3.

companies were further divided into three infantry platoons supported by a weapons platoon, while each platoon was organized into three subordinate squads. In addition, the division contained supporting tank, tank-destroyer, anti-aircraft, and combat service support units. Collectively, this triangular organization was self-sustaining, numbered approximately 14,000 troops, and was well suited for the emerging fire and maneuver doctrine that dominated the

World War II battlefield. Unfortunately, the state of the American Army was not ready to handle these changes.⁹

When the Germans conquered Western Europe with 136 divisions in 1939, the U.S. War Department reported it could then only field a mere five divisions. By the end of 1943 the Army had a total of 91 divisions, 38 of which were activated in 1942 along with the Tough ‘Ombres.¹⁰ The task of raising and equipping 8,000,000 soldiers was colossal, but training them to effectively fight was the ultimate challenge. When mobilization began in 1940, the Army had a mere 14,000 regular officers to develop and lead the future officer corps of over 600,000. Despite the fact that a third of this requirement would be filled by officers from the National Guard and Reserve, the experience and demographic cross section of the entire officer corps (Regular, National Guard, and Reserve) was well below a modest expectation of acceptability. Active duty majors averaged 48 years of age and not one officer in the entire U.S. Army had commanded a unit as large as a World War I division. One-fourth of the National Guard lieutenants were over the age of 40, and its senior ranks contained many political hacks in uniform. Furthermore, after summer training in 1940 the National Guard Bureau declared 20% of its staff and division officers unqualified for their positions. In an effort to overcome these deficiencies, War Department Committees known as plucking boards immediately began purging deadwood from the officer ranks. Meanwhile, the remaining officers embarked upon the arduous task of building an Army virtually from scratch in precious little time.¹¹

⁹ John Colby, *War from the Ground Up: The 90th Division in WWII* (Austin, TX: Nortex Press, 1991), 1; Christopher R. Gabel, *The U.S. Army GHQ Maneuvers of 1941* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1991), 12.

¹⁰ Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 492.

¹¹ Robert R. Palmer and William R. Keast, “The Procurement of Officers,” in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1948), 91-93; Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn*, 8-10; Gabel, *GHQ Maneuvers*, 16.

The plan to create 91 divisions was dubbed by Brigadier General John M. Palmer as the “finest piece of large-scale planning” he had seen in 50 years of service. Each of the standing divisions was designated as the “parent” of a future unit and tasked to provide a cadre of experienced officers and enlisted men for the core of that new division. Cadre personnel were taught the new doctrine and organization via specialty courses at the Command and General Staff School as well as individual branch and service schools prior to arrival at their new unit. Commanders, assistant commanders, and artillery commanders were designated separately by the War Department and schooled in similar specialty courses. Equipment and the bulk of the recruits were scheduled to start arriving shortly after the cadre, with the entire division present no later than 15 days after the activation date. The initial training cycle lasted one year, beginning with basic individual combat training and increasing in complexity to combined arms integration at the regimental level. Advanced training was scheduled for the second year and included division level large scale maneuvers against opposing units, as well as specialty subjects such as urban combat and fortified area attacks. Additionally, during the second year, each neophyte division was designated as a parent unit and tasked to groom a new cadre of trainers for subsequent divisions.¹²

The quality of initial 90th Division cadre is unknown; however, unlike the intent of the activation plan, the cadre arrived from three separate units: the 20th Infantry Regiment, the 6th Infantry Division, and the 33rd Infantry Division.¹³ The effect of this on the division’s training

¹² Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 433-436.

¹³ *Peragimus, We Accomplish: A Brief History of the 358th Infantry* (Weiden, Germany: Ferdinand Nickl, 1945), online edition, *The 90th Division Association*, URL:<<http://www.90thdivisionassoc.org>>, Accessed 7 April 2005; George von Roeder, *Regimental History of the 357th Infantry* (Oberfalz, Bavaria: Ferdinand Nickl Buchdruckerei Weiden, n.d.), online edition, *The 90th Division Association*, 9-11, URL: <<http://www.90thdivisionassoc.org/90thDivisionFolders/357thbook/357thhist.pdf>>, Accessed 12 March 2005.

was likely negligible; nevertheless, this was the first indication that the Army Ground Forces activation and training plan did not meet the realities of personnel and resources.

Limitations on manpower in 1942 along with the imperative to maintain an aggressive activation schedule left all new units under-manned at the start of training. At the same time, divisions created prior to 1942 struggled to meet training timelines because of a higher than expected demand for replacement troops in operational theaters and the cadre requirements already in place.¹⁴ Consequently, new units like the 90th were forced to provide a cadre of 216 officers and 1,460 enlisted men less than six months after their own activation and before each division had completed its full cycle of training. This meant commanders of new divisions either sent their best soldiers at a detriment to future training, or handicapped another fledgling division with mediocre cadre. In either case, the backfill of recruit replacements caused turmoil in the training program as troops became strung out at various phases without the correct number of instructors or leaders.¹⁵ For the Tough ‘Ombres, this occurred nine months after activation when an undetermined number of replacements caused part of the division to revert back to basic training while others continued with Regimental Combat Team training.¹⁶

Identifying and developing quality leaders at all ranks was by far the greatest problem confronting the U.S. Army in the early 1940s. In 1942, Army Ground Forces staff reports were filled with critical assessments of the basic unit leadership skills displayed by all divisions in the training pipeline. In October of the same year, one report regarding the 90th Division noted,

¹⁴ Robert R. Palmer, *Mobilization of the Ground Army*, Army Ground Forces Historical Section Study No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 4-9.

¹⁵ Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 438-440, 466.

¹⁶ Although the exact number of replacements received is unknown, the average number for divisions activated prior to the fall of 1942 was 1,200; Wiley, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 438; Information on the timing of replacements from George von Roeder, *Regimental History of the 357th Infantry*, 9-11.

“hesitant [and] uncertain leadership by platoon and squad leaders” during the platoon combat proficiency tests. Over time, reports began to note an increase in the technical proficiency and maturity of junior officers; however, this came at the expense of non-commissioned leaders.¹⁷ In July 1941, three-month officer candidate schools opened to meet the severe officer shortage projected for 1942. These schools siphoned off the most promising young enlisted men at the four to six month point. This reduced the future quality of non-commissioned officers and more importantly created a high personnel turnover rate for divisions in training.¹⁸ In an interview for a Command and General Staff student paper in 1966, Col Joseph H. Rustmeyer, the first commander of the 358th Infantry, stated that after activation most of his best non-commissioned officers left for officer candidate school. These vacancies were filled by young and promising soldiers who also left to become officers. “So you see,” he said, “it took a long time to shakedown the regiment.”¹⁹

While the problem of junior officer leadership was somewhat alleviated over time, the need for competent field grade officers lasted throughout the entire war. Many division commanders discovered shortly after arriving in theater that the battalion echelon was by far the weakest link in the division. Thus, graduates of the Command and Staff School at Fort Leavenworth became a coveted commodity and were quickly diverted overseas as field grade replacements. This created a self-defeating situation as stateside commanders found the best way to avoid losing talented officers was to withhold them from advanced training.²⁰

¹⁷ Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 457-459.

¹⁸ Palmer and Keast, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 95-97.

¹⁹ Colonel Joseph H. Rustmeyer, Commander 358th Infantry Regiment, March 1942-February 1943; Unpublished interview with Constantine Blastos, Major, USA, 10 January 1966; Combined Arms Research Library Archives, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Archive No. N8224.8.

²⁰ Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 466-468.

The problem of quality leadership also appeared at the colonel and general officer level. Prior to mobilization, captains and majors had been stuck on promotion lists for years with no way of advancing or gaining experience at higher levels of command. Consequently, in 1940, when Congress authorized temporary promotions to the general officer rank, a flood of untested leaders filled the abundance of emerging command positions.²¹ The failure of many division commanders, in particular those during Normandy, awakened Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall to the Army's problem of identifying competent division commanders. Subsequently, he forbade the selection of division commanders, assistant division commanders, and division artillery commanders who had not already successfully fulfilled a command position in combat. Furthermore, the permanent promotion of those already holding a command position was withheld until they proved their qualifications in the heat of battle.²²

In terms of senior leadership, the records of those who trained the 90th Division appear to indicate a high degree of experience and professional competence. The original commander, Major General Henry Terrell, Jr., was a 52-year-old regular army officer with an infantry background. He had won the French Croix de Guerre for bravery as the commander of a battalion in the 35th Infantry during World War I, and was an honor graduate of the Command and General Staff School in 1925.²³ Brigadier General Charles W. Ryder was the assistant

²¹ Gabel, *GHQ Maneuvers*, 15-16.

²² Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 439-441, 457-459, 466-468.

²³ Age data from the website *The Generals of WWII*, URL:<http://www.generals.dk/general/Terrell/Henry_Jr./USA.html>, Accessed 6 April 2005; Information on the Croix de Guerre from The Texas Military Institute Website, URL:<http://www.tmi-sa.org/scat_history_cadets.html>, Accessed 6 April 2005; Additional Croix de Guerre information from the University of Texas Phi Psi Prominent Alumni Website, URL:<http://utphipsi.com/intraclub/query/catquery.html?doc_number=564>, Accessed on 6 April 2005; Command and Staff Information from U.S. Army, *Annual Report of The General Service Schools, 1924-1925* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The General Service Schools Press, 1925), URL:<<http://www.cgsc.army.mil/carl/download/reports/rep1925.pdf>>, Accessed 6 April 2005.

division commander for a short period of time before departing to command the 34th Infantry Division in North Africa later that year. From there he rose to command 9th Army Corps in the Pacific. The impact of Ryder during his short time with the division is unknown, but on the merits of his successes before and after the 90th Division as well as his military education experiences at West Point (class of 1915), the Command and General Staff School, and the Army War College, it's reasonable to conclude he did not have a negative influence on the



Figure 3. Major General Henry Terrell, Jr. – Commander, March 1942 – January 1944

Source: 90th Division Association Website, <URL:<http://www.90thdivisionassoc.org>>, Accessed 6 April 2005.

division.²⁴

Brigadier General Sam Williams arrived in February 1943 to replace Ryder. Williams had enlisted in 1916 at the age of eighteen and risen to lieutenant via the officer training camps

²⁴ 90th Infantry Division, General Order No. 2, March 26, 1942, part of a collection of National Archives papers on microfilm at the Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Microfilm no. M-N-1092-B, Roll 2 of *General Orders 90th Infantry Division, Vol I & II*; Summary of Charles W. Ryder Papers and Biographical Note, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library Online, [URL:<www.eisenhower.archives.gov/listofholdingshtml/listofholdingsR/RyderCharlesWPapers19171950>](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/listofholdingshtml/listofholdingsR/RyderCharlesWPapers19171950), Accessed 9 April 2005.

opened in 1917 after the U.S. declared war on Germany. He was wounded twice—the second time seriously—as an infantry company commander in the 90th Division during World War I. After recovering, Williams accepted a regular commission in 1920 and went on to other staff and command assignments as well as the Command and General Staff School and the War College before arriving back at the 90th Division as the assistant commander.²⁵

The leadership of the division artillery was somewhat chaotic as three officers exchanged command prior to Normandy: Brigadier Generals John E. Lewis, George D. Shea, and John M. Devine. Not much is known about these men except Devine who led the artillery ashore on D-Day. He later received a battlefield promotion and moved on to take command of the 8th Armored Division in the fall of 1944 until the end of the war.²⁶

Regarding the regimental echelon, all three units changed leadership once during the first year of training. Little is known about the original three commanders other than the fact that one died seven months into training and another was replaced after twelve months because at 51 he exceeded the age limit for regimental commanders.²⁷ The three officers who took command for the later half of training and the deployment to England were all members of the original officer cadre and graduates of West Point. Colonels John W. Sheehy (class of 1919), James V. Thompson (class of 1927), and Clark K. Fales (class of 1917) commanded the 357th, 358th, and 359th Infantry Regiments respectively.²⁸ These were the men primarily responsible for ensuring

²⁵ Colonel Harold J. Meyer, USA, *Hanging Sam: A Military Biography of General Samuel T. Williams* (New Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1990), 17, 29-41, 55-57.

²⁶ General Order No.2 and No. 20, *General Orders 90th Infantry Division, Vol I & II*; Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 496-498.

²⁷ Rustmeyer. unpublished interview with Blastos, 10 January 1966.

²⁸ “90th Division Staff Officers and Unit Commanders,” *The Abilene Reporter News*, 30 May 1943, 16, part of a collection of National Archives papers on microfilm at the Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth,

the Tough ‘Ombres meet their training timeline and objectives; however, many external factors outside the control of the leadership complicated the division’s preparations.

In September 1942, six months after activation, the division was one of five converted to an experimental motorized configuration. Already low on experience due to the early departure of cadre the month prior, this conversion undoubtedly strained the staff and created additional training tasks for the troops.²⁹ In December, on the heels of this conversion and coincident with the arrival of new recruits, the division completed its first regimental combat team live-fire exercise at Camp Bowie, Texas. Immediately thereafter, in January 1943, the Tough ‘Ombres deployed to Louisiana for six weeks of division size force-on-force maneuvers against the 77th Division. Despite the emphasis on division level training, it wasn’t until the final two weeks of the exercise that division size attacks were attempted.³⁰ Furthermore, post exercise evaluations of both units cited a “laxity in training during the basic unit and combined arms periods . . . a lack of control on the part of commanders . . . a general failure on the part of officers to correct errors and deficiencies on the spot; and a failure to conform to tactical doctrine.”³¹ This harsh critique is evidence that the division was falling behind on training, likely because of the number command changes and disparate activities creating turmoil and hindering the training program. Adding to the problem, as soon as the Tough ‘Ombres returned from Louisiana in March, the

Kansas, Microfilm no. M-N-1091-B, Roll 2 of *90th Infantry Division Monthly Narratives and Supporting Papers for Staff Section, Selected Dates From 1942-1945*.

²⁹ Robert R. Palmer, *Reorganization of Ground Troops For Combat*, Army Ground Forces Historical Section Study No. 8 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 40-42.

³⁰ Roeder, *Regimental History of the 357th*, 9-11; *Battle History: Third Battalion 358th Infantry* (Plzea, Czechoslovakia: Nov & Všetisk, 1945), online edition, *The 90th Division Association*, URL: <<http://www.90thdivisionassoc.org>>, Accessed 12 March 2005.

³¹ Jean R. Moenk, *The History of Large-Scale Army Maneuvers in the United States, 1935-1964* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1969), 96-98.

motorized experiment was cancelled and they reverted back to a standard infantry division. In 1979, retired four-star General William E. DePuy—a lieutenant with the 90th in World War II—recalled that because of the ever changing cadre requirements, recruit arrivals, and organizational structures, most soldiers restarted the training cycle between two to three times. Consequently, the preponderance of division training was spent on basic soldiering and very little on highly integrated or advanced tactics.³²

Another problem that plagued all divisions throughout 1942 and 1943 was a shortage of equipment. Because of the continued underutilization of the nation's industrial capacity and the requirement to supply Russian efforts on the east European front, units in training were allotted only 50% of the normal table of equipment. However, in practice, this resulted in far less. Specifically, commanders consistently complained about the lack of ammunition and weapons that at times forced them to postpone portions of training for up to six weeks. One Army Ground Forces inspection report observed in February 1943, "The general shortage of equipment is a serious handicap to training. . . . Groups working single weapons were so large that individuals were receiving scant instruction." In April 1943, Brigadier General Shea, the 90th Division's artillery commander, echoed this frustration in a letter to the Army Ground Forces staff; he requested a three to six fold increase in ammunition stocks for both the infantry and artillery because the amount supplied was insufficient for soldiers to become proficient with their weapons.³³ Worse yet, three months prior to Shea's letter, division personnel in Louisiana had to mount broomsticks on wooden tripods in order to simulate machine guns.³⁴

³² Romie L. Brownlee and William J. Mullen III, *Changing an Army: An Oral History of General William E. DePuy, USA Retired* (Washington, DC: GPO, n.d.), 7-8, 11, 14.

³³ Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 456, 463-465, Quotation on 465.

³⁴ Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 4.

Nevertheless, in September 1943, the men of the 90th departed Camp Barkley for the Desert Training Center at the California-Arizona maneuver area near Yuma, Arizona. Over the course of the next three months, the division underwent what was considered the graduate school of combined arms training which culminated in a month long division size force-on-force exercise against the 93rd Division. Then, unexpectedly, at the end of December, the division received orders to move east for immediate deployment to England. Unbeknownst to the soldiers, the Tough ‘Ombres had been identified as a primary division for Normandy.³⁵ The precise reason for this selection over other divisions is not documented. However, almost certainly one of the deciding factors was the division’s participation in both large-scale training exercises. Furthermore, it was one of only thirteen divisions throughout the entire war to complete the Desert Training Center, and seven of the other divisions had been activated after the 90th.³⁶

Thus, on 8 January 1944, the Tough ‘Ombres arrived at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and for the first time in nearly two years traded their tents for barracks.³⁷ Little training occurred at Fort Dix where the effort was focused on preparations for departure. According to the regimental histories, even as the Tough ‘Ombres prepared to deploy, an unspecified number of replacements continued arrive from the 63rd Division which had been activated only six 6 months previously.³⁸

³⁵ Joe I. Abrams, *A History of the 90th Division in World War II: 6 June 1944 to 9 May 1945*, 2d ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: Battery Press, 1999), 2; Roeder, *Regimental History of the 357th*, 9-11; *Peragimus: A Brief History of the 358th Infantry Regiment*, online edition; Wiley in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 470.

³⁶ Four of the remaining five divisions that completed the Desert Training Center were already in theater. The fifth division was the 77th Infantry Division which deployed at the same time; Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 470, 489-492.

³⁷ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing and Army*, 12.

³⁸ Arrival of replacements taken from Abrams, *A History of the 90th Division*, 2; Roeder, *Regimental History of the 357th*, 11; *Battle History: Third Battalion 358th Infantry*, online edition; 63rd Division activation data from Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 470.

Amid the movement to England and the planning for D-Day, these tenderfoot replacements would be given little quality training time with their new units before going ashore at Normandy—unfortunately neither would their new commander.

On 23 January, less than five months before D-Day, Brigadier General Jay W. MacKelvie took the reins from General Terrell who moved up to command the XXII Corps. MacKelvie was a 52-year-old, regular army artillery officer with the credentials and connections for command. He had enlisted in 1913 and risen to the rank of sergeant major in just three years. Like General Williams, he also became a lieutenant in 1917 via the World War I officer training camps and fought in the St. Mihiel offensive with the 28th Field Artillery. On returning to the U.S., he held routine assignments intermixed with attendance at Command and General Staff School in 1932 and the Army War College in 1936. MacKelvie made his name in 1942 on the War Department Plans Group where he became known to the Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall. Afterwards, Marshall selected him to command the 85th Infantry Division Artillery and in September 1943 the XII Corps Artillery. Four months later, MacKelvie took command of the 90th Division as a Brigadier General.³⁹

³⁹ Meyer, *Hanging Sam*, 3.



Figure 4. Brigadier General Jay W. MacKelvie – Commander, 23 January - 13 June 1944

Source: 90th Division Association Website, <URL:<http://www.90thdivisionassoc.org>>, Accessed 6 April 2005.

In early March the division moved to a staging area at Camp Kilner, New Jersey, and on the 23rd sailed from New York Harbor. By 9 April, the entire division had arrived in Britain where it was split until the landing in Normandy. The main body encamped in Wales near Cardiff and Newport, while the 359th Infantry was in Devonshire attached to the 4th Division for the initial assault on UTAH beach.⁴⁰ Not unexpectedly, the training regimen less than two months prior to D-Day did little to exercise the planning and coordination of units larger than a platoon. Instead, it focused primarily on physical conditioning marches, squad problems, and classes on the German Army. Notably absent, however, was the additional thinking and training required for the specialized problem of hedgerow combat. This was not merely a 90th Division oversight, but one that plagued the Army as a whole for the first two months of the war on the continent.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Abrams, *A History of the 90th Division*, 3.

⁴¹ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing and Army*, 14.

In 1963, General Williams, in a series of letters to his sister, stated that the training of the 90th division suffered between 10 April and 5 June 1944. As the assistant division commander, his role was to oversee daily training and preparation; however, because he spent most of his time at Corps headquarters planning the 90th's role in the invasion, he was unable to carry out this duty. MacKelvie's actions to ensure the preparation of the division are not well documented. William's wrote that before his departure with an advance party to England, he ensured MacKelvie was thoroughly briefed on the division's issues, particularly the status of replacement troops from the 63rd Division, which Williams considered to be inadequate. According to Williams, MacKelvie asked few questions during his orientation and generally remained aloof. Once in England, the division of labor between MacKelvie and Williams is again not completely clear, but the inference from William's letters indicates MacKelvie did little to familiarize himself with the division, its personnel, or its potential problems.⁴²

One action MacKelvie did take was to replace the 357th Infantry commander, Colonel Sheehy, with Colonel P.D. Ginder less than a month prior to D-Day. By all accounts, Ginder (West Point class of 1927) received the command not because of inadequacy on the part of Sheehy but because he had somehow impressed MacKelvie. According to a postwar survey of division veterans conducted by John Colby for his book *War from the Ground*, Ginder was regarded by most as boisterous and a loose cannon—the complete opposite of the highly respected Sheehy.⁴³ These views are supported by both General William's letters and General DePuy's oral history.⁴⁴

⁴² Meyer, *Hanging Sam*, 3-5.

⁴³ Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 485.

⁴⁴ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing an Army*, 16; Meyer, *Hanging Sam*, 74, 77.

Thus, as the 90th Division went into action in June 1944, many factors worked against it. With the exception of six weeks of large force exercises, its officers lacked familiarity with a relatively new employment doctrine and the supporting organizational structure. Furthermore, most of its leaders were unproven, particularly at the regiment and below. Cadre requirements and the pull of officer candidate schools had contrived to constantly drain the division of experienced soldiers and non-commissioned officers; meanwhile, a haphazard influx of replacement troops and organizational changes continually reset the training timeline and reduced the amount of integrated and advanced skills training. Resource shortfalls added to the training problem with limitations on weapons and ammunition. On top of these issues, the division lacked continuity of command. Its leadership had inevitably changed after every training exercise when commanders had undoubtedly learned the most about their troops and the timing was appropriate to implement changes for improvement. Most importantly, in the case of MacKelvie, taking command late denied him the ability to gain confidence, overcome his lack of infantry experience, and learn how to employ the division—tactically and administratively—in a benign training environment.

With the exception of the last factor, these issues were not unique to the 90th Division. A study by the historical section of the Army Ground Forces in 1946 stated, “the fundamental principle of training in the Army Ground Forces was the integrity of the tactical unit. . . . No principle was more consistently violated.”⁴⁵ As additional proof, in a speech to the Command and Staff School one month prior to the 90th Division’s activation, the commander of the Army Ground Forces, Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, said “We [the army] have verified the

⁴⁵ *Principles and Methods of Training in the Army Ground Forces*, Army Ground Forces Historical Section Study No. 10 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 47.

inevitable—that inadequately trained officers cannot train troops effectively.”⁴⁶ These two statements go to the heart of the chaotic, dysfunctional state of division training during World War II. Despite many improvements in resources and personnel management over the course of the war, the effect of these conditions was to hamper the initial effectiveness of inexperienced units for the entire war. Sylvanus Thayer, the father of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, once stated, “To make a good army out of the best men will take three years.”⁴⁷ Only nine divisions activated for World War II received three years of training before departing for combat; most, like the 90th, got a tumultuous two.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the real training would be on the job and under fire.

⁴⁶ Palmer and Keast, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 92.

⁴⁷ Atkinson, *Army at Dawn*, 53.

⁴⁸ Wiley, in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 489-491.

THE 90TH'S BAPTISM OF FIRE—JUNE 1944

Operational Overview

The expected duration of the campaign on the European continent placed a premium on ports to sustain the Allied logistic effort. Hence, one of the primary Allied objectives after the establishment of the Normandy beachhead was the immediate capture of Cherbourg and its port facilities. The U.S. Army VII Corps, commanded by Major General J. Lawton Collins, was tasked to establish a lodgment on UTAH beach and link up with V Corps to the east on OMAHA beach before moving north to seize Cherbourg. Assigned to VII Corps, the fledgling 90th Division figured to play a key role in the attack on Cherbourg.

Collins' plan was to airdrop the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions in the morning hours prior to the main landing at dawn. The newly formed 101st Division was tasked to secure the roads leading inland from the beach and then the southern flank of the lodgment to enable the link up with V Corps. Meanwhile, the veteran 82nd would secure bridges across the Merderet River and the western approaches to the beach. As the main landing force, the 4th Infantry Division—another inexperienced unit—was tasked to pass over the roads secured by the 101st, and establish the northern boundary of the lodgment. Initially attached to the 4th Division, the 359th Infantry (90th Division) was to go ashore as a reserve before assuming the right flank on D+1 where the bulk of the 90th Division would fall in for the drive north to Cherbourg.

Problems with the airdrop combined with stiff enemy resistance placed VII Corps behind schedule at the end of D-Day. Two German divisions moved in to reinforce the Cotentin Peninsula along with the three already present. Fighting with these units delayed the 82nd Division in securing the western bridges for two additional days. In an effort to stem the flow of German troops moving to defend Cherbourg, the First Army Commander, General Bradley,

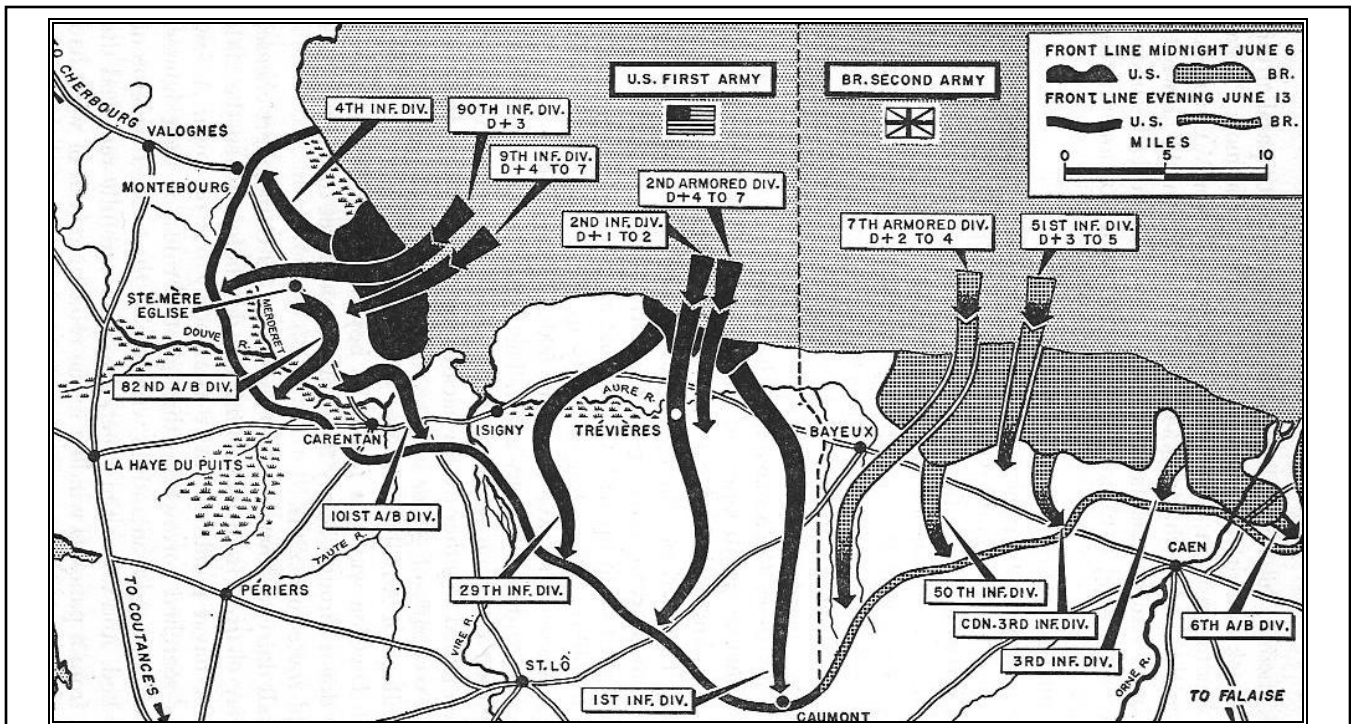


Figure 5. Overview of the D-Day Landings

Source: Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldiers Story* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), 284.

directed General Collins to shift the weight of his effort west in an effort to cut off the peninsula before heading north towards Cherbourg. With the bulk of the 90th Division still coming ashore, Collins reassigned it the task of moving west through the 82nd Division's bridgehead in order to seize terrain on the east bank of the Douve River near St. Sauveur Le Vicomte and Ste. Colombe. For the moment he left the 359th Infantry attached to the 4th Division.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1989), 183-188, 278-304, 396-401.

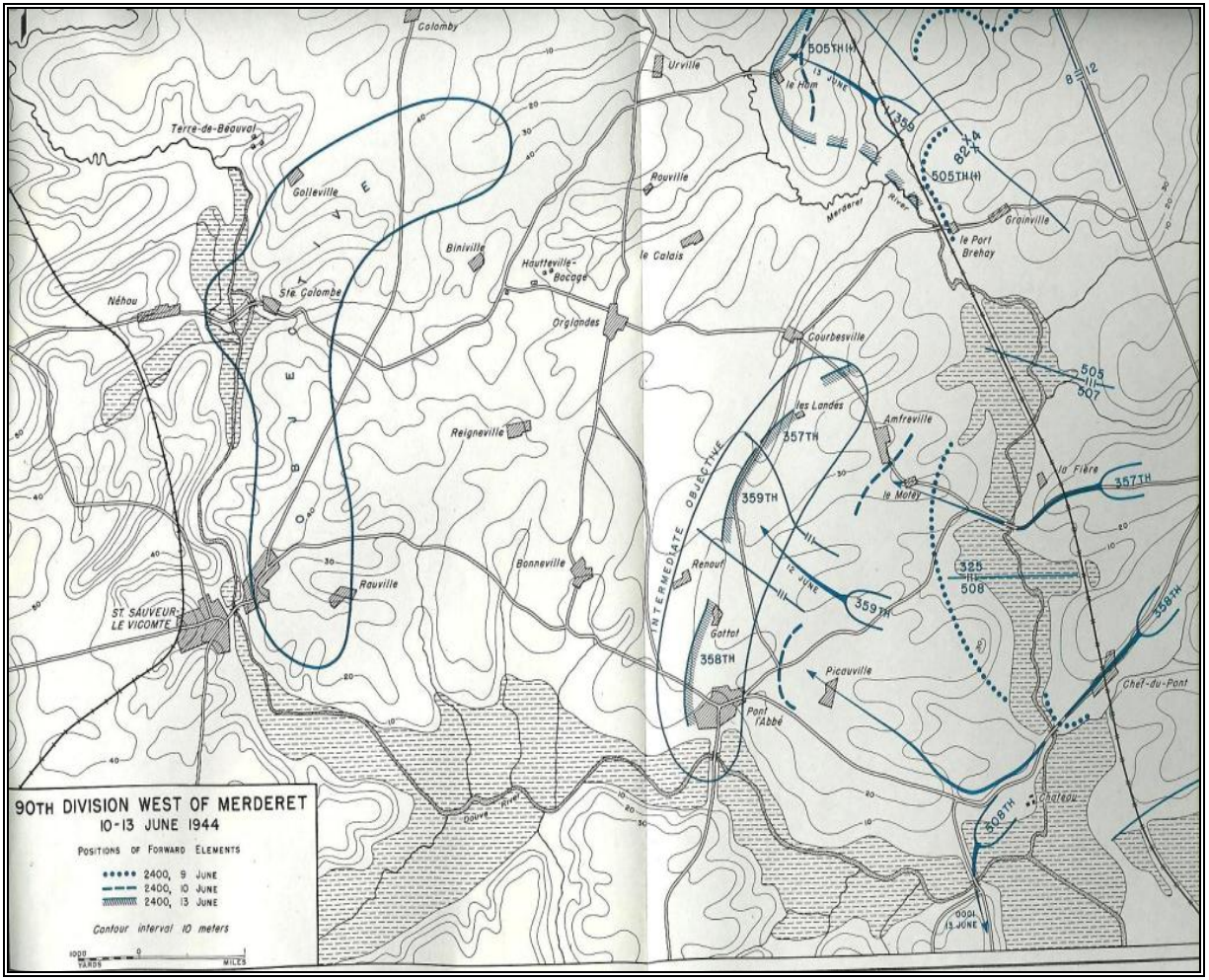


Figure 6. First Attacks by the 90th Division, 10-13 June 1944

Source: Major Roland G. Ruppenthal, USA, *Utah Beach to Cherbourg (6 June – 27 June 1944)* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947). Map 24.

Initial Failures and the Crisis of Leadership

On 10 June, Brigadier General MacKelvie led the 90th into the attack for the first time.

Unfortunately, against the extensively prepared German defensive positions, which made excellent use of highly advantageous hedgerow terrain, its uncoordinated assault failed miserably.⁵⁰ In its first attack, the 357th Infantry came under heavy fire and fell back after

⁵⁰ The hedgerows on Normandy were manmade organic fences that divided farmers' land, and protected livestock and crops from strong winds off the Atlantic Ocean. They were composed of a ten to fifteen foot hedge of brambles,

advancing less than a half mile. It took the regimental leadership almost 16 hours to organize another attack, which failed to reclaim lost ground and brought the total casualties to 99 for the day. Meanwhile, the 358th Infantry made better initial progress in its simultaneous attack to the south. However, the commander inexplicably ordered his troops to dig in after he became concerned about the failure of an engineer detachment to blow a bridge on his left flank. Once stationary, the regiment was hammered by artillery and mortar fire for over ten hours. The lead battalion alone lost 129 casualties and a futile attempt to resume the attack later in the afternoon was promptly rebuffed.

Days two and three produced similarly poor results. On 11 June, the 358th attempted to take the town of Pont l'Abbé with three infantry battalions supported by a rolling barrage from four battalions of division artillery. Despite overwhelming fire support, the attacking battalions were halted by individual machine gun fire and failed to either enter or encircle the town. On 12 June the 359th Infantry returned to the 90th's control—still untested in direct action. MacKelvie immediately committed the regiment in the middle of the line hoping to provide momentum to the stalled offensive, but poor combined arms coordination with air and artillery support hampered the attack. Over the course of the first three days the Tough 'Ombres moved less than three miles. The division displayed little synergy among its elements and battalion size attacks seemed to inevitably bog down under relatively small amounts of fire.⁵¹

vines, trees, and hawthorn on top of an earthen berm which varied from three to twelve feet high and one to four feet thick. The layout and size of each field was different, although they all had openings on the corners. Trails winding between adjacent hedgerows formed outstanding defensive positions and funneled all traffic towards the corners of each field where German defenders tended to place heavy weapons that interlocked fire with adjacent fields; Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1961), 11, Cited hereafter as Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*.

⁵¹ Major Roland G. Ruppenthal, USA, *Utah Beach to Cherbourg (6 June – 27 June 1944)* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947), 125-131; Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack*, 401-402.

On the afternoon of 12 June, General Collins and his aide went forward to determine the cause of the 90th's stalled attack. On arrival, he found the division's sector uncharacteristically quiet and void of the typical sounds of combat. Additionally, there was no identifiable regimental or battalion headquarters, and a minimal officer presence along the front. Later he found group of soldiers avoiding the fight by hiding in a ditch. Collins confronted MacKelvie about his unit's malingering attack only to find him bewildered and out of touch with the situation at hand. He immediately informed General Bradley of his intention to remove MacKelvie and requested a replacement division for the future march on Cherbourg. Later that day Collins' replaced MacKelvie with his Assistant Corps Commander, Major General Eugene M. Landrum, who had commanded the 7th Division under him on Attu Island in the Pacific.⁵²

The best insight about MacKelvie's time in command comes from General Williams' personal letters in 1963. Williams indicated that MacKelvie's cold personality caused a decline in officer morale almost immediately after he assumed command. Furthermore, his indecisiveness and habitual silence at the end of briefings garnered him the name "Oral Non" from the staff. Thus, officers were not surprised to find him sitting silent in the command post, providing little guidance, and staring into the distance as they scrambled to re-write orders following the change of tasking on UTAH Beach. Regardless of personality or command style, the worst indictment of MacKelvie is in regard to his presence under fire. According to General Williams' aide at the time, in the heat of battle on 12 June, Williams found MacKelvie, "lying prone in a shallow ground furrow, tight against a hedgerow" openly rattled by the action and the sight of dying soldiers.⁵³

⁵² General J. Lawton Collins, (USA), *Lightning Joe: An Autobiography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 208-209.

⁵³ Meyer, *Hanging Sam*, 4, 65, 73-74.

Another commentary on MacKelvie comes from a survey of 90th veterans conducted by John Colby for his book *War from the Ground Up*, an unofficial history of the 90th Division. Conducted almost 40 years after the war, the results of the survey found not one veteran with a single favorable remark regarding their second commander. Overwhelmingly, the responses condemned him as indecisive, unwilling to accept advice from subordinates, uninspiring, timid, and deleterious to the effectiveness of the division. Additionally, most 357th veterans will never forgive him for his last minute appointment of P.D. Ginder. Ginder was relieved one day after MacKelvie, but not before the regiment had suffered approximately 800 casualties over four days.⁵⁴ This sentiment is summed up best by the most notable member of the 357th Infantry, General William DePuy, who stated that Ginder was:

as incompetent as it is possible to be. . . . He knew nothing about an infantry regiment. He was erratic to the extreme. Three or four times he ordered the regiment straight ahead into a repeat performance of a failed attack. He will never be forgotten by the survivors.⁵⁵

General Bradley immediately recognized and understood the leadership problem that existed within the 90th Division. He also appreciated the challenge of leading green troops into combat for the first time. Typically, Bradley tried to place inexperienced divisions in relatively quiet sectors where they could adjust to the initial shock of combat. However, there were no such sectors at the outset of Normandy. When the 90th arrived in England, General Bradley considered replacing MacKelvie before deciding that his performance in garrison warranted an opportunity to command. However, in the end he concluded that, “MacKelvie found himself saddled with a job for which he had not been adequately trained.” Furthermore he stated, “His legacy included too many inept subordinate commanders and as a consequence the 90th fumbled

⁵⁴ Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 84, 149, 474-496.

⁵⁵ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing and Army*, 16.

its opening attack.” Therefore, as General Landrum took command, Bradley counseled him to “clean house” throughout the rest of the unit.⁵⁶

The VII Corps’ operational focus remained cutting off the peninsula, but Collins was in the process of shifting the weight of the main effort away from the 90th. He directed the 82nd and 9th Divisions to assume the westward attack while the Tough ‘Ombres maneuvered northwest in defense of their right flank. This proved as challenging for the division as the previous three days. On 14 June, two battalions of the 359th Infantry failed to maintain contact with the enemy, resulting in one nearly becoming encircled. That same day, in preparation for an attack on Gourbesville, the 357th Infantry botched a pre-arranged air mission for lack of proper marking smoke and an inadequately coordinated attempt to substitute artillery resulted in fratricide. This not only cost American lives but also delayed the attack by over eight hours. Two days later the 358th Infantry began an attack nine hours late because one of its battalions became lost.⁵⁷

On 16 June, the division’s slow pace exposed the right flank of the 9th Division causing Collins to order the Tough ‘Ombres removed from the front line, except for the 359th Infantry which was attached to the 9th Division as a reinforcement. Two days later, after the 9th Division successfully cut the peninsula, the 359th was tasked to block German units attempting to breakout along the coast and escape entrapment. Members of the division yet again faltered, as 1,400 enemy managed to escape taking one hundred 359th soldiers prisoner in the process.⁵⁸ With VII Corps already behind schedule for Cherbourg and a tough fight ahead, General Bradley relieved

⁵⁶ Bradley, *Soldiers Story*, 296-297.

⁵⁷ Ruppenthal, *Utah Beach to Cherbourg*, 133-136.

⁵⁸ Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 209.

Collins of his burden and transferred operational control of the Tough ‘Ombres to the newly formed VIII Corps. Under VIII Corps, the division assumed a defensive position south of the Douve River to protect the rear of the VII Corps attack north. Although still engaged with the enemy, this relative lull in the action provided General Landrum time to assimilate over 3500 replacements and implement a training regimen designed to renew confidence and instill aggressiveness.⁵⁹

Landrum assessed the division’s problems as a failure to apply the lessons of training and stressed that leaders reinforce basic infantry doctrinal principles. On 19 June, in a memorandum to the troops, he addressed the need to employ the fundamentals of constant movement, covering fire for maneuvering elements, and maintaining close proximity to rolling artillery fire once on the move. Furthermore, he demanded more initiative on the part of individuals and small units under fire, and stressed the need to maintain the tempo of an advance. Landrum attempted to reinforce these concepts with a series of speeches to regimental leaders. On 17 June he addressed the 358th Infantry, stating:

Coming under hostile fire causes inertia in our troops...[I do not] believe they’re afraid, but bewildered, and this can be broken by common sense, applying simple tactics of fire and movement which are applicable in any type of fighting...[we] mustn’t let ourselves be stopped by fire...[we] must get something moving right away...part of the line may have to take, but we have to get fire on the hostile weapons, the machine guns . . . PW’s [German Prisoners of War] say they can tell the direction from which we are coming and how we’re going, which indicates we’ve got to control our fire . . . and they say that we bunch up . . . we should be able to control our men better in this terrain...⁶⁰

These words and Landrum’s assessment of the division was fundamentally flawed in one way—it assumed the men had learned the appropriate lessons they needed to fight in the first place.

⁵⁹ 90th Infantry Division Report of Operations 6 June 1944 to 1 July 1944, Microfilm Roll 1 of 90th *Infantry Division Monthly Narratives and Supporting Papers*, 6.

⁶⁰ Ruppenthal, *Utah Beach to Cherbourg*, 133-136, 150.

Manifestations of Training Deficiencies

In hindsight, the initial experience of the 90th was almost predictable based on its chaotic training. At the lowest level, the division's errors directly reflect the moral and technical deficiencies of its leadership caused by the failure of training to instill competence, confidence, and a mastery of basic skills and doctrine. Simply put, the men charged with leading the division, from MacKelvie down, were not prepared to succeed by their training. As General Bradley recognized, most new divisions suffer an "acute mental shock" when they enter combat for the first time; this causes a typical reaction to "herd by instinct in fear and confusion." In order to overcome this, leaders—officer and enlisted—must be in front of the men demonstrating their knowledge, skill, and effectiveness. Thus, if the leader does not have the utmost technical competence and self-confidence, he has no chance to overcome his own fears let alone those of his men.⁶¹

In a survey of World War II combat veterans, author John McManus found the number one concern among enlisted soldiers was the competence of their officers, especially junior officers. When asked why, the resounding answer was the high correlation between officer competence and survival. As one soldier from the 99th Infantry Division stated, officers were judged by "whether the leader did his job and so minimized our danger; if so, he was respected and guarded by his men, regardless of personality." Conversely, if the officer was a detriment to survival, unit morale and willingness to fight were significantly reduced.⁶² After the 90th Division's initial engagements on Normandy, the troops immediately lost confidence in their

⁶¹ Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 296.

⁶² John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood: The American Combat Soldier in World War II* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 201-203.

leadership and morale became a serious problem. This is evident in the stories of two former 90th commanders.

Eventual Major General George Barth took over the 357th Infantry after six days of action on 16 June. He remembers walking into his headquarters for the first time and immediately sensing a pervasive state of zero morale, especially among the officers. His peer, future Major General Frank Norris was an artillery battalion commander at the same time and agrees with Barth's assessment. He recalls driving towards the front during the first week of action and finding a long line of troops, led by a captain, huddling in fear of a perceived sniper in a tree approximately a hundred yards away. Norris was unable to convince the captain otherwise until he personally walked to the tree, circled it, and returned. Even then the captain was reluctant to move his troops. As Norris emphatically stated, "That's zero morale!"⁶³

The lack of competence among the leadership of the 90th is directly attributable to officer experience and familiarity with operational concepts. General DePuy spoke at length about this in his oral history interview, stating that during training, "there was no apparent expertise on tactics anywhere in the regiment [357th Infantry], including the regular officers." Furthermore, after the transition to a motorized structure, all the "energy and imagination in the division" was absorbed in the process of how to "mount up the trucks, move down the road, not get lost, and get there on time" instead of actually learning how to fight. In DePuy's opinion the problem was blind adherence to the training program, which placed emphasis on completing the plan rather than measuring performance against a set of standards.⁶⁴ This produced a situation where officers had completed a block of training, but still were not competent in the skill and therefore

⁶³ Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 84-86.

⁶⁴ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing and Army*, 7-8.

not confident leaders. The results were manifested on Normandy in at least three of the nine infantry battalion commanders who either asked to be relieved or feigned injury to achieve the same.⁶⁵ Others almost certainly felt the same lack of competence but resisted asking for relief.

In the end, the emphasis on completing the training program left little time for officers to critically consider the implications of the Army's new doctrine and tactics, particularly as it applied to various types of terrain. The vast differences between combined arms employment in the U.S. western desert and the hedgerows of Normandy were never fully comprehended by anyone. As General DePuy said, "It never seemed to occur to us that we were going to be confronted in Normandy with very poor visibility, and that this would create a control problem and a firepower problem."⁶⁶ Thus, initially the division relied too much on indirect fire support without an understanding of direct fire support and the establishment of bases of fire to enable maneuver. Somehow in the Army Ground Forces training program, the lessons of direct suppressive fire from the battlefields of North Africa and Italy were translated into a technique called "marching fire." This technique placed units side by side and simultaneously marched them across the line of departure firing their weapons on the move for self-suppression. It was a horribly bad tactic and resulted in many deaths until replaced by the "over-watching" direct fire technique where one unit suppressed from stationary positions as another maneuvered. Additionally, the harsh reality of combat exposed the lack of appreciation and training for night infiltration techniques. Once implemented, this technique immediately reduced casualties and increased the men's confidence of survival.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, despite the initial competence,

⁶⁵ Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 149, 474-496.

⁶⁶ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing and Army*, 8.

⁶⁷ Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing and Army*, 10; Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 161.

confidence, and moral problems that plagued the Tough ‘Ombres, their overall effectiveness was greater than typically credited.

The Untold Success of June

Undoubtedly, the 90th’s initial leadership was abominable and in terms of seizing terrain its performance was a failure. However, while the division may have caused problems for Bradley and Collins, they also proved a tactical challenge for the Germans. In his letter to General Bradley detailing the relief of MacKelvie, General Collins stated:

The enemy opposition, in my opinion, has been relatively light except for mortar and 88-mm Artillery fire. G-2 information indicates that the enemy opposing the 90th Division has consisted of elements of units whose strength is less than one regimental combat team. From what I and my staff officers have observed, it is my belief that this opposition could have been overcome by vigorous attack.⁶⁸

While this appraisal was Collins’ best estimate at the time, it was wholly inaccurate.

Months prior to D-Day, the German’s made a considerable effort to strengthen defensive units on the Atlantic Wall. Two divisions on the Cotentin were reinforced and forward deployed along the east coast awaiting an allied assault. Additionally, just prior to the invasion, these units were fortified by three assorted battalions, two additional regiments, and the 91st Luftlande (Airborne) Division, which anchored the defense in front of the 90th’s attack.⁶⁹ On 14 June, the same date Collins wrote his letter to Bradley, the Allies learned from Ultra intercepts that the Germans had further reinforced the peninsula with the 77th Division. A large number of these reinforcements were attached to the 91st Division and used to establish a primary north-south line

⁶⁸ Meyer, *Hangin’ Sam*, 72.

⁶⁹ Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack*, 254-260.

of defense just west of Utah beach. Two days later, Adolph Hitler ordered the Cotentin be “held at any cost.”⁷⁰

Thus on 10 June, with the 359th Infantry in support of the 4th Division, the Tough ‘Ombres attacked a reinforced German division concealed by hedgerows and supported by substantial mortar and artillery fires with two inexperienced regiments. General der Artillerie Erich Marcks, the German Corps commander in charge of the Cotentin, commented that by 8 June Allied plans to drive west were obvious and “accordingly, the bulk of the German forces were deployed to stop such a drive.” Nevertheless, while the front line remained relatively static, it was not indicative of effectiveness of the attack:

German units in hedgerow trenches let the American barrage pass over them. . . . [then] Heavy artillery barrages on pre-determined target areas, crashed down on the Americans as they moved into the pre-set target zones. Although the 90th did not advance far in the center, it ground up the best German units. As a result, the German flanks broke and other American units drove through to cut off the peninsula.

Collins must have eventually realized the actual strength of the enemy force to the west, because he replaced the 90th with two full divisions. As the 82nd and 9th Divisions pushed westward, their rate of movement increased considerably while the 90th Division’s movement northwest continued to be measured in meters. What at first appears a validation of the 90th Division’s ineptitude was actually a product of the enemy shifting its line of resistance from north-south to east-west. Thus, while two divisions raced to cut the peninsula, the 90th continued to attack the heart of the German defensive effort. General Wilhelm Farmbacher, who took command after Marcks’ was killed in action, provided the first indication of the enemy defensive shift in a report to higher headquarters late on 14 June, “a large scale American attack

⁷⁰ Bradley and Blair, *General’s Life*, 262.

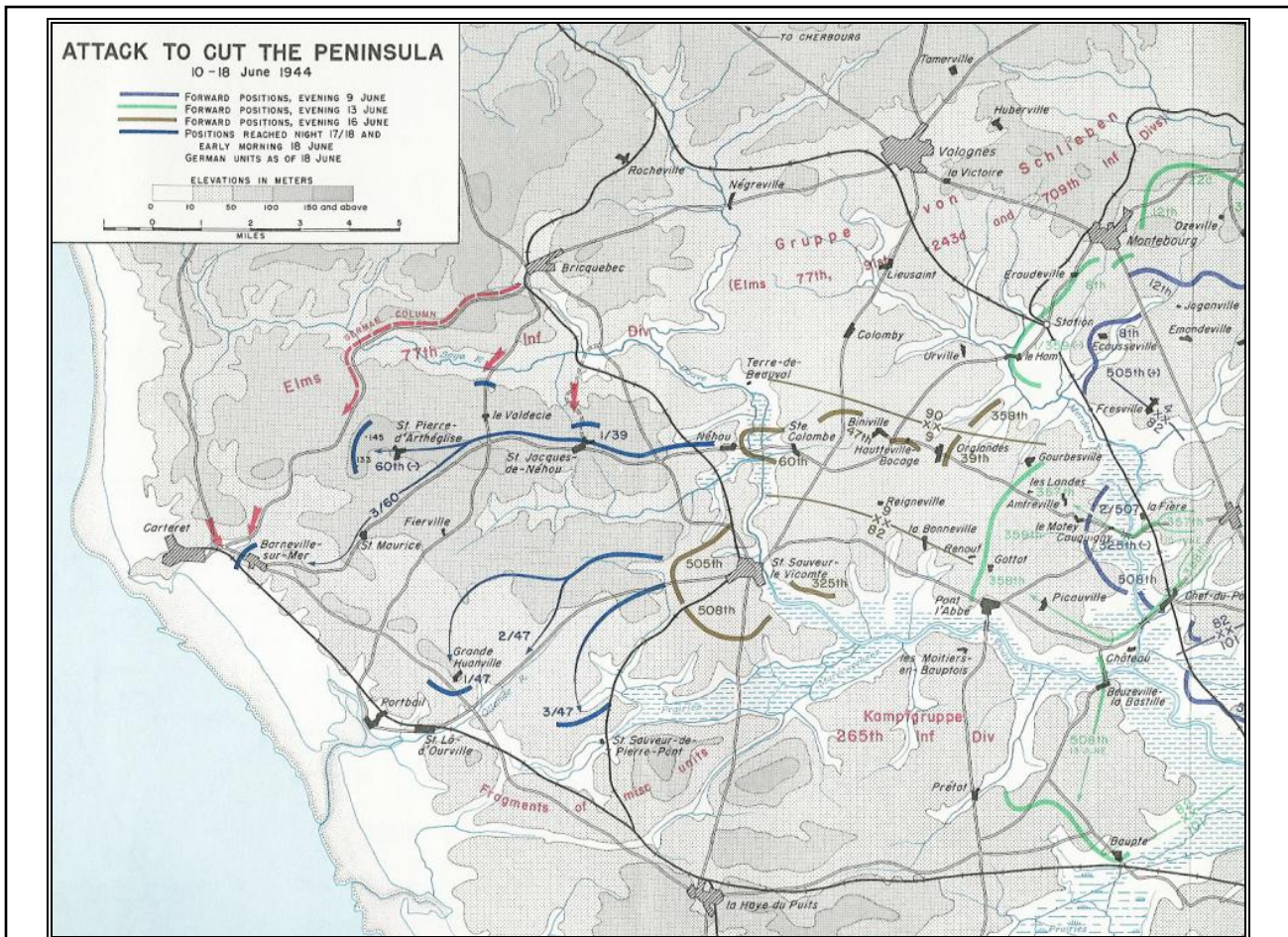


Figure 7. Attack to Cut the Cotentin Peninsula, 10-18 June 1944.

Source: Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1989), Map XXI.

westward could not be held because of the splitting and mixing of German units, the fatigue of the troops, and the lack of sufficient ammunition.” The poor condition of Farmbacher’s troops and their inability to withstand the 82nd and 9th Divisions westward push could only have been brought on by the Tough ‘Ombres attack from 10-13 June.⁷¹

Disparity in the level of resistance between the northern and southern arms of the westward attack provides further evidence of the German’s shifting defensive stance after 13

⁷¹ All quotations since note 70 are taken from Colby, *War from the Ground Up*, 152-153.

June. In the south, where the Germans had already begun moving the line of defense, the 82nd encountered minimal resistance from the time they stepped off. In fact, upon arriving at the intermediate objective across the river from St. Sauveur le Vicomte, they found German troops rapidly retreating from the town. In the north, the 9th Division, veterans of North Africa, entered the attack on 15 June before the Germans had shifted that portion of the line. Consequently, it met the same level of resistance that confounded the 90th the previous five days. Like the Tough ‘Ombres, the 9th Division’s attack was quickly countered and driven back as it crossed the line of departure. Throughout the rest of the day, the division was unable to generate any significant forward progress and regained only half of the ground it initially lost.⁷² Fortunately for the 9th, this was the enemy’s last serious resistance east of the Douve as the east-west defensive shift was completed the next day. Unfortunately for the 90th’s legacy, the subsequent speed of advance to the west coast is seen as another validation of its failure; hidden and not understood however, is the fact that conditions for the advance were created by its untold success.

⁷² Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack*, 404-406.

DEVASTATING CASUALTIES AND A DISASTROUS COLLAPSE—JULY 1944

Operational Overview

As VII Corps completed the capture of Cherbourg in late June, General Bradley reoriented First Army to the south for a major operation aimed at breaking out of the bocage. He envisioned an attack down the west coast of the peninsula designed to penetrate deep before turning east against the German left flank. Eighth Corps, under command of Major General Troy H. Middleton, was tasked with leading the attack and providing the momentum for the rest of First Army. Because of its location along the front, the 90th Division was designated the VIII Corps main effort and tasked with seizing the critical terrain around Mont Castre on the route to the Corps' objective area northeast of Lessay.⁷³ Hill 122, as Monte Castre was known, posed a tremendous tactical challenge for any division, but especially one that had yet to both master needed skills and acquire confidence.

Multiple high points dominated the terrain in the western sector, but none was more commanding than Mont Castre. From observation posts atop its 122 meter peak, the Germans could see the disposition of approaching troops as far away as UTAH Beach and had successfully controlled highly accurate artillery fire from there since D-Day. Movement around Mont Castre was restricted by a large marshland to the east, and hedgerows to the north and west. In order to secure the hill, the Tough 'Ombres would either have to execute a frontal assault up its north slope or attempt a flanking attack through the narrow eastern corridor in plain view of enemy artillery observers. Further complicating the problem was the heavily wooded forest which covered the mountain and prevented road access to the summit. Moreover,

⁷³ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 53-55.

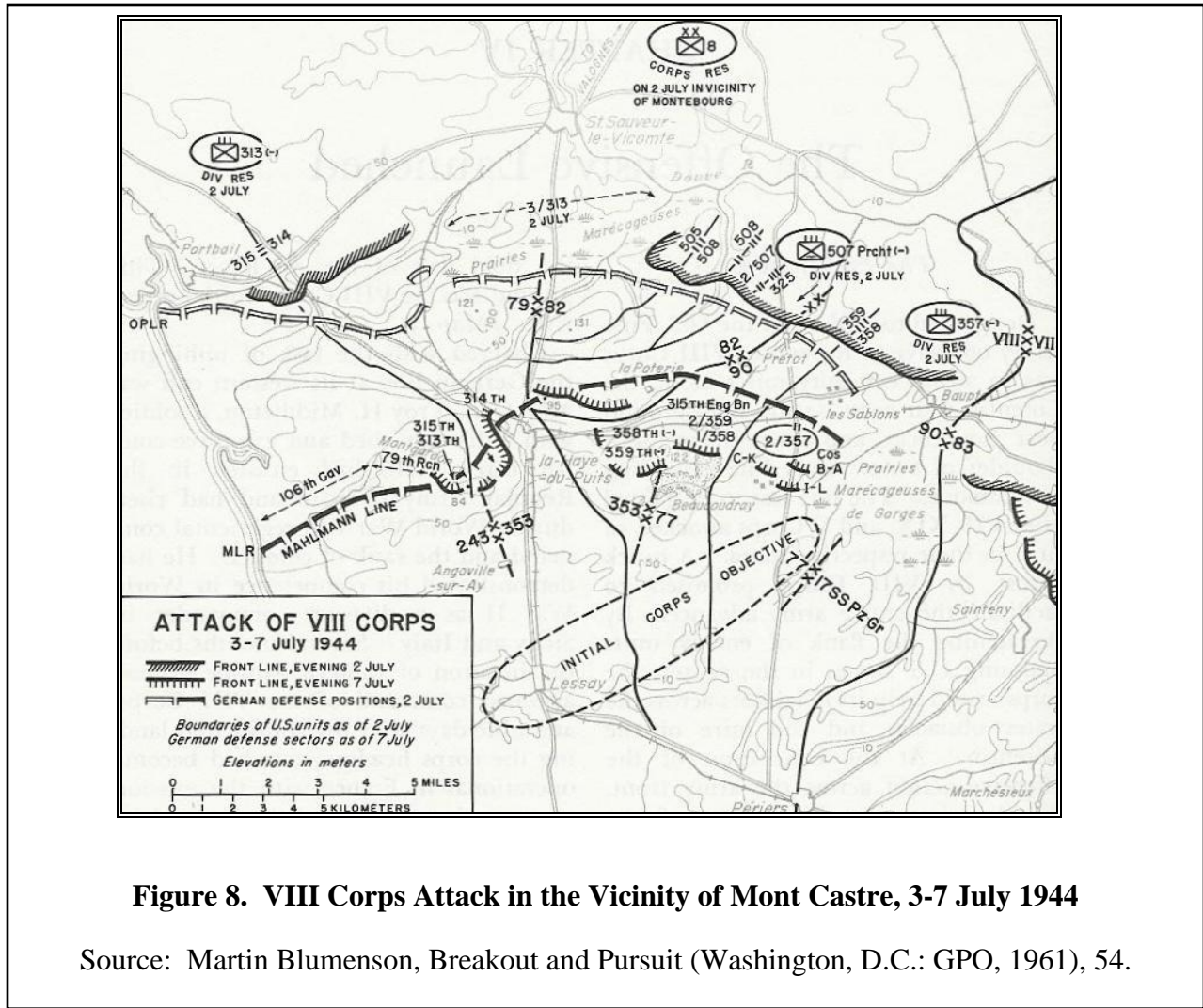


Figure 8. VIII Corps Attack in the Vicinity of Mont Castre, 3-7 July 1944

Source: Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1961), 54.

bypassing Mont Castre was not an option. The German's had anchored the entire western sector defense, known as the Mahlmann Line, off its position.

By late June, the 90th's sector of the Mahlmann Line was guarded by two fresh divisions and more than adequate numbers of artillery, howitzers, rocket launchers, antiaircraft guns, and antitank troops. Additionally, the 2nd SS Panzer Division was assembled nearby as the German Seventh Army reserve.⁷⁴ So much enemy strength was massed in front of VIII Army that in 1945, the newspaper *Stars and Stripes* described attacking the Mahlmann Line akin to "slow

forcing . . . a massive iron door with hinges rusted solid by the Beau Coudray marshlands” and “locked fast by the formidable forêt [forest] and Hill 122 [Mont Castre].”⁷⁵ Quite literally, a successful First Army breakout depended on opening this door, but the price of entry would be high indeed.

The Cost of Mont Castre

General Landrum’s plan was a simultaneous two regiment assault by the 358th and 359th on both avenues of approach to Hill 122. Once either regiment seized the peak, he would commit the 357th Infantry, held in reserve, through the eastern corridor towards the objective area beyond the hill. Ominously, on 3 July, the morning of attack, rain poured from the sky precluding the scheduled close air support and artillery spotting sorties. Unfortunately, enemy artillery spotters atop Mont Castre were unaffected—exactng over 600 casualties in combination with outpost defenses and allowing less than a mile of movement on the first day. Problems with morale and confidence persisted as inexperienced replacement riflemen fired at the first sounds of movement, passively dug-in when faced with fire, and at times executed spontaneous and uncommanded retreats.⁷⁶

Over the course of the next five days, the battle for Hill 122 was characterized by hard fought, close range action among thick brambles mixed with heavy doses of artillery fire. The third day brought better weather and, under the cover of air support, the American soldiers finally reached the base of hill. However, without control of the peak, troops in the eastern

⁷⁴ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 25-27, 54-60, 64.

⁷⁵ *Tough’Ombres: The Story of the 90th Infantry Division* (Paris, Stars and Stripes, 1945), online edition, 9, *Lone Sentry*, URL: < http://www.lonesentry.com/gi_stories_booklets/90thinfantry>, accessed 12 March 2005.

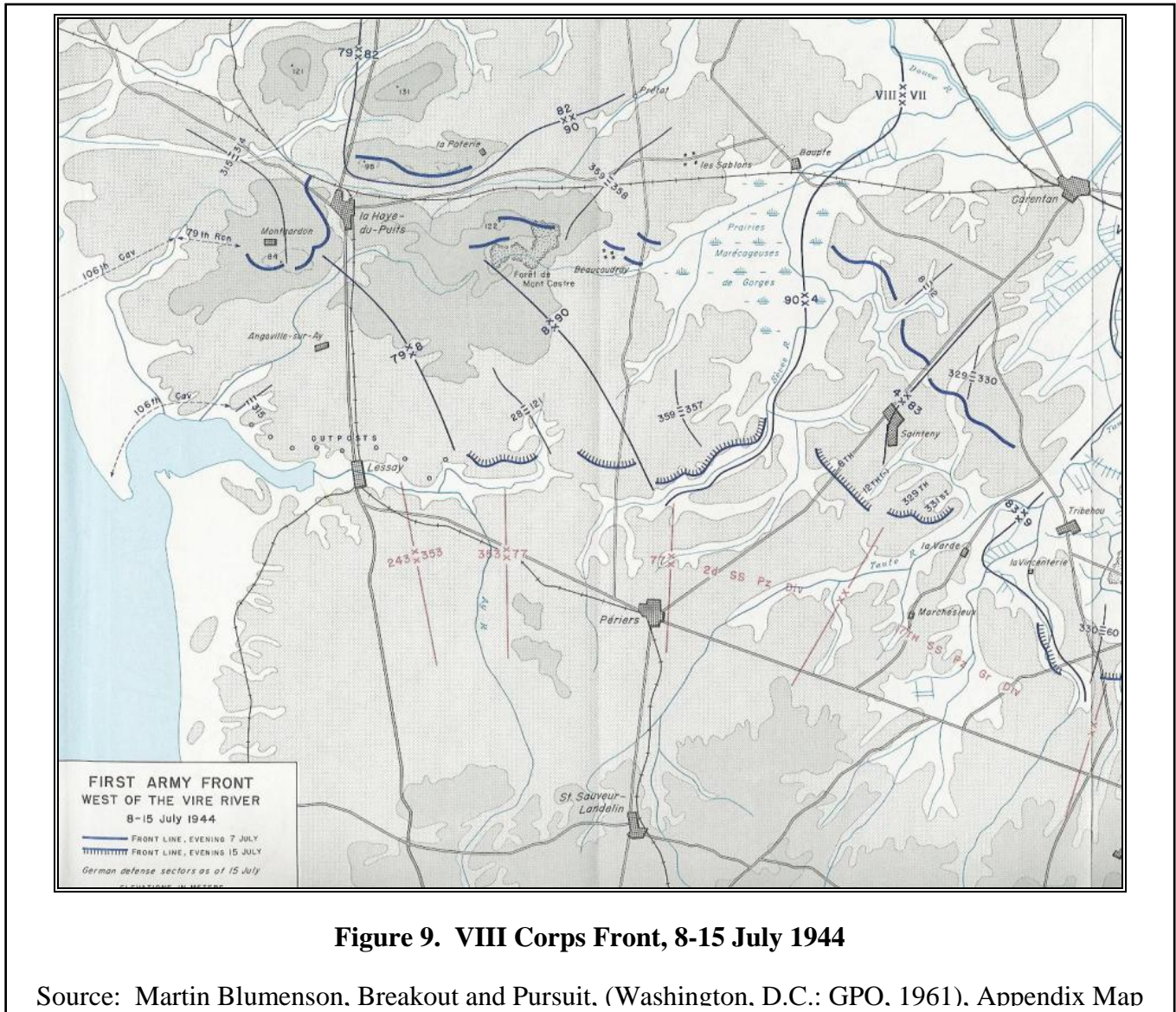


Figure 9. VIII Corps Front, 8-15 July 1944

Source: Martin Blumenson. *Breakout and Pursuit*. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1961). Appendix Map

corridor continued to take a severe pounding from artillery as well as freshly committed LXXXIV Corps and Seventh Army reserves. On the fourth day, Landrum was forced to commit his own reserves in order to reinforce the assault up the north slope. This resulted in the seizure of the hilltop by four battalions, albeit with a precarious hold. Over the course of 7-9 July the Tough ‘Ombres were able to hold off multiple counter-attacks using engineers, cooks, and

⁷⁶ United States War Department Historical Division, *St-Lo: 7 July – 19 July 1944* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 47-48; Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 57-58, 63-72.

drivers to replace fallen infantrymen. At one point the German's mounted ten counter-attacks inside a 24-hour period. Finally, on 10 July, the resistance broke and two days later the 90th secured its first objective of the war. Nevertheless, despite the 90th's success, the breakout General Bradley had hoped never occurred.⁷⁷

From 3-19 July in the vicinity of Monte Castre, the Tough 'Ombres lost over 4,000 casualties compared to an average 3,300 across all First Army divisions. In particular, however, the casualty toll was taxing on its already frail leadership. For example, on 7 July, a rifle company of the 357th Infantry was tasked to reinforce two companies heavily engaged in the corridor east of Mont Castre. As it reached the front, the company was attacked by mortars and a hail of small arms fire that killed or wounded every commissioned and non-commissioned officer in the company. Without leadership, the remaining soldiers fell back after failing to reach their beleaguered comrades. During another action, one battalion lost 11 of 17 officers and all but 126 men. The next day the battalion was reorganized into a single company and lost the remaining officers and 40 additional casualties.⁷⁸

First Army's July Report of Operations concluded the force was severely hampered by the hedgerows which limited observation, the use of supporting weapons, and tactical units' ability to maintain direction. Furthermore, it stated weather had severely restricted air support while marshes had canalized soldiers into well defined corridors. Although the breakout did not succeed, historians describe First Army's actions between 3 and 19 July as a relative success because it killed, captured, or destroyed over 100,000 troops, 250 tanks, and 197 guns which far exceeded U.S. losses. Nevertheless, senior commanders still believed the Tough 'Ombres had yet

⁷⁷ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 126-127.

⁷⁸ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 178-181.

“to learn how to make a skillful application of tactical principles to hedgerow terrain” and that “the division appeared to have faltered in July as it had in June.”⁷⁹

On the contrary, while the 90th may still have displayed the tactical inefficiencies inbred from training, it also showed a stamina and endurance that was missing in June. In 15 days, the Tough ‘Ombres had risen from a state of zero morale to break the iron door known as the Mahlmann Line. It had bested an equal number of German troops on highly advantageous terrain and forced their commanders to commit the entire Corps and Army reserve. One fact clearly demonstrates the commitment and valor of the 90th Division during the early part of July. After ten continuous days of brutal combat, not one rifle company in the division totaled more than 100 men—yet they still persevered.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, Monte Castre broke it beyond immediate repair, but no one recognized this or had the time to fix it.

St. Germain: The Attack was “Foredoomed to Failure”⁸¹

The breakout attempt of early July left First Army’s front roughly along the road from Lessay to St. Lô. Still pursuing a breakout from the Cotentin, General Bradley designed Operation COBRA. The plan was to fix the German west flank with VIII Corps’ five divisions while VII Corps penetrated the center and turned west to exploit the newly exposed flank of units engaged with VIII Corps. As a precursor to COBRA, Bradley directed the 90th and 83rd Divisions to reduce small salients along each of their respective fronts.

⁷⁹ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 72.

⁸⁰ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 126-128.

⁸¹ 90th Infantry Division After Action Report July 1944, 27.

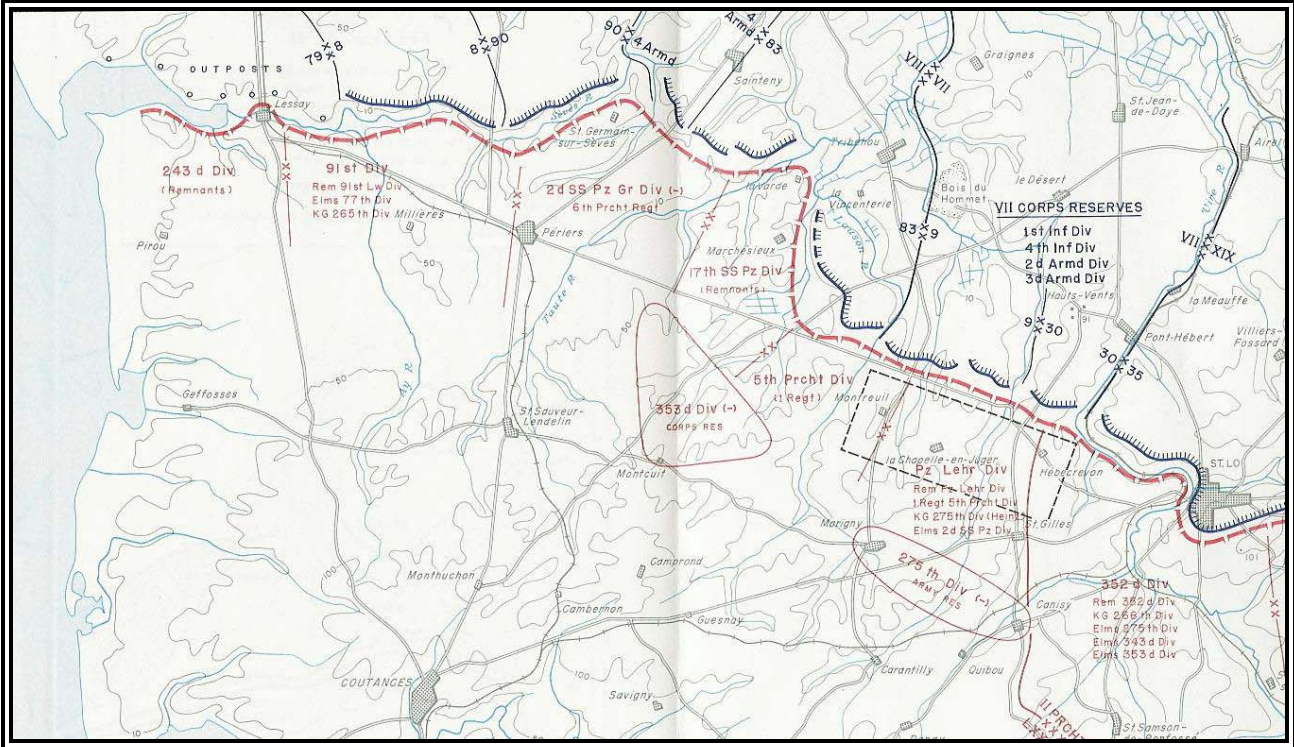


Figure 10. First Army Front Prior to Operation COBRA, 21 July 1944

Source: Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1961), Map IV.

In order to remove the salient in its sector, the Tough Ombres' needed to clear a relatively weak German battalion entrenched in the village of St. Germain-sur-Sèves. The village sat on a two-mile long, half-mile wide interior *island* created by the Sèves River and surrounding swampland. Access to the island was restricted on all sides, except the west, where a partially destroyed bridge and a mud covered country lane provided passage for foot traffic only. The terrain undoubtedly favored the German defenders who were concealed by hedgerows which afforded an unobstructed view and provided numerous fields of fire into the open axis of approach.⁸²

⁸² Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 197-201.

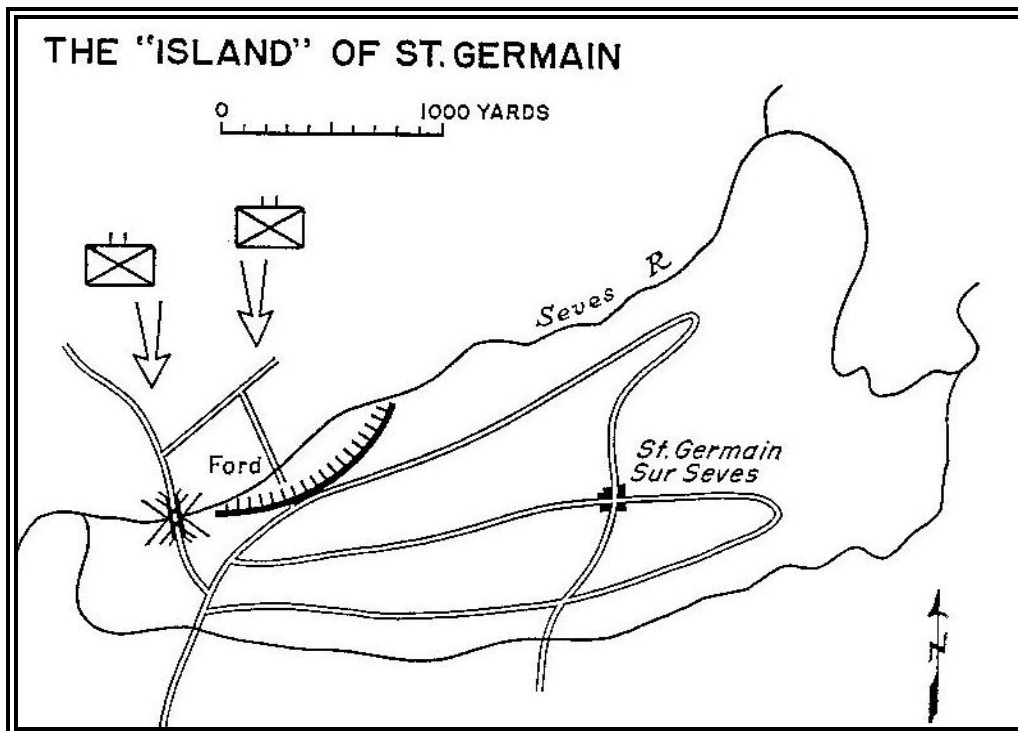


Figure 11. The 90th Division's Attack on St. Germain, 22-23 July 1944

Source: Martin Blumensen, "Re-Assessing a Reputation", *Military Affairs*, Vol 22, No. 2, Summer 1958, 97.

Given this difficult assault problem, General Landrum considered a night attack his best chance for success. However, the battle for Mont Castre had significantly reduced his unit's limited experience, especially amongst the officer corps. Replacements had arrived on 15 July, bringing the total number since D-Day to 100% of the enlisted infantrymen and 150% of infantry officers—thus the division was very different from the one that crossed UTAH beach two months prior and even more so than the one that trained in the California desert. Weighing the inevitable command and control problems of a night attack with new troops against a daytime assault across open terrain under plain view of artillery spotters, Landrum chose the latter. This

decision was reasonable considering he also planned for overwhelming artillery and close air support to mitigate the risks of the daylight assault.⁸³

The 358th Infantry, back at full strength with 50% replacements, commenced the attack early on 22 July—six days after the completion of Mont Castre. Similar to the assault on Hill 122, bad weather grounded fighter-bomber and artillery spotting aircraft. Consequently, the preparatory artillery barrage, while heavy, was also unobserved and hence ineffective.

Landrum's rationale for a daytime assault was now reversed as German artillery was unmolested and free to mass highly accurate and pre-ranged fire on the exposed attacking troops. The 90th Division Report of Operations for July 1944 described what happened:

the [American artillery] preparation lifted at 0630 [when] the Boche began the most intense and sustained counter-preparation fire that the Division had experienced to date. . . . the bitter fact remains that the [German] heavy artillery fire which began at H-Hour and continued throughout the day from the outset disrupted and disorganized the assault echelons and foredoomed to failure the well planned and the well coordinated attack.⁸⁴

It took the 358th Regiment five hours to move elements of one company across the Seves River. By nightfall, one battalion and an additional company had crossed the river to secure a 1000 by 200 yard lodgment but had taken 50% casualties in the process. Engineer units that had planned to bridge the river for follow on tank support were unable to accomplish anything under the storm of German artillery. During the night, disorganization and chaos ruled. Inexperienced soldiers became frightened and left their positions individually and in groups—often feigning

⁸³ 90th Infantry Division After Action Report July 1944, part of a collection of National Archives papers on microfilm at the Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, K.S., Microfilm no. M-N-1091-A, Roll 1 of *90th Infantry Division Monthly Narratives and Supporting Papers for Staff Section, Selected Dates From 1942-1945*, 26-27; Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 201-204.

⁸⁴ 90th Infantry Division After Action Report July 1944, 27.

wounds or acting as messengers for the rear. Officers, unable to identify their own troops amongst the mass of replacements, could do little to maintain discipline.

Adding to the problem, the assault battalion commander and his staff failed to provide adequate leadership as they remained on the far side of the river until ordered across by the regimental commander late in the evening. Although the commanding officer finally made it across, most of his staff became lost during the infiltration and never actually joined the fight. In the morning, the Germans mounted a counterattack with two tanks, an assault gun, and approximately 50 troops. The neophyte American soldiers panicked at the sight of the tanks and most retreated towards the river without firing a shot. Then, afraid of crossing the river because of a well placed German machine gun along the bank, the men huddled in fear as cries of “cease fire” began to ring out. The assault on Seves Island ended miserably as 100 were men killed, 500 wounded, and 265 captured. One week later General Landrum was relieved of command.⁸⁵

In hindsight, just as the 90th’s experiences in June were intrinsically linked to its pre-war training program, the results of St. Germain were equally tied to the effects of the Army’s replacement system. The official Army World War II history assessed the results of Seves Island this way:

Weather, terrain, a resourceful enemy, command deficiency at the battalion level (caused perhaps by combat exhaustion during the preceding battle of the hedgerows) had contributed to the result. The main cause, however, was the presence of so many inadequately trained replacements. The 90th Division had not had enough time to fuse its large number of replacements into fighting teams.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 201-204; Colby, 137-145.

⁸⁶ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 204.

In essence, the cumulative effect of casualties since D-Day served to further reduce the effectiveness of the 90th Division well below any definition of combat ready. It is likely even the best of leaders would have struggled under similar circumstances, and in this case most of the leaders were replacements themselves. The 90th Division not was alone in experiencing the problem of replacements. Two days earlier the 83rd Division was badly beaten, taking 50% casualties, as it failed to eradicate the salient along its sector of the front. As one of its infantry regiment commanders stated afterwards, “We have quite a few new men and they are really new, [they] don’t know their officers...and the officers don’t know their men.”⁸⁷ Unfortunately, the realities of combat on the European continent meant American divisions were forced to overcome this condition.

The Realities of Replacements and Operational Effectiveness

Sustaining the amount of troops required on the continent coupled with the logistics of trans-Atlantic Ocean crossing forced the U.S. Army to develop a replacement system which inherently emphasized numbers at the expense of combat effectiveness. By 1944, combat divisions were primarily allotted replacement soldiers from replacement training centers that ran a 17-week program which encompassed both basic and occupational specialty training. Tactical training for replacements focused on the squad and platoon level with one week of company size training. While this training emphasized the importance of teamwork on the battlefield, the end product was an individual soldier and not a cohesive team of replacements. In Europe, troops arrived in disparate groups at replacement depots where they waited upwards of three months to join their new unit. The process was exceptionally discouraging for soldiers because they were

⁸⁷ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 198-201.

effectively alone without the camaraderie of a close military organization. More importantly, during the waiting period they received no additional training, physical or academic.⁸⁸

Consequently, most American replacements entered combat disoriented and lonely. By contrast, the German model removed an entire unit from the line once it reached a certain level of ineffectiveness. This provided a period of time for the unit to refit and develop the mix of veterans and new soldiers into a unified team.

Post war studies and surveys indicate American replacements that joined their unit while it was engaged in combat had a lower chance of survival in comparison to those that did not. Most survey respondents attributed this to the amount of time spent with seasoned veterans who passed on the essentials of combat survival. Those that joined in the midst of combat were not assisted as readily because veterans had little time to help a new man in lieu of their own survival. One company commander described this harsh reality by stating:

We were always short of men in an infantry company. I got down to a hundred and thirty and that's about what I wound up with because you get new men in and you cannot absorb new men in a combat situation. They don't know how to fight and you don't know them so they get killed or wounded. It's not their fault. I used to cry if I lost good men but I never cried over most replacements.⁸⁹

If new soldiers got past the initial "baptism of fire," they almost always went on to perform well.

For the 90th Division, the casualty rate on Normandy meant a majority of its front line infantrymen were enduring their baptism in every battle. Approximately 7,200 of the 13,000 soldiers that came ashore with the Tough 'Ombres were assigned to infantry battalions. During the initial battles of June, when the entire division was baptized, over 3400 soldiers were either killed, captured, medically evacuated, or missing in action. This translates into approximately

⁸⁸ Robert R. Palmer and William R. Keast, "The Provision of Enlisted Replacements," in *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 170-179, 181-188.

⁸⁹ McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood*, 260-262; 270-271.

3100 infantrymen based on studies that show 92% of World War II Infantry division casualties were in fact infantry soldiers. Thus, the arrival of 3596 replacements at the end of June meant almost half the division's infantrymen were inexperienced during the bloody battles of early July. Prior to St. Germain, these battles cost the division approximately 4700 soldiers—roughly 4300 infantrymen. Then, between 15 and 18 July, another 3700 replacements arrived and four days later the debacle at St. Germain occurred.⁹⁰ These figures demonstrate, undeniably, what senior commanders had learned in North Africa in 1942—operational effectiveness is inversely proportional to the number of inexperienced replacements on the battlefield.⁹¹ Furthermore, 90th Division soldiers continually exhibited the same patterns of behavior as most typical inexperienced replacements in World War II.

Post war analysis shows the most common error of replacement soldiers was bunching up under fire. As one combat veteran explained, “they freeze and bunch up. They drop to the ground and just lie there.”⁹² General Landrum identified these issues in his memorandum on training at the end of June; nonetheless, most of his training effort was effectively lost with the casualties at Monte Castre.⁹³ Thus, the troops who froze and huddled together in the face of the German counter-attack at St. Germain acted similar to many other replacements throughout the war. The fundamental difference, however, was the number of replacements present and their unfamiliarity of the leaders with them--many, in fact, who were replacements themselves.

⁹⁰ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 3-4; 90th Infantry Division Field Order 1, Annex 2, Operation NEPTUNE Loading Tables, 23 May 1944, Roll 2 of *90th Infantry Division Monthly Narratives, 1942-1945*, 26-27; 90th Infantry Division Report of Operations 6 June 1944 to 1 July 1944, G-1 Report, and 90th Infantry Division After Action Report July 1944, Roll 1 of *90th Infantry Division Monthly Narratives, 1942-1945*.

⁹¹ Atkinson, *Army at Dawn*, 404.

⁹² McManus, 266.

⁹³ Blumenson, ““Re-Assessing a Reputation,” 100-101.

Familiarity among members of a combat unit is the glue that holds them together, but it takes time and training to achieve it—two things the 90th Division did not have available on 22 July.

The primary motivating factor for soldiers during World War II was a “complicated blend of peer pressure, teamwork, and fellowship,” something author John McManus calls the “Deadly Brotherhood.” McManus recently conducted a study of World War II veterans and found that while most were exceptionally proud of their unit, they did not risk their lives for its reputation; instead, they risked it for the men with whom they served. In fact, nine out of ten stated the fear of letting their buddies down motivated them during difficult circumstances. As one rifle platoon leader stated, “When a soldier sees he can trust and depend on his platoon and squad members, the morale and efficiency go up.”⁹⁴ Although it will never be known for sure, the likelihood that 90th Division soldiers at Seves Island were concerned about letting their buddies down is exceptionally low. Moreover, it’s exceptionally doubtful that after four days they even truly had buddies. Hence, the dilemma of the U.S. Army during World War II was maintaining a division’s manpower while not jeopardizing its combat effectiveness.

⁹⁴ McManus, 275-276.

THE 90TH DIVISION IN PERSPECTIVE

In his book, *An Army at Dawn*, Rick Atkinson makes the case that North Africa was the proving ground for the U.S. Army and its leadership in World War II. General Dwight Eisenhower's December 1942 letter to his friend, Major General Thomas Handy, confirms this:

The best way to describe our operations [in North Africa] to date is that they have violated every recognized principle of war, are in conflict with all operational and logistic methods laid down in textbooks, and will be condemned, in their entirety, by all Leavenworth [Command and Staff School] and war college classes for the next twenty-five years.⁹⁵

The difficulties of transforming the interwar Army into an effective fighting formation cannot be understated, nor can the problems encountered along the way. Initial combat deficiencies caused by the chaotic state of training were not isolated to particular units. Examples abound, in particular Atkinson points out the initial actions during Operation TORCH in November 1942, which “revealed profound shortcomings in leadership, tactics, equipment, martial élan, and common sense. . . . The U.S. Army was simply inept at combined arms—the essence of modern warfare.” In terms of leadership, the replacement of commanders was commonplace, sometimes two a day. Even Major General Lloyd R. Fredendall, II Corps commander and protégé of the General Marshall, was not exempt.⁹⁶

Despite the victory in North Africa, senior leaders were hesitant to predict future success. Brigadier General Lucian K. Truscott, Jr., who commanded the landings at Mehdia before taking command of the 3rd Infantry Division, openly worried about “too much satisfaction with a mediocre performance.” Additionally, General Bradley, who commanded II Corps during the

⁹⁵ Atkinson, *Army at Dawn*, 246.

⁹⁶ Atkinson, *Army at Dawn*, quote from 159, other facts from 390, 399-403

last stage of the campaign, felt the American soldier was still unwilling to close with the enemy.⁹⁷ Furthermore, even though the five American divisions who fought in North Africa were now seasoned veterans, the problems that plagued their training still existed. Thus it was reasonable to expect the many divisions that followed to go through the same growing pains. However, these newer divisions' baptism of fire would occur in the hedgerows of France which, according to General J. Lawton Collins, were deadlier than any terrain on the continent except the Heurtgen Forest and equivalent to “jungle-fighting” the Japanese in the Pacific.⁹⁸

The overall negative impact of the hedgerows on all divisions is revealed in First Army casualty statistics. Specifically, during the first breakout attempt from 3-19 July, First Army sustained approximately 40,000 casualties, 90 percent of which were infantryman. This number included a remarkably high number of officers, leaving many less than experienced lieutenants in command of companies the size of a reinforced platoon. Like the 90th Division a month earlier, many divisions were also experiencing combat for the first time. As the official U.S. Army history states:

the transition from training for war to the reality of battle was difficult and often rapid. . . . The experience of four and a half newly arrived divisions underscored the problems of transition. In addition to the mistakes made by units, many individuals temporarily forgot the lessons of basic training and failed, for example, to use cover and concealment properly.⁹⁹

The 8th Infantry Division relieved the 82nd Airborne Division during the battle for Monte Castre and is a superb example of another neophyte division that exhibited an initial period of ineffectiveness. Rated by Army Ground Forces Command as one of the best-trained U.S.

⁹⁷ Atkinson, *Army at Dawn*, 537.

⁹⁸ Collins, 237.

⁹⁹ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 175-176.

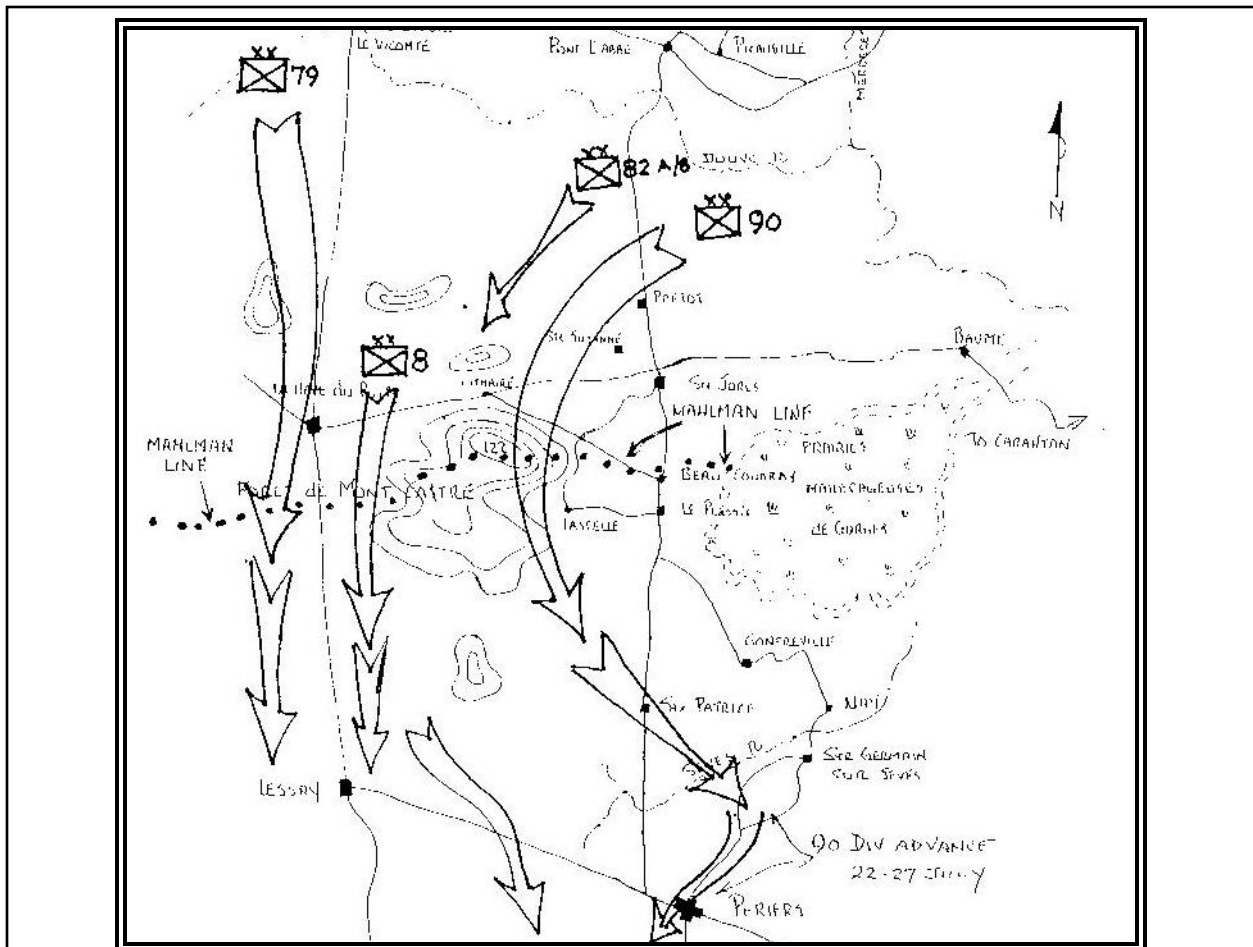


Figure 12. VIII Corps Advance in the Vicinity of Monte Castre, 3-28 July 1944

Source: John Colby, *War from the Ground Up: The 90th Division in WWII* (Austin, TX: Nortex Press, 1991), 132.

divisions to enter the European theater, the 8th Division's initial performance resembled what one would expect from the worst:

Hesitation, inertia, and disorganization marked its first attempts to advance. Inaccurate reporting of map locations, large numbers of stragglers, and poor employment of attached units were usual symptoms of inexperience, but the division also demonstrated a particular ineptness in the realms of organization and control.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 63.

In an effort to get the division moving faster, the division commander relieved two regimental commanders after less than two days of action. Ultimately, however, General Middleton was forced to relieve the 8th Division commander after four days because he was never able move the division forward.

Furthermore, the defensive network around Mont Castre was a difficult challenge for experienced as well as inexperienced divisions. On the VIII Corps west flank, the 79th Division, a veteran of North Africa, D-Day, and the siege of Cherbourg demonstrated that highly skilled units were vulnerable to the effects of high casualty continuous combat as well. During Monte Castre, it experienced panicked retreats, stalled advances, constant shelling, and multiple counter-attacks from elements of the German reserve. Casualties mounted to over 2,000, and according to the official history, “its remaining troops [were] badly in need of rest, and some units close to demoralization. . . the 79th Division was no longer the effective force that had marched to Cherbourg the preceding month.”¹⁰¹

The purpose of these examples is not to directly compare the performance of the 90th Division with other units. Instead, it’s intended to demonstrate that similar problems manifested on the battlefield were caused by deficiencies of leadership, training, or the replacement system. The Tough ‘Ombres story was a confluence of all these factors that occurred under the spotlight of the Normandy Invasion in tremendously difficult terrain. Thus, the plight of the 90th Division is an excellent case study to illustrate the multitude of problems faced by virtually all inexperienced American divisions and indeed the entire U.S. Army during World War II. It illuminates much about the importance of continuity during training and the inherent difficulties of rapidly expanding the military in times of national crisis. Furthermore, it highlights the need

¹⁰¹ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 72-76.

to continually manage and develop a highly trained corps of officers, even in times of peace. Otherwise, units in the future may find themselves repeating the words of Hamilton H. Howze, the 1st Armored Division operations officer in North Africa and a future four-star general; when asked about the arrival of *Old Ironsides* on the African continent, he stated, “None of the division was worth a damn.”¹⁰²

¹⁰² Atkinson, *Army at Dawn*, 53.

APPENDIX A: 90TH DIVISION CHRONOLOGY, 25 MARCH 1942 – 30 JULY 1944

1942	
25 March	Activated at Camp Barkley, Texas – MG Henry Terrell, Jr. commanding
August	Lose approximately 1200 Cadre to activate 104 th Division
September	Re-organized as an experimental motorized division
October	New 359 th Commander - Col Clark Fales
December	- Live fire regimental combat team tests – Camp Bowie, Texas - Basic training begins again for new recruits replacing the loss of cadre
1943	
February	- BG Sam Williams becomes 2 nd Asst. Div commander - Large-scale maneuvers begin in Louisiana against the 77 th Division
March	- Re-organized back to an Infantry Division - New 357 th Commander – Col John Sheehy
April	New 358 th Commander – Col J.V. Thompson
September	- Desert Training and large-scale maneuvers against the 93 rd Division begin in the California-Arizona Maneuver Area - BG John Devine becomes the third DIV ARTY commander in less than two years
1944	
8 January	Arrives Fort Dix, New Jersey – Begins preparations for movement to England. Limited training available until arrival in England.
15 January	Begins receiving replacements troops from the 63 rd Division. Replacements continue to arrive through March
23 January	BG Jay W. MacKelvie takes command
23 March	Division sails from NY Harbor after a brief staging period at Camp Kilner, New Jersey
9 April	Entire division established in England – 357 th & 358 th near Cardiff and Newport in Wales / 359 th in Devonshire with 4 th Division. Training prior to D-Day consists primarily of small squad / platoon drill, road marches, and academic classes on the German Army
6 June	359 th Regiment lands on UTAH beach with 4 th Division - remains in reserve until released back to 90th on 12 June
8 June	Remainder of division comes ashore
10 June	First attack across Merderet River under operational control of VII Corps
13 June	BG MacKelvie relieved – MG Eugene Landrum takes command
18 June	Transferred to VIII Corps – Assumes positions south of Douve River as Rear Guard for VII Corps march to Cherbourg
3-12 July	Battle for Monte Castre
14 July	BG Landrum requests to relieve BG Williams after an altercation. VIII Corps Commander, MG Middleton approves on 16 July
21-22 July	359 th Collapses at St Germain
30 July	Maj Gen Landrum relieved – Brig Gen Raymond S. McLain assumes command

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Primary Sources: By far, the best primary source was Brownlee and Mullen's oral history interview with General William DePuy. As the first commander of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the father of the Army's Air-Land Battle doctrine, DePuy is an authoritative source who provides detailed insight regarding the training and leadership of the 90th Division from activation to 1945. Next, the four rolls of archived microfilm from the Combined Arms Research Library provided the facts as written by the men of the 90th Division as known to them at the time. Unfortunately, the June Operations report was weakly written and vague. Moderately informative, the two volumes of general orders provide information on the rotation of division personnel and training at Camp Barkley; however, it does not cover the Louisiana or California-Arizona maneuvers. Constantine Blastos' Student Paper from the Command and Staff School provides little useful information. On the contrary, the transcripts of his interviews with General George Barth and Colonel Joseph Rustmeyer are outstanding perspectives from regimental division leader. General Bradley and General Collins autobiographies provide are good sources for the senior leader perspective, but the discussion is limited to a few pages per book. Finally, the oral history interview with General Collins provided little information on the 90th Division other than a statement about his close relationship and respect for the fourth division commander, General Raymond McLain.

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Official Histories and Studies: Undoubtedly, the best source of operational and tactical detail comes from the numerous volumes of official history produced by the Army Historical Section. Robert Palmer's historical studies and edited work on *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Forces* was essential to understanding the myriad of factors that went into the mobilization and training for World War II. Roland Ruppenthal's *Utah Beach to Cherbourg* contains a detailed discussion of the 90th Division's actions from D-Day through the collapse at St. Germain. However, while *St-Lo* was an excellent accounting of the action on the eastern flank of First Army in July, it had very little detail on the 90th Division. Blumenson, Cole, and Harrison's works were exceptionally detailed and contained hundreds of pages germane to the 90th Division. Furthermore, they were written almost exclusively from primary sources and are

well foot-noted. Each book is part of the Historical Section's *European Theater of Operations* Series and covers a different time frame during the war. Finally, Jean Moenk's *History of Large-Scale Army Maneuvers* provided details on the division's performance during the Louisiana maneuvers.

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Secondary Sources: Five of these sources provided a broader understanding of the World War II strategic and operational environment, while five were 90th Division specific, and four were relevant to the personal data on the division's leadership. In terms of broader background,

McManus's study on replacement soldiers was invaluable for understanding the psyche of the replacements and their impact on combat units. Atkinson provided a framework for understanding the impact of training on U.S. divisions in North Africa. In many ways this study is an extension of his thesis as applied to one division on Normandy. *Command Decisions*, contained an essay by Maurice Matloff entitled "The 90-Division Gamble" which, while not directly footnoted, was essential to understanding General Marshal's continuously changing calculation regarding the end strength of Army. This had a direct impact on the resources and personnel provided to fledgling divisions like the 90th. Gabel's study of the Louisiana maneuvers was valuable for its discussion of the Army's transformation of doctrine and organization just prior to the war as well as the problems of the interwar officer corps. Lastly, Hastings' work was a good overview of Normandy and an example of the typical historical criticism of the 90th Division's performance.

Regarding the sources specific to the 90th Division, the best was Harold Meyer's military biography of Sam Williams. It was derived from primary source material and gives another leadership insight into the inner workings of the division. Martin Blumenson's *Military Affairs* article assesses the 90th Division's legacy after Monte Castre and St. Germain. He similarly argues that training was the cause of its downfall and that its performance at Monte Castre is a commonly overlooked success. General Bradley and Clay Blair's book contains approximately two pages that address the 90th Division from the senior leader perspective; it's similar to *A Soldier's Story*. Betty Belvin's military biography of her father, Ray McLain, the 90th's fourth commander, contains good data on the success of the division after he assumed command in July and is based on his papers. Finally, Persons' book provides an account of Landrum's relief, but was not well noted or sourced.

The final five sources were all websites that provided minimal personal data on some members of the 90th Division's leadership. The most useful is the *Generals of World War II* website which is a good database of all allied and axis generals. It provides lifespan data as well as a chronology of command and staff positions held as general officers. The fidelity of data varies by individual, but it's a good starting point. The Texas Military Institute and University of Texas Alumni sites had data on General Terrell, while the Eisenhower Library Online had a summary of holdings for Ryder and short biographical note with more detail than *The Generals of World War II*.

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