

Chapter 7

PRELUDE TO OPERATIONS, 24 JUL 44—12 AUG 44

1. Channel Into Battle



CROSSING the English Channel was, for XII Corps, a somewhat protracted affair. Individuals and detachments were on the way from 15 Jul 44, as indicated at the end of the previous chapter, until the last section of the "rear guard" arrived in France thirty days later, which was two days after the corps had been committed to combat. The Advance Detachment took as long as any to make the crossing, being eight days from departure to a landing on Utah Beach on 23 July. This was only the day before the main party left Fordingbridge and Braemore for their crossing, which took until 27 July to reach Utah Beach. A final cleanup force, including Gen Cook and the C/S, stayed in England representing Third Army until nearly the bitter end, not quitting Braemore House until 11 August except, for occasional flying visits to the Continent. A few lucky fellows among these last made the hop by air, arriving the same day; but the majority took the boat, and landed 14 August. Thus XII Corps "hit the beach" all the way from "D-plus-47" to "D-plus-71," which led to considerable kidding along the lines of: "Let me tell you about my combat experiences: when I hit Utah Beach on D-plus-71—". It also caused not a little annoyance. This virtuous business of sticking in England to act as temporary heir and receiver for Third Army's British business cost the corps headquarters the Normandy battle star—by a scant three days. In War Department records, the corps' arrival in France is officially listed as 27 Jul 44; the period for the Normandy campaign was to be defined as 6 Jun to 24 Jul 44. The loss of this battle star, which some members of XII Corps Hq who were in France before the deadline felt should have been rightfully added to the four the corps was later to earn, didn't hurt so much while it added up to just a little additional glory; but after VE-Day, when it was to prove the equivalent of 5 whole ASR "points" to go home, its lack would cause much moaning and groaning.

Col Shattuck, big A C of S G-3, was in charge of the Advance Party. Their mission was to find a suitable CP for the corps and to check details of the XII Corps SOP against the experience of corps already in action for the purpose of recommending changes, if any. Perhaps the most vivid account of the Advance's experience, with a natural Signal Corps' slant, is that contributed by Maj John Myers:

"On the Liberty ship coming over the field grade officers had canvas cots in the pilot house, and the other officers slept in the corridors on the floor. . . . We landed on Utah Beach 23 July and went straight to XX Corps' CP at 1800 hours. They were just moving in. The landing was delayed very badly by the storm which had occurred two or three days before, and landing or beaching facilities were crippled. Col Shattuck got off by hook and crook by taking the captain's gig; he went ashore and all the way to Third

Army Hq in a DUKW to try to expedite our landing. He got hold of two LCT's at dark and we loaded by shielded searchlights, with the ship's crew running the winches and the GIs doing the rigging. We loaded over the side of the Liberty to LCT's by darkness; there were absolutely no lights above deck. During the process there was only one slip—a bumped fender. Otherwise, it was without accident. We cast off from the Liberty expecting to go ashore immediately, but the Navy wouldn't allow us to go ashore after 2200. So we slept in the camouflage nets, vehicles, and wherever we could find a place. After it got light, we went ashore and joined part of XX Corps at the staging area. The things that impressed me the most were the spider webs of wire which were left as the units advanced, they were just tangled up everywhere. It was unimaginable that there would be such large amounts of wire. We went through Ste Mere Eglise and Valognes, and northwest of St. Sauveur. The first two towns were almost completely demolished. There was a whale of a lot of traffic, and we got our first whiff of burning stables and rotting flesh—the odor of death. We stayed with XX Corps in their CP and dug our foxholes, and that night we had our first visit from 'Bed check Charlie,* who was on his way to Cherbourg."

What impressed Col John Wilkin of the G-2 section about the adventures of the detachment was as follows:

"A heavy air raid was going on over Omaha Beach at this time, and an excellent view could be had of the proceedings from the barge. The main source of amusement to pass the time was a continuous poker game, which lasted about 20 hours. Here I was indoctrinated into the value of invasion money. I suddenly discovered that 500 francs was worth \$10.00. We got off the barge at noon, drove up the ramps, and an MP directed us to Assembly Area B. We then found the location of the XX Corps CP, where we were attached until XII Corps could open their CP. This CP was located just north of St Sauveur LeVicomte. En route to the CP, we drove through Montebourg, which was a fine example of complete destruction, and impressed us much more than pillboxes, knocked-up equipment, and destruction on the beaches. To add to the contrast in Montebourg, not a house was standing,—everything was destroyed except a statue of some joker on a horse, sitting in the middle of the square, completely unharmed except for one foot knocked off. I won't easily forget that."

These incidents reported by Col Wilkin are universal experiences of war. There will be more about air raids and poker and crap games and smashed towns in this chronicle. Before XII Corps' experience in Europe was ended, men would hardly glance up for anything short of a huge fleet of bombers or a particularly spectacular raid as long as it stayed at a distance, but a single ME-109 looking for an American vehicle to strafe was always of acute interest. By the time games of chance were being played for invasion marks, which look like cigar store coupons, gambling would have lost much of its excitement. And men would become

* See later. Common ETO name for singl: German plane on routine night reconnaissance. About 2300 seemed to be the usual time. GD.

[Page 134](#) from [XII corps, Spearhead of Patton's Third Army by Lt. Col. George Dyer](#)

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