

# Operation Cobra Source Packet: Source B

E. C. Daniel, "Americans Drive Ahead West of St. Lô After Record Barrages," July 26, 1944

*The New York Times*

GAIN UP TO 1 1/2 MILES

Americans Drive Ahead West of St. Lô After Record Barrages

6,000 TONS OF AIR BOMBS

Canadians Take Verrières on the Eastern Sector of Front in Concurrent Blow

By E. C. DANIEL

By Cable to *New York Times*

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS, Allied Expeditionary Force, Wednesday, July 26 - After a stunning shrapnel attack yesterday by the greatest battle force of heavy bombers ever employed in a single assault, American troops in the western sector of the stiffly defended Normandy battle line are hammering southward on a wide front between St. Lô and Périers in a big offensive.

A front-line dispatch arriving here early this morning said the attack was made across the St. Lô-Périers road and advanced one and a quarter to one and a half miles in its first stages. [Lieut. Gen. Omar N. Bradley sent his American First Army into battle on a front stretching all the way from St. Lô westward to the sea and centering on a five-mile sector between the Vire and Taute Rivers, said an Associated Press dispatch.]

Follows Attack in East

After a lull of three days, enforced by the soggy of the battlefield, the weather finally broke clear and bright in the Allies' favor yesterday, and the coordinated American air and ground assault started before noon. It followed by about six hours the beginning of the British-Canadian uphill climb against grimly entrenched German defenses guarding the road leading south from Caen to Falaise in the eastern sector of the battle front. Except for the assurance that the Americans had broken into the German defenses, no official word had been received early today of the progress of the American attack. [...]

... The Germans had seen signs of the approaching storm on the St. Lô sector, and the weight of aircraft thrown into the fray yesterday could be justified only by serious intentions. In less than three hours the American planes dropped about 6,000 tons of bombs, which was followed by the heaviest artillery barrage the Americans had ever laid down in Normandy.

Eisenhower Impressed

The intensity of the air attack made Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower whistle when it was described to him during a visit to field commanders yesterday. Ten square miles of German defensive positions were saturated with fragmentation and 100-pound bombs by a force of more than 1,500 American Fortresses and -Liberators from Britain, escorted by 500 fighters and augmented by 500 medium and light bombers and up to 500 fighter-bombers-a total of 3,000 aircraft.

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For five miles behind the German front the ground shuddered as successive waves of sixty to seventy heavy bombers unloaded their freight. Smoke rose two miles high over the target area. While the planes employed in this attack were greater in number than any air fleet ever used directly in advance of a ground attack the weight of the bombs they carried was less than that delivered by the Royal Air Force's heavy night attack-bombers before the British breakthrough into Caen. The American heavies normally carry a lighter load than the British, and the bombs they were using yesterday were of a bulky type and not block-busters with a single big punch in a compact package. The bombs were designed to daze and kill personnel and wreck equipment and strong points.

### Attack West of St. Lô

The Allied communique of last night said only that General Bradley's attack was made "west of St. Lô." A German communiqué said that the attack started northwest of St. Lô and southwest of Carentan and that it began Monday, not Tuesday.

Capt. Ludwig Sertorius, German military commentator, asserted the drive was directed across St. Lô-Périers road toward Marigny, strategic road junction seven miles west of St. Lô. Sertorius also stated that the attack was launched Monday, and an Allied dispatch from the battle-front last night suggested that at least a "handful" of Allied aircraft bombed in that area Monday. The haze was so thick, the dispatch said, that some bombardiers misfired into the American front lines, causing casualties.

Yesterday morning, however, when the bomb runs started at 10 o'clock, the Norman skies were clear, and American heavies flew sometimes as low as 10,000 feet- far below their normal level-to pinpoint the targets. There was no Luftwaffe opposition, and only six bombers and three fighters were lost to flak.

Americans thrusting out between positions two miles north of Périers and a few hundred yards south of St. Lô entered some of the most difficult fighting ground in Normandy-a section of the "bocages" [groves] country. The terrain is pimply with little hills and ridges, which afford the Germans excellent sites for artillery, mortar batteries and strong points. The whole area is cut into innumerable small fields, each surrounded by a hedgerow, which Allied troops have learned from hard experience can give effective shelter and disguise to German tanks, anti-tank guns and infantry. These hedgerows are not ornamental borders but thickets of shrubs and trees, often reinforced by ditches and dirt walls sometimes five feet high. A German war correspondent's dispatch yesterday described how Nazi troops cowered under protection of these walls and ditches during artillery or aerial bombardment and then emerged to meet advancing Allied tanks and infantry.

# Operation Cobra Source Packet: Source C

Ernie Pyle, "An Inhuman Tenseness," August 9-10, 1944 (excerpt)

*Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*

*Ernie Pyle was a popular war-correspondent who was embedded with military personnel for most of World War II. His writing often appeared in newspapers associated with the Scripps-Howard newspaper syndicate.*

It is possible to become so enthralled by some of the spectacles of war that you are momentarily captivated away from your own danger.

That's what's happened to our little group of soldiers as we stood in a French farmyard, watching the mighty bombing of the German lines just before a breakthrough.

But that benign state didn't last long. As we watched, there crept into our consciousness a realization that windrows of exploding bombs were easing back toward us, flight by flight, instead of gradually forward, as the plan called for.

Then we were horrified by the suspicion that those machines, high in the sky and completely detached from us, were aiming their bombs at the smoke line on the ground - and a gentle breeze was drifting the smoke line back over us!

An indescribable kind of panic comes over you at such times. We stood tensed in muscle and frozen in intellect, watching each flight approach and pass over us, feeling trapped and completely helpless.

And then all of an instant the universe became filled with a gigantic rattling as of huge, dry seeds in a mammoth dry gourd. I doubt that any of us had ever heard that sound before, but instinct told us what it was. It was bombs by the hundred, hurtling down through the air above us.

Many times I've heard bombs with whistle or swish or rustle, but never before had I heard bombs rattle. I still don't know the explanation of it. But it is an awful sound.

We dived. Some got in a dugout. Others made foxholes and ditches and some got behind a garden wall - although which side would be "behind" was anybody's guess.

It was too late for the dugout. The nearest place was a wagon-shed which formed one end of the stone house. The rattle was right down upon us. I remember hitting the ground flat, all spread out like the cartoons of people flattened by steam rollers, and then squirming like an eel to get under one of the heavy wagons in the shed.

An officer whom I didn't know was wriggling beside me. We stopped at the same time, simultaneously feeling it was hopeless to move farther. The bombs were already crashing around us.

We lay with our heads slightly up -- like two snakes -- staring at each other. I know it was in both our minds and in our eyes, asking each other what to do. Neither of us knew. We said nothing.

## Ernie Pyle, “An Inhuman Tenseness,” August 9-10, 1944 (excerpt)

### *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*

We just lay sprawled, gaping at each other in a futile appeal, our faces about a foot apart, until it was over.

There is no description of the sound and fury of those bombs except to say it was chaos, and waiting for darkness. The feeling of the blast was sensational. The air struck you in hundreds of continuing flutters. Your ears drummed and rang. You could feel quick little waves of concussions on your chest and in your eyes.

At last the sound it dies down and we looked at each other in disbelief. Gradually we left the fox holes and sprawling places, and came out to see what this guy had in store for us. As far as we could see, other waves were approaching from behind...

How many waves of heavy bombers we put over I have no idea. I had counted well beyond four hundred planes when my personal distraction obliterated any capacity or desire to count.

I only know that four hundred was just the beginning. There were supposed to be eighteen hundred planes that day, and I believe it was announced later that there were more than three thousand.

It seemed incredible to me that any German could come out of that bombardment with his sanity. When it was over it even I was grateful in a chastened way I have never experienced before, for just being alive.

# Operation Cobra Source Packet: Source D

## Letter, William Howard Shelfer to Charles Boatman, Sr., June 27, 1943

Courtesy of Ruth Shelfer

**July 11, 1944**

Dear Dad,

*Once again I have my back against the sea. The last time I did not do so good, but maybe my luck will be better this time. It has been cold for the past three days and of course I am traveling light—one blanket and a raincoat. You would think that this time of year it would be hot, but it is a far cry from it. The days are very long, about 21 hours from light to dark.*

*I have had a ringside seat in what is called the greatest show on earth. I would gladly exchange it for a lesser one. I am very tired of big shows. Yesterday and the day before it rained ice water and I cursed whatever God there may be for sending me out in it. I sure do hate cold weather. The weather gives us fellas in the infantry a Hell of a beating. The enemy isn't enough, we have to fight the weather, too. When this war is over, I swear that I shall never be cold again. I do not know why I am writing at all for it is hard to find anything pleasant to say in my present surroundings. My blood really must be thin because I stay cold all the time and other people don't seem to mind it so much. I think that is one reason I hate Yankees so much. It is not good to hate people, but Dad, my heart is full of it. You may not be able to understand that, but you have never slept in ice water. I shall write as often as possible, but don't expect much. Tell Mamie that the slide rule is a great source of amusement, and that I carry it in my pocket. I look to the east and wonder what is in store for me. I will see Berlin yet and may not be long doing it. Tell the kids hello and give my love to all.*

Howard

**July 24, 1944**

Dear Dad,

*It is now ebb tide in my life. Never before have I felt so low. I am sure that I can not last much longer. I have had my share of this thing and am not through yet. We have paid a heavy price. I do not know what the papers say, but as in Africa and Sicily, the 9<sup>th</sup> Division has done much of the hard work over here. I know that I should not write like this, but there is nothing else to say. It is too late for me to come home now. I know that I am a wretch and I am not sure I ever want to come home. Please give my love to all and do not feel bad because I do not write more often. I am so sick of war that sometimes I feel that I am losing my mind. It has been very hard, but the damn thing cannot last forever - not for me, it can't. All of my friends are gone now. I am a stranger in my own battalion. I shall try to do better in my next letter. Tell the girls that I will bring them all a present soon and to save me some pears.*

Notwithstanding,

Howard