

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.