

vectoring XIX TAC Thunderbolts to the target. One such request was for an immediate attack on a group of tanks in a wood. A P-47 squadron was promptly dispatched to the wood, and its sixteen 500 pound bombs fell in thick concentration on 15 enemy tanks.

Since Luftwaffe opposition was so slight—only one daylight attack was reported in the 5 day campaign for Brittany—armored-column cover flights were often released and given permission to sweep over stretches of road up to 30 miles ahead of our lead tanks. These sweeps, free yet tied definitely to a particular armored column, brought in the heaviest bag of German motor and horse transport on the roads.

The toughest resistance encountered by armed reconnaissance patrols in Brittany was from the walled-in fortress at St. Malo; they were violently shelled by Germans deep inside concrete gun emplacements and on warships in the harbor. Third Army at once called for bomber assistance from Ninth Air Force; meanwhile Thunderbolts braved solid flak on 4 and 5 August to destroy or damage one combat ship each day. In other operations near St. Malo, fighter bombers blew up buildings loaded with explosives.

Guarding the southern and eastern flanks On 3 August the XIX TAC operations order called for cooperation with XV Corps armor and infantry, thrusting southeast from Fougères. Originally this was a reconnaissance rather than an offensive task, although the first patrols landed with reports of transport destroyed and rails cut. The XV was making such rapid headway that armed and tactical reconnaissance units had to fly as far south as Angers and as far east as Laval on the lookout for possible opposition. Tactical reconnaissance aircraft, flying in pairs for self-protection, returned with photographs of German defenses in a wide arc around the Third Army flanks, while armed reconnaissance struck closer to the Army's forward units and attacked whatever offered itself.

Later in August this aerial guard mount on the Third Army's right would turn into one of the most spectacular air cooperation achievements in history. For the time being it was in the watch-and-wait stage. Reconnaissance planes were instructed to seek out the 11th Panzer Division, which was repeatedly reported to be northward bound to hit General Patton's right flank near Rennes. The vigilant aircraft reported every movement to intelligence but, as it worked out, the 11th Panzer Division never turned up on the Third Army front, although a few elements may have been present for a time in the vicinity of Angers.

Protecting the corridor From the start the Third Army was menaced in the rear. Above Avranches, the First Army held the Cotentin peninsula; below Avranches, the Third Army was expanding in all directions. These two broad areas of American penetration were tied together only by a narrow, vulnerable corridor, crisscrossed by roads and bridges along which reinforcements were speeding southward. The enemy grouped at Mortain and attempted a powerful drive westward to Avranches and the sea, with the object of cutting the American armies in half.

From the first, General Weyland told his groups cooperating with armored columns, to make periodic sweeps backward to cover the Avranches corridor against air attack. As soon as XIX TAC got its first P-51's, they were assigned to keep a constant fighter umbrella over the Third Army rear. Enemy aircraft seldom came over the corridor during the day, but sometimes lone bombers or small formations attacked roads and bridges near Avranches by night. XIX TAC was not equipped with night fighters; hence a request for protection was forwarded to IX Air Defense Command, which put up Black Widows to drive off the harassing enemy air craft.

Second Phase The trap begins to close, 6-12 August.—Between 6 and 12 August, the trap began to close around the German Seventh Army. Rennes fell to General Patton's forces without a struggle; all Brittany was overrun except for the ports; the Third Army began an encircling movement to strike the rear of the enemy forces facing the First Army and the British near Mortain and Vire. Within a couple of days the Third secured Laval and Mayenne and was fanning out to the east and south of Le Mans. As this 6 day period ended, the Third Army's big push to trap the Germans in the Mortain-Falaise Argentan pocket was underway.

Weather was better in those 6 days, and XIX TAC flew more than 3,500 sorties, averaging almost 600 a day. On the clearest days, some groups flew as many as five separate missions daily, and many pilots put in a working day of almost 12 hours of continuous fighter-bombing. The air arm was being put to maximum use. On 7 August XIX TAC grew to its greatest stature, nine groups of fighters. Later in the week it took the wraps off its secret weapon, a picked P-47 squadron which carried and fired 5-inch rockets as well as the standard load of 500 pounds of general purpose bombs and .50-caliber machine-gun bullets.

As General Patton put more and more distance between his army and the XIX TAC flying fields in Normandy, General Weyland's headquarters came up sharply against its most vexatious problem—communications. On 7 August, Third Army moved to a new camp site near St. James, well below the Avranches corridor. As usual, XIX TAC went along. However, while General Patton's communications were made easier by keeping headquarters close to his advance units, XIX TAC's communications question was seriously complicated by moving away from the airfields in the rear. Nightly, enemy saboteurs cut the extended lines between the combat operations tent of the command and the landing strips. XIX TAC had to leave a small operating echelon behind at Beauchamps to maintain contact with the groups and to control operations.

XIX TAC never overtook Third Army headquarters during August. The Army sometimes moved 20 miles a day. As long as there were no available airfields near the front lines XIX TAC had to stay behind and send an advanced echelon up with the Third Army. General Weyland got into the habit of flying forward every other day to confer with General Patton or his chief of staff.

The enemy made XIX TAC's job as difficult as he could, but every one of his tricks was frustrated by the ingenuity of American fighter pilots. At first the Germans tried picking up our call signs broadcasting as General Ernest's task force or as the 4th Armored Division, in an effort to catch our aircraft in traps or to send them barging off on wild-goose chases. But the pilots spotted the enemy's clumsiness and unfamiliarity with our terms, challenged him to authenticate, and quickly distinguished true orders from bogus ones.

In the 6 days up to 11 August, fighter-bombers of XIX TAC took care of five separate major assignments: 1. Guarding General Patton's flank along the Loire, 2. Neutralizing enemy air power, 3. Flying armed reconnaissance, 4. Giving the ground forces close cooperation, 5. Continuing operations against Brest, Lorient, St. Malo, and the Ile de Cezembre Loire flank. Never in military history had a ground commander entrusted the defense of a flank to tactical aircraft. But early in August General Patton had only small forces available to man his southern flank along the Loire River. On the other side of the river, G-2 told him, there were enough Germans to cause a lot of trouble if they massed and made a big crossing.

General Patton asked XIX TAC to guard that right flank for