

Paratroopers & Freedom Fighters Capture Vital Rail Bridge

The double-track rail line that ran from Brest to Rennes was vital, with the high trestle bridge at Morlaix -50 miles east of Brest- very impressively vital. It was captured by 150 French parachutists and in conjunction with the local maquisards (freedom fighters) and an American, Captain B. Knox (future director of Hellenic Studies at Harvard), fought off die-hard German paratroopers and held it till the U.S. arrived. A GI asks directions from an Episcopalian pastor in Coutances.



Three main U.S. forces were utilized in the clearing of Brittany; the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions, and the mechanized Task Force A. (One must state the overall military objectives: the major ports of St. Nazaire, Lorient, and the larger one of Brest, as well as the harbors of St. Malo and Nantes; the nearest to Avranches was St. Malo. After their capture, important construction of a new harbor was perceived for the future, at Quiberon.)

The first tri objectives after Rennes (which was liberated with little difficulty on Aug. 3) were Vannes, Lorient, and Brest. General Bradley had envisioned the duty of the 6th to take St. Malo and then Morlaix on the road to Brest; while the 4th secured Rennes, Vannes, then Lorient (see p. 143).

Without waiting to take St. Malo, however, Patton in a novel move ordered the 6th Armored to pass it and speed on to Brest. As all units were to find out, beyond Avranches and its jammed debris-filled roads, the route of advancements became clear and fast. As the GI's trekked on, it is worthwhile to note something that happened of historical uniqueness, tantamount to Allied co-operation. What occurred was not really within purely conventional army tactics. On August 3, 150 French resistance guerrillas from England were dropped by parachute. They were highly specialized saboteurs, named the "Battalion of Heaven." Aided by the civilian populace, they seized several high railroad trestle bridges and saved them for the advancing U.S. units of General Patton, which headed for Brest. The resistance fighters were led by a Henri Bourgoïn. However, war can be strange—just outside Morlaix, American troops were not halted

The use of direct air to ground communications between advancing ground columns and close air support was begun in Italy via a powerful walkie-talkie link from forward line to the heavens. After Normandy, the link often included an airman riding with the lead spearhead tankers. The use of radar for ground advancement was initiated in France by the 9th Air Force.

Allied aircraft were steered to targets from radar stations called M.E.W. (Microwave Early Warning Systems) in ranges of several hundred miles. The main advantage was to pilots, who were relieved of the strain of guarding for bandits. A typical M.E.W. setup included several large round radar scopes (usually four). Another device was the mobile SCR-584's, which were roving trucks with big satellite-type dishes on their roofs; remember there were no satellites. The devices were primitive. You could only lock onto a plane or group screws together, moreover the range was 30 miles. Beyond, enemy mobile columns could sneak up on you.

