11 The Conduct of the Normandy Campaign

Two armies, each of two corps, landed between D-day and D+2 on the American beaches Utah and Omaha, and the British Gold, Juno and Sword. Montgomery planned to expand the British beachhead at once to include the road, rail, river and canal centre of Caen (Map 9). By D+2 armoured units were to intrude to disrupt German efforts to cordon off the invaders. On the American sector, the Cotentin peninsula would be cut and Cherbourg, at its northern tip, taken to provide a major port as soon as possible. The bridgehead would be expanded to allow space for the Build-Up corps responsible for the break-out. By that time two American armies, the First and the Third, and the Second British and First Canadian – the latter representing only one extra corps – would be in the line.

The timing of the plan’s three phases – landings and junction of the beach-heads, expansion of the bridgehead and break-out – was approximate, for it depended on the enemy’s actions. As the Germans built up their strength, Montgomery anticipated that the front might ‘glue up’ about D+14 if the British had not reached the vicinity of Falaise south of Caen and the Americans were still fighting in the bocage around St Lô. Preventing that situation arising by penetrating the comparatively open country south of Caen on the British front was an essential part of Montgomery’s plan.¹

The plan was based on the fundamental facts of geography. The Germans would have to hold their right flank firmly, first as an anchor for their front and then as a pivot for the orderly withdrawal of their western flank to the Seine. A defeat on their eastern flank would probably doom their forces further west. Unless that occurred, the allied break-out would begin on the American front in the west, at the handle of the door not the hinge. Its direction would be designed to seize the Atlantic ports on the right and to reach the Seine on the left. In a document issued on 8 May this part of the outline plan read:

Once through the difficult bocage country, greater possibilities for manoeuvre and for the use of armour begin to appear. Our aim during this period should be to contain the maximum enemy forces facing the Eastern flank of the bridgehead, and to thrust rapidly
9 Normandy