Welcome to the first (13 March) session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is James Carafano, author of *After D-Day: Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout*. Combat veterans will join him to discuss the bold attack that cut the German defenses and led to their encirclement at Falaise.

Unlike its much better known predecessor OPERATION OVERLORD there are rather few historical assessments of OPERATION COBRA. Martin Blumenson wrote the definitive study in the 1950s, and most of the more recent works are much more specialized in focus. The hagiography that has surrounded OVERLORD is unfortunate since it is really COBRA that defined how the war would be fought in Europe. It was one thing (necessary but not sufficient) to land on the beaches, but a bigger problem was how to re-conquer a continent.

After the Allied landings in France, the coalition forces became bogged down through the rest of June and most of July, barely able to move beyond sight of the beaches. Senior leadership began to have nightmares of another attritional war like World War I. To break this stalemate the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces Dwight Eisenhower (Ike) gave two generals a chance to over come this vexing problem. The first to get his chance was Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery (Monty) and his 21st Army Group. Monty had failed to take Caen on D-Day as planned, and he spent the rest of June and July grinding along (in several different “operations”) to finally take the city.

With OPERATION GOODWOOD, Monty promised to breakout of Caen and move southward to Falaise. Launched on July 18 with a massive air bombardment. Monty's forces then moved forward with three armored divisions. After the Germans recovered from the bombings they were able to re-group and stop the advance. GOODWOOD ground to a halt after two days and seven miles.

The next major effort was given to Major-General Omar Bradley’s US First Army. Bradley noted Monty’s failure and decided that instead of advancing along a broad front with armor, he would concentrate his forces in a rectangle along the Périers-St-Lô highway and do a “blitz” attack on a 7,000 yard front.

Much like GOODWOOD, Bradley would begin with an extremely close air bombardment, but instead of armored divisions he would use infantry first then have armored and mechanized infantry follow them. On July 24th COBRA began with disaster. The bombers who were supposed to fly parallel to the Allied lines, because of cloud cover flew in perpendicular to them and dropped some of their payloads right on the American 30th Infantry Division, which endured 156 casualties and over 30 dead. A second try on 25 July again resulted in short bombing. This time with greater casualties (in the 30 ID!), including LGT Lesley J. McNair (Commanding General, US Army Ground Forces), killed because he would not move further back.

Despite its inauspicious beginning COBRA moved forward. On the 25th, the infantry was able to take St.-Gilles and Marigny and by the end of July had taken not only Coutances but also Avranches. The Germans mistakenly thought the British-Canadian diversionary efforts around Caen were the main attack, and did not shift their forces westward.

As the American forces widened the gap they had created in the German lines, pouring in new forces, including VII Corps, which cleared the German line on 27 July, together with the 9th ID of VII Corps. By 28 July, German resistance was crumbling and the Allied advance gathered momentum towards the target city of Avranches where Patton’s Third US Army (operational 1 August) would split, part into Brittany, part eastward.

After much argument, Hitler ordered an offensive between Mortain and Avranches – OPERATION LÜTTICH, to include 8 of the 9 Panzer divisions and the Luftwaffe’s available aircraft. Generalfeldmarschall von Kluge ordered an immediate attack – because the situation was deteriorating rapidly – instead of waiting to assemble a sizeable striking force.

The disjointed attack was launched on the night of 6/7 August and foundered against Hill 317, held by 2/120 Inf. Regt. 30 ID. Forces passing down the Countance - Avranches road were deployed from their vehicles as infantry in a last line of defense. Fortunately, the German attack ended 2 miles short of Avranches as the 120 held.

The result as Patton’s Army went operational was to give George an idea. Instead of putting most of his forces into Brittany, he put a Corps, and pivoted the balance of his army eastward and began a rapid movement on Paris. His flank was guarded by the 1303 EGSR, the XIX Tactical Air Command, and

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com
As Patton slashed east, the German Seventh Army was becoming entrapped between the 21st Army Group to the northeast (near Caen), the US First Army on the northwest, and Patton to their south. This set up the “Falaise – Argentan Pocket or Gap. Had Montgomery either moved faster or had adjusted the boundary between 21st AG and TUSA northward, the pocket might have closed on the Germans. Instead, Montgomery dithered and the Germans, abandoning most of their equipment, fled east to regroup and fight again another day.

Further Readings:
Carlo D’Este, *Decision in Normandy:* (New York: Kennedy & Kennedy, 1994 ed.)

Announcements:
Civil War Symposium Apr. 5, 2014 – Historic Ft. Snelling Visitors Center - info@tccwrt.com - 612-823-4009
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Mar. 18, 2014 – McClellan 150 Years On- www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Mar. 24, 2014 – Armaments: USA v. CSA- 715-386-1268 – rossandhaines@comcast.net
Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-9970; www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@gmail.com - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org


Round Table Schedule 2014
27 Mar. World War II in China
10 Apr. Rabaul and the SW Pacific
8 May Landing on Omaha Beach
10-27 May Tour of Normandy

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Map from USMA (1983 version)