

SITUATION IN ITALY WINTER 1943-44

The Italian winter commencing in DECEMBER 1943, had imposed conditions of ground and weather which made large scale offensive ops extremely difficult and costly of life. Hence both the German and Allied Armies faced each other on a line running roughly from ORTONA on the ADRIATIC to MINTURNO on the MEDITERRANEAN. The seaborne landing at ANZIO in FEBRUARY, 1944, in an attempt to relieve this stalemate and effect the capture of ROME had failed on its object and left the Allies with the task of maintaining a costly beachhead or withdrawing from it, which would have been a severe blow to allied prestige.

THE ALLIED VIEWPOINT

In the meantime, big events were shaping. The "Second Front" was to be opened by the Western Allies in 1944 by the allied invasion of GERMAN occupied FRANCE. This all-out effort and a large scale offensive by the Soviets were to be the mighty blows which would beat the German Armies to their knees. Under such circumstances, the Allied effort in Italy was bound to assume the guise of a strategic detachment in order to economize in Military resources needed prior to and subsequent to the invasion.

Now the purpose of a detachment is to cause a Military threat which will contain forces of the enemy (superior forces if possible) and thereby weaken him where the maximum blows are to be struck. In ITALY it could prevent enemy withdrawal of battle experienced Divisions from ITALY to NORTH-WEST EUROPE or to the RUSSIAN front. To achieve this purpose the Allied Forces would require to maintain a vigorous defensive throughout the winter months and to mount a large scale offensive operations as soon as the ground and weather became fit. MAY was the earliest when the latter could be undertaken. At the same time it was essential that ROME be captured as soon as possible because of its world-wide value in the realm of politics and propaganda.

THE GERMAN VIEWPOINT

There is no doubt that the Germans realized there were big events afoot for the summer of 1944, and were well aware that the main Allied blows would come elsewhere than in ITALY. At the same time they probably reasoned that any disaster to their forces in that theatre would open the way to the BALKANS and AUSTRIA. Complete withdrawal was impossible. Therefore, although it entailed a long line of communication, defensive operations could be more economically in the mountainous parts of ITALY than by a withdrawal to the PO river and the plains of LOMBARDY. Any withdrawal would require to be a fighting withdrawal during those months when offensive operations were possible in ITALY, until Kinf Winter could again step in on the German side. The took steps, therefore, throughout the winter of 1944, to strengthen their defences by the construction of strong and elaborately fortified layback positions where the terrain between the mountains was suitable for all out offensive operations. By this means they hoped to minimize the forces they must maintain in ITALY. In the meantime, if the Allied defensive ops during the winter became slack and the prospect of an allied offensive were diminished by heavy withdrawals for elsewhere, they could take advantage of this situation and spare some of their forces from the ITALIAN front for use elsewhere. That they were unable to withdraw any appreciable force without replacement is an indication that the Allied Armies in ITALY fulfilled their task in an admirable way.

THE OFFENSIVE DESIGN

The Allied plan for the offensive in MAY was to stage an all out attack by the 8th BRITISH and 5th AMERICAN Armies between CASSINO and the MEDITERRANEAN Sea, with the object of destroying the GERMAN Armies in ITALY and, incidental to this, the capture of ROME. The offensive was to commence on the night 11/12 MAY and when this had drawn off the GERMAN reserves the allied forces maintained in the ANZIO beachhead was to break ~~through~~ out and drive for ROME with all speed. The timing of this break-out required a very close prediction by the Commander-in-Chief, as the force concerned required a period of notice to move.

The success of the offensive is now history. Within a period of five months the Armies had advanced nearly 300 miles to debauch on the Northern Plains where, unfortunately, the weather again reacted in favour of the enemy. It was only accomplished after much hard fighting and surmounting of demolitions in difficult country which taxed to the utmost the ingenuity and resources of the troops. It was a first class feat of arms by the American and Empire Troops which has tended to become obscured by the magnitude of the military successes which occurred in North West Europe during that period.

Having given this overall background, we may now return to the beginning of the offensive in MAY, and describe the part played by the FIRST CANADIAN DIVISION during the break-out phase in the LIRI VALLEY.

8th ARMY SITUATION

By April 1944, the 8th Army faced the Germans from ORTONA on the ADRIATIC, over the mountains to CASSINO and thence along the GARI River to its confluence with the river LIRI. The valley of the LIRI offered ample scope for ~~the~~ deployment and offensive manoeuvre, one the GARI had been forced by assault. The whole of the area was, however, dominated by the CASSINO Monastery and MONTE CAIRO on the Northern side, and on the other side by the high mountain slopes close to the SOUTH of the LIRI River.

A first class highway, No. 6, a direct route from NAPLES to ROME, lay close to the base of MONTE CAIRO. No other good road existed although there were several indifferent dirt roads and tracks lying SOUTH of the Main road.

THE ENEMY SITUATION

To back his outer defences on the GARI and to add depth to the position, the enemy had constructed a heavily fortified layback position known as the ADOLPH HITLER LINE. Hinged on the Monastery, it was refused back along the base of MONTE CAIRO to PIEDMONTE, thence to ACQUINO, to PONTECORVA and from thence across the LIRI ~~river~~ RIVER to the mountains held by. This gave a depth of between 8 and 9 miles to the enemy defences. So long as the enemy held MONTE CAIRO and the monastery the Artillery observation thus afforded turned the area between the forward defences and the layback position into a huge killing ground. The capture of MONTE CAIRO therefore required to be an important feature of the 8th Army plan.

THE 8TH ARMY PLAN

The ~~opening~~ plan for the opening phases was, briefly, as follows:

- (a) Polish Corps was to assault and Capture the Monastery and MONTE CAIRO.
- (b) 13 Corps under command 4 British and 8 Indian Division was to assault across the GARI simultaneously with these divisions and form Bridgeheads?
- (a) Having achieved these bridgeheads:
 - (i) 13 Corps was to exploit with 78 Division which was to swing right and cut highway 6 between AQUINO and PIEDMONTE. 6 Armoured Div was also available to this Corps for further exploitation and pursuit.
 - (ii) 1 Cdn Corps was to cross and operate between 13 Corps and the LIRI River. In this operation, 1 Cdn Div would pass through 8 Indian Div and exploit forward to make contact with, and eventually breach, the layback position between AQUINO and PONTECORVO. 5 Cdn Arm Div was to be held available to exploit this breach and conduct pursuit.
- (d) The Free French Corps under 5th American Army was to assault on the LEFT of the 8th Army with its RIGHT resting on the LIRI River.
- (e) H Hour was fixed for 2300 hrs night 11/12 MAY 44.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACKS

To bring about the tactical concentration of troops and supplies to mount this operation was a most difficult operation. The preservation of secrecy to achieve surprise was essential and nature could be said to conspire with the enemy in this respect. The main approach to the GARI River was limited to Highway No 6 - a First Class Rd - which for nearly 20 miles EAST of CASSINO ran through a narrow defile in the mountains. As the Rd approached CASSINO it was under enemy obs from the heights above CASSINO, as were all immediate overland approaches to the GARI River. Under such circumstances the ground available and suitable ~~for~~ to provide bivouac areas, gun positions for nearly 1000 guns, and huge forward dumps of supplies, ammunition and petrol, was strictly limited. Movement in all the forward areas was limited to bare essentials by day. Very strict camouflage arrangements were introduced and practiced on a large scale. All large movements were carried out ~~by~~ during the hours of darkness and in order to reduce the burden of traffic on Highway No 6, the Rlwy running parallel to and SOUTH of the Highway was converted for rd traffic purposes between MIGNAMO to a point WEST of MONTE TROCCHIO.

Thus it was only possible to concentrate the Divs required for the initial assault. The remainder were held many miles in rear to be staged fwd as the leading divisions gained ground over the GARI River. Despite all the difficulties of congestion and movement, all preparations for the opening of the battle had been completed by 11 MAY - Staff arrangements and planning of the highest order.

8th ARMY ATTACK AND ITS PROGRESS

The assault commenced at 2300 hrs 11/12 MAY under Artillery Support provided by the massed guns of 8th Army -- approximately 1000 guns of all calibres. The fighting was severe, but by 16 May Bridgeheads had been secured by the 48th British and 8th Indian Divisions. The Polish Corps were well ahead with their difficult task. On night 16-17 May 78th British and 1st Cdn Divs commenced their moves across the GARI River and on 17 MAY the leading Brigades advanced out of the bridgeheads.

CONTACT WITH THE HITLER LINE

Late on 19 MAY, after a steady progress in the face of heavy shelling and isolated pockets of resistance, the 1st and 3rd Cdn Inf Bdes made contact with the ADOLPH HITLER LINE between AQUINO and PONTECORVO. On 20 MAY it was proved by ground reconnaissance to be as strong as previous intelligence reports had indicated. This reconnaissance was intensified during the days following, and all ~~xxxxxxx~~ along the front probing attacks at the enemy defences were continued by day and night?

In the meantime, 78th Div had progressed well and their task of cutting Highway No 6 was in progress of fulfilment. This Fm was also in process of making contact with the HITLER Line on RIGHT flank of 1 Cdn Div. The Poles were engaged in the capture of MONTE CAIRO.

1 CANADIAN DIVISION PLAN OF ATTACK

The governing factor in the selection of the point of attack now to be delivered by 1 Cdn Div was ground suitable for Armoured Support by 25 (British Army Tank Bde under Div Command). The ground in the vicinity of PONTECORVO was unsuitable because the approach was very exposed and a very deep gully behind the defences and in front of PONTECORVO would limit tank movement. The most favourable lane of attack, about 3000 yds in width, ran parallel to and with the Forne d'AQUINO as its RIGHT boundary. This had a serious disadvantage in that it was infaladed from AQUINO a strong bastion in the German Defences? No other alternative offered.

The German defences were formidable. Fields of fire from concrete emplacements housing anti-tank guns and machine guns, the whole covered by a thick belt of wire and numerous minefields, had been constructed? Many of the minefields in front of the wire were confirmed. It was impossible, however, to confirm the existence or otherwise of mines behind the wire as the enemy was very much on the alert.

The assault was designed to penetrate the enemy defences in two phases. Phase I, to breach the field of defences and obtain a firm lodgement; and Phase II, to deepen and enlarge the breach to enable the passage through of 5th Cdn Armd Div to exploit.

The DivComd did not deem it desirable to involve 1 Inf Bde and the Reconnaissance Regt in the forthcoming attack. These troops were engaging the defences in the vicinity of PONTECORVO by infiltrating attacks and were enjoying fair success, besides which their efforts would serve as a diversion during the main attack. The main assault would, therefore, fall on 2nd and 3rd Bdes, supported by the bulk of the armour of 25 Army Tk.

The Div Comd decided to attack simultaneously with three Bns and to detail the R 22e together with Three Rivers Regt as Div reserve. 2nd and 3rd Bdes were to be positioned Right and Left respectively, the former with the PPCLI and S of C leading and the latter with C&Y Reserve Bns were the LER and the W N S R. These latter were to be employed in phase II.

The Arty planned involved the emp of app 800 guns of all types. Each phase of the assault was to be conducted under a barrage and at the same time, and in addition, an intensive counter battery and counter Mortar programme was planned. All move and preparations were to be completed by midnight, 22/23 MAY. H Hr was fixed at 0600 hrs 23 May and the operations was to be known by the code name CHESTERFIELD.

This plan was approved at Corps and Army level and implementation began late on 20 May.

Of the period of preparation nothing further need be said. The dumping of ammunition, reconnaissance and forward moves were completed on time, but not without considerable difficulties imposed by enemy shelling and traffic congestion on the limited tracks leading up to the gun areas.

THE ATTACK BY 1 CANADIAN DIVISION

The morning of 23 May was bright and clear, and the attack commenced on schedule.

The expected fog of war in the early stages of the attack began to lengthen out and as reports began to trickle in of the fierce enemy resistance Phase II was postponed indefinitely. It was 1200 hrs before the situation clarified to the extent where the Div Comd could base his plans for further action. The situation at that time was:

(a) 2nd Infantry Brigade

(i) Tanks unable to get through undisclosed mine-fields sited behind thick and continuous belt of wire. Many tanks reported knocked out by anti-tank fire from enemy guns in AQUINO.

(ii) Two companies of each PPCLI and SH of C were believed to be on the objective but without armour or anti-tank weapons. The reserve Coys were pinned and could make no progress.

(iii) The LER had been prematurely launched and was also pinned down by enemy defensive fire.

(iv) Communications within the Bns were practically non-existent except by runners who could not get near the forward elements.

(v) Casualties were heavy.

(b) 3rd Infantry Brigade

(i) C&Y R was on the first objective with tanks and anti-tank guns.

(ii) WNSR had been moved forward and was also on the first objective ready for the second phase.

(iii) Both Bns were exposed to heavy and continuous shelling and mortaring and had gung in.

(c) General

- (i) The enemy was reactive strongly. One counter attack developing from AQUINO was beaten off by Arty fire and the fire of a sqn of 12th Cdn Tank Regt which had been disposed to watch the right flank.
- (ii) A large number of prisoners had been taken by 3 Cdn Inf Bde, all were badly shaken.
- (iii) All tanks of 25 Army Tank Bde still in action were running short of fuel and required reparming.

The Div Comd delayed the issue of orders for amended Phase II objectives until 1245 hrs in the hope that some of the obscurity of 2 Bde front would dissolve.

By 1300 hrs, Comd 3rd Bde had been briefed and amended objectives marked on his map. R 22e was reverted to Bde control and 12 CTR (less one sqn) placed in support. There was no alteration in the Phase II Arty plan as it was suitable.

As it was anticipated that considerable time would be required to issue and disseminate new orders necessitated by the changes in the objectives (two of the Bns as previously mentioned were under fire) the fixing of H Hr was held in abeyance on the understanding that the Div Comd must have 30 min notice in order to warn the guns.

At 1610 hrs, the Bde notified the Div Comd that 3rd Bde would be ready in 30 min and H hr for the second phase was fixed at 1650 Hrs.

As the attack went in an enemy counter attack of large dimensions was beginning to take form against the 3rd Bde sector. Luck at last was on our side. The enemy was caught in the open by the barrage, and by 1800 hrs the units of the 3rd Bde had reached all their objectives and were mopping up and taking prisoners in large numbers.

RESULTS OF THE BATTLE

The breach was now secured, and a marked slackening of enemy resistance slowly became apparent all across the Divisional front. During the night 23/24 May, 5 Sdn Armd Div commenced its passage through the breach and after a few nocturnal skirmishes, was well on its way by first light on the morning of 24 May.

During the night 23/24 May the units of 1st Bde lodged themselves in the enemy defences on their front and mopped up, linking up with the 3rd Bde on their right at first light.

Thus ended the battle which breached the HITLER LINE and which will live forever in the hearts of those Canadians who were there. It was a hard fought battle in which the margin between success and failure had been slim. The cost in casualties, especially the 2nd Bde, was high, but not in vain. The Germans were now in full retreat which only ended when they reached ARNO River at FLORENCE.

LESSONS OF THE BATTLE

No story of a battle is complete without the lessons which emerged. These lessons usually cover errors or omissions, mistakes or methods by which the conduct of the battle may be improved. They are purely for the benefit of students of tactics, that they may profit by the experience of others. Just as in any civil profession, so in the profession of arms, practical experience is the greatest teacher.

Although this battle ended in a resounding success from the Command standpoint the great lesson learned was the need for greater flexibility, firstly, in the estimate of timing for progress of the battle, and secondly, in the Artillery Plan.

TIMING

An estimate ~~in the estimate~~ of timing in the progress of the battle is an essential feature to any military plan since this plan must co-ordinate all the resources available to the commander. On the other hand enemy action often upsets the rate of progress and it is quite impossible to stick to a rigid time table.

In this particular battle, the estimated timing for gaining the objectives in the first phase was 75 minutes. This estimate was based on a rate of advance of 100 yds in 5 minutes for an average distance of 1500 yds. This was to be followed by a pause of 60 minutes for consolidation and readying of the units hitherto in reserve to follow through during the second phase. In the planning it was foreseen that the second phase might not start on time and all concerned were warned? For the second phase, the estimate of timing required to carry the objectives was 50 minutes. This involved an advance of 1600 yds at a rate of 100 yds in three mins.

The battle opened at 0600 hrs. The first phase should have been completed by 0715 hrs, and the second phase commenced at 0815 hrs and completed by 0905 hrs, if it had been possible to stick to the estimated time-table. As it turned out, it was 1200 hrs before the situation clarified to the extent that it was possible to say that there had been partial success of the left flank of the attack and that the follow through Bn of 3 Inf Bde was in a position to commence the second phase. On the right the situation was still very obscure as there were reports that elements of the leading Infantry Bns were on the first objective, but it was not until about 1245 hrs that it became quite clear that the attack of 2 Inf Bde was hopelessly bogged down.

A Divisional success, therefore, depended on exploitation of the success gained by throwing in the Div reserve - one Inf Bn and an Armd Regt (R22e and 12 CTR). The objective of 3rd Inf Bde had therefore to be enlarged and new orders issued to the units involved. It will be remembered that one of these, the WNSR, was then sitting dug in on the first Phase objectives and under heavy fire. Under these circumstances, the briefing of this Bn took considerable time and a modified phase of the Infantry attack was commenced not at 0815 hrs, but at 1650 hrs -- 8 hrs and 35 mins after it was estimated it might commence.

For the student it might be profitable to note that the 3rd Inf Bde was ready and proceeded with the altered second phase attack 3 hrs and 50 min after the Div Comd had completed briefing the Bde Comd at 1300 hrs. If the plan had required alteration of the original Arty plan, it would have taken a great deal longer because of the mass of Arty involved. Under the circumstances therefore, no time was lost by the Bde in the transmission of orders and battle deployment.

The timing originally predicted for the second phase was not far out in estimate as it was completed prior to 1800 hrs, under

The timing originally predicted for the second phase was not far out in estimate as it was completed prior to 1800 hrs, under 70 minutes after commencement, with the amended estimate to reach the objective was 50 minutes.

THE ARTILLERY PLAN

The original timing may be criticized because it lacked flexibility. The lack of flexibility was due in great measure to the fact that the advance in each phase was to take place under a barrage. To use this form of support requires a set rate of advance in order to work out the gun programmes and the attacking Infantry must follow closely (i.e. lean into it) if the neutralizing effect of the fire is to be of use. Otherwise, determined defenders who "pop up" after the fire has lifted can cause serious delay to the attacking Infantry. The result is, the barrage gets away and it is most difficult to stop, and almost impossible to bring it back, especially when a mass of Artillery ~~xxxxxx~~ is engaged in the programme. It is the most inflexible form of Artillery support in the gunner's lexicon. It never suited the mentality of the Canadian soldier in Italy regardless of any success it may have achieved elsewhere.

The infantryman requires a form of Artillery support which he can stop, recall, and start at will during the course of the battle. In the very fluid battle, concentrations on call serve admirably, but against well organized and a stubborn resistance, there must be a form of support which has the goos points of the barrage, and the flexibility of concentration.

During the period between LIRI Valley Battle and the battles fought by 1 Cdn Div later in the year a different method of artillery support was devised which incorporated these requirements.

This method consisted of a series of block concentrations overlapping in depth and firing in lanes across the frontage of attack. See Diagram attached. Each block was given a number, letter or code name.

The fire plan involved amongst others, consideration of the following points:

- (a) Number of lanes required - frontage and depth of the attack and number of units involved.
- (b) Overall estimated rate of advance on which hinged the period of fire for each concentration.
- (c) The Artillery resources (Guns, ammunition, forward observation officers) available, on which hinged the density and rate of fire for each block, and also whether conditions under (a) above could be met.

This type of fire worked well in practice, as it had the following advantages:-

- (a) Each block concentration could be fired independantly of the other. They could, therefore, be recalled and repeated "On call" by the forward Infantry. Therefore, the fire support could be controlled, if necessary, by the man on the spot, unlike the ordinary barrage.
- (b) It was economical of ammunition, since the fire support never ran away from the forward infantry, as happened on innumerable occasions with the ordinary barrage.

- (c) It catered for the ebb and flow of the advance since it permitted portions of the attack slowed down by enemy action to progress independantly without alterations of fire plan.
- (d) It had all the flexibility and control of concentrations "on call" as opposed to the inflexibility of the ordinary barrage.

It required less time to work out a fire plan built on these lines than in the case of the ordinary barrage.

- (f) The commander could at all times get a clear picture of the situation through Artillery channels.

7 Its only disadvantage was the difficulty of control by the forward Infantry at night, and for night attacks the ordinary barrage was better so long as the objectives were not deep and the rate of advance more or less closely estimated.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the above critical analasys, the pain for this battle with its necessary alterations due to battle causes, worked well. Because the object of the attack never varied and ~~the~~ was forced home with determination, the enemy was made to conform to the plan and was beaten? Any plan of battle which is simple is a good plan and has a chance of success, and this plan was simple in the extreme. In theory battles move much more quickly than they do in real life. This is one of the most difficult lessons to learn for the student who has had no battle experi

This battle is a very clear example of the three phases of battle against organized resistance, i.e. the "Break in", the "Dog Fight" and the "break out"

The "Break in" to obtain lodgement in the enemy defences was partially successful under phase I. During the long pause and finally in Phase II occurred the "dog Fight", i.e. the period of strong enemy reaction and the widening and deepening of the breach by exploiting the partial success? The "Break out" role was assumed by the 5 Cdn Armd Div, and it will be noted here that the outer fringes of the breach required some hot skirmish work by the forward elements of this formation before they were free to surge forward.