

ORTONA

On afternoon of 2 Dec 1943 Comd passed from 78 Division to me as GOC 1 Cdn Div

2. At that time 1 Cdn Div was disposed as follows:

2 Cdn Inf Bde behind FOSSACESIA

1 Cdn Inf Bde in area PETACCIATO (Some miles behind R SANGRO)

3 Cdn Inf Bde in mountain sector NORTH of CAMPOBASSO in process of relief by 15 Bde of 5 Div

3. The following tps of 78 Div came under my Comd:-

4 Armd Bde

38 Inf Bde

RA 78 Div in support.

4. 38 Inf Bde and 4 Armd Bde were in contact with the enemy behind S VITO. On afternoon 2 Dec, I ordered 38 Bde to secure the S VITO ridge on 3 Dec and push on to the MORO R along the main axis, the rd S VITO - APOLLINARE. Our line of advance was crossed at intervals of varying distance by steep traverse valleys and gulleys running toward the sea. The enemy was carrying out a systematic demolition of all the rd bridges on our line of adv, all previously prepared. It will be appreciated therefore that the construction of BAILEY bridges was a major limiting factor in our rate of advance which was in a large measure restricted to the ability of the sappers to overcome obstacles. The weather was bad. The winter rains had commenced. The ground was soft and difficult off the rds and tracks for the cross-country movement of both men and vehicles.

5. On 4 Dec, 38 Bde and 4 Armd Bde secured S VITO and commenced adv towards the MORO. 2 Cdn Inf Bde had moved to ROCCO area and 1 Cdn Inf Bde to FOSSACESIA. 3 Cdn Inf Bde was commencing its move from the mountain

6. On 4 Dec, 38 Bde reached line of MORO and reported enemy in considerable strength on far side. All attempts to cross failed. During night 3/4 Dec, 2 Bde was moved fwd to the MORO and was now on left of 38 Bde from APOLLINARE to opposite ROALTI. My orders to both these bdes for the night 4/5 were to patrol across the MORO, Engineers to recce three main X-ing places - coast rd, main axis and ROALTI - where rd bridges had been demolished by the enemy. 1 Cdn Inf Bde was to move fwd behind S VITO. During the 4th and night 4/5, hvy rain fell and the bridges across the R SANGRO were washed out. This caused a period of anxiety in the adm set-off the Div and Corps, and for a period all maintenance across the river was carried out by means of DWKS to dumps in the FOSSACESIA area.

7. During the night 4/5, patrols crossed the MORO in several places and Engr recce on the X-ings was complete. As a result I decided to concentrate my efforts on the main axis and ordered CRE to est remours for that purpose, although the possibilities of X-ing by the Coast rd br and that near ROALTI were not ruled out. 38 Bde had severe fighting since it crossed the SANGRO and was now in no condition to continue. I, therefore ordered their relief by 1 Cdn Inf Bde during the late afternoon 5 Dec.

8 At this juncture the leading Bdes were deployed along the MORO R on a very wide front. Enemy Arty and Mortar Fire was concentrated and intense, and any movement on our side of the MORO visible to the enemy, especially in the APOLLINARE area, drew heavy fire. The weather was foul. My object was to establish one of my Bdes in the area of the X Rds 3214 at the earliest moment with a view to a subsequent move, first to TOLLO and then to ORTONA. With this in mind and whilst Engr resources were being built up by CRE for main crossing I ordered both Bdes to establish Inf, supported by tanks on the far bank, tanks to ford the river where possible. These efforts to be made on the coast rd and near ROATI with a view to drawing off enemy from the S LEONARDO area.

9. During 6 Dec, a Bn (H&PER) of 1 Cdn Inf Bde succeeded in X-ing the river on the Coast Rd sector and after hard fighting in which it was repeatedly counter-attacked, it maintained its footing on the far bank, although it was impossible to get tanks or A/Tk guns across. A Bn (PPCLI) of 2 Cdn Inf Bde crossed the river into ROATI where it was joined by the best part of a sqn of 44 R Tks. These latter forded the River by an incredibly fine effort. PPCLI was repeatedly counter-attacked by German Inf and Tks but held its ground and the enemy suffered heavily. 3 Cdn Inf Bde arrived in ROCQO area in the late afternoon and were moved up behind S VITO where I held them in reserve for the time being. On this day the relief of 4th Armd Bde ~~was~~ by 1 Cdn Armd Bde commenced.

10 On afternoon 6th Dec it became apparent that a bridgehead could be readily established in front of the crossing just SOUTH-WEST OF ROATI and I ordered 2nd Cdn Inf Bde to adjust ~~its~~ disposition to effect this manoeuvre and cover the construction of a br at that point. H & PER were to consolidate their posns and patrol strongly to ~~SSSSSSSS~~ S. LEONARDO the key to the crossing on the main Axis. The enemy Arty was very active and put down heavy concentrations both on the forward areas and to considerable depth, which caused us a number of personnel and vehicle casualties.

11 On Morning 7 Dec Corps Comd ordered relief of 2nd Cdn Inf Bde by 21 Ind Bde with a view of making 8 Ind Div responsible for cutting the ORTONA - ORSAGNO lateral rd on our left. This permitted me to re-group 2nd Bde with a view to concentrating full effort on the ~~XXXXXX~~ S LEONARDO Crossing. This relief and re-grouping, with 2 Bde moving into the area behind APOLLINARE, was completed during the day by 1800 hrs this date 1 Cdn Armd Bde had completed relief of 4 Armd Bde, 44 RTR remaining in place of 12 CTR which had not yet crossed the SANGRO but was on its way forward.

12. On the eve 7 Dec I issued my orders for the Crossing of the MORO on the main axis. Briefly 1 Cdn Inf Bde was to form a Bridge head by capturing S LEONARDO by Inf assault, commencing 1630 hrs 8 Dec covered by heavy air and Arty support. During the night sappers were to construct a diversion around the blown br laying the corduroy rd because of the soft condition of the river banks and bed. 2 Cdn Inf Bde with 11 and 14 CTR in support to cross at 0700 hrs. 9 Dec, with the object of capturing and consolidating the X-rds at 3214.

13 All preparations were completed and attack of 1 Bde commenced on time. 1 Bn (48 Hghrs) attacked and captured ground WEST of S LEONARDO without undue incident. The second Bn (RCR) attacked S LEONARDO, approaching from the EAST through the Brhead created by H & PER on the Coast rd. The RCR attack met very heavy resistance, was repeatedly counter-attacked in flank and was unable to reach S LEONARDO. During the night the Bn consolidated on the far escarpment in the general area 338131 in contact with the enemy. The sappers commenced their work at last light and continued through the night, at times under hostile MG fire. They succeeded in their task.

14 2 Cdn Inf Bde attacked on time and by 1100 hrs 9 Dec after hvy fighting, SEAFORTH had captured S LEONARDO. 14 CTR played a big part in the success of the attack, knocking out several hostile tanks and A/Tk guns in the village. The enemy, now identified as 90 P G Div lost heavily in men and eqpt. our casualties were comparatively light. The enemy counter-attacked strongly, which prevented further exploitation by Cdn Inf Bde that day? In the meantime RCR and H & PER were engaged in stiff fighting, but the latter only had made slight progress along the Coast rd. Possession of S LEONARDO permitted re-adjustments of the Br-head by 1 Bde during the night, RCR moving into S LEONARDO area and linking with H & PER the latter being reinforced by Tp of tanks and two 6 pr A/Tk guns moved across from S LEONARDO.

15 At 1000 hrs 10 Dec L EDMN R (2 Bde) with 11 CTR in support debauched from S LEONARDO with their objective the X-rds 3214. The adv progressed favourably although the day was wet and the ground boggy, until it became stabilized ~~by~~ in the face of machine gun, Mortar and Arty fire. It became evident that the enemy was determined to resist strongly in front of the main ORTONA - ORSAGNA lateral. As the day wore on, the enemy main posn was disclosed as being on the near side of the steep gully, which parallels the lateral on the near side of the X-rds 3214. All attempts by L Edm R to close the posn failed; mud and mines hampered tk movement. That afternoon I ordered 2 Bde to continue to its objective, (the X-rds 3214) on the 11 Dec, feeling out to the RIGHT to find out if any weaknesses existed in the enemy posn towards ORTONA. L Bde was ordered to maintain a Brhead as firm base and 3 Bde was ordered to a posn behind APPOLINARE.

16 On morning 11 Dec the Recce by 11 tk Regt along a track which leads from S LEONARDO to its junc with the main ORTONA ~~XXXX~~ ORSAGNA lateral rd at 305122, discovered an enemy tank laager of about 5 to 6 tks with the crews apparently asleep and obvious to their surroundings. The Officer on recce hastily returned to his Regt, a combat team of 1 Sqn of Tks with decimated Coy of Seaforths, was despatched to engage. The enemy tanks were surprised and completely destroyed by this party. The debauch on the main lateral was from the one dominated by us, but was a "hot" spot at all times.

17 During 11 Dec, 2 Bde made little headway. All attempts by the L Edm R to get forward failed and the PPCLI working off to the RIGHT front made very slow progress in the face of determined resistance. The whole area was infested with A/Tk mines and enemy MG posts, barricaded in houses. These mines were mostly difficult to clear under fire and this, combined with deep mud made the tank "going" well nigh impossible. Although a strong wight of Arty was used ~~throughout~~ to support throughout, it was apparent that the defilade afforded by the steep reverse side of the gully, in which the enemy were well built in, could not be adequately searched by the low ~~trajectory~~ trajectory field and Med guns. The only answer to the problem was provided by the 4.2 and 3" Mortars, which were deadly in their execution.

18. On the afternoon 11 Dec, 3 Cdn Inf Bde was moved to an assembly area in the vicinity of S LEONARDO. The Bde was ordered to launch an attack, with one Bn during the night 11/12 Dec which moving across country to the left of the main rd was to seize and hold the rd and track junc on the main lateral at 310140. By 0720 hrs the following morning the Bn successfully withstood four enemy counter-attacks, but suffered heavy casualties. H & PER was still in contact with the enemy along the coast rd, PPCLI was making slow progress in the face of strong opposition.

19 It would be as well to summarize the Inf and Tk dispositions as at 1200 hrs 12 Dec:

1 Bde Mast & PER in contact nr 340150
RCR in vicinity S LEONARDO
48 Highrs on La TORRE Spur

2 Bde PPCLI in contact nr 332140
L Edmn R in contact nr 327136
SEAFORTH in vicinity S LEONARDO with two Coys
positioned in contact nr 305122.

3 Bde WEST NSR in contact nr 318125
Carlt & York not vommitted 325132
R 22e R not vommitted 326125

1 1 ARMD BDE 11 CTR vicinity 322120
14 CTR deployed in support
12 CTR in process of relieving 44 RTR nr APPOLINAIRE

20 My orders for 13 Dec to 3 Bde were, that one Bn (Carlt & York) attack through L Edmn R at 0700 hrs and under cover of a hy concentration which was to move fwd in the form of a thick barrage, to capture and consolidate the X res. 14 CTR was in sp. L Edmn R was to Sp the attack where opportunity offered.

21. At 0530 hrs 13 Dec the enemy counter attacked on front of 3 Bde (WNSR) but was again beaten off. At 0700 hrs attack by Carlt & Y was launched, but failed to make headway beyond the ridge 3213. At 1100 hrs the WNSR were again counter attacked, but held successfully, although by now the Bn had suffered very hy casualties. The C&Y again launched an attack at 1200 hrs, but made little progress. This bn had also suffered hy cas and was badly shaken. It was now clear that both these bns were unfir got further offensive action for the time being and were ordered to re-organize and maintain their posns.

22 Orders issued afternoon 13 Dec were:as follows:-

"R22e R (s Bde) with one Sqn 11 CTR to assemble during night 13/14 in vicinity rd and track junc 305120 and at 0700 hrs to adv N.E. using the main rd as axis to capture the X-rds 3214. The attack to be supported by Corps and Div Arty in the form of a barrage with right flank moving on the gully and about 1500 yds in width. PPCLI (2 Bde) to adv from present posn and cut main lateral as opportunity offered. H&PER to continue pressing enemy on coast rd"

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On 14 Dec, R 22e R attacked as planned. Hy resistance was encountered and progress was slow, by night fall CASA BELARDI had been captured. The enemy's flank was now turned and his posn on the reverse slope of the gully in front of the X-rds 3214 tending to become untenable since CASA BELARDI gave us domination. The PPCLI had made little or no progress during the day. H&PER had maintained pressure on the enemy in the Coast rd sector, but had made little progress.

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My appreciation of the situation at this time led me to believe that a strong build up of the tks in the CASA BELARDI area, which must be held at all costs, would so shake the enemy who had been badly mauled, that pressure from this flank and on his front would cause an early collapse. I, therefore, ordered another sqn of tks to be moved up that night to the BELARDI area and on the following morning at 0700 hrs the C&Y to again attack frontally under heavy Arty concentrations. At the same time I had, in the back of my mind, that if this effort failed, then I must be prepared to make a much stronger thrust through 305122 and envelope the X-rds posn by a deeper movement on the left. Owing to the manner in which the battle had developed, only two bns were out of contact (RCR and 48 Highrs) and these units were deployed to hold the Br head. I did not wish to make any premature move in this respect as these units were well placed to adv through the X-rds posn if the attack planned for 3 Bde succeeded. I warned Comd 1 Bde, however, to be prepared for either move.

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15 Dec was a day of varying fortunes. The attack of C&Y was not pressed home and again failed in the face of determined opposition, although the bn advance 200-300 yds. A strong enemy attack on the CASA BELARDI area by approx 200 German Inf, supported by Tks was beaten off by R 22e R and their Tks with hvy loss to the enemy.

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Late in the afternoon of 15 Dec I decided to put my plan into effect for a strong thrust through 305122. To this end I determined on a 48 hr pause for preparation, the attack to be carried out by 1 Bde (Less H&PER), but placing R 22e" under Comd. The attack was to be carried out in two phases, 48 Highrs to attack & Capture, as a limited objective, the track 311130 - 306139 and consolidate the area gained. After a minimum pause of 1 Hr, RCR to pass through and using the rlwy as axis to strike NE at the X-rds posn, which they were to consolidate and mop up. The attack was to be supported by 12 CTR and each phase by an Arty barrage and concentrations fired by nine Fd and three Med Regts. The attack was timed to commence at 0800 hrs 18 Dec

27 16 & 17 Dec were days of active contact and small scale inf clashes. Our Arty ~~xxxxxx~~ and that of the enemy was most active. There were no signs of enemy withdrawal or thinning out, although wireless intercepts and prisoner interrogation showed that he was in a bad way.

28 On 18 Dec, the attack by 1 Bde commenced as planned. 48 Highrs followed close under the barrage and by 1030 hrs had reached their objective. Considerable numbers of enemy were taken prisoner and killed. At 1145 hrs phase 2 commenced. The RCR lost the barrage and made slow progress in the face of enemy m.g. and mortar fire. At 1430 hrs a tp of supporting tanks reported themselves on the objective. By 1830 hrs it became evident that the Inf could not reach the tks and the adv was stabilized just short of the objective. That night 18-19, remnants of the enemy garrison pulled out of the X-rds area, except for ~~xxx~~ small rear parties, and by mid-afternoon on 19 Dec RCR were established on their objective. In the meantime the SEAFORTH had relieved H&PER on the Coast Rd posn and the latter bn was swung over to join 1 Bde. 3 Bde commenced to reorganize.

29 During morning 19 Dec, plans were set in motion for 2 Bde to adv on ORTONA on the following morning, 20 Dec. The plan briefly was for L Edmn R adv behind a barrage moving on the axis main lateral to ORTONA, to debouch from X-rds posn at 1000 hrs, supported by one sqn 12 CTR. The PPCLI were to mop up the ridge to MR 333148 commencing at first light.

30 On 20 Dec the attack proceeded as planned. By 0905 hrs PPCLI had reached their objective and were in posn to support L Edmn R by fire. By 1400 hrs, after some heavy fighting, L Edmn R and their supporting Tks were into the outskirts of ORTONA and by 1800 hrs PPCLI were moved up in sp. Patrols from L Edmn R reported the town strongly held.

31 During the night 20-21 Dec large explosions were heard in ORTONA and on 21 Dec L Edmn R and SEAFORTH commenced clearing the town. The task saw some very bloody fighting between these units and ~~thex~~ 2 Bns of 1 German para Div before the town was finally cleared at 1200 hrs 28 Dec. The Germans systematically destroyed houses, thus creating barriers across the streetd, which they sowed liberally with Teller mines and booby traps. Our tps in turn systematically blew the enemy out of fortified houses by a combination of tk gun fire, A/Tk guns and hand placed charges. There was much hand to hand fighting, in which no quarter was asked or given. ORTONA should long remain a proud battle honour for the units which took part.

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During the period of the ORTONA battle which was solely an effort by 2 Bde, 12 CTR and 90 A/Tk Bty, the remainder of the Div was not idle. 3 Bde, which had suffered heavy casualties, was withdrawn to S LEONARDO area on 22 Dec to re-organize and rest. 1 Bde continued active patrolling in contact with the enemy, until on 23 Dec it commenced a series of very successful operations, resulting in the clearing and capture of of the S THOMASO - S NICOLA area and East towards ORTONA. This was not accomplished without heavy fighting against units of 1 German Para Div, in which the Bde, especially the 48 Highrs, distinguished itself. This effort on the part of the Bde contributed in large measure to loosening of the enemy resistance in ORTONA.

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On 28 Dec, at 1030 hrs, a patrol of FPCLI emerging from ORTONA along the Coast Rd, reached 320180. Here contact was made with a patrol of 48 Highrs. That evening 3 Bde were ordered to pass through 1 Bde at 0830 hrs on 29 Dec and moving across country ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ to the Coast Rd nr 320180 to press on to the ARIELLI.

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3 Bde commenced adv as planned with R 22e R leading, followed by C&Y. By nightfall the ~~22e R~~ Bde had made contact with the enemy on the line of the R RICCIO and at Pt 59, 311192, from which latter point the enemy was dislodged in the part of a day or so.

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From this time onwards the front began to stabilize. The winter rains had turned the ground into a morass, making free manoeuvre of the tks and Inf so difficult as to prohibit offensive operations on a large scale. Eventual re-organization of the Corps front resulted in our winter posns facing the Germans to be established on a two bde frontage, following general line Pt 59, 311192 - thence along the line of the gully 294176 - rd and track junc 281143, linking up with 8 Ind Div on our left. Intensive patrolling now commenced giving us at all times domination of no man's land.

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Thus the first period of intensive fighting by 1 Can Div, which commenced on 4 Dec and ended 29 Dec 43, drew to a close. During this period the Inf Bns of the Div suffered considerable casualties, especially in officer, NCOs and riflemen. No reinforcements were available until 28 Dec so that the Bns, towards the end, entered battle at strengths greatly below an efficient fighting strength. One cannot stress too much, the great difficulties of ground caused by the continued rains, which assisted the enemy in defence, but hindered the attack, which even so, was relentlessly maintained. We smashed 90 P G Div and we gave 1 Para Div a mauling which it will long remember.

37 During this period the Field guns ~~fire~~ alone fired more than 250,00 rounds and other types, such as medium Arty, a proportionate amount. The gunners worked night and day and the problem of feeding the guns with amm in the required quantities was handled in a tireless manner, under very difficult circumstances, by the RCASC of the Division. In speaking of the Adm Services generally, one can say that on no occasion did they fall down in the supply of food, amm and petrol, which were regularly maintained throughout. The extreme difficulties ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ of medical evacuation and treatment of casualties were overcome by the RCAMC units of the Division in a manner worthy of the highest praise.