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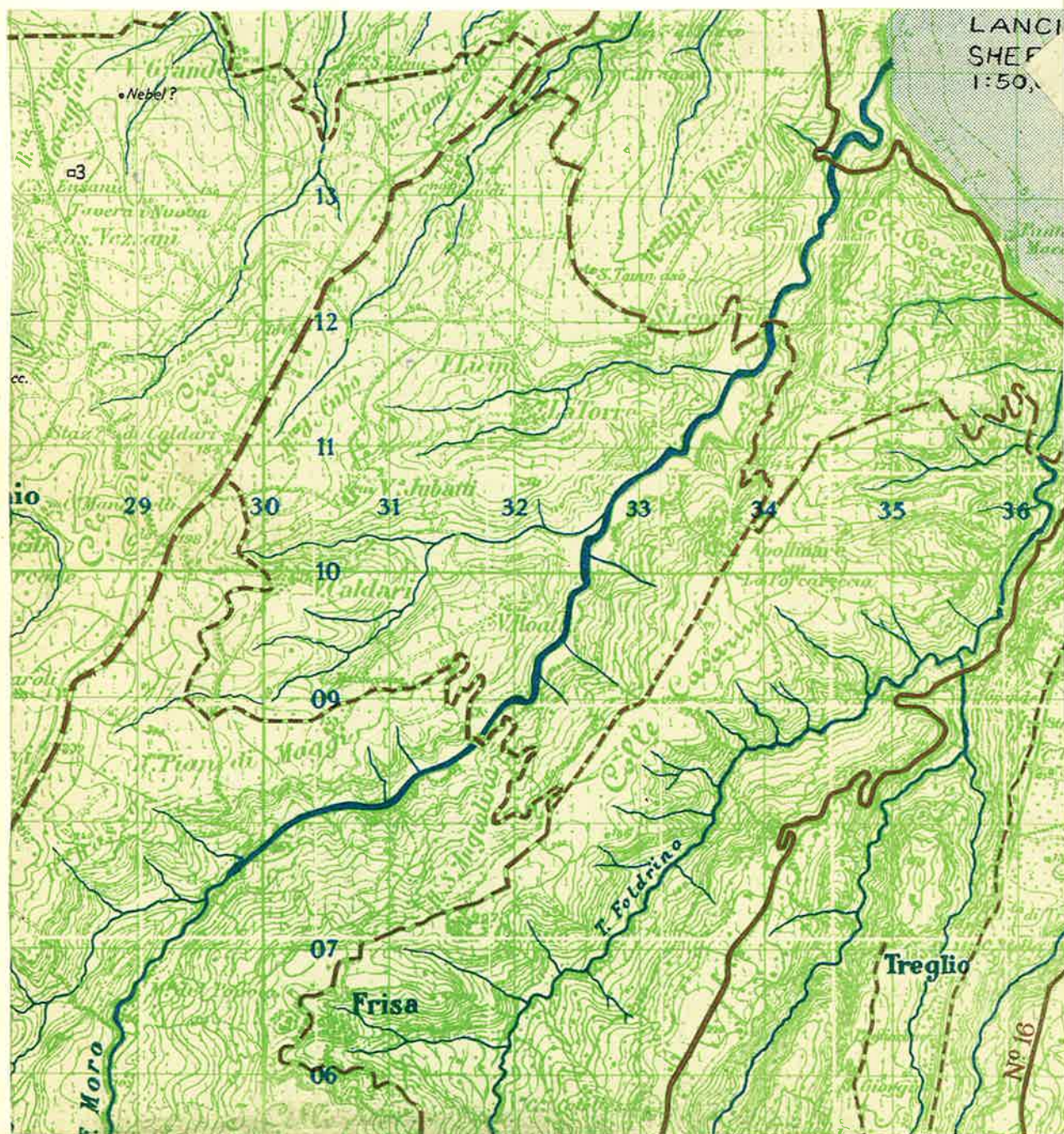
CROSSING OF THE MORO AND CAPTURE OF V. ROATTI

Dec. 4th 1943 - Dec. 7th 1943 Rogatti



VP

P.P.C.L.I.
ITALY. 1943



THE CROSSING OF THE MORO AND CAPTURE OF V. ROATTI

SITUATION

1. On 4 Dec 43, P.P.C.L.I. were concentrated on the high ground overlooking the MORO RIVER. The Battalion was on the left of the Bde sector with 8 Ind Div. on the left in FRISA. Bn H.Q. was at 335095. During the night 4/5 Dec., recce patrols were sent out to cover Engineer recce of the bridge 317086, find suitable fords for tanks and gain information of enemy in the ROATTI area.
2. One Sqn from 44 RTR joined P.P.C.L.I. in this area on morning 5 Dec, and a warning order to prepare for crossing of MORRO R. in the ROATTI area that night, was given by Comd. 2 Cdn Inf Bde. .
3. Very little was known of enemy intentions or dispositions on the far side of the MORO. It was thought that ROATTI was probably a lightly held outpost, with stronger dispositions in the CALDARI and JUBATI area. Daylight recce patrols were consequently immediately sent out to pinpoint enemy dispositions around ROATTI and check fords and routes for infantry. These patrols succeeded in pinpointing five M.G. posts on the perimeter of the near side of the village. They confirmed that the steep slopes on this side did not offer any good routes up, but that the right flank appeared to be more suitable.
4. During the afternoon 5 Dec., O.C. P.P.C.L.I. was ordered to cross the MORO on night 5/6 Dec, capture ROATTI, reorganize there until joined by the 44 RTR in support, at first light, then exploit as quickly as possible to CALDARI and cut the ORSOGNA - ORTONA lateral. This operation was to be supported by 1 Cdn Div Arty. All recce having been completed O.C. P.P.C.L.I. issued orders to sub unit and supporting arms comdrs in daylight from 328094, which overlooked the MORO and ROATTI. After dark O.C. 44 RTR sent tank officers with P.P.C.L.I. recce patrols to recce tank crossings. These were found to be extremely difficult but no thought of failure was entertained. A recce patrol from 12 pl B Coy, under Lieut J.L. McCulloch, was sent out at last light, with orders to penetrate to the village and gain last minute information on enemy dispositions affecting the route in. This patrol did excellent work and brought back important information regarding enemy activity in that end of the village.

PLAN AND METHOD

5. The enemy was judged to be holding the village by a perimeter defence with a garrison in the town itself. The plan was to make a silent crossing, with no preliminary arty or M.G. support, this crossing to be made on a one coy front at the best ford 324096. Coys were to cross on a timed basis, with the leading coy coming in from the right flank, breaking the perimeter, and the remainder passing through the gap thus created. Enemy dispositions did not point to the river being covered by M.G. fire, and as it was not anticipated that the crossing itself would be hindered by small arms fire, the leading coy was to press right in and so gain the maximum surprise. The forming of a bridgehead to secure the crossing for supply routes was to be left to the last coy to cross. Guides to Coy F.U.F's were supplied by B Coy. The tanks were to come down the road to the blown bridge at 317087, ford the river and move along it to the right of the village and thence up a steep and twisting mule trail, arriving as soon as possible after first light.

6. The Bn order of crossing was as under:-

B Coy	-	2400 hrs	Zero hour 2400 hrs
A Coy	-	0020 hrs	
C Coy	-	0050 hrs	
D Coy	-	on order	

Coy tasks were:-

B Coy - to force the perimeter and capture the main village (South West part) 319098.

A Coy - to capture the North East part of the village 321099. This part is separated from the main village by a wide draw.

C Coy - to concentrate area (321097) on outskirts of village, and when village was clear to pass through B Coy to occupy area 315095.

D Coy - to form the bridgehead to secure the crossing and routes for the supply mule trains and tanks.

7. Arty F.O.O's from 3 Cdn Fd Regt were allotted one to B Coy, one in an O.P. on the near side of the MORO, and the C.O.'s rep travelling with the Bn Comdr. All 22 sets were mule packed.

8. Intercommunication by wireless was normal, with C.O.'s 18 as control, and 18 set link to Rear Bn H.Q. at 335095. Rear Bn was on line to Bde H.Q. The 2nd in Comd. of 44 RTR was at Rear Bn H.Q. at all times in wireless communication with all Sqns of his Regiment. The Bn H.Q. 22 set moved by mule with the Bn Comdr.

9. Zero hour was 2400 hrs.

COURSE OF THE BATTLE

10. All coys reached their F.U.P's in good time and without incident, although the going was very steep and it was hard to keep silent. Considerable difficulty was encountered getting mules down the steep bank and they were finally forced to come down in separate parties.

11. B Coy crossed the River at 2400 hrs. The fording was very silent and there were no incidents. They moved down to the right and the leading platoon passed a track junction which led on the left to the main part of the town and on the right to the N.E. part, before fire was opened. Fire from enemy M.G. was opened up from the left and above this pl. This fire was not very effective and the pl. was getting into position to deal with this when further cross fire was opened up from the right, with some grenades. There was a rather confusing fire fight during which time Brens and 2" Mortars firing low angle were very effectively used. The Coy comdr. made his plan to knock out these posts and assaulted from the left flank. Two posts were knocked out by grenades and rushing and occupants taken prisoner. Enemy fire had broken out in several places around the perimeter, but was largely ineffective. Progress was slow but B Coy finally forced its way into the outskirts of the town and then to the town square. Positions were taken up and as fire appeared to be coming from all directions, mopping up was carried out by patrols in sectors of the village, as divided by the Coy comdr. Several prisoners were taken and mopping up took 'till 0700 hrs. These prisoners were in a majority of cases quite surprised to see the strength in the town and many of them had been asleep until the company entered.

Breakfast was ready in some of the houses.

12. A Coy in the meantime crossed according to plan and were still in the valley when M.G. fire opened up from above them. Scouts were in close contact with B Coy and A Coy took up position in rear of B Coy until they had broken through. A Coy then pushed through to the outskirts of the town and swung off to their objective on the right. Their first contact with the enemy was a motorcyclist coming down the road from the B Coy objective, shouting "Achtung". He was effectively dealt with. 8 pl. on the left investigated a house which was showing a light. It had been occupied and was apparently the German H.Q., as there was a sign, 5 Coy HQ - Regt.90 Pz Div. The occupants fled in the direction of 7 pl. and although some escaped, five or six were taken prisoner. One with his hands up threw a grenade and was promptly shot in the foot. Mopping up immediately commenced and more prisoners were taken from the houses and caves in the vicinity.

13. C Coy crossed according to plan and with Bn H.Q. were concentrated on the outskirts of the town about 0600 hrs, waiting for B Coy to finish mopping up. D Coy was in position as bridgehead, and mules were starting to come up.

14. The night had been very dark and confusing, with considerable firing on both sides, and first light was very welcome to enable the Coy positions to be reorganized and complete the mopping up. There was considerable sniping still going on and the Bn Scouts and Snipers had some good shooting in dealing with this. Considerable ammunition had been used up by all coys in the night's fighting. Soon after first light there was a prolonged mortar barrage, including Nebelwerfers, and shelling on the whole town and it was soon apparent that a counter attack was developing against A Coy from in front and to their left. 10 pl. B Coy was occupying a position in and about a house which enfiladed an enemy F.U.P. and got in some deadly execution. The enemy took good advantage of the cover provided in the olive groves and the remainder of B Coy was unable to assist except by sniping.

15. 7 Pl. A Coy was the left fwd pl. of A Coy and stood its ground until one section ran completely out of ammunition. Lieut R. Carey M.C., ordered this section back and when another section was out of ammunition he was subsequently taken prisoner with 5 other ranks from 7 pl. His defence enabled the remainder of the company to be successfully redispersed.

16. Coy H.Q. was meantime under heavy M.G. fire and Major W. deN. Watson, M.C., commanding A Coy, coolly reorganized his coy. 8 pl. covered the movement of Coy H.Q. into a new position and then covered by fire from 9 pl., 8 pl. worked itself into better positions. 9 pl. was in an excellent position and did good execution on the attacking force. From that time on the enemy were unable to advance or change their disposition. The ammunition supply was tense, but some was rushed up from C Coy and D Coy and the situation was well in hand. C Coy was concentrated, ready to deliver an immediate counter attack if the situation should warrant it.

17. The tanks in support could be seen from first light slowly making their way along the river. The mule track was very narrow and tortuous and the progress was most difficult and slow. By a fine effort five tanks finally got up to the Bn position. The leading one, with the Squadron commander on foot, arrived about 0930 hrs and was in action soon after arrival. Enemy positions were pointed out to the Trp comdr. and he swung his leading tank into action. The sound of the .75mm and unlimited M.G. ammn. was very cheering. Soon five Tanks were in action and in a short time all positions had been pointed out and there were no live Germans in ROATTI. Germans did not lack courage and one M.G. post opened fire on the leading Tank and kept firing until the M.G. crew were killed. The Infantry-Tank-co-op. could not have been higher. The arrival of the Tanks coincided with the arrival of the first ammunition mule train and the enemy were completely driven off by 1000 hrs. The enemy had with every intention of coming to stay and were loaded with blankets, food and a recent German E.F.I. issue. Several more were captured, hiding in caves, two hiding below Bn H.Q. and captured by the Signal Officer. Prisoners were from a different Coy of Regt. 90 Pz Div. Both arty sets had been knocked out by shell fire and all shooting was done thru the rear Bn HQ link until fresh sets were brought up.

18. Comd. 2 Cdn Inf Bde ordered O.C. P.P.C.L.I. to reorganize and consolidate on the position. The mule trail had become impossible and no more Tanks could get up. The position was reorganized and digging was completed. A and B Coy consolidated in roughly the same positions, with B Coy having 11 pl. in a vineyard on South end of town; 12 pl. in the area of the houses and in front S.W. corner of the town and 10 pl. in the morning position. Scouts and Snipers were positioned in the town and C Coy was located centrally for counter attack to either flank. One pl. of D Coy was placed under command of A Coy and the remainder dealt with sniping occurring against mule trains. Mule trains had arrived with much ammunition of all types. The tanks were placed in hull down positions to deal with any Tank threat from the CALDARI direction, which was deemed the only suitable Tank approach. Recce and Standing patrols were sent out to give early warning of another counter attack. All defences were tied in and the Bn was perfectly set for the next counter attack.

19. The second counter attack was Inf. cum Tank from the left flank along axis of road junc. 309091 - ROATTI. First warning was given from a standing patrol of B Coy at houses 313094. The attacking force consisted of 7 Mk IV Special Tanks and roughly a Coy of infantry or more. Fire was opened from these tanks from the houses 313094, one tank was knocked out by Bn A.Tk guns across the Moro valley. The houses on the edge of the town were subjected to M.G., H.E., and A.P. fir.

The attacking force split into two groups immediately after opening fire. Three tanks followed by infantry swung off the road to the left thru the olive groves, making for the 10 pl. position. The remaining tanks swung to the right, making for 11 and 12 pl. positions. Our D.F. fire was brought down, but the attack came on. One tank on the right was knocked out by Shermans and the three making for 10 pl. positions were all knocked out, although one got into the middle of the 12 pl. positions. The tank attack was then thoroughly broken and no more was heard from them. A Coy H.Q. was heavily shelled by H.E. and A.P. Heavy smoke concentration appeared on A Coy's right flank and a thrust from that direction was expected, but did not materialize.

20. The infantry accompanying the tanks deployed when close to the town and attempted to infiltrate in. They were met by such heavy and accurate fire from Bren guns and rifles that they were forced back a number of times. The tanks were having excellent M.G. shoots. Each time the enemy fell back they reorganized in the cover of the olive groves and came on again. One group succeeding in getting into some houses on the edge of town, but were trapped there and after two or three were killed, waved a white flag and gave themselves up. A Coy were getting in longer range fire on the enemy left flank. On our left flank 11 pl., in spite of a grave danger of being outflanked, held off all enemy and succeeded in killing many. A PIAT fired at a tank at 75 yds range, was unsuccessful as the bombs failed to explode.

21. After the fifth attempt to get into the town had failed, the enemy withdrew, leaving behind many dead, some prisoners and five knocked out tanks. One Sherman was knocked out. A German demolition party later blew up one of their knocked out tanks.

The Bn was again reorganized. D Coy bolstered up the left flank and night positions were taken up. Patrols were sent out and discovered the rd junc. 309091 was held, Caldari area was very active and there was considerable digging activity in the area of JABATTI and this ridge artillery was used extensively with good effect and screams and much yelling followed several shoots. About 2200 hrs recon parties arrived up from the L Edm R, who were pushing through P.P.C.L.I. to take CALDARI in the morning. This was later cancelled and further orders were to be received in the morning. With the exception of shelling, mortaring, some Machine gunning from the JUBATTI ridge and one threat which caused a complete stand to, the night passed without incident.

22. - 7 Dec was spent in the morning, getting some badly needed rest and cleaning up. In the afternoon the C.O. of the R.W.K., 8 Ind Div, arrived and recones were carried out preparatory to a relief that night. The relief was carried out without incident and P.P.C.L.I. were concentrated with 2 Cdn Inf Bde in their original position by midnight 7/8 Dec.

23. Casualties in the Bn over the whole action were some eight killed, 9 missing, believed POW., and sixty wounded. There were some 17 and 11 stretcher cases on the first and second days respectively and 32 walking wounded. Casualties occurring as a result of the heavy mortar and shell fire throughout the day were nested in Coy areas until they could be brought to the R.A.P. in a quiet interval. The R.A.P. was in the vicinity of Bn H.Q. Here they received necessary first aid and were retained until dusk when mortar and shell fire had diminished. Evacuation was effected by stretcher-parties of 60 and 45 on the respective days, composed mainly of A Ech personnel. Their route was entirely overland for almost two miles in most difficult conditions down the muddy slopes of the valley and along the river course to the bridge at 317087 where they were met by Bn and Fd Amb transport, which took them to 5 Cdn Fd Amb, M.D.S. in SAN VITO. The walking wounded made their own way back to the Rear R.A.P. at Rear Bn H.Q., thence in ambulance cars to M.D.S.

24. Between 45 and 50 prisoners were taken during the action. Those in the original assault were all from 5 Coy - Regt, 90 Pz Div and by the time the 2nd counter attack was over prisoners had been taken from all coys of the Regiment. A mass of German equipment was captured including M.G's, rifles, pistols, wireless sets, telephones, 3 motorcycles, clothing, blankets, food and cigarettes. Six 8.1

mortars were captured intact and one A.Tk gun which was dragged up the hill during the first counter attack. These mortars and A.Tk guns were later manned by trained personnel in rifle coys and used against the enemy. It is estimated that considerably over 100 Germans were killed the first day.

COMMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

25. The German immediate counter attack appeared to be excellently planned and well supported. There was no time lost in mounting it. The second counter attack with tank support was planned, but appeared to be clumsily mounted. Time after time the infantry came in with guts but as later learned from the prisoners, fatalism. The tanks were to have been one squadron strength but only seven were eventually used and then were not handled skillfully.

26. The most apparent lessons which were learned, although all were not new, were as under:

- (a). The immediate counter attack happens almost immediately, even during the mopping up phase, it is well supported by fire.
- (b). German mortar fire in support of an attack comes down 100 yds or even less in front of their own troops.
- (c). The German soldier will always return fire even if he has no idea where it comes from.
- (d). At night the German fires blindly, although probably on fixed lines, even though he has seen no enemy, and no one is threatening his post.
- (e). The German soldier has been taught and does shout and yell when he is attacking.
- (f). Lookouts must always be maintained during heavy mortaring and outposts must always protect men digging in. Smoke is used to take attention away from other F.U.P's.
- (g). If a German wants to surrender he must be made to come to you. They still pull the trick of apparently surrendering, but throwing grenades and opening fire from a flank when troops go near them.
- (h). It is imperative that D.F's should be registered before a position is attacked.
- (j). Alternative wireless links are always necessary, so there will be no loss of time when sets are knocked out by shell fire.
- (k). In a crossing such as this, not only must full ammunition to the capacity of the man be carried, but mule trains should be already packed, ready to follow up leading tps as soon as the objective is captured.

27. The degree of surprise attained in this operation was very high indeed, and the enemy on the objective was thoroughly "caught napping". This is attributed to skillful and thorough recon and absolute silence in the crossing. The absence of any large scale preliminary fire plan confused the enemy as to the size of the force coming in against them, and at first light they were faced with the accomplished fact. Any attack with a large force on a dark night, such as this, will inevitably lead to confusing fire fights in the dark with consequent delay and some confusion as to objectives until first light clarifies the situation.

28. Key personnel in P.P.C.I.I. during the operation were:-

O.C.	-	Lieut-Col C.B. Ware, D.S.O.
2 i/c.	-	Major R.P. Clark
Adj.	-	Capt R.S. Graham
O.C. "A" coy.	-	Major W. deN Watson, R.C.
O.C. "B" Coy	-	Capt R.F.S. Robertson
O.C. "C" Coy	-	Capt N.M. Cousens
O.C. "D" Coy	-	Major P.D. Crofton
O.Os arty Rep	-	Major R.S. Lang - 3 Fd Regt
O.C. 44 RTR Sqn.	-	Major Foster

CBW/TC

(C.B. Ware) Lieut-Col
Commanding, P.P.C.I.I.