

SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS OF CANADA

REPORT ON OPS

1 Dec 44 - 31 Dec 44

BATTLE FOR BAGNACAVALLIO

PHASE I - Defence of NAVIGLIO CANAL Brhead.
PHASE II - Attack to the SENIO.

OPERATIONAL REPORT

Seaforth of G 1 Dec - 31 Dec 44.

Note:- Marginal letters denote reference to appendix "A" to this report. "Lessons learned from Dec operations!"

The first day of December found the Bn prepared to move from the rest area in RICCIONE to the first conc area of the Dec campaign. At this time the broad Div plan was for 1 Cdn Inf Bde to make an Assault Crossing of the LAMONE RIVER between Brs at M 416352 and M 427365 with the object of pushing on to BAGNACAVALLLO. When this crossing had been successfully completed and the break-out in the direction of BAGNACAVALLLO well on the way, 2 Cdn Inf Bde was to make an assault crossing of the LAMONE RIVER in the vicinity of Brs at M 390332 and make a left hook through COTIGNOLA to LUGO.

The LAMONE bridgehead was our Bn assignment with exploitation in the direction of COTIGNOLA whilst the 1 EDMN R. passed through our bridgehead and swung left then right to a posn in rear of COTIGNOLA, with the PPCLI passing through to assault LUGO itself.

The move from the rest area in RICCIONE to the first conc area was carried out at night without incident and by dawn of the 2 Dec all Coys were under cover in area M 5320 - 5321 - 5322 awaiting further instrs. At 0830 hrs, 3 Dec the Bn recce party went forward to hold billets in a new area M 4722. The marching troops arrived in this area at 1200 hrs. During this move the Scout Offr and recce party had gone forward to the River LAMONE in area M 390332 and returned at 1800 hrs with a report that both rly and rd brs had been blown and that the enemy were in dug-in posns on the WEST bank preventing further recce of the River itself.

At 0800 hrs on Dec 4 the C.O. and Coy Comds, guided by the Scout Offr, left to recce the area of the bridges where the Bn had been given the roll of aslt crossing. Whilst this party was away, word was received from Bde Hq that marching troops would leave for a conc area at 1345 hrs, the area being immediately in rear of the river bank posns which were being held by 2 Sqns of the R.C.D.

By 1730 hrs, 4 Dec all Coys were in posn, our assault was held up pending the outcome of the 1 Cdn Inf Bde attack so we set about our plans grateful for the extra time for preparation. Some enemy mortaring was experienced during the night causing one casualty at Bn Headquarters.

On the morning of the 5 Dec it was learned that our assault had been indefinitely postponed, the 1 Cdn Inf Bde attack which had gone in according to plan had been savagely counter-attacked and they were forced to withdraw. So it was learned that there would be no move during the 5th of Dec and the night was uneventful.

The relief of the 2 Coys and the Scouts who had been observing from a house at M 393331 was completed without incident by 2035 hrs. Immediately after the relief, "A" Coy of the FPCLI repulsed an enemy patrol which left behind 1 dead, upon exam it was found that this man was completely dry proving that the enemy had been able to cross the river dry-shod, possibly by 1t Br.

During the 10 Dec each Coy practiced aslt handling of the new Olafson Br which had been used successfully by 1 Can Ind Bde before their withdrawal. The C.O. held an "O" Gp the Div plan remaining the same, dependent upon the success of a new 1 and 3 Can Inf Bde aslt which was planned for the same area as previously at first light 11 Dec. This combined attack during the early hrs 11 Dec was successful. Word was rec from Bde that our original plan was cancelled and that the Bn was on 2 hrs notice to move to a reserve posn in rear of 1 Can Inf Bde.

At 1415 hrs 11 Dec a recce party left for the new area across the LAMONE but by 1700 hrs, delayed because of bridging difficulties, we finally received word to move into a res area NORTH of RUSSI at approx M 4335, Tac HQ being at M 429336. The Bn moved off by march route at 1800 hrs led by the C.O., all tps were under cover by 2030 and the night was uneventful.

At 1800 hrs 12 Dec the Bn was ordered to a new fwd conc across the LAMONE, recce parties were to leave at 0730 hrs, 13 Dec.

The plan was now roughly this:- 1 and 3 Can Inf Bdes had established a bridgehead across our next obstruction, the CANALE NAVIGLIO. 2 Can Inf Bde were to pass through and enlarge this bridgehead.

At 0930 hrs, 13 Dec the marching tps pushed on across the LAMONE to our new area North of TRAVERSARA, Tac HQ was est at M 426388 and Coys were at M 423389 - 423386 - 426384 - 430392. At 1315 hrs it was learned that the 1 and 3 Can Inf Vdc bridgehead over the CANALE NAVIGLIO had been attacked 14 times and had shrunk to just a crossing over this semi-dry canal, to which H & PER and C & YR were tenaciously clinging. The L Edmn R were ordered to pass through, supported by tanks of the B.C.Ds, and enlarge and hold the bridgehead cominf under Comd 1 Can Ind Bde.

At 1900 hrs it was learned that our Bn was to move through the L Edmn R. Brhd and enlarge it to the South-west. At 2030 hrs, 13 Dec the Bn moved off, the plan being as follows:- "C" Coy with 1 Pl A/Tk Coy were to capture the bldgs at M 39963940, "B" Coy and 1 Pl A/Tk Coy to capture bldgs at M 400399, "A" Coy were to pass through this posn and capture bldgs CASA GALANA M 39754010, "D" Coy to pass through "B" Coy posn and capture bldgs and cover X-rds at M 39753975. Tac HQ would remain in present posn until fwd coys had reached their objectives, then move to M 402397.

The advance proceeded according to plan, "B" and "C" Coy posns had been occupied by the L Edmn R against lt opposition and were handed over to our relieving Coys. "D" Coy however was a different proposition, 2 Tiger tanks covered their objective and made it very difficult. They however reached their objective at 0400 hrs and lay low while supporting fire from our Arty endeavoured to locate the tanks which were in posn amongst the vines. "A" Coy moved cross-country and reached their objective at 0530 hrs. By 0600 hrs all Coys were on their objectives and anxiously awaiting supporting tanks which were to join them at first light. Enemy tanks were still in the vicinity scouting through the vines for a convenient shot.

On the morning of 6 Dec, the RCDs fwd of our immediate area attempted to attack and occupy bldgs near the river at M390333 LA RUGATA and bldgs immediately to the NORTH. The attack was unsuccessful. In the afternoon, A Coy moved fwd to occupy bldgs at M391326, immediately in rear of the river bank, The move was successfully completed and Schu and Teller minefds, located near these bldgs, were successfully dealt with by our Pioneer Pl.

(A) Plans for the recce of the river, its width, depth and current were laid on by the C.O. and 3 separate patrols were briefed for this op. Two patrols failed to reach the River owing to enemy patrol activity, the other patrol reached the river bank but could not cross owing to the silhouette caused by "artificial moon-light" at their backs.

During the night the R.C.Ds again attempted to occupy bldgs in area M 390333 and were successful, no enemy were seen.

On the morning 7 Dec, the C.O. ordered that we must dominate the river bank and that enemy observation of our activity must be made impossible. To effect this, a tall church tower at M 401433 had to be destroyed and 12 RTR, engaging it with 65 and 95 mm cut it down in 15 shots. Then "D" Coy were ordered to move from their present area to LARUGATA M 392336 after dark, the move was completed without incident by 2200 hrs and so, with a Coy in posn against the river bank NORTH and SOUTH of the rly and Rd brs, we were in better posn to carry out our Recce. During the night the enemy re-crossed the river SOUTH of the rly Br and attacked an "A" Coy party who were digging in on the river bank, causing one cas. A "C" Coy patrol during the night again got to the bank top and gave us our first report on the river. Banks 35 to 40 ft high with track 12 ft wide on top, sloping down at 45 degrees to the river which was about 20 ft wide running at 8 knots. An "A" Coy patrol on the EAST bank reported no contact. A "D" Coy standing patrol ordered out to area M 390332 between the Brs, ran into a Schu-minefd and was extricated with difficulty after suffering 5 cas with severe leg wounds. The enemy were very active on the opposite bank and used lt mortars and rifle grens very effectively.

(B) By morning of the 8 Dec posts had been established and a determined attempt made with sniper and MG fire to keep the enemy's heads down on the opposite bank. This was most effective and German Med orderlies had a busy day collecting from their various wpn pits. A recce patrol was again sent to the river to locate a reported ford, the patrol Offr travelled down-stream in water neck high for 200 yds but could not locate it, the stream was very swift.

During the day 9 Dec, it was learned that our 2 fwd Coys, "A" and "D", would be relieved by tow Coys of the PFCLI and upon being relieved would move to their former posns at M 398317 and 411316

(C) Gas by shellfire on up routes had been fairly heavy.

(D) Tac HQ, on moving fwd, had sent the Scout Offr and two men to recce the new HQ. At 0230 hrs they returned with word that the proposed HQ was on fire and untenable. As there were no further houses across the canal available, the comd gp stopped at the L EDMN R HQ with the intention of remaining until a suitable spot was found, our Tac HQ, however, was destined to remain in this spot at M410397 for the remainder of the battle.

By daylight on the 14 Dec, three tps of Shermans (BCD), some mounting 17 prs, were in sp of our bn, one tp being in sp each A, C and D Coys. Enemy DF, both mortar and shellfire, incl concs of "nebel" became increasingly heavy as daylight advanced. An AOP acting in conjunction with our 7.2 hows, had successfully engaged and knocked out two "Tiger" tks in the D Coy area, setting fire to one and knocking the other out.

Coys reported everything OK, one C Coy house was booby trapped causing five cas. At 0940 hrs, the Westminster Battle Gp consisting of the Westmr R and the LdSH passed through the brhead, their movement bringing down heavy enemy DF on our general area, they turned NORTH after crossing the Canale Naviglio and took up posns along the bank to the right and in rear of our brhead posn. The remnants of the 1 and 3 Cdn Inf Bde brhead defenders, consisting of elts of the H&PBR and of the C&YR had, by this time, moved to the rear.

At 1315 hrs enemy tks and inf were reported moving in at M400415 to the right of the brhead on the L EDMN R front, also some ~~XXX~~ movement of the same combination, tks and inf, between our fwd units and BAGNACAVALLLO. At 1345 hrs, a terrific arty conc covered both bn areas, lasting for approximately 15 mins and the expected counter-attack materialised. A particularly heavy attack ~~wx~~ was made on the right flank of the brhead and a slightly less formidable attack on our D Coy area. DF tasks which had been carefully planned were called for and fired continuously, aircraft with cannon and bombs also took a hand and by 1400 hrs the posns were still secure and severe cas had been inflicted on the enemy.

At 1525 hrs another attempt was made at the left flank, on our C Coy area, with a tk and inf. The inf were soon disposed of, but the tk left the road and proceeded cross-country and took up a posn 60 yds from the Coy posts, from which it proceeded to shell the posns.

(E) The A/tk defence in C Coy area consisted of the following:- One Arty 6 pr fired one round, missed, jammed and could not fire again. One Arty 6 pr, sited to cover the BAGNACAVALLLO road, could not traverse sufficiently to cover cross country tk approach, so both gun crews took shelter in the house. The two 75 mm Sherman tks, parked behind the house were unable to move owing to observation by the "Tiger" tk and shots were ineffective, one 17 pr Sherman got it's long gun caught in the bushes. One regt tk hunting pl got one PIAT bomb away and hit the tk without noticeable effect, one rifleman shot the tk comd and the tk hastily withdrew. By 1550 hrs the enemy seemed to have had enough and withdrew out of range. POW had been passing in a steady stream ~~XX~~ through our joint HQ, all being from 117 bn of 98 Inf Div, which had just moved into our area from BOLOGNA. Cas had been relatively light, 5 killed and 20 wounded. Our joint RAPs had with the help of the Fd Amb, done a remarkably swift job of treatment and evacuation despite heavy shellfire and veh difficulties caused by churned up roads, at the best, only mud tracks, which could not stand the strain.

(F) Our joint Tac Hq, with the E EDMN R, despite overcrowding, made the most of this inordinate proximity to correlate infmn and use of fire support. Tac Hq seemed to be the centre of an enemy "nebel" DF task which, by 2000 hrs had reached a peak of intensity, cas were however, extraordinarily light.

During the night the PPCLI passed through our brigade head posn and occupied occupied bldgs s out on area between us and BAGNACAVELLO. Snelling decreased during the night.

(G) At first light on the 15th December an enemy tank approaching D Coy posn was engaged by med arty and 3 direct hits were observed. This enemy tank activity contd throughout the morning but was successfully countered by arty fire directed from the ground and A OPs

At 1130 hrs our CO, who had been fighting off an attack of malaria through the opn was evac to hosp, command being assumed by Maj H.L. Glendinning DSO.

By this time the toll of enemy AFVs on our front, destroyed or disabled by arty and infantry weapons totaled 2 Tigers, 4 Panthers and 1 SP Gun.

At 1430 hrs 15 Dec the bn was ordered to attack and enlarge the bd-head. D Coy was to move west and occupy bldgs at CASA POZZI M 394399 and M 393401. C Coy was to occupy bldgs formerly occupied by A and D Coys. A Coy was to advance across country to bldgs at CASA ZABONI at M 394403. This move of the fwd coys was to be after dark with tank support.

D Coy reached their objective, took 15 POW suffering 7 cas, incl their sigs and 2 wireless sets destroyed by an AP shell which passed through their HQ bldg. A Coy reached their objective without opposition but did not get their tank support, due to road difficulties, until late the following afternoon. They were, however, not bothered during the night.

At 0800 hrs 16 Dec an enemy SP gun with infantry attempted to attack D Coy posns, but were driven off by supporting tanks of the BCD. Small numbers of enemy POW continued to filter into our lines, anxious in many cases to give themselves up, all stated that our DF tasks were very accurate and costly to their units. During the day the enemy contd to sned over conc of "Nebels" from tracked vehs situated 800 yds ahead of A Coy posn. They were constantly harassed by our 25 pdr and med arty.

(H) The only rd leading to our Coy posn from the canal, a stretch of 150 yds, from M 403396 to M400398, was under continual bombardment through the day and night and it was on this rd that most of our cas occurred. The approach to it were under direct observation from the towers of BAGNACAVELLO, still in enemy hands, and their accurate shell and mor fire caused severe losses.

At 1420 hrs the CO of the WNSR arrived at Tac HQ for we were to be relieved after last light. At 1830 hrs the change-over commenced and by midnight was complete, our new posns were in rear of the NAVIGLIO and N and E of BAGNACAVELLO. Tac HQ was at M 408388 with Coys at M 410387 - 397387 - 402386 and 405382. It was quiet on this side of the canal despite the enemy proximity and the tps got a good night's rest. The situation was now as follows: 3 Cdn Inf Bde were to hold our posns in the NAVIGLIO bd-head whilst 2 Cdn Inf Bde re-grouped, in preparation for a further attack which was intended to drive to the SENIO River bank. The DAF made a heavy attack on BAGNACAVELLO during the morning in an attempt to destroy the existing towers suspected of being used as OPs.

At 1330 hrs the Bd Comd, Lt-col M.P. Bogart, D.S.O., visited Tac HQ and outlined the Div plan. 2 Cdn Inf Bde were to exploit fwd to the SENIO River with 11 Cdn Inf Bde of 5 CAD on its right flank.

(J) were unoccupied and no movement seen. Standing patrols were left at strategic points on our side of the bank. These patrols however, stood down at 0700 and between that time and our next daylight patrol, some MG posns were re-occupied, keeping us away from the bank during daylight. During the day the Bd Comd issued instructions that we were to keep the enemy to his own side of the river, but none of our patrols were to attempt to cross. Harrassing fire was continuous throughout the day, also arty, mortar and MMG fire were brought down on all enemy movements.

During the night of 22 - 23 Dec, standing patrols were in posn on all blown bridges in our area at M357403, 360385 and 361381, also B Coy had 2 patrols along our side of the bank. A Coy sent a river recce patrol to M36354155 the report was as follows: Banks very steep, terraced, about 45 ft high on both sides. The River, however, at the recce pt was only from 3 ft to 5 ft wide and could be jumped, the patrol was fired on, one man being wounded. C Coy had 3 patrols out during the night and reported the enemy dug-in on our side of the bank between M359399 and 35392, also movement of an SP gun to the bridge at M357403 from where it sent several shots down the rd towards BAGNACAVELLO.

(K) At 1200 hrs the OG C Coy with a Pl Comd and 2 arty FOOs were leaving an OP in S.POLITO M3540 when a mortar bomb exploded near them, wounded all four.

At 1315 hrs a patrol from B Coy found a house re-occupied by the enemy (between patrols) near the bridge at M357403. The patrol leader was wounded and had to be left behind, a med "Murder" was put on the house under cover of which the leader got away and re-joined his Pl.

At 1410 hrs the Sqn from the RCDs arrived a Bn HQ to arrange the relief of our bn, we in turn would relieve the 1 Cdn Inf Bde who were to go out for Christmas. By 2000 hrs all Coys had been relieved by the RCDs and were moving towards BAGNACAVELLO and their new area immediately S of the town between the CANALE NAVIGLIO and SENIO River.

(L) The relief of the Coys of Hast and PER and RCR was carried out without incident, but our Mor offr with a complete Mor det motored into the enemy lines through lack of any kind of a block on the rd in the Hast and PER fwd Coy area. The truck was set on fire and was seen to burn for some hours, the fate of its crew unknown.

In this new area we occupied posn somewhat similar to those we had previously occupied in that we were in gps of houses E of the enemy occupied bank of the SENIO. The posns were as follows: Tac HQ M376359, Coys at 371352 - 369359 - 373373 and 371363 and 373374.

The night of the 23-24 Dec was extremely quiet, our patrols between Coys neither heard nor saw any enemy. Our supporting A/T arty moved in during the night and occupied posn previously held by tanks of 12 RTR.

The morning of 24 Dec was spent in re-adjusting Coy posns and Tac HQ moved to M383371. The enemy could be clearly seen moving about in their posns just out of SA range, some mor tasks were called down by fwd Coys, but no return fire of any nature was experienced. Our CO, Lt-col HF Bell-Irving DSO retnd from hosp and resumed comd. The day passed quietly, but the night was celebrated by the enemy in no small way, their drunken celebrations were rudely interrupted and quieted by our 3" mors just before midnight. Christmas day was clear and cold. Orders were given by the CO to an M10 to shoot down the church towers in COTIGNOLA and on the shrine to the N of the town, this was carried out at 1330 hrs with complete success. The day passed uneventfully and word was received that we were to be relieved by the LER on 26 Dec.

At 0900 hrs 26 Dec the advance party of the LER arrived and by 1130 hrs all Coys had been relieved and were embussing for RUSSI area to spend their Christmas day.

(M) The remaining days of the month were spent in rest, seasonable celebrations, re-organization and catching up on administration .

APPENDIX TO OPERATIONAL REPORT

LESSONS LEARNED FROM DEC OPERATIONS

(A) Patrols crossing riv r dykes are sharply silhouetted by almost any density of searchlights behind them.

(B) Patrols are prone to wrongly estimate river widths and depths without actual tests. Fewer, but better, patrols would be more productive.

(C) In planning approaches for a day or night attack, rds and other obvious approaches must be avoided if at all possible. Use of the rd in this attack resulted in needless casualties which could have been avoided by cross-country movement.

(D) On the approach to the NAVIGLIO, in passing a one-way stretch of extremely bad road, traffic control inserted a tp of tanks in the centre of the bn command gp veh coln. The completed destruction of the rd, resulting in the loss of essential command and medical vehs for many hours.

(E) This is considered the most important lesson of the month. The A/T plan, pre-arranged for this objective before the attack for the following reasons.

(a) Faulty appreciation by the bn comd of enemy tank runs. Judging by the performance of own tanks in this flat country, enemy Tigers and Panthers were wrongly judged to more or less rd-bound. In fact their cross-country performance was excellent. Siting of A/T weapons must cover cross-country approaches.

(b) RCA A/T 6 pdrs must be sited to fire on area of responsibility without necessity of disclosing themselves by removing hastily and badly constructed camouflage. Guns and crews must be dug-in so that crews may continue to man guns during an attack. Tp comds are not exercising sufficient supervision over their gun-sites.

(c) Some tks are prone to parking in a huddle in front of houses occupied, or surrounded by infantry. This necessitates movement in order fire. As movement draw immediate and accurate fire from enemy tks, often nothing happens. In this type of action tks should be sited and concealed in posns to fulfill their tasks. Infantry must be prepared to protect them in these posns.

(d) On reaching any objective in support of a rifle coy, the THP must immediately lay all necessary mine and PIAT traps and recon all poss routes suitable for mobile tk destruction. This action presented a first-class opportunity to tk hunting pl, it was wasted owing to lack of anticipation.

(F) The joint Tac HQ of the 2 bns, whilst over-crowded and inconvenient, was distinctly advantageous in many respects. The pooling of infmn and fire support was v ry valuable and allowed the totals supp resources to be used when urgently required on the joint bn front. The joint RAPs of the 2 bns worked with complete harmony, sharing each others vehs throughout the opn. Passage of casualties was accelerated very noticeably under this arrangement. Whilst the joining-together of bn HQs in one place should be avoided whenever poss, the joining-together of 2 RAPs is so valuable that it should be encouraged if suitable routes and accomodation present themselves.

(G) Throughout the whole advance arty support was amazingly speedy and effective. A particularly commendable arty service was the observed med and heavy arty shoots on enemy tks. Ground observed meds and A OPed 7.2 How fire wrote off three enemy tks and drove away 2 other known attacks. Our experience in this action brought this form of A/T support to particular notice. No casualties were caused to our own tps through the proximity of the shoots to our FDLs and it is felt that the risk is preferable to being shot-up by an 88mm.

(H) Before arrival, or particularly on arrival, in any objective or new area, careful thought must be given to the possibility of any route or part of the area being covered by enemy OPs. In this area, the short rd between coys was under observation from towers in BAGNACAVELLO. Although steps were taken for destruction of the towers, they were behind the bn and the visible enemy had been pushed out of sight in the front, so the rd was continuously used in daylight, with resultant casualties.

(J) In the latter part of the action, when near the SENIO bank W of BAGNACAVELLO, the enemy was kept on or over the river bank by numerous roving and standing patrols. There were, however, gaps of long duration between these patrols, allowing the enemy to get back into previously un-occupied houses, with disastrous effects on subsequent patrols who thought the area free. In order to dominate territory our patrols must be constant and where possible out-posts must be placed in posns which we find un-occupied to prevent re-occupation.

(K) A Coy comd, his one sub and two arty pers left a fwd OP together and either by observed or accidental fire, all became casualties through one mortar bomb. It is felt that they should have left the OP one at a time and if possible by a covered route. The seriousness of the loss of all one coys offrs in a fwd posn cannot be over-emphasied.

(L) The bn mortar offr with one mrdet and all stores were lost when they motored into enemy territory for the following reasons:

- (a) Poor map-reading
- (b) Failure of fwd tps to barricade rd at pt beyond which vehs should not go.

The above reasons are self-explanatory and are an expensive lesson.

(M) Each time the bn reaches a rest area, the endless duty of Coy orders, CO's orders and Courts Martial begins, tying up the majority of offrs and numerous pers whose time could be spent so much better advantage. It is felt that there has been a gradually increasing tendency in the unit in action to leave disciplinary and administrative matters for attention when in rest. This must be discouraged and all possible steps taken to make it unnecessary.