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THE VOLTURNO RIVER CAMPAIGN  
OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 1943  
(NAPLES - FOGGIA CAMPAIGN)  
(An Historical Example)

Type of operation described: Advance of Fifth  
Army from Volturno river to Winter Line

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO 2

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INTRODUCTION

On the night of 12-13 October, the powerful Fifth Army, consisting of about 100,000 men, struck across the Volturno River in its drive up the Italian peninsula.

In order to orient the reader for a proper appreciation of this and subsequent actions of the Fifth Army, it is well to turn the pages of the history of war back about six months.

The battle of North Africa having been won in May, 1943, the Allied forces next turned their attention to the attack on Italy, thru Sicily. This mission had several objectives. They were: to relieve some pressure from the Russian front by making it necessary for the Germans to send reinforcements into the Italian peninsula; to knock Italy out of the war; and to establish air bases in Italy, from which we could bomb important targets in German occupied territory. (1)

The operation against Sicily was begun in July, 1943, and was successfully terminated in August, 1943.

Continuing to press the attack against the Axis powers, the British Eighth Army effected landings across the Straits of Messina and at Taranto on 3 September and 9 September respectively. (See Map "A") This force moved to the north with the objective of capturing the airfields of Foggia. (2)

The letter of instructions given the Commanding General 5th Army instructed him to "seize the port of Naples and secure the airfields nearby, with a view to preparing a firm base for further offensive operations". (3)

(1) I, p. 3; (2) J, p. 1; (3) A, p. 18.

Footnote - For the purpose of this monograph, references to the British Eighth Army and British 10 Corps will be made only for the purpose of completing the overall picture of the operation.

At the time of landing the Commanding General 5th Army had under him the U.S. VI Corps and the British 10 Corps.

At the time of landing the U.S. VI Corps consisted of the following divisions; the 36th, 45th, 34th, 3rd, and the 82nd <sup>not an Army at this time</sup> airborne.

Also, at this time, the British 10 Corps consisted of the following divisions; the 56th, 46th and 7th Armored.

In order to carry out the mission contained in the letter of instructions, the 5th Army landed its two corps on the beaches in the vicinity of Salerno on the night of 8-9 September 1943.

(See Map "A") The British 10th Corps on the left was continuously and <sup>S</sup>orely pressed. A severe enemy counterattack on 13 September in the zone of the U.S. Corps threatened to erase our beachhead. (4)

On 15 September, the Germans seeing that they were not powerful enough to drive the landing force back into the sea, reverted to the defense, and began an orderly withdrawal to the north. (5)

Elements of the Fifth and Eighth Armies met at a point 20 miles south of the established beachhead on 15-16 September. The Fifth Army then wheeled to the left and began its advance along the west coast. The Eighth Army then concentrated its efforts to the central and eastern parts of the peninsular. (6)

On 1 October elements of the British 10th Corps entered Naples without opposition. The harbor installations were found to be wrecked as a result of allied bombing and effective demolition works by the enemy.

It was necessary for the army to continue the <sup>d</sup>advance to the Volturno River, 20 miles to the north, in order to secure the vital port against any possible ground attack.

(4) A, p. 40; (5) A, p. 42; (6) B, p. 86.

At about this time, on 30 September, operations instructions were received by 5th Army placing the Army Group phase line as the line running through Isernia, Venafro, Sessa to the Sea. (See Note 1) The right boundary of the Army was a line running through Benevento, inclusive to 5th Army, the road Pontelandolfo - Isernia inclusive to the Eighth Army. (7)

5th Army set the boundary between its two corps as the line running from Formo-Capua (inclusive to 10th Corps)-Sessa.

#### FIFTH ARMY ORDERS CROSSING OF VOLTURNO

On 7 October, Fifth Army directed VI Corps to force a crossing of the Volturno in the vicinity of Triflisco on night of 9-10 October, then to attack toward Teano. The British 10th Corps was instructed to effect a crossing of the river on the night of 10-11 October and to seize the high ground north of Mondragone. The attack by VI Corps was to be the main attack. (8)

At the time this order was issued, the 45th division had already established a bridgehead across the Calore River in the vicinity of Benevento and was in the process of securing the bridgehead and the right flank of the Fifth Army. It was in contact with elements of the British Eighth Army on the right. The 3rd Division was on the Volturno River line, its front extended from the vicinity of Triflisco to the junction of the Volturno and Calore rivers. The 34th Division was in Corps reserve moving into an area ten miles west of Benevento. The British 10 Corps was also on the Volturno River line. (9)

If we, at this time, make a brief study of the terrain facing the Fifth Army we will find the reason behind most of the subsequent orders and actions.

The Volturno River itself is to be considered a barrier. Due to the recent rains, it is swollen and is 100 yards wide

Note 1 - For this and all subsequent action, see Map "B".

(7) A, p. 10; (8) A, p. 12; (9) B, p. 12.

in many places. Its banks are steep and in many places are up to 10 feet high. A number of fording places exist but the remainder of the river varies in depth up to twenty feet. (10)

A hill mass, 15 x 10 miles exists north of Triflisco and west of the upper Volturno. The entire area is hilly and heavily wooded. Immediately south of the river in this area covered hills rise sharply near the banks of the river, thus denying the enemy observation deep into the approaches to the river. The hills north and northeast of Capua contained the main enemy gun area.

The area to the west of the Triflisco hill mass is a plain, gently sloping to the sea. There is very little cover on any part of the plain. Excellent observation is obtained by the enemy from the western slopes of the Triflisco hills and from the high ground in the vicinity of Mondragone some twenty miles to the north of the river in the coastal plain area. The coastal plain is cut by numerous canals running laterally across the front. These canals practically prohibit the use of armor as a spearhead or exploiting force. (11)

Along the eastern boundary rise the Matese Mountains. This formation is bald and rises to the height of 2,000 meters.

The valley of the upper Volturno is highly cultivated and is generally free from woods.

Having been given his mission to cross the Volturno, the Commanding General VI Corps found it necessary to change existing Division locations. The 3rd Division, from its present 15 mile front on the Volturno could not possibly attack in force in the Triflisco Gap area. As a result, the 30th Infantry of the 3rd Division on the right was to be relieved of its positions by the 34th Division. This relief was to be conducted under the most adverse conditions. The enemy, from positions on

(10) K, p. 5; (11) B, p. 5.

the north side of the river, had excellent observation of this area. Consequently, enemy artillery fire was heavy, and our movement was restricted to hours of darkness. As a result of recent rains, road conditions also greatly hampered this movement. Most of the 30th Infantry vehicles had bogged down and the 34th Division was experiencing considerable difficulty in gathering its forces into its assembly area to the west of Benevento and effecting the relief. (12)

Also, during this period, as a result of the increasingly cold nights and due to the fact that their barracks bags were still in Sicily, four officers of the 30th Infantry had to be evacuated as a result of overexposure.

When the difficulties of movement were brought to the attention of the Commanding General 5th Army, the crossing date was changed from 9-10 October to 12-13 October. (13)

This change was desirable for many reasons. It permitted the 10th and VI Corps to attack at the same time, it gave the front line units an opportunity to patrol for crossing points and bridging points, it permitted the attacking forces to familiarize themselves with the terrain over which they would operate and lastly, it allowed units time to complete and coordinate plans for the crossing. (14)

#### PLANS FOR CROSSING VOLTURNO - CROSSING (9 Oct.-14 Oct.)

On the 9th of October, the 45th Division, having cleared the enemy from the positions north of Benevento and having secured the right flank of the 5th Army, prepared to move out. The plan was to leave one reenforced Battalion in the vicinity of Benevento to guard the flank, and with the remainder of the force move north and west along the north side of the Calore River to the Volturno valley. This maneuver, if executed

(12) B, p. 12; (13) A, p. 11; (14) A, p. 13.

rapidly enough, would threaten the left flank of the enemy defense line along the Volturno river west of the Volturno-Calore junction at a time when the remainder of the corps was attacking it frontally. (15)

Having received his zone of advance across the Volturno, the 3rd division commander made his plans for his attack. It was apparent that there were two major terrain features the possession of which was necessary for the successful advance of the division. These were the Triflisco hill mass and the Mount Caruso hill mass. (See Map B) Both of these features furnished the enemy with excellent observation over the valley to the east of Triflisco up which the division wished to drive. (16)

It was further apparent that the enemy had to be deceived as to the zone of the principal attack. Accordingly, it was planned to place a battalion of the 15th Infantry on the high ground on the south side of the Triflisco Gap, and together with the heavy weapons companies of the 30th Infantry, was to effect a demonstration on the left flank of the Division zone. This firing was to commence two hours before the main assault across the river. If the enemy withdrew as a result of this display of firepower, a battalion of the 30th Infantry was to be prepared to cross at this point. (17)

The main attack was to be launched by the 7th Infantry which was to cross the Volturno at 0200 hours having for its objective Hill 502, which is immediately southwest of Mount Caruso. This attack was to be supported with a company of tanks and a company of tank destroyers. (18)

An attack in the right portion of the division zone was to be made by the 15th Infantry, less one battalion, with the objective of seizing Mount Monticello (Hill 141) and Mount

(15) B, p. 22; (16) B, p. 13; (17) B, p. 15; (18) B, p. 16.

Mesarinolo (Hill 246) immediately on the north side of the river, then to continue to the north to capture the high ground west of Mount Caruso. After this was accomplished, the regiment was to go to the west and join with the 7th Infantry. (19)

In order to augment the limited number of engineer boats given them for the crossing, a number of rafts were improvised from wooden bows and canvas covers of 3/4 ton trucks to aid in getting weapons and supplies across with the assault troops. (20)

Having been given its zone of advance the commander of the 34th Division decided to have two of his regiments assault the river line and to have one regiment reserve. The mission of 168th Infantry was to attack on the left main effort, seize the town of San Giovanni, proceed west thru Caiazzo and contact the 3rd Division. The mission of the 135th Infantry was to attack in the right of the division zone in order to capture the high ground above Squille. The remaining regiment was in reserve. (21)

Securing the 5th Army's right flank north of Benevento with a reenforced battalion, the remainder of the 45th started its drive north of the Calore River westward toward the Volturno valley. As the enemy retreated before this attack, he took full advantage of the hilly and irregular terrain to conceal numerous machine gun nests and strong points. Extensive demolitions along the route of advance caused our attacking forces to lose many hours of precious time. (22)

Nevertheless, by the 12th of October, the determined 45th had reached the last line of hills separating them from the Volturno valley. The division was advancing in two columns: the 180th Infantry striking westward south of Mount Acero, and the 179th striking westward north of Mount Acero between this mountain and Mt. Monaco.

(19) B, p. 16; (20) B, p. 19; (21) B, p. 20; (22) B, p. 22.

At the time the assault elements of the 3rd and 34th Divisions were starting the crossing of the lower Volturno against the defended north banks, the 45th Division had reached a line extending from a small town one mile east of Faiccho to positions immediately south of Mount Acero. Thus the plan to rapidly move the 45th Division west along the Calore River, threatening the east flank of the German defense position along the lower Volturno, succeeded only to a limited extent.

The crossing of the 3rd Division went very much according to plan. The demonstration on the left flank having started at midnight, the division started its crossing under cover of a heavy artillery concentration. The 15th Infantry on the right succeeded in seizing hills 141 and 246 with difficulty, and in the afternoon advanced to the hills north of Highway 87. The 7th Infantry crossed thru fields of machine gun fire, helped repulse a sharp German counterattack, but, nevertheless, reached the lower slopes of their objective, Mt. Majulo, in the morning hours of 13 October. (23)

It may be said at this point that the supply situation of the leading assault elements was hampered by the fact that most of the improvised rafts broke up in the swift current.

At this time the hill mass north of <sup>TRIFLISCO</sup> ~~the~~ Gap had yet to be taken. Several attempts had been made to take this objective by assault from the south bank of the river. During the night of 13-14 October, a battalion of the 30th Infantry crossed to the north side of the river east of the Gap and assaulted the enemy positions from the east. Once the enemy forces were driven from these defensive positions, the 30th Infantry began its advance along the ridge line toward Formicola.

(23) A, p. 18.

Having crossed the Volturno River barrier, the ability of the 3rd Division to continue the advance depended upon the ability of its supporting troops to keep it furnished with the necessary supplies. The engineers working in the zone of action of the 3rd Division did a splendid job of bridging the river. By evening of the 13 October, the division engineers had in operation a jeep bridge to the west of the hairpin loop in the river, and a bridge capable of carrying  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ton trucks to the east of the hairpin loop. Whereas enemy artillery made the construction and maintenance of the bridges extremely costly, it must be said that the flow of supplies was not seriously curtailed. (24)

The 30 ton bridge was constructed in the Triflisco gap on 14 October during daylight hours. The enemy had been driven from his defensive positions on the north bank of the river. The bridgesite was kept blanketed with smoke. Since it was evident to the enemy that this was a logical place to put in a bridge, he placed fairly heavy registered fires on the position. The bridge was not hit and the work did not stop. (25)

That this was an extremely important bridge is brought out by the fact that over 7,200 vehicles passed over it during a period of five days.

The attack of the 34th Division was successful, but was attended by a number of difficulties. Engineer units accompanying one of the battalions of the 168th Infantry missed the predesignated crossing point. As a result, the river bank encountered on the far side was so steep as to require the assistance of five men to lift one man from the river. This naturally caused a considerable delay in getting the entire battalion across. Another ~~b~~attalion found out that with a swift current, assault boats could be relied upon but for a few trips. An emergency crossing, in shoulder deep water, without the aid of guide ropes, proved costly in men and

(24) B, p. 39; (25) H, p. 33.

radio equipment. Nevertheless, the 168th Infantry, crossing the river generally opposite from Saint Giovanni, succeeded in getting all battalions across the river by the morning of the 13th. Heavy fire was received from the flat fields in front of the hills. It was only with the aid of heavy artillery support that the unit was able to advance from the flat lands near the river into the hills around Saint Giovanni. It was not until the next morning, 14 October, that the unit took Caiazzo. (26)

The 135th Infantry on the right did not experience much difficulty in its crossing. Its objectives, the town of Squille and the high ground to the north, were lightly held by the enemy. Upon being attacked by superior forces, the enemy fell back to the north. At the time the 168th Infantry was seizing Caiazzo, the 135th Infantry was closing in on the small town of Ruviano. (27)

The principal consideration governing the advance of the 34th Division at this time was its ability to supply itself with the necessities of combat. The level of supplies north of the river was critically low. The river, which it had just succeeded in forcing, was to prove a formidable supply barrier. The division could not continue the advance against an active enemy unless it could surmount this obstacle and deliver to its troops the necessary food, ammunition and artillery support. (28)

Bridging operations in the division zone of advance ~~was~~<sup>were</sup> impossible as long as the enemy enjoyed direct observation from the vicinity of Caiazzo over the possible crossing sites.

Early in the crossing operation, on the morning of the 13 October, an Engineer company operating in the zone of advance of the 168th Infantry, displayed great valor, but, at the same time, an utter disregard for the existing tactical

(26) B, p.43; (27) A, p. 20; (28) B, p.48.

situation. While the enemy was still in possession of good observation posts in the vicinity of Caiazzo, the engineers attempted to bridge the river. In order to save time at the river, the rubber floats were inflated in the rear area. Consequently, when the convoy of trucks carrying inflated floats approached the river, enemy artillery fire was directed at them and they were caught in a barrage. Several trucks and floats were destroyed. With no change in the enemy situation, a second attempt was made to bridge the river in the same area. Three floats were blown out of the water by direct hits before the attempt was given up.

A new crossing point defiladed from enemy fire was found south of Squille. The new problem here was to cross a portion of the river considerably wider than the original crossing site and having on hand only about half of its bridging equipment. The engineers had light traffic crossing at this point on the morning of 14 October.

The construction of the class 30 bridge, over the river south of Caiazzo, was forced to await the removal of the enemy artillery observation posts in and around that town. On the morning of the 15 October, this bridge was completed.

Because of the nature of the terrain in the zone of advance of the British 10th Corps, the advance met with severe resistance. The Corps attacked along its 17 mile front with three divisions. The division attacking on the right, in the vicinity of Triflisco Gap was stopped cold. The division attacking in the center managed to secure a small bridgehead during the first day of attack. The 46th Division, attacking on the left of the Corps did, with the aid of the Navy, manage to make a crossing in force. A company of their tanks made an amphibious landing to assist the assault elements as direct

fire weapons and as a great moral factor. By evening of the 14 October, the 46th Division had secured a bridgehead of about 600 yards. (29)

ADVANCE TO DRAGONI (15 - 18 October)

Having consolidated and secured the division bridgehead, the 3rd Division prepared to continue the attack. On 14 October, the boundary between the Sixth and Tenth Corps was changed so that the ridge line to the north of Triflisco Gap was given to the British. (See Map B) The 3rd Division's adjusted plans called for a drive to the north-east to capture the town of Dragoni, and at the same time to drive some seven miles over the mountains to cut the two lateral roads between highway six and the valley of the Volturno. The 15th Infantry was given the mission of cutting the roads, and by 17 October the job was completed. The 7th Infantry moved across the rugged hills to take Dragoni. It encountered severe delaying action along most of the way. In the vicinity of Liberi the enemy counterattacked repeatedly, in order to regain any lost ground. By 17 October, the regiment, advancing against discontinuous opposition, was in force on the high ground to the west of Dragoni. The road leading to the north out of Dragoni was placed under effective interdiction fires and was denied to the enemy as an escape route. (30)

The 30th Infantry, on the left of the division, advanced in contact with the British 10 Corps. It assisted the British in their assaults on the town of Formicola and was then placed in Division reserve.

As the 3rd Division advanced, it was forced to move along secondary roads. This heavy traffic, during the rainy season, was more than the roads could bear. It was necessary for the supporting engineers to haul in hundreds of tons of crushed rock and spread it over the roads to keep them passable. (31)

(29) A, p. 25; (30) D, p. 92; (31) H, p. 33.

THIS CHANGE MADE TO CORPS THE TRIFLISCO BRIDGE

The 34th Division, having cleared the enemy from the town of Caiazzo and from the high ground overlooking the river east of Caiazzo, next was given the mission of advancing to the north in the direction of Dragoni, clearing the upper Volturno valley west of the river of enemy troops. The division advanced against moderate resistance between 15 - 18 October, at which time it found itself bearing down on the town of Dragoni, which was at the same time being threatened from the west by the 3rd Division. (32)

It should be noted at this time, that the road leading north from Dragoni was being interdicted by 3rd Division fires, and, thus, the use of it was denied to the German defenders of the town.

During the advance from the river crossing to the vicinity of Dragoni, the enemy utilized small delaying positions located on the high ground overlooking the roads and commanding the roads by fire. Artillery fire hampered our crews performing road repair work. (33)

On 13 October, the 179th Infantry, advancing west near the north bank of the river, soon struck the strongly defended town of Faicchio. It was readily apparent that this small town defended by all types of weapons, including 150 Mm. self-propelled assault guns, was to be the pivot point for German defenses in this area. The attack on the town from the east by the 179th Infantry was repulsed by heavy fire. (34)

Also, on 13 October, the 157th Infantry, attacking from positions south of Mt. Acero did, after sharp fighting, clear this high ground of enemy troops. The 180th Infantry was ordered to the left flank of the Division and proceeded to clear of enemy forces the flat ground west of Mt. Acero and north to the river running west from Faicchio.

(32) B, p. 68; (33) G, p. 6; (34) C, p. 55.

On the night of 13 - 14 October, the town of Faicchio was subjected to a heavy shelling by artillery units supporting the division. On the 14 October, it was determined that the enemy had withdrawn from this fortified town.

The Division drove north along the left (east) bank of the upper Volturno reaching its objective, the high ground 2 miles southeast of the Piedimonte-Dragoni Highway.

At this time, the division left boundary was changed from the original boundary line along the upper Volturno to a new line running generally north, including the town of Piedimonte, but pinching out the division just beyond this point against the lofty Matese Mountains. The 34th Division was to cross the upper Volturno in the vicinity of Dragoni and take over the zone of advance of the 45th Division.

The division reached and occupied the town of Piedimonte on the afternoon of 19 October, and on the following day, reverted to Corps reserve. (35)

The 45th Division was given its first rest after 40 days of continuous fighting.

At this time, 18 October, the British 10th Corps had advanced, and was in contact with elements of the 3rd Division along the Corps boundary. Following the changing of the Corps boundary on 14 October, the British 56th Division crossed in the vicinity of Triflisco Gap, proceeded to the north and north-west, clearing the hills in its zone for a distance of about ten miles. The 7th Armored Division, in the center, had advanced about six miles from its crossing point and had reached Route 7. The 46th Division, on the left, held up by a canal cutting laterally across its front, had advanced a matter of four miles from its crossing point. (36)

(35) C, p. 56; (36) A, p. 37.

ADVANCE FROM DRAGONI TO THIRD VOLTURNO CROSSING  
(19 October - 3 November)

On 18 October, it was noted that the enemy forces in the Dragoni area were attempting to withdraw from their precarious position by crossing to the east side of the river in the direction of Alife. Consequently, late on the afternoon of 18 October, the 133rd Infantry of the 34th Division crossed the river to the south of the Dragoni - Alife road in an attempt to sever this avenue of escape open to the enemy. (37) At dawn the next morning when the battalions closed in on the bridge they found that the enemy had made good his escape from the town of Dragoni, and had done an effective job of demolishing the bridge over the Volturno at this point. (38)

The 135th Infantry crossed the Volturno south of the 133rd Infantry crossing site, secured the town of Alife and prepared to move to the north.

By this time, the 45th Division had occupied the town of Piedimonte three miles to the east. Thus, pinched out of the action, it was placed in corps reserve.

Early in the advance, up the valley east of the river, the 34th Division found out that to expose themselves on the floor of the valley during periods of good visibility was a fateful blunder. A battalion advancing on the valley floor under the protection of a dense fog, found themselves dangerously exposed when the fog suddenly lifted. The enemy immediately brought intense rifle, machine gun and artillery fire to bear upon them. The losses were extremely heavy. (38)

During the period, 20 - 24 October, the 34th Division advanced to the north against an active enemy occupying successive delaying positions. Despite intense artillery fire and several tank counterattacks on the part of the enemy, our forces succeeded in occupying the towns of St. Angelo D'Alife and Raviscanina.

(37) A, p. 32; (38) B, p. 71; (39) B, p. 72.

Continuing the advance on 26 October, the division ran into a small hill, hill 235, that was to prove to be a stumbling block for the next two days. Hill 235 rose out of the valley floor to a height of seventy-five feet and was located about midway between the river and the foot of the mountains to the east. The enemy chose to execute a strong delaying action at this point. He had strengthened the position with numerous machine gun positions and was using tanks as mobile artillery pieces. For two days, from this small hill, the enemy was able to resist our shelling, our infantry attacks and our tank attacks. On the night, 27-28 October, without opposition, the Germans effected a withdrawal from the area. (40)

Against discontinuous opposition, the division continued north to Lete Creek, turned up the creek valley for a distance of four miles, then advanced on Capriati A Volturno and arrived 3 November. (41)

The descent down the small valley was typical of the advance during the past few days. Infantry contact with the main enemy force had been broken and only scattered detachments offered any resistance to our advance. It was apparent that the enemy had withdrawn from the south side of the river to more favorable positions north of the Volturno valley. (42)

Again the 34th Division found themselves looking at enemy defenses across the Volturno. A third crossing, this time across a river which was shallow but several hundred yards wide, had to be made. The towering mountains which rose abruptly from the floor of the valley on the far side gave our attacking infantryman a premonition of the fighting that was soon to come.

The 504th Parachute Infantry was given the mission of guarding the 5th Army's right flank and took up positions

(40) B, p. 77; (41) A, p. 44; (42) G, p. 8.

to the east of the 34th Division.

The next mission of the 3rd Division was to close in on the Mignano Gap area. The Division pushed out from positions held on 17 October, and advanced to the north-west. The 7th Infantry advanced in the left of the division zone without making contact with the enemy. The remainder of the division advanced against moderate resistance. By the 3rd of November, the Division had cut the road running south from Dragoni at a point two miles south of that town. Other elements were approaching the town of Dragoni and advancing into the hilly area above Presenzano and east of Mignano. (43)

During this period, between 18 October and 3 November, the British 10th Corps experienced some hard fighting in the high ground between Teano and the valley of the Garigliano River. After a strong enemy stand, the town of Teano and the hills overlooking it fell to the British on 30 October. By 1 November, the 7th Armored Division, which had been moved into the left portion of the corps zone, had captured Mondragone and had chased the enemy from the hills commanding the town. This action left the coastal road open to the advance of armored units. A battalion of tanks passed to the north of the hills above Mondragone, then struck to the north-east. The enemy's position in the area thus threatened, he withdrew to the north. By 3 November, British patrols were operating as far north as the Garigliano with little opposition. (44)

ADVANCE AGAINST WINTER LINE (4 November-15 November)

The 3rd Division was to make the main effort in the zone of advance of the sixth Corps. Facing the 3rd Division was the Mignano Gap thru which ran the principal road and railroad

(43) B, p. 80; (44) A, p. 42.

to Cassino, thence to Rome. The gap was bounded by mountains, which rose to a height of about 1000 meters. Within the gap, Mt. Rotundo, wooded, and Mt. Lungo, bald, rose to a height of about 350 meters. (45)

Patrols of the 3rd Division soon found out that the valley was so heavily defended, so as to make an attack thru it almost out of the question. Thus, the division commander planned to attack the gap from the high ground on the flanks. Accordingly, the 30th Infantry passed thru the zone of the 45th Division, and advancing from the east, passed over the high ground between the valley of the Volturno and the Mignano Gap and attacked Mt. Rotundo on 6 November. This attack was met with murderous fire and was repulsed. (46)

Repeatedly attacking, it was not until the 8th of November that the 30th Infantry succeeded in taking Mt. Rotundo. At about the same time, the 15th Infantry succeeded in seizing the southernmost hill of Mt. Lungo.

While the attacks against the enemy positions in the floor of the gap were taking place, the 7th Infantry expended its total effort in the attempt to seize Mt. la Difensa. A high cliff running for a distance of about a mile near the crest of the mountain, resisted all attempts of the 3rd Division to take it. Some of the conditions that enabled the enemy to hold out in this position were; he had commanding observation at all times, his positions were blasted out of solid rock, and he was able to shift his reserves to meet threatened attacks and to replace losses. Couple with these factors the exhausted condition of our forces, the facts that our supplies had to be hand carried to the forward units, that the troops lacked proper clothing resulting in the evacuation of several men with frostbitten feet, it is no wonder that our attack bogged down at this point. (47)

(45) B, p. 96; (46) D, p. 97; (47) D, p. 99.

During this period, the principal effort of the 10th Corps was directed toward the capture of Mount Camino. The 56th Division attacked the mountain, seized several towns in the foothills, but in more than a week of fighting was not able to capture the objective. The nature of the terrain, the tenacity of the defending forces, and the decreased efficiency of the attacking forces all contributed to the failure of the mission. The attempt to gain the objective was finally given up on the 14-15 November and the exhausted forces were withdrawn from their precarious positions. No other gains of any importance were made in the zone of advance of the 10th Corps during this period. (48)

The 45th Division, from positions south and east of the upper Volturno, prepared to cross the valley and attack the hills on the far side<sup>s</sup>. (49)

The 180th Infantry was committed on the left of the division zone of advance, and was responsible for the area between Venafro and the left flank. Elements of the 180th Infantry crossed the Volturno on the nights of 2-3 and 3-4 November, in order to occupy a high ridge forming a reentrant in that area.

On the morning of 4 November, the 179th Infantry crossed the broad Volturno valley and advanced against the town of Venafro and the surrounding high ground. Heavy small arms fired from the west of the town held up the advance until it was neutralized with the assistance of artillery fire. The 179th Infantry Regiment occupied the town, having to close with the enemy to eject him. It was not until darkness fell, that the regiment was able to take the high ground above the town, thus, making their position secure. (50)

(48) B, p. 109; (49) C, p. 57; (50) A, p. 45.

An apparent soft spot in the defensive position was found in the vicinity of Pozzilli, a town about three miles northwest of Venafro. The town lies in a corridor, whose long axis lies in the direction of our advance. In addition, a good mountain road leads to the north thru this corridor. Elements of the 179th Infantry found this spot and advanced against little opposition. Unfortunately, before this situation could be exploited, the enemy moved strong forces into this area. Consequently, when the attack was again resumed in this zone on the 6th of November, our forces met with strong enemy resistance. (51)

For the next nine days, the 179th Infantry fought a bitter fight in the mountains, two miles to the north of Pozzilli, against a determined and stubborn enemy.

The main part of the 180th Infantry followed the advance of the 179th Infantry across the valley. Its objectives were the forbidding heights of Mt. Corno and Mt. S. Croce. These mountains, north-west of Venafro, rose from the floor of the valley to the height of over 1000 meters. Since our forces had direct observation on the south slopes of these hills, the German forces elected to defend the reverse (north) slopes of the hills. The defense system was elaborate. His positions, blasted out of rock, enabled him to place murderous fire on anyone crossing the crest. After making a four day effort to take these positions, the 180th Infantry was relieved from its position in line. On 10 November, a battalion of Rangers and a battalion of parachutists succeeded in dislodging the enemy from his position in this area. (52)

The 157th Infantry entered the action on 11 November against those enemy forces to the north of Pozzilli, which were holding up the advance of the 179th Infantry. It was not capable of advancing.

(51) A, p. 53; (52) B, p. 102.

As the 34th Division prepared to cross the Volturno, it realized that the two key features in its zone of action were the high ground in the vicinity of Roccaravindola in the right (east) sector, and the high ground in the vicinity of the village of Santa Maria Oliveto. The 168th Infantry was given the Roccaravindola mission. The 133rd Infantry was to take Olivato. (53)

During the night of 3-4 November, the assault elements of the 34th Division crossed the river valley against moderate enemy active opposition. However, the price of the crossing was heavy due to extensive passive defense measures. The enemy, having had time to prepare for just such a crossing, had sown an intricate and extensive mine field apparently across the entire front of his position. Our reconnaissance of these fields was necessarily meager because of the limited time available, and because of the rather long distances involved for patrol activity on the broad valley floor. In order for the attacking elements to be off the valley floor before morning, it was necessary to pass thru the mine fields with the least possible delay. Most elements assumed a single file formation and just walked in the direction of their objective. As the lead man activated a mine, he was replaced by the next man in the column and the advance continued without delay. (54)

By noon, the 168th Infantry had entered the town of Roccaravindola and, by that night, had secured the hills to the west and north-west.

The 133rd Infantry, encountering similar resistance, crossed the river and, after daylight, occupied St. Maria Oliveto and the hill to the west of the town. During the morning they were ejected from both of these positions, but promptly counterattacked and retook the objective. In the meantime,

(53) A, p. 46; (54) L, p. 38.

a battalion of the 133rd Infantry, advancing on the left, succeeded in taking hills located about a mile to the north-west of the primary objective. (55)

The 135th Infantry, which had not as yet been committed to action on this third crossing of the Volturno, was on 8 November committed as part of a task force with the mission of driving on Montaquila, located in the extreme right (east) of the division zone. The task force consisted of the 135th Regiment, a battalion of tanks, a company of engineers and some heavy weapons support. This powerful force drove on the town of Montaquila, taking it the same morning. (56)

It then proceeded to secure a series of hills to the west and north-west for a distance of from one to two miles.

Active patrolling indicated that extensive mine fields existed in the zone of advance of the 34th Division.

By this time, 12 November, the 135th Infantry was in contact with the 504th Parachute Infantry, guarding the right (east) flank of the 5th Army. The 504 was in the vicinity of Colli and was in contact with the British 8th Army.

#### ADVANCE OF THE FIFTH ARMY HALTED

By the middle of November, it was evident that any attempt to advance deeper into the enemy's defensive position at this time would be ineffective. A variety of factors contributed to establish this condition. (57)

The problems of supply was primary. It was apparent that in order to crack the defense line additional quantities of materiel would be needed. This would place an additional burden on the existing supply lines which were already bogging down in the deep muddy roads. It, also, must be remembered

(55) B, p. 94; (56) A, p. 55; (57) B, p. 107.

that the supply of many forward units would be by hand-carry. The problems of the engineers in keeping the roads and bridges open during the winter rainy season were many and complex.

The men in the line suffered from the constant wetness of everything. The clothing issued the men was not adequate protection against the bitter cold nights. There had been little relief from active fighting against the enemy. Replacements were few. Because of the problems of supply, the men did not receive the minimum number of hot meals required for this type of fighting.

Add to this the fact that the enemy occupied strong key terrain features, and had recently been reenforced with fresh troops. A temporary halt by our attacking forces was mandatory.

Consequently, on 15 November, the advance of the 5th Army was halted.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A study of that portion of the campaign just described will serve to condense the numerous actions into procedures. Some procedures greatly added to the success of the campaign. Others serve as lessons not to be repeated.

A. The overall plan of attack of the Volturno River was sound. The main effort was made by the VI Corps to the east of Triflisco. This area of wooded hills offered our troops the advantage of maximum concealment, and, therefore, the best possible chance of success. It was realized, prior to the attack, that the main enemy gun area to the north of Triflisco would have to be turned by an advance from the east before those forces working forward on the coastal plain could be successful. Albeit, it was necessary for 10 Corps to attack across the coastal plain, devoid of cover, in order to force the defenders to divide his fires. This strong secondary

attack would also make difficult for the enemy the problem of committing his reserves.

B. The preparation and conduct of the Volterno River crossing should receive special emphasis. It is the first instance, involving our forces in this theater of war, of having to cross a formidable river in the face of strong enemy opposition. It gave us the opportunity of putting into effect our theories and training practices under conditions which gave them the acid test. Generally speaking, the crossing was successful, therefore, our theories on river crossings were correct in this case. However, it will do well to examine more closely individual incidents which will show how well some principals were adhered to, and, on the other hand, how some principals were, if not violated, handled loosely.

(1) In the crossing of a battalion of the 34th Division, the engineers missed the crossing point decided upon during the reconnaissance. This error caused a considerable delay in the battalion's crossing. Since the mistake was not due to enemy action, it is unforgivable. Proper marking of routes and proper use of guides would have prevented this.

(2) An element of the 34th Division relied entirely upon the use of assault boats to effect its crossing. Since information concerning the rate of flow of the river was already in their hands, they most certainly should have prepared alternate plans for the crossing. As a result of this oneness of plan, when the assault boats had drifted so far downstream, after a few trips, so as to be useless, the remainder of the battalion had to make an emergency crossing by wading thru water shoulder high without the benefit of guide ropes. Two men were drowned and most of the radio sets were rendered useless.

(3) Since the engineers were unable to build any bridges in the zone of advance of the 34th Division until the morning of 14 October, supplies dwindled to a critically low level. Had the division been ordered to advance against determined resistance, prior to the night of the 14th, it would have been unable to do so.

(4) The Third Division, in having most of its improvised rafts broken up in the swift current, found out that improvised means are no substitute for standard means. All efforts should be exhausted in an attempt to get the necessary number of standard items to accomplish the job at hand.

(5) The splendid job of the engineers in building the bridge in the Triflisco Gap cannot be overemphasized. Despite constant, preregistered artillery fire, the work on the bridge did not stop. The importance of the bridge can be seen from the fact that 7,200 vehicles passed over it in the first five days.

C. During the advance from the Volturno to near the winter Line, it was found that it was not always possible to maintain contact with the enemy. The German delaying forces, using the rugged terrain to its best advantage and augmenting it with their expert use of demolitions, were able to break contact almost at will. There is nothing wrong with the rule that once having gained contact, this contact must be maintained. However, it should be pointed out that this is not always possible.

D. (1) The crossing of the Volturno for the third time by the 34th Division shows that there is no substitute for an extensive and exhaustive reconnaissance. A unit is most likely to suffer crippling losses in passing thru a mine field which has not previously reconnoitered.

(2) When the Germans ceased employing delaying tactics and assumed a defensive attitude, it was found that he often

and assumed a defensive attitude, it was found that he often elected to defend on the reverse slope of hills when it was to his advantage to do so. In this way, his positions avoided the effects of our massed artillery fire and the fires of most of our direct fire supporting weapons. This type of defensive position was effective and proved costly for us to take.

(3) The problem of protection against the weather was a serious one. The cases cited in which men were evacuated as a direct result of the weather were merely representative cases for the entire force. The severity of the winter weather could certainly have been ascertained prior to the operation, and the clothing necessary to maintain the combat efficiency of the soldiers should have been made available to them.

(4) By the time the Fifth Army reached the Winter Line the combat efficiency of all of its divisions had been seriously impaired. This was due to several reasons: lack of spare divisions to be used in relieving front line divisions, and, men exposed to raw winter, for extended periods of time, with insufficient supply of hot meals and protective clothing.

#### LESSONS

From my study of this operation, I believe the outstanding lessons to be learned are as follows:

1. The principal in the attack of making the main effort along the best route of approach to a position and launching a secondary attack along the next best route of approach applies to units of any size.
2. In the crossing of a swiftly flowing river, when fording is at all possible, the use of guide ropes is much more effective than crossing by assault boat.
3. Improvised means for effecting a river crossing are seldom as effective as the tried and tested standard means.

(4) Once a unit has forced a crossing of a barrier, it is up to its supporting troops to insure an adequate flow of supplies beyond the barrier. Without these supplies, the unit cannot continue the advance.

(5) Terrain and the use of demolitions will permit an enemy to break contact.

(6) There is no substitute for a thorough reconnaissance.

(7) A reverse slope defense is an effective defense, and may prove to be the most costly for the attacker to reduce.

(8) The combat efficiency of troops is greatly lowered when not given the proper number of hot meals and adequate protection against the weather.

(9) The efficiency of units is sharply reduced following a prolonged stay in the front lines without relief.