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Title: Interview with COL Robert B. Hutchins – Sicilian Campaign and Initial Phases of the Italian Campaign: Weapons Section, Part 4.

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Abstract: This report is an interview by COL Robert B. Hutchins on the Sicilian Campaign and the initial phases of the Italian Campaign. This is Part 4 titled: The Weapons Section.

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Interview with Col. Hutchins.

Part 4

WEAPONS SECTION

INTERVIEW WITH COL. ROBERT B. HUTCHINS

UNCLASSIFIED (Sicilian Campaign and Initial
Phases of the Italian Campaign)

5 April, 1944.

- Q. In the advance machine gun group, was any indirect firing done?
- A. Yes, but in our particular engagement not to any extent. Most of it was direct firing.
- Q. I wonder if you could give us an idea of what the engagement was like?
- A. Yes. Sicily is mountainous, as you know. We started from the beach, went in about fifteen to twenty miles before we struck any high ground. From then on it was very rugged, sparsely covered with olive groves and a good many barren hills. The roads followed the narrow valleys. The going across country as a result was strenuous - up and down steep grades. The movement across country had to be off carry as a jeep could not be used off the road to any extent. As a result, we substituted the light machine guns for the heavies when going across country, until we could get the heavies up to replace them. Due to the type of terrain we, therefore, had good positions for overhead direct fire.
- Q. Was it out of tactical necessity or lack of technical knowledge that they didn't use indirect firing?
- A. The men were trained to use either system of firing. I'm not sure which they used the most, it depended on the situation - whatever the heavy weapons commander wanted to employ.
- Q. Were they usually in defilade?
- A. Pretty well defiladed.
- Q. Were they doing much night firing?
- A. Yes, we did a lot of night firing.
- Q. Do you know what method they used for engaging their targets at night - the machine gun?
- A. I hesitate to answer that, although I saw them at the time, I wasn't inquiring into the method of laying.
- Q. To what extent were the heavy machine guns used?
- A. We used them whenever we could get them up.
- Q. Was overhead fire used?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Do you know what methods they used to determine safety?
- A. No. I know they were trained in the two methods given in the manual.
- Q. How would you compare the heavy and light machine guns?

- A. We had the A-4, the old light, not the present one. The heavy was the best weapon over there, barring none - German or English, for firing protective lines, for fixed firing and for long range. The consensus was that the men were all very well pleased with its operation and its use. They wouldn't give it up.
- Q. Of Heavy Weapons - We are particularly interested in what actually happens during reorganization; can you recall in a battalion or regiment attack what is done - do they reorganize on a hill; what do the elements do; when do you get the machine guns up, etc?
- A. I can answer this only by saying a great deal depends on the situation. In our case the Germans were withdrawing and normally reorganization was on the objective, forward on the crest.
- Q. At that time were the Germans counterattacking regularly or withdrawing?
- A. Withdrawing. We didn't get any counterattacks. The counterattacks came later. Not immediately after taking the objective.
- Q. Did you run into any mechanized attacks by infantry and tanks?
- A. No mechanized attacks as such but we constantly run into attacks by infantry and tanks. Tanks were always with the Germans in attack.
- Q. Can you give us some information about anti-tank defense?
- A. Ordinarily I had one of the anti-tank platoons supporting the assault battalion and in addition employed my tanks along with the leading battalion. The tanks followed close behind the front line elements so they would be there to meet any tanks. In addition we used the bazooka to good advantage; also the rifle grenade. The bazookas were scattered through the squads, plus the rifle grenade.
- Q. Did you have the 37 or 57?
- A. We had the 57 in anti-tank company and the 37 in battalion headquarters. The 57 supplemented the 37.
- Q. How did they work against tanks?
- A. The 37, we found wasn't very effective. The German tanks are heavily armored in front and the 37 had no effect. The 57 would knock out a Mark 6, with a hit anywhere except in front.
- Q. You don't recall the ranges?
- A. We fired under a 1000 yards with the 57. We never fired over that.
- Q. Did you run into any village fighting?
- A. Yes. We encountered village fighting in Victoria, Sicily and to some extent in one or two other towns. Nothing like at Casino, but the Germans were in the village and offered resistance by sniping and having their tanks come in and fire down the streets.
- Q. How did you take the villages?

- A. We received training in North Africa on village fighting. We supported the movement forward with our weapons until we reached the outer edge and then used the leadfrog method.
- Q. You used the same method they did at Fort au Pont?
- A. That's right.
- Q. Did you run into minefields when you took your objective?
- A. No. We mostly ran into mines along the roads and bypasses where bridges were blown out. There were anti-personnel mines and booby traps in fields we crossed but not to any great extent.
- Q. Did you have any infantry troops - any riflemen or the organic part of the rifle units trained to remove mines?
- A. We did something that worked out satisfactorily. We organized from the regiment, a mine detecting platoon. We had 18 mine detectors assigned to us and we formed 3 squads of 6 mine detectors each. In moving forward we attached one squad to a battalion. If there was only one battalion in the lead we would supplement that squad by one or two more if necessary. If the regiment was in reserve, division called on us sometimes to furnish our mine detecting platoon if they were running into serious minefields. This platoon was supplemented and supported by the mine platoon in the anti-tank company. It was commanded by an officer out of the regiment and operated very successfully. I think it is something that should be given consideration. The engineers cannot do that in addition to all the other things they are doing.
- Q. Did you do any battery firing with mortars?
- A. I can't give you an answer on that. I don't know.
- Q. You wouldn't know how they controlled them?
- A. No.
- Q. Do you have any information on ammunition supply difficulties and how they were overcome?
- A. From our experiences in Sicily, we revised the unit of fire for the regiment. A conference was called by the division commander at which the regimental commanders and division officers attended. Based on our combat experience, we added to and took from the various types of ammunition. When we went into Italy we had increased our mortar unit of fire but we still fired more than we could carry. That was the only type of ammunition we had difficulty in keeping supplied but it didn't handicap us a great deal. We could always send a vehicle back and get more.
- Q. You could operate your vehicles?
- A. Yes. The roads were all open.
- Q. As far as you recall you used all six of the mortars; you didn't drop off some?
- A. We used them all.

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- Q. You would have to add to the company to supplement the squads?
- A. Yes. We took them from the rifle companies. We went over 15% over-strength.
- Q. Have you considered whether it would be feasible to have the ammunition platoon in the heavy weapons company?
- A. I haven't given much thought to it. I'd say it isn't necessary. I think you need men trained to take over weapons. I'd rather see the squads increased than use a separate platoon.
- Q. You say you used the bazooka in anti-tank defense, how did they go?
- A. Not so well in Sicily. We were issued some defective ammunition. In Italy they worked well. The men used them against snipers in buildings. In going through a town, if a machine gun was needed they would use that.
- Q. Did you have anti-tank squads organized as such?
- A. Individual bazooka men.
- Q. Did the mortar squads in combat pick emplacements or would they depend on ~~battalion~~ alone?
- A. A great deal of that depended on the type of defilade. Ordinarily they got in defilade in draw and fired that way.
- Q. To what extent was the 60mm used without the bipod?
- A. That I can't answer. We used the base plate all the time so far as I know.
- Q. Were the mortars controlled by observers in the front line or observers near the mortar positions?
- A. By observers near the mortar positions.
- Q. They didn't try the liaison method - going forward and back?
- A. Not to my knowledge.
- Q. Did you use the 60 projector at all?
- A. No, we didn't have any.
- Q. How was the 57mm gun used in mountainous terrain?
- A. We operated on a wide front and a 57 platoon was attached to a battalion and operated with the battalion, supplementing their 37mm guns.
- Q. How did you move them around?
- A. We had half tracks. However, the anti-tank commander complained that they weren't so servicable - he would rather have a full track.
- Q. Did they try to move them by hand?
- A. I don't think so.

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- Q. Did they fire 57's at night?
- A. Yes.
- Q. What did they use then?
- A. I don't know that. What they used to site them, I didn't investigate.
- Q. Did the weather affect your 81 ammunition?
- A. Not to my knowledge. We had rather fine weather until the latter part of September and I left a month after that. I had no complaints.
- Q. What use was made of the supplementary positions?
- A. They picked out alternate positions. I'm not sure on supplementary positions.
- Q. When did they move to them?
- A. That I don't know.
- Q. What is the attitude of the troops to the 57?
- A. They liked it.
- Q. What is their attitude on the 37?
- A. They like that too, for the purpose we used it.
- Q. Which do you prefer, or is there a place for both?
- A. From the reports I got, I think there is a place for both of them.

German Tactics - Platoon and Squad.

- Q. What method of employment and what formation was used by the Germans in the squad and platoon in attack?
- A. I don't think I can answer that for you. I didn't look into that particularly. I know that in withdrawing, they always use a contact squad. They usually operated the same as we did.
- Q. Do you know the number of light machine guns and pistols used in a squad and platoon?
- A. That I don't know.
- Q. Reversal position?
- A. The Germans used self defense a great deal.
- Q. What general types of wire entanglement did you run into?
- A. We ran into the double apron type mostly and some single strands, usually connected to personnel mines.
- Q. Did you run into any German Tank Teams?
- A. Not that I know of.

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Q. What about methods of patrolling at night?

A. We were weak on patrols. We did have patrols out at night with specific missions. Patrols varied in strength - sometimes a squad or platoon.

Q. Did the Germans do a lot of patrolling at night?

A. Yes they did.

Cannon Group.

Q. You had a cannon company?

A. Yes.

Q. What were they armed with?

A. The self-propelled 75 - two platoons and one platoon of 105's.

Q. What is your opinion of the worth of the cannon company?

A. I think it has a real place in the regiment. It covers the gap between the mortar and artillery in the attack. In the beginning we relied too much on artillery to knock out pillboxes, whereas if we had employed the cannon company I think we would have gotten much better results.

Q. How did you employ your cannon company?

A. In Sicily I attached a platoon of 75's to the battalions and kept the 105's under regimental control in direct support and to assist artillery. In Italy we were closer together and were using the forward observing method for the cannon company. We had liaison to battalion and observers out to the forward elements.

Q. Who was the forward observer?

A. Usually the executive officer.

Q. Did you find any particular faults in the T/O or otherwise?

A. In our particular fight I preferred the self-propelled gun. You can move it quickly in and out of position.

Q. What type would they employ as a rule?

A. More or less artillery - single gun.

Q. Was there very much direct firing?

A. Initially, yes. In Sicily the guns were so far forward the small arms fire caused quite a few casualties. Toward the end of Italy, we were doing mostly indirect firing.

Q. When they started indirect firing, where were they in relation to the front lines of the troops?

A. Between 1800 and 2000 yards.

Q. Can you give me an idea of the ammunition expenditures?

A. I think they fired 6000 rounds in 40 days after we landed in Italy. That's from memory, of course.

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Q. What were they using, wire or radio?

A. Radio - sound power 'phones.

BAR

Q. From your experience, would you say that the BAR in its present state is more desirable than the old semi-automatic?

A. From what I heard, the BAR as it is now was found to be everything they wanted.

Q. Was there any particular weakness?

A. None, other than on the tips of the clips - they bend.

Q. Did you find any phase of the BAR training deficient or did the men seem well trained?

A. I think that the training was very good.

Q. As far as the bayonets are concerned, did you get any short bayonets?

A. We had the long bayonet only.

Q. Do you have any suggestions along the line of bayonet training?

A. I doubt if we ever reached the point where we used bayonets. They probably did at Casino, but I wasn't there.

Q. Do you think we should make more of a study of any particular feature - try to work up a defense of their particular method of fighting?

A. I don't see how you could have a much different attack - it's either going to be a parry or thrust. I don't see how it could vary much from the standard we follow.

Q. On grenades - we have been making quite a few tests - I was wondering whether in your opinion our present fragmentation grenade seemed to lack power.

A. I have heard some complaints about them since I came back but none came from the front lines to me. They seemed to be satisfactory.

Q. Did you use the British grenade or our own?

A. We used our own.

Q. That brings up another question, does the British grenade fragment more?

A. I am not in a position to answer that.

Q. If the assembly on our present fragmentation grenade was changed slightly so we got no smoke or sparking, in your opinion would the grenade be satisfactory?

A. Yes it would be.

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Q. How about timing?

A. That could be improved too.

Q. In fast moving situations, were you given plenty of time for careful patrolling?

A. No we weren't. We moved a great deal at night and were given our orders late - too late for much reconnaissance. Very little time was allowed to reconnoiter the area in which we were going.

Q. Is that what you were referring to when you stated that we were weak in scouting and patrolling?

A. Not particularly. We would send out a patrol to reconnoiter and instead of the patrol holding the place and sending back a messenger, the whole patrol would come back. Whether that was the fault of the officer issuing the order or whether the patrol just went out and came back, not realizing that it was an advantage having someone on that position, I don't know. The other point I would like to bring out is that I don't think they are sufficiently imbued as to what is important and what is unimportant and the more we can do to emphasize the important things to the patrol commanders, the better off we will be. They go out and see certain things and forget to bring the word back. Generally speaking, they just didn't operate as we wanted them to.

Q. Would you advise using larger patrols on certain locations?

A. That is a matter to decide, depending on what the commander has in mind. That might be the reason the patrols aren't operating as they should - because the commanders aren't specific in their instructions.

Q. In encountering these German patrols, did you find that by the use of counter-patrolling you could cut down on their aggressiveness?

A. Yes.

Q. Were any camouflage suits used by your patrol members?

A. Not to my knowledge.

Q. Did your patrols sent out on general missions bring back any worthwhile information?

A. Yes they did. They brought back such information as to where there were troops, what they ran into or anything else they encountered. The information they obtained was useful to the commander and more patrolling should have been employed. They hesitated on sending patrols out - I don't know why. That was due in most cases to officers themselves.

Q. Did you find it necessary to give two patrols the same mission in order to check on reports?

A. Ordinarily we did. We tried to verify information in some way.

Q. About the heavy machine guns in anti-aircraft fire, did we have supremacy there?

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- A. Yes we did, but the German could sneak in, and did, during different times of the day - sometimes three planes, sometimes, six and I have seen as many as twelve planes come over at a time. Ordinarily, unless they were actually strafing our area orders were issued not to fire. If they started strafing we would fire; otherwise we didn't want to give away our position.
- Q. Did you notice which was being fired, the light machine gun or the water-cooled?
- A. The heavy machine gun principally.
- Q. How about the A-67
- A. I think that would be handy. We didn't have any. Ours was principally the heavy machine gun.
- Q. How did they decide when to open fire?
- A. Depending on the unit commander and whether the planes were swooping down and strafing.
- Q. Do you think there is any value to the 30 caliber fire?
- A. I can tell you one instance where it proved effective. Soon after we landed in Sicily, the Germans were hedge-hopping over one of my battalions and the battalion opened fire on them and knocked one down. Other than that I don't know how effective they would be. It was very seldom we would open up and usually there was other anti-aircraft in the vicinity.
- Q. What was the maximum effective range that machine guns were used at?
- A. That I can't answer - I imagine 1000 approximately.
- Q. Did you notice in night firing that the muzzle blast tended to give your position away?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Was there any means of hiding it?
- A. We didn't have any.
- Q. Were your cannons ever taken away from you?
- A. No.
