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THE FIRST VOLTURNO RIVER CROSSING  
7 OCTOBER - 15 OCTOBER 1943  
(NAPLES-FOGGIA CAMPAIGN)  
(General Subject)

Type of operation described: AN ARMY  
ATTACKING ACROSS A RIVER

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THE FIRST VOLTURNO RIVER CROSSING, 7 OCTOBER - 15 OCTOBER 1943  
(NAPLES- FOGGIA CAMPAIGN)  
(GENERAL SUBJECT)

(INTRODUCTION)

On 9 September 1943 the Fifth Army, consisting of the American VI Corps and British 10 Corps, commanded by Lt. General Mark W. Clark landed on the beaches of Salerno. Despite determined resistance from the Germans they broke out of the beachhead and drove north and then northwest up the peninsula of Italy headed in the general direction of Rome. Once the landing at Salerno had been consolidated it became evident that the enemy was committed to delaying action **only** and could not be engaged in any decisive battle. (See Map A) (1) He employed mines and booby traps, ~~he~~ blew bridges and wrecked roads, ~~he~~ set ambushes and sometimes engaged in small unit action but everywhere he continued an orderly withdrawal. (2) Even the great port of Naples fell to the advancing 10 Corps without opposition: By 7 October 1943, the Fifth Army, with British 10 Corps on the left and American VI Corps on the right had possession of the south bank of the Volturno River from its mouth at Castel Volturno to the junction of the Volturno and Calore Rivers. (See Map B) (3)

In a somewhat similiar action the British Eighth Army had landed on the toe and heel of the boot of the Italian peninsula and had driven up to link up with the Fifth Army on a line running from the mouth of the Volturno along the south bank to the junction of the Volturno and Calore Rivers, and then east and north to the Adriatic Sea. (See Map A) (4) Fifth and Eighth Armies were part of 15th Army Group, commanded by General Sir Harold R. L. Alexander. Their movement up Italy was therefore coordinated by 15th Army Group. (5)

(1) A-1, p.1,5; (2) A-1, p.5 (3)A-2, p.10 (4) A-1, p.1 (5)A-1, p.10,11

## THE GENERAL SITUATION

Drawn up along the south bank of the Volturno, the Fifth Army was ready to enter the second stage of the Italian Campaign. The first, of course, was the landing at Salerno. The second was to cross the defended river and to push into the mountains toward Rome. The enemy was definitely on the defensive but he was certainly not beaten. (6) It seemed likely that he would use the natural barrier of the Volturno to gain delay so that he could prepare his "winter line".<sup>where</sup> (7) Already he had blown or destroyed all bridges across the Volturno. He knew where the Fifth Army would likely try to make their crossing and had his guns zeroed in to stop them. (8)

Opposing the Fifth army at the Volturno crossing were the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, the Hermann Goering Panzer Division, the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, and elements of the 26th Panzer Division. All of these units were part of the German Tenth Army commanded by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. There were, in addition, on the Eighth Army front three other divisions and other elements of the 26th Panzer Division. It was believed that in Rome and Northern Italy there were 16 other divisions. These took no part in the Volturno battle, however. The Fifth Army had a definite advantage in size of its force but helping to erase some of this advantage were weather, terrain and long supply lines. (9) (See Map B)

The American VI Corps consisted of five American Divisions. Only two of these actually participated in this crossing of the Volturno. These two were the 3rd Division and the 34th Division. The 82nd Airborne Division was garrisoning Naples. The 36th Division was in Army Reserve. The 45th Division was on the

(6) A-5, p.47 (7) A-2, p.6 (8) A-2, p.25 (9) A-1, p.7

right flank of VI Corps in contact with British Eighth Army. The 45th Division did not actually take part in the crossing of the Volturno at this time. The British 10 Corps consisted of the 46th Division, 7th Armoured Division and the 56th Division. These 3 divisions took part in the operation. All Fifth Army divisions were veterans of previous fighting. (10)

The poor road system combined with heavy rainfall and heavy traffic added to the problems of Fifth Army. Supply was extremely difficult. The port at Naples was almost completely destroyed when captured and, although strenuous efforts were made to repair the facilities, there was great need for more adequate port facilities. Mountainous country, theft by civilians, and loss by enemy action added to the difficulty. Sufficient warm clothes were not available to troops. Some units had not received their barracks bags which were left in Sicily. (11)

Possibly the most important factor affecting the action at the Volturno crossing was terrain. The Volturno River with its headwaters in the mountains to the north flows south until it joins the Calore River. Then it flows west through the mountains at Triflisco Gap and across the plains until it reaches the Tyrrhenian Sea. (See Map C) The Volturno River in the VI Corps area averages about 175 feet in width and 3 to 6 feet in depth. There is a river valley with hills rising out of it. The banks of the river rise 5 to 6 feet above it. Recent rains had caused a rise in water and had made the current swift. In the 10 Corps zone the Volturno averages about 225 feet in width and 6 feet in depth. The banks rise 12 to 20 feet above the water. In this area there are also levees which gave the Germans protection from flat trajectory fire. There are also a

(10) A-1, p. 10 (11) A-1, p.66; A-2, p. 12

series of canals running parallel to the Volturno on both sides in this area which limited the use of armor greatly and made an attack with an armored spearhead almost impossible. The enemy had excellent observation of the 10 Corps zone from Mt. Massico, while the 10 Corps had no decent observation except from Mt. Tafita in the zone of the VI Corps. In short the VI Corps zone was filled with rough mountains leading down to a narrow river valley while the 10 Corps area flat plain cut by the river and man-made canals. (See Map B) (12)

#### FIFTH ARMY PLAN OF ATTACK

On 7 October 1943 General Clark issued his order for the Volturno River crossing. He directed the VI Corps to cross in the vicinity of Triflisco Gap with one division on the night of 9-10 October and capture the high ground northwest from Triflisco. The 10 Corps was to cross in its zone the night of 10-11 October and capture the high ground around Mt. Massico. (13) (See Map C)

VI Corps commander, Major General John Lucas decided that two divisions would be needed to continue the attack after crossing the river and asked permission to attack with two divisions. This request was granted. Major General Lucas then ordered the 34th Division to take over a section of the river line on the right of the 3rd Division which was in contact with the enemy along the river line and to prepare to attack across the Volturno along with the 3rd Division. Due to muddy roads, rains and other delay the units were unable to attack as planned. Lt. General Mark Clark visited the front and decided on a general attack all along the river line for the night of 12-13 October. (14)

Since arrival at the river all units had patrols probing along the river. They were checking for good crossing and fording (12) A-1, pp.3, 17, 22 (13) A-2, p. 10 (14) A-1, pp. 15, 16

sites and feeling out enemy defenses on the north bank. The delay in time of crossing gave them extra time to learn the nature of the river and the enemy defenses. (15) The enemy, of course, did not know when the attack was coming but he continued to prepare for it. He continued to dig in, to plan his fires and register his artillery. Time was in his favor, but the allied army was ready to strike. (16)

#### ATTACK BY 3RD DIVISION

Major General Lucian Truscott, Jr., Commanding General of 3rd Division knew the enemy expected a crossing in the vicinity of Triflisco Gap. He therefore decided to make a feint there and make the crossing farther upstream. H-Hour was to be at 0200 13 October 1943. The 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry already on Mt. Tafita, supported by the heavy weapons of the 30th Infantry was to open fire on enemy positions across Triflisco Gap. If the enemy should show signs of withdrawing the 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry was to cross at the Gap. The 7th Infantry was to cross further upstream with Mt. Majulo as its objective. The 15th Infantry less the 1st Battalion was to cross in the vicinity of Hill 141 and Hill 246. 1st and 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry were still in bivouac in the vicinity of Caserta. (See Map C) (17)

At midnight 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry and the Heavy Weapon companies, 30th Infantry opened up on enemy held hills across Triflisco Gap. At 0100 hours all 3rd Division artillery began shelling enemy positions in their division zone north of the river. At 0155 smoke shells were dropped. (18) The artillery was aided in this by chemical units with 4.2 mortars. Smoke was maintained in some areas for as much as 18 hours

(15) A-3, p.88 (16) A-2, p. 25 (17) A-2, p.15; A-1, pp. 17, 18  
(18) A-3, p. 90

thereafter. (19) At 0200 the 7th Infantry started crossing. Some assault boats were used but many of the men used improvised rafts. The 1st Battalion crossed just below a hairpin loop in the river. Assault parties strung guide ropes. The current was swift and broke up some of the improvised rafts. Enemy machine guns opened fire but because the north bank was high no men were hit. The battalion had not gotten all men across by daybreak and, with <sup>the</sup> observation that daybreak brought, enemy artillery became very accurate. The last boat to cross received a direct hit. (20) The battalion struck a minefield as they moved up the river bank. As soon as they found a draw leading away from the river they moved out toward highway 87 and toward their objective. Before they reached their objective they received orders to halt and protect the left flank of the attack. (21) The 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 7th Infantry crossed by wading and holding on to guide ropes on a portion of the river farther upstream. These two battalions with the 2nd leading immediately started toward their objective - Mt. Majulo. (See Map D) By the middle of the morning they were nearing this mountain. About this time British Intelligence picked up a German message <sup>which stated that</sup> ~~that~~ a German Panzer Battalion was ready to attack those troops north of the river. Plans were then made to get tanks across the river to meet this threat. The tanks were waterproofed and ready to go but enemy artillery and machine gun fire had prevented bulldozers from leveling a bank so that the tanks could get down to the river. When this emergency became known, Engineers from Company A, 10th Engineer Battalion using picks and shovels prepared the bank so tanks could get

(19) A-6, p.42 (20) A-2, p.29 (21) A-2, p.30

down. By 1100 hours tanks were beginning to cross the river. However the impending Panzer attack was broken up by artillery and tank destroyers from the south side of the Volturno. (22) By the middle of the afternoon the 7th Infantry had secured its position on Mt. Majulo and was ready to make a possible flank attack on the high ground held by the enemy at Triflisco Gap. (See Map D) General Clark personally made a phone call to congratulate Col. Sherman, 7th Infantry Regimental Commander, in the fine showing of the Regiment. (23)

The 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 15th Infantry crossed as scheduled with their objective the hills behind Piana di Caiazzo. The 2nd Battalion crossed below a small island and immediately after the crossing ran into fierce resistance. They captured Hill 141 after heavy losses. The 3rd Battalion crossed north of the island. Assisted by mortars and machine guns already in place they pushed forward and soon captured Hill 246. As soon as the enemy withdrew from Hills 141 and 246 he placed terrific tank and artillery fire on them. The two battalions suffered heavy casualties but with the aid of artillery drove through the town of Piana di Caiazzo and from there on to their objective. (24) (See Map D)

In the meantime, the crossing at Triflisco Gap had not gone so well. The enemy had not withdrawn from the high ground as had been hoped. That part of the 10 Corps crossing on the left near Triflisco Gap had not been successful so no help could be expected from that angle except possibly artillery support. The 1st and 2nd Battalions, 30th Infantry, were ordered to move at once to use the crossing area of the 15th Infantry. About noon General Truscott decided to have

(22) A-2, p.31 (23) A-3, p.91 (24) A-2, p.34, 35

the 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry attempt a crossing at Triflisco Gap. The 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry was ordered to return to Triflisco to support their attack. This attempt was not successful. That night the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry crossed over at the site used by the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry and prepared to attack the high ground which had been held by the enemy overlooking Triflisco Gap. They found the enemy had withdrawn during the night. The 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry, followed by the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry then crossed the Volturno at Triflisco Gap without resistance. This completed the crossing for the 3rd Division. (25)

As the 3rd Division Infantry was driving the enemy away from the river, Engineers began to build bridges across in their wake. In spite of enemy artillery which damaged a lot of their equipment and took heavy casualties <sup>among</sup> ~~from~~ their personnel, two bridges had been placed in operation by dark on 13 October. On 14 October enemy planes bombed and strafed one of the bridges damaging four pontoons which had to be replaced. The Engineers used much ingenuity to keep these bridges in operation and kept them open in spite of these interruptions. As soon as the enemy withdrew from the high ground across Triflisco Gap, Engineers under cover of smoke built a 30 ton bridge across the river in that area. This was later instrumental in assisting the 56th Division of 10 Corps to cross the Volturno. (26)

#### ATTACK BY 34TH DIVISION

The 34th Division had time for planning their crossing and they made use of it. The terrain was studied, and sand  
(25) A-2, p. 38 (26) A-2, p. 29, 40

tables were used. 1st and 2nd Battalions, 168th Infantry were given dry land training on assault boats. (27) Supporting weapons were placed and dug in prior to <sup>the</sup> attack on night of 12-13 October. Every effort was made to familiarize every key man with the terrain over which the troops would move. (28)

Major General Charles W. Ryder, Commanding General, 34th Division decided to have the 168th Infantry make the main attack toward Caiazzo, the division objective. The 135th Infantry was to attack on the right. The 133rd Infantry was held in division reserve. (29) (See Map D)

The 168th Infantry, less 3rd Battalion, was to cross in the vicinity of Limatola and drive toward Caiazzo. (See Map D) (30) Company I, 168th Infantry was to cross on the left to protect the left flank of the Regiment. 3rd Battalion less L Company was to support the crossing with all its firepower from the hills south of Limatola. The 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry was to cross just below the junction of the Calore and Volturno and move into the hills north of Squille. (See map D) Company E, 135th Infantry was to cross just below Squille and capture Hill 131. Remainder of 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry to cross above Squille and capture 283. (31) (See Map D)

At 0145, 34th Division artillery opened up on enemy positions north of the river and at 0200 hours troops started the crossing. The 1st Battalion was able to cross but had difficulty with its boats and lost ~~some of its~~ equipment and rendered much of its radio and mine detecting equipment useless. The communications did not work well and 81 MM mortar fire had to be adjusted by the rifle companies. The battalion came under heavy fire but got into the hills southeast of

(27) A-5, p.47 (28) A-7, p.12 (29) A-5, p.47 (30) A-2, p.42  
(31) A-1, p.20

Caiazzo during the afternoon. (32)

The 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry crossing was not resisted, but the battalion for lack of adequate guides became lost in the darkness and as a result placed its ropes over deep water and not in the area they had planned. Some men were drowned and equipment lost as a consequence. (33) As soon as the battalion was across it moved rapidly on to the hill on its way to Caiazzo. Company G, of this battalion was sent to the 2nd Battalion's left flank to assist the advance of the 1st Battalion. One platoon entered San Giovanni but was fired on by our own artillery causing some casualties in this unit. The 3rd Battalion crossed on the night of 13-14 October and helped in the capture of Caiazzo. (34)

Company E. 135th Infantry crossed as planned and with little trouble occupied Hill 131. 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry made good progress just after their crossing, but were soon slowed down by tank fire and mine fields. 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry crossed after dark on the night of 13 October. On the 2nd day after the original crossing a number of tank destroyers forded the river and gave infantry support from Hill 283. (35) Artillery fire was well coordinated. The infantry men moved close behind it closing with the enemy before he could recover from its effect. (36)

One of the big problems of the 34th Division was supply. The original site chosen for the Division bridge by Company A, 36th Engineers was not in defilade from enemy artillery. As a speed-up operation the Engineers inflated their floats before bringing them to the river. An artillery concentration

(32) A-2, p. 43; A-7, p. 14 (33) A-5, p. 14 (34) A-2, p. 45  
(35) A-2, p. 47 (36) A-7, p. 15

ruined many of them. Each time construction started enemy artillery made it impossible to continue. The situation was beginning to look desperate since assault boats were the only means of bringing across supplies and evacuating the wounded. Fortunately a reconnaissance party found a site near Squille that was in defilade from enemy artillery. Working with speed and determination the Engineers got a bridge into operation and supplies began to cross in the zone of the 135th Infantry. As soon as the 168th Infantry cleared enemy artillery observers from the hills overlooking the crossing sites on the Volturno a bridge was quickly built in their zone. (37)

#### 10 CORPS PLAN OF ATTACK

Lt. General Sir Richard L. McCreery, Commanding General, British 10 Corps, was faced with a difficult area in which to attack over the Volturno River. After detailed reconnaissance and preparation he decided to attack on a broad front with his 3 divisions. The 46th Division was to attack on the left at the mouth of the Volturno. This would enable the Corps to take advantage of naval gunfire. The 7th Armoured Division was to cross in the center and the 56th Division was to cross near Capua. Two squadrons of tanks were to be moved by water around the mouth of the Volturno and make a landing on the north side to join in the attack with the 46th Division. (38) (See Map C)

#### ATTACK OF THE 46TH DIVISION

The 46th Division was to make the main effort of the 10 Corps. It was attacking on the left flank of 10 Corps. The 46 Division commander attempted to gain surprise by

(37) A-2, p. 48, 49; A-5, p. 49 (38) A-1, p.22 ,

shelling a town (Cancellio) in one area on the river and to cross at a different area nearer the mouth of the Volturno. The crossing was successful although one battalion of infantry was overrun by Germans. The tanks were landed but due to mine fields and poor terrain were stopped until the mines were removed. By nightfall of the 14 October 6 battalions of the 46th Division were across. Enemy bombers tried to bomb the landing of tanks but were not successful. (39) (See Map C)

#### ATTACK OF THE 7TH ARMoured DIVISION

The 7th Armoured Division was given the mission of making a feint attack near Grazzanise. It was also to capture the town of Brezza and protect the right flank of the 46th Division. Units were sent across the river in two areas. One crossed at the loop near Grazzanise and the other at Santa Maria La Fossa. The latter was withdrawn but the crossing at Grazzanise was successful and the division began to move slowly toward its objective at Brezza. (40)

#### ATTACK OF 56TH DIVISION

The 56th Division planned for 167th Brigade to cross the Volturno at Capua. 201 Guards Brigade was to make a demonstration on the right to make the enemy think a main attack was being made near Triflisco. The area at Capua, chosen for the crossing was covered with enemy fire but had to be used since no other crossing where assault boats could be used could be found in division zone. 56th Division troops were withdrawn from the banks of the river and the British artillery poured a heavy bombardment into the crossing area. 201 Guards Brigade then started its feint in the (39) A-2, p.51 (40) A-1, p.24

vicinity of Triflisco and the 167th Brigade attempted to cross near Capua. The enemy was waiting and sank 10 boats loaded with men before they could cross. The 201 Guards Brigade got one company across but withdrew them since they could not hold their position due to the failure at Capua. The 56th Division decided it could not cross in its own zone with any measure of success. Since the 56th Division could not cross in its own zone without excessive loss of personnel and the 3rd Division's rapid movement was leaving its flank open, General Clark decided to change the boundary between the VI Corps and ~~VI~~ X Corps to give the 56th Division responsibility for the ridge line on 3rd Division's left flank. Arrangements were then made for the 56th Division to cross on the 30 ton bridge constructed by the 3rd Division at Triflisco Gap. The 56th Division started across this bridge 15 October. This bridge was still receiving some artillery fire but by the evening of the 16th most of the 56th Division was across the Volturno. (See Map C) (41)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The crossing of the Fifth Army was successful. True, the 10 Corps, due to terrain almost completely favoring the enemy had failed in its original attempt to get the 56th Division across near Capua. However, this was offset by the complete success of all other units of Fifth Army. All other divisions had made successful crossings. General Clark's quick action in changing the Corps boundary enabled the 56th Division to cross with minimum casualties. These actions forced the enemy to continue his withdrawal, fighting stubbornly as he did so all along the Volturno. In two days

(41) A-1, p. 23, 24

both Corps had substantial bridgeheads and were driving farther into enemy held territory. Yet, the crossing had cost a large number of men. Why was the crossing as successful as it was? Why was so much accomplished in so short a time? One of the big factors was the careful and thorough reconnaissance prior to the attack. The delay in the attack enabled commanders of all units to carefully prepare their plans, to have all key men make reconnaissance and study the terrain. This delay also enabled patrols to discover enemy defenses and good sites for crossing the river.

There was little interference from enemy air. The only large scale attack by air was an attempt to prevent the landing of tanks in the 10 Corps zone. An attempt was made to destroy the division bridge in the 3rd Division area but this was not successful. Our air superiority played a big role in this successful crossing although there is no record of any direct tactical air support. Strategic air power of the Allies gave vital assistance by destroying the enemy air ability to strike with any measure of success and by isolation of the battlefield.

Terrain in the VI Corps area favored the attacker. The defender could not defend the entire line so he was forced to occupy strong points and attempt to cut off any penetrations. (42) The attacker could get close to the river-<sup>?</sup> line without being observed. This advantage to VI Corps was offset to a certain extent by the terrain in the (10) X Corps area which favored the defender.

*which*  
*with*  
—The attack was made at night which denied the enemy observation. Every effort was made to make the attack a

(42) A-4, p. 50

*why?*  
surprise and some success was achieved but this was not so in some cases. Artillery support was good. It kept the enemy pinned down until our riflemen could get near him.

Another factor was the attitude of the enemy. He evidently intended to use the Volturno for delay only. He seemed willing to trade space for time. Once the Allies were across he made no strong counter attack. In the VI Corps Area once he lost control of the valley he had no roads in the mountains and had to move quickly east.

*why?*  
The morale of our soldiers was good. (43) ~~had~~ had broken out at Salerno and he had the Germans on the move. The weather was not yet so bad as to make ~~him~~ suffer much.

We lost a large number of men. The VI Corps lost 544 men on 13 October 1943. (44) Why were our casualties so large? The Volturno was a natural defensive barrier. The Germans had destroyed all bridges and had their guns zeroed on all likely approaches to the river. He could mass most of his artillery and had time to register it. He knew where the allies were likely to cross and was prepared to exact a heavy toll.

As in almost all battles, some mistakes were made. The 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry, did not have an adequate guide system. Consequently, they crossed in deeper water than was necessary and had men drowned and lost, mine detector and radio equipment sorely needed. G Company, 168th Infantry was fired on by our own artillery through lack of coordination causing casualties. The Engineer Company, 34th Division, in building the division bridge chose a location open to enemy artillery fire when a position that had

(43) Statement by Captain James A. Luttrell, a Unit Commander present at the Volturno crossing. (44) A-1, p.58

*sh*

defilade from enemy fire was present. Lack of assault boats <sup>the use of</sup> caused <sup>aid</sup> improvised rafts to do a lot of damage when they broke up in swift currents. The attack started too late at night. Some of the battalions were unable to get their men across before dawn gave the enemy good observation to bring artillery and machine gun fire on them. The 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry made two attempts to cross at Triflisco Gap during daylight under observation of the enemy. The swift current of a flooded river caused some of our men, burdened with equipment, to drown.

#### LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Surprise is extremely valuable if it can be obtained in a river crossing.
2. Flexibility is necessary to the success of a mission.
3. Continuous communication is vital in almost every operation.
4. Prompt and proper dissemination of intercepted enemy messages will materially aid in "beating him to the punch".
5. Thorough reconnaissance and planning will pay dividends in a river crossing.
6. Units must be prepared to furnish their own anti-tank protection.
7. Air superiority is necessary for a successful large scale river crossing.
8. Field expedients can be used to advantage by ingenious soldiers. Ropes were particularly valuable in this crossing.
9. Good observation of the battlefield is important. It must be denied the enemy.

10. Attack over exposed areas or defended river crossings  
should be made at night if possible.

11. Night crossings of a defended river line should  
start early.

12. Strict control and an adequate guide system is  
necessary for a unit moving at night.