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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 10th MOUNTAIN DIVISION
ON MOUNT BELVEDERE, 16-26 FEBRUARY 1945
(NORTH APENNINES CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: A DIVISION ATTACKING
AND HOLDING KEY MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 10th MOUNTAIN DIVISION
ON MOUNT BELVEDERE, 18-26 FEBRUARY 1945
(NORTH APENNINES CAMPAIGN)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 10th Mountain Division on MOUNT BELVEDERE, ITALY, 18 - 26 February 1945, in the North Apennines Campaign.

The southern thrust of the Allied High Command's huge pincers movement to the heart of Germany had lapsed into its longest period of stalemate in late October 1944, thirteen months after the combined forces invaded Italy. (1)

The campaign which had started in NORTH AFRICA had progressed to Italy on 9 September 1943 with simultaneous landings at SALERNO by the Fifth US Army and at TARANTO by elements of the British Eighth Army, both preceded six days by the secondary effort of the British Eighth Army across the STRAITS OF MESSINA to the toe of Italy. There began the long and laborious fight up the toe and heel of Italy over high, rugged and inhospitable mountains, past NAPLES and the VOLTURNO RIVER to the harsh Winter Line of 1943-44. Even troops who had fought through North Africa and Sicily became well indoctrinated in the alogging slow movement caused by the rain and mud, the raw, chilling winds and snows of the valleys and mountain heights.

The ultimate success of the landing at ANZIO on 22 January 1944 helped break the Winter Line and together, under 15th Army Group, the two armies moved to the north. ROME fell to the advance on 5 June and the ARNO RIVER, 150 miles further up the boot was crossed in early August 1944. (2) (See Map A)

(1) A-2, p.88

(2) A-2, p.82

As a result of the Allied High Command's plan for landings in southern France on 15 August 1944, 15th Army Group was drained of many of its veteran divisions. (3) Also, the need for trained combat organizations in the low countries of Europe, France and Germany, took its toll of the Army's strength. It was apparent that Italy as an active theater had become a secondary effort. However, continued attacks were planned and conducted which moved the Allies from the ARNO RIVER line against the Gothic line to within fifteen miles of BOLOGNA. Increased enemy counterattacks from dominating terrain, mounting supply problems, tired troops, and few remaining reserves caused a halt to the offensive in October 1944. (4) But with the advent of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force and the as yet untested 10th Mountain Division late in the year, the campaign was to continue at an increasing pace in the spring of 1945.

This series of Allied thrusts through Italy was instrumental in holding German troops in Italy. It prevented any large scale movement of enemy troops out of Italy to support the fast weakening lines on the Russian front or stop the steady flow of US and British troops eastward through France into Germany.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

With the dawn of the new year, 15th Army Group found itself on the northern slopes of the APENNINE MOUNTAIN RANGE. Its front line was held by Fifth Army disposed on the left, stretching from the Ligurian Sea, east across the SERCHIO RIVER valley, up over the jagged barren mountains to the SENIO RIVER several miles east of the town of CASTEL VALSENIO. The British Eighth Army occupied the eastern sector with its right flank anchored on the ADRIATIC SEA, skirting the southern shores of LAKE COMACCHIO. (See Map B)

(3) A-2, p. 87

(4) A-2, p. 85

The only avenues of approach to BOLOGNA and the fertile PO VALLEY capable of carrying the advance of a highly mechanized and motorized army wound their way north under the direct surveillance of an enemy who was determined to hold the high ground at all cost.

Opposing the Allied effort, General von Vietinghoff, who had succeeded General Kesselring as Commander of Army Group Southwest, had approximately twenty-three German divisions and four Italian Fascist Divisions. (5) Marshall Graziani, who commanded the Ligurian Army, was utilizing approximately half of these divisions in the west on the Franco-Italian frontier, while the remainder were guarding the rear areas from partisan activity. The rest were split between Tenth and Fourteenth Armies, blocking the approaches to the PO VALLEY in strong well developed positions astride the main avenues of approach, Highways 12, 64 and 65. (See Map B)

During the period of relative combat inactivity which commenced in late October, 15th Army Group concerned itself with the task of rehabilitating its combat troops. Replacements of personnel and equipment and the resupply of ammunition, food and clothing, together with rear area rest for the front line units was of prime importance. Plans were also drawn up that would bring an end to the Italian war. In the final offensive to be launched with the coming of spring, it was planned to initiate a double penetration, one by each army, to break out into the PO VALLEY, followed by a double envelopment south of the PO RIVER and then a single push up the center of Italy to the German boarder. (See Map B)

To Fifth Army fell the task of the western penetration. (See Map B) The push would follow the general trace outlined by the PANARO RIVER on the west flank and the RENO RIVER on the east flank. The operation would open Highway 64 to the PO VALLEY. Fifth Army's IV Corps was occupying

(5) Personal Information from General von Vietinghoff

this sector in the center of the Army area of responsibility. II Corps was on the right (east) flank maintaining contact with the British Eighth Army's XIII Corps. The left (west) flank was held by the 92d Infantry Division.

The key to Fifth Army's advance in its assigned zone of action was MOUNT BELVEDERE, its twin peak, MOUNT CORGOLESCO, and the three mile saddle ridge line to MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA to the northeast. From the 3736 foot MOUNT BELVEDERE and surroundings, the Germans commanded observation of Highway 64. Three attempts had already been made up the sprawling slopes, only to be beaten back by the well organized defenses on MOUNT BELVEDERE supported by the protecting MOUNT MANCINELLO, MOUNT SERRASICCIA, MOUNT CAPPEL BUSO, MOUNT PIZZO DI CAMPIANO ridge line several hundred meters to the west. This ridge line afforded the defending Germans excellent observation and fields of fire of all approaches to MOUNT BELVEDERE. This four mile ridge line posed an equally important barrier, for it rose from the bed of the DARDAGNA RIVER to a height of 4526 feet, the first 1500 feet being almost a sheer rock face. It was imperative that this ridge, known as RIVA RIDGE, be captured before any attempt could be made up MOUNT BELVEDERE'S contrastingly gently rising slopes. The plans for the spring offensive utilized the MOUNT BELVEDERE mass as a springboard to the PO VALLEY. It had to be taken before the final push started.

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF IV CORPS

As directed by Fifth Army's operational directives relative to deceiving the enemy and keeping him uncertain about Allied future intentions, and preventing him from withdrawing from the front, IV Corps maintained aggressive, active patrolling and raiding of the enemy lines. (6)

(6) A-6, p. 111

Task Force 45, composed of converted AA troops under command of the 45th AA Brigade, (7), had been actively probing in their sector on the left (west) while the 1st Brazilian Expeditionary Force was getting the feel of front line duty on the right (east). IV Corps right (east) boundary rested on the SELTA CREEK and the left (west) boundary met the 92d Infantry Division a few miles east of BAGNI DI LUCCA. (See Map B)

As a result of a shift in troops under Fifth Army, in January, IV Corps was assigned the 10th Mountain Infantry Division. On 28 January 1945, the division arrived in the Corps sector and was placed under control of Task Force 45, on its right (east) flank. This was the largest single United States Army unit to be received by Fifth Army during the second Italian winter. (8)

It was during the early days of IV Corps planning for the operation to clear the MOUNT BELVEDERE area in preparation for the spring offensive, that Major General G. P. Hays, who commanded the 10th Mountain Infantry Division, suggested to Major General W. D. Crittenberger, IV Corps Commander, the brilliant and daring idea of scaling the MOUNT MANCINELLO, CAPPEL BUSO, PIZZO DI CAMPIANO ridge to insure friendly control of this critical terrain, preparing the way for the main assault on MOUNT BELVEDERE. On the capable shoulders of Lt Colonel Hampton, commanding the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, fell the task of working out the details of the plans. (9) For in his battalion was concentrated the cream of the United States Army mountaineers. Names of world famous rock climbers were listed on the rosters of the battalion's companies.

The final Corps plans directed the 10th Mountain Infantry Division to seize and hold the RIVA RIDGE on D-1, and on D Day attack and seize the MOUNT BELVEDERE, MOUNT GORGOLESCO, MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA area, defend it

(7) A-6, p. 6

(8) A-6, p. 37

(9) Statement of Captain Heidner, C.O., Co A, 86th Mountain Infantry

and prepare for further action to the northeast. The 1st Brazilian Infantry Division would support the main effort by attacking and holding MOUNT CASTELLO in the east. (See Map C)

SITUATION OF THE 10th MOUNTAIN INFANTRY DIVISION

Of all the divisions in the army, the 10th Mountain Infantry Division was probably the most unique, for it was the only one of its kind trained by the United States Army. Its personnel, mostly volunteers, if not well versed in skiing, mountain climbing and the use of pack animals in all kinds of mountainous terrain, when assigned to the division, was thoroughly taught those arts in the rugged peaks and valleys around Camp Hale, Colorado. The excellent physical condition imparted to personnel trained in mountainous operations was soon to be seen.

In organization, the Mountain Division differed from the standard infantry division in several respects. Of primary importance was the use of horses and mules as its main means of transporting supplies, and the substitution of a Quartermaster Battalion in lieu of the standard infantry organic company. (10)

Although one fourth of the division were veterans of the Aleutian Islands, as members of the 87th Mountain Infantry, this was the first engagement for the division as a whole. (11) It had been a long trek from the snow covered mountains of Camp Hale, through six months of the dust and heat of Camp Swift, Texas, across the Atlantic, through the staging areas of the Port of Naples, and up over ice covered roads to the feet of snow capped MOUNT BELVEDERE.

As the divisional units arrived in Task Force 45's sector, they were rotated into the line to get the feel and experience of patrolling against and living under the eye of the enemy. The majority of the time on the line was spent in the MOUNT BELVEDERE sector. Training programs were

(10) Personal knowledge
(11) Personal knowledge

investigated designed to polish up small unit operations and to bring the personnel back to the fine edge of physical condition needed for the coming operations. Included in the training program was the study of sand table models and aerial photographs of the objective areas. Continuous reconnaissance was carried out by the units at all times to locate the vital avenues of approach to the objectives, the position of enemy guns, location of mine fields, and to capture enemy personnel to facilitate the development of their positions. Dress rehearsals were also held over terrain very similar to MOUNT BELVEDERE and RIVA RIDGE.

During this period the division front was quiet with only ineffective sporadic shelling by the Germans, and an occasional fire fight engaged in by patrols.

Intelligence estimates resulting from the many reconnaissance patrols accurately placed four enemy battalions of the 232d Division defending the MOUNT BELVEDERE, DELLA TORRACCIA area, with four more battalions in reserve. Eighty-three enemy artillery pieces had also been located in the MONTESE area.

THE DIVISION PLAN FOR THE OPERATION (See Map D)

The final division plan directed the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry to seize and hold the MOUNT MANGINELLO, PIZZA DI CAMPIANO ridge on D-1; to protect the left flank of the division, and assist by fire the advance of the 87th Mountain Infantry. (12)

The 87th Mountain Infantry, attacking with two battalions abreast, was assigned the western slopes of MOUNT BELVEDERE. Its mission was to seize the towns of CORONA, FLORIO, and POLIA on the west slope, and VALPIANO on the northwest slopes of the mountain, and to secure the western portion of the summit. Upon completion of this phase, the regiment would, upon orders, relieve the 85th Mountain Infantry on MOUNT BELVEDERE and MOUNT GORGOLESCO

(12) A-5, Annex No. I

including the saddle between, and prepare defensive positions.

To the 85th Mountain Infantry, also attacking with two battalions abreast, fell the brunt of the attack. Its mission was to secure the eastern summit of MOUNT BELVEDERE and MOUNT CONGOLESCO to the northeast, and prepare for further action to seize MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA.

The 3d Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, on the division right flank, was assigned the mission of taking the towns of SAN FILIPPINA and MARRANANA on the southeastern slopes. The latter objective was to be held until the 1st Brazilian Infantry could move up and take over the position. The 86th Mountain Infantry (-) would be in division reserve.

Since the enemy had complete observation of the SILIA VALLEY, which lay directly south of MOUNT BELVEDERE, the success of the plan necessitated movement to the assault positions and the assault itself be conducted at night. With the hope of gaining tactical surprise, preparatory artillery fire was omitted. However, a well coordinated fire support plan was organized for the following days from organic and Corps artillery, as well as air support from Rover Joe of the XXII Tactical Air Command.

FINAL PREPARATION

Elements of the division in the western sector of Task Force 45 were relieved by the 473d Infantry on 15 February and were concentrated in the TIZZANO area in the southern reaches of the SILIA VALLEY. Task Force 45 Field Order No. 9 received on 15 February 1945, directed that the division revert to IV Corps control and assume responsibility for its zone of action, effective 0600, 18 February 1945. The time of attack for the main effort was set for 2500 hours on 19 February 1945. The 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, would jump off at 2300 hours, 18 February 1945.

A last minute change in the divisional plan augmented the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry with Company F of the 2d Battalion.

By morning, 18 February, all units had moved up to their assembly positions in preparation for the movement to the line of departure. The 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, had moved up to FARNH under the very noses of the enemy during the night of 17 - 18 February. The rest of the attack elements were to move up and take cover along the line of departure during darkness on 18 - 19 February. The weather had become warmer during the preceding day and the skies were clear. The melting snow, however, made foot and vehicle movement all the more difficult.

NARRATIVE

The assault up the cliffs of the MOUNT MASCINELLO, PIZZO DI CAMPIANO ridge against the enemy occupying its heights by the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, jumped off as scheduled at 2300, 18 February 1945. Company A moved against MOUNT MASCINELLO, Company B towards MOUNT CAPPEL BUSO, and Company C against MOUNT SERRASICCIA. Company F had been given the mission of reaching the southern slopes of MOUNT MASCINELLO to provide left flank security. A detached platoon of Company A was given the task of securing the PIZZO DI CAMPIANO spur to the northwest. The climb up the rock face was accomplished without incident. However, it was a long, slow, tedious and tiring climb for the attackers, for they carried all of the necessary supplies on their backs. The use of attack platoons composed of the expert mountain climbers, lead the way in each company, picking out the easiest ascent of a difficult climb; inserting pitons and fixing ropes for the main body. Of considerable aid in the climb up the first 1500 feet was the artificial moonlight which was cast over the area by searchlight beams playing in the distance. Shortly after midnight a haze drifted over the ridge giving added security as the troops neared the top. As a result, the German defenders were taken completely by surprise--so sure were they

that this approach to their positions was impassable. The attack hit the top of the ridge during the relief of the 2d Battalion, 1044th Grenadier Regiment by elements of the 232d Fusilier Regiment, thus giving the attackers additional advantage.

All units reached their initial objectives with no casualties. Company A arrived on top of MOUNT MANGINELLO at 190300, Company B was on CAPPEL BUSO at 190210, and Company C secured SERRASICCIA by 190500. Company F of the 2d Battalion had closed on the southern slopes of MOUNT MANGINELLO and had made contact with Company A by 190337.

Even though Companies B and C were held up by scattered small arms and mortar fire during the last stages of occupying their assigned positions, the battalion succeeded in capturing or killing the garrisons of each objective, and the ridge was declared secure by 190600. The first counterattacks were received by the platoon of Company A after a hard nine hour, (13), climb up to the crest of PIZZO DI CAMPIANO. Although the main counter offensives appeared to be against the area held by Company A's detached platoon, all units of the battalion received and successfully repulsed many counterattacks during the day of 19 February in an attempt by the Germans to regain the lost vantage points on the ridge.

The action had been an immense tactical success. The occupation gave the division the security and protection it needed for the left flank. During the day supporting engineers erected a trestle which reached two thirds of the way up the cliff and most of the problems in supply and evacuation were thus overcome. It also helped in the movement of two 75 mm pack howitzers and seven .50 caliber machine guns to the ridge top which were to be used in supporting the advance of the 07th Mountain Infantry during the next phase. (14)

(13) A-6, p. 81

(14) A-6, p. 81

THE ATTACK AGAINST MOUNT BELVEDERE - MOUNT GORGOLESCO

With the successful capture of the ridge, the rest of the MOUNT BELVEDERE attack plan was ready to unroll. As the mountain climbers of the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, worked their way up the ridge to the west the preceding night, the attack forces of the division moved the eight miles from SILLA and occupied pre-planned positions in buildings, homes and barns that dotted the landscape near the line of departure. Strict instructions were issued that every one would stay under cover, only routine movement normal to the area was sanctioned. At 2300 that night, 19 February 1945, the main attack jumped off. The line of departure generally followed the road running from QUERCIOIA on the left to GRECCIA on the right. (See Map C)

The 1st and 2d Battalions of the 87th Mountain Infantry, the 1st Battalion on the right (east), crossed the line of departure and headed in the direction of CORONA. In the center sector the 1st and 3d Battalions of the 85th Mountain Infantry also moved out. The 3d Battalion on the left started up MOUNT BELVEDERE foothills, and the 1st Battalion, several hundred meters to the east, advanced towards MOUNT GORGOLESCO. On the right flank, the 3d Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, moved over the southeastern slopes towards SAN PILOMENA. (15)

Company B of the 87th Mountain Infantry met the first enemy resistance in the form of superior small arms fire that pinned them down some 800 yards past the line of departure. By use of hand grenades, the enemy was dislodged and the company moved on to the north. Meanwhile, Company C had been slowed down by a series of mine fields which had been uncovered by melting snow.

Just short of CORONA, Company B again ran into trouble. Grazing fire sweeping down the western slopes of MOUNT BELVEDERE, and artillery fire,

(15) A-S, p. 15

apparently being directed from the town of CORONA, had nailed them to the ground. Relief arrived when Company C, having cleared the mine fields by use of guides who had reconnoitered the area previously, advanced on CORONA and relieved the pressure. The two lead companies bypassed CORONA, leaving it to be mopped up by Company A, and proceeded to the objectives up the western slopes. At 0430 the battalion reached the summit, and the town of VALPIANO fell to Company C at 0600.

The 2d Battalion of the 87th Mountain Infantry to the west also encountered resistance to the east of FLORIO and POLLIA shortly after midnight. Heavy mortar, artillery and small arms fire encountered by Company F halted their forward movement until dawn when they regrouped, attacked and captured FLORIO at 0615. Company G, after floundering through several mine fields, had moved into positions west of POLLIA at 1030. The assistance of machine guns, 75mm and small arms support from the CAMPIANO ridge, and air support from Rover Joe, had been of extreme help after dawn in the success of the regiment's first offensive.

The 87th Mountain Infantry occupied all objectives and held the ground from FLORIO to POLLIA through VALPIANO, and up to MOUNT BEVEDERE'S peak as scheduled. Meanwhile, the 85th Mountain Infantry was moving towards its objectives. The 3d Battalion, although receiving fire of all types, had advanced to the right side of MOUNT BEVEDERE. The leading companies had begun to encircle the peak when heavy small arms fire raked their positions. However, by a small enveloping maneuver, the resistance was overcome and Company I reached the top by 0410. The battalion secured complete control of the objective by 1000, but continued to receive heavy artillery fire from the northeast. Nevertheless, they proceeded to consolidate their positions, dig in, and establish contact with the 1st Battalion.

The 1st Battalion had advanced up MOUNT GORGOLESCO, through known mine fields, without incident until they neared the top. Then mortar fire, which

was thought to be final protective fire, fell throughout the route of advance, and although it was not heavy enough to halt the advance, it did cause a number of casualties. At 0500 the lead companies assaulted the objective and the summit was in the hands of the 1st Battalion by 0610.

On the extreme right, the 3d Battalion of the 86th Mountain Infantry had succeeded in passing through intermittent mortar fires and into SAN FILOMENA by 0345 with practically no opposition.

With the 86th Mountain Infantry securing both flanks of the division area, and the 87th Mountain Infantry occupying the gap from the western flank up to MOUNT BELVEDERE Summit, the 85th Mountain Infantry proceeded to continue the attack towards MOUNT DELLA TORBACCIA.

THE ATTACK AGAINST HILL 1088

At 0730, 20 February, Company A, which had been in reserve trailing the 1st Battalion during the initial attack, took the lead towards Hill 1088, the next objective enroute to MOUNT DELLA TORBACCIA. Companies B and C, after clearing the MOUNT BELVEDERE - MOUNT GORGOLESCO saddle, followed in column preceding the reserve 2d Battalion. Shortly after Company A moved over MOUNT GORGOLESCO'S ridge down on to the connecting saddle, it was hit with intense and accurate artillery fire. Counter battery fire partially neutralized the shelling, however, and a definite reduction was created by Rover Joe aircraft which arrived shortly after the attack began. They continued to provide close in support for the remainder of the day, bombing and strafing the enemy positions. Company B had also been caught in heavy machine gun fire and suffered many casualties.

Within an hour, the leading company continued down the ridge line and moved on to Hill 1088 at 0900. Shortly after 1000 the first of a number of severe counterattacks received during the day, was launched. The Battalion

was successful in repelling them with light casualties as they dug in to hold the newly won positions. At this time, the Regimental Commander of the 85th Mountain Infantry directed that the 2d Battalion pass through the 1st Battalion at 1800 hours and continue the attack. About 500 yards in front of the 1st Battalion between Hill 1088 and Hill 1053, the 2d Battalion met such heavy resistance in the form of small arms and artillery fire, that they were ordered to hold up the attack and prepare to continue the next morning.

In the meantime, the 3d Battalion of the 86th Mountain Infantry had advanced across the southeastern slopes of the MOUNT BELVEDERE, MOUNT GORGOLESCO ridge and captured the town of MAZZANCA at 1500.

During the day preparations were completed to have the 1st Battalion, 87th Mountain Infantry, relieve the 3d Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry of its positions on MOUNT BELVEDERE and MOUNT GORGOLESCO on the morning of 21 February as planned. The 3d Battalion was to rejoin the 85th Mountain Infantry in preparation for the last phase.

THE ATTACK AGAINST HILL 1053

With the coming of daylight, the 2d Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry, continued the attack through the tree covered approaches to Hill 1053 against well prepared positions. At about 0430 observed artillery fire covered the entire area forcing the battalion to seek cover. This shelling inflicted heavy casualties, many caused by tree bursts. Later, the battalion commander notified the Regimental Commander that the unit was in such serious condition that the attack could not be continued. However, he was ordered to press the attack vigorously, and by nightfall the battalion had secured Hill 1053. Support by Rover Joe and long range artillery again succeeded in quieting the enemy's artillery.

During the day, the 1st Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry was relieved of its positions on the MOUNT MANCINELLO, PIZZO DI CAMPIANO ridge by elements of the 10th Anti-Tank Battalion and the 10th Reconnaissance Troop. Also, four tanks of the 751st Tank Battalion had been successful in reaching positions on the top of the MOUNT BELVEDERE, MOUNT GORGOLESCO ridge, (16), where they were welcome additions to the defensive organization.

During the night of 21-22 February, the 2d Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry received intense artillery shelling and several counter attacks, however, on the following morning they moved out again towards MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA. The battalion inched ahead against very heavy small arms fire from well prepared defenses. At 1700 that afternoon, being low on personnel, ammunition, food and water, the battalion was told to consolidate its positions and prepare to receive supplies and replacements.

As of 1200 on 23 February, the consolidation was still taking place. The 1st and 3d Battalions, 85th Mountain Infantry were in the process of cleaning out bypassed pockets of enemy resistance and establishing contact. Repelling counterattacks aimed at the flanks of the spearhead composed of forces ranging from ten to twenty enemy kept most of the battalions' forces occupied during the day. However, the proportion and intensity of these attacks had been steadily decreasing as a result of the division's determined advances. The aircraft of Rover Joe were again over the area, strafing and bombing artillery positions, setting fire to enemy C. P.s, and ammunition supply points. (17)

During the period of consolidation, the 3d Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, which had been moving along the eastern slopes of the GORGOLESCO - DELLA TORRACCIA ridge, was ordered to move up to the ridge line, pass through the 2d Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry and prepare to continue

(16) A-5, p. 61

(17) A-5, p. 64

the attack to take the final objective. This attack was to commence at 0700, 24 February 1945.

THE ATTACK AGAINST MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA

With the exception of occasional artillery duels, the night passed with none of the expected and normal counterattacks materializing as the 3d Battalion moved up to the ridge and through the occupying troops to the attack area. As scheduled, the attack jumped off with Company I on the right and Company L on the left.

The 3d Battalion Commander had found on his reconnaissance that the ground from the line of departure towards the objective fell away rapidly immediately in front of his position and continued in a long easy swell up the side of MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA. To compensate for this lack of cover and concealment, he gathered all the machine guns of his battalion and all he could borrow from the 2d Battalion, and placed them in positions to give continuous overhead fire. It was possible for all the guns to commence firing as the troops moved over the line of departure and continue this curtain of protection until the advanced echelons were practically on top of the enemy positions.

This excellent support together with well coordinated strikes by Rever Joe allowed the advance to move into the enemy positions with little opposition from small arms and artillery fire.

As the battalion moved into the enemy positions with the concurrent lifting of the supporting fires, they were met with extremely heavy resistance. However, as a result of excellent fighting by all members, the battalion gained the summit of MOUNT DELLA TORRACCIA at 1500.

Within an hour the Germans had recovered, and twenty minutes later they hit the western flank with the last severe counterattack to be

received in the operation. No ground was lost and the attack was over at 1850. The rest of the night spasmodic attacks accompanied by artillery and mortar fire were launched in a piece-meal attempt to recover the last of the high ground overlooking the southern approaches to the valley beyond.

By 0700 on the morning of 25 February, the enemy had been definitely repulsed, and the final objective was well organized.

The 10th Mountain Division had been successful in its first combat assignment. By a vigorously pursued attack, following a daring plan of maneuver over terrain stubbornly defended by the enemy, the division had seized all of its objectives, driving a very important wedge into the side of the German mountain defenses. (18)

This wedge provided IV Corps the necessary opening in the enemy's anchor line to pour through to BOLOGNA and the PO VALLEY, enabling Fifth Army to complete its plan of maneuver, and together with the British Eighth Army, bring victory to 15th Army Group in Italy.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. COMBAT INDOCTRINATION

The opportunity afforded elements of the division to become accustomed to conditions of combat prior to the actual engagement was fortunate. Practically all echelons of the division had an opportunity to adjust to front line duty by actual patrol and reconnaissance activity. The mere fact of living under combat conditions on a relatively quiet sector had its effect on the individual's mental adjustment to what followed. It was through the use of limited patrols that grew to lengthy sorties through the enemy's outposts, that the cool and calm cooperation and coordination so essential to successful combat, was developed. Individual resourcefulness and

(18) A-5, p. 65.

initiative under fire was also developed. In addition, the troops seen learned the capabilities of their weapons, the meaning of fire and movement, and the effect of cover and concealment.

These circumstances also afforded the command echelon an opportunity to see where prior training programs had failed while time was still available to correct the noted deficiencies.

A definite advantage in this instance, although not always available, was the opportunity for the soldier to observe the terrain he was expected to fight over and become accustomed to its demands. This was especially advantageous in view of the night attack over mountainous terrain which took place.

2. TRAINING

To analyze the operation of the division as a whole, or any one of its unit actions, as to cause and effect, the training received must be considered. For with one exception, referred to later, the action of all elements was combined in an outstanding success, witnessed by the three former futile attempts at occupying the area.

The training the division received in the United States had been very thorough in all phases of mountain operation. In part the program included:

1. Rock climbing technique,
2. Use of animal transport,
3. Principles of winter bivouac,
4. Use of special clothing and equipment,
5. Application of tactical principles to mountainous warfare, and
6. Use of over-snow vehicles.

It was the knowledge and ability gained from this training that created a successful operation where others had failed. The program had been so arduous that after the MOUNT BELVEDERE operation, several persons remarked to the effect that it was nothing compared to the "D" series.

The value of studying the sand table models, aerial photographs and stereoptic pairs of the area, which was part of the program instituted by the division prior to combat, is readily seen, especially during the night attacks. The reduction in confusion and mix up concerning locations, routes of advance, and objectives, facilitated the speed of the attack and contributed a great deal to the element of secrecy.

Such detailed and minute training is essential to mountain operations conducted either in daylight or darkness.

5. TACTICS

The tactics employed in the MOUNT BELVEDERE operation were dictated by the terrain. All phases of the main offensive were frontal attacks. Regardless of direction, the attackers were moving straight into prepared fields of fire. The attempt to overcome this disadvantage resulted in the use of several principles essential to mountain operations: first, the night attack, coupled with a second prerequisite, secrecy. The preliminary acquisition of the MOUNT MANGIARILLO, CAMPIANO ridge and the initial attack of MOUNT BELVEDERE and MOUNT GORGONESCO, both conducted at night without preparatory fires, are even more outstanding in their success when it is realized that green troops were participating in their first action.

A third principle, utilized for the first time with success in the Italian theater, was the close coordination between and support received from the Tactical Air Command. Close in air support was accomplished by use of a modified air-ground system similar to the system that became so well known in other theaters.

The fourth principle was the importance of ridges and ridge lines. All routes of advance were planned along the traces of the commanding ridges. This kept the fighting elements out of the draws and ravines where there is no escape from enfilade fire, and kept them on commanding terrain.

4. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

Again, as a result of adequate training and planning, the division as a whole suffered no difficulty with supply and evacuation procedures. By use of the increased quartermaster strength, the organization of porter platoons within the combat echelons, and the use of mules, supplies moved forward when they were needed and where they were needed.

Evacuation of casualties, although made even more difficult by the speed of the advance, had been organized to handle all movement from the battalion aid stations, located on tops of the mountains and ridges, by hand and mule carried litters to the rear.

5. 2D BATTALION, 85TH MOUNTAIN INFANTRY

The failure of the 2d Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry, to move rapidly through the tree covered ridge enroute to Hill 1053 upon receiving artillery fire, resulted in exceptionally heavy casualties. By allowing the battalion to become pinned down, the commander not only exposed his unit to the disastrous effect of tree bursts, but lost the opportunity to move forward out of the impact area to force the enemy artillery to cease firing when the battalion approached the defended positions. Had the battalion moved on through the wooded area, the casualties would have been much lighter and the commander would have retained the initiative, and of course, obtained his objective much earlier.

Any unit, regardless of size, must keep moving when fired upon by either small arms, mortar or artillery. To halt and seek cover is an invitation to heavy casualties and failure. Continued movement creates uncertainty and confusion in the ranks of the enemy.

6. USE OF BATTALION AND COMPANY WEAPONS IN GENERAL SUPPORT

Although not a normal procedure, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry, in his use of all the automatic weapons in his battalion and those he could borrow, gave the battalion excellent, accurate, direct

fire, overhead protection. This employment in general support allowed his unit to move in much closer than if artillery and mortar fire had been employed.

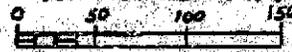
However, due to the often extremely rugged terrain found in mountains, and the attendant difficulties in displacing company machine guns forward in a hurry, it is believed this practice should not be encouraged. The opportunity to use the guns in defense against counterattacks would normally be lost if they were continually kept in general support.

7. MOUNTAIN WARFARE

It is, I believe, logical to assume that mountain warfare can well be classed as a special type operation just as amphibious, jungle or airborne operations are classed. This fact is born out by the difficulties of logistical support, evacuation, and mere living, which all units encountered when they were first committed to combat in mountainous terrain. By pure trial and error, these units overcame the lack of knowledge and training necessary to success in such combat. They also were quick in the discovery that certain equipment normal to a standard infantry division was not suitable for operations in the mountains and that specialized equipment and a modified organization were needed. Too, they learned that a knowledge of conditions to be found in such terrain, such as thick fog, sudden storms and extreme temperature changes, as well as man's capabilities when confronted with precipitous ridges can work to his advantage.

The 10th Mountain Division had been thoroughly trained for this type of task. They proved that exaggerated terrain and its attendant difficulties could be overcome to the point of exceptional tactical success. They had been provided with special equipment and trained in its use to facilitate movement and living under these demanding conditions. The organization of the division had also been modified to meet the specialized requirements in terrain, which limited freedom of movement and made supply and communication unduly difficult.

MAP A
OPERATIONS IN ITALY
9 SEPTEMBER 1943
TO
20 OCTOBER 1944



SCALE IN MILES



MAP C

SCHEME OF MANEUVER

10th MTN DIV

VAL BELVEDERE-DELLA TORRACCA
OPERATION

