

RECOLLECTIONS OF AN INFANTRY COMPANY COMMANDER

MAJOR GENERAL ALBERT H. SMITH, JR., U.S. ARMY RETIRED

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In the 1st Infantry Division—the “Big Red One”—our ultimate goal, of course, was to win the war against Nazi Germany and then go home. We were dedicated to “doing it right”—accomplishing every mission as soon as we could with the fewest possible casualties. By mid-1943, 1st Infantry Division soldiers were experienced, professional warriors who could be counted on to get the job done.

My remembrances recorded in this two-part article begin

near Oran, Algeria, during late May 1943 and conclude with the successful end of the Sicily campaign in late August. I extend special thanks to Albert N. Garland, co-author of the U.S. Army’s official history of the Sicily campaign, for helping me put these remembrances into an accurate historical framework.

Finally, because they played important roles in our Sicily victory, I have included anecdotal recollections of two great 16th Infantry Regiment combat leaders—Major General

Charles T. Horner, Jr. (now deceased), then a major who led the 3d Battalion, 16th Infantry, and Colonel (Retired) Bryce F. Denno, then executive officer and later commander of the 2d Battalion.

To most Americans today, the capture of the island of Sicily by a combined U.S.-British force in mid-1943 is one of the forgotten campaigns of World War II. Even within the U.S. Army, it seems the only people who remember it at all are those in the airborne and Ranger communities, and theirs is but a part of a much larger story.

The battle has not been forgotten by those of us from the 1st Infantry Division who went into Sicily on 10 July 1943 and who survived the next 38 days to fight again in Normandy in June 1944.

I had been a member of the 16th Infantry (one of the division's three infantry regiments, the others being the 18th and 26th) since July 1940. I had commanded Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry from June 1942 through the invasion of North Africa (Operation TORCH) and the Tunisian campaign before being wounded during the battle of El Guettar in late March 1943. (The medics evacuated me—by plane, train, and ambulance—all the way back to the 12th General Hospital in Oran, Algeria.) Recovered and returned to full duty in mid-May 1943, I was given command of Company L, 3d Battalion, 16th Infantry.

It was not a happy division that I rejoined: The soldiers' morale was way down, and the division had acquired a bad reputation for brawling "in towns from Bizerte to Oran," as General Omar Bradley later wrote in his book *A General's Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1983).

Their actions should not have surprised anyone, however. First, the men had been given no time to relax between the end of the fighting in Tunisia and the beginning of a strenuous training program to get them ready for Sicily. Instead, they had been sentenced to spend time in one dirty, dusty training camp after another for the next two months.

On top of that, we in the 1st Division had somehow gotten it into our heads that the division would be sent back to the United States when the fighting in North Africa ended. Our soldiers were understandably upset when they learned they would lead the assault into Sicily.

Originally, in fact, the 1st Division had not been scheduled for the Sicily operation. Lieutenant General Omar Bradley (II Corps commander) was to lead two of the three assault forces—the newly arrived 36th Infantry Division and the 45th Infantry Division, which was coming directly from the United States with only a short stop in North Africa before going into Sicily. But he had refused to accept two untried and untested divisions for this major amphibious operation. He had insisted that he needed the 1st Division to bolster his chances of succeeding. General Dwight Eisenhower, the senior U.S. commander in the theater and the overall commander for the Sicily operation, had agreed to substitute the 1st Division for the 36th.

For that matter, Bradley and his II Corps headquarters had not originally been scheduled to participate either. Major

General Ernest J. Dawley's VI Corps headquarters, also newly arrived in North Africa, had been tagged for it. But Lieutenant General George S. Patton, Jr., the U.S. Seventh Army commander, did not want to go into Sicily with an untried corps headquarters. He knew Bradley and the II Corps, and Eisenhower had agreed to this substitution.

As this high-level drama played out, I joined Company L on 20 May 1943 in the 3d Battalion's austere tent camp near Arzew, Algeria. It was immediately obvious that I had to do something, and quickly, to improve the soldiers' morale. I brought my senior NCOs together to talk about the problem, and they recommended we begin a simple, if unauthorized, rest and recuperation (R&R) program. They wanted me to excuse one platoon of soldiers from training each day and provide them with truck transportation for the round trip into Oran and back to camp. The men could spend a full day there, forgetting about the war. My first sergeant and platoon sergeants guaranteed there would be no bad-conduct reports and our soldiers would be clear of Oran each day before the 1700 curfew imposed by the Mediterranean Base Section.

It worked. The program was entirely successful, and the company's morale and spirit went way up. No new commander ever had a better opportunity to help his men and also gain their support.

A short time later we moved to the Fifth Army Invasion Training Center at St. Leu, Algeria, where we were trained by the 36th Infantry Division in landings and movements inland, which culminated in our conducting live fire attacks on fortified defensive positions. Although we agreed we needed this kind of refresher training, we did think it strange that battle-tested veterans were being taught how to fight by units that had never heard a shot fired in anger.

Happily, we moved on to Algiers the second week in June. Here, we continued small unit training, drew the necessary supplies for the forthcoming operation, and prepared our vehicles for the invasion. It was also here that I encountered two rather serious disciplinary problems.

In the first one, a young private decided he would prefer a court martial to combat in Sicily; he also told his squad leader, his platoon sergeant, and his first sergeant he would not go on kitchen duty as directed. When these NCOs failed to persuade him to do otherwise, they brought the problem to my attention.

Once again I called my senior NCOs together to talk over this breach of discipline. We concluded that every man assigned to the company *would* go into Sicily unless an individual member was declared physically unfit for combat by the battalion surgeon. We felt that if we allowed even one to get out of the invasion, we would be making a big mistake. We therefore placed the private under a 24-hour armed guard and confined him to the immediate vicinity of his pup tent. We told him he could return to regular duty status whenever he decided to report for kitchen duty. He continued refusing to do this until after we had embarked on an LCI (landing craft, infantry) and headed for Sicily. He went on to do well in the fighting and later thanked me for saving his honor and his reputation.

The other case involved a technical sergeant who was one of the best infantry platoon sergeants in the division. Because almost everyone wanted to go into Algiers, only company commanders could authorize departures from their bivouac areas. We had a jeep and trailer on the road almost every day picking up supplies in the city, and this NCO was in charge of one of those supply runs.

Just before evening chow on a day he had gone into town, two military police jeeps escorted him, his driver, and a half-dozen of my soldiers to my headquarters tent. It seemed that, instead of picking up rations as he was supposed to do, he had hosted an uproarious party through the streets of Algiers, including a trip past General Eisenhower's headquarters. By the time the military police finally stopped this group of partygoers, there were 24 individuals (U.S. soldiers, French civilians, and Arab merchants) plus much wine in the company's jeep and trailer. Obviously, the group had enjoyed a great time "on the town."

I blistered the six junior soldiers with oral reprimands. Since the NCO was responsible for what had happened, however, I reduced him to the rank of private first class (PFC). He accepted this punishment without protest, asking only what his job would be during the invasion. I replied, "Unless your platoon leader recommends otherwise, you will continue as platoon sergeant without stripes." He did a great job during the invasion and regained his chevrons a week or so after we landed.

On 26 June our battalion sailed from Algeria aboard five

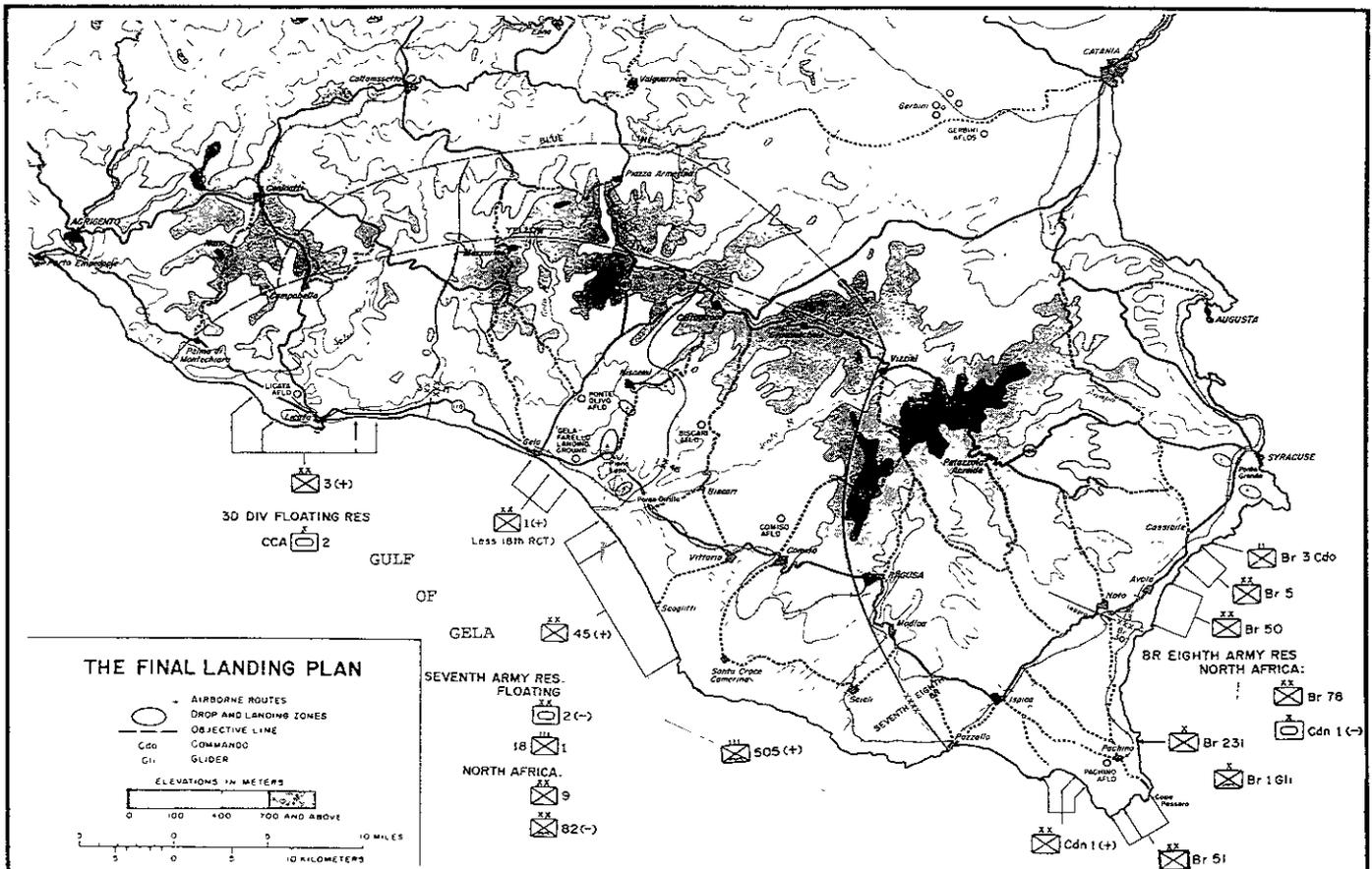
LCIs bound for Bizerte, where we disembarked for a short stay in a miserable forward assembly area. An LCI is not a pleasure craft by any measurement, but ours certainly looked good to us when we got back on board on 5 July.

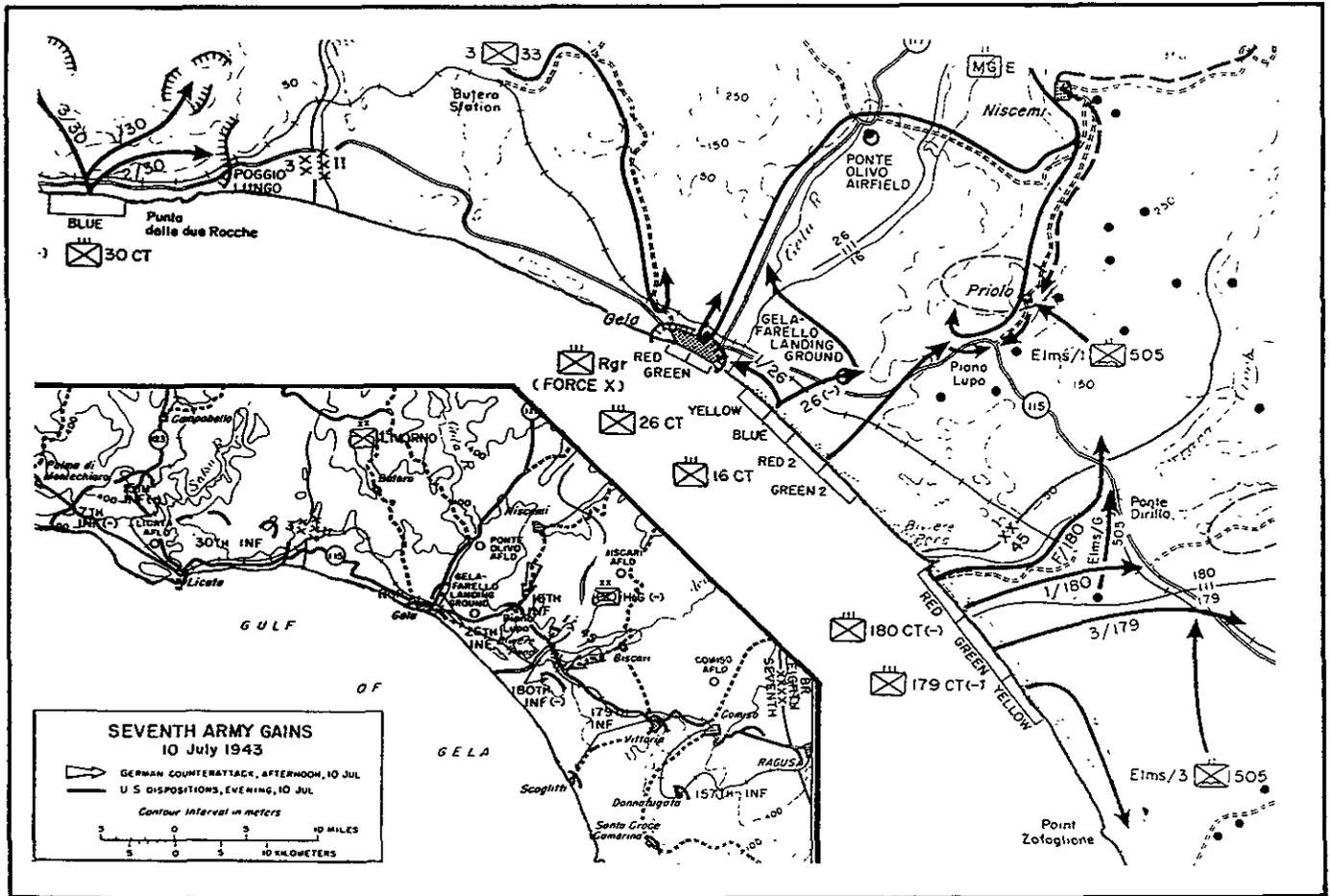
Better yet, we soon moved outside Bizerte harbor and anchored in a calm, beautifully blue Mediterranean Sea. We permitted those soldiers who could swim to do so while the others took advantage of the good weather and relaxed on deck. This would be their last R&R until the fighting stopped in mid-August. We were excited and our spirits were high as the invasion armada formed around us.

During this short period of relaxation, we were able to review certain aspects of the coming campaign and our specific role in it.

Sicily, shaped like a great triangle, is roughly the size of the state of Vermont. Its coast has numerous sand-and-shingle beaches that range in length from less than 100 yards to several miles. A narrow coastal plain backs the beaches in the northwestern corner of the island, then widens somewhat midway along the southwestern coast opposite the Gulf of Gela (our destination). All of the island's airfields were located on the coastal plains, none more than 15 miles inland. In the northeastern corner stand the island's highest and most rugged mountains, with many peaks from 4,500 to 5,400 feet, and with massive Mount Etna, 10,000 feet high and 20 miles in diameter at its base.

Throughout the island, the better and more important roads were near the coast. In the interior, the roads were poorly sur-





Map 2

faced and narrow, with sharp curves and steep grades. Most towns and cities were built on hilltops for the sake of defense, with steep, winding approaches and narrow streets. The major ports were Messina near the northeastern tip, Catania and Syracuse on the eastern side, and Palermo near the western end.

The final Allied plan called for the entire assault force to be directed at the southeast peninsula (see Map 1). General Patton's Seventh Army was to land along the beaches of the Gulf of Gela. General Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army would extend the assault around the Pachino peninsula and part-way up the east coast. The overall ground commander was British General Harold Alexander, who simultaneously served as General Eisenhower's deputy commander-in-chief.

(As I discovered later, Alexander considered the U.S. Seventh Army landings a secondary effort at best. In his eyes, the British Eighth Army was to make the main effort and quickly drive up the east coast to grab Messina, thereby cutting off the enemy's main escape route to the Italian mainland. In short, Alexander expected Patton to protect Montgomery's left flank and rear while the latter drove his British troops to the main strategic objective in Sicily.)

To carry out the Seventh Army's main effort, General Patton assigned Bradley's II Corps the 1st Division (minus its 18th regimental combat team—RCT—but reinforced by a special Ranger force), the 45th Infantry Division, and a reinforced parachute infantry RCT. Patton kept Major General Lucian

Truscott's reinforced 3d Infantry Division, the other major U.S. assault force, under his direct control.

According to Patton's plan, II Corps was to seize key terrain features north of Gela and Scoglitti. The 3d Division was to land in the Licata area and anchor the Army's beachhead on the west. D-Day was 10 July, and H-hour for the beach assaults was 0245.

The 1st Division, with the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions attached, was to land over six beaches. The Ranger force was to take the coastal town of Gela; the 26th Infantry RCT was to land east of Gela and assist the Rangers if necessary; if not needed in that role, it was to move around the town and then inland.

Our 16th RCT was to land in the right half of the division's zone, with the 1st and 2d Battalions abreast, and then attack inland toward the hilltop town of Niscemi. The 3d Battalion was the regiment's reserve force.

Along the way, all regimental units had been alerted to join forces with paratroopers of the 505th RCT, who by then would have seized Piano Lupo (Map 2) and other key terrain on our axis of advance.

Few of us in the assault force had any real idea of the number, types, combat effectiveness, or disposition of the enemy forces on Sicily (Map 3). From our recent combat experiences in Tunisia, though, we knew we were in for a real fight, especially if we had to take on a German panzer unit. There-

fore, we were to get off the beaches, advance inland quickly to seize the initial high ground, and then prepare for the inevitable enemy counterattack.

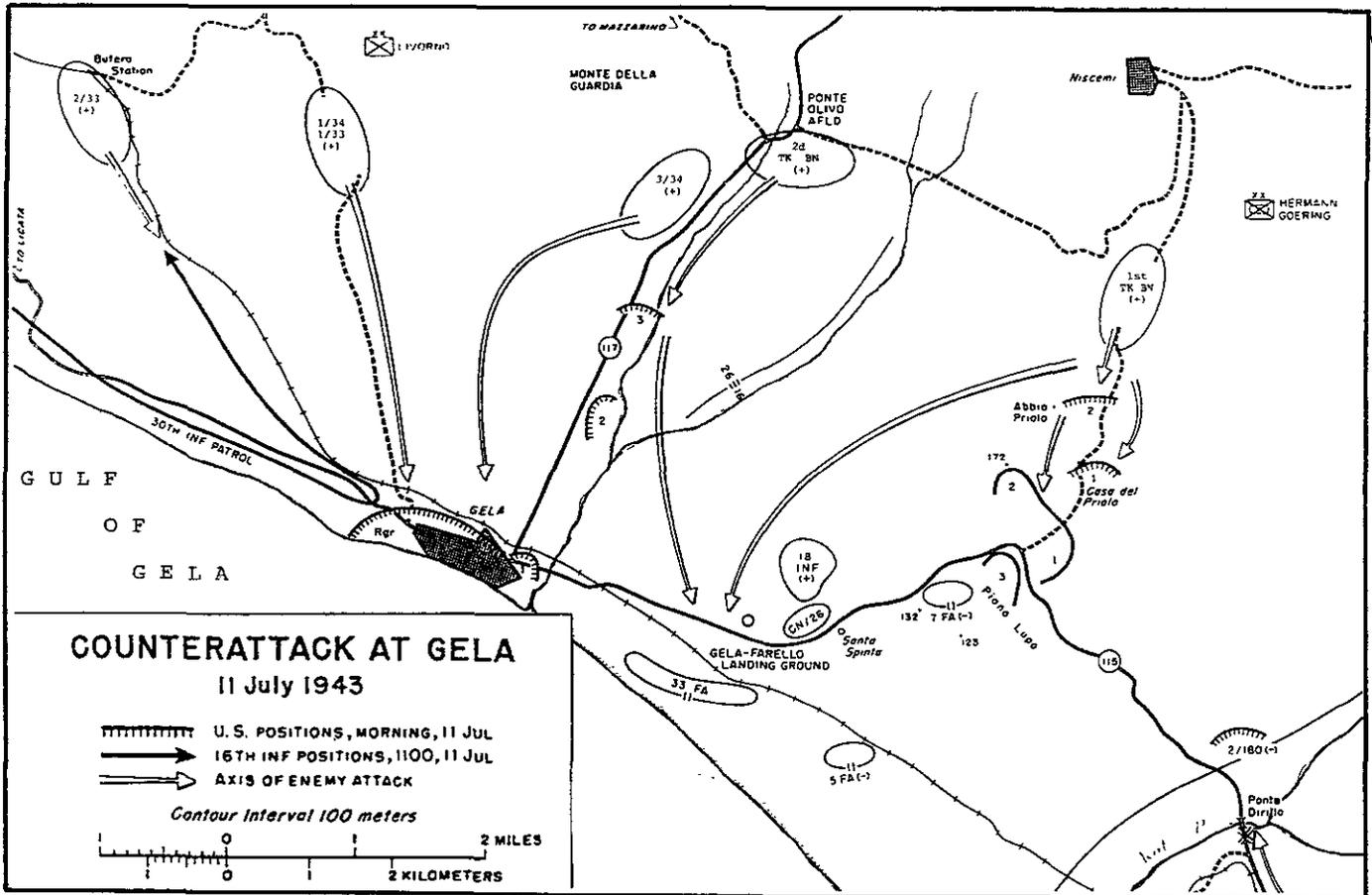
We sailed from Bizerte on 5 July and soon joined the hundreds of other vessels of every shape, size, and description forming the various convoys, all of which would head for Sicily on D-day minus 1. Unfortunately, the good weather of the previous week disappeared almost with the dawning of 9 July. Ships of every size were soon being rocked by heavy seas and 40-mile-per-hour winds. Everyone on our LCI was either seasick or about to be. To make matters worse, we developed engine trouble. I can remember our small craft falling farther and farther behind the invasion armada, which finally disappeared over the horizon. Winds and currents were pushing us toward the rocks of Malta, and it seemed there was nothing the crew could do about it. Finally and forcefully, I was able to get the Navy skipper and his seasick mechanics below decks, where they found the trouble and restarted the engines.

With the engine power restored, our LCI headed north again, finally rejoining the invasion armada well after midnight. Even in the semi-darkness, that line of ships was an awesome sight. Our completely disoriented LCI skipper moved from warships to transports to other invasion ships always asking where our battalion was landing. It turned out to be at the extreme right (east) of the line.

By now, H-hour had come and gone. It was almost dawn when we arrived opposite our designated landing area. Headquarters, I, K, and M companies had landed about 0300, almost on schedule. Now, here we were at 0430 trying to catch up with them across an undefended, peaceful-looking beach. That was the good news. On the negative side, our Navy crew "goofed" again.

According to prescribed procedures, an LCI was supposed to run rapidly ashore, dropping its anchor at the last moment to help it back off the hard sand. On this D-day, our Navy skipper dropped anchor too soon and too far out. The exit ramps on either side of the bow dropped into deep water. As the leading soldiers left the ramps, they sank like rocks into water well over their heads. Only their inflated life preservers saved them from drowning. I tried to persuade the Navy lieutenant to back off and come in again at full speed, but he refused, saying that the LCI was his command responsibility. We would have to find some way of disembarking or go back with him to North Africa. It was all we could do to keep from throwing him overboard, but that would not have helped.

Instead, we had our strongest swimmers carry two long ropes to the beach. We attached these to the bows of rubber life boats and attached a second rope to the sterns to allow us to pull the boats back. Then for the next half-hour or so we loaded the rubber boats with soldiers, pulled them ashore,



Map 3

pulled the boats back to the LCI, and then repeated the process. Although this was a maneuver never before practiced, it enabled me to get Company L ashore and into the fight.

We had a good idea where the battalion should be and, after a brief reorganization, headed north over the sand dunes. There was still no fire headed in our direction; everything seemed too peaceful and quiet. About that time, I saw, for the first time in that campaign, a soldier who had been killed in action—a U.S. artillery officer who had been hit by a high-velocity tank round. Clearly, there was fighting ahead.

We hurried forward to rejoin our battalion on the high ground called Piano Lupo. There, just south of the Gela and Niscemi road intersection, we occupied our assigned defensive sector, reinforcing Companies I and K. Major Charles T. Horner, Jr., our battalion commander, welcomed us warmly. For our part, we were happy to be ashore, back with our Army buddies again. Later that D-day afternoon, two Company L soldiers manning a road block became our first casualties when long range artillery shelling killed one and wounded the other.

For the next two-and-one-half days, the 16th Infantry fought off several strong German counterattacks, and its two leading battalions—the 1st and 2d—paid heavily. The desperate battle between U.S. riflemen and German tanks on 11 and 12 July is summarized in the U.S. Army's official history, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, by Albert N. Garland and Howard McGaw Smith, pages 188-189, as follows:

The 16th Infantry, particularly the 1st and 2d Battalions, had had by far the severest fighting thus far in the invasion. These two battalions had been largely responsible for blunting the Hermann Goering Division's counterattacks. Each battalion had lost its commander. And each subsequently would receive a Presidential Unit Citation for its outstanding performance. Casualty figures alone indicated the severity of the fighting between Piano Lupo and Casa del Priolo on the 11th and 12th of July. During these two days the 1st Battalion lost 36 dead, 73 wounded, and 9 missing; the 2d Battalion lost 56 dead, 133 wounded, and 57 missing.

Captain Bryce F. Denno was executive officer and later commander of the 2d Battalion during the fierce fighting to secure our 1st Division beachhead. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his inspiring leadership and courageous deeds. Now retired Colonel Denno recently recalled the fighting during those two days:

During the early hours of D-plus-one, Companies E, F, and H attacked, encountered enemy tanks and withdrew to a hill near Priolo Sotton where Company G was dug in with the recently arrived battalion 37mm antitank guns. Some men in the assault companies were crying with frustration because they had nothing with which to fight tanks except a few bazookas. Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Gorham, commander of the parachute battalion that had landed in front of us, also appeared with a handful of his paratroopers. (He had been my squad leader when I was a plebe at West Point.)

Shortly after noon, enemy tanks attacked and I hit the ground with Company G's executive officer alongside me. "Hell, let's not wait for them to attack us," he said. "Let's attack them

first." These brief words were his last. Hit in the head by a bullet, he died instantly.

During the ensuing fight, I tried to move about as much as possible to encourage the troops. I watched one tank charge a 37mm gun, bursting into flames just before it overran the gun and its wounded crew. I saw a soldier with a bazooka and loaded a round for him. He hit a tank that passed just yards away with its gun at right angles pointing directly at us. The tank careened crazily on a slope, then turned over and burst into flames. I saw another soldier standing up, firing his .45 caliber pistol at a tank. Our intense small arms fire forced the tanks to button up.

Officers manned another 37mm gun and fired on a tank pursuing soldiers from our assault companies. They had not had time to dig in. The gun scored a hit and the tank withdrew. One of our officers, a Lieutenant Elzy, put a 60mm mortar round in the open turret of another tank—a miraculous shot. The tank, which appeared to be a command vehicle, never budged thereafter. A bazooka team from Company F knocked out another tank, bringing our tank kills to four. The remainder of the tanks withdrew.

As darkness approached, we could see additional tanks assembling in the Casa del Priolo area to our front. Using a field telephone, I directed fires from the USS Boise (my fire orders being relayed by radio to the cruiser from the beach). Concurrently, I directed the fire of our 7th Field Artillery Battalion. The tanks scattered.

In the early hours of D-plus-two, we continued the attack with two rifle companies; I commanded them. In single file we moved like ghosts past nearby Germans we could hear talking and digging in. After reaching our objective—high ground south of Casa del Priolo—I returned to the battalion CP, which was co-located with our reserve company.

At first light we came under heavy machinegun fire from the Germans, some of whom were between our reserve company and our assault companies. From our observation post (OP), Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Crawford, our battalion commander, and I tried to find out what was going on. He was hit by machinegun fire in the shoulder and neck and I helped him from the OP and saw to his evacuation.

At my urgent request, regimental headquarters sent us two self-propelled guns from Cannon Company—a 105mm howitzer and a 75mm howitzer. We located these in defilade about 400 yards to the front of our reserve company. When I started toward their position, I came under machinegun fire from my left flank. I hit the ground and crawled a few yards. Then I got to my feet and started running. The machinegun opened up again and when the bullets started coming close I grabbed my belly as though hit, dropped to the ground, and started crawling again. The machinegun stayed with me as I repeated this performance three or four times. There might have been more than one enemy machinegun. An 88mm round, apparently fired by a Mark VI tank on the Niscemi road, just missed me—it was a dud.

Finally I reached the two howitzers and joined the 75mm crew and directed it to attack the machinegun. The moment we came out of defilade, however, our half-track was hit by

an enemy shell that passed through the front of the vehicle, wounding the driver, and exploded in the tool box underneath the gun, wounding additional crew members. The piece was out of action.

Accordingly, I crossed over to the 105mm howitzer's full-track vehicle and took command of the gun. The 105mm fire silenced the machinegun. Cannon Company, which I had activated, trained, and commanded throughout the North African campaign, had come through for me again!

Subsequently, the 105mm howitzer's gun crew, on its own, engaged Mark VI tanks on the road to Niscemi, took a direct hit from an 88mm gun that killed the gunner and wounded the crew members before their track burst into flames.

Things were suddenly quiet and it appeared the enemy had withdrawn. Therefore, we resumed the attack, taking the Casa del Priolo position with ease. At that point we were joined by a platoon of U.S. medium tanks that attracted immediate enemy tank fire and destroyed the platoon leader's tank. The rest withdrew.

Reaching regimental headquarters by telephone, I talked with Captain Carl Plitt, the regimental S-3. "General Patton directs that we continue the attack," Carl said. "Give me the regimental commander," I replied. I explained our situation to Colonel George A. Taylor. I told him I had about 200 men, including the paratroopers who were now commanded by a captain, [Lieutenant Colonel] Gorham having been killed. To our front, parallel to the Niscemi road, was an open field that ended in woods some 800 yards away. There were tanks in the woods that came out, from time to time, to shoot at us. To our northeast was German artillery; we had seen what it had done to our friendly tanks. Our flanks were open. Colonel Taylor agreed we should stay where we were.

That night the enemy subjected us to a tremendous artillery barrage and we braced for his attack. In reality, he was withdrawing. We entered Niscemi unopposed the next day, 13 July.

From where we in the 3d Battalion were located, we could not observe the fierce fighting on 11 July that took place north of our defenses, but the sounds of war were loud and clear. The naval gunfire was especially awesome. Toward late afternoon, I watched the arrival of our regimental Cannon Company with its 75mm and 105mm howitzers.

Deploying his howitzers laterally on the reverse slope of a north-south ridge not far from Company L's position, the commander employed a seldom-used but well-practiced maneuver to take on the attacking German tanks. An NCO from each howitzer moved forward to an OP; when he spotted a German tank to his front, he skillfully directed his howitzer into a hull defilade firing position. The howitzer crew then fired several shots directly at the designated enemy target and then backed the howitzer off the crest before another German tank gunner could retaliate. The howitzer crews repeated the procedure, which required discipline and teamwork of the highest order, again and again with great success. Many enemy tanks were destroyed or severely damaged during the next two days. The soldiers of Cannon Company earned a Presidential Unit Citation for their courageous and effective deeds.

From the high ground of Piano Lupo most of us in the 3d

Battalion had a grandstand seat for the fireworks generated by a massive German bombing attack near the Gela beaches and the Navy's reaction to it during the early evening hours of 11 July. We even ducked a few times as debris from anti-aircraft fire seemed to be falling around us. Later, after what seemed like almost an hour of bombing, calm was restored and the beachhead became quiet.

We had been told to expect a parachute drop by Colonel Reuben Tucker's 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment about 2300. As it turned out, the lead troop carrier planes (C-47s) crossed the beach-line about ten minutes early. We cheered as the first parachutes opened and our paratrooper reinforcements floated down to their drop zones.

Then we witnessed a terrible disaster—the worst of the campaign. Probably due to the recent air raid, an over-eager anti-aircraft gunner opened fire. Within what seemed like seconds, every ship in the area and some of our shore-based anti-aircraft units joined in the shooting. We watched helplessly as our buddies were killed by friendly fire. Seeing the planes fall from the sky and seeing open parachutes shredded by the tremendous volumes of shells and shrapnel was an awful experience, never to be forgotten.

The incident was investigated, of course, but no specific person could be found negligent. On the other hand, because of the after-action report, our later airborne drops in Normandy were diverted around Allied ships and troops and came in over German rear areas to avoid another tragedy of this kind.

The 1st and 2d Battalions were ordered to conduct a night attack during the night of 11-12 July. The 3d Battalion was ordered to occupy defensive positions north of the Gela and Niscemi road intersection as the assault companies of the two leading battalions advanced to the north. In the semi-darkness of a quarter-moon sky and burning hilltops, I deployed my company around a small hill that had been vacated by Company G. Dead soldiers, both German and American, were to be seen throughout the area. The smell of death was in the air. We grieved for our losses, knowing we were the lucky ones to have been in reserve. Our morale, which had been tested by this eerie moonscape, fell another couple of notches upon seeing two U.S. soldiers who had been crushed in their very shallow slit trenches by German tank treads. As dawn arrived and the reports of progress reached us from regiment, our spirits rose again, and we got on with the war.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: General Smith's recollections of the Sicily campaign will conclude in INFANTRY's September-October 1993 issue.)

Major General Albert H. Smith, Jr., U.S. Army Retired, also served with the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam, as assistant division commander and acting division commander. He served as Honorary Colonel of the 16th Infantry Regiment from December 1983 until May 1990.
