

THE RAPIDO RIVER CROSSING: A BATTLE ANALYSIS

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On 20 and 21 January 1944 the 3d Battalion, 143d Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division, attempted to cross the Rapido River near Sant'Angelo, Italy. In this effort, it faced fierce resistance from elements of the German 15th Panzer-grenadier Division and failed in two attempts to cross. While there were many circumstances surrounding this costly failure, the 3d Battalion was unsuccessful partly because it was unable to concentrate enough combat power at a decisive point.

By early 1944 the United States and her Allies had firmly seized the initiative in the Mediterranean theater. First landing in North Africa in November 1942, U.S. and Allied forces had pushed the Axis forces from the continent by early 1943. In July 1943 Allied forces had landed on Sicily and within two months had driven the Axis forces onto the Italian mainland.

On 9 September 1943 the U.S. Fifth Army, under the command of General Mark Clark, landed at Salerno. The invasion force, code-named Operation AVALANCHE, consisted of the British 10 Corps and the U.S. VI Corps. After successfully landing, the Fifth Army began its slow progress up the peninsula. Facing fierce resistance, the Allies had to wrest each foot of soil from the German defenders.

By January 1944 the Fifth Army had moved to positions just east of the Rapido River (Map 1). Its subordinate elements consisted of the British 10 Corps, the U.S. II Corps, and the French Expeditionary Corps. With the impending invasion of Anzio by the U.S. VI Corps, General Clark intended to fix the German reserves along the Rapido and Garigliano Rivers. The British 10 Corps was to cross the Garigliano on 19 January and then secure the left flank of the U.S. II Corps. The 36th Infantry Division, a subordinate unit of II Corps, was to cross the Rapido on the night of the 20th. General Clark believed

this attack would also open the Liri Valley to the tanks of Combat Command B, 1st Armored Division. Unfortunately, the British attack on the 19th failed, leaving the Germans in possession of the heights overlooking Sant'Angelo. The 36th would be attacking with its left flank dangerously exposed.

At this point, Major General Fred L. Walker, commander of the 36th, had two regiments at his disposal—the 141st and the 143d Infantry. (II Corps had held his 142d Infantry as a reserve near Mount Trocchio.) The 141st would cross on the division's right flank to the north of Sant'Angelo, while the 143d would cross at two sites to the south of the village. The 3d Battalion, 143d Infantry, was to cross the river at the division's southernmost site (Map 2).

The 3d Battalion had seen its share of combat. After landing on the Salerno beaches in September 1943, the battalion had fought its way up the peninsula. In early January 1944 the 36th Division was placed in reserve. Both battle and non-battle casualties had taken their toll on the 3d Battalion. Before the attack, it received replacements that brought it back almost to full strength. Although these new soldiers seemed to be trained and also received replacement equipment, they were not yet fully integrated into the unit.

In preparing for the Rapido crossing, the 142d and 143d regiments, originally selected for the assault, had rehearsed a river crossing on the Volturno River. (The unit commanders believed that this rehearsal was helpful, but the division commander questioned its value. The Volturno's banks, current, and depth were nothing like those of the Rapido.) Later, however, the 141st Infantry Regiment was substituted for the 142d, which left only the 143d with even this inadequate rehearsal. While the 3d Battalion, 143d Infantry, had rehearsed basic river assault techniques, it would be crossing the

Rapido with little or no practice.

Facing the 3d Battalion were elements of the German 129th Panzergrenadier Regiment and 115th Reconnaissance Battalion. Both belonged to the German 15th Panzergrenadier Division, commanded by Major General Eberhardt Rodt (Map 3). These units had taken part in the defensive battles all the way up the peninsula and were tired, but they were also well trained. Lieutenant General Fridolin von Senger, commander of the German XIV Panzer Corps, considered them his finest combat organization. Although the Germans did not have air superiority, they were well equipped and able to move their forces rapidly. The S-1 of the 3d Battalion, 143d Infantry, believed that both sides were on an equal footing before the engagement.

The area surrounding Sant'Angelo was a combination of mountainous heights and flat, level valleys. To the north-northwest, the Benedictine monastery atop Monte Cassino dominated the skyline and provided clear observation to the river. Heights to the south also provided excellent observation of the area. Between these ridgelines, the Liri Valley ran directly west toward Rome. To the northeast, Monte Trocchio overlooked the river. Running north to south, a small valley separated Monte Trocchio and Monte Cassino. The Rapido River lay at the center of this valley.

Although the Rapido did not look impressive, it was a formidable obstacle; it was 25 to 50 feet wide and nine to 12 feet deep, with banks of three to six feet. It was unfordable and

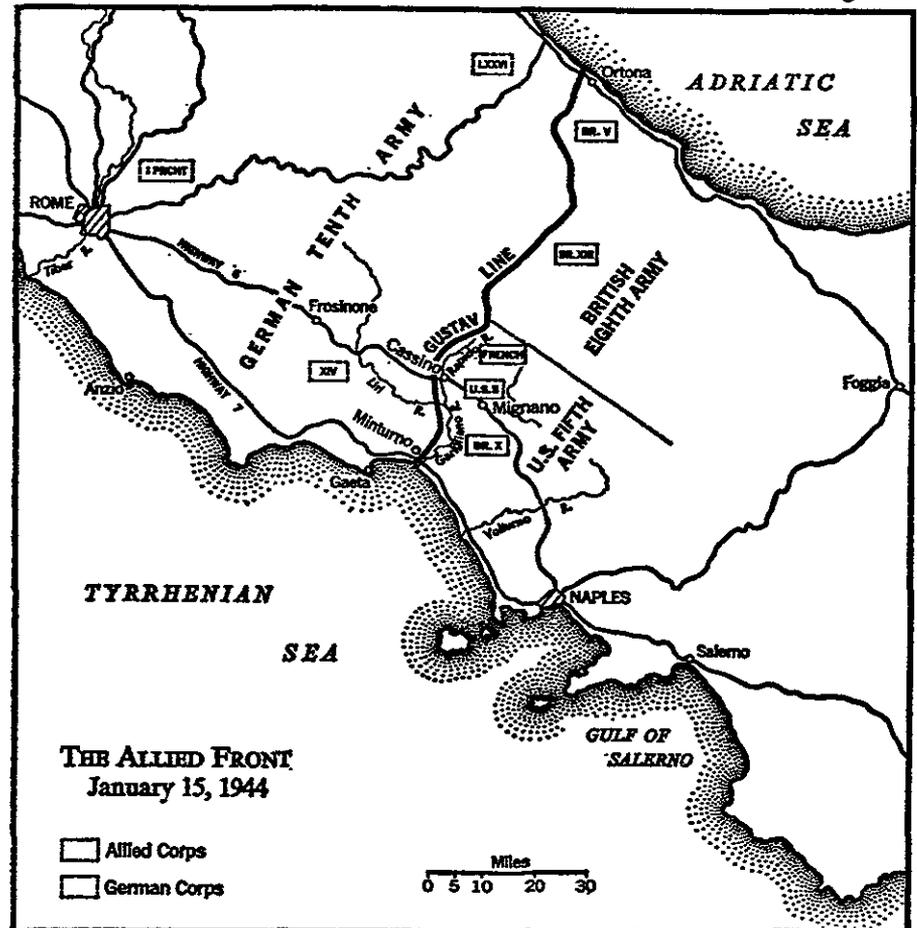
the river's swift current would make it difficult for soldiers to even cross by boat.

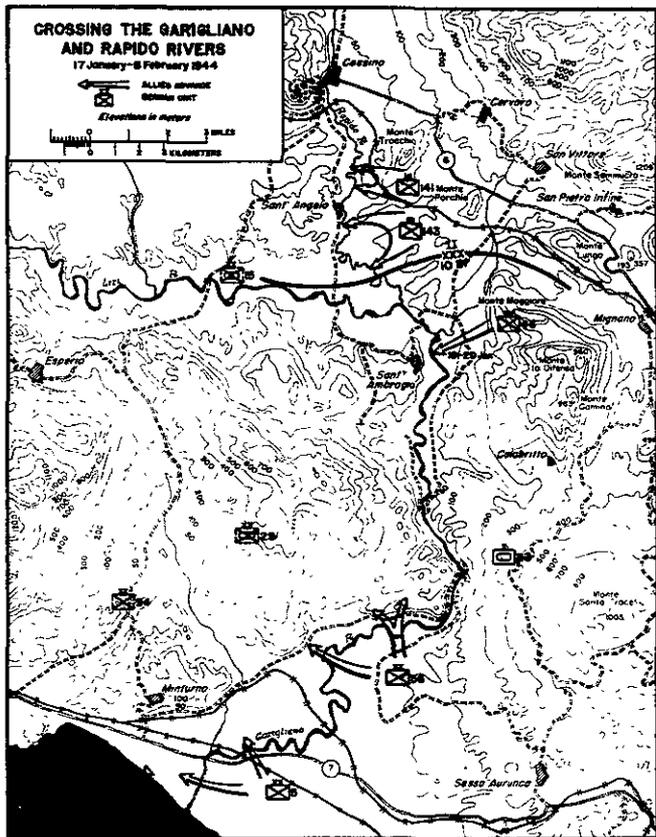
As for the weather, the winter of 1943-44 was much the same as other Italian winters. Temperatures averaged 25 to 40 degrees Fahrenheit. It rained nearly every day in November and December, and the terrain was a muddy morass. Almost daily at 1700, thick fog blanketed everything in low-lying areas and remained until it burned off at about 1000 the next day. Both the terrain and the weather reduced observation and trafficability for both sides. Sant'Angelo sat on a 50-foot bluff directly overlooking the Rapido. The German commander capitalized on this position and made the village a strong point. Each building contained prepared fighting positions that gave the defenders excellent cover and concealment. Concrete machinegun emplacements were prepared both inside and outside the village.

Not satisfied to defend just the town, the Germans cleared all vegetation 100 yards from the banks on both sides of the river. They also emplaced double-apron wire on the north side, just short of their fighting positions, and reinforced these obstacles with a minefield one mile deep that straddled the river. The minefield included antipersonnel and antitank mines and wooden box mines, and considerable engineer effort would be required to clear lanes through it to the river and beyond. Clearly, the 3d Battalion faced a well-prepared and dangerous foe.

General Walker realized that this would be an engineer-

Map 1. (From *Bloody River: The Real Tragedy of the Rapido*, by Martin Blumenson, Houghton Mifflin, 1970.)





Map 2. (From *Salerno to Cassino*, by Martin Blumenson, Office of the Center of Military History, 1969.)

intensive operation. He placed the 1st Battalion, 19th Engineer Combat Regiment (minus one company), and Company B, 16th Armored Engineer Battalion in support of the 143d Regiment. The 3d Battalion received one engineer company for the assault.

On 19 January the 111th Engineer Battalion cleared lanes through the German minefield to the river and marked them with cords so the units following could pass through easily. But the 111th did not coordinate with the engineer units that would be making the assault. Besides, the Germans heavily patrolled both banks of the river and relaid the mines or moved the lane markers.

At the same time, the 143d Infantry moved to its assembly areas at the base of Monte Trocchio. Almost 1,000 yards of flat valley lay between the 3d Battalion's assembly area and the river.

On the morning of 20 January, the XII Air Support Command flew 124 sorties in support of the Rapido crossing. P-40s and A-20s bombed near Sant'Angelo and Cassino. A larger support effort was impossible because of the imminent landings at Anzio and the support the British 10 Corps needed at its Garigliano bridgehead.

H-Hour was set for 202000 January; the line of departure was the Rapido River. The 3d Battalion was to depart the assembly areas just after dark, but it could not leave until the assault boats for the infantry arrived. Fifteen battalions of artillery from the II Corps and 36th Division fired a 30-minute preparation on schedule beginning at H - 30. By the time the

battalion began moving, however, the preparatory fires had ceased and it had to move without fire support. Forward observers could not adjust fires because heavy static interfered with radio reception.

The battalion's companies left in column, with Company K leading, followed by Company I, then Company L. Guides from the 19th Engineer Combat Regiment led the units through the narrow lane. Company K carried assault boats—pneumatic, wood, or canvas—for the initial assault. Once they had established a bridgehead, the engineers planned to construct the wooden catwalk whose sections were being carried by Company I. By 1900, the usual dense fog settled over the valley and reduced visibility almost to zero.

As the battalion snaked forward, the boats and the bridge weighed heavily on the soldiers. After moving 500 yards, the soldiers' engineer guide announced that they were no longer inside the lane and that he was lost. Battalion commander Major Louis Ressijac, who was with Company K, moved forward, conferred with the company commander, and attempted to pinpoint his location. Then he called for the battalion engineer officer, who responded that he did not know the route, and that the platoon that had cleared the lanes had left the area the day before. The supporting engineers then brought up mine detectors and began the painful process of clearing a lane.

By this time, the Germans had responded to the activity to their front and were pouring indirect fire into the valley. Both personnel and equipment, especially the pneumatic boats, took heavy casualties. As the engineers cleared a lane, one soldier detonated a mine, resulting in more casualties. The effects on the other soldiers were devastating. Panic spread among the assaulting troops. The leaders had lost effective control of their units.

The battalion S-3 requested that the battalion return to its assembly area, but the regimental commander, Colonel William H. Martin, ordered that the assault continue. At 0010 on 21 January, Major Ressijac informed regimental headquarters that he still did not know where the river was and that he had only five serviceable boats left. At 0500, Colonel Martin ordered Lieutenant Colonel Paul D. Carter to take command of the battalion. Colonel Carter protested, saying he did not have enough knowledge of the situation or of the battalion to take command. Nevertheless, he assumed command of the 3d Battalion, 143d Infantry Regiment, at 0515.

At 0630, ten and one-half hours late, the 3d Battalion reached the Rapido. With the sun rising, the battalion, with its five serviceable boats, headed back to the assembly area at the base of Monte Trocchio at 0645. Its first attempt to cross the Rapido had failed miserably.

At a meeting at the 143d's regimental command post, Colonel Martin issued new guidance to his battalion commanders. The 760th Tank Battalion, attached to the regiment, would now fire across the river without positively identifying its targets. Also, Colonel Martin discussed the numerous stragglers who appeared during the assault, men "who complain and try to return to the rear under pretense of illness." The regiment would try again to cross the river later the same day.

At the 3d Battalion's command post, Colonel Carter directed that the battalion attack farther south, this time with two companies abreast. Company K would lead, with Company I crossing on its right (north) flank, while Company L would follow Company K.

At this point, the balance tipped in favor of the Germans. Although 3d Battalion had not been in contact, it had undergone both the physical exertion of carrying the assault equipment and the emotional stress of negotiating the minefields.

By late afternoon, the engineers still could not push forward all of the assault boats that were needed. As a result, the battalion was again forced to attempt a crossing at a single site. This second try came at 1600 on 21 January. Visibility was good, and the 3d Battalion found its crossing site without difficulty. By 1700, Company K was on the far side of the Rapido. Following swiftly, Company I was across within 45 minutes as well. Moving onto the flat approaches to the river, both companies ran straight into the Germans' interlocking machinegun fire. Indirect fire from the German mortars and field artillery also pounded the pinned-down soldiers. The 3d Battalion had a foothold but was unable to expand it quickly.

Although two companies had crossed in a short time, there

were still problems at the river. Because of the swift current, the soldiers used communication wire to pull the boats across. With nightfall, they could not tell which wire was for communication and which was for the boats. Consequently, since the radios did not work, communications from the lead elements to the rear were almost nonexistent, and any communication had to be by messenger.

By 1830, Company L and the battalion's mortars had also crossed to the far side and the battalion had a bridgehead about 500 yards deep. As it moved west, the battalion hit more mines, and the German artillery intensified. The soldiers were pinned down under the withering enemy machinegun fire. Maneuver was impossible. With no communications, forward observers could not call in suppressive fires. Formerly cohesive units broke into small groups of men intent only on survival. The 3d Battalion had ceased to exist as an organized unit. More and more soldiers found one reason or another to recross the river.

By 0330 on 22 January the 3d Battalion's S-1 was the senior officer on the far side, and he returned to the near side to link up with the 2d Battalion, which had been committed just before midnight. With the crossing of the 2d Battalion, the Germans intensified their efforts to dislodge the bridgehead. With daylight coming fast, the U.S. forces had to determine quickly how they would expand their salient. Before they could do so, the Germans seized the initiative, counterattacking at 1000 and clearing the weakening resistance on that side of the river.

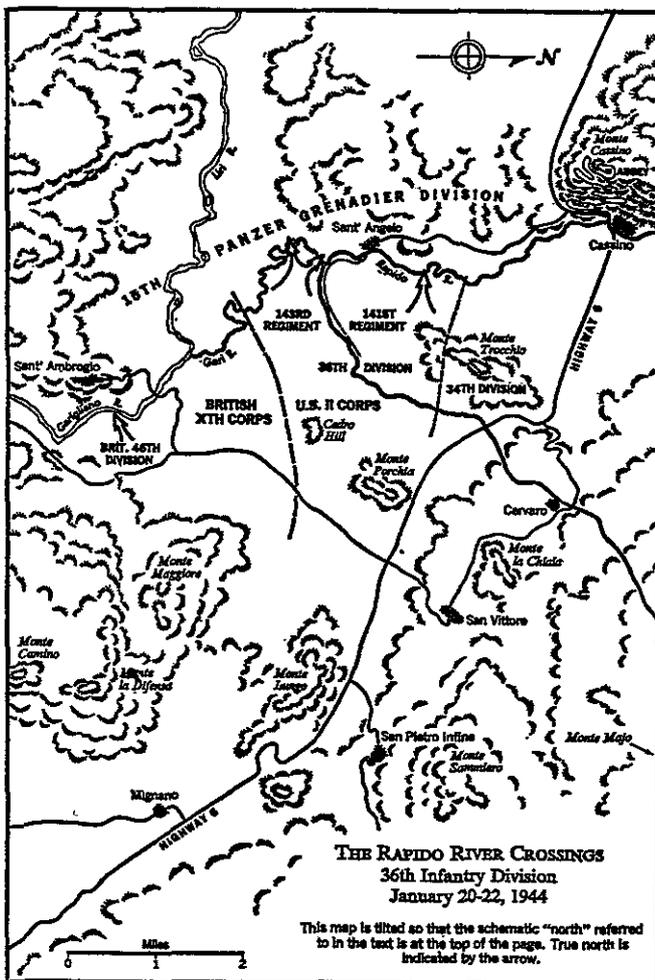
The U.S. soldiers who could recross the river did so, and most of those left on the far side were not seen again. Survivors trickled back to the battalion's assembly area. In all, the 3d Battalion, 143d Infantry, had lost 268 men. The attempts to cross the river had been expensive indeed.

Such a terrible defeat can be explained in many ways. One way is through an analysis of the battalion's combat power. Combat power, a unit's ability to fight, includes maneuver, firepower, protection, and leadership. An examination of these four elements illustrates why the battalion was unable to cross the river successfully.

Maneuver—the movement of forces in relation to the enemy to secure or retain positional advantage—is the means by which units concentrate their forces at the critical point. Mobility is generally, but not always, associated with maneuver. The 3d Battalion's ability to maneuver was impaired by a number of factors.

First, the battalion could not maneuver when it reached the far side of the river because of the Germans' minefields and intense mortar and machinegun fire. Small units could neither call for fire nor provide enough suppressive fire to be able to move against the German positions. As a result, they lost their momentum and suffered heavy casualties.

Second, the engineers could not construct the necessary bridges to cross supplies and tanks, and the two footbridges they built in the battalion's area did not last long under the intense German artillery fire. Little ammunition resupply came forward, and this compounded the forward elements' problems with suppressive fire. Further, with such a small



Map 3. (From *Bloody River: The Real Tragedy of the Rapido*, by Martin Blumenson, Houghton Mifflin, 1970.)

bridgehead, the crossing site was under direct observation and fire, which made it impossible for the engineers to build the Bailey bridge necessary for the tanks to cross. Both the German defensive positions and the steep river banks themselves prevented the battalion from concentrating its efforts through maneuver.

Massing firepower on an enemy—the destructive force essential to defeating the enemy's ability and will to fight—can quickly bring an engagement to a close, but unfortunately, the 3d Battalion could not mass its fires, suffering instead from the massed fires of the Germans. Little help came from the Army Air Force, which flew only 124 sorties in support of the crossing. Although 15 battalions of artillery did fire in support of the crossing, the scheduled fires ended before the battalion reached the river; observed fires could not be called in by the forward observers because of the difficulties with both FM radio and wire. The effective suppression of the German positions and the massing of artillery fires were therefore impossible.

The attached tank units were also unable to influence the engagement with their firepower. The swampy terrain along the river prevented them from getting close enough to the banks to fire. With only optical sights, they could not effectively engage targets during periods of limited visibility. They could not cross the river to fire at close range because there was no bridge. The infantrymen on the far side were on their own. While the 3d Battalion had the assets to mass firepower on the German positions, it could not bring these assets to bear on those positions.

Another element of combat power—protection—was lacking as well; the assaulting forces could find little cover and concealment during their 1,000-yard movement from their assembly area to the river, and the flat approaches to the river itself did not afford much more. In addition, although the engineers had cleared lanes through the minefields earlier, the Germans had closed or moved many of those lanes. The men of the 3d Battalion had to find whatever protection they could under their steel pots.

The assault boats and foot bridges the battalion carried also reduced its fighting potential. The boats weighed 410 pounds each; they could not be pre-positioned at the river because the trucks could not get through the mud. The soldiers had to carry all of their assault equipment the full 1,000 yards across the valley. They were exhausted by the time they reached the river, even before the actual crossing and fighting took place.

Once again, circumstances conspired against the 3d Battalion.

The area in which the 3d Battalion was most lacking was leadership—the element of combat power that provides purpose, direction, and motivation in combat. The battalion's leadership was hampered by General Walker's lack of confidence in the upcoming attempts to cross the Rapido. He wrote in his diary, "We are undertaking the impossible, but I shall keep it to myself; however my . . . battalion commanders are no fools." The division adopted his sentiments. An officer of the 36th Division later stated that it was common knowledge the division would not be able to cross because of the Germans' strength.

Motivation was also clearly lacking among the soldiers. Colonel Martin's comments on 21 January about the number of stragglers also hint at this problem. In addition, the soldiers did not feel confident of their ability to fight at night, a clear training deficiency. An engineer interviewed after the crossing attempts said, "The infantrymen I talked with didn't like night fighting and lacked confidence in their ability to knock out the enemy in a night engagement." Another officer put it even more succinctly when he said that engineers can't put infantry across a river if they don't want to go. Fighting at night and against a strong enemy, the battalion needed strong leadership, and that leadership was clearly lacking throughout the two attacks.

The failure of the 36th Infantry Division to force a crossing of the Rapido River was a result of many factors, including a well-trained and entrenched enemy, poor coordination, inaccurate information on terrain and minefields, and poor soil trafficability. Due to these and other reasons, the Division was unable to concentrate a preponderance of combat power at the critical point and time, and therefore sustained heavy losses in men and equipment. The lessons of the Rapido crossing are many and are well worth the attention of leaders who may some day have to press the attack across a water obstacle to dislodge an enemy as tenacious as those facing the 36th Infantry Division in January 1944.

Captain David M. Toczek conducted a commander's staff ride to Cassino, Italy, in 1991. While assigned to the 3d Battalion, 325th Infantry, he led a rifle platoon and served as company executive and battalion adjutant. He is currently a senior platoon trainer in the 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry, at Fort Benning. He is a 1988 graduate of the United States Military Academy.

