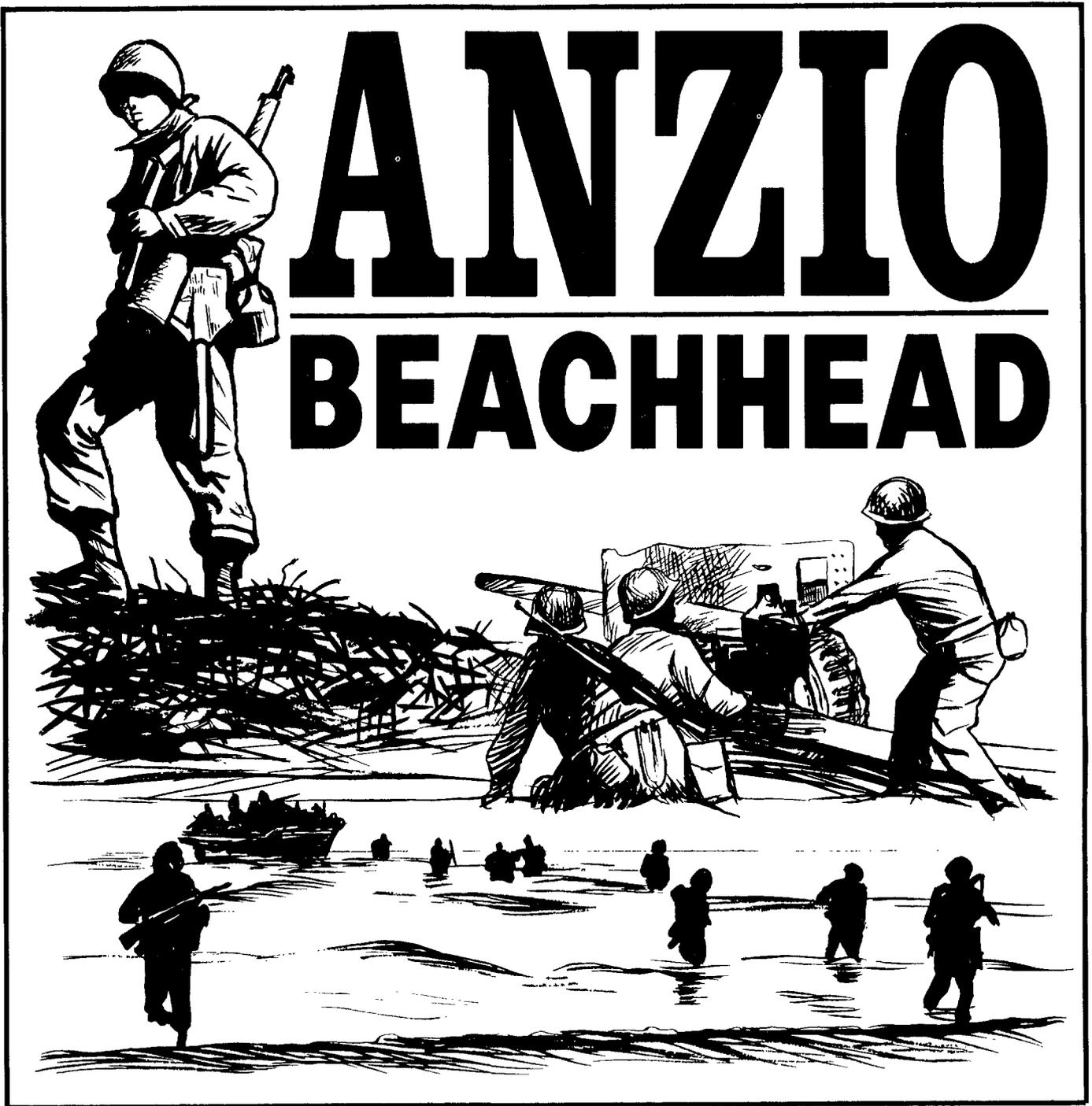


# ANZIO

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# BEACHHEAD



## CAPTAIN BRIAN K. COPPERSMITH

The Allied defense of the Anzio beachhead in Italy in February 1944 was one of the most bitterly contested battles of any war. In terms of the manpower and resources expended, this engagement stands as a testament to the destructiveness of warfare and the herculean effort of vanquished and victor alike. Nowhere in the world had so many men, ships, and machines fought in such a confined space over such unfavorable terrain.

To the ground troops defending the beachhead—veterans

of Tunisia, Sicily, and southern Italy—the fighting assumed a savagery that surpassed that of any other campaign of the Mediterranean theater. Elements of six German divisions attacked along a nine-kilometer front. One small unit Company I, 179th Infantry—lay directly in the path of the German main axis of advance. The company's story, as told by the commander, Captain James H. Cook, Jr., is both tragic and inspiring. (*"The Operations of Company 'I', 179th Infantry (45th Infantry Division) in the Vicinity of the Factory, Anzio*

*Beachhead, From 16-18 February 1944," by Major James H. Cook, Jr., Advanced Infantry Officers Course, 1949-1950.)*

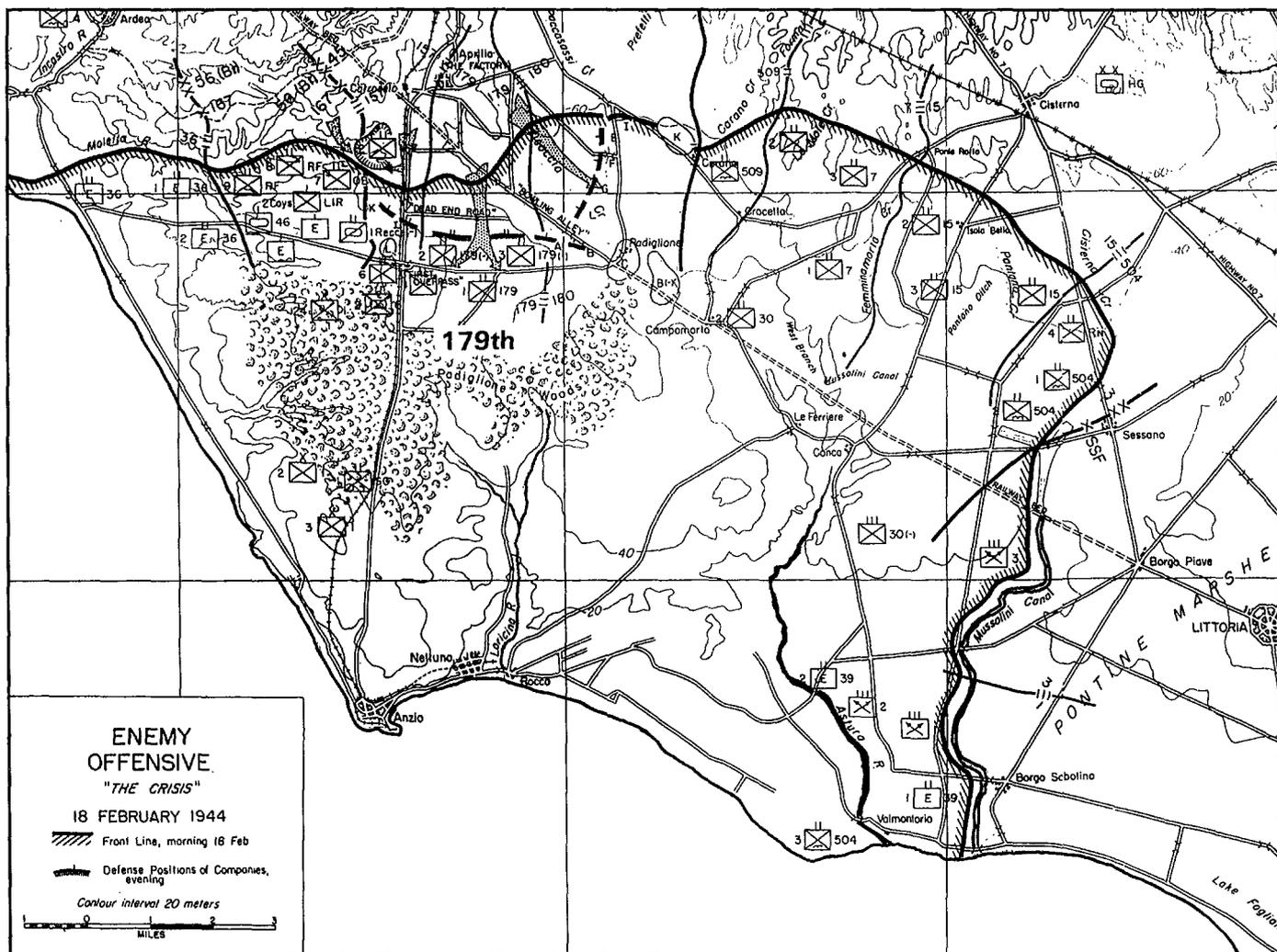
Few men survived, and many who did spent the rest of the war in prisoner of war camps, but the unit held the line with epic bravery and determination. Removed from the considerations of strategic planning, these soldiers operated far down the chain from general officer decisions. For them, just having a dry hole and enough ammunition to last the night was a luxury. Their story deserves the attention of junior leaders in the Army today for its meaningful, practical lessons and its historical inspiration. (EDITOR'S NOTE: The 1994 INFANTRY cover cartoons were drawn by Bill Mauldin, himself a veteran of the 45th Infantry Division's Anzio campaign.)

In the winter of 1943-1944, the Allied forces lay bogged down in the mountains of southern Italy opposite the Gustav Line. Spanning the width of the peninsula, this barrier of obstacles and fortifications lay along natural lines of resistance in the mountainous southern part of the peninsula. The U.S. and British forces that had thrown themselves against it for months now found themselves stalled in a battle of attrition. The campaign needed an invigorating departure from

convention, a bold stroke that would draw off German forces from the line or even force them to withdraw to defensive positions north of Rome. The Allies decided on a flanking amphibious landing 65 miles north of the line at Anzio.

Two divisions assaulted on 22 January 1944, one American and one British, plus some special units employed as regular infantry: Rangers, a regiment plus of U.S. parachute infantry, and a 1,500-man force of Americans and Canadians called the First Special Service Force. The intent, as specified by Allied strategists, was for the troops to move swiftly inland to cut off German supply routes running up and down the western side of the Italian peninsula. The troops waded ashore and met little resistance on the beach, quickly establishing a beachhead 14 miles wide and seven miles deep, but the German Army reacted quickly. Calling up reserves from all over southern Europe and the Balkans, the Germans bottled up the Allies and forced them to revert to defensive operations by 1 February.

A period of stabilization followed and lasted about two weeks. During this time, both sides launched limited attacks and conducted aggressive patrolling operations at battalion level and below. The Allies continued their beachhead supply



Map 1

efforts, and the Germans prepared for their counterattack. The Allies withdrew some units that had been badly depleted in the earliest fighting and replaced them with reserves waiting offshore to exploit a breakthrough.

By 16 February the beachhead line defense consisted of depleted units of the British 1st and 56th Infantry Divisions and the U.S. 3d and 45th Infantry Divisions and parachute infantry, and the 1st Special Service Force. Two combat commands of the U.S. 1st Armored Division stood in reserve.

Captain Cook's company lay opposite the village of Aprilia (Map 1) and its adjacent agricultural processing center. This farmers' clearing house complex, which figured prominently in the entire Anzio campaign, came to be known as "the Factory." Since these masonry and brick buildings provided a sheltered assault position for the German units, they became a pivotal area for both sides during the battle. On the German operations overlay, Company I's positions lay directly in the path of the German axis of advance.

The company was disposed in positions centered to the front of the same houses that lined the road leading into the Factory. Captain Cook dubbed this the "Southwest Road." The 1st Platoon occupied the house and the surrounding ground on the company's left flank and likewise down the line to the right for the 2d and 3d Platoons. The company command post (CP) occupied a fourth house, and the weapons platoon shared a house and surrounding area with 3d Platoon.

In the years before the war, the ground in the vicinity of the beachhead had been reclaimed from coastal marsh land, and the corresponding water table now rose to within inches of the surface. This made the construction and occupation of fighting positions a disease hazard as well as a chore. Each platoon therefore manned its positions with a single squad, while the other two squads rested in the relative shelter of the houses. The German units occupied positions north of the Factory on a line essentially parallel to the Allied beachhead.

At 0600 on 16 February, German rocket and tube artillery fired a monstrous preparation on known and suspected U.S. positions. At 0630 dismounted German infantry made its way into and around Company I's defense. The company had been expecting a major German counterattack for some time, and this heavy cannonade signaled its beginning. Before the shells fell too thickly, though, the soldiers of the off-duty squads ran to their positions, locked and loaded weapons, pulled the safety clips from grenades, and trained their sights on the expected avenues of approach. Cold water that was armpit deep in their holes boosted their already elevated heart rates as the bombardment rolled up to, onto, and then beyond their positions.

At 0630 dismounted enemy infantry advanced from the German assault position in the Factory toward the beachhead line. The battle was joined on a relatively narrow front of about 900 meters. Tanks supported the infantry despite the soft ground and made inroads to positions that provided overwatch for the infantrymen as they assaulted out of the Factory. The fight started badly for Company I and only got worse as the day wore on.

Almost immediately, artillery cut the dual wire system between the company and the units it needed to talk to. Wet conditions in the defense had severely deteriorated the company's radios, making reception spotty. The fire support officer's (FSO's) radio provided the only reliable communications in the company.

Enemy shells landed accurately and heavily among selected targets, and the company suffered immediate losses. Casualties mounted as the assault pressed on. Crew-served weapons such as machineguns and antitank guns drew precise fire, adjusted by the enemy's forward observers. These weapons often had to be dug out of their collapsed positions and remanned wherever possible. The crews that had survived the bombardment were almost certainly wounded and had joined the growing throng of casualties at the platoon aid stations.

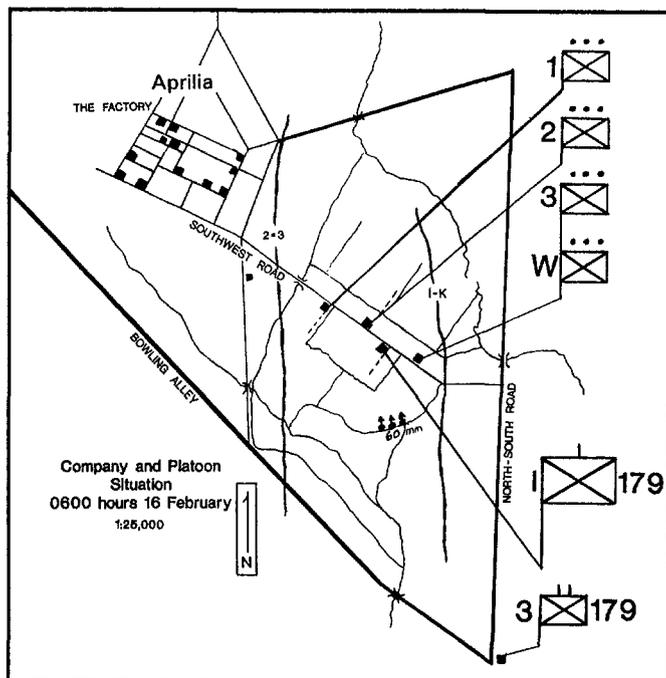
At 1200 the FSO was wounded and his functions taken over by Captain Cook. The company executive officer (XO) became a battle fatigue casualty and accompanied the FSO to the rear. Soon afterward, infiltrating enemy units blocked the evacuation route to the rear, capturing some wounded soldiers and their escorts. As a result, the company halted the casualty evacuation, and wounded soldiers began to crowd the platoon and company collection points.

At 1500 artillery destroyed the company's last functioning radio, and runners were now the sole means of communication with the rear, but even this proved largely ineffective. One of two messengers sent to battalion headquarters was felled immediately upon leaving the company CP, and the other disappeared, never to be seen again.

On Company I's left flank, a German tank pulled up to within 25 yards of a house occupied by Company K and pumped three rounds into one of its windows. The survivors promptly came out of the house with hands raised and were quickly evacuated to the German rear as POWs, by way of the Factory. By mid-afternoon, enemy fire had destroyed all the company's machineguns and attached antitank weapons. Hours earlier, the tank destroyers that had been operating in the company sector had quickly expended their ammunition and moved to the rear to rearm. It was clear that the vehicles were unlikely to return in time.

At 1600 Captain Cook observed enemy infantrymen moving around his left flank, and he soon noticed enemy behind his position on the right as well. A runner came up from 2d Platoon and informed him that 1st Platoon had withdrawn without permission along the drainage ditches toward the rear. That left Company I in a tough spot. Captain Cook ordered the runner to return to his platoon and inform the platoon leader that he should hold the company line. This was done, and no enemy penetrated the position.

Just as the company readjusted its defense, the Germans attacked again with a significant concentration of tanks and infantry. Thick mud in front of the company's positions prevented the tanks from maneuvering as intended, and the attack was beaten back, with heavy losses on both sides. As darkness fell, the enemy tanks withdrew, relieving some of the pressure on Company I. Concentrated air and artillery



Map 2

bombardment caused panic in many of the attacking enemy soldiers, and they retired in disorder, also giving Company I some respite.

Under cover of darkness, the company itself withdrew about 100 yards to a shallow ditch to reorganize. The 2d, 3d, and Weapons Platoons were present, as was the company headquarters. This group totaled 60 enlisted men and four officers. Besides the soldiers' individual weapons, the company could field only two Browning automatic rifles (BARs) and two 60mm mortars.

When Captain Cook moved to the battalion CP to report and check on casualties, he found the missing platoon leader with 15 of his soldiers and ordered him to join the rest of the company in the line. Unit strength now stood at 75 enlisted and five officers. Company I spent the rest of the night resupplying themselves, improving their new positions, and routing infiltrators.

The morning of 17 February began with renewed air and artillery shelling at 0740. Three enemy regiments struck the 1st and 3d Battalions, 179th Infantry. Sixty tanks in small groups supported the infantry during the day. (Captain Cook notes bitterly that although friendly armor blamed the soft ground for their failure to support the U.S. infantry, German tanks made life a living hell for the American soldiers dug in along the ditch.)

At 1000 the regimental commander ordered both the 2d and 3d Battalions to withdraw 1,000 yards to the rear to better tie in the regimental line of defense (Map 2). The regiment would establish this new line parallel to Carroceto Creek. The retrograde, which was not well-planned or coordinated, cost many casualties as a result of German fire and lack of cover along the withdrawal route. The 2d Battalion became so disorganized during the retrograde that it could not consolidate along the intended line and ended up another

1,000 yards to the rear, leaving the left flank of Company I exposed once again. Considering this latest development and in light of the heavy casualties they had taken, Company I and the rest of 3d Battalion consolidated into strongpoint positions along the line. Manned by the remnants of each platoon, these formations could not cover all the necessary ground but facilitated control of the company's soldiers; for many of them, only the threat of physical force prevented them from fleeing to the rear.

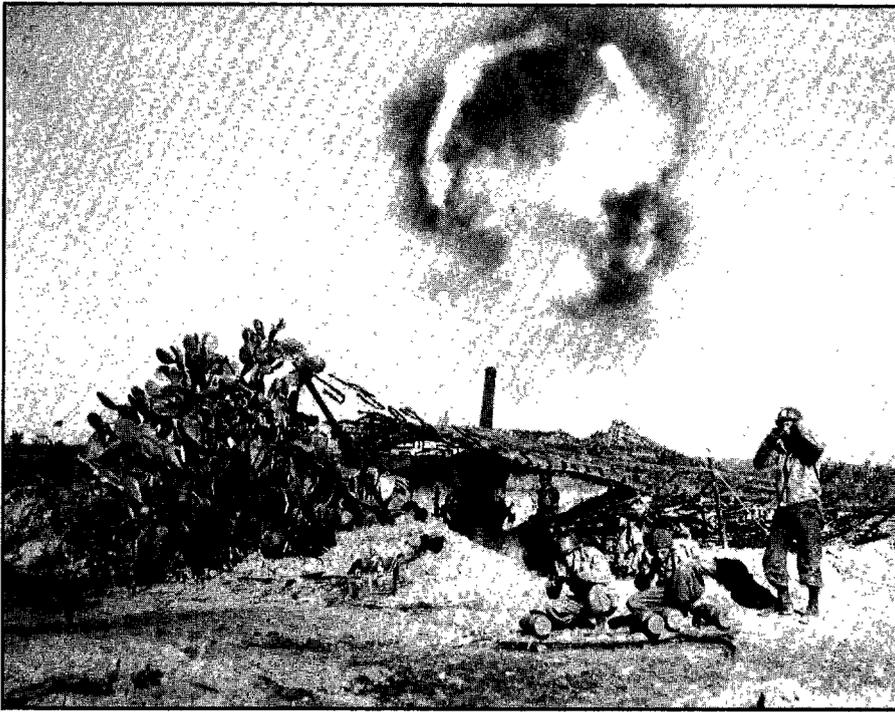
At 1030 the enemy launched a devastating air attack against the regiment's supply and command and control facilities, one plane targeting the battalion's positions. The bombardment destroyed all electronic communications in the battalion command post and caused tremendous casualties in the headquarters staff. A bomb detonated among the soldiers of Company I, and once again the officers and NCOs had to resort to outright force to prevent wholesale flight.

The attack on the combat and field trains added to the pandemonium, because ammunition was running low in the company area. Enemy fire had destroyed all organic antitank capability in the unit, and without the support of friendly armor the soldiers' only means of discouraging enemy tanks lay in the meager armor-penetrating capability of their rifle-propelled grenades. Runners returning from the trains revealed that few crates of the grenades had survived the attack. Without the prospect of a resupply of these grenades, many soldiers who had retained their composure now lost confidence in their ability to stave off the relentless enemy attacks.

Just as the situation was becoming unbearable and threatening to turn into a rout, all indirect fire assets in the vicinity of the beachhead were brought to bear on the enemy. Although Captain Cook would not find out until much later who called the mission, more than 450 tubes of artillery, every heavy and medium mortar within range, three Allied cruisers, and the fighter bombers of the XII Air Support Command "rained steel and death" down on the German forces. Friendly fire brought in so close to the company's positions transformed the soldiers' distress into an urgency to seek cover below ground and to thank God for the artillery.

Although the soldiers in Company I would scarcely have believed it, the German attackers endured far worse treatment than the Americans. Whole German regiments disappeared in the bombardments delivered by Allied guns and planes. At Anzio, for the first time in the war, heavy bombers flew missions in direct support of Army tactical operations. Two hundred eighty-five B-17s dropping bombs within 3,000 yards of the U.S. perimeter helped the U.S. soldiers realize that the task of defending the Anzio beachhead did not rest entirely on infantry shoulders. The heavy Allied fire broke up the enemy assaults and forced a withdrawal.

The intense enemy action subsided at the end of the day. Company I consolidated and reorganized without a doubt that the Germans were preparing to renew the attack. As darkness fell, Company I began the doubly agonizing task of evacuating the wounded to the rear for the second time since the attack began. Any movement in the vicinity of the front car-



**The precise, long-range fires of American artillery—such as this 155mm gun firing at Anzio—disrupted German battle formations and helped relieve pressure on the units holding the fragile beachhead line.**

ried the risk of contact with German infiltrators. And the task of carrying litter patients whose terrible wounds and cries of pain—made worse by movement over shell-pocked ground—pushed many soldiers once again to the limits of their sanity. The deep cannon shell holes and thick mud, combined with the sight of trees shredded by the shelling, reminded some veterans of scenes of World War I, which they had survived only to be thrust into this one.

After Company I cleared the wounded, resupplied themselves, and initiated a bare-bones rest plan, the regimental commander ordered a counterattack. The battalions were to regain the ground lost earlier in the day and reestablish themselves along Carroceto Creek, an advance of slightly more than one-half mile.

With Company I in reserve, Companies K and L attacked abreast. Not long after crossing the line of departure, the two companies found themselves surrounded by enemy in a meeting engagement. The Germans, with a superior force of tanks and infantry mounted on half-tracks, killed or wounded a large part of the assault force of both companies and captured most of the rest. The few survivors who made it back to the relative safety of Company I's positions were in shock, some of them crying hysterically as a result of the casualties suffered among their buddies. The soldiers of Company I, many of whom had been in a similar state a few hours earlier, greeted them with sympathy.

Company I advanced to the Leschione Canal to pick up stragglers and meet the expected morning attack. Throughout the night, soldiers came into the perimeter until, a few hours before dawn, the 165 men of the 3d Battalion who were still able formed an active defense. Once again, rumors circulated that 2d Battalion, on the left, had withdrawn. Company I and those who swelled its ranks could hear heavy armored vehicles moving into position a few hundred yards

away. With the left flank once again uncovered, the Germans at first light would enfilade the survivors with tanks and infantry. Captain Cook repeatedly dispatched runners to the regimental command post to advise the commander of the situation and request permission to withdraw. Finally, the order came at 0500, and Company I moved into a reserve position 200 yards behind 1st Battalion and prepared for an all-around defense.

After arriving at the new position and assigning sectors of fire, Captain Cook heard the by-now familiar sound of enemy rockets and cannons. The company dug in, even as incoming rounds landed around it. Four fresh enemy regiments assaulted the 179th Regiment's positions. These enemy troops once again enjoyed the support of a powerful tank force, but U.S. armor also appeared in strength. Their performance on the previous day had been brought to the attention of the division commander, and he ordered them attached to each company instead of operating independently as they had done previously. The division commander threatened an unspecified retaliation if the crews withdrew without permission and ordered that any crew whose vehicle was knocked out would remain in position and fight as infantry. As a result, Company I benefited from improved support from the tank and tank destroyer units on this day.

From the Factory, the enemy advanced under well-controlled combined arms fire up to the Leschione Canal. Because the Americans had blown the bridges, the German tanks could not cross. The German infantrymen left the tanks behind and pressed the attack alone to the 179th's front. Failing to breach the line, they skirted the beachhead line to the east. Repulsed again and again, these German infantrymen continued to attack, after local withdrawals to reorganize, throughout the day.

At 1100 an aerial observer pilot who spotted 2,500 enemy

massing on the Albonal Road, close behind the German assault positions, quickly called for and adjusted fire on the formation. More than 220 Allied guns from all over the beachhead responded to the opportunity, engulfing the enemy troops in a maelstrom of fire. The force disintegrated in panic and never made a showing in the Anzio battle. Within 50 minutes, the pilot called four more fire missions onto enemy concentrations. Heavy firepower allowed the Allies to barely hold onto the beachhead. The Germans demonstrated an astounding commitment to offensive success, and on the ground the attacks continued.

By the afternoon of 18 February, Company I lay deployed in a drainage ditch 100 yards behind and parallel to Lateral Road as shown on Map 2. Unit strength stood at 55 enlisted men and three officers. This position represented the one bright spot in an otherwise dismal situation. The walls of the ditch, although only four feet high, gave the soldiers their first dry fighting position in days. Captain Cook combined 1st and 2d Platoons, deployed the mortars 100 yards to the rear, and emplaced the one remaining automatic weapon, a BAR, on the left flank covering a field.

The hospitals in the rear of the beachhead, with space only

for the most severely injured, had sent some of the lightly wounded and battle fatigued soldiers back to the company. Most of these men, however, were not prepared for the shock of returning to combat and arrived without weapons or equipment. Preventing the spread of defeatism and panic required constant vigilance from the officers and NCOs, further taxing the company's already scarce leadership resources.

As the afternoon progressed, enemy attacks became increasingly intense and frequent. Friendly antitank capability dwindled. Most of the regiment's guns lay in twisted heaps along the beachhead line, and U.S. armor had suffered heavy losses. To Cook, it seemed like the beachhead line was about to collapse. The enemy showed signs of launching their heaviest attack yet.

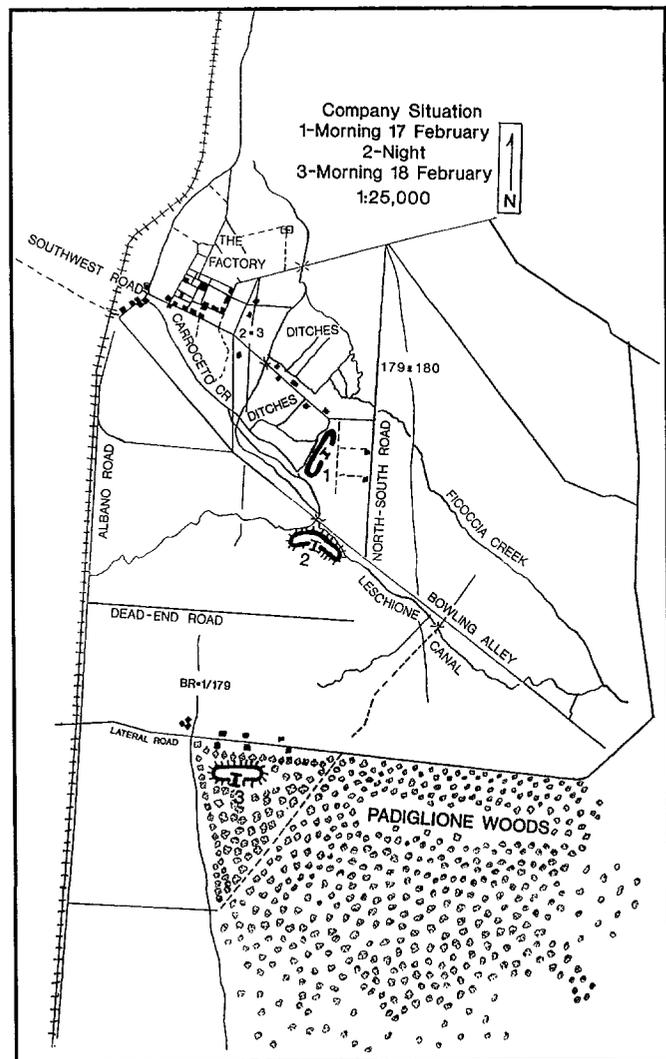
At 1700, 12 German tanks supporting masses of infantry assaulted down the diagonal road nicknamed "Bowling Alley." Not much stood between them and the beach. Only the providence of a destroyed bridge and thick winter mud prevented the Germans from maneuvering around U.S. pockets of resistance. Three hundred *Panzergranadiers* assaulted out of the woods 200 yards to the front of the 1st Battalion. The Americans, firing madly and calling for artillery, barely stopped the wave 100 yards in front of their positions.

Captain Cook heard the BAR open up on his left. Two hundred yards away, a strong enemy force of about 100 was trying to penetrate between the U.S. 1st Battalion, 179th Infantry, and the British unit on its left. The enemy again threatened to cut Company I off by turning its flank. Without communications, already engaged from the front by a significant force and pinned in place by well-observed artillery, Captain Cook despaired of lasting out the day without becoming a German prisoner. Once again, providence intervened, and a company of British infantry counterattacked out of the the Padiglione Woods. In an instant, the situation changed from one of imminent danger to relative safety as the infiltrating enemy were captured and herded to the rear by the British.

Throughout the day the enemy assaulted, counterattacked, withdrew, consolidated, and attacked again. Because the area around the beachhead lacked cover, the attacks moved over the same ground each time. Eventually, tree lines, ditches, and fields leading to U.S. positions were strewn with enemy dead. By 2130 the German infantry and tanks withdrew in a general retrograde that marked the day's first discernible lull.

The 45th Division consolidated and reorganized, and the Allied VI Corps prepared a counterattack force. In the early hours of 19 February, the German infantry and tanks made their last serious threat against the beachhead all along the front. The counterattack force prepared by VI Corps maneuvered on the enemy on the Albano and Diagonal Roads. This relieved the pressure on such dedicated defensive units as the 179th and reestablished some previously held Allied positions (Map 3).

The German attacks continued until 4 March but never again constituted a serious threat to the beachhead line. Both sides conducted local combat patrolling and suffered heavy casualties as a result. On 11 May the Allies broke the stale-



Map 3

mate in Italy by penetrating the Gustav Line near Cassino and breaking out of the Anzio beachhead. Rome fell on 4 June 1944, two days before the Allied invasion at Normandy.

### Lessons Learned

Junior officers today can learn many practical lessons from the actions of Company I in defending the Anzio beachhead:

**Communications.** Communication is the most important sub-mission priority in any situation. The need for coordination on the battlefield demands constant attention to electronic communication facilities and equipment. Although most military electronics we now have are hardened against the effects of weather, they still demand preventive maintenance and careful treatment.

If Company I's radios had been working, Captain Cook may have been able to alert his superiors or adjacent units to the danger of enemy in the battalion's rear. It is imperative that adjacent units inform each other of movements. When 1st Battalion withdrew, leaving Company I's left flank unsecured, it opened the way for the German infantry to flank the company. Obviously, a timely radio transmission might have helped avoid this.

**Leadership Under Extreme Stress.** Leaders must expect their men to react adversely to the shock of combat. Soldiers display almost incredible acts of courage and sacrifice. They may also suffer psychologically from the horror that surrounds them. Determining which soldiers are more likely to be affected, and their likely reaction, way is often impossible; some may display extremes of behavior during a single day. Leaders must circulate among defensive positions and encourage and console those most in need. Valorous and duty-minded soldiers should be rewarded. Combat fatigue casualties should be treated as far forward as possible and returned quickly to their units.

**Responsive Fire Support.** Massive and immediate indirect fire can have a far-reaching effect on the enemy. In addition to the local advantage of physically disrupting his formations and facilities, indirect fire has a tremendous negative effect on the enemy's momentum of attack and may be the key to regaining the tactical initiative.

**Attachment of Small Units.** Small elements or individual weapon crews from other units—like the armored vehicles in this example—should be attached directly to the unit responsible for the defense, down to company and platoon level, if

possible. Not doing so will prevent the most efficient use of firepower and will weaken the overall defense.

**Planned Withdrawal Positions.** Units should not withdraw without authority. Withdrawal in the defense is a difficult subject to address. If soldiers see a commander emphasize withdrawal, they may withdraw without cause or authority. On the other hand, a well-rehearsed plan using prepared positions makes the work of the defender less confusing and less intimidating when he is hard-pressed. Rehearsals and strictly enforced disengagement criteria are the keys to planned withdrawal. In this case, a planned withdrawal could have prevented the uncovering of the Company I's left flank.

**Counterattack.** Waiting too long to counterattack can be disastrous. Time favors the unit that holds the ground, whether that is the friendly force or an enemy who has just ejected a defender from his positions. An enemy on the objective, if allowed the opportunity to consolidate unopposed, may establish his own defense so strongly that nothing less than a deliberate attack will dislodge him.

When the men of the 179th Infantry counterattacked late on the night of 17 February, they faced a superior force that had time to consolidate and reorganize, bring up its reserve, and register artillery in their new positions. Against tanks and half-track-mounted machineguns, the exhausted men of the 179th did not stand a chance. In their depleted state, they may have failed anyway, but attacking an enemy before he can consolidate his newly seized ground has a greater prospect for success.

The actions of Company I, 179th Infantry, from 16 to 18 February 1944 illustrate well the tenacity and fighting spirit of both the American soldier and his German adversary. The margin of victory was slim, but in the end the beachhead line was held by a combination of leadership, timely and accurate indirect fires, and stubborn determination. These factors are as important today as they were in World War II, and our leaders must understand them if they are to succeed on the battlefield of tomorrow.

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**Captain Brian K. Coppersmith** recently completed the Infantry Officer Basic Course. He previously served as a rifle platoon leader, a TOW platoon leader, and a rifle company executive officer in the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. He is a 1989 graduate of the United States Military Academy.

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