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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: The 81st Reconnaissance Battalion on ANZIO BEACHHEAD

SCOPE: Missions performed by the 81st Reconnaissance battalion, 1 February - 4 June 1944, on the Anzio Beachhead and during the breakout from the beachhead to Rome. Types of missions include:

- Warning System
- Preparing Reserve Positions
- Outposting Tanks
- Antiairborne Attack
- Direct Fire Support
- Antiamphibious Attack
- Daylight Raid
- Flank Security of Combat Command
- Filling a Gap
- Flank Security of Division

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THE 81ST RECONNAISSANCE BATTALION
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The 81st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Armored Division, landed on the beach at ANZIO, Italy, 1 February 1944. The operations of the battalion prior to that time, except for a few reconnaissance patrols around the RAPIDO River area north of NAPLES, had been confined to the open, rolling terrain of the TUNISIAN desert. The completely different terrain of the Italian peninsular offered a challenge to the established SOP and tactical doctrine which had been successfully employed in the battalion in the past.

It is not my intent to discuss here the tactical reasons for the establishment of this island of resistance, however on this point, General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, Commander of all Allied Forces in the Mediterranean Area at the time, stated that the new beachhead was intended to get away from the difficult terrain and winter weather which had been delaying the main army. The belief of allied commanders was that the main German force might swerve from their present position to the rear, toward the ANZIO beachhead.¹

By the 25th of January, the enemy had succeeded in moving a sufficient number of troops into position, to effectively contain VI Corps within the established limits of the beachhead, for an undetermined period of time.

The greater part of the 1st Armored Division was being utilized initially, as a mobile reserve, to stop any armored threat that developed around the

1. War in Italy, The Field Artillery Journal, April 1944, p. 235.

perimeter of the beachhead. The reconnaissance battalion was given the mission, initially, of establishing a number of observation posts and listening posts around that portion of the perimeter most susceptible to attack by enemy armor, and to relay immediate notification of appearance of enemy armor direct to division headquarters.

The radio net established was direct to division, on the division reconnaissance net. Battalion headquarters monitored all messages. This warning system gave the division commander information of enemy armored attacks, much faster than the normal communications channels available to the front line infantry. In addition, the reconnaissance platoon leaders maintained close liaison with the headquarters of the frontline battalions for speedy information of those areas not covered by their observation posts. Reports were rendered every two hours, throughout the twenty-four hour period.

During a part of this near-static period, the 75mm, M-8 Assault Guns of the reconnaissance battalion were attached to an armored artillery battalion to add to the massed fire power of that unit.

Several days after the beachhead had been established, enemy artillery and air became very active. All vehicles and installations not armored were dug in a sufficient depth to protect them from the many shell fragments and antipersonnel bombs that were flying around, especially at night. During this period, much time was spent in digging alternate positions, not only for our own personnel and vehicles, but also many yards of reserve positions for the armored infantry. Most of these infantry positions had to be dug at night, as the flat marshy terrain offered little concealment from the alert

eyes of enemy artillery and mortar observers.

On the morning of 18 February, one of the warning system observation posts reported that enemy tank activity in the vicinity of CARRECETO was increasing. Later in the day the enemy attacked with tanks and infantry. Elements of the 1st Armored Regiment were moved into position to support our infantry with direct fire. The attack was stopped on the night of 19 February, and the reconnaissance battalion was given the mission of outposting the tanks of one company of the 1st Armored Regiment, to enable them to get some much-needed rest, without moving out of their supporting positions. This mission was accomplished by moving one reconnaissance company through the tanks at dusk, and into positions several hundred yards to the front. A dismounted listening post was maintained in front of each armored car, and the vehicular weapons were manned throughout the night. The Germans evidently were expect- us to counterattack that night, as the entire area was illuminated at frequent intervals with parachute flares dropped from enemy planes. At daybreak the reconnaissance company withdrew back through the tanks and the battle was resumed.

Frequently during the next three months, the reconnaissance battalion was assigned anti-airborne missions. These missions were executed by making a thorough reconnaissance of the assigned area of responsibility and remaining on an alert status, ready to move on short notice into the invaded area. Areas of responsibility were subdivided down to platoon level, in order that the entire area would be covered effectively, if the enemy attempted an air-borne attack.

On 25 February the battalion, minus A Company, was attached to the 1st Special Service Force. This organization was assigned the southeastern sector of the beachhead perimeter.² Company A continued to occupy a line of observation posts astride the ALBANO-ANZIO road.

The primary reason for the transfer of the reconnaissance battalion to the 1st Special Service Force, was the buildup of enemy strength, especially tanks, in the enemy area opposite this sector.

The terrain in this area was very flat, with many small ditches and a few canals, including the Mussolini Canal, cutting through the landscape at all angles. Mussolini had invested a considerable amount of money in reclaiming this marshland, and from all appearances the project was highly successful. The road net was very good, however, all bridges over the Mussolini Canal had been destroyed when the Germans withdrew.

When the battalion moved into the new area, several of the armored cars and halftracks were stuck in a cow pasture. The extrication of these vehicles became a major engineering feat, because the tundra-like pasture would collapse immediately with any vehicle that was made to pull more than its own weight. Most of the car crews and all of the maintenance personnel worked all night to insure removal of all vehicles before the first enemy fighter flight arrived over the beachhead the next morning.

The missions assigned the battalion, while attached to the Special Service Force, were many and varied. The primary mission, however, was to

2. After Action Report, 81st Cavalry Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Armored Division, Feb. '44 through May '45, p. 5. TAS file No. AAR 230.

provide direct fire support in the event of a surprise attack.

Initially, the battalion was assigned a secondary mission of establishing a series of observation and listening posts along the southeast coast, to guard against an amphibious attack from the sea. These observation posts were contacted periodically by bantam patrols, and hourly security reports were made to battalion headquarters. In addition, anti-airborne patrols were placed in operation to cover this very lightly-organized coastal area.

In executing the primary mission, the battalion commander decided to deploy the battalion into platoon strong points along the entire MLR of the 1st Special Service Force, inasmuch as a night attack by the enemy was regarded as a prime capability. Visibility during daylight was good, and with the added advantage of the Mussolini Canal to the direct front, a daylight attack could have been stopped almost before it started, by employing the large amount of artillery available at this time. The battalion maintained control of the company and platoon strong points by radio, over the command net, and telephone communication was established between the strong points and the supported infantry companies.

During this period of operation, the assault guns were all attached to the 69th FA Battalion. The nine guns functioned as two batteries, and fired many harassing and interdiction missions with good effect.

The mortars of the battalion were attached to the 1st Special Service Force to augment their defensive fires as the situation dictated.

During the next few weeks the situation remained fairly quiet. The enemy had evidently decided that the beachhead could not be eliminated and

he appeared satisfied to contain it within the area held at that time. During this lull a training program was instigated primarily to train replacement gun crews and vehicle crews. Rest areas were established, and other recreational activities were set in motion, designed to establish morale and esprit de corps on a very high plane. This plan was highly successful and the battalion was able to relax to a degree, for the first time in several weeks.

On the 15th of April the battalion participated in a raid on CERRETO ALTO, a small village approximately two miles east of the Mussolini Canal. The raiding force was a combined arms team, consisting of armor, infantry, and artillery. The 1st Special Service Force furnished the infantry from their 2d Regiment, and the armor consisted of two medium tank platoons, one platoon of tank destroyers, one platoon of light tanks and one reconnaissance platoon. The medium tanks and tank destroyers were attached to the reconnaissance battalion from the 1st Armored Division, for this operation. Artillery support was furnished by the 69th Field Artillery Battalion with our M-8 Assault Guns attached.

In the original plan for this operation, one platoon of medium tanks, one section of tank destroyers and the platoon of armored cars were to move down Grand Road at daylight to establish a road block in the vicinity of RJ GO68134 on the south of CERRETO ALTO (fig.1). On the west side of CERRETO ALTO, a platoon of light tanks and a section of tank destroyers would move up the improved road, known as Tank Road, to the northwest and establish a road block in the vicinity of GO31171. The remaining platoon of medium

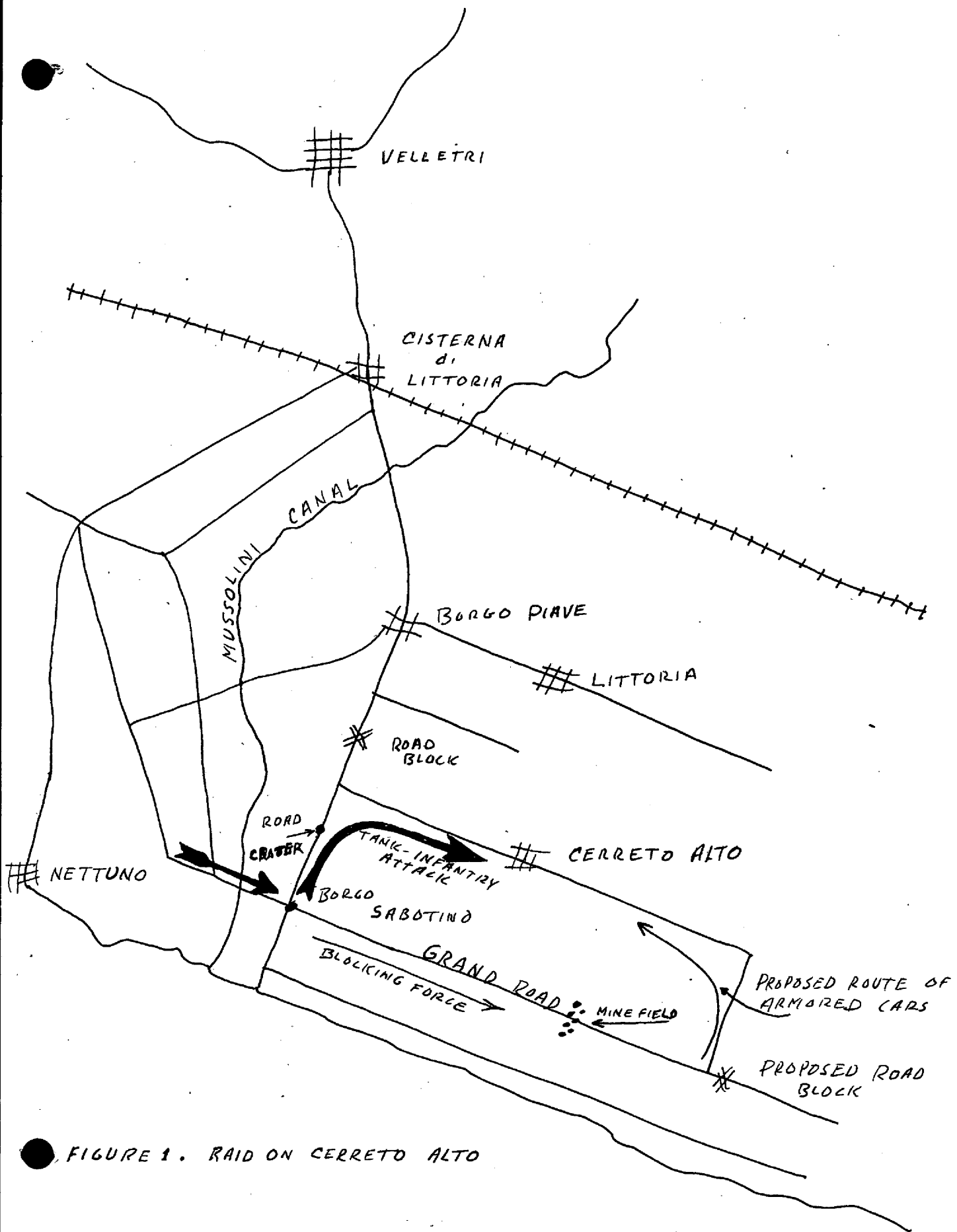


FIGURE 1. RAID ON CERRETO ALTO

tanks would follow the blocking force, join the infantry in the attack position and make the raid on CERRETO ALTO to the northwest. In coordination with this attacking force, the armored cars down on Grand Road with the first road block, would move north and turn east on the improved road to move into CERRETO ALTO from the west. This double envelopment was believed sound in this instance, because of the good visibility afforded by the flat terrain, and the amount of time available for planning and coordinating.

The raid started as scheduled, but because of certain unpredictable circumstances, the operation was not executed exactly as planned. The tank platoon and tank destroyers, charged with establishing the road block on Grand Road, were halted approximately one mile west of the road junction at GO68134 by an antitank minefield. Before this obstacle could be breached, the attack from the west was started. The marshy terrain in the vicinity prevented the armored cars from bypassing the minefield and moving on CERRETO ALTO as planned. This force was then directed to block in place, and to support the raid by direct fire.

The column responsible for blocking to the northwest, and the platoon of medium tanks designated to support the infantry in the raid on CERRETO ALTO, moved through BORGO SABOTINO and turned northeast on Tank Road. Lieutenant Roy Mitchell, platoon leader of the light tanks, led the column with two of his M5's, followed by two M10 tank destroyers, three more M5's, and the platoon of mediums following. When the column arrived at a point approximately one mile northeast of BORGO SABOTINO, the two leading light tanks passed over the edge of an unmarked road crater, but the M10 directly behind fell into

the crater, and effectively blocked the road until it was removed at 0740, same date. The vehicles in the rear were prevented from bypassing the road block by the marshy terrain on either side of the narrow road. Lieutenant Mitchell continued on with the two light tanks, established a road block at the first crossroad at GO26164, and was immediately directed to proceed with the infantry in the attack, replacing the medium tanks stopped by the road block. This order was executed and the light tanks joined the infantry in the attack position.

The tank-infantry team thus formed, moved to accomplish their mission without further delay. Under cover of the prearranged artillery fire and the supporting mortar and machine gun fire from the infantry, the two light tanks moved rapidly across the road into the field, and occupied firing positions within close 37mm cannon range of the village. HE, AP, and cannister ammunition was fired into the houses with very good results. The HE seemed to penetrate the walls and explode inside the houses, especially when fired through the closed doors and windows. While this fire fight was in progress, the road block was cleared and the medium tank platoon and one of the light tanks joined Lieutenant Mitchell and the infantry in the assault on CERRETO ALTO. The remaining two light tanks were directed to reestablish the road block. When the village had been thoroughly pounded by the tank guns, the infantry moved in, mopped up the position, and gathered in sixty-one prisoners. Twenty dead were counted in the rubble of the demolished buildings. By this time all firing had ceased and the infantry withdrew, covered by the

tanks.

This raid was considered to be highly successful. Our losses for the entire operation were one injured enlisted man, and two medium tanks, lost by mine action.

On 9 May the battalion, minus Company A, reverted to division control. Company A was attached to CCB and later became part of the Task Force Howze and remained separated from the battalion until after the capture of ROME. At this time plans were formulated for the expansion of the beachhead, in conjunction with the westward movement of the Fifth Army from the southern front.

In the initial breakout, the mission of the battalion was to protect the left flank of CCA and reconnoiter Highway #7 to VELLETRI.

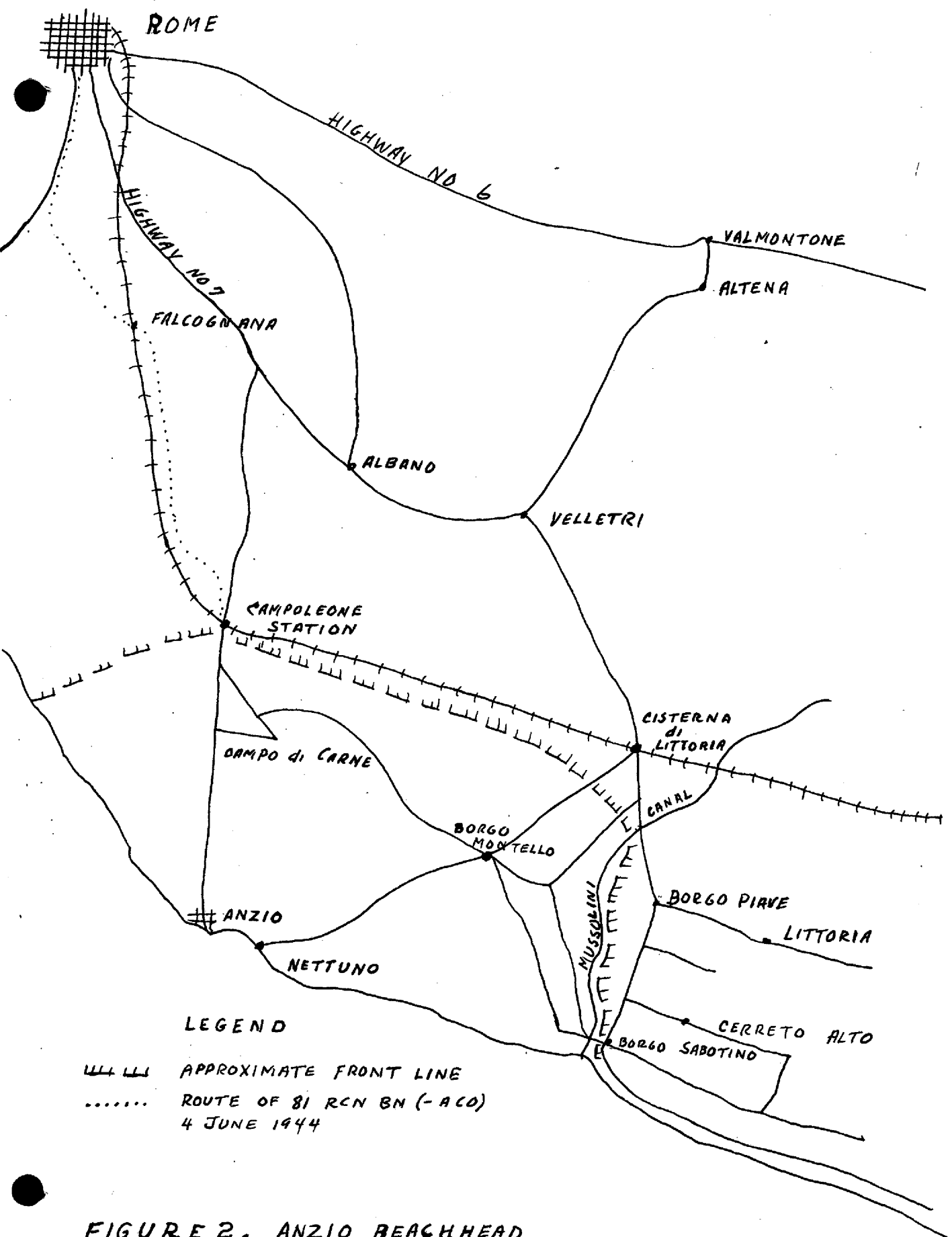
While executing this mission, the battalion became very well acquainted with the closein fighting qualities and abilities of some good German units. The terrain covered during this phase was broken and rolling, covered in many places with a heavy growth of olive trees and grape vines. While moving through this type of terrain, many of the enemy troops would climb into the thick olive trees and wait until they had a chance to fire on the car commanders in the open turrets directing the movement of the vehicles. In most instances the enemy soldier never had a chance to fire twice, but their initial shots caused considerable anxiety nevertheless. During the closein fighting, the car crews learned the true worth of the .50 caliber anti-aircraft machine guns mounted on the turrets of the armored cars when used as ground weapons. The speed and accuracy with which this weapon could be

brought to bear on closein ground targets enhanced its value to a great degree.

During this operation, Lieutenant Colonel Popowski kept the command post very close to the forward platoons. In one instance, the command post was within 400 yards of the front lines. At this time, the enemy counterattacked with a few tanks and a considerable amount of infantry and it became necessary to draw up a final protective line immediately in front of the command post, utilizing all of the headquarters personnel except the medics and radio operators. The position of the command post so close to the front lines appears foolish, however, division was very anxious to secure identifications of new units contacted with minimum delay, and in one instance, the personnel of battalion headquarters observed the capture of six prisoners, and identifications concerning them had been forwarded to CCA within twenty minutes.

When this mission had been completed, the battalion was pulled out of the line for a few days rest and maintenance.

On 30 May the battalion was assigned the mission of left flank security for the 45th Infantry Division and maintaining contact with the British 1st Infantry Division on our left. This mission placed the battalion astride the railroad track about seven tenths of a mile northwest of CAMPOLEONE STATION (fig.2). While in this position, the battalion received more fire of all types, over a longer period of time than it had at any other time during its past history. The Germans were being forced to withdraw, and in keeping with their tactics, they threw into the fight all of their available fire power. The assault guns and mortars of the battalion were kept busy firing closein missions and interdicting roads, crossings and known enemy



LEGEND

- ||||| APPROXIMATE FRONT LINE
- ROUTE OF 81 RCN BN (-ACO)
4 JUNE 1944

FIGURE 2. ANZIO BEACHHEAD

positions throughout the day and night. Our patrol activity was intensified to determine at the earliest possible moment any lessening of pressure along the sector by the enemy.

The battalion commander had promised some first-class pass and leave privileges to the first platoon to arrive in ROME, and consequently, the morale and esprit de corps within the entire organization was superior. After being cooped up on the beachhead for about four months, the officers as well as the enlisted men were looking forward with eager anticipation to a brief holiday in a large, recently liberated city.

The breakout from our new position on the perimeter came on the 4th of June, and the battalion was poised and raring to go. The British troops on the left flank of the battalion assumed responsibility for our sector on the preceding night. Enemy artillery and mortar fire began to lessen during the night, and at dawn the battalion moved out on its route of advance; objective—ROME!

Inasmuch as I was in command of B Company of the battalion, I will confine my remarks primarily to that unit during the next day's activities.

The plan for the employment of the battalion on its flank security mission placed B Company in the front of the column, with the remainder of the battalion, minus Company A, following down the route of advance. The length of the battalion would effectively screen the entire left flank of the combat elements of the division.

B Company moved out at 040500 June and immediately ran into a minefield; however, before I could get to the head of the column to determine the reason

for delay, the 1st platoon commanded by Lieutenant Fagan had found a bypass and the chase was on. For the next four hours the actions of the 1st platoon portrayed, to a very high degree, the results that can be expected from well trained and well diciplined units, aided by excellent morale and esprit de corps.

After bypassing the minefield, the column moved back on the road and proceeded at speeds up to 30 miles per hour between blown culverts and small bridges. When these demolitions were encountered, part of the armored cars would move into firing positions, to cover the balance of the car crews as they performed emergency engineer work. In most instances, the broken pieces of concrete and other available material would suffice to fill in the craters to the degree necessary for crossing. Bypasses had to be found in some instances when the blown bridge or crater was too large to fill in. As soon as each crossing was accomplished, the leading elements would move out in a burst of speed to the next road obstacle.

Many Germans were bypassed during the next few hours, however, no attempt was made to gather them in. Those who gave up close to the route of advance were waved to the rear, and those seen in the woods and fields, staring in dismay and disbelief, were fired on and dispersed as the column passed.

The first serious resistance developed about one mile south of the village of FALCOGNANA. Here the 1st Platoon suddenly found itself in the middle of the antitank company of the Lehr Regiment, a unit of the 362d German Infantry Division. The speed and quietness with which the armored cars

were advancing permitted their arrival, in this position, to be a total surprise to the unsuspecting enemy.

An intense fire fight developed and in the next few minutes B Company had lost two armored cars from antitank action and the advance came to a halt. The Germans lost two halftrack prime-movers, and three 47mm antitank guns in this initial engagement. Again, the .50 caliber antiaircraft machine guns were highly successful in knocking out surprised gun crews, as they frantically went into action against the rapidly advancing armored cars.

At this time, the battalion commander was riding in my armored car which was the fourth vehicle in the column. When the fire fight started, we both dismounted and started to the head of the column, to check on the situation. We could hear the sound of many types of weapons firing, as the fight developed. As Lieutenant Colonel Popowski ran across a small concrete bridge, he was taken under fire by a 47mm antitank gun located near a large farmhouse, about 500 yards to our right flank. The first round was a near miss and the colonel was hit in the jaw with a shell fragment as the round plowed through the bridge railing. The antitank gun was taken under fire immediately by an M-8 Assault Gun which was following the first platoon, and in a matter of minutes, was knocked out.

The platoon leader of the leading platoon withdrew to a covered position approximately 200 yards short of the enemy strong point. At this point, the platoon leader was questioned for firsthand information, and a limited reconnaissance was made. The battalion commander decided to hit the strong point with everything he had. This particular action and the new mission assigned

the battalion can best be told in the words of the battalion commander:³

"Troop "C" was ordered to attack to the left of the road, "B" around the right, and "D" on both sides initially. The scrap lasted about an hour and a half and resulted in the complete overrunning of the enemy position. Four armored cars from Troop "B" were burned and two light tanks from Troop "D" were temporarily disabled. The enemy lost the entire Antitank (the 14th) Company of the Lehr Regiment attached to the 362d German Infantry Division. About 60 prisoners were counted; the dead were left on the field. Twelve antitank guns, including two 88s, and one American 57 were captured. The smallest gun was a 47mm. In their haste to escape the situation the jerries also abandoned one Mark IV Special Tank at Falcognana. The squadron's personnel losses for this engagement were very light for the advantage gained.

During this skirmish, the squadron became attached to CC "B" and was given the mission of protecting the left of the combat command and seizing and holding the bridge on the Tiber River south of Rome (see map). Troop "B" had been committed to such an extent that it was out of the question to recall it to put it on the flank of the combat command, so because of the momentum already gathered "B" was to continue on to Rome. "D" was maneuvered on the right flank of CC "B" to protect the exposed flank. "C" was ordered to the bridge south of Rome, and in moving would also protect the combat command's left flank."

All of these missions were executed, and at 041815 June 1947, Company B had set up its command post at Saint Paul's Basilica in ROME.

The next day, the battalion attached to CCB moved out to push northwest from Rome, establish contact with the enemy, and perform route and terrain reconnaissance in that direction.⁴

3. Lt. Col. Michael Popowski, "The 81st Reconnaissance Fights Way to Rome,"

The Cavalry Journal, Jan. - Feb. 1945, p. 37.

4. After Action Report, 81st Cav. Rcn. Bn., 1st Armored Division, June '44, p. 4, TAS file No. AAR 230.

I believe that most of the reconnaissance missions discussed herein are unique, especially in the ETO, because normally a reconnaissance battalion will not be expected to operate for any length of time in an area as restricted as was the ANZIO beachhead. However these missions substantiate to a great degree the theory, as taught in The Armored School, that the reconnaissance battalion should not be considered as a specialist. It is capable of performing any type of mission which its commander has the ability to visualize and solve.

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3. Lt. Col. Michael Popowski, "The 81st Reconnaissance Fights Way to Rome", The Cavalry Journal, Jan.-Feb. 1945, p. 37.
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