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THE CROSSING OF THE RAPIDO RIVER AND
OCCUPATION OF POSITIONS ABOVE CASSINO,
ITALY, BY COMPANY "I", 168TH INFANTRY,
(34TH INFANTRY DIVISION) 27 JANUARY - 15 FEBRUARY 1944
(ROME-ARNO CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Squad Leader)

Type of Operation Described: COMPANY IN THE ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the crossing of the Rapido River and occupation of positions above Cassino, Italy, by Company "I", 168th Infantry Regiment, 34th Infantry Division, 27 January - 15 February 1944, from its assembly area near Cervaro, Italy, until relieved by the elements of the British 4th Indian Division on 15 February 1944.

For the purpose of bringing the reader up to date on the previous operations of the Fifth Army, and the 34th Infantry Division in particular, it is desirable to give at this point a brief resume of events leading up to this phase of the Italian Campaign, beginning with the establishment of the Salerno Beachhead.

On 9 September 1943, six (6) days after the landing of the British Eighth Army in Italy, the United States Fifth Army, under Lieutenant General (now General) Mark W. Clark, landed on the beaches of Salerno Bay, 130 miles north of the Eighth Army landing across the Strait of Messina. (See Map "A") In order to prepare a firm base for further offensive operations, the Fifth Army, according to the plan, was to seize the Port of Naples and secure all airfields in that vicinity. (1)

After severe fighting, the beachhead at Salerno was secured; and on 28 September 1943, the main forces of the British Eighth Army came abreast of the Fifth Army. (2)

The 34th Infantry Division landed at Paestum, Italy, on 21 September 1943, and took part in the drive which resulted in the capture of Naples on 1 October 1943, and the withdrawal of

(1) A-1, p. 31-32. (2) A-2, p. 32.

the Germans across the Volturno River. Naples was a badly battered seaport; but with a harbor which could be and was quickly restored to service, supply of the Fifth Army was now shifted from the Salerno beaches to Naples. (3)

After the breakout from Salerno, the Volturno River formed the first large obstacle which the Germans had decided to defend. (See Map "A") This river was crossed three (3) times by some elements of the Fifth Army. The first crossing was made on 14 October 1943 and the third and last on the night of 3-4 November 1943. (4)

The successful crossing of the Volturno put the Fifth Army in position to press the Germans northward. By November 1943, Fifth Army troops had driven from the beaches of Paestum and Salerno to the German Winter Line, which future operations proved to be only temporary positions. This line, extending from the Garigliano River northeast through the hill hill masses barring access to the Rapido Valley, consisted of a jumble of mountains, valleys and plains which varied in character from crags and peaks which soared more than 6000 feet in height on the Fifth Army's right to the wide coastal plain on the left. (5)

From 15 November 1943 to 15 January 1944, Fifth Army continued the campaign to drive the Germans out of southern Italy - San Pietro, Mt. Sammuero, San Vittore, Mt. Lungo, Mt. Maggiore, Mt. Pantano and Cervaro being but a few of the places and names to figure in the fighting. (6)

From its arrival at Paestum until it was relieved in December, 1943, the 34th Infantry Division saw seventy-six (76) successive days of contact with the enemy. On the night of 8 - 9 December (3) A-2, p. 88-89. (4) A-2, p. 51. (5) A-2, p. 19; A-4, p. 5. (6) A-2, p. 22.

ber 1943, the relief of our worn out troops by the 2nd Moroccan Division began and on 10 December this was completed. The 34th Infantry Division withdrew for rest, training and replacements to the area of S. Angelo d'Alife. (7)

Returning to the front lines on 30 December 1943, after a brief rest, the 34th Infantry Division conducted a steady, grinding attack against stubborn German resistance; and after having captured San Vittore and Cervaro, finally drove the enemy back to his main winter positions. (8)

By 15 January 1944, along the general line of the Rapido and Garigliano Rivers, the Fifth Army was secure, and whether the Germans were ready or not they now had to defend their Gustav Line. Attention was now drawn to the town of Cassino. Sharing the spotlight with this German stronghold was the famous Benedictine Monastery, the Abbey of Monte Cassino, which rested on a high peak overlooking the town. (9) (See Map "C")

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Main positions making up the Gustav Line extended from Minturno, on the Gulf of Gaeta, ran along the Garigliano River, then on the west bank of the Rapido to a position above Cassino. To that portion of the line lying north of the Liri River, Cassino was the key. (10)(See Map "C")

The terrain along the Gustav Line was greatly in favor of the defending Germans and they made the most of it. On the west of Mt. Trocchio lies the broad Liri Valley along which Highway 6 and a railroad lead to Rome. At the east end of the Liri Valley, the Rapido River, flowing north to south, joins the Liri River

(7) A-4, p. 48. (8) A-4, p. 91; A-5, p. 53. (9) A-2, p. 24. (10) A-1, p. 66; A-4, p. 5.

just south of Cassino. The high hills overlooking the Rapido were held by the Germans. (11)

Cassino was built at the base of an imposing hill around which ran the narrow road leading to the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. Above the town rose a number of craggy peaks, one in particular, Hill 445, dominating but not controlling the Abbey hill because of a deep gorge which separated the two heights. (12) (See Map "C")

The Germans had dammed the Rapido River in its natural course, causing it to flood the flat lands on the east side of Cassino. Between the river line and the hills, the zone was heavily mined and wired. Covering the low ground near the river were anti-tank positions and machine gun nests. Bunker positions had been built with reinforced concrete and railroad ties from the ruined station of Cassino. Others had been blasted out of the rock and earth of the Cassino hill. Portable steel pillboxes, each containing a machine gun, had been half buried in the ground. The building of such fortifications by the Germans had resulted in giving virtually every man and every weapon shelter from artillery fire and small arms fire. Artillery positions had been constructed behind Cassino and along Highway 6. The terrain around Cassino was so suitable for prolonged resistance that the Italian War College had used it as an example of a well-chosen defense line. (13)

To the north of Cassino the village of Cairo huddled close to the hillside. (14) (See Map "B")

In order to avoid the strong defenses in the immediate vicinity of Cassino, the Fifth Army's II Corps planned to make an

(11) A-6, p. 506; A-5, p. 55. (12) A-4, p. 55. (13) A-6, p. 506; A-5, p. 55-56. (14) Personal knowledge.

envelopment of Cassino as follows:

1. The 34th Infantry Division, from positions on the right, was to hold enemy forces east of the town.
2. To the left of the 34th Infantry Division the 36th Infantry Division was to establish a bridgehead across the Rapido River below Cassino, and penetrate the Gustav Line.
3. Combat Command "B" of the 1st Armored Division would then exploit through this bridgehead to Piedimonte and Aquino.

To the right of the II Corps, the French Corps was to support this attack by advancing westward into the mountains.

South of the II Corps, the X Corps attacked across the Garigliano River on 17 January 1944 and by the 20th of January had established a bridgehead. Although the X Corps had been successful, the 46th Infantry Division (British) on its right failed to make a crossing, which meant that the left flank of II Corps was then exposed in its attack across the Rapido.

On 20 January 1944, elements of the 36th Infantry Division crossed the Rapido River and were successful in establishing a bridgehead approximately 2½ miles south of Cassino. However, they were forced to withdraw across the river two (2) days later after suffering 25% casualties. Among the chief factors which contributed to the failure of the 36th Infantry Division in establishing a beachhead across the Rapido were the strong enemy defenses in this area, the fact that they were unable to maintain supply lines due to bad weather and heavy enemy fire, and the failure of the 46th Infantry Division to establish a beachhead to the south. (15)

(15) A-1, p. 66-67.

The II Corps, after having had such little success in its efforts to take Cassino from the south, was then ordered by General Clark to attempt to envelop Cassino from the north. This plan of attack called for the 34th Infantry Division to cross the Rapido north of Cassino and advance south, sending one column down the road into Cassino and other forces through the mountains to take the high ground dominating the town and striking the enemy's rear near Piedimonte. The French Corps was to change its direction and turn southwest towards Piedimonte. (16)

THE COMPANY SITUATION

From 15 January to 23 January 1944, Company "I", 168th Infantry Regiment, 34th Infantry Division, having been relieved from the Winter Line, was in an assembly area near Cervaro, Italy, resting and reorganizing in preparation for the crossing of the Rapido River. (See Map "C") On 24 January 1944, the Platoon Leader, 1st Platoon, Company "I", ordered us to complete final preparations for moving up. 25-26 January 1944 were spent in moving into positions approximately 800 yards from the east bank of the Rapido River. (See Map "B") Company "I" reached this position at approximately 0400, 27 January 1944. (17)

The terrain over which the attack was to take place was flat and muddy due to the fact that the enemy had rerouted the river causing it to flood the entire area. This condition was to create a major problem in the conduct of this attack as the tanks got bogged down in the marshy ground and in ditches, which in some instances were at least four (4) feet deep. (18)

(16) A-6, p. 66-67. (17) Personal knowledge. (18) A-8, p. 1.

Tanks of the 756th Tank Battalion were used in support of the 168th Infantry Regiment in the crossing of the Rapido, having been deemed necessary because of the many obstacles in the nature of shu-mines, barbed wire entanglements, pillboxes, etc., that the enemy had constructed several hundred yards west of the river. (See Map "B")

Company "L", 168th Infantry Regiment, took up "lead-off" position in column of platoons, followed by Company "I" in the same formation, with Company "K" in Battalion reserve. To the left of Company "I" was the 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, and the 133rd Infantry Regiment, while to the north lay the French zone of action. 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, was in Regimental reserve. (See Map "C")

In order for the battalion to accomplish its mission of taking Cairo, Company "I" had as its objective the northeast portion of Hill 213 and Cairo. (See Map "B") (19)

CROSSING THE RAPIDO RIVER

On the morning of 27 January 1944, at approximately 0700, Company "A", 756th Tank Battalion, started firing and by 0716, they had completed firing and were moving back for more ammunition. Since the tanks were in plain view of enemy observation this move added a little deception to the action. The mask of trees along the river bed was the only element that prevented the enemy from using flat trajectory weapons against the tanks. (20)

On 0730, 27 January, Company "B", 756th Tank Battalion, together with elements of the 3rd Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, began the crossing of the Rapido River. The initial plan

(19) Personal knowledge. (20) A-9, p. 10.

of attack was a column of companies; Company "L" leading, followed by Company "I", with Company "K" in reserve. Other elements of the 756th Tank Battalion remained on the road, giving fire support to those elements that were attempting to cross the river. (21)

By 1200, 27 January 1944, only three (3) tanks had been able to reach the west bank of the Rapido, all others attempting to cross having either been knocked out by enemy fire or bogged down in the mud and were unable to continue the attack. However, they did render fire support to the infantry from their positions. The three (3) tanks which crossed the river, performed several missions for the infantry but all tanks across the Rapido were out of action by 1300. (22)

Company "I", having followed the first group of tanks until they either were bogged down or knocked out, now attempted to continue the attack without aid of the tanks. It succeeded in reaching the west bank of the Rapido, but because of the minefields and the mortar and artillery fire from the enemy, suffered such severe casualties they were unable to hold their position on the west bank of the river. They became disorganized and were forced to pull back, through the position held by Company "I", to the Battalion assembly area. (23)

At the beginning of the attack, Company "I" followed Company "L" for approximately 150 yards, at which time we were held up on the road in rear of those tanks which were supporting the leading elements. By now it was broad daylight and the enemy had begun to lay down heavy mortar and artillery fire in the entire area. Lieutenant Torcelene, our Platoon Leader, was the first man in Company "I" to be wounded and was ordered by the (21) Personal knowledge. (22) A-9, p. 11. (23) Personal knowledge.

Company Commander, Lieutenant McMahon, to go to the Battalion aid station. Command of the platoon was then assumed by the Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Shorge.

When Company "L" halted ahead of us, forcing Company "I" to halt also, Lieutenant McMahon went up to the forward elements of Company "L" to determine the cause of the delay. Seeing that the infantry was unable to advance further, he returned to the Company and ordered that word be passed back for Company "I" to move off the road and dig in. As the men were in an exposed position on the road beside the tanks, which were beginning to draw heavy enemy fire, the order he gave after having sized up the situation undoubtedly averted many casualties to the Company.

The men dug in and remained in this position for approximately two (2) hours, during which time the tanks were attempting to maneuver to the river bank, and Company "L" was pulling back of our position by platoons.

At 1100 the order to move forward was received from Lieutenant McMahon, and Company "I", with 1st Platoon leading, moved out and took up positions along the east bank of the river, where we remained until dusk. During this time the enemy kept up heavy mortar and artillery fire and Company "I" suffered a large number of casualties.

At dusk, the Platoon Sergeant ordered us to move back to our original positions. This move was accomplished under heavy fire and with great difficulty. By now the ground over which we had to return was so shelled marked that movement was extremely difficult and a number of the men, falling into shellholes, were forced to discard all of their equipment in order to regain their footing. (24)

(24) Personal knowledge.

As soon as the Company had reassembled at the original starting point, we immediately moved out in a column of platoons into the French zone of action (See Map "B"), arriving there at approximately midnight. Upon arrival, platoon positions were assigned, security was posted, men dug in and bedded down for the remainder of the night.

The morning of 28 January 1944 dawned cloudy and cold. To men who had spent the day before lying in mud and water and who had slept in wet foxholes, the cold was an added discomfort.

The next two (2) days were spent at this position and the men were kept busy cleaning their weapons, etc., while the Engineers were preparing a crossing for the tanks.

On the night of 29-30 January 1944, Company "I" moved out of its position in the French zone and proceeded across the river, occupying positions on the west bank. (See Map "B") No enemy opposition was encountered during the crossing. Having reached the west bank, platoons were ordered to post the necessary security and men to dig in and get as much sleep as possible for the rest of the night. Lieutenant McMahon ordered Sergeant Shorge to send out a five (5) man reconnaissance patrol in the direction of Hill 213. Sergeant Estep and four (4) other men went on this patrol. The patrol did not return and no trace of the five (5) men was found on, or in the vicinity of, Hill 213 the next day. Later, after having reached Cairo, we were told by the Italians that they had seen the Germans taking five (5) Americans over the hill to the rear on 30 January 1944.

Approximately 0700, 30 January 1944, Company "I", with 1st Platoon leading, moved out in a resumption of the attack upon Hill 213, which was a part of the Regimental objective. (25)
(25) Personal knowledge.

West of the Rapido River were anti-personnel mine fields which paralleled the river to a depth of three hundred (300) yards. From the river to the base of Hill 213 lay an absolutely flat plain, all vegetation having been removed to provide a perfect field of fire for the elaborately prepared bunkers and numerous machine guns emplaced in portable steel pillboxes at the foot of the hill. On this plain were several buildings, most of them containing self-propelled, anti-tank, and/or machine guns. Approximately one hundred (100) yards from the base of Hill 213 there ran a band of barbed wire about fifteen (15) yards in depth. A barrier made of trees and brush, which had been taken from the hill itself, formed a dead abatis just back of the pillboxes. Below the military crest of the hill a line of individual foxholes with overhead cover was protected by a band of double apron wire. Immediately in front of Company "I", Hill 213 rose to a commanding height overlooking the countryside, and to the Company's left, the Abbey of Monte Cassino could be seen rising in the distance. (26)

As Company "I" came out into the open area, movement was observed around the fortified house to the right front, from which some small arms fire was being received. As the Company continued to move forward, it was fired upon by a German self-propelled gun from the right front corner of the house. Leading elements of the Company immediately hit the ground and sought shelter behind a rock terrace. Lieutenant McMahon sent word back for the tanks, who had succeeded in crossing the river on 29 January 1944, a platoon of which was now supporting us, to move forward. This was done and the tanks were successful in eliminating the enemy gun before casualties could be inflicted upon the Company. The Com- (26) Personal knowledge; A-7, p. 52-53.

pany then proceeded across the open area and moved up on Hill 213 without further enemy opposition.

It is felt that the main reason Company "I" experienced such a small amount of enemy resistance in their movement from the river to the northeast portion of Hill 213 was due to the fact that at dusk on 29 January, the 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, having been committed to the attack on 29 January, had successfully completed a crossing of the Rapido River to the left of Company "I" in the vicinity of the cemetery (See Map "C") and was now occupying the south portion of Hill 213.

At the time Company "I" was occupying positions on Hill 213, the 2nd Platoon, Company "K", supported by tanks, moved forward across the river and into the town of Cairo. Taking the enemy completely by surprise, it was able to capture an entire German Battalion Command Post.

OCCUPATION OF CAIRO

After having spent several hours on Hill 213, making contact with elements of the 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, Company "I" followed Company "K" into Cairo. (See Map "B")

The 1st Platoon, Company "I", was ordered to outpost the west end of Cairo. At dusk, these outposts were pulled back in, positions were consolidated and visiting patrols were established by the various outposts. During the night, Company "I" was engaged in a number of small arms fire fights with small enemy patrols, who, not knowing that Cairo was now in the hands of the Americans, were infiltrating through the area in attempts to reach their battalion command post. A large number of German prisoners were captured during the night, while casualties to the Company were relatively small. (27)

(27) Personal knowledge, A-10, p. 52.

On 1 February 1944, elements of the 135th Infantry Regiment passed through the elements of the 168th Infantry Regiment, and pushed on up the hill, trying to reach Highway 6 and isolate the Abbey. Company "I" remained in Cairo until relieved by the French on 2 February 1944. (28) (See Map "C")

OCCUPATION OF POSITIONS ABOVE CASSINO

Immediately after having been relieved by the French on 2 February 1944, Company "I" moved out of Cairo and followed the 135th Infantry Regiment in their attack through the mountains above Cassino. The 3rd Battalion, 168th Infantry, was attached to the 135th Infantry to reinforce the regiment in its zone. We were not to be committed unless absolutely necessary.

Upon reaching the zone of the 135th Infantry, the 3rd Battalion, 168th Infantry, took up positions in rear of the 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry, on the forward slopes of Hill 445 which overlooked the town of Cassino. (See Map "C") Directly in front of Company "I", though separated from it by a deep gorge, lay the Abbey of Monte Cassino. (29)

Hill 445, together with Hill 593, was the last real height before the Liri Valley. Both hills were northwest of the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. Hill 445 afforded direct observation on the Abbey, as did 593, and the two hills were generally regarded as the key features in taking Monte Cassino. Hill 445 was part of a ridge running southeast from Hill 593. A rock wall, three (3) feet high, ran generally east and west across the top of Hill 445. On the south side of this rock wall there was considerable shrub growth, while on the north side it was barren and rocky. (30)

(28) Personal knowledge. (29) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain Anderson Q. Smith, then Company Commander of Company "K", 168th Infantry, on 27 October 1947. (30) Personal knowledge.

Initially, the 3rd Battalion, 168th Infantry, was to attack through the positions now held by the 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry. On the morning of 3 February 1944, Company "L", followed by Companies "K" and "I", attempted to advance but suffered heavy casualties and was unable to advance any appreciable distance. At dusk, Company "K" relieved Company "L" who was pulled back, reorganized, rested and later returned to the lines. Company "K", with one (1) platoon of Company "I" attached, attacked on the morning of 4 February but it was also unable to advance, therefore Company "I" pulled back a short distance and attempted to dig in for the night. (31)

Due to the rocky ground in this area, it was impossible to dig foxholes and men piled rocks around them in an effort to obtain some protection from enemy fire. The Abbey of Monte Cassino afforded the enemy direct observation upon our position and because of this, it was necessary for the men to spend all of the next day, 5 February, in their foxholes. (32)

During the night of 4-5 February, Lieutenant McMahon, Company Commander of Company "I", was wounded and evacuated. Company "I" was then combined with Company "K" under the command of Captain Anderson Q. Smith, and joined Company "K" in its position behind the stone escarpment, one (1) platoon at a time during the hours of darkness for the next two (2) days. (33)

From 6 February 1944, until the morning of 15 February 1944, Company "I" remained in this position, unable to do more than hold ground previously taken. Because of the weather and terrain, enemy resistance, heavy casualties without adequate replacements, and supplies, Company "I" was not able to make any attacks whatsoever

(31,33) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain Anderson Q. Smith, then Company Commander of Company "K", 168th Infantry, on 27 October 1947. (32) Personal knowledge.

during this period of time.

To add to the misery and suffering experienced by all those on the hill, it was quite cold and wet. Rain, which had started at dusk on 4 February, would turn to snow during the daytime and into ice at night, making it impossible to keep dry and warm as foxholes became filled with water and clothes began to freeze on the men. A large majority of the men had lost their bedrolls in which they had packed changes of clothing and while a few had arctics, none had shoe packs. The Company was not properly dressed or equipped for this type of weather and as a result of this exposure without proper clothing, men soon began to suffer from Trench Foot and respiratory diseases. It was alternately raining and snowing during the entire period this position was occupied by Company "I", and the weather was the chief factor towards preventing attacks.

During the daylight hours, we were under constant observation from both the Abbey of Monte Cassino and German positions to our immediate front, a distance of approximately fifty (50) yards. During the day, movement was impossible because of this observation. The slightest move on the part of our troops drew immediate sniper, mortar and artillery fire. During the night, periodic barrages were laid down by the enemy on the ridge to our immediate rear.

In spite of the support which our artillery and tanks gave to the infantry, very little useful help could reach the men in the foxholes on these forward positions. By night, our artillery could be observed firing their night preparations. From our position directly across from the Abbey of Monte Cassino, it was plain to see that this artillery fire was having very little, if any, effect on the Abbey or the volume of enemy fire. (34)

(34) Personal knowledge.

Casualties were increasing by the day and as no replacements were forthcoming, with the exception of personnel from the Battalion motor pool, this necessitated a constant shifting of the remaining personnel in order to cover the Company sector. By now, after weeks of constant fire, often seemingly endless nights on the bare rock of Hill 445, and with no protection against the weather, the men had reached the limit of human endurance. Our numbers were so reduced that every time a man was taken off the hill by litter bearers a gap was left in the lines. Aidmen worked both night and day and the problems of evacuating casualties down the treacherous mountain trails and across the shell-swept approaches to the position were very serious. Casualties from enemy fire, respiratory diseases, and/or Trench Foot who were able to walk, walked back to the Battalion aid station after nightfall in order to avoid snipers. Litter cases were evacuated at all hours. By the time relief was effected, the ranks of the 1st Platoon, Company "I", had been thoroughly decimated. Of the entire platoon, only one (1) non-com (the author) and five (5) privates remained when relieved by the British.

(35)

Throughout this entire period, supplies -- each box of rations, every can of water, all ammunition used by the infantry -- were brought up by Italian mule pack units, across ground under direct observation from hills that were still in enemy hands. The enemy being fully aware of this, laid down continuous and accurate fire on all critical points. Freezing temperatures at night made the problem of supply difficult. Mule trains formed every night in the San Michelo area and would start out at dusk on the perilous journey that would take all night to accomplish. C and D rations

(35) Personal knowledge; A-5, p. 62.

supplemented by an occasional loaf of bread, which many times was thoroughly water logged, were the only rations received during these nineteen (19) days. The rations were brought to the Company Command Post and hand carried from there to the men in the foxholes.

RELIEF OF THE COMPANY

On the morning of 15 February 1944, elements of the British 4th Indian Division took over the position held by Company "I", 158th Infantry. Although the relief was scheduled to arrive during the night of 14 February, it was delayed because of the slippery trails caused by freezing temperatures and an inch of snow. Consequently, relief was accomplished just at day break. Several of the men were quite reluctant to move at this hour because of the sniper fire that troops had been subjected to along the route we had to follow.

Several hours later on 15 February 1944, after having descended from the mountains and crossed Liri or "Purple Heart" Valley into comparative safety, we halted and watched the first bombing of the Abbey of Monte Cassino by the American Air Force. The Germans throughout the operation took full advantage of the fact that the Allies had undertaken not to fire at the Abbey in view of its importance to the world as a religious institution and the relative immunity which the enemy obtained for his observation can hardly be overestimated. To the six (6) remaining men of the 1st Platoon, Company "I", who watched this first bombing on that cold, winter morning in February, there was but one thought - "it should have been done before". (36)

(36) Personal knowledge, A-5, p. 59

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The analysis and criticisms of this operation are made from the standpoint of an enlisted man, which the author was at that time.

The Company, as a whole, was not properly oriented on the task that faced them. During the week before the initial crossing of the Rapido, when the Company was still in the assembly area, training should have been conducted with tank units that later supported us in the crossing of the river and capture of Cairo. The men were not prepared for this type operation in that they had not been informed that it was to be a combined infantry-tank operation and in that a large majority of the men in Company "I" had never worked with tanks in combat since approximately one-half ($\frac{1}{2}$) of the Company consisted of replacements who were to see their first combat action in the Rapido crossing. These men should have learned something of the capabilities and limitations of tanks, as most of them were under the impression that tanks were only good to draw artillery fire and the men were afraid to follow tanks in the operation of a successful infantry-tank team.

The method of employment of tanks in the initial crossing of the Rapido was carried out with a great deal of zeal by the tank crews, but in doing so a number of them forgot that tanks must have a firm standing in order to maneuver. When the crews of those tanks along the road observed other tanks being bogged down in the marshy terrain, they did not heed the warning thus gained. Instead of taking up advantageous firing positions along the road, they, with equal zeal but little initiative, immediately followed into the marshy ground and were also bogged down,

rendering their tanks useless to the attack and making them stationary targets for enemy fire.

Company "I" should not have been ordered to take up the position in the relatively same location as that which had been occupied by Company "L" in their initial attempt to cross the Rapido. Unit Commanders should have realized that since Company "L" was unable to cross successfully at that point, the possibility of another company of approximately the same strength doing so was nil; since by this time the enemy had been fully alerted and was placing a large volume of fire in this area. In taking up this position, Company "I" was unable to further the progress of the attack and suffered numerous unnecessary casualties, as the troops were under direct enemy observation and had no protection from the heavy enemy fire.

It is realized that from the Allied point of view things of historical or religious value such as the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino should be preserved; but such preservation should be effected only when it can be accomplished without needless bloodshed and loss of lives by our troops. If the above mentioned Abbey had been bombed by the Air Force prior to the Allied attack in this area, they would have denied to the Germans the use of an excellent strong point and observation post; and in all probability, the II Corps would have been able to have accomplished its entire mission.

Three (3) days prior to the initial attempt to cross the Rapido, the Allies had successfully established a beachhead at Anzio. It is felt that with the establishment of this beachhead just prior to the Gustav Line Offensive, one of the principles of war was violated - this being the principle of "mass". If sufficient troops could have been employed to continue the momen-

tum of the Gustav Line Offensive, rather than a diversion of forces to the Anzio beachhead, a break-through could have been accomplished into the Liri Valley at this time, thereby enabling the Allies to make full use of armor in exploiting this break-through. If the Germans had known the true status of the Company's strength on Hill 445 and had so desired, they could have attacked through the Company's position regaining in a very short time that portion of the high ground which we held overlooking Cassino.

Men were not properly clothed and equipped for the type of weather they encountered in this operation, nor were changes of dry socks provided until two (2) days before relief. During this time, many men had contracted Trench Foot, which could, in a measure, have been prevented by frequent changes of socks. A large number of casualties were due to exposure without proper clothing, which resulted in respiratory diseases.

LESSONS LEARNED

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Prior training is necessary in order to secure maximum success in combined infantry-tank operation.
2. When tanks are used with infantry, the terrain should be suitable for their employment in order to obtain the maximum use of the tanks' fire power, mobility and shock action.
3. Unnecessary movement during daylight hours under direct enemy observation will draw all types of enemy fire.
4. In a static position, such as the one held above Cassino, men should be rotated to a position where they can obtain dry clothing, a hot meal and a good night's sleep before returning to the line.

5. Infantry troops must be trained to move through mine-fields, clearing their own paths as they proceed.

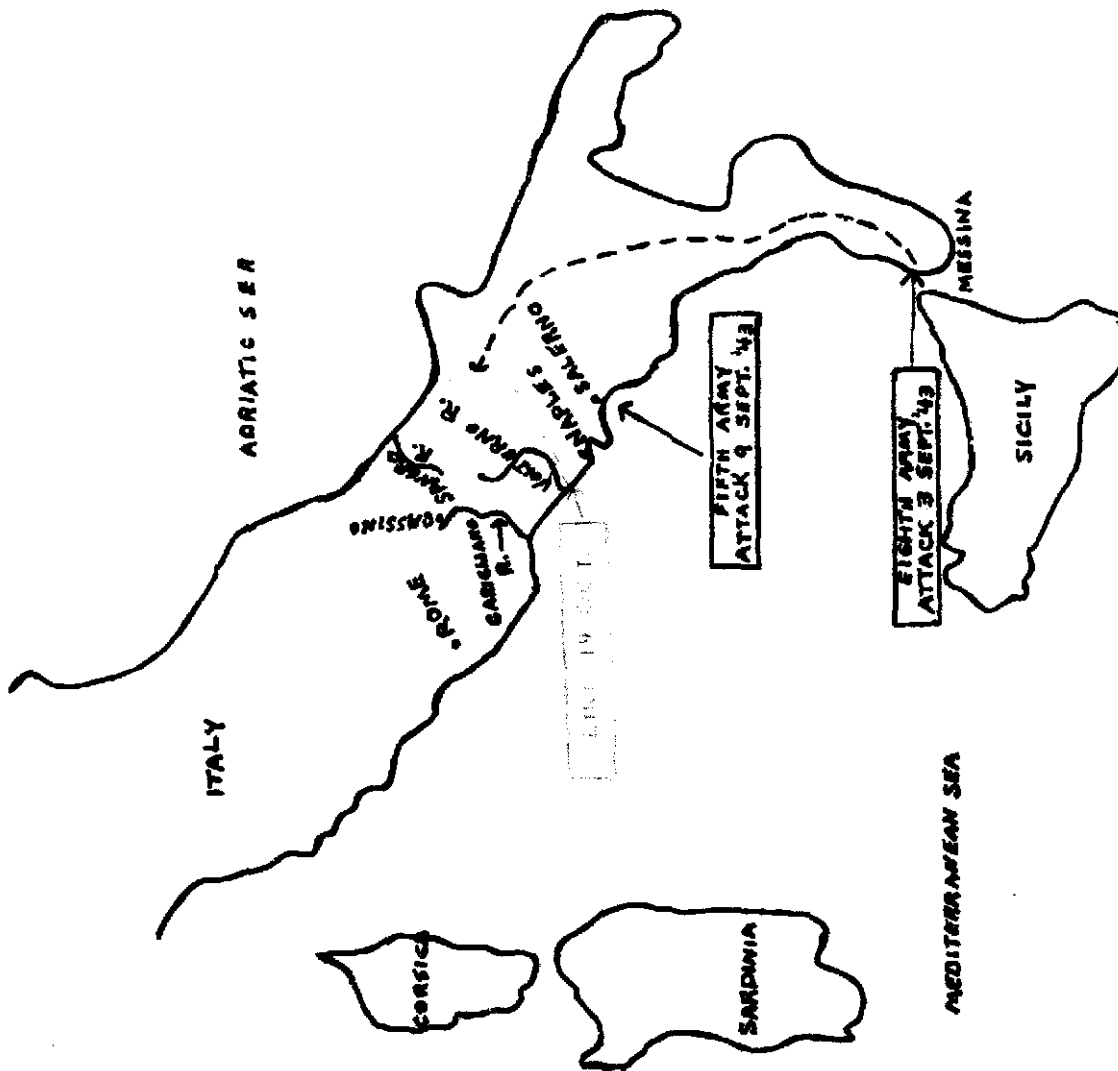
6. Air power should be used when necessary to prevent bloodshed and loss of lives, regardless of the historic or religious background of the target.

7. Reorganization should be continuous in combat.

8. Troops should be properly equipped and clothed for mountain operations during the winter months.

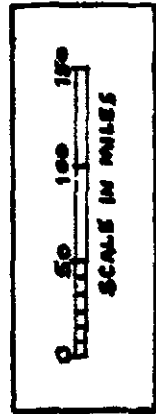
9. Constant flow of replacements is necessary to sustain units in battle.

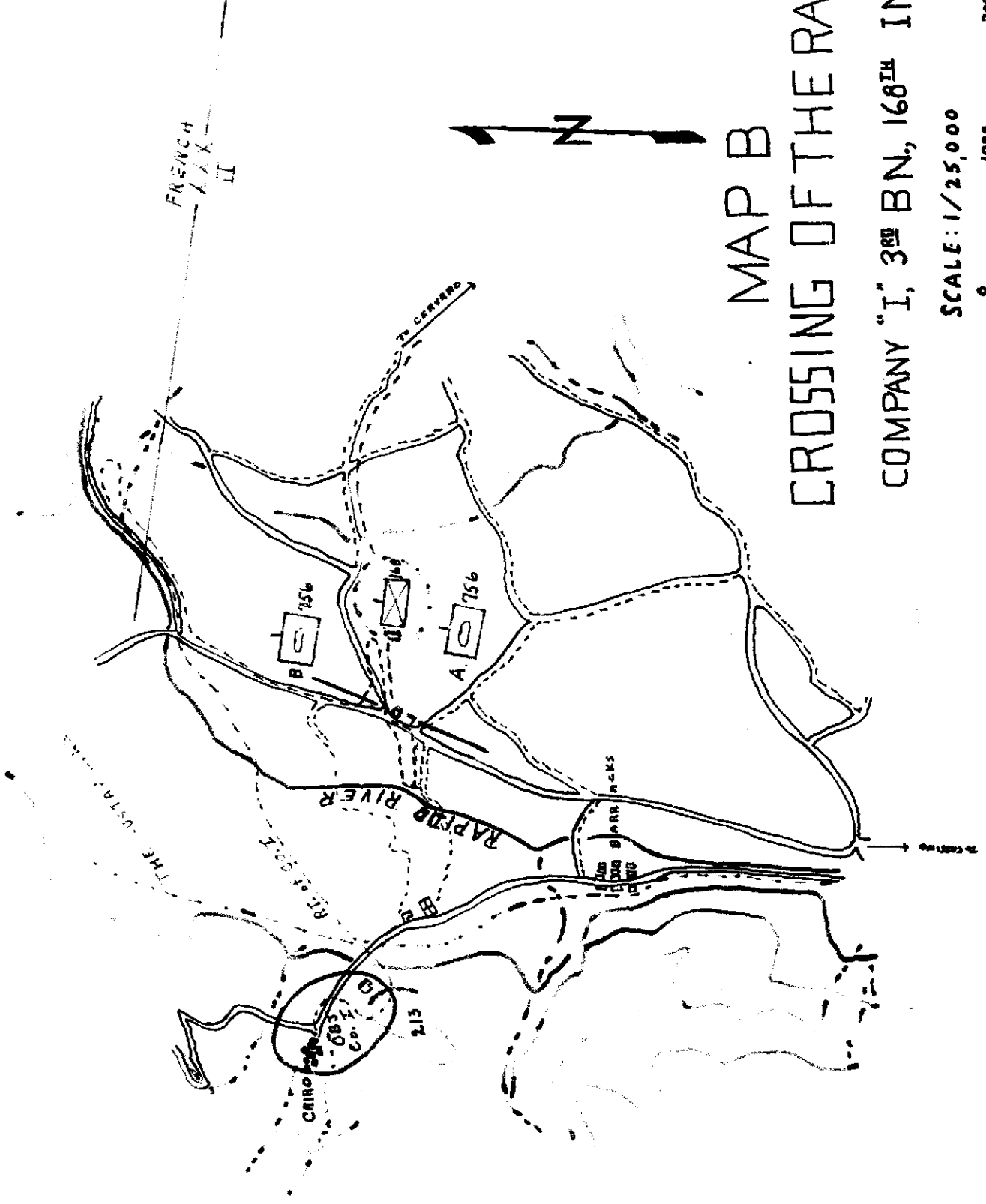
10. Troops should be instructed in the prevention of Trench Foot. Constant supervision by officers is necessary in order to carry out fully the measures necessary to prevent this disease.



MAP A

LANDING AT SALERNO
TO VOLTURNO R.





MAP B
CROSSING OF THE RAPIDO
COMPANY "I", 3RD BN, 168TH INF.

SCALE: 1/25,000



MAP C

GUSTAV LINE OFFENSIVE

27 JANUARY - 15 FEBRUARY 1944

SCALE: 1/25,000

0 1000 2000

Contour Interval 100 m.

FRENCH
XXXI

XX 34

34
XX
36

